



News and events

- We are delighted to announce that our monthly programme of talks will restart on Wednesday 20 October when Kris Lockyear will talk about recent findings from the geophysics research at Verulamium. Details to follow by email.
- On Saturday 25 September Mike Smith will lead a short walk round Saxon Wheathampstead, looking at a number of features that offer clues about the village during this period. Meet at St Helen's at 2.00 pm.

Crinkly old paper

As many members will know, the oldest document in the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies archive is the 1060 gift of the manor of Wheathampstead from Edward the Confessor to the Abbey of Westminster. What is less well known is that the National Archives website lists nearly 270 medieval documents about the village. Many of these documents are reeves' annual accounts dating to the 13th and 14th century. The reeve was elected from the local peasant farmers and had the task of overseeing the manor and reporting back to the Abbot of Westminster. The reeves' accounts contain fascinating information about the medieval manor including details of the rents paid by the tenants, who are named, and the fines and charges levied on them.

Most of these documents have never been used to help research the medieval history of Wheathampstead. There is a good reason for this, as I discovered when I visited HALS last week. HALS



hold most of the documents about Wheathampstead that are listed by the National Archives. I asked to see five of the reeves' accounts dating from 1275 and

for permission to photograph them.

The first disconcerting experience was when the documents arrived in the form of a bag full of rolled-up paper neatly tied in ribbons. They looked more like a raffle draw than valuable

documents. Gingerly I started to unroll the 746-year-old reeve's account for the year 1275. The hand-made paper felt alarmingly thin and crisp and I used the glass weights provided by HALS to carefully flatten it down on the table.

The paper was yellowed and the ink had faded but it was still readable – if you understand Latin.



But this wasn't classical Latin – forget Horace and Cicero. This was a medieval form of ecclesiastical 'admin' Latin and was full of specialist abbreviations. Worse still, the document was a densely written roll measuring a metre long with writing on both

sides. Handling the reeves' accounts was nerve-racking at first, a bit like unrolling a venomous snake, but gradually I got the hang of it and managed to photograph all five documents.

What was the point of laboriously photographing five documents that I can't read? What I was doing was a scoping exercise, seeing what the reeves' accounts looked like and exploring the possibility of setting up a project to translate and interpret these important medieval documents. Early indications are that this will be a major project and the History Society may have to apply for a Heritage Lottery grant in order to buy in professional help. In the meantime, if any members know how to read Latin, please let me know.

Mike Smith