

Archaeologists find key to Devon's Medieval past

University of Exeter archaeologists may have found the key to Stokenham's Medieval manor house. Along with local schools and members of the community, the team has been digging a site in the South Hams village throughout July to try to uncover Stokenham's Medieval history.

The dig has unearthed hundreds of items, including 13th century coins, a belt buckle, building materials, fish hooks, animal bones, sea shells and pieces of pottery. All of these help to piece together the history of the manor house, but the latest find, an ornate 15-cm-long iron key with a heart-shaped handle, is the most exciting discovery yet.

The key was uncovered by first-year archaeology student Lynsey Dunn amongst rubble from the abandonment and collapse of the manor house in the late 16th century. The animal bone provides interesting insights into medieval lordly life and the discovery of deer bones by first-year student Grace Doughty hints at the elite lifestyle of hunting and feasting.

Dr Howard Williams, University of Exeter archaeologist and dig leader said: 'This site, now just a field, contains the well-preserved remains of a Medieval and Tudor manor house, which would have been the heart of the village until the 16th century. The site is full of clues as to who lived here and how the house was used. Amidst the vast arrange of building material, objects and artefacts uncovered, the key is a particularly striking find. At first glance a familiar item to the modern eye, the key dates to a period when life was markedly different from today, but which saw the dawning of the modern age. The archaeological evidence at Stokenham is casting light on the period when medieval institutions such as the manor were undergoing rapid alteration. The final abandonment of manor house at Stokenham in favour of a fresh site nearby may have been a means of making a break with the medieval past.'

Dr Williams and his team of twenty-eight students have worked with local volunteers and school groups to reveal the structure of the building, which was completely hidden underground. They have unearthed several collapsed walls and have also found evidence of a road leading up to the house. While previous research into medieval settlements in the South-West of England has focused on the uplands of Bodmin Moor, Dartmoor and Exmoor, the work at Stokenham is giving new insights into the origins and development of lowland settlements. For the South Hams in particular, the project, now it its third year, is adding considerable information to our knowledge of rural life in the later medieval and early modern periods. The University is working closely with the parish church and the local community on this project and the work is providing invaluable archaeological training for the students and volunteers taking part.

Despite the unusually wet weather this summer, the team is pleased with the progress it has made. Dr Williams said: 'We've only lost about two hours' work through bad weather. The enthusiasm of the students and support of the community has been superb.' The team will now take their finds back to the University for analysis.

This dig, which finishes on Tuesday 24 July, is part of the X-Arch (Exploring Archaeology) community project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The excavation is also supported by the Archaeology Exploration Fund, which is funded by donations from the University's alumni.

Source: University of Exeter

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