

**NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT**

Report No. 869

**An Archaeological Evaluation at  
The Street, Sporle,  
Norfolk**

39677 SWP

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October 2003

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Location: The Street, Sporle, Norfolk  
Grid Ref: TF 8484 1122  
HER No.: 39677 SWP  
Date of fieldwork: 22nd September 2003

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## **Summary**

*An archaeological evaluation consisting of a single trench on a vacant plot adjacent to The Street in Sporle, Norfolk has been undertaken. Two pits were located within the trial trench, one containing several sherds of early medieval pottery, the other post-medieval glass, pottery and tile fragments.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

An archaeological evaluation was carried out to determine the archaeological potential of an area of land prior to development, adjacent to the Street in Sporle, between the properties named 'Chapel View' and 'Thatched Cottage'. It was implemented for Mr and Mrs Levitt of Development Insight Ltd.

The development site was aligned west to east and faced the street frontage. It measured 20m in length from west to east; 15m wide on its western edge and approximately 17m wide on the eastern side. The site was overgrown with ground cover and mature trees, particularly in its western half; building rubble and general refuse littered the ground.

This archaeological evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: AJRH 22/02/01 and a Method Statement prepared by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU Ref: MS/Eval/1642/jb).

The work was designed to assist in defining the character and extent of any archaeological remains within the proposed redevelopment area, following the guidelines set out in *Planning and Policy Guidance 16 — Archaeology and Planning* (Department of the Environment 1990). The results will enable decisions to be made by the Local Planning Authority with regard to the treatment of any archaeological remains found.

The site archive is currently held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards.

## **2.0 Geology and Topography**

The village of Sporle is situated approximately 4km to the north-east of Swaffham, Norfolk. The site is located near the centre of the existing village at an elevation of approximately 65.2m OD on a long slope that rises to 82m OD in the west near Palgrave. A small stream runs down the line of The Street from north to south and is carried in a narrow cut on the west side of the road, crossed at intervals by concrete or wooden access bridges. Due to underlying clay deposits in the area, the village occasionally suffers flooding along this course.

The underlying natural geology of the parish of Sporle with Palgrave is a meeting of Upper Chalk and Boulder clay. The overlying soils reflect this mix of geology with representations of High Norfolk chalk scarp and boulder clay plateau and Low Norfolk Breckland soils, sandy clay and glaciofluvial sand and gravel overlying chalk.

The site under consideration is raised above the level of the street on the east frontage by about 1.40m whereas the adjacent properties, and several of those along The Street, are situated at a lower elevation.

### **3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background**

The settlement of Sporle is known to date from the Late Saxon period and its name indicates an 'enclosure in a wood'. It is mentioned in Domesday as belonging to Edward the Confessor, who subsequently passed it to Earl Ralph who held it at the conquest. The village may have been comparatively large with a population of approximately 200, a mill and common woodland. The parish church of St Mary contains elements of Romanesque arcading and buttressing indicating remnants of the Norman architecture prior to the main building style which dates between the 13th and 14th century.

The Norfolk Historic Environment Record (HER) lists the site of a Benedictine priory (HER 4185) which lies approximately 250m to the north-east of the site, located close to the parish church. The village has a connection to Eton College after land was apportioned to it at the dissolution of the priory. The college retains the right to appoint a village rector.

Little previous archaeological investigation has been carried out in the area. During a watching brief of house footings in 1992 to the north of the current site, a fragment of medieval roof tile was found amongst post-medieval building debris (Flitcroft; 1992).

An archaeological evaluation in 1995 of six trial trenches at the public house 150m to the north of the site found a series of 19th and 20th century pits and two linear features of medieval date containing several sherds of an early medieval handmade ware cooking pot (Samuels, 1995).

There have been a range of artefactual finds made to the east and west of the site, notably Iron Age and Romano-British coins (HER 28569) and metalwork in addition to Middle and Late Saxon, medieval (HER 19123) plus post-medieval material. Several medieval pilgrim tokens have also been recovered from surrounding fields, particularly to the west of the site in which direction lies the ancient route of Peddars Way.

### **4.0 Methodology**

The objective of this evaluation was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the development area.

The Brief required that a 5% sample of the overall size of the site be excavated across the footprint of the proposed development. The project design proposed a single 4m by 4m trench as close to the street frontage as possible to maximise the archaeological potential.

Machine excavation was carried out with a wheeled JCB-type excavator using a toothless ditching bucket under constant archaeological supervision.

An overhead mains power cable ran along the frontage of the site. The cables had been sheathed above the entrance to the site specifically to allow access to excavation plant. The position of the trench was adjusted towards the centre of the site to ensure a safe working distance from the overhead power lines. It was hoped

that a second relocation of the trench to the west of the site could be avoided as this would have reduced the archaeological potential of investigating any surviving street frontage deposits street as well as requiring further removal of standing trees. Furthermore, a sketch plan supplied by the client indicated that a water supply pipe ran across the site from north to south. As the route of this pipe apparently crossed in the position of the relocated trench, it was proposed to locate the pipe within the trench through careful exploratory machine excavation. Should the pipe have been located then the position of the trench would have been adjusted to avoid it.

Investigation of the line of the water pipe failed to locate any evidence of it. Machine excavation of the western area of the trench thus continued, being taken down in 100mm spits, until a natural clay sand was reached at a depth of approximately 1m from the surface, revealing a darker coloured patch of soil in the base of the trench against its western edge.

The excavation then continued, removing overburden on the east side of the trench, maintaining observation for the route of the water pipe. This resulted in an excavated area measuring 4m by 3.50m (14m<sup>2</sup>). This trench was only slightly restricted from the full extent originally proposed due to the presence of a tree to the west.

After the machine excavation was complete the base of the trench was cleaned by hand to reveal two features near the south-western portion of the trench. Both features were similar in size and shape, although the feature near the south edge of the trench had a fill that was lighter in colour than its companion.

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All metal-detected and hand-collected finds, other than those which were obviously modern, were retained for inspection.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using the Norfolk Archaeological Unit's *pro forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour and monochrome photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

A level was transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark of 64m on the south-east corner of the chapel opposite the site.

Site conditions were somewhat restrictive; apart from the electrical overhead cabling to the east, a large amount of dumped garden waste had to be moved to gain access to the site and several small tree stumps needed to be extracted by the machine in the region of the trench. The rear of the plot contained several apple trees and may have originally been part of a larger garden.

The narrow width of the site also meant the machine had to manoeuvre very carefully in order to be able to access the site, excavate and backfill the trench as well as being able to leave the site safely. Weather conditions were general dry and clear apart from at the end of the day when a torrential rainstorm broke and deluged the site.

## **5.0 Results**

After hand cleaning the base of the trench, two features, both in the southern half of the trench were apparent cut into the natural clay sand base. One feature, [3], in the west half of the trench was an irregular oval shape and was approximately 1m in diameter, its western limit continued under the west baulk. The feature was half-

sectioned and was found to be 0.35m deep with a concave base rising to the west and contained a compact mid grey-brown sandy silt (4) with occasional chalk fragments and flecks, charcoal flecks and small fragments of brick or tile. Several fragments of modern glass, a piece of tile and one sherd of glazed post-medieval pottery were found within the fill of the feature.

Close to the south-east of the feature [3] was a second feature ([1]) cut into the natural clay sand. It was roughly oval in shape with a length of 1.30m and a width of 1m. This was half-sectioned to reveal a concave base at a depth of 0.40m, containing a light grey-brown compact fill, (2). with occasional charcoal flecks and fragments. Within the fill were found five sherds of grey well-fired pottery of Late Saxon and medieval date (10th - 14th centuries) and a single oyster shell.

Pit [1] was not exposed until the removal of the overlying subsoil, however Pit [3] appeared to have been cut from a higher level.

## **6.0 The Finds**

### **6.1 Ceramic Building Material**

The site produced a single fragment of late post medieval/ modern pan tile (0.023kg [03]).

#### **6.1 Shell**

A single oyster shell (0.037kg [01]) was recovered.

### **6.2 Post-Roman pottery**

#### Introduction

A total of six fragments of pottery weighing 0.067kg was recovered from the evaluation. The ceramics are mainly Late Saxon to early medieval in date, although a single sherd of post-medieval pottery was found.

#### Methodology

The ceramics were quantified by recording the number of sherds present in each context, the estimated number of vessels represented and the weight of each fabric. Other characteristics such as condition and decoration were noted, and an overall date range for the pottery in each context was established.

The fabric codes used are based mainly on the fabric groups identified in *Eighteen centuries of pottery from Norwich* (Jennings, 1981).

#### **Late Saxon/early medieval**

Five fragments of Late Saxon and early medieval date were present in [1]. Two large body sherds of wheel-thrown greyware have a cylindrical shape typical of Thetford-type ware, and one of these has a sagging base. They are made from a dense sandy hard fabric, and have light brown outer margins. The fragments are likely to be Grimston Thetford-type ware variants, dating to the 10th-11th century. A small fragment of another Thetford-type ware is also present. In addition, two small sandy body sherds, one of which may be an Early medieval ware, can be dated to the 11th-14th century.



### ***Post-medieval***

A single small sherd of Banded Yellow ware was identified in pit [3]. The fragment, which is decorated with horizontal white banding can be dated from the late 18th into the 19th century.

#### **Conclusions**

The small quantity of pottery shows evidence of Late Saxon to early medieval date activity. The site is not far from the production centre of the Grimston Thetford-type ware industries which lie to the North-west of Sporle.

## **7.0 Conclusions**

The topsoil excavated exhibited characteristics of an organic garden soil, dark grey-brown loam with many root traces. It represented a sizeable build-up of deposit in that it accounted for 40% of the overall depth of soil and most likely represents a lengthy period of organic deposition as well as possibly deliberate make-up.

Although little archaeological material came from the fill of the two pits, it is likely that they were originally meant for rubbish disposal. The pottery found in the fill of pit [1] indicates a medieval date for its infilling. The pottery found therein includes several body sherds of Thetford-type ware, dating from the Late Saxon period, plus a possible early medieval sherd (11th-12th century) and a medieval sherd (11th-14th century). The pottery is a local type and the Grimston/Thetford-type ware was made approximately 10 miles to the north-west of the village. From other sherds of pottery found, an indicated overall date range of between the 10th and the 14th century can be assigned to the fill.

The few finds from the second pit, [3], indicate a later date, the one sherd of glazed pottery found in the fill dates to the 18th-19th century, and the feature most likely represents a post-medieval refuse pit dug in waste ground or garden soil.

It was noted that the properties either side of the site and also several others along The Street were lower in elevation than the plot under investigation. It was initially thought that while the other properties may have been cut into a bank, the ground level of the site under investigation was the original level of the topography. The level of the base of pit [1], cut directly into the natural is, however, only around 0.40m above the level of the present street and thus more readily equates with the building levels of the properties on either side of the site. This appears to indicate that the ground encountered on the site has been made up to its present level by a combination of deliberate and natural deposition. This may have been a precaution as a consequence of flooding previously occurring along the frontage.

Local information indicates that the site has not been built upon in living memory and appears to be, at present, an open plot along the line of The Street. It appears that it may once have been part of an adjoining property and was at some stage apportioned into a separate plot that thereafter remained undeveloped.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1805 shows the site as an empty plot of land, as do subsequent maps of the village up to the present day. However, the presence of the concrete bridge to the plot and the access slope into the site indicates active use of the land, possibly as a garden or allotment.

The original intention of the evaluation excavation was to ascertain the presence of any archaeological information pertaining to the development of the village during the medieval period.

The presence of a rubbish pit containing early medieval pottery approximately 7.5m to the west of the street frontage may be an example of an isolated feature. Alternatively, it may represent part of activities at the rear of a dwelling fronting onto the main route through the village in the medieval period.

Recommendations for future work based upon this report will be made by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology.

### ***Bibliography***

- |                 |      |   |
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### ***Acknowledgements***

The author would like to thank the machine driver from John A Brothers for his skill in manoeuvring within the restricted site and his accuracy of excavation. Thanks also to the ladies from the Sporle local history group who provided on-site documentary evidence and valuable insight into the nature of the local land use.

The evaluation was carried out by Chris Phillips and the author. The finds were processed by Lucy Talbot and the pottery was assessed by Richenda Goffin. Historic Environment Record (HER) information was kindly provided by Jan Allen and Martin Horlock. The report was produced by Maggie Foottit and edited by Jayne Bown.

### **Appendix 1: Context Summary**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Upper level (m OD)</b>	<b>Period</b>
1	Cut	Pit	63.90	Medieval
2	Deposit	Fill of pit [1]	64.30	
3	Cut	Pit	63.94	Post-medieval
4	Deposit	Fill of pit [3]	54.26	
5	Deposit	Topsoil	65.23	Post-medieval
6	Deposit	Subsoil	64.82	
7	Deposit	Orange clay-sand	64.22	Natural

### **Appendix 2: Finds by Context**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Weight (kg)</b>
2	MPOT	5	0.064
2	SHELL	1	0.037
4	PPOT	1	0.004
4	PCBM	1	0.023

Key:

MPOT Medieval pottery (Late Saxon-medieval)

PPOT Post medieval pottery

PCBM Post medieval ceramic building material

SHELL Mollusc or bivalve

### **Appendix 3: Pottery**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Fabric</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Weight (kg)</b>	<b>Date</b>
2	THETG	BODY	2	0.056	10th-11th century
2	THET	BODY	1	0.002	10th-11th century
2	EMW?	BODY	1	0.003	11th-12th century
2	MCW	BODY	1	0.003	11th-14th century
4	YELW	BODY	1	0.003	L18th-19th century

**Key:**

THETG Grimston/Thetford-type ware

THET Thetford-type ware

EMW Early medieval ware

MCW Medieval coarse ware

YELW Yellow ware

***Appendix 4: Ceramic Building Material***

<b>Context</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Weight (kg)</b>	<b>Period</b>
4	PCBM	1	0.023	Post-medieval

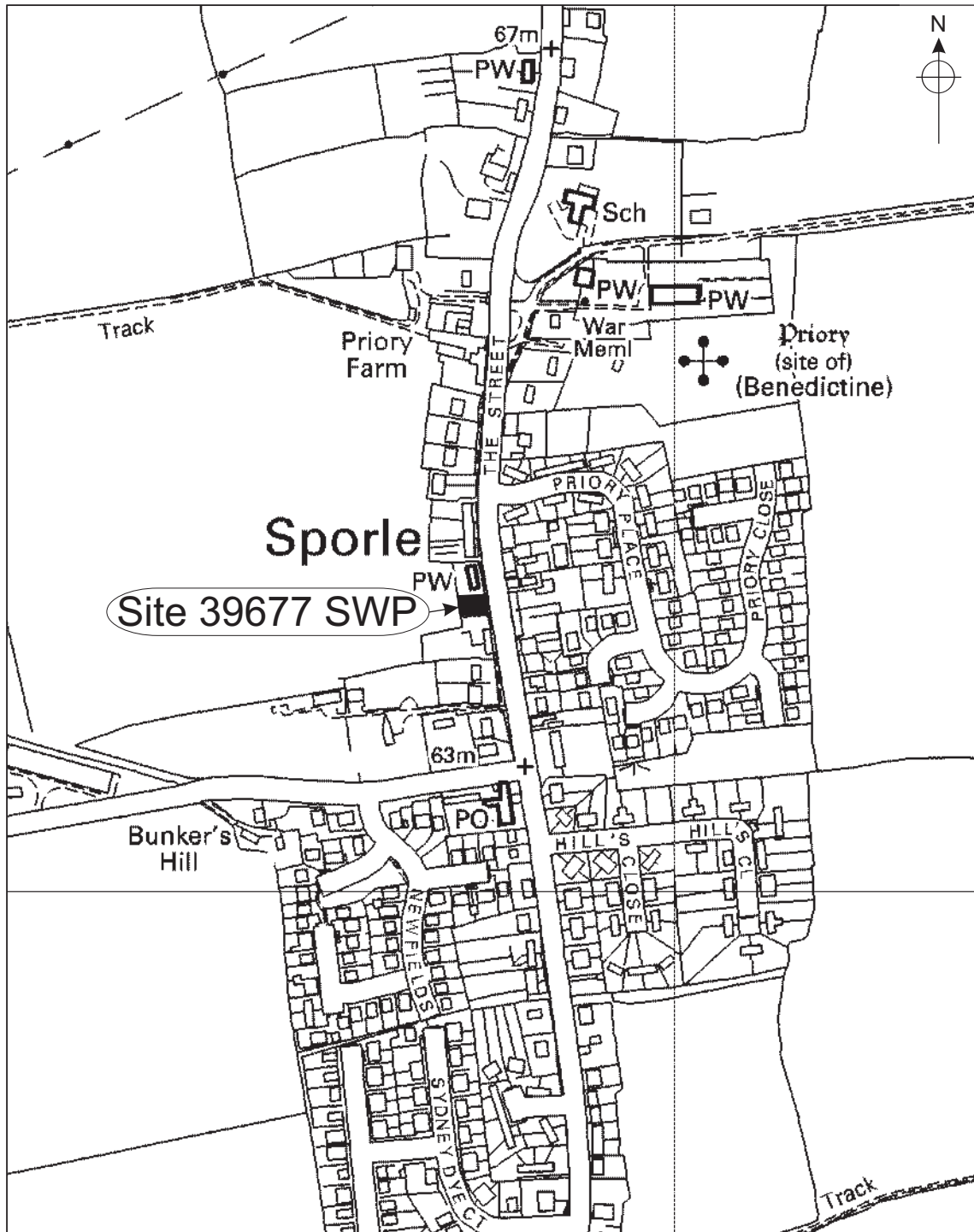


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:5000



Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:500

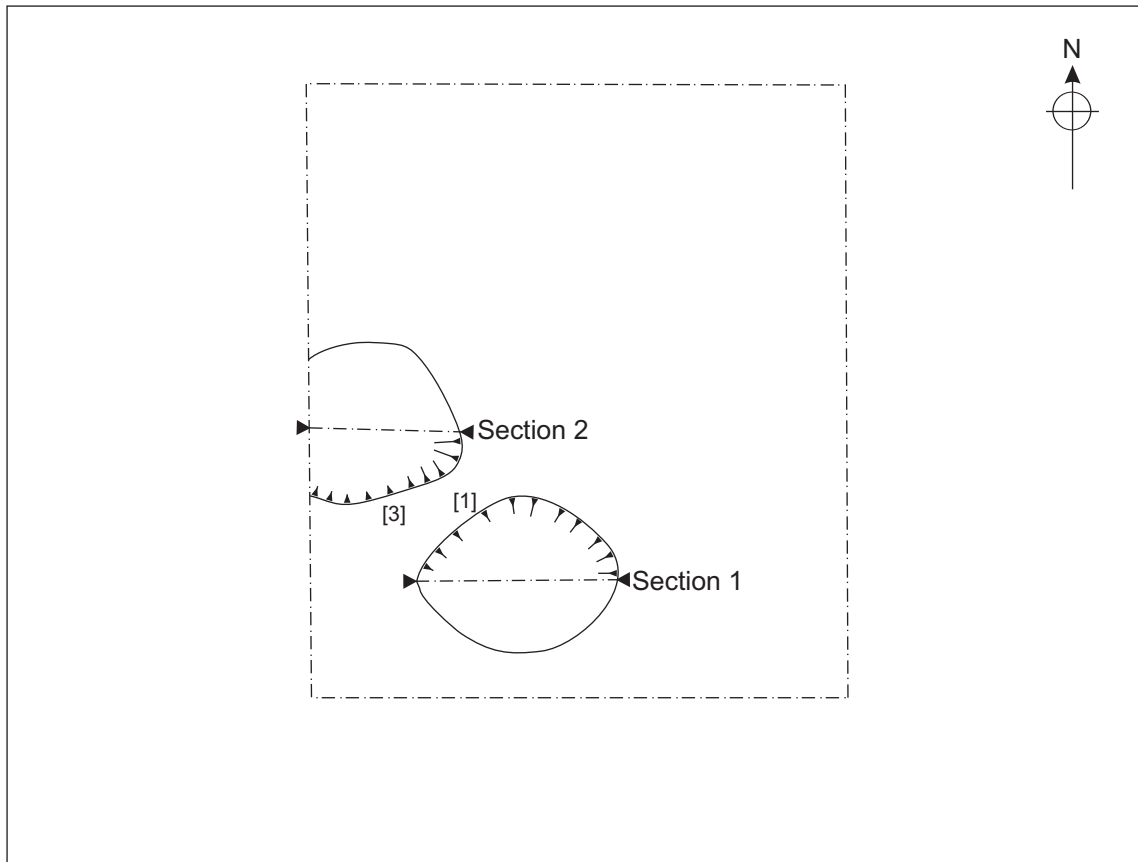
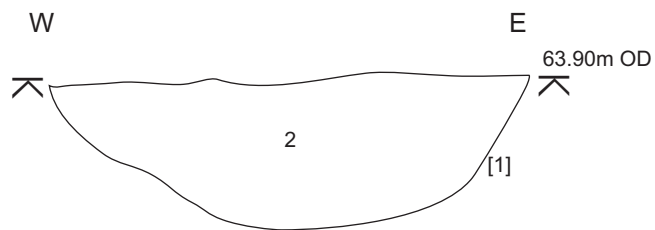
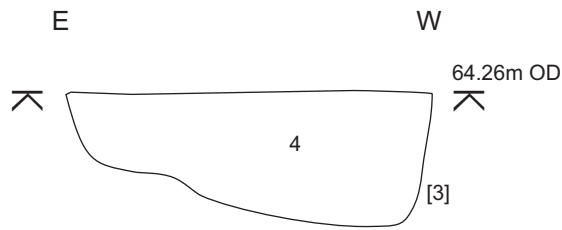


Figure 3. Plan of trench. Scale 1:50



North facing section 1



South facing section 2



Figure 4. Sections 1 and 2. Scale 1:20

