

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Peter Robinson

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's the 7th November 2006 and I'm talking to Peter Robinson in Doncaster Museum. Good morning Peter.

Morning.

I wonder if we could make a start by you telling me when and where you were born please?

Yes, I was born on the 16th of the fourth nineteen seventy-four and as far as I'm aware I was born in Doncaster Royal Infirmary.

Oh so you're a local person.

I am yes.

And you went to school in Doncaster?

I did, I think, I don't remember the name of the school but Wheatley, it was, Wheatley was the, Wheatley Primary I think was my first, first school, don't really remember much before that and then I think when we were about, when I was about five or six we moved out to Kirk Sandal, which is where my family's been based since, since that move, so.

Tell me what your position is at the museum please.

I'm now the, Museum Archaeology Officer and my responsibilities are to look after the archaeology collections but also numismatics which is the coins, tokens and medals collection and I also have a responsibility for looking after world culture collections which were formerly ethnography. Although it's not, my background isn't in ethnography so it's a collection that I sort of look after but don't know a great deal about.

Tell me a bit about how you came to be here, where did you go to university and how did you come to arrive at the museum?

Right, okay. Well I actually got into archaeology through ancient history which I studied at school. I studied ancient history both at Daneham and then at Hallcross and it came to that point towards the end of my A levels when I was being asked the question 'what do you want to do next?' and I knew that I wanted to carry on ancient history, certainly because it was a subject that I'd enjoyed but I'd also acquired an interest in archaeology through, both through family and through family friends that had taken me out to visit sites and I'd been, I'd been out and worked on the site at West Heslerton up near, is it near, sort of Filey, that way on. Its a project run by Dominic Powsland who's a former student at Manchester University and I very much enjoyed that and so on that basis I decided to take up ancient history and archaeology at university and chose Manchester, or rather Manchester chose me, I don't know, a bit of both perhaps and that's where I ended up doing my degree for three years.

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Came out with a BA degree in archaeology and ancient history and during the time at university I sort of quickly discovered that I'm perhaps not the most perfect academic in that I prefer, far prefer the practical side of the subject that I was learning and often in class found it very difficult to put anything into context and sort of struggled to really get a, develop a real enthusiasm or interest about things just by it being put up on a black board or it being lectured to you. And I found the times that I was happiest was when what we were being taught was put in a very practical way and that was, you know, that we were being either taken out in a field to excavate or to record or to survey or to learn the techniques in a practical way. And at that point I sort of realised that what I wanted was, really to do it as a, to do archaeology as a job.

I think it was over the first summer of my first term at university, I went out and got a voluntary position on an excavation in Doncaster which was, the excavations that took place at Askews, the old print shop at Askews, just to the east side of the church, St George's Church. And I started off as a volunteer there and they seemed fairly happy with my abilities and so offered me employment over the rest of the summer term. So I actually got my first job as a paid, fully paid professional archaeologist in Doncaster, in my home town, on a really very interesting site and probably one of the largest full scale excavations to take place in Doncaster, certainly since the sixties.

And that sort of progressed through university then. I decided that I enjoyed that so much that it was what I wanted to do when I finished my course. So once I finished my degree I filled out a CV and lots of letters and posted them off to just about every archaeological unit I could think of and probably like most people fresh out of university having done an archaeology course I suffered a lot of rejections and knock backs because I didn't have quite enough experience and this is bearing in mind that I'd done quite a lot more than most people in terms of practical work. But I managed to get a job which was down south with a company called AOC Archaeology, working on a site near Reading, the Oracle site, which was a large medieval water mill and from there it grew. I sort of spent I think six or seven years in field archaeology with little gaps in between and the gaps in between I filled with all manner of things to keep me, to keep me occupied and to put money in my pocket. So worked in packing warehouses and I ran an international backpackers for a while and eventually went back to archaeology, field archaeology again. And at that point it was around nineteen ninety nine, the opportunity came up for a temporary post here at Doncaster Museum as the, the current curator had gone on leave, maternity leave, and I applied for the job, was successful in the interview and was offered the job. I took it on and I think that was for about, I think it must have been about six or seven months it lasted. Thoroughly enjoyed it, it gave me all the things that field archaeology didn't and that is the, really I think the biggest thing was the opportunity to work with the public which was something that I'd had some experience of when I worked as an archaeologist on site, because you had to show people around the site and often you would get school groups and you would show them what you were doing and I really enjoyed that, I, it kind of, maybe a little bit of an egotistical thing, but it's really nice to share something you love so much and you're so proud of with other people that then will enthuse about it themselves.

So that side of museum work really appealed to me and the other thing was the chance to really get stuck into the research behind the sort of field archaeology and the excavations and what comes out of the excavations which as a field archaeologist you rarely get the opportunity to do unless you're, unless you reach project manager stage and you're writing up the projects. What you do is in the field but once it's finished you hear very little about it because you've moved onto the next job. So you never really get to, get your teeth stuck into something and I found with museums you could do that. You could really sort of study a subject and get to grips with things and the other thing was, you know, you get an office and you can sit around, you don't get your hands mucky, you don't break your back, you don't hurt your knees kneeling down in wet sort of muddy uneven ground all

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

the time and that really appealed to me as well, so that, that really for me was the point at which I decided museums were the area that I then wanted to make a move into.

So again I sort of had a look around for job opportunities and a few came up and a few, I got a few rejections again and I went back into field archaeology for a while and then an opportunity came up at Salisbury Museum. And again, put an application in and was successful with that and I think still to date that was, that was probably one of the things that I got that I was most proud of securing in terms of a job, because it was an opportunity to develop a gallery at, a whole gallery at Salisbury Museum at the Kings House, dedicated to Stonehenge, to the site, because Salisbury Museum holds all the collections from the excavations at Stonehenge. And, yeah, I worked for about a year, year and a half on that project building, designing, developing a new gallery, choosing the objects to go in it, prepping and writing the text panels and it was probably one of the best experiences I've ever had. One of the most enjoyable, one of the most stressful, but one of the most enjoyable and out of that came the Stonehenge Gallery which won awards for, I think, best interpretation of a difficult subject, which was the archaeological awards that it won, so, yeah, I was very proud of that.

Then when that finished I spent a short time at Gloucester, at Gloucester Museum, which wasn't such a happy time because I was only on two and a half days a week. Struggled to survive in Gloucester on the wages that I was being paid, wasn't really allowed to go into work on the days that I wasn't employed so that left me with very little money and nothing to do when I'd rather have been in the museum just doing something. And that was quite an unhappy time and a time at which I really started to question whether I could continue to keep, to sustain trying to build a career in archaeology because I'd spent a lot of years already on very little money and having to move around and, you know, having to earn very little and, it gets quite tiring and you really sort of question whether it's what you want when all your friends are going off and getting jobs with great money and you know they're getting their selves houses and you're still, you know, moving around from flat to flat, struggling to survive. But I, I sort of stuck with it and as often happens something came up just at the right time and that was the job at Doncaster. The curator who'd previously been on maternity leave whose post I'd covered had now left for another job and so I kind of crossed my fingers and hoped that it might come off because the opportunity to work in my home town in a museum that I grew up coming to as a child and looking around was really a dream opportunity for me and, and so, yeah, I went for the job and was fortunate enough to get it and that's pretty much where I am at the moment which is great and I've spent five, very, sort of happy years here so far. Developing myself and helping to develop the museum, it's been, you know, a real pleasure to be able to work in my home town. It gives me a very big sense of pride as well to do something that my sort of family and friends and my friends family and what have you can actually come and see, you know, it's really nice to be able to do that because, you're more detached when you work in a museum somewhere else because, you know, it's, it's not really something you've grown up with and it's not something that's familiar to you or your friends or family, so, yeah.

And your job here, you've outlined it. It seems to have sort of three parts to it, the museum interpretation, the research and do you get any opportunity to do field archaeology as well?

I would say the opportunity to actually do any field work is very limited. I mean I've been quite crafty in that we started a young archaeologist club and that was about three years ago now, and as part of that we take them out and we actually do real archaeology, field archaeology, field walking, survey, that sort of thing and so I get the limited opportunity to do that, maybe sort of like, a week a year, I get to actually go out and do some field archaeology but otherwise no. Really there's not so much an opportunity to go out and do the field work.

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Why is that?

Well it's not really the role of this museum anymore, or any museum arguably. That you know, you have professional field units now that are, that are paid or contracted to do work as part of the planning and development process. Really the museum's job is to help monitor and to keep an eye on that work and to feed into the process where possible with information that might be useful to the archaeologist working on site, in terms of getting the most out of the site that they're excavating or helping them understand the site, so my connection really is, with field archaeology is to keep in touch with the field units, to make sure that the way that they're excavating the site and the archive that they're generating is, is as good as it can be and meets the, the professional standards that it needs to meet, so that when it comes to us we're not left with, you know, this really badly put together archive that's no use to anyone. But also I'm there to provide them with a local knowledge if you like, sort of information that we hold as a museum and that we've gathered as a museum provide them with the little details that help these units often who are coming from all over the country and have no real depth of knowledge about the area, to build information and a knowledge that will help them better understand the archaeology generally and the archaeology of the site that they're working on so that they can get the best out of it.

It sounds as if Doncaster's quite an active place for archaeologists, so perhaps you could give me some background to what kind of archaeology goes on here and the significance of Doncaster in that respect.

Right, okay. I suppose some might say Doncaster's sort of glory days, hey day of archaeology and of archaeological discovery was back in the sort of fifties and sixties when there was a massive amount of development, particularly in the town centre, but also in the surrounding areas and archaeology was being turned up everywhere and at that point Doncaster Museum had it's own archaeological service that went out and did excavation work, albeit rescue excavation work and at a very small, on a very small scale. Because back then there was no control over archaeology related to planning and development as there is now with PPG 16, and so the excavations that took place were small scale and it was really rescuing what they could whilst plenty more was being thrown in the back of big dumper trucks and as much as was saved twice as much was probably lost at that point. But it was still a very important period in Doncaster's archaeological history because it was the point at which we suddenly learnt all about Doncaster in real terms, not just what's written about Doncaster in history, but actually got to see in the ground what was there and how that related to, to the little bits of information you can glean from history's writings of what Doncaster was and it's place in history.

Obviously since PPG 16 which, which was introduced in ninety six I think, then there's been much more control over planning and development and related archaeology and most times now when, when a site comes up for development, if there's any potential archaeology, that has to be dealt with via a recommendation from the planning department. And they, they employ South Yorkshire Archaeology Service who basically deal with planning and development control on our behalf as a council. They ensure that nothing gets missed and that everything gets looked at in one way or another. And so there's, I mean, as you know yourself there's been a lot of development in Doncaster again in recent years. The new bus and train terminal, the college and you know, there are plenty of sites in the town centre like Dixons, that have recently sprung up and have caused the need for excavation and sort of research into the archaeology of the town centre again. And housing is another thing which is growing rapidly, housing estates are springing up all over the place and big industries, things like the big Ikea Distribution Centre at Armthorpe and elsewhere at, at Carrhouse Lane and Blackbank, you have the big B&Q, all the sort of major distribution sites are springing up all over Doncaster as Doncaster's sort of moving forward and finding it's feet again. That's

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

opening up lots and lots of opportunities for archaeology to be looked at and sites are springing up left, right and centre. I mean, every year it seems there are maybe thirty or more archaeological investigations or excavations that lead to some information which develops the picture of the borough throughout archaeological time and there's been some real fantastic discoveries made and some which just build on what we already knew.

Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about what that archaeological picture is, what, a picture of the borough that its given us.

Right, okay, I mean it's quite difficult to give a snapshot of the borough as a whole archaeologically because it's so diverse. Doncaster itself, the town centre and the immediate surrounding area is, some of it is fairly low lying, as is Marshgate, some of it is fairly high ground, so around Christchurch is quite high up. But Doncaster has a very rich, certainly Roman and Medieval history. As you know there's a, Doncaster was a Roman fort town, Danum, and certainly excavations from the sixties to the present day are, are proving more and more that it's a garrison town it's not, it doesn't have a vicus in terms of a separate settlement to the fort that's then grown. The vicus settlement is essentially just an extension of the fort and it's very much a garrison town. There's very little evidence for, for much in the way of a real civilian settlement it would just be a settlement of people who were either feeding into the fort, or who were related to the soldiers in the fort and that picture is becoming clearer. Although recently we've got, we've got snapshots of something being there before the Roman fort of there being something, some sort of possible settlement there before. And this, the sixties excavation some of the bronze age material that turned up from the sixties excavations suggests that in the area where it drops from Christchurch down to the river, to the sort of relatively low lying area around the River Don, by North Bridge, you have something which must be a bronze age cemetery because a massive amount of, of material related to bronze age burial rites has turned up.

And so you get these little snapshots of there being something there before the Romans but really it's at the point that the Romans occupy the site of Doncaster that we really have a wealth of material. And then on into the medieval period Doncaster becomes an incredibly important medieval town and we have little clues that there was something there in the Saxon and the Viking periods, that there was some sort of military strong hold or settlement, but nothing, nothing major, but certainly again something military. You get into the medieval period proper and Doncaster just booms, it explodes. You've got two, you've got, oh sorry I've forgotten the words that I was going to use, you've got two monastic sites. The site at Priory Walk and then the site at Marshgate. You have a medieval motte and bailey castle, you have several schools, religious schools linked to the monastic sites. There are hospitals, there are shops, there's a large market place and it's really a regional centre, a sort of hub for culture, for learning, and for, for merchants and for the sort of making and distributing of all sorts of goods, everything from leather clothing to pottery. So it becomes a very important town.

Then you look out into, out into the borough and there are equally important towns or settlements such as Bawtry and Thorne that have developed in very different, in very different ways but have their own sort of Roman connections and medieval settlements. A picture as a whole and a best way of really describing Doncaster in archaeological terms though would perhaps be to say that you have, down the middle of the borough you have this, this large limestone ridge of high ground, high and dry and then to either side to the, particularly to the east, but also to the west you have lower lying areas of marshland and fenland and the whole pattern of development and land use is very much influenced by the, that, those landscape types.

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

So in the wetlands you see people exploiting that environment so you get the sort of marsh forts such as Sutton Common and then you have, you have people sort of using, crossing the landscape, using track ways, such as the one recently discovered at Hatfield. And there seems to be a, a whole eco system that's different to the upland area, where you've got a more, a more sort of obvious use of the high ground. You get the big castles like Conisborough on the high ground and you get a more sort of obvious pattern of farming and you know everything that high dry ground allows. Which is a more sort of complex style of settlements, more compact style of settlement and land use, your typical sort of farming of fields and, but you get into the wetlands and obviously it's, they're still farming the land but in a very different way. It's, it's much more a case of their taking from the wetlands what they can, what they can use without actually leaving, necessarily a footprint on the landscape, so.

Is there any particular reason that you could say as to why Doncaster was developed into such an important place?

I think the, the, it stems back to looking at the landscape. Doncaster is important because of the landscape it sits in. You have high dry ground which is fantastic for farming, for agriculture and for the raising of herds and livestock and then close by you have the wetlands which are perfect for exploiting the natural environment, for wildfowl, for fish, for peat, for wood and those two things together provide a perfect balance for, for survival. You've got everything you could possibly want. So people can graze livestock and grow crops on the, the uplands whilst still exploiting the wetlands for everything else that they might need. But also it's great, as it is now, it's a fantastic place for, for getting around, you know, there are so many points of connection to other places. Doncaster is essentially a place where you can travel anywhere from, in almost any style. I mean now, obviously we have an airport, but for centuries we've had fantastic road routes through the landscape and we've had the rivers, rivers like the Torne and the Don, which then feed into, into bigger river systems. And it's because of that ability to be able to get anywhere else from Doncaster and for people to be able, have to cross through Doncaster from big places like York and Lincoln, Manchester and elsewhere that Doncaster become so important and in fact is becoming so important again from a point of view of distribution, because it's a base for people from which they can travel to other places and it also is a place where people generally have to come through. And whenever somebody has to come through a place that place sucks business from those travellers and I guess that's why it's been so important and is still a very important place.

You say they have to come through is that because of the way that the topography and the landscape is formed?

Yeah, it's, it's, it provides the quickest route over the, the landscape, the topography of the landscape means that to pass through Doncaster it's the easiest route through that landscape, when you've got these sort of low lying wetlands to either side and you've got the, the limestone ridge that runs straight through it's a natural route way through and of course most people will, will understand that the roads that we use today essentially for the most part are the roads that have been used for centuries and centuries. We might have added one or two motorways like the M62 and the M18 but they, they essentially lie in land, which was still crossed in one way or another regularly by people in the past. So no, no route through the landscape is new, the, the actual structure, the road itself might be new, but the landscape can only be crossed in certain ways at certain points, most efficiently and they've been the same since people have, people first were inhabiting the region, so.

Was the Don navigable right up to, through Doncaster?

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

The Don was navigable up to the point just past Doncaster around sort of Conisborough area. But, so traffic could come as far up as Doncaster and a little further but, but really most river traffic would only come up as far as Doncaster and then it would change to road traffic.

And is there evidence for substantial river traffic, or is the river getting a little bit narrower, or shallower?

I mean obviously now you have the canal systems which have been used in previous decades and are much more efficient, but certainly there is evidence that right up until the sixteen, seventeen hundreds the River Don and the Torne were being used to transport material up and down and into, feeding into bigger river systems and indeed where the Humber is into the, you know, into the sea.

I was just wondering if there were any finds of boats or wharves or that kind of thing?

We certainly know from the archaeological record in Doncaster that there was a wharfage at Doncaster, almost underneath where the new college is now and that that was, that was certainly used from Roman times onwards. Elsewhere in the, in the borough, obviously you have Bawtry, a very important twelfth century port at Bawtry, although I suspect that the port at Bawtry is a lot older than the twelfth century but there is some, some evidence that, or at least the evidence is clear that there was a, you know, that it became an important port in the twelfth century. And I mean, Thorne, obviously again, Thorne was very important for the, for it's sort of river traffic and still is to a point today I think. I mean it's not, it's only in recent decades that they stopped making, actually making ships and boats at Thorne, so, you know in the last century Thorne was still an important river route. But other than that the evidence is somewhat scant, it's, it's more a case of assumption than solid evidence.

I just picked up a reference somewhere that I've not seen substantiated at all anywhere else, that there was a, I think it was probably at the excavation you mentioned at one of the bridges or one of the gates, I'm not quite sure which, there was a couple of prehistoric boats found and I wasn't sure whether that was true because I've not heard anybody else mention that.

I'm not aware of any prehistoric boat finds in the borough, there certainly have been close by. I mean there have been log boats found on the Humber and also I think the Witham. But not within, not within our borough I don't believe, no. I mean there have been rumours of log boats from Hatfield Moors, but they've never been, you know, they've never been substantiated, they're sort of just rumours I think.

And you talked about the wider borough and the exploitation of both the drier uplands and the wetlands of the Thorne and Hatfield area in particular. What evidence is there of exploitation from actually from the town out into those areas?

That's, that's difficult. Archaeologically they almost sit, sit separately, the links between, I think what you're trying to get at is are there links between, sort of Thorne and Hatfield and Doncaster.

Yes, I just wondered if there are any obvious direct links?

Archaeologically no, not that are so clear that you could prove one way or another, but of course they're there. I mean it's natural that these towns would feed, these settlements would feed into each other.

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

I'm thinking also in terms of are there any particular industries that might particularly be associated with resources that were in the marsh areas?

Well, with Hatfield and Thorne obviously you've got the peat extraction which is something that, the peat would have been exploited from medieval times and perhaps even before that. I suspect that the type of trees that grow in the marsh, marshland areas and the peat were all farmed for use in industry, but I mean you have sort of tanning and pottery making industries which would have all needed fuel of some kind and it's a possibility that peat and wood were farmed from Hatfield and Thorne Moors for those purposes but it's difficult to, difficult to prove that in terms of real evidence.

It hasn't got a stamp on it has it.

No, no, there's no stamp as yet, but I mean, you know, that's something that could well come.

Can you just mention something about the pottery industries in particular, because I understand that they were quite significant?

Yeah, pottery's been, pottery's been sort of one of the biggest, largest industries in Doncaster since Roman times. The Romans really started the whole thing with the pottery, military potteries that were set up at Cantley, Rossington Bridge, Blackston and that area, producing wares which were travelling up as far as the Antonine and Hadrian's Wall and were even getting into York, Lincoln and other sort of large settlement around. The whole borough is littered with Roman pottery made at Cantley and Rossington.

What kind of pottery was it? Was it quality pottery or was it..?

It was a mixture, it was a mixture of sort of very basic, almost, your sort of Roman Tupperware, and the more high status material/ They were copying, they were copying Gaulish pottery, the sort of dented fine wares and they were copying Samian ware, making their own form of Samian ware and also producing things like mortaria, the sort of large grinding bowls which are fairly specialist, which were a fairly specialist type of pottery to manufacture. So a bit of everything really. And then you have what's known as Parisian ware, which is a sort of very fine, a very fine ware pottery, table ware, with a very sort of indigenous flavour to it in terms of its style and decoration. So yeah, they had a bit of, a bit of everything really, everything that good Romanised people might want or need, could be supplied by the potteries in the Doncaster area and what couldn't obviously be brought in from outside.

You said that the fort in, well the Roman Fort in Doncaster it was simply a fort, there was no associated town if you like, except for things that were needed to supply the garrison and their own families.

Yeah, by a vicus, essentially what we're saying it is, is a settlement that grows up alongside the fort, which is peopled by tradesmen, craftsmen and also all the other types of people that would in some way interact or feed the fort with, or rather the garrison of the fort with what they wanted. Everything from women to beer, to shoes and jewellery and clothing. So it's, it's not a civil settlement in its own right, it just is part of the, the industry needed to keep a fort supplied and to keep it, to keep it going.

And how big and how important was the fort at Doncaster?

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Indications are that Doncaster was certainly within the region, an important, an important strategic point in the landscape. It's mentioned in the, the, Antonine Itinerary and again in the Notitia Dignitatum and therefore it seems for, at least four centuries to remain a fairly important staging post which is a fort which secures both a river and road route through the landscape. But it's never a, it's never a large fort and its, for those four hundred years of its history it wasn't always garrisoned, or at least it wasn't completely garrisoned. It may have had a small contingent for some part. But never the less it still remains an important site from a strategic point of view because it, it's a point that must be crossed on the road from York to Lincoln or vice versa and that made it, that made it a very important, very important military site in its own right.

And do we have an indication of where the troops came from?

The evidence for that is, is, is slight at best and trying to tie down one legion or another that may have garrisoned the fort at Doncaster is nigh on impossible because certainly there's, unfortunately we don't have anything from the excavations of the fort site that, that give us any clue of who might have garrisoned the fort there, so it's really just guess work.

They're not necessarily going to be Italians then?

Certainly not, in fact the, the likelihood is, with it being a small, a relatively small fort and not within one of the larger Roman settlements that it was more likely to be garrisoned by troops taken from elsewhere in the empire. So, the chances of having a Roman soldier in the terms of somebody actually having grown up in Rome, then I would say that's fairly slight, it's far more likely that the troops were either local, drafted locally or came from one of the other large provinces, Gaul, Germania, somewhere like that perhaps, Spain even.

And just, do we have the usual things here that, you know the baths and the...?

Yeah, certainly, there certainly are the, I mean the fort has everything that a Roman, a Roman fort should have. In fact it's the one thing the Romans were good at they stuck to it, they had a pattern for everything and generally stuck to it. So the fort would have had granaries, it would have had a bathhouse, it, it would have had a basilica and then the, the individual quarters for the soldiers. So it had everything that a normal Roman fort should have. And there is evidence certainly for that, although it's not, we don't have it en mass, but we certainly have all the sort of building material that you would expect, the stone columns, the clay tiles, the wall plaster, that all exists in the archaeological record.

If we could move, you've mentioned one or two things already, in that, sort of more into the Thorne and Hatfield area, which is obviously the area of this project, you've mentioned marsh forts and that kind of thing.

Yes.

What kind of, can you give me a picture say pre Roman, of the part of that area?

You're largely looking at a, a rural farming community, probably very dispersed farms and I think you can push this as far back as the Neolithic, when, when sort of, settlement of the landscape begins. And the nature of settlement in those areas I think is fairly sort of self sufficient farms. There's nothing in the way of villages, not until the early, well certainly not until the Roman period in any, in any, and arguably even then you wouldn't call it a village, it might just be a cluster of families or farms in an area. So, I think pre Roman and, well I mean, you obviously have things

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

like the, what is termed as the marsh fort at Sutton Common. Arguable whether it's a fort or not, in fact I don't think we fully still understand exactly what it is. Research is still, still continues on that site and it's, it seems to have and most archaeologists, or non archaeologists hate this phrase, a ritualistic motive and that is that it seems, it doesn't seem to be being used as a settlement site or really as a fort, although it has all the, it has all the accoutrements of an iron age hill fort in that it has ditches and it has banks and it has walls, palisaded walls. But I suspect that that is something more to do with an appearance, creating an appearance than it is to do with real defence.

What kind of age are we talking, what kind of date?

Well the recent excavations seem to suggest that at least some of the activity on the site is Bronze Age and that extends into the Iron Age and even into the Romano British period. So there seems to be a sort of continual development of the site. But it certainly seems to be that what's happening there is people are interacting with the wetlands in a very interesting way, it's, if you want to call it religious observance perhaps that's, that would be one, that would be perhaps the best way of describing it, although I think that there's more to it than that. But it seems that in the, certainly in pre Roman times most of the settlement seems to be right on the very edge of the dry sort of upland areas and marshland and it sort of follows that, that tide mark all the way up through the borough on either side of the limestone ridge and they're using the dry land but they're exploiting the wetlands. And these features like the marsh forts at Sutton Common are something to do with their connection with the wetlands and how they, how they see the wetlands as, as both a resource but also as something which is quite mysterious, quite dangerous and perhaps even quite otherworldly. Because, I don't know, I went out onto Hatfield Moors recently, when we were looking at the track way and bearing in mind obviously you're looking at a landscape which has been milled and stripped, it's still, there are still parts of it that are intact and it has sometimes just a very otherworldly feel about it. It's quite, it's not particularly, it is inviting, but it's not, and there's kind of an edge to, to the place. You get these rolling mists sometimes that run over it and the dark water which is sort of blackened by the peat and the mass of trees and ferns and it can be quite, it can be quite a solitary uninviting place as much as it can fill you with awe, because..

[Phone ringing]

[Paused]

Is the marsh fort actually in the marsh then, or is that on the edge too?

The marsh fort is, is, well I mean it's as close to the edge as you can get, but it's sitting, it's sitting on two sand islands within, within the sort of marshy area itself. And between the two sand bank islands you have a paleo channel which is part of an old tributary of the Torne which is, which has long since dried up but would have still been, would have still been sort of a relatively wet channel in the Bronze Age and certainly in the Iron Age still. You know, it wouldn't have been a flowing river, but it certainly would have been a sort of wet channel.

And what makes you say that you think there's a ritualistic aspect to the finds that have been made?

Well, I think that the most sort of outstanding find of recent years are the, the skulls which were, the human skulls which were placed in the terminals of ditches by one of the entrances in the large enclosure. They seem to date to the Bronze Age I think and it, they're in the very upper fills of that ditch and it seems that you might, you might speculate that when that site was closed off, when its use had come to an end the last thing that they did as they closed that site off was to put two human skulls in the ditches by the entrance to guard, or, well perhaps to guard the site or to ward people off or to ward evil spirits off. I mean you can, you can sort of let your mind run wild with ideas of, of,

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

you know what the site is and the significance of particular finds, which is one of the great things about archaeology is you can use your imagination but also one of the frustrating things sometimes is that it's very difficult to get into the mind set of somebody who lived centuries or thousands of years ago. And it's difficult to know what they were thinking when they did something or what something meant to them, what significance a particular object had or what a particular action meant and of course you can only, you can only really speculate using the evidence.

But it certainly doesn't fit the bill of a normal settlement site somewhere where, you know, somewhere that is simply domestic. Everything there seems to, seems to have something more to it. You have Bronze Age burials at one end of the large enclosure, the whole enclosure is filled with, with what seemed to be granaries that would be standing on, on stilt, but why put granaries on a wetland site when you're trying, if you're trying to dry grain you don't put a granary on a wetland site, because the grain will, you know, if it's damp or it gets wet it's no good. And none of it makes sense in terms of domestic usage but it all seems to point to an idea of it being used for, for something else.

So we, if we're looking at sort of the Thorne and Hatfield Moors area, from the Neolithic period, there are people living around, around the edges of it are there?

Yeah, it would seem that people in the Doncaster Borough, in the wetland areas, people are right on the fringe of the dry land and the wetland. Recent excavations at Sykehouse, near the barrier bank, have turned up sort of late iron age settlements, a cluster of round houses in a relatively wetland environment, but it's, it's just on the edge of the proper wetlands. Again at Black Bank, near Potteric Carr, before you get into the wetlands properly there's, there's Iron Age enclosures and settlement. And that pattern is, seems to be, seems to be repeated all over the borough and the more excavation that takes place in those areas the more it seems that there's a connection throughout pre history with the, with the wetlands, but there, the settlement or the uses is along the edges, it's not deep into the wetlands, except perhaps in the case of the Hatfield track way. Which of course isn't any, isn't evidence for settlement, but it is evidence for people using that, that landscape and, or crossing that landscape, but again it's attached to an island within a wetland landscape, so, there's a possibility that, that the island itself had some limited settlement on it.

This is Lindholme?

Yes, yeah.

Before we actually come to talk about the track way itself, are there any finds within the moor itself within the wetlands of Thorne and Hatfield Moor?

There's a mixture of, there's a mixture of written record and actual objects which we can, you know, objects which we can locate now. There's a lot of Bronze Age material, stone axes and there's also, before that there's a lot of Mesolithic and Neolithic flint scatters and a collection of flint tools. Then Iron Age, well the Iron Age is difficult there's less evidence but certainly places like Sutton Common are turning up Iron Age artefacts and then you have the reference to, to the odd find, sort of way back in history, there are two references to bog bodies having been found on Thorne and Hatfield Moors. I think one was found in the seventeen hundreds, the other in the eighteen hundreds from recollection. But there's very little information on those other than that I think part of an arm or part of a leg was found and a body was found in the moor and reburied and it's very difficult to really, to really judge what period they belong to or, or what they mean, because the evidence is scant from the point at which they were found. They could be, you know, it could be your, your sort of Lindow Man, it could be an Iron Age bog body or it could be something

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

much later, it could be somebody who was crossing the moor in the sixteen, seventeen hundreds and you know, fell foul of a pool of water or, it's really difficult to, really difficult to tell without having that physical evidence there to examine in the modern context.

We'll just never know, but they're, sort of like tasty tit bits really that get your, get your imagination running and make you sort of think the possibilities are there. But also I find them very annoying because, you know, for me it's information lost, it's, it's sort of that really exciting find that you want, that you sort of desire and it's, it's been found and lost and all the information that you could have got from it in a modern context of archaeological research has gone as well. And all we can do is sort of say well, you know the opportunity's lost, you hope that it might, that something like that might present itself again sometime in the future.

Well talking about exciting finds and I want to come on to talk about something, a recent find, what we're calling the track way. Perhaps if we could look at it from exactly how you came to this, what was the first you heard about this?

Right, okay. Well the first, the first I heard of it was Mick Oliver, the person who actually discovered the track way or what we've called the track way, phoned me. Now he'd had a, a relationship with Colin Howes, previously he'd done a lot of work with Colin Howes looking at sort of the environment and sort of the natural aspect of the moors and so he, he knew of the museum and he knew the staff here. But I'd never met, I'd never really met Mick before, maybe bumped into him once or twice and he gave me a phone call and he said that he'd made this discovery of a track way on Hatfield Moors and asked if I would be prepared to come out and have a look at it and try and confirm whether what he thought it was was, was something of archaeological importance. And I, I sort of think in some ways I'm quite cynical, I'm a bit of a pessimist, because when you get people phoning you up sometimes, or writing to you, sometimes you can be disappointed. So I like to sort of, I don't like to get too excited about things initially, because then, then it's really sort of upsetting when you find out that it's not something.

So I think initially my first thought was, oh, you know, it's unlikely, I really couldn't bring myself to think that it was possible, because the, mainly, not because I didn't believe that somebody could recognise something like that, it was more because the, the moors had been so badly stripped in terms of peat milling that I just didn't think that in the area that he said he'd found it there was any chance that anything could have survived. But, also the optimistic side of me said, you know, you've got to go check this out because, you know, it's important and that's my job. My job is to, is to check these things out but also to, that's what, we're there as as a museum, we're there as a point of contact for the public. There have been chance finds by members of the public before, not just here but all over the world, some which have turned out to be the most fantastic things ever to be found and so I sort of went out, we agreed a date and a time to go out there and have a look and I sort of went out there, mainly pessimistic and sort of thinking, oh, you know, it wouldn't be anything, it would end up being that I would have to disappoint him and I hate that, I hate having to tell somebody that actually what they thought something was is nothing at all. So I don't like to disappoint people.

So we sort of took a walk out to the site and I found Mick a really sort of enthusiastic, quite intense person. He, a bit like Colin actually, Colin Howes, he's somebody who enthuses about things and really kind of gets you, gets you excited about things and I like that in people, I like that enthusiasm. So we got on really well, we sort of hit it off on a good foot and we were walking out to site and I was looking at the landscape, just looking at how badly, sort of stripped the landscape was in terms of the milling and all the time I was just thinking it's just gonna be a collection of material in the peat which is just natural, you know, sort of trees that have sort of blown over or,

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

just sort of wood that's laying around in the peat from the process of trees sort of falling down, branches falling off and rotting and what have you. We got out there and by the side of the, they've created, they'd sort of created these ponds, almost artificial ponds, by creating lots of banks, they'd created these sort of square, this square grid of ponds almost, by heaping up some of the peat into banks, making a grid. And got to one of these grids and I saw this huge sort of pool of water and on the edge of this pool of water these, these sort of branches, all laid out in a line. I sort of looked at them and I thought well yeah that is curious, it doesn't look terribly natural. But again I was still with my pessimistic head and I thought, you know, I'm really not, I really don't want to say to him 'yes, yes this is,' you know 'this is definitely a track way', because I wanted to be a little more sure myself before I sort of got him excited or dashed his hopes and I'd brought a trowel along and we sort of looked at it, we discussed it and I let Mick explain to me how he'd found it and whether he'd, whether he'd uncovered anything or, or whether he'd moved any soil because I needed to get an idea of the context in which this thing was now sitting in the ground and once I was happy that, that Mick had just sort of brushed off the dry peat that had been covering the surface of it and that it was as it should be in the ground, untouched. I had a bit of a scrape around by some of the, the pieces of wood that were lying horizontally in a row and I could see immediately that there was, there was one long piece of wood beneath those running in an opposite direction, almost like a train track. You'd got this one long length of wood with wood lying over the top of it and the material around it seemed to be quite different from the general make up of the peat.

So at that point I was becoming a little less pessimistic and a little more optimistic, but I have to say that I still wasn't entirely confident that it was something. This is about, I don't know, we'd maybe been out there twenty minutes and I was reluctant to really do much more in terms of excavation around the, this feature, simply because if it was going to be something then whatever I was doing was, was being done in an unrecorded manner and so I was conscious of that although if I was then going to be going off and contacting other archaeologists and getting them to come out and look at it I had to, I had to be a little more sure about what it was, because I didn't want to be wasting people's time. So I had a little more of a clean up of it and I think once I'd kind of cleaned the whole area up and I'd had a little, I'd excavated a little fifty centimetre by fifty centimetre slot around the back end of this feature, I'd decided that it was certainly most likely that it was something archaeological.

Although my, my experience of track ways or of these sort of wetland features is very limited it's really from my, from my sort of studies and what I've read, but I've never had any, I've never excavated anything of that nature before, so I was a little unsure about it. But I was, I was certainly sure at the end of about an hour with Mick that we'd got something that was very promising and I was, I was getting more convinced that we'd definitely got something archaeological and if that was the case where it was it had to be, A old, B very unusual and C probably quite rare, because there's only one other known find from the area and that's the track way at Thorne, which of course is very, very different to this find.

So at that point I sort of said to Mick 'Well, you know, I really think we've got something here' and I actually thought and I still think to this day, I am amazed at how he found it, because I think most archaeologists would struggle to have recognised it as something just by crossing across a vast area of moor like that, particularly when you've got so much organic material in terms of wood and tree, and tree stumps and what have you lying around. I'm still amazed that he noticed it, I think, you know, it's an incredibly keen eye and intelligent eye for somebody who has no archaeological background to notice something like that and then to have the conviction to believe that it is a track way. So I sort of gave him the good news in that I thought it was something and then we discussed what to do from then really and that was, that was really that we needed to contact the Sites and Monuments Record, the archaeological service. Also contact English Heritage and I also had a

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

contact with the Wetlands Unit at Hull University, Henry Chapman, who'd been working on other projects in the Humberhead Levels and I thought immediately to contact those three organisations and see if I could get one or all of them to come out and have a look at this because obviously then time was of the essence. This thing was exposed and you know, there was a large pool of water at the side of it which could well have expanded and covered it over or equally could have retracted and the whole thing could have dried up and we were certainly conscious that the longer it took to get somebody out to it the less of it would remain because once it had been uncovered it was just going to disappear bit by bit as it either dried up or got wetter and wetter.

So we did just that, we went back to the office, I immediately contacted the SMR, English Heritage and Henry Chapman at the Wetland Unit at Hull and I think it was, we managed to get everybody to agree to a site meeting at which me and Mick were then invited back and I wasn't able to attend that site meeting because of something else I had on at the museum but as I understand it they all met up on site and several of the group were not convinced that it was archaeological although Henry was sort of adamant that it was something that ought to be investigated and since the Humber Wetlands Project covered that area that it was easy to fit it into that, into an already existing study and from that point it, plans were made to sort of go back and have a look at it, do some controlled excavation and study of the site. Leading to what we've ended up with so far, thus far, today which is.

Which is?

Well not a track way it seems. Or rather it is, there is part of a walkway that leads to a possible platform. Now, my involvement in the project since Mick's initial discovery has been relatively slight, in that I've taken the usual role of a Museum Curator and that is to keep an eye on the project and to monitor it. I went out and had a few days actually excavating with the Wetland team but other than that I've sort of kept a distance really from the project and let the archaeologists get on with it and just sort of sat back and waited for the reports to come in and it seems that they believe it to be a walkway that leads out to a platform. So it's not a track way in the sense that it only goes so far and then terminates. And I know Mick doesn't, isn't happy with that, and he sort of doesn't agree with the archaeologists and they don't agree with his view of things and I, I sort of prefer to take a back seat on that.

I've had sort of discussions with Mick and I've had discussions with the archaeologists and, you know, as with everybody I have my own opinions as well and I'm not entirely sure I agree with either in some cases, but I think that Mick has some very valid points in terms of looking at what's left of any archaeological feature and the one thing that Mick points out is that a great deal of what was there has been stripped away and so what the archaeologists are looking at is really what's the remnants of what's left of a complete, a once complete feature and it's on this that the archaeologists are basing their theories of what it is. But I do think that Mick has a point in terms of being cautious about trying to, trying to decide what it is when what you're looking at is not complete.

My opinion is that I'm not entirely sure of whether that platform does terminate or whether it could have gone on perhaps to another platform even, or have led somewhere else entirely, but certainly what seems to be there is, and this is irrefutable, is that there is a length of track which leads to something which expands out into a more, more sort of platformed area. Past that it's very difficult to, it's very difficult to say because then it's, it's theory and assumption because there's nothing else, there's nothing else there. So the archaeologist's argument is that, you know, the platform, it terminates at a platform and therefore it's something which has some religious significance.

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Mick thinks that platform may have been a stopping point at which there was further, a further length of track that may have led elsewhere and there's a good chance that he maybe right with that. But since I haven't been wholly involved with the excavation it's very difficult to say and taking a more balanced view on it I would say that both have a good chance of being right. And that's the thing with archaeology sometimes is it's open to interpretation and it's open to opinion and it's open to theory. So there are no hard and fast 'this is what it is' rules, it's simply a matter of how you interpret the evidence and I think that there are many possibilities.

And the track way, have you got any idea where it leads from, has it got a landfall?

It does, the landfall, well it almost island hops actually, what you have is Lindholme Island which is a large part of a glacial moraine, which is a sort of land, a sort of sand and gravel landscape that's been cut through by water and where it's been cut through by water you have a build up of peat from the sort of low lying wetland areas. Lindholme's this large sort of island of sand and gravel and the, the track seems to lead towards that and hits a smaller island almost like a peninsula of the larger island. So, yeah, it seems to, to sort of lead from Lindholme Island out into the lower lying wetland area and then just stops. Whether it stops because the rest has been destroyed or whether it stops because that was the, the point at which it was built to is difficult to say, but it certainly would lead you either way to conclude that the focus of attention is the island itself and that is that whoever's built this has built it from the island heading out into the wetland. Whether there are any other routes that come into that island, because of course it's surrounded by wetland, is open to speculation.

You would hope that perhaps something else might be discovered or something else might survive elsewhere that might prove that the island is just a stopping point. But certainly, certainly if you look back in history, islands that sit in wetland seem to have, seem to be a focus of people's attentions and almost always seem to have some religious connection as well, some non domestic, non functional purpose. One that I'm thinking of, of course is Glastonbury Tor, which is a very famous island that sits in a wetland environment and...

And Lindholme itself of course has its own reputation for hermits and monastic people.

Yeah it does, it does and there seems to be some evidence, not proven by archaeological fact, but some evidence that in Lindholme Hall there is remnants of an older building or older structure on that site and, yeah, I think the likelihood is that the island has been used as a secluded place. But also it's the perfect place to be used for, for more sort of religious activity, because what people seek is, in terms of religious observances is often seclusion and also that, that kind of otherworldly feel that the island has sitting in a huge sort of marshland, very uninviting, very unfriendly and just sort of quite ethereal feel about it.

What date has been put onto the track way?

I believe that they've done some, they've had some dendrochronological dating, which has come back as Neolithic, so, the track way's a lot earlier than the Bronze Age track way on Thorne Moor.

And how important and how significant is it as a find?

Well as a Bronze Age feature, sorry, as a Neolithic feature it probably makes it one of the most important discoveries nationally in decades. There are, you have very famous features like the Sweet Track, which of course is a track way.

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

In the Somerset Levels?

Yeah, and is Neolithic and it's one of a, it's one of a kind for this country. Most of these sort of track ways and platforms tend to be regularly found in Ireland but they're not so regularly found over here and this is in terms of a feature for this country it's unique and with it being dated as Neolithic it's one of the earliest structures of it's kind as well in this country. So it's of national importance.

Did you say it predates the Sweet Track?

I'm not actually sure.

Or are they likely to be...

I'm still not sure whether it predates, I mean it's of the same period but I don't know whether it predates or postdates the Sweet Track.

Just give us a little bit of context, say comparing in date terms with say Stonehenge, which you obviously know something about as well.

It's difficult because I'm not entirely sure whether it's, whether it's been dated early or late, early, middle or late Neolithic, but in terms of fitting it into a sort of national archaeological picture, I suspect that it ties in with the very early wooden phases of Stonehenge, which are a late Neolithic. It ties in with features like your long barrows and your sort of banked and ditched henge monuments, Thornborough. And you're really looking at a point in time when people are just starting to settle in the landscape, are starting to move from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a more sedentary farming lifestyle. But it would be wrong to think that they're completely settled at this point in time, certainly in this area because what you have is, it's not quite the same picture as in the south of England where, where the advent of farming in the Neolithic means that people are becoming almost completely sedentary. The concept in, in our area would be that there, there's some farming being undertaken on the uplands, in the upland areas, but they're also still moving around with their livestock, particularly because it's better land up here for the raising of livestock. And any, any raising of herd animals means that you have to move, have to move them around and particularly it's a good area for that because you can move them from the uplands to the wetlands in a sort of rotational pattern.

But also the people are exploiting the wetlands at the same time as using the dry uplands so there's some indication that whilst they have sedentary bases they're still in some respect moving around the landscape as they had done previously in the Mesolithic and continuing some, perhaps a more limited hunter gatherer lifestyle, which has been far more supported by, by farming and the raising of livestock. So it's, the two are sort of happening in sync. That's the sort of picture into which this feature fits.

In terms of what's happening in the landscape it's a sort of a, we've got an event horizon. And that is that the area around Lindholme Islands, particularly the Humberhead Levels, in general have been relatively dry and are suddenly getting wetter and wetter and it's at this point that our short track way and platform exist. They're being put down at a point when the, that area is becoming wetter and wetter. So you can imagine perhaps a couple of hundred years or less before the existence of the Hatfield track way, people are crossing that, that landscape was fairly dry landscape and then it becomes wetter and wetter and less possible to cross until at some point it's impossible to cross that landscape, particularly with herds or, and probably even alone it would be quite a, you

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

know, dangerous undertaking and so there's suddenly a change in the connection that people have with that landscape. Whether it's because they're trying to figure out what's happening, or whether it's because they have a different understanding or different belief about what, what wetland areas mean or what, or what significance they have to them it's difficult to say. But they're certainly interacting with it.

So you're talking about the time before the peat was there?

Yes, yes, essentially the track, the track way, well it's at the point at which the first layers of peat are, would be starting to form. As the material beneath the track is, is, there are some levels of peat I believe beneath the track but it's also very sort of silty material so it's the very sort of start of the wetting of that area and the track sort of laid onto that. So it's, it's at a point when, when something's changing perhaps within the lifetime of the people that are building this feature and that it's their reaction to this change and that reaction, you know, I suspect it has some religious connection because, as with most things people like to, people like to see something as having, when people can't understand a reason for something happening it's often proscribed to something otherworldly, whether you want to call that gods or whatever.

We have been talking for a long time so you probably need to finish fairly soon, but, you've mentioned the other track at Thorne.

Yes.

Could you tell me something about that?

I can tell you a little bit about that. It was, I'd, I think it was found in the late seventies, early eighties, and it was partially excavated by staff at the museum and that is a very, that's a very different feature. That is sort of cut, shaped, planks of wood laid down in the formation of a track and staked. Where that's going to and where it's leading from is again difficult to say because of the nature of how it was found and the limited excavation that took place. It was really just an exploratory excavation of the part that was found that had turned up from, from peat milling. But that's much later that, I believe is Bronze Age and that really is a bit more along the lines of the idea of the Sweet Track and that is something which is, which is laid down to allow people to cross, to cross a landscape, to cross a wet landscape, whether that's moving themselves or moving herds is again, it's difficult to say, but that would be the assumption that people are trying to get from one point to the other and the thing that's in their way, they get around by, by building a platform which can support, to support their weight as they cross a wet area.

And these, are there any other similar kinds of tracks in the area, or just these two?

There's only those two that are recorded, I mean there are plenty of rumours of other things being found on Thorne and Hatfield Moors, track, parts of track ways and objects as well, even bog bodies, even further bog bodies, but none of them are, you know, you can't put any of those rumours to bed because we don't have the evidence to prove that they are just sort of either local rumours or, local, I suppose you'd call them rural myths, rather than urban myths. But it's frustrating because they can't, you know, they can't be proved and as an archaeologist, or a scientist you want to be able to prove something before you, before you believe it.

Just to finish, do you know if there's any future work planned on the Lindholme track?

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

As I understand it the, it will be an ongoing study now which will encompass the landscape around that find as well, certainly there are I think future planned seasons of excavation of the track way itself, although I think it's coming close to, to being written up now. After, after that I'm not entirely sure what's going to happen with it. What, what I do know as of this time, is that it's thought that the feature won't be able to preserved in situ, so if anything it will be completely excavated and that's kind of sad because it is of national importance and it would be nice to think that it was possible to preserve it for future generations but also for future scientific studies as science improves, techniques improve and it would be nice to think that we could preserve it so that people, so that archaeologists could come back and look at it again the future. But it really just doesn't seem possible to do that because it's so badly damaged anyway in terms of its, the level of its exposure, that it wouldn't, it wouldn't survive if it was now to be covered over, it would continue to decay and eventually disappear from the archaeological record.

So I believe that the course of action that's been chosen is to completely excavate it in order to be able to completely understand what's left of it and then perhaps to recreate it for people to see how it might have looked when it was complete and it was freshly built.

Thank you very much indeed.

Ok you're welcome.

[Recording Ends]