

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

SPRING NEWSLETTER

2003



We are sending out this newsletter to members halfway through the year following the distribution of the first Annual Report in October. The last six months have seen significant progress on a number of projects, and it seems right that we should bring the highlights to you.

New initiatives

Bloodgate Hill, South Creake hillfort

The Heritage Lottery Fund last June generously offered a 75% grant for the purchase and conservation of the important, but badly eroded, Iron Age hillfort at South Creake. It is now pleasing to report that the balance of the funding required has been raised. This has come from a variety of sources including English Heritage, the Everett bequest (see below), an anonymous donation, Bernard Matthews, the Scarfe Charitable Trust and Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Council. It is all most gratifying that the purchase can now proceed.



The ploughed-down earthwork of the Iron Age fort at Bloodgate Hill .
Photo by Derek Edwards, Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service

The Trust takes possession of the site immediately after harvest. There will then be a geophysical survey of the field. This will be followed by the excavation of a section across the fort defences and a limited excavation of the interior to see how much archaeological evidence remains after so much plough damage. The limited excavation of the interior may also help us to gain some understanding of the nature of the prehistoric settlement within the fort. Surface finds have been relatively few so far, so we hope that some dating evidence will come to light from this work. This is the largest Iron Age fort in East Anglia, so it is well worth protecting.

After the excavation, we will fence the whole field, put it down to grass, plant new hedgerows, make a small car park and picnic area and erect interpretation panels. We will use an old-fashioned grass mix, and our aim is to enhance biodiversity as well as conserve the archaeology. We are aiming to have a formal opening in the spring of 2004.

Binham Priory

At Binham the Trust completed the purchase of the priory gatehouse, the precinct wall and adjacent meadow on 11th December. The gatehouse is a sadly neglected structure which has been largely abandoned compared with the rest of the monastic remains which are kept in immaculate order by English Heritage. The purchase was made possible thanks mainly to a generous grant from English Heritage.

The cloisters and surrounding monastic remains are owned by the Trust but they have been under the management of English Heritage since they were excavated in the 1930s.

However, with English Heritage support, there is much we can do to make the site more interesting and enjoyable for visitors. Our proposals include:

- * removing the ivy from the gatehouse, recording the structure and carrying out urgent repairs,.
- * repairing the precinct wall and rebuilding the section near the gatehouse which collapsed in the 1980s,
- * studying the finds from the 1930s excavations which are still in their original bags in museum stores,
- * creating a new site interpretation scheme and providing disabled access from the car park to the cloisters.

Binham Priory is a very attractive and architecturally significant place; the west window of the church probably contains the earliest bar tracery found anywhere in England. We want to enhance the interest of the place without changing its essential character.



John Ette, English Heritage inspector, William Wales, the local farmer, and Peter Wade-Martins, Norfolk Archaeological Trust, viewing the newly purchased gatehouse at Binham Priory. There is much to be done to restore this derelict structure.

Photo by Sue White

Forthcoming projects



St Benets Abbey gatehouse and windmill tower. *Photo by Sue White*

St Benets Abbey

In last Annual Report we said that discussions were in hand about the future of the famous gatehouse and windmill at St Benets following our purchase of the rest of the site from the Crown Estate in May 2002. It is good to announce that the Trust has since reached agreement to purchase these ruins and also to take a 199-year lease on the foundations of the abbey church which lie in the centre of the monastic earthworks. Once we have achieved this, we will have put the management of the site back together for the first time since the site was split up and sold off by the Church Commissioners in 1921.

The next step is to release a site Management Plan as a consultation draft and seek the views of all interested parties on the best way forward. There is one issue which can't wait, and it is one on which everyone is already agreed. We must rebuild the riverbank to stop further erosion caused by the wash from holiday cruisers. Plans for this are being prepared for us by the Environment Agency.



The wash from cruisers on the River Bure is doing considerable damage to the river bank at St Benets. *Photo by Sue White*

Text by Peter Wade-Martins. Design by Sue White

Exciting find at St Benets!

A sharp-eyed visitor to the site has just made an exciting discovery. Mr I. Tubby from Beccles picked up what appeared to be an uninteresting piece of folded lead from a mole hill near the abbey church. Luckily, he had the presence of mind to pass it to the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service for identification. Written on it is a remarkable late tenth-century runic inscription of 49 characters on five lines (which is exceptionally long for a text like this). Photographs of the object have been sent to rune scholars all over Europe, but because it appears to be in a code no-one has yet managed to decipher it. We await developments with great interest!

Although there is good documentary evidence for the monastery having an Anglo-Saxon foundation, this is the first time it has been possible to back it up with hard archaeological evidence. The object was found on land still owned by the Diocese, but the Bishop has agreed to give it to the Trust. The Trust, in its turn, is likely to pass it on to the Museums Service for safe keeping since it is not Trust policy to collect objects. A museum is the right place for it.



The runic inscription on a folded lead plaque from St Benets Abbey. *Photo by David Wicks, Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service*

Caistor St Edmund Roman town

There is much discussion at the moment about whether it is better to keep Caistor as a low-key educational resource and a place for quiet countryside enjoyment or to develop it as a major visitor attraction as the National Trust have done so successfully at Sutton Hoo. South Norfolk Council, who manage the site for the Trust, have commissioned a consultants report which advocates a major scheme with a new visitor centre on the hill on the opposite side of the Tas valley. This has caused much concern locally, and the Council are currently consulting widely on the options. The outcome of these consultations is awaited. In the meantime, there is an obvious need to carry out urgent repairs to the Roman walls in places, and the Trust has fundraising in hand.

The Everett bequest

The Trust recently received its first bequest, a generous £10,000 from the estate of the late Professor Douglas Everett of Bristol. Bequests could be a significant source of income for the Trust and they could be used for the protection of many other important sites in the county. Norfolk has an immense wealth of archaeological remains, much of it in need of care and protection, just as much so as its wildlife. When you make your will, please bear the Trust in mind and thereby help us pass some of the valuable evidence of our past to future generations.