

New times, new ways of working life in the time of COVID-19 (with apologies to Gabriel García Márquez)

As part of the large-scale advance archaeological work during the enabling works for HS2 mitigation works between London and Birmingham, an area of 7ha has been excavated at Wellwick Farm, near Wendover, Buckinghamshire. Implemented on the ground by Infra JV, the works have been designed and managed by Dr Rachel Wood MCIFA of the Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy (HERDS) team at Fusion JV and led on the ground by Louis Stafford MCIFA of Infra.

Running from December 2019 to July 2020, the excavation has explored an unexpectedly complex and chronologically deep landscape across the area, including a previously unsuspected large earlier prehistoric timber circle, a possible Iron Age shrine, Iron Age and Roman settlement, early medieval settlement and a medieval smithy.

More than half the project has been carried out since the implementation of COVID-19 regulation and guidance. As a result of detailed, robust and imaginative health and safety solutions Infra was able to protect the team and continue site works throughout the pandemic without a hiatus.

New ways of working were introduced for the site team to allow social distancing. We were very early adopters of the 'Worker Household' concept, allowing team members living in the same household to travel and work together with appropriate social distancing, and also to ensure any need for self-isolation could be contained. All staff were issued with their own tools with no sharing and we instituted a system of dedicated recording and archive handlers to avoid transmission.

For those site staff who did not drive, we provided a 52-seater coach to transport them to site, socially distanced. Additional welfare cabins, staggered breaks and thorough cleaning regimes all contributed too. Back at our post-excavation facility in Cardiff, all finds and samples are quarantined for 72 hours on arrival from site. Processing of these has continued with social distancing measures. The success of the measures is shown by the fact that we have had no cases of the virus in the site or office teams and our procedures have been commended and recognised as an exemplar by the HS2 safety team.

Within the COVID-19 period, a square enclosure of Roman date with what was thought to be a well at its centre was uncovered on the eastern edge of the site. Further investigation showed that the upper part of this 'well' feature contained a lead coffin, presumed to be of Roman date, with its lid in situ. The relative rarity of this kind of burial and the potential for well-preserved remains within the coffin required detailed design of the archaeological methodology and safe systems of work.



The skeleton under excavation.
Credit: INFRA-JV; © HS2 Ltd

We engaged with our osteoarchaeological specialist for the project, Dr Malin Holst of York Osteoarchaeology, who could provide the benefit of her previous experience with lead coffin excavation. In normal circumstances, she would have attended site and supervised the excavation, but this was impossible at the time of lockdown, with travel restrictions and social distancing for the site team in place, and we had to adapt our ways of working.

The solution was for the site team, led by our on-site osteoarchaeologist Rose Calis, to excavate the burial using a livestream feed via Microsoft Teams with Malin in York

supervising. An endoscope was used to explore inside the unopened coffin. The Teams call was recorded and will form part of the archive for the project.

Unfortunately, the endoscope showed that all that survived within the coffin were the human skeletal remains, as the seal had not been intact. The lid was then removed, and the skeleton excavated and sampled, again under Malin's direction. A detailed lift methodology was devised and implemented and the carcass of the coffin lifted, boxed and transported to one of our post-excavation facilities in Lincoln, the box looking like the final scenes of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Once the coffin was removed, it was clear that it had been placed within the top of a deep well or shaft. At the time of writing this is still under investigation but the shaft has been excavated to a depth of 3m with no sign as yet of the bottom of the feature. The chronological sequencing of the 'well', the enclosure and the burial will have to be teased out in post-excavation.



Rose Calis livestreaming with Dr Malin Holst. Credit: INFRA-JV; © HS2 Ltd



Mark Collard and David Bonner

Mark Collard is Project Director and David Bonner is Operations Director for the Infra Joint Venture between Rubicon Heritage and Network Archaeology, working for the enabling works contractor Fusion JV to deliver archaeological fieldwork for the scheme on behalf of HS2. Mark is a Director of Red Group which includes Rubicon Heritage and Red River Archaeology and David is a Director of Network Archaeology. Both companies have long track records in the archaeology of infrastructure projects.

The lead coffin boxed and ready for transport. Credit: INFRA-JV; © HS2 Ltd

