

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGY

PREHISTORIC OCCUPATION EVIDENCE AT BUSSEYS GARAGE PALACE STREET, NORWICH

by Phil Emery and Trevor Ashwin

with contributions by Sarah Bates, Sandrine Etienne and Sarah Percival

Introduction

(Fig. 1)

by Phil Emery

A prehistoric buried soil or *palaeosol*, rich in struck flint of later Neolithic or Bronze Age date, and traces of a possible later Bronze Age building — a rarity in Norfolk — were discovered during a recent archaeological evaluation at Busseys Garage. Any future excavation at the site might reveal significant new information about this prehistoric activity. This note is intended as an interim statement, drawing attention to one of the most remarkable prehistoric sequences yet recorded within the area of the medieval City of Norwich.

Two evaluation trenches (A and B; Fig. 1) were excavated by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit during February–April 2000 in response to a pre-application enquiry concerning potential redevelopment of the 6182m² site (SMR Site 26442; Emery 2000a). The prehistoric evidence was revealed in the ‘upland’ part of the site behind the Palace Street frontage (Trench A, TG 2338 0901).

The site straddles the edge of the gravel terrace bordering the Wensum flood plain. Ground conditions in its southern part are therefore dry, while the northern part contains deep and partly waterlogged alluvial deposits. A two-metre thickness of Terrace Sands and Gravels overlies Upper Chalk in the upper part of the site. At Fishergate, on the opposite bank of the Wensum, lateral sediment accretion and peat formation predominated prior to land reclamation. Quayside, however, lies on the outside of a gentle river meander and here erosion seems to have predominated. The channel appears to have migrated southwards, cutting into terrace sands and chalk. There is no sign of peat development, just thin river beach gravels apparently over glacially-modified chalk at minus 0.72m OD (Murphy 2000). An apparent tributary valley immediately west of Pigg Lane, and a suggestion of a mid-channel bar on the site of Fye Bridge, were identified on a provisional deposit model based on bore-hole data and results of previous archaeological interventions (Fig. 1). The latter feature seems to have persisted as an island, making an obvious crossing point.

Two trenches, A (40m²) and B (29m²), were located in the upland and waterfront parts of the site respectively (Fig. 1). The natural subsoil recorded in Trench A was a bright mid yellowish-orange coarse sand that was well sorted and included flint pebbles and cobbles. The highest levels were recorded in the eastern (3.30m OD) and southern (3.06m OD) edges of the trench. At the northern edge, levels of around 2.86m OD were noted. In addition to this evidence of a general fall towards the River Wensum (Fig. 1), a small natural gully cutting into the sand was apparent near the east end of the trench.

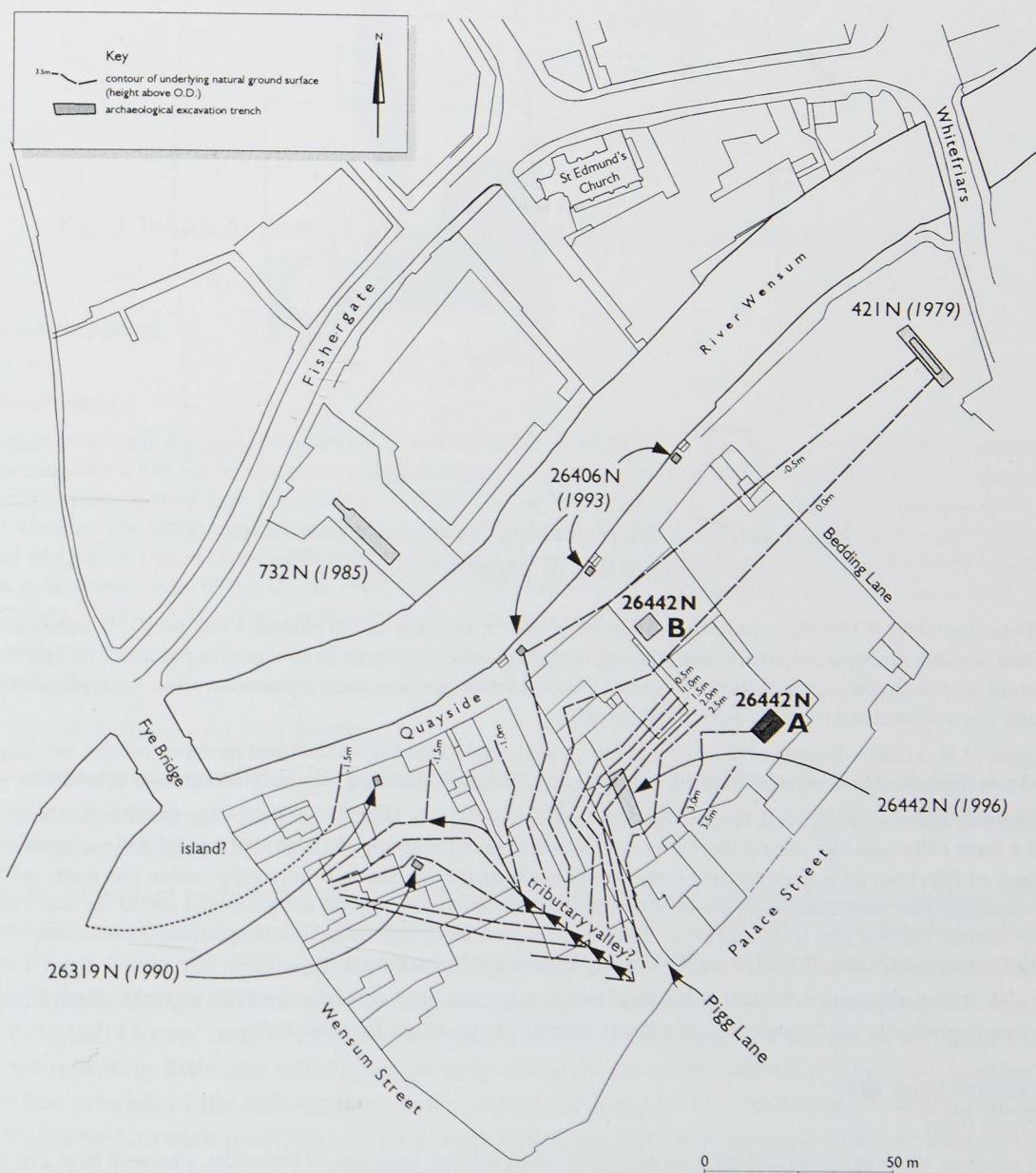


Fig. 1 Trench location, showing conjectured natural topography and previous archaeological interventions nearby

Prehistoric features and deposits

by Phil Emery and Sandrine Etienne

(Fig. 2)

Immediately overlying the natural sand in the central part of Trench A was a layer of mid-brown sand up to 0.5m thick. It was compact and well sorted and included moderate pebbles, cobbles and frequent flecks of charcoal. Browner and siltier than the underlying natural sand, it contained numerous infilled root and worm holes. An arbitrary unit of c. 0.3m³ volume was excavated in four spits and sieved in order to assess its artefactual and ecofactual content. This sampling, together with trowel excavation of two other component contexts, produced a total of 122 worked flints. The flint assemblage, the stratigraphic evidence, and similarities with underlying natural deposits all indicate that it is a palaeosol of late Neolithic or Bronze Age date.



Fig. 2 Trench A: plan showing ?prehistoric post-holes and surviving extent of palaeosol deposit 1134

?Post-hole 1190, 0.13m deep, only became apparent after excavation of the palaeosol had begun. It represents the earliest possibly structural evidence found, although its dating is based purely on its stratigraphic position. The light brown sand fill, with occasional small flints and moderate charcoal flecks, provides some information about the upper palaeosol, which was truncated and therefore unavailable for study.

Layer 1134, a compacted and well-sorted mid-brown sand, was 50mm thick. It included moderate pebbles and frequent flecks of charcoal. Partial excavation by trowel recovered 25 worked flints and fragments of thermally-crazed flint.

Four post-holes were recorded, three of them physically cutting layer 1134. Seven flints were found in post-hole 1180 and a sherd of Bronze Age pottery was recovered from the upper fill of post-hole 1151. The latter find prompted 100% sieving of fills from all stratigraphically-early post-holes. Spatial appreciation is impossible within this restricted area. However, the four post-holes might possibly be separated into two pairs, aligned at right-angles one to the other, on the basis of size. The first pair (1151 and 1180), lying on a north-to-south alignment, were respectively 210mm and 160mm deep. The second (1150 and 1186) were respectively 280mm and 100mm deep.

Layer 1138, composed of charcoal and reddish orange burnt sand with occasional rounded and subrounded flints and very small patches of ash, might represent a hearth contemporary with the four post-holes.

Struck and burnt flint

by Sarah Bates

167 pieces of struck or shattered flints were recovered, along with ten fragments of burnt flint, almost all from Trench A.

The assemblage consists almost entirely of unmodified flakes, spalls and chips. Most flakes are irregular and many are hard-hammer struck, probably dating to the later Neolithic or Bronze Age, but a few soft-hammer struck flakes may date to the earlier Neolithic period. Most of the 122 flints from the palaeosol are fine knapping debris collected during sieving. A few had been burnt prior to deposition. Objects from the palaeosol include two small blades and a soft-hammer struck flake which may also have been used as a small tool. A few flints were found within the post-hole fills; a single spall came from post-hole 1056, which produced a Bronze Age sherd. Other artefacts found unstratified or within post-prehistoric deposits include an irregular flake knife or scraper, two probable scrapers bearing steep retouch and four other retouched pieces.

The abundant spalls and chips suggest that knapping took place here. The assemblage adds significantly to the body of prehistoric lithic evidence from Norwich. Three flakes, two of them of possible earlier Neolithic date, were found during recent evaluation trenching at Fishergate on the opposite bank of the Wensum (Site 26521) and a single burnt flake fragment and two other burnt flints were found during excavation at Site 26515, also on Fishergate. Struck flint has *not*, however, been found before at other NAU-examined sites close by, including Fishergate (Site 732), Quayside (Site 26406), Pigg Lane (Site 26442), Allen and Page (Site 26319) and Norwich School former gymnasium (Site 45). Further afield, small assemblages have come from recent NAU works at 10–12 Oak Street (Site 26503), at Dragon Hall on King Street (Shelley 1998), and during the recent Riverside (Emery 2000b) and Millennium Library developments (Hutcheson 2000).

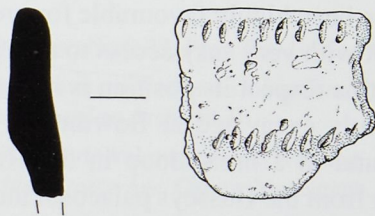


Fig. 3 Trench A: sherd of Biconical Urn pottery from post-hole 1151. Scale 1:2

Prehistoric pottery

(Fig. 3)

by Sarah Percival

A single prehistoric rim sherd, weighing 21g, was recovered from the fill of post-hole 1151. It is in good condition, suggesting that it had not been exposed before deposition within the post-hole. It forms part of a bipartite vessel with a straight neck, tapering from the shoulder probably to a narrow base. Fingernail decoration is present on the rim top and shoulder. The fabric contains grog, quartz-sand and occasional fresh flint. Both form and fabric suggest that the sherd was part of a small Biconical Urn. Similar examples have been recovered from occupation sites on the Fen Edge such as Hockwold-cum-Wilton (Healy 1996, fig.82, P108) and have been dated to the later Bronze Age (c.1800–1300 BC: Healy 1996, 115). It probably formed part of a domestic assemblage.

Conclusions

by Trevor Ashwin and Phil Emery

The character and quality of the prehistoric features and deposits from Busseys Trench A seem quite exceptional given the dearth of *in situ* prehistoric remains recorded by previous investigations within the City of Norwich.

Many important prehistoric sites are known from the Norwich environs and the valleys of the Tas, Yare and Wensum, and the convergence of these natural routeways would have made it a continuing focus for prehistoric communities. Excavated sites include the Late Neolithic Arminghall Henge (Clark 1936) and numerous Neolithic/Bronze Age barrows in the 'Arminghall Group' nearby (Ashwin and Bates 2000). Yet despite the wealth of evidence from the surrounding hills and valleys, especially those to the south and south-east, excavation to date has provided little information about prehistoric activity and environment within the area occupied by Norwich itself. In many respects this is unsurprising since prehistoric remains may either have been devastated by medieval and later building and landscaping or, in riverine locations, deeply buried by later archaeological deposits.

The deposit model developed for the Busseys site (Fig. 1) illustrates how much more 'dramatic' its pre-modern topography was, a phenomenon observed by archaeologists in many other parts of the City (*eg.* Prince of Wales Road/Rose Lane: Emery forthcoming). Perhaps the results of the recent Norwich Southern Bypass Project, which concentrated on the Arminghall Henge environs and the area of the Tas–Yare confluence itself, offer a topographic and archaeological analogue for prehistoric activity within the gravel hills and valleys of Norwich itself (Ashwin and Bates 2000). Barrows — and perhaps other communal or ceremonial monuments — may well have occupied local summits and prominent 'false crests', yet the Southern Bypass Project results suggest that the area was no depopulated 'ritual landscape', despite the presence of at least one henge and many funerary monuments. It is clear that there were numerous Neolithic and Bronze Age 'settlement' sites within this landscape too although their remains, often representing short-term or episodic occupation, are usually quite ephemeral.

Trench A's location would have been highly favourable for prehistoric settlement, on a dry and slightly elevated promontory yet with very easy access to the rich wetland resources offered by the Wensum valley bottom. In this respect its position is remarkably similar to that of a site of the 4th–3rd millennia BC recently excavated at Bowthorpe, 6 km to the south-west, which occupied slightly elevated ground in a broad loop in the River Yare (Percival and Ashwin forthcoming). The worked flints from the Busseys palaeosol indicate a later Neolithic or Bronze Age date; the Biconical Urn associated with the post-holes suggests occupation of this upper part of the site in the mid 2nd millennium BC. While the structure was clearly later than the palaeosol, the chronology of prehistoric occupation is otherwise unknown: the structure may have post-dated the soil accumulation by several hundred years, representing merely the most easily detectable of numerous visits by Neolithic and Bronze Age people over centuries or millennia.

The Bronze Age structural remains are of intrinsic interest, regardless of their 'urban' discovery context and uncertainties as to whether or not they actually represent a building. Middle and later Bronze Age structures seem relatively common in some other regions (for example the chalklands of southern and south-west England) but are seldom found in northern East Anglia, where most Bronze Age occupation 'sites' are evidenced only by artefact scatters and pit groups (Healy 1995; Ashwin 1996). This has led to suggestions that non- or semi-sedentary Neolithic and Early Bronze Age occupation patterns were longer-lived in this region than elsewhere, with dwellings and other buildings having only shallow substructures which seldom survive for study. Remarkably, this is the third NAU excavation project of 1999–2000 to encounter Middle Bronze Age structural evidence, although admittedly the Busseys results are the least prepossessing. A Middle Bronze Age roundhouse excavated at Witton near North Walsham (Site 33959: Crowson *et al.* in prep.) is still under analysis; much closer, excavation only c. 3 km distant at The Oaks, Harvey Lane, revealed a series of post-holes possibly representing a side- and end-wall of a rectangular structure measuring at least 5.70m x 2.50m (Trimble forthcoming). The great difficulties involved in finding occupation sites of the period in the East Anglian landscape (Ashwin 2001) other than by pure chance may have militated against discoveries of this kind.

There has been little published research or conjecture into the prehistoric character of the tract of land now occupied by the City of Norwich itself, reflecting the degree to which archaeological research has focussed on appreciating the medieval city. Some recent NAU projects — not only at Busseys but also in advance of the Riverside development, where palynological assessment has identified the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition and suggested how woodland exploitation and agricultural practises evolved during the Neolithic and Bronze Age (Wiltshire and Emery 2000) — have offered opportunities to begin to redress the balance. While the small size of Busseys Trench A places numerous constraints upon interpretation, the potential for future research is clear.

June 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The evaluation was funded by Bussey and Sabberton Bros. Phil Emery wishes to acknowledge the personal support and interest of Charles, Paul and David Bussey and of Keith Jeary. Recording during the excavation was co-ordinated by Francesca Boghi. The finds were processed by Lucy Talbot and Sophie Tremlett. The illustrations are by David Dobson. Trevor Ashwin is grateful to Brian Ayers and Liz Shepherd for a number of conversations about prehistoric Norwich over recent years.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashwin, T.M., 1996, 'Neolithic and Bronze Age Norfolk', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 60, 41–62
- Ashwin, T.M. and Bates, S.J., 2000, *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass, 1989–91. Part 1: Excavations at Bixley, Caistor St Edmund and Trowse*, E. Anglian Archaeol. 91
- Ashwin, T.M., 2001, 'Exploring Bronze Age Norfolk: Longham and Bittering', in Brück, J.M. (ed.), *Living Landscape: tradition and transformation in the British Bronze Age*, Oxbow Monograph, 23–32
- Clark, J.G.D., 1936, 'The Timber Monument at Arminghall and its Affinities', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 2, 1–51
- Emery, P.A., 2000a, *Report on an Archaeological Evaluation at Busseys Garage, Palace Street, Norwich*, NAU Report 498
- Emery, P.A., 2000b, *An Archaeological Evaluation at St Edmunds Works, Fishergate, Norwich, 2000*, NAU Report 472
- Emery, P.A., forthcoming, *Norwich Greyfriars: Excavations at the former Mann Egerton site, Prince of Wales Road, Norwich 1992–5*, E. Anglian Archaeol.
- Healy, F., 1995, 'Pots, Pits and Peat: ceramics and settlement in East Anglia', in Kinnes, I., and Varndell, G. (eds), *Unbaked Urns of Rudely Shape*, Oxbow Monograph 55, 173–84
- Healy, F., 1996, *The Fenland Project, Number 11: The Wissey Embayment: Evidence for pre-Iron Age Occupation*. E. Anglian Archaeol. 78.
- Hutcheson, A.R.J., 2000, *Norwich Millennium Library, excavations 1998–9*, NAU assessment report (unpub.)
- Murphy, P., 2000, *Quayside, Norwich: Notes on site visit, 4.4.00*, with some recommendations for sampling and assessment (unpub.)
- Percival, J. and Ashwin, T., forthcoming, 'Excavations at Three Score, Bowthorpe, 1999–2000', *Norfolk Archaeol.*
- Shelley, A., 1998, *An assessment of excavations and surveys at Dragon Hall, Norwich* Norfolk Archaeological Unit unpublished report
- Trimble, G.L., forthcoming, 'Excavations at The Oaks, Harvey Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, 1999–2000', *Norfolk Archaeol.*
- Wiltshire, P.E.J. and Emery, P.A., 2000, *Archaeological Watching Brief at the Riverside Development, Norwich, 1998*, NAU Report 354

IN SEARCH OF THE PIED FRIARS OF NORWICH: RECENT FIELDWORK

by Andy Shelley and Robert Smith

This paper summarises recent work undertaken close by the likely 13th-century location of the Pied Friars in Norwich. A building survey by Robert Smith and an archaeological watching brief by Andy Shelley targeted Raven Yard (Fig. 1), which is situated behind No. 70 King Street (TG 62340 30841). This is the property to the north of a yard marked on the 1885 Ordnance Survey plan as 'Pied Friar's College, (Site Of)'.

Little is known of the Norwich Pied Friars (the Friars of Blessed Mary or St Mary de Areno). The Friary was founded c. 1253; its existence was recorded by Blomefield (1806, 96) who placed the house of *Fratus de Pica* at the north-east corner of St Peter Parmentergate churchyard. The inferior mendicant orders were suppressed by the Council of Lyons (1274: Southern 1970, 329), and the house of the Norwich Pied Friars is thought to have been closed by c. 1307 (Messent 1934). The order amalgamated with the Franciscans and the house passed to the Hospital of Beck in Billingford, Norfolk, whose master, according to Blomefield, made it his city house. Thereafter it was used as a college for the Chantry of St Peter, which housed 24 priests.