

Walkern

Walkern may not be part of North Hertfordshire (although Box Wood in the north-western corner of the modern parish was a manor at the time of Domesday Book, part of which now lies in the North Hertfordshire parish of Weston), but I have been helping out its Local History Society for three years. My role has been to advise their project of test-pitting across the village, which is currently on hold because of the CoViD-19 outbreak. Last year, I gave the Society a talk summarising what had been discovered during three seasons of test-pitting across the village; this is an expanded version of that talk.



Figure 1: Walkern on Bryant's map of Hertfordshire, published in 1822

The historical background

Walkern is a parish in Broadwater Hundred (one of the ancient divisions of Hertfordshire), first recorded as *Walchra* in Domesday Book. The name is Old English *wealc-ærn*, 'a fulling mill'; these were sometimes known as 'walk mills' (*wealc-ærn* means 'walk-house') and were water-mills where cloth was thickened by being pounded. Intriguingly, Domesday Book does not mention a mill, but the mills it records elsewhere were usually flour-mills, as these were a source of revenue for the lord of the manor. The current water-mill at the south end of the village, where the main road crosses the River Beane, was built in 1828 but one is known to have existed early in the twelfth century when its revenue was granted to the parish church.

Writing in 1700, Sir Henry Chauncy wrongly, but picturesquely, gave the etymology as being 'from the moist and ousing Springs which reinforce the River of Bean or Benefician, with a Stream that driveth a Mill out

at the South End of the Town; for Wall in the Saxon Language signifies a most or watry Place; and 'tis recorded in the time of William the Conqueror under the Title of Terra Tainorum Regis.'

The church had pre-Norman origins, and it may have been the minster serving the territory of the *Beningas*, a people who gave their name to Benington. It became a barony under Henry I, with a castle. There was a medieval deer park of over 300 acres. The bad weather and cattle murrain of 1341 led to hardship, with large areas of the open field left unploughed.

Archaeological data

Archaeological data is an important but often misunderstood element in local history. To many people, it is a collection of pretty finds; to others, it is an impenetrable mass of data about prehistoric times. Needless to say, both views are completely wrong. Archaeologists study the physical remains of the past, be they artefacts (including the pretty finds, if any exist), buildings, excavated pits and so on. They may be hundreds of thousands of years old or they may be only thirty years old: age is not important. The basic aim is to put all this data into a chronological sequence and to investigate what it can tell us about the past.



Figure 2: Depiction of Christ dated about 950-1050, that stood above the original south door of St Mary's Church

When looking at the archaeology of a single place, the best place to start is to see what is contained in the Historic Environment Record (or HER: they used to be known as Sites and Monuments Records or SMRs). This is a database maintained by the County Council's Historic Environment Unit, which is used to help planners make decisions about the suitability of development applications.

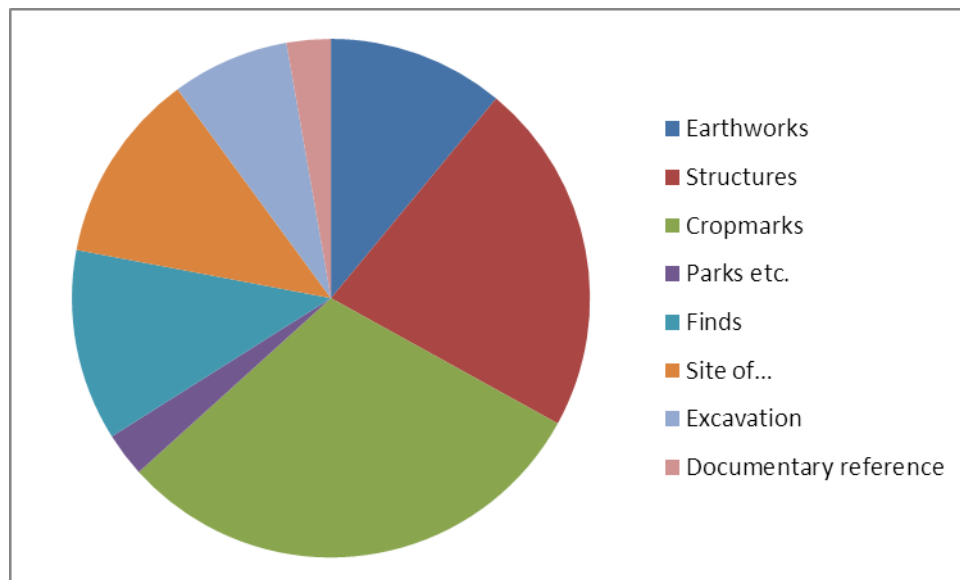


Figure 3: summary of the Historic Environment Record for Walkern in 2017

The Hertfordshire HER for Walkern contained 109 entries when the test-pit project was launched in 2017. Over half of the information about the village came from cropmarks (33) and surviving buildings (24). Only 13 finds had been recorded, while only eight archaeological features had been excavated or recognised in foundation trenches.

Adding in data from the Portable Antiquities Scheme database (finds.org.uk) gives 78 extra data points. Most of these (41) are post-medieval in date (after about 1540); there is one prehistoric object, eight

Roman, one 'central medieval' (about 800-1100), seven high medieval (1100-1350), eight late medieval (1350-1540) and 12 late medieval to post-medieval (1350-1700).

This is not a lot of data overall. There is almost nothing about prehistory (a possible prehistoric ditch has been recorded, while several cropmarks may show the ditches of ploughed-out burial mounds) and even the Roman period can boast just over a dozen entries, when it is often one of the best represented periods. So, is it possible to say anything about the development of Walkern through time? With the results of test pits carried out across the village, we can begin to build the outline of a story.

The test pit programme

The idea of digging test pits is not new; in the early 2000s, Carenza Lewis developed a new methodology that was designed to investigate what she calls 'Currently Occupied Rural Settlements'. She deliberately left her definition of what constitutes this sort of place vague, so that a wide variety of places of different character could be examined. Generally, her project looked at villages that are still inhabited. This class of 'monument' had rarely been targeted for research before, and most research into historic villages had been carried out on deserted sites, such as Caldecote, north of Baldock, or Wharram Percy (Yorkshire). Deserted villages are less common than occupied villages, so what we can learn from them may tell a story that is quite different from that of currently existing places.

Another part of Professor Lewis's idea of test pits was to engage local communities in finding out the past of where they live. Rather than calling in trained archaeologists as experts from outside the villages, she encouraged property owners to get involved in digging, recording, washing finds and generally taking ownership of the past. Once people begin to make their own discoveries, they usually care more about the history of their community.

Another aim of the project is to dispel the idea that archaeology is boring, with dusty old professors brushing away at soil and finding old bones. Another view sees archaeologists as Indiana Jones characters, obsessed with finding treasure. Both views are wrong. Archaeology finds clues in everything. Those who carry out excavations, the most highly visible aspect of the profession, deal largely with scraps of rubbish, although there are occasionally exciting finds to be made. Archaeologists also look at buildings, at landscapes, at documents, at placenames, searching for clues about the past. It's the big picture that counts: the development of a community through time, the transformations people have made to the landscape, understanding why the world is the way it is. A single object can rarely tell us a lot, but when set beside others of the same date or from the same place, it helps to create a picture of the past.

How do we do a test pit?

The first task is to find a site. With this sort of project, that usually means finding someone who doesn't mind having a hole dug in their garden. There is no need to pore over maps, trying to work out which places might give the best results. The idea is that these pits are random samples of the archaeology of a community; some will tell us a lot, while others may reveal nothing at all. Even test pits that produce no finds still tell us something, though. They may show that part of the village was not used by people until recent times.

The test pits are dug to be 1 m square which gives an area large enough for several people to dig away at the same time, but small enough to allow the work to be finished in just one or two days. Digging a pit begins with removing the top surface, which is usually turf in people's gardens. We put it to one side so that it can be put back carefully at the end. Digging then proceeds in 'spits' that are 10 cm

deep; these are random layers of soil that take into account the general principle that more recent finds will sit towards the top, with increasingly old material as the pit gets deeper.

Recording what is being dug is vital. Proper recording is more than simply listing the finds that came from each spit. At the start of each spit, its surface is photographed and drawn on a scale sketch plan, which might show tree roots, patches of differently coloured soils, pipes, brick walls and so on. The depth the top of each spit from the original ground level needs to be measured (one measurement in each corner of the pit). We record what the soil is like: is it stony (and if so, how many stones of what sort of size), sandy, silty, clayey? We look for the presence of carbonised wood (which a lot of people call 'charcoal', but proper charcoal is deliberately manufactured and rarely turns up in test pits); this may be an indication that people were burning wood nearby.

We keep records of each spit on a pre-printed form to ensure that everyone notes the same details. As well as ticking boxes and filling in field recording colour and so on, each record has a written narrative. This part of the record isn't technical but a collection of observations and thoughts made by the people who were digging the spit. They may notice things like softer areas, concentrations of finds in one area, or a sudden smelly patch that needs to be recorded.

We dig until we've reached what archaeologists call 'natural'. It can be a difficult concept to grasp, as soils are usually natural. What an archaeologist means by the term is any deposit that hasn't been created or altered by human agency. It may be a solid bedrock, a deposit of clay laid down during the Pleistocene Ice Age or some other layer unaffected by human activity. A layer of alluvium, from a flooded stream, may overlie earlier human activity, so we can't stop if we hit something like this.

We initially keep everything that's not soil or recent vegetation, as the people digging the test pits often have no archaeological background and might otherwise throw away something of interest. A team sieves soil removed from the ground, to look for anything that the diggers may have missed. Anything that is obviously not archaeological, such as roots, chalk pebbles and so on, can be thrown away by the archaeologist on site, ideally before the team cleaning the finds has wasted time on them.

At this stage, it is possible to make a quick assessment of what the finds are, perhaps giving an indication of their age and what the deposit might be. The most common material from the test pits is what archaeologists refer to as CBM: ceramic building material. This term covers tile and brick, which are difficult to tell apart when they are only small fragments. With the finds from Walkern, there is a range spanning prehistoric to the present day.

The Walkern test pits

The Walkern History Society launched a programme of test-pitting at the Walkern Fair on Sunday 30 April 2017. The first pit was dug just six days later, at the United Reformed Church, towards the northern end of the village, on Saturday 6 May. Over three summers, the society's members and others dug 15 pits; it looks as if it will not be possible to dig any in 2020, at least not until the late summer or early autumn.

Most of the test pits have been dug in the core of the village, along the High Street and especially north of the junction with Froghall Lane. A few pits have been dug near the church, on the opposite side of the River Beane from the High Street, and close to Walkern Mill at the south end of the village. The six pits excavated in 2017 were at the United Reformed Church, 43 Church End, the Old Rectory grounds (former Glebe Farm), where there were enough volunteers to excavated two pits, at The Gallery in High Street and at The Dovecote in High Street. There were five in 2018: at 20 Totts Lane, 96 High Street, Bridgefoot Farm and the White Lion pub in High Street; the fifth, at Skinnydiggers in High Street had to be abandoned because it was too dry to dig. There were four in 2019: at Capel

House (62 High Street), at Walkern Mill at the south end of the village, a second test pit at The Gallery and a second at the United Reformed Church.

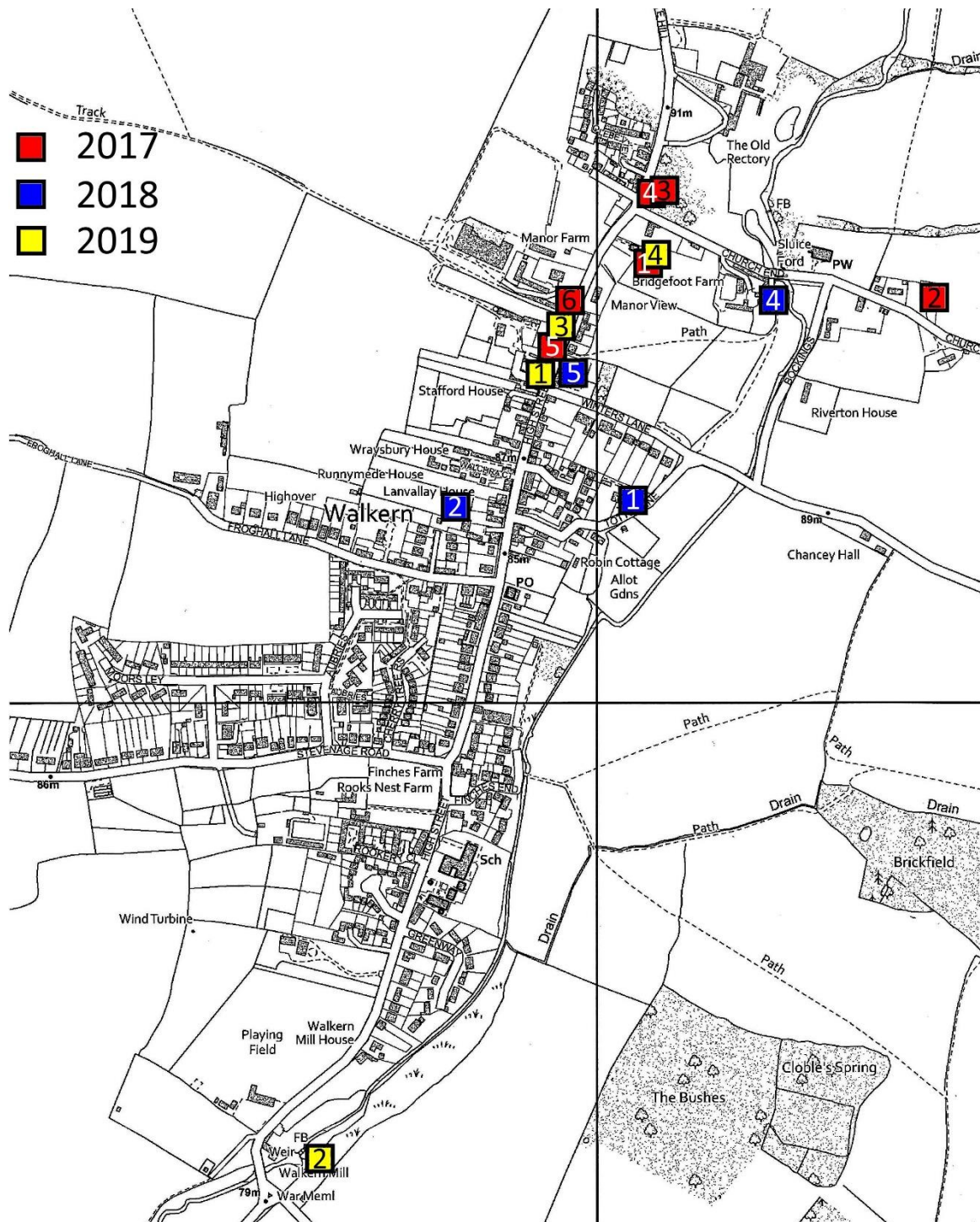


Figure 4: the locations of test pits excavated 2017-19

What have we learned?

Finds dating from recent centuries (1800 onwards) were found everywhere. A lot of it consists of blue-and-white transfer printed ware, often called Willow Pattern, although this is just one type of the ware. Plastics were unsurprisingly a feature of the 20th and 21st centuries, while machine-made nails were common from about 1800 on, with wire nails dominating after 1900. There were also a lot of factory-made ceramic building materials (bricks and tiles).

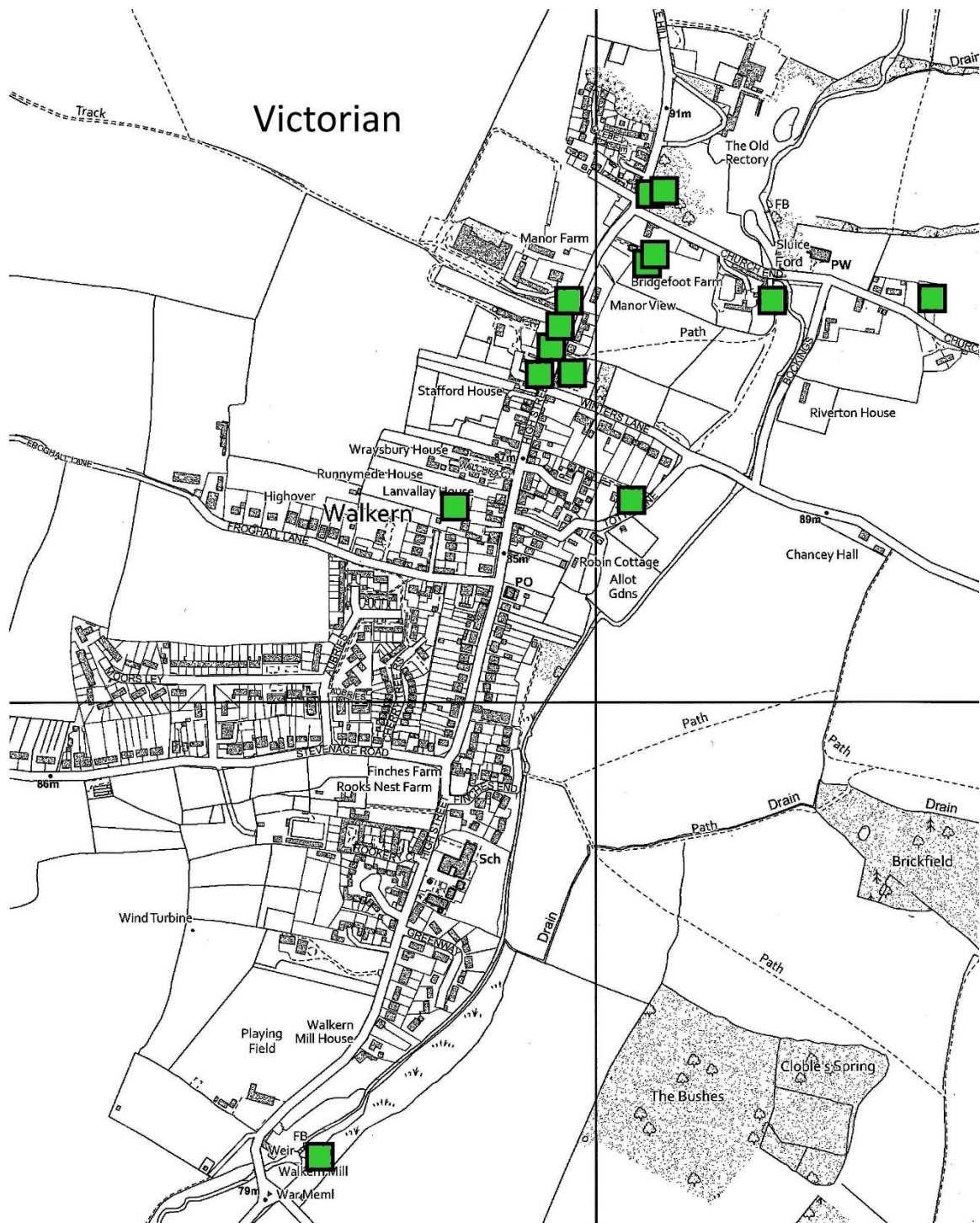


Figure 5: test pits with 19th-century finds

It's unsurprising that so many finds date from the past 220 years. This has been an age of rampant consumerism, with cheap factory-made goods that almost anyone can afford. The idea of inbuilt obsolescence began to take hold from the end of the 18th century, when pottery manufacturers like Wedgwood hinted in their advertising that crockery from ten years ago was out-of-date and needed replacing with the latest fashionable designs.

The 'long 18th century' (about 1650-1830) was another period seen in most (but not all) test pits. Only the United Reformed Church and 43 Church End lacked finds from this period. In the case of 43 Church End, that perhaps reflects the fact that the present house was built as a school, which was not built until 1829. The case of the United Reformed Church is more puzzling, as the church site was a barn during the 18th century.

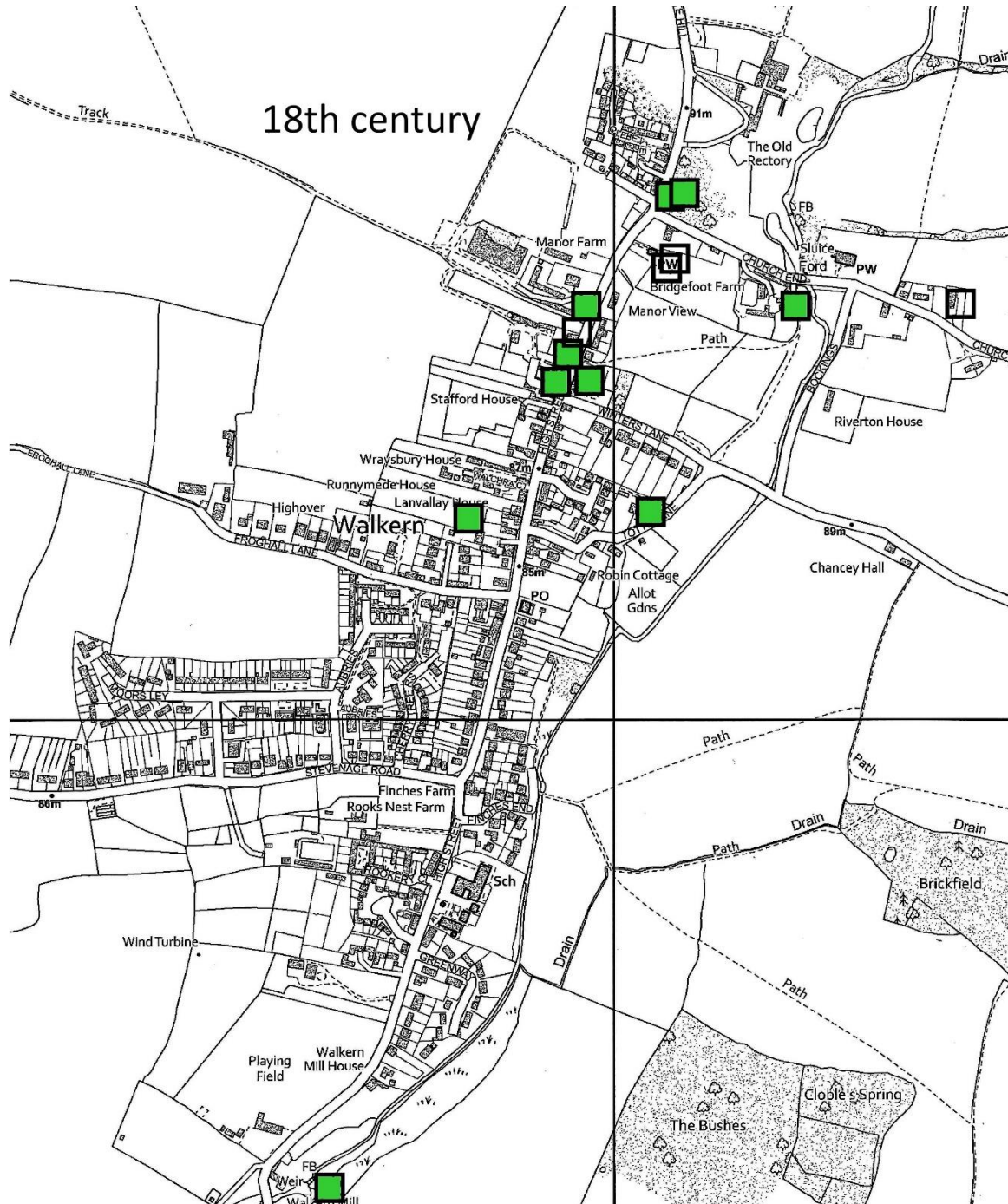


Figure 6: test pits with finds from the 'long 18th century'

The period from about 1550 to 1700 (overlapping with the 'long 18th century'), covering the period from the Dissolution of the Monasteries almost to the end of the Stuart Dynasty, is usually called early post-medieval by archaeologists. This unromantic term masks the social turmoil of the period, with the establishment of the Church of England, the rise of Puritanism, the Civil War and the growth of Dissenting religion. Finds of this date were more restricted in their distribution than those of later periods. Apart from finds at Bridgefoot Farm, there was nothing at the northern end of the village, yet

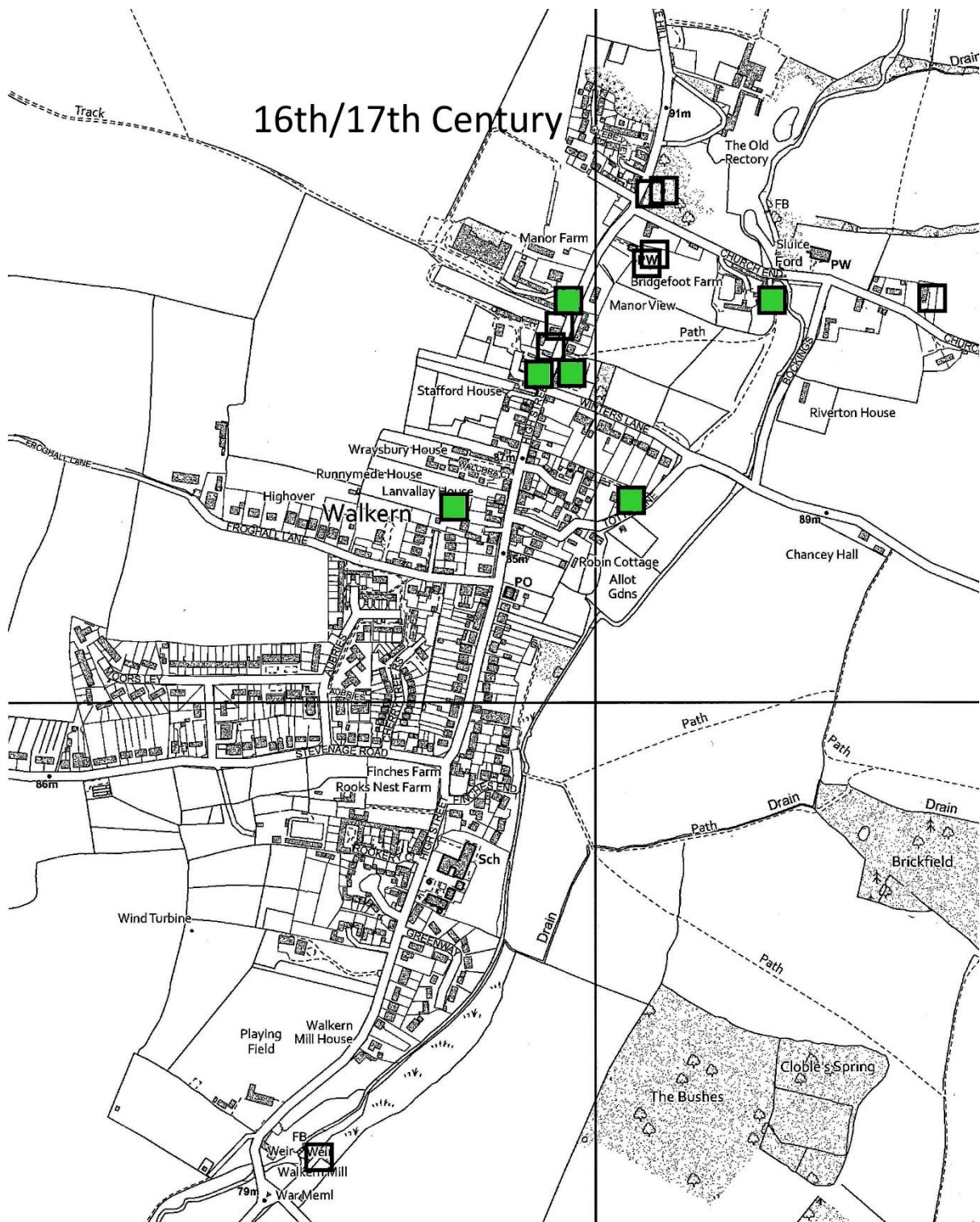


Figure 7: test pits with finds dating from about 1550 to 1700

this is where the church is located. Was the church isolated at this time or do we have problems recognising material of this date?

The Late Middle Ages ran from the Black Death in the late 1340s, to the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1540s. Test pits across the village revealed finds of this date, although some had none. In many of the villages that Carenza Lewis's project examined, there was a dramatic decline in finds from the centuries after the Black Death, showing how badly that particular pandemic affected the population of eastern England. We know that Pirton in North Hertfordshire was especially badly hit by the plague. Might this also have been the case with Walkern? From the results so far, this does not seem to be

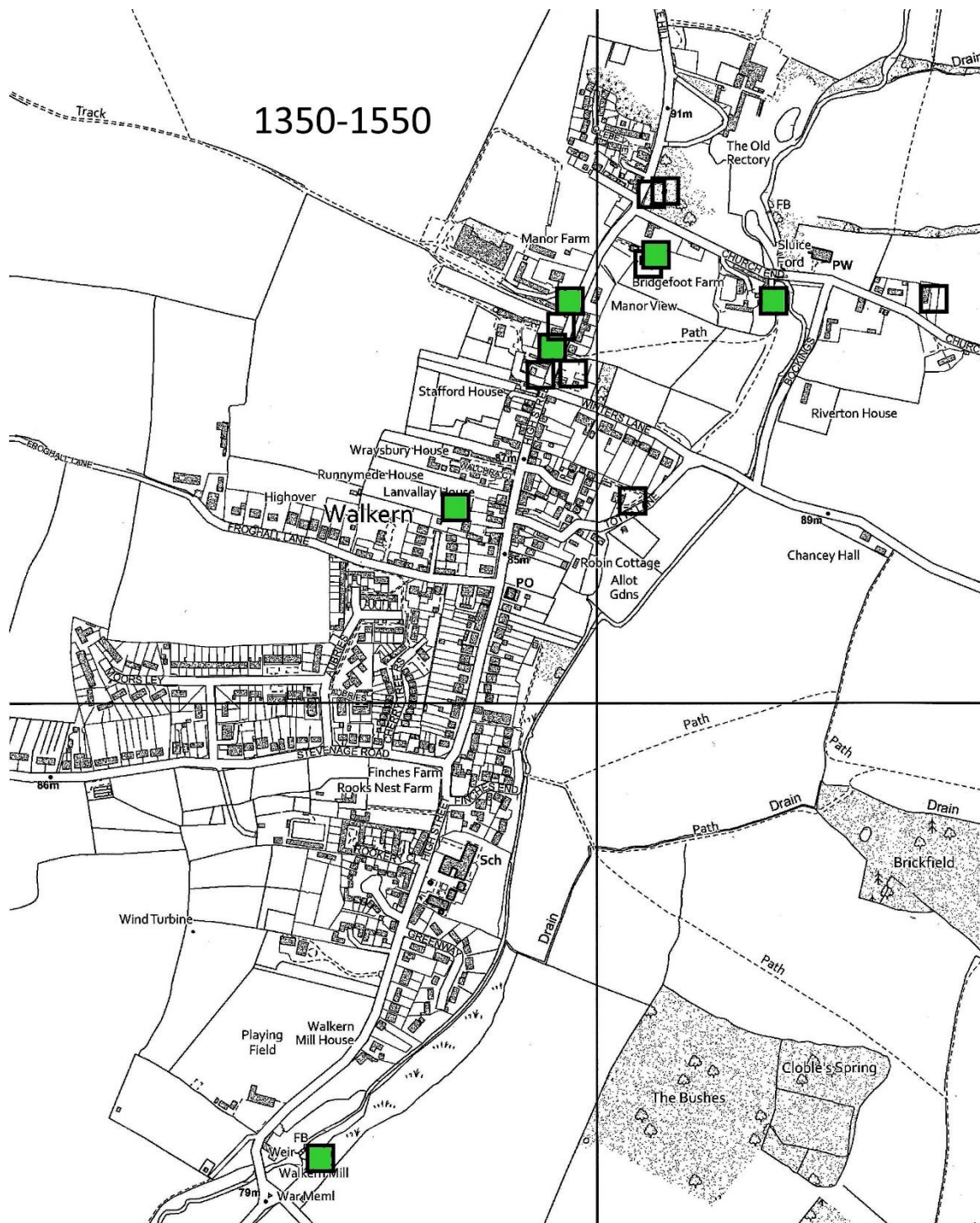


Figure 8: test pits producing finds of Late medieval date

the case: fewer pits contained finds of High medieval date (about 1150 to 1350) than of Late medieval. If this is a true pattern, which would mean that the village rode out the Black Death relatively unscathed, will only be answered by more test pitting.

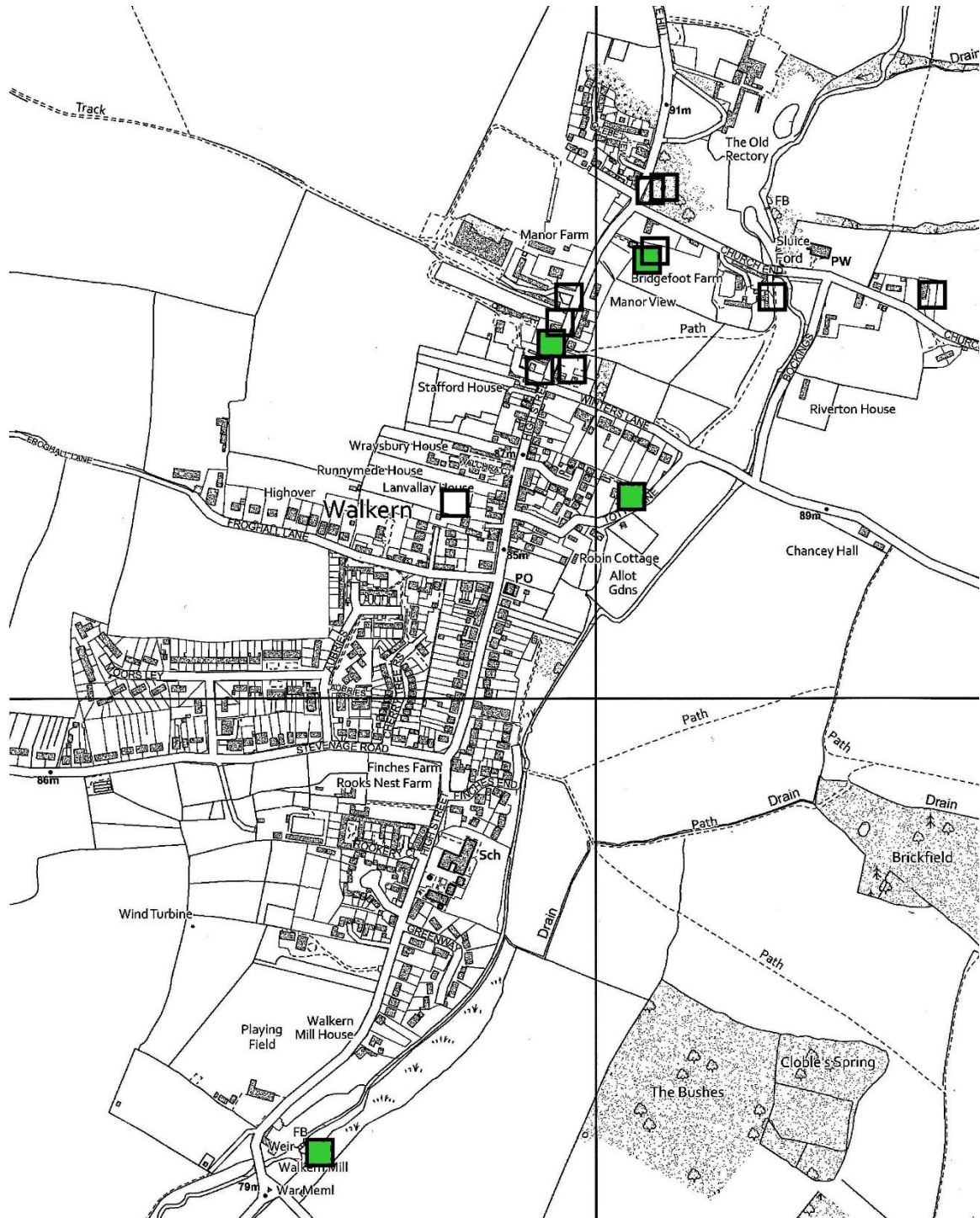


Figure 9: test pits with finds of High Medieval date

As already indicated, fewer test pits contained finds from the High Middle Ages than later, which is an unusual pattern. What the four pits that contained this material may indicate is that although Walkern is today a village very much strung out along a High Street, this may not have been the case 900 years ago. On the other hand, the society had dug only one pit south of Froghall Lane, so perhaps the early

focus of the village lay further south. It may also be that the community was scattered between separate hamlets; perhaps Box, at the west end of the parish, was one of these.

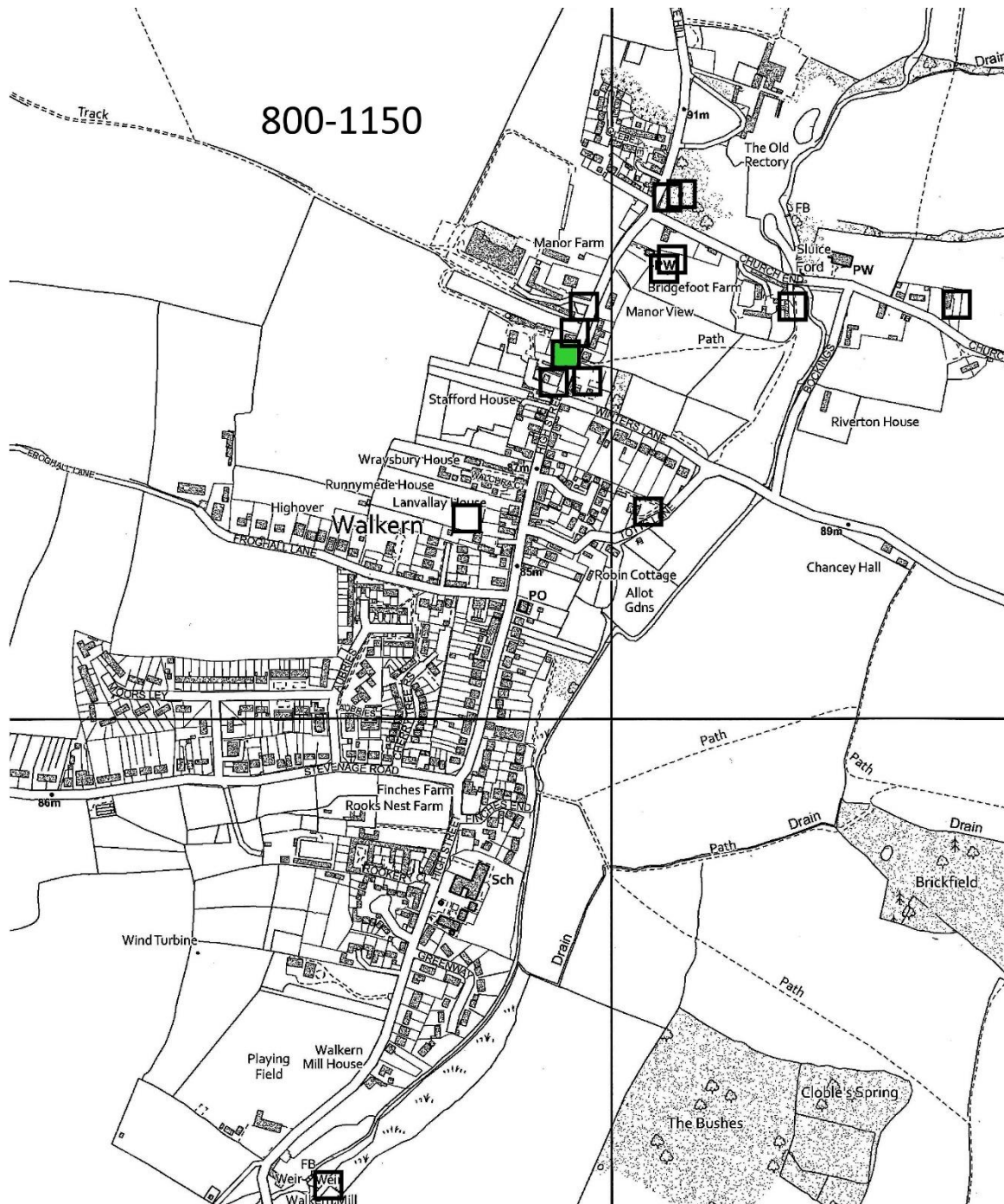


Figure 10: test pits containing finds of the 'Central Middle Ages' (800-1150)

The period from about 800 to 1150 does not have a traditional name for historians, who tend to divide it between Late Anglo-Saxon and Norman. The division makes little sense archaeologically, as the stuff that people used every day barely changed across these centuries. The main innovation of the aftermath of the Norman Conquest in 1066 was the creation of castles: Walkern has one. We can perhaps instead think of this period as the Central Middle Ages, taking us from the gradual coalescence of separate kingdoms to form England to the height of the feudal system and the period of Viking invasions. These divisions are artificial, in any case, and we only use them to make sense of the past. Only one site produced a find of this date, a sherd of tenth- or eleventh-century Stamford Ware from

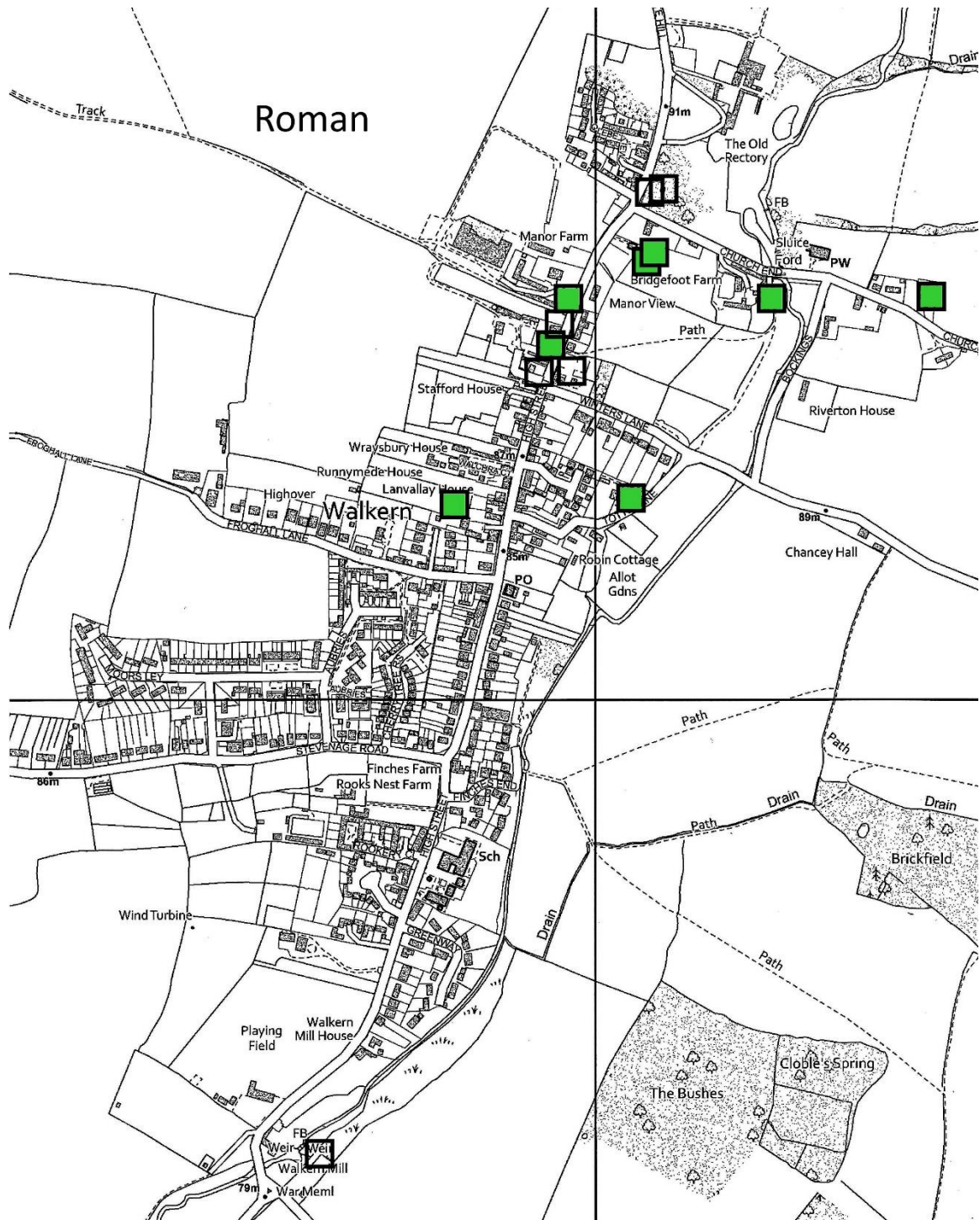


Figure 12: test pits with finds of Roman date (AD 43-450)

The Roman period is one for which we would expect to make finds. Its society was one where the better off, at least, had access to factory-made consumer goods, which they often threw away. Eight test pits included finds of Roman date, mostly small, worn sherds (archaeologists call them abraded). A lot of this material probably made its way out into the fields of a nearby community as domestic and farmyard waste spread as part of manuring. There is a scatter across the northern end of the village, suggesting that there was habitation nearby. It happens that we know of a site west of the northern end of Walkern, to be described below, which could be one of the sources of these finds



Figure 13: test pits with Iron Age finds

We often find that communities that existed in the Roman period were first established in the Late Iron Age, but none of the results so far from the test pits has confirmed this. Perhaps the community whose waste we are finding in them was not established until after the Roman Conquest. Only one test pit has produced any finds that we can date to the Iron Age: the 2019 test pit at the United Reformed Church contained a sherd of what seems to be Middle Iron Age pottery (about 400-100 BC). Sites and finds of this date are rare in Hertfordshire, clustering in the north around Baldock and to its west, with a thin scatter in a band from Tring in the west to Bishops Stortford in the east. This sherd provides a link in the distribution between the Baldock area and the more southerly distribution.

Finds from the Bronze Age, from before 2000 BC to about 850 BC, were made in three test pits (43 Church End, 96 High Street and the United Reformed Church). These finds consisted mostly of struck

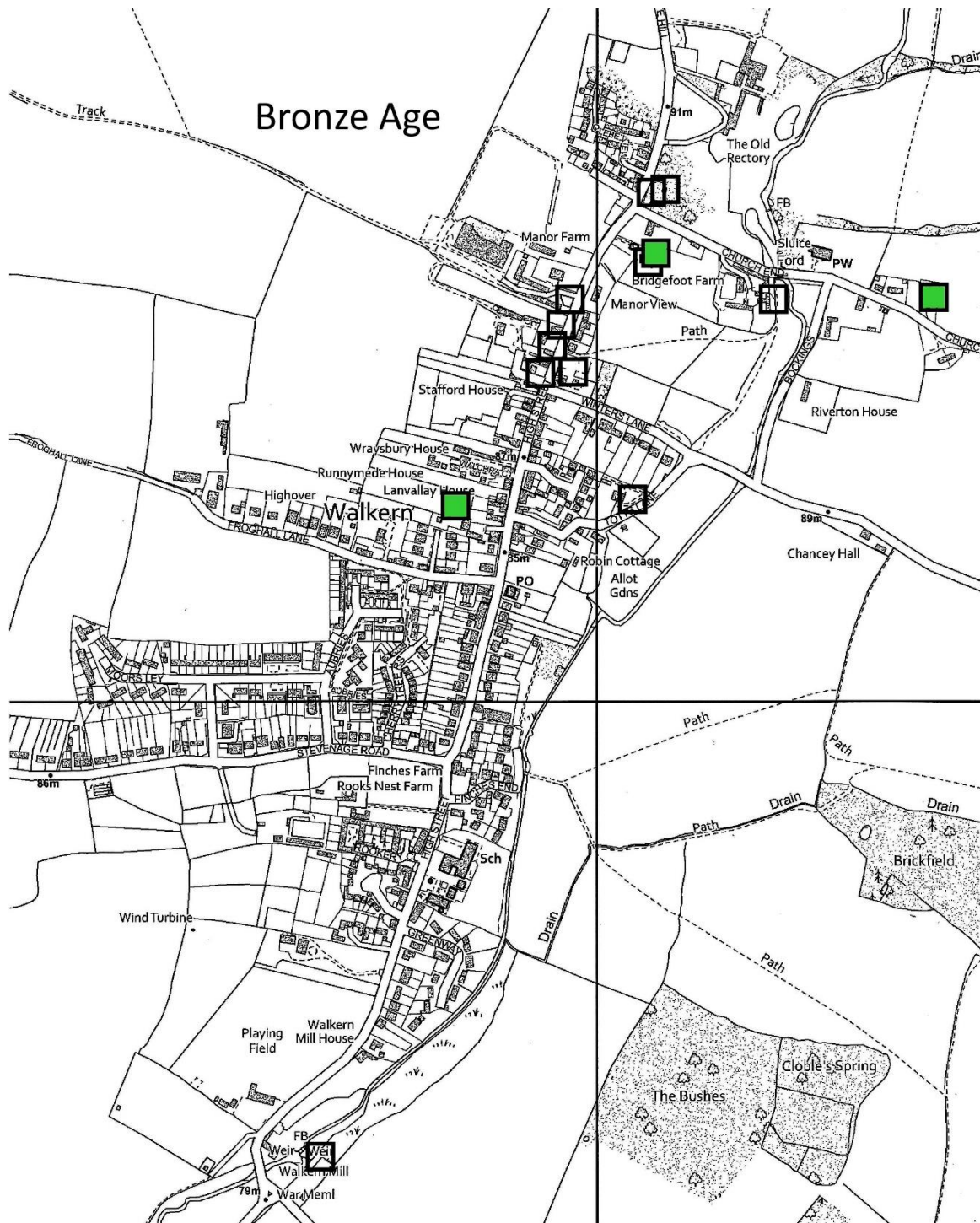


Figure 14: test pits containing finds from the Bronze Age (before 2000-850 BC)

flints, although there was also a single sherd of pottery. Prehistoric pottery is fragile and is soon broken up in ploughsoil, so the findspot of this one sherd was probably close to where it was initially deposited. The Bronze Age is a period best known for its burials, and several destroyed burial mounds are known from Walkern, mostly to the west of the village. All but four test pits also contained struck flints whose date could not be determined from their shape; some of them are undoubtedly Bronze Age, too. Interpreting finds of this type and date is very difficult, especially as we have little idea about where the communities that made and lost them were located.

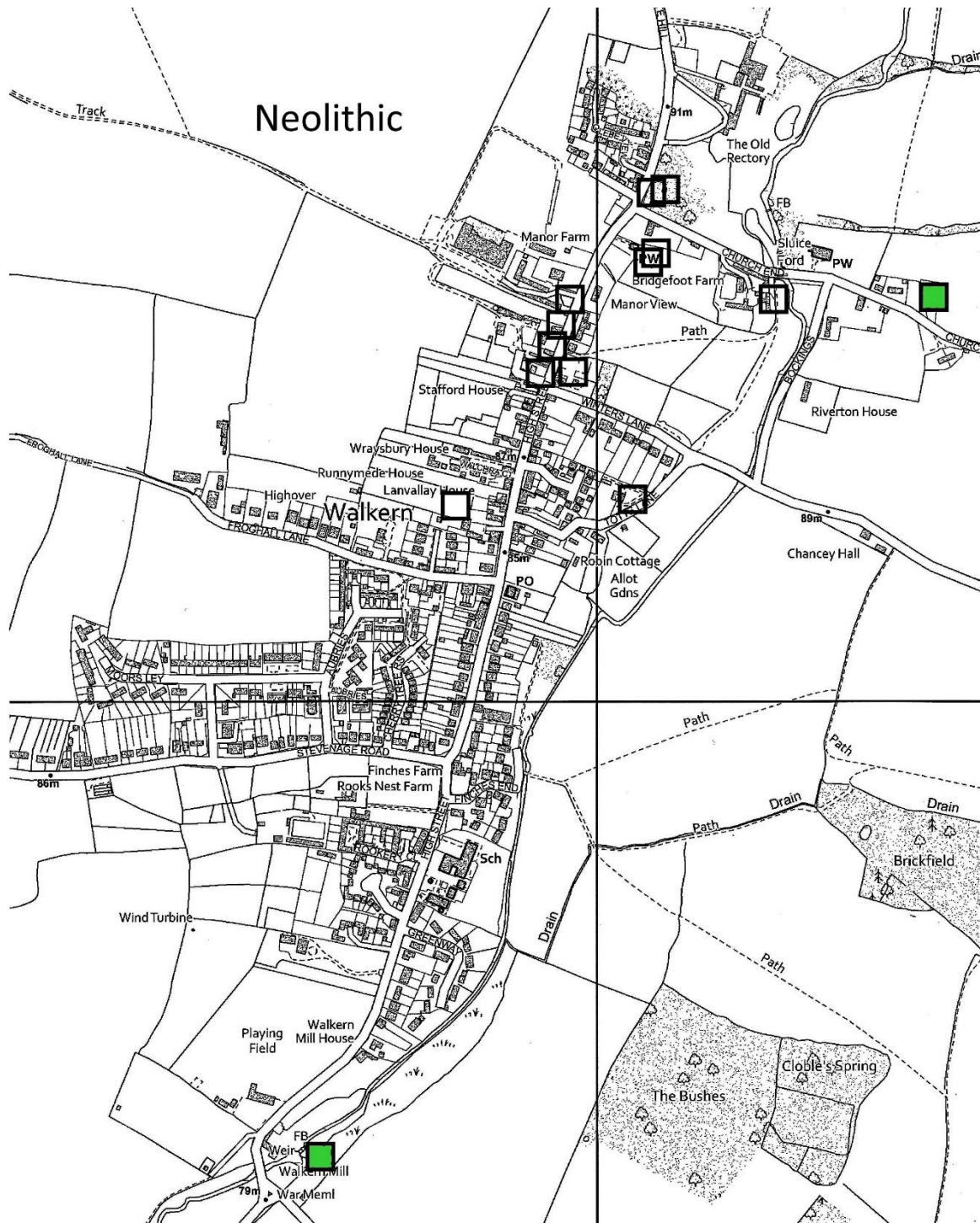


Figure 15: test pits with finds of Neolithic date (4000-2000 BC)

Two test pits contained finds that were Neolithic in date. The Neolithic was the period of the first farmers in Britain, from about 4000 BC to about 2000 BC. There were struck flints from 43 Church End and pottery from Walkern Mill. As with the Bronze Age pottery, Neolithic ceramics are fragile and soon destroyed in ploughsoil, so it cannot have travelled far before coming to rest where it was found. It probably means either that there was a community living nearby or that there is a nearby religious or funerary site. We will see that this does appear to be the case.

Four test pits contained struck flints that were probably Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) in date, from about 10,000 to 4000 BC. The people who made this material were the first population of Britain to

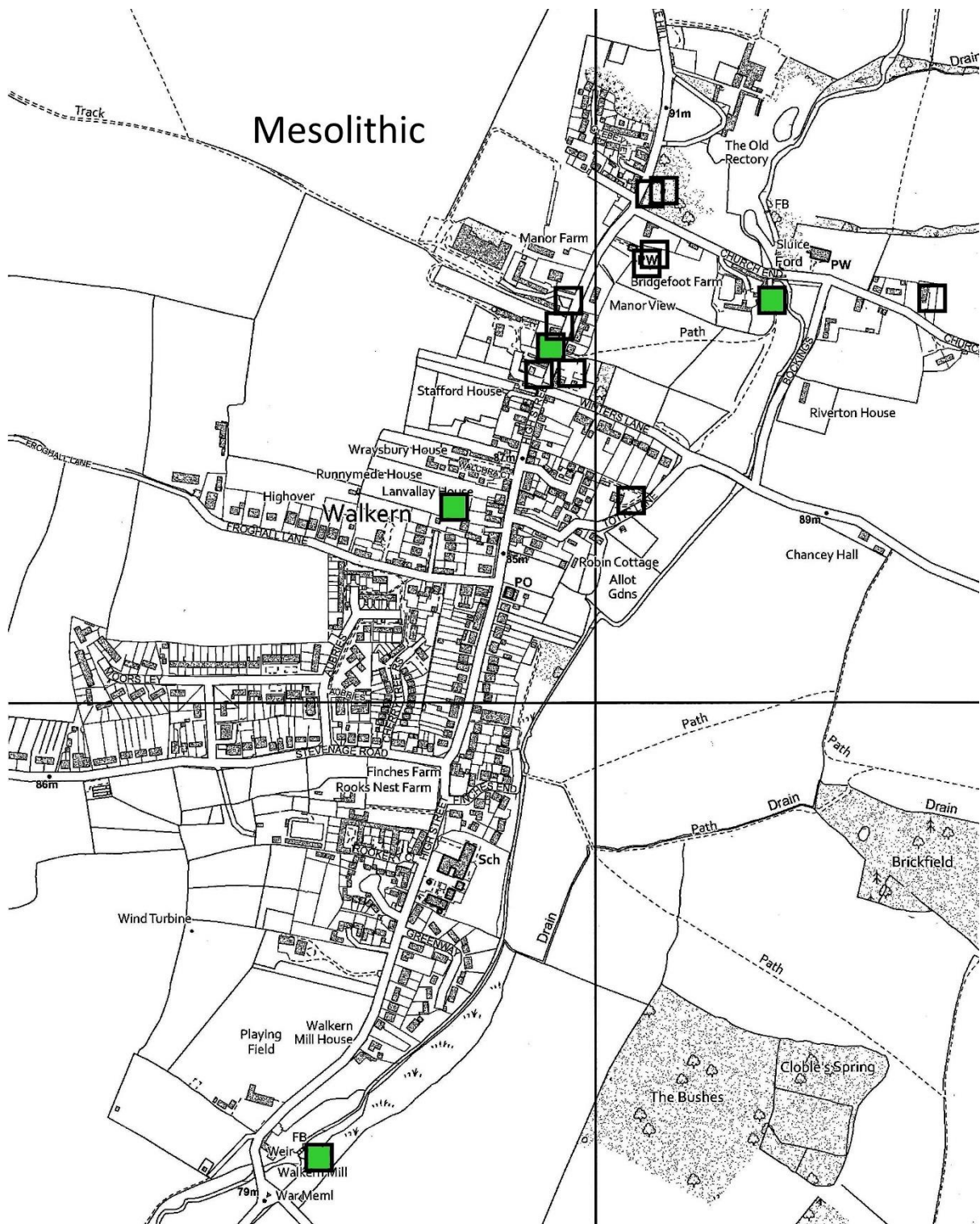


Figure 16: test pits producing finds of Mesolithic date (10,000-4000 BC)

arrive after the end of the Pleistocene Ice Age. They were foragers, who hunted animals and ate wild plants. Their numbers were small, so it is uncommon to find the remains of their tools. The four places producing material of this date in Walkern is probably a sign that the valley of the River Beane was a favoured location, which would have been rich in the resources they needed. The test pit at Walkern Mill contained evidence that people were making tools there in the Late Mesolithic (after 6150 BC) when Britain had become an island for the first time.

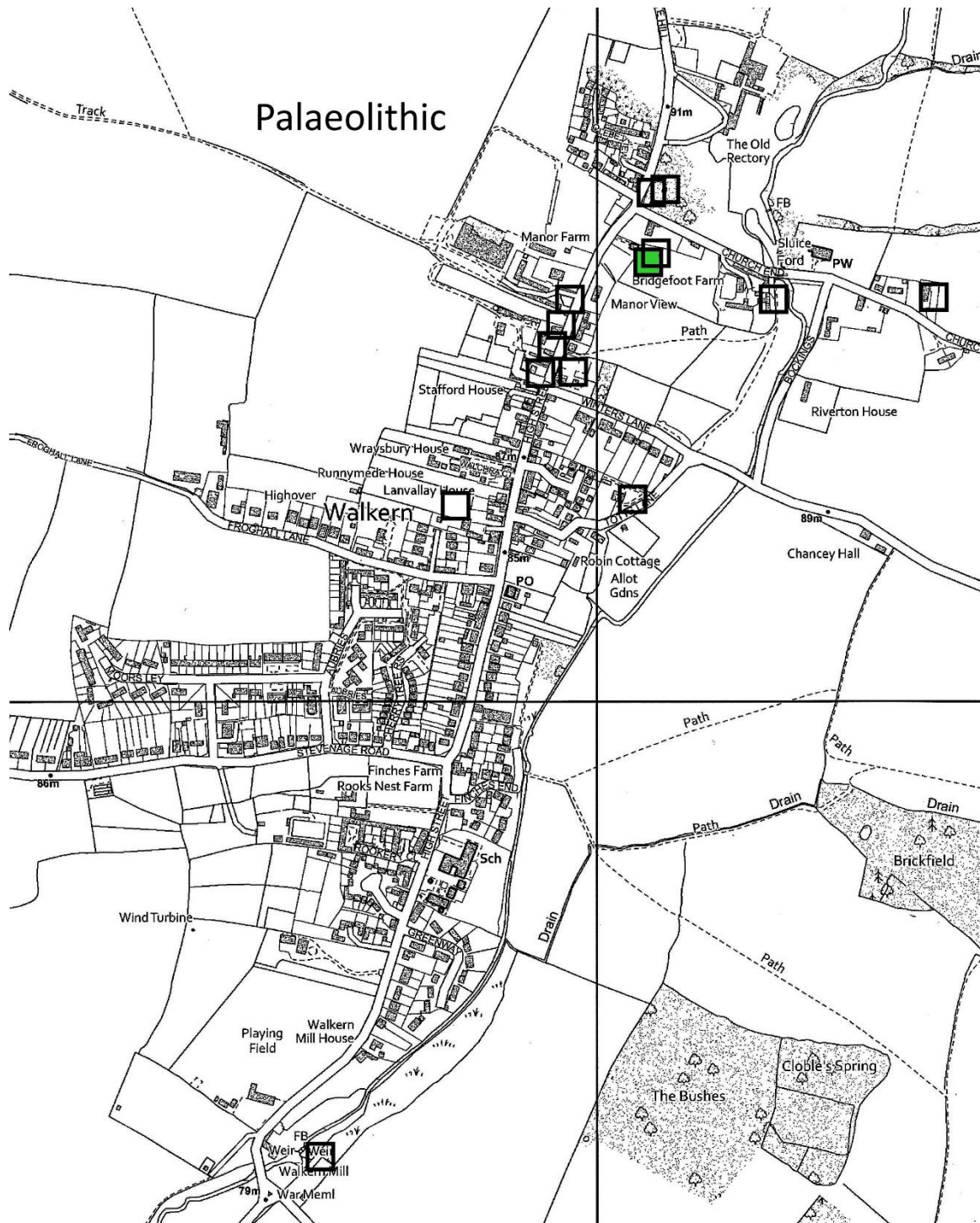


Figure 17: test pits with Palaeolithic finds (before 10,000 BC)

There is one potential find that takes the story back into the very remote past, the Palaeolithic. At the very first test pit, dug at the United Reformed Church in May 2017, the lowest deposit consisted of gravel. It was probably laid down by meltwaters from glaciers further north: deposits of this kind are known across the Beane valley and are termed fluvioglacial by geologists. In it was a rounded flint cobble with massive damage on one side. Although this could have happened in the violent flow of water that laid down the gravel, all the damage was on one side, which may indicate that it was a result of human activity. This interpretation is highly speculative, and because the object came from a water-lain deposit, it could have been carried a long distance before coming to rest. We must count this as an intriguing but unproven possibility.

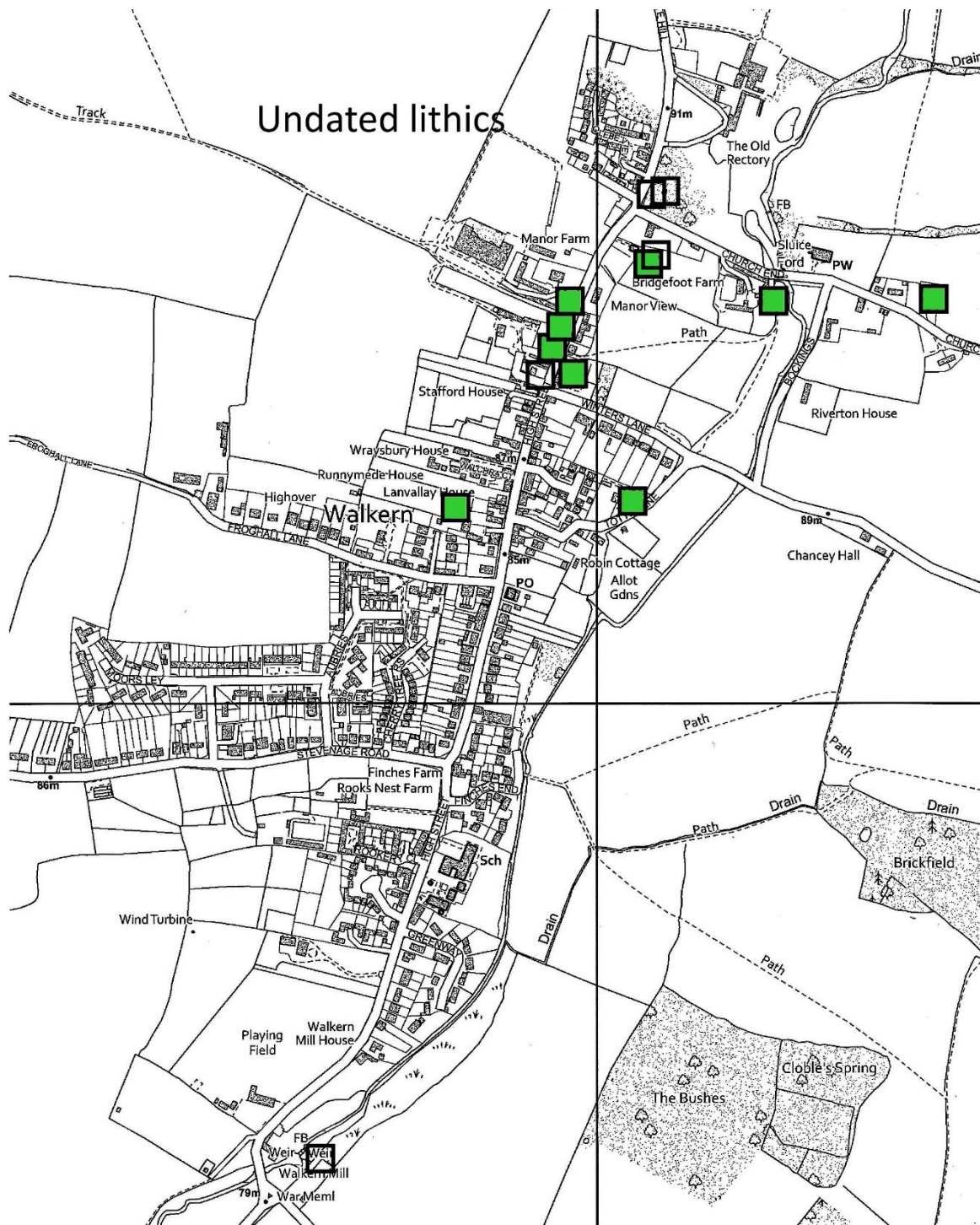


Figure 18: test pits containing undated lithics (struck flints)

Many lithics (struck flints) are not easily datable, especially if they consist of débitage (waste material from knapping). Flint tool-making technology stretched from remote prehistory into the first millennium BC (and even beyond, with the production of gunflints for flintlock pistols). The undated lithics are generally prehistoric, although of unknown period. All the test pits, apart from those at Glebe Farm, 63 High Street and Walkern Mill. Flint is commonly found in local soils and was an excellent raw material for tool making for thousands of years, so most places in this area will have these sorts of finds.

Future research

The test pits have only begun to give information about the history of Walkern, and we hope to dig more in coming years. They are not the only source of information, though, and it is always possible to reinterpret the information we already possess. One source that is proving a useful tool for recognising new sites and putting known sites into a better landscape context is Lidar (Light Detection and Ranging). It is a technique that measures distances with a laser; when done from an aeroplane, it gives a very accurate picture of heights, that can be modified by ‘switching off’ woodland and buildings, and by shading. The Environment Agency has covered a lot of England and Walkern is in an area with excellent coverage. At a small scale, it shows the topography of the village well, highlighting the Beane valley and the valleys of its tributaries. At a larger scale, it can show earthworks that are often not easy to survey on the ground because they are inaccessible on private land or are covered in trees.

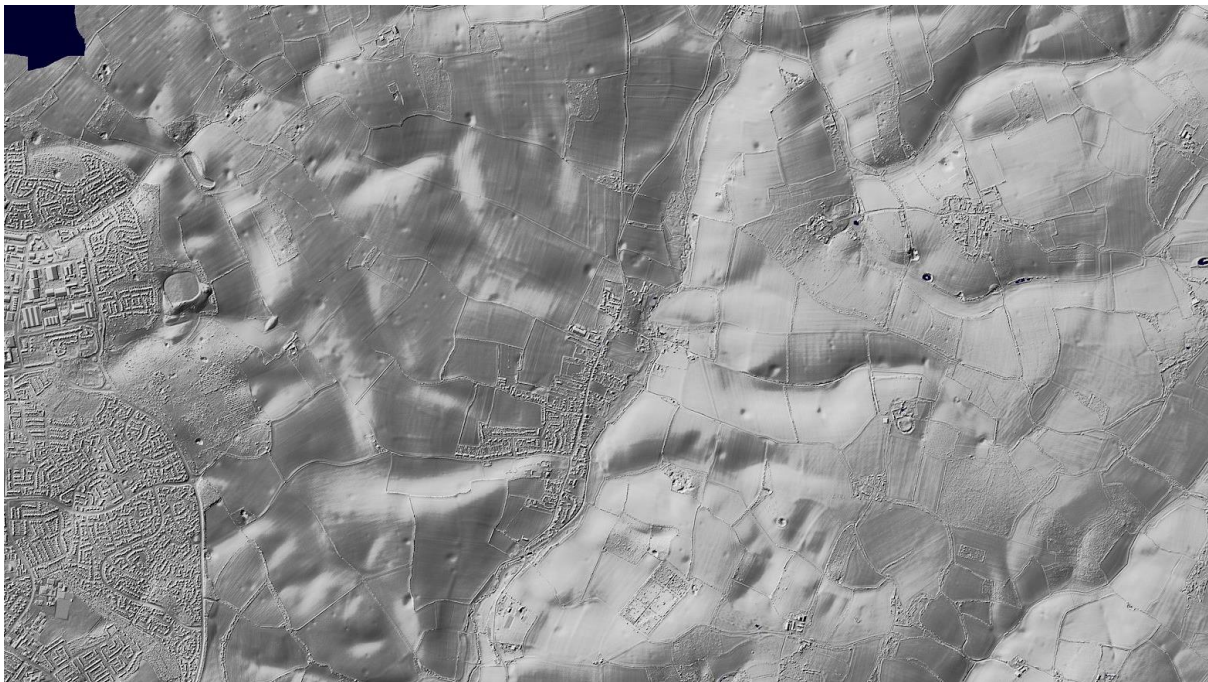


Figure 20: a Lidar view of Walkern and the surrounding area

When we start to look at specific sites in detail, we can see unexpected details. The ringwork at Walkern Bury, a well-preserved Scheduled Ancient Monument, is a defended knoll about 1.25 km south of St Mary’s Church. The Lidar view shows a large trapezoidal earthwork enclosure to the north and a smaller rectangular enclosure to the north-east. This is a site that would repay further work outside the Scheduled area.



Figure 19: a Lidar view of Walkern Bury ringwork

At Coble’s Spring, south of the village, Lidar can ‘strip away’ most of the ancient woodland, revealing a rectangular pattern of banks and ditches. Although the wood is divided by ‘rides’ into three separate zones, the earthworks are not part of this arrangement. Again, this is somewhere that needs further work.

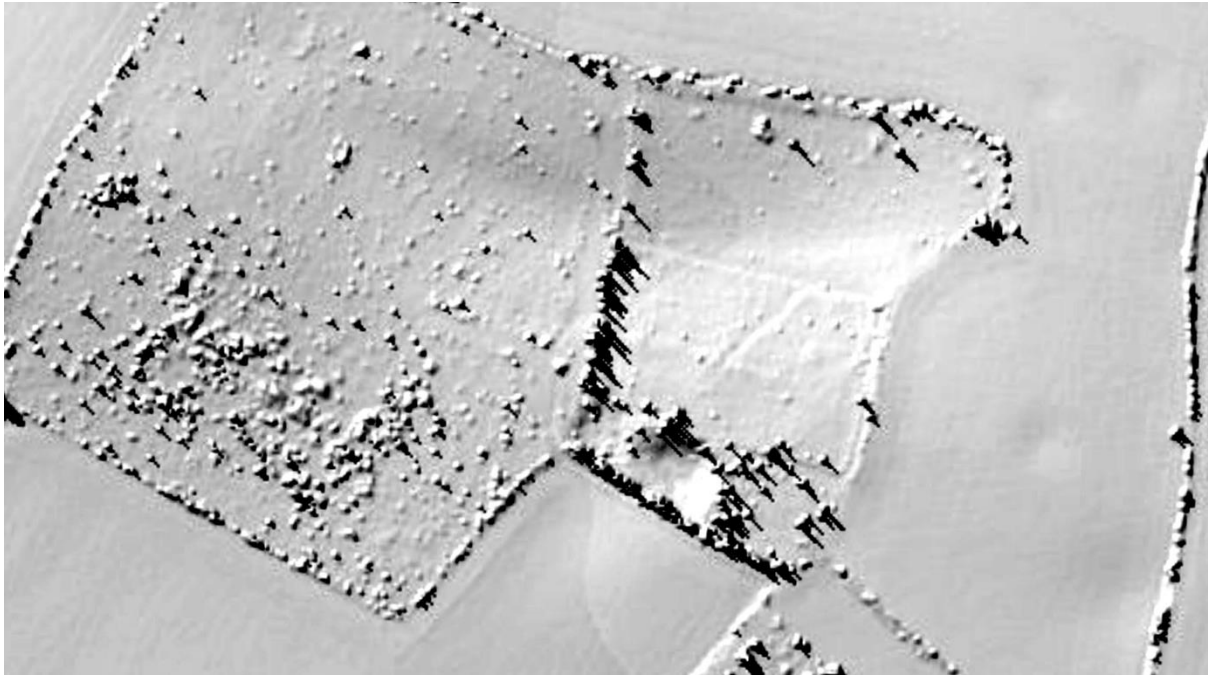


Figure 21: Lidar view of Coble's Spring (right) and the Buses (left), without tree cover

The earthworks at Box Wood have long been known and were long described as part of a 'deserted village'. Boxe or Boxbury was a manor in its own right at the time of Domesday Book and it continued to exist into the twentieth century. Whether or not it was ever a village type settlement is disputed. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) concluded in the 1990s that the earthworks are not part of one. It is unclear what they do represent, although an earlier course of Stevenage Road, which now skirts the southern and part of the eastern side of the wood, can be seen.

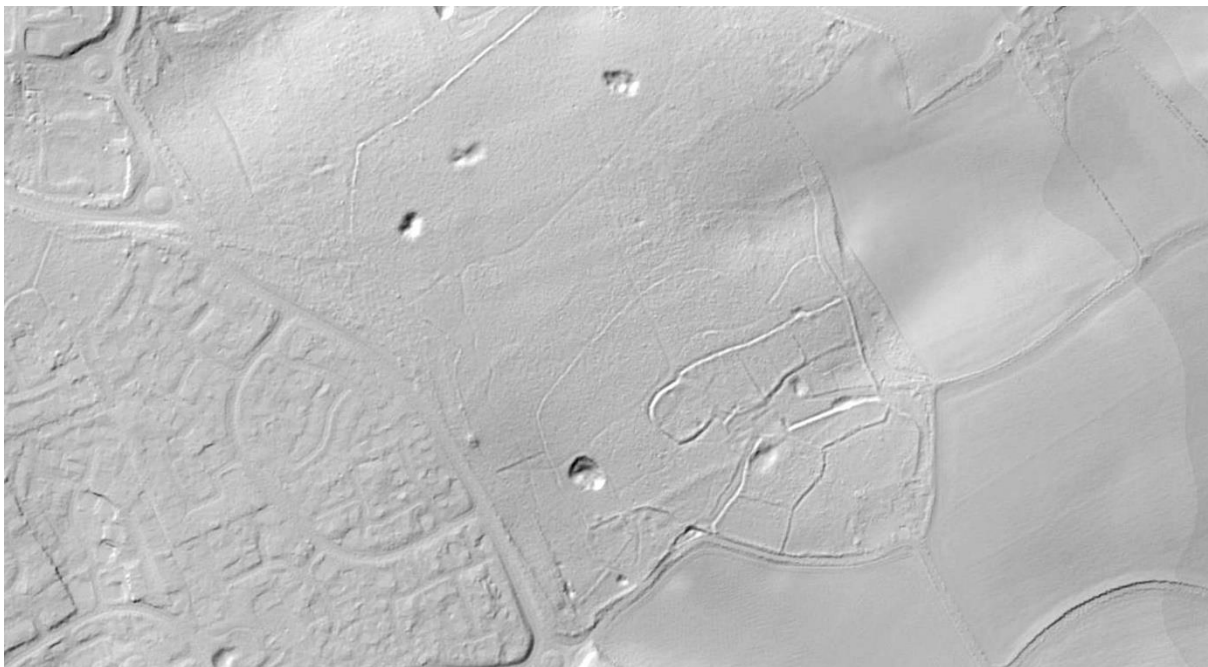


Figure 22: Lidar view of the earthworks at Box Wood

Another freely available tool is Google Earth Pro, which allows the user to scroll through satellite imagery of different dates. It is possible to use it to bring out cropmarks only visible in some dry summers. In the field immediately south of the test pit at Walkern Mill, a few anomalies show up in

patches where the subsoil is suitable for the production of cropmarks. Not all soils will show these marks, caused by the differential growth and drying out of crops that can occur over buried pits, ditches and walls. Some pit-like and ditch-like anomalies (coloured red in the photograph below) show up, as do field drains (coloured blue). The cluster of pits may be the source of the Neolithic pottery discovered in 2019. A group of three parallel lines to the east, also coloured red, look as if they may be part of an Iron Age triple ditch system, a type of boundary that began to be constructed in the second century BC. Only excavation will show if these guesses are correct.



Figure 23: cropmarks visible south of Walkern Mill on Google Earth Pro

In summary

The test pit programme to date has shown that even though the Historic Environment Record contains not much information about the archaeology of Walkern, this is a lot buried in people's gardens. Enough has been discovered so far to enable a start to be made on writing a story of the village through time. These pits have barely scratched the surface, though, and there is obviously a lot more waiting to be discovered.

Inevitably, the work has raised questions about the history of the community. The most difficult to answer with the data we have at the moment is what the character of the place might have been in the High Middle Ages. Was it a village, strung along its High Street, as we see today, or was it entirely different? Was the population dispersed between different hamlets (called End – like Church End and Clay End – or Greens – like Bassus Green)? Equally puzzling is where people were living in the centuries immediately before the Roman conquest and those that followed the end of Roman rule.

The project shows how much can be achieved through the dedication and hard work of a small team of regular volunteers and occasional visitors. The people of Walkern can be proud of what they have done so far and look forward to what they may discover in the future.

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2020