



Community Landscape & Archaeology Survey Project Newsletter

Website

www.claspweb.org.uk

Summer 2025

Charity No 1111667

Chairman's update

Fieldwork

I am pleased to say that the gradiometer is now repaired (with considerable thanks to our IT guru and new Trustee Don Atwell). This means that we have so far this year carried out Geophysics surveys at Nether Heyford and Edgewick Farm plus conducted one training session.

What could be better than being out in the countryside in good weather and having a laugh with friends.? **Do think about joining us in future sessions, whether to learn how to walk with the machine or to set up the grids.**

Steve Young is currently considering the form of our summer projects. In the absence of a site being available for excavation we will arrange for a day or two for both Geophysics and Field Walking.

Field Centre

I have just made a rare visit to our Field centre for Steve, Jackie Pyle and I to meet with Ben and team from the Northants Archaeology Resource Centre (ARC). This was a very good meeting in which it was reconfirmed that there is space allocated at the ARC for CLASP's collection of artefacts and some initial actions were agreed. The visitors noted the considerable work by Jackie and colleagues in working through the collection.

Finances

Trustees met in May and reviewed the financial outturn for the year to end March 2025. We will have made a loss of about £2500. Some of this is inflated because of exceptional items. However, principally because of the cost of the Field Centre, our budget for 2025-26 shows a substantial deficit.

We do want to remain at the Field centre for at least three years, but we could exhaust our unrestricted reserves before then. Opportunities for grants are limited and so Trustees are looking at other forms of fundraising. **All fundraising ideas welcome.**

100 Club

One good source of revenue in the past has been the 100 Club where members pay £60 a year and we pay out 50% of all takings as prizes and retain 50% towards the cost of the Field Centre. Membership though has dropped. **Do please join** (by clicking on the "Join Us" tab on the website or contacting our Treasurer Angela).

Rob

The View from the Archaeological Director for Summer 2025

CLASP archaeological field work has been largely in a state of hiatus during the spring and early summer. Unfortunately, events beyond my control meant that proposed fieldwalking at Whitehall Farm during February and March couldn't be undertaken because the propagation of the crop was too advanced to allow us onto the field by the time it could be arranged. However, training for volunteers interested in geophysical survey was completed. Their consequent fieldwork garnered further information to add to data previously obtained concerning the wider ancient landscape constituting the Roman villa estate at Whitehall Farm. This activity proved to be extremely useful in furnishing opportunities for experienced practitioners to 'brush up' their skills, and for some other volunteers who have not been previously involved to acquire a greater understanding of the process. By enlarging the pool of people available for geophysical surveys, more fieldwork can be conducted, which enhances CLASP's capability to undertake a wider range of future projects.

The broadening of the base of those available to engage in this type of fieldwork makes geophysical surveying easier to undertake in the future for two important reasons. Sharing the work burden of site exploration among a larger group of individuals eases the human resource challenges and over reliance on a few key individuals. It also affords the chance of employing and making greater use of a methodological approach which offers the potential for acquiring essential future funding to help our community based archaeological charity to continue to deliver its overall aims and objectives.

On a more technical point a further positive result is that we were able to establish that our instrument isn't in need of a dire and costly refurbishment. It could be calibrated correctly and utilised effectively, demonstrating that long term technical issues which had plagued our magnetometer have now been dealt with, an outcome for which we must also thank our technical adviser Don Attwell who not only sorted out

the magnetometer but the overhaul and restoration as well of the resistivity instrument. We are fortunate he also recently took on the role of trustee for our charity. It will now be possible going forward to expand and accept commissions on several projects that require geophysical survey work over the rest of the year and beyond. The donations from this will help fund our growing operational costs, which are not inconsiderable.

Apart from this, an exhibition at Northampton Museum called Gladiators of Britain, which is on from Saturday 24 May - Sunday 7 September 2025, features the Gladiator glass vessel. This was excavated from the sub floor levels of Room 3b in the mid-4th century smaller bath house, associated with the late wing corridor villa and excavated with the help of many of our volunteers at Whitehall Farm. The building itself replaced an earlier and much larger late 3rd to early 4th century AD bathing, leisure facility and hunting establishment occupying the site, a phase of activity at the site which related to the unique farming and ritual usage of hares, something not previously recorded in Roman Britain.

Several figured fragments of the container are on display alongside a reconstruction of the drinking vessel. Its inclusion in the display demonstrates the importance, wealth and status of the settlement during the Roman period. Unfortunately, the inclusion of this artifact in the exhibition is mixed with a sense of sadness as twenty-six surviving fragments of the vessel were to be reconstructed by our conservator Pieta Graves before her recent untimely death. Members of CLASP will I'm sure recall her tremendous contribution to the conserving of the metal artifacts from the nearby Post Roman/Migration period cemetery site, for which I am most grateful. Nevertheless, the exhibition is worth a visit and will help raise awareness of the work of CLASP locally. During May CLASP was able to embark on a project connected to the geophysical survey of a pasture field at Edgewick, near Brickhill, Milton Keynes. CLASP was commissioned to undertake the fieldwork to help Woburn Sands Town Council and the Friends of Edgewick Farm to investigate one of three fields in a conservation area to the northeast of Danesborough Iron Age Hill Fort. This group under the aegis of Andy Mason, had raised some funding to carry out initial exploratory work and they assisted in the laying out of the site grid as well as acting as guides for local people who came to see the CLASP team at work. We were asked to become involved as CLASP had previously undertaken a geophysical field survey elsewhere in Milton Keynes for their new museum and the local heritage association had helped fund the purchase of capital equipment in the past for CLASP and knew that we could successfully shoulder responsibility for such an enterprise.

The rationale behind the survey was to ascertain whether there was any evidence of geophysical anomalies demonstrating the presence of archaeological features, potentially of Iron Age date, associated with the location and the wider area that would assist them in devising a long-term historical and environmental conservation plan for the site. A working group of ten volunteers and local people were involved and an area of about 1.5 hectares was investigated. Various challenges in laying out the grid system and calibrating the magnetometer were encountered but these were resolved, and a successful survey was completed. However, given the locality and the existence of an Iron Age hillfort and a medieval hunting park bank and ditch in the vicinity, the complete absence in detecting any potential archaeological anomalies was surprising as well as unexpected.

The commissioning local group were no doubt disappointed by the absence of any characteristic features but understood the lack of evidence to support the existence of

archaeological features simplified their conservational priorities and approaches to maintaining the environment balance of the area for the future. It is possible that our team may return to the site to investigate the remaining two fields, and Rob Close will be talking with Andy about when and whether this will be going ahead in the future. I'd like to thank all those who took part in this successful initiative as it demonstrated our continuing ability to carry out such projects as well as highlighting where we can improve future practice to be more effective.

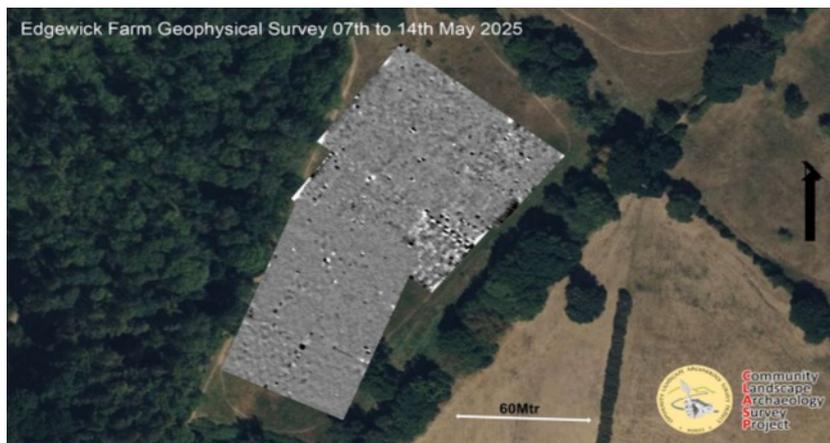


Photo 1: Edgewick Farm Field Survey

The fieldwork provided an excellent opportunity for the reorganised Geophysics team under the stewardship of Rob Close to undertake and complete a project for the first time since the death of Fred Kay who had been in charge previously. It was also a good opportunity to see, experience and deal with the challenges that present themselves in conducting this type of fieldwork amongst the current group of volunteers and, hopefully, will assist us in establishing more effective approaches to future surveys as they become a more significant part of our activities. In addition, networking with other groups and individuals involved with them is also useful in creating openings and opportunities to become better acquainted with new technical skills or for developing prospects for future projects. The application of Lidar and its investigative capacity in a supporting role in this instance has been useful for this project and our future approach to evaluating site interventions.

Based on the success of this fieldwork, the geophysics party are now able to return and complete some fieldwork at Cogenhoe, Northamptonshire, which had been interrupted last year because of technical problems. Again, this geophysical survey is of an exploratory nature to try and determine whether there are any archaeological anomalies in the field data which might suggest habitation of this area on the outskirts of the village in the Late Saxon to Norman period (9th to 12th centuries). Our geophysics supremo will be working with local historian Robert Vaughan and the Cogenhoe Archaeological Society. I'm sure that should there be any significant discoveries we shall write more about the fieldwork in future CLASP newsletters.

Interestingly, regarding future initiatives I'm looking into the possibility of developing a long-term project, which is something CLASP is currently lacking, with Nick Crank, Senior Archaeological Officer, Milton Keynes City Council. Should the project come to fruition it will concentrate on the development of a research framework to combine the application of a range of archaeological methodological related schemes. The overall

objective will be to enhance the interpretation of the site of the Roman small town, and probable posting station, of Magovinum, Little Brickhill, Bletchley, Milton Keynes. The site is an enigmatic and little explored 'urban' settlement that offers a breath of archaeological opportunities like those we have already encountered at Bannaventa, Whilton Lodge. Most importantly, it would firstly provide a schedule of confirmable and datable fieldwork interventions, whilst secondly offering the rare prospect of being able to compare the salient features of two roadside settlements associated with Watling Street; one of the main arterial routeways of the Roman province. A veritable first in British archaeology which would not only be very exciting to undertake but quite unique in the annals of Romano-British studies... so no pressure there then.

Initially fieldwork would be connected to several relatively small-scale resistivity surveys of known selected geophysical anomalies that appear to represent significant structural elements within the settlement. These features possibly constituting evidence of major stone buildings within the Roman town. Analysis of them might enable us to determine whether they represent the remains of civic, commercial or elite residential structures associated with the site. These substantial structures appear to be rare in such settlements and any attempt to understand the '*raison-detra*' for their existence within the confines of Magiovinum would be extremely helpful. The absence of organised associated internal road layout (*insula*) within these small towns makes their interpretation of even greater importance to the location and meaning of these buildings and the 'urban' spaces they represent.

The targets for exploration will be chosen based on the evidence obtained from a previous large scale geophysical survey of the site undertaken by MOLA Northampton in 2015. CLASP's archaeological rationale is to enhance the general understanding of the archaeological anomalies previously recognised and to try to ascertain the layout and character of these 'stone structures'. Magiovinum is a scheduled site, but this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of further, more invasive, archaeological investigation through trial trenching or, alternatively, small open area intervention could be considered as the project matures. Examination of the previous geophysical survey results for Magiovinum appears to show many shared characteristics seen in other comparative roadside settlements associated with Watling Street as its carriageway slices its way through the Midlands plain.

Hopefully the resistivity surveys will provide sufficient data to improve the interpretation of these areas of the site and to clarify the relationship between the small town and the Roman Watling Street both in terms of the Milton Keynes Council requirements as well as for the general development of the discipline itself. This is an opportunity for CLASP that will allow us to use our experience and field craft capabilities to a high degree. The project would enable us to build on an area of work with which we are well acquainted through CLASP's large scale geophysical survey and fieldwork of Bannaventa, a sister site located further north along the Watling Street thoroughfare. Currently the site is under long term pasture and managed as a wild meadow/park leisure space. It is owned by Milton Keynes Council which, should our collaboration mature, enables us to deal more effectively with the perennial problem of obtaining access to a site for fieldwork within a predictable timeframe. Consequently, we can organise and prepare in good time for fieldwork in a way we haven't been able to plan since the days of the Whitehall Farm Roman Research Excavation.

Speaking of future fieldwork, there will be several opportunities across the summer and early Autumn to become actively involved. However, this year there will be no trial trenching or open area excavation. Events have conspired against this as we have

moved into a period of adjustment due to the changing schedule of priorities, relating to our overall portfolio of activities. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that our traditional summer excavations are a thing of the past and next year I hope to announce a new project which will centre on a 'digging' experience connected to our broader research framework interests.



Photo 2: Whitehall Farm Roman villa Magnetometry Survey

This August and September a detailed programme of geophysical survey and fieldwalking, initially organised for earlier this year, is being planned, to complete the wider landscape investigation of the Whitehall Farm Roman villa hinterland area. A large swathe of the fields concomitant with the central zone immediately surrounding the villa have been extensively recorded whilst an expanse of land immediately to the northeast has not. This space is known to contain Roman material, with a hundred coins of the period being retrieved from metal detecting survey work, here ranging in date from a Republican denarius to late 4th century nummus. Magnetic anomalies have also been observed in geophysical sampling of the area implying the existence of enclosures and a field system, which needs investigation to establish the northern boundary of the site. The purpose of the zone is also enigmatic and, although probably agricultural, may possibly contain the location of the yet undetected settlement's Roman cemetery.

The extent of the field system in the Proto Villa field to the south is also undefined and requires more examination. Analysis of the previous geophysical findings suggest these features extend further to the south and it would be helpful to establish the scope of these topographies. I am also interested in finding the alignment of a trackway in this area which I believe provided the main access to the villa connecting the site with the Roman Watling Street less than half a kilometre away - a prime target for future excavation should it be located, as would the cemetery to the north, should it exist. The situation is similar in the field to the west of the site where archaeological anomalies were detected during the training event earlier this year. Several pit alignments were observed, associated with other archaeological features strongly implying the Roman landscape features stretch further beyond the recognised edge of the known site in this direction. The significant extension of the pit alignments evidence carrying

implications for the origins and early development of the site during the Late Iron Age/Roman transitional period.



Photo 3: Proposed Grid System for Whitehall Farm Magnetometry Survey.

The geophysical survey will initially begin with the complete reappraisal of Field 2. Fieldwork will be undertaken one day a week starting in August. This will then be extended into elements of Field 5, 4 and 3 once the farmer has finished harvesting the fields during late August and early September. The potential area for exploration covers between ten to fifteen hectares; a sizable chunk of real estate within which the context of the villa estate can be explored.

In addition, a fieldwalking survey of Field 5 will also be conducted at this time utilising the CLASP GPS equipment supplied by Don Attwell. Training both in the use of the instruments and in the recognition of archaeological material will be given during the fieldwalking sessions. This will provide the first opportunity for volunteers to combine the use of the new range of instruments with an updated methodological approach for retrieving and recording archaeological data from the plough horizon. These sessions will most likely take place in early September when the field has been ploughed or harrowed, and optimal conditions exist for retrieval of artifacts.

In the last Newsletter I indicated that considerable work was underway to develop a systematic computerised approach for bringing together the various planning, photographic and databased resources that CLASP holds into one accessible medium for recording and interpretation of any archaeological fieldwork across the board undertaken by the charity. Providing a consistent 'one stop' interface within which everything can be viewed, considered and evaluated is quite an ambitious aspiration if you think about it, but seemingly now achievable given the technical support available to us. The case study for this is the Whitehall Farm Villa research excavation, because it is the most extensive, wide-ranging and comprehensive archaeological record we have.

I think it is useful to explain to you by demonstrating as far as possible the overall complexity and potential of the approach for interpreting the data we have in an easily understood visual manner, whether that be for an academic audience or presentation to the general layman. The basic layer is the ability to combine the planning and

photographic archives together in a visual way within an accurate cartographic space. Putting this into context, there are nearly two hundred and fifty plans, two hundred sections and several thousand photographic images of the excavations to be assimilated - a challenge of some proportion, as can be seen. Many of you might recall that all the plans had been digitally transcribed by Colin Evans and his team and are all entirely editable even within the QGIS version currently being used, which is the computer interface Don and myself are building. This not only allows us the facility to view the different data presentations at the same time but the ability to edit material if required. Photograph 4 gives an inkling of this process where the excavated image of the features can be seen overlain by the archaeological plan of Bath House 2 at Whitehall Farm revealing the visual connection between the two. The different colour of the plans allows us to combine and observe the yearly fieldwork results as well as understand the relationship between areas of the site in their real-world spatial environment. This effect is not straight forwardly achieved because the archaeological photographs are mostly if not entirely oblique in nature depending on whether they are high- or low-level shots. These must be rectified, as previously mentioned in the newsletter, into a vertical format to fit within the actual spatial landscape constructed by the computer program. Photographic rectification will become a central task soon as the basic logistical solutions are put in place. However, completing this work is entirely dependent on the locational data provided for the archaeological plans being in place and accessible to the photographic rectifiers. This part of the process is critical and highly ambitious. I know of no other amateur archaeological group or charity attempting this approach outside of the commercial and academic milieu.

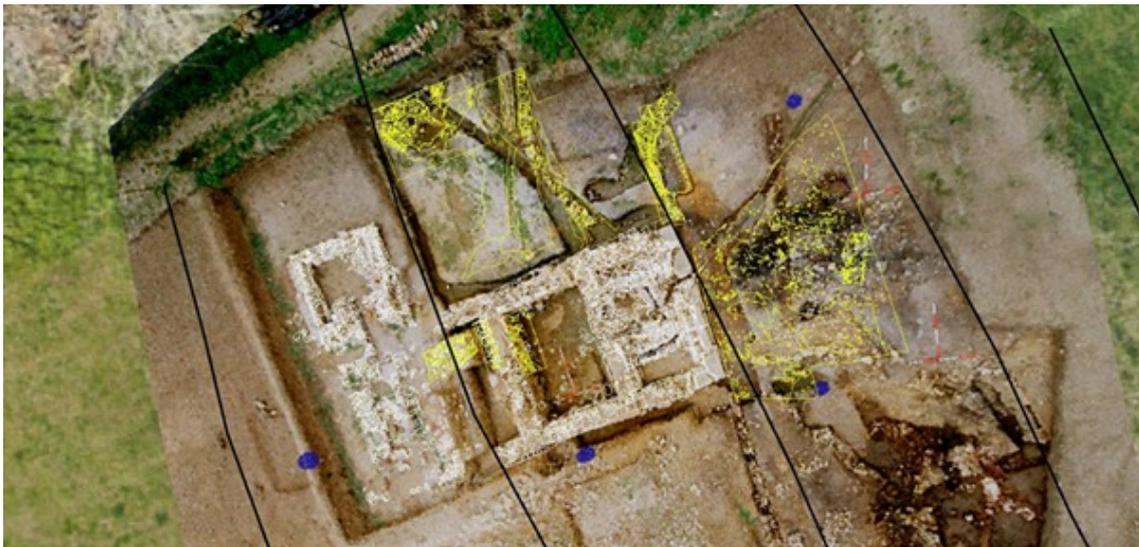


Photo 4: Combination of planning data and excavation photographic coverage in topographic real time space

Obviously, we are viewing a 2D digital environment which presents us with challenges when trying to utilise 3D related information. However, this does not preclude us from integrating the information recorded on the drawn archaeological sections. The positions of these can be displayed on the screen and linked to the digital drawings for analytical examination in conjunction with the relevant plan. Height above sea level will be included as will contour lines across the site, as demonstrated by the

black line contours observable on the photograph. Entity, feature and context numbers and their data will appear as discernible layers to explain the detail attached to the related planning figures.

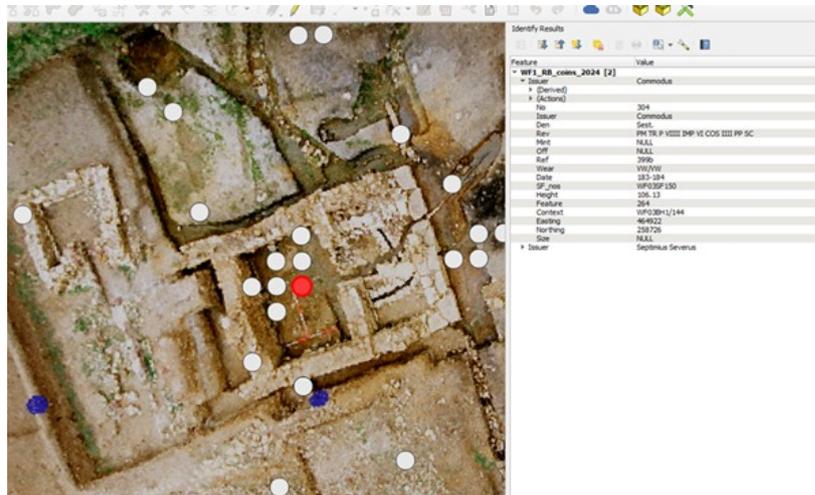


Photo 5: Roman Coin distribution in relation to archaeological features

The position of every individual find from the different artefactual assemblages, recovered from thirteen seasons of fieldwork, can be explored, analysed and their digital database entries read, and their meaning construed. I'm sure many of you who worked on the site will remember the large number of small finds logged over the years. Artefactual spatial acuity is an increasingly important way of viewing and interpreting material culture. Elaborating on the connection between artifacts and the associated structural elements or features of an archaeological site will enable CLASP material to be evaluated in a wider cultural context.

This is particularly discernible in the distribution of pottery sherds with its implications for the chronological phasing of the site in general, which is crucial, and the individual development of the different elements of the settlement that can be drawn from it. The provenance of course or fine ware forms and fabric signals potential cultural practice and, to an extent, elucidating the story attached to the domestic habitation of the villa complex.

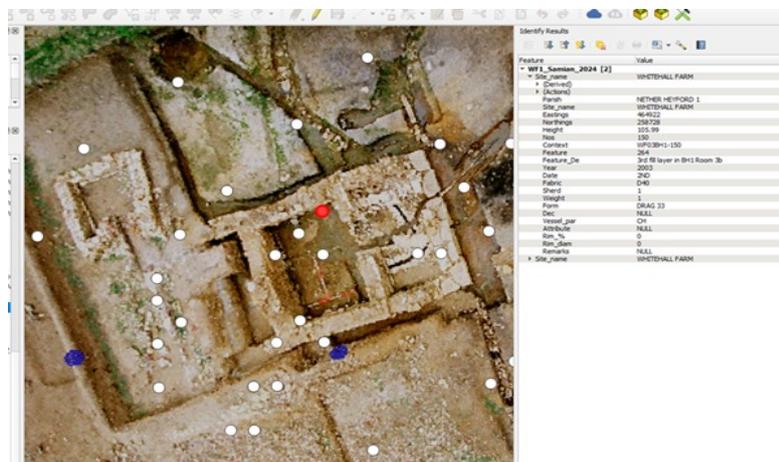


Photo 6: Roman Samian Pottery distribution in relation to archaeological features

This is all exciting and groundbreaking stuff that will hopefully eventually make our archaeological experience accessible to all. It's certainly providing extra insights for me as I move towards publishing the site. For all those who have expressed an interest in becoming involved in aspects of this work your patience is about to be rewarded. Volunteers have also been working hard at the field Centre on raising skill levels and perfecting their ability to identify generic Roman Pottery fabric and forms. The first stage in this process is proceeding well and is helping in the archiving of the large fieldwalking assemblage from Bannaventa, Whilton Lodge.

Finally, Salma Perves and I are hoping to organise another season of mid-week, in the evening, archaeological zoom lectures starting in the Autumn. I feel this would be an excellent opportunity for our CLASP volunteers to find out about recent archaeological fieldwork in our region and to learn more concerning the outcomes and implications of CLASP activities and how they have enhanced our understanding of different aspects of the past. Although as a format these visual presentations may not be as sought after as in the time of Covid, they can be informative and fun to attend.

However, such a series of talks takes time and hard work to bring to the screen so I would encourage all volunteers to attend online and support this venture. These talks are also recorded and can be viewed later through the CLASP website and are a good advert for the type of work we are involved or interested in as well as making our, and other people's, findings available to a wider audience.

Potential lectures for the Autumn, most likely starting after the CLASP AGM, will discuss the recent and ongoing archaeological excavation of the winged corridor Roman villa at Warkton, Kettering by Peter Masters, Cranfield University, the cremation burial from Manshead, Bannaventa, Whilton Lodge by Dr Noël James, Director MKCDC, Bradwell Abbey, Propaganda on Late Roman Coinage by Marcus Spencer Brown, Ashmolean Museum and two talks on subjects related to CLASP projects to be presented by myself. There are a range of topics to choose from, but those selected will reflect the nature of the finalised programme and developments across the available research that I feel it would be useful to disseminate. However, there maybe other options that become available. Certainly, there are one or two other options being pursued, and we will communicate the possibilities as the programme is finalised.

CLASP, despite some unforeseen travails, is still managing to attract new volunteers, which I find very encouraging for the future, although funding is still an ongoing challenge. Daily logistics, scientific procedures, conservation and specialist reports or interventions always require financial support. We continue to work tirelessly in extending our network of contacts and collaborators, for example, working with ceramic specialist Adam Sutton from Aurelius Archaeology on Roman pottery. Regarding other news, recently Norman Garnett, Rosemary Daniels and I attended The *Roman Fest* event. This occasion attracts several thousand people every year and is held by the Archaeological Resource Centre at Little Irchester. However, we could do with a few more volunteers next year to help crew our stand across the weekend. Any volunteer also wanting to help CLASP financially is more than welcome to join our *Hundred Club* lottery for £5 a month to raise funding to cover fieldwork related costs. Finally, I also like to reiterate my appreciation for the dedication and commitment of our longer-term members, without which our charity would find it difficult to survive. I hope you can see that although field activities have been relatively restricted recently, it hasn't meant CLASP isn't looking forward to a lively future at the forefront of community archaeology practice.

The Edgewick Farm Geophysics Project May 2025

CLASP was invited to undertake a geophysics exercise at Edgewick Farm, Woburn Sands. The field belongs to the Parish Council and as there is an Iron Age Fort nearby they were keen to establish whether there were any archaeological remains. The area is thickly wooded and a beautiful spot, hard to imagine that it is close to Milton Keynes, which is completely hidden by the woodland. Local residents have carried out a number of surveys into the spread of wild flowers. They estimate that the hedgerows have been there for about 800 years.

A red kite was often seen circling overhead and on one occasion a buzzard swooped down, possibly attracted by the beeps of the machine.

The field sloped in more than one direction and in addition was covered in little hillocks, tufts of grass and rabbit holes. This meant it was very difficult to keep the machine upright, at a consistent level and maintain a constant speed.

Day 1

We arrived at 10.00 on a beautiful summers day. It took some time to set out the grids (30m x 30m). The field, as well as being on a slope, was an irregular shape with a fence which we didn't want to survey too close to. However, we did manage to survey 9 grids in the end. Unfortunately when the data was downloaded it did not produce any clear results.

Day 2

An earlier start – 9.30 – and again a super day with a cloudless sky. Given the results of the previous day we changed our tactics. We had been starting in the south west corner, which meant going uphill. It was decided to start in the southern corner and move across the slope rather than go up and downhill in the hope that it would be easier to keep the sensors straight.

We surveyed 6 grids on day 2, 4 of which produced usable results. Given the difficult terrain it seemed that the issues were to do with setting up and calibrating the machine.

Day 3

Once more a beautiful summers day. We had left markers in to help locate the lines of the grids but it still proved problematic. Fortunately in the end we did get the grids straight and rewalked the Day 1 grids going across the field rather than uphill. Finally we had good data for 15 grids – after examination though no sign of any significant archaeology.

However, it was an interesting project and we were blessed with superb weather.

Rosemary Daniels



Hi all

Steve Bacon here, just giving an update on my previous contribution to the last newsletter.

As I mentioned I was asked to undertake a task identifying samples of field walked Roman CBM, which from my point of view was designed to improve my ability to identify the particular ceramic types; shelly, grogged etc, and so make me more useful and confident on digs.

I have now moved on to a more targeted project, again aided and supported by Jackie, to check and re-measure what Stephen describes as 'specials', significant or identifiable pieces of tile, and add or amend this information on a pre-existing CLASP database.

This task requires much more accuracy and care than the previous one and so is quite daunting if I allow myself to think about it too much, but thoroughly worthwhile, so wish me luck.

Again if any members feel they'd like to get involved in any projects like this please let Jackie or Stephen know, they'd be pleased to offer advice and assistance.



Archaeology and Invention

The lightbulb moment came in the museum at Housesteads fort on Hadrian's Wall. "Roman soldiers," read the caption, "were not allowed to marry, but they were allowed to have relationships with local women."

Despite scraping through an A level in history, I had never really thought before about how many fascinating stories must have slipped through the gaps in our knowledge. In this case, not just about Romans and Britons fighting each other but – more interesting to some of us – how they managed to find ways to live side by side.

An evening class in creative writing had already revealed the fun of bringing whole worlds into existence using only a piece of paper and a biro. Roman Britain had the extra advantage of being a very long time ago, and everyone in it was safely dead. This meant none of my friends and relations could possibly imagine I'd written about them – and after an unfortunate misunderstanding, I was acutely aware that this was Not A Good Thing.

Roman Britain was thus a fine setting for fiction – except that I knew nothing about it. So, in those pre-Internet days, I borrowed piles of library books and took up Barbara Evans Reiss's invitation to an open day at Whitehall Roman Villa.

Signing up as a volunteer digger at Whitehall was one of the best decisions I've ever made. The atmosphere was welcoming and the supervisors were patient teachers. As for the site itself – it soon became clear that Roman Britain was far more interesting and complex than the series of battles recorded by the Roman historians. Since the Britons staunchly refused to write anything down, archaeology provides our only unbiased clues about what they might have thought of it all.

Whatever the politics between soldiers and civilians, everyone would have wanted to be fed. And with almost no mechanisation, farming must have occupied most of the inhabitants of Britannia for most of the time. What soon became clear at Whitehall was that the transition from British to Roman-style farms was a complex and gradual process. Our very "Roman" villa with its splendid bathing facilities was neatly set between two traditional British round houses.

It seems the owners were local people who had done well for themselves and upgraded accordingly. As to how they'd done it – to the delight of the team, animal bone expert Naomi Sykes assured us that the ancient Whitehall sheep were vastly bigger than those she'd seen evidence of on other sites. Perhaps an investment in new breeds of imported livestock was what had led to everything about the site becoming more luxurious for the owners?

One of the appeals of historical fiction is said to be the realisation that our ancestors were "just like us". The site was a farm with fine views then, and it's a farm with fine views now. We found potsherds with fingerprints in the clay, and the pawprints of a dog who had run over the roof tiles while they were laid out to dry. We found hairpins and jewellery that had been lost down the drains of the bath house. The remains of a drinking glass had a picture of a gladiator painted on it – an early version of "merchandise"? There was even a writing stylus, proving that at least some of the inhabitants were literate.

Like us, the residents could draw on a wide range of imported luxuries. A small twist of pinkish pottery was all that remained of a huge Dressel 20 amphora from southern Spain, which would have been full of olive oil. Some of the pottery (Samian) had come from Gaul. (I'm sure there were other things as well but if you want to know what they were you'll have to ask someone with a better memory!) It seems they also had the sort of problems we can understand today. Over several seasons of digging it became apparent that there were two bath houses on the site. The one higher up the hill had replaced the larger one below. As we squelched around, baling and sponging out the flooded underfloor heating area of the lower site after heavy rain, we developed our own theory about why the owners had chosen to abandon it. They had clearly spent a lot of money on the new baths, where the flow of water was more easily controlled.

A contrasting appeal of historical fiction is said to be that our ancestors were also very *different* from us. We don't live in an island that's occupied by foreign troops. We don't buy and sell human beings, nor do our bosses have the right to use our bodies in whatever way they see fit. Although the Roman system allowed some enslaved people to be freed, a large proportion of the population would have had no choice about what they did by day or night. The bath house might have been a luxury for the bathers but someone had to gather the fuel and keep that furnace lit for the underfloor heating no matter what the weather was like outside. Meanwhile others had to look after the sheep, and to see that everyone was fed without any of the "instant" ingredients we enjoy today. If you wanted a loaf of bread, you had to start by grinding the corn. In the absence of electric mixers, any food to be broken down had to be crushed against the gritty sides of a pottery mortarium. A third element of appeal in a story is said to be conflict. My books are set in an earlier period than the Whitehall villa: they begin with Hadrian's reign. The first one is set in Chester, a major military base. I chose this because the presence of the military provided plenty of scope for disagreement with the locals. As someone whose name I forget once wisely said, "Nobody wants to read about people having a nice time."

By the time it came to drafting out a plan for this first novel, I had signed up with a literary agent who, thank goodness, knew a lot more about selling books than I did. "You've got much too much plot here," she told me, "and you need to put a crime in it." This came as a shock, but by happy coincidence one of my main characters was a doctor. Doctors get called to deal with all sorts of crises. Well mine did. Plus, we have lots of medical textbooks from the time, so we have a fair idea of what they did. Some of it impressive, some alarming. (No matter what Dioscorides wrote back in the 1st century AD, I shan't be applying lizard dung to my cheeks in the hope of a glowing complexion.)

There was a potential crime to draw upon at Whitehall. We were working on cleaning up the stones of the ancient courtyard when the digger next to me was given permission to investigate a dip in the surface. Perhaps it was a well?

It wasn't. It was a hole containing a male skeleton. He seemed to have been buried with scant respect in a very odd place. As if someone was... keen to hide the evidence?

In fact I've never written any fiction about that man under the courtyard. Having seen his bones, I felt he was far too real to be "used" for the sake of entertainment. It would have seemed disrespectful.

In other ways, though, the physical reality of the Whitehall villa site was a blessing.

Writing is an indoor, sedentary and solitary occupation. You make all decisions on your own with both the freedom and the doubt that sole responsibility brings. On a dig, you're out in the fresh air getting plenty of exercise, and you're part of a team that follows instructions. You don't have to worry about whether something in chapter 21 contradicts what you wrote in chapter 17 or whether you have accidentally changed one of the characters' names halfway through. You only have to think about the mud in front of you (and sometimes all over you).

Someone once said to me, "I like your Roman Britain. I can *smell* it." I'm pretty sure that was intended as a compliment, and I'm even more sure that any sense of reality in my attempts to portray Roman Britain come from the boots-on-the-ground privilege of being part of the Whitehall Villa team. You know who you are, and I'm grateful to you.

Ruth Downie has written a series of eight full-length novels and one novella. All are murder mysteries, set mostly in Roman Britain, featuring Roman Army surgeon Gaius Petreius Ruso and his British partner, Tilla.

To find out more, go to www.ruthdownie.com



Roman Fest at the ARC 28th – 29th June 2025

The Roman Fest is an annual event at Chester House (the ARC). A variety of organisations interested in Roman life and times participate. It is an excellent opportunity to showcase CLASP activities and encourage interest and hopefully new members.

CLASP had display boards with a collection of photographs showing our activities including field walking, excavations, aerial photography and artefacts. We also had a display of coins and other small finds from Bannaventa which attracted a lot of interest.

The event itself is an interesting day out with around 30 exhibitors, including archaeological groups such as CLASP, museums and heritage centres and a variety of stalls showing what life was like in Roman times, such as weaving and clothmaking, pottery, food and games. The Ermine Street Guard put on a military display and had a good exhibition showing what life was like in the army.

It was a hot weekend but worthwhile with approx. 4000 visitors. People are interested in knowing more about what we do so it is a good opportunity to promote CLASP. We are dependant on sufficient volunteers to man the stand however so that everyone has a chance to look at the other stalls and events. The Trustees would appreciate help from any members prepared to assist with the stand next year or with other publicity events.

List of contacts for CLASP Associations

Organisation	Contact	Tel Number
Flore Heritage Society	Jay Philips	01327 340282
Brington History Society	Ian Dexter	01604 771353
Whitehall Farm Roman villa Landscape Project	Norman Garnett	01604 755479
Bugbrooke History Society	Alan Kent	01604 830518
History of Tiffield Society	Steve Jowers	01327 350292
Blisworth Heritage Society	Jim Aveling	0164 859109
Northampton Artifact Recovery	Alan Standish	Not Available

By completing this form and submitting it, you are giving your consent to CLASP to store the information you have provided and use within CLASP.

Membership to CLASP is payable annually. If you don't wish to pay by Bank Transfer, your subscription (£10.00) may be paid by cheque and sent to the address below. Please make cheques payable to CLASP. In order to keep our records up to date.

Please complete **all sections** below whether you are a new member or are renewing your existing membership.

Please return this form with your payment. Thank you.

Surname	Forename
Address	
Telephone Number	Mobile
Email	
New/Renewal £...	Donation £...

Please print clearly and return to:

Membership Secretary

CLASP, 7 Eton Close, Weedon Bec, Northants NN7 4PJ