

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST SPRING NEWSLETTER 2009

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



The Thanksgiving Service at Binham Priory on 17th May, led by the Bishop of Norwich and attended by project patrons, invited guests and members of the parish, was followed by lunch in the church.

In this Spring Newsletter we feature the completion of the Binham Priory project, the start to the second phase of the conservation of the Roman town walls at Caistor, our lottery for St Benets Abbey and our bid to Natural England for improved access to Burgh Castle.

Binham Priory Project

The Thanksgiving Service attended by the Bishop of Norwich on 17th May brought to a close the site works at Binham. The Archaeological Trust's conservation of the medieval gatehouse and the long length of precinct wall were all completed on time and to budget last the autumn. The new church entrance, neatly inserted into the footprint of the old north aisle by the Parochial Church Council, was finished over the winter. The new western porch with the reconstructed vaulting built in oak and with a gilded central roof boss looks magnificent. The light streaming in through the old west doorway onto the handmade floor tiles creates a great sense of dignity and a feeling of space. You can't help but stand there and say "Wow!" Those members of the Trust who were not able to attend the celebrations are urged to go and see what has been achieved. Look also at the new displays on the history of the priory at the gatehouse and in the church and the fresh English Heritage information boards in the cloisters.



The new north porch of Binham Priory church.



A section of the precinct wall at Binham which was conserved by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust as a part of the Binham Priory Project. The inset shows the team from building contractors W.S. Lusher who worked on the precinct wall all through the summer of 2009 and finished the job on time. Photo by Geoff Scott

The area outside the north aisle which had to be dug away for the new church path was excavated by Archaeological Project Services (APS) from Lincolnshire, and over seventy inter-cutting burials of medieval and later date were removed. The bones have all been reburied in the churchyard except for samples from the three earliest graves which have been sent to a radiocarbon dating laboratory in New Zealand. One of the burials was actually under the north aisle wall, so the date of these graves will be of particular interest.



The excavating team from Archaeology Project Services worked in all weathers to clear the area outside the north west corner on the church to lower the ground level to allow for disabled access in through the new north door.

APS are now preparing a report on the archaeology for publication, and discussions are in hand with English Heritage on how this report can be integrated with the study of the finds which survive from the excavations carried by the old Office of Works in the cloisters. Some of the finds and a small selection of the architectural stone from the old excavations are being prepared for display in showcases in the new north porch.

Caistor

Excavations during 2009?

Dr Will Bowden, who is organising the Caistor Research Project, is hoping to carry out some limited excavations in the field to the south of the town near to the amphitheatre to test the possibility that some of the circular marks found by geophysics may be pre-Roman Iron Age houses. The Trust Council has given its approval in principle to this excavation, and it all now depends on Will being able to raise sufficient funds. Excavation is very expensive process, and funding needs to cover not just the excavation but also the study and conservation of the finds and the subsequent publication. Meanwhile, members will be interested to see the photograph published in the Eastern Daily Press in 1929 to mark the start of the previous excavations by Donald Atkinson.



An illustration from the EDP in 1929. The site owner, the Rev Corbold-Warren, is shown turning the first sod. "Also in the picture are Mr Edgar Cozens-Hardy and Mr H.H. Halls".

Geophysical survey

The area covered by the geophysical survey of the Roman town continues to grow. In the spring the field to the north of the defences was completed by Dr David Bescoby using a caesium vapour magnetometer. Although the area was relatively small, these new results contain two important discoveries. One is the line of the most northern east-to-west Roman street, which survives just beyond the town ditch, as well as several north-to-south streets which continue on beyond that.

The other discovery, which is of the greatest significance for the history of the site, is further evidence for the early triple ditch defences previously seen to the south and to the east of the town. These ditches suggest that the early settlement was remarkably large and they raise all sorts of interesting questions about the origins of Venta Icenorum. Was it a legionary fortress built to suppress the Boudiccan Revolt of AD 60-61? If so, it was a big one.

The area covered by the geophysical survey at Caistor grows, this time with the addition of the field to the north. The significant discovery here is the line of the early triple defensive ditches previously seen to the south (arrowed).



Further wall conservation

It was very gratifying over the winter to be offered a grant of £142,000 by Natural England to cover 100% of the cost of the final stage of the repairs to the Roman town walls. W.S. Lusher & Son, the building contractors, have just returned to site after a gap of two years while they were working for us at Binham Priory. Lushers will be working on site all summer. This final phase will involve the south wall and the fragments of the west wall near the river, including the one surviving bastion near the Roman west gate.

We noticed this spring that there has already been some frost damage to parts of the north wall conserved in 2006, mainly where it was thought the Roman mortar was strong enough to resist the frost and therefore didn't need to be covered over. This does raise some interesting questions about how to treat these wall tops which were, of course, never intended to be exposed to the weather. The only answer may be to put a complete modern protective cap of flints and mortar all over the wall tops as they are now so that only the original flintwork where it survives on the faces will be visible. Further discussions are needed with English Heritage and other conservation interests on how acceptable that would be.



Conservation work begins on the Roman bastion overlooking the river at Caistor. A new flint and mortar cap is being placed over the Roman flintwork to protect the structure from frost damage.

Guided tours

The Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society are organising guided tours of the Roman town this summer on Sundays at 11 am on:

14th June,
19th July, 29th July,
2nd August
13th September

Burgh Castle

New car park

While writing this newsletter we are waiting for a decision from Natural England on a major grant application we have made to them for the cost of the new car park and access paths to the Roman fort. We are expecting a decision any day now, but not unfortunately before we go to press.

St Benets Abbey

Further riverbank repairs

Readers of our autumn newsletter may recall a picture we published there showing how the riverbank repairs carried out in the winter of 2004/5 have not been entirely successful. The reed rolls put on top of the wire gabions to protect the medieval remains from the river have rotted completely, thus exposing the wire gabions. This has led in turn to cattle trampling in some places close to the river's edge. Broadland Environmental Services Ltd. (BESL) have agreed to return to St Benets with their contractors, Nuttalls, to raise the riverbank further to overcome the problem, and the work is due to be completed before the fishing season begins in June.

Lottery bid

We reported a year ago that the Trust had obtained planning consent for a small car park and new footpaths from the car park to the monument. This will allow us to clear cars away from the present parking area near the gatehouse and make the gatehouse more suitable for disabled access. We also have planning consent for a series of low-profile interpretation panels. All the details are just about ready for a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund, for which we now have to follow a complicated three-stage process. Bids to the HLF do now require much more work if they are to be successful, after the government removed funding from the HLF to pay for the Olympics. Only the very best bids succeed, so it is all taking longer than we intended. We will be submitting the bid soon, and we hope the situation will be clearer by the autumn.

Middleton Mount

The site of our Norman motte and bailey castle at Middleton is managed for us by Middleton Parish Council. The bailey needs to be grazed by sheep to keep it tidy, but there are no sheep farmers in the vicinity able to help. So, the Norfolk Wildlife Trust has come to the rescue by sending in their Flying Flock of rare breed sheep. We are very grateful to the NWT for their help!



The Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Flying Flock of sheep grazing at Middleton Motte. Most of the sheep are Herdwicks, the native breed from the Lake District.