

THE CAISTOR EXCAVATION 2012

BY WILL BOWDEN

2012 was the final excavation season of the current Caistor project. Running as usual for 3 weeks during August, this season saw the team dividing their efforts between the field to the south of the walled town and Dunston Field, newly acquired by the Trust. The excavations were sponsored by the British Academy, while additional assistance was supplied by May Gurney Ltd, who have been wonderful supporters of the project since 2009, BAM Nuttall and Anglian Home Improvements.



The location of the trench across the triple ditches. *Photo by Mike Page.*

The “triple ditches”

The larger of the 2012 trenches focused on the so-called “triple ditches” that run across the South Field. First identified by aerial photography in 1960, for many years the ditches were thought to be part of a postulated Roman military camp predating the Roman town. However, recent work by Norfolk County Council’s HER team under the aegis of English Heritage’s National Mapping Programme, together with geophysics carried out by Dave Bescoby for the Caistor project, has demonstrated that the ditches are part of an apparently kite-shaped enclosure around the town. Investigation of the ditches during the excavation of a service trench in 1997 was inconclusive and so one of the main aims of the 2012 season was to dig a section across all three ditches. It was hoped to establish the date at which they were first created and how long they remained in use, in order to be able to suggest their function and their relationship with the town itself.

The trench was located at a point where the ditches intersected with a small road leading from the town towards the amphitheatre as we wanted to know whether the road ran over the back-filled ditches (and thus post-dated them) or whether the ditches cut through the road surface. As ever the reality turned out to be more complex than we had envisaged!

The southern and central ditches were narrower and shallower than the northern ditch and appeared to predate it. Preliminary analysis of the pottery suggests that they were filled in during the 2nd century AD before a rough gravel road was laid over the top. Fragments of two ceramic votive figurines from the southern ditch suggested that the ditches may also have served a symbolic as well as a practical function. The limited width and depth of the ditches could suggest that they were intended to define the town as much as defend it. The northern ditch was more substantial and seemingly cut through the gravel road that ran over the two earlier ditches, while finds indicated that it remained open well into the 3rd century.

Perhaps the most surprising find from the north ditch was an inhumation burial that was found slightly over halfway down the ditch fills. The fully articulated nature of the burial suggests that the body was not simply thrown into the ditch but was instead placed into the ditch and covered. Like the 2009 burials from the South Field it reinforces the impression that the dead were treated rather unusually at Caistor. A further burial was found at the northern end of the trench, just beneath the ploughsoil and it is likely that further burials exist in this area.

A further intriguing find was traces of a post-built structure cutting through the road surface at the southern end of the trench. Although no dating evidence was recovered, this points to very late Roman or post-Roman activity in the south field.



Recording the north ditch.

Dunston Field

As all Trust members will be aware, Dunston Field has been the focus of considerable activity since the Trust acquired it last year. As detailed in the Trust's 2012 Annual Report, it formed the other focus of the 2012 season. Following Dave Bescoby's magnetometer survey of the field, we identified a number of anomalies that looked likely to be Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured buildings, several of which had already been noted by the National Mapping Programme team. Further resistivity survey helped us to identify which of these features would be the most likely target, and with some trepidation (knowing the problems of excavating geophysical features!) we opened up a trench above our putative building. Over the course of the season, to the delight of all involved, a sub-rectangular mark on the ground gradually turned into a classic sunken-featured building, with central post-holes on the end walls. The pottery and a single coin from the base of the building indicated a 7th or early 8th century date for the structure.



The excavation of the sunken-featured building.

The building was absolutely full of animal bone, probably indicating that the hollow left in the ground after the building was demolished had been used as a rubbish dump. By comparing this material with the huge late Roman animal bone assemblage recovered from the town, we will be able to draw important conclusions regarding changes in animal husbandry and diet during the Roman to Saxon transition.

Following the excavation, Dave Bescoby has been able to further refine the geophysical data, which will allow us to identify further sunken-featured buildings in Dunston Field.



Gilbert Burroughs shows off his wares on the family day.

The excavation and the public

As always, the excavation was open to the public and we received almost 3000 visits over the course of the season including groups from the Kings Lynn Archaeological Society and the Aylsham History Society. All were guided round the excavations by our enthusiastic team of volunteers. We also held very successful family days including a visiting Roman cavalry man, a stall showing beautiful replica Samian pottery, and other Roman themed activities, while the luckless George (our e-bay plastic skeleton) was repeatedly exhumed by eager children in the artificial excavation. As ever, the success of the excavation owed everything to the enthusiasm of the volunteers. Over the last four years a wonderful community has been created around Caistor Roman town and all have appreciated the opportunity to excavate at such a marvellous site. For a flavour of the excavation and many more pictures, see the excavation blog at <http://caistordig2012.wordpress.com/>

The project was also filmed for the new BBC series *The Flying Archaeologist*, which examines the importance of aerial photography for archaeology. Caistor was an obvious choice for the programme, given the significance of aerial photography for study of the town.

After four years of excavation and the geophysical surveys that preceded the digs, our understanding of the Roman town has changed dramatically. We look forward to fully analysing the results and using them to create a new interpretation for Caistor.



Filming for the Flying Archaeologist.