Oxfordshire

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Geophysical Survey at North Farm, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Oxfordshire, 2016.

Introduction

In 2016 the MSc in Applied Landscape Archaeology programme, taught by Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, located its field survey training week at the Earth Trust in Little Wittenham. The field survey training was administered and financed by the Department and directed by David Griffiths. This report provides a summary of three geophysical surveys undertaken on the Earth Trust's land at North Farm, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. One of these surveys was performed during the field survey week and two were performed later in the autumn of 2016.

North Farm

In 2008, 2010 and 2012 the MSc field survey training week had been held in Dorchester-on-Thames as part of the Discovering Dorchester-on-Thames Project (Booth *et al.* 2012; Wintle *et al.* 2016; Wintle and Griffiths 2017). The 2016 training week provided an opportunity for survey training to take place on sites south of the River Thames. The Earth Trust (formerly the Northmoor Trust) is based at Hill Farm, Little Wittenham. An extensive archaeological survey of the land at and adjacent to Hill Farm was performed in the early 2000s (Allen *et al*. 2010). More recently, the Earth Trust has purchased adjoining land further east at North Farm in Brightwell. Training in earthwork and topographical survey took place on Castle Hill, Little Wittenham, and geophysical survey training was located at North Farm, Brightwell. The modern North Farm also includes land previously known as Lowerhill Farm.

Passing through North Farm is a bridleway way which is presumed to represent the line of the Roman road linking Silchester and Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxon HER 8924; Grundy 1918, 133-134; Malpas 1988). In 2004 a construction trench for a gas pipeline cut through this bridleway and a cobbled surface measuring about 6 metres in width and up to 20 cm in depth was observed in both trench sections. Two iron hobnails were found, one in the cobbled surface and one nearby. This provides a limited amount of evidence for a road surface dating to the Roman period (Wilson 2008, 288).

The Geophysical Surveys

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the three sites surveyed, the River Thames and the line of the presumed Roman road to Dorchester-on-Thames. The three sites all lie south of the River Thames and a short distance south-east of the Iron Age Dyke Hills enclosure. Also shown on figure 1 is the location where the gas pipeline crossed the presumed Roman road. The first site was surveyed in June 2016 as part of the MSc field survey training week and had been chosen because of its proximity to the Roman road and its use as pasture grazed by sheep.

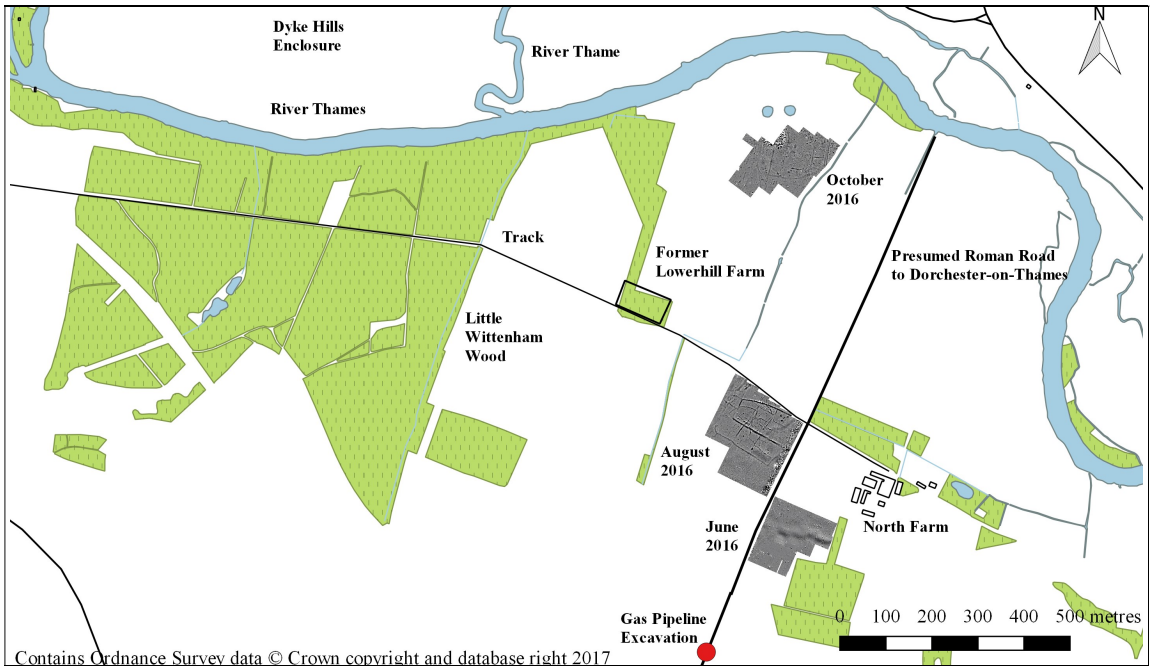


Figure 1 – Overview of Geophysical Surveys

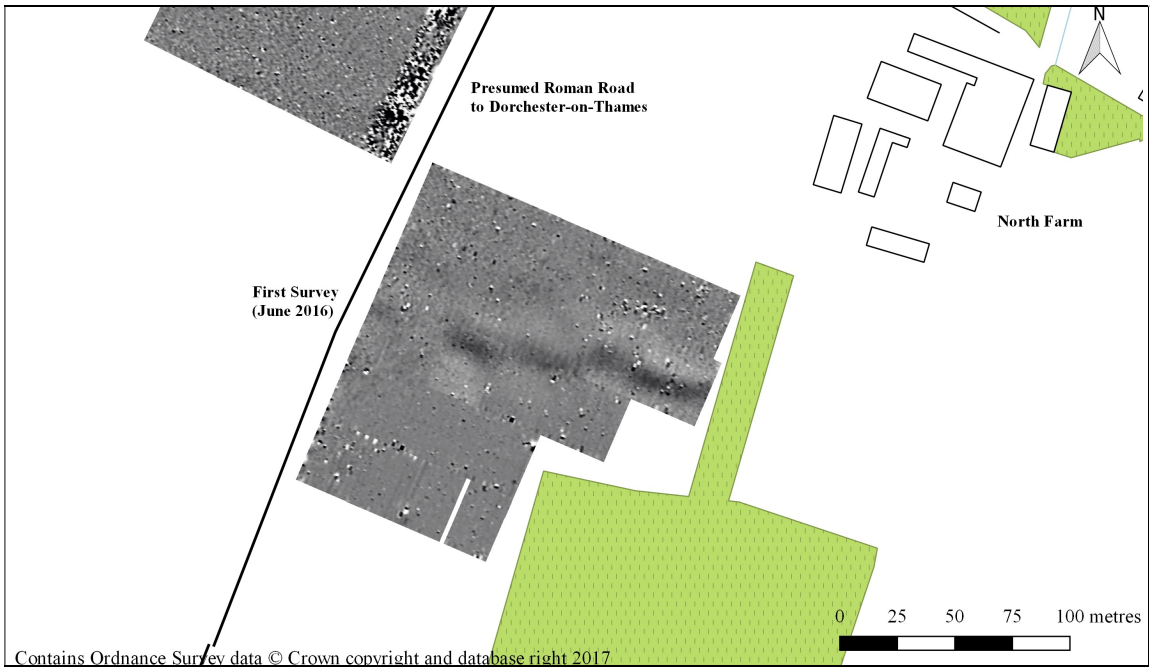


Figure 2 – Survey south-west of North Farm (June 2016)

A detailed view of the first survey is given in figure 2. The only feature appears to be a ditch running east-west across the survey area, possibly fading out before reaching the Roman road in the west. This may be a geological feature as it is very close to the boundary between greensand (to the south) and clay (to the north). Such a boundary would serve as a spring line and the feature may indicate a ditch to drain water from springs.

The second survey, illustrated in figure 3, took placed in late August 2016 on stubble after a cereal crop had been harvested. The site was previously known from cropmarks and is recorded as NMR Number SU59 SE144 and Oxfordshire HER 12305. The survey suggests the ditches may be more than one phase, with two prominent east-west ditches either cutting or cut by a series of fainter linear and curvilinear ditches. These latter may continue westwards beyond the survey area. The dappled linear feature in the east, parallel to the Roman road, represents a temporary trackway constructed to allow spoil dug from the 'River of Life' project area adjacent to the River Thames (Sims 2014, 77-78) to be transferred to a site further south.

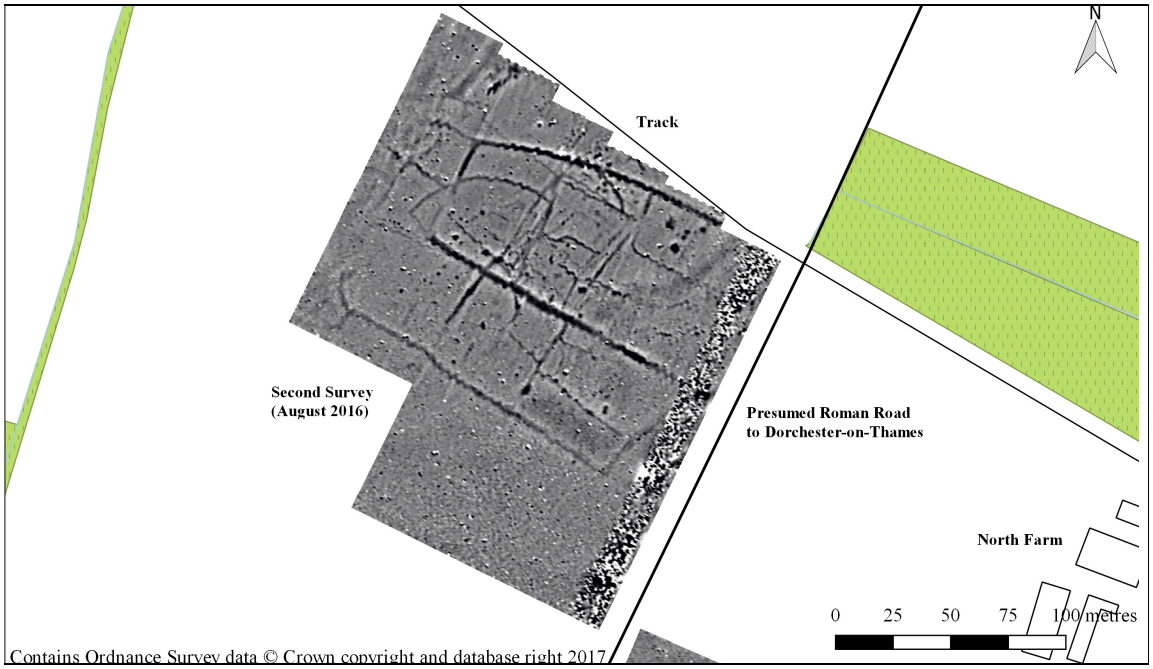


Figure 3 – Survey west of North Farm (August 2016)

During the survey pottery was collected from the surface of the field. This included 40 sherds of Roman date, including a few sherds of Samian and two of mortaria. Both the morphology of the features and the pottery evidence indicate a Roman date for many of the features.

The third survey, illustrated in figure 4, took place in October 2016 after a bean crop had been harvested and the field ploughed. The site had been observed as containing cropmarks and grassmarks on Google Earth by one of the MSc students (Margaret Dean) and appears to correspond to NMR Number SU59 SE49. In 1895 Samian and other Roman pottery had been found in a gravel pit about 500 yards north of Lowerhill farm (Manning 1898, 44). The location of the gravel quarry is recorded in the 1883, 1912 and 1932 6-inch Ordnance Survey maps. The 1960 Ordnance Survey map of SU59 shows the quarry as a slight feature and indicates the findspot of Roman pottery. By 1963 the quarry was disused and overgrown and by October 2016 the quarry had been backfilled with sand and other material (including shells). The quarry and its backfill are the cause of the substantial magnetic anomalies in the north-west part of the survey area.

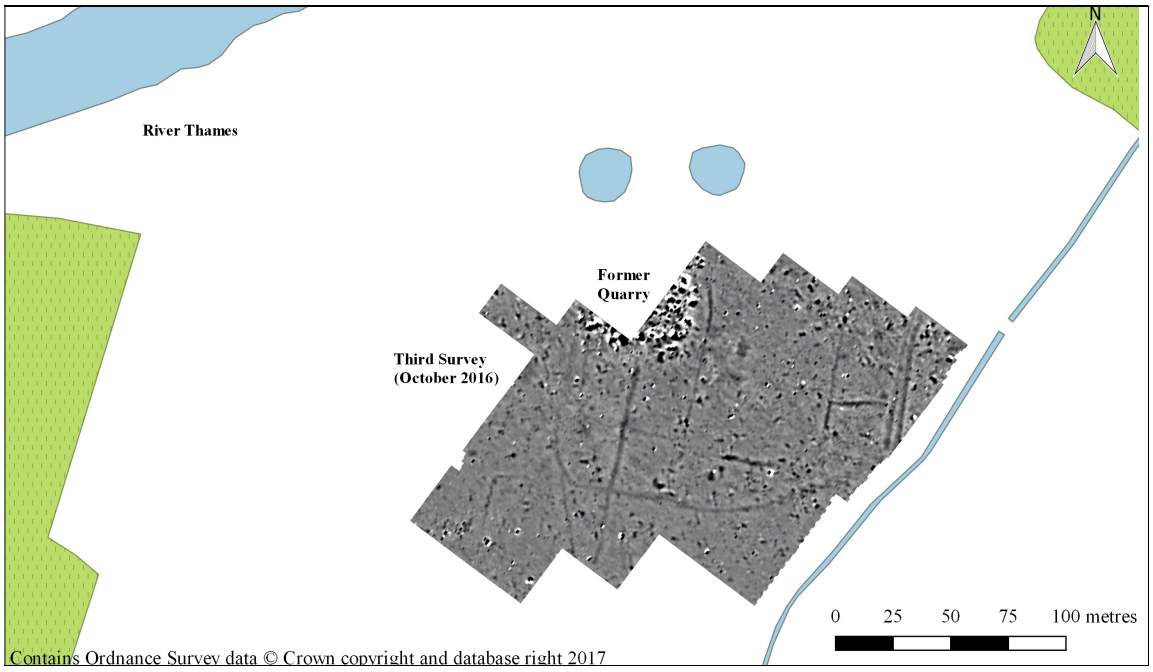


Figure 4 – Survey north-west of North Farm (October 2016)

The features detected by the geophysical survey correspond closely with those observed in Google Earth. It is probable that the features extend further west in the field, and also further north into a grass field adjacent to the River Thames and the 'River of Life' project. Some dating is provided by a small amount (7 sherds) of Roman coarsewares which were collected from the ploughed surface during the survey. Earlier, in July 2015, one of the authors had found a large Samian sherd about 200 metres east of the survey area, near the River Thames and not far from the line of the Roman road.

Discussion

Three sites have been surveyed close to the presumed line of the Roman road leading from Silchester to Dorchester-on-Thames, and very close to the point where the road would have crossed the River Thames. Two of the sites suggest Roman and possibly earlier occupation. The site surveyed in August 2016 lies very close to the road and may have some spatial relationship with it. In contrast, the site surveyed in October 2016 lies further from the road and there do not appear to be any features linking it to the road.

Acknowledgements

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