

Excursion to Thetford – 18 August 2018

Margaret Gooch, our new Excursions Secretary, arranged a day at Thetford during the summer which started at The Ancient House Museum in the centre of the old medieval town. Our host and guide for the day was Keith Robinson, a Thetford resident and expert on the town. We started at 10.30 with a comprehensive outline of how the town had developed over time. It had been settled first about 2000 BCE by the confluence of the Rivers Thet and Little Ouse. This provided access to the sea – eventually – and was the crossing point for the great trading route, the Icknield Way, which ran from the Cotswolds to Hunstanton. The main river crossing developed at what is now Nun's Bridges, and by 500 BCE had a hillfort, probably thrown up by the local Iceni tribe. They dominated the area until the Roman Conquest. After Boudicca's revolt, and the eventual departure of the Romans, a substantial settlement grew up on the south bank of the Ouse between the 7th and 9th centuries.

An Anglo-Saxon earthwork was thrown up at Red Castle with an associated wooden

church dedicated to St. Lawrence. This was the beginning of Thetford's pre-eminence as the chief town in Norfolk. In 870, Lothbroksson set up his base here after defeating King Edmund at Hoxne, and by 900 Anglo-Scandinavian defences were built, forming a ditch and bank constructed in two semi-circles. This was centred on a ford, where the present bridge stands, on the old London road. The defences did not stop Swein of Denmark sacking the town in 1004 and again in 1010 – but after this Thetford became the centre of Danish occupation in East Anglia, growing into one of the six biggest towns in England, with a population of about 5000. After the Normans arrived, they built a castle and transferred the see of East Anglia from North Elmham to Thetford. This was the apogee of Thetford's importance. Bishop Herfast who controlled the church of St. Mary, began a campaign to take over the important abbey at Bury St. Edmunds. Soon after, Bishop Losininga moved his HQ to Norwich and Thetford's decline was sealed. Keith delivered this story with the aid of maps and illustrations, which are to form part of his forthcoming book on Thetford. Most tellingly he brought alive his story with artefacts from Thetford Museum's collection.



Thetford, the Cluniac Priory of Our Lady, and (inset) NNAS members on the Thetford excursion © Derek Leak

Society Lecture Report – 7

Silver and the Great Viking Army

Andrew Woods, Senior Curator of the Yorkshire Museum, was our speaker for this year's Sue Margeson Memorial Lecture. He gave a talk about the types and ways in which silver was used at the site of Torksey, 14km north west of Lincoln, where a Viking over-winter camp dated AD 872–3 has been identified.

From AD 865 to 879 a Great Viking Army (in Old English, *micel here*) wreaked havoc on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, leading to conquest and settlement in the area known as Danelaw. This army, formed from several different groups, landed in East Anglia in 865 then moved around the country and over-wintered. Little is known about it: documentary sources provide few insights into its activities and intentions, and archaeological evidence is scant with only a small number of finds. Repton in Derbyshire (873–4) is the best known site, a small enclosure of half a hectare centred around a church with a ditch and bank. It produced numerous finds including a large mass burial of a few hundred men.

Previous finds were hoards as in Gotland AD874, which produced 15,000 coins plus ingots and rings, but over the past twenty years, several 'productive' sites, of coins and other metalwork have been discovered in eastern England by metal-detecting. Previous scholarship has been significantly enhanced by new finds including Torksey from the 1990s onwards; the Vale of York Hoard of 2009 with 617 coins and 67 objects deposited around AD 927; and the Bedale Hoard found in 2012, likely 9th-century and consisting of diplay items, ingots, neck rings, brooches and rings all broken up. Andrew produced a map of the geographical distribution of many single finds across East Anglia, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire and some in the Midlands, *i.e.* the Danelaw area, which correlate with Great Army camps. Such finds show a Viking mentality, chronological change and geographic extent.

Torksey is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* AD872 entry: 'the army went into

Next, we explored the museum where details of a fabulous Roman hoard were displayed, together with the story of recent excavations at the Cluniac Priory of our Lady. Then to the great outdoors where our first destination was the priory ruins. This is now little more than a low rubble outline of the extensive site, except for the Prior's House which is a two storey range later converted into a grand residence. There is a small plaque near the former altar of the Priory Church, which commemorates the burial site of "Thomas Duke of Norfolk - victor at Flodden Field". He had been buried here 1524, but only a decade later the Dissolution took place. In 1536, the third Duke of Norfolk petitioned the King to allow the conversion of the priory to a college of secular canons in order to save the tombs. This failed and the priory was despoiled. The tombs of the Norfolk family had to be moved quickly. They, together with the tomb of the bastard son of Henry VIII, were hurriedly taken to nearby Framlingham where an extension to the parish church was built to house the magnificent structures – always worth a visit if you are in the area. You will see the last examples of great medieval monumental tombs.

We lunched on a floating Portuguese restaurant, which served excellent omelettes and large glasses of fruity red wine. From the port holes we could see Captain Mainwaring's statue on the river bank which commemorates Thetford's association with the TV series *Dad's Army*.

Our day was completed with a tour of the planned medieval town, which finished up at the castle site. Luckily there is a recently installed giant stairway which takes you to the top of the mound. The view from here is spectacular, allowing a panoramic outlook over the whole town. It was an apt place to finish, as all we had learned during the day fell neatly into place.

Derek Leak, NNAS Trustee