FIELD WALKING AT MANOR FARM, FIELD DALLING

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This article presents a summary of the field walking that has been carried out at Manor Farm in Field Dalling since 1984. The author describes how his interest began almost by accident and developed over the years with practice in the field and searching relevant literature. The emphasis is on the finds and on the conditions best suited to their discovery, with some comments on implications.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years of working – and walking – on Manor Farm, both Ted and Eric Hotblack were aware that archaeological artefacts ought to be present in the plough soil: two polished flint axes, for instance, had been found in the 1930s. During the 1970s and early 1980s a few more flint axes, together with a few pieces of pottery, did indeed turn up. The axe finds may have been the result of ploughing to a greater depth than in previous years, or by recognising that the rougher, unpolished tools now found were indeed axes as well.

Then came a breakthrough in pottery finds. Ted Hotblack discovered an area where pottery could always be seen when re-visiting a spot located by aligning field hedges. Then Mike Fenn, an employee on the farm, having worked on a neighbouring farm with a known Romano-British site, also discovered an area with pottery near a little oak tree on the next field (Figs 1 and 2). With repeated visits it was realised that the two areas were parts of the same site, and on handing in the finds to the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service for identification it was also found that the site had already been discovered by Derek Edwards' aerial photography in 1976. It had therefore been given a site number in the County Council's Sites and Monuments Record (SMR No. 12795), but the new finds, covering a larger area over two fields, were given a new number (SMR No. 21317).

Fieldwalking is a way of finding out about man's use of the area in previous unrecorded times. Archaeological excavation covers very small areas in great detail; field walking, by contrast, can not only find previously unrecorded sites, but provides information on the past use of far larger areas. It is non-invasive, in the same way as geophysical surveying, and is likely to be treated with less suspicion by landowners than is metal detecting. The crops and land are undamaged, with the work taking place at times when there is unlikely to be conflicting farm work. It is well suited to the amateur who, if living nearby, can easily see when the conditions are right.

LEARNING TO FIELDWALK

Fieldwalking conditions

It soon became apparent, as it does to all fieldwalkers, that there is an enormous difference between walking the fields in optimum conditions compared with the same effort expended in poor conditions. Weather, soil state and agricultural operations are the principal factors involved.

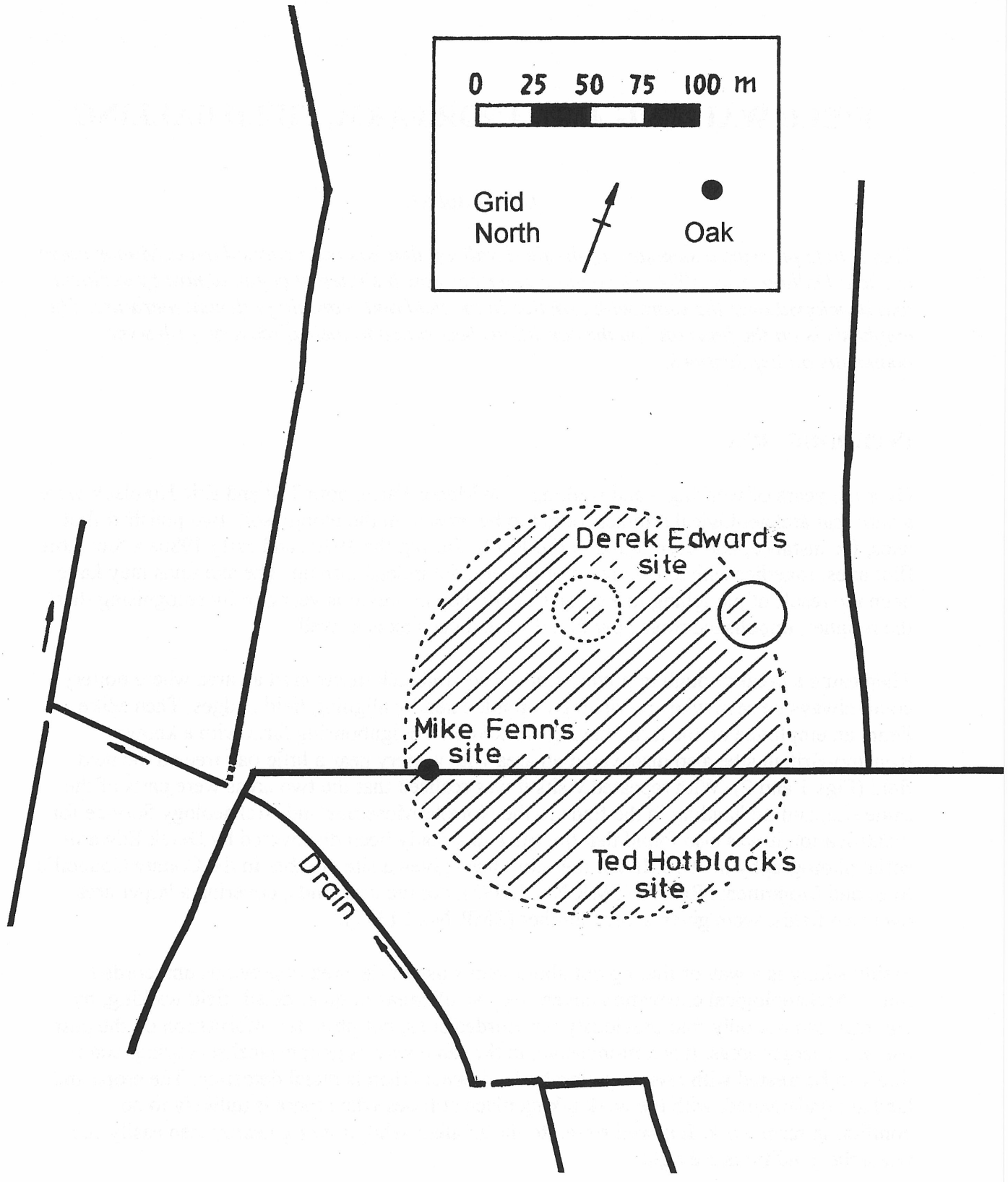

FIGURE 1 ROMANO-BRITISH SITE (Plan)

The Derek Edwards site (from aerial photo)	SMR 12795
The Fenn / Hotblack site (from fieldwalking)	SMR 21317

FIGURE 2 ROMANO-BRITISH SITE (Photo)

Oblique aerial photograph looking north-north-west. The darker crop in the foreground is sugar beet, and the darker crop in the background is spring barley with a stone hole showing very clearly as a light patch. The other three fields, which all look the same colour, are winter wheat. The sandier soil on which Site 21317 is located is clearly visible, although no archaeological crop marks can be seen. (The black triangle, top left, is part of the aircraft.)

Taken on 2nd July 1996 by Eric Hotblack from a Leopard Moth aircraft piloted by Henry Labouchere.

It is best if the soil is fine and level and has been weathered by rainfall to wash loose soil from the pottery. Winter corn is the crop most likely to provide these conditions but the actual operations employed are also relevant. Late drilling in wide rows will tend to produce less leaf cover, and spraying for weed control in the autumn may also thin the crop as well as remove distracting ground cover. Cold frosty weather also tends to thin the crop.

The surface weathers best if left undisturbed. Activity by moles and rabbits is therefore a disadvantage, although finds can sometimes be made on fresh molehills or rabbit scrapes. Damp soil gives the best contrast between pottery and soil. In practice this means that the soil should be wet after rain, or beginning to dry, but not yet changing colour to leave a dry crumb which will make pottery less distinct. Drizzle can help to keep the surface wet without creating flooding and puddles. Previous crop residues, and leaves and bark from nearby hedges and trees, can also cover the ground adding to the distraction. Still conditions are best suited to fieldwalking as crop movement in windy conditions is a distraction to the eye. Visibility is best in dull, indirect sunlight as the shadows produced by the low winter sun can have sharp edges like pottery.

To summarise, the conditions required for fieldwalking are as follows:

BEST	**WORST**
Preceding weather and field conditions	
Soil wet	Soil dry
Soil weathered	Soil freshly worked
Fine tilth	Clods
Stone free	Stony
Undisturbed	Disturbed by moles & rabbits etc
Wide drills	Narrow drills
Clean crop – sprayed	Weedy crop – unsprayed
Clean surface	Debris from previous crop etc
Current weather conditions	
Dull or hazy sun	Bright sun
Still	Windy
Cool	Very cold or frosty

The winter months meet these criteria best. As spring approaches the soil dries under the warmer sun and there is less likely to be a period of consistently suitable weather, although a good day or two will occur before rapid crop growth covers the ground.

Field walking conditions therefore have an important bearing on the quantity of finds that can be collected. They can also have an effect on the quality. For example, heavier soils are usually worked more so that pottery tends to become more fragmented than on light land. The combination of smaller pieces and greater clod size tends to mean that less pottery is recovered on heavier land; although the quantity of sherds may be greater due to their smaller size, the total weight may be less.

Some pottery is less easy to find because of its own characteristics: pottery which is the same colour as the soil, for instance, will be more difficult to see. Some less well fired pottery, such as Iron Age or Early Saxon, degrades easily on exposure to the elements and the resultant small fragments are not easily found.

Field conditions and the nature of the material are not the only determinants of likely recovery rates: there are human factors as well. It has already been acknowledged that an experienced fieldwalker will find much more material than an inexperienced one, and it is also true that a cold, tired, or impatient walker will find less than another person of equal experience who is in tune with the job.

Finds other than Pottery

When thoroughly searching for pottery it is obvious that other finds are likely to be made. Some, of course, may be modern, or of no interest, but some can add to the archaeological record.

Quern stones, used for grinding food such as grain, are one such find – most frequently as pieces of lava which were brought from the Rhineland area of Germany.

Iron slag from smelting iron can also be found. This may be from any period from the Iron Age onwards and needs to be studied by an expert to determine its age.

Building materials, such as brick, tile, stone with mortar, and more recent concrete, tarmac and cement mortar, can often be found. Some of this may be significant clues to the locations of vanished buildings.

Worked flint is the most common 'other find' and can be more common than pottery in some places. Such flints proved very difficult to find when learning how to recognise pottery because in areas with a lot of natural flint the eye tends to disregard flint altogether. A few blades and flint flakes had been found, but only a small proportion of the quantity scattered around, until one day when walking a post-medieval site light rain and drizzle began to alternate with very bright, sunny spells. This had the effect of making the ripple marks of the strikes and the facets of tools obvious (Fig. 3). After this experience it became more common to find more worked flint than pottery. Unfortunately, most worked flint can only be classified as 'undated prehistoric' because of the relatively few diagnostic pieces. Flint, as the local material, is predominant, but chert and other stones may also have been used for tool-making.

In addition to the lucky find of, say, a bead or a hone, the fieldwalker must be aware of the possibility of finding an industrial site, such as a brick or pottery kiln.

A ROMANO-BRITISH FARM SITE (SMR 21317)

The Romano-British site introduced above is located on a west-facing slope of light sandy soil contrasting with the surrounding clay. There is a watercourse at the bottom of the slope which is a tributary of the River Stiffkey. A field hedge bisects the site so each side is walked separately, depending on the cropping.

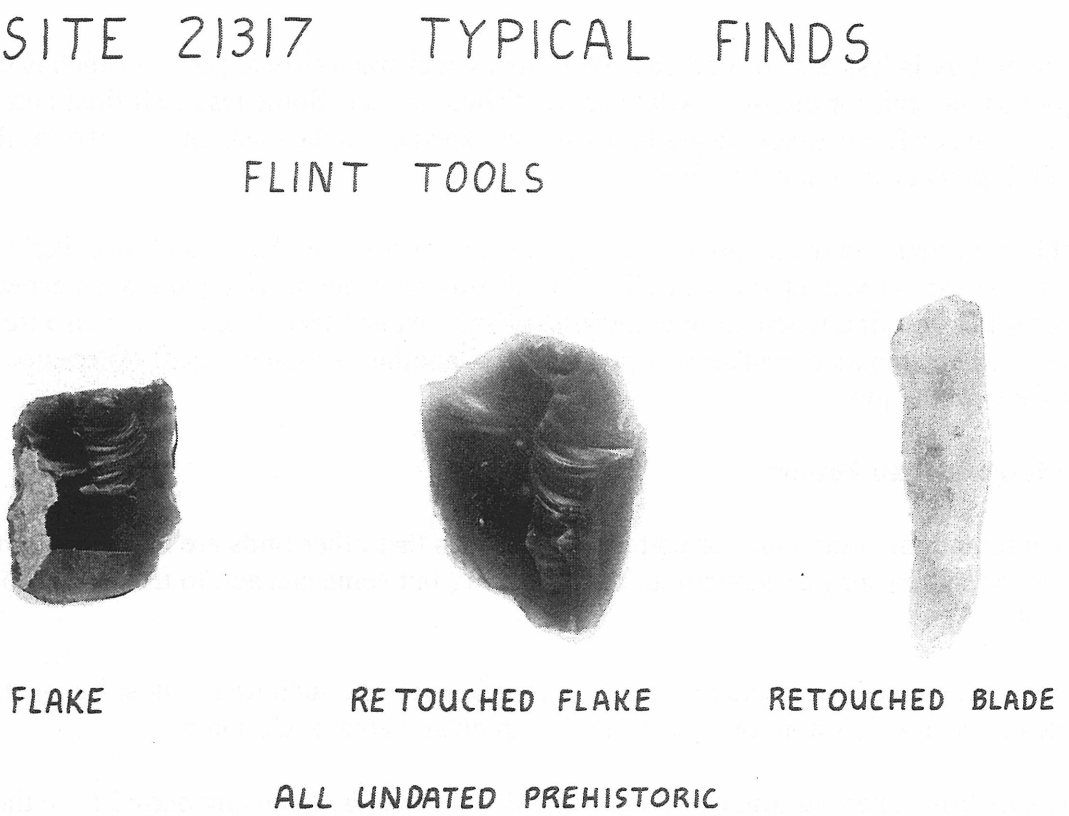

FIGURE 3 SITE 21317 : TYPICAL FINDS

Pottery

The pottery finds, including over 18 kg of Romano-British greyware, date overwhelmingly to the third and fourth centuries – only two pieces are earlier. Domestic activity is indicated by mortaria and a greyware spindle whorl. It is uncertain where all this greyware was produced, but the finds include pieces of giant flagon rim, a type made at Brampton near Aylsham in the third century. Other material could also be from there, although a nearer production site was at Weybourne (SMR No. 6273), and perhaps there is an even nearer kiln site as yet undiscovered.

In addition to the Romano-British greyware are pieces of East Anglian gritted mortaria (food preparation bowls), some ironstone gritted and some flint gritted, and also an Icenian rusticated jar of the third century. From further afield come Nene Valley colour-coated ware and some Romano-British Oxfordshire pottery, but the furthest travelled must be three sherds of Spanish globular amphorae.

Metal Detector Finds

The site was also being searched for metal finds by two members of the Norwich Metal Detector Club who had been recommended by the late Tony Gregory. They had searched on a neighbouring estate finding signs of Roman activity, but without any obvious centre, so wondered whether the site under discussion was a major site which could account for their finds. It was subsequently found that there was no connection between the Field Dalling site and the one in Saxlingham on which finds seemed rather dispersed due to later damage.

Of the coins found, 41 could be identified and were all of third or fourth century, except for one of the first/second century. Fragments of bracelets and bronze brooches are again attributable to the late Roman period, except for an upper half of a Langdon Down brooch of the mid-first century, and a bridge brooch of about AD 100. Two other interesting finds are the pointed end of a bronze needle, and a bronze probe which may have had some surgical use.

Other Finds

Eleven fragments of Romano-British tile (their equivalent of bricks) and one piece of flue tile have been found. Although it is difficult to prove a negative finding, a site searched as thoroughly as this one would surely have produced far more building material if this had been a villa site.

The Romano-British Site: Conclusions

The finds show that this site is most likely to have been a Romano-British farm of the third and fourth centuries. It is lacking in military finds, while the presence of mortaria indicates food preparation and the spindle whorl and needle suggest other domestic activities. The small quantity of building material shows that it was not a villa, but does suggest that there was a building of the Roman period in the vicinity – although it must be at least a mile away or fieldwalking to date would have found it.

Finds from Other Periods

In an area so frequently walked and detected, finds from other periods are bound to be made. Roman sites are notoriously rich in finds, which can mask the use of the site in other periods from which pottery and metal artefacts are scarce.

Two such periods are the Iron Age preceding the Roman period, and the Pagan Saxon period which follows. Unfortunately, it is difficult to distinguish the pottery from these two periods. Of more than 40 pieces of early pottery which do not seem to be Romano-British, most appear to be Saxon, one with distinctive 'wheel, hub and spokes' stamped decoration. The majority of the pieces have been identified as Pagan Saxon or Mid-Saxon. The local Mid-Saxon pottery is Ipswich Ware, represented by five pieces.

It is perhaps dangerous to suggest that the site continued in use from the Romano-British period through the Pagan Saxon period and into the Mid-Saxon on such slender evidence, but there have been metal detecting finds of a Pagan Saxon annular brooch and a fragment of a cruciform brooch head with side-knob. Moreover, there is a Pagan Saxon cemetery nearby, overlooking this site.

There are also finds of medieval, post-medieval and more modern pottery whose presence can be explained by 'manure scatter'. If such items are thrown on a muckheap then they too will be distributed when the muckheap is spread over the arable fields – a practice which may have been followed in earlier periods as well.

Over the centuries some items must have been lost in the fields, and clay tobacco pipe stems are easily found in areas where farm staff would have stopped for a break.

After most of the fieldwalking had taken place some finds of flint tools were also made. Few have diagnostic features so have to be classed as 'undateable prehistoric'. Unless the area is re-walked it will be impossible to find out if there was more activity in one particular period or whether there was just a background scatter over a long period.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Aerial photography

The photograph by Derek Edwards, already mentioned (SMR No. 12795, see Fig. 1), shows one clear circle approximately 30 metres in diameter and another less clearly, of similar size. One wonders what period they belong to. Could they be ring ditches or other enclosure ditches of either the Roman or Saxon periods? Or could they be Bronze Age barrows?[1, 2, 3] If an accurate grid were marked in these areas fieldwalking and metal detecting finds might be made to explain them.

Sites

The word 'site' has so far been used without explanation of what it really means because no single definition is appropriate in fieldwalking. Different densities of finds are significant in different periods.[4] Man uses the landscape to the maximum of his abilities at the time, so if an area shows no sign of habitation or industrial use it does not follow that it was unused. A

'manure scatter' has already been mentioned as an indicator of arable fields, but permanent grassland, reed beds, forest or common land will probably not yield any finds by which to identify these uses.

Recording

Fieldwalking finds have no great financial value – their interest lies primarily in where they are found. It is therefore important to have an accurate record of the find spot. The difficulty of interpreting the finds of other periods made on the Romano-British farm site has been mentioned. If these other finds had been plotted accurately, centres of activity in other periods might have been deduced. When in the winter of 1986/7 a site was found which had both Late Saxon 'Thetford' Ware and medieval pottery it was suggested that it was re-walked in a grid. This was the beginning of walking in 25 x 25 m squares an area which now (2002) amounts to 60 acres in Field Dalling. This allows a greater amount of information to be recorded, plotted on plans and subsequently interpreted. Greater detail could be achieved with an even smaller grid but this is rather difficult on a field scale. Indeed, one is continually wondering whether the same amount of information could be found by walking less intensively.[5]

The ultimate method of plotting finds is to record them individually by means of a global positioning system.[6, 7]

SUMMARY

Fieldwalking is regarded as a non-destructive archaeological surveying method which is well suited to the local amateur who can work in conditions that do not interfere with farming operations.

The weather is both friend and foe to the fieldwalker. In the first place, certain weather conditions must occur if the soil is to be in the right state for fieldwalking. During the actual fieldwalking, however, the best weather conditions for making finds are often those which are too cold for comfort when moving slowly.

It is best to learn fieldwalking on a relatively productive site so that one can make frequent finds; it is easy to become dispirited on a sparse site, thinking that one is unable to see what ought to be there (but isn't). It can be particularly difficult to find worked flints for the eye has to distinguish them from the large numbers of unworked flints also likely to be present, as well as remaining vigilant for other types of finds. Intensive fieldwalking, trying to collect all finds, is very time-consuming, so for large areas a method expending less effort, called 'line walking', is available.[8] In this method only a percentage of the area is walked, which means there is a chance of missing sites from periods with very few artefacts. However, 'fast survey methods' have been very effective in the Fenland Project.[9, 10]

It is tempting to try to correlate the results of fieldwalking with historical events. However, it should be remembered that one is studying the everyday life of country people who were rarely touched by the great recorded events of history.

Acknowledgement

It is important to have contact with the Finds Identification and Recording Service provided by the County's museums, and we are particularly grateful for the help of Dr Andrew Rogerson, PhD, FSA, MIFA.

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Eric Hotblack is a Field Dalling farmer whose fieldwalking experience has led to a wider interest in landscape archaeology.