

## AN IRON AGE BUILDING AT DUNSTON, STOKE HOLY CROSS, NORFOLK

by Andy Shelley

The remains of an Iron Age timber structure and earlier drainage system were discovered during the course of recent archaeological investigations at Dunston Hall Hotel (TG 223 024).<sup>1</sup> The excavation (SMR Site 31858) was conducted by Norfolk Archaeological Unit in advance of a golf course development by Dunston Hall Ltd, who generously funded the archaeological work.<sup>2</sup>

The excavated area lay in the archaeologically-sensitive River Tas valley to the south of Norwich. The Roman town of *Venta Icenorum* lies a little over 1km to the north and a Bronze Age barrow cemetery, Iron Age settlement and Middle Saxon cemetery<sup>3</sup> have been found close by. The site itself is situated on the western valley slope and had been heavily disturbed by recent forestation.

### Description

The drainage system (Fig. 1) consisted of two parallel east-to-west aligned ditches marked at their western ends by a north-to-south aligned ditch and replaced by a pair of wider, flat-based features. All the features were shallow and contained loam-rich silts, none of which produced finds.

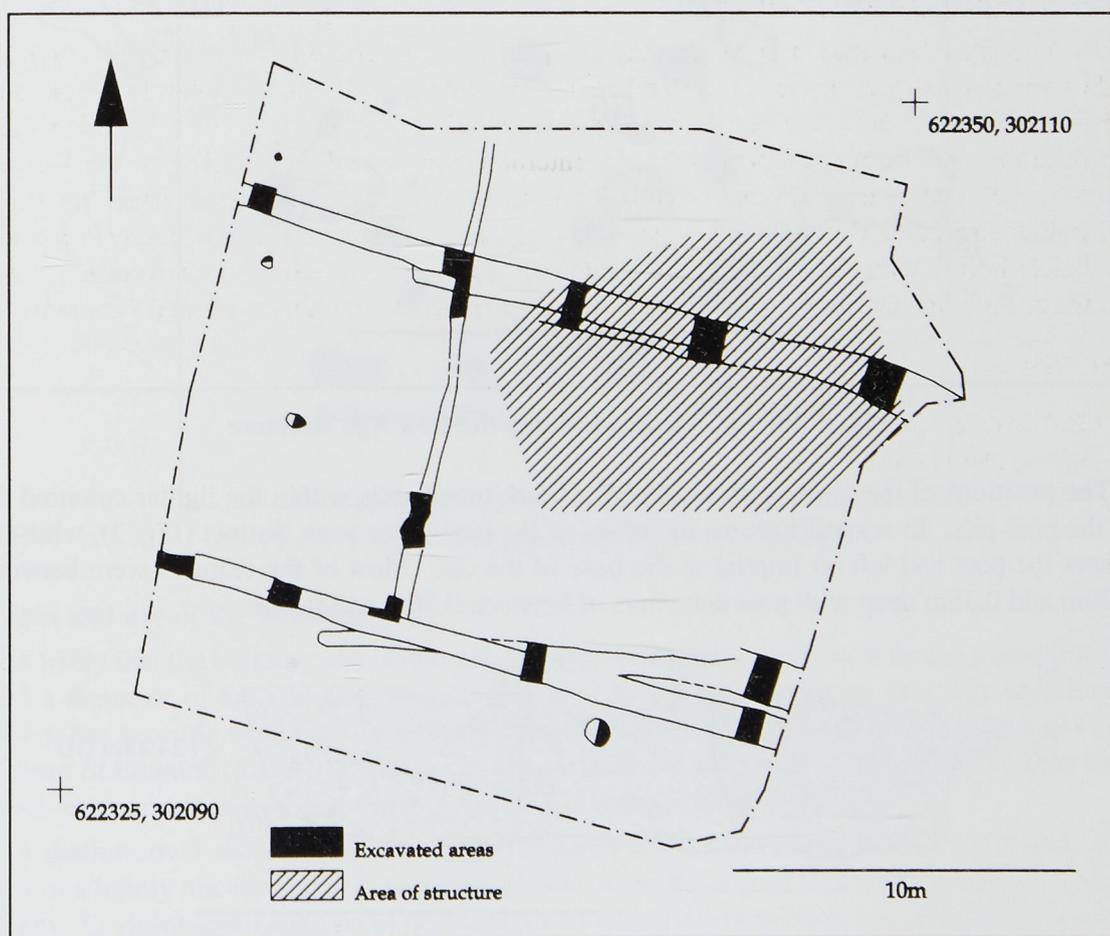


Fig. 1 Area of excavation, showing field system and area of structure

The structure was composed chiefly of distinctive elongated post-pits, cut through the underlying natural sands and gravels of the area (Fig. 2). Seven of these elongated features formed three sides of an uncommonly-shaped building plan. The northern edge may have been formed by three smaller features, whilst a further two post-holes lay within the area of the building. Each of the large post-pits contained the impressions of at least two posts; the two most westerly features contained three.

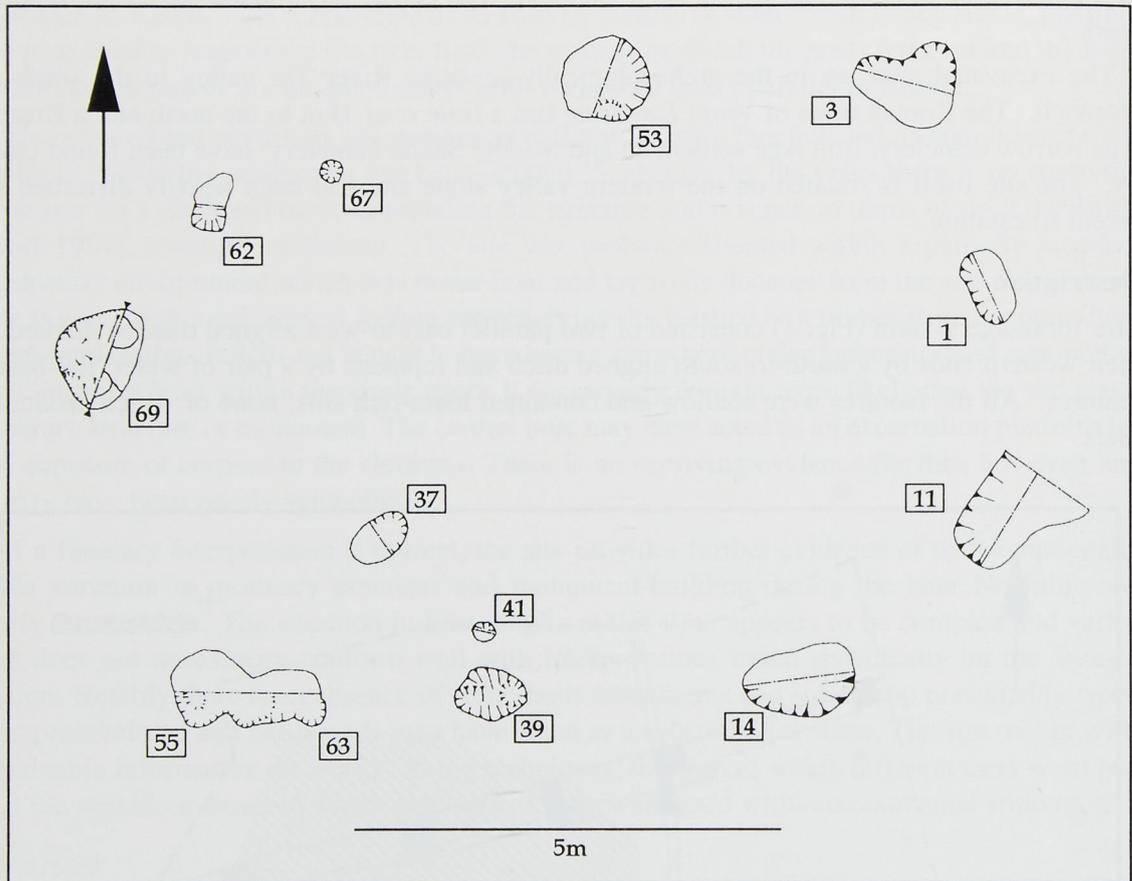


Fig. 2 Plan of features forming the Iron Age structure

The positions of the posts were indicated by dark-toned soils within the lighter coloured fill of the post-pits. In several features the edges of the post-pipes were distinct (Fig. 3), whilst in others the post had left an imprint at the base of the cut. Most of the features were between 0.20m and 0.35m deep with post diameters of between 0.30m and 0.40m.

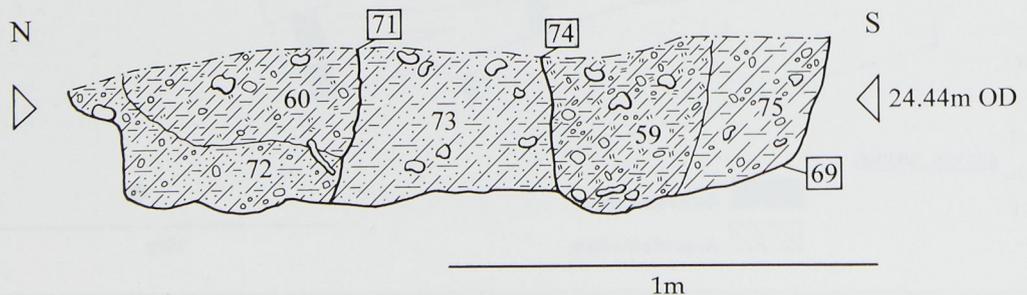


Fig. 3 Section through post-pit 69

Six of the features contained fired clay fragments, suggesting the posts may have supported wattle and daub walls. All but one of the post-holes contained pottery, a total of 1.323kg being recovered. The ceramic assemblage included shouldered jars with fingertip impressions to the rim and shoulder. These are stylistically characteristic of the early Iron Age, *ie.* the 8th–7th centuries BC.<sup>4</sup> Small bipartite bowls were also represented, together with a small number of Bronze Age pottery sherds.

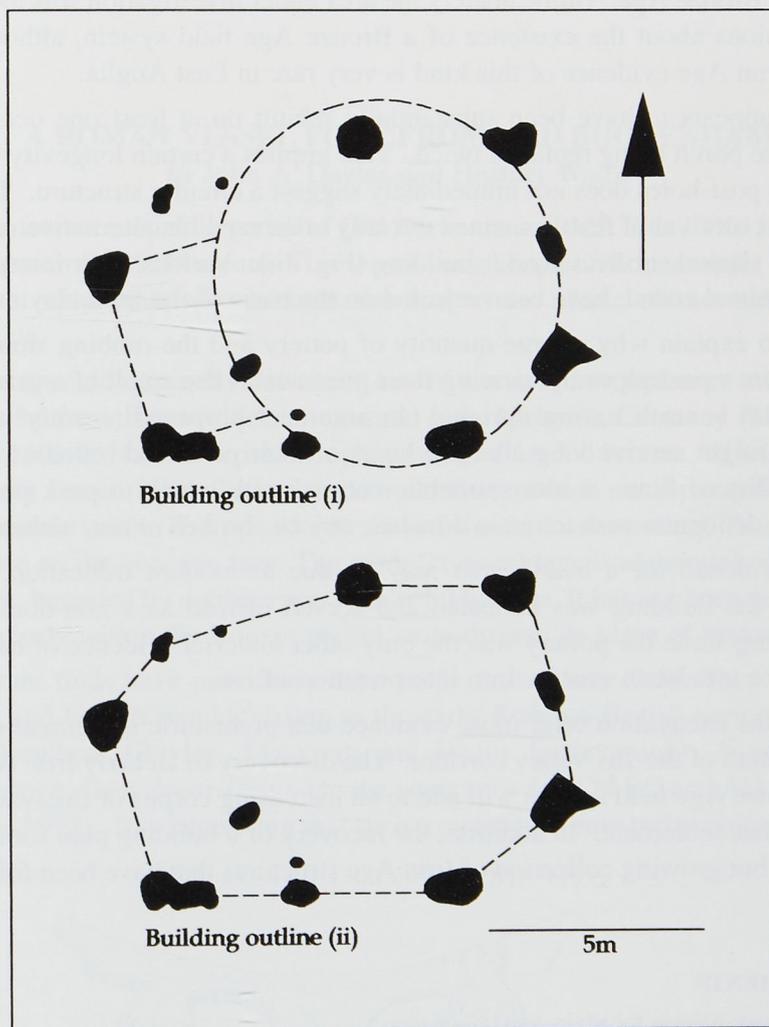


Fig. 4 Conjectured outlines of the structure's plan

### Form and use of the building

It is likely that the building was originally circular, with a west-south-west facing porch (Fig. 4i) and a diameter of 8m. In size, therefore, it may be compared with an Iron Age roundhouse which has recently been excavated on the line of Norwich Southern Bypass at Harford Farm, Caistor St Edmund (Site 9794)<sup>5</sup>, although the position of the porch is at odds with the more usual south-eastern orientation of those attached to the Harford Farm buildings.

A shallow, oval-shaped post-hole within the porch utilised a rubbing stone as a post-pad. This was of a lightly micaceous rock, probably granite, worn flat on one side through use on a saddle-quern. Environmental analysis of charcoal found within the post-pipes indicates charring of the posts or clearing of internal fire debris. Wheat, barley and hazel nuts were present, although

only in small quantities. No hearth was found, although there were sufficiently large quantities of burnt flint within the post fills to indicate the building may have been heated.

### Conclusions

The 'early' character of the Iron Age pottery from the building, and the recovery of fourteen Bronze Age pottery sherds from the site, suggests that the drainage system it replaced might have dated to the Bronze Age. Unfortunately the area under investigation was too small to draw any firm conclusions about the existence of a Bronze Age field system, although it is worth noting that pre-Iron Age evidence of this kind is very rare in East Anglia.

The structure appears to have been substantially rebuilt on at least one occasion, with the corner posts of the porch being replaced twice. This implies a certain longevity to the building. The layout of the post-holes does not immediately suggest a circular structure. This is probably due to differential survival of features, since the only other credible alternative reconstruction is a most unusually shaped sub-rectangular building (Fig. 4ii). Various other interpretations, such as a granary or animal corral, have been rejected on the basis of the fired clay evidence.

It is possible to explain why a large quantity of pottery and the rubbing stone were located within the structure's post-pipes by viewing their presence as the result of a gradual process of deliberate insertion beneath rotting uprights (an argument proposed recently<sup>6</sup> to explain how timber buildings might survive long after the bases of their posts had rotted away). However, the local availability of flint – a more suitable material with which to pack post-holes – may indicate instead a deliberate wish to retain domestic objects, broken or not, within the household.

The lack of evidence for a hearth area may be due to modern truncation, although it is conceivable that the building was unheated and served instead as a non-domestic structure. Besides the rubbing stone the pottery was the only other material evidence of habitation, and it would therefore be unwise to venture into interpretation of use.

The results of the excavation offer more evidence that prehistoric settlement extended along a considerable length of the Tas Valley corridor. The discovery of an early Iron Age roundhouse and possible Bronze Age field system will add to an increasing corpus of excavated information on the nature of that settlement. In addition, the recovery of a building plan for the roundhouse adds to the small but growing collection of Iron Age structures that have been found in Norfolk.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Trevor Ashwin for advice and information.

- 1 Archaeological work was conducted between September and December 1996 on a large area between the A140 trunk road and Dunston Hall. Four areas were excavated (Sites 31820, 31821, 31856 and 31858) of which 31858 (Area E) is reported on here. Results from the remaining areas may be published separately, perhaps in the context of a proposed landscape study of the environs of Caistor Roman town. An interim report of these excavations has been produced (Norfolk Archaeological Unit report no. 315) and is lodged with Norfolk Museums Service.
- 2 Excavation was conducted by David Adams, Kären Gaffney, Neil Moss, John Percival and Andy Shelley. A previous evaluation was undertaken by Trevor Ashwin, Sarah Bates, Phil Emery and Chris Phillips. Environmental analysis was by Peter Murphy and Val Fryer. The site archive will be deposited with the Norfolk Museums Service.
- 3 Extensive archaeological excavations were conducted in advance of road construction. These are detailed in Ashwin, T.M. & Bates, S.J., forthcoming, *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass 1989-1991. Part 1: Excavations at Bixley, Caistor St Edmund and Trowse, Norfolk*, and Penn, K.J., forthcoming, *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass 1989-1991. Part 2: The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Harford Farm, Norfolk*. E Anglian Archaeol.

- 4 The pottery was examined and reported on by Sarah Percival (NAU Report 315).  
 5 Harford Farm, structure 5213 (Ashwin and Bates forthcoming).  
 6 Reynolds, P.J., 1995, 'The life and death of a post-hole', *Interpreting Stratigraphy* 5, 21-25.

### A ROMAN VESSEL FOOT FROM OLD BUCKENHAM

by John A. Davies and Heather Wallis

An unusual find from a site in the parish of Old Buckenham (SMR Site 30864) has recently been recorded at Norwich Castle Museum. This was a vessel foot, of Roman date, which was found by a local metal detectorist who brought the find to the notice of the staff of the Norfolk Museums Service.

The vessel foot would originally have been one of a set of three that were attached to the base of a bucket or cauldron. It resembles an example from Mehrum, Germany (Menzel 1986: tafel 4, 24 and tafel 160). It is made from a single casting of leaded bronze, which curves to fit the shape of the main vessel. It has flat inner and outer faces, which are separated by two elaborate D-shaped openwork voids. The tips of one end of the foot are missing. Traces of silver-grey solder are visible on the concave face. The outer (convex) face is elaborately decorated with an interlace pattern, bounded by double rope-style solid borders. It has not been possible to date the vessel foot precisely within the Roman period, or to discern its place of manufacture.

Other important finds have previously been made in the same field. They included copper-alloy brooches and brooch moulds dating to the early Romano-British period, which are to be reported on elsewhere (Bayley, Mackreth and Wallis forthcoming). A small coin hoard, comprising fourteen silver *denarii* dating to the years between 124 BC and AD 41-45, was found in 1994 (Davies 1997). It is interesting that such a quantity of rare metal objects has been found in one small area.

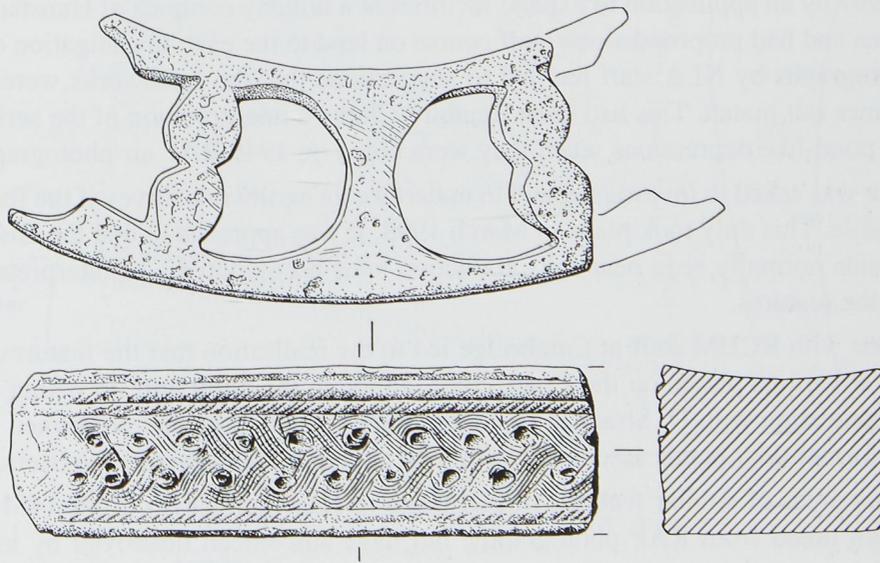


Fig. 1. Bronze vessel foot from Old Buckenham. Scale 1:1