

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

REPORT TO MEMBERS

2008/9

<http://www.norfarchtrust.org.uk>



Sunrise through the east gate of the Roman fort at Burgh Castle.

Photo by John Russell.

This Annual Report is distributed to members prior to the 2009 AGM which will be held at the Assembly House, Norwich on Tuesday 13th October. While it covers the work of the Trust for the whole year, we focus particularly on significant news over the last six months, following the distribution of the 2009 Spring Newsletter.

A new dawn for Burgh Castle

Work starts on our “Access for All” project

We are delighted to announce that Natural England has generously offered the Trust a grant of £408,000 to build an entirely new car park, a network of disabled access paths around the property and a viewing platform overlooking the River Waveney and the Halvergate Marshes. The grant was offered by Natural England for a Special Project as a part of their Higher Level Stewardship Scheme for Burgh Castle. These conservation schemes for farmland are intended to enhance the conservation of wildlife and the historic landscape and to improve access to the countryside.

Burgh Castle is a special place, because not only is it one of the best preserved Roman forts in Britain, it is also on the edge of the Breydon Water Site of Special Scientific Interest which is a Special Protection Area for birds. The property overlooks the Halvergate Marshes and the Berney Arms windmill, and it probably provides the best location in the Norfolk Broads to see modern wetland conservation in action over a wide area, supported by Natural England.

We will be erecting a viewing platform to overlook the river, the reed beds and the marshes and hope to explain not just the archaeology of the Roman fort, the Anglo-Saxon monastery and the Norman castle, but also the landscape history of the area. The remarkable succession of Roman estuary, medieval marshes, eighteenth-century drainage and the great controversy surrounding the ploughing up of the wetlands in the 1970s and early 1980s is a story well worth telling. The Halvergate Marshes are where government support for conservation farming all began. We need also to explore where global warming may lead us at a time of rising sea levels. Burgh Castle is where you can say it all.

Construction work is due to start on the new access and viewing facilities on 28th September and will last about six months. Having tried for ten years to raise the money for the project, this will be an exhilarating moment for the Norfolk Archaeological Trust. The scheme has been designed by our landscape architect, Su Chisnell, and she will be supervising the work. The contractor will be Giles Landscape Ltd.

Caistor Roman Town



“Cutting The Turf” ceremony at Caistor on 25th August. The excavations in the amphitheatre field started with a photo opportunity to re-enact the similar scene from 1929 (left). Left to Right: Peter Wade-Martins (Trust Director), David Gurney (County Archaeologist), Keith Weeks (South Norfolk Councillor), Rosie Bunn (Rector of Caistor), Trevor Lewis (South Norfolk Councillor), Philip Fellowes-Prynne (Director of May Gurney who are sponsoring the project), Will Bowden (Project Director), Matthew Martin (Trust Chairman) and Hazel Leese (Project Administrator). Photo by Dave Leese

Excavations in amphitheatre field

For three weeks in September Dr Will Bowden and his team excavated in the amphitheatre field to the south of the town defences for the Caistor Roman Town Project. The team found both Roman and prehistoric features cut into the gravel subsoil, but it is rather too early at the time of going to press to give any assessment of the results. So, it is best to hold this over until the Spring Newsletter.



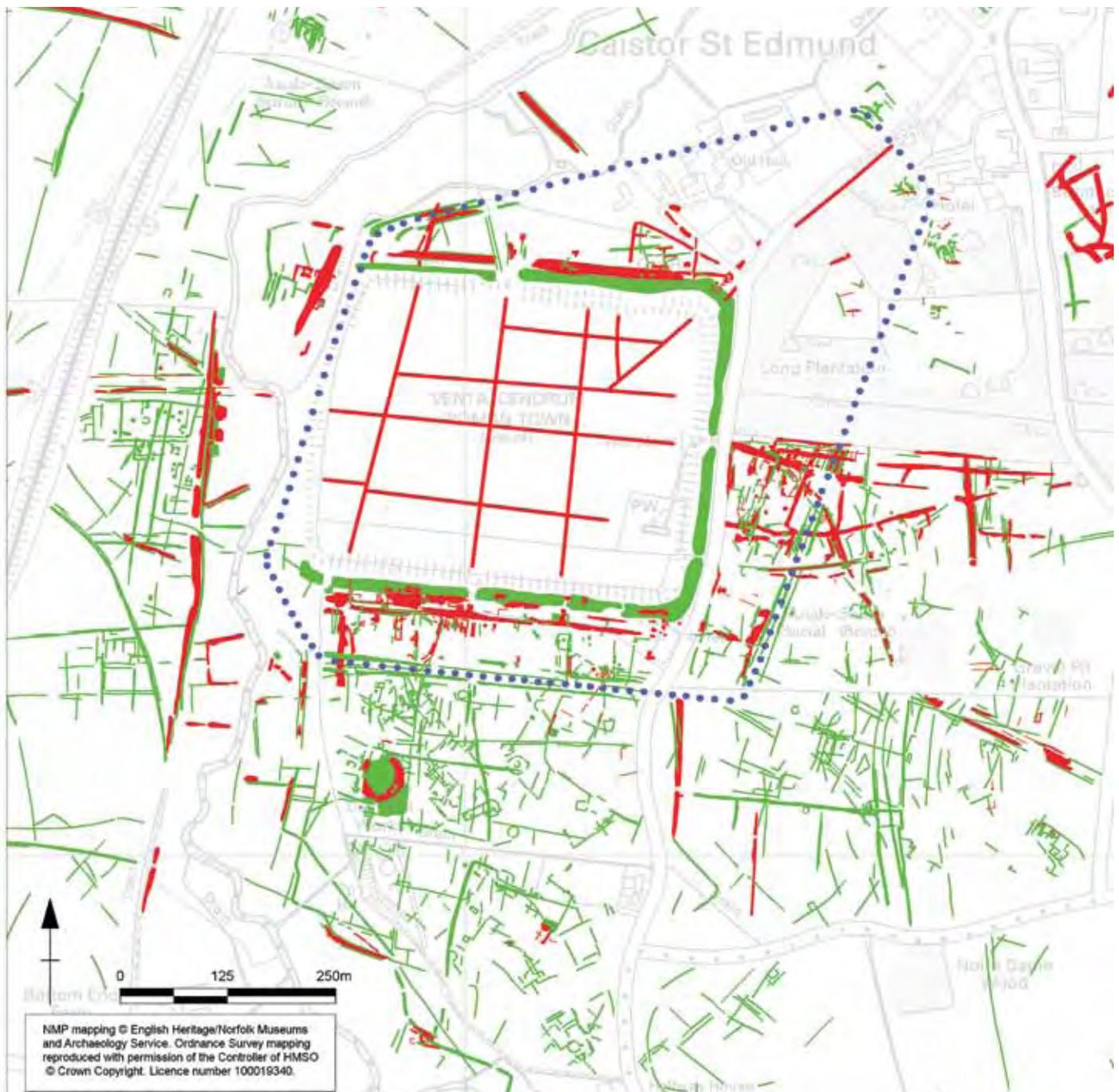
Excavation of the trench against the south wall of Caistor church in progress showing facing flints in the wall which look Roman.

Excavations in the churchyard

At the same time as excavations were taking place in the amphitheatre field, Will Bowden dug two evaluation trenches in the churchyard to assist the Parochial Church Council in obtaining planning consent for an extension on the south side of the church. The trench close to the church revealed that the lower part of the south wall is built of squared flints which look remarkably similar to those used as facing in the Roman town defences. It is assumed that they are re-used flints, but one can't help wondering if they could represent a Roman building; now there is a thought!

Plotting the Caistor cropmarks

While we have featured in several issues the geophysical survey results from the fields in and around the Roman town, we have not so far mentioned the work Norfolk Landscape Archaeology at Gressenhall is doing to plot and interpret the many cropmarks recorded by air photography in the area. It is especially interesting to compare the results of the two techniques. The early defensive ditches plotted from the geophysics in the field to the north of the town defences (arrowed on p. 3 of the Spring Newsletter) were actually first picked up from air photographs, and their full known extent is shown on the plan. To use the two techniques together is the best way to understand the development of the Caistor landscape.



The NMP mapping of the area surrounding Caistor Roman town. The green signifies the remains of ditches and pits, both earthwork and cropmark, and the red depicts the presence of former banks and stonework and compacted surfaces like roads. The hypothetical plan of the kite-shaped triple-ditched defences is shown as a blue dotted line.

Mapping the cropmarks of the early town defences - by Sarah Horlock - Norfolk NMP Project

Caistor Roman town falls within the current project of the National Mapping Programme (NMP) in Norfolk, which covers Norwich and Thetford, their environs and the interlinking A11 corridor. NMP is an English Heritage initiative that aims to identify, map and interpret all archaeological sites that are visible on aerial photographs. This includes the systematic consultation of all available aerial photographs and it is this assessment, in particular that of historic aerial photographs, which often leads to new discoveries and reveals new aspects of well studied sites and landscapes. One of the most significant discoveries at Caistor was the identification of the triple-ditched defences in two sections to the north of the town – a finding that has since been backed up by geophysical survey.

All of the triple-ditch segments can now tentatively be linked up to form a large kite-shaped enclosure. This has some similarities in plan with second century and later civil defences at other Roman towns in eastern England, which along with other aerial photographic evidence, may indicate that the triple-ditched defences were not part of an early military fort as has been suggested. The NMP mapping has also added to the evidence for the extra-mural settlement and streets and traces of pre-Roman activity have tentatively been identified. The NMP mapping has also added to the evidence for the extra-mural settlement and streets, and traces of pre-Roman activity have tentatively been identified, although there is some uncertainty over these features at present.

Roman town wall repairs continue

Meanwhile, at Caistor the Trust's conservation work on the Roman town walls has continued all summer. The contractors, W.S. Lusher and Son who have done all of our other conservation work at Caistor, are being supervised by our Building Surveyor, David Watt. The work is costing £142,000, again funded by Natural England. We mentioned in the Spring Newsletter that there had been some frost damage to the north wall which was repaired in 2006. We hope some of this can be rectified with any unspent funding we may have at the end of this season.



Adrian Fox and some of the team from W.S. Lusher & Son rough racking the top of the Roman western bastion at Caistor.

Disaster at Binham

Rare plant on the precinct wall destroyed

The picture on the front cover of our 2007/8 Report to Members featured our success in conserving the very rare plant which grew on the medieval precinct wall while at the same time completing repairs to the wall. All went well until the spring of this year when the vegetation on this same section of wall all suddenly died soon after a contractor working for Norfolk County Council's Highways Department was spraying weedkiller on the adjacent pavement. Luckily, Gillian Becket, the botanist who had been advising the Trust on plant conservation while building work was in progress, kept some seed for emergencies and she is hoping to re-establish this plant in its rightful habitat. At the time of writing Norfolk County Council is denying responsibility for what happened.



The dead vegetation, including the very rare wall bedstraw, on one of the wildlife reserves the Trust created on the precinct wall at Binham soon after the adjacent pavement had been sprayed with weedkiller.

St Benets Abbey

Riverbank repairs completed

In the last Annual Report we highlighted the damage done to the riverbank at St Benets so soon after it has been fully repaired in 2004/5. It is very pleasing now to report that this damage has all been made good with an addition layer of "rock rolls" wired on to the top of the wire gabions. It all looks splendid again, thanks to further generous support from the Environment Agency.



Heritage Lottery Fund support for the conservation and access project

Our next objective is to carry out repairs to the medieval gatehouse, eighteenth-century windmill and other monastic remains as part of a wider project to improve access and public enjoyment to the abbey. The abbey is regarded as one of the iconic sites in Broadland, and as we go to press word has just come through from the Heritage Lottery Fund that our Round One application has been successful! This will give us the funding to work up our proposals in full for a Round Two application by the end of 2010. Not all Round Two applications succeed, but to be awarded a Round One grant for St Benets is another achievement for the Trust to build upon.



The Bishop of Norwich arrives by the wherry Albion for the 2009 annual service at St Benets, held on the first Sunday in August.