



NAU Archaeology

Report No 1316

An Archaeological Watching Brief on land to the rear of Roman Bank Cottages, Wisbech Road, Walpole St Andrew, Norfolk

NHER 50567 WPL

B. Hobbs

January 2008

BAU 1635

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Location: Land to the rear of Roman Bank Cottages,
Wisbech Road, Walpole St Andrew

District: West Norfolk

Grid Ref: TF 4920 1691

HER No.: 50567 WPL

Date of fieldwork: 15th-17th & 20th August 2007

Summary

An archaeological watching brief on land adjacent to an early medieval fenland sea bank was carried out to monitor the excavation of foundations for a residential development. No features of archaeological interest were observed in the sections of the groundworks and other than several sherds of post-medieval pottery no finds were recovered from the site.

1.0 Introduction

The archaeological watching brief was requested by Mr Colin Hopper in response to a Norfolk Landscape Archaeology brief stipulating archaeological monitoring during groundworks for a residential development on land 80m to the north of Roman Bank Cottages, Wisbech Road, Walpole St Andrew, Norfolk.

This archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: EJR 11/02/06 & 02/07/07). The site archive is currently held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, in accordance with the relevant policy on archiving standards.

2.0 Geology and Topography

The site is located in an area of Upper Jurassic solid geology which is covered by marine and riverine alluvial deposits and marshland, being formally part of the Wash estuary. Thick deposits of fine clay formed by prehistoric sea levels laid the basis for peat deposits to form at the edge of the sea reach (Funnell, 2005). These deposits were saturated by a major marine incursion in the Iron Age which gradually dried out during the Roman period to enable a vast Imperial agricultural estate to be created. At the end of the Roman period further inundations returned the land to a waterlogged state, depositing more alluvium until reclamation of the land commenced in the post-Roman periods (Gurney, 1986).

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

The area of excavation lay approximately 6m to the east of the line of the Sea Bank, a fenland sea defence earthwork running from the Ouse at Wiggshall St Germans, northwards then south-west in an arc passing through Walpole St Andrew and ending at Wisbech.

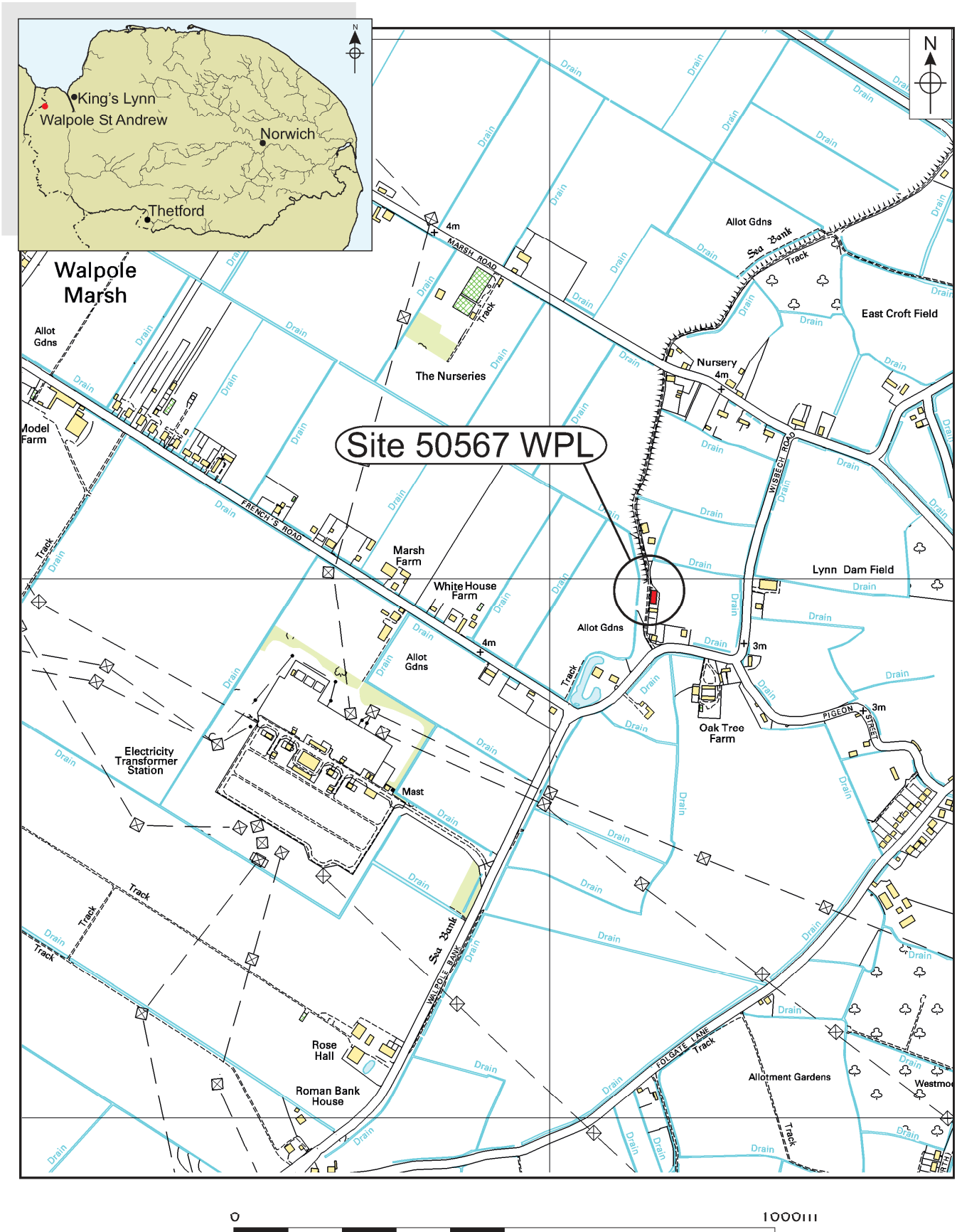


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

Local Authority No.100019340

Fig. 1 is based upon the Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 map with the permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 'Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings' Norfolk County Council, County Hall, Norwich (05/01/05). **Reference copy: no further copies to be made.**

'We would draw your attention to the fact that the *Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988* will continue to apply to the Ordnance Survey map which will be subject to Crown copyright protection. The Ordnance Survey map is supplied for the sole purpose of assisting you to understand the information overlaid on it. Should you wish to use the information in any other way, for example by making multiple copies or issuing copies to the public, then please contact Ordnance Survey and they will advise you as to whether or not you will require a licence' Ordnance Survey (01/01/05)

The bank is thought to date originally from the Middle to Late Saxon period. It was built to reclaim land following periods of marine inundation and was reinforced in the medieval and later periods to eventually shape the present fenland aspect of the area. To the west of the site the bank survives today as a much reduced and overgrown raised feature along which runs a partially metalled track.

Early maps of the region do not reveal much detail of the immediate area; the Tithe map of 1848, for example, just shows areas of farmland. The first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1884 does however depict two buildings within the enclosed strip of land adjacent to the bank, one of which stood on the current site.

The Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER) lists several sites of archaeological interest in the vicinity: Approximately 800m to the east of the site archaeological fieldwalking and metal detecting have produced finds including Late Saxon and medieval metalwork and pottery (NHER No. 20156/20157) and further to the north-east examples of Romano-British and medieval pottery (NHER 21330).

Previous archaeological work in the area consists of a watching brief at the site of Roman Bank Cottages just to the south which had exposed burnt silt deposits, fired clay and early medieval pottery (Tremlett, 2000).

4.0 Methodology

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during the machine excavation of foundations for a residential development. The Brief required that an archaeologist be in attendance during groundworks on the site and to make use of a metal detector during the excavations.

The site had previously been occupied by a bungalow with associated outbuildings which had been demolished and the ground partially cleared. Areas of hardstanding, former footings and services remained to be broken out and removed during the site work. A live electric cable delayed excavation along the west side of the site until it was neutralised.

The groundworks consisted of an area measuring 113.4m² that was fully excavated with the intention that a concrete foundation raft would be constructed to cover the area, rather than individual footing trenches. In addition to this a hole measuring 3m² was excavated on site for a 'Biodisc' sewage treatment plant with associated pipe trenches leading to the property.

Additional excavations on the site included two small soakaway pits, each 1m² and 1.5m deep to the north and south of the main excavated area and pipe trenches leading to and from the sewage treatment plant. These were 0.40m wide and on average 0.50m deep. An angled pattern of pipe trenches of these same dimensions was created in the north-eastern corner of the site to act as a run-off filter from the sewage treatment plant. No features or deposits other than topsoil and subsoil were observed within these trenches.

The building contractor used a wheeled JCB excavator with a 1.2m wide toothless ditching bucket to excavate the footings and treatment plant hole and a 0.40m wide toothed bucket to excavate the pipe trenches.

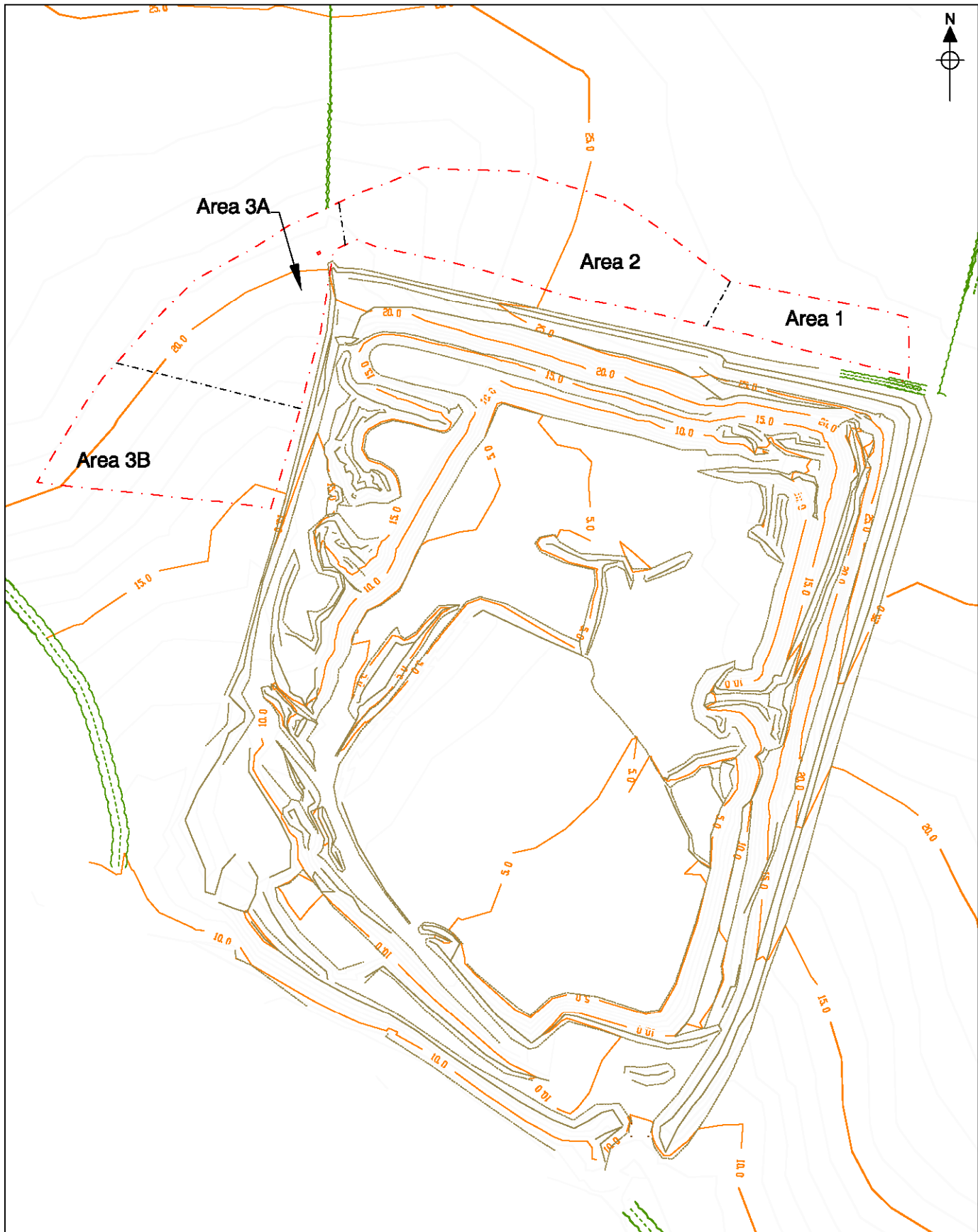


Figure 2. Site sub-divisions and Contours. Scale 1:2000.

Spoil was partly removed to create working space, with the remainder to be later used for landscaping. Working space for the machine excavator was somewhat restricted which entailed a fine degree of manoeuvring on behalf of the drivers.

Spoil and exposed surfaces were scanned with a metal detector. No metal detected or hand-collected finds of archaeological interest were recovered from the spoil of the groundworks: modern artefacts observed in the spoil were not recovered.

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

Conditions on site were generally clear and bright. Site access was from a track leading along the Sea Bank from Wisbech Road.

5.0 Results

The large area for the concrete raft foundations measured 12.6m by 9m and was begun at the north end of the site. After approximately 30% of the required area had been excavated, the site plans were amended to comply with the proposed location of the 'Biodisc' treatment plant. This entailed relocation of the main excavation (moved approximately 5m to the south) and the area already excavated was consequently backfilled and consolidated.

The ground on site sloped gradually to the south and the depth of the main excavation varied due to this. At the north end the depth was on average 0.80m which decreased to 0.50m in the centre and 0.40m at the south end. The excavations exposed 0.40m of dark grey-brown garden soil ([1]) which contained building rubble, grass roots and moderate small stones. Several sherds of black glazed pottery were recovered from this deposit.

Below the topsoil was a mid orange-brown clayey sandy silt ([2]) which extended (at least) to the base of the excavations. This contained very occasional small fragments of mudstone, but was otherwise devoid of major inclusions. The colour and texture of this deposit was consistent and homogenous throughout, when eventually fully exposed within the foundations.

In the centre of the main excavation was a 2m wide area of building rubble that extended 0.30m into the subsoil, as well as the route of a water pipe. Along the western side a small brick-lined chamber was exposed that extended under the section to the west. The cut of this chamber ([5]) measured 2m long by 1.2m wide, with a depth of 1.5m from the surface and appeared to have been lined with plaster. It had been backfilled with rubble and refuse and may have been an old septic tank connected to the original dwelling.

Other than the modern intrusions described above there were no features observed in any of the sections of the main excavated area. The only finds retained from the spoil of the excavations were several sherds of robust pottery with an internal black glaze.

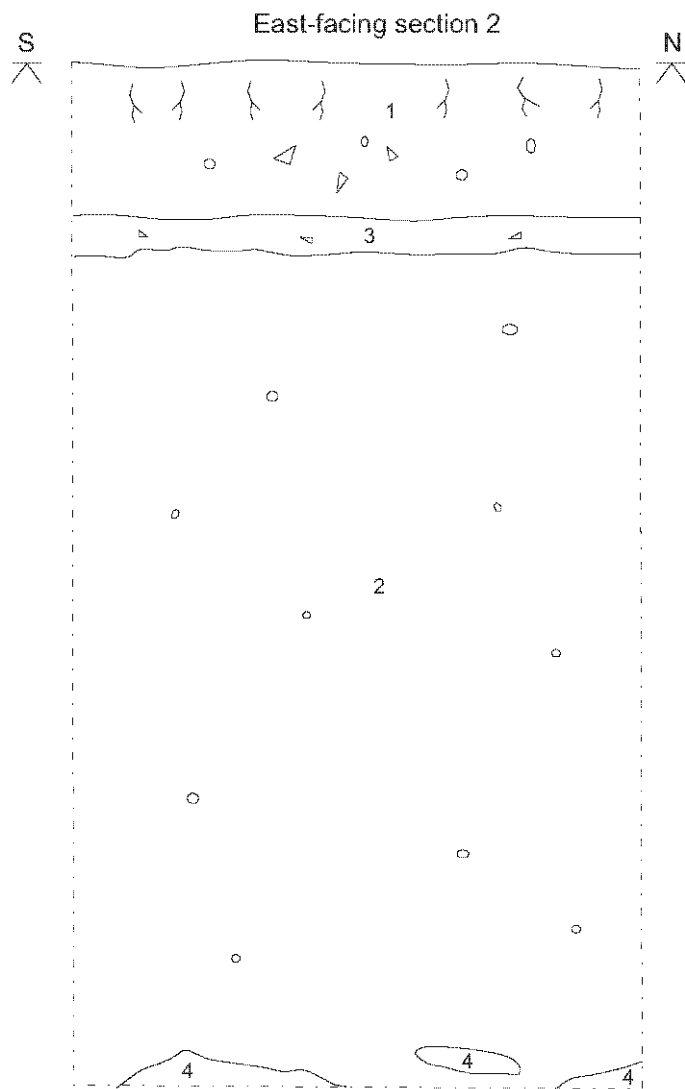
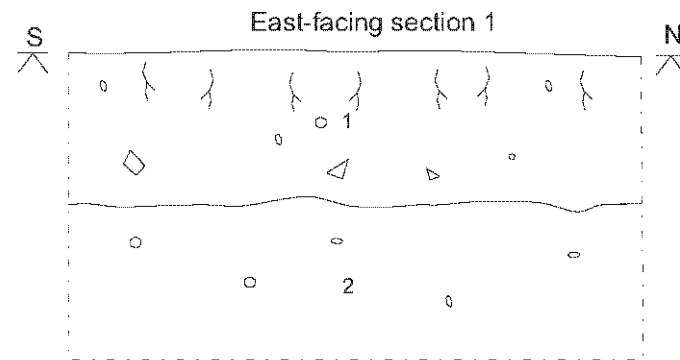


Figure 3. Sections 1 and 2. Scale 1:20

The hole for the sewage treatment plant was located 7m to the north of the main excavation, close to the entrance to the site and approximately 3.5m to the east of the centre of the track running alongside the site to the west. The ground level here was approximately 0.50m higher than that of the main excavation area.

The hole was excavated using a 1m wide toothed bucket and measured 3m² with an approximate final depth of 2.7m. The deposits observed during this excavation were similar or the same as those seen in the main area: topsoil, of an average depth of 0.40m, containing moderate roots and some building rubble overlaid a 0.10m thick layer of ash and clinker ([3]) containing occasional fragments of glass and slate tile. Additionally a modern rubbish pit ([6]) was uncovered in the west-facing section containing rusty iron and broken glass within an ashy silt ([7]). Beneath the ashy layer was the same clayey sandy silt subsoil ([2]) as seen in the main area, which continued to the base of the hole. At the base patches of blue-grey natural clay ([4]) were exposed.

The west-facing section, the side closest to the region of the bank, showed no differentiation in deposition to that of the other sections in the hole and indeed of the excavations as a whole. Consequently no elements of the Sea Bank were identified, despite the potential of the greater depth of excavation in this area.

6.0 Finds

Pottery

Rebecca Crawford

The assemblage was quantified (counted and weighed) by form and fabric (see appendix 3). Identification of the fabrics was based on the typology of Norwich ceramics established by Jennings (Jennings, 1981).

The site produced four fragments of post-medieval pottery weighing 0.283kg. All four sherds were from one vessel which was of black iron-glazed stoneware of 18th to 19th-century date.

Faunal Remains

Julie Curl

One context ([1]) produced a single bone weighing 0.035kg. The bone is a fragment of cattle humerus that has been sawn and cut, attesting to its butchering for food. Sawn bone such as this piece, with evenly-spaced saw tooth marks, suggests a post-medieval date, although some sawn bone is occasionally found in Romano-British deposits.

7.0 Conclusions

The Sea Bank in the area of the site has probably been reduced considerably from its original dimensions by erosion and artificial levelling. Despite its proximity to the area of excavations, no evidence of deposits that might have been related to the earthwork was observed in any of the groundworks. It is possible that during the

levelling of the bank over time, original material may have been displaced to the west of the site.

The deposits seen in the main area of excavation as well as the deeper hole for the treatment plant were consistent throughout, the mid orange-brown silt subsoil visibly extending to an undisturbed depth of at least 2.5m being a product of natural accumulation. The pottery and the fragment of bone recovered from the topsoil during the excavations are of post-medieval date, the pottery from the 18th or 19th centuries.

The early medieval pottery and evidence of hearth material found in the previous archaeological work at Roman Bank Cottages probably designates this as an isolated or temporary habitation site of a type that may have occurred on the protected side of the bank between the main areas of developing settlement, such as Walpole St Andrew. The lack of archaeological stratigraphy and the absence of finds in the immediate vicinity of the current site may merely indicate an area of undeveloped farmland, as depicted on early 19th-century maps.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Mr Colin Hopper for his assistance and Mr and Mrs Eli Frankham for their co-operation and hospitality during the watching brief. The finds were processed by Lucy Talbot. Norfolk Historic Environment Record information was provided by Alice Cattermole of Norfolk Landscape Archaeology and the report edited by Martin Smith.

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Jennings, S.	1981	<i>Eighteen Centuries of Pottery from Norwich</i> The Norwich Survey/Norfolk Museums Service
Tremlett, S.	2000	<i>Report on an Archaeological Watching Brief at Wisbech Road, Walpole St Andrew</i> NAU report No. 539 (unpublished).

Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
1	D	Topsoil	Modern
2	D	Subsoil	Natural
3	D	Ash and clinker layer	Modern
4	D	Blue-grey clay	Natural
5	C	Septic tank	Modern
6	C	Rubbish pit	Modern
7	D	Fill of [6]	-

Appendix 1b: OASIS feature summary table

Period	Feature type	Quantity
Modern (1900 to 2050 AD)	Septic tank	1
Modern (1900 to 2050 AD)	Rubbish pit	1

Appendix 2a: Finds by Context

Context	Material	Description	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Object date
1	Pottery	Body sherd	4	0.283	Post-medieval
1	Bone	Cut fragment	1	0.035	Post-medieval

Appendix 2b: NHER finds summary table

Period	Material	Quantity
Post-medieval	Pottery	4
Post-medieval	Bone	1

Appendix 3: Pottery

Context	Fabric	Form	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Ceramic date
1	IRON	Body sherd	4	0.283	Post-medieval

Key:
IRON Ironstone ware

Appendix 4: Faunal Remains

Context	Total context weight (kg)	Total context quantity	Species	Species quantity	Age	Comments
1	0.035	1	Cattle	1	-	Sawn/butchered meat bone