

---

## THREE HUNDRED MILES IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF VESPASIAN ... AND THE ANCIENT MONUMENTS LABORATORY

Paul Cheetham, Dave Stewart and Harry Manley

*Department of Archaeology, Anthropology & Forensic Science  
Faculty of Science and Technology, Bournemouth University  
Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, UK - BH12 5BB*

*pcheetham@bournemouth.ac.uk*

---

According to Suetonius in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Vespasian, as the general of the *Legio II Augusta*, thrust his legion westward through the county of Dorset as part of the conquest of the lowland areas of Britain in the decade after the Claudian invasion of AD 43. He is credited by Suetonius for subduing two tribes and twenty towns, as well as capturing the Isle of Wight. Vespasian's military success in the Dorset countryside set him on trajectory that would see him becoming Emperor in AD 69.

For many years it was postulated that there should be a Roman invasion base somewhere in Dorset from which this phase of Vespasian's campaign was conducted. Norman Field, a schoolteacher and amateur archaeologist, suggested the possible site of such a base at Lake Farm near Wimborne Minster, with his trial excavations in the 1960s indicating he might be correct (Field 1992). As a result of the finding, in the late 1970s and early 80s, one of the most significant large-scale geophysical surveys undertaken at the time by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory (AML) proved the presence of not just a small fort, but unexpectedly, a large 12Ha Roman vexillation fortress. The survey and interpretation were undertaken by none other than Andrew David, Alastair Bartlett and Tony Clark, and the survey figures prominently in Tony Clark's *Seeing Beneath the Soil* (Clark 1990: 139-141).

Further limited excavation was undertaken on the site, but the AML survey remained the main source of evidence for the size, layout and orientation of the fortress. That this survey provided a level of interpretive detail hard to exceed today, despite the constraints of the surveying technology available at the time, is a testament to the expertise of the AML team (Fig. 1). In 2016 a team from Bournemouth University took on the challenge of building on that seminal AML survey, by resurveying the areas and, more importantly, extending the survey into areas of the fortress and its immediate hinterland not covered by the original surveys.

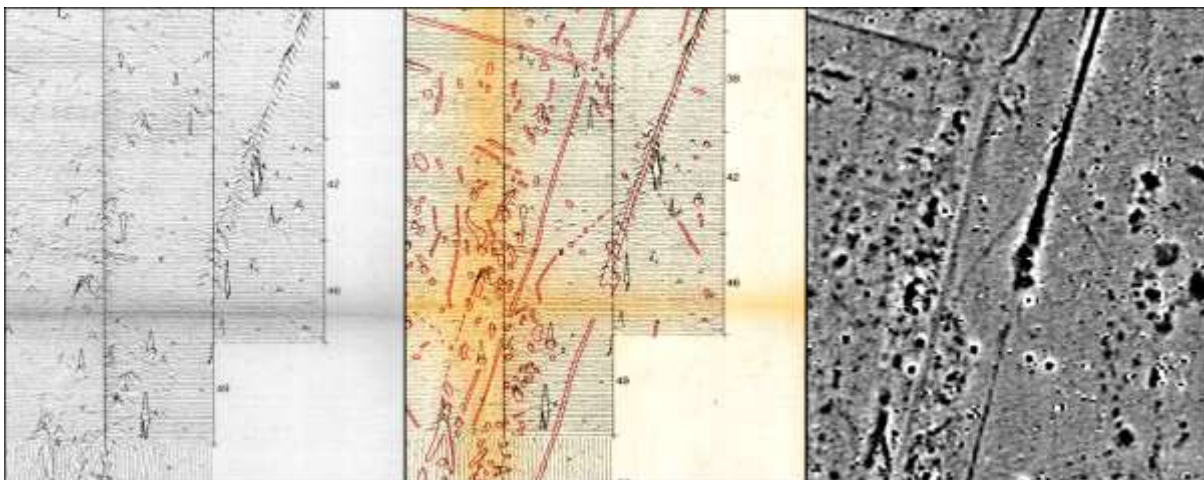


Figure 1. An example of the original 1980 AML x-y plotter survey data with its interpretation alongside the 2016 survey results presented as a greyscale image. Note that all the major anomalies have been picked up in the AML survey, but not the subtle annular anomaly (an Iron Age roundhouse?) in the centre of the area, and the industrial area outside the east of fortress beyond the AML's survey area.

The surveys have covered an area in excess of 40 hectares, and required walking more than 300 statute miles (326 Roman miles or 483km) in the process. While not adding major anomalies in the areas already surveyed by the AML team, the increased coverage does clarify overall the size and layout of the fortress and reveals extensive evidence of extramural activity (Fig. 2). It is this extramural activity that has led to a reinterpretation of the fortress in relation to the military road system. The results show that there appears not to have been a road approaching from the south and directly entering the fortress by its southern gateway. However, there is a clear road from the east lined with anomalies of an 'industrial' character. This suggests that the original supply line into the fortress was from the east, approaching up the valley of the Stour, utilising the river to bring supplies inland to the fortress and not overland, as has been previously assumed, from the Roman port that developed at Hamworthy, on the banks of Poole Harbour.

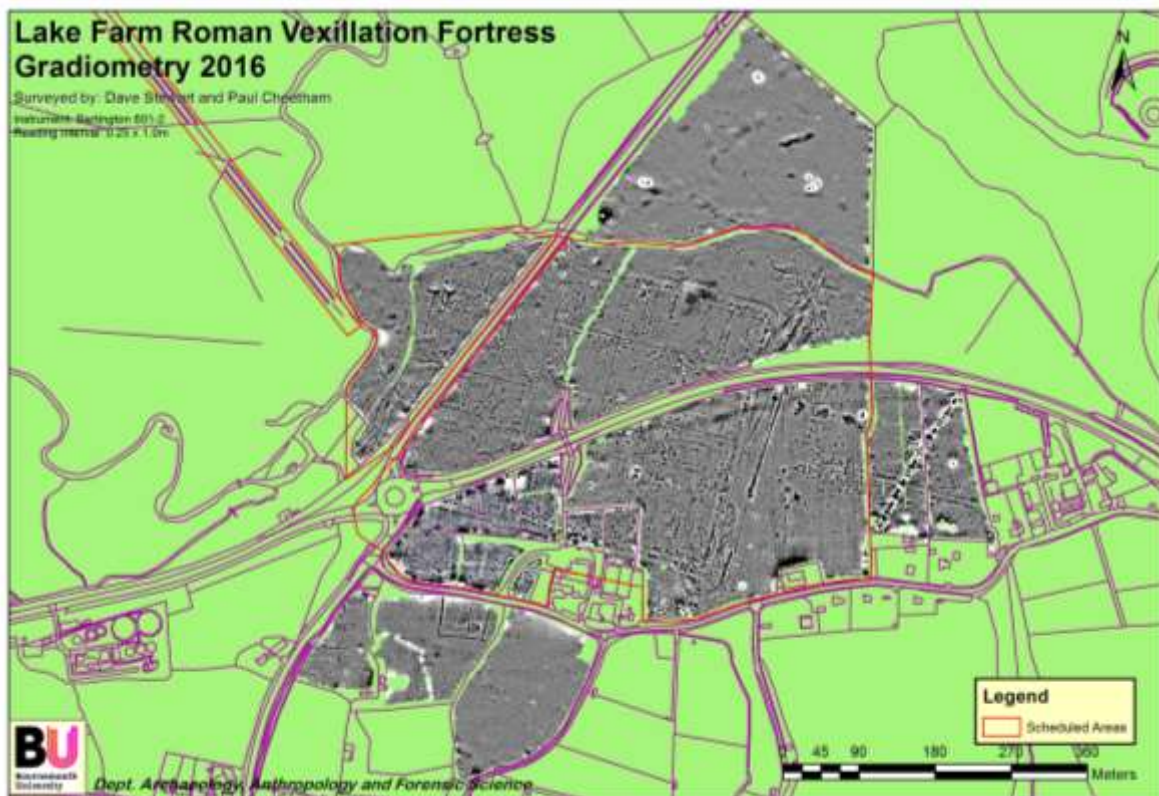


Figure 2. Fluxgate gradiometer survey of the fortress and surrounding areas. The 2016 surveys revealed the site of the military industrial enclosure situated directly outside the south gateway of the fortress blocking any direct road into the fortress from the south, and the 'industrial' areas lining the road extending east from the fortress. Bartington 601-2 at 0.25x1m reading intervals. Black positive. Plotting Range -5 to +5nT.

This research delivers both a celebration of, and an accolade to, the pioneers of archaeological geophysics in the UK in their discovery of this fortress, while showing how the more recent geophysical surveys have changed our understanding of the role of the fortress and its relationship to the Roman port at Hamworthy. Both surveys confirm that it is geophysical techniques that have provided the step changes in our understanding of this monument.

## Bibliography

- Clark A (1990) *Seeing Beneath the Soil*, Batsford: London  
 David A, Thomas B (1980) *Lake Farm 1980*, AML Report on Magnetometer Survey, Report No. 21/80  
 Field, N., (1992) *Dorset and the Second Legion*, Dorset Books: Tiverton