

**Norton Bury Farm – Excavations for the Time
Team Big Dig 28/29 June 2003**

Report compiled for Mrs Ruth Baker by Neil Rushton

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Introduction

Norton Bury Farm (NGR TL 2346 3488) was used as a guide and scout centre from 1978 to 2002, when the site was purchased by Mr Graham Hilton. The current farmhouse stands on the edge of a medieval moated manor site in the parish of Norton in North Hertfordshire (figure 1). The excavation was planned so that children of the historic parish of Norton could take part in an archaeological excavation close to their homes; about 30 local cubs, brownies and also schoolchildren from St Nicholas School, Norton took part in the excavation. With such an important site it was also decided to requisition the help and advice of the archaeology officer for North Hertfordshire District Council, Dr Neil Rushton. Very little is known about the medieval use of the site and this was an opportunity to add archaeological evidence to the historical documentary research that has been carried out.

The Landscape and History of Norton Bury

Two test pits were excavated at 57m aod in the centre, and at the edge of a medieval moated enclosure that now forms the garden of Norton Bury Farm (see figures 2 and 3). The rectangular moated enclosure (HCC SMR no. 1931) is approximately 45m by 30m and consists of three ditch and bank arms to the S, E and N, while the western arm has become silted up/filled in. The current farmhouse stands close to what would have been the western arm of the moated enclosure. Centrally located within this enclosure is a raised rectangular platform of about 12m by 7m that may have been the location of the original medieval house. The platform is raised about 0.6m above the surrounding enclosure area. The moated site lies on the S side of a shallow valley 5m above the River Ivel, which has a number of spring sources 450m to 1km to the SE. 500m to the N, on the opposite side of the valley basin, is the site of a large Roman villa at Radwell (SAM), and 400m to the SW is the medieval village of Norton, 25m higher up in the valley. The cross country ridgeway called the Icknield Way passes 1km to the S, where it forms the northern boundary of the Iron Age and Roman settlement of Baldock. Geologically Norton Bury Farm lies on the boundary between lower and mid chalk overlain with boulder clay, close to an exposure of Melbourn Rock, which accounts for the number of spring sources feeding the River Ivel.

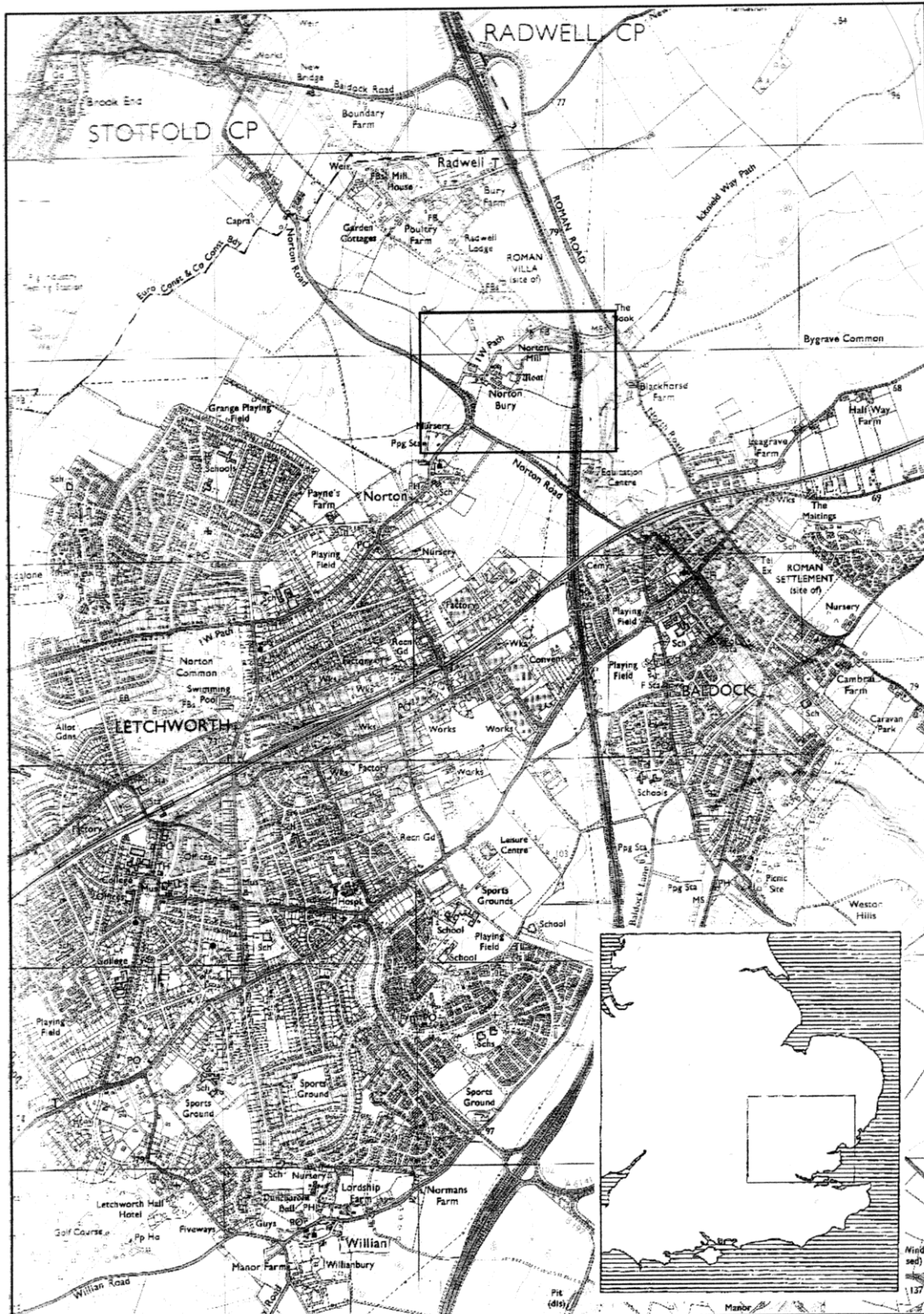


Figure 1: Nortonbury Location

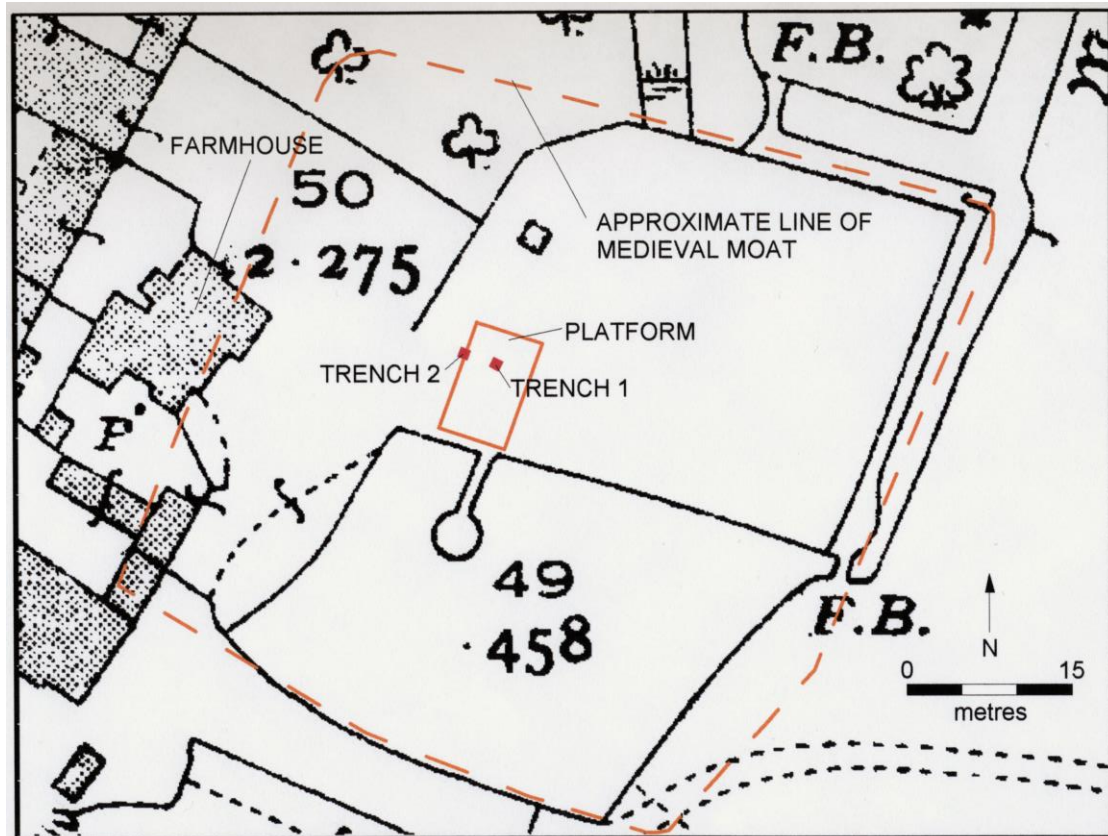


Figure 2: Trench Location

The manor of Norton is first mentioned in a charter of 1007, where it is called 'Nordtune' (Glover *et al.* 1938, 114). By the time of Domesday in 1086 it belonged to the abbey of St Albans, in whose possession it remained until the Dissolution (Morris 1976). The current house at Norton Bury Farm is a multi-period house dating in part back to the early sixteenth century, but extensively renovated between about 1670 and 1840 (Robertson 2003). Previous to the sixteenth century it seems likely that the main house stood in the centre of its moated enclosure as was the norm in medieval moated sites. The manorial court rolls show that the manor house stood at Norton Bury Farm and that the court was held here throughout the medieval period and in Early Modern times, but shed no light on the physical location or appearance of the medieval manor house (Giles 2003). Moated sites became common in eastern and southern England during the thirteenth century and so although there may have been a manor house at Norton Bury since Saxon times, the moated enclosure probably dates from the 1200s. Moated sites were defensible but in reality it was the status they conferred on the owner that was the most important function of their construction (Aberg 1978). The nineteenth-century tithe map and the early editions of the OS maps show that at some point previous to 1840 the S half of the moated enclosure had been flooded to form a pond (figure 3). Photographs of about 1900 show that the raised platform in the middle of the moated enclosure formed an edge to this pond (plate 1). Rectilinear canalisation of the River Ivel to the NE of the enclosure was also completed by 1840 and these water features were probably the result of eighteenth-century garden landscaping. The location of the raised platform in the centre of the moated enclosure was seen as the



Plate 2: Nortonbury in the early 20th century

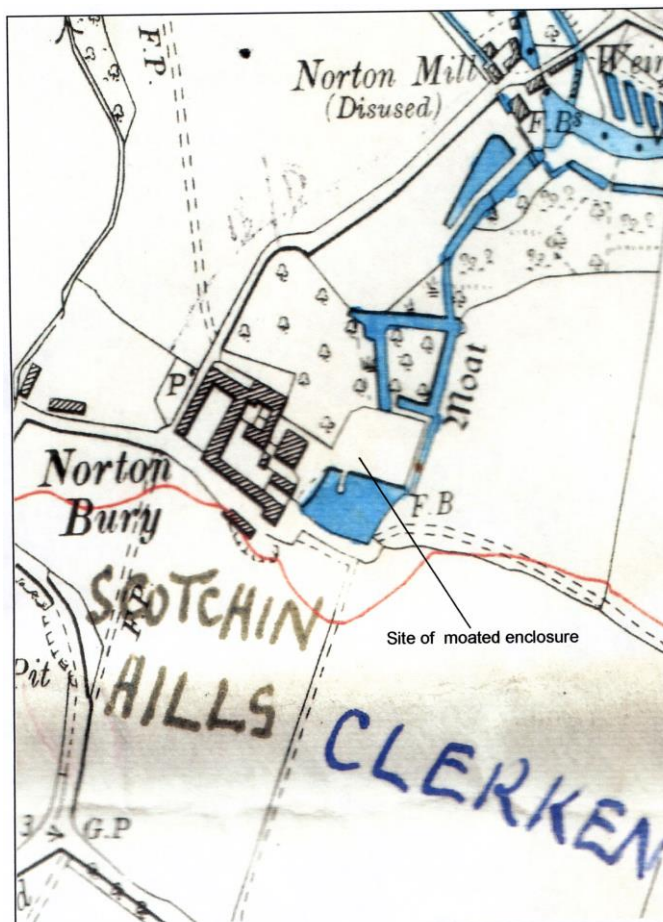


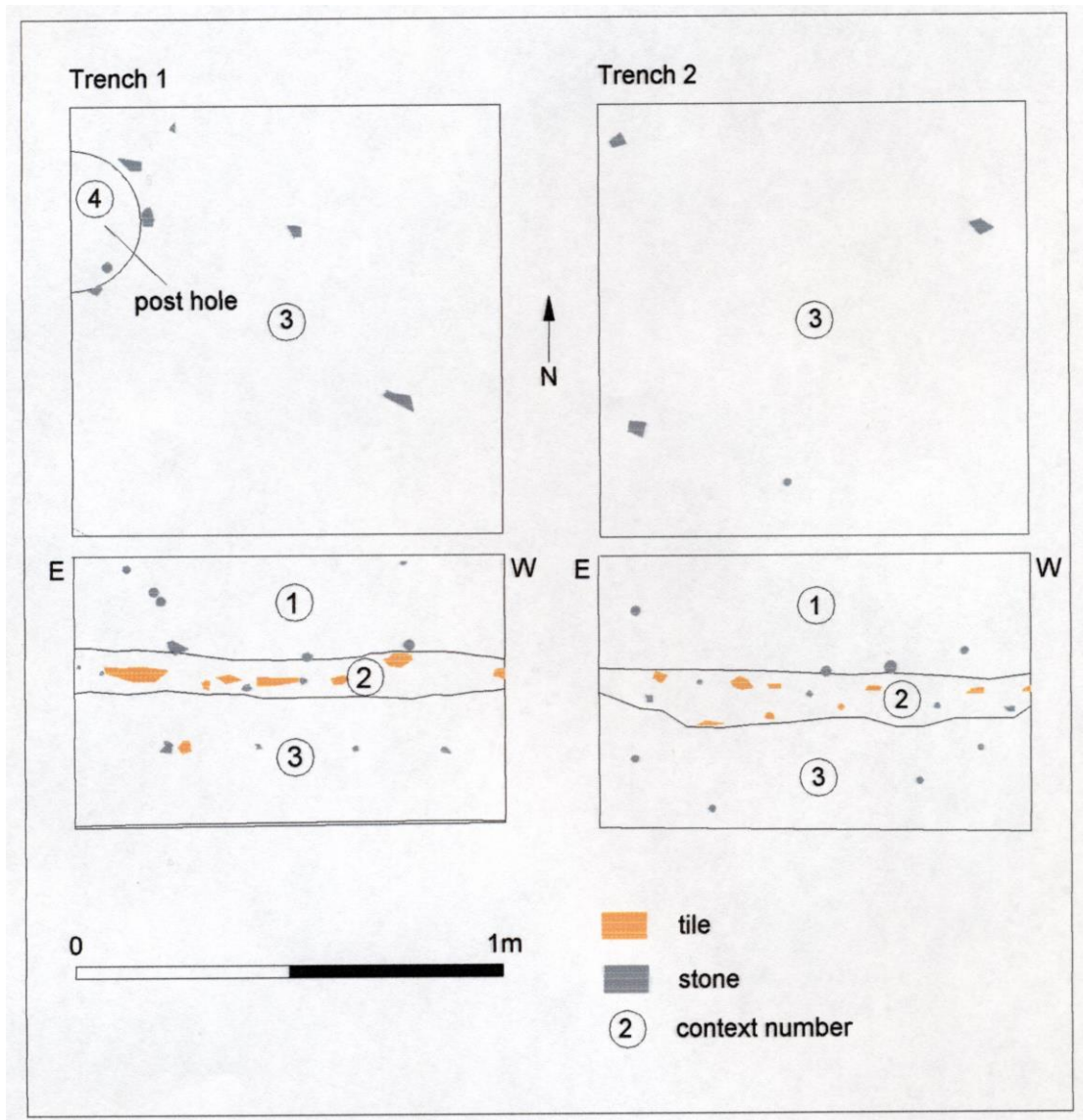
Figure 3: Early Ordnance Survey Map

most appropriate location to excavate in order to investigate the development of the site. The main research objectives were to find out whether there was a house on this platform at some point in the past, and what evidence could be found for its construction?

The Excavation

The digging, processing and recording were conducted entirely by the children who had signed up for the weekend, supervised by Dr Neil Rushton. Both trench 1 and trench 2 were excavated by hand using mattocks, spades and trowels to the specifications laid down in the Time Team Big Dig Action Pack. All excavated earth was sieved,

and all finds were washed and bagged on site. The upper contexts of both trenches were infested with tree roots but they were shallow and most of the pit contained clay over chalk. The earth was dry and there was no sign of any waterlogging.



Figures 4 and 5: Trenches 1 and 2

Trench 1 (figure 4 and plates 2-4): The main features of trench 1 were a demolished tile floor and a post hole. The tile floor was located between 25cm and 30cm into the trench. It consisted of an abundance of broken unpatterned, red-clay floor tiles with a thin seam of mortar underneath. The tiles spread over the whole N-side of the trench but were less prominent on the S-side. All tiles were severely damaged but were significantly different than the broken roof tiles found at a depth between 10cm and 20cm. Below this level there was disturbed clay with more broken tiles with some brick and pottery. At a depth of 64cm was a post hole cut into the natural chalk on the W-side of the trench, partly obscured by the baulk. This was roughly circular, had a diameter of about 23cm and consisted of a yellow/orange clay material with abundant stones. This post hole was excavated and found to be of a

depth of 18cm. Unfortunately there were no finds from the excavated post hole. The post hole showed up well in the plan photographs and the broken tile floor can be seen in the S-facing section.

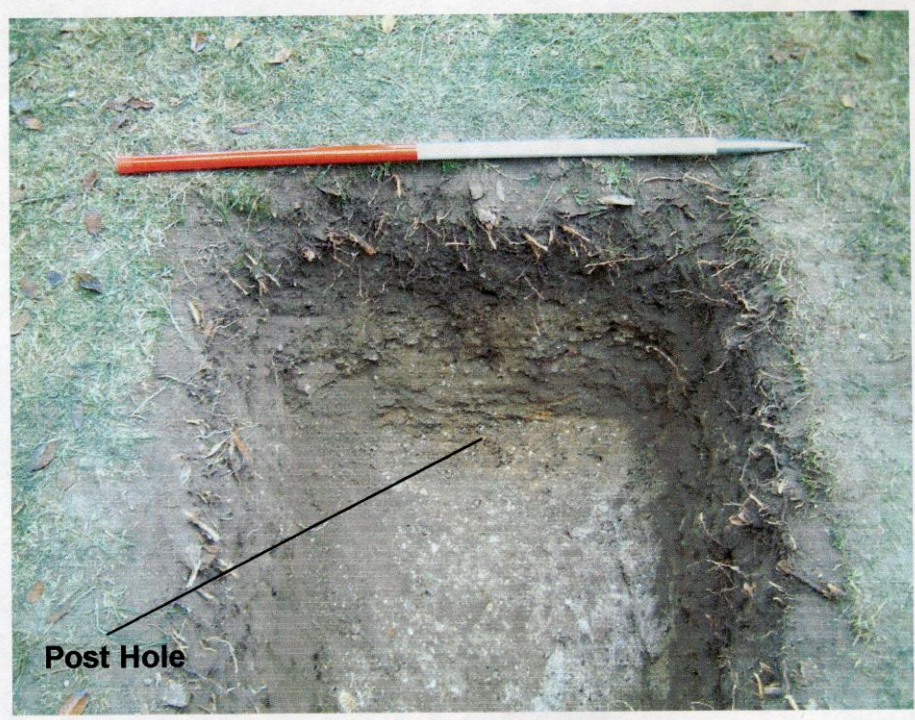


Plate 2: Post Hole in Trench



Plate 3: Post Hole in Trench 1, close up

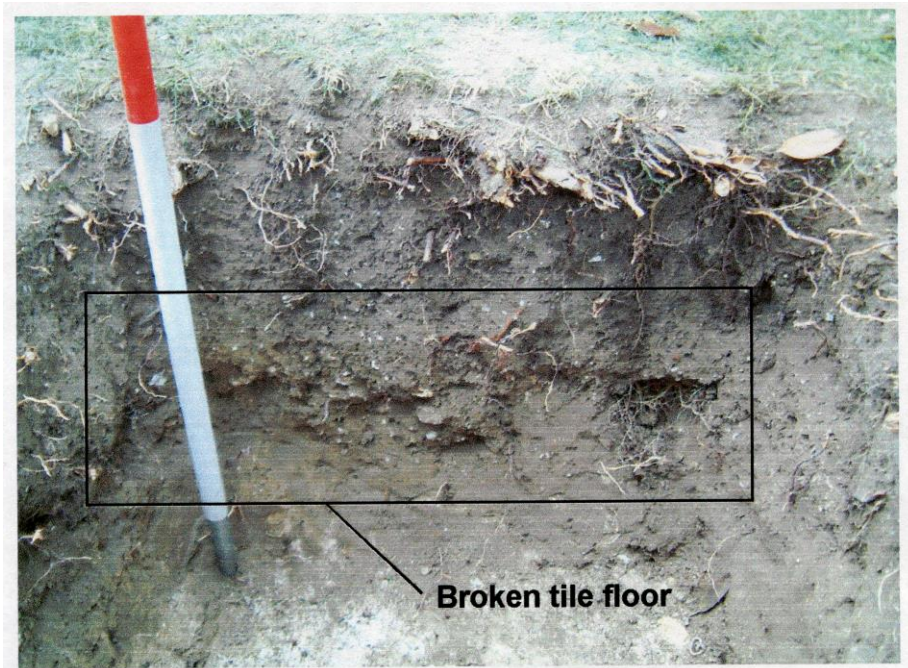


Plate 4: Broken Tile Floor in Trench 1

Trench 2 (figure 5 and plate 5): The main feature of trench 2 was a demolition layer at 30cm that consisted mostly of broken roof tiles, with occasional fragments of floor tiles and pottery. The layer was approximately 5cm in section. Below this layer was a dark clay soil that seems to represent a natural sedimentation of the site below the platform to the W. This layer continued down to the 0.7m, where excavation stopped before reaching natural subsoil.

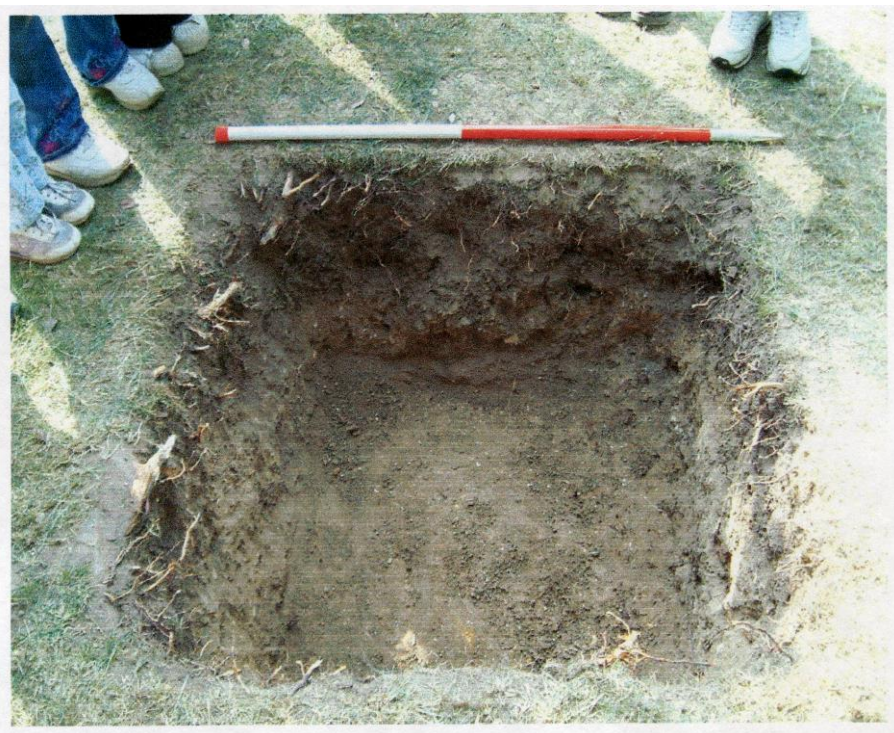


Plate 5: Trench 2

The Finds

The finds represent a substantial archive from such small test pits. There was a large amount of roof tile and a concentration of floor tiles in trench 1, and much roof tile and some slate from the demolition layer in trench 2. The two shards of medieval pottery was under the broken floor tiles in trench 1. The most dateable shard of pottery was the glazed green ware from context 3, which is of the fifteenth century. Floor tiles were noticeably thicker than roof tiles, but there were also many fragments that could not be identified beyond 'tile'. There was also a large limestone erratic in the centre of trench 1 at a depth of 35-40cm below the tile floor level. This was naturally occurring and probably had nothing to do with the building of any structure on the site. The following is a consolidated finds record.

TRENCH 1

Find type	number	weight (g)
<i>Context 1</i>		
roof tile	51	375
brick	15	40
pottery	9	6
buckle	1	45
oyster	1	5
iron	3	5
charcoal	10	9
nails	37	127
<i>Context 2</i>		
floor tile	75	553
roof tile	26	209
brick	1	1
oyster	6	5
clay pipe	1	1
bone	3	7
pottery	9	70
<i>Context 3</i>		
glass	1	1
charcoal	8	1
tile	2	4
oyster	1	1
pottery	1	1

TRENCH 2

Context 1

tile	91	786
oyster	3	1
pottery	36	61
glass	6	7
clay pipe	4	3
iron bolt	1	83
charcoal	20	3
bone	3	3
china horse toy piece	1	1
Pig modified incisor	1	1
snail shell	1	1
nails	4	15
brick	2	2
Metal bottle top	1	1
pull ring from metal can	1	1
Spherical clay object	1	1
brick/mortar	1	10
slate	4	30

Context 2

tile	234	797
brick	1	1
pottery	9	13
glass	1	1
clay pipe	1	2
nail	2	4
charcoal	6	1
bone	15	115
nail with wood	1	2

The floor tiles and roof tiles from both trenches are not precisely datable, but the two pieces of late medieval green-glazed ware found in context 3 of trench 1 were directly underneath the demolished floor and so suggest a date of the late fifteenth century or the sixteenth century for the floor's final use. Trench 2 contained much nineteenth-century pottery in context 1 and also one piece of eighteenth-century brown-glazed ware. The charcoal fragments and oyster shells from trench 1 also suggest occupation of the site. (Plates 6-11 show a selection of the finds from trenches 1 and 2).



Plate 6: Early 18th century pottery



Plate 7: 19th century pot



Plate 8: clay horse



Plate 9: clay pipe



Plate 10: medieval pottery



Plate 11: floor tile

Conclusions

The concentration of floor tiles with associated mortar at a depth of approximately 25cm in trench 1 suggests that this was the remnant of the last building to stand on the site of the raised platform. There were several shards of medieval pottery below this level but none above it. There were also shards of sixteenth-century pottery associated with this layer. We know that the present farmhouse was in its current location by some point in the sixteenth century and so it seems possible that it was moved at this date from the raised platform in the middle of the moated enclosure leaving the remains of

the demolished medieval/sixteenth-century house on the platform. It is impossible to be more specific with the lack of conclusive dating evidence from the excavation, and the lack of dendrochronology dates from the current farmhouse. The large post hole cutting into the natural subsoil suggests that there were timber uprights supporting the roof of a relatively imposing building on the platform. The lack of dating evidence from this post hole is disappointing, but it was either contemporary with, or it ante-dates the demolished tile floor. The fragmentary state of the tiles meant that it was impossible to see whether the timber upright passed *through* the floor or predated the building of which the tile floor was a part. However, together, the roof tile rubble, the tile floor and the post hole do suggest that the trial trench located the remains of the last building to stand on the raised platform in the middle of the medieval moated enclosure. Despite the lack of absolute dating evidence this building seems to be of sixteenth century date or earlier.

The roof tile rubble layer in trench 2 could represent the demolition layer of this demolished sixteenth-century building. Most of the tiles are of a sixteenth-century type. If they were unbroken they would most likely have been used on the new building at the edge of the moated enclosure, but if they were broken they would simply have been left *in situ* next to the platform.

However, the limitations of two metre square test pits should be recognised and only a full excavation of the platform will reveal the extent of the structures that may be associated with it and allow for a full interpretation of the site.

References

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Acknowledgements

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finds into an archive database. But most of the work was done by the local cubs, brownies and children of St Nicholas' School in Norton under the tutelage of Ruth Baker and Margaret Gilbert. They deserve full credit for their hard work and interest. Thanks also to Time Team for making the exercise possible in the first place.