

News

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Workers expanding Norfolk primary school discover 1,500 year old skeleton

Workers from Morgan Sindall have unearthed a 1,500 year old skeleton while working to expand Drake Primary School in Thetford.

The skeleton, believed to date from between the fifth and seventh century, was unexpectedly discovered in the school grounds while the Morgan Sindall project team built a new path to the school buildings.

The discovery led to an excavation which revealed a well-preserved skeleton of an adult male who had been buried on a north-south alignment about 1,500 years ago, with an iron knife on his left hip and an iron buckle on his right.

Following the discovery, Year Three pupils at Drake Primary School have had the unique opportunity of learning about life during that time as well as a chance to quiz an archaeologist about the findings.

Head teacher of Drake Primary, Mary Bartrop, said: "This has been a really exciting discovery for our school and I think we were all amazed to find that this person who possibly lived around here so many years ago was buried so close to our school.

"The skeleton was excavated and removed from the school grounds ahead of the children being aware of it, but since then we've taken every opportunity to use its discovery as a way of helping to bring the past to life for our children while they've been learning about how people lived in this area so many centuries before us.

"Our Year Three students in particular have had the chance to study the photographs of the skeleton in depth and cross examine Harriet, the archaeologist who excavated him and Phil Hazelwood, the site manager. They also made a video of their work which we've shown to parents who have been extremely impressed."

The skeleton was discovered during the current £4.8 million expansion project to refurbish and remodel Drake Primary school and improve the learning space. The scheme, for Norfolk County Council, is part of a £144 million capital investment programme to increase the number of school places across the county, improve school facilities and create more all-through primary schools. The work is being carried out by Morgan Sindall, with design and project management by NPS Group, and oversight of the archaeological work by Norfolk County Council's Historic Environment Team.

Morgan Sindall's site manager for the Drake Primary School project, Phil Hazelwood, said: "This is a fascinating discovery that has really made us all think about the people who may have lived here over 1,500 years ago.

"It's been wonderful to see how interested the pupils at Drake Primary School have been in the discovery and how our work on site has created an invaluable learning experience for them."

Saul Humphrey, regional managing director for Morgan Sindall, said: "We're delighted to be delivering this important project which will provide Drake Primary School with exemplary learning

and teaching space for pupils and staff to enjoy. Morgan Sindall has lots of experience working in areas with a rich cultural heritage and we're pleased to have been able to assist the archaeology team to gain access to this significant discovery at the school."

Harriet Bryant-Buck, assistant project officer/osteologist for NPS Archaeology, who excavated the find added: "We weren't expecting any burials in this area, so when the site manager called up and said they'd found what looked like a human skull it was definitely a surprise for everyone!

"Since he's been removed, we've been able to carry out more in-depth analysis off site, and so far we've discovered that he was older than first thought - likely to be over fifty - with his joints showing signs of his age and an active lifestyle.

"The children have asked lots of very interesting questions and we've got lots more research to do which we hope will give us more answers about where the individual is from, and whether he'd suffered from any trauma or illness - information which will help the children, and the rest of us, learn more about the earlier inhabitants of Thetford in the future."

With a height of approximately 1.72m (5'7"), about average for someone of this era, the north-south burial alignment and the inclusion of knife and buckle in his grave both indicate the individual was pagan, rather than Christian. His possessions are quite typical, and don't indicate much in the way of status. However, early expert analysis shows the knife can be dated to the late seventh century i.e. Anglo-Saxon and the buckle plate has some beautifully preserved fabric, which still shows the weave, which is considered to be quite rare for this type of archaeological material. All of the elements associated with the find will undergo significant further analysis.

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