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AN EARLY ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT AT BISHEE BARNABEE WAY, BOWTHORPE: EXCAVATIONS 2001

by Gary Trimble

with a contribution by Richenda Goffin

Introduction

(Figs 1 and 2)

The Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) was commissioned by Persimmon Homes to undertake an archaeological excavation at the site of a housing development at Bishy Barnabee Way, Bowthorpe, Norwich, during May 2001 (HER No 35757; Fig. 1). The excavation was carried out within the terms of a brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology and a research design drawn up by the NAU. The site archive is currently held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service (NMAS). The work follows on from an evaluation employing a walk-over survey and trial trenching (Fig. 2) undertaken by Archaeological Project Services in November 2000 (Albone 2001). Sub-surface cut features were recorded in Trench 2. Although interpreted as Late Neolithic features in the evaluation report, they were shown to be Early Anglo-Saxon in date when full excavation of the site allowed more detailed investigation. The excavation encompassed the footprint of the proposed building in the vicinity of Trench 2 and measured 625m². The results of the evaluation, where relevant, have been incorporated into this publication.

The site was located on the western edge of Norwich, approximately 5.5km from the city centre and south of the centre of Bowthorpe village (TG 1784 0873). The area of excavation was situated on the eastern edge of a low hill at an elevation of 22m OD and lay on very gently sloping ground falling away to the east. To the west the ground rose very gradually to the brow of the hill before falling away steeply into the floodplain of the River Yare. Soils were coarse and fine loamy soils of the Burlingham I Association developed on boulder clay, gravel and sand. Boulder clay predominated in the south-eastern part of the area of excavation, whilst sands and gravels covered the remainder of the site. The underlying geology is chalk with some flint (Hodge *et al.* 1984).

Archaeological and historical background

(Fig. 1)

Prehistoric

Bronze Age barrows and ring ditches have been recorded at various places on the high ground and slopes along the Yare valley. Approximately 2km south of the excavation area, possible crop-mark ring-ditches are located near Watton Road,

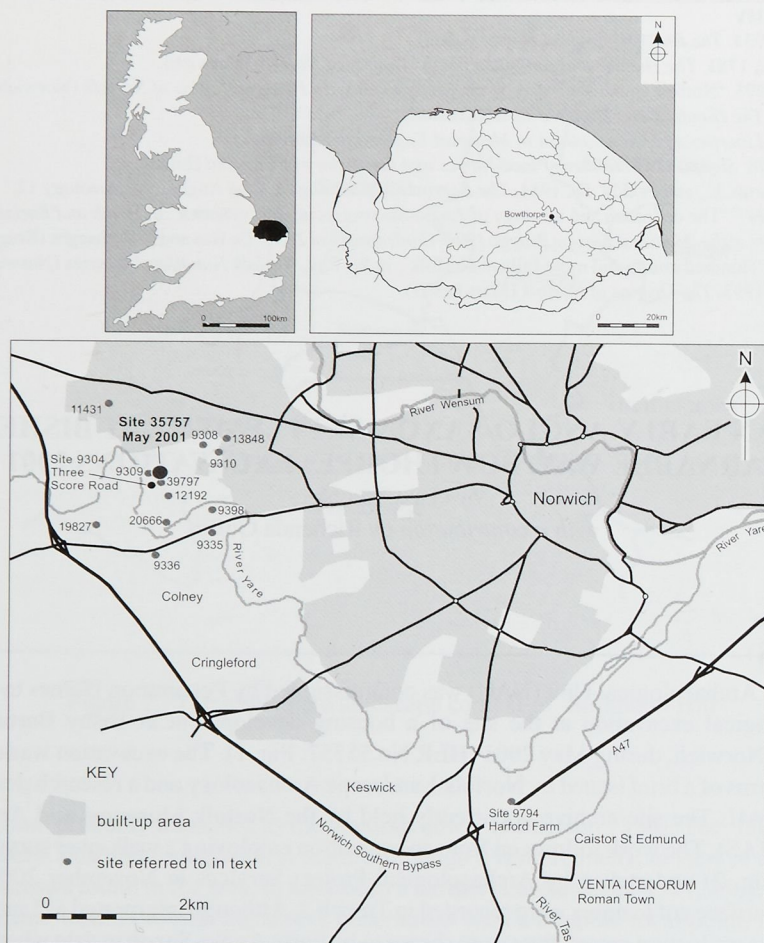


Figure 1. Site location

Colney (Sites 9335 and 9336). A barrow ring-ditch was excavated in 1979 at the junction of Barnard Road and Roberts Way, Bowthorpe *c.* 3km north of the site (Site 11431: Lawson 1986, 20–49).

Recent evaluation trenching on land immediately to the east, south and south-west of the present work recorded a pit of Early Iron Age date (Site 39797: Trimble 2003). Further south, excavations at Three Score Road (Site 9304: Percival 2002) have revealed features dating to the Early Neolithic and the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age periods. To the south of the Yare, excavations at the John Innes Research Centre revealed evidence for Early Neolithic occupation (Site 9336: Whitmore 2004). Findspots from the vicinity include a Palaeolithic hand axe *c.* 1km to the south-east (Site 9398) and a scatter of Mesolithic flints 'by the Yare at Bowthorpe, half a mile south-west of Bowthorpe Hall' (Sainty 1947, 236). An Early Bronze Age flint dagger was found immediately west of the present site (Site 9309) whilst a flint scatter has been recorded *c.* 400m to the south-east (Site 12192). A Neolithic axe, blades and waste flakes have been recovered to the north-east at Bunkers Hill (Site 9308). To the south-east of Bunkers Hill, Mesolithic flints, a barbed and tanged arrowhead and a polished axe have also been recovered. Also in this area, flint flakes have been recovered from the Bowthorpe/Earlham marshes (Site 9310); a watching brief in this area produced more worked flint and a sherd of Bronze

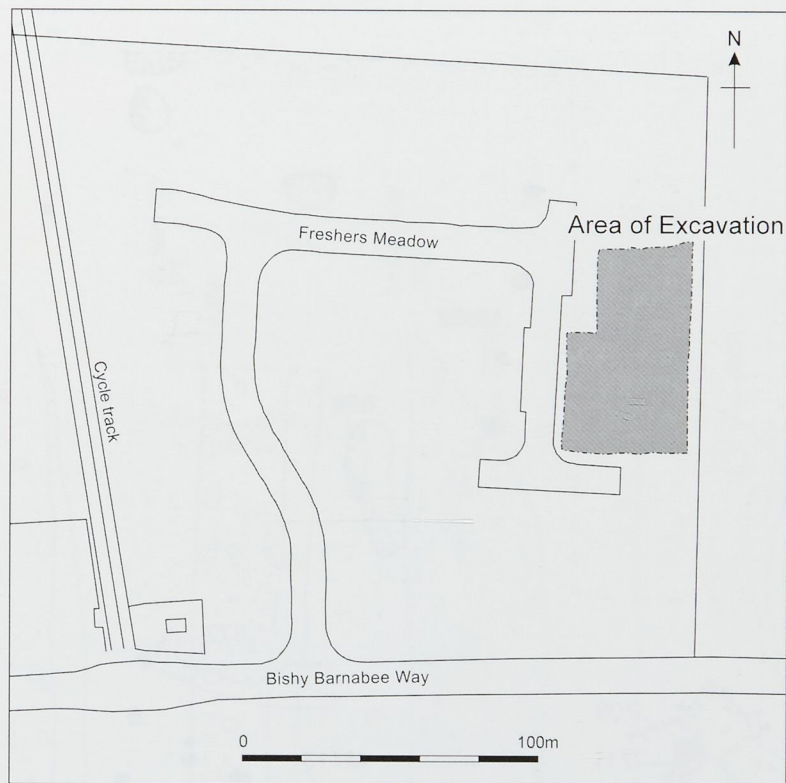


Figure 2. Location of evaluation and excavation trenches

Age pottery (Phillips 1999). To the south-west of Bishy Barnabee Way, flint flakes have been found in the grounds of Colney Hall (Site 19827).

Romano-British

Ditches which formed a component of a Romano-British field-system were recorded during recent evaluation trenching on land immediately south of Bishy Barnabee Way (Site 37979; Trimble 2003). Another part of this system had been revealed previously during excavations further south at Three Score Road (Site 9304; Percival 2002). A small number of coins and other metal objects have also been found in the area.

Anglo-Saxon

Metal artefacts including coins and a brooch fragment have been found in the area of Bowthorpe/Earlham marshes c. 800m from Bishy Barnabee Way (Site 9310). Approximately 250m north of these findspots, an Early Saxon spoon or spatula and a Middle Saxon pin were found (Site 13848). A Middle Saxon brooch has been recovered from land to the south of Bishy Barnabee Way (Site 20666).

Further afield, a group of important Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are known from the vicinity of the Roman civitas capital of *Venta Icenorum*, 7km to the east. In addition to the well-known mixed cremation and inhumation cemetery at Markshall (Myres and Green 1973) close to the River Tas, an important Middle Saxon inhumation cemetery has been excavated at Harford Farm, Caistor St Edmund (Site 9794; Penn 2000). The latter site lay on high ground to the south-west of the confluence of the Rivers Yare and Tas, in the area of a prehistoric barrow group c. 1km from *Venta Icenorum*, which may have been a focus of commercial or other specialised activity at this time.

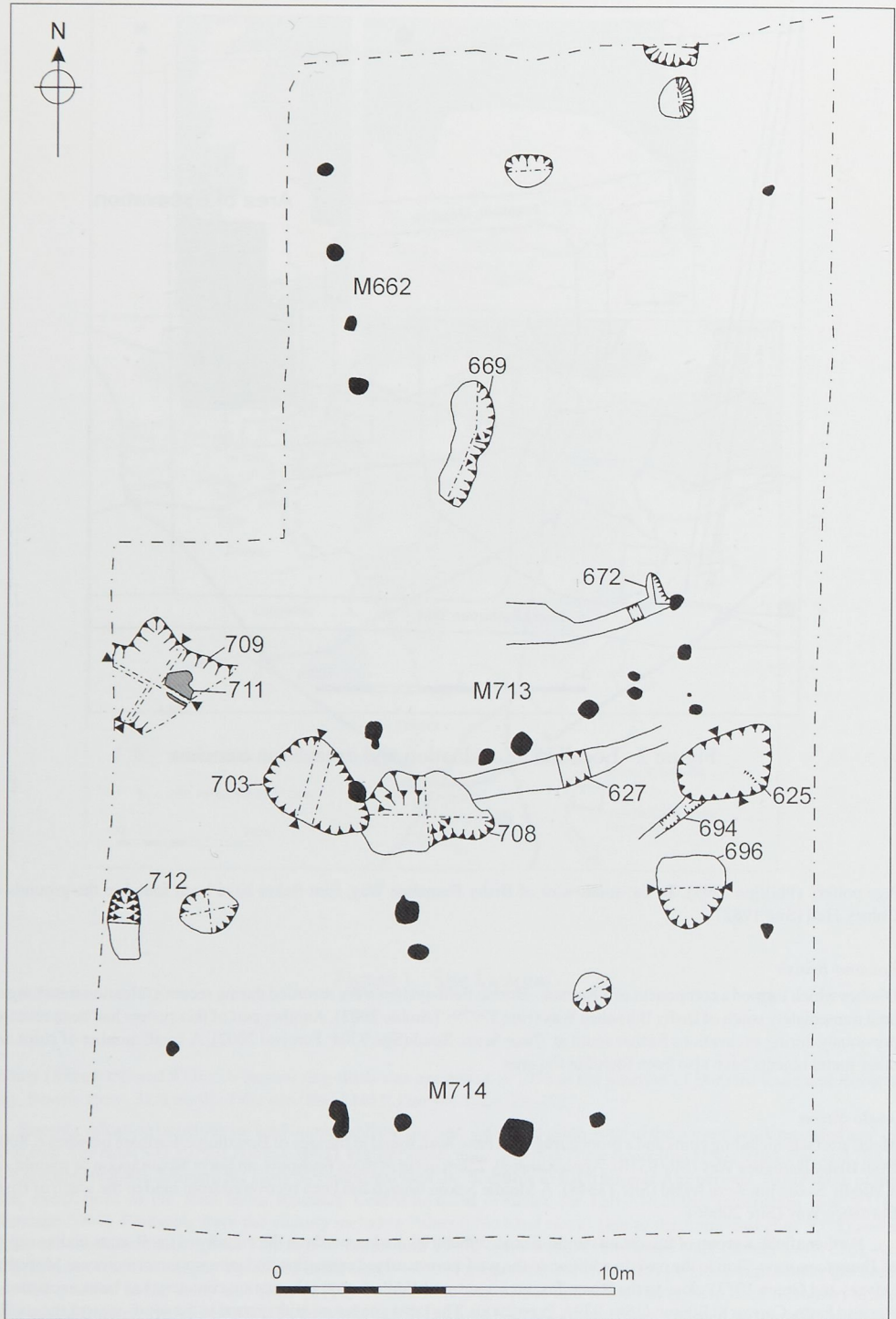


Figure 3. Plan showing all archaeological features

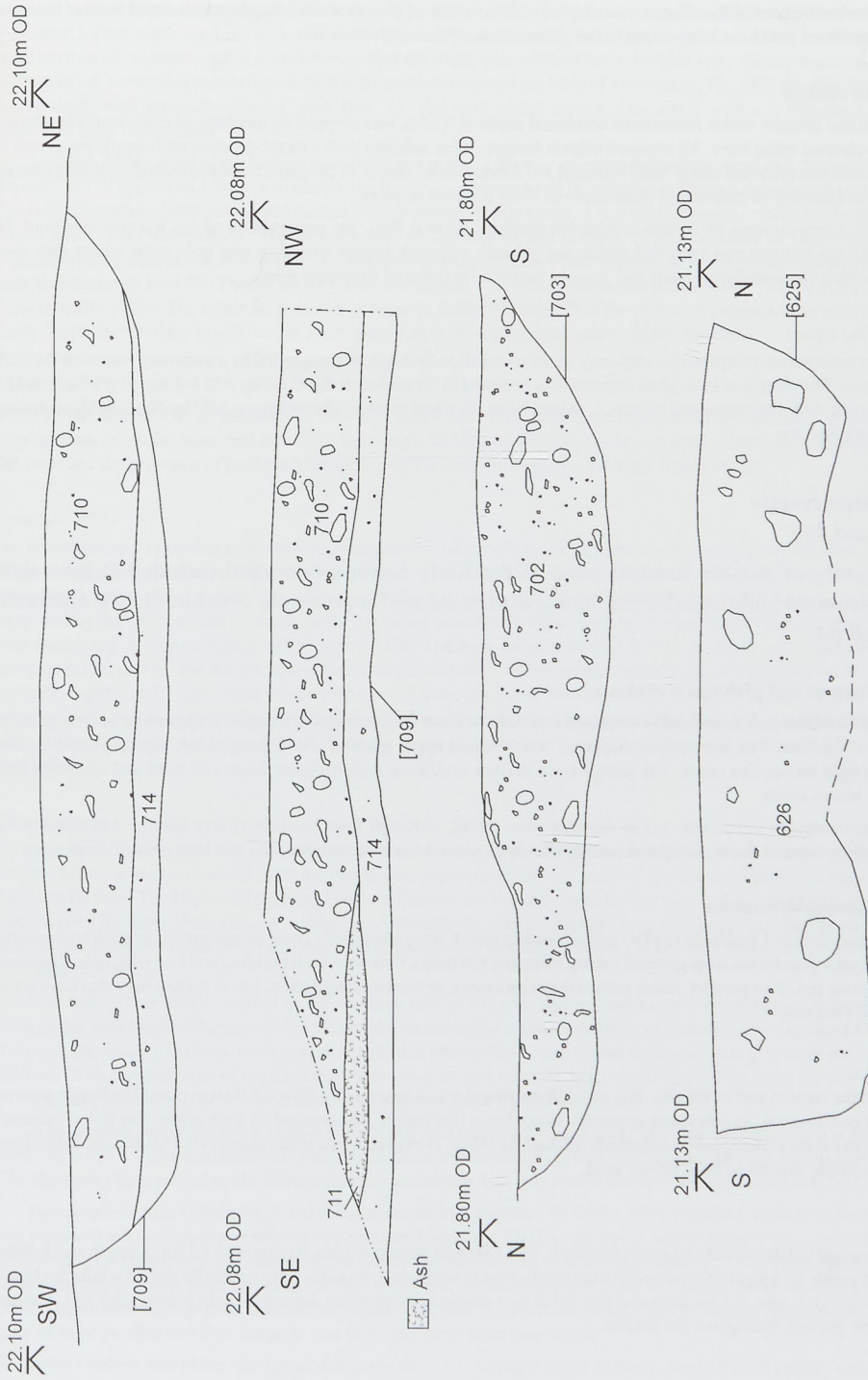


Figure 4. Sections across sunken-featured buildings

Medieval

The medieval settlement of Bowthorpe was situated *c.* 200m north of the site around the church. Isolated finds of medieval and post-medieval date have been found in the general area of the excavation site.

Excavation method

The topsoil and subsoil, which measured a combined depth of 0.65m, was stripped by mechanical excavator. The site was then hand-cleaned using hoes. All exposed subsoil features were scanned with a metal-detector and sample excavated by hand. The site was recorded using NAU standard *pro forma* record sheets. A programme of ecofactual sampling concentrated on the recovery of carbonised plant material from selected features.

Despite being covered by a total overburden depth of up to 0.70m, the preservation of cut features was poor. No evidence of cut features was recorded within the subsoil, although feature visibility was poor even where they were recorded within the underlying sands and gravels, partly on account of their pale fills.

Layout of the report

This report presents an interpretative summary of the excavation findings, accompanied by a summary report on the Early Saxon pottery. Full details of individual features may be found in the project archive, along with listings of artefacts and full reports dealing with environmental evidence, animal bone, flint and pottery. The archive is held by Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service.

Excavation results

(Figs 3 and 4)

The majority of datable features were of the Early Saxon period and included at least three sunken-featured buildings (SFBs), along with evidence for post-hole structures and a distinctive elongated pit.

Natural features and prehistoric evidence

The natural features (not illustrated) comprised a system of ice-wedge polygons, solution hollows and several probable water run-off gullies. The ice wedges displayed bowl-shaped upper profiles above steep-sided, tapering lower profiles filled with light brown fine sands. The gullies were shallow and linear with irregular bases and sides and were also filled with light brown sands.

No demonstrably pre-Anglo-Saxon features were found, although Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age activity was represented by worked flints and sparse pottery sherds recovered from natural deposits and later cultural features.

Early Anglo-Saxon evidence

Three sunken-featured buildings (SFBs) and a possible fourth were identified. Their interpretation as such rests on their sub-rectangular planforms, with generally steep sides and flat bases. One post-built building and two post-hole alignments were also recorded. Two parallel, linear gullies may represent a structure. A third short, linear feature may also have served a structural function.

SFB 625

An SFB in the eastern part of the site, this was sub-rectangular and measured 2.80m x 2.00m in plan. The longer axis was orientated east-to-west. Its sides were generally steep. Since this feature was situated on the boulder clay it was extremely difficult to excavate with the base particularly difficult to define. However, a maximum depth of 0.35m was recorded. It was filled by a single deposit of light brown sand.

SFB 703

This feature had cut the western edge of a broad pit, 708. Sub-rectangular in plan, it measured 3.25m in length and 2.40m in maximum width. Its longer axis was orientated north-west to south-east. Its sides were gradually sloped whilst the bottom was flat (Fig. 4). It was 0.32m deep and was filled by a single homogeneous deposit of light brown sand 702. Frequent stones were present throughout the profile.

SFB 709

Located in the western part of the site, this was only partially revealed within the area of excavation. Sub-square in plan, it measured 3.10m south-west to north-east and 2.90m south-east to north-west. The longer axis of the building was orientated north-west to south-east. It is unfortunate that the south-east end had been stripped away during machine removal of the subsoil. A projecting area at the western end continued beyond the limit of excavation. The SFB was flat-bottomed and 0.35m deep, with gradually sloping sides (Fig. 4). The base of the hollow was 'lined' with a 0.10m-thick deposit of stone-free light brown sand, 714.

Located in the centre of the hollow and above this primary fill was an amorphous shaped ash and charcoal rich hearth deposit, 711. It measured 1.00m in diameter and 0.10m in thickness and included nine Early Anglo-Saxon pottery sherds, fired clay fragments, burnt stones and animal bone. Roman ceramic building material fragments which had been re-used as hearth lining were also present. The mixed nature of the deposit and the lack of any evidence of scorching beneath it suggested that it does not represent an in situ hearth located to the base of the hollow, but that it probably formed part of the post-abandonment backfill. The fill above the hearth deposit 710 was similar to the primary fill 714 except that it incorporated frequent stones. The upper fill probably represents deliberate backfill of the hollow. It produced five pottery sherds of Early Anglo-Saxon date in addition to a tiny fragment of an amber bead and a single iron nail.

?SFB 696

Sub-circular feature 696, to the south of SFB 625, might have represented the remnants of another SFB. It had gradually sloping sides and a flat base, and was filled by a single deposit of mid greyish-brown sand. Although relatively small, the flat base and the presence of positively identified SFBs close by suggests a similar interpretation.

Structure M713

Ten post-holes and a possible stake-hole represented three sides of a building in the south-central part of the site. It occupied an area measuring 10.60m x 5.40m with the longer axis orientated east-north-east to west-south-west. The post-holes represented parts of the north, east and west walls, but there was no evidence of post-holes forming a south wall. Considering the shallowness of some of the recorded post-holes, these may have been lost to plough truncation or to over-machining during stripping of the cover soils. The post-holes averaged 0.22m in depth with diameters ranging between 0.36m and 0.74m. Single post-holes were positioned c. 1.80m to the north of the east and west corner posts of the northern alignment. It is uncertain whether these were associated with building M713, though it is possible that they represent surviving post-holes of an outer wall of an aisled building. The building post-dates SFB 703, the infilled SFB having been cut by the north-west corner post. A single sherd of Early Anglo-Saxon pottery was recovered from one of the post-holes.

Other features

An irregular north-to-south line of four post-holes measuring 7.60m in length, M662, was situated in the northern part of the site. All were badly truncated, with the deepest example surviving to a depth of just 0.09m. Diameters ranged between 0.42m and 0.58m. The alignment may represent an element of a building, with further post-holes either lost to the plough or lying beyond the limit of excavation to the west. Alternatively, similar alignments comprised of just four posts interpreted as short fence-lines or racks have been recorded on Anglo-Saxon settlement sites at Broome (Robertson 2003) and Spong Hill (Rickett 1995).

Post-hole group M714, located in the southern part of the site, was an east-to-west alignment of four post-settings 8.00m long. Two intercutting post-holes formed the westernmost setting, one of these probably representing a replacement or repair. The spacing between posts was similar to that seen in M662 and the two arrangements may have served the same function. With the exception of the large post-hole lying second from the east, which was 0.40m deep, the post-holes were very shallow, averaging just 0.12m in depth. All were filled by light brown sands.

In the eastern part of the site a south-west to north-east orientated linear gully, 694, had been truncated at its north-east end by SFB 625. Its course to the south-west was not discernible within the surrounding boulder clay. Its function is unclear, although it may have served as a bedding trench for a structure. Its lower profile was bowl-shaped and it was 0.14m deep.

Two parallel linear features 627 and 672, separated by a distance of 4.00m, were recorded north of gully 694. These may represent beam-slots of an east-to-west orientated building. The true length of neither feature was established, due to the difficulty encountered in defining their cuts within the surrounding boulder clay. Hence 627 may have continued further eastward while 672 may have continued further westward. At its eastern end gully 672 turned northward for a distance of 1.00m before terminating. Both features had steep sides with flat bases and were filled by orange brown sands. The similarity of their profiles and fills suggests that they may have been associated.

In the western part of the site lay an elongated pit, 712. A single sherd of Early Anglo-Saxon pottery was recovered from its fill. Not far to the north-east was a large pit, 708, which truncated the west end of linear feature 627. It had been cut

on its western edge by SFB 703; its irregular shape and tapered profile suggests that it did not represent another feature of this kind.

Undated features

A total of six undated pits of varying dimensions were distributed around the site. Most were circular or ovoid and all were filled by single homogeneous deposits of light brown sands. An elongated 'feature', 669, may have comprised a series of three intersecting pits. Three isolated post-holes were also recorded.

Artefactual and environmental evidence

Full specialist reports on the animal bone, worked flint, prehistoric pottery and plant macrofossils can be found in the project archive. Summaries of these reports are presented within this report, whilst the Anglo-Saxon pottery is considered in greater detail.

Anglo-Saxon pottery

by Richenda Goffin

(Fig. 5)

Nineteen vessel fragments, dated broadly to the 5th–7th centuries, were identified. The fragments are in hand-made sandy fabrics with some organic content and from vessels which had simple upright or nearly upright rims. No Ipswich ware or other fabrics which could be attributed to the later Middle Saxon period were identified. The pottery was found in six contexts, three of which also contained residual prehistoric pottery.

The largest quantity of material was recovered from deposit 711, the ash-and-charcoal hearth material within SFB 709. Fragments from at least four separate vessels are represented. Three joining unabraded fragments of a large pot with a diameter of 0.22m are made of a sandy fabric with some mica and occasional voids from the burning-out of organic material (Fig. 5, no. 1). The pottery is undecorated, but has been slightly tooled on the exterior. A second vessel is slightly thicker and has a similar but more regular rim. It has a sandy reduced fabric, which has also been tooled on the exterior (Fig. 5, no. 2). Three other body fragments likely to have originated from a single vessel have been fired with an oxidised external margin, with some sooting. They are of a sandy, slightly micaceous fabric, which may have had some organic material added. One of the more abraded fragments has the remains of a thumbnail or fingertip decoration. Two other body sherds from different vessels, both with oxidised outer margins and reduced cores, were also found in deposit 711. One is of a coarse sandy fabric, whilst the second sherd has been tooled both internally and externally, and is made from a dense sandy fabric, also with the remnants of some organic material.

A further five fragments were recovered from the fill of SFB 709. Two fragments are likely to be from two of the vessels identified in deposit 711. A single rim sherd of a vessel which has been tooled internally, and still has some sooting on the inside of the vessel, is made from a sandy fabric with some organic material (Fig. 5, no. 3). One of the body sherds has an oxidised external margin, also with sooting inside. Another rim with tooling on the exterior and interior surface was also present, made from a sandy slightly micaceous fabric (Fig. 5, no. 4). Two smaller body sherds are made from two different sandy fabrics.

A single body sherd of decorated pottery of the same date range was identified from pit 712 (Fig. 5, no. 5). It is slightly abraded, with the remains of a banded decoration with herringbone impressed design, similar to decorative elements found on cremation urns of the Early Saxon period (e.g. at Spong Hill, North Elmham; Myres 1977, 248 no. 3586). The fabric is sandy and has some organic content.

Further small and abraded fragments of similar types of fabric were recovered from unstratified context 629 and post-hole 648.

Other finds

Seventeen sherds of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age pottery were recovered during the evaluation and subsequent excavation. These were all from the fills of natural features or occurred residually within later cultural features, the latter including seven sherds from SFB 709. Most showed signs of abrasion. No definite forms were identified but the fabrics fell into two main groups, one predominately quartz-sand tempered and the other combining quartz sand with crushed flint; both of these are typical of the Later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. One sherd from the evaluation phase was of Later Neolithic Grooved Ware or Peterborough impressed Ware.

One hundred and three pieces of struck flint were also present within naturally derived features and residual within later cultural features. The assemblage was predominantly Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date, consisting principally of undiagnostic flakes and debitage. Several show evidence of retouch, forming scrapers and a fabricator.

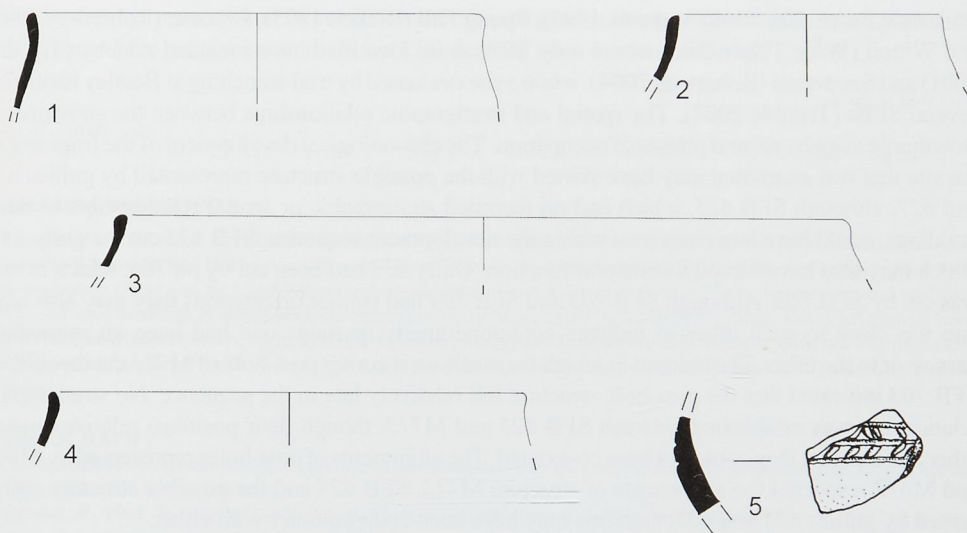


Figure 5. Illustrated Anglo-Saxon pottery

The only context to produce animal bone was the hearth material 711 found within SFB 709. Sixty-one fragments, all of which belonged to a large mammal, were recovered. Four pieces were positively identifiable as bones of cattle. Evidence of both primary and secondary butchering was present, with a scapula indicating a prime cut of meat.

Samples for plant macrofossils were taken from across the excavated area and sixteen were submitted for assessment; eight were from the SFBs, while eight from various pits were submitted in the hope that macrobotanical data might indicate a possible date. Unfortunately the pit fills contained an extremely low density of material. Spelt wheat and hexaploid type grains were recovered, but as single specimens they are unreliable indicators of date. The assemblages recovered from samples taken from SFB 709 indicate that the material present is probably derived from a low density scatter of domestic refuse including cereals (barley and hexaploid wheat), hazel nutshells and burnt bone fragments.

Discussion

The assemblages of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age worked flint and pottery sherds recovered from the fills of natural features and residual within Anglo-Saxon features suggest activity of this period within or close to the excavation area. Although no prehistoric features were positively identified, it is possible that some or even all of the undated pits were of this period. The proximity of the site to the river valley and the natural resources this environment would have provided would have made it an attractive location for habitation by prehistoric communities. A Neolithic and Bronze Age site represented by pit clusters and a small ring-gully has recently been excavated 400m to the south at Three Score Road, Bowthorpe (Site 9304; Percival 2002).

The relatively small area of excavation meant that the extent of this Early Anglo-Saxon settlement remains unknown. Evaluation trenching across the wider area affected by the development did not provide evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity, although it remains likely that the settlement continued westward toward the brow of the hill. Subsequent evaluation trenching in the fields immediately south and east of the excavation area also failed to identify any Anglo-Saxon features (Trimble 2003).

The presence of a combination of SFBs and post-built structures is typical of some other sites of this period, with previously recorded examples in the region at West Stow (Suffolk; West 1985),

Redcastle Furze, Thetford (Andrews 1995), Spong Hill (Rickett 1995), Broome (Robertson 2003) and Witton (Wade 1983). Sites where only SFBs were identified have included Aldeby (Trimble 2001) and Snetterton (Robertson 2004), while a site evaluated by trial-trenching at Beetley identified several SFBs (Trimble 2002). The spatial and stratigraphic relationships between the structures at Bowthorpe suggest several phases of occupation. The chronological development of the fragment of the site that was examined may have started with the possible structure represented by gullies 672 and 627, although SFB 625, which had no recorded stratigraphic or spatial relationships to other buildings, could have lain anywhere within the development sequence. SFB 625 cut the gully 694, which may also have served a structural function. Gully 627 had been cut by pit 708, which in turn was cut by SFB 703. Although SFB 703 and SFB 709 had similar orientations they may also have lain too close to each other to indicate contemporaneity; perhaps one had been an immediate successor to the other. The manner in which the north-west corner post-hole of M713 cut the infilled SFB 703 indicated that the post-hole structure fell relatively late in the sequence. No stratigraphic relationship was established between SFB 625 and M713, though their positions relative to each other indicate that they could not have co-existed. The alignments of post-holes represented by M662 and M677 respected the alignments of structure M713, SFB 625 and the possible structure represented by gullies 672 and 627, and thus may have been contemporary with either.

No satisfactory general interpretation has been suggested regarding the above-ground appearance of SFBs of this kind, or their likely function. However, it is now generally accepted that the hollow would have been covered by a wooden planked floor, with the space beneath perhaps used for storage. Most SFBs feature post-holes at each end of the hollow and/or around its perimeter, which would have supported the floor and above-ground structure. Several categories of building have been identified based on the number of associated post-holes present and their particular arrangement: two-, four- and six-post variations have been recorded (West 1985). In a minority of cases, hollows have been found with no evidence for posts, and these represent Type D buildings within West's classification. Although it is possible that, in these cases, the posts have not left any trace of their former presence, it is equally plausible that these features represent a distinct type of building which did not depend upon posts sunk into the ground. No post-holes were found in association with any of the SFBs at Bowthorpe. The frequent difficulty in identifying cut features in boulder clay might possibly explain the lack of post-holes associated with SFB 625. However, SFBs 709 and 703, situated on the sands and gravels which occupied the western side of the site, featured no evidence of post-holes either. Unfortunately the south-east end of SFB 709 was destroyed by over-machining which could have removed any post-hole which may have been present there, though none were recorded at the north-west end.

Hearth material above the primary fills within SFBs has been recorded elsewhere, and has been used to help suggest that raised floors had existed above the hollow. At West Stow (West 1985) several SFBs had evidence of hearths which, like that in SFB 709 at Bowthorpe, were generally located in a central position. West interpreted the hearth debris as constituting part of the post-abandonment backfill of the hollows. Significantly they were situated immediately above the clean and pebble-free primary fills of the SFBs which are thought to have accumulated during the use of the buildings, unlike the upper, often artefact-rich deposits representing deliberate post-abandonment backfill. West concluded that hearths were positioned on the raised planking above the hollow during the use of the building, and were tipped into the hollow when the planks were lifted on abandonment. A number of SFBs filled by two discrete deposits have also been identified at Spong Hill (Rickett 1995) and Snetterton (two cases: Robertson 2004). At Witton, hearth-derived deposits were recorded within six of the eleven recorded SFBs (Wade 1983). Even

though distinct primary and upper fills were not recorded at Witton, Wade considered the hearths to be part of the post-abandonment backfill derived from external hearths.

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