

**Emergency Investigation into Treasure Hunting Damage  
in June/July 2002 to the Roman Religious Complex  
at Wanborough, Surrey**



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July 2002

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(Scheduled Monument no: 3389)**

## Summary

*A series of overnight raids by treasure hunters in June and July 2002 had caused severe damage to a section of the scheduled Roman religious site at Wanborough, Surrey. As a result a small scale rescue excavation was undertaken at short notice by the author at the request of English Heritage. This established that the treasure seekers' holes had removed a length of the ambulatory wall of the Romano-Celtic temple, first excavated in 1984/5, and had also damaged associated archaeological levels. Two Celtic silver units, of Epaticcus and Verica respectively, were recovered, indicating that it was likely that the 'nighthawks' were finding and removing financially valuable artefacts from the site.*

## Introduction

The Roman religious site at Wanborough (SU 9204 4958) has a long history of being damaged by treasure hunters and in many ways is the most notorious example of such activity in the country. Following the discovery of the site in the late 1970s a number of raids took place, leading to the mounting of a rescue excavation in 1985-6 (O'Connell & Bird 1994). This work established the presence of a Romano-Celtic temple on the site and the fact that it had been constructed on and to one side of a large deposit of, mainly Celtic, coins and a foundation deposit containing examples of priestly regalia.

During the following years the site continued to be attacked on a regular basis and this led to English Heritage carrying out a geophysical survey to establish the extent of the site. Based on the results of this survey a second rescue excavation was carried out in 1999 (Williams in prep) which, among many other features, located a second but earlier temple, this time circular, lying immediately to the north west of the square temple (fig 1).

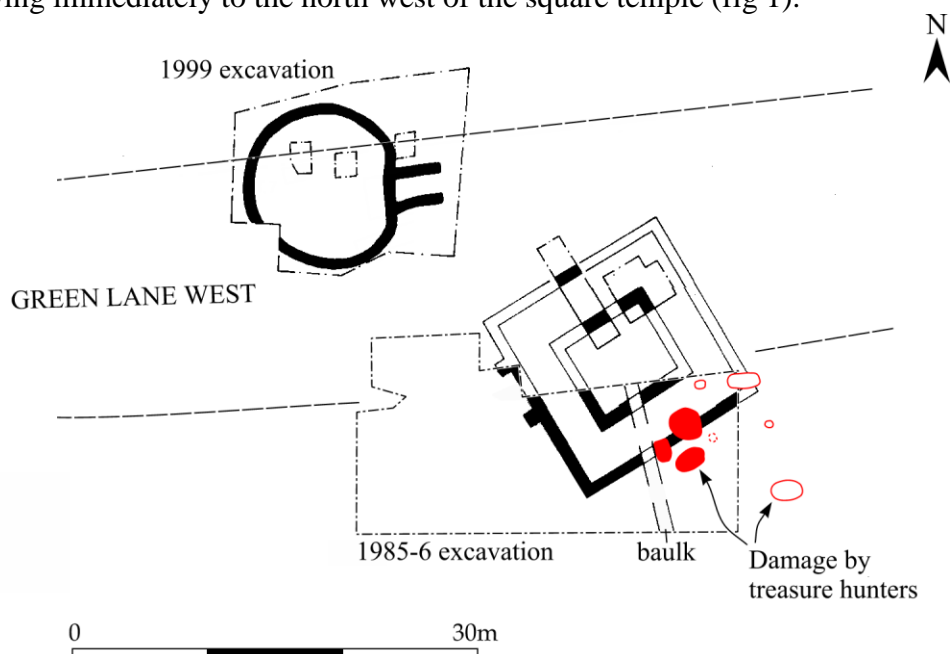


Fig 1 Green Lane, Wanborough, July 2002. Location plan. Solid red shapes show damage June/July 2002. Hollow shapes show earlier holes still open.

Despite the temple area of the site now being scheduled, it has continued to be attacked at intervals, culminating in a series of night-time raids in June and July 2002, which left a part of the site severely damaged by three large and deep holes (plate 1; figs 1 & 2, TH1 - 3). As a result the site was visited by the local Inspector of Ancient Monuments and the author was commissioned to undertake an emergency investigation of the affected area (Site code WANR02). This was intended to establish whether intact archaeological deposits were being damaged and equally whether the treasure seekers were finding archaeological objects of financial value and hence were likely to return.

## **The Investigation**

The site of the latest damage (fig 1) lies in the field immediately to the south of Green Lane West, a public right of way. While the exact position of the square temple found in 1985 was uncertain, all the original datum points having been lost, the area attacked appeared to lie within or close to the south eastern edge of the later temple building. The treasure hunters had dug three irregular holes into natural, over an area about 5 x 4m, dumping the spoil in a rough circle around the diggings.

In order to complete the work speedily, a machine was used to strip the topsoil and some of the spoil from the immediate area and a small team of volunteers hand cleaned, excavated and recorded enough of the sections in the holes to establish the answers to the questions posed at the outset (fig 2).

The work has established that a length of the flint and Upper Greensand ambulatory wall footings of the temple had been destroyed by the treasure hunters, but still showed in section (figs 2 - 3 and plate 2) where it entered (section A - A1) and left (section B - B1) the damaged area. A straight crack was noted running along the western edge of the stripped zone (fig 2) and this is almost undoubtedly the edge of a baulk left within the 1985-6 excavation trench. The upper part of the sections (contexts 01, 02, 03, 04, 09) therefore show the backfill of the 1985-6 trench, while beneath this, and cut into the natural London Clay, are the remains of the mortared temple wall and associated deposits (contexts 05, 06, 07). Given the very limited nature of the current investigation it is not possible to interpret the latter features, other than to say that there seems to be a cobbled surface (05) on the external side of the ambulatory wall (06) showing in the western section (A - A1). The original ground surface has been lost and, while height OD was not established, the site was levelled in relation to a water hydrant cover in the adjacent lane. This was used as a base datum in the 1999 excavations and it is therefore possible to relate the levels of the two sites.

During the course of the investigation, which was completed within a day, two Celtic coins were recovered by a voluntary metal detector user. These were silver units of Verica and Epaticcus respectively and came from the backfill of the 1985-6 trench (fig 2, SF1 and 2). Given that the very limited amount of soil moved produced two coins, it seems very likely that the treasure hunters have indeed been finding financially valuable artefacts and that consequently further attacks to the site can be expected. Otherwise finds were limited to one sherd of oxidized coarse ware (from the surface of 08) and three tesserae (two ironstone and one chalk) originally from the black and white floor of the cella, but found redeposited in the backfill of the 1985-6 trench. The deposit of flint and tile (fig 2, 10) in the south-west corner of the cleared area is probably part of the building rubble level recorded in the 1985-6 excavations and which still remains intact.

The site was backfilled by machine at the end of the work.

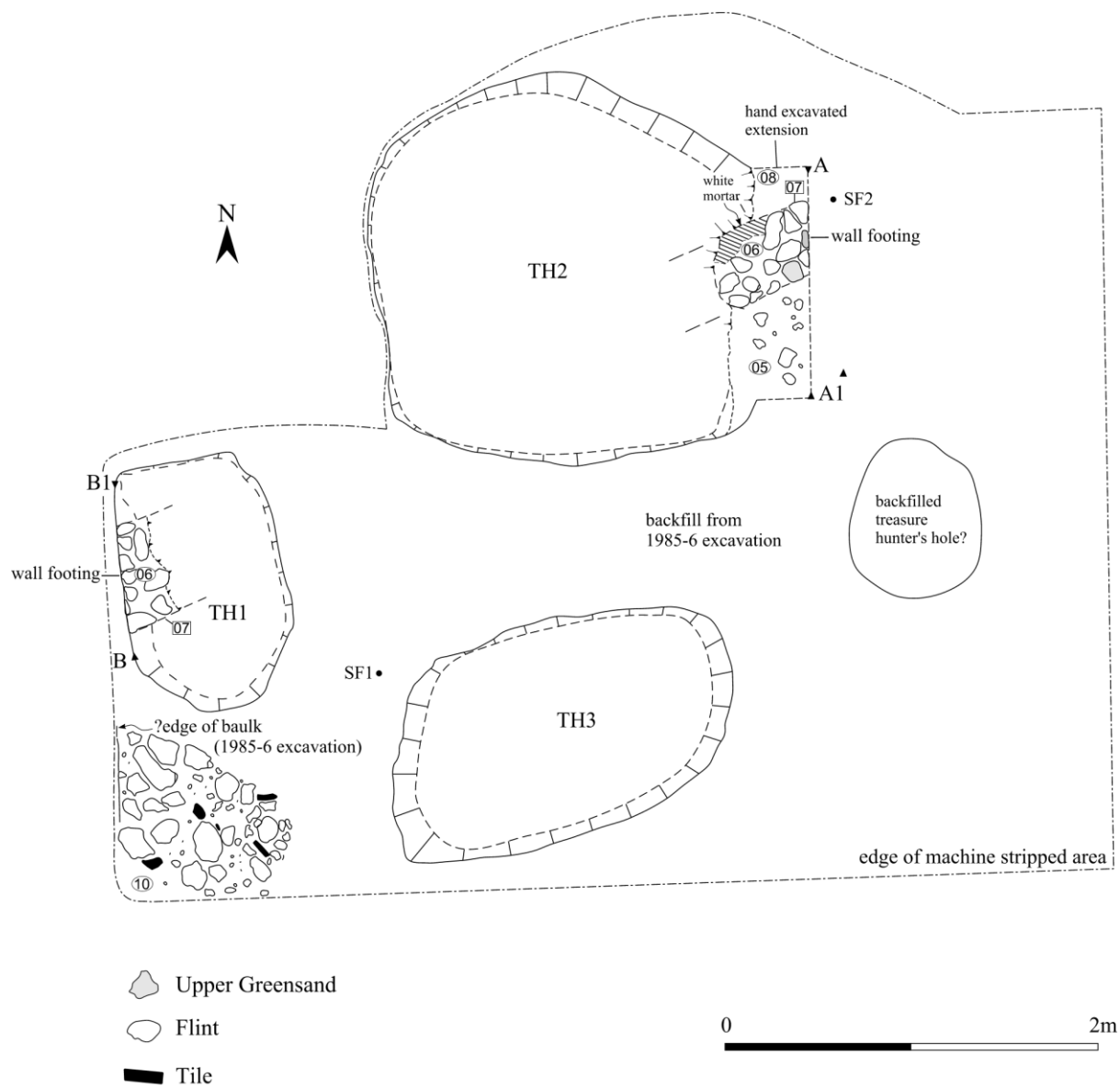


Fig 2 Green Lane, Wanborough, July 2002. Plan of area examined showing three definite treasure hunters' holes (TH1 - 3) and one possible (backfilled) hole, together with the locations of the two coins (SF1 and 2).

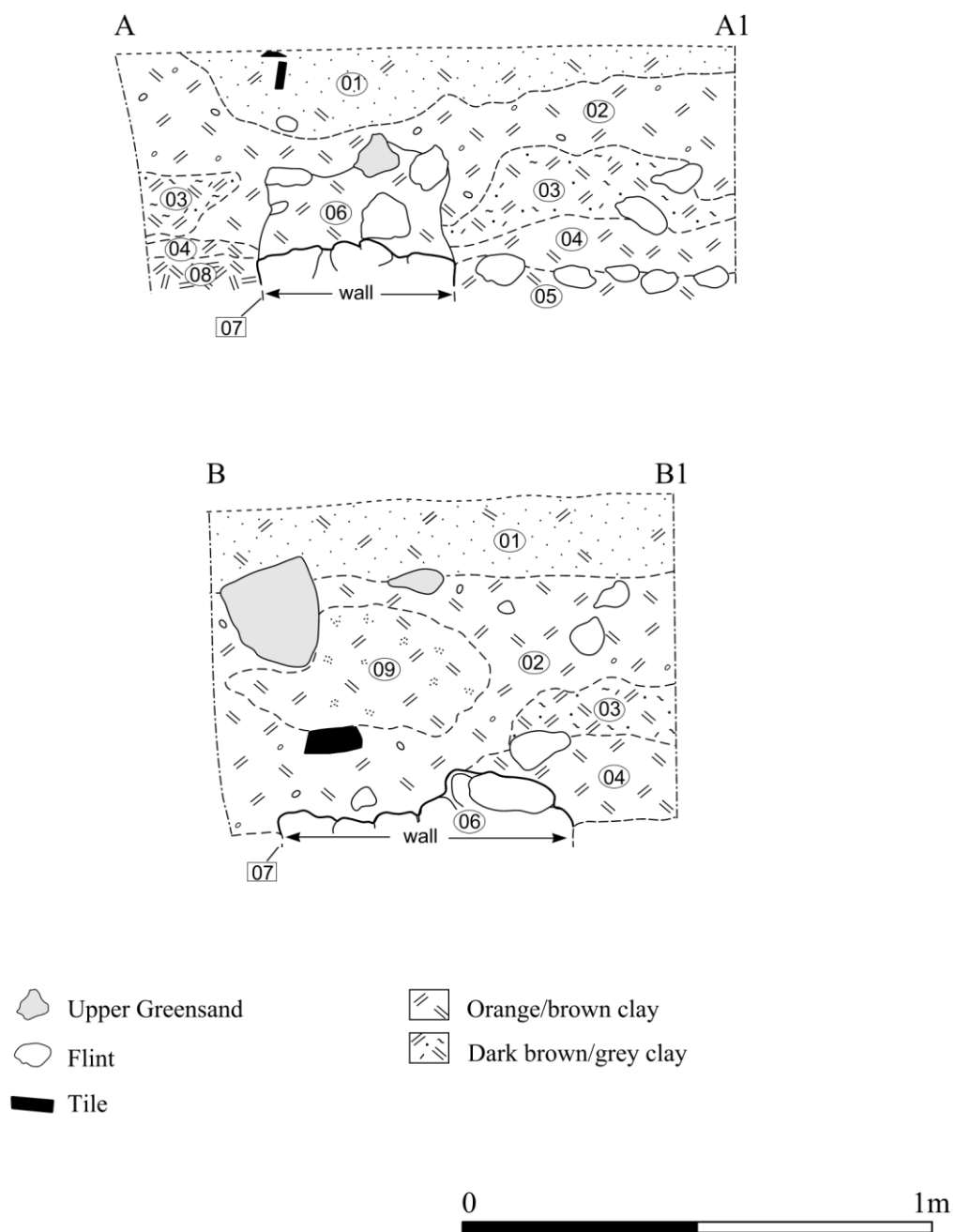


Fig 3 Green Lane, Wanborough, July 2002. Sections A-A1 and B-B1





Plate 1 Green Lane Wanborough, July 2002. View of treasure hunter holes shown solid red on figure 1 and the subject of this report (TH3 in foreground). (scales in 0.5m units)



Plate 2 Green Lane Wanborough, July 2002. Part of the ambulatory wall exposed in the excavated area on the east side of TH2 (scale 10cm).

## Conclusions

Despite the fact that intact archaeology is being damaged, the current treasure hunter holes lie within the main 1985-6 trench. As a result the basic arrangement and sequence of the temple in this area is already known though, no doubt, further detail could be added.

Of potentially much greater concern is the fact that a number of earlier treasure hunter holes were also noted (fig 1) in scrub slightly to the east of the temple building. This area has never been investigated and any further attacks will result in irreparable damage being done to any archaeological levels that may be present, in exactly the same way as occurred to the west of the temple in the period leading up to the 1985 rescue excavations.

In the longer term, the publication of the results of the 1999 excavations will bring to the attention of the general public the fact that the religious complex at Wanborough extends far beyond the current scheduled area. It seems likely that, as happened in the 1980s, this may well lead to renewed and more widespread phase of attacks to the site, the greater part of which has yet to be examined in any detail.

The coins have been deposited with the other finds from the site at Guildford Museum.

David Graham  
21 July 2002

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to: Judith Roebuck and Chris Scull of English Heritage for their support; Dr David Bird of Surrey County Council for his advice; and to David Attride, Audrey Graham, Alan Hall, Tony Howe, Roger Minty, Elizabeth Whitbourn and David Williams, who gave up a day to help on site. The landowners, Mr and Mrs D Melville, kindly gave permission for the work to be carried out.

## Figs 2 and 3: context nos, description and interpretation

01	Clay with inclusions	1985-6 trench backfill
02	Mixed clay/chalk/flint rubble/tile	1985-6 trench backfill
03	Dark brown/grey clay	1985-6 trench backfill
04	Orange/brown clay	1985-6 trench backfill
05	Intact cobbled surface ?	Associated with temple wall
06	Mortared flint/greensand wall	Foundations of ambulatory wall of temple
07	Cut into natural clay	Cut for foundation trench
08	Clay (potsherd from surface)	Natural (London Clay)
09	Clay with chalk inclusions	1985-6 trench backfill
10	Flint and tile surface	Possible surviving temple demolition rubble (see O'Connell & Bird 1994, plate 3)

## Reference

O'Connell, M G C, & Bird, J, 1994 The Roman temple at Wanborough, excavation 1985-1986, *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, **82**, 1-168