

Archaeology in Doncaster

Romans on the Don Teachers Pack – Background Information

Discovering Doncaster's Iron Age and Roman Archaeology

When the Roman army first marched north to the River Don, they found a landscape full of people. Doncaster had long been settled by families farming land divided into large fields and living in timber round houses. The Romans' impact was to be massive. They built forts and roads, as they always did when taking control of new territories. Perhaps their most enduring legacy was Doncaster itself, which grew up around the fort of Danum, named after the River Don. Pottery kilns were set up south of the town and an economy based on coins was introduced for the first time. New forms of domestic architecture were adopted by many families, who replaced their round houses with rectangular ones. Some people even built heated bath houses.

Excavations at aggregate quarries have provided a view of some of these changes and told us about the lives of people who lived in Doncaster before and after the Romans arrived.

Mapping the Ancient Landscape

Roman and earlier habitation in Doncaster's rural areas began to be explored with the work of Derrick Riley in the 1970s and 1980s. Riley was a pilot who flew over much of South Yorkshire taking aerial photographs of crop marks typical of ancient field systems.



Ancient field systems showing as dark lines on an aerial photograph

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Many of Doncaster's Iron Age and Roman sites do not survive above ground because of centuries of ploughing and development. Vast buried landscapes have come to light from the air as these crop marks. These otherwise invisible ancient worlds have been revealed by the crops that grow above them because crops tend to grow taller over the deeper soils that fill ditches and shorter above the foundations of walls. Once photographed, the features revealed by the crops' growth can be drawn on to maps and the full extent of these crop marks plotted.

The Roman fort at Rossington Bridge was one of the first sites to be photographed, in the 1960s. The true extent of the cropmarks began to be identified during the 1970s when archaeologist Derrick Riley flew hundreds of missions. He discovered a regular pattern of square and rectangular fields, seen as the lines of boundary ditches dug to enclose the fields. Most were arranged into 50-100 metre wide strips divided by long parallel ditches, which led Riley to call them "brickwork fields". Other sites could also be seen within this overall pattern. Sometimes two ditches ran in parallel 10-40 metres apart, forming lanes which were probably droveways for moving livestock. Outlines of building foundations were also glimpsed here and there amongst the fields. What Riley had discovered were the vast buried remains of ancient agricultural landscapes.

It is difficult to date cropmark landscapes without finding objects from specific periods or material suitable for scientific dating either by surface collection or excavation. The ones photographed by Riley were clearly very old, but how long they had been buried was something of a mystery until he observed that the line of a Roman road cut through some of the fields. The fields must have been earlier than the road.

Based on the photographs taken by Riley and others, archaeological excavations have been recommended by South Yorkshire Archaeology Service whenever aggregate extraction has been planned in areas where crop marks have been recorded. The resulting work has told us much about ancient Doncaster. Objects found by excavation give an approximate date for when a ditch was filled-in. Roman pottery and other artefacts have been found in many of the filled-in ditches, but often near the top, which suggests that the ditches themselves were dug sometime earlier. Rare finds of Iron Age pottery suggest that the fields originated in the centuries before the Romans arrived but stayed in use throughout the Roman period.