

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 1111

**An Archaeological Evaluation at Topcroft Hall, Topcroft,
Norfolk**

10196 TPC

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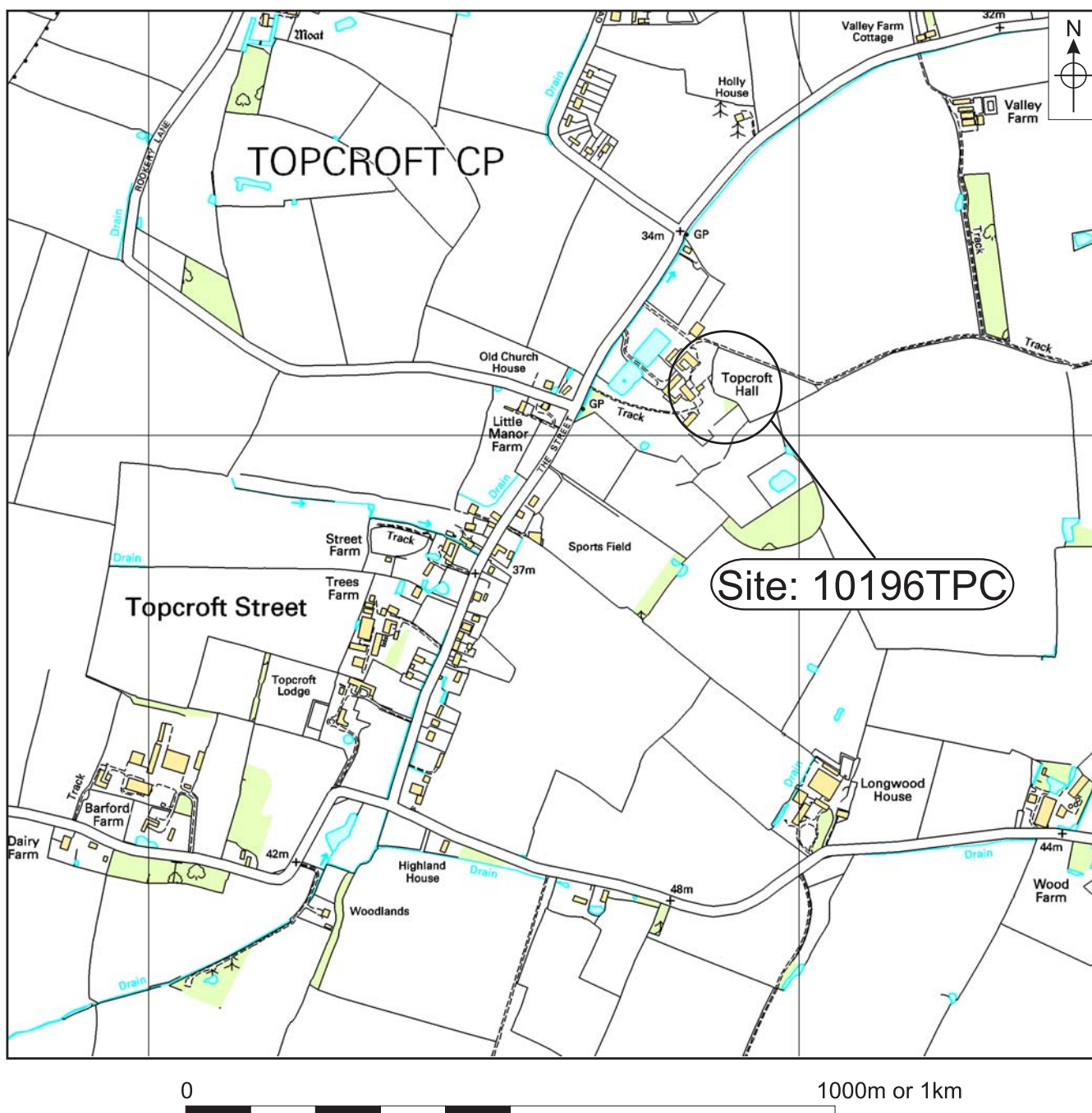


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

Local Authority No.100019340

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Location: Topcroft Hall, The Street, Topcroft, Norfolk
District: South Norfolk
Grid Ref: TM 268 920
HER No.: 10196 TPC
Date of fieldwork: 12th September 2005

Summary

An archaeological evaluation at the rear of Topcroft Hall exposed several deposits of made ground including a truncated gravel layer that may once have been a garden path. In addition three shallow features were located, two containing post-medieval ceramic building material and medieval pottery and one containing a single sherd of medieval pottery.

1.0 Introduction

(Fig. 1)

An archaeological evaluation was carried out to the rear of Topcroft Hall, Topcroft, Norfolk prior to the installation of an extension and conservatory adjoining the rear wall of the south-east wing of the building.

Mr C. J. Sewell of Topcroft Hall commissioned the work.

Topcroft Hall has at its core an early 16th-century timber-framed open hall and chamber block. The development proposal was considered to affect the presence of a possible earth platform, thought to indicate an extension of the south-east wing of the house. A single machine-dug trench measuring 6m by 1.6m was excavated within the footprint of the proposed extension to investigate the underlying deposits for evidence of any foundations.

This archaeological evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a Project Design and Method Statement prepared by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU Ref: AS/1862) and a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: ARJH/09/05/01).

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 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards, currently hold the site archive.

2.0 Geology and Topography

The underlying natural solid geology of the area is London clay. This is overlain by deposits of Boulder clay, mainly Lowestoft Till and other Anglian tills, part of the Norfolk boulder clay plateau where streams and rivers provide light gravel soils suitable for settlement (Funnell 2005).

The site was located on a slight hill, sloping to the north-west, at a height of 39.84 OD. The deposits encountered, apart from a thin garden soil, was a well turned disturbed soil containing building rubble with underlying natural boulder clay at an average depth of 0.70m.

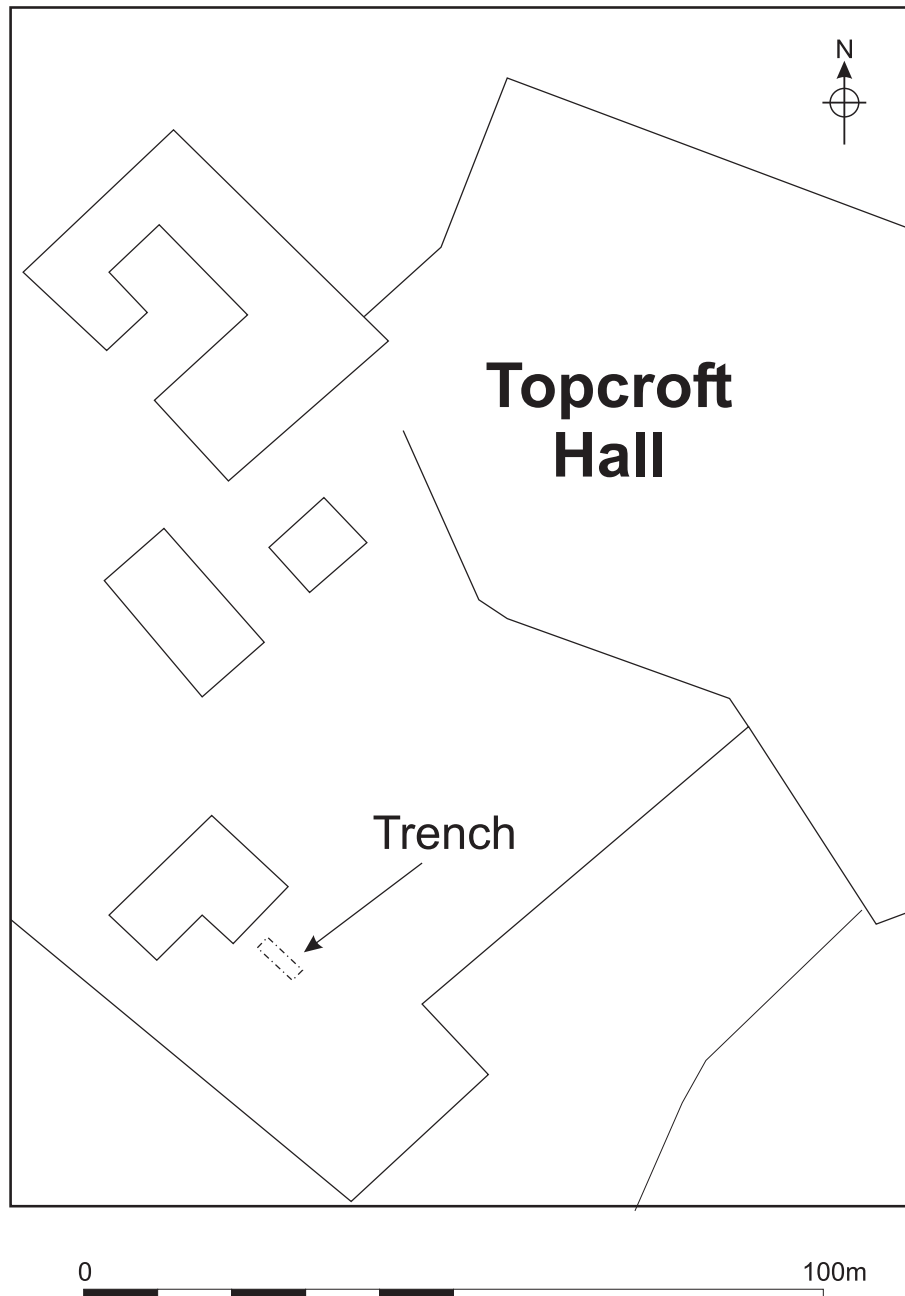


Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:1000

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

The area of heavy clay soils around the present village of Topcroft was possibly unattractive to early settlers and not until the Roman period was there evidence of settlement of any density. Approximately 1.6km to the north-east of the site lies the

remains of a Roman villa or farm complex (Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER) 10194). To the west of this, other finds of Romano-British pottery (NHER 18437) and coins (NHER 19151 and 28489) are evidence of the presence of Roman influence.

The church of St Margaret (HER 10214) lies in Topcroft village c. 800m to the north-west of the hall. This church may have an 11th-century tower base with a 14th-century nave and later additions in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Close to the church to the west is the site of the Free Chapel of St Giles (HER 10197) that was founded prior to 1280 and belonged to the Lords of Topcroft Hall.

Approximately 700m to the west of the hall are earthworks possibly representing a medieval moated enclosure (HER 20531), with a second moated site at Rookery Farm c. 300m to the north of this (HER 10206).

Topcroft Hall itself (HER 10196) is a timber-framed mansion with early 16th-century origins. A Georgian extension was replaced in 1898 by a large wing, itself now extended in neo-Georgian style. Fragments of earlier stone windows and Tudor fireplace are set in outside of 20th-century sections. Pevsner notes (Pevsner & Wilson 2000) the main first floor room retains wide arched braces to the ties, suggesting an upper hall chamber.

Previous archaeological work in the area has included a field survey and evaluation at Low Farm, Snakes Lane, Topcroft that produced prehistoric flint and medieval pottery and coins (Penn 2003).

4.0 Methodology

(Fig. 2)

The 6m long by 1.6m wide (9.6 sq. m) trench was located 1.20m to the south-east of the existing south-eastern wing of the 'L'-shaped hall and within the footprint of the proposed extension. The trench was machine excavated by a tracked 'mini-digger' with a 1m wide toothless ditching bucket in 100mm spits under constant archaeological supervision.

The objective of this evaluation was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence or absence of earlier foundations by investigating a possible earth platform thought to continue to the south-east from the line of the house wing.

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

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NAU *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 38.65m on the south-west corner of 'The Old School' in Topcroft Street. Although a non-permanent peg was used as a temporary benchmark on site, a level 39.84m OD was taken on the patio steps, approximately 3m to the south-west of the corner of the south-east wing of the hall.

Due to the lack of suitable deposits, no environmental samples were taken.

Site conditions were good, the weather being warm and bright. Access to the site for the machine excavator lay partly across a tended lawn, damage to which was reduced by the careful manoeuvring of the machine by the driver.

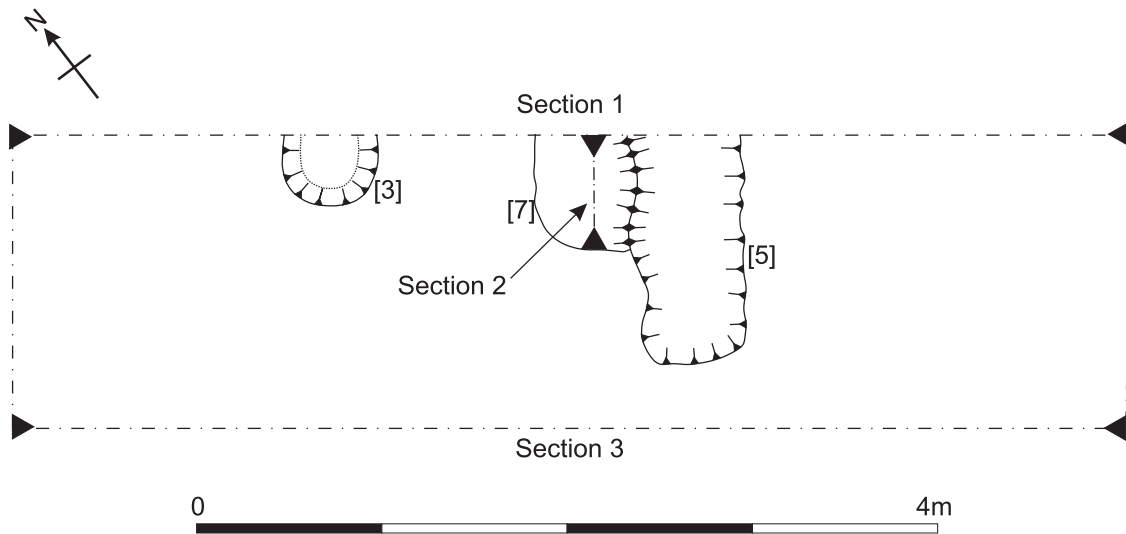


Figure 3. Trench plan. Scale 1:40

5.0 Results

(Figs 3, 4, 5 and 6)

The single trench was excavated down to natural boulder clay at an average depth of 0.70m. The garden topsoil ([1]) was a moderately compact mid to dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional small flints and chalk flecks. It had an average thickness of 0.30m and was covered by a grass lawn.

Below the topsoil was a mixed soil ([2]) comprising of a mid grey brown compact clay silt with moderate small flints and chalk flecks with brick and tile fragments. This deposit lay directly above the natural clay ([12]).

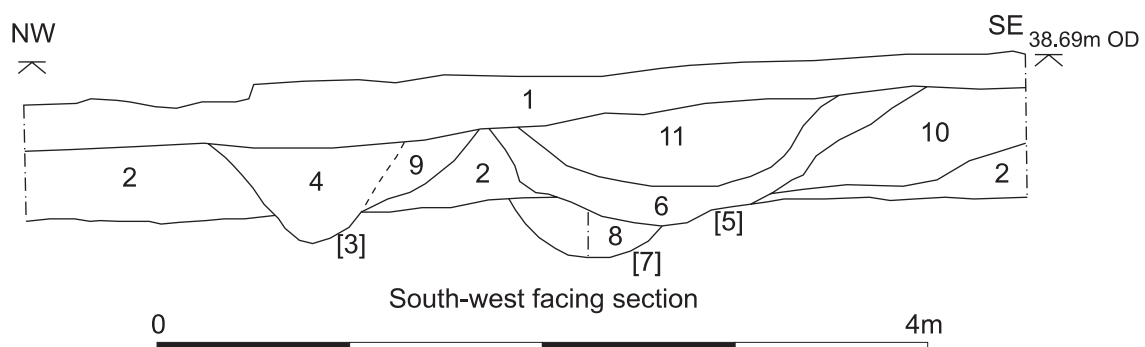


Figure 4. Section 1. Scale 1:40

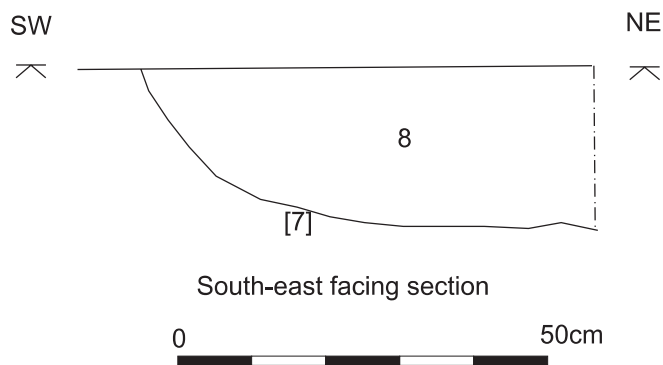


Figure 5. Section 2. Scale 1:10

Three small features were observed cut into the natural clay. The first of these ([3]) was a shallow circular pit, 0.50m in diameter as seen cut into the natural and extending under the trench baulk to the north. In the south-west facing section the pit could be seen to cut through deposit [2] and widened to 1.15m at the top of the cut, below the topsoil. The fill ([4]) of this feature was a loose mid grey brown sandy clay silt with occasional small flints and

fragments of brick and tile and one sherd of pottery. Below this fill, in the south-east side of the cut for this feature was darker gritty sandy silt ([9]) that contained brick fragments and ash.

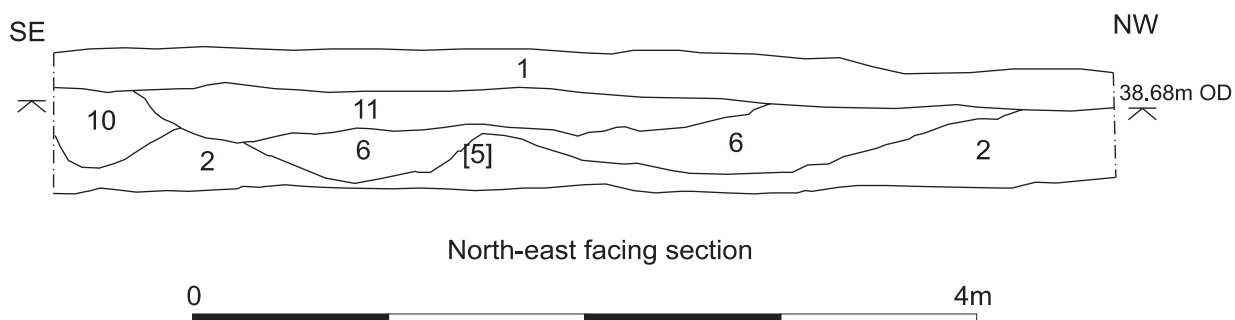


Figure 6. Section 3. Scale 1:40

The second feature observed cut into the natural was a shallow pit ([5]) that measured 1.25m long and 0.65m wide and ran from north-east to south-west, part way across the trench; extending under the baulk to the north-east. This pit contained a primary fill of light grey brown loose silty clay ([6]) that contained one sherd of medieval pottery and eight fragments of post-medieval ceramic building material. The pit was observed to be cutting through deposits [2] and [10], the later deposit was a compact orange gravel and sand c. 1.2m wide in section and 0.50m thick but extending slightly into the baulk to the south-east. Where the pit cut this gravel deposit it was redeposited as a backfill of mixed gravel and soil ([11]) above the primary fill ([6]) within the feature.

The third feature observed in the base of the trench was a small sub-circular pit ([7]) c. 0.65 in diameter, with a single mid brown sandy clay fill ([8]). A solitary fragment of medieval pottery was recovered from this feature. This small pit was truncated slightly by the cut of pit [5].

6.0 The Finds

By Lucy Talbot

Introduction

The finds evidence from the site is presented in tabular form with basic quantitative information in Appendix 2: Finds by Context.

In addition to this summary, more detailed information on specific finds is included in separate reports below. Supporting tables for these contributions are included in the Appendices.

Pottery

(Appendix 3)

The site produced three examples of medieval pottery (0.025kg). The assemblage consists of a single sherd of a typical South Norfolk/North Suffolk square rimmed bowl of late 13th- to early 14th-century date and two fragments of medieval unglazed ware base and bodysherd, dating from the 11th to 13th century.

Methodology

The assemblage was quantified (counted and weighed) by form and fabric. The fabrics were identified by eye and the main inclusions noted. Fabric descriptions and dates are based on the provisional type series established by Sue Anderson of CFA Archaeology Ltd, formally of the Suffolk Archaeological Unit.

Ceramic Building Material

(Appendix 4)

The site produced eleven examples of post-medieval ceramic building material (0.232kg). The material recovered consists of pieces of medium sandy brick and plain roof tile dating from the 17th to 20th century.

7.0 Conclusions

The location for the single trench evaluation trench was designed to encompass both the area to be disturbed for the planned extension as well as to investigate the evidence for a possible earth-building platform.

The excavation revealed the area of raised garden immediately to the south-east of the house to be made-ground that consisted of topsoil, post-medieval subsoil and a disturbed dump of gravel and soil ([11]), possibly remnants of a garden path running north-to-south. No dating evidence was recovered from the gravel that was cut by pit [5] and was partly used as backfill for that pit.

The three shallow pits each contained a sherd of medieval pottery, although two of the pits ([3] and [5]) also contained several fragments of post-medieval ceramic building material. The third pit ([7]) contained only a single sherd of medieval pottery. The pottery appears to be consistent with a date range between the 11th to the early 14th centuries.

The pottery pre-dates the known early 16th-century origins of Topcroft Hall and may have come from manuring of earlier agricultural land. The fact that two pieces of the pottery recovered were found in association with post-medieval building material

indicates that it is most likely residual, at least in the case of two of the pits. The third pit is possibly a medieval feature, on the evidence of a single sherd of pottery.

Enquiries were made of the householder, Mr Sewell, as to the difference in height, (c. 0.5m) of the garden area under investigation and the adjacent lawn to the south. He indicated that the lower area had once been a tennis court. In levelling the ground to build the tennis court, excess soil had been heaped up onto the adjoining garden to make a raised lawn. This would explain the depth of make-up observed in the section of the evaluation trench and also the disturbance of the gravel that, if a path, may have continued across the width of the garden before the installation of the tennis court.

Norfolk Landscape Archaeology will make recommendations for future work based upon this report.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Mr and Mrs Sewell for their co-operation and hospitality. Tony from N. K. Machine Hire of Seething skilfully carried out machining. David Whitmore and the author carried out the evaluation.

Pottery and ceramic building material was processed and assessed by Lucy Talbot. Norfolk Historic Environment Record (HER) information was provided by Jan Allen (NLA). The report was edited by Alice Lyons and illustrated and produced by Julie Curl.

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Appendix 1a: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
1	Deposit	Topsoil	Modern
2	Deposit	Subsoil	Post-medieval
3	Cut	Pit	Post-medieval
4	Deposit	Fill of [3]	-
5	Cut	Pit	Post-medieval
6	Deposit	Fill of [5]	-
7	Cut	Pit	?Medieval
8	Deposit	Fill of [7]	-
9	Deposit	Fill of [3]	-
10	Deposit	Gravel	Post-medieval
11	Deposit	Backfill of [5]	Post-medieval
12	Deposit	Clay	Natural

Appendix 1b: OASIS feature summary table

Feature type	Period
Pit	Medieval (1066 to 1539AD)
	Post-medieval (1540 to 1900AD)

Appendix 2a: Finds by Context

Context	Material	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Period
4	Pottery	1	0.009	Medieval
	Ceramic building material	3	0.080	Post-medieval
6	Pottery	1	0.013	Medieval
	Ceramic building material	8	0.152	Post-medieval
	Iron-nail	1	-	-
8	Pottery	1	0.003	Medieval

Appendix 2b: NHER finds summary table

Material	Period
Pottery	Medieval (1066 to 1539AD)
Ceramic building material	Post-medieval (1540 to 1900AD)

Appendix 3: Pottery

Context	Fabric	Form	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Period
4	Medieval Unglazed ware	Bodysherd	1	0.009	Medieval
6	South Norfolk ware	Square rimmed bowl	1	0.013	Medieval
8	Medieval Unglazed ware	Bodysherd	1	0.003	Medieval

Appendix 4: Ceramic Building Material

Context	Form	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Ceramic date
4	Brick	2	0.015	Post-medieval
	Roof tile	1	0.065	Post-medieval
6	Brick	3	0.055	Post-medieval
	Roof tile	5	0.097	Post-medieval