

THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW ROMAN VILLA AND UNIQUE MOSAIC IN RUTLAND

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In August 2020, investigation of a cropmark identified by landowners resulted in the discovery of a spectacular figurative mosaic on land on the eastern side of Rutland. Following the notification of the Leicestershire and Rutland Historic and Natural Environment Team, a programme of investigation was initiated, and University of Leicester Archaeological Services were appointed to record the trench with support from Historic England. A follow-up programme of geophysical survey, trial trenching and test pitting was implemented to establish the extent, nature and date range of the archaeology, and to assess the risk to the remains from the current farming regime – providing information that would ultimately lead to the designation of the site as a Scheduled Monument.

The work has established the presence of an elaborate villa complex, encompassing eight buildings and a host of other structures, enclosed by a ditch system. The excavated areas produced evidence broadly dating it to mid-late third to the late fourth century AD, although there are hints of earlier activity. Unusually, the site has apparently survived as a substantially complete complex, encompassing the full range of buildings that would be expected in a Roman villa, in Britain and is therefore of national and regional significance. However, much of the archaeology was at a shallow depth and therefore potentially at risk from continued cultivation.

The mosaic was within a probable dining room at the northern end of a large villa building with an apse, from where it would have been viewed. It depicts scenes from the story of the Trojan War cycle and, in particular, the conflict between Achilles and Hector at Troy. The legend is illustrated in three rectangular panels, each portraying a different act from the tragedy. The inspiration for the imagery is likely to have been taken from an illustrated codex, presumably provided by the proprietor of the villa, marking them out as a highly educated individual. The subject matter of the mosaic is unique in Britain and rare in the rest of the Roman Empire, and it has been described as the most important Roman mosaic to have been discovered in the last 100 years.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, Google Earth released new aerial photographs, apparently taken in June 2018, of an arable field in Rutland, which appeared to show the cropmarks of a possible Roman villa. The cropmarks indicated a rectangular building with two clear apsidal features at its southern end and a single larger apse on the northern end, as well as another adjoining structure on the north-east corner. The discovery was shared with the Leicestershire County Council (LCC) Historic and Natural Environment Team in May and the site was added to the county's Historic Environment Record (HER) at the start of June.

At the beginning of August, the landowner's son, Jim Irvine, contacted LCC to report that he had excavated a small area measuring approximately 6m × 3m and had identified a mosaic floor, apparently located towards the north end of the villa building, close to the single apsidal structure (as interpreted from the aerial photographs).

A site visit by Richard Clark and Peter Liddle established that the mosaic floor was well-preserved and lay at a relatively shallow depth below ground level. It included a series of figurative panels, depicting warriors in horse-drawn chariots, a robed figure carrying a jar, and a third figure whose context was indistinct at that time. These were divided by guilloche frames, with a four-strand guilloche defining the outer band and a border of larger tesserae. It was clear by this point that the discovery was of great significance.

Following consultation between the landowner, Richard Clark, the Principal Archaeologist for the Historic and Natural Environment Team at Leicestershire County Council (LCC), and Tim Allen of Historic England (HE), a programme of work was determined to assess the nature, extent and preservation of the archaeology on the site, and allow for a more detailed consideration of how it could be protected and managed in the future.

The rare mosaic and surrounding villa complex have now been protected as a Scheduled Monument by DCMS on the advice of Historic England. The protection as a scheduled monument recognises the exceptional national importance of this site. It ensures the remains are legally protected and helps combat unauthorised works or unlawful activities such as illegal metal detecting.

INVESTIGATING THE MOSAIC AND ITS CONTEXT

Initial fieldwork, carried out by University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) with support from Historic England, consisted of a programme of remedial excavation, cleaning and recording of the exposed area of archaeology, before the exposed mosaic was covered back over. This included a detailed record of the mosaic, including the imagery depicted, recording of the trench sections, and excavation and sampling of any remaining deposits above the mosaic to help understand the remains in their immediate and wider context.

This was followed by two stages of geophysical survey, including a magnetic survey across two adjacent fields farmed by the landowner followed by a Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey of a targeted area. Both were carried out by SUMO Survey.

A programme of trial trenching was also undertaken, guided by the results of the magnetic survey. This steered away from the villa building and focused on the peripheral areas of the site, including ditch systems identified by geophysics.

Finally, a series of test pits was excavated across the site following consultation with Historic England and Worcestershire Archaeology. These used the interim GPR data to check the depth and nature of selected archaeological features, but was primarily aimed at areas without archaeology to examine the depth and characteristics of soil profiles across the topography of the two fields. The test pit

assessment was intended to assist in the preparation of a scheduling description and to inform a management plan for the monument.

In September 2021, ULAS returned to complete the excavation of the mosaic room to fully expose the pavement so it could be recorded in its entirety. This work involved undergraduate students from the School of Archaeology and Ancient History (SAAH) at the University of Leicester (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. University of Leicester archaeology students at work uncovering the mosaic (© ULAS).

The villa complex: geophysical survey

The villa complex has been revealed in remarkable detail through geophysical survey of the two target fields (Field A on the western side and Field B to the east). This work consisted of magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar survey methods. The fields proved highly responsive for geophysical survey, and produced excellent results that have helped define the extent and character of surviving archaeological remains. The combined survey results are illustrated in Figure 2 and the key results described below.

The magnetometry results

The magnetometry survey revealed a series of ditches with different characteristics in both fields and other areas of increased or decreased magnetic response, indicating

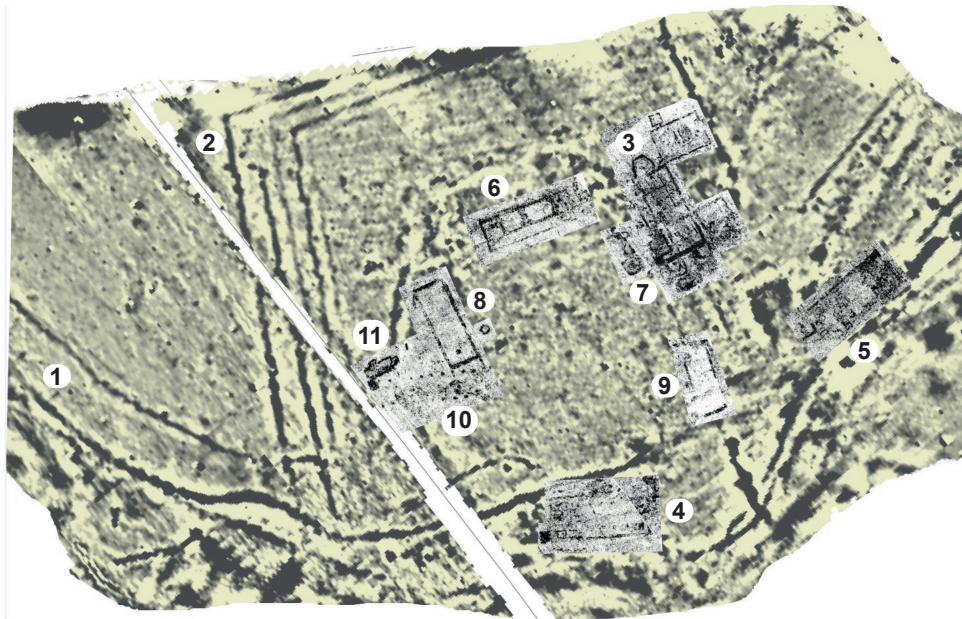


Fig. 2. The combined results of the magnetometry (general background) and the ground-penetrating radar (inset boxes) surveys.

structures and associated settlement features. Two parallel ditches (1) curve round from the north-west of the site, following the edge of the higher ground above the adjacent River Chater. They appear to continue in the south-east of Field B, still following the river.

Between the two areas the curving ditches are disrupted by a series of other anomalies. Towards the bottom of Field A, these are met by a set of multiple parallel linear responses (2), representing further ditches with an obtuse angle in the north-west corner of Field B, and forming the western and northern limits of a building complex identified in the GPR data.

The main areas of enhanced magnetic responses were located on the higher ground of Field B. The range of anomalies may represent pits, post-holes and gullies, as well as fired features such as ovens, hearths, furnaces or kilns. There are also negative responses indicating possible wall lines. The area of the Trojan War mosaic (Trench 5) is located in the midst of responses indicating walls, pits and burnt features. Immediately west of the building complex, a partial ring anomaly may represent a round house. A set of anomalies south-east of the villa building comprise a horseshoe-shaped positive response inside a negative anomaly, which could indicate a surrounding wall. Further clusters of positive and negative responses indicate further building complexes at the southern end of the field, possibly suggesting a bathhouse. To the west a series of pit-like anomalies was noted. Amorphous responses denoting alluvial deposits were present at the bottom of the slope adjacent to the river channel.

Ground-penetrating radar results

The GPR survey produced a strongly visual plot in which eight substantial structures could be identified, many of which were not apparent in the magnetic data. Whilst detailed interpretation of the buildings is not possible on the basis of the geophysical survey alone, the GPR and magnetometry surveys indicate the presence of:

- A substantial and well-preserved main villa building of possible double portico/corridor type (3) that housed the recently discovered mosaic. This building appears to have two further ancillary structures of uncertain function laying immediately adjacent to its north-east and south-east corners. Presence of substantial linear anomaly on the magnetometry survey suggests that the northernmost ancillary structure may have had a water supply.
- The remains of two substantial aisled halls (4 and 5) lying on the break of slope below the villa, immediately above the river to the south-east. Whilst the details of both are unclear that at 4 would appear to have a partitioned western end typical of developed forms of such buildings found in the region and more widely in a broad band from the Humber estuary to the Isle of Wight in the later Roman period (Taylor 2001; 2013; Cunliffe 2008), in which one end of the hall is partitioned into a separate suite of rooms that can contain tessellated pavements, hypocausts and even integral baths. These hybrid buildings had both practical agricultural and industrial functions, and often appear to have acted as substantial residences or meeting spaces in their own right.
- Just to the west of the main house lies a further simple corridor type building (6) that lays adjacent to a probable circular building that may or may not have been contemporaneous. The latter may be a round house or as is not uncommon on other villas to the south of the region a shrine (as at Cosgrove, Ringstead and possibly Stanton Low).
- A small circular (or circle within a square) structure immediately to the west of the main house (7) that is of uncertain function, but which could be a small mausoleum.
- Two simple stone/brick founded rectangular barns or workshops at 8 and 9.
- A further probable aisled building or barn (10) of which only the substantial aisle posts survive of a different phase to its immediate neighbour (8). Whilst this may be an Anglo-Saxon hall, its overall dimensions and form would suggest the former rather than the latter, but would need excavation to determine which.
- A small probable detached bath house at the western end of the settlement at 11 that the magnetometry survey again may suggest was supplied by a linear water feature to the north.

THE TROJAN WAR MOSAIC

The second phase of excavation in 2021 was undertaken with the aim of uncovering the full extent and context of the mosaic that had drawn attention to the site's importance the year before.



Fig. 3. The complete mosaic within the floor plan of the triclinium with the apse at the bottom of the picture. (© Historic England).

Having been fully revealed, it was clear that the mosaic depicted scenes from the story of the Trojan War cycle and, in particular, the conflict between Achilles and Hector at Troy.

Despite areas of damage from later activity the mosaic is spectacular, measuring around 7m × 11m in extent, and the imagery is remarkable, illustrating the tragedy over three panels in a very dynamic, almost comic-book style (Figure 3). The floor is thought to have been laid in a *triclinium*, or dining area, at the northern end of a large villa building, with the images arranged so to be viewed from an apse where guests would have been seated.

The mosaic is highly detailed, and specific features show that it is the work of highly skilled mosaicists. The range of colours used, the attention to fine detail, and the way that some figures transgress the guilloche boundaries, suggest that the inspiration for the floor may have been an illuminated manuscript that was in the possession of the villa owner. It also raises the possibility that this person had an understanding of the classics, and wanted to share that knowledge with their friends and guests.

The start of the story is told in the northernmost panel and shows the duel between two charioteers armed with spears and carrying shields, racing towards each other at speed (Figure 4). Achilles, on the left, is shown as the larger figure and clearly has the advantage. He is driving a chariot drawn by a light and a dark horse (the immortal horses Xanthus and Balius), whose harnesses are elaborate with ‘jewelled’ red and white edges. The horses of Hector’s chariot, to the right, are smaller and both light-coloured with red harnesses, bridles and reins. Hector, dressed in a tunic and with his back to the viewer, is slightly compressed into the right side of the panel. He holds his shield in his left hand and spear or javelin in his right.

The story is continued in the panel above, which shows that the battle is over, and Achilles is victorious (Figure 5). A large red shield and a spear are held by Achilles on his chariot, but damage has erased all of him except an arm and parts of his torso and legs. The chariot drags the prone body of Hector, eyes closed in death, naked and with strips of red tesserae marking wounds and abrasions. A



Fig. 4. The northern panel of the mosaic showing Achilles and Hector in battle on chariots. Note how large Achilles is portrayed in comparison to Hector (© ULAS).



Fig. 5. The middle panel of the mosaic with the victorious Achilles dragging the body of Hector behind his chariot. King Priam is shown on the right-hand side begging for the release of his son (© ULAS).

shield-bearing figure behind the chariot, wearing a tunic, seems to wave his arm in celebration. Facing the horses, and possibly running towards them, is a bearded figure in a long striped, blue tunic and a red Phrygian cap, marking him as a Trojan. He is barefoot with his arms outstretched. This is Priam, King of Troy and the father of Hector, and he is pleading for the return of his son's body. Below and to the right are the red three-pronged tails of sea creatures, perhaps indicative of the coastal location or referring to the gift of the immortal horses from Poseidon.

In the final scene, Priam has begged Achilles to release his son Hector's body for dignified burial, and in this version his weight in gold is the price (Figure 6). Centrally placed in the panel, an imposing figure with red leggings, sandals and a purple tunic holds the scales for the transaction. Hector's body lies on one side of



Fig. 6. The southern panel of the mosaic showing the dramatic weighing of Hector's body against his weight in gold. Achilles is seated on the burnt left-hand side with two figures in attendance, while Priam places gold vessels onto the scales on the opposite side (© ULAS).

the scales, supported by four red suspension cords or rods. A line of red tesserae may be the wound inflicted by Achilles. The other side is being filled with gold vessels held by King Priam, who is dressed identically to the previous panel except for his red shoes or boots. The head and shoulders of a shield-bearing figure can be seen in the top right corner behind Priam. The left side of the panel is unfortunately badly fire-damaged, but Achilles can be seen, seated and holding a spear with his right leg outstretched and left leg bent. There are two possible figures standing behind Achilles, but this is very hard to see because of the damage.

Achilles was a popular figure on late Roman mosaics, and he appears on several examples from Roman Britain, although this is the only known example featuring this episode of his story in such detail. Examples are also rare across Europe, but a similar scene to the final panel is shown on a late fourth-century mosaic from the villa del Tellaro, Cadeddi in Sicily.

It is notable the mosaic diverges from the *Iliad* in several respects. For example, in the *Iliad* the battle between Hector and Achilles is on foot and Achilles vows not to return Hector’s body, *not even* for his weight in gold. The addition of the scales to balance the gold with the corpse seems to have come from the work of a fifth century BC playwright, Aeschylus, in his now mostly lost play ‘The Phrygians’. It has also been suggested that the scenes may have been based on illustrations from a codex known to the proprietor of the villa.

Important information was also gathered from the layers overlying the mosaic. After the room had gone out of its original use, a series of fires was lit on the floor resulting in burning and damage to the mosaic. Above this were several rubble layers; the end result of the building gradually collapsing or being deliberately demolished (Figure 7). In the top of the rubble were two human skeletons, quite



Fig. 7. Detail of a cross section through the layers overlying the mosaic, showing their complexity (© ULAS).

deliberately buried within the bounds of the room, perhaps suggesting it was still apparent above ground. We await dating of these burials and the rubble in which they lay, but this all offers great potential to learn more about what happened at sites like this after they had lost their original significance.

DISCUSSION

The archaeological evidence

The original recognition of the cropmark evidence and the subsequent discovery of the mosaic by Jim Irvine has prompted an investigation that has produced fruitful information throughout the programme of work. It is thanks to a set of spectacular geophysics results that evidence from the test pits and trenches can be assembled within a coherent site plan. Dating evidence from the pottery, the coins and the style of the mosaic itself place the activity from the later third century to the later fourth century, and, so far, there is little positive evidence outside this date range. There are three radiate coins from the mid-late third century, but most of the identifiable coins belong to the issue period 13 (AD 317–48). A coin of Valentinian (AD 364–75) is the latest in date. The coin loss pattern, even from this small group, is typical for later Roman rural sites, such as a farmstead and an aisled villa at Empingham, Rutland (Ponting 2000, 123–6).

The site is set on a gentle south-facing slope in a loop of the nearby River Chater, with views over the surrounding countryside. The villa complex is surrounded by a ditch system. A pair of parallel ditches, spaced between 16m and 20m apart, curved around the slope, following the contour of the river from beyond the north-western boundary of Field A. Their relatively simple form can be broadly traced to the eastern side of Field B and it is easy to believe that they are an earlier feature of the site, possibly a form of leat or even to hold flood water when the river rose.

One of the clearest features of the magnetic survey was a series of five parallel ditches, which seem to form a clear boundary to the west and north sides of the buildings detected by the GPR survey.

The research context and significance of the villa

This new site is one of a steadily increasing number of known villas in east Leicestershire, Rutland and north Northamptonshire, in a region that until recently had not witnessed the same scale of archaeological survey and excavation as that in the lower Welland and Nene between Barnack and the western edge of the East Anglian Fen to the east. Most are either antiquarian or earlier twentieth-century discoveries (e.g. Clipsham, Tixover), or were partially excavated in the middle years of the twentieth century (e.g. Collyweston, Thistleton, Great Casterton, Empingham Great Weldon and Whitwell – Cooper 2000; Liddle 2004). Consequently, there is a rather scattered pattern of sites, often with only partial plans lacking in detail, phasing and quality-quantified artefactual and paleoenvironmental evidence. Several of these sites have also subsequently been destroyed and so this recent discovery of a seemingly substantially intact villa complex is of real significance.

Characteristics of the settlement itself

The programme of work carried out to date make it clear that the villa is of national and regional significance both for the range of buildings that form the villa, and its seeming survival as a substantially complete complex that can be studied and understood in its entirety.

Together, the currently available evidence suggests the villa was a large, high-status complex, if not quite of the grandest scale at a provincial level such as that of the villas at Cotterstock, Northamptonshire or Castor, Peterborough elsewhere in the region. At present the small amount of evaluative excavation carried out suggests this complex is broadly of third–fourth century date, but the presence of a wider range of further unexcavated features on the magnetometer survey, as well as two probable circular buildings seen in the GPR survey, indicate that earlier phases of settlement may also be present.

The geophysical survey indicates the presence of at least eight groups of buildings that together show a substantial and well-appointed mid-late Roman villa complex arrayed around an open space/court overlooking the River Chater, a tributary of the River Welland to the south. The magnetometry survey would seem to indicate that these buildings were enclosed by ditched features on at least three sides and the entire complex may have been enclosed in a form similar to that seen at some of the other larger villas in Northamptonshire (e.g. Sulgrave), Leicestershire (e.g. Lockington) and Nottinghamshire (e.g. Cromwell), where the core range of villa buildings are arrayed loosely around an open space rather than forming a single unified architectural complex.

Together they represent a fairly comprehensive suite of the range of buildings and related features we might expect to encounter in a Roman villa in Britain on one site. Whilst the excavation of villas has had a long history in this country, a recent national survey noted that in less than a quarter of cases do we know anything about the layout and wider form of the site beyond the main villa building (Smith *et al.* 2016). In this respect the villa at Ketton is important, as seemingly the entire settlement core survives in plan – allowing not just a consideration of the main house but the entire range of social, economic and ritual activity across the site.

Given both the quality of the existing survey evidence and the very small scale of the current round of evaluative excavation, there is great potential for further archaeological research on the villa surrounding a range of important but as yet unanswered questions about its history, character and significance. In particular, there is scope for limited evaluative excavation of a number of the buildings to better establish their state of preservation, chronological development and character.

Extensive excavation and survey of the full extent of villas and their immediate surroundings are still comparatively rare in Britain, but when this has occurred it is common to find further ancillary structures and activities closely associated with the site. This can range from large agricultural buildings such as the massive aisled barn located some 100m to the east of the main villa complex at Winterton, Lincs (Goodburn 1978), to cemeteries and a temple/mausoleum some 200m north of the Bancroft Villa, Bucks (Williams and Zeepvat 1994), or the extensive networks of

field systems, roads and enclosures around North Leigh, Oxon (Creighton and Allen 2017) and Brading, Isle of Wight (Payne 2010).

The villa's riverine setting

A second significant aspect of the Ketton villa is its substantially intact riverine setting. Whilst a significant part of the villa sits on the hillside above a bend in the River Chater, buildings B5 and B7 lie on the lower slopes immediately adjacent to the now alluviated valley bottom. Their location next to magnetic anomalies, consistent with the presence of alluvial deposits and palaeochannels, indicates the potential for riverside or river front structures and activities at the villa. Whilst the geophysical survey data alone is insufficient to characterise the nature of this evidence, this area of the site has significant potential for the investigation of water management practices and potential investigation of riverside structures such as mills (with excavated examples being known from the region at Redlands Farm, Stanwick and Towcester, Wood Burcote), ponds, revetments, jetties or even river crossings.

Equally, the presence of such alluvial deposits and relict water courses beside and potentially burying parts of the site provide the opportunity for the survival of significant palaeo-environmental remains. Published analyses of the wider paleoenvironment of Roman rural sites in the region is very scarce (Taylor 2006), and still largely focused on the major river valleys such as the Nene and Soar that have been subject to large-scale mineral extraction and developer funded archaeology (e.g. Brown *et al.* 1994 and 2009; Meadows *et al.* 2009). Whilst the preservation of deposits for palynological or macrobotanical sampling in a smaller valley such as the Chater is unknown, some work to evaluate the potential of deposits in this stretch of the valley would be valuable.

The wider landscape setting

Finally, the site at Ketton has significant potential for the study of a villa within its wider landscape setting. Many of the known villas in the region (and indeed nationally) were recorded as antiquarian discoveries, or partially excavated as part of research or developer funded projects ahead of development. Consequently, we frequently know little of their wider landscape setting. Much recent literature on the future study of Roman rural settlement has emphasised the need to better understand the wider dynamics of rural settlements through time, and their articulation with the field systems, trackways and other features of the wider landscape of which they were a part (e.g. Taylor 2006; Millett 2016; Smith *et al.* 2016). At Ketton the area around the site is a largely agricultural landscape that is only marginally affected by encroachment from modern transport infrastructure and settlement. Equally, and unlike most villas in this region in the Lower Welland and Nene valleys, the hinterland of the villa has not been subject to large-scale mineral extraction or urban sprawl.

Consequently, the modern rural landscape around Ketton provides an ideal context for survey-based fieldwork (e.g. geoprospection, fieldwalking) that would better establish the villa’s landscape context, and so better understand the role of villas as complete agricultural settlements and communities. Equally, the survival of this wider landscape context provides the opportunity to assess another area of current concern, namely, local settlement dynamics in the form of any nearby evidence for Late Iron Age and/or early Roman precursors for the site, contemporary later Roman settlements; and any Anglo-Saxon settlement in its vicinity through geoprospection and field survey.

The Rutland villa – looking ahead

Clearly, the discovery of this major new archaeological site, with its unique ancient artwork, is a substantial addition to what is already known about Roman Rutland, and the quality and completeness of the archaeology offers much potential for further research. Additional excavation has been carried out in 2022, in a combined effort by ULAS, the School of Archaeology and Ancient History at University of Leicester and Historic England. The aim of this work was to evaluate a wider area of the villa complex, using the geophysical survey results to target certain areas and buildings, to provide a better understanding of the site as a whole. A period of analysis and reporting will follow, involving specialists from all the project collaborators, and a full report will be published in due course. Meanwhile, Rutland County Council have engaged museum display consultants to consider options for communicating the results of the project to wider audiences.

Much work is to be done on analysing the results, but once completed the story of this remarkable villa complex should shed a fascinating light on villa life in late Roman Britain that will inform not only on Rutland, but will have a bearing on how this period is understood on a national level as well.

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imagery, taking the story well beyond Rutland and enhancing the significance of the discovery. The excavations could not have been possible without a small army of excavators including many University of Leicester archaeology students, Debbie Frearson, ULAS colleagues Adam Clapton, Andrew McLeish, Jonathan Landless, Ian Reeds, Matthew Beamish, Donald Clark and George Issit. The authors are also grateful to LAHS for the provision of a research grant towards the post-excavation work of the project.

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