

MARYPORT 2015 BLOG

12 June 2015

Back in Maryport! What a pleasure it is to be here. Very conscious that this is the last season of the Project. I think we will all miss the place and the people. The survey team have been at work setting out the trench outlines, Tony has done a walk-through of the site with the land agent – it is vital to ensure everyone is happy not just with where we are digging, but where we will be dumping spoil – and the 13 ton excavator is hard at work opening trench G, the first and biggest of this season's trenches. Trench G occupies the area immediately north-west of last year's excavations. We also use this time as an opportunity for advanced field training for our MA students. So many training programmes out there neglect to nurture a skill that can make or break an excavation – machine watching. Undercut and you will not have enough time for the archaeology, overcut and you will destroy it.

13 June 2015

Over the last couple of days we have run refresher training alongside our programme of site preparation. This is an opportunity to double check that everyone is up to date with the surveying systems, and that all are confident with our site recording methods. Experience is vital, of course, but we need to ensure consistency in practice. Tony and I take a closer look at a couple of points where a concentration of cobbles can be seen in Trench G. The concentrations are clearly not natural, but neither do they resolve themselves into clearly defined features.... what are they? As we work, both of us are mindful of a key research question for the project team. Where were Maryport's famous altars first displayed? We know that some of them must have been displayed outside and we know that it is unlikely that they were simply stood on the hillside. Something must have been done to ensure that they didn't sink or slide on the ground. Could the cobbles have provided the necessary stability? It is a question to consider, but of course our objective in the first instance is to record what is there – definitive answers are some way off.

15 June 2015

The first rotation of the main team arrives. It is clearly a good group. Everybody has to go through induction before being released onto the site – and this includes the veterans of previous seasons. So in addition to a review of the research objectives and the site's broader context, there is plenty of time spent revising single context recording methodology.

On site, site preparation continues, the 13 ton excavator is opening the new trench areas. Our plan is to open three areas/trenches west of Trench G.

16 June 2015

A revelation! As we begin preparations for the new trenches we are struck by the depth of the top soil in the northernmost of the group, Trench K. We had originally planned to open a trench 15 x 20 m here, about 15 m south of the southernmost trench opened between 2011 and 2013. You may remember that in during that time we investigated the area where, 1870, the celebrated series of Jupiter altars were discovered. Our work then allowed us to demonstrate that the '1870s' site had also been home to major timber structures in the Late Roman/Early Medieval period. We also observed that the 1870s site lay on the highest point in this part of Maryport. And now, encountering the depth of topsoil between it and our other activities, we came to realise that in ancient times, the high ground must have been even more pronounced. Anyone approaching it from the south-east, the direction of the temples, would have had to cross a small valley at the bottom of the hill. The topsoil which has built up over the years had essentially filled in this valley, giving a misleading impression of a gradual rise, rather than a pronounced change. We adapt. The machine allows us to cut a section across the small valley, and to plot the contours. Suddenly the 1870s area appears as an even more important landscape feature.

18 June 2015

While we have adapted our plans for the northernmost site trench, work continues elsewhere much as planned. The excavator has allowed us to open two further trenches, H and J (no 'I' note, to avoid confusion between J and I). We now have teams working through the northern end of Trench G and across Trench H, they form trowel lines, working back across the site and exposing features as they do so. We can see the traces of ditch systems emerging, some of these silted up ditches are producing significant amounts of Roman pottery. We have encountered one of these ditches before, we last saw it in 2013 running *underneath* the rectangular temple to the south.

21st June 2015

Work in trenches H and J is progressing extremely well. The Roman ditch system that was operational in the early second century AD is now coming clearer, but we are coming to understand other features better too. The concentrations of cobbles can now be better understood. The modern ground surface over Trench G, on the western side of our site, is notably lower than the ground over Trenches H and J. That is to say that the old hedge row that runs through our site marks a drop in ground level, having retained more of the soil on the east, while soil from the west has tended to move downhill over the years. Excavation in both areas has revealed plough marks from different extended phases of ploughing. The most recent plough activity respects the hedge line, of course, but other plough marks reflect different orientations and in some cases can only be explained by plough activity prior to planting of the hedge, ie prior to the 1830s. In addition to evidence for modern ploughing, we can see in some cases the legacy of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing, a practice that generated a bigger up cast of soil between the plough lines. Understanding the ploughing history is vital, because it helps us to see how the passage of the plough has impacted on the archaeology. Two things become apparent. We only seem to find

concentrations of cobbles overlying the Roman ditches that were in use in the early second century OR under the ridges of the medieval ridge and furrow ploughing. In the first case they have survived because they have slumped into the Roman ditches as though ditches have settled, in the second case they have survived because the earthen build-up of the ridge has blanketed them. In both cases, the process has shielded them from the generations of plough damage that has otherwise destroyed the ancient ground surface. The conclusions are clear, these patches of cobbles, so similar in form (similar cobbles, laid down in two layers), are all part of what was originally one large open cobbled space: an assembly area in front of the temples.

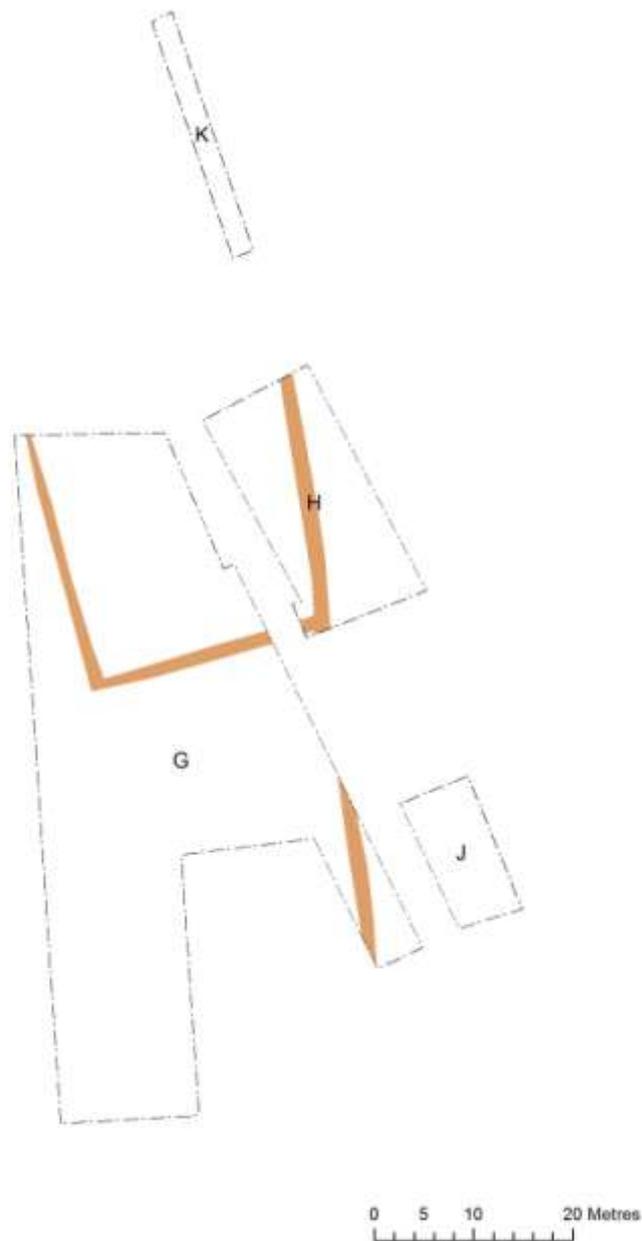


Figure aligned on Site North showing trenches and (in beige) traces of the Roman ditch system.

Monday 29th June.

It was a disappointment this morning to find evidence of metal detecting on the site. Two small holes had been dug. It is unlikely that they got away with much, as our own detectorist regularly scans the site. However as a precaution the police have been alerted and will keep watch. On a more positive note, we were joined by a group of sixth form teachers who will be gaining practical experience to help their teaching. The photographic tower arrived, and we set it up to get good images of the ditches and cobbling in Area H. This was just in time, as the colours showed well in the damp conditions. After an hour this had dried out making feature visibility difficult.