

NASNEWS

Newsletter of Northamptonshire Archaeological Society

www.northants-archaeology.org.uk

April 2004

Daventry Museum

As many NAS members will be aware Daventry Museum has closed. The decision to close this local museum, based at the Moot House, a fine listed building, was made by Daventry District Council at short notice in February taking everyone, including the staff, by surprise. It is understood that the collections are being mothballed, the hope being that some form of 'private' or voluntary museum might be re-established at a later date. In the meantime much of the collections and the Moot House are no longer accessible to the public and the excellent local educational service has ceased to exist. The pressing need to ensure a balanced budget and to constrain the rise in council tax was cited as the main reasons for what was described as being a tough decision to close.

Northamptonshire Archaeological Society wholeheartedly regrets this retrograde step which will deprive the people of Daventry access to much of its past. It is astonishing that such closure should take place at a time when a huge expansion in population, housing and jobs is planned for the county and when the new West Northamptonshire Development Corporation is about to be launched to help steer through that growth in Northampton, Towcester and Daventry. As part of this unprecedented expansion, much play has been made by local and national politicians, by the proponents of the new WNDC and others, of the need to ensure that growth is carefully balanced by robust care of Northamptonshire's green and historic environment – the much trumpeted building of sustainable communities. One aspect of this is the current talk of bolstering cultural assets, including museums, through establishment of a 'cultural golden mile' in Northampton, a futile folly, if at the same time cultural assets elsewhere in the county are all being mothballed! The focus must surely be to encourage and promote local diversity and character, and what better way to achieve this and help provide a 'sense of belonging' for existing and new residents, than through vibrant museum and heritage services serving local needs? Surely, this is a time when attention should be turned to strengthening, even expanding such services not dismantling or mothballing them!

Sadly, the reality is that in the absence of any statutory requirement on local authorities to maintain local museums or heritage services, such services across the country will continue to be extremely vulnerable. They are easy targets for hard pressed councils desperate to make savings and avoid council tax rises or, as with Daventry, the threat of Government capping. Recent years have seen substantial cutbacks to Northampton Museum and to the heritage services run by the County Council. At present it is the small museums that are most vulnerable of all, with Daventry lost and Kettering under pressure – its opening hours reportedly under threat. The situation in the voluntary sector is perhaps less bleak with some excellent local examples such as the museum at Piddington run by UNAS, going from strength to strength. The fact remains that Northamptonshire, without any form of county museum service, is now one of the worst provided counties in terms of full time museum services and the situation looks likely to get worse. The Government's ideal of developing sustainable communities in Northamptonshire, is in practice in danger of being accompanied by widespread dismantling of one of the key foundations of sustainability, the ability to understand and interact with our past and to pass that knowledge on to future generations. In this context, it is vitally important that NAS and all others with an interest in the future of our past, continue to lobby our MEPs, MPs local politicians and councillors, the new West Northants Development Corporation and the new development frameworks being developed by all councils, for real sustainable development in Northamptonshire. To hell with the mothballs!

Journal & NAS 30th Anniversary

The next Journal, volume 31 for 2003 will be available to members later this year. Work is nearing completion on the production of an 'Archaeology in Northamptonshire' book utilising the results of the countywide research frameworks exercise. The Society is giving consideration to launching the book as part of its 30th Anniversary celebrations later this year. It is expected that the book will cost in the region of £15 to £20. Other ideas from members to mark this anniversary would be very welcome.

Hunsbury Hillfort

As some of you might know, Dennis Jackson has recently received a grant (matched by English Heritage) to carry out an assessment of the surviving archaeological remains at the Hunsbury Hillfort. He has already commissioned an extensive geophysical survey and carried out trial trenching, which has revealed that much more of the interior survived the 19th century Ironstone quarrying that was previously imagined. A full report will follow shortly.

Irchester, Chester Farm & Roman Town

The local press has reported that Northamptonshire County Council, with substantial grant support from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), has recently acquired Chester Farm at Irchester. As NAS members will be aware this farm includes major archaeological interest, including the Scheduled Monument of a walled Roman Town, the deserted medieval village of Chester on the Water and a fine range of Listed historic farm buildings. Purchase has been made possible as part of the Sustainable Communities plan being taken forward by the ODPM, the County Council and others in the region. NAS understands that the County Council is currently exploring with potential partners, a number of options for the good long term care of this heritage park site. One objective must be to safeguard the complex from the pressures that that will inevitably arise as the nearby town of Wellingborough expands eastwards in future years. Chester Farm is also being seen as having great potential for public educational and recreational use and as a key site and focus for the developing River Nene Regional Park.

Northamptonshire Portable Antiquities Scheme Surgeries

Tom Brindle, Northamptonshire Finds Liaison Officer has arranged a series of finds surgeries at venues around the county where members of the public can bring in chance finds or other archaeological objects for identification and recording. Surgeries will be held in Northampton, Oundle, Daventry, Kettering, Towcester and Wellingborough. For details of dates and times and other details, or to request a free copy of the Scheme's illustrated latest Annual Report, please contact Tom Brindle care of the NCCs Historic Environment Team, PO Box 163, County Hall, Northampton NN1 1AX. Tel: 01604 237249 or at tbrindle@northamptonshire.gov.uk Further details of the national PAS scheme can be found at their website www.finds.org.uk

NAS Subscription Reminder

A reminder to all members that subscriptions were due for renewal on 1st September 2003.

Subscription rates remain extremely good value at an unchanged £10 for individuals, £12 family, £8 student and £15 Local Association. We would encourage members to sign up to Gift Aid as this provides some valuable additional income to your Society. If you are renewing your subscription or want a Gift Aid form, please contact Martin Tingle at the address below as soon as possible. Those in subscription arrears may not receive the next Journal.

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