

# ◆ An archaeological investigation of a Roman villa in the parish of Elsted with Treyford cum Didling, West Sussex

By Jonathan Dicks

*Casual finds of Romano-British pottery, tesserae and ceramic building material in a field near the village of Treyford were reported to the local archaeological society and led to a small-scale excavation of the site. The society opened three small trenches and were rewarded with the discovery of an unknown Romano-British rural villa site. Two of the trenches revealed the foundations of Romano-British structures, potentially a substantial bathhouse and a strip house, or barn.*

## INTRODUCTION

A change of agricultural regime from pasture to arable in a field in Treyford, West Sussex, known as Phylliss Wood Field, brought to light the presence of Romano-British pottery and building material, including combed flue tiles and red *tesserae*. This came to the attention of the Elsted Archaeological and Historical Society (EAHS) and during 2013 members performed a geophysical survey, both earth resistance and magnetometry, covering an area of 7,200 square metres at the western end of the field. The survey identified two areas that warranted further intrusive investigation and a limited excavation was undertaken by EAHS under the direction of Dr. Jonathan Dicks in May 2014. The aim of the excavation was to identify, define, date and interpret any archaeological features preserved below the current soil horizon. This report documents both the results of the excavation and a suggested approach to future archaeological investigations.

## LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND GEOLOGY

The site of the excavation centered on a north-facing slope at about 72m OD (SU 821184), just below the escarpment of the South Downs (Fig. 1a). The local bedrock geology is a band of West Melbury Marly Chalk Formation, part of the bottom of the Lower Chalk Formation, and consists of soft, pale-to medium-grey marly (clay-rich chalk), with thin, grey-to-brown limestone beds (British Geological Survey 1996; Hopson 2000, 9). This was covered by a thin layer of superficial deposits of grey, chalky

topsoil. The topsoil varied in depth across the site, being approximately 300mm thick at the southern and northern ends, but more than 0.6m thick in the centre. At the southern end of the site, close to the boundary with a copse, Rook Clift, and under the topsoil, was a layer of grey-green, fine, calcareous, silt loam with abundant small chalk inclusions of unknown depth, which has been interpreted as hill wash. A natural spring rises at the base of the north face of the South Downs, less than 200 metres to the west of the site, and the stream from the spring runs just to the north, creating a natural boundary.

The Iron Age hill fort of Beacon Hill is 850m to the south-west, Torberry is 3.5 km to the north-west and Butser 10 km to the west. The Roman road from Chichester (*Noviomagus Reginorum*) to Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*) (2.5 km to the east), the villas of Batten Hanger (3 km to the south), Chilgrove I and II (5 km to the south east) and Stroud (10 km to the west), testify to exploitation of this area in the Romano-British period.

## METHOD OF EXCAVATION

Three trenches, A, B and C, were opened (Fig. 1b). Trench A was 10m by 2m, trench B was 4m by 2m and trench C was 7m by 5m. Trenches A and B were at the southern end of the site, with trench A extending three metres into the wood. Trench C was roughly in the centre of the site, above a geophysical anomaly. All three trenches were dug by hand, with the topsoil removed by spade and shovel, while the remaining earth around the archaeology was removed using small hand trowels. All deposits, cuts and structures were recorded as single contexts;

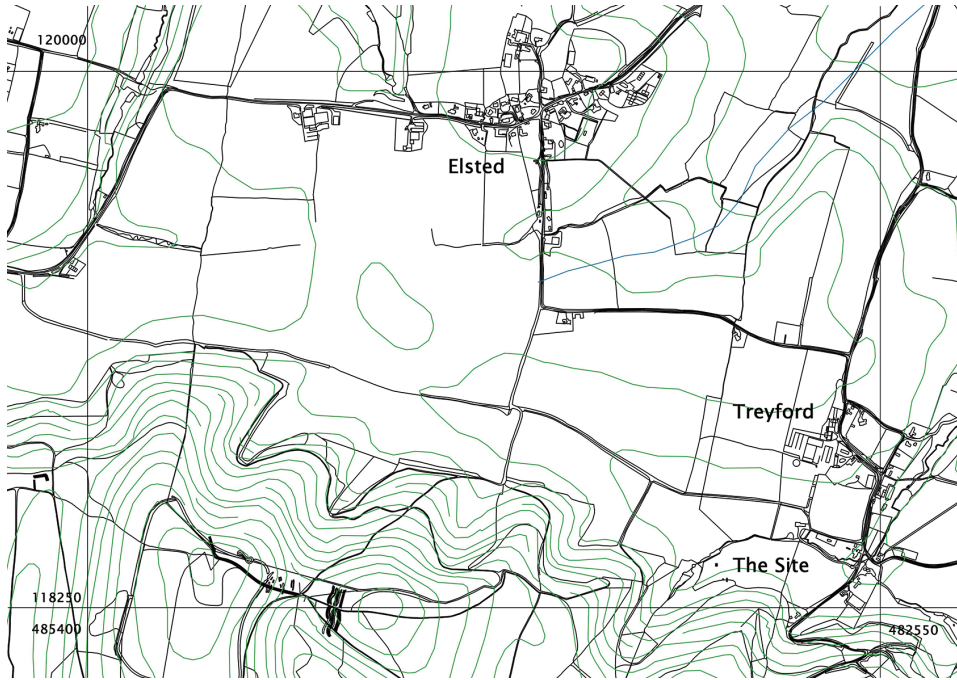


Fig. 1a. Site location.

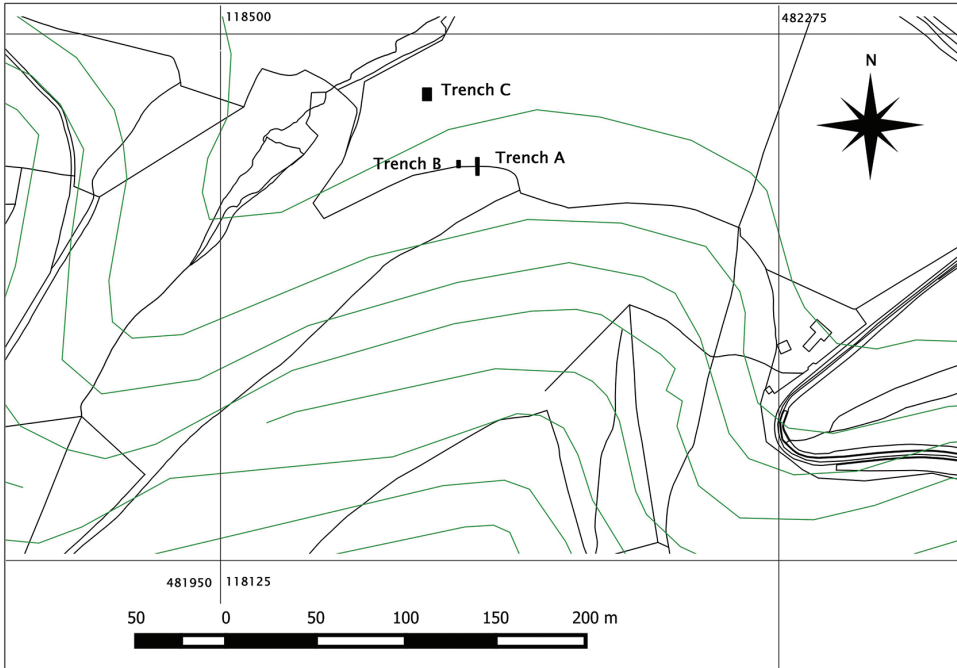


Fig. 1b. Site plan.

features were drawn at 1:20 scale for plans and 1:10 for sections, with levels recorded from a temporary bench mark (TBM) related to the Ordnance Datum established on the site. All finds were recorded by context and were appropriately cleaned, marked and bagged.

THE RESULTS

TRENCH A

Trench A was excavated to a depth of 0.6m without finding any *in situ* archaeology. There were, however, large amounts of Upper Greensand stone blocks and large flints which could have been used as building material and may have come from a demolished building. Additionally, there were numerous large ceramic tiles with several examples of the different standard sizes of Roman brick commonly used in hypocausts, but which could also have been used in ordinary walling.

The random nature of the tiles and stones did not suggest any form of structure and probably represents the dumping at the edge of the field of material collected by farmers over time (Fig. 2). The bank at the southern end of the trench, just in the wooded area and originally thought to be a wall, was possibly an old boundary.



Fig. 2. View of trench A looking south. Scale: 200mm; 300mm; 500mm; 2m.

TRENCH B

A substantial wall running east-west across the trench at a depth of 340mm below the top of the plough soil was discovered in trench B (Fig. 3). The wall [201] was 1.2m wide and at least 0.85m deep,

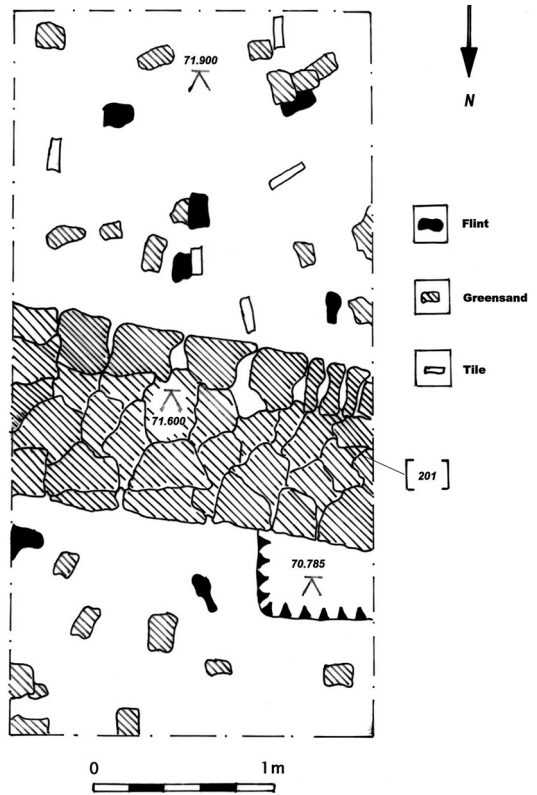


Fig. 3. Plan of trench B.



Fig. 4. Wall in trench B [201]. Scale: 400mm; 500mm.

but time did not allow for it to be fully excavated. It was constructed from large, roughly 280mm by 300mm square Upper Greensand mortared stone blocks and excavated to a depth of six courses (Fig. 4).

Again, as in trench A, there were ceramic flue and roof tiles, both *tegulae* and *imbrices*, as well as several large Horsham stone roofing tiles. The angle of the stone tiles, which were roughly hexagonal in shape, suggested that they may have slid from the roof of a building. There were several examples of *pedalis*, *bessalis* and *lydion* brick tiles in the rubble. Four shaped, Upper Greensand blocks recovered from the rubble were probably part of an arch or vaulted roof (Fig. 9).

Below the shallow, 200mm-thick topsoil, the subsoil was a fine, calcareous, silt loam, which extended down to the lowest level of the excavated wall and may well continue further down; it has been interpreted as hill wash from the north slope of the chalk downs above the site.

### TRENCH C

Trench C was the largest of the three trenches and measured 7m by 5m. The depth of the plough soil varied from 300mm at the northern end of the trench to 0.65m at the southern end, commensurate with the slope of the site. Removal of the plough soil revealed wall [307], running north-east-south-west, and two further walls, [304] and [311], running north-west-south-east. Wall [307] was cut by a ditch (310) running east-west across the trench (Fig. 5).

Wall [307] was 0.6m wide and set on a base of faced Upper Greensand blocks approximately

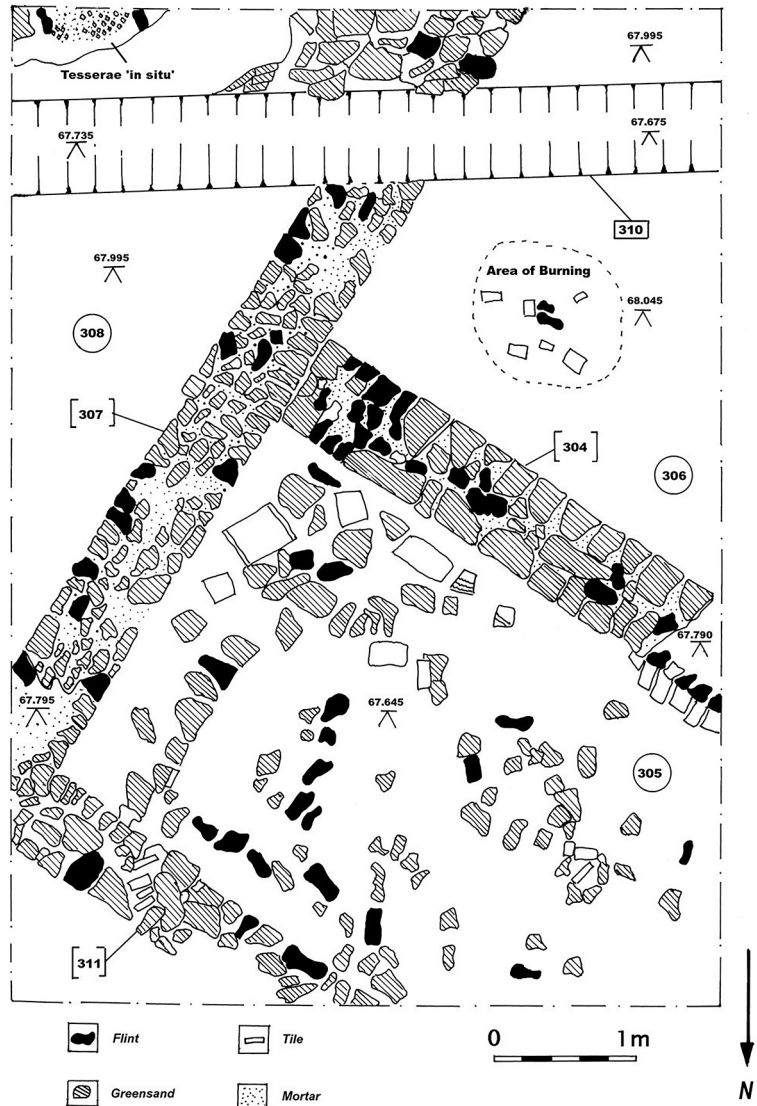


Fig. 5. Plan of trench C.

200mm to 250mm square and 80mm to 100mm thick, with one course of large flints approximately 100mm by 120mm by 80mm, set in loose friable material, probably decayed mortar. Wall [304], which abutted wall [307], was 0.65m wide, with only two courses remaining; a base constructed from squared Upper Greensand blocks 300mm by 200mm by 100mm thick, in-filled with flints set in mortar below large, faced flints, probably represented the bottom course of the wall. At the western end of the wall was

a layer of reused *tegulae* which probably represented the base of the threshold of a doorway. Wall [311], which was to the north of wall [304] but was only partially excavated, was similar in construction. It was possibly bonded to wall [307].

Wall [307] had been cut by a ditch running east-west across the trench. It was 0.95m wide and 0.75m deep (Fig. 6). The ditch fill (309) was dark brown, firm, silty clay, the upper part of which contained 18th- and 19th-century pottery. The 1840 Treyford tithe map (WSRO TDW129) shows that the site was in fact two fields separated by a boundary running east-west. The ditch found in trench C probably represents the field boundary between the two fields. This would explain the presence of post-medieval pottery and glass in the top fill.

The floor layers between the walls were not exposed, but the demolition rubble contained ceramic building material, both roof and flue tiles, as well as quantities of Greensand stone blocks, smaller chalk blocks and large, faced flints, in addition to

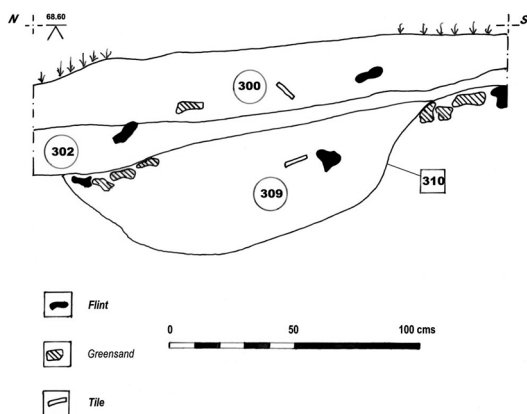


Fig. 6. Section of ditch 309/310.

more than 1,000 tile and stone *tesserae*. A small section of *tesserae*, possibly *in situ*, were exposed, and extended under the south baulk of the trench to the south of ditch (310) and east of wall [307].

## THE FINDS

Few dateable finds were recovered during the excavation, with most being found in unstratified contexts.

### THE POTTERY

Sixty-four sherds of Romano-British pottery were found, with an average sherd weight of less than 10g (Table 1). All were severely abraded, indicating that they had been the subject of continual disturbance over centuries and there was too small a sample to produce any meaningful statistical analysis. The greywares were either from the kilns at Rowlands Castle or Alice Holt, as would be expected. Four fineware sherds were recovered: two very abraded Central Gaulish sherds, dated to the second century AD, but too small to identify the vessel types, and a rim sherd from an M22 whiteware mortarium from the Oxfordshire kilns and the base of a jug or beaker from the New Forest, both dated to the second half of the third

Table 1. Summary of Romano-British pottery.

Ware	Number	Weight (g)	EVEs
Rowlands Castle	18	176	0.09
Alice Holt	16	200	0.31
CG Samian	2	9	
Miscellaneous	24	159	0.23
BB1	2	38	0.07
New Forest	1	18	
Oxfordshire	1	24	0.05
Total	64	624	0.75

century to the late fourth century AD. Two sherds from a black-burnished ware 1 (BB1) vessel were recovered from unstratified contexts. A single Late Iron Age sherd of pottery, found in an unstratified context, was the only evidence of pre-Roman occupation of the site.

### THE GLASS

Only four fragments of Roman glass were recovered: two small fragments of colourless vessel glass from context C300, probably dating from the 2nd–3rd century AD, and two fragments of pale green vessel glass from context C309, probably from a cup of the 4th century (Allen 1998, 48).

### THE METAL

Twenty square iron nails, possibly of Roman date, were recovered from trenches B and C. The majority were between five and seven centimetres long, but there were two large nails, each 10 centimetres long, that could have been used to secure tiles to the roof of a building. One was found in the demolition rubble of trench B (context 200) and the other in the demolition rubble in trench C (context 305).

### THE CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL

By far the most common Romano-British finds recovered were ceramic building materials (CBM). All major tile forms were present including *tegulae*, *imbrices*, box tiles and *pilae* (Table 2).

An almost complete *bipedalis* recovered from trench C (context 305) had been marked with the letters NVS prior to firing (Fig. 7). This may well have been the initials or name of the tile maker.

There were triangular hypocaust flue tiles present (Fig. 8). Similar tiles have been recorded at Chilgrove 1 (Down, 1979, 177).

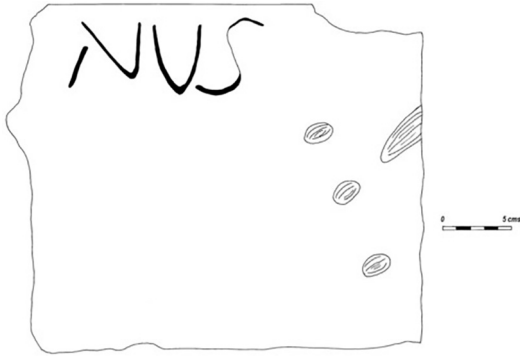


Fig. 7. Graffito on a bipedalis.

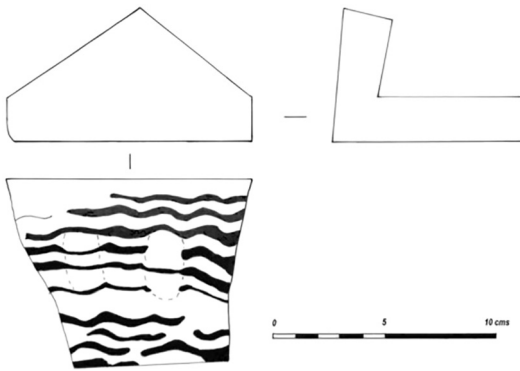


Fig. 8. Hypocaust flue tile vent.

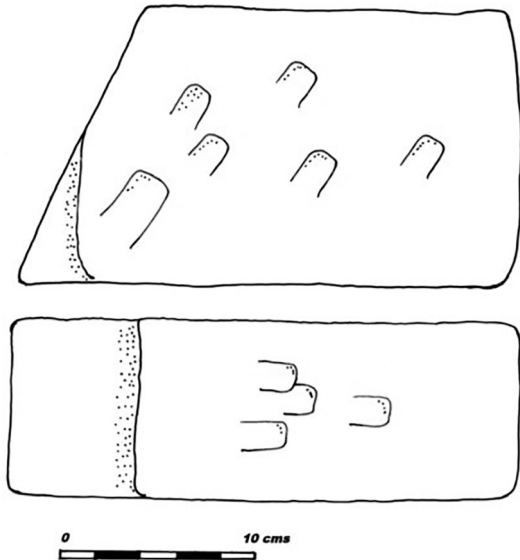


Fig. 9. Worked Greensand block.

### THE STONE BUILDING MATERIAL

The wall in trench B was constructed from blocks of malmstone (a local form of the Upper Greensand), a grey, fine-grained calcareous siltstone. Amongst the demolition rubble within the trench were many more malmstone blocks, as well as Horsham Stone roof tiles. Horsham Stone is a calcareous, flaggy sandstone (Birch 2006) and was used extensively during the Roman period in Sussex and Hampshire for roofing. Several of the malmstone blocks had been shaped and the chisel marks were still evident (Fig. 9). Their shape suggested that they may have been used to form an arch, or part of a barrel-vaulted roof.

The walls in trench C had a foundation layer of malmstone blocks with flints set in mortar as a core to the walls. There was only one course of dressed flints remaining on top of the malmstone foundations. Large quantities of dressed flints were recovered from the demolition rubble, so it would seem reasonable to assume that the walls would have been constructed from more dressed flints. The source of both malmstone blocks and flints would have been close to the site. The Upper Greensand malmstone outcrop lies to the north of the site, and large flints would have come from the chalk escarpment to the south of the site. The church at Elsted has both grey- and brown-weathered Upper Greensand malmstone; the village of South Harting is predominantly built of this stone.

### THE TESSERAE

More than 1,500 *tesserae* were recovered, all from trench C (Table 3). While this may seem a large number, it represents only an area of approximately one square metre. The large *tesserae*, both those made from tile and those made from Greensand, were approximately 29mm by 24mm square and probably came from a tessellated pavement. The smaller *tesserae* were approximately 15mm by 15mm square and may have come from a mosaic, or a pattern, within the tessellated pavement. Most of the cubes were recovered from either the topsoil or plough soil; none were found *in situ*. This would appear to indicate that some of the Roman floor levels have been destroyed by agricultural and plough activities over the centuries.

That trench C produced all the *tesserae* may suggest that the building at the northern end of the site contained at least one tessellated floor and a mosaic, but at this stage the theory is conjectural. The small *tesserae*, which might have come from a simple mosaic, were red, white or brown in colour. Simple geometric mosaics were popular during the late first and second century AD. There is an example of a geometric patterned mosaic constructed of red, white and brown *tesserae* in the corridor along the west side of the north wing at Fishbourne Roman Palace (Cunliffe 1971, Plate LXXXVII) dated to around AD 100–280, but at this stage it is uncertain if a similar one existed at Treyford.

Confirmation of a mosaic at Treyford, similar to the one at Fishbourne, indicates an extension of the influence of Roman cultural and social values into the local indigenous population. Mosaic pavements were designed as an important feature of a villa and can be seen as an expression of wealth. This would suggest that the owners of the villa at Treyford had sufficient disposable income to spend on such luxuries. Similar small mosaics, within much larger areas of tessellated floors, are suspected at several other Sussex villas, such as those at Beddingham and Barcombe (see Rudling 2003, 121; 2016, 87).

Table 2. Occurrence of ceramic building material by trench.

	Thickness mm	Decoration	Use	Trench B	Trench C
<b>Parietes</b>	44–55	Comb pattern	Bricks		
<b>Bipedales</b>	65–70	Diagonal pattern	Pilae capping	Y	Y
<b>Lydions</b>	40–46		Pilae capping	Y	Y
<b>Pedales</b>	32–40		Pilae capping	Y	Y
<b>Bessales</b>	30–40		Pilae stack		Y
<b>Box Flue</b>		Comb pattern	Hypocaust	Y	Y
<b>Tegulae</b>		Figure signature	Roof Tile	Y	Y
<b>Imbrices</b>			Roof Tile	Y	Y

Table 3. Numbers of different tesserae by context, size and material.

Context	Large Tile	Small Tile	Large Greensand	Small Greensand	Chalk	Total
<b>300</b>	882	9	69	2	32	994
<b>302</b>	158	6	65	7	13	249
<b>305</b>	11		5			16
<b>306</b>	18		54	3	8	83
<b>308</b>	4	1		1		6
<b>309</b>	233		66	2	5	306
<b>Total</b>	<b>1306</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>1654</b>

## SUMMARY

The substantial wall recorded in trench B could signify the presence of the remains of a large building. The shaped Upper Greensand blocks recovered from the demolition rubble suggest that at least part of the building contained an arch, or may even be part of a barrel-vaulted roof. The Horsham Stone also recovered would seem to indicate that at least part of the building had a stone-tiled roof. This would account for the need for substantial stone walls.

The walls in trench C would seem to represent the lower foundations of a hall house facing south-east, or simply an agricultural barn. While no post-holes or post-pads were uncovered, it is not impossible that the building was an aisled hall. Aisled barns in central southern Britain were being built from the late 2nd century AD until the late 4th century AD (Cunliffe 2008, 126) and varied considerably in size. Most, however, were modified over time, as and when required, to meet the demands of managing a rural estate. These

changes normally consisted of the subdivision of the aisled buildings into social and domestic spaces of both accommodation and bath suites as, for example, at Chilgrove 2, Building 2 (Down 1979), Stroud (Moray-Williams 1909) and Houghton Down (Cunliffe and Poole 2008), as well as at Sparsholt (Johnston and Dicks 2014). The building at Treyford was only partly exposed, but the abutment of the north-west–south-east walls to the main north-east–south-west wall would seem to suggest that the building had also been subdivided.

The recovered finds were too limited to accurately date the two structures, but the presence of both late first-century and fourth-century pottery would indicate that there was perhaps some activity on the site for a period of at least two hundred and fifty years.

While this investigation and excavation have been successful in identifying the presence of a Romano-British rural villa settlement on the site, there is clearly much more that has yet to be understood about the extent and true nature of the buildings. The excavation has, however, provided

a tantalising glimpse of what may exist on the site. The next phase of investigation should be a geophysical survey of the rest of the field, although it should be noted that the previous surveys have suffered from both the ground conditions and the similar nature of the archaeological remains to the local geology. Such a survey might provide evidence of other hidden archaeological features and structures associated with the walls and building.

The wall in trench B and the building in trench C were only partial exposed and the full extent of both is currently unknown. It is recommended that further archaeological excavations of both features should be undertaken to establish their full extent and function and hopefully recover enough datable material to establish the date range of the buildings and the settlement generally

### Acknowledgements

The Elsted Archaeological and Historical Society would like to express their gratitude to Didling Farms Limited for giving their permission to carry out this excavation on their land and for their continuing assistance. Thanks are due to Matthew Blyth, Flock Manager of Didling Farms, for his co-operation, encouragement and advice throughout both the planning and the execution of the archaeological investigation. Thanks are also due to Charlotte Elliott, of Natural England, who kindly agreed to a limited excavation within the wooded area (an area of SSSI) to the south of the site.

EAHS also wishes to thank James Kenny, Chichester District Archaeologist, for his support and encouragement, English Heritage for the use of surveying instruments, Andy Payne for his assistance, and David Bone who kindly identified some of the building stone.

Several society members need a particular mention for their contribution to the success of the excavation: Heather Coulson for the photography, Jeremy Heritage for cataloguing the finds, and the 24 members involved in the excavation. The finds and site archive will be deposited with the landowner.

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