

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

MEDIEVAL ROADSIDE SETTLEMENT TO THE SOUTH OF BULL LANE, LONG MELFORD, SUFFOLK

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THIS NOTE DISCUSSES the development of a small medieval roadside plot located to the south of Bull Lane, on the eastern side of Long Melford and to the immediate south-east of Melford Hall and Park. Long Melford is one of Suffolk's wealthy 'wool towns' and has a distinctive linear plan incorporating a triangular green. The site was located in a predominantly rural setting outside the main village, on a slight hill (*c.*42m OD) that slopes gently downwards towards the north and the Chad Brook valley (NGR: TL 8705 4581, Fig. 158).

The small excavation (0.48ha), which followed a phase of trench evaluation, was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology East in advance of a residential development and revealed remains ranging in date from the prehistoric to the post-medieval periods.¹ Evidence for earlier activity notably included an unurned cremation burial of Bronze Age date and a Neolithic stone *polissoir* (a separate note has been prepared for the latter), while post-medieval features were largely related to agricultural use.² This summary focuses on the medieval archaeology (Fig. 159), while a full discussion of all the remains revealed by the excavation can be found in the grey literature report which is freely available to download from the OA library.³

During the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, two large ditches measuring a maximum of 2.5m wide and 0.9m deep were laid out parallel and perpendicular to Bull Lane, possibly representing an early roadside ditch and a boundary dividing two plots. Associated with these were a number of smaller ditches, pits and post-holes, some of which may indicate the presence of a barn or other agricultural building within the easternmost plot. A complete horse skeleton was found within one of the pits. These features, along with the associated finds of pottery, animal bone, ceramic building material and fired clay, are indicative of domestic settlement and provide the first evidence for the post-Conquest expansion of Long Melford eastwards along Bull Lane (possibly associated with Melford Hall). Similar roadside plots have been recorded elsewhere in the county, including at Great Blakenham and Cedars Park, Stowmarket, where settlement seems to have flourished in the twelfth century.⁴

This plot layout was subsequently modified in the high medieval period (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) when some of the earlier features were backfilled and activity was focused on a rectangular building set within a small ditched enclosure, associated with which were a number of pits and ovens. The L-shaped enclosure ditch presumably extended from the road frontage to the north and formed a sub-rectangular plot with the north-south boundary retained from the previous phase. Two parallel linear flint-rubble foundations, each 0.8m–0.9m wide, survived within the enclosure, indicating a building measuring roughly 5m by 5m in plan (Fig. 160). The only internal feature was a 1.5m wide and 0.34m deep circular pit located fairly centrally within the building. If contemporary, this pit, which had vertical sides and a flat base and produced a small quantity of high medieval pottery, may have held a cistern or even a block of wood such as a tree trunk to act as a working surface.

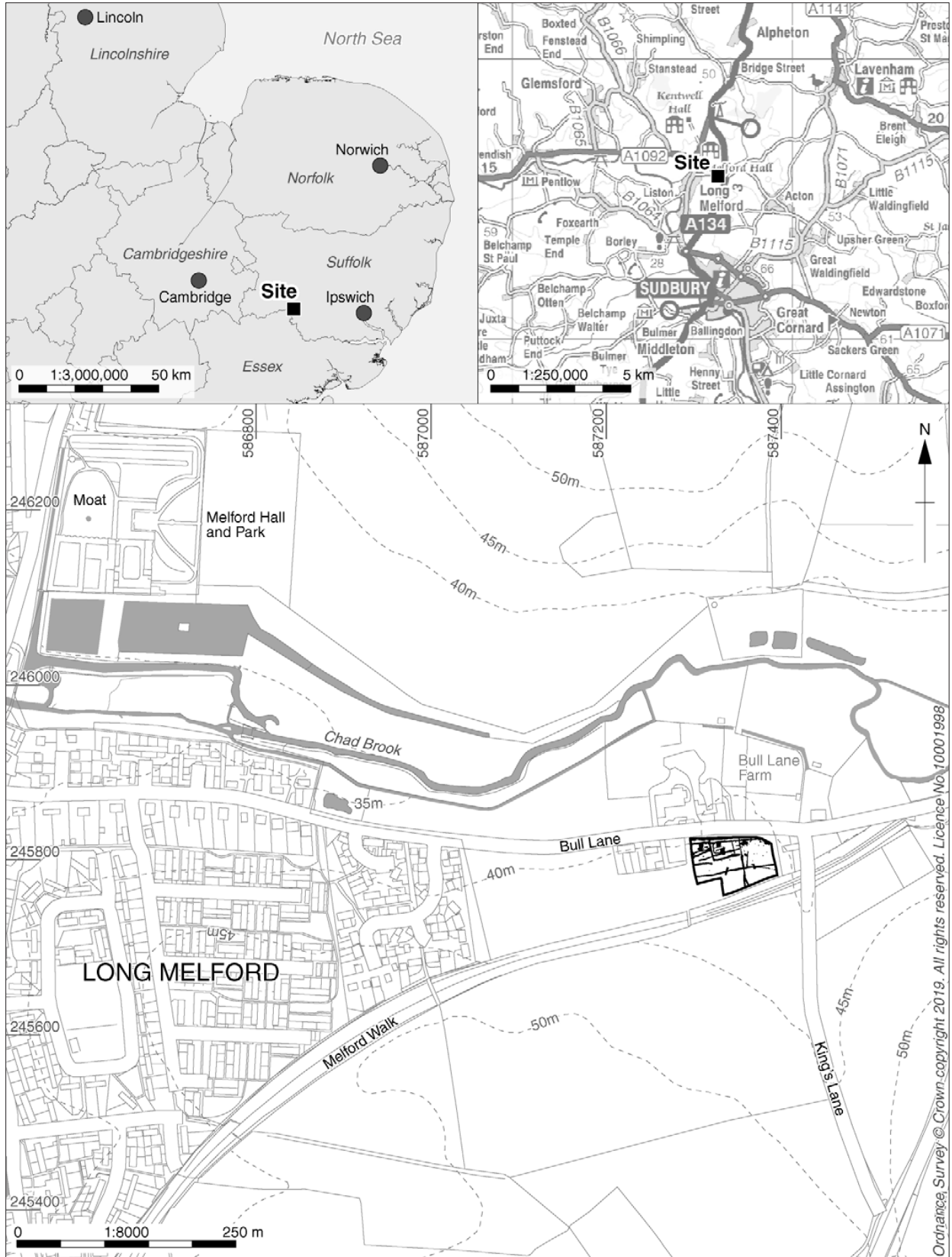


FIG. 158 – Site location.

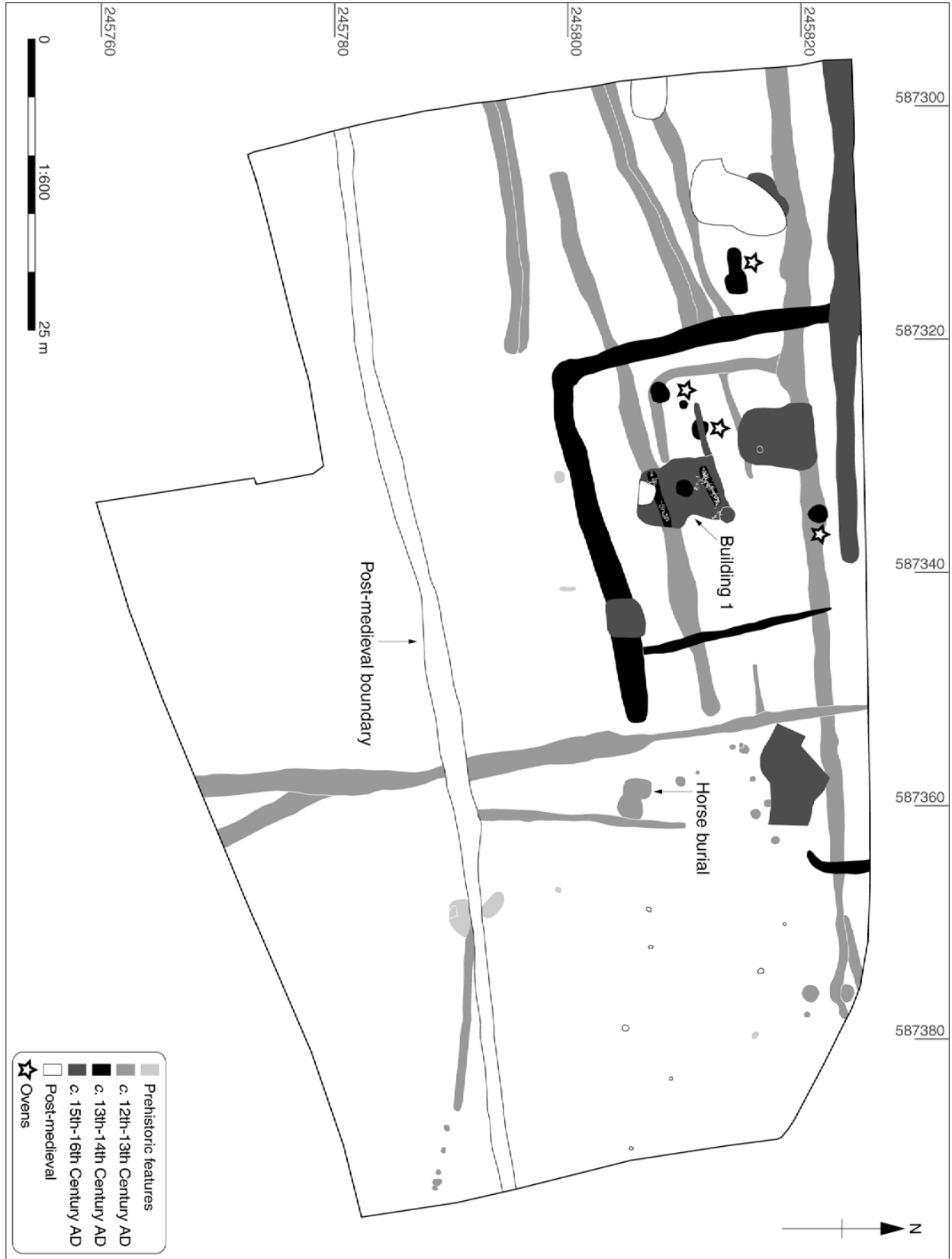


FIG. 159 – Plan of medieval and later features.

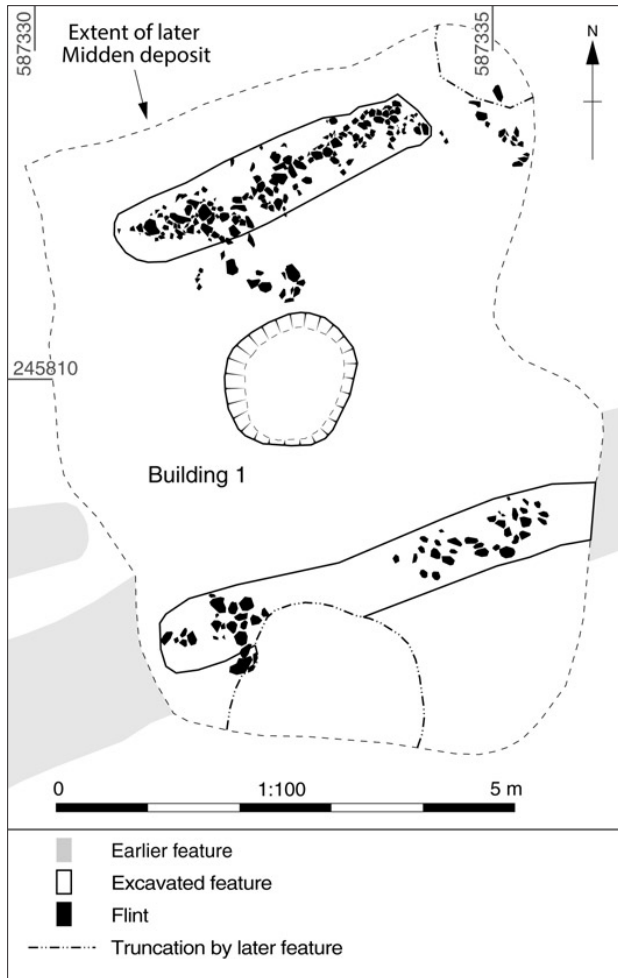


FIG. 160 – Detail of Building 1.

Three sub-circular ovens were located to the immediate west and to the north of the building; these varied between 0.9m–1.8m in diameter and between 0.1–0.2m in depth. A fourth keyhole-shaped oven was present outside the western arm of the enclosure and was the largest of the group at 3.84m long, 1.78m wide and 0.2m deep. All four ovens showed evidence of a collapsed clay superstructure (clay that may possibly have been quarried from nearby pits of a similar date). Extensive environmental sampling of the ovens was undertaken which notably produced very little charcoal, suggesting a fuel source other than wood was being used (possibly peat). The oven deposits contained mixed cereal varieties, including wheat, barley and oats, along with occasional legumes and various weed seeds. This variety may be explained by grain being used to prevent loaves of bread sticking to oven shelves and/or the use of the ovens for drying fully processed grain to make it harder prior to milling for flour.

Building 1 appears to have been linked to crop processing, an interpretation possibly underscored by the nearby recovery of (albeit worn) pieces of lava quern stone. It may perhaps have been a detached kitchen or bakehouse associated with a dwelling located closer to the road.

Activity on the site appears to have dropped off in the late medieval period, represented by a few large pits, a new boundary ditch parallel to the road and several layers. Pottery associated with Building 1 indicates that it may have continued in use into the late fifteenth–sixteenth century, but following its abandonment a long-lived midden deposit accumulated over its footprint. This layer was characterised by large amounts of finds including pottery (1.3kg) spanning the medieval to early post-medieval periods but predominantly of sixteenth–seventeenth-century date, ceramic building material (1.7kg), shell (0.65kg) and animal bone (1.8kg). Numerous metal finds were also present including dress fittings, household objects, such as a knife and a candleholder, and structural items including a hinge and numerous nails. Pottery recovered from some of the larger medieval boundary ditches suggests that these features remained at least partially open into the late medieval period.

It is probable that some of the more remote tenements outside of the main settlement core of Long Melford were abandoned from the late fourteenth century onwards and disused plots such as the current site were used for the disposal of waste, possibly from nearby dwellings along Bull Lane that continued to be occupied. There may have been specific reasons behind this situation, alongside the more general factors that are documented such as worsening climate conditions, the resulting poor crop yields and numerous outbreaks of plague.⁵ Long Melford is not the only medieval village in the region that appears to shrink or even disappear after the

fourteenth century, with similar evidence recorded at Stowmarket (Suffolk), Stebbingford (Essex) and Strethall (Essex).⁶ Conversely, Long Melford was at its most prosperous in the fifteenth century and many of the settlement's hall houses were constructed in this period (at least twelve of which survive). These, and the magnificent 'wool' church of Holy Trinity, stand in testament to Long Melford's status as a centre of late medieval industry, commerce and agriculture.

This plot appears to have remained uninhabited and in agricultural use into the modern period. A map of Long Melford drawn up in 1580 by Israel Amyce for the Cordell family and currently in the ownership of the Hyde-Parker family at Melford Hall, clearly shows the site as being outside the core of occupation at that date, forming part of a large plot called 'Le Home Field'. However, the plot to the east and adjacent to the junction with King's Lane does appear to have a dwelling within it and presumably continued to be occupied into the present day.⁷ Finds and environmental evidence from the site provide some insight into the diet and economy of the people living in this part of Long Melford during the medieval and late medieval periods. The pottery assemblage (1259 sherds totalling over 19kg) is typical of a rural site of this date in south-central Suffolk, consisting largely of cooking vessels (mostly jars with a few bowls and jugs) in local coarsewares, with similarities in type and form to pottery from north Essex, reflecting Long Melford's proximity to the county border. The presence of sherds of imported drinking vessels may indicate a rise in status of the inhabitants of Bull Lane in the late medieval period. Analysis of the faunal remains (15.24kg with 194 recordable fragments) shows that cattle was the most well-represented species through all of the phases and therefore it is highly probable that beef was an important dietary component. Horse is also well-represented through the presence of the complete skeleton buried in a pit, alongside horseshoe fragments, nails and harness fittings found elsewhere. During the early and high medieval phases sheep were predominantly used for secondary products such as dairying or for wool. This situation changed in the later medieval period when sheep were being slaughtered at a younger age, presumably for meat; a picture that is perhaps slightly at odds with Long Melford's known association with wool-production at this time.

Although this was a relatively small excavation, its results have shown that investigation of this type of site through the development process is useful, as cumulatively sites such as these can contribute to research agendas on a number of different levels. On a local and regional level, the results provide evidence for the expansion and contraction of Long Melford against the wider backdrop of the rise and fall of Suffolk's wool towns, while more nationally they can inform research into late medieval settlement flux and the potential myriad reasons underlying these changes.⁸ Furthermore, summaries such as this enable the key results of developer-funded works to become available to a wider academic audience through targeted and peer-reviewed publication.

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NOTES

- 1 Archaeology South East; King 2016.
- 2 Billington, Timberlake and Firth forthcoming.
- 3 Firth 2018 (<https://oxfordarchaeology.com/oalibrary>).
- 4 Great Blakenham: Wallis and Meredith 2011; Cedars Park, Stowmarket: Woolhouse 2016.
- 5 Jordan 1997; Brown 2018.
- 6 Stowmarket: Woolhouse 2016; Stebbingford: Timby *et al.* 2007; Strethall: Ward 1996.
- 7 Dymond and Johnstone 1987.
- 8 Brown 2018, 154.

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