

The Late Saxon Town of Thetford: An Interim Report on the 1964-6 Excavations

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DURING the 11th century the population of Thetford—at that time the second largest town in East Anglia—moved from their homes on the S. bank of the Little Ouse and re-established themselves on the Norfolk side of the river. The site of the Saxon town, abandoned in this way, remained virtually free of buildings until the present century.

The opportunity of investigating a major late Saxon town presented by this shift of population is almost unique, and is fast vanishing. Already by the 1930s Thetford had spread back across the river and had reclaimed half of her original site. By the end of the 1950s, only a quarter of the area remained free. At the time of writing, this has been reduced to an eighth.

Thetford first made its appearance in the written record as a wintering place for the Danish army in the year 869. Set on the tract of open country running between the forest and the fen, and connected by river traffic with the ports of the Wash and the North Sea (FIG. 39),* the position of Thetford favoured its growth as a trading town. By the reign of Edgar the town was important enough to be the site of a mint, and the East Anglian see was transferred there from North Elmham in 1072. At the time of the Domesday survey the population must have been well over four thousand. Possibly, however, the population was at that date already declining and the move across the river saw the end of Thetford's rapid expansion. The see was moved to Norwich in 1094, though the mint remained in production until the middle of the following century.

That the Saxon town originally lay on the S. bank of the river was unknown until 1947, when T. C. Lethbridge recovered late Saxon pottery from builders' trenches. Between 1948 and 1958, G. M. Knocker carried out excavations on several sites for the then Ministry of Works, and succeeded in establishing the extent of the town (FIG. 41). The earliest Saxon settlement seems to have been near the ford to the west of the later town, in the area subsequently partly covered by the Norman ring-work known as Red Castle. It is possible, however, that there were settlements opposite the other fords and that the late Saxon town grew out of the amalgamation of two or more of these hamlets. By the beginning of the 11th century the town was defended on the landward side by a bank and ditch, and stretched along the S. bank of the river for about a mile. St. Peter's Church

* All the illustrations (FIGS. 39-54) are grouped at the end of the text, pp. 196-208.

on the N. bank is recorded in Domesday as a pre-conquest foundation, but in general there is little evidence of extensive occupation on this side of the river until the 12th century. The great Norman motte, most probably a work of the 1070s, was sited within the defences of an iron-age hill-fort, and is thus likely to have been a cause, rather than an effect, of the abandonment of the S. bank.

The area excavated by Knocker between 1948 and 1952 can now be seen to have lain in a peripheral position near the town defences. With the exception of one large house (possibly boat-shaped) the buildings were small and straggled irregularly along narrow cobbled roads. Metalworking and other industrial activities were carried on in this part of the town, which thus seems to have been an artisans' quarter.

THE 1964-6 EXCAVATIONS

In 1964 the then London County Council and the Thetford Borough Council launched a major housing scheme affecting some seven acres within the western part of the Saxon town. In an attempt to locate specific concentrations of buildings, this area was 'prospected' using proton-magnetometers.¹ The resultant pattern of magnetic anomalies suggested that the entire area had been densely occupied. Eventually a zone was selected in the NE. part of the threatened area, close to areas threatened with destruction in 1965 and 1966, in order that a single compact block of land might be available for investigation over a period of three years. In the course of the three seasons' work, nearly three acres of the town have been excavated.²

Over most of this area the subsoil was covered by little more than a foot of soil, and deep ploughing had penetrated almost to the natural gravel. Farther south the top burden increased to 2½ ft., the upper 18 in. of which proved to be a post-medieval sand-blow. Medieval occupation-débris was thus preserved to a maximum depth of 6 in., and this only in the south of the area to be excavated. In view of the unique opportunities presented by the site, and the rate of destruction, it was decided to strip the entire area mechanically. No doubt this caused some loss of detail in individual structures and the palimpsest of features renders interpretation difficult. It was felt, however, that such factors were outweighed by the advantages of exploiting a larger area.

THE GENERAL PLAN (FIG. 40)

The general plan shows features ranging in date from the 1st to the 14th centuries in a single plane as they were found. No attempt at differentiation has been made at this stage.

¹ I wish to record my grateful thanks to Dr. M. J. Aitken and his colleagues at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford, for undertaking this work.

² The excavations were carried out by the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Public Building and Works, and lasted for some 36 weeks. The work of supervision was carried out at various times by Mrs. S. Davison, Miss C. Finnegan, Miss V. Russell, Miss H. Sutermeister, Mr. J. Cherry, Mr. M. Faragher, Mr. F. Hawtin, Mr. E. Judkins, Mr. T. Miles, Mr. A. Moore, Mr. M. Rowlands and Mr. R. Wainwright. During the 1965 and 1966 seasons the processing of finds was carried out by Miss M. Wood. Preliminary notes on the work of 1964 and 1965 appeared in *Med. Archaeol.*, ix (1965), 173, and *id.*, x (1966), 172.

The most noticeable features are the long boundary ditches, many of which were evidently recut several times. None appears to have been accompanied by a fence, and their filling shows that the spoil was not left to form a boundary bank, but was removed from the site altogether. Under these conditions it is not surprising that the boundaries frequently needed redefining. At least three distinct systems can be seen, and it is clear that the dividing up or amalgamation of properties was fairly common. The pattern of properties is clearest in the western part of the excavated area, where the buildings were large, and here the numerous rubbish-pits were evidently dug along boundaries defined by the ditches. Farther east, the pattern is less coherent: individual properties are more difficult to distinguish, the digging of pits seems to have been more irregular, and the buildings were smaller and more widely scattered.

Across the southern part of the area ran a wide metalled road, from which a narrower subsidiary road ran northwards towards the river. These roads evidently formed an integral part of the layout of the town in its earliest phase, since few features underlie them. However, the buildings and properties do not show any clear general relationship to the road system. The street frontages have not been built up as might have been expected. It would seem rather that we are here dealing with an 'open-plan' town across which ran a network of arterial roads.

The various late Saxon features are overlain by the chalk-built walls, corn-drying ovens and wells of farms established in the 13th century.

THE STRUCTURES (FIGS. 42-52)³

With the exception of one circular hut of the 1st century A.D., the earliest structures are four sunken-floored huts or *Grubenhäuser* (FIG. 42). These vary in length from 11 to 20 ft. and were dug some 2 ft. into the ground. The basic structure was simple, the floors being flat and the sides of the sunken areas almost vertical. The roof consisted of a ridge supported by two single uprights; no trace was found of any wall-material. In one hut entry was by a step in one corner, in another by a door in the middle of one of the long sides. Only one of the huts had been heated. The smallest of the four was apparently fitted with some large item of equipment requiring to be fastened to the floor. Otherwise, there was no indication of their function.

The four sunken-floored huts appear to have stood alone. The remainder of the buildings are later. These vary in length from 17 ft. to more than 110 ft., the largest buildings lying in the western part of the excavated area. The construction would appear to have been of timber throughout, since no trace of daub or any other wall-material could be detected. Only one of the buildings was provided with a permanent hearth, but it is possible that in the others braziers were used when required.

The westernmost building clearly outshone the others in size and importance. It was a great aisled hall, G, over 110 ft. long (FIG. 43). Although the main uprights

³ It is clear that further analysis will reveal other structures. For the sake of brevity, only the more complete plans are illustrated and described here.

were evidently rather irregularly placed both in alignment and interval, the shallowness of the post-sockets indicates that the building must have been adequately braced above ground level. No internal partitions can be distinguished with any certainty, but the shallow settings of the main structural members suggest that minor features may have left little or no trace.

The neighbouring building to the east appears to have been a cumulative structure. The central unit C (FIG. 44) seems to have been built first, with straight sides and bowed-out gables. This nucleus was extended some 48 ft. to the south by building D (FIG. 45). Possibly about the same time or slightly later the nucleus was also extended northwards for a further 40 ft. by building B (FIG. 46), the three component units now giving a total length of 135 feet. Finally, the northern part of this range was demolished and a large hall, E, 70 ft. long, was built across its site at right angles to the old axis (FIG. 47). The principle of above-ground bracing was by now fully grasped and the framework of the building was reduced to a series of trussed couples. Apparently, however, difficulty was still being experienced in laying-out, for an error of 5 degrees in the right angle was repeated cumulatively along the building from west to east, finally necessitating the last minute insertion of extra frames in the eastern part of the building and an extra post at the SE. corner. The use of short lengths of ground-sill in the middle of the S. wall may reflect the existence of an exterior stair at this point leading to an upper floor.

There is a sharp contrast between the halls and long range just described and the buildings lying farther east, none of which achieved a length greater than 30 feet. Building F (FIG. 50) may have been an outbuilding associated with the long range, but buildings K (FIG. 48) and H (FIG. 49) were apparently small detached properties flanking the roadways.

East of the N.-S. subsidiary road stood two detached buildings, set well back from the street front. Both incorporated a cellar. Building L (FIG. 51) was apparently framed on uprights set into sills embedded in the cobble-packed floor of the cellar. An earlier pit at one side was recut at this time and apparently served as a kitchen-annex. The post-holes surrounding the cellar and annex probably date from after the dismantling of the building, when the cellar was used as a rubbish-pit. The building above cellar J (FIG. 52) was the same size as building L, but differed in construction. The mortared floor of the cellar had been laid up against sills at the E. and W. sides, but the uprights of the N. and S. walls were set directly into the ground. Struts raking inwards at 45 degrees supported the floor above. Entry to the cellar was by a ramped passage at the E. end.

THE KILNS (FIGS. 53-4)

During the 1964 season an isolated pottery-kiln was found. The following year a concentration of pottery wasters was noted to the south of the main excavation, in a peripheral area just inside the town defences. The presence of kilns was confirmed by a geomagnetic survey, and an area 96 ft. by 84 ft. was excavated in 1966 (FIG. 53). This peripheral zone was divided from the main part

of the town by a ditch noticeably wider and deeper than those defining individual properties farther north and recut on several occasions. Between this ditch and the town defences smaller ditches defined the N. and W. sides of the kiln-yard; unfortunately the full extent of the yard was not determined.

No buildings were found within the area of the kiln-yard excavated in 1966, though there may have been drying-racks and storage-sheds standing back from the kilns. The point of manufacture is perhaps indicated by an isolated stone-packed post-hole; it is tempting to regard this as the base pivot for a potter's wheel, since stone packing is a feature not encountered elsewhere on this site. Near by, a large storage-pot was sunk into the ground, possibly to provide a readily accessible supply of water for the potter. Reject material and rakings from the furnaces were disposed of in the various small rubbish-pits dotted about the yard.

The kilns themselves were grouped in the centre of the yard. Three were single-oven structures, the stoke-pits of two of them overlapping in such a way as to provide evidence of the succession. However, at one period there seems to have been a battery of three kilns served from a single stoke-pit, though one of the kilns evidently went out of use before the other two were finally abandoned. The kiln-type is very distinctive, and is similar in principle to that of the kilns found by Knocker in 1948. The clay-lined oven-pits vary in length from 6 to 9 ft. internally. During firing the pots were apparently supported on a series of permanent clay arches constructed on a centering of withies set into carefully prepared abutments. The space between these arches was sometimes as much as 18 in. and during firing must have been bridged by the larger pots, since no evidence was found for the use of movable firebars. The cross-arches supporting the pots stood 18 in. to 2 ft. above the bottom of the oven-pit. The unusually large air-space thus formed under the oven floor seems to have acted as a 'heat-mixing' chamber, resulting in greater uniformity of temperature in all parts of the kiln. In two of the kilns (e.g. FIG. 54) the clay dome of the clamp had collapsed into the oven-pit, sealing the smashed remains of the stacked pots. The number of vessels in both these kilns seems to have been small—about 25–50 pots. This suggests that the load need not have been stacked more than three pots high, and the clay dome may have been correspondingly low.⁴ The clay dome evidently rested on the flue-arch, which sometimes received an extra reinforcing of withies to enable it to withstand the weight. The eventual failure of the flue-arch to carry the load seems to have been the most frequent cause of the collapse of the superstructure. There was no evidence to show how the flue-arch was 'stopped' when the correct temperature had been reached. Surprisingly, a considerable amount of ash seems to have been allowed to accumulate in the flue itself, where it must have greatly reduced the effective draught. Some indication of the way in which the kilns were served is perhaps given by trampled areas, shown stippled on FIG. 53.

⁴ These figures are provisional. It is hoped to repair the broken pots, and thus to arrive at a fairly precise figure for the size of each load. Similarly, it should be possible to calculate from the volume of its collapsed remains the size of the clay dome.

DATING

The material associated with the four *Grubenhäuser*, though too meagre to yield much information, would seem to suggest that these huts were occupied in the early, rather than in the middle, or late, Saxon period.

No material was found during these excavations which can be referred to the 7th or 8th centuries. When buildings were next erected on the site Thetford ware was in common use. This discontinuity is emphasized by the fact that pottery of the early, middle and late Saxon periods was found by Knocker in 1958 under the Red Castle earthwork near by.

A detailed four-dimensional analysis of the late Saxon features is complicated by the same absence of stratified deposits which facilitated the original stripping of the site. 'Sealed' associations of pottery are provided only by the remetallings of the roads. Pottery groups derived from the pits are inherently suspect, since the practice of removing from the site all spoil produced by pit-digging has resulted in soil to fill the pits being raked up from a considerable distance around each pit. The pits thus contain jumbled, and even completely inverted, sequences of material. The relative dating of individual buildings and properties must therefore await a detailed statistical analysis of the material in bulk. For the present, the limits of the occupation of this part of the town can be said to lie between the introduction of Thetford ware in the 9th century and the increasing appearance in the region of early medieval ware in the 11th and early 12th centuries. Preliminary work suggests that the kilns discovered in 1966 date from about the beginning of the 11th century. The general absence of recognizable 12th-century material suggests that the move to the N. bank of the river was largely complete by that date. The scattered farms overlying the site of the Saxon town were apparently established in the 13th century.

CONCLUSIONS

Early settlement on the site of the later Saxon town was evidently sparse. The four *Grubenhäuser* were not accompanied by contemporary larger buildings, and their scattered distribution in the western part of the excavated area suggests that they represent outliers from the area of early Saxon settlement revealed by Knocker during the excavation of the Red Castle earthwork in 1957-8. They may thus have been field-sheds rather than dwellings which were permanently occupied. After the desertion of these huts the area evidently lay unoccupied for several centuries.

The growth of the western part of late Saxon Thetford seems to have been fairly sudden, and may even have been part of a programme of planned expansion. Large areas of open ground were apparently taken over and divided up into individual properties by narrow boundary-ditches. The peripheral position of the kiln-yard, of the metal-working areas discovered in exploratory trenches in 1964, and of the 'industrial slum' excavated by Knocker in 1948, suggests that the zoning of industry was a deliberate feature. The number of unlined rubbish-pits cut in the soft gravel subsoil is smaller than might be expected after some 200

years of occupation. It is possible that burying rubbish in the open areas between the houses was restricted in some way, and that the careful removal from the site of all spoil derived from both pits and boundary-ditches similarly reflects conditions imposed by some central authority.

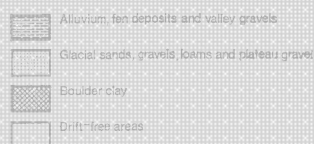
The pattern of settlement revealed at Thetford, while evidently the result of a certain amount of elementary planning, nevertheless differs considerably from that of such contemporary towns as Winchester and Wareham. It may be that Thetford, initially a Danelaw town lying open to the river, is to be compared rather with towns like Birka and Hedeby. However, the variation in form and layout shown within a relatively small area at Thetford makes it dangerous to generalize even about this one part of the town. In a town not conditioned by an inherited regular pattern of streets and walls, zoning may well have resulted in differing patterns of settlement through the town.

The reason for the desertion of the original site and the move to the N. bank of the river is not clear. The various groups of people involved are likely to have been activated by different motives. At all events, by the early 12th century the site seems to have been abandoned, and by the 13th century the land was being farmed. As a thriving town, Thetford seems not to have survived the move. In 1946 the population was much the same as it must have been at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086. The post-war decision to raise the population from 4,000 to over 20,000 people will restore something of Thetford's former prestige, but the cost in terms of the destruction of much potential knowledge of medieval town life is high.

NOTE

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EAST ANGLIA
DRIFT GEOLOGY

Compiled from Geological Survey of Great Britain.
Published by Ordnance Survey 1950

FIG. 39
MAP OF EAST ANGLIA
showing position of Thetford in relation to the surface geology (p. 189).

*Based upon the O.S. map with the sanction of the Controller
of H.M. Stationery Office. Crown copyright reserved*



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FIG. 40 (p. 190 f.)

[face page 196]

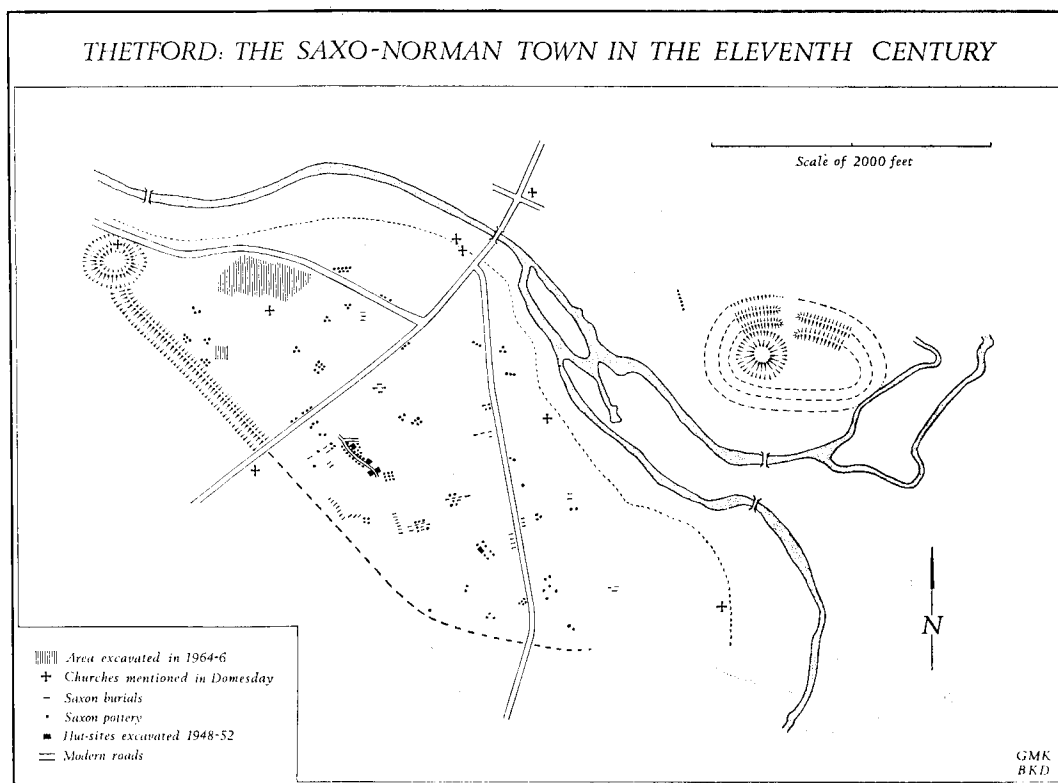


FIG. 41 (p. 189 f.)

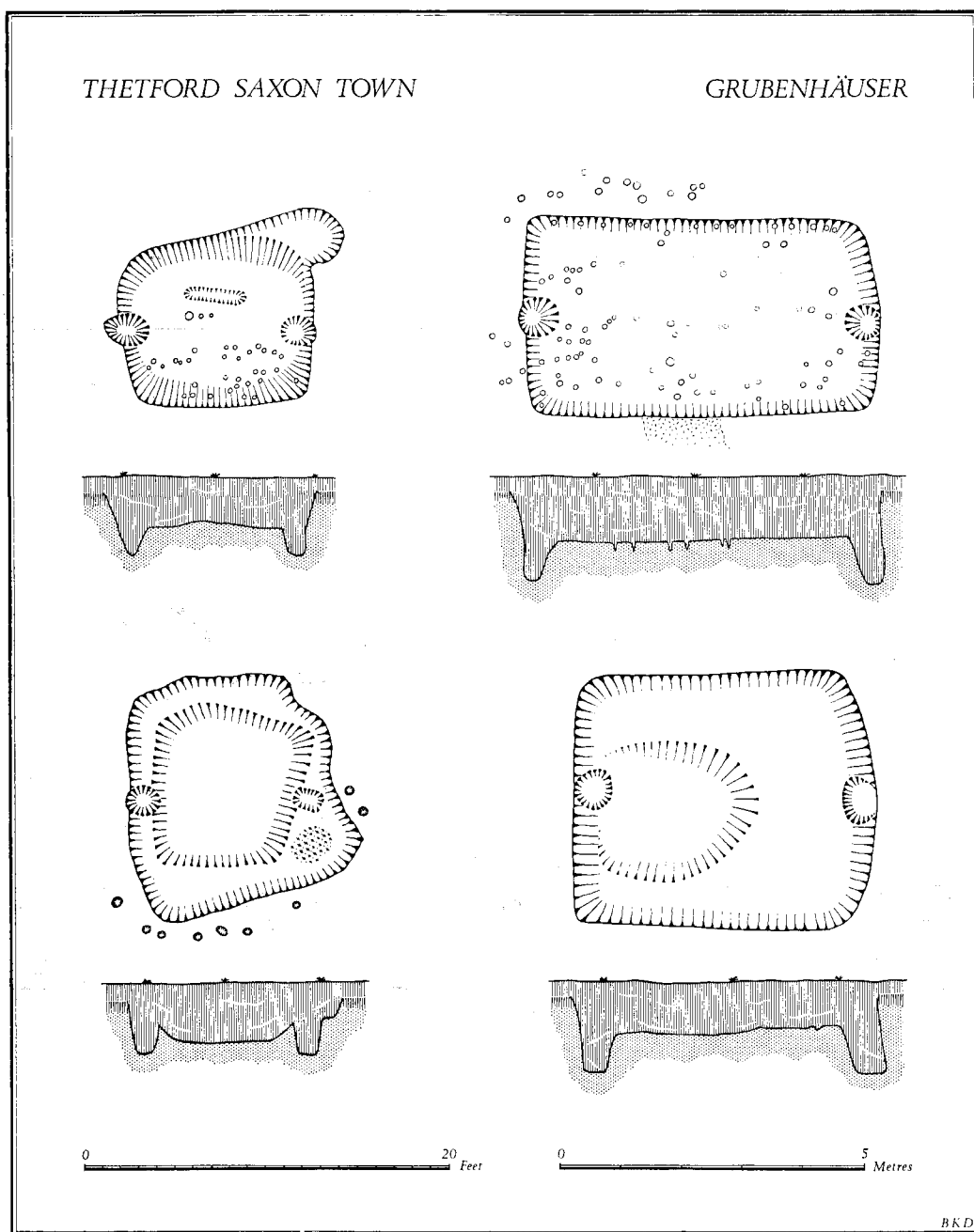
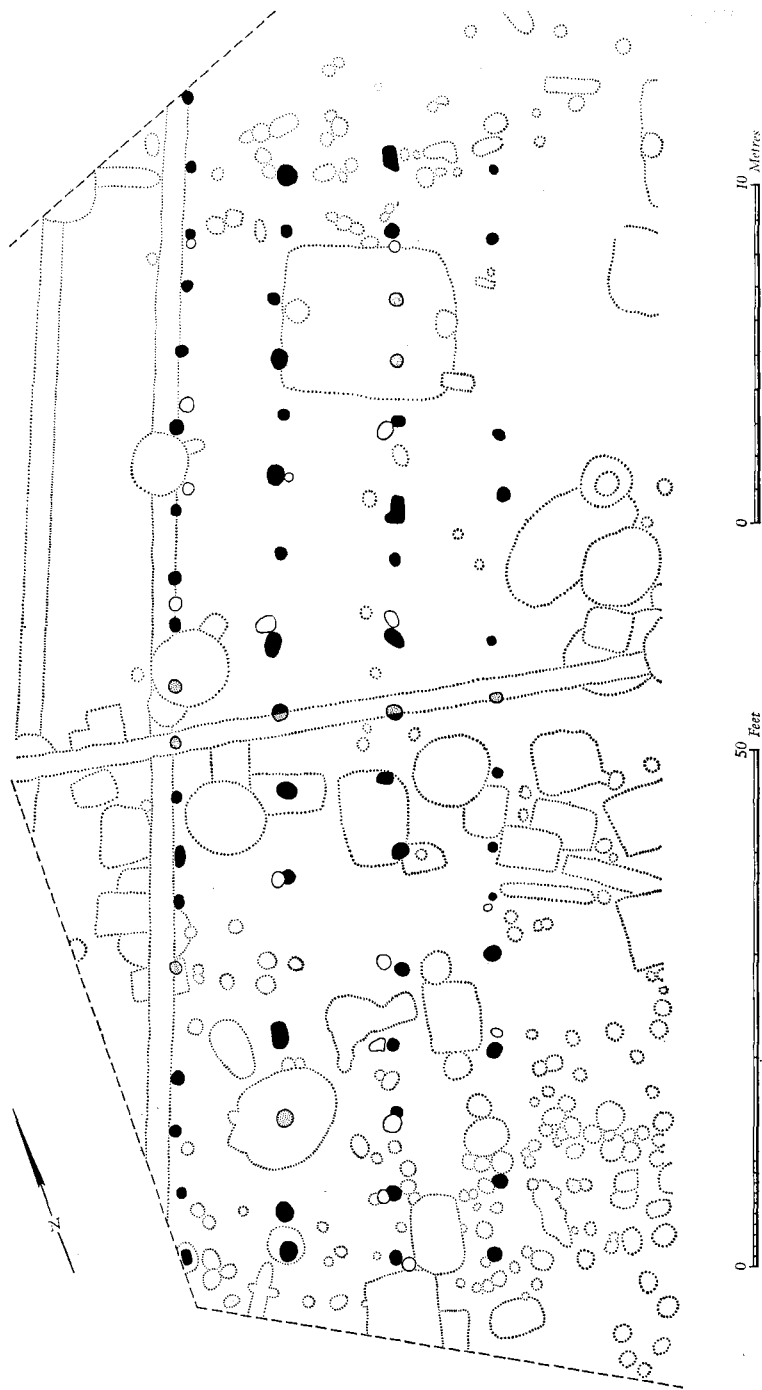


FIG. 42 (p. 191)

THETFORD SAXON TOWN

BUILDING G



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FIG. 43

PLAN OF BUILDING G, THETFORD, NORFOLK (p. 191 f.)

Main structural features in black; restored features stippled; inferred repairs shown as open circles; features not associated with building G indicated by dotted lines.

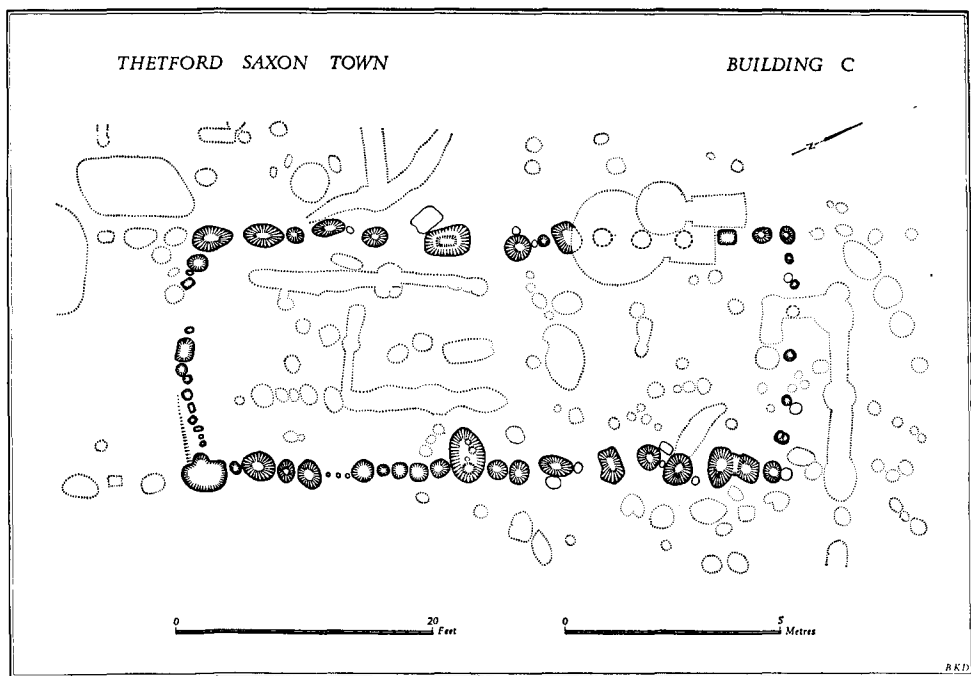


FIG. 44 (p. 192)

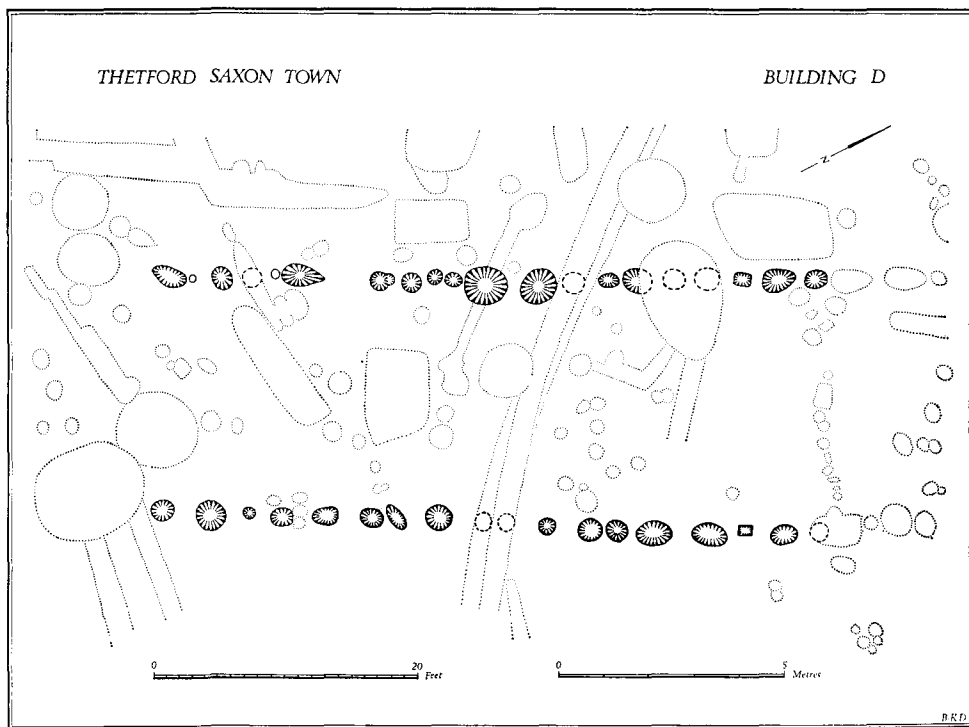


FIG. 45 (p. 192)

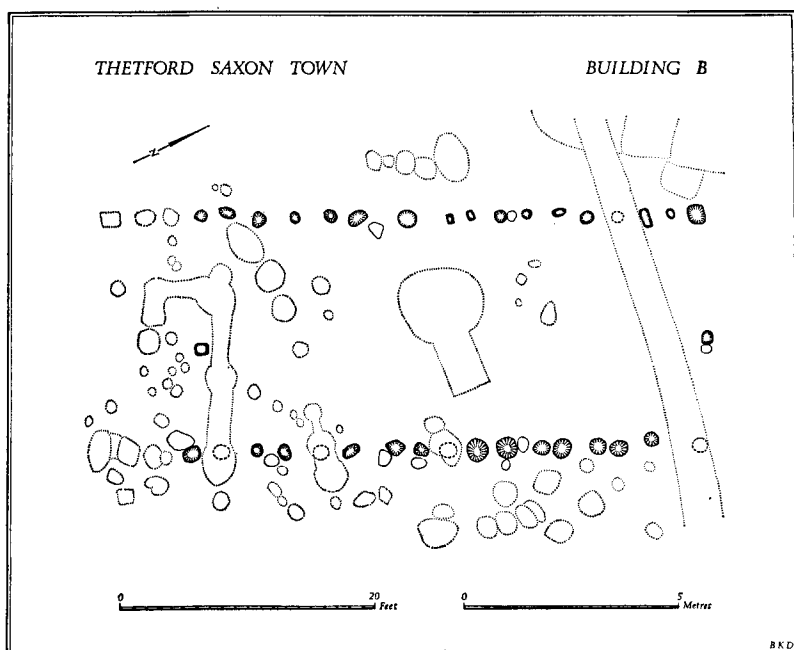


FIG. 46 (p. 192)

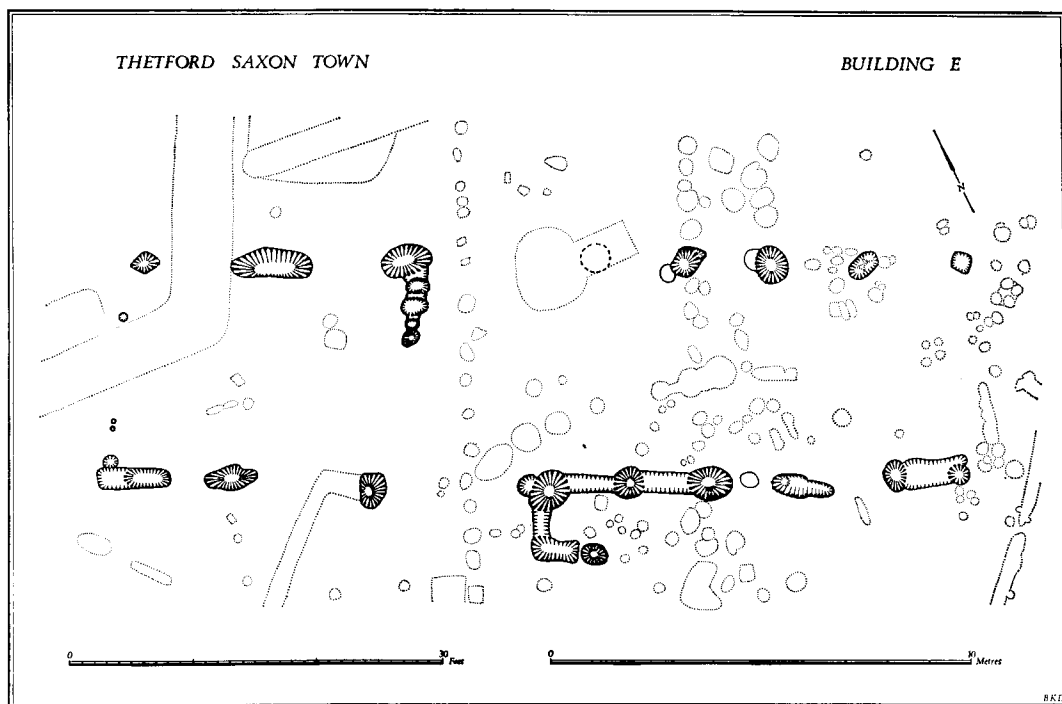


FIG. 47 (p. 192)

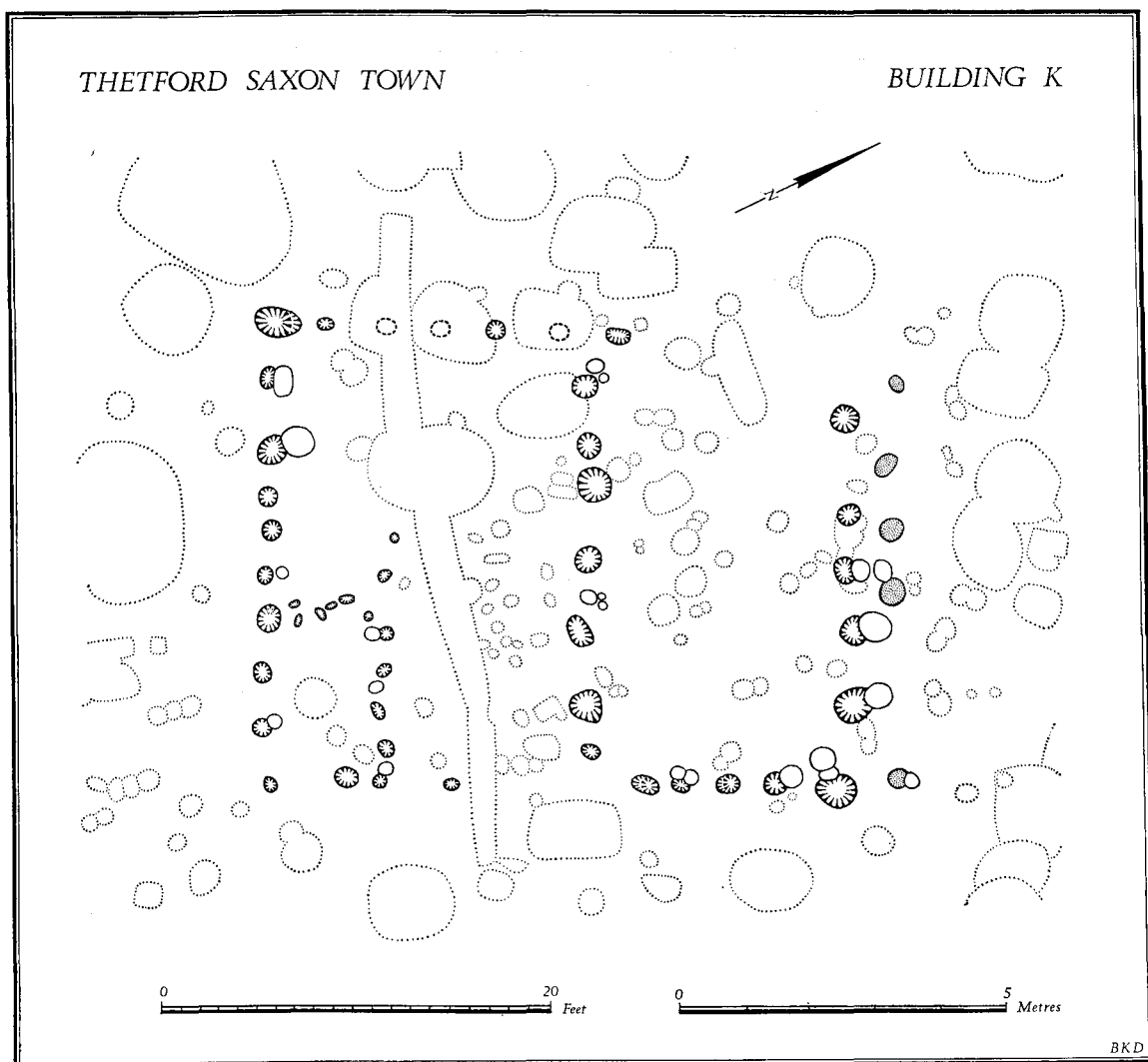


FIG. 48 (p. 192)

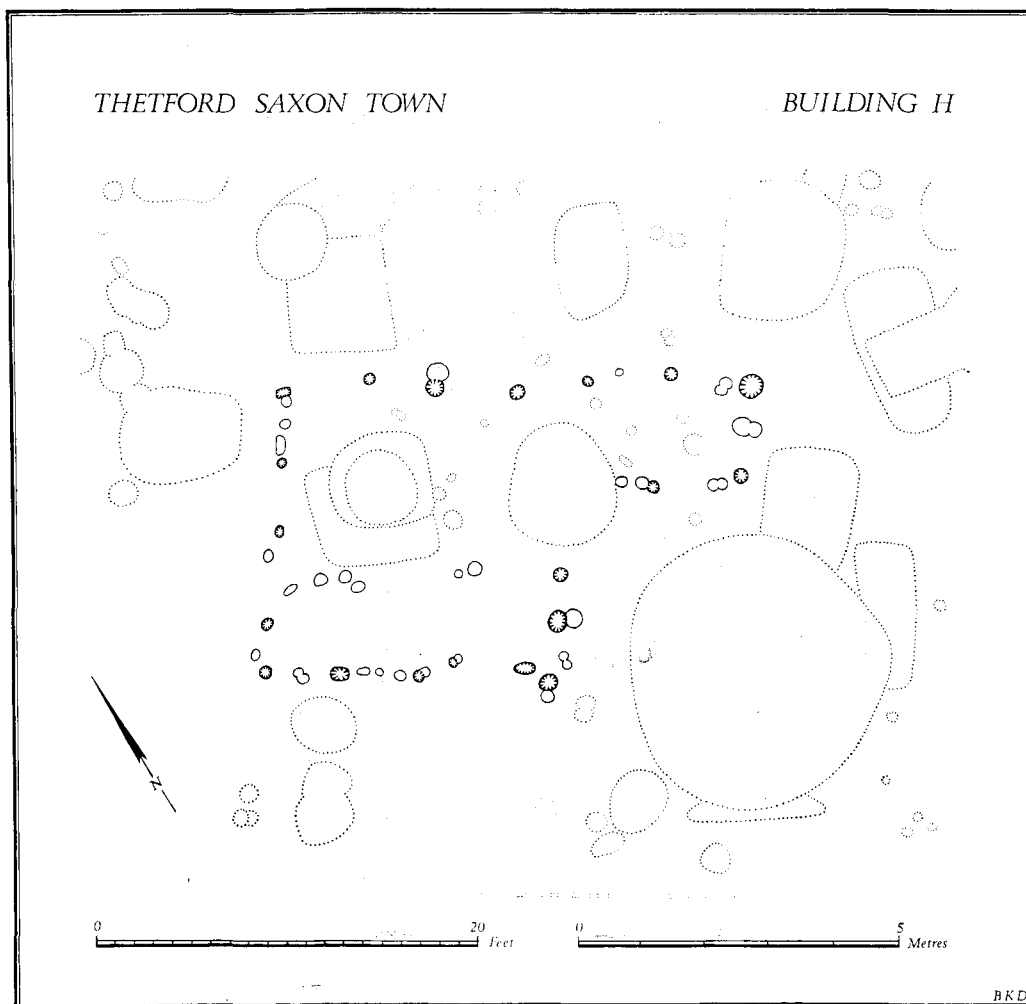


FIG. 49 (p. 192)

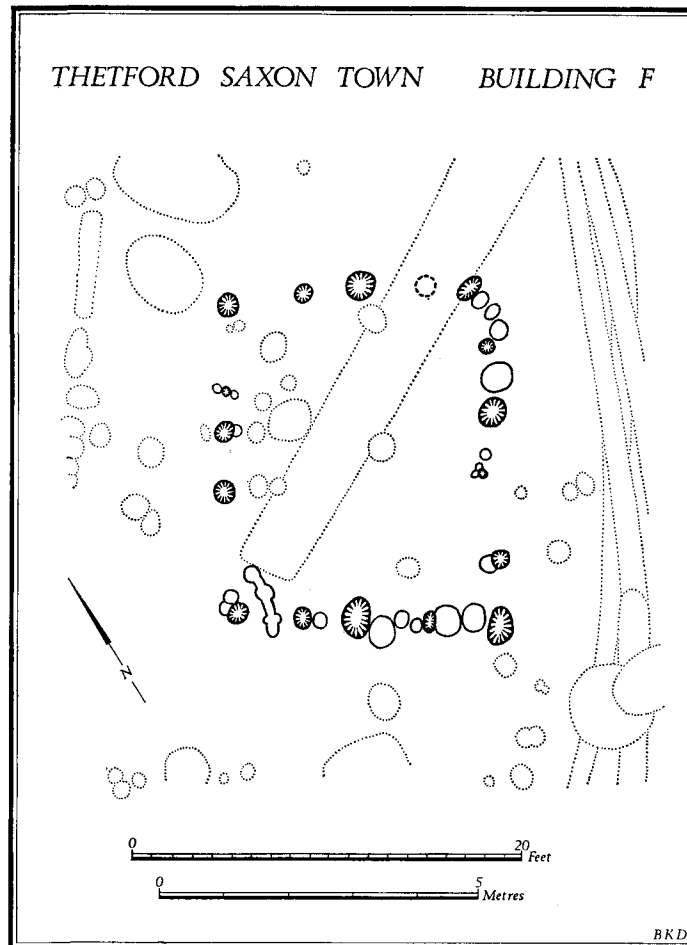


FIG. 50 (p. 192)

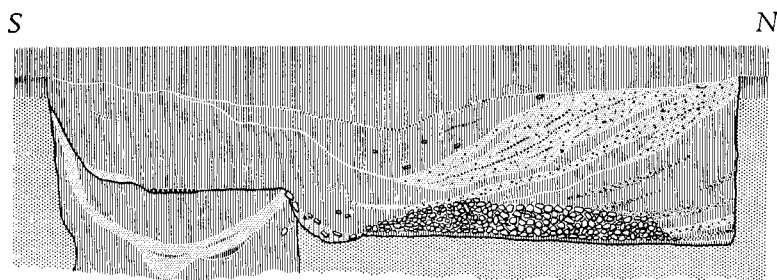
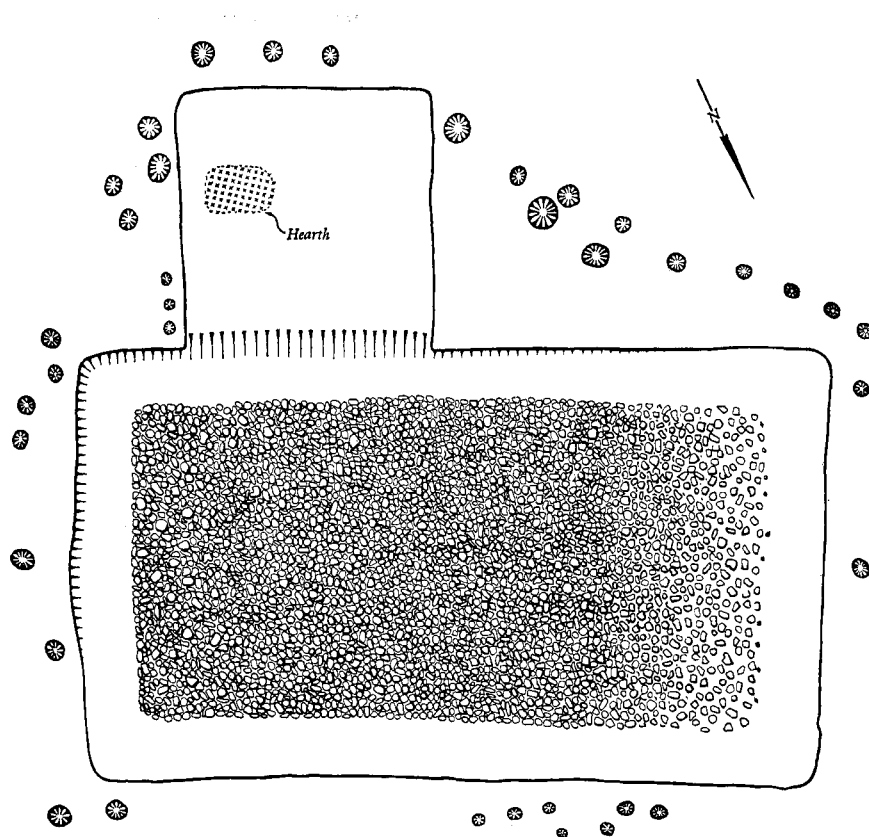


FIG. 51 (p. 192)

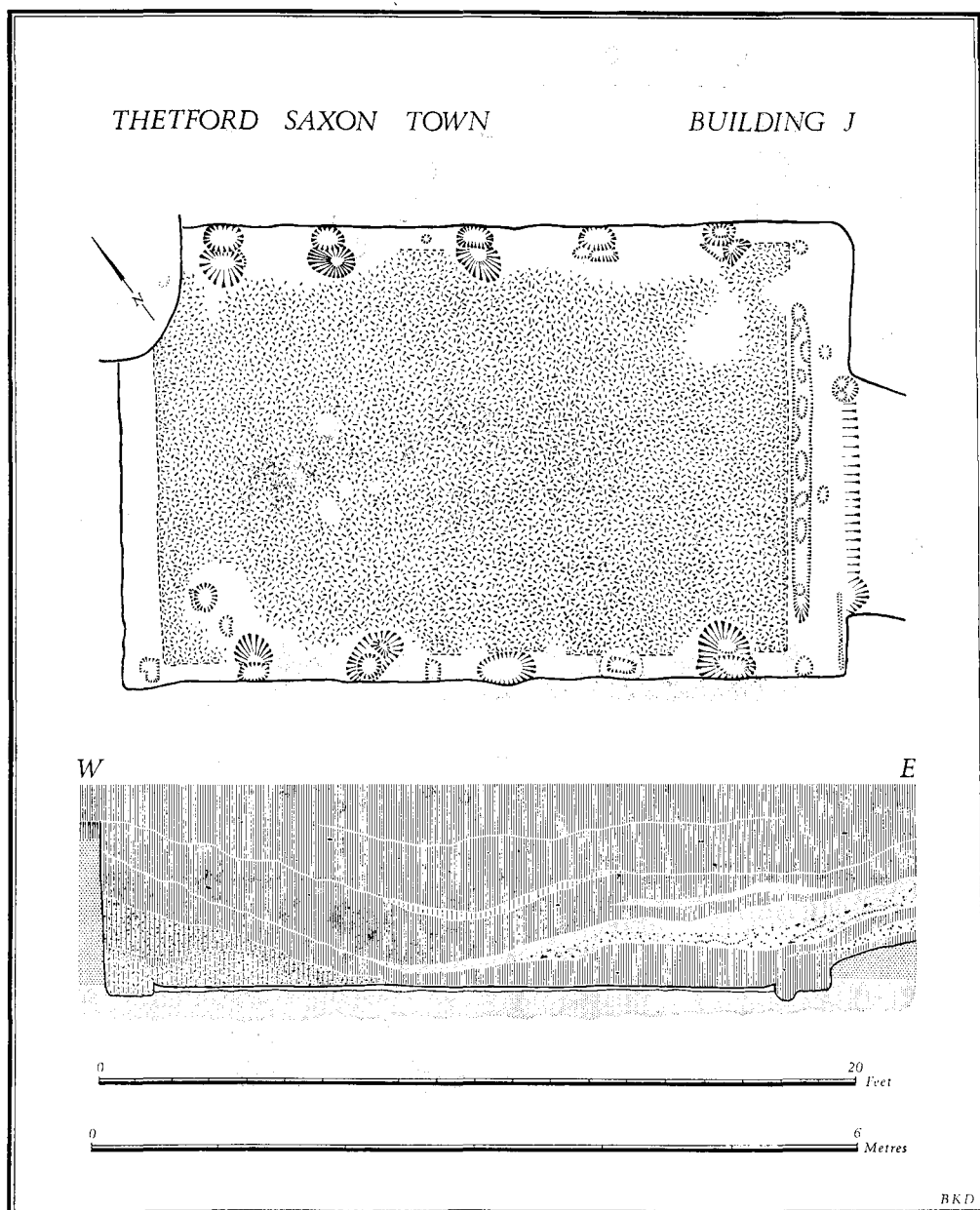


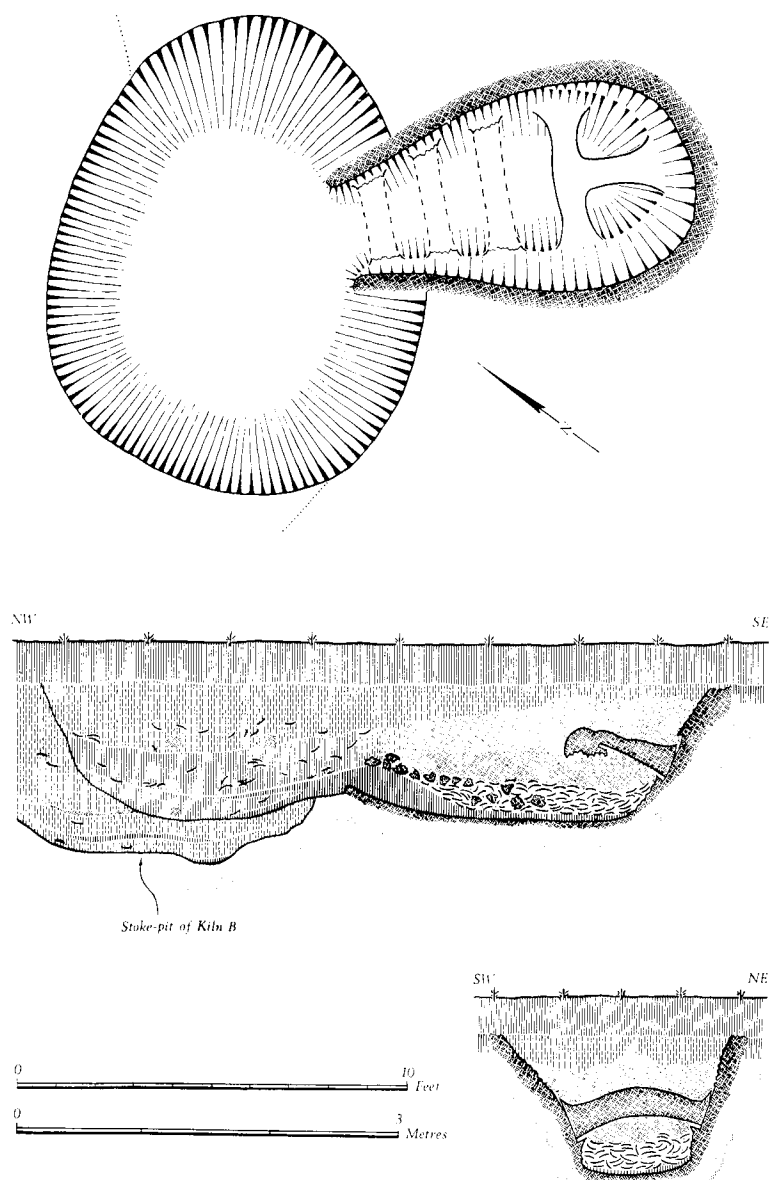
FIG. 52 (p. 192)



FIG. 53

KILN AREA, THETFORD, NORFOLK (p. 192 f.)

Ditches, pits and post-holes in black; trampled areas stippled. Kiln C (FIG. 54) is overlying one in the northerly pair



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FIG. 54 (p. 193)