

# ‘Bridging the gap’ at Hinton St Mary: a collaborative project in North Dorset

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*Students and volunteers overseen by an archaeologist from Albion. Credit: photo by Mike Luke © The British Museum*



*Banners/logos created by students displayed during the open days. Credit: photo by Mike Luke © The British Museum*

The ‘Bridging the gap’ theme of this issue of *The Archaeologist* seemed tailor-made for the fieldwork project undertaken earlier this year at Hinton St Mary, Dorset – a project jointly run for The British Museum by commercial and academic organisations to the great benefit of all involved. So much so that we couldn’t resist telling you why we think it was so great!

The village’s Roman site is famous for a mosaic that was found in the 1960s. The central roundel in the larger room shows the bust of a man wearing a tunic and cloak, flanked by pomegranates and with the Greek letters X and P (Chi and Rho) behind his head. Scholars have previously suggested that the figure is one of the earliest representations of Jesus Christ from the ancient world, and probably the first to be found on a mosaic. Despite the significance of the discovery and the transfer of the mosaic to the British Museum, no fieldwork has been undertaken on the site for the last six decades. The recent fieldwork is part of a wider collaborative project that will hopefully lead to the relocation of the mosaic to a Dorset museum and its redisplay.

The fieldwork was designed to generate new evidence with which the historical and religious significance of the mosaic can be better explained to the public and to provide a teaching opportunity for undergraduates from Cardiff University/Prifysgol Caerdydd. After a delay caused by the pandemic, an initial evaluation was successfully completed in 2021,<sup>1</sup> highlighting how little was known about the mosaic, or Hinton St Mary, in the Roman period.

Each of the partner organisations provided a co-director: Peter Guest of Vianova Archaeology &

<sup>1</sup> For more information go to <https://vianovaarchaeology.com/hinton-st-mary/>



*Morning warm-up exercises led by an archaeologist from Albion. Credit: photo by Mike Luke © The British Museum*

Heritage Services, Mike Luke of Albion Archaeology, and Richard Hobbs of The British Museum. The directors' presence on site gave the students an opportunity to learn from them and discuss how their own future career paths might develop.

Alongside the directors, Albion Archaeology provided supervisors (Matevž Grošelj and Kathy Pilkinton) to assist on site and work closely with the students. In addition to support in kind and some staff time provided by Albion Archaeology, the team working on the project volunteered their own time to support the project. Various specialists brought their expertise and enthusiasm to the site to teach the students about surveying and geophysics (GPR) (Keith Wilkinson, University of Winchester), zooarchaeology (Mark Maltby, Bournemouth University), and Roman pottery (Jerry Evans, Barbican Research Associates). The original mosaic was recorded as a painting by David Neal in 1963 and it was brilliant to see him back on site 59 years later helping us record the new mosaic we discovered!

In addition, we invited 33 children with special educational needs from nearby Yewstock School to work with us in the trenches and showed over 300 people around the site during our two open afternoons.

For many of the first-year students this was their first opportunity to participate in an excavation and they were assessed for the practical component of their university courses. The presence of experienced commercial archaeologists meant that there was always someone on hand to offer advice or answer questions. It also resulted in cautionary tales and sage advice from Albion staff who have developed a healthy respect for continuous manual labour over the years: 'It's never too early to start being careful with your back, knees, and ankles.' There were no digging-related injuries throughout the four-week excavation – a coincidence perhaps?



*Exposing a mosaic overseen by an archaeologist from Albion. Credit: photo by Mike Luke © The British Museum*

Working alongside the students were other volunteers at the beginning of their archaeological careers. Those graduating in the last week of the project perhaps benefited most from the presence of archaeologists from a broad range of sectors. Besides the additional experience they gained while excavating, they were also able to learn more about the profession they would soon enter. As a more tangible benefit, they had the chance to graduate with a reference from the commercial sector, which should help them if they chose this career path.

All the students were keen to talk about future career choices and as you might expect were less familiar with the commercial route than the academic world in which they had spent their undergraduate years. They got to hear first-hand about the pros and cons of commercial work and the day-to-day reality for people working in that sector. They were impressed that those of us from Albion had taken annual leave to work on the excavations and that university specialists were visiting in their own time. It's always reassuring to see that people in your chosen profession still have a passion for the subject many years into their careers.

The archaeology too benefited from the presence of professionals. Although the students and volunteers did an excellent job most had no more than eight weeks' site experience. This cannot compare to the experience gained from years of working as a professional archaeologist. Having professionals working alongside the students means the work is more carefully monitored and enables the students to undertake a range of tasks that require a little more supervision.

Participation in a training excavation also brings huge benefits to a commercial organisation. The staff

involved get to work on the kind of sites rarely seen in commercial archaeology (a scheduled monument with a mosaic in this case), to engage with the public and school children (not always possible to such an extent on a commercial excavation), and to meet and work with various specialists from academia (perhaps creating future opportunities for collaboration and fostering working relationships outside the usual spheres). This is excellent for their CPD and enjoyment!

Commercial organisations in turn provide expertise, resources, and equipment to facilitate the smooth running of both the excavation and the post-excavation analysis. Albion also currently employs a Level 3 apprentice archaeologist (Chris Sopp), so we took the opportunity to send him along for a few days as part of his training. This provided valuable exposure to an archaeological research and training excavation which, because of his career path, he had not previously experienced.

From a personal point of view, it was a fantastic opportunity to share our skills and knowledge with future archaeologists and hopefully make a positive difference at such an early stage in their careers.



The 2022 field team. Credit: photo by Mike Luke © The British Museum

## Acknowledgments

Archaeology is about people – past and present – and special thanks are due to all the staff, helpers, volunteers, students and the local community, who made the project such a rewarding and enjoyable experience. There are too many to mention here but they will all be acknowledged in the forthcoming interim report. However, special thanks go to Jill Cook (The British Museum), Katie Scorgie (landowner), the Hinton St Mary Estate, Dr Mike Watts and Jolanda Watts (patrons), and the Roman Research Trust/Roman Society (funders) – without you this project would never have taken place.

### Kathy Pilkinton

Kathy has worked at Albion Archaeology since 2005 and has recently taken on the role of Project Manager. She has extensive fieldwork, post-excavation and outreach experience, helping to set up and run the local Young Archaeologists' Club and assisting on many community and training digs over the years.



### Matevž Grošelj

Matevž joined Albion Archaeology in 2019 and is currently an archaeological supervisor. He is interested in promoting the experience of the field archaeologists and appreciates a nice section.



### Mike Luke

Mike joined Albion Archaeology in 1989. He is a project manager and has managed and published sites across the East Midlands. He has recently published a monograph on a Neolithic to post-medieval landscape north-west of Bedford (Albion Monograph 8); a complimentary copy was given to each of the Hinton St Mary project team. Independent of Albion he has worked as co-director on research excavations by Cardiff and Nottingham Universities. He is currently secretary of the Archaeological Committee of the Roman Society.

