Field-Walking Guidance Notes

Field-walking has established itself as an accepted technique in archaeological research. As Rackham (1994:11) states, it has:

> "… revolutionised the understanding of landscape in the last forty years: the land was filled with habitation and agriculture thousands of years earlier than had been thought possible. As a method it is cheap, requiring no expensive equipment (Haselgrove et al 1985:7), non-destructive (Renfrew and Bahn 2000:74) and highly cost effective. Moreover it is at regional level that it shows its worth (LA:4.10), by producing data that can be used to address mainstream issues of social and economic history and aid understanding of settlement changes over time."

However, as with computers, 'garbage in = garbage out', and the quality of the raw data is the most critical factor influencing the meaning and reliability of the results. Several aspects need to be considered in order to achieve this quality, and these are summarised below under the headings of **'Where?'**, **'Who?'** and **'What?'**.

1. Where?

This is the location of the survey.

There is much discussion about how a survey should be delimited – using national grids, natural topographic boundaries such as rivers, or other boundaries such as hedges around fields (Renfrew and Bahn 2000:74) – and the choice may also be influenced by whether the final repository is a computer program such as GIS software.

The boundary that seems reasonable to one specialist may not be so for another. However, a major objective of field-walking is that the exercise should be repeatable (Haselgrove et al 1985:13-14), and an arbitary boundary can make the area more difficult to locate at a later date. In addition, it may be difficult to re-locate artefact densities found within the survey area unless very accurate information is noted at the time of survey.

The ideal situation for any project is to be able to undertake a complete overall survey of the chosen area (Fairclough et al 1999:38, Renfrew and Bahn 2000:78). In reality, however, time and resources usually mean that a sample is necessary (Renfrew and Bahn 2000: 78).

The type of sampling selected – judgmental, probabilistic, transect etc – should be clearly stated in the research agenda so that the results can be interpreted in a meaningful way (Renfrew and Bahn 2000:76-77 and 178). If, for example, a judgmental strategy were used, such that all wooded areas or wooded parts of a grid were not sampled, then the results might require adjustment to take account of this (after Taylor 1975 in Aston 1985:98-9). Also the type of agricultural or urban activity in the area can affect what can be walked and what can be found (Schofield 1991:6 and 76).

The topography of the land may also influence the results (Schofield 1991:54) if geological processes such as alluviation, colluviation, or erosion have taken place. These processes may not only make some areas inaccessible, but in the case of alluviation artefacts may have been buried or exposed and destroyed with erosion (Fairclough et al 1999:41, Schofield 1991:39 and 76).

2. Who?

The personnel involved in the survey are the second critical factor.

The level of expertise of the personnel can make a great deal of difference to the data collected. An experienced member of the team may discover more sites (Schofield 1991:81), may be able to

differentiate more artefacts from the plough-soil or earth (Haselgrove et al 1985:23 and 45, Renfrew and Bahn 2000:78) and may be able to cover wider transects and larger areas). However, even with the most experienced team member, the time of day (Haselgrove et al 1985:44) and the weather conditions can influence their ability to identify artefacts (Schofield 1991: 81).

A key member of the team is the director of the project, and may specify a bias in the data collected. The director's personal research agenda can bias the collection policy towards a certain period, and ignore others that may be useful to other scholars at a later date (Fairclough et al 1991:24-37). In much of CLASP's work, pottery later than Medieval sometimes tends to be discarded, although English Heritage would consider the last 50 years as 'historical' with the Defence of Britain project (Foot 2000).

3. What?

The nature of the artefacts collected comprises the third critical factor. As mentioned above, the collection policy can significantly bias the results of the project. A total collection policy is the ideal situation, but in many cases this is impractical. The information that can be obtained from the collection may not only cover the basic evidence of where settlement has taken place and the period when it existed, but also what kind of status the people had, and information about trade both within and from outside the immediate area.

Before drawing conclusions from these collections, the analyst needs to be aware that artefacts survive at different rates. For example:

- Coarse-ware usually degrades more quickly than fine-ware; and moreover, due to its 'earthy' colour coarse-ware may not be spotted amongst plough-soil.
- Therefore, it is not just the density of the finds which is important but also the composition of the collection (Haselgrove et al 1985:92).
- Anglo Saxon pottery is quite a rare find and therefore every piece found provides an important piece of information.
- For the benefit of future researchers, it is essential to collect both known diagnostic artefacts and unknown ones.

The above are probably the most critical factors influencing the meaning and reliability of data.

Other factors such as the definition of a 'site' or 'settlement', 'off-sites' and 'non-sites' (Haselgrove et al 1985:9, Schofield 1991:4 and 81, Renfrew and Bahn 2000:74), and the relationship between surface and sub-surface features are still in the experimental and discursive stages and will benefit from further clarification (Haselgrove et al 1985:16, Renfrew and Bahn 2000:92).

In conclusion, "the greatest obstacle to understanding similarities in and differences between field data from different projects is the common failure of archaeologists to be explicit about their field and analytical procedures" (LA:3.1), as "different methodologies will probably result in different data sets" (LA:1.10).

If the information is clear and explicit, on the other hand, the results can provide information not only on the physical extent of 'sites' or 'off-sites' but also the time period of occupation and the "evolution of settlement" (LA:12.3 and 22.9).

4. Standardised recording

A disciplined approach should be adopted to collecting and processing finds, with a standard form for recording data, as set out in Appendix 1.

4.1 Nature of local landscapes and regional archaeology to be recorded

The area north-west of Milton Keynes is dominated topographically by the River Ouse and its floodplain. It is part of the Oxford Clay vale of the East Midlands. There are Upper Lias clays on the lower part of the river valley, with Cornbrash, Blisworth limestone and clay as well as deposits of glacial sand and gravels up the gentle slopes of the river valley, with boulder clay outcrops at the top. (Croft et al 1993: 1-3).

The land use is a mixture of farmland, parkland, residential and light industrial built-up areas.

As this fertile area has produced evidence from all periods from the Mesolithic onwards, an attempt has been made to reflect this as a checklist on the pro-forma. For example, recently the Whittlewood Forest Project (Jones, pers. comm.) expected to find Medieval and possibly Roman artefacts, but found predominantly flint scatters.

4.2 Practical fieldwork methods

As most projects will ultimately record the data in a GIS system, the methods to be employed must reflect the requirements of the software. The probable multi-period nature of finds can be combined with the geological, topographical, Ordnance Survey, SMR and air-photograph data available (added as notes), to produce useful information on their inter-relationships.

Note should be made during the initial survey of any inaccessible areas, so as to add them onto the GIS and for inclusion in the final report, in order to prepare for correction of any sampling bias.

The areas to be covered will usually be present-day farm fields (which should be recognisable and locatable on current OS maps). A temporary grid (facing north) can be set up in each field fairly quickly using an optical square, tapes and ranging poles at 10m intervals (further away can cause distortion in a small field).

It may also be possible to use GPS devices to give co-ordinates of any large scatters of artefacts found.

The number of transects walked depends on the size of the team. However, the team should have at least mixed experience, and should alternate experienced and inexperienced walkers in neighbouring transects.

With a large team it may be possible to cover an area in full in an initial survey. However, it may often be preferable to cover a larger area and adopt a probabilistic sampling policy, for example:

10m transects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Sample size
Teamworkers											
(E = experienced,	E	I		E	I		E	I		E	70%
I = inexperienced)	E			E			E			E	35%

Each team member walking in the middle of their transect, but scanning out to the edges. It is important to have experienced workers on the edge of a field, in order to co-ordinate information found in adjoining fields.

It is feasible to adopt an overall collection policy, but with experienced field-walkers initial identification could take place in the field. This may slow up the survey but may give other less experienced team members the chance to feel that they have achieved something and to gain a wider awareness of the appearance of other artefacts.

A hand-spring 'fishing scale' can provide quick weights of artefacts found even though they will have earth on them.

There should be one main recorder for each 10x10m grid square, who will also mark finds bags with the Survey Field Number. If possible the recorder should also take digital photos of any large or interesting scatters of artefacts with a suitable scale beside and note their approximate location on the sketch plan. With a digital camera, the images can be checked for accuracy immediately, and re-taken if necessary.

Appendix 1: Field-Walking pro-forma

Explanation of the data categories included on the form

Side 1:	
Shaded boxes:	Can be completed after the survey has taken place. Fieldworkers need only complete the blank boxes.
Survey Field No.:	The initials of the project followed by the next field number in the sequence. (or specific field numbers, if field numbers are allocated to the project)
OS Grid Reference:	Take the reference from the middle of the field.
Day/mth/yr:	Enter the date of the field-walking survey
Time:	Enter time at the start of the day
Weather:	Tick the appropriate box
Photograph Nos.	Enter reference numbers of photographs taken.
Approx area accessible (%)	Give approx percentage of the field that is available for walking.
Reason:	Tick the appropriate box(es) for the reason of inaccessibility
Crops:	Tick the appropriate box or fill in the details in 'Other'
Topography:	Tick the appropriate box. If there is a slope just tick underneath the word best describing the slope.
Soil Colour:	Use the Munsell chart to get the soil colour reference
Soil Type:	Use MOLAS (1994: Fig 14) flow diagram to describe the type of soil
Waterlogged:	Tick if appropriate
Wet:	Tick if appropriate
Dry:	Tick if appropriate
Team members:	List names, or initials if using a separate personnel list.
Transects	
Width:	From grid prepared in metres
Length:	Approx length by pacing in metres
No. of transects covered:	Enter number
% of field:	Calculate percentage covered from no. of transects walked
Area covered:	Either in the field or the office, multiply width, length and number of transects covered to give square metres covered.
Sketch of field and transects:	Include coordinates at each corner and centre Draw sketch of field and approximate position of transects. Add co-ordinates at corners of field and in the centre. Mark north on the sketch. If you wish, add large scatters found in their approximate locations – remember to include a key.
Side 2:	
Survey Field No./OS Grid ref.	Copy from Side 1
Finds Present:	Tick if found
No. of bags:	Complete at the end of the exercise
Weight in field:	Enter weight using the handspring 'fishing scale' in grams
Structural Remains:	Give description and sketch (if appropriate) of any found.
Notes/Comments:	Any other comments about the exercise which you noted – such as large stones found in boundaries etc
Form completed by:	Initial the form and date it.

FIELDWALKING PROFORMA

On-site: only complete white boxes **In office: complete shaded boxes**

Survey Field No. **OS Grid reference (middle of field)** **SMR ref** **Air photo** **Day/mth/yr** **Time**

Weather

Sunny	
Overcast	
Raining	

Owner/Tenant

Phone No.

Geology:

Photograph Nos

Approx area accessible for walking (%):

Reason:	
Wooded	
Waterlogged	
Pond	
Other	

Crops

Ploughed	
Grass	
Rape	
Corn	
Other	

Topography

River valley			
Ridge			
Slope	Gentle	Moderate	Steep

Soil

Colour (Munsell):	
Type: (MOLAS guide)	
Waterlogged	
Wet	
Dry	

Team members

Transects

Transect width	
Transect length	
No. of transects covered	
% of field	
Area covered	

Sketch of field and transects - include coordinates at each corner and centre

Fieldwalking ProForma

On-site: only complete white boxes **In office: complete shaded boxes**
Survey Field No. **OS Grid reference**

FINDS

		Present	**No of bags**	**Weight in field**	**Weight in office**	**No. Density**	**Wgt Density**	**Avg size**
Pottery	IA							
	RB							
	Med							
	Late Med							
	Post Med							
Flint								
Tile	RB							
	Med							
	Post Med							
Metal (Bag separately)								
Bone								
Shell								
Other (Describe)								

Structural Remains (Description/sketch):

Notes/Comments:

Form completed by:

Initials	**Date**

Input onto GIS:

Initials	**Date**

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