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Heslington East Archaeology Project: a Summary

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Archaeological research on the 116ha greenfield site of university expansion at Heslington East offers a unique opportunity to understand multi-period settlement and its landscape setting, in the Vale of York. Fieldwork carried out here jointly by York Archaeological Trust (YAT), On Site Archaeology (OSA) and the Department of Archaeology (University of York) between 2007 and 2011 is about to progress (October 2011) from the assessment to the analysis phase and when this is complete it will add substantially to the corpus of data about York's hinterland, from prehistory until the end of the Roman period. It will also add detail to a range of period and thematic research questions.

At this interim stage my paper will present a brief chronological summary of the archaeological evidence and will consider, in more detail, some of the other benefits of the work in terms of outreach, engagement and collaboration.

Introduction to the archaeological evidence

The site lies on the south facing slope of the York moraine, immediately east of the village of Heslington. There are currently several active spring heads on the hillside and geoarchaeological work has identified a series of early palaeochannels running north-south down the slope which probably created an area of standing water beginning in the early post-glacial period (Carey 2009, 168). This may have been a wetland mosaic which contained a variety of vegetation and attracted wild fowl. Some of the archaeological definition on the site was complicated by a series of hillwash sands and silts that sealed and masked archaeological features which were effectively cut from different levels. These colluvial deposits vary in depth with the morphology of the hillslope but also vary significantly in their lateral extent and depth.

The earliest evidence for human activity at Heslington East is formed by a number of stone implements which date from the early Mesolithic period, and include a serrated saw, though the majority of the flint and worked stone found dates to the Neolithic and Bronze Age (Makey 2009). The flint assemblage is described as ‘significant’ for the Vale of York and will be subject to full analysis in due course. Landscape scale features, including some curvilinear ditches and deposits around watering holes, also date to the Bronze Age (Antoni et al. 2009). Hollowed-out alder logs have been used on the springline to form probable well linings and at least one of these dates to *c.* 3750BP.

An unstratified collared urn was discovered by a mechanical digger on the site in 2009, a rare example from York. In 2011 an *in situ* example was recovered with a cremation during the Department of Archaeology undergraduate field school. The collared urn appears to represent Longworths ‘Primary Series’ with repetitive, incised herringbone external and internal decoration which was probably created with a single tool (Manby pers.comm; Longworth 1984). At the time the urn was discovered, a further cremation (without vessel) was identified to the immediate north.

An initial assessment of the cremated bone is suggestive of an infant burial within the cremation vessel, but full analysis is not yet complete. Approximately 40m from the

cremations, in a subcircular pit, half a polished Bronze Age battleaxe was recovered (Neal and Roskams 2012; Illus. 1). This implement had an expanded butt and on initial inspection appears to be representative of a 'Stage V' Loosehowe type (Manby pers.comm; Roe 1966, 209).

Illus. 1. Bronze Age battleaxe © University of York

There is late Iron Age settlement evidence at Heslington East in the form of the remains of several roundhouses, some situated within elaborate ditched enclosures with evidence for their rebuilding on successive occasions. The primary division of the agricultural landscape occurs at this time (Antoni et al. 2009). Several areas around the springheads across the site were increasingly managed at this time with evidence including wattle-work fencing, revetment and deliberate cobbling. Within a substantial springhead deposit an Iron Age skull was recovered and has been subject to rigorous scientific analysis due to the preservation of human brain tissue (O'Connor et al. 2011).

We know that the Roman road to Brough on Humber passed close to the current northern site boundary, that a Roman coin hoard was found during the construction of the main university campus at Heslington in the 1960s and that a location off Field Lane was the site of the discovery of a high status Roman gypsum burial. (Yorkshire Philos. Soc. 1832). Despite limited evidence for occupation at Heslington East from remote sensing and reconnaissance techniques in advance of development, there was significant Roman settlement in the form of domestic stone and timber buildings, landscape features (including large ditches, cobbled trackways and terracing) and some specialised craft activities. Other substantial structures on the site, include a 3m deep stone-lined well (Illus. 2) and a probable mausoleum which utilised Roman technology sometimes seen in civic building within the military zone. We have a number of Roman burials and can see, in one case, the line of an earlier boundary ditch restated by the insertion of two late third-century inhumations (Illus. 3). There are hints of early Roman settlement (late first – early second-century) but the majority of the ceramic and radiocarbon dating evidence suggests a third- to fourth-century date for most of the Roman features. Evidence for immediate post-Roman activity is ephemeral, presumably largely truncated by deep ploughing, but assemblages of putative Anglian material are currently under scrutiny by specialists. Across the site there is widespread evidence for medieval ridge and furrow which frequently cuts earlier features.

Illus. 2. Becky Kelly excavating the base of the well in 2011 © Cath Neal

Part of the research value of the site at Heslington East is derived from its rural nature and the lack of subsequent settlement, this has led to the exceptional preservation of some classes of evidence, for example, the Roman brick and tile (McComish 2011, 38). The proportion of imbrices related to tegulae fragments and their relatively smaller size compared with the norm (for York, and for Britain as a whole) merits further analysis. It is also noted that there is the frequent use of a brick/tile fabric type seen rarely in York. These issues bring into sharp relief the mechanisms of supply and trade at the site and also the significance of chronological variation within the assemblage.

Illus. 3. Burial excavation 2009 © University of York

It is apparent at this stage that current analyses will elucidate many research questions identified at the outset of the project including:

- How quickly was the impact of Rome felt - sudden transformation or evolutionary change?
- What form did it take? Did it adopt existing forms of farming and landscape exploitation, or alter them by introducing new landholding systems and agricultural techniques?
- Were any changes confined to functional needs, or can we identify changes in socio-cultural norms, e.g. in respect of 'Romanised' architectural forms?

The wider context

The University of York has taken an innovative approach to the archaeology at Heslington East as the landowner and developer. The university has been supported in this endeavour by the Principal Archaeologist of the City of York, the archaeological consultant and by the Department of Archaeology itself. This has largely been organised by the division of funding to allow selected areas of the site to be evaluated rapidly by commercial organisations (YAT and OSA), whilst other areas were evaluated over longer periods of time by students from the Department of Archaeology and by community archaeology volunteers. Although varied approaches and methods have been applied, to a lesser or greater extent, by different organisations who are responding to differing situations, the overarching aim of the project is now to bring the analyses together to tell the story of the site as a whole.

Community participation within the heritage sector has increased markedly in recent years in the UK and encompasses a diverse range of activities in many different parts of the country (Thomas 2010). Community engagement and outreach work has a natural resonance with archaeology which provides a straightforward mechanism to facilitate action and dialogue, drawing on a wide range of disciplinary approaches and applied scientific techniques. In addition to the many benefits derived from community archaeology and heritage assets related to connectedness to place (English Heritage 2009), there is an increasing body of data linking community archaeology to increased levels of social capital and civic engagement, for communities in general but especially for marginalised groups (Newman 2005; Little and Shackel 2007; Kiddey and Schofield 2011).

The attempt to combine commercial work, on the most time-pressured part of the site, alongside student training and a programme of community engagement, all tied to an overarching research agenda, is necessarily conceived as a collaborative project. The success of the project in gathering data from different organisations and in developing a coherent joint research dividend will be measured by the outputs from the project at its conclusion but there have been a number of fruitful and mutually beneficial partnerships, the sharing of information and of skills to date. These benefits have not only applied to the staff in each organisation but also to the student community, and to the volunteers.

The range of people who have worked on the site have been varied; paid staff (commercial and teaching staff), unpaid volunteers (students and local volunteers), homeless people from the Arclight Hostel, school children from Lord Deramore's Primary School, Badger Hill Primary School and Archbishop Holgate's School and personnel from other departments at the university. Working to a common end these groups have experienced many stages of the fieldwork process and have contributed to the overall success of the project.

In 2010 we received a 'Your Heritage' grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to increase knowledge about the site by providing practical sessions for school children, a website, heritage information boards and popular publications at the end of the fieldwork. This has enabled us to increase the scope of community involvement and will allow us to produce some lasting and tangible outputs.

Illus. 4. Undergraduate field school 2010

Outcomes

From the outset we aimed to make the project as accessible and inclusive as possible within the confines of a development site. We held open days for the public and for university staff, we invited schools, commuters from the local 'Park and Ride' and a range of societies and groups participated in site tours. Over the course of four field seasons (42 months) we welcomed around 520 individuals to excavate with us on the Department of Archaeology part of the site (Illus. 4), and we had an additional 350 or so visitors to look around the excavations. We have given seventeen local society talks about the archaeology at Heslington East and have participated in several academic conferences in the UK, and also in Europe. In June 2012 the project was presented, by invitation, to the Archaeology in Contemporary Europe conference 'Integrating Archaeology' in Frankfurt. We have also welcomed scholars from other departments at York (chemistry and physics), other institutions (Durham University, Stanford University, the Council for British Archaeology) and other disciplines (British Geological Survey) to the site, aiming to increase understanding through sharing information, sharing skills and developing research ideas.

In 2010 we welcomed one hundred local children to the site as part of their transition programme from primary to secondary school, this was funded by the HLF; they undertook a range of activities including geophysical survey, excavation and recording but the most popular activity was the construction of a 'Roman' kiln and the production of some Roman-style pots. The children used classroom skills in practice, and worked with cohorts from other schools. They enjoyed being outside and thinking about what their own neighbourhood was like in the past. At the conclusion of this element a head teacher from one of the schools said 'The school has benefited greatly from the expertise, creativity and opportunities the

Department has shared with our learning community'. After the week spent on the site, follow-up in the schools indicated the success of the project in raising awareness about what archaeology is and what it does. The effect of participating was also apparent in the way that experiential learning promotes enquiry, with the children asking questions such as 'how do we know?' and 'what is the evidence?' and then producing their own film about Roman culture.

Two workshops were undertaken, with community participants, to seek feedback about the most significant part of their experience working on the site. In addition to gaining archaeological knowledge and skills, and enjoying working on specific archaeological features, a number of transferable skills were described, including problem solving and team work. Lying above this, however, were several higher order concepts to do with a sense of belonging, concerns over ownership and ideas about memory and landscape.
The heritage protection reform, developed in the UK since the *Power of Place* report (English Heritage 2000) has widened participation, but it is recognised that there is frequently a tension between national frameworks for stewardship/management and local significance/localism.

Although community archaeological projects often encompass the 'feel good factor' many communities and locales are contested, and the concept of participation is not entirely value free. 'Community' and 'heritage' are malleable concepts and the wider socio-political context of participatory approaches have a long history of analysis and critique in other disciplines including the political, social and health sciences (Arnstein 1969, Savage 2009). Whilst some archaeologists have developed a post-modern critique of heritage practice, exploring the mechanisms, processes and theories of engagement (Carman 2002; Smith 2006), and recent practice guidance embraces multivocality (English Heritage 2008), the overarching statutory framework is based upon protection and a conservation ethic. Some scholars assert that the current concept of 'community' within the heritage sector frequently serves to propagate and affirm the status of the 'expert' (Waterton and Smith 2010, 19) which detracts from the positive impact of community participation. With this in mind we have aimed to engage volunteers with all stages of the fieldwork process, encouraging them to have an impact on the final outputs and interpretations where possible, and the project has been cited as an example of good practice in community archaeology (English Heritage 2009)

Conclusions

Because of the collaborative approach taken and the levels of participation from various sectors of the community, the archaeological site at Heslington East is an important example of the way that fieldwork is changing in the twenty-first century. We anticipate that the benefit of this more diffuse approach to evaluation will be felt not only in our understanding of the archaeological features themselves but also in the breadth of our understanding about 'what archaeology does' for local communities and the impact that it can have on a local level.

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