Trench MF8b narrative

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Introduction

Trench 8b was made up of a group of three small exploratory trenches. For the purposes of this narrative a numerical sequence has been applied to the three trenches that make up 8b re 8b1, 8b2 and 8b3. These exploratory trenches were based on the results of the magnetometer survey of the area which identified several anomalies.

Trenches 8b1 and 8b2 were first opened in 2002 and were positioned to the south of the Roman arena aimed at investigating the natural coomb deposit (superficial deposit of weathered chalk and flint debris) and to further explore the Roman drain that ran southwards from the arena. Trench 8b3 was opened in 2004 and was the largest of the three trenches. This trench was positioned 3m south of Trench 8b1 and 1m east of Trench 8b2. Notable across these three trenches is layer (8501), a common layer comprised of sub-soil within which large numbers of bronze, glass and iron objects of Romano-British date were found. It does appear that these finds were probably deliberately deposited and if so, this does present an intriguing question of why they were in this remote location but not connected with any convincing evidence of structures. These finds therefore provide evidence of previously unsuspected set of activities, possibly ritual deposition of votive objects, being carried out just outside the south bank of the arena.

In 2003 Trench 8b was extended initially to determine the southern extent of the bank construction of the arena, as well as to better explore the area surrounding the vicinity where many small finds were recovered towards the end of the previous excavation season 2002. The extension south from the end of Trench 9 quickly revealed a linear stone structure cutting across the trench. This structure consisted of a single course of limestone blocks of varying sizes. The position of the structure is significant, however, as it rests at the end of the far additions to the bank, overlying only a long thin layer of clay from the last clay deposit of the bank. A diffuse layer of rubble extended south of the structure, and as this layer was reached significant quantities of first animal bone and then small finds were recovered. These finds extended south for some metres from this point, and it is possible that the stone courses may have delineated the back of the arena bank. Small finds throughout the southern extent of Trench 8b consisted almost exclusively of bronze brooches, bone and bronze pins, Roman coins, glass beads and trinket rings. The preservation of the small finds was exceptional and some showed signs of deliberate defacement. Further structures were uncovered in the southwestern corner of the trench, and all appear to be associated with a layer of fine rubble resting on a pre-Roman surface evident across both trenches 8b and 9. At least six structures were also found, consisting of a small collection of angular fine stones arranged in triangular or circular patterns around a small void. A cut was apparent in the excavation of only one of these and they therefore may represent post platforms for small wooden structures, possibly shrines, resting atop of a deliberately laid cobbled surface. Small finds stopped almost immediately underneath the laid rubble surface, and these structures (and the associated cobble surface) represent the only Romano-British activity immediately south of the arena.

Trench 8b1

Initially trench 8b 1 opened in 2002, was positioned to determine the southern extent of the arena's bank construction as well as to better explore the area surrounding the vicinity where many small finds were recovered towards the end of the 2002 season. Trench 8b1 measured

4m x 2m and was set north-south on its longest axis. This extension south from the end of Trench 9 quickly revealed a linear stone structure [8506] cross cutting the trench from north-west to south-east. This structure consisted of a single course of angular pieces of limestone laying on a coarse rubble layer (8513) on its south side that formed a possible path up to 1m wide. The position of this structure is significant as it edges the turf additions to the arena embankment, overlying only a long layer of clay, from the last clay deposit of the bank. It is possible that this structure delineated the bank of the arena. A diffuse layer of rubble (8513) extended south of the stone structure and within this layer significant quantities of first animal bone and then small finds were recovered. These finds extended a metre or so from the structure.

Trench 8b2
Also opened in 2002, this trench was positioned approximately five metres southwest of Trench 8b1 and one metre west of the later trench 8b3. Trench 8b2 was a relatively small trench measuring 3m x 1.7m and set east-west on its longest axis.

Trench 8b2 identified further structures that all appear to be associated with a layer of fine rubble (8512) laying on a pre-Roman surface (8522). This surface was evident across both trenches 8b and Trench 9 in the arena. Seven structures were found within this fine rubble layer [8519], [8521], [8524], [8525], [8526], [8528] and [8529], each consisting of small groups of limestones arranged in triangular or circular patterns around a small void. In three of these structures [8519], [8528] and 8529] the stones were set in an upright position that would suggest that these structures were created deliberately (further details of these are given in the cuts and structured section of this narrative). These structures were set around a feature (8520) that consisted of a large oval depression toward the west of the trench. This depression of fine brown sandy material with rubble inclusions together with some larger stones set on end contained the remains of a single Roman pot that had contained fragmentary pieces of bone (possibly human) together with pieces of charcoal. This feature strongly suggests the possibility of a funerary or ritual structure. Also, within this feature a bronze finger ring and a bone hairpin were found.

Within layer (8512) and around the stone structures several small finds were recovered, many of which were of a personal nature that further supports the possibility that some form of ritual activity may have taken place here. Offerings may have been placed in some form of structure, the nature of which is now hard to determine. In total 64 small finds were recovered within these groups of stones. These finds included 37 items of jewellery or toilet implements (bronze brooches, bone/antler hairpins and nail cleaners), including two Roman coins of the late 3rd to 4th centuries. Small finds stopped almost immediately beneath the laid rubble surface. At the time of excavation, the idea was that this group of stone structures may have been possible post pads however, this has since been ruled out given the nature and construction of these structures.

The structures in both trenches 8b1 and 2, and the associated cobbled surface in 8b1represent the only Romano-British activity immediately south of the arena.

Trench 8b3
Trench 8b3 opened in 2004 was the largest of the three trenches and was positioned 3m south of 8b1 and 1m to the east of 8b2. This trench was deliberately sited over the considered north-south line of the drain from the arena as it travelled south towards the river Ock. This

siting provided an evaluation of the drain at this point. This trench measured 7.5m x 3m and was set north-south on its longest axis

The drain which was approximately 1.3m in width, entered the trench from the northeast running the length of the trench and exited at the trenches southwest bottom edge.
Two significant features were excavated along the line of the exposed drain cut [8571]. In the northerly section of the drain a circular feature [8542] was excavated which contained a concentration of Roman tile within a matrix of dark greasy, sandy loam, this feature corresponded with a large anomaly visible on the magnetometer survey. Further excavation of this feature showed it to be a large pit centred over the drain its precise purpose can only be speculated. It was suggested that this might have formed a silt trap within the drain, but its construction was rather crude in comparison to the carefully constructed drain with side coursing and capping stones. However, given the Roman tile and other Roman finds within the pit's fill layers it was used within the Roman period and not later. The second feature just south of the pit was a section of Roman drain. The cut of the drain [8571] was clearly identified and showed the drain to be approximately 1.5m wide at this point. Further excavation showed the drain to be about 0.8m deep down the capping stones [8576] set over the drain channel. It was not possible to excavate beneath the capping stones as the base of the trench was waterlogged. The drain trench above the capping stones was back filled (8567) over the capping stones which probably occurred during the construction of the drain.

The level and nature of the small finds across the three trenches does suggest that this area may represent a deliberately delineated area where votive offerings were made, which may have been placed within some form of structure, the nature of which is now hard to determine. Coins recovered from these trenches extend into the 4th century AD.

Contexts

(8500). Topsoil, all trenches.

Trench 8b1. Northern trench

(8505). Sub-soil. This layer sat directly below the topsoil (8500) and consisted of mid-brown silty sub-soil varied in depth 40–70 cm. Signs of plough damage to this layer were recorded. Significant within this layer was the number of small finds, in total 74 - animal bone plus pottery fragments and metal objects.

[8506]. Stone path. Possible stone path. This feature appears as a band of flat and angular pieces of limestone laid across the upper section of the trench that form what may have been a paved surface of a path. This structure was a single course of stones that cut across the trench in a north-west to south-east alignment. At its widest point it measured approximately 0.9m wide. This is also thought to be associated with the lower limit of the arena embankment.

(8513). Rubble. An area of rubble extending from the south edge of structure [8506], and may have been part of the substrate/foundation for the stone structure. This layer forms a club shaped area across the trench from the southern edge of the stone structure extending 2m across the trench and 1m at its widest point and narrowing to 40cm along its length.

(8515). Clay. A clay layer with rubble and stone inclusions within which the rubble layer (8513) sits. Below (8513) layer at the southern end of the trench is layer (8505).

[8535]. Pit/ Structure. A possible structure that was made up of several pieces of limestone arranged in a small delta shaped pit. This feature was positioned directly below structure [8506]. It may also be part of the rubble layer (8513) as they both meet at this point or possibly part of the foundation for structure [8506].

Trench 8b2. The western trench.

(8502). (8512/27). Subsoil. Important layers of subsoil with (8502) overlying (8512/27) within which many small finds were recovered many of them being of a personal nature. Also, within layer (8512) six separate groups of stones set in circular or triangular pattern forming a small central void. These stone groupings together with the small finds strongly suggest that some form of votive activity may have been carried out here. Also, within these layers a small shallow pit [8520] was noted that contained the remains of a broken Roman pottery vessel together with pieces of bone (possibly human) and pieces of charcoal. Together these finds may suggest votive or ritual funerary activity.

[8519]. Structure. Group of stones. A cluster of stones forming a circular group about 30cm round. Together with the finds is strongly suggestive of a votive purpose.

[8520]. (8527) Pit. A shallow pit within which lay a group of stones varying in size from several large pieces to medium and fine, within which the remains of a whole Roman pottery vessel together with pieces of bone (possibly human) and charcoal that suggest a possible funerary or ritual association. The larger stones of this grouping were embedded into layer (8527) below it.

[8521]. Structure. A group of four large pieces of stone positioned just inside the southern edge of the trench (there may have been other stones as part of this group in the trench edge that were not excavated). This group of stones were laid in a circular formation producing a void of about 20 cm.

[8524]. Structure. A compact group of angular stones forming a rectangle. The larger being set into layer (8527). This grouping was set within an area of fine/coarse rubble that made up part of (8512). Possibly a random grouping but thought to be a deliberately laid feature that may have a votive association.

[8525]. Structure. Compact group of angular stones that form a rough circle of about 40cm. This grouping may also be votive.

[8526]. Structure. Similar to [8525]. This group of stones formed a rough circle of 30cm.

This grouping was also thought to be a votive structure.

[8528]. Structure. A group of seven stones laying in a circle with a central void of about 15cm. These stones were laid on end, embedded into layer (8527). This grouping was also thought to be a possible votive structure.

[8529]. Structure. A circular collection of five stones, set into the ground end on forming a central void of 10cm. This grouping was also thought to be a deliberately laid votive structure.

[8541]. Pit. A shallow pit 70cm in diameter x 20cm in depth set into layer (8527) and overlain by layer (8512). This pit had gently dished sides forming a basin shape.

(8539). Fill. Fills of [8541] comprising sandy loam and varying sized pieces of
(8544). Fill. limestone surmounted with a large flat piece of limestone.

Trench 8b3. The eastern trench.

[8542]. Pit. Cut of a deliberately dug pit in the northern end of the trench, sited
[8550] directly over the line of the drain from the arena. This cut appears as semi-circular from the east edge of the trench projecting 1m into the trench and 2m along the trench baulk. Excavation showed that the pit was dug down to the base of the Roman drain and was perhaps intended as a silt trap. The base of the pit was flat and roughly circular and approximately 1m in diameter. A single large flat piece of limestone remained in the pit and is thought to be a remaining drain capping stone (8576). Inclusions such as Roman pottery and animal bone found within the various layers strongly suggest that the pit was dug during the Roman period and not at a later date. Six fills.

(8543). Top fill. A compressed thin layer 4cm/5cm comprising sandy loam with pieces of animal bone, Roman pottery and tile.

(8551). Mid fill. A compact layer of brown loam with oyster shell, stone and Roman pot plus Roman bronze coins (3rd to 4th century).

(8553). Mid fill. A thin layer of mixed dump material containing lumps of mortar, oyster shell, Roman tile, iron nails and Roman pottery.

(8554). Mid fill. Layer of mid brown loam with animal bone, Roman tile and pottery (including the base of a Samian ware pot) and oyster shell.

(8572). Mid fill. A sandy silt layer with animal bone, stones, Roman pottery and charcoal.

(8573). Bottom. Yellow sand with large pieces of stone including Roman pottery, animal bone and iron pins.

(8576). Stone. A large single flat stone measuring 55cm x 35cm, thought to be capping from the original build of the drain at the bottom of the pit.

(8574). Layer. Associated layer into which the pit was cut and forms the sides of the pit. Composed of yellow sandy silt. This is a natural layer.

[8571]. Drain cut. The cut of the Roman drain from the arena appeared as two parallel lines set 1.5 m apart that ran from the centre of the trench just below the position of the pit to the southern edge of the trench. These lines provided a guide from which to determine the course of the drain running diagonally across the trench from northeast to south-west. Excavation of the drain showed the structure to have deep parallel sides and with only one fill.

(8567). Single fill. The fill of the drain cut over the capping stones [8576] appears to have consisted of a single back fill directly after construction.

[8576]. Capping stones. A series of large flat irregular pieces of limestone that formed the capping over the drain. These capping stones rested upon upright pieces of limestone that formed the side walls of the drain. The largest measured over a metre in width. It was not possible to excavate beyond the capping stones as the trench was waterlogged.

Important layers

(8501). Layer. A general subsoil layer that extended across Trenches 8b2 and 8b3 made up of mid brown sandy loam. Within this layer 118 small finds were recovered (see small finds analysis below for detail).

(8563). Layer. A layer of mid brown sandy loam with animal bone and Roman tile fragments. This was a general layer that stretches the length of Trench 8b3 primarily on its western side from which large numbers of small finds were recovered.

(8564). Layer. An area in the southern half of Trench 8b3 directly over the line of the drain. This layer was made up of brown sandy loam that contained a large number of small finds (24) together with animal bone and Roman pottery.

(8565). Layer. A sandy loam layer alongside pit (8542) in Trench 8b3 within which a number of small finds were recovered.

Small finds

In total the three 8b trenches yielded 496 small finds. These were made up of 84 from trench 8b1, 80 from 8b2 and 78 from 8b3. There were also 118 finds recovered from a general layer (8501) that lay across trenches 8b2 and 8b3 exposed after the removal of topsoil. Given the unique nature of these small finds and their possible association with votive activity these subsoil finds have been included in this analysis. Normally finds that are found in subsoil layers that have been disturbed through ploughing would not be regarded as archaeologically significant, however, their proximity to these trenches provides argues for all these finds being kept together. This is further supported by the location of these trenches which are sited due south of the Roman arena but not close to any other structure that might explain why

these small finds were deposited in this location. A further nine small finds were recovered from the topsoil (8500) which have been excluded from this analysis.

Sheila Raven's report on the Votive Finds at Marcham (this website) references the work of Ann Woodward, an archaeologist who has conducted research on Romano-British votive objects and assemblages. Woodward categorised "personal trinkets" as a specific votive group. This group included all types of jewellery and small personal items like grooming equipment and spoons etc. The 8b trenches showed a marked concentration of copper-alloy finds in general and together with bone hairpins and points strongly reflect Woodward's votive group of "personal trinkets". Sheila Raven also points out that in Trenches MF24 and MF8b, two trenches that have shown strong evidence of votive activity, more Roman brooches were found than any other part of the Marcham site.

Context (8501)
This context was a general layer at subsoil level that lay across both trenches 8b2 and 8b3. The small finds included 37 items of jewellery made up of eight glass beads, seven hairpins, three bracelet fragments, seven earrings, a necklace fitting, two copper-alloy brooches and a copper-alloy finger ring. Other personal items included 34 copper-alloy needles and pins. Ten 3rd/4th century copper-alloy Roman coins together with a silver sestertius completed this group of finds.

Trench 8b1. The north trench. 84 small finds.
Many small finds from this trench came from a general context layer (8505), within which context [8506] the stone structure and context (5513) the rubble layer were situated. Within this group of finds were 16 items of jewellery and personal trinkets (four bone hair pins, five copper-alloy finger rings, four cu-alloy brooches, two earrings and a copper-alloy bracelet).

Within context (8513) the rubble layer, ten finds were found which included eight personal items (three pieces of jewellery, five bone pins and needles) and two 3rd/4th century copper-alloy Roman coins.

Within context (8506) the stone structure finds were limited to pieces of pottery, animal bone and pieces of charcoal.

Trench 8b2. The western trench. 80 small finds.
In this trench 64 small finds came from context (8512) which was a general layer within which six stone groupings were sited, contexts (8519), (8524), (8525), (8526), (8528) and (8529) together with context (8520) a shallow pit. These stone groupings are of particular interest as they appear to have been deliberately constructed, with each forming a small circular or triangular pattern with a central void. Some of the stone groupings were constructed with the stones set on end. These may represent personal shrines. The shallow pit (8520) is notable as it contained the remains of a Roman pottery vessel together with bone (possibly human) and charcoal and may have funerary associations. The construction of small cairns or stone groupings is a well attested votive practice during the Roman period within which votive offerings would be placed. Those in this trench together with the small finds do therefore take on a particular significance.

In total there were seven contexts within which small finds were recovered, contexts (8502) four finds, (8504) six finds, (8512) 64 finds, (8514) two finds, (8520) two finds and (8524) one find.

Many small finds (60) were made up of personal items that included 30 pieces of jewellery, seven toilet items and 23 needles and pins, primarily copper-alloy. These personal items strongly suggest the possibility of votive activity. Within the group of jewellery finds were nine copper-alloy brooches, seven copper-alloy finger rings, eight hair pins (primarily bone or antler), one earing and two glass beads.

Trench 8b3. The western trench. 78 finds.
The small finds from 8b3 came from 17 contexts, however significant amongst these were five contexts which accounted for 54 of the finds. Contexts (8554) seven finds, (8562) seven finds, (8563) ten finds, (8564) 24 finds and (8572) six finds. This trench was the largest of the three trenches and the finds were fairly scattered across the trench.

Context (8564) was a layer directly over the line of the Roman drain in the southern half of the trench that formed a capping layer over the original backfill of the drain. This layer also contained several pieces of animal bone and Roman pottery. Both contexts (8554) and (8572) were mid layer contexts within the pit in the northern half of the trench

Finds from this trench continue the trend of personal items, although there were no apparent votive structures. Amongst these small finds were 11 copper-alloy finger rings, 12 bone/antler hair pins, 26 largely copper-alloy pins and needles, eight copper-alloy brooches, four glass beads, six toilet implements, one earring, a bracelet fragment and nine 3rd/4th century copper-alloy Roman coins.

Jewellery items by type.

Glass beads.	14	Cu-alloy bracelet fragments.	3
Quartz beads.	2	Cu-alloy earing's.	11
Bone hair pins.	33	Cu-alloy Bracelet.	2
Cu-alloy brooches.	24	Cu-alloy necklace fitting.	1
Glass jewellery.	1	Cu-alloy finger rings.	23
Chain link.	1	Iron brooch.	1
Cu-alloy hairpin.	1	Iron finger ring.	1

Toilet implements by type

Cu-alloy Ligula.	3	Cu-alloy tweezers	4
Cu-alloy Spatula	3	Cu-ally nail cleaner	1
Cu-alloy Specillum.	2	Unspecified items	4

Roman Coins
A total of 46 Roman coins were recovered across the three trenches that primarily are of a 3rd and 4th century date. Amongst this group 21 have so far been identified by type, that includes

eight Copper-alloy Sestertius, four Copper-alloy Minimissimus, eight Copper-alloy Minims and a silver Denarius.

Pottery Analysis
The total assemblage of pottery from the three 8b trenches yielded 1,559 sherds. This was made up of 108 pieces of prehistoric (Iron Age) pottery and 1,451 Romano-British sherds.

Prehistoric pottery
The prehistoric pottery was made almost entirely of Prehistoric Coarse Ware (PCW) and one sherd of decorated ware. The bulk of the PCW pottery came from three contexts, as follows:

Context (8503) 36 sherds of PCW and context (8527) 31 sherds of PCW were layers within trench 8b1 that made up the base of the trench as part of a broader context (8505) within which the stone structure (possible path) lay. This surface was consistent with similar surfaces found in the excavations just to the north, in the embankment and the arena and may represent the original prehistoric occupation levels.

Context (8540) ten sherds of PCW. Similarly, this context was part of larger context (8512) that made up the base of Trench 8b2 within which the six stone structures and shallow pit were positioned. These layers may also be part of the wider prehistoric occupation levels.

The remaining 35 sherds were found distributed across all trenches in random finds of one, two or three per context.

Roman Pottery
The 1,451 Roman sherds were predominantly six specific pottery types which are as follows:

RCWR.	Roman Coarse Ware Reduced	660 sherds.	45.4%	
RCWO.	Roman Coarse Ware Oxidised.	203 sherds.	13.9%	
RFWR.	Roman Fine Ware Reduced.	168 sherds.	11.5%	1,264 sherds. 87.1%
RFWOX.	Roman Fine Ware	93 sherds.	6.4%	
RFWW.	Roman Fine Ware White.	83 sherds.	5.7%	
D.	Roman Decorated Ware.	57 sherds.	2.9%	

Major contexts
Context (8501) 310 sherds. RCWR pottery predominates with 192 sherds together with RCWO 39 sherds and RFWR at 33 sherds. This context was a general layer that spread across Trenches 8b2 and 8b3.

Context (8505) 294 sherds. RCWR pottery predominates with 138 sherds and RCWO with 70 sherds. This context was a subsoil layer forming the base of Trench 8b1. Spot dates were from the mid to late 4th century.

Context (8507) 84 sherds. With 36 sherds of RFWOX and 19 RCWR sherds. This context Was a small layer within Trench 8b1.

Context (8512) 210 sherds. RCWR with 114 sherds with RFWR with 38 sherds and 19 RCWO. This layer formed the base of trench 8b2. Spot dates were from the late 3rd century to the 4th century.

Context (8520) 78 sherds. Predominantly RCWR with 73 sherds. This context was a layer within the shallow pit in Trench 8b2.

Context (8551) 45 sherds. A wide mix of roman pottery types. This layer was a mid-fill layer in the large pit in Trench 8b3.

Context (8562) 53 sherds. Primarily RCWR with 22 sherds and a general mix of pottery types. This layer was a small area on the west side of Trench 8b3.

Context (8563) 88 sherds. RCWR at 21 sherds, RFWR at 20 sherds and RFWOX at 14 sherds. This context formed a large layer down the western side of Trench 8b3. Spot dates were from the late 3rd century to the 4th century.

Context (8564) 54 sherds. 16 sherds of RCWR and 16 sherds of RFWR plus a general spread of other types. This context was a layer in the southern half of Trench 8b3. Spot date ranged in date from the 2nd century (but in poor condition) to the 4th century.