

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 893

**An Archaeological Excavation
at Swannington Hall,
Norfolk**

(As prepared for Norfolk Archaeology)

7739 SWT

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MULTI-PERIOD ACTIVITY AT A MEDIEVAL MOATED SITE: EXCAVATIONS AT SWANNINGTON HALL, 2002

by Mavis Whitmore and David Robertson

with contributions by Richenda Goffin, Sarah Bates, Julie Curl and Alice Lyons

SUMMARY

Archaeological evaluation and excavation by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit to the east of the moat at Swannington Hall produced important evidence about activities dating between the prehistoric and modern periods. The earliest objects found were residual flint flakes of possible Neolithic date and later Romano-British pottery sherds. A possible pit and ditch of medieval date were uncovered, along with a late medieval or post-medieval rectangular post-hole and beam slot built structure. Shallow medieval linear features probably marked garden or kitchen garden plots associated with the medieval manor house; they were cut by pits of post-medieval date.

1.0 Introduction

(Fig. 1)

In April 2002 an archaeological evaluation was conducted by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit at Swannington Hall (Historic Environment Record (HER) 7739; NGR TG 1385 1930). It was followed immediately by an excavation in part of the evaluation area. The work was carried out in advance of the construction of a new garage and stable block and was generously funded by the owner of the Hall, Terry Weston.

2.0 Geology and Topography

(Fig. 1)

Swannington Hall is situated on the north side of the valley of a tributary of the River Wensum, about 0.5km to east of the village of Swannington, in central Norfolk. It lies on relatively level ground at approximately 20m OD and is surrounded by pasture, arable land and wooded plantations. The underlying geology is a chalk bedrock, overlain by boulder clay and in turn by alluvial and colluvial deposits.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical background

(Fig. 2)

Relatively little prehistoric archaeology has been found in the vicinity of the site. Discoveries include pieces of two Neolithic axes, a barrow, part of a Late Bronze Age sickle or knife and an Iron Age "floor" (HER 5005, 7455, 7705, 7706 and 33085). The same is true of Roman objects and features with only a few coins, some mortar and a possible bronze torc (HER 7455 and 7712) discovered close by.

Swannington Hall (a Grade II* listed building) is roughly H-shaped with northern and southern wings. Although subjected to rebuilding in the 18th and 19th centuries, much of the structure dates to the mid-16th century. The presence of

medieval bricks in its fabric suggests the presence of an earlier building on the site (Birks 2000, 4; Havercroft 1997; Rose 1993). This hypothesis is supported by the Domesday Book of 1086 which mentions two manors in Swannington (Brown 1984, 4,32 and 25,6), one of which could have been administered from the site. There are three other candidates for the sites of the manors (Swannington Manor HER 10547, Manor Farm HER 21866 and a moated site HER 29484) but as these are located close together in the east of the village it is unlikely that more than one of them was in use in the late 11th century.

The Hall is enclosed by a wide, water filled, rectangular moat with rounded corners (Fig. 2). This has been infilled at the north-western corner to create a driveway to the building. In 1993 brick footings for arches or gateways and timbers from bridges were observed during cleaning of both the western and eastern arms of the moat. To the east of the eastern arm is a ditch that may have formed an enclosure associated with the moat. An archaeological excavation carried out within the confines of the moat in 2000 - following the demolition of the eastern part of the Hall's north-wing - revealed post-medieval, 19th-century and modern features (Birks 2000).

4.0 The Excavation

(Figs 2 and 3)

Methodology

Eight evaluation trenches, each measuring 3m by 2m, were located directly to the east of the moat within the ditch-enclosed area (Fig. 2). Five were excavated within the footprint of the new garage and stable block, with two to the north and one to the west. The excavation (Fig. 3) immediately followed the evaluation. The excavation area measured approximately 20.5m by 14m, encompassed the complete garage and stable block footprint and contained the site of five evaluation trenches. During both elements of the project a tracked 360° excavator was used (under constant archaeological supervision) to remove the topsoil until naturally formed soil horizons were encountered.

Results

The flat topography of the area and the heavily truncated appearance of the excavated cut features suggested that the ground surface had been artificially landscaped, probably in the relatively recent past.

The earliest datable feature identified was a possible pit *113* found in evaluation Trench 2. As it continued beyond the southern and eastern edges of the trench, its full extent could not be determined. It was only 0.1m deep and contained a grey brown silty sand fill from which seven sherds of 12th-century pottery were collected.

Ditch

A north-to-south orientated ditch *153* cut across the western end of the excavated area. At its southern end it curved eastwards, before finishing in a rounded terminus. The feature measured approximately 1.80m wide, 0.26m deep and was filled with a greyish brown sandy silt clay *130/190*, from which two sherds of local medieval unglazed pottery, a sherd of possibly 14th-century Yarmouth-type ware, animal bone and three residual sherds of Romano-British grey ware pottery were

recovered. The waterlain appearance of the ditch fill suggests that the highly abraded Romano-British sherds may have been washed in from a Romano-British feature nearby. Although the medieval sherds are small and also likely to be residual, they are probably a better indicator of the date of the ditch. Five struck flints were recovered from the base of the ditch terminus and may suggest that it had been cut through an earlier unidentified prehistoric feature. Cutting the east edge of this ditch was a late medieval or post-medieval beam-slot 151.

Beam slot and post-holes

The beam slot 151 was L-shaped and measured about 0.4m wide by up to 0.15m deep. Three post-holes were found to the west of it, whilst fourteen post-holes discovered to the east. These were all relatively shallow with depths ranging from 0.05m to 0.25m. One of the eastern post-holes 108 contained a highly abraded and residual sherd of Grimston Thetford-type ware. It seems likely that the features combined to form an ephemeral rectangular structure, measuring about 11.3m by 3.75m, with its long side aligned roughly north-west to south-east. There is the possibility that all the post-holes and the beam-slot may date to a single phase. If so, the beam slot could either have been an external wall with the three western post-holes forming an annex or an internal division with the western post-holes marking the western outer wall. However, if the features date to several different phases the beam slot could signify the original western extent and the three post-holes may represent an increase in size of the building. As no occupation evidence or hearth was observed it seems probable that the structure would have been a shed or barn (although the lack could be a reflection of truncation). Seven other post-holes were observed in various locations, but none formed part of a readily identifiable structure. One 159 contained a worn piece of local medieval unglazed ware.

Shallow linear features

Numerous east-to-west orientated shallow gullies were observed. These features were predominantly clustered in the south-eastern corner of the excavation area, with a group of three were noted close to the position of the suggested beam slot and post-hole structure and one 115 in the north-eastern corner. Nearly all of these features were extremely shallow (no more than 0.06m in depth). An exception was gully 179 which had almost vertical sides, was 0.6m wide and 0.3m deep, with a rounded terminus. Four sherds of abraded local medieval unglazed ware pottery collected from it suggest a broad 11th to 14th-century date, although their abraded character may indicate a later provenance. The other linear features in the south-eastern quarter of the site appeared to respect gully 179, being parallel to it equidistantly (1.45m) to the north and south.

Pits

At least eight pits were observed within the excavation area. None contained any dating evidence although pit 183, close to the eastern edge of the excavation, did contain fragments of post-medieval ceramic building material. Pits 181, 197 and 204 had clearly been cut through the east-to-west gullies already described, including the substantial vertical sided example 179. All were filled with a mid orangey brown sandy clay, similar in appearance to redeposited natural.

Modern features

Two relatively modern pits were noted in the two evaluation trenches (Trenches 1 and 6) closest to the moat. One pit 123 had been backfilled with a mixed deposit containing modern building materials, fragments of window and bottle glass, post-medieval pottery and a horseshoe (SF16). The second pit 100 was located right on the edge of the moat. It cut into a solid chalk natural and was filled with two layers of rich organic silty sands separated by a deliberate backfill of redeposited chalk which contained post-medieval ceramic building material, two struck flints and a residual sherd of medieval pottery. It is possible that this feature may have acted as a drain to allow surface water to wash into the moat.

4.0 Specialist Reports

Lithics

by Sarah Bates

Eleven pieces of struck flint were recovered from the site (the flint is mid grey in colour with an orange tinge and most lacks cortex). Most are quite sharp, thin, unmodified debitage and some are soft hammer struck. There are several blade-like flakes; one appears to have come from a blade core and one has a possible retouch at its proximal end. The thinness and the blade-like nature suggests that an earlier Neolithic date may be likely and its sharp nature and consistency of appearance indicates that the pieces may derive from relatively undisturbed deposits. One flake differs in nature from the rest (from pit 100), it is very fresh and 'dry'-looking in appearance, has slight traces of mortar adhering to its surface, is almost certainly builders knapping debris and is probably of medieval or later date.

Romano-British pottery

by Alice Lyons

Three abraded Romano-British sherds, weighing 0.149kg, were found in ditch 153 along with local medieval unglazed sherds dated between the 11th and 14th centuries AD and, therefore, are residual. A single coarse ware fabric was identified consisting of an unsourced sandy grey ware, in which only flat jar base sherds were found. The severely abraded nature of this assemblage has destroyed any surface evidence for function (such as sooting or limescale) and decoration. The sherds are not very closely datable and can only be assigned to the Romano-British period generally.

Post-Roman pottery

by Richenda Goffin

Twenty-one fragments of post-Roman pottery, weighing 0.217 kg, were recovered. These included a single abraded body sherd of a sandy grey Grimston Thetford-type ware recovered from the fill 109 of post-hole 108.

Seventeen fragments medieval pottery were collected. These mostly consist of fragments of a sandy medieval unglazed ware. The best preserved sherds, recovered from fill 114 of feature 113, comprise part of the rim and shoulder of a single handmade cooking vessel or jar with flared and everted rim. Both fabric and form are not dissimilar to pottery sherds collected at the production site of Blackborough End, Middleton. The dating of this particular site is uncertain and awaits further study, but it may begin post-1150 and continue into the 13th century (Rogerson and Ashley 1985, 188). The vessel from Swannington, however, is probably of 12th-century date, since it is likely to have been made comparatively locally, and local early medieval ware produced in the central and eastern parts of the county span the period from the 11th to the 12th centuries.

A single abraded fragment of Yarmouth-type ware with frequent sand and shell inclusions was found the fill 130/190 of ditch 153 (along with two sherds of medieval unglazed ware) and dates broadly dated to the 11th and 12th centuries (Mellor 1976, 175). The remainder of the medieval assemblage came from the subsoil 131 and consists of Grimston-type glazed ware. A fragment of a highly decorated strap handle from a jug decorated with incised circular overlapping stamps is likely to be of 14th-century date.

Three fragments of post-medieval pottery were recovered from two contexts. Pit 123 (fill 125) contained a fragment of a late unglazed redware from a container or plant pot. In the same context was a worn fragment of later 16th-century green glazed Border ware from a bowl or porringer with small beaded rim (Pearce 1992, 55). A small body sherd of 17th to 18th-century hard-fired Glazed red earthenware with dark green glaze was collected from pit 100 (fill 102).

Discussion

The oldest objects found during the excavation were residual flint flakes of possible earlier Neolithic date. A collection of these were found together in a medieval ditch and as they were similar in form and sharp, it seems probable that the cutting of the ditch disturbed prehistoric deposits or features. As previous prehistoric discoveries in the Swannington area are limited, the assemblage is an important addition to local knowledge. The same is true of the residual Romano-British sherds, with only a few Roman artefacts known from the vicinity of the site.

No features were discovered to confirm the association of Swannington Hall with one of the manors described in the Domesday Book, although the residual sherd of Grimston Thetford-type ware provides a hint of 10th to 11th-century activity on the site. The earliest surviving feature encountered was a possible pit, the fill of which contained 12th-century sherds. As it is thought that moated sites in Norfolk were first constructed during the 12th-century (Rogerson 1994), the feature could date from around the time the moat was dug.

Medieval ditch 153 was on the same orientation as the north-to-south aligned section of the ditch which survives to the east of the moat. This could suggest that the two ditches were dug at the same time and were originally attached. If so, they would have formed an enclosure separate from the moat, one which may have been laid out at the same time as the moat; the infilling of ditch 153 could then represent the time at which this enclosure was joined to the moat. Another scenario is that the two ditches were not attached but instead ditch 153 was dug and orientated with reference to the ditch which was already in existence to the east. In this case, the surviving ditch would have formed an enclosure attached to the east of the moat and ditch 153 would have served as an internal boundary within, possibly marking a garden plot.

Once ditch 153 had fallen out of use and had infilled a late medieval or post-medieval rectangular structure was built over the top of it. This post-hole and beam slot building was similar in form to examples found at Middle Harling (Rogerson 1995, 25-26) and Thuxton (Butler and Wade-Martins 1989, 26-31). The construction of this building could symbolise the expansion of domestic activity eastwards from inside the moat, although it is more likely that the structure was used for agricultural or horticultural purposes.

It was not possible to determine whether the structure was used whilst the shallow medieval linear features were being excavated and used. The parallel nature of the gullies suggests they were all related, with some used at the same time and others sequentially. Their shallowness means it is unlikely they would have served as substantial boundaries and it is probable that they indicate garden or kitchen garden plots associated with the medieval manor house. After the gullies were no longer needed, and probably once the structure had been disused, a number of pits were dug across the site. Their original purpose may have been as quarries for sand and clay during post-medieval work on the Hall or they could have had an agricultural use.

Although Swannington Hall is one of over 400 moated sites known to have been constructed in Norfolk between the mid-12th to 16th centuries, few have been subject to excavation. Those examined include Hempstead, Kelling (Rogerson and Adams 1978) and Wimbotsham (Shelley 2003). For East Anglia as a whole (Brown and Glazebrook 2000; Glazebrook 1997, 52) most are known only from earthwork surveys and/or aerial photography (Rogerson 1994). The medieval and post-medieval information collected during this excavation is, therefore, of local and regional importance.

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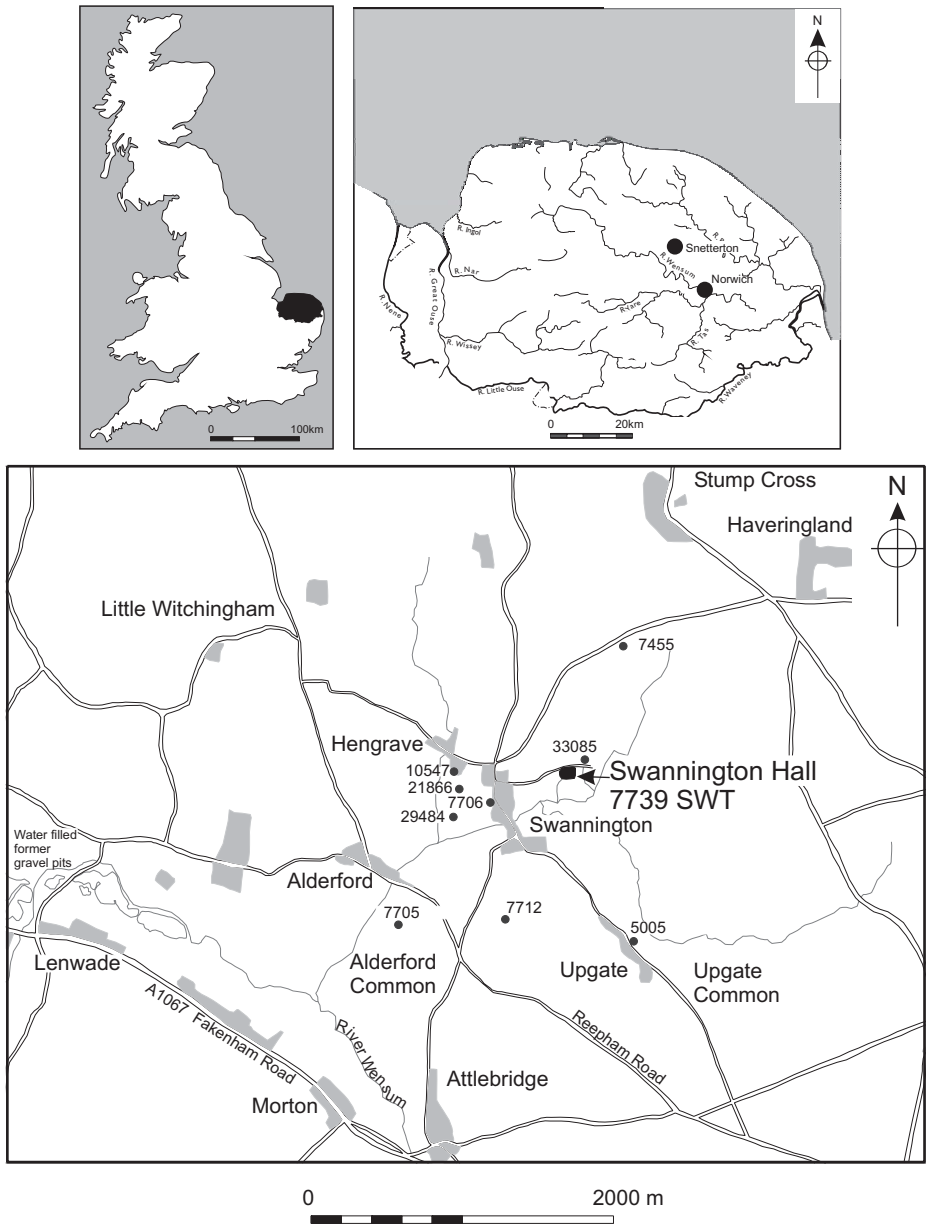


Figure 1. Swannington Hall in its national and local setting. Scale 1:50,000

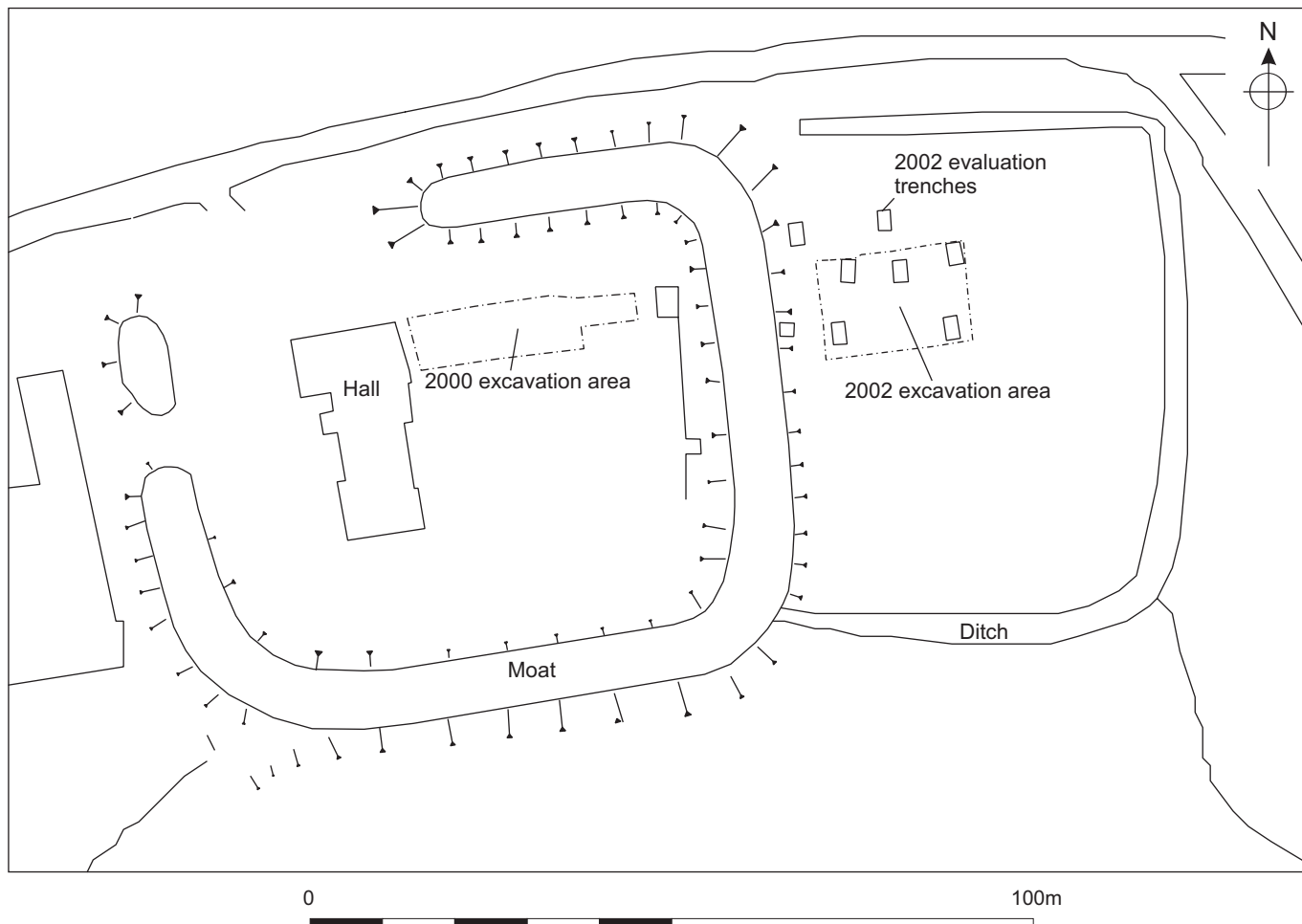


Figure 2. Location of excavation area. Scale 1:1000

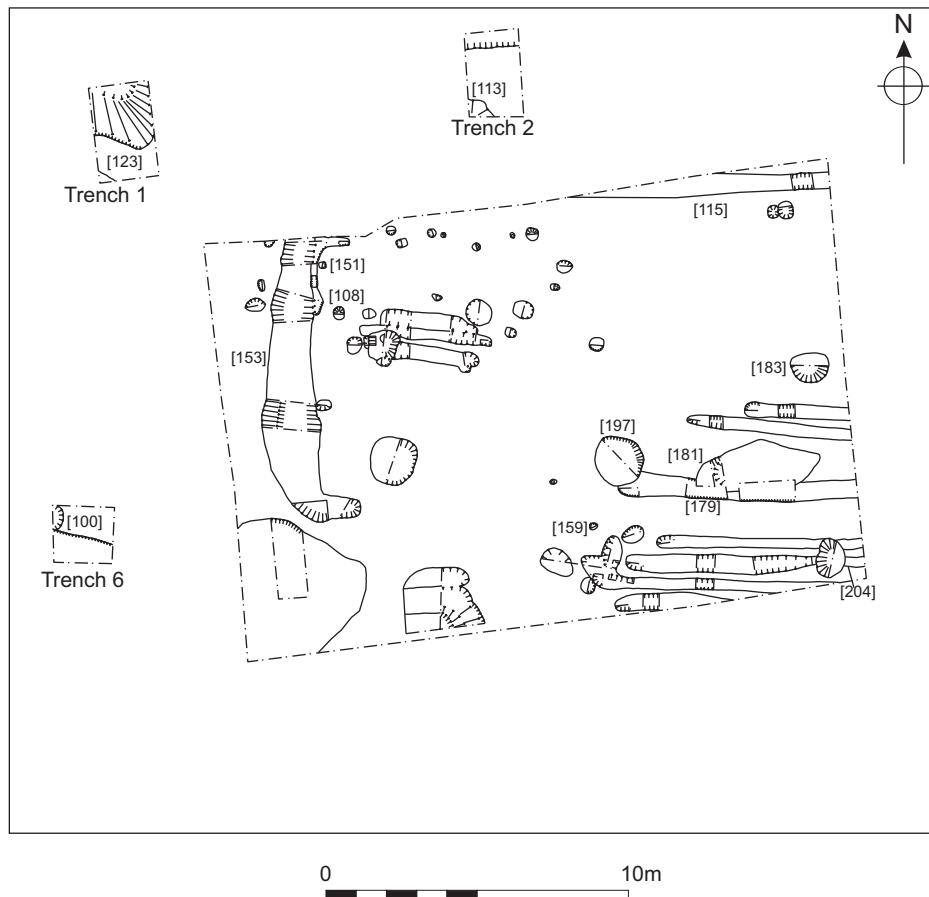


Figure 3. Excavated features. Scale 1:250