



Issue: 15 September 2023

# BLHS Newsletter

The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society

## 2024 Calendar Launch

Our calendar for next year will go on sale in October, with an official launch at the October meeting. It will be based on a theme of Transport. The talk at that meeting will be a presentation of the photographs we've chosen and the history behind them.



This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 16th October at 7:30pm.

## Victorian Christmas Talk

A welcome return by Tim Healey with his new talk about how Victorian innovations shaped mass society Christmas as we know it today. Before Victoria's reign, Britons were unfamiliar with Santa Claus, Christmas crackers and cards. Most people did not have holidays from work for the festive period. The wealth and technologies generated by the industrial revolution of the Victorian era changed the face of Christmas forever.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 20th November at 7:30pm.

## Plea for Volunteers

As explained in last month's newsletter, we are still in desperate need of volunteers to help run the society. According to the rules set out in the constitution we require at least six committee members, but we currently have only five. We also require someone to take and write up the minutes of each meeting, though this doesn't necessarily have to be a committee member.

There are many non-committee jobs that would really help keep things running too. Things like organising and cataloguing our archive, writing articles for the quarterly magazine, helping out with events, advertising our talks, plus many others. None of them have to be done by just one person and could easily be shared.

If you are interested in helping out with these, or anything else you can think of, then please speak to one of our few committee members.

## Ghosts and Gouls

Do you know of any Bicester ghosts or spooky phenomena? If so then please speak to Bob who is trying to resurrect our ghost walks.

## Dates For Your Diary

2023 BLHS AGM and talk

*18th September @ 7:30pm*

Bicester Advertiser local history article

*5th October*

October newsletter submission deadline

*6th October*

2024 BLHS Calendar talk

*16th October @ 7:30pm*

Bicester Advertiser local history article

*2nd November*

November newsletter and Bicester Historian submission deadline

*3rd November*

Victorian Christmas talk

*20th November @ 7:30pm*

## Archaeology, Artifacts and a Career in Ruins Talk



Anni Byard, an archaeologist for more than twenty years, introduced her talk back in April by explaining that she studied archaeology, mostly Egyptology and the Ancient Near East at the University of Liverpool. She then began working in commercial archaeology, getting called in whenever a large building project was being planned to record the archaeology of the site before the building work started.

After that she became finds liaison officer at the Portable Antiquities Scheme, covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, then Oxfordshire only for two or three years. Whilst there she studied landscape archaeology, looking specifically at what is called plough zone archaeology. With the Portable Antiquities Scheme, they

work mostly with metal detector users who find lots of little things, often in the plough zone, which basically refers to the top 12 inches of soil on a ploughed field.

She left the Portable Antiquities Scheme in 2019 when she was offered a fully funded PhD with the University of Leicester and the Ashmolean Museum. Originally studying full time, since the Covid 19 pandemic she has been studying part time with the PhD and working two days a week for Oxford Archaeology as their small finds specialist.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme was set up in 1997 when the new Treasure Act came in and replaced the old Law of Treasure Trove. It is a voluntary scheme set up by the British Museum for the recording of archaeological artefacts found by members of the public, mostly metal detector users. If you find an artefact then you can take it to the Portable Antiquities Scheme and they will identify it, record it, put it onto the national database, and then give it back, so all that information is available on the Portable Antiquities Scheme website. The database includes finds from about 500,000 B.C. all the way up to 1800. The scheme has a network of finds liaison officers across England and Wales and they also administer the legal obligations of the Treasure Act. For example, if a detectorist finds a hoard in the ground, they are asked to stop digging, then archaeologists will go in and excavate the hoard to make sure it is recorded properly.

There are currently about 45,000 objects found by the public; this doesn't include archaeological digs. By far the most popular thing to record is coins. About 20,000 coins are currently recorded, from Iron Age right through to about 1700, but also things like brooches, belt buckles, tokens, and finger-rings.

Most of the stuff is not shiny, or ground-breaking, or going to rewrite history, it is just run-of-the-mill stuff and of course has been in the ground for many years. But recording these grotty little things is actually really important.

When asked to choose her favourite find, Anni replied: "Old Blue Eyes, he is lovely. I used to go to Banbury Museum once a month and people would bring their artefacts in. One day a chap turned up with a backpack, put it on the table, and he took this head out and I nearly fell off my chair!" It was found in 1970 when it was ploughed up just outside Brackley. It was a bronze head of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Anni persuaded the finder to sell it to the Ashmolean Museum



The bronze head of "Old Blue Eyes" Marcus Aurelius

for £60,000, so it remained local and is now on display in their Roman gallery.

She also remembered recording a rare 7th century Kentish composite disc brooch found near Bicester. They are usually found, as the name suggests, down in Kent, but a little collection has also been found in Oxfordshire. What is amazing about them is the quality of the gold work and the wide network of trade that they show. The white you can see on the brooch is coral from the Red Sea, and garnets probably from Italy. This was a European wide network of trade and goods. Why we have this little concentration in Kent, but then this little group in Oxfordshire is thought to be something to do with the ruling classes, or the



A digital reconstruction of the Bicester Brooch, which was found in pieces.



A similar brooch, found in Hanney, near Wantage.

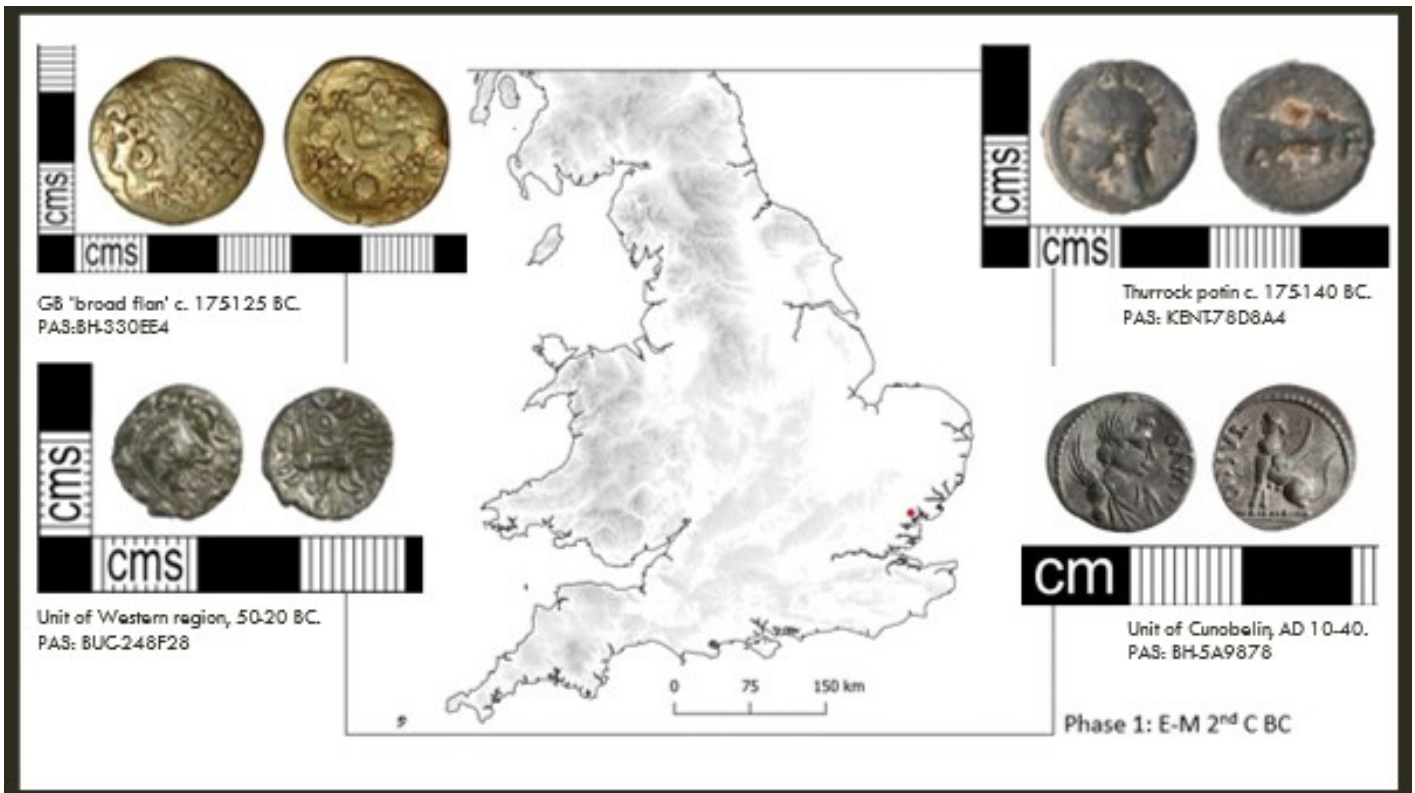
by ringing it. So maybe they were buried because eventually they were going to be recycled, but for whatever reason they never were.



The Merton axe hoard, seen as it was when removed from the ground and after it had been fully excavated and cleaned up.

Gewisse, a tribe of this area during the 7th century. But they must have obviously had connexions to Kent.

The Merton Axe Hoard is another important discovery made locally. It was discovered on the 23rd December a few years ago and Anni's first problem was to secure the site. But it was two days before Christmas and no one was available, not even the farmer. So, she had to block lift it – basically dig it out as a whole and hope that it stayed intact. It then stayed in her kitchen over Christmas before being taken to the British Museum, where they excavated it properly. Bronze Age axe hordes are incredibly rare in Oxfordshire, in fact this is pretty much the only one. There were 13 axes in all. But what is interesting with these axes is that some of them had been used somewhere, some were pretty much brand new, but the metal is not very good quality. The British Museum had a specialist come in and look at them. He said that the Bronze Age metal worker would have known that the quality of the metal was poor



Anni ended the talk by explaining her PhD. She is looking at the Iron Age to Roman transition in Britain from the perspective of coin hoards, and from there looking at the continuity and differences in hoarding practice up to 96AD, the end of the Flavian dynasty. How hoarding is related to context, that is: landscapes, archaeological sites, settlements, temples, that kind of thing. What happened to Iron Age coinage? Did hoarding practice change? We know that the minting of Iron Age coins ceased with the Boudican Revolt of 60/61AD.

If you are interested in the Portable Antiquities Scheme, please do have a look at their website.

**[www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)**

You can search by location and will see all sorts of interesting objects come up.

- Mark Lewandowski

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