The Landscape Research Centre

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Archaeological Recording following the disturbance of human remains at Spital Farm, Staxton, North Yorkshire TA2339/79474

Report compiled
by
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Background

The site at Spital Farm lies immediately east of the Hospitium of St. Mary, a medieval hospice founded in 1180 and dissolved before 1535. The SMR Record indicates that the main hospice buildings were south of the present farm, with a large univallate enclosure to the west and a graveyard to the east. Human bone had previously been recovered by workmen around 1890, but were thought to be post-medieval due to the presence of 'bullet holes' in the skulls. Brewster also excavated in the area in the early 1960s and recovered human bone. An excavated area south of the farm had previously recorded four graves, with additional human bone in the surrounding area. The burials had been disturbed, probably as a result of ground levelling.

Figure 1: One of Brewster's trenches from the early 1960s, with Spital Farm in the background. The child in the foreground is probably one of the Sleightholme family.

Other excavations in the immediate vicinity at Grainger's Pit and during the construction of the petrol station opposite had also revealed evidence of Anglo-Saxon burials. It was therefore initially unclear whether the disturbed human burials at Spital Farm related to the Anglo-Saxon or medieval burials previously recorded in the area.

An archaeological investigation was carried out by the Landscape Research Centre (LRC) at Spital Farm, Staxton during the last two weeks of July, 2002. The site is referred to as site 68AA. The area excavated lies at grid reference TA2339/79474. For some unknown reason either the building works were conducted without planning permission or no archaeological condition was included a considerable oversight given that the site is part of a scheduled monument; it was clear from comments made at the time that the landowner felt that he should not need planning permission. It was also observed that a new fence had been inserted which appeared to re-define the limit of the SAM, the fence has since been removed.

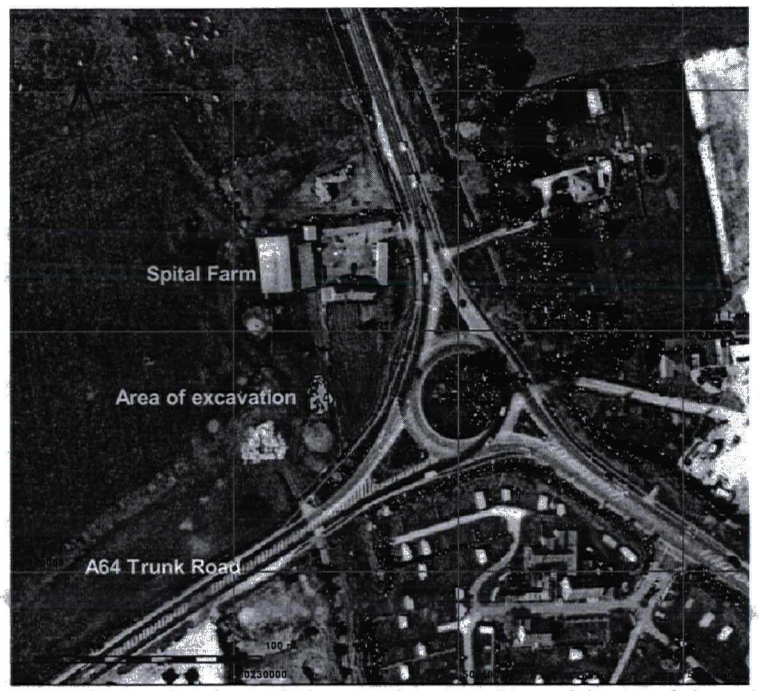

Figure 2: Getmapping image showing Spital Farm, the Staxton roundabout and the A64 trunk road to the south and east. The area of archaeological investigation is shown immediately west of the roundabout.

The area had been considerably disturbed prior to the arrival of the Landscape Research Centre team. The landowner, Mr. Hunneybell, had excavated a large area at the southern end of his garden, with a view to placing a pond there. Several human bones were recovered during this process, but their context was unknown. Some archaeological features survived intact, and were excavated by the team (description below). However, it must be noted that the general understanding of the site was considerably impaired by the machine excavations which had previously taken place, and the archaeological investigations were purely of an emergency salvage nature.

Figure 3: Spital Farm, with some of the pond area excavated down to the natural gravel by machine in the background. The area which the LRC was able to excavate is shown in the foreground.

Methodology

Due to the circumstances of the excavation it was not possible to employ all standard LRC recording methodologies. Several of the human bones had already been collected from the site by the landowner,

so their original context was unknown. Where archaeological features remained intact, standard LRC recording procedures were applied, including the individual recording of all contexts, all of which were entered into computerised databases. Plans with contours were produced, which were subsequently digitised as part of the LRC Geographic Information System. Sections were generally drawn at a scale of 1:10, but some of the larger sections were drawn at 1:20. A Nikon DTM A10 total station was used to record the spatial location of contexts, initially tied in to the surrounding buildings and field boundaries, and later put into real space within a GIS. Finds were lifted by context rather than being individually located, partly due to the heavy disturbance which negated the benefits of full 3d recording, and partly due to the constraints of time in an emergency salvage operation.

The Site Archive

The excavated area comprised some cut features and several deposits. Some pits were excavated, but none showed evidence of having been grave cuts. It is more likely that they relate to dumping of rubble. A hollow way is also thought to run east-west at the southern extent of the site, and a slot through this was excavated (context 2). Many of the fills had been redeposited, probably as a result of previous levelling. The most common find was disarticulated human bone. Several pottery sherds were also recovered, dating to the 11th to 14th centuries. Some sherds were of very fine quality, being wheel-made and frequently burnished. It is likely that the pottery originated from an early phase of the Staxton or Potter Brompton kilns. There was also some ironwork of post-medieval date, and post-medieval pottery and tile. However, due to the highly disturbed nature of the site, specific dating of individual features is difficult.

All finds including the Human Bone have been returned to the landowner.

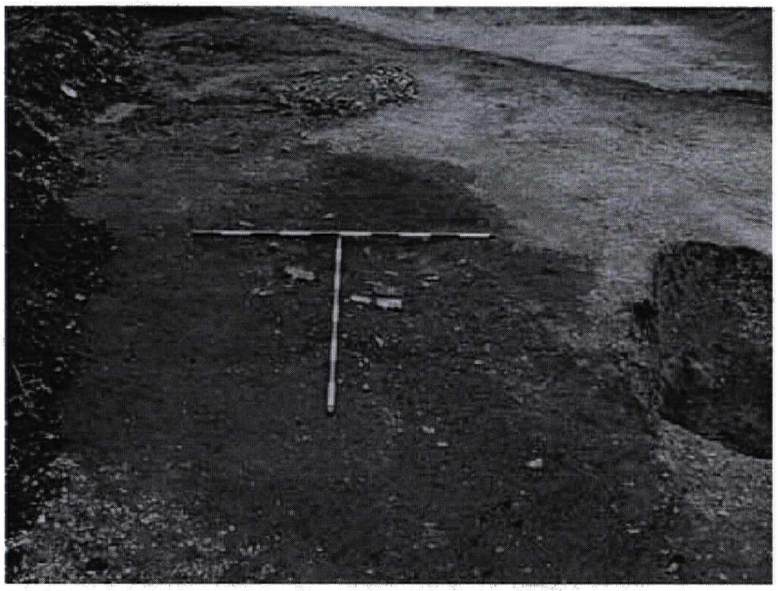

Figure 4: Cut features in plan prior to excavation

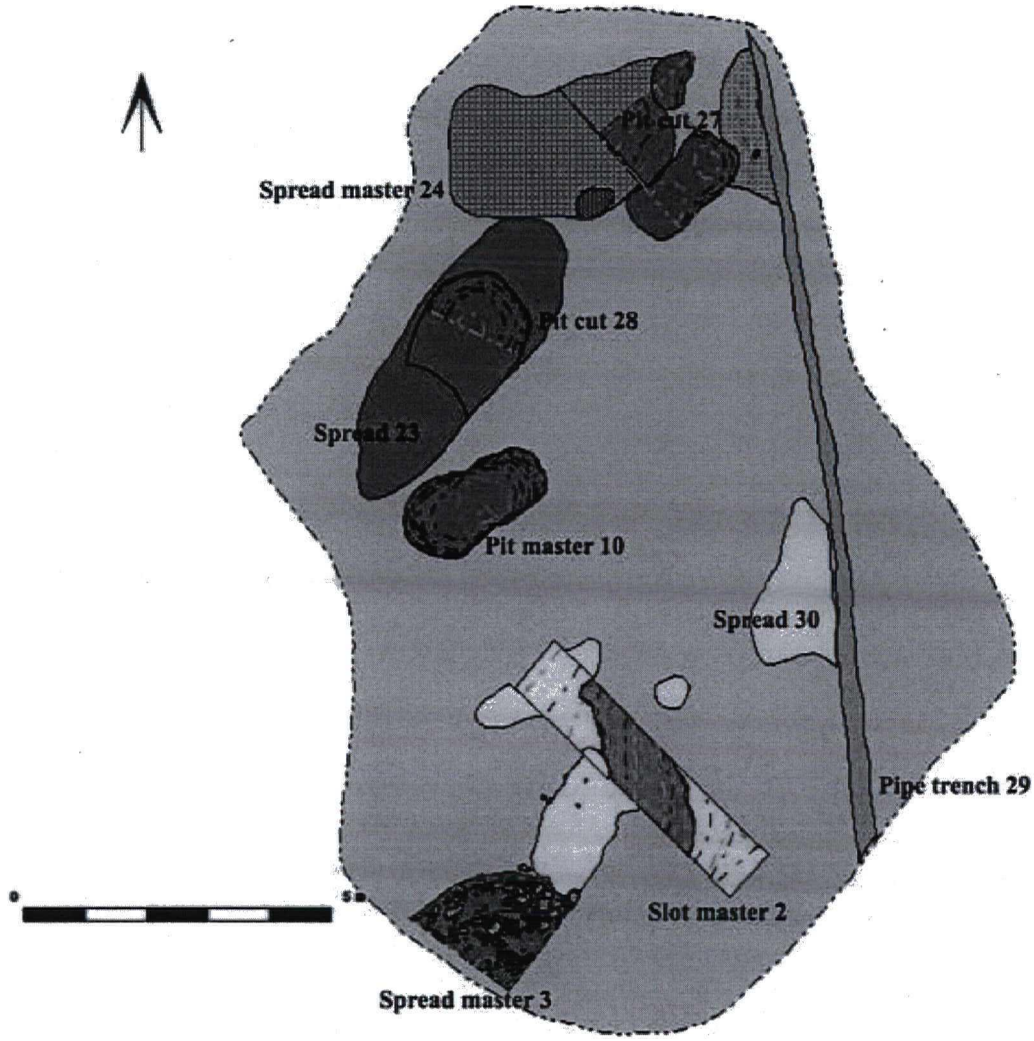

Figure 5: Digitised plan of the excavated area at Spital Farm

Context Summaries

068AA00001
Surface of the area excavated for the pond liner. Loose sandy material had been raked over the area to provide a bedding for the pond liner. This was obviously disturbed and mottled and contained a large number of human bone fragments and pottery sherds, mostly of post-medieval date (collected as unstratified material prior to excavation). Also contained localised areas of loose chalk rubble. This context was removed during the initial cleaning spit.

Removal of this spit revealed a number of discrete features cut into natural and a large area of material on the south-western side of the pond.

068AA00002
Slot cut through material on the eastern side of the pond revealing a stratigraphically complex sequence of layers. The most significant feature within this sequence was a ditch (068AA00037) apparently relating to the hollow way which runs E-W through the site. This ditch cut through a number of layers toward the bottom of the sequence, including a rammed chalk and mortar surface which probably also relates to the construction of the hollow way. Layer 068AA00014, also cut by the ditch, contained human bone. This ditch and the layers it cut through were sealed by 068AA00012, a deposit of very compact sand and chalk gravel. This deposit contained large quantities of disarticulated human bone

(refer to bone report page 12). This layer probably represents material disturbed and redeposited by earlier levelling operations.

This was in turn sealed by a darker sandy material (068AA00009) which probably represents topsoil buried beneath a spread of disturbed chalk rubble (068AA00005) and sandy material (068AA00004), again probably relating to earlier levelling activities on the site.

This slot was taken down as far as 068AA00057, which appeared to be redeposited natural material.

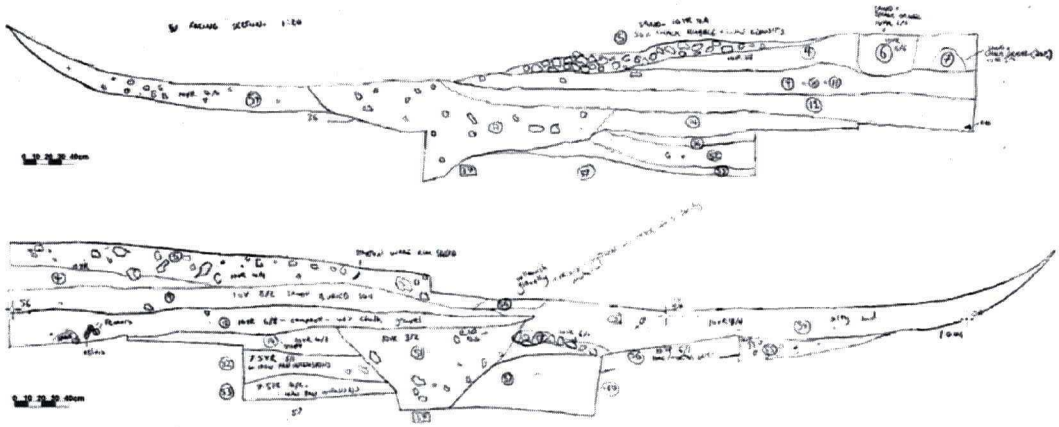

Figure 6: Sections through the hollow way and associated layers

Figure 7: Excavated slot master 2 and section detail

Figure 8: Detail of disarticulated human bone within compacted deposit 12

068AA00003

After the removal of the initial spit this appeared to be the surface of a pit filled with angular chalk rubble (068AA00019). Further excavation revealed no edges indicative of a cut feature, rather a sequence of disturbed sandy layers under the rubble. A number of finds were recovered from this area, including iron and ceramics of a post-medieval date.

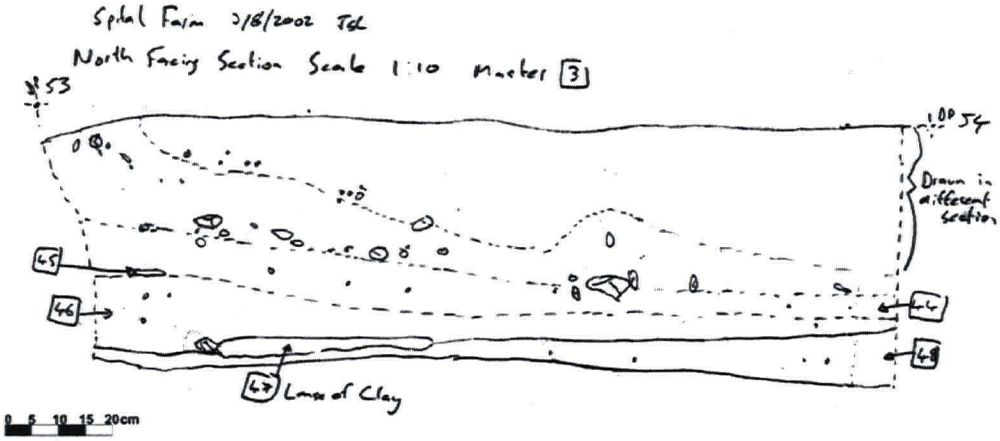

Figure 9: Ovate pit containing chalk rubble deposit

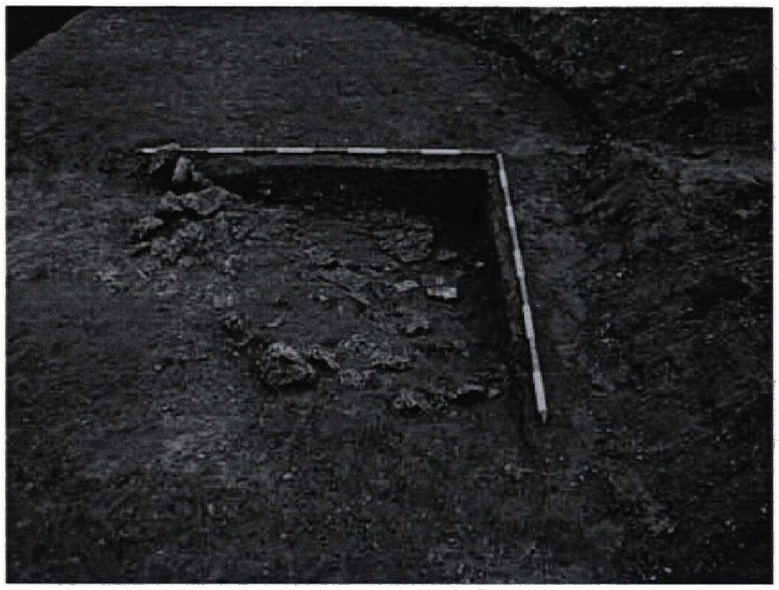

Figure 10: Chalk rubble deposit 19

068AA00010

Ovate pit feature containing three fills. This was visible from the surface as a brown fill cut into natural chalk gravel. It originally appeared to be a grave due to its shape and orientation but it contained no evidence of an inhumation. The lower fill was a spread of large angular chalk rubble (068AA00020). A number of fragments of animal bone and apparently post medieval pot were recovered from the upper fill (06800022).

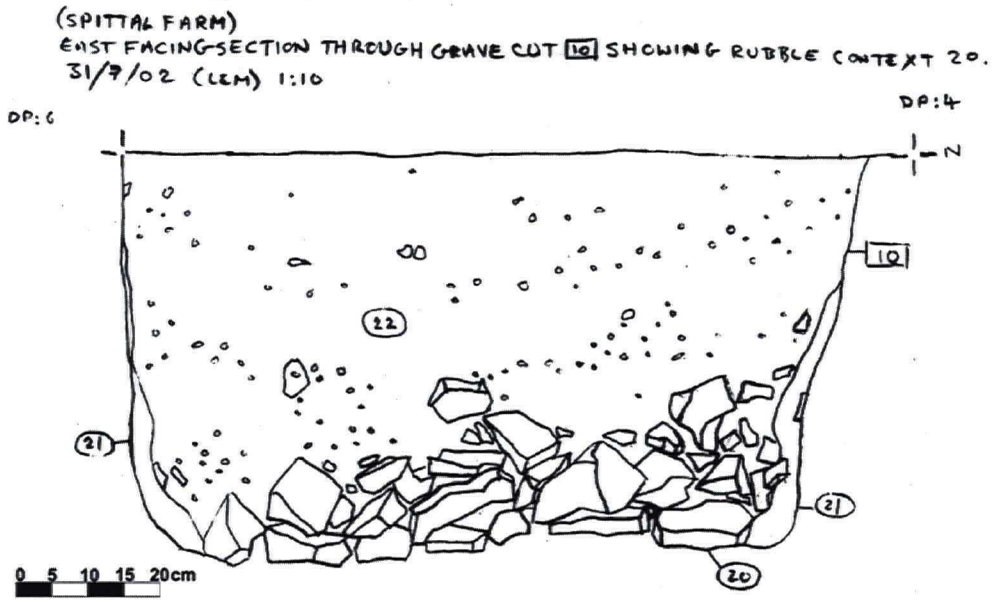

Figure 11: Section through cut feature 10. Initially interpreted as a grave cut, no evidence was recovered of a burial. The presence of a substantial dump of chalk rubble in the base indicates that it is more likely to relate to rubbish disposal.

Figure 12: Half-section through pit 10, showing dark upper fills and chalk rubble in the base

Figure 13: Rubble deposit 20 in plan after removal of upper fills

068AA00023

Large ovate vertical sided pit cut into chalk gravel natural. This feature contained a sequence of seven similar sandy fills with inclusions of chalk pebbles, charcoal flecks and lumps of lightly fired clay. This feature was probably a quarry pit for the extraction of chalk gravel.

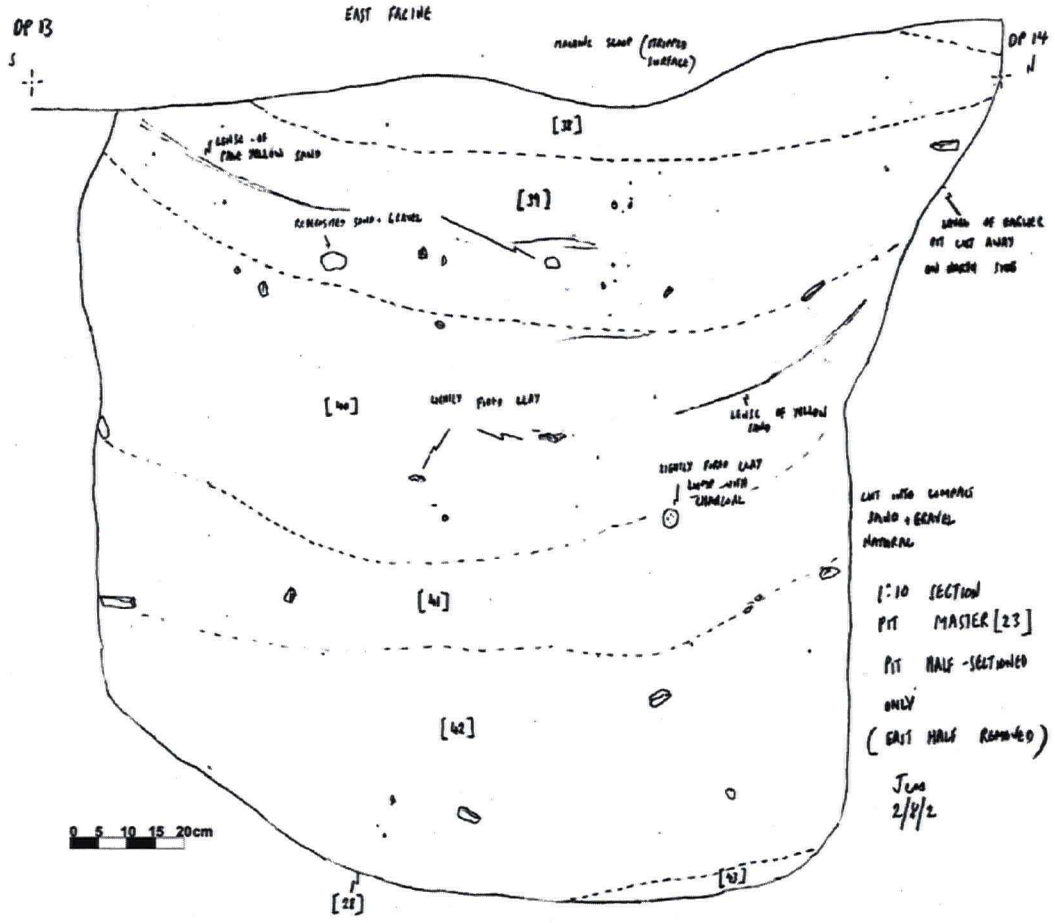

Figure 14: Section through large ovate pit 23

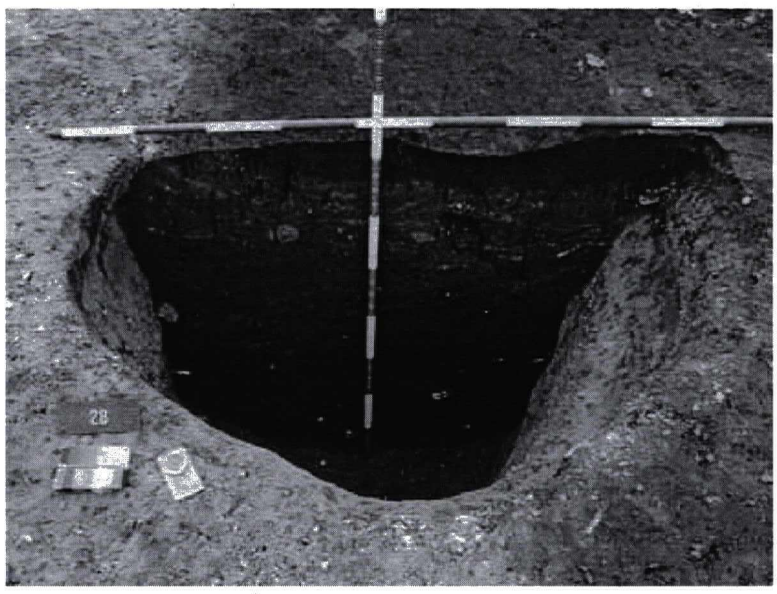

Figure 15: Section through large ovate pit 23

068AA00027
Bone rich spread in northern side of site. An area of chalk rubble (068AA00024) seals a complex of three intercutting quarry pits. Pits 068AA00032 and 068AA00034 were both filled with very mixed redeposited sand and chalk gravel natural. These were both cut by 068AA00027. The spread of chalk rubble 068AA00024 and the upper fill of the latest pit (068AA00026) both contained large quantities of disarticulated human bone.

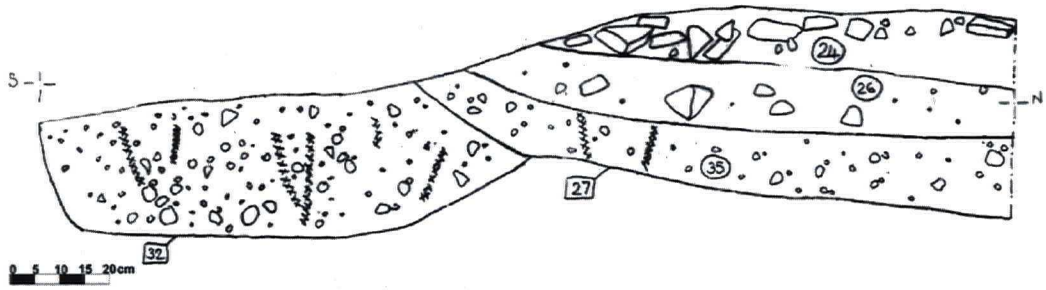

Figure 16: Section through layers of dumped rubble and redeposited material

Figure 17: Excavated quadrant through chalk rubble spread

068AA00030
Yellowish sand deposit adjacent to pipe trench 29. This deposit contained a large amount of human bone, including longbones, phalanges and an intact skull (no lower mandible). The edge of the deposit is ill-defined, but is clearly separated from bone-rich spread 25.

068AA00029
Modern pipe trench cutting across site.

The Human Remains
By Christine Haughton

All of the human remains recovered from salvage excavations at Spital Farm had been disturbed and redeposited; many showed evidence of fresh breakage. The majority of the skeletal remains had been collected by the landowner prior to the commencement of excavation without any contextual information. Six excavated contexts contained quantities of redeposited bone.

A basic count of longbones and mandibles suggests that the minimum number of individuals represented is ten, although the actual number is likely to be far higher. Very few small bones, such as carpals, tarsals, phalanges and vertebrae, were recovered.

All of the bones appear to belong to adults. Only one longbone, a femur, displayed an incompletely fused femoral head, indicating that this individual was probably around 16 years of age at time of death (Chamberlain, 1994, 14).

Determination of sex was impossible due to the incomplete nature of the skeletons and the fragmentary nature of the pelvic bones.

Very little pathology was encountered. The incidence of degenerative disease is rare, suggesting that these were fairly young adults. A few of the longbones had evidence of small bone deposits and pitting, indicating the onset of osteoarthritis. A possible osteochondroma, a benign and probably painless bone tumour, was identified on a distal femur fragment. These normally arise during childhood or adolescence, and cease growing at the end of puberty when the epiphyses fuse.

Examination of the teeth revealed a reasonable amount of wear due to the presence of abrasive particles in the diet. There were very few carous teeth, although one maxilla fragment had two severely decayed pre-molars, one of which had resulted in an abscess in the jaw.

Perhaps the most interesting example of pathology is a right parietal cranial fragment which had been trephined adjacent to the sagittal suture. Trephination is a skilled surgical procedure involving the excision of a disc of bone from the cranium to relieve pressure from intracranial bleeding, perhaps resulting from a fracture. There would have been a high risk of complications from infection or brain injury, but this particular individual evidently survived the procedure because the borders of the perforation have been smoothed by new bone growth.

Bibliography

Chamberlain, A. 1994 *Human Remains*, London
Ubelaker, D.H. 1989 *Human Skeletal Remains*, Washington

Catalogue of Provenanced Skeletal Material

Context SF12: This contained what appear to be the disturbed remains of a single individual: cranial fragments, a few carous teeth, 2 femurs, 2 tibiae and fibulae, sacrum, pelvic fragments, lumbar and thoracic vertebrae fragments and 2 humeri, radii and an ulna. An estimated height of 1.8m for this individual was calculated according to the Trotter and Pineau formulae described by Ubelaker (1989, 61-62).

Context SF14: A few rib and longbone fragments.

Context SF26: Cranial fragments, mandible, 2 thoracic vertebrae and several vertebrae fragments, scapula fragments, a radius and an ulna.

Context SF29: cranial vault fragment.

Context SF30: 1 femur, three lumbar vertebrae, rib fragments, 2 clavicles, one patella, cranial fragments, mandible, 2 humeri, a radius and an ulna. At least two individuals are represented.

Context SF33: 1 proximal metatarsal and three longbone fragments.

Context SF44: A single sheep scapula.