

ROMAN WENHASTON ‘SPRINGS’ INTO LIFE

by GRAEME CLARKE

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Summary

In 2015 an archaeological excavation on the edge of Wenhaston, one of Suffolk’s putative Roman ‘small towns’, revealed part of an extensive settlement that appears to have flourished during the second to early third centuries AD. Early activity was focussed on a hitherto unknown spring, from around which many metal artefacts were recovered, the nature of which suggests special deposition near to a shrine or sanctuary. During the Middle Roman period a series of regular plots was superseded by several wells, timber structures and associated features. The high proportion of Samian and amphora from the site perhaps supports the interpretation of a small town, while the excavation has provided important contextual information for the significant finds assemblages previously recovered from this part of the village.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A SMALL (1.5ha) EXCAVATION was conducted by Oxford Archaeology East (OA East) in advance of residential development of a former agricultural field off St Michael’s Way on the eastern edge of Wenhaston, in north-eastern Suffolk (NGR TM 4285 7535; WMH038) (Fig. 7). Geophysical survey followed by trial trenching in 2013 had identified significant Roman remains, including possible ‘dark earth’ deposits in the eastern (lower) part of the site.¹ This article summarises the key aspects of the excavation, the largest area yet to have been excavated within the putative Roman small town, with emphasis given to the significant artefact and ecofact assemblages that were recovered. Full details, including methodologies for excavation and analysis, are available in the grey literature report, which is freely available to download from the OA library.²

The Roman settlement at Wenhaston lies largely to the east of the later village at a fork between the river Blyth and one of its tributaries, and some 7.5km inland from the river’s estuary on the east Suffolk coast. The excavation was located roughly 1km from the river, at a height of 15–20m OD on a sand and gravel slope. Wenhaston is one of eight possible Roman small towns in Suffolk, identified on the basis of size, location and evidence of multiple functions.³ Wenhaston’s inclusion in this group was initially based on the discovery of pottery scatters and roof-tile fragments found by fieldwalking in 1975 to the north-east of the village (Suffolk Historic Environment Record WMH004). This was further enhanced by numerous cropmarks identified from aerial photography alongside additional (multi-period) metal-detected finds unearthed during surveys undertaken from the late 1980s that targeted the arable fields on the eastern side of Wenhaston (WMH004 and 005) (Fig. 7). The quantity and range of Roman artefacts recovered, including coins, personal possessions, domestic items and evidence of bronzeworking, are indicative of a substantial and long-lived settlement.

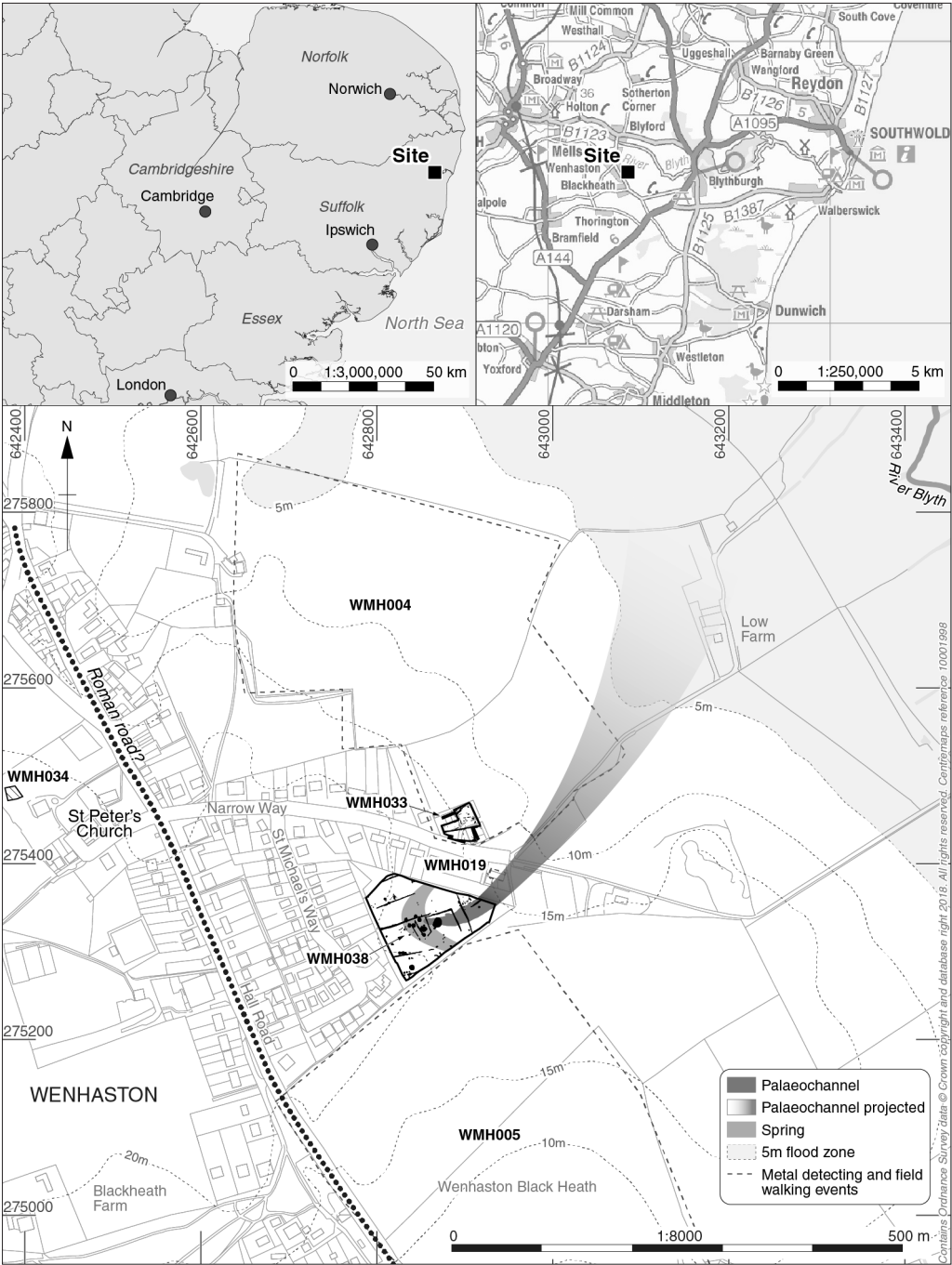


FIG. 7 – Site location map and HER entries.

More recently, mitigation in advance of residential development has led to the discovery of Roman remains, notably to the immediate north and north-east of the current site (WMH019 and 033) as well as further to the north-west (WMH034), close to St Peter's church. Of particular pertinence to the current site was the small excavation (WMH033) located to the north of Narrow Way, within the wider area covered by WMH004, which revealed evidence for an Early Roman (late first-/early second-century) building and associated boundary ditch aligned north-east to south-west. This arrangement was superseded by later second- to third-century buildings, boundaries and other features on the same axis.⁴

ORIGINS: THE SPRING AND PALAEOCHANNEL (PERIOD 1)

Perhaps the earliest feature revealed by the St Michael's Way excavation was a natural spring that had formed along the 18m OD contour as a result of groundwater perched over a thin band of sandy clay within the underlying natural deposits. Palaeochannel deposits comprising sterile pale yellow and dark grey sand were also found filling an 18.5m wide by 1m deep hollow extending to the east, suggesting that this spring once fed a small stream that presumably flowed north-eastwards towards the river Blyth (Fig. 7). These deposits were overlain by a thin accumulation of dark brown sand with moderate gravel content (195; not illustrated); presumably the 'dark earth' identified during the evaluation. This yielded a total of forty-two Roman metalwork artefacts (twenty-two copper-alloy and twenty iron; see below and Figs 11–12), in addition to thirty-one coins, the latter dominated by Early Roman issues. The

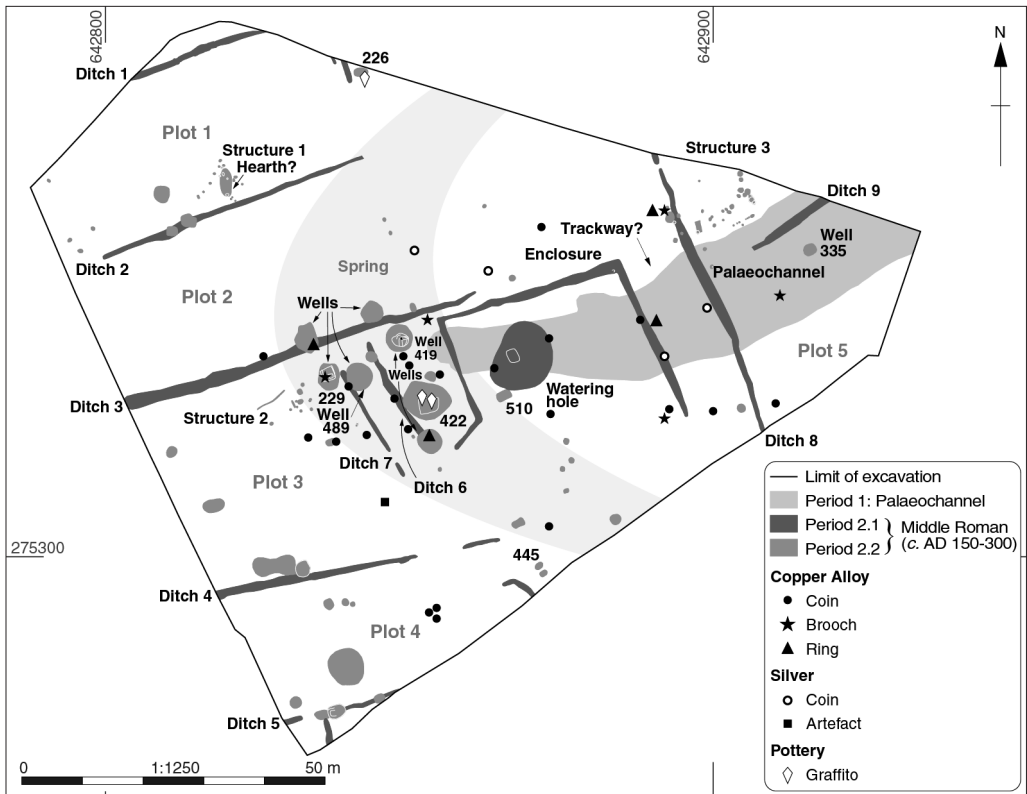


FIG. 8 – Overall site phase plan with metalwork distribution.

distribution of metalwork, coins, pottery, ceramic building material and other finds indicate that the area of the former stream had acted as a natural accumulator for these objects from the nearby settlement (Fig. 8).

EARLY-MIDDLE ROMAN SETTLEMENT (PERIOD 2)

Introduction

Extensive but somewhat dispersed settlement remains, predominantly dating to the Middle Roman period (c.AD150–300), were revealed in the area of the former palaeochannels and spring. At least two successive subphases of activity were represented, with an apparent focus on the latter part of the second century (Fig. 8). Metalwork, coins and ceramic artefacts form the main body of the associated finds assemblages, with only scant archaeobotanical remains being preserved due to the acidic character of the sandy deposits. However, the waterlogged fills of two wells produced pollen, allowing some limited reconstruction of the contemporary environment and farming practices.

Phase 1 (Fig. 8)

In the western part of the site, a row of four plots of land (ranging from 25–32m wide) were partially revealed on a north-east to south-west axis. These appear to have formed part of a wider arrangement of land division across the higher plateau, perhaps extending from a main road to the south-west. Each plot was defined by ditches (Ditches 1–5) that ranged in width from 0.85–2.4m and in depth from 0.1–0.58m. A combined total of forty-seven sherds (686g) of coarseware, two sherds (50g) of Central Gaulish Samian ware and one sherd (30g) of South Gaulish Samian ware was recovered from the ditch fills, along with a single fragment of Roman tile and small quantities of animal bone.

Positioned at the head of the former stream in Plot 3 lay two short lengths of parallel ditch (Ditches 6 and 7), laid at right angles to boundary Ditch 3. Adjacent and to the east of the ditches was a three-sided rectangular ditched enclosure (30m by 20m), which was open on its southern side. Located within the enclosure was a large subcircular watering hole that was sunk into the spring head: it had a maximum diameter of 12m and was 2.3m deep with a wide, shallow profile. The ditches produced very few finds, with their fills yielding a combined total of forty-six sherds (390g) of coarseware pottery. Some of the wells identified in Plots 2 and 3 were probably also sunk in this phase, notably wells 229 and 419 that did not cut the plot boundary ditches (see below). Well 419 only produced a handful of pottery sherds which are indicative of a second-century date for its disuse and infilling, while well 229 appears to have been infilled slightly later.

A fifth plot of land, possibly a paddock, was partly exposed at the base of the sloping ground towards the eastern extremity of the site, defined to the west by Ditch 8 and sub-divided by another ditch (Ditch 9). Very few finds were recovered from these features, demonstrating that this area lay at some distance from the main settlement. The 10m wide gap formed by the eastern arm of the enclosure within Plot 3 and Ditch 8 may have defined a trackway or lane along the rear of Plots 1–4.

Phase 2 (Fig. 8)

Several of the plot boundary ditches had evidently silted up and/or been infilled as they were subsequently encroached upon by a number of poorly defined post-built structures, a group of wells, each sunk into the spring, and a scattering of pits of various sizes and shapes. The large watering hole set within the enclosure in Plot 3 had also become disused, which on ceramic evidence probably occurred in the early to mid-third century. Its four backfills produced a

moderate amount of pottery (sixty-one sherds [803g] of coarsewares and eleven sherds [230g] of Samian ware) alongside nearly 2kg of ceramic building material, a fragment of Roman glass and an iron-smithing hearth base.

The larger examples (between *c.*1.5m and *c.*6m wide and a maximum of 2.3m deep) of the various pits identified across the area were generally subcircular in plan with near vertical sides and flat or slightly concave bases. These probable quarries produced almost exclusively Middle Roman pottery sherds and fragmentary ceramic building material, along with animal bone. Notable finds included a fragment of brick displaying a signature and finger impression from a pit within Plot 3 (see Fig. 15: 7), and a mortaria sherd with a partial and abraded maker's stamp (see Fig. 14: 12). Pit 565, cut into the spring, contained parts of the head, vertebrae and limbs of a relatively large horse estimated to have been between 3–3.5 years of age.⁵

Plots 1 and 3: structures and associated features

Within Plot 1 lay the remains of a post-built structure (Structure 1) encompassing an area of approximately 10m by 7m and which may have extended across the path of Ditch 2. The post-hole fills, some of which were charcoal rich, contained small quantities of fired clay, along with a fragment of solidified molten lead and an iron nail. Positioned within the building's footprint was a large but heavily truncated (0.15m deep) oval pit, which contained a series of burnt fills. These produced sherds of coarseware pottery, alongside relatively large quantities of ceramic building material (*c.*2.7kg) and fired clay, weighing nearly 1kg. Some of the fragments of tile and fired clay had evidently formed part of a broken-up hearth. A further pit (226) within this plot is of note as its small pottery assemblage included a sherd from the base of a dish that displayed graffito (see below and Fig. 13: 7).

A second structure (Structure 2) was evident to the south, within Plot 3, formed by a rectilinear arrangement of ten post-holes and two beam-slot gullies that encompassed an area of approximately 10m by 5m. The post-holes produced small amounts of coarseware pottery alongside two sherds of Central Gaulish Samian ware.

Plots 2, 3 and 5: wells

Clustered over the spring line to the north-east and east of Structure 2 was a group of seven large wells. The wells ranged between 1.1m and 4m in depth (with most being in excess of 2m) and typically had vertical sides widening out to a cone-shaped pit at the top (Fig. 9). Saturated deposits were encountered in all the wells below a depth of 1m and two examples contained evidence of timber linings typical of 'corner post' type construction (see below). Well 229 (Fig. 9) contained the best-preserved remains, comprising a 1.5m square lining of oak planks laid on edge and retained by four driven stakes at each corner. Oak planks thought to represent collapsed shuttering/lining were also found towards the base of nearby well 422 (Fig. 10), along with some larger oak beams.

Within well 422, the basal fill beneath the timbers produced an unusually large group of graffito, including an example of a large swastika carved into the base of a coarseware folded beaker, and adapted pottery vessels. These may have been specially selected or grouped for deposition for a particular (possibly votive) purpose (see Fig. 13: 1–6); presumably once the well was abandoned. Together, the pottery is consistent with a late second-century date, indicating that the well may have been constructed in the previous phase and/or did not remain in use for very long. This assemblage also included sherds of adapted greyware vessels, with several post-firing nicks taken out of the rim of a jar and two partially drilled holes within the base of a flanged dish (see below). Similar evidence was found within the basal fill in well 229, including a Central Gaulish Samian bowl displaying an owner's mark scratched into the external wall, a burnished greyware jar with cross-hatched decoration and fragments of

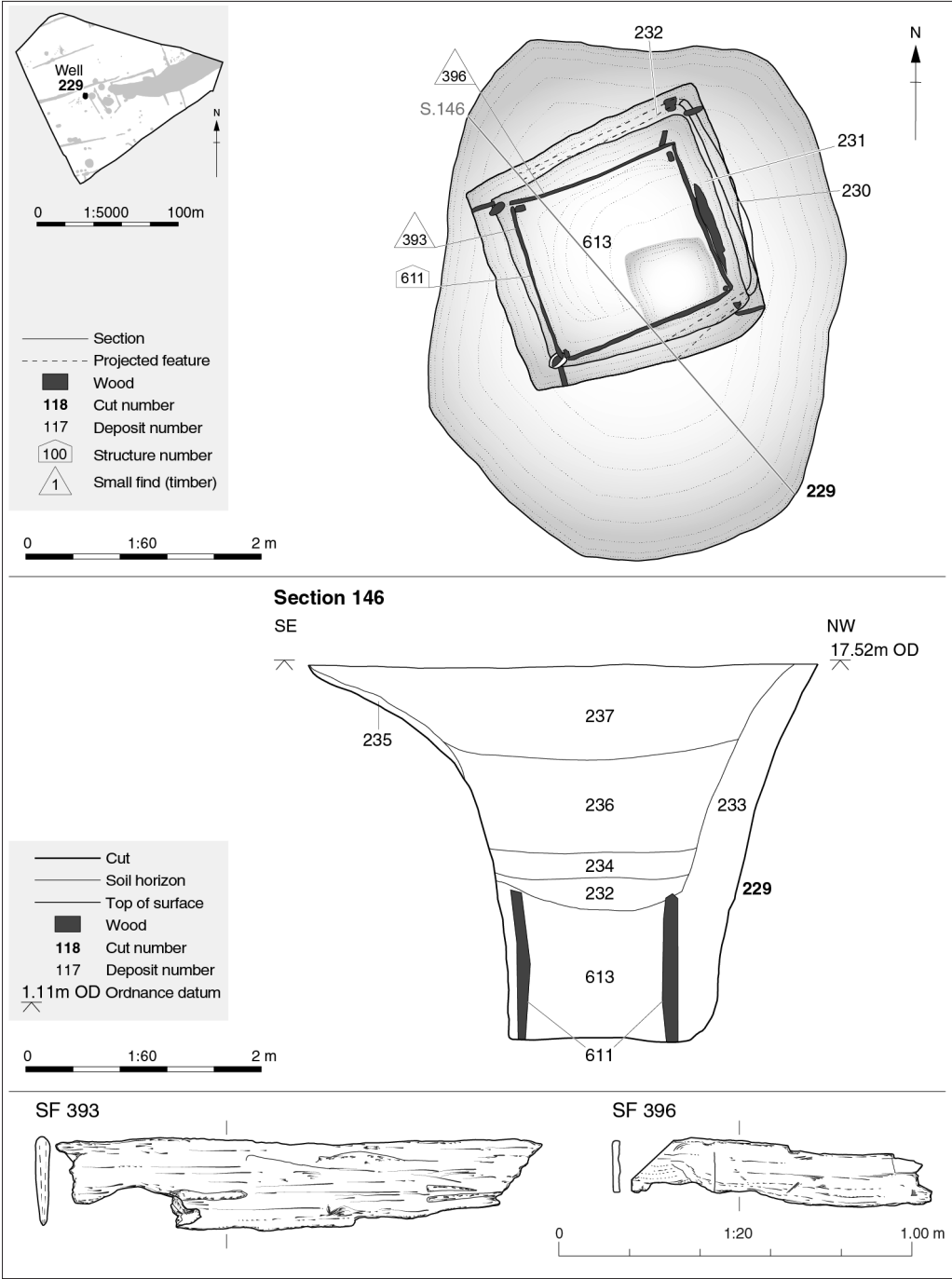


FIG. 9 – Detail of well 229.

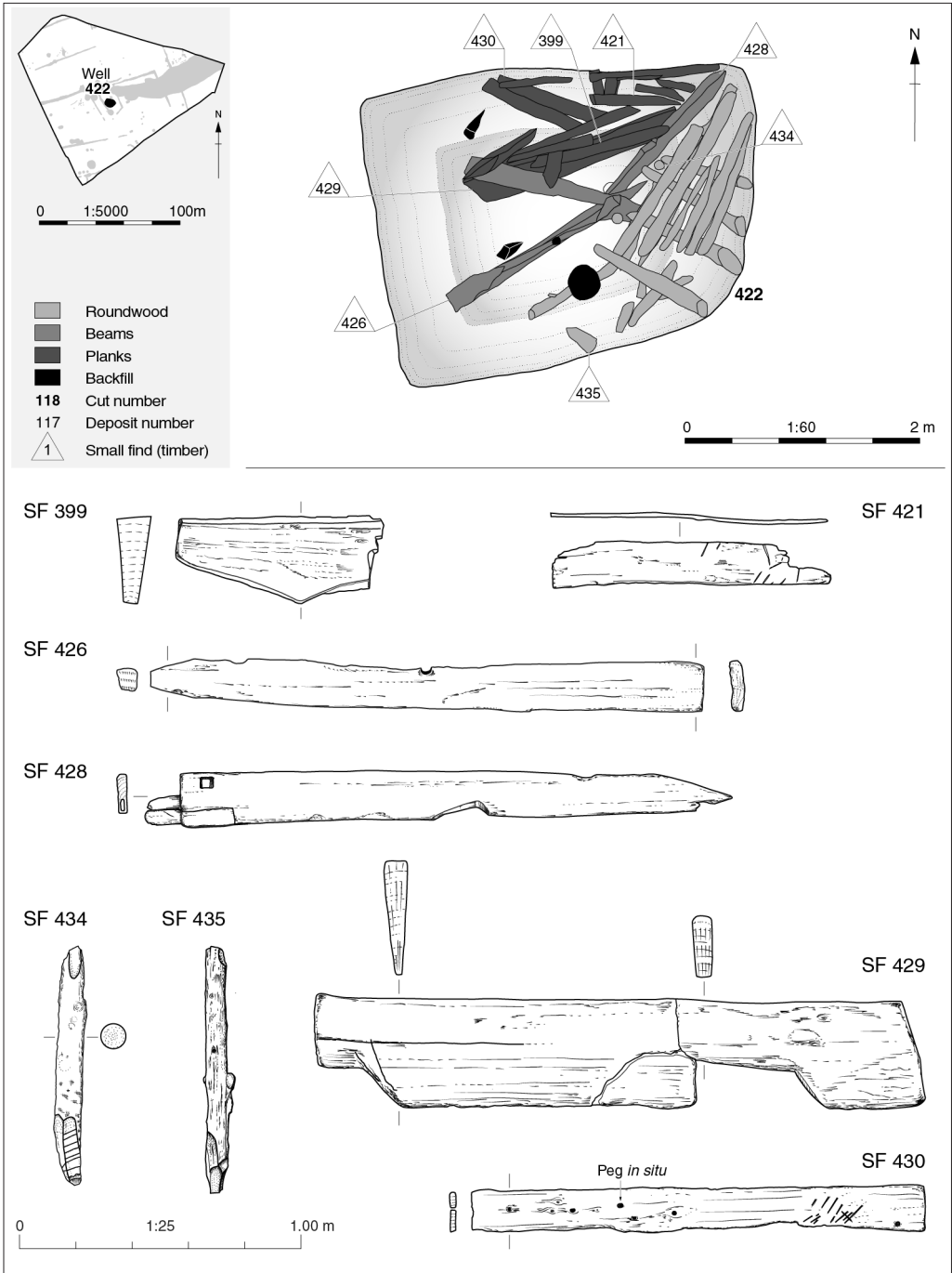


FIG. 10 – Detail of well 422.

mortaria (see Fig. 14: 8–9 and 13–14).

Overall, the backfills of the wells contained a range of settlement-related debris including pottery (generally spanning the mid-/late second century to mid-third century), ceramic building material, metalwork, metalworking debris, vessel glass, quern fragments and animal bone. The pottery assemblage mostly comprised coarseware sherds along with some examples of finer wares including Spanish globular olive oil amphora and Samian. One greyware beaker example from the basal fill of well 489 was decorated with panels of barbotine dot decoration (see Fig. 14: 10).

Plot 5: Structure and well

Further to the north-east, within Plot 5, were two rows of post-holes that defined a rectilinear structure (Structure 3) encompassing an area of approximately 12m by 7m. The fills yielded two fragmentary copper-alloy needles (not illustrated), twenty-five sherds (161g) of Middle Roman pottery largely comprising coarseware sherds (with a single sherd of Samian ware), along with small quantities of ceramic building material and animal bone.

Located to the south-east of Structure 3 was a well (335) of similar character to those described above, positioned at the lowest lying point of the site and sunk to a depth in excess of 2.8m through the palaeochannel deposits described above. Finds recovered from the various backfills of this feature included varying quantities of pottery (eighty-five sherds in total), ceramic building material, fired clay, animal bone, iron nails and an irregular disc of reddle or haematite, possibly for use as a pigment. The pottery mostly comprised sherds of coarsewares with some fragments of Central Gaulish Samian, Nene Valley colour coat and Spanish globular olive oil amphora, and largely dates to the mid-second century or later. One Samian bowl fragment had been trimmed to make a circular gaming counter and one example of ceramic building material fragment displayed a signature (see Fig. 15: 6).

COINS

by Paul Booth

Thirty-one Roman coins were recovered from the site. The assemblage, though small, is notable for its domination by Early Roman issues: the great majority of the coins span the period from c.AD 64–211. The distribution of the coins (and other metalwork items described below) is shown on Fig. 8. Most of the coins were not securely stratified; all were metal detector finds. The coin loss pattern is remarkable in relation to that usually observed in rural settlement contexts (including those associated with minor nucleated settlements/small towns, as here). On sites of this character occupied through much of the Roman period, assemblages are invariably dominated by Late Roman coins, particularly those of the fourth century, while sites only occupied in the Early Roman period will typically have very few coins, or perhaps none at all. Coin loss data for a number of putative small towns from Suffolk, conveniently summarised by Plouviez, support the general trend, and this is emphasised by recent publication of the evidence from Scole.⁶ In Plouviez's summary, however, it is notable that the evidence from Wenhampton, derived almost entirely from surface finds, includes respectable representation from the Flavian period onwards, while still conforming to the overall pattern of a preponderance of Late Roman coins.⁷

METALWORK

by Chris Howard-Davies

Excavation (WMH038) assemblage

The metal detection of the site recovered forty-two Roman metalwork items, in addition to the thirty-one coins described above. These were largely from the topsoil and subsoil overburden across the site, as well as the tertiary build-up deposit (195) over the Period 1 palaeochannel; some items were subsequently recovered from securely dated Roman settlement features. The distribution of the metalwork is shown on Fig. 8. All objects have been assigned to one of the functional categories defined by Crummy, with the vast majority being related to dress or dress accessories.⁸

Copper-alloy objects comprise eleven brooches (Fig. 11: 1–8), two finger rings (Fig. 12: 9–10), a toothpick, a needle, a pin, two studs possibly from a harness, a faceted bead (Fig. 12: 11), a miniature votive sword (Fig. 12: 12), and two unidentifiable strips. The (incomplete) brooches reflect the dating of the large number of such items recorded in the area by the Portable Antiquities Scheme, most of which seem to be Colchester-derivative types (Polden Hill/T-shaped/Dolphin variants present) of first-century AD date. One of the *c.*first-century fragmentary rings (SF 251, Fig. 12: 9) is regarded as being of Graeco-Roman Mediterranean origin (uncommon in Britain) and was most probably brought here from the Continent as a personal possession.⁹ A knee brooch (SF 103; Fig. 11: 7) comprises the single military item recovered from the site.

Items related to transport are represented by the possible harness fitting studs and the large faceted cylindrical bead. This bead (SF 284) is almost identical to one recovered from Romano-British Settlement 7, excavated at Love's Farm, St Neots, Cambridgeshire, and described as a polygonal tubular fitting.¹⁰ The miniature votive sword or *spatha* (SF 107; Fig. 12: 12), the only religious item recovered, is of particular interest, partly due to its rarity, with less than twenty of these objects recorded in the PAS database. Clearly intended to represent a *gladius*, it seems to have been deliberately part cut or scored where the blade joins the hilt in order, presumably, to facilitate bending. The bend, seen on several examples of this type, perhaps reflects a 'ritual killing'.¹¹

Iron artefacts are largely represented by fifteen nails, along with two hobnails, a knob and two unidentifiable objects.

Illustrated items (Figs 11–12)

1. SF 205: Small bow brooch with a hinged pin set in a cylindrical spring case. The lower part of the bow and the foot are both missing, as is the pin. There are transverse ridges on the upper part of the bow. L: 15mm; W: 14mm; Ht: 6mm. WHM038, 100 topsoil, first century.
2. SF 257: Colchester-derivative brooch of Polden Hill type. The spring and pin are absent and the spring case damaged. There is a rearward-facing hook to rear of the spring case. The bow is decorated by a single medial ridge and there is a small foot. L: 39mm; W: 25mm; Ht: 12mm. WMH038, 195 tertiary deposit, first century.
3. SF 159: T-shaped brooch, with very wide cylindrical wings and a hinged pin. The lower part of the bow, catchplate, and pin are all missing. The wings, decorated with four encircling grooves to each side, completely enclose the axial bar (seen in X-ray). The bow has a single central ridge crossed by faint transverse lines, and a zig-zag motif, created by groups of three diagonal lines, down the sides of the bow. L: 21mm; W: 36mm; Ht: 9mm. WMH038, 101 subsoil, first century?
4. SF 261: Small T-shaped brooch with wide cylindrical wings, the foot damaged and the pin missing. The bow has a medial ridge but is otherwise undecorated. L: 25mm; W: 27mm; Ht: 8mm. WMH038, 195 tertiary deposit, first century.
5. SF 211: Large dolphin brooch, the spring cover is damaged and the spring missing. The foot and

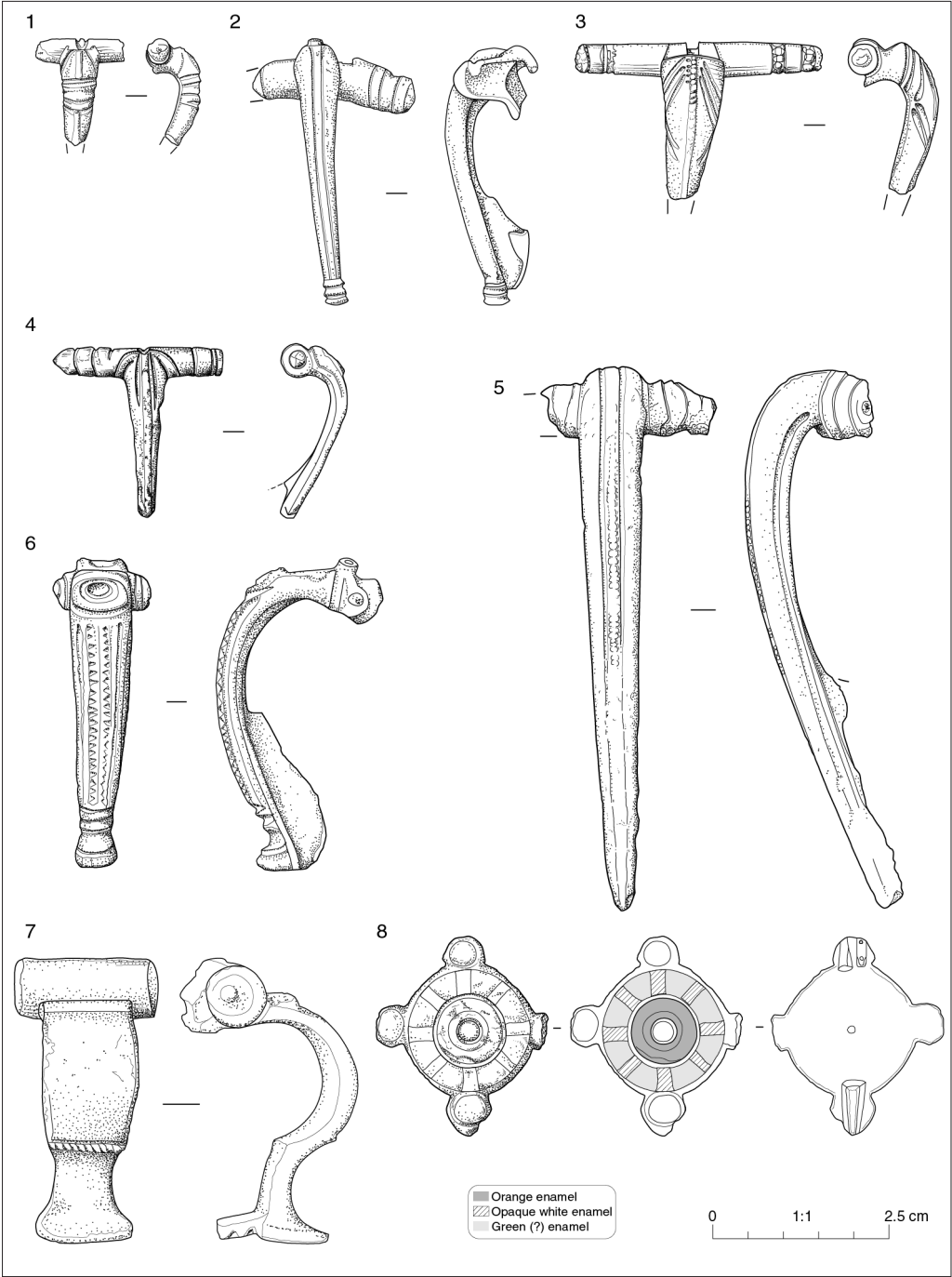


FIG. 11 – Copper-alloy objects (Nos 1–8).

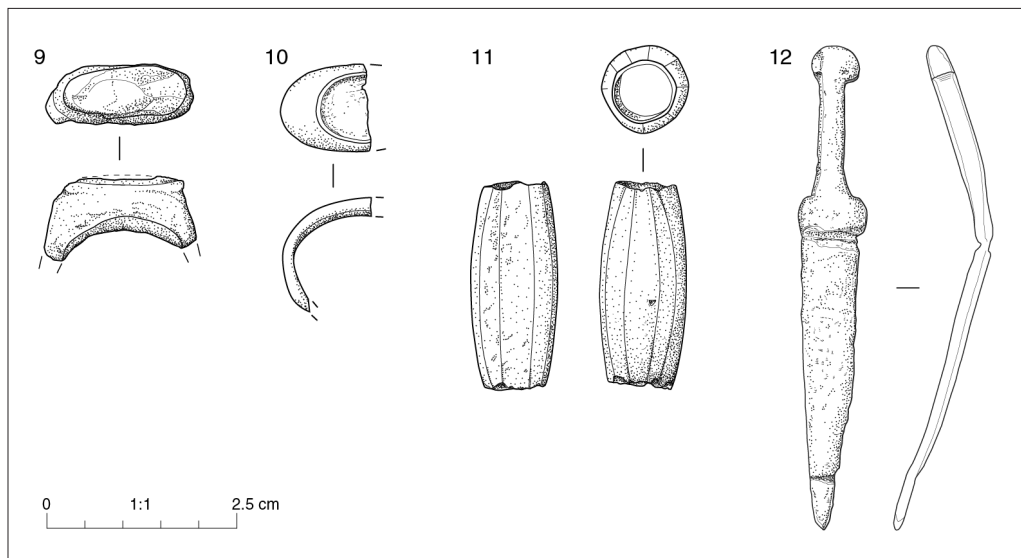


FIG. 12 – Copper-alloy objects (Nos 9–12).

catchplate are missing, as is the pin. The bow is ridged and the ridge decorated with faint transverse grooves. L: 77mm; W: 24mm; Ht: 15mm. WMH038, 195 tertiary deposit, first century.

6. SF 264: Incomplete headstud brooch, the hinge and catchplate are damaged, the headloop and pin are both missing. It has a fixed headloop cast in one with the bow. The wings have two transverse grooves. The headstud is probably enamelled, but the glass is now in poor condition and has lost its original colour. There are two deep grooves running down each side of the bow, with the central ridge between them bearing transverse ridges. There are also transverse ridges across the base of the bow and on the foot. L: 40mm; W: 12mm; Ht: 17mm. WMH038, 195 tertiary deposit, first–second century.
7. SF 103: Tubular-headed knee brooch with horizontal catchplate, the pin and part of the catch are missing. A transverse moulding on the lower part of the curved bow has closely spaced nicks, giving the impression of a beaded line. White metal coated.¹² The type is particularly associated with military contexts.¹³ L: 40mm; W: 12mm; Ht: 17mm. WMH038, 100 topsoil, second century.
8. SF 108: Enamelled plate brooch, there is slight damage, with the pin and catchplate both missing. The brooch is round, with four opposed lobes, two of which accommodate the pin hinge and catchplate. Each lobe is decorated with a single enamel dot, the colour of which is now lost. The decoration on the main body of the brooch comprises a central spot (colour lost), surrounded by an unbroken ring of orange enamel, and then by a ring comprising alternating blocks of opaque white and what now appears green enamel, but was probably opaque yellow, having been affected by corrosion products from the copper-alloy body of the brooch. L: 29mm; W: 24mm; Ht: 5mm. WMH038, 100 topsoil, second century.
9. SF 251: Fragmentary bezel from a finger ring. The bezel, rising from the widest part of the hoop, is an elongated oval, set with a now shattered transparent blue glass gem. Guiraud (1989) type 1. L: 12mm; W: 21mm; Th: 7mm. WMH038, 101 subsoil, first century.
10. SF 212: Fragment from the bezel of a finger ring with large oval gem setting (gem missing). The ring falls into Henig's type II/III.¹⁴ L: 17mm; W: 13mm; Th: 2mm. WMH038, 195 tertiary deposit, first and second century, possibly later.
11. SF 284: Large faceted cylindrical bead. Complete, with only slight damage to edges. L: 27.5mm; max. diam.: 11mm. WMH038, 101 subsoil.

12. SF 107: Miniature *spatha* with detail of handle and pommel well defined. Bent just below the handle at what appears to be a deliberate cut. L: 64mm; W: 8mm; Th: 3mm. WMH038, 100 topsoil.

Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database

Consideration of the large group of Romano-British artefacts listed in the PAS database for this part of Wenhaston, focused on the coins and items of personal adornment, is key to more fully understanding the significance of the metalwork assemblage from the excavation. In total, 889 coins of probable Roman date are listed, the overwhelming majority (792) generated by event WMH005. Broad chronological analysis of the copper-alloy coinage shows an extremely strong bias towards deposition in the third and fourth centuries, whilst, for silver coinage, deposition was concentrated in the second and third centuries, but with a recognisable presence of pre-conquest and first century issues. After coins, brooches form the next largest group in the record, with 128 examples, the majority (114) from event WMH005, which even at a gross level show is a strong emphasis on first- and early second-century deposition.

This pattern of deposition, with peaks in early brooches and late coins, is often associated with votive activity. Brooches seem most likely to reflect a period of active deposition of Late Iron Age and early post-conquest Roman date, especially in eastern England and seen, for instance, at Nettleton Top in Lincolnshire, where many of the finds were also recovered by metal-detecting.¹⁵ Nettleton Top is also notable for having an exceptionally large number of miniature (votive?) weapons amongst the group, a presence noted in both event WMH005, which records two (an axe and a possible knife), and the present excavations, which produced a single miniature sword (see above). A similar pattern of deposition can be seen at Great Walsingham temple in Norfolk (NHER2024) where the number of brooches has been commented on.¹⁶

Albeit at a later date, at Elms Farm, Heybridge, in Essex, Late Roman coins were concentrated within a pool of standing water immediately outside the temple precinct, suggesting that the votive deposition of small but personally significant possessions, like coins and brooches, was a widespread feature of the entire Roman period. Interestingly the bias towards late coins seen at event WMH005 could also be seen in this light, as, at Elms Farm, the majority of the coins were relatively late and it was noted that coins seem to have become increasingly popular as ritual/votive objects in the later Roman period.¹⁷ Deposition was not, however, confined to brooches and coins, with other personal items also playing their part. To this end, the group of seventeen finger rings (including two of silver and one of gold), four bangle fragments, and five pins listed in the PAS database might, again, represent votive activity. There are also two small fragments of figurines, but whether these originate from a temple or from household religious observation must remain open to debate.

ROMANO-BRITISH POTTERY

by Alice Lyons with Stephen Wadeson and Roger Tomlin

An assemblage of Romano-British pottery comprising 1467 fragments, weighing 21.2kg, was recovered from the site. The pottery is in a fairly good but fragmentary condition, with an average sherd weight of c.14.5g, and represents a minimum of 421 vessels. The majority of the pottery was found within a series of pits, wells and a watering hole cut into a spring line (c.74 per cent by weight) and in the tertiary fill over the palaeochannel (c.16 per cent), although lesser amounts were also found in other features.

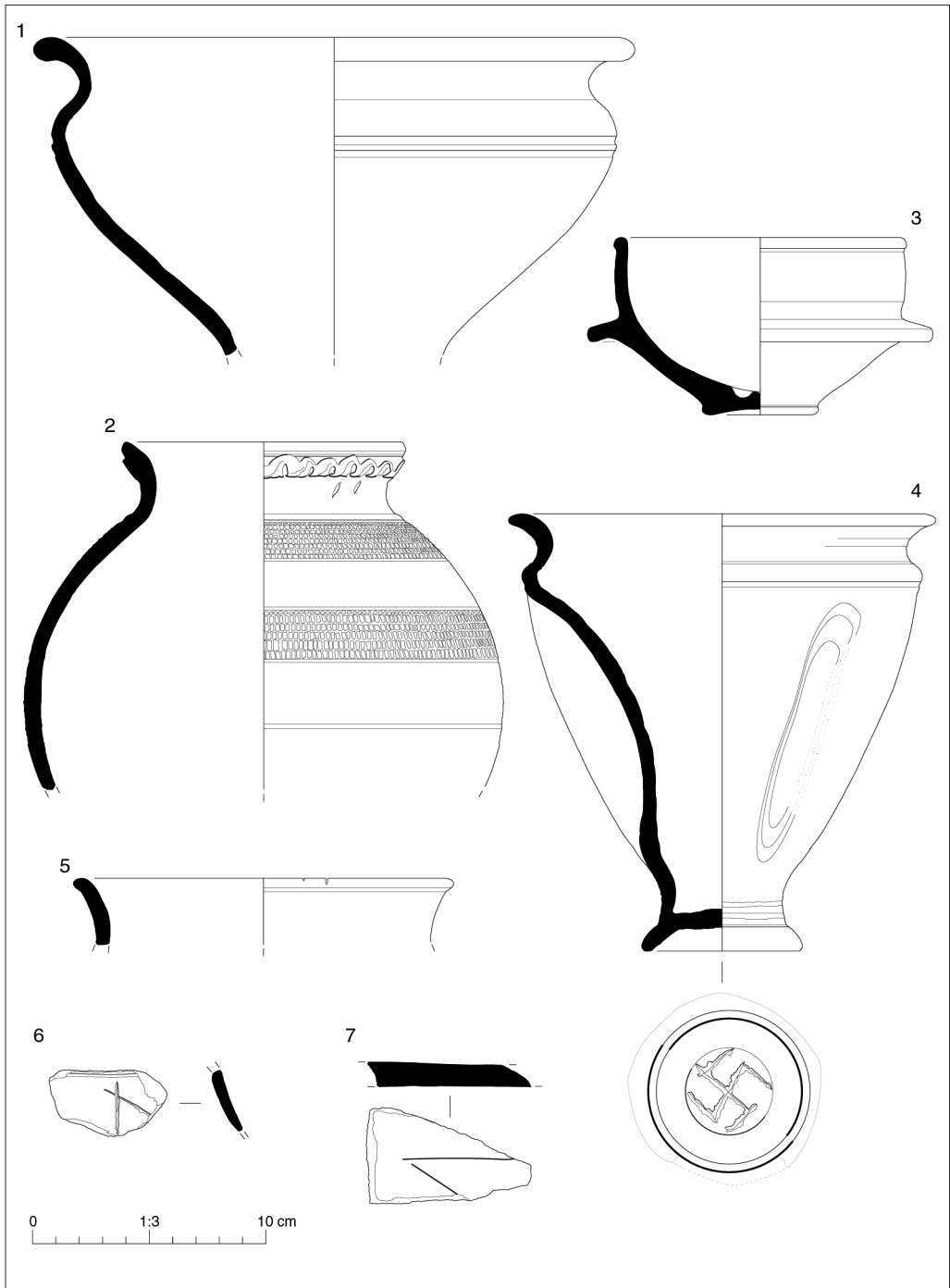


FIG. 13 – Pottery (Nos 1–7).

Fabrics	Billingford		Scole (1973)		Scole (1993–4)		Wixoe		Radwinter		Wenhaston	
	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
Brampton greywares	54	67	0	0	0.38	<1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nar Valley reduced wares	5.8	7	0	0	0.24	<1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local micaceous greywares (Wattisfield type)	<1	<1	Not calc	-	70.5	9	42.6	9	38	47	14.4	69
Samian	4.1	5	3.45	<1	2.74	<1	2.5	1	2.85	4	7.43	35
Nene Valley colour coat	1.5	2	1.38	<1	0.93	<1	0.44	<1	0.29	<1	0.03	<1
Oxfordshire red colour coat	1.7	2	0	0	0.84	<1	0.14	<1	0.37	<1	0	0
Shellywares (South Midland type)	1.1	1	Not calc	-	1.23	<1	0.19	<1	0.92	1	0.02	<1
Total weight (kg)	81		700		756		484		81		21	

TABLE 1 – Comparison of major fabrics from small towns in East Anglia (after Lyons and Tester 2014, chapter 6). No statistics available for Hacheston.

The assemblage mostly comprises locally produced utilitarian sandy reduced (grey)ware (SGW) jars and dishes (67 per cent by weight) and sandy oxidised (white)ware (SOW) (14 per cent), supplemented by a small number of Colchester and Nene Valley fineware beakers (<1 per cent). It is worthy of note that the settlement was well supplied with Samian (SAM) (7 per cent) from all the major Gaulish factories, also at least one Colchester Samian vessel is present which displays a maker's stamp, associated with Gabrus ii (SF 115, Fig. 14: 11), who was active *c.*AD 160–200.¹⁸ The Samian assemblage is primarily from Central Gaul (*c.*85 per cent by weight), principally Lezoux, the majority of forms typical of the later second century. In addition, two Samian sherds displayed inscribed marks of ownership of names abbreviated to a single letter that shows a level of literacy among the settlement's population. Some quite large pieces of Spanish globular olive oil amphora (5 per cent) were also found along with nineteen fragmentary examples of East Anglian bead and flange type mortaria, with a single Mancetter-Hartshill kiln example (7 per cent).

Several well-preserved well assemblages were excavated, one of which contained an interesting group of adapted and graffitied vessels. All graffiti were made after firing and thus relate to the ownership or use of the vessel, not its manufacture. The near complete folded beaker (SF 444; Fig. 13: 4) from the base of well 422 displays a neatly incised swastika more

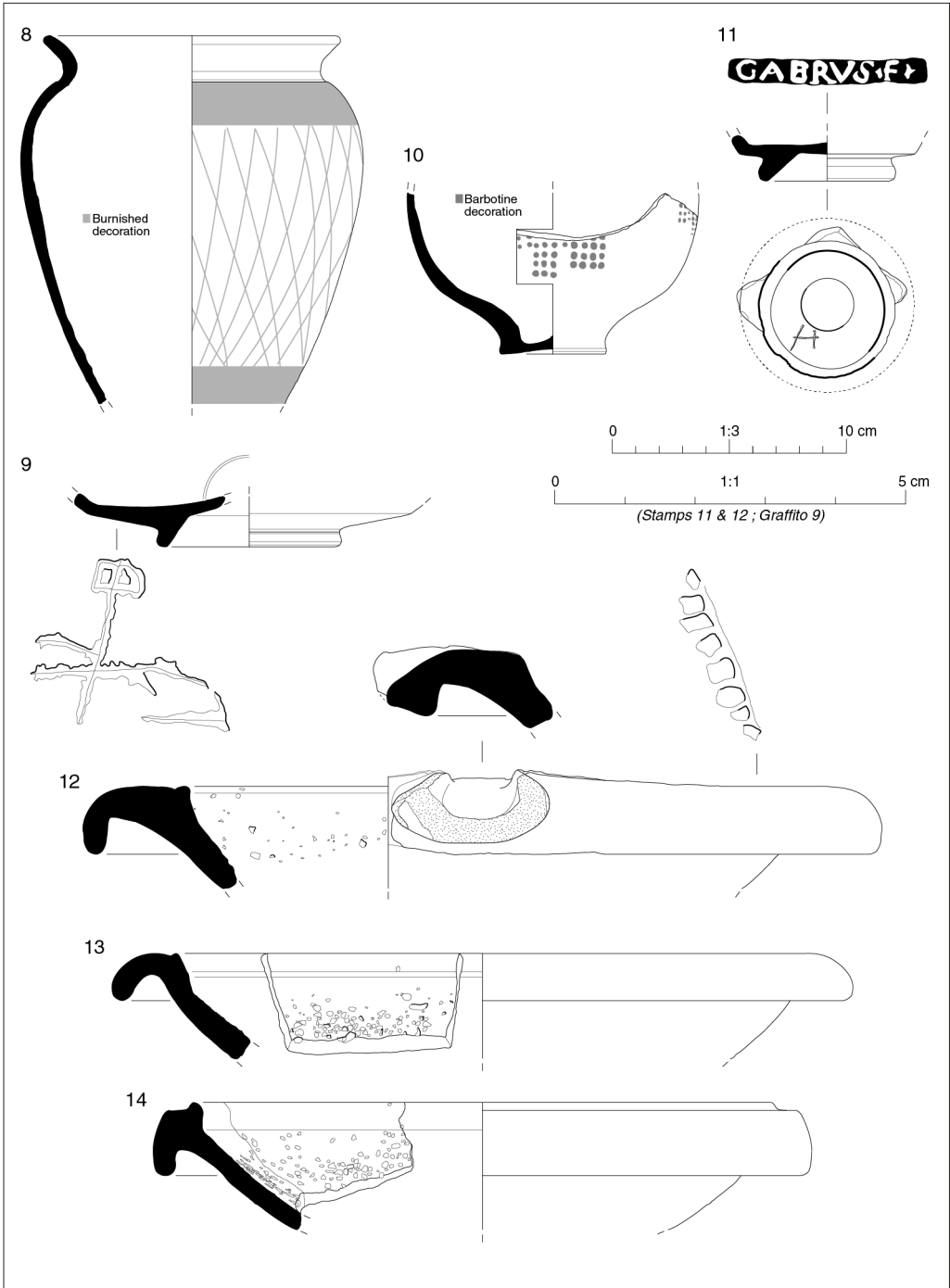


FIG. 14 – Pottery (Nos 8–14).

likely to have been intended as a mark of ownership rather than conveying any votive or religious significance.

Similar to the pottery assemblages from other small towns in the region, such as Hacheston, Scole, Billingford, Wixoe and Radwinter, the Wenhashton pottery assemblage appears typical for the region in that ceramic supply is dominated by sand-tempered reduced (grey)wares (Table 1).¹⁹ The supply of Samian is of particular interest as it forms an unusually high percentage of the assemblage when compared to other small town assemblages. The relatively high levels of Samian may be due in part to the date of the assemblage which includes the period when the importation of Central Gaulish Samian was at its most prolific. It also suggests an urban pattern of Samian use which may indicate that Wenhashton was well located within the Roman infrastructure of rivers and roads, whilst its proximity to the sea may also suggest that imported pottery reached the town this way.²⁰ Relatively common Samian also indicates that the second-century population of Wenhashton had both the fiscal means and the desire to invest in high-status tablewares and the associated style of Roman eating.

Illustrated vessels (Figs 13–14)

1. SGW jar. Fill 612 in well 422.
2. SGW jar. Double girth groove on shoulder. Fill 612 in well 422.
3. SGW bowl. Burnished with gold mica dusting. Well-worn internally with two drill holes adjacent inside the base. Fill 612 in well 422.
4. SGW folded beaker (SF 444). Swastika graffito. Fill 612 in well 422.
5. SGW jar/beaker (SF 448). Post-firing 'nicks' on rim. Fill 612 in well 422.
6. SGW jar/beaker (SF 449). Graffito. Fill 612 in well 422.
7. SGW dish. Graffito on base. Fill 228 in pit 226.
8. SGW jar. Burnished cross-hatched decoration. Fill 613 in well 229.
9. SAM bowl (SF 445). Graffito on base of vessel wall. Fill 613 in well 229.
10. SGW beaker. Panels of barbotine dot decoration. Fill 603 in well 489.
11. SAM Colchester cup (SF 115). Subsoil 101.
12. SOW mortaria (SF 341). Partial abraded maker's stamp. Fill 446 in pit 445.
13. SOW mortaria. Fill 613 in well 229.
14. SOW mortaria. Fill 613 in well 229.

CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL AND FIRED CLAY

by Cynthia Poole

A modest assemblage of ceramic building material in a standard range of Roman forms, amounting to 315 fragments (41.023kg), was recovered predominantly from pits, wells and a watering hole, alongside a small quantity of fired clay (184 fragments, 2.093kg). All pieces are fragmentary with no complete dimensions surviving apart from thickness and the majority exhibit moderate to heavy abrasion. Brick forms the largest constituent of the assemblage (45 per cent by weight) followed by *tegulae* (28 per cent), plain flat tile (19 per cent), *imbrex* and ridge (4 per cent) and flue-tile (2.5 per cent).

The emphasis of the assemblage is on flat slabs, whether *tegula* or brick, almost certainly selected for the purposes of reuse; several of which display signatures (Fig. 15). These were probably obtained from a local villa or similar type of masonry building during rebuilding, refurbishment or demolition. The evidence of burning and heat discolouration on the tile suggests much of it was used in ovens and hearths with those tiles with uniform burning on one surface indicative of hearth surfaces, such remains commonly being found in Roman sites. Clear evidence for this reuse of tile embedded in a clay structure comes from a possible oven

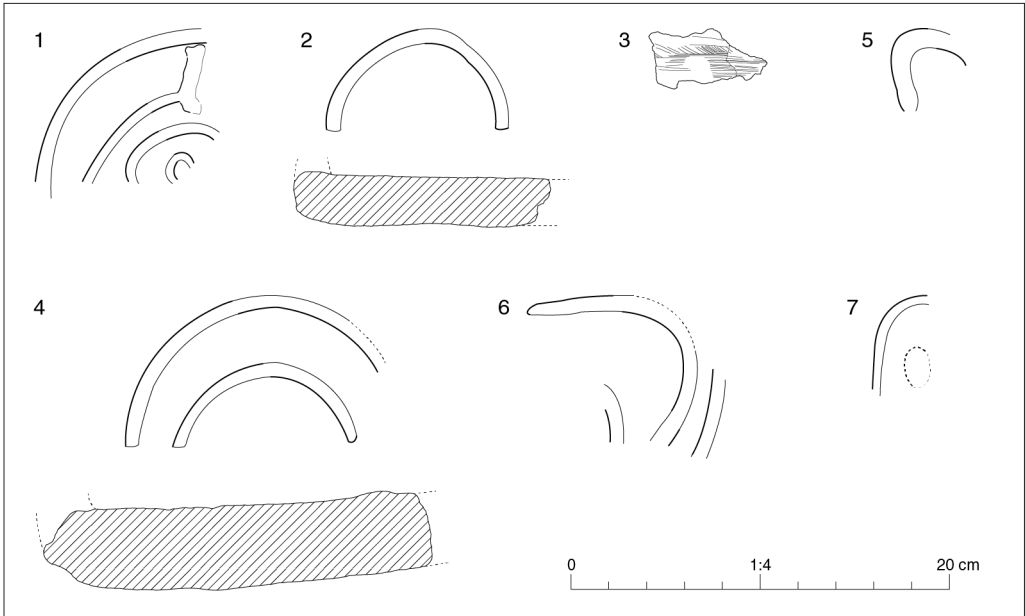


FIG. 15 – Roman ceramic building material (CBM) signatures.

within Middle Roman Structure 1. Associated with this was the largest group of fired clay, which included pieces with some sort of keying suggestive of tile having been pressed into it. This pattern of usage is typical of lower status rural settlements, where tile would have been too expensive a commodity for major structures, but was valued as a resource in the construction of ovens and hearths.

Illustrated items (Fig. 15)

1. *Tegula*. Signature. Spiral: middle finger groove, discontinuous and there appears to be part of circular dot or ring in the middle of the innermost ring. Subsoil 101.
2. *Tegula*. Signature. Finger groove along flange. Tertiary palaeochannel layer 195.
3. Flue. Keying/diagonal combing. Band of diagonal combing possibly crossing a second vertical band running parallel to the corner angle; c.4+teeth, >14mm (W). Blob of surplus clay partly obscures keying. Tertiary palaeochannel layer 195.
4. *Tegula*. Signature. Two grooves. H: 84mm; W: >140mm; (inner groove, W: 100mm and H: 46mm). The two grooves diverge from 14mm apart at LH on edge to 31mm on RH side. Starts 40mm from LH edge Tertiary palaeochannel layer 195.
5. Brick. Signature. Tightly curved finger groove suggestive of loop. Tertiary palaeochannel layer 195.
6. Flat tile. Signature. Three arcs of curved finger grooves. The two outer grooves are concentric on the RH side but have possibly crossed by the LH side. The third inner groove is on a different alignment and must have been swiped separately to the others. Fill 336 in well 335.
7. Brick. Signature. Finger mark depression within signature: small. H: 40mm; W: >60mm. Fill 512 in pit 510.

WATERLOGGED WOOD

by Michael Bamforth *with a contribution by* Maggie Henderson

The two timber-lined wells with corner post construction recorded from the site (see above and Figs 9–10) are typical of examples seen across Roman Britain in the first and second centuries AD in both major and minor urban centres and rural settings.²¹

Well 229 produced retaining timbers that are a mixture of tangential and radially aligned timbers, two of which have been cut at the ends at 45 degrees. No evidence of tooling survives. The timbers are somewhat degraded with evidence of wet rot and water wear, which is to be expected of items recovered from the base of a well.

The woodworking evidence is also typical of the period. This includes radially cleft planks and boards, quarter split posts, tangentially faced items and trimmed (often cross-cut) ends. Due to the moderate condition of the material, little evidence of tooling remains. One item displays evidence of possible sawing. Joints and fixings include mortise holes, tenons and, somewhat unusually, round, pegged holes.

The majority of the timbers have been identified as oak. This excellent, hard-wearing structural timber survives well in wet environments and is a common choice for the linings of Romano-British wells.²² An *ad-hoc* working platform recorded above the collapsed lining of well 422 was formed of alder, another species that performs well in wet environments.²³ Both oak and alder are likely to have been growing in the region of Wenhaston during the Roman period. Several of the oak timbers are derived from unusually large trees with several items split down from trunks with diameters in excess of 400mm and one which had a diameter greater than 800mm.

The linings of both wells contained reused structural timbers that are likely to have originated in timber-framed buildings. Elements identified include possible studs, posts, wall staves and weatherboards/wall planks. The presence of charring on two of the timbers suggests that the building(s) from which the timbers are derived may have been damaged or partially destroyed by fire.

Illustrated items

Well 229 (Fig. 9)

- SF 393 Oak. West side of well frame. Both ends and inner edge degraded. Brown rot, wet rot/water wear. One end TR 1 dir at 45 degrees. No visible tooling. L: 1403mm; B: 253mm; Th: 35mm.
- SF 396 Oak. North side of well frame. Both ends degraded. Water worn. Brown rot, wet rot/water wear. One end TR 1 dir at 45 degrees. No visible tooling. L: 850mm; B: 150mm; Th: 25mm.

Illustrated items

Well 422 (Fig. 10)

- SF 399 Oak. Degraded surfaces. One end broken. One end cross-cut, sapwood removed, no visible tooling. L: 730mm; B: 300mm; Th: 90mm.
- SF 421 Oak. Both ends degraded, wet rot. Diagonal marks. ?saw marks. L: 790mm; B: 130mm; Th: 10mm.
- SF 426 Oak. Both ends degraded, wet rot and beetle attack. Sub-square blind mortice measuring 80 by 80mm. L: 2050mm; B: 330mm; Th: 170mm.
- SF 428 Oak. Wet rot, brown rot and wood-worm attack. One end broken and degraded. Charring to part of one face with c.15mm of material charred away. Shouldered tenon at one end. Small oblique sub-square mortice adjacent to tenon. Birds mouth lap on one edge. L: 2150mm; B: 320mm; Th: 90mm.
- SF 429 Oak. Degraded surfaces, wet rot and brown rot. Charring to part of one face c.1m from end, 20mm of material charred away with small protection mark. Both ends cross-cut, sapwood

- removed, no visible tooling. L: 2060mm; B: 400mm; Th: 90mm.
- SF 430 Oak. Radial drying cracks. Beetle attack on one face: circular holes *c.*6mm diameter. Both ends cross-cut, sapwood removed, no visible tooling. One subrectangular ?nail hole. Five circular holes along length, one contains RW peg and one contains oak heartwood dowel. L: 1500mm; B: 150mm; Th: 20mm.
- SF 434 Alder. One end degraded. One end TR 2 dir to point. One SB TR one dir. L: 860mm; B: 90mm.
- SF 435 Alder. Top end degraded. One end TR all dir to point. Flat facets, max. length 94mm. L: 980mm; B: 80mm.

DISCUSSION

by Graeme Clarke *with* Rachel Clarke, Chris Howard-Davis *and* Alice Lyons

Settlement origins and development

It seems probable that the Roman settlement at Wenhaston was established during the Flavian period (AD 69–96), at a similar time to the other putative Suffolk small towns, notably Wixoe.²⁴ The overall distribution of recorded metal objects and other finds from the village, combined with the results of the archaeological excavations, suggests that the settlement may have extended for some distance eastwards from The Street/Hall Road, across the low promontory overlooking the river Blyth and its tributaries (Fig. 7).

The earliest activity in this (excavated) part of the settlement appears to have initially been focused on a spring and the head of a small stream. By the later first century this area was enclosed and subdivided by a series of boundary ditches demarcating several regular plots. During the Middle Roman period, the formal plot layout was largely abandoned although the area continued to be used for (peripheral) settlement-related activities. This area of Wenhaston clearly witnessed a flourish between the mid-second and third centuries AD, which mirrors an upsurge of activity recorded at other economic centres in the region, notably at Wixoe.²⁵ Similar evidence for an Early Roman planned layout followed by a reorganisation in the Middle Roman period was found at the site to the north-east (WMH033).²⁶

A possible shrine?

The presence on this site, albeit in very mixed contexts, of a relatively large number of brooches and a clearly votive miniature sword might raise the possibility of a Romano-British temple, shrine or sanctuary in the close vicinity. The predominance of Early Roman issues within the coin assemblage is also suggestive of ‘special’ deposition, with the spring probably acting as a focus for this votive activity. This combination has been seen on a number of Late Iron Age/Early Roman temple sites, for instance Hayling Island, Nettleton Top in Lincolnshire and Thetford in Norfolk.²⁷

Although not conclusive, there is a reasonable amount of evidence to suggest a temple, probably of Romano-Celtic type, within the settlement at Wenhaston; its origins probably lying in the first century.

Evidence for a ‘small town’ at Wenhaston

In addition to the suggestion of a probable shrine or temple, a potential indicator of a higher order settlement, additional evidence that seemingly supports the interpretation of Wenhaston being a small town is provided by the excavated pottery assemblage. Although the assemblage as a whole is typical of the other Suffolk small towns, the presence of relatively high levels of Gaulish Samian and Spanish amphora is noteworthy. Furthermore, the fairly wide range of pottery and other artefacts recovered from the site also demonstrate that Wenhaston was well

connected with the infrastructure of Roman Britain and beyond. Clearly, Wenhasston's population had the means to invest in high-status tablewares and lived in an urban-like centre, although finewares from other production centres (such as Colchester and the Nene Valley) are relatively rare. Materials brought to the site from further afield include lava quern from the Rhineland and millstone grit quern from the southern Pennines, along with pudding stone from Hertfordshire. These assemblages (combined with those recorded from the neighbouring fields) demonstrate that the settlement was more than a merely self-sufficient farming community, but acted as an important centre for trade in east Suffolk during the second century at least.

Such a trading centre would have lain within a network of other putative small towns or nucleated settlements within the region. These would have fulfilled similar roles, serving as administrative, mercantile, industrial and religious centres for their respective hinterlands. Many of the small towns identified and excavated in east Suffolk, such as Scole on the river Waveney, Hacheston on the river Deben and Wixoe on the river Stour lay close to riverine junctures with the region's road network (Fig. 16).²⁸ Wenhasston may have been similarly selected to exploit the trading potential offered by a nearby river crossing close to the tidal limit of the river Blyth. Historically, the river Blyth was navigable from the sea to Reydon Quay located 6km to the east.²⁹ It is plausible that the river may have once been navigable in Roman times to an as yet unidentified point adjacent to the Roman settlement at Wenhasston to facilitate trade.³⁰ Goods being carried by road would ultimately have travelled along Stone Street to the regional centre and market of *Venta Icenorum* (located by Norwich, 35km to the north-west), presumably via another possible small town at Ditchingham on the river Waveney, located 16km to the north-west.

The wider known Roman road network in east Suffolk exclusively lies on higher ground above the 30m (c.100ft) contour, with a notable section skirting the headwaters of the many estuarine rivers crossing the coastal landscape (Fig. 16). Today, these estuarine rivers lie within zones of relatively passable reclaimed land that in Roman times may not have been so easily traversed by road.³¹ A possible Roman road, passing through Wenhasston on the alignment of The Street/Hall Road, may have been a landward trading link to Stone Street acting in conjunction with the river Blyth. The projected intersection of these trading links corresponds with the present crossing of the river at Mells Hamlet, 2km to the north-west. A possible continuation to the south-east delineates a routeway that may have ultimately led to Dunwich, 7km to the southeast, long suspected to be a coastal port of Roman origin.³²

Layout and character of the settlement

Although only a small sample of the area once occupied by the putative small town of Wenhasston has been examined, this excavation (and that to the north) has provided the first insights into the settlement's chronology, layout and character at any meaningful scale. Similar to other small towns of the period excavated in Suffolk (Scole, Hacheston and Wixoe), the Roman settlement at Wenhasston may have originated as ribbon development along a road (or crossroads), although recent research suggests that these settlements had more complex layouts.³³ The set of fairly regularly defined plots are indicative of deliberate planning and probably represent individual properties extending eastwards from a road or lane. The layout of the plots clearly respects the axis of the current main thoroughfare of The Street/Hall Road (Fig. 7) and it is possible that any associated building frontages may have lain as far west as this road. Perhaps more likely is that the plots relate to properties laid out along a parallel routeway, located between this thoroughfare and the site. Part of a possible similarly aligned trackway or field lane was revealed by the excavation that would have provided access to the rear of the plots. The subsequent encroachment of buildings and pits over the former boundary ditches suggests they may have only been in use for a short period of time, before this 'planned'

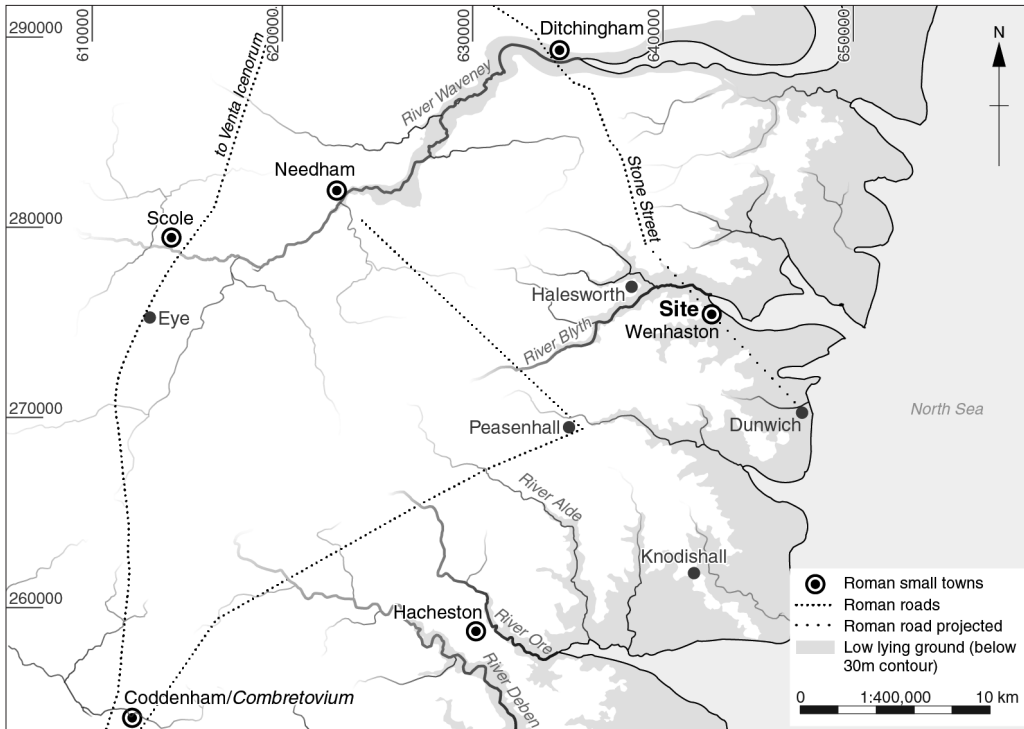


FIG. 16 – Roman Wenhaston in its regional context.

system of plots began to erode and break down as the settlement expanded and contracted. A similar pattern of later second-century encroachment of pits onto the plot boundary ditches was revealed at Scole.³⁴

Although no street frontages or associated dwellings were revealed (the various post-built structures presumably representing agricultural buildings or workshops), the quantities of domestic debris recovered from the pits, wells and ditches suggests that the settlement focus was not located far away. Furthermore, fragments of roof- and floor-tile, bricks and structural timbers found deposited within redundant wells and other large features provide evidence for demolished buildings (some possibly destroyed by fire) that had presumably once stood in the vicinity. The presence of flue-tile suggests a building with heated rooms, indicating a higher than average status of the owner.

The seven wells clustered on the spring line (and one beyond) would have provided a valuable water supply for the local populace and probably represent successive features excavated as each existing well silted up or fell out of use due to contamination or a change in the groundwater level. The pottery assemblages recovered from two of the wells include a range of fineware vessels considered to be refuse from a dining room rather than merely kitchen waste, with an unusually large group of both adapted vessels and vessels displaying marks of ownership, predominantly dating to the late second century. Such examples of ‘special’ deposition from both Scole and Wenhaston raise the possibility that certain items were selected for votive deposition within wells.

Analysis of the scant environmental remains (notably pollen), largely recovered from the wells, suggests that an earlier phase of crop cultivation (or processing) was subsequently

replaced by a phase of possible pastoral activity. Although small, the faunal assemblage indicates that whole carcasses of cattle (and possibly of sheep and pig) were probably butchered on the site.³⁵ This evidence, combined with the presence of a large watering hole, associated enclosures and a number of insubstantial structures, suggests that this part of the settlement probably included paddocks and buildings associated with livestock keeping.

Abandonment or shifting foci?

The very small number of diagnostically Late Roman vessel fragments and coins found in the overburden demonstrate a decline in activity on the site from the second half of the third century AD, after which date this part of the settlement appears to have been abandoned or changed in use. A similar picture is evident at other excavated 'small towns' of the region such as Scole, Hacheston and Wixoe during the fourth century where a decline in pottery deposition was also recorded.³⁶ The pollen record also indicates that the surrounding environment may have deteriorated in this later period to a landscape dominated by moorland and scrub vegetation.³⁷

CONCLUSION

This excavation (along with site WMH033 investigated to the north) has provided some valuable context for the substantial artefact scatters previously recorded from the surrounding fields (notably WMH004 and 005), the presence of which first led to Wenhaston being identified as the site of a possible Roman small town. Both the stratigraphic and artefactual evidence from the excavation has helped to elucidate the origins, development and eventual decline of this local centre and how its evolution fits with the emerging pattern for Suffolk's other Roman small towns.

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NOTES

- 1 Ames 2013.
- 2 Clarke 2017, <https://library.thehumanjourney.net/3198/>.
- 3 Plouviez 1995.
- 4 Antrobus and Stirk 2013, 39.
- 5 Smith 2017, 210.
- 6 Plouviez 1995, 75; Davies 2014.
- 7 Plouviez 1995, 69.
- 8 Crummy 1983.
- 9 Henig 1974; Guiraud 1989.
- 10 Hinman and Zant 2018, fig. 6.39, SF 1145.

- 11 King and Soffe 2013.
- 12 See Mackreth 2011, plate 131, especially 7592, 7603.
- 13 Crummy 2015.
- 14 See Henig 1974, 37–8, fig 1.
- 15 Farley 2011.
- 16 Bagnall-Smith 1999.
- 17 Guest 2015.
- 18 Hull 1963, 86–7.
- 19 Hacheston: Seeley 2004; Scole: Lyons and Tester 2014; Billingford: Cooper and Lyons 2011; Wixoe: Lyons 2018; Radwinter: Lyons forthcoming.
- 20 Lucas 2006, 399, table 7.27.
- 21 Blair *et al.* 2006; Carver *et al.* 1978; Hawkes and Hull 1947; Rodwell 1975; Rogerson 1977; Wilmott 1982.
- 22 Blair *et al.* 2006; Gale and Cutler 2000; Wilmott 1982; Wilson and White 1986.
- 23 Gale and Cutler 2000.
- 24 Atkins and Clarke 2018, 181.
- 25 Atkins and Clarke 2018.
- 26 Antrobus and Stirk 2013, 39–40.
- 27 Hayling Island: Briggs *et al.* 1992; Nettleton Top: Farley 2011; Thetford: Gregory 1991.
- 28 Scole: Ashwin and Tester 2014; Hacheston: Blagg *et al.* 2004; Wixoe: Atkins and Clarke 2018.
- 29 Good and Plouviez 2007, 41.
- 30 Steerwood 2003, 258.
- 31 Hegarty and Newsome 2005, fig. 4.
- 32 Good and Plouviez 2007, 47.
- 33 Atkins and Clarke 2018, 184–5.
- 34 Ashwin and Tester 2014, 48 fig. 2.24.
- 35 Smith 2017, 211.
- 36 Blagg *et al.* 2004; Lyons 2018.
- 37 Rutherford 2017, 224.

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