



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**Roman and medieval remains at
Middle Street, Isham, Northamptonshire**

Iain Soden and Charlotte Walker

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Summary

Two new houses are under construction on land off Middle Street, Isham. A small set-piece excavation accompanied ground-works and was undertaken by IS Heritage.

A pit and gully contained Roman pottery and appear to be part of a wider area of Roman activity in this area, although the nature of the activity and scale remain unclear.

A well, a gully and a spread of pits date from the medieval period. These features are likely to be part of back-plot activity associated with buildings on the Church Street frontage.

Introduction

Full planning consent was granted to Mr J Davis for the erection of two new houses on land off Middle Street (and to the rear of 20 Church Street), Isham, Northamptonshire (NGR SP 8860 7400; Fig 1). A condition for archaeological fieldwork prior to development was applied to the planning consent and the scope laid out in a brief prepared by Northamptonshire County Council's Assistant Archaeological Advisor (NCC 2014). The detailed methodology for the archaeological fieldwork was set out in a Written Scheme of Investigation, prepared by IS Heritage and approved by the Assistant Archaeological Advisor (AAA).

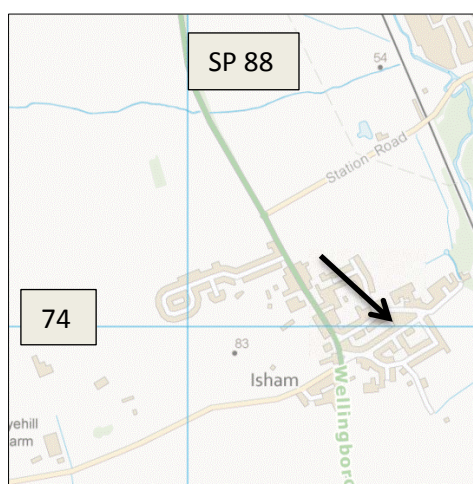


Fig 1: site location (arrowed). Contains Ordnance Survey data
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Middle Street, Isham

Location, topography and geology

The site was overgrown and empty of buildings apart from a small garage, which was demolished as part of the development. It lies in the centre of the village of Isham, c 4km south of Kettering and 2km west of Burton Latimer. The site is bounded by Middle Street to the south and residential properties to the north, east and west.

The bedrock geology of the site was Ooidal Ironstone of the Northampton Sand Formation; no superficial geology is recorded (bgs.ac.uk). The site lies at c 70m aOD on the western side of the Ise valley.

Historical and archaeological background

There have been a number of finds of Roman material within the village. A pipe trench excavated in 1967 to the south of the church revealed two curving parallel ditches, of which one was excavated. It contained Roman pottery, including Samian pottery, tiles, tesserae and animal bone. Roman pottery has also been found south of the church and south of South Street (RCHME 1979, 100). A number of objects found in c 1976 to the rear of 25 Middle Street included a Roman spindle whorl and six large tesserae. The size of the tesserae suggests that they were from a low quality, low status floor meant for heavy footfall.

There are a number earthworks associated with former medieval settlement of the village. These are largely located to the north-east of the current settlement towards the mill. A broad hollow way continues the line of Church Street to the east and a more indistinct hollow way continues the line of South Street. A number of former closes appear to lie between Middle Street and the hollow way extension of South Street; depressions at the north-western end of the closes may be former house sites fronting onto Middle Street (RCHME 1979, 100-1). It is considered that the form of these settlement remains suggests that the village may have had planned origins.

Historic maps dating from the early 19th century onwards suggest that there was very little settlement on either side of the eastern end of Middle Street, with the later 19th century Ordnance Survey maps indicating areas of orchard. It is unclear whether this lack of building along Middle Street was part of the wider shrinkage of the village during the medieval period or whether there were historically no frontages along this part of the street and it provided access to the rear of plots fronting onto Church Street or South Street.

Methodology

An L-shaped area of approximately 18m x 18m covering the southern half of the development plot was stripped of topsoil and subsoil in order to expose the natural geology. This was undertaken using a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket under archaeological control. The geology of the north-west portion of the area (the up-hill portion) had been truncated in a previous episode of levelling.

Middle Street, Isham

Following machine-work, a base plan was created, located using existing topographical surveys of the site and tied into the Ordnance Survey. Site levels were related to Ordnance Datum. The surface of exposed archaeological deposits was cleaned by hand to enhance their definition and planned to scale.

All archaeological deposits and artefacts encountered during the course of excavation were fully recorded. They were given individual context numbers and described on *pro-forma* context sheets, including details of the context, its relationships, interpretation and a checklist of associated finds. Since the site was small and relatively uncomplicated plans were drawn at 1:50 scale. Photographs were taken as 35mm monochrome negatives for archive purposes and digital media for reporting purposes.



Fig 2: The southern half of the site along Middle Street, newly stripped, looking south; scales 1m

Roman remains

At the north-east corner of the site lay a pit (25) and a gully (23), whose fills were of a much lighter shade than all other features on site, being a medium brown-dark yellow colour. The pit fill (26) produced a single sherd of soft, pink-grogged Roman pottery of a type known especially from Towcester. A single sherd is insufficient to date the remains further. The gully produced no pottery but on the grounds of the similarity of their fills, the two features are likely to be broadly contemporary.

The alignment of the gully, which was some 600mm wide at its widest, was slightly off the perpendicular to Middle Street. It is not an alignment quite sufficient to suggest a continuity of plot/road layout from the Roman period to later remains, but may be considered a coincidence.

Middle Street, Isham

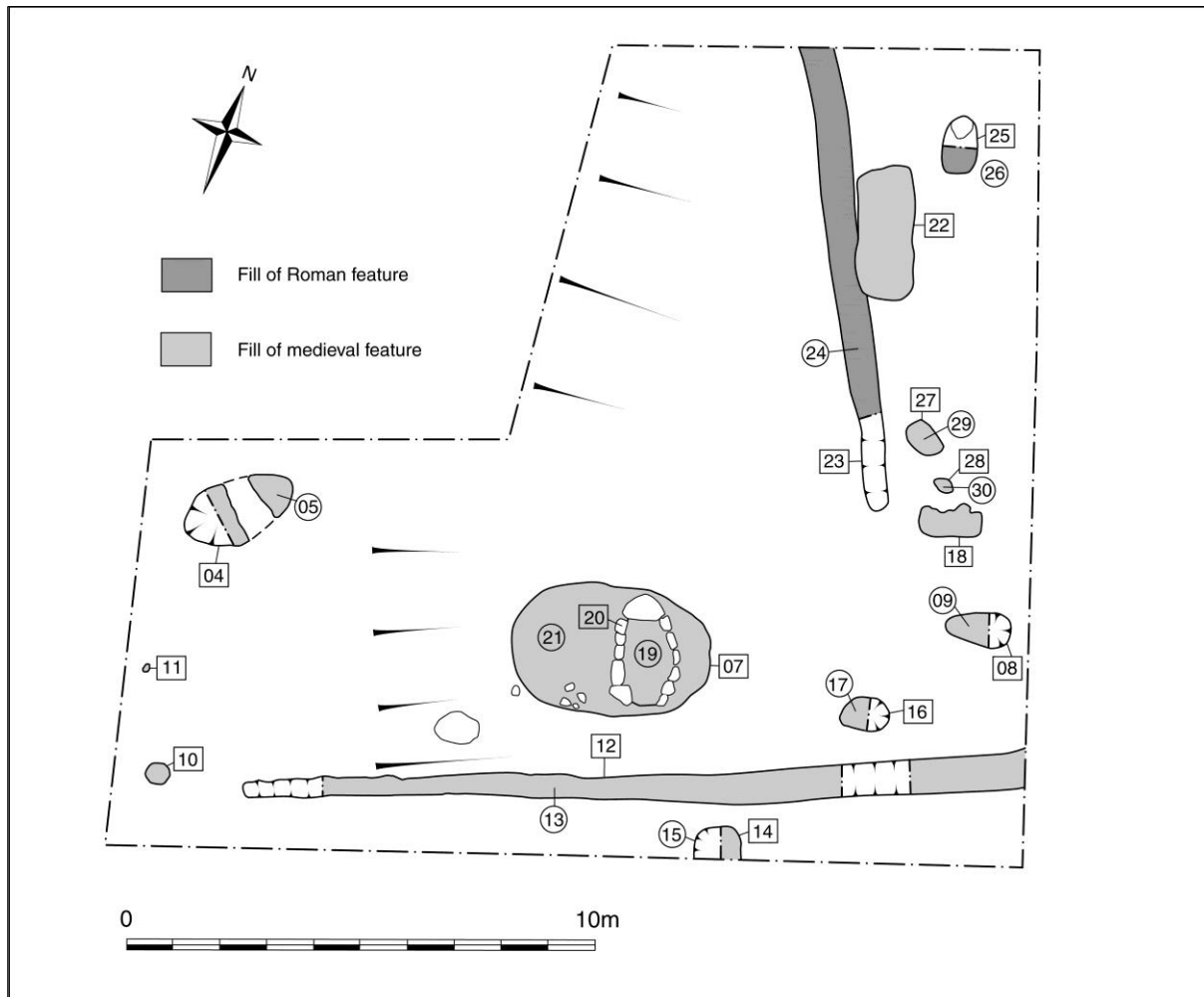


Fig 3: All remains on the site, phased. The roadside boundary of Middle Street lies 1m from the southern edge of the excavation.

Medieval remains

Medieval remains were spread throughout the site, but with no specific pattern. Two features dominated. The first was a long straight gully some 500mm wide (12), which from its location was probably an early plot boundary, replaced by the existing boundary wall along Middle Street. It was truncated at the western end where the ground had been previously reduced. It was not accompanied by any bank or evidence of fence or hedge.

Just inside the plot was an elliptical limestone-built well (20). This had been set into a larger oval construction well-pit (07). Pottery from both the well-pit and the backfill of the well at its disuse show that its life lay entirely within the medieval period, probably the 13th-14th centuries. The well itself was curiously constructed, with its southern end un-lined in stone. This incomplete circuit may have had a deliberate purpose, but this is now lost. No parallels have been found. The well was altered on its west side where a portion had been cut away, the purpose unclear. It was backfilled with limestone rubble and included some secondary pottery (rubbish) dumping. This was excavated to a depth of about 800mm, but this was curtailed when ground water began to rise and voids were encountered making stability of the fills questionable to work in.



Fig 4: The medieval well and well-pit, looking west; scale 1m

Elsewhere across the site was a scatter of pits of different sizes, ranging from 2m across to c400mm diameter (04, 08, 14, 16, 27, 28). That at the western side of the plot (04) had been truncated and disturbed. Two small nearby possible post-holes (10, 11) had brick impressed into their surface and this suggests they may have been disturbed by the garage which recently stood above; they were not further investigated.

A rectangular patch of the natural ironstone (18) was scorched reddish purple, possibly denoting a former bonfire or brazier lay there. It was undated but lies within an area of other medieval features.

Pit (08) contained some very large sherds of medieval pottery, but which still only made up a small proportion of a large storage jar. It is suggested that the pit may have been a planting hole and that these may have been placed as 'crocking', to aid drainage. Other pits contained small amounts of small sherds, just sufficient for approximate dating.

A large rectangular pit at the north-eastern corner of the site (22) comprised the burial of a complete cow, the cut to which was seen relatively high in the sequence. Although considered here to be part of the overall medieval occupation of the site, this means it may well be later in date. This was not excavated.

Pottery

From 05 (the fill of pit 04) came a residual sherd of Roman Greyware. From 09 (the fill of pit 08) came another sherd of Roman Greyware. From the fill of the medieval well-pit (21) came a possible fragment of amphora, but very abraded.

From 26 (the fill of pit 25), was a single sherd of soft-pink-grogged Roman pottery, the only probable non-residual Roman sherd on the site. All of the above were non-diagnostic body sherds.

A much-abraded fragment of tile also from 05, may be Roman. It too was residual, however.

Middle Street, Isham

Medieval and later pottery was identified in accordance with the published Medieval and post-medieval County Type Series (CTS). Sherds were counted and weighed. The pottery present was as follows:

Type/ context	CTS	Production range	05	06	09	13	15	19	21	29	30	Total
Stamford B ware	205	850-1150					1/2g					1/2g
Shelly coarseware-types	330	1100-1400	10/36g	8/49g	2/67g		1/3g	7/159g	1/10g	1/8g	1/9g	31/341g
Sandy coarseware-types	360	1100-1400			2/50g	1/1g		10/51g				13/102g
Lyveden/Stanion types	319/ 320	1150-1500		3/38g	9/860g			7/105g	1/10g			20/1013g
Brill-Boarstall type ware	324	1200-1600		1/5g								1/5g
Potterspury-type ware	329	1250-1600			1/11g			5/65g				6/76g
Tudor Green-type	369	1350-1450			1/1g							1/1g
Totals			10/36g	12/92g	15/989g	1/1g	2/5g	29/380g	2/20g	1/8g	1/9g	71/1540g

Much of the medieval pottery was water-affected to some extent, probably because of the longevity of the gardening activities above and the resulting permeability of the soils. This resulted in the majority of shelly inclusions and oolites being washed out or dissolved. While this is distinctive for such types, it makes some identification tentative (short of creating numerous fresh breaks). None were good examples of their types.

None of the pottery implies primary dumping. Indeed, where material was deliberately dumped, in particular to infill the disused well, it was of a very mixed, secondary nature, suggesting sherds may have been deposited with general back yard-waste (primarily limestone rubble).

The earliest stratified pottery in any numbers suggests that deposition on site began in earnest in the 13th century or later and that the well, as potentially the focus at this part of the site, went out of use around 1400 or a little later. There are no types which can be said to date solely to the 15th century or after.

Conclusions

While this site contained Roman and medieval remains, they are both relatively scant and provide little idea of the wider contemporary landscape.

There was perhaps only minimal occupation of the site during the Roman period as evidenced by only a single sherd of pottery. Such a scarcity of such normally ubiquitous debris, suggests that any potential focus of Roman occupation may be some way off.

The site seems to have been a back-plot yard/garden, or possibly a similar side-plot, to medieval occupation beyond the excavation area, probably of the 13th-15th centuries, although one sherd (residual Stamford ware) suggests there may have been nearby occupation as early as before the Norman Conquest. Whichever is the case, the relatively scant remains suggest that Middle Street

Middle Street, Isham

was either a back-lane with no northern frontage, being only for access, in this case to Church Street, or that it may have contained a discontinuous northern frontage with no real press for space.

The site appears to have remained as a garden thereafter, but with no digging of any deep features, subsequently becoming allotments in recent times. The absence of finds from the clean, stone-free loamy topsoil and subsoil during machining was testament to this.

Bibliography

RCHM 1979 *An Inventory of The Historical Monuments in The County of Northampton; II Archaeological sites in central Northamptonshire*, Royal Commission on The Historical Monuments of England



IS Heritage, 3 July 2014