

Caistor Roman Project

Interim Summary of 2015 Season of Test pits at Caistor Old Hall



Introduction

This brief report summarises the first results of the 2015 campaign of test-pitting in the grounds of Caistor Old Hall in the village of Caistor St. Edmund. The work was part of a continuing project to use test-pits and other archaeological survey techniques to investigate the extra-mural area of the walled town of *Venta Icenorum*. It is also part of a programme to develop volunteer and community involvement in archaeological research around Caistor. Work to date has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society and the Keir Group. The 2015 season was generously supported by the Foyle Foundation. We are also particularly grateful to Mr and Mrs Jarrold of Caistor Old Hall for the enormous help and support that they have given to the project and its members during the 2015 season.

A total of eight test-pits were dug between the 17th and 29th of August in the grounds of Caistor Old Hall. The 2015 test pits have collected a significant amount of information and, combined with the 2014 test pits, have resulted in a well-considered sample, spread across the site.

This brings the total number of test-pits dug around Old Hall to eighteen (including one at Old Hall Farm and one in front of the cottages). A further nine have been dug in Wymer field to the north, with another at Caistor Cottage. Together this represents a great achievement for the project, as we now have a significant amount of new data, stretching through an area of the Roman town formerly enclosed by the early triple ditch defences, but which was presumably cut off by the construction of the town walls in the late 3rd century AD.

The following is a brief summary of observations made during the 2015 fieldwork:

Test Pit 31

This was placed within the area of the known post-medieval farm complex and, thanks to Ady's tenacity, it revealed a particularly deep sequence of cobble surfaces, the lower of which may predate the 1700s ruined brick barn (the location of the temporary CRP HQ).

Test Pits 32 and 37

To the west of TP34, this test-pit also revealed a probable post-medieval stone surface, with a layer of trampled material below which was stained by cessy material – possibly produced by farm animals standing in a yard area. The trench did generate a good background noise of Roman pottery, along with a Caistor project first in the form of a coprolite.... probably mineralised horse poo!

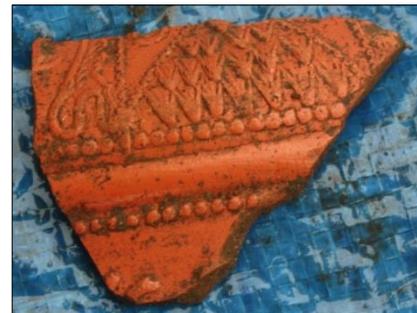
The other test-pit in this area, situated close to where the triple ditches may run (TP37), uncovered some complex features and the decision was made to expand the trench to 2m in length in the hope of better understanding them. There was plenty to keep Rhiane and her team busy as yet another stone surface of uncertain date was revealed, cut by the footings for some form of building. The footings contained loosely packed building flint rubble and a few large floor tile fragments which may have been constructed to support a timber sill for a post-medieval outbuilding, although curiously a few large stray sherds of Roman pot were also retrieved from this feature. The edge of a gully was also excavated which cut through the gravel surface.

Test Pit 35 and wall fabric inspection

A test-pit was placed close to the house, against a long flint boundary wall to test its foundations and check for any Roman or medieval fabric. The wall had slightly buttressed foundations with no evidence to suggest it was not a single post-medieval build. To Wendy and Rob's dismay, the ground against the wall was built up too deep to reach natural or any undisturbed Roman levels, although they were rewarded by a lovely residual piece of highly decorated Samian ware and a 4th century Roman coin (AE4 GLORIA EXERCITVS - 337–340, Constantine II).¹



A further review of the wall fabric was made by Keith and John, who suggest a date of around 1700-1750 for its construction. A brick string within the fabric appears to be primarily of 18th century hand moulded brick and they recognised that the general standard of masonry expertise was not particularly noteworthy, postulating that it may have been built by estate labour when down time was available. The flints were originally set in a sandy lime-mortar with more recent repairs showing cement content. Many of the flints used in the construction of the wall are faced flints placed randomly within it, showing that they are reused and most likely sourced from the Roman defences.



¹ We are very grateful to Andy Barnett for his comments on the coins from the excavations

Test Pit 38



A double length test-pit was placed on the grass in front of Old Hall, initially opened as a test-pit for our young archaeologists. Over a dozen children and their families took part in our family trench, including local children and members of the Norwich branch of the Young Archaeologists Club.

A cluster of three Charles II farthings (one dated to 1673) were found by the children in the upper subsoil, which probably represents a lost purse.

This trench did not disappoint with plenty of residual Roman pottery, including a few pieces of finewares and Samian and even some possible rusticated wares of early Romano-British date. A large roman brick fragment was also found with the deep finger marks of its maker impressed into its corner.

Below the subsoil this trench proved to be really interesting, with a distinct 1m wide boundary ditch and a shallow pit containing pieces of daub. Several hob-nails, a few pieces of Roman glass, a large millstone fragment and a Roman coin of 4th century date (AE4 VICTORIAE DD AVGG Q NN - 342–348, Constans or Constantine II) and a copper-alloy fragment of Roman brooch/bracelet in a twisted design were collected during the work but more importantly this test-pit demonstrated that we can now assume that this particular area is a fairly busy one!



Test Pit 39

Last year a couple of the test-pits ended up finding a Roman road/trackway which can now be defined on the Magnetometer Survey. This year, we were keen to have a couple of trenches close-by but off the line of the road. TP39 was placed to this end and landed bang on the fill of a pit, as recognised by Mike. The test-pit was lengthened by half a metre to define the limits of the feature and a sample slot was excavated across it.

A good quantity of finds were collected from the pit, which included Roman pottery and fragments of butchered animal bone – this is great as it means at least some of the finds were probably incorporated as rubbish into the pit-fill by people living close by. A last minute find from the pit was made prior to backfilling, in the form of a complete copper-alloy brooch with silver-tinning. The brooch is of an unusual equal ended type and although a late Roman date has been suggested, it is very similar to a 1st to 2nd century one found at a Villa site at a Temple site at Harlow, Essex.²



Test Pit 33

Was also placed away from our roadway line and a good background noise of residual Roman finds was collected along with a rare occurrence for this site, in the form a clay tobacco pipe bowl. A clear but shallow gully of Roman date was found below the subsoil by Tony and his team who expertly and efficiently made short work of this 2m by 1m trench. They also found a rather nice flint blade of Mesolithic date in the process.



Test Pit 32

This test-pit was placed in an untested area within the former vegetable patch (and former orchard if the early OS plans are to be believed). Despite being started in particularly wet weather, the team's mettle was more than up to the task and, with the help of a gazebo, progress continued unabated.



² Many thanks to Natasha Harlow and Tim Pestell for their comments on this brooch.

The soils here proved to be particularly deep, not surprising if the area once served as an orchard. A keyhole dug beyond the 1m depth of garden soils and subsoils discovered the clear edge of a deep and waterlogged ditch. The test-pit was positioned close to the expected alignment of the Roman defensive ditches and although the alignments are yet to be confirmed it seems likely that the test-pit clipped part of these.

Amongst the residual Roman finds was a fingernail sized fragment from a beautifully made pale blue Roman glass vessel with a decorative applied thread twisted with yellow and white glass.



Survey work

John Percival assisted with a survey of the banks and earthworks at the north-east end of the site, where medieval pottery and deep layers of redeposited soils were recorded in two of the test-pits last year. This information is yet to be examined closely but does confirm that the area has been subject to landscaping from the medieval to post-medieval period.

An additional survey was made of the slopes and ephemeral lumps and bumps in the south-west paddock, where the line of the triple defences has been projected to run. In the right light a slight bank and ditch could be picked out with eye of faith and the survey may help define these features further. An auger survey was also made across the expected line of the ditches here and, although no truly deep features were present, some correlation was made between the surface features and deeper silts/silty sand. Overall, these observations suggest that the line of the defences is slightly further to the north than previously assumed and that they do not appear to be anything like as monumentally deep as those we excavated to the south of the town in 2012.

Some further observations and what next?

Although analysis work is ongoing, the 2015 information added to the 2014 data has begun to throw up some interesting trends and patterns in the finds assemblages.

For example, yet again we noticed a complete dearth of shellfish across the site. This is worthy of note, as oyster and other shellfish were consumed in large quantities in most Roman settlements, so something different is going on at Caistor. Will commented on



this last year and he believes that the large volumes of oyster shell inside the Roman town are a later phenomenon, possibly it took a while for the general Iron Age taboo or dislike of seafood to fade here.

Although we are aware of a metalworking site to the east of Old Hall, no particularly rich areas of debris or slag relating to smelting or smithing have been found through the test pitting. Having said that, this is still a very small sample and more metalworking debris has been collected during the test-pitting than last year. The volume of industrial waste we have includes evidence for both ironworking and copper working in the general area.

The Roman pottery analysed to date has a general date range of 2nd to 3rd century, perhaps indicating that by the time the walls went up around the town much less domestic detritus was building up in this 'cut-off' area defined by the older defences. The pottery itself is consistent with the range of coarsewares and finewares found within the town, although the highly fragmentary and abraded appearance of much of it indicates that discarded pottery sherds here were much more subject to erosion processes from ploughing or landscaping activities.

A small but significant number of Saxon to medieval pottery sherds have been collected from Old Hall which indicate a continuity of land use through these periods. The presence of even these small quantities of early to middle Saxon activity here are really intriguing, as very little such material has been collected in this area before.

A moderate assemblage of worked flint collected from Old Hall represents our earliest activity at the site including a Mesolithic microlith, flakes, bladelets, blades, cores and scrapers and what appears to be an unfinished early Neolithic leaf shaped arrowhead. Several examples have been identified by their method of manufacture as evidence of Mesolithic to Early Neolithic flint working along with some Late Neolithic to Bronze Age pieces. Together this material shows that similar activity recorded previously from the recent excavations within the walled area of the town extend out along this ridge of land which overlooks the flood plain of the river Tas.

Overall the 2015 work at Old Hall has been remarkably successful, with new information on the true line of the Roman defences gained, new areas tested for both Roman and post-Roman activity and survey work undertaken to allow further insight into the landscaping activity at the northern end of the site. We now have an enormous amount of new information to analyse which will contribute significantly to a more informed discussion on the historic land use of this area of the Roman settlement. There still remains a further test pit or two to dig at Old Hall, one of which will be sited in an untested area within Antony and Anne's garden. No doubt further detailed analysis of the finds will throw up more surprises and interesting trends.

There are still plenty of valid research questions to be raised and investigated at Old Hall, such as attempting to understand the nature and location of the Saxon to medieval land use and



the likely presence of a medieval manor site which may have been redeveloped as the Old Hall site. There may also be scope to investigate and characterise the Roman and post-Roman activity further through some form of targeted excavation now that we have confirmed the presence of sub-surface features and the likely course of the defensive ditches.

All in all a lot of valuable investigation work has been carried out to an excellent standard, all of which has the potential to enhance our understanding of an area of the Roman settlement which until now was only defined by a small number of metal detected finds, stray pieces of pottery and patchy cropmarks. Just as importantly, the group has grown in confidence and skills, with several university students benefitting from some hands on training prior to taking up archaeology courses, and we have also taken the time to inspire the next generation of archaeologists.

Giles Emery of Norvic Archaeology, September 2015