

The Roman Villa at Blacksmith's Corner, Walberton, West Sussex: An interim report on the 2008 excavations



Figure 1: Excavation in process, August 2008

Worthing Archaeological Society
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SUMMARY

In 2006, at the invitation of Mr Luke Wishart, the Worthing Archaeological Society undertook excavations in a field at Blacksmith's corner, Walberton to investigate finds of pottery. Three seasons of excavation and field survey have revealed a previously unrecorded Roman villa. The 2008 fieldwork involved excavation investigating the construction of the villa, the possible bath house and an area outside the main building.

The villa consisted of five main rooms (and two possible narrow corridors), with corridors/verandas to the east, west and south. Pottery and coins ranged in date from the mid first Century to the forth century.

The excavation investigated the relationship of a number of internal walls between rooms 1 & 2 and 2 & 3, in particular examining whether the internal 'corridor' walls were all built at the same time as the main villa walls. In addition, the trenches investigating the construction of the walls were dug to the base of the surviving wall foundations to investigate the survival or otherwise of any floor levels.

A possible pit, which cut one into the main west wall of the villa building, was also investigated, to determine its relationship to the villa. Based on the contents of the pit, it appeared to be directly related to the demolition of the villa.

A Trench was also located at the apsidal wall found in 2007 to investigate whether this feature related to a possible bath house.

Finally, an evaluation trench was located to the north of the villa building to investigate the landscape outside the villa. This trench uncovered a ditch rich in Roman refuse.

This year's excavation has recovered quantities of ceramics, animal bone, oyster shell and small finds. Finds of note include coins, a broach, stamped samian pottery and a chariot terret ring.

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PREVIOUS WORK

2008 was the third season of excavation on the site of the villa at Walberton, West Sussex. The previous two years had focused on uncovering the location and the layout of the villa to determine the shape and size of the main villa building.

In 2006, a series of test pits were located based on the verbal evidence of the landowner that a large quantity of pottery and ceramic building material (CBM). One of these test pits located the junction of the walls of the main villa, and a geophysical survey (Fig. 2) was undertaken which showed the layout of the rooms of the villa.

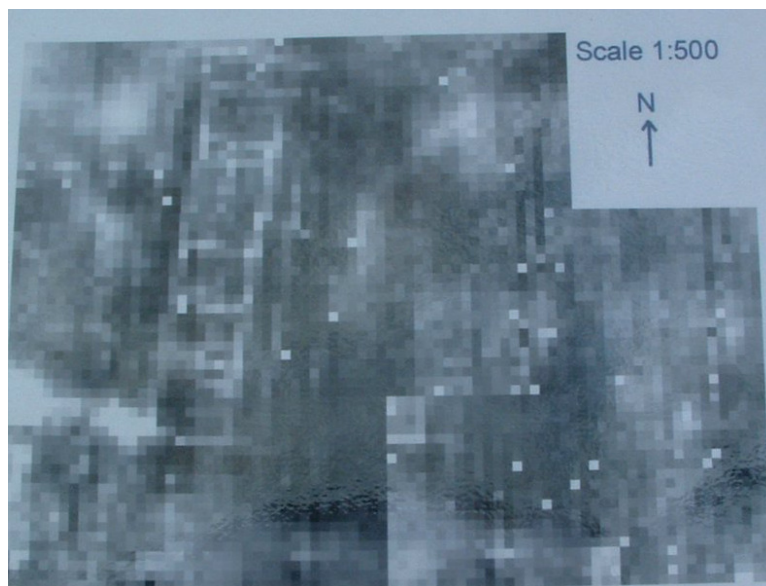


Figure 2: 2006 Geophysical survey results

In 2007, a 30m x 30m trench was opened to reveal the majority of the floor plan of the villa (Fig. 3). A sondage was dug in areas to determine the extent of the walls, which extended to a depth of 0.83m below the top of the remaining wall.

In addition, in 2007 an apsidal wall was uncovered. It was not immediately obvious whether this wall related to an apse ended corridor, or whether this was part of a possible bath house structure.

B.C.W. 07 Trench 'A'

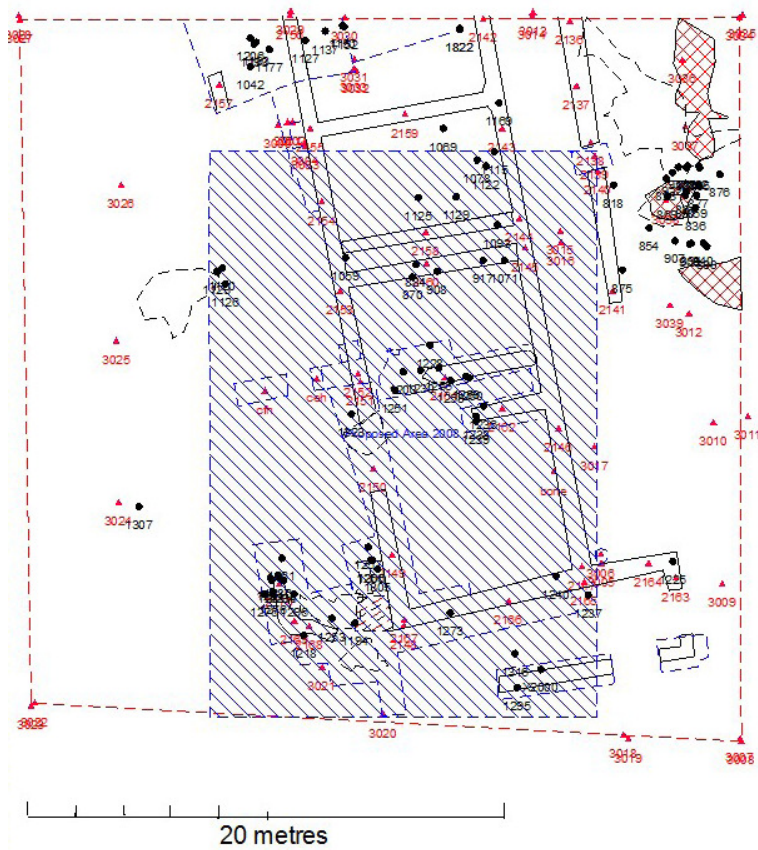


Figure 3: 2007 Trench Plan (with 2008 trench highlighted in the blue hashed area)

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of the 2008 excavation can be split into general aims relevant to the understanding of the construction of the villa, and more specific objectives related to features already exposed in the villa building. The archaeological aims were:

1. To open up areas to ascertain if the 2007 excavation exposed the floor level of the villa building or whether there were any surviving floor(s) at greater depth.
2. To determine if the internal walls were of the same construction method and date as the main external villa walls.
3. To investigate the apsidal wall to determine if this relates to an apse ended corridor or a possible bath house.
4. To investigate the “pit” area uncovered in rooms 1 & 2.

RESULTS

Trench B1

Trench B1 was located inside room 1 against the centre of the east wall (Fig. 4). The trench was dug to explore the depth of the walls, and to see if there were any traces of surviving floor levels below the level exposed in the 2007 excavations.



Figure 4: Trench B1 partially excavated (facing east)

The walls continued to a depth of almost 0.7m and were constructed of packed flint. No evidence of a foundation trench could be seen, so it is assumed that the builders dug the trench the width of the required foundations.

The soil the whole depth of the trench was clean brick earth, and there was no evidence of any surviving floor layers. At the base of the trench, an area of flints was uncovered, although this is thought to be a natural geological deposit.

Trenches B2a & B2b

These trenches were dug parallel to one another in the corridor south of room 1. Trench B2a was against the outside of the south wall of room 1, and trench B2b was located on the inside of the corridor wall.

Trench B2a (Fig. 5), similar to trench B1, showed the main wall of the villa to be surviving to a depth of approximately 0.7m.



Figure 5: Trench B2a under excavation

Trench B2b showed that the external corridor wall only extended to 0.1m deep.

Both trenches again consisted of clean brick earth with virtually no finds of any description. The limited number of finds made in the trenches is thought to have been deposited through bioturbation (the physical rearrangement of the soil profile by plants and animals).

Trench B3

Trench B3 was located to the south of the apsidal wall uncovered in 2007. The trench showed clear layers of mortar between each course of flints. Under a relatively shallow layer of brick earth, the soil contained a very high percentage of flint gravel (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Trench B3 (facing north)

Trench B4

Trench B4 was located against the western bulk of the main trench area. The trench did uncover a layer of flints, but time constraints meant that this trench was not explored further.

Trench B5

Trench B5 was opened at the south west of the main villa building. Trench 5 was located to investigate an area of burning that had first been discovered in 2007 (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: Trench B5 area of burning (facing north)

The trench revealed a deep area of burning to the south of a slightly curving wall. Directly north of the area of burning and adjacent to the wall was a patch of clay that had been partially fired by heat.

Trench 5 was extended to incorporate trenches B3, B8 and B11 (see below).

Trench B6

Trench B6 was located at the western end of the southern corridor wall that had had investigated in trench B2b. The wall seemed to stop suddenly, and so trench B6 was dug to see if the wall continued at a deeper level. There was no sign of the wall, but it could not be determined whether the wall deliberately finished or if the foundations beyond this point simply had not survived.

Trench B7

This trench was located between the internal corridor walls between rooms 2 and 3. The southern corridor wall was bonded into the main eastern wall of the villa building. Both the eastern wall and the southern corridor wall extended to a depth of 0.8m, although the corridor wall did have a band approximately 0.1m in depth of brick earth running the full length of the trench (1.8m) (Fig. 8)



Figure 8: Trench B7 Southern corridor wall between rooms 2 & 3 (facing south)

The northern corridor wall was only one course of flints deep, and was not bonded into the eastern wall. In fact, it appeared to have the corners of the wall missing. It has been put forward that this wall may have been built with wooden posts in each corner, although there is no surviving evidence of any such posts.

Two pieces of Iron Age pottery were found in this trench, but as with Trenches 1 and 2, it is thought they were deposited through bioturbation.

Trench B8

Trench B8 was located on a pit feature that had first been uncovered in the original 2006 (Fig. 9). The pit cut into the main western wall of the villa building, and the trench was located to investigate the extent and nature of the feature.



Figure 9: Trench B8 (facing east)

Directly to the east of the trench was a possible corridor wall similar to that exposed in the northern section of trench B7 and the southern section of trench B9. The trench was extended to the east towards the corridor wall where the spread of flints increased (Fig. 10).



Figure 10: Trench B8 (facing west)

In the north of trench B8 the cut if the pit was clearly visible, with the clean brick earth to the north, and the pit area with a very high percentage of mortar and chalk inclusions to the south. The pit feature seems to be related to the demolition of the villa and was full of large flints, tile, brick fragments, box flue tile fragments, partial dressed greensand blocks, and painted wall plaster fragments.

To the east of the trench, under the rubble spread, was a partial articulated chicken skeleton (figs. 11 & 12).



Figure 11: Chicken Skeleton (facing west)



Figure 12: Chicken Skeleton uncovered (facing west)

The pit feature seems to extend for a diameter of approximately 4m and seems to have been deliberately dug in the North West corner of room 1.

The pits area appears to have been created at the time of the demolition of the villa. The large amount of demolition type rubble and the overall small amount of tegula and imbrex seems to show that at the end of its life, the villa was dismantled, and any reusable material was taken away. The final destination of this material is not known, but there is an amount of roman tile visible in the walls in the church at Walberton.

Trench B9

This 1.5m x 1.5m trench was located at the south western corner of room 3, against the west wall of the villa and the northern side of the north corridor wall exposed in trench B7 (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: Trench B9 (facing west)

The corridor wall was shown to only be one course of flints deep, and was not bonded into the western wall. The corner of the corridor wall was once again missing, tying in with the evidence from trench B7.

The western wall itself continued to a depth of 0.8m, and appeared to have been better constructed than the eastern or southern walls of the main villa building. Two clear beds of mortar were visible at the top of the wall exposed, and the whole wall appeared to be constructed in clear layers of flint.

Trench B10

This 1m x 1m trench was located in the north western corner of room 2, against the west wall of the villa and the southern side of the south corridor wall exposed in trench B7 (Fig. 14).



Figure 14: Trench B10 (facing west)

The soil was clean brick earth with very few finds. The western wall of the villa made up of well defined layers of flints, as with trench B9.

The southern corridor wall visible in the north section should have been the same as the south section in trench B7. However, whereas the wall in B7 extended the whole depth of the trench (excluding the 0.1m gap described in B7 above) the corridor wall in trench B10 only extended down 0.3m and was not visible below this point. Due to time constraints, we were unable to extend either trench B7 or B10 to try to determine at what point the lower section of the wall ceases to continue.

It now appears that what were thought of as internal corridor walls now appear to be evidence of a rebuild at some stage in the lifetime of the villa. The south walls of each 'corridor' are built into the main north-south walls, and are at least 0.3m deep. In contrast, the north walls of each corridor are only butted up to the main wall and are only 1 or 2 courses of flint deep.

Trenches B1, B2a, B7, B9 and B10 have also all independently confirmed that there are no surviving floor levels remaining below the level of the 2007 excavations inside the main villa building. It may even be that the original roman floor level was at or even above the current ground level. Thousands of tesserae have been found during the three seasons of excavations, both in the trenches and across the field, but none have been found in situ.

Trench B11

Trench B11 was located on and to the north of the apsidal wall (Fig. 15).



Figure 15: Trench B11 Apse Wall (facing north)

The flint rubble filling the apse was removed, and the area within the apse was taken down approximately 0.1m. When the area of the apse was cleared, the beginnings of a second apse were revealed (Fig. 16).



Figure 16: Trench B11 - Double Apse (facing south)

Trenches B3, B5, B8 and B11 were joined together to investigate the relationship of the various features. At the intersection of B5 and B8, a small area of opus signinum flooring was found together with a number of pilae tiles, including one with mortar adhering to both the top and bottom, giving evidence of a possible hypocaust (Ernest Black, 2008, pers comms).

The apsidal wall now does appear to be a bath house. The area of burning to the south of the apse (Fig. 17) appears to be related to a slightly curved wall feature leading towards the south of the apse. It is thought that this area would have held a cauldron or pan of water that would have been heated by the fire to provide the hot water for the bath house.



Figure 17: Possible stoke hole area (facing south)

Trench C

Trench C was dug to the north of the main trench B. The trench exposed the northern end of the villa, with a possible ditch running parallel on an east-west alignment.

The ditch was found to be rich in finds, including a large quantity of oyster shells and animal bones, fine roman glass fragments, pottery, and a copper alloy chariot terret ring.

Included in the pottery finds was a stamped Samian base and footring sherd marked with the name "ALBVCIANI" (Fig. 18). This potter was working in Lezoux in central Gaul between 140 and 190 AD.



Figure 18: Stamped samian base sherd found in trench C

The trench also contained large portions of the remains of the base of a Rowland's Castle ware storage jar.

The ditch feature itself appeared to be lined with flints, but no immediate reason for this lining could be ascertained.

Trench D

Trench D was a continuation along the line of trench C. A large spread of flints was revealed, but time constraints meant that the feature could not be further investigated this season.

ARTEFACTS AND CHRONOLOGY

The last three years of excavation have resulted in the recovery of a number of important artefacts which provide a relatively accurate chronology for the villa.

The coin evidence has been very limited given the large size of the villa, but the coins we do have span the date range from the 1st century through to the 4th century.

The date range of the pottery, both fine ware and coarse ware, correlates very closely with the coin dates, although it is noticeable that the fine wares tend to be more prolific in the earlier life of the villa.

A number of personal finds, including the copper alloy bracelet found in 2006 (Fig. 19), the remains of two rings, one from 2006 (Fig. 20) and one from 2008, the probable toilet set implement (Fig. 21) from 2007, the bone pin from 2007 (Fig. 22) and the various brooches and pins do give us a tantalising glimpse into the lives of those who would have lived and worked in the villa in its heyday.



Figure 19: Copper alloy bracelet found in 2006



Figure 20: Ring fragment found in 2006

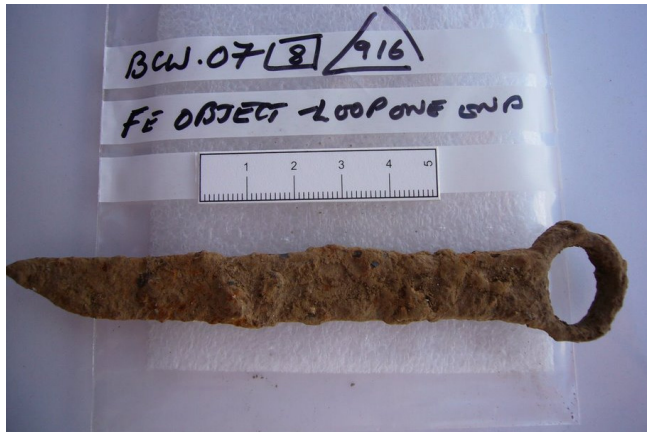


Figure 21: Toilet set implement (?) found in 2007



Figure 22: Bone pin found in 2007

More detailed analysis of the relative dating of the features of each trench is now underway, and we hope this will lead us to a tighter chronology of the life and demolition of the villa.

Interim Finds Report

Trench B

Metal finds, apart from iron nails, include a coin from the 4th Century Constantine Dynasty, a complete copper alloy 1st C. bow brooch, a pin and a brooch fibula and a fragment of a silver ring. Post Medieval finds from the plough soil include Musket balls and pewter buttons.

Other significant finds include glass window and vessel fragments including a blue/green prismatic jar or bottle of the 1st/2nd C., a fragment of a bone pin, Mesolithic and Neolithic flint work of debitage and tools and quern fragments.

Animal bone from sheep, cattle and pig were recovered and also the articulated skeleton of a domestic fowl.

Building material includes red painted wall plaster, *opus signinum*, limestone and ceramic *tesserae*, large fragments of *tegulae*, imbrices and box flue tile.

Trench C

A complete Samian potters stamp was found and identified as *Albvcianvs* of the Central Gaulish production site of Lezoux dating to 140-190 AD.

The most significant metal finds from this trench are a copper alloy Terret Ring from the 1st C., a 4th C. coin from the Constantine Dynasty and a small complete copper alloy nail that may have been used for decorative purposes.

The glass finds include fragments from very thin walled pale green vessels and a blue/green deep tubular rimmed, possibly decorated, bowl of the 1st/2nd C.

Bones have been recovered from cattle, sheep and pig as well as a bird, from the thrush species, and fish, as yet unidentified.

There are also large quantities of shell, mostly oyster but a few whelk and mussel.

Ceramic building material was also recovered.

Finds Appendix 1: Pottery from Blacksmiths Corner

By Gordon Hayden (B.A.)

The overall impression of a brief spot dating of the pottery from the first three years of fieldwork indicate that the site was occupied during the early Roman period, but that there might be a hiatus in occupation at the site, with occupation returning during the latter part of the 3rd century.

There are two sherds of very early mortaria - an import from Noyon in Gaul (c. AD 50-80) and an early Wiggonholt example (c. AD 50-120) – yet the majority emanate from the New Forest and Oxfordshire kilns beginning during the latter part of the 3rd century.

There is little amphorae to speak of, and what is present is not easily datable. Suffice to say the Guadalquivir Valley Dressel 20 body sherds are manufactured in the later fabric, which places them anywhere from the Flavian period to c. AD 260; a date which is contemporary with the Gauloise 4 example. Amphorae are not that common on rural sites and the possibility that these vessels may have arrived at the site through some form of secondary use as containers cannot be discounted.

At first glance the majority of the coarsewares appear to comprise of everted rim jars from Rowlands Castle which could date anywhere from c. AD 60 until AD 300. However, during the 2008 excavations a number of bead rims from early jars datable to the 1st century AD have been found in an oyster pit adjacent to the building(s). These coupled with a small number of Southern Atrebatian Overlap sherds suggest a presence at the site by the mid-1st century AD. Black-Burnished ware is almost totally absent with only one sherd definitely identified; most likely indicating the importance of water transport to its distribution (hence its almost total absence at this rural site).

The early finewares also indicate a presence at the site from c. AD 50 onwards. Initially it was presumed that the Arun Valley beakers, Chapel Street flagons and other assorted Gallo-Belgic copies amongst the assemblage indicated a hiatus in occupation sometime towards the end of the 1st century AD (c. AD 85-90); however Malcolm Lyne has indicated that the ring and dot beakers were in existence between c. AD 50-150. Nevertheless, if these beakers arrived at the site towards the earlier part of this period, in conjunction with the early mortaria, this hiatus can still be postulated. The samian that can be dated indicates one vessel brought to the site before or soon after the conquest. Also present is small quantities of South Gaulish Flavian-period samian, 2nd century Lezoux samian and 2nd-3rd century East Gaulish samian. The British fineware industries are absent from the mid-2nd century (or possibly earlier), until the rise of the New Forest and Oxfordshire industries (both which appear here) from the late-3rd century onwards.

The earliest diagnostic material is as follows:

Gallo-Belgic Copies

Site Code	Context	Type	Kiln	Date	No of sherds
BCW06	92 (TP9)	Ring & dot beaker	Arun Valley (Hardham)	c. AD 50-150	2
BCW06	112 (TP11)	Ring & dot beaker	Arun Valley (Hardham)	c. AD 50-150	1
BCW06	1001 (TR1)	Ring & dot beaker	Arun Valley (Hardham)	c. AD 50-150	2
BCW06	1002 (TR1)	Girth Beaker	?Wickham Barn	c. AD 50-85	1
BCW07	2	Platter	Arun Valley (Hardham)	c. AD 50-75	1

Southern Atrebatian Overlap

Site Code	Context	Type	Rim Dia	Date	No of sherds
BCW06	95 (TP9)	Jar body sherd	n/a	c. AD 20-60	1
BCW06	121	Jar body sherd	n/a	c. AD 20-60	2
BCW07	2	Jar body sherd	n/a	c. AD 20-60	3
BCW07	2	Bead rim jar	10cm	c. AD 20-60	1
BCW07	20	Jar body sherd	n/a	c. AD 20-60	2
BCW08	8832	Jar body sherd	n/a	c. AD 20-60	6
BCW08	8832	Bead rim jar	10cm	c. AD 20-60	1

Chapel Street (Chichester)

Site Code	Context	Type	Date	No of sherds
BCW06	1002	Flagon body	c. AD 50-60	1
BCW06	4004	Flagon body	c. AD 50-60	1

Amphorae

Site Code	Context	Type	Kiln	Date	No of sherds
BCW06	91 (TP9)	Dressel 20 (fabric 2)	Guadalquivir Valley (Sth Spain)	c. AD 70-260	1
BCW06	92 (TP9)	Gauloise 4	Rhone Valley (Sth or Cent Gaul)	c. AD 70-260	1
BCW06	1001	Dressel 20 (fabric 2)	Guadalquivir Valley (Sth Spain)	c. AD 70-260	1

GH 15th September 2008

CONCLUSION

The year's excavations were successful. The weather was relatively good, with only a couple of days work lost due to rain and the labour force willing and capable. A considerable amount of soil was shifted, and the results are exciting and informative. Some specific goals were set for the season and it is sensible to conclude this report with an assessment of how successful we have been in meeting our targets.

The objectives were:

1. To open up areas to ascertain if the 2007 excavation exposed the floor level of the villa building or whether there were any surviving floor(s) at greater depth.
2. To determine if the internal walls were of the same construction method and date as the main external villa walls.
3. To investigate the apsidal wall to determine if this relates to an apse ended corridor or a possible bath house.
4. To investigate the "pit" area uncovered in rooms 1 & 2.

These objectives were all achieved, and we were also able to identify new areas for future excavation.

Our general aims were also advanced considerable by this year's work.

A number of environmental samples have been recovered and it is hoped these will be processed later this year. This should give us a detailed understanding of the agricultural practices occurring around the villa in the roman period.

The assemblages of animal bones, pottery and other artefact types are large enough to begin meaningful analysis to sharpen the chronology of the site. Unfortunately, anecdotal verbal evidence that the site has been very heavily metal detected over the years appears to be backed up by the very low number of coins recovered during the past three seasons.

However, based on initial analysis of the pottery, it does appear that the site was in constant use from the mid 1st century all the way through to the late 4th century, and the limited coin evidence we do have ties into these dates very nicely.

As with any excavation, we have finished the season with a new set of questions to be answered. Although the main layout of the villa has been determined, the bath house area, and the area immediately to the west of the main building still warrant further investigation.

The pit area in trench B8 appears to be related to the demolition of the villa, and further work here may help provide a date of this final event in the life of the building.

Additionally, the landscape surrounding the villa needs further investigation, in particular the search for boundary ditches, track ways, and out buildings. A very small amount of Iron Age pottery has been found over the three seasons, and so work to understand the longer term development of the site is also needed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavations would not have been possible without the kind permission of Mr Luke Wishart, and we would like to express our gratitude for his continued interest in our work.

We would also like to thank May Gurney for their generous sponsorship by providing the digger and operator that greatly speeded the removal of the top soil.

Gordon Hayden and Malcolm Lyne provided much appreciated on site support with the identification and dating of the pottery finds, and Martyn Allen for his help identifying the range of animal bones.

We would also like to express our thanks to John Mills (County Archaeologist) and James Kenny (District Archaeologist) for their interest and guidance in the excavations.

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