

CAISTOR ROMAN TOWN PROJECT NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER 2007

Welcome to the first newsletter of the Caistor Roman Town Project. First, please accept my sincere apologies for the long silence between now and our first meeting at Framlingham Earl School. Although I have had contact with a number of you, others have been left in the dark as to what is going on. This newsletter is intended to fill you in on what has been happening over the last year and what will be going on in the future.

Caistor Roman town geophysical survey

A new geophysical survey, sponsored by the British Academy, has resulted in a complete plan of the walled area of the town, and significantly added to our understanding of the town's layout. The survey was carried out by David Bescoby of UEA, using UEA's new state-of-the-art magnetometer. Around 30 volunteers (who had indicated that they were available on weekdays) took part in the project and we are very grateful to all who assisted.

One of the more important discoveries was the identification of a number of circular and sub-circular anomalies, including gullies and ring ditches, suggesting that there was a significant pre-Roman presence on the site. Although this had been previously indicated by finds of late Iron Age coins

and metal work, the existence and extent of pre-Roman occupation at Caistor has been disputed by several authors.

The plan revealed suggests that the town and its road system were much more irregular than previously published plans suggest. It seems that the streets were rebuilt and altered over time, with streets in the central areas in particular producing stronger signals suggesting successive resurfacing. Drainage channels in the streets also showed up clearly, as did a long line of probable iron collars that would have joined wooden pipes and which were first noted on the 2006 pilot project.

The public buildings excavated in the 1930s (two temples, forum basilica and bath house) were clearly visible on the survey but in addition a possible theatre was noted (marked with red arrow on the plan). This was indicated by two semi-circular anomalies directly to the east of the two temples (a characteristic location for a theatre in a Romano-British context). With the exception of the insula containing the forum and the small insula containing the temples, all the insulae have significant open areas and large parts of the walled area (particularly in the north-west quarter) were apparently sparsely occupied during the Roman period.



The geophysical survey also revealed possible post-Roman occupation in the form of a large sub-rectangular enclosure that clearly cuts the metalling of the Roman street in the north-west corner of the site. Possible structures are visible within these enclosures. The earlier discovery of middle Saxon coins and metalwork outside the west wall of the site, combined with the presence of two early Saxon cemeteries in the vicinity suggests that these enclosures may be associated with previously unknown post-Roman occupation of the town.

The survey will continue in 2008, when the area will be expanded to include the field to the south of the town, so we will again be asking for help from our volunteers. We are also seeking funding to test the results of the geophysics through trial excavation

The discovery of a Roman villa

Field walking by NAHRG (Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group) and aerial photographs by Mike Page (below) have located a major complex of Roman buildings at a site just to the south of Caistor. The site, which is likely to be that of a major late Roman villa, was the subject of trial excavations earlier in the summer, which I directed at the invitation of NAHRG as part of the wider Caistor project. The excavations demonstrated that the building visible from the air was indeed Roman. Its plan (which resembles a spaceship) is very unusual and is unique for Roman Britain, although there are continental parallels for both villas and temple complexes that have elements of this unusual plan. Of particular interest were the many fragments of painted wall plaster, which is rare on Roman sites in Norfolk. After the main complex had gone out of use it was replaced with a post-built structure more than 100 feet in length. The two lines of post-holes are also clearly visible on the aerial photograph.



Environmental survey

As part of the work to establish whether the River Tas was navigable as far as Caistor in Roman times, David Bescoby and Neil Chroston from UEA (seen here wrestling with the auger) took a series of cores (bore-holes to measure the depths of different sediments) across the flood plain between the town and the Tas. Dave and Neil, assisted by Martin Clarke, have now followed this up with Electrical Resistance Tomography (a technique for measuring the electrical resistance of different sediments that can penetrate the ground to a depth of about 11m). The results of this latest work are still being processed but at present the results (rather intriguingly) suggest that the Roman river was not much bigger than the modern one (at least in the area that we have looked at). However other evidence still point to the river being navigable so we are seeking funds to follow up this pilot study with a more wide-ranging survey of the lower reaches of the Tas.



The field survey (and you)

The field survey programme is taking shape. It has taken longer than I envisaged because of the size of the survey area (around 120 km²) and the daunting logistics of both gaining permission from landowners and co-ordinating fieldwalking with crop schedules. Fortunately I am now being assisted in this task by Hazel and David Leese, and progress is much quicker as a result. We have also been successful in gaining an equipment grant (£1360) from the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, while the John Jarrold Trust has committed £500 towards the volunteer programme.

It is envisaged that the field survey will broadly work as follows. Our volunteer walkers will be divided into groups of around 15-20 based on

experience and stated availability. Each of these groups will have a co-ordinator who will liaise with Hazel and David. The groups will be assigned a number of farms which they will walk as and when fields become available. Initial contact with landowners will be through Hazel, David or me. This is so that the landowners feel confident that they have a constant point of contact. However, a key to the success of the project will be the development of good relations between field walkers and landowners and it is hoped that the role of negotiating field availability will rapidly devolve to the team co-ordinators once they are known to the farmers. Equally, if you are personally acquainted with any farmers who might be approached, please contact me. The project will be helped enormously by using networks of personal contacts.

I will be in contact shortly with details of teams and a second meeting, where I will talk you through the methodology of the project and distribute equipment and health and safety instructions. You will be insured through the University of Nottingham's public liability cover, but this means a certain amount of paperwork which I am assembling at present. We are now entering the main "window of opportunity" for field survey, so I intend to get started in a matter of weeks rather than months.

The GIS programme

A grant of £4750 from the University of Nottingham has allowed us to commence work on the Geographical Information System that will store all the project data. Data from the Historic Environment Record is being assembled in a "GIS friendly" format by Danny Voisey (who also created our virtual models of Roman Caistor) assisted by Andy Barnett and Alan Pask. The mammoth task of assembling all the known archaeological data from 25 parishes and reformatting it for GIS is daunting but it is an essential part of the field survey strategy.

A new audio tour for Caistor

I have been working recently with Imagemakers, a company hired by South Norfolk Council, to create a new audio tour of Caistor that can be received directly via your mobile phone. At a cost of £1.50 (billed as a text message) you can have unlimited access to the tour for 48 hours. The tour gives three different levels of information. In the first level, a pompous Roman councillor guides you around the town. The second level gives you more detailed information about the archaeology of the town, while

the third level tells you about the current research. The tour will be formally launched in the next two weeks, and can be accessed on 0207 112 1928 (the last part of the number referring to the year that Caistor was first revealed by aerial photography)!

The "mobitour" was felt to be particularly suitable for Caistor as, unlike conventional audio tours, it requires no on-site infrastructure and has no maintenance costs.

A date for your diaries

Lindsey Davies, the author of the Falco novels, has kindly agreed to give a talk about her work in association with the Caistor Project. Lindsey's novels, which have been translated into numerous languages, recount the adventures of a Roman private eye living in the reign of Vespasian (so just around the time when the streets of Caistor were being laid out). She is an excellent speaker and always happy to answer questions about her work, so it should be an entertaining evening. The talk has been provisionally scheduled for 26th July 2008 (venue to be confirmed).

Credit where it is due!

Progress on the Caistor Project would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of the Norfolk Archaeological Trust, South Norfolk Council, Norfolk Landscape Archaeology, Norfolk Museums Service and English Heritage. The project has received financial support from South Norfolk Council, the British Academy, the University of Nottingham, the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies and the John Jarrold Trust.

In particularly the project owes a great deal to Dave Bescoby and Neil Chroston of UEA's School of Environmental Sciences, to Danny Voisey and to the many others who have assisted the project in different ways. The advances that the project has made are largely due to their expertise and hard work.

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