

Anglo-Saxon Occupation at Yardley Hastings, Northants

by

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SUMMARY

Limited excavations near to Yardley Hastings' church revealed the foundation trench of a late Saxon timber building as well as evidence of earlier activity. There is a possibility that stone structures or foundations were in use on the site as early as the 7th or 8th century.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence of Anglo-Saxon occupation was revealed at Yardley Hastings in 1982 when a site to the north of Manor Farm and the parish church was developed for housing (Figs 1 and 2). During the development a limited excavation was carried out on behalf of the Department of the Environment and Northamptonshire County Council. Thanks are due to the developers, Messrs. Watson and Cox Limited, for their permission and co-operation during this work. The plans and sections which accompany this report have been drawn by Jean Eisenhauer, Leslie Hoyland and Linda Marciniak. The pottery was illustrated by T. Pearson.

The site is located on a bedrock of Oolitic Limestone and marl, which is overlain by a deposit of weathered rock and orange clay. A stream flows through the village some 100 m to the west.

EARLIER WORK

Two small excavations were carried out near to the site prior to work in 1982. In 1966 a small excavation was carried out by the Upper Nene Archaeological Society at the invitation of the tenant of the Manor Farm. A mound situated adjacent to the boundary fence on the north side of his garden was excavated and found to be

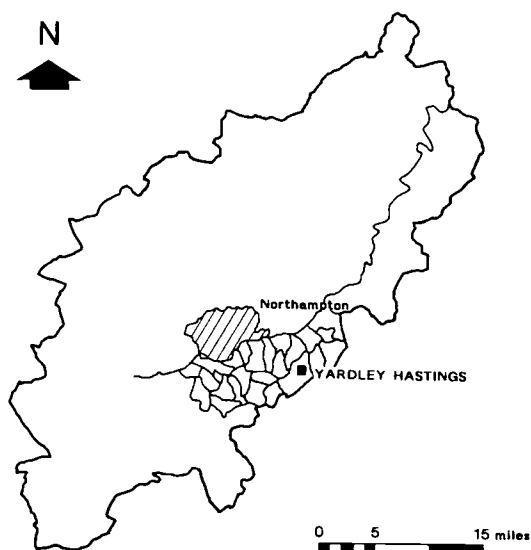


Fig 1 General Location

composed of Medieval building rubble. Beneath the mound several small pits or post-holes of probable Anglo-Saxon date were recorded. The site has not yet been published.

In 1981 an evaluation was carried out by the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit in the field threatened with development. This suggested that some of the low mounds in the field were the result of localised quarrying for Limestone in the Medieval period (Northamptonshire County SMR no. 8657009/1).

THE 1982 EXCAVATION (Fig 3)

Before the excavation began a cutting made for the new estate road revealed three ditches

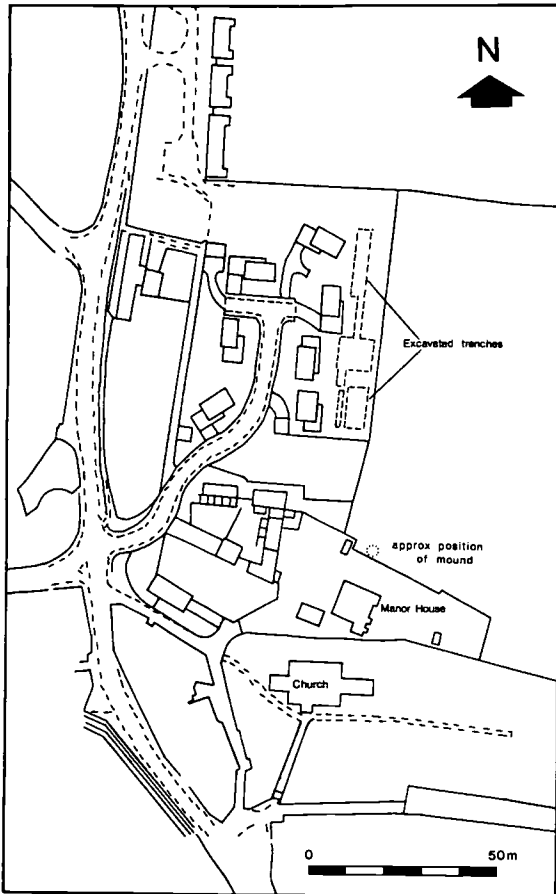


Fig 2 Site Location

(Ditches A, B and C) and several pits. No excavation was possible in the area but the contractors kindly dug a trial trench (Trench 1) to the rear of one of the house plots. This revealed a ditch of Anglo-Saxon date (Ditch A) and prompted the excavation subsequently carried out nearby. The siting of Trenches 2 and 3 was controlled by the position of house plots, spoil heaps and stacks of building materials.

Some 80 individual features were recorded during the excavations in 1982 but there was little linking stratigraphy and the majority contained no dating evidence. Nevertheless, none of the main features was demonstrably later than early Medieval and they can largely be assigned to two broad phases in the Anglo-Saxon period.

PHASE 1: EARLY TO MIDDLE SAXON (A.D. 450–850).

The excavated features cannot be confidently dated before the 8th century A.D. but the presence of earlier pottery in the ceramic assemblage suggests there was activity on the site before that time. The linear ditch in Trench 2, Ditch A, is clearly one of the earliest features and pottery from its upper layers (layers 1 and 1a: *c.f.* fig 4) suggests that it dates to a period no later than the 8th century A.D. The ditch ran in an east–west direction and was traced across the site during development for a minimum distance of 46 m. Two further ditches were located in Trench 3 (Ditches B and C: fig 3), running parallel with Ditch A but situated some 9.5 m to the north. They appeared to extend over a similar distance. Ditch C was probably a re-cutting or a replacement of Ditch B but the only dating evidence from either ditch consists of a few fragments of Phase 1 pottery from the filling of Ditch C.

Deposits of lime mortar occurred in the filling of Ditch A (layer 3: fig 4) and the possible remnant of a stone wall, with fragments of Phase 1 pottery in and above the stonework, was located in Trench 1 to the north. At Northampton mortar mixers dating to the middle Saxon period have been excavated (Williams, 1979), and the presence of mortar at Yardley Hastings at this time may suggest that the site was of above average status.

Other features were recorded on the site containing only Phase 1 pottery, but in each case, the amount of pottery was small and could have been residual material. In addition to Ditch C the features include a trench or gully, F61 and pit F59, both in Trench 2, and a pit (Pit R2) situated in the estate roadway to the west.

PHASE 2. LATE SAXON (A.D. 850–1100)

The main feature dating to this phase in Trench 2 is the wall trench of a presumed rectangular building (Building 1, fig 3). Other features in this trench that probably date to this period include a large, shallow pit, F61, situated near the north-east corner of the building, and some, if not all of the post groupings to the east.

Building 1

The plan of a building 10.5 m long was partly recovered, with the east side presumed to lie outside the area being developed. The wall trench was flat bottomed with near vertical sides, and varied between 45 and 70 cm in width and between 10 and 19 cm in depth. A number of deeper holes and depressions of the trench probably represent the position of structural timbers and two internal post-holes which are roughly parallel with the north wall may be associated (F67 and F68). A small patch of burnt subsoil, F71, may indicate the position of an internal hearth or oven.

The building appears to be of a type common in the middle to late Anglo-Saxon period in England. A number have been excavated at Raunds, Northants. (Cadman, 1982, fig 3) and on analogy with these the width of the Yardley Hastings building may have been in the region of 5 to 6 m. The building overlies Ditch A, which contained 8th-century pottery, and the small amount of pottery from the wall trench itself does not conflict with the suggested late Saxon date for the structure.

Many of the post-holes to the west of Building 1 are aligned and could possibly represent another building (Fig 3).

ANGLO-SAXON OCCUPATION AT YARDLEY HASTINGS

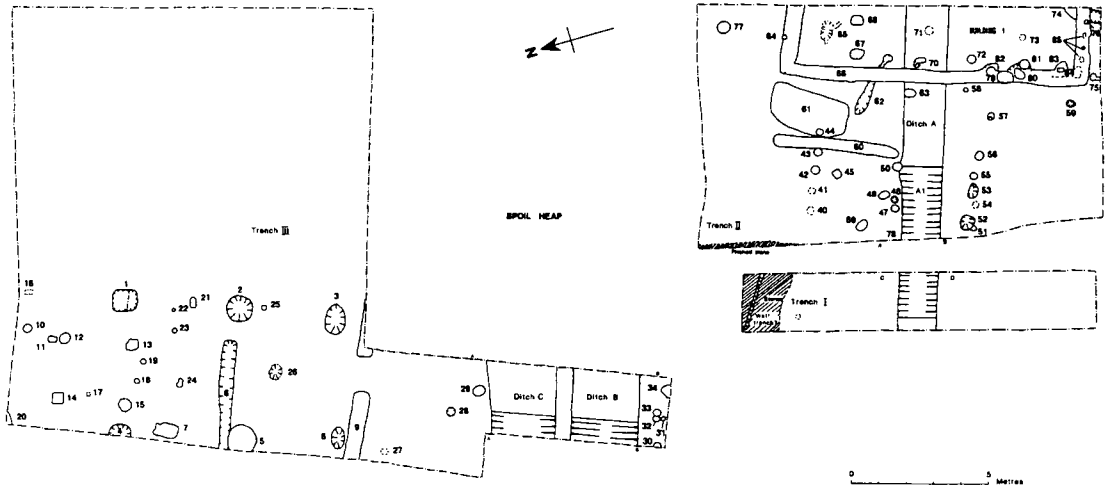


Fig 3 Plan of the Excavated Trenches

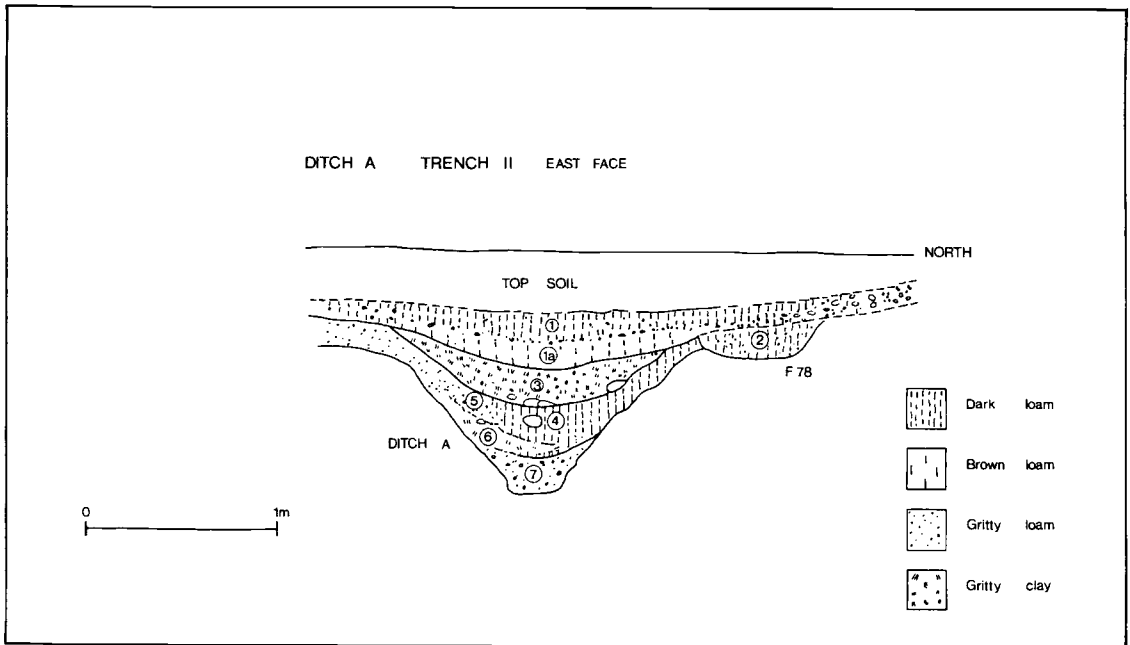


Fig 4 Section across Ditch A.

The post-holes situated to the north of Ditch A were shallow and it is clear there may have been others which did not survive. Each had a filling of dark, ashy loam. A number of post-holes to the south of Ditch A were also aligned but two of these (F52 and F53) were more substantial and may either represent a doorway or an independent two-post structure.

The only other features containing Phase 2 pottery in their filling were the two shallow gullies, F8 and F9, in Trench 3. There are on a similar alignment as Ditches A, B and C and could imply a continuity of land use through the Saxon period.

Other Features.

The symmetrical arrangement of six undated features in Trench 3 (F1–F6, Fig 3) suggests that they may represent a structure aligned with Building 1. However the features were irregular in both depth and profile and appear to have silted naturally. Most of the other post-holes recorded during the excavation formed no obvious structures, but a group of four, Nos. 12–15, in Trench 3 could represent a four-post structure, 2.35 x 2.5 m in diameter, or form part of a larger grouping.

MEDIEVAL ACTIVITY.

Pottery of late 12th and early 13th century date was found amongst rubble during earlier evaluation work, but it was almost entirely absent from the area excavated in 1982.

THE SAXON AND MEDIEVAL POTTERY
by Terry Pearson

The trial excavations at Yardley Hastings Manor produced 3 sherds of Romano-British wares, and 169 sherds of Saxon and Medieval pottery. The pottery comprises a small but important assemblage which has been used to phase the site into three broad periods.

Phase 1 Early–Middle Saxon (c.450–850).

Phase 2 Late Saxon (c.850–1100).

Phase 3 Medieval (c.1100–1300).

The Saxon assemblage from Phase 1 is of particular significance in that it contains Middle Saxon shell-tempered and Ipswich-type wares. It is argued that the composition of this group suggests that the date range of this phase can be narrowed to the 7th and 8th centuries. Analysis of the fabrics, forms and manufacture techniques within the assemblage offers some evidence of this and suggests that during this period the occupants of the site were trading with a region to the north and west of the site in Northamptonshire and Leicestershire rather than to the south. Given the nature of Saxon pottery studies at present and the circumstantial nature of the available dating evidence for domestic pottery groups in the region the results of this work should be treated with caution and its premises examined in the light of new material. There is no implication of ceramic continuity between Phases 1 and 2 at present, but the argument that the shell-tempered Middle Saxon pottery (perhaps related to Maxey ware (Addyman, 1964, 47–58)), is the pre-cursor to the Late Saxon St. Neot's-type wares of Phase 2 (Addyman, 1965) should be considered.

The Late Saxon pottery of Phase 2 consists entirely of St. Neot's wares and indicates structural activity in the 10th and 11th centuries. A small group of later Medieval pottery was recovered from the evaluation trenches.

A full report on the pottery has been deposited in the Northamptonshire Archaeological Archive.

Catalogue of the Pottery illustrated in Fig 5.

1. Fabric A1 YH7 Bowl	Ditch A	Layer 1
2. Fabric A1 YH7 Large globular jar	Ditch A	Layer 1a
3. Fabric A3 YH4 Small jar	Ditch A	Layer 1a
4. Fabric A3 YH9 Small jar	Ditch A	Layer 4
5. Fabric A3 YH11 Small jar	Ditch A	Layer 4
6. Fabric A3 YH4 Small jar	Ditch A	Layer 4

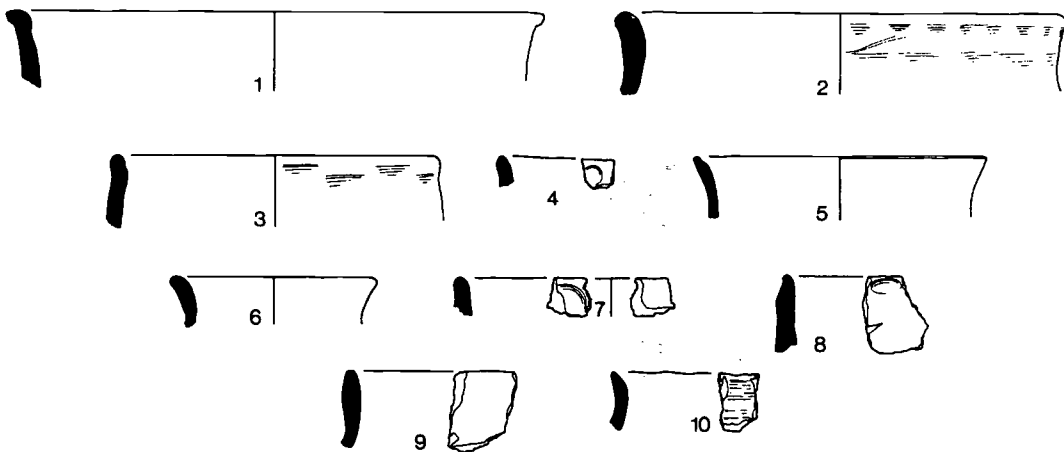


Fig 5 Pottery, scale 1:4

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|---------------|-----|--------------------|--------------|---------|
| 7. Fabric A3 | YH4 | Small jar | Ditch A | Layer 4 |
| 8. Fabric A3 | YH9 | Large globular jar | Pit R2 | |
| 9. Fabric A3 | YH4 | Large jar | Unstratified | |
| 10. Fabric A2 | YH2 | Small jar | Unstratified | |

CONCLUSION

Occupation of Middle to Late Saxon date at Yardley Hastings appears to have extended beyond the excavated area both eastward into the adjacent pasture field and southwards into the area of the Medieval manor house.

Such widespread occupation is paralleled at Raunds where, in the northern part of the village, similar traces of Saxon settlement extended over an area of c. 10 ha. (Audouy, forthcoming). Within the overall spread, several discrete areas of activity and former habitation could be

discerned, comprising the site of an early manor and adjacent structures. The post-in-trench building of Phase 2 at Yardley Hastings is of an identical type to some of the contemporary structures excavated in Raunds and like them may have been contained inside an enclosure. The proximity of the excavated structure to the site of the later manor is also reminiscent of the situation in part of Raunds at Langham Road and Furnells, where the Domesday manor was one of two chief holdings in the village.

By contrast the manor of Yardley Hastings at Domesday held dependencies in numerous adjacent townships (Fig 6). This type of estate arrangement is thought to reflect Saxon administrative organisation, with a 'soke' or territory being administered from the estate centre. A number of such sokes can be identified

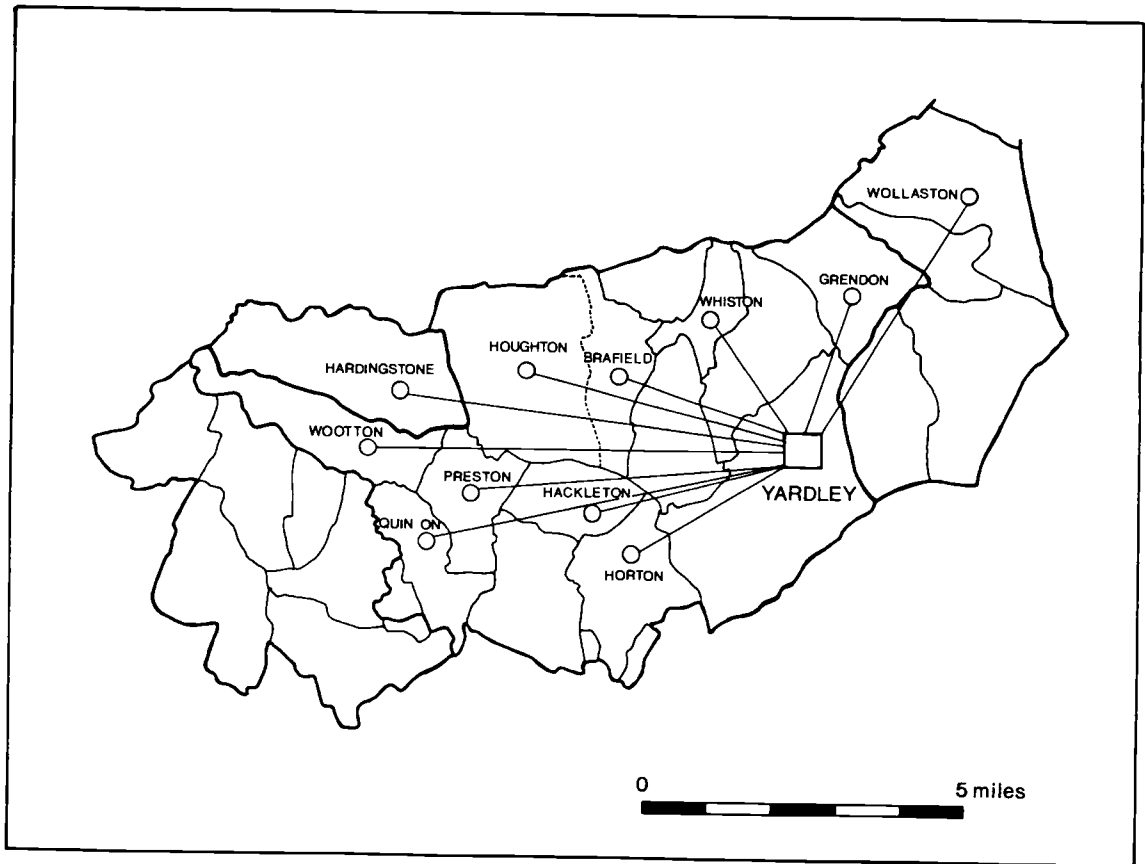


Fig 6 Dependencies of Yardley

throughout Northamptonshire, often in 1066 still held by the Crown (Foard, 1985). In the case of Yardley, the soke was held by Walthaof, earl of Northampton. A 10th-century reference to the granting of land at Whiston, a dependency of Yardley, to Ramsey Abbey by Earl Byrhtnoth implies that the association of Yardley with the earls of Northampton and Middle Anglia extended back long before the conquest (Hart, 1978–8). These earls or ‘ealdormen’, as the provisional representatives of the Mercian kings in the dependent territories, might be expected to hold estates with their offices, and Yardley may represent an estate held by the ealdorman of the province dependent upon Northampton.

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