

MEDIEVAL ACTIVITY ON THE SITE OF THE FORMER VILLAGE HALL, LITTLE CRESSINGHAM

by Ben Hobbs and David Robertson

A series of pits, a structural feature, pottery and painted glass of medieval date were found during archaeological investigations on the site of the former Village Hall, Little Cressingham (Fig. 1; TF 8724 0001). An evaluation and excavation of footing trenches (HER Site 36308) were carried out by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit ahead of the construction of an office building by Abel Developments Ltd.

The site was located in the west of Little Cressingham village, immediately to the north of Fairstead Lane and to the east of the church of St Andrew. The church is mostly of 13th-century date with some Norman masonry. It is likely to have been established in its present location by the late 11th century, although it is not mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Book entry for Little Cressingham (Brown 1984, 22, 25; 66, 69). Iron Age, Romano-British, Saxon and medieval

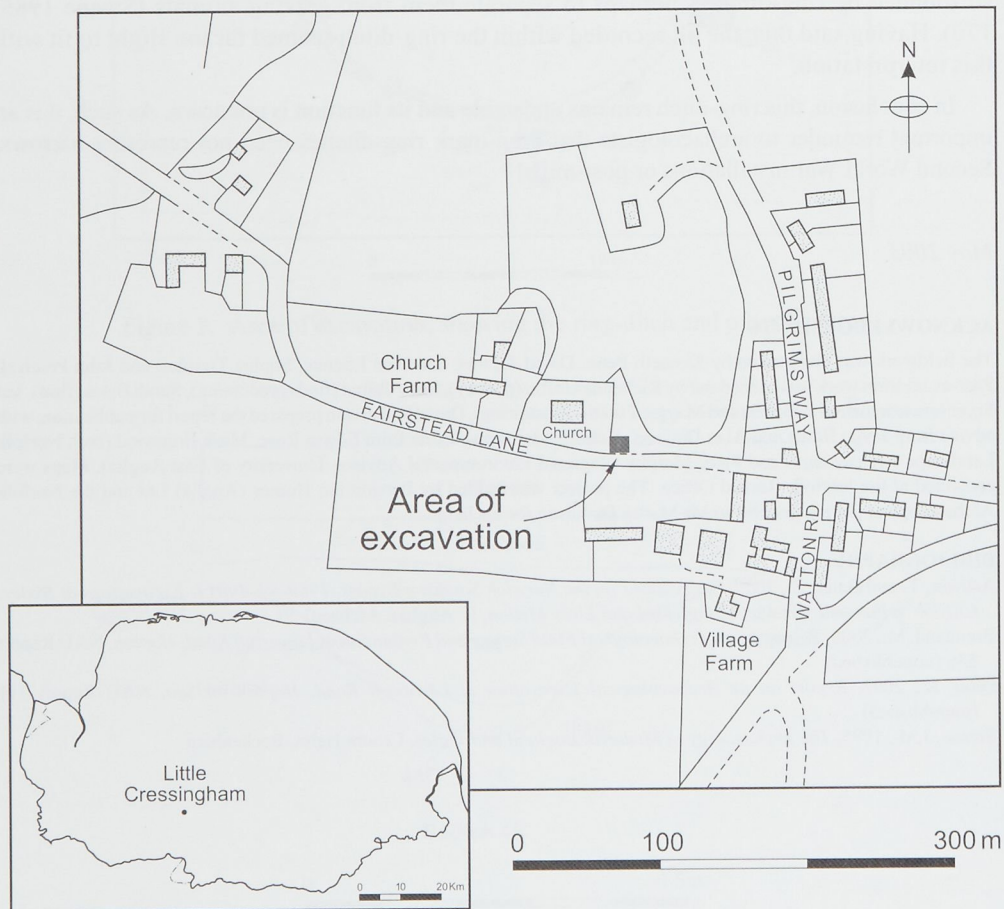


Figure 1. Location of Site 36308

pottery has been found in areas to the north, west and south of the site, as has an Iron Age pin (Davison 1994; Emery 2001; Hobbs 2002).

Description

(Fig. 2)

Probably during the 10th or 11th century, a pit (37) was dug on the site. It measured 2.4m by at least 1.1m and contained a dark grey-brown sandy silt fill. Two small pottery sherds were collected from the fill, one of them Thetford-type ware (the other remains unidentified). This pit cut a larger, earlier pit (41), filled with a grey-brown clayey sand.

The 13th or 14th century saw the excavation of an elongated pit or a terminus to an irregular shaped ditch (33). Measuring at least 5.3m long by 1.6m wide and 0.6m deep, it contained a grey-brown silty sand fill. This deposit yielded finds including chalk lumps, three sherds of Thetford-type ware, a piece of Early Medieval Ware, a glazed Grimston-type ware strap handle and a piece of (possibly human) skull.

Slightly later, a further pit (39) was dug further to the north. It measured at least 3.0m by 2.4m and was filled with an orange-brown clayey sand which contained three sherds of a green glazed Grimston-type ware jug dating from the 14th or 15th centuries. The recovery of a piece of 14th-century painted glass, along with a residual Thetford-type ware rim sherd, from the primary fill of another large pit (27), suggested further activity on the site this period. This latter feature measured at least 3.5m by 1.3m and had a maximum depth of 0.8m. One of its two interleaved upper fills contained a piece of 16th–17th century pottery. This was highly abraded and may have been intrusive.

An east-to-west aligned linear feature (32) in the south-west of the site, 0.15m deep and 0.45m wide by at least 2.50m long, contained a grey-brown clay sand fill from which a piece of post-medieval bottle glass was recovered. This might have been the remains of a footing trench or beam-slot from a building.

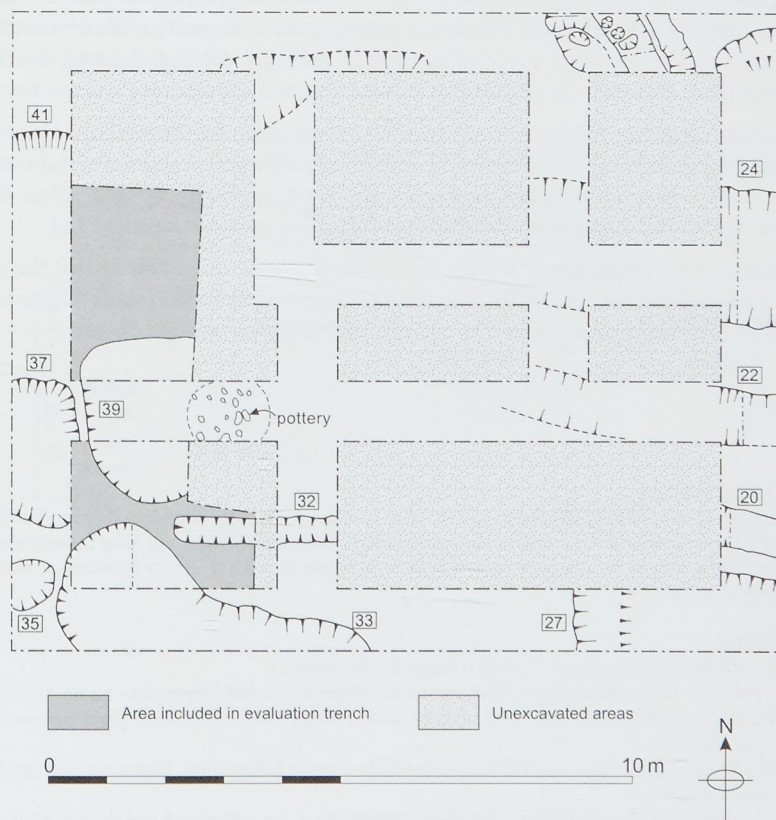


Figure 2. Area of excavation, showing all features

A number of other undated features were also recorded, including a small pit (35) and a number of linear features and natural hollows.

Discussion

Norfolk, and East Anglia as a whole, has seen few excavations within present-day villages. Most archaeological work concerning rural settlement has focused on geographical patterns and landscape development, with a few excavations carried out at deserted villages (Wade 1997, 52). In this context, evidence for medieval activity of the kind recorded here can represent a useful addition to existing knowledge.

Although not a great deal is known about the development of Little Cressingham village, at least five concentrations of medieval pottery have been recorded within the parish (Davison 1994, fig. 2, 67–9). These findings suggest a dispersed pattern of settlement. The pottery collected from four of the five pits and from the elongated pit or ditch indicates activity at this site, abutting the south-east corner of the present churchyard, between the 10th and the 16th–17th centuries, although it was not clear whether or not this was continuous.

The pit-like features were probably used for cess and rubbish disposal in the back yards of properties that fronted Fairstead Lane, immediately to the south. Although no evidence was found for north-to-south property boundaries aligned perpendicular to the road, the clustering of four pits and the elongated pit or ditch in the western part of the site might suggest that they lay within a different property to the single pit in the east. The east-to-west aligned gullies and ditch may have been property boundaries. They could have been of different dates, indicating that boundaries migrated over time, although the possibility that they were contemporary can not be ruled out.

The structural feature 32 may have represented a foundation for the wall of a building aligned either at right-angles or parallel to Fairstead Lane. If the building was aligned at right-angles to the street, then it may have represented the back wall. The post-medieval bottle glass from its fill suggests that the building had been demolished during the post-medieval period.

As no graves were encountered within the excavation area, it is unlikely that the churchyard had ever extended as far east as the site. The finding of a possible human skull fragment, however, might indicate re-deposition of earth that had originated within the churchyard.

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