

High Wych History – 21 - Early Days

As you may know I concentrate on recent history. If ever a book will result from these writings, it will be a collection of essays covering particular aspects of High Wych life after 1800, not a linear history. Also: others have covered the territory already. This time however, I do want to go a bit further back..

Just how old our village is, I have as yet been unable to find out. Early maps such as Sellers from 1676, Oliver from 1695, Walker from 1746, Warburton from 1749 and Dury and Andrews of 1766 all call it "Highwick" spelt as one word. Wick as a suffix in place names such as Warwick or Eastwick is Middle English for farm or settlement. So the name of our village means farm or homestead on a hill. High Wych, as two words with the second one rhyming with the first is perhaps a "poshification" dating from the mid 1800s

Going back to the very beginning: early settlements in our area both in East Herts and over the border in Essex date from the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic era. Bronze Age pottery was found on the Rowney Farm estate. It was around there, at Rowney Lodge to be precise in March 1898 that workmen discovered two "cinerary urns" Nearly four decades later, on 14th December 1935 the Herts and Essex Observer reports the finding of ancient relics and skeletons in the same area. A week later H.C. Andrews, secretary of the East Herts Archaeological Society (EHAS) writes to the same paper reporting that several objects had been removed, and that "various authorities outside the county had been consulted and visited the site..... If the finders of objects would submit them to us it would greatly assist in keeping an authentic record". To me that sounds as if the objects had become the subject of local politics!

It was clear though that a professional archaeological dig would have to be undertaken. An appeal was launched to EHAS members for money to fund such activity and excavations did indeed take place around Easter in 1936. On the 11th April 1936 the Herts and Essex Observer once again writes on the subject: The skeletons were taken away To Oxford for examination. Dr. Mortimer Wheeler promises to examine and report. H.C. Andrews of EHAS in a preliminary report finds that 20 burials were unearthed and that associated objects point to these dating from the third and fourth centuries AD.

Boys from Harlow College, John Sapsford amongst them, assisted in the excavations. Many years later John writes in his memoirs: "In the summer of 1937 (some mistake there!) I spent several happy days helping with an excavation of pre roman remains discovered during the building of new houses now known as Rowney Gardens. Some 20 skeletons were found, but my work was in a kitchen area where I uncovered some crude pottery and a deer antler, probably used as a pick." The EHAS transactions. (see next page) did indeed publish a photograph of such an item.

Strangely only a preliminary report was ever published. The skeletons, so it said were "taken away to Oxford for examination" by a Captain Musgrave of their anatomical department. What the Oxford people reported, if anything, I did not find out. The only reference I did find was published in the Bulletin of the British Museum Natural History.

The first volume of "Story of Sawbridgeworth" (recommended if you can still find copies) also reported on the Rowney Garden finds and furthermore says " All these Roman finds seem to be connected with the burial ground of a Roman settlement not yet itself discovered". What made them say that? Sadly Lionel Munby and his helpers have now all passed on. So there's another question which for the moment remains unanswered.

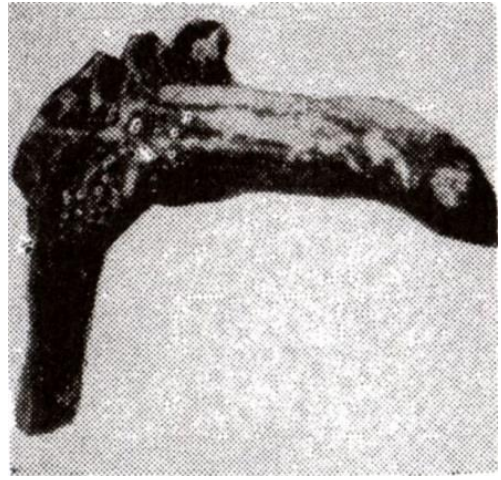
Whatever is the case, six of the Pishiobury - Rowney Garden items did end up in Hertford Museum where they were kindly shown to me some time ago. I had hoped to encounter the "glass bead earring and the "deer antler pick" mentioned in the preliminary report. Sadly they were not there. The objects also seem to have come from Pishiobury rather than Rowney Gardens. Not that that makes the slightest bit of difference as to their historical value.

On a future occasion I hope to deal with the period between AD 400 and AD 1800.

My sources this time have been "The Story of Sawbridgeworth" by L. Munby e.a, the Transactions of EHAS, the East Hertfordshire Archaeological Society, Sarah Taylor from Hertford Museum, the Herts and Essex Observer and the people at HALS, aka County Archives. Previous articles from this series (many in extended versions) can be downloaded from the Parish Council website at <http://www.highwychandallensgreen.co.uk/8.html> Meanwhile, the High Wych History Project still needs your contributions, your memories, stories and photographs. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 72546



From the EHAS transactions: A skeleton found at Rowney Farm



Another photo from the EHAS transactions. – Perhaps this was the deer antler pick found by John Sapsford.



14-12-1935: The Observer reports on the findings



A Roman jar



Six objects from Pishiobury now at Hertford Museum