

Newsletter

Sep 2025



Many don't give Northampton's library a second glance, but if it were located in a town like Cirencester, I am sure it would grace the front of many a postcard.

- Photo by Alexander Howes -

Photo of the
month

Talk report

The Judges
Lodgings

Around the
county with Alex
and Benji

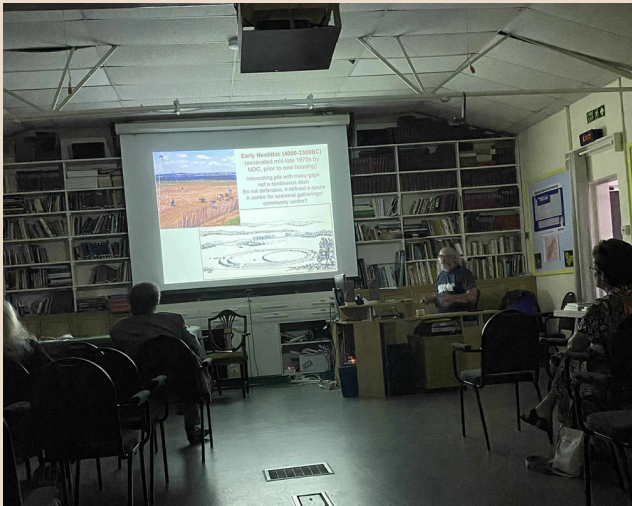
Speakers 2025

Talk report - The archaeology of Northampton

by Andy Chapman

Last month, we were very lucky to welcome Northampton's most notable and experienced archaeologist, Andy Chapman. He presented a fascinating and engaging talk that took us on a tour of the county's extremely rich archeology as he revisited his most interesting finds. I knew that Northampton was hiding incredible history under its roads, shops, and car parks, but I was not ready for the scale presented by Andy.

Andy began by introducing himself and his career. He first visited Northampton for a job in 1976 and never really left. He continued working on projects in the county until his last dig in 2013, when he assisted in the excavation of the town's long-demolished royal castle.



Andy sharing an artists impression of the neolithic earthworks which he and his team excavated.

During his long career, Andy experienced three 'eras' in British archaeology. These impacted how Northampton explored its buried past. These were;

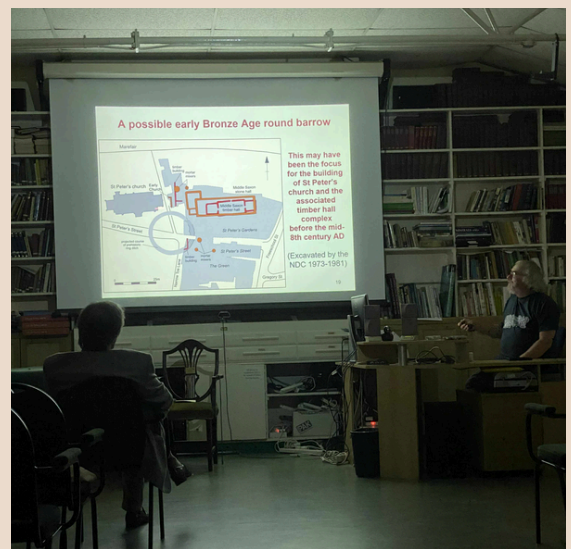
- **Rescue archaeology (1950 to early 1970s)** - Essentially a period in which developers could get away with anything, as the county had very few professional archaeologists. Therefore, archaeology during this period heavily relied on volunteers and the public to pressure the council into commissioning archaeological surveys.
- **Local government archaeology (1970s & 1980s)** - Social and policy changes encouraged greater political and public interest in recording and preserving local heritage. This resulted in county archaeologists being employed by councils and the local sites and monuments records being increased.
- **Commercial archaeology (1990s onwards)** - Developers were now being forced to include archaeological surveys as part of their planning applications. This encouraged an entirely new generation to consider archaeology as a viable career.



Some of the many flint tools unearthed and catalogued by Andy during his many digs.

Andy didn't allow the changing political landscape to interfere with his work and continued to participate in digs. Thanks to the Nene Valley being a rich and fertile land, many of his finds date from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. Of particular note were large hoards of ancient flint tools found in Duston and even under Chalk Lane car park in Northampton town centre.

Whilst finds from the Stone Age have been fascinating Northamptonshire's anthropologists for centuries, up until the 1960s, there was little interest in the county's early Bronze Age and Iron Age History (partly due to the county lacking visible earthworks and standing stones). Andy, however, argued that artefacts from this period are plentiful. Of particular interest was the excavation of Banbury Lane in 2011, which uncovered a triple ditch enclosure (likely used as a meeting point) alongside



There is even evidence of a Bronze Age barrow on the castle site!

a mass stone age grave! The grave was nationally significant as it contained the remains of 150 people. Curiously, key bones (such as foot and hand bones) were missing, which indicated a ceremonial mass burial and provided vital clues into how our ancestors lived and died.

Swords, parts of scabards, and even the remains of a chariot have been found during an excavation of Hunsbury Hill (the remains of an Iron Age hill fort). Sadly, by the time Andy was able to conduct his digs, the only archeology that remained was in the old fort's banks as the centre was quarried away by the Victorian landowner. Whilst the Victorians attempted to preserve significant ancient remains through introducing new legislation, they were often unable to prevent landowners from exploiting ancient sites on their land. This failure has led to the destruction of many fascinating sites!

A constant throughout Andy's career has been the area surrounding St Peter's church and Northampton's old castle, as finds representing all



Andy sharing other finds from the local area which indicate extensive Saxon activity.

periods in human history have been found here. Andy started his first dig near St Peter's church in 1973 during redevelopment work, which uncovered evidence of a significant church complex predating the standing Norman church. The size and quality of the foundations indicated a high-status Saxon religious site. However, it wasn't until his return in 1982 that the location's true importance was revealed.

The latter dig discovered a massive Saxon hall alongside 5 mortar mixers. This was a high concentration by Saxon standards, which confirmed Andy's earlier suspicions. Digs around other parts of the town provided more evidence of a notable Saxon settlement. Excavations along the



The most significant find of Andy's career may have been the huge Saxon hall under the ground surrounding St Peter's church. A plaque is the only evidence of this discovery.

route of the old town wall uncovered their Roman origins, but also evidence that they were repaired and maintained by Northampton's Saxon population.

Unfortunately for Andy, he was unable to start excavating parts of the Northampton Castle site until the 2010s, many years after the first recorded archaeologists. For example, John Dryden led a survey team during the castle's destruction in the 1800s. The 1960s saw further excavations, which discovered evidence of a major fire during the 1300's which coincided with the beginning of the castle's decline.

By the time Andy began his work, he was expecting an uneventful dig thanks to the previous activity. However, despite being limited to the outer bailey, his team found rich deposits in Medieval pottery and remains of the ancient castle walls. This supported claims that Northampton Castle was once one of the most significant in medieval Britain.

Andy's talk was a fascinating and inspiring glimpse into the life of a Northamptonshire archaeologist. It was amazing to hear about his many finds and adventures which have changed the way we understand our past. Andy has many more stories to tell, so I am sure we will invite him back in the future.

Report by Alexander Howes.

Judges' Lodgings in Northampton's George Row under threat!

There are many fine historic buildings at the centre of Northampton. Of those facing George Row, St Giles Square, Guildhall Road and Angel Street the Judges Lodgings is my favourite.

There was no written guide available for me when I first visited, whilst writing an account of the Culworth Gang. The gang were notorious highwaymen and robbers who were imprisoned and tried on this site before the hangings at the town's Racecourse in the eighteenth century.

Public access was available to many of the buildings during Heritage Day visits or by special arrangement with the owners, principally the local council. I became fascinated by the history of the site generally as I researched the Culworth Gang's time of imprisonment at the County Gaol (now part of County Hall in George Row), and trial, at the 1787 Summer Assizes at the adjoining Sessions House.

Having published my account of the Culworth Gang, I set about writing up what I had learned about this historic group of buildings. Some of the council-owned buildings appeared underutilised and I feared for their future.

The wonderful Judges' Lodgings is to the immediate east of Sessions House. Built as an impressive townhouse shortly after the Great Fire of 1675, the house was acquired by the town corporation shortly afterwards for the use of visiting circuit judges and their retainers. These county administrative buildings have now been in continuous use for well over 300 years.

Even before the Great Fire, the site had comprised part of the infamous Bell Inn, acquired by the magistrates for a temporary County Gaol after the town's castle had become ruinous. Many are recorded as having died in the dungeons. A sad memorial to one Thomas Madewell who was imprisoned for refusing to swear an oath of allegiance can be found in the garden behind Judges Lodgings.



To this day, The Judges' Lodgings remains the hub of judicial life of Northampton. The Lodgings are fully staffed for the visit of high court judges and the Lord Lieutenant has an office there.

Dignitaries meet at the Judges Lodgings before and after important services at nearby All Saints church. The lodgings come alive when a visiting judge is in town and the town's important people parade to and from the church, and of course on the annual Oak Apple Day in May.

On 8th September 2022 the Lodgings became a particular hive of activity during Operation London Bridge after our monarch passed away. Within hours of the Queen's death her representatives assembled at Judges Lodgings before proceeding to All Saints to attend a solemn service conducted by Rev Oliver Coss.

So, it is a great shame today to see the Judges Lodgings is to be sold. Details of the property together with one or two other historic and equally little remembered buildings on the site are being advertised on the internet.

I hope Judges Lodgings in particular finds a buyer sympathetic to history who understands the national importance of these fine buildings on George Row.

For anyone interested in further reading about Judges Lodgings and adjoining buildings, copies of my guide book Gaols, Gallows and Ghosts are available from the Museum and Art Gallery bookshop and Georges Café.

Report by Richard Blacklee.

Richard kindly permitted us to share the above article as he is keen to bring attention to this historic but threatened building. You can also view the article at: <https://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/community/historic-judges-lodgings-in-northamptons-george-row-faces-uncertain-future-as-sale-looms-5276843>

Around the county with Alex and Benji - Harlestone

This month, Benji and I paid a visit to Harlestone. Before we begin, it is important to note that Harlestone no longer exists as a single village; it has been divided into Upper Harlestone and Lower Harlestone. For the sake of this article, I will refer to both as Harlestone, as this is how most historical sources refer to the villages.



Looking up towards the Upper Harlestone where the medieval manor once stood.

Harlestone is located near Northampton, yet it retains its rural charm thanks to its designation as a heritage conservation area. Once one begins exploring, it isn't difficult to see why. The village hosts many listed buildings characterised by the use of locally sourced Ironstone and sandstone. In fact, the remains of the old quarries still scar the local landscape.

It is likely that the name, Harlestone, has Saxon or even Danish origins. This is supported by earlier documents in which Harlestone is spelled various ways, such as Erlestone, Herolvestone, and Herolvestune. These spellings likely originate from a local Saxon or Danish landowner.

Despite the name's origin, one must travel much further back to find that of Harlestone's, as there is extensive evidence of a prehistoric settlement in the area. In addition to flint tools being found on the Althorpe estate, an Iron Age site and Bronze Age earthworks have been identified along the southern edge of Lower Harlestone. We know that human occupation continued into the Roman period as lower class Roman dwellings were excavated in 1927 alongside a hoard of over 800 Roman coins! A significant Roman presence isn't unexpected considering the village's proximity to the major Roman road of Watling Street.

As we enter the Medieval period, Harlestone's history really starts to come alive. Unsurprisingly, Harlestone



The Dovecote is the only surviving part of a once large and powerful medieval manorial complex.

appeared in the Domesday book, which notes that there were 15 freedmen in the village, a mill, and a priest. Interestingly, it also records an unusual amount of 'wasteland' for a village of its size. Supported by archeological finds, some speculate that the 'wasteland' was from a Viking raid in the 10th century, which destroyed much of the settlement.



A quiet and charming green surrounded by 17th Century buildings which once housed estate workers.

In addition to the remains of at least three medieval manors, the quarries (which may date as far back as the late medieval period), and the old butter cross, some significant medieval finds have been made around the village. Most interestingly, a Middle-Eastern gold coin was unearthed during cleaning work in the nearby stables, implying that a villager may have participated in the 11th-century crusades and brought their spoils home. Many of you who know the area may have visited the Scarcens Head pub at Brington (I highly recommend it), and like me, wondered where the name came from. You can now wonder no more.

Of the medieval manors, only the outbuildings of the second survive. The second was owned by the Lumley family from the 13th century, and situated in Upper Harlestone on the site of Dovecote House. It comprised a hall, stables, outbuildings, and a dovecote; the latter is the only surviving building from the complex.

Beyond the dovecote, Harlestone's earliest surviving buildings date from the late 17th century. By this time, of the 115 recorded buildings, only a handful would have been made from the stone, meaning that few survived.



The old stables are the location of a major archaeological find, the 11th-century Middle Eastern coin. It is now a private residence, so I was unable to get any closer.

17th-century Harlestone was a parliamentary stronghold thanks to its proximity to the staunchly anti-royalist Northampton. The exception to this was the royalist Sir Lewis Dyve, owner of Henry de Bray's Manor Farm. The estate was consequently confiscated by parliament and gifted to the Andrew family, who, in 1715, built the neo-classical Harlestone House. Over the next century, the estate grew, the parklands were landscaped, and the house was modernised before it was sold to Earl Spencer in 1829. The Spencers would rename the estate to Althorpe and embarked on a building project that defines modern Harlestone's character. Many of Harlestone's buildings were built for the estate workers and thus retain a characterful but uniform appearance.

Finally, no Northamptonshire village is complete without a medieval church, and Harlestone certainly does not disappoint. The current St Andrew's Parish Church dates back to the 14th century, with a 12th-century tower. It has seen relatively little alteration since the medieval period, other than some major restoration in the 19th century to repair its crumbling



Benji exploring the grounds of Harlestone's medieval church

walls. When visiting the church, keep an eye out for the altar and pulpit. The altar predates the current church by over 100 years, whilst the beautifully carved pulpit is formed of 16th century Flemish carved oak panels, reputedly from Fotheringhay Castle.

The Harlestons are truly worth a visit. There are multiple lovely country walks from which one can take in the characterful buildings and landscape. As you explore, don't forget to pop into the well-known Fox and Hounds pub for a drink and a bite to eat. The pub is named after the once popular Harlestone hunt, which could once be seen riding through the nearby woods, Harlestone Firs. Whilst the hunt is a thing of the past, the pub remains a popular but characterful retreat.

Article by Alex Howes



Another view up towards the old manor house.



Speakers 2025

Humfrey Rooms
10 Castilian Terrace, Northampton NN1 1LD

Please arrive at 7:15 for a prompt 7:30 start so you have time to help yourself to tea and biscuits!
We kindly ask a for a suggested donation of £5 pp to cover the cost of renting the hall

March 17th

A history of St Peter's church

Jenny Rose and Gareth Lugar-
Mawson

St Peter's, Marefair is a designated Grade I listed building and, being a redundant parish church, has been under the care of the Churches Conservation since 1998. Considered by some to be the finest 12th Century church in Northamptonshire, this will be a talk covering most aspects of its evolution from earliest origins to present day.

In this spooky talk we explore the rich and mysterious ghosts, legends, and folklore of Northampton! Adrian, or as he is better known, the ghost detective, is the author of a series of books investigating Northamptonshire haunted locations. So who better to take us on a tour of Northampton's haunted past?

May 19th

Haunted Northampton
Adrian Perkins

June 16th

Film from 20th century
Northampton
Peter Austin

The Northamptonshire Film Archive Trust is a registered charity dedicated to collecting and preserving cine film and converting the footage into a digital format to screen to audiences around the county. Our visit to Northampton Civic Society will include scenes taken in and around Northampton in the 20th Century.

This month's talk will see us welcome our neighbours from Wellingborough Civic Society, who are offering a fascinating and thought-provoking talk on a major community asset: the Victoria Centre. Through an exploration of its history, we will begin to understand why a multi-cultural community centre is so important for the local community.

July 21st

The Story of the Victorian
Centre
Freud Edeltraud

August 18th

The Archaeology of
Northampton
Andy Chapman

From the Neolithic, he will move on to the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, with Hunsbury Hill providing the only surviving upstanding prehistoric earthwork. The Romans will get a brief mention before he explores the Anglo-Saxon origins of the town in some detail. He will finish with the rise, fall and eventual demolition of Northampton's royal Castle.

Poplars is a grand house built in 1778 by a wealthy widow, in a prime place at the top of a hill in Wellingborough. Mike's talk will take us to explore the people who called the 50-acre estate home. We will understand where they came from, what they did, where they went and what legacy they left behind. Like the Channel 4 series "A House through time", we will experience how the house adapted to social changes during its first 125 years.

September 15th

Poplars Grand House
Mike Williams



Keep your diary free for our next talk on Aug 18th

Keep your diary free for our next talk on the evening of September 15th when Mike Williams will be visiting us from Wellingborough Civic Society!



Mike will be offering a fascinating talk which aims to introduce us to Poplars Grand House!

Poplars is a grand house built in 1778 by a wealthy widow, in a prime place at the top of a hill in Wellingborough. Mike's talk will take us on an exploration of the people who called the 50-acre estate home. We will understand where they came from, what they did, where they went, and what legacy they left behind. Like the Channel 4 series "A House Through Time", we will experience how the house adapted to social changes during its first 125 years.

We hope to see you there. Please see the events list above or visit our website following the QR code or at the address below for further details. Also, please join our Facebook group for any updates.

Thank you for reading!

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