Waking the Legions, Chester

As part of the Festival of Archaeology 2016 Big Heritage partnered with Magnitude Surveys to undertake a geophysical survey of the Deanery Field, situated in the grounds of Chester Cathedral within the north-east corner of the city's historic walls. The survey had two primary aims. The first was to engage the local community with Chester's archaeological heritage and the second was to locate and identify any surviving sub-surface archaeology. The survey element was supported by an exhibition in the King Charles Tower, which had nearly 19,000 visitors over a three-month period. The exhibition detailed previous archaeological work on the site and displayed artefacts from the Grosvenor Museums collection, which were recovered during excavations of the site in the 1920’s and 30’s. These excavations revealed Roman barrack blocks and associated buildings.

A multi-method geophysical approach using ground penetrating radar, earth resistance, and magnetic methods targeted the known and postulated buried remains. This combined approach successfully detected several archaeological features that likely reflect Roman occupation, notably the barrack blocks identified in the 1930’s. GPR has also revealed other possible structures not matching the dimensions of barrack blocks, perhaps indicating a different use of these parts of the site, or structures built at a different time.

We were joined on site by many volunteers over the survey weekend, including Merseyside and Dee Young Archaeologist Club, students from the University of Chester and members of Chester Archaeological Society, who helped us undertake the different types of survey and science experiments that demonstrated how the geophys kit worked in simplified terms. The results of the geophysical survey are available at www.bigheritage.co.uk.

Joanne Kirton, head of operations said: “The results clearly show that there is plenty of surviving archaeology in the Deanery Field, which may not all be Roman. However, the most exciting result was the community engagement. We were amazed by the enthusiasm showed by volunteers, and the huge amount of visitors to the exhibition in such a short space of time.”