The St Algar's Project

Fieldwork at a Romano-British site produces unexpected results

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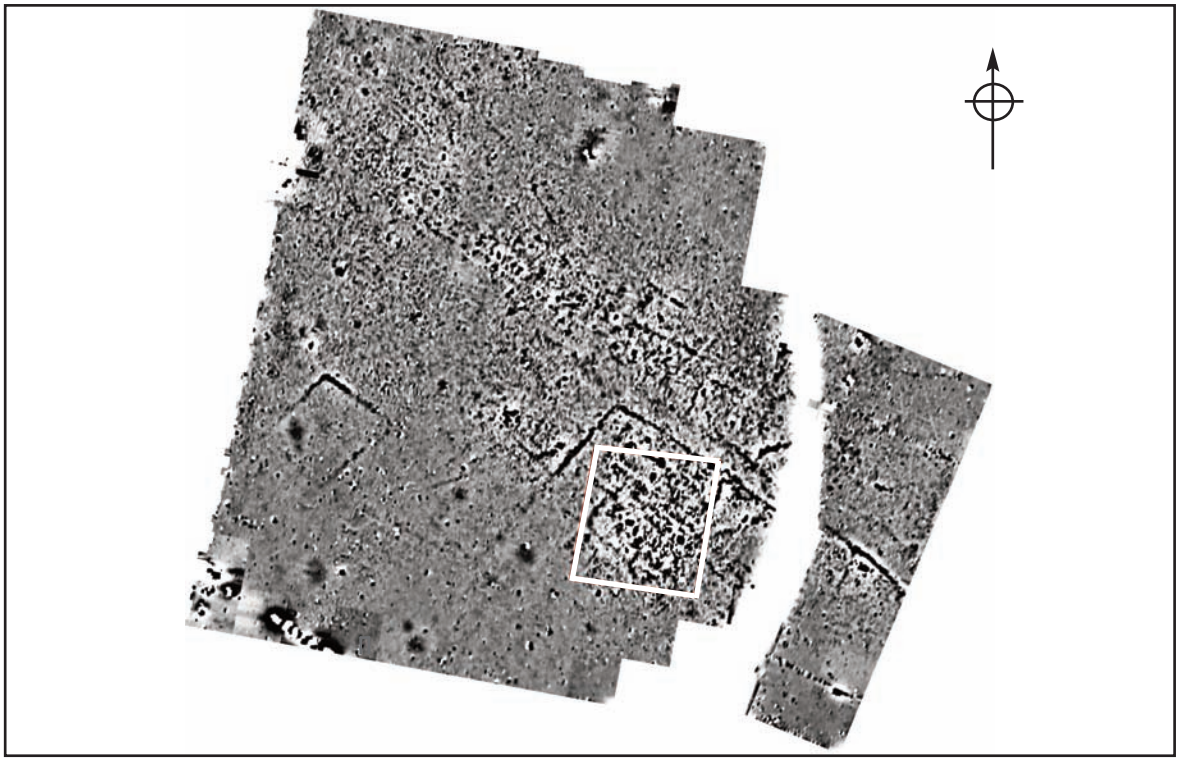
The St Algar's Project started in late 2009, when I met with the owner of St Algar's Farm, West Woodlands, to look at the Roman pottery and other items that he had picked up from a nearby field, after ploughing, since the 1960s. Due to his interest the site was briefly excavated in 1971 with a large, shallow trench, and although the site was subsequently scheduled it was not clear what the nature or period of Roman occupation at St Algar's consisted of, and no fieldwork had taken place since. I was looking for a new research project to work on and so it all began…

An assessment of the fieldwalking finds indicated occupation spanning the Roman period; the pottery included over 50 sherds of Samian ware and over 70 sherds of New Forest ware, along with 2nd and 4th Century coins, a Polden Hill type brooch dating from AD75-120, and a stud from a 3rd or 4th Century plate brooch.

A platform was faintly visible in the field, but as the site was under permanent pasture the next logical step was geophysics. A licence was obtained, and during the spring of 2010 I was joined by 20 BACAS members over 14 days for gridding out and geophysical surveying, which was certainly comprehensive. It started out as a 4 day session but rapidly expanded as each day revealed more and more archaeology. Over 160 grids were surveyed with the Bartington magnetometer and 125 grids with both the TR/CIA and the RM15 resistivity meters. The results were beyond my wildest expectations.

The magnetometer survey (*see Figure 1*) clearly shows large areas of disturbance and linear boundary ditches, along with a possible trackway crossing the field. The resistivity survey (*see Figure 2*) provides further detail - a winged corridor villa is clearly visible within the scheduled area, and this is surrounded by three sections of 100m long boundary ditch. To the east of the villa complex is a 40m square boundary ditch, on the same alignment as that surrounding the villa, with what appears to be a building within it. It is possible that this is a mausoleum or temple. As ever, the on-screen results hint at much more than is revealed on paper. Other activity and possible buildings are scattered across the field and it is possible there is a gatehouse just to the north east of the boundary ditch.

Figure 1
The magnetometer survey results showing large areas of disturbance and occupation



Armed with such fantastic results, the big guns were brought forth and Ground Penetrating Radar and resistance pseudosection profiling (with the TR/CIA), were used to survey the grids within the scheduled area to try and glean as much information as possible, within the period of the licence. On this occasion, on a heavy clay soil, the former wasn't especially informative, showing a number of anomalies but no coherent pattern. The resistance profiling, however, did identify walls and that the archaeology was not far below the surface, with most detail between 40cm and 80cm, but no deeper than 1 metre.

Geophysics was revealing archaeological activity in the field to the west of the site, separated by a modern field boundary, so surveying continued until it had to stop due to the farming calendar.

In late August, having produced a comprehensive geophysics report and having acquired a further licence, Robin Holley and I ran a small evaluation excavation, again assisted by a small army of BACAS members. The finds were typical of a villa site, with pottery and coins spanning the 1st to 4th Centuries. It soon became clear, however, that there was something unusual about this site. The number of glass finds (400+) from such a small area greatly exceeded that found at most fully excavated villa sites and some 22 unusual pieces of pottery with an internal glaze were identified as sherds from crucibles (glass melting pots), used in the Roman glass working process. There are 16 confirmed Roman glass working sites in Britain - St Algar's is the only confirmed site in the southwest and the only one in the country based in a rural location. Roman glass experts have now denoted it a site of national importance.

At the time of writing this article, Robin and I are finishing writing the full report of the 2010 excavation, having raised funds for the necessary, but expensive, specialist reports. We are also planning further excavation and, of course, more geophysics. My research project has now become a major undertaking for a site of national importance and I am thoroughly enjoying every minute of it.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 2
The resistivity survey results showing the winged corridor villa within an enclosure and a smaller enclosure to the east at the top of the hill. The scheduled area is within the white box in both images