
Short Report:

Late Saxon Properties at Fordham Primary School

Elizabeth Popescu and Aileen Connor

Illustrations by Charlotte Walton

First mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon charter of the late 10th century, Fordham perhaps originated as a Middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farm' linked to Soham minster. Previous archaeological investigations provide a case study for potential Late Saxon grid planning. These are supplemented by recent excavations close to its medieval core which revealed new evidence for its pre-Norman settlement, together with medieval quarrying that may relate to building works associated with the adjacent church.

Introduction

Fordham is located on the River Snail, which flows 400m to the west of the subject site at the Primary School (TL 6337 7801, Fig. 1). The latter was investigated by Oxford Archaeology East in 2000 and 2016 and lies at approximately 16m OD, with the land sloping gently towards the river to the south and west. The natural geology is sand and river terrace gravels above chalk formation bedrock (British Geological Survey online map viewer, <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/>).

The village is documented in a charter dating to c. AD 972, its name meaning 'settlement by the ford' (Reaney 1943, 191). At Domesday, it was part of the hundred of Staploe, consisting of 25 households with ten 'ploughlands', six meadows and two mills (Martin 2003, 520): its largest manor belonged to the royal demesne (Wareham and Wright 2002a). By 1279, the settlement contained about 140 houses, occupied by 135 manorial tenants (Wareham and Wright 2002b). Fordham Primary School lies close to the centre of the medieval village, c. 75m to the north of the Church of St Peter and St Mary Magdalene. The extant church was constructed in the 12th century (perhaps replacing an Anglo-Saxon predecessor) and was substantially rebuilt in the following century, with later additions (Wareham and Wright 2002c; CHER 07574). It was originally dedicated to St Mary, with the dedication to St Peter being added in c. 1850. In origin, it may have belonged to the first royal manor, although it probably remained incorporated to Fordham Priory until its surrender in 1538 (Wareham and Wright 2002, 412–417). The 1887 First edition OS map depicts the subject site as a large field, with The Crown public

house lying immediately to the west.

Previous excavations within the village – revealing Anglo-Saxon remains – have generally lain to the south of Church Street and relatively little is yet known about the archaeological background of the area to the north of this road, in which the current site lies (Fig. 2). Extensive excavations at Hillside Meadow, to the south-west of the church and c. 100m to the south-west of the subject site, revealed a sequence of Anglo-Saxon enclosures and buildings spanning c. AD 500–1050 (Robinson and Kenney 1996, Mould 1998, Patrick and Ratkai 2011; Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (CHER) CB14613). Surrounding investigations found further evidence for possible Anglo-Saxon ditches and other features, some of which may link to the same settlement (Casa Hatton 2001, CHER CB14611; O'Brien and Gardner 2002, CHER CB15561; Sutherland and Wotherspoon 2002, CHER CB15031; Gdaniec 2012, 27, CHER MCB19640). The evidence has been taken to provide potential evidence for the village's origins as a Middle Anglo-Saxon 'home farm', as well as for the use of a later gridded layout that may reflect monastic connections (Wright 2015; Blair 2013). Archaeological work at the Hillside Meadow site found a ditch, secondary to the main Late Saxon enclosure system, that perhaps defined the western limit of the cemetery and survived as a functional boundary to be recorded by the first edition OS survey (Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 105 and fig. 3.25).

Building on the previous findings, this short article summarises the new results, deriving from excavations in three trenches (Trenches 1–3), which are fully detailed in the project archive and freely available online at <<https://library.thehumanjourney.net/4660/>>.

Late Saxon Settlement ((9th)/10th–11th century)

The earliest activity at the Primary School (Phase 1, Fig. 2) took the form of two parallel ditches in the northern part of the site, which may have defined a track or potentially indicate the presence of property boundaries: evidence for recutting suggests their extended use. The ditches were aligned east to west, at

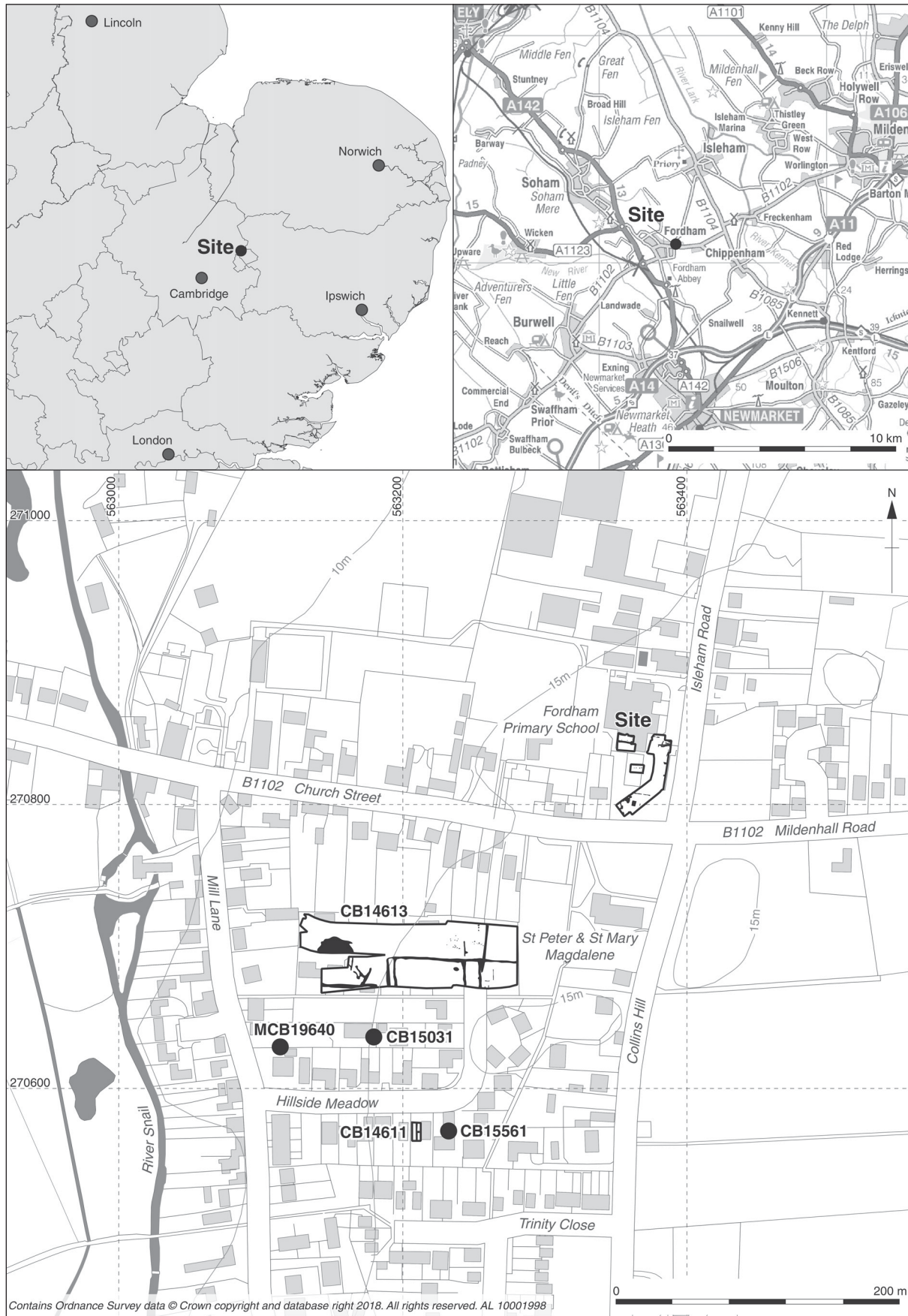


Figure 1. Site location, showing the Late Saxon properties revealed at surrounding sites.

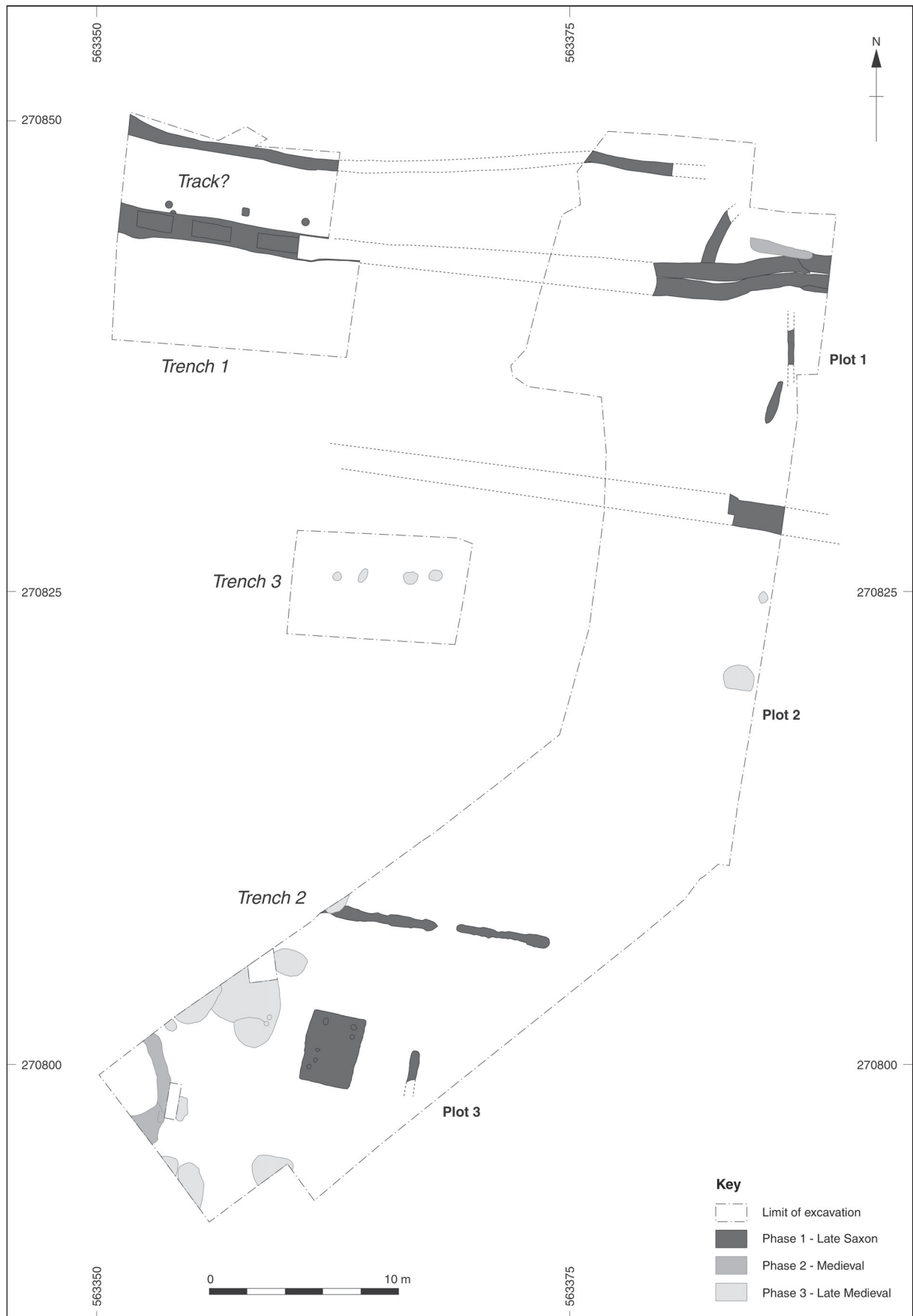


Figure 2. Late Saxon properties.

right angles to the course of the modern road (Isleham Road) to the east, with a recut and more sinuous section at the eastern end of the southernmost ditch (Trench 2). A small assemblage of domestic pottery (44 sherds; 742g) was recovered from fills of the southernmost ditch in Trench 1 and was almost exclusively Late Saxon in origin. The assemblage is dominated by variants of St Neots-type ware, with lesser quantities of probable variants of Thetford ware, including unbraded sherds from a spouted and handled pitcher. The St Neots-type ware consists largely of sooted jars, suggesting usage as cooking pots. On the basis of the character and condition of the material, a date in the range AD 900–1100 appears likely. Other finds included three whittle-tang knife fragments of mid 9th- to mid 11th-century type, a chalk spindle whorl and a slate whetstone that was pierced for suspension. Faunal remains included bones of cattle, sheep, pig, goat, equid and dog/fox. Samples from the ditch fills yielded charred grains of indeterminate free-threshing wheat, barley, rye and oats (perhaps originating from stored crops), while flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) may indicate cultivation for linseed oil and/or linen. Weed species included fat hen (*Chenopodium album*), corn gromwell (*Lithospermum arvense*), cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*), lesser burdock (*Arctium minus*) and a mineralised nutlet of the great fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*).

Adjacent to the northern side of the southernmost ditch were three equidistant postholes, perhaps supporting interpretation of the ditches as successive property boundaries. Various other gullies lay to the south of the ditches and may indicate the presence of other fences or ephemeral structures within a property (Plot 1), defined to the south by a third (undated) ditch, which lay c. 10–11m from the more northerly ditches.

Lying to the south was another possible property (Plot 2), although no Late Saxon remains were found within it. Assuming that it formed a single property, it would have been c. 23m wide.

In the southern part of the site lay a plot of land (Plot 3, Trench 2) delimited by narrow ditches to the north and east, each of which contained a few sherds of Late Saxon pottery and faunal remains including a single fish bone and a (possibly intrusive) cat mandible. Within the defined plot was a rectangular sunken-featured building aligned north-east to south-west (measuring c. 4.00m by 3.00m and 0.4m deep) containing three fine, silty deposits. The superstructure was supported by several earth-fast posts which were mainly positioned close to three corners of the pit (Fig. 3). The building's size is typical of structures of this type (Tipper 2004, 64). The fact that one of the postholes cut into a subsequent fill of the feature suggests that later additions or repairs were made to the building, as has been noted at other Anglo-Saxon timber structures (Hamerow 2011, 6–7). The construction cut contained pottery dating to the 10th century including a sherd of St Neots ware and another of Stamford ware: their date may indicate that these sherds were associated with the abandon-

ment of the building, which perhaps originated in the 9th century. In addition to pottery, four small fragments of abraded lava quern were also found, while faunal remains included a fragment of horse pelvis with chop and cut marks. Environmental samples produced small quantities of charcoal and occasional charred grains of oats, barley, rye and free-threshing wheat. The evidence combines to suggest domestic, rather than craft, activity. Rural sunken-featured buildings normally date to the Early to Middle Saxon periods, although the tradition continued into the Late Saxon period in urban settings, when timber architecture and construction techniques became more diverse (Hamerow 2011, 2–5). In contrast to the later form of the building at the Primary School site, the sunken-featured buildings found at the Hillside Meadow site were of familiar Early to Middle Saxon form and contained the common suite of finds, many associated with textiles (Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 46).

Limited evidence for the local economy was recovered from other features of this period at the Primary School site. A general lack of cereal chaff in environmental samples suggests that the early stages of crop-processing had taken place elsewhere. Most of the plant remains consisted of charred cereal grains with some weed seeds which had not been removed as a result of sieving. These remains were found in a wide range of features, often reflecting scatters of lost or discarded remains from food-preparation activities. That the plant remains reflect household-scale food preparation and consumption is supported by the presence of several lava stone fragments, probably from querns. Animal bones were present in small quantities (38 fragments), although cattle, sheep, goat, pigs were all represented, and there is some evidence that horse-meat was also eaten during this period. The question of horse consumption in Anglo-Saxon England has been addressed by Poole (2013) who notes that the phenomenon was intricately related to the spread of Christianity and social beliefs. While butchered horse bones are known from Late Saxon sites, they are notably less common in this period compared to Early and Middle Saxon settlements, and particularly at rural sites (*ibid.*, 324–7). Notably, a horse skull (from a stallion or gelding) was found in a Late Saxon pit cutting into a boundary ditch at Hillside Meadow, where the possibility that its deposition was associated with ritual or 'magic' was discussed (Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 106).

Marine resources were certainly being imported to Fordham and there is evidence from the Primary School site that fish, mussels and oysters were all eaten during this period, reflecting the wider national trend for increasing seafood consumption from around AD 1000 (Barrett *et al.* 2004). The fairly uniform size of both the oyster and mussel shells implies controlled harvesting, with evidence of shucking (to open the shells) being apparent. The oysters are estimated to have been harvested at around 3–4 years old, an age known to provide the greatest quantity of meat without sacrificing its quality (Hagen 1995, 172).

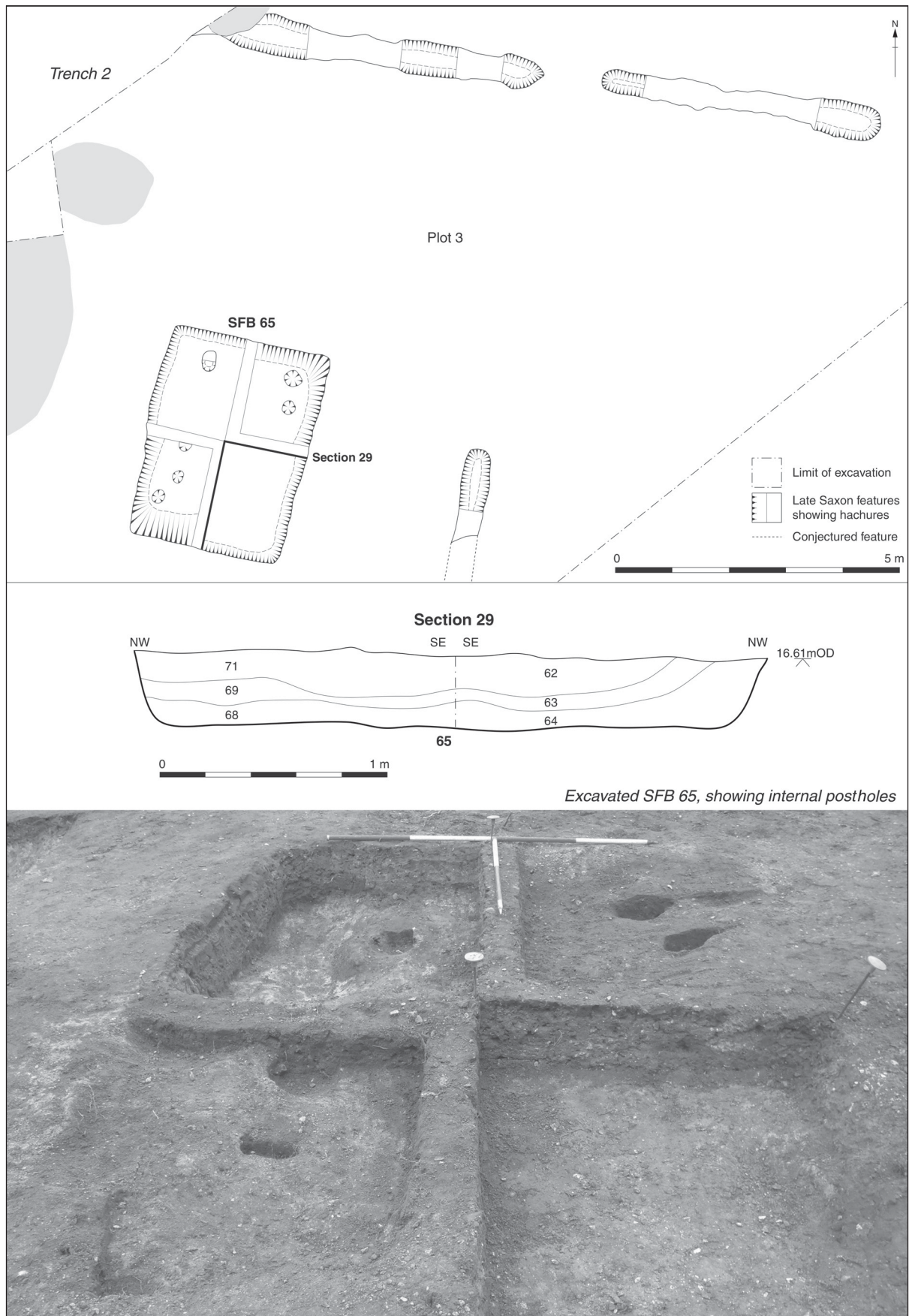


Figure 3. Detail of the sunken-featured building.

Later activity (12th–15th century)

Limited activity continued into the 12th and 13th centuries (Phase 2), when the boundaries in the northern part of the site may have remained in use. A new boundary consisting of four postholes was added in the central area (Trench 3). Further south were various pits, particularly to the west of the former sunken-featured building. These perhaps served as gravel quarries to produce raw materials for construction and road building within the village, potentially including the adjacent church. The meagre remains of 14th- and 15th-century date (Phase 3) consisted of a ditch and a pit in the southern part of the site (perhaps a pennanular enclosure) and a ditch to the north.

Discussion

It has been suggested that, in its earliest years, Fordham may have been a dependant 'home farm' associated with Soham minster, the two being connected by the navigable River Snail (Wright 2015, 31–5). This suggestion was based on the excavations at Hillside Meadow, where enclosures related to three or four sunken-featured buildings and an associated droveway were attributed to *c.* AD 500–850 (Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 44–50). This droveway continued northwards and was preserved in later boundaries. In his analysis, Wright suggested an end date of *c.* AD 725 for this phase of activity (Phase 1) given the 'absence of Ipswich ware' (Wright 2015, 32), although this is not reflected in the published excavation report which clearly identifies a Middle Saxon phase on the basis of the presence of Ipswich ware (totalling 35 sherds; table 3.1): such pottery derived largely from the droveway ditches and an enclosure (Enclosure E; Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 69). Interestingly, the droveway ditches also contained the remains of four juveniles, who may have met with a violent death (*ibid.* 108).

Taken as a whole, the results suggest that this was 'part of a much larger complex which extended in all directions' (*ibid.*, 108). The settlement developed in the period *c.* 850–1050, with an initial phase seeing the redefinition of the droveway and enclosure system (Enclosures C and D), followed by the creation of regular enclosures (Enclosures E and G; perhaps defining properties) cutting across the now abandoned droveway. These enclosures may have been associated with timber buildings, suggesting a uniform approach to planning. There was a subsequent shift in focus, with settlement moving towards the church by the mid 11th century: abandonment of the site for settlement may have occurred well before the Norman Conquest. A secondary ditch on a north to south alignment (Enclosure F) may indicate the western boundary of the churchyard of St Mary Magdalene (Blair 2013, 49 and fig. 26; cf Patrick and Ratkai 2011, fig. 3.2, Phase 2 (late)). Again Wright refers to a rather different dating scheme of mid 8th to mid 9th century

for the initial part of Phase 2 (early), with a date of mid 9th to 12th centuries for the later features (Phase 2, late) (Wright 2015, 34).

Originally interpreted as a 'much more orderly system, perhaps based on an overhaul of agricultural practices' (Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 105), the final phase of Late Saxon enclosures at Hillside Meadow has recently been taken to provide evidence for possible grid planning based on the short perch module (equivalent to 4.6m), which was the dominant measure until the 12th century (Blair 2013, 49 and fig. 26). Use of the four-perch square led to the creation of box-like forms. Such planning was effectively the preserve of monastic centres in the period *c.* AD 600–800 and has been identified at both domestic sites and their dependencies. A second phase of such planning appears to have occurred between *c.* AD 950–1020 (Blair 2013, 53), within which period the changes evident at Fordham may have occurred: there is currently no example of such gridding in England that has been identified as dating between *c.* AD 800 and *c.* AD 950 (Blair 2013, 54).

Given the distance between the two sites (and the location of the church and its cemetery between the two), it remains unknown whether the long narrow properties defined at the subject site, fronting onto Isleham Road (and those in surrounding sites), relate to the same late system of land division as was apparent at Hillside Meadow or reflect the more familiar use of strips in village planning, as occurred from the 12th century onwards (Blair 2013, 49). The putative track found at the Primary School site may have linked to a continuation of the droveway to the west and the dating evidence suggests broad contemporaneity of the adjacent properties with the final phase of Late Saxon enclosures at Hillside Meadow. The distances between the putative property boundaries suggest a width of *c.* 11m for Plot 1 (2.39 short perches) and *c.* 23m for Plot 2 (5 short perches), with the southern limit of the southernmost area (Plot 3) which contained the sunken-featured building lying beyond the limit of excavation. The fact that this latter plot was evidently sub-divided may suggest that a more complex system of division and enclosure originally existed.

If the interpretation as a monastic 'home farm' is correct, Fordham may have supplied Soham minster with agricultural produce between the latter's foundation in the early 7th century and the 9th century (since the minster was apparently not re-founded after the Viking incursions of the 9th century; Wright 2015, 31). Notably, Fordham appears to have been one of the first sites to abandon the cultivation of spelt in favour of free-threshing wheat (Patrick and Ratkai 2011, 41). On the basis of the findings from Hillside Meadow, it has been suggested that the settlement's Anglo-Saxon economy, lying on the boundary between chalk geology and the fenland, was based on cultivation of the local light chalkland soils (rye 55%, barley 20%, wheat 25%), with a relatively high proportion of cattle (52%) indicating an animal husbandry

regime based on use of the nearby freshwater wetlands (Rippon *et al.* 2014, 243). A relatively wide range of cereal taxa was present in the Late Saxon ditches at the Primary School site, including free-threshing wheat, barley, rye and possibly oats (although these may have occurred as weeds amongst other crops). The average size of the associated weed seeds suggests that the remains represent the cleaning out of storage facilities (such as pits) by fire, before the new crop was deposited.

Taken as a whole, the results from the Primary School and surrounding sites highlight the considerable potential of future investigations at Fordham, not least in terms of the evidence for its planned layout. In addition, there is clear potential to explore further the economy of this rural settlement from its potential origins as a Middle Saxon 'home farm' to its development into a medieval village.

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