

BASINGSTOKE ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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STANCHESTER 2026



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Welcome to the August 2026 newsletter.

It has been a busy summer for BAHS. Despite the soaring temperatures, the excavations at Stanchester in June/July were well attended and a huge success - thanks are due to Mark Peryer and the rest of the field work team for all their hard work, and to everyone who took part. Gazebos sheltered diggers from the worst of the heat, and special thanks go to Pauline Hedges for her steady supply of cooling refreshments, cakes and biscuits. There will be an interim report in the November newsletter.

Also in June, we successfully launched the latest book in our Basingstoke Histories Series – ‘Six Notable Women of Late Victorian and Edwardian Basingstoke’ by Roger Ottewill and Jennie Butler – there is a report on page 4.

As ever, this edition is cram packed with news and articles, including Bob Clarke explaining the background to his latest book ‘The Woman who gave birth to Rabbits’ – which must surely be a contender for best book title of the year? Annabel Stowe goes in search of the grave of JP Williams Freeman - eminent local historian, and dubbed ‘Father of the (Hampshire) Field Club’. And Kayleigh Cooper takes us on a personal tour of Jarlshof, the remarkable historic site on Shetland.

Hope to see you at our September lecture meeting.

Penny Ingham

BAHS LECTURE PROGRAMME 2026/2027

All lectures take place at Church Cottage, Basingstoke at 7.30, with the exception of The Melsonby Hoard on January 11th, which will be online.

September 7th: The Winchester Cathedral Mortuary Chests Project

Dr Heidi Dawson-Hobbs, Senior Lecturer in Biological Anthropology, University of Winchester

October 5th: Winchester to Bolton: the progress of the Paulets

David Whiter, Historian

November 2nd: Made with humility and skill”: The origins and development of the Verwood-type pottery industry

Dr Dan Carter, Archaeologist

December 7th: Children of Basingstoke Workhouse

Barbara Large, Historian and author

January 11th The Melsonby Hoard

ONLINE PRESENTATION ONLY

Dr Sophia Adams, British Museum

February 1st: Roman Archaeology and Science: New discoveries and interpretations

Professor Tony King, University of Winchester

March 1st The Cretan Labyrinth – myth, history and afterlife

Dr Katy Soar, University of Winchester

BOOK LAUNCH FOR 'SIX NOTABLE WOMEN OF LATE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN BASINGSTOKE'



BAHS hosted a successful celebratory event on Monday, June 1st, to launch our latest publication, 'Six Notable Women of Late Victorian and Edwardian Basingstoke', the seventh in our Basingstoke Histories series.

The book was written by local historians, Roger Ottewill and Jennie Butler, who are also stalwarts of the Victoria County History Hampshire team. They contributed to 'Basingstoke Reinvented 1800-1925', as well writing for various journals and papers on the local history of Basingstoke and Hampshire.

Held at Church Cottage, the event drew more than 60 guests. The evening began with an entertaining talk from Roger Ottewill giving



insights into his and Jennie's research process, and a taster of the lives of the 'six notable women'.

The evening also included a book-signing session, with a lengthy queue.

The celebrations concluded with Roger and Jennie cutting a marvellous custom-made cake adorned with the cover design of

their book, crafted by Pauline Hedges.

About the book

The six notable women celebrated in the book all played their part in the immense social and political changes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Elizabeth Rollin Sealey was the first headmistress of the Basingstoke Board Girls' School, working tirelessly to improve standards in children's education. Likewise, Alice Blatch was the first woman in Basingstoke to secure elective office, serving on the Basingstoke School Board from 1891 to 1894. At her final meeting, she argued forcefully on behalf of children with special educational needs. In the field of social care, Ellen Mitchell was the first woman in Basingstoke to be elected a poor law guardian. During her tenure, she strove to improve conditions in the Workhouse, including the provision of better meals. And on the political stage, Harriot Stanton Blatch was an influential early campaigner for equal rights of working women, and the right of women to vote. Drawing on contemporary newspaper reports and records, the book paints a vivid picture of six pioneering Basingstoke women, and serves as a fitting tribute to their endeavours.

'Six Notable Women' is priced at £6 and is available to buy at our monthly lecture meetings, or from the Willis Museum, or online at: <https://bahsoc.org.uk>

LECTURE BY PROFESSOR DAVID HINTON, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON



*Professor David Hinton cutting
Pauline Hedges' farmhouse cake.*

Our talk for May was kindly presented by long-time friend of the Society, Professor David Hinton of the University of Southampton. The subject was "Rural Settlement in Medieval Hampshire and beyond: from the fifth century to the fifteenth" and David gave a very comprehensive description of all the influencing factors that affected settlement during the period.

These included climate and culture, geology and topology, conquest and immigration plus the transition from rural to congregated settlement.

Highlighted were our increasing knowledge of the extent of late Roman settlement (over 3500 sites now known across England), through development

archaeology and coin finds. Together with immigration, the previously believed population collapse at the end of the Roman period may not have occurred.

Towns started to appear from the 8th century onwards, with clustering around manor houses and churches common. Farming techniques changed, with heavier ploughs and strip farming together with grazing for livestock. Towns flourished through the 10th to the 12th century and it wasn't until the late 13th century that population levels suffered following climate change due to volcanic eruption, and animal and human disease including the black death.

David Austen

WHAT'S ON



HERITAGE OPEN DAYS

11-20 September 2026

Every September thousands of volunteers across England organise events to celebrate our history and culture.

Here are just a few of the things to do and places to visit **FOR FREE** in our local area:

Farleigh House, The Avenue, Farleigh Wallop, Basingstoke, Hampshire. Pre-booking preferred. Friday 11 September: 1000 & 1200. Sunday 13 September: 1500 & 1700

A house has stood on the site for almost a thousand years. The building and its surrounding land have travelled through the generations either by marriage or inheritance since the Domesday Book; it has never been bought or sold in recorded history. Visitors will be able to tour parts of the house, viewing many works of art, portraits, furniture and silverware.

**Gilbert White's House & Gardens, Selborne. 17 Sep 2026.
Pre booking not required**

A museum dedicated to pioneering 18th Century naturalist Gilbert White, who was also Curate of Selborne church. The top floor is devoted to an exhibition highlighting the lives of Victorian explorer Frank Oates, and his nephew Captain Lawrence Oates, a British army officer and explorer who took part in Robert Falcon Scott's Antarctic expedition of 1910–1913. During the difficult return journey from the South Pole, Oates realised that he was slowing down his companions. He made a selfless sacrifice by leaving the tent during a blizzard, reportedly saying, "I am just going outside and may be some time."

**The Great Barn, Wanborough, Surrey, GU3 2JR
Saturday and Sunday 12 and 13th September: 1000-1700
Pre-booking not required**

One of the oldest wooden structures in the south of England, the great barn has endured for over 600 years, a striking legacy of Waverley Abbey's

rich history. There will also be an exhibition bringing 10,000 years of Wanborough's story to life.

The National Trust

Many National Trust properties are offering free admission during the Heritage Open days fortnight, including Hinton Ampner on 12th September; The Wyne on the 12 and 13th of September; Basildon Park near Reading from Monday 14th to Friday 18th September, and Nuffield Place from Friday 18th September to Sunday 20th September. Nuffield Place reveals the surprisingly down-to-earth lives of William Morris, later Lord Nuffield, founder of the Morris Motor Company, inventor and philanthropist, and his wife, Elizabeth.

Historic Reading walking tour:

Kings, Queens, Commoners & Life in 16th-17th Century

Thursday 17 September: 1000. Saturday 19 September: 1030

Pre-booking required.

Meet at Maiwand Lion in Forbury Gardens, Reading, Berkshire

Medieval Seal Making Workshop (Hyde900)

St Bartholomew's Church, King Alfred Place, Winchester.

19th September. Pre-booking required

Step into the shoes of a medieval monk and make a seal for authenticating a grant.

The Royal Logistic Corps Museum, Worthy Down Camp, Worthy Down, Winchester, Hampshire, SO21 2RG

Tuesday 15 September: 1100 & 1300

Join veteran volunteers for an introduction to 300 years of military logistics in this fascinating tour.

(The Museum is open all year round, Tuesday to Saturday 9.30 to 4pm.

Entrance is **free** but donations are welcomed.)

The complete list of events and properties taking part in this year's Heritage Open Days can be found at: **www.heritageopendays.org.uk**

WILLIS MUSEUM

Exhibition until 1st November: I Grew Up in the 90s

Free admission

This summer, the Willis Museum & Sainsbury Gallery brings together more than 200 objects and artworks to take visitors on a journey back to the decade of Britpop, Cool Britannia, Pokémon, Power Rangers and dial-up internet.

TADLEY AND DISTRICT HISTORY SOCIETY

Mon 14 Sept - **Rover Scouts during WWII** – Brian O'Neill

Mon 12 Oct - **Shaw House: 400 years of History** – Sarah Somerville

Mon 9 November - **Pamber Priory – 900 years** – TADS Project Group

WINCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGY RESEARCH GROUP

The National Trust has invited WARG back for a second year to investigate several Bronze Age barrows. September 14th to October 2nd.

More details can be found at:

[WARG: Hinton Ampner Excavation 2026](#)

HAMPSHIRE FIELD CLUB

Sat 19th September – **Conference: Celebrating Hampshire Historians**

United Church Winchester, Jewry St, Winchester, SO23 8RZ

Wed 30th September - 7.30 pm **the Annual OGS Crawford Lecture will be given by John Crook - His life and work in Winchester**
Hampshire Record Office, Winchester.

COOKHAM ABBEY EXCAVATIONS

Cookham Abbey on the Thames near Marlowe was a royal monastery founded by Queen Cynethryth after the death of her husband Offa, King of Mercia, in 796 AD. She was the abbess, and Offa's co-ruler – a queen in her own right and an important figure in Northwestern Europe, corresponding and exchanging gifts with Charlemagne and the Pope. She was the only queen in this period to have her own coinage minted.

Reading University has been excavating the site for six seasons, uncovering the well preserved remains of this early Christian religious



house. Professor Gabor Thomas, who is leading the excavation, explained: “We already know Cookham Abbey was a place of healing. Sick and dying people came here to be cared for in what may have been one of the earliest centres of its kind in England...We are studying ancient DNA and the chemical traces preserved in the buried remains to learn more about who the people buried at the abbey were and the illnesses they suffered from.”

Site tours are available to book:

www.ticketsource.com/friends-of-cookham-abbey/cookham-abbey-site-tour/e-yryvyk

Image shows a coin of Queen Cynethryth found in Oxfordshire.

MILESTONES MUSEUM

Uncover Their Story: Learn about your connection to WW1

Thursday 30 July - 10 December 11:00am

Free with Admission (Must be booked in advance)

Do you have a relative or family friend that served during the First World War? Bring their memory to life with a personal, one-to-one session with Milestones' resident WW1 expert.

Milestones' volunteer historian has spent years studying the Great War, its regiments, campaigns, records, and the everyday lives of the men and women who lived through it. Share the name of your relative or friend by email in advance, and they'll dig into the archives to uncover their service history, the battles they may have fought in, and the wider story of their war. Find out more at:

www.milestonesmuseum.org.uk/uncover-their-story-learn-about-your-connection-ww1

Penny Ingham

BAHS INSPIRES THE NEXT GENERATION OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS



Lilibeth Clarkson (on the left) and Iona Blacklaws enjoy some cooling watermelon during the heatwave at Stanchester 2026

BAHS has long encouraged young people to join our excavations. The list is too lengthy to name everyone, so here are just a few:

James Wood is a stalwart of Stanchester, working on finds processing during his holidays from studying Chemistry at the University of Bath.

Lilibeth Clarkson and Iona Blacklaws will be studying archaeology at the University of York from September. They both agree digging with BAHS played a large part in their decision to aim for a career in archaeology.

Likewise, Luisa Salsi who joined the Basingstoke branch of YAC, (the Young Archaeologists' Club) when she was nine years old, has just finished her first year at York, also studying archaeology.

And last, but by no means least, we are always delighted to host the Basingstoke YACsters at Stanchester every summer. A report on what they've been up to over the last few months can be found on page 12.

Penny Ingham



We have come to the end of another successful YAC season; I think that's our tenth! Our waiting list is still sitting at a healthy 20+, and at present we'll be able to fill four places with new members for the start of the new term in September.

It's been a very busy year, including making medieval style tiles with the help of Steph from Pots to Paint in Viables. The results were amazing.

In May we took the group to Stonehenge, the weather played ball and we looked at everything. We have to thank our volunteers, YACsters and parents for helping us to make this a fun day out for us all.

For our last session in June we looked at evidence for children in the



archaeological record generally and in different types of sites, including settlements; water; buildings and in cemetery contexts. For the second half of the session we played games and discovered that a number of games that we have all

played were invented in ancient times, in particular by the Egyptians. Who would have thought it! Some of the games we played were Jacks/five stones, cat's cradle, dominos, bagatelle, shuv ha'penny, snakes and ladders, draughts and others.

We are now starting to plan for next season, and sadly we now have to do this without our wonderful Treasurer and volunteer Paul Cater who has decided to retire from YAC this year. We wish him all the best for the future. We will of course be looking to recruit a volunteer to this role from September.

Penny Martin, Co-Leader Basingstoke, YAC

OBITUARY

PETER HEATH



Peter died peacefully on 18th April aged 94. He was a very early member of the Society, responding to our first announcements, and he took part in the first excavations at Ructstall's Hill. He went on to play an important part in our progress, serving for many years on the committee and taking a turn as Treasurer and Chairman. He was always most interested in fieldwork and joined in fieldwalking, surveying, excavating, recording and writing up. On more than one occasion he led the excavation and was there to answer the call

when there was an 'emergency' need for diggers.

Working in London close to the British Museum, he was able to persuade some of the staff down to Basingstoke to give us a lecture! He made the arrangements for the first BAHS tour abroad – to northern France and he and his late wife Jean took an enthusiastic part in all our social activities. In retirement, he took an archaeology course and became very interested in the Mesolithic period in the Weald. Until quite recently he attended lecture meetings and retained his support for BAHS.

He was a very kind man, proud of his family, faithful church worker and charity supporter - and, after Jean's death, an intrepid traveller, cruising to other continents. Peter was a valued friend for many years and he will be greatly missed.



Mary Oliver

The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits

Bob Clarke

THE WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO RABBITS: GODALMING'S GIFT TO GRUB STREET



BOB CLARKE

Three hundred years ago in 1726, the country was shocked by the amazing news that a poor woman from Godalming was giving birth to rabbits. The first report in the Daily Journal said John Howard “an eminent Surgeon and Man-Midwife from Guildford” had delivered nine rabbits from her at the rate of one a day.

This sensational news was reprinted in the other London newspapers, including *Mist's Weekly Journal*, which sold between 8,000 and 12,000 copies each week, and the tri-weekly evening posts that were published on the three nights the post-horses left London to deliver mail across the country. The news was then copied by the provincial

papers as far north as the *Caledonian Mercury* in Edinburgh. Soon the whole nation had heard about these strange births.

Later papers provided updates, including the news that King George had sent two of his royal surgeons down to Surrey to investigate. They both delivered rabbits from the woman on separate occasions. After she had given birth to seventeen rabbits, the king ordered his surgeons to bring her to London where, “great Numbers of the Nobility have been to see her and many Physicians have attended her, in order to make a strict Search into the Affair”.

Mary Toft was 23 years old when she gave birth to rabbits. Her husband, Joshua Toft, was a few months older than her. He was a journeyman cloth worker. Due to the depressed state of the cloth industry in the 1720s, their poverty was such that, despite being pregnant and

having a young child at home, Mary was working as an agricultural day labourer.

Mary told John Howard that, in April 1726, when she was about five weeks pregnant, she was weeding in a field when she was startled by a rabbit. She chased after the rabbit and tried to catch it. Shortly after, another rabbit sprang up near her, but again the rabbit got away. That night she dreamt she had the two rabbits on her lap, “and from that Time she hath not been able to avoid thinking of Rabbits”.

A few months later Mary suffered a long and painful miscarriage that lasted several weeks, but then something came out that did not appear to be human. They called in John Howard and over several days he delivered the guts of a cat containing the backbone of an eel, three cat’s legs, one rabbit leg and a rabbit’s head from Mary.

Thereafter, Mary started giving birth to rabbits. Howard spent most of his time in Godalming delivering rabbits from her. When he was not helping Mary give birth to rabbits, Howard was sending letters to “Persons of Distinction in Town” excitingly reporting news of these wonderous births, which was how the king and the newspapers got to hear about the births.

After delivering the ninth rabbit, Howard moved Mary to Guildford because he was so busy delivering rabbits at Godalming that he was neglecting his practice at Guildford. Also, Guildford was more convenient for the important visitors from London he was hoping to attract. When the king ordered his physicians to bring Mary to London, they lodged her in a fashionable Bagnio in Leicester Square near the Prince of Wales’s residence. Mary and her rabbits were the talking point of London. She was surrounded by aristocrats, courtiers and curious onlookers. Doctors were queuing up to examine her. She was being watched 24/7. When Mary finally confessed to having manually inserted rabbits into herself and allowing them to be removed as if giving birth, she was sent to prison where vast crowds flocked to see her. After four months in Tothill Fields Bridewell, she was freed to return to Godalming because there were no laws against giving birth to rabbits.

Mary’s story was a media sensation. As well as providing several months of sensational material for the newspapers, it inspired a host of pamphlets, caricatures, ribald ballads and satires. Many of these delighted in the tale of

an illiterate country girl who outwitted the doctors. Some used her story as an opportunity for bawdy humour. Some reflected the conflict between traditional midwives and men-midwives, while others sprang from resentment about the Hanoverian king's preference for German-speaking physicians and courtiers.

To mark the 300th anniversary of this sensational event that generated hilarity and anxiety and split the nation between those who believed the rabbits had been bred inside her and those who thought the whole thing was a hoax, I have written a book, **The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits: Godalming's Gift to Grub Street.**

The book puts Mary in the heart of the story, explains why she did it, why the doctors believed her, why George I was so interested in her case and what led to her final confession. As well as being a human-interest story, it deals with print culture, medical developments and beliefs, freak shows and other aspects of 18th century life. It has 220 pages, 25 illustrations and is a bargain at £9.99.

Bob will be signing copies of his book at our September meeting.

Subs – Standing Order Reminder

Please may we remind you that our subs increased last September and if you have not already done so, please update your standing order to the new amount before this September. This will help us avoid having to ask you to pay the difference.

As a reminder, the current subscription rates are:

Single membership - £15

Joint or family membership - £23

Paper newsletter supplement - £8

Williams-Freeman: Longevity versus Mortality

Reflections in a Country Churchyard

By Annabel Stowe

Alternative title: *Confused Quest in a Country Churchyard*

On an impulse, one May afternoon in 2023, I called in to Weyhill Churchyard to look for the grave, marked by a piece of sarsen, of Williams-Freeman, eminent local historian. Dubbed ‘Father of the Field Club’ by his associate O G S Crawford, Williams-Freeman’s *Field Archaeology as Illustrated by Hampshire*, published 1915, is still seen by many as one of the most seminal publications of the developing subject. Rather than following his elder brother into the Army, Williams-Freeman entered the medical profession, arriving at Weyhill in 1889 as a country doctor, living at Weyhill Lodge opposite the Church of St Michael and All Angels.



Stepping carefully through a thick carpet of forget-me-nots in a cool corner of the churchyard on that summer’s afternoon, I found what I (thought I) was looking for - Williams-Freeman’s grave. There was a nagging suspicion that all was not well, however. The headstone didn’t look sarsen, for a start, and I didn’t think that **the** Williams-Freeman’s name had been George! People did tend to have more complicated forenames in those days, though. Showing admirable persistence, I returned several times to comb the churchyard for another Williams-Freeman grave, knowing that it had to be there somewhere. Still no success. Still puzzled.

Life then got in the way of this barking-up-the-wrong-tree quest until, over two years later and just this past week, I came into possession of a key fact -apparently **the** Williams-Freeman isn't buried in the churchyard by the church (how silly of me to assume this!) but in the separate cemetery round the corner, a couple of hundred metres away. Cautiously optimistic of success now, back I went yesterday. Sure enough, there was the small piece of sarsen showing the full name, which by now, of course, I had checked, **John Peere Williams-Freeman**. Hurrah! As you probably guessed some time ago, the headstones in the churchyard belong to his elder brother, Captain George C Peere Williams-Freeman and his wife Lavinia Augusta Charlotte.

Closer scrutiny of the names and dates on both sets of grave markers, in both the churchyard and the cemetery, led to my reflections on longevity and mortality (we've got there at last...).



John Peere Williams-Freeman, born 1858, buried at St Michael's and All Angels in 1943, lived to a ripe old age (you can do the sums). His wife, Mabel Christiana Napier Williams-Freeman, died in 1969 at the even riper old age of 97. In contrast, Captain George C Peere Williams-Freeman, was only 49 when he died, and his widow 64. Trotting between the two sets of graves, I then moved on to study the names and ages of the children. The longevity of J P and his wife was echoed in their children, also buried at Weyhill: Grizelda Mary lived to 96, and Ursula Margaret to 93.

Vivien Rosalind was 68, and the fourth daughter, Flora Elizabeth, died in Gloucestershire at the age of 86.

Now comes the really poignant part. Back in the shady overgrown corner of the churchyard, next to the headstones of Captain George and his wife Lavinia, was a smaller grave marker, smothered in ivy, commemorating Patrick Peere Williams-Freeman, born October 2nd 1898, who died exactly a year later on October 2nd 1899. His sister, Lorna Augusta, didn't even make it to her first birthday, only to ten months. I appreciate that infant mortality was high in those days, but read on ...



The final twist in the tale. I had assumed that Patrick Peere and Lorna Augusta must be the children of Captain George and Lavinia, as they were buried in the same plot. However, subsequent research revealed that they were in fact the children of J P,

which means that, of the six children which Mabel Christiana bore, two made it to their 90s, one to her 80s, one to her 60s, but two didn't make it to their first birthday. It somehow felt doubly sad that the names of these two little mites had been illegible until I had peeled away the ivy.

Longevity versus mortality. The luck of the draw. On that thoughtful note I shall end, but with a sudden chilling realisation – today's visit, and the writing of this piece, took place on October 2nd.

Acknowledgements:

David Allen's *Following in the Father's Footsteps: a few miles with J P Williams-Freeman*, HFAS Newsletter No.74, Autumn 2020

Jarlshof: Walking Through 4,000 Years of History

Field Notes from a Visit to Shetland's Most Remarkable Archaeological Site

By Kayleigh Cooper

Introduction

On the southern tip of Shetland, battered by sea winds and surrounded by the constant cry of seabirds, lies one of the most extraordinary archaeological sites in Britain. Jarlshof is a place where time sits close to the surface and has been inhabited for more than four millennia.

I visited the site on a bright but blustery day, walking through layers of history that quite literally rise from the ground. What struck me most was not just the age of the place, but the sense of human continuity. The realisation that people have been living, working, and adapting to the same landscape for thousands of years.

The Earliest Houses: Hearth and Home

The journey through time begins with the earliest settlers, around 2500 BC. These were the first farmers of Jarlshof, who built simple oval houses from stone and turf beside the bay. Each home is centred around a hearth, the focus point of prehistoric life.

The surrounding shell middens reveal how they lived: growing grain, collecting shellfish, keeping cattle and sheep. Wood was scarce, so roofs were probably made from turf or driftwood.

Bronze Age Smithy: Sparks of Innovation

By around 800 BC, the settlement had changed. A small, stone-built smithy marks the arrival of skilled metalworking on the site. Inside, a bronze smith once tended his fire, melting and shaping metal into tools, ornaments, and weapons. Fragments of moulds and bronze castings found here tell us that Jarlshof was no isolated outpost. Instead, it formed part of a network of trade and exchange stretching across the North Atlantic.



The stone-built Bronze Age smithy (c. 800 BC), marking the introduction of metalworking at the site. Inside the smithy, evidence of casting and tool-making revealed skilled craftsmanship and wider trade links.

Iron Age Wheelhouse: A Circle of Life



A well-preserved Iron Age wheelhouse, with its circular layout and internal stone divisions built around a central hearth.

Moving forward in time, the architecture shifts again. The Iron Age brought the wheelhouse, one of the best-preserved examples of its kind in Scotland. These circular stone buildings, divided into compartments around a central hearth, were designed for warmth and stability. The wheelhouses replaced earlier brochs,



offering practicality and comfort rather than defence. Among the finds are painted pebbles and rotary querns; small glimpses into domestic life and ritual.

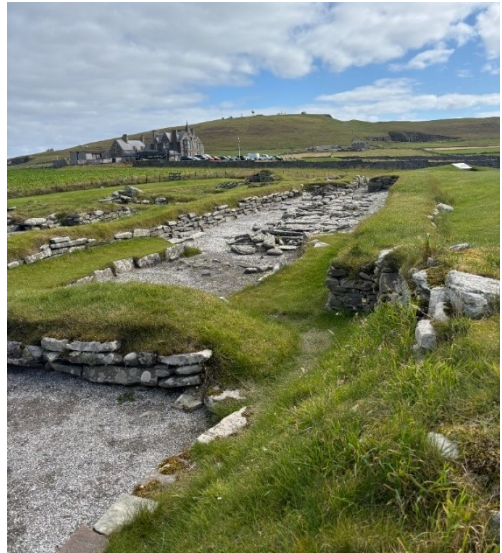
Left: Interior view of the Iron Age wheelhouse, showing the radial compartments that gave the structure its distinctive 'wheel' form.

Norse Settlement: New Arrivals From Across the Sea

By AD 850, Norse settlers from western Norway had arrived, drawn by Shetland's location on key sea routes. Their rectangular longhouses were very different from the circular buildings that came before, reflecting Scandinavian building styles adapted to the local environment.

These were practical and enduring homes, with living quarters at one end and byres for animals at the other.

Archaeologists believe the Norse occupation lasted through at least twelve generations. Whether these newcomers integrated with the existing community or displaced them remains unclear, but their influence on Shetland's culture and identity is unmistakable.



Stone foundations of Norse buildings, illustrating how living spaces and animal byres were combined under one roof.

Medieval Farmstead: Continuity and Change

By the late 1200s, the Norse longhouses had evolved into more complex medieval farmsteads. The rectangular stone buildings visible today were built for families who grew and processed ‘bere’ barley, a hardy grain still cultivated in Shetland. Corn-drying kilns, visible at one end of the structure, were used to preserve the harvest through long, cold winters. Even after Norse rule ended in 1469, their influence endured. The layout of these medieval buildings reflects the same patterns of resilience and resourcefulness that defined the earlier Norse farms.

The Laird’s House: Power and Abandonment



The ruins of the 16th-century Laird’s House, a fortified residence later abandoned and gradually buried by sand.

The most recent structure on the site is the Laird’s House, built in the 1500s as a fortified residence. It marked a new chapter in Shetland’s story, reflecting the arrival of Scottish authority. Its thick walls and high gables stood in stark contrast to the humble turf homes that had come before.

However, like so many grand projects, it did not last. The building was eventually abandoned and buried by sand until archaeologists uncovered it in the late 19th century. Standing beside the ruins today, it is easy to see how quickly nature reclaims even the mightiest of structures.

How we Know what we know

The visitor centre at Jarlshof gives fascinating insight into how archaeologists pieced all of this together. Through excavation, radiocarbon dating, and environmental analysis, each layer of settlement has been carefully recorded. Animal bones, seeds, and soil samples tell us what

people ate, what crops they grew, and even what diseases they faced.

Modern techniques such as aerial photography and geophysical surveys allow archaeologists to detect buried features that are invisible to the naked eye. Jarlshof remains one of the best-documented multi-period sites in northern Europe, revealing how communities adapted to changing environments over thousands of years.

People, Stories, and Legacy

Although we can piece together how the people of Jarlshof lived, their individual stories are lost to time. Yet their legacy endures in Shetland's culture. Storytelling, a tradition that stretches back to the Viking age, still forms part of island life today.

The 13th-century Orkneyinga Saga tells of the Norse jarls who ruled these northern seas, while Sir Walter Scott's 1822 novel *The Pirate* revived their legend for a new audience. It was Scott who gave the site its name, Jarlshof, meaning 'The Earl's House', and the name has stayed ever since.

As I left the site, the wind was still strong, but the sun was shining, and I couldn't help but reflect on how much history survives in this small stretch of coastline. From stone-age hearths to the laird's grand hall, Jarlshof is not just a ruin, but a living timeline of human resilience, ingenuity, and connection to place.

BASINGSTOKE ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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