

**HORNCASTLE**  
**DEVELOPMENT AT REAR OF ACHURCH AND SONS LTD**  
**THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

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**LINDSEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SERVICES**

**FRANCIS HOUSE**  
**SILVER BIRCH PARK**  
**GREAT NORTHERN TERRACE**  
**LINCOLN**  
**LN5 8LG**

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**Introduction**

The Roman walls at Horncastle identify this site as special among Roman settlements. Excavation and research during the last twenty five years has established that in Roman times a large civilian settlement at Horncastle flourished from the 1st-4th centuries and extended over 54 hectares.

In the late 3rd-4th century massive, stone, military defences, enclosing an area of about 2 hectares, were constructed to the north of this settlement, on previously unoccupied ground at the junction between the Rivers Bain and Waring. The only fortifications in the country which are similar to those at Horncastle are at Caistor (also in Lincolnshire).

The walls were originally thought to have enclosed the heart of the Roman town but in fact they were a military construction probably enclosing a depot or store rather than a fort. Although the walls did not enclose any part of the Roman town they formed the nucleus of an important post-Roman administrative and religious centre. The walls were clearly an important feature of the town's medieval and later topography as they still survive, in part, today.

Horncastle is often compared to Caistor but unlike Caistor early Anglo-Saxon finds have been scarce. At Caistor a cremation cemetery dating to the 6th century was found in 1957 at Fonaby (Cook 1981) and other finds have been made in Caistor itself. At Horncastle a single warrior burial accompanied by a spear, sword and shield boss was discovered in 1918 but its location was not recorded. Since then a 6th century small long-brooch was found during excavations in the Market Place in 1978 (Field and Hurst 1983). In 1980 two human skeletons were uncovered during drainage work in a yard to the rear of Achurch and Sons Ltd. One was accompanied by a short iron knife, a bronze brooch and two beads dating the burial to the 6th century (White 1981, 71-2).

Archaeological evidence from other towns (e.g. Lincoln) has established that urban settlements contracted rapidly after the collapse of the Roman Empire. One of the critical questions to be asked is what happened to the population of Horncastle at this time? Maps dating from the 18th and 19th centuries confirm that the core of the medieval settlement lay within and around the Roman walled area and that Horncastle did not expand over the full area of the Roman settlement again until after the mid- 19th century. The most likely area for early Saxon settlement is probably in the vicinity of the Roman walls.

Whilst Horncastle's fortunes immediately after the collapse of Rome are not known there is considerable evidence to suggest that it was a major centre by the later Saxon period. The location of both the church and the manor house within the Roman walled enclosure is significant. The estate of Horncastle was in royal hands by the 10th century and there was a mint in the town at this time. Only at the time of the Norman Conquest did the land pass out of direct royal ownership.

#### **The Archaeological Significance of the Development Site**

The area of land lying between Conging Street and High Street is of critical importance archaeologically. Not only is it the site of one of only a handful of Saxon discoveries from the town but it lies just outside, and east of, the Roman walls.

The development site includes land adjacent to the Roman east wall. External sections have been examined on the north and south walls showing extensive water erosion. Nothing is known about what lies outside the east wall and without the natural protection of the rivers it is possible that the remains of a ditch and bank will be present.

Detailed study of the exact wall-line during redevelopment work, especially in the 1960s (summarised in Field and Hurst 1983) has shown that the gateway in the east wall probably lies beneath the modern High Street. Civilian settlements often developed outside the gates of military sites and it is possible that this happened at Horncastle. The Roman walls were defended on three sides by water. Only on the east side would there have been any room for extra-mural development within the area enclosed by the two rivers.

The development site lies just to the north of this gateway and could lie within the area of late Roman development and earliest Saxon settlement/resettlement.

It is therefore recommended that selected archaeological excavation of the development site should be carried out prior to redevelopment.

#### **References**

Cook A.M., 1981. The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Fonaby, Lincs. (Occasional Papers 6. Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology.

Field F.N. and Hurst H., 1983. 'Roman Horncastle' in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology vol.18, 47-88. (Offprinted in 1984)

White A.J. 1981. 'Archaeology in Lincolnshire and S.Humberside', in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology vol. 16, 71-2.

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**Provisional Proposals**

1. The area adjacent to the Roman east wall comprises concrete floors for buildings which have been demolished. The whole area would benefit from tidying up. Perhaps a feature could be made of the wall and its north-east bastion, which is the best-preserved of the three which survive. Proposals for a joint consolidation programme (DoE and ELDC) for all the surviving parts of the Roman wall were made more than ten years ago. Unfortunately the budget was cut. There is an opportunity here to encourage the display of what is, after all, one of Horncastle's best tourist attractions. Apart from the piece in the Library there is very poor public access.

2. Excavate a section at 90 to the Roman wall to determine whether there were any external fortifications such as a ditch. This wall should be better-preserved below ground than the north and south walls because it will have escaped water erosion, although the facing stone may have been robbed out.

Deposits at other locations within the Roman wall have been shallow. This means that even shallow foundations destroy the archaeological remains. It may be that previous site levelling may already have disturbed archaeological deposits within the development site.

3. Excavations in the vicinity of Anglo-Saxon burial should be carried out to examine the possibility of further burials/cemetery.

4. An area fronting onto Conging street should also be excavated to examine the medieval burgage plots and their origins.

Naomi Field  
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