



North Leigh Roman Villa

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

April 2014

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Issue: 1

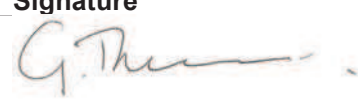
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North Leigh Roman Villa

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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with contributions from Paul Booth and illustrated by Julia Collins

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Summary

On April 2, 2014, Oxford Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief during the installation of new visitor information signs at North Leigh Roman Villa.

The watching brief observed two layers potentially associated with the levelling of the villa courtyard, or buried ploughsoil. These deposits contained ceramic building material, and a pottery sherd which could only be broadly dated to the Roman period. The lower of these deposits was observed to be overlying a possible stone and mortar structure, although the limited extent of the excavations made the true extent, form and function of this structure impossible to determine. Additionally two deposits likely to represent spoil from the early 20th century excavations of the Villa were observed to the north-west of the central range.

1 LOCATION AND SCOPE OF WORK

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) were commissioned by English Heritage to undertake a watching brief at North Leigh Roman Villa (Fig. 1).
- 1.1.2 The works consisted of the installation of four new visitor information signs, and repairs to one existing visitor information sign. Signs 1 and 3 were placed on pre-existing display boards, and required no excavation. Signs 2 and 4 required intrusive excavation to establish footings for the posts for new display boards (Fig. 2).
- 1.1.3 The site lies on SP 397 154 and is located to the north of North Leigh village (Fig. 1).
- 1.1.4 The area of works lies within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of North Leigh Roman Villa (Scheduled Monument 1009419). Scheduled Monument consent for the works was given by Chris Welch of English Heritage (case reference number: S00049176).
- 1.1.5 All work was undertaken in accordance with local and national planning policies including the *Standard and Guidance for archaeological watching briefs* (IFA 1999).

2 METHODOLOGY

- 2.1.1 The watching brief was conducted as a single site visit during intrusive works which had the potential to disturb or destroy archaeological deposits or features. These works consisted of the excavation of four small circular holes (200mm x 200mm), two holes for each new visitor information signs which required footings.
- 2.1.2 All excavations were hand dug using a post hole digger and an iron rod to pre-determined depths of 550mm for Sign 2 and 800mm for sign 4.
- 2.1.3 All spoil generated was placed in a bucket and hand sieved for artefacts before being deposited outside of the Scheduled Monument boundary.
- 2.1.4 All deposits and structures disturbed through excavation were issued with unique context numbers. Context recording was completed in accordance with establish OA practices.
- 2.1.5 Bulk finds were collected and bagged by context.
- 2.1.6 A digital photographic record was taken of all excavations and of both signs requiring excavation after their installation, and within their settings.



- 2.1.7 Representative sketch sections were made of each of the four holes excavated, drawn at a scale of 1:20 (Fig. 3).
- 2.1.8 No plans were drawn as English Heritage provided a plan showing the location of the new visitor information signs (Fig. 2).

3 DESCRIPTION OF DEPOSITS

3.1 Sign 2

- 3.1.1 Sign 2 was located to the north-west of the central range of the Villa, on a slightly raised, level grassed area (Fig. 2).
- 3.1.2 The excavation of the post holes was monitored until a pre-determined depth of 550mm was established in both the north-east and south-west locations.

North-east hole (Figs 2 and 3)

- 3.1.3 The earliest deposit observed in the north-east location was at least 70mm deep, and a loose mid grey silty clay with light yellowish brown mottles (6). The depth of this deposit was not ascertained as the base of the deposit was not revealed. The deposit contained common (20%), poorly sorted, sub angular fragments of limestone/sandstone (20-90mm) and frequent (35%) fragments and flecks of charcoal. No artefacts were recovered from this deposit.
- 3.1.4 Sealing layer 6 was a loose, dark grey brown silty clay forming a layer (5) 380mm thick. Layer 5 contained common (20%), poorly sorted, sub angular fragments of limestone/sandstone (20–110mm) and frequent (35%) fragments and flecks of charcoal. A modern twisted iron wire (with very little surface corrosion) was observed but not retained from within this deposit, as well as fragments of ceramic building material, which were retained (see Appendix B).
- 3.1.5 Sealing layer 5 was a 100mm thick layer of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil and turf (1).

South-west hole (Figs 2 and 3)

- 3.1.6 A loose dark grey-brown silty clay (5) was observed (earliest stratigraphic layer) in the south-west hole location for Sign 2, and was at least 450mm thick (see above for soil description).
- 3.1.7 Above deposit 5 was topsoil and turf (1), measuring 100mm thick. Fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from this deposit (see above for soil description, and Appendix B for finds data).

3.2 Sign 4

- 3.2.1 Sign 4 was located at the centre of the south-east extent of the maintained, level, grassed area representing the edge of the courtyard of North Leigh Roman Villa (Fig. 2).
- 3.2.2 The excavation of the Sign 4 footing holes was monitored until the pre-determined depth of 800mm in the north-east footing hole. In the south-western hole excavation ceased at an archaeologically determined depth of 530mm when possible structural remains were encountered.

**South-west hole (Figs 2 and 3)**

- 3.2.3 At a depth of approximately 530mm, possible structure remains were observed (4). The possible structure was comprised of a roughly hewn limestone blocks and a light yellow brown sandy mortar.
- 3.2.4 Overlying structure 4 was a layer of soft, mid yellowish brown silty clay, measuring 100mm thick (3). This deposit contained common (15%), moderately sorted, sub angular fragments of limestone/sandstone (<10-70mm) and infrequent (<5%) flecks of charcoal. Fragments of pottery and ceramic building material were recovered from this deposit.
- 3.2.5 Above layer 3 was a 330mm thick layer of soft, mid greyish brown silty clay (2). This deposit has been interpreted as subsoil, although it is possible that it represents a levelling deposit. Contained within deposit 2 were infrequent (5-10%), well sorted, sub angular fragments of limestone/sandstone (<10-40mm) and very infrequent (<2%) flecks of charcoal. Fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from this deposit (see Appendix B).
- 3.2.6 Sealing layer 2 was a 100mm of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil and turf.

North-east hole (Figs 2 and 3)

- 3.2.7 The earliest deposit observed within the south-west footing hole for Sign 4 was layer 3, measuring 370mm thick (see above for soil description). Fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from this deposit (see Appendix B).
- 3.2.8 Sealing deposit 3 was deposit 2, which measured 330mm thick (see above for soil description).
- 3.2.9 Sealing layer 2 was topsoil turf line 1 (see above for soil description).

3.3 Finds

- 3.3.1 The artefacts recovered during the course of the watching brief consisted of ceramic building materials and a single small of pottery. A modern iron wire was recovered from the north-east footing hole of Sign 2, however, this was not retained. All fragments of ceramic building material and pottery were retained for specialist analysis (Appendix B).

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**4.1 Sign 2**

- 4.1.1 The lowest stratigraphic layer, 6, and the deposit observed above this, layer 5, were both interpreted as being the up-cast, or spoil, most likely from the early 20th Century excavations of the Villa. The uneven topography and loose, mixed nature of these deposits, with the presence of a modern iron wire (as indicated by the lack of surface corrosion), suggests recently deposited material.
- 4.1.2 The lack of a subsoil (buried ploughsoil) underlying the topsoil further suggests that layers 5 and 6 are of a recent date.
- 4.1.3 The top of the underlying natural geology was not reached during the excavation of the Sign 2 footing holes.



4.2 Sign 4

- 4.2.1 The possible structure, 4, observed at a depth of 530mm in the south-west footing hole was interpreted as such due to the presence of a light brown yellow sandy mortar associated with a roughly hewn limestone block. The extent, form and function of this possible structure was not determined because of the limited extent of the hole excavated. It is important to note that possible structure 4 was not observed within the north-east footing hole. Whether this is an isolated structure, or if part of a wall footing for example, is uncertain.
- 4.2.2 Layer 3 which overlay the possible structure, was interpreted as either made ground or a buried ploughsoil. It is important to note that the limited extent of the excavations made the interpretation of the deposits difficult due to the 'keyhole' nature of the excavations.
- 4.2.3 The dating evidence from these layers only gave a broad Roman date.
- 4.2.4 The top of the underlying natural sequence was not observed during the excavation of the Sign 4 footing holes.

APPENDIX A. CONTEXT TABLE

| Context | Type | Depth / Thickness | Width | Length | Comments | Finds | Date |
|---------|-----------|-------------------|-------|--------|------------------------------|--------------|------|
| 1 | Layer | 100mm | 200mm | 200mm | Topsoil | CBM | |
| 2 | Layer | 330mm | 200mm | 200mm | Subsoil / levelling layer | CBM | |
| 3 | Layer | 100 – 370mm + | 200mm | 200mm | Levelling layer | CBM, pottery | |
| 4 | Structure | - | 200mm | 200mm | Wall? | - | - |
| 5 | Layer | 380– 450mm + | 200mm | 200mm | Redeposited material / spoil | CBM | |
| 6 | Layer | 70mm + | 200mm | 200mm | Redeposited material / spoil | - | |

APPENDIX B. POTTERY AND CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL

By Paul Booth

- B.1.1 A single sherd of pottery (5g) and 15 pieces of ceramic building material (737g) were recovered in the course of the watching brief.
- B.1.2 The pottery sherd, from context 3 (Hole 4) is in Oxford Archaeology fabric R37, a reduced coarse ware tempered principally with common-abundant fine sand. This fabric is attributed to an unsourced 'West Oxfordshire' industry, and is the most common



Roman coarse ware fabric in the area. It was in production from the mid/late 1st century AD up to the early part of the 4th century and is therefore of little use for dating. The sherd is probably from the lower neck/shoulder of a jar with a slight offset at the base of the neck, and is moderately abraded.

- B.1.3 Ceramic building material (CBM) was recovered from topsoil (context 1), from contexts 2 and 3 in Hole 4 and from context 5 in Hole 2. Most and possibly all of the material is of Roman date, although small fragments were not sufficiently diagnostic for a Roman date to be certain. Despite being well fragmented the CBM fragments were mostly otherwise in quite good condition, with little indication of abrasion indicating extensive redeposition. The material was scanned rapidly and principal characteristics noted. The CBM fabrics, though not recorded in detail, fell into four main groups; three of these were tempered principally with quartz sand with respectively no significant secondary inclusions (fabric AN), clay pellets (fabric AP) and voids (fabric AZ). The voids were fairly certainly from organic inclusions which had burnt out during firing. A fourth fabric (NZ) contained a few voids of this type but no significant primary inclusions. Quantification of the CBM by fabric group and context is tabulated below. Tile types present are indicated by letters as follows: T – tegula; I – imbrex; F- flat uncertain.

Quantification of CBM by fragment count/weight (g)

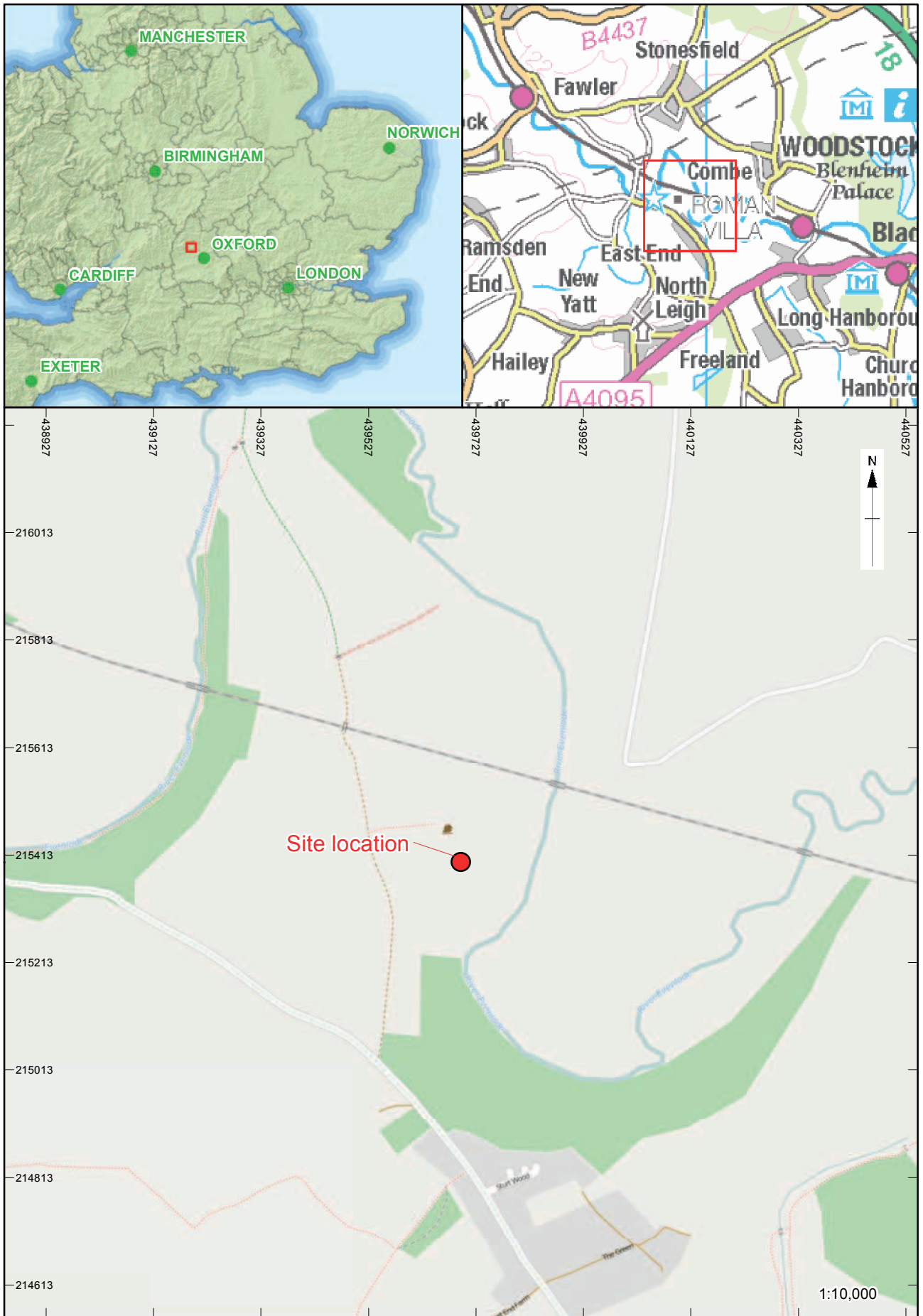
| Fabric | Context | | | | Comment |
|--------|---------|--------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 5 | |
| AN | | | 1/27 I? | | |
| AP | | | 3/198 I, F | | |
| AZ | 1/57 I? | 1/3 | 2/8 | 2/28 F? | |
| NZ | | 1/212* T? | | 4/204 T?, I, F | *'signature' mark |
| TOTAL | 1/57 | 2/215 | 6/233 | 6/232 | |

- B.1.4 None of the pieces was large enough to allow meaningful comment about detailed characteristics of the types represented or their chronology. Probable or possible tegula fragments were 24-25mm thick and the small 'flat' fragments were all 22-23mm thick and so were most likely from tegulae, though other forms are possible. Imbrex and possible imbrex fragments were recorded with thicknesses of 12mm, 13mm, 16mm and 15-18mm. The only mark of note was an incomplete semicircular signature mark (a single line) on a probable tegula fragment in fabric NZ from context 2.
- B.1.5 The presence of CBM and a single pottery sherd of Roman date in these post pits is unremarkable.



APPENDIX C. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

C.1.1 Institute for Archaeologists, 1999 *Standard and Guidance for archaeological watching briefs*

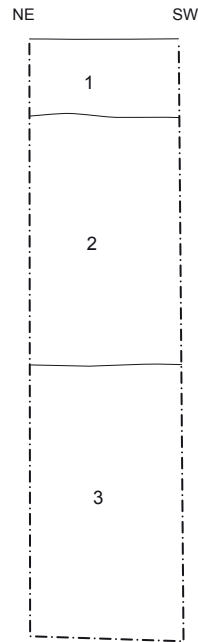


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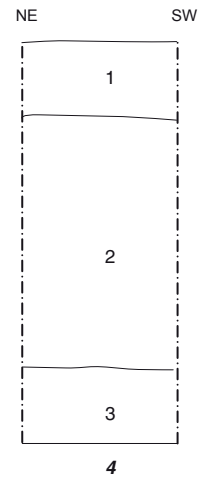
Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2014
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Figure 1: Site location

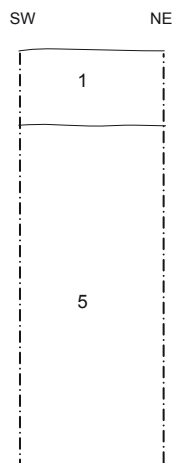
Sketch section of North east hole at Sign 4



Sketch section of South west hole at Sign 4



Sketch section of South west hole at Sign 2



Sketch section of North east hole at Sign 2

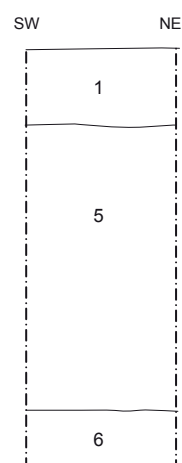


Figure 3: Sections



Figure 1: Location of the study



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