

## Early days in High Wych

(Originally published in the High Wych *Link* around 2013.)

As some of you may have noticed, I concentrate on recent history and primarily write about High Wych. If ever a book were to result from these writings, it will be a collection of essays covering particular aspects of High Wych life after 1800, not a linear history. Others have covered the territory already. This time, however, I do want to go a bit further back.

Just how old High Wych is, I have as yet been unable to find out. Early maps, such as those produced by Sellers in 1676, Oliver in 1695, Walker in 1746, Warburton in 1749 and Dury and Andrews in 1766, all call it 'Highwick', spelt as one word. Wick as a suffix, in place names such as Warwick or Eastwick, is Middle English for 'farm' or 'settlement'. So, the name of our village means 'farm' or 'homestead on a hill'. High Wych, as two words, with the second one rhyming with the first, is perhaps a 'poshification', dating from the mid-1800s.

Going back to the very beginning: early settlements in our area, both in East Herts and over the border in Essex, date from the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic eras. Bronze Age pottery was found on the Rowney Farm estate. It was around there, at Rowney Lodge to be precise, in March 1898, that workmen discovered two 'cinerary urns' (vessels for created human remains). Nearly four decades later, on 14 December 1935, the *Herts and Essex Observer* reported the finding of ancient relics and skeletons in the same area. A week later, H.C. Andrews, secretary of the East Herts Archaeological Society (EHAS), wrote to the same paper, reporting that several objects had been removed, and that 'various authorities outside the county had been consulted and visited the site... If the finders of objects would submit them to us it would greatly assist in keeping an authentic record'. To me that sounds as if the objects had become the subject of local politics!

It was clear, though, that a professional archaeological dig would have to be undertaken. An appeal was launched to EHAS members for money to fund such an activity, and excavations did indeed take place around Easter in 1936. On the 11 April 1936 the *Herts and Essex Observer* once again wrote that the skeletons were taken away to Oxford for examination. Dr. Mortimer Wheeler promised to examine and report. H.C. Andrews of

EHAS, in a preliminary report, wrote that 20 skeletons were unearthed and that associated objects pointed to these dating from the third and fourth centuries AD.

Boys from Harlow College, High Wych resident John Sapsford amongst them, assisted in the excavations. Many years later John wrote in his memoirs: 'In the summer of 1937 (some mistake there!) I spent several happy days helping with an excavation of pre roman remains discovered during the building of new houses now known as Rowney Gardens. Some 20 skeletons were found, but my work was in a kitchen area where I uncovered some crude pottery and a deer antler, probably used as a pick'. The EHAS (see next page) did indeed publish a photograph of such an item.

Strangely, only a preliminary report was ever published. The skeletons, so it was said, were 'taken away to Oxford for examination' by a Captain Musgrave of their anatomical department. What the Oxford people reported, if anything, I did not find out. The only reference I did find was published in the Bulletin of the British Museum Natural History.

The *Story of Sawbridgeworth*, still the best overall history of that town, including High Wych, also mentions the Rowney Gardens finds and furthermore says: 'All these Roman finds seem to be connected with the burial ground of a Roman settlement not yet itself discovered'. What made them say that? Sadly, Lionel Munby and his helpers have now all passed on. So, there's another question which, for the moment, remains unanswered.

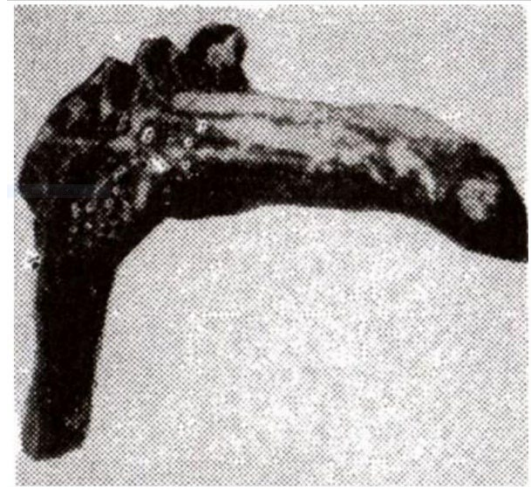
Whatever is the case, six of the Pishiobury/Rowney Gardens items did end up in Hertford Museum, where they were kindly shown to me some time ago. I had hoped to encounter the 'glass bead earring' and the 'deer antler pick' mentioned in the preliminary report. Sadly, they were not there. The objects also seem to have come from Pishiobury, rather than Rowney Gardens. Not that that makes the slightest bit of difference as to their historical value.

My sources this time have been *The Story of Sawbridgeworth*, by L. Munby et al, the Transactions of EHAS, the East Hertfordshire Archaeological Society, Sarah Taylor from Hertford Museum, the *Herts*

and Essex Observer and the people at HALS, aka County Archives in Hertford.



*From the EHAS transactions: a skeleton found at Rowney Farm.*



*Another EHAS picture, perhaps this was the deer antler pick found by John Sapsford.*



*From the Herts and Essex Observer of 14-12 1935 – Ancient human relics at Sawbridgeworth.*



*A roman jar.*



*Six Pishiobury objects from Hertford Museum.*