

21st century road upgrade sheds new light on Roman treasures, coins, roads – and potholes!

As part of an improvement of the A1 in North Yorkshire, archaeologists discovered the Romans settled in the area at least a decade earlier than previously thought, producing coins and interacting with local people.

They also found evidence of early investment in infrastructure... and 2,000-year-old attempts to fix potholes.

The illuminating discoveries on Highways England's upgrade of the A1 between Leeming and Barton, focussed around Scotch Corner, still a significant road junction today. Heralded by Historic England as one of the top 10 archaeological discoveries of the decade, the finds are documented in a new book out today.

The A1 upgrade is one of several Highways England projects across the country helping experts uncover more of England's rich history. Others include a bypass and junction improvement in the north west which has provided an early glimpse of life on a watery peninsula, and Britain's recently opened biggest road project in the east which has uncovered mammoth tusks, rare Roman coins, and evidence of ancient beer brewing.

Highways England worked with AECOM, lead designers for the A1 project, responsible for managing the archaeological work and analysis.

Dr Jonathan Shipley, AECOM Principal Heritage Consultant, said:

Scotch Corner is now known as a key junction on the Highways England network, but the remains identified show it was also the site of a much older junction. The remains include evidence of an Iron Age settlement where coin production, the first north of the River Humber, was potentially taking place. The extraordinary objects provided us with an insight of the interaction between the Romans and the local population.

Other fascinating finds include evidence for the upkeep of the Roman road network, with the site revealing potholes that had been repaired. Evidence of investment in the road infrastructure during Roman times links well with the recent investment in infrastructure which resulted in the discovery of the site.

Before major road projects begin, teams of archaeologists carefully peel back the surface of construction sites to ensure that archaeological remains are preserved and recorded. By commissioning experts and working closely with the country's heritage bodies and local authorities, Highways England can ensure

knowledge is conserved and our understanding of the past is enhanced.

Highways England's Principal Cultural Heritage Advisor Jim Hunter said:

At Highways England we try to have as little effect on the historic environment as we can. Where the disturbance of archaeological remains is unavoidable we are committed to recording them to as high a standard as possible so that the information they contain is available for everyone now and in the future.

This is an exciting publication. Where important remains such as those at Scotch Corner are revealed we are proud to be able to contribute to the knowledge of the past through our funding of the archaeological work and we are delighted to have been able to add to the understanding of the Roman conquest and settlement of the north of England in this way.

The A1 project finds are detailed in 'Contact, Concord and Conquest: Britons and Romans at Scotch Corner' published this week by Northern Archaeological Associates.

The remarkable archaeological excavations demonstrated how Scotch Corner was and remains a focal point along this north / south route. The upgrade has helped experts to understand the interaction between the Romans and the local population around the beginning of the 1st millennium AD. It was a time of relative peace and the excavations show how prosperous locals showered the invading Romans with gifts of exotic objects and foods to maintain harmony.

The new book describes the unearthing of engineered roads, the discovery of potholes and how the Romans fixed them – not with today's asphalt or concrete but with local limestone.

The publication represents a major step forward in understanding of the Roman conquest of the north, and will set the agenda for studies into the Late Iron Age and Roman Conquest of the north for the next 25 years.

And discoveries like these on the A1 at Scotch Corner are being unearthed at Highways England schemes across the country.

In the north west, work on the A585 Windy Harbour to Skippool bypass and junction improvement project has provided a glimpse of early life on a watery Fylde peninsula thousands of years ago.

The new £150 million road project will help shape future housing and jobs in this part of Lancashire. However, Oxford Archaeology unearthed perfectly preserved prehistoric vegetation as well as the stone tools providing clues to the homes and jobs of the past. The finds helped show how people lived and developed from hunter gatherers living on the coast to early farmers eking a living from salt marshes.

Pottery, stone tools and charred remains provide direct evidence for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers foraging, and possibly camping, at the water's edge and later on, Neolithic and Bronze Age farmers living on the fringes of a salt marsh.

In the south west, Highways England is carrying out a huge amount of work in advance of the A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down scheme near Stonehenge, involving more detailed investigations than for any other road scheme in the country.

Geophysical and archaeological surveys have been undertaken of the ground that would be disturbed by the scheme both within and outside the World Heritage Site, including the location for the new Longbarrow Junction and the whole of the Winterbourne Stoke northern bypass route.

Survey work has uncovered some interesting but not unexpected finds, including quantities of worked flint and pieces of pottery and a vessel containing a cremation burial dating back as far as 4,000 – 5,000 years. Outside the construction footprint of the scheme – which includes a two-mile tunnel, a further 50 metres away from the Stonehenge monument – a small hengiform monument and bones from a crouched burial, and a further cremation burial have been found.

Meticulous planning for the proposed route has seen ground penetrating radar used as part of a comprehensive geophysical survey strategy, to Historic England standards, and the company has now started the procurement process for the archaeological mitigation work to take place ahead of construction, subject to a Development Consent Order being granted.

And over in the east of England mammoth tusks, rare Roman coins, and Britain's oldest beer brewing have all been among the amazing archaeological finds on Highways England's £1.5 billion programme upgrading the A14.

Up to 250 archaeologists were working on the upgrade at its peak. A targeted approach to archaeology helped the road open eight months ahead of schedule and in the process the team found three Anglo Saxon villages, 41 Roman pottery kilns with 215,000 shards of pottery weighing 2.8 tonnes, and 15 Iron Age and Roman settlements.

These major road schemes have provided the opportunity to look beneath the surface and understand how life was lived may years ago. And Highways England is now seeking tenders to become part of their archaeology framework. This £250 million framework divided in to six lots will offer successful companies the opportunity to work on new exciting discoveries on future road schemes, with an announcement on winning tenders expected this winter.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.