



An archaeological watching brief at Sywell Aerodrome runway, Northamptonshire

by

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with contributions by

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SUMMARY

Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching brief during the removal of topsoil prior to the infilling of land to the west of runway 5/31 at Sywell Aerodrome, Sywell, Northamptonshire. For the most part, any archaeological remains would have been sealed beneath subsoil and therefore not visible during the present work. However, in small areas where the subsoil was shallow a number of features were exposed, including a Roman oven with a pitched stone surface, a ditch and two pits. A small assemblage of 1st to 2nd-century Roman pottery was recovered from the oven and ditch. A small number of residual worked flints and a few sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the subsoil.

INTRODUCTION

Northamptonshire Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief on land to the west of Runway 5/31 at Sywell Aerodrome, Sywell, Northamptonshire, between September and October 2007 (SP 8240 6875; Fig 1). The work was undertaken in order to meet the archaeological conditions attached to the planning consent to level land within an area of 7.45 hectares. The work met the requirements of a Project Design (Tingle 2007) in accordance with a brief issued by Northamptonshire County Council.

The project was managed by Steve Parry and was supervised by Anne Foard-Colby with help from Mark Patenall. Thanks also to Jacqueline Harding and Richard Watts for the illustrations, and to the various specialists who have contributed to the report.

BACKGROUND

Sywell aerodrome lies 4km to the north-east of Northampton and directly to the north of the village of Sywell (Fig 1), between 124m and 127m above Ordnance Datum. It is situated close to the junction of three natural strata comprising: Northampton Sand with Ironstone; Lower Estuarine Series Pale Sand and Sandstone; and Boulder Clay (BGS 1980).

Aerial photographs taken in the vicinity of the site have revealed linear and circular cropmarks suggesting extensive Iron Age and Roman settlement on ridges

located between tributary streams which flow south into the River Nene. Excavations carried out in 1996 to the south of the present development found Iron Age occupation, which appeared to form part of one such line of settlements on high ground overlooking the Billing Brook (Atkins *et al* 2001). However, archaeological evaluation in 2000 failed to identify previously observed cropmarks situated on the edge of the present development and the observation of topsoil stripping at the end of runway 03 during 2006 recovered only residual worked flint (Tingle 2007).

The aim of the present works was to identify any evidence for the survival of archaeological features within the development area and to record and characterise any such remains. The watching brief took the form of intensive monitoring of topsoil stripping across the route of the haul road and the large area for levelling (Figs 2, 3 and 4). Excavation was undertaken by a bulldozer with blade, a 360° mechanical excavator with toothless ditching bucket and two dumper trucks. A walkover survey of the stripped areas was undertaken to identify any archaeological features. A general site plan was drawn at a scale of 1:50, with more complex features planned at a scale of 1:20. Sections were excavated through a ditch and a pit to determine their character and date.

EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

The natural substrate was only observed within the section of a Roman ditch, and occasionally elsewhere across the site where the blade of the mechanical excavator had pulled back the subsoil during particularly wet weather. It consisted of light grey-brown, silty clay with chalk and gravel inclusions and was 0.35m – 0.52m below the surface of the field. A number of features, including an oven, a pitched-stone surface and part of a ditch, all situated in close proximity to each other, were partly exposed. A stone-edged feature and an isolated small pit were also revealed (Fig 2). The oven and pitched-stone surface were hand cleaned, but they were not sectioned so they could be reburied intact.

OVEN

The oven, 109, was aligned north-east to south-west and cut the natural substrate (Figs 3, 5 and 6). A foundation trench measured 4.2m long by 2.2m wide, and set within



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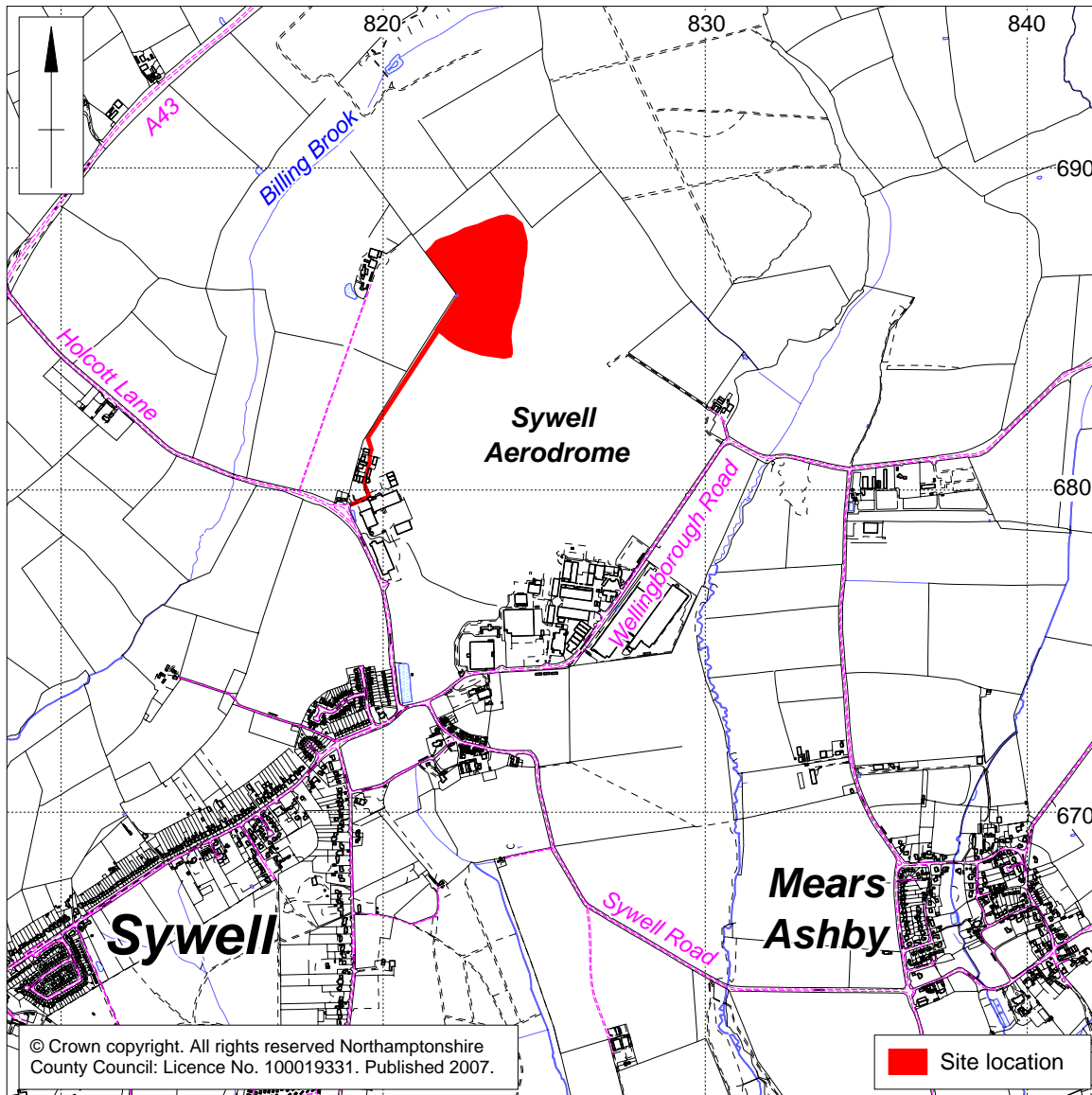
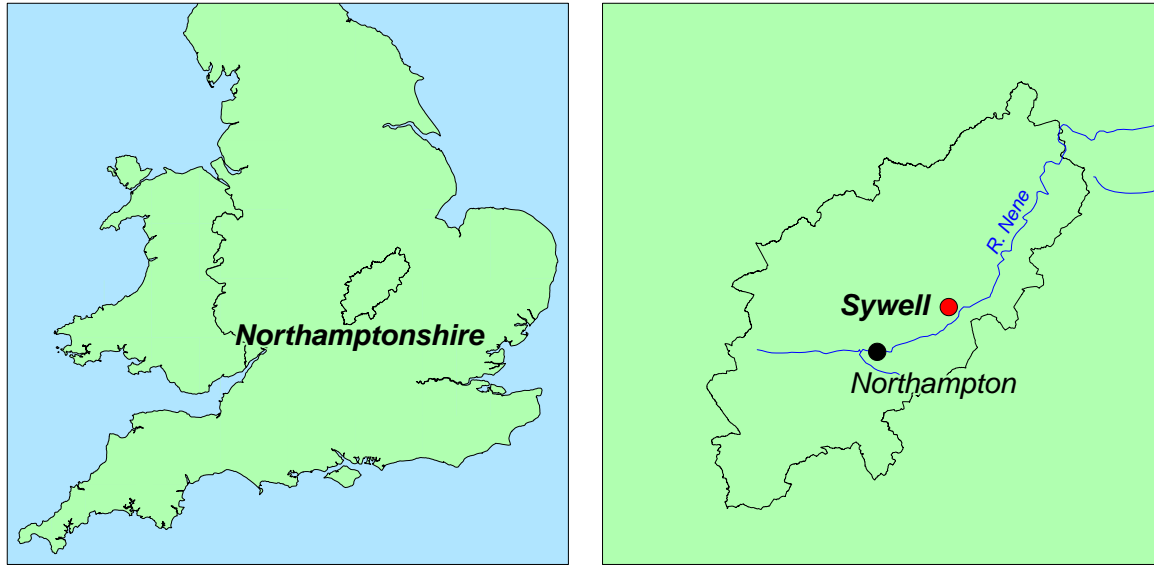


Fig 1 Site location



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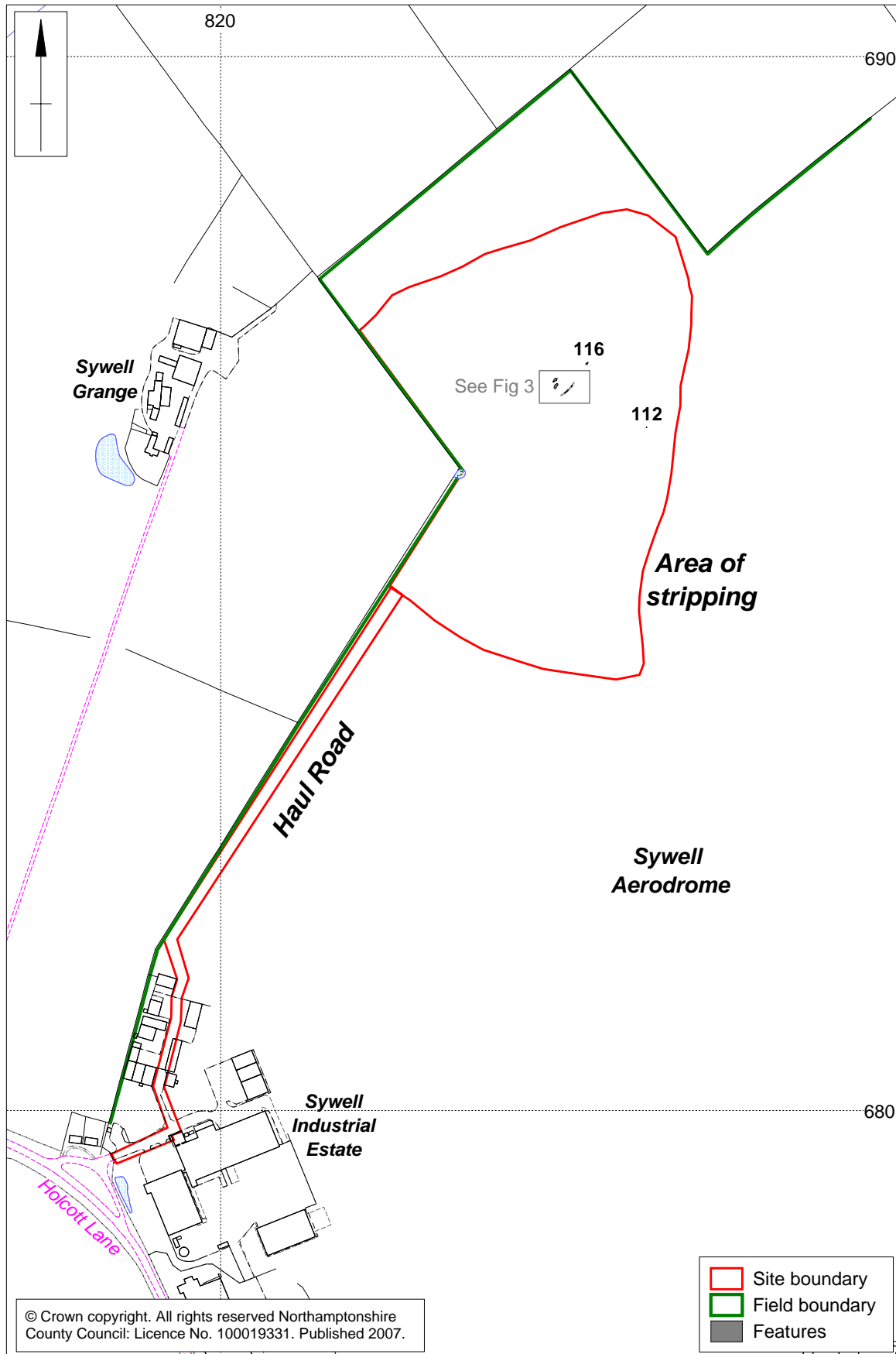


Fig 2 Area of site stripping and haul road



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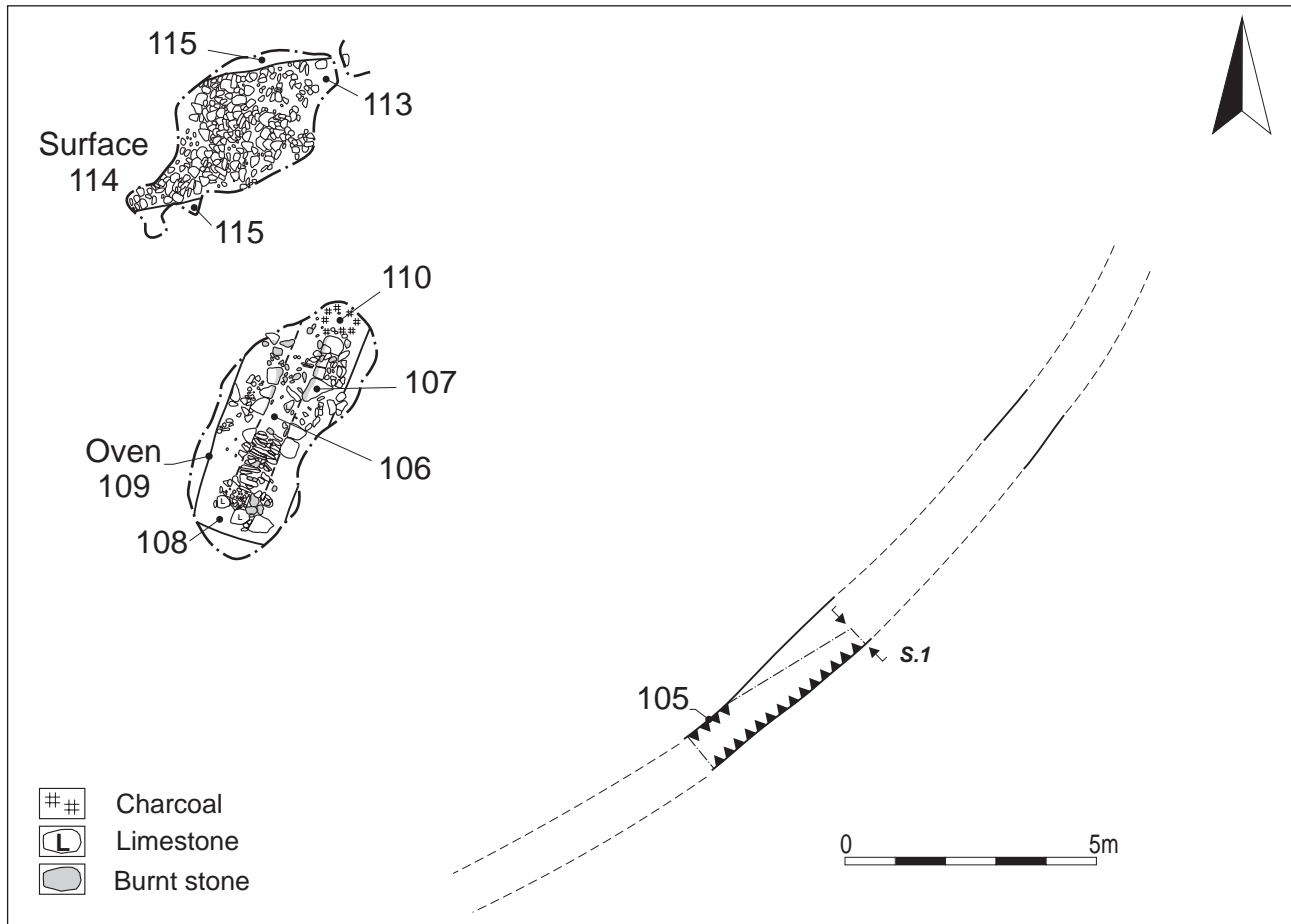


Fig 3 General plan of exposed features



Fig 4 View of the site during topsoil stripping, looking north-east

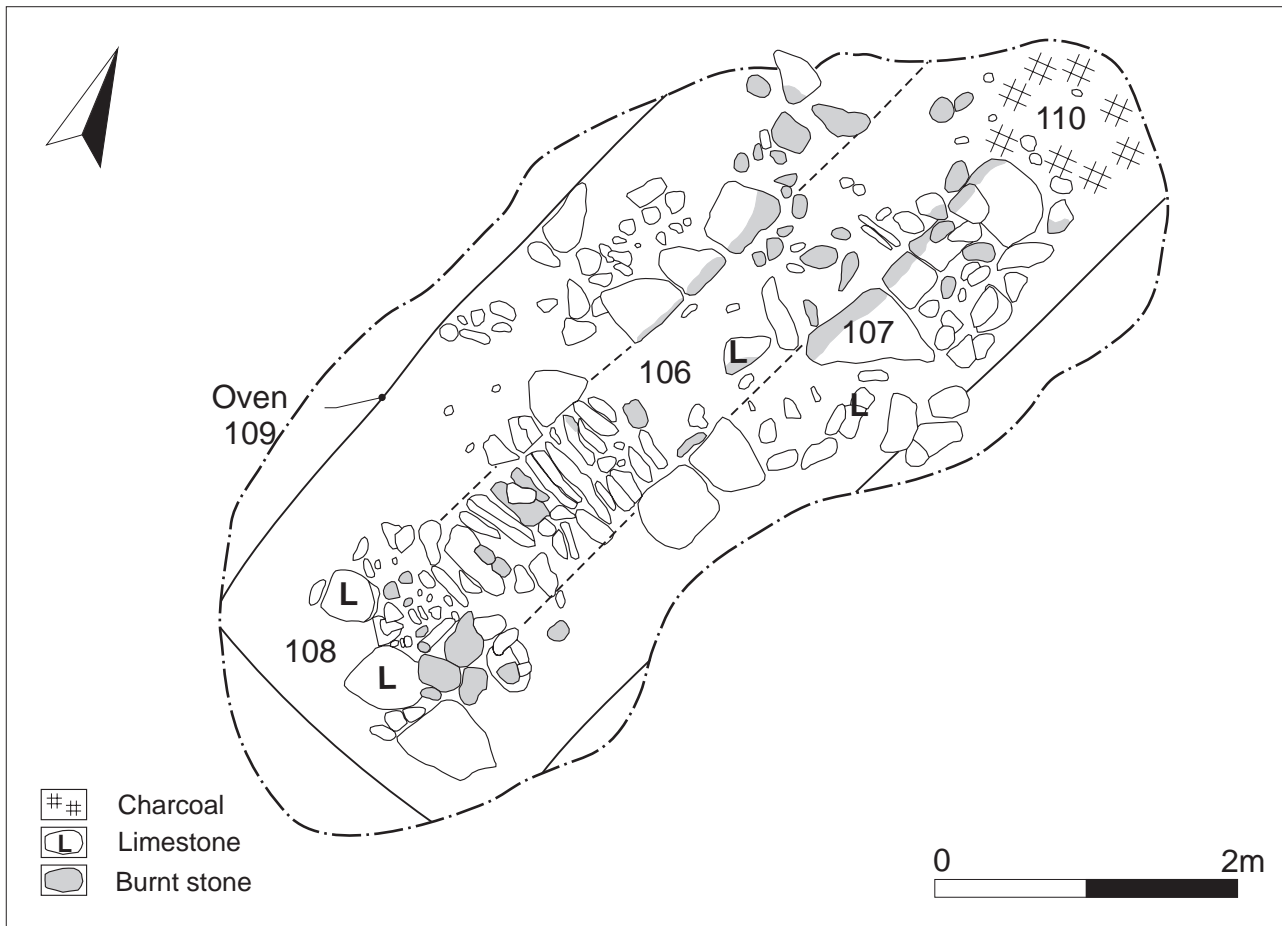


Fig 5 Plan of oven, 109

it was the stone structure of an oven, which consisted of rough hewn ironstone and occasional limestone blocks, laid as two parallel walls, 107, creating a chamber 0.6m wide. Due to heavy truncation by ploughing, the walls only survived to one course in height. The stones in the base of the chamber, 106, were pitched, and some of them were burnt red and obviously re-used; patches of a second layer of stones, lain flat on top of the pitched stones was evident, some of which were also burnt red. Those stones in the half of the chamber closest to the stokehole (north-east end) were burnt red on the inside face. At the south-west end, a short end wall closed the chamber. Light grey silty clay with small chalk and gravel inclusions was used to bond the structure of the oven.

At the north-east end of the oven was the stokehole, outside of which was a patch of grey clay which contained charcoal flecks and small lumps, 110, which was most likely the area where the ashes and charcoal were raked from the stokehole during cleaning. It measured 1.1m wide and 0.7m long, but was not fully exposed. The chamber fill was observed for a length of 1.5m at the north-east end. It was 0.03m thick and consisted of dark grey-brown silty clay with frequent small chalk pebbles, moderate gravel and charcoal, and contained a sherd of Roman pottery and a residual flint flake.

PITCHED STONE SURFACE

Three metres to the north of the oven was a pitched-stone surface, 114, which consisted of rough hewn ironstone, approximately 0.3m by 0.3m in size. These were laid at a forty-five degree angle over an area 2.3m wide and more than 5m long, with the western edge too deep under the subsoil to establish a limit (Fig 3). The stones appeared to have been set into a layer of dark grey brown silty clay with some small gravel and chalk inclusions, charcoal lumps and flecks, 115. Overlying the surface were patches of mid grey, silty clay with charcoal lumps and flecks, 113.

OTHER FEATURES

A ditch, 105, lay 5m to the south of the oven on a curving east-west alignment. It was U-shaped in profile, 0.87m wide and 0.30m deep (Fig 3). The fill consisted of firm, dark blue-black silty clay with gravel and chalk pebbles and very frequent charcoal lumps. Roman pottery sherds and charred cereal grains were recovered from the dark, rich fill, which may have come from cleaning out the stokehole of the oven.

A rough crescent-shape of undressed ironstone fragments in two courses, measuring 1.5m in diameter



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Fig 6 The oven, 109, showing reused and *in situ* burnt stones (top), looking north-east

by 0.25m–0.30m high (Fig 2, 116), lay to the north-east of the pitched-stone surface. It may be the truncated remains of a small circular stone structure. A small isolated pit, 0.7m in diameter by 0.2m deep, lay 90m to the south-east (Fig 2, 112). Residual Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery sherds, together with a few flint flakes, were recovered from the subsoil, which sealed all the features and was 0.10m - 0.12m thick. The topsoil was 0.25m – 0.40m thick.

THE POTTERY *by Tora Hylton*

The watching brief produced a small group of pottery dating from the Roman, medieval and post-medieval periods. A total of 77 sherds with a combined weight of 0.97kg was recovered from five individual deposits.

The assemblage is dominated by Roman pottery (93% by weight) dating from the mid-late 1st to 2nd centuries. Fifty-eight sherds of Roman pottery were located in stratified deposits; the majority (53) from the fill of the ditch, 105, while much smaller abraded groups were associated with the oven fill and the layer which partially covered the stone surface. With the exception of one sherd of Samian, the entire assemblage comprises locally

manufactured domestic wares in coarseware fabrics. Hard-fired grog-tempered wares are dominant and diagnostic forms include channel rim jars and a necked jar with everted rim. There are few diagnostic forms in the other fabrics represented; those worthy of note include a shell-gritted jar with lid-seating and a necked jar in a sand-tempered fabric. There are no diagnostic sherds of greyware. Imported wares are represented by one sherd of Samian recovered from the subsoil. The sherd is highly abraded and much of the exterior slip is lost, it comes from a Dragendorf Type 32 dish with curving sides and a footring. This form dates to the late 2nd century (Webster 1996, 44).

There are three sherds of medieval pottery dating to the 14th/15th centuries and five sherds of post-medieval pottery dating to the 19th and 20th centuries, all display signs of abrasion and were recovered from subsoil deposits.

CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL *by Pat Chapman*

There are five tile sherds weighing 748g. One from the fill of the stokehole of the oven and four others came from the subsoil. The sherd from the stokehole end of



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the oven is a fragment of Roman *imbrex* roof tile, 18mm thick. The sherds from the subsoil are probably medieval in date, although a fragment of a possible decorative wall tile is most likely post-medieval.

There were also 42 fragments of fired clay in the fill of the ditch.

THE CHARRED PLANT REMAINS *by Karen Deighton*

The fill of the ditch, 105, produced some 54 cereal grains. The cereal types noted (spelt (*T.spelta*), hulled barley (*H.vulgare*), oat (*Avena* sp) are those expected for this period, although the small quantity precludes any assessment of evidence for crop ratios. The scarcity of chaff could suggest the earlier stages of crop processing (eg threshing and winnowing) were taking place elsewhere, with grain brought to the site for storage, consumption or further preparation related to either of these. However, this statement is tentative due to the small amount of data. Only seeds belonging to the dock family (*Rumex* sp) could be identified to taxon for the wild taxa present. Members of this family are often weeds of cultivation or of other disturbed ground. The proximity of the samples to an oven would suggest an activity associated with it.

DISCUSSION

An oven, a pitched-stone surface, a short length of ditch, a stone-edged feature and an isolated pit were revealed during the topsoil stripping for levelling. The oven and ditch both produced Roman pottery from the mid to late 1st – 2nd centuries. The stone surface may have provided

a dry working surface adjacent to the oven or perhaps was the base of a small shed. The purpose of the oven is uncertain as only part of it survives, but was clearly a low temperature drying oven of the type used to dry or malt grain.

These features were clustered towards the centre of the present field and it is likely that further settlement remains are preserved below the subsoil. If so, this settlement may be part of a farmstead that extends the series of Iron Age and Roman occupation previously noted further to the north.

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