

# The excavation of a Saxon *grubenhause* at Itford Farm, Beddingham, East Sussex

by Richard James

with major contributions by

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*During the summer and autumn of 1998, a watching brief was maintained by Archaeology South-East (a division of University College London Field Archaeology Unit) during the construction of a wastewater pipeline between Lewes and Newhaven. Visual inspection of the pipeline easement to the north of Itford Farm, Beddingham revealed a number of cut features in the chalk bedrock. Excavation of the features revealed one to be an Early Saxon sunken-floored building (grubenhause) of 5th- to 6th-century date, from which a small but interesting assemblage of pottery was recovered. A boundary ditch of probable Saxo-Norman date was also investigated. Further features proved to be natural solution hollows in the chalk. No other structures were observed within the easement, but the discovery indicates the longevity of settlement at Itford Farm, and provides an interesting, albeit small-scale, example of shifting settlement patterns within the Ouse Valley.*

## INTRODUCTION

Between July and October 1998, Archaeology South-East, a division of University College London Field Archaeology Unit, undertook a watching brief along the line of a new pipeline linking the Lewes and Newhaven wastewater treatment works. The archaeological work was organized by Mott MacDonald, on behalf of Southern Water who funded the project. The route was just under seven miles (11 km) in length, running down the eastern side of the Ouse valley floodplain (TQ 423093 to 452007).

A preliminary desk-top assessment and walkover survey highlighted the historic importance of the lower Ouse valley (Barber & Dunkin 1998; James 2000). However, a geoarchaeological assessment carried out at the same time (by Martin Bates, University of Wales, Lampeter) indicated that prehistoric and early historic archaeological deposits were likely to be deeply buried by alluvium in most areas and thus invisible from the surface. Nevertheless, borehole data suggested a number of areas where shallower alluvial deposits rested on higher elements of the underlying landform. These areas would have originally formed drier interfacial zones (or ecotones), which would have been attractive resource-centres for early communities. One of these areas was plotted in the fields just north of Itford Farm, near Beddingham (referred to in the original reports as Land Unit 17 - TQ 433 059).

Following the machine stripping of the topsoil, visual inspection of this area revealed a number of features cut into the underlying chalk bedrock and combe deposits, 410 metres north of Itford Farm (Fig. 1), where the easement began to climb the valley side. These features were investigated by hand. Three of the features were found to be irregular hollows of probable natural origin (Contexts 13–15: Fig. 1). The remaining two were archaeological in nature, comprising an Early Saxon *grubenhause* (Sunken Floored Building) and a later, medieval ditch.

## RESULTS

### THE GRUBENHAUSE

The *grubenhause* was seen initially as a sub-rectangular cut (Cut 5, Fill 4), with the western side rather irregular in comparison with the other three edges. The feature was aligned east–west, with a length of 3.4 m and a width of 2.4 m. The extreme north-western corner was masked by the adjacent spoilheap (Fig. 2).

A quadrant was excavated in the north-east quarter of the feature, in order to ascertain its nature. It was found to be 350 mm deep with vertical sides. The quadrant was extended to the south-east, where a roughly circular post-hole, some 480 mm deep, was found cutting the chalk at the base of the main feature and hard up against its eastern edge (Context 9).

The south-west quadrant was excavated to try and locate an equivalent post-hole on the opposing,



Fig. 1. Site location plan.

western side of the feature. The proximity of the spoilheap and the less obvious edge on this side made it difficult to establish the true centreline of the feature at this point. An additional box extension to the quadrant succeeded in locating the post-hole (Context 7), which was slightly larger and deeper (580 mm) than that to the east (Context 9). The bedrock in this quadrant was found to be more irregular, with the southern edge forming a rough platform. No edge was present at all on the short western side, just an irregular ramp of chalk, although the bedrock had been quarried away around the mouth of the post-hole. The visual effect of this suggested that the feature had been terraced into the slope, an observation confirmed by the levels.

The fill of the main feature (Context 4), a homogeneous light grey-brown, compact silty-clay, containing frequent (>30%) small-medium (<40 mm)

rounded and sub-rounded chalk lumps, and occasional small, angular flint pieces, contained a significant quantity of Early Saxon pottery along with a few residual and intrusive sherds.

The fills of the two post-holes differed. The fill of Context 9 (Context 8) was practically indistinguishable from the main fill (Context 4). Three larger chalk blocks in the lower half of the fill may have been packing stones. Post-hole 7 contained three recognizable fills: a primary deposit (Context 6), a 'post-pipe' deposit (Context 11) and a packing deposit (Context 12) consisting of an almost solid concretion of medium angular chalk pieces set within a light grey-brown silty-clay matrix.

When the fill of the main cut (5) was completely removed, a number of small circular or ovoid areas of grey silt were observed spaced irregularly in the bedrock. These were investigated, and found to be shallow cylindrical stake-holes penetrating the

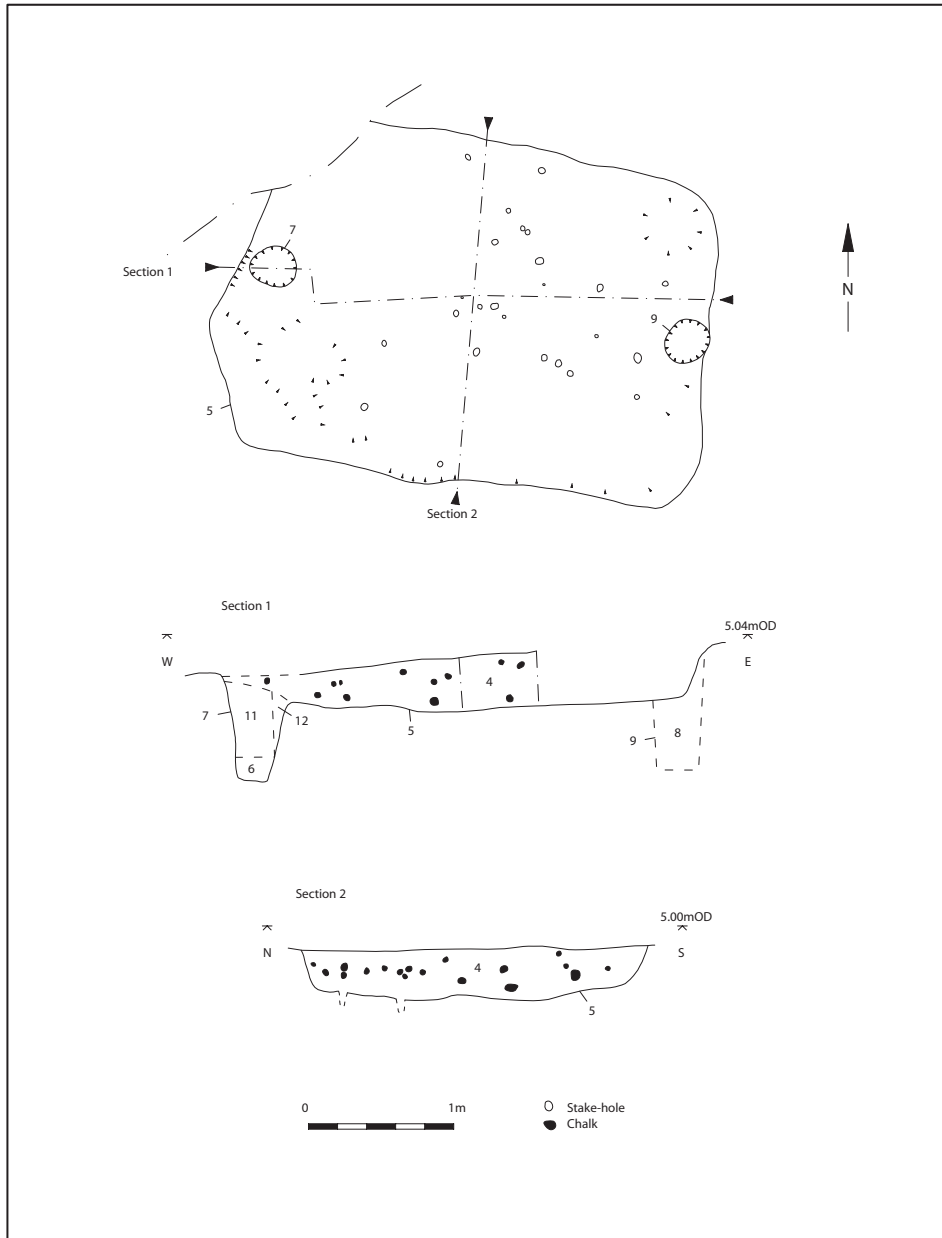


Fig. 2. The grubenhaus: plan and sections.

bedrock to depths not exceeding 150 mm. Some of the holes were vertical, while others were set on a slant. No obvious pattern was evident.

An area measuring 1.5 m from the edge was cleared all around the feature to check for the

existence of any other closely associated features. None were observed, although the heavily weathered nature of the chalk bedrock would have militated against the recognition of small discrete features such as stake-holes.

### THE DITCH

A linear spread of light grey-brown silty clay (Context 2), averaging 1.8 m in width, was observed crossing the easement on a north–south alignment some 22 m to the south of the *grubenhaus* (Fig. 1 only). The northern end continued beneath the baulk, while the southern end gradually petered out. This deposit was set within a thick band of chalk gravel (Context 3) which masked the bedrock just above the point at which the riverine alluvial deposits were encountered. A section excavated

across the feature revealed a very shallow linear cut (100 mm depth) with an irregularly flat base and gradual, slightly convex sides (Context 1). Several abraded sherds of a hard-fired, multicoloured, flint-tempered fabric were recovered, which, based on one surviving rim, probably date to the Saxo-Norman period (several similar sherds were recovered from the topsoil of the easement to the south of Itford Farm, and a few intrusive small, abraded sherds were found in the fill of the *grubenhaus*).

### THE FINDS

#### THE POTTERY By Luke Barber

The excavation of the Anglo-Saxon hut produced a small assemblage of pottery from two contexts: post-hole fill 8 (two sherds weighing 4 g) and the main hut fill, Context 4 (50 sherds weighing 562 g). Owing to the scarcity of published Early Saxon pottery in East Sussex, particularly from domestic sites, it was decided that the larger group (Context 4) should be published in full despite its relatively small size.

The group includes four small abraded sherds of later medieval pottery (weighing 13 g) in coarse sand with flint and moderate fine to medium flint-tempered wares. This intrusive material almost certainly derived from manuring and cultivation in the 11th to 13th centuries. Two sherds of Romano-British pottery are also present. These consist of a small chip of Samian (1 g) and the rim from an East Sussex Ware beaded and flanged bowl (15 g). Although the Samian is abraded and obviously residual, the bowl rim is in better condition and, owing to its probable 4th-century date, may be a late survivor in use with the Early Saxon material. If this were the case, a 5th-century date would be likely. However, the Saxon pottery in the current assemblage could easily be as

late as the later 6th century and as such the precise date of deposition cannot be established with certainty.

The Saxon assemblage consists of unabraded sherds of a generally moderate to large size suggesting they have not been subjected to repeated redeposition. Although many appear to have come from the same two or three pots, few conjoining sherds were located. Five handmade fabrics are represented.

#### Fabric ES/Q/AS/1

Fine sand-tempered. Common translucent to clear well-sorted sub-angular to sub-rounded quartz sand (0.25–0.75 mm) with rare iron oxide inclusions to 0.75 mm. This fabric group, which was also located at the 1997 Eastbourne College excavations (ECAT) (Barber in prep.), includes 6 sherds weighing 14 grams. No rimsherds are present.

#### Fabric ES/Q/AS/2

Fine/medium sand-tempered with organic inclusions. Common translucent to clear well-sorted sub-angular to sub-rounded quartz sand (0.25–1.5 mm) with 1–6% chaff/grass? inclusions to 6 mm long, frequently appearing as linear voids on the vessels surface. This fabric group, which was also located at the ECAT site, includes 35 sherds weighing 455 g. At least

five different vessels are present of which three have surviving rimsherds (Fig. 3). These consist of:

- 1) Jar with inverted rim. Heavy wiping marks are apparent on the surface, particularly internally, and there is a slight external burnish. Dark grey core with dark grey to black surfaces. Similar jars are present at Bishopstone (Bell 1977, 228–9, nos 5 & 6).
- 2) Jar with simple out-turned rim, lightly burnished externally. Mid-grey core with black inner surface and dull brown/grey external surface.
- 3) Crudely made ?bowl with simple rim. Black core and internal surface with patchy grey to black external surface.

#### Fabric ES/Q/AS/3

Fine to medium sand-tempered with rare inclusions of milky and iron-

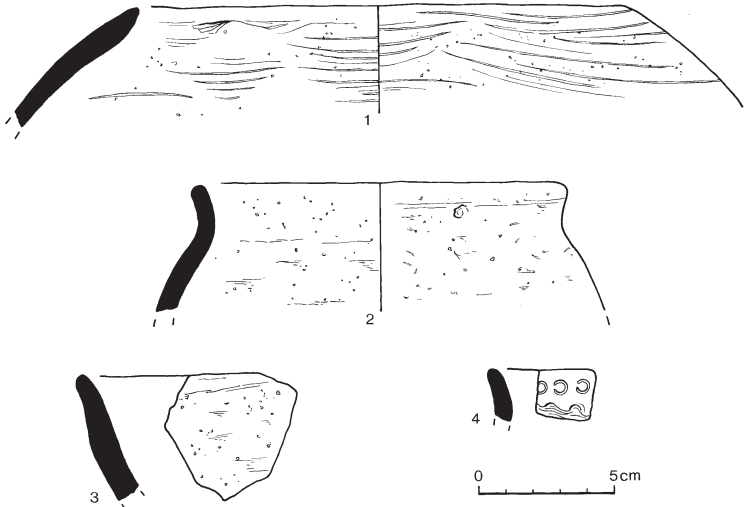


Fig. 3. Early Saxon pottery from the *grubenhaus*.

stained quartz to 2 mm, flint to 2 mm and shell to 2 mm. This fabric group, which was also located at the ECAT site, is represented by only one bodysherd weighing 15 g.

#### **Fabric ES/F/AS/4**

Moderate fine (to 1 mm) angular to sub-angular multicoloured (mainly grey and white) flint with rare (2%) shell to 2–3 mm and sparse (2–4%) milky quartz inclusions to 1.5 mm.

This fabric group, which was also located at the ECAT site, is only represented by one bodysherd weighing 2 g.

#### **Fabric ES/U/AS/1**

A very fine silty fabric with no visible tempering, though some very rare organic and sub-rounded quartz (to 0.1 mm) inclusions are visible under  $\times 20$  magnification. This fabric group, which was not located at the ECAT site, includes only one rimsherd weighing 4 g.

4) Simple, slightly out-turned, rim from a ?jar decorated with at least two horizontal rows of stamped circular decoration. Black core with dark brown/grey surfaces. Similar stamped decoration is present on a number of flint-tempered vessels at Bishopstone (Bell 1977, 230–31, no. 17).

It is interesting to note that four of the five fabric groups from this site can be paralleled at the ECAT site which falls within the same chronological time bracket. Similar fabrics were also present at the domestic settlement at Bishopstone (Bell 1977) where the main sources of stratified pottery were three sunken huts comparable to that at the present site. At Bishopstone the better-made, sand-tempered wares (Bishopstone Fabric 1 — probably equivalent to current fabrics ES/Q/AS/1–3) dominate the assemblage and this is a pattern reflected at Itford. It is interesting to note that at both sites the more poorly made flint-tempered wares (Bishopstone Fabrics 2 and 3) do not make up a large percentage of the overall site wares (15.5% by weight at Bishopstone). This is in contrast to the ECAT site where flint-tempered wares are well represented (53.4% of the Anglo-Saxon assemblage by sherd count) and were frequently, but certainly not exclusively, used for cremation burials. The

negligible quantity of flint-tempered pottery at Itford suggests that occupation had ceased prior to the rising dominance of the flint-tempered wares in the late 6th to 7th centuries. More assemblages will be needed from both domestic and funerary sites in order to explore the possibility of these two main fabric types correlating with vessel function through time.

#### **THE OTHER ARTEFACTS** by Luke Barber

The fill of the hut (Context 4) contained a small assemblage of other material. This includes two residual prehistoric flint flakes, a fragment of Roman glass, an illegible Roman coin (probably a 3rd-century radiate) as well as intrusive pieces of coal and West Country slate. Two pieces of iron, a dome-headed tack/farrier's nail and a nail fragment, are also present but are not diagnostic of exact date. Context 4 also produced four pieces of iron forging slag weighing 43 g.

#### **ECOFACTUAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE**

by Lucy Sibun

Five ecofacts were located within the hut fill. These consisted primarily of a small assemblage of poorly preserved bone fragments. This assemblage was found from two different contexts: the main fill (Context 4) and the fill of one of the post-holes (Context 8).

In addition to the bone, two saltwater mussel shells were located in Context 4. These are nearly complete and represent two different mature adult individuals. Environmental soil samples were taken from Contexts 4 and 6, but these did not produce any charred seeds although small quantities of charcoal was present.

#### **Animal bone**

Sixty-seven fragments of animal bone were recovered from two contexts (4 and 8). All the material is in a very poor state of preservation with total surface erosion. As a result, the majority of the assemblage remains unidentified. Context 4 produced 55 fragments and these included tooth fragments from cattle and sheep, possible red deer antler and one burnt fragment. The 12 fragments recovered from Context 8 included cattle teeth and rib fragments.

## DISCUSSION

### **THE GRUBENHAUS**

The feature represented by Context 5 is a classic example of a *grubenhäus* or Sunken Floored Building (SFB), a type of structure characteristic of the Early and Middle Saxon periods, although found less frequently later in this period. A large number of *grubenhäuser* have been excavated throughout England, and have tended to predominate in the archaeological record owing to their greater visibility and durability. This over-representation has tended to lead to false assumptions being made about sites of this period, especially as regards status and function. The discovery at the nearby site of Rookery Hill, Bishopstone, that *grubenhäuser* were greatly outnumbered by post-built structures was an

important development (Bell 1978, 39–41), a situation also seen at Chalton in Hampshire (four *grubenhäuser* against 59 rectangular buildings). They have often been decried in the past as 'hovels', although later writers have stressed the importance of these features for understanding early Saxon settlement (e.g. Jones 1979).

*Grubenhäuser* differ greatly in size and depth (see Appendix 1: a brief comparative list drawn from Rahtz 1976b, 408–52). This particular example falls within a comfortable mean size of 3–4 m in length and 2–3 m in width (e.g. Structure L at Bishopstone measured 3.7 m by 2.7 m: Bell 1977, 195). The depth of 350 mm (which may originally have been greater before the effects of over a millennium of erosion and colluviation) suggests a deliberate penetration of the bedrock rather than erosion through use, as

does the terracing into the hillslope. The best interpretation, given the small size of the feature, would be of a small central hollow set within a larger building at ground level, although a search of the area around failed to reveal any structural evidence outside Cut 5. However, if the main superstructure of the building was set upon surface ground-beams resting directly on the chalk surface (e.g. Building 49, West Stow, Suffolk: Welch 1992, 24), or in relatively shallow post-holes, this would have left no trace, especially given the weathered nature of the bedrock. However, given the sloping nature of the site, this arrangement seems unlikely, and no evidence survived to indicate either what form the superstructure took, or, in particular, the methods used to level the building. The post-holes at either end would have held two large timber uprights, which in turn would have supported a ridge-pole running the length of the building. This is the commonest type of arrangement (Rahtz 1976a, 75).

One of the major problems regarding *grubenhäuser* involves the use to which the sunken part was put. Was the base of the pit used as a working/living surface, or was there a suspended wooden floor at floor level, relegating the sunken portion to the status of a storage cellar? The latter is an attractive idea, as the cooling effects of the rock would aid preservation of foodstuffs and other perishable items, and the all-round air circulation would give the floor timbers some protection from decay. Welch points out (Welch 1992, 22) that the timber uprights would still be vulnerable and would eventually spread wet-rot to the floor-boards. They would, nevertheless, still be expected to have a longer life.

Two arguments against this interpretation are the ramp at the western end, suggesting an access point, and the possible stake-holes in the base of the pit. An alternative interpretation could be that the stake-holes relate to an industrial use of the building: perhaps a structure such as an upright loom or looms were used for weaving, the uprights being set in the ground and perhaps moved around, thereby forming an irregular pattern of stake-holes. By excavating a pit in the floor, extra working

headroom could be gained without any extra expense in building materials. Many *grubenhäuser* have produced clay loom-weights testifying to their use as weaving-sheds (e.g. Old Erringham, West Sussex: Holden 1976). Unfortunately, no artefacts relating to weaving were recovered from the fill. The homogeneity of the fill, with the absence of any tip-lines, might suggest that the pit had been backfilled with rubbish once it had ceased to be useful in its original function. The use of former *grubenhäuser* for rubbish disposal is well attested on other Early Saxon settlement sites (Arnold 1997, 49–50).

The excavated evidence is not strong enough to favour either of the above interpretations. All that can be said with confidence is that the feature represents a small domestic structure of Early to Mid Saxon date. No evidence of any others was observed, although the strong possibility remains that other *grubenhäuser*, and probably associated structures including post-built rectangular halls, may exist in the vicinity outside the pipeline easement, particularly upslope towards the modern road. A settlement here would have been in a good position to exploit both the river valley and the nearby downland environments. Settlement appears to have shifted to the south, with the later Saxon and Norman settlement centred around Itford Farm. This may have been due to marine transgressions gradually raising the river levels, culminating in disastrous floods in the post-Conquest period (Brandon & Short 1990, 106).

#### THE DITCH

The linear feature to the south of the SFB is most likely a truncated boundary ditch of later, perhaps Saxo-Norman date. It follows the contour around the north-east flank of a shallow, dry valley, and may have served to channel away excess flood water. The base of the feature was irregular, and it is possible that Context 2 was only the upper fill of a larger, deeper ditch feature, mostly filled with gravel. Flooding during the cutting of the pipe-trench in this area prevented further investigation.

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Appendix 1. Comparative list of selected SFBs to show size and depth range (see Rahtz 1976b).

Site name	Dimensions (m)	Depth (m)
Bishopstone, E. Sussex (SFB 1)	3.7 × 2.7	1
Bulmer, Essex	3.7 × 2.7	0.3
Crossgates, N. Yorkshire	4.3 × 2.3	0.6
Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxon.	3.5 × 3	0.7
Farnham, Surrey	5 × 4	0.6
Great Dunmow, Essex	9 × 6	0.2–0.3
Harston, Leics.	4 × 2	0.7
Itford Farm, E. Sussex	3.4 × 2.4	0.35
Keston, Kent	4 × 3.6	0.2–0.4
Linford Quarry, Mucking, Essex	3 × 2.4	0.9
Old Erringham, W. Sussex	4.9 × 3.4	0.3
Portchester, Hampshire	3.4 × 2.7+	0.45
Postwick, Norfolk	4 × 2	0.3
Worlington, Suffolk	3.6 × 2.4	0.6

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