

Understanding Ospringe

2008-9 & 2011

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1. Introduction

FSARG, the Faversham Society's archaeological research branch, was founded in 2005. An account of the initial three-year project *Hunt the Saxons* 2005-7 is available and on the KCC HER. For a second project, after considerable discussion, the FSARG team decided to carry out a multidisciplinary study of Ospringe. The early stages involved pulling together the considerable amount of research done on the area over the years and pinpointing the outstanding questions about the development of the settlement. These centered upon a) Early medieval Ospringe, especially the period before the building of

the Maison Dieu and including manorial and church investigations b) the Middle Westbrook valley in prehistory. It was very likely that evidence of Roman activity would come up, although that was not the main focus.

The focus on Ospringe came from the fact that in 2003, the Kent Archaeological Team, working with English Heritage, produced a detailed archaeological assessment of Faversham in a volume on Kent's Historic Towns (KHTS) in which Ospringe was not included. This is in spite of the fact that the historic part of the village falls within the modern Faversham town parish. We did not think that the history of Faversham was understandable without Ospringe and planned to redress the problem. There were also a number of significant gaps in Ospringe's historical record, notably the mid medieval and the prehistoric. Finally, the small size and community strengths of Ospringe were seen as enabling a great deal of contact with and involvement of local people. We planned to work with such groups as the school, church, allotment society and also with local landowners.

The main end product has been a detailed archaeological assessment of Ospringe, using the model contained in the KHTS, to be archived at Maidstone as well as locally. We also put on an exhibition at the Maison Dieu, and a major article on the prehistory of the Westbrook valley is in preparation (January 2012) for *Archaeologia Cantiana*. The site archive (material, paper and digital) is lodged with the Faversham Society and is available to any researcher who wants to use it.

2. Location

The approach for 2008 was mainly exploratory and preliminary, with much archive research, geophysics surveying, small scale test pitting and some auguring and field walking. The main village was the chief area of interest. From this came a clear focus for work in 2009, with intensive follow up in the Maison Dieu area and in the Middle Western section of the valley near the parish church. This was so productive for the prehistoric in particular that a final short return was made in 2011 to complete the area survey by investigating the east side of the middle valley.

See Appendix 1 for details of all field activities in Ospringe.

3. Background

a) Geology

Ospringe village lies in a south to north chalk valley with abundant springs. The western side of the valley is gentler in slope than the eastern side and is mantled with brickearth deposits up to two metres thick. The steeper eastern valley side has only occasional thin patches of brickearth and clay with flints and the chalk is much closer to the surface. The valley floor has thick deposits of gravels, of glacial and immediate post glacial origin. Gravels sizes vary but can be up to 20 cm diameter. These gravels would have been deposited as outcomes of solifluction and melt water streams. At a few points in the valley are sarsen stones, e.g., next to the Bier House but close examination of these has shown that they are natural occurrences, residual from the Thanet sands which once covered this area.

Nowadays the valley through Ospringe itself is dry but until the 1960s a small but powerful spring fed stream, the Westbrook, flowed through here, running northwards to empty into tidal Faversham Creek. This stream was harnessed at a number of points for waterpower. Insofar as there is any water left after extraction by Southern Water, it now runs underground through a culvert.

b) History

Ospringe lies on Roman Watling Street, where it crosses the Westbrook stream. Just to the west are Roman cemeteries, both cremation and inhumation in type and so many other signifiers of Roman activity that Syndale Hill (Judd's Hill), next to Ospringe, is thought to be the site of Durolevum, mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary as a small settlement midway between Canterbury and Rochester.

Little is known about Saxon Ospringe although the village is close to an extensive and wealthy 7th-8th century cemetery in Kingsfield. By Domesday, however, a Manor of Ospringe existed in the middle valley, thought to be the present day Queen Court Manor and a church, presumably the parish church St Peter and St Paul, is mentioned. Domesday also lists a mill, a fishery and a salt pan. By the 13th century, the huge growth in pilgrimage traffic to Canterbury had led to the foundation of a Hospital at Ospringe, part of which survives to this day as a standing building. Ospringe at this time was part of a rural deanery.

The Hospital of St Mary was defunct by around 1515, but the importance of the route way continues to this day for different reasons. Numerous inns grew up along its route and during the Napoleonic period a barracks existed briefly at the North West end of the village. Mills continued to flourish along the Westbrook, with one in the village itself and another just to the north. Windmills were also built in the area. The surrounding farmland produced hops, fruit and cereals, and industries using these and also the willows lining the stream grew up. Chalk was quarried near Queen Court and the brick industry flourished to the north using the brickearth.

The coming of the railway in 1861 cut the main village street off from the rest of Faversham and really from this time on the village begins to dwindle. The mills were shutting down and the inns closing - nowadays only one survives. The agricultural industries are no more, the chalk quarry is disused and the brick works almost gone. The hop pickers' settlements are disappeared or rusting away in the hedgerows. Only the traffic remains, thicker and more polluting than ever.

c) Archaeological investigations

Nearby Syndale and the Stone Chapel have been subject to many archaeological investigations over the last 150 years: at least 150 trenches have been dug. Ospringe village, however, is much less investigated. The only investigation of any size was the very thorough 1977 Ministry of Works rescue excavation of the Hospital of St Mary site. In 1989 and 2007, commercial digs took place on other parts of the Hospital site with unexpected findings regarding the orientation of buildings.

One other commercial dig had taken place on the site of new property west of Water Lane. This reported finding only low status post medieval deposits above thick natural gravels.

d) HER entries

At the time of writing (January 2012), fifty-four entries are published in the Kent County Council HER for Ospringe parish. Most of these relate to features mentioned above e.g. site of Durolevum, and nearly all of the others relate to late medieval/ early post medieval houses in the more rural parts of the parish. The main part of the village lies in the Faversham parish section and has twenty-one entries. Nearly all of these are listed buildings in Ospringe Street.

Overall, only four entries out of seventy-five relate to any part of the prehistoric period, and three of these relate to poorly provenanced stray finds.

4. Methodology

All FSARG work is carried out by volunteers with training. Team members include both the experienced and novices. At the post excavation stage, specialists are often paid to help with identification and dating of finds, by checking FSARG findings and training the team further.

a) Desk top

To begin with, the study area was accessed through as many different records as possible. These covered historic pictures, photographs, aerial photographs, maps, documents and books. Reports of earlier investigations in the area were studied carefully. Wherever possible, local people were interviewed,

especially those whose memories go back a long way. (This proved invaluable with Brook Cottages, for example).

b) Non-invasive fieldwork

As far as possible, field investigation was non- or minimally invasive. First-hand observation came first, followed up by geo resistivity surveys. Increasingly we are using geo resistivity not only for large scale surveying, e.g. of the Ospringe school playing fields, but also for small scale surveys checking out a garden area e.g. the garden of No 47 Water Lane to find the underground culvert of the former Westbrook.

In the main village part of Ospringe, a house survey was carried out by updating a 1970s survey obtained from Swale council.

In the middle valley the areas of investigation were fields. Here the large Manor Pound field, around the church, was investigated using field walking methods (10% sampling) and in the small area nearest the road a metal detector survey was carried out. For Echo Field in the floor of the valley, an augured transect approach was used

c) Light touch excavation

Finally small-scale excavation took place. This was always on carefully selected sites (FSARG always has more offers of sites than it can possibly dig, so selection is a genuine process) in relation to our main interests and the outcomes of the non-invasive and desk top research. For the village area the most typical intervention was a one by one and a half metre pit, to a maximum safety depth of 1.2metres. Up on the steep east side of the middle valley opposite the Church, a transect of eight pits was used to look for evidence for prehistoric activity.

In a few cases e.g. the Bier House spring, larger areas were opened up, enabling the excavation of slots to a greater depth than 1.2m. In the smaller pits, spoil was sieved with an aim of 100% finds recovery.

Il excavation used the single context method.

d) Post excavation

Post excavation processing and analysis took place during the field seasons and continued full time immediately afterwards. Reports of individual excavations were published online by the autumn of the same year. A well attended group meeting in November each year enabled evaluation of the year's work, practice improvement decisions were taken and plans made for the next year.

5. Results and interpretation

a) General Characteristics of interventions

The contrast between the archaeology of Ospringe and those parts of Faversham investigated in Hunt the Saxons was striking. In Tanners St, Lower West Street and Abbey Street a typical pit had around 40cm of clinker, coal and 19th century deposits, overlying what were often impressively prosperous 17th-18th century artefacts remains. Typically, at maximum depth of 1.2m, the medieval period had not been reached - reports of commercial excavations in Faversham suggest at least 2 metres for the depth of Saxon deposits in those areas settled for a long time.

In Ospringe the archaeology was much shallower. Even on Ospringe Street, thought to follow the course of Roman Watling Street, medieval deposits were reached at around 40cm and the prehistoric at a startling 80-90cm. The uppermost layers had little fire grate deposits and the pottery was mostly low grade red wares and 19th century earthenware. As will become clear below, a third of the pottery excavated was in

fact medieval in date and another 5% Roman and prehistoric. Post medieval amounted to only 4% of the total pottery excavated. Even at this stage we can see that the stories of the prosperity of Ospringe during the 'coaching inns' stage have been much exaggerated.

b) Findings by chronological period

i) Prehistoric

Evidence of activity from nearly all prehistoric periods has been found during the three years of this project in the middle Westbrook valley, on both sides of the stream. The earliest was a Wymer Type 5 hand axe found in a small keyhole (K83) at the top of the east side of the valley. This hand axe, probably around 200,000 years old, was found about 60 cm down in a context just above the natural and underneath a context rich in Bronze Age flints (seven finished tools, a core and many waste flakes and pot boilers). Mesolithic blades have been found in many excavations and in the field walking of Manor Pound field.

A particularly exciting assemblage was found in a pit in the garden of the former Anchor Hotel (K59) at a depth of only around 90cm on the west side of the valley: this consisted of eight sherds of grooved ware, probably from a single pot: two beautiful late Neolithic scrapers and a number of waste flakes and pot boilers: abundant butchered animal bone including that of red deer and two well preserved aurochs' teeth.

Another keyhole, K61, revealed a Bronze Age flint manufacturing site with cores, large quantities of waste flakes, some finished tools such as a piercer and a scraper, and huge quantities of pot boilers. This was also on the west side of the valley and was re-opened for further excavation with 3-D coordinates being recorded for all flint finds (over 2,000) Bronze Age flints up on the east side have already been mentioned (K83). Some small sherds of possible Bronze Age pottery have been found.

Finally, a small but good assemblage of late Iron Age/ early Romano-British pottery was found along Water Lane (K52) This included classic 'Belgic' wares.

ii) Roman

Most of the excavations along the line of Watling Street yielded a few small sherds of Roman or Romano British pottery but only as residuals. The middle valley and the field walking of Manor Pound did not yield any Roman material at all. A small contribution was, however, made to local Roman archaeology by two glimpses of what might have been the original Roman Watling Street (K44, K63T). In both cases the road lay around 20m south of the present day A2 a distance similar to that firmly established for the route of the original Watling Street up on Syndale. The possible road surface consisted of large carefully arranged shaped flints forming a flat surface and in the case of K63T, was paralleled by a ditch.

iii) Anglo Saxon

A few sherds of possible Saxon period pottery were found in a scatter of sites (K44, K50, K63T, and K84A). Two fine pieces of Saxon glassware exhibited in the Maison Dieu Museum are said to have been found in Ospringe, also a sceatta (porcupine type) was said have been found in the Allotments area but both of these find spots are unreliable. Queen Court is, of course, a pre-Conquest foundation but unfortunately we were unable to gain permission to investigate the Queen Court site.

iv) Medieval

The most important building along Watling Street in the medieval period was the Hospital of St Mary, Ospringe, built around AD1234 to accommodate pilgrims on their way to worship at the shrine of Thomas of Canterbury. The geo resistivity surveys of Barkaways field and the garden of the Ship Inn and the excavations of keyholes 43 and 62 were all attempts to resolve arguments about foundation date (was there an earlier Templar institution here?) and orientation (to stream or road?)

Both of the geo resistivity surveys yielded significant findings, suggesting walls lines and rooms. Excavation K62 focused on one of these walls and also revealed a cobbled surface. The orientation respected the road, not (as with the 1977 buildings) the stream. The Barkaways field pattern seemed to have a similar roadwards orientation. As far as earliest date was concerned neither of the excavations were helpful, mainly because we did not want to dig through walls to the levels below.

Elsewhere in the village, however, small but significant assemblages of early medieval shelly ware (predating the traditional foundation date of the Maison Dieu) were found. The most substantial were a) in K63/63T opposite and south of the original gateway of the Hospital, and b) opposite the Church on the site of now-demolished Brook Cottages. In both of these sites, the shelly ware gave way to medieval pottery, nearly all of which was locally made (Tyler Hill ware). In neither of these cases had there been any suspicion of medieval occupation, so these are genuine discoveries. Shelly ware was also found in no less than thirteen other keyholes, some in Water Lane e.g. K54 where the abrasion and sherd size suggested midden scatter and others e.g. K44 in the Street where the fresh break and large sherds suggested primary domestic dumping.

Medieval pottery and mortared flints used in buildings were found in K46 and we were also told of a circular built stone feature with associated medieval pottery in the cellar of a nearby building, both of these suggesting medieval stone buildings to the west of the Hospital.

One last (to us) rather surprising fact was the lack of any medieval pottery from the Manor Pound Field walking. We have come to expect midden scatter type sherds in those fields around Faversham which have not been brickearth scraped. The earliest pottery from this large field was post medieval. The metal detectorists did, however, find a very attractive late medieval dagger handle in the section nearest the road.

v) Post medieval

Many of the standing listed buildings in Ospringe date from the period 1600-1800 - only the two surviving medieval buildings on the north corners of Water Lane and Queen Court itself are earlier and these have major post medieval sections. Nearly all Ospringe houses are quite humble: even the shabby but impressive Georgian front to College House, opposite the junction with Ospringe Road from Faversham, is only a front on a couple of modest 17th century farm buildings. The wealthier buildings are southwards along Water Lane in the church area (Queen Court, Laurel Cottage, the Vicarage).

The post medieval finds are also modest in character. There is almost no sign of the Delft, Early English Delft, Bellarmine pottery and chafing dishes, early clay pipe bowls and Nuremburg tokens found down in Faversham gardens. The pub sites of the Ship K62 and the Anchor K59 yielded some post medieval pottery and the fact that K63/63T yielded a lot of late medieval and post medieval perhaps suggests that this too was originally a public house site. This is further reinforced by the unusually large quantity of clay pipe fragments in K63/T.

The later stage of the post medieval period and the early 19th century does seem to be represented in Ospringe by a lot of water management systems. A number of gardens had abandoned wash houses/lavatories at the far end and we often came across redundant pipes. The most dramatic system, however, was at K48, behind Officers Row. This smart terrace of houses was built around 1790 for the Barracks. Here, a splendid three metre deep domed cistern of brickwork was a pleasure to excavate! Apart from this, however, the systems were modest and in keeping with the rest of the village.

vi) Modern times

There was the usual large quantity of modest 19th century pottery, vessel glass etc. One of the most interesting collections came from K48, the water management cistern, where an excavation around the cistern to carry out repairs had been back filled with 'rough stuff', material associated with the adjacent brickworks. A lot of cheap transfer printed pottery, lemonade bottles with FAVERSHAM on them, Codd bottles, inkwells etc were found and make a nice display. Another engaging group of finds were children's toys from the field walking - this used to be a hop field and the toys were presumably dropped by small children playing in the aisles whilst their parents worked.

6. Conclusions

The main foci for the Understanding Ospringe project were the middle medieval period (AD900-1250) and the prehistoric (all periods before the Romans), about both of which almost nothing was known for Ospringe and the Westbrook valley. What have we learned about these times in Ospringe's past?

The key clues to the mid medieval come in the form of North Kent Shelly ware. This is a simple hand made type of pottery where the crushed shell is incorporated in the fabric, not just dusted over the surface as in the later (13th century) Tyler Hill versions. Shelly ware has gone out of production by around AD1225, i.e. before the generally accepted foundation date for the hospital of St Mary. Given this, the interest lies in the find locations for shelly ware. The most substantial pieces came from the newly identified building opposite the Hospital gateway (K63/T). The sherds found on Water Lane sites (K54, 60, 61) displayed the characteristics of midden scatter, suggesting agricultural usages in this area in mid medieval times. Another cluster of domestic sherds, however, came up on the Brook Cottages site opposite the Church. Although it has not been possible to date the now demolished Brook Cottages, there does seem to have been occupation on this site from probably the time of the Conquest, linked to the nearby ancient manor site of Queen Court.

The published account of the 1977 excavation of the Maison Dieu site does mention shelly ware and dates it to the 13th century. Unfortunately, it does not say whether it is the early type (therefore miss-dated by the 1977 archaeologists) or the later Tyler Hill version (correctly dated). If it is the early type then we do seem to have two separate villages at this time, one around Queen Court and the other down by Watling Street perhaps around an early Templar building, with farmland in between. There is no evidence whatsoever, for the theory floated by some that medieval buildings lined Water Lane, in spite of some carefully sited pits.

If the mid medieval findings have been interesting, the findings relating to the prehistoric period have been stunning. Every single excavation and field walking exercise yielded flint tools, waste flakes and huge quantities of pot boilers. People were bringing us scrapers and arrowheads from their allotments and gardens! Three important points need to be remembered about these finds. Firstly they come from very small excavations and, as prehistoric material is usually rather scarce, finding so much so easily suggests an area exceptionally rich in prehistoric material. Secondly, much of it seems to be in situ, even the Wymer Type 5 hand axe. Thirdly we were starting almost from scratch, with only a few stray finds except for a possible Bronze Age site just to the south of the Parish Church spotted during a gas pipeline excavation in 1994.

Such an overall assemblage obviously demands close attention and at present (Jan 2012) a major article is in preparation for *Archaeologia Cantiana* on the prehistory of the Westbrook valley. This will include the prehistoric pottery and possible features and draw in findings from all sources. Meanwhile further investigations are planned, especially for the tops of the valley sides and the areas around springs (see below).

7. Community involvement

The project was launched in June 2008 with a very well attended meeting in the Village Hall and concluded in November 2009 with another big get together, this time with displays and a presentation on what we had found. During this main period for the Project we were able to join in on a special church weekend remembering the past - some fascinating stories and photographs came from that very enjoyable event. During our main summer digging season, finds processing was in the front garden of a house in Water Lane and we had a constant stream of interested visitors.

Throughout the summer season of the Maison Dieu Museum in 2010 a display on the findings so far was available in the entrance lobby. I also gave the annual Maison Dieu lecture on what we had found out about the village.

8. Proposals for the future

At present there are some limited plans to return to the site of the finding of the Wymer Type 5 hand axe to survey the adjoining small field and garden. This is really more to do with the Bronze Age assemblage found in K83 - this is a ridge top site and we really do have to check for ploughed out barrows. At some stage, we would also like to do some more investigation around the dried up spring site in the south east corner of Echo Field. Perhaps most important of all would be some field walking in the upper part of the Westbrook valley near Painters Forstal. Recently I heard an eminent academic say quite confidently that in his view the North Downs had almost no prehistoric archaeology, except in the Medway gap. It would be nice to prove him wrong.

9. Site archives

Once any desired finds have been returned to the householders, the site archive (material, paper and digital) will be lodged with the Faversham Society and be available to any researcher who wants to use it.

10. Thanks

Our main thanks are, as always, to the local people who trust us with their gardens and show such interest in what we are doing. Special mention needs to go to the Rev Ali Duguid and the parishioners of St Peter and St Paul, who made us so welcome; to Jonny at the Ship Inn who fed and watered us many times over and also let us dig in his garden; the late Alan Gidlow who managed the Allotments and gave us lots of help. Finally, again as always, thanks to our great FSARG team who tackled Ospringe with their usual zest and professionalism.

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January 2012.

Appendix 1: Understanding Ospringe field activities 2008-9 and 2011

a) Small scale trenches excavated for project

Test Pit No.	Address	Grid Refs.	Area of TP in m2	Maximum OD in metres*	Maximum depth in metres	Season Dug
43	22, Ospringe Street	TR 00331 60898	1.5	10.8	0.9	2008
44	21, Ospringe Street	TR 00341 60840	1.5	10.9	1.35#	2008
45	38, Ospringe Street	TR 00264 60934	1.5	[12]	1	2008
46	42, Ospringe Street	TR 00249 60926	1.5	[12]	1.5#	2008
48	60, Officers Row, Ospringe Street	TR 00207 60925	2	[13]	0.9	2008
50	67, Lion Lodge, Ospringe Street	TR 00201 60871	2	12.2	1.1	2008
52	Orchard House, Water Lane	TR 00284 60766	2	[11]	1.15	2008
53	41, Water Lane	TR 00323 60709	1.5	[11.2]	1.2	2008
54	46, Water Lane	TR 00257 60735	2	[11.5]	0.8	2008
55	47, Water Lane	TR 00276 60692	1.5	10.9	0.9	2008
57	19, Water Lane	TR 00314 60796	1.5	10.8	0.8	2008
59	Former Anchor, Ospringe Street	TR 00304 60836	2	11.6	1.15	2008
60	Arbory, Water Lane	TR 00196 60646	1.5	13.3	1.2	2009
61	4, Dawsons Row, Water Lane	TR 00172 60614	4	[13]	1	2009
62	Ship Inn, Ospringe Street	TR 00403 60881	2	9.9	1.1	2009
63	9, Ospringe Street	TR 00431 60826	4	11.6	1.2	2009
64	Manor Pound Field verge, Water Lane	TR 00072 60464	1.5	[13.5]	1.2	2009
65	Echo Field, Bier House, Water Lane	TR 00109 60300	4	11	1.3#	2009
81	Pettits Row, Ospringe Road	TR 00681 61048	4	16.5	1	2011
83	1 Queen Court Cottages, Vicarage Road	TR 00288 60429	1.5	[24.5]	0.6	2011
84a	Laurel Cottage, Mutton Lane	TR 00321 60575	1.5	[17]	1.3#	2011
84b	Laurel Cottage, Mutton Lane	TR 00301 60575	1.5 Varies from 0.6m2 to 1.5m2	[16]	0.9	2011
85a-h	Brook Cottages Field, Vicarage Road (transect of 8 pits)	TR 00194 60238 (centroid)		16.5 to 26.5	0.2 shallowest 1.4# deepest	2011

b) Geo resistivity surveys for *Understanding Ospringe*

Area surveyed

Area surveyed	Address	Grid refs. (centroid)	Maximum OD in metres*	Minimum OD in metres*	Season
Ospringe School Playing Field	Water Lane (west of)	TR 00233 60772	10.4	12.3	2008
Northern grassy strip of Allotments	Access from Water Lane	TR 00137 60839	10.5	13	2008
Garden of Lion Lodge,	67 Ospringe Street	TR 00180 60859	[12]	[13]	2008
Field and gardens of Barkaways plot	22-24 Ospringe Street	TR 00342 60892	9.9	11	2008
Back Garden of 47 Water Lane	47 Water Lane	TR 00309 60706	10.9	9	2008
Area around Bier House, Echo Field	Water Lane, opposite Church	TR 00114 60301	11	11.4	2009
Former Barracks site plot	Empty plot north of Ospringe Street	TR 00264 60942	[11.9]	[12.5]	2008
Garden of Ship Inn	Ospringe Street	TR 00404 60884	9	10.1	2009
Site of Brook Cottages, east side of valley.	Between Echo Field and Vicarage Road	TR 00162 60253	16.5	17.5	2009
Garden of Laurel Cottage	Mutton Lane	TR 00314 60553	[19]	[16]	2011
Garden of 1, Queen Court Cottages	Vicarage Road	TR 00283 60419	[24.5]	[25]	2011

c) Other systematic non-intrusive field methods used in *Understanding Ospringe*

i) Flowerbed surveys (2011)

ii) Systematic metal detecting surveys (Manor Pound Field: 2008, Echo Field Transect and 'crater': 2009)

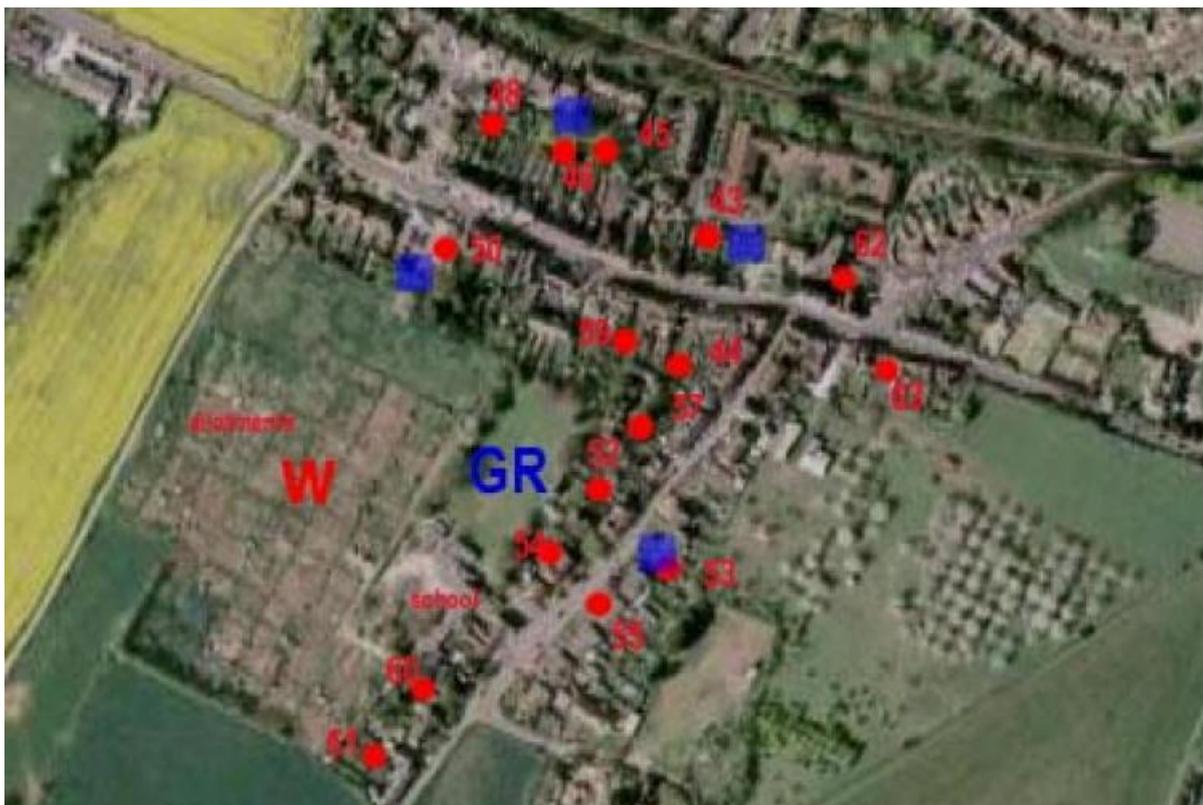
iii) Field walking (whole of Manor Pound Field. 2008-9)

* [] indicates OD estimated from map data.

maximum depths greater than 1.2m safety limit refer only to small sondages in the trench floor.

Appendix 2: Understanding Ospringe Field activity locations 2008-9 and 2011

a) Ospringe Village (2008-9)



b) Middle valley of the Westbrook (2009 and 2011)



Key:

GR: Geo resistivity surveys. Blue squares also show this

MD: Metal detecting survey

FW: Field walking

Red spot: small scale excavation with number