
Short Report:

Excavations at Main Street, Little Thetford: investigating a medieval *berewick*

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Incorporating specialist information from David Hall (pottery),
Vida Rajkovača (faunal remains), Ian Riddler (worked bone),
Ellen Simmons (plant macrofossils) and Simon Timberlake (worked stone)

Excavations at Little Thetford have provided the first archaeological information on this medieval rural settlement, indicating that it originated in the Middle Anglo-Saxon period and had ditched plots from the 10th–12th centuries onwards. Medieval Little Thetford was a dependent outlying estate rather than a village and the implications of this are considered.

An archaeological evaluation and excavation by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit at 11–15 Main Street, Little Thetford, in 2016–17 (Middleton 2018; Tabor 2016) represent the first significant investigation of this medieval rural settlement (Figs. 1–3). Although developer-funded investigations of medieval rural settlements are now commonplace in Cambridgeshire, they mostly relate to the nucleated villages that are recorded as such in Domesday Book in the late 11th century. Little Thetford is rather different, as it is recorded as a *berewick* or dependent outlying estate rather than an autonomous settlement, making these results of particular significance.

Origins

Little Thetford is located on the south-eastern edge of the Isle of Ely on locally relatively high ground around 350m to the west of the river Great Ouse, at a cross-road where the major route from Ely to Cambridge crosses a more minor route from Sutton to Soham. It is therefore in a significant location, which is reflected in its name (see below). No evidence for Prehistoric, Romano-British or Early Anglo-Saxon activity was recovered from the excavations, although there is a Late Iron Age and Romano-British settlement site nearby at Watson's Lane (Lucas and Hinman 1996; see also Evans, Knight and Webley 2007, 70–1). There is some evidence for Early Anglo-Saxon activity in the general area (Fig. 2), the most notable being a 6th–7th-century cemetery with at least 30 inhumations and some impressive grave goods north of Ely Field Farm (Fowler 1948; Lethbridge 1953; Murray 1955), although it is un-

certain where the associated settlement was located.

The importance of Little Thetford probably increased in the late 6th or early 7th century when the Isle of Ely was absorbed into the kingdom of East Anglia, as Exning, to which Little Thetford was connected by a routeway which ran through Soham, was an East Anglian royal estate.

The earliest material from the excavations was two sherds of Middle Anglo-Saxon Ipswich ware weighing 24g found in later contexts (Fig. 4), dating to *c.* 720–850 (Blinkhorn 2012). As Ipswich ware is usually only found in relatively small quantities on sites in Cambridgeshire the sparsity of material is not surprising given the scale of investigations. This indicates that Little Thetford may have originated in the Middle Anglo-Saxon period.

The Late Saxon and Early Norman *Berewick*

Features dating to the 10th–12th centuries are concentrated near Main Street, indicating that this has always been the frontage of the property (Fig. 4). There is evidence for a network of ditches; the most substantial was 2.1m wide and 0.7m+ deep and probably represents an enclosure around an area of domestic occupation (Fig. 5 section A). The other smaller ditches probably relate to secondary enclosures around this (Fig. 5 section B). There were also some postholes outside the enclosed area, forming a timber structure *c.* 6.0m by 4.0m in extent that is probably an ancillary agricultural building rather than a domestic structure (Fig. 6). Overall the pattern suggests relatively restricted occupation of a rather organic nature near the street, which is less extensive and organized than typical for Cambridgeshire villages of this date. Only a small quantity of pottery of this period was recovered (85 sherds, 1338g); comprising Thetford-type ware (Fig. 7.3 and 7.5), St. Neots-type ware, Stamford ware and various mid/late 12th-century coarsewares. There was one single pointed pin-beater cut from the midshaft of a cattle-sized

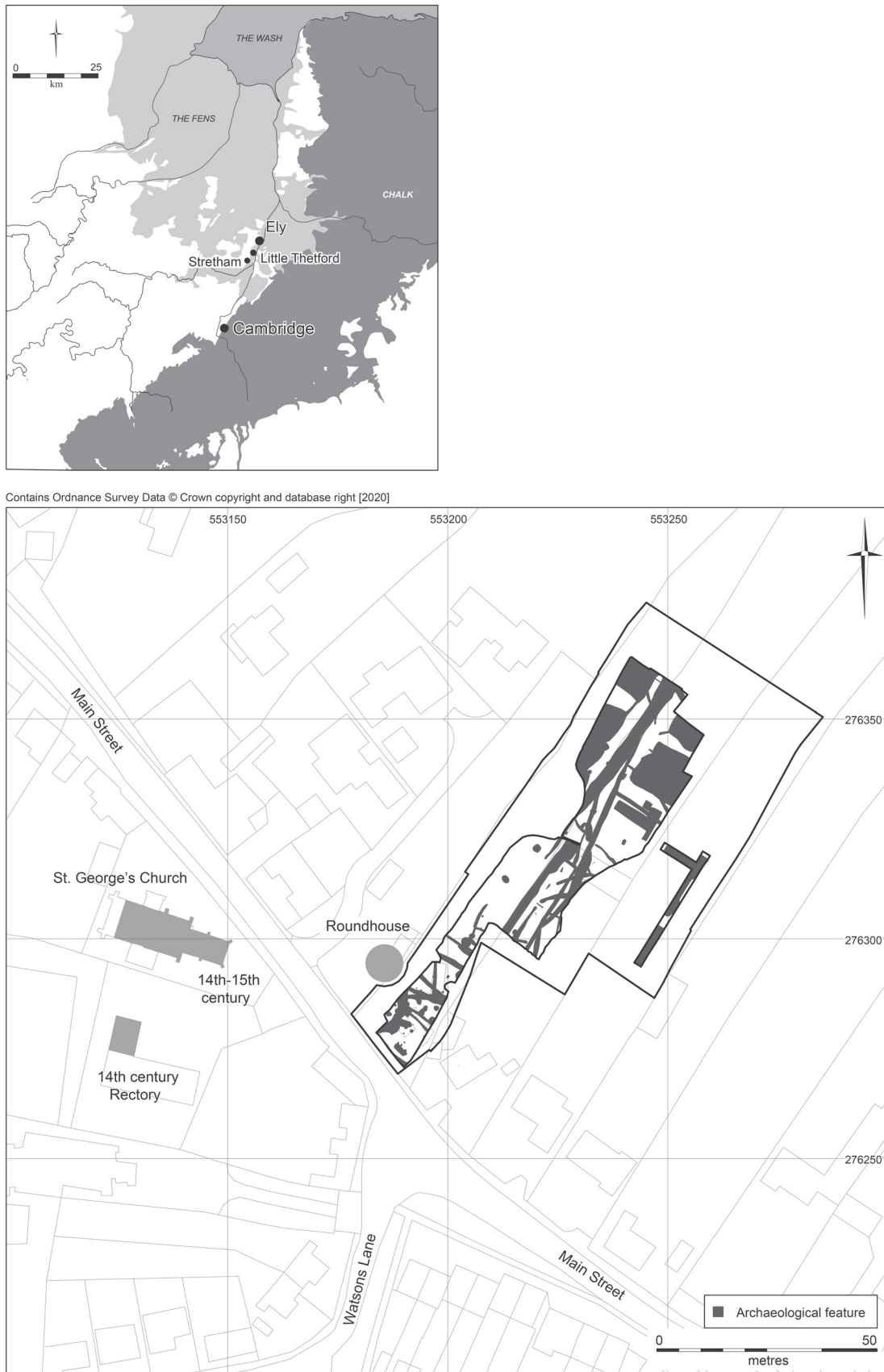


Figure 1. Site location.

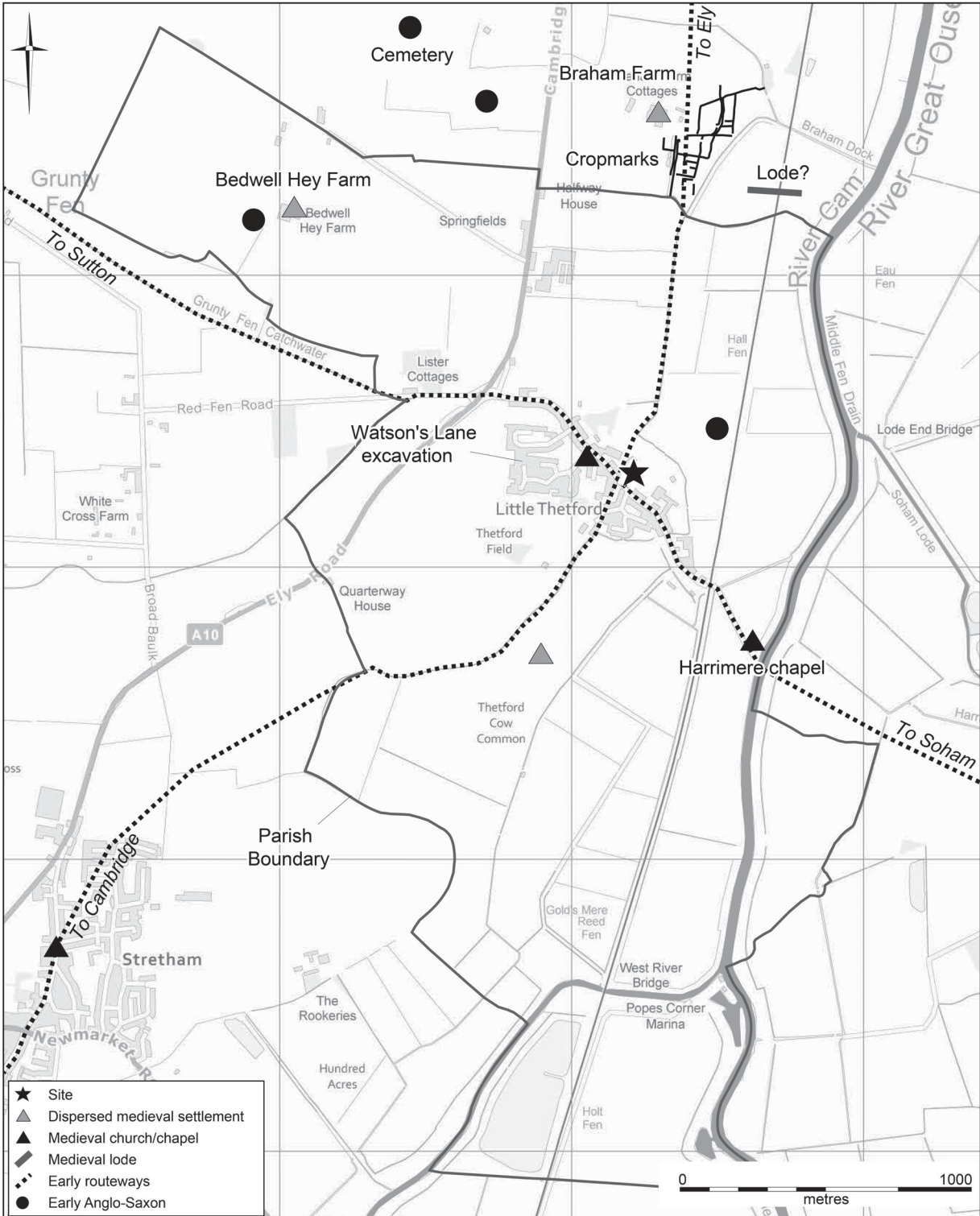


Figure 2. The parish landscape.



Figure 3. View of site facing northwest with adjacent possibly Late Medieval Roundhouse.

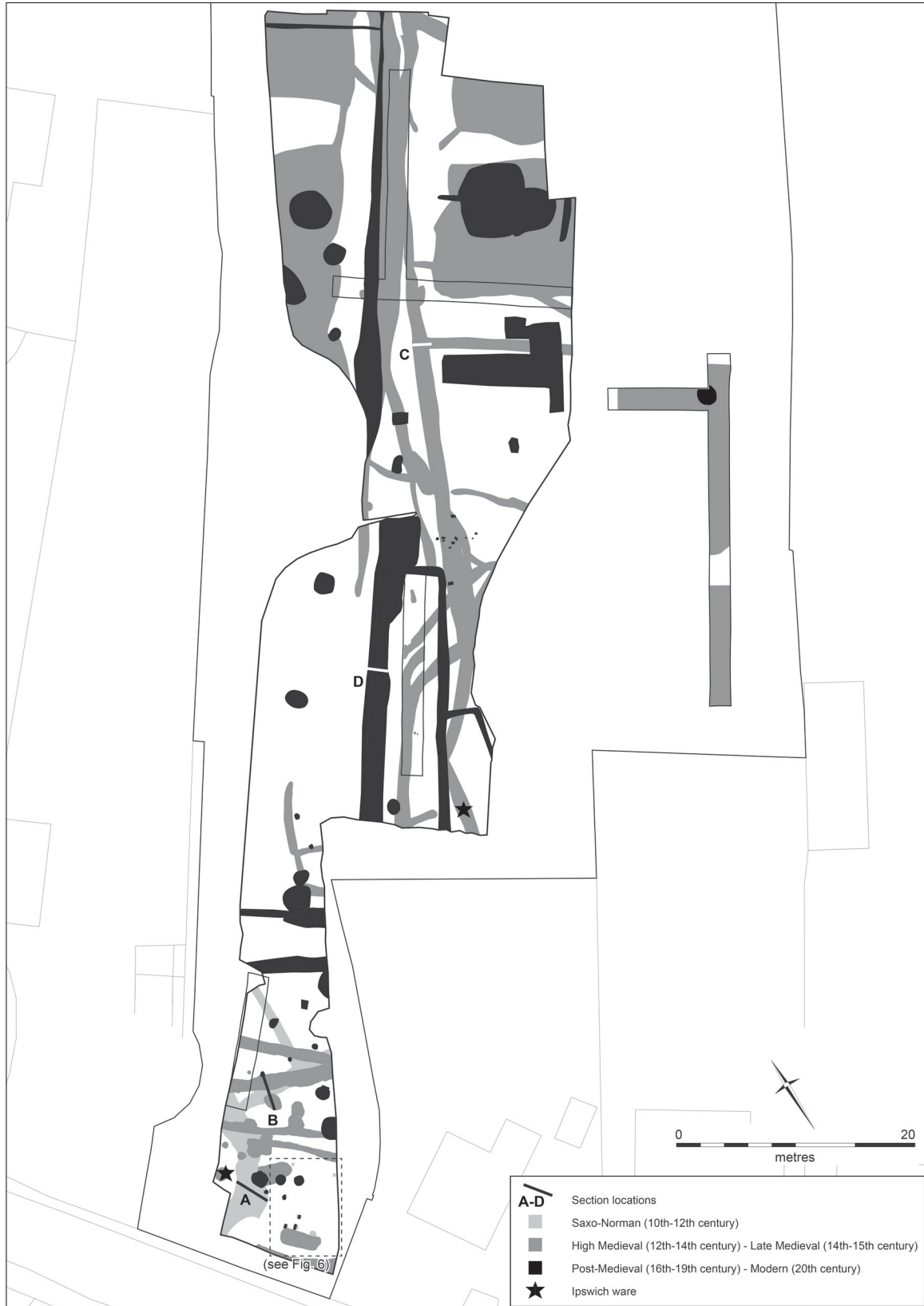


Figure 4. Phase plan.

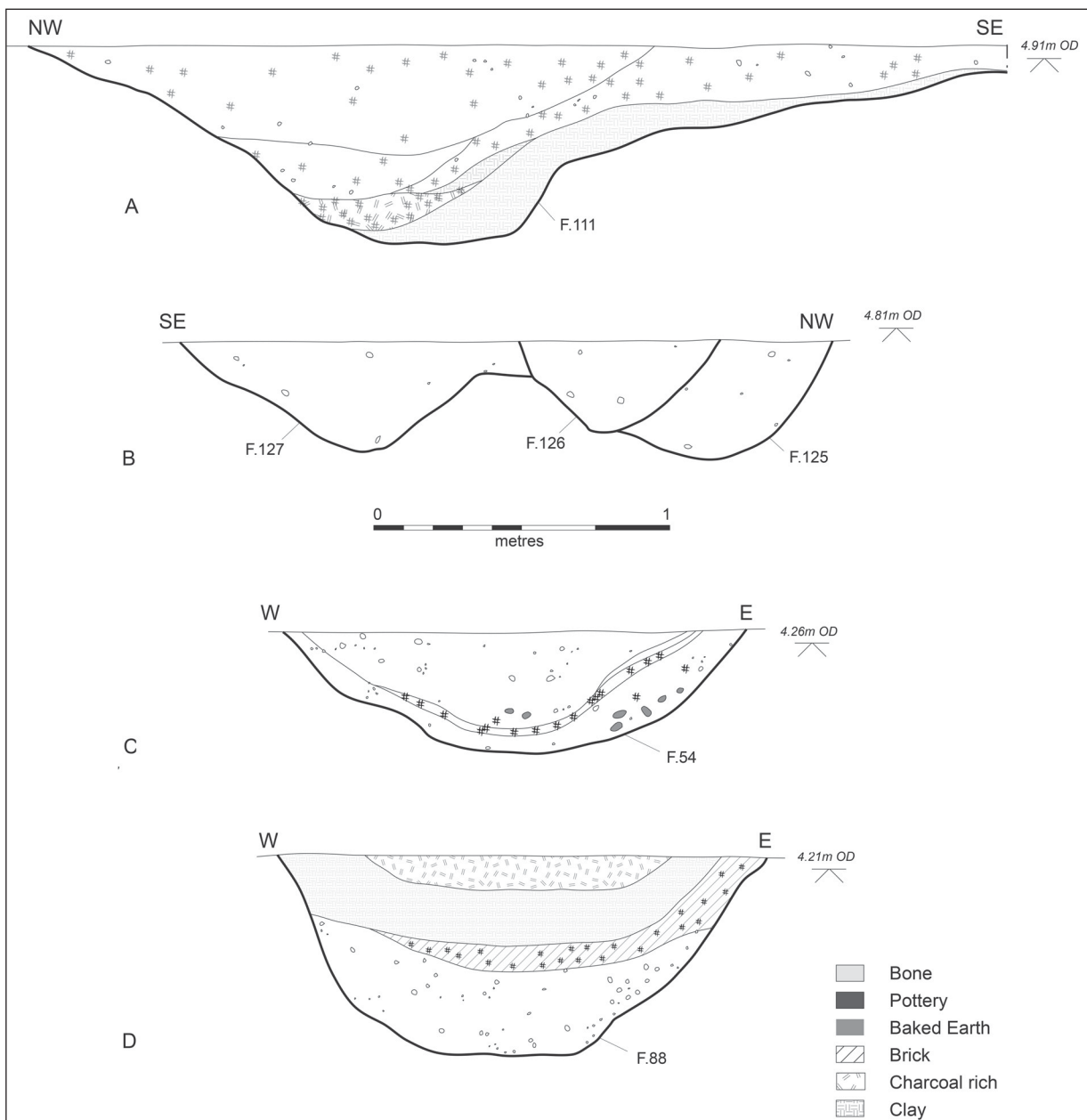


Figure 5. Sections of selected features. See Figure 4 for section locations.

A. main 10th–12th century enclosure ditch; B. sequence of minor 10th–12th and 13th–15th century ditches; C. 13th–15th century plot boundary ditch; D. Post-Medieval/Modern plot boundary ditch.

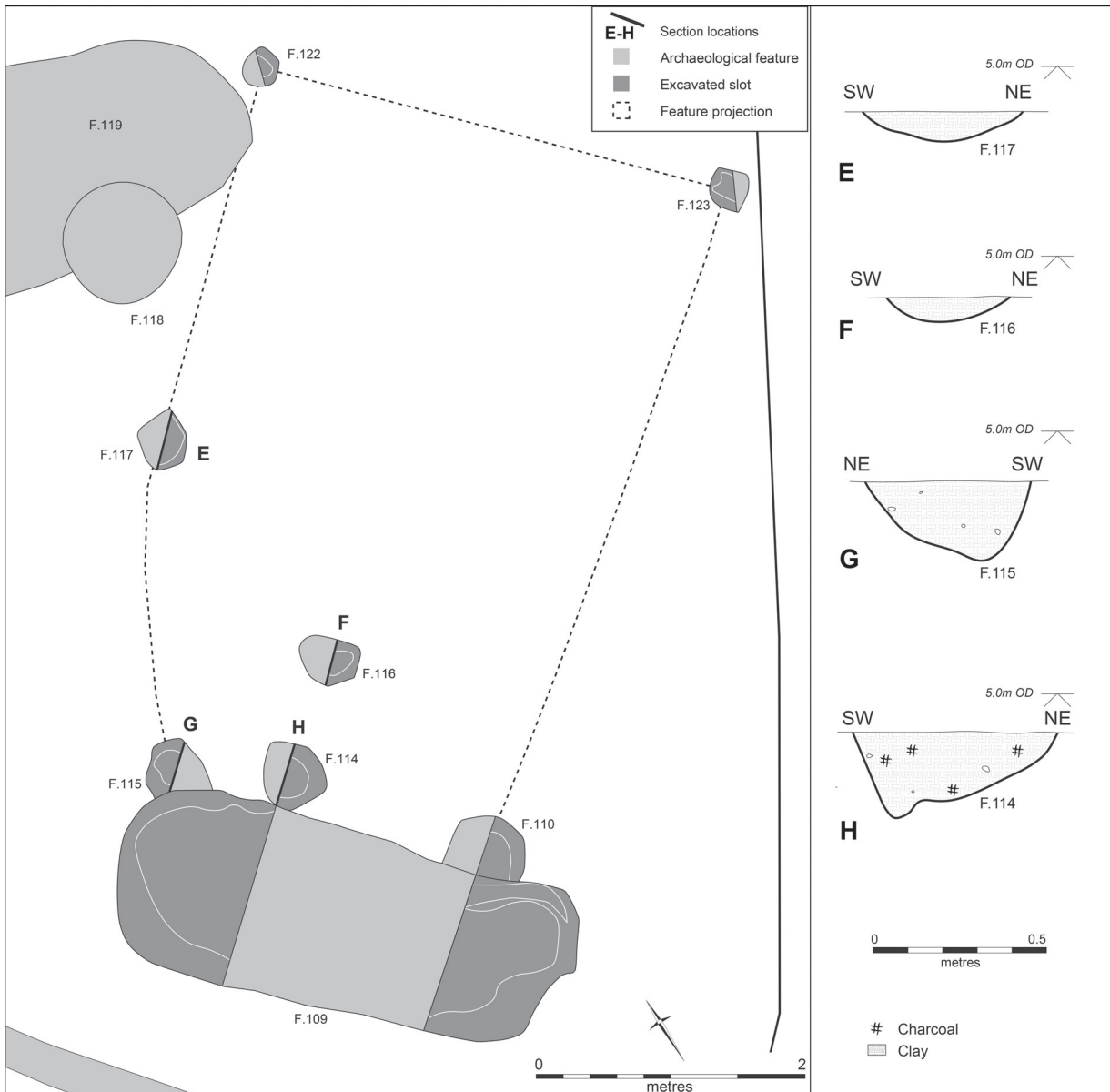


Figure 6. Plan and sections of possible 10th–12th century structure.

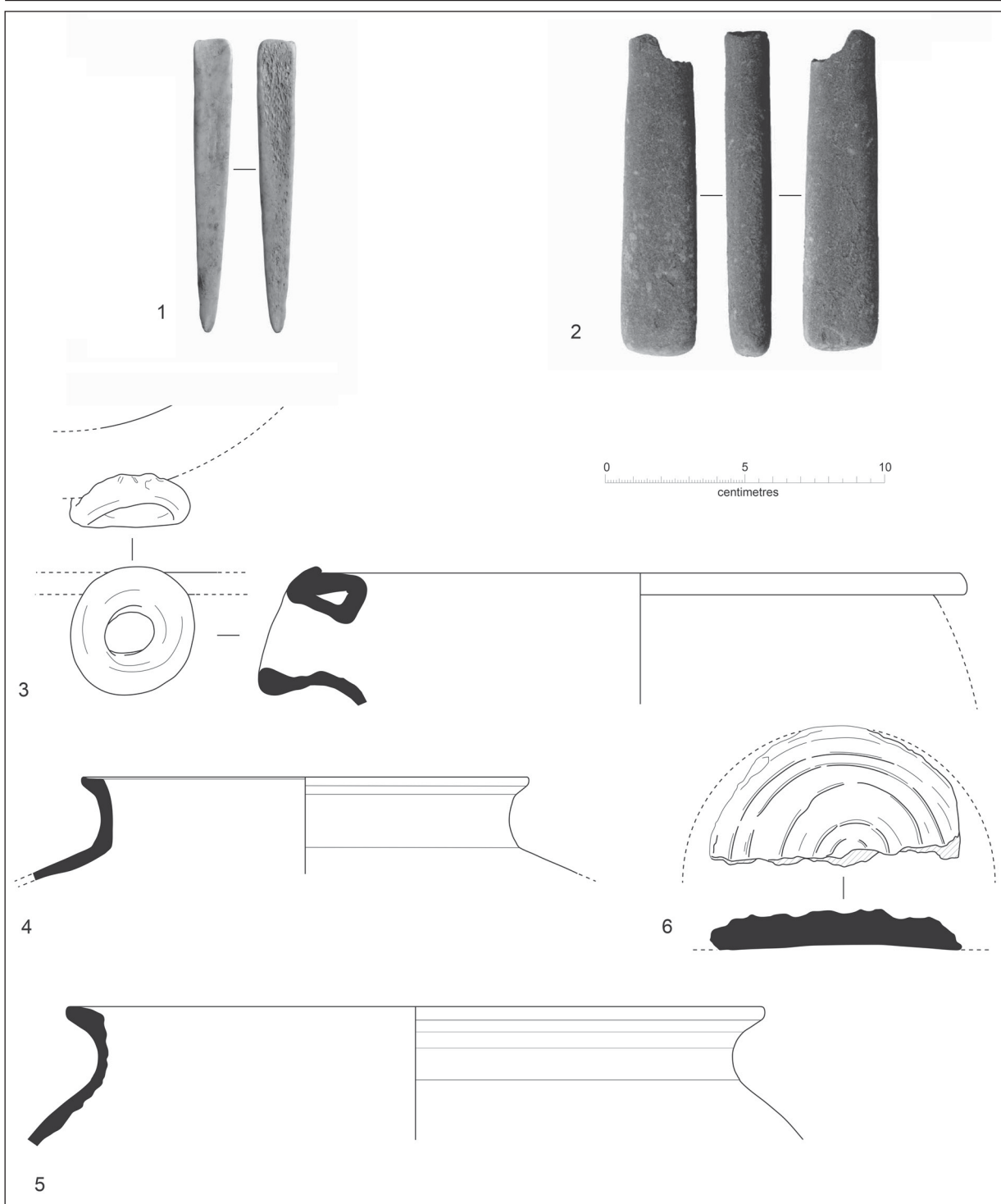


Figure 7. Selected finds.

1. worked bone pin beater <247> F.125 [224.01]
2. broken whetstone <185> F.88 [185.01]
3. Thetford-type ware pitcher spout <293> F.108 [200.01]
4. Blackborough End-type jar rim <252> F.133 [231.01]
5. Oxidised Thetford-type ware jar rim <223> [210.01]
6. Medieval Ely ware 'chicken feeder' <100> F.51 [102]

long bone (Fig. 7.1), typologically dated to the 9th–12th/13th centuries. This was probably used in association with a vertical two-beam loom.

Cereals identified from samples include barley, free threshing wheat and oats, with large seeded legumes, vetch/wild pea and field pennycress also present. Bramble, birch and elder indicate scrub type vegetation, while henbane suggests nutrient rich soils. The small faunal assemblage was dominated by cattle and sheep/goat, with small quantities of pig, horse, dog, and red deer. One fish bone was recovered and fish scales were identified in a sample.

The placename of Little Thetford is first recorded as *lytel Thiutforda* in a charter of around 972, the name being a combination of the elements ‘people/nation’ and ‘ford’ (Reaney 1943, 242). Land at Thetford and fisheries around those marshes were granted to the Abbey of Ely, located 4km to the north, by Ælfwaru in 1007 (Fairweather 2005, 159) and there are references to plots of land at *Piutforda* (Naismith 2016, 340–41, 343, 350; see also Hart 1966, 32,47, 80 nos. 27–8). In Domesday Book *Liteltedford* is a very small settlement described as a *berewick*, which literally translates as ‘barley farm’ but refers to a dependent outlying estate, in this instance of the Abbey of Ely (Rumble 1981, 5.49). There were no freemen at *Liteltedford* at this time and just a single *villein* or unfree peasant, who owed his lord labour services but also farmed six acres of land for himself, plus four *cottars* or unfree peasants without land. The settlement was valued at 20 shilling in 1066 and 40 shillings in 1086, with one ploughland of arable land, meadows and fisheries that yielded 500 eels and 4½d. in tribute. At only five households the Late Saxon and Early Norman *berewick* was a small settlement with a population of perhaps 17–25. Significantly the archaeological evidence indicates that this was in the same location as the core of the High/Late Medieval settlement.

The High/Late Medieval Settlement

There is evidence for a long-lived 13th–15th-century ditched boundary, running southwest to northeast, that was re-cut at least five times (Figs. 4 and 5 section C). This correspond to a Modern plot boundary and must represent the division between two medieval plots. There were also a number of other ditches running perpendicular to this, which were particularly common close to the Main Street frontage. There were also a few pits, including some large 14th–15th-century quarry pits towards the rear of the plots. Although the limited exposure limits interpretation it appears that there were a series of long rectangular plots fronting onto Main Street, in a manner that is archaeologically indistinguishable from Cambridgeshire village sites of the period. The exact period when these plots were established is uncertain, but it was at some point in the 13th–14th centuries.

Two hundred and ninety-five sherds of 13th–15th-century pottery weighing 4535g were recovered (Fig.

7.4 and 7.6); over half of the pottery was produced nearby in Ely (165 sherds, 56%) with other identifiable sources including Grimston, Bourne, Surrey Borders and Brill/Boarstall. Although found in a modern context an almost complete whetstone is probably of medieval date (Fig. 7.2). This was a round-edged tapered-rectangular light-grey quartz mica schist whetstone, 113mm long by 23–26mm wide and 14mm wide with a perforation for suspension. It had been extensively used as a knife hone on all four long sides, with a slight wear/rounding of the surface (perhaps from pounding use) at the broad tip. It was imported from Eidsborg in Upper Telemark, Norway, where there was a well-established whetstone quarrying industry. These whetstones were regularly traded across the North Sea from the port of Skien from the 9th–11th centuries onwards (Hansen 2009), probably to trading ports such as Ipswich and Norwich. They were exported as large undressed blanks, which by the 13th century were typically 300mm by 50mm by 30mm that were then split to the required size and worked in urban workshops in England. Although a common item on English medieval sites this whetstone simultaneously supplies evidence for minor rural settlements such as Little Thetford being connected to international trading networks and also the most tangible link to an individual living at Little Thetford. Such items were personal possessions that most adults would have owned, this one was used extensively to sharpen its owner’s knife over a period of years. When it broke at the weak point of the suspension perforation, perhaps when it was being misused as a pounding tool, it was discarded even though it could have continued to be used indicating that a replacement was easily obtainable and affordable.

The small faunal assemblage was dominated by cattle followed by sheep/goat with small quantities of pig, horse, dog, cat, chicken, goose and red deer. No fish bone was recovered, although small quantities of fish scale were identified in some samples. The most frequent cereal was free threshing wheat, followed by barley with oats, including cultivated common oat, and rye was also present. Large seeded legumes, raspberry and brambles seeds may also represent foodstuffs. Charred wild or weed plant seeds, which are probably associated with crops, included those commonly associated with fertile disturbed soils, grassland and damp soils. The waterlogged seeds, which are likely to be representative of the immediate local environment, indicate nitrogen enriched soils, shallow water or wet nutrient rich mud and standing water.

In the 13th-century Little Thetford was treated as a part of Stretham, located 3km to the southwest. One free tenant in 1221 and three in 1251 are described as being ‘of Thetford’ and the inhabitants of Little Thetford are mentioned in the Ely Coucher book of 1249–50 as sharing various common rights in a number of local fens (Willmoth and Oosthuizen 2015, 22, 68, 79–80). There is some evidence of dispersed medieval settlement in the vicinity of Little Thetford (Fig. 2). South of Little Thetford there is a cropmark

complex of trackways and ditched enclosures that probably relate to a deserted medieval settlement and both Bedwell Hey Farm and Braham Farm, located north of Little Thetford, had some form of medieval occupation, with two clusters of posts and stakes possibly representing the revetments of a medieval lode at the river near Braham Farm (Edwards 1996, 9–12). There was a chapel near the river known as Haveringmere or Harrimere on the route to Soham that is documented in 1381 and 1411 and the site has produced sherds of 10th–12th-century St. Neots-type ware.

One of the key events in the history of the settlement was the construction of St. George's church (Wells 1953, 157–8). There are no early documentary references to the church and it is largely of late 14th-century construction, with no evidence for earlier structural elements. Its dedication to St. George suggests it was established after Edward III made him the patron saint of the Order of the Garter in 1348, in thanks for his supposed intervention at the Battle of Crécy in 1346. St. George's church was subsidiary to its mother church at Stretham, nonetheless its construction suggests that Little Thetford was thriving in the aftermath of the various crises of the early/mid 14th century. Part of the rectory to the south of the church is also 14th century, the ground-floor room with a chamber above was probably part of the medieval parsonage. The circular brick-built thatched Roundhouse (Fig. 3) immediately to the northwest of the excavations is first mentioned in 1793 as a dove house in the yard and may have been originally constructed in the 15th–16th centuries, although the dating is uncertain.

The core of the Late Medieval settlement was located in the vicinity of St. George's church and the archaeological investigations have demonstrated that this developed from earlier settlement in the area and was similar in character to other investigated medieval villages.

Later Activity

The ditched plots continued to be occupied throughout the Post-Medieval and Modern periods within stable boundaries (Fig. 5 section D). The most intriguing discovery is a fig seed from a 16th–17th-century pit. Whilst discoveries of figs are common on Post-Medieval urban sites this discovery indicates how widely dispersed such imports were in rural contexts. In the mid-16th century Little Thetford was a separate manor and by 1582 there were 20 messuages with tofts, gardens, and orchards, a dovecote, 300 acres of arable, 100 acres of meadow, 100 acres of pasture, 200 acres of furze and heath and two acres of woodland and foldage for 300 sheep (Wells 1953, 154).

The Watson's Lane site had a set of well-preserved ridge and furrow earthworks that was thoroughly investigated with survey, section recording, bucket sampling and micromorphology (Gdaniec 1994; Gdaniec and Butler 1994; Lewis 1998). They comprised twelve ridges *c.* 4.0m apart and surviving to

a height of *c.* 1.0m, with a total buried and upstanding height of less than 2.0m. There proved to be two phases of ridges, both on the same alignment, but the later *c.* 0.3–0.6m offset from the earlier. Although small quantities of 13th–15th-century pottery were present, particularly at the eastern end of the site, the spacing indicates that the ridge and furrow is 18th–19th-century. So this ridge and furrow, and other instances around Little Thetford cannot be linked to the medieval village

Discussion

The evidence suggests that the *berewick* or dependent outlying estate at Little Thetford originated in the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, the same time as most archaeologically investigated nucleated villages in Cambridgeshire. In the Late Saxon to Early Norman period the occupation appears to have been more restricted and organic than is typical for local rural settlements, but was in the same location as the High/Late Medieval settlement core. In the High/Late Medieval period the settlement expands and is more regular, becoming archaeologically more similar to other contemporary local rural settlements with two long rectangular plots. This suggests that the crises of the early/mid-14th century may ultimately have benefited Little Thetford.

Whether Little Thetford was typical of *berewicks* is unclear, although there was probably as much variation in these outlying estates as there was for villages. If the excavated site of Little Paxton is a *berewick* of Great Paxton, then this was a much more significant settlement than Little Thetford in the Late Saxon and Early Norman period but was abandoned before the High/Late Medieval period (Addyman 1969). March, a *berewick* of the Bishop of Ely's manorial centre at Doddington, appears to have been a much larger planned settlement founded in the early 13th century with a large number of planned messuages (Oosthuizen 2013), very different from Little Thetford. Similarly excavations at the rural non-village hamlet of Howes near Cambridge indicates that this was very different in character from Little Thetford (Cessford 2015). These examples indicate that non-village settlements in medieval Cambridgeshire demonstrate a wide degree of variety, requiring individual assessment and where possible archaeological investigation.

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