



NEWSLETTER: MARCH 2025

ABINGDON ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY SOCIETY

A WELCOME FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Dear AAAHS Members,

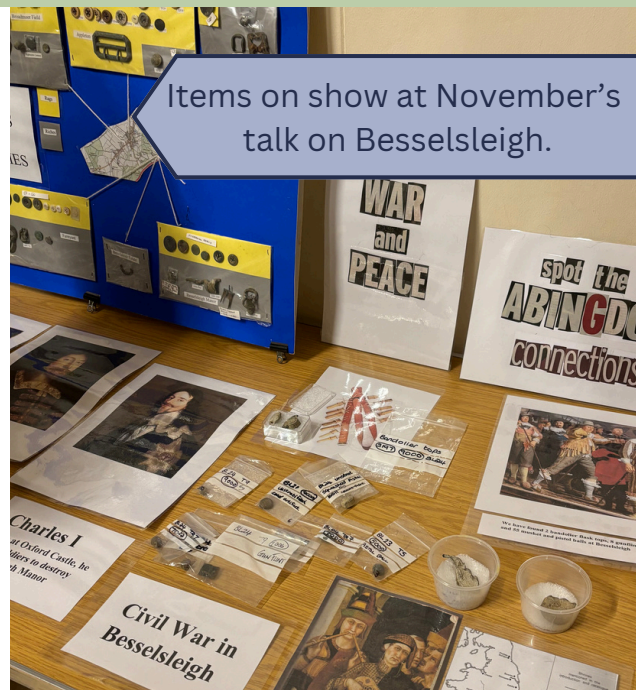
Welcome to the revived AAAHS Newsletter! The Society last published its Newsletter in Autumn 2021. Now, with Sophie Torrance joining the Committee, we have more capacity and are able to resume producing a twice-yearly Newsletter. We are very pleased about this, as it's a good benefit which we can offer to AAAHS members.

This edition of the Newsletter contains a number of items which we hope will be of interest. They include a report on current work to revamp the Society's website, write-ups of the talks which we've had since September, an article on the Brunel Houses at Steventon by Chris Brickwood (who spoke on this topic at our Open Evening last June), an article by David Clark about the Clough dynasty, and a 'who's who' of the current AAAHS Committee.

This edition of the Newsletter is, in a way, experimental. We'd be very pleased to have your feedback on it. Is it about the right length, too long or too short, and do you have any suggestions for the kinds of things you'd like to see in future editions? Please send us your thoughts to: [email address].

The Committee is most grateful to you all for supporting the Society. We feel that that AAAHS is in good heart, with membership numbers fairly steady and good audiences at our monthly lectures. We are, though, one committee member short. Being on the AAAHS Committee is not a major commitment, and having another hand on deck would be a great help. Please give it some thought.

We hope you enjoy this Newsletter, and please do send us feedback on it - communications@aaahs.org.uk.



Items on show at November's talk on Besselsleigh.

COMING UP

AAAHS Monthly Talks

7.45pm at The Northcourt Centre

Thursday 17 April

The Archaeology of East Oxford

David Griffiths & Olaf Bayer

Thursday 15 May

Lambrick Lecture

Getting Big Stories from Small Finds:

The Portable Antiquities Scheme in Abingdon and Oxfordshire

Ed Caswell

Thursday 19 June

Open Evening with Presentations by Members

Abingdon Heritage Weekend

Sat 13 & Sun 14 Sept
Abingdon



WEBSITE REDEVELOPMENT

Sophie Torrance

Communications, AAAHS Committee

We are pleased to share that the Abingdon Area Archaeology and History Society's website has been successfully updated.

The website now has an upgraded content management system (the nuts and bolts whirring in the background that make the website function). This makes the site more navigable and visually pleasing, and allows us more flexibility when it comes to arranging and displaying menus and articles.

WWW.AAAHS.ORG.UK

Although the website is still a work in progress, and members can look forward to further refinements over the coming months, it is now in excellent shape and we encourage you to take a look.

Our aim is to make this an online hub for historical and archaeological resources, news from the local area, and all the important information that members might need about AAAHS talks, activities, visits and more.

In particular, you may enjoy browsing the following:

1

The 'Gallery' page which includes a selection of old photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. More photos will be uploaded over time, so keep checking back!

2

The 'People' page under 'Research Archive' for some fascinating profiles of Abingdon figures, written by members of AAAHS.

3

While we are celebrating the reestablishment of the AAAHS newsletter, head to 'Newsletters' to take a look back at over 20 years of AAAHS news.

We welcome your feedback as we continue to tweak the website to make sure it is appealing and functional for all members. If you'd like to share your thoughts, please email us at: **communications@aaahs.org.uk**.



Please note that the Clocktower is on private property, and not viewable from the public footpath.

MEMBER PHOTO



The iconic Clocktower of Radley College stands prominently in the centre of the campus. It was one of the first constructions following the founding of the College in 1847 (inadvisably, given the financial constraints they faced). It was hoped that one day the College would be able to afford a clock, but initially bells to call the boys to chapel were the priority.

"The Tower is a very beautiful structure, built of plain brick, and thoroughly German in character and proportion." - Robert Singleton, Radley College Founder, 1847.

Exactly what 'thoroughly German' might mean is unclear, with research pointing to Romanesque towers in the Rhineland, the C11th tower of Sompting Church, Sussex, and a C19th drawing of a chimney at nearby Abingdon Abbey. Originally free-standing, the tower buttresses were added in 1855.

It was not until 1864 that the school could finally afford a clock.

Send us your photos: **communications@aaahs.org.uk**.

JOHN GANDELL AND THE 'BRUNEL HOUSES' AT STEVENTON

Chris Brickwood, Steventon History Society

What led Brunel to write to John Gandell in November 1840 referring to houses built at Steventon as “your houses”?

John Gandell, born in Worcester in 1815 to a merchant family, was ten when the Stockton and Darlington Railway opened. Ten years later he joined Stephenson's London & Birmingham Railway as a sub-assistant engineer and opened an architectural practice. When the L&BR was completed in 1838, Stephenson wrote to Brunel with a good reference for Gandell and he joined as Resident Engineer for the GWR Reading-Swindon and as architect for the domestic buildings at Steventon station. Gandell rented and furnished a large house at Faringdon for his family.

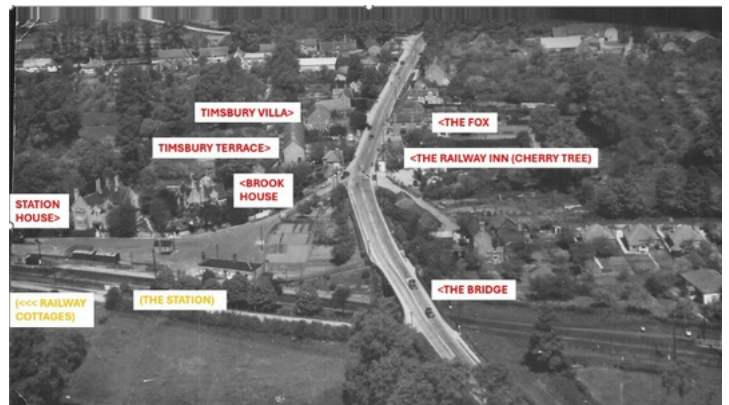
There were two attempts, in 1837 and 1838, to pass a bill to enable the building of a branch line from Didcot to Oxford but both failed - so Steventon became where Oxford passengers transferred to a stagecoach.

Gandell then got his team to produce contract drawings based on Brunel's sketches.

Brunel and Gandell had a fractious relationship at times, with Brunel often complaining about excessive costs, delays, and speculative building. Brunel wrote in early 1840 that Gandell needed to choose: engineer or speculator, and Gandell resigned as Resident Engineer but stayed to finish the Steventon buildings.

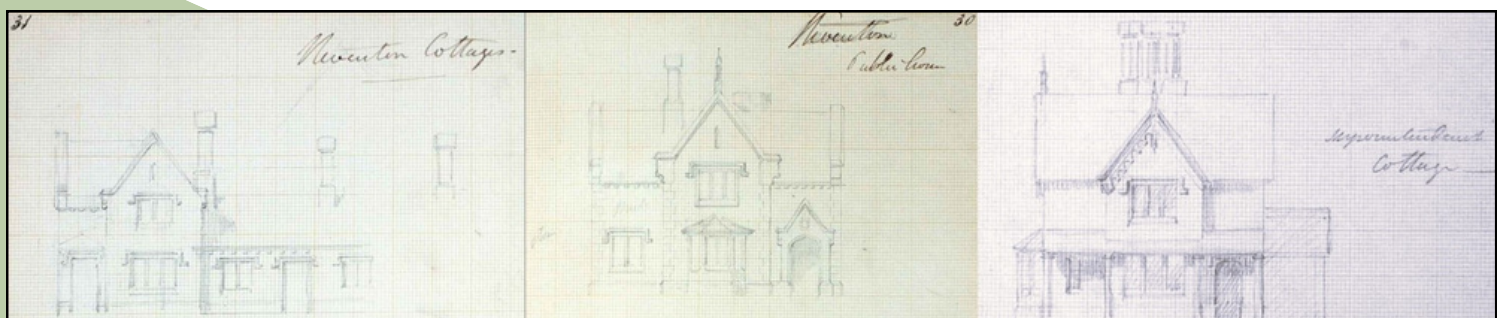
In April 1840 Brunel wrote “to complain very seriously of the delay at Steventon. We shall open that place on 1st June and there will evidently be neither cottages for our men or stables or any other of those accommodations which you have undertaken to supply.” He advised that a much larger Superintendent's House would be needed as “Mr Bell, with a wife and a dozen children cannot live in the house I proposed”.

In fact, the cottages (demolished in 1969) the stables (also demolished) and the two houses (today known as Station House and Brook House) were ready on time.



▲ *Steventon in the 1950s: Station House & Brook House are just north of the station; the cottages just out of picture west. The Timsbury houses in the photo were built for coal merchant Robert Langford in 1877).*

▼ *Brunel produced these sketches for nine railway workers cottages, a pub, and a superintendent's cottage.*



JOHN GANDELL AND THE 'BRUNEL HOUSES' AT STEVENTON

The superintendent's house was apparently owned by the GWR from the start, but Gandell built the other properties on land leased from the GWR: he presumably thought that Steventon was going to remain an important station, either unaware that Brunel continued to plan a branch line from Didcot to Oxford or he discounted this.

The superintendent's house was much bigger than originally planned but the 'pub' became a hotel and refreshment room: there is some debate as to which building was the superintendent's house and which the hotel.

It may have been due to expenditure on the hotel that Gandell ran out of money in Autumn 1840: he put everything in the Faringdon house up for sale but was declared bankrupt.

In 1842 the GWR advertised the sale of Gandell's leases but Steventon lost the Oxford connection when the Didcot to Oxford line opened in 1844: the last reference found to the hotel was an 1845 advert for the sale of the contents, and in 1851 it was empty. The history of the houses since then needs further research.

Despite Brunel's refusal to provide references, Gandell set up an engineering partnership in Birkenhead in 1844 but was again bankrupted in 1847 (allegedly because of non-payment for work done). He went to Italy in 1852 to build railways in Tuscany but was bankrupted again (backers pulled out because of the Crimean War) and he was imprisoned for 16 months for fraud.

Eventually judged innocent he was released, built more railways in Piedmont, retired in the 1860s to Mondovi, but lost most of his money again having invested in a gas lighting project. He died in 1886 a poor but apparently well-loved man.

► *Station House, now two homes, the rear of which is called Sycamores, (top and middle) and Brook House (bottom) today.*



AAAHS TALKS ROUNDUP

We have enjoyed a number of fantastic talks over the last six months, covering topics as varied as rewilding, Commonwealth War Graves, the archaeology of Besselsleigh Manor, and the Christmas Truce of WW1.

The Road to Peace is Paved with Headstones: An Introduction to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The 2024-25 AAAHS talks programme began with an insightful and sobering talk by CWGC speaker Dick Richards.

Founded in 1915 by Sir Fabian Ware, CWGC began its work to record the names, dates, and locations of the fallen in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances, determined that instead of mass graves, each individual would be commemorated by name.

Design of the cemeteries involved famous horticulturists, writers and architects such as Gertrude Jekyll, Rudyard Kipling and Edwin Lutyens. The first cemetery was opened just a year before the outbreak of WW2.

The CWGC Archive is available to use online: www.cwgc.org

Conservation and Rewilding: Recreating Ancient Landscapes?

On 17 October, we enjoyed an inspiring and moving talk by Peter Taylor, author and ecologist. Peter discussed the role that rewilding is already playing in restoring biodiversity to areas of the UK, as well as overseas. Not only does this help habits recover from human development and agricultural pressures, it makes them better able to cope with changes in climate and weather and, as Peter explained, helps to bring home the 'soul' of local ecology.

We discussed the UK's ancient Atlantic Oak Forest which, during the last interglacial period, was home to our very own species of elephant, rhino and hippo. We also looked at rewilding reintroduction success stories such as red kites, beavers and white tailed eagles.

Importantly, Peter showed that no project can be successful if human neighbours are excluded and overlooked. To work, rewilding needs to be a collaborative and sensitive transformation which involves people at every age, making the landscape something for them to be responsible for and treasure.



UPCOMING TALKS

at 7.45pm in The Northcourt Centre

Thur 17 April

The Archaeology of East Oxford
Speakers: Dr David Griffiths & Dr Olaf Bayer

Thur 15 May (Lambrick Lecture)

Getting Big Stories from Small Finds: The
Portable Antiquities Scheme in Abingdon and
Oxfordshire

Speaker: Ed Caswell

Thur 19 June

Open Evening with Presentations by Members

A Place Apart: Recent Excavations at the Deserted Medieval Manor and Village of Besselsleigh

On 21 November, we welcomed Dr. Jane Harrison for a fascinating talk on the archaeological excavations at Besselsleigh. The area boasts a rich history including Roman routeways and significant Iron Age finds.

Dr. Harrison highlighted the archaeological record of Besselsleigh Manor, including Anglo-Saxon pottery and pinheads indicating early settlement. The manor flourished during the 12th and 13th centuries, with its thick walls and notable medieval discoveries, such as a sealed pilgrim's ampulla from Walsingham. A standout find was a rare 14th-century water pipe, transporting fresh water from a well to the manor—an unusual feature outside monastic contexts.

The manor's role during the Civil War was equally compelling. Initially held by Royalists, it was later retaken, slighted, and partially rebuilt before serving as a girls' school and eventually falling into disrepair.

Dr. Harrison's presentation on the site's layered history and significance, was generously supplemented with artefacts for attendees to examine.

Meet at Dawn Unarmed: The Christmas Truce of 1914

In August 1914, Captain Robert Hamilton left his young family behind in Devon to start a six month journey through France and Belgium with the 1st Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. A few months later, he recorded in detail the Christmas Truce of 1914, in which he played a prominent part.

For our December talk, Andrew Hamilton shared his grandfather's personal account and debunked some famous elements: while soldiers traded cigars and chocolate, there was never a football match!

Find out more: www.meetatdawnunarmed.co.uk

AAHS TALKS ROUNDUP

Recording Britain: Celebrating the Country's Natural Beauty & Architectural Heritage

In the early days of WW2, the Recording Britain scheme, masterminded by Kenneth Clarke, Director of the National Gallery, was a professional lifeline for artists who were commissioned to go forth and capture the country's architectural and social heritage in watercolour.

On 16 January, Dr. Graham Twemlow took us on a tour of Oxfordshire and our neighbouring counties through the work of artists such as SR Badmin, John Piper, Kenneth Rowntree and Phyllis Dimond who recorded market squares, high streets and everyday scenes before they could be destroyed by an anticipated invasion.

In all, 63 artists were involved with the scheme, creating 1549 works which were eventually published in four volumes as *Recording Britain*.

The Archaeological Excavations at Wittenham Clumps

In February, we were joined by Nat Jackson, Senior Project Officer at DigVentures. Nat's talk on DigVentures' excavations at Wittenham Clumps explored the site's long history of settlement. Castle Hill and Round Hill were occupied from the Bronze Age to the Roman period, with evidence of fortifications, homes, and industry.

A key discovery was an early Iron Age blacksmith's forge, likely a regional center for tool production. Roman finds included a villa, imported pottery, coins, and domestic artifacts. The inhabitants farmed, fished, and hunted, storing grain in pits for winter.

The site's strategic position by the Thames made it a key settlement for centuries, from prehistoric times to King Offa's reign.

Find out more: <https://digventures.com/projects/>

CLOUGH ON BOARS HILL

David Clark, Architectural Historian

There are three Cloughs in this story: Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect, Arthur Hugh Clough, the poet, and his son (of the same name). The last of these was the chap who gave the architect his first commission. They were all associated with Boars Hill, but in quite different ways.

Clough Williams-Ellis designed the Lodge at Orchard Lea on Bayworth Lane (Fig. 1) in 1908 for Alice Dryden, historian and photographer, who had moved to Boars Hill from Canon's Ashby after the death of her father, Sir Henry Dryden. Last year I gave a short talk at the members' evening in June about the house, and the story of the building has now been published in *Oxoniensia*, the journal of OAHS, in an article titled 'Family Jobbery' (Vol. 89 pp. 175-207), and I shan't repeat that here.

Following the meeting, I was introduced to the author of an article in the Summer 2015 newsletter of the Boars Hill Association relating to another house very close to Orchard Lea – Foxcombe End (Fig. 2).

This was built in 1926 by Oxford architect Thomas Rayson for two headmistresses, Lucy Silcox and Olivia Dymond, who had chosen the area for their retirement home. Initially, this did not seem to be relevant to my search for other Boars Hill houses that Clough had designed, but in it, one name was prominent – A H Clough – and I knew I had to investigate further.

The trouble is, which of the two Arthur Hugh Cloughs was being referred to? This had clearly also puzzled the author of the 2015 article, but I was able to tell him that while the elder (1819-1861) was indeed the well-known poet – who had introduced Boars Hill to his schoolmate from Rugby, Matthew Arnold, a visit that led to *The Scholar-Gypsy* and *Thyrsis* – he was dead before Lucy Silcox was born. But although the younger Clough (1859-1943) was the man who invited the young Williams-Ellis to design the 'Home for Feeble-minded Girls' on Cumnor Hill (1905), I had not previously associated him with Boars Hill. Indeed, as he was born in London and brought up there by his widowed mother, I had not even connected him with Oxford.



▲ *Figure 1: The Lodge, Orchard Lea, Bayworth Lane*



▲ *Figure 2: Foxcombe End, Boars Hill*

CLOUGH ON BOARS HILL

Looking into this, I found him in 1871 at age 11 boarding at Summer Fields School in Summertown. Ten years later he was at Trinity College, Cambridge. The 2015 Boars Hill article mentioned that he had maintained a long correspondence with Lucy Silcox – letters that were burnt after her death. Lucy (1862-1947) was clearly a formidable woman (see ODNB <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/53822>) and what seems to have linked her to Clough – and some of the other clients of Williams-Ellis – was the creation and early period of Newnham College, Cambridge.

The first Principal of Newnham (in 1879) was Anne Jemima Clough, the poet's sister. Lucy was a student there from 1881–1885, and Sophie Earp was also there in its first decade. She, along with her companion Lily Dougall, commissioned Clough Williams-Ellis to build Cutt's End House in Cumnor village in 1911 (Fig 3.).

Around the time A H Clough (junior) was at Trinity College, his sister Blanche Athena Clough was also a student at Newnham at the same time as Lucy. (Blanche later was also to become its Principal.)

So, although Lucy and A H Clough probably first met as students and thereafter went their separate ways – Clough married Eleanor Freshfield, one of the Thackeray clan, and Lucy, who never married, was closely involved with Ottoline Morrell's social circle at Garsington (which included her on-and-off lover the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who lived for a short time in Bagley Wood Road) – and they clearly kept in touch.

So, while none of this helped me with my research on the houses of Clough Williams-Ellis, it did shed some light on the Clough family connection with Boars Hill, and perhaps, with its proximity to Oxford and Garsington, why the headmistresses chose it for their retirement.



◀ *Figure 3: Cutt's End House, Cumnor Village*

ABINGDON THEN & NOW

30 Ock Street, the site of Brind Gillingham and Co.,
Ironmongers, stationers, etc.



c. 1905



2024

Sophie Torrance recently
found this clay pipe in
her back garden in
central Abingdon.

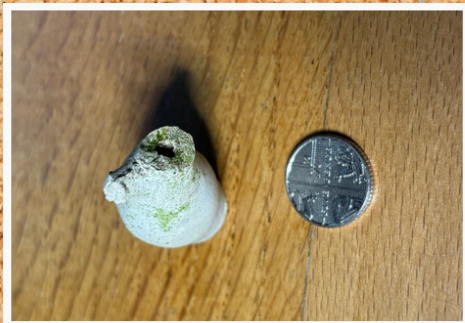
Any information about it
would be welcome!

5p for reference

AAAHS COMMUNITY NOTICE BOARD

Share your favourite historical facts,
sights and archeological news ...

Email us at:
communications@aaahs.org.uk



WHAT'S ON IN THE ABINGDON AREA

LAST CHANCE! On until 6th April

Abingdon Museum: *Atomics to Medieval Knights – a history of Fitzharris Manor Estate*

This tells the story of Fitzharris Manor, from its beginning after the Norman Conquest, when it was granted to a knight called Owen or Oin. One of his descendants was called Fitzharry, whose name attached itself to the Manor and is still reflected in the modern housing estate. We track the history of the Manor through time, and how the Manor House changed with a succession of owners. The exhibition then focusses on the coming of the AERE research establishment at Harwell, which brought an influx of new people to the town – the “Atomics”. To provide housing for them, a new estate was built on the site of Fitzharris Manor – the Fitzharris Estate. The exhibition looks at the construction, the design, and the people’s life on the estate. It also lifts the lid on what went on at Harwell, and some events which shaped world history. Much of the research into the history of the estate has been done by Mike Evans of the Fitzharris Estate Residents Association.

Fri 16th - Sun 18th May

Ewelme: *The Alyce Chaucer Festival*

Everyone is invited to Ewelme on the weekend of 16-18 May, for a big celebration of the life and times of Alyce Chaucer. Granddaughter of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, Alyce was born a commoner and died in Ewelme as a Duchess, where she is buried in a magnificent alabaster tomb.

In partnership with her husband William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, Alyce built the almshouses and the school in Ewelme and rebuilt the church. Together they form a unique complex of medieval buildings, all of which will be open to visitors throughout the festival.

For more information, visit: www.alycechaucer.uk

COMING SOON: AAAHS VISITS

Merton College, Oxford & Abingdon School
Dates to follow soon.

ABINGDON HERITAGE WEEKEND

Sat 13th & Sun 14th September



Dates for your diaries!

We are pleased to share that Abingdon’s Heritage Weekend will take place again this year in mid-September. Talks and other activities will take place over the course of the weekend, exploring the theme of ‘architecture’.

Keep an eye out for further details and communications over the spring and summer as the programme for the weekend takes shape.

We look forward to seeing you out and about throughout the town.

WHO'S WHO ON THE AAAHS COMMITTEE

This, our first newsletter in a couple of years, seems like a good opportunity to provide a quick reminder of who is on your committee and what they are responsible for:

Roger Thomas - Chairman

Roger oversees all activities of the Society and researches local history.

Tim Barnett - Secretary

Tim is first port of call for general enquiries. He also reviews planning applications that may concern the Society.

Andrew Steele - Treasurer

Andrew manages the Society's finances and provides annual audit reports.

Anne Dodd - Membership Secretary

Anne manages subscriptions to the Society and communicates with members.

Michael Bloom - Talks Co-ordinator

Michael organises speakers and publicity for the monthly meetings, covering a wide range of subjects from archaeology to recent history. We concentrate on our local Oxfordshire area but occasionally touch on other broader topics.

Sophie Torrance - Communications

Sophie manages the AAAHS website (including the recent upgrade), is editor of the newsletter, and runs the Society's Instagram. She also designs our posters and leaflets.

Jackie Smith - Archives

Jackie is the Society's Archivist and researches local history. She is also the Honorary Archivist for Abingdon Town.

Elizabeth Drury - Visits Co-ordinator

Elizabeth organises Society trips and visits, usually numbering three or four per year.

Valeria Cambule - Outreach and Social Media

Valeria helps to keep the AAAHS Facebook up to date and lively.

Mary Haynes - Webmaster (non-Committee)

Mary keeps the website up to date and looking smart.

AND NOW SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ...

We would love to hear your favourite jokes and riddles on the subject of history and archaeology. Send them to us at communications@aaahs.org.uk or note one down and hand it to us at the next talk.

***Archaeologists say that Roman cement was stronger than the modern stuff ...
but we need to see some concrete evidence to be sure ...***