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An Anglo-Saxon settlement at Cherry Orton Road, Orton Waterville, Peterborough

James Wright

Excavations close to the parish church of Orton Waterville revealed Anglo-Saxon settlement remains dating from the 7th/8th century to the 11th/12th century. These mainly comprised enclosure ditches of various phases, pits, post-holes, and one possible sunken-featured building. Some hand-made pottery, though undecorated and undiagnostic in form, may pre-date the 7th century.

This short article summarises the excavation results and their significance. Full details, with specialist contributions on the finds and environmental remains, can be found in the archive report (Wessex Archaeology 2004).

Introduction

Following field evaluation which indicated that the site of a proposed housing development at Cherry Orton Road, Orton Waterville, Peterborough contained Saxon and medieval features (AOC 2003), Wessex Archaeology undertook an archaeological excavation in 2003. The site (centred TL 1568 9627) covered c.0.25ha to the north of St Mary's parish church (Fig. 1). Underlying solid geology comprises either Cornbrash or Great Oolite Series, overlain by Pleistocene drift deposits of Fen and Valley Gravels (BGS 1971). The site lies on a gravel terrace at c.16m OD, approximately 1km south of the present River Nene and 400m from the floodplain.

Archaeological background

There are few known finds or findspots recorded in the Peterborough City Council Historic Environment Record (PCC HER) from the immediate vicinity, but prehistoric and Roman archaeological remains in the Nene valley are well documented. The area is also rich in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and other remains. In Peterborough (*Medehamstede*) a rich monastic site was founded in the mid-7th century and controlled much of the surrounding area until it was sacked by the Danes in 870. Seventh-century masonry survives beneath the present minster. At Orton Hall Farm, just

over 1km to the southeast of the site, there is evidence for continuity of settlement from the Roman to the early Saxon periods (Mackreth 1996), and a possible Saxon village was noted in the 1930s during gravel extraction in Orton Hall Park (PCC HER 01808c). Mid- and late Saxon features have been identified at Botolph Bridge (Kemp and Spoerry 2002). An early Saxon cemetery was recently excavated at Alwalton less than 2km to the west (HAT 1999) and there were finds of Anglo-Saxon burials at Woodston Hall (2.5km to the northeast) between the early 19th and early 20th century (PCC HER 0716).

No distinction is made between Orton Waterville and Orton Longueville in Domesday, and only one church is recorded. By the end of the 12th century the parish had been divided and there were two churches. *Orton* may derive from 'TŪN on the slope'; *Orton Longueville* is thought to be named after Longueville, near Bayeux, and *Orton Waterville* is presumed also to be named after a town in France (Ekwall 1959, 351). St Mary's church, Orton Waterville, retains some 12th century fabric (Salzman 1938), and the churchyard wall forms the southern boundary to the excavation site. Several 17th and 18th century cottages lay along Cherry Orton Road to the west, but the site itself appears to have remained as open ground, probably backlands, and Ordnance Survey and other maps show no buildings here.

Anglo-Saxon activity

A very small quantity of undiagnostic worked flint of presumed prehistoric origin and two sherds of Romano-British pottery, all redeposited in later features, were recovered, but otherwise there was no evidence for land use before the Anglo-Saxon period.

The earliest features (Phases 1a and 1b) comprise an arrangement of ditches, probably reflecting an enclosure and related field system. These have been assigned to the early to mid-Saxon period and provide evidence for the development of rural settlement beginning in probably the 7th/8th century and con-



Figure 1. Site location plan, showing excavation area and all features.

tinuing, within the excavated area, until the 11th or possibly 12th century (Figure 2). Phase 1a was represented by ditch 4 (the southeast, right-angled corner of an enclosure), pit 192 within this enclosure, ditch 1 to the south, post-hole cluster 258 and post-hole line 170. Phase 1b saw remodelling of the enclosure, with ditch 3 perhaps extending it to the south and ditch 2 replacing ditch 1. Subrectangular pit 94, possibly a sunken-featured building, and pit 203 have also been assigned to this phase, though it is possible that both belong to Phase 1a.

The precise chronological sequence remains uncertain, partly a reflection of the small quantity of datable finds (in this case exclusively pottery), and partly the difficulty in closely dating this undiagnostic material. This applies particularly to the early to mid-Saxon pottery, with the potentially earliest elements (organic-, igneous- and sandstone-tempered wares; 4, 26 and 20 sherds respectively) perhaps of pre-7th century date and representing 45% of the period assemblage (111 sherds). However, no features can certainly be assigned to this date, and the pottery may represent residual material from settlement in the vicinity (but beyond the limit of excavation), perhaps reflecting a shift of activity. The recently excavated cemetery, of probable 6th century date, at Alwalton (HAT 1999) may have been associated with this postulated settlement.

The 0.25ha excavated at Cherry Orton Road provides only a 'keyhole' view of the layout and development of the settlement, and one might compare this with the site recently excavated at Godmanchester (Gibson 2003), almost ten times as large as that at Cherry Orton Road. Even there, only part of the 6th – 7th century settlement was exposed and at least two alternative sequences of settlement development are put forward (*ibid.* 2003, fig. 42). Similarly, the proposed sequence at Cherry Orton Road might be reinterpreted, although the late Saxon phase seems to be fairly clearly defined. Despite this caveat, the nature of the ditches in particular suggests that they formed part of a system of rectilinear boundaries representing enclosures, fields and trackways that were subject to subsequent modification. Such ditches indicate development from the late 6th century onwards, with boundary features becoming of increasing significance, particularly in the 7th and 8th centuries (Reynolds 2003, 98). Their layout at Cherry Orton Road suggests that the focus of settlement lay northwest of the site in both phases.

A possible sunken-featured building and two pits provide some evidence for settlement in the early to mid-Saxon period, with small quantities of pottery and animal bone from the pits, but only one sherd and a fragment of animal bone from the sunken-featured building. This paucity of material is not unusual in this period. For example, the early Saxon settlement at Godmanchester produced only 50% of the pottery at Cherry Orton Road in terms of early to mid-Saxon sherds per 100m² of the site, with between six and 358 sherds recovered from the six buildings (Gibson 2003).

Identification of feature 94 as a sunken-featured building is somewhat equivocal as it was rather small. It measured just 2.3m by 2.1m and was 0.2m deep with steep sides and a flat base, and contained a single homogeneous fill. Furthermore, there were no associated post-holes. However, other examples without post-holes have been recorded and it would fall within West's Type-D classification (West 1985, 114), although with square rather than rounded corners. Two groups of early to mid-Saxon post-holes, as well as a late Saxon group, probably reflect fences or similar, rather than buildings.

Late Saxon/medieval development (Phase 2) appears to comprise modifications to the existing layout of ditches rather than a wholesale replacement as has been suggested at, for example, Little Paxton, where the settlement is dated to the 9th – 11th centuries (Reynolds 2003, 115; cf Addyman 1969). The attribution of features to this phase (10th – 11th century) at Cherry Orton Road is based largely on the presence of varying quantities of late Saxon pottery. More than 76% of the period total (103 sherds) comprises St Neots ware (65 sherds) and wheelthrown Thetford ware (13 sherds) assigned to the 10th – 11th and 11th – 12th centuries respectively. There is some indication at Cherry Orton Road for an enclosed settlement, extending northwest of the site, represented by partial re-cutting of ditch 4, ditch 5, and re-cutting of the northern part of ditch 3. The latter and ditch 130 may have formed the south end of a trackway, although little of the overall layout was exposed. No structural remains were identified within the limited area exposed, but hearth 243 might indicate the location of a building and post-hole group 6 a fence line, with pits 106, 167, 195, 246 and 260 perhaps also reflecting settlement.

Artefacts

Finds from the early/mid to late Saxon phases are, excluding pottery, limited to a few nails, a knife, a bone skate and lava fragments probably from a quern, though such a restricted assemblage is not unexpected from a rural settlement of this nature. The range of variation in the early to mid-Saxon pottery fabrics is also limited, but indicates that several sources could be represented. The most common types contain sub-angular quartz, but calcareous wares (tempered with shelly or oolitic limestone) are present in smaller quantities, as are fabrics containing sugary sandstone of a type known in Lincolnshire, or coarse sandstone typical of the Lower Carboniferous strata of Derbyshire and the Pennines. There are also fabrics with igneous-derived, granitic inclusions, possibly from the Charnwood Forest area of Leicestershire (Williams and Vince 1997). The presence of a relatively large proportion of St Neots and Thetford wares has been noted above, and there is a single sherd of unglazed Stamford ware.

Animal bones

The enclosure arrangements are likely to reflect stock control, and though the small assemblage of animal

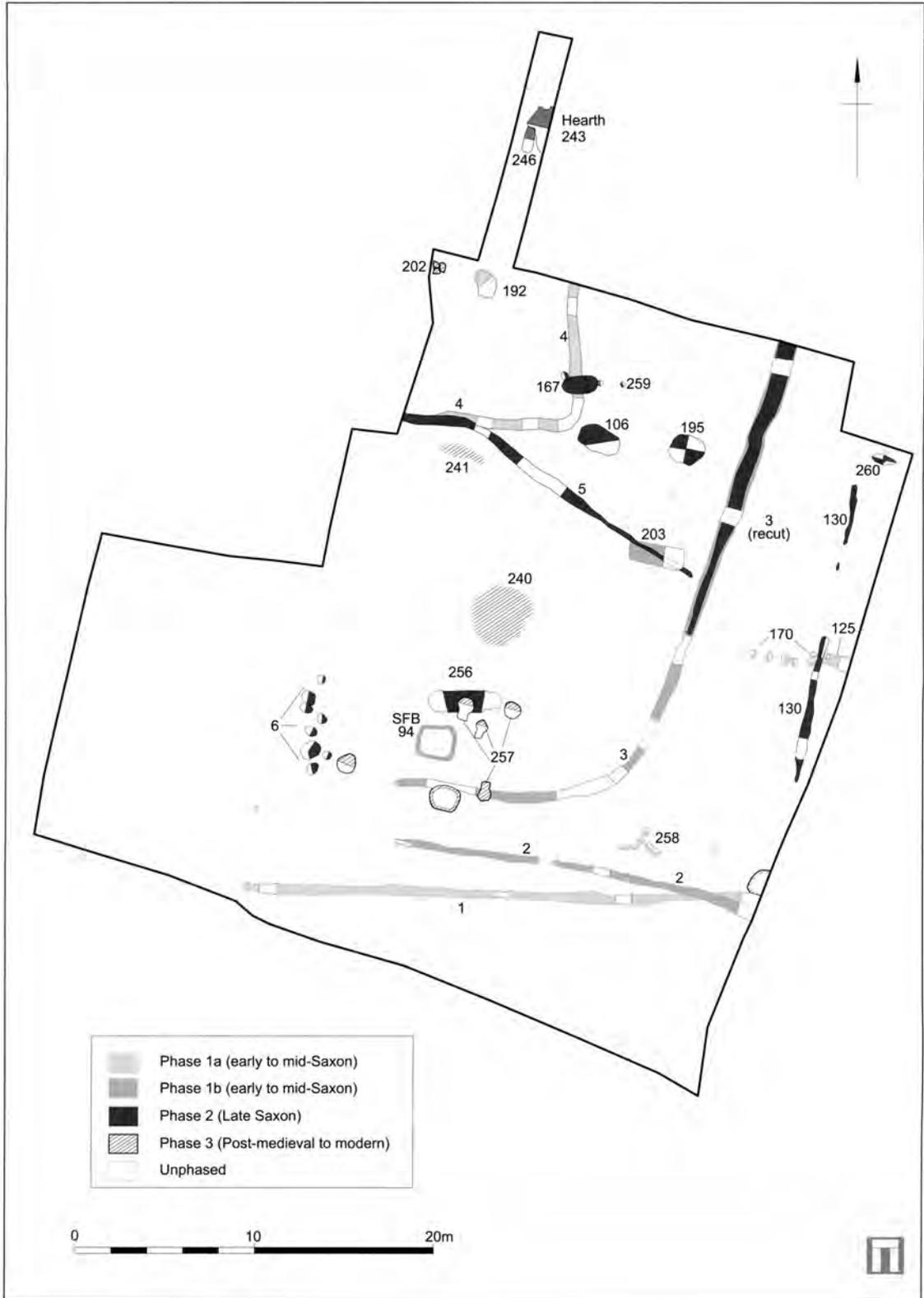


Figure 2. Phase plan, all features.

bone provides little information it does indicate that the common domesticates were exploited, probably mainly for their milk as well as for meat. Animal sizes are of a similar range to those at West Stow (Crabtree 1990) and, among the 51 identified bones, cattle and sheep/goat (though no positive identifications of goat) were most common and fairly equally represented, with fewer horse, dog and pig bones.

Plant remains

Charred plant remains reflect exploitation of both clayey (in the floodplain?) and sandy soils, though the soils may generally have been of low fertility. Grains of free-threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum sensu lato*) were by far the most common, barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) less so and rye (*Secale cereale*) relatively infrequent. A glume base and spikelet fork of hulled wheat (*Triticum dicoccum/spelta*) provides a further hint that this crop may have been reintroduced in the Anglo-Saxon period. Several probable or possible grains of leguminous crops were also recovered, most identified as broad bean (*Vicia faba*) or pea (*Pisum sativum*). Grains of oats (*Avena* sp.) were common, although it was not possible to say if these represent the wild or cultivated variety. Seeds of wild species, mainly common arable weeds, were abundant compared with many mid- and late Saxon sites in East Anglia where remains consist predominately of cereals and large grass seeds. Overall, the available evidence suggests that the earlier stages of crop processing had been carried out before the crops were put into store. The small quantity of charcoal with a high ratio of wood from the hawthorn/ *Sorbus* group may reflect dependence on scrub or marginal woodland for firewood.

Medieval activity

There were no medieval features and only a single sherd of pot, of 13th – 14th century date, probably reflecting a settlement shift. This postulated shift might coincide with the division of the parish into Orton Waterville and Orton Longueville by the end of the 12th century, and settlement in Orton Waterville may have subsequently focused around the church. Cherry Orton Road is likely to have been a medieval development, and the few post-medieval remains, including post-hole structure 257, limestone pad 202 and metalled surfaces 240 and 241, probably reflect backland activity associated with buildings along the street frontage.

Conclusion

Excavation at Cherry Orton Road, Orton Waterville has revealed a sequence of mid to late Saxon rural settlement probably spanning the 7th/8th – 10th/11th century with hints of both earlier and later activity. Subsequent evaluation of land south of the site recorded a sparse distribution of pits and gullies and

just two sherds of early/mid and late Saxon pottery (Upson Smith 2004). This has been interpreted as representing activity peripheral to the site under discussion, and provides additional confirmation that the main focus of Anglo-Saxon settlement lay further northwest. Despite the small area investigated at Cherry Orton Road, it is possible to discern evidence for the increasing significance of boundaries and a probable later, medieval shift towards the parish church. Similar sequences are encountered in other village centres, clearly demonstrated for example at Cottenham (Mortimer 2000). The 'clear need to research rural settlement patterns and their origin' (Wade 1997, 52) is a challenge which is being taken up, at Cherry Orton Road and elsewhere, by taking the opportunity to investigate vacant plots within villages before they are infilled with modern development.

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