

North Herts Museum Update: Promoting the heritage of North Hertfordshire

Since Letchworth and Hitchin Museums closed to the public in September 2012, staff have been understandably very busy with dismantling the old displays, cleaning objects and packing them. There have been plenty of updates on the blog about these sorts of activities. What about the archaeology? This summer, there was no excavation in Norton to write about, largely because Norton Community Archaeology Group members have needed time to catalogue the nearly 14,000 finds made on and around the henge. I have also needed time to work on the archaeological elements of the displays in the new museum, choosing objects, drafting labels and looking at artefacts in the stores.

There is another side to my work, which can be overlooked: I give a lot of talks about the heritage of the district. These can be to special interest societies, to local community groups or to academic audiences. They can be about a very specific topic or about something more general (but related to North Hertfordshire, obviously). Most of them take place in the evening, but some are during the day, especially at lunchtime. The audiences can vary in size from a dozen or so people to more than a hundred.

I always use PowerPoint for my talks. I find it useful because I can put up text as well as pictures, include video and sound, and animate the presentation. It is so much simpler than the old days of using 35 mm slide transparencies, which would sometimes be put in upside down or back-to-front. I can also keep dozens of different talks on my laptop because one never knows when one might be called on to give a talk...

Autumn is usually the busiest time for evening talks. To give some idea of what I have been up to, here is what I have been doing for the past seven weeks or so:

7 September: an afternoon stroll around Hitchin town centre for Hitchin Historical Society. Here, I talk about the early development of the town, mostly describing what can no longer be seen, and try to put it into its national context. It turns out that Hitchin is a very unusual and rather important place.



Talking to Norton Community Archaeology Group in 2007

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Corporate Induction group at the entrance
to Royston Cave

23 September: NHDC Corporate Induction. All new council employees have a day spent learning about their employer and about the district. My involvement is to give a guided coach tour, covering the four towns (Baldock, Hitchin, Royston and Letchworth Garden City in order of age): there isn't enough time in an afternoon to do justice to the rural areas.

25 September: INSETT day at Celtic Harmony camp. Celtic Harmony is an educational trust based on a reconstructed Iron Age farm at Brickendon. Recent changes to the National Curriculum mean that teachers now have to cover British prehistory, which many are not confident about. I took them through 800,000 years of the human story up to the Roman Conquest in just an hour.

1 October: talk on Norton Henge to the North Hertfordshire Branch of the National Trust. This large group meets in Christchurch, in Hitchin. I talked to them about the results of four years' excavation on the site, which lies between Letchworth Garden City and Baldock, beside the A1M.

7 October: the speaker booked to talk to the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society couldn't make it. I supply the IT support to the group (laptop, projector and screen) and, as I was there with my equipment, I stepped in and gave a talk on *Ancient Baldock: Britain's First Town?* It's for this sort of emergency that I always keep a stock of talks ready to give at a moment's notice.

9 October: another INSETT day at Celtic Harmony. As well as giving the teachers an informal lesson, I handed round a selection of genuine artefacts from Palaeolithic handaxes to a Late Iron Age pottery bowl. This is something that people don't often get to experience and being able to engage directly with the objects helps information about them to sink in more thoroughly.

10 October: talk to the Welwyn Archaeological Society on Norton Henge. This time, I put the henge into its local context, with contemporary sites in Letchworth Garden City and Baldock. Our local landscape looks like a smaller version of what has recently been discovered around Stonehenge.

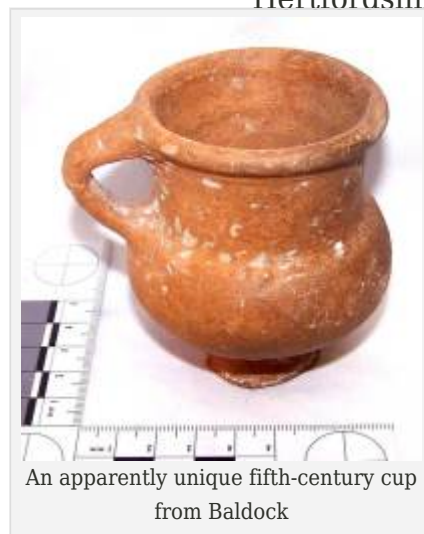
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13 October: talk to the Manshead Archaeological Society in Dunstable on *Roman Pottery in the Fifth Century? Becoming "Saxon" in the North-East Chilterns*. This is based on an academic paper I gave a few years ago at a conference, exploring the remarkable sequence of sub-Roman (fifth-century) pottery from Baldock and surrounding areas and the lack of early Saxon remains in the district.

15 October: lunchtime talk to the Letchworth Support Group for Macular Disease on Roman dining. This is a talk accompanied by genuine Roman cooking and food presentation ceramics as well as puddingstone quern for grinding grain into flour. Being able to handle the objects is a great help for people with macular disease, who might have difficulty watching an illustrated talk.

16 October: Norton Community Archaeology Group's AGM, where I talked about the landscape around the henge and particularly about a site at Works Road in Letchworth Garden City, where some remarkable Neolithic finds were made between 1997 and 2000. They include equipment for working gold, the burial of a child, a house and an antler pick. Each talk requires preparation because each audience is different. There is the outline to write, which mustn't be pitched at too academic a level but at the same time must not talk down to the listeners. There are pictures to find, which often involves getting an object from the store for photography. Even though I have given three talks on the henge in Norton over the past few weeks, every time it has been a different talk, largely because I think of new ideas while I'm preparing a new version.

The important part, as I see it, is that it is helping to get out the message that North Hertfordshire has a rich, fascinating and diverse heritage. What we lack in romantic ruined castles, impressive Roman forts or enigmatic stone circles is more than made up for by discoveries from excavations or hidden behind modern shop frontages. Sometimes, it is just a matter of encouraging people to look at what they think is familiar with new eyes, pointing out the historic details they may have overlooked.



An apparently unique fifth-century cup from Baldock



Graffiti of 1601 in the porch of St Mary's Church, Letchworth

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