

Investigations at a Roman Villa site, Ailsworth, AILRV 97 (TL1094 9767). A Preliminary Report.

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Summary.

An investigation was undertaken on 18th October 1997 at the site of a Roman villa (Scheduled Ancient Monument No.125) following reports that the site had been deep-ploughed. The work was undertaken to assess the amount of damage that the deep-ploughing had brought about in relation to the affects of a history of ploughing at usual levels. The work was undertaken by a team of archaeology students on a certificate course at the Board of Continuing Education, Madingley Hall, University of Cambridge and led by Dr Tim Reynolds of Cambridgeshire County Council. A brief metal detecting survey was undertaken over the villa itself by members of the East Cambridge Detectors Society. The background level of damage to the surviving monument was found to be minimal but deep-ploughing had brought up a number of tesserae, tile fragments and exposed the top of a limestone wall. Non-building cultural material was rare, even at the site of the villa itself, suggesting that any surviving midden deposits or stratified layers were only minimally affected even by the deep-ploughing. It is recommended that the site should be brought out of ploughing and placed in a stewardship scheme, which would protect the site more fully and enhance the existing Nene Way public access. Interpretation boards would also be a valuable addition to the Durobrivae landscape as a whole.

1.0 Introduction.

A Scheduled Ancient Monument, No 125, was deep-ploughed in late September/early October. This was a change to the usual pattern of agriculture over the site and may have resulted in serious damage to the surviving archaeological remains. The English Heritage Field Monument Warden, Trish Roberts drew this to the attention of the County Archaeology Office. The CAO suggested a brief survey to examine and assess the impact of the deep ploughing on the monument. This was agreed and went ahead on 18th October 1997 using students enrolled on the Certificate in Field Archaeology course at the Board of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge.

2.0 Topography and Geology.

The site lies on First Terrace River Gravels close to the River Nene which has deposited Flandrian alluvium over the southern part of the site (BGS 1984). The site is on the northern river bank, less than 100m from the river itself. The site falls within two types of soil association the Fladbury 3 River Alluvium, a stoneless clayey, fine silty and fine loamy soil affected by groundwater and Sutton 1, River Terrace Gravel, fine and coarse loamy soils over gravel with a calcareous mix (Mackney et al. 1983).

The site has an undulating surface (which reflects residual traces of ridge and furrow) and lies entirely below the 10m contour. The total surface height variation can be over one metre across the field which slopes gently from north to south.

The site has been pasture and is presently planted with a cereal crop. It is owned by the Nene Park Trust.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical background.

There are no known prehistoric sites near the investigated site although the gravels on which it lies have, elsewhere, yielded Palaeolithic handaxes which may be as old as 210 000 BP. Equally, the terrace gravels are a favoured location for prehistoric activity and sites may be present that are presently not known, possibly due to alluvial cover.

The investigated site was discovered and investigated by Artis in the early Nineteenth century (Artis 1828). He described it as a range of at least fifteen rooms, seven of

which contained mosaic pavements or tessellated floors. Five rooms had hypocausts. The eastern side of the building extended south as a wall which Artis considered to be one side of an entrance into courtyard.

Material recovered in the 1920's confirmed the presence of tessellated floors as tesserae were recovered (SMR No.07792) and close to Castor station a cist burial of an adult male was discovered.

Study of aerial photographs by R Palmer in 1983 identified a series of rectilinear enclosures associated with the villa and suggested that the site was part of a larger courtyard villa which had been damaged by erosion by the River Nene on its southern side. In addition to the Roman complex of features, the aerial photography identified traces of ridge and furrow running north-south across the field of the site. This was later confirmed by a site visit. The presence of ridge and furrow indicates the site's post-Roman history: it was part of the medieval strip farming system within the parish of Ailsworth and then reverted to pasture, either during or after the medieval period.

Although a separate civil parish, Ailsworth is part of the ecclesiastic parish of Castor. A religious house was founded in the seventh century in Castor, quite possibly on the site of the present church, dedicated to St Kyneburga. St Kyneburga was a married daughter of King Peada of Mercia, who with her sister, set up a nunnery in Castor. These church lands passed into the possession of the monastery at Peterborough and after the dissolution were held by the Dean and Chapter of Peterborough Cathedral. Both Castor and Ailsworth are mentioned in Domesday (AD1086) (Thorn and Thorn 1979). Ailsworth had two entries, one for the abbot and another for three knights. The former holding included two mills. The hamlet of Ailsworth is first noted in texts as Egelswith in the tenth century (Serjeantson and Adkins 1970).

The studied site is scheduled as an Ancient Monument and is part of an important Roman landscape comprising the town of Durobrivae which lies south of the river, the main north-south road running through the town and out to the north of the site (Ermine Street), a series of substantial Roman buildings at castor which possibly form a major temple or palace complex, kiln and agricultural sites and a relatively well-preserved barrow. This landscape has been studied by the Nene Valley Archaeological Committee which adds to the significance of the sites remaining.

Copies of the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record entries for the area of the site are presented in Appendix 1.

4.0 Methodology

The project aimed to identify whether deep-ploughing had adversely affected the site and to appraise the degree of 'normal' damage produced by ploughing over the monument. To that end a gridded fieldwalking was undertaken collecting all non-building material artefacts within a 10 x 10m box, and sampling building materials (after counting the amount exposed on the surface). The grid was placed across the site through its central part running north-south and comprising a 30m wide sample (Figure 1). This transect approach evaluates the distribution and dispersal of materials from the site across the field. The transect measured 160m x 30m. Boxes were labelled A - P north -south and 1 - 3 west - east.

In addition to the fieldwalking, a metal detector survey was used in those boxes directly within the site. The boxes studied in this way were A1- A3, B1 - B3 and C1 - 3. An English heritage licence to detect on a Scheduled site was obtained.

In order to control for recovery, a fixed time of five minutes was spent in each box for the fieldwalkers. The six detectorists spent a total of one and a half hours in the area they studied.

5.0 Results

Full analysis of the material awaits its being processed on November 22nd. However, from field assessment and brief scanning of the collection the following summary may be drawn.

There is an overall paucity of material across the field as a whole - once line C was passed there was a dramatic fall-off in the amount of material being recovered. In addition to this general poverty of finds, pottery was generally lacking, only a few sherds of pottery, mostly local grey wares and some Nene Valley ware, were recovered. However, there was a consistent appearance of tesserae in the collection with some roof tile and box tile. There was no evidence of post-Roman materials except for some recent pottery sherds.

The condition of the material and its distribution suggest that generally ploughing has not been regularly interfering with the surviving remains and that cultural deposits remain outside the ploughzone. However, recent deep-ploughing has brought material to the surface (conditions of the collected material imply recent exposure and few encounters with the plough). The bulk of the material brought to the surface is building material and so it is possible that any surviving cultural deposits below the level of the surviving walls are still protected and have not been affected by the deep ploughing. At one point in the field a line of limestone slabs, mortar fragments and associated tile and tesserae suggests the top of a surviving wall has been exposed.

The metal detecting recovered very little material, a total of eight small bronze coins of fourth century date (where identifiable), some iron nails and a few unidentifiable fragments of bronze and iron being the only finds. The detectorists felt more could have been recovered with longer searching but even allowing for this, the assemblage is, like that of the pottery, poor. Either this villa was an impoverished one in cultural material terms or deposits retaining artefacts have not been plough-disturbed. Given the size, associated sites, and quality of the building, the former explanation is unlikely.

6.0 Discussion

The study so far indicates that the site is not generally damaged by ploughing but that deep-ploughing has damaged the villa. It would seem from the material collected that the surviving upper parts of the structure have been hit dislodging stones and tiles and some flooring materials. Any surviving midden deposits or cultural layers within the structure do not, as yet, seem to have been affected.

The site has been pasture in the past and is adjacent to grasslands next to the River Nene. It is also publicly accessible through the Nene Way. It would seem appropriate to place the site into a management programme, possibly stewardship which could then prevent deep-ploughing in the future. It would also be of great value if the site and its neighbouring sites (such as the Roman Road, the barrow and other scheduled structures) could all be interpreted for the public on display boards around the sites. The west Peterborough Roman landscape remains one of the best known and, potentially accessible, areas of the archaeological landscape in East Anglia and management of the Roman complex north of the Nene at Ailsworth and Castor should be a priority.

A full report will be produced in December, for distribution after Christmas, which will include the fieldwalking data plots and a statement of the potential for analysis of the remains recovered. The archive (both paper and material) will be deposited in the Peterborough City Museum and Art Gallery in Priestgate, Peterborough.

References.

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