

CAMBRIDGE INDEPENDENT ARCHAEOLOGY – CIA28

Review and Research Plan for Nine Wells Whittlesford 2015

This Review and Research Plan outlines proposals for further work at Nine Wells, Whittlesford. The area has long been recognised as important both from the evidence of surface finds and from aerial photographs. Excavation by Cambridge Independent Archaeology over the past three seasons has added significantly to the knowledge of the area immediately to the north of Little Nine Wells. The intention is to compare the evidence from excavation with the documentary evidence for this site and similar ones in the area so as to establish areas of consistency and inconsistency. This will then be used to guide further work at the site.

Background

The site lies on a shallow south-west facing slope adjacent to a small group of springs known as Little Nine Wells (TL452473).

Little Nine Wells and the adjacent Great Nine Wells feed a stream known as the Hoffer Brook which flows to the north, forming the boundary between the parishes of Whittlesford (where the site lies) and Thriplow to the west. The stream also forms the western boundary of the site (Fig 1).

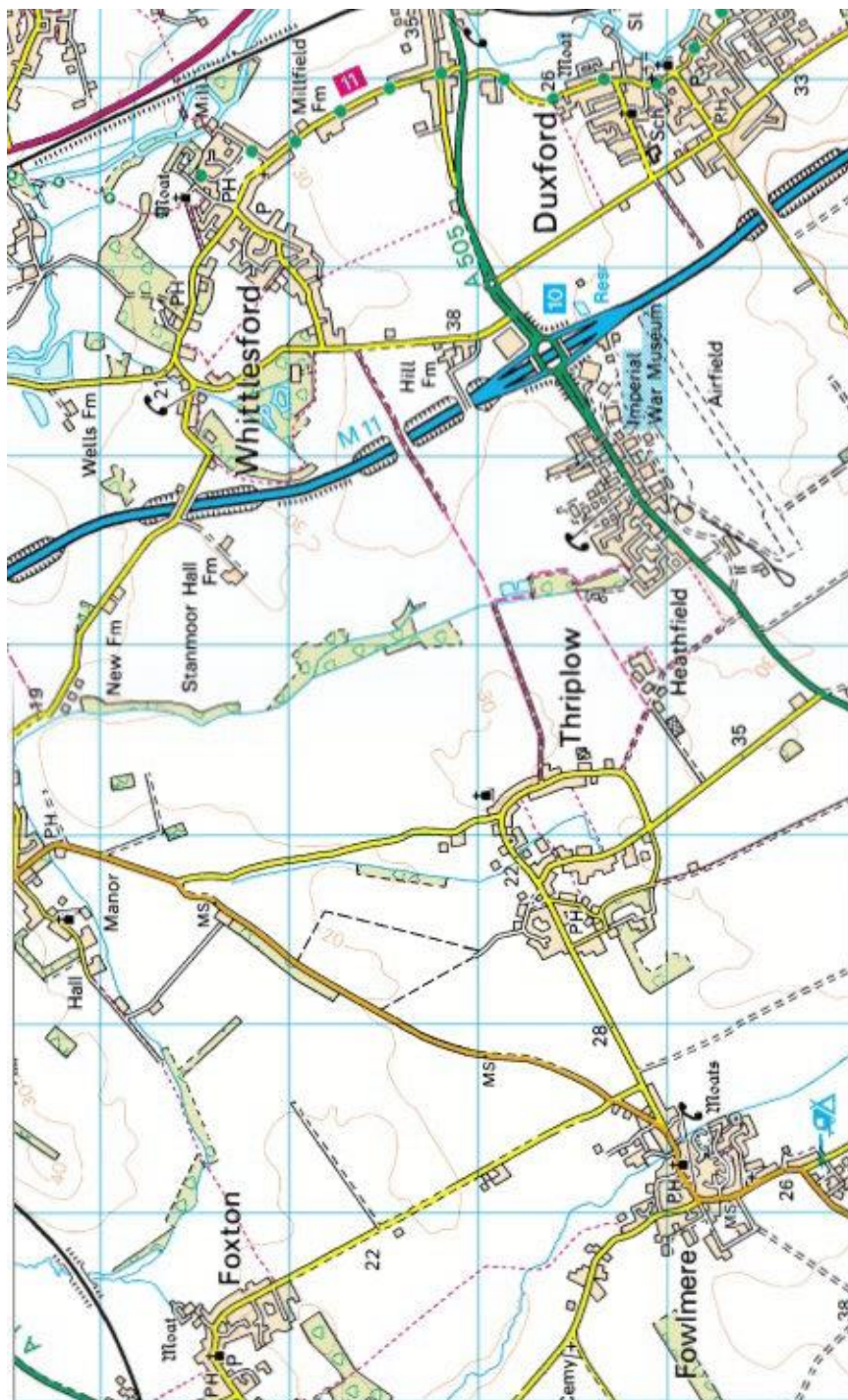
The villages of Fowlmere, Thriplow, Whittlesford and Sawston lie on a line running ENE, approximately parallel to the present A505. The site also lies on this line, 1.1 km from Thriplow church and 2.2 km from Whittlesford. The line is an extension of Ashwell Street (Margary Route 230) [1, fig 7b & p207], some 300m to the north of the present bridleway which links the two villages. Ashwell Street lies parallel to Icknield Way (Margary Route 168b, p182).

Sources indicate that activity in the immediate area resulted in several sets of features which have now been lost. Although these are generally treated separately in the literature they may be linked, or represent a continuum of occupation over an extended period.

The earliest set of features is a group of five barrows known as The Chronicle Hills. The Historic Environment Record indicates that three of these ‘may be early Iron Age’, implying that the others were Roman [2]. The precise location of these barrows is not known - the Enclosure map produced at the same time as the written record do not show any barrows, and the positioning on later maps such as the Ordnance Survey must therefore be suspect [3]. The number of barrows recorded may not represent the true picture, as the antiquarians could have treated those of smaller diameter or lesser height as not worthy of note.

Item 7 on the record refers to Roman building material. A variety of building material is evident from fieldwalking, and further material has been recovered by excavation by CIA. Whilst much material found by excavation had been disturbed and redeposited in antiquity some – notably hypocaust pilae – was in situ.

The scheduled site to the south of the area under review is described as ‘Roman Settlement south of Chronicle Hills’ and is on the Heritage at Risk register (No 1006794). Its condition is described as ‘Generally satisfactory but with significant localised problems’, being vulnerable to arable ploughing. [4].



The Site

Significant documentary research work has been done by individuals in CIA. Fieldwalking has been conducted by members of the group, and by Rheesearch. The latter have also published the results of extensive magnetometry and resistivity surveys conducted over several seasons. Cambridgeshire HER contains some notes from field surveys. CIA have conducted excavations over three seasons under the increasing guidance of a professional archaeologist. All of these activities have served to show that the site is of a significance not previously realised.

The site has a complex geology. Solution hollows from the Anglian ice-age are clearly shown on aerial photographs and identified as 'pingos' in some cases [5]. In view of the circular nature of both pingos and barrows, it is difficult to differentiate between the geophysical signature of the two features.

The underlying bedrock is East Anglian Chalk; the interface with the less-permeable Melbourn Rock runs through the site in a generally N-S direction, giving rise to the springs which feed the Hoffer Brook. The south-western slope makes the area particularly attractive for settlement.

Agriculture and post-enclosure landscape improvement was aimed at levelling and infilling the solution hollows, as well as reclaiming waste land identified as 'Got Moor' [6].

1) Communications

The Icknield Way is generally regarded as a conglomeration of ancient tracks crossing the countryside from the Avebury area to the Norfolk coast. A route referred to as Ashwell Street is part of this group, running from Watling Street in the west to Fowlmere in the east. Hippisley-Cox, writing in 1914 about green roads remarks how Ashwell Street divides to the east of Royston, but concentrates on the route to Ickleford [7]. Margary has some doubts about whether the route was continuous in Roman times [1, p207]. He remarks that 'No doubt it lead on eastward still further, but the visible traces of it end at Thriplow Church'. Margary first published in 1955, so both he and Hippisley-Cox had the benefit of seeing the routes before extensive agriculture took a hand, however neither would have had ready access to aerial photography. More recently Harrison acknowledges the idea of a zone of communication [8], but argues that the Icknield Way was not a long-distance Roman route.

Research Proposal 1:

As the site lies on the extended line of Ashwell Street, the opportunity exists to investigate whether any evidence exists of a formal trackway crossing the site.

2) Parish and Administrative Boundaries

The western boundary of the site is formed by the Hoffer Brook. The brook also forms the boundary between the present-day parishes of Whittlesford and Thriplow. It is assumed that this boundary is post-Roman, and probably post-Saxon.

The site lies within present day Cambridgeshire, but is approximately 5km from the boundary with Essex and 9km from that with Hertfordshire. It seems reasonable to broaden the research into these counties.

Research Proposal 2:

As modern administrative boundaries are of little relevance, the research should examine adjacent parishes in detail, and extend further, probably into adjacent counties.

3) Evidence from Aerial Photographs

The site was initially identified from aerial photographs, followed by geophysics by Rheesearch. It is on chalk, and has until recently been divided into relatively small strips which are subject to agricultural activity. As a result, in any one season, crop- or soil-marks are frequently broken by modern agriculture. Until recently only a limited selection of images were available. It is probable therefore that the full extent of the site has not been realised.

Research Proposal 3:

To gather together all available series of aerial and satellite imagery, georectify and plot crop- and soil-marks. The resultant image to be overlain on the magnetometry and resistivity made available by Rheesearch and compared to it, so that estimates can be made of the extent of features.

4) Similar sites in the area and intervisibility

There are a number of general features of the site which warrant comparison with others. For example:

a) Excavation at Nine Wells has also revealed an apparently sacred site [9]. This might be compared with Hutcheson's work at Ken Hill Snettisham [10]. That site appears to have been sacred in the later Iron Age. Finds included animal bones, tesserae ... a number of fragments of (dark purple) painted wall plaster, and ceramic building material.

The excavator records 'What is of further interest about this particular temple site is the apparent 'mess' that the archaeology is in.' [10, p45] and concludes with the question 'Could it be that the evidence [points] to the very purposeful and thorough destruction of the temple site during the dying throes of Roman rule in Britain ... ' [10, p47]. This description could well apply to the Roman levels at Nine Wells.

b) Fox commented upon the proximity of barrows to the routes through Cambridgeshire [11], and this has generally remained the view. However, in a recent paper, Eckart et al analyse the intervisibility of sites in the area, taking the Bartlow Hills as their focus [12]. She comments (p81) 'At Bartlow ... antiquarian observers noted the presence of a very substantial enclosing earthwork.' Although no such earthwork is known at Nine Wells, this may be because nobody has looked for, or recognised it. Subsequently she comments (p89) 'The most striking pattern to emerge is a focus on display to a local rather than a transient audience.'

Research Proposal 4:

The overall layout and detailed features found in Proposal 3 should be compared with other sites in the region with the intention of identifying elements which may be common, and those which are unique to the site.

Résumé

The overall intention is to raise the level of knowledge of:

- a) the detail of the site,
- b) the general locality,
- c) the context of the site in relation to other historic sites in the area.

Considerable effort has been expended on geophysics and on fieldwalking. This has enabled targeted excavation to take place. A small area has also been investigated by ground penetrating radar. The gpr revealed an unstructured mass of hard artefacts which was virtually impossible to interpret.

Finds recorded on the HER have included concentrations of tesserae over a span of almost forty years. It appears that in the past agriculture has had a dilatory effect upon the site. The present farmer is very sensitive, and can see how close the archaeology is to the surface. It might be argued that scheduling would protect the site, but as can be seen from the area to the south which is indeed scheduled, damage can still occur and the farmer has no way of knowing how close the plough is to the archaeology until the two make contact and artefacts are brought to the surface. At that point the damage has been done.

It may also be argued that excavation is not desirable in that it is destructive. On the contrary, the area of excavation is small compared with that of the site overall, but has produced considerable – arguably a disproportionately high – amount of information. As well as being fed back directly to the farmer, the information is put into the public domain by way of reports on the HER.

Conclusion

Considerable opportunity exists for review of the work to date against published work from other sites.

Professional work in the last ten to fifteen years has tended to challenge traditional views, such as those on the Icknield Way, and on positioning and visibility of barrows. In addition new questions have been posed regarding possible deliberate destruction of sites at the end of Roman rule. These are examples of how quickly new ideas are developing in this field.

It would appear that previous small-scale excavations have revealed significant detail of the site. It is suggested that the geophysics be studied in combination with aerial photographs in order to identify potentially new areas of the Nine Wells site for excavation on a similar scale. By continually reviewing our work against other published work, and by seeking advice from relevant professionals it appears that continuing excavation on this site in the present manner will provide a high return for minimal outlay.

References

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- 2) NMR TL44NE1. http://pastscape.org/hob.aspx?hob_id=370806
(Incorrectly described as in Fowlmere).
- 3) e.g. Cambridgeshire 1st edition 1:2,500 Sheet LIV-10 Surveyed 1885, Published 1886.
Shows three barrows.
- 4) <http://risk.english-heritage.org.uk/register.aspx?id=26571&rt=3&pn=9&st=a&ctype=all&crit=>
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- 5) Cambridge University Committee on Aerial Photography, Catalogue.
CFV15-18 and RC8DH231-5.
- 6) Gentleman's Magazine, 1819. Pt 1 pp27-28.
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- 8) Harrison, Sarah, 2003. *The Icknield Way: Some Queries*, The Archaeological Journal, Vol 160,
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