



MIDDLE NENE ARCHAEOLOGICAL GROUP

The Nassington Roman excavation and landscape study

In spring 2016 Andy Roberts reported finding a stony area and Roman pottery and coins in a field in Nassington. Reporting this to The Middle Nene Archaeological Group (MidNAG) led to a plan of action and subsequently a long term excavation and landscape survey. Our thanks must go to the farmer who very generously allowed us to use his land.

Spring 2016

Our initial action was to contact the farmer who gave us permission to field walk the area followed by the excavation of some small 1m square test pits confirm Andy's findings. Almost immediately a stone wall was uncovered 20cm below the surface of the soil. Members of the Society then carried out an electrical resistivity survey, led by Bob Randall, which clearly demonstrated that there were many interesting anomalies and we started to plan an excavation. Derek Roberts offered his help as a professional archaeologist.

August 2016-August 2017

Derek and Andy used a small, 360° tracked excavator to remove the topsoil up to the point where the top of the subsoil and the top of some of the walls became visible and 30 diggers began to work clearing the loose soil across the whole area. A fixed metric grid was then put in to help with recording.

After two days the stone foundations of what proved to be a c. 8m x 16m rectangular building aligned East – West became visible. Diggers then set to and cleared all the loose soil away. The stone foundations were formed using roughly faced local Lincolnshire limestone blocks, and were c.60 cm thick. Medieval ridge and furrow had caused patchy survival of the floor inside. Several burnt areas of clay floor showed as the remains of hearths. A more substantial hearth which was filled with broken pottery has yet to be analysed. An entrance was suggested on the north side and there was evidence for rebuilding of the whole structure in the form of limestone rubble filled foundation trenches of an earlier building; these forming an almost identical footprint of the more solidly built stone foundations of the building clearly visible above. Large, presumed, Iron Age ditches to the immediate west and south of the building, silted up and abandoned long before the Roman phase of settlement,

would appear to be responsible for the upgrade or replacement of the earlier building; the softer silt/clay fills of these features causing subsidence of the south long axis wall.

Known Roman building practices suggest that the earlier building, with its limestone rubble filled foundations, would have been erected sometime in the 2nd century AD; spot dated pottery finds suggest sometime around 120 AD. This building type would, we think, have been of timber framed construction with sleeper beams placed directly onto the rubble foundations; perhaps an attempt to deter damp. This rectangular building had a large door set into the north long axis wall, a smaller door set into the north corner of the eastern short axis wall, a central hearth and separate partitioned living quarters to the east.

Lasting for some 100 years this building, presumably badly effected by the Iron Age ditches, was replaced by a building of equal size and for a similar purpose. Again, very dateable known Roman building techniques place this later building within the 3rd century; spot dated pottery finds has this sometime around 230AD. Foundations formed of stone in herringbone style levelled with coursed stone blocks appear to come into fashion sometime in the 3rd century AD; our spot dated finds appear to confirm this. These solidly built stone foundations are thought to be taken to c.1m above the ground at which point a timber sleeper beam is placed and timber framing above that; again, presumably an attempt to thwart rising damp. It would appear that the Romans were finding it not so pleasant in this green and pleasant land with continentally inspired building designs becoming damp and rotten.

Features such as corn dryers and bread ovens in association with charred grain and animal bones would seem to suggest an existence above that of subsistence.

The full extent of these Iron Age ditches and later Roman buildings has yet to be fully investigated. Tantalising features such as a large area of hard standing formed with used Roman building materials, comprising Collyweston Stone Tiles, distinctive Roman red tiles and brick, plaster and mortar, and near complete but well-worn millstones, leave us in wonder at what could be around these buildings.

Aerial photographs, record shots, section drawings and soil samples were taken as and when necessary. All finds were saved and recorded.

After each seasons excavation the site is covered with Terram and back filled until next year. In the meantime, work carries on sorting all the thousands of pieces of pottery and small finds ready for specialist reports.

After two seasons what we learned so far is as follows:

The building is a large, possibly aisled, barn like structure formed with timber framing upon limestone dwarf walls. We think there has been at least two phases of construction revealed by two separate building techniques.

Two Iron Age ditches may have caused the collapse of the earlier buildings; the south-east corner in particular had been shored up by large amounts of stone. We still need to complete the excavation of this area.

The room may have been divided off at some time at the west end perhaps as living quarters.

The clay floor inside was reddened in many places by burning, probably from hearths of some sort but most of these were almost ploughed out. Only one survived in good shape and this was filled with large potsherds which had been deliberately placed in a matrix of burnt clay.

The remains of two corn drying furnaces were located outside the building to the north and north-west.

Judging by the amount of pottery and building material lying around, which includes plaster, hypocaust tiles for heating of a domestic building, roof tiles and floor tiles, there must be another type of building nearby.

October 2017

Thanks to a grant from South Midlands CBA and the Northamptonshire Archaeology Society we were able to commission a Magnetometer survey of 5 hectares around our site which illustrated what we had suspected; the whole area and the landscape around is covered with archaeological features.

August 2018

Owing to the very dry conditions we were unable to dig the Roman building. Plan B was put into action and the decision made that we would investigate some of the landscape anomalies shown by magnetometry. Ten trenches were excavated to subsoil level, followed by cleaning back so that the features became visible.

What we found

The flanking ditches of an Iron Age trackway ran north-south in the west of the site, this had very clear ruts made by wagons and would also have been in use in the Roman period. (Tr 8 and 13).

A very deep ditch in the south east corner of our field contained an ox skull at the very bottom, this is a common ritual in Iron Age and Roman times. (Tr 5)

Another building close to this ditch was visible and what appears to be the entrance to some sort of large furnace could be seen in the trench edge. The ashy fill of a pit was obviously the dumping ground for old domestic rubbish including shoes (hob nails), wood work nails, pottery and animal bone. (Tr12).

A small enclosure with a hut and the surrounding drip gulley, date undecided. (Tr 6).

A large area of what had been very boggy land to the west of the barn had been filled with animal bone in large quantities along with pottery, building stone and general rubbish of Roman date. Some of this might be a pit which had been dug for clay. (Tr 14 and 17).

Other ditches running across the field attest to the problems this whole area had with drainage and another spring lower down the field may be the reason why this was the site of the settlement (Tr 9, 10, 11).

Samples of all contexts are taken. All finds are cleaned and conserved where necessary and sent for specialist scrutiny. A full photographic record is taken.

Dating so far with coins and types of pottery and small finds puts the site starting in the early to mid 2nd century, at its peak in the 3rd century and failing by the very late 4th- early 5th, mirroring the rise and fall of the Roman Empire.

Who lived here?

It is a bit early to say. It is likely that they were tenant farmers of British origin who were living here in the Iron Age and under the control of one of the larger villas within the area, possibly Yarwell Villa. The Roman administration of land may have taken ownership, but the farmers remained as tenants. As Roman markets opened up they would be selling their cattle and sheep, grain and other products, and in return buying Roman pottery from the Stibbington kilns, and trading and buying other goods from Durobrivae, all within a few miles of the site.