

Medieval settlement remains in Westoning, Bedfordshire

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SUMMARY

Investigations by Albion Archaeology in 2008 at Westoning Lower School revealed numerous postholes, gullies and ditches, representing the remains of two phases of medieval activity. The earliest phase comprised the partial footprints of three probable buildings dated by pottery to the 12th–13th centuries. Their location suggests that a road on the line of the present-day High Street was already in existence by this time. This road is possibly one of three focal points from which the village of Westoning developed. By the beginning of the 14th century, the buildings appear to have been abandoned and were replaced by ditches demarcating a NE–SW boundary. These had become completely infilled by the end of the 15th century, from which time the site appears to have been used as farmland until the construction of the school in the early 20th century.

INTRODUCTION

Planning permission was granted by Bedfordshire County Council for the construction of an extension to the existing school buildings at Westoning Lower School. Because the school lies within the historic core of Westoning, a condition was attached to the permission requiring the implementation of a programme of archaeological investigation. Albion Archaeology was commissioned by Mouchel to undertake the work. The first stage comprised trial trenching (Albion Archaeology 2008), which identified significant evidence for medieval occupation. As a consequence, archaeological excavation of the footprint of the proposed extension was undertaken in July 2008, in accordance with a brief issued by the County Archaeological Officer (BCC 2008).

SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

Westoning Lower School lies in the north-east corner of the village of Westoning, which is located approximately 20km south of Bedford (Fig. 1). The area of the extension measured *c.* 220m² and was located on the west side of the school, centred on grid reference TL 0345 3260.

The topography of the area comprises a shallow valley through which the River Flit flows

northwards, passing to the west of the village. The site itself lies on relatively flat ground at *c.* 75m OD on a band of Gault Clay. The clay appears to lie on the east side of the village; to the west the geology predominantly comprises Lower Greensand.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The site lies on the east edge of the historic core of Westoning. To the west of the village stands Westoning Manor house, which at Domesday was held by King William as part of his manor of Hitchin in Hertfordshire (Page 1912). It is not mentioned in the Bedfordshire survey, although it was assessed as belonging to the Bedfordshire hundred of Manshead. The manor remained as royal demesne until the late 12th century, after which it passed through the hands of various families.

Close to the manor are a medieval moat and fishponds and the 12th-century church of St Mary Magdelene. The construction of the moat has been attributed to William Inge, who acquired the manor of Westoning in 1297 and who also rebuilt the church in the early 14th century. This area, centred around the church and manor house, is perhaps the most likely location for the earliest settlement focus in Westoning. However, very

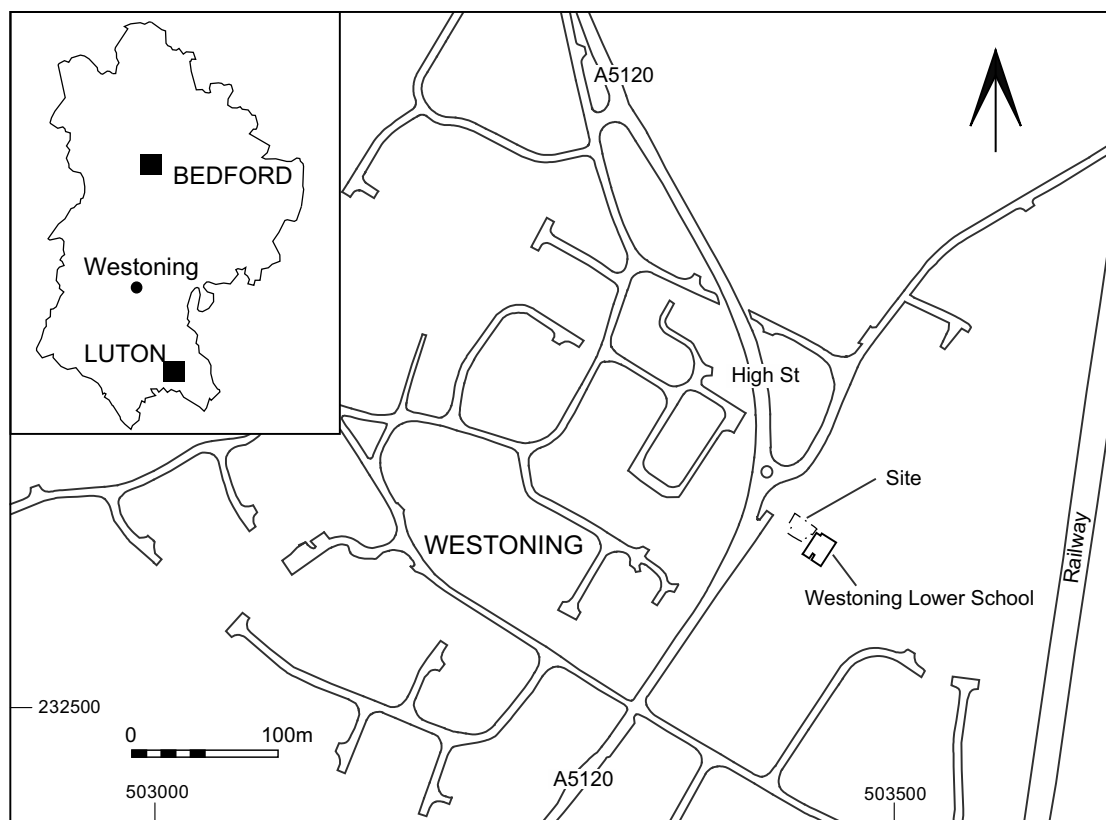


Figure 1: Site location

little archaeological work has been carried out in the village; evidence for its origins is scarce, and pre-medieval remains are limited to scattered pre-historic flint artefacts and some Roman pottery.

By the time of Enclosure in 1842, over half the parish had been enclosed, including the site itself which fell within a narrow strip of land called Fisher's Close, belonging to Samuel Mead. The previous year's Tithe map shows this area as being part of a larger piece of land owned by the same person. On early Ordnance Survey maps, it is depicted as open arable or grazing land until the construction of the school in 1913.

RESULTS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

The excavations revealed numerous postholes together with some associated gullies and three NE–SW aligned ditches (Fig. 2). Artefactual and stratigraphic evidence enabled the identification of two phases of medieval activity. The only hint of

earlier activity in the vicinity was provided by two abraded late Iron Age pottery sherds recovered from medieval features.

The following narrative is presented in chronological order by Phase, and integrates the results of both the trial trench evaluation and excavation with specialist finds reports. Elements within each Phase are referred to by a Group (G) number, which represents an agglomeration of 'contexts' that are closely related both stratigraphically and interpretatively. Some of the Groups have been amalgamated to form Buildings I–III. Detailed information on the pottery analysis is included in an appendix, which contains information on the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series.

PHASE 1: EARLY MEDIEVAL (c. 12th–13th century)

Evidence for the earliest phase of activity comprised numerous postholes and three gullies, representing the partial remains of three probable NE–SW aligned buildings (Fig. 2). The pottery

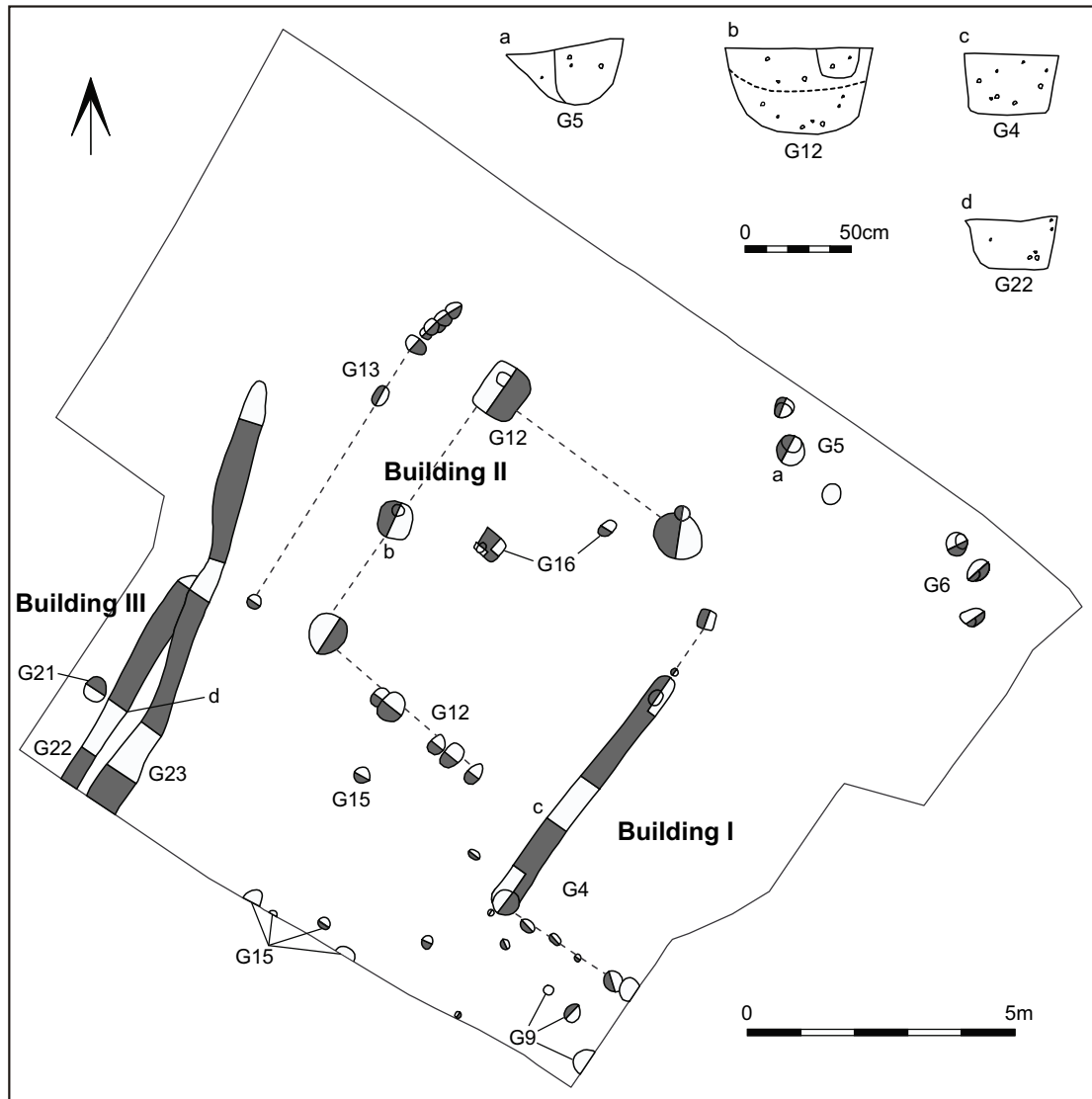


Figure 2: Plan of early medieval remains (Phase 1), with selected sections

from these features is almost exclusively early medieval in date, while other finds are restricted to a few fragments of indeterminate animal bone, and a negligible quantity of fuel ash.

Building I

The partial footprint of Building I measured at least 7m x 3m — two of its sides were visible within the excavation area, defined by a steep-sided gully and several postholes G4 (Fig. 2). The gully defining the north-west wall of the building contained a posthole at both ends. It may have

formed a wall constructed of vertical posts with an infill of planks or wattle, or a horizontal sill with mortised uprights, staves or wattle. The presence of the postholes at either end of the gully and a lack of evidence for any intervening posts perhaps suggest the latter is the more likely.

Smaller postholes were located just beyond the ends of the gully, possibly to accommodate minor supporting posts. A square posthole located beyond the gully probably represents the north corner of the building. By contrast, the south-west side of the building was only defined by postholes

of varying dimensions. Two were intercutting, suggesting replacement of the earlier post. No structural evidence for the north-east side of the building could be discerned, although this may have been due to the presence of modern service trenches.

Building II

Immediately to the north-west of Building I, four post-pits and five postholes (G12) defined the 6m x 4.5m outline of Building II. Three of the post-pits supported the corners of the building, whilst the fourth was located centrally within its north-west side. The three post-pits on the north-west side were all similar in size and form, 0.7–1m in diameter and *c.* 0.4m deep, with steep sides and relatively flat bases (Fig. 2, b). At 0.14m deep, the post-pit in the north-east corner was considerably shallower. Evidence of former posts *c.* 0.2m in diameter was visible in three of the post-pits. They all appeared to have been removed once the building had fallen into disuse.

The south-west side of the building was defined by five postholes. Two were intercutting, suggesting that the earlier post had had to be either replaced or supported by another. No structural evidence for a south-east wall was visible, although given its proximity, it is possible that Building II was an extension of Building I.

Post-pit and posthole G16 are the only evidence for possible internal features. The post-pit was square in form, 0.5m across and 0.34m deep (Fig. 3, a). Clearly visible within the fill of the pit was a darker fill representing a removed or decayed post, *c.* 0.2m in diameter. The frequent medium to large stones in the fill of the pit represent displaced packing from around the post.

A row of small postholes G13 represents the line of a probable fence or a possible extension to the west of the building. Beyond the postholes lay gully G23, which was probably a drainage channel. The deviation in its alignment suggests it respected the line of postholes.

Building III

Part of a structural gully G22 (Fig. 2, d), similar to that of Building I, and a posthole G21 were revealed in the south-west corner of the site, indicating the presence of a further building. In contrast to Building I, no postholes were revealed within the gully. Its relative shallowness suggests it is more likely to have contained a sill to hold the wall structure rather than vertical posts.

Structural gully G22 was partially truncated by gully G23, which appears to have been contemporary with the line of postholes G13 associated with Building II. This suggests that Building III was earlier than Building II, or at least that it went out of use before G13 was added to Building II.

Other Postholes

Various other postholes with no obvious patterning were located in the general vicinity of the buildings. Although there is no apparent spatial relationship, artefactual evidence recovered from their fills suggests they were broadly contemporary with the buildings. Two similarly arranged groups of three postholes (G5 and G6) located near the north-east corner of the site were particularly distinctive. They were 0.3–0.55m in diameter and up to 0.4m deep (Fig. 2, a). An area of dark grey-brown silty clay within their fills indicated where the 0.20–0.38m diameter posts had once existed.

Finds Assemblage

Pottery

Phase 1 features yielded ninety-seven sherds (861g), representing eighty-two vessels and constituting 52% (by weight) of the total ceramic assemblage. Although surviving in fair condition, the highly fragmented nature of the pottery is attested by a low vessel to sherd ratio and an average sherd weight of only 9g (Table 1).

The majority of the assemblage comprises both wheel-thrown and handmade body sherds in a range of fine to coarse, sand-tempered fabrics (types C03, C04, C53, C59A/B, C60, C63, C71) characteristic of the early medieval period. Two contemporary shell-tempered sherds (type B07) also occur. All are well attested types, and are likely to be of local manufacture. The homogeneous nature of the assemblage is of interest, particularly the predominance of fabric types C59A

Group	Description	Vess: Sherd No.	Wt (g)
4	Building I	26:34	469
5	Postholes	12:12	37
6	Postholes	3:3	10
9	Boundary ditch	1:2	5
12	Building II	27:32	273
13	Postholes (Building II)	2:3	6
16	Postholes (Building II)	1:1	2
15	Postholes	5:5	26
23	Drainage gully	5:5	33
		82:97	861

Table 1: Phase 1 pottery quantification

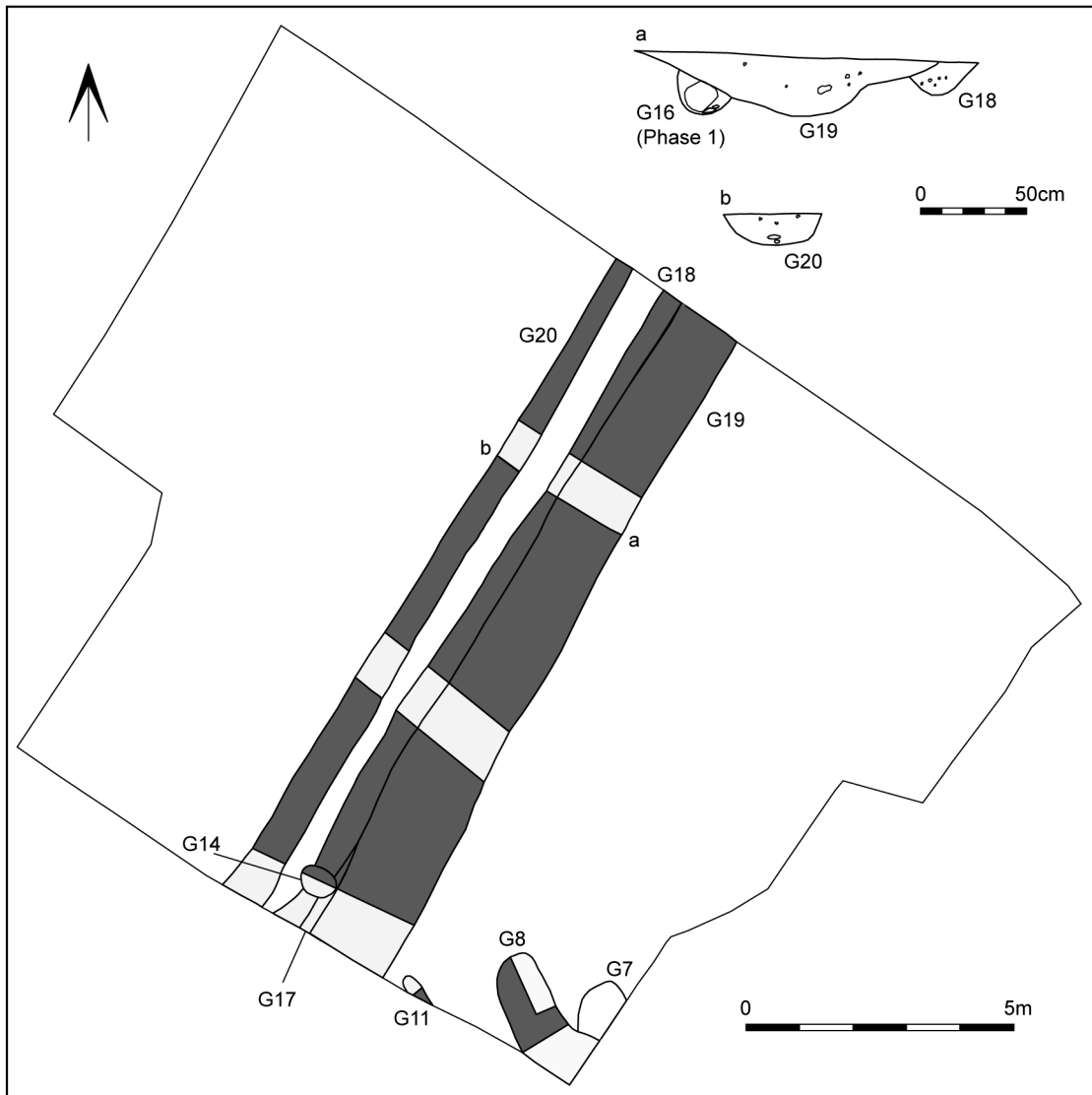


Figure 3: Plan of late medieval remains (Phase 2), with selected sections

and C59B, which together constitute over 97% of the pottery. These types are well attested from sites in the south of the county, for example Chalgrave (Brine 1988) and Grove Priory (Baker in prep.), and their prevalence probably reflects the influence of local geology on pottery manufacture. Diagnostic forms are everted, square and flat-rim jars (one with a combed rim top), and bowls. One body sherd has combed decoration, and the exterior surfaces of a number of vessels are sooted, indicating their use as cooking pots. The majority of the assemblage derived from deposits associ-

ated with Buildings I and II, which respectively produced 469g and 281g of pottery (Table 1). Two abraded grog-tempered, late Iron Age sherds (16g) were residual finds.

PHASE 2: LATER MEDIEVAL (c. 13th–15th century)

The function of the site changed in the late medieval period, with the buildings from Phase 1 being replaced by a ditched boundary. The finds assemblage from the features in Phase 2 is

dominated by early medieval material, with only a few items from the late medieval period, suggesting that this phase of activity ceased by the end of the 15th century.

NE–SW boundary

This phase of activity was characterised by four parallel ditches G17–20, which defined a NE–SW boundary running across the site (Fig. 3). The largest of the ditches truncated two of the smaller ones, with very little of G17 surviving.

Although the boundary was on the same alignment as the Phase 1 buildings, it truncated several postholes, including some associated with Building II. This, together with the range of pottery recovered, suggests that the buildings had been abandoned by the time the boundary was created.

A pit or possible posthole G14 was dug into boundary ditch G18. It contained no finds, but its fill was similar to that of the nearby medieval features, suggesting it was of a similar date.

Other features

Pit G7 and NNW–SSE ditch G8 were partially revealed in the south corner of the site. Although both contained early medieval pottery, they were stratigraphically later than the adjacent early medieval building G4. The ditch also contained a piece of wattle-impressed daub, hinting at the type of construction that may have been used in the earlier buildings. Near to the ditch, a similarly aligned gully terminus G11 was partially revealed.

Finds Assemblage

Pottery

Phase 2 features yielded 102 sherds (744g), representing eighty-nine vessels and constituting 45% (by weight) of the total ceramic assemblage. Sherds are highly fragmented and survive in a similar condition to those of the preceding phase. Fabrics are almost entirely sand-tempered (types C03, C04, C53, C59A/B, C60, C71), and datable to the 12th–13th centuries. The assemblage also includes five sherds (69g) in the late medieval reduced-ware tradition (type E01). Diagnostic forms are everted, square and flat-rim jars; bowls; and a thumb pipkin(?) handle. Two body sherds have combed decoration and one has a plain applied strip. Sooted exterior surfaces attest to the vessels' usage. The greatest pottery concentration derived from the fills of boundary

Group	Description	Vess:Sherd No.	Wt (g)
7	Pit	1:1	2
8	Ditch	9:13	112
18	Boundary ditch	19:21	114
19	Boundary ditch	41:46	335
20	Boundary ditch	19:21	181
		89:102	744

Table 2: Phase 2 pottery quantification

ditch G19 (335g), with the remaining features each yielding negligible quantities (Table 2).

Other finds

Boundary ditch G18 yielded the fragmentary remains of two flat-headed iron nails with short rectangular shanks. One may be a shoeing nail, although its poor condition precludes positive identification. A sand-tempered flat roof tile fragment of late medieval/early post-medieval date (32g) derived from ditch G19, and a piece of sand-tempered daub (128g) with an 18mm diameter wattle impression was recovered from ditch G8.

Faunal remains comprise nine abraded fragments (29g) recovered from the upper fills of ditches G8, G18 and G20. Diagnostic elements are long-bone fragments from a large mammal of indeterminate species, two incomplete sheep/goat teeth, a number of amphibian bones and a mouse tooth, the latter deriving from the sieved residues of soil samples.

DISCUSSION

Although recorded at Domesday, there is scant archaeological evidence for Westoning's early origins. The remains revealed within the grounds of Westoning Lower School are, therefore, significant, as they confirm the presence in the early medieval period of settlement to the east of the present village centre, apparently respecting the alignment of what is now the High Street.

Artefactual evidence indicates that the probable early medieval buildings were houses, or out-buildings associated with houses, constructed of earth-fast posts and walling of either timber or wattle. Their proximity to and alignment on the present-day High Street suggest that they, or adjoining properties, may have fronted this road as it existed in the 12th–13th centuries. It is this road that is likely to have provided a focus for settlement in this part of the village.

Early maps of the village indicate that Westoning may have developed from more than one focal point (Fig. 4). The locations of these *foci* are likely to have been:

1) in the vicinity of the parish church and manor house on the west edge of the village; 2) along Church Road and around its junction with Tyburn Lane, where the layout also suggests the presence of a green or market place; and 3) along the Toddington to Flitton road, on which the school site is located.

It is possible that the granting of a weekly market and annual fair in 1303 (Page 1912) influenced the development of the village. If the market was held in the vicinity of Church Road and Tyburn Lane, which is the most centrally placed of the three *foci* and has evidence for a market place, it might have drawn settlement towards that area, possibly to the detriment of the other two *foci*. The period around the granting of the market and fair at

the beginning of the 14th century certainly seems to have been a time of decline and abandonment for the settlement at the school site. However, this apparent decline also corresponds with a period in medieval history when there was widespread economic decline and agricultural recession that contributed to the shrinking and desertion of many villages. The region of Bedfordshire located on Gault Clay, within which Westoning partly lies, is an area where the densest distribution of shrunken sites occurs in the county (Lewis *et al.* 1997, 149).

The later medieval boundary ditch that superseded the buildings continued to respect the alignment of the nearby road but did not tie in with any of the later boundaries shown on historical maps. These ditches appear to have become completely infilled by the end of the medieval period, with the land in the vicinity of the site remaining as open fields until the construction of the school in the early 20th century.



Figure 4: Possible medieval development foci of Westoning

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APPENDIX: POTTERY ANALYSIS

METHODOLOGY

The investigations yielded 206 sherds, representing 177 vessels, weighing 1.7kg. The pottery was examined by context, and fabric types and form codes identified in accordance with the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series (see below). Quantification was by minimum vessel and sherd count, and weight. The condition of the pottery from each context was noted, and attributes such as decoration, manufacture, levels of abrasion and evidence of function (residues, sooting and wear marks *etc.*) were recorded.

CERAMIC TYPE SERIES

Pottery fabrics, based on surface appearance and major inclusion types, are summarised below by chronological period (Table 3), using type codes and common names in accordance with the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series, currently maintained by Albion Archaeology. Detailed fabric descriptions are available from Albion Archaeology; published references are noted below. Full fabric descriptions are only provided where examples have not been previously published. Bracketed numbers after each fabric code denote sherd numbers. No new fabric types were identified.

Fabric code*	Common name	Reference
<i>Late Iron Age</i>		
F06B (1)	Medium grog	Parminter and Slowikowski (2004, 443)
F09 (1)	Sand and grog	Parminter and Slowikowski (2004, 444)
<i>Early medieval</i>		
B07 (2)	Shell	Baker and Hassall (1979, 167)
C03 (7)	Fine sand	Baker and Hassall (1979, 171)
C04 (15)	Coarse sand	Baker and Hassall (1979, 172)
C53 (12)	Sand (pasty)	Baker and Hassall (1979, 177)
C59A (53)	Coarse sand	Brine (1988, 43)
C59B (88)	Harsh sand	Brine (1988, 43)
C60 (5)	Hertfordshire-type grey ware	Brine (1988, 43)
C63 (2)	Flint	Brine (1988, 43)
C71 (13)	Sand (buff-grey cored)	Wells (1996, 113)
C75 (1)	Micaceous**	See below
<i>Later medieval</i>		
E01 (2)	Late medieval reduced	Wells (1996, 113)

* excludes unidentified pottery

****C75 Micaceous:** hard fired, wheel-made fabric with grey-brown to light grey surfaces, and a light grey core. Moderately fine and smooth to the touch. Contains abundant white mica throughout the fabric, but particularly obvious on surfaces where smoothing has brought the smaller particles to the surface. Also moderate amounts of poorly sorted, subrounded to rounded quartz, both clear and pink in colour, 0.1–0.8mm, and sparse, small black patches, approx.0.5mm, where organic matter has been burnt out.

Table 3: Ceramic Type Series