Norfolk County Council

Discovering the Archaeology of the Brecks

What Lies Beneath

Norfolk Historic Environment Service

LOTTERY FUNDED heritage lottery fund

Breaking New Ground HLF Landscape Partnership

Suffolk County Council

Norfolk County Council

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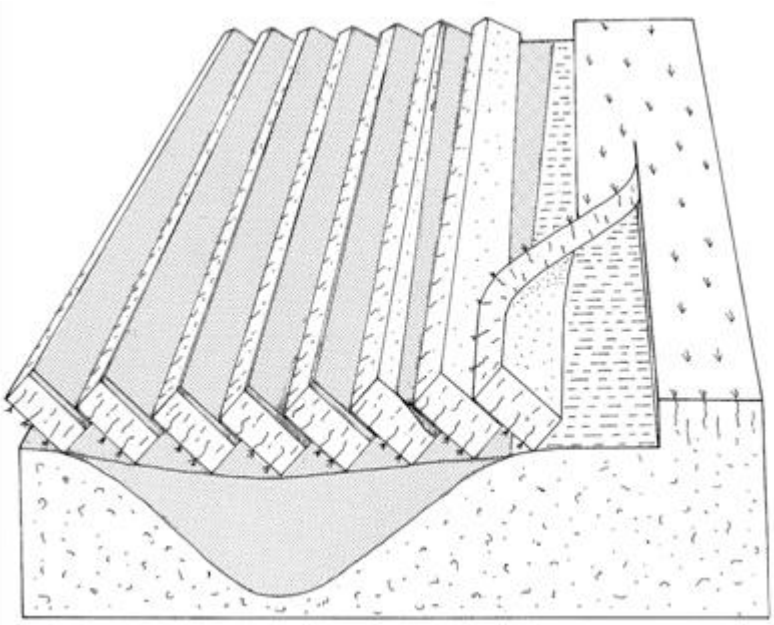
What is field walking?

Field walking is the practice of systematically walking across an area of land (usually a field), in order to collect archaeological artefacts.



When fields are ploughed the blades of the plough may cut into the top of any shallowly buried archaeological remains and turn material up onto the surface of the field. By systematically walking the ploughed surface and collecting any archaeological artefacts which may have been revealed it is possible to build up a picture of the nature and extent of the buried archaeology.

Field walking is an excellent way of quickly collecting data for large areas of the landscape, without having to resort to excavation. It is a particularly good method for finding areas of activity which are too ephemeral to be seen on aerial photographs, or for confirming the date of those that are. The systematic nature of the survey ensures that once the finds have been identified, their locations can be plotted on a map. This allows the recognition of concentrations and patterns in their distribution. Different concentrations of artefact can indicate different types of activity, for example, large amounts of brick or tile can signify a building, and a scatter of Anglo-Saxon brooches could point to a cemetery.

The primary advantage of field walking is that it requires very little equipment much of which can be found in the average shed, and so can be undertaken by groups or even individuals with minimal expenditure.

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Conducting a survey

Preparation

Get permission

The first, and most important, thing you will need to do before you start your field walking project is to get permission from the landowner. Do remember that any finds you recover will legally belong to them, unless they are declared treasure. If you wish to keep any of the finds yourself, or on behalf of a group, you will need to have an agreement in place which allows you to do so, preferably in writing. Please be aware that there are some types of site, for example Scheduled Monuments, where it is illegal to remove artefacts even if the landowner has given permission.

Research

Before going out into the field it is a good idea to do some research on the area you are going to investigate. The Norfolk Heritage Explorer (www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk) has a number of guides on how you might go about this.

A good place to start would be by checking the relevant Historic Environment Record to see what, if anything, has already been found. In some counties you can do this online (Norfolk: www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk Suffolk: www.heritage.suffolk.gov.uk), in others you will need to make contact with the staff who maintain the record. Details of how to contact the Historic Environment Record for your area can be found here: www.heritagegateway.org.uk.

It is also a good idea to check the current and historic imagery on Google Earth. This can reveal cropmarks and earthworks which may not be visible from the ground, but could help you target your survey.

It may also be worth searching your local record office for any documentary evidence relating to the field you are interested in.

Finds

It is extremely important that you have made arrangements with a suitable specialist to have your finds identified **before** you start your survey. There is no point in putting all the effort into walking your field if you end up not knowing what you have found. For small quantities of artefacts you might be able to arrange for your local Finds Liaison Officer to identify them, for larger amounts you will probably need to contact a commercial specialist.

Equipment

Field walking requires very little equipment, but there are a few things you will need before you start:

- Suitable clothing for the weather conditions, including strong footwear
- A map showing your field
- Clear plastic resealable bags. You can get these from archaeological survey suppliers, but sandwich bags will suffice. You will need at least one for each grid square you walk
- A permanent marker pen
- At least two (preferably three) tape measures large enough to mark out your grid squares.
- Something to mark out the edges of the grids. Ranging poles are ideal for this as they are brightly coloured. If using garden canes it is useful to tie something to them to improve their visibility
- A stopwatch or other timing device
- A (directional) compass

Other useful items:

- A GPS unit
- A whistle

Method

Ideal Conditions

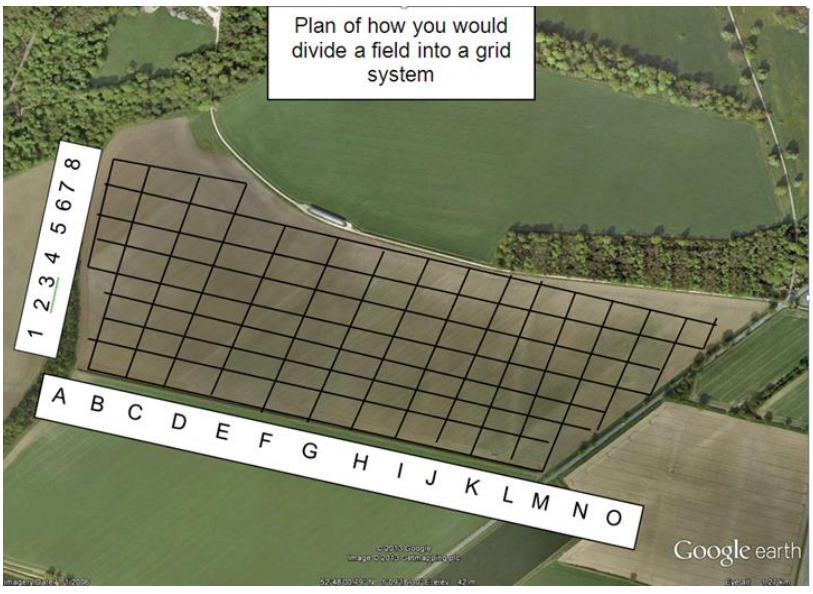
The best ground conditions for field walking occur shortly after ploughing has occurred, once the freshly turned earth has had chance to weather and artefacts may have been washed clean by the rain. However, the increasingly short interval between ploughing and sowing means that perfect conditions are hard to come by, this said field walking can be undertaken at other points in the crop cycle, but the results might not be as good. Be sure before starting that you have the permission of the landowner.

Setting up

The key to successful field walking is making an accurate record of the locations from which artefacts are collected. The most reliable way to do this is to divide the field into a grid. The corners of the grid should be marked on the map, preferably using measurements taken from fixed locations on the map. The corners can also be recorded using a handheld GPS unit if you have one.

To make sure finds are properly located it is useful to give each square of the grid a unique identifier. Usually each row of the grid is given a letter, and each column is given a number. Thus, the first square you walk will have an identifier of A1. It is very important to make sure that finds from each square are put into separate bags, and the bags are labelled with the identifier.

Laying out a grid system



The base line

You will need to start by creating a baseline. This line is an arbitrary point from which the rest of your grid will be measured. Ideally the baseline should be placed on the edge of the field that you are walking, however, sometimes the shape of the field will require you to lay it out elsewhere. Use your own judgment as to what is best. Ideally the line should be parallel to the field boundary, however, if this is not possible try to position it so that it can be easily related to reference points in the landscape.

To lay out your baseline choose a point to begin and place a marker in the ground. Run a tape measure from this point, and place a marker every 20 metres. Depending on the size of your field and the number of walkers you may wish to begin with five 20 metre intervals. You can always lengthen the line later, or miss out any squares that you do not have time to walk.

The Grid

Once you have finished the baseline it is now time to complete the grid.

1. Start at one end of the baseline. The first marker is the corner of your first grid square, your first 20 metre marker is the second corner. The section of baseline between them will be one side of the square.
2. To find the other two corners take two tape measures and fix one to each of the corners you already have. Measure 20 metres from the first point and 28m 28cm diagonally from the second.
3. Get the two measurements to meet in a triangle, keeping both tapes taut, straight and as low to the ground as possible.
4. Where they meet place another maker to denote a new corner of your grid.
5. In order to mark out the final corner just make the same measurements in reverse so the tape that you measured 20m on should now be strung out to a length of 28m 28cm and the one which you measured out at 28m 28cm should be measured to a distance of 20m, where these meet, place the final marker.

For each new grid square repeat the process, to form as many squares as you wish. You can form the new grid squares from any side of an already prepared square if you wish rather than the baseline.

The Survey

The essential methodology of field walking is simple. If you are walking in a group:

1. The field walkers should be spaced evenly along the width of one side of the grid square. Make sure the area is covered evenly.
2. Walk across the square in a straight line and pick up any finds that you can see lying on the surface.
3. To make sure the collection from each square is comparable, you should walk each one for the same period of time. Ten minutes is recommended for a square of this size.
4. When the ten minutes is over, collect all the artefacts together in a clearly marked bag. Use a different bag for each square.

Field walking can be done alone, but you will need a much greater amount of time for each square. If you are walking on your own, please let someone else know where you are going and what time you will be back.

Recording finds in the field

As mentioned above finds should be bagged at the end of each grid square in order to prevent them from being mixed with those from other squares. Before doing so, each bag should be marked with its location, so it can be identified later.

The details that you need to record are:

- The name of the group which you are working with.
- A record of the sort of survey you carried out. [abbreviate FW for field walking, MD for metal detecting , TP for test pitting]
- The date on which the finds were collected.
- The grid square which the finds were from.
- It is recommended that you use plastic finds bags and write on them in permanent marker.

At the end of your field walking session it is important to clean your finds as soon as possible to prevent them from growing mould. Most finds can be washed in water (no detergent) and brushed with a soft toothbrush. Metal finds should just be brushed gently with a dry toothbrush. Finds should then be laid out to dry on newspaper, do not leave them in direct sunlight or near a heat source. Once they are completely dry they can be placed in clean bags and taken to the finds specialist.

Your Results

Once you have received your finds back from the specialist you should have been provided with either a list or a spreadsheet showing what you have found. The finds should be broken down into artefact type e.g. pottery, flint, metalwork and by date e.g. Neolithic, Roman, medieval. Your specialist should also give you definitions of any key terms they use, if not contact your local Finds Liaison Officer for advice. This report will tell you which periods of history your field was used in.

You may be able to spot some patterns in your finds just from this report, but to really make sense of them you will need to plot them on a map. You can of course do this manually by drawing your grid onto some tracing paper placed over a map, and marking the location of your finds using colour coded dots. Using a bigger dot for larger numbers of finds will enable you to see where larger concentrations of artefacts are. Doing this for each date range will tell you when and where your site was used most, plotting different artefact types may indicate what it was used for.

If you are comfortable with using a computer, you may find it less time consuming to plot your finds digitally using a Geographical Information System. Professional archaeologists will usually use either ArcGIS or MapInfo to do this, but there is a free version of the software called QGIS, which can be downloaded from: www.qgis.org. The system is not entirely intuitive but the Jigsaw Cambridge Community Archaeology Project has written an excellent guide to using it. The guide can be found at: www.jigsawcambs.org/resources/downloads/2-content/168-recording-and-reporting under the heading 'An Introduction to QGIS - Level 1'. As well as potentially speeding up the map producing process, you will also be able to plot each type of artefact in a different 'layer' which can then be switched on or off in combination to show different things.

Reporting your work

Although finding out more about the archaeology of an area is exciting in itself, the real value of any field work is when it is shared with others. The Historic Environment Record (HER) exists to collect information about historical and archaeological sites, so that it can be used for research projects and to inform the planning process. As such it is important to make sure that you report your work to the local HER. In Norfolk we would like you to fill in a digital copy of the following form. You can request a copy of this form by emailing heritage@norfolk.gov.uk.