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Murray Andrews[1,*]

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*Correspondence: m.j.andrews@ucl.ac.uk
[1]UCL Institute of Archaeology, UK

Of hillforts and heritage crimes: investigations at Hanbury, Worcestershire, in 2025

Murray Andrews

Abstract

This article investigates the impact of heritage crime on an important multi-period site in the west of England. It shows how archaeological methodologies can reveal the degree and impact of threats to sites and monuments as well as providing new understandings of past activities.

Keywords: heritage crime; Iron Age; Roman; early medieval; public archaeology

Introduction

Rising high above the Severn Vale, Church Hill in Hanbury, Worcestershire, is a familiar sight for travellers passing along the M5 south of Birmingham, and forms a scenic remnant of the ancient woodland landscapes that once traversed the West Midlands from the Warwickshire Arden to the Forest of Dean (Figure 1). The hill is a natural topographic focus in a mainly low-lying farming district, and its commanding views over the ancient Droitwich salt ways towards the Malverns, Cotswolds and River Severn have made it a prominent and attractive site for human occupation over millennia. Though previously subject to very little archaeological investigation, topographic and documentary sources indicate a complex sequence of multi-period activity concentrated on the hilltop and upper slopes, which include phases of use as a 4.7 ha Iron Age hillfort (the source of the parish name: Old English *hean* + *burh*, 'the high fortification'), an Anglo-Saxon monastic centre and a medieval manor-church complex held by the Bishops of Worcester until the accession of Elizabeth I (AD 1558–1603) (Bassett 2009; Bassett and Dyer 1980; 1981; Dyer 1991). The Grade I-listed church of St Mary, which has crowned the hilltop since at least the eleventh century, remains in use today and forms a focal point for parishioners, church-crawlers, dog walkers and others drawn to the hill for worship, leisure and picturesque views across the Worcestershire countryside.

Like many prominent archaeological sites in England and Wales, Church Hill has become a target for heritage crime enacted by 'nighthawks': clandestine metal detector

Figure 1 North-west facing aerial view across the northern end of Church Hill, Hanbury (Source: Craig Carvey)

users operating outside legal frameworks, looting archaeological sites of saleable antiquities and causing physical and intellectual harm in the process (Renfrew 2000, 83–9). Though notoriously difficult to measure, estimates suggest that as many as 3,500 nighthawks may currently be active in England and Wales, and there are indications that the extent of the problem has worsened over the past decade (Daubney and Nicholas 2019; English Heritage 2020; Hardy 2017, 17). While the impact of nighthawking is seen most keenly through high-profile examples of looted 'treasure', like the prehistoric and Roman bronzes from Salisbury (Wiltshire) and Icklingham (Suffolk) and the early medieval hoard from Eye (Herefordshire), these cases form only a small subset of a wider problem more often represented by pockmarked holes dug through archaeological sites, many of which are not subject to statutory protection and are therefore more difficult to address through legal mechanisms (Hoverd et al. 2020; Stead 1998; Wilson and Harrison 2013). The experience at Church Hill falls into this second category. Evidence of nighthawking at the site first emerged in August 2023, when a small group of illicit detectorists were caught operating within an area of woodland on the north of the hilltop, close to the modern boundary of St Mary's churchyard. Follow-up investigations established that the group had undertaken extensive scrub clearance, which enabled the digging of three large looter trenches (Figure 2). Examination of the spoil heaps revealed a quantity of disturbed Roman and post-medieval pottery and human remains, the latter of which produced a calibrated radiocarbon result (94 per cent probability) covering the date ranges AD 670–779 (78.4 per cent), 787–829 (15.4 per cent) and 858–870 (1.6 per cent) (E. Hancox, personal communication, 2 October 2024). The scale of the looter trenches, together with the material recovered from the spoil heaps, suggests that the nighthawks were targeting archaeological deposits within the hillfort ramparts, at least some of which may relate to the documented Anglo-Saxon minster cemetery.

Figure 2 North-facing view of one of six looter trenches recorded at Church Hill, Hanbury. The looter trench measures 5 m long and 2.2 m wide, and was dug through one or more Anglo-Saxon burials (Source: Murray Andrews)

Nighthawked sites like Church Hill are just one expression of the global problem of archaeological looting, a phenomenon that has been much debated since the adoption of UNESCO's 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Particular attention has been given to issues surrounding the outputs of looting – that is, unprovenienced or falsely provenienced antiquities – and their legal, ethical and intellectual implications for scholars, museums, dealers and collectors (Gill 2012; Gill and Chippindale 1993; Renfrew 2000), as well as to the wider socio-economic, cultural and political factors that encourage or discourage looting (Bowman Proulx 2013; Brodie et al. 2022), but there remain fundamental questions about the extent to which archaeologists can meaningfully engage with looted sites. Does looting render sites scientifically worthless (Lundeen 1997), or is it possible to salvage archaeological data in the looters' wake? These issues have been prominent in Mediterranean and Latin American archaeology, where clandestine digs by *huaqueros* and *tombaroli* (grave robbers) pose recurring challenges for cemetery excavations (Cadwallader et al. 2018; Di Noto and Guglielmino 2002; Tremain 2017), but have been less frequently addressed in Britain despite a long tradition of rescue and salvage excavation. Investigation of the nighthawked site at Church Hill therefore offers a valuable opportunity to explore this problem in a British context and to consider the kinds of information – if any – that can be recovered through the scientific excavation of sites affected by an increasingly common form of heritage crime.

Archaeological investigations

In May 2025 a team of 22 staff and students from the UCL Institute of Archaeology, aided by 15 local volunteers, undertook a programme of archaeological fieldwork at Church Hill,

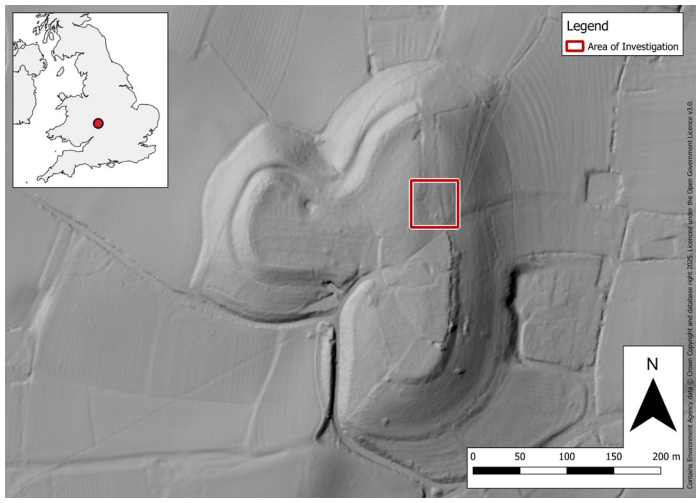

Figure 3 Site location map, showing the area of investigations in 2025 (Source: Murray Andrews)

which aimed to assess the nature, extent and degree of impact of illicit metal-detecting at the site (Figure 3). The project was designed in collaboration with local stakeholders, and was delivered as part of an elective field school for second-year undergraduates, who are required to undertake at least 50 days of fieldwork training as a condition of their degree. The combination of student and public involvement was a central part of the project design and reflects a conscious engagement with the UCL Institute of Archaeology's policy regarding the illicit trade in antiquities, which emphasises the responsibility of staff to educate others of the dangers of looting and the importance of the concept of archaeological context (UCL Institute of Archaeology 2022).

The investigations involved a combined programme of field survey and excavation, which sought to locate and record evidence for looter disturbance and assess the survival of buried archaeological features and deposits within the nighthawked area. These latter objectives were to be addressed through the manual excavation of three trenches (total area 57 m^2) sited in locations wholly (Trench 1), partially (Trench 2) and not previously impacted (Trench 3) by illicit metal detecting. Given the nature of the research questions, a comprehensive programme of dry sieving was adopted, with 100 per cent of excavated spoil manually processed using 10 mm mesh hand sieves. The results are therefore likely to offer a highly accurate representation of buried archaeological remains, and can be used as a benchmark for evaluating physical and informational loss in the area of the site impacted by nighthawking.

Results

Field survey

Field survey proved an important tool for gauging the location, extent and degree of impact of illicit metal detecting at Church Hill. In total, six looter trenches and four looter pits were

recorded within the nighthawked area – that is, more than double the number observed during previous investigations in 2023 (Figure 4). While it is conceivable that the full total was present at this date but was obscured by autumn leaf cover on the woodland floor, we cannot discount the possibility that the additional three trenches and four pits instead relate to a subsequent and previously unknown phase of illicit detecting at the site in 2024.

The six looter trenches cover a total area of 37.9 m^2, corresponding to 4.2 per cent of the ground surface previously cleared of scrub by illicit detectorists. The excavated depths varied from trench to trench, with the shallowest (Looter Trench III) dug to 0.27 m and the deepest (Looter Trench II) to 0.58 m below ground level. These measurements suggest that at least some of the buried archaeological remains at the site are relatively shallow and are therefore especially vulnerable to nighthawk activity. Based on the dimensions and profiles of the looter trenches, we can estimate that at least 15.8 m^3 of soil at the site has already been disturbed by illicit detecting – a volume equivalent to more than a dozen 1 m x 1 m archaeological test pits, and a stark indication of the potential scale of harm caused to buried features and deposits.

The field survey also identified incidences of disturbance to the site that had not been caused by illicit detecting. Earlier observations that the hillfort defences were 'in an eroded state' in the east (Dyer 1991, 14) were verified within the nighthawked area,

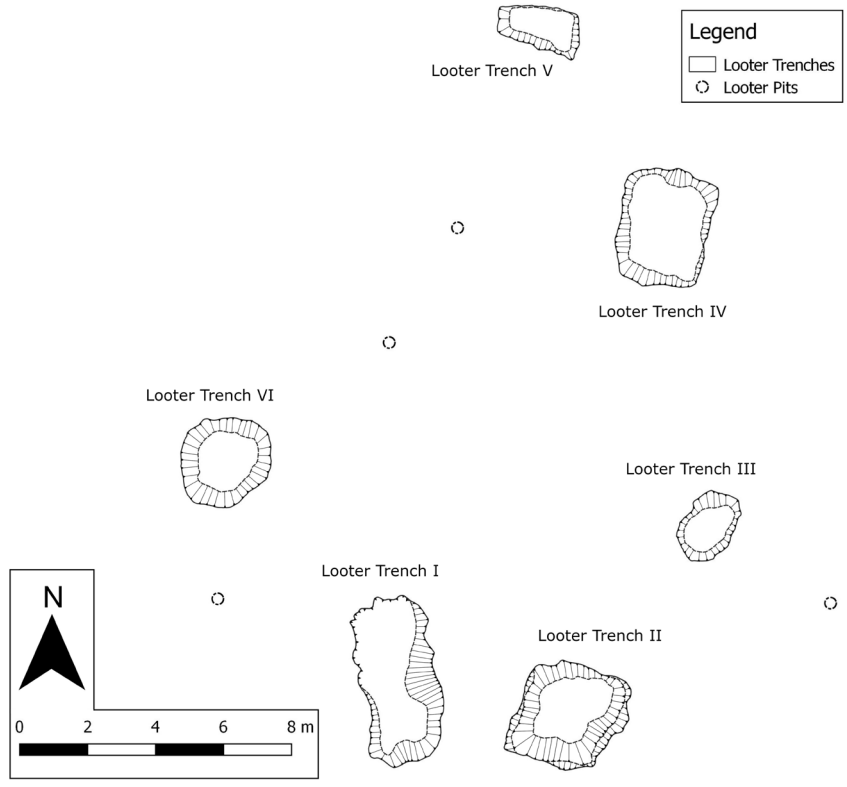

Figure 4 Plan of looter trenches and pits recorded at the site during field survey. Three of the looter trenches (I, II, VI) were recorded in 2023, but the remainder were not previously known (Source: Murray Andrews)

where the rampart was found to be almost totally levelled and planted with sycamore trees. Evidence from tithe and estate maps (Kew, The National Archives, IR 30/39/64; Worcester, Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service, BA 7335/154) shows that this took place sometime between 1733 and 1838, and formed the first of several phases of eighteenth- to early-twentieth-century landscaping and managed planting at Church Hill, which gradually expanded tree cover from an area of ancient woodland on the slopes to nearly the entire northern half of the hilltop. This process of post-medieval landscape change was also reflected in the discovery of an abandoned burrow to the north-west of the nighthawked area, which was associated with a small quantity of disarticulated human remains. Most of these were stained or bore traces of moss growth and had evidently been exposed on the woodland floor for some time. While these discoveries highlight the impact of bioturbation at the site, they nonetheless indicate the presence of additional buried features and deposits in areas not previously disturbed by illicit detecting, which presumably extends beyond the area investigated in 2025.

Excavation

The three excavation trenches produced significant new evidence for the extent, nature and degree of survival of buried archaeological remains within the nighthawked area at Church Hill (Figure 5).

Trench 1 was positioned directly above Looter Trench I, which appeared to be the source of the pottery and disarticulated human remains collected from the detectorists' spoil in 2023. Due to practical constraints, the trench was only partially excavated, with two 2 m² areas investigated in the north (Trench 1A) and south-west (Trench 1B). In Trench 1A the northern edge of Looter Trench I was found to cut a west–north-west- to

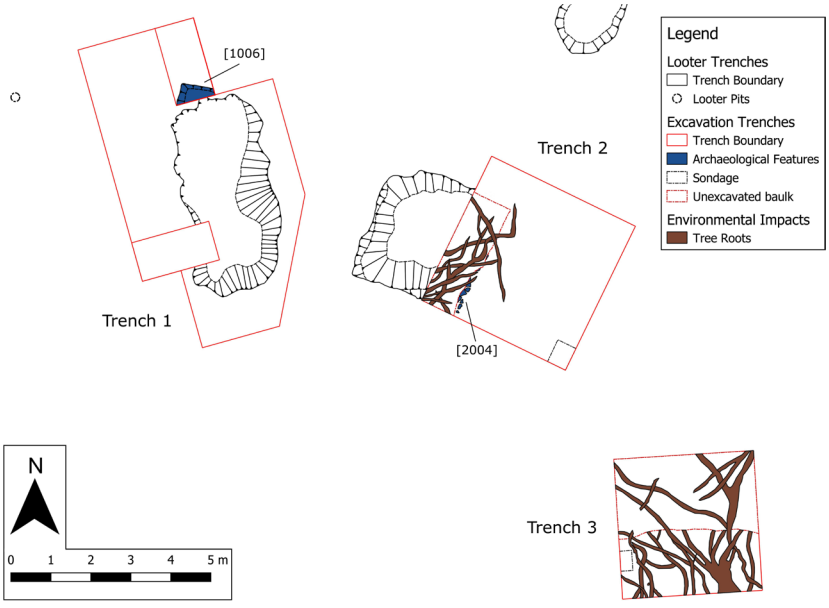

Figure 5 Plan of trenches and features excavated at the site (Source: Murray Andrews)

east–south-east-oriented inhumation grave [1006], which contained the partial upper remains of an adult male. While no datable artefacts were recovered from its fill, earlier discoveries in this area suggest that the grave is likely to be of early medieval date, and it is notable that other excavated Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Worcestershire have produced inhumations with similar orientations (for example, St Mary's, Kempsey: Vaughan and Webster 2017, 26). By contrast, Trench 1B did not contain any identifiable archaeological features or finds, but was covered with a 0.82 m thick deposit of upcast spoil created during the digging of the looter trench.

Trench 2 was positioned across the eastern half of Looter Trench II and was impacted in its south-west corner by modern tree roots, which were left undisturbed in an unexcavated baulk. The trench appeared to capture part of a west to east sloping quarry scoop within the interior of the hillfort defences, similar to those observed elsewhere in the Welsh Marches at Croft Ambrey, Midsummer Hill, and Sutton Walls (Kenyon 1953, 13; Stanford 1974, 38–40; 1981, 65–7). This feature was infilled by a 1.3 m-thick deposit, which contained an extremely rich assemblage of Iron Age and Roman finds together with a small quantity of eighteenth-century bottle glass and clay tobacco pipe. Its scale and composition are suggestive of large-scale landscaping and earth movement, and almost certainly derives from the eighteenth or early-nineteenth-century levelling of the hillfort rampart, which formerly lay immediately east of the trench. This could also account for the presence of an associated spread of light greenish-grey stone slabs (2004) in the south-west of the trench, which continued into the unexcavated baulk and may have originally formed part of an internal revetment for the rampart.

Unlike Trenches 1 and 2, Trench 3 was sited in an area not previously impacted by illicit detecting. While excavations were constrained by modern tree roots, which were left undisturbed in unexcavated baulks, a 0.38 m-thick mid- to late-nineteenth-century dump deposit was recorded throughout the trench, which appeared to overlie the same levelling deposit as observed in Trench 2. The dump contained a large assemblage of archaeological finds, including more than 20 kg of ceramic building material (CBM). This consisted mostly of post-medieval to modern brick and roof tiles, and also included an incomplete fragment from a glazed medieval floor tile. The group probably represents demolition rubble from the adjacent St Mary's Church, which may have been dumped during G. E. Street's restoration of the east end in 1860–1 (Brooks and Pevsner 2007, 344). While not yet proven archaeologically, the dump deposit almost certainly forms the backfill of a small Victorian aggregate quarry, which is known to have been dug in this location to provide sand for Street's building campaign (Cotton 1886).

Finds and environmental evidence

Relative to the scale of excavation, the investigations at Church Hill produced a large assemblage of artefactual and environmental remains, which included more than 2,200 specimens weighing a total of 51.8 kg. These results at least partly reflect the application of systematic dry sieving, which produced nearly one-third of the total assemblage and had an appreciable impact on its overall composition (Table 1), especially in the case of low-visibility objects made of copper alloy, flint and silver (Levitan 1982, 23–7; Payne 1972, 55–61).

Table 1 Distribution by material type of artefactual and environmental remains recovered by hand in trench and recovered by dry-sieving excavated spoil

Material	Recovered in trench (g)	Missed in trench, recovered by sieving (g)	Total (g)	Percentage efficiency of recovery in trench
Bone	7590	2870	10460	73
CBM	17262	5882	23144	75
Charcoal	37	79	116	32
Coal	16	32	48	33
Copper alloy	45	53	98	46
CTP	10	5	15	67
Flint	0	34	34	0
Glass	1448	128	1576	92
Iron	1127	582	1709	66
Plastic	21	0	21	100
Pottery	7165	5186	12351	58
Silver	0	1	1	0
Slag	74	924	998	7
Slate	797	429	1226	65
Total	35592	16205	51797	69

While analysis of this assemblage is ongoing, preliminary assessment has yielded important new insights into the chronology and nature of the buried archaeological remains present at the site, and, by extension, the potential character of remains already looted from the site by illicit detectorists. Hints of pre-hillfort activity were provided by residual Neolithic or Early Bronze Age flints in Trenches 2 and 3, which echo similar finds from the Worcestershire hillforts of Conderton Camp and Midsummer Hill (Bellamy 2005, 117; Stanford 1981, 118–21) and add to a growing picture of the nature of such sites as multi-period 'persistent places'. Iron Age pottery from the made ground deposit in Trench 2 almost certainly originates from the demolished eastern rampart, as may a silver unit of Anted (*c.*AD 20–45), a ruler of the Dobunni tribe of the Severn-Cotswolds region (Figure 6). This is one of two late Iron Age coins known to have been found within the hillfort ramparts since the nineteenth century (Cotton 1886). Its discovery complicates regional narratives of Iron Age settlement, which emphasise discontinuity and hillfort abandonment during the Middle to Late Iron Age transition (Hurst 2017, 115; Moore 2006, 165). Perhaps the most significant finds, however, date to the Roman period, which is represented by a large assemblage of pottery, CBM, coins and other small finds found mostly within the Trench 2 levelling deposit. Initial examination of the pottery has identified a high proportion of early forms and fabrics, including significant quantities of Severn Valley Ware with attributes typical of the mid-first to early second centuries, while the coins are of contemporary date and omit any of the common types of the third and fourth centuries. The volume, condition and tight chronology of this material, reinforced by finds of a Polden Hill brooch (*c.*AD 75–175) and blue glass melon bead (*c.*AD 43–200), suggests that the hillfort saw significant reoccupation during the Flavian and early Antonine periods – an unusually late

instance of hillfort reoccupation in post-Conquest Britain south of Hadrian's Wall (Harding 2012, 158–62). The site's coin profile (Figure 7) opens a window on the likely character of this activity: by far the closest parallels among a corpus of 187 comparative sites are the auxiliary forts at Castleford and Brecon Gaer, both establishments of the late first and early second centuries (Mattingly and Pirie 1998; Reece 1991; Wheeler 1926). The possibility of a military reoccupation of the hillfort is tantalising, and could directly relate to developments at the neighbouring salt production centre of Droitwich (5 km west of the site), where mid-second-century changes in the organisation and scale of production at the brine springs may reflect to a shift from direct to indirect military administration, or possibly even to franchised civilian control (Freezer 1977, 3–8; Hurst 2006, 243–5).

While the finds offer glimpses into the kinds of material that may have been removed from the site through illicit detecting, they also include some distinctive forms of material culture that were almost certainly left by the looters themselves. These include several plastic soft drinks bottled scattered across the surface of the nighthawked area, as well as the plastic wrapper for a chocolate-coated flapjack found among looted spoil near

Figure 6 Selected finds from the 2025 investigations at Church Hill, Hanbury. Left to right: prehistoric flint blade, silver unit of Anted (*c.*AD 20–50), copper alloy *as* of Domitian (AD 86), Roman melon bead (Source: Murray Andrews)

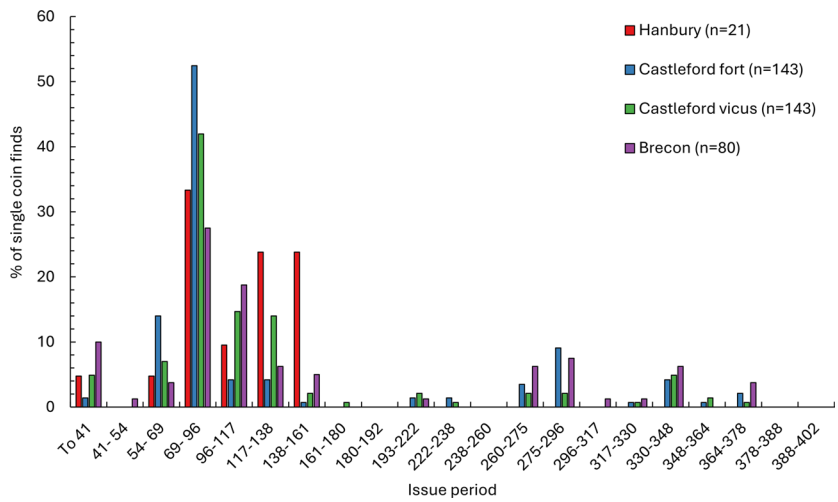

Figure 7 Coin loss profile for Roman coins from Church Hill, Hanbury, compared to assemblages from Brecon and Castleford (Source: Murray Andrews)

Trench 2. This object has a best-before date of 25 November 2023 – a *terminus ante quem* for illicit detecting in this area of the site.

Conclusion

The results of the investigations in 2025 demonstrate both the potential of archaeological fieldwork as a means of generating useful information about an increasingly prolific form of heritage crime and the potential of looted and otherwise damaged archaeological sites to preserve meaningful information relevant to an understanding of the human past.

It is now clear that the extent and degree of impact of illicit detecting at Church Hill is far greater than previously thought, a conclusion underscored by new estimates for the volume of earth movement undertaken by the looters: at least 15.8 m^3 of soil, equivalent in scale to a small archaeological excavation. Work of this magnitude is intrinsically suggestive of significant archaeological discoveries, the character of which probably varied across the site. Looter Trench I appears to have targeted metal objects from an early medieval cemetery, which might conceivably have included coins, buckles and strap ends (as at Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire: Dornier 1977), while Looter Trench II is more likely to have targeted Iron Age or Roman metalwork and coins. Though not yet fully investigated, it seems probable that the remaining trenches and pits were intended to produce metal objects of similar dates. These findings open potential lines of enquiry for the identification of looted material from the site offered on the antiquities market. However, even if such objects were recovered, it would not undo the harm to the site caused by their recovery, which was undertaken in a reckless and uncontrolled fashion and significantly disturbed buried archaeological remains, including human graves. This fundamental point lay at the heart of the project's public outreach programme, which created opportunities for local groups and schoolchildren to engage directly with the site, its archaeology and the wider issue of heritage crime (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Site tour for Hanbury Parochial Church Council on 7 May 2025. Three public events saw more than 120 visitors from local schools and community groups learn more about the investigations (Source: Ethan Doyle White)

While illicit detecting has robbed us of key information about Church Hill's past, it has not destroyed it altogether. Excavation has demonstrated the survival of buried archaeological features and deposits in the vicinity of the looter trenches, and examination of both the excavated and looted spoil has revealed artefacts and environmental material that generate new knowledge and new questions about human activity at Church Hill from prehistory to the present day. Some of these are quite unexpected, and are of particular archaeological interest: new discoveries relating to a possible Roman military reoccupation of the hillfort in the late first to mid-second centuries, for example, are potentially of national significance, and highlight the continuing ability of the site to generate new insights that engage with wider research agendas. Such questions will be at the forefront of future fieldwork seasons at the site, which aim to further mitigate the harms of illicit detecting through scientific monitoring and investigation.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this article.

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