

## Marking 75th anniversary of town's archaeological and historical society

# Revealing and decoding stories of Scarborough's past

One evening in the summer of 1989, the unpredictable and inherently compelling nature of archaeological excavation was markedly illustrated by an unusual discovery made in Scarborough's Old Town, at 1-3 Leading Post Street.

Embedded within the filled-in deposits of what had been the town's 13th century defensive ditch, what seemingly appeared to be a single piece of animal bone would later eventually reveal itself to be part of a complete disarticulated skeleton of a medieval horse.

Given the clear evidence of a gash in the unfortunate animal's skull, it was surmised that it may have become injured or trapped in the ditch and was mercifully put out of its misery.

This is one particularly memorable example of Scarborough Archaeological & Historical Society's (SAHS) regularly undertaken excavation projects. In recent decades, these have also been often in close collaboration with leading professional teams from English Heritage, York Archaeological Trust (YAT), York University, and Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, among others.

Eminent archaeologist Dr Patrick Ottaway directed a SAHS team of volunteers on the YAT excavation of the Roman Signal Station on Filey Brigg in 2000. He said: "Community-based archaeological research is fundamental to our understanding of many aspects of our past. The Scarborough society is an outstanding example of how best to do this, combining the enthusiasm and knowledge of local people with serious academic enquiry to create an archaeology of their town which would otherwise be

Acclaimed by leading professionals, Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society played a pivotal role in one of the most significant discoveries ever made in Europe, namely the Star Carr prehistoric site near Seamer. **PATRICK ARGENT** talks to the voluntary group's President, former English Heritage archaeologist Trevor Pearson, in the year of the group's 75th anniversary.



Excavating at Scarborough Castle in summer 2019.

largely unknown and unappreciated."

As a local voluntary organisation, apart from an annual public lecture programme, what greatly differentiates SAHS has been both its regular active involvement within the archaeology profession and a long-established commitment to historical research and independent academic publishing.

Numerous leading members of the society are or have been professional archaeologists, historians or academics, all of whom have brought their substantial experience and combined expertise to bear on these two core activities. The renowned Scarborough historian Dr Jack Binns is a Life Member of the society and the late John Rushton, known to many for his histories of local villages, was

President for a number of years.

A registered charity, the society's key objective is to advance education of the town's and surrounding region's archaeology and local history, for the benefit of the public. Research into sites and archives of archaeological, architectural and historical interest, the publishing of the subsequent results and also the identification and preservation of such sites and archives are also important components of the group's work.

Archaeology is an intriguing and collaborative hybrid activity that presents a tangible and detailed illumination of the past. Frequently complex, it involves solving an often-multi-layered three-dimensional puzzle of material remains and associated detritus of past cultures and societies.

It comprises part-detective work, part-surveying, part-excavation, part-scientific analysis and part-academic research, all evidential factors that form an interpretative picture of the historical background of a site and its former occupants.

This comprehensive decoding of the past by archaeology then informs historians.

Former professional archaeologist, SAHS President Trevor Pearson, describes its pervasive allure as in essence "the uncovering of new evidence about the past". He explains: "Archaeology can create histories of periods where there are few written records such as after the departure of the Romans (the so-called Dark Ages), and also tells us about the lives of ordinary people who maybe haven't left any writ-

ten trace behind them."

Inaugurated in the immediate aftermath of World War Two, the society became established at a meeting in the Rotunda Museum in June 1947. Remarkably, within its initial year of forming, this nascent group would make one of the most important archaeological discoveries ever unearthed in Europe.

Among the founding members was John Moore, whose initial uncovering of 10 prehistoric hunting camps in the Vale of Pickering in 1948 was the forerunner to the internationally significant Star Carr excavations led by Professor Graham Clark of Cambridge University in 1949-51.

Further extensive investigations of this extraordinarily rich site were carried out more recently by Professor Nicky Milner of York University commencing in 2004, with assistance from society members. Further extensive investigations of this extraordinarily rich site were carried out more recently by Professor Nicky Milner of York University commencing in 2004, with assistance from society members. Further extensive investigations of this extraordinarily rich site were carried out more recently by Professor Nicky Milner of York University commencing in 2004, with assistance from society members. Further extensive investigations of this extraordinarily rich site were carried out more recently by Professor Nicky Milner of York University commencing in 2004, with assistance from society members.

Clark's 1954 Star Carr excavation report would subsequently become widely acknowledged within the archaeological profession as a seminal text both of the

period and generally in the wider academic context of prehistory.

"The Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society have done a phenomenal amount of work over the last 75 years," Prof Milner stated. "They have not only discovered and uncovered some spectacular archaeology, including the important site of Star Carr, but have also worked hard to make sure their findings are known about in the local area. It has been a great honour and privilege for me to know and work with members of this society and it has been wonderful to be able to celebrate this anniversary with them."

Initiating an ongoing lecture programme featuring many eminent figures, one of the first speakers in 1949 was C.W. Phillips, the archaeology officer with the Ordnance Survey who, with Basil Brown, had excavated the famous Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon ship burial, just prior to the outbreak of World War Two and, typically, featured in the 2021 film *The Dig*. (Coincidentally, Phillips is portrayed by actor Ken Stott, a cast member in the 1990 production of Shakespeare's *Othello*, directed by Sir Alan Ayckbourn at the Stephen Joseph Theatre when based at Westwood).

In the late 1950s the group would again enact a pioneering role within archaeological practice, in excavating the deserted medieval village of Hatterboard, in the grounds of Scarborough

Hospital. The society's initiative was decades before mainstream archaeologists paid attention to the study of such abandoned medieval settlements.

Renowned society member Peter Farmer realigned much of the group's activities during the late 1960s and 70s towards investigating the urban sites of the former medieval town area of Scarborough itself.

These specific excavations subsequently led Mr Farmer to study the town's once significant medieval pottery industry. The distinctive and immediately identifiable luminous green glaze found on Scarborough Ware is a key dating indicator and also a signifier of the town's national and international trading connections of the 13th and 14th centuries. Accordingly, a decorative element from such a ceramic jug made in Scarborough, which depicts the stylised figure of a medieval knight, forms part of the society's logo identity.

Notably, within the Old Town, the 1996-7 excavation at Springfield revealed parts of the Franciscan friary, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the course of the stream called the Damyet that once provided fresh water to the inhabitants of the medieval town.

Less than 1% of this area has been fully excavated, leaving so much unsubstantiated information regarding the town's early development to be discovered.

### Publications

Since the early years, publishing has consistently formed an integral component of the society's activities. From detailed academic post-excavation reports, historical accounts to more accessible guides and pamphlets, the group's emphasis has primarily been on serious authoritative publications. The society's journal *Transactions*, first produced in 1958, carries reports on members' historical researches, in total comprising a set of 43 volumes. Commemorating the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of the town, *Scarborough 966-1966*, a compilation of chapters written by society



members and invited academics, became the first modern history of the town to be published. Additionally, researches by society member Keith Johnston into the Scarborough historical pageant of 1912 were published in the 2020 book *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain*. A more recent volume is historian Stewart MacDonald's scholarly and comprehensive narrative of Scarborough during the

From the mid-1980s, historic buildings specialist Chris Hall and Trevor Pearson have led the society's activities, resulting in national recognition when it was presented in 1990 with the prestigious Pitt Rivers Award for its campaign of urban excavations. A decade later the society would again come to prominence in achieving the runners-up position in 2000. Additionally, in 1995 the group won the Association for Industrial Archaeology award for its project at the Saltwick Alum Works.

Since 1994, Channel 4's *Time Team* series has done much to change the public's perception of unearthing the past, popularising the science of archaeological excavation. A number of the key professionals featured in the programme have given lectures to the society.

Other notable lectures staged by the society have included those given by Dr Alice Roberts and Scarborough-based Egyptologist Dr Joann Fletcher, both of whom are familiar broadcasting figures for their

numerous BBC television documentary series.

Details of forthcoming SAHS events and activities together with a range of publications are available via [sahs.org.uk](http://sahs.org.uk)

Copies of *Transactions*, published between 1958 and 2013, can be found at [archive.org](http://archive.org)

The society's excavation reports can be found and downloaded free at the *Archaeology Data Service* - [archaeologydataservice.ac.uk](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk) - or on the SAHS website.



The archaeological team at Brompton Castle Hill in September 2021 with the remains of a medieval building. Right, excavating at Levisham Moor in jackets, ties and cravats in 1960. Far right, society members on site at Ayton Castle in 1958.



SCARBOROUGH  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
AND HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



## Disappointments ... and hopes

As practitioners, the group's past itinerary of excavation projects has included a historically diverse and wide-ranging spectrum of sites. These have included a middle-Bronze Age site (c.1500BC) in Raincliffe Woods, a 2nd century Romano-British farmstead at Crossgates and a 17th c. English Civil War artillery emplacement on the North Bay cliffs.

As with all exploratory archaeology, on occasions the subsequent results can also prove to be overwhelmingly disappointing. The prospect of undiscovered medieval finds led to an entire weekend's digging in Toller Gate during the 1990s that achieved little else than the clearance of rubble and backfill from a large Victorian cellar. The only partial consolation was the discovery of a number of heavily corroded sections of one of the 3.6 million wartime Anderson Shelters.

In 2021 society member, former City of York Archaeologist John Oxley MBE, instigated a new joint venture in collaboration with the newly-established *Big Ideas By The Sea* festival. Relevantly titled *The Big Dig*, this annual community-based project aims to actively involve both the public and school groups in practical excavation work. Referring to what

would be the ultimate archaeological discovery in the area, Mr Pearson aspires to adding to the story of what is undoubtedly this country's most famous and consequential historical event. "Evidence of previous Viking settlement at Scarborough and, significantly, remains of the town supposedly destroyed by the Vikings in 1066," he answered. According to the early 13th c. *Heimskringla* Saga compiled by Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson, Harald Hardrada's Norse army on landing at Scarborough met fierce local resistance. The Viking invaders consequently burned the township beneath the headland before embarking further down the Yorkshire coast on their quest to conquer York via the Humber and Ouse rivers. The attack on Scarborough was a precursor to the Battles of Fulford and Stamford Bridge, the latter becoming a key factor in events leading to the Battle of Hastings, the dethronement of Harold Godwinson as King of England and the cessation of Anglo-Saxon rule. That elusive confirmation of Scarborough's role in these profoundly momentous events, which permanently changed the course of British history, has evaded all endeavours by archaeologists so far. Until, of course, the next dig perhaps.