

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 1114

**An Archaeological Excavation on the Town Bank at
Redcastle Furze Primary School, Thetford**

41937THD

Kenneth Penn
November 2005

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Location: Redcastle Furze Primary School, St Martins Way, Thetford
District: Breckland
Grid Ref: TL 862 827
HER No.: 41937THD
SAM No.: 331
Date of Fieldwork: 22nd to 26th August 2005

Summary

A Community Excavation was carried out on the Town Bank at Thetford (Scheduled Ancient Monument 331) to investigate its character and to recover material; both artefactual and environmental, to aid its dating (if possible). The excavation was one element of a community project that attracted over 200 participants.

The Town Bank lies on the line of the known Late Saxon defences around the town on the south side of the river and was thought possibly to preserve part of its fabric and structure.

Excavation revealed that the upstanding bank in the stretch within the school grounds (where it is at its highest) may be of much later date than supposed, with finds from the base of the bank being of post-medieval date. However, the finds from this work also included several sherds of Late Saxon Thetford ware and a single sherd of St Neots ware, testifying to Late Saxon activity nearby. No material was recovered for a meaningful scientific date.

1.0 Introduction

(Figs 1 and 2)

The site lay within the grounds of Redcastle Furze Primary School, just outside the line of the Town Bank (Fig. 1) and consisted of a single trench, 2m wide and 7m long (14 sq. m), across the upstanding bank (Fig. 2).

The excavation and report were commissioned by The Ancient House Museum, NMAS, on behalf of The Thetford Society.

The Local Heritage Initiative (LHI) made the project possible, which is a partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund, Nationwide Building Society and the Countryside Agency. The LHI awarded the Thetford Society a grant of £17,820 to run the event.

Stuart Wright, Chairman of the Thetford Society said "We are delighted to have received funding for this event which we hope will give a greater appreciation of Thetford's great history. The event hopes to involve people of all ages to allow them to learn more about their town and archaeology in general".

The Ancient House Museum worked in partnership with the Thetford Society to offer opportunities for families to find out more about Thetford's history. Activities included sorting and cleaning finds, making clay pots and striking coins as well as the dig itself.

This archaeological community excavation was undertaken in accordance with a Project Design prepared by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU Ref: WAB

26.04.05)) and a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: 03.02.05 ARJH).

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

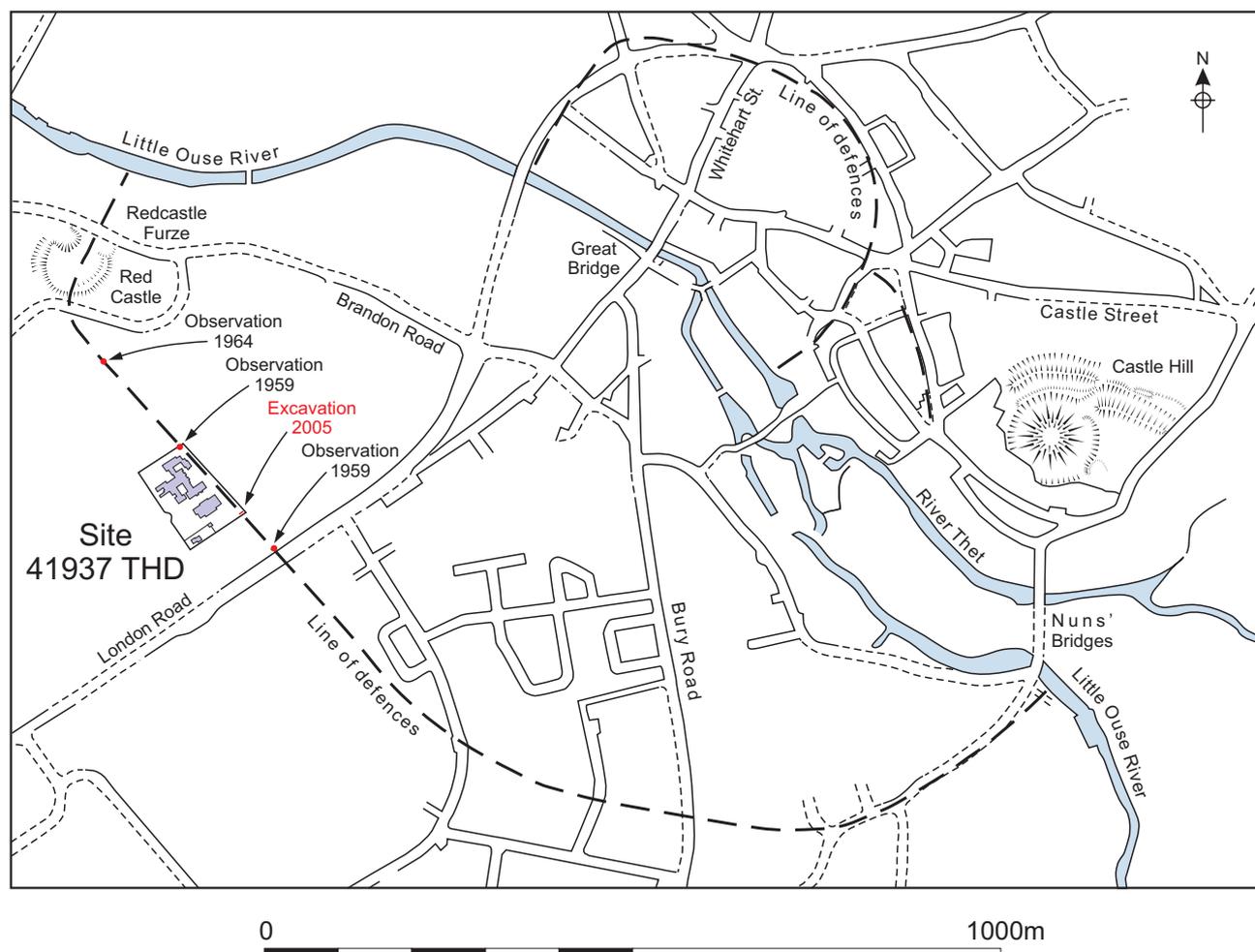


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

2.0 Geology and Topography

The site lies on the gentle slopes overlooking the valley of the River Little Ouse. This area lies within Breckland, an area whose geology is characterised by poor sands overlying Chalk.

On a small site to the immediate south, excavation recorded 'windblown sand over a natural subsoil of fine-medium sand interspersed with variable amounts of gravel, in patches and bands,....The distinction between the windblown deposit and the underlying sand was very slight.' (Davies 1993, 443).

At Redcastle Furze, the natural deposits were not exposed in the excavation, but are likely to be windblown deposits of no great age over Chalk at depth.

The bank stands at c. 20m OD, on a long slope with the land dropping gently away to the river to the north-east. A level was taken from a benchmark in London Road, with a value of 20.75m OD.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

Early Settlement

There had been settlement along the river valley from the prehistoric period and at least one important river crossing in the area of the later town.

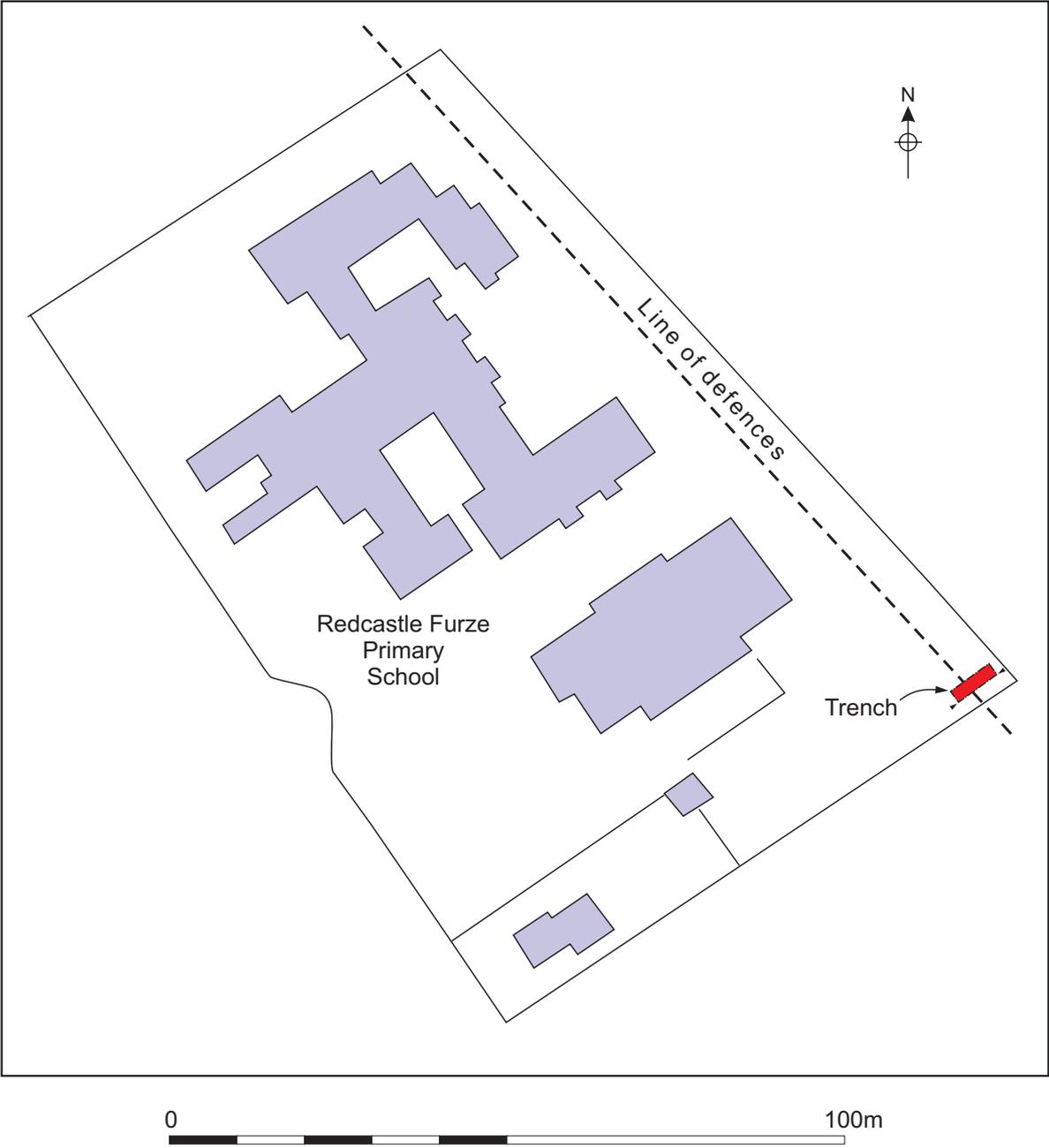


Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:1000

The Iron Age fort (at Thetford Castle) was probably sited where the Icknield Way crossed the river, and only 2km to the north lay the major *Iceni* religious or ceremonial centre at Gallows Hill. Several small Roman sites, probably farms, have been found, one near the central ford and another near the Red Castle ford, to the west.

It was around these three fords that settlement was centred, and Thetford later developed, with Early Saxon settlement near the Red Castle ford in the 6th century. At least a dozen huts have now been excavated here, probably part of a riverside village. Middle Saxon objects and features have also been found in the same general area, attesting to extensive activity along the river around AD 700/800. Finds from north of the central ford may indicate its continued use, while pottery and coins from the Iron Age fort may come from its use as a meeting-place, possibly for markets and fairs.

Difficulties in precise dating of pottery make it impossible to say if there was a break between the Middle Saxon occupation and the start of the Late Saxon town on the south bank, by the central ford.

The Viking 'camp'

Thetford (in Anglo-Saxon: 'chief' or 'people's' ford) probably had its origins around 870 when 'the raiding army [of Vikings] rode...into East Anglia and took up winter quarters at Thetford... and killed the king...' according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. They almost certainly made use of the earthworks of the ancient Iron Age fort, in a perfect location overlooking the river and with easy land routes in all directions.

Thetford in a Viking kingdom

For about fifty years, until 917, East Anglia was part of a Danish kingdom, and during this time Thetford became an important centre. The long looping line of the defences on the south bank are known from observations and excavations, which show that (in one place) the ditch had silted up and been built over by the late 10th century, suggesting that the defences were built early in the life of the town. They initially enclosed a large but quite scattered settlement, only here and there densely packed, and elsewhere, areas of open ground and paddocks.

A north bank

It was once thought that the southern ditch must be the original and only defensive circuit, but in 1963 a circuit on the north bank was suggested, a theory untested by excavation until 1996, when it was found in excavations at the library (in 1989 a small excavation in Guildhall Street found an addition to the circuit).

The origins and dates of the two sets of defences are unclear; perhaps the West Saxons, when they took East Anglia from the Danes in 917, built a new 'burh' here, represented by the defences on the north bank. However, apart from a few Middle Saxon finds, evidence from excavation suggests occupation here beginning sometime in the 11th century.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that the Danes burnt Thetford in 1004 and 1010; it is possible that Ulfketel, a royal official, laid out a new defence at this time, in the

face of renewed Danish threat (and possibly another set of defences around this time at Bungay in Suffolk).

The Late Saxon and Norman town

Excavations in the 1940s and 1960s on the south bank have shed light on the town's character. At its Late Saxon and Norman peak, Thetford was a town of loosely-arranged timber buildings, often set back from gravelled streets, in their own yards with associated cesspits, wells and rubbish pits. Many seemingly casual burials have been found, singly or in larger groups, not associated with any known churchyard.

Thetford was an industrial town, with extensive trade links, best known for its pottery (several kilns have been found), and textile production. It had a mint from the reign of Edgar (at least), and excavations have revealed metalworking, including silver refining and a coin die at Mill Lane. North of the river at Guildhall Street, evidence for silver refining dates to the 13th century. Excavations also in the 1960s revealed traces of a timber church in its churchyard (perhaps one of those mentioned in Domesday Book).

Thetford gained a (Norman) castle (possibly royal), built within the Iron Age earthworks and Viking camp soon after 1066. Thetford was also briefly the site of the bishopric (1071-1094). Domesday Book reveals that Thetford in 1066 was one of the largest towns in Late Saxon England with 934 burgesses, occupying land on both the Norfolk and Suffolk sides of the river Little Ouse. Twelve churches were recorded, including St. Mary and its dependants, St. Peter, St. John, St. Martin and St. Margaret. For 1086, 724 burgesses and 224 empty houses were recorded, possibly a sign of the decline that afflicted Thetford on the south bank from this period, perhaps due in part to the rise of Lynn and hostility from the abbot of Bury.

A small grid of streets between the town defences and the Norman castle may represent a 12th-century 'planned suburb', whilst the streets within the castle defences represent another market place, after the castle went out of use in 1173. St. Nicholas Street was perhaps built to replace Minstergate whose route out to the west was blocked by the Cluniac priory, built in 1114. Red Castle, on the edge of the town, and straddling the line of the former Anglo-Saxon defences, is a 12th-century earthwork, and was probably hastily thrown up in the civil war of Stephen's reign (and may hint at one of the steps in Thetford's decline and abandonment on the south bank).

Nonetheless, Thetford remained important, with several religious houses, catering for pilgrims on their way to Walsingham; all these disappeared at the Dissolution, however, and the land on the south bank became arable and sheep pasture.

Archaeological observations and excavations

A series of reports on excavations in Thetford since the war sets out the evidence for the town, both from historical sources and from excavations. The main reports are:

Knocker, GM., 1967: 'Excavations at Red Castle, Thetford', *Norfolk Archaeology* 34 ii, 119-173

Dunmore, S., and Carr, R., 1976: *The Late Saxon Town of Thetford*, East Anglian Archaeology 4

Rogerson A., and Dallas, C., 1984: *Excavations in Thetford 1948-59 and 1973-80*, East Anglian Archaeology 22

Dallas, C., 1993: *Excavations in Thetford by B.K. Davison between 1964 and 1970*, East Anglian Archaeology 62

Andrews, P., 1995: *Excavations at Redcastle Furze, Thetford, 1988-9*, East Anglian Archaeology 72

Andrews, P., and Penn, K.J., 1999: *Excavations in Thetford, North of the River*, East Anglian Archaeology 87

Wallis, H., 2004: *Excavations at Mill Lane, Thetford, 1995*, East Anglian Archaeology 108

Individual records in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER) often relate to extensive areas of the historic town, with NHER 5756 relating to part of the town within the southern defences and NHER 5886 being the whole line of these south defences.

A bank and ditch enclosing the town on the south side is known from late historical sources and from excavation since the war.

1. In 1867 an embankment was said to run from Red Castle 100 yards towards the London Road and then turn south-west along that road (NHER 5886).
2. Excavations in 1952 located the town ditch, some 42 feet wide and 11 feet deep (12.6m, 3.3m) by the London Road. This was also found at the Red castle earthwork and seen to change direction some 300m south of that earthwork (Knocker 1967, 130-131).
3. In 1959, Knocker saw a ditch 30 feet wide and 8 feet deep alongside the London Road in contractors trenching (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 55). An excavation across the Town Bank in 1959, about 125m north of the present excavation, by Knocker, revealed that the low bank was post-medieval and overlay a Late Saxon ditch some 12.8m wide and dug 3.5m below the natural surface. However, this was the result of the recutting of an earlier ditch, silted up. Above the filled second ditch was a layer of gravel, which thickened into the Town Bank (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 60, fig. 105). The first fills of the primary ditch produced early medieval and St Neots pottery (and a single sherd of Stamford ware). The lower fillings of the recut ditch contained only Thetford ware. Medieval sherds lay below the bank itself, whose make-up produced post-medieval pottery, tile and glass.
4. In 1964 Davison cut a machine trench across the bank and ditch at TL 8608 8295 (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 63).

Amongst recent excavations in Thetford, a small site some 100m to the north of the present site was excavated but proved negative in its results (Birks 2003: NHER 38137).

4.0 Methodology

(Fig. 2)

The archaeological objectives of this excavation were to determine as far as reasonably possible the character of the upstanding bank, to locate and sample any buried soil and to date the bank from finds and by scientific methods.

The Brief required that only the bank was examined, and to this end a trench was laid out some 7m in length across the upper part of the bank (Fig. 2).

Excavation was carried out entirely by hand, using the labour of the Community Excavation, under supervision. Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All finds were retained for inspection.

A level was transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark of 20.75m OD on The Lodge on the London Road to the south-east. A temporary benchmark was set up on the top of the spigot for the new climbing tower in the school playground, with a value of 19.40m OD.

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

Site conditions were good with reasonable access to the trench, although restricted by fence and tree roots. The weather was mostly fine and sunny with little delay because of rain.

5.0 Results

(Figs 3 and 4)

Introduction

The excavation was intended to allow numbers of participants in the Community Excavation to spend time in the trench and this meant that the section could not always be maintained to a consistent arbitrary level at its base. However, this also allowed part of the lowest deposit ([4]) to be exposed and recorded.

Excavation revealed the fabric of the bank to be a sandy deposit ([2]) resting on stoneless sand ([6]) and orange-grey sandy gravels ([3] and [4]) with no intervening soil or turf line (Fig. 4). Deposits [3] and [4] are not natural subsoil, but make-up deposits for the post-medieval bank. The profile across the adjacent slope and the earthwork, and the likely profile of the underlying natural surface (Fig. 3), also pointed to this conclusion.

Excavation

The lowest deposit was seen at the north-east end where excavation was carried down in a small cutting. This deposit was grey sand ([4]) with many small stones that was interpreted as a make-up deposit rather than natural subsoil. Above this was a similar layer of gravely sand ([3]), variously an ochre-grey or orange-grey colour that also contained many small stones. This deposit had a very irregular surface, with 'peaks' and 'troughs', possibly reflecting dumping activity; the troughs were filled with a light grey brown virtually stone free sand ([6]) which this contrasted to the stony deposits ([3] and [4]) below. Deposit [6] is also interpreted as a dumped deposit, although in origin possibly a wind-blown sand.

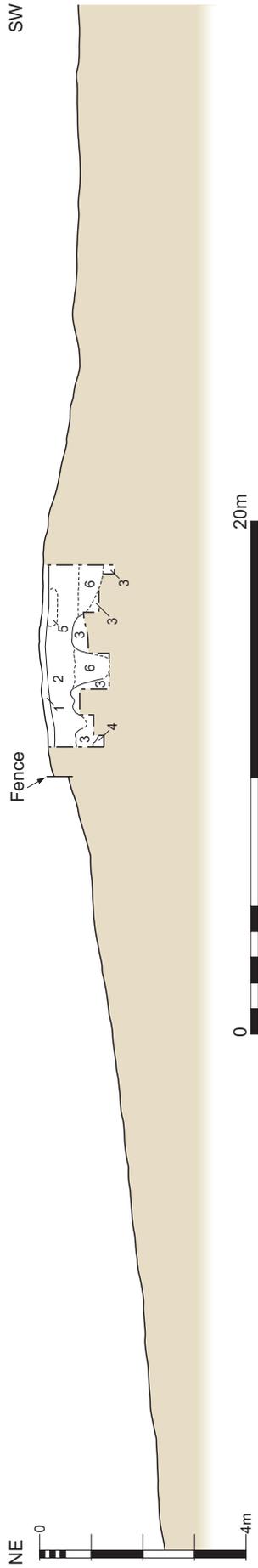


Figure 3. Profile across the bank, with excavated section and contexts 2,3,4, and 6.
Horizontal scale 1:250, vertical scale 1:125

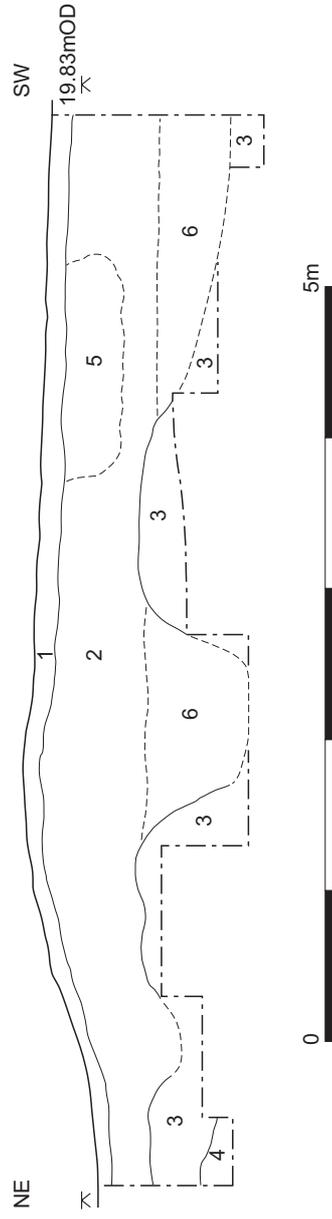


Figure 4. Section of trench. Scale 1:50

The main body of the bank was a deposit of sand ([2]) that contained a moderate amount of small stones. At the top this was grey and humic, grading down to a pale grey-ochre colour at its base, where it merged into pale sand ([6]) that was distinguishable by the number of stones each contained.

Towards the top of the bank was a lens of dirty sand ([5]) that contained relatively modern material, clearly a recent dump. The surface layer ([1]) was recent leaf litter and mould, the equivalent of a turf line in this situation below pine trees.

The Artefacts

Finds of post-medieval date came from the lowest part of deposit [2], on the surface of deposit [3]. These were: a buckle of 17th-century date, two iron nails, two sherds of Late Saxon Thetford ware, one sherd of St Neot's type ware, the lid of an 18th-century teapot, a sherd of post-medieval Glazed red earthenware and fragments of post-medieval roof tiles.

The main body of deposit [2], besides prehistoric flints (see below) produced two sherds of Thetford ware.

The finds from the base of deposit [2] show that the surface of layer [3] was open at some time in the post-medieval period, whilst the grey colour of the sandy gravel deposit [4] might suggest a humic element. This suggests either an earlier surface or, more likely, because of the absence of a turf line, that deposit [4] was derived from a humic deposit. The profile across the monument and the relative heights of deposits [3] and [6] suggest that they are not natural deposits but dumped as part of the make-up of the bank.

6.0 The Finds

Introduction

The finds and environmental material from the site is presented in tabular form with basic quantitative information in Appendix 2: Finds by Context. The finds are discussed below and listed in more detailed appendices by material type. Full methodologies are held in the archive.

Pottery

by Lucy Talbot and Andrew Rogerson

(Appendix 3)

A total of seven sherds of pottery, weighing 0.081kg, were recovered from an unstratified layer (one sherd) and the main bank deposit ([2]; six sherds). This material consists of four sherds of Late Saxon Thetford ware, one sherd of early medieval St Neot's type ware, a sherd of post-medieval Glazed red earthenware and the lid of an 18th-century teapot. Although this material indicates that this section of the town bank was constructed in the late post-medieval period, the presence of earlier Late Saxon to medieval sherds confirms activity in the area at that time.

In addition to this material 292 sherds, weighing 9.803kg, of modern pottery were retrieved from rubbish dump ([5]). This material would not normally have been

retained but was of interest to the local community and was used to demonstrate finds processing techniques.

Ceramic Building Material

by Lucy Talbot and Andrew Rogerson

(Appendix 4)

The site produced fifty-one examples of post-medieval ceramic building material weighing 5.469kg.

The assemblage consists of fragments of brick, plain roof tile and pan tile dating from the 18th to 20th century. The largest form recovered is pan tile (4.013kg), with the majority collected from context [5]. Although mostly unglazed, a few pieces have a thick covering of dark brown/black, iron-rich glaze on a medium to fine sandy, orange fabric with few coarse inclusions. The four pieces of brick recovered are of poorly mixed, medium sandy fabric, varying in colour from pale yellow to pink with occasional grog inclusions. The plain flat roof tile consists of seven fragments of orange, medium sandy material with occasional coarse inclusions of flint and ferrous pellets.

Flint

by Sarah Bates

(Appendix 5)

Twelve flints were recovered from the site. The assemblage includes a flake core on a squat lump, four flakes, three retouched flakes and an utilised flake.

There is also a quite large thick chunky 'shatter piece' and a large lump of battered flint that has possible retouch at one end – it may have been used as a tool of some sort.

The struck flint represents activity during the prehistoric period, whilst the nature of the material (with several pieces which are broad in shape and have clearly been struck by hard hammer) suggests that it probably dates to the later Neolithic period or Bronze Age.

Another quite large chunky lump had a small patch of mortar adhering to its surface that suggests that it was used as building material and is probably of medieval, or later, date. It has been discarded.

All of the flints came from deposit [2], make-up material for a bank. The flint is likely to be residual in this context.

7.0 Conclusions

As the focus of the town shifted slowly to the north bank in the middle ages, this area on the south side of the river, although within the defences, became peripheral. With medieval decline and shift, it became a mixture of sheep walks and arable fields.

It seems likely that the area by the bank (or near its line), although close to Westwick Warren, may have been arable strips in the medieval period, as was the area to the south-east side of London Road, at St Margaret's Field (Crosby 1984, 53).

Hodkinson's map of Suffolk of 1783 and Faden's map of Norfolk 1797 (Fig. 5) show that this area as open with no land divisions. More importantly, it may be seen from the 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps the whole area, indeed, the majority of Breckland exhibits a markedly regular rectangular pattern of fields, often bounded by lines of Scots pine.

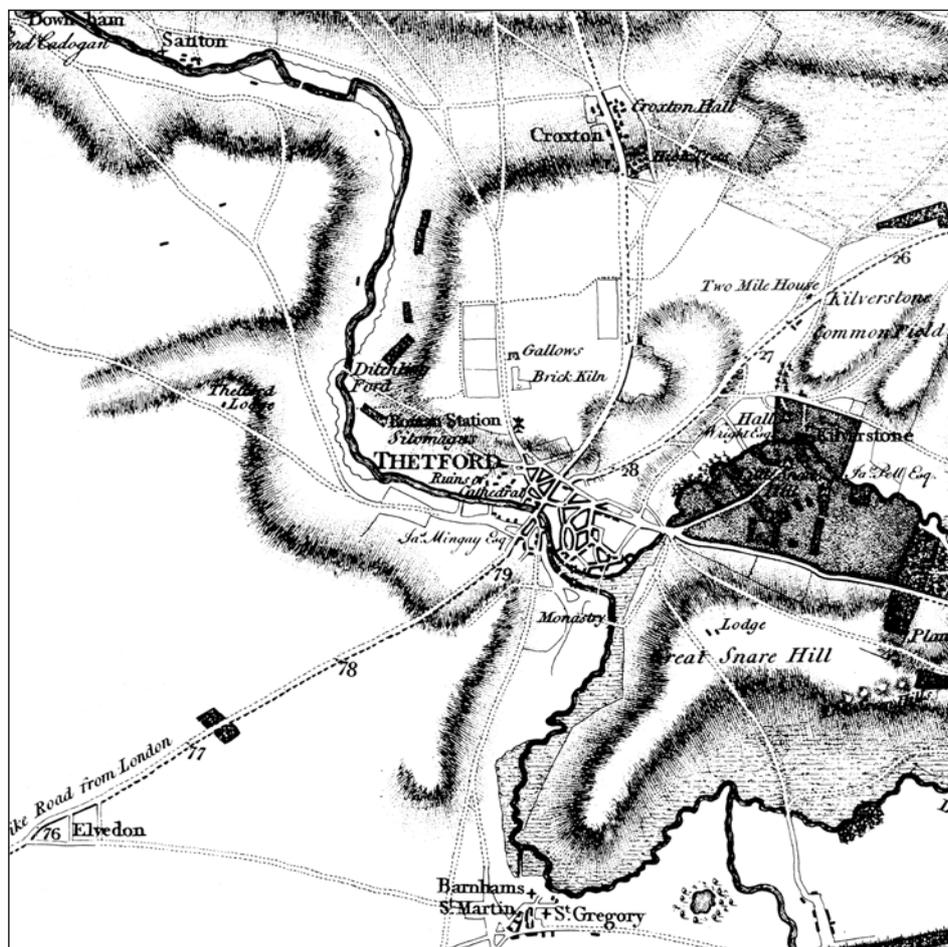


Figure 5. Faden's Map of Norfolk 1797 (detail)

As to the later landscape, although one may see from the 19th century Ordnance Survey maps that just to the north of the excavated site lay the heathland of Redcastle Furze itself, the Town Bank was part of a pattern of regular fields and boundaries, the excavated bank being the boundary of such a field, and bears a belt of Scots pine (Fig. 6).

In her study of Breckland, Sussams (1996) noted that changes occurred in the late 18th century as fields and commons were enclosed, with straight roads, rectangular fields and shelter belts using Scots pine. Scots pine were used as early as 1668 in Breckland for this purpose, although as late as 1829 a bank was described as a 'new mode'. Arthur Young noted sheepfolds enclosed by 'thick turf walls' in 1813 (Sussams 1996, 104-5).

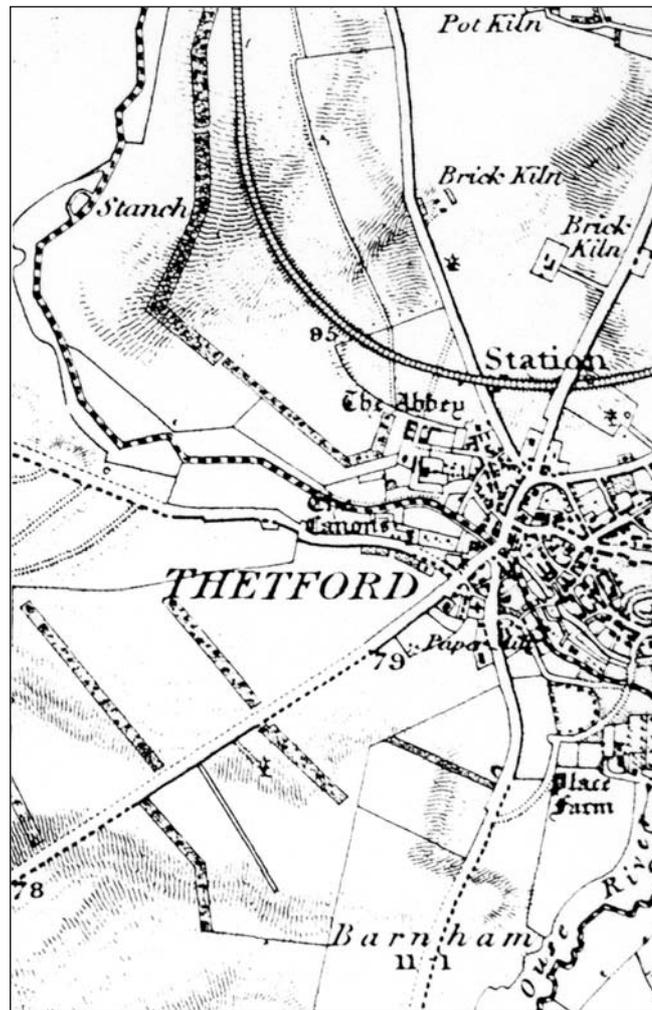


Figure 6. Ordnance Survey 6" map (detail)

The excavated evidence shows that the bank as we see it dates to the post-medieval period and may be part of that extensive enclosure and replanning of the Breckland landscape. However, given the observations and excavations made in the 1950s, it is clear that the Anglo-Saxon bank and ditch lies on effectively the same general line, although Knocker's excavation in 1959 showed that the bank he saw stood *above* the filled-in Late Saxon ditch and must therefore be considerably later.

The relationship of the excavated evidence and the long profile across the monument shows that any natural deposits must lie a little below the lowest point reached by the Community Excavation and that the grey stony sand ([4]) was therefore a deliberate deposit, probably part of the post-medieval bank.

In conclusion, the excavated bank is of post-medieval date, although the earlier observations and the apparent continuity of the Late Saxon line suggests the ditch must lie below or immediately in front of the Town Bank.

A brief summary of this work will be published in the 'Recent Archaeology' section of *Norfolk Archaeology*.

Acknowledgements

NAU is grateful to the Thetford Society and to The Ancient House Museum for commissioning and funding this project. Fieldwork was carried out by the participants of the Community Excavation under the supervision of the writer, assisted by Zoë Way and Adam Barker. Finds were recorded and analysed by Lucy Talbot, Sarah Bates and Andrew Rogerson.

This report was edited by Alice Lyons and produced by David Dobson.

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Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context	Type	Description	Period
1	Deposit	Leaf litter, garden debris and modern rubbish	Modern
2	Deposit	Sand with small stones; dark ochre grey and humic at top grading down to a lighter and less humic ochre sand.	Post-medieval
3	Deposit	Mid-orange-brown compacted sand/gravel. Frequent small flints	?Post-medieval
4	Deposit	Mid-grey sand. Frequent small flints	?Post-medieval
5	Deposit	Lens of 19th-century rubbish (a deliberate dump)	Modern
6	Deposit	Light ochre sand. Almost stone-free, possibly windblown sand in origin	?Post-medieval

Appendix 1b: OASIS feature summary table

Period	Feature type
Post-medieval (1540-1900)	Bank
Modern (1900-2050)	Deposit

Appendix 2: Finds by Context

Context	Material	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Period
Unstratified	Pottery	1	0.024	Medieval
2	Pottery	6	0.057	Medieval to post-medieval
	Ceramic Building Material	5	0.306	Post-medieval
	Copper alloy – SF1	1	-	Post-medieval
	Iron - nails	2	-	-
	Flint - worked	11	-	Prehistoric
	Coal	-	0.001	-
	Coke	-	0.002	-
5	Pottery	292	9.803	Modern
	Ceramic Building Material	46	5.163	Post-medieval
	Mortar	2	0.107	
	Clay tobacco pipe	3	0.015	Post-medieval
	Iron - objects	29	-	Post-medieval
	Glass - bottle	46	-	Post-medieval
	Glass - window	10	-	Post-medieval
	Stone - SF2	1	-	Post-medieval
	Coal	-	0.031	-
	Animal bone	-	0.239	-
	Shell - Cockle	-	0.005	-

Appendix 2b: NHER finds summary table

Period	Material
Unknown	Iron nails, coal, coke, mortar, animal bone, shell
Prehistoric (500000BC to 42AD)	Flint (worked)
Late Saxon (851 to 1065AD)	Pottery
Medieval (1066 to 1539AD)	Pottery
Post-medieval (1540 to 1900AD)	Pottery, ceramic building material, copper alloy, clay tobacco pipe, iron objects, bottle and window glass, stone,
Modern (1900 to 2050 AD)	Pottery

Appendix 3: Pottery

Context	Type	Sherd count	Period
Unstratified	Thetford ware, rim, rouletted	1	Late Saxon to medieval
2	Thetford ware, rim	1	Late Saxon to medieval
	Thetford ware, body sherd	1	Late Saxon to medieval
	Thetford ware, basal sherd	1	Late Saxon to medieval
	St Neot's ware, basal sherd	1	Early medieval
	Glazed red earthen ware sherd	1	16th to 18th century
	Lid of teapot	1	18th century

Appendix 4: Ceramic Building Material

Context	Form	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Period
2	Roof tile	4	0.279	Post-medieval
	Pan tile	1	0.027	Post-medieval
5	Brick	4	0.949	Post-medieval
	Roof tile	3	0.228	Post-medieval
	Pan tile	39	3.986	Post-medieval

Appendix 5: Flint

Context	Type	Quantity
2	Single platform flake core	1
	Flake	4
	Shatter piece	1
	Retouched flake	3
	Utilised flake	1
	Struck fragment	1
	Building fragment	1

Appendix 6: Small Finds

Small Find	Context	Quantity	Material	Object Name	Description	Date
1	2	1	Copper alloy	Buckle	Fragment of tinned double loop trapezoidal buckle; with moulded lobed protrusion either end of strap bar; bevelled outside edge. (Whitehead 2003, no.513)	c. 1620-1680
2	5	1	Stone	Pestle	Fragment	Post-medieval

Appendix 7: Catalogue of other metal objects (not small found as they have no archaeological significance)

Context	Quantity	Material	Object Name	Description	Date
5	3	Iron	Heel Irons	Angular, and fullered. Possibly from a marshman or clay diggers boot/clog. (F. Collinson, pers. comm.)	19th century
	3	Iron	Heel iron	Curved	Post-medieval
	1	Iron	Gas cooker fitting		Post-medieval
	2	Iron	Bolts		Post-medieval
	1	Iron	Screw		Post-medieval
	1	Iron	Staple	Incomplete	Post-medieval
	2	Iron	Strip	Fragments	Post-medieval
	1	Iron	Collar	Fragment	Post-medieval
	1	Iron	Wire	Fragment	Post-medieval
	1	Iron	Fitting	Unidentified	Post-medieval
	13	Iron	Sheet	Thin fragments	Post-medieval