

CAMBRIDGE INDEPENDENT ARCHAEOLOGY– CIA8 (NWVV11)

*EXCAVATION OF AN AREA WITH POSSIBLE REMAINS OF A ROMAN BUILDING
AT NINE WELLS WHITTLESFORD TL 447 482*

Report by W Hughes May 2012

Summary

An area surveyed by The RheeSearch Archaeology Group that gave a high concentration of high resistivity readings was selected for evaluation as possibly indicating the presence of building foundations. A small number of trenches were dug in some of these high resistivity areas.

They were excavated down to the natural. Two trenches did not show any features nor were there any finds. A third trench had no features, but a single piece of part of a Roman pot was found on the floor of the trench by The RheeSearch Group sometime after the trench had been dug. The fourth trench also did not reveal any features but did have a number of finds of cattle bones, and one piece of Roman roof tile and one piece of Roman flue tile.

These finds are not considered to be related to any actual feature but were probably re-deposited when there was landscape levelling done in 1818.

It is also considered that the high resistivity readings are due to the underlying geology and in the case of trench F the high density of flint.

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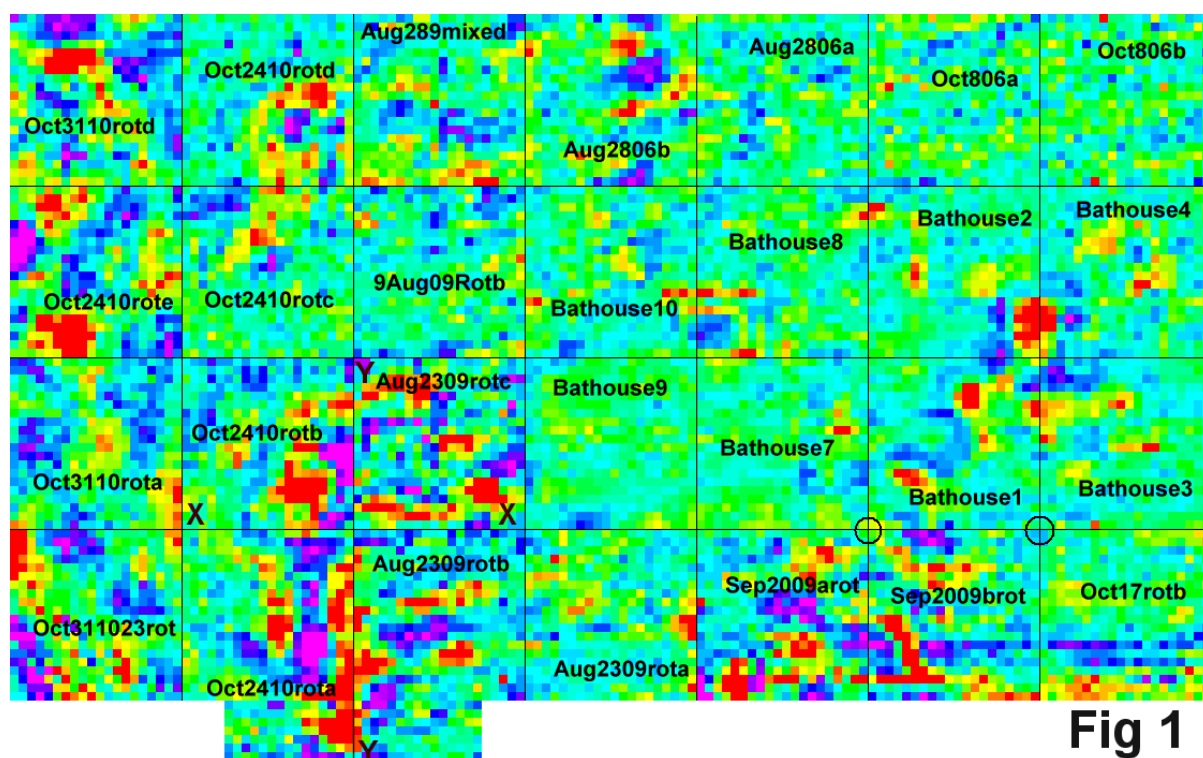
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Objective

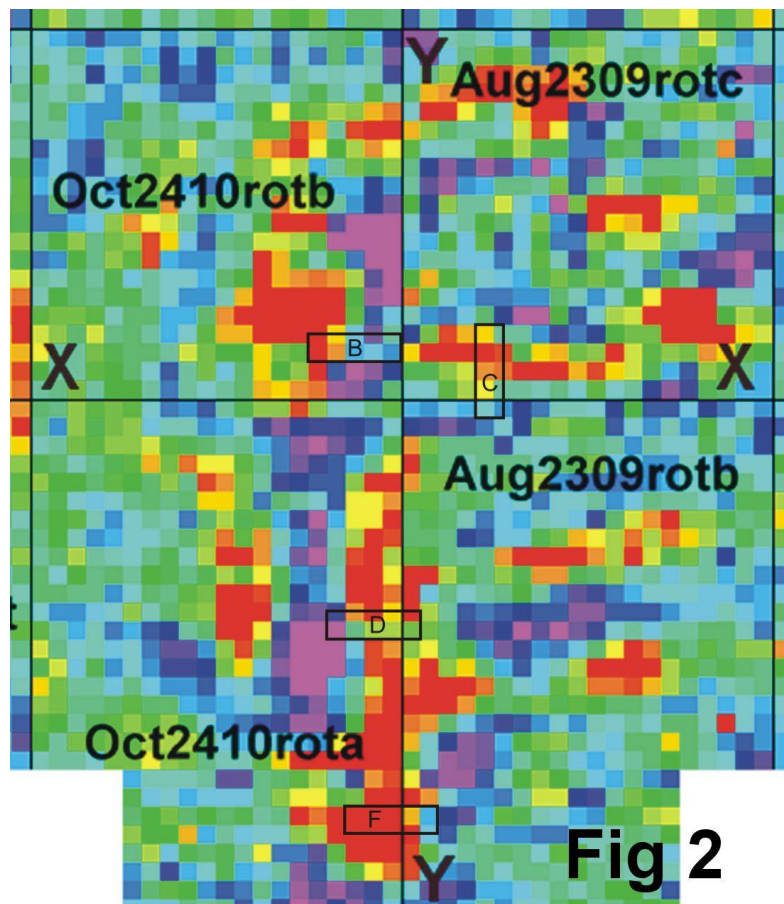
As the area had a high concentration of high resistivity readings, it was reasonable to believe that they indicated possible remains of buildings. Therefore, a limited number of trenches were planned to evaluate this possibility.

Excavation

The original plan was to excavate five trenches A, B, C, D, E, over the areas of high resistance measured in the geophysical survey by the RheeSearch Archaeology Group. However only trenches B, C, D of the original were dug as the results from them indicated that similar could be expected from A & E (Fig 1, 2). But following a later resistance geophysical survey which measured a section below ground (Fig 19), trench F was dug across this survey line, at section of high resistance (Fig 2)

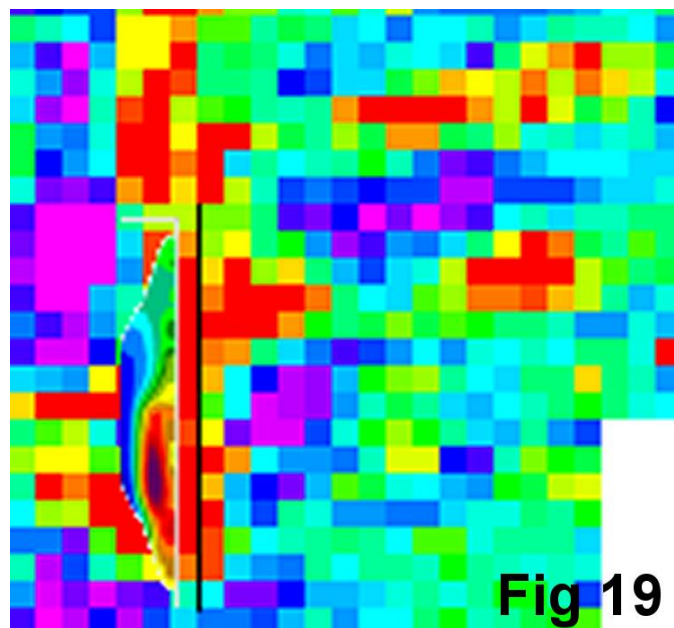


1 Geophysical survey large area



2 Geophysical survey area of excavation showing grid reference lines XX & YY

The trenches were excavated with a JCB using a toothless bucket of 1.5 metres width, down to a level that exposed the underlying natural. Machined depths:- Trench B 50/54 cms, Trench C 44/62 cms, Trench D 52/54 cms, Trench F 68/77 cms



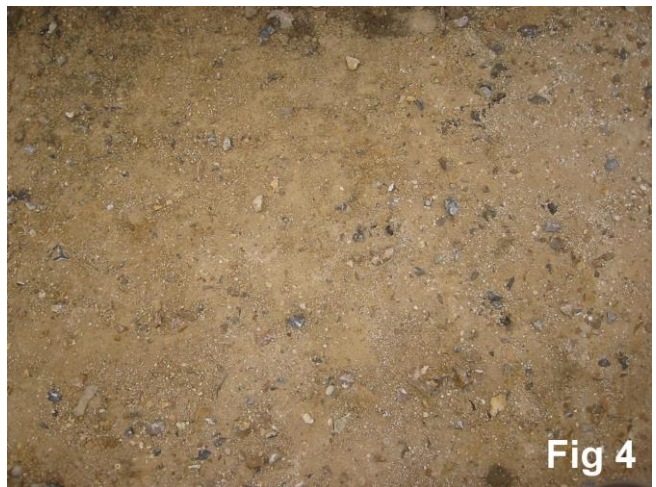
Section resistivity on reference line YY area of trench F, overlaid on geophysical plan

All trenches were 5 x 1.5 metres. Whilst the trenches were being excavated a watch was kept to see if any features were revealed. No features were noted.

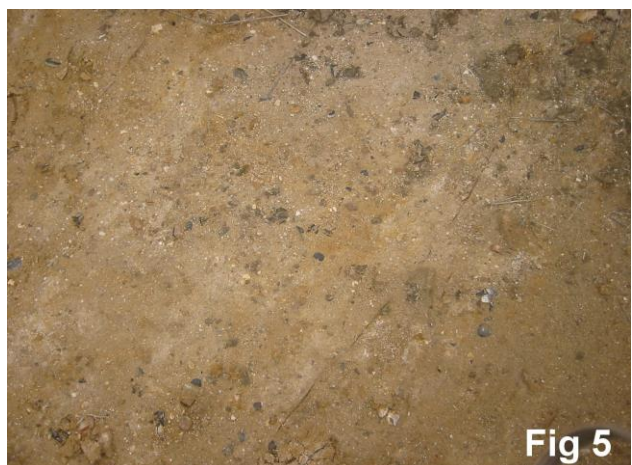
Trenches B (Fig 3,4,5), C (Fig 6,7,8,9), and D (Fig 10,11,12) had no finds, apart from the base of a Roman grey ware pot in trench D, which was found by the Geophysical group lying on the natural sometime after the trench had been dug (Fig 13, 14).



Trench B looking south east



Trench B north west end, natural at base of trench

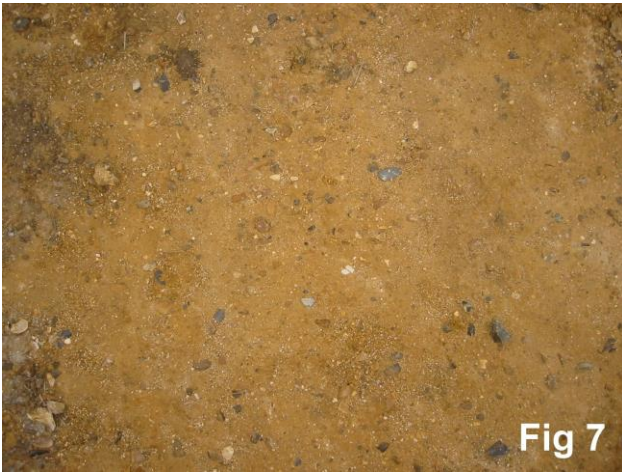


Trench B south east end, natural at base of trench

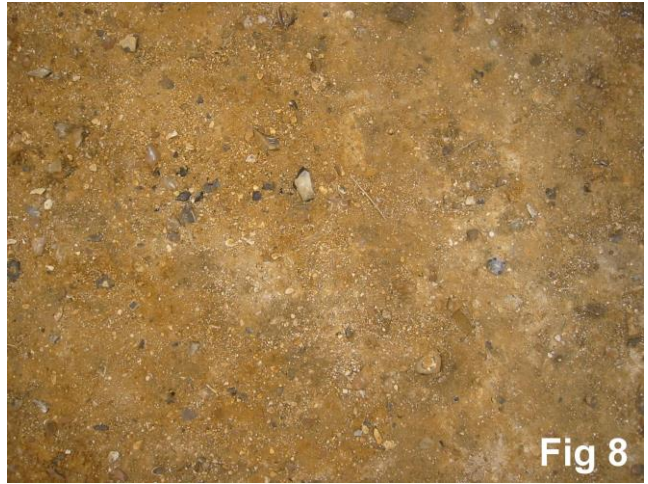


Trench C looking north east

Sondages were dug in trenches B, D and F to confirm the level of the natural. Pictures of the natural are shown in Fig 4,5 for trench B, Figs 7,8 for trench C and Fig 11,12 for trench D, Fig 17 for trench F.



Trench C north west end, natural at base of trench



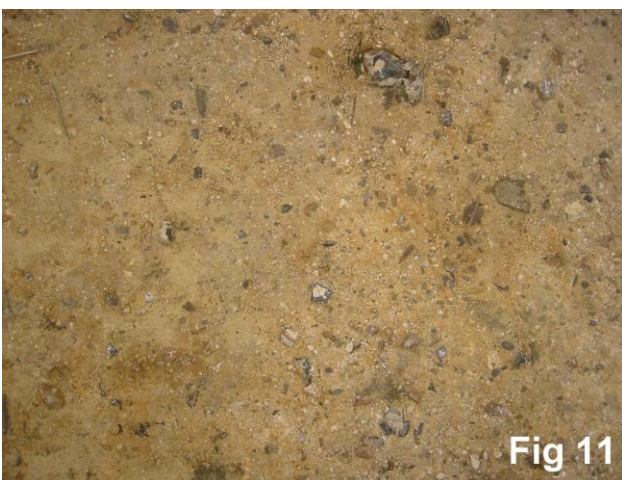
Trench C south west end, natural at base of trench



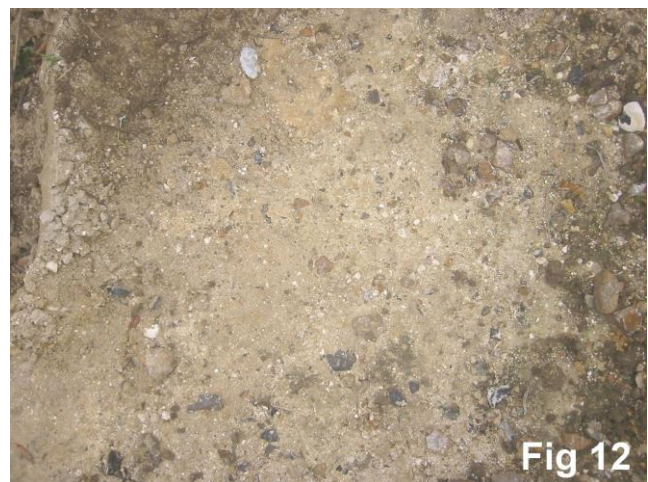
Trench C looking north west showing side section



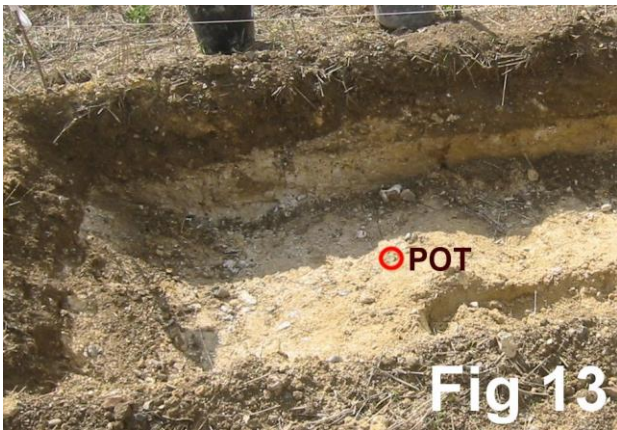
Trench D looking south east



Trench D south east end, natural at base of trench



Trench D north west end, natural at base of trench



Trench D looking south west showing base of pot found by Geophysics group



Close up of Trench D showing base of pot found by Geophysics group lying on natural

Trench F (Fig 15,16,18) did have finds both from the digging by the JCB and from the limited sondages dug by hand into the base of the trench. (See Finds section). These were mainly cattle bones plus a roof tile and two pieces of flue tile and did not appear to have been related to any specific feature.



Trench F looking south east



Trench F north west end natural



Fig 17
Trench F middle with sondage showing section of north east side



Fig 18
Trench F south east end looking south west

Finds

Finds were only found in trenches D & F.

Trench D

The base of a greyware Roman pot was found on the bottom of the trench by The RheeSearch Archaeology Group sometime after the excavation had ended (Fig 13 & 14). As this level (53 cms) is well down into the natural which was at 33 cms depth, the only reasonable explanation for its presence is that it has been re-deposited as a result of the landscape levelling done in 1818.

Trench F

From the machine excavation to depth of 68/77 cms.

52 pieces of bone weight 339 gram, and 4 larger pieces weight 710 gm.

2 pieces of Flue tile weight 311 gm.

From sondages dug into the base of the machine excavation.

Cattle bone 11 piece weight 416 gm.

Teeth of horse or sheep 3 piece weight 62 gm.

Boars tooth 1 off weight 8 gm.

Roman roof tile 1 off weight 578 gm.

As these finds particularly the flue and roof tiles, were not linked to any feature there presence may be again explained by re-deposition when the landscape was levelled in 1818.

Discussion

The area is thought to be adjacent to a road/track way of one of the Icknield Way routes from Thriplow. This route then heads in a north easterly direction towards Stanmoor Hall Farm, and beyond to the Dernford crossing of the river Cam meeting another of the Icknield Way routes which also crossed the Cam at this point. So it is quite reasonable to think that there may be a building in this area, particularly as it is known that a Roman Shrine/temple is just 40 metres to the south, and a Bathhouse 80 metres also to the south, and they would almost certainly been accessed via this road.

However the siting of the trenches over areas of high resistance was somewhat arbitrary, as there was no obvious pattern in the geophysical survey.

The excavation clearly shows there was no evidence for any building structure. The high resistance areas in trenches B, C, D, could be explained by the good drainage provided by the natural of sandy gravel. The high reading for trench F, both in the original plan survey and the section measurement could be due to the relatively high density of flint nodules in the fill and in the natural gravel. A suggestion that these flints might be from a wall that was nearby to the tumuli found in 1818 whose precise location is not known, can not be substantiated, as none of them had any mortar attached to them. It is considered that all of the flints were just naturally deposited and not laid by man. Although it is just possible that they were re-deposited from some nearby area, where they may have been part of a foundation to some building.

It is clear that making a geophysical survey in this area is difficult due to the underlying geology, however this should not rule out further perhaps more detailed survey in the future. The area is thought to be adjacent to a road/track way of one of the Icknield Way routes from Thriplow. This route then heads in a north easterly direction towards Stanmoor Hall Farm, and beyond to the Dernford crossing of the river Cam meeting another of the Icknield Way routes which also crossed the Cam at this point. So, it is quite reasonable to think that there may be a building in this area, particularly as it is known that a Roman Shrine/temple is just 40 metres to the south, and a Bathhouse 80 metres also to the south, and they would almost certainly be accessed via this road.

Acknowledgements

Mr L Harrison is thanked for giving permission to excavate, and his continued interest in the dig, and for machine backfilling the trenches saving us many hours of manual labour.

The RheeSearch Archaeology Group again provided the geophysical survey which revealed the site.

Mark Hinman of Pre-Construct Archaeology gave much appreciated comment on the excavation.