

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGY

A PROBABLE MEDIEVAL BURIAL GROUND AT GREAT MASSINGHAM, 2002

by David Adams

with contributions by Francesca Boghi, Richenda Goffin and Lucy Talbot

In response to the proposed redevelopment of the Old Reading Room, Great Massingham (Fig. 1), an archaeological excavation was undertaken in accordance with a brief issued by the Landscape Archaeology Section of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service. The project was funded by the landowner, Mr Dix. Full and comprehensive information on the excavated features and finds is contained in the archive, which is held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service.

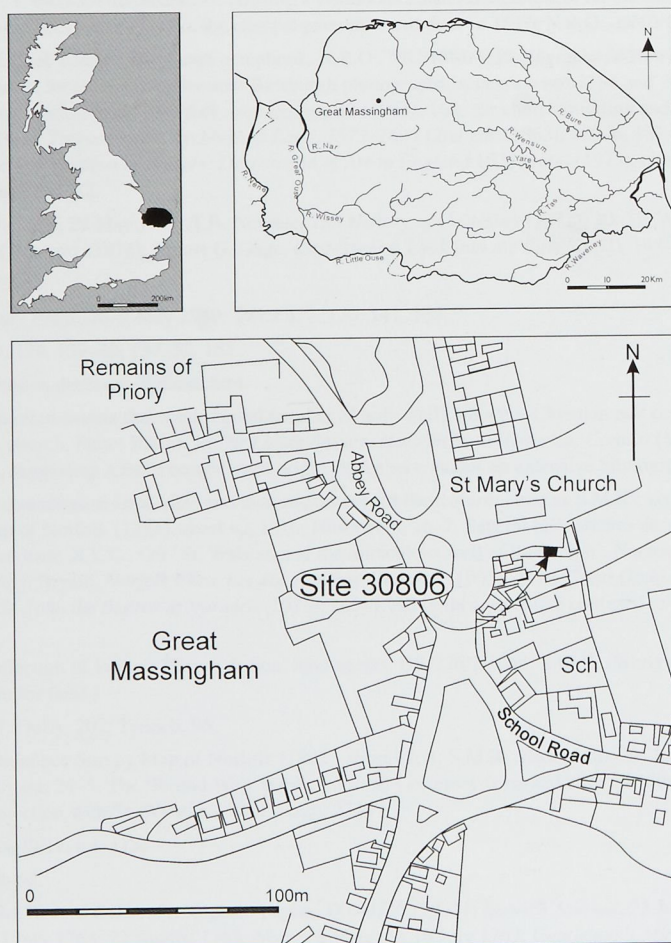


Fig. 1 Site location

The village of Great Massingham is located in west Norfolk, between King's Lynn and Fakenham. To the west lies the low escarpment and the chalk is overlain by Good Sands, consisting of a coversand over a clayey subsoil over chalky till (Corbett and Dent 1993). The church of St Mary's lies directly to the north of the site.

The development lay within an area of archaeological interest. Previously finds, consisting of an Iron Age terret (Site 28961) and a Roman coin (Site 28960), were made west of the excavation area. Also found nearby was a Late Saxon silver strap-end (also Site 28960). While these finds may represent accidental losses they could also indicate occupation. Domesday Book has seven entries for 'Massingham', suggesting a Late Saxon date for settlement, probably in Great Massingham. It is also possible a church existed at this time, although none are mentioned. By the medieval period, however, there were two churches in Great Massingham; All Saints' and St. Mary's, of which only the latter survives. An act of 1535–6 allowed adjacent parishes to be united, and one church abandoned, if they were less than one mile apart and one was valued at less than £6 per annum. All Saints' was probably abandoned at this time. Human skeletons previously unearthed nearby were thought to belong to the graveyard of All Saints' Church (Site 30806).

Also nearby to the west are the remains of the small Augustinian Priory of St Mary's and St Nicholas. This was united with West Acre Priory in 1475, functioning thereafter as its cell until dissolution (Alan Davison, *pers. comm.*).

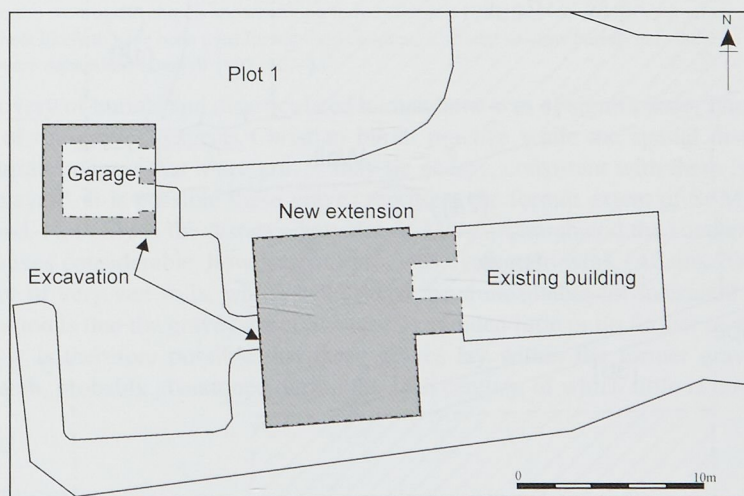


Fig. 2 Location of excavation areas

Excavation results

(Figs 2 and 3)

There was excavation in two areas, that of the extension to the Old Reading Room and a smaller area proposed for the construction of a garage. No excavation continued below the 0.60–0.75m depth of the proposed foundation trenches.

The earliest deposit recorded in both trenches was a mid yellow-brown sandy clay (4/52), which may have been a natural soil. No dating evidence was retrieved. In the area of the Old Reading Room this deposit was cut by six articulated burials aligned east-to-west. All were juvenile, with three located in the south-east part of the trench (29, 30 and 31), and three in the south-west (32, 33 and 34). As they lay immediately below the level of the base of the foundations they were not excavated, although their location was recorded in plan and one (29) was cleaned to allow photographic recording.

The burials were sealed by a mid grey-brown silty sand, 3, with medium-sized flints, frequent chalk flecks, occasional charcoal and a maximum depth of 0.30m. A small quantity of human bone and a single post-medieval iron

object were collected. Its relationship to an east-to-west aligned wall, 5, could not be determined. The wall was constructed of flints bonded by an off-white lime mortar. The surviving part measured 5.50m in length and 0.85m in width and appears to have been robbed to the base of its foundation. A Long Cross penny (1422–71) found within the wall indicated construction after the mid-late 15th century.

In the north-east part of the trench a spread of light yellow-brown sand and crushed chalk, 6, measuring 3.50m by 4.00m in plan, appeared to overlap the wall. To the north-west was a spread of stony mid-brown clay sand, 38. This deposit was overlain in turn by light yellow sand layer 37, which measured 1.60m by 3.25m and contained frequent small mortar lumps with small stones and chalk flecks, and a single sherd of a late medieval and transitional vessel dated to the 15th or 16th century. These tips or spreads appeared to infill a damp, low-lying area. A group of modern post-holes (17, 20, 22 and 28), a soak-away 24 and an east-to-west aligned drain (36) were also recorded. These cut deposit 3 and may have been associated with construction of the Old Reading Room.

Overlying these features was a dark, heavily root-disturbed garden soil, 0.30m deep. This was overlain by a similar soil with frequent inclusions of brick and rubble. In the area of the proposed garage similar deposits were found.

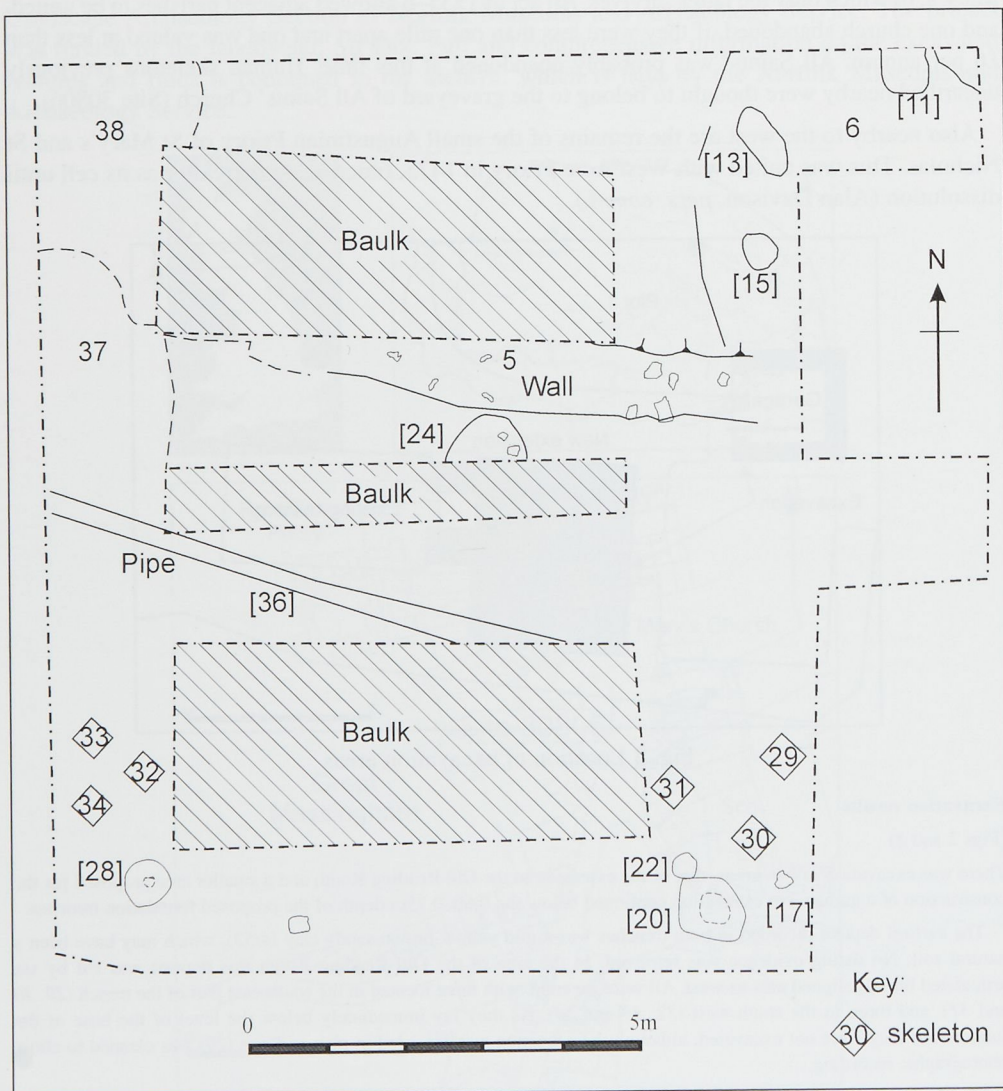


Fig. 3 Plan of main excavation area (Old Reading Room extension)

Finds

by Richenda Goffin and Lucy Talbot

The excavations yielded twenty-one sherds of pottery (0.300kg). The earliest pottery was a sherd of a late medieval transitional vessel (37) of the 15th–16th centuries. The remainder of the pottery was of late 18th–19th century date. Post-medieval building debris was also retrieved.

Of particular interest is the possible Henry VI silver York mint Long Cross penny (SF1, 5) of 1422–71. Although much worn and mostly illegible, obverse details include trefoil to right of crown and pellet to right of hair, whilst the reverse bears a quatrefoil with pellet at centre (A. Rogerson, *pers. comm.*).

Human skeletal remains

by Francesca Boghi

The human skeletal remains that were collected accounted for a minimum of three individuals (one adult and two children aged between birth and five years). The ?male adult was represented by fragments of skull and shoulder bones. This individual appears to have suffered from sinusitis, a chronic infection of the sinuses, and to have overcome childhood anaemia (evidenced by healed lesions in the roof of the right orbit). One child was represented by a few skull fragments and a metatarsal, and a younger child by a single lower leg bone.

A total of six graves were also identified, but these remained unexcavated. It is interesting to note that they all appeared to be juvenile burials, like most of those previously discovered at the Old Reading Room (Site 30806). This cluster of juvenile burials may be explained by the practice of grouping children in a designated area of a burial ground, as well as by the high child mortality rates (between 30% and 50%) that prevail in pre-industrial societies. Concentration of child burials in specific zones is believed to have been a common medieval practice, with the areas to the east and to the west of the church apparently preferred (Daniell 1997, 124–6). While such an area within a parish graveyard is most likely to have been used for baptised children, scattered shallow burials may indicate the secret burial of those that were unbaptised (Daniell 1997, 127–8).

The discovery of burials and disarticulated human bone was of significance. The east-to-west alignment of the graves respects Christian burial practice while the spatial distribution and depth of burials suggest that more graves may lie nearby, consistent with them lying within a church graveyard. It is possible these graves represent the former extent of St Mary's Church burial ground. Not only is the distance between St Mary's Church and the southernmost of the recorded graves considerable, however, but previous evaluation work (Adams 2002) indicated the presence of very wet soils, which would have been unsuitable for interment, in this area. The implication is that the graveyard of St Mary's extended little or no further to the south than at present. It is therefore possible that these graves lay within the former graveyard of All Saints' Church, probably abandoned during the 16th century, of which little is now known.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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AN UNUSUALLY-ALIGNED BURIAL IN NORWICH CATHEDRAL CLOSE

by Francesca Boghi and Peter Warsop

During the course of a watching brief at Life's Green, Norwich Cathedral Close (NGR ref. TG 623561 308966) during July 2002 an unusually-aligned post-medieval coffin burial was discovered. The watching brief, funded by the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral and conducted by Norfolk Archaeological Unit, monitored the excavation of a gas pipeline trench from Bishopgate to the north transept of the cathedral.

The north-to-south aligned burial was the most significant finding. Several clusters of undated disarticulated human remains, probably disturbed by previous service trenches, were also found nearby, indicating that this grave was not isolated.

The burial was nested in the corner of a pre-existing right-angled wall, with the grave cut partially truncating the wall. Given the limited width of the trench, it is not known whether there were any physical impediments, such as a return of the wall towards the north, that prevented the burial from being oriented east-to-west. It is possible that the constraints posed by the presence of a pre-existing wall, previous graves, or possibly the existence of a path connecting the north side of the cathedral with Bishopgate may have influenced the orientation of this grave. Personal preference, possibly motivated by a non-conformist affiliation, is also a possibility. The proximity of this burial to the bishop's chapel, which was leased to the Walloon congregation between 1565 and 1631 (Atherton 1996, 660), is in this respect significant.

The articulated skeleton, supine with limbs extended and in a very good state of preservation, was that of a middle aged male (35–50 years) with a stature of 159.9 ± 2.99 cm and a particularly well-developed musculature of the pectoral girdle. His left leg showed a long-standing spiral fracture of both tibia and fibula, probably the result of a single accident. The presence of calcified musculature tissue (*myositis ossificans*) indicates that complications followed the injury. Despite this, both fractured bones healed in perfect alignment with a very good rate of apposition and minimal shortening, indicating that a good level of care had ensured the correct reduction and immobilisation of the fractured limb.

Several changes across the skeleton were indicative of the early stages of *diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis* (DISH), though a diagnosis could not be made due to the lack of sufficient diagnostic criteria. DISH is a slow progressive disease of unknown cause, which induces stiffness, reduction of motion and back pain.

This individual also appears to have suffered from childhood anaemia (*cribra orbitalia*) and from minor episodes of non-specific infection in both feet. Osteo-arthritis affected both shoulder joints and *Schmorl's nodes* or herniae in the spine were observed in all eight surviving thoracic vertebrae. These lesions are generally associated with trauma caused by exceeding the weight-bearing capacity of the spine, or increased weakness of the vertebral bodies through ageing. Three of the fifteen teeth present had caries and seven teeth (out of a total of 25 available alveolar positions) were lost pre-mortem, apparently mainly because of severe periodontal disease.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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COLKIRK SETTLEMENT PATTERN: A REAPPRAISAL AND A QUESTION

by Paul Rutledge

In 1990 I wrote in *Norfolk Archaeology*¹: 'Colkirk lies along a boulder clay ridge ... The site was comparatively inhospitable ... It is therefore not surprising that the settlement is a comparatively late one. The place-name is Scandinavian and Christian... No pre-Conquest archaeological finds are reported from Colkirk.' The revolution in field archaeology brought about by fieldwalking and controlled metal detection has since reached the parish. Metal detecting has, in Andrew Rogerson's words, 'in one field close to the present village revealed, as well as an Icenian gold stater, a substantial concentration of Roman finds near to a group of four pieces of sixth-century metalwork, along with Middle and Late Saxon material'.² This field (SMR 30867) lies north and north-west of the church and north of a suggested Roman road called Toft Way³, on which the church lies, which runs eastwards through the parish from the neighbourhood of the Roman crossroads settlement at Toftrees about 1km to the west. It includes the open-field furlong Drake North ('dragon hoard'), recorded on the parish map of 1592/1617, which alone previously hinted at archaeological largess here.⁴ Even more recently prehistoric, probably Iron Age, pottery has been collected by Dr Rogerson in the churchyard (SMR 7126) and he has located a concentration of Iron Age potsherds in the north-eastern sector of the parish (SMR 34298). Smaller areas (SMR 10863 and 30016) examined just north and west of the village nucleus and the enclosed central green have produced mainly Late Saxon and later material, though another just north-east of it has yielded a sceat of 710–15 and a Pagan Saxon pendant (SMR 30823). Occupation, even if shifting and intermittent, may be assumed at least on the interfluvies between the small streams that run north out of the parish from the pre-Roman period onwards, though the church and nearby green became the main focus of settlement in the Late Saxon period.

These discoveries prompt another look at the place-name. For Colkirk, Ekwall gives the derivation Cola's or Koli's church and comments that the first element may be Old English Cola or Scandinavian Koli — personal names — and that the second element varies in early records between Old English *cirice* and Old Scandinavian *kiria*, both meaning church.⁵ The assumption made in 1990 was that the place-name and the settlement were late pre-Conquest, post-dating the conversion of the Danes to Christianity, and that the Old English variant was a borrowing by Danish speakers. In the light of these recent discoveries it now seems possible that the name was established in the Anglo-Saxon period and later adapted to Danish usage. Tom Williamson opens up further possibilities by referring to the name in the context of the possible Christianisation of a pagan shrine.⁶