

WELCOME TO THE NDAS AUTUMN NEWSLETTER

An introduction from our Joint Chair, Alison Mills

“ Many thanks to Sarah for pulling together this latest edition. You will see that, as well as reports on things happening in North Devon, mostly to do with the museum/NDAS Potted History project, Sarah has gathered some interesting snippets from the work of archaeology that you might not have heard about! Thanks Sarah for all your hard work.

Here at the museum we are pulling together our next exhibition, **The Peopling of North Devon**, which will run from October to February. Following on from the DNA analysis of some of the skeletons from the Barnstaple Castle cemetery, which has been carried out as part of the Crick Institute's 1000 genome project, we have invited 100 North Devon residents to have their DNA analysed. The exhibition will look at the North Devon evidence for ancient and more recent migrations, as well as the utility of DNA testing for individuals. It's a complicated, and controversial area to discuss, but several NDAS members are among our cohort of volunteers.

We were disappointed at the low take-up of summer visits offered by the Society, and the committee is thinking again about whether to continue with these. The winter talks programme, however is coming together under Linda's guidance and we look forward to seeing you soon.!”

ALISON MILLS, Joint Chair, NDAS

POTTED HISTORY UPDATE

The first initial phase of the project came to an end at the close of August when the final gatherings of volunteers completed the sorting of the original 200 boxes of sherds, pots and kiln material. The lights were switched off in the warehouse and the last remaining biscuits in the kitchen area eaten!



To start the next phase of the project, we await the results of the funding application to The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Funding from Historic England is already secured but we do need the additional monies to enable the warehouse to open its doors again! The application decision will be with us by December so there is a bit of a wait until we know if further “potting” can continue.

In the meantime we have said a very poignant goodbye to the amazing Sonia Guerrini who has led the project from the off. Sonia has been offered a permanent archaeological post near Bedford based at Wrest Park and we are so sad to see her leave us. However, Sonia's extensive work, methodologies, training and reports live on to help us move the project forward into 2027. Thank you Sonia and we wish you all the best in your new role.

So, watch this space for updates on the next phase of Potted History. We hope the warehouse will be open for business again (with some much needed heaters!) and to start opening the next section of boxes stacked on the shelves.

TALKING ALL THINGS POTS – THE POTTED HISTORY SYMPOSIUM

The symposium took place in the newly refurbished Bridge Chambers Hall, attracting a keen audience eager to learn more about the Barnstaple post-excavation project.

Museum of Barnstaple Director Alison Mills opened the symposium and introduced the first speaker, Linda Blanchard, retired archaeologist, landscape conservation specialist, Joint Chair of NDAS and adviser to the Potted History Project. Linda brought first-hand knowledge to the subject, having worked on the original Castle and Library site excavations in the 1980s.

Digging Up Barnstaple

Linda explained that the series of digs around the castle, the current library site and other town-centre locations arose from Barnstaple's urgent need to modernise in the 1980s. Narrow roads, traffic congestion and limited facilities had left the town struggling to serve a growing population. Archaeological work was therefore carried out where old roads and run-down buildings were being removed to make way for a shopping centre, a new library and a more efficient road system. Earlier excavations in the 1970s at Joy Street and Paiges Lane had already confirmed Barnstaple's distinctive early history. Finds included flints, postholes from 12th- and 13th-century buildings, 13th- and 14th-century stone structures, evidence of metalworking, rubbish pits and significant quantities of post-medieval pottery.



Surveying inside the old Bridewell building (L Blanchard)

The 1980s excavations were conducted under challenging conditions. There were no laptops, tablets or mobile phones; no office base; and very limited staffing. Building surveys were completed by hand, and delays caused by planning, inquiries and demolition added further complications. All reports were handwritten.

Support eventually arrived through enthusiastic volunteers, many from NDAS and DAS, together with funding from the Youth Training Scheme and local business sponsorship. A small professional archaeology team later joined the project — followed, at last, by a computer! Community activities enabled local schools to take part through site visits and a recreated kiln firing, making the work one of the earliest archaeological community projects in the UK.

Excavations on Castle Green in the 1970's uncovered an Anglo-Saxon cemetery, indicating

Barnstaple was an established settlement by the time of the Norman Conquest. Defensive ditches were also identified.

The range of finds — including flints, ovens, kilns, latrines, metalworking evidence, tile making, pottery and pipe production — revealed the breadth of Barnstaple's industrial and commercial history.

After the practical archaeology ended and the office closed in 1990, illustrations, photographs and reports were completed and published as a detailed report on the finds in 2002.

The Potted History Project now aims to examine in detail the pottery finds that have been stored in boxes across basements and attics in Barnstaple for more than 30 years. Launched in 2024, the project follows on from the report and sets out to bring archive storage up to 21st-century standards, deepen understanding of Barnstaple's pottery industry, prepare grey-literature reports for digital publication, produce printed and easy-read reports, train volunteers in post-excavation skills, raise public awareness of Barnstaple's archaeology and potting heritage, and foster pride in the town's past. Two and a half years later, with the initial pilot phase complete, the project now awaits the possibility of funding for the next three years so that this popular and engrossing community venture can continue and expand.



Library site under demolition/excavation. Top right: the cattle market buildings were still in use. (North Devon Local Studies P251885)

From Castle to Pop

The second talk, by Terry Green, former Landscape Archaeologist with SWARCh, past Chair of NDAS and Barnstaple and North Devon Museum Development Trust, and Deborah Gahan, Local Studies Librarian and researcher, offered a fascinating journey through the history of the castle and library site.



OS map, 1889, showing Dornat's (site of the old Bridewell building) and the castle mound. Castle House no longer exists. (OS maps)

The castle site was not always a castle – prior to it's development there was an Anglo Saxon cemetery making Barnstaple's history extend back at least 1,000 years. With the Norman invasion in 1066, the castle finally became - a castle! The mound was built with a timber structure on the top, later a more secure stone edifice was built in the 11th or 12th centuries. The outer bailey lay where the current green lies and the inner bailey where the car park is now situated. Tuly Street was once the outer ditch and there is evidence of a 13th century kiln in the area. By 1534 the castle lay in ruins but a change was upon the town.

In the 17th century, the Bridewell building appeared on the current library site. Barnstaple's Bridewell was established as a parish poor house and house of correction, and also served as a small prison and a school for poor children. It contained

spinning wheels and looms for inmates, and a 1757 record shows the Master buying wool specifically to employ the poor in spinning, carding and weaving. Newcourt's 17th century map of Barnstaple shows the Bridewell buildings and garden extending up to the castle mound, covering the area now occupied by the library.



By the 19th century, accommodation for the poor had become unsatisfactory, which must be saying something! In 1838 the building came up for auction. The Bridewell was then leased to woolstaplers, reflecting North Devon's flourishing wool industry. By 1870, the buildings had been conveyed to Dornat's, a soda-water manufacturer producing seltzer, lemonade, Vichy water, beer, cordials and other drinks. Dornat's continued as a successful business in Tuly Street into Edwardian Barnstaple and throughout the First World War. In the 1920s the company supplied fashionable soda siphons and, in 1922, added a bottling department. By the

Second World War, Dornat's was bottling beer and cola, but access for motor vehicles through the narrow lanes was increasingly difficult, and further expansion had become impossible. In 1933, part of the building was condemned. During the factory's final years in the 1970s, photographer James Ravillious recorded Dornat's inside and out. By 1980, the whole area had been condemned, and the present library was proposed for the site, standing above the remains of the former factory.



*Dornats from Gammon Walk
1974 (James Ravillious/Beaford
Archive)*

So, next time you “pop” into the library to change your book, remember what lies beneath your feet: a cemetery, kiln works, a poor house and a soda factory — the many and varied faces of Barnstaple's past.

Barnstaple's Unusual 17th-Century Kilns

The third presentation was given by pottery expert David Dawson, Archaeologist and Specialist in Historic Pottery Kiln Development, together with kiln specialist Dr Oliver Kent, Ceramicist and Specialist in Post-Medieval Pottery Production.

What made Barnstaple's kilns so distinctive? The answer lies in their fireboxes. While many kilns operated with a single central firebox, several Barnstaple examples used two. More unusually still, these fireboxes were arranged in parallel, unlike two-firebox kilns elsewhere in the country, where the fireboxes were usually set vertically, with one at the top end of the kiln and one below. Although two-firebox kilns generally disappeared during the medieval period, parallel fireboxes continued to be used by tile makers, especially in Delft and southern Europe. Kiln design itself can be traced back to Roman traditions, using either single fireboxes or double opposing fireboxes.

One Barnstaple kiln at Potters Lane, although built with a traditional single firebox, survived in an



*The reconstructed kiln at the Museum of North Devon
(MND)*

unusually good state of preservation — a rare occurrence. It has now been reconstructed at the Museum of North Devon. This type of kiln could fire around 300 pots at a time at temperatures of 800–850 degrees Celsius. Many North Devon pots were also unusual because they were fired twice: first decorated with slipware and fired to a biscuit state, then refired to fix the glaze.

David and Oliver considered how these unusual conventions of kiln building and firing may have

developed. Were they local innovations, or did they reflect the influence of immigrant potters who settled in the area and brought new industrial and decorative techniques with them? In Europe, two parallel fireboxes tended to disappear during the medieval period, but continued in use among tile manufacturers. It is highly possible that Barnstaple's kilns were also used for tile making and perhaps pipe manufacture, re-using existing structures and saving potters both time and money.

Barnstaple therefore offers a distinctive example of how different kiln and firing traditions from across Europe may have blended locally, while also showing how kilns could be adapted for the manufacture of pottery, tiles and pipes.



Example of a two parallel firebox from 1650-75 (Bickley Ceramics Project)

On Common Ground

The morning session closed with an engaging talk from Bill Horner, County Archaeologist and Historic Environment Manager, about a one-day excavation of a pottery dump in Torrington.

The 1993 dig took place on the side of Torrington Common, on the south side of the town below the current car park. Archaeological excavations and site assessments in 1993 provided strong evidence that the 17th-century Deane pottery kilns were situated behind Caynton House, off Mill Street in Great Torrington, North Devon. The dig yielded historically significant pottery sherds, clay pipes and clay saggars. The kiln had first been discovered accidentally in 1989 by builders developing three new houses in the grounds of Caynton House, although the discovery was not reported to the relevant authorities at the time. The kiln dump lay below the site on the slope of the common, a convenient place for disposing of rubbish and broken pottery while the potter was working.



Volunteers on the slopes of the Common (Bill Horner)



Pot washing (Bill Horner)

Bill and a willing group of volunteers from local schools opened a 4m by 1m test trench along the hillside and worked inwards. The narrow path along the edge of the common created logistical difficulties, but the rewards were immediate: even as the topsoil was removed, large deposits of pottery began to appear. As the hours passed, clear layers of deposition became visible. The upper levels contained

18th-century material, while sherds from the 1640s appeared nearer the bottom. This suggests that the kiln was built around the 1630s and had ceased to function by the time Caynton House was built in 1735. Volunteers helped wash, dry and sort hundreds of finds during the day, including saggars, clay pipes, ointment jars, sgraffito wares, a 1737 glass bottle seal, tiles and roof ridge tiles. In total, 636 kg of material was recovered. Most finds indicated utilitarian use, including bowls and jars for storage, cooking and dairy work, along with a few fish-oil lamps. Lower levels produced Peters Marland white-clay vessels, including pots, plates and cups. Some of the trailed slipware was so crudely decorated that it was nicknamed “Mr Blobby Ware”!



Enthusiastic volunteers get to work under the watchful eye of Mark Knight, then of Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit, but now with Cambridge University Archaeology Unit. Excavated the Must Farm Bronze Age site. CBA Archaeologist of the Year, 2017. (Bill Horner)

Overall, around 14,500 artefacts were processed from the dump during the one-day dig. They were then stored locally while Bill and his colleagues worked carefully and slowly to record the finds, many of which can now be found in Torrington Museum.

Community Archaeology and Legacy Collections

After lunch, the symposium resumed with Sonia Guerrini, Lead Archaeologist for the Potted History Project, speaking about community archaeology, legacy collections and work with the Library site archive.

What happens when the digging stops, the archaeologists clean their trowels, and everyone moves on to another trench on another site? In the case of the Library site, a substantial collection of finds was sent into storage at various locations in Barnstaple. There it remained for around 40 years — potentially one of the most important archives for understanding medieval and post-medieval Barnstaple.

Alongside the finds, the archive included extensive paper documentation: written reports, photographs, slides, drawings, surveys, individual context sheets and daily site records, all helping to interpret the collection.

From the outset, the project was highly physical. Around 200 boxes from the Library site alone had to be moved to the project’s working office, a warehouse above Green Lanes shopping centre. Each box was then examined, recorded and weighed. The contents were sorted into context order, examined and weighed again, and later divided into rims, sides, bases and handles for detailed recording of the pottery type. Given the volume of broadly similar pottery in any one context, a proportion was set aside as “disposable” and will be



The warehouse - the hub of activities and home to some 200 boxes of finds! (S Guerrini)

carefully disposed of at the end of the project. The saved examples will then be available for researchers and archaeologists in the future.

In total, volunteers probably worked through the 200 boxes three or four times to record, sort and weigh the contents accurately, while Sonia built up large spreadsheets of data to back up the work being undertaken.

Alongside the pottery sherds, the collection contained kiln waste, tiles, stoneware bottle fragments, brick fragments, a spindle whorl, three footed skillets, evidence of metalworking, (possibly bell casting) transfer-printed sherds from delicate Victorian tea services, and a few pipe remains. These may indicate that pipes were fired in the same kilns to save time and space. Together, the finds add depth to the story of Barnstaple's pottery industry. Much of the pottery was for general household use, including bowls, jugs, cooking pots, cisterns, plates and mugs. By examining the archive chronologically, the project can date and develop a ceramic sequence for the town.

Specialist support came from David Dawson and Oliver Kent, who spent a day sifting through the boxes and advising on some of the more interesting kiln debris.



This was just the pottery rims from the infamous context 144 – Thanks Kim and Jane! (S Guerrini)

North Devon pottery is renowned across the north-western seaboard of what is now the United States. Clay pipes, harvest jugs, sgraffito plates and bowls appear in abundance, carried by travellers to the New World or imported through ports and towns in Newfoundland, Virginia and the Carolinas, where they may have offered a reminder of home.

Twenty-five regular volunteers took part in this substantial five-month initial phase, all learning far more about pottery than they ever expected. By May 2026, many

could instantly recognise a sgraffito bowl base or a North Devon courseware rim with a single glance! Volunteers contributed 1,326 hours, many spent bent over benches crowded with sherds. The success of this impressive project rests on the people it brought together: their expertise, interpretation, enthusiasm, willingness to learn and steady supply of biscuits and cake!

Excavation is only the beginning. The archive created by this project will remain a resource for future generations, while also opening up new questions and discoveries about Barnstaple's past.

The Fabric Type Series for Medieval and Post-Medieval Pottery

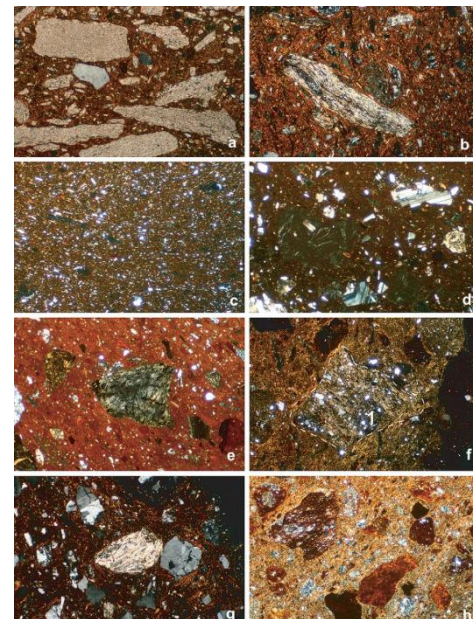
The final talk was given by Kate Berlewen, Archaeological Conservator and Pottery Fabric Researcher, who provided an update on the fabric type series for medieval and post-medieval pottery in Cornwall and Devon.

Kate, a conservator for archaeology and museums and a medieval pottery specialist, has received Historic England funding for a four-year project to create a fabric type series for medieval and post-medieval pottery in Devon and Cornwall. The work forms part of a wider national scheme to improve

standards of archaeological recording and train a new generation of ceramics specialists. As time passes, the unique knowledge held by many ceramic experts is at risk of being lost, making this work particularly important. The project outcomes include a digital database of fabrics for online publication through the Archaeology Data Service, alongside wider dissemination of the project findings. Completion is expected in 2027.

Covering Devon and Cornwall, Kate's database draws on both published and unpublished information about pottery across the two counties. It aims to standardise terminology and fabric types and to create an online digital collection that will support future pottery dating and fabric analysis.

Thin-sectioning selected sherds allows them to be viewed under a microscope at high resolution. At this microscopic scale, the material becomes transparent, enabling archaeologists to examine the clay matrix and non-plastic inclusions under a polarising microscope. This analysis can help identify clay sources and the ceramics produced from them, mapping trade routes and connections between localities, regions, countries and even continents. The project has already completed an analysis of Devon's local fabrics and is now moving on to Cornwall.



An example of thin sectioning of a variety of ceramic sherds showing the vastly different materials used to create them

Finally, Alison Mills brought the symposium to a close after a thought-provoking and fascinating day. We look forward to an update on the Potted History Project next year.

EXMOOR PIONEERS – PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The Exmoor Pioneers project seeks to connect people to the natural and cultural heritage of the former Royal Forest in the heart of Exmoor, support nature recovery, protect heritage at risk, and develop the skills needed to support this landscape in the future.



From 2025 until December 2028, you can join in the journey to protect, enrich, and explore this incredible part of Exmoor.

The Pioneers Project organises a wide range of schemes, developments and ventures to benefit Exmoor. New volunteers are always welcome! Just a few of the diverse projects have included: water vole reintroduction, peatland restoration, natural flood management, heritage at risk –monument protection and preservation, Exmoor farming heritage, community excavations, living landscapes LiDAR project and tree planting and tree nursery work.

Exmoor Pioneers is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, with additional funding thanks to a generous legacy from the late Cynthia Hadley to CareMoor for Exmoor and support from BMW, Historic England, Defra, National Parks England, and the Forestry Commission.

For further information and to get involved in the various projects visit: www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/nature-and-landscape/exmoor-pioneers-project/join-us

PIONEERS AT PINKERY

The exploration of the UK's highest canal – Kimberley Colman, Heritage Ranger reports from an exciting excavation high up on Exmoor this summer, as part of the Pioneers Project.

One of the most exciting and intriguing projects run by the Exmoor Pioneers project this year was the excavation of the Pinkery Canal, high up on Exmoor. Pinkery, or Pinkworthy Canal is often described as the UK's highest canal. It lies just to the south of Pinkery Pond and runs towards Prayway, Exe Head to the south of Warren for around 8km (or 4.9 miles) across the high moor. The canal was constructed between 1819 and 1820 by John Knight, shortly after the Knight family purchased large parts of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor. This was land that had been held by the Crown for around a thousand years, and the Knights' purchase marked the beginning of one of the largest agricultural improvement schemes in the South West. Their aim was to transform the high moor into a more productive farmscape.



Pinkery Canal in the landscape (ENP)



Pinkery Canal up close (ENP)

Pinkery Canal formed part of this ambitious plan, but its exact purpose remains unclear. The original Knight family letters do refer to it as a canal, although they do not fully explain why it was built or how it functioned. It may have been intended to transport goods such as lime, stone or minerals, possibly using small bathtub sized tub boats. One of the puzzles is that the canal does not appear to connect to anything obvious, and it is still not known how it was supplied with water. What makes

the canal especially important archaeologically is that its banks effectively act as a time capsule. When they were built, they sealed and preserved the soils and sediments beneath them. This gives us a rare opportunity to investigate what the landscape was like before the Knight family began transforming this part of Exmoor. We often think of Exmoor's moorland as wild and untouched, but it has been shaped by thousands of years of human activity.

The excavation was also important because part of the canal lies within an Exmoor National Park

Authority (ENPA) area being considered for rewetting and woodland habitat creation. Before any new habitat work takes place, the team needed to understand what survives below ground, both to protect archaeology and to better understand how future habitat work might fit into the longer history of the landscape. To do this, ENPA and Pioneers volunteers created a deposit model before the excavation began. This is a way of building up a picture of what lies beneath the surface by taking hundreds of auger samples across the area, recording



Pioneers volunteers recording sediments in the auger for the deposit model (ENP)

the depth and type of different sediments, and then stitching that information together in GIS. The model identified three zones: an area of deep peat with well-preserved old land surfaces (palaeosols) beneath it; an area with less well-preserved peat and buried soils below more mineral-rich deposits; and an area where shallow mineral soil lay directly over much older Ice Age deposits (Pleistocene), with no surviving peat. This raised an important question: had the Knight family deliberately altered or reclaimed parts of the peatland after 1819, turning peat into more mineral-rich agricultural soils?

The excavation was designed to test this question by looking more closely at each of these three depositional zones and trying to investigate the processes with their formation. A trench was opened across the canal itself, where the banks had sealed the old ground surface, and three 1 m by 1 m test pits were dug, each one targeting one of the zones identified by the model. The project also sought to recover samples from each zone for archaeological analysis, to establish a record of landscape change from prehistory through to the nineteenth century, and to reconstruct the environmental history of this high moorland landscape.



Sediments recorded by Pioneers volunteers during augering for the deposit model (ENP)

The excavation, which took place in July, was organised through ENPA as part of the Exmoor Pioneers Project and led by Kimberley Colman, Heritage Ranger. Pioneer volunteers and archaeologists exposed and explored part of the canal and test pits were dug to collect soil samples for further analysis.

Open Day

The open day on 18th July attracted over 100 enthusiastic members of the public all happy to take the hilly walk up to the site. While excavation work was underway, visitors were able to learn about the construction of the canal, see the archaeology in progress, and hear how scientists use sediments and pollen to reconstruct past environments. They also had the chance to find out what the project was already beginning to reveal about Exmoor's changing landscape.



The canal and banks cleaned (ENP)

After the excavation finished, Kimberley had some interesting updates:

Test Pit 1: The Deep Peat and Ancient Woodland

Test pit 1 was the deepest of the three pits, reaching about 1 m below the surface and targeting the zone where the deposit model had identified deep peat over a preserved palaesol, and it quickly became one of the most exciting parts of the excavation. At the base of the pit, the team found a brown earth palaesol (associated with ancient woodland soil), formed from Loess (fine wind-blown sediment laid down during the last Ice Age). This shows that the area was once very different from the open moorland we see today. Within this old palaesol were layers of charcoal and identifiable plant remains; these are especially important because they may help date episodes of possible prehistoric burning and give us evidence for people using or changing the landscape thousands of years before the canal was built. Above this, deep peat had built up over thousands of years, sealing and preserving the earlier ground surface beneath it. The pit also

produced one of the standout finds of the excavation: large pieces of preserved wood, roughly the size of a forearm. It was found at the boundary between the palaeosol and the peat above it, and may be part of the prehistoric woodland that once grew thousands of years ago in this area.

Test Pit 2: The Mystery Pit

Test Pit 2 targeted the second zone identified by the deposit model, where less well-preserved peat and old buried soils were thought to survive beneath more mineral-rich deposits. This proved to be the most difficult test pit to understand. The deposits appeared to lie in a clear sequence, so it was possible to see different layers in the pit. However, the material within those layers was jumbled, suggesting that the ground had been disturbed at some point, something that is often associated with ploughing, backfilling, or other forms of ground disturbance.

Even so, the pit still produced useful evidence. At the base of the sequence was the top of an old brown earth palaeosol containing charcoal. Although the disturbed layers above may be difficult to interpret, the charcoal from this lower palaeosol may help identify and date earlier burning activity and give the team an important point of comparison with the other test pit.



Dr. Chris Carey describing the sequences in Test Pit 1 on the open day (ENP)



Soil sample being collected by Dr Chris Carey (L Blanchard)

Test Pit 3: shallow soils

Test Pit 3 targeted the third zone identified by the deposit model. Unlike the other test pits, there was no peat or preserved palaeosol beneath the surface. Instead, the shallow mineral soil sat directly on Pleistocene material, showing that this part of the landscape had developed in a very different way from the areas where peat and palaeosol had survived.

Pinkery Canal Trench

The canal trench produced one of the most unexpected results of the excavation. When work began, the team expected to find peat sealed beneath the canal banks. Instead, they uncovered a brown earth palaeosol beneath more mineral rich deposits. This was important because it suggests the pre-canal landscape was more varied than first

expected. Rather than showing that the Knight family had converted deep peat into mineral-rich agricultural soil after 1819, the trench showed that some of these better-drained or more mineral soils may already have existed before the canal was built.



Successful lift! (L Blanchard)

What Happens Next?

The next stage is to bring together the specialist analysis of the samples taken from the test pits, canal bank and ditch. These samples should help build a much more detailed picture of how the Pinkery and Driver landscape changes over time.



Open day visitors in the canal trench talking to Kimberly Colman about the test pit (L Blanchard)

Dr Richard Macphail, from UCL, will undertake micromorphology. This involves looking at very thin slices of soil under a microscope. It can help identify tiny features that are not visible during excavation, such as trampling, burning, weathering, waterlogging or soil formation. Dr Chris Carey, from Bournemouth University, will carry out sediment analysis. This will look at the chemical make-up of the soils and sediments, including whether lime or other minerals are present and in what quantities. This may help show whether material was

deliberately added to the land, or whether the mineral-rich soils formed naturally.

Professor Ralph Fyfe, from the University of Plymouth, will carry out the pollen analysis. Pollen grains can survive in peat and buried soils for thousands of years, and different plants produce different types of pollen. By looking at the pollen from each layer, it may be possible to see how the surrounding vegetation changed through time.

Dana Challinor (archaeobotanist) will examine the wood and charcoal from the site. This should help identify which tree species were present and which pieces of charcoal may be suitable for radiocarbon dating. This is especially important because charcoal from different layers could help date episodes of burning, and may give evidence for people using or changing the landscape long before the canal was built.



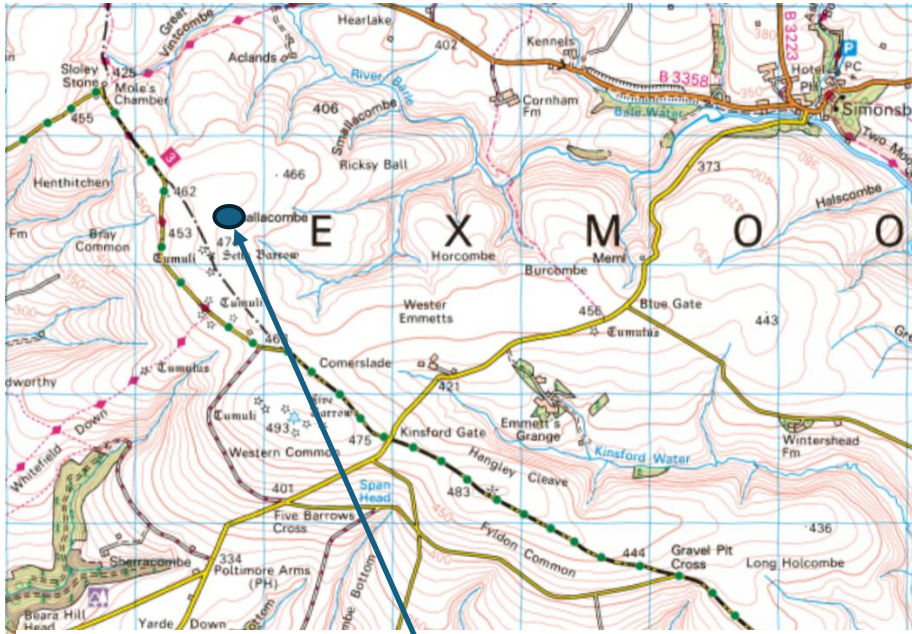
Block lifted preserved woodland from test pit 1 (ENP)

John Giorgi (archaeobotanist) will analyse plant remains from the samples. Tiny seeds, stems and other preserved plant material can give important clues about the local environment. Together, this work should help answer some of the key questions raised by the excavation: what the landscape looked like before the canal was built, whether the Knight family altered or improved areas of peatland, and how people have interacted with their environment in this part of Exmoor over thousands of years.

PIONEERING AT SETTA BARROW

As a volunteer with Exmoor Pioneers Project – Heritage at Risk, Sarah McRae was delighted to be part of the team examining Setta Barrow over two days in late May, during a memorable heatwave.

Setta Barrow sits on a prominent ridge above Simonsbath, near Shoulsbarrow, in the watershed of the Rivers Bray and Barle. To the south lies Five Barrows, a well-known Bronze Age series of burial mounds, close to the White Ladder stone setting. Setta Barrow is a short ten-minute walk across private land from the lane that runs along the ridge and shares its immediate setting with three other, much smaller and flatter barrows. Even from the road, it is a conspicuous monument.



Setta Barrow location (OS Maps)

Dating from the Early Bronze Age, the barrow is an oval, flat-topped mound measuring up to 31.4m long, 30m wide and 2.8m high. It has a stone-built retaining kerb measuring up to 0.6m high. Surrounding the mound is a partially buried outer ditch measuring up to 3m wide and 0.1m deep. It has a central excavation hollow and is crossed, unfortunately, by a Victorian field boundary, now the county boundary between Devon and Somerset.

Having recently been recorded as being “at risk”, Setta Barrow has been included by the Exmoor Heritage at Risk Project as one of the important sites requiring detailed survey and recording, so that plans can be put in place to prevent further deterioration. The main risk is to the kerbstones at the base of the monument, which are being eroded not only by time, but also by livestock grazing and roaming across the barrow. Some are already leaning at a perilous angle and would not take much more damage before falling. Once the bank of the barrow is exposed, it will erode quickly and the monument will deteriorate further. Once that happens, the damage cannot simply be reversed.

The plan is that, once the barrow has been fully surveyed and any further assessments concluded, a thorn hedge will be established close to the kerbstones to prevent further damage by animals. The hedge will be set in biodegradable matting with a gravel base, using locally sourced material, to give it the best chance of establishing successfully.

And so, on a hot May morning, I met up with Heritage at Risk organiser



Setta Barrow showing the boundary bank running through its centre . The “Devon” side is on the left. (Winter 2024 – David R Abram)

Kimberley Colman (Pioneers Heritage Ranger), Patrick Watts-Mabbut (Volunteer and Outreach Officer from ENPA) and volunteers Martin, Holly, Lorna and Graham. Our Day 1 mission was to use scythes to



The "Devon" side of Setta Barrow - ready to be surveyed! (S McRae)

remove rough grass, tussocks and thistles from around the barrow so that geophysics surveying could be undertaken by Headland Archaeology from York the following week. Also on the day's agenda was learning about photogrammetry, so that a 3D record of the barrow could be created for future study, and using GPS equipment to record and survey further aspects of the site.

Job number one was scything. As a complete novice, I watched Patrick, *aka* "The Scythe Master", as he gave a demonstration and safety talk; those scythes were more than razor-

sharp! Each one was then adjusted to the right handle length for each of us. I have to say I was unimpressed with my own efforts: it's much harder than Patrick (or Ross Poldark) makes it look. Martin and Graham seemed to take to the task easily, swinging their blades across the rough terrain. I am told it is all in the hip movement, so perhaps I need dance classes or golf lessons to improve my "swing". Patrick, who even scythes his own lawn, returned every 15 to 20 minutes to resharpen our blades. There was a large area to clear on either side of the barrow, and it was a considerable job to keep going, especially as the vegetation was so tough. I just hope no one noticed the odd untidy "tufty bits" where I had been hacking away!

After a short lunch break, enjoyed with a stunning 360-degree view of Exmoor and the surrounding countryside, it was time to swap the scythes for the more up-to-date side of archaeology: GPS equipment. While Lorna and Holly had plotted the top of the barrow during the morning, our job was to plot each of the kerbstones at the base. Some were clearly visible, while others were still hidden beneath the grass. After Kimberley demonstrated which buttons and functions to use, we were soon plotting the stones and entering the data. Next came photogrammetry using a handheld camera. Eight or nine "targets" were placed around the lower edge of the barrow and each was plotted using GPS. We then climbed the barrow, taking overlapping photographs of the slope. At the top, we moved a couple of feet across and descended, again taking photographs. Going up was straightforward enough; descending while concentrating on the camera and trying not to trip over tussocks, uneven ground and a steep slope was rather more challenging.



The visible kerbstones at the base of the barrow (S McRae)

By the end of a very warm day, the grass and tussocks immediately around the barrow had been cut back, the “Devon” side of the monument had been entered onto GPS, and the photogrammetry for the whole barrow had been completed.



The survey drawing coming to life (apologies for the shadow of my hand!) (S McRae)

Day two dawned a little cooler, and our task turned to surveying and plan-drawing the barrow. Alongside me, Graham and Holly had volunteered again, and we were also joined by Jackie Kiberd (Volunteer Support & Partnerships Coordinator at ENPA) and Rob Wilson North (Head of Access, Engagement & Estates at ENPA).

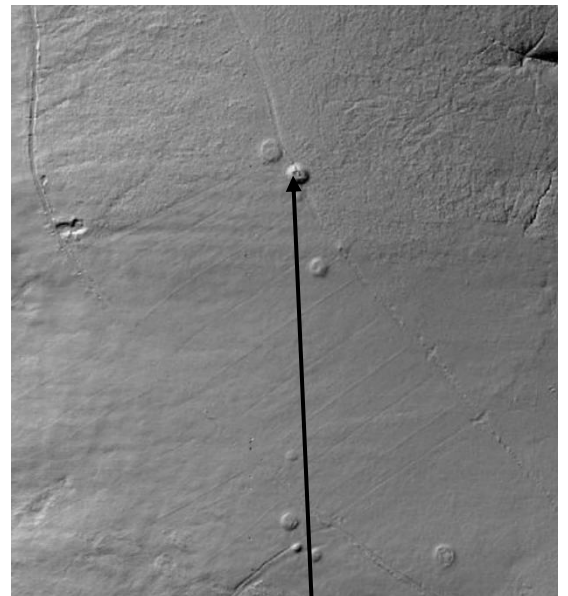
The surveying and drawing was all to be carried out by hand, with no fancy electronic equipment, but it proved a great opportunity to learn how the job

can be done using basic archaeological and drawing kit: tapes, ranging poles, an alidade, pencil, ruler and permatrace. In fact, it was far more exciting than I had expected. With Rob directing us, we checked our positioning using permanent fixtures in the landscape, lined up the alidade and set out our initial tapes around the barrow. All measurements could then be taken as offsets from those tapes. Although we were slow to start, we quickly became more confident with the process, and we all had the chance to draw the relevant features onto the plan: the kerbstones, the slopes, the ditch, the depression in the top of the barrow and an odd but clearly visible track down one side.

By the end of the day, at around 4pm, we had completed the “Devon” side of the barrow to Rob’s satisfaction. The “Somerset” side was completed a few weeks later.

Our hard work can now help to protect this ancient monument, alongside work undertaken by other volunteers at Alderman’s Barrow, Beckham stone setting, Swap Hill and Kittuck stone setting. By combining GPS, photogrammetry, the results of Headland Archaeology GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) ER (Electromagnetic) surveys, available LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) mapping, our measured hand surveys and, just as importantly, our own observations of the monuments and their surrounding landscapes, it will be possible to record each site in detail. That record should help future deterioration to be identified early and, it is hoped, prevented.

I thoroughly enjoyed taking part in this remarkable project: learning new skills, if not quite mastering the scything, and meeting like-minded volunteers equally keen to help preserve and protect our local historic environment.



LiDAR map showing Setta Barrow plus smaller, flatter surrounding barrows (ARCHI Maps. Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2022)

There is still photogrammetry work to complete later in the year, and Kimberley is hoping to run workshops to enable volunteers who have taken part in other “at risk” monument surveys to create their own 3D models for future reference.

Thanks go to Kimberley, Patrick, Rob and Jackie from ENPA for their enthusiasm, advice and guidance, and to the generous support of all the Project sponsors.

WHAT DID THE ROMANS EVER DO FOR US.....?

They built an amazing villa near Halberton! Sarah McRae reports on a joint NDAS and ACE Archaeology Club visit.

A small but enthusiastic group of NDAS and AC Archaeology Club members gathered in a sunny field near Halberton on 2nd July to see the latest discoveries from a rare Roman villa recently uncovered in Devon.

The SHARE project—Save Halberton’s Ancient Roman Environment—is a major five-year archaeological, learning and community initiative. Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, it brings together Tiverton Museum, Tiverton Archaeology Group (TAG), Sampford Peverell Society (SPS), Devon County Council, the University of Exeter and Cotswold Archaeology. Together, they are investigating a large Roman villa set in countryside between Halberton and Sampford Peverell, involving both university students and volunteers in the excavation and study of this important site.

We were welcomed by Project Lead Dr Susan Greaney, Director of Postgraduate Research and Employability Lead at the University of Exeter, who introduced the story of the villa’s discovery.



Area 1 - the main villa site (D Bryant)

The site was first identified in 2004, when a local metal detectorist began finding coins and other objects from the Roman period. These finds were reported, and TAG and SPS, supported by the County Archaeologist, investigated further through fieldwalking. Surface finds included tesserae, pottery, roofing slates and tiles. In 2019, TAG volunteers excavated two small trenches, revealing part of a mosaic floor. A geophysical survey and full evaluation by AC Archaeology in 2021 then mapped underground features and revealed the foundations of several buildings, suggesting an extensive villa complex.

With only three or four other Roman villas so far discovered in Devon, the Halberton site is of considerable significance. Devon lay at the far western edge of the Roman Empire, and this discovery adds greatly to our understanding of Romanisation in the region.

Area 1: The Main Villa

From the shallow trench containing the mosaic and villa foundations, it was immediately clear that the remains lay only inches below the topsoil and were at serious risk from further ploughing. This underlines the urgency of the excavation: the team must preserve and record as much as possible before the land returns to farming.



Main villa showing part of the beautiful mosaic floor (D Bryant)

The villa dates from the mid-2nd to 4th century. It began as a small corridor-style building, then was extended and remodelled over time into a more rectangular plan. Later additions included the mosaic room, a porch and possibly a staircase leading to a first floor. At the rear of the building, projecting walls and a deep gully may have collected rainwater from a lean-to roof, perhaps covering storage areas.

One of the main highlights was the mosaic room: a small chamber, probably added in the mid-3rd to 4th century. Although damaged by ploughing, parts of the design survive, with red, white and black tesserae arranged in a finely crafted polychrome pattern. Mosaics were costly additions in Roman Britain and are usually associated with wealthy households. The remains at



Close up of part of the mosaic (Cotswold Archaeology)

Halberton therefore suggest a high-status settlement, even if the villa's origins were more modest. Dr Greaney explained that, because the room is small, it may have served as a reception or "meet and greet" space rather than a dining room. Another possibility is that it was a lararium: a place for the household shrine. More will be revealed once the mosaic is lifted and the original floor beneath it is exposed.

Area 2: The Outbuildings

Area 2 presented a very different picture from the main villa. Volunteers and students uncovered substantial wall remains belonging to two newly identified buildings. Although these structures had been "robbed out", with much of their stone and building material removed for reuse elsewhere, enough remained to indicate their layout and scale.



Area 2 - the outbuildings with the opus signinum lined tank.(S McRae)

Ditches and pits have also been identified, but the most striking feature so far is a tank-like structure containing opus signinum. This Roman waterproof concrete, made from lime mortar mixed with crushed pottery, tile or brick, was used for damp-proofing and in structures involving water, such as baths, aqueducts and cisterns. The tank is now rectangular but appears originally to have been square; at some point, its walls were remodelled to make it longer and narrower. It is probably a plunge

bath, although further excavation is needed before the building can confidently be described as a bath-house. If confirmed, it would provide further evidence of wealth and domestic comfort at the settlement.

The other building in Area 2 is a long stone structure extending beyond the edges of the trench. It may have been an agricultural or storage building. A forebuilding or porch appears to face into the villa precinct, with a metallised floor surface. In this area, students found animal bone and antler, including signs of antler working, suggesting that it may have been used for craft activity or butchery.

The Finds

The finds trays were full of varied material, including nails, roof slate—some still showing nail holes—animal bones, oyster shells, pottery, slag

and hypocaust tiles. There are also indications of iron smelting in the neighbouring field, which the project hopes to explore in future seasons. Some of the most exciting artefacts had already been sent to Cotswold Archaeology's specialist conservation labs. These included an indented beaker, probably late 3rd- to 4th-century

New Forest ware; painted pottery, possibly New Forest or Oxfordshire parchment ware; and a striking piece of Samian ware mortarium, or mixing bowl, with a lion spout, found near the water tank. Other notable finds included a blue glass intaglio depicting the Roman goddess Victory, originally set into a ring and used to seal documents in wax; a flint mixing palette or mortar, perhaps used for paint or cosmetics; and a delicate copper-alloy bangle found lying on top of the mosaic, again hinting at the wealth and status of the occupants.



The remains of a large ceramic bowl or basin (somewhat broken) . It may have been used as a "quench" in iron manufacture. (S McRae)



These huge sherds of pottery once belonged to a large amphora, which looks to be a 'Dressel 20' type – in use from the mid-1st to later 3rd centuries AD. Made in the Guadalquivir valley in southern Spain, close to where olives were grown, such vessels could've transported olive oil all the way to Devon! (Cotswold Archaeology)



The beautiful intaglio, part of a ring seal. (Cotswold Archaeology)



Spoon with mandolin-shaped bowl, made of copper alloy and covered with silver plate. This luxurious tableware commonly dates to the later Roman period, with other examples found in Colchester (Roman Camulodunum).(Cotswold Archaeology)

The pottery will help to date the site, and future ceramic residue analysis may reveal what foods were cooked or stored in the



Hypocaust tiles (S McRae)



The indented beaker, probably late 3rd- to 4th-century New Forest ware. (Cotswold Archaeology)

vessels. Environmental soil samples from across the site should also help identify activities in different areas, such as butchery or metalworking.

NDAS and AC Archaeology Club would like to thank Sue and her team of students and volunteers, who answered our questions with enthusiasm and expertise. We are already looking forward to next year and to seeing what more this remarkable site will reveal.



A RINGING PAIR

Two superb rings, one a rare Roman example and the other a Tudor beauty are now safely housed in local museums where they can be seen in all their glory.

The Broadhembury Ring

Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) is currently in discussions to host the Broadhembury Ring, a rare late Tudor gold and amethyst ring discovered in Devon.

The ring was found by a metal detectorist in the Blackdown Hills in 2020 but was initially returned to the landowner after no museum could acquire it at the time. It was sold at auction in April 2026 for £20,000 to London dealer Symbolic & Chase, who are now working to loan the piece to RAMM for public display.



Photo: Spinks

polychrome enamel, and intricate goldsmithing influenced by continental Europe. More than a jewel, it is a tangible link to the social, cultural, and artistic life of elite England between 1585 and 1620.

The findspot in Broadhembury parish situates the ring within a landscape historically connected to the Drewe family, prominent local landowners and notable lawyers with Royal court connections. Although no documents

The Broadhembury Ring is a striking example of late Renaissance jewellery, a substantial gold finger ring, likely worn on the thumb, dating to the late 16th or early 17th century. Discovered in Broadhembury parish in Devon, it offers a rare glimpse into the sophistication of English elite jewellery during a period of stylistic transition, combining a finely cut gemstone,



Photo: Spinks

survive to link it to the family, auction house Spink said the ring's "quality and style" align it with the family's "social and material standing".

Likely designed as a thumb ring, it combines a large amethyst, high carat gold and sophisticated blackwork enamel in a style influenced by continental European goldsmithing. The amethyst is cut in an "aille en seize" manner – a transitional cut between medieval point cuts and the post-1600 rose and brilliant cuts. Despite minor distortion and a little enamel loss, the ring remains in exceptional condition.

The Ilminster Ring

An "extraordinary" Roman gold finger ring has been acquired by South West Heritage Trust and will eventually be on display at the Somerset museum.

The ring, along with a hoard of coins, were discovered as part of an archaeological dig at land near Ilminster, Somerset, in 2018 by metal detectorist Kevin Minto and his friend Phil Costello.

"I was on a group dig when I found it," said Kevin, "I was walking in this field on an estate by myself and I found a couple of coins. Then I found a couple more and a couple more and realised it was a hoard. I got on the phone to the organiser and put a message on the group chat and Phil came over and helped find more coins. They were everywhere. By the end of the day we had something like 200 coins."



(Photo: SW Heritage Trust)

"We returned to the field with the finds liaison officer and that is when Phil found the gold ring. It is a ring that is unique to Britain. Because of the size and quality of it, it must have belonged to someone very important like a top Roman general or a high ranking official."

Following conservation, the ring will go on display in the Roman collections at The Museum of Somerset in Taunton.

Amal Khreisheh, senior curator at South West Heritage Trust, said: "The Ilminster Ring is both large and heavy, with elaborate goldwork and a beautifully executed intaglio. While other examples are known, these elements combine to create a spectacular ring that is only paralleled by continental discoveries. Its discovery sheds light on how South Somerset's Roman inhabitants navigated a period of unrest from 286-296. It is likely the ring was buried shortly after, in 297, as part of a hoard including coins, lead and pottery objects."

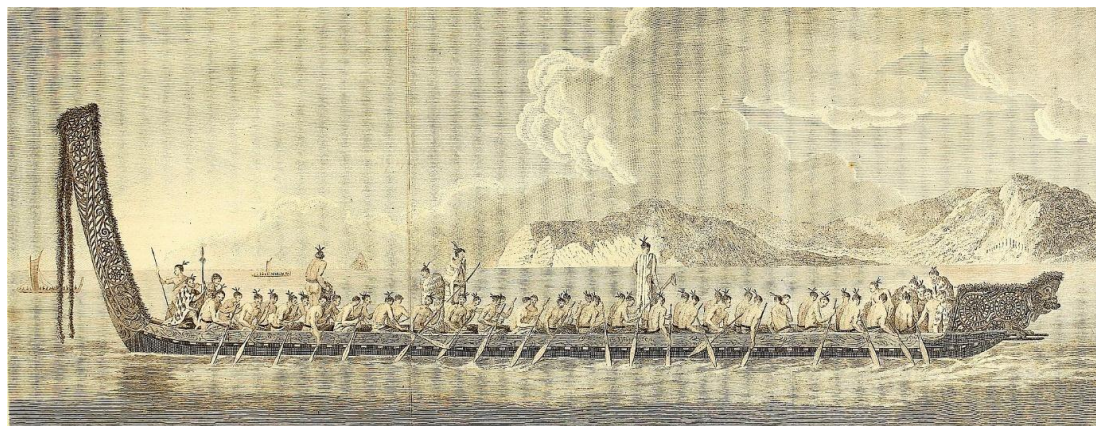
As the coroner declared the hoard treasure it was given to the British Museum so that another public institution had the chance to acquire it.

The South West Heritage Trust raised £78,010 to acquire the Ilminster Ring and Hoard, which is made up of 297 coins, with support from the Arts Council England, V&A Purchase Fund, Art Fund plus a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation, and The Headley Trust, alongside generous local support from the Friends of The Museum of Somerset, Ilminster Town Council, Taunton U3A and Ilminster Education Foundation.

SEMANTICS, SEAFARING, AND ARCHAEOLOGY: A GOOD YARN FROM NEW ZEALAND

John Bradbeer takes us overseas to the remote Chatham Islands in the Pacific Ocean....

What does ‘finding’ archaeology actually mean? This has been the subject of a case in the Maori Land Court in New Zealand concerning the discovery of part of a waka on Rekohu (The Chatham Islands). More than 450 artefacts from the waka were found in pieces in the Chatham Islands. As dating and other analysis of the material gets under way, lead archaeologist Justin Maxwell expects the waka will reveal new insights about Polynesian boat building, voyaging and



A *waka taua* (war canoe) as drawn from observation on James Cook's Expedition in 1773.

trade. He said the age of the waka is not yet clear. “No matter how old it is, we can’t overstate how incredible it is. It is by far the most important discovery in New Zealand, possibly Polynesia, and it will go down as one of the most important finds of all

time in Polynesia,” Maxwell said.

Under existing legislation, the Crown is obliged to protect and conserve as appropriate any archaeology found in New Zealand predating the arrival of Europeans. The New Zealand government argued that it only had responsibilities for the part of the waka uncovered as this was what was ‘found’ But expert opinion is that this is being probably no more than 20% of the whole which lies buried under sand dunes, but that the whole waka has been ‘found’. There is some urgency to the case since the original sighting of remains on the beach in August 2024, the site has been swept by storms and temporarily protected by sandbags, whilst an excavation of the exposed timbers has been carried out. Excavation of the dunes behind to reveal the rest of the waka is seen as imperative. The judge ruled that the whole waka had been found and that obligations to excavate and prove how much had survived could not be avoided and funded.



The excavation site at Rekohu (Chatham Islands) showing the emergency protection against the sea. (Justin Maxwell/Supplied by Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

A little background is now necessary. You will have to have a very good atlas to find the Chatham Islands/Rekohu, as they lie some 800 kilometres east of New Zealand's South Island and with an area just under 800 square kilometres. It enjoys District Council status but with a population of 620, it is easily the smallest in New Zealand. The site lies on private land, and the owners have been prime movers in seeking to have the waka excavated in full. Other government agencies, such as the Department of Conservation and those

concerned with Maori affairs, also see excavation as essential but are not well enough funded to be able to do this without further support. Hence the importance of the case.

The Maori arrived in New Zealand in CE 1250-1280 and the oral histories and traditions have them arriving from the mythical homeland of Hawai'iiki in large ocean-going waka with twin hulls and a platform linking them. Most of the modern iwi (Maori tribes) link their genealogy to a founding waka. The first Europeans encountered Maori in waka taua (war canoes) and we have several contemporary drawings. However, these waka were constructed by hollowing out logs. New Zealand had large stands of huge trees, especially the kauri (*Agathis australis*), and the totara (*Podocarpus totara*), which attain 30-35 metres in height, and the Maori were able to use their trunks to make canoes, abandoning techniques that had developed to use the far



Smashed waka pieces in situ at excavation site, Chatham Island, New Zealand. (Justin Maxwell/Supplied by Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

smaller trees of the more tropical Pacific islands. The Chatham Island waka is one of very few of the earlier type of ocean-going waka to have been found in New Zealand. The waka recently found has planks and vegetable fibre lashing, with this latter being radio-carbon dated to CE 1440-1470, but expert opinion is that the lashing material may well have represented a last repair, and that the waka itself could well be older by several decades. There are tapu restrictions about the prows of a waka, and to respect these, radio-carbon dates have not been obtained from the timbers found, as these may well be of the tapu part of the waka. The English term taboo derives from tapu but the original Maori word conveys a sense of 'sacred and revered,' with certain actions, such as the eating of food treated as being disrespectful. The destruction of the wood to produce a C-14 date would also be a clear act of disrespect.

One thing to be learnt from this episode is that what looks like retrogression in material culture, may be nothing of the sort. In Europe we usually see hollowed out log boats as 'more primitive' than plank-built craft, but for the Maori arriving in New Zealand in plank-built vessels as there were no trunks large enough in their ancestral homelands to be hollowed out to make ocean-going craft, the abundance of the huge trunks of kauri and totara allowed them to produce waka of a very different kind.

ALL FOR ONE....?

Have the remains of the musketeer D'Artagnan been found in a Dutch church?

More than 350 years after the death of legendary French musketeer d'Artagnan, his remains may well have been found under the floor of a Dutch church.

Jos Valke, deacon at St Peter and Paul Church in Maastricht, helped unearth the skeleton in March this year and is 99% certain that the remains belong to Charles de Batz de Castelmoré, a close aide to France's Sun King Louis XIV who was known as Count d'Artagnan.

D'Artagnan was killed during the Siege of Maastricht in 1673, but later immortalised in the adventure stories of Alexandre Dumas as a friend of the Three Musketeers. His remains were long rumoured to have been buried in the church, but no evidence has been found until now.



D'Artagnan statue in Maastricht, near to where he was killed in 1673. (Maastricht Writers WordPress.com)

Deacon Valke said that nobody had dug under the floor until now, but as a few tiles had been broken it was decided to have a look. They first found a wall and took out a brush to dig further. At this point an archaeologist was called, who discovered the skeleton beneath where the altar table had stood 200 years ago.

"We became quite silent when we found the first bone," he said, adding that there were several pointers indicating that the skeleton belonged to the Sun King's right-hand man. "He was buried on sacred ground below where the altar was; we found the bullet that put an end to his life and we found a coin from 1660 in his grave, and it was from the bishop who attended Mass for the Roi Soleil."

The archaeologist who took part in the excavation is more cautious. "I'm a scientist, but my expectations are high," Wim Dijkman commented, adding that he preferred to wait for DNA confirmation of the skeleton's identity. There is of course uncertainty about whether genetic testing will be definitive, noting that d'Artagnan had two sons but that the broader lineage is unclear. A sample has been taken from

the remains and is currently being analysed in Germany, while some of the bones have been taken to the Dutch city of Deventer to assess the skeleton's age, where it is from and whether it is male or female. "I've already been researching d'Artagnan's grave for 28 years. This could be the highlight of my career," said Dijkman.

D'Artagnan is believed to have been hit in the throat by a musket ball as Louis XIV sought to capture Maastricht. The French army decided that as it was mid-summer they would bury him locally, and their camp had been set up close to the church in the Wolder area in what is now the south-west corner of Maastricht.

Although d'Artagnan was modelled on a historical figure, the three musketeers were fictional characters who may have been inspired by three members of an elite corps who provided protection for the king and took part in military action.

Historian Odile Bordaz, who has written extensively about d'Artagnan, noted that the burial in the Wolder church is plausible but unproven, calling it "a very logical hypothesis. But it remains a hypothesis." Bordaz said the church's proximity to Louis XIV's royal encampment and



D'Artagnan's grave uncovered in the St Peter and Paul church. (Reuters)

burial customs of the period support the theory. “In that time, it was very common to bury important people in churches,” she said. “And d’Artagnan was a close officer of the king.”



Remains found in the grave including a bullet and a coin (Stitching 6213HL Gamma-Rapho)

She added that she is in close contact with archaeologist Wim Dijkman. “It is very interesting and good that the Netherlands is working on this,” Bordaz said. “Science will determine it.” French historian Jean-Christian Petitfils called the discovery “tremendous.” “I have been working on d’Artagnan for fifty years,” he said. “For France, he is a double hero: on the one hand, he is a fictional character, d’Artagnan. But in French history, he was also a real hero: a loyal man, very devoted to the king. The king was very fond of him.”

In Lupiac, d’Artagnan’s birthplace in 1611 in southwestern France, the discovery has drawn attention. Aline Goebel, who oversees the d’Artagnan museum in Lupiac, said: “Lupiac truly lives thanks to d’Artagnan. This is the place where he learned to ride horses and fence before he left for Paris.” She said the museum focuses mainly on his later life because little is known about his childhood, and its exhibition ends with his death in Maastricht. “There have often been moments when people

believed they had found clues about his remains,” she said. “We are waiting for the research results, but if this really is d’Artagnan, it would be a miracle. He is a very mysterious figure; finding him would make him feel real.”

DIGGING UNDER THE DAME

After the 2019 fire, Notre Dame was restored and reopened in late 2024. Paris is now turning its attention to the cathedral’s forecourt, with plans to plant 160 trees and add a shallow water feature as part of a wider redesign due to be completed by 2028.

Before that work can begin, archaeologists must examine the ground beneath the square to protect and remove any historic artefacts that could be damaged during construction. In a city as old as Paris, even routine building work can uncover centuries of buried history. As



Archaeologists working 4m below the surface of the old square (AP: Nicolas Garriga)

a result, part of Notre Dame’s forecourt has become an archaeological site: an open pit, edged by barriers and crossed by a wooden walkway, only steps from the queue of cathedral visitors.

Paris began on the Île de la Cité, the island in the Seine where Notre Dame now stands. In Roman times, the town was known as Lutetia, with its centre across the river on the Left Bank. As the Roman Empire declined, people moved back to the island and fortified it with stone taken from earlier buildings. By

the time construction of Notre Dame began in 1163, the area around the cathedral was packed with medieval houses divided by a single street.

Hundreds of objects have already been unearthed, offering glimpses of the site's Roman, medieval and later history.

Among the most notable finds are:

- a fourth-century coin bearing the image of Emperor Constantine;
- fragments of medieval pottery, including shards with faint, undeciphered markings;
- a Roman threshold stone reused from an earlier building;
- animal bones, broken pottery and other everyday remains from earlier occupation.



Archaeologist Valentine Breloux says the Notre Dame dig has found rare complete ceramics.(AP: Nicolas Garriga)

The first traces of finds appear just 50 centimetres below the surface. Four metres down, the team is still uncovering new



A small selection of the thousands of finds (AP: Nicholas Garriga)

material; on some days, researchers have filled as many as 15 crates with finds from ground that has lain undisturbed for decades.

As the excavation has progressed, archaeologists have uncovered the cellars of medieval houses that once crowded the square. Beneath those lie Merovingian and Carolingian grain pits from the sixth to the tenth centuries, followed by a dense Roman quarter from the fourth and fifth centuries.

Together, these layers compress roughly 20 centuries of history into just four metres of earth.

Some of the richest discoveries have come from the deepest and least glamorous places: old latrine pits beneath medieval houses, which also served as rubbish

dumps. The soft waste preserved objects that might otherwise have shattered, allowing archaeologists to recover whole jugs and cups alongside broken plates and animal bones.

Valentine Breloux, an archaeologist with the Paris archaeology unit, described complete ceramics as rare. Even more intriguing are the pottery sherds marked with faint reddish writing on the inside. The repeated markings have not yet been deciphered, giving the discovery its “modern Da Vinci Code” quality.

The redesigned square is expected to be mostly finished by 2028.

Plans include a shaded, woodland-like forecourt with 160 new trees and a thin sheet of water across the stone to help cool the area during hotter summers. The former underground car park will also reopen as a visitor centre looking out onto the Seine. Until then, the Notre Dame team hopes to keep digging deeper, beyond the Roman layers and toward evidence of the Gauls who gave the city its earliest name.



A fragment of pottery with mysterious writing (AP; Nicholas Garriga)

WINTER TALKS PROGRAMME

Join us for the winter talks programme 2026/2027

Date	Speaker	Title	
Tuesday 20th October 7.30pm Castle Centre	Thomas Thurlow	Historic Buildings of Exmoor	Tom was formerly the Historic Buildings Officer and is now head of the Historic Environment team for Exmoor National Park. He will talk about his role and some recent examples of work to ensure the future and character of Exmoor's build heritage.
Tuesday 17th November 7.30pm Castle Centre	Bryn Morris	Recent work by South West Archaeology	Dr Bryn Morris is the Director of South West Archaeology Unit based locally at South Molton. SWARCH is a commercial archaeology unit operating mainly in Devon and Cornwall undertaking site evaluations, excavations and surveys, including recently work at Bear Street in Barnstaple.
	The Barnstaple Hotel		Annual NDAS Christmas Lunch. Details nearer the time.
Tuesday 20th January 2027	Gary Dennis	The Combe Martin Sliver Mines	
Tuesday 17th February 2027	TBA		
Tuesday 17th March 2027-	TBA		AGM at 7pm with speaker (TBA) at 7.30pm
Tuesday 21st April 2027	TBA		

IMPORTANT DATE FOR YOUR DIARY!

NDAS ANNUAL CHRISTMAS LUNCH!

Come and join us for a splendid Christmas celebration on **Saturday 5th December**, 12 noon for 12.30 at **The BARNSTAPLE HOTEL**. Further details and menu will be announced nearer the time.



PLEASE KEEP IN TOUCH!

We'd love to keep in touch with ALL our members!

Have you moved, changed your phone number (landline or mobile) or created a new e-mail address? Then please let us know so we can keep you updated with all our news and activities.

Contact BOB SHRIGLEY at rvs1120@gmail.com

AND FINALLY...

A big "thank you" to the contributors of this newsletter: Bill Horner, Kimberley Colman, Alison Mills, Sonja Guerrini, John Bradbeer, Linda Blanchard, Dr Susan Greaney – we couldn't do it without you!

If you would like to contribute an article to our next edition (or any edition for that matter!) I'd love to hear from you – just e mail me at sarah.mcrae2106@gmail.com