

# Bulletin

SOAG



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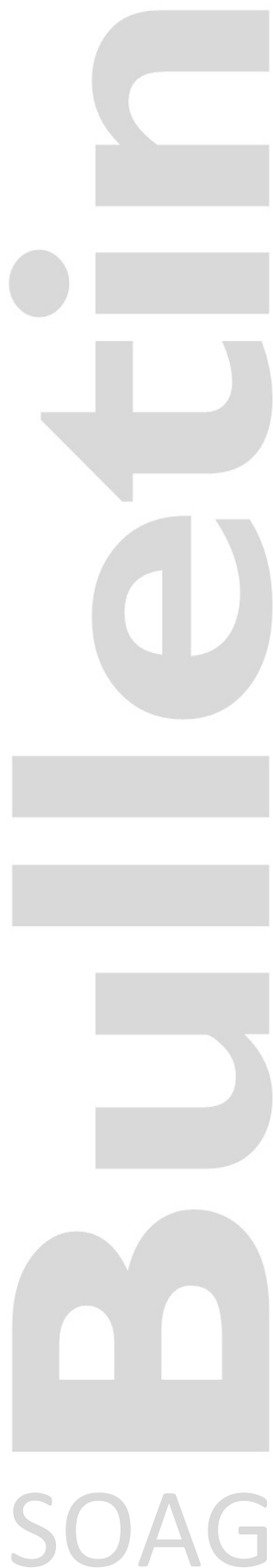
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Articles, accompanied by illustrations if appropriate, and book reviews are invited for publication in the next issue of the *SOAG Bulletin*. Authors are referred to the *Notes for Contributors* inside the back cover.

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Cover illustration: 'The Gatehampton Beaker' from Trench 16 at Gatehampton.  
Photo: © Richard Miller



# Contents

<b>Chairman's Report</b>	<i>Dave Carless</i>	1
<b>Margaret Westwood: Obituary</b>	<i>Hazel Williams</i>	2
<b>Ian Clarke: Honorary Membership</b>	<i>Mike Vincent</i>	3
 <b>Lectures, Events and Visits in 2016</b>		5
SOAG summer visit to Wittenham Hall House	<i>Dr Chris Howlett</i>	6
SOAG visit to the Houses of Parliament	<i>Mike Green</i>	8
Gatehampton Open Day	<i>Hazel Williams</i>	9
 <b>Reports and Articles</b>		
<i>Gatehampton Farm Roman Villa Excavation:</i> Interim Report 2016	<i>Hazel Williams</i>	11
<i>Blewbury Local History and Archaeology Group:</i> Blewbury Big Dig – 5th Interim Report	<i>Lindsey Bedford and Dave Carless</i>	19
<i>High Wood Roman site:</i> Interim Report 2016	<i>Alan Hall and David Nicholls</i>	22
 A Finest Hour	<i>Ian Clarke</i>	28



# Chairman's Report

Dave Carless

*Given at SOAG Annual General Meeting 23 April 2017*

## Introduction

Firstly I am delighted to announce that the committee has unanimously appointed Ian Clarke as an Honorary Member of SOAG. Ian has been a member since 1999 and has made major contributions to the Group both administratively and as a project leader. Having served as Secretary and then Chairman, he is currently our Honorary Vice President and has been prominent in our BBCHAP and Ascott Park work. Thank you Ian.

Once again we had a busy year in 2016 with major fieldwork activities in three locations (High Wood, Blewbury and Gatehampton – see below) and a full programme of events including lectures and a site visit organised by Nancy Nichols. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank the whole membership for their continued support and contributions.

## Membership and Finance

Our finances remain on an even keel. Membership in 2016 fell slightly to 130 which is a little disappointing but within our budget assumptions. We welcome all our new members and hope to attract many more in 2017. Again our Hon. Secretary, Mike Vincent, was able to secure a substantial Gift Aid contribution.

## Publications and Communications

My thanks to all those who undertake these vital roles. Mike Green works tirelessly to maintain communications with all of the group's members both routinely through publication of *SOAG Messenger* and management of the web site, and by ad hoc email updates. Mike Grinstead works on vital local communications to broaden our appeal.

John Hefferan and Mike Green edited and produced our flagship annual report, *SOAG Bulletin* 70. Mike took over from Janet Eastment, who has undertaken the typesetting of *SOAG Bulletin* for many years but, due to personal circumstances, had to relinquish the duty this year. We offer special thanks to her for her excellent work until now, and we hope that she will be able to resume the task soon.

In addition to *SOAG Bulletin* we also publish results of our research projects to a wider audience through the CBA South Midlands Archaeology annual report.

Work also continues on digitising and making available our written archive of past projects.

## Fieldwork and Research

Fieldwork at Gatehampton Roman Villa, under Hazel Williams' leadership, has been in progress for more than 20 years. The project has provided easy access to excavation for SOAG members and newcomers throughout the summer months and the annual Open Day in September 2016 was as popular as ever. Since we have now opened and researched almost all the accessible areas of the villa it was thought that 2016 would be the last season. However new discoveries were made late in 2016 and with the recent removal of the hedge across the villa improving access, there is a real chance of resolving some of the remaining mysteries of the villa. Regular Sunday digging will continue during 2017 at Gatehampton.

The High Wood project in 2016 provided an enjoyable and instructive experience for many of our members. The archaeology revealed a Roman structure whose function is not yet understood and operations in 2017 will be directed at learning more and, hopefully, beginning to answer this question. We are delighted that the project leadership team will be strengthened for next season. David Nicholls, who has been leading the project hitherto, will remain as overall project director and Alan Hall MA who joined SOAG in 2016, from Surrey Archaeological Society, and who has directed several excavations on sites in that county, will be Site Director. We will also again benefit from advice from Oxford Archaeology.

The Blewbury Big Dig project, under the joint direction of Lindsey Bedford and myself, took its first steps out of the village and into the fields in 2016. Making full use of all of our available surveying techniques (magnetic and resistivity geophysics, auger surveying, metal detecting and field walking)

and much expertise from within the group, we began investigations of some interesting crop marks on the downs. Having discovered an unexpected shaft, with potential Iron Age or Roman ritual significance, we

are keen to get back to the site for further work but we are constrained by almost continuous agricultural activity.

## Margaret Westwood: Obituary

Hazel Williams, President of SOAG, on behalf of the SOAG committee



In January 2017, long-time SOAG member, Margaret Westwood passed away. Margaret joined SOAG in the early 1980s and took part in all the key SOAG excavations and other activities of that period, including organising many SOAG visits. For 12 years she was secretary of SOAG, following which she continued to organise tea and coffee at our lectures until the mid- 2000s. In her memory we are here republishing an extract from the citation for her election as Honorary SOAG Member in 2011. It was prepared and read by SOAG President Hazel Williams at the 2011 SOAG AGM and was first published in the *SOAG Bulletin* 65.

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Margaret had a career as a teacher of art in London girls' schools before moving to Goring in the early 1980s. She met Cyn at the local yoga class, found her friendly and welcoming, and joined SOAG. She already had an interest in historic buildings and had taken part in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings National Barn Survey in the 1970s.

She and her husband, John, became keen members of SOAG, participating in most of the projects, large and small, that the SOAG group were involved in over the next 28 years. The first excavation they took part in was at Newington, the project that was recently re-excavated and was the subject of the January lecture by Gwilym Williams. Margaret has many fond memories of that excavation. Margaret also took part in the major excavation of the Anglo-Saxon monastery site at Abingdon in the 1980s where SOAG worked with Oxford Archaeology.

Following this, Margaret was one of the group that worked with Oxford Archaeology on the Thames Water site at Gatehampton, and went on to do extensive fieldwork in the area in the late 1980s. A

number of trial trenches were dug and I have an archive photo of Margaret, alone in a large ploughed field, obviously dressed for cold weather – the diggers were more hardy in those days – with trowel in hand, kneeling in front of a small 1m sq. trench. It is thanks to the efforts of Margaret and the other early members that we have this project that has been so important to SOAG over many years.

But I think Margaret's most important contribution to SOAG has been her 12 years as Honorary Secretary from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s.

She mentioned to me that already the minute book was an historical archive of SOAG activity over many years. Margaret continued the meticulous recording by hand of the SOAG minutes and administration, before the days when PCs were available.

SOAG was an active and social group and although Margaret downplays her role somewhat, crediting Cyn with organising activities, I'm sure that Margaret was equally responsible for the smooth running of the group over these many years. A lot of work was involved in the arranging of lectures, visits and social events – summer parties were held every year at the Oratory School in the late 80s.

After stepping down as Hon Sec, Margaret very kindly continued for several years to help organise tea and coffee at lectures. She and John have continued to be enthusiastic supporters of all SOAG activities and are still regulars at lectures and events, taking a keen interest in the various projects; I was pleased to see her at Gatehampton recently.

It is with great pleasure that we thank you, Margaret, for your past work as Honorary Secretary of the group for 12 years, for your participation in fieldwork on SOAG projects large and small over 28 years, and for your continued and loyal support of all the SOAG's events, projects and lectures..

## Honorary SOAG Membership for Ian Clarke

Citation by Mike Vincent delivered at the 2017 SOAG AGM



It is with real pleasure and a deep sense of gratitude that SOAG today proposes awarding Honorary Membership to Ian Clarke.

Ian joined SOAG in 1999 and was immediately co-opted onto the committee, becoming Secretary in 2001 and then Chairman from 2006 to 2009. During those years, Ian actively promoted and was instrumental in leading the reorganisation and modernisation of SOAG to secure its long-term future as a thriving and successful archaeology group. He is currently Honorary Vice President of SOAG.

Between 2002 and 2008 Ian edited the SOAG Messenger, during which period he introduced colour, articles like "Tailings" and much more content – and the use of email to publish it.

In 2006 he set up the Brightwell Baldwin Community History and Archaeology Project (BBCHAP) drawing it into the SOAG fold and gaining Heritage Lottery funding, enabling the purchase of our first resistivity meter and digital projector. Over six years he led many BBCHAP/SOAG projects, including the site of Blooms Field 19th C farm, Cadwell Farm moated manor and Roman trackway, and the successful search for the lost manor house in Brightwell Park.

Work at Ascott Park, near Stadhampton, began in

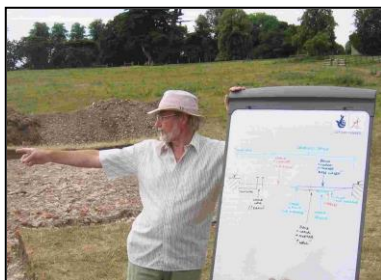
2013 when a project led by the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust, to locate the short-lived 17th C house, left many unanswered questions, and Ian took up their invitation for SOAG to continue the work. Three seasons of geophysical surveying and desk-based research have led to different interpretations of the earlier fieldwork and revealed much new evidence, all of which provides a firm basis and clear direction for future research. It seems there is much more to Ascott Park than first meets the eye, and Ian is still determined to follow this up.

Ian has been inspirational – for example motivating the Brightwell Baldwin villagers into the BBCHAP project, and encouraging us as individuals into doing more for SOAG than we could ever have imagined (or intended!).

Ian is a consummate professional - instilling the discipline and application of good techniques and recording throughout. Ian once remarked that a SOAG motto could be "digging to professional standards but having fun doing it" and he certainly lived up to that and always tried to ensure that his diggers felt the same.

We thank you so very much, Ian, for all your past work as Hon. Secretary, Chairman and Vice President of the group, for your instigation and participation in fieldwork on SOAG projects large and small over the past 18 years, for your continued and loyal support of SOAG's events, projects and lectures, and for your wisdom and judgement ever available to the SOAG committee.

### *Some scenes from Ian's activities in SOAG*



*Briefing the diggers at the Brightwell Park dig in 2010*



*With wife Catherine, explaining the dovecote in Brightwell Park, which he helped establish to be Tudor in date*



*Planning the geophys survey at Ascott Park in 2013*



# Lectures, Events & Visits in 2016

## Lecture Series

*28 January*

Dr Simon Townley (Victoria County History)

**Ewelme and Ewelme Hundred: Recent VCH Work**

*25 February*

Professor John Blair (University of Oxford)

**The Anglo-Saxon Upper Thames region: New Discoveries and New Thoughts**

*24 March*

Mike Allen (Allen Environmental Archaeology)

**New interpretations of the prehistoric environment of Stonehenge: why Stonehenge is really where it is & other stories from environmental archaeology**

*24 April*

**46th AGM and Review of SOAG Archaeology, followed by SOAG Social**

*22 September*

Tim Allen (Oxford Archaeology and SOAG Hon Member)

**Excavations at St Brieuc, Brittany - an Iron Age town?**

*27 October*

Ben Ford (Oxford Archaeology)

**The Westgate Project, Oxford**

*24 November*

Two 30 min lectures by SOAG members:

Alan Hall

**Field Work by The Roman Studies Group of Surrey Archaeological Society**

Dave Carless

**Excavating a Saxon sunken featured building in Blewbury**

## Events and Visits

*16 September*

**SOAG Summer visit to the Oxford University Institute of Archaeology Saxon Hall House excavations at Long Wittenham.** (see page 6)

*18 September*

**Open House at SOAG Gatehampton Roman Villa Excavation** (see page 9)

*19 December*

**Visit to the Houses of Parliament, courtesy of the office of John Howell MP** (see page 8)

## SOAG summer visit to the Wittenham Saxon Hall House dig

Report by Dr Chris Howlett

A pub is a good place to meet isn't it? Simple fare drawing people together with a not so simple academic subject, the study of the "Well, it might have been." The Plough Inn in Long Wittenham reminded us of friends seen on digs in diverse parts of the Thames Valley, familiar faces, familiar backsides(!).



Fig. 1: the SOAG team at the Plough Inn.

And we were gathered to look at a Hall. Why do we always think of halls as being large? It is an elastic word describing structures of many sizes; you return home from say Westminster Hall, you turn the latch key and what do you enter? But archaeological small talk over our lunch reminds us that we are in a Thames area brimming with history that filled the 600 years between the Romans packing up and the Normans moving in. And from the 7th C onwards we have the slow pervasion of Christianity.

Referring to this period as Saxon we have evidence of modesty at one end of the scale and great trade and wealth at the other. We SOAGs have dug up bits of the modest, that lovely grubenhauser in Blewbury. While in Sutton Courtney, and at burial sites along the River Lambourne, other archaeologists have found jewellery of great local skill but set with materials, amber say, that have come from places afar. So that concept of trade that we so easily forget, was alive and well in our area of the Thames. Where goods are traded, so are cultural ideas of design. So a whole melee of possible hall images jostled as we set off to see an Oxford University Institute of Archaeology supervised group working on a possible Anglo-Saxon Great Hall.

Our half mile walk from the pub to the archaeology site was entirely flat as we made our way over what geologically is the Second Thames Terrace. In places

where tractors had broken through the top soil, the even distribution of gravels was striking; an area that must always have drained well, an excellent site for a building entirely of wood, no stone at all. We had been walking through a field of oilseed rape but even the modest height of this crop had been high enough to camouflage the dig, and we came on it abruptly. The uniform sedimentary sand colour across the whole site was attractive to see, but must have made feature identification extraordinarily hard. But most importantly the outline of the "Hall" structure was clear as the team had dug pits on the outline of the walls.



Fig. 2: The pits mark the outline of the Hall House. (And yes, that is SOAG Roelie Reed in the foreground)

And now we are in the thrall of our American guide who is doing an Oxford PhD. Despite his eloquence and extensive enlightened knowledge, there is no doubting classical English history does sound strange presented with a North Carolina twang! The Saxon Great Halls are few in number, about a dozen in the country. Even their purpose is not all that clear. But one thing does seem likely - they were built for a similar function as they all have a similar form even if varying in size. The essential form relayed along that cultural trade route is L-shaped, a major rectangular space with a modest wing, and this is what we have at Wittenham. This geometric form is unusual in a culture where we expect settlement layouts and housing shapes to be rather haphazard. The Great Hall at nearby Sutton Courtney for instance has a long (35m) rectangular hall but then 33 domestic

buildings are scattered around it. And Great Yeavinger Hall in Northumbria, and the star player near Canterbury at Lyminge (excavated recently by Reading University), are imposing, while our building is a more modest 12m by 13m.

So what were these Halls for? A popular view of their use has of course been established by Beowulf – feasting and story telling. So could they be resting places for kings and princes on a regal circuit? It seems unlikely as the early Saxon demesnes were not overlarge (although we were told that the discovery of this structure at Wittenham is causing something of a rethink on the whole topic as it is very close to the hall house at Sutton Courtney). Storage possibly? Not really. as crops such as grain were best kept in small quantities within the home. A place for village celebration? This would seem more plausible either as a place of worship or a focus for community gathering.

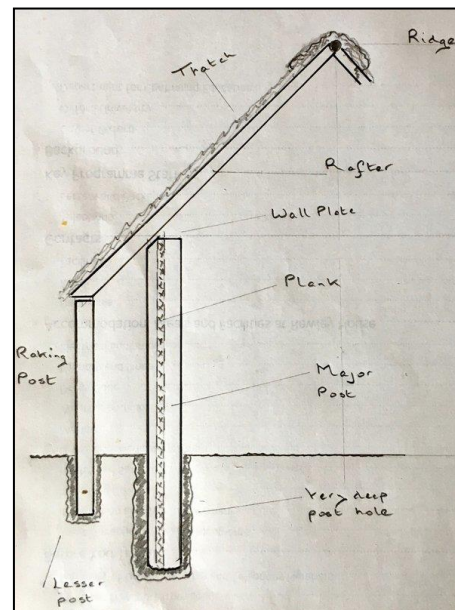
In a community, buildings reflecting political power or built in adulation of our Gods are done with skill and weight far exceeding other buildings in the area. Our own parish churches are a simple example of this. We also have the rather sinister pattern where an evolving culture tends to build its sites on top of a vanquished culture. A world example - the combination of Cathedral and Mosque in Cordoba. Much nearer to home many of our parish churches sit on high ground, not to keep their feet dry but because the current building sits on top of a pre-Christian site. Our guide tells us that the Wittenham Hall is built adjacent to several Bronze Age barrows and that this can be a feature at other Halls as well.

These Saxon Great Halls reflect the adulation concept. They were constructed with greatly oversubstantial posts interspersed with hefty planking - wood entirely. The holes for these wooden columns could be a metre or more deep which seems structurally unnecessary. Even in our modest Hall there had to be a very substantial amount of timber used to have left such a striking crop mark on a 1972 aerial photograph. A feature supporting the idea that this Hall was simply a place of gathering, rather than anything domestic is the lack of archaeological finds - no rubbish tips, no signs of things domestic and disappointingly sterile of "small finds". Perhaps after use it was systematically cleared of all materials.

Another characteristics feature of the few Hall Houses previously excavated is a palisade of posts, raking posts, encircling the outer wall. They do not support the wall but are an extension of the roof

structure. So a rafter left the ridge of the roof, came across the support of the upper wall (the wall plate) but then continued to this post.

Fig. 3: Wittenham Hall House structure.



So what are they for? They would protect the wall from say cattle. They also give an extended eave to the building giving weather protection for the wall and incidentally a significant area for shelter or storage. However at the half way point in the Wittenham dig none had yet been found. They could well have been in quite shallow post holes and might well have been washed away. It would be interesting to get an end-of-dig update on this topic.

Finally there is another interesting feature of these Halls - with their apparent high status they were extant for an extraordinarily short time. So with the supreme example at Lyminge, developed to the level of a banqueting hall. Reading University, who dug it, feels that this large structure was rebuilt twice but their evidence then suggests it was used for no longer than a century. So it would seem that our Great Halls represent a peak of the early Anglo-Saxon power structure that followed the decline of the Roman empire in England, but whose own decline may then be related to the new power system formed by the arrival of Christianity in the 7th century.

It was a very interesting visit. The site is within a large area that has been earmarked for a woodland project. We can only hope that relevant archaeology is recognised and that it uncovers more evidence clarifying what this site is all about.

## SOAG visit to the Houses of Parliament

Report by Mike Green

On December 19<sup>th</sup> 2016 20 SOAG members and friends visited the Houses of Parliament - a trip facilitated by Nigel Peters through the office of John Howell, the MP for Henley, and organised by Mike Vincent. We had an excellent guide for a tour of all the areas open to the public, which included Westminster Hall, St Stephens Hall, the lobby areas, both chambers of Parliament, the voting chambers, the Royal Gallery and the Queen's Robing Room.

The meaning of 'open to the public' came as a surprise to some of us. Since medieval times, as subjects we have had the constitutional right of unhindered access to Parliament and our MPs, and the public is indeed free to walk around without appointment or booking – the only check being an airport-style security screening before entering the Palace. Having ourselves stood at the Dispatch Box in the morning, some of our number returned in the afternoon when the Commons was in session to watch Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn confront each other across it in the afternoon!

The oldest part of the Palace is of course Westminster Hall, built in 1097 and to which one of the largest hammer beam roofs in existence was added in 1393. It is a stunning space and, of course, one in which so many key events in our history have been played out. But time doesn't stand still and June 2016 saw the unveiling of a remarkable new window above the entrance from the Westminster Hall into St Stephens Hall. It's called New Dawn and celebrates 150 years since the campaign for women's votes began. The window lights celebrate all the individuals involved, and the illumination

varies continuously with the rise and fall of the Thames, just outside. It is beautiful and moving.

At the end of our tour we met John Howells in a small committee room. John has a background in archaeology and we had the chance to discuss with him some of the current concerns of local archaeologists, including changes to the planning process mooted in the new Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and also concerns about the resourcing of county museums.

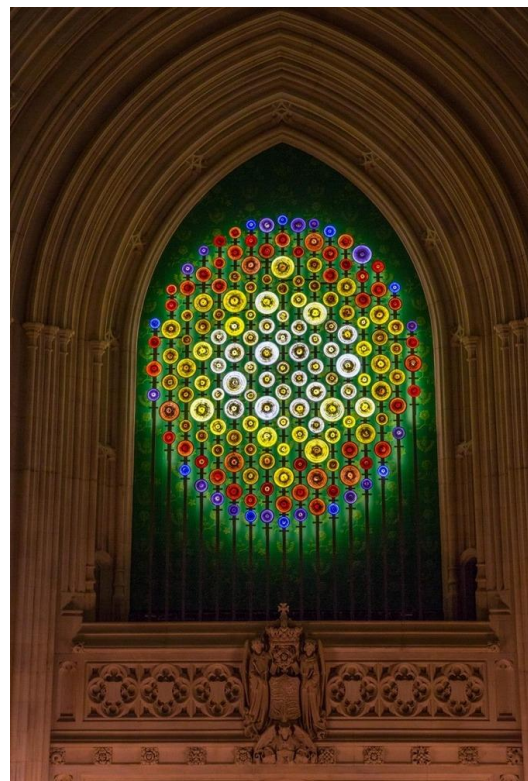


Fig. 1: New Dawn in St. Stephens Hall



Fig. 2: Some of the SOAG team in Westminster Hall, with Henley MP John Howell (somewhat obscured by SOAG Chairman Dave Carless) left of centre at the back!

The visit was followed by a very sociable lunch at the Red Lion pub just down the road in Whitehall.

## Open Day at Gatehampton 2016

Hazel Williams

The annual Gatehampton Open Day for 2016 was held on Sunday 18 September and went very well with over 100 visitors to the site. We were pleased to welcome friends from SOAG and other local societies, parents and children from Checkendon primary school, local visitors and passing walkers. The highlight of the display of site finds and information was, of course, the Gatehampton beaker, displayed in a slowly revolving display case (solar powered – SOAG at the forefront of new technology!)

Visitors were given a guided tour of the site by the usual team of Mike Green, Dave Jobling and Derek Birks; all three made an excellent job of explaining the site and our plans for the project to visitors. They

were kept busy all afternoon as there was a steady flow of visitors. Becky Morrison and Gail Eaton provided tea and cakes for visitors to round off their visit. A small group of children supervised by Phillippa Wray and Roelie Reed enjoyed some trowelling in Trench 7; some of them returned in the following few Sundays and we hope they continue to be inspired to take part in excavation.

My thanks to all those involved for their help in preparing the site in advance and on the day. We enjoy the opportunity to update those familiar with the site on our progress during the year and the event always brings in new people interested in getting involved in excavation.



*Fig. 1: Derek Birks (in the foreground) explaining trench 7 to visitors.*



*Fig. 2: Parents watching their kids having a go.*



*Fig. 3: Hazel Williams displaying our best finds of the year – including 'The Gatehampton Beaker' in its special display cabinet (see page 15 for more about its discovery).*



# Reports and Articles

## Gatehampton Farm Roman Villa Excavation

Interim Report 2016

Hazel Williams

### Introduction



Fig. 1: Site plan 2016

The Gatehampton Roman villa is a substantial 3rd – 4th century building set in a large ditched enclosure. The villa is part of a farmstead, set up in the 2nd century. Beyond the villa enclosure are field boundary ditches and tracks, a corn drier and cobbled yards. After the discovery of the farmstead by Oxford Archaeology in the mid-1980s, subsequent fieldwalking and excavation by SOAG led to the discovery of the villa building. The villa has been excavated in stages by the group since 1993 and a survey of the surrounding landscape in 2004.

Gatehampton Roman villa has provided easily accessible excavation experience for many people over the years and this is an important aspect of the Gatehampton project. Participation during 2016 was good and, although there were fewer diggers than the high number of previous years, most of them were experienced SOAG diggers. The annual Open day attracted a high attendance and is reported separately.

In 2016, excavation was focussed on the eastern end of the villa building in four trenches; it was planned

that, if possible, this work would be completed and the project would close at the end of the year. In the event, new and exciting features were discovered, including a cess pit in the north-eastern corner of the building and a very early mortar feature on the south side in Room 3. These features meant that during 2016 most of the excavation work was focussed on two of the four trenches - Trench 7 and Trench 16 - and the following report therefore covers only these two trenches.

### Trench 7



Fig. 2: View west across Trench 7 showing Room 8

The northern half of Trench 7 was backfilled early in 2016 leaving an area of trench 12 metres long and between four and six metres wide over part of Room 8 and the eastern end of South Corridor Room 3 (Fig. 2). No changes were made to the other trenches except for some extension into the hedge line on the west side of Trench 16.

### Discovery of mosaic tesserae

Prior to the backfilling of Trench 7, two small sondages, each approximately half a metre square were dug along the line of the north to south wall 7448/7491, where the wall line showed only as a mortar spread at floor level. The intention was to confirm there was a continuous foundation beneath, and this was proved, but there was an unexpected development; the discovery of over 100 small mosaic tesserae. These were within a soft mortary deposit, in a narrow gap, under 20 cms wide, between the east side of wall 7448/7491 and the end of chalk wall 7495 abutting it. The adjacent corners of rooms 9 and 10 were immediately investigated but no laid tesserae or evidence of tessellated floors were found. The floors of Rooms 7 and 8 had been looked at previously; in Room 8 there is evidence that large terracotta tesserae were laid around the edges of the room and mosaic floors usually have that type of wide border. However, no small mosaic tesserae were found in the levelling layers and floor surfaces,

and only one small grey tessera was found in the overlying demolition rubble.

There is also a substantial flint wall 7448/7491 separating Room 8 from the tesserae deposit. If there was a mosaic floor in the vicinity, it must have been comprehensively removed. In the villa building as a whole, very small numbers of tesserae are found within the building, this deposit of over 100 is the exception. Just under 20 tesserae were found scattered in the demolition deposits outside the bath house and a similar number were found at the east end of the building, again in demolition layers outside the building. The tesserae are mainly of white and grey stone that is not local and perhaps this material was valuable enough to be worth re-using elsewhere?

### Room 8

Just over half of Room 8 remained exposed after backfilling, leaving an area 3.5 metres long and 3 metres wide. As outlined above, excavation of the room prior to 2016 had found that it had a tessellated floor as there were two small patches of laid large terracotta tesserae still in place against the walls. There were also many loose tesserae within the sandy and chalky floor surface 7554, up to 500, but lying at all angles, giving the impression of a floor that may have been re-worked at some stage. The surface was also patched with areas of chalk at the northern end; the same method of maintaining floors seen in Central Room 2 and other parts of the building. The soft sandy levelling layer 7576 beneath the surface was very like that found in Rooms 5 and 6 previously and just over 20 cms deep.

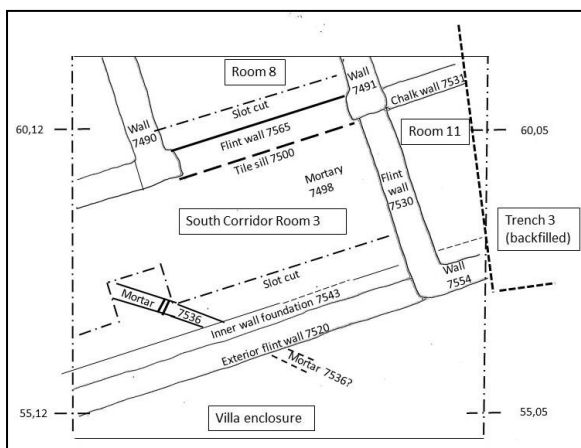
The only new work in Room 8 was a slot one metre wide cut into the levelling deposit 7576 along the south side of the room to look at the construction of the sill 7500; a line of large terracotta tiles set vertically.



Fig. 3: View of Wall 7565 in Room 8

Beneath the levelling layer a well-constructed flint wall footing 7565 was found (*Fig. 3*). The sill tiles about the southern side of the wall footing and it therefore pre-dates the sill and is consistent in alignment, and in the good quality of its construction, with the inner lateral wall line along the south side of the building from the bath house through to Room 8.

Wall 7565 appears to be contemporary with and built into wall 7490 to the east and possibly also wall 7490 to the west; it was reduced to two courses to form an opening along the south side of the room, giving access either directly to the exterior enclosure at that point or to South Corridor Room 3. The floors of both Room 8 and Room 3 were subsequently made up to the level of the sill with tessellated areas abutting the sill tiles.



### Room 3

*Fig. 4: Plan of Trench 7 showing Room 3*

Room 3 lies south of the sill 7500 and wall feature 7565 and is the eastern end of a long corridor that extends twenty metres along the south side of the building (*Fig. 4*). Whilst most of the corridor appears to have been a veranda with probably a half height wall separating the corridor from the outside, the extreme western and eastern ends are of more substantial construction and are enclosed by flint walls.

The upper floor surfaces along the length of the corridor consist of patches of laid large terracotta tessera, many loose tesserae and areas of chalk floor, probably laid to patch up the original tessellated surface once it had deteriorated. The section of corridor in the current area of Trench 7 has a small area of chalk floor surface close to the baulk on the west side but has little else except for two very small patches of laid tessera that abut the sill and some mortar remaining on the surface around them. The underlying levelling deposit is again quite sandy and

is about 20 cms deep, much like that used in Room 8. There are two shallow hearths in the surface of this deposit, recorded previously. The composition of the deposit in the last two metres at the east end of the room is more varied with a horizontal layer of re-used tiles about 10 cms below the upper level that are laid close to one of the hearths. There is also a substantial amount of flint and chalk rubble within the deposit at this end of the room; perhaps the use of available building material to make up the floor. It seems less likely to be collapsed wall as it is overlaid by the later floor surface.

In 2015 a slot had been cut into the levelling layer 7498 along the south side of the room that showed that, alongside the south wall 7520, there was an inner foundation wall footing 7543 and an area of hard mortar 7536. During 2016 the slot was extended to establish the relationship between the three features. As more of the overlying levelling deposit 7498 was removed it became clear that the mortar area 7436 was a distinct feature consisting of very hard yellowish mortar half a metre wide and edged with small flint stones.



*Fig. 5: View west showing the parallel grooves in mortar feature 7536*

There are two narrow V shaped grooves about 5 cms apart, across the feature; these are approximately 5 cms deep and 3 cms wide at the surface. It extends two metres from the baulk to the west and may curve slightly to pass under both inner foundation 7543 and wall 7520 (*Fig. 5*). It is on an alignment at about 40 degrees to the south wall 7520; different to that of any other walls found in the villa building and appears to pre-date the existence of the enclosed area of Room 3. By the end of 2016 traces of it were found south of wall 7520, outside the building.

The wall footing 7543 is approximately 50 cms wide, consists of one course of flint nodules and broken flint stones 10-15 cm in size. It has a loose

construction with little mortar apparent. 7543 was laid across mortar feature 7536 and does cut about 5 cms into the edge of the mortar in one small area. 7543 was overlaid by the levelling layer 7498 in Room 3 and appears to be all that is left of a wall demolished to make way for a new exterior wall 7520.

Wall 7520 was well built, approximately 55 cms wide and constructed on the same alignment but half over wall foundation 7543. There are two courses of flint stones above ground level; the flints are about 15-20 cms in size with flat dressed surfaces facing outward, separated by a 3-5 cm thick horizontal course of yellowish mortar and with slightly smaller flint stones packed within the wall, a typical construction for the building. One possible explanation for shifting a wall line just 30 cms further out may have been to achieve a better alignment with adjacent walls, perhaps wall 7564 to the east, or to replace a sub-standard wall with a better construction.

### Room 11

Room 11 had produced a pleasing number of copper alloy coins and small finds during 2015 in the demolition rubble 7529 over the chalk floor 7540 and so it was not a surprise that more items were found as the rest of the deposit was cleared in 2016. These included one early fourth century copper alloy coin in poor condition but with a reverse of Wolf & Twins

with star, also two more fragments of the metal strapping and two circular iron studs.

The eastern side of Trench 7 slightly overlaps the old Trench 3, the first major trench over the building that was backfilled in 2000. The process of digging down through the layers in Room 11 was in effect a repeat of work done in 1999-2000 and provides an interesting glimpse into the earlier work done at Gatehampton. *Figure. 6*, below, shows the section across the area between the outer south wall of the building and the inner chalk wall just under three metres away. This is part of a long section across the building, along the western baulk of Trench 3, drawn by Geoff Deakin in 2000.

The chalk floor surface 7540/3040 is quite clearly shown and does not extend right to the south wall 7564/3100. A large fragment of tegula roof tile is shown protruding from the face of the section in the soil and rubble over the floor 7529/3013. In 2015 and 2016 the demolition deposit above the chalk floor 7540 produced nine copper alloy coins; most of them common low value issues by Constantine 1 in the early fourth century (SOAG Bulletin No. 70, pp. 15 & 16) Three similar coins were found in Trench 3 in the rubble deposit over the chalk floor, close to the western edge of the trench. They appear to be part of the same group of early fourth century coins although not in very good condition and are listed in *Table 1* below.

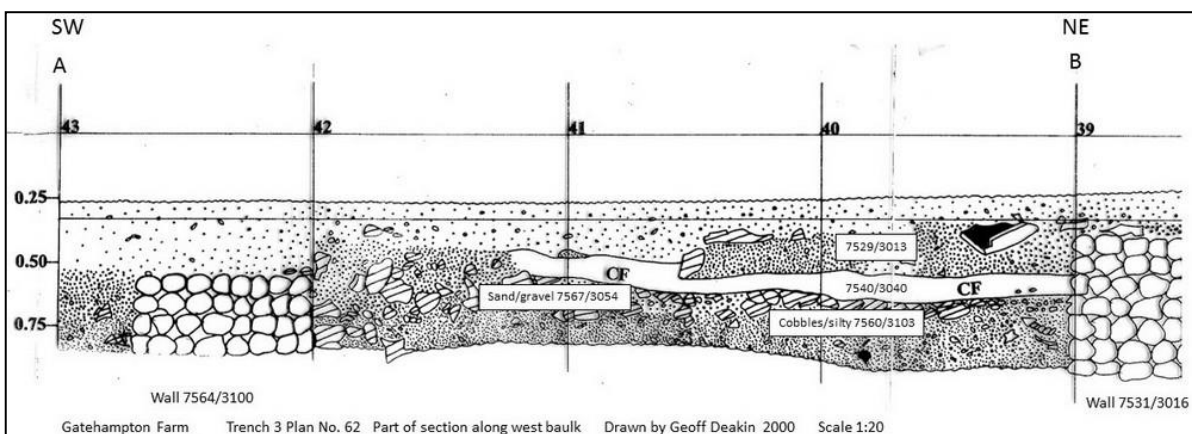


Fig. 6: Section across Room 11

Small Find No.	Obverse	Reverse	Date	Mint
100a	Constantine 1	Gloria Exercites: 2 standards	330-335	Illegible
100b	--	Gloria Exercites: 2 standards	4th century	-
100c	-	-	4th century	Trier TRP

Table 1: Coins found in Room 11

The composition of the levelling deposits under the chalk floor were found to be very mixed; gravelly sand under the chalk 7567/3054 and below this, lenses of silty and sandy layers, probably reflecting a random addition of available material to make up the levels. At about 20cms beneath the chalk floor silty deposits and loose flint cobbles (7570,7560, 7561/3103) are recorded in both trenches and it is at that level that finds become more frequent and suggest an earlier phase of occupation; fragments of Samian ware, blue glass and animal bone in Trench 3 and nails and more animal bones in Trench 7 along with and a well-preserved bronze hair pin (Fig. 7) and a fragment of what is probably South Gaulish black-slipped ware, distributed only until the early third century.

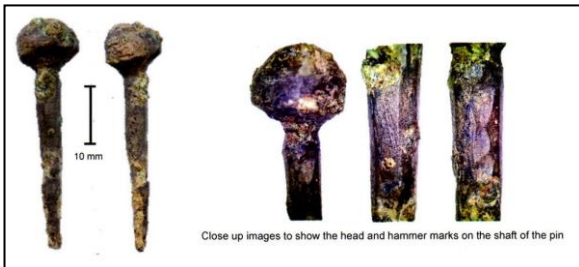


Fig.7: Copper alloy pin found in Room 11

There is no clear floor surface at this point and depth of the silty layer varies with the undulating surface of the natural beneath.

One interesting feature of Room 11 is a deposit of flints 7559 on the inner side of wall 7564 that appears to be the same as the inner wall foundation 7543 in Room 3, meaning that it probably continues under wall 7530, but this is still to be confirmed. The Trench 3 section shows a cluster of flint stones close to the wall 3100 and Trench 3 records note that a denser deposit of flints was found but were interpreted at the time as part of the demolition rubble from the wall.

## Trench 16

(Based on an article written for SOAG Messenger by Dave Jobling)

Trench 16 was opened in 2013 and it was immediately clear that there were two L shaped walls appearing within the narrow trench (Figs. 8 and 9). The southern "L" (context 16002) is formed from the villa's northern façade, meeting the eastern wall at a right angle, both showing levelling (or decorative) layers of tile. Built into this wall is the tile lined culvert (16002A). The northern "L" (16018) is cruder and thicker, the two parts again meeting at a right angle. In both cases, the east-west segments

disappear into the baulk of the trench. What was this northern L-shaped projection?

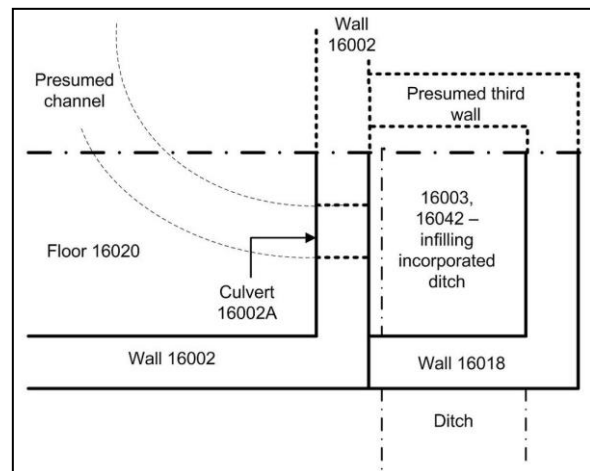


Fig. 8: Plan of cess pit area in Trench 16



Fig. 9: View of north eastern corner of the building and Dave Jobling in 'the cess pit'

It has no equivalents at Gatehampton, the outer walls of which are more-or-less straight along their entire lengths. We have begun to unravel the mystery, and in doing so, have uncovered one the site's most remarkable finds.

The key to solving the puzzle lay in the sluice and in the contents of the projection. It is believed that a third wall lies buried to the west of the projection, forming a square enclosure attached to the northern façade of the villa, and entered by the culvert. The projection was initially thought to be part of a truncated earlier building but it is now clear that it was added later.

Digging down into the contents of the projecting enclosure, there was a soft deposit 16003 (up to half a metre thick) containing masses of pottery and butchered animal bone. This is unlike deposits on the same level outside the enclosure, suggesting the enclosure was used as a dump.

Below that context was a deposit of loose mortar 16042 containing fragments of painted wall plaster, although the walls at this eastern end of the villa do not show traces of plaster or painting. This material has clearly been brought from elsewhere, probably while the western walls were being remodelled. This context proved to be up to 1.5 meters in depth (Fig 10)



Fig. 10: Trench 16: View of cess pit showing depth of enclosing walls

By this time, it was clear that the east-west part of the projection is very unusual. Most walls at Gatehampton are three or four courses proud of the surface. The inner lining of the dump has no fewer than eleven, the upper four being the usual dressed flint and rising above the surrounding ground level, those below being chalk blocks dug into the ground. Once finally dug out down to the natural geology, the enclosure showed itself to be two meters in depth.

In its lower levels, the mortar deposit revealed masses of animal bone, mostly sheep, and including a sheep skull cut expertly in half from top to bottom. Another is still embedded in the baulk. Also found was a large, heavily corroded iron object, possibly a key (Fig. 11), and piece of lead water pipe (Fig. 12), with an affixing iron nail still attached.



Fig. 11: SF 552 Part of a key found in Trench 16

Beneath that layer was a 10-15 cms deep context made up of human coprolites 16056, now

biologically inert and heavily mineralised. At this point, the relationship between the projection and the rest of the building became clear.



Fig. 12: SF 542 Fragment of lead water pipe with nail attached found in Trench 16

Inside the villa, a channel 16036 has been found under the chalk floor 16020. This leads to the culvert, and is believed to have contained a pipe, explaining the length of lead pipe found inside the enclosure. It is assumed that at the other end of the channel would have been the latrines, and that the enclosure acted as a cess pit.

The channel, the culvert, the projecting walls, the pipe, the coprolites and the depth of the enclosure form a coherent picture. It is the villa's toilet system (though not yet the latrines themselves), which was also at times used as a dump for building rubble and discarded bone and domestic rubbish.

At just above two meters down, in the north-eastern corner of the enclosure, a small piece of very fine, glazed, decorated pottery was found. Then some more, clearly all part of the same vessel (Fig. 13).

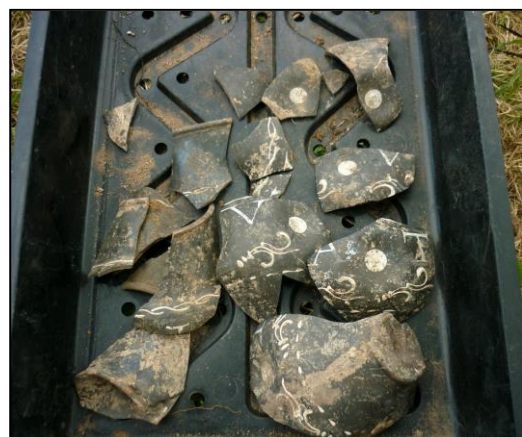


Fig. 13: The motto beaker fragments found in the cess pit

. . . and this was re-constructed by SOAG John Hefferan (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14: The reconstructed motto beaker

The vessel is a “motto beaker”. These are well known, though rare, associated with drinking wine, and usually inscribed with boozy slogans such as “long life”. It is of the “dimpled” form, with six regularly shaped depressions around the body of the vessel, each decorated with a white circle, denoting grapes. Also prominent are white barbotine depictions of vines. It is an altogether beautiful object, a fine example of Moselkeramik, made in Trier between 150 AD and the 300s, though not exported after 250.

Its inscription is IVVAT, Gatehampton’s only example of orthography. IVVAT has been variously interpreted as a misspelling of VIVAT, meaning “long life” (surely not all Romano-Gallic craftsmen were at the top of their trade, or fully literate?), or a transliteration of IUVAT, as in AUDENTIS FORTUNA IUVAT - Virgil’s “fortune favours the brave”. The beaker has subsequently been photographed in 3D by SOAG Richard Miller and can be viewed on the SOAG website.

In addition to the work on the cess pit area, excavation continued during 2016 on the remaining area of Trench 16 and this will be reported more fully in the next edition of *SOAG Bulletin*. Emerging features include the continuation of wall 16002 south to the edge of the trench. West of the wall 16002 and within the building, more of the chalk floor has been uncovered and a cobbled surface. Right at the end of 2016 a linear feature was emerging along the western side of the trench close

to the hedge (Fig 15). It is constructed with thick terracotta tiles laid flat in more than one layer and has a thin flint wall along the east side.



Fig. 15: Surveying in Trench 16. The newly emerging linear feature behind and to the left of Dave Jobling

The position of this feature is important as it may mark the western boundary of the workshop and cess pit area. There are plans to extend the trench further into the hedge line in 2017.

### Summary

Excavation during 2016 has produced more insights into the quite complex development of this part of the villa building but also left some puzzling questions to answer.

The slightly curved mortar structure in Trench 7 is the most enigmatic feature; its alignment does not relate to any previously excavated wall in the building. It obviously existed before the two rooms on the south side of the building; Rooms 3 and 11 were both built and modified later and the feature does not appear to connect with any other part of the building. What is interesting is that initial exploration of the surfaces adjacent to the mortar shows a sandy deposit on the north-eastern side associated with levelling layers within the building and reddish clayey silt on the south-western side that is seen in the enclosure. That would suggest a slightly concave curved wall enclosing an interior space that pre-dates the eastern end of the villa or was added to an early section of the building. Further exploration of this feature will be done in 2017.

The highlight of 2016 was, of course the discovery of the cess pit and the Gatehampton beaker. Only part of the fill of the cess pit area was excavated and it is hoped that more of it can be done in 2017. The plan is for the trench to be extended west toward the fence line and the hedge to be reduced to allow better access. It is probable that the sluice is in the centre of the south wall of the cess pit area and therefore the western end of the cesspit will be excavated during 2017. At the end of 2016 a linear

feature running north-south was emerging along the hedge line and this, along with the west wall of the cess pit, may mark the extent of the 'workshop/cesspit area' at the eastern end of the villa. Was the cesspit and working area added to the end of the building? Can dating evidence be found to show how the east end of the villa building was developed. It may be that like the western part of the building, it was gradually extended east and the cess pit was a later addition. What lies between the features uncovered in Trench 7 and those in Trench 16? Excavation in 2017 will explore these questions when it is hoped that there will be time to excavate Trenches 17 and 18 more fully.

### Participation and Acknowledgements

2016 was a relatively quiet year at Gatehampton in terms of the numbers involved; 35 diggers of whom most were experienced SOAG volunteers (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16: 21 diggers lunching on a Sunday in August

This allowed more time to focus on excavating and recording key features but several family groups and students did take part; encouraging young volunteers is an important aspect of the project and the Open Day provided a good opportunity for this. I would like to thank all the volunteers, but particularly the SOAG Gatehampton team for all their hard work during 2016.

Many of the Gatehampton diggers have taken part in the project for a long time and in 2016 we said farewell to two of our most experienced diggers; Dave Jobling and Phillippa Wray (Fig. 17)

Phillippa has worked at Gatehampton and most of SOAG's other sites during the last twelve years. Her skill at trowelling, her extensive excavation experience and ability to train and encourage new diggers will be missed. It was Phillippa who discovered the mystery mortar feature in Trench 7, leaving a puzzle for us to solve. Dave joined the project only

five years ago as a beginner in archaeology but rapidly became a skilled digger, taking on the supervision of Trench 16 in 2013. It is pleasing that the highlight of Dave's last season of digging at Gatehampton was his discovery of the Gatehampton Trier beaker, after a substantial amount of digging down into the fill of the cess pit.



Fig. 17: Farewell to Phillippa Wray, and Dave Jobling

I would like to thank them both for their dedication to the project and all the work they have done for SOAG. Special thanks also this year to Richard Miller who spent many hours photographing the Trier pot to create excellent interactive 3D photographs of the pot on the SOAG website.

None of the work described in this report would be possible without the kind co-operation of the landowners and it is a pleasure to thank the folks at Daisytown Ltd for allowing us to continue to dig this remarkable site. Particular thanks also to Bob and Liz Jones for all their help and support and to Robin Cloke for his interest in the project.

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For a formal description of a Moselkeramik pot, see <http://potsherd.net/atlas/Ware/MOS L.html>.

For an interactive view of the Gatehampton beaker, see <http://www.soagarch.org.uk/beaker.html>

# Blewbury Big Dig

## 5th Interim Report

Lindsey Bedford and Dave Carless

### Introduction and background

In 2016 for the first time our joint research project with Blewbury Local History Group moved out of the village itself and onto the downs. In particular we surveyed a large rectangular cropmark on Churn Hill (SU 52248407) lying within the Blewbury Bronze Age barrow cluster and less than 3 km from the Roman temple site at Lowbury Hill.



Fig. 1: Aerial photograph of Churn Hill showing crop marks [Photo: Andy Moore]

The cropmarks (Fig. 1) are well known and suggest a double ditch enclosure, with features within and further extensive linear features and round barrows outside. As part of the National Mapping Programme, in the Lambourn Downs report (2002) English Heritage digitised these features (Fig. 2) and identified them as a possible Roman temple. Others have suggested it could be an Iron Age *vierechtschanze* (a four-sided ditched enclosure). The site has not previously been investigated.

A team of 20 volunteers (and a dog) from SOAG and Blewbury undertook the fieldwork in dry conditions in April and May 2017 (Fig. 3). A grid of 20m squares was established over the double enclosure and a range of techniques including, geophysical surveys (magnetometer and resistivity), auger survey, metal detecting survey, field walking and environmental sampling were used.

### Auger survey and environmental sampling

Two short transects across features were augured at 1m intervals. The plough soil on the site was typically 200 to 300mm deep above natural chalk. The first

transect was across the south western double ditch. Both ditches were approximately 4m wide and 1.1m deep.

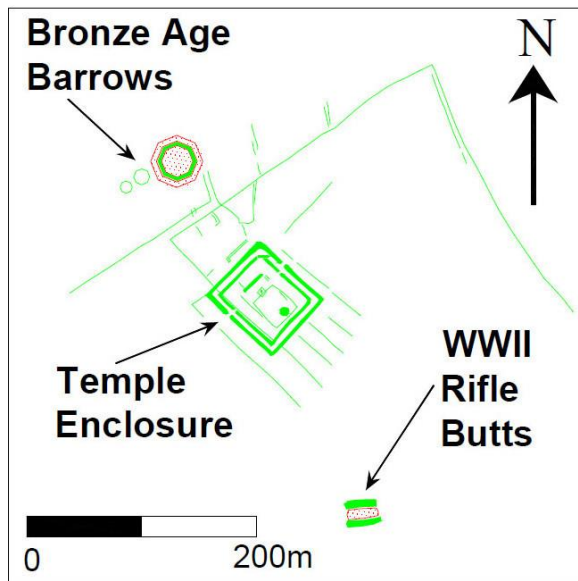


Fig. 2: Digital transcription by English Heritage



Fig. 3: The team enjoying a well-earned tea break [Photo: Mike Green]

### Geophysical surveys

The geophysics results (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5), though clearly confirming the location of features and adding more detail, are difficult to interpret because of the presence of modern ploughing and tractor tracks almost exactly parallel to one axis of the rectangular enclosure. Orthogonal lines suggest either further ditches or possibly the remains of

structures within. Of particular interest is the dark circular feature which is also visible on the crop mark images.

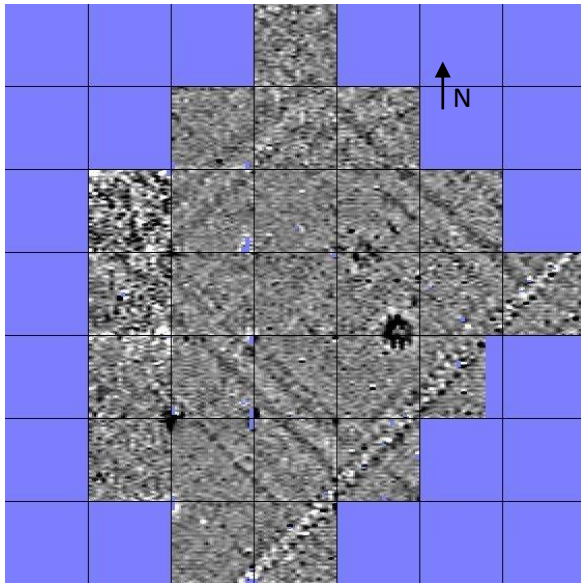


Fig. 4: Magnetometer survey

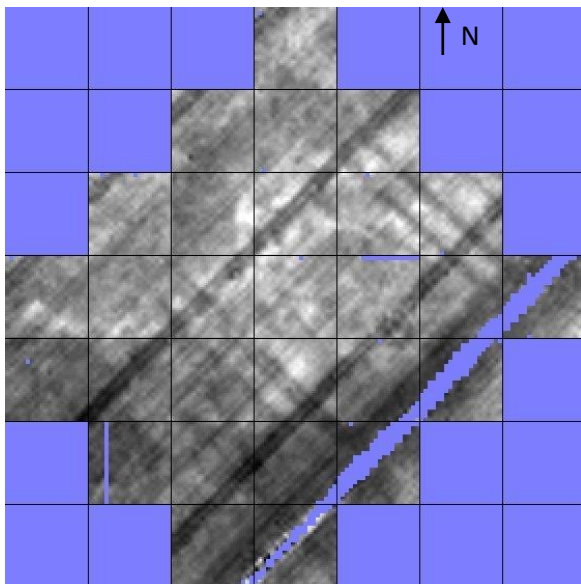


Fig. 5: Resistivity survey

The second transect was across the dark circular feature. This was 10m diameter and broadly conical to a soil depth of 1.8m above the chalk. At the centre was a deep void to natural chalk at 6.8m depth. Beyond the soil layer (approx. 2m) there was little resistance on the auger, which could be pushed down. This appears to be an unfilled shaft of perhaps 1 to 2m diameter.

It was noted from the auger that a layer of soil approximately 100 to 200mm thick at the bottom of the conical section (circa 1.6m deep) was a darker colour than that above. It was thought that this

might be the remains of a wooden capping and so samples were collected and subsequently examined.

Possible interpretations of this shaft are discussed further below.

### Metal detecting survey

As there were crops up to a height of 200 to 300mm in the field, metal detectors could not be used close to the surface. Nevertheless, 112 metal items were found. These were almost all consistent with military use of Churn Hill as a rifle range for many decades of the 19th and 20th centuries (Fig. 6). These included a military button from the 82nd Regiment of Foot (Prince of Wales Volunteers) 1793 – 1881, 81 cupro-nickel rifle bullets, 9 lead bullets, and 5 musket balls (Fig. 7). No metal objects relating to earlier occupation were found.



Fig. 6: Army camp located at Churn Farm [Historic England – Viewfinder]



Fig. 7: A selection of the different types of bullet found through metal detecting [Photo: Lindsey Bedford]

## Field walking

Because of the crops in the field, walking was confined to the tractor tracks (approx. 2m wide), and these were compressed and therefore not ideal. Two tracks pass through the rectangular enclosure and one just outside. The survey on one of these was extended to the field boundaries (total length 1.1km) to see if there was any variation in the concentration of finds in the enclosure area.

A total of 63 ceramic sherds were collected, mostly of unremarkable redware but including a few glazed pieces. None could be identified as Roman or prehistoric. In addition two pieces of glass, one of possible slag, one of worked flint and five pyrites nodules were found.

There seemed to be a greater concentration of ceramic material around the enclosure site but this may relate to modern military usage.

Unfortunately none of the material found nor images produced provide any useful dating evidence.

## Interpretation

The double ditched enclosure resembles a large Roman temple ambulatory but there are no indications of any masonry remains within it. Faint anomalies in the geophysics may suggest slightly more ephemeral structures existed. There do appear to be possible entrances on the NE and SW sides, not quite in line and which cut through both ditches. Several other ditch intersections indicate several phases of construction.

The clearest geophysics anomaly in the enclosure is the circular feature (shaft) centrally located towards the SE edge. Several theories have been examined as to the possible nature and function of the circular shaft. It has been postulated that it could be a well but this notion has been discounted as to reach the water table in this location the shaft would need to be significantly deeper. Several extant wells in the vicinity, and lower in the landscape, have a typical depth of around 60m to reach the water table.

Chalk quarrying via a shaft (a *Dene hole*) has also been discounted as there is an abundance of chalk on and near the surface so mining for it seems unnecessary. These shafts are mainly found in Kent and Essex with examples at Bexley, Gravesend and Thurrock.

A natural swallow hole (sink hole) was also considered as these do occur in chalk landscapes. This does remain a possibility and may have been recognised as something extraordinary appearing in the already established ritual landscape. It was

conceivably extraordinary enough to enclose and revere as a portal to the underworld and be used as a 'ritual shaft'.

Shafts associated with religious sites have been excavated, for example those at Wilsford in Wiltshire (Ashbee et al 1989) and Keston in Kent (Piercy Fox 1967). The Wilsford shaft has the same weathering cone as suspected at Blewbury where the original opening has weathered and widened, funnelling down to a narrower main shaft. It was originally thought that a lens of organic material the auger went through at circa 1.6m in Blewbury might have been the remains of a wooden capping with voids beneath. Initial analysis however, by Cathie Barnett (Reading University) show it to be a mixed organic sample including fragments of waterlogged wood, molluscan and fine herbaceous matter with a sandy matrix and not a decayed timber capping but perhaps a buried soil layer. If the shaft did have a seal this may have decomposed and dropped into the fill leaving a compact soil layer over a void.

Other ritual shafts have yielded stratified deposits including pottery, refuse and numerous skeletal remains, some of which may be accidental occurrences but others are more ritualistic such as the 20 dogs in the shaft at Springhead in Kent (Andrews et al 2011).

No ritual shafts are known in this particular part of the country and the only way to find out the true nature of what we have in Blewbury is to do a comprehensive excavation of this exciting and potentially important site.

## Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the landowners, Beeswax Farming Ltd, for allowing us access to their land.

Particular thanks to Cathie Barnett for the environmental analysis and Andy Moore for aerial photography.

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# Excavations at High Wood, Harpsden, Oxfordshire

## Interim Report 2016

Alan Hall and David Nicholls

### Introduction



Fig. 1: Regional setting displaying rivers and settlement; Locality showing site relative to roads and woodlands [after OS map]

A Romano-British site in The Chilterns, at Harpsden, Henley-on-Thames, is under investigation by the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group (SOAG), see Fig. 1. Unfortunately, the site has been subject to serious plundering by illicit metal detectorists and the two seasons of excavation have as yet failed to elicit the nature of a building on the site. But some clear wall lines and flooring have now been exposed. However, because of the plundering, little *in situ* stratigraphy has been found.

Therefore, investigation and excavation is continuing, and it is hoped to discern some relationships with other nearby Roman archaeological features in the landscape. These other features, a possible Roman Road, a double ditched Enclosure and a 16m diameter Mound, are described

in more detail under *Location and local features* below.

### Background

The site of a probable Roman building first came to notice when the Henley-on-Thames Archaeological and Historical Group (HAHG) excavated what was initially believed to be the base of a windmill mound. Over an intermittent period from May 1977 to 1983 they re-interpreted the mound as a spoil heap from excavation of a suspected nearby Roman Villa.

In 2013 during dowsing within High Wood, undertaken by J. Ridout Sharpe, C. Francis, and P. Carter, much disturbance of ground conditions was observed and, following further examination, large quantities of Roman tile and pottery shards were

found on the surface, along with considerable quantities of flint from masonry structures.

Three small geophysical surveys were targeted over and adjacent to the excavation site. In late 2014 David Thornley of Reading University and Mike Green of SOAG conducted successive magnetometry investigations. The initial survey revealed no clear diagnostic indications but a later survey produced results suggestive of linear features. Rafael Korzinsky from Reading University used hand-held Ground Penetrating Radar but this did not produce conclusive results, possibly due to the massive extent of localised ground disturbance.

### Location and local features

The Romano-British site lies in mainly deciduous woodland on the Phillimore estate (see Fig. 1) at an altitude of 90m.

Recent study of old maps and documents has shown that the wood has undergone changes of use throughout its existence, areas having been at different times part of an open field system and, later, given over to coppicing. In particular, a Parish Map of 1840 shows that the older heart of High Wood was probably to the north of the area presently under investigation.

The site covers about 1 acre (0.4 hectares) with the core area at 475100 179580. The geology is Winter Hill Gravels with pockets of clay. The underlying chalk is at a depth of probably no more than 2m.

The site is located on high ground bounded by shallow east-west folds in the land to both the north and the south. The deciduous woodland cover is underlain throughout with brambles and bracken, which necessitated extensive clearance to reveal the terrain.

The evidence of previous incursions is striking: deep pits and up-thrown heaps give an appearance which present-day investigators have likened to a First World War battle field.

### The Enclosure

Google Earth imaging has revealed the crop marks of a double-ditched enclosure lying close to the south east of the excavation site (see Fig. 2). Although not yet investigated or dated, it nevertheless exhibits the characteristics of an Iron Age or early Romano-British enclosure. Further work is projected, which will be informed by a geophysical survey in 2017. To the north of this feature, lying just within the southern edge of the wood, a deep ditch runs parallel and may be associated with the possible enclosure.



Fig. 2: Double-ditched enclosure From Google Earth

### The Mound

The Mound lies some 100 meters to the west of the excavation site, is roughly circular, and is approximately 16 metres in diameter.

The records of HAHG indicate that in their 1977–83 excavations they recovered a metric tonne of Roman ceramic building material, 2237 sherds of pottery, over a thousand pieces of wall plaster, a quantity of animal bone, and 17 worn coins dating from the early 1st to the late 4th century.

Evidence of probable foundation walling was exposed during extensive excavation and the records suggest that there were possibly two walls running on a north-west to south-east alignment, which seemed to be of similar construction to the wall found in SOAG's 2016 excavation in Trench 3.

During their 1977-83 work, HAHG had been troubled by the activities of unauthorised metal detectorists who were disturbing and plundering not only the mound but an area immediately to the east of the site where they had exposed walls and destroyed others (Cottingham, 1996).

This feature is problematic. If it is a spoil heap relating to the main excavation, then it is remarkably inconveniently placed and might suggest the presence of another Roman building lying nearby. The finds from here cannot presently be located but there is photographic evidence in the HAHG archive that a few plastic bags - which presumably contained artefacts from the site - were reburied on site. Whether to pursue these during the current exercise has yet to be decided but a decision will follow further fieldwork in the immediate area.

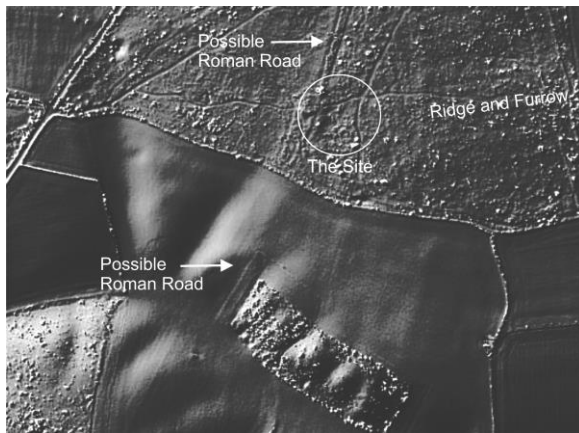


Fig. 3: LIDAR Image of the site

[Source <https://houseprices.io/lab/lidar/map>]

### The possible Roman Road

A dowsing operation in 2014 revealed the apparent side ditches and agger of a minor Roman-type road running north-north-east to south-south-west across the wood and pointing in the direction of Henley-on-Thames. The line of the ditches is clear on LIDAR imaging of the site (see Fig. 3) but cannot be seen further to the north of the wood although there appears to be an alignment of possible ditches in the field to the south which may merit investigation. Trial trenching in 2015 within the wood was limited by tree growth to a section across the western side of the road. The side ditch was clear and a plain gravel surfaced agger was suggested but there was no sign of other metallurgy.

Although a Roman road is suggested, questions remain:

- on the LIDAR image, the apparent side ditches do not appear to continue northwards into the older heart of the High Wood
- a small number of pieces of Romano-British CBM were found within the construction of the 'agger'

A further full width section is proposed for 2017.

## Excavations

### Test Pitting in 2015

Initial investigation was conducted within a 30m x 30m area which was laid out at right angles to a baseline which was oriented 35° east of magnetic north. Within this area eight 1m x 1.5m pits were excavated with a further 3m x 4m area (Trench W00). Large flint nodules and Roman ceramic building material (CBM) were present in varying quantities throughout.

An apparent wall, loose flint rubble, CBM, and significant quantities of quern/millstone pieces

became visible during the clearance of the site and this was investigated as Trench W00.

The 'wall' was found not to be a significant feature, being composed of loose flint rubble and small quantities of CBM without any form of bonding.

Structural features were found only in Test Pit 4, which revealed the corner of a mortared wall, with a return oriented north-east to south-west that was subsequently seen to connect with walls later excavated in 2016 in Trench 3.

A significant quantity – 2kg – of bone was recovered and analysed.

### Excavations in 2016

The area of excavation had been initially laid out for recording on a grid and spit system and, while these grids were noted, a system of recording individual contexts within numbered trenches was substituted in 2016.

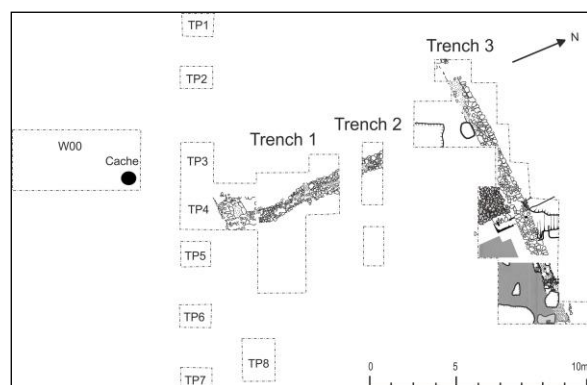


Fig. 4: Layout of the Romano-British site

**Trench 1** (see Fig. 4) was sited to pick up a continuation of the wall revealed in the previous year's test pitting (TP4). This wall was found and seen to continue for the full width of the trench. It was constructed of flints bedded in a strong mortar some 5 courses high. Many of the outer flints were napped but the construction was somewhat irregular without any selection of larger stones or 'headers' for the outer layers and with a slight 'kink' and bulge at the northern end. This showed a very different construction to the wall in Trench 3.

The trench was excavated down to the 'natural' without finding any evidence of a floor.

The surrounding matrix throughout the trench was mixed soil and CBM exhibiting no clear stratigraphy such that it was concluded that the area had probably been excavated and back-filled in recent times. Pottery was found at all levels as well as quantities of bone, glass, and two coins.

**Trench 2** revealed a 1m continuation of the wall constructed in a similar manner - although only four courses in height - and with a disturbed surrounding matrix as in Trench 1 (see Fig. 4). There was no evidence of a floor.

**Trench 3** was situated over a wall showing at ground surface level and was extended both to the east and west as the feature was unearthed (see Fig. 4). The full extent of the wall was not revealed. It appears to continue further both to east and west. As in Trenches 1 and 2 it was clear that the area had been subject to substantial earlier disturbance: CBM was mixed with woodland topsoil and with some floor tile being evident at higher levels than roof tiles and, additionally, what appeared to be a 'tip line' of tiles, showing in section, was exposed.

The wall was of a more regular construction than that seen in trenches 1 and 2, being 65cm in breadth, extending for 13m, and built of regularly laid flints with 'headers' on the outsides napped to form a smooth outer surface, all set in a firm mortar. It was 3 courses (50cm in height), at its highest in the centre, but gradually degrading towards the extremes of the trench. A 'depression' area towards the centre required two additional courses to provide stabilization.

At the eastern end of the trench bounded by the southern side of this main wall was an *opus signinum* floor, some 8cm thick, which was overlaid, in a small area only, by a skim of finer mortar. Pottery and ferrous items were found in sampling below the floor and pockets of root disturbance pierced this layer. A small area showed evidence of burning indicating a later hearth or fire. This was one of the few contexts to provide sealed stratigraphy.

The threshold and short stub of wall projecting south from the main wall was only partially excavated. However, the mortar floor stopped at the threshold in a clear straight edge. There was no evidence of paving to the threshold but on the western side was a surface of rammed flints which may indicate an outside yard (see Fig. 5).

The stub wall was soundly constructed in a firm mortar with a strengthening course of tiles below the top course. The southern side of the threshold was not excavated as it lay under the baulk of the trench.

Clearly, we might expect that further building remains would lie to the immediate south of this area.

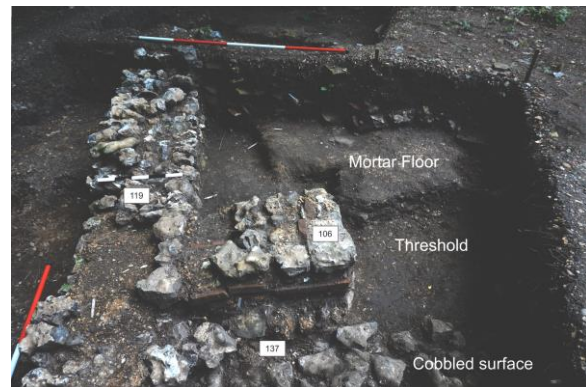


Fig. 5: Eastern end of Trench 3

To the north of the main wall, apparently outside the building and at level below the foundation of the wall, was a pit. It was partially excavated because only one quadrant of this (1m x 1.25m) lay within the bounds of the trench. At the base of the pit lay some large adjoining sherds of Late Iron Age to early Romano-British pottery with a latest date of AD 70.

### Finds

Apart from a few sherds of pottery found in the pit lying immediately outside the building, and a few from under the mortar floor, no other finds from the excavation were in secure stratified archaeological context and can give only a general indication of the occupation dates and status of the site. All will be subject to expert review and report in due course.

Although clearly identified and discussed the finds have not yet been assigned definite date ranges and will, in due course, be incorporated into full reports on classes of artefact from the site. Those 2015 finds reports were:

### Finds recorded from 2015

Reports on many of the 2015 finds have been published previously (Nichols, 2016). The 2015 coins and metalwork finds have been included with the 2016 finds reports in the following section.

### Bones and Molluscs

The assemblage was dominated by sheep and goat with cattle and pigs secondary. It was noted that this array could be indicative of a temple site (Ridout Sharpe and Carter, 2016, 34).

### Chain Mail

Four masses of Lorica Hamata articulated mail links were X-radiographed by Wiltshire Conservation Service (C2015423, J2187). These were found to fall within the constructional and size parameters of Roman-period mail found elsewhere in the British Isles (Mould, 2016, 38).

**Pottery**

The collection of more than 1600 sherds, which comprised the majority of coarse wares, was sorted and weighed (Nicholls, 2016, 39) but remains to be identified as to form and to be incorporated into the recording system subsequently adopted for the site.

**Querns and Millstones**

A collection of 30 pieces of quern and millstone were recovered, of which eight derive from rotary querns and which were formed of Lodsworth Greensand or Old Red Sandstone. Six pieces of millstone were identified that were formed from Millstone Grit.

The surprisingly large corpus indicates the existence of organized and centralized grain processing in the area (Shaffrey 2016, 33).

**Coins**

The twenty-five coins recovered include one coin of Domitian (AD 81–96) and one of Gallienus or Claudius (AD 253–268) with the remainder falling within the fourth century AD (Nicholls, 2016, 27). The greater proportion were recovered from metal detector searches within control of the site operations.

A total analysis will be undertaken by a suitable specialist.

**Finds from 2016****Metalwork**

A small amount of metalwork was recovered. The items were X-radiographed by Wiltshire Conservation Service. These items were:

- a Decorative Plate rivet
- an 'S'-shaped building brace with residues that suggest use on a wooden building. This may have been an ornamental ferrous forging fixed to a door. The weight is approximately 1.2kg and although in two pieces, was approximately 400mm in length. cursory inspection by Oxford Archaeology suggests a dissimilar metal placed under the centre of this is part of a larger base which has survived
- a decorative plate with hook, weighing approximately 800grms, which had probably been used on a wooden item, possibly from a doorway
- several rivets and a bracket, which are likely to have been used with large wooden structures or possibly large pieces of furniture. In addition, some 3kg of miscellaneous nails, fittings, boot studs, and knife blades were recovered. Further

x-ray analysis is being undertaken on particular items

Additionally, 166g of slag and 254g of roofing nails were recovered.

**Pottery**

All pottery from the 2015 and 2016 excavations has been classified using the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) coding system (MOLA 2014).

Field analysis indicates occupation from the Late Iron Age throughout the Romano-British period as tabulated:

Pottery	Weight (grams)	%
Total Iron Age/ C1	1139	2.47
Total C2	4478	9.71
Total C1 - C3	571	1.24
Total C2 - C3	1255	2.72
Total C3 - C4	2388	5.18
Total C1 - C4	36275	78.68

There was a wide variety of pottery fabrics present with a typical, but small, presence of imported wares in the early period.

Pottery	Weight(grams)
Alice Holt, Surrey (early industry)	62
Alice Holt, Farnham (later industry)	835
Black Burnished Style	565
Highgate Wood Poppy Head Beakers	179
Cologne Colour Coated	11
Moselkeramik	7
Swan Wood, Nettlebed Local Ware	570
Nene Valley Colour Coated	23
Oxford Industry	874
Central Gaulish Samian	170
Unclassified greywares	42042

Mean sherd weight is 10.62g and mean Estimated Vessel Equivalent of rims is 8.27%, which is reflective

of the heavy disturbance, and possibly selective looting, of the site.

The understanding of the sources of grey sandy wares is a problem ubiquitous to the study of pottery for the period and, as a generality, it has been conventional to emphasise the dominance of the Alice Holt potteries of the Hampshire/Surrey border. However, it has been possible to recognise a significant presence of sherds from the near locality at the apparent (but unexcavated) kiln site at Swan Wood, Nettlebed. As to the remaining greywares, it is apparent that much may be from as yet unidentified, local regional sources (Paul Booth, pers. comm.).

Similarly, sherds which were classified as 'Alice Holt, Farnham' and 'Highgate Wood Poppy Head Beakers' were similar in both form and fabric to the wares of those potteries, but it is possible that they may be of a more local and unsourced regional manufacture (Paul Booth, pers. comm.).

## Conclusions

Clearly, these results strongly indicate the site of a substantial building or buildings of the Romano-British period. The high ground of the western part of the Chiltern Hills holds few known remains of this period, the nearest known building lying at Harpsden (distance 1.25km) and which was not excavated or published to modern standards. The Hambleden Villa (distance 10km) lies on a valley floor and may not be comparable in terms of function with a hill-top site. A possible comparator may be a Roman building excavated at Bix, some 5.7km to the north-west and which has received private publication only (SOAG Bulletin 61, 2006).

The extent and function of the building is not known but targeted geophysical survey and test pitting should inform an excavation strategy to answer these questions. Furthermore, the possible existence of an adjacent road of the period may indicate the possibility of a more-extensive settlement.

The nearby mound is problematical in that it cannot be assumed that the building material and artefacts therein come from the building under investigation. It could indicate the presence of further undiscovered buildings nearby or, possibly, a roadside settlement.

Expert reports on finds will be commissioned in due course but, at this stage, spot-dating of pottery and coinage indicates a date range throughout the Late Iron Age and Romano-British periods.

While the bone assemblage may indicate a temple site, it might equally suggest a settlement that exploited the surrounding downland for sheep husbandry.

The presence of Roman period chain mail is very unusual on a rural site. It could suggest occupation by a member, or former member, of the Roman military, or alternatively - as has been suggested - it may be a ritual deposit or gift at a temple.

Disappointingly, this work has established that the site has been the subject of previous substantial digging and undisturbed stratigraphy was encountered only in the pit to the north of the building. An understanding of the building and its function will depend on identifying intact archaeology, which may possibly exist within the tree lines to the east-west and south of the areas thus far excavated.

Further investigation and excavation of the site is planned for 2017, and hopefully we will also be able to develop plans for investigation of the other "interesting" local features.

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## A Finest Hour

Ian Clarke

Summer 2017: we are into the peak season for field archaeology and the diggers are out there getting alternately hot and dusty or wet and muddy. But not everyone who loves archaeology is into digging holes in the ground and for some, staring down at yet another jumble of flints – “It might be another wall” – can wear thin after a while. So why not try a completely different kind of archaeological summer outing?

My birthday present from Catherine this year is a 60 minute ‘Ancient England by Tiger Moth’ flight with *Finest Hour Experiences*. Their De Havilland DH82A Tiger Moth, T7109, was built by Morris Motors at Cowley in 1940 (it’s three years older than me!) and has been beautifully restored in WWII camouflage. We are flying out of Chiltern Park, a small grass airfield near South Stoke which provides the perfect ‘biplane era’ setting. It’s the 21 June, the hottest June day for 40 years. Watching the aircraft being refuelled, my thoughts drift back to June 1940 when the Air Ministry also recorded exceedingly high temperatures: ‘at Oxford the mean maximum temperature was the highest for June in a record back to 1881’. This was the month when Britain first faced the might of Germany alone and Churchill

delivered his great peroration: ‘... the Battle of France is over ... the Battle of Britain is about to begin ... Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, *‘This was their finest hour’*’.

There’s plenty of time for a good look round the aircraft and Chris Thompson, my instructor, explains all the details. Designed and first flown in 1931, the ‘Tiger’ became the principle basic training aircraft for British and Commonwealth pilots, right through to the early ‘50s, and to meet the demands of the War around 9000 of them were built. Although it looks frail to modern eyes it is in fact a tough little aeroplane, as befits a basic trainer. We don leather flying jacket, helmet and goggles, which might seem overkill for the hottest day of the year but not when you are going to have an 80mph wind around your neck. I climb into the front seat and get strapped in. Chris runs through the pre-start checks and then our ground-crewman, Mark Wright, takes control for the start-up: “Throttle Set, Contact!” and Chris replies “Contact!” and gives the ‘thumbs up’. Mark switches on the front magnetos, swings the prop and with a stuttering roar the Gipsy Major engine bursts into life and settles down to a smooth idle.



Fig. 1: Refuelling the Tiger Moth

Photo: Ian Clarke

A short taxi out to the end of the runway, run up the engine and test the magnetos; line up and open the throttle wide and we're racing forward over the grass, tail up and in just a few seconds we're airborne. Crossing the Thames, we head west over the Berkshire Downs towards Lambourne and our first ancient site. Membury Camp/Fort is a large Iron Age hillfort of about 14ha enclosed by an impressive ditch, with stone and earth banks on each side. It lies on the border of Berkshire and Wiltshire and is quite well preserved, despite some damage done when the wartime RAF Membury airfield was built right alongside.

Next we fly north to Alfred's Castle, a smaller Iron Age hillfort, which older SOAG members will remember was investigated as part of the University of Oxford's *Hillforts of the Ridgeway* project in the late '90s, directed by Gary Lock and Chris Gosden. Occupied from the Early Iron Age, a late 1<sup>st</sup> century Romano-British farm was discovered inside the hillfort. Here we also have a superb view of Ashdown House, the 17<sup>th</sup> century 'hunting lodge' built by William Craven, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Craven and Viscount Craven of Uffington. It was supposedly intended for the 'love of his life' Elizabeth of Bohemia, the 'Winter Queen', but she died before it was completed. The sarsen stones originally used to face the hillfort ramparts provided a ready source of stone for the construction of the house!



Fig. 2: Alfred's Castle and Ashdown House  
Photo: Oxon Images

From here it's just a short flight north to the Ridgeway and along it to the Early Neolithic 'Wayland's Smithy' chambered long barrow. By far the oldest monument we will see today, it has been radiocarbon dated by the Universities of Cardiff and Central Lancashire (funded by English Heritage) to the 35<sup>th</sup> century BC – a thousand years older than the Great Pyramid! A little further along the Ridgeway and we reach the Late Bronze Age Uffington Castle, Dragon Hill and the White Horse, the oldest chalk-cut

figure in Britain. The view from an open cockpit at low level is magnificent, the best you can get of this beautiful horse – or dragon, or whatever it is! Uffington Castle was also part of the *Hillforts of the Ridgeway* project and was found to have been remodelled and reused in Romano-British times, by which time the White Horse was perhaps already a 1000 years old. There was no evidence of occupation so it is assumed it was used for ceremonial or celebratory gatherings in association with the horse.

Leaving the chalk escarpment behind, we fly north-east over the Vale of White Horse to Cherbury Camp, an Early Iron Age settlement just north of the village of Charney Bassett. This is a 'hillfort like' site but unusual in being built on low-lying ground a little south of the Thames. A geophysical survey of the interior by Oxford University (Bartington Grad601 gradiometer) revealed clear evidence of many round houses and gullies indicating intensive settlement over a long period of time. Just to the west and pinpointing the Cherbury site is the splendid mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Pusey House, still in private ownership.

There follows the surprise of the day. A radio call by Chris has cleared us to fly north of the Thames into the Brize Norton CTR (an RAF Control Zone) to see the Devil's Quoits, a Late Neolithic stone circle that is one of the best kept archaeological secrets of Oxfordshire. Before the War the henge existed as a slight earthwork in a field with just one stone of the circle still in its original position.



Fig. 3: Devil's Quoits

Photo: Chris Thompson

It was excavated in the summer of 1940 by W. F. Grimes, under the auspices of the Ashmolean Museum and HM Ministry of Works, just before it disappeared without trace under RAF Stanton Harcourt – the main concrete runway was under construction at the time over a third of the site! The aerodrome opened in September 1940 and became a home to RAF No.10 OTU (Operational Training Unit)

for Bomber Command; Winston Churchill flew from here in January 1943 for the secret Casablanca Conference with President Roosevelt, when they discussed the plans for ending the war.

The aerodrome was disbanded in 1946 and the concrete runways were largely broken up in modern times for vast gravel extraction and then landfill. Excavations by the then Oxford Archaeological Unit in the '70s and '80s, in advance of the gravel extraction, revealed the complete plan of the henge and this small area was partially protected. Between 2002 and 2008 the circle was restored: the bank was rebuilt (to about half height) with material brought in and the ditch excavated to an Early Roman level to preserve the earlier archaeology; a number of the stones were found buried and these were re-erected and some of the missing ones replaced. This is a major Class II henge (two entrances diametrically opposed) with outer bank and berm and an inner ditch enclosing an area about 110m across containing a 77m diameter circle of (originally) 36 stones. What we see now may be a reconstruction but it is mighty impressive none-the-less. Seen from the air and closely encircled by a gravel lake and a landfill site, it appears a remarkable survivor.

Over the sites the flying has been done by Chris so that I could concentrate on the ground. Chris's skill with the Tiger Moth is legendary and his steeply banked, low-level turns, give a perfect view of the sites, neatly framed by the biplane's wings. It makes for wonderfully atmospheric photos. Between the sites I can fly the aeroplane, so I take the controls again now to fly us back to Chiltern Park. I'm revelling in the lightness and responsiveness of this little aeroplane as it rides the air – it's a sheer delight to fly. We pass close to Didcot with its power station

cooling towers still standing proud and finally over Wittenham Clumps with the Anglo-Saxon burial mound and our last hillfort of the day. Descending for the airfield approach, we cross the Thames with a close-up view of the magnificent Isambard Brunel skew viaduct on the G.W.R. at Moulsoford. Then Chris takes control for the landing, a tricky affair at the best of times in a Tiger Moth but even trickier today because Chris chooses to land crosswind – "It saves a long, bumpy taxi run back!"

Back on the ground the mid-day heat hits us and we retreat quickly to the shade to reminisce and relive the past hour, and to plan for other adventures to come ...

*Finest Hour Experiences:*

<https://www.finesthourexperiences.co.uk/>

is a relatively new company based at Bicester Heritage, formerly RAF Bicester. They have a number of set heritage tours in the Tiger Moth to choose from but are always happy to configure something special. Their emphasis is on providing a high quality, top-of-the-range service and for this I can thoroughly recommend them. No previous flying experience is necessary. They have suggested that if a few SOAG members would like to form a small party to repeat the above flight out of Chiltern Park, they would be happy to do this at a reduced price for each flight. A shorter flight could be considered to further reduce the cost and the waiting around. If anyone thinks they would like to do this they should get in touch with me in the first instance. Alternatively, just choose a flight for yourself. Archaeology and vintage aeroplanes – it really doesn't get much better!



Fig.4: Uffington White Horse

Photo: Oxon Image

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## NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Contributions are invited for the next issue of the *SOAG Bulletin*. Articles should preferably describe original field or documentary research undertaken by the author and priority will be given to items relevant to South Oxfordshire. Short reports of SOAG visits and other meetings are also invited.

Authors are reminded that copies of the *SOAG Bulletin* are sent to the legal deposit libraries in the United Kingdom, to local libraries and Universities. The reputation of SOAG therefore rests largely on the quality of the *SOAG Bulletin*.

In order to ease the burden on the editorial and production team, it would be appreciated if potential authors would also bear the following points in mind:

Articles are accepted at the discretion of the Editor, who reserves the right to edit material prior to publication.

Contributions should ideally be between 500 and 2000 words in length. With the agreement of the author, shorter articles may be published in the *SOAG Messenger*. Longer items may be accepted depending on the availability of space.

- Articles should not have been previously published elsewhere.
- Any quoted material should be inside quotation marks and sources, including material freely available on the internet, should be given. If your information comes from a website you must cite the full www address and the date you consulted it.
- Articles should be submitted in Microsoft Word format, preferably by email. However, cleanly typed and/or clearly handwritten articles may be accepted. When sending copy by email, please ensure that you include 'SOAG Bulletin' in the email title and include a few lines of text in the message: unidentified attachments will not be opened.
- Please be as concise as possible, omit non-relevant material and avoid needless repetition.
- Illustrations are welcomed, if appropriate. Drawings and photographs are also invited for consideration for the front cover. Maps, drawings and photographs may be submitted in paper or electronic format as separate

attachments. Photographs and original artwork will be returned to authors after publication if requested.

- The use of footnotes is discouraged.
- The text should be single-spaced; the title and author name(s) should be included at the beginning of the article. Numbered figure captions should be placed in the text to indicate the approximate position of illustrations, and the source of the illustration included where appropriate.
- Metric units must be used where feasible. When imperial measurements are used, as in documentary studies, the metric equivalents should be added in square brackets if appropriate.
- Pounds, shillings and pence need not be converted into pounds and new pence.
- The Harvard System should be used for references whenever possible but the author's principles will be followed when items do not lend themselves to this system, subject to discussion.

e.g. Articles from journals and magazines:

Margary, I. D. (1943) Roman roads with small side ditches. *Antiquaries Journal*, 23: 7-8.

e.g. Books:

Henig, M. and Booth, P. (2000) *Roman Oxfordshire*. Stroud, Sutton.

e.g. Chapters from edited books:

Karali, L. (1996) Marine invertebrates and Minoan art. In: Reese, D. S. (ed.) *Pleistocene and Holocene fauna of Crete*. Wisconsin, Prehistory Press. pp. 413-419.

To assist Oxford County Archaeological Services HER database collection, and with landowners approval where appropriate, please include a National Grid Reference (NGR) with any site information.

Contributions before 28 February for publication in that year to the *SOAG Bulletin* Editor John Hefferan, 41 College Road, Reading, Berks. RG6 1QE. Email: [bulletin@soagarch.org.uk](mailto:bulletin@soagarch.org.uk).

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SOAG was established in 1969 and now has over 120 members. The aims of the Group are to promote an active interest in archaeology and its allied disciplines, particularly in South Oxfordshire. It works in close cooperation with the County Archaeologist and Oxford Archaeology, is a member of the Council for Independent Archaeology and is affiliated to the Council for British Archaeology South Midlands Group.

- Monthly meetings are held from September to April when lectures by professional speakers and members are given in an informal atmosphere
- There are opportunities for members to take part in excavations, fieldwalking, surveys and post-excavation work. Visits are made to places of interest in the summer – sometimes to sites not open to the public
- Members receive the annual *SOAG Bulletin*, which contains reports of the Group's activities and original articles focused on South Oxfordshire, and the monthly *SOAG Messenger*, which carries details of forthcoming events and brief news items
- Experts and complete beginners of all ages are warmly welcomed as new members.

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