

Heritage Lottery Project SH-15-07514

(Old London Road, Towton, North Yorkshire)

Full Report:

Carry out an archaeological survey of a stretch of historic roadway.

Old London Road is a Public Bridleway running west from the A162, Main Road, Towton, in North Yorkshire. It forms part of a public footpath running from Towton to Stutton and is also part of the Towton Battlefield Trail. The Battle of Towton (1461) was part of the Wars of the Roses and has been described as the “bloodiest battle on British soil” with estimates of up to 30,000 dead, many of which remain in large burial pits within the battlefield site. The Battlefield area is a Designated Battlefield of predominantly agricultural land and is protected by Historic England. In 2014 the Towton Battlefield Society (TBS) negotiated with the landowners to create a signed circular walk around the battlefield and Old London Road forms part of this Battlefield Trail which is open at all times to the general public. TBS run guided walks around the Battlefield Trail each month throughout the year.

Old London Road is an historic road, appearing on maps from mid C18 but which was certainly in use in the C15 and probably well before that. It has long been used by agricultural traffic for access to productive land as well as by generations of horse-riders, dog walkers and ramblers. As such it has been a valuable amenity for Towton residents and the wider public.

The surface of Old London Road had deteriorated such that it became impassable on foot following heavy rainfall, thus restricting its use as an amenity and as access to the Battlefield. Towton Parish Council wanted to repair the surface to enable it to be used throughout the year and at the same time try to identify the actual age and initial construction of the road, for which they obtained HLF funding.

With the support and guidance of Tim Sutherland of York University’s Archaeology Department a survey was undertaken of a section of Old London Road at a location where it was felt there may be evidence to support a theory that the road was Roman in origin. Dr Sutherland is the accepted expert on Towton Battlefield and the surrounding area and has been involved in all recent research and excavations across the site. He was delighted to have the opportunity to excavate Old London Road

A community archaeological dig was undertaken in June 2016 under the guidance of Tim Sutherland and colleagues of his from York University’s Archaeology Department. Over a period of 4 days a total of 28 members of the public took part voluntarily in the dig. Participants included residents of all ages from Towton and neighbouring villages plus members of the Tadcaster Historical Society.

According to Mr Sutherland the community dig was exemplary in terms of the surrounding organisation (support from landowners and Parish Council, health and safety, refreshments, commitment of the participants, communications, publicity, facilities and resources. Additionally, the weather was excellent for the whole of the dig! The feedback from all the participants was, likewise, wholly positive. They valued the guidance and input of Mr Sutherland and his colleagues immensely and felt privileged to be involved in a highly professional and informative archaeological survey. During the period of the dig Mr Sutherland and colleagues took time to explain to all and every passer-by what was happening and why we were digging at that specific location. This added

greatly to the general involvement and appreciation of local residents and stimulated significant additional interest in our local heritage.

During the dig the local community was kept informed of progress by the Parish Council and the story was taken up by a variety of local publications and Radio York. Details of the publicity gained for the Project are on an attached document.

Following the excavation the Road was restored to its previous state. Subsequently, HLF funding was used to resurface those parts of Old London Road that were most heavily rutted and which prevented it being used for many weeks of the year due to deep mud. Following advice was taken from the landowners and Dr Sutherland local limestone chips were used to resurface the road. This has proved to be extremely successful and has been welcomed by all users, especially the Towton Battlefield Society, who have seen a significant increase in the number of members of the public taking the guided walks each month, especially during the winter months when it was previously impassable and uncomfortable, or even dangerous. The resurfacing has also re-established Old London Road as an extremely popular rambling, horse riding and dog-walking route used by local residents and people from the wider area. It is an extremely pleasant convenient, useful, peaceful but also historic pathway giving access to all users (including wheelchair users and those with restricted mobility) to the countryside and the battlefield. As such it has significantly enhanced the amenity for Towton residents in general whilst increasing their appreciation of the history and heritage.

Towton Battlefield Society has reported that there has been increased interest in the Battlefield Trail since Old London Road has been resurfaced and that since the resurfacing work no programmed guided walks have been cancelled due to the condition of the bridleway.

Photographs of Old London Road before and after resurfacing are attached to this Report.

On completion of the dig, Mr Sutherland prepared a full report on the survey and findings (see attached documentation). Whilst this has not so far been accepted for publication by any academic journals it nevertheless is available to any interested parties and provides valuable additional knowledge about the history and heritage of Towton, the Battlefield and the surrounding area.

The report confirms that no evidence was found to suggest the original road was Roman but the surface of the known and documented C18 turnpike (as a principal route to Tadcaster over high ground, avoiding Tadcaster Ings) was found. Data from the dig location, the geo-physical exploration of surrounding land and aerial images from recent years do, however, suggest that the roadway is older than C18 but previously followed a slightly different pathway as it neared Towton at its eastern most extent.

As a result of the archaeological dig many new connections were made between the Parish Council and residents, local organisations and bodies which have been exploited in a variety of ways.

Photographs from the dig are attached to this Report.

Share findings through publication in relevant journals.

On completion of the dig at Old London Road, Tim Sutherland prepared a full professional Archaeological Report on the survey and findings (see attached documentation). Whilst this has not so far been submitted for publication to any academic journals it nevertheless is available to any

interested parties and provides valuable additional knowledge about the history and heritage of Towton, the Battlefield and the surrounding area.

Despite the Report being compiled by a much respected academic, the fact that no evidence that the Road was constructed in Roman times or, indeed, prior to the mid C18, limits the opportunity for publication in relevant journals. However, efforts have been made to disseminate the results as widely as possible.

The Archaeological Report has been sent to Towton Battlefield Society and is available through their website. It is also accessible from the Towton Parish Council website and through the Tadcaster Historical Society plus, of course, York University's Archaeology Department.

Copies of the Report are available as part of the display of artefacts maintained by the Towton Battlefield Society and at the premises of Tadcaster & Rural Community Interest Company (TRCIC) in Tadcaster. The TRCIC (a not for profit organisation) was engaged to assist with several practical issues for the Project. Within the next few months the TRCIC will have a greater presence in Tadcaster in a community facing building open to the public and has committed to displaying artefacts and information relating to Towton Battlefield and is expecting to establish a Tadcaster Visitors' Centre in 2018, where these artefacts and information will be on permanent display.

Display artefacts and information at events and talks.

As part of the legacy and dissemination strategy a programme of talks on the Project is taking place in local venues. These talks will be given by eminent archaeologists and historians. They will be freely open to the public and will cover topics related to the Old London Road Archaeology Project, the Battle of Towton and the Battlefield and the wider context of roads and communications in the Towton/Tadcaster area.

We originally intended to deliver these talks late in 2016 but found that Towton Battlefield Society already had a published programme of talks on similar themes. We have therefore been liaising with TBS and have agreed that in order not to confuse interested parties and potential audiences we will sponsor a minimum of 3 talks within their programme during 2017.

We are expecting that Tim Sutherland will do a talk on the HLF Project dig and subsequent findings, plus the recent changes to the Designated Battlefield site. It has been difficult to arrange timings for the talks by Mr Sutherland (plus Simon Richardson and other potential speakers) because of his involvement in filming for a new series of the TV programme, Medieval Dead, to be aired soon.

Advice was sought from Mike Gurney, the Public Rights of Way Officer at North Yorkshire County Council on the materials to be used for resurfacing Old London Road. This established a useful link for the Parish Council and has led to other actions in relation to Public Footpaths in the area. Mr Gurney was impressed with the Project and has informed other Councils and Bodies about the HLF Grants and used our Project as an exemplar.

Locating and obtaining permission for displaying artefacts from Towton Battlefield has proved complex and time-consuming. However, with the support of Tim Sutherland we are confident we will have some items displayed by September 2017. There have been many difficult and previously unforeseen issues regarding the nature of approved display cabinets, the security of items held and the cost of appropriate insurance. These issues are being resolved and within the next few months the TRCIC will have a greater presence in Tadcaster in a community facing building open to the

public (Manor Farm) and has committed to displaying artefacts and information relating to Towton Battlefield. It is expected that a Tadcaster Visitors' Centre will be established in 2018, where these artefacts and information will be on permanent display.

In all communications, publicity, talks etc. relating to the Project the Heritage Lottery Fund has been mentioned and its role highlighted.

Volunteer labour to the project and any non-cash contributions.

No additional cash or non-cash contributions were received for the Project. Any overspend on the Project will be covered by Towton Parish Council.

The overall management and organisation of the Project has been undertaken by Mr Graham Webb, Clerk to Towton Parish Council, on a purely voluntary basis. The involvement of the 5 Towton Parish Councillors has also been entirely voluntary.

All of the 28 participants in the archaeological dig were volunteers, apart from Tim Sutherland and 1 of his colleagues (Dr Rachel Wood) from York University Archaeology Department, who were paid very modest fees (£440 and £260 respectively) for leading and directing the dig.

The 28 participants in the archaeological dig represented all ages and backgrounds. Some had previous experience in archaeology but most did not. The highly professional but equally engaging and supportive manner of Tim and his colleagues made a massive impact on all involved and several volunteers have been actively seeking involvement in future digs. Several have pressed Towton PC to arrange more digs on Old London Road or within the Battlefield!

Supplementary information:

Quotes from Volunteer Participants

"I'm really grateful to the Project for a very interesting insight into the procedure and methodology of an archaeological dig. I was most impressed with the way everything was managed and the enthusiasm generated throughout the team." Mr C Cook

"Fascinating – really enjoyed it. Had a go at most things and felt that even as a complete amateur my input was appreciated. Definitely want to do it again – even though my knees hurt!" Mrs Marshall

"I only came up to see the progress – and ended up staying for the rest of the dig! I've never been involved in anything like this before and have loved being involved and washing the "finds" etc." Alex Harrison

"I have been looking forward to helping excavate in Towton however, when it came I am pregnant so couldn't dig! But everyone managed to find jobs and I helped with managing, planning, sieving and "pot washing". I was made to feel more than welcome. I would volunteer again." Holly Brown

"We joined the group for interest and enjoyment and had a superb 4 days. Thanks to everyone for their instruction, help, encouragement, good company and enthusiasm." Diane & Richard Combs

“High point – learning how to do “geo-physics”! Just like Time Team. Wonderful experience.” John & Gil Firth

“Our first experience of a dig. A great experience working with the professional archaeologist and a great team of very happy and willing volunteers.” Tony & Su Morgan

Publicity and dissemination:

BBC Radio York: 2 x live interviews with Assistant Dig Director, Dr Rachel Wood

Article in Yorkshire Reporter

Article in Locate Magazine

Article in York Press newspaper (25.06.16)

Article on Towton Battlefield Society website

Article on Towton Parish Council website

Evaluation

Towton is a very small community (c. 200 residents) constructed in linear fashion along a busy main road (A162) with no community amenities whatsoever, located in an extremely important area, adjacent to what is generally accepted to have been the site of the "bloodiest battle" ever on British soil on Palm Sunday in 1461. At a national and international level the archaeological survey has achieved the objective of producing valuable additional knowledge about an important and historic roadway. However, although the site is valued nationally and internationally, not all residents of Towton were aware of the importance of the battlefield or the history of Old London Road which is an ancient route now forming part of the Battlefield Trail. So, it is perhaps at a very local level where the main impact of the Project has been felt. In recent years, especially following the unearthing of skeletons from the Battle during excavations at Towton Hall (adjacent to Old London Road) and several subsequent television programmes on the subject, the profile of the battle has been raised but there has never been a forum for residents to collectively engage with the heritage on their doorstep. This Project has allowed the Parish Council to communicate and engage with all residents and make them aware of the historic importance of Old London Road and the battlefield. They did not all participate in the archaeological dig but at least everyone was made aware of the Project and the heritage of the village. As the dig took place in June 2016 many residents just came to see what was going on and ask questions. This led to significantly increased communication between the Clerk and Councillors and the wider community and a much greater appreciation of the role played by the Parish Council more widely. The archaeological dig only lasted 4 days but the subsequent resurfacing of Old London Road has made a huge difference to the whole community as the new surface means it can be used all year round without the need for wellingtons, irrespective of the weather, including by the elderly, those with mobility issues and even wheelchairs, giving everyone access to the outstanding surrounding countryside. This was a major objective that has been fully achieved. Horse-riders, ramblers and, mainly, dog walkers (of which there are many!) now use the Old London Road more easily and more frequently and it has become a valuable "meeting place" for villagers – as we have no Village Hall or other amenity. The dig and improved surfacing remains a frequent topic of conversation. Although the Project's core activity (the archaeological dig) did not involve all

of Towton's residents the main outcome has been that the Old London Road now constitutes a focal point for villagers of all ages. It is perhaps interesting to consider that an ancient track that once enabled communication between local inhabitants (medieval, certainly, but perhaps even Roman!) has now delivered the objective of encouraging communication between neighbours and residents of a single village that might otherwise not engage with each other but do so now on Old London Road in the midst of its heritage and history.

Graham Webb

Clerk to Towton Parish Council

September 2016