

# Uncovering town's royal past

Archaeologists this month spent two weeks on an intensive dig at the site of Wyke Grange, just outside Faringdon, investigating one of the most important mediaeval discoveries of recent years.

The Cistercian farm complex is believed to have once covered thousands of acres over all of what is now the parish of Great Faringdon, from the line of the present by-pass as far as, and including, Radcot. Documentary evidence backed up by aerial photographs indicate that the farm was of elaborate proportions fit for royal visitors, and included three giant barns equal in size to the famous 'tithe' barn at Great Coxwell. Employing many local people, and run by lay brothers, it once served King John's abbey at Faringdon before shifting to the authority of the monks of Beaulieu, in Hampshire.

Firm fragmentary evidence of a mediaeval building had long been visible amongst the turned earth of the fields of Faringdon House estate alongside the Radcot Road. But it was an archaeologist from Swindon office of the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments, Graham Soffe, who worked out the significance of the buildings from new aerial photographs, and identified the site as that of Wyke Grange. Mr Soffe, who lodges in Faringdon, has set up a steering committee to make plans for in-

## Dig begins at Wyke Grange



vestigating the grange. This month's dig was merely exploratory, because the site is not at risk except from future ploughing. But Mr Soffe is optimistic that further excavation could take place next year if funding becomes available — particularly as the field in question is then likely to be empty of crops, under the Government's set-aside scheme.

The excavation team, led by Andrew Millard of the Oxford University Archaeology Society, and including some local enthusiasts, dug test trenches into the foundations of the old buildings, which are believed to have been abandoned somewhere between 1600 and 1750. They uncovered part of the foundations to one of the barns, and also considerable human and animal debris which will be scientifically analysed. Fragments of richly decorated mediaeval floor tiles were also found just below the surface, where the great hall may have been.

The group also made geophysical surveys, and carried out systematic field walking over a wide area. They were looking, particularly, for the dairy, the chapel, and the main domestic buildings themselves. These, according to Mr Soffe, would have been of 'palatial proportions', because of the high status of the grange which played host to King Henry III and Prince Edward, together with their vast entourages.

Also under investigation are the grange's fishponds (which would have been complete with sluices to drain out the water in order to gather the 'harvest' of fresh carp) — one of which may have formed part of the garden to the later Tudor grange which belonged to Sir Henry Unton's family after the dissolution.

Among local enthusiasts and members of the Faringdon Historical Society who joined Mr Soffe and Mr Millard's team on various parts of the dig were Paul Haskin, Ann Allen-Stevens, Rosemary Church, Betty O'Brien, Alison Corley, Robert Dyer, Gill Collett, Katharine Stocks and Walter Booth. Faringdon residents, including Peter Curzon of Stanford Road, also helped out with dry clothing and replacement camping gear when rain and wind hit the university diggers' campsite near Faringdon House, and John and Ann Allen-Stevens threw a party at their home, Wicklesham Lodge.

● Pictured above, at the site of a trench where wall foundations can be seen uncovered, are Shrivenham student Katharine Stocks and Graham Soffe, of the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments, with (inside the hole) Andy Beaumont and team leader Andrew Millard.

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