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NOTES

A Roman farmstead at Walnut Tree Farm, Yarwell: An interim report

by

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Introduction

The Middle Nene Archaeological Group (MidNAG), aided by Derek Roberts of Pre-Develop Archaeology, acting as technical director, has carried out two geophysical surveys and three seasons of research and community excavation on land associated with Walnut Tree Farm, Yarwell (TL 0564 9614), which lies within the Parish of Nassington. Permission for the work was kindly granted by the land owners, David and Anne Fen. A research brief and initial field surveys informed the preparations for a multi-season research excavation supplemented by geophysics and fieldwalking. The brief proposed a group-lead community and research project on the site to enhance the evidence, in the form of finds scatters and cropmarks, gathered and recorded by Andrew Roberts. More widely, the aim was to enhance understanding of Roman socio-economic life within the Nene valley.

Geophysical Survey

In October 2015 the non-intrusive element of this landscape research project began with a small-scale resistivity survey, using equipment generously loaned by Mr Bob Randell who also led the small team of volunteers from MidNAG (Randell 2016). This targeted finds scatters and cropmarks and revealed hard to interpret high and low resistance anomalies, present throughout the produced data plot. Two anomalies, one high and one low resistance, seemed to mimic crop marks seen on Google Earth. The curvilinear low resistance anomaly, a possible ditch, seemed to run the full width of the field, some 110m north-south, and could be directly associated with a cropmark visible on Google Earth. The rectangular high resistance anomaly, a presumed building, was located at the northern limit of the survey. To aid interpretation of the resistivity data a 6–hectare magnetometer survey was carried out by Allen Archaeology (Fig 1), funded by MidNAG with additional generous donations from the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society and the Council for British Archaeology, South Midlands Group (Allen Archaeology 2017). Completed in September 2017 the survey revealed an array of anomalies seemingly representing habitation and land use from the prehistoric, Roman, medieval and post-medieval periods including what appeared to be pits, trackways, enclosures and ridge and furrow.

First trial trenching, 2016

In August 2016, the first season of excavation saw a main trench placed over the rectangular high resistance feature revealed during the 2015 resistivity survey. Two small trenches were placed to target two high resistance hot spots (Fig 2). A ditch, possibly late Iron Age, ran into the main trench from the field's northern hedge line. This ditch and a meandering linear feature, running east-west, were the only presumed prehistoric features encountered. The north-south ditch was out of use and silt filled when two gullies cut across it and ran to the north and south-west beyond the limit of excavation; both appear to be curving. They could represent roundhouses of the 1st century AD. This part of the site appears to have undergone a major redevelopment phase with the construction of a rectangular building, some 7m wide and 13m long, constructed on trench foundations filled with limestone rubble. The southern long axis wall would appear to have been constructed directly over the silted-up east-west linear feature which was either unknown to, or ignored by, the builders. Associated with this building were two possible corn dryers: one circular, with a long flue aligned north-south; and the other possibly T-plan, extending beyond the western limit of excavation.

Backfill, consisting of rubble and mortar, within these features represents the second phase of major works within the area as the earlier rectangular building was demolished. One substantial change was the move from rubble-filled foundations to limestone-coursed and herringbone-pitched limestone foundations. This new building was also rectangular and had almost the same orientation and position as the earlier building. A succession of preserved floor layers, visible within the southern half of the building, would suggest there had been a problem with the first building. The cause of this problem may have been the east-west linear feature running under the southern wall. The later building would seem to be in response to this problem. The Mason's trench for this later

building was excavated to the bottom of the east-west linear feature which helped to facilitate the construction of an impressive 600mm wide and 750mm deep solid limestone foundation. This later building had a clearly visible mason's cut running along the inner face of the north long axis wall. This cut through the floor levels of the earlier building. Within the building and on the external south side, thick ashy deposits were visible which, externally, lay over what could be an area of hardstanding or a trackway running east-west. The two small trenches revealed more of this hardstanding to the west and another large solid limestone wall, aligned north-west to south-east. This wall could not be associated with the later main building but did have deep deposits of sooty ash down its south-west edge.

Further investigation 2017

The 2017 season saw the re-opening of the 2016 trench over the two buildings with the intention of completing the excavation of the internal elements of the two buildings. To aid our understand of some deposits and features encountered during the 2016 excavation the trench was extended to the east by some 4m, and north to square-off the trench to the field's northern hedge boundary (Fig 3). The limit of the rubble foundation of the earlier building could now be seen to have an opening within the eastern short axis wall on the north side and close to the corner. Large stones set as a possible floor along the inside edge of the northern long axis wall would seem to suggest a wide, roughly central, doorway. Deposits of plaster, possibly painted, mortar and limestone rubble within the south-west corner of the building would seem to confirm the assumption that the earlier building was demolished; no evidence could be seen which would indicate any period of inactivity before the construction of the second building. A line of small postholes *c*.1m from and running parallel to the northern wall would seem to suggest an aisled barn-type building, or at the very least a partitioned north side to the building. Deep deposits within the southern side of the building are still waiting to be excavated.

A hearth-type feature was excavated and revealed ashy material, over crushed Roman over-heated pottery, and methodically set small limestones lightly burned red. A succession of possible flues or earlier hearths continued to the east. To the immediate west of the building a large rubbish pit contained dark fills with inclusions of Roman pottery dating to the 3rd-4th centuries AD. A gully seemingly truncated by, but not extending beyond, the pit may suggest its use as a sump of some description. A large rubbish pit to the immediate north-west of the building, again, containing Roman pottery of the 3rd-4th centuries AD, seemed to indicate the end of life of the circular possible corn dryer associated with the earlier building; the eastern side of this pit ends at the entrance to the long flue of the corn dryer. The eastern pit appeared to be an end phase of the later building, which could have collapsed and been out of use for a while. It would appear at this point of the excavation that the pits were cut through limestone rubble which may be evidence of

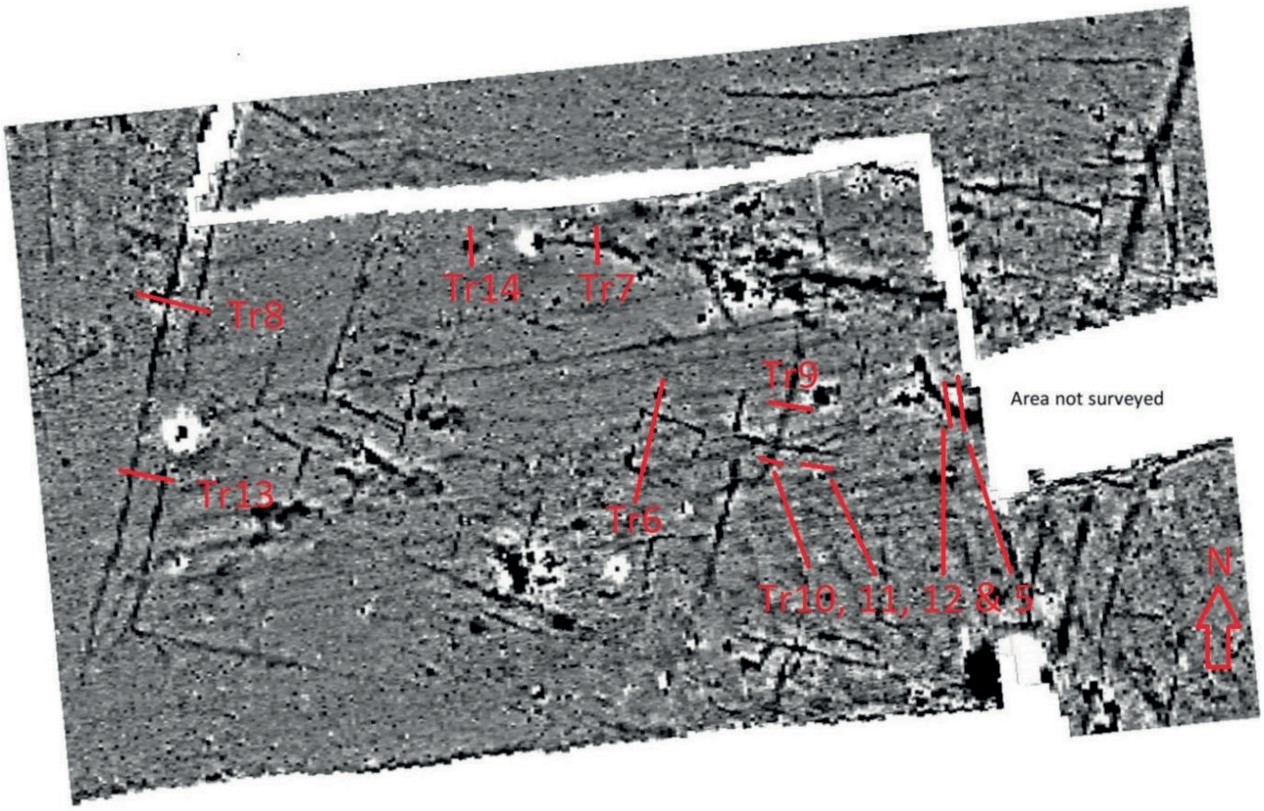

Fig 1: The 2017 Magnetometer plot with 2018 trench positions

the collapse of the east gable of the later building. Further redeposited natural clay/silt substrate would appear to represent an early floor of a building, possibly, associated with the earlier building.

Trial trenching the boundaries

It was intended that the third season of excavation in 2018 would again re-open the trench over the buildings to complete excavation of their internal features. Due to the unseasonably hot and dry August, we moved to less challenging areas for fear of missing valuable evidence. Most of this site sits on mid-estuarine deposits of clay which would have simply baked hard. It was decided that ten strategically targeted trenches across the boundary and enclosure ditches, trackway ditches and pit-like anomalies, as revealed during the magnetometer survey, would hopefully aid dating and general phasing of the site.

The data from the third season of excavation is still being collated, so the following discussion of the major elements is only provisional. Figure 1 shows a trackway running roughly north-south, lying at the western limit of the survey. Trenches 8 and 13 were placed across this feature and revealed trackside ditches of a possible prehistoric date which cut into the eastern limits of the Blisworth Limestone bedrock to the west of the buildings. The top fill of the western trackway ditch, in trench 8, appeared to be truncated by a circular pit the fills of which seem to suggest an Iron Age origin. Trenches 5 and 12 revealed another presumed prehistoric ditch over 2.0m deep and *c*.3.5m wide. Seen as a possible ditch terminal, on the magnetometer plot it ran from trench 5 westwards into trench 12 where it turned to the north. It was sectioned in trench 5 and revealed successive fills with inclusions of Roman pottery of the 3rd-4th centuries AD, over some primary silting; an ox skull seemed to have been purposely placed at the bottom of the ditch as the terminal started to rise to the west. This presumed prehistoric ditch was not excavated in trench 12 where pits had been cut into its upper fills, again containing Roman pottery dating to the 3rd-4th centuries. Interestingly, here pottery categorised as Nene Valley Post-Industrial Roman Pottery (NVPIRP) was present within the upper fills of these pits which could suggest occupation continuing into the 5th century (Mackreth 2001). Tantalisingly, the north-east corner of a coursed limestone wall, 600mm wide, continued beyond the baulk at the south end of the trench, suggesting another building of the 3rd to 4th centuries.

Trenches 9 and 10 cut across the linear feature aligned east-west, visible in the resistivity and magnetometer survey data plots, and also as a cropmark. It was confirmed

Fig 2: End of excavation 2016 (R Gibson)

Fig 3: End of excavation 2017 (R Gibson)

to be a ditch, but dating was uncertain, and the exceptionally dry weather hampered interpretation of the fills. It was not clear whether a later Roman re-cut or truncation of the original ditch had occurred. Pottery from the fills comprised both Iron Age pottery and Roman pottery dated up to the 3rd century AD. Trench 6 was placed across an isolated square anomaly, possibly an enclosure, but the results were inconclusive due to extreme conditions and multiple furrows running through from east to west. At the north end of the trench was a pit with the fills containing Roman and possibly Iron Age pottery. Trenches 7 and 14 were cut across and on the projected line of the long ditch-like feature running west-east. Trench 14 revealed a large pit with large amounts of large animal bone and frequent sherds and fragments of Roman pottery and building material. The fill of this feature was so compacted and dry it was decided to leave for another season. Trench 7 revealed the long ditch-like feature with later Roman pits across it. The pottery from one of these Roman pits ranges in date from the 2nd-5th centuries AD, again with the inclusion of a sherd of NVPIRP.

Conclusion and future aims

In conclusion, it is already possible to suggest this small piece of Northamptonshire landscape has evidence of prehistoric land use over which a regularised Roman farmstead was placed, a similar sequence to that excavated at Orton Longueville in the 1960s (Upex 2018). At Nassington it would appear that there are at least two substantial building phases, one beginning with the limestone rubble-filled foundation of a building erected in *c.*120 AD, and the second beginning with the limestone-coursed and herring-bone-pitched foundation of a building erected *c.*230AD. The evidence suggests occupation came to an end in the early part of the 5th century. Our aim, spurred by the quantities of pottery and building material lying across the site, which includes painted plaster, box tiles, roof tiles, floor tiles and Collyweston stone slates, is to try and reveal the rest of this site and place it within its economic landscape. Continued small open area excavation coupled with targeted evaluation trenching will hopefully phase this site and link it to contemporary sites and communication routes. Forthcoming interim reports will combine data gained through palaeo-botanical analysis of soil samples, assessments of bone, pottery and coin assemblages and small find categorisation and classification which should, over many years to come, aid in our understanding of the past in our region and link with a wider national view.

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