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Christopher Barringer	John Peterson
Charlotte Barringer	Klondyke, Old Street
23 St David's Road	Newton Flotman NR15 1PD
Hethersett, NR9 3QH	Tel 01508 471078
Tel. 01603 810557	jwmp@cmp.uea.ac.uk

Cover illustration.

A new Roman site near Caistor St. Edmund: crop marks in the early summer of 2007 (Photo Mike Page).

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Last year the then joint editors challenged the members of NAHRG; they pointed out that continued publication of the Annual depends mainly on members' contributions. I hope you will agree that this issue shows how well members have risen to that challenge. It contains a full complement of articles covering a wide range of subjects and periods, from Roman times to the twentieth century. This is as it should be.

Perhaps it is unfair to pick out contributions for special mention, but I must stress the importance of William Bowden's article on the excavation of a singular Roman building near Venta Icenorum. This was a collaborative effort by members, very ably coordinated by Jim Beckerleg. Given that this structure, perhaps constructed for outdoor entertainment and dining, is of such great interest, I hope that it will become much more widely known and bring great credit to NAHRG.

At the other end of our time span another article stands out. Written before the current credit crunch and threatened bank failures, John Barney's article on such a event in nineteenth century Norwich seems uncannily prescient and topical.

Of course I must again make the usual plea for more contributions, and emphasise how willing I am to discuss ideas for articles and notes, but I remain hopeful that they will come. In the meantime I hope you share my enjoyment of the accounts that you have in front of you. For me, all of them, from possible Roman fine dining to a relatively recent case of financial chicanery, demonstrate the relevance of archaeology and history to our own world.

Possible extension of Roman centuriation to Lothingland (Norfolk/Suffolk)

John Peterson

The very significant results of the National Mapping Programme (NMP) for the Norfolk Coastal Zone are currently appearing in two ways. There is a publication (Albone, Massey and Tremlett 2007) and there are also descriptions of individual sites in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER). The latter may be viewed on the Norfolk Heritage Explorer web site. Some of the most detailed mapping of the aerial photography comes from the northern (Norfolk) part of Lothingland. Many features are visible, including multi-period field systems, roads and tracks.

Of the Roman features in Lothingland, the most impressive is NHER 43591, a “possible Roman road or major land boundary”. It is very straight, 1.6km long, and runs from the end of Back Lane, Belton (OS grid reference TG 4883 0219), to TG 5041 0258. The NHER record concludes by saying, “It is entirely possible that even if this road or track is originally Roman in date, it could have stayed in use for a considerable time afterwards. The fact that it links up with ‘Back Lane’ suggests that at least part of this route has continued in use until the modern day”.

This feature passes through a field system (NHER 43592), described by the NMP publication as a landscape extensively covered by fields and smaller trackways in the Roman period. The publication suggests that the two were associated, because they are aligned. Furthermore it notes that some modern boundaries are also apparently aligned on the road. However, it does not regard this as diminishing the likelihood of the road being Roman in origin, since the alignment of Roman roads may be preserved in later field boundaries.

The other major feature, NHER 43495, lies to the south east, in the parish of Hopton-on-Sea. It is a field system, interpreted by Sarah Massey (Norfolk NMP) as planned and Roman. This system as a whole is definitely not evidence for a centuriation. Its southern part is much too sinuous and its northern part, although more regular, has areas with dissimilar orientations apparently based on two major straight boundaries that are not at right angles. The northern boundary is oriented approximately 24° north of east. The western boundary is defined by a trackway, whose orientation is approximately 11° west of north. Its NHER description reads “The trackway runs from TG 5189 0200 to TG 5224 0087, although the clearest section runs from TG 5193 0176 to TG 5198 0148. This section is approximately 11m wide and runs in a straight line”¹.

The NMP publication sees the possible Roman road and its associated fields, together with parts of the Hopton landscape, as evidence for local planning, but not for centuriation. However, it notes (as does the NHER record) that the orientation of the north western part of the Hopton field system is “roughly consistent with a hypothetical centuriation system suggested for South Norfolk, in particular the Scole/Dickleburgh area, which is oriented at approximately 11 degrees west of north”. Given this observation, the author, who was the proposer of the system in question, was encouraged to reconsider what evidence there might be for its extension to Lothingland.

The possible "South Norfolk A" system had originally been studied by using a transparent overlay grid on modern topographic maps. This is a method that has been used in Norfolk even quite recently (Frere 2000). However, such an approach is impractical and inaccurate for the study of a large area. Much more reliable is a mathematical model that calculates the OS grid coordinates of the intersections of the centuriation. When some of these have been plotted on the map a small grid can be accurately placed on them. In the case of South Norfolk the parameters of the model were set so that the grid fitted major axes of the Scole/Dickleburgh field system, and also other straight features, including a Roman road, in the area south of Norwich. The orientation was set at 11.077° west of OS north. This precise figure would be the same at whatever distance the hypothetical axes were plotted on OS maps. The positions of intersections of the axes would, of course, also be fixed. They could not to be changed in order to coincide with features that, in a subjective view, ought to fit the grid. In other words, cheating, after the event, would not be allowed.

The result of a projection of the system to part of Lothingland is shown in figure 1. In this figure the square grid of the centuriation is drawn on a reproduction of the current OS 1:25,000 topographic map. On the map are also plotted the two straight linear features already described.

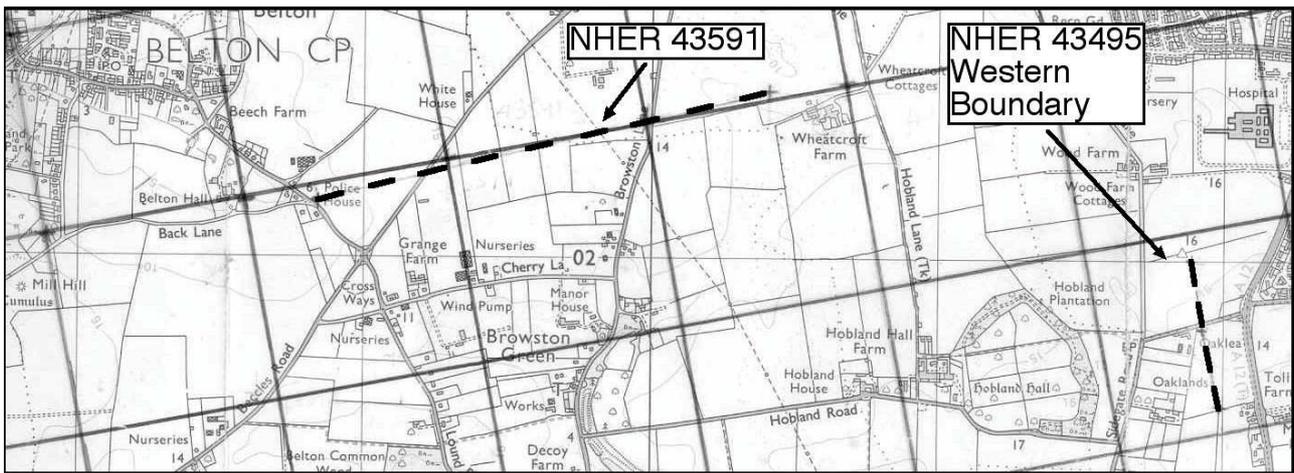


Figure 1. Selected NHER features, Belton and Hopton (Norfolk) © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All right reserved.

The road or boundary (NHER 43591) runs at about 13° north of east, so its orientation is 2° different from the model. This could be evidence against the hypothesis. However, if it is taken together with its possible extension, Back Lane, it could be argued that together they are derived, by two different types of deformation, from an axis of the grid. The straight part of the western boundary of the Hopton field system (NHER 43495) is a very good fit. Its orientation is the same, and its position, halving a grid square, is extremely common in many surviving, directly visible, centuriations. These features are suggestive, but do not give certain confirmation that the hypothetical Roman land survey influenced Roman boundary layout in this area.

The analysis so far, and further consideration of figure 1, raises two points that may be worth noting. Firstly the orientations of the Roman road/boundary and the northern and western boundaries of the Hopton field system are not the same. Measuring counter-clockwise from the OS cardinal directions they are at 13° , 24° and 11° respectively. Contrary to the opinion of the NMP publication, the first two values cannot be seen as evidence of a remarkably similar alignment; there is a difference of 11° between the orientation of the road and the northern boundary of the field system. The road's orientation is much more compatible with that of the western boundary, since these two features are nearly orthogonal. Secondly, in figure 1 a single orientation, similar to that of the hypothetical centuriation, is dominant in the existing field boundaries. If such a thing were seen in the Mediterranean parts of the Roman Empire, the influence of centuriation would be immediately suspected. In those areas the persistence of a common orientation, even when plots are subdivided and amalgamated, has been commonplace.

The hypothetical centuriation grid can be used as a tool to select other similarly oriented existing boundaries in Lothingland. The resulting map (Fig. 2) is derived from first series (mid 20th century) OS 1:25,000 maps; it makes it appear that, in many places, modern boundaries at around 11° (and at right angles) are just as visible as they are in the area covered by figure 1. Across the middle of Lothingland there is a broad band of these features. This starts in parishes in the east, on the North Sea coast: the southern part of Hopton and the northern part of Corton (Suffolk). It extends to Somerleyton and other neighbouring Suffolk parishes.

The NMP for Suffolk has interpreted the aerial photographs from only a tight coastal strip of Lothingland. Results from Corton show boundaries that, on the whole, form enclosure patterns that look like the late prehistoric or Roman systems further north, although there is no dating evidence for them. The majority of these boundaries have orientations similar to the modern boundaries and the coast. Further away from the coast, the crop mark traces have not been processed by the NMP and hence not systematically interpreted. There are several orientations, different from that on the coast and from each other, that seem to be related to natural topography or perhaps to pre-existing routeways. The modern layout in this area, aligning to the coast, is generally classified by the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service as a landscape of late enclosure, i.e. 18th century or later.

This modern landscape in Lound, Ashby, Herringfleet and Somerleyton is strikingly similar to that of the Norfolk parishes further north. Therefore, by analogy, we would be unwise to rule out the possibility that it also has features derived from a pre-modern landscape. The presence of a widespread dominant orientation is significant. The process of enclosure does not normally create a dominant orientation in field boundaries within a single parish. Furthermore, parishes are normally enclosed individually. It is hard to imagine a

mechanism whereby individual modern surveyors deliberately created such widespread uniformity. Hence we must question the assumption that the modern boundaries are unrelated to an earlier layout.



Figure 2. Possible traces of South Norfolk A cadastre, Lothingland © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All right reserved.

A very rapid search using Google Earth gives some evidence for this. At geographic coordinate $52^{\circ} 31' 42.93''$ N $1^{\circ} 40' 02.28''$ E (TM 4884 9862), in the parish of Ashby, there is (on the current image, dated Jul 2, 2006) a cropmark feature, two parallel straight lines, about 5m apart. This feature conforms to the orientation of modern boundaries. It also conforms to the hypothetical centuriation, being parallel to and 20m from an east-west axis. In the next field to the east its continuation as parallel marks is visible, although less clearly,

and seems to be abutted by the very clear trace of a straight track, running north at a right angle. This track corresponds to a one fifth division of a hypothetical century. Furthermore, in the next field the double trace continues, extending it to a total length of over 700m. It is here about 6.5m wide and slightly sinuous. This feature is centred at TM 4937 9873, 11m from the hypothetical centuriation axis. Abutting this feature on the south side (and definitely not crossing it) there are boundaries at right angles, spaced at roughly 8-13m. These resemble the divisions of medieval strips.

Here in Ashby, as we have seen in the case of NHER 43592 in Norfolk Lothingland, an earlier regular landscape seems to underlie the modern one, but share its orientation. If this is typical, it provides a good explanation for the dominance of a single orientation in most of area stretching from the coast across central Lothingland. It would not then be necessary to propose that 18th century surveyors used the coast, a long distance away, as a basis. The regularity, not imposed by topography, would be pre-modern and most likely to originate in the Roman period, as the result of a regular survey.

One candidate for such a survey is the grid of South Norfolk A, but we should also consider the Roman road or boundary to the north (NHER 43591) as perhaps a major division of a system oriented at 13°. I have not attempted this here, partly because of the disparity between this orientation and that of the Ashby linear feature, but also because of the correspondence between South Norfolk 'A' and significant existing boundaries and other features.

Figure 2 includes several sections of parish boundaries (shown by closely spaced small dots) that more or less conform to major divisions (mainly axes, shown by dots at intervals of 177m) of the centuriation grid. They are hard to see on the map, when reproduced at the size imposed here, so may helpfully be listed. For Gorleston, two sections of western boundary are on parallel axes; and part of the southern boundary bisects two squares of the centuriation. The Hopton-Corton boundary again bisects squares, running from the sea up to the main road (the present A12). From that point the eastern boundary of Lound runs down the road, and the side of a square, to a corner, from where the southern boundary of the parish runs westwards, approximating an axis of the grid for two squares. Other sections of parish boundary run parallel to the axes, but are not so closely associated with them.

On the map every fifth axis is shaded. These represent the *quintarii* already determined by their coincidence with major features, some of them Roman roads, in the area from Norwich southwards (Peterson 1993). The relationship between one of them and Burgh Castle supports the idea that those running North-South are correctly positioned.

Much more work remains to be done. Aerial photographs and satellite images need further study, particularly in south Lothingland. It may also be possible to obtain support for the centuriation hypothesis from the statistical study of distribution of Roman sites, provided there are enough of them. Place name study may also be revealing. Most importantly, we must develop a clear understanding of the way in which Roman cadastres, and the land surveys on which they are based, can co-exist with apparently incompatible, but contemporary, physical divisions on the ground.

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(available on-line at <http://www.sys.uea.ac.uk/Research/researchareas/JWMP/Peterson1993Thesis/Thesis Content.html>)

Note

¹ This section, and associated boundaries, is currently (20 October 2008) visible on Google Earth. It is indeed extremely straight.