

A MEDIEVAL MOATED FARMSTEAD AT DEBENHAM

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In a field known as Bloodwood, half-a-mile north-west of Debenham (TM/168637), was a circular moat enclosing an area of about half-an-acre. The moat was between 40 and 50 feet wide and, in places, 10 feet below the level of the centre of the enclosure. A Victorian cottage had been built, oddly enough, in the bottom of the moat, which had been widened at this point to accommodate the garden. To the south was a shallow, hook-shaped depression some 90 feet long. The site lay on the 150-foot contour on sloping ground 200 yards north of the Deben, here a narrow stream less than 2 miles from its source. The field contained several large trees and a profusion of cowslips and orchids; in view of the depth of the moat it is unlikely that it has been under the plough since medieval times. It was pasture land in 1837 when the tithe map was drawn up; the field at this time was known as Mount Piece and the moat was indicated. It was not, however, marked on the O.S. maps.

In 1967 the owner, Mr. C. O. Styles, decided to grub up the trees and hedges, fill in the moat and turn the land into arable. Two local residents, Mr. R. R. Watson and Mr. R. J. Webster, informed the Ipswich Museum that the site was being destroyed and the writer, accompanied by Mr. Norman Smedley, went out to inspect it. It was evidently a medieval moated farmstead with its attendant fishpond, but of a somewhat unusual type since most moated sites of this period in Suffolk are rectangular.

Mr. Styles readily agreed to notify the Museum when the levelling operations began, and allowed observers to be present throughout. Mr. R. Moulton, the bulldozer driver, also proved most co-operative in leaving an area where a feature had been revealed until it had been examined and its position plotted on the map. In this way it was possible to record the presence of 5 hearths and 3 cobble spreads, and to excavate 10 rubbish pits. No farmhouse or buildings were located but these would probably have had walls of clay lump or wattle and daub, and floors of beaten earth which would leave slight traces detectable only by careful excavation. Rubbish pits were conspicuous, even in the smeary surface left by the bulldozer, because of the pottery and shells they contained, but post holes are far from obvious in the heavy clay soil such as that at Debenham. A group of four small pits in the

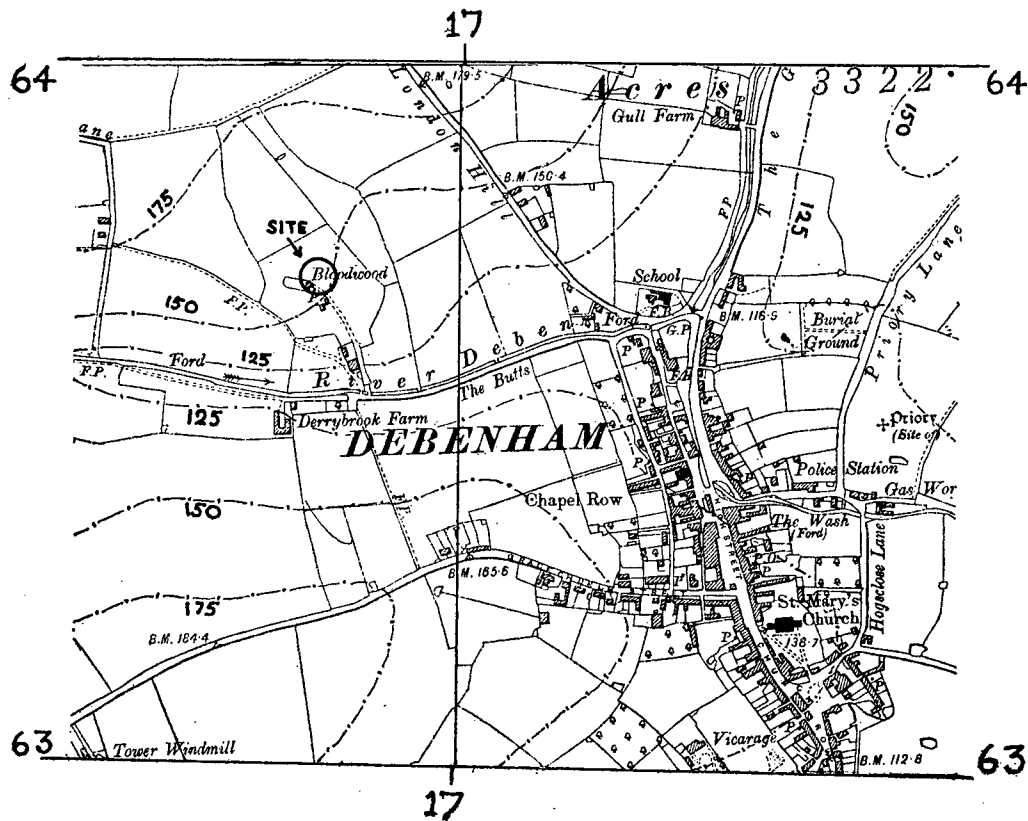
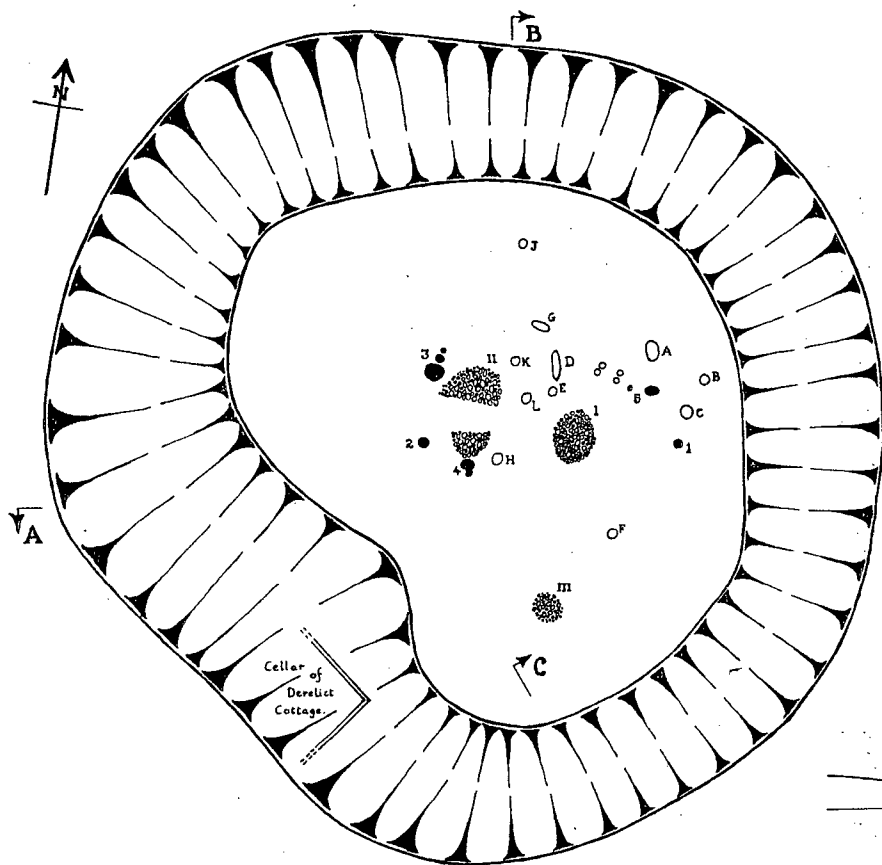


FIG. 24.—Map of Debenham, based on O.S. map. Scale 6 ins. to 1 mile.



KEY

- : Hearth.
- : Rubbish Pit.
- : Cobble Spread.

SCALE

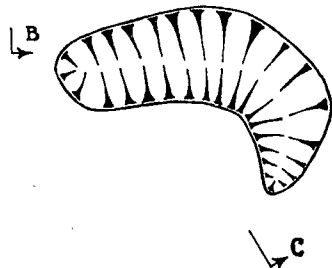
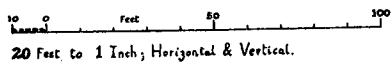


FIG. 25.—Moated s

SECTION B-B

North Ditch.

South Ditch.

SECTION C-C

South Ditch.

SECTION A-A

West Ditch.

East Ditch.

MOATED SITE
AT
BLOODWOOD, DEBENHAM
SUFFOLK.

B.B.

Bloodwood, Debenham.

north-east corner may have been post holes but no others could be found so it is not possible to speak with certainty. The southern part of the enclosure contained no recognisable features and may have been the site of one or more buildings. No observers were present when the north-western section was levelled, but Mr. Moulton stated that this also appeared to be barren.

The cobble spreads were 15, 25 and 10 feet long respectively. They were oval in shape being 9 to 12 inches thick in the centre and thinning out at the edges; there were no traces of encircling walls or post holes and they seem not to have been roofed. The cooking hearths also were almost certainly out of doors as they were not surrounded by floors or occupation layers. They consisted of platforms of hard white clay reddened to a depth of 5 or 6 inches. The smallest, Hearth 1, was only 1 foot 6 inches in diameter; the largest, Hearth 3, consisted of a string of hearths, 6, 3 and 2 feet in diameter. It was lying close to Cobble Spread II, but had been destroyed before this was revealed so that it was not possible to ascertain the relationship between the two. Hearth 2, however, which was also 6 feet across, was actually touching the southern tip of Cobble Spread II, and was obviously associated with it. Presumably not all the hearths were contemporary but no sequence could be worked out. In only one instance were a couple of hearths visible simultaneously; it could then be seen that Hearth 2 was 3 feet 4 inches lower than Hearth 3. Much of the intervening 21 feet had been removed, but it seems likely that the difference in height had no chronological significance and was due merely to the natural slope of the land; Cobble Spread II dipped sharply towards the south-east. The rubbish pits also were revealed and excavated in isolation and as none cut into another no chronological sequence could be established. This was unfortunate as most of the pottery came from these pits, especially Pits A and C, and it would have been useful to have had some dating evidence, even relative dating.

THE POTTERY

(Figs ~~29-31~~²⁶⁻²⁸ and Plate XXIII)

The great bulk of the pottery was coarse ware of the usual medieval forms, shallow dishes, cooking pots and large jars, all with sagging bases. 3 main types of coarse pottery could be distinguished:

Ware A: Dark, rough, shelly ware with lumpy rims. A complete section (No. 1) shows that the pot was squatter than is usual for medieval cooking pots.

Ware B: Grey smooth ware, slightly micaceous. The small cooking pot (No. 6) has a plain, upright rim reminiscent of those found on Middle Saxon Ipswich ware, but most of the rims are square though with a fairly soft outline.

Ware C: Buff-coloured fabric, harsh and gritty with sharply angular rims.

In most of the pottery groups one type of ware clearly predominated. Thus most of Ware A came from a black layer 4 inches thick which underlay Hearth 5 and extended 3 to 4 feet beyond it on the south and east. Here Ware A was dominant. From Pit A came one sherd of Ware A but the bulk of the pottery was of Ware B. Below Cobble Spread II was a silty layer containing a considerable amount of pottery; most of this was of Ware A but from it came a section of a large jar of Ware C (No. 2). The central portion of this cobble spread was removed by the bulldozer; some pottery including No. 3 was retrieved from the moat where the earth was being dumped. It almost certainly came from this layer but must be regarded as unstratified. The commonest type of pottery on the site was of Ware C; the largest group of this came from Pit C. Pottery of Ware A can be closely paralleled at Snape, Wantisden and Helmingham,¹ in each case associated with Late Saxon Thetford ware and in the case of Wantisden with one sherd of Stamford ware; it seems likely that it was of 12th century date. Cooking pots with square rims and dishes with thumb impressions were found in a mortar layer at Bungay Castle associated by the excavator with a Licence to Crenellate granted to Roger Bigod in 1294.² The pottery from this layer in Ipswich Museum is intermediate between Wares B and C in both form and fabric. It is possible that Wares B and C are merely the products of different kilns but it seems more likely that there is a chronological distinction. If so, Ware B is probably the earlier, perhaps mid 13th century, while Ware C may be late 13th/early 14th century.

Very little fine glazed pottery was found on the site; only 9 fragments in all. One was the neck of a jug from Pit C (No. 15). It closely resembled in glaze, fabric and form, a jug and the neck of another found in Ipswich and is almost certainly a product of the same kiln. The Ipswich jugs are shown for comparison (Nos. 16 and 17). One body sherd with a light mottled green glaze and a narrow applied strip decoration, from under Cobble Spread II, was probably made in the London area. All the glazed pottery can be dated to the late 13th/early 14th century.

¹ All pottery in Ipswich Museum: Debenham Reg. no. 967-79; Snape 968-101; Helmingham 965-12; Wantisden 1911-48. The latter came from the earthwork in Staverton Thicks (TM/354512) which was excavated and published by H. St. George Gray ('The Earthwork near Butley', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.* xiv (1910), pp. 69-90) who associated it with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 but it seems almost certain that this date is too late.

² G. Dunning, 'Report on the pottery from the Mortar Layer in Bungay Castle', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.* xxii (1936), pp. 334-8.

Pottery from under Hearth 5

1. Squat cooking pot with round, lumpy rim. Brownish-red, blackened outside; Ware A rough with numerous flint grits. Probably 12th century.

Pottery from under Cobble Spread II

2. Large jar with angular rim. The body is decorated with vertical rows of thumb marks impressed directly into the pot and not to applied strips as is the more usual practice from late Saxon times onwards. Light buff with patches of black; Ware C.

3. Cooking pot with rim intermediate between Nos. 1 and 2. Buff, blackened externally; Ware B. (This sherd was rescued from the dump after the cobble spread had been partly demolished by the bulldozer.)

4. Rim of dish 18 inches in diameter with squared rim hollowed on top. Light grey, blackened externally; Ware B.

Pottery from Pit A

5. Rim of dish 18 inches in diameter. Light grey; Ware B.

6. Small cooking pot with upright rim slightly thickened externally. Light grey, blackened outside; Ware B.

7. Dish with small lip and lug handles decorated with three rows of oblique slashes and two thumb impressions. Light grey; Ware B.

8. Dish decorated with a row of double nail impressions below the rim. Light grey; Ware B.

Pottery from Pit C

9. Dish with squared rim, row of thumb impressions on neck. Buff, blackened externally; Ware C. Dishes with thumb impressions are extremely common in Suffolk and appear to be an East Anglian type.³

10. Dish with squared rim, hollowed on top, thumb impressions on neck. Pinkish-buff, blackened externally; Ware C.

11. Dish similar to No. 10 but less angular. Buff, blackened externally; Ware C.

12. Large jar with angular rim. Buff inside, grey outside with patches of black; Ware C.

13. Jar with squared rim much less angular than No. 12. Black inside, pink outside, the lower part blackened with soot; Ware C.

14. Neck of jar or large jug. Pink with grey core, green glaze with darker streaks, lip unglazed.

³ Mary Cra'ster and J. G. Hurst, 'Waterbeach Abbey', *Proc. Camb. A.S.* LIX (1966), p. 92.

PLATE XXIII



Debenham pottery, 1967, nos. 7, 2, 6 and 8.

PLATE XXIII



Debenham pottery, 1967, nos. 7, 2, 6 and 8.

15. Neck of jug with part of small lip. Dark grey with dark green glaze. On the neck are two horizontal lines of pale yellow slip with vertical lines on the body; this slip is slightly pitted like the skin of an orange. Above the decoration the glaze ends in untidy trails and blotches.⁴

Two jugs found on building sites in Ipswich are almost identical in glaze and fabric and are shown here for comparison:

16. Tower Ramparts, Ipswich (Reg. No. 963.106). Neck of jug with bridge spout. On each side a mask, the eyes composed of circular stamps, the mouth and beard drawn in free hand. Fabric and glaze as in No. 15.

17. Upper Brook Street, Ipswich (Reg. No. 962.245). Jug without spout, thumb impressed base. Fabric and glaze as in No. 15.

OTHER FINDS

The only other find was a fragment of limestone, probably the base of a mortar.

No metal objects were found apart from three nails 2 inches long, presumably from a building.

ANIMAL REMAINS

The site yielded very few meat bones. This is not due to the nature of the soil since those that were found are in good condition. They consist of part of the lower jaw of a pig, 2 teeth and the cannon-bone of a horse, the cannon-bone and tibia of an ox, 3 other bones of a horse or ox and the tibia of a sheep. In contrast, several thousand oyster shells were found both in the rubbish pits and incorporated in the cobble spreads; over a thousand came from the make-up of Cobble Spread II. Oysters were very numerous also in Pit C, together with a few whelks. Pit A on the other hand was composed largely of mussel shells; the base of the spine of a thorn-backed ray also came from this pit. Shell-fish are common on medieval sites, but their enormous preponderance over meat bones at Debenham is strange since animals were presumably reared on the farm, and it is 20 miles from the coast.

SUMMARY

Observations made during the destruction of the medieval moated farmstead at Debenham showed the dispersed nature of the

⁴ Mr. Alan Carter considers this may come from Lyveden (Northants). See Northampton Museums and Art Gallery, *Journal* 11 Dec., 1967.

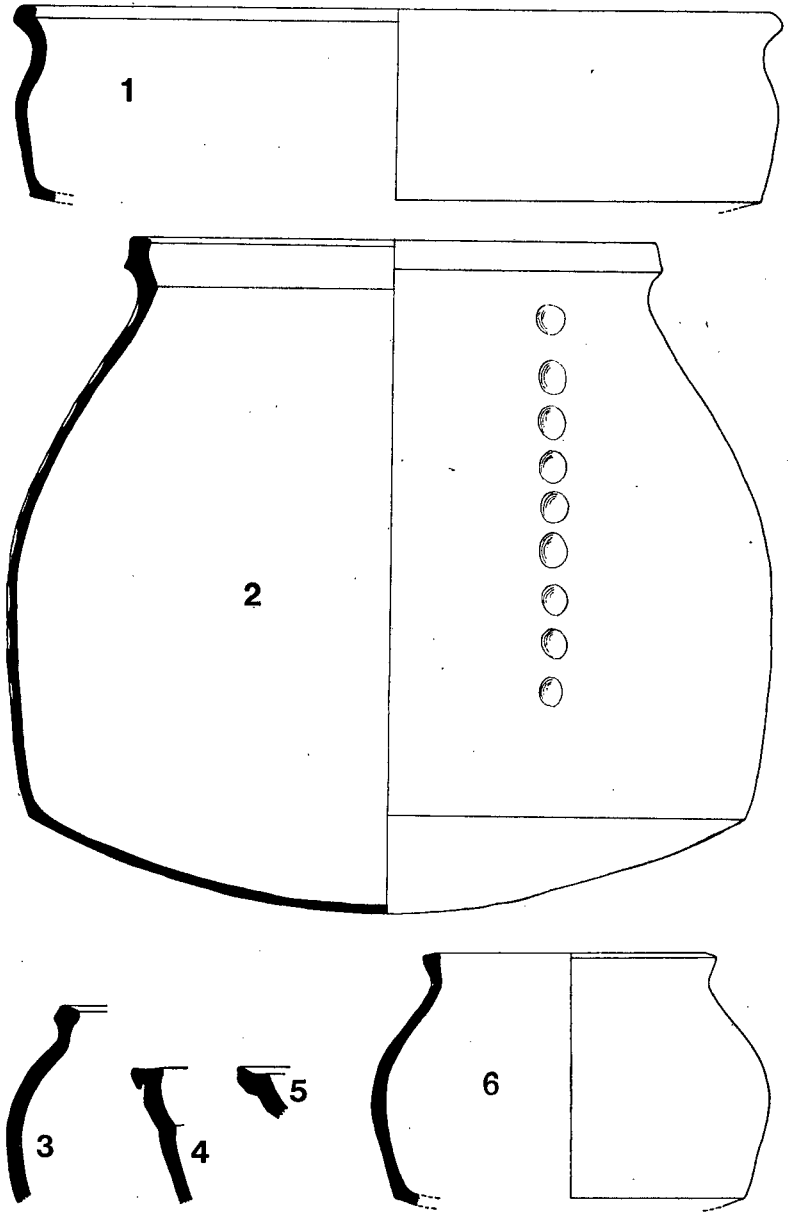


FIG. 26.—Debenham pottery, 1967, scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

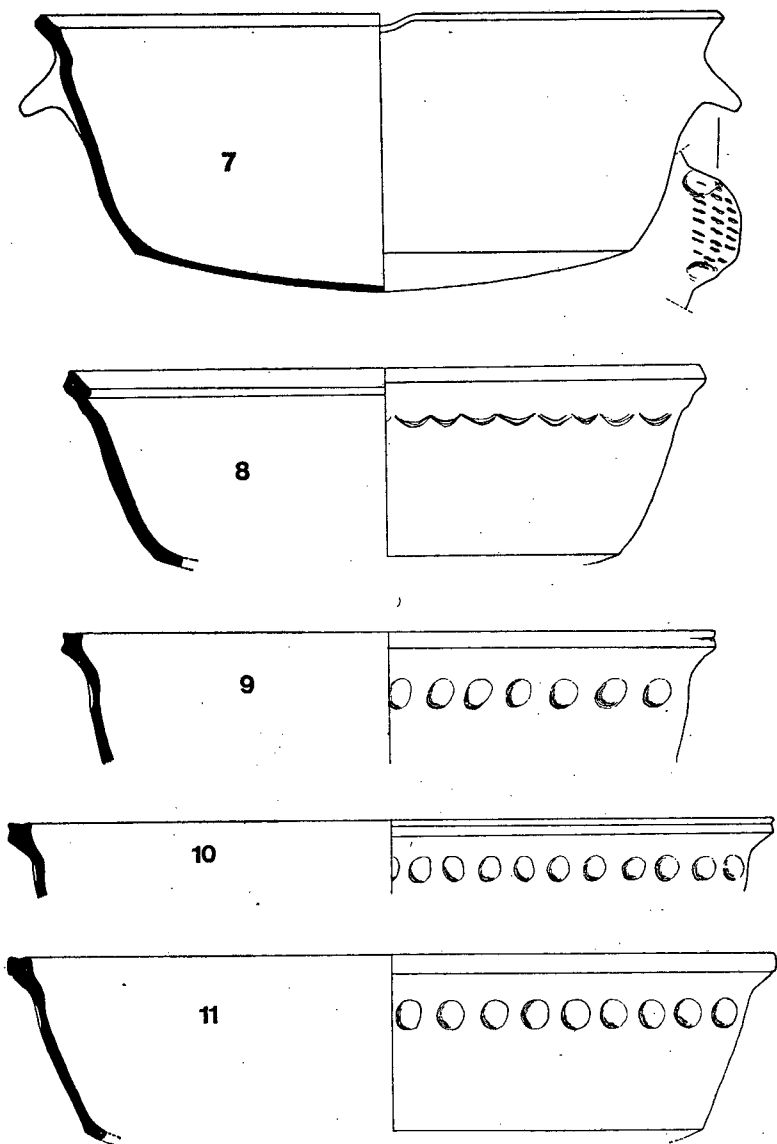


FIG. 27.—Debenham pottery, 1967, scale $\frac{1}{2}$.

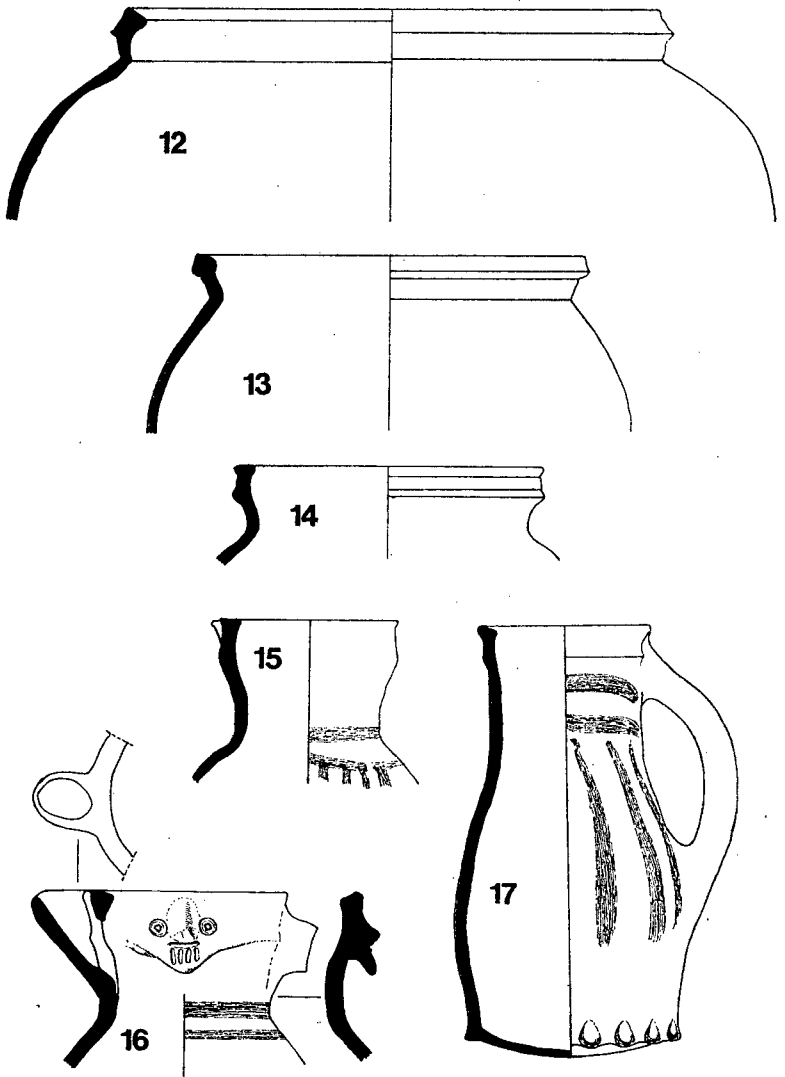


FIG. 28.—Debenham pottery, 1967, and Ipswich pottery (nos. 16 and 17). Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

occupation represented by a series of hearths and paved areas none, it would seem, under cover. An interesting series of coarse pottery was recovered but the scarcity of glazed pottery and the complete absence of metal objects apart from a few nails show that the occupants of the farm were far from affluent. Meat seems to have played little part in their diet but shell-fish were commonplace. The occupation seems to have lasted only some 200 years, from the 12th to perhaps the early 14th century. It is not known why the site was abandoned.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our grateful thanks are due to Mr. Styles for allowing us to be present during the destruction of the site and generously giving instructions that all features were to be left as long as possible, and also to Mr. Moulton for his active co-operation. We are indebted to Messrs. Watson and Webster for drawing our attention to the site, and to Mr. R. Hollyfield for handing over the pottery he had collected; to all those who helped in the excavation, especially Messrs Norman Smedley and Barry Barton, whose experience of surveying was invaluable on a site where the features and fixed points alike were constantly vanishing; to Messrs. F. W. Simpson and R. Potter for preparing the photographs and figures, and to Mr. J. Cherry of the British Museum for his invaluable assistance with the pottery.