

# NNAS Excursion to Nottingham, September 2018



*Laxton motte and bailey castle* © Derek Leak

On Day 1, we arrived via Ermine Street to meet our guide, Dr Will Bowden at St Martin's Church, Ancaster, within the site of the Roman town he has been investigating. Two sarcophagi were visible as well as part of the defences. A replica of a Three Mother Goddesses sculpture was set in the churchyard wall. The church itself dates from the later 12th century. Two bays of the north arcade exemplify bold and massive late Romanesque use of billet and chevron mouldings.

We crossed Ermine Street to explore the site of the western defences, to be greeted by enthusiastic sheep. Having escaped and scraped our boots, we continued to the very civilised back garden of Ancaster House where a local society has been carrying out a series of investigations. We were lucky to find not only a dig in progress, but to see and handle a display of amazing finds: pottery, including substantial sherds of a large bowl decorated with a combed design, an exquisite, intact animal brooch, many small coins and, importantly, a piece of a mould for actually producing Samian ware.

We continued by coach for Laxton, by which time rain had begun. We met our guide,

Professor John Beckett at the Information Centre where he explained the medieval open field system which, uniquely at Laxton, escaped enclosure. The three fields, divided in strips, survive and are farmed to this day. The layout of the fields was clearly illustrated by a full-scale wall reproduction of the 1635 map made by surveyor Mark Pierce and painted on nine sheets of vellum (original in the Bodleian).

Professor Beckett was clearly on familiar terms with many of the present-day tenants, some of them 'hobby' farmers, and the complications of maintaining this anachronistic form of collaboration were hinted at briefly. Then out we went to tramp through long grass, stubble, uneven furrows, over stiles, as our cheerful guide led us through driving rain in a circuit of the c.500-acre site.

Day 2 was our introduction to the City of Nottingham and urban archaeology. Dr Gareth Davies of York Archaeological Trust led us on a walk through the Anglian/ Viking Borough, having provided us with a sheaf of colour photocopies. The maps, showing boundaries of these two early phases of occupation superimposed on the city's present layout,



*Dr Gareth Davies explains the excavations at Nottingham Castle © Derek Leak*

were enormously helpful. Maps also showed locations of six of Dr Davies' excavations in the area. By experiencing the streets on foot, and especially by pausing to look south through the mist to the wide panorama of the Trent valley, we gained insight into the local topography, and the historic importance of the tributary River Leen.

Several of the group chose to lunch at the historic Olde Trip to Jerusalem Inn, built into the sandstone of Castle Rock. We reconvened by a statue of Robin Hood at the foot of the Castle. The original timber castle was one of the first to be built after the Conquest. Rebuilt in stone, it has undergone many changes over the centuries, was destroyed in 1649 after the Civil War, and was rebuilt as a mansion by Henry Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle. During the Industrial Revolution it was burned down in a popular rebellion. Restored in 1875 it was opened as the first municipal art gallery in the country, outside London.

The gallery is currently being extended and the castle closed for two years, giving archaeologists an opportunity to investigate the site – and another chance for us to witness work in progress. We had a grandstand view

from the castle bridge down to the exposed service courtyard where Dr Davies and his students had completed work the previous day. It must have been quite a challenge to work among the various exposed pipes, cables and drains. Trenches had been dug where piles for the gallery extension will be.

Then it was a short coach trip to the site of another of Dr Davies' projects: Lenton Priory. Set in a meander of the River Leen, SW of the castle, it was founded c.1106 under the Cluniac Order, and would certainly have been one of the most



*A carved corbel at Rufford Abbey © Derek Leak*

splendid monuments in the county. Robbed out after the Dissolution, very little of the fabric survives above ground, but enough is known from excavation to recognise an 11-bay nave, east apse and ambulatory and four apsidal chapels – in similar style to the Burgundian mother church.

Our day concluded with a double surprise – the Rock Cemetery, and sunshine with it. Now run by the city council, this extensive hillside site has provided an important open air amenity since the mid 19th century. Built over old sandpits and occupying part of what was once Sherwood Forest, the excavation of graves, 'catacombs' and tunnels served to give employment to the poor at the same time as producing quantities of valuable fine sand. Exploring the warren of unused tunnels was exciting, requiring the use of torches and walking sticks.

On Day 3 we set off for Rufford Abbey to be greeted by lively Community Archaeologist, Emily Gillott who introduced us to the complexities of what appeared to be, and had been, a grand country mansion, but had originated as an austere Cistercian monastery, evidenced by a surviving groin-vaulted undercroft. We were then conducted round the gardens to inspect some of the collection of antiquities, while locals were enjoying a relaxing Sunday in the park.

Then to Southwell. After examining an impressive display of finds, maps, data and



*A leafy column head at Southwell Minster © Derek Leak*

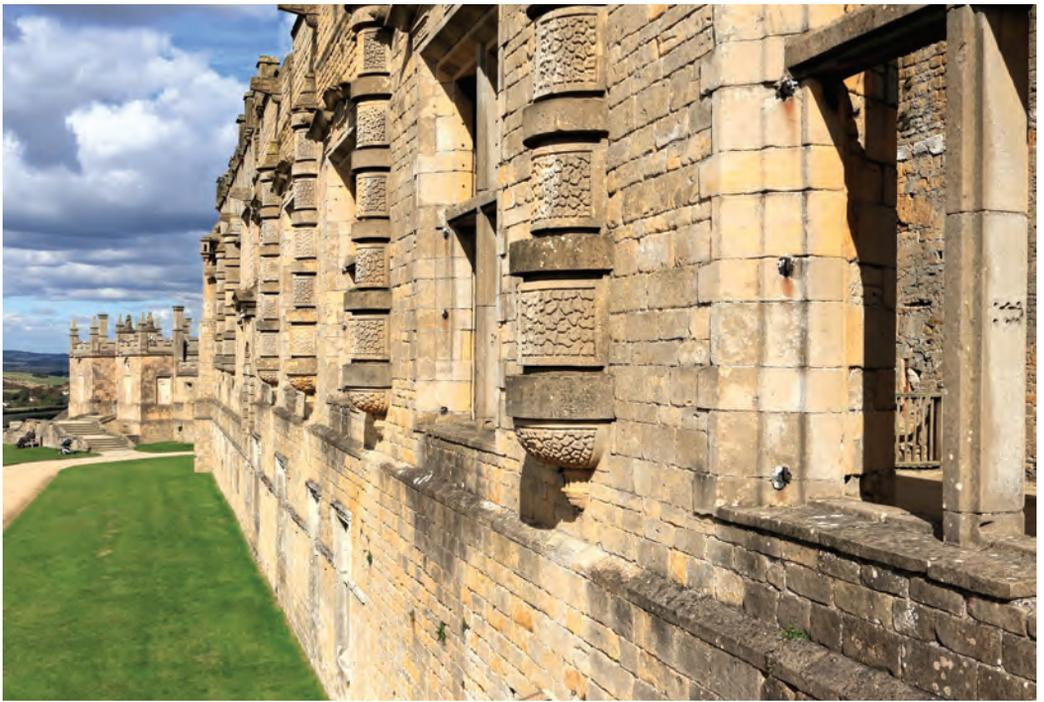


*Writing on the walls in the rock-cut tunnels at the Rock Cemetery © Derek Leak*

illustrations of the work of the Southwell Archaeology Group, we were guided by member Ellis Morgan round the attractive site of their investigations, the Burgage Green, an open space of grass and trees surrounded by Georgian houses including the former home of the young Byron, an ex-House of Correction and a maltings.

Thence (after a brief lunch break) to meet Dr Chris Brooke at the Minster. He gave a succinct account of the building history, pointed out the earliest carved capitals, the 11th-century St Michael and Dragon lintel reset in the north transept, the exposed remains of a tessellated floor possibly from the villa underlying, or adjacent to, the Minster, and the fragment of painting from the Roman bath-house. Then to the exquisite octagonal chapter-house with its famous carved leaves. Dr Brooke's scientific research is revealing more about the pigments originally used in their decoration.

There was time to visit the remains of the Archbishop's Palace before driving to Newark where Dr Bowden outlined the complex history of the Castle, sited at a point where the Fosse Way meets the Trent. The castle was slighted



*Bolsover Castle © Derek Leak*

after Royalist Newark's surrender in 1646 and restored in the 19th century by Salvin.

Day 4 was back to the Stone Age! One might have been sceptical about headlines such as 'Sistine Chapel of the Ice Age found at Creswell Crags,' but visiting Church Hole cave with a knowledgeable guide equipped with pointer and torch, we were able to recognise the incised outline of a stag, possible birds or dancing women and symbols of a type also found in caves elsewhere. The walk through the gorge with its many caverns was interesting as was the museum and hospitable visitors' centre.

Our final visit was to Bolsover Castle with its elegant architecture and spectacular views over a once-industrial landscape. Although originally a Norman castle, what we see today are remains of the 17th-century country retreat of Charles Cavendish, son of Bess of Hardwick. The 'Little Castle' with its vaulted interior, splendid fireplaces and painted rooms evokes renaissance notions of aristocratic leisure. What looked like a floor-length pictorial tapestry in one room turned out to be a photograph of a

Blickling original, photoshopped and printed onto canvas! In the spacious Riding House we were impressed by the great oak timbers of the roof. Originally these were hidden by a ceiling. The third structure on the site is the 11-bay Terrace Range housing state apartments where Charles 1 stayed and attended the masque written for that occasion by Ben Jonson.

Many thanks to Dr Bowden for masterminding as well as guiding such an interesting and varied tour.

*Margaret Forrester*



*The participants in the shadow of Robin Hood © Derek Leak*