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AN ENCLOSED MEDIEVAL FARMSTEAD AT GREAT ELLINGHAM, NORFOLK

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(*with contributions by* SUE ANDERSON,[2] FRANCES GREEN, JOSHUA WHITE[3] *and* VAL FRYER, *and with illustrations by* DAVID DOBSON[4])

In 2018–19, geophysical survey and trial trenching in advance of housing development on land between Hingham Road and Watton Road, Great Ellingham, Norfolk (TM018977), highlighted the archaeological potential of the site (Davies 2018), and Informative Trial Trenching recorded the presence of significant archaeological remains (Whitmore 2019). In consequence, NPS Archaeology were commissioned and funded by All Saints Development (Great Ellingham) Limited to carry out excavation and stripping, mapping and sampling of a targeted area covering an apparent ditched enclosure and associated features. The methodologies employed by the project are detailed in the site archive report (Boyle 2021).

Topography

The village of Great Ellingham lies in the south of Norfolk, in the Breckland district, c. 3.5 km from the nearest town, Attleborough (Figure 1). The site lies between 52–60m above OD. The nearest known watercourse is a minor tributary of the Thet, c. 60 m to the south-east. The underlying bedrock in the Breckland district of Norfolk is Cretaceous chalk, with overlying drift deposits of Lowestoft Formation chalky boulder clay, sand, diamicton and alluvium, plus superficial deposits formed in the Quaternary Period (BGS 2015). The local landscape is characterised as 'South Norfolk and High Suffolk Claylands', with relatively sparse settlement and a number of small hamlets at bridging points, either linear (Bridgham) or nucleated (Brettenham), in addition to occasional scattered farmsteads (Land Use Consultants 2007).

Archaeological and historical background

Anglo-Saxon

The place-name 'Ellingham' has Old English origins, probably derived from 'homestead of Ella's, Ēdla's or Eli's people'. Small collections of Early and Mid Saxon (fifth- to ninth-century) pottery have come from a number of locations to the south of the site and also closer to Attleborough Road and the historic core of Great Ellingham (NHER 4257, 57408, 64696). A large clay-lined pit, perhaps for tanning, was recorded by trial trenching adjacent to Attleborough Road, some 500 m south-east of the site (NHER 63025). This pit produced small amounts of Late Saxon and early medieval pottery. Separate trial trenching close to Attleborough Road recorded linear and discrete features (NHER 57408). Dating evidence was scarce, but these remains were probably of Late Saxon and medieval date.

Medieval

Great Ellingham is first documented in the 1086 Domesday survey, which details a church, meadow, woodland, pigs, ploughs, cattle and horses (Morris 1984). Medieval artefacts and remains provide the most numerous records in the historic environment register for Great Ellingham. The known site of a moated manor is 200 m east of the site (NHER 34571); significant medieval earthworks for enclosures and house platforms, and soil marks of probable roads/paths, are present to the south-east (NHER 57408). Earthworks for ditched enclosures and boundaries 400 m north-east of the site, evident on aerial photographs, probably represent medieval settlement (NHER 58612). These features are adjacent to Manor Farm (NHER 35184), an early seventeenth-century building relatively close to the southern edge of Deopham Stolland common land. Metal-detecting near these areas has recovered a range of objects from this period (NHER 18835, 57317). The exact location of a deserted medieval village in the vicinity is currently unknown (NHER 11925).

The fourteenth-century church of St James is approximately 600 m south-east of the excavation site (NHER 4259) (Figures 1–2). That historic settlement at Great Ellingham was focused around the church is confirmed by medieval remains, including pottery of eleventh- to thirteenth-century date, recorded during archaeological investigations on Church Street (NHER 40352).

Results

Archaeological finds were assigned to five periods, from Period 1 (Late Prehistoric) to Period 5 (Post-medieval). The evidence from Periods 3 and 4 is presented below (Figure 3); that from Periods 1, 2 and 5 can be found in the archive report (Boyle 2021).

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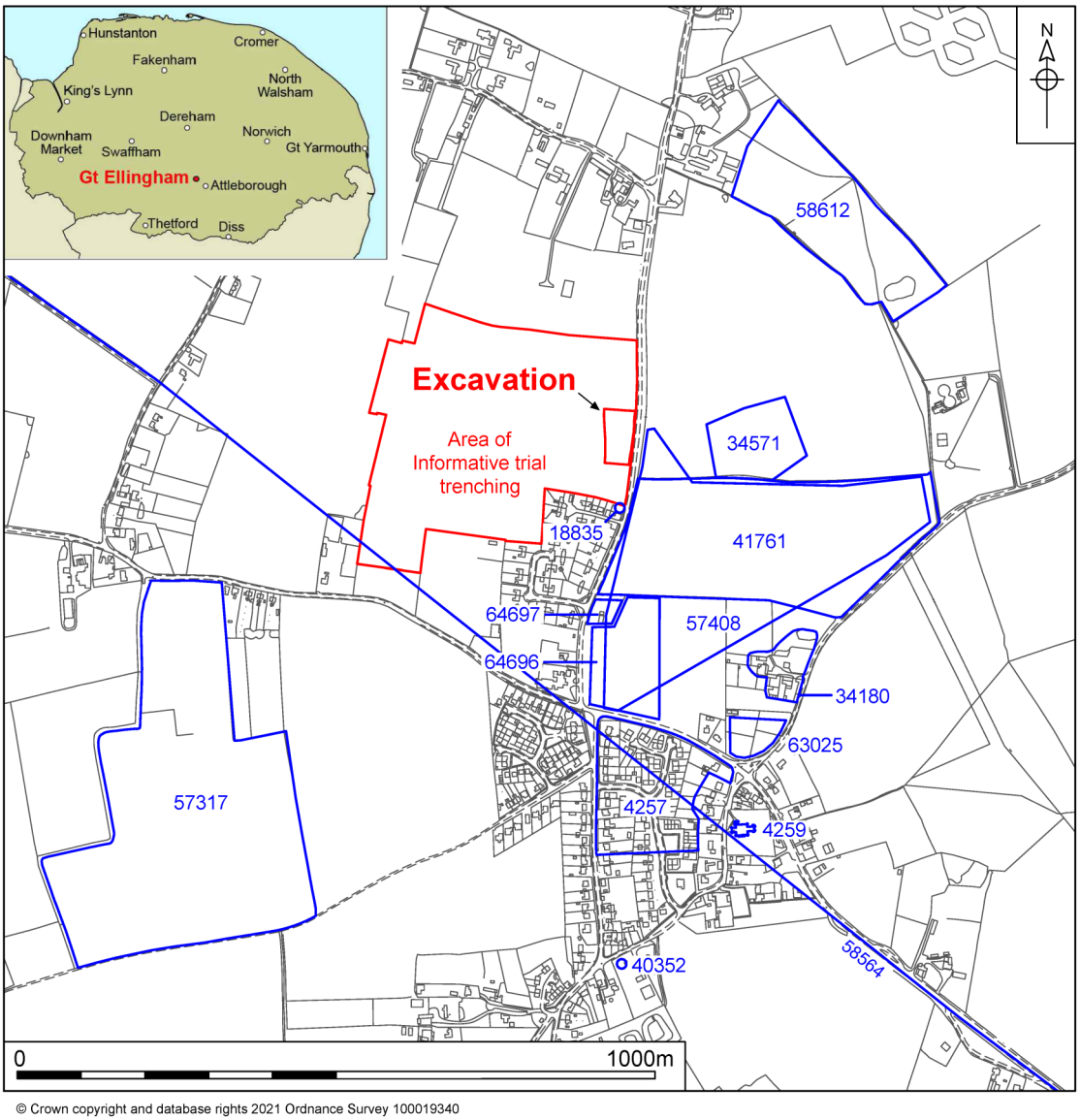

Figure 1 Site location with selected HER data as mentioned in text.

Figure 2 The site under excavation looking south east. The medieval church of St. James can be seen in the background.

Period 3: Anglo-Saxon (410 – 1066)

Evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity was limited to a small assemblage of potsherds, mostly residual in later features: a single large sherd of Mid Saxon Ipswich ware (*c.* AD 725–850) and eight small abraded sherds of Late Saxon date.

Trample 1272, which sealed medieval metalled surface 1276, contained two sherds of Late Saxon pottery, while a suspected pond in the north-west corner of the site contained three sherds of eleventh-century date. The fact that no other dateable material was recovered from that feature might suggest that it was open in the Late Saxon period or earlier.

Period 4: Medieval (1066 – 1540)

Ditched Enclosure

Medieval features and deposits in the excavation area all lay within an area defined by a sub-rectangular ditched enclosure (G101: c. 62 x 34 m), which seems to have extended beyond the limits of excavation to the east. An angled, linear feature (NHER 57408) east of Hingham Road and opposite the excavation site seems likely to represent the continuation of the southern return of this enclosure (Figure 4). Though the northern return (G102) contained a plastic drainage pipe along its length, other factors indicate that this feature was the original line of the enclosure. The northern end of the western return did not extend beyond G102, and appeared to turn east just before the two features coincided. If these projections of both the north and south enclosure ditches are correct, they suggest that the excavated area represents part of a rectangular enclosure measuring c. 75 x 62 m, with an internal area of c. 4,650 m^2, equivalent to just over one acre. Ceramic evidence suggests that the enclosure ditch was allowed to infill during the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries.

Internal Dividing of Enclosure G101

The ceramic evidence suggests that two broadly parallel, east-west aligned ditches (G84, 85), approximately central in the site, were infilled during the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, a similar period to the filling of the enclosure ditch (G101). These features appear to have divided the enclosed area into three unequal plots. Breaks of approximately 3 m between the western termini of these two ditches and the enclosure ditch might have provided access between plots.

Some variation in the array of medieval features across the three divisions is apparent, with features more numerous in the north and south plots, and virtually absent in the smaller central division, which may therefore have served a different purpose.

Post-built Structure

Four post-trenches and 16 postholes in the northern plot formed a broadly rectangular plan of a timber structure, measuring c. 14.5 m east-west by 11 m north-south (Figures 3, 5). A pair of postholes at the centre of the structure's east end indicates that this side may have been open or contained a main entrance. Two similar postholes perhaps represent internal features close to the north side. If not structural, these perhaps formed an internal setting for a small division, rack or livestock trough.

It may be coincidental that a pit of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century date (G 19) was central within the building. At almost 2 m deep, the base of this circular, vertically-sided feature was below the current water table, and it might originally have been dug to source or store water.

The archaeological evidence provides no clear indication of the function of this rudimentary structure: whether domestic, for agricultural storage, animal shelter, or indeed a mix of all of these across its lifetime, which the small assemblage of pottery from the structure's features suggests fell within the thirteenth century.

Excavations at Boreham Airfield, Essex (Clarke 1996), discovered enclosed settlement of twelfth- to thirteenth-century date, with several timber buildings interpreted as a house, outbuildings, a granary, and an early form of windmill within a large rectangular moat. The surviving remains indicated that the adjacent outbuildings measured c. 11 m by 5.5 m and c. 10 m by 4 m respectively, and both buildings seemed to have one open side. They were constructed with shallow, intermittent post-in-trench slots and postholes, and were thus similar to the larger example at Great Ellingham.

Six substantial pits (Gps 8, 10, 12, 19, 24, 34) in the vicinity of the structure were ultimately used for waste disposal, with pottery from these features perhaps contemporary with the building's use – though whether this material represents domestic waste associated with the building, or rather derived from unidentified settlement activity nearby, remains uncertain.

Two further substantial pits (Gps 16, 17), which cut the structure's southern perimeter, clearly post-date the building's use. Both pits contained small assemblages of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century pottery, which suggests that the structure was relatively short-lived – perhaps unsurprisingly, given its rudimentary construction.

Metalled surface and associated deposits

A metalled surface (G 98) of flint pebbles and stones in the south-east corner of the site was adjacent to the eastern excavation limit and within ditched enclosure G 101 (Figure 3, 6). Measuring c. 9.5 m north-south and at least 9.6 m east-west, this feature extended beyond the excavation limits to the east. Generally heavily worn and wheel-rutted, the best surviving areas of metalling exhibited neat and tight construction. The finds assemblage from the metalled surface comprised 45 pottery sherds spot-dated to the twelfth to thirteenth centuries (including 25 from a single vessel), and twelve lava quern fragments. The damage and wear apparently caused by wheel rutting suggest that this surface may have formed the western end of a trackway rather than a yard or floor surface. If so, could the associated material culture result from imported domestic waste transported to the site for disposal on a midden?

Sealing the metalled surface was a chalk-flecked, reddish-brown silty sand (1272) with occasional flint pebble and stone inclusions. Up to c. 0.3 m thick, this layer had levelled the slightly concave profile of the metalled surface and probably represents material accumulated during the use and abandonment of the feature. Animal bone, marine mollusc shell, pottery and iron objects (including nails and a fragment of horseshoe) were retrieved from this deposit. The 160 pottery sherds from layer 1272 represent a wider, more mixed, and generally slightly later range of wares than that obtained from the underlying metalled surface. The assemblage was dominated by eleventh- to thirteenth-century pottery, including several sherds of a single

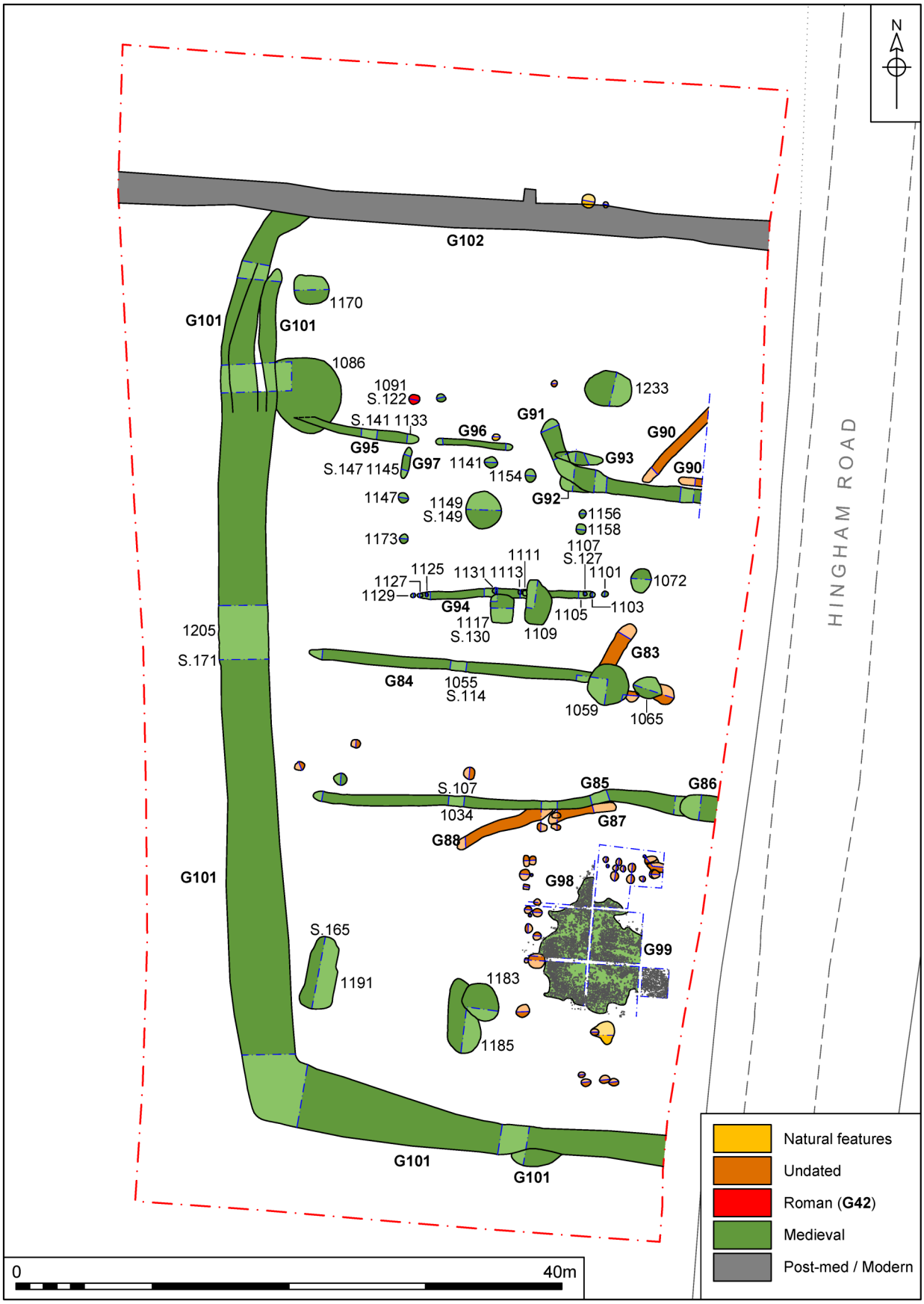

Figure 3 Phased plan of all features.

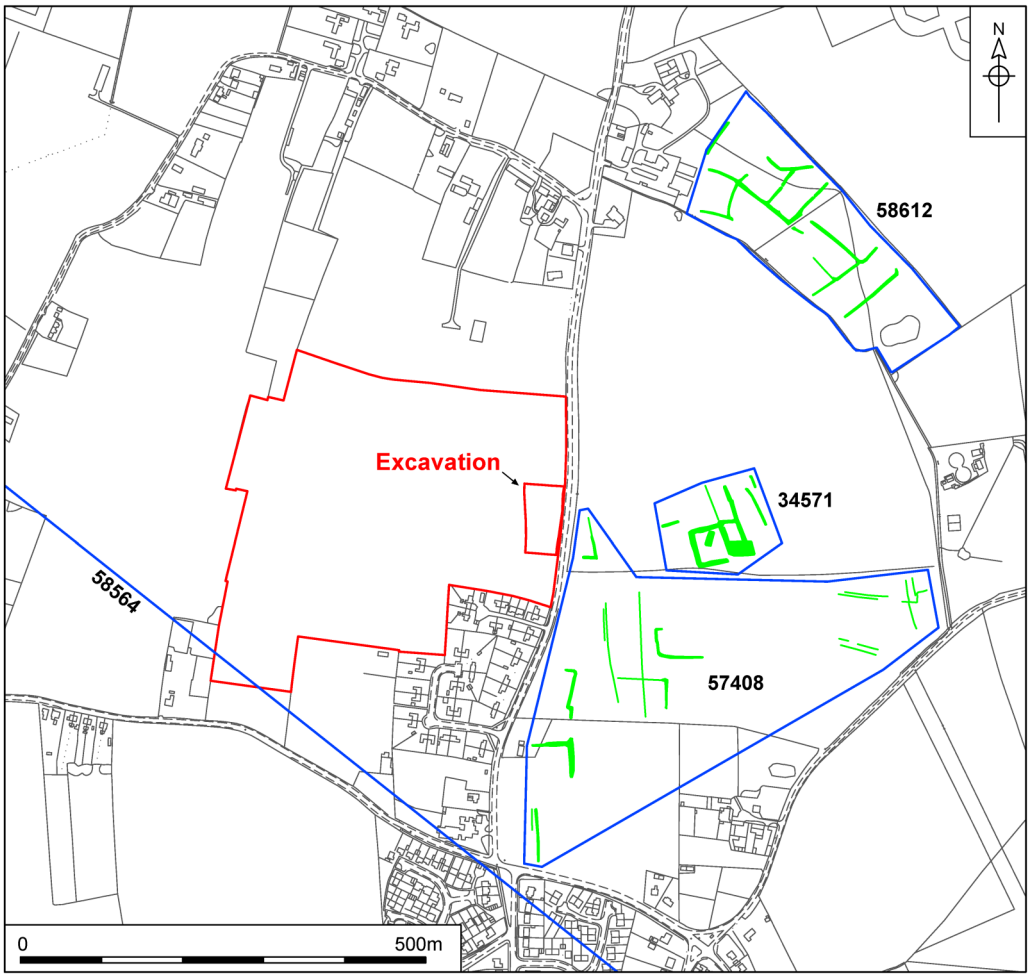

Figure 4 Site location with selected Norfolk National Mapping Programme NMP data mentioned in the text.

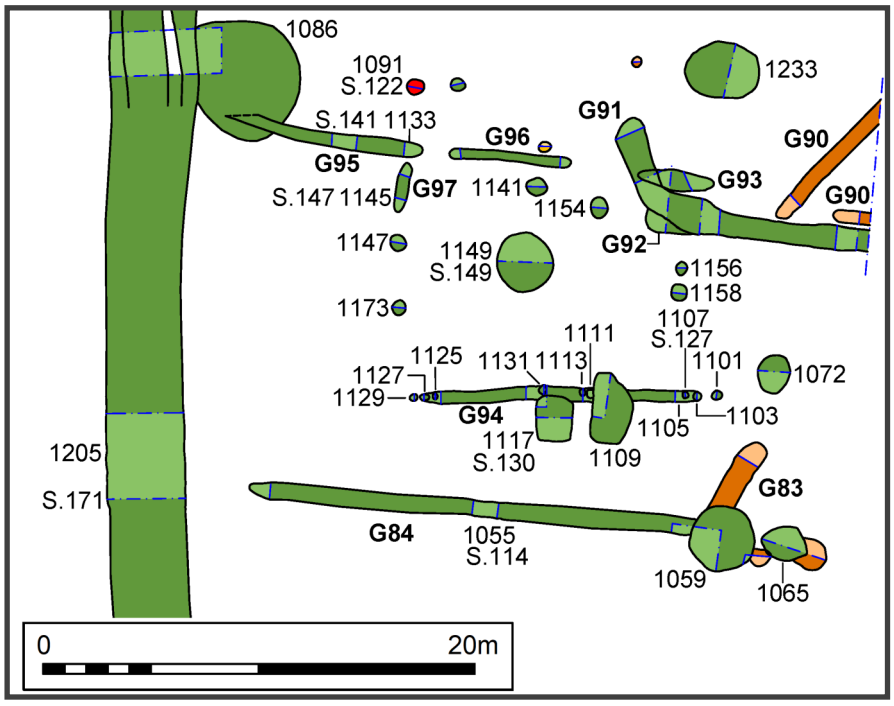

Figure 5 Detail of post-built structure.

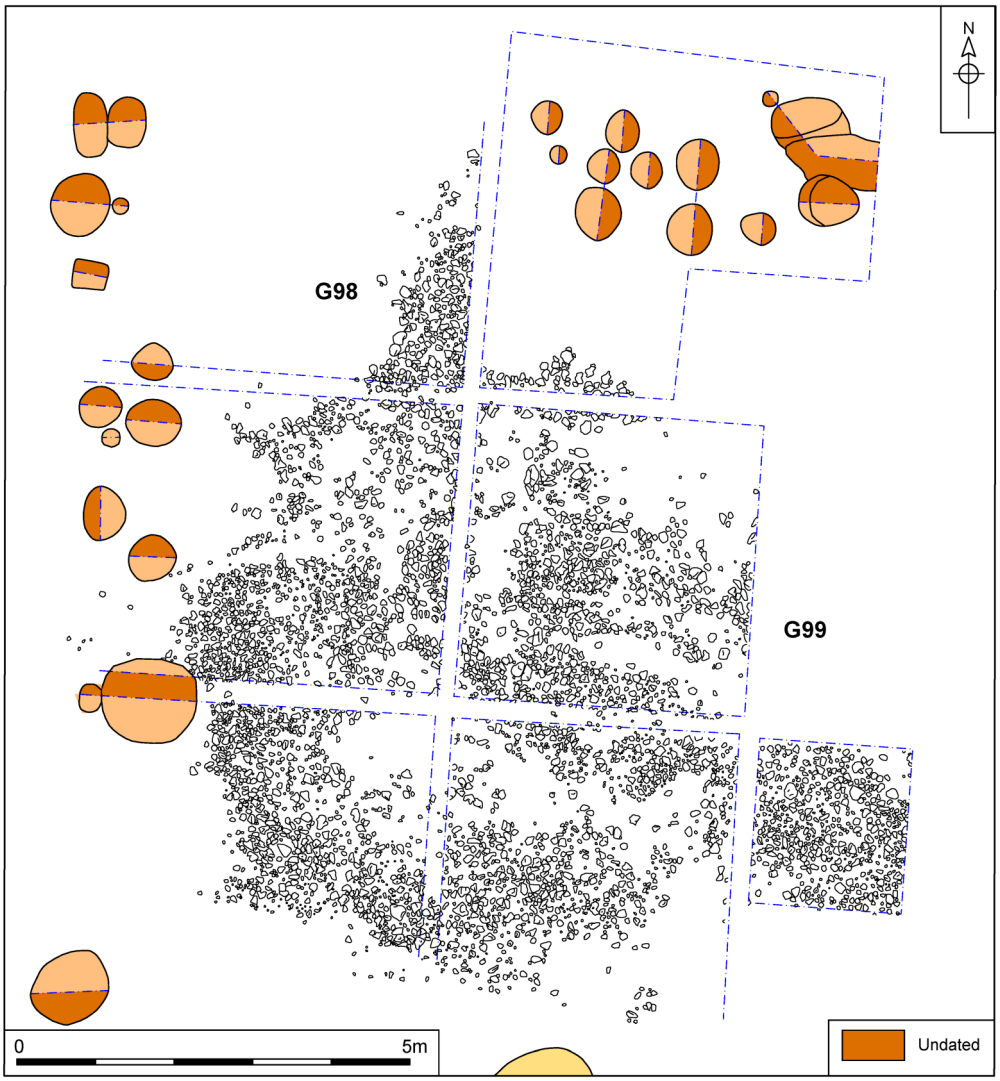

Figure 6 Plan of metalled surface 1276 (G 98).

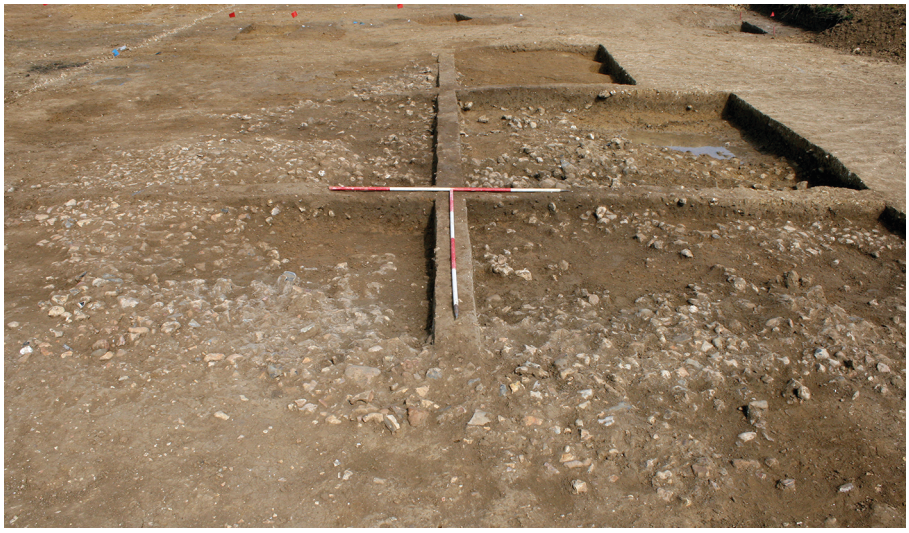

Figure 7 Metalled surface 1276 (G 98) under excavation looking north, 2 x 2m scales.

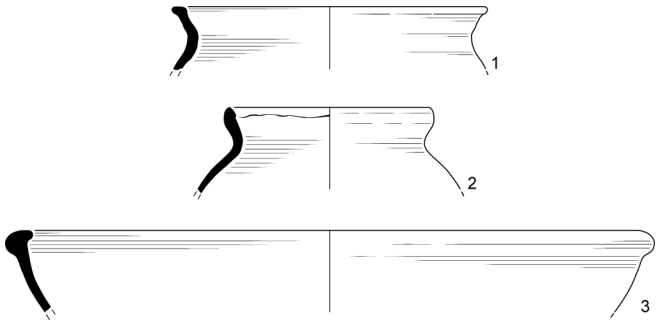

Figure 8 Illustrated early medieval vessels 1–3: (1) EMWFL jar, simple everted rim (tree throw fill 1140, G 1); (2) EMWFL jar, everted rim with in-turned tip (trample 1272, G 99); (3) EMWFL bowl, beaded rim (trample 1272, G 99).

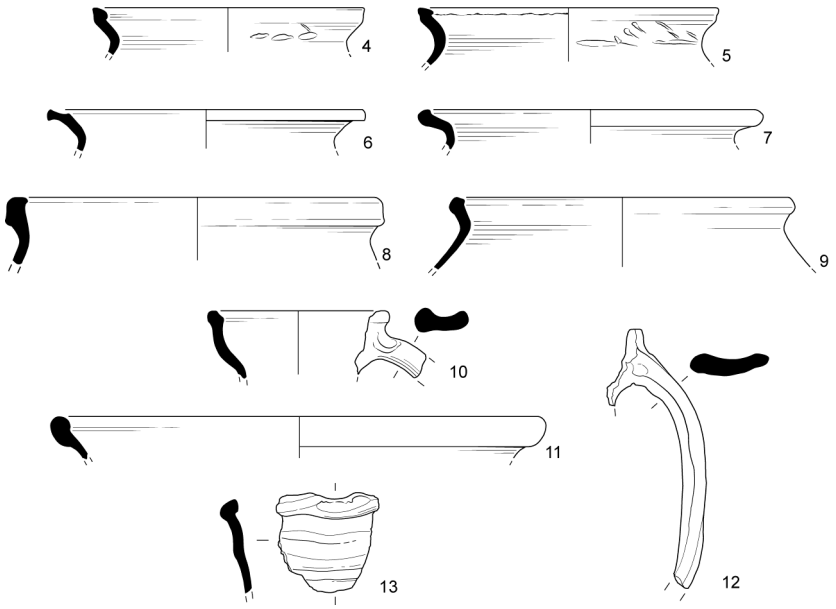

Figure 9 Illustrated medieval vessels 4–13: (4) MCW1 jar, everted square-beaded rim? (ditch fill 1006, G 85); (5) MCW3 jar, everted rim with in-turned tip (trample 1272, G 99); (6) MCW3 jar, everted rim with everted tip (pit fill 1153, G 19); (7) MCW3 jar, everted rim (pit fill 1153, G 19); (8) MCW3 jar, everted square-beaded rim (trample 1272, G 99); (9) MCW3 jar, upright square-beaded rim (ditch fill 104, G 95); (10) MCW3 jug, upright plain rim and wide strap handle (ditch fill 155, unphased); (11) MCW2 bowl, beaded rim (ditch fill 1134, G 95); (12) GRIMT jug, collared rim (ditch fill 1082, G 95); (13) UPG jug, ?triangular beaded rim (trample 1272, G 99).

bowl found spread across the area. A relatively high proportion of twelfth- to fourteenth-century sherds, along with a few late medieval sherds, suggest that the area may have remained in use into the fourteenth century.

Finds

Post-Roman Pottery (by Sue Anderson)

Pottery totalling 395 sherds was collected from 51 contexts. Table 1 provides a quantification by fabric, and selected vessels are illustrated in Figures 8–9.

Late Saxon and early medieval wares have been recovered from a number of sites in Great Ellingham in recent years (e.g. Anderson 2018a–b), but this is the first assemblage to contain a substantial quantity of high medieval and some later medieval wares. It is therefore an important resource for medieval pottery studies in this part of Norfolk.

The ceramic evidence indicates limited activity on this site before the Late Saxon period, with sherds of prehistoric, Roman and Mid Saxon pottery probably representing no more than a background scatter introduced by manuring. The quantity of sherds increases noticeably from the Late Saxon to the high medieval period, and falls again into the late medieval period.

The pottery itself is likely to be of local origin, with much of it in three broadly similar coarseware fabrics. However, the mix of both north Norfolk and apparent Suffolk rim types in the group is of particular interest. Similar forms have recently been noted at Long Stratton (Anderson 2020b), but there has been little work at sites to the south-east of the county around the Waveney Valley. This area was almost certainly the source for much of the pottery used in the north-east of Suffolk in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, but it is currently unclear as to whether they also served parishes in south Norfolk.

Glazed wares in the medieval period appear to have been sourced from both north-west Norfolk and the Fens, although some of the Grimston-type ware may well have been sourced more locally. The unusual

Table 1 Pottery quantification by fabric. Eve: estimated vessel equivalent; MNV: estimated minimum number of vessels.

Description	Fabric	Date range	No	Wt/g	Eve	MNV
Gritty Ipswich ware	GIPS	L.7th–9th c.	1	14		1
Thetford-type ware	THET	L.9th–11th c.	3	15		3
Thetford-type ware (local?)	THETL	10th–11th c.	4	14	0.11	3
'Early medieval' sandwich ware	EMSW	11th c.	1	18		1
Late Saxon shelly ware	LSSH	10th–11th c.	1	1		1
Early medieval ware	EMW	11th–12th c.	80	458		70
Early medieval ware micaceous	EMWM	11th–12th c.	2	13		2
Early medieval ware with flint	EMWFL	11th–13th c.	89	973	0.90	44
Early medieval ware gritty	EMWG	11th–13th c.	4	48		4
Medieval coarseware gritty	MCWG	12th–13th c.	1	47		1
Grimston coarseware	GRCW	12th–13th c.	4	28		2
Ely coarseware	ELCW	12th–14th c.	1	80	0.12	1
Local medieval unglazed (Norwich type)	LMU	11th–14th c.	13	88	0.20	9
Medieval coarseware?	MCW?	12th–14th c.?	1	4		1
Medieval coarseware 1	MCW1	12th–14th c.	14	227	0.50	12
Medieval coarseware 2	MCW2	12th–14th c.	21	259	0.29	17
Medieval coarseware 3	MCW3	12th–14th c.	51	584	1.12	41
Medieval coarseware micaceous	MCWM	12th–14th c.	8	113	0.05	7
Essex-type medieval coarseware	MEMS	12th–14th c.	2	79	0.15	1
Grimston ware	GRIM	L.12th–14th c.	40	487	0.22	27
Grimston-type ware	GRIMT	L.12th–14th c.?	37	676	0.60	27
Barton Bendish glazed ware	BBGW	12th–14th c.	1	2		1
Ely-type glazed ware	ELYG	12th–14th c.	1	18		1
Unprovenanced glazed ware	UPG	12th–14th c.	3	60	0.18	2
Yarmouth-type glazed ware	YARG	13th–15th c.?	4	34		1
Late Grimston ware	GRIL	14th–15th c.?	5	46		4
Late medieval and transitional ware	LMT	L.14th–M.16th c.	1	2		1
Pearlware	PEW	L.18th–19th c.	2	3	0.03	2
Totals			395	4391	4.47	287

rouletted and glazed sherd is of uncertain provenance but is certainly non-local and may represent an import of English or northern European origin.

Faunal Remains (by Joshua White)

A small assemblage of 115 fragments of hand-collected animal bone was recovered from thirteen different deposits (Table 2). These were in a poor state of preservation with considerable fragmentation and moderate surface erosion. Cattle are the predominant species represented, and age-at-death indicators show that they were mostly aged over three years, and therefore kept principally for secondary products (traction and dairy), only being slaughtered when they had passed the peak of their useful life.

Table 2 NISP quantification of faunal remains.

Species	No. of Identified Specimens
Cattle	18
Equid	2
Ovicaprid	4
Large mammal	3
Medium-large mammal	29
Small mammal	1
Mammal	15
Total	72

Worked Stone (by Frances M.L. Green)

Twelve fragments of lava were retrieved from metalled surface 1276, and a single fragment was recovered from fill 1235 of pit 1233. The lava fragments were derived from one or more broken-up querns or (less likely) millstones. The lithology of these lava fragments is distinctive, and typical of basalt imported from the Meyen/Niedermendig area of the Eifel Hills region of Germany. Quernstones from that region were first imported to Britain in the Roman period and continued to be in use until the early medieval period (Pohl 2010; Peacock 1980).

Environmental remains (by Val Fryer)

While cereal grains were present in most of the environmental samples tested for plant macrofossils, preservation was very poor and quantities sparse. The remains most likely derive from scattered refuse accidentally incorporated across the various features and deposits. A small plant macrofossil assemblage from medieval waste pit 1086 may derive from cereal processing or storage waste. However, given the poor preservation of the material, it could represent hearth waste rather than a primary domestic/agricultural deposit.

Discussion

The medieval remains discovered in these excavations contribute to a gradually emerging picture of Great Ellingham in the Middle Ages, and in particular the development of settlement activity associated with a moated manor. Cropmarks approximately 200 m east of the site are interpreted as a medieval moated manor (NHER 34571), and further cropmarks to the south-east – similarly aligned to the excavated enclosure reported here – may represent roads, paths, boundaries and ditched platforms belonging to the same medieval period of occupation. Homestead moats are characteristic of the medieval landscape in clay-land parts of the East Anglia. Martin (2012) maps the currently known distribution in Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and parts of Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, revealing a concentration unmatched elsewhere in England. He presents evidence for them principally being visible status symbols.

The excavated remains reported here appear most likely to represent part of an enclosed farmstead, possibly associated with the unexcavated moated manor. Significant activity probably began in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries with the setting out of the enclosure, metalled surface (or track) and earth-fast timber structure – perhaps an agrarian outbuilding intended to provide temporary shelter. Widespread pits containing domestic debris, such as broken pottery and animal bone, point to nearby habitation, conceivably in the unexcavated eastern part of the enclosure. Although charred plant macrofossils proved very scarce and poorly preserved, the recovery of lava quern fragments – chiefly amongst debris from above the metalled surface, in the southern portion of the site – hints at grain processing in the vicinity. The site appears to have been abandoned during the fourteenth century. It is perhaps best categorised as a 'dispersed' farmstead peripheral to the Great Ellingham parish, the historic core of which is c. 600 m to the south-east, around the fourteenth-century church of St James.

While no close parallels of enclosed medieval farmsteads such as this have been identified within Norfolk by the current project, excavations at Cedars Park, Stowmarket (Suffolk) – similarly situated on the South Norfolk and High Suffolk Claylands – revealed part of an enclosed farmstead with the main period of activity corresponding to the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries (Woolhouse 2016).

Conclusions

The most informative aspect of the Great Ellingham excavation is that it captures a distinct period of twelfth- to fourteenth-century rural settlement largely unaffected by later development. The remains of a timber structure represent a rare addition to the few medieval rural buildings excavated in this region.

The postulated farmstead was probably established under favourable environmental conditions in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, at a time of rising population. The reasons for the abandonment of the site in the fourteenth century are unknown, but the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague from the mid -fourteenth century are frequently cited as the root cause of such decline. In addition, the difficulty of farming heavy clay soils during the worsening climate of the

fourteenth century might have contributed to the site's decline and eventual abandonment. Alternatively, or additionally, the abandonment of the excavated site could be associated with a shift in focus towards a new settlement core in the vicinity of the church of St James, built in the fourteenth century.

Similar small farms and roadside or green-edge settlements were typical of the medieval landscape of the Suffolk, Essex and Norfolk claylands. However, while these forms of dispersed settlement are known from documentary records and field survey, until now very few have been subject to modern open-area excavation and the recovery of detailed structural evidence.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

NHER. Norfolk Historic Environment Record. Searchable at https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/ (accessed 12/08/22).

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