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Modern living in an historic environment

Archaeological Observations at

40-42 Broad Street, Syresham

Northamptonshire

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Archaeological observation and recording at 40-42 Broad Street, Syresham

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Summary

A programme of archaeological observation took place during groundworks to set out a new dwelling at 40-42 Broad Street, Syresham. Here there lay truncated wall and rear yard remains of a 19th century cottage demolished in the 1930s but there were no remains present of earlier occupation or settlement.

Introduction

Full Planning Consent was granted by South Northamptonshire Council for the construction of a two-storey dwelling at 40-42, Broad Street, Syresham S/2013/0813/EXT. Since the site lies in an apparent gap in the modern frontage of one of the principal medieval streets of Syresham, a pre-commencement condition was requested to be applied to the consent by Northamptonshire County Council for a programme of archaeological fieldwork, for approval before commencement of ground-works. In accordance with this, an approach was made to the District's Archaeological Advisor at Northamptonshire County Council, following receipt of the condition. She indicated that receipt of a suitable Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI), would be sufficient to elicit approval for works to commence. This was duly compiled and approved. Fieldwork took place in October 2013 in accordance with the Written Scheme of Investigation and lasted two days.

Fig 1: Site location (arrowed); OS 10,000 Vector Map, sheet SP64.
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The site lies at NGR: SP 6291 4171 and is on Jurassic Lias Clays. It rests at about 128m above Ordnance Datum.

Aims, objectives and methodology

The site lies on the frontage of Broad Street, Syresham and comprises one of a very few gaps in that (possibly) medieval building line. It is believed to lie on the edge of part of the circuit of an apparent large oval enclosure. In terms of settlement morphology, this is a plan-form which is thought to have its origins in the pre-Norman Conquest period and so may denote firm Saxon origins to the village. For the published surrounding remains, regardless of date, see RCHME (1982, 141-3). The frontage of the site is shown as built-upon in early Ordnance Survey Maps, and possibly as far back as the Ordnance Survey Surveyors Drawing of 1812 (Towcester sheet, available through www.bl.ac.uk), although the scale is too small to be more exact. There the oval plan form is very clear and is still just recognisable in the modern map (Fig 1).

The aim of the archaeological fieldwork was as follows:

- To determine and understand the nature, function, character and development of any archaeological remains which may lie on the plot, in their cultural and environmental setting
- To record the extent, nature and date of any archaeological features or deposits that may be present during the ground-works programme for the new development
- To preserve by record archaeological features or deposits found therein and report on them.

The work was carried out by a small 360-degree excavator fitted with a 1.5m-wide toothless ditching blade and latterly a 600mm wide bucket with its teeth deliberately removed. The reduction of the plot overall was only about 200mm. It was the foundation-digging which extended down to the natural geology (Lias Clays) and then extended a further 300-400mm into these. The work was carried out under the supervision of an archaeologist.

Fig 2: The site frontage at the start of works, looking east.

Observations

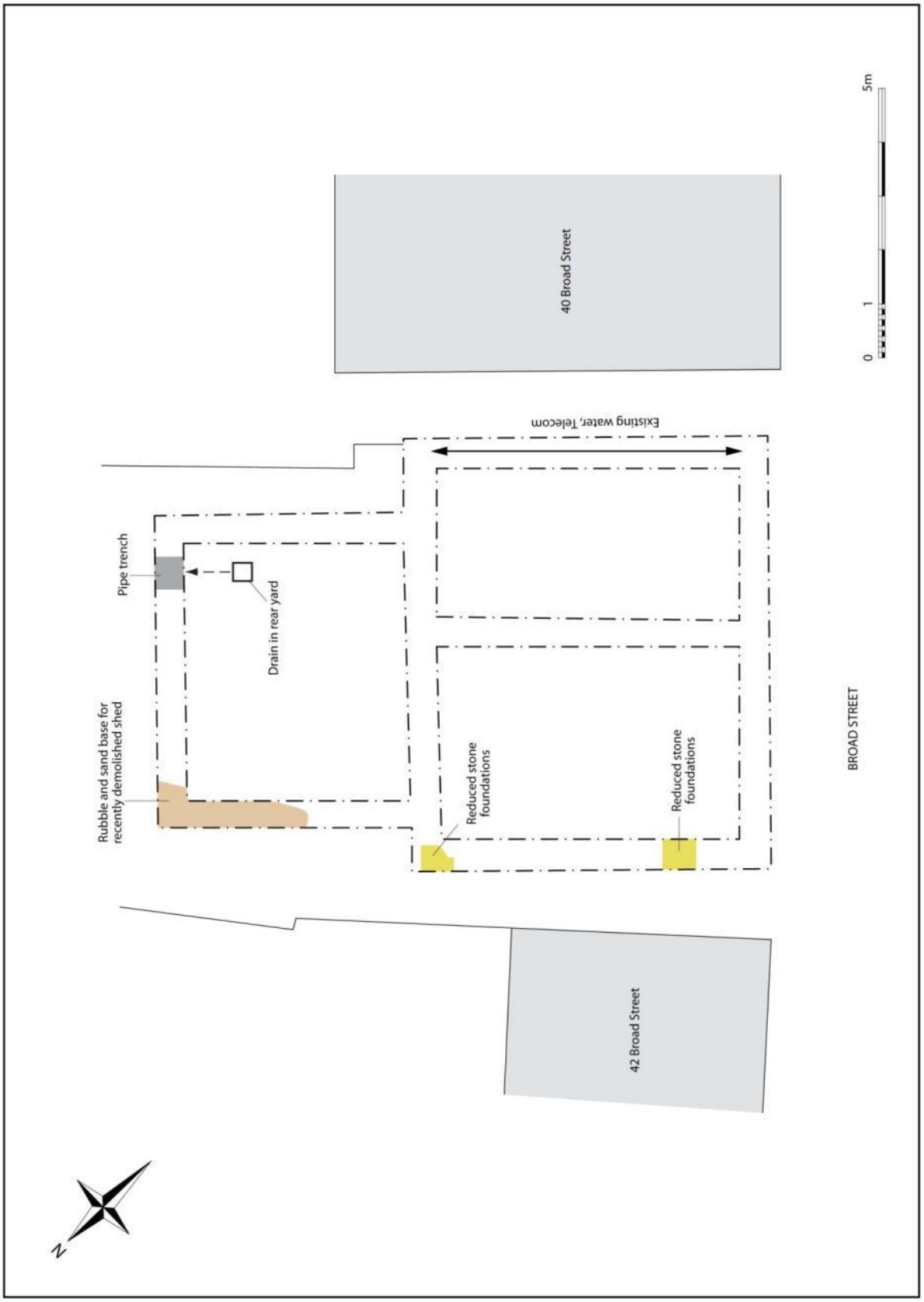

Fig 3: Plan of the site and the new house foundation trenches (Candy Stevens)

Fig 4: The site during machining, viewed from the garden, looking towards Broad Street

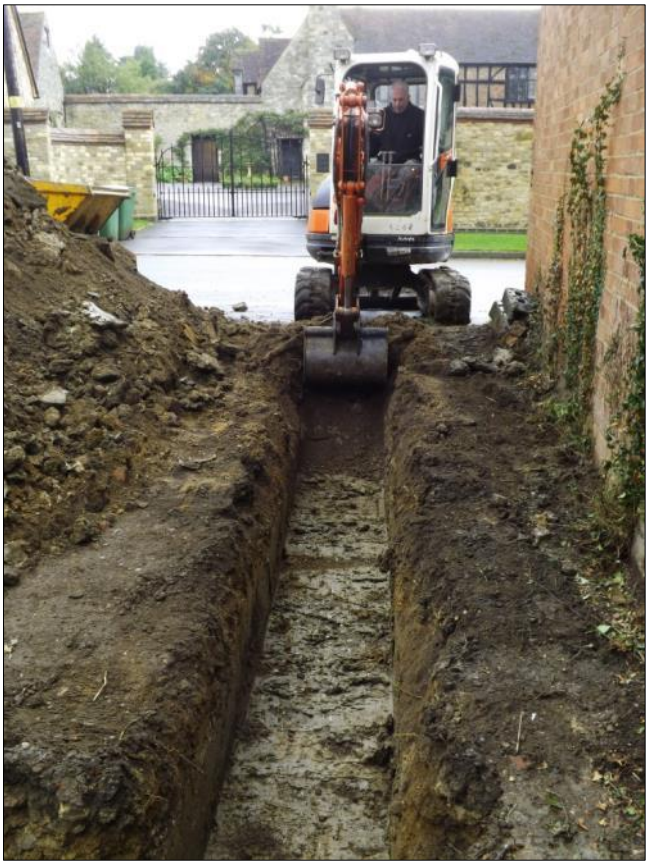

Fig 5: Machining foundations at the north-western end of the new building: clean natural clay

The site was cleared mechanically using a 5-ton tracked 360-degree mechanical excavator under archaeological control. Work began once the existing shed on the site and undergrowth and rubbish had been cleared away.

The top of the site was stripped by an average 200mm to level the rear of the plot and remove topsoil and remaining vegetation-roots. This exposed no archaeology prior to a 20th-century blue-brick yard surface with a salt-glaze drain at its centre and a spread of bricks and rubble which had formed the floor of the former shed on the plot.

With the surface of the plot reduced, the machine bucket was changed to a 600mm-wide toothless example, with which the foundation trenches of the new house were dug, again under archaeological control. These trenches, which lay under the load-bearing walls of the new house, would later be filled with concrete, and extended some 300-400mm into the natural Lias clay.

The wall trench closest to no 40 Broad Street (south-east) contained existing services for that property (water and telecom) and had been excavated previously. It contained only disturbed material down to the natural and into the Lias clay.

The wall trench closest to no 42 Broad Street (north-west) contained the vestiges of two stone foundations close to the front and to the rear. These barely comprised three mortared limestone rubble blocks and were the merest survivals. Both lay above the natural Lias clay and did not extend into it. They represent the last vestige of the front and back wall of the former thatched cottage which stood here in the 19th-20th centuries, and which was demolished in the period between the world wars. Anecdotal evidence suggests this was formerly owned by the George Timms Charity and was last occupied as a cobbler's shop (ex inf Mr L Hawkins, current owner of the site).

A spread of rubble lay at the rear of the property which was the sub-base for the shed demolished at the start of works. This was cut into the natural clay.

The remainder of the house footprint was not reduced further. The sections of the wall trenches showed no surviving stratification over the natural ground surface, just disturbed mix of soil, limestone-and-brick rubble, sand and mortar, left after the cottage had been demolished. A salt-glazed drain at the rear related to drainage of the former yard behind the cottage.

The wall trenches penetrated 300-400mm into the Lias clay and throughout there were no pre-modern features or disturbances into the natural geology.

Discussion

No pre-modern or significant archaeology was present. Although the garden area behind the new property was not reduced beyond the level of modern topsoil, the absence of early remains on the frontage suggests this part of the plot would not probably contain anything more.

A negative piece of fieldwork (where no significant remains are found despite possible expectations), inevitably leads to some soul-searching and discussion. This is an entirely necessary outcome but one in which the absence of evidence need not be seen as either detrimental to on-going enquiry, nor a waste of resources. It merely confirms where evidence is absent. The reasons may be numerous and potential signposts are there to be recognised.

Pre-Norman Conquest oval enclosures have been postulated at a number of small towns in Northamptonshire, usually on the basis of mapped plan-forms, most notably at Higham Ferrers and

(closer-by) Daventry, where a number of pieces of fieldwork have sought it out. There, however, the evidence of the plan-form on the ground has been very thin, although in what is a much more intensively occupied town centre, excavations have demonstrated major occupation and landscaping very close to the enclosure line, both before that period and after (Soden 1997, 94; Soden et al 2005, 127). However, contemporary material (and there is plenty) cannot yet be associated with any elliptical plan-form as the key 'concentric' lines for the most part probably lie underneath long-lived boundaries, just as here at Syresham. It is thus extremely difficult to establish this boundary between a Late Saxon enclosed and possibly inhabited zone (which is clear enough at Daventry – ibid 2005, 120-22) and the liminal boundaries, which may have taken the form of bank, ditch, palisade, fence, hedge etc. Any possible distinction at Daventry is muddled by the discovery of coeval remains in greater profusion *outside* that elliptical plan-form as well as inside (Soden 1997, 60-64). This is where the potential comparison between Syresham with Daventry is at its most apposite, since this Syresham site appears to lie on the outer edge of such a circuit so in a Daventry-model, remains which might be un-enclosed or excluded are possible.

Although it may be argued that a negative piece of fieldwork such as this has made no positive contribution to the regional research agenda, it has not discounted the former existence of a late-Saxon oval enclosure, since the circuit is described by a wide arc of both the road-width and the frontage on the far side. It remains distinctly possible that a former bank or ditch may have occupied one or both of these lines and that related, deeply-dug remains lie under the carriageway, footways or opposite frontage. That the current site, lying, as it does on the outer margin of the circuit, contained no related remains is perhaps a matter of acknowledging that an un-enclosed area, outside the circuit, only became desirable for any initial frontage once the ditch-circuit had 'fossilised' into a road –and the space on the inside of the old circuit was all taken up.

In any case it seems that, while the search for evidence for Late Saxon administrative oval enclosure goes on, evidence on the frontage on the outer eastern side of its circuit at Syresham does not survive or was always absent on this plot.

It is perhaps apposite that the original champion of the existence of these enclosures in Northamptonshire (Glenn Foard), who considers Syresham to be one, should have most recently written: *'..the suggestion of such enclosures from plan-form alone is fraught with difficulties'* (Partida et al 2013, 94).

The search for evidence continues in line with re-development in the towns and villages affected.

Bibliography

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