

TRIAL EXCAVATION AT TOP LANE, LAXTON, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Laxton lies in mid Nottinghamshire, about mid-way between the towns of Tuxford and Ollerton, astride the Mercia Mudstone ridge which forms the western boundary of the valley of the River Trent. The village is noted nationally for the survival of the system of Open Field farming. A substantial part of the farmland within the parish has escaped enclosure, by act of Parliament or private agreement; the unenclosed land is organised into three open fields, with tenants holding land in strips distributed across the three fields. The open fields are ringed by a number of farmsteads and closes with their origins in piecemeal enclosure, principally in the 18th century.

As well as the open fields the parish contains a number of notable earthworks, including a fine medieval motte and bailey castle, medieval fishponds and a number of mill mounds. The village itself comprises the open field farmsteads and a variety of other buildings. The majority of the village buildings date from the 18th and 19th centuries; many have been altered and added to in the recent past.

Though much has been written on the history of Laxton and in spite of its historic character and undoubted importance, there is little archaeological evidence for the development of the village or the parish landscape. Recent work has attempted to consolidate existing archaeological information about the village (Challis 1993) although its potential in this respect remains largely unknown, and no systematic excavation has ever been undertaken.

TRIAL EXCAVATION

During the Autumn of 1993 the Trent & Peak Archaeological Trust carried out trial excavation, on

behalf of Newark and Sherwood District Council and the Crown Estate Commissioners (owners of the estate), on a site on the western edge of the village, earmarked for new affordable housing. This short report contains a summary of the results of this excavation. Those requiring further details should consult the excavation archive, a copy of which has been lodged with the Nottinghamshire Sites and Monuments Record.

The site, which comprises two adjacent, narrow, ploughed fields, bounded by low hedges, lies on the north side of Top Lane (Fig. 1). The position of the fields within the village and their general layout suggests that though now given over to agriculture, they were originally tofts and crofts intended for occupation. The surface level of the fields is some 1.5m above that of Top Lane, which at this point is a wide, shallow hollow-way. The field surface rises gently to the north, reaching its maximum height some 150m from Top Lane. From here the field surface falls gently northwards towards Hall Lane which marks its northern edge. The southern edge of the site is bounded by a low bank with a ditch on its south side (Figs. 2 and 4). The ditch survives only as a slight hollow, but local people report that before its deliberate backfilling it was a substantial open dyke, with a stone paved path on its northern side. It may perhaps be the remnants of a medieval toft boundary.

Documentary sources indicate that the site has not been built upon since at least the early 17th century (both fields are shown as vacant in the earliest surviving map of Laxton, dated 1635, and on all subsequent maps). The terrier for the 1635 map (Orwin and Orwin 1938) describes both fields as comprising a number of croft lands, which suggests that they may have been ploughed at that time. Subsequent surveys are equivocal about land use; however, field 7823 is

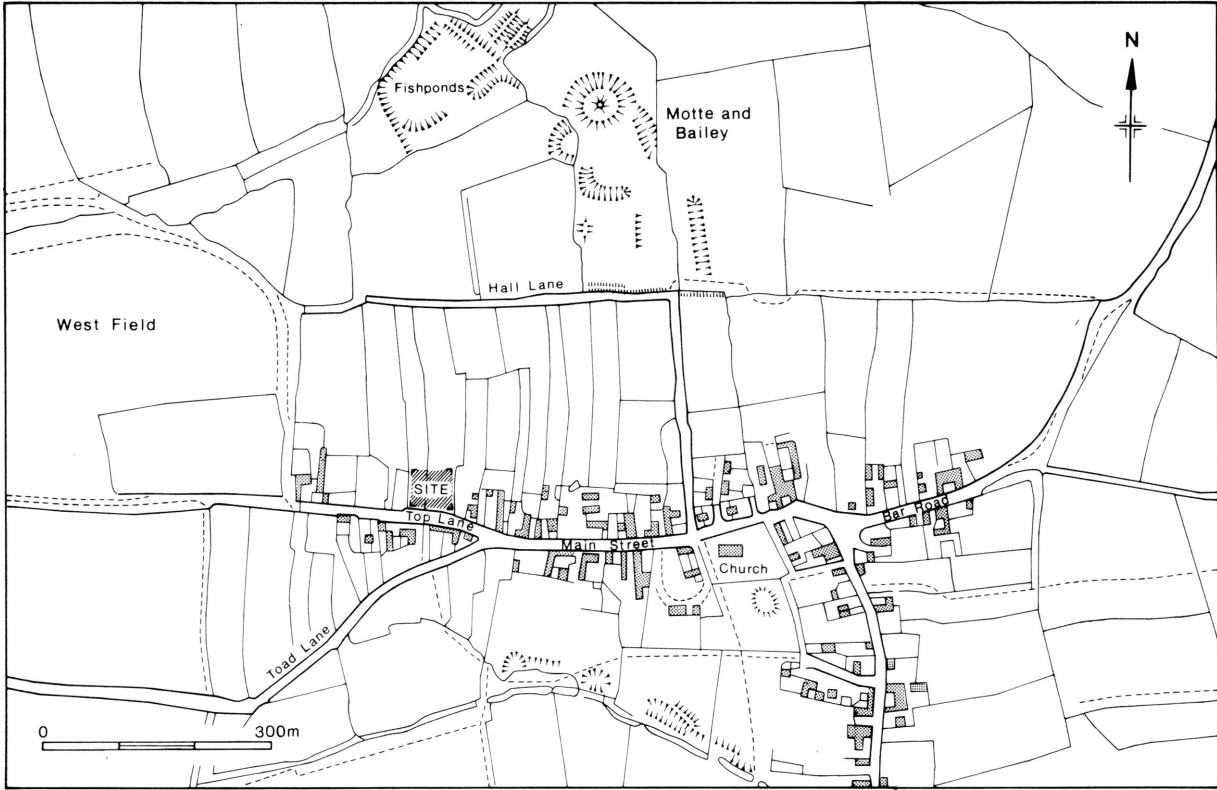


FIGURE 1: Laxton: Plan of the Village showing the location of the trial excavation.

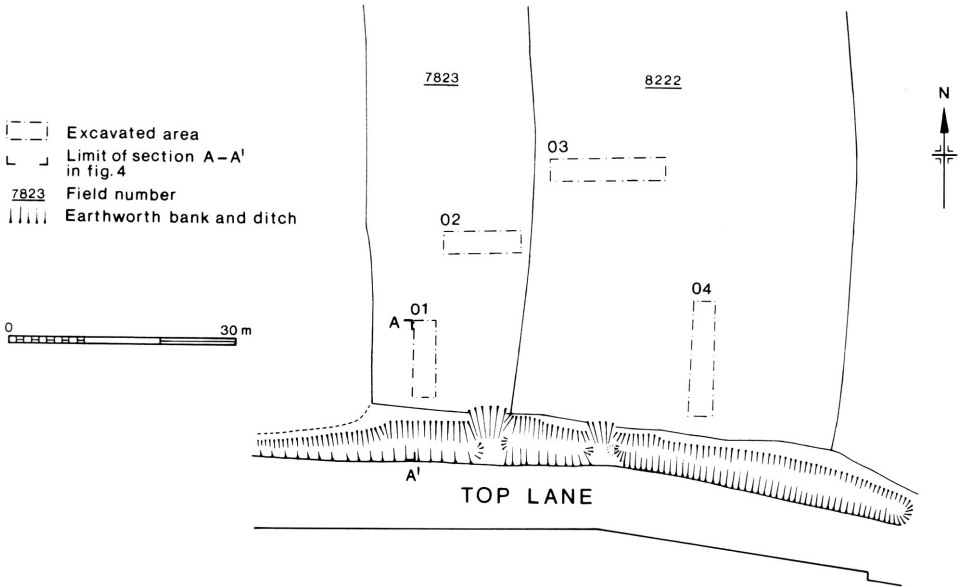


FIGURE 2: Laxton: Plan of the southern end of fields 7823 and 8222 showing the earthwork bank and ditch on the southern field boundary and the location of trial trenches 01 - 04.

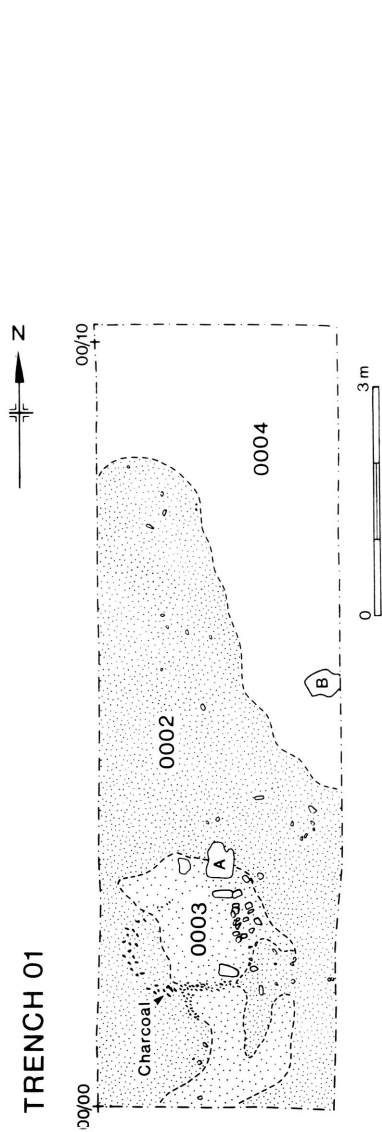


FIGURE 3: Laxton: Plan of trench 01, archaeological deposits are shown stippled.

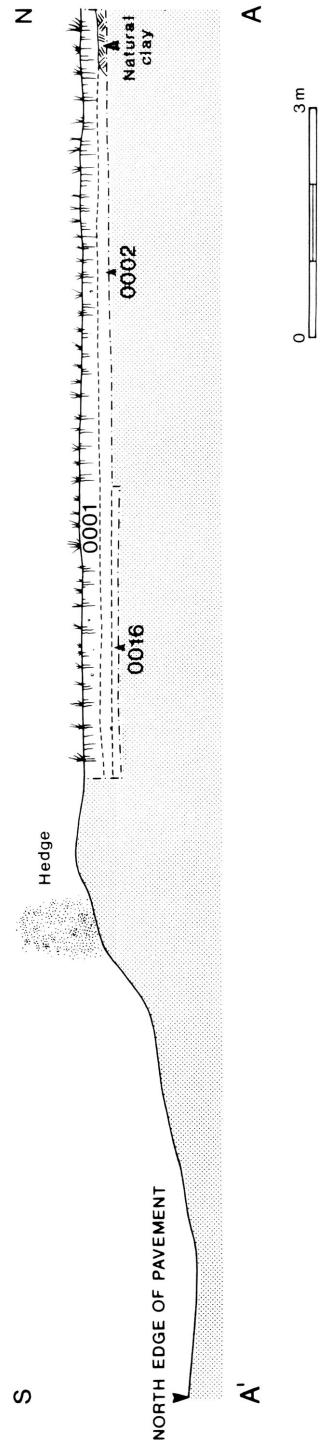


FIGURE 4: Laxton: Profile of the earthworks at the southern boundary of field 7823 also showing the section through the excavated archaeological deposits.

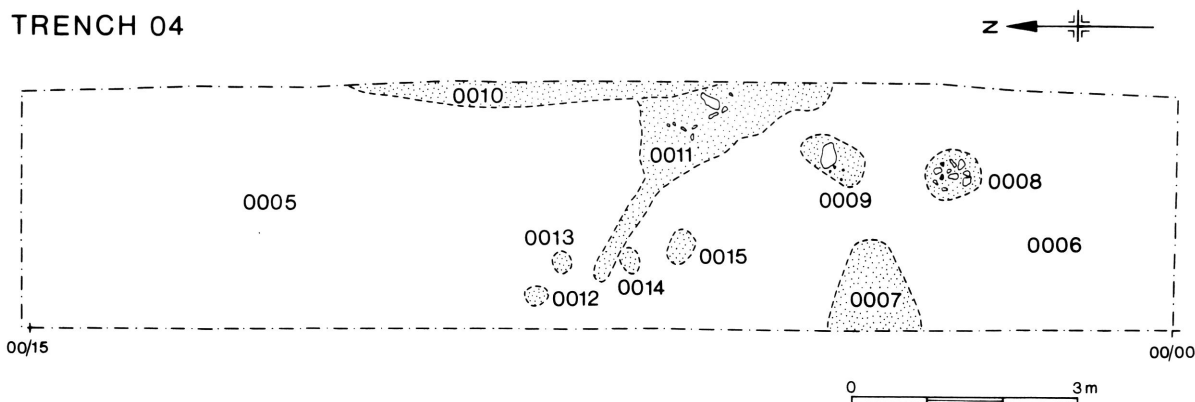


FIGURE 5: Laxton: plan of trench 04, archaeological features are shown stippled.

named on a number of maps as 'Bull Close' which might imply that it served as pasture for a time (Field 1989, 32).

Four trial trenches were excavated, positioned to examine a sample of the area to be affected by the proposed new buildings (Fig. 2). The two trenches closest to Top Lane (trench 01 and 04) produced evidence for medieval occupation, in the form of area stratified deposits and isolated features cut in to subsoil.

In trench 01 a series of horizontal layers (0002, 0003 and 0016), lay beneath the ploughsoil and above the natural subsoil 0004 (Figs. 3 and 4). 0003, a compact red clay, might be a floor surface and was associated with two large flat stones (A and B on Fig. 3) which might be pad stones for small timber uprights. The limited excavation of these deposits produced a substantial quantity of medieval pottery. 0002 produced 58 sherds ranging in date from the 9th to the 16th century, with the majority of 13th to 14th century date. 0016 produced 26 sherds of 13th to 14th century date. A single sherd of 18th century pottery and a fragment of 18th century tile were also recovered from 0002 and 0016. Both are likely to be intrusive, perhaps introduced by the disturbance caused by recent deep ploughing, which has penetrated well into the archaeological layers.

In trench 04 a number of isolated features were identified cut into the subsoil 0005 and 0006 (Fig. 5). These included a roughly triangular feature, perhaps the butt end of a ditch or gully (0007), two small

circular features (0008 and 0009) perhaps post-holes or small pits, two more substantial intersecting gulleys (0010 and 0011) and four small circular features (0012-0015). Both 0009, 0010 and 0011 produced a number of sherds of medieval pottery ranging in date from the 12th to 15th century. 0011 also contained a single residual sherd of middle Saxon northern Maxey type ware.

The two trenches sited away from Top Lane (trenches 02 and 03) contained no archaeological features; ploughsoil directly overlay natural subsoil. The ploughsoil produced a number of finds, including two sherds of Stamford Type ware from trench 03.

THE POTTERY

A small collection of pottery, comprising middle Saxon, Late Saxon, Saxo-Norman and medieval sherds, was recovered from the trial excavation. The majority (75%) of the pottery was from secure contexts, including the stratified deposits within trench 01 and the pits and gulleys within trench 04. A selection of the pottery is described below and illustrated in Fig. 6. Where possible, correlations have been made with known production centres and recognised wares.

SAXON AND SAXO-NORMAN POTTERY

A single sherd of 8th to 9th century northern Maxey Fabric B was recovered from a residual con-

text within the fill of gully 0011. Its occurrence this far east is unusual and at present it represents the only evidence for middle Saxon occupation at Laxton.

The pottery of the later Saxon period was dominated by Lincolnshire products including four sherds of 9th and 10th century Lincoln Kiln Type and four of Stamford Type ware. Both are reasonably widely distributed throughout the East Midlands and therefore, are not unusual finds here. A single sherd of Early Glazed York Type 1b recovered from topsoil, is an unusual find this far south, though a single sherd is also known from Lincoln (J. Young, pers. comm.).

MEDIEVAL POTTERY

Nottingham products are represented by some 40 sherds which closely match medieval material from Nottingham. A further 73 sherds are of unfamiliar fabric and may indicate the presence of further, as yet unlocated, kiln sites within Nottinghamshire, perhaps in the northern part of the county as these fabrics are unknown from the city of Nottingham.

Lincolnshire products are less common in the medieval assemblage. Five sherds of Lincolnshire Shell and Quartz Tempered ware, 11 of Medieval Shelly ware and 9 of Lincolnshire Shelly ware dating from the 12th to 15th century, were recovered stratified within trenches 01 and 04. 18 sherds of Humber ware came from a similar context. In Gainsborough, Humber ware supersedes Lincoln glazed wares in the 14th century and limited quantities have also been found in Lincoln. The presence of this quantity in Laxton suggests that its distribution is more widespread than hitherto thought. 3 sherds probably of Bourne 'A' were also among the medieval pottery assemblage from the site.

LATE MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL POTTERY

Later pottery was virtually absent from all but the ploughsoil. The small collection included Midland Purple, Cistercian Type ware and local coarse earthenware.

CATALOGUE OF ILLUSTRATED POTTERY: FIGURE 6

The pottery was examined under a x10 microscope and the fabrics described follow the formula below:

<i>Colour:</i>	narrative description only.
<i>Hardness:</i>	soft - can be scratched by a finger nail hard - can be scratched with a penknife blade very hard - cannot be scratched with a penknife blade
<i>Feel:</i> (<i>tactile qualities</i>)	smooth - no irregularities felt rough - irregularities felt sandy - grains can be felt across the surface granular - abundant grains felt under surface of slip
<i>Fracture:</i> (<i>visual texture of fresh break</i>)	smooth - flat or slightly curved with no visible irregularities irregular - medium, widely spaced irregularities laminar - 'stepped' appearance granular - regular-sized grains over surface of break
<i>Inclusions:</i> <i>Type:</i>	after Peacock 1977 indicated on a 4-point scale - abundant, moderate, sparse and rare where abundant indicates the break is packed with an inclusion and rare indicates the break has only one or two of an inclusion.
<i>Frequency:</i>	indicates the homogeneity of size of inclusion
<i>Sorting:</i>	angular - convex shape, sharp corners sub-angular - convex shape, rounded corners rounded - convex shape, no corners platy - flat
<i>Shape:</i>	fine - 0.1-0.5mm medium - 0.5-1mm coarse - 1-1.5mm very coarse - 1.5mm or greater
<i>Size:</i>	
<i>Maxey Ware</i> 1 (0011) (Context)	cooking pot; body sherd; red-brown surfaces and margins, mid-grey core. Soft, smooth feel, laminar fracture, abundant, well-sorted, medium shell.
<i>Lincoln Kiln Type ware</i> 2 (0001)	cooking pot; rim; buff surfaces and margins, mid grey core, soft, smooth feel, laminar fracture, moderate coarse fairly well-sorted shell, sparse well-sorted fine sub-angular quartz.
<i>Nottingham</i> 3 (0011)	jug; handle; buff margins and surface, pink core,

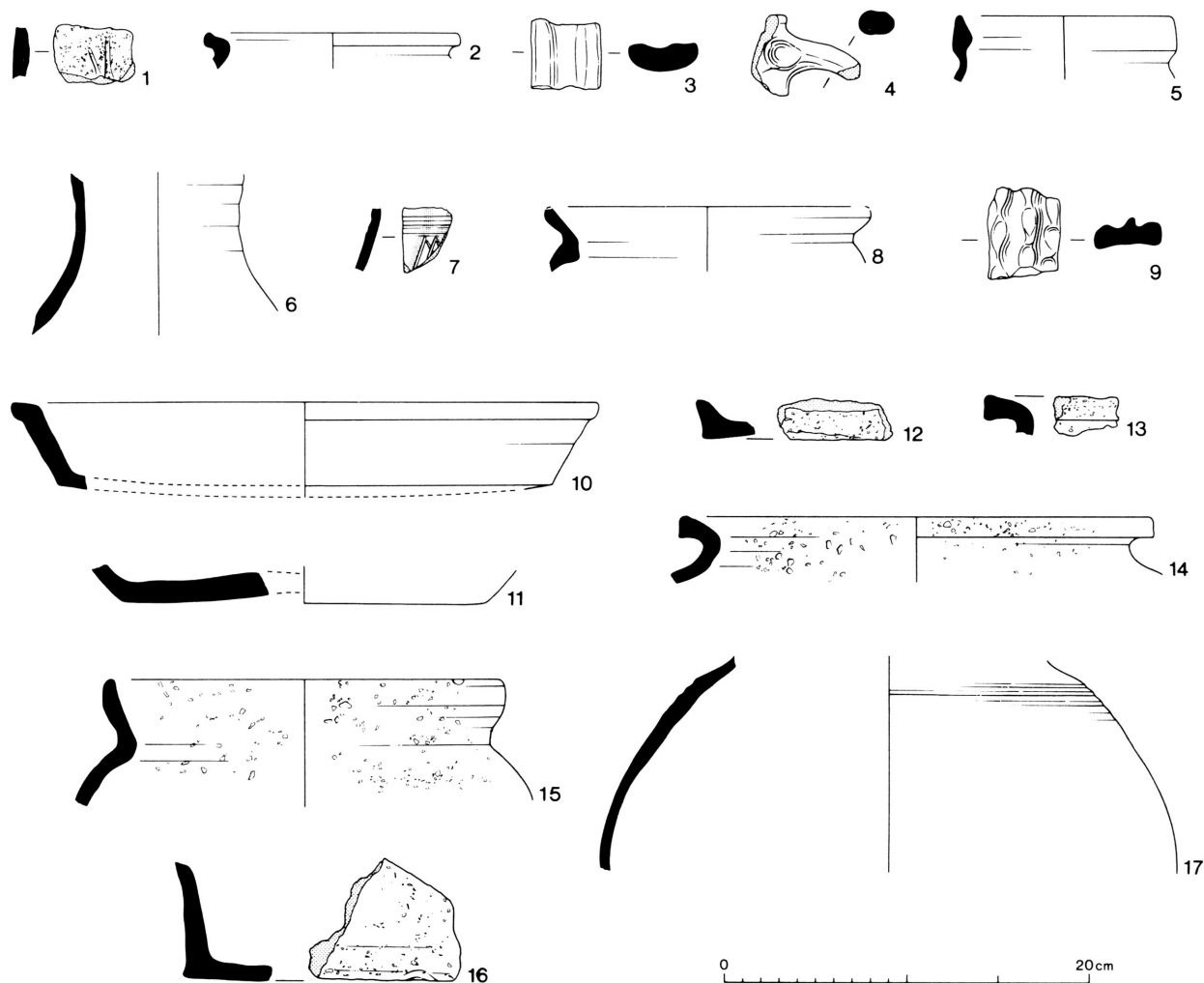


FIGURE 6: Laxton: Selected pottery from the trial excavation.

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|----------|---|--------------------------|--|
| | hard, granular feel, granular fracture, abundant well-sorted fine sub-angular opaque white and rose quartz, rare ill-sorted very coarse limestone, rare, ill-sorted round brown iron oxides. Pale cream slip on exterior and sides of handle, orange-brown glaze on exterior of handle. | <i>Unsorted Medieval</i> | |
| 4 (0016) | jug; thumb-applied handle on neck; orange brown throughout, very hard, smooth feel, finely granular fracture, moderate fine well-sorted sub-angular quartz, sparse ill-sorted fine to coarse rounded brown iron oxides; green glaze on exterior. | 6 (0002) | jug; body sherd; orange throughout, soft, smooth feel, fine irregular fracture, moderate fairly well-sorted rounded quartz; green glaze on exterior surface. |
| 5 (0001) | jug; rim; mid-dark grey throughout, hard, sandy feel, irregular fracture, moderate well-sorted fine sub-angular quartz, rare fine rounded black iron oxides; green glaze on exterior. | 7 (0002) | form unknown; body sherd; red-brown interior surface, mid grey core, soft, very smooth feel, smooth fracture, moderate sub-visible quartz; two parallel grooves following circumference, incised chevron pattern below; green glaze with brown bands following incised chevrons (shown by tone on Figure 6.7). |
| | | 8 (0002) | cooking pot; rim; red-brown surfaces and margins, mid grey core, very hard, gritty feel, irregular fracture, moderate well-sorted fine sub-angular quartz, sparse well-sorted fine round |

- cream inclusions, rare coarse rounded brown iron oxides.
- 9 (0011) jug; handle; orange brown surfaces and margins, dark grey core, hard, sandy feel, irregular fracture, moderate well-sorted sub-angular quartz, sparse fine rounded white inclusions; decorated with three irregular thumbed ribs on front face of handle.
- 10 (0009) dish; rim; red-brown surfaces and margins, mid grey core, soft, sandy feel, irregular fracture, moderate well-sorted fine sub-angular quartz, rare coarse rounded brown iron oxides.
- 11 (0001) dish/large cooking pot; base; red-brown surfaces and margins, mid-grey core, soft, smooth feel, smooth fracture, sparse well-sorted fine rounded quartz; white, powdery calcareous deposit on interior surface, vitrified in places.
- Medieval Lincolnshire Shell and Quartz Tempered*
- 12 (0002) cooking pot; base; red-brown interior surface and core, grey brown exterior surface, soft, smooth feel, laminar fracture, abundant ill-sorted fine to coarse shell, sparse fine rounded quartz.
- 13 (0002) cooking pot; rim; mid-grey exterior surface and core, red-brown interior surface, fabric as 12.
- Lincolnshire Shelly Ware*
- 14 (0011) cooking pot; rim; dark grey interior surface, red-brown exterior surface, grey core, hard, smooth feel, laminar fracture, abundant medium to coarse shell, sparse well-sorted very coarse rounded quartz, lightly burnished interior surface with carbonized deposits adhering.
- Medieval Shelly Ware*
- 15 (0002) cooking pot; rim; buff surfaces and margins, mid-grey core, soft, smooth feel, laminar fracture, moderate well-sorted medium shell.
- 16 (0002) cooking pot; base; buff interior surface, grey-brown exterior surface and core, soft, smooth feel, laminar fracture, moderate ill-sorted medium to very coarse shell, rare fine sub-angular quartz.
- Humber Ware*
- 17 (0005) cooking pot; body sherd; decorated with two parallel grooves on shoulder; mid-grey throughout, hard, smooth feel, finely irregular fracture, moderate well-sorted fine rounded quartz, rare fine rounded brown iron oxides; green glaze on exterior surface.

DISCUSSION

The trial excavation has both demonstrated the survival of medieval archaeological deposits within the historic core of the village of Laxton and served to indicate the potential of archaeology in addressing

the issue of the history and development of the village.

The excavation has produced what is so far the only archaeological evidence for pre-conquest occupation at Laxton. Both the middle and late Saxon pottery was residual and so the precise nature of Anglo-Saxon occupation remains unknown, although speculation is possible. Laxton's north row, of which Top Lane is part, forms one arm of an L-shaped village, with tofts and crofts radiating from north-south and east-west main streets and ending at back lanes running parallel with the two main streets. Examination of early maps of Laxton, in particular the Pierce map of 1635, suggests that the regularity of the village layout might indicate that the L-shaped village was a planned creation, perhaps laid out as a single episode. The date of origin of such planned villages, of which Nottinghamshire has a number, is unknown. In Laxton's case it is possible that the layout of the planned village may be at least in part contemporary with the 11th or 12th century construction of the motte and bailey castle (as argued by Cameron 1980). If this is the case an earlier layout must have preceded the planned village; traces of this earlier layout might survive, either within elements of the later village plan or as archaeological evidence.

Evidence for the date and motive for the creation of a planned village at Laxton is crucial in understanding its early history. The middle and late Saxon pottery from Top Lane may suggest that the planned settlement pre-dates the Norman castle; however since this pottery is residual and so may equally be derived from a stage in the village layout predating the regular plan, such assertions at present remain speculation. Further excavation may serve to clarify the nature of Late Saxon activity and the origin of the planned village.

The medieval pottery from the excavation provides evidence of settlement on the site from the 12th to the 15th century. Once again results from the trial excavation are not sufficient to demonstrate the nature or extent of this settlement, however, the virtual absence of late medieval pottery suggests that the

area was not occupied after the 15th century. This observation may be born out by documentary sources, which indicate that from the later 14th century Laxton experienced a marked decline in its fortunes. This decline was in part a result of nationwide recession and the effects of the Black Death, although local factors, such as the loss of the keepership of Sherwood Forest by the lord of the manor Robert de Everingham in the late 13th century, may also have played a part (Beckett 1989, 14). Economic decline undoubtedly led to a reduction in the village population and the gradual abandonment of formerly occupied tofts.

The principal identified medieval pottery sources were Nottingham and Lincoln. The quantity of med-

ieval pottery from the site with no identified source suggests that one or more new medieval production centres should be sought, probably somewhere within north Nottinghamshire. Likewise, the range and quantity of the coarse medieval pottery from Lincolnshire may suggest another major shell tempered production centre apart from Potterhanworth (J. Young pers comm). From the mid 14th century Humber ware appears to have become more common in Laxton, perhaps reflecting the shift in pottery supply seen elsewhere, for example at Gainsborough. Such a change may have particularly affected Laxton if it received most of its pottery via river-borne trade, though it is perhaps unwise to speculate further on the basis of so small a sample.

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