

CAMBRIDGE INDEPENDENT ARCHAEOLOGY– CIA5 (HS11)

*EXCAVATION OF A ROMAN STRUCTURE AT CAMBRIDGE PLANTS NURSERY AT TL 497 635
ADJACENT TO THE SCHEDULED ROMAN POTTERY KILN SITE*

Report by W Hughes, May 2012

Summary

The excavation was made at a low resistance area following a geophysical survey by The RheeSearch Archaeology Group. This area was thought to be a possible pottery kiln. However three side walls of an “enclosure” made of partially fired clay were found. Although a definite explanation of the function of this enclosure cannot be made, the finds and layout support the view that it was some form of bake house with bread ovens, rather than anything to do with the making of pottery. There were shelves/ledges with fired surfaces which could be the base of ovens. One of these had the remnants of a possible arch which would have formed the roof of the oven. In one corner there was a flue which had a burnt floor and some fragments of charcoal. Within the interior of this enclosure there were probable ritual deposits, of a pewter platter, a complete Nene Valley flagon with an apparently deliberately made hole in its side, and a pot with its base removed all at substantially the same level. These deposits were possibly made when the enclosure went out of use. An iron steelyard, one lead weight, and an iron handle possibly from a flat ladle which could have been used to place the bread in the ovens were also found.

Horningsea HS 11 Excavation

The excavation was in the grounds of the nursery of Cambridge Plants at The Lodge Clayhythe Road, (Fig 1) and resulted from a geophysical survey done in 2007 by the Rheesearch Archaeology Group (HER Ref. ECB 2963) and was a follow up to the excavation made in 2008 based on that survey (HER Ref. ECB 3400).

The excavation was made between 16 April and 14 July 2011, by:-

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From the survey, four areas were chosen to dig as possible locations of pottery kilns. Trenches C & D were placed at the two areas of high resistance which were thought most likely to be kiln sites.

Trenches A & B were placed over the low resistivity areas, with trench B being a possible kiln and trench A across a possible associated flue (see Fig 2).

Trenches C & D over the high resistance areas were dug but did not reveal any feature that might be a kiln.

Excavation of Trenches A, C, & D, will be reported in an addendum to this report.

Trench B was planned to be 2 x 2 metres square, but initially a trench 2 x 0.5 metres within that area was excavated.

This was excavated to a depth of 50 cms to a layer of very hard earth which seemed to have a high clay level. Approximately midway along this preliminary slot there was a scatter of partially fired clay pieces. These had a basically flat buff coloured fired surface with an irregular rear of semi-fired clay. This led us to believe at this early stage that they were pieces from the base of a pottery kiln, as kiln furniture from a dome structure of a kiln would probably have grass marks both sides and be substantially evenly fired. It was decided to extend the trench by 0.5x 0.5 metre to the south west to see if this scatter extended (Fig 4A Ext. 1). Further pieces of this partly fired clay were found. The trench was extended to the south to determine the limit of the low resistance area shown in the survey, this was Extension 2. When collecting up these partly fired clay pieces one piece was partially embedded in the bottom of the trench. Digging this out revealed a continuous line of this clay which was deduced to be a wall of a possible kiln or other enclosure that had been subjected to heat from inside.

Therefore the trench was extended to the north west by 1 x 0.5 metre (Fig 4A Ext. 3). This extension had many pieces of partly fired clay in it and consisted of a grey clay layer beneath the dark brown soil from 35-44 cms to 70 cms depth. Clearly this was a backfill. At 65 cms depth the neck of a large pot was revealed in the south east side of the extension. It was excavated from the side of the trench and found to be broken, incomplete and badly fired. (Fig 5) At a depth of 65.5cm the top of a complete Nene valley colour coated flagon lying on its side was revealed. It had a small hole in the side of the body (Fig 6).

Then at a depth of 70cms at the bottom of the layer of grey clay, a badly corroded incomplete pewter platter was found (Fig 4B plan, Fig 7A & 7B photo). The significance of these three finds is discussed later. Further extensions of 0.5 x0.5 metres were made to north west & east (Extension 3A & 3B), and to south east (Extension 3C) (Fig 4A) to enable possible lifting of the platter and also see if other metal items had been deposited nearby. Extensions 3A & 3B revealed a wall of partly fired clay, badly fragmented. The wall in 3B was taken down to gain access to the pewter platter, however it was decided that the platter was too incomplete and fragmentary to attempt too recover in one piece so it was removed piece by piece. After removal two pieces of partly fired clay were found immediately under where the platter had been. This indicates that the enclosure wall had broken up before the platter was deposited. Then a sondage about 20 X 20 cms was dug under where the centre of the platter was down to a depth of 30 cms where there were 3 sheep bones at the bottom, and two pieces of pottery in the fill Figs 8 & 9. One of these has been identified as late Iron Age.

Now the trench was enlarged to the full 2 x 2 metres as originally planned and walls of partly fired clay were revealed in north west joining that from extension 3A, and in the north east linking with that in 3B, and in south west linking up with that found in extension 3(Fig 4B & 4C). Thus it was revealed that there were 3 walls forming the sides of a feature. The area outside of these walls was excavated down to the top of the wall on the north west & east sides. On the south east side where the possible 4th side of the enclosure might be, excavation was down to 73 cms where a badly corroded fragmented iron steelyard was found (Fig 10). As it was not possible to lift this out in one piece, it was taken out piece by piece (Figs 11,12).

Adjacent to this steelyard to the south east, in the side of the trench were two pieces of a broken rim of a pot. They were removed along with a body sherd. Resting above the pot was a piece of squared clunch (Fig 13A & 13B). Excavation of the grey clay in this area down to 88 cms revealed a burnt layer with a number of pieces of charcoal in it just above a layer of natural gravel. This was suggestive of a possible flue entrance to the enclosure area.

Taking down the area to the North of extensions 3A & 3B showed a shelf of fired clay at depth of 56 cms (Fig 14A & 14B). This could be the possible shelf floor of a bread oven. A corner of the fired clay wall at a depth of 41 cms leads into this shelf (Fig 15). In Extension 3A at 70 cm depth there was a layer which from its colour showed that it had experienced high temperature (Fig 14A). Excavating the area south west of Ext.3 an iron handle was found at a depth of 73cm (Fig 16) (marked IH in Fig 4B)

The central area was then dug down to a depth of 89cms to a layer of natural relatively coarse gravel in the south west side of the trench. A survey with a metal detector of this gravel area gave a very strong signal, and just a centimetre or so down there was a lead ball 13 mm diameter weighing 13 gram. This looked like a musket ball on first examination, or possibly a Roman weight. However it could not be explained how a late age musket ball could be in a layer below the clay backfill layer which was presumably deposited in roman times. The find later in the excavation of a steelyard gives more credence that it was a weight, even though it is only 13 gram (this aspect is discussed later). The coarse gravel layer was only a few centimetres thick and under it was natural of small particle size red gravel.

In cleaning up the section below the north east enclosure wall just to the south east of the sondage dug under the platter area, and just above the small particle size red natural gravel at 105cm depth,

some bones (one knuckle, one bird, and one other yet to be identified) came to light. These were removed and it is likely that they are part of the same deposit as the sheep bones found in the sondage.

Finds

Details of all finds are in Figs 43, 44 spreadsheets.

Pewter platter. This was found at a depth of 70 cms (Fig 17). Initially it was thought to be an upturned large diameter pot, but was quickly shown to be metal. A small piece from the centre was analysed with a spectrometer and found to be about 70% Tin and 30 % lead. It was very corroded and fragile and in many pieces. Thus it was only recovered in 52 pieces, weighing 1623 gram. These pieces were numbered and their position recorded. Later they were laid out for a reconstruction (Fig 18). The diameter was about 48 cm but parts of the rim were missing and the remaining parts did not form a perfect circle so an accurate measurement could not be made. The largest piece is shown in Fig 19. Six other pieces were revealed when the finds from other parts of trench Extension 3 were processed (see reference numbers 8, 19, 29, 31, 32) These weighed in total 314 gram, giving a total weight for recovered pieces of 1937 gram.

Roman Black pot

This was found in the south east side of Extension 3 lying on its side at a level just above that of the Pewter Platter. It was removed when it was found to be broken. There were 6 base sherds of 419 gram, 3 rims of 245 gram, 4 large body of 135 gram, and a quantity of small body sherds of 252 gram. Regrettably not all of the pot was recovered. The pot was obviously a waster of very bad quality. However some reconstruction was possible (Figs 20A to D, 21A to C). Its dimensions are: - height 23.5 cm, rim diameter 18 cm, base diameter 10 cm, max diameter of body 20.6 cm, max circumference estimated as 64.7 cm. The largest reconstruction piece had 33% of rim, and 41% of the base. The smaller reconstruction piece had 46% of the base. Thus the total percentage of the recovered base was 87%. It can be seen that the base of the pot is completely missing and it is deduced that this was deliberately broken and the pot was a "ritual" deposit along with the pewter platter. A comparison can be made with a pot from the excavation of the Roman Villa at Shepreth by R. Parker in 1968-72 where the base was also removed. (Figs 22, 23) (Parker, R. HER Ref. MCB4165).

Roman Nene valley Colour Coated Flagon

At substantially the same level as the pewter platter and the above black pot, this flagon was lying on its side (Fig 24). When removed it could be seen that it had a small hole in its side near to the handle (Figs 25, 26, 27, 28, 29). Inside was the spall from the inner side, this giving a reasonable indication that the hole was made deliberately from the outside. This flagon is also thought to be a "ritual" deposit. The flagon is 18.4 cms height, with maximum body circumference of 40.5 cms, outer neck diameter 3.7cms, and base diameter 5.8cms. It has been dated by Oxford East Archaeology as probably early to mid 2nd century and possibly as late as early 4th century.

This flagon has been returned to Mr K Buchdahl the owner of Cambridge Plants Nursery at The Lodge.

Steelyard

This was found lying horizontally 72cms depth (Figs 10). It was fractured and could not be recovered in one piece. There are 15 pieces weighing 169 gram. The reconstruction immediately after recovery is shown in Fig 11, and later in Fig 12. It is approximately 46 cms (18 inch) long. It has 2 pivot points.

Pivot point A is 7.3 cms from suspension hook (where the item to be weighed would be hung) and suspension point B is 12.6 cms from suspension hook. That is almost equivalent to 3 & 5 inches. At the other end of the steelyard there was a suspension hook from which a weighing pan and weights could hang. It is also possible that sliding weights and pan could be placed along the steelyard. Detail pictures of each section are shown in Figs 32, 34 to 37

Lead Ball Weight

This was found as a result of metal detecting in Extension 3 area in the coarse gravel at a depth of about 97cms. It is 13mm diameter and weighs 13 gram which is approximately half a Roman uncia of 27.4 gram. It is almost certainly a Roman weight which was used with the Steelyard. There is no sign of a wire loop which would possibly indicate it was used as a sliding weight along the steelyard, therefore it is probable that a number of different weights were used and were loaded into a pan hung from the opposite end of the steelyard to the load.

Iron Handle

This was in the clay layer at a depth of 73 cms. It was found when the area between the north west enclosure wall and Extension 3A was dug (Fig 4B marked IH). Although recovered in one piece it broke into two on handling. It appears to be a handle possibly for flat wooden or iron board used to handle items/bread in the enclosure. In the corroded and unconserved state it has a weight of 96 grams. Base length 11 cms, curved handle tip to base part 7 cm, (Fig 16).

Fired clay

Most is from the destroyed enclosure wall and has a flat surface which is buff coloured and an irregular rear surface which in general is not so highly fired. Thus this recovered fired clay is the same as the in situ wall of the enclosure with the flat surface being on the inside. Also found was a small quantity of hard grey fired clay which had grooves in it indicating probable use in the base of a dome where the saplings used to form the dome had left their circular impression. These have been recorded as "grooved" (Fig 39A & 39B). Similarly a few pieces of fired clay had grass impressions indicating use as dome lining. These are recorded under "grass marks" (Fig 40). Weights of these different types are given in Figs 43, 44 spreadsheets. The northern corner of the enclosure wall appeared to have been repaired or strengthened with a patch which resembled concrete in that it was grey and much harder than the other fired clay of the wall (Fig 14B).

Roman pottery

Two significant pieces of pottery were found above the flue area in the south of the trench, weight 391 gram (Fig 41). It is possible that the rim formed the arch of the flue with the body sherd being displaced when the enclosure went out of use, although it is also possible that they were just part of the backfill when the enclosure went out of use.

There were 146 other pieces of Roman pottery weighing a total of 2394 gram. This pottery has not been fully analysed but appears on first examination to be of Horningsea production.

Other

In extension 3B a curved triangular section piece of iron weighing 435 gram was found in the plough level along with modern slate and an iron nail, so is probably a modern piece of farm machinery.

A small quantity of post medieval and modern pottery was found.

A very small quantity of charcoal was found, significantly in the area of the possible flue in the south of the enclosure.

Discussion

The big question is whether it is possible to determine the function of the enclosure. Clearly the shape of the enclosure and the artefacts found inside it are not like a typical pottery kiln hence this function is ruled out. However the fact that the walls are of fired clay and that an area in the south had all the attributes of a flue with signs of high temperatures and pieces of charcoal, certainly indicate that the enclosure was used for some form of heating. This evidence coupled with the facts that there were three areas that appeared to have been subjected to heat as shown by partially fired surfaces are possible indications that the function was low temperature heating.

The finds of a steelyard and one lead weight, and an iron handle along with the above evidence might show that it was used for some form of drying of clay prior to forming pots etc, or of unfired pottery. Another possibility is that it was a bake house with bread ovens.

The presence of the deposited Pewter platter, Nene valley colour coated flagon, and the black pot, both ritually broken indicate that the site was considered to be significant and worthy of remembrance. The pewter platter would not have been an everyday item used in a production area of pottery kilns. It was probably of domestic origin and valued. The composition of the pewter, 70% tin and 30% lead, was a mix used in Roman times. This is different to modern pewter that has a tin content between 85 and 99 % for the better quality items, and up to 15 % lead for lower grades generally used for applications not involving food. All of these items were found at roughly the same level, i.e. the bottom of the backfill of grey clay which was about 26-35 cm thick. It is possible that they were deposited at the same time as the backfilling, but no evidence can be given to support this hypothesis.

The find of bones and a sherd of late iron age pottery in the sondage that was dug beneath the area where the pewter platter was, plus the bones found in the section nearby, show that the site was being used in some manner before the deposit of the pewter platter, or that these items had some connection with the deposit of the pewter platter. Radio carbon dating of the bones would possibly resolve this question.

It was not possible to locate the fourth south eastern wall of the enclosure as the trench could not be expanded because of the adjacent tree. Though there were signs indicated by the wall fragments that were recovered close to the edge of the trench that the fourth wall was only a short distance outside of the trench.

It is not possible to closely estimate the height of the original enclosure wall, but some measure may be made by weighing a number of flat pieces of fired clay and assessing their area. This has been done and gives a weight in grams per square centimetre of 1.736. Thus dividing this weight/sq.cm

into the total weight of 13,084 gram of wall fired clay recovered, gives an area of 7,537 sq. cm. So dividing this area by the length of the four walls gives the added area of the walls.

The length of the three excavated walls plus the length of predicated fourth wall is 5.46 metres thus the recovered wall fired clay would add $7,537/5.46$ sq. cms per metre to the height of the found wall, i.e. 1,380 sq. cm. Therefore added height is $1,380/100$ cm=13.8 cm. The accuracy of this result cannot be deduced because of the variability of thickness of the recovered fragments and the measurement of the area of the selected pieces is not precise because they cannot be closely fitted together, therefore it can only be taken as a very rough indication. It should be noted that the depth to the top of the in situ wall varied between 35 and 62 cm, and the bottom was at a depth level about 70 cm which was the bottom of the presumed clay backfill and at the natural coarse gravel layer. Thus the in situ wall height was 8 to 35cm. Unknown is how much of the demolished wall is dispersed outside of the trench and under the un-excavated area within the trench, so a total height cannot be given. It is deduced that the enclosure wall was not above ground because no signs of any reinforcing or support by a framework of saplings or timber was noted and the wall was not of sufficient thickness/strength to be unsupported. Thus the wall was let into the ground and enclosed the heated area of the bake house with ovens.

The enclosure would therefore have had some form of roof above ground level and this was possibly domed like the usual pottery kiln with a sapling frame of willow covered by clay and turves, which would explain the presence of the few fired pieces of clay with grooves and grass marks.

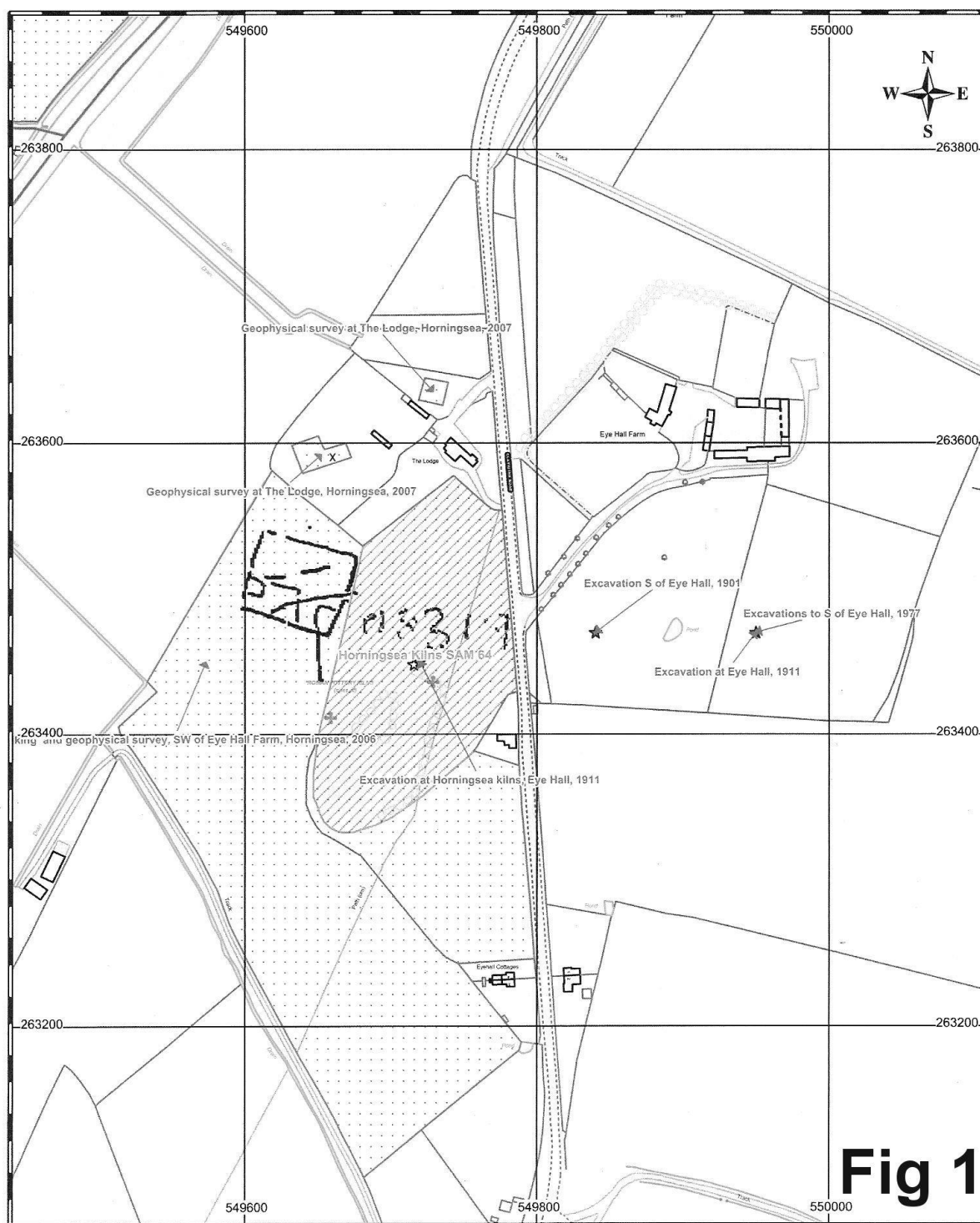
The area of partial fired clay in the north east adjacent to excavation areas 3A & 3B had a corner of the wall leading into that area and there appeared to be remnants of a structure either side of it which may have been a dome, thus suggesting that it may have been a small oven (Fig 4B & 15). Likewise the area 3B showed signs of heat being applied, as the earth was very red. Also 3C area had a hard surface so they may have also been areas that were used for possible baking of bread (Fig 4B). This theory cannot be proved as firm evidence from the excavation has not been found. A discussion in "The Pottery Kilns of Roman Britain" Pages 47, 48, (Swan, V. G.) of drying enclosures including bread ovens, refers to them being adjacent to pottery kilns so as to utilise their heat or at least to use the same stokehole. It should be noted that there is a high resistance area about 4 metres to the south, but this is where there is a tree which could cause the ground to be dry. So it can not be positively identified as a kiln area.

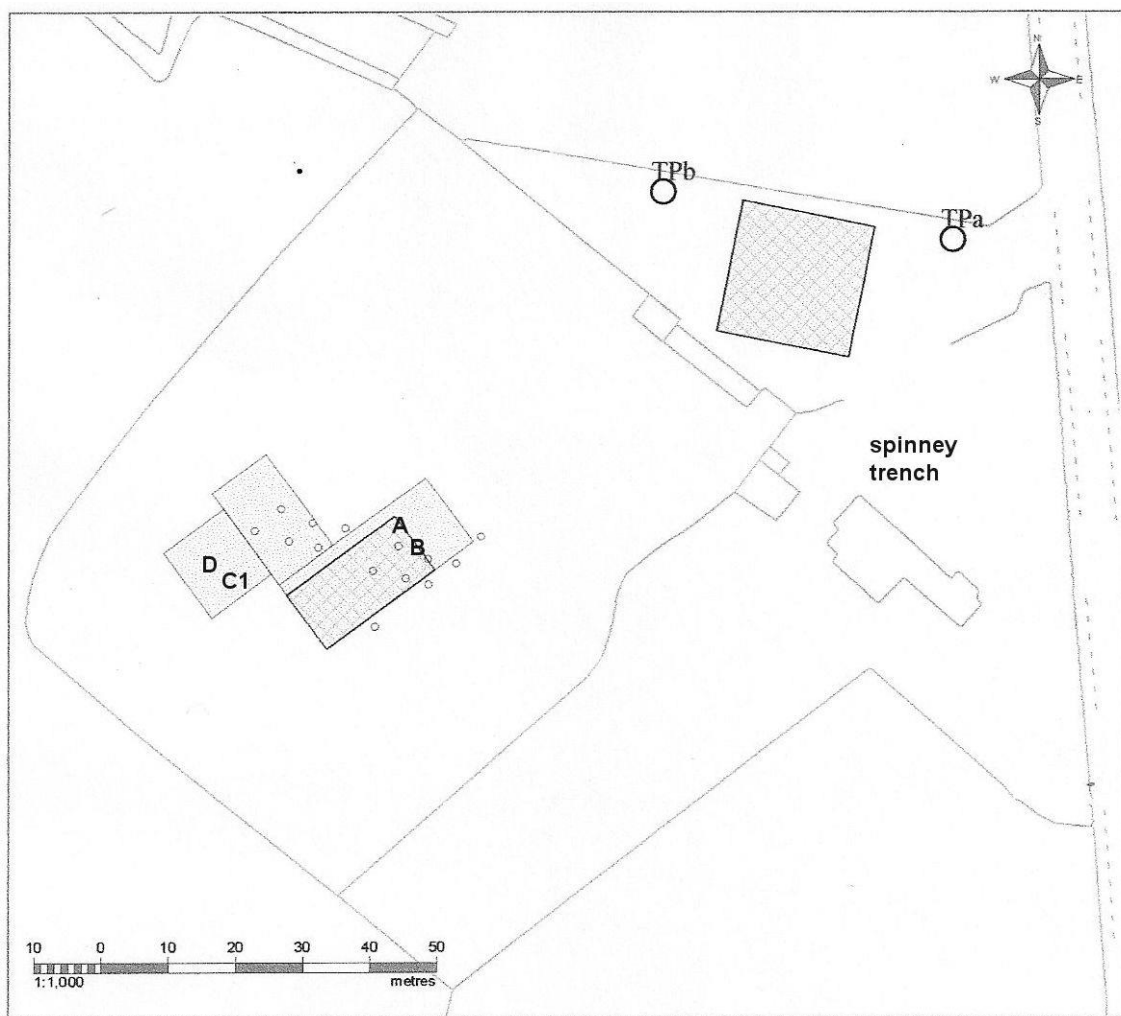
A feature which cannot be explained is that immediately under the Pewter platter but not outside of it, the ground had the appearance of being subjected to high temperature as it was coloured red and white (Fig 8A & 8B). Also beneath the platter where a sondage was dug the soil was greyer than adjacent soil. This was where the sheep tibia bone and two pieces of pottery were found and nearby in the section there were other bones possibly of sheep. However above the platter no sign of the soil being heated was observed. A sample was taken of the soil below the platter for possible future analysis.

Taking all the evidence into consideration, out of the three possible functions of the enclosure as given above it is thought that it was some form of bake house with ovens, probably for making bread, and that this interpretation fits the evidence better than the other uses. But until any further evidence is obtained the enclosure must remain an enigma.

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Location plan: Survey areas with Clayhithe Road to the east. **Fig 2**
 (Resistivity survey areas solid, Magnetometry areas crosshatched, trees circles)

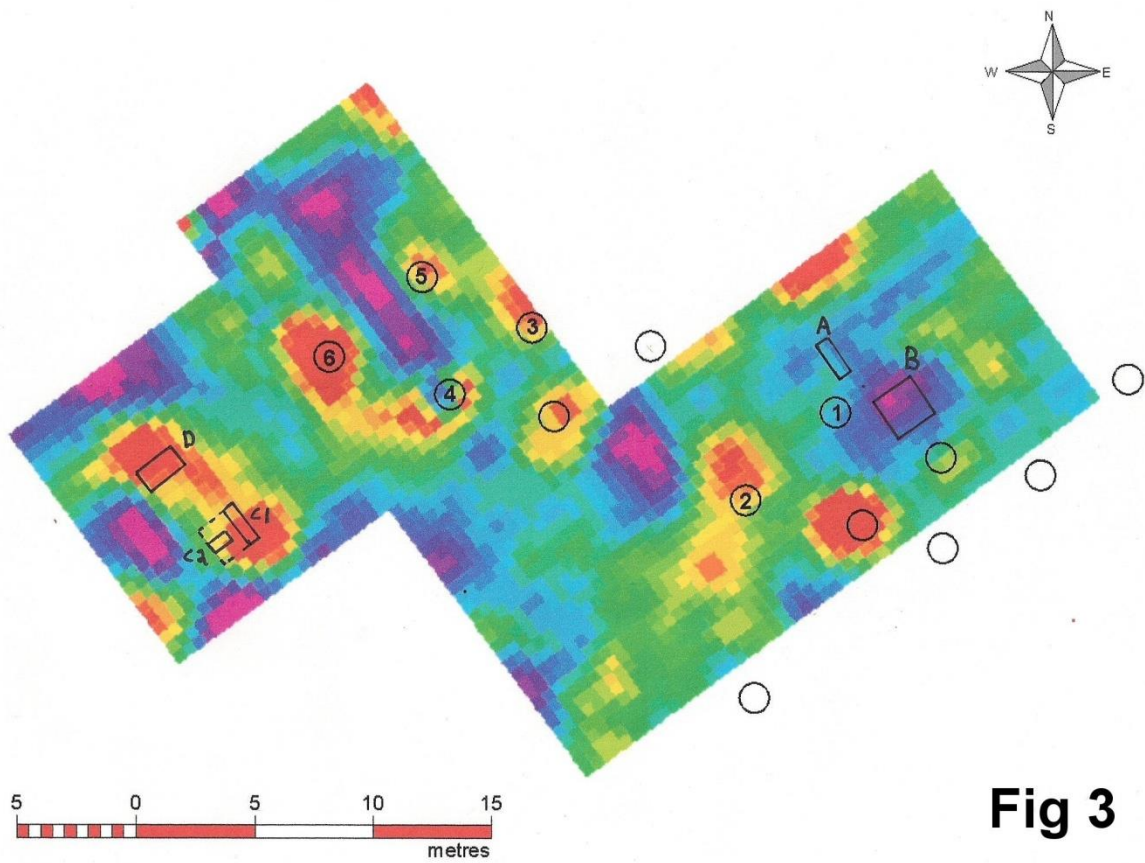


Fig 3

Trench B Extensions

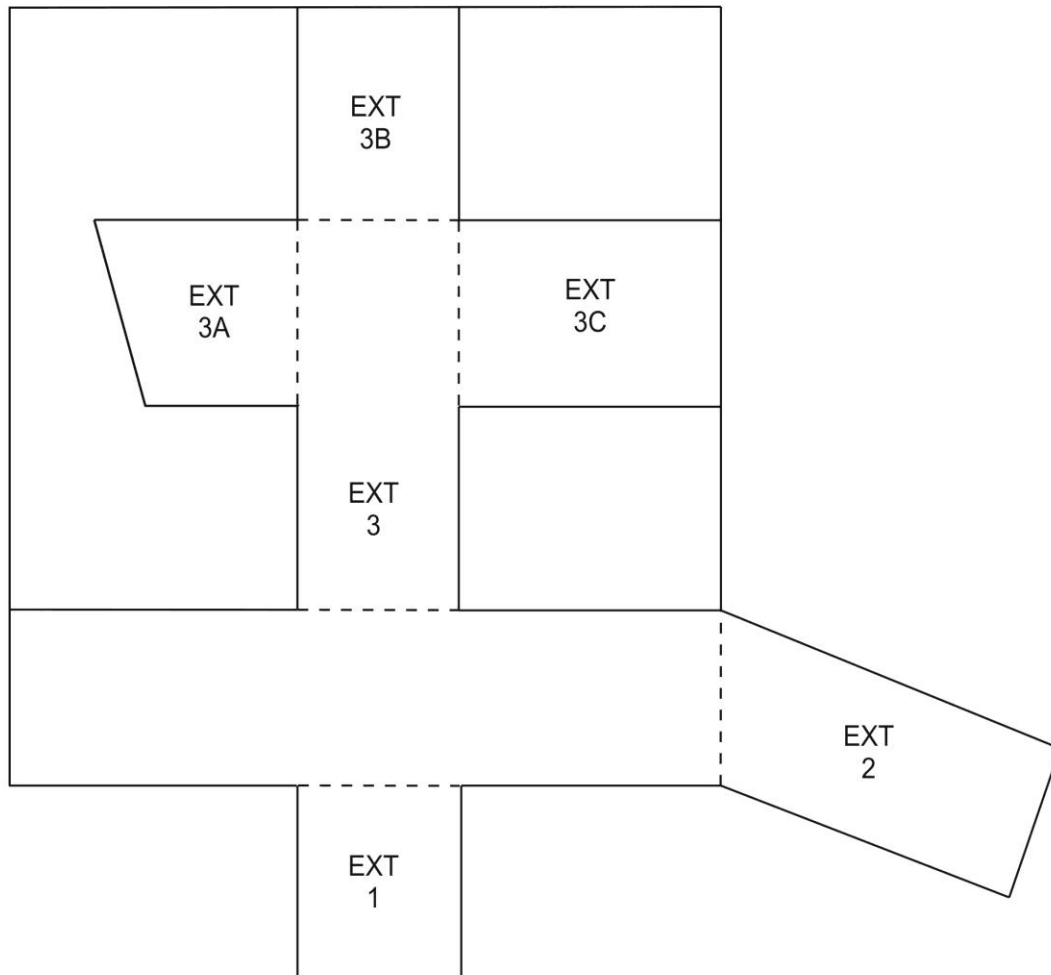
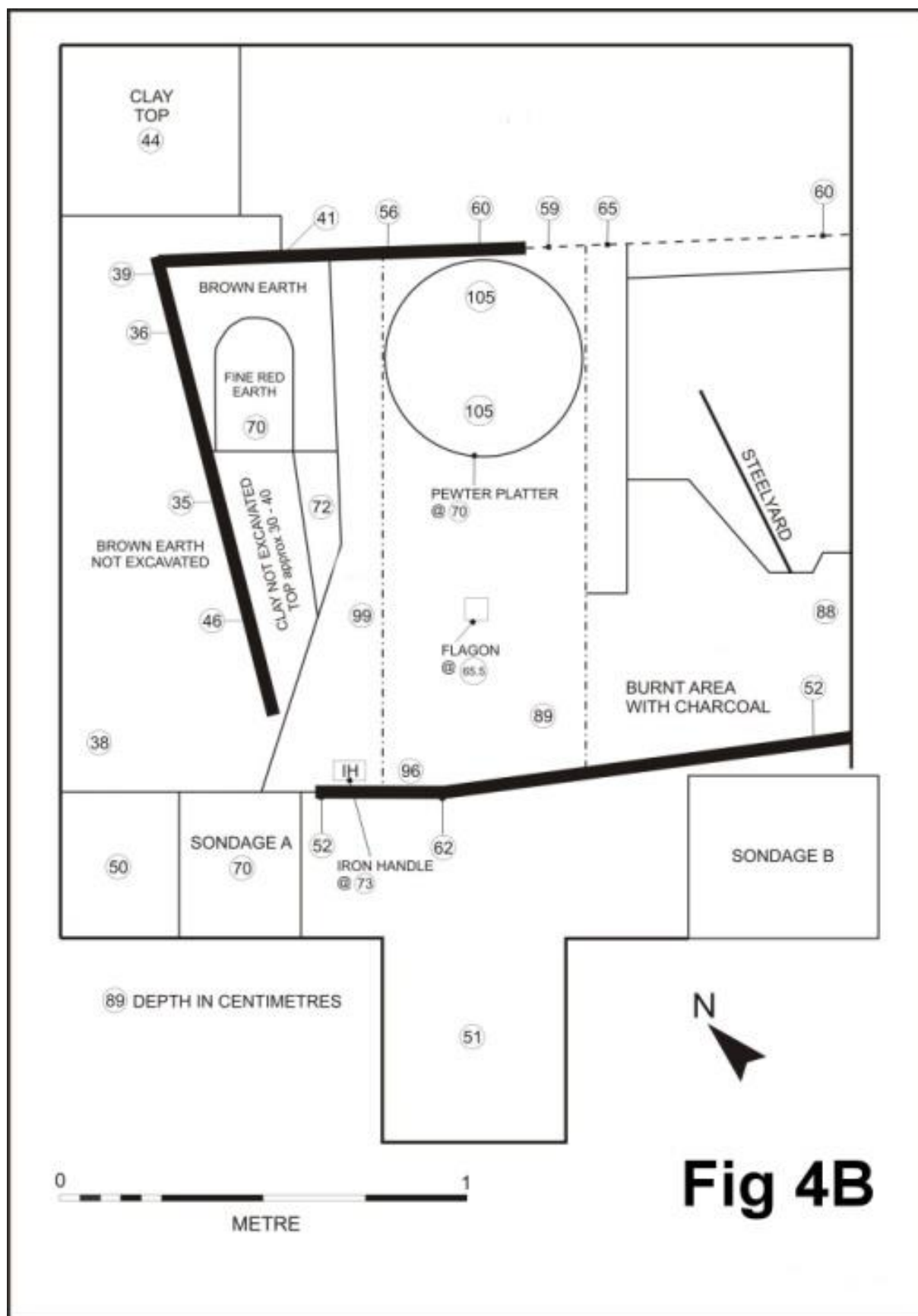


Fig 4A



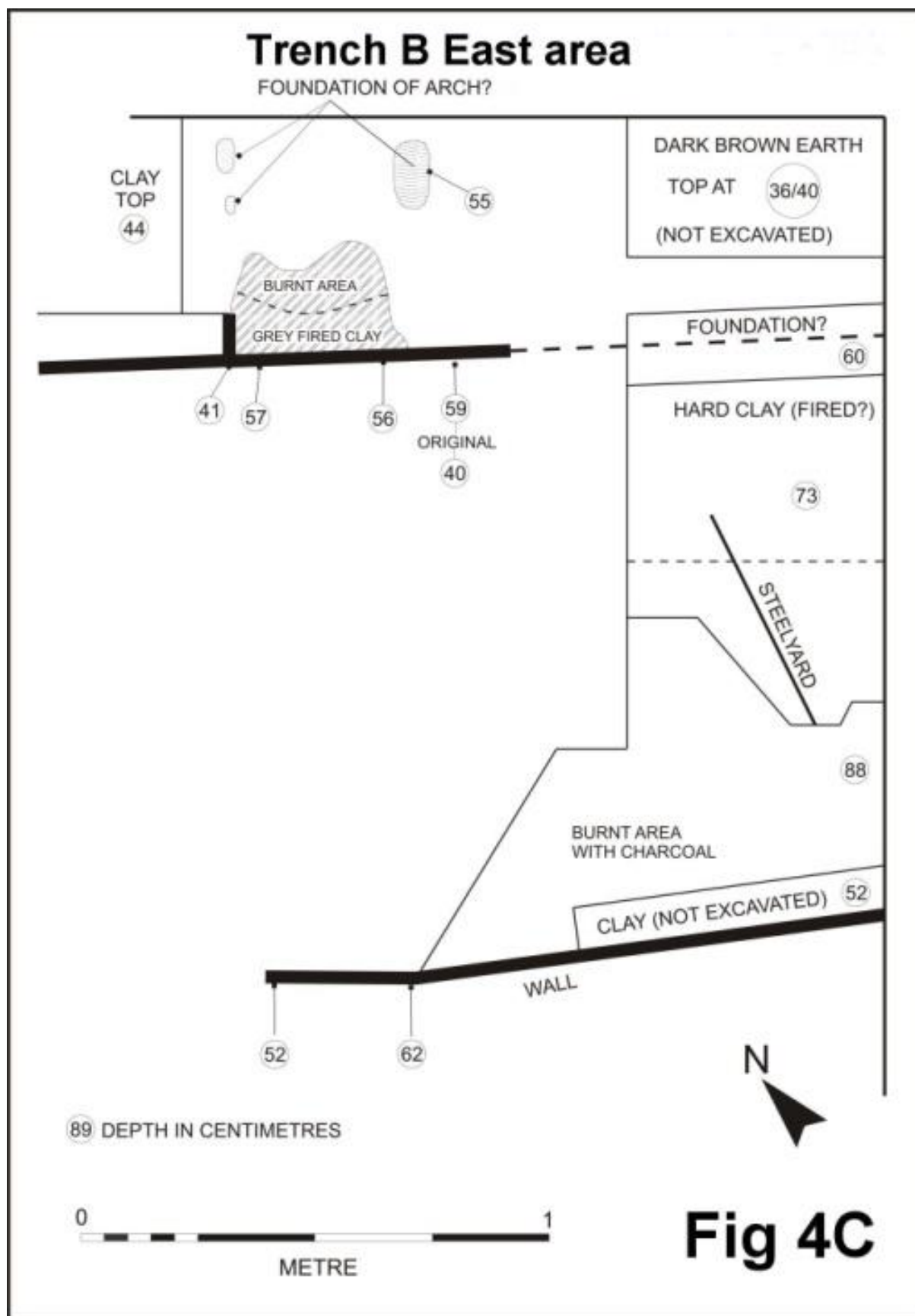








Fig 7A



Fig 7B



















Fig 18











Fig 20D



Fig 21B





Fig 22



Fig 23





Fig 25



Fig 26



Fig 27



Fig 28





Fig 32





Fig 35















Fig 43 and Fig 44 – Horningsea 2011 – Site Cdoe HS11 – Trench B

Ref. No	Date	Excavator	Trench	Depth	Fired clay Wt g			Roman Pottery		Pottery PM/modern	Bone		Other
					wall	grooved	grass marks	No	Wt g		No	Wt g	
1	05-Jul		area east baulk								6		1 flint
2	17-Jun	wh	3C		150								1 snail
3	21-Jun		3								1		
4	14-Jul		3	>70				1			5	47	
5	05-Jul	wh	south baulk		39						1	3	
6	15-Jun	wh	3C		261	39		3	53		3	6	3 snail, stone ? 152g
7	15-May	sr	ext 1		39	37	43	2	13		1	5	1 flint, mod brick/concrete 29g
8	28-May		3	50-70									PEWTER 55g
9	21-May	wh	sondage A		7	63		1	3		1	12	
10	25-Jun		3 SE side		17			2	37	2	2	26	
11	14-May	rs			401			1	6				(fired clay inc 3 grass marked)
12	05-Jul	gr	east baulk		65			1	3		1	11	
13	28-Jun		North of 3A & B		362			2	53		1	2	
14	14-Jul		under steelyard		418						1	8	(fired clay inc 2 corners)
15			central	50/55	528	117		1	10				
16	30-Jun	sr+wh	Y		102			16	525		11	62	Kiln Bar? 75g. (fired clay inc 3 grass marked) 1 Burnt flint, 2 Mod. glass, 1 slate 1 Mod. nail
17		rs	3A		254								
18	11-Jun	sr	3B		1041			7	161				
19	15-Jun	rbs	3+3B	70	792						X	15	PEWTER 33g
20	21-May		ext 2		19	75		4	32	1			
21	14-May	rs	2 x 0.5m orig.	40/50				23	65		9	33	1 flint
22	28-Jun	wh	North of 3A & B	plough		25		9	134	1	1	3	1 clay pipe stem, 1 gun cartridge, 1 mod. Brick
23	11-Jun	sr	3B	18	256		25	4	36				1 iron curved bar 435g, 1 slate, 1 nail
24	28-Jun	wh	North of 3A & B		174					2	3		1 charcoal 1g, 1 slate
25	15-May	sr	ext 2 south					7	75	6	3	38	1 clay pipe stem, 2 mod. Tile
26	30-Jun	sr	X		156			1	5		1	4	1 L/stone 52g
27	21-May	sr	sondage B	70	99			2	26				
28	08-Jul	rs	SE side+flue		548			2	391				charcoal 1g
29	17-Jun	rbs	3		838	27		4	124		1	1	PEWTER 19g
30			3A corner		585								(fired clay inc 60g hard grey)

31	21-Jun	rbs	3 under platter		396	98	200						PEWTER 102g
32	28-May	rs+wh	3	50-70	369	16		4	33		3	2	2 PEWTER 105g, 1 snail, charcoal<1g, 2 stone 176g
33	02-Jun		3		69			1	2				
34	05-Jul	wh	3		18						1	1	1 round stone 20g
35	25-May	wh	sondages 1+2		260								
36	11-Jun	wh	3C		115	53	26	9	65	2	5	49	1 flint, 1 burnt flint, 5 mod. Brick 59g, 1 slate, 1 mod, nail
37	29-Jun	wh+gr	Z		28	29		2	4		2	6	2 burnt flint/stone
38	28-May	rs+wh	3	0-50		54	48	18	201	2	11	95	1 flint, mod. 5 tile 93g+1glass 3g
39	30-Jun	wh	3C		524								
40	29-Jun	gareth	3A	plough				9	99	3			1 clay pipe stem
41	02-Jun	wh	3		394	18	18						(fired clay inc 4 hard grey 120g), 2 frags charcoal
42	28-Jun		3	0-48	38	32		x+1 rim	103	5	5	11	1 slate 2g, stone 30g, fossil ball 5g, 6 sandstone worked? 146g
43	30-Jun	sr	X	clay layer	530			1	32		2	8	
44	30-Jun	wh	Y	clay layer	36			1	11		1	2	
45	01-Jul	rs	over flue		178						1	5	(fired clay inc 1 grooved)
46	05-Jul	wh	3A	92				1	30				
47	08-Jul	wh	W of steelyard		555						2	3	charcoal<1g
48	28-May	rs+wh	3	50-70	407	193		3	12		3	7	4 PEWTER 85g, 1 sandstone? 107g, 1 mod. nail 5g,
49	19-Jun	rs	sondage under platter		26								
50	14-May	rs	orig. NE	40-50	84			2	44	1			mod. Brick/tile 169g
51			SW face	43							1	6	
52	15-Jun	rbs	orig					1	6				
53	02-Jun	rs	3	63-65				1	105 1				(black pot many pieces 1051g)
ditto	ditto	rs	3	ditto									6 base 419g, 3 rim 245g, 4 large body 135g, small body 3 bags 252g
54	30-Jun	sr	3	?									1 iron handle, (in 2 pieces) 109g
55	28-May	rs+wh	3	70									PEWTER PLATTER (many pieces)
56	05-Jul	gr	C	72									1 STEELYARD
57	21-May	wh	sondage A in orig.	12	70								
58	01-Jul	wh	3	89									1 Roman weight lead ball 13mm diameter 13g
63	01-Jul	rs	under platter		62			9	88		8	52	granite stone with burn mark? 78g, N.B. fired clay not kept
64	19-Jun	rs	do		71								fired clay not kept
65	19-Jun	rs	under platter		84						1	7	2 iron 77g, fired clay not kept

66	07-May	rs			58			19	119	6	6	34	charcoal<1g,PM glass 1bottle top+1wine base+1sheet metal
do	do	do											Modern brick 405g not kept, fired clay not kept
67	11-Jun	rs	3A		1561	137		13	81			129	Modern: 1 glass+2 nail, 1stone, not kept
68	16-Jun	rs	sondage under platter								1	27	Sheep tibia bone was in 3 pc, now taped together
69	19-Jun	rs	do								2	5	
70	19-Jun	rs	do					2	58				Pot is 1 rim 38g+1 body 20g both mid-late iron age
				Grand	Total	1308			379		10		
					4	1013	360	189	1	31	7	725	

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