

# Saltford Geophysics

## Geophysics near Saltford has brought to light more Roman buildings

In the summer of 2015, BACAS was contacted by the Chairman of the Saltford Environment Group (SEG) enquiring about the possibility of the Society carrying out a geophysics survey of a field to the south of the village. SEG are researching and recording the history of the village and, as part of their research, they wanted to know more about this field as it appeared to be of particular archaeological interest.

### Background

Roger Vaughan  
John Oswin

In 1948 a stone coffin complete with the skeleton of a young man (*see Figure 1*) had been found in the field when the farmer was removing a tree. Buried two feet below the surface, it appeared to date from the Roman period. Made from oolitic Bath stone, it was of a similar type and age to other coffins that had been discovered in various locations in and around the city.



**Figure 1**  
1948 photograph of Roman coffin (in situ) found in field at Saltford. Source: F W Jefferies, 1950, Roman Burial and other Remains at Wickhouse Farm, Saltford, Keynsham Manor Estate.

The year after the coffin had been found, some trial trenches had been dug to determine whether there was any other evidence of Roman occupation. The excavations had unearthed pottery fragments, coins, nails and utensils as well as 'oyster shells too numerous to record'. There was also a suggestion that there may have been a road in this location, but whether this was of Roman origin was unable to be determined. A detailed report describing the finding of the coffin and the subsequent excavations appears in the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society Vol 95 published in 1950.

### Figure 2

Examples of Roman coins and a brooch found at the site. Source: SEG Online Museum, <http://www.saltfordenvironmentgroup.org.uk/history/history005.html> accessed 1 January 2017.



In recent years, metal detectorists have discovered Roman coins and brooches (*see Figure 2*) in the field as well as a late Bronze Age axe blade. Oyster shells and fragments of pottery can be spotted when field walking. In the light of these continuing finds, the field appeared to be a good candidate for a geophysical survey. We were fortunate to obtain both the landowner's agreement, and to find dates in John Oswin's busy diary, to enable the survey to be undertaken.

## **The Survey**

The first phase of the survey was carried out in the autumn of 2015, the second phase in November 2016. BACAS members were assisted by a number of volunteers from SEG.

### **Phase 1 - 2015**

The 2015 survey focussed initially on the northern part of the field as – according to Historic Environment Record and the 1960s Ordnance Survey maps - this is where the finds of Roman pottery and other artefacts had been discovered in 1949. The results from this area, however, failed to produce any evidence of a Roman building or structure. Unexpectedly, though, the magnetometer does appear to have identified the sites of several Iron Age roundhouses. These roundhouses are not far from - and are at an approximately similar contour level to – the sites of other possible roundhouses that were discovered in a geophysical survey carried out by BACAS at the nearby Saltford Golf Club in 2013.

In the second week, because of the limited time available, it was decided to concentrate the grids more in the centre of the field, working southwards towards the top of field where the coffin was found. This is also the area where metal detectorists have more recently discovered Roman coins and other artefacts. At this point, the field, which is otherwise gently sloping, reaches a small, but discernible, lynchet. It was here that there were stronger responses, particularly from the magnetometer. Subsequent analysis of the data suggested that - on what was the final day of this phase – the survey may have identified the corner of a structure, possibly a Roman building.

### **Phase 2 - 2016**

On returning to the field in November 2016 it was decided to give priority to the magnetometer, as it was this that had produced the most interesting data. We also had two teams working with the resistivity meters. As the magnetometer was much faster, John Oswin was able to press on and try to finish the remainder of the field – which he did – just.

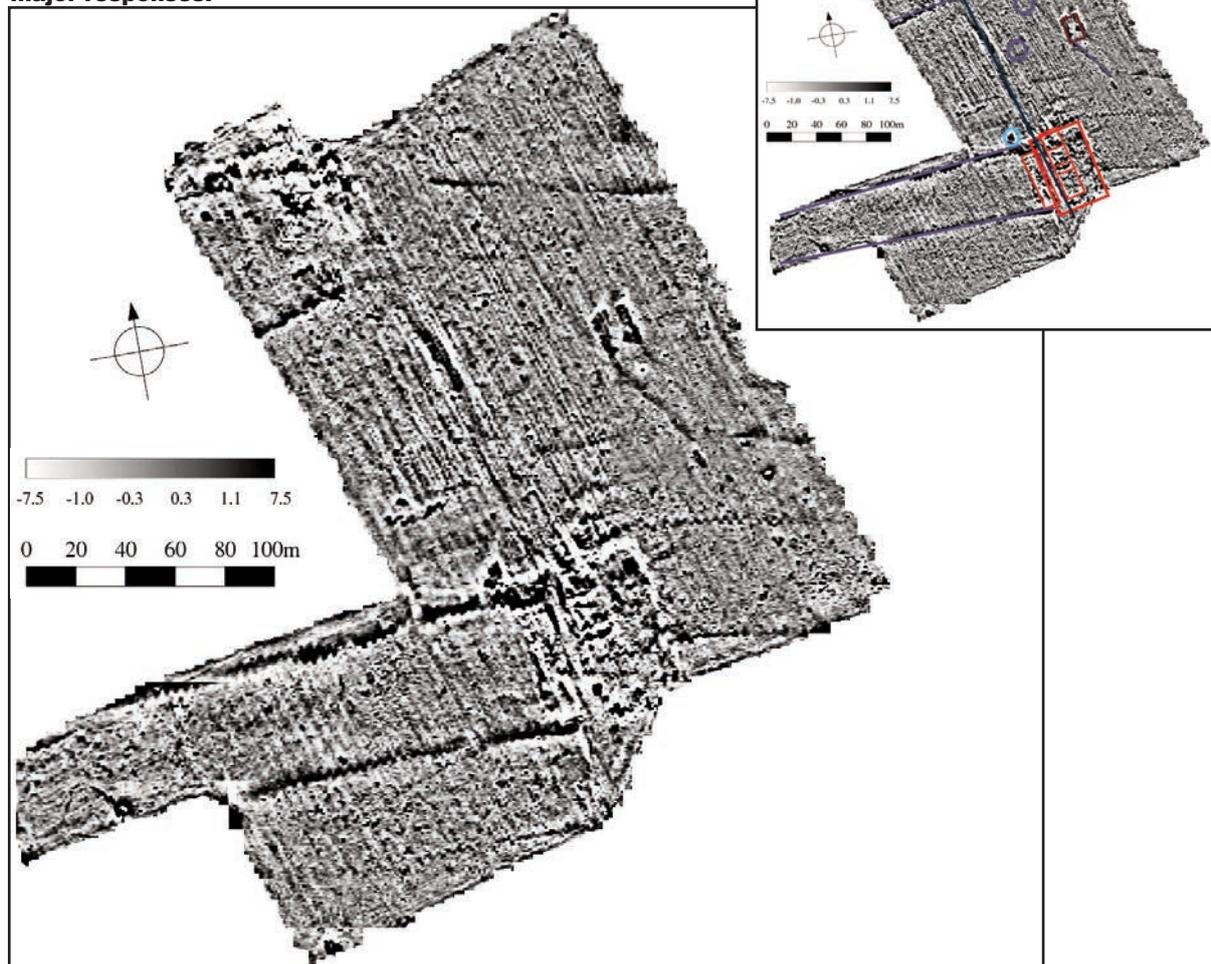
## **Analysis**

Figure 3 shows the magnetometry of the whole field – all 200 grids. Plenty of activity can be seen, but much of this is the effect of plough, forming thin curving stripes throughout. There is a large feature at the southern end, but this has exactly the same alignment as the plough, so it is difficult to separate out the archaeology. Figure 4 has been prepared to pick out the principal details. Note that there are some ditches showing in Figure 3 which are not marked up in Figure 4. This is because they are probably modern features intended for field drainage. Once marked up the Roman feature, shown in red, does begin to resemble a long building, possibly more than one, but curiously, they lie across the contours rather than along the slope. The views from up here are splendid; all the way from south-east Bristol to Kelston Round Hill, and would have included the new-found Roman town of Trajectus by the old chocolate factories in Keynsham.

A strong north-south line heads straight towards the main feature in the south: this could be a ditch or an old field boundary, but may be a road. There are also a pair of ditches (marked in mauve) heading from it to the west, beyond the surveyed area. They are a bit far apart to be roadside ditches, so this might otherwise be a long thin enclosure. They do seem to encompass the structure, so must be closely associated with it.

In the north-west corner, there appears to be another, smaller, simpler building, shown in orange, but magnetometry did not give a clear image of it. It does appear to be in its own ditched enclosure, as marked in mauve and blue. To the east are shorter strong parallel lines, marked in brown. The interpretation of these is not straightforward, but the feature appears to be substantial, 10 metres by

**Figure 3 below**  
**The magnetometer plot of the whole field.**  
**Figure 4 right**  
**The magnetometer plot annotated with the November 2016**  
**major responses.**



5 metres. It may be of modern agricultural use, such as a washing pool. In the area of this feature, faint circles may possibly represent prehistoric round houses as has been mentioned earlier. These are shown in Figure 4 by mauve circles. And the coffin? That might just have come from the disturbance marked by a light blue circle. The location tallies with the story, but we cannot be sure.

So, we had a big and lively field to start our working relationship with SEG. Analysis of LiDAR images has also indicated features in a number of neighbouring fields. SEG are hoping that with the landowner's and BACAS's agreement further work will be undertaken in the future.

### **Postscript**

The description of the Roman skeleton, which appears in the official report for the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1950, was provided by 'Mr and Mrs Martin A. C. Hinton' who had recently moved to North Somerset. Mr Hinton was a zoologist, his wife was an archaeologist. Interestingly, Mr Hinton is one of the suspects associated with the Piltdown Man hoax. Piltdown Man was a composite of an altered human skull and ape jawbone planted, and subsequently 'discovered', at a dig in Piltdown, Sussex between 1908-1912 and presented as a missing link between man and ape.

The link to Martin Hinton as a possible perpetrator was not made until after his death. At the time of the original discovery of the Piltdown Man, Mr Hinton was working at the Natural History Museum in London. He later became Keeper of Zoology. In 1970, some nine years after his death a trunk belonging to Mr Hinton was found in storage at the museum. This contained animal bones and teeth carved and stained in a manner similar to the Piltdown finds. Two decades later, in 1996, the bones found in the trunk were analysed. It was established that they had been stained in the exact same way as the Piltdown fossils.