

A Summary of Archaeological Work at Gallow's Hill, Swaffham Prior,  
TL 578645

## INTRODUCTION

An archaeological excavation through complex rectilinear cropmark enclosures was completed at Gallow's Hill, Swaffham Prior (*figure 1*), as a continuation of a survey of the archaeology on the County Farms Estate (Malim, 1991). The cropmarks appeared to be linked to a large Roman Villa (S.A.M Camb 32), 1 kilometre to the north-west, by a trackway raising the possibility that they might represent a contemporary ritual centre. The site is situated just off the top of a prominent chalk knoll on fen-edge facing towards the south-east. In the lee of Devils Dyke, a massive Anglo-Saxon defensive structure, the site is located in a vivid and historic landscape.

The work was completed by Simon Bray of Cambridgeshire Archaeology over three weeks between February and March 1993. The project was funded by English Heritage.

The primary research objectives of the project were to determine:-

- 1) The function, period and morphology of the site.
- 2) The extent and state of preservation of archaeological deposits and their depth below the ground surface. To enable recommendations for future long term beneficial management of the site to be made.

An area roughly covering 100 square metres was represented by the cropmarks. Four trenches were opened within this area using a 360° tracked excavator to identify the date and nature of the features showing as cropmarks and to determine whether there might be any surviving internal activity. Two further trenches were positioned away from the area delineated by the cropmarks to identify whether the lack of cropmarks corresponded to a lack of archaeological activity.

## RESULTS

The evaluation excavation at Gallows Hill have not only demonstrated the survival of archaeological remains but they have also shown additional features that had not been previously seen by cropmarks. All the features in the areas examined had suffered plough damage, some to a greater extent than others. The enclosures identified from aerial photographs were found to be fairly shallow gullies dated by pottery from within the ditch fills to the second or third century AD. A large cropmark enclosure, 100 metres square and apparently encompassing the remainder of the features (*figure 2*) was found to consist of a straight-sided and flat-bottomed ditch with postholes within it. These latter features possibly can be interpreted as a palisade trench surrounding the site.

A square, deep cut pit was uncovered within the main enclosure in the south-west corner of the site. Containing a loose chalk rubble fill a large piece of late iron-age pottery and a miniature iron sickle was recovered from the feature. The function of the pit remains at present unclear but given the iron sickle a ritual interpretation seems feasible.

Within the main enclosure, but not identified by cropmarks, a small single-celled structure was uncovered (*figure 2*). Substantially constructed with clunch blocks the building enclosed an area of 3 metres square (*figure 3*). A high density of iron nails from within and immediately around the structure suggests it had a tile roof. The outer walls appear to have been plastered. Within the structure, orientated north-west/south-east, the remains of an adolescent were found. A demolition layer was recorded over the whole internal area, covering the inhumation, indicating that the burial and building are contemporary with one another and that the building was perhaps specifically constructed as a mausoleum. Within the demolition were the shattered fragments of high quality Roman pottery, perhaps vessels accompanying the burial. The building has been dated by pottery to the late second or third century. Both the inhumation and building had been badly damaged by the plough.

Additional Roman features found within the main enclosure include a square-cut Roman pit in Trench III, and four post holes in Trench I (*figure 2*). The limited nature of the trenching does not allow for any pattern or interpretation for the postholes to be discussed. These features have also been dated to the late second or early third century on association. A small pit adjacent to one the main enclosure gullies was found to contain a complete, small, plain "votive" cup. Dating of this artefact remains ambiguous with both the Roman and Saxon periods suggested for the date of manufacture. However, given the location of the pit containing the cup, which is next to and respects a Roman gully it seems plausible to temporally assign the artefact to the Roman period. Further supported by discovery of cups of a similar design and style at Uley Roman temple (Woodward A, 1992).

Anglo-Saxon activity was identified on the site with the discovery of eight burials (*figure 2*), three of which have been assigned, by associated gravegoods, to the fifth and sixth centuries. The gravegoods found with two of the burials excavatedTwo further inhumations are equally likely to be of a similar date as they were found cut into the fill of a second or third century ditch.

## DISCUSSION

The evaluation at Gallow's Hill has added considerably to our knowledge relating to the settlement and use of the fen-edge landscape. It has indicated the ritual significance of the site over a period of 600 years or more, demonstrated by the indication of a possible Celtic religious sanctuary, a Romano-British religious complex and an Anglo-Saxon cemetery. A well defined double enclosure in the north-eastern corner of the area of cropmarks could represent a temple site. In plan it is very similar to other excavated Roman temple sites at Hayling Island and Gosbanks. However, this area was unavailable at the point of evaluation as it had a crop on it, further work is felt necessary to examine this possibility as well as the Celtic religious angle to the site. The limited nature of the excavation to date does make it impossible to state the precise function of the site. Furthermore in the absence of further excavations we cannot be certain if those centuries not so far represented in the sequence were in fact periods of activity at this location. If this proved to be the case it would represent continual sequence of ritual use from the Iron-Age to the sixth century. If the activity was, however confined only to those periods of use identified so far, then the explanation of the site's selection for ritual/burial functions may be purely topographic.

26/05/93  
Simon Bray

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Site Code: SWPGH93

Archaeological Investigation completed over three weeks between February & March 1993

The archive is deposited with the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire Archaeology. It contains:-

An archaeological research design  
Site correspondence  
Site records (context sheets, small finds records, field drawings, site notebook,  
black & white contact prints, colour prints & slides)

Finds: 1 box of pottery, 1 box of animal bone, 3 complete human skeletons

Small finds:	1 small ceramic cup
(associated with burial 26)	1 large, shallow ceramic bowl
(associated with burial 36)	1 bronze cruciform brooch, 1 iron knife, 1 iron girdle? ring, 114 amber beads, 2 glass beads, 1 chalk bead, 2 silver beads
(spoilheap finds)	1 part of fifth century silver wristclasp
" "	1 bronze, roman?, leather belt? fitting

## REFERENCES

- Malim T, 1990      Archaeology on the Cambridgeshire County Farms Estate,  
                         *Cambridgeshire County Council*
- Woodward A, 1992      English Heritage Book of Shrines & Sacrifice  
                         *B.T. Bastsford Ltd/English Heritage*