

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST ANNUAL REPORT 2012

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The Anglo-Saxon “sunken featured building” excavated in Dunston Field this summer. Standing within it is Giles Emery (left) who skilfully excavated the structure and Dave Bescoby (right) who located the hollow in the gravel with pinpoint accuracy using geophysics before the trench was opened. *Photo by Will Bowden.*

We feature in this Annual Report a summary of the two projects which the Trust has focused on during the last year, at Caistor Roman Town and at St Benets Abbey. The report will be presented to the AGM to be held at the Assembly House, Norwich, on Tuesday 16th October. Details of our other activities will feature in the 2013 Spring Newsletter.

Caistor Roman Town

Caistor has always been our largest property, and last year we added to it the additional 55-acre Dunston Field on the west bank of the River Tas. It was here that most of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement had been found.

Dunston Field

Over last winter Dave Bescoby was commissioned to carry out a geophysical survey of the field, and an interpretation of his results was published in the 2012 Spring Newsletter. This showed up the pattern of Roman roads on this side of the river and provided strong evidence for both settlement and industrial activity alongside the main road from Colchester. It also revealed a scatter of rectangular features in the gravel which we suspected might be examples of a type of Anglo-Saxon building known as a “sunken featured building” (an SFB!). These buildings consist of rather mysterious under-floor cellars which are not deep enough to stand up in, and their purpose remains unclear. They are thought to have been outbuildings rather than houses, and some may have been weaving sheds because loom weights can be found in the lower fills of these features.



The SFB during excavation with baulks left in position to record soil layers. The fill was found to contain much Roman material dumped into the building after it had been demolished. The buckets were to collect all the soil from the feature for sieving.



The two faces of the Anglo-Saxon sceatta (AD 700-710) found in the soil just above the SFB. *Photo by Will Bowden*

One of these rectangular features was excavated this summer by Will Bowden and his team during their annual excavations, and, sure enough, it was Anglo-Saxon. Usually cut into the floors of these cellars at either end are massive post holes to hold ridge posts, and in this case the post holes were found exactly where they were expected, at either end. Although most of the finds from the feature were Roman, there was enough hand-made pottery from the fill to show it was a later structure. One coin, a sceatta dating from AD700-710, came from the topsoil just above it, and at the bottom was another coin, a sceatta imported from Frisia and struck 710 - 750. So there is no doubt about its date and significance.

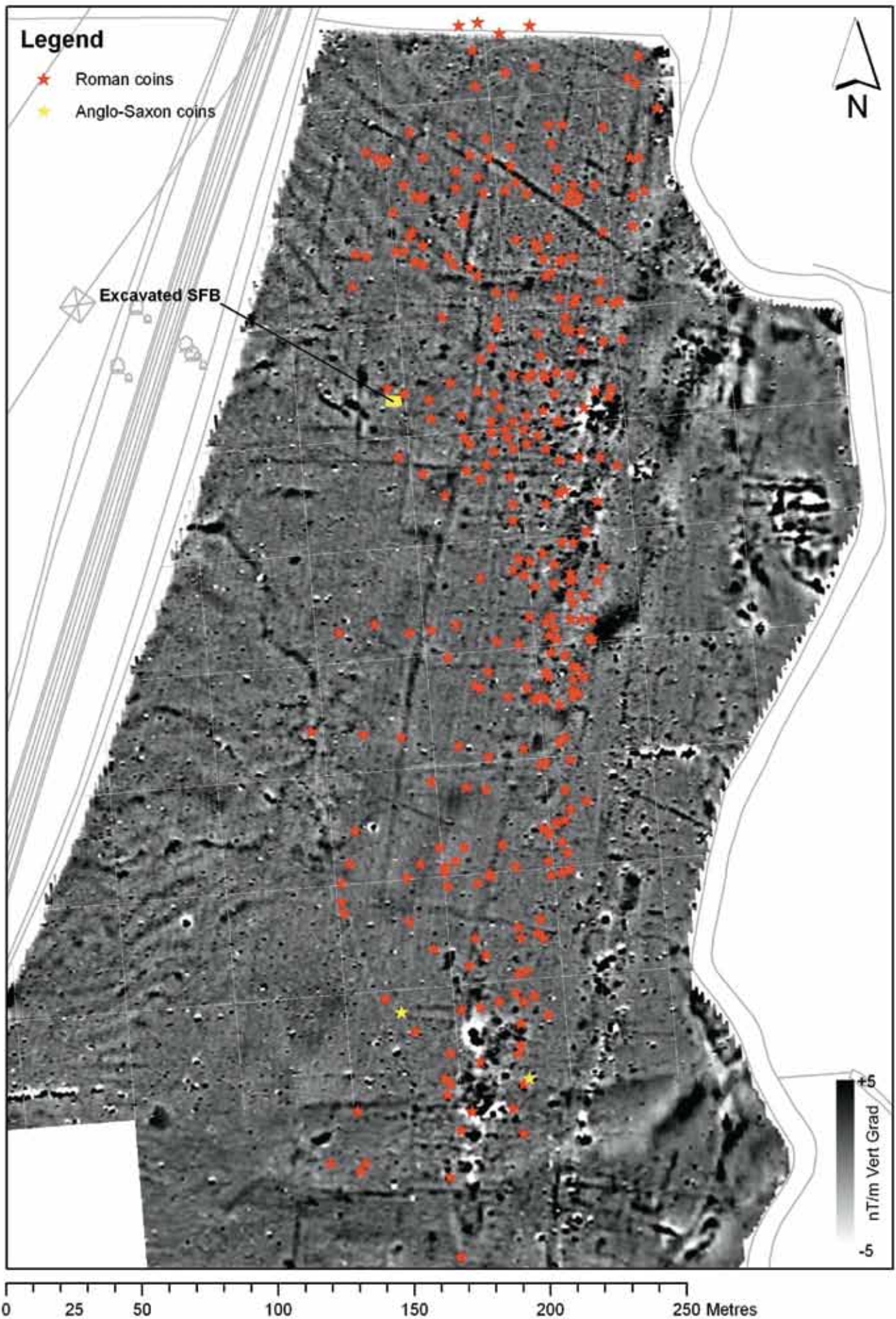
The geophysics and the excavation have both demonstrated that the Trust was right to make the great effort to raise the money to buy the field to add to its Caistor property and thereby ensure its long-term preservation. The field will soon be put down to grass, with funding provided by Natural England to protect it from further ploughing and illegal metal detecting.

The Caistor Project has organised its own metal detector survey, and the Trust has also arranged for a local detectorist, Mark Turner, to do the same, resulting in the recovery of several hundred metal finds, including at least six more Anglo-Saxon sceattas to add to the evidence from earlier discoveries, mainly made during the 1980s. A plot of Mark Turner's

Roman and Anglo-Saxon coins, recorded with great precision using GPS technology, is shown here overlaid on the geophysics. This plan should be seen as an interim statement while we await the results of the rest of the detecting work. Nevertheless, we believe that this may be the first time that geophysics and metal detecting techniques have been used together with such great effect.



An air photograph of the fully excavated “sunken featured building” with the two half-sectioned post holes for the ridge posts at either end. *Photograph by Mike Page*

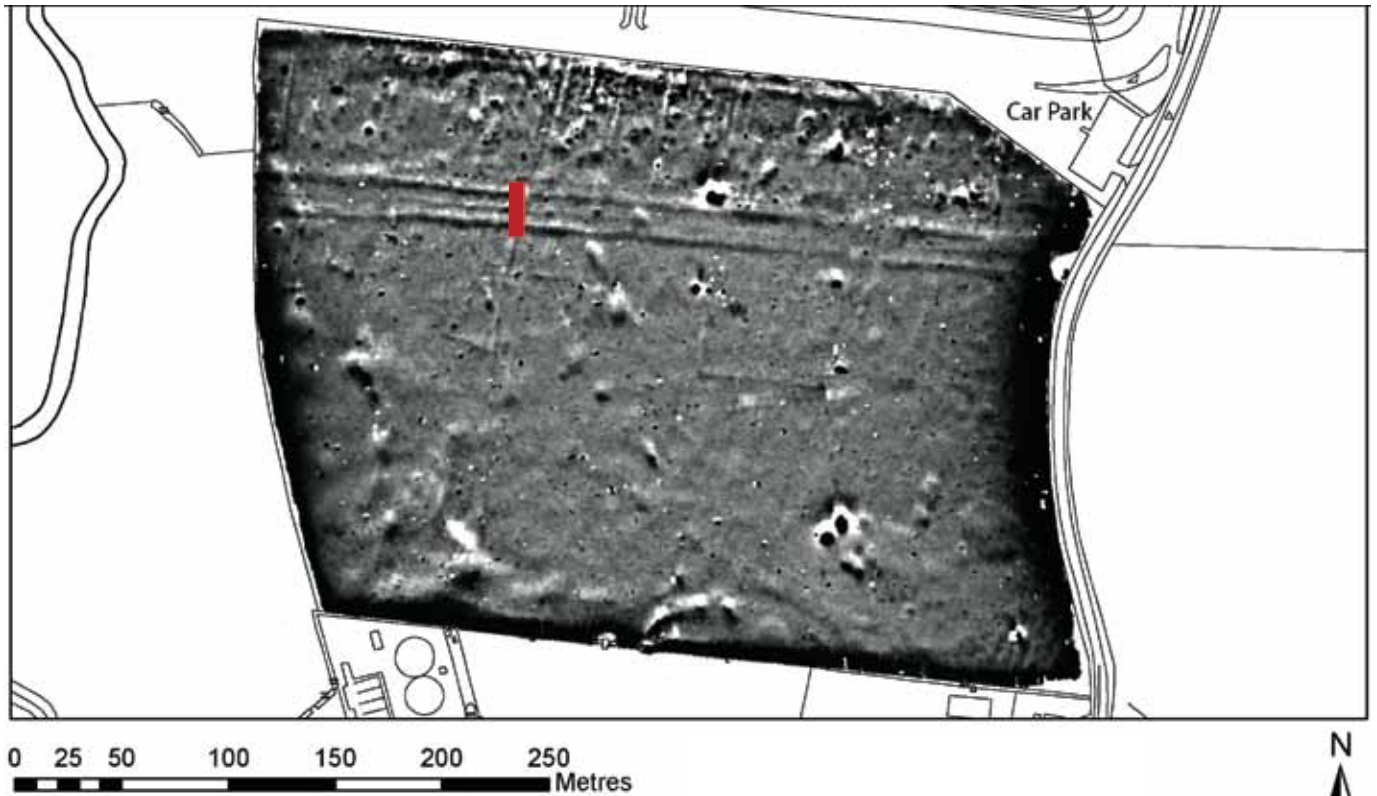


The geophysical survey of the northern part of Dunston Field showing the raw data from the survey overlaid with a distribution map of Roman (red circles) and Anglo-Saxon (yellow stars) coins recorded by local detectorist, Mark Turner, who located each find using GPS. The excavated SFB is marked with a yellow rectangle.

Excavation of the town defences

Meanwhile, on the other side of the river Will Bowden's team cut a trench across the three parallel ditches representing the early town defences which always show up prominently on air photographs. The central and southern ditch proved to be earlier than

the northern one, but details of the dates of all three can only be determined by careful study of the finds. In the fill of the later ditch was a human skeleton which had just been dumped in the ditch without ceremony, and its significance remains unclear.



An extract from the geophysical survey of the field to the south of town centre showing the location of this year's trench across the early town defences



The northern town ditch under excavation.



An air photograph of the trench across the three early town defensive ditches looking west. The central ditch and the one to the south (left) appeared to be contemporary. The northern one (right) was later. *Photo by Mike Page*

The excavations reach their conclusion

It is sad to see these excavations come to an end after four years when they have told us so much about the town, but it was right to stop so that Will Bowden can carefully assess and publish the mass of data he has accumulated. One of the outstanding achievements of the project has been the way the project staff engaged with local people to make archaeology much more accessible to a wider audience. We believe that this will have great long-term benefit. Meanwhile, the Project's well-established team of fieldwalkers will continue their work over the winter.

Higher Level Stewardship Scheme for Caistor

As we go to press we have just heard that Natural England has offered the Trust generous payments to assist with site conservation and improving public access at Caistor. These payments will include:

- Sowing Dunston Field with a grass and wildflower seed mix.
- Providing a fresh set of information panels for the enlarged property.
- Further conservation work on the Roman town walls.
- Converting all the remaining stiles to disabled access kissing gates to help the less mobile enjoy Caistor.

The new information panels will incorporate the results of Dave Bescoby's geophysical surveys and Will Bowden's excavations to keep the public in touch with the latest thinking about the Roman town and the Anglo-Saxon settlement which followed it. We hope that in time a new guidebook will be written by John Davies and Will Bowden and that new displays in the Castle Museum will also reflect the recent discoveries.

The only element of the project Natural England is unable to fund is a footbridge over the River Tas, and grants to cover this are being sought elsewhere.

St Benets Abbey

Site conservation

The lottery-funded St Benets Abbey Project will last two years and will include the conservation of the medieval gatehouse, the eighteenth-century windmill, the abbey church and the precinct wall. Work this summer has focused on the gatehouse and windmill. Once scaffolding was in place we found that many more bricks in the windmill had to be replaced than we had expected, but the stonework in the gatehouse was relatively sound and only a few pieces of dressed stone were in need of attention.



Three thousand five hundred and fifty bricks were cut out from the windmill and replaced with matching hand-made replacements from the Bulmer Brick and Tile Company in Sudbury. Our contractors have calculated that a total of 960,000 bricks were originally used to build the windmill.

Public access

Just outside the abbey precinct a small new car park is being constructed by the Broads Authority, acting as contractor to the project. This will be finished this year and will be opened in the spring.



A visit by Norman Lamb, M.P. (left) to St Benets Abbey during the summer with Caroline Davison, the Trust's project manager, and Peter Griffiths, our trustee with special responsibility for the project.



The construction of the new car park for St Benets Abbey is being run by a Broads Authority work team who are acting as contractors. The hard standing created using crushed stone was surrounded by a low earth bank. Over the crushed stone a layer of sand has been laid to form a bedding for plastic “Ecoblocks” to be filled with soil and grass seed to form a green hard standing for cars.

The car park will provide spaces for ten cars plus two for the disabled. Next year when all the associated footpaths are completed there will be disabled-friendly access both from the moorings on the River Bure and from the car park onto the site and right into the gatehouse.

Public engagement

The first four months have seen encouraging community interest and engagement in the project. Through attendance at a number of fetes, exhibitions and events, and talks to parish councils and other local groups the project manager, Caroline Davison, has tapped into an existing enthusiasm for the abbey site and its conservation. Around 8,000 people saw the travelling exhibition over the summer at the open days in Ludham Church, the excavations at Caistor and The Raging Sea exhibition at Waxham Barn.

It is now possible to download volunteer role descriptions and application packs from the new Volunteers page on the NAT website. An exciting range of training is planned, including day schools on the historic landscape, wildlife, art & literature, practical conservation, and monastic life at the abbey. These will be grouped into ‘mini-festivals’ throughout next summer, alongside family-friendly activities, guided tours, exhibitions, performances and other creative activities.



Most of the stonework in the gatehouse was in good order and the joints were just raked out and filled with fresh lime mortar.



The portable exhibition designed by Caroline Davison to encourage people to join the St Benets Abbey project as volunteers in the visitor marquee at Caistor, visited by about 3,000 people over the three weeks of the excavation.

The first training event, delivered by Matt Champion, brought 30 people to Ludham Church in September to learn how to find, interpret and record historic graffiti. Feedback was very positive and participants are planning graffiti recording at the abbey gatehouse and in local churches which were once controlled by the abbey. In October three local junior schools will visit the site for a day of historic graffiti recording and molehill surveys, as part of the programme to develop outdoor learning materials. Over twenty people will also be participating in two sessions on archive research at the Norfolk Record Office, with the intention of undertaking further research on St Benet's which will contribute to future interpretation at the site.

Training to become a St Benet's Abbey Guide is programmed for March 2013, led by a local Blue Badge Guide, Gwen Digby; and the Curator of Archaeology at Norfolk Museums and Archaeological Service, Tim Pestell.

If you are interested in getting involved in the project or would like to be added to the news and events mailing list, please

- email info@stbenetsabbey.org
- Tel: 01603 462987
- Go to Volunteer page at www.norfarchtrust.org.uk



Recording the many graffiti (both old and new) in the medieval gatehouse while the scaffolding is in place will be an important part of the project. Here, Matthew Champion, the county's leading expert of church graffiti, is running a training session in nearby Ludham Church. Photo by Caroline Davison.