

# From Hillfort to Mansion: Excavations at Fineshade Abbey

by

GILL JOHNSTON AND BURL BELLAMY

with contributions by  
Paul Blinkhorn and Adrian Challands

## Summary

*A small promontory of land in East Northamptonshire has been shown to have dominated the surrounding landscape and its occupants for at least two and a half thousand years. Following a survey of the landscape of the Priory of Fineshade and the adjacent Castle Hymel, resistivity surveys were undertaken in 2004. As a result of these surveys three evaluation trenches were excavated to the north in the area of the priory inner court and three within the castle bailey to the south. Within the inner court the geophysical and excavation results reinforced previous findings of work carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology in response to a planning application in 1992. These concluded that this area of the site had been extensively disturbed by the former presence of the 18th-century mansion and its gardens, together with the levelling of the site after its demolition in 1956. However, excavations in 2007 have shown that the considerable build up of soil on the downslope side of the site may have afforded greater protection of any remains of the priory.*

*The castle ringwork and bailey has seen much degradation over the centuries, perhaps in the period of the priory and certainly in the post-Dissolution period by the removal of part of the ringwork to create a vista for the later house and also the levelling of part of the interior for the construction of the stable block of 1884. A trench across a remaining section of the bank to investigate its construction exposed the remains of a lime kiln of Roman type. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal from the front of the kiln produced a date of AD 125–225. Previous excavations of the site have provided widespread evidence of Roman occupation of the area within and around the castle. The discovery of a lime kiln, set into the bank, has shown that the Roman building and the later Norman castle sited here were taking advantage of an already existing earthwork dating to the early Iron Age.*

## Introduction

The site of Fineshade priory and Castle Hymel, Northamptonshire lies at the northern end of the county, 12km south-west of Stamford (NGR SP 973 976: Fig 1). The former extra-parochial district of Fineshade is now integrated with Duddington. Fineshade Abbey became a

Scheduled Monument in 1962, and the scheduling was amended in 1993. The castle ringwork and bailey has seen much degradation over the centuries, perhaps in the period of the priory and certainly in the post-Dissolution period when part of the ringwork was removed to create a vista for the later house, and the levelling of part of the interior for the construction of the stable block of 1884.

Previous excavations at the site, which have provided widespread evidence of Roman occupation of the area within and around the castle, and for Saxon iron smelting in the early-middle Saxon period, are summarised below. Resistivity surveys of the castle's inner and outer baileys were undertaken in 2004, with the aim of locating the remains of the priory buildings. A palimpsest of features was revealed, particularly on the southern side. Subsequently, in September and October 2007, six trenches were excavated by the authors to investigate features revealed by the surveys, permission being granted by English Heritage.

## Location and geology

The Priory lies 0.35km to the east of the A43 road on the other side of the northward flowing Fineshade Brook. From here the land rises steeply toward an area of medieval woodland which, in the past, partly encircled the site. From close to the stream the castle embankment rises by 5m to the bailey platform at 60m OD, from whence the ground continues to rise steeply to the rear.

Lower Lincolnshire Limestone occurs predominantly along the western side of the valley with Rutland Formation and Blisworth Limestone occurring along the lower slopes to the east. This geology is rarely exposed at the site due to the build up of the ground levels. On the steeply sloping hillside to the rear of the castle bailey, previous trenches have exposed Blisworth clays.

## Background

In the 12th century the Engaynes built Castle Hymel on the site, this was replaced early in the reign of King John by an Augustinian priory, first called the Priory of St. Mary, Castle Hymel and later Fineshade Abbey. The priory was granted land around the site and Fineshade became an extra-parochial district (RCHME 1984).

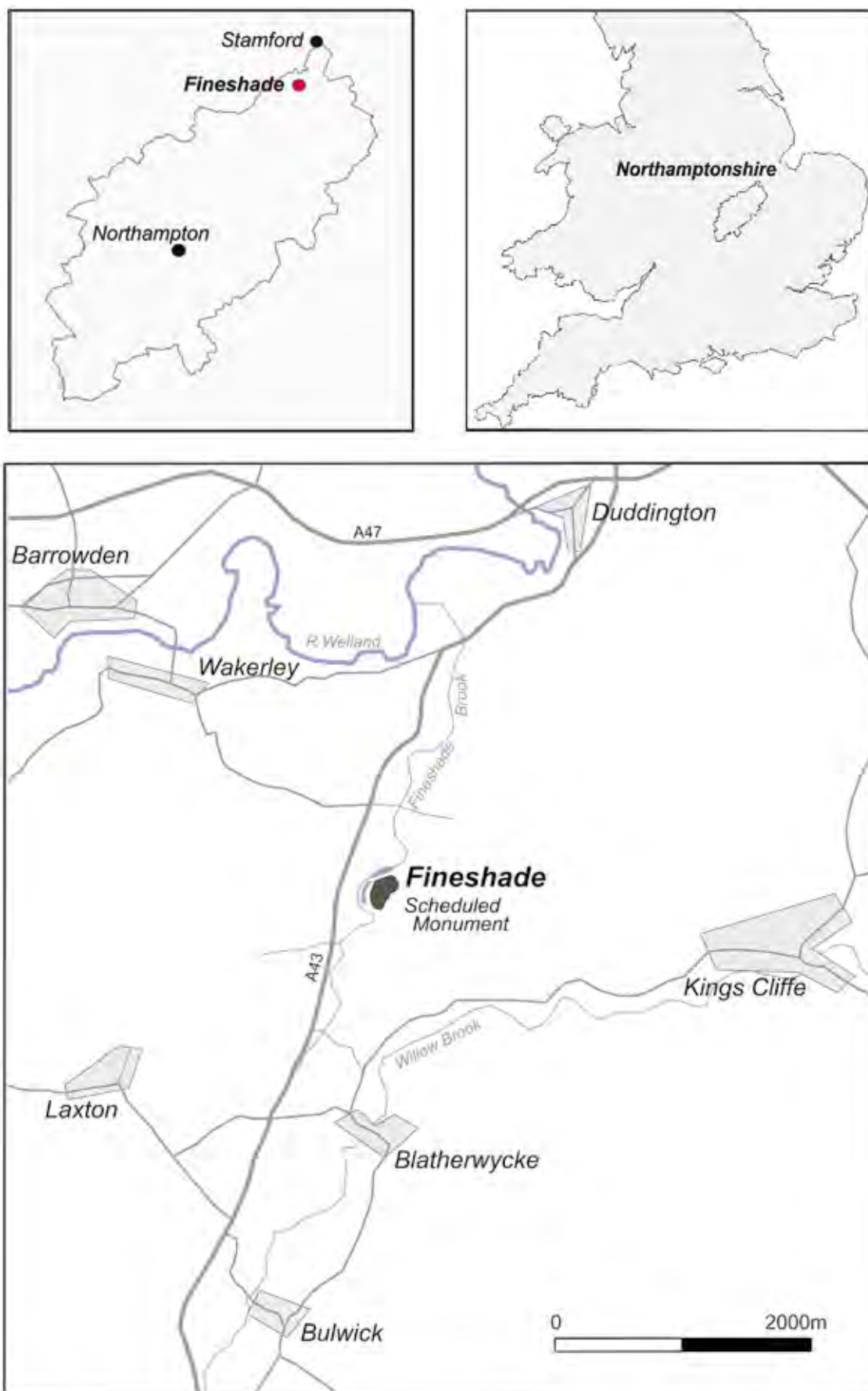


Fig 1 Site location



Fig 2 Aerial photograph of Fineshade Abbey in 2002 (NMR 21594/19)

At the Dissolution of the monasteries the priory became the property of John, Lord Russell and four years later was bought by Sir Robert Kirkham, Knight, who lived in a house constructed in the conventual buildings. There is a description in Bridges (1791) and a drawing by Tilleman of this building *c* 1721 (BL ADD. Ms 32467 f103).

In 1749 ownership went to William King who demolished the priory building and built a new house adjacent to the old one; this was extended in the mid-18th century when the property was acquired by the Monckton family who made it into a fine country mansion. In its final stage of life this building was acquired for use as the offices of the Corby Development Corporation. It was largely demolished with three explosions in 1956 when only the southern kitchen and laundry bays were left standing; now only the laundry remains. The stables, built in 1884 to the south-west of the house survive and have been converted into a house.

The only early map showing the site is an undated, but most likely Elizabethan map of the parish of Fineshade

(TNA: PRO MR1/398), possibly drawn for Sir Robert Kirkham. This map shows a walled enclosure divided into two parts, the northern half containing the country house, the southern part containing four small buildings around the perimeter, presumably inside the castle ramparts. Another building, which is probably a gatehouse, gives access between the two enclosures. It would seem that the rampart, which Bridges identified as the castle, does not relate to the Tudor map, but lay at that time within Burrow Close. Other earthworks to the north-east, around the 18th-century house, do seem to correspond to the enclosures shown on the map.

Work in 2001 has shown that the Fineshade valley, with its abundance of wood and ironstone, has been an important focus for iron smelting since the Roman period with radiocarbon providing dateable evidence for smelting throughout the Saxon period and into the 13th century (Bellamy, Jackson and Johnston 2001).

In the Roman period an industrial scale bloomery and associated settlement existed, 0.5km to the south-west in

Laxton parish at SP968971 (Jackson & Tylecote in 1988). Medieval ironworking a quarter of a mile to the north-east at SP974978 and to the south-west at SP972974 are mentioned by Bridges, the latter may be the site of the ironworks mentioned in the foundation charter of the Abbey, lying just outside the property described in the Tudor map. This almost certainly represents the land granted to the Abbey and hence corresponds to the charter description of the grant of all the land below, i.e. downstream from, the ironworks. The mill shown on the map may be the site of Forge Mill at SP974978, or perhaps Bridges' or Morton's own interpretation, with water provided by a pond which was the predecessor of the ornamental lake situated north of the 18th-century house. Large amounts of iron slag lie on the north edge of the stream at this point and probably relate to the Saxon smelting discovered close by in the old kitchen garden (Mudd 2005 & 2006).

The platform on which the site is situated has been terraced into the hillside and is divided into two areas, the southern half of which appears to have housed the castle; the other to the north, possibly the outer bailey of the castle, was the site of the priory and ultimately the 18th-century mansion.

In the southern half, to the west and south, a bank or rampart forms the edge of the platform, the ground below this dropping steeply to the stream. In the recent past there

has been a farm entrance at the southern end where there is a gap in the rampart with what might be the remains of a small building attached; this has not been investigated. To the north-west the bank has been levelled, presumably to allow a view for the 18th-century mansion. On the east side, on rising ground, a bank and ditch continue round to the north east corner where the bank has apparently also been levelled, probably to accommodate the priory buildings. On the northern half a lake lies 3m below the edge of the levelled platform.

Fieldwork, aerial photography and archaeological excavations carried out for various purposes has shown that the Fineshade valley was extensively occupied in the Roman period, particularly on the west side of the stream, although this view may be clouded by the lack of opportunity for fieldwork on the east side due to much woodland and permanent pasture. Nevertheless, trial trenching within the priory precincts over a number of years has shown that the site of the castle and priory may well have been occupied from the early Iron Age until the present time.

### Acknowledgements

Permission to investigate the site was granted by English Heritage (Certificate number EH 2008/15), who also



Fig 3 The bank and ditch on the east side



Fig 4 The bank on the west side

provided the radiocarbon dating; this was funded by the Robert Kiln Trust. The owners of the property, Ms Joy King and Mr Paul Kermeen and Kate and Nigel Fuller very generously allowed complete freedom of access. The Middle Nene Archaeology Group loaned equipment and manpower. Diana Sutherland gave advice on the geology of the site. Dennis Jackson gave advice on the earthworks and Iron Age pottery. Tony Brown helped with the archival reference on Bridges, Brenda Dickinson advised on the Samian ware. Northamptonshire Archaeology was, as usual, extremely helpful with advice and support. Steve Upex kindly read and commented on the final report.

Our thanks are especially due to Derek Roberts, James Pease, Mick Riley, Bob Seaton, Carole Bancroft-Turner, Sarah Botfield who also helped with post-excavation work, Chris Stanley, Mastin Greene, Peter Hill and to John Hadman and Dave Wills, who also helped by delivering and collecting the equipment.

### Previous excavations

In 1987, Northamptonshire Archaeology put in five trenches to investigate the state of the archaeology in the southern half of the site following a building application. These were within the castle bailey which later became the outer precinct of the priory (Johnston and Dix 1988). The trenches revealed the presence of hitherto unsuspected extensive Roman occupation as well as a medieval presence. The continuation of the castle rampart was

identified to the north-east but little else could be interpreted as the remains of the priory or castle.

In April 1987 five trenches, each 1.40m wide, were cut by machine, removing 0.15m of turf and topsoil. Immediately below this, in all areas examined, was a layer of small rubble limestone, containing 19th-century pot sherds, tile and grey slate and Romano-British pot and tile, which probably relates to the general levelling of the area and the construction of the 1884 stable block. Around the buildings on the west side a slightly thicker, more consolidated layer of rubble indicated metalling for a stable roadway to the back of the buildings.

Trench 1 was 92m long and ran NNW–SSE across the platform in front of the stable block. Trench 2, which was 48m long, ran N–S along the track immediately in front of the stables. Trench 4 was a spur off Trench 2. Trench 3 was 9.50m long and was designed to cut across where the bank might have been behind the stables. Trench 5, was 27m long, and was also behind the stables in an E–W direction.

On removal of the rubble limestone a plethora of features was exposed, particularly to the west of the stables along the full length of trenches 1, 2 and 4 (Fig 5).

From the limited area examined, Romano-British occupation appears to have been concentrated in the central part of the area bounded by the castle bank, (Trenches 1, 2 and 4). The evidence comprised stratified occupation debris and at least four ditches, one of which was 6m wide, several walls, large amounts of roofing tile, building stone, rubble, plaster, decayed mortar and

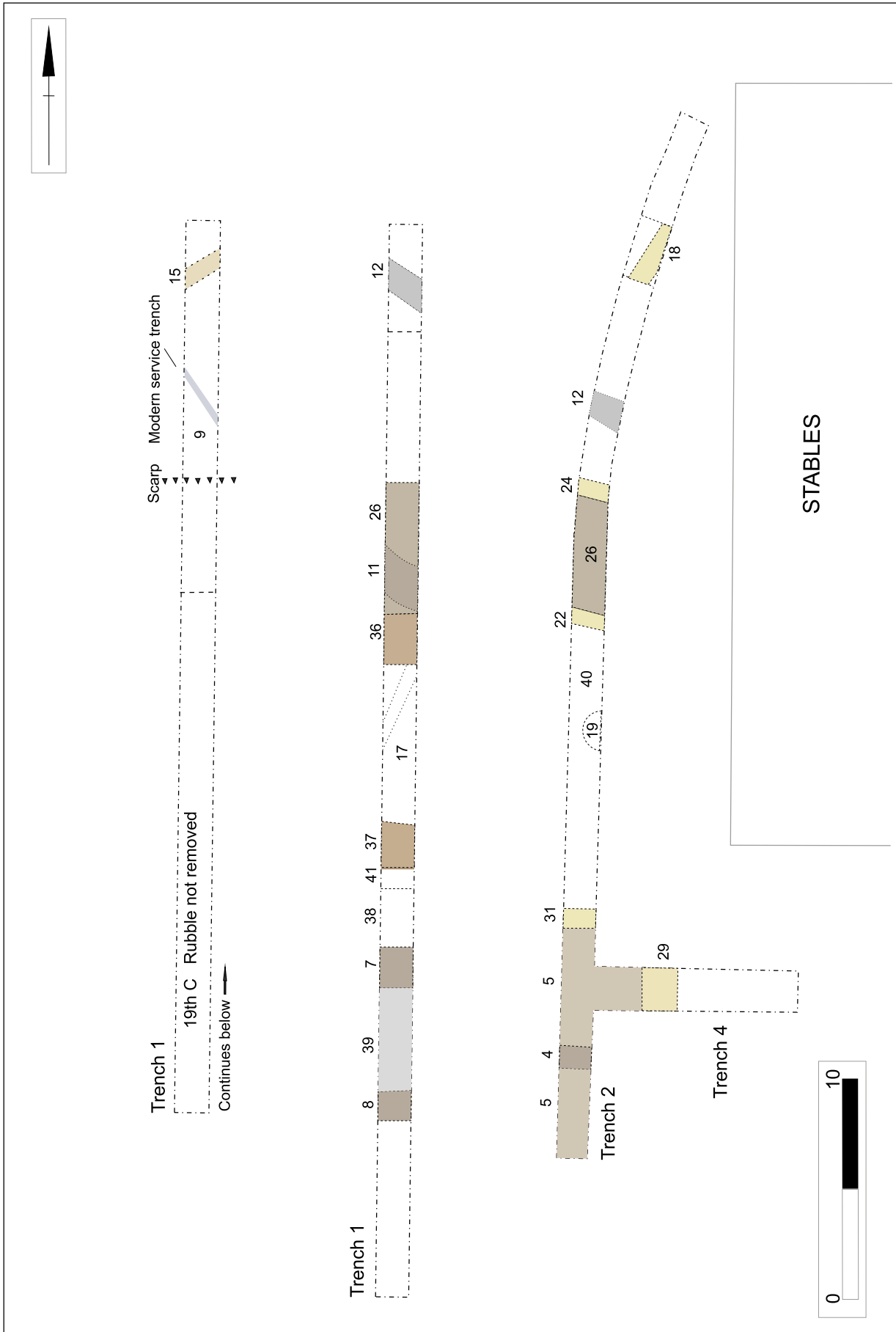


Fig 5 Evaluation trenches in 1987

a possible well. The 19th-century rubble limestone layer over the whole area contained a significant amount of residual Romano-British pottery and fragments of roofing tile, of which three diamond-shaped ones were complete, and when recovered were lying as though making a path at the N end of Trench 1 (Fig 5). Painted wall plaster was recovered from Trench 2, layer 5.

A low linear mound at the north end of Trench 1 (layer 9), was composed of building rubble, plaster, Collyweston stone slates and medieval glazed ridge tiles. This would suggest the site of a medieval building, although Roman roofing tile and pot sherds were also present, suggesting again either re-use of Roman material or landscaping which had disturbed Roman deposits. A robbed out wall, 0.80m wide and 1.0m deep, close to the NW corner of the stable block (Trench 2, layer 18), may be medieval, and two walls, 22 and 24, may be the predecessors of the 19th-century stable block. Several other walls of unknown date were also identified, none of which appeared to be strictly parallel with each other. A linear hollow (12) which ran N–W from the west side of the stable across the platform was considered to be modern; this was subsequently investigated again in 1987 (See Trench 7) and is thoroughly described in the 2007 section of this report (See Trench F2).

Trench 4 was at right angles to Trench 2 and extended into a small stable yard at the south end of the stable block, the purpose of the trench being to determine the extent to which terracing of the hillside had caused destruction of archaeological deposits. It was only necessary to go back 9m, at which point the ground surface was already almost 2m below the natural hillside and the geology scraped off by the machine was solid Sandy Ironstone natural.

Trench 5 was 27m long and was designed to establish whether archaeological deposits survived on the rising ground behind the stable block. The trench extended to within 8m of the western edge of the scarp which represents the cut into the hillside. The usual limestone rubble layer was again encountered mixed with 19th-century grey slate, coal and glass bottles, thicker where it filled a sag into the upper fills of what was considered to be a medieval ditch, which ran E–W.

Trench 3 was in the extreme NE corner of the plot, an area of elder scrub covering the steep hillside behind the stable block. Beyond this the field to the east has a bank and ditch, thought to be the ring work or rampart of the castle. In the area of Trench 3 this bank appeared to have been levelled. The mechanical excavator employed to cut a trench at the point where the bank might have been had great difficulty in getting to this area and the results were not entirely satisfactory.

The geology of this hillside was pale orange clay with some grey patches. No stratigraphy was observed apart from the ubiquitous layer of 19th-century rubble, which at this point was barely 0.5m thick. The trench was 9.50m long, and filled rapidly with water because of torrential rain. At a depth of 0.15m, a wall, 0.20m wide, composed of limestone rubble of varying size, but in the main measuring 200mm × 200mm × 150mm, was set into a disturbed clay layer, and lined up with the existing inner edge of the bank. The feature was not fully investigated because of extreme water logging, but the stone wall was

a substantial feature with some depth and appeared to be revetting the hillside on its W side. It was concluded, therefore, that this was a continuation of the castle bank.

In November of the same year, another exploratory trench, Trench 7, was cut at the W end of a geophysical anomaly thought to be a drainage channel which ran E–W across the platform in front of the stable block. This proved to be a deep ditch, which was not bottomed as it was considered to be modern. Of interest was the S bank of this feature which, beneath the modern fill, was entirely covered in burnt soil and charcoal; the N bank was not exposed.

In 1988 a planning application was submitted for a house to be built on the platform of land to the N of the stable block on the site of the 18th-century mansion. Subsequently, no house was ever built. Five machine-cut trenches were investigated by Northamptonshire Archaeology (Johnston and Dix 1988), two within the footprint of the demolished building and three to the W of the house site. Very little evidence of structures remained. To the W the natural limestone bedrock lay within 0.27m of the present surface and was separated from it by a thin layer of brown earth, and beneath this a layer of crushed limestone consistent with the make-up of a metalled driveway. In Trench 3 a rectangular setting of limestone, with individual stones of up to 330mm × 330mm × 120mm, formed part of the base of a rectangular pit c 1.50m wide and 0.11m deep. This lay at the bottom of the trench at a depth of 0.45m. The only dating evidence was a single sherd of Lyveden/Stanion ware from the sand fill. Within the house the bedrock had been dug out to 0.76m below modern ground level to accommodate a slate sub-floor beneath one of the 19th-century extensions. Other areas had been backfilled with deposits of clay and gritty earth containing much limestone rubble, bricks and fragments of red quarry tiles and other modern materials.

In 1992 further trial trenching took place at the extreme east end of the northern platform in order to assess the survival of archaeological deposits in the zone between the site of the old house and the septic tank (Audouy *et al* 1992).

Trench 1 was machine cut and ran E for 28m. Immediately above the solid limestone bedrock a 0.38m thick layer of yellowish-brown sandy loam containing large fragments of coarse limestone rubble proved to be the backfill of shallow quarrying. This disturbance was bounded by a rough limestone wall, aligned N–S, which was 0.80m wide and had probably been robbed out at the N end. Three metres further E and divided by a compacted area of dark soil together with ash and small fragments of limestone another wall ran in parallel. This wall was similar in construction but much better preserved and can still be seen in the turf, running N for a distance of some 10m.

Along the length of Trench 2 several sondages, excavated to assess the depth of features, revealed large amounts of building material including Collyweston stone tiles and medieval glazed ridge tiles mixed with the quarry backfill. Immediately S of this the medieval surface may still be *in situ* and unaffected by quarrying as a few sherds of medieval pottery, several fragments of medieval roof tile and numerous oyster shells appeared to be *in situ* upon its surface approximately 0.5m below the top of the turf.

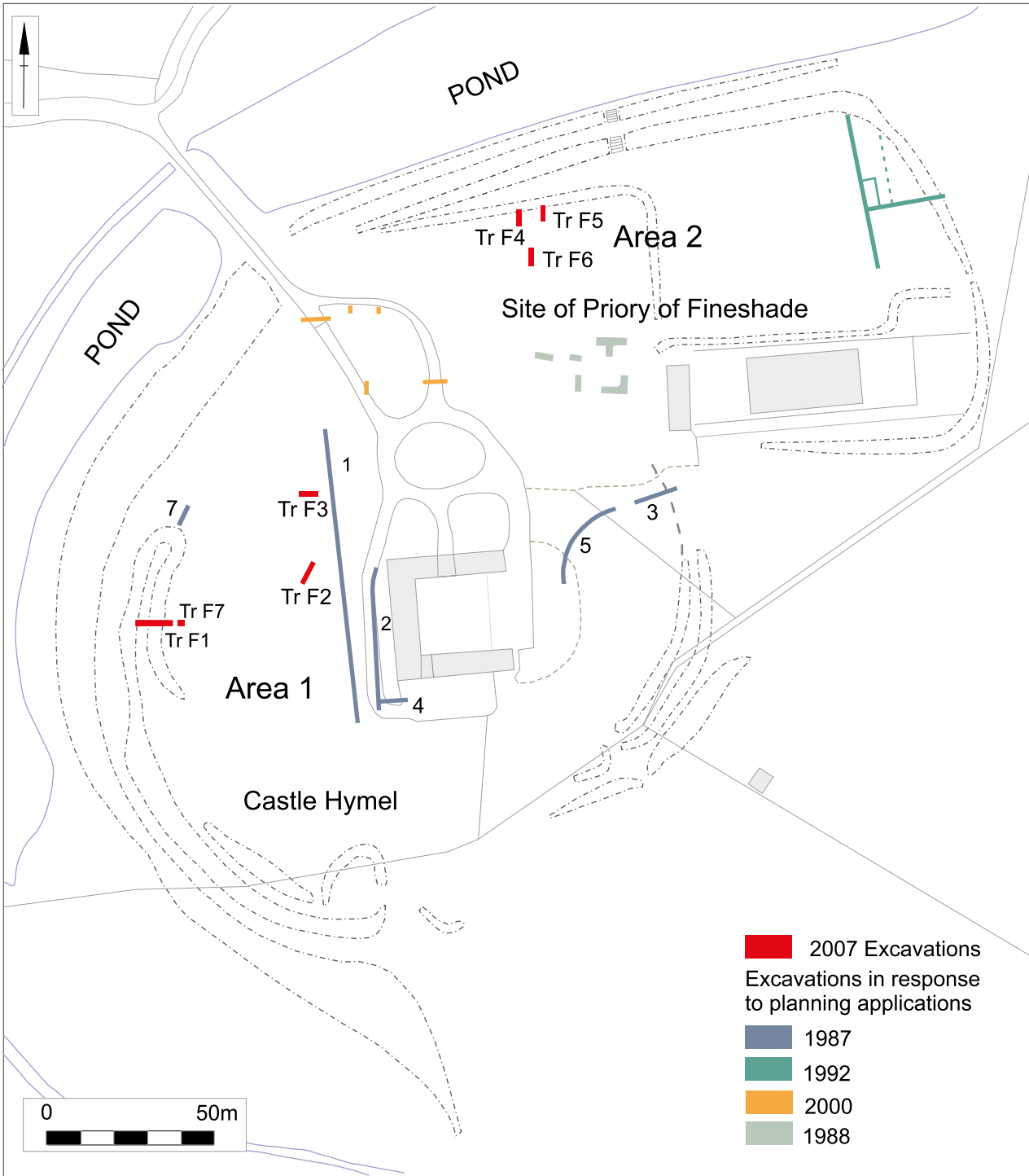


Fig 6 Location of all excavations at Fineshade Abbey

Two metres from the S end of Trench 2 a potentially large ash-filled feature was identified. The general impression of this area was that it had largely been quarried, probably during the construction of the 18th-century house.

An excavation in 1998 by Northamptonshire Archaeology prior to the construction of a house on the kitchen garden on the N side of the lake, revealed the presence of early-middle Saxon iron smelting, with overall ‘noise’ of Roman occupation in the form of the usual scatter of clay roofing tiles (Mudd 2005 & 2006).

In May 2000 a watching brief by Northamptonshire Archaeology recorded 45m of trench prior to bedding a conifer hedge. In addition, an area 46m long and 4m wide was stripped on the line of the old driveway prior to laying a new one. Six short lengths of wall were discovered, four of which appeared to form a rectangular building sited across the entrance road next to the bridge (Thorne 2001).

Over the past 20 years several other applications have resulted in trial trenching, mainly on the N half of the site, where the priory is believed to have been, but little



was found of any specific nature (Dix 1989; Audouy *et al* 1992; Prentice and Maull 1998).

### Background to the excavations in 2007

In February 2004 a resistivity survey of Area 1, the castle bailey (the S half of the site), funded by the Robert Kiln Trust, was undertaken for the authors by Adrian Challands (Rep AC/04/01), followed in November 2004 by a survey of the outer bailey (the N half), with the aim of locating the remains of the priory buildings (Challands, Rep AC/04/08).

A palimpsest of features was revealed, particularly on the S side. Subsequently, in September and October 2007, excavations were carried out by the authors to investigate features revealed by the surveys, permission being granted by English Heritage.

Excavations within the inner court of the priory, Area 2, were for the most part inconclusive, however, these did reveal the extent of terracing of the site in the 18th century, which had removed as much as 2m from the uphill (E) side of the site, this being deposited downslope and consequently burying earlier features to a greater depth than the geophysical surveys were able to penetrate. Only the remains of a later terrace retaining wall incorpo-

rating non-reusable architectural stonework of priory date were found.

The geophysical survey of Area 1, the outer court of the priory, formerly the castle bailey, recorded resistivity values over an area of 9,600 square metres of which approximately 75% showed evidence of ground disturbance interpreted as walls, pits, ditches and banks of rubble, probably resulting from wall robbing.

Geophysics in area 2 appeared to show several wall like anomalies, the three trenches, F4, F5, and F6 were therefore sited to test the theory that some buildings might survive at the W end between the site of the mansion and its driveway.

With permission from English Heritage, six trial trenches were excavated as part of an in depth study of the Priory; three in Area 1 and three in Area 2 (Fig 6). It had long been felt that the bank around the monument might be earlier than a Norman ring work, so a section across this bank, Trench F1, was the most pressing investigation; it was hoped to note its construction and to find the buried ground surface. Trench F2 was designed to look at the linear anomaly which ran across the platform in front of the stable block in a N–W direction. Previous attempts to quantify this in 1987 (Trench 7), identified it as a relatively late feature, possibly a drainage ditch but this did not tie in

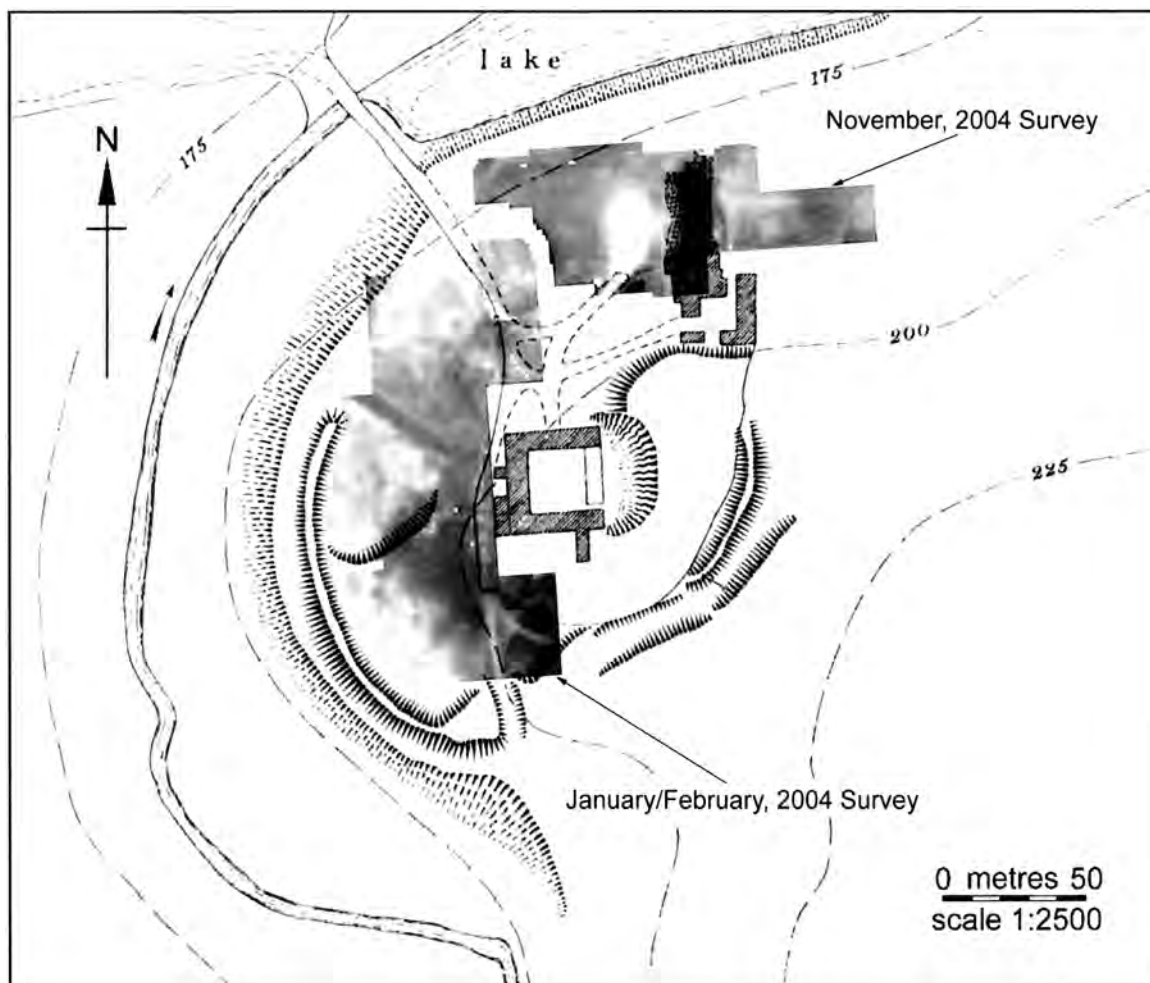


Fig 7 Geophysical survey of Areas 1 and 2

with the apparent size on the geophysical survey. Trench F3 addressed the complicated collection of anomalies to the NW of the stable block where the geophysical survey suggested the remains of buildings.

### The Excavation

#### Area 1: The Castle Bailey

##### Trench F1: The Bank (Size: 8.5m by 1.0m)

Layer J1, immediately below the turf, was a mixture of dark earth, small flat limestone fragments, burnt limestone fragments, burnt clay, sherds of Roman pot and roofing tile, iron ore and iron slag, medieval pot, coal, animal bone and Staffordshire pottery of the 17th century. The layer was thicker on the E side and extended down to the bottom of the slope, and thinner on the W, steeper side where it had been eroded by sheep and weathering; in this area stones protruded from the soil. Below this, layer J3 was a mixed layer of dirty orange-brown clay with lenses of dark earth, large amounts of burnt clay, natural iron ore nodules, slag and Roman tile. This was ultimately classed as upcast from lower down the slope.

At 0.60m below the existing turf level a curving stone wall J 31 was discovered, laid in horizontal layers. At the bottom of the slope of the bank the top of this wall was 0.77m below turf level. This proved to be the inner edge of a lime kiln, which had been cut into the bank. The kiln was a circular, stone-built structure, about 3m wide and 2m deep internally, with a splayed entrance to the east, the floor of which extended at least 6m beyond the firing chamber or pot. The top ledge was 0.60m wide, heavily burnt on the inside edge and had two stones which protruded out into the centre; these may have been used as extra supports for the load. The wall above this height had been demolished.

The interior of the kiln was filled with very large blocks of limestone, some of which were too large to move, contained in a matrix of red burnt clay and red stained soil (J40). At a depth of 2m on the W side, the base of the cavity had a layer of fine grained black ash, 0.15m thick, with some small flecks of charcoal embedded in it. This had been so well burnt that sampling was out of the question. Only a small area of wall was exposed and excavation proved to be very difficult due to the confined nature of the trench. Archaeomagnetic dating was attempted but so little clay had been used in the structure that this was not feasible.

The wall of the kiln was left undamaged.

##### Trench F7 (1.0m by 1.0m)

In order to try to date the kiln and assess its size permission was given to dig a further 1.0m-square trench. Trench F7 was excavated 6.65m to the W of trench F1. At a depth of 0.90m the clean, dark garden type soil became stonier with frequent fragments of burnt clay and some charcoal in a matrix of cornbrash and pale brown clay soil. At 1.05m from ground level the top surface of a hard lime deposit (Layer J54), 0.8m – 0.10m thick, formed an edge running E–W across the trench and curving at the W end. It was thought that this probably only represented one

or two firings. A sample of charcoal was collected from between these well stratified lime deposits. Radiocarbon dating provided a likely *terminus post quem* of AD125–225 (EH 2008/15). This trench was remarkably free of finds, only two sherds of Roman pottery were recovered.

Layer J6. Behind the kiln and below the upcast of debris from this feature the older profile of the bank became visible, this being flattened at the top and sloping steeply on its outer side with a slight flattening below the summit on the inside. Obvious lines of deposition were visible, composed of decaying limestone subsoil forming a friable crumbly matrix with inclusions of limestone fragments of irregular shape alternating with layers of larger fragments of Lincolnshire Limestone. The occasional iron ore nodules found were entirely natural. This whole deposit gave the impression of having been dug straight out of the ground.

Layer J13. At a depth of 1.20m an orange-brown layer composed of crumbly gritty decayed limestone which was virtually free of larger stone fragments sloped downwards E–W as does the natural hillside, and was first thought to be a buried soil layer. The bulk of this layer was a sequence of small pebbles, getting larger as it got deeper and showing a white deposit of fungal filaments. At a depth of 2m, layer J47 consisted of very large blocks, 300mm × 300mm × 80mm, of Lincolnshire Limestone (Diana Sutherland pers com), deposited in a jumbled fashion with large voids and virtually no soil. The whole layer was not quantified as it became too deep; the base of the bank was not reached as it was too dangerous despite shoring up of the sides but extrapolation of the ground surface from the bottom of the lime kiln would suggest that the base of the bank should be around a depth of 3m from its summit, bearing in mind that the base of the kiln pot or chamber may have been below ground level. There were no finds in any of the layers which were not directly affected by the insertion of the lime kiln.

##### Trench F2 (5.0m by 1.0m)

This was sited to investigate a very obvious geophysical anomaly (Fig 5; 12 and 7), which ran E–W across the platform in front of the stable block. Previous sectioning in two places was inconclusive as its total depth and width were not investigated. Of interest was the southern side which had been noted to have an old turf horizon covered in charcoal and burnt clay fragments.

The topsoil was removed to reveal the top of a 6.0m wide, U-shaped ditch which had been backfilled in the late 19th century. Down the centre of this feature the backfill had sagged and a further deposit of blue clay and building material topped by a shallow deposit of medium-sized water worn pebbles had been added. Finds from the topsoil and layer J5 beneath contained material from the Roman period to the 20th century and included large blocks of dressed building stone in a matrix of blue clay. Beneath this was another blue clay deposit, layer J17, containing more large blocks of dressed building stone, some with 19th/20th-century mortar adherent. This was the primary fill of the ditch and had clearly been put in after the insertion of a large terracotta drain at 1.10m below ground level, designed to drain the stable block and probably dating to its construction in the late 19th century.

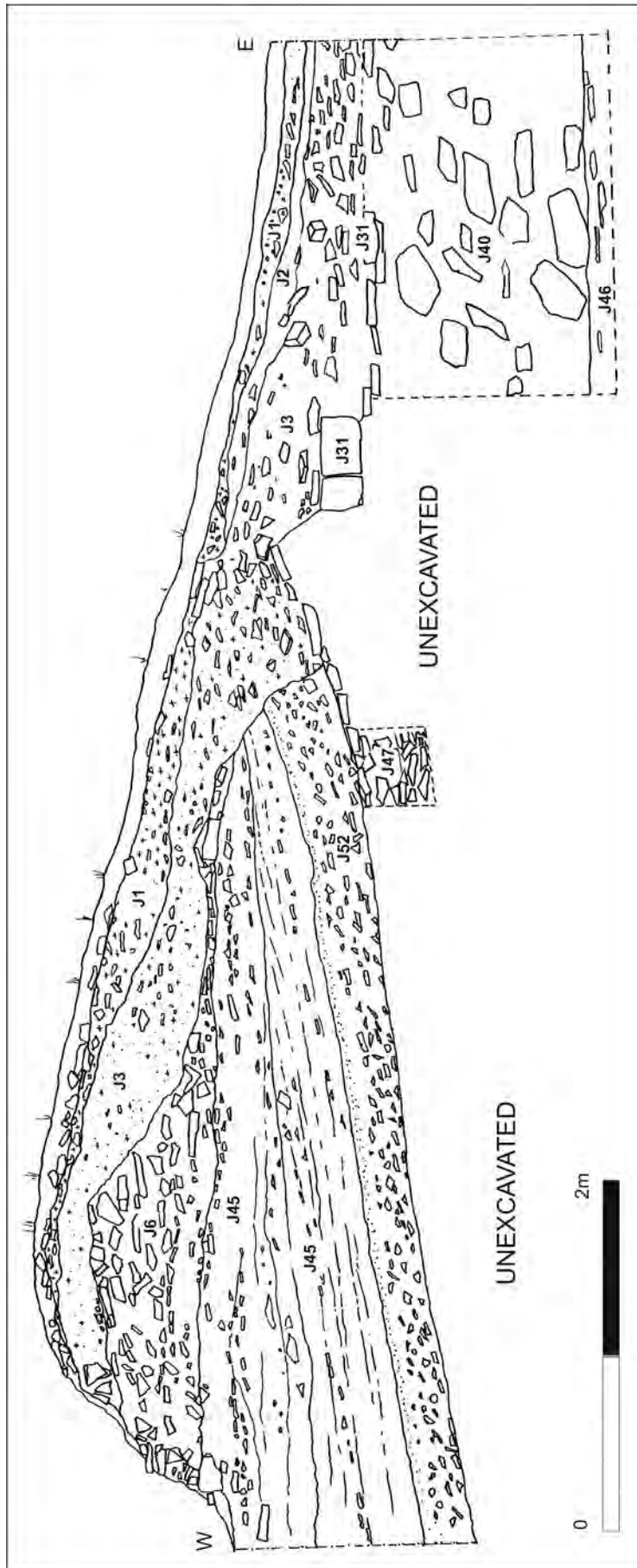


Fig 8 Section through the bank and lime kiln (Trench F1, Area 1)

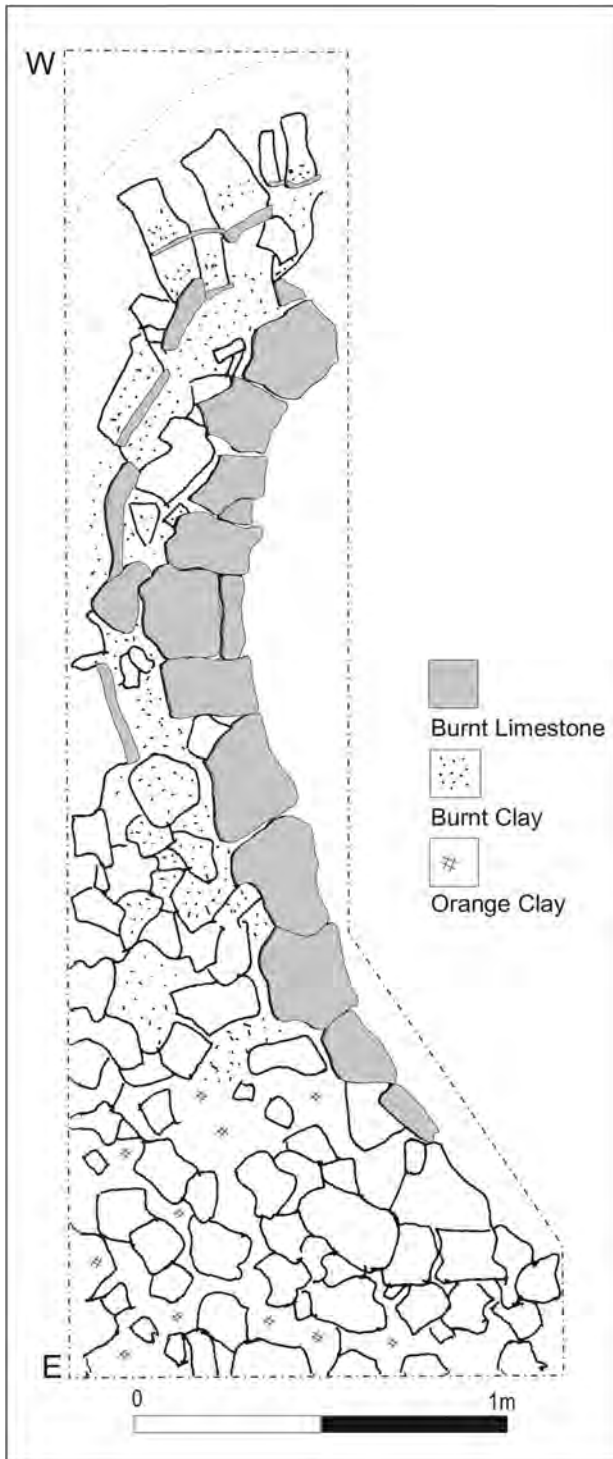


Fig 9 Plan of the lime kiln (Trench F1, Area 1)

The southern bank of the ditch again showed an old turf layer, 0.35m thick, (layer J11) which had been a steep bank before the pipe was inserted. Finds from this layer were sparse, only one piece of Roman roofing tile and four fragments of burnt clay. There was possibly another old turf level beneath layer J11, (layer J21) but this was not investigated. The profile of the original ditch had been partially destroyed by the insertion of the pipe but water in the base of the trench made further digging impossible.

### Trench F3 (3.0m by 1.0m)

On removal of the turf, the dark earth layer beneath contained Collyweston roofing tiles, iron slag, raw iron ore, coal, plaster, blue slate, square iron nails, granite road chippings, window glass, Roman colour coat pottery, Roman roofing tiles, Staffordshire 19th-century pot and animal bone.

Layer J4 consisted of broken Collyweston roofing tiles, many tipped or slipping at an angle as though dumped. Mixed with this were sherds of Stanion-type ridge tiles, Roman roofing tiles, Roman pottery, plaster, coal and glass. Beneath this, layer J7 on the E side of the trench, contained more substantial blocks of building stone, 300mm × 300mm × 100mm, some faced, lying in a matrix of dark earth mixed with Collyweston roof tile fragments, animal bone, iron slag, iron ore and burnt stone. A patch of ironstone gravel fragments, layer J9, was sited beneath layer J4.

Layer J10, in the centre of the trench, was an area of mixed limestone rubble, mainly small stones with a creamy appearance, average size 100mm × 100mm × 30mm, rough plaster lumps with stone impressions and Roman roofing tile. Layer J14 was composed of orange-brown clay soil with sharp sand and mortar fragments. Inclusions of medium-sized limestone fragments and smaller pieces of Collyweston roof tile were mixed with a large amount of iron ore, several sherds of medieval shelly ware and a sherd of Roman roofing tile. Layer J15 was a dirty brown soil containing mortar flecks, coarse ware pottery and oyster shell.

Two postholes of indeterminate date were identified: posthole J18 was 300mm × 300mm, the pipe measured 150mm square and was 100mm deep and posthole J19 which measured 300mm × 350mm, was 150mm deep with a post-pipe 200mm square. Both postholes, sealed below layer J7, were reinforced with limestone sides and filled with charcoal-flecked dark soil; the post-pits were not destroyed.

At a depth of 0.32m, the only identifiable features were two small unmatched postholes and a variety of stone surfaces. A possible stone wall foundation (J20) formed from pitched limestone rubble with plaster pressed into it and feature J21, composed of more Collyweston roof tiles sloping at an angle and lying partly below wall foundation J20, showed that this was a very busy area and apart from one piece of late bottle glass, the finds were of Roman date. At the E end of the trench an area of small limestone rubble, worn smooth on the E side, was sharp and unworn on one side. This was cut by postholes J18 and J19. As there was no possibility of extending the trench and as all finds below 0.35m were of Roman origin, it was backfilled without further interference.

### Area 2: The Priory Inner Court

Three trenches were excavated in order to ascertain whether anything remained of the W range of priory buildings and church. Layers of building rubble could be roughly matched between all three trenches.

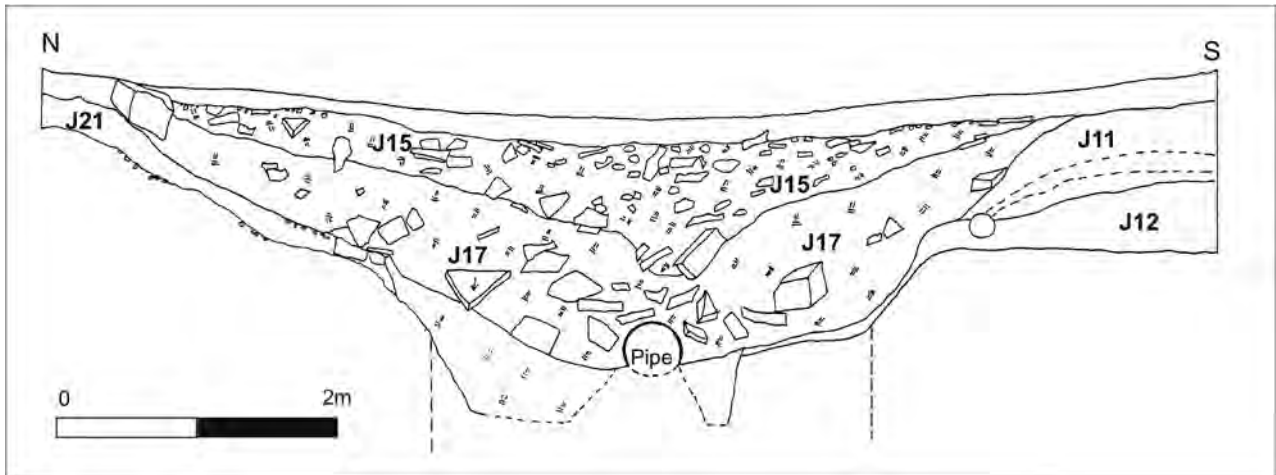


Fig 10 Section across ditch F2 (Trench F2, Area 1)

**Trench F4 (5.0m by 1.0m)**

This trench was situated on the edge of the levelled platform where the remnants of a stone wall (J35), 0.60m wide, lay 0.20m below the surface and acted as a revetment to the edge of the platform (Fig 11). The wall was 0.70m high and made use of architectural fragments dated to the 13th century. It was set on a base layer of tightly packed small limestone fragments (J37), probably natural. A dark earth layer (layer J36) or wall trench could be seen, on both sides of the wall and it was badly disturbed by rabbit activity.

On both sides of the wall and cut by it, layer J38 consisted of orange clay soil containing large amounts of plaster, Roman pot, medieval pot, medieval ridge tile,

clay tobacco pipe stems, coal, grey slate, cinder, post-medieval pottery sherds, early window glass, Collyweston roof tile, marble fragments and animal bone.

At 0.70m below ground level on the S side and 1.0m at the N end, beneath layer J38, a dark very dense thin soil layer, J42, appeared to be the natural sloping ground surface before levelling. This contained Roman roofing tile, pottery and animal bone. This layer covered the dirty stony natural.

**Trench F5 (3.0m by 1.0m)**

Cut on the edge of the terrace, this was filled with a series of layers of mixed multi-period building materials which had been dumped on top of the original soil layer J42, at



Fig 11 The north face of the garden wall (Trench F5, Area 2)

0.60m below ground level at the S end and 1.0m at the N end. This sloped downhill towards the edge of the lake to the N. No revetment wall was present in this trench.

#### Trench F6 (6.0m by 1.0m)

The topsoil layer consisted of gravel mixed with fine black soil and within this layer was a small amount of medieval roofing tile, pottery, iron slag, and bone.

Beneath this, layer J22 filled the entire trench to a depth of 0.30m and consisted of discrete deposits of demolition material lying directly on the natural limestone bedrock, largely composed of small and medium-sized fragments of limestone of a type suitable for wall filling, iron slag, plaster, concrete, 20th-century brick, Roman roofing tile and pottery sherds, *opus signinum* and grey slate. Included in this layer were five architectural fragments (Fig 12), dated to 13th century and therefore belonging to the priory (Brian Giggins pers com).

This layer was cut by a small pit, J29, which had a fill containing Collyweston slate, Roman roof tile, plaster, charcoal, slag, lead, iron nails, oyster shell, medieval pottery, medieval ridge tiles and animal bone, with a capping of sandy clay (J23) up to 100mm thick.

The natural bedrock was somewhat smoothed and clean with a 1m-wide band of red burning visible running E–W.

## DISCUSSION

Previous excavations at Fineshade Abbey had established that it was the site of a Roman building of some status with evidence for stone walls, terracotta floor and roofing tiles, *opus signinum* and painted plaster, mainly red and black. Pottery from the site indicated a date in the late 1st or 2nd centuries AD.

A Roman lime kiln built into the W bank and no more than 100m from the very substantial remains of the Roman buildings, was radiocarbon dated to 125–225AD. Only the base ‘pot’ or firing chamber of the kiln has survived, the form suggesting a periodic or ‘flare’ kiln where the load of limestone was supported either on a wooden framework or by corbelling the load of limestone on a ledge above the pot. A fire would then be lit in the pot and the lime burned for several days. Presumably the lime produced was used in building walls and floors and wall painting. Very similar kilns of the 2nd and 3rd centuries have been found at Weekly, Northamptonshire (Jackson 1973), Helpston, Northamptonshire (Challands 1976) and more recently in Gwynedd, Wales (Parry and Kenney 2012). Material from the destruction of the kiln had been heaped up on top of the bank, either during the Roman period or perhaps during clearance and construction of the castle.

The date of the kiln would tie in with the likely date of the nationally important Laxton iron smelting furnaces and substantial industrial settlement only half a kilometre to the SW and which it overlooks. Dated pottery from the smelting furnaces covered the late 1st/early 2nd centuries. The settlement itself produced a large amount of pottery mainly of 2nd and 3rd century date. A coin of Valentinian in grave 7 and a small amount of pot from other graves was mainly of the late Roman period and features in the cemetery were dated to the 2nd–4th centuries (Jackson *et al* 1988). Interestingly the furnaces date to around the same period as the early phase of the Roman *Praetorium* at Castor, and a small section of Roman road has recently been identified skirting the northern end of the site continuing Margary’s road 571 which runs from Castor westwards (Margary 1973). A military purpose has yet to be demonstrated.



Fig 12 Architectural fragments from Trench F6 Area 2



Fig 13 Architectural fragments from previous excavations

Little work had been done on the bank which surrounds the remaining 19th-century stable block on three sides and which had always been considered to be a fortification of the Norman castle. Excavation in 2007 and the discovery of the Roman lime kiln has shown that the bank is much earlier than its presumed Norman date.

The earthwork or ringwork, lies on the east side of the A43 situated on a curved promontory which rises up from a small stream valley on its S and W sides. The promontory has been flattened and partially cut away to form a platform for buildings, the latest being the remaining stables. Behind this is a steep slope up to the E bank and external ditch and beyond this the hillside continues upwards. The bank encloses an area of 2.3ha and including the bank, 4ha. Overlooking the valley the bank stands 5.0m above the stream level. At the south end of the earthworks a 5.0m wide gap in the bank could be construed as an entrance and there is some evidence for a possible stone structure on its western side; in antiquity there has been a road out of the site in this position but the possibility of a building or a complicated entrance should not be dismissed.

The bank itself was constructed on top of a base layer of blocks of Lincolnshire Limestone rubble and in its more superficial layers with smaller rubble and decayed limestone. Unfortunately, the old ground level was not reached as the trench sides became too unstable. A clear profile of the earlier bank can be seen in section showing a flattened top and a lower ledge on the inside (Fig 8). This may, of course, have been changed during use of the kiln or on its demolition. No evidence was found for box construction or posts along the top.

The earthworks at Fineshade do not now form a complete ringwork but evidence from the NE area behind the modern stables in 1988, where the bank is formed

from clay, showed that the inside of the bank had been revetted with a stone wall, presumably to stop the clay from sliding downslope. The external ditch is around 8.0m wide. On the N side any evidence of a ditch and bank has been destroyed by landscaping for the Roman villa, the castle, the priory or the later mansion. Whatever the date, an enormous amount of landscaping has been carried out over the centuries.

Evidence for the form of the Norman castle is non-existent. A blank area on the geophysical survey may be the remnants of an earth mound and the remarkable lack of finds in Trench F7 may represent the spreading of this soil at a later date. Augmentation of the bank on its inner face could be attributed to this period but this could also have occurred when the lime kiln went out of use. Bridges (ibid.) mentions a castle wall but no evidence for this was found.

A section across the 6.0m-wide ditch which contained the drainage pipe from the stables showed that this was a re-used earlier U-shaped ditch which may have belonged to the castle phase and perhaps divided the inner and outer baileys. This feature goes right to the edge of the platform and through where the bank would have originally been. If this is the case the bank must have been levelled before the drain was inserted. Bridges (1791) also mentions a castle ditch but again it is not clear just what this means.

Elsewhere on the S side of the site, in Trench F3, the complexity of features made it necessary to close the trench. Three sherds of early Iron Age pottery have been recovered in residual contexts together with medieval and Roman material. This does, however, prove an Iron Age presence. When Hunsbury Hill fort was quarried for ironstone in the late 19th century, survival of material from pits was remarkable and it has recently been demonstrated that a small area is still intact (Jackson and Tingle

2012). Fineshade does not have a record of such severe attrition and the complex nature of the geophysical survey may mean that similar pits survive here also.

On the N side of the site, in the area where the priory and later the mansion stood, it was apparent that large scale clearance and levelling had removed any chance of finding evidence of priory buildings; of interest was Trench F6 where demolition debris lay directly on top of burnt bedrock. There is a history of a great fire in the priory in 1420 and this may be in the area of a cellar.

Along the edge of the platform above the lake, the remnants of the garden wall of the Monckton mansion were exposed; this can be seen on contemporary photographs. Layers above this were similar in all three trenches, namely 19th-century demolition debris mixed with earlier material which included an appreciable quantity of Roman roofing tile. The earlier hill slope was visible beneath the landscaping layers but it was not possible to ascribe this to a particular period.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, excavation has shown that the site now known as Fineshade Abbey probably started life as a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age ring work, or given the defensive nature of the site, a hill fort. The enhancement of the edge of a promontory with a large quantity of freshly quarried stone, and further enclosure around the back with a bank and large external ditch, which affords a view up and down the valley, can reasonably be named as such. Northamptonshire can claim the ownership of six other early Iron Age hillforts (Deegan and Foard 2008). Hunsbury is a roughly circular earthwork which encompasses an area of approximately 1.6ha with a bank of varying height, but averaging 1.7–2.7m; the outer ditch was recorded in 1952 as being 5.5m deep and had at that time silted up to almost half its depth (Atkinson in Jackson 1994). Fineshade is a similar shape but slightly larger, with

an internal area of around 2.3ha; the bank stands between 1.5m and 2.0m above the natural slope of the land on the edge of a steep curving stream valley, dropping down to a flattened area 3.0m below and then dropping even further to the stream. Rabbit damage and repeated efforts at landscaping in the past have caused severe erosion of the bank. The central area has been levelled and to the east the hillside rises again with the bank and an external ditch of around 6m – 8m wide continuing the arc of the earthworks. The depth of the ditch can only be guessed at, but erosion is likely to be of some magnitude as the hillside continues to rise steeply beyond. Only a small portion of Hunsbury survives intact because of iron quarrying (Jackson and Tingle 2012). At Fineshade survival is likely to be much greater.

The relatively high status of the Roman buildings as illustrated by the painted plaster, roofing tiles and opus *signinum* combined with its position overlooking the smelting site and settlement is indicative of some sort of administrative function. It is likely this early industry was of military origin but this has yet to be demonstrated.

The shallow nature of the Roman and medieval features would suggest that survival is remarkable on the southern half of the site. The complex nature of the geophysical survey shows that the whole area is covered in anomalies and remnant buildings of Roman and medieval date, it is therefore likely that Iron Age features may also have survived.

Sadly, recent landscaping of the south side has levelled the southern half of the western bank despite its status as a Scheduled Monument.

## The pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprises 48 sherds with a total weight of 394g. It is mainly Romano-British, although a small assemblage of medieval material was also present.



Fig 14 Possible early Iron Age pottery



Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

Fabrics Trench	Context	RB		F209		F330		Date
		No	Weight (g)	No	Weight (g)	No	Weight (g)	
3	U/S	2	13	–	–	–	–	U/S
3	10	10	57	–	–	–	–	RB
3	15	1	5	–	–	–	–	RB
3	25	20	246	–	–	–	–	RB
4	32	–	–	1	2	4	12	12th century
4	42	4	19	–	–	6	26	12th century
6	U/S	1	19	–	–	–	–	U/S
	<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>38</b>	

## Fabric

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*.

A single sherd of decorated early Iron Age date (Denis Jackson pers com) was unstratified but came from Trench F3. Two other sherds are also likely to be of Iron Age date (Fig 14).

In addition, there were 37 sherds (354g) of Romano-British pottery. This mainly comprises shelly wares and grey wares, along with a single sherd of 2nd-century Samian ware, form Dragendorf 33 made in Lesoux (Brenda Dickinson pers com). Ninety sherds of Roman roofing tile, both *imbrices* and *tegulae* were recovered.

The late Saxon and medieval pottery was quantified using the chronology and coding system of the Northamptonshire County Ceramic Type-Series (CTS), as follows:

F207: South Lincs. Oolitic ware (?late 10th – late 12th century), 1 sherd, 2g

F330: Shelly Coarseware (AD1100–1400), 10 sherds, 38g

The medieval pottery assemblage consists entirely of small bodysherds, with the range of fabrics typical of sites in the region dating to 12th century. The extremely small mean sherd weight (3.8g) suggests that they are all the product of secondary deposition, and may even be all residual.

Twenty sherds of medieval glazed crested ridge tiles of Stanion/Lyveden shelly fabric (1100–1400AD) are all from residual contexts.

## Pottery from previous excavations

by Gill Johnston

Pottery from previous excavations is also unremarkable. In 1987 two sherds of possible Iron Age pottery were found unstratified. The Roman material was considered to date from 1st to 3rd centuries and included mainly grey wares, a small amount of Nene Valley colour coat, Bourne-Greetham wares and one sherd of Lezoux Samian. Three complete flat hexagonal Roman roofing tiles were recovered, laid as though being re-used as a path, one of which had a finger impressed closed loop inscribed on the surface (Fig 15). Seven other sherds of tile, both *tegulae*

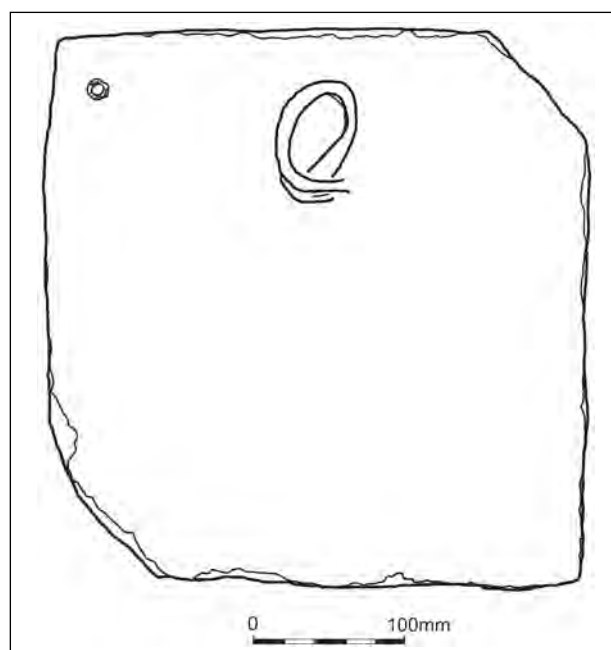


Fig 15 Complete ceramic roof tile

and diamond-shaped flat tiles and one sherd of floor tile (*bessales*) were also marked in the same way (Figs 16 and 17). Brodrigg believed these to be the signature of the tiler who was apparently making roofing and floor tiles (Brodrigg 1987). Identical marks have been found on *tegulae* from Barnwell (Upex 2014). Similar looped marks on tiles from Cirencester were over stamped, perhaps by the owner of the tiler (McWhirr 1984).

Hexagonal tiles with a single nail hole at the top are rare, the examples from Fineshade are similar to those from a tile kiln at Crookhorn (Brodrigg 1987) apart from the fact that in the Fineshade examples only the sides have been trimmed. This shape of tile may be an attempt to imitate the Leicestershire Switherland slate tiles which are fairly common in north Northamptonshire and were used extensively at Rushton in the Roman bath house (unpublished).

In the 2000 trial trenching (Thorne 2001), 16 pot sherds were reported by Vanessa Clarke and Iain Soden as spanning the period from 12th to 18th centuries with 8 sherds of post-medieval pot.



Figs 16 and 17 Fragments of tiles showing possible signature

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