



Time Signs Episode 1 The Deserted Valley

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Countryside

The English countryside is perhaps richer than any other in the visual evidence of the past. And yet it is a strange fact that we know more about historic castles and churches than we do about the small villages, hamlets and farmsteads where the majority of our ancestors lived. We know from documentary evidence that isolated settlements that lie scattered across the English countryside date back to Domesday and possibly beyond. Yet in only a small number of cases have archaeologists been able to peel back the surface to discover what lies beneath. Knowing more about this aspect of our common past is an essential element of our culture and it has relevance to the present. By looking at the way our predecessors lived, we are able to get a perspective on our own way of life and the effect we are having today on the landscape around us.



Bratton Clovelly

It is our own contemporary values and needs that have, in one area of southwest England, led to a unique archaeological opportunity. The valley of the River Wolf is destined to become a new reservoir. Three miles of water, over 100 feet deep, will soon flood the valley. Thanks to the



River Wolf

cooperation of the reservoir builders, archaeologists and historians have been able to take a complete area of the landscape, including its settlements, and examine each layer of archaeological evidence before it disappears beneath the water. The skills they apply to the landscape and the objects they find will build a picture of the men and women, our common ancestors, who have farmed in the valley of the River Wolf for over 2000 years and left signs of their presence as evidence of the past.

The search for evidence doesn't begin in the dusty documents of museums and libraries, but in the everyday landscape in which we lived.

'Archaeologists traditionally are thought of as that we dig. They dig in the soil, they find things, record them and so on. But in fact a lot of archaeology isn't concerned with digging and one of the most important processes is called fieldwork. This is where people actually go out in the fields and look for evidence of past activities without actually doing any digging, without any disturbance to the soil. And where it's done over huge areas, it can really tell us a great deal about prehistoric settlements, Roman settlements, medieval settlements and in some cases, what's actually going on in these settlements. It's as if we're using the bits and pieces found in the soil as sort of little time capsules, little clues, to what's been happening in the area sometimes in the quite remote past.'

These clues are the result of people's interaction with the landscape over thousands of years and their discovery is an important event. It's the moment when the past starts to break through into the

present and begins to release its flow of information. This can create a significant effect. Single fragments of evidence may completely change our view of a crucial aspect of the past. It's possible to read this evidence of the object in the landscape like an historical document, an ability which is part of the archaeologist's trade.



Arrowhead

'This is about 4000 years old, an object like this. That in itself is quite an interesting feeling. This object was made, used by somebody an awful long time ago. It would be lovely if this thing could actually paint us a picture around it of when it was made. We might have a situation where the harvest is in, all the crops have been brought into the farmstead, it's the end of the summer into the autumn, there's time not only to maintain the buildings, put some fences up and so on, but there's time to make some new implements. The drawings of course always show people sitting outside the house in the cold, but I fancy they would sit inside and they would knocking out a new set of arrowheads for the hunting season, perhaps showing the younger members of the family how to make it and, at some stage during the autumn, perhaps on a reasonable day they would be off into countryside around that was probably still wooded this period for a lot of areas. And they would be after the red deer, perhaps the wild boar and so on, the wild animals that we find on archaeological sites. And so all of that is encapsulated in a way in an object like this, all the family relationships, the buildings, the lifestyle that went on at that time. As I say, about 4000 years ago in round figures.'

Objects like a piece of worked flint, a shard of pottery, a piece of stone from a foundation, are some of the basic raw materials that archaeologists use to build up a picture of the past and are the kind of information we're going to be looking for in the valley. In isolation, they can only tell part of the story, but combined with background knowledge, research and the kind of painstaking work that goes on at archaeological sites throughout the country, they become part of a jigsaw of evidence that builds up to create an impression of the lives our ancestors once lived.

We may be able to pick up this kind of historical sixth sense that some archaeologists seem to have. As we explore this valley, we too can perhaps begin to perceive its past more clearly, to see in our mind's eye the slow turn of a medieval mill, hear the sound of a prehistoric ax as it cuts into a tree.

'A find like this raises a question of whether this represents people actually coming through the area, passing through perhaps on a hunting expedition when it was lost, or were they were actually living here, and what the relationship of where they would have been living, the settlements in the area, is to the present settlement. We don't know very often how old the farms were in the area. Do they in fact go back to the prehistoric era? Now ideally it would be nice to actually take the farms down, dig underneath them. But this isn't possible. People continue to work in the land, they don't want to be disrupted that much. It's not something archaeology is able to do. But with the work that's going on in the valley, with the building of the Roadford reservoir, the opportunity's presented to us as archaeologists of actually looking under these farms. When they're taken down, to have the opportunity of looking underneath, you can see how old the settlement is in this area, how far back were people living here. And this is the sort of golden opportunity that isn't normally available to us and it's going to be very interesting to see what sort of story comes out of this.'

The Wolf Valley lies about ten miles from the northern edge of Dartmoor, running from north to south. The river is one of the tributaries of the Tamar and although small, it carries an abundance of trout and salmon. And its high level of purity made it an attractive source for the reservoir supplier. At each end of the valley, the sides steepen to enclose the Wolf in wooded hillsides. At the northern end, the small village of Germansweek is located, and to the south Broadwoodwidge. Each village has its church and both, along with the distant church at Bratton Clovelly, have played their part in the life of the valley. Below them, the small hamlets and single farmsteads that lie within the area to be flooded, are scattered throughout the valley. Moving south from Germansweek, these include the mill site of Hennard, on the eastern side the settlements of East and West Wortha and, further to the south, we find Shop Farm.

'This is actually where the ordinary people lived. This is where the vast majority of humankind, if you like, for the last 6 or 7000 years have lived. They've lived in places like this, they've farmed in places like this, they've lived in the sort of buildings that you see here. That is, rather small basic sort of buildings. But that is where most people have lived. And a lot of us find great attraction in looking at the ordinary, looking at the lot of the common man if you like, rather than the great royal or ecclesiastical structures. And that's really the attraction, the ordinariness of it all, that's the real attraction.'



4000 Years Ago

'In the Devon landscape, of course, you've got every possibility of continuity from very early times. The Roman conquest, the military takeover, the ordinary everyday peasant carries on farming, carries on living in the same site, carries on doing what he's always done, probably swap the landlord, but basically he's got to go on farming, he's got to go on growing the crop. So there is continuity, that persistence of those agricultural communities, the farming year if you like, the necessity to plant and harvest and look after the animals, year in year out. It can't break because there's starvation if you break down. And it really doesn't matter what's going on at the top level as long as those chaps on the ground, the predecessors of all the people that have just left the valley, have carried on doing that work. And we can see that it's probably got a 6000-year history at least in a valley like this.'

At this stage, we don't have much hard evidence of that history. We can only guess at how far these sites go back in time. However there are references to the area in the Domesday Book and, just outside the valley, is a farm called Breazle, a name which may suggest links with the Celtic past. A set of documents relating to one of the farms refers to a settlement near the river in medieval times. Our starting point for our journey back into the valley's history begins at the environmental level. This can give us an idea of how the soil structure and vegetation may have influenced the valley's farmers. Over the generations, they would have had to meet similar challenges in their battle to gain a living from the soil.

'Just generally looking around me, there are a lot of things I can actually say about the landscape and how it might have been used in the past, simply by for example looking at the soils. Now the soil in this area is a heavy clay soil. It's prone to waterlogging. This soil retains a lot of moisture and it's



Clay

also very hard to work. It means the growing season's shorter. So in the past, there would have been areas in the valley which were far better used for pasture than for arable production. The soil is important because it's the basis for growing food. If you're going to settle an area, then you need to have a good food supply. And you tend to find that the better soils are around some of the old settlements in the valley. Now much of the land today is used for pasture and it probably would have been in the past. There are areas of the lower valley which are very wet in the summer and you would have had to have been very careful with your livestock because otherwise you would have created problems with destroying the soil structure by putting animals on land which was far too wet.'

'From my own experience working in the valley, I can tell you it's not only the farmers who have problems with this sort of clay and the sort of conditions it produces. Many days we've spent trudging through ankle-deep mud, which is very difficult to work in, very difficult conditions to work in. And if you can imagine a farm located in the lower reaches of the valley, which would have been fairly wet in the winter, at times with the livestock moving backwards and forwards along trackways, it would have made life quite difficult.'

So archaeologists, looking at the valley for the first time, would expect to see the earlier settlements on the higher, south-facing well-drained slopes. At this stage, we're still at the surface level. The speed of the reservoir construction means that it's important to get as much as possible from the structures that still exist.

'We can actually interpret something of the decay of the buildings, what they were used for and indeed the various phases of the life of the buildings, from what we can actually see. There's some lovely modern clues littered about to tell us that sort of information.'

'Right, coming through the garden gate now into what was the garden, which is all pretty overgrown, hard to get through the brambles. And bear in mind that we're talking about a very short length of time for this place to be abandoned, people moving out. We can already see ivy growing up the walls, probably had some ivy anyway. It's actually growing up under the eaves, taking over the porch, the windows are beginning to fall out. So we're seeing the beginnings really of an archaeological process whereby a building just falls apart. This one may well be demolished before it gets that far. But to an archaeologist this is very interesting because we're actually seeing the place producing the sort of archaeology in the ground that the archaeologist then comes in later and actually digs up. So we're seeing the beginning of that process, piling the material up. And as we go around the farmyard, we can actually see piles of stone, cob that's fallen apart and going back into soil, bricks that are falling down. And the vegetation's coming in over the top of it and as it dies down, rots away, more vegetation comes in. You get the beginnings of a series of layers of archaeological deposits building up on the site. So this is right at the beginning of that process.'

One of the great advantages of the farming community, from the archaeologist's point of view, seems to be that they rarely throw away anything that might be useful, and if they do, it ends up in the vicinity of the buildings. All the sites seem to have their small rubbish heaps, where more recent historical small evidence of a kind accumulates. Amongst the range of objects that still exist are the everyday papers and materials that will gradually begin to rot away.



Abandoned Farmhouse

'Here we are outside and I think if we can pull the brambles aside a bit, am I looking in to what? I suppose it's a dairy or a kitchen. It looks as if they just walked out and more or less left everything as it was, certainly left all the everyday items, nothing of any obvious value left behind. I don't much fancy going in there because the roof doesn't look too good but I can see all sorts of documents, lists and so on and what looks like agricultural papers which, of course, an archaeologist or historian in the future would give their eye teeth for, the actual day-to-day accounts of how people are spending

their time, their shopping journeys and so on. This is the most ephemeral evidence in fact, the stuff that rots away first and foremost and it's interesting it's still actually just here. I wonder how long it will be before the water gets in and it all rots away.'

'Right, well this is really horrible, this bit is, because we must be in what was somebody's bedroom once and I feel really like a trespasser. I also feel not too safe because just above me, you see up here, is a ceiling which is bowed down pretty horribly, plaster's come away. But again, we have a superb example of where people have just moved out. And they've left all sorts of objects. We have a completely unsavoury collection of objects, in fact, like a finger stall and a broken comb and a brush. I don't know whether I've had a tetanus injection recently but perhaps I should have done. I think to be quite honest I prefer it when it's a bit more decayed than this. This is a bit sort of smelly and dusty and a bit unpleasant for my liking. I like it when it's got to the stage where everything that can rot has rotted and we end up with perhaps the metal of the glasses case or the rings of the curtain without the cobwebs and dust and all the rest of it on it. So I think a suitable retreat is called for from this place before anything worse happens to me.'

'You can see the layers here of the cob underneath, brick on the top and then a layer of plaster over top of that is coming away, here this place is. A bit like layers of an onion, as you peel the layers off, you get back into time.'

These buildings are in themselves time signs. They can be read like an historical document, to tell us about the lives of people who once lived in them.

'It soon became apparent that these buildings had a lot to tell, a lot of information in them. Beneath the wallpaper, the pink bathroom suites and things like that, there was some really interesting features. We have secondary fireplaces where it's almost as if we have like a stonemason going around to every house and selling the same style of granite supports. And we also have clome ovens that are being inserted like, again, everyone has to buy one for their house, everyone has to have one. And the way the buildings change from a single dwelling to a dual dwelling, presumably there's some time in this valley's history where houses are either not being built or it's just too expensive, and having two families living in a house that was built. And we're just seeing this same story in each house we go to. And if we're lucky, sometimes we see a building where there's a sharing of human and animal occupation. We have the nice even flat cobbles for the humans around a fireplace and a hearth, whereas the room next door would have very rugged cobbles with drains, obvious signs of animal occupation.'

The shape of the buildings we inhabit reflects the priorities we have in using the space around us. In a modern home, for example, the small amount of space for growing food and, in contrast, the large area devoted to the car, represents the relative importance of these needs. The structure of these earlier dwellings in the valley indicate a different set of priorities. Here the living space of the farmer and his family was clearly of less importance than giving shelter under the same roof to the animals, on which they relied for their survival. Traditional building skills still survive and the area and they're useful in enabling archaeologists to study the kind of techniques, like building in cob, that we used in the past.

[cob builder] 'They've stood the test over a number of years because if you even go back to the twelfth century when they made cob and they're still standing. It's very cool in the summer and it's very warm in the winter. So there's no way you can condemn cob really. And all you do is add straw to the subsoil. But don't ask me how much straw I actually put in because, as I said earlier, it's like mother making a cake. She put in a handful of this and a handful of that and it came out beautiful. But it's just getting to know the right texture for this, and once you've the right texture, it's no trouble. But this is the hard way of making it. Normally we have two little bullocks to tread it up. And when they said that they added the dung to cob, the little bullock added the dung because he always reckons when he left work to leave his dung behind and that's how the dung got into the cob. I was taught this when I was only knee-high because I belonged to fourth generation of building in this old stuff.'

[archaeologist] 'We've got people that were living in them until five years ago. And they can turn around to us and say this is this and I remember when father put this little brick seat in the corner of the fireplace so I could sit there during the winter. And when we take out the packings from the fireplace and there it is, there's a real community history. And it's things like, we're not just learning from the buildings, we're learning from local people.'

'Did your father plant some of these?'

'Yes, and also me brother. He took it on after father died ... trees I can remember seeing ... I reckon.'

'And all your brothers worked on this farm?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'And then I suppose it was about 15 years ago that the reservoir began to be talked about.'

'Yes, it upsets, awful ... they'd be talking about it morning, noon and night, be on all the time ... didn't want to get out ... Nothing you could do about it, you know. This will be the last crop of apples ... last one, yep.'



Roadford Dam

'The point I think to make about an archaeologist's day is that in a way it's a mistake to think it's about the past. An archaeologist can look at any community, whether it's people living 5000 years ago or indeed people living today, and can learn a lot about them from physical evidence because that's what we deal in. We deal in structures, we deal in pottery finds, we deal in objects. It's a way

of looking at things, it's a way of looking at societies. And it's equally applicable today. And the great value of archaeology, I think not only to adults but also to schoolchildren as well, is that it should make them question their role in the society, within what that society's doing. And the way we deal with past societies, certainly with our students, that's what happens. And I think that's a tremendously important role when as we see here, we effect our surroundings so drastically in what we do. And if archaeology just gives us that edge to stand back and think well quite, what are we doing here, your know where do we fit into it, then that should be its primary role. Certainly I would say that's its primary role today.'

Transcribed by Kim Baldacchino

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