

Old Place, Icklesham East Sussex; Roman Road Excavations 2024

Cameron Ross

Contributions by David Staveley

Abstract

Archaeological investigation undertaken from October-December 2024 commissioned by Philip Merricks to further investigate LiDAR features (Fig:01) recognised by Andrew Scott from the then Winchelsea Archaeological Society representing an ancient road or trackway running east west across the Icklesham ridgeline from Icklesham village to Winchelsea Village parallel to the modern A259 road. The initial speculation was that; could this be the remains of a Roman road or Medieval track way? Further geophysics was undertaken by David Staveley on the 26th and 27th October specifically magnetometry to develop a more detailed survey, the results of which showed the clear outline of a 9-meter-wide double ditched metaled road representing the typical format of a Roman Road. Extended geophysics concluded that the road indeed continued east orientating towards Crutches Farm highlighting the suggestion that the road may terminate at a previously unknown Roman port or 'vicas' on the Pewes Marsh and West into the village of Icklesham itself suggesting a possible Roman footprint to the village. Excavation undertaken in November/December 2024 on a section of the road quantified this discovery detailing a well-constructed slag Metaled Road surface flanked by two V-shaped ditches, the north ditch cut containing a fragment of 3rd century Roman glass at its base.

Introduction

Archaeological work was under direction of *(BAG)-Cameron Ross* with assistance from volunteers from the Wealden Iron Research Group (*WIRG*) on the 25th of November 2024 excavations running until the 3rd of December. With the kind assistance of a digger from the landowner, a 4.5m by 15m scrape was undertaken over the furthest western extreme section of the road anomaly determined by the geophysical survey undertaken by David Staveley and based on the LiDAR data (Fig:) Further excavation was undertaken by hand where the remaining Top soil and subsoil was removed to expose the road surface and associated parallel ditches. The road surface was well defined and metaled with Iron smelting slag in various grades according to placement and positioning within the roads matrix. Large sections of the middle of the road forming the main 'Agga' where however missing having been previously removed possibly due to historical ploughing or robbing of material for other uses. Heavily corroded Iron oxen or bullock shoes were found in association with the road surface, presumably Roman as they were found within the sealed context of the road and a single body fragment of prismatic glass found at the base of the

northern ditch dated to the 3rd century AD. The only other finds apart from random slag fragments were found within the subsoil and top soil and not associated with the road where medieval or post medieval, peg tile. Several Distinctive cart track impressions were also identified on the road surface giving a unique insight into the history of the site. The Road is a substantial well build feature measuring at least 9m across and built according to the geophysics results in large straight sections spanning the entire Icklesham ridgeline running east west opening out the possibility of larger Roman infrastructure than previously expected for the south east.

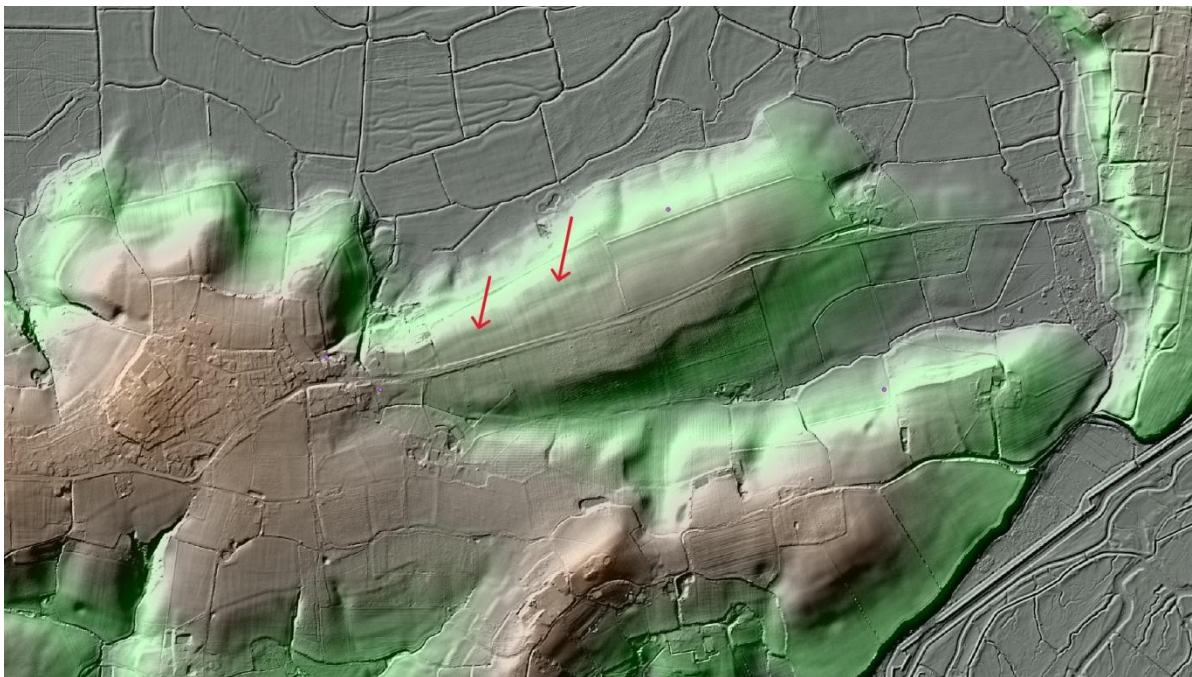


Fig (01) LiDAR image showing the impressions of a track-way or road indicated by the red arrows.

Geological and landscape Setting

The geology of East Sussex is diverse consisting of a range of sedimentary rock formations yet comparatively the formations are all recent. The oldest rock formations are known as the Purbeck formation laid down 140 million years ago in the Jurassic with the formation of shallow island lagoons. The preceding Cretaceous formation known as the Ashdown formation comprising of Ashdown Beds at the base with Tunbridge Wells Sand sandwiched by Wadhurst Clay. Collectively known as the Hastings Group comprising of silty sands and sandstone, shale, clay rich in iron stone. The village of Icklesham is situated on a ridge running east west extending towards the English channel with the once tidal river estuaries of the Brede and the Pannel streams either side north and south forming a peninsular or ridge line topped with sand, sandstone (Ashdown Sand) overlaid with clay, iron stone, shale, Wadhurst Clay (fig: 03) (*Williams. R from Leslie & Short; 1999*)



Fig (02) Location of research area (Wikipedia maps)

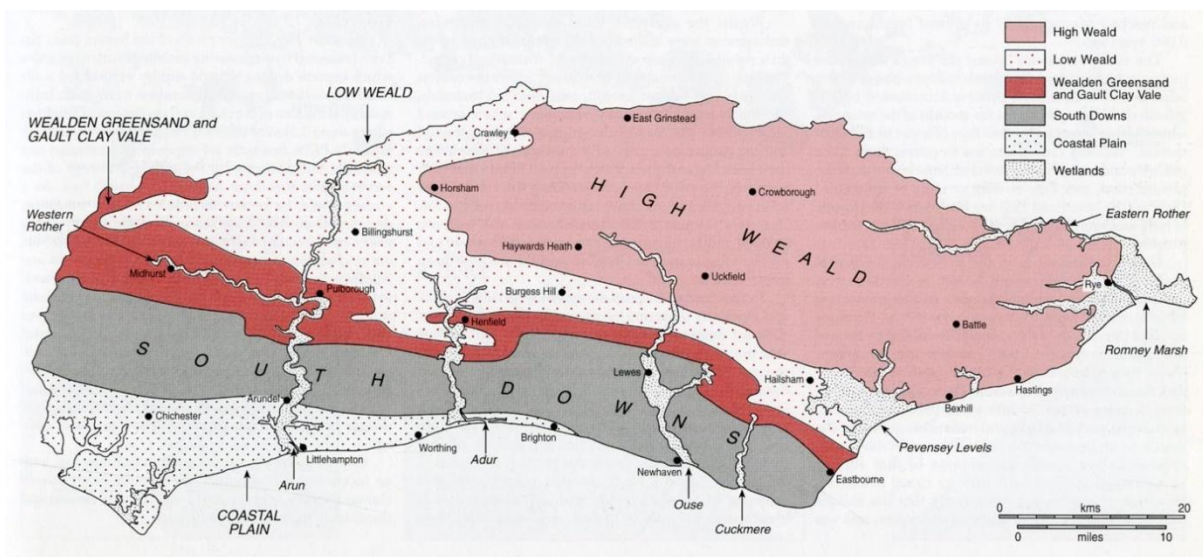
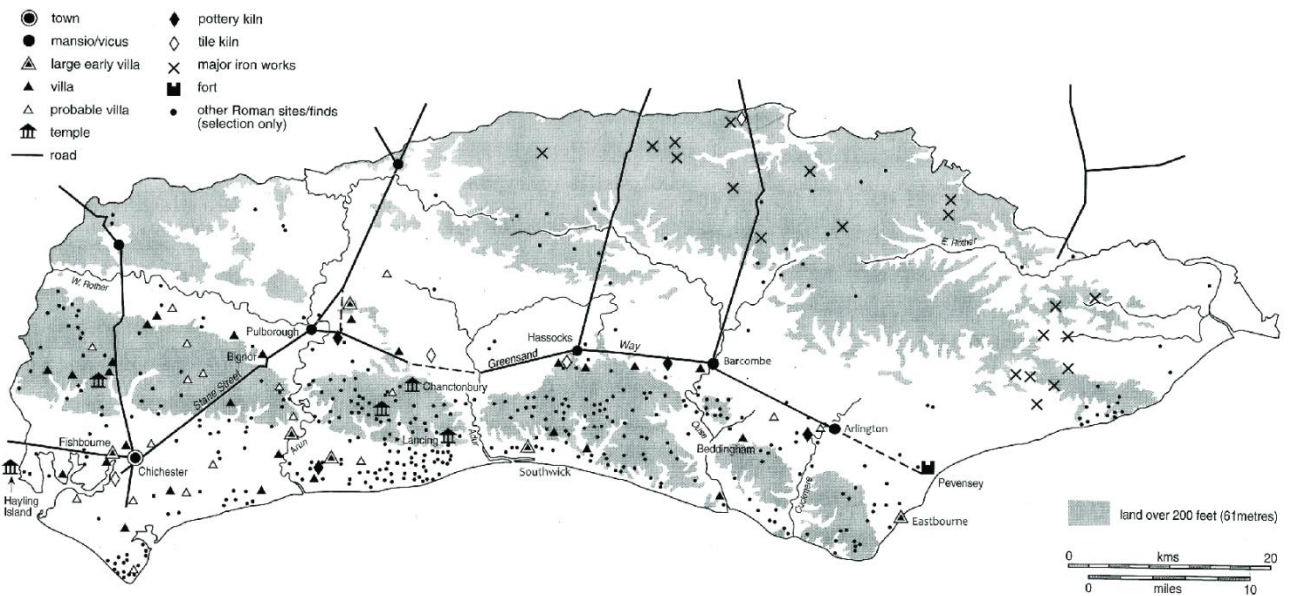


Fig (03) Geology of East Sussex (*An Historical Atlas of Sussex by Leslie & Short, 1999, p3*)

Icklesham’s Roman Archaeological and Historical Background

The Weald of Sussex in south Eastern Britain during the Iron Age and the early Roman period was the seat of industry for the production of iron in the south, and no doubt served as a major source of income and power to those locally who controlled the procurement and production of this valuable resource. By the end of the 1st century BC and the beginning of the 1st century AD, iron was one of the major trading commodities coming out of Britain feeding the Roman Empires vast demands. The Weald had all that was needed to procure this resource with iron seams in plenty found along the many forested gullies and streams dropping into coastal estuaries. Wood in plenty for infrastructure and charcoal, clay and sandstone to build furnaces and tidal estuaries navigable by boat to the sea and open trade to the continent. (Russell 2006, 242) Britain’s main exports to the Roman Empire were ‘grain, cattle, gold, silver and iron’. (Strabo Geography, IV,5) Archaeologically however little remains in the form of municipal infrastructure like roads and towns and ports supporting this vast industrial footprint. Though they must exist, a fine example of this would be the

impressive remains found at Beauport Park in Hastings with its bath house and massive slag heaps (Russell 2006, 245) Slag is the most common evidence found. Iron slag was the key component for the metaling of road surfaces in the weald and what roads exist seem to have availability of vast quantities of slag giving an indication of the scale of iron production. This by-product from the Roman iron industry was still being dug up and used as a building resource up until the 19th century yet the knowledge of the Roman road network in the Hastings area of East Sussex is limited.



Fig(04) Roman sites and road networks in Sussex, note the large gap in road network knowledge of the Weald (An Historical Atlas of Sussex by Leslie & Short, 1999, p25)

Iron slag concentrations form the basis for the main archaeological evidence relevant to any Roman archaeology found locally at Icklesham. In 1936 W. Homan reported that during sand extraction on the northern aspect of the village for the construction of Old Place House, Icklesham (TQ 8795 1658) no less than six possible Roman bloomery's were found in close proximity accompanied by vast quantities of iron slag, a piece of possible Belgic pottery and a Denarius coin of Hadrian (117-138 AD) was also found. None of these finds were ever professionally recorded, even Homan himself never visited the site. (Stacker 1969) Romano-British pottery was also found on land associated with Wickham Manor, documented since the 12th century. The name Wickham indicating a possible Roman origin, 'Wick' suggesting a place for a 'Vicus' or Roman fort or seat of local administration. Ashes Farm (Essles farm 13th century) to the south of Wickham also having found Romano British pottery and later Samien ware. (Vahey 1982).

Trial Excavations undertaken by Hastings Area Archaeological Group (HAARG) in 1978 in the village of Icklesham in the back garden of Old Place Cottages inspired by the local residence finding pieces of Roman pottery and slag, eventually leading to the discovery of a section of tightly packed slag forming a surface. (Vahey 1978) These excavations continuing again in 1981-82 leading to the packed slag surface as being redefined as a slag metaled Roman road

with one surviving northern ditch cut, the southern ditch lying under the now A259 road. An estimate given for the possible width of the road being some 22 feet wide. Roman pottery was also identified as well as quantities of slag, burnt clay and possible bloomery workings. Oxen and horse shoes were also associated with the slag surface of the road. Medieval pottery and associated artefacts were also found yet these items seemed to be associated with a higher fill context. Later further excavation was undertaken by HAARG (Child 1983) following a soil resistivity survey in the field further north of Old Place Cottages associated with the sand quarry, finding large amounts of Roman slag, some Romano-British and medieval pottery yet no indication of bloomeries. A final test pit was sunk into the previous excavation area undertaken by Vahey in 1983 at the back of Old Place Cottages by Dick Child in 1984. Child extended the Vahey test pit site further to the south to again find more evidence of the slag surfaced road (Child 1984, 51) other evidence for Roman occupation of the Icklesham area was discovered in the final days of excavation of 'Old Place' Icklesham Manor by (HAARG) in 1982. Found at the deepest deposit (layer 11) before water flooding the trenches made further excavation redundant traces of Romano-British pottery and tile were identified. (Vahey 1982)

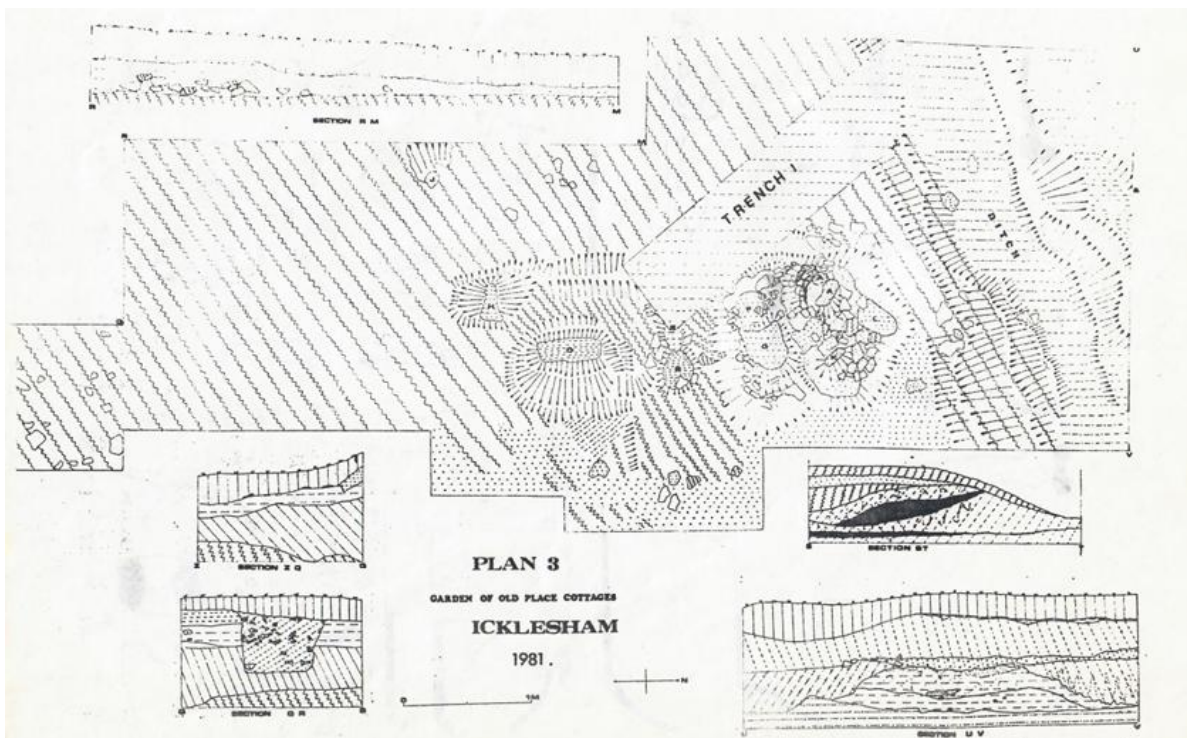


Fig (05) Roman road surface found by HAARG in 1982/3 (Vahey 1983)

More possible Roman bloomery sites have been identified and located along the Icklesham ridge line facing the Brede estuary in several places by field walking. At Crutches Farm Romano-British pottery has been identified as well as tile and bloomery slag (Martin 1993).

Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out archaeological investigations on land associated with the Vicarage, Icklesham in 1992 (Oxford,1992; IIV 558/93) findings included medieval pottery from the 11th – 15th century and 3rd Cent Roman Pottery and slag. A professional

watching brief for an installation of an art studio to the rear of Jasmine Cottage, Icklesham found no visible archaeology except traces of iron slag (Butler 2006) A further magnetometer survey undertaken by HAARG in 2010 scanning ground north north east of Jasmine Cottage reported a very high magnetic response, yet trial excavations failed to find any significant archaeological features except loose quantities of iron slag (Cornwell 2010) Excavations carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services in 2020 found evidence for Early Roman Occupation and a Burial Enclosure parallel to the main Road, Icklesham, (Virginia Fuentes and Sean Wallis)

Other locations recorded by the Wealden Iron Research groups attempt to map and record previously located possible bloomery or Roman occupations sites in the Icklesham area are listed as: Cinderbank (TQ87161571), Telegraph Mill (TQ86631593), Pannel Farm (TQ8870 1470), (TQ8880 1490) and Pett Barn (TQ8830 1470)

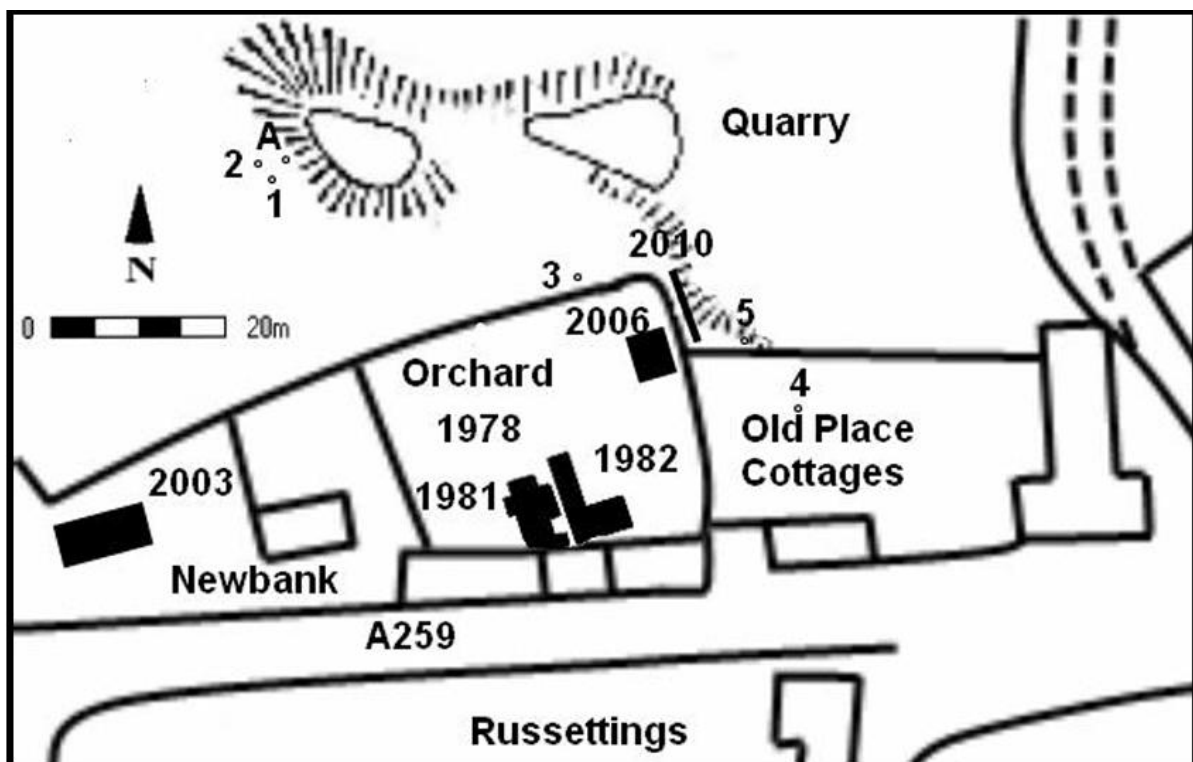


Fig (06) Plan of the locations of archaeological investigations carried out over time within the village of Icklesham north of the A259 road and centred around Orchard , Jasmine and Old Place cottages. (Cornwell 2013)

Geophysics

Icklesham Roman Road – Interim Report

By David Staveley

Introduction

The author was asked to survey an area of land on the peninsula between Icklesham and Winchelsea in East Sussex, where Andrew Scott had noticed a sunken LiDAR feature running east-west across the top of the hill, and wondered if it was part of the Roman road excavated by Zoe Vahey in Icklesham itself. The landowner, Philip Merricks, contacted an archaeologist, Cameron Ross, who contacted the author for a geophysics survey across the area. A Bartington GRAD601-2 magnetometer was used to survey the fields immediately to the east of Icklesham (TQ88281660 TQ88741680). This interim report will contain less technical detail than will appear in the final report that will include the entire landscape survey of the Icklesham ridge and not just this section of the ridgeline east of the village relevant to the recent road section excavations.

LiDAR

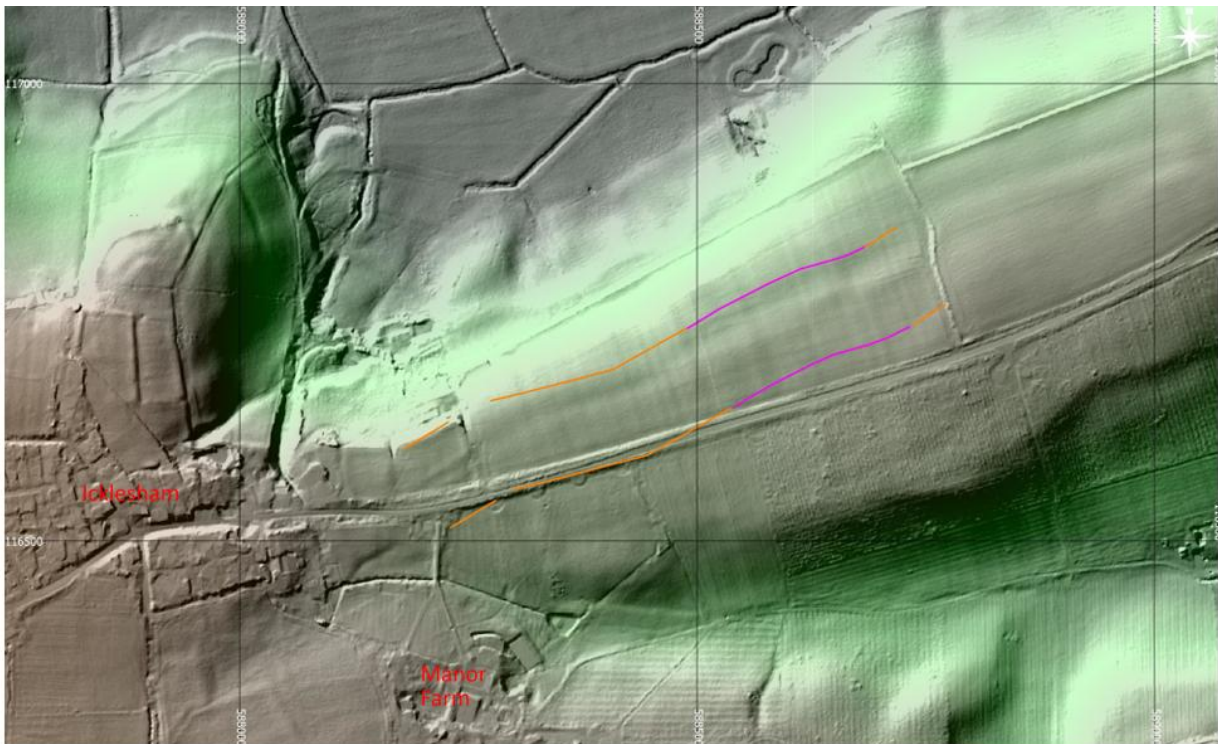


Fig (07) LiDAR image showing the location of the track-way/road anomalies.

There are three sections of geophysics showing the Roman road, shown in orange. The westernmost one, as the survey of the field is not finished, is not shown in this interim report. The road also appears on aerial photographs (GE2022), the line of which is shown in magenta.

Magnetometer Results



Fig (08) Magnetometer Results at two locations East and West showing clear indications of a road way.

Magnetometer Interpretation



Fig (09) Magnetometer Interpretation of features located within survey area.

The road appears clearly on the magnetometer results, with the intervening route visible on the Google Earth imagery, where the road ditch appears darker, and the surface appears lighter. There is a slight S bend in the road on the aerial photographs, between the two areas of geophysics. On the interpretation, possible archaeology is shown in dark green, the road surface in dark cyan, geological features in purple and modern metal in red. The top of slope of the LiDAR feature is shown as a pair of cyan lines. Annotated features are described below. The excavation area is shown as a red-bordered rectangle on the west side of the survey area.

A) This is the Roman road. Where the side ditches are clear, they appear 7-8 metres apart, with the iron-slag surface showing in between. To the east, the road is not as clear, as there may be some modern disturbance here.

B) Some possible features are shown towards the eastern edge of the western survey area. They could be from the Roman period, but could also be modern disturbance or geological.

C) The road in the eastern survey area is not as well formed, with the side ditches barely visible.

D) There is a possible sub-oval enclosure here, with possible larger posts within the line of the enclosure. Given the noise in the area from geology and/or modern metal from the site being used as a car park, it is difficult to say for definite if this is archaeological.

E) As with feature D, the possible features here may be archaeological may also be modern, but are given here as possible archaeological features.

Conclusion

The Roman road here is a substantial slag surfaced road of the same form as the Roman road between Bodiam and Beauport Park, via the major iron-working settlements at Footlands and Oaklands Park. For the most part, it seems to stay 30m from the LiDAR feature, turning where the LiDAR feature turns. The exception is at the western end, where the road descends into the LiDAR feature as it heads west. The current thinking is that the LiDAR feature is a worn trackway from the early days of the Roman period settlement at Icklesham, which was replaced by the metalled road, using iron slag from the settlement.

The Future

While examination of the iron-working settlement under Icklesham itself is currently on-going, and not part of this report, there is also further work to be done to the east and west. To the west, there are a substantial number of pits, from which the iron ore may have originated. There are no pits in the immediate vicinity of Icklesham, so a road to these pits, and further on towards the main area of iron-working in the Roman period, is likely, and worth following. To the area, there are further LiDAR features, and Roman period finds on the historical environment record, but it is unknown if the road extends all the way to Winchelsea.

Excavation Results

On the 25th of November 2024 on open farm land belonging to Philip Merricks adjacent to Old Manor Cottages, TN36 4BH Icklesham, East Sussex, 24m east of the boundary fence and 24m north of the A259 road a 15m x 4m evaluation trench (*Trench 1*) was designated for top soil removal pre archaeological exploration. This location specially designated as its positioning directly corresponded to the magnetometer data highlighting the existence of a possible ditch lined road, more than likely Roman in origin. The evaluation transect trench was orientated north south and extended the full length of the width of the roadway anomaly with the linear ditches and road way running east west almost parallel to the modern A259 road with a slight north east inclination. Grass and top soil was removed to a depth of 10-15cm so as not to impede the integrity of the possible road or any archaeological material associated with the road. Conditions were wet and muddy yet once the immediate wet top soil was removed the ground began to dry up and reveal more manageable dark loam and sandy friable ground conditions. Victorian and Post Medieval material was located at this depth mainly Delftware a single coin (Victorian) or token, flint debitage and terracotta peg tile but also some Roman slag was recorded, mostly all the slag were large pieces greater than 6cm. Excavation was then undertaken by hand under the direction of Cameron Ross (*BAG*) with the help of Wealden Iron Research Group volunteers (*WIRG*). Subsoil recognised as more consistently sandy clay in nature was located at roughly 20cm in depth followed by a consistent line of loamy sandy clay sporadically pitted with large pieces iron slag greater than 6cm to smaller fragments less than 4cm. A more consistent but sporadic in places metaled surface of iron slag being reached at a depth of 30cm. No Medieval or Post Medieval material artefacts were located at this depth.

The road:

The central aspect of the road was primarily a raised 'agga' made up of a naturally accourting belt of sand stone sheets and blocks interspersed with iron stone and sand. The metaled surface at this central location was robbed of the majority of iron slag material either deliberately or by the plough, though a residue of slag was still present in the section and in scattered areas. Either side of the 'agga' especially on the northern aspect of the road a very solid metaled surface was still present. This solid section extended for 2.5 meters and was made up of at least four grades of metaled slag. At the base layer directly laid onto the Ashdown beds were the smallest grades of iron slag no greater than 2cm diameter, this layer also interspersed with sand stone fragments and sheets 4-6 cm in diameter then topped with grades of slag 3-4cm in diameter, these levels both around 5cm in depth demoted the primary base layer to the road forming the most consistent matrix of the road, some areas deeper than others accounting to the undulation of the Ashdown beds. A third layer of iron slag was also evident measuring 4.5-6.5cm and a possible fourth layer of large iron slag measuring in at 7-8cm and greater. This layer had been almost totally removed due to possible deep ploughing, yet there was enough of it still present to suggest a specific material grade. Perhaps this larger grade of slag was the final capping to the road surface now almost lost. Indeed this grade was the most common size of slag found within the top soil and subsoil as well as was found at the base of the northern and southern road side

ditch fill suggesting parts of the top road surface being worn off or knocked off when in use. The entire area of the road between ditch cuts measuring around 6m. One of the most intriguing aspects of the iron slag metaled surface of the road in the northern sector was the presents of wheel rut impressions imprinted into the road surface. At least four distinct impressions were recorded but could be as many as six. These impressions were deep on the outer extremities of the road as the 'agga' dipped into the ditch cut and it is in this area that we see the possible extra three impressions as the cart wheels are being tracked even deeper into previous wheel ruts. The cart tracks are of various widths due to constant use yet could possibly be defined as being a standard 5cm wide wheel rim. Coincidentally it was while cutting a section of the road in this northern section of the road and in the same context as the deepest outer wheel ruts an iron Ox or Bullock shoe was recovered [04]. The shoe was heavily corroded and the amount of nail holes and style of shoe remains unclear yet due to the shoes context directly with the road has been assumed to be contemporary. During cutting of the same section yet another Ox or Bullock shoe [03] was also recovered on the southern extremities of the road in a similar condition.

The road surface was loosely packed with iron slag at the extremities bordering the ditches up until the ditch cut. Larger sandstone stones also seemed to aligned on the inner road side of the ditch to perhaps hold back the iron slag fill of the road, though this wasn't entirely clear as belts of natural sandstone where also evident in these areas as both ditch cuts had penetrated sandstone and iron stone beds. A very small amount of charcoal was recovered from within the road in only one location {01} yet the sample was less than 5 grams.

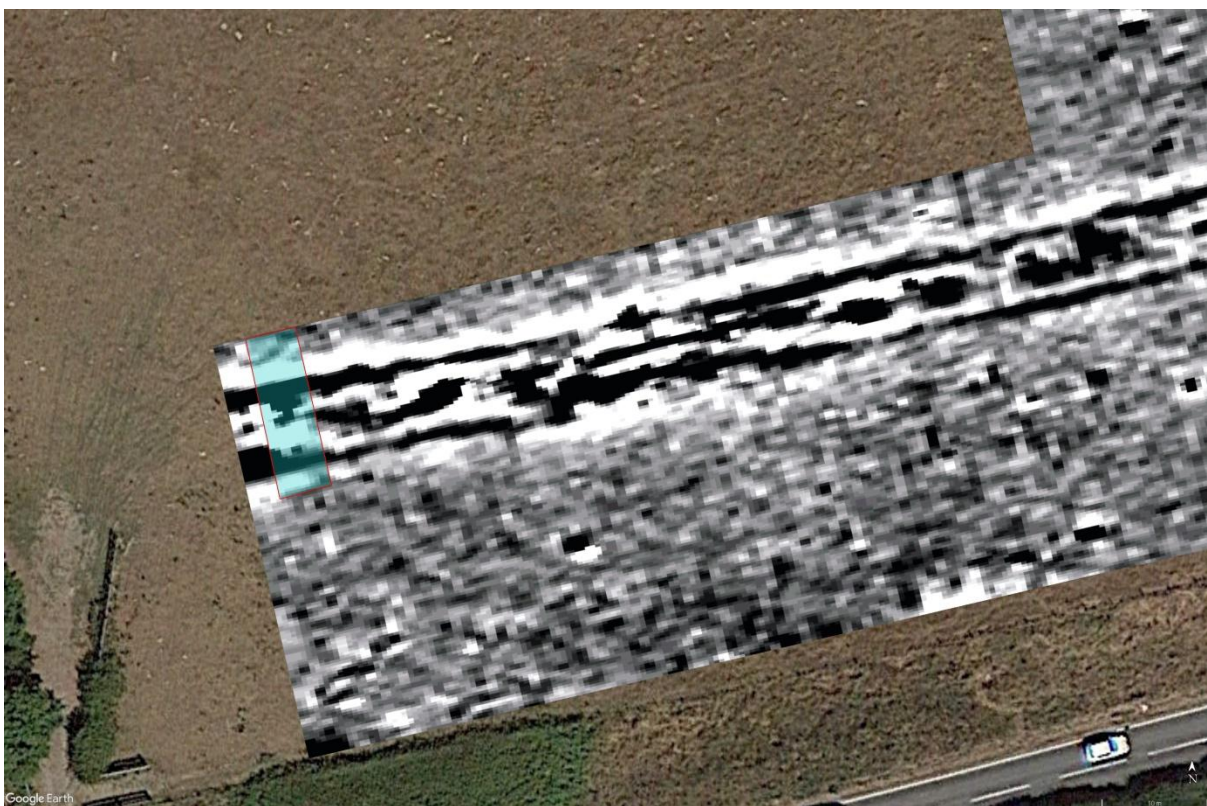


Fig (10) transect location Data:T1_1,588294.52,116600.93,33.78/T1_2,588289.75,116599.42,33.81
T1_3,588285.97,116614.21,33.42/T1_4,588290.59,116615.51,33.45.

Ditches:

Two linear ditch cuts (*North D*) and (*South B*) orientated east west were also found bordering the iron slag metaled surface. The ditch cuts were uniform both measuring 1.7m wide containing a very dark brown grey fill. The ditch cuts were dug directly into the natural yellow Wadhurst clay interspersed with sand stone belts and pitted with iron stone and sand. Both ditch cuts were cut as v-shaped ditches bottoming out into a flat bottom flue presumably as they were dredged out or cleaned. The primary fill of both ditches was the same containing various levels of the same dark brown grey loam and sandy friable fill until 20cm off the base of the flat bottom of the ditch cut which was predominantly a grey clay and sandy clay silt. Large pieces of iron slag greater than 7-8 cm were found in this context. The depth of the northern ditch (ditch D) was 0.70m and the (South B) ditch cut 0.60m deep. A small amount of charcoal {03} was recovered from the very base of (Ditch D) yet again the sample was very small representing less than 5 grams. A further soil sample taken from the grey silty clay constituting the base fill of (Ditch D) was also taken {02}. It was in this context at the very base of the ditch cut was recovered an angled piece of green glass [02] around 2-4cm representing a plain body fragment, with no decoration and no rim, base or handle remaining yet most likely from a prismatic bottle or jar, identified as Roman possibly 3rd century AD (Broadley, 2024) perhaps a little earlier or later. The area to the north of ditch (D) was exposed to the natural clay for an extra 4m and no other features were identified. An area of 1.5m was also exposed on the very southern extremities of ditch (B) and a post hole (Feature C) was identified measuring 25cm diameter and 10cm deep, with a dark loam infill and pieces of Post Medieval peg tile [01] incorporating the top layer of the fill. The post hole was cut into the exposed natural sandstone clay and iron stone bands.

Slag recovered from 5.8m x .20m x .10m section:

Slag sizes	weight
1-2 cm	11.5 kg
3-4 cm	8.5 kg
5-6 cm	5 kg
7-9 cm	4 kg

Total weight: 29kg

Loose slag recovered from total area of excavation:

Slag recovered from top/subsoil	6kg
Slag recovered from North ditch	2kg
Slag recovered from South ditch	1.5kg

Total weight: 9.5kg

Tile and CBM recovered from top/sub soil 500g

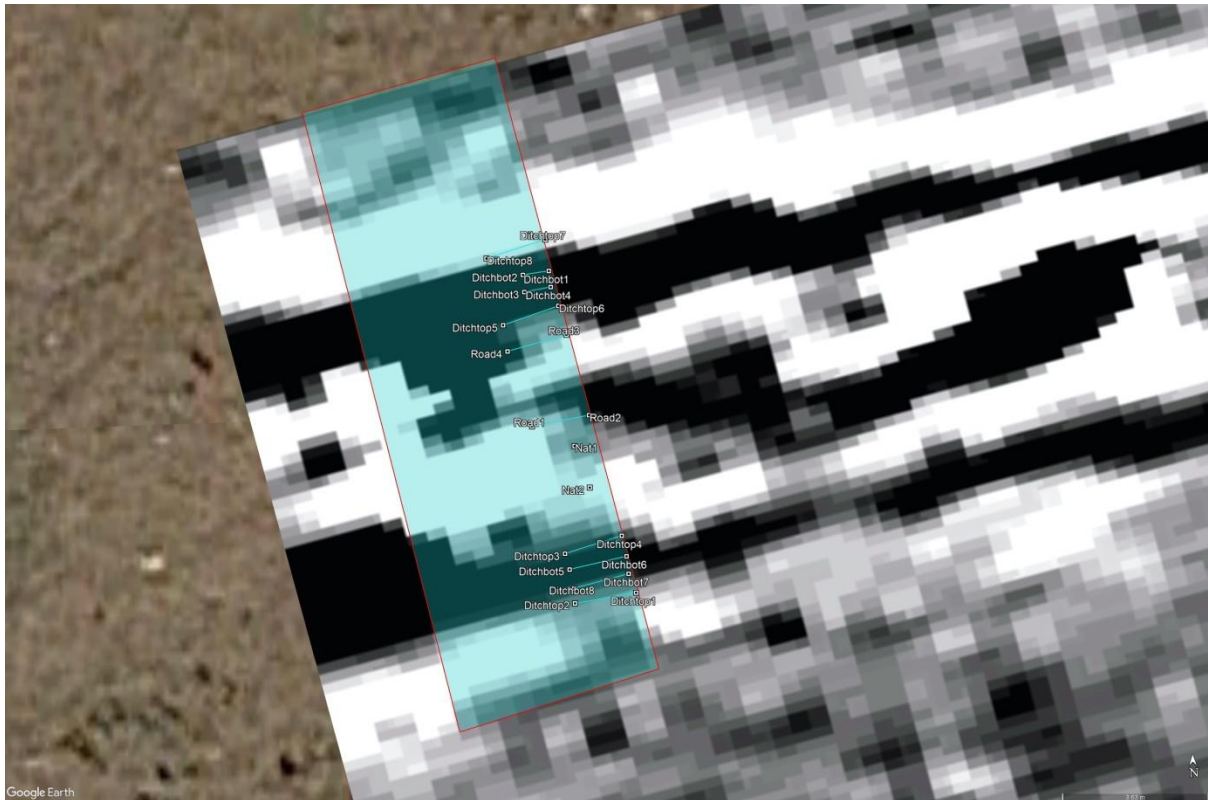


Fig (11) Transect raw data relevant to positioning and heights in the landscape.

Dichtop1,588294.01,116602.57,33.34
 Dichtop2,588292.49,116602.31,33.42
 Dichtop3,588292.24,116603.54,33.36
 Dichtop4,588293.65,116603.98,33.38
 Dichtop5,588290.69,116609.21,33.13
 Dichtop6,588292.07,116609.69,33.17
 Dichtop7,588291.75,116611.34,33.21
 Dichtop8,588290.28,116610.87,33.20
 Ditchbot1,588291.83,116610.56,32.75
 Ditchbot2,588291.19,116610.46,32.82
 Ditchbot3,588291.22,116610.04,32.76
 Ditchbot4,588291.88,116610.16,32.73
 Ditchbot5,588292.35,116603.15,32.95
 Ditchbot6,588293.77,116603.48,32.91
 Ditchbot7,588293.82,116603.04,32.92
 Ditchbot8,588292.47,116602.68,32.95

Road1,588291.41,116606.70,33.19
 Road2,588292.84,116606.98,33.21
 Road3,588292.27,116608.98,33.17
 Road4,588290.81,116608.56,33.19



Fig (12) Drone image of the fully excavated road section (A). South Ditch (B) on the left and North Ditch (D) on the right. Road orientated East-West. North-South section of the Road taken on the Eastern elevation.



Fig (13) Southern Ditch (B) East facing section. Note the post hole to the centre left.



Fig(14) Northern Ditch (D) East facing section.



Fig (15) West facing section of feature (A) the road surface. Note the central 'agga' of the road has been removed.



Fig (16) Central West facing aspect of the road (A) showing the main surface matrix of iron ore slag.



Fig (17) East facing Northern surface area of the road (A) showing cart wheel impressions into the metalized surface.



Fig (18) Cart wheel impressions being revealed on the northern aspect of the road (A) East facing section.



Fig (19) Cart wheel impressions under excavation of feature (A) running east-west, highlighted by the late afternoon sun. Note the position of the Brede valley of the ridgeline of the road at the top of the image.



Fig (20) Historically removed central section of the road surface.



Fig (21) Sectioning (A)



Fig (22) North facing section of the road surface (A) revealing the depth of the metal slag surface onto the natural sandstone and clay base.



Fig (23) Sampling the road surface (A) and the discovery of the iron oxen shoe [3]



Fig (24) Charcoal [01] impeded within the road (A)

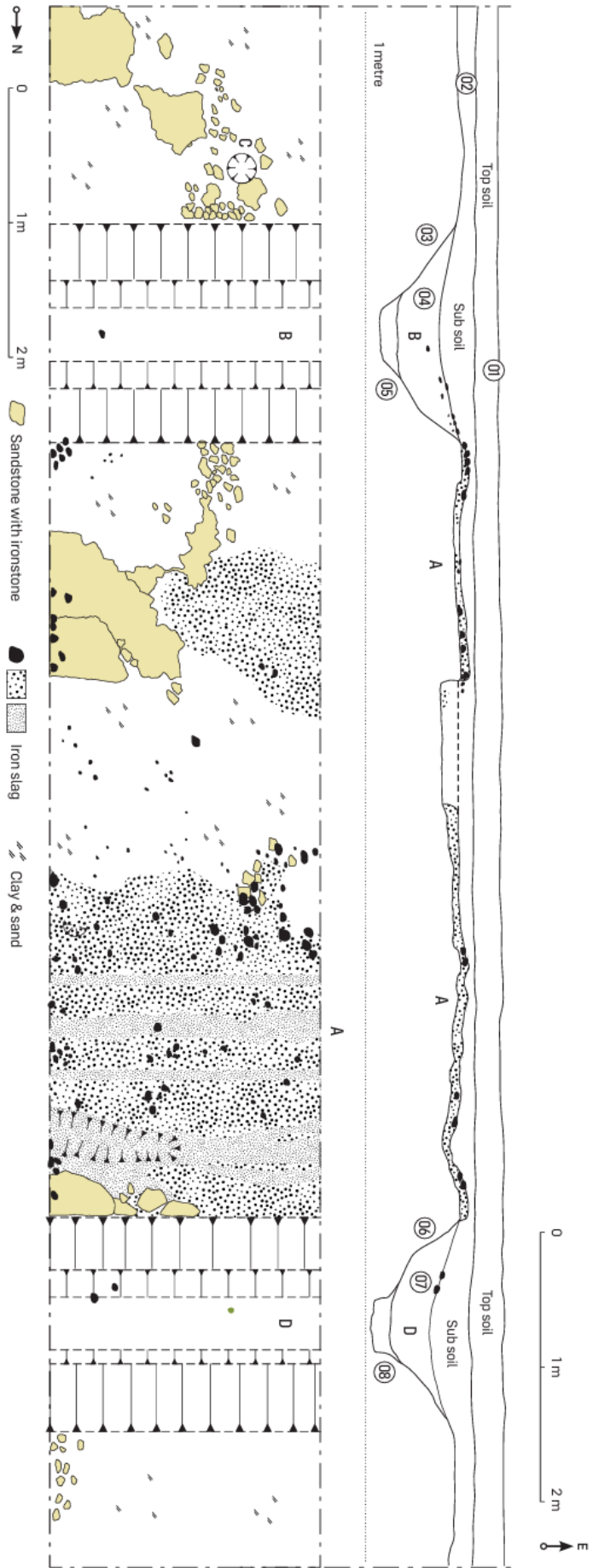


Fig (25)

Artefacts:



Fig (26) Ox or bullock shoe [03] found on the southern extremity of the road (Feature A)



Fig (27) Ox or bullock shoe [04] found on the northern extremity of the road (feature A)

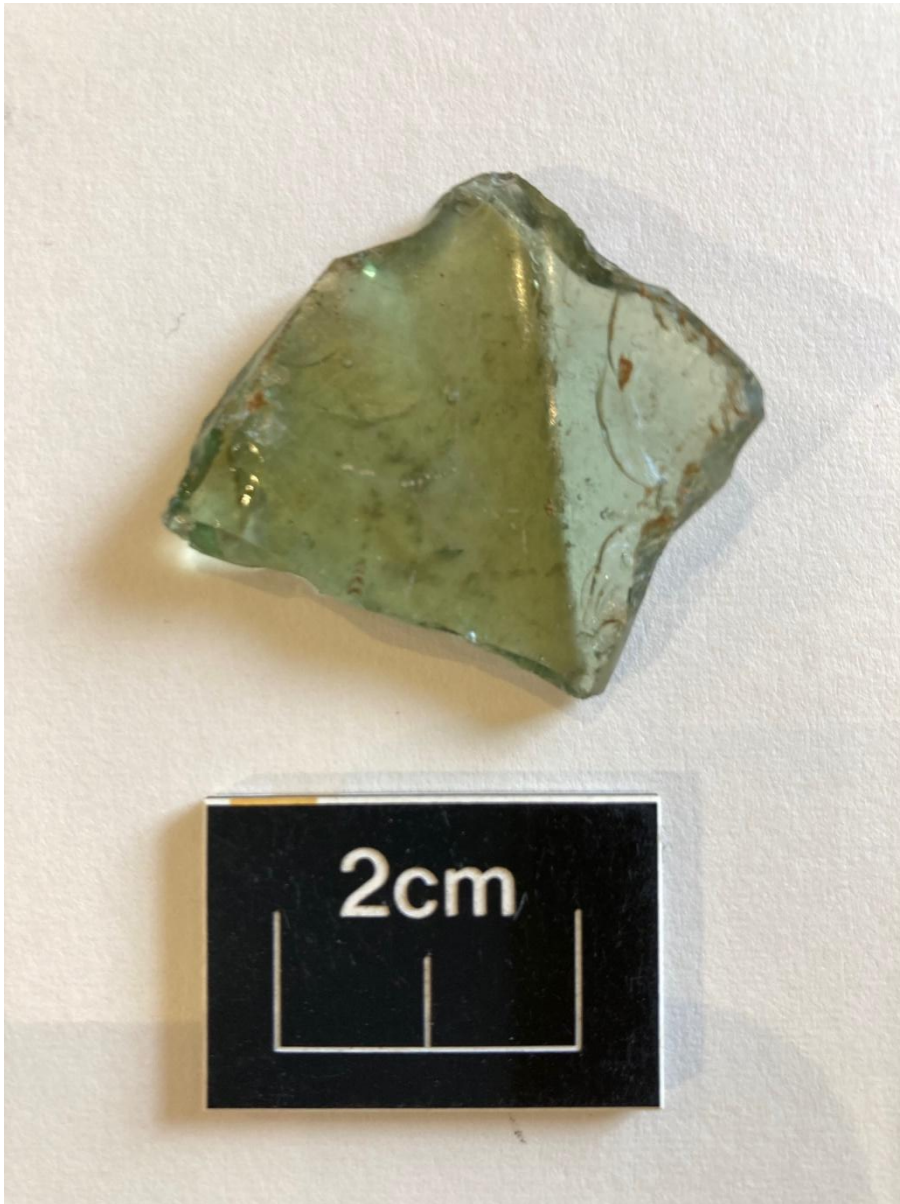


Fig (28) Roman 3rd Century AD green prismatic glass [02] found in ditch (D)

Medieval Post-Medieval:



Fig (29) Post Medieval 'Peg' tile found in association with post-hole feature (C)



Fig(30) Medieval post-Medieval tile found in the topsoil across the excavation area; note also flint and a possible coin or token?



Fig (31) CBM, flint and a clay pipe fragment found in the subsoil transition of trench 1.

Slag:



Fig(32) Four grades of iron slag found to constitute the road: 1-2cm; 3-4cm; 5-6cm; 7-9cm.

Conclusions and further analysis

Conclusions of the excavation results mirror that of the geophysical interpretation being that of a metaled road surface primarily of iron ore slag aligned with two parallel ditch cuts north and south of the road of which oriented roughly east west. The origins of the road could be confidently classed as Roman, not only due to the material artefacts associated with the road but also the style and construction of the road would seem contemporary with other Roman examples. Further analyse further west and east would be advantageous to gain a better understand of total road construction techniques and materials used as well as the increased possibility of material artefacts being associated with the road and ditch cuts. Extensive further geophysics East to the Pewes Marsh could also define the ultimate purpose of the road, as would further survey around the village of Icklesham itself, thus giving a much broader understanding of the importance of Icklesham in the Roman period and its association to the Iron Ore industry of Sussex.

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