Report on a Programme of Archaeological Works at Stoner Hill, Ridge Hanger, Froxfield, Hampshire (SAM HA113)

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This document sets out the results from a programme of archaeological works carried out by West Sussex Archaeology Ltd. on behalf of the landowner and English Heritage, at Stoner Hill, Ridge Hanger, Froxfield, Hampshire. These works confirmed that the site is a Roman villa, composed of two square enclosures, the southern of which contained the principal buildings. The villa buildings contained black & white mosaics and a bath suite. Since abandonment the buildings have been extensively robbed and the site ploughed.

BACKGROUND

Topographical Background

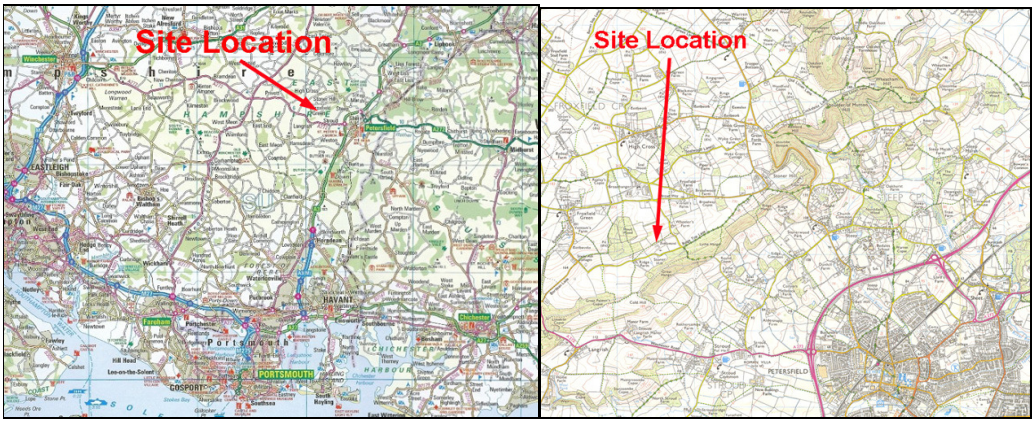

Figure 1 Site location. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. License number: AL100036068

1. The Roman earthwork at Stoner Hill, Ridge Hanger, Froxfield, Hampshire, lies 1½ miles to the west of the A3 and 2.3 miles north-west of the town of Petersfiield in Hamphsire (fig.1). The site lies at 208m aOD and is centred at OS grid reference SU 715250. The underlying geology of the site is chalk overlain by clay with flints. The site is positioned a short distance back from top of ridge facing south-east across the Rother valley overlooking Petersfield and the South Downs.

Project Background

1. Following unauthorised ploughing on the site of the scheduled monument at Stoner Hill, it was agreed between English Heritage and the landowner, Mr. H. C. Toomer, that a programme of archaeological works would be undertaken on the site at the latter's expense. The purpose of this work was twofold; first to assess the state of preservation of the monument and secondly to provide information that would inform its future management.

2. The methodology for this project was set out in a Design Brief drawn up by Richard Massey, Inspector of Monuments for English Heritage, and in a resulting letter from West Sussex Archaeology Ltd. It consisted of four elements:

    - A walkover survey of the site, the results from which would inform the other elements.

    - A geophysical survey: initially intended to be both magnetometry and resistivity.

- An excavation: two areas were to be investigated, with one trench will be placed across two depressions at the east end of the scheduled area and a second placed across the ditch excavated by Stevens in 1936-7 (see below) and extended to include an area likely to be the site of the principal Roman building on the site.

- Restoration: clearance of scrub over the site of the Stevens' excavations and the backfilling of his trenches.

3. This report documents the results from the resulting archaeological work, which was carried out on June 13th 2008 (site survey), 22nd & 23rd July (geophysical survey) and 29th & 30th July (excavation & restoration). The geophysical survey was carried out by Chichester & District Archaeology Society (CDAS) while the other elements of the work were executed by George Anelay, Robin Barnes, Ken Mordle & Wayne Robertson of West Sussex Archaeology Ltd.

Historical Background

1. Three previous archaeological investigations of this monument have taken place. In 1855 Mr. R.G.P. Minty of Petersfield examined "a shallow bath", uncovered by labourers while digging, composed of tegulae laid flat, flange down, and sunk into the clay geology to the depth of the width of one tegula, some of which had been used to line the sides. These tegulae were 17in (432mm) in length, by 13½in (343mm) in breadth at the upper end and 11 3/8 (289mm) at the lower. The "bath" is described as being 3 ft 7 inches square (c.1.1 metres). At its north-west angle imbrices were noted placed level with the floor, apparently to allow drainage into the ditch which surrounds the site, at this point only a few feet distant. Upon a second visit Mr. Minty found the remains to have been vandalised and as a result largely destroyed. From the description it would appear that these remains were in the north-west corner of the site.

2. The second investigation took place between 1909 and 1911 and was carried out by Mr A. Moray Williams of Bedales School, Petersfield. He is said to have found in the north-west corner of the site "foundations of rough walls…..said to be remains of a bath" (Williams-Freeman p.285-6 & 398).

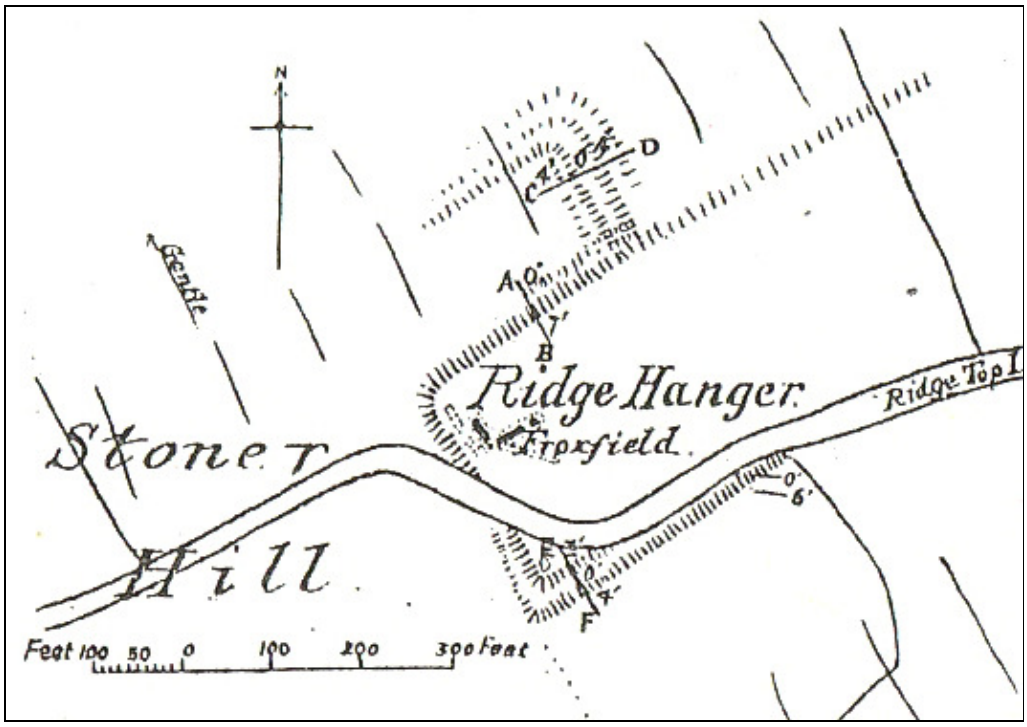

Figure 2 Plan of Moray-Williams trenches, taken from Williams-Freeman 1915 p.399.

3. The third investigation was carried out between 1934 and 1937 when Mr. C. E. Stevens excavated a total of seven trenches on the site. The first three of these, in 1934, were sections across the bank and ditch surrounding the site; the following year, 1935, he returned to investigate the earthworks to the north of the main enclosure with another three trenches; the final trench, excavated in 1936 and 1937, was positioned inside main enclosure. No records survive relating to the results of the 1934/5 excavations, save a location plan of the trenches (see fig.3). Two short paragraphs published in the Journal of Roman Studies in 1937 and 1938 are all that is known of the 1936/7 excavations. These describe an east ditch, “sleeper walls” filled with packed clay-with-flints, and an occupation layer of flints. The “sleeper walls” would appear to have formed a building 32ft (9.75m) by 28ft (8.55m) described as a “barn building”. This structure can be seen on the trench plan (fig. 3). Steven’s believed he could identity two phases of buildings, the second of which occurred after the eastern ditch had been back-filled. He also suggested that during this phase the site was more than doubled in size, with an extension to the east.

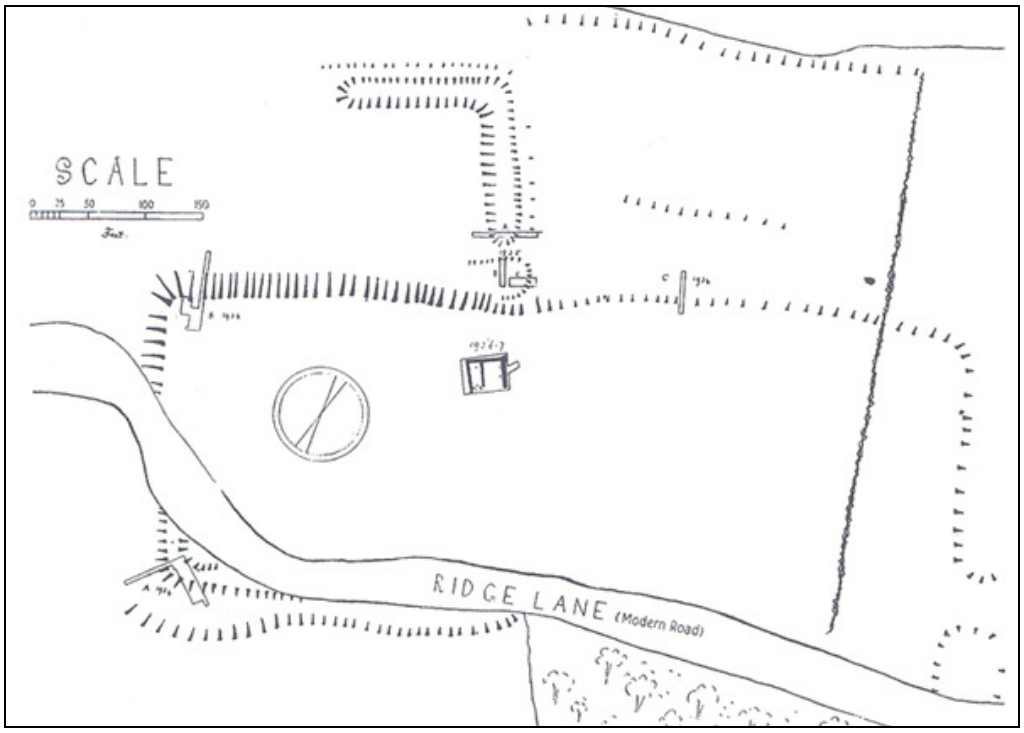

Figure 3 Plan of Stevens' trenches, taken from the Journal of Roman Studies 1938 p.195.

RESULTS

The Walkover Survey

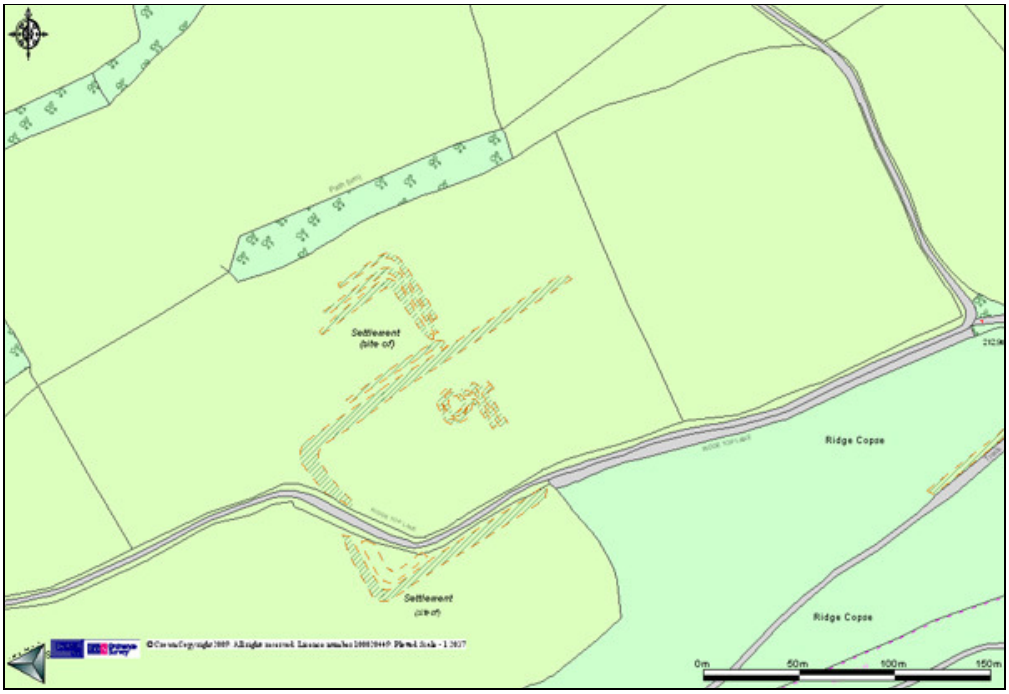

Figure 4 Modern OS map of the site. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. License number: AL100036068

1. The site at Ridgehanger consists of two rectangular enclosures. The northern of these is no longer visible as a significant earthwork due to ploughing, but would appear originally to have been the smaller of the two. It is described by Williams-Freeman as “a ditch, 4ft deep, with indication of an inner and a very slight outer bank” which “runs north at right angles [to the north side of the southern enclosure] for 40 yards, and then turns west and dies out a few yards short of the west bank of the camp” (Williams-Freeman p.398). The southern enclosure now consists of a well defined bank and ditch on three sides, but with no obvious barrier to the east. Williams-Freeman suggested that the eastern side lay in the adjacent field to the east. The partially back-filled trenches from Stevens’ 1936/7 excavations are still in evidence, but covered now with dense scrub and brambles.

2. Two principal observations were made during the walkover survey; first it was noted that the main concentration of artefacts in the ploughsoil lay in the vicinity of Stevens’ 1936/7 excavation trench and to its immediate south. This may indicate that this was the site of the principal Roman buildings on the site, although it could feasibly be discarded material from Stevens’ activities. There was no discernable increase of artefacts in the ploughsoil in the north-western corner of the site, although this was where both Minty and Moray-Williams seem to have uncovered the foundations of a bath building. Across the site as a whole there was a scatter of artefacts, most commonly Roman tile, which continued eastwards until a point about 15m to the east of Stevens’ 1936/7 trench, when it died away. For the remainder of the field in which the discernable earthworks lie, and into the field to the east, there was only the very occasional piece of tile.

3. The second observation concerned the location of the eastern boundary of the southern enclosure. As stated above, Williams-Freeman felt that the site extended into the field to the east, and that its boundary on this side was marked by two depressions. Stevens’ supported this view, although he qualified it by suggesting that this eastern boundary was the work of a later phase in the site’s occupation, with the earlier phase using a ditch which he excavated in his 1936/7 trench. Having visited the site, it appeared that the evidence for this later eastern ditch is very slight. The two depressions bore little resemblance to a partially ploughed out ditch and both the southern and northern sides to the enclosure very obviously end at a point equal to the ditch found in Stevens’ 1936/7 trench. The much smaller earthwork which runs eastwards from the north-east corner of the enclosure is much more likely to be a field boundary than a continuation of its significantly larger northern bank.

The Geophysical Survey

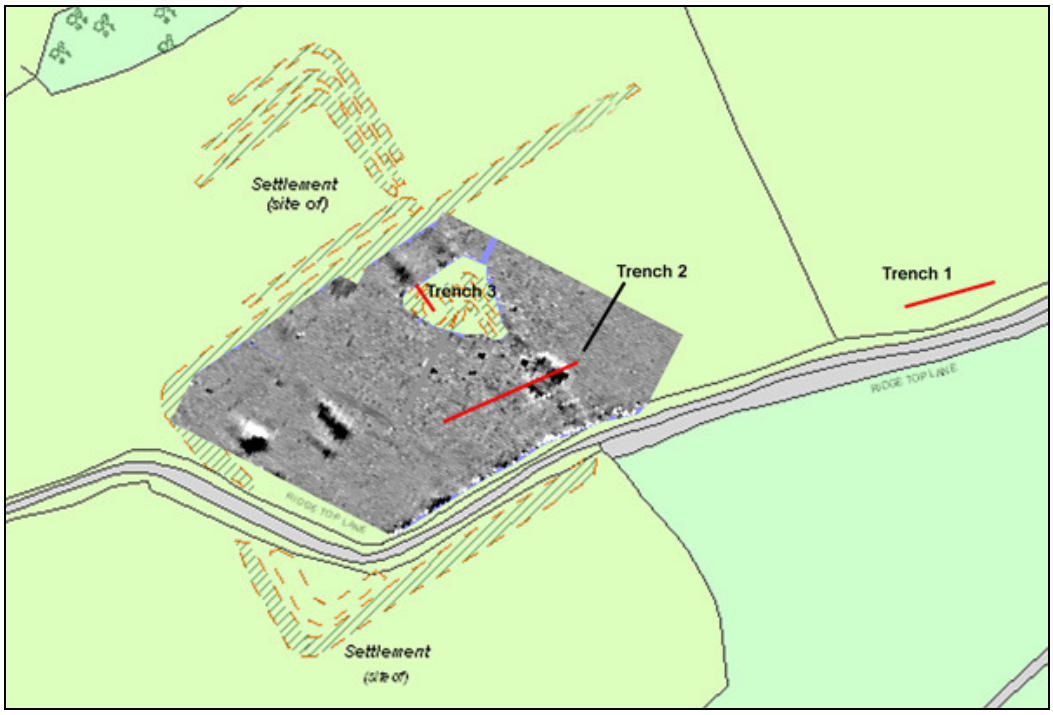

Figure 5 Plan including the results of the geophysical survey and indicating the position of the excavation trenches.

1. A full report on the geophysics can be found in the CDAS document: "A geomagnetic Survey of a Roman Site near Froxfield", where the more technical aspects of the work are set out (CDAS 2008). Here it will suffice to discuss those anomalies shown up by the survey.

2. A consistent reading along the east side of the surveyed area, running north-west to south-east, almost certainly represents the backfilled eastern ditch of the enclosure. Its southern and northern ends tie up well with the earthworks surviving at these points.

3. Several other anomalies are clear on the results: in the north-west corner of the enclosure two dark patches are present, and these may well be burnt areas or floors linked to the bath building found by Minty and Moray-Williams. In the north-east corner another dark patch runs from the area of Stevens' 1937/7 trench to the northern enclosure bank. This is possibly linked to the "barn building" Stevens identified. The fourth anomaly sits astride the eastern ditch, to the south of the Stevens trench. It was decided to place one of the excavation trenches over this dark patch to attempt to determine what it represents.

4. While the magnetometer survey performed a useful purpose in demonstrating the position of the eastern ditch and locating some potentially significant other anomalies within the enclosure, a complimentary resistivity survey is much to be desired. Time pressures

meant that such a survey was not feasible on this occasion, but it is hoped that it could be carried out at a later date. The main aim of such a survey would be to locate the remains of buildings within the enclosure, something which resistivity is more likely to do than magnetometry.

The Excavations

1. Three small trenches were excavated as part of this project: the first was placed over one of the depressions in the field to the east of the site (Trench 1); the second was positioned over the eastern ditch at a point where the geophysical anomaly visible on the CDAS survey crossed it (Trench 2); and the third was excavated within the area of Stevens' 1936/7 trench (Trench 3).

Trench 1

2. Upon excavation the depression proved to be exactly that – a shallow, broad scoop (20 in fig.6) 9.5m across and 0.55m deep, dug into the clay-with-flints geology (10 in fig.6), filled with a layer of grey/blue clay at its base and then silty clay above. It is uncertain what this feature was, possibly some form of pond, or alternatively a pit dug to extract the flints or clay. It did not, however, bear any resemblance to a Roman boundary ditch. The only artefacts recovered were a sherd of post-medieval pottery and two abraded fragments of Roman tile. The second depression to the north, of similar appearance, is probably of the same date and performed the same function.

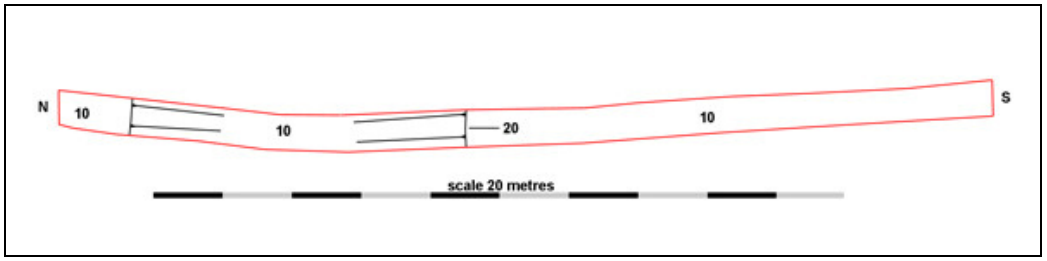

Figure 6 Plan of Trench 1, north-east is to the left of the image.

3. On the basis of this evidence it would seem logical to shrink the scheduled area to a point nearer to the eastern ditch revealed in the geophysical survey. On the basis of the scatter of artefacts in the ploughsoil, it would seem sensible to make this point 15m to the east of the 1936/7 Stevens trench.

Figure 7 The shallow depression in Trench 1 looking east.

Trench 2

4. This trench was placed across the line of the eastern ditch noted on the geophysical survey and extended westwards to include the width of the area of concentrated artefacts noted in the walkover survey. The geological deposits within this trench tended to purer clay with fewer flints as they got deeper.

5. The eastern half of the resulting trench was largely filled by a pit (2 in figs.8 & 9) some 12m wide and up to 1.17m deep. This corresponds to the anomaly visible on the geophysical survey, which would indicate that the pit is roughly square in shape. Two sections were dug into this pit, one against its southern edge and the other near its northern.

6. The pit in its southern section contained two layers, the upper of brown clay soil (3 in fig.9) containing numerous pieces of Roman building material, including upper greensand, flints, chalk, tile and tesserae in black, white and red. The lower layer (4 in fig.9) was composed principally of greenish/grey mortar and clay, with the same types of Roman building material, red tesserae and some fragments of opus signinum.

7. The northern section revealed four layers within the pit, the upper being the same as in the southern section (3 in fig.9). Below this was a darker layer of grey/brown clay soil (5 in fig.9), above a black clay soil (7 in fig.9) which would appear to be composed mainly of burnt material. All these layers contained frequent fragments of Roman building material. The lowest layer in the pit included a patch of orange clay (6 in fig.9), identical to the clay of which the base of the pit is composed (11 in fig.8).

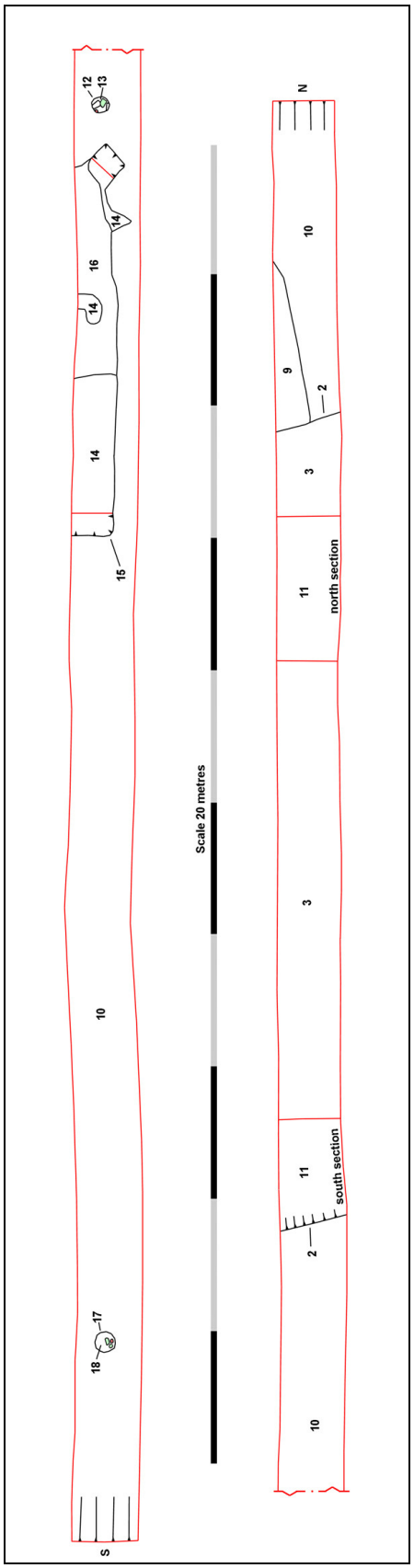

Figure 8 Plan of Trench 2, north-east is at the top of the image.

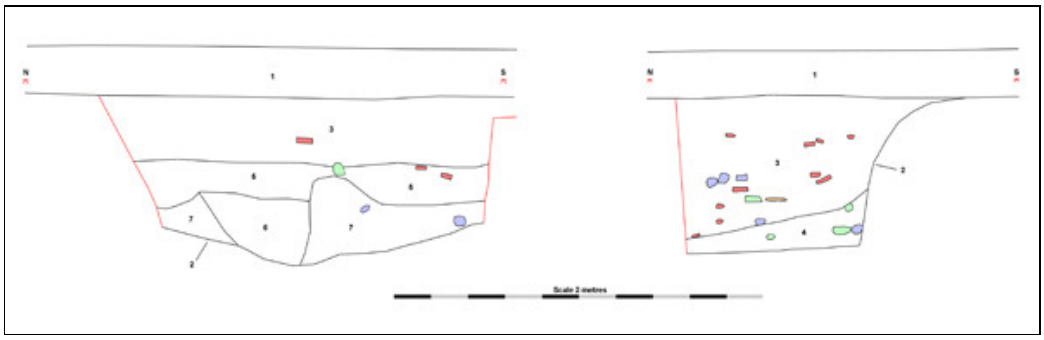

Figure 9 The north sides of the northern and southern sections in the large pit (2). Tile is shown in red, flint in blue and greensand in green.

Figure 10 On the left is the east side of the northern section showing the burnt layer (7), on the right is the north side of the southern section.

8. The quantity and un-abraded nature of the material filling this large pit suggests that it was dug at a time when significant parts of the remains of the Roman buildings on the site were still present. However it also demonstrates that these buildings were no longer in use and the material found in the pit may well be that not wanted as robbing of what was left took place. The original purpose of the pit is unclear, but it may have been dug in order to extract clay and/or flints, before being used as a rubbish dump. The presence of the tesserae, particularly the finer ones in black and white, suggests that a building of some quality existed on the site during the Roman period.

9. Five and a half metres to the west of this pit there was rubble filled trench (15 in fig.8) running roughly parallel to the excavation trench for 5.9m. The southern edge of this feature was visible within the excavation trench, approximately 0.35m in from the baulk. Within the clay soil (16 in fig.8) filling this trench there was much flint, with occasional tile and upper greensand. Frequent flecks of chalk (14 in fig.8) also occurred in patches along its length. Two short sections were excavated at either end which showed it to be only 0.15m deep, below the surface of clay-with-flints. While it is not possible to be certain about the identification of this feature, particularly since only a part of it was exposed, it would be consistent with the robbed out footing trench of a building.

Figure 11 The southern section excavated through the rubble-filled trench (15), looking north-east.

10. The only other features visible in the trench were two small post-holes (12 & 17 in fig.8), each 0.3m in diameter, and a spread of chalk and clay soil (9 in fig.8) which had been partially destroyed by the digging of the large pit (2 in fig.8)) at the north end of the excavation trench. None of these features was excavated.

The Restoration

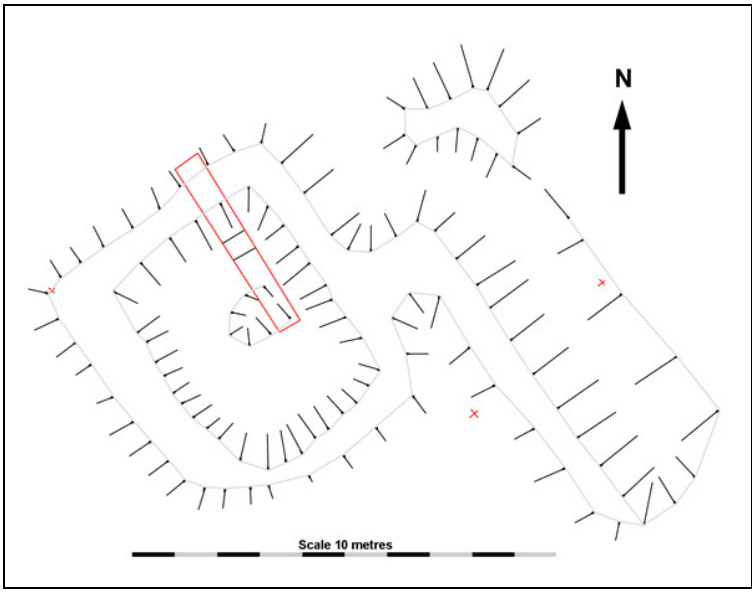

Figure 12 Plan of the earthworks created by the partial backfilling of Stevens' trench.

1. It had been noted in the walkover survey that the area of Stevens' 1936/7 trench was overgrown with scrub and brambles. As part of this project these were cut down and burnt. Once this had been done it was possible to draw up a plan of the Stevens trench and carry out a small excavation within it (Trench 3). Once the topsoil was removed from Trench 3 the usual clay-with-flints was exposed for its entire length except in one place where a band of clay soil (c.0.5m wide) containing much chalk rubble crossed it. This is probably the remains of one of the "sleeper walls" excavated by Stevens.

Figure 13 Trench 3, looking south, the chalk rubble footing lies just above the 1 metre scale.

2. The earthworks left by Stevens' activities indicate that he had excavated a section of the eastern ditch in addition to the trench shown on the published plan (see figs.3 & 12). It had been intended to level all of these earthworks, since they all relate to Stevens' excavations, but time do not allow for this.

SURVIVAL OF DEPOSITS

1. The result of the work undertaken for this project has been that the nature, extent and survival of the site at Stoner Hill are considerably better known; however there is much that could still be done. There is little doubt now that it was the site of a Roman villa and the presence of black and white tesserae indicate that it was not of the meanest type.

2. The overall layout of the site seems fairly clear now that the line of the eastern ditch has been confirmed. It is approximately a square enclosure, 90m metres across, defined by a bank with external ditch. On the northern side the ditch is absent, probably made unnecessary by drop in ground level at this point. It is likely that the whole enclosure was built up against an existing lynchet running east-west along the contours of the spur upon which the site lies. Traces of this lynchet are still to be seen running eastwards from the north-east corner of the enclosure. To the north of this lynchet lies a second smaller enclosure, as recorded by Williams-Freeman, the full extent of which to the west was not visible in 1915. The southern of these two enclosures seems to have contained the principal buildings of the villa.

3. The internal layout of the southern enclosure can be tentatively described: it seems likely on the basis of the work by Minty and Moray-Williams that a bath building lies in its north-west corner. This may be a stand alone structure, or part of a larger building. Other buildings seem to have existed on the eastern side of the enclosure, close to the eastern boundary ditch. Stevens found what he describes as a “barn building” in the north-east corner of the enclosure and Trench 2 of this project revealed evidence for the end of a building further to the south. It is possible that both these structures are part of the same complex extending down the eastern side of the site.

4. No clear evidence exists for the alleged eastwards expansion of the site suggested by Stevens, he believed that late Roman buildings had been constructed over the top of the backfilled eastern ditch. While this is possible, it should be viewed with caution until further evidence is recovered. There is certainly no evidence to support the case for the enclosure being extended as far as the depressions in the field to the east.

5. No clear dating of the site has been possible from the limited number of artefacts recovered, but the presence of a significant proportion of Samian ware pottery, from the first and second centuries AD, would suggest that site began relatively early in the Roman period.

6. It would appear from the condition of the foundation trenches revealed in these excavations that much of the site has been robbed. It would seem unlikely that anything has survived of the floor surfaces in any of the buildings, including any of the mosaics. However a ground plan of the buildings is probably recoverable since the bases of their footing

trenches, although shallow, seem to have evaded destruction by the plough to date. In addition, any deeper features, such as pits, post-holes or wells, should also have survived relatively undisturbed.

7. The next priority for any future work would be to undertake a resistivity survey of the site. This could clarify the internal layout without recourse to further excavation.

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