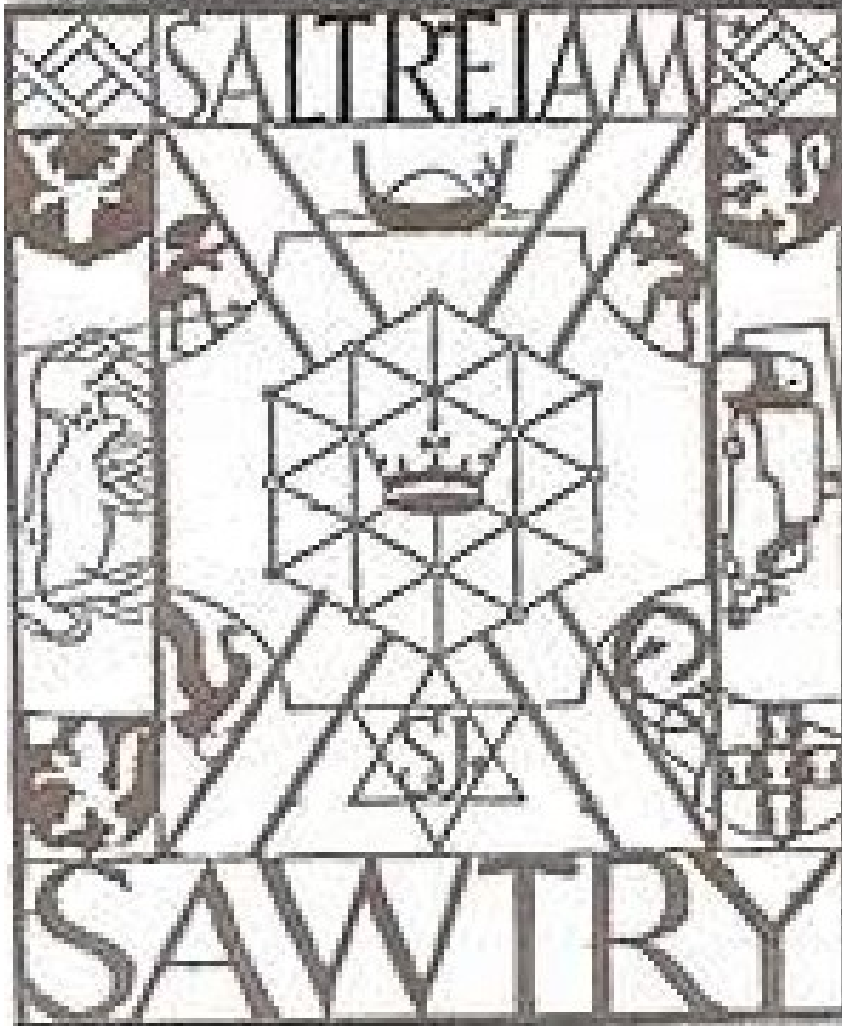


SAWTRY HISTORY SOCIETY



ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTERIM REPORT
SHS17-1_IR-1

RESEARCH INTO PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATIONS PRIOR TO 2009 - HILL TOP,
ALCONBURY WESTON

4 October 2020

by

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Philip Smith Landowners' Historical Research Group (LHRG)

OASIS REPORT FORM

PROJECT DETAILS		OASIS No:	
Project name	Archaeological investigation of Hill Top and Long Nines fields in Alconbury Weston.		
Short description	Sawtry History Society archaeologists undertook desk-top research into previous archaeological investigations undertaken by local and commercial archaeologists prior to 2009.		
Project type	Desk-top research		
Site status	N/A		
Previous work	None		
Current land use	Arable farming		
Future work	Geophysical survey, fieldwalking survey and excavation		
Monument type/ period	Iron-Age/Romano-British, <i>circa</i> 100 BC to AD 410		
Significant finds	N/A		
PROJECT LOCATION			
County	Cambridgeshire		
Site address	Hill Top, Alconbury Weston		
Study area	119,600m ² (11.96ha)		
OS grid reference	TL18374 77628		
Height OD	48m aOD		
PROJECT CREATORS			
Organisation	Sawtry History Society		
Project brief originator	Sawtry History Society		
Project design originator	N/A		
Director/Supervisor	Phil Hill		
Project Manager	Kevin Redgate		
Sponsor or funding body	Sawtry History Society		
PROJECT DATE			
Start date	Oct 18		
End date	Jun 19		
ARCHIVES	Location	Content	
Physical			
Paper			
Digital	SHS Archaeological Digital Archive	SHS Archaeological Digital Records and Media	
BIBLIOGRAPHY			
Title	Research into Previous Archaeological Investigations Prior to 2009 - Hill Top, Alconbury Weston		
Serial title & volume	N/A		
Author(s)	Kevin Redgate & Phil Hill		
Page numbers	014, plus 3 Annexes		
Date	4 October 2020		

1. **Introduction.** Hill Top has provided tantalizing evidence of a potentially significant Romano-British settlement through the antiquarian investigations of Dr J R Garrod MD in the 1932, and the developer led commercial archaeological evaluations of the both the Archaeology Section of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCCAFU) and Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) 1990s. A paper regarding Garrod's investigations can be found in the Transactions of the Cambridgeshire & Huntingdonshire Archaeological Society, Volume VI, Part VIII; whilst the evaluations undertaken by both CCCAFU and BUFAU resulted in three and two reports respectively. It is these reports and paper that provide documentary basis for the research presented in this interim report.

2. Site Details.

2.1. **Event Number.** N/A.

2.2. **Location.** The site consists of Hill Top and Long Nines that covers an area in excess of 8 hectares. It is located west of the A1 and east of Vinegar Hill in the centre of Alconbury Weston Civil Parish (Figure 2.1), and centrally in the northern half of National Grid Reference (NGR) square TL1877. Situated on the west edge of a 45m contour, the site has commanding views of Ermine Street to the east, the Alconburys and Alconbury Brook to the immediate south, and the lowlands west of Ermine Street in all directions (Figures 2.2 and 2.3).



Figure 2.1: Site relative to Alconbury Weston (Google Earth, 2016)

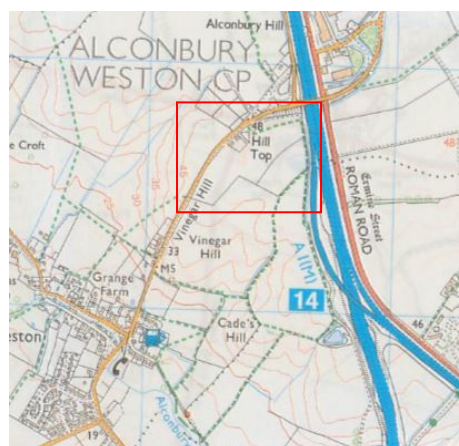


Figure 2.2: Site relative to Alconbury Weston (Ordnance Survey, 2006)

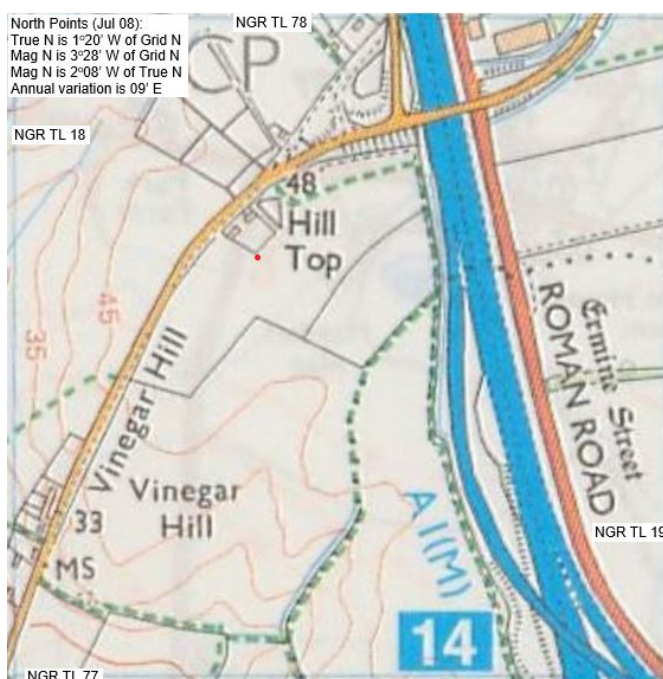


Figure 2.3: Hill Top site with SBM in red (Ordnance Survey, 2006)

2.3. **Reference Points.** The Site Benchmark (SBM) has been set on the edge of the tree line adjacent to the south corner of the residential gardens at NGR TL18374 77628 (Figure 2.3). Grid Alignment Points (GAP) are set 20m north, east, south and west of the SBM in order to facilitate development of a site grid.

2.4. **Site Grid.** The site grid can be found at Annex A.

2.5. **Geology.** The site sits on the west edge of a plateau on the 45m contour that overlooks the Alconburys. The bedrock is Oxford Clay Formation-Mudstone with Oadby Member-Diamicton superficial deposits, above which is a varying depth of plough-soil (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.4: Site geology (British Geological Survey, 2017)

2.6. **Protection.** The site is not protected or within a conservation area.

2.7. **Land Use.** The two fields that comprise the site were used for arable farming and, as such, subjected to modern farming methods including ploughing and harrowing for crops, and deeper mole ploughing for drainage. From early 2018, Hill Top was held as grassland for hay and silage. In early 2020 the site was returned to arable use.

2.8. **Utilities.** An active branch of the ex-government fuel oil pipeline (now under private ownership) runs through the west end of the site, whilst a medium pressure gas pipeline runs through the site on a north/south alignment west of the Hill Top cottages. There is also a short low voltage (230V/480V) supply line serving the new barn in the berm enclosure and a low voltage supply line to the north of Hill Top Cottages that serves a sewage kiosk; suggesting that there is an underground sewage tank at the northeast of Hill Top Cottages (see Figure 2.5).

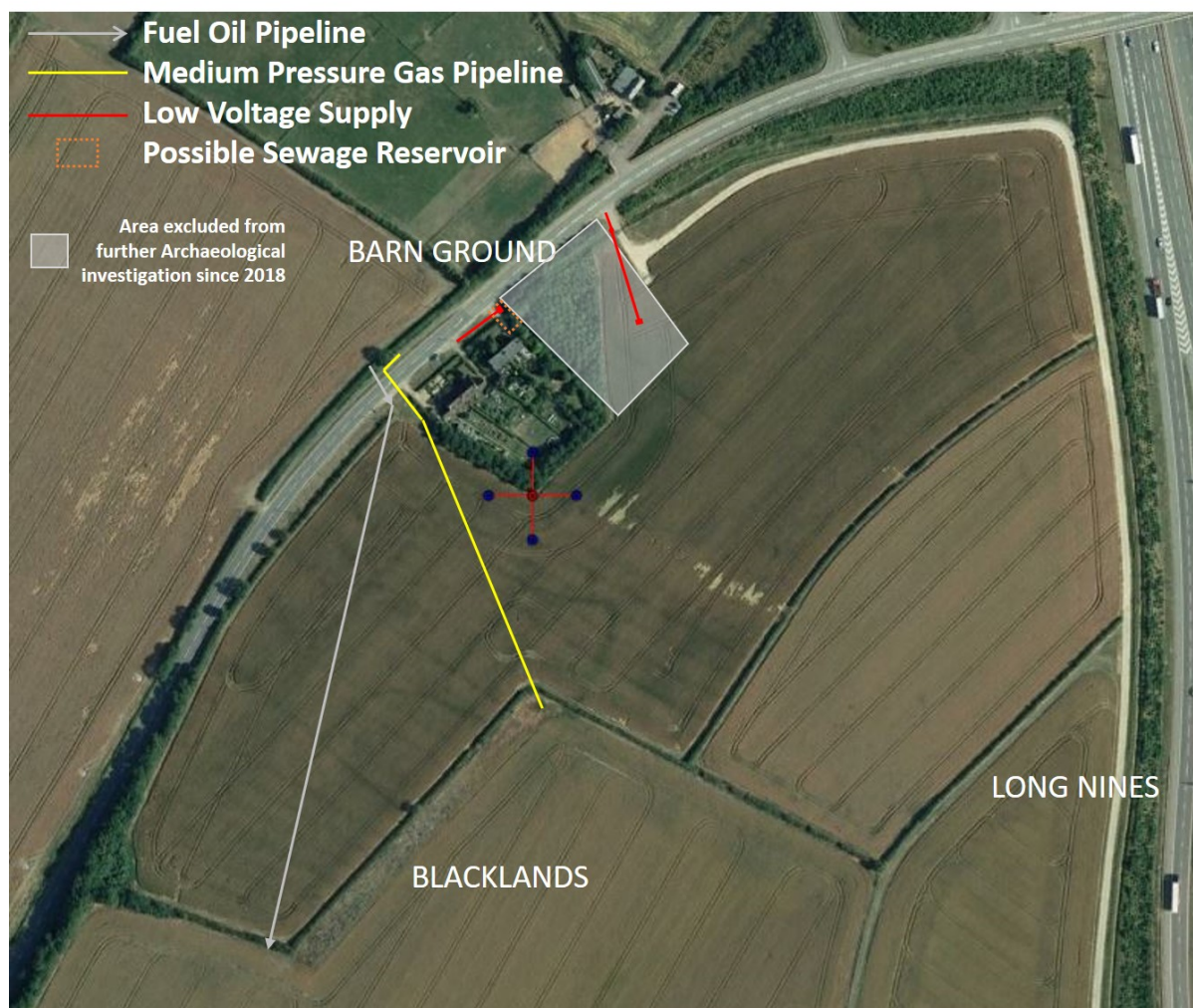


Figure 2.5: Utilities (Google Earth, 2016)

2.9. Historical Background. In 1932 Dr J R Garood MD, a local antiquarian of the Cambridgeshire & Huntingdonshire Archaeological Society (CHAS), began investigating the fields of Blacklands and Barn Ground (the previous field names of the field now known as Hill Top) as part of a wider investigation of Iron Age and Roman-British settlement sites on Alconbury Hill. Further archaeological investigations were undertaken by the Archaeology Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCCAFU) in 1991, 1992 and 1995 in advance of A1 widening. Archaeological investigations were also carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) in 1996 also in advance of A1 widening. Since 2009 the two fields of the site have undergone methodical metal detecting which has produced a considerable volume of Roman artefacts ranging from coins to high status jewellery spanning four centuries of Roman occupation. Incidental to the metal finds was a wealth of ceramic artefacts including pot sherds, CBM and tesserae.

3. Aims and Strategy.

3.1. Aims. The aim of this research is to review the various reports and papers detailing archaeological investigations undertaken by Dr Garood, CCCAFU and BUFAU, in order to better determine the extent, nature, status and duration of Romano-British settlement at Hill Top, Alconbury Weston. Specifically:

3.1.1. Determine whether settlement consisted of a single building or several buildings and, if multiple buildings, whether settlement was nucleated or dispersed.

3.1.2. Determine the period of Romano-British settlement and duration of occupation, and whether it was continuous or phased.

3.1.3. The purpose, nature and status of settlement on Hill Top, and whether there are any unique functional spaces or complexes; for instance, is the site a *mansio* or lesser status roadside way-station, a villa, a religious complex, or one of industry or manufacturing.

3.1.4. Place the site within the contemporary landscape in respect of local rural settlements and the nearby towns of *Durovigutum* (Godmanchester) and *Durobrivae* (Water Newton).

3.1.5. Whether there is evidence towards the supposition of an Imperial Estate in the fens.

3.1.6. An understanding of the site's relationship with the road and river communications networks (Ermine Street, secondary roads connecting Leicester and Dorchester, and the river Great Ouse) in respect of trade, commerce and/or industry.

3.1.7. The origins of Romano-British settlement; whether this evolved from a pre-existing Iron-Age settlement or developed independently as an adjunct or supplant and whether, subsequently, it was abandoned when Roman administration withdrew in AD 410, or did settlement continue and adopt Anglo-Saxon identity.

3.2. **Strategy.** The strategy for research of the previous archaeological investigations was to collectively re-assess the various reports and papers produced in order that a consolidated analysis could then be undertaken.

4. Results.

4.1. **Activity.** Each of the previous archaeological investigations is considered to be an independent activity and re-assessed as such in the first instance, and then consolidated into a single set of contextualized results.

4.2. **Dr J R Garrood MD, 1932.** Transactions of the Cambridgeshire & Huntingdonshire Archaeological Society, Volume VI, Part VIII (Garrood, 1946: 203-208).

4.2.1. At the time of Garrood's investigations the field that is now Hill Top was divided into two - Blacklands to the west and Barn Ground to the east, as indicated on Figure 4.1. The east boundary of this field lay against the then A14, placing it further east than the present boundary which lies along the A1(M). Alconbury Hill



Figure 4.1: Locations of Garrood's investigations on Hill Top (Garrood, 1946:205)

Farm was located at the northeast corner of Barn Ground; the entirety of which was demolished by the widening of the A1(T), and subsequently the A1(M), and construction of the flyover carrying Vinegar Hill to Alconbury Hill (Figure 4.2). Long Nines, located to the southeast, was similarly bounded at the east by the then A14, and was also truncated by the widening of the A1(T) & A1(M), as also shown in Figure 4.2.



Figure 4.2: Hill Top without field division and east boundary post-A1(M) widening (Ordnance Survey, 2006)

4.2.2. Garrod carried out three investigations as indicated on Figure 4.1. The first consisting of excavations in the form of a series of 'trial holes' to the east end of Blacklands close to the field boundary with Barn Ground. On finding a 'rubbish pit', he excavated that to its depth of 7 feet-6 inches (2.286m). He records that the 'trial holes' yielded only a few sherds of Romano-British and Castor wares at approximately one foot (0.305m) depth; inches off the natural clay which he found at one foot-two inches (0.356m) depth. Although he does not quantify as such, he implies that the rubbish pit contained a fuller assemblage of pot sherds ranging from late Iron Age C to Castor wares; with the Iron Age predominantly below the three feet (0.914m) level. His second investigation was in the form of a 'watching brief' of the foundation trenches for Hill Top Cottages (referred to by Garrod as 'council houses') that were then under construction, whilst his third investigation appears to have been a surface observation of sorts in Long Nines (Garrod, 1946: 203).

4.2.3. In Blacklands, Garrod records a pot sherd that he dates to Iron Age A but, unfortunately, he does not give a location or depth. Nor does he give an indication as to its condition with regard to abrasion, so it is not possible to determine its relationship with the site; other than there was an instance of occupation or activity on this part of Hill Top some time before 400 BC. Besides the aforementioned sherd, Garrod attributes the Iron Age pottery assemblage of eight sherds to the Iron Age C period. He states that these came primarily from the rubbish pit and mostly below the three feet (0.914m) level; with two above this depth at one foot-five inches (0.432m) and two feet (0.61m) respectively. He records a Romano-British pottery assemblage in the upper fill of the rubbish pit, quantifying seven sherds (including

two Samian) and stating the assemblage also included some Castor ware and sherds of grey, brown or red typical Romano-British wares that were dated to the second century or later; with sherds of this assemblage being found at depths varying from one foot-six inches (0.457m) to four feet (1.219m). In addition to the pot sherds, the Romano-British assemblage consisted of three tile fragments - one of which Garrood suggests is a roof tile and another, that is combed, he suggests is from a hypocaust (heating system) flue, some bone artefacts, a quern stone (of a pre-Roman style) and a bronze Penannular brooch (Garrood, 1946: 204-206).

4.2.4. From his watching brief of the construction of Hill Top Cottages in Barn Ground, Garrood recovered Romano-British pottery sherds that he categorized as Castor, Coarse Roman and Gritted wares; he also mentions a grooved tile (possibly hypocaust or *parietalis*), some pieces of *tegulae* and oyster shell. Whilst, from fieldwalking in Long Nines, he recovered a piece of roof tile (Garrood, 1946: 203, 206).

4.3. **Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section (CCCAS), 1991-5.** A1 Widening Scheme, Alconbury - Fletton Parkway: An Archaeological Assessment 1990 (Evans and Shotliff, 1990); A1 Widening Scheme - 1992; Alconbury - Fletton Parkway (Pelling and Leith, 1992); Archaeology on the A1 between Alconbury and Fletton Parkway, Stage 3 Assessment, Volume 1 (Kemp and Reynolds, 1995).

4.3.1. The CCCAS investigation took place in Vinegar Hill field immediately to the south of Hill Top field. It consisted of fieldwalking and trial trenching in the northeast area of the field adjacent to the previous A1(T) embankment, as marked by the shading and F4 on Figure 2.4, which did not reveal any archaeological features. However, fieldwalking along the north area of the field revealed a substantial scatter of early Roman pottery, along with a large piece of *opus signinum* (a strong and durable Roman mortar containing crushed building tiles that gave its distinctive pink

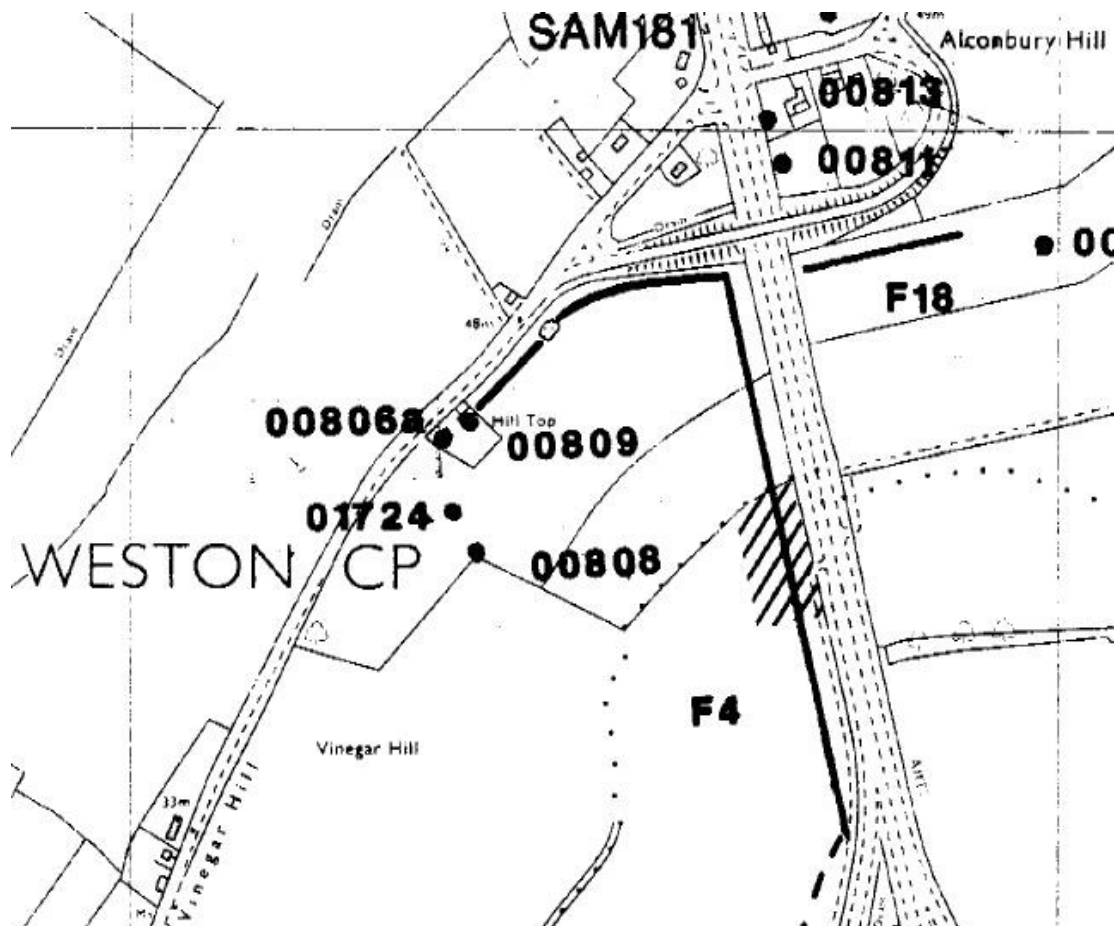


Figure 4.3: Locations of CCCAS investigations on Hill Top (from Evans and Shotliff, 1990: Map 2)

colouring); all of which increased in intensity closer to the boundary with Long Nines to the north.

4.4. **Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU), 1996.** A1(M) Alconbury to Peterborough DBFO Scheme: Archaeological Evaluations at Norman Cross, Vinegar Hill and Alconbury Hill, February 1996 (Ellis *et al*, 1996); A1(M) Alconbury to Peterborough DBFO Scheme: Archaeological Investigations, Post Excavation Assessment and Research Design (Mould *et al*, 1996).

4.4.1. The final investigation was undertaken by BUFAU on the north edge of the extreme northeast corner of the site (incorrectly identified as Vinegar Hill rather than Hill Top) and directly opposite a second BUFAU excavation on the immediate east side of Ermine Street (referred to as Alconbury Hill - which revealed nothing of archaeological significance other than one sherd of Roman pottery and some post-medieval pottery), as indicated on Figure 4.4. The main excavation was carried out

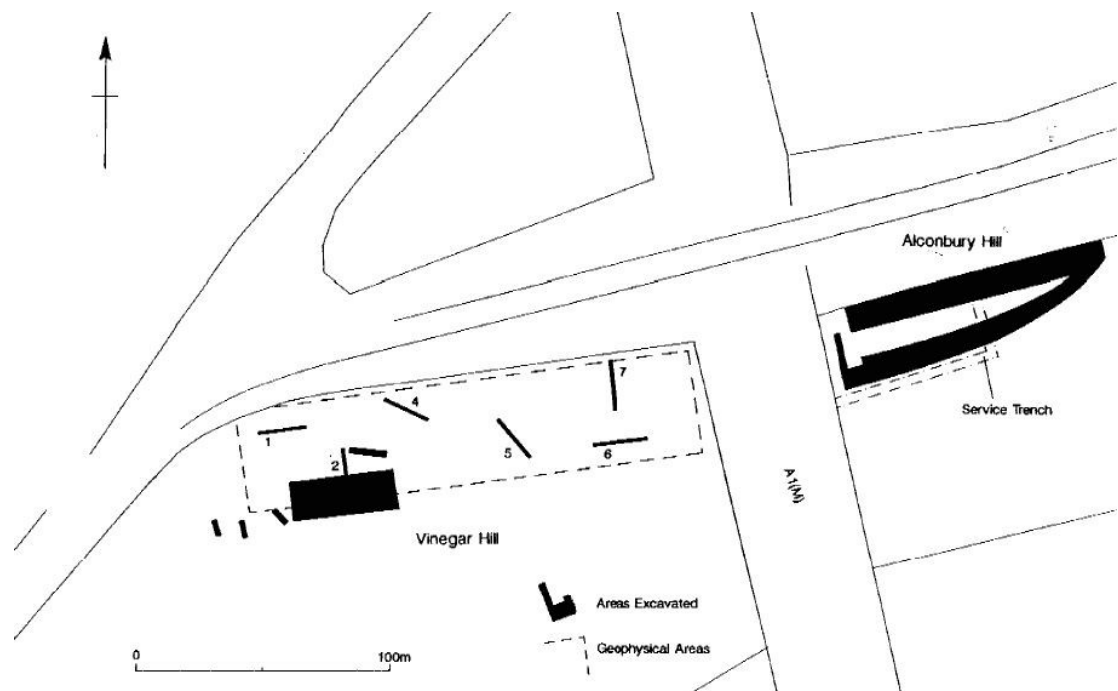


Figure 4.4: Locations of BUFAU investigations on Hill Top (Mould *et al*, 1996: Figure 19)

in the wide-area trench #2 (Figure 4.4) which revealed a number of natural water channels and cut water ditches indicating water and land management. The bottom of the fills contained abraded Romano-British pottery sherds and tile fragments from a wide-ranging time period, along with a number of well-preserved animal bones. The pottery assemblage from across the investigation consisted of 354 sherds dating primarily to the second and third centuries, with some sherds from the first century. The largest quantities of sherds were grey, oxidized, shell tempered and Nene Valley Colour Coated wares, with smaller quantities of grog tempered Belgic, Black Burnished type 1 and Samian. Other finds from across the investigation included; one brooch pin, two belt buckle, two pieces of door furniture, 36 building nails, one fragment of slag and 17 coins (none of which was dated), 102 pieces of CBM (*tegulae*, *imbrices*, hypocaust), 16 pieces of miscellaneous fired clay and 19kg of animal bone. None of the metal items were dated, whilst the animal bone was in poor condition and fragmented (indicative of butchery and kitchen waste) and gnawed (suggesting secondary deposition). Seventy percent of the animal bone assemblage was identifiable as cattle, sheep/goat and pig; with all but four pieces being cattle. Environmental sampling provided evidence of spelt, emmer and barley. There was evidence that the emmer and spelt were being cleaned for domestic use

and, therefore, suggestive of subsistence farming. Weed seeds of dock, goosefoot, medick, stinking mayweed and duckweed were also identified; the latter alluding to the presence of permanent water. There were also substantial quantities of molluscs representing two species groups found in differing habitats; marshy and watery (Mould *et al*, 1996: 18-21, 32-35, Table 3, 40-41).

4.5. **Features.** A consolidation of archaeological and archaeology containing geological features revealed by the previously discussed archaeological investigations is at Annex B.

4.6. **Finds.** A consolidation of the archaeological assemblages recovered by the archaeological investigations discussed above is at Annex C.

5. Analysis.

5.1. The blurred stratification of the Iron Age and Romano-British assemblages within the rubbish pit excavated by Garrood, along with intermixed animal bones and oyster shell, is highly suggestive of continued occupation from the first century BC into the fourth century AD. The pit's close proximity with the two rectilinear crop marks indicative of ditched enclosures that are visible on Google Earth imagery (Figure 5.1) is a strong indicator of the nucleated Iron Age origins of the settlement, with continued Romanized settlement. The Iron Age 'A' pottery sherd recovered by Garrood dates the earliest settlement to between 400BC and 800BC; although continued occupation through to the Late Iron Age is not proven. The northeast enclosure measures 61m by 55m and the southwest enclosure measures 55m by 49m (although it is very likely this is truncated by the field boundary and was a larger dimension) giving enclosed areas of 3,350m² and 2,400m² respectively. These are comparable to the Late Iron Age enclosure at Ilder Crescent, Peterborough that measured 59m by 54m, covered an area of 3,100m² and contained three roundhouses (Henley *et al*.,

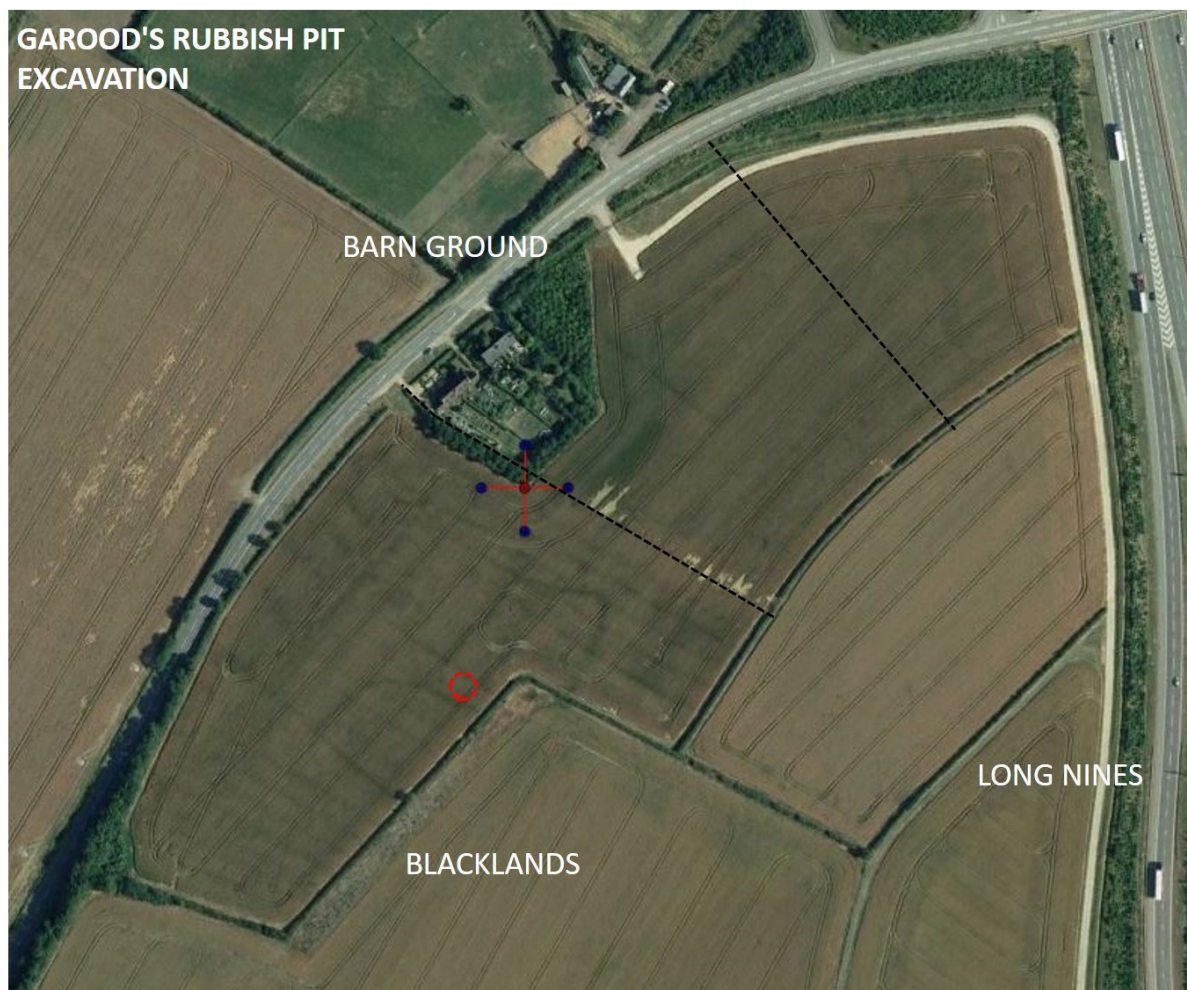


Figure 5.1: Garrood's rubbish pit excavation (Google Earth, 2016)

2012: 17). It is conceivable, therefore, that the nucleated Iron Age settlement on Hill Top consisted of three to six roundhouses. The presence of Romano-British pottery and ceramic building materials in the council houses foundation trenches in Barn Ground is indicative of a separate Romanized building, as is the piece of roof tile found in Long Nines of a third Romanized building. The possibility of three separate structure locations is derived from the site not having been subject to modern ploughing at this time and, due to the lack of any significant abrasion of the finds from the council houses foundation trenches and Long Nines, the unlikelihood that bioturbation could have migrated these finds from the locale of the rubbish pit; the rubbish pit is in Site Square -2,-5, the council houses are located in Site Squares -1,4 / -1,3 / -2,3, whilst the Site Square in which the roof tile in Long Nines could have been found in is 4,-6 - the distance between each is 140m and 110m respectively.

5.2. The extensive quantity of early Romano-British pottery, along with the large piece of *opus signinum*, recovered by CCCAU from Vinegar Hill field in the vicinity of the field boundary with Long Nines is highly suggestive of significant Romano-British settlement activity that, in all probability, is relative to that indicated by the roof tile found by Garood in Long Nines.

5.3. The right-angled ditch revealed by the BUFAU excavation could either be a settlement or livestock enclosure ditch or a field boundary drainage ditch; although environmental evidence indicates the permanent presence of water, which suggests the latter. The varied assemblage of pottery, ceramic and stone building materials, metal items (including slag) and items of clothing accoutrement recovered from the ditch fill indicates the presence of another separate area of settlement activity in the vicinity. Although environmental evidence and non-cattle proportion of the animal assemblage indicates a reliance, to some extent, on subsistence farming, the disproportionate quantity of cattle in the animal assemblage strongly suggests the existence of a cattle based industry.

6. Summary.

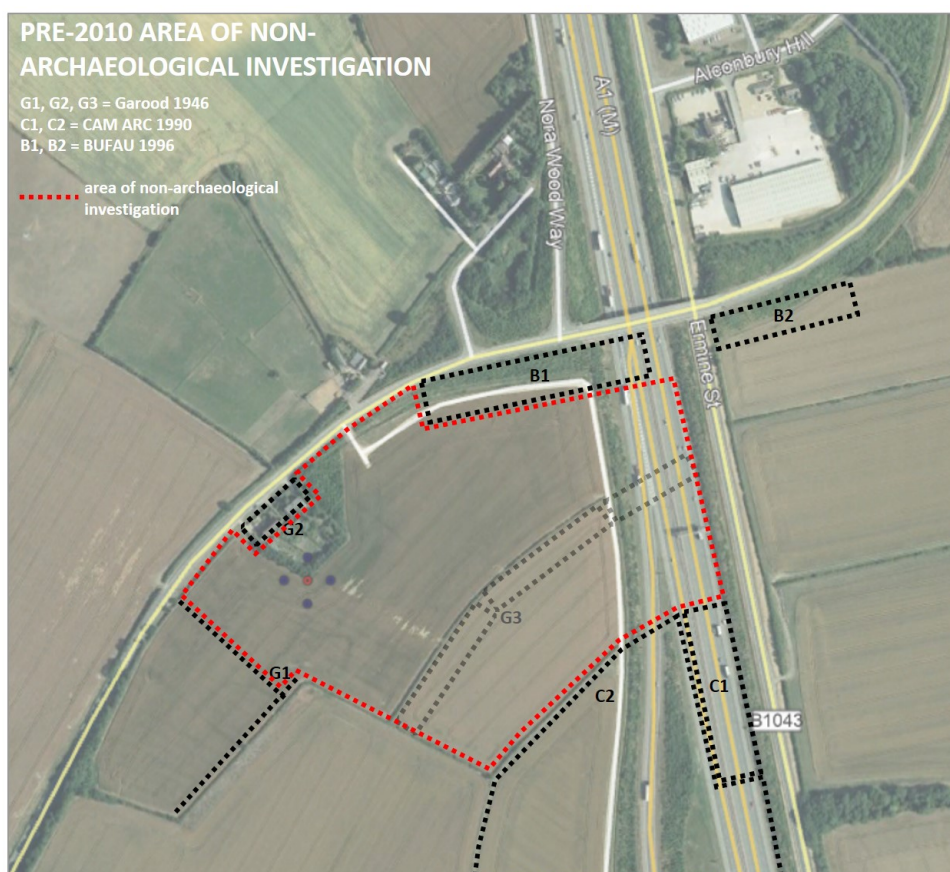


Figure 6.1: Pre-2009 area of non-archaeological investigation (Google Earth, 2016)

6.1. The separate investigations individually give strong indication of Romano-British settlement in their respective immediate vicinities, but no direct evidence of in-situ structures. However, when viewed collectively (see Figure 6.1), areas of greater potential for the location of Romano-British settlement become more evident.

6.2. Garrood's investigations, indicated by G1, G2 and G3, all provided evidence of Romano-British building, however, it is not possible to determine whether this is evidence of one or several buildings, or possible location. Garrood's investigations bracket a large expanse in the centre and east of Hill Top, giving plenty of potential for one or more, as yet, undiscovered buildings; however, the scope of G3 is purely speculative as all that Garrood mentions is that he found one sherd whilst walking the field (Long Nines). The presence of hypocaust (or *parietalis*) and *tegulae* is a good indication that there was at least one Romano-British building of some substance with a tiled roof, plastered walls and heating. The pottery assemblage in the area of G1 offers good evidence for continuous occupation from the late Iron Age through to the fourth century AD. The excavation site for this assemblage is in close proximity to crop marks resembling ditched enclosures. If an association were proven it could be the point of nucleation for wider settlement activity on Hill Top.

6.3. The CCCAFU investigation effectively placed a firm bracket to the southeast of Hill Top as a result of the concentrations of early Roman pottery and the *opus signinum* that were recovered in the vicinity of the field boundary Vinegar Hill and Long Nines. It should be noted that Hill Top and Long Nines were not subjected to modern ploughing until the 1950s and has been deep mole-ploughed on only a few occasions. This would explain why Garrood only recovered one surface find, whereas they were more plentiful at the time of the CCCAFU investigation. However, whilst regular ploughing, bioturbation and the shallow incline from the southern boundary of Hill Top through Long Nines to the east side of Vinegar Hill are contributory factors to the migration of archaeological deposits, the extent of that migration is questionable; nor can it be addressed, as the CCCAFU report does not comment on whether field walked finds were abraded - and if so, to what extent. However, on the assumption that these finds were in a similar condition to those recovered by a recent Sawtry History Society field walk, they cannot have migrated from Hill Top suggesting the presence of at least one Romano-British building of some status in Long Nines.

6.4. The BUFAU provided the final bracket at the northeast of Hill Top. It too revealed evidence of Romano-British activity in the area, particularly land and water management which, when viewed with the quantities of wheats and cereal identified in the environmental sampling and the animal bone assemblage, is suggestive of subsistence farming and animal husbandry. The very high percentage of cattle bones may be indicative of a local trade in dairy and/or beef products for both the surrounding community and Ermine Street travellers. The building material is comparable to the Romano-British found by Garrood and that found by the CCCAFU field walk, and is indicative of a building similar in status and quality in the nearby vicinity; either a small farmstead removed from Ermine Street or a roadside merchant.

6.5. The locations of these investigations leaves a considerable area of Hill Top and Long Nines (discounting Garrood's ineffective field walk) where no recorded archaeological investigation has been undertaken, as bounded by the red dotted line on Figure 6.1. Whilst each investigation provides evidence of a building in the near vicinity, collectively they provide sufficient evidence to suggest the existence of either one large substantial building or several dispersed buildings on Hill Top. With the pottery assemblages indicating occupation from at least the first century BC through to the fourth century AD, the possibility of multi-phased buildings cannot be discounted. The absence of any direct evidence of buildings further strengthens the argument for such evidence to be found within the area delineated in red on Figure 6.1.

6.6. At the time of his investigation, Garrood was quite satisfied that he had identified a Romano-British settlement with Iron Age origins that was, 'small and poor...typical of the

very rural part of the county' (1946: 203). Some fifty years later, the CCCAFU final assessment (Kemp and Reynolds, 1995: 22) was that a high-quality Roman building existed in the area; although their belief was for the building to be at the east of Hill Top, within the A1 widening development area. In their Summary, Kemp and Reynolds(1995: 25) advocate strongly for wider investigation of Vinegar Hill (Hill Top) beyond the project defined limitations of the A1 widening scheme.

ANNEXES

- A. Site Grid.
- B. Consolidation of Archaeological and Archaeology Containing Geological Features Revealed by Previous Archaeological Investigations.
- C. Consolidation of the Archaeological Assemblages Recovered by Previous Archaeological Investigations.

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