



FIELD WALKING
2005-07

**Big Leas Field,
Manor Farm,
Marcham,
Oxon**

Undertaken by the Abingdon Archaeological and History Society
with help from the Risborough Countryside Group

By Roger Gelder

Field walking in Marcham Village

(Big Leas Field, Manor Farm, Marcham, Oxon)

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Objective

To show whether the potsherd distribution in the Big Leas field showed any association with ritual activity in the Roman period.

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Big Leas Field, Marcham, Oxon

Introduction

Whilst ploughing this field for organic winter wheat, the owner, Will Cumber, noted the presence of Roman potsherds. He was familiar with such material since the University was already undertaking a major excavation in another field (Trendles), some 1 km distant. The Big Leas field was known to have contained a saline spring, together with associated sea celery (*apium prostratum*), from which the village had received its Saxon name. It was thought possible, given both Iron Age and Roman associations between unusual landscape features and ritual activities, that the potsherds might be the focus of such activity here.

AAAHs were asked to undertake a field walk, collecting potsherds and analysing their distribution. This work commenced in September 2005, but only in the drier western half of the field. The northern quarter of the eastern half contained standing water and very muddy conditions and was left until dry in summer.

Description of field

Approximately rectangular, the field runs north-south, some 300-350 m wide and 550 m deep, ending at the (new) River Ock (old Norbrook). Up to twenty years ago, the southern boundary was to be found some 200 m further south at the original River Ock. A flood relief scheme had required the deepening of the Norbrook and re-direction of the Ock into this deeper channel. Despite the scheme, flooding of this meadow still occurs on a regular annual basis, but not, fortunately, during this field walking exercise.

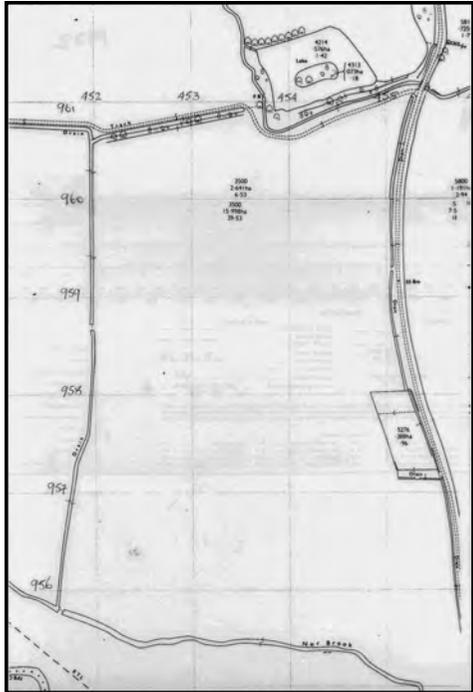
At the northern end, altitude is 55 m, reducing at the southern boundary to 54 m. There appears to be a very slight plateau at mid-field, but otherwise the field appears featureless, apart from the trio of north-eastern damp depressions, one containing the sea celery at its edge. The inset area on the eastern boundary represents land held by the church. The grid shown is in 100 m squares.

Apart from the 'new' River Ock along the southern boundary, there is a stream which approaches the mid-point of the northern

boundary, running north-south. However, at the field edge, this stream diverts to the east along the northern boundary edge, crosses under the Mill Lane road, bounds a further field before turning south to join the Ock.

A Victorian botanical paper does refer to a saline stream running through the field, but refers to in-filling of the stream bed. There is no evidence for this feature on maps going back to 1760. These maps, both estate enclosure as well as the earlier Roque map, show other field divisions but otherwise the overall shape of the field is as shown above.

An aerial photograph, taken in 1997 for NMR, Swindon, shows a dark line, central to the field, running north-south, ending along-side the sea celery patch and field boundaries



Geology and Landscape Contours

The geological survey map (Fig 2) shows the Corallion Rag limestone bed under-lying the northern half of Big Leas field with the southern half notated as silt.

It is, perhaps, worth drawing a comparison between the Trendles and Big Leas fields, which are just 1 km apart on an southeast-northwest axis, with both having the River Ock as their southern boundary. Trendles, containing an extensive Romano/British religious site, has Corallion rag limestone very close to the surface, with topsoil ranging from 0.3 to 0.6 m thickness, whereas Big Leas appears to have

a top- and sub-soil coverage of more than twice that thickness, with no evidence of the limestone occurring near the surface.

Trendles field slopes at a steeper angle than Big Leas, such that the latter is frequently subject to extensive winter flooding when compared to Trendles. In the distant past, an archaeo-river-channel helped to form the central feature of Trendles—a depression some 50 m in diameter—but there is no surface evidence to suggest that the saline spring or the northern boundary stream at Big Leas had any similar effect.

Approaching Marcham from the north, the Ordnance Survey map shows two streams from the east and from the northwest, with the centre of the village on higher ground lying between these. To the south of the village, three streams are evident, with the two on the eastern boundary showing sharp 'cut-backs' into the 55 m contour line, whereas the western boundary stream(with its right-angle change of course at the Big Leas boundary) shows only a limited cut-back closer to Marcham Mill, suggesting that this latter course is more recent in origin than the other two streams.

Farming Activity in the Ock Valley

(i) Neolithic

The presence of worked pieces of flint, from arrow head to scrapers, and including numerous rounded pebbles best suited to sling shot usage, suggest that this field was well visited by pre-Iron Age people hunting the wetlands beside the River Ock.

(ii) Iron Age and Romano/British era. (Figure 2)

Held in the Westgate Centre for Oxfordshire Studies are aerial photographs obtained by the Centre from the English Heritage National Monuments Records (NMR). These show a web of field ditch boundaries extending along the Ock Valley from Marcham to the

Abingdon *oppidum* and bordering the River Ock. Further west lies Trendles field, the Romano/British religious site in Frilford. Still further west, another 6 km, is Cherbury Camp, an Iron Age ‘fort’ site with a reported adjoining cluster of Iron Age round houses.

The field ditch boundary lines, shown in Figure 2, suggest that farming was intensive in this region.

(ii) Saxon Period.

Only a single potsherd has been found for this period but this is hardly surprising, given the low-temperature firing used in the production of this pottery, which results in poor survival of this pottery fabric.

However, the presence of the sea celery gave rise to the name of Marcham village, suggesting that this herb was well known enough to merit naming the village after the plant. It implies that it was present in sufficient quantity to merit note, suggesting that Big Leas, while probably very wet, may have been farmed for this herb.

(iii) Monastic Period

Abingdon Abbey had been founded in Saxon times but little survives of land records from that period. In Norman times, the Domesday Book shows that Marcham village was held by the Abbey as some 10 hides or approximately 1,500 acres. It seems likely that this extended from Werg Mill (southeast corner of Big Leas) in the south to Gossards Ford in the north, from Frilford in the west, towards Abingdon eastward.

This holding was one of the more prosperous of the lands held by the Abbey and may account for the presence of Werg Mill, (now known as Marcham Mill, with the 30’ wide road leading to it) from the centre of Marcham, along-side Big Leas (see Figure 3).

(iv) Post-Dissolution

The immediate possessors of the Abbey grounds are not currently known. The Rocque map of 1761 gives no indication of land ownership, with the southern half of Big Leas marked as ‘common mead’,

with parts of surrounding fields indicating 'vicarial tithes', suggesting that this was the original glebe land. Glebe land is normally indicated as belonging to an ecclesiastical authority (the Abbey here) but is expected to have been bought well before the 1761 date of the Rocque map, given the Dissolution period lies around 1530—1540. The 1816 maps of the Enclosures show George Elwes as a principal land-owner in Marcham, indeed he is the village squire, and he, with others, own the then divided Big Leas field (see Figure 3), with the glebe land having been re-assigned.

Field Walk Management (September 2005 to April 2006)

The field having been sown to winter wheat the previous month, the field walking was limited to

- (a) the months of September to April inclusive and
- (b) to the western half only in detail with
- (c) a smaller sampled comparison of the eastern half of the field., before cereal growth prevented further access.

Once the harvest was complete in late August, there was time only for detailed collections from Blocks 2(east) and 3 before the field was re-ploughed and sown to grass.

Having determined to walk the drier western half first, a grid layout was formulated, based on 100 m squares, with four squares spanning the field, although the most easterly were partial squares only. This arrangement corresponded as close as practicable to the Ordnance Survey grid.

Large (25 litre) tubs were used to mark each corner of a square together with a central line mid-field, north-south. Within each square, walk-lines, each 10 m long were denoted with pea-sticks, with two collectors walking the 1 m width each side of the line. Preparation of each square two or three days before the walking and collecting, ensured that the limited number of walkers accomplished each square with minimum delay.

The samples collected represented 20% of the field area of the complete western half of the field. The eastern half collection was cut short by harvesting requirements and only comparison samples were possible in the time available, corresponding to 4% by area. This was sufficient to note no substantial differences between western and eastern halves of the field.

Once the harvest was gathered in (August 2006) the very wet top eastern corner of the field was dry enough to mark out and walk squares 2 (eastern half) and 3 in which the initial Roman potsherds had been noted. This area also contained the sea celery, associated with the saline spring area, which had been recognised only as one of three very wet patches of ground, each 10 to 20 m in diameter, shown in Figure 6.

Potsherd Collection (Figures 7, 8 & 9)

Some 1500 potsherds were collected, washed and, with the aid of a knowledgeable expert, broadly characterised into three groups— Roman, Medieval and post-Medieval. These represent very broad categories and further work remains to be done in cataloguing the finds.

In general the assemblages appear to show common characteristics, namely, that the bulk of the pottery is kitchen/farm ware, with, for example, cheese-making bowls in several styles and periods. However, at about the 5% level, much better pottery was also represented throughout, suggesting that all farmers of this field were not living and working at a subsistence level, but were successful in their management of the land.

(a) Roman period (43 to 410 CE) Figure 8

Whilst the upper half of the field shows double the number of potsherds in each 100 x 100 m square, compared to the lower half of the field, it is not considered significant.

However, in square 3, a local concentration (some dozen items) of fine Samian ware (terra sigillata) was found with negligible wear, unlike similar and other Roman potsherds elsewhere in the field which

showed normal wear due to ploughing movements over the past fifteen hundred years.

Figure 6 shows this location (D) some hundred meters distant from the sea celery location (A) and from location B where a concentration of broken limestone fragments were scattered over a very wet patch. The owner considered that these represented the efforts of farmers to consolidate a section of very wet ground but it is possible they represent building remnants although no potsherds were particularly associated with this location B.

From the limited knowledge available on the types of potsherd of the Romano-British era collected from Big Leas, these show continuous occupation and use of the land for farming through-out that period.

(b) Medieval period (410 to 1550 CE) Figure 8

The first six hundred years of this period appear to be represented by a single potsherd (St. Neots ware) from the late Saxon time, found in square 9. Given the de-forestation of the area in Roman times, it is possible that the Big Leas field was in an undrained condition, giving rise to marshy ground with the saline spring permitting the growth of the sea celery, after which the village was considered to be named.

The present area associated with the sea celery (Figure 6, location A) is very limited, amounting to some 10 x 5 meters square. Apart from the wet condition of the area, there is no sign of a brook arising from the saline spring.

The other medieval potsherd distribution shows triple numbers in the southern half of the field when compared to the northern half— a reversal of the Roman distribution. This may be associated with the sub-divided field layout shown in Figure 4.

(c) Post-medieval period (1550 to 1850 CE) Figure 9

The post-medieval pottery is very asymmetrically distributed with a considerable concentration in squares 9, 10, 13 and 14. Shown in Figure 4 is a 'road' marked as 25' width, extending the width of the

field from east to west. It is noted that at both ends deposits of broken brick, tile and limestone fragments mark the start and finish of this 'road', suggesting that it was necessary for the passage of farming equipment on otherwise unstable ground. The heavy concentration of potsherds may be associated with a farm not belonging to George Elwes, local squire and major landowner, then resident in what is now Denman College, to be found to the north of the church in Marcham village. The Enclosure map (Figure 4 is a local section of a much larger map from 1816) shows numerous landowners in and around Marcham village, although George Elwes was the largest land holder at that time. It is possible that Elwes used the household midden on fields closer to his main residence whilst another farmer, living closer to Big Leas field, and with a similar large household, deposited midden in the southern half of the field.

This view may be supported by evidence of farming practices developing in the nineteenth century, when steam ploughing using large traction engines came into use. Deposits of clinker were noted in squares 17 and 18, but none in the northern squares. This suggests that different owners employed different practices in the northern and southern halves of this field.

(d) After post-medieval (from 1850 CE)

Few potsherds (a dozen items) could be considered to arise beyond the Victorian period, when sewage and waste disposal were developed, although locally, village sewage (up to the mid-1900s) was held mainly in cess pits dug in gardens and emptied every few months.

The potsherd distribution

The evidence for associating the distribution of potsherds during the Roman period with any ritual activity is slight. Whilst the concentration of fine Samian alongside the northern track (Figure 6) is suggestive, there was no other material present there, apart from the limestone rubble at location B. It is noted that at the Frilford site both tem-

ple and ‘sacred area’ (the semi-amphitheatre) are separated by some two hundred meters so it is possible that in the Big Leas field, that the separation between locations A and B (wet area and saline spring) and position D (Samian pottery) may be similar. If a shrine had been built it is possible that it has been covered by the path or disturbed during the construction of the lake to the north of Big Leas field.

The even distribution (apart from the special Samian) suggests that there was little problem in working the land which implies that the wet patches encountered nowadays may have been less of a problem in the Roman period.

A second factor arises from consideration of the stream skirting the northern boundary.

Landscape factors

The presence of small flint tools thinly but widely distributed across the whole of the field, suggests that in pre-historic times, this area was an area used more for hunting of game than for agriculture.

Farming of the Big Leas field appears to have begun as a series of small fields and enclosures during the Romano-British period or slightly earlier, similar to most of the River Ock valley. Little or no evidence has been found for the Iron Age period although some three fragments of very coarse potsherd were found in the same locality as the fine Samian. No conclusions are drawn from this.

The NMR aerial photograph (Figure 2), taken in the 1995-97 period from a location to the south of Big Leas field, shows no clear details in the northern half, although the extensive nature of the Romano-British field boundaries in the southern half is clear. This may be a reflection of the wet nature of the northern section of the field, then as now, but this is surmise.

The stream located at the northern boundary is considered to be artificial because of the two right-angle bends in its course and to have been diverted from a more northerly route. This view is based on changes in the 55 m contour line from the Ordnance Survey map and

the Corallion rag limestone geological map shown in Figure 10.

The two streams (Figure 10, **1** and **2**) flowing towards Marcham from the north, show in-cuts into the limestone at the points immediately north east and northwest of Marcham, although no detail is shown at the southern limestone boundary. It is noted that the northern geological boundary has more detail shown perhaps because of the greater change in levels where the streams have cut the alluvial soil. The southern boundary is shown dotted, suggesting that there is less certainty where the limestone lies beneath relatively flatter fields and where access to bedrock may have been difficult.

At the southern boundary, the geology appears uncut, a dotted line on the map, and may be in doubt. The 55 m contour line shows two sharp incuts from streams leaving Marcham to the south and to the south-east (Figure 10, **3** and **4**). The eastern stream is continuous on the map, curving round the eastern boundary of Marcham. The second stream appears to start in the housing to the south of Marcham cross-roads, skirting Manor Farm but passing along-side a second farm one kilometre east, but within a hundred meters of the Big Leas stream, when both turn south to the Ock. The Big Leas stream has only a slight cut in the 55m contour (Figure 10, **5**). In marked contrast, the River Ock shows a major cut-back in the limestone (Figure 10, **6**) but little in the contour lines.

Both the geology and the contour maps suggest that originally the northwest stream (**1**) may have been contiguous with the southern stream (**4**) and might have run through the centre of the present Manor Farm. Most early farms required water for cattle within the near vicinity, but not, it is suggested, through the centre of the farmyard as this might have done. A diversion along the western field boundaries of Manor Farm and across the northern boundary of Big Leas field would have been convenient.

Water management was a major concern of the monastic period although such a stream displacement could have taken place post-dissolution once the land was under new management. The present stream course appears on all available maps back to 1761, so nothing

extra can be said at this time.

Conclusions

- (i) Evidence for the presence of an early shrine during Romano-British times is slight and limited to the presence of the Samian ware, position **D**, in the top north-eastern corner of the field with perhaps a link to the limestone rubble over-lying the very wet patch, shown as **B** in Figure 6.
- (ii) However, the limestone rubble can be explained as a simplifield improvement by farmers wishing to avoid ploughing difficulties across the wet ground.
- (iii) Equally possible is that the stream diversion and the later construction of the small lake to the north of Big Leas may have eliminated any structure in this area.
- (iv) The stream diversion suggests that if the saline spring had produced a steady flow, then the connection of stream and spring would have been a logical route for water flow down to the River Ock.
- (v) It is surmised that the saline spring has most probably been a long-term seepage, perhaps arising after the major de-forestation in the Roman period. This resulted in a marshy patch of ground, rather than a flowing stream, until drainage improvement schemes reduced its impact on the field structure.

Recommendations

(i) **Low priority**

Consider the possibility of investigation trenches (10 m x 1m) across locations **B** and **D** (figure 6) to determine the presence of sub-soil structures. It is understood that a geophysical survey of this area

has shown nothing significant.

(ii) Medium priority

Investigate the stream and lake border to the north of Big Leas field for the presence of other material. The stream's northern border is currently overgrown with undergrowth and is unlikely to have been disturbed since the construction of the artificial lake nor since the possible diversion of the stream. Two or three one meter square test pits may reveal other material.

(iii) Medium priority

Investigate any possible previous route of the stream bordering the northern border of Big Leas field. Any evidence for a previous stream course might lend support to the idea that the saline spring was a seepage rather than a free-flowing brook.

Acknowledgements

The unfailing help, local knowledge and willingness of Will and Janey Cumber, Manor Farm, to bear with this work are most gratefully acknowledged. That the result is not what was hoped for is disappointing.

The efforts of all members and helpers of the societies undertaking this work cannot be praised too highly. Most could only manage Sunday walks, in rain, fog, frost and - occasionally, very occasionally- sunshine. Perhaps we should be more grateful that the usual annual flooding of this water meadow did not occur during our field walking although a third of the field disappeared under a foot of flood water the following year.

Maureen Mellor's contribution to our understanding of our collection is beyond measure. To assess and sort some fifteen hundred potsherds in some six hours was awesome to watch, outstanding in results and

extremely informative for our efforts.

APPENDIX

Figures 1-10



Figure 1. Aerial photograph ~1995.

The 'pink' area indicates fallow ground in false colour.

The Norbrook was deepened and widened to accommodate the re-directed River Ock and the lighter patches showing in the 'pink' may be subsoil spread on the field when this work was done.

This latter area, corresponding broadly to squares 21-24 inclusive, yielded negligible potsherds, when compared to other squares within the field.



Figure 2. English Heritage Aerial Photograph, 1997, showing what are believed to be Iron Age/Romano British field ditch boundaries. Contrast has been exaggerated to show patterns of ditches in the southern half of the field.

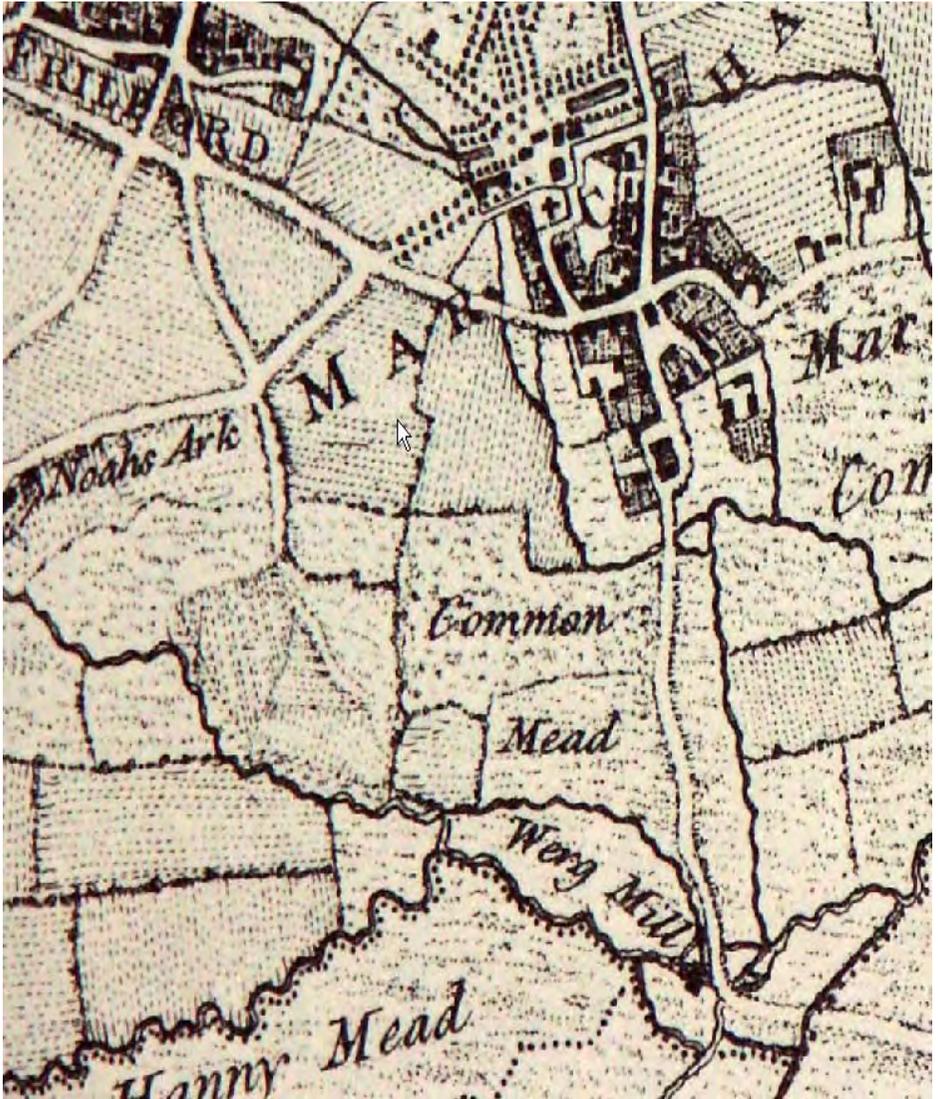


Figure 3. Extract of the 1761 Rocque map (oldest map available). Post-dissolution by some 200 years, the designation 'Common Mead' suggests that this might be pasture rather than arable at this time. Arable land appears to be marked with narrow dotted straight lines, implying straight furrows from ploughing, whilst the dotted 'tufts' suggests grassland for the Big Leas field. There is no marking suggesting the presence of the saline spring.

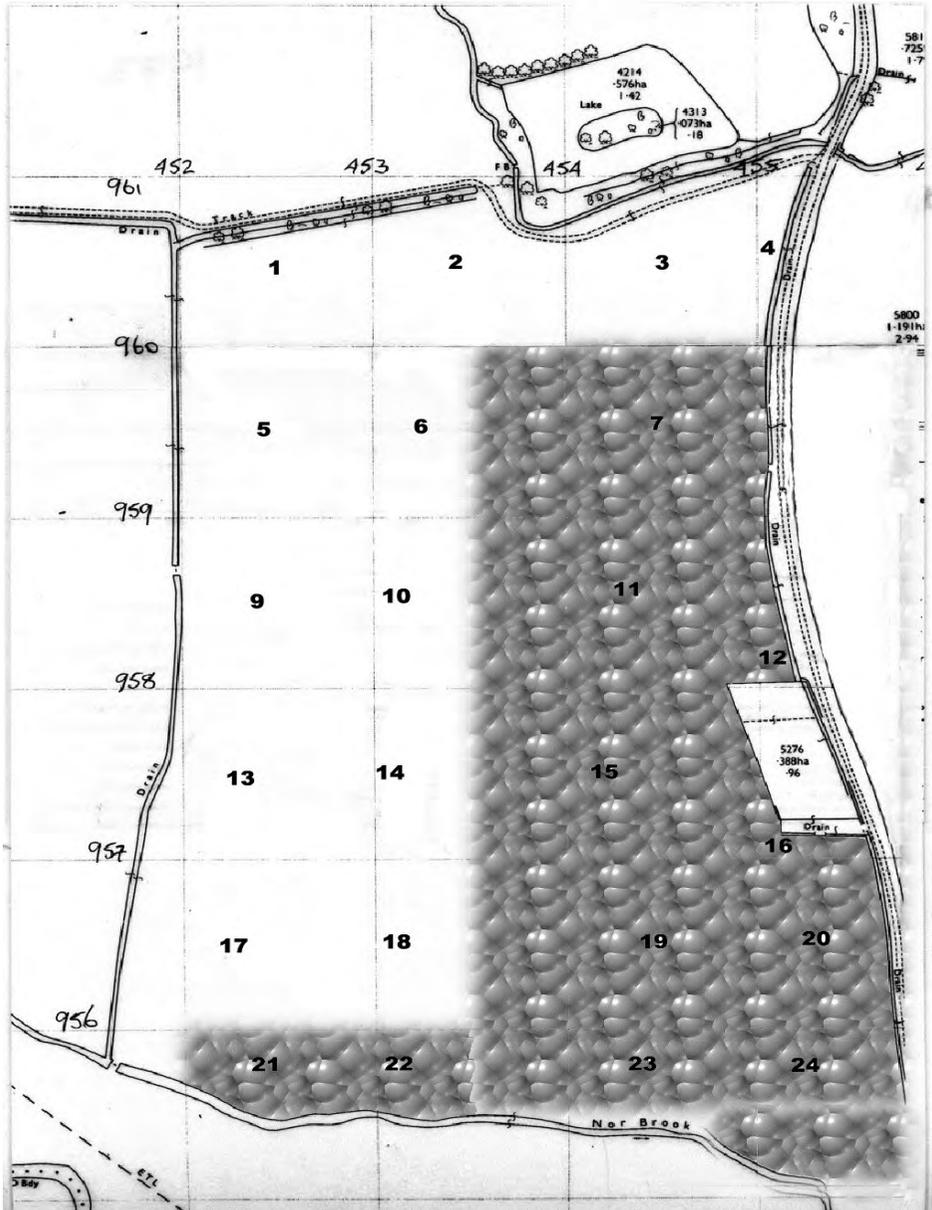


Figure 5 Field walking layout.
 Clear area 20% walked, mottled area 4% walked.

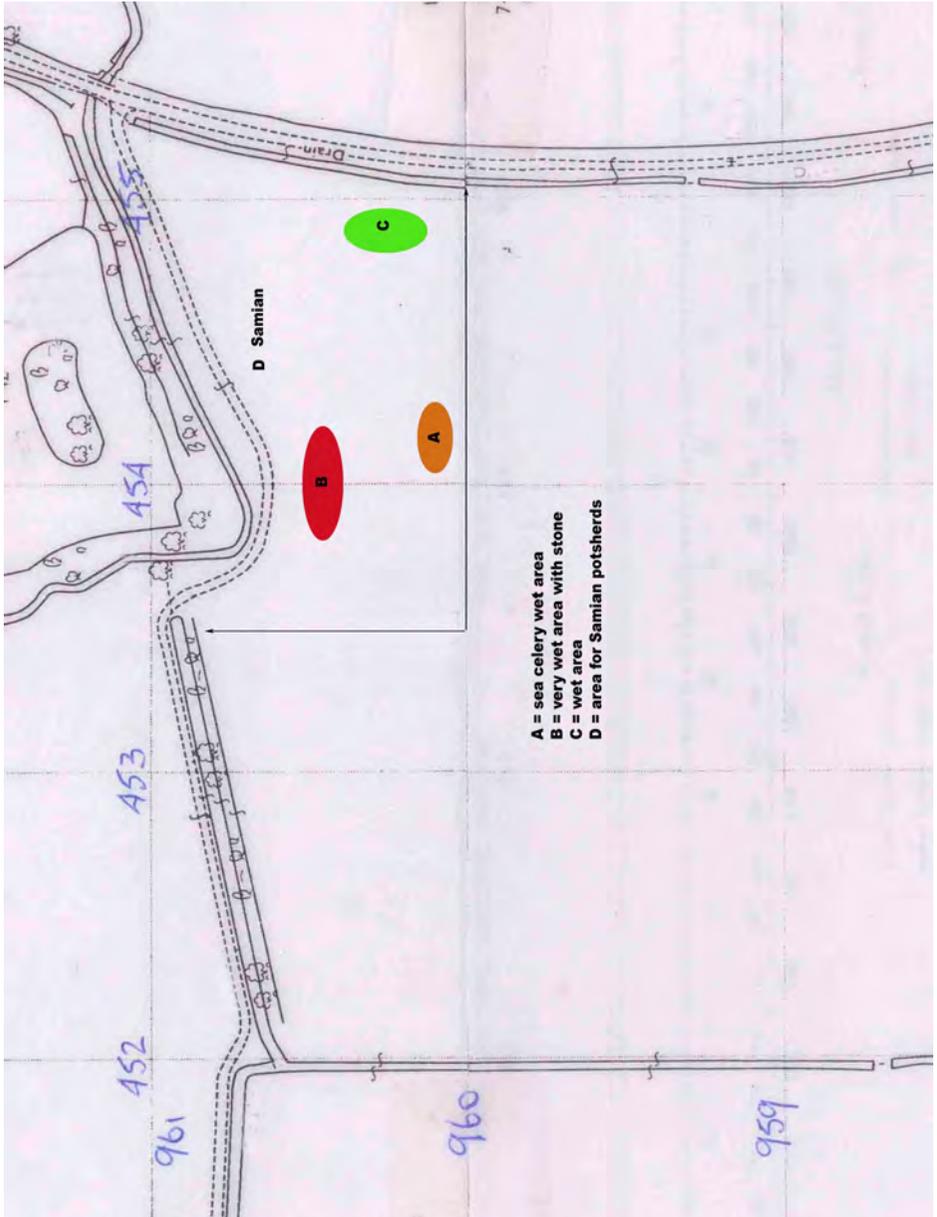


Figure 6. Blocks 2(east) & 3. Wet ground nine months of the year.
A sea celery area; **B** very wet with limestone rubble;

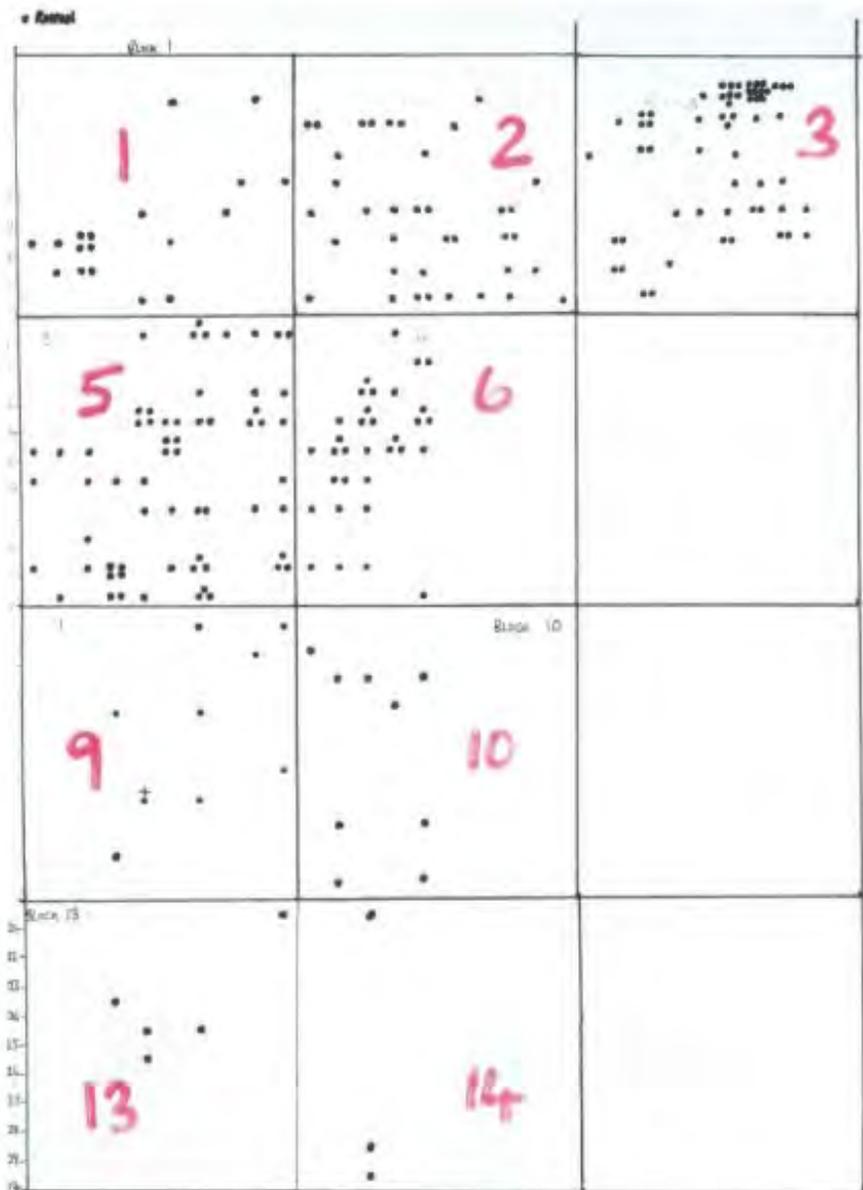


Figure 7. Distribution of Roman potsherds.
 Heavy concentration in Square 3 was unworn Samian potsherds (see Figure 6)

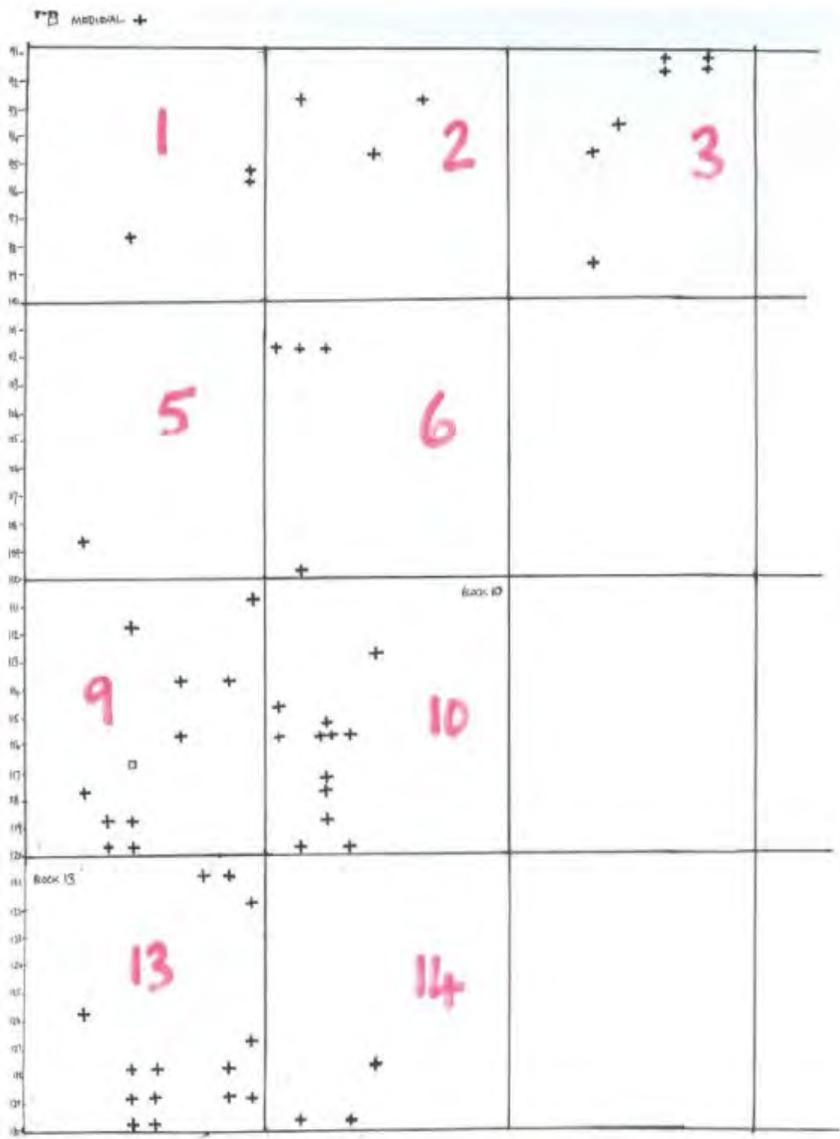


Figure 8. Distribution of medieval pottery.
 No obvious concentration in any one square.
 Single Saxon potsherd in block 9.

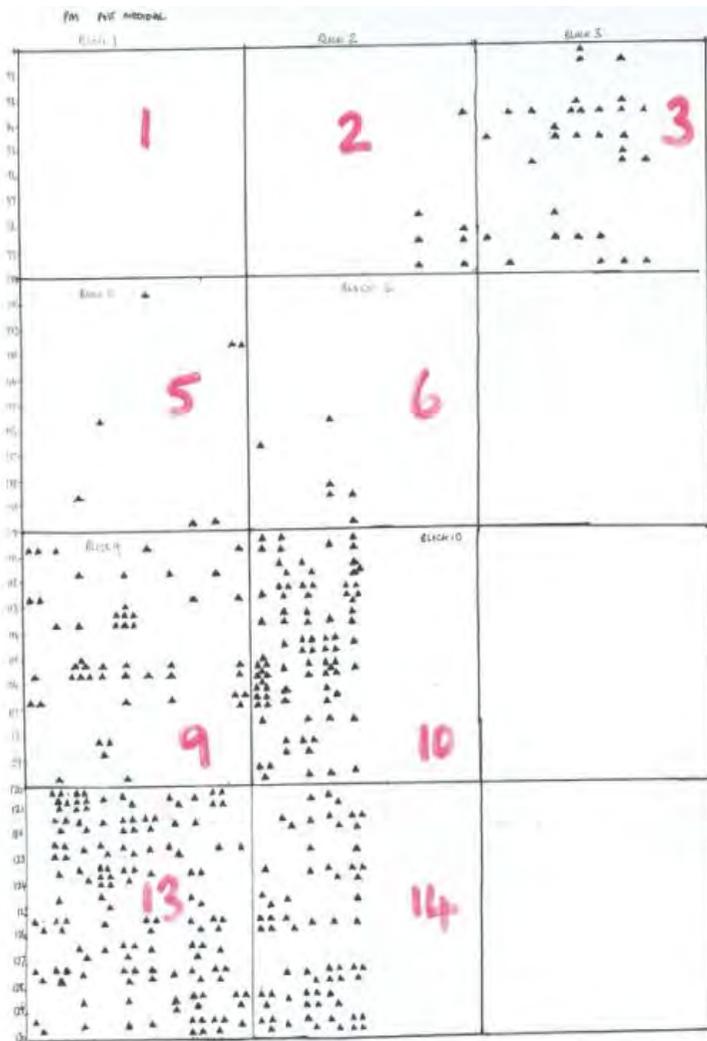


Figure 9. Distribution of post-medieval pottery.
 Inexplicable distribution—different owners of parts of Big Leas?
 Most closely related to Figure 4 (Enclosure Act field layout) with
 different owners of the divided lower half of the field.

