

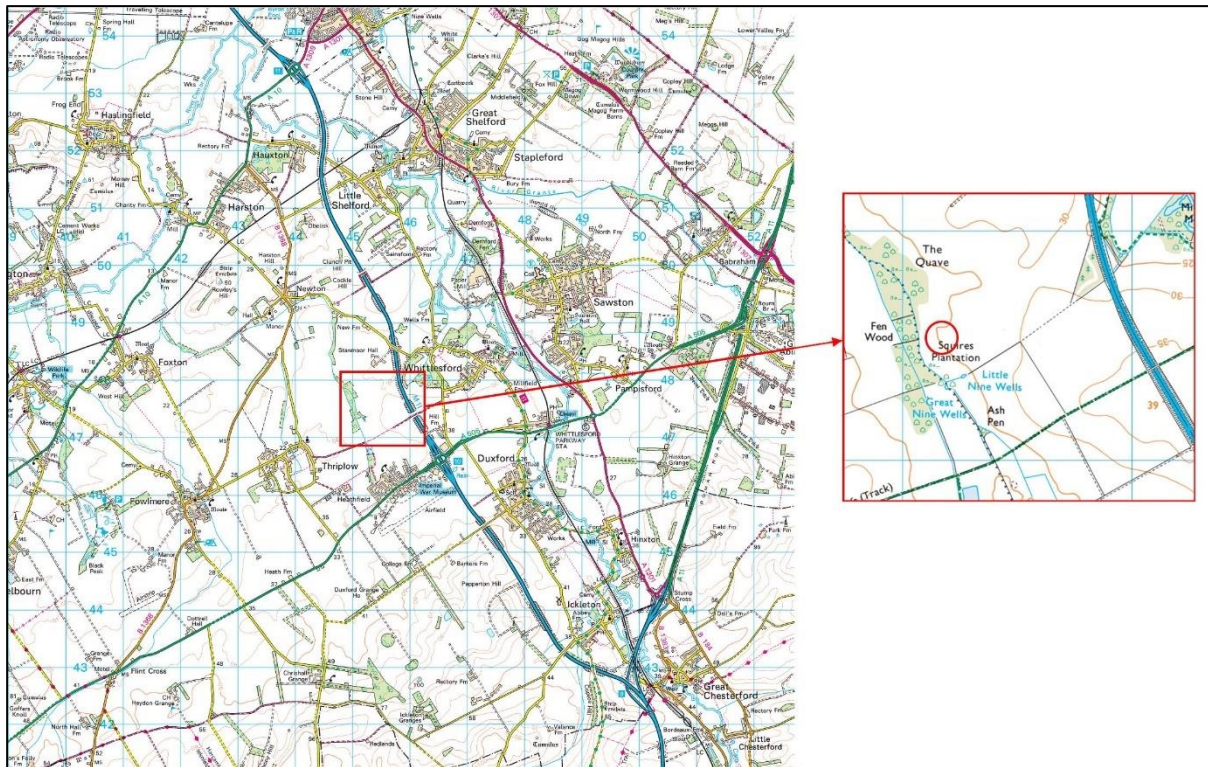
CAMBRIDGE INDEPENDENT ARCHAEOLOGY – CIA29

The Chronicle Hills, Cambridgeshire 2019: R Skeen

Cambridge Independent Archaeology is a small group of interested amateurs working with guidance and advice from a professional archaeologist and reporting annually to the County archaeologist. This note describes the work so far carried out by the group on the Chronicle Hills Roman site and objectives for future work.

Location and landscape setting

The Chronicle Hills are located on arable land in Cambridgeshire near to the villages of Whittlesford and Thriplow.



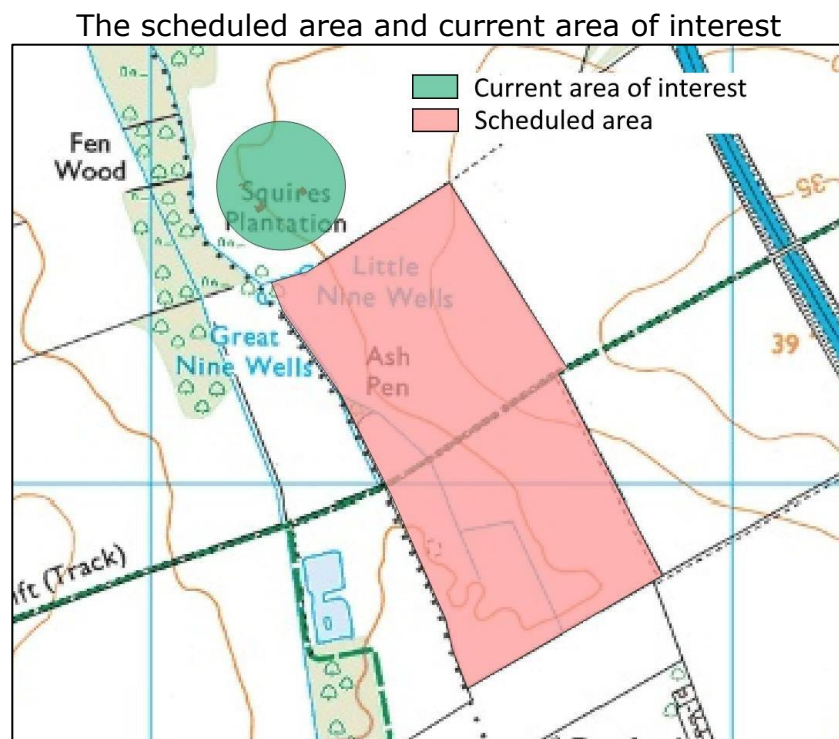
Chronicle Hills location

The site lies on a shallow south-west facing slope which sits on the Middle and Lower East Anglian chalk (TL452473). To the west it is bounded by the Hoffer Brook and a series of small springs known as the Little Nine Wells which rise along an interface with the less permeable Melbourne Rock. Early post glacial freezing created a series of circular ponds or 'pingos' along the line of the springs. To the south east an adjacent field is scheduled and is described as 'Roman Settlement south of Chronicle Hills' and is noted on the Heritage Risk register (No 1006794) as being at risk and vulnerable to ploughing.

In addition to the springs and scheduled site there are a number of other significant features associated with the area. The most important of these are the five barrows known as the Chronicle Hills. The Historic Environment record indicates that three of these may be early Iron Age, which suggests a Roman date for the remaining two. These were levelled in the 19th century and are now completely ploughed out. Their precise location is not known although a geophysical survey shows round features to the east near our present centre of interest. A 19th century antiquarian report suggests that these were associated with a flint and pebble wall and that the largest barrow was a substantial 27 yards in diameter (24.7m).

It has been suggested that all five barrows could be Roman and that the wall might have been part of a cemetery enclosure (Jessup). Recent work by Hella Eckart on the nearby Barton Hills Roman barrow site identifies a number of parallels with the Chronicle Hills, including the large size of the barrows and evidence of enclosure walls.

Other associated landscape features include evidence of what may be Iron Age field systems a short distance from the site on the south west side of the Hoffer Brook. Significant late Iron Age and Roman occupation has also recently been identified by Historic England. In particular, a regular and extensive area of cropmarks has been mapped near where the Hoffer Brook and River Rhee join (about 4km distant from the Chronicle Hills site). It may also be significant that the route of Ashwell Street appears to pass alongside the site.



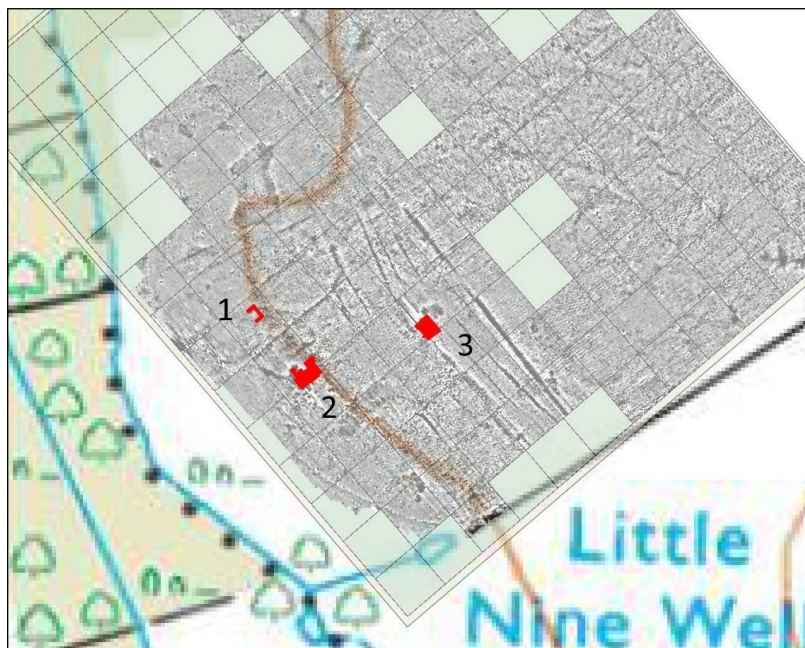
Although the site was known to antiquarians little was done to explore it during the 20th century (see Taylor and Arbon). Between 2003 and 2009 the Rheesearch group carried out magnetometer and resistivity surveys which identified a number of possible features including a small 'U' shaped structure. A limited excavation in

2009 confirmed the existence of what may have been a small Romano British temple (Report reference – CIA2 NWT09). This was located on a chalk spur overlooking a wetter area adjacent to the Hoffer brook (possibly an in-filled pingo). Finds included roof tiles, tesserae, pottery, oyster shells and coloured wall plaster. This is site 1.

The work carried out by Rheesearch also identified what appears to be a larger building complex to the south of site 1. Further work, including excavation, fieldwalking and test pitting, was carried out by the CIA group over the next six years with the aim of understanding these structures. This identified a building with bath and hypocaust together with other associated rooms (Report references – CIA4, CIA7, CIA10, CIA12-CIA17, CIA19-CIA20). Material recovered included considerable volumes of roof and flue tile, pottery, painted plaster and window glass sherds. A small surviving intact area of tessellated floor was also found together with large quantities of loose tesserae. This is site 2.

In order to gain some evidence of the scale and extent of the site as a whole the 2016 and 2017 excavations have concentrated on the eastern area where geophysics suggested a possible trackway, boundary wall and areas of disturbance. This work has revealed a substantial flint wall and pits containing deposits of broken household and industrial/kiln material. The pits also contained the skulls and disarticulated bones of up to five horses, together with other domestic animal bones and broken painted plaster. The excavation also found a large worked masonry block which may at some stage to have been keyed into another stone (approx. 70cm x 50cm). (Report references – CIA21-CIA27). This is site 3.

Location of excavation sites (geofiz courtesy of RheeSearch Archaeology)



In total over 3200 pieces of Roman pottery have been excavated from the three sites. The pottery appears to range in date from the 1st to 5th centuries. Sites 1 and 2 include a higher proportion of fine wares while site 3 appears to contain more coarse kitchen type wares. Most appear to be household vessels. In addition to considerable amounts of building material each sub site has produced painted wall plaster with a wide range of colours employed. The tesserae from site 2 included

small decorative pieces in three colours which appear to have been laid in a geometric pattern. Small finds have included a bracelet, a coin of Cunobelinus (AD 10-41), etc.

Interpretation and further questions

These investigations suggest that the site is significant in the context of the Roman occupation of Cambridgeshire. The area probably had a long standing attraction for people and the pools of spring fed water may have been regarded as a focus of attention in prehistoric as well as Roman times. The small temple overlooking one such pool may indicate the sacred nature of the site. It is worth noting that 3rd/4th century votive offerings to the water goddess Senuna were excavated near Ashwell at the western end of Ashwell Street.

The area of land with evidence of Roman occupation, taken together with the adjacent listed site, is extensive. The quantity and quality of excavated material suggests a degree of wealth in comparison with other Cambridgeshire sites. The remains of so many horses are also unusual and may also indicate the importance of its occupiers and/or a possible military connection. The presence of at least one large stone architectural block is consistent with the high status of the site.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the site is its close association with the Chronicle Hills burial mounds. At least two other villa sites contain similarly important high status burial areas: Littleton 12 kilometres to the east (connected by Ashwell Street) and Bartlow Hills 14 kilometres to the west. The almost equal spacing between them presents an intriguing possibility that all three may have had some wider administrative functions.

While the Roman area complex is extensive much remains unknown. Our objectives for the next three years are:

- To continue our investigation of site 3 by analysing the deposition contexts, exploring the significance of the horse burials and the function of the substantial flint wall and associated post hole.
- To understand the period of occupation of the sites so far excavated, some of which appear to have been demolished and rebuilt at least once. This will help understand the building sequence and development of the structures. Expert pottery identification will be required.
- To find measures which will allow comparison with other Roman sites in SE Britain and clarify its status. We will need advice on the identification of key finds including window glass, small finds and bones
- To identify the extent of the site and its relationship with the Chronicle Hills.

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