

## **“Ancient Dead of Hampshire (and Beyond)”**

**Talk by Dr Dawn Cansfield, January 2025**

Our first talk of 2025 was by Dr Dawn Cansfield on how modern techniques have added to our knowledge of ancient human remains found in Hampshire and elsewhere in south-east England. Until recently Dawn was a research fellow at the University of Winchester and is the author of three main research studies on ancient human remains. Most of her work has involved reassessing skeletal material, stored in museums, uncovered many years ago and this re-examination has often led to original assumptions being disproved.

New techniques such as DNA profiling mean that we can now find out much more about our ancient ancestors. Evidence of age, biological sex, and pathology, even hair colour can sometimes be determined and the location, position and orientation of the original burial, along with any surviving grave goods can add to the picture.

The first case study we looked at was a fairly recent (2006) evacuation at Itchen Farm near Winchester. This contained burials from the early Neolithic to post-medieval periods. The earliest burial was of a child in a crouched position facing north. The grave had flint flakes, pottery sherds and a sarsen stone. The bones were in a poor condition but it was possible to determine that the deceased child had a problem with an eye socket, indicating malnutrition or parasitic infection.

A Neolithic long barrow was discovered at Nutbane near Andover in 1955 and excavated two years later. Although the site had been badly damaged by ploughing, the remains of four bodies buried in crouched positions in a mortuary enclosure were discovered. The bodies were covered by soil and chalk blocks and the graves contained remains of “Windmill Hill” (early Neolithic) pottery. One of the skeletons was of an adult male with the top centre teeth removed, perhaps evidence of a long-forgotten ritual?

Another long barrow at Barton Stacey near Andover was largely destroyed by the MoD in 1940, although the human remains were salvaged. This consisted of the partial remains of four individuals and could represent a family group. The remains have still not been accurately dated so there is scope for further research.

We then looked at another very-eroded long barrow at Chattis Hill in the Test Valley, excavated in 1898. The remains were lost for many years but have now been tracked down and mainly consist of skull pieces.

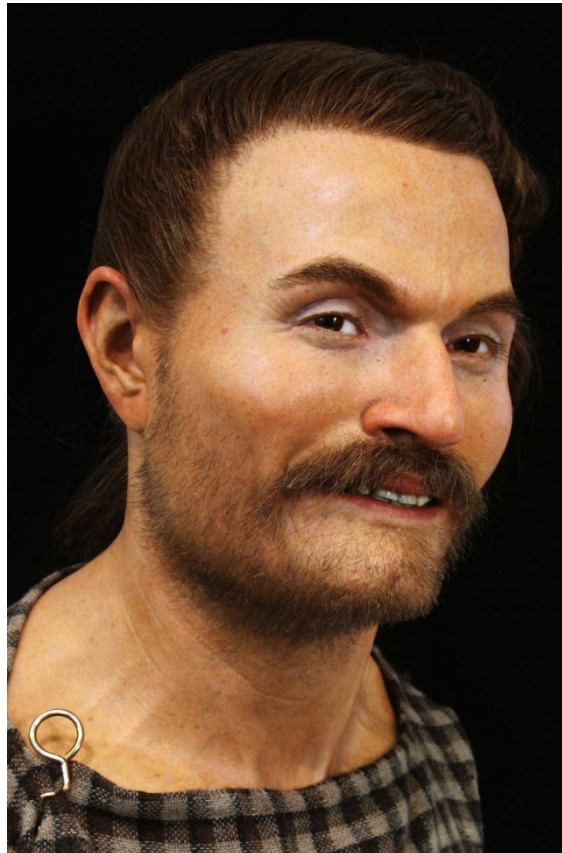
A particularly interesting case is provided by human bones excavated at St Lawrence, Isle of Wight in 1923, dating to the Bronze Age. Recent examinations point to an early to middle Iron Age date, making the site much later than originally thought. Another site on the island is a round barrow at Knighton, excavated in 1928. This consisted of a centrally-placed skeleton with Windmill Hill pottery, although carbon 14 dating showed the skeleton to be early Bronze Age.

Moving into Sussex, we looked at Tolmare Farm, where a non-monumental burial was found by farm workers in 1957. This proved to be an adult male aged over 45 who had no top teeth! He had a slight curvature of the spine and arthritis so must have suffered from back pain as well as halitosis! The remains were dated to the middle of the Iron Age.

A flint coffin containing a female of about 25 years old was uncovered during residential development in Woodingdean near Brighton in 1934 and was described in the local press as a “4,000

years sleep”, the remains being identified as late Bronze/early Iron Age although a more recent re-examination has indicated that they are earlier.

A storage pit uncovered during road works at Slonk Hill, Shoreham in 1968 contained a male skeleton in a semi-crouched position. The burial dated from the Iron Age and contained a thick pile of mussel shells and fossilised sea urchins as grave goods. The face of the male has been reconstructed, showing a cleft chin and through DNA we can even determine his hair colour.



*Reconstructed face of the “Slonk Hill man”.*

Being able to look at the face of a long-dead ancestor really brought home how far archaeological techniques have progressed and we look forward to future revelations.

*Alan Sandford*

*February 2025*