Cheshire Hillforts

Hillforts are the most conspicuous features of the Iron Age that can still be seen in our landscape. The chain of important hill top forts concentrated along the Sandstone Ridge is the focus of a new project Habitats and Hillforts of Cheshire’s Sandstone Ridge, which will target resources at six hillforts and their surrounding habitats and landscapes in order to improve their conservation and the public’s experience of them. The project is led by Cheshire County Council in partnership with English Heritage, the National Trust, the Woodland Trust, the Forestry Commission and local landowners. Subject to a successful application to the Heritage Lottery Fund the project will run for 3 years and will help to raise awareness of these special assets and the issues affecting them. Practical activities will improve their condition, their surrounding habitats and their links with the landscape and encourage more people to enjoy them and to take an active role in their management.

There is a lot to be discovered about Cheshire’s hillforts. Very little is known about them in terms of chronology, function, occupation history, economy and status. The project has already started to reassess what we know about these sites, which will develop our understanding of them and lead to enhanced interpretation.

How these sites were used in the medieval, post-medieval and modern periods has contributed to their physical state today. Ploughing, woodland planting, scrub encroachment and even use as an army cadet training area have all left their mark. A thorough condition survey of the hillforts, carried out by archaeologists from Oxford Archaeology North, will be followed by maintenance work as well as a reassessment of their current landuse and long term management. This aspect of the programme will contribute to the sustainable management of these sites and ensure appropriate long term land use. The project will also provide an opportunity for local communities to get involved in archaeological survey work, work to create an access link from the Sandstone Trail and will provide both on and off site interpretation. All of this will help to enhance public awareness of the hillforts, their great antiquity and their importance in the landscape.

For further information contact Jill Collens, Project Leader – Historic Environment phone 01244 973204, email jill.collens@cheshire.gov.uk
Nantwich’s Waterlogged Deposits

Over the last few years we have reported on excavations in Nantwich and the spectacular finds from the Roman, medieval, and post-medieval periods. The town still continues to reveal its past and in 2007 two timber trackways were discovered during a watching brief at Welsh Row.

Earthworks Archaeological Services made the discoveries whilst working for National Grid during the installation of a new gas main. At Welsh Row, which originated as a medieval suburb, the new gas trenches were c. 3m deep. At about 1m. below the present road a well-preserved wooden trackway was recognised within the organic deposits. This consisted of a course of substantial timbers, which were aligned north-to-south and clearly formed on an earlier road following the same alignment as the modern Welsh Row. There were no finds from this level, but a dendrochronological date from a single timber suggests a 13th-century date. Further down, a Roman road on a different alignment was revealed at a depth of nearly 3m. This road consisted of a timber trackway set on a rammed base directly overlying the natural boulder clay. It seems certain that this is the same road seen during the recent excavations at Kingsley Fields, which linked the Roman settlement at Nantwich with the road from Middlewich to Whitchurch.

This discovery of Roman and medieval timber roads in Welsh Row adds to our growing picture of the archaeology of Nantwich. A common feature underlying much of the historic town is a deep, waterlogged, organic deposit. It is now clear that this material is the result of human activity and it appears to be a wholly post-Roman phenomenon. We have a rough idea of its extent and a connection with the waste generated by the salt industry has been suspected. But, we still do not really understand why the material is so deep in the town and so well-preserved.

In an attempt to understand more about these waterlogged deposits, Cheshire County Council and English Heritage have set up the Nantwich Waterlogged Deposits Project, with work being carried out by SLR Consulting Ltd. Cores have been taken across the town to establish the precise extent and depth of the deposits at different locations. Samples are also being gathered to look at the material in more detail in order to understand its nature and current state of preservation.

This project will result in a greater understanding of deposits that are comparable in richness with material in Carlisle, York, and London. In addition, it will produce a strategy to provide archaeologists, planners and developers with information on the archaeological implications of future developments in Nantwich in order to ensure the survival of the town’s archaeology through sympathetic construction methods.

For further information contact Mark Leah, Senior Regeneration Officer (Archaeology) phone 01244 973289, email mark.leah@cheshire.gov.uk

Publications

The last few years have seen the publication of a number of archaeological reports on Cheshire sites, which add to the increasing catalogue of reports on significant sites in the county. These publications illustrate the wealth and variety of the archaeology of the county.

In the last eight years reports have been produced on excavations at Church Moss; Davenham; Warrington Friary; Old Abbey Farm, Risley; Warrington; the Roman industrial site at Wilderspool; the Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement at Oversley Farm, Styg; the prehistoric and Romano-British settlement at Birch Heath, Tarporley; the multi-period site and historic landscape at Tatton Park; and the research, excavations and experiments at one of the earliest metal mining sites in England and the site of the first Roman mineshaft in this country at Alderley Edge.

Much of this work is included in the Regional Research Frameworks reports, which are the first comprehensive synthesis of the archaeology of the North West from prehistory to the 20th century.

Reports on further developer-funded excavations are expected shortly covering the excavations at Kingsley Fields, Nantwich; King Street, Middlewich and Old Mill, Congleton.

For full details of these publications and how to obtain copies see our website www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology or contact: Mark Leah, Senior Regeneration Officer (Archaeology) phone 01244 973289, email mark.leah@cheshire.gov.uk
Romans in Wilderspool

Wilderspool and Holditch: Roman boom towns on the road north by Ian Rogers and Dan Garner (British Archaeological Reports, 449, 2007) is the recently published report on the extensive excavations carried out at the major Roman industrial settlement at Wilderspool in the 1990s.

There is, however, still more to learn about Wilderspool and its associated settlement. Excavations during the summer of 2007 by Earthworks Archaeological Services revealed remains of Roman settlement at Stockton Heath, to the south of Wilderspool. Following an evaluation in 2005, which had revealed well-preserved Roman remains, the footprint of the proposed new primary school at Stockton Heath was excavated. Preservation of early archaeological deposits was good across much of the site, despite disturbance by a series of Second World War air-raid shelters and agricultural activity. The key feature was the Roman road running south from Wilderspool, which survived in places as a thick deposit of gravel, with sandstone buildings forming a kerb. Alongside the road, traces of timber strip buildings were recognised, although there were no surviving floor surfaces. Wells and rubbish pits were also excavated, including a well-constructed sandstone well, which is to be preserved and displayed within the new school. Hearths and furnaces were also revealed and a number of cremations were uncovered. All the cremations were contained in pots, and in one case three pots had been placed in a substantial pit and were in almost perfect condition. The excavations represent the first extensive works in Stockton Heath for more than a century and have revealed a substantial portion of the Roman ‘ribbon development’ to the south of the Wilderspool settlement.

Local Government Reorganisation

Just before Christmas the Government announced its decision to create two new unitary councils in Cheshire. The six district councils and the County Council will therefore be abolished and replaced by two new unitaries, The City of Chester and West Cheshire, and East Cheshire.

The Historic Environment Team in Cheshire County Council currently provides an archaeological advisory service to five Cheshire Districts (Congleton, Crewe & Nantwich, Ellesmere Port & Neston, Macclesfield and Vale Royal) and the diocese of Chester, while Chester Archaeological Service provides a service to Chester City and District. In addition, the County Council also provides an archaeological service to Warrington and a combined archaeological and historic built environment service to Halton Borough Councils under service level agreements.

The delivery of archaeological services in the new West and East Cheshire authorities has not yet been considered and so the future of the current services, staff and resources delivering archaeological advice and information is uncertain. Current arrangements will continue until the vesting day of the two new unitaries on 1 April 2009, but we hope that future arrangements will provide sufficient resources for the continued effective and efficient management of Cheshire’s archaeology.

For further information contact Jill Collens, Project Leader - Historic Environment phone 01244 973204, email jill.collens@cheshire.gov.uk

Find out...

Keep up-to-date with archaeological fieldwork, publications, projects and events in Cheshire on our website

www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology

Here you can find:

- Details of all fieldwork specified and monitored by the Historic Environment Team since 1999.
- Summaries of 2007 fieldwork have just been added
- Information on Historic Landscape Characterisation and a new summary brochure to download
- Details of the Cheshire Historic Towns Survey and reports on 30 towns to download
- Information and leaflets about archaeological sites in Cheshire from the Revealing Cheshire’s Past database
- Details of historic built environment specialists and contractors.
Portable Antiquities Scheme

2007 saw a change in personnel with Frances McIntosh starting in February as the new Finds Liaison Officer. 323 finds were recorded from Cheshire in 2007. Eighteen prehistoric finds were recorded, including Bronze Age axes and spearheads and flint tools. A fine Neolithic flint axe was found in Weaverham (below). It has been polished all over and retains a sharp edge, which is amazing after c.5000 years in the ground.

Amongst the 31 Roman finds recorded is an extremely rare coin, a quadrans dating to c. AD 81 - c. AD 161, found in Goostrey (above). Quadrans were struck mainly for use in Italy and so are rare finds in Britain. They are the smallest denomination of Roman coins, but nonetheless a very exciting discovery. An interesting Roman svastika brooch was found near Northwich. It is cast copper alloy complete with the pin and catch mechanism still in place. This type of brooch generally dates to the second half of the second century running into the 3rd century AD. The svastika, (a cross formed from 4 Greek capital gamma characters) was widely used long before the Christian period, possibly in pagan religious contexts. It did however continue in use into the early Christian period as a veiled symbol of the Cross.

For further information see www.finds.org.uk or contact Frances McIntosh, Finds Liaison Officer for Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire. Phone 0151 478 4259, email Frances.mcintosh@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk.

In brief

Watching briefs during development have been carried out at: Springwood, School Lane, Audlem; Butterley Hayes, Haywood Lane, Audlem; Nantwich town centre gas main renewal; Springfield, Whitchurch Road, Spurstow; Garden Hill Cottage, St. Anne’s Lane, Nantwich; Inner Marsh Farm, Burton; Chelford Quarry gas main diversion; land to the rear of Church Street, Macclesfield; Northwich United Reformed Church, Castle Street, Northwich; Canalside Farm, Rudheath, Northwich; land at Mitchell Street, Stockton Heath, Warrington; St. Elphin’s Park, Warrington.

Archaeological evaluations, in advance of development, have been carried out at: The Market Square, Sandbach; Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Terminal, Ditton Road, Widnes; land to the West of Norton Priory, Runcorn; St. Elphin’s Park, Warrington, and land off Jersey Way, Middlewich.

Archaeological excavations have been carried out at: Stockton Heath Primary School, Warrington (see detailed article).

Lindow Man returns to the North West in April 2008 in a new exhibition at Manchester Museum. For details see www.museum.manchester.ac.uk

Cheshire Archaeology Day 2008 will be held on Saturday 19 April at the Northwich Memorial Hall. The guest speaker is Carol Michaelson from the British Museum who will speak on China’s terracotta army.

Tickets are £11 each (£9 concessions). For a booking form contact Pam Rutherford, Business and Policy, Room 251, County Hall, Chester, Cheshire, CH1 1S7. Phone: 01244 973175; email pam.rutherford@cheshire.gov.uk

Thanks to…

The projects described in this newsletter were funded by: National Grid, The Sandbach Partnership, Halton Borough Council, Dreaming Spires, Warrington Borough Council, Russell Homes, and the RSPB.

They were carried out by: Crewe and Nantwich Metal Detecting Club, CGMWS, Earthworks Archaeological Services, L&P Archaeology, Oxford Archaeology North, SLR Consulting Ltd, Wardell Armstrong and Worcestershire Archaeological Service.

Mailing list

Cheshire Archaeology News is produced by the Historic Environment Team, Cheshire County Council. The Team works to protect, conserve and enhance Cheshire’s historic environment. For information on the Team’s services and contact details see www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology.

Cheshire Archaeology News is sent free of charge to all those on our mailing list. If you would like to add your name to the list, please contact Jill Collens, Project Leader - Historic Environment, Regeneration Resources, Transport & Regeneration, Cheshire County Council, Backford Hall, Backford, Chester CH1 6PZ, phone 01244 973204; email jill.collens@cheshire.gov.uk

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