
Medieval Archaeology at the Old Great North Road, Water Newton, Cambridgeshire

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Excavation adjacent to 2 Old Great North Road, Water Newton revealed archaeological features dated as 9th to 13th century, a single post-medieval feature and modern layers and deposits associated with the use of the site as a garden and yard attached to the adjacent farmstead at 2 Old Great North Road.

The medieval archaeology comprised three parallel ditches, representing three successive demarcations of a boundary aligned perpendicular to the Old Great North Road, and a series of pits and short linear features representing activity within the plot defined by the boundary. Possible beamslots may represent a street frontage structure, possibly indicating that this plot represents a toft and croft-type peasant holding.

Although the Old Great North Road site is small, and the evidence regarding the nature of the activity carried out there is somewhat inconclusive, its identification comprises a significant addition to the corpus of information regarding Water Newton in the early medieval period. It increases the number of locations in the village at which Saxo-Norman activity has been identified and it can be confirmed that activity ceased, or began to cease, here at or around the 13th century; this is consistent with the theory that, at this time, there was a shift in the focus of settlement to the area around the church of St Regimius, the current building of which was constructed in the 13th century.

Introduction

In June 2012, Archaeological Solutions Limited (AS) carried out an open-area archaeological excavation on land adjacent to 2 Old Great North Road, Water Newton, Cambridgeshire (Fig. 1).

The excavation revealed archaeological remains of medieval date (10th to 13th century; Phase 1), some limited post-medieval activity (Phase 2), and extensive disturbance, mostly within the western part of the site, of late post-medieval and modern date (Phase 3).

Background

The Site

Water Newton is a small village in the district of Huntingdonshire, located c. 10.6km to the west of Peterborough. The site lies in an area of archaeological potential on the northern side of the Old Great North Road which runs broadly parallel to the modern A1. The excavation site was situated between 2 Old Great North Road to the west and Hop Corner to the east (Fig. 2). At the time of excavation, it comprised a roughly rectangular plot of scrub/grassland with an area of c. 933m².

Archaeological and historical background

The site is located in an area that has yielded a wealth of Roman archaeological remains. Settlement and industrial activity flourished following the establishment of a fort (Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (CHER) No. 05316) and a later civilian town at *Durobrivae* (CHER 01901) c. 1.2km to the south-east. Associated Roman sites, including villas (CHER Nos. 01710, 01876, 04457, 09094 and 09692; Greenfield 1958) and a large kiln complex (HER 09095), discovered by the antiquarian E.T. Artis, have been recorded in the surrounding area.

The earliest reference to a manor at *Niwantune* is in a charter dated to AD 937 (Cambridgeshire County Council 2002, 18). In AD 972, the manor of *Niwanton* was acquired for the Abbey of Thorney by Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester.

Despite this documentary evidence, physical evidence for Saxon settlement in the area is lacking until late in the period (Cambridgeshire County Council 2002, 18). Excavations south of Water Newton in 1958 at Elton Road (now beneath the A1) revealed evidence for a late Saxon hall and post-built stockade (CHER 1578; Green 1964). The hall itself has been dated to the 10th to 12th centuries while later partition of the enclosure occurred in the 12th to 13th centuries (Cambridgeshire County Council 2002, 18). The location of this site, south of the later village, suggests

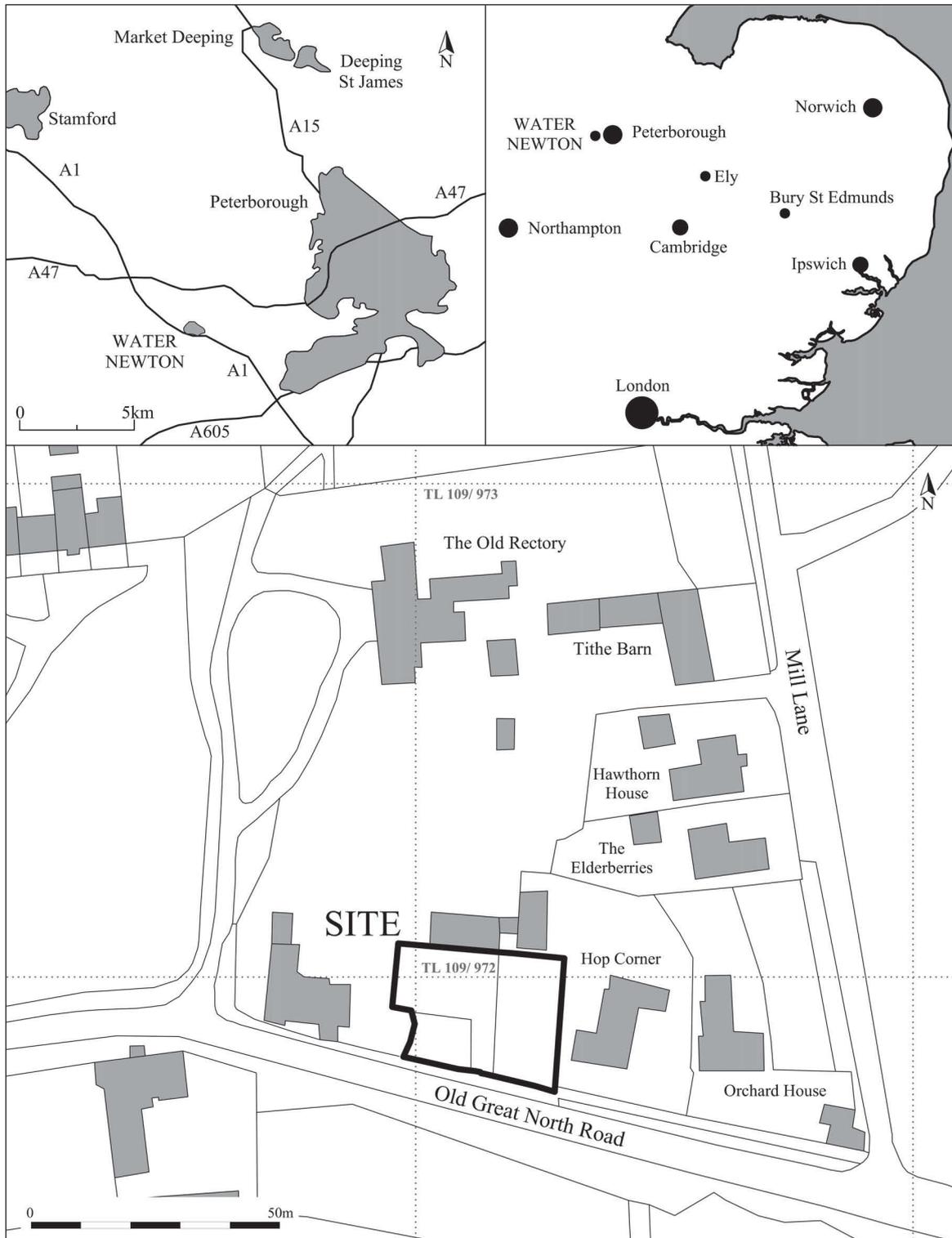


Figure 1. Site location.

An arrangement of three ditches would appear overly elaborate for the marking of the boundary of what is considered, based on artefactual evidence, to be a low-status landholding. Boundaries are 'conservative features' and can frequently be seen to have survived over long periods despite other changes to the landscape (Jones & Page 2006, 31); it is unlikely that the boundary itself changed or moved but the features marking it may have been modified over time. Indeed, there is some evidence for reworking of the boundary features; F1123 is clearly a recut of the earlier feature F1125.

Hurst (1971, 533) has suggested that medieval peasant holdings were subject to regular reorganisation as they passed from one generation to the next. Recently, this has been revised to an average period of 70 years (Gilchrist 2012, 232). Smith (2010, 72) notes that at the medieval settlement of Westbury, Milton Keynes, major reorganisation occurred every 50 to 60 years, in contrast to other medieval villages excavated in the Milton Keynes area where change was much slower. It is possible that the successive demarcation of the same boundary may be the result of this type of reorganisation, although it is difficult to identify the intervals at which this occurred at this site from the available evidence.

A series of shorter, east to west aligned, linear features (F1073, F1075 and F1077) towards the southern part of the excavated area were identified as beamslots, and as such may represent elements of a structure within the 'toft' part of the holding. These were not particularly substantial features, suggesting that any structure that they formed part of may have been of quite flimsy construction.

Evidence from the faunal and archaeobotanical assemblages is suggestive of a mixed agricultural economy. The animal bone assemblage, dominated by sheep/goat and cattle with pig, horse and dog also present, would appear to be consistent with the norm for the period in East Anglia (Wilson 1995, Wade 1996, Bedwin 1992, Hutton 2004, Sykes 2006). Wheat, exclusively of a free-threshing variety, was the dominant cereal species in the archaeobotanical assemblage and is understood to have been an economic staple during this period. The pottery assemblage is unremarkable for the area and fits neatly with the suggestion that the site represents a fairly low status peasant holding. It comprises mostly local St Neots and other shelly wares. Unglazed Stamford ware is also present.

The assemblages of artefacts that may be regarded as refuse material (animal bone and pottery, for example), recovered from the medieval features, are small, perhaps suggesting that activity of this date was not intense. Furthermore, evidence from the archaeobotanical assemblage indicates that the site was probably located close to areas of human activity but may have been on the periphery of the settlement. However, evidence from Wharram Percy, East Yorkshire, where activity of similar date has been recorded, shows that the tofts here were kept remarkably clean and contained little refuse material (Beresford & Hurst 1990,

44), indicating that a lack of refuse material does not equate to a lack of occupation.

Later activity

Following the 10th to 13th century (Phase 1) activity it appears that the site was abandoned or turned over to an archaeologically-invisible agricultural usage until the modern period. Pit F1047, which contained a partial horse burial, represents the only identified post-medieval activity at the site.

The site is depicted as comprising the garden of a property to the west on the 1674 map of Water Newton (Smith 1674). The 1837 Tithe Map (Archdeaconry of Huntingdon 1837) depicts the site as the garden of the adjacent Grade II listed 18th century former farmhouse and inn at 2 Old Great North Road (CHER DCB3072). Much of the late post-medieval/modern activity (Phase 3) recorded during the excavation, comprising cobbled surfaces and levelling layers, may be consistent with this use of the site as semi-agricultural land or gardens. Pottery from the surfaces in the south-western corner of the site and from Pit F1115 is of 17th to 18th century date, while that from the large spread of material in the north-western corner is of 18th to 19th century date. By the time that the 1902 Ordnance Survey map was published two narrow outbuildings had been established within the site. Two modern walls identified at the southern edge of the excavated area, which truncated several earlier features, clearly represent buildings shown in this location on the 1902 and 1950 25 inches to 1 mile Ordnance Survey maps (Ordnance Survey 1902, 1950).

Discussion

The function of the site in the 10th to 13th centuries

The presence of a possible boundary aligned perpendicular to the Old Great North Road would appear to indicate that the recorded Phase 1 (c. 10th to 13th century) archaeology represents a roadside enclosure.

Although it is tempting to suggest that, as a roadside plot, the site represents a medieval toft/croft peasant holding all that can be said with any certainty is that the Phase 1 archaeology comprises Saxo-Norman/medieval features representing a possible boundary and domestic activity.

The Old Great North Road site and the development of medieval Water Newton

Although the extent of medieval Water Newton remains uncertain, it is generally accepted that from the 13th century settlement in the area was focussed on the church of St Regimius, to the north (Cambridgeshire County Council 2002, 5, 24). The enclosed site recorded at Elton Road (CHER 1578; Green 1964) appears to have been in use up until the late

12th to 13th century and O'Brien (2002) asserts that the earlier Saxo-Norman settlement was focussed on this site, to the south of the current village.

The dating evidence recovered from the Old Great North Road site indicates that Phase 1 activity is likely to have been broadly contemporary with the use of the Elton Road site. Its position in relation to this suggests that it may have lain close to, but possibly on the periphery of, the main area of the earlier Saxo-Norman settlement. The 12th/13th century shift in the focus of settlement to the north provides an obvious explanation for the reduced level of activity at the site in the later medieval and early post-medieval periods.

However, Saxo-Norman remains, earlier in date (AD 875–1150) than those at the Old Great North Road site and representing domestic occupation, have been recorded further to the north, at Mill Lane (O'Brien 2002). It is also possible that a church existed at the site of St Regimius before the existing 13th century structure was erected. Indeed, it is possible that the undated manor house located to the west of the church (ruinous by 1742) was originally a Saxon foundation; the construction of a church adjacent to a manor house has been identified as a characteristic of late Saxon 'thegnly culture' carried out by the elite in order to distinguish themselves from the less well-to-do (Senecal 2000).

If late Saxon activity in the Water Newton area was as widespread as this evidence suggests, then the Old Great North Road site may not have been located at the margin of the settlement at all, making it perhaps more likely that domestic occupation did occur here.

That activity at the site should effectively cease in the 13th century (though some elements of the pottery assemblage may extend in to the 14th century) may be unusual in light of its proximity to the Great North Road. During the 13th century the route was growing in importance as a major route from London to northern England (Connor 2009, 89). The Great North Road fuelled the growth of other settlements through which it passed (O'Brien 2002) and the current site would have been an ideally suited location to take advantage of passing trade.

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest significance of the evidence obtained from the excavation here is that it complements the results of previous work in the area to contribute to a greater understanding of the development of medieval Water Newton. Like Cambridge University's work on continuously occupied rural settlements (CORS), it has provided evidence to inform, develop, and challenge existing notions regarding past patterns of occupation in this rural settlement (Lewis 2007, 162). The CORS project has demonstrated that numerous small-scale investigations, in this case test-pitting, within and around rural settlements can assist in establishing the extent, distribution and date of human activity within, across and around that set-

tlement (Lewis 2010, 84). Clearly, if this is the case, then a concentration of small-scale development-led interventions, such as that described in this paper, within the core of a rural settlement can have a similar effect. However, as Thomas (2006, 34) notes, the nature of such work has not lent itself to meaningful publication on a settlement by settlement basis. In Leicestershire, a project aimed at synthesising the results of developer-funded work conducted in the cores of historic villages has been initiated to aid the study of medieval rural settlement (Thomas 2006, 34). The work conducted in Water Newton may make a notable contribution to such a project in Cambridgeshire.

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