

Dates for your diary

Thursday February 12th 7:30pm

Thropton Small Hall. Dr. Kate Sharpe, from Durham University, will describe her work on rock art and the associated use of stone in the North-East, Cumbria and Yorkshire.

Wednesday March 25th 7:30pm

Thropton Small Hall. Dr. David Petts is from the Centre for Roman Cultural Studies at Durham University. He will talk about his work at the Roman fort of Binchester, where he runs the university's archaeology field school.

Thursday April 23rd 7:30pm

Thropton Small Hall. Dr. Rob Young will discuss the Derwentcote Forge project. Built in the early 18th century Derwentcote is the earliest surviving steel-making furnace and forge in Britain; the project is investigating cottages used by workers at the forge.

Saturday May 9th 2:00pm A tour of Bedlington and the ironworks, led by Barry Mead who talked to us about this a year or so ago. Meet at the car park at the bottom of Furnace Bank, Bedlington Station (off Stead Lane). Let Chris Butterworth know if you are coming (01669 621955)

Thursday May 14th 7:30pm The AGM. Thropton Main Hall. Our guest speaker will be Roger Miket. Refreshments will be provided.

Saturday May 16th 10:30am A visit to Spadeadam led by Phil Abramson, the MoD archaeologist. Still an active RAF station, the site was used in the Cold War as a rocket test site, with static firing facilities for the Blue Streak missile. More details will follow.

Thursday July 16th to Sunday July 26th.

This year's dig at the Hepden Burn site – continuing the investigation from last year but also, if possible, starting work on at least one other site in the area. More details and a call for volunteers will follow, but the arrangements will be much the same as in previous years, with a rest day on the middle Tuesday.

A Roman Road Revealed

It's long been known that there's a Roman road that crosses the Coquet near Sharperton. It was built to connect Bremenium, the first century fort on Dere Street at Rochester, with the Devil's Causeway. This was the road that forked off from Dere Street near Corbridge and headed north-east to Berwick; the fort at Learchild marked the junction with the road across to Bremenium.

Working for the Duke of Northumberland, a survey of the road was published in 1864 by Henry Maclauchlan. Much of its route can be traced on OS maps and fragments of it are still visible in places along the route.

Recently some members from Holystone found that a short stretch of it near the Burma Road has been completely uncovered. It looks as if this is not a natural occurrence; examination of Google Earth pictures seems to show that someone opened up the site between 2003 and 2009, but we don't know who this was. It wasn't a trivial job, with about 15 square metres of heather and undergrowth being removed.

Here's what it looks like today.



The road has been cleared over its entire width, which at about 6.3 metres (top to bottom in the photograph) is about average for a Roman trunk road. In most places the visible area is about 2 metres across but at the bottom of the picture it's 3.6 metres. New young heather is starting to sprout between the stones.

Just visible towards the top of the picture is what looks like a division running along the length of the road. Here's a better shot of it.



It's close to the middle of the road with some 2.9 metres of paved area to the north (right) and 3.4 metres to the south; these distances may have been more equal when the road was built, because the southern half has slumped downhill, and may now be wider than it was originally. Its function is unclear. Was it to divide the road into two lanes, or maybe a central drain or a raised feature to facilitate drainage to either side? It's not just a local feature: in 1936, Blair and Richmond uncovered part of the road near Campville, just under a mile nearer Holystone, and saw a similar thing (at 'A' in this old picture).



That summer, Ian Richmond and Gilbert Askew had walked the length of the road from High Rochester to Low Learchild and it's clear that 80 years ago the road was more visible in several places than it is now. This exposed section was 6.8 metres wide (50 cm more than ours) and the central feature was described as a rib of edge-on stones projecting 6 or 8 inches above the road, which sounds more prominent. They said it was unusual, although they did quote a few other examples including one on the Devil's Causeway

and claimed "There is no doubt that the function of the central rib was to hold in place the upper layer of finer stones now washed off the road by storms". That may be so, although you might then expect to find a similar raised rib at each side of the road, and that doesn't seem to be the case; the kerbs there are definitely lower.

Barrowburn and Hepden Burn

This year's dig is listed in Dates for your Diary above. As you know, last year was the final season at the mill and the first paper about the site appeared in the 2014 edition of *Archaeologia Aeliana*, the journal published annually by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries. A copy of this paper is being circulated to members along with this newsletter. It deals with the background to water mills and fulling, discusses why the mill might have been built at Barrowburn and what might have happened to it. A second (longer) paper that describes the archaeology we found there has been submitted for publication later this year, and will include the results from all four seasons' work.

In January, John Nolan talked to members about the 2014 season at the Hepden Burn site, and described what he'd like to do this year.

The structure is still an enigma – both in terms of what it looked like and what it was used for.



One of the most striking aspects of the dig so far has been the exposure of a cobbled floor of a quality that you wouldn't expect to find in a building like this.

But as John pointed out, the situation is more complicated. The small section of wall you can see towards the top of the picture is of poor quality – not as good as the length exposed in the first year of work on the other side of the entrance (and now under turf in the picture). It's slightly offset as well, and it's not sitting directly on the cobbled surface, but rather on a deposit on top of that surface.

Here's picture of it from the other side, which shows that the floor continues outside what looked to be a rectangular structure, although some of the stones in the floor do seem rather larger.



You can also see the edge of a low wall or kerb running down the bottom right of the picture, again 'outside' what was originally thought to be the enclosed area.

That kerb continues inside the enclosed area and there are the remains of what looks like a post hole next to it. And when an area of the cobbled floor nearby was lifted at the end of last year's dig, another floor was exposed – consisting of somewhat larger stones.

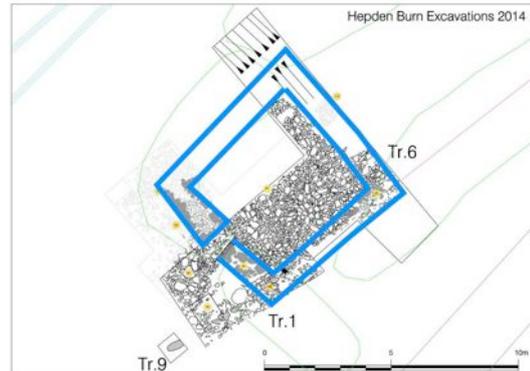


While the earth ridges marking out the structure have a stone wall or rubble core at the end nearest Barrowburn farm, those at the other end appear not to, and are just built up with earth and turf. The exception is at the corner nearest the burn, where there is a pronounced spur set at an angle to it. A trench here exposed a length of wall that had been built outside the main structure, and running diagonally down to the burn.



There seems to be similar stonework on the other side of the burn, so maybe this was a later wall, perhaps used to manage stock movement.

Phasing seems typical of the structure as a whole. Although it seems likely that there is a rectangular stone structure underlying part of



the ridged area, the rest of that area is actually bounded by earth or turf banks. And there seem to be several phases of construction – starting with that underlying floor built with larger stones. This has earth deposited on top of it, perhaps indicating a period of abandonment. Then there's the main cobbled floor, part of which is enclosed by low walls, at least some of which don't sit directly on it and which may have been robbed at some stage. And then there's the cobbling at one end outside those walls. We seem to be working on a structure that has been built and rebuilt or modified several times.

The dating evidence is also complex. There are the remains of late 17th or early 18th century clay pipes, some from Tyneside and some probably from Scotland.



One of these fragments was found in a context below one of the walls, so that provides some useful information about relative dates.

As well as more modern china and glass remains, there's also the base of a 17th century drinking vessel.



So it would seem that people were either working here in the 17th century (after the Border troubles had died down) or at least visiting the site and smoking and drinking. But there is no sign yet of a hearth, which may imply it wasn't residential.

Complicating the situation is the discovery of a few fragments of medieval pottery.



There was obviously medieval activity in the general area – after all, we been excavating the mill site a few hundred yards away and records show the Abbey had a grange at Rowhope in the next valley – but it's not clear if these fragments are directly linked to this site or are the result of more random scatter.

This year John wants to expose the rest of the top level of cobbling – both inside the enclosure on the west and also outside it, to the south, to see how far both it and the adjacent kerb or wall go. We will also need to lift some more of the cobbling to investigate the larger paving underneath – and hopefully find some dating evidence. Finally, there's a need to establish whether or not the wall segments that we've exposed so far do actually form a rectangle as John believes they do.

Border Roads update

We have started to prepare walking groups who will be going out on the Roads when (if) the weather gets better. The County Council has given us lists of all the Historic Environment Record entries along the routes, and the groups will identify these, photograph and document them, and see if there are other features that are not listed. As well as just exploring the routes, we'll also start to plan circular walks around them that will be attractive to other people.

One group is ready to go, and we're working with a second. If you put your name down for walking and we haven't been in touch with you yet, don't worry. We want to see if the plans and approaches we've drawn up work for the first group, and if they do then we'll engage more people for more groups.

At the end of January we had a workshop at Woodhorn for those who want to do library

research. It was very useful, and the staff there took us through likely sources of information – various types of maps, estate transactions and census returns as well as old guides and books.



There's a lot of material that will help us add context to the lines on a map. We'll be focusing on the English side of the Border to start with, and then move on to Scotland.

Following advice we got at the launch meeting last year, the first deliverable we'll work on is the web site. It's early days yet, but clearly it would be useful to get an attractive and engaging site up relatively early, and then add to it with regular updates as the project develops. So we've had some initial thoughts and will probably be engaging a developer in the spring to help us.

We've had an initial meeting at Thropton First School with help from Krissy Moore who used to be the Community Archaeologist at the National Park; she's now doing that job part time while starting a PhD at Sheffield University. She will be running an archaeology session at Thropton this month and then we'll see what else we can do for other schools in the valley.

Finally, we are integrating the work at the Hepden Burn into the project. As described above, it's clearly an intriguing site that's close to two routes up through the Cheviots. There are other sites in the area that are of interest as well, and we hope to investigate at least one of these this year. There are the remains of what is probably a house a bit further up the burn, as well as two structures on the hillside above that look like the remains of platforms (for houses?) surrounded by low enclosure walls.



We don't know what these are, but it would be good to get some clues. See you in July.