

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL & DOCUMENTARY REPORT

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**Court Knoll, Nayland with Wissington  
(SAM no. Suffolk 115)**

**SMR no. NYW 006**



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**REPORT No. 2001/112**

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**Summary**

*Nayland-with-Wissington, Court Knoll, (TL/9734; NYW 006)* Court Knoll is a D-shaped enclosure or ringwork surrounded by a wide ditch and with an internal area of some 2 hectares. It lies to the south of the village of Nayland, close to the River Stour which also forms the Suffolk/Essex border, and is a Scheduled Monument. It is believed to have been a defended manorial site. Although physically it is an obvious monument, relatively little is known about its history and origins. Limited excavations in 1924 revealed building foundations believed at the time to be Norman and constructed of flint and tile, which was tentatively interpreted as being reused Roman tile. In order to discover more about Court Knoll, and to aid future management of the site, a project was formulated by the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society, the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Countryside Project and Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, and funded by the Local Heritage Initiative. This project consisted of a geophysical survey by GSB Propection, a documentary search by Anthony Breen and systematic fieldwalking of the sites internal area by a team of local volunteers supervised by the author for SCCAS.

The geophysical survey revealed a number of anomalies including what appear to be the remains of building foundations, as well as disturbance which may be the result of excavations on the site by Major W.F. Dick in 1924. Documentary evidence confirms the sites manorial status and suggests that a range of buildings occupied Court Knoll from at least the thirteenth century when there are records of repairs to buildings including a solar and chapel. The presence of a chapel, albeit in a ruinous state, is also recorded in the eighteenth century by the Essex historian Philip Morant. By the time Morant was writing, the ruins of the chapel were the only structural remains visible on the site, although the decline of Court Knoll may have begun during the fourteenth century under the lordship of the Scrope family. The Scropes held the manor from 1336 but their main residence was in Yorkshire and as such, the maintenance of Court Knoll was not their first priority.

For fieldwalking purposes, the site was divided into 10m squares from which all surface finds were collected. The vast majority of material recovered from the site was late- or post-medieval brick and tile but a significant quantity of medieval pottery was also present. However, the medieval pottery finds, in themselves, did not point to any residence of particularly high status on the site. The fieldwalking evidence supports the historical documents which indicate a decline in the status of the site in the later medieval/early post-medieval period, culminating in an apparent reversion to purely agricultural use by the mid eighteenth century. A large quantity of re-used Roman tile and a lack of contemporary pottery found during fieldwalking adds credence to Major Dick's interpretation of flint and Roman tile constructed foundations rather than indicating a Roman presence on the site itself.

### **Acknowledgements**

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And to all the individuals who gave up their time to participate in a variety of ways, in all weathers, and without whom, the fieldwalking event would not have been the resounding success that it was.

## **2. Geophysical Survey**

This survey was designed to investigate the interior of Court Knoll to identify any remains of archaeological potential. Both gradiometer and resistance techniques were employed in an attempt to provide information regarding the layout of the interior to understand the classification of the monument more clearly. The gradiometer survey covered the whole 2 hectare whilst a resistivity survey was employed over a smaller area of 0.6 hectares, focussing on activity picked up by the gradiometer. The survey was undertaken by GSB Prospection in July 2001.

Copies of the full geophysical survey report are held by English Heritage, the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society and the county Sites and Monuments Record in Bury St. Edmunds.

### **Summary of results**

Both geophysical techniques have provided evidence of possible former settlement at Court Knoll. The gradiometer survey revealed numerous anomalies of archaeological potential, some of which may indicated burnt features and areas of occupation. However, the levels of background magnetic fluctuation have made it difficult to discern any clear patterns in the results. The resistance survey detected several anomalies suggestive of structural remains and rubble spreads. Unfortunately, no clear plan of the structures could be identified due to an insufficient moisture contrast in the dry soils.

Figure 6 is a summary interpretation of the survey results.

### **Discussion**

Although many of the anomalies identified do not offer obvious explanations, certain features can be interpreted.

Areas of increased magnetic response (D and E) which could represent disturbed archaeological deposits, and linear feature (3), a possible robber trench, are all candidates for the location of the 1924 excavations. A sketched map showing the location of the foundations seen by Dick (Figure 3) suggests that these anomalies are roughly in the right place for this interpretation. The plan shows the building remains to be approximately 96 feet away from the outer ditch and in line with both an unspecified building and the south of the church tower. This 'sight line' is not an accurate or reliable enough means of plotting the sites location, however, both areas D and E are roughly 96 feet away from the ditch, albeit in different directions. Without further information as to the extent and nature of Major Dick's fieldwork, it is not possible to be any more certain of the exact whereabouts of the foundations he planned.

High resistance in three areas indicate the remains of walls. The largest of these areas in the north east of the site is particularly interesting for the fact that a series of anomalies in combination (A, B and 1) could be indicative of brick, rather than stone foundations, should they all be the same feature. This is credible in light of Major Dick's record of flint and tile foundations and also with the distribution and quantity of brick and tile recovered during fieldwalking (see below). Whatever the case, the survey suggests the remains of at least three buildings and whilst it is not possible from the plan to fully interpret these, their presence does back up the documentary evidence.

Perhaps the most intriguing feature on the geophysical results is the square building roughly central to the site. Again, a definite interpretation is not possible but the plan and dimensions are suggestive of either some kind of watchtower or a dovecote, neither of which would have been out of place within a medieval manor complex.

Numerous amorphous anomalies are shown on the plan as potential archaeological features. These are impossible to interpret from the survey results alone but may include features such as post-holes and building slots associated with former structures, as well as various pits. In the past, pits were dug for a number of purposes including quarrying, storage and perhaps most frequently for the disposal of rubbish. If nothing else, these anomalies suggest the presence of archaeological evidence and activity over most of the site.

### **3. Field Survey**

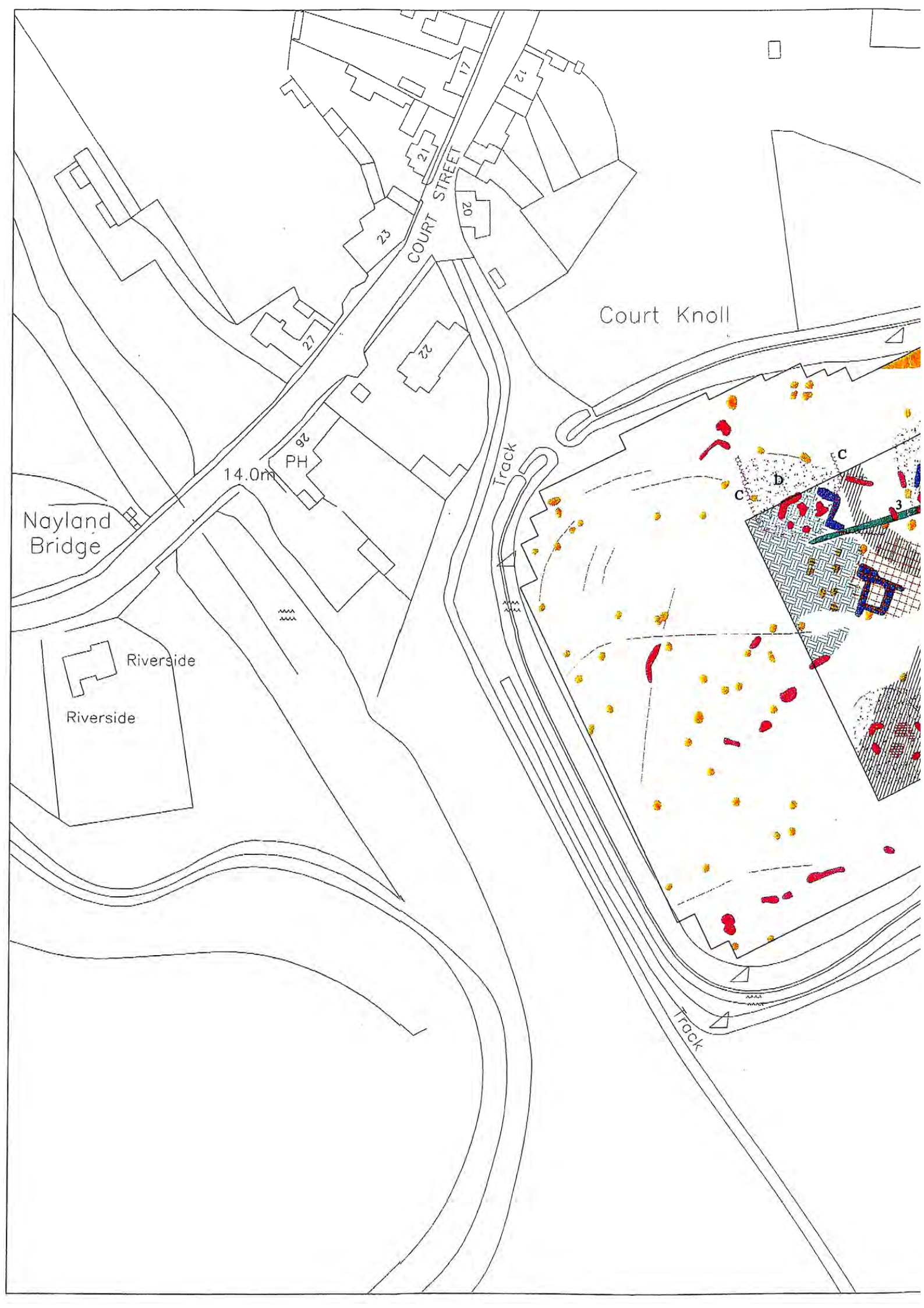
Fieldwalking was carried out by a team of volunteers from Nayland and the surrounding area, under the supervision of the Stoke by Nayland Fieldwalking Group and the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service.

#### **Methodology**

A 10x10m grid was set out on the same alignment as that used during the geophysical survey, using a theodolite and 30m tapes. A series of coloured flags were used to mark the grid squares, each of which was allocated its own unique alpha numeric code for identification and labelling of finds. Each square was systematically walked to ensure coverage of the whole area, by at least two volunteers, collecting all material culture visible on the surface. The soil was a mid brown sandy loam which had been well weathered since ploughing. However, heavy rain over the weeks between ploughing and the fieldwalking event had encouraged swift re-growth of vegetation, particularly around the site edges, resulting in an average surface visibility of around 50%.

All finds collected were washed and dried before being quantified and identified by the finds staff of Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service. The results are set out below. Due to the large quantity collected, much of the ceramic building material (CBM) has been discarded. The remainder of the finds have been deposited in the County Store in Bury St. Edmunds.

The survey element was completed by drawing profiles across the bank and ditch in four locations, shown in Figure 7. These profiles (Figure 8) were drawn at 1:50 and record the shape and dimensions of the earthwork as it survived in 2001.

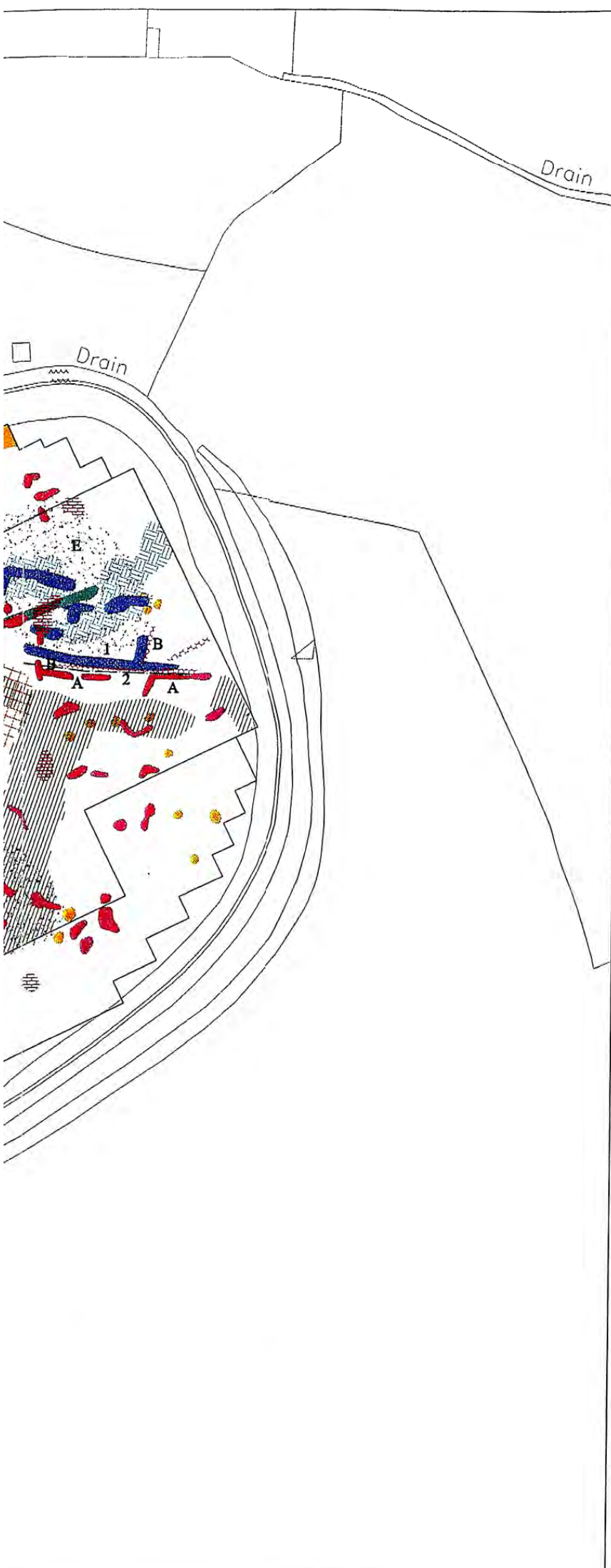


# GSB PROSPECTION








PROJECT: 2001/75 Court Knoll, Nayland

TITLE: Summary Interpretation






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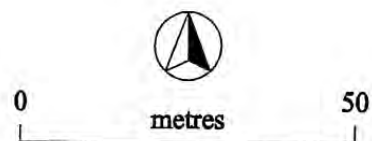


## Gradiometer Anomalies

-  ?Archaeology
-  ?Burnt Feature
-  Area of Increased Magnetic Response
-  Negative Anomaly
-  Trend
-  Area of Magnetic Disturbance
-  Ferrous

## Resistance Anomalies

-  High Resistance - ?Walls
-  High Resistance - ?Rubble
-  Low Resistance - ?Drain
-  Low Resistance - ?Robber Trench
-  Low Resistance - ?Natural



## 4. Discussion

This project was formulated with a view to unlocking some of the unknown history of Court Knoll, involving the community of which the monument is a part. Rather than looking at the site from just one perspective, a combination of approaches were employed and the results of the documentary search, fieldwalking and the geophysical survey were compared and integrated to produce a broader overall picture.

Prior to this project, the only evidence of buildings once present inside Court Knoll came from two photographs Major Dick's 1924 excavations and from a reference to a ruined chapel on the site by the eighteenth century historian, Philip Morant, but the location, extent and form of any such structures remained unclear. The geophysical survey pinpoints one area towards the north-eastern corner of the site where foundations of at least three buildings appear to exist. Other structures could be present but may not have been picked up by the survey owing to 'background noise' and adverse soil conditions which can mask signals. Finds from the fieldwalking were generally more abundant in the area where buildings are suggested, particularly in the case of Roman tile and post-Roman (mostly medieval) roof tile. This coincidence of building materials and geophysical evidence provides the best evidence for the precise location of at least some of the buildings known to have occupied the site during the medieval period.

Although the precise origins of Court Knoll remain uncertain, it is likely that the site was constructed for Swein of Essex, the owner of the manor of Nayland in 1086 when the Domesday Book was compiled. The Domesday entry for Nayland records a hall in Nayland and whilst it cannot be proved that this is a reference to a manorial hall at Court Knoll, it is more than tempting to believe that this may be the case. A hall was certainly in existence somewhere in Nayland by 1086 but whether this was built for Swein, or his father, Robert is unknown. Both Swein and Robert were sufficiently important landowners to have been able to afford to create such an impressive earthwork as Court Knoll, a symbol of their power and wealth. Very little pottery recovered during the fieldwalking could be dated as belonging to such an early phase of the site although Dr. Laver's interpretation of 'Norman' foundations revealed during excavation supports an early medieval establishment. It is also noteworthy that the site appears to have been part of the demesne lands of the manor of Nayland.

In 1336, after a brief period of royal ownership, the manor of Nayland passed to Geoffrey de Scrope and thereafter remained under the jurisdiction of the influential Scrope family until sometime around the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Since the main residence of the Scopes was in Yorkshire, Court Knoll was again staffed by representatives of a series of absent lords. This could go some way to explaining why the finds from a manorial site which one might assume to have been the focus for a high standard of living, included no imported or high status pottery. The pottery assemblage is fairly typical of a rural, domestic site which suggests that the tenants or resident stewards based at Court Knoll during the Scopes' lordship did not have the trappings of a high status lifestyle as one would expect the Scopes themselves to have had.

It is all but impossible to construct an exact history through archaeological methods, rather a body of evidence is built up from a range of sources from which it is possible to interpret a most likely case scenario. The strength of this project lies in the integration of a number of fields of experience, all employed to unravel some of the history of Court Knoll. Although the picture is far from complete, work so far has opened up new



lines of enquiry and hopefully inspired those involved to follow new directions which may enhance our knowledge of Court Knoll yet further. Above all, what has emerged from this project is a picture of a defended medieval manorial site, home to a range of buildings and activities, but which is likely have gone out of residential use by the sixteenth century and had reverted solely back to agricultural use by the mid eighteenth century. Undamaged by subsequent building, Court Knoll survives as a notable example of an early medieval defended manor where the internal layout and archaeological evidence are likely to be well preserved. Indications from both excavation and the recent geophysical survey suggest that this may well be the case and as such, the significance and importance of Court Knoll should not be underestimated.

#### **Further areas of potential study**

- Further information concerning Laurence Harley's research into Court Knoll in the 1960's. What conclusions, if any, did his study reach?
- Details of Major Dick who led the 1924 excavations and how he became involved with the site.
- Search of the archives of Colchester Castle Museum for information and/or finds deposited by Major Dick. Mr. Harley is known to have consulted papers held there.
- Study of early maps of the area searching for names mentioned in the manorial accounts and for former field boundaries which may point towards former river crossings, tracks and the like. Such information would help to understand Court Knoll in the broader context of its landscape and of the manor it served.
- There may be limited scope for further documentary research into the de Burgh family who held Nayland during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Hubert de Burgh was an important political figure at the time and records of central government for that period may hold early references to Nayland.

