

La Signy Farm Serre

Excavation of a Great War Observation Post



No Man's Land
April 2004

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1. Background

- 1.1 In October 2003 *No Man's Land* battlefield archaeology group were commissioned by the BBC to undertake an archaeological excavation of Great War trenches at Serre, France (Brown, Forthcoming). In the course of those excavations the group obtained permission from the landowner of that site, M. Claude Samain to carry out further archaeological investigation of other Great War remains known to survive within the bounds of his property at La Signy Farm. In the light of this, a preliminary walk-over survey of the farm was carried out by NML team members David Kenyon and Martin Brown on 11 April 2004. This walk-over identified a number of visible features, including a concrete observation post built into a field boundary on the west side of the farm. Permission was obtained from Mr Samain for further investigation of this post, and two days of excavation were carried out by NML team members between 14-15 April 2004.

2. Location

- 2.1 The post is located at French UTM WGS84 Kilometre Grid 0474.00E 5549.65N, approximately 2.5km west of the village of Serre (Dep.Nord/Pas De Calais) (Fig.1). The post is built into an east-facing field boundary lynchet on the western edge of the La Signy Farm property. It lies at the head of a shallow valley running downhill to the east, at a height of approximately 155m above Marseilles Datum.
- 2.2 The underlying geology is chalk, overlaid by several metres of silty clay *liman*. Undisturbed natural deposits were not encountered in the course of the excavation which took place entirely within previously disturbed deposits.

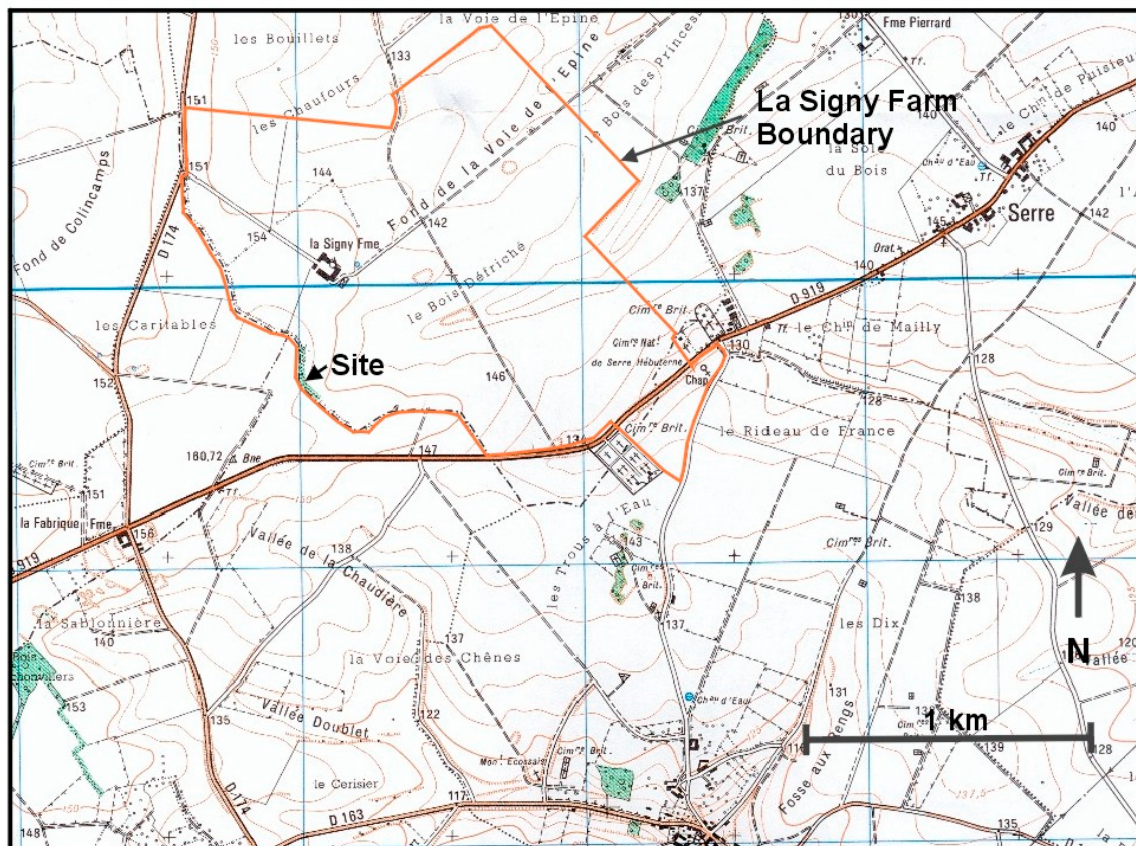
3. Aims and objectives

- 3.1 The access provided to La signy Farm by Mr Samain has provided NML with a unique opportunity to explore archaeologically a portion of the Somme battlefield. It is hoped in due course to characterise as much as possible of the surviving archaeology on the farm, and support this by documentary research. While the excavation of the post was

essentially opportunistic, as time and labour became available at short notice, in the context of this wider project it was determined that a limited investigation of the post would contribute significantly to the overall project objectives. While the excavation results currently stand in isolation, in due course further research and fieldwork would allow the post to be contextualised more fully. The immediate objectives of the excavation were as follows;

- To determine the extent of the built concrete structure of the post in order to elucidate its form and function.
- To examine the soft deposits around the concrete structure in order to establish the method of construction of the post, and identify any associated trench lines or other features.
- To recover artefactual material from within and around the post in order to establish its date of construction and function.

Fig. 1 Site location (not to scale)



4. Methodology

- 4.1 After clearance of initial vegetation (Fig. 2), excavation was continued by hand digging to provide a longitudinal section along the concrete structure (A-A on Fig. 6). This provided a profile along the concrete, as well as a section through the overlying soft deposits. At the western end of the structure this excavation was extended southwards to provide access to the entrance to the post. Clearance of the entrance allowed limited excavation within the internal passage of the post, but time constraints did not allow this to proceed further than the immediate area of the entrance.

Fig. 2 Post prior to removal of vegetation (From north-west)



5. Results/Description

- 5.1 The fully excavated post is depicted in Fig. 3 and a measured plan and profile are provided in Fig. 6. A list of excavated contexts is provided in Appendix 1. The eastern end of the post consisted of a teardrop-shaped concrete position approximately 2.5m wide and 3m deep. It stood 1m above the level of the field to the east, which left the roof of the post broadly level with the ground surface to the west of the site. The lower part of

the structure and the aperture to the front had been constructed of curved, pre-cast concrete blocks, but these had not been assembled to a formal symmetrical design, rather they were inserted ad-hoc to create an irregular shaped structure. A domed concrete roof covered this part of the structure, covered with a smooth mortar rendered surface. A series of sockets were apparent in the sill above the aperture, with evidence of rusted-out angle irons, suggesting that iron supports once protruded from the front, possibly to support camouflage, or additional sandbag protection. Patches of greenish stain were apparent on the front face of the structure, these may be traces of camouflage paint, or may be a by-product of algae growth and weathering of the concrete.

Fig. 3 Post as excavated (Scales 1m)



- 5.2 The rear portion of the post consisted of a concrete corridor approximately 2.5m long and 1m wide. The construction method here differed from the front portion of the post. Externally the structure was formed of rough-cast concrete, and impressions of sandbags were preserved in the concrete (Fig. 4), to the extent that not only the shape of the bags but also the weave of the hessian was evident in the set concrete. It would

appear that the external part of the structure was banked-over with sandbags while the concrete was still soft, and that these formed an integral part of the structure. The fill material immediately against the structure consisted of silty-clay *liman*, with small quantities of military debris; shell fragments and spent rounds, suggesting that this material originally formed the fill of this sandbag covering, the bags themselves having decayed.

Fig.4 Sandbag impressions



- 5.3 The entrance to the post was on the south side of the west end of the corridor, and consisted of a rectangular opening with a pre-cast concrete lintel, set at an angle with its south end higher, in order to enlarge the entrance opening. A concrete step, and part of a flat concrete floor were uncovered 1.5m below the level of the lintel. The interior of the post was entirely filled to ceiling level with clean silt. Thus it was not possible to examine more than the immediate entrance area in the time available for excavation. It is not clear how this material entered the structure but the location of the entrance against the field boundary bank may have resulted in a natural flow of silt into the interior over the past 85 years. Animal burrows were evident within this silt, entered via the frontal aperture. Where visible the internal walls were of smooth vertical concrete, it was not possible to determine whether this was pre-cast or poured against shuttering in-situ.

Fig. 5 Entrance (Scale 2m)



- 5.4 A vertical construction cut line (002) was observed in the clay surrounding lower portion of the post. This extended upward to the same level as top of the vertical portion of the concrete walls, then sloped away from the walls at a shallow angle. This suggests that the post was constructed by digging a cut in the existing field bank (003), only a few centimetres larger than the shape in plan of the post. The concrete structure was then inserted, and a subsequent layer of clay (possibly in sandbags) (001) placed over the top. Artifacts of Great War date were found in both the lower bank material into which the cut was made, and the backfill material.

6. ***Finds***

- 6.1 A full catalogue of objects recovered during the excavation is contained in Appendix 2. The assemblage is typical of what might be expected of a Great War site, including large numbers of SAA cases and unfired rounds (over 60). As the site is likely to be of late war construction (1918 see discussion below) the head-stamps of the rounds recovered are not particularly diagnostic. The presence of a single late-war dated German round is tantalising in view of the German advance of 1918, however it is not possible to draw

any significant inference from a single spent case. Similarly the absence of French material from the assemblage supports the post 1915 date of the post and its surrounding trench system. No particularly rare or unusual types of equipment or ordnance were recovered during the excavation, and no finds were retained after analysis.

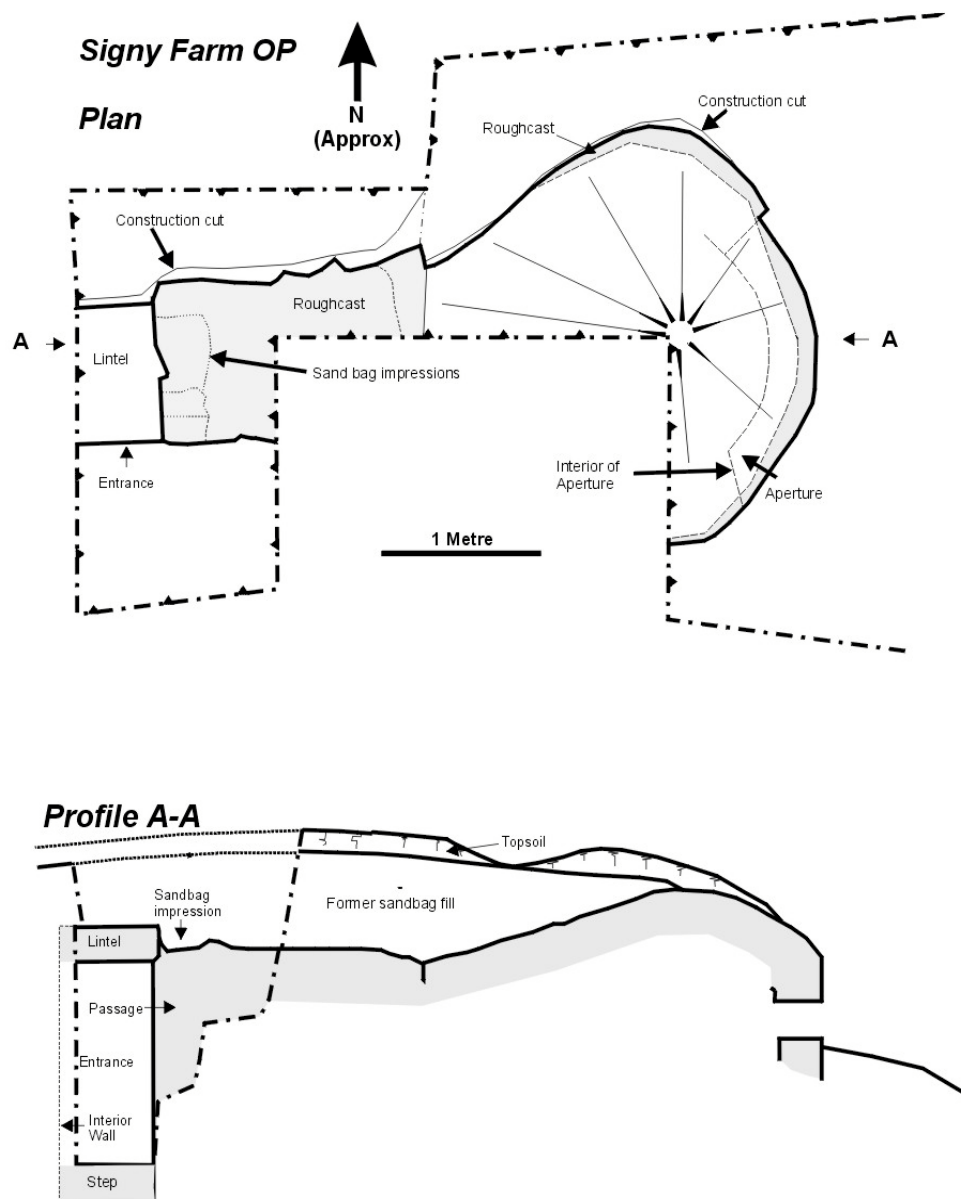
7. Discussion

- 7.1 The exact date and function of this post has yet to be elucidated by documentary research. However its location some distance behind both the French front line of 1915 to the east, and the British Front line of 1916/1917 to the south-east suggest that it was part of a defensive system constructed in the early part of 1918. A 1918 artillery map in the possession of Avril Williams shows the post marked in pencil as "CT.OP" although the exact provenance of the map is at present unknown as are the meanings of the initials. The presence of late-war dated small arms ammunition, as well as the absence of French items support this hypothesis but are not conclusive.
- 7.2 The post is well paced to provide observation or allow machine-gun fire down the valley to the east (See Fig. 1), and the aperture is large enough to allow a machine-gun to be used. Unfortunately it was not possible to excavate the interior of the front of the post as this may have provided more information on function. It is hoped to return at a later date and completely clear the interior of the post.
- 7.3 It is likely that the post was entered via a trench running along the line of the field boundary lynchet, on its western side. Such a trench is depicted on maps from as early as 1916, providing communication to the front line of that period to the south. It is possible that this trench was modified to form part of a 1918 defensive scheme. Unfortunately the line of this trench to the west is outside the boundary of La Signy Farm, and while it was possible to excavate within the hedge-line it was not possible to extend the excavations to the west to define this trench. It is hoped that permission might be gained to extend into that area at a later date.

8. *Project team*

- 8.1 The excavation was undertaken by members of No Man's Land under the supervision of David Kenyon and Martin Brown. The report and illustrations were prepared by David Kenyon, finds analysis was by Luke Barber and Justin Russell. Thanks are due to M. Claude Samain and family for access to the site, and to Avril Williams for her hospitality during the project.

Fig.6 Plan and section (1:40)



Appendix 1 Recorded contexts

Context	Description
000	Modern humic topsoil, up to 0.2m thick.
001	Yellow clay <i>liman</i> , redeposited material sealing roof of post, probable original sandbag fill.
002	Construction cut for post.
003	Yellow clay <i>liman</i> , redeposited material forming field bank into which post was constructed.
004	Concrete portion of post.
005	Yellow clay <i>liman</i> , redeposited material around entrance to post, probable backfill of access trench (number allocated to finds from this area).
006	Yellow clay <i>liman</i> , redeposited material in front of aperture of post (number allocated to finds from this area).
007	Yellow clay <i>liman</i> , redeposited material, silting within entrance corridor (number allocated to finds from this area).

Appendix 2 Finds catalogue

Context 001

Quantity	Nationality	Type
Large calibre ordnance		
13	-	Shell fragments assorted
2	UK	Shrapnel discharge plate
1	UK	Shrapnel ball
Mortars/grenades		
1	Ger	Stick grenade head/cup
3	UK	No. 36 grenade (1 RG with gas check plate, 1 with pin, 1 minus pin)
SAA		
4	UK	.303 rounds complete (1914:1 1915:2 Und:1)
11	UK	.303 cases (1915:4 1916:5 1917:1 Und:1)
1	Ger	7.62mm case undated
1	UK?	Shotgun cartridge, (possible Stokes primer?)
2	UK	Full 5 round chargers (1 early type , 1 late, headstamps 1916/17 where visible)
17	UK	Chargers, empty
Other		
1	UK	Mess tin lid
1	UK	Mills grenade fuse tightener
1	?	Leather fragment (strap?)

Context 005

Quantity	Nationality	Type
Large calibre ordnance		
3	-	Shell fragments assorted
2	UK	Shrapnel discharge plate (18pdr?)
SAA		
1	UK	.303 Bullet loose
10	UK	.303 cases (1915:6 1916:3 1917:1)
1	Ger	7.62mm case Oct 1917
22	UK	.303 chargers empty, type indistinct
Other		
1	UK	Spade head rusted
3	?	Food tins
1	?	Bottle top
1	UK?	Bayonet tip fragment
1	Ger?	3-hole white metal button (shirt?)
1	?	Leather fragment (strap?)

Context 006

Quantity	Nationality	Type
SAA		
6	UK	.303 cases (1915:5 1916:1)
7	UK	Chargers, empty
Other		
1	UK	Mess tin lid
1	?	Food tin

Context 007

Quantity	Nationality	Type
Large calibre ordnance		
1	-	Shell fragment
1	UK	Shrapnel ball
Mortars/grenades		
1	Ger	Stick grenade head/cup
1	UK	No. 36 grenade gas check plate
SAA		
5	UK	.303 rounds complete (1916:3 1917:1 Und:1)
20	UK	.303 cases (1915:14 1916:4 Und:2)
16	UK	Chargers, empty
Other		
1	UK?	Cu alloy tunic hook