Memoirs and Recollections Series

Conversation with David Preston by Roger King
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The Newbold Verdon and District Archaeology and Local History Group

RK
What was the name of the group?

DP
It was known initially as the Newbold Verdon and District Archaeology Group. Later, when we started taking photographs, we added the 'Local History' phrase. It was formed when Leicester Museums started the network of groups around Leicestershire. They wanted to find out more about what went on this side of the county, because as far as the museum knew, nothing went on this side because nothing had been found.

RK
You were one of the founder members. Did you know Mick before, or did he put some sort of note *out to find people?*

DB
No, I don't think I knew him before. I lived at Preston Drive, and he lived on Arnold's Crescent.
He put a put a note in I think the church magazine. My notes tell me that it was started around 1976-77.

RK
There are notes being written in 1978 about it. This one was from Peter Liddle (the Archaeological Survey Officer for Leicester and Leicestershire) *and it was dated June 1978. The group was obviously going then, but why Mick. Was he a trained archaeologist?*

DP
No, by what he has told me is it was Linda his wife who did archaeology at Uni. Mick was a draftsman in Narborough.

RK
Had you been doing any archaeology before that?

DP.
I remember that in 1959 I had to be taken into Leicester to see an optician. It was Parry Williams on St Nicholas' Circle opposite the Jewry Wall Museum, though I don't think it was a museum then. I remember there was a shop nearby and in its cellar they had discovered a Roman mosaic, which I found very interesting to see. That's what might have started me off. Later, in 1974, I started metal detecting locally and I found a few interesting finds. I didn't do it for the money.

RK
So how did he organise it? Was it at his house?

DP
Yes, we met there. I think originally there were six of us. There was me, Mick, and several others, some from out of the village. I think we first met on the 15th. November and we had the first field walk on the 20th. November. Its winter when you field walk but not when it is frosty because you can't see anything unless the frost melts.

RK
But no-one had been trained in field walking? Did Peter Liddle come and do some training?

We went down to the New Walk Museum sometimes. I used to be good at finding objects because of my job. You got used to spotting things off the back of a mower. You had to make sure they didn't damage the blades.

RK
But how did you all know what was worth picking up or not? How did you build up that knowledge as a group?

DP
You can't pass it on. You've got to find stuff and realise what it is. You can see the blue and white stuff, that's dead easy; everyone can pick up that stuff or the thick creamware. I think there was something about identification of pots down at the museum. If you go around there, you'll see all the different types of pots in a unit. You know, then you probably see bits being broken off. We would take our finds back home and wash them carefully to get the feel of the texture of the pot.

RK
And did you get some people coming to walk alongside you from the museum at all?

DP
No. There weren't that many people in the museum, you know. It was a time of austerity and that sort of thing. I think there were twenty or thirty groups formed in the county; well, that's a hell of a lot of people. But we used to go down the museums to very regular meetings and it would be a full house.

RK
It really was a bit of a sort of everybody learning off each other with a little help from the museum?

DP
You would pick it up as you go on. If you found something that looked interesting, you would pick it up and have a word with Mick and see what he says.

RK
How did you start to make decisions about which fields to walk?

We would find a ploughed field and then ask for permission after getting in touch with the landowner. There was Jim Pickering. He was an expert aerial photographer in archaeology, his aerial photographs showing ancient plots. He would fly over, and if he saw anything interesting he would let Mick know and then we would go out and have a look. That's how we found the Mill Field site next to the Windmill Inn on Brascote Lane.

RK

Did the farmers ever give you a clue? Did they ever say there's stuff in that you might want to have a look at?

DP
They would let you walk it, provided you didn't damage the drop. There was no hassle. Just once, we had permission off a tenant farmer in Congerstone to go and date his hedgerow. You did this by counting the number of plant species along a certain distance of hedge and it would give you the approximate date it had been laid. We had been on a museum sponsored course arranged by Mick, I think. It could have been the Workers educational Trust.

We went to the field one weekend, when this chap turned up not looking very happy and it was the landowner. He hadn't been told by his tenant that he had given us permission. He was worried our attendance would encourage others to come along. But most were fine. They just asked to let them know if we found anything of interest.

RK
How did you discover the Roman tile kiln?

DP
I was working in Mary Fisher's garden who lived down the little lane down towards Desford. and she mentioned that George Hill was ploughing boulders up in the field. This turned out to be where the kiln site was discovered. George said it was okay to have a look, and I checked with Mick Preston who rented it from the Church; he was quite interested. When we did a field walk, we found parts of roof tiles and that's what set us off.

RK
Was that the first time you'd come across anything that was Roman or any other period?

DP
No, we had picked a lot of stuff up before then. We did one field walk at Osbaston or actually Gotham as you turn the sharp bend, it was the field on the righthand side. And we found Mesolithic struck flint flakes and many other finds.

RK
You walked quite widely in terms of where you went.

DP
The group's area covered Newbold, Osbaston, Barlestone and Cadeby, and at the start it was Market Bosworth. I think Pete's Liddle's ideas was to get as many areas in as possible, because the more areas, the more people involved. And as far as Newbold, you know there wasn't much there. Well, there was in the end, but before this no one ever showed an interest because nothing had been found here because nobody had looked.

RK
But did you find anything else? I'm sure you were recorded as being local archaeology group that found a Roman villa?

DP

I can't remember now but I know there was a quern stone found in Philip Vernon's field in Osbaston near the farmyard.

RK
Did you find that you started to look for a particular period of history?

DP
Oh no, people have lived here for thousands of years. You can't just pick one thing if you pick a scatter up it could span a long period of history.

RK
And what happened to all the objects that you found?

DP
The decent stuff was taken down to the museum. Most of the finds were what we called 'muck heap scatter'. Thrown away into a midden or ditch by those around at the time. I've got a few bits down home. For example, I found this piece of like a black burnish ware or Anglo Saxon, or it could have been prehistoric.

It came out of some soil, and when gardening you got loads of topsoil. You get all sorts of stuff in from different areas. Some that has come from lower down in the earth but where it originally came from is anybody's guess. You had to be careful not to jump to a conclusion too soon. I remember when we first started digging at the moat at Hall Farm, within the first foot we found some Roman pottery. But that had been dug up somewhere and brought there to build the bank up.

RK
When you did that dig at the moat in 1981, it was quite a substantial dig, wasn't it? Did you have anybody overseeing it for you and giving advice on how to do it.

DP
I think they were there ready to give advice. I think there were a few times they came down from the museum, and we kept them updated on what was going on. We had to write reports on the fieldwork. I remember the weather becoming very wet and the museum people had to finish the excavation.

RK
The group lasted about 13 years, didn't it? Why did it all end?

DP
I can't remember, perhaps when Mick moved to Congerstone I think it all ended then. I had got married and little feet got in the way. Some group members moved away and others married.