

# LATER PREHISTORIC AND ROMANO-BRITISH OCCUPATION AT TOWNSEND FARM, POYNTINGTON. GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY AND EVALUATION 2010-11

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## ABSTRACT

*Geophysical survey and trial excavations were carried out on two fields, Hanglands and Fairmile, at Townsend Farm, Poyntington, Dorset. Gradiometry was carried out across the entirety of Hanglands. Despite having been seriously affected by ploughing it produced evidence of linear cut features and included curvilinear anomalies possibly representing roundhouses. Three evaluation trenches were positioned with the aim of characterising the geophysical anomalies, understanding the quality, preservation, and gaining some chronological understanding. Despite considerable truncation by ploughing, an enclosure ditch and a curvilinear gully of later prehistoric date were identified as well as an undated terrace along the break in slope on the eastern side of the field, which could be Romano-British or medieval. Gradiometry over a small area at the north end of Fairmile, identified anomalies on a rectilinear alignment where Romano-British pottery had been recovered from the surface, including a South East Dorset Orange Wiped Ware sherd of the late 4<sup>th</sup>-early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The anomalies are suggestive of a substantial Romano-British building and associated features. The limited investigations have demonstrated an area of later Iron Age occupation adjacent to what appears to be a previously unrecorded villa.*

## INTRODUCTION

The work at Townsend Farm, Poyntington, was prompted by the discovery of a selection of pottery and burned stone by Mr Gareth Lewis whilst metal detecting. The South Somerset Archaeological Research Group (SSARG) was invited to carry out a geophysical survey and exploratory excavation, which took place over the summer, autumn and winter of 2010-2011.

## BACKGROUND

The current parish of Poyntington has had a complex history, having been part of the Horethorne Hundred from before Domesday, and remaining part of Somerset until 1888. The current parish and county boundary runs along the top of Poyntington Hill immediately to the east of the site, and follows the route of a Late Saxon herepath (Davey 2005, 102). The village of Poyntington, recorded in Domesday and located c. 1km to the south of the site, is situated around the water courses. The church is of 12<sup>th</sup> century origin (RCHME 1974, 186) although earlier origins have been suggested. The Manor House and Court House, close to the church both have late medieval origins and there are medieval lynchets in the south-east part of the parish (RCHME 1974, 188-189). An unexplored promontory hillfort is known to the east at Milborne Wick. The site is immediately to the south of Poyntington Down, which had extensive gradiometry and some excavation as part of the South Cadbury Environs Project (SCEP). Most features examined as part of that work were Late Bronze Age and Iron Age in origin, although scattered Romano-British pottery was noted in the topsoil in test pits (Tabor 2008). There are also a number of recorded find spots of Romano-British pottery within Poyntington parish largely clustering around the outskirts of the modern village.

The site is centred on NGR ST 649 210 and covers two fields known as Hanglands and Fairmile (Fig. 1) situated to the north of the village of Poyntington. The bedrock geology in Hanglands is Fuller's Earth Rock Member – Limestone, which forms the promontory of which it consists, whilst Fairmile is Fuller's Earth Formation - Mudstone (BGS 2016). The soils are shallow loamy lime-rich and free draining. A source of one of the many tributaries of the Yeo rises c. 800m to the north-west and runs at the base of the hill on the west side of Hanglands through Poyntington village situated to the south.

The western field, Hanglands, covers the apex of a promontory c. 125m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) at the north end with the eastern field boundary slightly down slope (c. 110-115m-aOD). There is a steep drop to the west with the Yeo at the base and the land slopes away to the south (c. 100m aOD). This field was in grass at the time of investigation but clearly had been previously ploughed given the quantity of broken stone visible on the surface. The eastern field, Fairmile, comprises the western side of a dry valley, at the southern end of which is the source of a stream which runs north-south down towards Poyntington village. It slopes over its length from c. 125m to c. 95m aOD, north to south and generally from c. 115m –c. 100m aOD west to east, creating a south-east facing slope. Fairmile was in an arable rotation and had spring barley sown in late 2010.

Geophysical survey was carried out over a small area of Fairmile, but could not be extended due to the timing and crop rotation. A small surface sampling exercise examined the same area. Geophysical survey was also carried out in the adjacent field, Hanglands along with targeted excavation of three trial trenches. Full details are included in the HER report (Randall 2019). It had been intended to carry out additional geophysical survey and evaluation, but it was subsequently not possible to arrange further access to the site.

**Figure 1. Location of Hanglands and Fairmile, Townsend Farm, with location of evaluation trenches 1-3.**

## THE GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY, *Liz Caldwell*

### *Fairmile*

A small test survey in Fairmile, revealed a series of contiguous linear positive and negative magnetic anomalies on a north-east to south-west alignment forming a clearly rectilinear arrangement (Figs 2 and 3). The anomalies indicate some subdivision of the rectilinear area. Readings are suggestive of a stone structure with possible associated structures/enclosures.

### *Hanglands*

The results are dominated by an extensive network of linear anomalies suggesting multi-phase activity (Fig 3). At least four major systems are distinguishable by their orientation. The readings are generally within the range for ditches with thermo remnant or high organic content and are consistent with those for field boundaries and enclosures. There is also a small grouping of curvilinear anomalies suggestive of circular structures south-east of the centre of the field. A weak but significant linear trend on an east-west alignment crosses the eastern side of the field, with readings and appearance consistent with those for plough marks. The results also reveal a number of other linear anomalies which are of differing alignment to each other and to the dominant linear systems.

There is a general scatter of non-linear anomalies across the survey area. These are within the range for pits/cut features containing thermo-remnant/organic material. Some of these apparent features appear concentrated in and around specific linear and curvilinear anomalies, suggesting an association. Some of these anomalies have a strong magnetic signature exceeding 20nT which is within the range for significant thermo-remnant features, e.g. hearths or features with a fired or ferrous magnetic content. These appear to be concentrated around the central area of the field at the highest topographical point. The major ferrous magnetic anomaly to the west of the field is due to a former quarry.

Figure 2 Fluxgate gradiometer survey. Hanglands and Fairmile.

Figure 3 Fluxgate gradiometer survey. Detail of Fairmile.

## SURFACE COLLECTION

### *Surface collection in Fairmile*

Metal detecting in Hanglands (around NGR 364834 120975) had previously produced two Roman coins. Whilst detecting in the north-western corner of Fairmile, Mr Lewis noticed further material, largely burned stone and pottery, and gathered a sample. On further examination by SSARG, two concentrations of material were noted, largely on the upslope side adjacent to the north-west hedge boundary, presumably where the plough was cutting into the thinner soils. There was a notable scatter of limestone on the surface at NGR 364963 121042, and some pieces appeared dressed. Additionally there were burnt stones present and most of the Romano-British pottery came from this area. Materials recovered included hand-made ceramic building materials, animal bone, flint, and Romano-British pottery, including Black Burnished Ware (BB1) and Savernake ware (from NGR 364923 121166) as well as another three Roman coins.

### *Ploughzone sampling in Fairmile*

A limited programme of ploughzone sampling by shovel pitting was undertaken, covering the same area and grid as the gradiometry survey. At each grid point (every 20m 40 litres of soil was screened through a 10mm mesh sieve to retrieve and note all finds. This produced a small selection of post-medieval and Romano-British material, but at low levels which did not produce any noticeable concentrations of material. It is suspected that the material retrieved from the area over the geophysical anomalies is likely to be derived from upslope as more substantial pieces of surface collected material retrieved from near the hedge may be from deposits which have been disturbed by ploughing.

## THE EXPLORATORY EXCAVATION IN HANGLANDS

Three test trenches, 5m x 1m were excavated by hand in Hanglands (Fig 1), positioned to examine anomalies noted on the geophysical survey. Hanglands was laid to pasture, but was known to have been previously ploughed. In Trenches 1 and 2, on the plateau, the topsoil (contexts (1001) and (2001)) was a yellowish/reddish brown sandy silt with large number of angular and sub angular small to medium limestones, clearly resulting from ploughing. In Trench 3, the soil matrix of the topsoil (3001) was similar, but contained fewer, smaller and less angular limestone fragments. The topsoil in Trench 1 overlay a subsoil (1002) with a similar matrix, also containing large numbers of limestones as well as burnt and cultural material, which overlay the natural limestone (1003). In Trench 2 the

topsoil directly overlay the natural limestone (2004). In Trench 3, the limestone natural (3004) was overlain by a possible buried soil (3003) and hillwashes (3002) and (3005). Features which corresponded with anomalies on the gradiometry were identified in all three trenches, with an additional feature in Trench 2.

Trench 1 had been located to examine a linear anomaly which appeared to be a north-south aligned element of a sub-rectilinear enclosure. A ditch, F1001 (Fig 4) corresponded completely with this anomaly. The entire feature was 2.20m wide and almost 0.60m deep, with a gently sloping concave side on the west. This cut was filled with a largely stone free silt (1005). F1001 had apparently then been re-cut on the same alignment, but with a moderately steep concave western side, which more closely mirrored the steep cut into the natural limestone on the eastern side. This re-cut was 1.40m wide and 0.58m deep and filled with a similar yellow-brown silt, but which contained a considerably greater quantity of limestones, burned and unburned. A single sherd of Romano-British pottery and handful of post-medieval pottery was recovered from the topsoil and sub-soil in Trench 1, but not from F1001.

**Fig. 4. Trench 1, Ditch F1001, (facing N; 2m scales)**

**Fig 5 Plan, Trench 2 gully F2001**

In Trench 2 (Fig 5) a gully or shallow linear (F2002) was located which corresponded with one geophysical anomaly. This was on a broadly east-north-east to west-south-west alignment. It had straight sides and a flat base and was 0.48m wide and 0.22m deep. A single fill (2002) of sandy clay silt contained some medium-large angular limestones as well as burnt stone and charcoal flecks. This fill contained a number of sherds of late Iron Age/Romano-British pottery, animal bone and a single small fragment of vessel glass. A posthole or small pit (F2001) was also located in this trench, comprising a sub-circular shallow cut with near vertical sides, 0.48m in diameter, and contained a similar fill to F2002, including burnt stones. The exact nature of both of these features was difficult to appraise as they both appeared to be heavily truncated.

Trench 3 was situated on the east facing slope to examine a diffuse linear geophysical anomaly. This trench contained a subsoil (3002) of reddish yellowish-brown sandy silt with moderate fine and medium sub-angular limestones which was 0.30m thick, interpreted as a colluvial layer. This sealed a similar layer (3003), which had built up on the natural limestone (3004). The natural was exposed in a strip across the centre of the trench, with another silty build up to the east of it. The location where it was exposed corresponded to the anomaly on the geophysics, and it seems likely that as it followed the contour of the hill this represented a cultivation terrace and slight lynchet.

## FINDS

*The Pottery from the Hanglands evaluation excavations, Clare Randall*

A total of 42 fragments of pottery were recovered from the three trenches, almost half of it 18<sup>th</sup> century or later in date, and the majority of the material from the topsoil. A total of 16 sherds of post-medieval pottery were recovered, 15 from topsoil contexts and one small fragment of bone china in posthole (2003). This selection of material included probably locally produced glazed coarsewares, as well as 19<sup>th</sup> century transfer print table ware, white china, and imported glazed stoneware.

Seven sherds in different fabrics, were identified as broadly prehistoric, variously including calcite, flint, limestone and platy shell. Almost all of these sherds were small and very heavily abraded, potentially representing manuring or related to the degree of stone in the topsoil. They may be Iron Age in date, with some conceivably earlier. All but one sherd was from Trench 2, with five fragments coming from the fill of F2002. Their condition implies that they may have been redeposited. A single sherd came from the colluvium (3002) in Trench 3. Trench 2 also produced six sherds of shell tempered pottery which can be more firmly assigned a Middle Iron Age-Late Iron Age date. Three sherds came from the topsoil and three from the fill of F2002, with the largest and freshest prehistoric sherd, albeit a wall fragment, from this feature.

A single very small and abraded sherd of probably Romano-British pottery came from layer (1002). A total of twelve undiagnostic, probably wall, sherds were identified as Late Iron Age/Romano-British sandy fabric. All but one of these came from Trench 2, with seven sherds from the topsoil and four from the fill of F2002. The sherds from the topsoil were small and abraded, those from F2002 less so. One sherd was recovered from the colluvial deposit in Trench 3.

*Surface collected Romano-British pottery from Fairmile, James Gerrard*

A single rim from an everted rim pie-crust decorated jar probably of Wessex Archaeology Type 12 was one of the initial surface collected finds from the site. The fresh sherd weighs 51g and has a single pre-firing perforation. The fabric appears consistent with South- East Dorset Orange Wiped Ware. These vessels have been discussed by Gerrard (2010) where they are argued to be one of the latest components of the Roman period Poole Harbour pottery industries. A date in the range of c.AD350-450 is appropriate for the sherd. Its appearance at Poyntington is of some interest as this is beyond its current known distribution in southern and eastern Dorset.

*The surface collected coins from Fairmile, Ciorstaidh Hayward Trevarthen*

Three coins were recovered from the topsoil in Fairmile and are identified in Table 1. These are all 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century in date.

Table 1. Coins

Ruler	Description	Mint	Reference	Reece Period	Date (AD)
Claudius II	Obverse: illegible – Bust, right radiate Reverse: [IOVI VICTO]RI – Jupiter standing left holding sceptre in left and thunderbolt in right Diameter: 18.1 mm Weight: 1.75 g Die axis: 6 o'clock	Rome	Cunetio cf. no. 1997	13	268-270
Theodora	Obverse: illegible – female portrait facing right, braided hair Reverse: [PIETAS ROMANA] – Pietas standing facing, holding infants Diameter: 14.5 mm Weight: 0.74 g Die axis: 6 o'clock	-	-	17	337-340
Constans	Obverse: CONST[ANS ---] – Bust facing right, laureate, cuirassed Reverse: VICTORIAE DD [AVG Q NN] – Two Victories holding wreaths Mint mark: NR ligated/--- Diameter: 12.8 mm Weight: 1.52 g Die axis: 6 o'clock	Arles	LRBC Pt I, No.454	17	341-346

*Stone, flint and other finds from Hanglands, Clare Randall*

Two small pieces of a micaceous red sandstone were recovered from the topsoil (2001) in Trench 2. A larger old red sandstone fragment with one flat face came from the topsoil (3001) of Trench 3. A total of three pieces of flint were also found in topsoil contexts. One very small chip came from Trench 2. A small unworked flake came from (3001) and another piece may be a plough damaged fragment of core. None of this material is inherently dateable, but it is likely that the flint and Old Red Sandstone fragment are later prehistoric in origin.

A small selection of other finds came largely from topsoil contexts. A total of six fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from Trench 2 and Trench 3. Most of this was of a clearly handmade appearance, but all was small and abraded. Five small fragments of fired clay were recovered from (1001). A possible Romano-British hobnail came from the buried soil (3003).

#### *The human remains from Hanglands, Clare Randall*

A single fragment of human bone was recovered from the topsoil of Trench 1. This comprised part of the proximal shaft of a left third metacarpal. The proximal end was fairly abraded, and the breaks at the distal end of the fragment (about mid-shaft) have a slightly ragged appearance indicating that the breakage occurred when the bone was no longer fresh. The bone condition is however good. It would seem that this element has been displaced by ploughing. Comment can only be limited, but it is worth noting that human remains are a not infrequent inclusion in later prehistoric features in this area (Randall 2010).

#### *Faunal remains from Hanglands, Clare Randall*

A total of 22 fragments of animal bone were recovered, 21 from Trench 2 and one from Trench 3. All of the material was fragmented and poor-average in condition. Cattle and sheep/goat were identified as well as cattle-sized and sheep-sized mammal bone, but more than half of the material came from topsoil contexts. The rest of the material came from the fill of F2002, the later Iron Age gully, including cattle and sheep/goat. Little can be said about this limited assemblage, but the presence of livestock is to be expected in this period. A range of body parts was present, as well as evidence for gnawing (indicating the presence of dogs); aging information was limited.

## DISCUSSION

The geophysical survey, surface collection and excavation of Hanglands and Fairmile have demonstrated that there is a nucleus of both prehistoric and Romano-British activity situated on the hilltop and at the head of the dry valley above the village of Poyntington.

The enclosure ditch in Hanglands Trench 1 remains undated, but the gully in Trench 2 produced clearly prehistoric pottery. This feature probably dates to the end of the Iron Age or early Romano-British period, but was evidently located close to earlier Iron Age activity, with probably residual Middle to Late Iron Age sherds also present. The greatest concentration of prehistoric and LIA/RB pottery occurred in the topsoil of Trench 2, which suggests that ploughing has affected the area truncating archaeological features. The only find from a very shallow posthole was a extremely small fragment of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery, but this may well be intrusive, and it is more likely that this was a largely ploughed out feature associated with the gully. It is possible that this represents part of a roundhouse or other settlement structure. It would seem to support the possibility that there was an area of later prehistoric settlement on the top of the rise, possibly associated with a number of boundaries which may represent associated field systems. The work carried out by the South

Cadbury Environs Project immediately to the north on Poyntington Down and Milborne Down identified linear and other features of later prehistoric date, although most of these related to the Sheep Slait ringwork and associated field system dating to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition (Tabor 2008, 94). The Hanglands occupation may represent shifting settlement around the locality during the later prehistoric period.

The small area of geophysical survey which could be undertaken in Fairmile has provided a tantalising glimpse of apparently regular, rectilinear anomalies. Although no further work was possible due to the agricultural regime, the clear geophysical anomalies indicate that features are likely to be better preserved than those in the adjacent field where ploughing has caused truncation. The anomalies may represent an arrangement of structures at least 40m long by 60m wide. At the eastern extent of the survey, a series of linear anomalies characterised by a very low magnetic response appear consistent with a stone-built structure in the region of 40m long and more than 10m wide. The anomalies suggest a cellular arrangement of internal divisions, each measuring c. 5-6m by c. 3-4m. The rest of the survey area contains further linear anomalies aligned at right angles to this potential building. These positive and negative anomalies demarcate an area at least 60m across and may represent either wall foundations or ditched boundaries. The surface collected finds from Fairmile, from immediately above some of these structures, were probably generated by the plough cutting into archaeological deposits along the upslope/north-west headland. They are almost exclusively of Romano-British date, with some indications of occupation very late in the Romano-British period. Metal detected material reported from Hanglands indicates that Romano-British activity extended upslope, although none of the features examined could be dated to this period.

The indications are therefore of a substantial Romano-British building and associated archaeological features situated on a sheltered but elevated south-facing slope on fertile agricultural land. The admittedly limited and untested ground plan of potential structures indicated by the gradiometry is highly suggestive of the types of buildings and their arrangement seen in excavated examples of villas in the region such as Halstock and Barton Field, Tarrant Hinton (*cf* Lucas 1993, 12; Graham 2006, 53). The overall scale, organisation and similar dimensions of the visible subdivisions support the comparison. This apparently substantial Roman building falls into the group of villas and other contemporary settlements within the orbit of *Lindinis* (*cf* Putnam 2007, 94-6), but away from the core distribution. Villas in this area appear in general to be associated with river valleys. The Fairmile building, whilst more distant from an urban centre or known road is situated close to the head of one of the Yeo tributaries. Several other known findspots of Romano-British material in the area occur in similar settings although this pattern has probably been reinforced by the later settlement pattern leading to greater likelihood of discovery. The identification of this site however indicates that we still have an incomplete understanding of the distribution of settlements and estates, and the way in which the productive landscape of the Romano-British period in this area was articulated.

The presence at Fairmile, albeit in the form of a single sherd, of South East Dorset Orange Wiped Ware, extends the documented distribution (Gerrard 2010). That this Poole Harbour product dating from the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD was reaching the furthest northern reaches of Dorset and into Somerset is significant. A further sherd is present in the South Cadbury Environs Project archive from Sigwells, Charlton Horethorne, c. 3km to the north-west of Fairmile. Coins from Sigwells in the SCEP archive suggest activity late into the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. As the potential date range for SEDOWW may take us into the first part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, it is important to note it as an indication that

connections could have potentially been maintained with south-eastern Dorset into the immediate post-Roman period and we should be alert to its potential presence in later Romano-British contexts across this region.

Trench 3 in Hanglands examined an undated terrace which corresponded with a long north-south linear indicated on the geophysical survey and situated along the break in the slope. This is most likely an agricultural feature and may be medieval, or indeed earlier in origin. A broadly rectilinear field system on a north-west to south-east alignment has been identified in the surrounding landscape which covers most of the Horethorne Hundred (Davey 2005, 67; Figure 5.3). It is identifiable in the south-west, south and along the western boundary of the parish of Poyntington (which is also the county boundary). It appears that the overall system predates 1086, as the county boundary which was established at this time appears to respect the general alignment (Davey, 2005, 70). In the area of the site, the pattern appears to have been obliterated, with few remnants identifiable in the current land boundaries. However, consideration of the geophysical survey of Hanglands indicates that there are the remnants of a rectilinear arrangement of boundaries on the same general alignment as that identified by Davey. The Trench 3 linear is on this orientation, but the feature remains undated, and its alignment may have been influenced by the local topography. Nevertheless, the field immediately to the north of Fairmile and Hanglands has a 'ham' name, indicative of habitation. It has been identified as part of a dispersed pattern of early medieval settlement within Poyntington parish (Davey 2005, 52, 59). If some of the boundaries seen in Hanglands are part of this broader later 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD system of landscape organisation, and the adjacent field provides a hint of early medieval occupation, it is perhaps significant that it occurs immediately adjacent to what may be a substantial Roman building with indications that it may have lingered in use into the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

## CONCLUSION

Geophysical survey, supported by ground-truthing excavation, has demonstrated that there are extensive archaeological features and deposits in Hanglands and Fairmile dating to the later prehistoric and Romano-British period. It seems likely that the extent of the archaeology in Fairmile is greater than that covered by the area which was available for geophysical survey, but there are indications of a substantial Romano-British building. The character, arrangement and scale of the anomalies would suggest that this may represent a previously unrecognised villa. Trial excavation has indicated that ploughing has already affected the archaeology in Hanglands, leading to truncation of features and re-deposition of soils on the slopes. It is likely however that the features and deposits in Fairmile are more deeply stratified and protected. If Fairmile represents another villa site, it underlines the density of sites in this area and posits again questions around the differences between the hinterland of Ilchester, and that of Dorchester. In addition, some of the linear anomalies seen may fit within an early medieval organisation of the landscape which is of particular interest if accompanied by a building which was in use at the very end of the Roman period.

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