

# On the road to Marshfield

**An interesting  
multi-period  
landscape  
north of Bath**

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**M**arshfield's history has been well documented over the years through books, radio and television, although documentary evidence tells us little, if anything, about its Saxon origins, its Roman occupation, or its prehistory (Leech, 1974). However, an archaeological survey carried out in 1982 by the then County Archaeologist, Vince Russett, examined areas in and around the South Gloucestershire town of Marshfield and provided new evidence for its prehistoric past, from the Mesolithic through to the Iron Age.

One of the few Iron Age settlements excavated in Marshfield was by Kevin Blockley in the 1980s at Iron Mongers Piece. This was predominantly a Romano-British settlement with an initial phase of earlier occupation of around 50 BC (Blockley, 1982-83). The fact that so few Iron Age sites have been located in and around Marshfield is surprising for an area that had such a density of settlements in the succeeding Romano-British period, with an estimated total of 30 Roman sites which is thought to be on the conservative side (Russett, 1983).

Having lived in Marshfield all my life, and being heavily influenced by my grandfather's passion for history, I made a flask of tea, some cakes and set off over the fields to find more of this missing link in Marshfield's past. After months of walking in freshly ploughed mud, coming home shivering, soaking wet and clutching find bags full of very little but stone, I was convinced that the reason the Roman army had built the Fosseway, was simply to bypass Marshfield and its freezing temperatures!

The next phase of investigation was a prominent hill that stood south of Marshfield's boundary and is situated close to the Fosseway, not far from the Romano-British villa at Colerne and close to the Iron Age hill fort, Bury Wood Camp, excavated by Dennis Grant-King in the 1960s. After finally making contact with the three landowners, I was given permission by two of them to walk some of the fields at Henley Hill and what follows are the interim results of a field survey carried out in 2008, the second phase was undertaken in the late summer/winter of 2008-09.

The Geology of Henley Hill consists of Great Oolite Limestone surrounded by Jurassic Clay. The soil is of the Sherbourne series which is light and well drained. The hill is surrounded by pastureland and woodland, providing adequate shelter from prevailing winds and to the north lies Doncombe Brook.

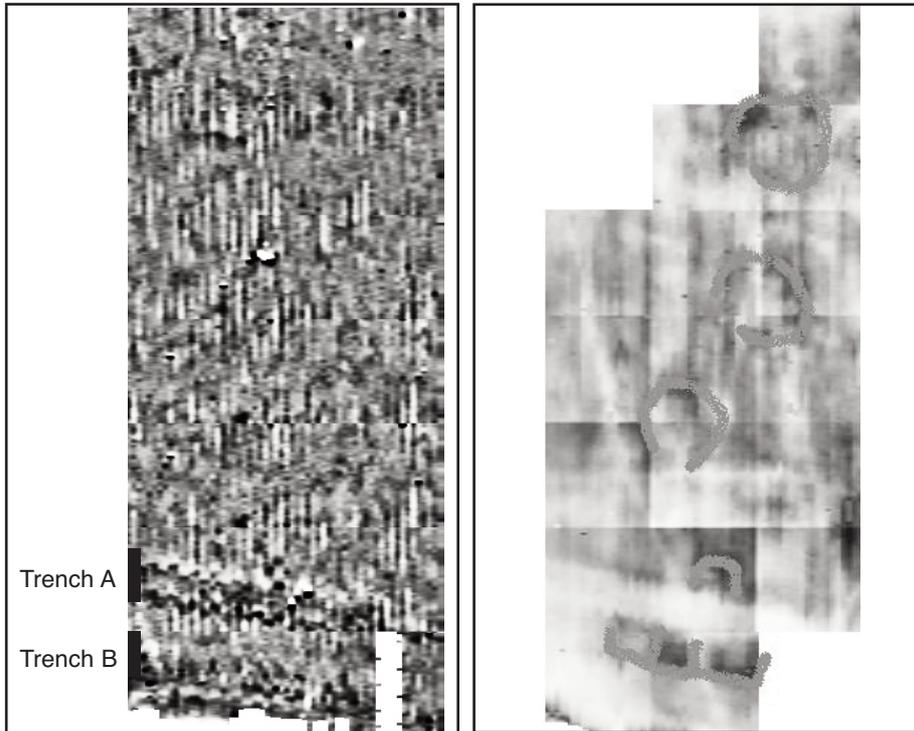
Initial field walking located a range of surface finds including flint (*see Figure 1*), pottery and pennant stone. With the help of both the South Gloucestershire County Archaeologist, David Evans, and Kurt Adams, the local Finds Liaison Officer, these artefacts were identified. Some of these finds included microliths, scrapers, barbed and tanged arrow heads and also pottery, which dated from the late Iron Age through to the Romano-British period.

Thanks to Bill Adams and his expertise we can now say that flints picked up through fieldwalking at Henley Hill suggest an industry represented predominantly in the Mesolithic and which also expands the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods.



**Figure 1**  
From left to right  
Mesolithic microliths,  
a Neolithic arrow head  
and Bronze Age barbed  
and tanged arrowheads

On a cold winter morning, Owen Dicker, Les Hayes and Tavis Walker bravely trod the November stubble to undertake a resistivity survey, followed by John Oswin with the Bartington magnetometer. The results of the magnetometer survey indicated a possible roadway, defined by its two flanking ditches, with isolated black spots on the survey, suggesting cut features such as pits/postholes. The resistivity survey confirmed the linear area of lower resistance of a possible Roman road or track, as well as four distinct areas of higher resistance, and a number of square/rectangular areas in shape, suggesting the remains of structures. Possible curvilinear features were also located, shown as higher resistance features which may represent stone remains, such as walls, although a geological feature could not be ruled out (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2**  
**Left**  
**Magnetometer**  
**survey of Henley**  
**Hill. With location**  
**of Trench A and B**  
**marked**  
**Right**  
**Resistivity survey**  
**of the same area**  
**with the areas of**  
**high resistance**  
**marked**

Unfortunately time was against us due to the sale of an area of land which provided us with access to the site, so a series of test pits was followed by two trenches which were placed over the linear feature, with the purpose of locating a possible surface, along with any ditches and datable evidence.

The test pits produced flint, bone, Romano-British pottery and a piece of Late Iron Age pottery and what seemed to be a compact surface. The two trenches were situated either side of the baseline on a north south alignment. Trench A measured 7m x 1m and Trench B measured 6m x 1m



south of the baseline. The aim of the trenches was to determine the length of the compact surface, evidence of ditches, and datable evidence as to its period of use/construction.

Both trenches revealed the plough soil to be at a depth of around 30-40 cm, overlaying a compact surface of deposited flat limestone, which containing a layer of compact gritty sand (see Figure 3). Excavation through these deposits was not carried out, due to time constraints.

**Figure 3**  
**Trench A looking north, the road surface is**  
**visible at the bottom of the image and the**  
**ditch at the top**

The length of the ditches measured approximately 5m and revealed an undisturbed archaeological deposit directly beneath the plough soil, which consisted of a medium compact, light orange brown soil with sandy fine-grained grit. Finds from both trenches included charcoal, bone, and late Iron Age and Romano-British pottery fragments, identified by Mark Corney as Samian ware, Black Burnished ware, Severn Valley ware, and locally made grey wares (see Figure 4). The pottery has since been cross referenced with previously known Romano-British sites in the area including Oldfield and Blackies. The only evidence to date for Romano-British pottery in the urban area of Marshfield itself comes from a few sherds of Romano-British pottery found off Sheep Fair Lane (La Trobe-Bateman: 1996).



**Figure 4.** Romano-British pottery found in Trenches A and B, Samian ware, Severn Valley ware, local grey ware, Black Burnished ware and top right late Iron Age pot

Dawn Hodgson, the bone specialist for BACAS, identified the assemblage of animal bones located in the lower levels of Trench A as primarily a mixture of cattle and pig, including part of a cattle femur, the lower part of a cattle jaw, and canines from both pigs and cattle.

As a result of field walking, geophysics, and trial trenches, evidence has been provided of the existence of a previously unknown Romano-British road. It has been suggested by experts in this area that there may be more roads or tracks on this site. Sadly, permission was not granted to undertake any surveying to the west of Henley Hill, in order to locate the possible route and subsequent reason as to the position of this road, and the question of the specific role of Henley Hill in prehistoric and historic Marshfield. Due to the recent sale of Henley Hill barn, access to the site and any further investigation has since been denied.

#### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Mark Corney, Bill Adams, Dawn Hodgson, Owen Dicker, John Oswin, Keith Turner, Tavis Walker, Les Hayes and Bob Whitaker for their help and advice.

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