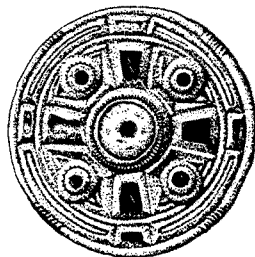


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Late Roman Activity at Wheatsheaf Road, Woodhurst

J. Last

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Late Roman Activity at Wheatsheaf Road, Woodhurst, Cambridgeshire

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1997

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SUMMARY

Fieldwalking on the line of a Cambridge Water Company pipeline near the village of Woodhurst, Cambridgeshire, revealed a scatter of late Roman pottery about 1km east of the village (TL 329 754). Trial excavations carried out in the area of the scatter after the stripping of the easement exposed a large feature of uncertain function and a linear ditch (Area B2). The relationship between these two features was obscured by later furrows but they appear to be broadly contemporary. Finds including pottery, tile, bone, shell and coins date the activity in this area to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. At the west end of the pipeline, near Woodhurst village (TL 319 759), a number of shallow features, which had not produced a fieldwalking signature, were revealed (Area D). Some of them might be furrows, like those in Area B2, while others seem to represent part of a small ditched enclosure, again probably of late Roman date. A small piece of 4th century silver with a Latin inscription was also discovered in the vicinity of Area D.

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LATE ROMAN ACTIVITY AT WHEATSHEAF ROAD, WOODHURST, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

1 INTRODUCTION

Between 30th October and 4th November 1997 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out trial excavations on the line of a Cambridge Water Company pipeline, running on the south side of Wheatsheaf Road between the east end of Woodhurst village (TL 319 759) and a site 200 m south of Hensby crossroads, the junction with the B1040 to St. Ives (TL 333 751). The total length of the pipeline is *c* 1800 m. The excavations followed a programme of fieldwalking which was carried out on 20th October, before the stripping of the pipeline easement.

Initial fieldwalking identified a scatter of Roman pottery towards the east end of the route of the proposed main (centred on TL 329 754). Inspection of the stripped easement and limited excavation confirmed the presence of subsoil features at this point, and also revealed a number of features, which had not produced a fieldwalking signature, at the west end of the easement by the village (TL 319 759).

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The village of Woodhurst lies in eastern Huntingdonshire, about 5 km north of St. Ives, within an area of relatively high ground between the Ouse gravels to the south and Ramsey Fen to the north (Fig. 1). Wheatsheaf Road, on the south side of which the pipeline is sited, runs in a straight line south-east from the village in the direction of Bluntisham and Earith. It lies at an elevation of 33-38 m OD on a small ridge of gravel, sloping gently down from west to east. The gravel forms part of a peninsula of glacial deposits, chiefly boulder clay, which stretches from Woodhurst to Bluntisham, overlying Amphill Clay. Current land use in the vicinity of the easement is predominantly arable.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Woodhurst is a ring village with Saxon origins and a church which dates back to the 12th century (Cambs SMR 3546). Before this time the parish had been attached to St. Ives to form part of the endowment of the monastery founded there in 1001-2 (Hart 1968). Excavations at the west end of the village in 1949, in advance of house construction, revealed occupation and burials of the late Saxon and early medieval periods (SMR 3588). Today a few 17th century cottages are the oldest remaining in the village, which was almost entirely destroyed by fire in 1834 (Simpkins 1932).

Evidence for Roman activity in the vicinity of Woodhurst comes from a number of finds to the north and east of the village (Fig. 1). Roman urns and burials were found in 1801, during the digging of gravel north of Wheatsheaf Road around TL 322 759 (SMR 3603), and surface pottery was picked up by C.F. Tebbutt in 1949 during a "limited perambulation" around TL 329 751

(SMR 3723). Slightly further afield, Roman pottery has also been found at a site 1 km north of the village (SMR 3456) while a bronze cup was discovered in Bluntisham parish, 1 km from the eastern end of the pipeline (SMR 3644). Taken together, these finds suggest a certain density of Roman activity in the area of Woodhurst, although the nature of occupation and communications is uncertain. Settlement sites to the north-east at Somersham and Colne, excavated in the earlier part of the century by G.L. Keynes (1906) and C.F. Tebbutt (1929) respectively, reflect the spread of population onto the higher land north of the Ouse during the later Roman period (Taylor 1926). However, the primary focus of these settlements remains riverine, with most sites close to the West Water. As for roads, Fox (1923: 171) notes straight stretches of parish boundaries and modern roads from Hartford Hill north-west to Old Hurst, and between St. Ives and Somersham (i.e. the B1040), but there is no definite evidence of Roman construction in either case.

There is no recorded prehistoric activity in the area, the nearest finds being socketed axes of Late Bronze Age date from Pidley, to the north (TL 33 77). Probably the heavy clay soils in the area were not favoured for cultivation before late Roman times.

4 FIELDWALKING

4.1 *Methods*

The route of the pipeline runs through four fields, labelled A-D (Fig. 1). At the time of fieldwalking, Fields A (Parcel No. 2222) and B (9837) were harrowed, with a winter crop just beginning to show. Visibility was good. With the exception of its northern border, which was under grass, Field D (0078) was more deeply furrowed by ploughing, and visibility was fair. Field C (4900) was yet to be ploughed and could not be walked. Differences in the conditions of and plans for each field were reflected in a variety of fieldwalking strategies along the route.

Field A, which includes the site of the booster station, was crossed by two alternative routes for the main - one around the north and east sides, the other diagonally across the centre of the field. In order to accurately locate any artefact scatters the majority of the field was intensively walked in ten north-south transects spaced 20 m apart (labelled A-J from west to east, J being the eastern edge of the field) and up to 200 m in length. Finds were collected within 20 m segments (e.g. F120 means transect F, 100-120 m south of Wheatsheaf Road).

Field B was divided into eastern (B1) and western (B2) halves by the stand of trees at TL 3304 7542. Four transects parallel to Wheatsheaf Road were made, at 0, 10, 20 and 40m south of the road.

Since Field C could not be walked, two transects were made in Field E (5200) to the north of Wheatsheaf Road. These lay 0 and 10 m north of the road and ran from *c* TL 3235 7576 to 3278 7557.

Transect 0 in Field D could not be walked because of the presence of a grassy border on its northern edge, approximately 8 m wide. Hence transects were made at 10, 20, 40 and 60 m south.

4.2 Results

Field A, which was walked more intensively than the others, produced moderate quantities of post-medieval and modern material, but little that was earlier. Four struck flints and three Roman sherds showed no tendency to cluster. In particular there was no sign of any continuation of Tebbutt's Roman scatter some 200 m to the west-south-west. Post-medieval (i.e. 18th-19th century) pot and tile was widely distributed across the field, but modern (i.e. 19th-20th century) stonewares and porcelain were more common close to the B1040 (transects I and J). It was thought possible that the pipeline route along the edge of the field would encounter roadside features of recent date, especially given that the road junction marks the boundary between three parishes (Woodhurst, Colne and Bluntisham). In fact this was the route chosen for the easement, but no features were visible after topsoil stripping.

Fields B1, D and E produced no finds of note, merely thin scatters of burnt and struck flint (the latter most common in E, transect 0) as well as post-medieval pot and tile. Two possible Roman sherds came from D, transect 40, and B1, transect 20.

The only finds of any significance came from Field B2 where a relatively dense concentration of Roman pottery was encountered. In transects 0 and 10 this seemed to be centred on a point 130 m west of the stand of trees dividing B1 and B2 (c TL 3292 7547). A collection box of 18 x 10 m was marked out around this 'hotspot' and a total of 48 Roman potsherds were collected, along with six fragments of Roman tile, two pieces of slag and some animal bone. A few sherds of medieval and post-medieval date were also recovered. The density of Roman finds and the clarity of the scatter are certainly indicative of a site. In transect 20 the extent of the scatter was estimated at some 80 m from east to west, while in transect 40 only one sherd of Roman pottery was found. The site therefore appears to cover an area of about 80 x 30 m south of Wheatsheaf Road, centred on TL 3290 7547. Its extent to the north of the road has not been determined.

The Roman pottery was generally very abraded, suggesting it had been in the ploughsoil for some years, although the excavated material subsequently turned out to be in a similar condition (see below). The assemblage consists of a range of fabrics, although just over 50% of the sherds are shelly wares. The rest comprise mainly grey wares, including some Nene Valley sherds (NVGW), as well as a little Nene Valley Colour Coat (NVCC) pottery and a single piece of imitation Samian with the end of a maker's stamp preserved. The date of the assemblage can be estimated as 3rd to 4th century AD (P. Copleston, pers. comm.). The tile includes *imbrex* and *tegula* fragments.

5 MONITORING AND EXCAVATION

5.1 Methods

Fieldwalking produced one potential site in Field B2 (see above). Elsewhere no archaeological remains were *anticipated* (although they could not be ruled out). Following stripping of topsoil the whole easement (approx. 6-7 m wide) was walked. No features were noted in Fields A, B1 or C. Although stripping could not be monitored within B2, the putative Roman site indeed showed up, initially appearing as three large black patches within a slight depression in the natural sand and gravel. These features (Area B2) were centred beneath

the focus of the fieldwalking scatter, some 130 m from the eastern edge of the field (Fig. 1).

The only surprise during the monitoring was a series of features which emerged at the west end of Field D, close to the village (Area D). Both here and in B2 it was difficult to precisely define features because the machine had tracked over them. These areas were therefore intensively cleaned by hoe and shovel, and sample excavation was then undertaken. Given the constraints of time and money excavation could not be extensive, but as the pipe trench was likely to truncate only a narrow strip of ground on the northern side of the easement it was sufficient to characterise the archaeology.

Site recording followed the standard AFU single context system, with trench plans drawn at 1:50 or 1:100, sections at 1:10, and a full photographic record. In addition site staff were aided by a local metal detectorist who gave the AFU access to metal objects found in the spoil heap and on the surface of the easement in the vicinity of both sets of features.

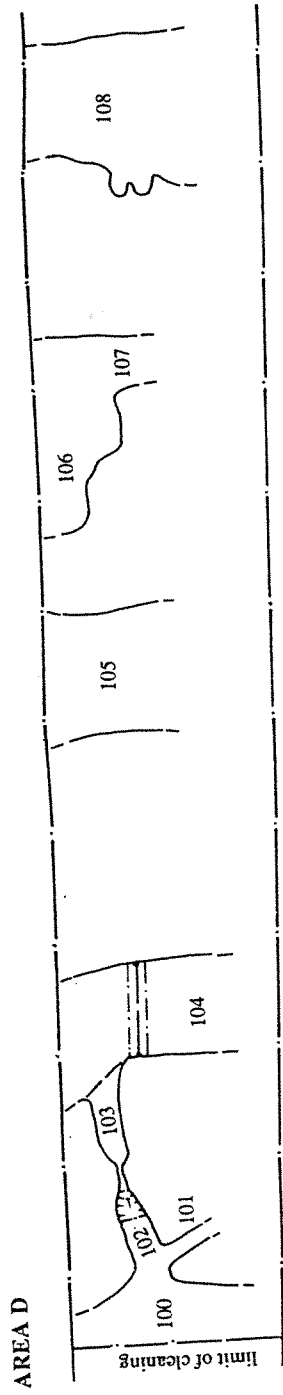
5.2 *Results*

5.2.1 Area D

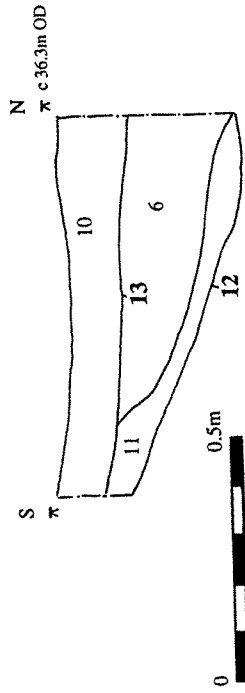
In Field D the easement ran inside the narrow strip of set-aside grassland on the northern boundary of the field, i.e. approximately centred under the 10 m fieldwalking transect. Cleaning with hoe and shovel covered the northern side of the easement over an area 31-68 m from the western edge of the field. Further archaeology may well have existed at the extreme western end of the easement but it was not possible adequately to clean this area. In the selected strip cleaning revealed a series of broad linear soilmark features (100, 104, 106-7, 108) running north-south across the trench and some narrower ditches (101, 102, 103) on a different alignment towards the west end (Fig. 2). The height of the machining level was about 38.0 m OD.

The broad features may represent natural depressions, or the remains of ridge-and-furrow cultivation. A slot 0.5 m wide was excavated through deposit 104. In profile it had the character of a depression more than a cut feature. The sides sloped gently down to a depth of 0.25 m below machining level in the centre of the feature. The fill was a sticky light olive brown (2.5Y 5/3) stony silty clay with occasional charcoal and a few finds of pottery and animal bone. The features to the east were not excavated but appeared to have the same character, with similar fills and depths, although 107 seemed particularly shallow and of dubious validity. Finds were rather less common in this area, although a small group of animal bones was picked up from the surface of 108.

The narrow ditches to the west were more convincing and productive. A slot was excavated through deposit 102, showing an asymmetrical profile some 0.20 m deep, with a steep southern and shallower northern side. It was filled with olive brown (2.5Y4/3) sandy silty clay with occasional charcoal and chalk fragments, as well as patches of yellowish brown (10YR 5/6) natural sandy clay. Finds came from throughout the fill. 103, which was not fully excavated, appeared similar in fill and depth, but both north and south sides were fairly steep and the profile therefore more symmetrical. These features may represent the north-west corner of a rectilinear enclosure, with a further narrow linear (101) apparently running off to the south. At first there appeared to be a break about 1 m wide between segments 102 and 103 but with further cleaning it became apparent that a narrower slot (unexcavated)



SECTION 1



AREA B2

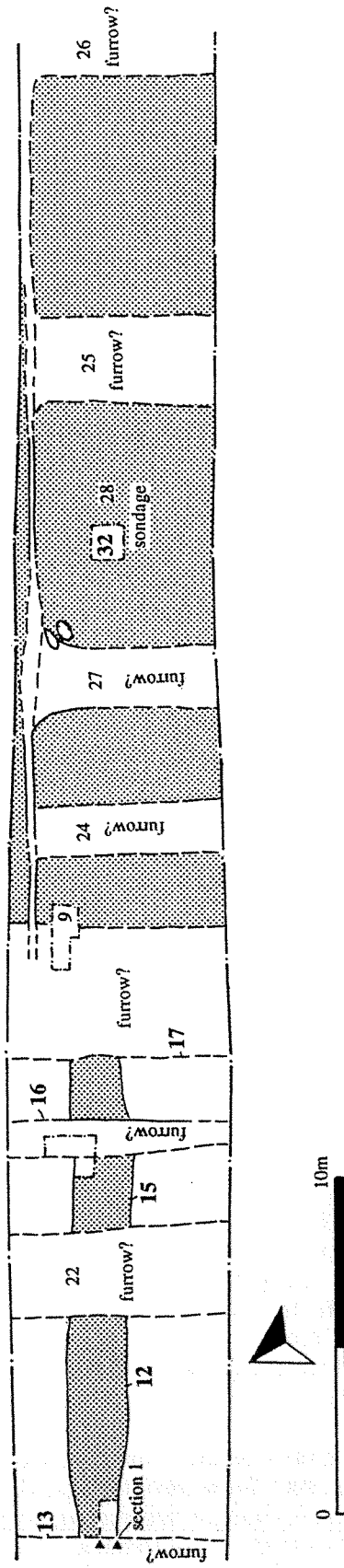


Figure 2 Trench Plans, and Section through Ditch I2 in Area B2

connected the two presumed butt ends. This may indicate a shallow recut of the putative enclosure ditch although the section excavated through 102 showed only a single fill.

The finds from these deposits consisted of animal bone, a little building material and a few sherds of pottery. The sherds from 102, 103 and 104 include NVCC, shelly wares and grey wares - an assemblage of 3rd or 4th century date. No finds from these features were definitely post-Roman, but the abraded nature of the pottery suggests it might be residual.

From initial cleaning over 100 and 102 came a mixed assemblage including Roman sherds (NVCC, NVGW) and modern porcelain (18th-19th century). Finds of recent date might be related to this field's historical role as the village pound. Metal detecting at this western end of the easement produced similarly mixed results, including 19th century objects and Roman coins. The most spectacular find was a square of silver, apparently cut from a longer strip, which had been inscribed with a Christian Chi-Rho symbol and the letters VRSACI VIVAS ('may you have life, Ursacius')¹.

5.2.2 Area B2

Cleaning over the area of the dark patches revealed beneath the fieldwalking scatter suggested that they in fact formed a single large feature some 30 m across which was cut by furrows of a lighter colour (Fig. 2). 'Furrow' 17, for instance, filled with compact yellowish brown (10YR 5/4) clay (23), clearly truncated the very dark greyish brown (10YR 3/2) sandy clay fill (9) of the large dark feature (32). From the west side of the dark feature a linear ditch (12 and 15) ran for some 15 m along the centre of the easement before petering out. The relationship between the ditch and feature 32 was obscured by furrow 17.

The surface of ditch 12/15, as revealed by machining, lay at a height of c 36.4 m OD to the west and 36.2 m where it met feature 32. The surface of the latter then sloped down to a lowest point of c 35.7 m on its east side. Ditch 12/15 was about 1.8 m wide and 0.35 m deep beneath the level of machining, with shallow sides and a flat base. At the west end it had a thin basal fill of yellowish brown (10YR 5/6) clay (11), which included finds of pot and bone, below an upper fill (6) of very dark greyish brown (10YR 3/2) sandy clay, which was rather ashy and contained burnt bone and charcoal (Fig. 2). A section cut towards the junction of the ditch with feature 32 lacked the distinct basal deposit and had a single fill (7) of very dark brown (10YR 2/2) sandy clay.

A 1 m square sounding was cut through the centre of the dark feature 32. This revealed an upper layer (28) of very dark grey (10YR 3/1) cloddy clay about 0.30 m thick, overlying a softer, more friable and less sticky deposit of dark grey (10YR 4/1) slightly clayey silt with a moderate density of charcoal inclusions (29). This was about 0.25 m thick and overlay a much lighter deposit of olive brown (2.5Y 4/3) clay (30) which was not fully excavated but apparently contained few or no finds.

The formation processes involved in these deposits are hard to characterise. In general the potsherds are, like the fieldwalking material, small and abraded - which suggests that they were not dumped as rubbish directly into these features, but represent a redeposited (tertiary) assemblage. However, the animal bone and oyster shell tended to be much better preserved with large elements surviving e.g. in context 9. There was also some variation between deposits: while both 28 and 29 contained a similar range of finds (pot, tile,

animal bone, shell) those from 29 are generally larger and less abraded - though the sherds are still relatively small. The ambiguous evidence for the formation of these deposits implies that the structures from which the material was generated are not necessarily in direct proximity. However, there is no evidence that the assemblage is residual within features of a later period: no post-Roman sherds came from Area B2 or its vicinity.

The pottery from these deposits is, like the fieldwalking material, entirely consistent with a 3rd to 4th century date. The only major difference is that in the excavated assemblage grey wares outnumber shelly fabrics. The fill of ditch 12/15 (contexts 6, 7, 11) produced several grey ware sherds, including a storage jar rim, and single sherds of shelly ware, Much Hadham ware and reduced ware. A number of roof-tile fragments (including *tegula* and *imbrex*) were also present. Rather more material came from feature 32 (contexts 9, 28, 29); a total of about 185 sherds comprised mainly grey wares (52%) and shelly wares (24%) with NVCC and NVGW (7%) and small amounts of other fabrics, including flagons, parchment ware, white ware, Oxfordshire wares, Much Hadham ware and Samian (P. Copleston, pers. comm.). Building material included stone, and tile in both sandy and shelly fabrics. Among the latter is one piece of box-flue (context 29), which may have come from a bath-house and signifies buildings of some status in the vicinity².

Other ceramic finds came from cleaning over the tops of the features. In addition to the wares listed above these surface contexts produced sherds of Harrold (shelly) ware (4th century) and a mortarium fragment of uncertain type.

A number of metal coins came from the surface of feature 32 and the adjacent spoil-heap. All were badly corroded and only one could be positively identified - as a 'barbarous radiate' copy of coins of the 'Gallic Empire' of Postumus and Tetricus (c AD 260-280). A second coin on which some features were visible could be an 'VRBS ROMA' issue of Constantine (early 4th century) (K. Konuk, pers. comm.).

6 CONCLUSIONS

The limited excavations at Woodhurst have revealed two sites of Roman date. The minor one (Area D) possibly consists of a small ditched enclosure close to the modern village, with a low density of finds - although at least one coin and the silver object discussed above came from this area. The features were shallow and had no fieldwalking signature. They are not considered to represent activity of any great significance, although the 19th century discoveries mentioned above (SMR 3603) came from only some 300 m to the east and the present finds may therefore lie on the edge of a larger site.

The more significant site (Area B2) consists, as revealed, of a large feature of unknown origin and a linear ditch. Both elements contained fills relatively rich in artefacts which seem to represent rubbish or midden deposits. Although the potsherds were generally small and abraded, the animal bone and oyster shells appeared fresh, and the relatively large quantities of tile fragments and possible building stone suggest structures stood in the vicinity. We might imagine buildings similar to the late Roman hut excavated at St Ives, 5 km to the south, which was roofed with *tegulae* and half-flue tiles but had walls of wattle and daub (Green 1959). Feature 32 may fill a natural hollow of some kind, but from the homogeneity of the deposits and the

attitude of many finds within them it appears to have been filled relatively quickly rather than by purely natural silting. It therefore seems more likely to represent a large artificial feature, possibly a quarry pit, on the edge of an area of occupation.

Because of the limited investigation that was possible, the site remains enigmatic in many aspects. However, by producing definite evidence of occupation the work sheds some light on what the isolated Roman finds discovered in this area over the years might relate to. The Woodhurst site reflects the spread of late Roman settlements onto the higher ground between the Ouse and Ramsey Fen, although the previously known settlements around Colne and Somersham are situated near waterways (the site at Camp Ground, Colne Fen may have boat docks). However, the description of the Camp Ground settlement as comprising large gravel pits and ditches of various width seems to resemble the features at Woodhurst (Tebbutt 1929). The addition to our understanding of the Roman landscape in the region again raises the question of road access; it is unlikely that there was never a formal route through this area, and the road from St. Ives to Somersham is certainly straight enough to have had Roman origins (the straight line of Wheatsheaf Road, however, seems to be of recent origin).

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NOTES

1. The inscription is written in three rows: VRS/ACI(Chi-Rho)/VIVAS. Initially it was thought to be incomplete, and indeed from the roughness of the left and right sides compared to those at the top and bottom it does appear to have been cut down from a longer strip. However, the cramped position of the final 'S' of 'VIVAS' suggests the inscription was purposely fitted in to this space. 'VRSACI' (the vocative form of Ursacius) is not common but some notable 4th and 5th century bearers of this name are known from different parts of the Empire. The object may be a ring bezel, although it is relatively large (11 x 12 mm). From the Chi-Rho symbol, which is of Constantinian type, it probably dates to *c* AD 350 (W. Frend, pers. comm.). For similar inscriptions elsewhere in Roman Britain see Thomas (1981).
2. Tebbutt (1929) reports a "house of some pretensions" with hypocaust central heating near the Camp Ground in Colne Fen.

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