New evidence of a Romano-British settlement at Upper Wellingham, East Sussex

by David Millum

The results of a magnetometer survey in 2011 at a farm in the Upper Ouse Valley near Barcombe Mills, by David Staveley on behalf of the Culver Archaeological Project, has revealed evidence of an unknown Romano-British settlement and ditched enclosure. The geophysical images have been supplemented by finds from metal detecting, including a long sequence of Roman coins. This paper includes the geophysical survey images and a summary of the artefact data accumulated to date. It also seeks to interpret what this initial evidence might suggest, given the site's location and comparisons with the excavated roadside settlement at Westhawk Farm in Kent.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2011 the Culver Archaeological Project (CAP) gained permission to investigate several fields at Bridge Farm at Upper Wellingham, Nr Lewes (TQ 433144). As the topographical elements of the name imply, the farm is adjacent to the bridge at Barcombe Mills and, as indicated in the Old English *hamm* ending of Wellingham, is quite literally 'land in the river bend' (Dodgson 1978, 84) (Fig. 1). Document research had shown that a north–south Roman road in this location had been suggested by William Stukeley as early as the 18th century (Horsfield 1835, 38), and that Ivan Margary had undertaken a small excavation (Section 14) in the large field to the south of the farm buildings when investigating the location of the London to Lewes road. Margary (1948, 125, 162) records that he exposed a very compact flint surface 6.4m wide and approaching 400mm thick at a depth of 300mm and made 'from large lumps to small chips, mixed with gravel, and a very small amount of iron slag'. Roman pottery described as 1st or very early 2nd century overlaid the edges of the road, which led to a proposed construction date of around AD 100.

SOME UNEXPECTED RESULTS

CAP's investigations commenced with a magnetometer survey of this field by David Staveley to see whether this modern technology could accurately trace the route and prominent features of the road.

The initial results were so outstanding and unexpected that the survey area was extended, and over the next two years a clear picture emerged, not only of the road heading to the north, but also of the framework of a substantial Roman settlement adjacent to the River Ouse (Fig. 1). The settlement pattern is interrupted by what appeared to be a double-ditched enclosure, confirming that this was a site of more than one phase of activity. This enclosure appears to overlay and truncate the open settlement, but the chronology cannot be determined conclusively from the magnetometer images. Robert Wallace, the project's director, decided that this was a crucially important question that could only be resolved by targeted excavation. Progressive surveys revealed roads heading to the east, and possibly the west, with smaller trackways and boundary ditches in the areas surrounding the main settlement.

Further work undertaken by David Staveley for the Ringmer Roman Studies Group during 2012, just east of More Lane and south of Laughton Road at Ringmer (TQ 472123), produced strong evidence that the eastern road continued towards the Roman settlement at Arlington, and then on to Pevensey (Chuter 2008). With Barcombe Mills as the accepted eastern end of the Greensand Way, this puts the Bridge Farm settlement in a pivotal location at the junction of the road from London and the Wealden iron works with roads to Pevensey and Chichester, and on a navigable stretch of the River Ouse giving access to the coast. The potential importance of the site is further enhanced by its proximity to the

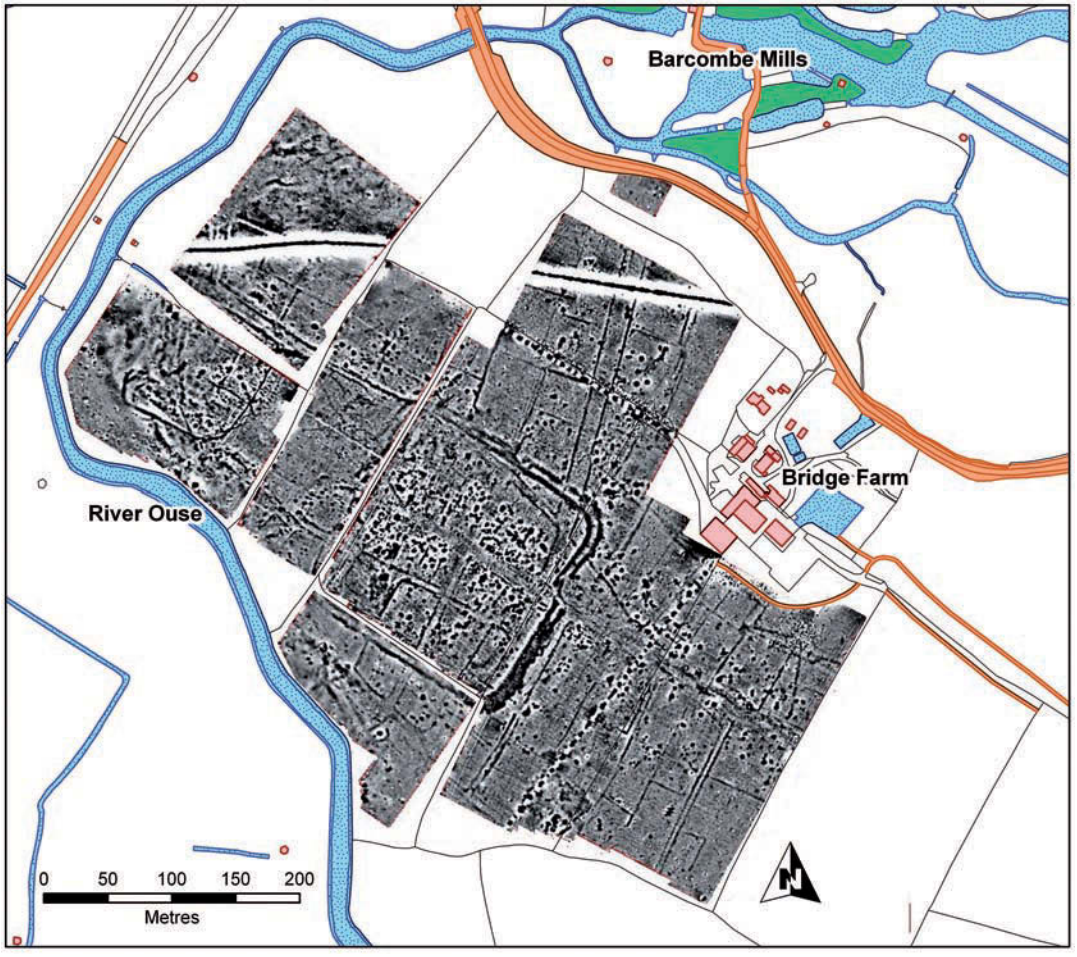

Fig. 1. Geophysical survey results (Staveley 2013).

Table 1. Summary of items collected from the 2011 field-walk (Millum 2012).

Material	No.	Weight (g)	Remarks
Pottery	800	5426	Mainly small abraded sherds of local Romano-British coarse wares with some black-slipped fine ware and amphora. Some later to modern sherds
CBM: tile/brick	555	10,611	Mainly post-medieval with only 23 pieces recognised as Roman tile by fabric and/or shape
Burnt flint	589	13,994	Distributed too evenly over the site to be diagnostic
Prehistoric flint: worked flakes cores	121 11	728 511	More prevalent in the northern half of the field; the largest numbers of flakes were generally found adjacent to cores. This assemblage appeared to be mainly of mesolithic character
Iron slag	128	4903	Mainly collected to the north of the main settlement, but concern over possible uneven collection of this material by the field walkers
Glass	5	505	Mainly post-medieval to modern
Animal bone	3	7	Too small a sample to be diagnostic, but probably modern
Clay pipe	5	12	Post-medieval stem pieces

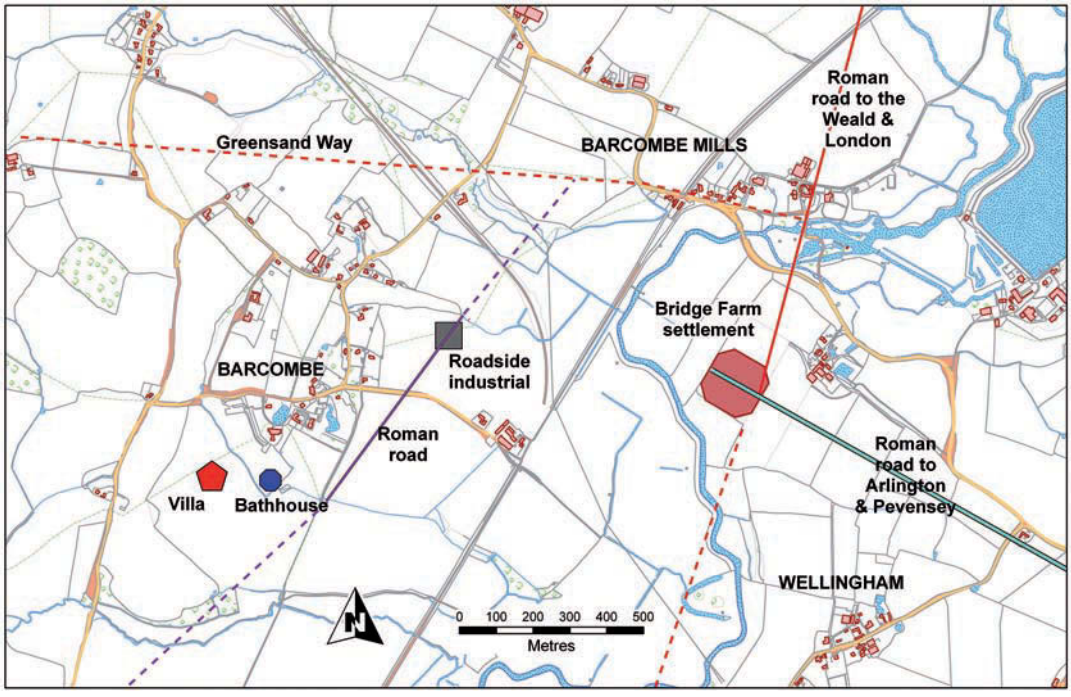

Fig. 2. Location of the settlement in relation to other Roman features (Rudling *et al*. 2010; Millum *et al*. 2013).

Barcombe villa complex and adjacent bathhouse, recently excavated by the University of Sussex and the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team, just over a kilometre to the west (Fig. 2). It is situated midway between the known Roman settlements of Hassocks and Arlington, approximately 13k west and east respectively, making it an ideal staging post for trade and travel across the district as well as from the Weald to the coast.

The interpretation of the buried features as Roman was supported by the pottery and tile collected by systematic transect field-walking in March 2011, when CAP volunteers were joined by members of the Brighton & Hove (BHAS) and Lewes (LAG) archaeological societies (Table 1).

AN EXTENSIVE COLLECTION OF COINS

In November 2012 Robin Hodgkinson, of the Independent Historical Research Group (IHRG), met a local metal detectorist who had collected metal objects from the site over several years. The collection, which was intact, proved to be quite extensive, and ratified the longevity of the settlement because it included a series of more than 50 probable Roman silver and bronze coins, with identifiable examples from the Republican era right through to the Emperor Gratian in the late 4th century AD (Fig. 3). While it is possible that the Republican coins, being well-worn, indicate use in the 1st or even 2nd century AD rather than when they were minted (David Rudling pers. comm.), the coin sequence still indicates a time span of around 300 years. The collection also extended the evidence of activity into the Saxon period, with artefacts including circular and axe-shaped mounts and, from just north of the site, a Merovingian tremissis, a rare gold coin, possibly from Neustria (northern France) and dating from the late 6th to 7th century AD (Dr John Naylor, National Finds Director for Medieval and Post-Medieval Coinage, pers. comm.) (Fig. 4).

The assemblage also included a number of biconical-shaped lead weights with the vestiges of the iron hooks by which they would have been suspended from a steelyard scales or *statera* (Fig. 5), eight brooch fragments of the small bow type

Fig. 3. A small selection of the detected silver coins: a] Titia 1 (Q. Titius) denarius, *c*.90 BC (18.8mm dia.); b] Aemilia 8 (M. Aemilius Scaurus and Pub. Plautius Hypsaeus) denarius, *c*.58 BC (16.4mm dia.); c] Galba denarius AD 68–9 (17.8mm dia.); d] Trajan denarius *c*.AD 114–7 (17.2mm dia.); e] Julia Maesa (died AD 225) denarius (19.8mm dia.); f] Gratian siliqua AD 375–8 (mint of Thessalonica) (18.4mm dia.).

Fig. 4. The Merovingian tremissis (11.4mm dia.).

Fig. 5. A 20g biconical steelyard weight.

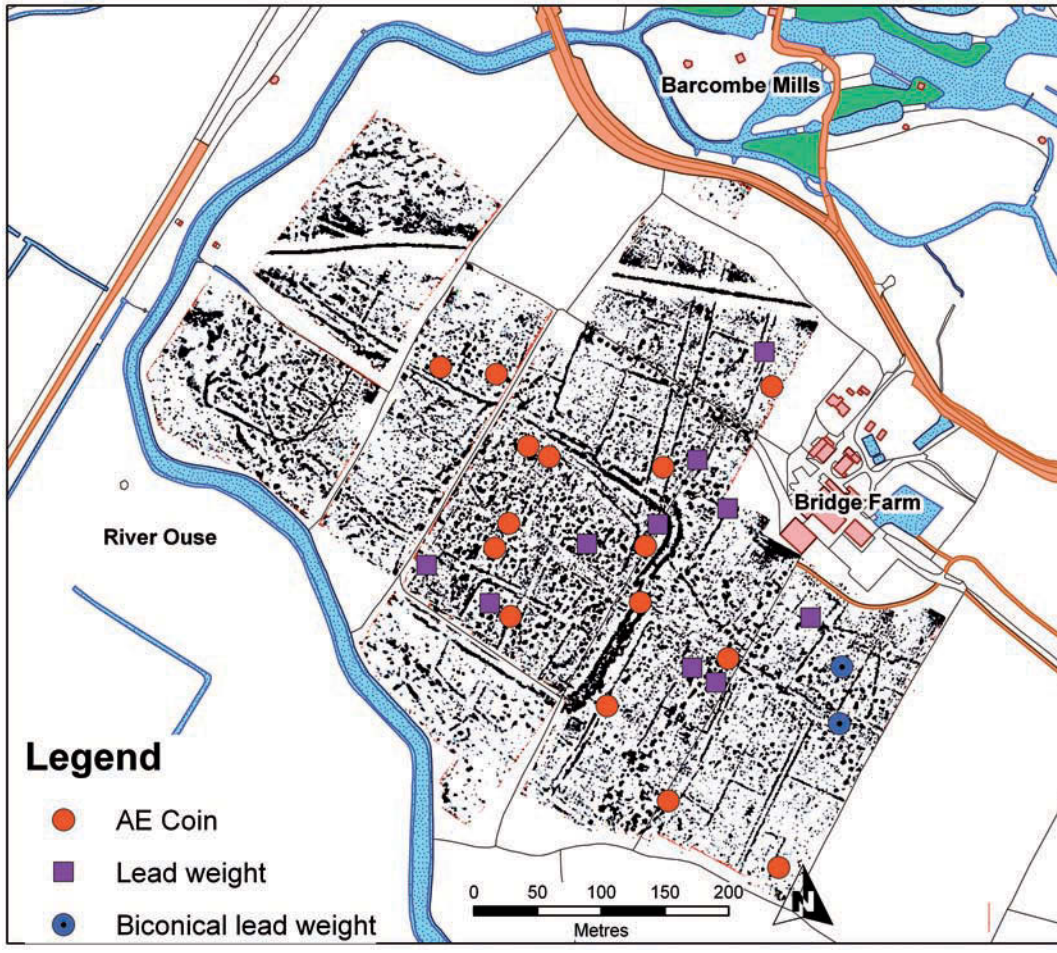

Fig. 6. Distribution of the Roman coins and lead weights collected in 2012.

usually associated with the early Romano-British period, and a Roman copper-alloy key-ring.

In early December 2012 CAP organised a thorough and systematic metal detecting survey of the site by the Eastbourne, West Kent and Ringmer groups, during which a further 17 Roman coins were found, the majority being over the main settlement area (Fig. 6). This was at variance with the finds detailed above, which were far more dispersed, many, including the Republican specimens, coming from the area to the SE of the enclosure. The artefact assemblage, comprising 237 iron, 248 lead and 203 other metal objects, is awaiting full analysis, but it included two more biconical lead weights as well as 11 others of various shapes (Fig. 6).

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE CURRENT EVIDENCE

The open nucleated settlement appears closely allied to the road heading to the north, which is shown by the image of two ditches 16m apart, the same distance observed between the boundary ditches of the Roman Greensand Way where excavated at Plumpton (Millum 2011). The northern alignment may result from the requirements of the intense, state-instigated period of iron production in the Weald. This would embrace a 1st to 2nd century AD origin for this phase, in line with Margary's dating for the road, and provide an explanation for the presence of the earliest coins and brooch fragments.

The outer enclosure ditches are approximately 185m long, enclosing an area of ground approaching 3ha; this compares with under 2ha for the *mansio* enclosure at Alfoldean and 3.6ha for the late 3rd-century walled fort at Pevensey. It appears to have its main access midway along the eastern side, in an oblique rather than the more usual square form of the early military forts and *mansiones*. The geophysical images do not show any clear access to the wide northern road, implying that when the enclosure was erected the main focus was east–west. This, if proven by excavation, could imply a date for the ditched structure later than the mid-3rd century, after the Wealden iron industry had started to decline and the importance of the Saxon shore fort of *Anderita* (Pevensey) had increased. It could also correlate with the decline of the nearby Barcombe villa and bathhouse complex, which from the current evidence available would seem to be either totally or partly disused by the mid 4th century. Early indications from the excavations of July 2013 suggest that the large enclosure ditches do cut the smaller roadside ditches of the open settlement supporting this hypothesis, which at this stage must still be regarded as but one of many possible scenarios.

MARKET VILLAGE TO DEFENDED ENCLAVE?

The longevity of occupation suggested by the coin data encourages comparisons with the settlement at Westhawk Farm, near Ashford, established on an important road junction from the Weald to Canterbury and Lympne just after the conquest, and showing coin evidence for activity to the mid-4th century (Booth *et al.* 2008). This complex, nucleated settlement, stretching over 15ha, has been categorised as a small town or market village, despite the rural character of some marginal areas. It consisted of timber buildings in both round and rectilinear forms located side by side throughout the period, but with the latter becoming slightly more prevalent during the 2nd century. A shrine set in a small rectangular enclosure in an open space was the only obvious public building discovered within the settlement, the cemetery being outside the north-west boundary. Evidence of iron working, in the form of both smelting and smithing, was found, although seemingly indicating local craft production rather than a major industrial site. A possibly significant similarity between the sites is the presence of lead, biconical, steelyard weights at both locations. The presence of such weights, together with the copper alloy bar of a steelyard scales at Westhawk, was taken as an urban characteristic of the settlement and indicates commercial and/or administrative activity (Booth *et al.* 2008, 154, 392). The economic emphasis of Westhawk was interpreted by Booth *et al.* (2008, xix) as based on agriculture and local market services, with a possible administrative role in the iron trade. Given the parallels in location and artefacts, it is tempting to predict a similar pattern for the Bridge Farm settlement. With some areas outside the enclosure still to be surveyed, the open settlement at Bridge Farm may well stretch over an area approaching that found at Westhawk, and a similar predominance of timber buildings might explain the modest amount of Roman tile collected in the field-walking survey in 2011 (Table 1).

The coin evidence from the Westhawk excavation has only 10 coins post-dating AD 235 out of the 237 collected, with only 1 Republican and a single 4th-century coin, although a slightly wider variation was collected by metal detecting over a larger area (Booth *et al.* 2008, 135). The coin evidence so far gained from Bridge Farm would seem to indicate that the settlement was in existence at least as early as Westhawk. A longer continuation of activity is possible, either despite or because of the changes to its form, and possibly its function, with the building of the ditched defences – defences which may have been necessitated by its proximity to a navigable river and the threat, real or perceived, of coastal raiding.

FUTURE FIELDWORK

While Westhawk, which was under imminent threat of a housing development, was the subject of a large, developer-funded, open-area excavation, the Wellingham site is in a rural location under mixed farmland, the main settlement area being subjected to an arable rotation. Investigation of the site will therefore be on a targeted basis which is likely to last over a number of years, as and when acquisition of funding allows and specific objectives demand. The possibility that the settlement might be constructed of mainly timber buildings may mean that larger open-area

excavation may need to be considered in future project designs.

An interesting result from Westhawk was the survey into how the various non-ferrous metal artefacts were collected, which showed that a significant majority of the heavier solid pieces were found by metal detecting in the plough soil, whereas the lighter finer and flatter pieces were discovered during excavation. This is particularly relevant with regard to the steelyard weights. Eight of the nine Westhawk examples were found from unstratified collection, which suggests that the assemblage of lead weights at Bridge Farm should not be taken as an indication that there are a lot more awaiting discovery during excavation. Encouragingly, the scarcity of light jewellery and cosmetic items in the unstratified finds does not signify a potential dearth of such items on the site, as these were found mainly in excavation at Westhawk (Booth *et al.* 2008, 158–9).

The Culver Archaeological Project has gained a substantial grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund that will enable a programme of surveys and excavations during 2013, with a strong focus on the involvement of the local community and village primary and secondary schools. The excavations, with the approval of the County Archaeologist, will target the intersection of the double-ditch enclosure with features from the open settlement, to aid understanding of the crucial question of archaeological sequence and to add to the general chronological and archaeological evidence of the site. The trenches are also located to show any difference in preservation of the archaeology between the grassed meadows and those fields used for arable production from at least the mid 18th century.

Whatever the results of the proposed excavations, it is evident that initial use of magnetometry, together with field-walking and metal detecting, has facilitated the discovery of a rare combination of an open settlement and a ditched enclosure that could potentially alter our understanding of Roman activity in the Upper Ouse Valley. It has also demonstrated the value and practicality of these techniques in gaining important data whilst covering large areas of ground in a relatively short time, producing results that can inform investigations, including excavation.

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David Staveley for the use of his magnetometer survey images and for his expertise and perseverance over many months in the field; David Cunningham for access to his artefact collection; David Rudling for identification and dating of the Roman coins; Robert Wallace for instigating the investigations at Bridge Farm and his wide knowledge of the archaeology of the area; Mark Stroude for allowing CAP access to his land; all the volunteers who make these projects possible.

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