

# SANDHILLS FARM Longbridge Deverill, Wiltshire

# evaluation of lead coffin

February 2003

prepared on behalf of:

Libraries and Heritage Service
Wiltshire County Council
Bythesea Road
TROWBRIDGE
Wiltshire
BA14 8BS

by:

ASI Heritage Consultants
Furlong House
61 East Street
WARMINSTER
Wiltshire
BA12 9BZ

Reference: ASI 3260 May 2003

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SUMMARY

Sand Hill Farm, Longbridge Deverill, Wiltshire NGR ST 8750 4095 Calibration of Lead Coffin Burial

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February 2003

Cleaning and limited investigation of the context of a lead coffin and associated coin hoard discovered – and correctly notified – by metal detectorists at Sand Hill Farm near Longbridge Deverill in Wiltshire, indicated the lead to have been the lining of a timber coffin, possibly within a greensand (stone) sarcophagus, set within a simple 'normal' sized grave cut. The coffin was not opened and was left *in situ*.

Two 4<sup>th</sup> century coins and a fragment of a pennant sandstone roof slate were recovered from the site of the adjacent hoard, the rest of which had been removed to the *British Museum* prior to the evaluation works.

The report concludes that, given the proximity of the site to other recent finds of Roman material, the burial is likely to be part of a cemetery and potentially indicates the former presence of a Roman villa close to Longbridge Deverill.

# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Land owner:

Mr and Mrs G. Read, Sand Hill Farm, Longbridge Deverill, Warminster,

Wiltshire.

Detectorists:

Wayne Green, 9 Bishopstrow, Warminster, Wiltshire. Richard Boyd, 9a Bishopstrow, Warminster, Wiltshire.

Sponsor:

Libraries and Heritage Service, Wiltshire County Council, Bythesea

Road, Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

Site works and

descriptive report

Bill Moffatt BA AIFA, t/a Pathfinders Archaeological Reconnaisance, 25

The Hollow, Lower Woodford, Salisbury, Wiltshire. SP4 6EN

Finds assessment

and Period consultant: Mark Corney BA FSA, The Cheese House, Manor House Farm, Stoke

St Michael, Somerset. BA3 5LD

Management and

Report assembly:

Michael Heaton BTech PgDip MIFA IHBC t/a ASI Heritage Consultants,

Furlong House, 61 East Street, Warminster, Wiltshire. BA12 9BZ

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# CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTI	ON
1.1 1.2 1.3	The site and its	s situation
2	METHODOLO	OGY
2.1 2.2 2.3	Report prepara	ation
3	RESULTS	
3.1 3.2		ata
4	CONCLUSIO	NS
4.1 4.2	Archaeologica Archaeologica	l interpretation
BIBLIOG	BRAPHY	
ILLUSTF	RATIONS	Figure 1. The site and its situation Figure 2. Relative positions of coin hoard and grave Figure 3. Detail plan of grave Figure 4. Detail plan of coffin
APPEND	DICES	Appendix 1. Site records

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 The Project

- 1.1.1 This report presents an archaeological evaluation of the context, condition and significance of a Roman lead coffin burial discovered by metal detectorists at Sandhills Farm near in the parish of Longbridge Deverill in Wiltshire during January 2003. The evaluation was commissioned by the Libraries and Heritage Service of Wiltshire County Council to assist the landowner in the management of the site and to provide a proper record for the county Sites and Monuments Record. Site works and the descriptive report were undertaken by Bill Moffatt MA AIFA, t/a Pathfinders Archaeological Reconnaisance; the work was supervised, and the report completed, by Michael Heaton BTech PgDip MIFA IHBC t/a ASI Heritage Consultants with a finds report and additional contextual assessments by Mark Corney BA FSA
- 1.1.2 The exact date and circumstances of discovery are not known to the author but it is understood to have been during the last week of January 2003. Evaluation site works commenced Thursday 6th February 2003 and were completed the following Monday when the excavation was backfilled by the landowner. Following processing of finds, the descriptive report was submitted to ASI on 11th March 2003. Following receipt of finds reports and contextual assessment in late April 2003 this report was submitted to Wiltshire County Council on 2nd May 2003.
- 1.1.3 The following texts present a geographic and archaeological introduction to the site; methodological statements; the results; and concluding assessments of the context, condition and significance of the find. Texts are augmented by line drawings and a selection of photographs.
- 1.2 The Site, its situation and status.

Figure 1

- 1.2.1 The civil parish of Longbridge Deverill is situated in the upper Wylye valley approximately 4km south (upstream) of Warminster in Wiltshire. It encompasses the full width of the valley at the point at which the river changes direction to flow south-eastwards towards Wilton, creating an enhanced floodplain on its south side formed by a broad and gently sloping exposure of Greensand at the base of the north-western scarp slope of Cranborne Chase. The Greensand substrate generates deep sandy soils, typically 600mm thick with poor boundary definition between A and B horizons.
- 1.2.2 Sand Hill is one of a group of hillocks that form the north-western edge of the Greensand exposure, overlooking the village and the river from the north-west. The ground slopes down gently to south and east towards Sutton Veny before rising again, sharply, at the chalk scarp. The eponymous farm occupies the full width of the greensand exposure and the chalk downs on the east side of the village.
- 1.2.3 The lead coffin and a hoard of coins within a ceramic vessel were discovered in the field immediately east of the village, on the south side of the Longbridge Deverill Sutton Veny road, centred on NGR ST 8750 4095. At the time of discovery, the field had been ploughed and tilled and was awaiting drilling. Both finds were correctly reported by the landowner and detectorists to the *Portable Antiquities Officer* for Wiltshire who duly informed the County Archaeological Officer at Wiltshire County Council. The coin hoard was removed immediately to the *British Museum*. At the time of the evaluation, the coffin had been partly exposed for several days and the entire grave fill along its west and south sides had been removed or disturbed by the detectorists.

# 1.3 Archaeological setting

- 1.3.1 The chalk downlands of Wiltshire and north Dorset and the intervening valleys are an area of outstanding archaeological survival. Here, the earthwork remnants of prehistoric, Roman and medieval field systems, dotted about the skyline monuments of prehistoric pastoralists, attest to millennia of agricultural activity, and have been the subject of antiquarian and academic study for the last 400 years at least.
- 1.3.2 Longbridge Deverill was recorded as a Saxon manor Devrel at the Domesday Survey of 1086. It is likely to have been the principal settlement in the valley above Warminster which, by 10<sup>th</sup> century, was known as Deveril', though the name alludes to much earlier occupation, being a collusion of the British terms dubro meaning water (as in Andover and Micheldever), and ill meaning fertile cultivated land (Gover, 1939). Settlement earthworks survive adjacent to the church and at the south end of the village close to The Manor; but much of the present village core was known as 'The Marsh' until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the present turnpike road was constructed on an embankment and the course of the river diverted (L/Bridge Dev. encl. map, Longleat Archives).
- Despite this pedigree, the villages of Wiltshire in common with many of the valley bottoms within the downlands have received little archaeological attention to date compared to the surrounding hills or to the adjacent areas of Somerset, for example (cf. Aston, 1985; Ellison, 1983). The Sites and Monuments Record maintained by Wiltshire County Council at Trowbridge records chance finds of Roman and prehistoric material from the downlands around the village and the remnants of undated field systems, though no systematic survey has been made. However, recent PPG-lead work within the village itself (Heaton, 2001) has indicated a possible Roman origin, reflecting a trend increasingly recognised throughout southern Britain (English Heritage, 1990). The site is 4km from the Great Ridge Roman Road and the Pit Meads Roman Villa at Norton Bavant

#### 2 METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 Site Works

- 2.1.1 The purpose of the work was to establish the context of the burial and its superficial condition with the minimum of further disturbance. Site works and report preparation have been conducted in accordance with the Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation published by the *Institute of Field Archaeologists* (IFA, 2000) and ASI's standard specification by *Pathfinders Archaeological Reconnaissance* supervised by ASI Heritage Consultants.
- 2.1.2 The detectorists' excavations were emptied of backfill and accumulated groundwater and recorded 'as found' before any further work was undertaken. Trench 1, the area around the burial, was eventually expanded to 9.8m long by 8m wide and excavated to the top of natural base. Trench 2, the shovel pit excavated during the recovery of the coin hoard was not expanded. Its dimensions were ca 600mm long and 400mm wide, largely excavated to the top of natural base. All deposits revealed were manually investigated, and recorded in accordance with the specification, using complementary written, drawn and photographic records. The site position was tied in to fixed landscape features by tacheometry; height above mean sea level was established from OS contour lines on Explorer 143 "Warminster and Trowbridge".
- 2.1.3 Datable artefacts recovered were retained and processed in accordance with current *UKIC* and *.IFA* guidances.
- 2.1.4 No palaeoenvironmental materials were recovered and no sol samples were retained.

## 2.2 Report preparation

- 2.2.1 In the following sections of the report, the principal observations are summarised with reference to Figs 3 4. Detailed descriptions of the deposits encountered are in the Trench Records, which are presented unaltered as Appendix I. Deposits are referred to by the numerical references assigned on-site, the first integer of which refers to the Trench No. (i.e. 100, 200).
- 2.2.2 The artefact assemblage recovered during the evaluation has been examined by Mark Corney MA FSA, whose descriptions are presented unaltered in Section 3.2 below.
- 2.2.3 The report concludes with an assessment of the methodological efficacy of the work and an assessment of the archaeological significance of the results, for the purpose of informing the proposed reconstruction works. The report makes no recommendations.
- 2.3 Archive.
- 2.3.1 The archive of written, drawn and photographic records has been compiled into an indexed archive according with Appendix 6 of *Management of Archaeological Projects* (English Heritage, 1991).
- 2.3.1 The coin hoard has been removed to the *British Museum*. The Lead coffin has been left *in situ*. Artefacts recovered during the evaluation and accompanying records are currently held at ASI's offices in Warminster. With the landowners' permission these will be deposited with Salisbury *Museum* in due course. Microfilm copies of the archive and report will be deposited with the *National Monuments Record Centre* at Swindon within approximately 12 months of report submission.

#### 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Stratigraphic data

Deposits exposed comprised ploughsoil and lower ploughsoil, sealing a grave cut into natural clay over chalk marl.

## 3.1.1 Overburden and Modern Deposits.

Upper ploughsoil (100,201) consisted of dark brown silty clay loam and was ca 300mm deep.

Lower ploughsoil (101, 202) consisted of a dark yellowish brown silty clay loam, which was considerably more argillaceous than (100,201) and was ca 200mm deep. The coin hoard and its associated pottery were recovered from within this lower soil.

The re-excavated backfill of Trench 2, (200) was a wet, vacuous deposit derived from both (201) and (202).

# 3.1.2 Archaeological deposits.

The grave [105] was 2.15m long, 0.68m wide and ca 0.5m deep. It contained two layers of redeposited natural backfill (102, 103) overlying a dense, homogenous deposit of compact green sand, (104), which surrounded the coffin (Object 1) and partially overlay it at its southern end.

The coffin consisted of a two-piece lid, a coffin lining and associated iron nails at its corners. The lid was 1.65m in overall length, 0.38m wide at its northerly end and 0.30m wide at its southerly end. The lead sheet was ca 6mm thick. The two halves had been joined across the middle of the coffin by a lead strap 30-40mm across. The coffin lining was incompletely exposed, but could be seen to be more substantial than the lid at 8-10mm thick. The original presence of a wooden outer coffin was suggested by the presence of substantial iron nails at the exposed corners. Their positions suggest an overall width of ca 400mm at the northern end.

The green sand deposit (104) was incompletely exposed, but may represent the remains of a badly decayed Upper Greensand outer lining, or possibly a sarcophagus.

#### 3.1.3 Natural Base

Natural base consisted of compact yellow brown silty clay ca 400mm thick overlying chalk marl.

# 3.2 Artefactual data

The artefacts comprised flint tools and a fragment of a red Pennant sandstone roof slate, Roman ceramics, Roman coins and the lead coffin lining. The flint tools are considered to be an incidental inclusion here and are not described further. The Pennant roof slate was recovered from the base of the coin hoard 'shovel pit': though certainly in situ, it is of a generic and well understood type and is also not described further. The coffin is described above and considered in greater detail below.

#### 3.2.1 Roman ceramics.

A total of 48 sherds of pottery were recovered from Trench 2. These are all from the same vessel but the rim and base are absent. The vessel form is a jar, at least 26cm

high and an approximate maximum circumference of 20cm. The central zone of the body is decorated with lightly burnished acute lattice- work lines arranged in groups of four. The fabric is as follows: the matrix is very fine, sandy with abundant micaceous inclusions. The surface colouring is a pale/light brown with an orange core. The vessel is well made and the walls are relatively thin, averaging 4mm. The lack of base and rim sherds hampers close dating, but the general form and fabric are quite in accord with local coarse industries of the later Romano-British period.

## 3.2.2 <u>Coins</u>

Two Roman coins were recovered from Trench 2, the coin hoard 'shovel pit'.

SF3 Æ4 of Constans.

Obv. Laureate bust right. CONSTANS PF AVG. Rev. Two victories. VICTORIAE DD [AVGG] Q NN Mint mark TRP• Trier. HK162. Mint period AD341-48

SF4 Æ4 (fragment) House of Constantine.

Obv. Part of laureate bust right. No surviving legend. Rev. As SF3. [VICTORIAE DD AVGG Q NN] Mint mark: illegible. AD341-48

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

# 4.1 Archaeological Interpretation

- 4.1.1 The stratigraphic relationship between the coffin burial and the coin hoard was not identified in the necessarily limited site work undertaken here. However, lead coffin burials are a late Roman phenomenon in Britain (se below), so, if the two 4<sup>th</sup> century coins recovered from the 'shovel pit' are representative of the rest of the hoard, it would not be unreasonable to associate the burial with the coin hoard.
- The lead coffin is, in fact, the lining of a timber coffin indicated by iron nails at three of the four corners of the lead lining (Figure 3). It is a single burial within a single 'normally' sized grave, with fragmentary evidence of a greensand (stone) sarcophagus surviving at one end. It is, however, unaccompanied by any other form of mortuary structure. Lead coffins from Roman Britain have been classified and discussed in depth by Toller (1977). Annable (1980) has observed (ibid. 187-8) that an example from *Cunetio* near Marlborough and three of the other Wiltshire examples display a common localised form of construction involving two cast sheets joined by soldered strips. Given that the lid of the Sandhill Farm example employs this method of manufacture, it is possible that the coffin is also of this local form. Evidence from other sites (see below) suggests the lead lining and the wooden coffin may also have been placed in a greensand sarcophagus, which appears to have been the case here.

# 4.2 Archaeological significance

- 4.2.1 Lead coffins and coffin linings are predominantly late Roman in date. The extensive late Roman urban cemetery at Poundbury, Dorchester included 26 inhumations in lead-lined coffins, all dated to the first half of the fourth century AD (Farwell & Molleson, 1993, 63-4), one within a greensand sarcophagus (Davies & Grieve, 1987), though the adjacent cemetery at Alington Avenue (Davies, Bellamy, Heaton and Woodward, 2002) included a single 3rd century example. Outside the archaeologically-excavated cemeteries they occur as isolated though undated finds on Sites and Monuments Records and older versions of Ordnance Survey maps, principally because they were a relatively common find during agricultural improvement works of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Subsequent investigation of some (Heaton, 2002) has indicated that many of these 'isolated' finds may have been components of larger cemeteries.
- 4.2.2 The discovery of the lead coffin lining at Sandhill Farm is an important addition to the record of late Roman burials from Wiltshire, being only the ninth example of this type from the County. The majority of the Wiltshire examples are from the western side of the County, with only one, from the Roman town of Cunetio near Marlborough, in the east. Close to Sandhill Farm an example within a greensand sarcophagus is known from Maiden Bradley, some 6km to the west (Annable 1966). Other lead linings are known from Bratton, North Bradley, Headington, Grittleton, Roundway and Devizes (Grinsell 1957).
- 4.2.3 Lead coffins and coffin linings are, like stone sarcophagi, expensive items and are most likely associated with high status individuals. At the Poundbury cemetery the majority of the burials associated with lead linings occurred in prominent positions or, in four cases, within stone mausolea (Farwell & Molleson, 1993, 64). Such an interment is unlikely to be an isolated event, and a Romano-British cemetery should be anticipated in the immediate vicinity. The burial, coin hoard and the piece of pennant sandstone also point to a site of some status in the area. Given that ceramic finewares of Roman date have been recovered from the centre of the village 500m west of the site (Heaton, 2001), the possibility of a villa within close proximity of Sand Hill Farm is highly likely.

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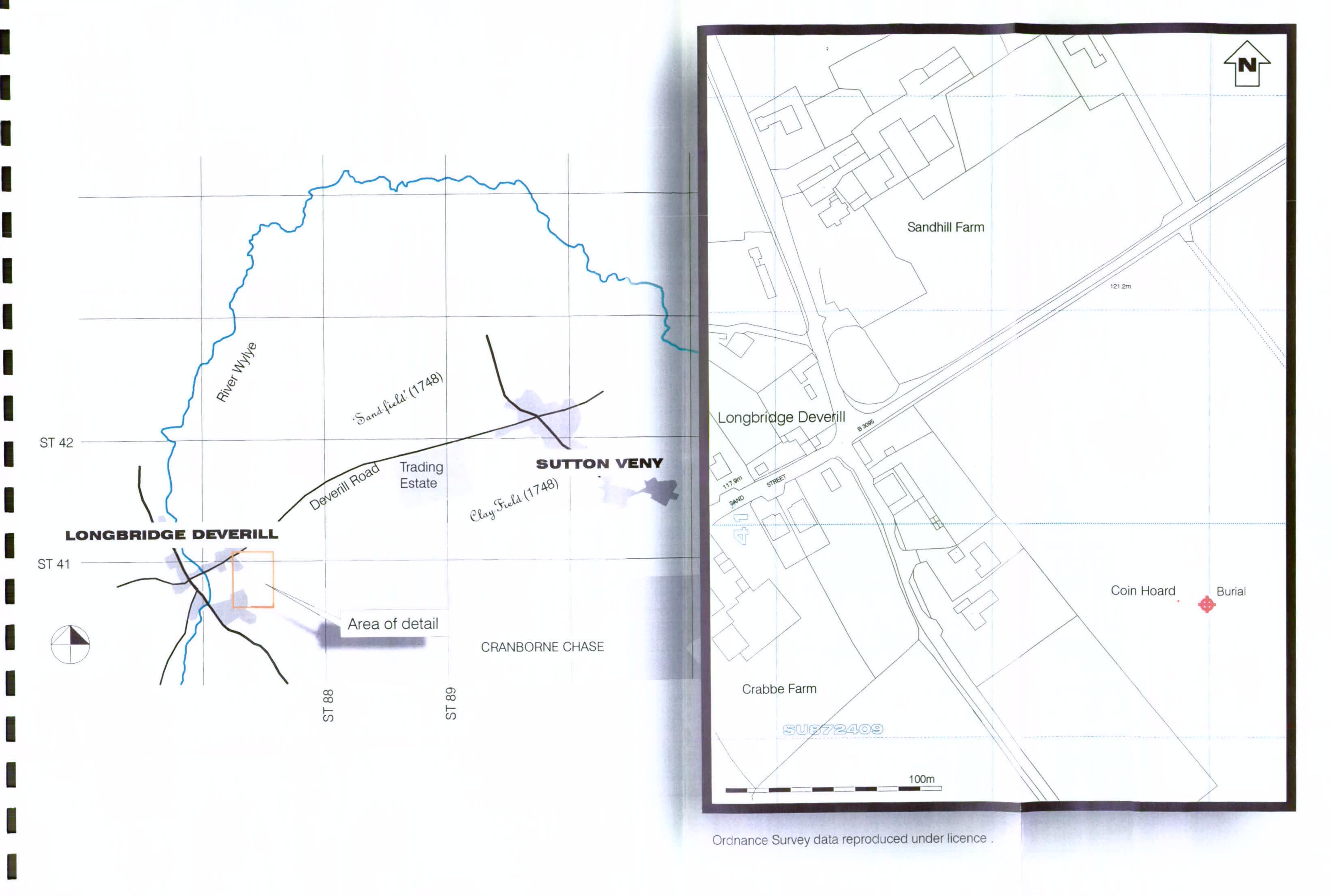
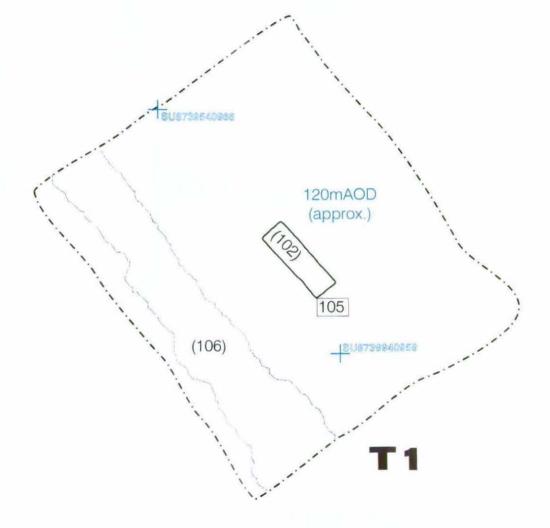


Figure 1. The site and its situation

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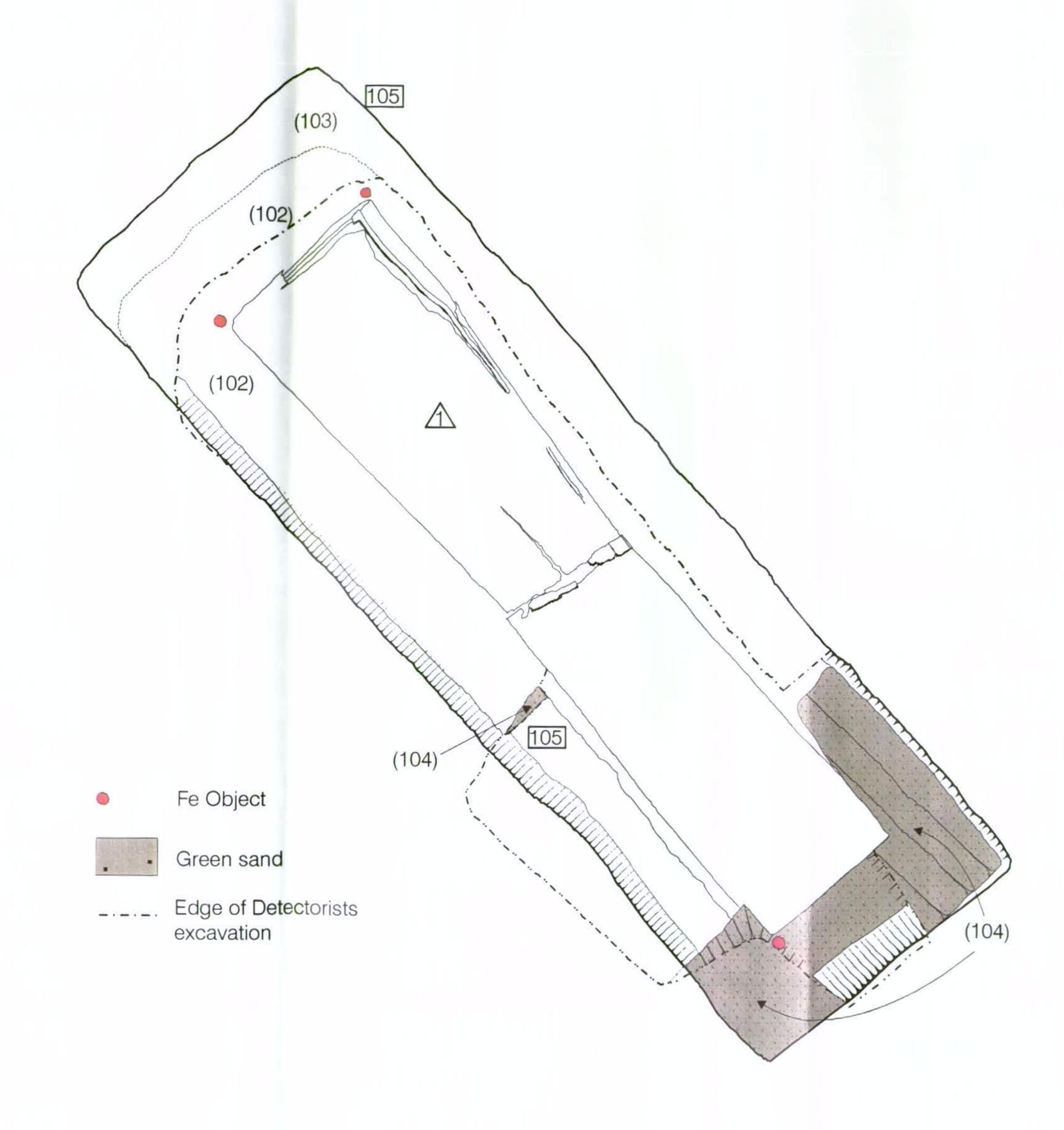




Figure 3: Plan of grave

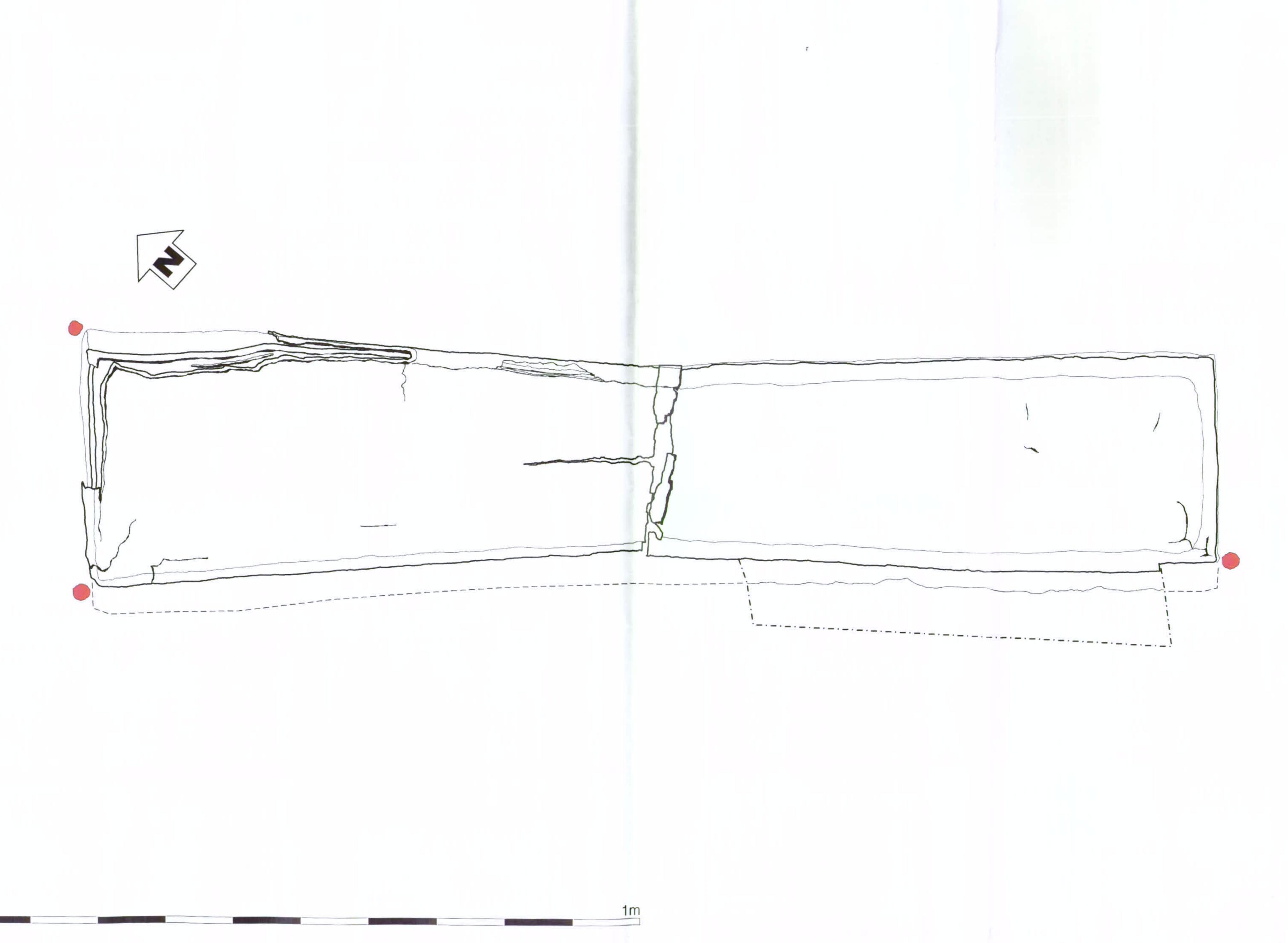


Figure 4: Detail plan of coffin



The coffin as found, from sou-thwest



The coin hoard 'shovel' pit after cleaning, showing depression formed by pennant roof slate

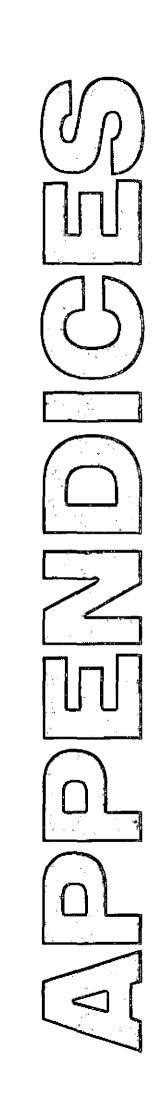


The coffin and surroundings after cleaning



The site, from the south

Figure 5. Selected photographs



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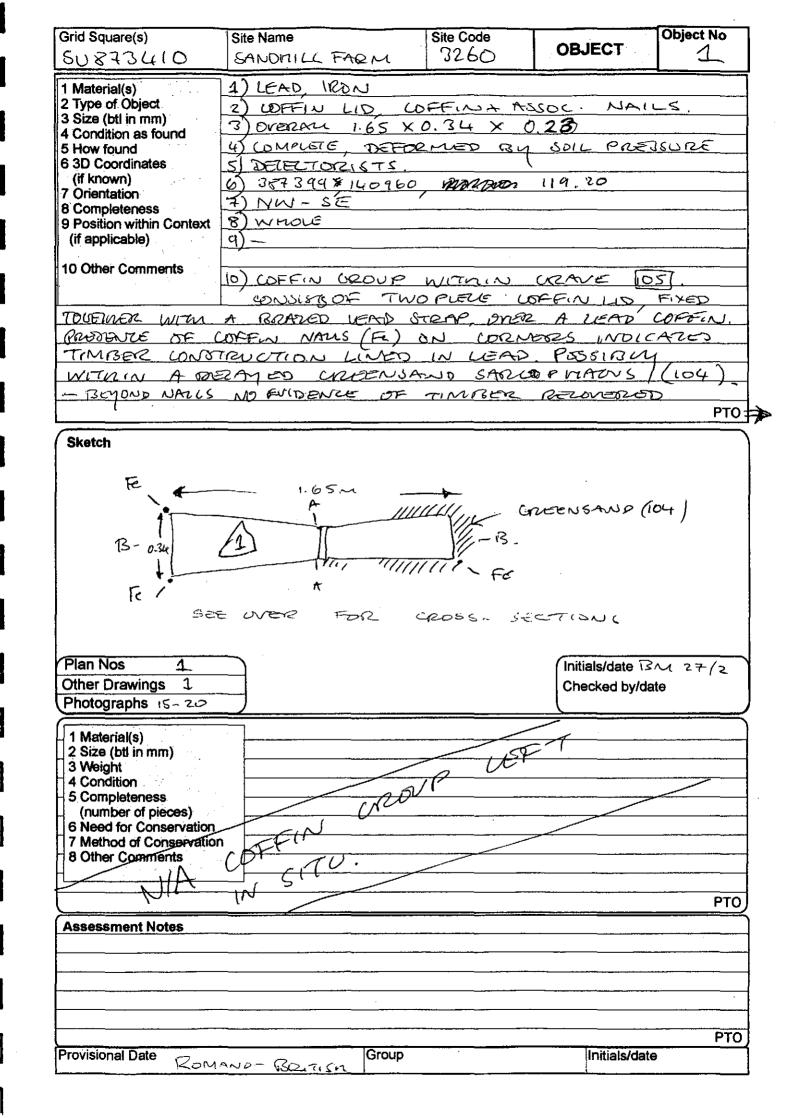
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4 Material/o	D FLINT			<del></del>	<del></del>
1 Material(s) 2 Type of Object	<del></del>	<u> </u>	<del></del>		
3 Size (btl in mm)	2) TOOL		<del> </del>		
4 Condition as found	3) 35×28×	<del></del>			
5 How found 6 3D Coordinates	4) GOOD. 5) WALKING	chase AGE	A		
(if known)	· 1	OVER TIPE			
7 Orientation	6) —				
8 Completeness 9 Position within Context	8) COMPLETÉ	-			
(if applicable)	4) -				
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10 Other Comments	10) BLRAPER		······································		
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1 Material(s)					
2 Size (btl in mm)		·	·		
3 Weight 4 Condition					
- 5 Completeness			<del>.</del> ,		
(number of pieces)			- <del></del>		
6 Need for Conservation					· <del></del>
7 Method of Conservation 8 Other Comments	·				
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Grid Square(s)  Site Name  Site Code  SUFFIGURE  SANDHUL FARM  3260  1 Material(s) 2 Type of Object 3 Size (btl in mm) 4 Condition as found 5 How found 6 3D Coordinates (if known) 7 Orientation 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable)  10 Other Comments  Site Name  Site Code  3260  3 Size (bd   mm) 3		3
1 Material(s) 2 Type of Object 3 Size (btl in mm) 4 Condition as found 5 How found 6 3D Coordinates (if known) 7 Orientation 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable)  1) Cu Augy 2) Color 3) IL M DiA 4) SOLID LORRODED. 5) IN BACKELLI DE TR 2. 6) — 8) Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable)		
2 Type of Object 3 Size (btl in mm) 4 Condition as found 5 How found 6 3D Coordinates (if known) 7 Orientation 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable)  2 Condition 3 14 M D D 4 SOLIO LORRODED 5 IN BACKELLI DF TR2, 6 TR2 7 Comments		
3 Size (btl in mm) 4 Condition as found 5 How found 6 3D Coordinates (if known) 7 Orientation 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable) 3 14 M D D:A 4 SOLID LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELL OF TR2, 6 7 7 - 3 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable)		
4 Condition as found 5 How found 6 3D Coordinates (if known) 7 Orientation 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable) 4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  4 SOLIO LORRODED. 5 IN BACKELUL INF TR 2,  6		
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7 Orientation 8 Completeness 9 Position within Context (if applicable)		
9 Position within Context (if applicable)		
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10 Other Comments 10) PART OF COIN MORRO		
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1 Material(s)		<del></del>
2 Size (btl in mm) 3 Weight		
4 Condition		<del></del>
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Grid Square(s)	Site Name	Site Code		Object No
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1 Material(s)	D WALLON			
2 Type of Object	2) COIN			
3 Size (btl in mm)	1 8			
4 Condition as found				
5 How found 6 3D Coordinates	4) CORRODGO F	reagment	ENCH ?	
(if known)	1 131 CELLO		-NUT ?	<del></del>
7 Orientation	6) -			
8 Completeness	3) Ca 2/3			
9 Position within Context (if applicable)	9) -	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·		
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1 Material(s) 2 Size (btl in mm)		· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·		<del></del>
3 Weight				
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