

Shillington Archaeology

Test pits and field walking

We have been investigating the archaeology of Shillington since 2013. In that year, Shillington families, friends and neighbours excavated small test pits in their gardens. The aim was to look through the soil for things that people had used long ago and then thrown away or lost. Over 100 people took part.

A generous 'All Our Stories' grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund enabled Cambridge Community Heritage to send a team of archaeologists led by Doctor (now Professor) Carenza Lewis to support the work.



Test pit at Redhouse Farm



Archaeologists Carenza Lewis (right of photograph) and Alex Prior (centre) along with pottery specialist, Paul Blinkhorn (foreground) supervised teams of residents working at 15 sites in Shillington.

Since then a group of enthusiasts have continued digging test pits in Shillington and Pegsdon and carried out field walking and metal detecting. They have found thousands of pieces of old pottery, coins and other artefacts.

Many can be dated and suggest where their owners lived at the time. What has been found shows that parts of Shillington have not always been occupied and the site of Pegsdon has moved completely!

To find out more, take a look at the most recent reports: -

[Shillington Archeology - Shillington History \(shillington-hub.org.uk\)](http://shillington-hub.org.uk)

What have we found?

Paul Blinkhorn has examined every piece of pottery from the test pits and field walking and recorded the period when it was made, its type and weight. Plotting its distribution on maps- each dealing with a separate period- is revealing how settlement in Shillington and Pegsdon has changed over the centuries.

As well as pottery, finds have included: -

- Numerous broken bowls and stems of clay pipes for smoking tobacco
- Worked flint
- Pieces of sharpening stone
- Pieces of brick, floor tile, roof tile, slate and other building materials
- Coal and charcoal
- Metal items including, nails, horse and pony shoes, pieces of farm machinery, bottle tops, coins and buttons
- Glass bottles, pieces of window glass and marbles
- Animal bones and teeth, oyster shells
- Modern 'rubbish' including pieces of plastic, crisp packets and electrical cable



How test pit and fieldwalking finds have added to Shillington's history

The prehistoric period

Flints are common in the soil in this area but some of them show signs of knapping where striking one against another repeatedly makes a tool with a very sharp edge. Fieldwalkers collected several between 2017 and 2020 near Shillington church. Among them was an 'Aeschulian' hand axe (pictured below) of a type that nomadic hunter-gatherers used between 450,000 and 240,000 years ago when there was a temporary warm interlude during the ice age.



It is possible that it was crafted at a 'factory' in Hitchin where early humans (*Homo heidelbergensis*) made them around 400,000 years ago. Neil Pinchbeck, lithic expert at Enfield Archaeological Society identified it and provide the pictures of the front and back.

Mesolithic (9600 - 4000 BC) and Neolithic (4000 - 2300 BC) flint scrapers, blades and pot boilers have also come from Church Field and also from several test pits. They may be the first signs of semi-permanent settlement in this area as the climate warmed gradually at the end of the ice age.

Two Shillington test pits have produced Bronze Age pottery with a relatively large quantity from the Old Vicarage garden (SH13/11, pictured) producing evidence for a settlement site in about 1,000BC. The availability of one of life's essentials- fresh water from nearby springs- makes this most plausible.

A small sherd of Iron Age pottery appeared in a test pit at 59, Hanscombe End (SH19/3) in 2018.



Made between 800BC and AD0, a small sherd of Iron Age pottery appeared in a test pit at 59, Hanscombe End (SH19/3) in 2018.

A small piece of Romano-British pottery found on Pegsdon Hills may be part of a cremation burial urn and we found a similar piece (pictured) in a Pegsdon Grange test pit (PEG21/2) which indicates that people were living in Pegsdon in the first century AD.

The Roman occupation in 43AD to 410 and beyond

Roman pottery occurs in modest quantities in about 1 in 4 test pits. Unless manuring has affected the distribution of this pottery, it suggests that small, dispersed family-run farms dotted the landscape.

Generally, archaeological evidence from after the Romans left in 410AD through to 1,000 are uncommon and this is so in Shillington. These six centuries have produced no pottery from any of the test pits so far. People may have lived in an area where there have been no test pits so far. There were outbreaks of plague towards the end of the Roman occupation and raids by Saxon invaders which may have reduced the population in this area. However, 2 test pits in every 3 with Roman ceramics also contain Late Saxon pottery from about 1,000, hinting that habitation might have been continuous but left behind no trace.

Late Saxon and Medieval times

Late Saxon pottery from about 1,000 has turned up in roughly one in three of the test pits and much has come from the centre of modern-day Shillington and shows the village forming as families left their scattered farms to live close to others. The pottery shows settlements evolving at Upton End and Hanscombe End as well.

Made between 1066 and 1400, early medieval pottery appears almost everywhere in Shillington and its 'Ends'. Most of the 18 sites that had late Saxon pottery also contained early medieval but its appearance in 28 additional test pits demonstrates a rapidly increasing population and new homes being built. By the 'high' medieval period around 1300, Shillington's layout was similar to how it was in 1850.

Pegsdon was also a thriving village then although the test pit pottery shows that settlement was further west than it is now. Moated sites demonstrated that some individuals had become wealthy.

The creation of strip lynchets on Pegsdon Hills (pictured below) shows extra land being used for crop production and confirm that the population was rising.



The Late Medieval period began around 1400. Pottery improved in quality and included green glazed Brill/Boarstall ware. A sherd of it appears in the photograph.



However, the weight of pottery from this period had halved compared with the 'high' medieval and about 40% of the occupation sites had been abandoned. Upton End and Hillfoot End may have been the worst hit.

The reduction in pottery supports other evidence that it was the plague or Black Death that was the culprit and it may have killed between one third and half the population.

Post medieval onwards

Some of the area's oldest surviving buildings such as Pirton Grange (photographed in the 1950s) date from the 1500s and more were added as time went by.

Documentary evidence builds up too and shows that the village is recovering from plague-induced problems.

Pottery made after 1550 backs this up, showing settlement sites rising from 29 to 49 and yields nearly trebling.

The trend continues to the present day and Victorian or later pottery has been found in almost every test pit.

