

# A medieval tenement at College Street, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire

by

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with contributions by

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## SUMMARY

*Following extensive trial trenching, a small excavation was undertaken ahead of residential development on land west of College Street, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire. A number of shallow ditches and pits indicate that the area was occupied through the twelfth century, and tenement plots had probably been established at this time. By the later thirteenth century several stone buildings had been constructed. The presence of a circular oven base and stone-lined drains suggests that these were ancillary buildings perhaps pertaining to a domestic residence fronting onto Collage Street, although no evidence for this was located. To the west a ditched and later walled boundary, found in the trial trenching, appears to divide the frontage from the back plots, which contained only quarry pits and scattered pits and ditches. The buildings appear to have fallen out of use by the end of the fifteenth century when the town is known to have been in decline. The historic map evidence indicates that the southern part of the area was still undeveloped at the end of sixteenth century, and remained an orchard until well into the nineteenth century, despite extensive development to the immediate north from the eighteenth century onward.*

## INTRODUCTION

Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned by F & L Group Ltd to undertake an archaeological excavation prior to proposed residential development of land off College Street, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire (centred on NGR SP 9596 6880; Fig 1). The site is bounded by College Street (the A6

Trunk Road) to the east, Cemetery Lane to the south and Saffron Road to the west.

The site lies within the historic market town of Higham Ferrers in an area where evidence for medieval tenements fronting onto College Street was considered likely to survive. Due to this potential, the County Archaeological Planning Officer requested that a desk-based assessment and a trial trenching evaluation be undertaken prior to determination of the planning application. The evaluation was carried out in July 2002 and produced evidence for the survival of medieval buildings on the eastern part of the site, while some contemporary pits, ditches and quarries lay to the west (Morris 2002). As a result of this survival, an archaeological mitigation strategy was proposed for the development of the south-eastern part of the site for a single dwelling with surrounding gardens. The footprint of the new house was to be excavated prior to construction, while surviving deposits around the house were to be preserved beneath the gardens. The excavation was carried out in July 2003. The site code was HFC 03, and the context numbers ran from 100-145. The evaluation (site code: CSHF02) used contexts 1-103.

The excavation was funded by F & L Group Ltd. The fieldwork was supervised by Chris Jones, assisted by Rob Smith, Ben Pears, Ailsa Westgarth and Neil Guiden. The evaluation was supervised by Steve Morris. The site plan was drawn by Carol Simmonds. Analysis and reporting is by Chris Jones and Andy Chapman.

The objectives of the excavation were: to determine the extent to which the application site contained archaeological remains that could address issues identified in the Extensive Urban Survey Research

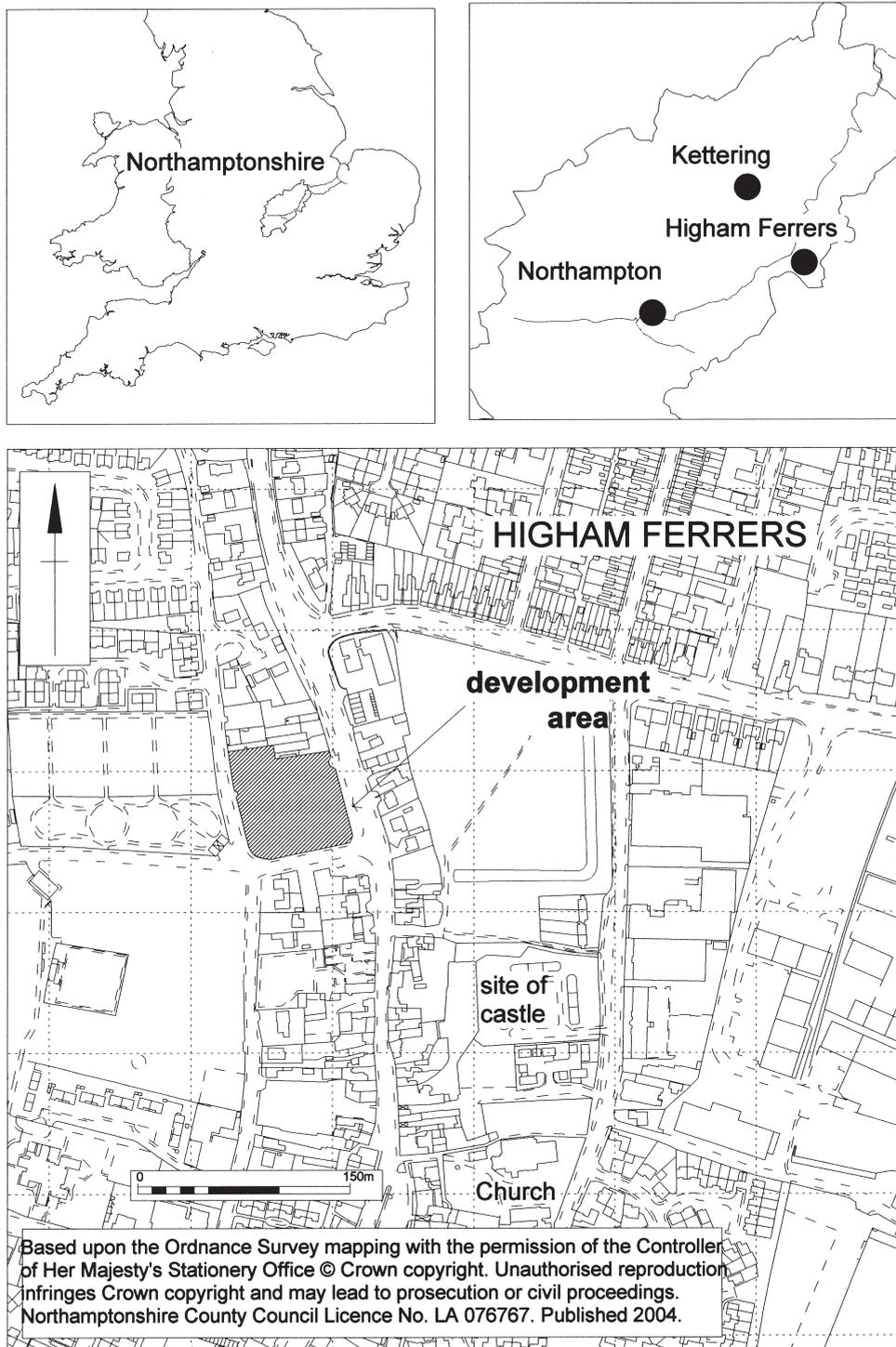


Fig 1 Site location

Agenda for Higham (Foard and Ballinger 2000); to identify any evidence for the survival of Saxon, medieval and post-medieval settlement remains on the site which may have been threatened by the development, and determine the depth of burial, character, date, extent and state of preservation of any such remains.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The application site is located within the historic centre of Higham Ferrers (Fig 1). The recent Extensive Urban Survey (EUS) of Northamptonshire carried out by the Historic Environment Team of Northamptonshire County Council, funded by English Heritage, has identified the town as part of the polyfocal centre of the middle Saxon royal estate of Irthlingborough (Foard and Ballinger 2000). In the tenth century Higham was one of two hundredal manors in the area, probably created from the aforementioned estate. By 1086 it was one of only four places in the county with a recorded market reflecting its early tenorial and administrative importance.

The early and middle Saxon focus of settlement would seem to have been located just beyond the northern edge of the medieval settlement, with an additional focus possibly within the area encompassed by the later church and castle. It is thought that sometime during the tenth century, in association with the creation of the hundredal manor, the primary focus of settlement was shifted to create the manor, church and market place, the elements later forming the core of medieval settlement.

The probable eleventh century market village developed to true urban status in the twelfth and earlier thirteenth centuries, with its own self-governing borough comprising a medieval hospital, school, college and almshouse, all within close proximity to the castle. As with all small towns in the county, Higham was affected by the famines of early fourteenth century, the Black Death of 1348-9, and the succeeding pestilences of 1361 and 1368-9. It also suffered significant economic decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with competition from the nearby town of Wellingborough compounding the situation. Although Higham retained its status as a borough throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its population by the beginning of the nineteenth century was low and not dissimilar to many of the

surrounding villages. In the late nineteenth century the boot and shoe industry developed in Higham, though it was small in comparison to Rushden to the south.

The post-medieval history of the excavation site is illustrated by a sequence of historic maps, which begins with the 1591 map of Higham Ferrers by John Norden (NRO map 4661). These show that a block of land to the immediate north of Cemetery Lane was open ground from at least the later sixteenth century through to the twentieth century. Some maps show this as an orchard. To the immediate north there was development only along the frontage onto College Street up to the mid-eighteenth century, but from the later eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century there was a progressive expansion of buildings westward towards Saffron Road. By the end of the nineteenth century much of the area to the north was occupied by the buildings of a Boot and Shoe factory, and extensions to these spread onto the north-western part of the application site in the early twentieth century. These buildings had been demolished, and the site levelled prior to the application for redevelopment.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

##### THE TRIAL TRENCHING

Given the archaeological potential of the site, nine trial trenches were excavated in July 2002 to determine the survival of any medieval or earlier deposits. At this stage, the former factory buildings had been levelled and the topsoil had been removed from the southern part of the site. As a result, intact medieval deposits lay only just below the exposed surface (Morris 2002).

The trial trenching established the pattern of earlier activity (Fig 2, T1-T9). Small quantities of Romano-British and early/middle Saxon handmade pottery (four and two sherds respectively) were recovered as residual finds. Similarly small quantities of pottery of Saxo-Norman date were also recovered, suggesting that the main occupation began no earlier than the twelfth century.

To the west there were several quarry pits (T2, T3, T7, and T9). These were typically long narrow quarries, as little as 2.5m wide, with one side inclined at around 45 degrees while the other undercut the limestone bedrock. They were flat-bottomed but only 0.55m deep. The small quantity of pottery recovered from the fills was no later than

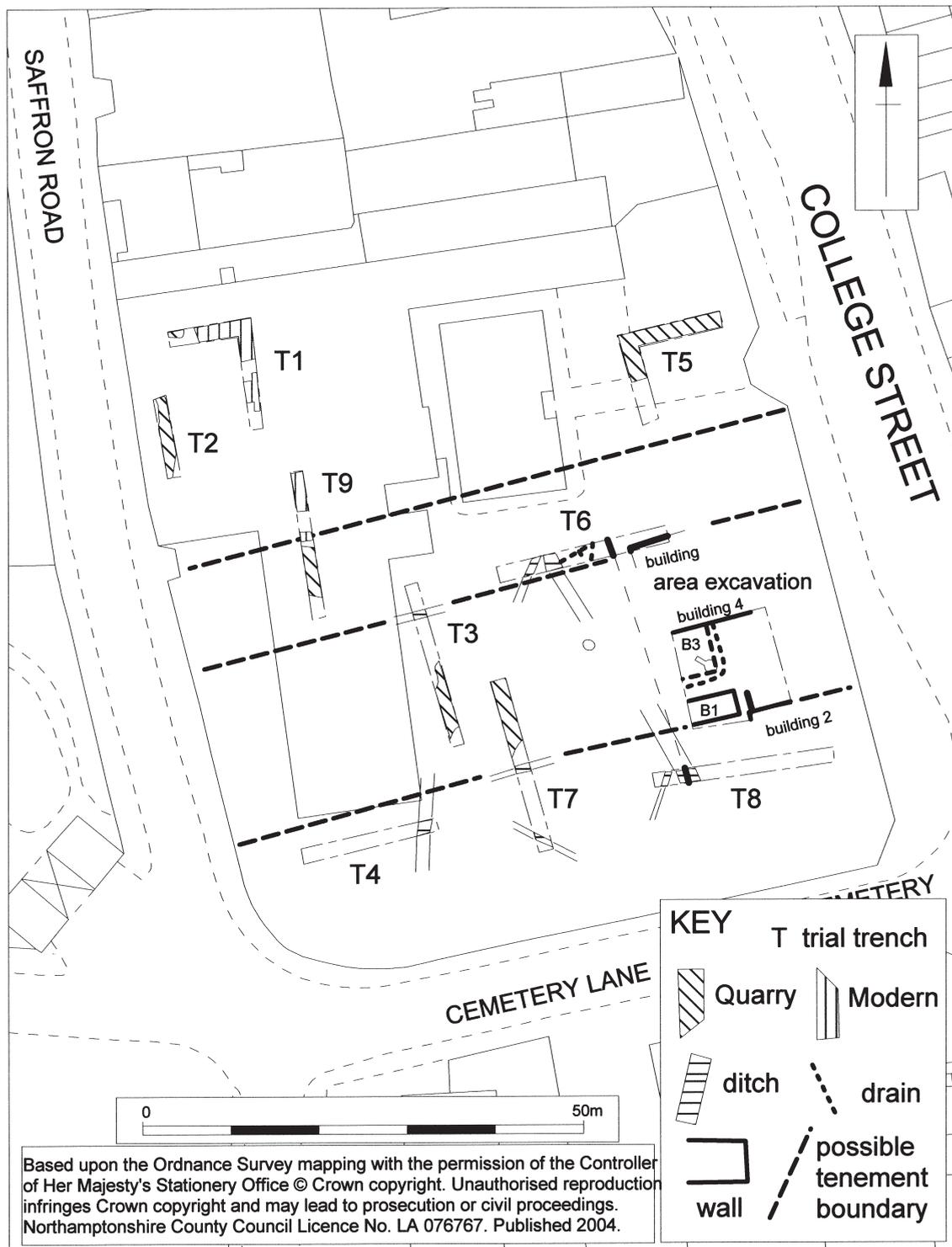


Fig 2 The development area, showing trial trenches, area excavation and postulated tenement boundaries

the twelfth century in date, suggesting that the quarries belonged with the early development of the site.

A number of ditches and pits of medieval date were also found and east to west ditches in trenches 3 and 7 may have been original tenement plot boundaries. The date of origin of these ditches was not established, but the pottery assemblages from both the evaluation and the main excavation indicate that more intensive occupation only began in the twelfth century.

On the eastern half of the site there were a number of limestone walls and stone-lined drains dating to the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. In trench 6, north of the excavated area, there was the north wall of a building and a possible boundary wall to its west. There was also a system of stone-lined drain drains with a single outflow into a ditch to the west. In trench 8, south of the excavated area, a possible boundary wall lay above an infilled ditch, which it had perhaps replaced. At the east end of this trench there were two pits, dated to the twelfth century, but a spread of limestone in the top of one pit was perhaps related to the presence of later stone buildings to the immediate north. This evidence indicated that it was the eastern third of the tenement plots that had contained domestic occupation, probably ancillary buildings to main ranges fronting onto College Street itself.

No further building remains were present, apart from the foundations of the recently demolished factory buildings on the north-western part of the site (T1 and T2). This confirmed the map evidence that the site had been open ground through the post-medieval period.

## TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site was generally level, situated at around 67m above Ordnance Datum. The British Geological Survey has mapped the underlying geology as Great Oolite Limestone in the north-east part of the site and Upper Estuarine Series clays in the south-west (British Geological Survey, sheet 186, 1989).

## THE AREA EXCAVATION

### METHODOLOGY

The excavation area measured 11.5m square, an area of 132sq m, taking in the footprint of the proposed new building (Figs 2 and 3). The excavation was located in the south-eastern part of

the development area, which had recently been stripped of its topsoil. As a consequence this left only shallow remnant soil horizons comprising dark yellowish brown clay loams containing moderate small limestone fragments, no more than 100mm to 200mm thick, above the clay natural. These soils were stripped by a mechanical excavator using a 1.5m toothless ditching bucket to reveal either the top of any underlying archaeological remains or, where these were absent, the natural subsoil. This generally meant exposing stone structures and layers containing substantial quantities of limestone rubble. Retrospectively, it seems likely that the removal of the thin overburden may have included remnants of earthen soil horizons contemporary with, or even pre-dating the buildings, and perhaps including floor surfaces. It is certainly evident that the medieval stratigraphy had been very severely truncated prior to excavation. The excavated structures were typically represented by the lowest course of wall foundation, which had probably lain below actual floor level, and some lengths of wall had evidently been largely removed.

All identified finds and artefacts were retained but as a result of the loss of most of the stratigraphy few finds were recovered. The up-cast spoil was scanned using a metal detector in order to help locate any pre-modern metal artefacts.

### THE MEDIEVAL DITCH SYSTEMS

Occupation of the site through the twelfth century was represented by two lengths of ditch to the south, 102 and 104, a further length of undated ditch to the west, 135, and a pit to the south, 140, which was sealed beneath the north wall of building 1 (Fig 3).

Ditches 102 and 104 ran south to north, curving towards each other so that they were only 1.35m apart at their northern terminals. They were both cut into natural clay, 0.50-0.60m wide and only 0.17m deep, and were filled with dark brown clay with occasional limestone fragments. A shallow gully to the west and running west to east, 135, was 0.35m wide by 0.18m deep, with a similar fill to the ditches. It was overlain by the medieval yard surface, 133, so only a short length was exposed. It did not continue east of ditch 102 and was aligned on the terminals of the two south-north ditches, suggesting that it was contemporary and related.

A shallow irregular pit, 140, was at least 1.0m in diameter by 0.20m deep but the extent depicted on plan includes over cutting into the surrounding clay natural, which appeared to have been disturbed in this area.

These features all produced small assemblages dominated by St. Neots ware and shelly coarseware, suggesting that they date from the twelfth to early thirteenth century, probably with an origin before 1150 (Ceramic phases 0 to 1, 1100-1150 and 1150-1225).

### THE MEDIEVAL BUILDINGS

Small pottery assemblages from the walls of building 1, from wall 115 to the south-east, and from pit 121 to the north suggest that the buildings were constructed during the second half of the thirteenth century (Ceramic Phase 2/2, 1250-1300).

#### *BUILDING 1*

A small building lay to the south-west (Fig 3). It had an internal width of only 2.5m and was in excess of 4.5m long, but the western end was not located. No more than a single wall course survived. The walls were faced with roughly squared slabs of limestone and the wall core was packed with smaller limestone fragments; no mortar was observed. The north wall, 120, was

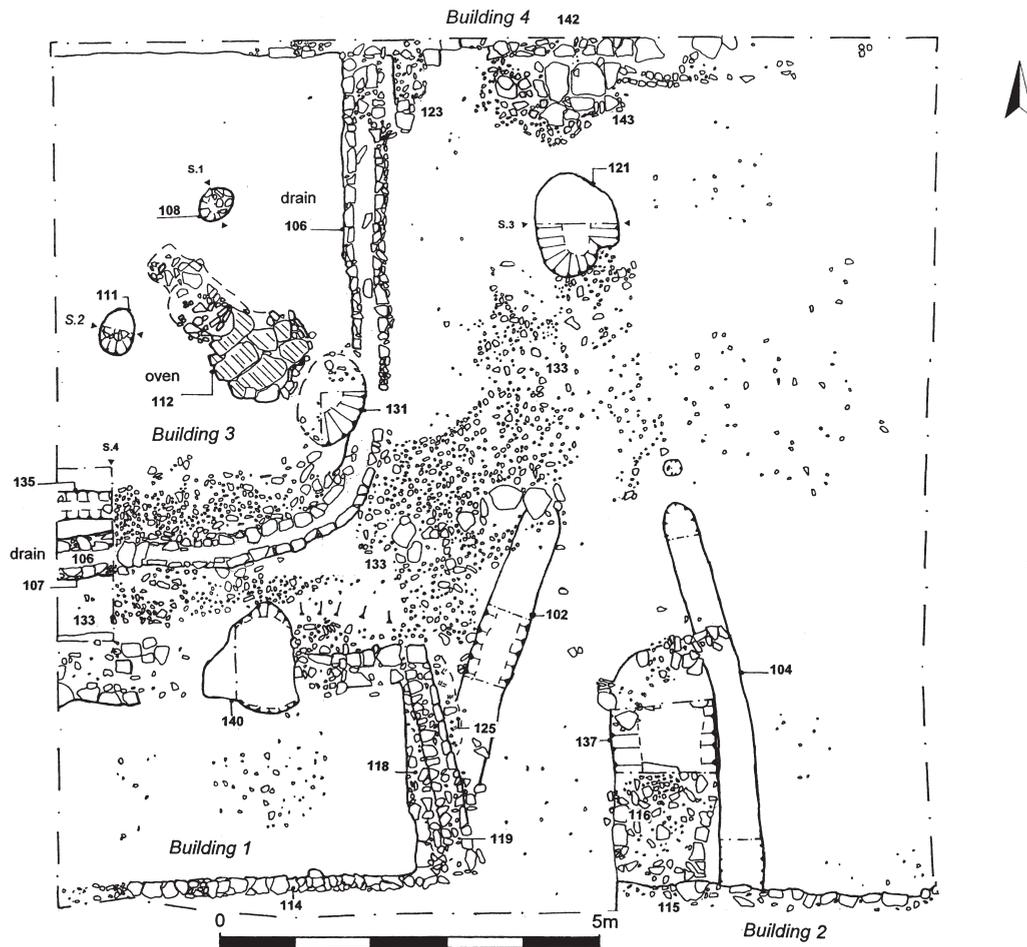


Fig 3 The excavated buildings

0.50-0.60m wide, but the width of the east and south walls was not determined. The east wall, 118, was totally rebuilt but with the rebuild lying at a slight angle, 119. This rebuild was only 0.40m wide, indicating that it did not provide structural support for the main roof timbers, while the change in angle may suggest that the roof was hipped rather than gable-ended. Along the north wall, to the west of pit 140, a break in the wall and an adjacent cluster of flat-laid limestone slabs suggests the possible presence of a doorway with an external threshold setting. This doorway may have been near central to a two bay structure some 6.0-6.5m long. No floor level survived within the building in fact, following machining and cleaning, the interior was down to natural clays at a level below the base of the walls. The small size of the building indicates that it was a minor ancillary building.

#### BUILDING 2

In the south-east corner of the area, the northern face of a

disturbed limestone wall, 115, was exposed in the edge of the trench. This was presumably the north wall of a building that lay to the south, beyond the excavated area, and also continuing further to the east. The building must have been less than 5.0m wide, as it was not present in trench 8 (Fig 2). At the western end of the north wall a broad stone foundation ran northward, 116. This foundation was 3.25m long by 1.25-1.35m wide and was constructed within a broad, flat-bottomed foundation trench, 0.30m deep, 137. The fill of the construction trench was a mixture of flat laid and inclined large limestone slabs and smaller pieces of limestone in a matrix of brown clay with mottles of gritty yellow crushed limestone. At the exposed surface it was edged with flat laid limestone slabs. This broad and short foundation presumably formed a solid base for a structure set against the north wall of the adjacent building. This might have been an external stairway, but the lack of any information about the nature of the adjacent building makes it impossible to speculate further.

#### THE YARD AND DRAIN

To the immediate north of building 1 there was a yard surface, 133, comprising small pieces of limestone in brown clay matrix, with an area of larger limestone slabs to the east. The surface extended 2.5m north of building 1 where it ended quite abruptly, while to the east it extended further to the north. To the north and east it petered out, and may have been lost to later disturbance. Also to the north of building 1, there was an L-shaped length of stone-lined drain, 106. This presumably served a building to the north with the outflow probably being fed into a ditch to the west, as seen in trench 6. The sides of the drain were lined with vertically set blocks of limestone and, in places, a capping of large limestone slabs survived, with the open drain 0.20-0.25m wide.

#### BUILDING 3

To the west of the drain and north of the yard surface the base of a circular oven had survived (Fig 3). The chamber was 1.1m in diameter with a floor of large limestone slabs blackened and cracked from burning, 112. Around the eastern side of the chamber disturbed remnants of the limestone lining had survived. To the north-west there was a flue, 1.4m long by 0.5m wide. The base of the flue was surfaced with small blocks of limestone, both reddened and blackened by burning, and part of the basal course of the flue wall survived on the southern side. The clay beneath the oven had been scorched red by indirect heating. Two postholes, 108 and 111, 0.45m in diameter by 0.20-0.30m deep lay to either side of the flue and may have been related to the use of the structure.

The full context of the oven is unknown. Only the very base survived, and the floors of such circular ovens are often set below floor level, and even below the base of the walls of the surrounding building, which would have been ground laid. As the surrounding area was stripped down to the natural, it is therefore possible that the oven had been within a small kitchen for which all evidence of the walls and floors had been lost. The southern wall could have abutted the well-defined northern margin of the yard surface while the eastern wall might have stood next to the stone-lined drain. This would place the oven as having been recessed into the south-east corner of a building *c* 4.5m wide south-north.

#### BUILDING 4

Along the northern margin of the excavated area the southern face of a limestone wall was exposed, 142. This is presumed to be the southern wall of a building lying to the north, which was at least 10m long. The stone-lined drain must have served this building, unless it was of a different phase of activity. To the immediate east of the drain a stub of a contemporary wall, 123, 0.6m wide, ran south for a length of 1.0m but had been totally removed beyond this. It seems unlikely that it had continued much further south as remnants of the yard surface lay within 3.0m of the northern wall. To the east of wall 123 and immediately south of wall 142 there was an isolated area of flat-laid limestone slabs, 143. These might have formed a threshold to a doorway in wall 142. Another possibility is that wall 123 formed the west end of a small stone-flagged chamber abutting the south wall of building 4. Similar stone-floored chambers have been found attached to kitchens and bakehouses at other contemporary sites in the county (Atkins et al 1999, Thorne forthcoming and Chapman forthcoming).

#### OTHER FEATURES

Towards the north end of the site there was a single pit, 1.35m long by 0.59m deep, 121. It was filled with grey clays containing some small limestone pieces, 128 and 129, which are dated to the later thirteenth century. A further pit lay to the west, 131, 1.0m in diameter by 0.37m deep, filled with grey clays containing much small limestone. It cut the stone-lined drain and also must have cut through the lining of the circular oven, although its extent was not clearly defined in plan. The small pottery assemblage from the fills is dated to the earlier fifteenth century (Ceramic phase 4, 1400-1450).

#### DESERTION OF THE BUILDINGS

Several contexts are dated to the fifteenth century (Ceramic phases 4 and 5): the yard surface, 133; the stone foundation to the south, 116; the pit cutting the drain and oven, 131, and the disturbed wall stub to the north, 123. A general soil layer, 113, and stone rubble, 117, overlying surface 143 are of the same date, although rubble layer 117 also contained a single sherd of nineteenth century pottery. The evidence therefore suggests that the buildings were still in use into the fifteenth century but had probably fallen out of use by the end of the century. The way that pit 131 cut both the drain and the oven structure might suggest that building 3 had fallen out of use earlier in the century, and the absence of walls might indicate that it had been levelled at this time.

#### POST-MEDIEVAL ACTIVITY

Later truncation of the site had removed most traces of any former demolition layers of stone rubble and any other later deposits. A single exception occurred along the northern margin of the site, where a layer containing small limestone fragments, 117, which overlay wall 142 and stone surface 143 is clearly a remnant of demolition rubble. The pottery from this layer included late medieval reduced ware, confirming the fifteenth century date for abandonment, and a single sherd of nineteenth century pottery presumably related to later disturbance and truncation of the medieval deposits.

### THE FINDS

#### THE MEDIEVAL POTTERY by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 132 sherds with a total weight of 1,410g. The estimated vessel equivalent (EVE), by summation of surviving rimsherd circumference was 1.01. The range of pottery types present indicate that there was occupation throughout the medieval period. In addition, two sherds of middle Saxon pottery and a fragment of Romano-British material were noted. There was also some ceramic evidence to suggest that metalworking took place at the site in the early medieval period.

#### FABRICS

The late Saxon and medieval pottery was quantified using the chronology and coding system of the Northamptonshire County Ceramic Type-Series (CTS) (see above).

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F96: Raunds-type Maxey ware, AD650-850.	2 sherds, 30g,	EVE = 0.02.
F100: T1(4) St Neots ware, AD850-1100.	1 sherd, 5g,	EVE = 0.05.
F205: Stamford ware, AD850-1250.	2 sherds, 11g,	EVE = 0.08.
F200: T1 (2) type St. Neots Ware, AD1000-1200	29 sherds, 200g,	EVE = 0.
F330: Shelly Coarseware, AD1100-1400.	53 sherds, 669g,	EVE = 0.40.
F360: Miscellaneous Sandy Coarsewares,AD1100-1400	3 sherds, 8g,	EVE = 0.
F319: Lyveden/Stanion 'A' ware,AD1150-1400.	3 sherds, 88g,	EVE = 0.14.
F329: Potterspurpy ware,AD1250-1600.	17 sherds, 158g,	EVE = 0.10.
F365: Late Medieval Reduced ware, AD1400-?1500	11 sherds, 127g,	EVE = 0.12.
F401: Late Medieval Oxidized ware, ?AD1450-?1500	8 sherds, 84g,	EVE = 0.10.
F404: Cistercian ware, AD1470-1550.	1 sherd, 7g,	EVE = 0.
F1000: Miscellaneous 19th/20th century wares.	1 sherd, 4g.	
F1001: Miscellaneous Romano-British wares.	1 sherd, 19g.	

CHRONOLOGY

Each context-specific assemblage was given a seriated phase-date based on the methodology defined in the Northamptonshire County Ceramic Type-Series (Table 1). The pottery occurrence per ceramic phase is shown in Table 2.

The data in Table 2 indicates that there was more or less unbroken activity throughout the medieval period. There was a possible hiatus in the first half of the thirteenth century, although this may simple due to the small assemblage size.

Table 1: RSP phases and major defining dars for the medieval ceramics of Northamptonshire

RSP Phase	Defining Wares	Chronology
LS4	T1(2) St. Neots Ware	c AD1000-1100
Ph0	Shelly Coarsewares, Sandy Coarsewares	c AD1100-1150
Ph1	Lyveden/Stanion 'A' Ware	c AD1150-1225
Ph2/0	Lyveden/Stanion 'B', Brill/Boarstall ware	c AD1225-1250
Ph2/2	Potterspurpy Ware	c AD1250-1300
Ph3/2	Raunds-type Reduced Ware	c AD1300-1400
Ph4	Lyveden/Stanion 'D' Ware, Late medieval Reduced ware	c AD1400-1450
Ph5	Late Medieval Oxidized Ware	c AD1450-1500

Table 2: Pottery occurrence per ceramic phase, all fabrics

Phase	Number	Weight (g)	EVE
LS4	2	40	0.05
Ph0	37	278	0
Ph1	6	73	0.14
Ph2/0	0	0	0
Ph2/2	39	611	0.46
Ph3/2	0	0	0
Ph4	12	85	0.12
Ph5	25	188	0.24
Total	121	1275	1.01

DISCUSSION

The range of vessels and fabrics at this site is typical of that noted at other excavations in the town, and particularly recent work at King's Meadow Lane where the earliest stratified assemblages date to around the time of the Norman conquest (Blinkhorn forthcoming). The residual Romano-British sherd and two sherds of Middle Saxon Maxey-type war at College Street shows that there was activity at this site which is contemporary with that at King's Meadow Lane, which is thought to have been a Saxon administrative centre.

Also of note is a fragment of a Stamford ware crucible, although the sherd was redeposited in a later context. The sherd shows extensive signs of having been heated, and suggests that there was metalworking taking place at the site during the Saxo-Norman or early medieval period. Stamford ware crucibles were widely traded, perhaps due to being functionally superior to the other wares of the period, which were less suited to the purpose. An exceptionally large number of them were noted at Flaxengate in Lincoln (Kilmurry 1981, 168-9). Such vessels are far from common in Northamptonshire. It is therefore possible that this part of Higham Ferrers may have been an industrial area related to the King's Meadow Lane complex. This possibility could only be explored by further excavation, as the majority of the Anglo-Saxon pottery at the site was redeposited, suggesting that any deposits of that date were disturbed by medieval activity. The rest of the assemblage comprised largely small, fragment sherds, other than a large fragment of a shelly coarseware bowl.

OTHER FINDS  
by Tora Hylton

The excavations produced a small assemblage of ten individually recorded finds of two copper alloy and eight iron objects spanning the medieval to post-medieval period.

There is little of intrinsic interest, but items worthy of note include a rim sherd from a copper alloy bowl, with a diameter of c 340mm, and a rectangular buckle frame ornamented with engraved oblique incisions, which dates to the late fifteenth to sixteenth centuries (Whitehead 1996, No 479). The iron objects include fragments of two keys for use with mounted locks, a possible blade fragment and three nails.

ANIMAL BONE  
by Karen Deighton

A total of 1514g of animal bone from nine contexts were analysed using standard archaeozoological methods.

## A MEDIEVAL TENEMENT AT COLLEGE STREET, HIGHAM FERRERS, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Fragmentation was high and was largely the result of old breaks, although fresh breaks were noted in context 130. The surface condition of the bone was reasonable with little abrasion being noted. Two instances of canid gnawing were noted. No evidence for butchery or burning was observed.

Although all the domestic species were represented, of which half were cattle, and including two examples of bird bone, only 24 individual animals were present. Due to the small size of the assemblage no valid conclusions can be drawn as to the frequency of species or the dominant species. Subsequently no comments can be made on the nature of husbandry associated with the site, although the assemblage appears to be the result of domestic activity.

### ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS

by Karen Deighton

A single 20 litre sample was hand collected from a charcoal rich fill, 128, of a late thirteenth century pit, 121. The sample was processed using a siraf tank fitted with a 500 micron mesh and flot sieve. The resulting flot was dried and analysed with a microscope at 10x magnification.

Two taxa of mollusca were observed, these were *Ceceliodes asicula* and *Cochlicopa lubrica*. *C. asicula* is an invasive, burrowing species, which lives on roots and therefore is of little value for environmental reconstruction. *C. lubrica* has catholic habitat preferences, so alone provides little definitive environmental information. Eight amphibian bones were also present.

Approximately 30-40 abraded cereal grains were noted. Where further identification was possible these appeared to be naked barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), possible bread wheat (*Triticum cf aestivum*) and rye (*Secale cereale*). A single fragment of chaff seems to confirm the presence of a free -threshing wheat such as bread wheat. A small number of pulses were present, of which four were pea (*Pisum sativum*), the remainder were indeterminate. A small number of weeds were observed, these included dock (*Rumex SP*), fat hen (*Chenopodium album*) possible campion (*Silene alba/dioica*) and cleavers (*Galium aprine*). The above are all common crop weeds. The high ratio of cereal grain to chaff and weeds suggests a late stage in crop processing. The deposit would appear to be the result of refuse disposal.

### DISCUSSION

The evaluation and excavation has provided an outline of the chronology for the formation and early use of a series of medieval tenement plots fronting onto the west side of College Street, Higham Ferrers, although this view is necessarily fragmentary and incomplete due to the limited scope of the work.

#### EARLIER OCCUPATION

A series of evaluations and larger scale excavations have demonstrated the presence of both Iron Age and Roman settlement on the northern margin of Higham Ferrers, in an area currently being absorbed into the town through the expansion of housing

development onto former agricultural land. The presence of a small quantity of Romano-British pottery probably reflects the nearby presence of these settlements.

Similarly, the small quantity of middle Saxon pottery probably also reflects the presence of a nearby focus of middle Saxon occupation beyond the northern end of the medieval town, at King's Meadow Lane, which is thought to have been a Saxon administrative centre related to royal estate of Irthlingborough (Foard and Ballinger 2000).

#### ELEVENTH CENTURY ACTIVITY

During the Saxo-Norman period similarly small quantities of residual pottery were present, indicating that there was no direct occupation of the excavated site. However, the presence of a Stamford ware crucible would be consistent with the nearby presence of a settlement large enough to include some craft specialisation. This would coincide with the conclusion of the Extensive Urban Survey (Foard and Ballinger 2000) that Higham Ferrers was probably a market village in the eleventh century.

#### THE FORMATION OF THE MEDIEVAL TENEMENT PLOTS

Only small quantities of pottery were recovered. A total of 286 sherds weighing 3.5kg came from both the evaluation and the excavation, and 1.0kg of this are from a single near complete coarseware jar from the evaluation. The small total, and the small size of many of the individual context groups, makes it difficult to provide a close chronology for the site. However, significant quantities of twelfth century material are present, and many of the ditches and pits contain no later material. It is therefore evident that occupation of the site began in the twelfth century, but as most of the groups recovered contain some later twelfth century pottery a date around 1150 may be most appropriate.

The nature of this occupation is poorly defined as the excavated evidence comprises only short lengths of ditch and gully and some pits, located in both the evaluation and the excavation. No evidence of any timber buildings was recovered but given the limited scale of the works this is only to be expected, and it must be considered likely that timber buildings had preceded the thirteenth century stone buildings.

Two of the twelfth century ditches can be postulated as possible east-west tenement boundary ditches as they can be fitted into a metrical model

of the possible plot structure, as discussed below (Fig 2). It is therefore suggested that the increase in activity in the twelfth century relates to the establishment of a row of tenement plots along the west side of College Street, and presumably to the north of the former extent of the settlement. This can be seen as part of the growth of Higham Ferrers towards true urban status.

The domestic activity was concentrated on the eastern half of the site, towards College Street, while to the west there was a series of shallow quarry pits cut into the limestone bedrock. These contained no pottery later than twelfth century in date, which might suggest that the area perhaps contained marginal settlement and quarries providing stone for higher status buildings elsewhere. However, it is also possible that they provided stone for the thirteenth century buildings discussed below, but with their fills containing only residual pottery from the earlier activity.

#### THE COLLEGE STREET FRONTAGE

By the second half of the thirteenth century the eastern third of the tenement plots were occupied by ranges of stone buildings, perhaps utilising stone from the shallow quarry pits scattered across the western part of the site. This date coincides with the raising of 92 tenants to the status of burgesses in 1250-51 within the newly created self-governing borough, and illustrates the growing urban prosperity of the town.

A north-south wall located in two of the trial trenches may have formed a western boundary to the domestic plots. The location of major east-west building walls in trench 6 and along the southern side of the area excavation appear to coincide with the projected lines of the postulated plot boundary ditches. This suggests that the plot structure was still respected by the buildings, but as none of the excavated areas or trenches fully spanned these boundaries it is impossible to determine whether these were separate plots or had been amalgamated to form larger properties.

It is assumed that the major domestic ranges would have fronted onto College Street itself, but it was not possible to examine this area. The single near complete building that was investigated was small, with a floor space only 2.5m wide and perhaps 6.5m long, with narrow ground laid, unmortared walls in rough hewn limestone. This, and the presence of

stone-lined drains and the base of a circular baking oven, suggests that the investigated buildings were all ancillary buildings serving as kitchens and stores. The loss of floor levels and demolition rubble to later truncation had also removed most of the finds assemblages, making it impossible to draw any conclusions concerning the status or the nature of any specific specialised activities or crafts that may have been carried out. However, the very presence of the stone-lined drains and a probable detached kitchen range does imply a reasonable level of sophistication. Most of the excavated walls could all lie within a single tenement, but too little of the tenements to the immediate north and south were investigated to determine whether these held similarly extensive building ranges.

These buildings remained in use until the later fifteenth century, but were then abandoned and levelled. This partly reflects the general decline of such small towns through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Other specific factors that influenced the decline of Higham Ferrers included the increasing importance of Wellingborough and a fire in around 1408 that destroyed the shops and moot hall in the market place and many other houses.

Following abandonment it is evident that, if they had not been joined earlier, at least three plots became a single entity to form the one-acre orchard shown on the map of 1591 and later maps. The area was to remain open through to the twentieth century, indicating that there was not intensive pressure to redevelop. However, this was somewhat atypical as the tenements further north did see progressive development through these centuries, with a gradual expansion of ancillary buildings onto the previously open backage of the plots, as catalogued through the sequence of historic maps. An eighteenth century quarry in the north-eastern part of the site was the only further activity prior to the construction of boot and shoe factories in the early twentieth century.

#### METRICATION OF THE TENEMENT PLOTS

Ditches aligned east to west in trial trenches 3 and 7 lay approximately 20m apart and 20m north of Cemetery Lane (Fig 2). This distance can be equated to a four rod width: based on a rod of 16.5feet (5.03m), suggesting that these ditches may have been original tenement plot boundaries. The length of these tenements is less certain, but map projection does suggest that College Street has been widened

and now impinges onto the eastern ends of the medieval plots. A length of approximately 75m (15 rods) can therefore be suggested as an approximate value. Given that the statutory acre measured 40 by 4 rods, the two southern tenements, measuring 15 by 4 rods, would each have occupied 0.375 acres (3/8th of an acre). The mapping of the former orchard indicates that it extended 50m north-south, taking in two 4 rod wide plots and a further half plot, 2 rods wide. The orchard, which was established before the end of the sixteenth century, was therefore 1 acre in extent. This same pattern is also seen in the map of 1591, which shows a series of 20m (4 rod) wide tenements continuing northward from the orchard.

The later history of these tenement boundaries cannot be established, but a recut of the east-west ditch in trench 3 contained fifteenth century pottery. Building walls also appear to lie on an eastward projection of these ditches, indicating that the boundary lines were still evident, even if the individual plots had been amalgamated into larger units.

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