

WORKING AT THE MARGINS: EARLY MEDIEVAL ACTIVITY AT LONG LANE, STOKE HOLY CROSS, NORFOLK

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(with contributions by SUE ANDERSON³, REBECCA SILLWOOD and
VAL FRYER, and with illustrations by DAVID DOBSON¹)

Introduction

Pre-development excavations in 2014 at land off Long Lane in the village of Stoke Holy Cross, Norfolk (TG24100181) discovered an area demarcated by ditches, within which the remains of apparent agrarian or industrial activity dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries were identified.

Although these remains offer few precise insights into the period from which they derive, they represent a unique addition to the corpus of early medieval rural activity known from the region. The findings add to our knowledge of early manorial systems and the nature of rural industrial activities undertaken in Norfolk around the time of the Norman conquest, a period of great change. This report presents a summary of the excavation findings and their significance.

The site is located at the far east of Stoke Holy Cross, c. 7km south of Norwich, and occupies an elevation of c. 41m AOD (Figure 1). It is situated on a west-facing slope overlooking the Tas Valley, with the watershed draining into the river Tas via Stoke Holy Cross to the west, and Caistor St Edmund to the north-east. The underlying geology at the site consists of Crag Group sands and gravels overlain by Lowestoft Till boulder clay.

Archaeological and historical background

Locally, both prehistoric and Romano-British remains have been recorded in abundance. Cropmarks of a Neolithic long barrow, a Bronze Age round barrow and a probable Iron Age field system have been identified in the near vicinity. The frequency of remains dating to the Romano-British period is largely due to the presence of the *civitas* capitol of *Venta Icenorum*, located just c. 2km north-west of the site.

Occupation at Stoke Holy Cross in the Late Saxon/early medieval period is documented in the Domesday Book, which records that *Stoche* was a populous settlement with 63.5 households and a total tax assessment of 5.7 geld (Morris 1984). Although a church is listed in Domesday, the remains of this structure have not yet been identified. It was most probably located on the site of the current parish church dedicated to the Holy Cross, parts of which have been dated to the late

thirteenth century. A surviving fourteenth-century chapel is present in the village at Blackford Hall, previously the site of a crenellated medieval mansion.

The medieval village appears to have developed as a linear settlement arranged along an axis of Long Lane and Norwich Road. The site therefore appears to have occupied a location probably at the far eastern extent of the village during this period.

The high population density recorded by the Domesday Book is well attested by extensive medieval earthworks identified in the vicinity of the site, including tofts, hollow ways, enclosures and a further moated manor (as recorded in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record). Such an abundance of activity is also suggested by the frequent recovery of Late Saxon and medieval artefacts from the site's surroundings.

Summary of excavation results

The excavation followed a geophysical survey of a proposed development site which identified a series of magnetic anomalies in its north-east corner. The topsoil and subsoil from a c. 1650m² rectangular area was mechanically stripped from over these anomalies, which exposed the top of the boulder clay sediments along with a number of archaeological features and deposits (Figure 2). These remains were systematically hand excavated and recorded.

Based on ceramics found at the site, all of the features and deposits discussed are considered to date from the eleventh-twelfth centuries, with some activity potentially extending into the thirteenth century.

The perimeter ditches

Three ditches were identified, all oriented NNW-SSE, which collectively appeared to demarcate a narrow, probably rectangular area approximately 20m wide. These ditches had an irregular form, with asymmetrical profiles, widths varying from 1.04m to 3.22m and depths ranging from 0.40m to 0.80m (this variation possibly enhanced by uneven horizontal truncation). They were filled with deposits of orange-grey mottled clay containing frequent charcoal flecks and occasional large, rounded flint inclusions.

The fills of these features contained a large assemblage of pottery which compellingly indicated an eleventh- to twelfth-century date, along with lava quern and a

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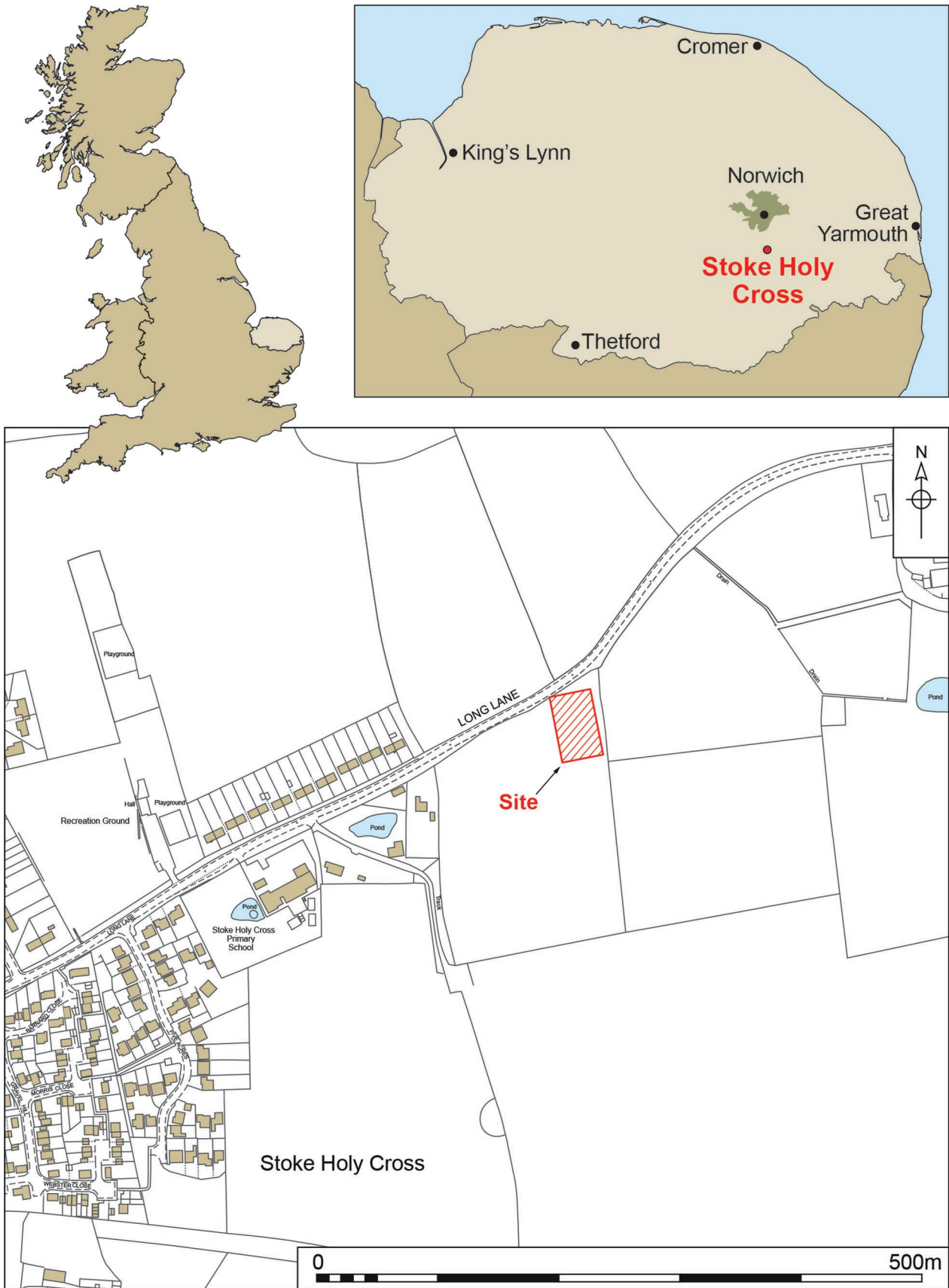


Figure 1 Site location map.

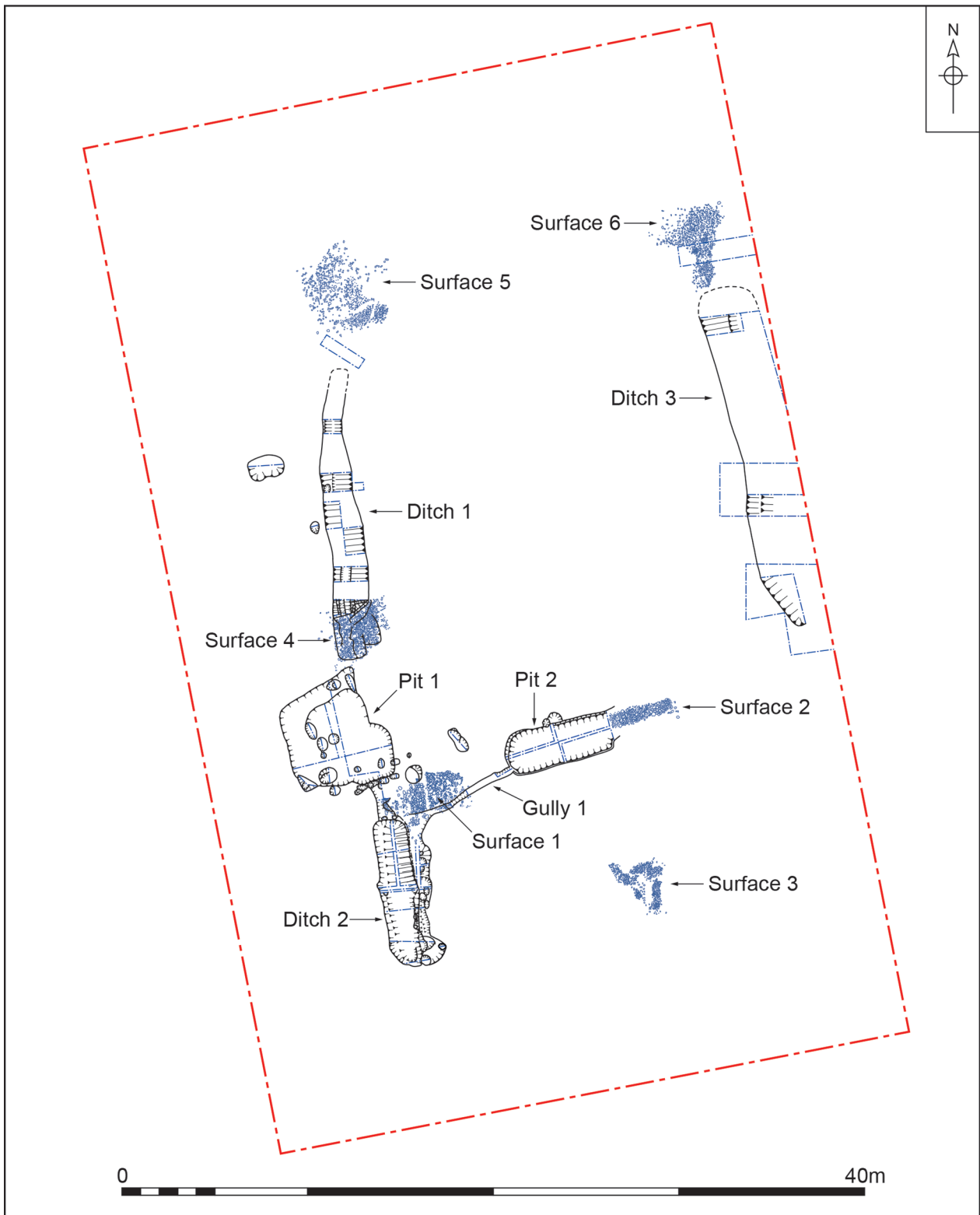


Figure 2 Plan of all features.

fragmentary, largely unidentifiable collection of faunal remains. An iron knife, an iron sickle and a horseshoe nail were also recovered from these features.

A probable 'activity zone'

A cluster of various features was identified towards what may have been the centre of the enclosed area (Figure

3). Fifteen postholes were arranged around Ditch 2 with a further 22 postholes identified around sub-circular Pit 1. No coherent arrangements or structures were identifiable from these posthole groups, although some possible alignments of posts were discerned. The fills of some postholes contained pottery dating from the eleventh-fourteenth centuries.

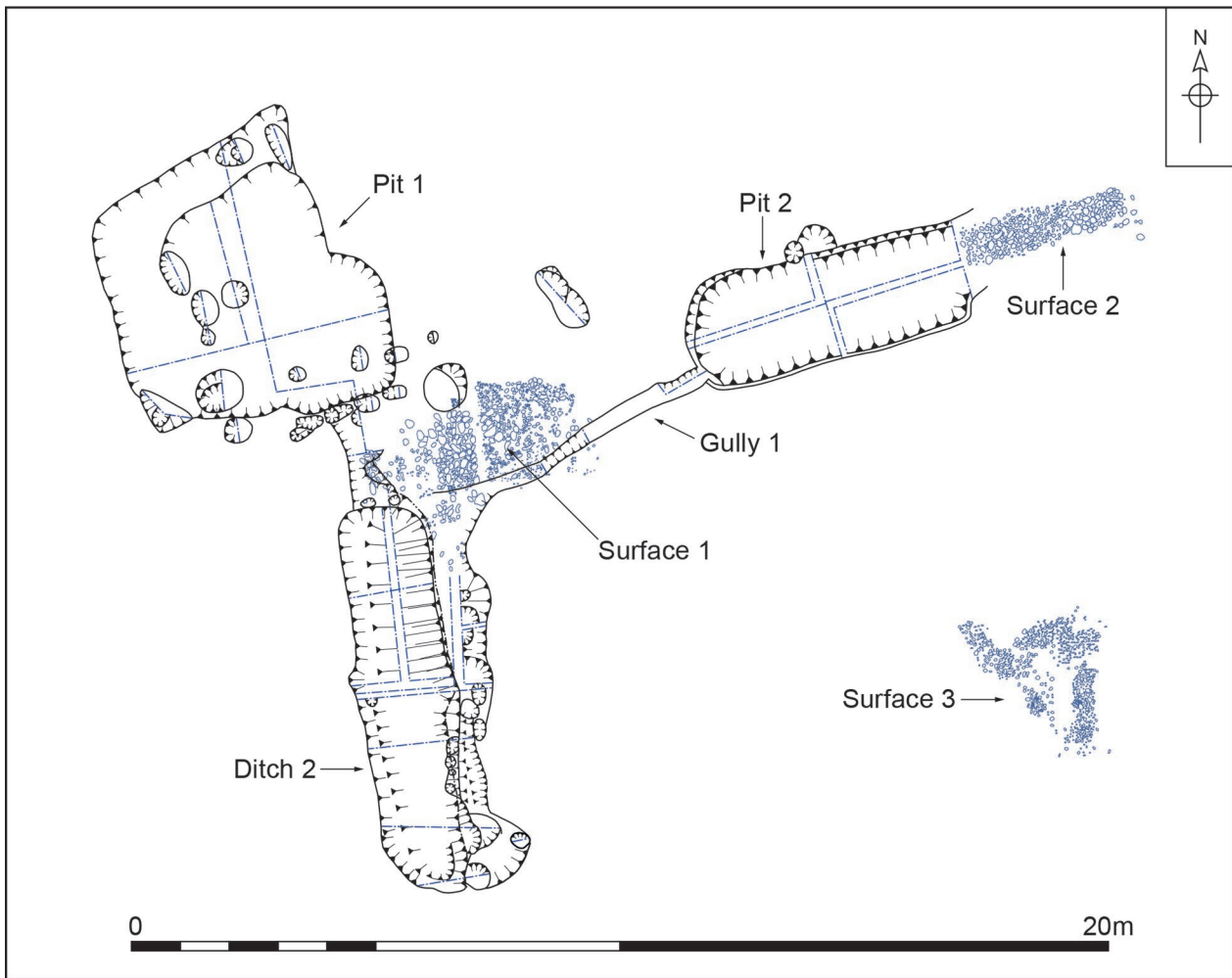


Figure 3 Plan of 'activity zone'.

Sub-circular Pit 1 was situated to the west of the site between Ditch 1 and Ditch 2. It was 0.20m deep with an approximate diameter of 5.50m and was filled with a dark greyish-brown silt deposit. A significant pottery assemblage consisting of 174 sherds from 103 vessels dating from the eleventh-thirteenth centuries was recovered from this feature. Small assemblages of lava quern, faunal remains, fired clay and ceramic building material were also recovered.

To the immediate south-east of this pit was cobbled Surface 1 which measured c. 4.10m long by c. 2.10m wide. This comprised a c. 0.20m-thick layer of medium-to-large flint nodules, from which twenty sherds of eleventh to fourteenth-century pottery were recovered. The southern extent of these cobbles was demarcated by Gully 1. This gully was 0.33m wide and extended for a length of 5.80m from Ditch 2 to Pit 2. It was oriented NNE-SSW, had a convex profile and was filled with a deposit of dark brown sandy clay, from which nine potsherds of eleventh- to twelfth-century date were collected.

Pit 2, to which Gully 1 was connected, was rectangular in plan and also oriented NNE-SSW. This trough-like feature with steep sloping sides and a near flat base measured 6.15m long and 2.20m wide. Infilling this feature were several mid-to-dark brown and orange clay deposits, from which a large assemblage of eleventh-

to twelfth-century pottery was recovered, as well as fragments of lava quern.

Cobbled Surface 2 extended on the same alignment from the east of Pit 2. This surface, composed of medium-to-large flint nodules, was rectangular in plan (measuring 3.40m long by 0.85m wide) as if previously confined by some unpreserved feature.

It is notable that several cross-linking pottery sherds were recovered from across the 'activity zone' features discussed above, further emphasising their contemporaneity.

Other cobbled surfaces

Four further cobbled surfaces of similar composition to those discussed above were present across the site. Surface 3 was situated towards the south of the site and had an amorphous shape with an approximate diameter of 2.70m. Surface 4 partially overlay the southern terminus of Ditch 1, suggesting it had been laid towards the end of the period of activity at the site.

Surfaces 5 and 6 were both situated to the immediate north of the NNW-SSE oriented ditches and perhaps demarcated the northern limit of the plot. These deposits were both amorphous in plan and measured 4.65m by 4.72m and 4.40m by 3.95m respectively.

The finds and environmental evidence

Brief summaries of the pottery, metal finds, and plant macrofossil assemblages are provided below. Full reports of these assemblages along with the ceramic building material, fired clay, quern fragments, metal working debris, struck flint and faunal remains recovered during the excavation can be found in the archive report (Ames 2017).

Pottery (Sue Anderson)

The assemblage comprised 860 sherds (5,952g), representing 514 vessels (Table 1). Apart from one sherd of probable Early Saxon handmade sandy pottery, one sherd of post-medieval Frechen stoneware and three unidentified sherds, the assemblage spanned the Late Saxon to medieval periods.

Late Saxon or Saxo-Norman wares totalled 181 sherds of 58 vessels. A high proportion of this material was of a type identified in Norwich as 'early medieval sandwich ware' (EMSW; Jennings 1981), now thought to be a late form of Thetford-type ware. The assemblage also contained some sherds of probable rural Thetford-type ware in two fabrics. The fabrics are medium sandy or, less commonly, fine sandy with occasional flint/quartz, ferrous, soft clay pellet and/or chalk inclusions and they tend to exhibit less controlled firing than the typical urban wares of the period, with coloration varying from grey through brown to buff throughout or at the surfaces only. No 'urban' Thetford-type fabrics were identified. The fabrics found here are comparable with, though not identical to, examples from the known production site at Langhale, Kirstead (Wade 1976) and rural Thetford-type wares found on sites excavated around the outskirts of Norwich (e.g. Anderson 2016a and 2016b). It is likely that there are more rural production sites of this ware waiting to be discovered, and as yet there is no known production site of EMSW. The high proportion of the latter found at this site may suggest an origin somewhere nearby.

Early medieval handmade wares totalled 164 sherds of 99 vessels. Early medieval wares were generally fine sandy, or occasionally medium sandy, with few other inclusions apart from sparse mica. The range of wares is typical of that seen both within and around Norwich, with fine sandy wares dominating and calcareous Yarmouth-type wares forming the next largest group. Other minor wares were also present, including two sherds of Pingsdorf ware from the Rhineland.

Wheel-made medieval wares formed the largest part of the assemblage, totalling 510 sherds of 353 vessels. Medieval coarsewares were dominated by local medieval unglazed ware (LMU) of the type found in Norwich and thought to have been made to the north-east of the city in the Potter Heigham area. This fabric group is generally fairly uniform, but occasional outliers are different enough to be assigned to separate fabric groups. At this site there were three such medieval coarsewares. All three are similar to examples found to the east of Norwich. The version of LMU with clay lenses (MCW2), for example, was particularly common at sites in Postwick and Great Plumstead (Anderson 2016a, MCW3), but less frequent further north. A similar sand and clay-lens fabric was

found in several large assemblages from sites along the Bacton to King's Lynn pipeline in north Norfolk (Anderson 2006, MCW1), however, and in another assemblage from Cedars Field Moat, Stowmarket (Anderson 2003, HOLL). It seems likely that these fabrics were being produced by different workshops using similar clays, particularly as the Suffolk forms are different to those found in Norfolk. Other medieval wares found at Stoke Holy Cross included glazed wares of local, regional and possibly Flemish origin, including sherds from a Grimston vessel, an Andenne vessel, and three unprovenanced (perhaps locally-made) vessels.

Although nominally divided into three period groups for the purposes of classification, this assemblage is of broadly eleventh- and twelfth-century date, with some elements which suggest it continued into the early thirteenth century. No developed rim forms were present in the LMU assemblage, and the range of glazed wares was limited, with only one sherd from Grimston, probably indicating that activity at the site ended before this ware was ubiquitous (late twelfth-fourteenth centuries).

The assemblage shows some unusual traits for a rural site, containing at least two imported vessels of broadly tenth- to thirteenth-century date, several spouted pitchers and very few bowls. The presence of a number of spouted pitchers (probably including the imported vessels) may be related to specialist activity on the site in the eleventh-twelfth centuries. Most of the identifiable vessels are jars, however, as is typical of this period, and most of these can be paralleled in the Norwich corpus.

Metal finds (Rebecca Sillwood)

Fifteen metal objects and fragments were recovered from the excavation. Eleven pieces were of iron, two of lead, and two of copper alloy. These were found unstratified or in features dating to the eleventh-twelfth centuries. Four of the iron objects are worthy of further discussion in relation to the other excavated evidence from the site.

A large incomplete iron sickle, in two pieces, was recovered from Ditch 3. The piece was missing the very end of the blade, which measured around 280mm in length from the end of the tang to the broken edge. The tang was rectangular in section and the blade was at almost 90° to it, with the width of the blade measuring 42mm, at its widest. Similar examples have been recovered from Norwich and are usually dated as medieval to early post-medieval (Margeson 1993, 194, fig. 145, nos 1521-1526).

Two small iron nails were recovered unstratified and from Ditch 2. These are likely to be horseshoe nails of 'fiddle-key' type (Clark 2004, 86, fig. 64). Both measured 19mm across their semi-circular heads, and whilst one had a broken shank, the second measured 24mm in length. These are most likely to be medieval in date.

A whittle tang knife was also recovered from Ditch 1. The piece was incomplete, missing the end of the blade, and measured 132mm long by 20mm wide. The blade was quite thin and could be that of a leatherworking knife (Margeson 1993), although it is difficult to be certain with the end of the blade missing. The pottery from this context has been dated to the eleventh-twelfth

Table 1 Pottery quantities by fabric. Eve: estimated vessel equivalent; MNV: estimated minimum number of vessels.

Description	Fabric	Date range	No	Wt/g	Eve	MNV
Early Anglo-Saxon medium sandy ware	ESMS	C5–7	1	6		1
Thetford-type ware (local variant)	THETL	C11?	32	498	0.34	23
Thetford-type ware (local variant, fine)	THETLf	C11?	8	48	0.05	6
‘Early medieval’ sandwich wares	EMSW	C11	141	990	0.39	29
Early medieval ware	EMW	C11–12	141	669	0.74	90
EMW micaceous	EMWM	C11–12	1	6		1
Yarmouth-type ware	YAR	C11–12	3	4		1
Yarmouth-type non-calcareous	YARN	C11–12	16	57	0.11	4
Early medieval sparse shelly ware	EMWSS	C11–13	1	6		1
Pingsdorf Ware	PING	C10–13	2	29		2
Local medieval unglazed	LMU	C11–14	458	3051	4.88	325
Medieval coarseware 1	MCW1	C12–14	19	145	0.10	10
Medieval coarseware 2	MCW2	C12–14	13	84	0.11	11
Medieval coarseware 5	MCW3	C12–14	2	59		2
Andenne Ware(?)	ANDN	C12–13	12	192		1
Unprovenanced glazed 1	UPG1	L. C12–14	2	51	0.21	2
Unprovenanced glazed 2	UPG2	L. C12–14	3	13		1
Grimston-type ware	GRIM	L. C12–14	1	4		1
Frechen stoneware	FREC	C16–17	1	31		1
Unidentified			3	9		2
<i>Totals</i>			<i>860</i>	<i>5,952</i>	<i>6.23</i>	<i>514</i>

centuries, and two knives illustrated by Margeson (1993, 190, fig. 141, nos. 1469 and 1471) which date to this period are very similar to the Stoke Holy Cross example.

Plant macrofossils (Val Fryer)

Seventeen samples were submitted for plant macrofossil retrieval and analysis from features dating to the eleventh–twelfth centuries. The samples were processed by manual water flotation/wash-over and the flots were collected in a 300-micron mesh sieve. The dried flots were sorted under a binocular microscope at magnifications up to x16. Nomenclature follows Stace (2010).

Cereal grains, seeds of common weeds and wetland plants, along with tree/shrub macrofossils were present at low to moderate densities in all but two of the samples studied (full data in archive). However, preservation was generally poor, with many of the grains being both severely puffed/distorted (probably as a result of high-temperature combustion) and very fragmented. Oat (*Avena sp.*), barley (*Hordeum sp.*), rye (*Secale cereale*) and wheat (*Triticum sp.*) grains were recorded; bread wheat type rachis nodes (*T. aestivum/compactum*) were present in only one sample. Weed seeds were exceedingly scarce, occurring mostly as single specimens within ten of the samples studied. In addition to dry land herbs, seeds of yellow iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) and bog bean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) were identified; both species are characteristic of wet meadow or shallow water habitats.

The composition of the assemblages would appear to indicate that the recovered remains are primarily derived from hearth or oven waste, with the poor condition of the material suggesting that very high temperatures were employed during combustion. It remains unclear whether the cereals within the assemblage represent the use of crop-processing waste as tinder/kindling, or whether they are the residue of an activity occurring within a hearth or oven (i.e. cereal drying/food preparation). However, given that cereal remains were not especially abundant overall, it is considered very unlikely that the large-scale processing of cereals was occurring on or near the site.

Discussion

The excavation identified a discrete area of activity to the immediate south of Long Lane, one of the two primary axes of the medieval linear settlement of *Stoche*. Pottery suggests that the recorded features were probably set out at some point in the eleventh–twelfth centuries in the far east of the village. Little evidence indicative of the site’s precise function was identified, but activity does not appear to have been of a domestic character.

The peripheral location of the site in relation to the Late Saxon/early medieval core of Stoke Holy Cross is possibly more indicative of an area related to industrial or agrarian activity. To the east of the site, a north-south aligned earthwork representing a sunken trackway is

present, which could represent an organised, planned separation of the domestic and industrial aspects of the rural settlement.

The site's situation upon the boulder clay was also likely related to its function. It occupies a geological divide, with the underlying deposits transitioning from boulder clay in the east to sand and gravels in the west. It is possible that this location on water-retentive soils in a damp environment was deliberately selected for a particular purpose: for example, the pits here may have been intended to contain water or other liquids.

Textile production, leather working, brewing or agricultural processing are all activities which could have conceivably been carried out at the site, but a lack of distinctive residues, organic remains and artefacts has precluded any more refined interpretation of the activities conducted. In the absence of such remains, however, and considering both the water-retentive nature of the trough-like features and the consolidated cobbled areas, the 'activity zone' may simply represent a constructed 'watering hole' for the livestock kept in pastoral regimes exploiting the seasonal pasturage of the area (Mark McKerracher *pers. comm.*).

Whatever the exact functions of the site, the remains are best considered to represent a small element of the rural economy, most likely under manorial control which perhaps commenced following the Norman conquest. By the early thirteenth century, activity at the site appears to have ceased.

While houses, streets and backyard activities within the historic cores of villages and towns in Norfolk have often been investigated, the margins of medieval rural settlements have usually received less attention. Recent archaeological interventions within the county, such as the work at Stoke Holy Cross, seem to reflect an increase in modern developments beyond previous village and town boundaries. This extension of modern settlement boundaries has thus created opportunities for examining peripheral elements of earlier settlement where specific industrial activities or indeed households may have been quartered. While the conclusions about what exactly was carried out at the Stoke Holy Cross site remain uncertain, these findings contribute significantly to our understanding of such marginal settings, and highlight the potential for future investigation as modern development patterns change, and more interventions take place beyond modern village bounds.

It is hoped that results such as these will contribute to a critical mass of evidence, supporting future assessments

of early manorial systems and rural industrial activities undertaken around the time of the Norman conquest, in both Norfolk and the wider region.

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