

A POSSIBLE MIDDLE SAXON BUILDING AND FEATURES IN WENHASTON, SUFFOLK

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THIS NOTE DISCUSSES a possible Middle Saxon building and associated features that have been identified on a predominantly Roman site in Wenhaston in the east of the county. It potentially adds to a relatively small regional corpus of excavated rural settlement data for that period.

Wenhaston lies on the southern side of the Blyth valley (Fig 20). In origin, it is one of the ‘small towns’ of Roman Suffolk that are characterised by finds scattered over areas of 10–30ha.¹ Aerial photographs of the open fields to the east of the village reveal crop-marks of enclosures and field systems, and these coincide with not only Roman but also prehistoric, Anglo-Saxon and medieval surface finds (Suffolk Historic Environment Record nos WMH 004 and 005). Limited excavation to date suggests that Roman activity extended beneath part

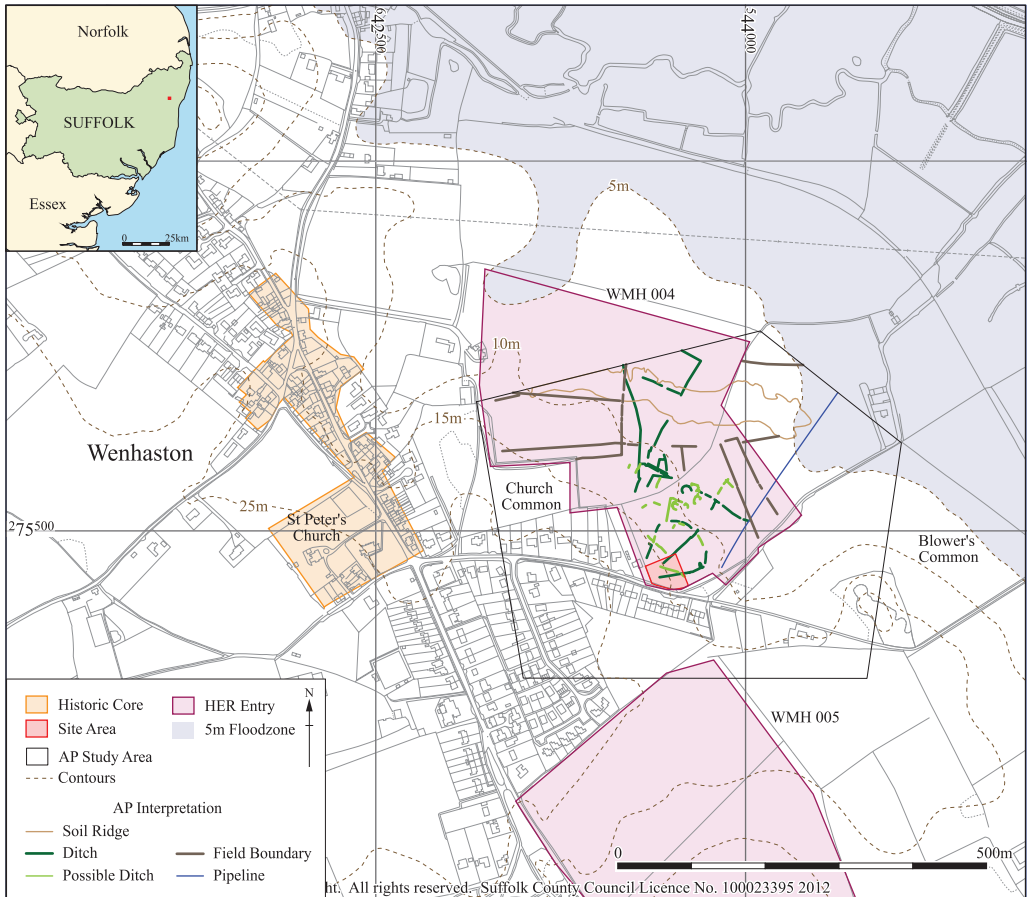


FIG. 20 – Site location and archaeological context.

of the modern village, between WMH 004 and WMH 005.² Scattered pottery and metalwork within the area of WMH 005 indicates a cemetery of early Anglo-Saxon date in that vicinity, but the historic village core, as shown on the 1884 Ordnance Survey map, is concentrated to the west, extending northwards from St Peter’s church, which is Norman or earlier in origin (WMH 010). The area therefore holds appreciable latent potential for understanding the development of Wenhaston and its apparently shifting settlement focus.

This note focuses on a site, WMH 033, dug in 2009 prior to development of farmland to the north of Narrow Way (TM 4290 7544). It lay just within WMH 004 on the edge of the present village.³ Two phases of Roman activity were identified: in the first, a late first/early second-century timber building was oriented to a south-west–north-east boundary ditch, the alignments of which were reiterated in later-second–third century buildings and associated ditches (Fig 21).

Parts of the Roman settlement were properly revealed for the first time, but the concern here is a later organisation of the site. A large east–west ditch, G1012, on a different alignment to earlier features, was cut across preceding buildings. Structure G1013 and possible fence line G1014 shared the alignment of that ditch, with pit G1023 situated between them. These features produced relatively small assemblages of finds dating to the Roman period but, significantly, single sherds of Middle Anglo-Saxon Ipswich Ware (AD700–850) were

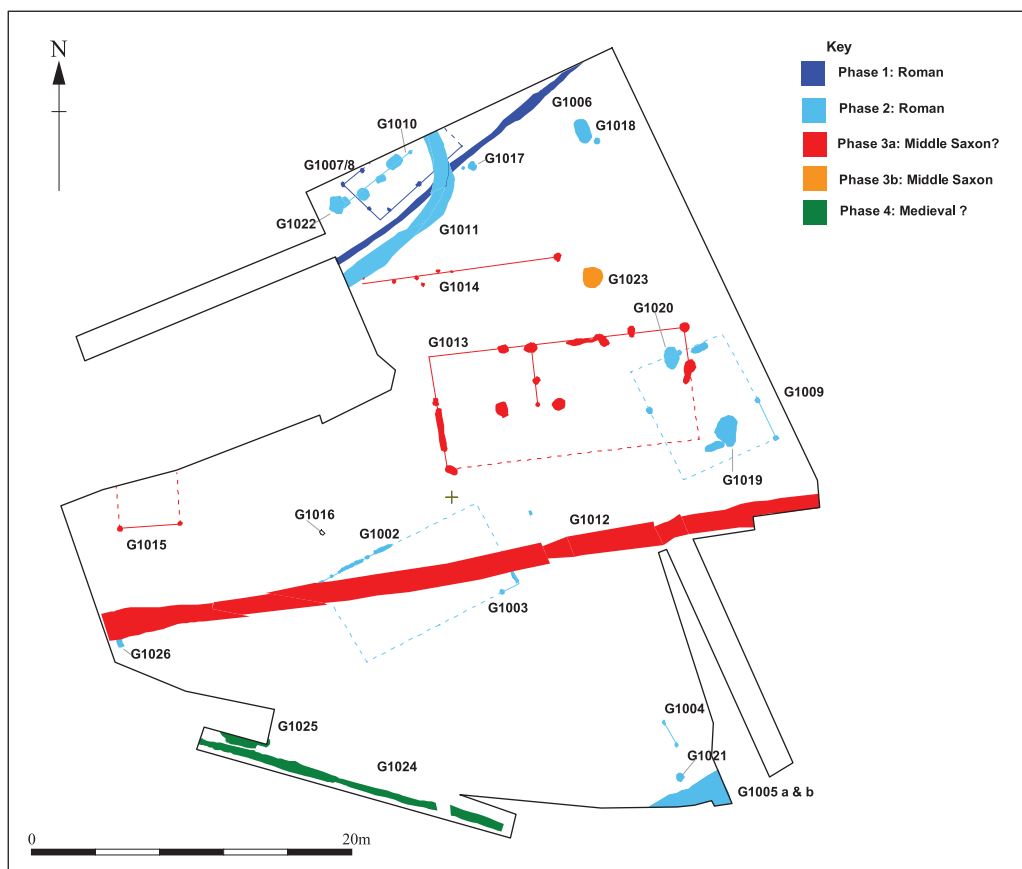


FIG. 21 – Phased plan of archaeological features.

recovered from the truncated surface of ditch G1012 and from pit G1023. This points to activity of that date, largely masked by the presence of earlier finds, and a high degree of abrasion to the Roman pottery from these features leads to the interpretation that it was residual on site.

This sets a context for the interpretation of structure G1013 as an Anglo-Saxon building, which will be briefly described. It was a rectangular structure up to 7.7m wide and 16m long. Two roof supports may have occupied post-holes on the long axis: post-pipes were 0.27m and 0.45m in diameter. The site was on a subsoil of sand and sandy gravel and had been ploughed; possible truncation or destruction might therefore account for the absence of internal surfaces and structural features such as slots all round the building, as well as the sparseness of remains on the southern side. Smaller post-holes (0.5m by 0.38m by 0.29m deep, and 0.31m in diameter by 0.24m deep) seem to represent an internal partition spanning at least halfway across the structure from the northern wall, giving a chamber 6.2m wide.⁴ Despite the truncation, the external walls show a combination of earth-fast post and post-in-trench construction, with two or three post-holes ranged along the eastern side, and an irregular, shallow slot and four unevenly spaced post-holes of varying depth on the northern. The western end comprised four post-holes, two of them within each end of a slot. Repair of the structure is suggested by double post-pipes in some of the post-holes.

Earth-fast posts and sill beams were used across the region in both the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods. The post-in-trench technique as used here, however, is most commonly seen in Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon buildings⁵ including, for example, at Whitehouse Industrial Estate in Ipswich, West Stow and, further afield, Catholme in Staffordshire.⁶

Although not robustly provable, the features of the building, the Ipswich Ware, abraded Roman material, and reorganisation of the site provide circumstantial evidence for an Anglo-Saxon phase of associated building, pit and fence within a boundary ditch. This ditch had a possible structural slot in parts of the base, perhaps evidence for a palisade, and it appears to relate to a significant curvilinear crop-mark shown on Fig. 20.⁷ This first indication of the presence of an enclosed settlement comparable to that at Whitehouse Industrial Estate,⁸ or Higham Ferrars in Northamptonshire,⁹ offers one pointer for future exploration of Wenhaston's palimpsest of crop-marks.

The possible presence of such an Anglo-Saxon site, between the Blyth and one of its tributaries, on a former Roman small town, contributes to the study of settlement in Suffolk, where the Middle Saxon period remains under-represented. Early Anglo-Saxon settlement is generally understood to occupy the lighter river-valley soils and gravel terraces (such as the sandy soils of the Blyth valley),¹⁰ but whilst data from the Portable Antiquities Scheme is filling in gaps in the mapped record, relatively few settlement sites, particularly of Middle Saxon date, have been excavated.¹¹ A related observation is that studies of village morphology are increasingly adding to large-scale understanding of early settlement shifts and eventual stabilisation, often, although not exclusively, in the Late Saxon period:¹² this posited Middle Saxon phase at Wenhaston is close to the indicated Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery site at WHM 005 noted above, but 400m from St Peter's church, north of which the village is now concentrated. This suggests a shift dating to sometime between the Middle Saxon period and the construction of the Norman church. Whilst the site highlights inherent uncertainties in identifying Anglo-Saxon phases on sites where residual Roman artefacts can swamp relatively uncommon later finds, it also offers a small window into the changing focus and nature of a settlement over time, demonstrating the information potential of even small development sites within and on the periphery of historic villages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Plouviez 1995.
- 2 Boulter 1998: a Roman pit and ditch at 14 Narrow Way (WMH 019) were revealed in evaluation; Stirk 2009: monitoring at Church Lane revealed Roman finds.
- 3 Stirk and Benfield 2009; Stirk 2010.
- 4 Partitions dividing off sections of buildings have been recorded on other sites, e.g. Hall 2 at West Stow, where a partition gave an eastern chamber 2.44m wide (West 1985, 11).
- 5 Jude Plouviez and Jess Tipper *pers. comm.* Hamerow's national corpus (2002, 46) shows a trend at this date towards post-in-trench buildings. Roman buildings on WMH 033 were represented by post-holes and possible evidence for timber/wattle panels between posts rather than posts-in-trenches.
- 6 West 1985; Caruth 1996, 479; Losco-Bradley and Kinsley, 2002; Lucy *et al.* 2009; Andrew Tester *pers. comm.* for Brandon.
- 7 Stirk and Benfield 2009, 24, citing Palmer 2008.
- 8 Caruth 1996.
- 9 Hardy *et al.* 2007.
- 10 West 1999, 44.
- 11 Medleycott 2011, 48, 57 – with notable exceptions: Brandon, West Stow and Ipswich.
- 12 Wade 1999, 46 for late Saxon stabilisation; other major studies designed to explore settlement change are also reaching fruition e.g. Aston and Gerrard 2007, Page and Jones 2007.

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