

# Following the Fosse Way through Nottinghamshire

## Archaeology and the A46





Text by Phil Andrews and Phil Harding  
 Photographs by members of the CWA site teams, Aerial-Cam,  
 Highways Agency, BBCEL and Karen Nichols  
 Graphics by Julian Cross, Rob Goller, Liz James, Richard Milwain  
 and Karen Nichols  
 Layout and design by Kenneth Lymer

William Stukeley's engraving on page 12 courtesy of  
 the Society of Antiquaries of London

Published by Cotswold Wessex Archaeology  
 on behalf of the Highways Agency  
 Printed by A J Green Printing, Cheltenham

Cotswold Archaeology, Building 11, Kemble Enterprise Park,  
 Cirencester, Gloucestershire GL7 6BQ  
[www.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk)

Wessex Archaeology Ltd, Portway House, Old Sarum Park,  
 Salisbury SP4 6EB  
[www.wessexarch.co.uk](http://www.wessexarch.co.uk)

© Cotswold Wessex Archaeology 2012

*Front cover: Archaeological evaluation trenches at  
 Lings Farm, Saxondale*

*Inside front cover: The remains of part of the Margidunum  
 suburbs along the Fosse Way*

*Back cover: Excavations at Margidunum Hinterland, with the  
 Fosse Way (A46) in the background*



# A46 Newark to Widmerpool Improvements

The Highways Agency's decision to upgrade the A46 trunk road between Newark and Widmerpool in Nottinghamshire heralded the start of a three-year construction project. This also provided an opportunity, in 2009, for archaeologists to find out more about how people had lived and worked in the past along this routeway, which started out as the Roman road known today as the Fosse Way.

The new dual-carriageway completes the link between Lincoln and the M1 motorway near Leicester, the stretches between Lincoln and Newark and between the M1 and Widmerpool having been completed some years earlier.

This major construction project not only involved the building of 17 miles (28 km) of dual carriageway, but also the excavation of deep cuttings, the creation of embankments, and the construction of several bridges and complex road junctions.

It is Highways Agency policy to avoid archaeological remains where possible, and where this cannot be achieved, to lessen the loss by arranging for their investigation in advance of construction work. A considerable effort went into assessing the impact of the new road on archaeological remains, and planning how known sites as well as new discoveries would be archaeologically investigated. The fact that the archaeological work resulted in many new discoveries, and was conducted without delay to the road building programme, is due to the close working relationship between archaeologists, environmental teams, construction teams and designers.

This is the story of the archaeological investigations that took place in advance of construction of the new road, and of the discoveries spanning 13,000 years that were made.



# The Archaeological Programme

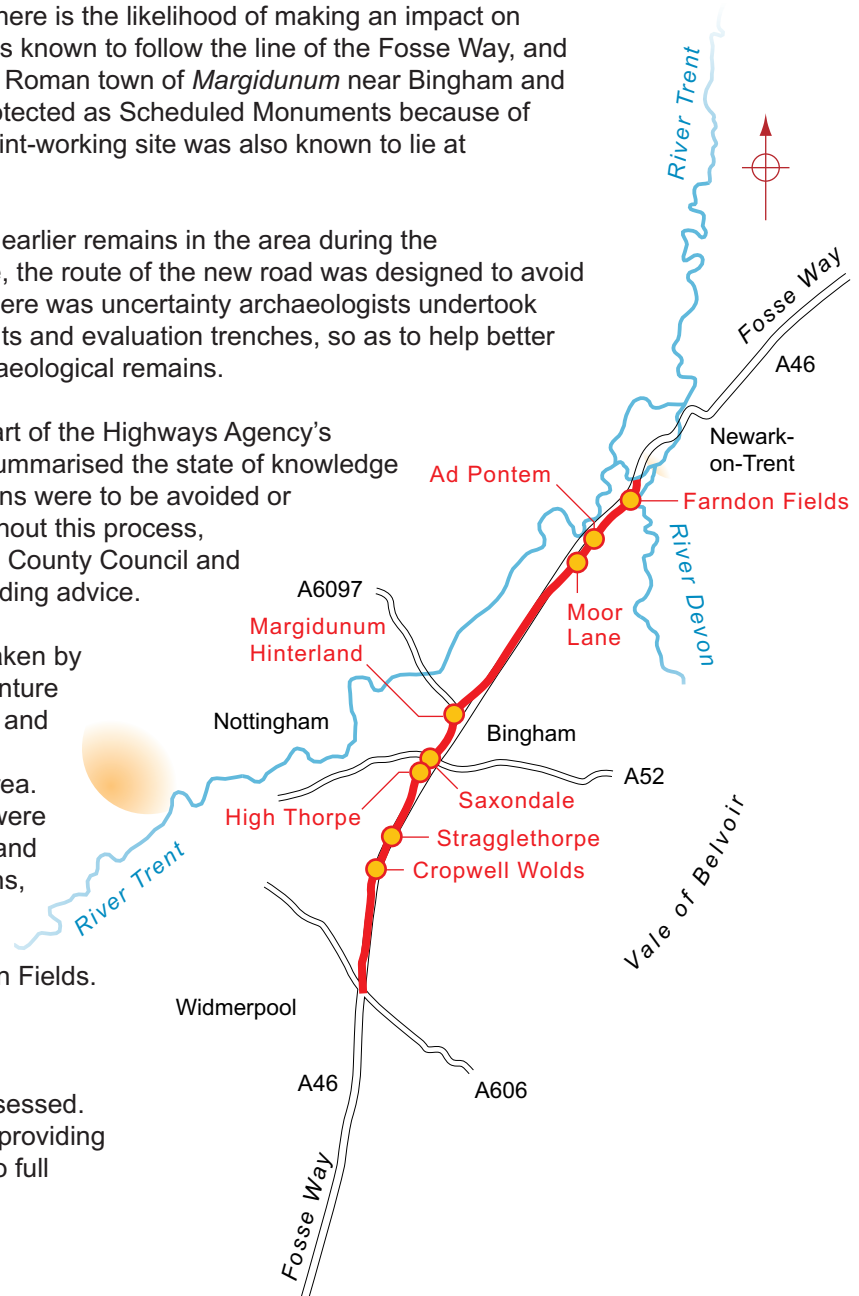
Archaeological preparations connected with upgrading the A46 began in the early 1990s. In any development scheme of this size there is the likelihood of making an impact on archaeological sites. The route of A46 was known to follow the line of the Fosse Way, and passes through the buried remains of the Roman town of *Margidunum* near Bingham and *Ad Pontem* near East Stoke. Both are protected as Scheduled Monuments because of their national importance. A Palaeolithic flint-working site was also known to lie at Farndon Fields, near Newark.

The chances of finding more Roman and earlier remains in the area during the improvements were high. Where possible, the route of the new road was designed to avoid known archaeological sites, and where there was uncertainty archaeologists undertook geophysical surveys, field-walking, test-pits and evaluation trenches, so as to help better understand the nature and extent of archaeological remains.

The archaeological information formed part of the Highways Agency's Environmental Statement in 2007. This summarised the state of knowledge and set out how the archaeological remains were to be avoided or investigated prior to construction. Throughout this process, English Heritage, archaeologists from the County Council and universities were closely involved in providing advice.

The archaeological fieldwork was undertaken by Cotswold Wessex Archaeology, a joint venture company, and took place between March and November 2009, involving a team of over 60 archaeologists, many from the local area. Hundreds of further evaluation trenches were dug to help identify archaeological sites, and there were several large-scale excavations, most notably where the new road passed by *Margidunum*, at the big new interchange at Saxondale, and at Farndon Fields. The eight principal sites investigated are highlighted on the route map (see right).

All the finds have been examined and assessed. Now, in 2012, this detailed information is providing the framework for analysis that will lead to full publication of the important archaeology revealed by the A46 road scheme.



# From Prehistory to History

| Time Chart                     | Farndon Fields | Ad Pontem | Moor Lane | Margidunum | Saxondale | High Thrope | Stragglethorpe | Cropwell Molds |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Medieval<br>1066–1500          |                |           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓         | ✓           | ✓              |                |
| Anglo-Saxon<br>410–1066        |                |           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓         |             |                |                |
| Romano-British<br>AD 43–410    |                | ✓         |           | ✓          | ✓         |             |                |                |
| Iron Age<br>700 BC–AD 43       |                |           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓         | ✓           |                | ✓              |
| Bronze Age<br>2200–700 BC      |                | ✓         |           | ✓          | ✓         |             | ✓              | ✓              |
| Neolithic<br>4000–2200 BC      | ✓              | ✓         |           | ✓          |           |             | ✓              |                |
| Mesolithic<br>9500–4000 BC     | ✓              |           |           | ✓          |           |             |                |                |
| Palaeolithic<br>650000–9500 BC | ✓              |           |           |            |           |             |                |                |



The A46 road improvement scheme provided a wonderful opportunity to investigate a slice of history across the south-eastern part of Nottinghamshire. The road itself can be traced back to the Roman period, when the Fosse Way was constructed between the legionary fortresses at Lincoln and Exeter.

However, the story of this area begins much earlier. At Farndon Fields evidence for flint working to make stone tools dates to approximately 13,000 years ago towards the end of the Last Glaciation. It is extremely rare to find any remains of this age.

From about 10,000 years ago the land became progressively more wooded. Early hunters left little trace of their presence, but the first farming communities established around 4000 BC began woodland clearance and have left more substantial remains.

These later prehistoric sites are more common and together create a picture of the settlement and land-use of this part of the county. A Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age burial monument at Stragglethorpe is a notable addition to our knowledge of prehistoric life and death in the region.

It was not until the Iron Age that the landscape took on the character of fields, trackways and farmsteads that is more familiar to us. The later Iron Age saw settlement on several sites, particularly near what was to become *Margidunum* and at Saxondale. The new road passed through the western outskirts of the Roman town, revealing the expansion of settlement along the Fosse Way and in the hinterland of the town.

Anglo-Saxon remains often prove elusive, but the excavations at Margidunum Hinterland and Saxondale have also provided important new evidence for settlement and burial in this area in the 5th – 6th centuries AD.



# Early Hunters and Gatherers

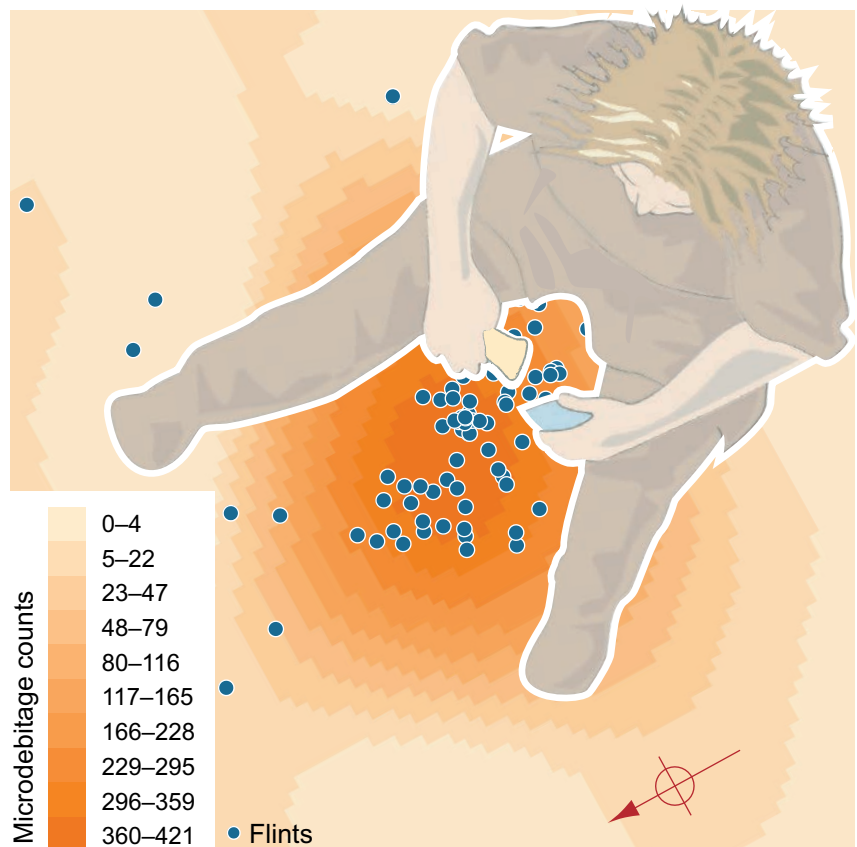
The story of Farndon Fields is an especially interesting example of how early people used a piece of countryside that was a particularly good place to settle, if only temporarily, drawn here by the confluence of the Rivers Trent and Devon and the supply of fresh water used by migrating herds of animals.

The story begins approximately 13,000 years ago at a time when Britain was enjoying a relatively warm climate, freed temporarily from the grip of the Last Glaciation. Groups of hunters followed migrating game across vast distances, regularly but briefly returning to favoured locations. These people hunted animals such as wild horses, wild cattle and Arctic hares.

What sets the findings at Farndon apart from previous discoveries is the excellent preservation of a cluster of flint working debris, undisturbed since the day it was dropped. Analyses suggest that the raw material was brought to Farndon from possibly as far away as Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire. We can reconstruct the flint-working event in great detail from the waste flint left behind. A highly skilled flint worker, perhaps part of a group, sat on the ground, producing tool 'blanks' that were later made into arrowheads, scrapers and knives. From the spread of the smallest flint chips (microdebitage) we can even suggest that the person was right handed.



*Detailed flint recording at Farndon Fields*



# Climatic Change: Abandonment and Return



Some time after the early episode of flint working at Farndon Fields the climate deteriorated for a short period and people appear not to have visited the location. However, by perhaps 12,000 years ago, as the climate began to improve, hunter-gatherer groups once more returned to the same spot.

This time the evidence is not so well preserved in detail, but provides a broader picture of life at an early hunter camp site.

There was greater use of poorer quality flint from local river gravels, and a more rudimentary, but nevertheless efficient method of flint working. Concentrations of burnt flint indicate where hearths may have provided focal points for people to work, relax and socialise. Regrettably our only evidence of people's lives at Farndon comes from worked flint; nothing remains of their other possessions. No wood, bone, fibres or evidence of their diet survives. However, it is likely that tents would have provided shelter, and evidence from other early camp sites indicate that red and roe deer were hunted.



Further to the south-west, near Bingham, a lake formed during the Last Glaciation. Between about 8500 and 4000 BC, this lake, fringed by marsh, attracted Mesolithic hunter-gatherers.

Excavations at Margidunum Hinterland revealed the edge of the dried-up lake, around which were found a few flint tools and a red deer bone, probably food remains left by a Late Mesolithic hunting party. Within the lake sediments was a very rare and now extinct species of snail, a victim of climate change, its size dwarfing a similar species which has survived to this day (see above).



*Flint tools from Farndon Fields*



# Neolithic and Bronze Age Farmers

Farming was introduced from mainland Europe in the Neolithic period a little after 4000 BC. The new farmers gradually cleared the Mesolithic forests and fragments of stone axes found at Margidunum Hinterland may have been used in this process.

The most important Neolithic site on the route was at Stragglethorpe where a ring-ditch, just over 20 metres in diameter, was dug around 2400 BC, towards the end of the Neolithic period. The ditch probably provided soil for a mound to cover a burial in the centre, but any mound had been ploughed away over the centuries and the grave had been robbed of its contents. It is likely that the monument was erected to mark the burial place of an important local person.

Within the upper fill of the ring-ditch were the remains of seven more burials, five adults and two infants, all probably buried around 2000 BC during the Early Bronze Age. As far as we can tell all the adults were female. They may represent members of an extended family group or small community. One of the

burials included a pot – a highly decorated Beaker that may have been used as a drinking vessel (see left). It was made of local clay with the rim decorated with cord impressions and the body covered with patterns perhaps created using a flint tool.



*The ring-ditch at Stragglethorpe*



*Female burial with a Beaker pot at Stragglethorpe*



# Iron Age Farmsteads



Archaeologists mark the pit alignments at Margidunum Hinterland



Iron Age farmer using an ard

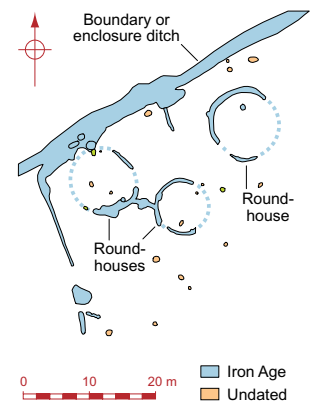
From about 700 BC, at the start of the Iron Age, until the Roman Conquest, the local population increased significantly, with farming intensifying and diversifying. For the first time along the route we have clear evidence for major land boundaries, settlements and fields.

At Margidunum Hinterland, a meandering alignment of two parallel lines of shallow pits ran across the site. This dates to the early Iron Age, and was perhaps a boundary dividing the slightly higher ground to the north from the lower lying and periodically flooded land of the former Bingham Lake to the south. Such double pit alignments are rare in the Trent Valley, and why they dug pits rather than ditches is not known.



At High Thorpe, a series of small ditched enclosures were found – probably pens for cattle or sheep – to the west of a boundary ditch. Several quern stones for grinding cereals were also recovered, suggesting a mixed farming settlement.

Cropwell Wolds is a later Iron Age site, although a few Bronze Age pits hint at an earlier origin. The south-facing slope was crossed by an important boundary ditch, with the remains of three round-houses to the south. Each was defined by a drip-gully, dug to drain away water dripping from the thatched roofs. Deposits of charred grain show that wheat (mostly of the hardy spelt variety) and barley were grown.



Plan of the farmstead at Cropwell Wolds

# Late Iron Age Settlements to Roman Towns

When the Romans arrived in this area in or shortly after AD 43 they are likely to have found a well-populated and thriving agricultural landscape. At Margidunum Hinterland and at Saxondale were clusters of Iron Age round-houses, enclosures and fields.

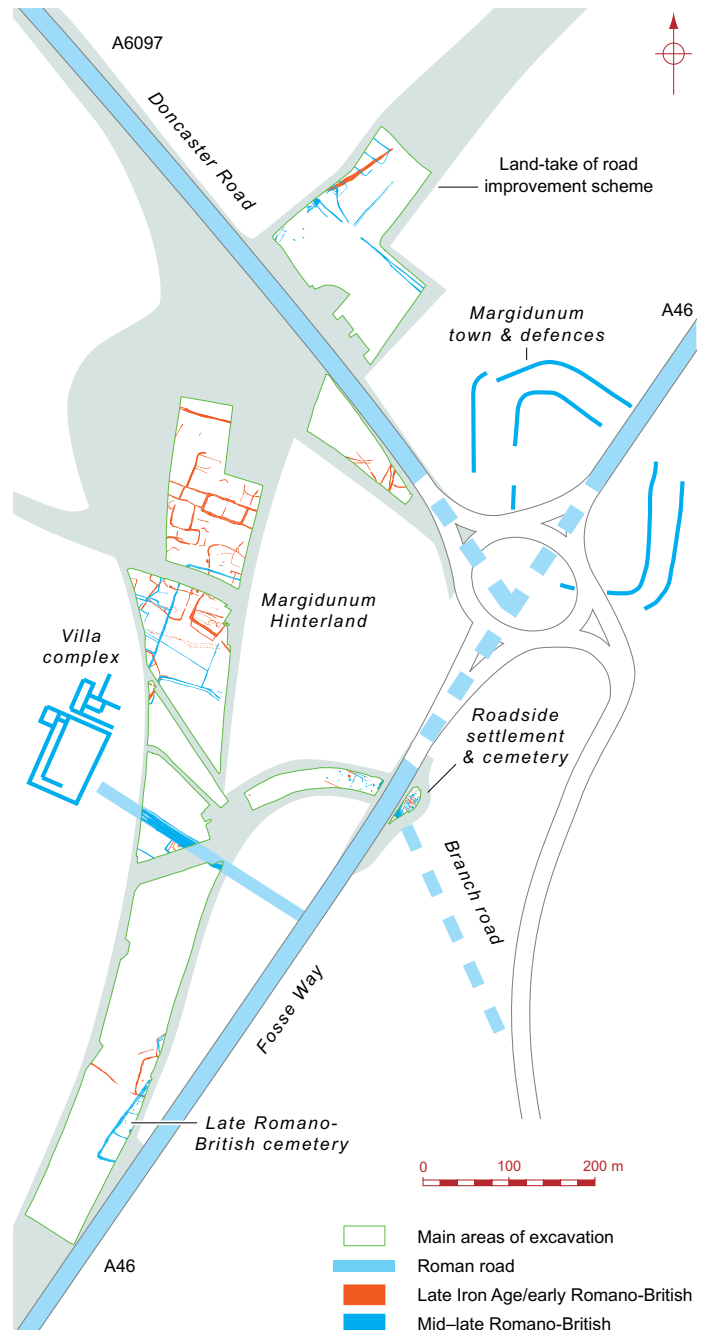
The building of the Fosse Way, one of the longest and most important Roman roads in the country, was an early and major undertaking by the Roman army. Within the development area much of the Fosse Way lies undisturbed below the course of the old A46, and in only one place was a large part of it exposed in the recent excavations.

A garrison was established at *Ad Pontem* on the south side of the River Trent, controlling a bridging point, which is what its Latin name suggests. There may have been another fort at *Margidunum* (the Latin name), around which the small town developed from about AD 100.

Parts of the site of *Margidunum* were excavated in the 1920s, and again in the 1960s, when the stone foundations of buildings, pits and burials were exposed within and immediately outside the diamond-shaped layout of later Roman defences.

The 2009 excavations outside the town revealed continuity in the use of the existing Iron Age settlement

enclosures and fields, as well as a new roadside settlement with round-houses, rubbish pits and wells. The upper stone lining from one well (see left) was removed and has been re-built in the cemetery in Bingham by the Bingham Heritage Trails Association.





# Roman Farmsteads and Villas



*Roman branch road to Bingham*



*Base of large storage jar*



*Building foundations north-west of Margidunum  
– another villa?*

Roadside settlement at *Margidunum* continued until the 4th century AD, with 'Iron Age style' round-houses now succeeded by rectangular post-built structures. These buildings had walls of wattle and daub, and thatched roofs, lending the settlement a more rural appearance than would have

been seen in the major towns such as Lincoln, where many buildings were built entirely or partly of stone.

A branch road leading south from the Fosse Way was established, running in the direction of Bingham. Further south, several new enclosures were laid out next to the Fosse Way, probably at the limit of the roadside settlement.

Other Roman enclosures and field systems were found at Saxondale, and there was certainly a settlement there. One group of small enclosures on the crest of a hill adjacent to the Fosse Way, might have been the site of a Roman signal station.

Sometime in the 2nd or 3rd century AD there was a major change in land-use to the west of the Fosse Way at Margidunum Hinterland. The pattern of small enclosures and trackways disappeared and was replaced by larger fields associated with a Roman villa complex known from geophysics to lie just to the west of the site. Much building material and pottery has been collected during earlier fieldwalking in this area.



Villa estates were large farms that produced food to supply the army and expanding local urban populations. There are known to have been several around *Margidunum*.



# The People of Margidunum

We can learn something of the people who lived and worked in and around the small town of *Margidunum* from the cemeteries where they were buried and from the objects and food remains they left behind. Most of the inhabitants of the town are likely to have been people local to the area, rather than from Rome or elsewhere in the Empire.

One very unusual grave group comprised two infants and seventeen babies who were still-born or died soon after birth. This cemetery lay at the junction of the Fosse Way and the branch road towards Bingham, and appears to have been specifically for these very young individuals. Initial study suggests some may have succumbed to infection or disease. Two

rectangular stone platforms were found here, which could have been the remains of bases of shrines, and a small stone-lined chamber – perhaps once part of a cenotaph – contained the neck from a glass flagon (see left).



A second cemetery contained the remains of at least fourteen adult males and females, the graves dug inside an enclosure alongside the Fosse Way. The population showed some evidence of joint degeneration, and dental disease was common. This is not unexpected in individuals who had probably worked hard on the land, and several of whom had reached the relatively old age of 40 years or more. A few graves contained hobnails from boots, and a coin minted around AD 330 dates this cemetery to the late Roman period.



*Infant burial under excavation*



*Skeleton of an adult female in the Fosse Way cemetery*

# Roman Economy and Environment

*Decorated samian ware showing a dolphin and cherub. The rivet holes at the edge are for repairs*



Pottery was used as containers, lamps, for cooking and for eating and drinking. Most pots found at Margidunum Hinterland were produced within the Trent Valley and around Lincoln. More exotic or specialised vessels came from further afield, including samian ware from Gaul. A number of these show signs of repair using lead rivets or staples inserted into holes near the broken edges, and there may have been a workshop nearby specialising in the repair of these valued pots.

We found a range of bronze and iron objects, mainly nails, clamps and other fixtures used in buildings, but also tools, household equipment and small personal items. A concentration of iron slag indicates a smithy next to the Fosse Way.

Among the numerous coins were two silver *siliquae* of Arcadius, the Byzantine Emperor AD 395–408, which were lost perhaps at the beginning of the 5th century.



*Cattle spine disposed of in a ditch after butchery*

Large quantities of animal bones show that sheep and cattle were kept, with lesser numbers of pig, horse, dog and chicken. Wild species, such as deer, were rare. Iron Age husbandry practices were not superseded until the later Roman period, when cattle replaced sheep as the principal farm animals.

Charred cereal remains from crop dryers and ovens also tell us much about arable farming practice. Spelt wheat and barley continued to be important. Weed seeds indicate the initial cultivation of dry, grassy land, but later in the Roman period when the population increased, heavier clay soils were also brought into production.



# Anglo-Saxon Settlers

Following the collapse of the Empire and the departure of the Roman army from the shores of Britain in AD 410, new settlers from the North Sea coast of Europe brought a distinctively Germanic culture and a new language to England. Collectively we call them Anglo-Saxons.

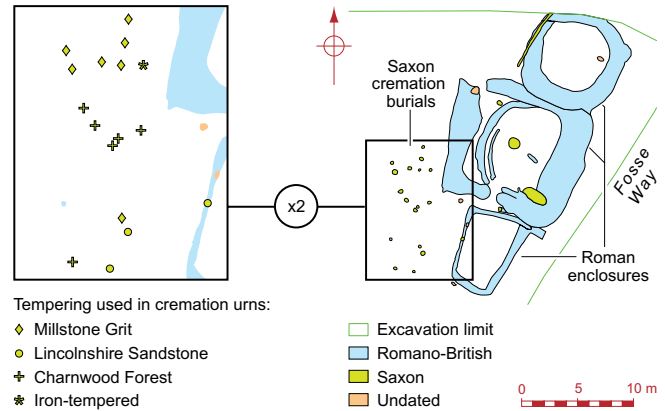
People no longer lived in the old Roman villas and rural settlements, and the towns of *Margidunum* and *Ad Pontem* were abandoned. However, from around AD 500 onwards, people re-established an agricultural landscape with areas of managed woodland.

The Anglo-Saxons introduced new forms of wooden buildings, often without deep foundations and leaving little trace in the ground. However, so-called 'sunken-feature buildings' had an air-space below a planked floor to keep the floor dry. One was discovered at Margidunum Hinterland and others have been found in the Trent Valley. When this building at Margidunum Hinterland was abandoned it was filled with rubbish, including a damaged bronze cruciform brooch (see below). Saxon pottery found at Moor Lane to the north-east suggests the existence of another settlement nearby.



The Fosse Way may have continued in use and at Saxondale an Anglo-Saxon cremation cemetery was established next to the former Roman roadside enclosures. The cemetery contained 17 burials, most within pottery urns. Analysis of the tempering added to the clay shows that the urns were made in at least four different places. The clustering of vessels of similar type may reflect the family groups. This location was known as Moothawes in the Middle Ages (later *Moothouse*) and was probably a later Anglo-Saxon meeting place for local assemblies.

Much later, in 1722, an engraving by the antiquarian William Stukeley shows a mound apparently in the middle of the Fosse Way at Saxondale, very close to the location of the cemetery.



*Plan of the cremation cemetery at Saxondale*



*Engraving showing the Fosse Way looking north from Saxondale (1722)*



# Peace and War

Further settlement shift occurred from around AD 900 when most of the existing village sites probably became established. The new route of the A46 avoids these villages, and only the widespread remains of medieval ridge-and-furrow agriculture were encountered. No trace was found of the last battle of the War of the Roses, fought near East Stoke on the 16 June 1487. However, some musket balls found near Farndon Fields can probably be linked to the Parliamentary siege of Newark between 1642 and 1646, during the English Civil War.

The Fosse Way never regained its importance as a long distance route. In Nottinghamshire, only the 11-mile section between Newark and Bingham, which linked the important crossings of the Trent at Newark and Trent Bridge (Nottingham), was made a turnpike road by Act of Parliament in 1772. Elsewhere, most of the Fosse Way became broken into a series of major roads, minor roads, lanes and bridleways, which can still be traced along much of its 230-mile length between Lincoln and Exeter.

---

## Acknowledgements

Cotswold Wessex Archaeology (CWA) extends their thanks for the co-operation shown by the Balfour Beatty Civil Engineering Limited (BBCEL) team during the fieldwork, in particular Peter Taylor, Glenn Carter, Pam Hobson, Ben Sheridan, Richard Barnes, Alan Potts, Will Neaves, Tim Betts and David Emery.

CWA would also like to record their appreciation for the support throughout the project provided by the BBCEL designer Scott Wilson (now URS), notably Jay Carver, Neil Macnab, Louise Robinson and Dave Aspden.

The programme of archaeological works has been monitored by archaeologists from Nottinghamshire County Council, English Heritage, Jacobs and the Highways Agency. In particular, CWA would like to thank Ursilla Spence, Jon Humble, Jacqui Huntley, Jonathan Dempsey and Rob McNaught.

During the course of the fieldwork, many other organisations and individuals provided advice and support to CWA, including Daryl Garton, Simon Collcutt, Andy Howard, John Lewis, Patrick Clay, and Peter Allen of the Bingham Heritage Trails Association. The Trent and Peak Archaeological Unit undertook much preliminary work for the scheme and CWA would like to acknowledge their

valuable contribution. Finally, the many landowners and farmers who facilitated access to their land are thanked for their forbearance.

The overall fieldwork programme was co-ordinated for CWA by Andrew Crockett, managed in the field by Cliff Bateman, and supported by the CWA JV Board of John Dillon and Neil Holbrook. The individual sites were directed by Phil Andrews, Mark Brett, Ralph Brown, Nicholas Cooke, Chris Ellis, Tim Havard, Ray Holt, Sian Reynish, Sian Reynolds, Rebecca Riley, Kelly Saunders, Julia Sulikowska, Vasilis Tsamis, Fiona Walker, Nick Wells, Alex Wilkinson and Jamie Wright. The on-site finds processing was supervised by Angela Aggujaro and the environmental processing by Darren Baker.

The post-excavation assessment was managed by Karen Walker with the assistance of Andrew Crockett, Andrew Mudd and Nicholas Cooke.

CWA staff and external specialist who have provided information or assisted in the production of this publication include Nicholas Cooke, Linda Coleman, Andrew Crockett, Phil Harding, Lorrain Higbee, Grace Jones, Matt Leivers, Jacqueline I. McKinley, Ed McSloy, Gwladys Monteil, Andrew Mudd, Ruth Pelling, Richard Preece, Fiona Roe, David Starley, Chris Stevens, Sylvia Warman, Martin Watts, Sarah Wyles and Jane Young.

The Highways Agency's decision to upgrade the A46 between Newark and Widmerpool to a dual carriageway provided an opportunity for archaeologists from Cotswold Wessex Archaeology to find out more about how people had lived and worked in the landscape along this part of the Roman Fosse Way.

This is the story of the archaeological investigations that took place in 2009 in advance of construction of the new road, and of the discoveries spanning 13,000 years that were made along the route.



If you have any enquiries about this publication email: [ha\\_info@highways.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:ha_info@highways.gsi.gov.uk) or call 0300 123 5000. Please quote the Highways Agency publications code PR04/12. Highways Agency media services Birmingham. Job number M120008: Printed on paper from well-managed forests and other controlled sources.