



Chichester and District Archaeology Society

West Wittering Church Field Trial Trench

June 2013



Figure 1. The excavation in progress

Background

West Wittering Church Field has recently been acquired by The West Wittering Estate. The field is to the west of the church and borders the graveyard. The field is currently to rough grass; the Estate's plan is to allow the field to revert to a wildflower meadow. Given the age of the church, the implications of long term occupation of the surrounding area and because the field has not been ploughed in living memory, there is the possibility that evidence of previous occupation exists. As a result, the Estate agreed to allow the Chichester and District Archaeology Society (CDAS) to carry out a geophysical survey.

The survey was carried out in two phases. The first phase consisted of a survey of the whole field taking readings at 1 metre intervals. After considering these results, it was decided to re-survey part of the field taking readings at 0.5 metre intervals.

The results of the more detailed survey were of sufficient interest for CDAS to propose digging a 1 metre by 10 metre trial trench with three objectives:

1. Confirm the existence of the main features seen on the geophysical plots.
2. Clarify the nature of the features and understand whether a further larger scale excavation would be justified.
3. Ideally, discover sufficient evidence to date the feature.

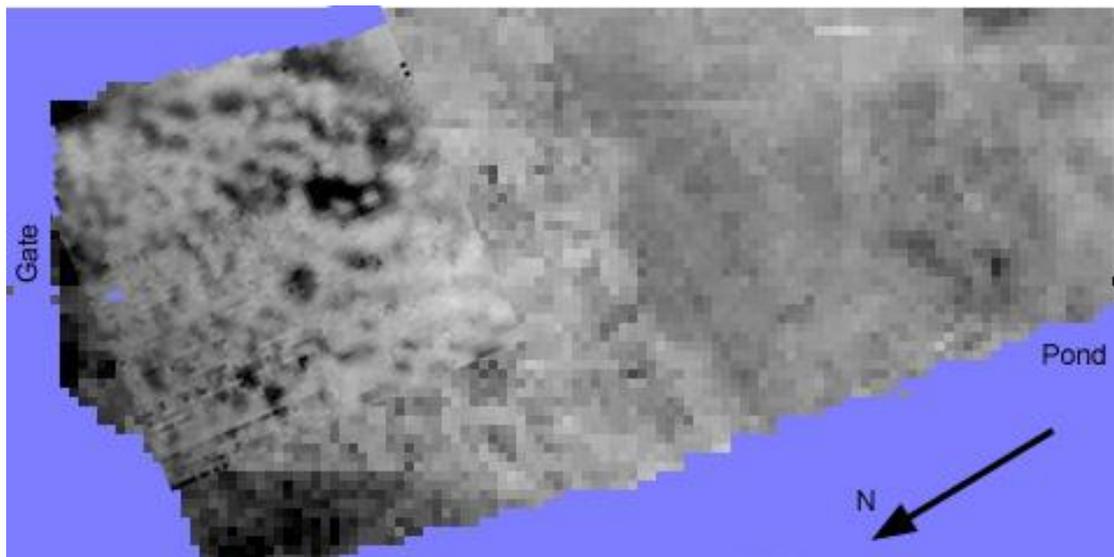
Volunteer Participation & Training

All volunteers were briefed about the Health and Safety conditions on site (Appendix 1). In total CDAS spent 5 days on this excavation. Including set-up, metal detecting and finds processing, 20 members were involved providing 40 man days of resource (Appendix 2).

Geophysical Survey

Figure 2 shows the plot that resulted from both the geophysical surveys in February and March 2013. Towards the north eastern corner of the site the plot indicates that a structure could have been present.

Figure 2. 0.5 metre plot overlaid on 1.0 metre plot



Locating the trench

The original grid of 30 metre squares was re-established. The grid was orientated parallel to the section of the cemetery wall south of the stile and 1.5m west of it. The bearing of this line was 211 degrees magnetic.

A 50mm square semi-permanent marker post was placed in the garden fence to the north. This post was 21.7m north of the position at which the theodolite was set up. A second semi-permanent marker (A) was set up along the line of the fence separating the pond from the field. This was 60.15m south of the theodolite position. A further point (B) was established 30 west of the theodolite position at right angles to the base line.

The line A-B provided the orientation of the 0.5 metre survey grid (Figure 2).

Figure 2. 0.5 metre grid alignment.

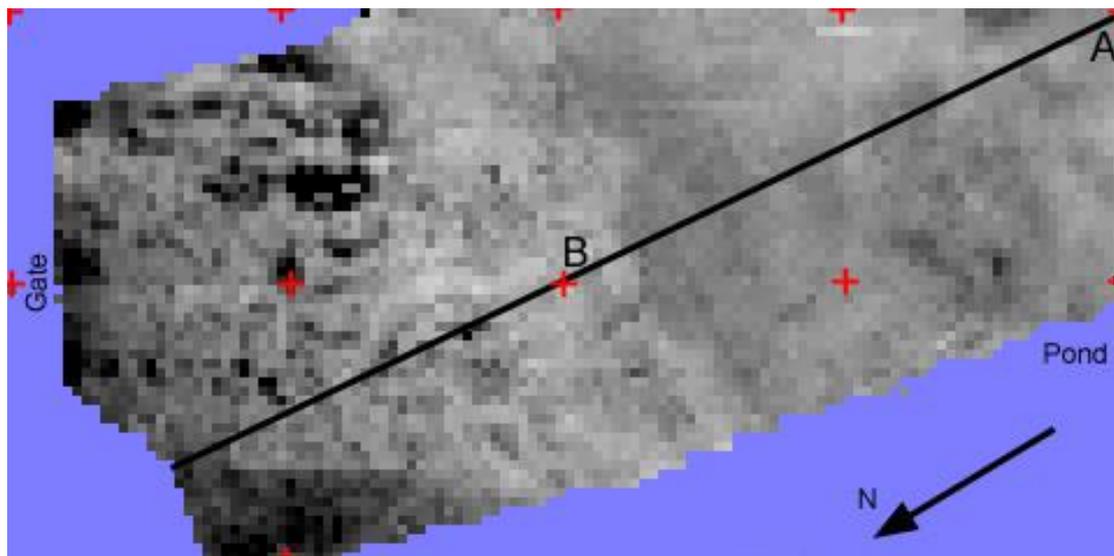
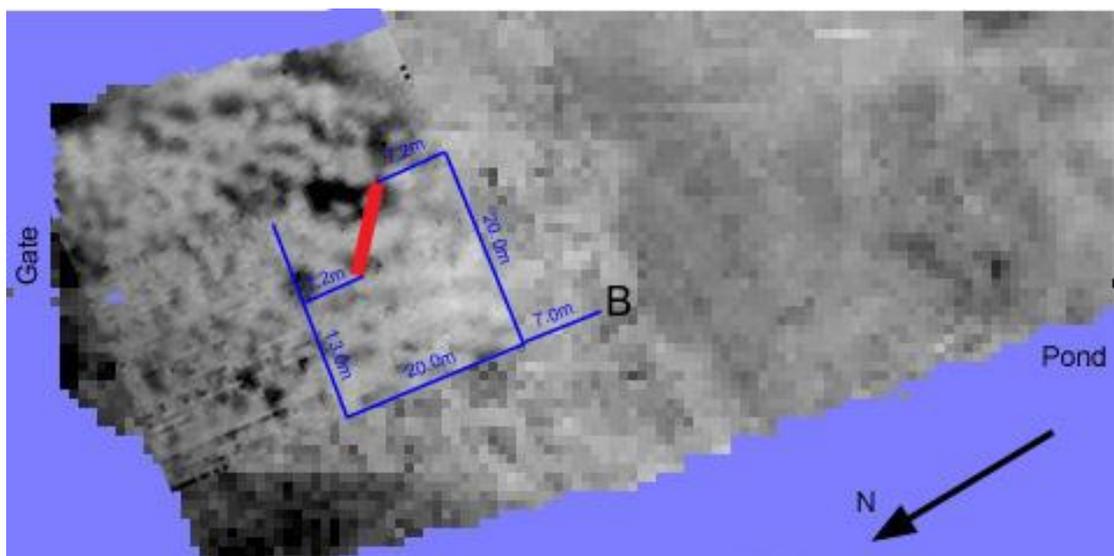


Figure 3. Location of Trench



The trench was located relative to point B at the corner of the 0.5 metre survey grid as shown in Figure 3 above. This location was chosen to cut across the most interesting looking responses on the geophys survey.

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The turf was removed using a turf cutter; coiled in 2 metre strips and laid aside on a tarpaulin to be replaced at the end of the dig.

Excavation - Gravel Layer.

Once the turf had been removed, the soil was excavated by hand. It quickly became clear that about 100mm below the surface was a large area of gravel. Above the gravel layer was very fine alluvial soil which contained no stones or larger fragments. It extended throughout the excavated area (Figures 4 and 5). The presence of these layers confirms the local assertions that the field had not been ploughed in living memory. The pottery finds on the top of the gravel layer were from a wide range of dates. This gravel layer is clear in all the section drawings in Appendix 4 - figures 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6.

While 19th century pottery predominated, there was also 16/17th century and Roman grey ware. There was also the partial bowls of two clay pipes, thought to be from the 19th century. This is a classic example of bioturbation. This is the term for “Changes to the nature, form, and arrangement of archaeological deposits and sediments as a result of biological activity in the ground. This includes root activity from plants and trees; animal activity; and the effects of microorganisms...” (Darvill, 2002). The finds were more extensive and in greater volume than would have been expected by excavating a normal field. This implies that there were settlements at the periods of the finds relatively close to the field.

Figure 4 – Gravel layer about 100mm below the surface



Figure 5 – Showing the gravel layer with fine alluvial soil above – eastern end of the trench



Further Excavation.

The gravel layer discussed above was transparent to the geophysical survey, because it did not feature on the plot. Consequently, two deeper areas were excavated at the eastern and western ends of the trench. As the gravel layer was removed it became clear that it was a thin deposit on top of what had then been the surface. There was no evidence of any foundation layer at all.

The eastern end of the trench contained more 19th century pottery shards.

The western end of the trench contained a variety of straw tempered Saxo-Norman pottery. Some sherds were possibly earlier – 7th 8th and through the 9th centuries. In addition there was some later medieval pottery.

The layout of the excavated trench is shown in Appendix 4, figure 4.1.

The excavation uncovered substantial flint footings. These were in the locations shown on the geophysical survey plot. It is reasonable to assume that the other responses from the resistivity survey are also flint footings that are similar in character.

Alongside the footings, the excavation was continued down until yellowish clay was reached (Figure 6). The yellowish clay was interpreted as the natural earth at this location.

Figure 6. Yellowish clay alongside the footings



As the excavation progressed, some particularly damp patches were interpreted as features. One was in the location of the square pale (that is damp) feature visible at the eastern end of the trenches on the plot in figures 2 and 3. This was carefully excavated and produced no finds, and eventually came down onto the yellowish clay mentioned above (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Excavation of the damp pit showing yellowish clay at the base.



Metal Detecting

A metal detector was used during the excavation in three ways:

- To periodically scan the trench to pick up metal objects that might otherwise be lost.
- To scan the spoil heap.
- To scan the surrounding area.

All the finds have been collected and catalogued.

The scan of the surrounding area picked up a number of 20th century coins all of which were found around the layer of the gravel, which appeared to be present over most of the flat area

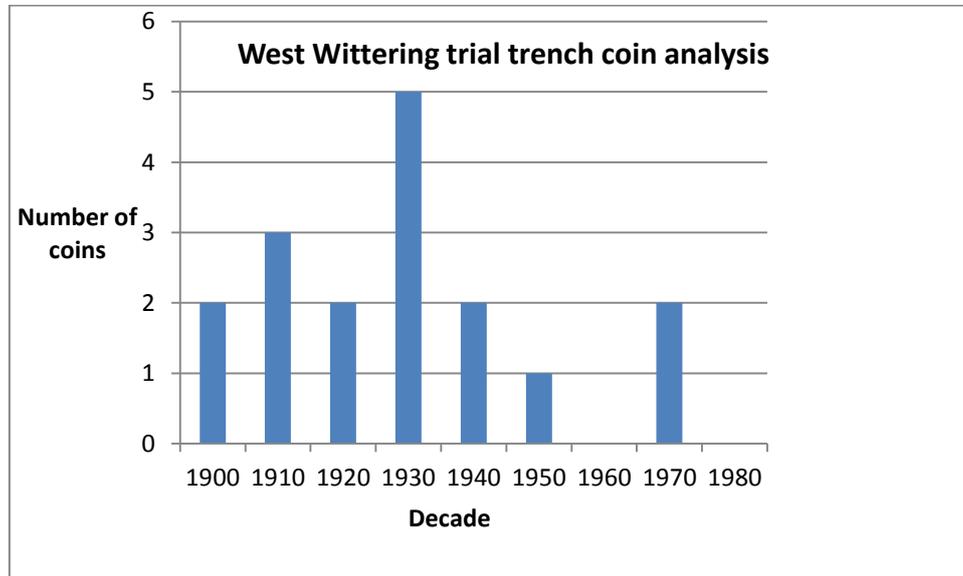
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at the northern end of the field. An analysis of these coins in figure 8 shows that the coins were predominantly from the first half of the 20th century. One coin was not included in the analysis because it had been worn completely smooth on both faces.

A 1938 halfpenny was completely smooth on one side. We believe that this was used to play the game shove halfpenny.

Figure 8 Coin Analysis



Interpretation

The phasing could be:

Initially, there was Middle Saxon and later medieval occupation. This occupation resulted in a number of associated structures including some structures constructed from 'rubble' (wall footings, floors, hearths, yard surfaces, etc.).

Subsequently, these structures were abandoned and the remains are left to become, gradually, archaeology beneath the surface of a paddock.

The paddock was ploughed extensively for a few years in the early modern period and artefacts from middens are introduced in manuring it.

For some reason the field was returned to long-term pasture some time ago, and was not subsequently ploughed.

During the early 20th century, the northern end of the field seems to have been used for communal events. The presence of a halfpenny modified for the pub game of shove halfpenny, might indicate that the event was a fundraiser – possibly for the church.

The paucity of finds at the level of the footings makes dating very difficult. Furthermore, the method of construction is not date specific.

One interpretation could be that the footings belong to an aisled building aligned north east – south west. The square damp patch with no finds could have been the site of a pad stone – now removed. Equally, this may not be an aisled building at all, but a series of small buildings.

Regrettably, in dating the structure and assessing its purpose, the excavation made little progress.

Next Steps

Unless new and compelling evidence is forthcoming, there is no reason to believe that excavating a larger area would provide better dating evidence than we already have. We therefore conclude that no further action is worthwhile.

Bibliography

Darvill, T., 2002. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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