

## The Lufton Project: a retrospective

It's difficult to believe that the Lufton Project began way back in 2009. Like many field projects this one grew out of a long-standing interest in the Lufton villa, which stretched back to my childhood in Yeovil. The original work was intended to fit my circumstances: as a lowly post-doc at Cambridge on a fixed-term contract, I wasn't very keen on biting off more than I could chew. Some geophysics over the villa to determine its survival and extent was all I was after. SSARG agreed to help out and the rest is history!

My memories of the first geophysical survey are a bit hazy. I think it was at Easter and the weather was extremely hot. Neil ran the resi rig and Nigel and Liz ran the gradiometer. It was all very reminiscent of my time working with Richard on Sigwells back in the mid 1990s. The survey was a great success. The villa was shown to survive (hooray!), but the fields it was in were badly plough-damaged and covered with field drains. What looked most interesting were a few grids we did right at the end just to the south of the villa in the next field (called Hungerford).

Moving the survey into Hungerford was a big deal, because Hungerford is a very big parcel of land. The following year we started. Nigel, Liz, Tony, Doug and myself (and probably a few others I've forgotten!) began at the western end of the field and surveyed about a third of it. It was clear that it was stuffed with archaeology. SSARG then carried the survey on, completing Hungerford and two fields closer to the road (Mr Unwin's Field and Danscombe). These were very rich archaeologically with masses of anomalies forming field systems, enclosures and trackways.

By this time it must have been 2011 and I'd managed to get a lectureship at Newcastle through a combination of hard work, persistence and sheer luck. In the summer of 2012 I brought a handful of students down to excavate a small trench over some of the anomalies in Mr Unwin's Field. These turned out to be a ring ditch from an Early to Middle Bronze Age roundhouse and a Late Iron Age ditch. This was a bit of a crazy season. We dug the entire trench by hand because I was a bit strapped for cash (a perennial problem for the project). We found the sewer overflow pipe for the septic tank that serves the house. One of the students got dumped by girlfriend on his birthday and drank more vodka than I thought was humanly possible. He survived and was last seen at Bournemouth studying forensics.... Doug stuck an L plate on a wheel barrow, which endeared him to another student (Danni, now a professional archaeologist in the NE).

The following year we went back to the same field. Here we dug two trenches. One was an open area that contained a lot of agricultural sub-soiling features (which we lovingly recorded, oh what fun that was) and some Late Iron Age and Roman ditches. The other trench was a 40m long 2m wide transect across the geophysics. This allowed us to date a number of ditches to the Late Iron Age, find an early Roman brooch and some deep inter-cutting ditches that were stuffed with fresh Late Iron Age pottery. Analysis of this showed it to be the sort of stuff current in the first century AD, so around the time of the Roman Conquest.



*Left: the 2012 team ©J Gerrard*

The following year was a bit of an odd season. We wandered down the hill and dug a trench over a ploughed out DMV. This was, in hindsight, a moment of madness. It was quite interesting though. The heat was so bad that we started work at 7.30am. The clay baked. We found a very nice and deep medieval ditch, with a post-medieval field drain at the bottom. There was also a nice pit with bones and fresh bits of medieval pottery, which Pete Missenden helped to dig. Ski came up trumps and found a medieval seal matrix two metres outside of our trench.



In 2015 we dug at Easter in Hungerford. This was a monstrous trench: 100m long and 4m wide. It cut right through our geophysical survey, which allowed us to date a lot of the anomalies. Lots of sections across ditches were dug. A few of these were late Roman and filled with blue clay and not much else. A few more had Late Iron Age and Early Roman pottery (including scraps of first century South Gaulish Samian). Star finds were a great big lump of millstone, proof that somewhere nearby the Romans had a watermill and a copper-alloy finger-ring.

*Left: 2013: James: 'There's a feature here!'. Unconvinced looks from the team.*



*Above: 2014: Oh, what a wonderful ditch!*

By this time SSARG and GeoFlo had covered about 40ha with gradiometry. This is no mean achievement. Lufton is now one of the best studied Roman villas in Somerset from a landscape perspective. What our work to investigate those geophysical surveys has shown, is that the villa sits in a landscape heavily exploited in the Late Iron Age and early Roman periods. What we haven't found (so far) is extensive evidence for late Roman activity contemporary with the villa building. Clearly the story at Lufton is much more complex than simply the villa. The villa is part of a complex landscape history that we're slowly beginning to understand.



*Left: 2015: As one local said, 'Are you archaeologists? Or are you laying a gas pipe?'*

Last year we dug the villa and (due to an off-the cuff comment made in earshot of a reporter) it was comparable to [David Beckham's House](#). This gained us a few column inches in the papers, but I haven't quite been able to live it down. We showed that the structure is far more complex than the previous excavation would have us believe. At the moment we're embroiled in the post-ex. This is a challenging task and one that is taking up a lot of time and funds.

Even as I write this, Nigel is sieving my soil samples and looking forward to the invoice being paid!

If you want to learn more about the project then reports on the geophysics are available from GeoFlo or the HER. Assessment reports for the first two seasons of excavations can be accessed from the project blog (which also has a blow-by-blow account of each season). The report on the DMV is hopefully coming out in the journal of the Medieval Settlement Research Group in the near future. An interim report on last year's excavation of the villa can be found in the most recent volume of the Yeovil Society's journal. Finally, some of the geophysics has gone on to be the poster-child for my project on contaminated greenwaste, recently discussed in *British Archaeology* and published properly in *Archaeological Prospection*.



*Left: 2016: Hypocaust anyone?*

It's always been a great pleasure to work with SSARG on the project. The group has been an integral and welcome part of the work and it shows what can be achieved when people work together. There are plans afoot for this summer, so we're looking forward to working with you all again.

<https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/luftonarchaeology/>

[James Gerrard](#)