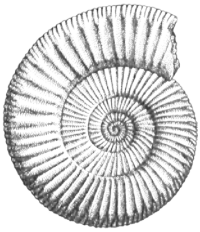
CORAL RAG

The Marcham Society Journal

Volume 7



Marcham 2007

FIELD WALKING IN BIG LEAS FIELD, MANOR FARM, MARCHAM

Roger Gelder

In August 2005 Janey Cumber, secretary to the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society (AAAHS), asked the Society if they were interested in doing a field walk – collecting and evaluating potsherds and other artefacts. Big Leas, a field just south of Marcham owned by the Cumber family, was due to be ploughed. Of course we were interested, particularly since we were told that Roman potsherds had been turned up during previous ploughing. Previous articles in *Coral Rag* have talked of the Oxford University excavation at the Frilford end of the farm, and this is just a kilometre distant to the northwest from Big Leas, as is shown in Figure 1.[1] Big Leas (Fig. 2 page 20) is also home to a salt-water spring where wild sea celery (*Apium graveolens*) grows.

Old English for celery is *merece*, and it is from this word that the place-name of Marcham is derived.[2] It is thought that the celery may have been farmed in Saxon times or earlier, and Janey and her husband Will were keen to know whether any artefacts that turned up in Big Leas might point to its cultivation during the Roman period. There is also a possibility that the salt-water spring, very unusual so far inland, might once have been venerated, and a field walk might show up evidence of a shrine.

A first view of the field was daunting – you could not see the far end, it was so long! In fact it is some 550m long (N-S) and 350m wide (E-W), with drainage ditches along the north and west boundaries, the modern Ock River (previously the Norbrook) to the south, and Mill Road (once known as Werg Mill Lane) to the east.[3] The Marcham Enclosure Map (1818) and the Roque map of Berkshire (1761) both show earlier layouts of the field (Figs. 3 and 4, see pages 21 and 22) which Will thinks may have been water meadow in the modern era until it was drained some time during the 1960s.

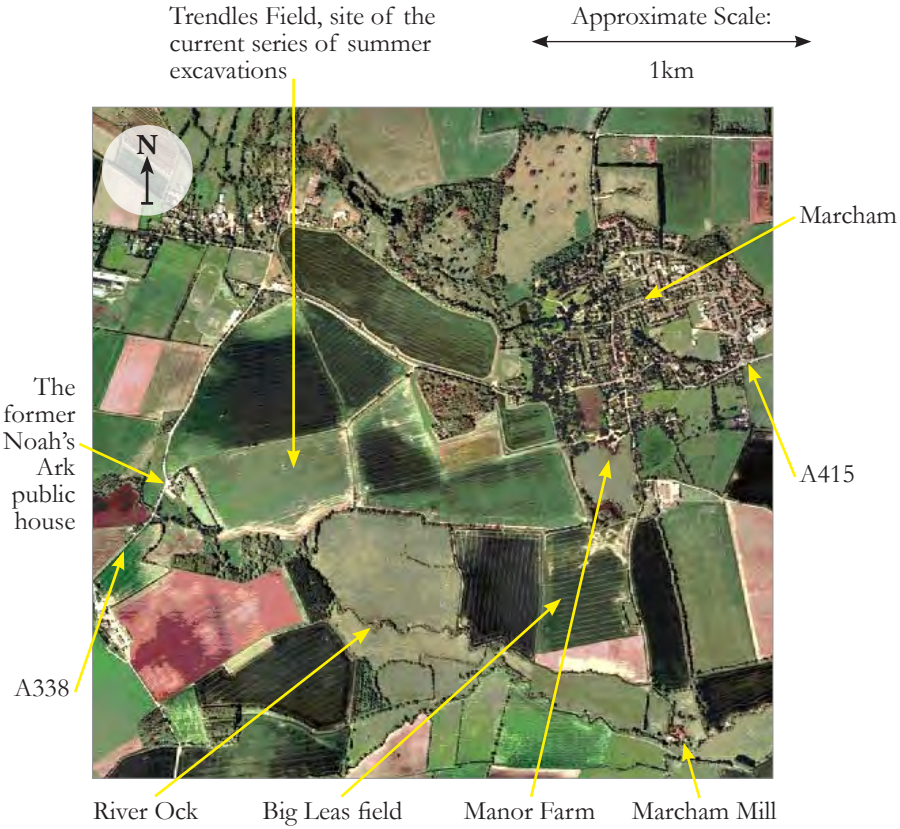


Figure 1

Aerial photograph of fields to the south and west of Marcham. Taken, probably, in July 2000.

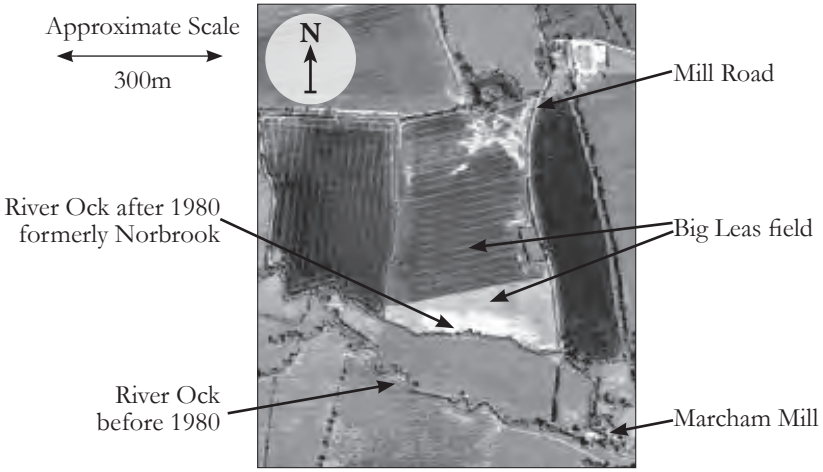


Figure 2

Aerial photograph showing Big Leas field. Taken, probably, in July 2000.

The light-coloured 'splodges' in the north-east corner are wet areas. The salt spring and the wild celery are in this part of the field. The fodder crop on the main part of the field has just been cut. The triangular area at the south of the field shows as a lighter colour because it had been left fallow.

Big Leas today is 18.64 hectares (47 acres). In the area of the saline spring (the north-east corner) the drainage has broken down, resulting in some serious damp patches. These wet areas show as pale patches in the aerial photograph (Fig. 2). The south end of the field is still flooded regularly by the river, reflecting the change in height above sea level from 54m at the south to 55m at the north. Such flooding can be valuable to pasture, bringing silt onto the land as well as raising its temperature in the spring, encouraging the earlier growth of the grass.

Field walking began in September 2005 with the field newly ploughed and set to a crop of organic wheat, which was already a couple of inches above ground. We were assured we would do no damage to the crop at this stage. Before the walking began the setting out of a grid was

Figure 3

Part of the 1818 enclosure map of Marcham showing the area that is now Big Leas Field. The map shows the re-allotment of ownership made under the enclosure award. The same field boundaries are shown on the 1st edition large-scale O.S. map, surveyed in 1875-6, and are still in place on the 1932 revision of the 1914 O.S. map. The trackway shown on the enclosure map running E-W across the field might not have been made, or might have been ploughed over as agricultural practice changed. Only the eastern end can still be seen as a truncated track to the south of the small enclosure next to Mill Road, whilst the western end may be marked by a kink in the line of the hedgerow. During the field walking, reinforcements of small pieces of limestone and roof tile fragments were noted at both ends of this trackway line.

Map reproduced by kind permission of the Berkshire County Archivist. The enclosure map can be found at http://www.berkshirenclosure.org.uk

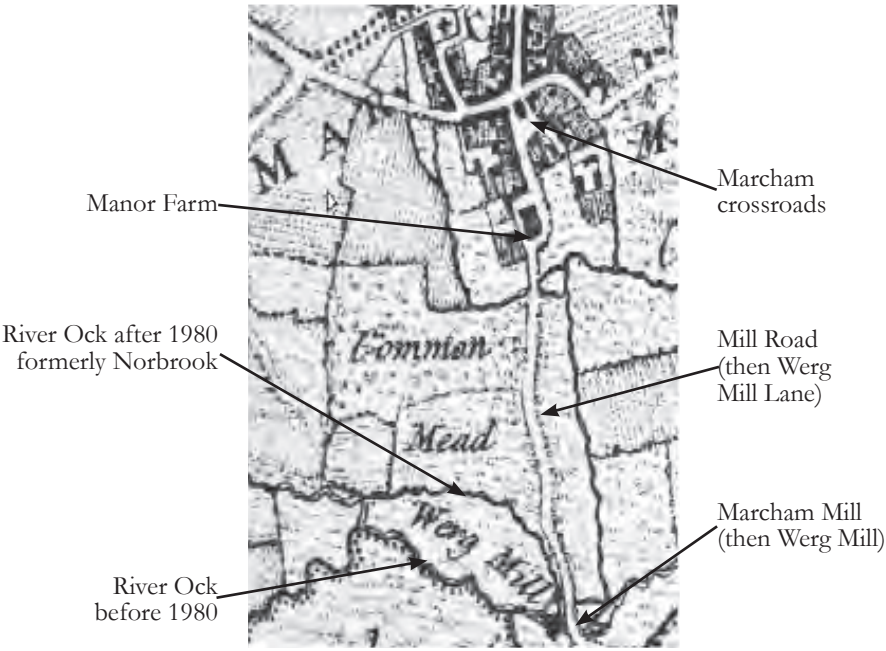


Figure 4
Extract from Rocque's map of Berkshire of 1761 showing the land to the south of the village. Before enclosure, Big Leas field was part of the Common Mead. (Compare with Figs. 2 and 3)

This extract is reproduced by kind permission of the publishers of the 1973 facsimile edition of Rocque's map, Harry Margary at http://www.harrymargary.com

essential, in order for us to plot our finds onto a map of the field. This would enable us, for example, to locate a Roman farmstead by looking for the greatest concentration of Roman potsherds. Collecting would be made along 10m transects, covering 1m on each side of these lines and beginning with the dry western half of the field. The wet areas, including the area surrounding the salt spring, would have to wait until the ground was drier. We laid out a grid of 50m x 50m boxes whose corners were marked off with large drums and linked to as accurate a

baseline as we could determine. Pea sticks marked the 10m transects. With field walking done on Sundays, this meant two of us racing around three days earlier, preparing the grid for the walkers.

We walked, collected, laid more grid and walked again from September through to April with very few days when we were totally 'rained off', although the wind chill on frosty days left us numb, red-nosed and with frozen fingers. Once or twice we could barely see the pea sticks in the fog. The finds of pottery fragments built up with our steady progress down the field. Flint scrapers showed the presence of early man, as might a number of egg-sized quartzite pebbles, scattered across the field. A boy with a sling and a quartz pebble could have brought home a useful meal of wild duck or goose for early hunter-gatherers.

The top eastern end of the field finally dried out by August, the wheat was harvested and the ground ploughed – once more we had access. This time we were helped by the Risborough Countryside Group who had their own field-walk to do and needed the experience first. With the grid in place, the top end walk over an area of one and a half hectares (just under four acres) was completed in the one day. Alas, no special finds turned up in the area of the salt spring and the wild celery but we all had a very pleasant day's walk in full sunshine, for a change.

The potsherds that we collected yielded the Roman, medieval, post-medieval and modern pottery we all expected. Unexpectedly there was a narrow scatter of superb Samian pottery sherds alongside the track at the top of the field with, perhaps, three pieces of Iron Age pot rims. The Samian could have fallen from the Sunday-best dinner table just the week before, shattered and been thrown out, and had no signs of the plough damage and wear you might expect after lying in the soil for over 1500 years. We searched for other concentrations around there, but found no more. It is suspected that there was a well-to-do Romano-British farmhouse close by – not many would have afforded the best Samian pottery – but it is not visible in this landscape.

Much of the material we found is a result of manuring. It should be realised that waste disposal by local authorities is a relatively modern phenomenon, starting in the early 1900s in urban areas. Whilst cesspits were used in towns and villages throughout the ages, farms were different, with all household waste, including broken pottery, ending up with the

On the left, a selection of the pot fragments found.
On the right, illustrations of the types of vessel they might have come from.

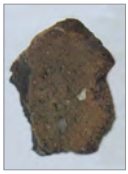


Figure 5a
An iron age pot fragment (25x35mm) of about 100 BC

Figure 5b
An English pre-Roman iron age bowl about 150mm across

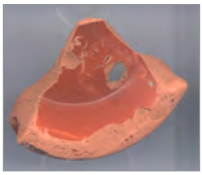


Figure 6a
A Roman Samian bowl fragment (40x60mm) of 100-150AD. It would have had steeper sides than the bowl on the right.

Figure 6b
A Roman Samian bowl about 200mm across made in Gaul

Figure 7a
A glazed medieval bowl fragment (25x60mm), 15th century

Figure 7b
A small English glazed medieval bowl about 100mm across, 15th century

On the left, a selection of the pot fragments found.
On the right, illustrations of the types of vessel they might have come from.

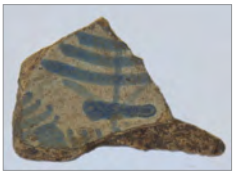


Figure 8a
A mid-16th century tin-glazed pot fragment (30x40mm)

Figure 8b
An English tin-glazed pot c.1550

Figure 9a
A post-medieval earthenware pot fragment (25x50mm) Fulham ware. Note the pint-level marker.

Figure 9b
An English mid-18th century stoneware Fulham–type tankard, 155mm tall. Note the pint-level marker near the handle.

animal manure in middens not far from their back doors. These were regularly spread out on the fields to improve fertility.

The earlier Big Leas field boundaries (Figs. 3 & 4) help make sense of some of our finds; for instance several clay pipe stems and bowls seemed to lie alongside the old E-W boundary across the middle of the field. I can imagine Victorian farm hands taking their lunch break and a pipe of tobacco at the edge of the field. Alongside the present track at the top of the field, several thick fragments of glass led me to believe

we had found Roman glass, but no such luck. It was beer-bottle glass, presumably dropped by farm labourers. Various sizes of horse- and cow-shoes also give a record of agricultural activity. Fragments of fine coal and clinker spread uniformly across the field might result from a deliberate application by Victorian farmers, who knew the benefits of phosphates. All the finds taken together raise the possibility that the land was drained and cultivated in Victorian times. One puzzle was the three groups of clinker found in the bottom half of the field, each roughly spread across a 3m diameter. Clearly subject to high temperatures (the slag shows 'bubbles' across the surfaces) their origin is not clear and the lumps seem too big to have been spread for their phosphate content. What brought them here?

The potsherds we found have been washed and cleaned and examined by an expert, Maureen Mellor. Figures 5-9 illustrate the range of our finds, from the iron age and Roman periods to the late medieval. Apart from the Samian fragments, all came from the sorts of dishes and vessels that would have been in everyday domestic use.

With the potsherds cleaned, bagged and identified the last six months have seen steady progress in entering data onto the site map, with patterns of potsherd spread developing much as we expected, although the bottom end of the field shows very little. Selected potsherds have been chosen for a reference collection and further investigation. Our potsherd plots are very simple – Roman, medieval and post-medieval – dotted across our field map, transect by transect, a visible record of all our efforts – the freezing Sundays, the dank drizzling days setting out the grids, the soaking wet sleeves from pot-washing. Watch out for further analysis of our finds in the next instalment of the Big Leas saga.

And finally, a recent aerial photograph (not shown here) from the National Monuments Records collection at Swindon[4] shows a criss-crossing of drainage lines in the bottom third of the field that has been interpreted by the County Archaeologist as showing ditched (possibly iron age) enclosures and that does need to be investigated further.[5] Different techniques will help us to find out more – geophysics and trial holes are a possible start. It's an exciting prospect.

Acknowledgements

I thank Maureen Mellor for finds analysis, the Local Heritage Initiative and the Vale and Ridgeway Trust for funding the analysis, W. Cumber & Son (Theale) Ltd. for practical assistance, and AAAHS members for many hours of voluntary labour.

The photographs of the finds and pots are all by the author except for Figures 7b, which is from the author's collection, and 9b, which is from the Ashmolean Museum's PotWeb site (http://potweb.ashmolean.org ref. PW389) and is used by kind permission of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The other pots were photographed in the British Museum and the photographs are used by kind permission of the Museum.

References

1 William Cumber, 'Trendles Field: An Update. Excavations on Trendles Field, Marcham, 2004-5' *Coral Rag 6* (2006) pp.11-16. Full details of the excavation and other references can be found at http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/research/research_projects/marcham

2 Janey Cumber, 'Wild Celery' *Coral Rag 1* (2001) pp.7-9.

3 The main channel of the Ock was changed in 1979-80 by the Thames Water Authority from the original southern channel to the northern one that was previously the Norbrook. Will Cumber, private communication, February 2007.

4 Photograph reference: SU453957 15-Jul-1997 NMR 15744/15.

5 Paul Smith, private communication, February 2007. Aerial photographs of fields to the east show the same patterns along the banks of the Ock as far as Abingdon.