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# Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCVI  
for 2007



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## Early Saxon and medieval remains adjacent to the round moat, Fowlmere

Paul Spoerry and Mark Hinman

with contributions by Paul Blinkhorn and Adrian Popescu

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*An Early Saxon building containing a noteworthy assemblage of pottery was found next to a horse burial. These, together with the remnants of other buildings and a network of ditches, begin to suggest early settlement of the area, with implications for the understanding of Fowlmere's origins.*

Fowlmere's round moat lies within the historic core of the village, to the south of the High Street on the west bank of Fowlmere Brook (Fig. 1). The settlement appears to have been a relatively prosperous medieval centre, growing from 36 'households' in Domesday Book to about 100 by 1279 (Hitch 1993). This growth was sufficient to warrant a Market Charter by 1207 (Keeling 1982, p. 160). Population declined in the fourteenth century following the general pattern of economic hardship and disease at the time. Fowlmere's later recovery was, however, good with more than 70 households mentioned in several mid- to late fifteenth-century sources (Keeling 1982, p. 155).

Although the round moat is believed to have been occupied in the medieval period, its origins may well predate the Norman Conquest. Round moats have received limited investigation and verifiable dating has not advanced much beyond the situation that enabled Jean Le Patourel to state in 1978 that they, as a type, might be of twelfth century date, pre-dating the general masse of rectilinear moated sites attributable to the thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries (Le Patourel 1978, p. 41). To this suggestion must be added evidence for fortified enclosures of the Late Saxon period, as excavated at Goltho, Lincolnshire (Beresford 1987), which represent an alternative dating and descriptive grouping for 'round moats' in the Eastern counties.

The layout of settlement in Fowlmere suggests that the village was originally centred on the round moat and church, but that the location of the manor at the west end of the High Street from the early fourteenth century (Keeling 1982, p. 157), allied with the increasing importance of the commercial activities along this road, resulted in a shift of focus to the north-west, away from the moat. Maps and local documentary evidence indicate that both of the historic properties

on the High Street that lie within the evaluated area were occupied by buildings from at least the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

The large bank and ditch of the round moat would have provided effective protection during times of stress and conflict, although it is not certain for whom. It is also likely that it performed non-defensive functions: it might have originally been an administrative centre, perhaps an earlier location for the manor, and could have served both as a domestic site and an agricultural store. If this was the case, then it would be expected to find evidence of activity quite close to the exterior of the bank and ditch, something that would be unlikely in a purely defensive or military site.

A. C. Yorke, in an early investigation of the earthwork, suggested that the entrance to the moat was on the north-western side, based on observation of existing earthworks at the time (Yorke 1909). If correct, this would indicate that the original access to this point from the east might have been more direct before the High Street was fully established. Such an earlier routeway might have traversed part of the development site that is the subject of this paper. Alternatively an eastern entrance to the round moat might have existed, for which a trackway might also be sought.

Yorke noted that the round moat is recorded on the parish enclosure map (1848; Cambridgeshire Record Office (CRO) Q/RD c 70) as 'White's Close' and that a Robert White had appeared on the 1447 rent roll (British Library Addit. Charters 27338). In 1887, when the owner of the moat, Mr Edward Wedd, planted a number of trees on the central platform within the enclosing bank and ditch, a surface paved with cobblestones and a well containing a large amount of 'broken drain-pipes' were unearthed. Yorke reported that around the turn of the century the moat was cleaned out on its northern side so that it could be used as a fishpond; the reference is unspecific, however, and has been taken to refer to the apparently embanked area to the north-east of the moat.

Yorke observed a hole across the entrance to the east side of the moat. While the nature of the moat silts is not recorded, he noted that they were six feet

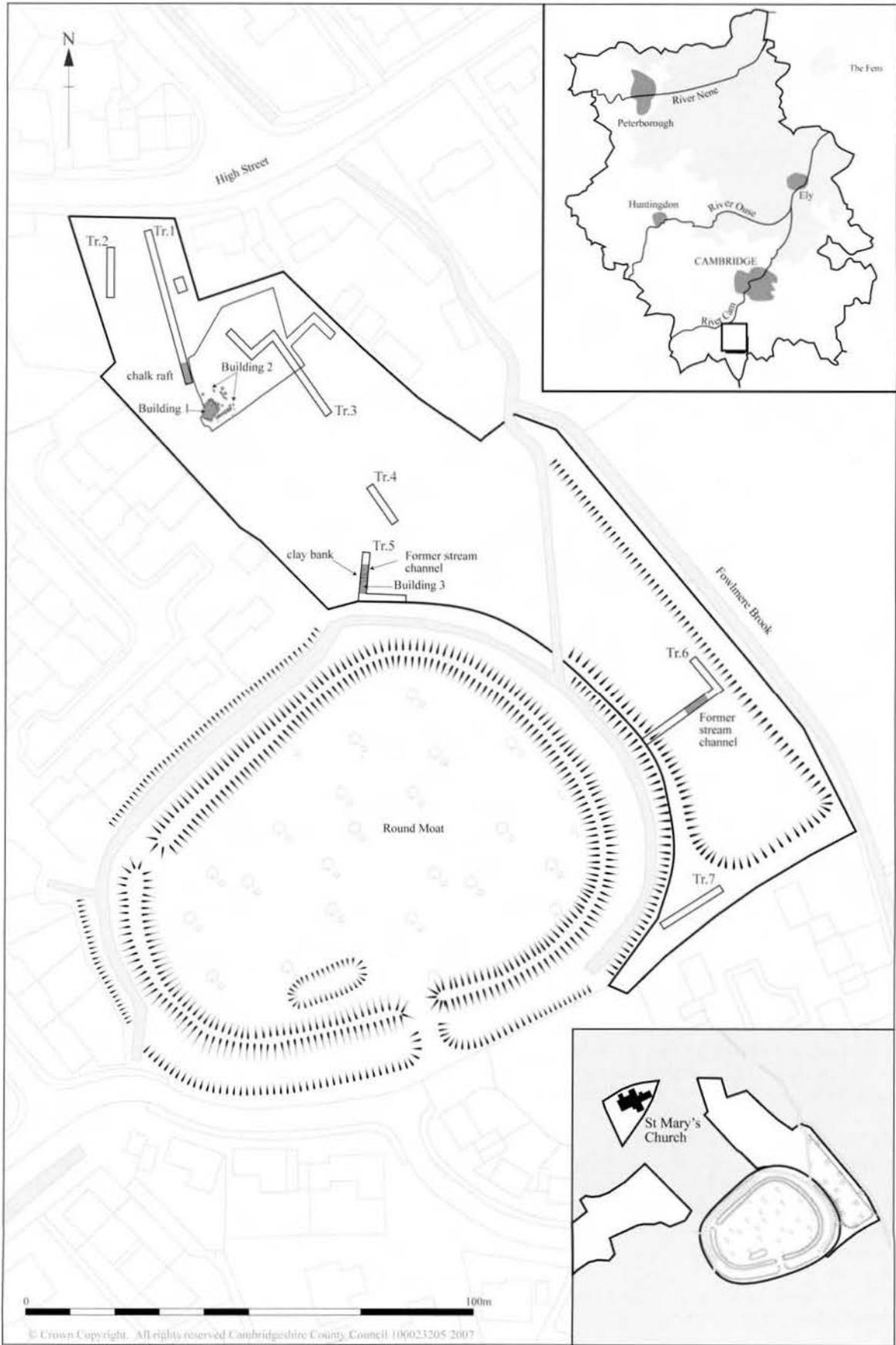


Figure 1. Site location.

thick, at which depth the excavators reached the bottom of the moat and also struck water. Although the pottery recovered during these excavations may be early medieval in date, Yorke's work reveals little about the age and character of the site.

More recently, a small excavation in 1975 took place in the area adjacent to the moat, between its north-western side and the parish church, where houses now stand. This produced a large quantity of medieval pottery dating from between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, with most sherds attributable to the thirteenth century. Some residual Roman buff and grey-ware bases, together with some sherds of Samian ware, were also recovered (Murphy 1975, p. 71).

In 1992, further small-scale work sought to establish the depth and state of preservation of the silts within the north-eastern sector of the round moat, many of which proved to have been removed by the cutting of drainage ditches during the late nineteenth century (unpublished archive held by CAM ARC; formerly the Archaeological Field Unit). The subsequent investigations carried out by CAM ARC in 1993 and 1999 occurred to the north and east of the moat (TL 4235 4590) and were necessary because of development for housing. Seven evaluation trenches were placed across the site, with the later excavation trench (and a smaller secondary trench) to the north.

### Early Saxon remains

A sunken featured building (SFB; Building 1; Fig. 2) was found in the western part of the excavated area. It was sub-rectangular in plan, measuring roughly 4.50 metres east to west by 3.65 metres north to south. Internal post and slot impressions indicate the presence of wall and roof supports, although there were no apparent deposits associated with the habitation or primary usage of the structure. In addition to a varied ceramic assemblage indicating an Early Saxon date, which was scattered throughout the fills, subsequent infilling contained a moderate amount of animal bone, including bones from young cattle and sheep, which indicate the consumption of lamb and veal as well as of mutton and beef. Some of the sheep long bones had been split to extract the marrow. Along with domestic food waste, two sawn ram's horn cores and a fragment of worked and burnt red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) antler were recovered, suggesting craft working.

A large pit immediately to the east of the building contained the complete articulated skeleton of a small pony, buried on its right hand side with its head pointing towards the south and its legs flexed. Although undated, the burial's position in relation to the SFB suggests that the two might have been contemporary. Specialist examination of the animal's lower incisors suggests an age at death of seven years (Barone 1980), which is largely confirmed by the crown heights of

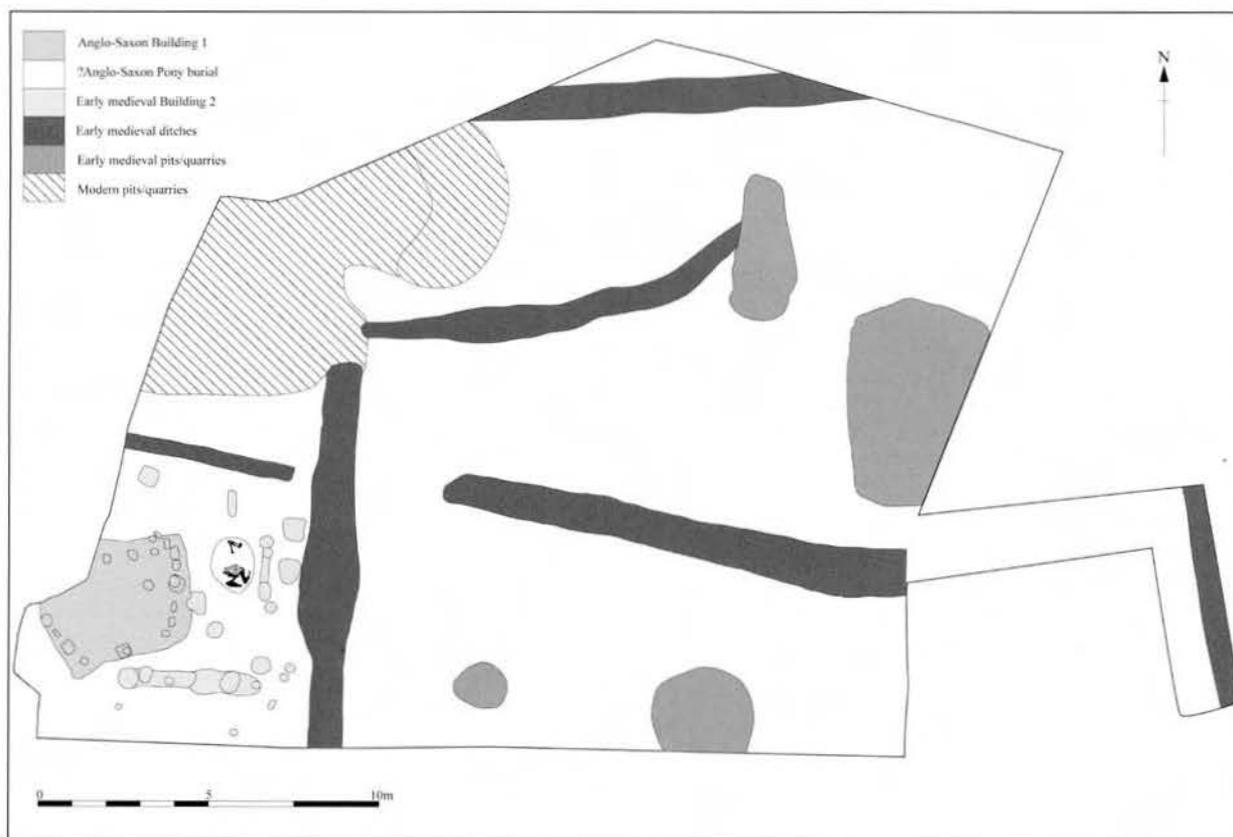


Figure 2. Plan of features found during 1999 excavation.

the loose grinding teeth (Levine 1982). Withers height calculations (after Kiese-walter 1888) indicate that the pony stood approximately 114.6 centimetres high at the shoulder or just under 12 hands. The mandible possesses vestigial canines but none were recovered from the fragmented cranium, suggesting a mare (Sisson & Grossman 1953, p. 399).

### Saxo-Norman and medieval remains

Elements of a second structure (Building 2) appeared to surround the SFB, although the apparent association between the buildings is assumed to be circumstantial since no parallels for this arrangement are known. This structure, built with posts, was roughly rectangular in plan, although its layout remains uncertain due to the high degree of root disturbance affecting this part of the site. No dating evidence was retrieved: while the similar alignment of the structure to that of a Saxo-Norman ditch to the east may suggest a contemporary origin, the building may well be earlier than the ditch. Post-in-slot foundations for timber buildings appear in this region to be a construction technique used from the Late Saxon period (later ninth century) onwards.

The western edge of another post-built structure (Building 3), which appears to have contained floors or occupation deposits rich in charcoal and organic matter, was found sealed beneath levelling deposits near the northern ditch of the round moat during the evaluation. This structure might have been bounded to the north by a clay bank, on the other side of which ran a channel, possibly a stream. Building 3 was overlain by a sequence of yard surfaces or abandonment layers, perhaps equivalent to those that sealed the SFB and thereby indicating a possible early origin. The limited available evidence suggests that Building 3 had fallen from use by the twelfth century at the latest.

Four ditches aligned roughly east to west were identified within the two excavated areas. Two others ran north to south, one of which contained two partial piglet skeletons. The recovery of small fragments of pottery suggests a Saxo-Norman date. The features probably served as field or strip boundaries or as drainage ditches flowing into the brook immediately to the east of the site.

With the exception of the easternmost of the north to south ditches, none of the features correspond, in terms of alignment, with the pattern of development along the High Street. This, together with the low densities of finds recovered from their fills, suggests that the site was now either at or beyond the limits of core settlement. A series of irregularly shaped and undated pits might result from small-scale quarrying for flint, chalk and gravel.

Evaluation trenches along the High Street frontage revealed medieval layers surviving to 0.30 metres deep while, closer to the round moat, a 3.5 metre-wide chalk rubble feature of relatively recent origin was found (Fig. 1). This might indicate the position of

a yard or footing of a building, or possibly the former line of a metalled track.

Evidence from trenches placed between the round moat and the brook suggests that this area never served as a fishpond, although it does appear to have formed a wet marshy area. Its deceptively embanked appearance results from the fact that the area is surrounded by other landscape features: on its north-eastern, western and north-western sides by the embankment of the brook, by the round moat outer 'bank' or upcast zone, and by its outfall channel respectively. In more recent times, the area appears to have contained a watercourse on its north-eastern side, presumably a pre-canalised line of the brook, which might have been a deliberate attempt at drainage. It therefore seems likely that the eastern approach to the round moat was in earlier times very wet and perhaps impassable.

Examination of the south-eastern edge of the round moat suggests that the ground level here was increased (up to 0.50 metres), perhaps in the Late medieval period and more recently further layers have been deposited here. The north-eastern edge of the round moat similarly contains much made-up ground (up to 1.5 metres), including further layers that probably resulted from clearing the moat. These deposits extend some 20 metres or more from the round moat ditch itself, suggesting deliberate efforts to raise and dry out the ground.

### *Pierced Roman coin*

*Adrian Popescu*

A Late Roman coin with a deliberate hole was recovered from spoil created by machine clearance, but is known to have come from the area above Building 1. No Roman features were found during the excavations. The hole was probably made after the coin ceased to be currency, indicating the strong possibility that it was used as an adornment, probably as a pendant, in the early Anglo-Saxon period when this practice was relatively common (King 1988, pp. 224–5; Moorhead 2006, p. 100). Most holed Roman coins have, however, been found in burials (White 1988, pp. 98–101). The position of the hole on the coin found in Fowlmere, in front of the bust, indicates no intention that it was to be worn suspended in such a way as to show the emperor's bust or the deity on the reverse. Since the coin was not found in stratified deposits, the date it was lost is difficult to establish but it can be assigned, with the necessary reserve, to the late fifth to sixth century (White 1988, p. 101). The custom of using Roman coins as adornments seems to have declined significantly after the end of the sixth century (Geake 1997, p. 32).

Constantine I (306–337)

Obv. IMP [CO]NSTANTINVS [P F A]VG

Rev. [SOLI] INVI-C-TO COMITI, T-[F]//PLN

AE V 3.76g; 22mm; holed in front of bust (3 o'clock)

RIC VI, p. 133, no 122, London, c. mid 310

### The pottery

Paul Blinkhorn

The small ceramic assemblage consisting of 79 sherds (1.137 kilogrammes) is dominated by Early Saxon and later material. The Early Saxon fabrics comprise a range of chaff- and mineral-tempered pottery, typical of the handmade Anglo-Saxon ceramics of the period. They can be paralleled at numerous sites in East Anglia and the south Midlands, such as West Stow (West 1985). Two of the decorated vessels from Fowlmere (Fig. 3, nos 1 and 4) are in a fabric with sandstone inclusions and comprise most of the small group of sherds in this fabric type from the site. This suggests that such clays might not have been local and that the pots were the work of a 'specialist' potter from outside the immediate locality. Decorated sherds from at least three vessels were present.

The most remarkable sherd has long-bosses and incised designs (Fig. 3, nos 1 and 1a). Such vessels are said to be typical of those found in East Anglia and examples of variants of the style are known from many areas of eastern England, including Yorkshire, the north and east Midlands and East Anglia (Myres 1977, figs 218–88). As a result, they are considered to be typical of the areas settled by people of Anglian origin (Myres 1986, p. 64 and fig. 3), but they also occur outside these areas, such as the vessel from Eynsham Abbey, Oxfordshire (Blinkhorn 2003), and can also be found outside the 'Anglian' areas of the Continent.

The form of the vessel is very distinctive, with sharply carinated shoulders. These vessels have close affinities with contemporary Norwegian pottery (Myres 1977, 43b). Myres stated that bossed vessels with long necks are particularly well represented in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk (*ibid.* 10b), although this vessel does not possess this distinctive feature. It is, however, very close in style to other vessels from Cambridgeshire, such as those from Little Wilbraham and, in particular, from Linton Heath (Myres 1977, fig. 260). The latter vessel (corpus no. 2619) was found in association with a spear head dated to c. 500 AD (*ibid.* 44a) and Myres dates long-boss vessels generally to the first half of the sixth century (*ibid.*).

It is difficult to ascribe anything other than a general date to the stamped sherd (Fig. 3, no. 4), although vessels with decoration like this can be given a date that falls within the range suggested by the bossed vessel. Stamped vessels are known from the fifth century, but most date from the sixth century (*ibid.* 19–22). This sherd has four complete and two partial stamped impressions of Briscoe type 5g iv and a fragment of an incised line, which suggests that the original vessel might have been decorated with stamped pendant triangles, a common East Anglian decorative scheme of the sixth century (*ibid.* 53a).

Three small sherds were noted with fragments of combed linear decoration. Due to the small sherd size, the overall decorative scheme could not be identified and thus it is only possible to give the sherds a general fifth- or sixth-century date.

Two sherds were noted with scored surfaces (e.g. Fig. 3, no. 5). Vessels with such surface enhancement are rare finds on Early Saxon sites; their few locations are widely distributed and occur at places such as Mucking, Essex (Hamerow 1994) and Eynsham Abbey, Oxfordshire (Blinkhorn 2003). Vessels like these can only be dated to within the Early Saxon period, although the technique was used on both British and Continental pottery of the pre-Roman Iron Age (Hamerow 1994, p. 31).

All of the pottery of diagnostic form (illustrated in Fig. 3) occurred within the fill of the SFB and all of the sherds were from jars or bowls. A total of 14 rim sherds were noted, of which eight were from jars and six were from small bowls. All of the vessels are typical of those from settlement sites and the jars, apart from the decorated vessels, were all baggy forms with no remarkable features (e.g. Fig. 3, no. 2). The bowls are similarly undistinctive, with the exception of that illustrated in Fig. 3, no. 3. This vessel is exceptionally well-made, with thin walls and a well-smoothed and burnished outer surface.

### Catalogue of illustrated sherds

- 1 Long-boss vessel. Dark grey fabric with variegated light brown and dark grey outer surface. Both surfaces are smoothed and lightly burnished. Fabric: crushed sandstone grains up to 2mm, some calcite cemented, rare ferruginous grains. Moderate sub-angular free quartz grains c. 5mm.
- 2 Rim and shoulder from jar. Mid-grey fabric with buff and dark grey variegated outer surface. Both surfaces are unfinished. Fabric: sparse sub-rounded white and grey quartz up to 2mm. Very rare ferruginous and/or calcite-cemented sandstone, ironstone and red quartz up to 1mm, very rare angular chalk up to 3mm. Very rare gold mica platelets up to 1mm. Rare rounded quartz pebbles c. 5mm.
- 3 Bowl. Uniform black fabric with well-finished, smoothed and burnished outer surface. Dense sub-angular white and clear quartz up to 1mm, most 5mm or less. Some larger polycrystalline grains, rare rounded chalk up to 1mm.
- 4 Stamped sherd. Uniform black surface. Fabric as No. 1.
- 5 Incised sherd. Dark grey fabric with brown outer surface. Fabric as No. 3.

### Conclusions

The recent work at Fowlmere has produced the first direct evidence for the Early Saxon origins of the village. The SFB is the first to be identified locally and others might survive nearby. Soil thrown up from cleaning or recutting the round moat was found to contain only abraded Romano-British finds. This material seals earlier timber structures, implying that the occupation history here is complicated. Although the excavation was limited in scope, it is tempting to suggest a zone of Early Saxon settlement between the round moat and the position where the parish church was later placed. The key to better understanding lies in future excavation.

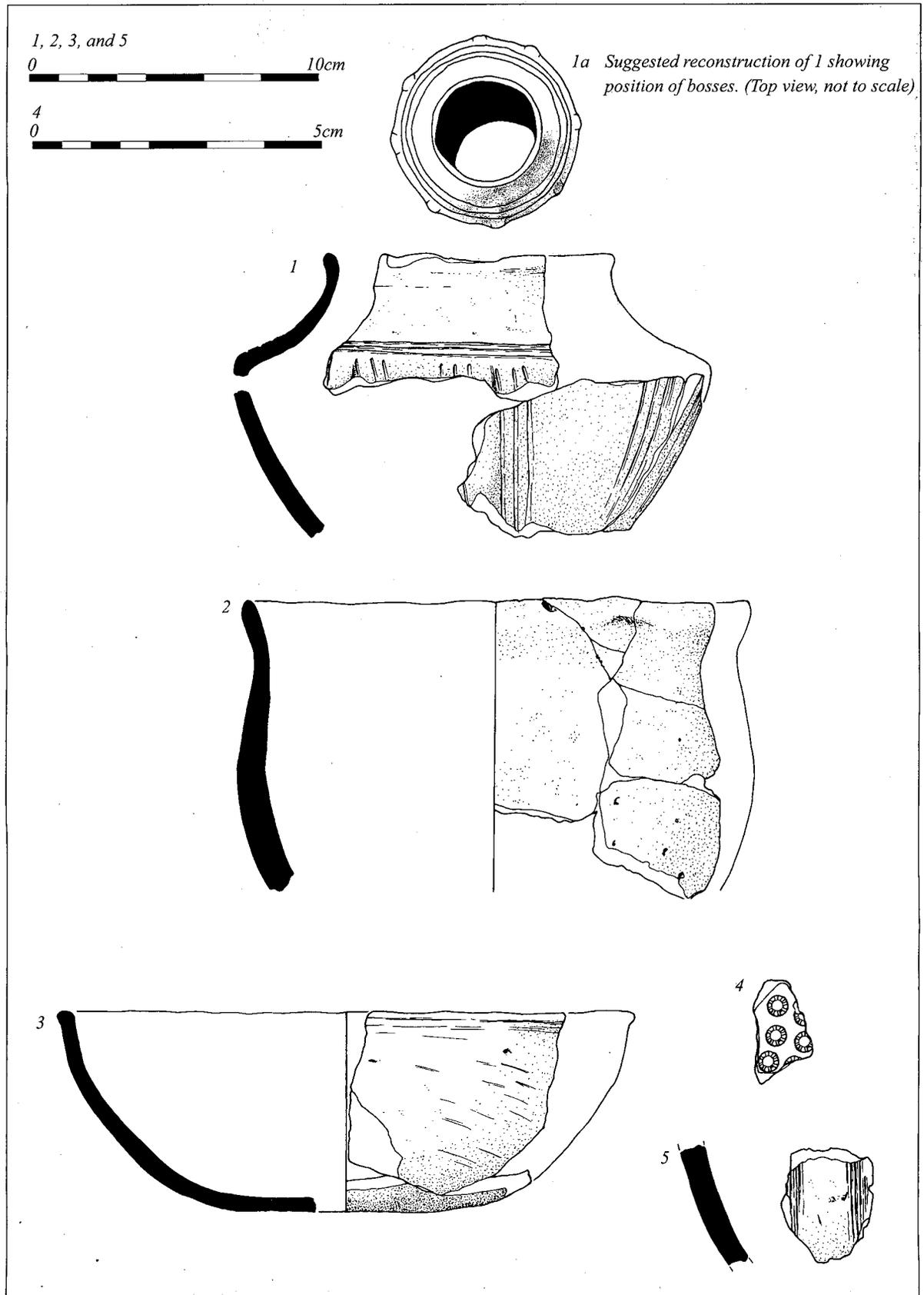


Figure 3. Early Saxon pottery. 1a shows the suggested positions of pushed-out bosses.

The relationship between the other buildings and adjacent ditches remains unclear, although a degree of continuity is implied by their common alignment. It does appear, however, that by the thirteenth century the area had reverted to open ground since no later finds were recovered from the upper fills of these ditches: the whole of the excavated area was subsequently covered by a single grey clay silt layer beneath topsoil.

A shift in habitation is indicated by the abandonment of the network of Saxo-Norman ditches and relative paucity of finds, suggesting that the area was given over to agricultural use, which perhaps occurred as early as the twelfth century. If the results of this excavation are taken to imply a wholesale shift in settlement core, this would be considerably earlier than the previously suggested date of the shift of the settlement, which has been linked to the establishment of a manor on higher ground to the north of the church in the early fourteenth century. An alternative time for this reorganisation might have been when lands were transferred following the Norman Conquest, with the ditched enclosures recorded in the excavation ceasing to be maintained from then onwards. In either case, the emphasis of the settlement changed from a spread of occupation adjacent to the round moat – which might have been used as a Saxon proto-manorial centre and towards which the line of Ashwell Street appears to have been kinked – to a village with a High Street and properties arranged along it.

The new findings also provide information about the topography of the site and, in particular, the position of possible watercourses. These have implications for local ground conditions and access routes to the moat, as is perhaps reflected by the possible chalk surface found between the High Street and the earthwork. Finally, the embanked area adjacent to the moat can now be discounted as a fishpond, its origins evidently being an accidental grouping of banks serving various functions.

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