

Wollaston Bypass, Northamptonshire. Salvage Excavations 1984

by

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with contributions on the pottery by E.H. MacRobert and T. Pearson

SUMMARY

A watching brief and salvage excavations were carried out in late 1984 during topsoil stripping prior to the construction of a bypass running to the west of Wollaston, Northamptonshire. At the highest point on the roadline a complex of features was recorded and investigated.

Prehistoric activity comprised a linear ditch, a pit alignment and part of a hut circle, together with a cluster of pits of Bronze Age or early Iron Age date.

The majority of the features were Roman. Two major ditch lines appeared to form the north-western corner of a large ditched enclosure. Within this area, subsidiary ditches were located, while a corndrier and the furnace room and remnants of a plunge bath of a bath-house were subject to limited salvage excavation. The location of a bath-house within a ditched enclosure would seem to confirm the presence of a villa, lying largely to the east of the roadline, as suggested by previous fieldwalking. A small amount of the pottery recovered was 2nd to 3rd century AD in date, but the bulk was of the 4th century and associated with building materials dumped in the enclosure ditches and within the demolished bath-house.

A scatter of Early-Middle Saxon pottery sherds in the final ditch fills revealed a Saxon presence on the site, while a sunken-featured building dated to the later 6th or early 7th century AD provided evidence for Saxon occupation immediately outside the ditched enclosure.

INTRODUCTION

The route of the Wollaston bypass had, in part, been designed to skirt the western edge of an extensive area of Romano-British occupation, a possible villa site, known from earlier fieldwork (SP 90326254).

During the removal of topsoil along the road corridor, in September 1984, a watching brief was maintained. A concentration of features, including two stone-built structures, associated with both Romano-British and Saxon pottery were observed (SP 90266254). These features lay adjacent to the known occupation area and represented its extension westwards into an area which had previously been under pasture (FIG 1). Salvage excavations were conducted during late September and early October under the difficult conditions of continuing machine stripping along the road corridor. The objective was to determine both the nature and the date of the Romano-British and Saxon occupation and to examine the relationship, if any, between these two periods of use.

The site is situated on a west-facing spur on the clays and limestone of the Upper Estuarine deposits. The major part of the occupation area lies on Great Oolite Limestone on higher ground to the east, while to the west the ground drops steadily away to the floor of the Nene valley. The area examined lay between 61 m and 64 m above OD, with the southern end of the excavated area being on the ridge of the spur, while the remainder lay across the north-facing slope.

The watching brief and excavations were funded by the Highways Department of Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) and organised by the NCC Archaeology Unit.

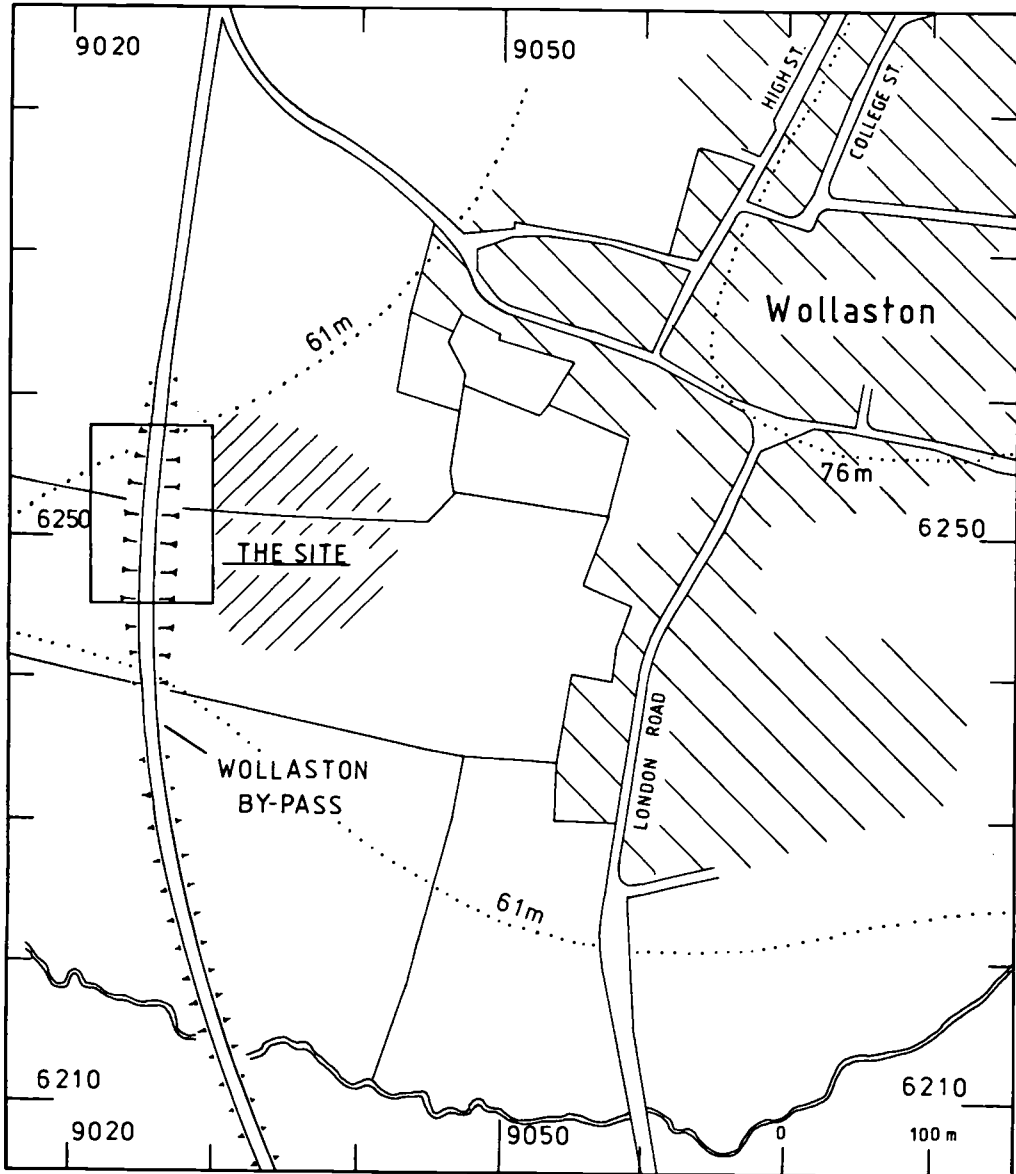


Fig 1 Wollaston Bypass, Northants – site location.

The Romano-British pottery has been examined by E.H. MacRobert and the Saxon pottery by T. Pearson. Information on coins located during metal detector surveys has been provided by P. Inchley and comments on other finds are by the authors. The Level III records and the finds will be deposited in the Northamptonshire archive.

PREVIOUS FIELDWORK

The existence of this extensive area of Romano-British occupation had been established by the fieldwork of several individuals at various times over the past twenty five years (RCHM 1979, 180 site 25; Hall and Nickerson 1966, 6). Romano-

British pottery and ceramic tiles, as well as building stone, had been collected and, on the basis of this evidence, it had been identified as a possible villa site by D.N. Hall.

More recent fieldwork with metal detectors has produced a quantity of coins ranging in date from the mid 3rd to late 4th centuries AD.

To the east of the area fieldwalking has also produced a Saxon and post-medieval pottery scatter (SP904626).

THE EXCAVATION

STRATEGY

After the machine removal of the topsoil, features were visible across the full width of the road corridor (up to 40 m) over a length of some 110 m (FIG 2). The stone-built structures lay adjacent to the cutting edge and were reserved from immediate machine disturbance to provide time for recording and partial excavation. The remainder of the site was subject to regular machine traffic and continuing stripping.

The features recorded were those revealed during machine stripping and clearly many small features must have been missed. The major ditch lines could only be plotted at widely spaced intervals and they may not have been as rectilinear as depicted. Sections were cut across most of the main ditches, but the bulk of the pottery assemblage and other finds were collected from the ditches as they were progressively lowered during the machine stripping. Only a few of the smaller features were partially excavated to obtain dating evidence.

PHASES OF OCCUPATION

PREHISTORIC

A linear ditch, F9, is interpreted as prehistoric even though it was on an alignment similar to the later enclosure ditch, F1. This ditch was not sectioned but it was approximately 2.5 m wide by 1.5 m deep. The fill was a fairly homogeneous red-brown sandy clay with small limestone fragments, being generally similar to the fills of the pits forming the linear pit alignment.

The relationship of this ditch to the pit alignment was not established with certainty, but the fill of F9 was cut by a narrow slot-like feature which lay on the line of the pit alignment, a possible indication that the pit alignment post-dated the linear ditch.

The individual pits of the pit alignment were of a regular sub-square plan, 1.8–2 m diameter, and quite regularly spaced at c. 3 m centre to centre. Observations and measurements during machine stripping indicated that most, if not all, of the pits were almost vertically sided and c. 1 m deep. All of the pits had a homogeneous fill of red-brown sandy clay with few inclusions.

No dating evidence was recovered from either the ditch or the pit alignment but late Bronze Age or early Iron Age dates may be suspected. Other pit alignments have been recorded in the county possessing a similar uniformity of shape, depth and

spacing and early Iron Age pottery has been recovered from some of these (Jackson 1978, 168).

To the east of F9 an arc of gully, F16, was observed only after its partial removal. Originally, this feature was probably some 0.6 m wide and up to 0.5 m deep and it may be interpreted as a hut circle gully with a diameter of 7 m to 8 m. Within this area lay a cluster of four pits, all filled with dark clayey loams containing charcoal and small fragments of burnt limestone. A few small sherds recovered from these pits are probably of late Bronze Age or early Iron Age date.

ROMANO-BRITISH

The Enclosure Ditches

Three ditches (F1, F23 and F24) fully crossed the road corridor and all other features of Romano-British date lay in the area between them (FIG 2). The northern-most ditch, F24, may have been the earliest; it was not sectioned but part of a single 2nd–3rd century vessel was recovered from its lower fill. Two other features appear broadly contemporary. A large pit, F41, produced an assemblage of mid to late 2nd century pottery, while the fill of a small 'key hole' oven contained an indented beaker of the 3rd century. The form of the 2nd–3rd century occupation is unknown, but since the main enclosure ditches were clearly maintained for some time, with F1 being recut at least twice and F23 at least once, it is possible that the ditched enclosure was in existence at this time.

Ditch F1 was up to 5 m wide by 1.7 m deep while F23 was some 2.3 m wide by 0.9 m deep. In both instances, the final fills contained much occupational and building debris, the latter appearing to have been deliberately dumped in the ditches and being most prevalent on the eastern side of the road corridor. The building debris comprised fragments and blocks of roughly squared limestone and ceramic roof tile fragments. The associated pottery was of 4th century date with a small amount of residual 2nd century material. A coin of Crispus (AD 317–326) came from the final fill of F23, as well as a scatter of Early-Middle Saxon pottery sherds.

A number of subsidiary ditches and gullies were present, running parallel to either F1 or F23. Only F6 was sectioned and it had a final fill containing dumped building debris associated with 4th century pottery and a coin of Constantine II (AD 330–335).

A further two ditches (F21 and F22) can be interpreted as drainage ditches for the bath-house emptying into F23. F21 was a flat bottomed ditch, 1.5 m wide by 0.45 m deep. Its final fill, containing building debris including small fragments of lead and painted wall-plaster, appeared to pre-date the final fill of F23, although the pottery assemblage was again of 4th century date. F22 was 2 m wide by 1 m deep with a V-shaped profile. Its final fill appeared to be continuous with the final fill of F23, containing a similar range of building debris and 4th century pottery. This ditch terminated at a butt-end beneath the furnace room of the bath-house (FIG 3), with the north wall of the furnace room, F31, being constructed over the lower ditch fills. It had cut an earlier clay filled ditch, F29, immediately to the north of the furnace room.

The Bath-House

The part of the bath-house within the road corridor comprised most of a furnace room (*praeefurnium*) and part of a plunge bath, presumably attached to a hot room (*caldarium*). While this area had been reserved temporarily from machine disturbance,

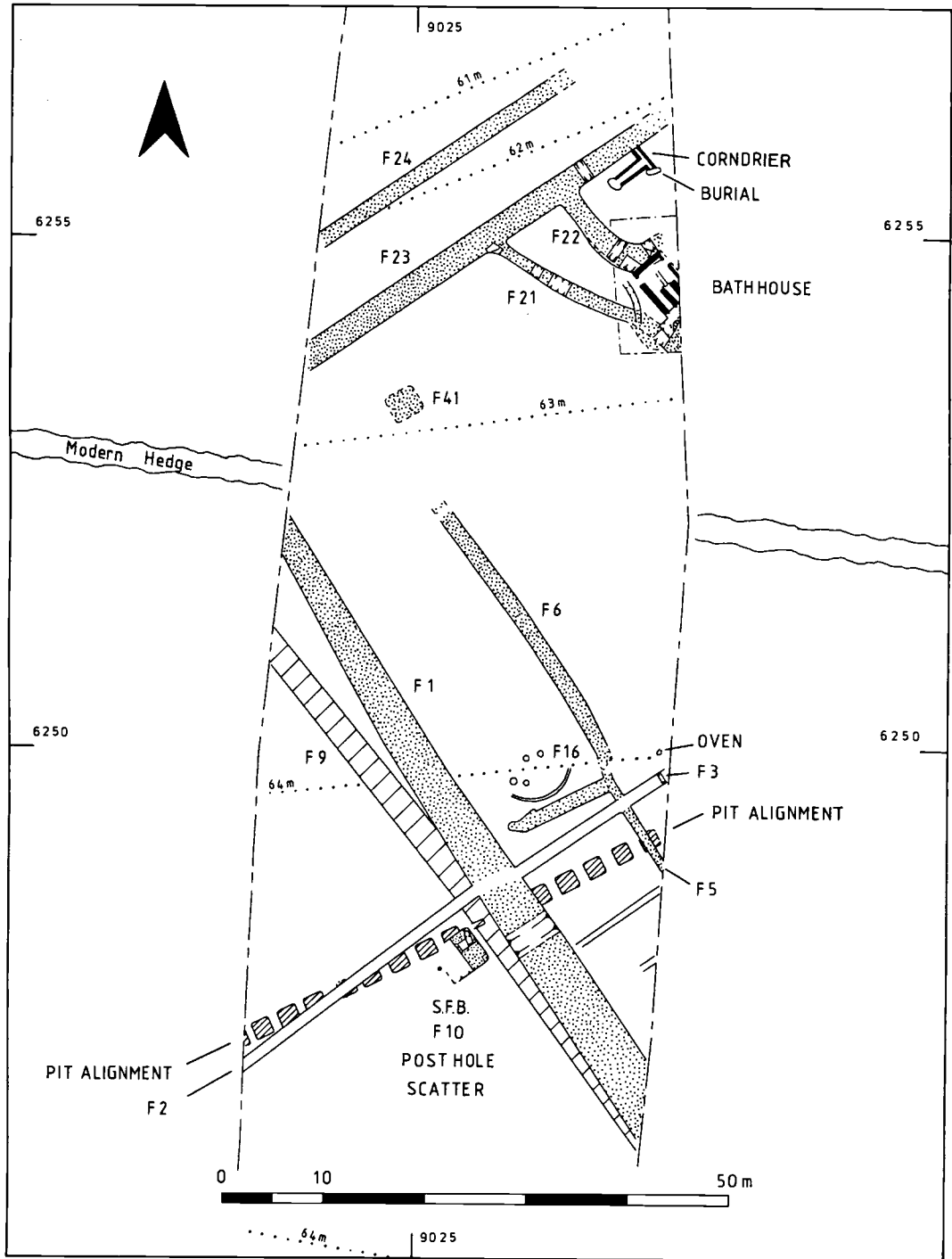
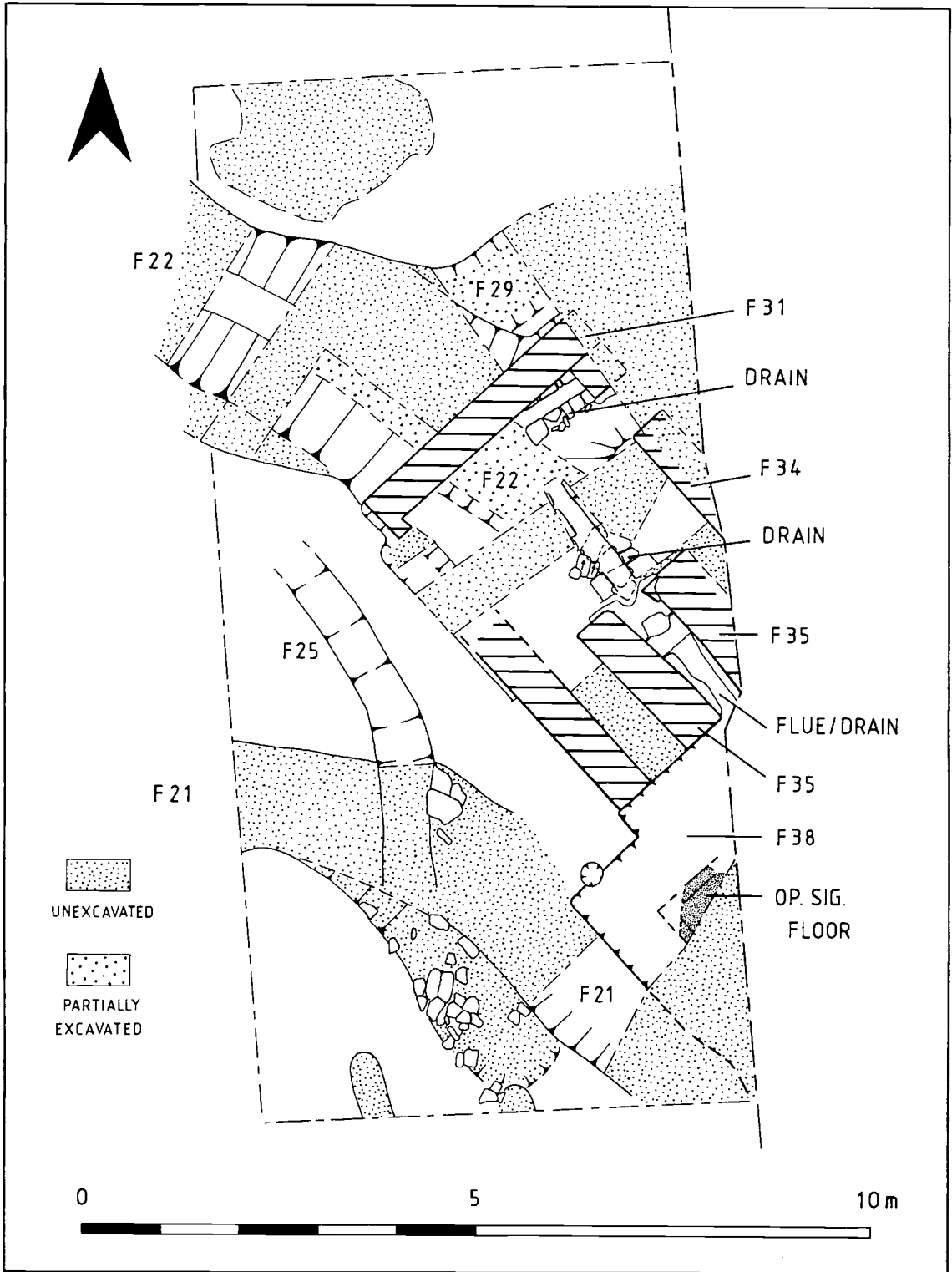


Fig 2 Wollaston Bypass, Northants – the excavated area.



excavation-time was still severely limited and it was only possible to clear enough of the rubble filling to identify the basic form of the structure (FIG 3).

Only the north-west corner of the hot room and plunge bath lay within the road corridor. The walls had been totally robbed, but the 0.5 m deep and almost vertically sided pit, F38, which was backfilled with loosely packed building rubble, had clearly closely respected the original construction pit. Evidence for the function of this room was provided by an *in situ* fragment of *opus signinum* floor at the base of the construction pit and possessing the scars left by the removal of a quarter-round moulding. This must have been the floor of a plunge bath, with the adjacent furnace room indicating that it was attached to a hot room. The walls enclosing the plunge bath would have been c. 0.7 m thick.

The rubble backfill contained a wide range of building materials: roughly squared limestone blocks, ceramic tile fragments, pieces of *opus signinum* including quarter-round mouldings, a few tufa blocks and fragments of painted wall-plaster. The wall-plaster most probably came from the bath-house itself. The decorative scheme was of a series of panels in white, red and possibly yellow, outlined by frameworks of stripes and lines in red, purple, white and yellow. These probably surmounted a dado in yellow, with red and white stippling to create a marbled effect.

In its final form, the furnace room was 4.6 m long by 2.75 m wide internally. The walls were 0.53 m thick and well coursed in roughly squared limestone, with some of the quoining in ironstone. The eastern wall, F34, had a 0.65 m wide doorway towards its north end. There may have been an opposing doorway in the west wall, F32, but this area had been heavily disturbed. Remnants of a clay floor survived adjacent to the walls, with the floor level being some 0.5 m below the subsoil surface.

In its original form the room may have been open to the north, with two stone-lined drains running to the butt end of ditch F22. The northern drain presumably served an unlocated room to the east and this was partially removed when wall F31 was constructed over the lower fills of the ditch. The other drain ran beneath the furnace flue and probably drained the excavated plunge bath. This drain must also have gone out of use when the ditch, F22, was blocked by the insertion of the north wall, F31.

The furnace flue was flanked by substantial side walls in limestone, F35. The walls were 2 m long by 0.55 m thick and survived to a maximum height of 0.46 m. These would have supported a hot water boiler. The flue itself was 0.4 m wide at the south end and flared to 0.54 m at the north end. The entire interior of the room was covered by a layer of black loam with charcoal, at its thickest (70 mm) around the flue opening. The flue was floored with two large slabs of limestone which had also acted as a capping to the drain beneath.

The demolition rubble filling the furnace room contained building stone and roof tile fragments, but very little wall-plaster or *opus signinum*. Only a limited amount of pottery was present within the bath house backfills. This included some 3rd century forms but was mainly of 4th century date.

Other Features

To the north of the bath-house, a T-shaped corn-drying oven was exposed, but not excavated. It was constructed in limestone, with the main flue being 3.1 m long and 0.55 m wide at the stoke hole and 0.7 m wide at the opening into the side flues, which were 0.25 m and 0.3 m wide. The northern side of the flue appeared to be cut by enclosure ditch F23 and the southern side flue had been

disturbed by an adult inhumation burial which was undated, but may be assumed to be of late Roman date.

SAXON

A scatter of later 6th to early 7th century sherds was present in the final fills of the enclosure ditch F23. They appear to have been restricted to the upper part of the final fill and, if so, would post-date the deposition of at least the bulk of the building debris.

A sunken-featured building, F10, lay immediately south-west of the enclosure ditch F1. It had been partly machined away, but was of sub-rectangular plan, c. 4.8 m long by 4 m wide, and survived up to 0.08 m deep. Central postholes were present at either end, with the north-east posthole being set in a 0.3 m deep slot which had probably run across the full width of the structure. The slot-fill contained an assemblage of large sherds from a limited number of later 6th to early 7th century vessels. An apparently random scatter of flat-laid limestone slabs covered part of the floor of the structure.

To the south of the structure an extensive scatter of postholes was observed during machine stripping. These may have denoted the presence of other contemporary structures but they were undated and no form was apparent at the time.

A shallow linear ditch, F2/F3, which was c. 1 m wide by 0.5 m deep, ran across the site from north-east to south-west on the same alignment as the northern boundary of the Romano-British enclosure. It had a fill unlike the Romano-British ditch fills and while undated it was probably post-Roman (FIG. 2). A ditch on a similar alignment and with a similar fill was observed some 40 m to the south of F2/F3 (not shown on plan). These ditches are most likely to be post-Roman field boundaries laid out with some respect for the location of the Romano-British enclosure.

THE ROMANO-BRITISH POTTERY

by E.H. MacRobert

The salvage excavations on Wollaston bypass produced 761 sherds of Romano-British pottery, weighing 17 kg. As the assemblage is small, detailed analysis was not considered to be worthwhile; the material from each context was divided into its major fabric groups with further subdivisions when sources or particular types could be identified. A summary description of each group was made.

One group appears to be earlier than the majority of the pottery. F41 contains greywares of the lower Nene Valley and Ecton types, a channel-rim jar in a hard grogged fabric, which occurs in similar, early 2nd century forms at Ashton, and a lower Nene Valley colour-coated beaker with underslip barbotine decoration, possibly a hunt-cup. This group need be no later than the mid to late 2nd century. F41 also contained a pie dish in a sandy ware, similar in its coarseness to Verulamium-region products, but also to some white ware mortarium fabrics produced in Northamptonshire in the 2nd to early 3rd centuries. The pie-dish form is one which is current from the 2nd to 4th centuries. The enclosure ditch, F24, is possibly also of a similar date, but the single vessel, probably an Ecton product of the 2nd to 3rd century, is in itself insufficient dating evidence. The vessel is a necked jar with a cavetto rim.

The bulk of the material falls into the later Roman period, and there is only a small quantity of residual Samian, lower Nene Valley and possibly Ecton greywares and the 2nd century hard grogged fabric which occurs in channel-rim jars. Most of the lower Nene Valley colour-coated ware (7% of the assemblage) is in the more thickly walled dog-dishes, flanged, bead-rim and necked bowls, and a narrow-mouthed jar, all usually dated to the 4th century; although a substantial part of an indented beaker with underslip barbotine scale-decoration, a type which is commonest in the 3rd century, came from the key-hole oven. Otherwise, most of the decoration is rouletting or overslip white barbotine. The other fine wares consist of small quantities of Oxford and Hadham wares, again mainly bowls. All the identifiable Oxford forms have fairly long production periods (Young 1977; C45, 48, 51 and 55), but generally little material from these two production centres seems to reach the Northampton area before the 4th century.

A 4th century date is reinforced by the presence of Harrold-type storage jars and wide-mouthed flanged bowls, in one instance with incised wavy line decoration on the flange (c.f. Woodfield 1983, 253, 258). Included in the shelly ware is a small quantity of thin-walled, soapy, black vessels, usually necked jars with everted or hooked rims and sometimes rilled on the body, which may correspond with fabric 44d at Towcester (*ibid.*). The chronological swing in the later 4th century from the predominance of Harrold products to fabric 44d at Towcester is certainly not evident here, where the coarser shelly ware occurs in much greater numbers. As well as the Harrold-type forms, other vessels in the latter fabric are necked jars with everted, hooked or bead-rims, and one with a rilled rim.

Only a few sherds of BB1 are present and it is also interesting to note the small quantities (2.5%) of the 'soft pink' grogged fabric which in Towcester is one of the major 3rd and 4th century fabrics (*ibid.*, fabric 35.5), but whose distribution seems to tail off to the east and forms a much less significant part of the assemblage here and at Ashton.

Most of the grey wares are fairly coarse and rough to the touch and are mainly in necked jars and bowls and pie and dog dishes, sometimes burnished and with intersecting arc decoration in BB1 style. A few sherds had burnished surfaces reminiscent of the East Midlands burnished ware style commonest in the 4th century (Todd 1968).

Further corroboration of a 4th century date can be found in the presence of a lower Nene Valley self-coloured mortarium (cf. Howe *et al.*, 1980, 103).

Unfortunately, it is not possible to date the assemblage more closely within the 4th century with any certainty, and the assemblage is too small to see any chronological progression within the later material.

THE SAXON POTTERY

by Terry Pearson

The excavations produced 122 sherds of Early-Middle Saxon pottery representing a minimum of 22 vessels. This pottery was derived from the upper fills of Roman ditches and from the fill of a sunken-featured building. Contextually these features

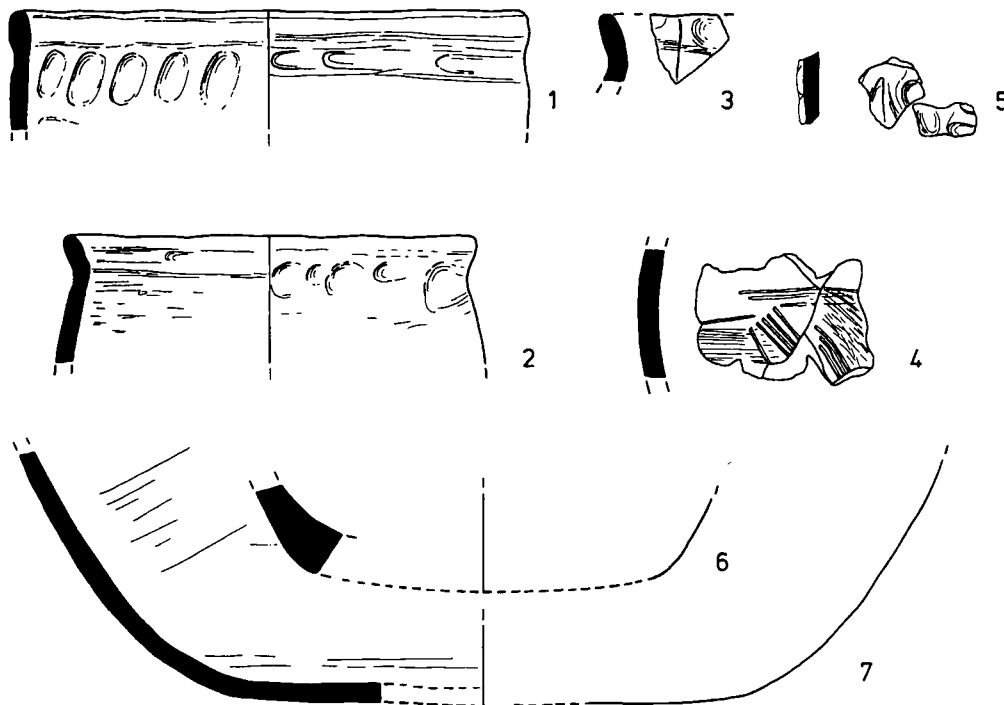


Fig 4 Wollaston Bypass, Northants – the Saxon pottery. Scale 1:3.

should be early within the period following the abandonment of the Roman site and while it was still visible within the landscape. The forms, style and technology of the pottery suggests that it is early, possibly belonging to the first phases of Anglo-Saxon settlement, although there are some late elements in the area. One vessel (FIG 4, No. 5) is rusticated and shows the clear imprint of the potter's fingernails.

The pottery was sorted by eye, with the aid of a x20 magnifying glass, into sherds from the same vessel and fits were established. The analysis of the fabrics identified four types (A1-4) of which 81% was found to derive from one group (A1). The Fabric groups are listed below:-

- A1 Early-Middle Saxon Ferruginous Sandstone-tempered.
- A2 Early-Middle Saxon Quartz-tempered.
- A3 Early-Middle Saxon Granite-tempered.
- A4 Early-Middle Saxon Calcite- and Quartz-tempered.

Table 1: The number of sherds and vessels by context and fabric group.

Context	A1	A2	A3	A4
F10	81		15	
F23	18			7
F25		1		
Totals	99	1	15	7
Min. Number of Vessels	8	1	12	1

THE EARLY-MIDDLE SAXON FABRIC GROUPS

- A1 *Ferruginous Sandstone-tempered.*
Hard fabric with moderate to abundant ferruginous sandstone inclusions (up to 3 mm in size with rarer larger grits). Moderate quartz (below 0.5 mm in size). Isolated iron-ore (below 1 mm) and weathered limestone (up to 5 mm) lumps. Harsh surface texture.
Hand-made, coiled vessels with external smoothing (and self-slip) and internal wiping.
Large jars with flattened bases (FIG 4, No. 3 and 7). Straight-sided vessels with small diameter (FIG 4, No. 1). Jars with intense incised combed lines possibly to imitate rustication (FIG 4, No. 4).
- A2 *Quartz-tempered.*
Hard well-fired fabric with abundant fine quartz inclusions (below 0.5 mm). Rare iron-ore and calcite (up to 1 mm). Hard smooth surfaces from self-slip. Base coiled over a concave mould with very thick fabric section (12-20 mm). The internal surface is smooth from contact with the mould.
Large globular jar (FIG 4, No. 6).
- A3 *Granite-tempered.*
Hard fabric with abundant large granite inclusions (up to 3 mm in size). Moderate quartz mainly below 1 mm in size. Frequent mica, biotite. Rare weathered limestone lumps. Coil-built vessels with roughly wiped internal surfaces and smoothed external which in some cases

- have a self-slip.
Hand-made, coiled vessels.
Large jars and small jars (FIG 4, No. 2).
- A4 *Calcite- and Quartz-tempered.*
Moderate calcite inclusions (below 1 mm in size) and subangular quartz (below 0.5 mm in size). Rare iron-ore. Fairly hard fabric with coarse texture externally from the decoration and internally wiped. Hand-made, coiled.
Jar with external rusticated decoration produced by finger-pinching (FIG 4, No. 5).

DISCUSSION

The general lack of absolute dating evidence for the Anglo-Saxon periods makes it difficult to date pottery except within very wide boundaries (i.e. c. 450-850). Myres (1977) has shown that the Anglo-Saxon ceramic traditions had an evolutionary development making it possible to look at early and late elements of pottery design and manufacture methods. The assemblage from Wollaston is small with few diagnostic features; however, it is possible to suggest that it belonged to a shorter period of time.

The largest group (A1), the ferruginous sandstone-tempered wares, represents 81% of the assemblage. These fabrics are more difficult to provenance in that they could have derived from the wider region covered by the Northampton sands and Bunter sandstones. The granite-tempered fabrics account for 12.9% of the assemblage, representing traded pottery as there is no known source for this inclusion in the county. The nearest granite source to the site is the Mountsorrel formation in the Charnwood District of Leicestershire. The wide distribution of granite-tempered types in Northamptonshire (Gryspeerd, 1981 & 1981a) and Lincolnshire (Walker 1978, 224-229) give an indication of the scale of the trade of this type.

The range of forms is interesting in that there are early and late elements. The rusticated decoration (FIG 4, No. 6 and possibly No. 3) is not common on domestic Anglo-Saxon wares in Northamptonshire. Typical examples derive from West Stow and Lackford, Suffolk (Myres 1977, Fig 112) but are considered a later development (*ibid*, 20). Apart from the rusticated sherds no other pottery was decorated or burnished. The method of manufacture involving the use of a mould (A2) is only represented by one sherd from F25. This technique is thought to have originated late in the Pagan period.

The analysis of the pottery would suggest that it could possibly be dated later in the Pagan Saxon period, later 6th or early 7th century, than its context would suggest.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ILLUSTRATED SHERDS (FIG 4)

Number	Context	Fabric	Form and Description
1	F10	A1	Rim sherd from a straight-sided jar. Reduced grey core and internal surface. Buff external surface.
2	F10	A1	Small jar with upright rim. Reduced black fabric.
3	F10	A3	Rim sherd from globular? jar. Reduced grey core with black surfaces.

4	F23	A1	Body sherds from a globular jar with external, random and dense incised combing. Reduced black fabric and surfaces.
5	F23	A4	Body sherds of jar with rusticated decoration created by finger-pinching the surface of the vessel while it was wet.
6	F25	A2	Base sherd of globular jar. Reduced black and oxidised buff orange in colour.
7	F10	A1	Large jar body and base with pinched rim. Slightly oxidised grey to brown core with black surface.

DISCUSSION

The location of part of a bath-house at Wollaston has provided confirmation that this was a villa site. The remainder of the bath-house and the villa proper must lie to the east of the excavated area and within what appears to be a substantial ditched enclosure of rectilinear plan.

This enclosure may have been created during the mid to late 2nd century and it was certainly in use well into the 4th century. The date of the demolition and the partial robbing of the bath-house is not secure, but may have occurred slightly earlier than the extensive levelling of the site, which resulted in large quantities of building materials being used to infill the enclosure ditches. This latter activity could not be occurring earlier than the mid-4th century and, given the presence of late 6th to early 7th century sherds in the final ditch fills, it is possible that at least some of this levelling of the derelict buildings took place as late as the 6th or even 7th century.

While no evidence for Saxon occupation within the villa enclosure was located, the sunken-featured building lay immediately outside the main enclosure ditch and attests to occupation in close conjunction with the villa during the late 6th and 7th centuries.

Although the relationship between the Romano-British villa and the subsequent Saxon occupation

has not been resolved by these excavations, it is clear that the substantial, surviving, part of the site possesses a considerable potential for examination of this question.

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