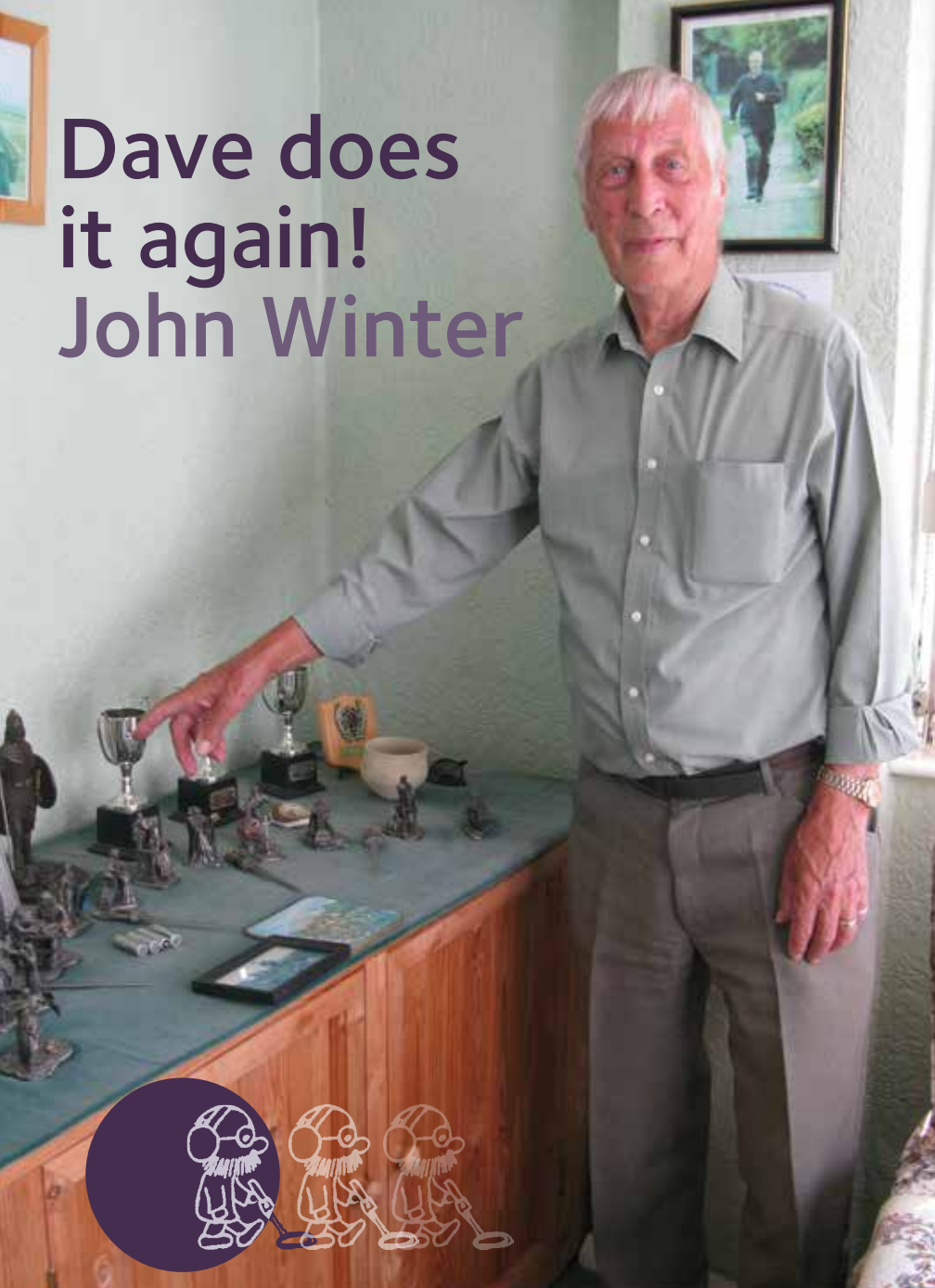


Dave does it again!

John Winter



A reprise

Detectorist Dave Derby is a venerable, quietly spoken gentleman who recently celebrated his 80th birthday. He has been involved in the hobby for over 40 years, long before *The Searcher* was born.

Regular readers may be familiar with the name for he has graced the pages of this magazine on several occasions. The last time I wrote about him was in January 2014 when I detailed his detecting career and its many highlights.

The article ended by focusing on the discovery (with detecting partner Dave Pulley) in 1996 of a Roman villa complex in Northamptonshire, which received a lot of publicity. As I explained then, further excavations, geophysical surveys and more detecting revealed a Romano-British village based on stone round houses with accompanying rectangular enclosures and bathhouses. This complex became known as the *Whitehall Farm Roman Villa*, and was instrumental in the formation of the *Community Landscape Archaeology Project (CLASP)*.

In September 2012 the site was infilled and returned to pasture. If you wish to read more about the Whitehall story and have a computer, you may like to take a look at www.whitehallvilla.co.uk

Whilst writing the earlier account I became even more aware of the understanding and mutual respect between some archaeologists and detectorists and how working together could be beneficial. Stephen Young, at that time Senior Lecturer at the University of Northampton; Archaeological Director of CLASP and the Whitehall Farm Roman Villa Research Project said:

“Dave and I continue to work together on new sites which allow us to fill in the gaps in our understanding of the historical landscape. I think that I can honestly say that Dave’s contribution and that of his detecting colleagues to fieldwork that we undertake has been critical to the success of the projects and directly enhanced the relevance of our approach by helping develop the diversity and wide scale interest in archaeology necessary to make community based initiatives work in an effective way. I know as we start to reinterpret our understanding of Roman Britain at least in the watershed of the River Nene, his personal contribution should not be underestimated.”

Alert

And that was that ... or so I thought ... until 2015 when I read the news in a local newspaper that ‘a skeleton from the 5th century had been uncovered in a field near a Northamptonshire village’. The news was followed up by an email from Alan Standish (I did not know him) alerting me to the find and saying that Dave thought it might make an interesting story. Indeed it would!

And that’s how I renewed my acquaintance with Dave, his lovely wife Rita, and had the opportunity to meet Alan for the first time!

Like Dave Pulley in the article of 2014, Alan is an occasional detecting partner of Dave, and also a member of the CLASP project. He also regards Dave as an inspiration and mentor, often helping out by stooping down and investigating what is in the hole when the master makes a find. “His skill, knowledge and detecting know-how complements that of the professionals. They appreciate his input”, said Alan.

Alan has also been very helpful in my telling of the latest story and I appreciate his help and co-operation. I talked to them both in Dave's Den, surrounded by machines, trophies, pictures and other detecting memorabilia.

Revisiting the scene

Dave settled down in his favourite chair, cleared his throat, and started by repeating a favourite saying of his: "Detecting is a fascinating hobby. You never know what you are going to find." Rita brought us coffee. We were in for a long haul and a fascinating tale.

He continued, telling me that the site hadn't been detected for four years or so and he'd always wanted to return for further exploration, so contacted his friend Alan Standish. Together, they sought the necessary permissions, and confirmed with the Site Director and landowner their intention. They wished to continue the project looking for a Roman cemetery, which had eluded them for over 20 years. But there was some urgency. Between harvest and sowing they only had a short 'window' to search the area.

Alan told me that they set out on their quest on the morning of Friday 14 August and searched an area about 40 metres to the North of where it was thought the small Anglo-Saxon cemetery had ended.

Dave's first signal was an army button - 48th Regiment of Foot; then he found a Roman coin. The third signal was even better. At about three inches he unearthed an Anglo-Saxon fantail brooch dating from the late 6th century, which was a similar date to those found previously.

Surprise in the spoil

On examining the soil that had been removed from the hole, the guys noticed small bone fragments, so they donned gloves and carefully placed them in bags. At this stage they informed the farmer and archaeologist Steve Young who promptly arrived on the scene, and a plan of progress was agreed. It was confirmed that the bones were human and, after taking a GPS reading of the location, the hole was filled in.

"Knowing when to stop searching and hand over to the experts is very important," said Dave. Alan concurred and nodded his head in agreement. Because of their previous experience, the guys had a very good idea of what they had found!



© Don Martin and CLASP

Anglo Saxon shield boss

The agreed plan was that Dave and Alan should detect the surrounding area very thoroughly and dig one more signal, noting the position of that and any others nearby. Moving about one metre to the left, Dave got another clear signal and they dug down. As they got closer to the target they stopped using the spade in favour of a pinpoint probe and small trowel. Then, they carefully uncovered a 'round' disc. The probe also clearly defined areas of metal around the center disc, and at about 4" in each direction.

They stopped searching once again and informed the authorities, partially refilled the hole and returned with Steve Young the next day.

Next day at the site

Alan takes up the story, "Next day at the site, Steven partially excavated the infill and quickly agreed with us that the find was extremely significant. He was well pleased that we hadn't gone any further to destroy the context of the find.

His words were, "There will be so much more information that we can recover as a result of this." He outlined that his next task was to approach the heritage

department to obtain a licence to explore the area and possibly exhume any body/bodies, which may be there ... meanwhile the object had been reburied and remained so until he had obtained permission from the relevant authority.



Determining the two areas in which to search © Alan Standish



Making sure the shield boss is centred © Alan Standish

So, it looks as if the cemetery had indeed extended further than was first thought and that there may be two bodies in the area, probably aligned east west in accordance with custom at the time. What is of major importance is that he is trying to establish the missing link of the last use of the Roman site nearby, which was last in use in 460AD and the Anglo Saxon bodies discovered close by a few years ago, dating from 600 to 700AD.

At the end of August those in the group who are trained to use CLASP's own magnetometer conducted a geophysical survey of the site. The initial results were inconclusive, but it did show up an ancient trackway that we hadn't known about. So, after this preparation we turned our attention to the medieval excavation that we had scheduled to take place the following week. There wasn't anything we could do until the licence to excavate had come through."

September and Shield Boss

Members of the CLASP project – fresh from a week's excavation of a medieval site near Daventry – gathered and listened to a brief from the archaeologists as to how the dig was to proceed. The volunteers were integral to the project and are an example of how CLASP brings local archaeology enthusiasts together with professional archaeologists, who lead activities and contribute specialist skills. Whilst all this was going on, Dave continued to search around the area!



Anglo-Saxon warrior © Don Martin and CLASP



A scale picture © Alan Standish



Preparing to lift the body © Alan Standish



Two new burials © Don Martin and CLASP

Under a hot, relentless sun and under the watchful eyes of the archaeologists, Alan joined a group trowelling back the soil. After three days of painstaking work a shield boss was revealed plus and outline of two graves ... and more bones. It was clear that the shield was very delicate and flaking. Recovery was going to be very tricky!

At this stage the gentlemen (and ladies) of the press were invited to pay a visit. A Northamptonshire paper revealed that a skeleton with a shield boss had been excavated and analysis showed that it was likely to be more than 1,500 years old. An archaeologist – probably Steve Young – was reported as saying, “We believe it is 5th or 6th century as the burial seems to have followed pagan rituals. In those days men tended to be buried with a weapon of some sort. Other skeletons we have found in the area have been buried with swords.”

A conservator was on hand to oversee the recovery of the shield boss, which was covered with clingfilm, then foil and lastly Plaster of Paris. Whilst a small group remained at the site to finish drawings, the ‘plasterers’ retired to the local pub for refreshment, saying that they must give time for the plaster to set!

Incidentally, a look back through the project records revealed that a test pit was made in 2005 to try and determine the extent of the cemetery boundary. This had been made only three metres away from the present graves, but nothing was ever found. So near ... and yet so far!

The remains of the smaller body was that of a young female between 10 and 16, but, due to plough damage, there wasn't a skull. When a metal detector was swung over the site, a clear iron signal revealed a small knife, duly excavated under supervision. The adolescent girl's grave also contained beads that could have been from jewellery. She was buried in an east to west direction, indicating a Christian tradition.

Lifting the bones

Alan takes up the story. “Then the time came to lift the shield boss. Three people were involved and after a gentle easing and a quick inversion, the boss came out in one piece and a handle could clearly be seen in place.

After the shield was secured for transport, we set about lifting the bones, but not before we ran the detector over the area where the shield boss had been. Yep, we had another iron signal and again with careful excavation we found

another knife belonging to this huge 6ft warrior. His femur measured 40cm!

Another quick check of the area and a signal with a clear tone emerged, the soil showed a green copper tinge and again with careful excavation we had found a strap end. So, all in all, a very successful result demonstrating clearly the Community Archaeology project is a testimony to those with complementary skills who come together to work for the benefit of our area and nation's history. CLASP is a leader in the concept of Community Archaeology.”

The archaeologist's tale

I end this report by handing over to Steven Young who tells how the work and cooperation of detectorists like Dave, Alan and others is so important to archaeologists.

“Dave Derby and Alan Standish of NARC recently undertook a metal detecting survey in an area adjacent to the site of a small but significant 5th to 7th century cemetery associated with a late Roman villa estate at Whitehall Farm, Northamptonshire. A systematic investigation discovered a brooch and shield boss as well as some disturbed human bones indicating the existence of two more graves. The shield boss was left in situ to facilitate a more detailed record of the context through excavation. This is an exemplar approach and most important prerequisite for recording the past and is evidence of a growing understanding between the two groups based on closer working relationships of the methodological rationale required in archaeology to achieve what constitutes best practice.

The metal detecting group Northamptonshire Artefacts Recovery Club (NARC) is part of our community based archaeological charity and works in tandem with us on all our projects. In this case Dave and Alan identified new archaeological material associated with a cemetery excavated several years ago due to on going erosion and plough damage to the individual burials at that time. Incidentally the original identification of the site was due to Dave's earlier work in the area whilst we were engaged in the research excavation at the villa itself. If nothing else it also demonstrates the importance and usefulness of cooperation between archaeologists and metal-detectorists in establishing the real extent and survival of the archaeological resource.

Previously extensive test pitting of the

wider area around the cemetery during the original excavation suggested that we had the full extent of the site but the recent work undertaken by Dave and Alan has illustrated this not only to be untrue with the cemetery covering a wider area but that these new finds indicate the existence of other graves that were still being subjected to on going plough damage and erosion. As a result the detecting survey enabled CLASP not only to review and re-evaluating the previous fieldwork but enhanced our understanding of the evolution of the cemetery considerably. It will also result in further fieldwork to excavate any other burials that must exist but as yet are not identified as we move towards fully understanding the site.

Initially nine inhumations were excavated hinting at two types of burial rite and possible phases of cemetery use. The larger group of 5th century date was aligned east to west were buried with grave goods indicating a mixture of Christian and Pagan religious beliefs. These inhumations composed of male, female and children skeletons could well represent a band of Post Roman *foderati* – Germanic mercenaries billeted on the estate in the disturbed period subsequent to the fall of Rome. The other smaller group of burials are aligned north to south appear to be later, Pagan and dating from the late 6th to earlier 7th century AD. Presently these appear to be exclusively male and are buried specifically with an item of military gear. These could well represent English and specifically early Mercian settlement of the area. The finding of the two new burials not only confirmed the current interpretation but also has enabled us to build on our hypothesis as to how the cemetery developed through time and relates to the historical context of the area during the Dark Ages.

The importance of these finds will only become fully apparent as we draw all the evidence together but the work undertaken by Dave, Alan and other metal detectorists who work with us will only enhance our general understanding of the archaeology of our area and help underpin its place in the wider setting of Britain's story.” ●

Acknowledgements

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