

Caversham Court restoration project February 2009

Building work is well underway. The contractors have reconfigured the exterior of the toilet block to accommodate the improvements, building new doorways for the toilets and a serving window for the kiosk. Rebuilding of the terrace walls below the main path is complete. Stonemasons' work to the forecourt walls is progressing, and the stone pier caps are almost all replaced. Regrading of banks was done as soon as there was a break in the weather and the site dried out. The rainwater harvesting tank and associated ducting have been installed.

A delay to works on the gazebo and causeway arose when contractors found an even older garden wall behind the western causeway retaining wall (which amounts to a facing). Ironically, the archaeologists missed this when making their investigations, because the exploratory trench was dug at a point of repair to the old wall. It was necessary to wait until a structural engineer from English Heritage could visit the site and make recommendations before the architects could issue a revised design for the causeway. However, works have recommenced, and the footing for the east causeway wall has been built.

Emily and her apprentice, Ben, have planted new trees and transplanted two existing ones. They have also worked at lawn maintenance, repairing damage, filling in dips and overseeding. Within the allotment gardens, they have created paths installing gravel boards, weed matting and scalplings, and set out boarded and planted hedging for a 'Secret Garden'. With the help of other staff, they have also worked on St Peter's churchyard, doing necessary clearance and maintenance before the bird-nesting season.

Snippets of the month:

Causeway: It appears that the causeway to the gazebo was constructed by using an existing garden wall as one retaining wall, throwing earth against it, and building another retaining wall to the east. The older wall was at least partly made of dressed chalk, and a later brick and flint facing to this western wall was constructed. English Heritage wants the older wall repaired, recorded and tied to the eastern wall, and then the brick and flint facing reconstructed.

Vaults: The vaults at the eastern end of the former glasshouse area have been cleared of vegetation and the first two vaults have been dug out. The third vault, with the connecting archway through the forecourt wall (to the current rectory), has collapsed. Investigation works are still progressing, but it appears the first vault may have been a gardener's store/potting shed associated with the glasshouse. The floor level of this vault appears to have been dug out after the adjacent forecourt wall was constructed, as the brick floor of the vault is approx 300mm below the underside of the wall. The second vault has been excavated to the same level, although the original floor level has not been found, even after digging a trial hole in one corner to a depth of 1.2m. Inside the second vault, there is a chimney flue and cast iron pipe as well as evidence of smoke damage on the brickwork. It is likely that this vault contained the boiler for the glasshouse, located in a deep pit to allow the water to be gravity fed around the heating pipework. Inspection of the third vault is difficult because of the collapsed roof and infilled material. Early indications are that this could have been the coal cellar with a coal chute through the forecourt wall from the adjoining gardens (now the Rectory). Coal would have been required to keep the boiler operating and it is unlikely that this would have been brought through the main gardens.

All archaeology is being recorded carefully, and will be interpreted in information that will be available in the gardens, so that the information is not lost.