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A MEDIEVAL POTTERY PRODUCTION SITE AT BLACKBOROUGH END, MIDDLETON

by Andrew Rogerson and Steven J. Ashley

INTRODUCTION

The site (Co. No.17915) lies within the parish of Middleton at *c.*14m. O.D. along the N.E. side of the road leading from Blackborough End (Fig.1) to Wormegay, close to the base of a pronounced slope to the S.W. which forms the north side of the valley of the Nar. The peat-covered flood plain of the Nar, perhaps a source of fuel for firing pots, reaches to within *c.*200m., while the ground to the N.E. rises steeply to a height of 40m. O.D. The subsoil is freely-draining Sandringham sand of the Lower Cretaceous, the nearest deposit of Gault clay, a likely source of potting material, being 1.2km. away to the N.E. (British Geological Survey Solid and Drift Map 1:50,000. Sheet 145 and part of 129). The site of the Benedictine Priory of St. Mary and St. Catherine (founded *c.*1150) is situated *c.*700m. to the S.E. However the medieval archaeology of the surrounding area remains unexamined.

Circumstances of Excavation

The site was discovered by Mr. John Smallwood in February 1982 when, in driving past, he noticed amongst soil cut back from the N.E. edge of the road much red burnt sand and ash. He collected a small amount of medieval pottery and realised from the discolouration of some sherds and the evidence of burning that the site was a production centre. Following Mr. Smallwood's prompt reporting of his findings to the Archaeological Unit, a small-scale excavation was carried out by the authors and two assistants, David Wicks and Thomas Cheetham, on the 16th–18th February. We are grateful to the site owner Mr. A.R.Mitchell for permission to excavate. The finds have been donated to Norfolk Museums Service.

Excavation and Observation

The site had been heavily disturbed before archaeological work began, firstly by a 3m. wide and 2m. deep service trench along the length of the site, parallel to and *c.*12m. N.E. of the road, and secondly by scraping back of parts of the northern edge of the road which was cut into the natural slope by *c.*2m.

The battered sides of the service trench showed that a *c.*1m. depth of stratification consisting of layers of red burnt sand, ash, and charcoal flecked sand, occurred in two areas (Fig.1; contexts *1* and *2*), both of which, and particularly the south-eastern one, were mirrored by a slight rise in the ground surface. The southern area ran through the south-eastern boundary and was visible as a dark soil mark in the adjacent arable field (gridded survey; contexts *18–25*). N.W. of the northern area the service trench cut

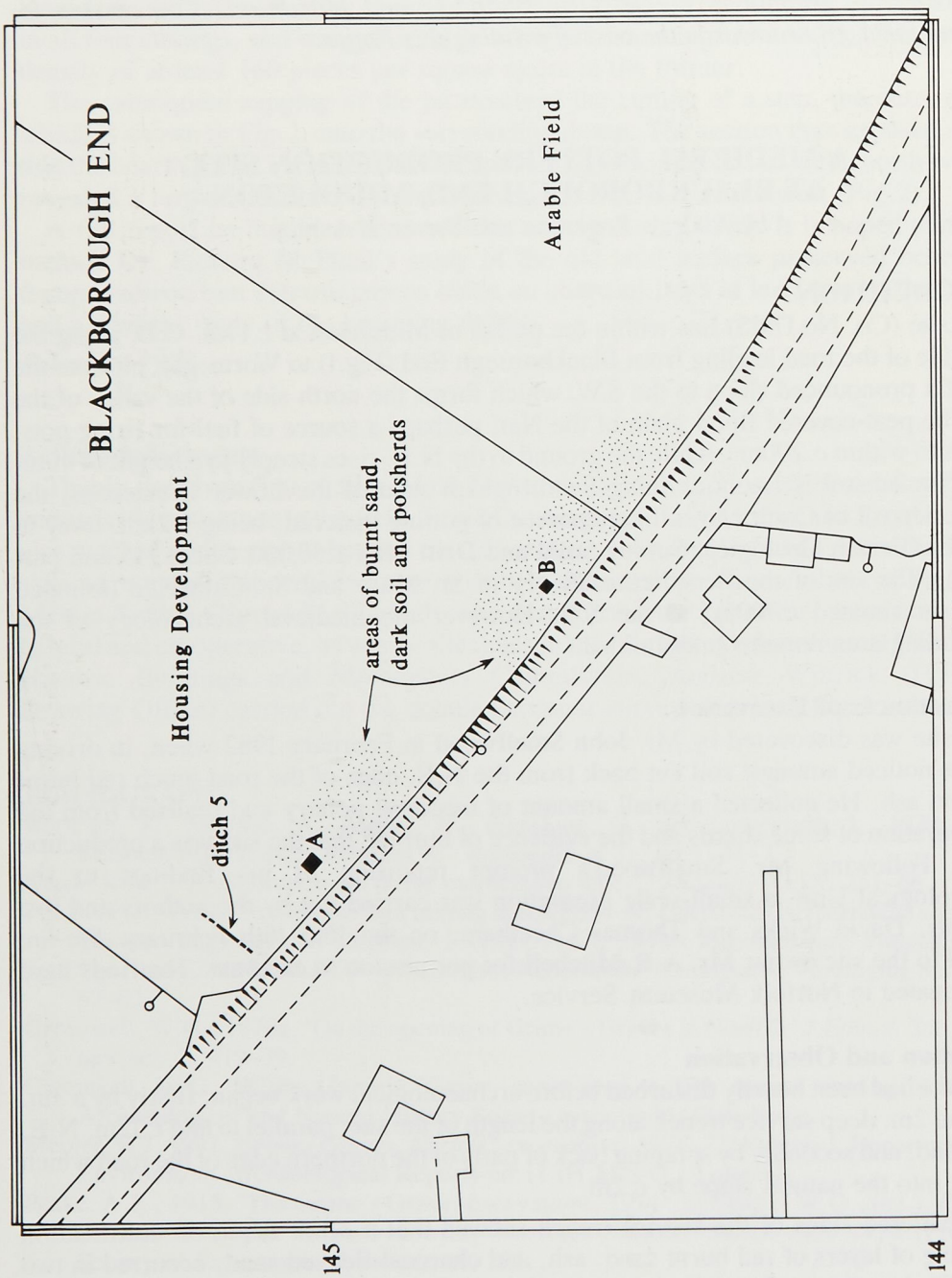

Fig. 1
Location plan. Scale 1:1250.

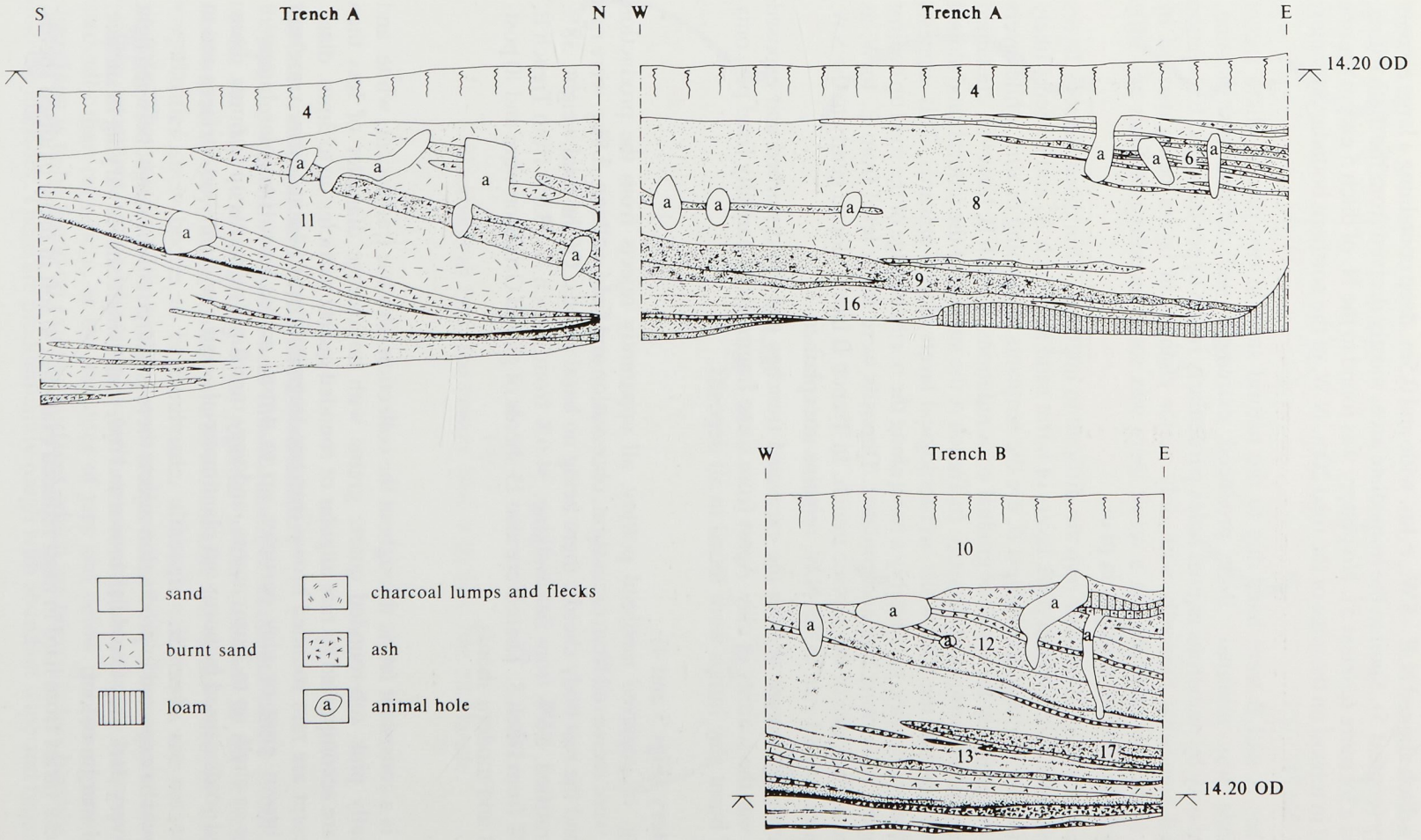

Fig. 2
Blackborough End: South-east and south-west facing sections in Trench A south-west facing section in Trench B Scale 1:30.

through a ditch aligned N.E.–S.W., *c.*1m. wide and 0.5m. deep containing a large amount of pottery (context *5*). Spoil in the immediate area, mostly derived from the ditch filling, produced a lot more (context *3*). No pottery was found to the N. of ditch *5* except for one rimsherd in topsoil on the edge of the road 20m. N.W. of the northern boundary, (context *14* Fig.3, No.7).

Trenches A and B were hand-dug to the natural sand in two places where recent disturbance was minimal. Both produced extremely well-defined stratification, disturbed only by numerous animal holes particularly in the upper deposits. Excavation proceeded somewhat hurriedly with only major changes in layers being marked by changes in context numbers. As a result there was some muddling of finds and little opportunity to observe deposits in plan.

The sections (Fig.2) on their own are difficult to interpret. Thin discontinuous layers of ash and sand contrast with thick layers of burnt sand in Trench A, and it seems likely that the former, for example context *6*, are the remnants of burning *in situ*, while layers *8* and *11* are probably the result of gradual accumulations. Trench B, however, contained no such extensive burnt sand deposits. In Trench A the surface of the natural sand sloped downwards towards the S.W. while archaeological layers sloped upwards. This suggests that there was a barrier, presumably a bank along the northern edge of the road up against which layers of burning had accumulated. Deposits were fairly level from E. to W. as they were in the sides of the service trench. In Trench B layers sloped gently to the S.W. but the pronounced rise to the N.W. remains unexplained.

A noteworthy feature of both the excavated trenches and the disturbed and exposed deposits was the scarcity of clay. Apart from some fragments of partially fired pot, only 480g. of burnt clay lumps were found in all deposits.

The Pottery (Figs.3 and 4)

16.57kg. of unglazed medieval pottery, all apparently rejects from the production process, were recovered from excavation, observation and field walking. 3.9kg. were rim sherds, and the rest body sherds, there being no basal sherds. Of the total weight, 38% was unstratified, 5.6% from fieldwalking, 34.6% from Trench A, 13.6% from Trench B, and 13.6% from Ditch *5*. There were also 13 sherds of glazed Grimston ware and 10 post-medieval and modern sherds.

Fabric

There is a consistent fabric throughout the collection. Profuse translucent, white, and occasionally pink sub-rounded quartz grains with an average diameter of less than 0.5mm. are accompanied by rare angular or rounded quartz particles up to 3mm. diam. Also present are rare rounded brown iron ore fragments up to 4mm. diam., rare soft reddish brown grog or clay particles up to 4mm. across, rare irregular lumps of limestone or chalk up to 3mm. across, and very rare flint fragments up to 6mm. diam. Elongated voids caused by burnt-out plant material occur very rarely on surfaces and in fracture.

As should be expected in production rejects there is a large colour range, between light grey and very dark grey to reddish brown and red, many single sherds varying in surface, core, and margin colour.

Hardness varies from hard in most reduced examples to soft in many oxidised sherds.

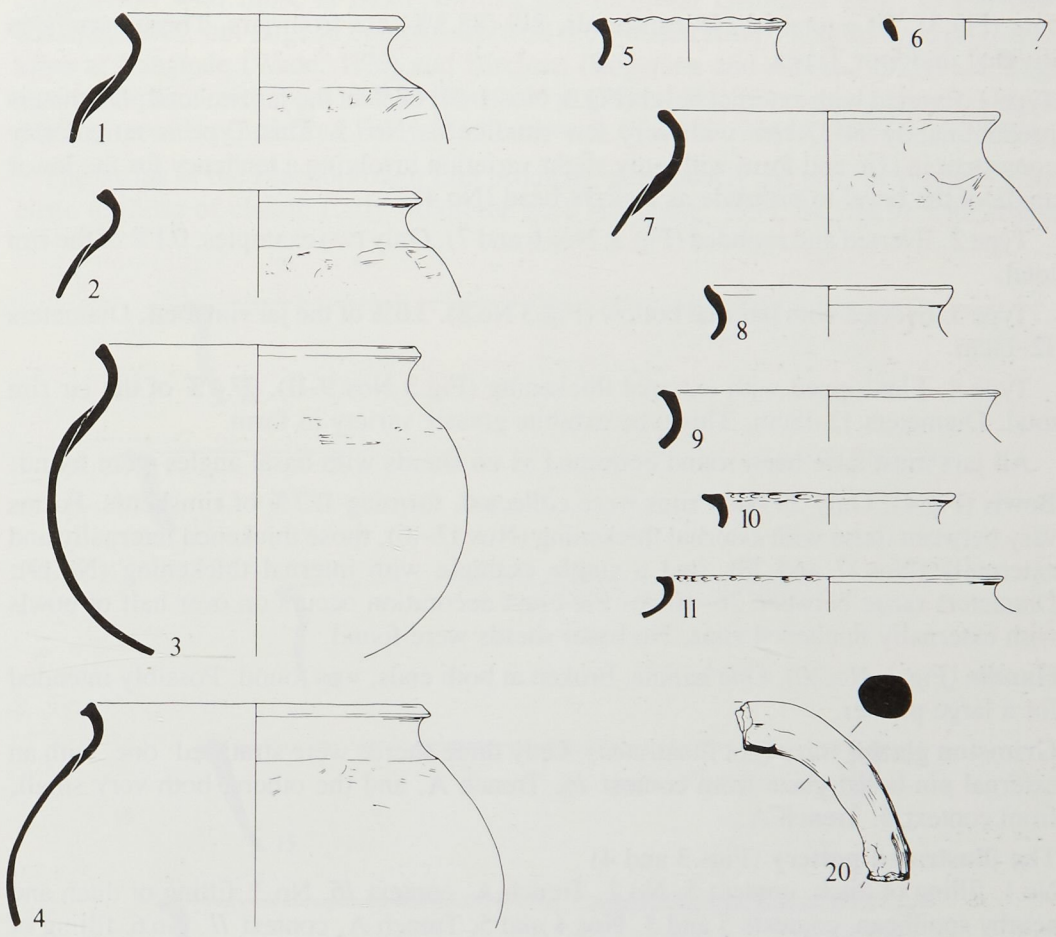

Fig. 3
Blackborough End: The Pottery. Nos. 1–11, Jars; No. 20, Handle.

Surface treatment and methods of manufacture

Rims are wheel-thrown or wheel-finished and the remainder of the vessel is handmade, the two elements being luted together at the shoulder, as the fracture often demonstrates. Very fine horizontal marks indicate the use of the wheel on rims, while irregularities show bodies to be handmade, although coil marks are not visible in fracture. The junction of the two elements is also indicated by the most obvious external surface treatment, knife-trimming, which consistently occurs, on some pots more markedly than on others, at the shoulder of jars and below the rim of bowls. Some smoothing is to be found on external surfaces which are normally less harshly textured than the interiors. These are predominantly rough with abundant wipe and finger marks.

Forms

Jars (Fig.3). Of a total of 248 rimsherds, 219 (88.3%) are from jars. These have been divided into four Types.

Type 1. Everted with external bevel (Fig.3, Nos.1–5), 68% of the jar rim total. Diameters predominantly 14–17 cm. with very few smaller, as No. 5. This Type is remarkably consistent in size and form with only slight variation involving a tendency for the lower angle of the bevel to protrude as a slight bead (No.4).

Type 2. Everted and rounded (Fig.3, Nos.6 and 7). Only two examples. 0.1% of the rim total.

Type 3. Everted with internal hollow (Fig.3 No.8). 3.6% of the jar rim total. Diameters 12–13cm.

Type 4. Flat-topped with external thickening (Fig.3 Nos.9–11). 27.4% of the jar rim total. Diameters 12–18cm. This type exhibits greater variety in form.

All jars must have been round bottomed as no sherds with basal angles were found.

Bowls (Fig.4). Only 29 bowl rims were collected, forming 11.7% of rimsherds. Forms vary between those with external thickening (Nos.12–16), those thickened internally and externally (Nos.17 and 18), and a single example with internal thickening (No.19). Diameters range between 26–40cm. Pie-crust decoration occurs on over half of bowls with externally thickened rims. No basal sherds were found.

Handle (Fig.3, No.20). One handle, broken at both ends, was found. Possibly intended for a large pitcher.

Grimston glazed ware (not illustrated). Only three sherds were stratified: one, with an external pin-holed glaze from context *16*, Trench A, and the others, both very small, from context *6*, Trench A.

The illustrated pottery (Figs.3 and 4)

No.1, filling of ditch, context *5*. No.2, Trench A, context *16*. No.3, filling of ditch and nearby spoilheap, contexts *5* and *3*. Nos.4 and 5, Trench A, context *11*. No.6, filling of ditch, context *5*. No.7, unstratified N.W. of northern boundary, context *14*. No.8, Trench A, context *9*. No.9, topsoil, Trench B, context *10*. Nos.10 and 11, unstratified in N.W. part of site, context *3*. No.12, Trench A, context *9*. No.13, Trench B, context *12*. No.14 Trench A, context *11*. No.15 topsoil Trench B, context *10*. No.16 unstratified in N.W. part of site, context *3*. No.17, filling of ditch, context *5*. No.18, unstratified near edge of road N.W. part of site, context *2*. No.19, unstratified in N.W. part of site, context *3*. No.20, filling of ditch, context *5*.

Discussion and Dating

The large quantities of discoloured and distorted sherds and the superimposed layers of burning make it certain that this site was a production centre. However, the absence of any kiln structure or remnant thereof suggests that permanent kilns were not employed. Clamps or bonfires must have been used. That definite evidence for such operations was not recorded is hardly surprising in view of the lack of careful excavation to expose horizontal surfaces. As mentioned above, it is likely that some layers recorded only in section, such as context *6*, Trench A, may represent areas of firing. There is no doubt that this site, now destroyed, would have provided a mine of information to the skilled excavator with sufficient time and resources.

The scale and intensity of pottery production at Blackborough End were small in

comparison with those at Saxo-Norman and medieval Grimston 8km. to the N.E. (Clarke, 1970), but large in comparison with the isolated rural Thetford-type producing kilns at Langhale (Wade, 1976) and Bircham (Rogerson and Adams, 1978), and large again compared with three sites in Fransham in Central Norfolk recently identified from surface spreads of misfired Early Medieval ware (Co. Nos.20446, 20766 and 20788).

The forms of the Blackborough End products, particularly the jars, in Types 1–3, are close to those of classic Early Medieval ware (Dunning, 1959, 44, fig.9) with simple

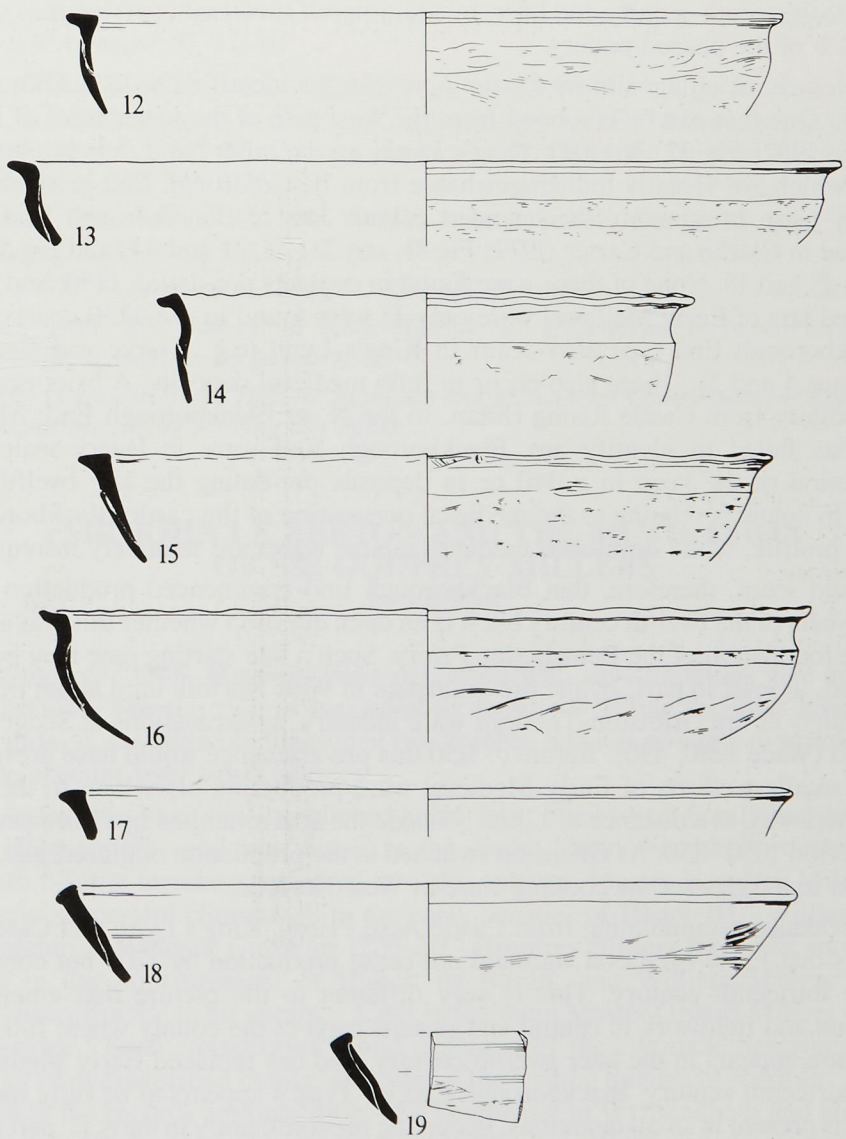

Fig. 4
Blackborough End: The Pottery Nos. 12–19, Bowls.

everted rims, thin walls, and rounded bases, and might be expected to be dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. At North Elmham Early Medieval ware spans these two centuries, overlapping with and giving way to medieval coarse wares after 1150 (Wade 1980, 445). At Castle Acre castle, Early Medieval ware is present before the construction of the castle in *c.*1085 and is still in use at the end of the sequence in the upper ward in *c.* 1180 (Milligan 1982, 224–5). In the excavation of a barn at Castle Acre Priory this ware forms 71% of the site total (Dallas 1980, 253) and is present in such vast quantities in the thirteenth century and beyond that it is difficult to accept that its use ceased in the later twelfth century; indeed 46% of the phased Early Medieval Ware was found in contexts of the late thirteenth century and later. In addition full medieval coarseware accounts for only 4.4% of the phased pottery.

Few vessels at either site in Castle Acre can be identified as Blackborough End products. One that can be is a bowl from the west gate of the lower ward of the castle (Milligan 1982, Fig.32, No.104). King's Lynn, on the other hand, has produced many vessels which are visually indistinguishable from Blackborough End products, though normally grey, presumably the intended colour. Jars of Blackborough End type are illustrated in Clarke and Carter (1977) Fig.81, nos.21, 23, 31 and 34, and Fig.82, nos.2, 4, 5, 10, 13 and 16. None of these were found in deposits pre-dating 1250, and out of 54 illustrated jars of Early Medieval ware only 13 were found in pre–1250 contexts. Bowls of Blackborough End type also occur in King's Lynn (e.g. Clarke and Carter 1977, Fig.85, nos.4 and 5). These also occur in fully medieval deposits. A brief examination of the pottery from Castle Rising (10km. to the N. of Blackborough End; Milligan in prep.) has failed to identify any Blackborough End ware in layers sealed by the construction of the keep in *c.*1140 or in deposits pre-dating the late twelfth century chapel. In contexts relating to the medieval occupation of the castle Blackborough End jars are prolific, while developed medieval coarse wares are relatively infrequent.

It would seem, therefore, that Blackborough End commenced production after the middle years of the twelfth century but it is an open question whether this was associated with the foundation of the Benedictine Priory. Such a late starting date may perhaps be explained, at least in part, by the pre-eminence in West Norfolk until about this time of the products of the Grimston–Thetford ware industry, as excavations at Sedgeford have indicated (Wade 1980, 436). Before *c.* 1150 this pre-eminence would have prevented any but the smallest efforts of Early Medieval ware production elsewhere in the vicinity. Castle Acre was, at a distance of 12km., outside the area swamped by Grimston products in the period 1050–1150. As Grimston switched to the production of glazed jugs, so a gap appeared in the market for cooking ware in West Norfolk.

The evidence accumulating from Castle Acre Priory, King's Lynn and Castle Rising indicates that Early Medieval ware did not cease production by 1200 but continued on into the thirteenth century. This is very different to the picture that emerges from excavation and fieldwork in central and eastern parts of the county where full medieval coarseware appears in the later twelfth century, and has replaced Early Medieval ware by the thirteenth century. Blackborough End jar Type 4 appears to be fully medieval in form. It is present in small quantities, occurring predominantly in the S.E. part of the site and in the upper layers of excavation, and may not have been introduced until the later thirteenth century.

That a pottery type can be introduced 150 years after its conventional starting date and persist perhaps 100 years after its normal finishing date, is surprising and only serves to

show that much more work needs to be done in medieval pottery studies at a local level within the county.

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SIR JOHN LE BRETON AND THE MUTILATION OF SIR GODFREY MILLERS

by J.B.Post

Under the year 1248, Matthew Paris described with sanctimonious glee an incident which, he said, was the ruin of two knightly families.[1] While this may have been an exaggeration, it was certainly the ruin of two knights, and it is possible to supplement the chronicle account from other sources.

The two families were well established in Norfolk. The Millers family had its principal seat at Happisburgh, and was active in the county from the twelfth century to the fourteenth.[2] Some members appeared in wider spheres. Master Humfrey Millers was a moderately successful churchman in the early decades of Henry III;[3] William Millers was constable of Windsor Castle in 1229–30.[4] Humfrey Millers (possibly another) was involved in the imprisonment of Hubert de Burgh, and William Millers (possibly another) was involved in his escape.[5] Later in the reign Master Gilbert Millers was in the king's service.[6] Such connections would explain why the chronicle describes Godfrey Millers as 'of distinguished family' and 'one of the leading knights of Norfolk',[7] although his traces in the records are only those of a landowner in Wymondham and elsewhere,[8] and nothing is known of him personally before 1248 save that he was married with at least one grown son.

John le Breton seems to have been similarly placed, although niceties of relative social and political status must remain obscure. He, too, was a married man with grown