

**HILL TOP, ALCONBURY WESTON 2018
SAWTRY HISTORY SOCIETY EXCAVATION
'DIG' DIARY**

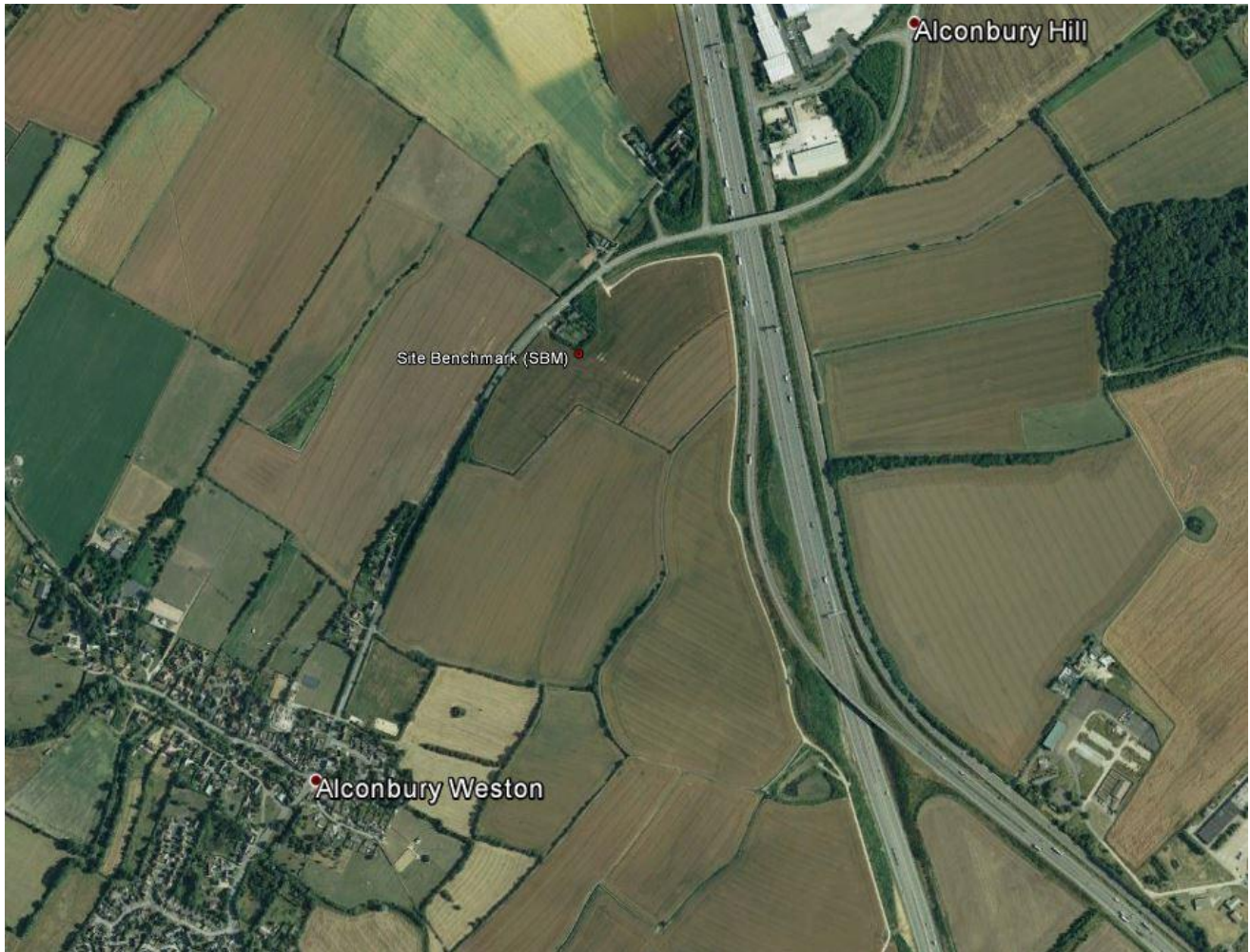


Figure 1 - Site Location

Site Location

Aims and Objectives

Project: Romano-British Settlement on Hill Top

Season: 02

Open a 15m x 2m evaluation trench with long axis aligned north-south in the site grid squares highlighted in Figure 2. The purpose of this evaluation is to:

- investigate a strong high resistance mass anomaly in the southern of the highlighted site grid squares
- investigate a low resistance area to the immediate north of the high resistance anomaly
- investigate a magnetometry anomaly indicative of a ditch that bounds the north edge of the high resistance mass in the north of the highlighted site grid squares
- determine any relationships between the anomalies through dating evidence, any truncations and assemblages

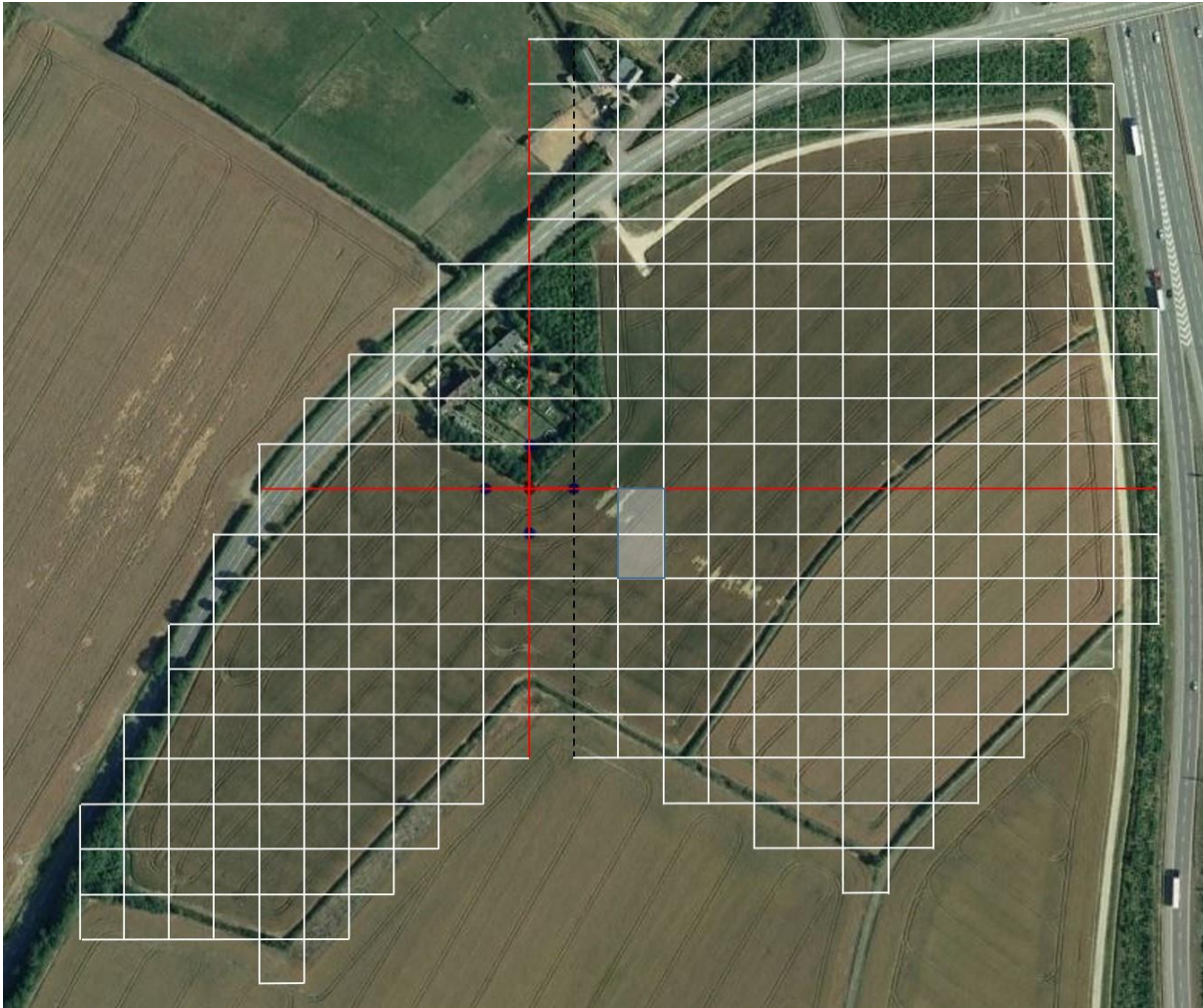


Figure 2 - Location of Trench 1

Day 1 - 30 Nov 18

Activity

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather was clear skies and sunny with a light breeze, the ground conditions were damp, and the forecast temperature was 10°C.

The afternoon's activity was de-turfing the trench and excavate top-soil to a depth of approximately 8-10 inches. This revealed the top of building demolition rubble at the south end of the trench and extending north for 5-8m then disappearing under the top-soil. There is evidence of localized high temperature in the SE corner above which, in the top-soil, a large concentration of tesserae was recovered. The final act of the afternoon was to straighten and tidy the trench walls ready for the next day and clear the loose.

Finds: numerous tesserae; pot sherds; various tile sherds; some hypocaust sherds.

Notes: the building demolition rubble was as predicted by earth resistance geophysical survey results which was a rewarding start.

Options: clean and level trench floor in order to determine the next excavation strategy.



Figure 3 - De-turfing Trench 1



Figure 4 - Trench 1 Looking North

Day 2 - 1 Dec 18

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was overcast with light squally rain and drizzle, and breezy, the ground conditions were damp and the forecast temperature was 8°C.

The morning's activity was to clean and levelled the trench floor. The building rubble was not as extensive believed and after cleaning by hand trowel became more of a compacted clay surface with tesserae and other CBM embedded. A potential post hole was revealed close to the west wall of the trench and approximately 1.5m from the north end. Suggestions of broad bands of alternating drier frangible soil and damper sticky soil spanning the width of the trench on a southwest-northeast alignment also began to appear.

Finds: hypocaust sherds, numerous tesserae, numerous CBM, pot sherds (including nene valley wares).

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather remained overcast with light squally rain and drizzle, and breezy, the ground conditions remained damp and the forecast temperature was 10°C.

A continuation of the morning's activity with no significant changes to the features and potential features identified during the morning.

Finds: hypocaust sherds, numerous tesserae, numerous CBM, pot sherds (including nene valley wares).

Notes: the end of day interpretation was that surface at the south end of the trench is compacted clay floor either as a base for tesserae or possibly a later floor overlaying the tesserae.

Options: continue hand trowelling from south end to determine the extent of the possible floor/compacted surface and the edge with the adjacent sub-soils.



Figure 5 - Trench 1 Looking North



Figure 6 - Trench 1 Possible Post Hole

Day 3 - 2 Dec 18

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was bright with scattered cloud and strong breeze, the ground conditions were damp and the forecast temperature was 12°C.

The morning's activity continued with trowelling back from south end to clear sub-soil and expose top of building rubble - comprising CBM, mortar, plaster, opus signinum and tesserae. A 1m wide slot extending 5m centrally from north trench wall was opened.

Finds: CBM (including hypocaust), mortar, plaster, opus signinum, tesserae, glass fragments, pot sherds.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather had become overcast with a continuing strong breeze, the ground conditions remained damp and the forecast temperature was 14°C.

The afternoon session was a continuation of the morning's activity. The top of the building rubble was noted to become deeper thereby increasing the thickness of the covering sub-soil. Excavate of the slot at the north end of the trench continued.

Finds: CBM (including hypocaust), mortar, plaster, opus signinum, tesserae, glass fragments, pot sherds.

Notes: the extent of the building rubble has continued further north into the trench than anticipated at the end of Day 2; the top of the building rubble can now be seen to be lower than the compacted clay layer at the south end of the trench, which gives a strong assumption that the compacted clay overlays building rubble.



Figure 7 - Trench 1 Looking South Over Building Rubble



Figure 8 - Trench 1 Looking North Along Slot

Day 4 - 3 Dec 18

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was overcast with a light breeze that quickly changed to drizzle with squally showers; the ground conditions were damp and the forecast temperature was 10°C.

Due to the inclement weather the morning's activities were primarily site admin - labelling trench contexts, bagging-up yesterday's finds and refining context descriptions. By late morning the weather had improved allowing for trench-work - this consisted of removing by mattock a depth of the sub-soil above the building rubble for a further 1.75m across a 1m width on the east side of the trench. The remainder of the morning was spent cleaning back by hand trowel the area cleared by mattock.

Finds: mainly ceramic building material (CBM), some larger pieces of mortar and opus signinum and a few tesserae.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather was overcast, which cleared to sunny intervals with scattered cloud and the occasional gusty breeze throughout the afternoon; the ground conditions were wet (due to torrential showers over lunch period) and the forecast temperature was 10°C.

The afternoon's activity was a continuation of trowelling back the area cleared by mattock in the morning.

Finds: large CBM, larger clumps of mortar and opus signinum.

Notes: the top of the building rubble sloping downwards that was revealed yesterday, now that there was a context to it, now appears to be a transition edge in the nature of the building rubble; the area to the south, that was exposed during days 2 and 3, is relatively level building rubble comprising small CBM particles, with the occasional larger piece, and numerous tesserae compacted into a soil/mortar mix; the nature of the building rubble north of this transition is of large pieces of CBM and large clumps of mortar and opus signinum with a noticeable absence of tesserae; in the northeast corner of this latest excavated area is a 'void' containing no CBM, mortar or opus signinum and in-filled with a mix of sub-soil and inclusions similar to those in the level area of building rubble (which will require further investigation); this change in the nature of building rubble could be possible evidence of a wall or traces of the wall itself.



Figure 9 - Trench 1 Looking North Over Changed Nature of Building Rubble



Figure 10 - Trench 1 Looking East Across Changed Nature of building Rubble

Day 5 - 8 Dec 18

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was overcast with a light breeze; the ground conditions were damp/heavy and the forecast temperature was 8°C. Due to the amount of rain that had fallen during the preceding three days the morning's activities were to clean the entire surface of the trench. The sides and bottom of the 'slot' excavated in the N end of the trench were improved also.

Finds: A Roman coin was recovered from the rubble/debris scatter in the southern end of the trench but otherwise the finds were the same as previous days, I.E. ceramic building material (CBM), some larger pieces of mortar and opus signinum and a few tesserae. A number of sherds of Romano-British pottery also.

Afternoon: The weather was overcast and the forecast temperature was 8°C but no more rain fell all day.

The afternoon's activity was a continuation of trowelling back over the rubble/debris scatter and extending the 'slot' in the northern end.

Finds: large CBM, larger clumps of mortar and opus signinum.

Notes: In the slot ridge and furrow ploughing is obvious and immediately south of the 'ridge' there appears to be a ditch or ditches running east – west.

Day 6 - 9 Dec 18

Activity

Morning: The weather was overcast with a light breeze bringing occasional brighter spells; the ground conditions were damp/heavy and the forecast temperature was 6°C.

Afternoon: The weather was overcast and the forecast temperature was 7°C a few brighter spells of sunshine.

The day's activities were to extend the cleaned area over the possible wall feature/rubble scatter. The 'furrow' in the north end of the trench was excavated out down to 'natural'. There is no doubt that ridge and furrow is now visible in the trench.

Finds: The finds were the same as previous days, I.E. ceramic building material (CBM), some pieces of mortar and opus signinum and a few tesserae. A number of sherds of Romano-British pottery also.

Notes: The slot was continued right up to the rubble/debris scatter. The rubble scatter appears to stretch right up to (and over) the southern edge of the east-west running ditch suggesting that the ditch predates the collapse of the building. Further investigation will confirm.

Day 7 - 10 Dec 18

Activity

Morning: Heavy cloud and occasional rain showers with intermittent drizzle with temperatures of around 10 degrees.

Afternoon: The weather was overcast and the forecast temperature was 8°C but no more rain fell all day.

Due to the amount of rain that had fallen during the preceding night conditions underfoot were 'heavy' and because of the nature of the geology progress was extremely slow. The excavating activities were close to being postponed.

The 'slot' excavated in the N end of the trench was extended right up to the rubble/debris scatter. The rubble scatter appears to stretch right up to (and over) the southern edge of the east-west running ditch suggesting that the ditch predates the collapse of the building. Further investigation will confirm.

Finds: The finds were the same as previous days, I.E. ceramic building material (CBM), some larger pieces of mortar and opus signinum and a few tesserae. A number of sherds of Romano-British pottery also. Some 'modern' finds were forthcoming from the subsoil excavated as part of the 'slot'. An intact glass bottle from the Cambridge Soda water Company was amongst this.

Notes: In the slot ridge and furrow ploughing is obvious, this will make interpretation of the east-west ditch(es) challenging, the ditches are situated where the next 'furrow' would be. The rubble/debris scatter may lay over the ridge and furrow suggesting heavy truncation by modern agriculture.



Fig 11. Cambridge Soda Water Co.



Fig 12. Painted wall plaster.



Fig 13. Large numbers of tesserae still visible on the surface of the trench.



Fig 14. Trench one looking south, the slot extended south to the rubble scatter



Fig 15. Trench one looking south, the yellowish clay is the top of the ridge, the furrow is under the bucket. Possible ditches running east-west are the darker bands of a more organic soil south of the ridge.

Day 8 - 18 Jan 19

Activity

Morning: Clear with temperatures below zero.

Afternoon: Temperatures slightly above zero, little sunshine then overcast.

The frozen surface made excavation slower but at least it was not claggy or sticky until it had thawed, by around lunchtime. The two baulks either side of the long slot through the middle of the trench began to be removed to make interpretation easier. A slot through the rubble scatter was cleaned & marked and excavation through the rubble was begun.

Finds: The finds were the same as previous days, I.E. ceramic building material (CBM), some larger pieces of mortar and opus signinum and a few tesserae. A number of sherds of Romano-British pottery also. Some 'modern' finds were forthcoming from the subsoil excavated from the baulk either side of the 'slot'. Heavily corroded barbed wire fragments were recovered.

Notes: The removal of the baulks will make interpretation of the north end of the trench much easier. Immediately south of the ridge a number of possible archaeological features are now visible but they will remain difficult to interpret until the ridge and furrow is fully exposed.

Day 9 - 19 Jan 19

Activity

Morning: Overcast with temperatures just above zero, a little drizzle and sleet during the morning.

Afternoon: Overcast with temperatures just above zero.

The two baulks either side of the long slot through the middle of the trench are almost all gone revealing two ditches at 90 degrees to each other in the northern end. They appear to be under the ridge and furrow cut directly into the natural. The slot through the rubble scatter was continued however the possible 'wall' across the trench soon turned out to be nothing more than a concentration of larger rubble pieces. In the extreme south of the trench two post holes were excavated, both had carbonated burnt posts in situ. Adjacent to these is what appears to be a portion of flooring material, approx. 100mm thick, the extent hasn't yet been established.

Finds: The finds were the same as previous days, I.E. ceramic building material (CBM), some larger pieces of mortar and opus signinum and a few tesserae. A number of sherds of Romano-British pottery also. All the finds from the two ditches in the north end are Roman in date.

Day 10 - 20 Jan 19

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was clear skies, the ground conditions were frozen - softening during the course of the morning, and the forecast temperature was -2°C.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather remained clear skies, the ground conditions had softened and were slightly damp from the residual moisture, and the forecast temperature was 5°C.

At the north end of the trench the two ditches forming a 90 degrees angle were investigated further in order to; identify a southern edge, determine the extent of damage/destruction caused by the expected medieval furrow, and the relationship of the ditch targeted on the magnetometry survey - evidence of which became apparent throughout the day. The post hole in the western baulk was sectioned and turned out to be quite a significant post that had been sunk to a substantial depth. The central area of the trench north of the long slot was cleaned back further and the extent of the



Fig 16. Post hole and post in-situ.



Fig 17. Post tip at the base of the post hole section.

building rubble spread to the north was finally revealed. The building rubble in the long slot was excavated further by several volunteers along its length, in places down to a depth of 15cm without breaking through. Similarly, the southern end of the trench continued to be excavated through the previously mentioned compacted clay floor and into a lens of building rubble beneath.



Fig 18. South end of the trench looking east.

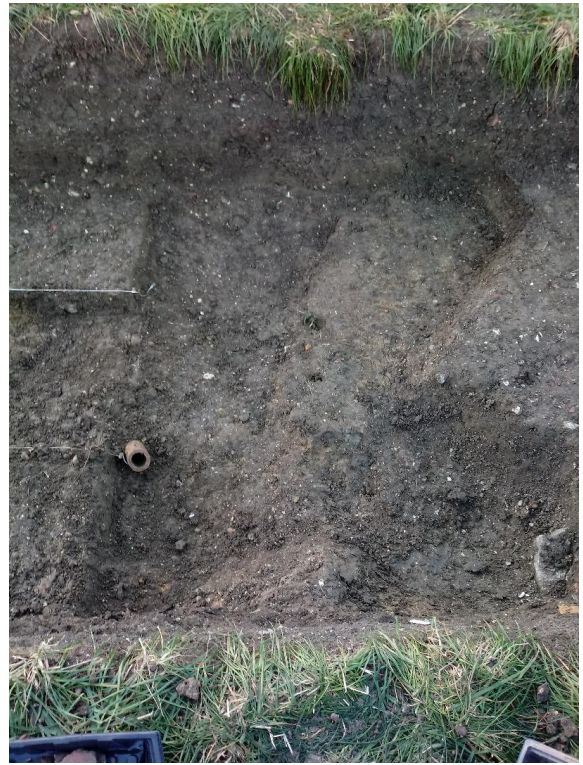


Fig 19. North end of the trench showing interconnecting cuts and exposed end of the field drain.

Finds: finds continue to be similar to previous days; CBM, varying sizes of mortar and opus signinum, some tesserae, varying sizes of Romano-British pot sherds - much of which is unabraded indicating it has moved very little since it entered the archaeological record some 2000 years ago. An unusual find was a length of (possibly early 19th Century) field drain in the ditch correlating to the magnetometry anomaly.

Note: a possible explanation of the intercutting ditches at the north end of the ditch is; the two ditches forming a 90 degrees angle are of Romano-British origin, the south edge of these ditches was damaged by a medieval plough furrow, these were subsequently cut through in order to lay a field drain and the whole was disrupted by modern ploughing.

Day 11 - 21 Jan 19

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was broken cloud with light breeze, the ground conditions were damp, and the forecast temperature was 2°C.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather had improved a little with scattered cloud and sunny intervals with a stiffening breeze, the ground conditions remained damp, and the forecast temperature was 6°C.

The north end of the trench was cleaned up in order to determine the natural geology from sub-soils and ditch fills. The north end of the slot was excavated in order to identify a north edge to the later

ditch and determine any stratigraphy of the building rubble. The field drain was removed intact from the top of the later ditch fill - it was approximately 30-35cm in length, a diameter of approximately 10-12cm and an inner bore of approximately 8-10cm. It was clearly hand-made, with a slight curve at one end, and of a clay that fired to a chalky/pastel ceramic. The finds within the ditch fill were Romano-British CBM and it was thought that the ditch and fill were of that period; until three more similar sections of field drain were found abutted and in-situ at a depth of 0.75m within the ditch fill (approximately 1.3m below the modern field surface). Excavation of the building rubble in the central section of the slot was also continued which revealed accumulations of larger pieces of CBM and structural stone - often with mortar residues attached; tantalizing hints of possible walls and/or floors. The south end of the trench also cleaned up revealing that the previously mentioned burning events were more extensive than first indicated. Trench records and drawings were updated.



Fig 20. South end of the trench looking east.



Fig 21. North end of the trench showing interconnecting cuts and exposed end of the field drain.

Finds: sherds of CMB and large pieces of mortar, plaster (some of which was painted or slipped) and *opus signinum* - one large piece of plaster was of interest as it was imprinted on one face with the tile combing that would have facilitated adherence of the plaster. Other finds were, primarily, pot sherds of Nene Valley Colour Coated Ware, black burnished wares and grey wares - all of a fine fabric and finish, including distinctive and diagnostic rim and base sherds.



Fig 22. Slot through the building rubble - north end of the central section, looking south.



Fig 23. Slot through the building rubble - north end, looking north over the later ditch with field drain visible.

Day 12 - 15 Feb 19

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was sunny with clear skies and early weak haze, the ground conditions were dry in the main - although the surface was damp at first from thawed frost, and the forecast temperature was 6°C.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather remained sunny with clear skies, the ground conditions were dry, and the forecast temperature was 10°C.

The principle activity was to continue excavating the central slot in order to determine the depth of the building rubble and whether it overlay further archaeology or natural geology. Once the concentration of stones at the north end of the slot and immediately south of the cut with the field drain were cleaned up it was agreed they had a 'wall' like appearance and it was decided to remove the berms either side of the stones to determine whether they formed a linear feature and, if so, whether that feature extended beyond the trench walls. Once the berm sections had been excavated the anticipated stone linear feature was revealed; with the extra bonus of a circular feature suggestive of the bottom of a post-hole with in-situ lining or packing, the diameter of which equalled the width of the linear feature - approximately 1m. As the linear feature rested directly on natural geology the trench-side interpretation was that this was the base of a wall foundation, with the circular feature being the base of a load-bearing structural post rising through the wall.

In the northern central section of the slot further concentrations and alignments of dressed stone were revealed as the building rubble was excavated. One concentration towards the centre of the trench was investigated further by excavating a section in the east berm and the dividing berm immediately south of the feature.

In the southern central section of the slot a section of the building rubble was excavated fully revealing compacted soils.

At the southern wall of the trench patches of the trench floor had become extremely damp from an unknown cause. If this area was prone to water accumulation and poorly drained it may explain the thin layer of clay encountered when the trench was first opened which may have been used to cap or seal the area. Another lens of clay at the south end of the slot was exposed, its deep orange colour suggesting it had been exposed to high heat which may indicate an association with a hypocaust system. As the building rubble was excavated from the south section of the slot larger pieces of dressed stone were also revealed, but not in any concentration or relationship.

Finds: CBM - *besales* and *pedalis* (hypocaust *pilae*), *tegulae* and *imbrices*, and *parietalis*; mortar; dressed stone; *opus signinum*; pot sherds (some with diagnostic rims and bases); glass; nails; oyster and muscle shell; animal and avian bones.



Fig 24. Trench, looking north.



Fig 25. Possible base of wall foundation with 'post-hole', looking south.



Fig 26. South end of trench showing damp patches and deep orange clay.

Day 13 - 16 Feb 19

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was overcast with a light breeze that kept a chill throughout the day, the ground conditions were dry, and the forecast temperature was 10°C.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather remained overcast and breezy with the morning chill persisting, the ground conditions were dry, and the forecast temperature was 13°C.

Today's activity was a continuation of that of yesterday with excavation of the remaining sections of building rubble within the central slot. Excavation of the saturated area of the southern end of the trench was started. The fill was a very dark soil with finds contemporaneous to rest of the trench and suggestive of a ditch or cut, the form of which is yet to be revealed. In the central area of the southern section of the slot, full excavation of the building rubble was completed to natural geology that left an east-west linear feature of building rubble no more than 0.5m in width within the natural geology. This was also excavated to the natural and, due to its alignment with dressed stone in both the east and west sections of the slot, was provisionally interpreted as a robbed-out foundation cut for an interior wall; this reflects and supports earlier suggestions of a wall at this location (Day 4).

The possible wall foundation base and post-hole were interpreted as such with a greater deal of confidence and drawn in plan. The fill, which was a dark soil that included large pieces of CBM and dressed wall stone, was excavated followed by the packing and lining stones. The width of the wall was measured at 1.2m whilst the post-hole diameter measured at 1m and the diameter of the post itself was assessed at 0.5-0.75m.

Finds: CBM - *besales* and *pedalis* (*hypocaust pilae*), *tegulae* and *imbrices*, and *parietalis*; mortar; dressed stone; *opus signinum* (some flat on one face), mortar and wall plaster (some flat on one face, one or two painted); pot sherds (some with diagnostic rims and bases); glass; oyster shell; animal bones.



Fig 27. South end of trench, looking east showing stratification in east trench wall.



Fig 28. Possible robbed-out foundation cut for internal wall, looking east showing stratification in the east trench wall.



Fig 29. External wall foundation base and post-hole, looking west.



Fig 30. Trench, looking north.



Fig 31. A selection of finds from Days 12 and 13.

Day 14 - 17 Feb 19

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was clear skies and sunny with a light haze and breezy, the ground conditions were dew damp, and the forecast temperature was 7°C.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather remained clear skies and sunny with a gusting breeze, the ground conditions were dry, and the forecast temperature was 12°C.

In the morning the remaining sections of building rubble in the central slot continued to be excavated and the stones of the external wall and around the post-hole were cleaned up. At the south end of the trench the latest layer of dark clayey soil was excavated to natural geology.

In the afternoon the final areas of building rubble in the southern section of the central slot were fully excavated to natural geology.

A 0.5m section was excavated through the sandy layer across the width of the trench immediately south of the external wall to better determine the nature/purpose of the sandy layer laying directly on the natural geology in this area. The consensus was of sand deliberately deposited, possibly as a bed for hypocaust *pilae*. At the south end of the central slot two cuts were revealed and excavated; one elongated on an east-west axis, the other rounded in the main but not fully circular.

Finds: CBM - *besales* and *pedalis* (hypocaust *pilae*), *tegulae* and *imbrices*, and *parietalis*; mortar; dressed stone; *opus signinum* (some flat on one face), mortar and wall plaster (some flat on one face, one or two painted); pot sherds (some with diagnostic rims and bases); glass; oyster shell; animal bones. Of particular note was a sherd of Nene Valley Colour Coated Ware from a Hunt Cup (an image of a complete cup can be seen at <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1980-53-835-2/>).



Fig 32. Trench, looking south.



Fig 33. Cuts at south end of trench, looking west.



Fig 34. Hunt Cup sherd.

Day 15 - 18 Feb 19

Activity

Morning: at the start of the morning session the weather was overcast and breezy, the ground conditions were dew damp, and the forecast temperature was 9°C.

Afternoon: at the start of the afternoon session the weather was broken cloud with sunny intervals and gusting breeze, the ground conditions were dry, and the forecast temperature was 11°C.

Remaining building rubble was excavated from the central slot fully to natural geology, whilst the south end of the trench was cleaned up. The two cuts at the south end of the trench were excavated; the southern of the two became a circular feature with walls sloping to a bowl base which was interpreted as a post-hole (its diameter being similar to that of the post-hole in the

external wall towards the north end of the trench) with the adjacent large stones believed to have been used as packing material, the northern of the cuts was slightly undercut (the interior diameter being greater than the diameter of the opening) which bottomed out at approximately 1.5m below the modern field surface. The east wall of the trench was dressed along the line of potential interior wall extending south from the external wall on a north-south alignment and the adjacent stones re-cleaned. This revealed a contiguous linear concentration of stones extending approximately 2m south from the external wall along the base of the trench wall, above which was a thin 'binding' layer of mortar which was clearly defined in the stratigraphy. A 1m section was excavated in both the east and west berms adjacent to the potential internal wall to determine whether it extended beyond the trench walls. Despite direct evidence of the wall petering out, the difference between the building rubble in this alignment with that on either side - notably, the distinct absence of *tesserae*, as previously identified on Day 4 is still suggestive of an internal east-west wall.

Finds: CBM - *besales* and *pedalis* (*hypocaust pilae*), *imbrices* and *tegulae*; *parietalis*; numerous *tesserae*; dressed stone; large pieces of *opus signinum*, mortar and plaster (some of each flat on one face); pot sherds (some with diagnostic rims); oyster and whelk shell. Of particular note was a second coin (not far from where the first coin was found on Day 5), a sherd from a glass beaker/cup with motif that was a near copy of that on the ceramic Hunter Cup sherd excavated yesterday, and a glass handle with intricate detail.



Fig 35. Possible internal wall at base of trench east wall.



Fig 36. Possible storage pit.



Fig 37. Glass handle (© Rex Gibson, FRAG).