

Higham Ferrers, Saffron Road: an archaeological evaluation

by

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with contributions by
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SUMMARY

An archaeological trial trench evaluation was undertaken on the Saffron Road car park, Higham Ferrers, prior to the development of a new doctor's surgery. This site lay within the historic core of the medieval town, just north of the market and south of Chichele College. The historic map evidence indicated that part of a probable medieval layout of small square plots had survived into the 16th century, making this a rare opportunity to investigate the origins and early development of Higham Ferrers. Unfortunately, in the early 20th century the backage of the plot had been levelled and utilised as a coal yard. All that was left was the remnant of a single medieval pit, which contained four sherds of 12th-century pottery.

INTRODUCTION

Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned by Neil Nibblet Associates Ltd, to undertake a desk-based assessment followed by archaeological evaluation on a car park between Saffron Road and College Street, Higham Ferrers ahead of development of a new doctor's surgery (SP 9598 6856; Fig 1). A brief was issued by Myk Fliteroft of Northamptonshire County Council's Historic Environment Team (NCCHE 2005). The evaluation was carried out in January 2006 following a project design produced by Northamptonshire Archaeology (NA 2005).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The desk-based assessment was by Pat Chapman (2005). The excavation was managed by Tony

Walsh and was directed by Stephen Morris with the help of Mark Patenall. The medieval pottery was analysed by Paul Blinkhorn. The original client report (Morris 2006) has been edited for publication by Pat Chapman. The transcriptions of the historic maps were taken from copies held by the Northamptonshire Record Office. The illustrations are by Carol Simmonds and Andy Chapman.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site is generally level at c 70m above Ordnance Datum. Residential and commercial properties bound the area to the north and south with Saffron Road to the west. The lower part of the façade of the frontage on the old northern plot still survives and stands at the easternmost end of the car park with blocked window openings and a pedestrian entrance onto College Street.

The underlying geology is Northampton Sand with Ironstone and Great Oolite Limestone with clay of the Upper Estuarine Series, the site possibly lying across the geological boundaries (BGS 1989).

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

By Pat Chapman

The Extensive Urban Survey (EUS) for Northamptonshire identified Higham as part of the Saxon royal estate of Irthlingborough (Foard and Ballinger 2000, 11). Excavations at Kings Meadow Lane to the north of the town revealed a major complex of buildings and ditches dated to the 7th century and possibly connected to Irthlingbrough on the opposite side of

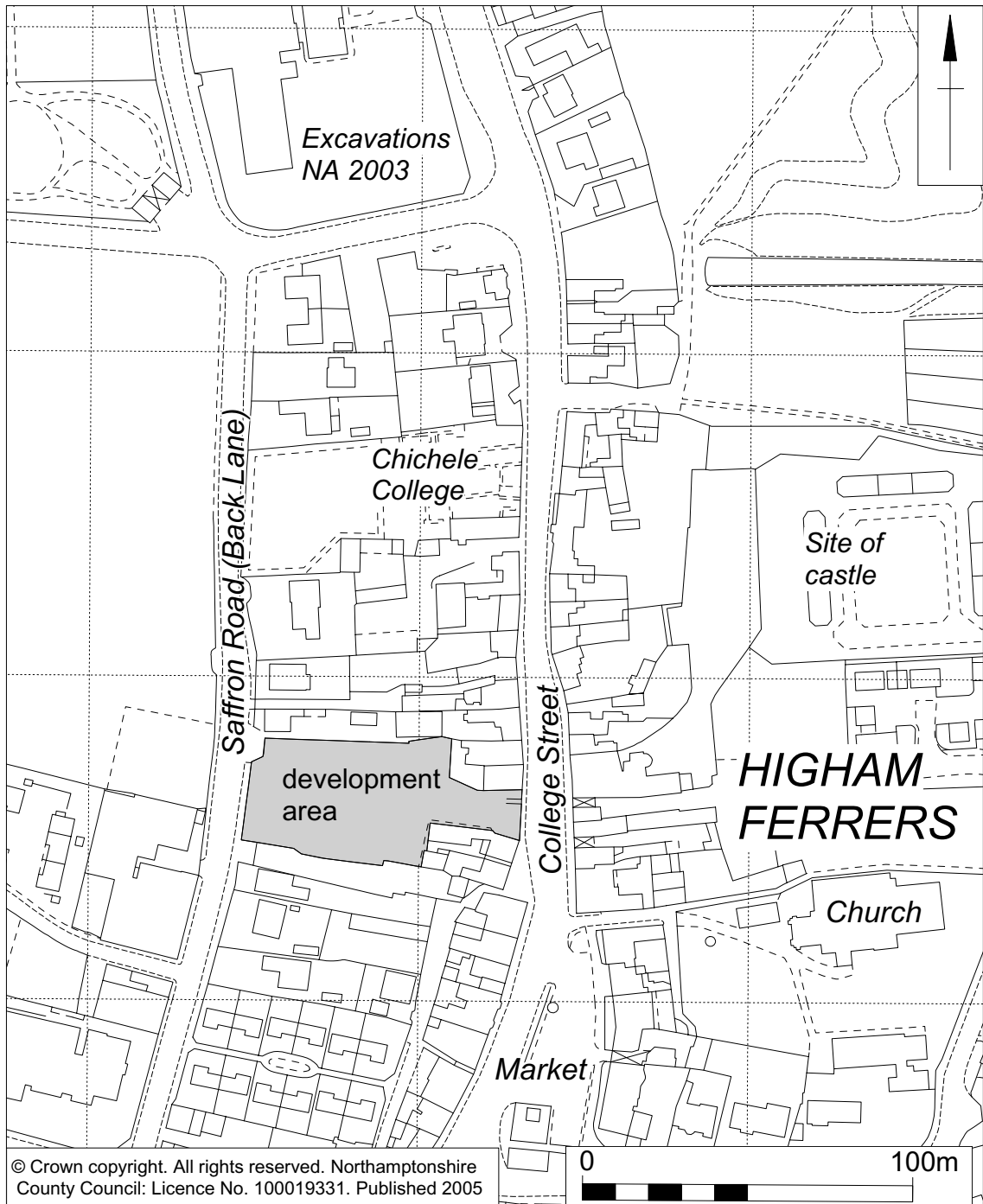


Fig 1 Higham Site location

the river, which was a Saxon royal town by the 8th century (Hardy and Lorimer 2004, 13-15; *SMA* 26 (1996), 43 and *SMA* 32 (2002), 32-34). Sherds of middle Saxon pottery, but no contemporary features, were recovered in excavations 200m to the north of the application site (Jones and Chapman 2003).

The Saxon estate to the north of the town was abandoned and replaced by a minor settlement during the 9th century, when the area fell within the Danelaw (Hardy and Lorimer 2004, 36). The Saxon reconquest and land reorganisation of the 10th century created what was to become the town's modern core. By 1086 it was one of only four places in the county with a recorded market, reflecting its early tenurial and administrative importance.

The probable 11th-century market village developed to true urban status in the 12th and earlier 13th centuries, with its own self-governing borough. The development site lay within the heart of the medieval town, with the market to the immediate south, the church to the east, the castle to the north-east and the college less than 100m to the north (Fig 1).

Excavations 200m to the north in 2003, on another plot between College Street and Saffron Road, located boundary ditches dated to the 12th century (Jones and Chapman 2003). This indicates that the setting out of tenements alongside College Street and extending a considerable distance north of the core of the town had occurred by the middle of the 12th century, and their establishment illustrates the rapid growth of the town to urban status at this time. In the 2003 excavation, ranges of stone buildings occupying the eastern third of the plots had appeared by the late 13th century. The main domestic buildings would have stood on the frontage onto College Street, which was not investigated, with ancillary buildings to the rear. Further west, towards Saffron Road, there were pits and stone quarries.

As with all small towns in the county, Higham Ferrers was affected by the famines of early 14th century, the Black Death of 1348-9, and the succeeding pestilences of 1361 and 1368-9. It also suffered significant economic decline in the 14th and 15th centuries. At the 2003 excavation to the north, at least the ancillary buildings had been abandoned and levelled by the end of the 15th century, reflecting this decline (Jones and Chapman 2003). However, the new development area lay closer to the core of the medieval town and would have been less affected by these episodes of decline.

The town was virtually ignored by Leland in his

Itinerary of the 16th century, and J Morton dismissed the town as 'small and not very populous' (Hardy and Lorimer 2004, 44). Although Higham Ferrers retained its status as a borough throughout the 18th to 20th centuries, its population by the beginning of the 19th century was low and not dissimilar to many of the surrounding villages.

In the late 19th century the boot and shoe industry developed and led to a re-expansion of the town.

1591 MAP OF HIGHAM FERRERS BY JOHN NORDEN (NRO MAP 4661)

The map transcription is taken from a three-dimensional pictorial colour map looking from the east (Fig 2, 1591). It depicts the main features that are still present today; the Church, Castle Fields and medieval fishponds, the Market Square and Chichele College. The map contains distortions of scale so the transcription onto the modern map base is not completely accurate, although there seems no reason to doubt its depiction of the nature of the area at this date.

The map indicates that the area encompassing the development site then comprised several small square plots, each of which contained a building or buildings (Fig 2). There were two larger plots with frontages onto College Street, while the western half of the area contained four plots, one of which was further subdivided, with a partial frontage onto Saffron Lane, then recorded as Back Lane. Access between the plots was provided by a network of small lanes, one of which appears to have run south-north across the study area, dividing the College Street frontage from the small plots to the rear. The presence of this arrangement in an area to the immediate north of the market would suggest that the plots may have been held by small traders or craftsmen producing or dealing in goods to be sold through the market. This is almost certainly a fossilisation of a medieval arrangement.

1737 MAP SURVEYED FOR THE RT. HONOURABLE THOMAS EARL OF MALTON BY JOHN COLBECK (NRO LIBRARY BOOK 136 AND NRO MAP 2803)

By the early 18th century, and perhaps considerably earlier, the medieval pattern of smaller plots had gone and the area then comprised two elongated plots that ran from College Street to Saffron Lane (Fig 2, 1737). These conformed to the pattern of burgage plots that front onto both sides of College



Fig 2 Transcriptions of maps of 1591 and 1737 to modern Ordnance Survey base

Street extending for several hundred metres to the north of the historic core of the town. At this time most of the frontage was built-up on both plots with further ranges extending westward along the common boundary. An elongated building range lay along the southern boundary of the southern plot, and a small square building stood in the centre of the northern plot.

These plots and their buildings remained little changed until the later 19th century, when the plots were amalgamated to form a single property. By 1926 the backage had been cleared, presumably for the Co-operative coal depot.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the work, as stated in the Brief (NCCHE 2005), were to determine the extent to which the development site contained archaeological remains that could address issues identified in the Extensive Urban Survey. These issues include the investigation of the development of the late Saxon settlement; the origin of the manorial precursor of the church and market place to understand the beginning of urbanisation in Northamptonshire, and evidence for the functions of the 11th-century tenements and of their later varying nature of activities and thus the origin and development of the market place (Foard and Ballinger 2000, 68-70).

Two 20m long trenches, aligned east-west, were located where the new surgery and pharmacy would overlie the buildings and lane depicted on the map of 1591 (Fig 3). Two 5m long trenches were targeted on features by Saffron Road. A further two 5m long trenches lay in the northern part of the footprint of the proposed building to evaluate the depth of modern material present and the degree of truncation of earlier deposits.

The car park tarmac surface and reinforced concrete were removed by a JCB excavator fitted with a breaker and toothless ditching bucket (Plate 1). The underlying make-up layers and overburden were removed under archaeological supervision,



Plate 1 Trenches cut through car park tarmac

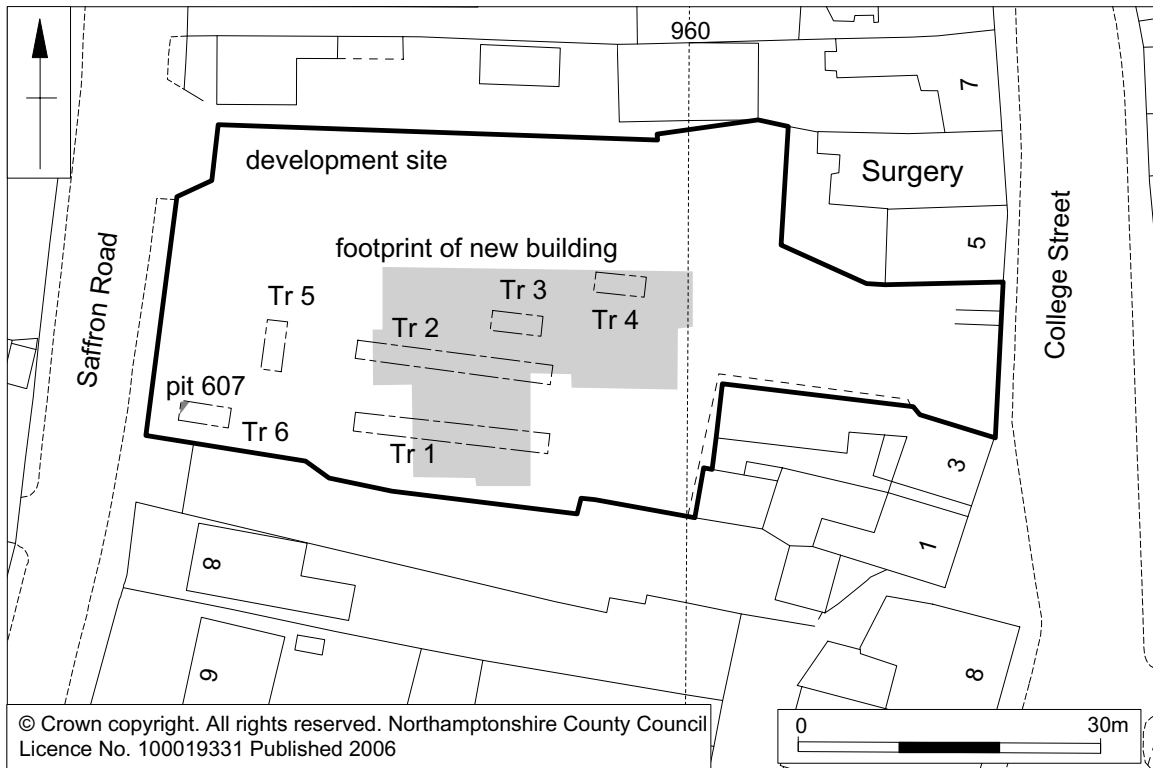


Fig 3 Location of the trial trenches

and mechanical excavation proceeded as far as the surface of the natural substrate or the first significant archaeological horizons.

EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

The undisturbed natural geology, a weathered limestone with patches of clay, lay 0.45-0.65m below the modern ground surface. Archaeological features were found in two of the trenches.

A MEDIEVAL PIT

Cut into the natural geology at the south-west corner of trench 6, close to Saffron Road, was the truncated remnant of a medieval pit or ditch 607 that lay largely beyond the excavated area (Fig 3). It survived as an irregular edge sloping to an uneven base, and was at least 1.4m wide and 0.30m to 0.50m deep (Plate 2).

The primary fill was dark yellowish mottled gritty clay, 0.15m to 0.35m thick, containing rounded limestone chips and pebbles. Four pottery sherds

from near the base of the pit comprised two sherds of shelly coarseware and two sherds of Lydden/Stanion ware. Both fabrics date to the late 12th century. The secondary fill was a thin band, 0.04m to 0.12m thick, of loose dark brown black loam, perhaps a result of animal disturbance. Above this



Plate 2 Trench 6, showing medieval pit 607

was dark grey green loamy clay, 0.10m to 0.25m thick, containing small limestone chips, gravel and grit and the occasional brick or tile fragment. The feature was sealed by a levelling layer of limestone with occasional brick and tile fragments, in a mixed gravelly yellow sand and grey clay matrix, up to 0.20m thick. This layer was overlaid by reinforced concrete 0.18m thick and the car park tarmac surface, which was 0.05m to 0.12m thick.

METALLED SURFACE

Throughout trench 4, near the centre of the site, there was a metalled surface, 0.12m to 0.30m thick, laid directly upon the natural limestone to create a hard-standing or track. The surface consisted of very compacted sub-rounded limestone fragments with occasional rounded pebbles and small fragments of brick. Overlying the limestone surface was a hard-packed layer of dark grey to black gritty coal dust, containing brick and limestone fragments, up to 0.14m thick. The limestone surface may have been the remains of an earlier 19th-century yard surface, although the overlying deposit of compressed coal dust suggests that it was also used as part of the coal yard in the 20th century. These deposits were sealed by the levelling layer for the present tarmac.

THE MEDIEVAL POTTERY

by Paul Blinkhorn

Four sherds (26g) of pottery were recovered from a single feature and comprise two sherds of Shelly Coarseware (F330), dated between AD 1100-1400 and two sherds of Lyveden/Stanion 'A' ware (F319), dated from AD 1150-1400, using the chronology and coding system of the Northamptonshire County Ceramic Type-Series (CTS). It is suggested that this group probably dates to the second half of the 12th century.

DISCUSSION

The possible medieval pit or ditch near the Saffron Road frontage was dated to the late 12th century from the pottery, which comprised sherds from commonly used domestic vessels. The presence of such pottery is consistent with the position of the site at the centre of medieval Higham Ferrers, but unfortunately this was all that survived of any occupation that may have been related to features depicted on the map

of 1591. As a result of later occupation and perhaps specifically levelling of the area to create a yard to be used by the Co-operative Society coal depot during the 20th century, any earlier archaeological deposits that may have held important evidence for the early development of the town had been almost totally removed. This was very disappointing given that few opportunities arise to investigate the development of the core of any medieval town. It should be noted, however, that only the backage of the plot was examined, and the frontage may still hold intact deposits.

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