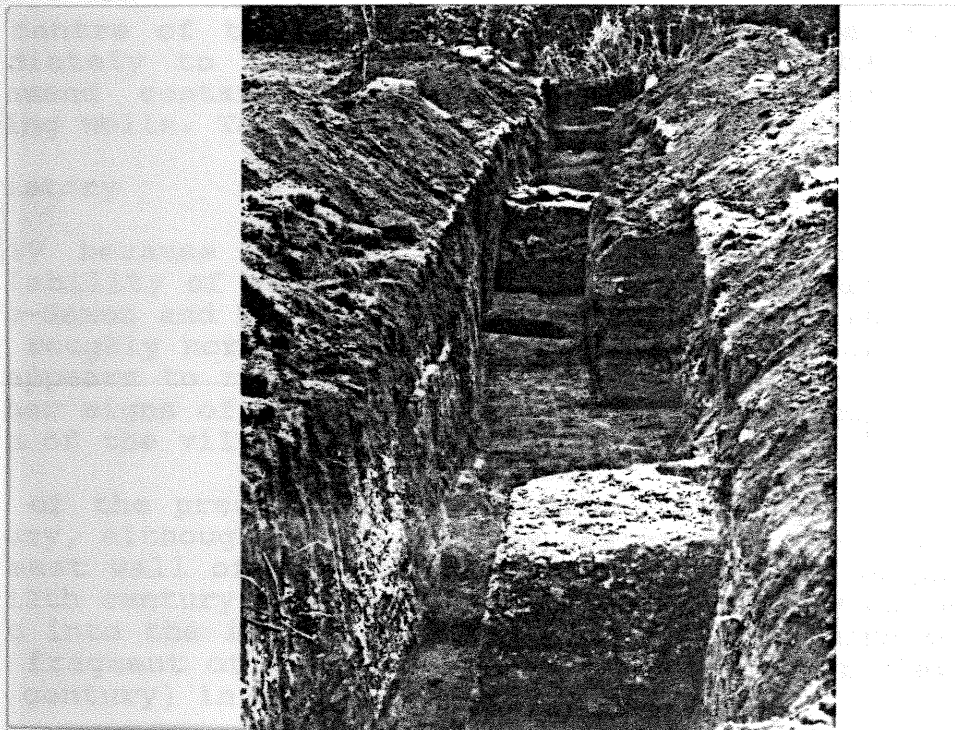


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STRETHAM RECTORY - 1989



Cambridgeshire
County Council

Rural Strategy

A TRIAL EXCAVATION AT STRETHAM RECTORY

November 1989

NGR: 5512, 2746

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Summary

A trial excavation in the garden of Stretham Rectory revealed the remains of two substantial wall foundations, a series of pits and a possible mortar floor. These appear to form part of a building which probably dates to the medieval period. A band of post-medieval building debris was found above these features.

Introduction

A trial excavation was carried out in the garden of Stretham Rectory by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section in November 1989. The work was funded by the Diocese of Ely, and took place because of a proposal to develop the site commercially.

Setting

Geology and Geography

The village of Stretham lies on a ridge approximately 4 miles south of Ely, which constitutes the eastern end of an island on which the villages of Haddenham and Wilburton are also located. The church of St. James occupies a high position in the centre of the village, and the rectory is next to it, immediately to the south. Both lie on a band of lower greensand containing underground water which can be tapped by digging wells. The underlying geology is Kimmeridge clay.

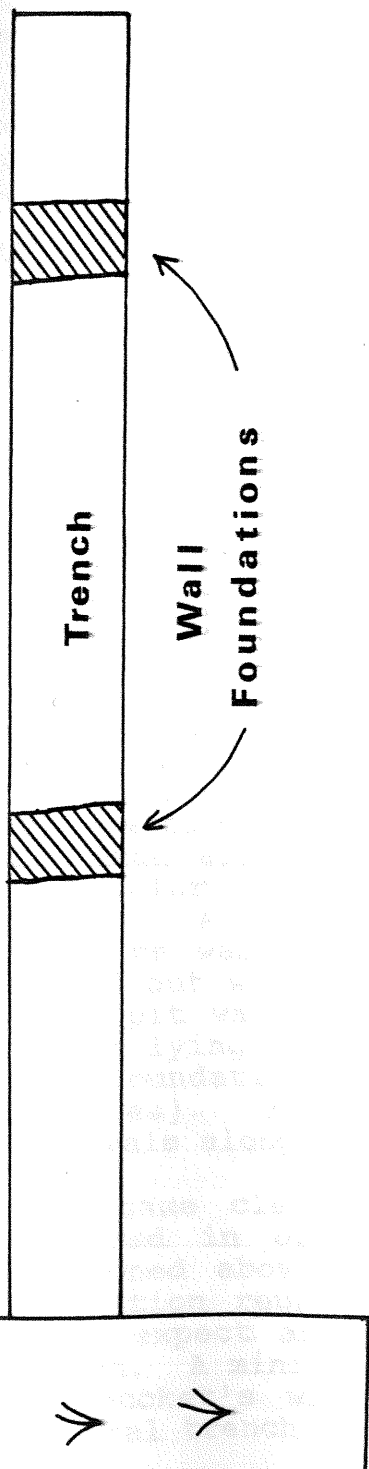
History

Partly because of its relatively high elevation and the availability of water, Stretham was occupied during the late Anglo-Saxon and Medieval periods. A Roman road (Akeman Street) runs roughly north-south through the west side of the village and appears to run along the west edge of the rectory garden. Further signs of Roman settlement are found immediately to the south of the village.

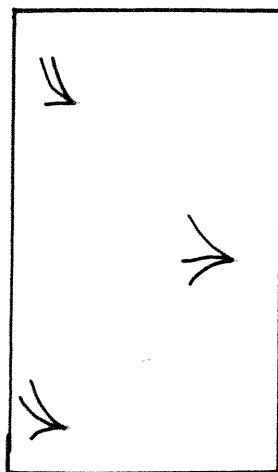
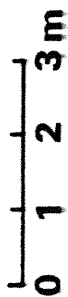
Much of the present church building dates to the early 14th century, although it was heavily restored in the 19th Century. The east wall of the chancery, however, dates to the end of the 12th century and there are some 12th century carved stones built into the inside of the porch. There is also reputed to be a fragment of a late Anglo-Saxon grave cover (late 10th - 11th century) in this location.

The rectory is a particularly interesting building and much of it dates to the 16th century with 18th and 19th century additions and restoration. It was originally constructed in the 14th century, and a wall dating to this period can be seen at the north end on the east side. Rumours abound of an Anglo-Saxon church in the rectory garden. See for example 'The History of the Parish of Stretham' by the Rev. S. Stitt, (unpublished manuscript, 1922), who imaginatively proposed that the church was a circular hut of osiers or wattle with a mud roof and a central altar presided over by semi-druids. There are some pieces of disused church masonry which have been incorporated into the garden architecture. A pillar has

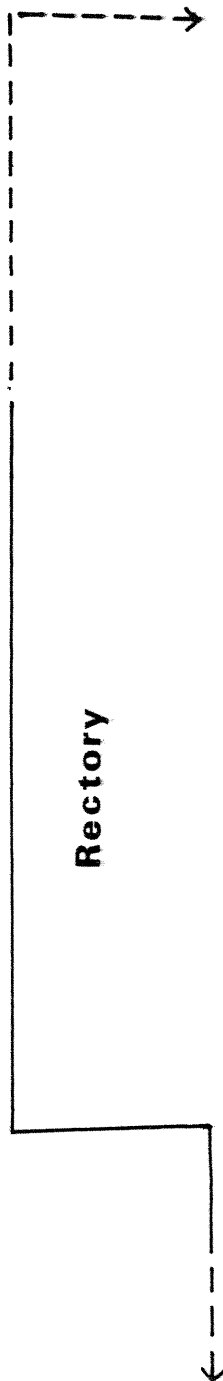
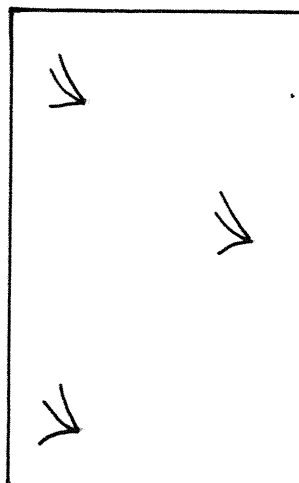




Scale



Flower
Beds



been used as a bird table and cornices line one of the garden paths. The pond (now empty) is lined with brick and stone, some of which is worked, and a pillar was placed in the centre as a decoration. It has been said that these are of the Anglo-Saxon period, but in fact they date from the 14th to the 19th centuries.

Previous Work

No previous archaeological excavations have been carried out in the grounds of the rectory. However, a resistivity survey was carried out by Dr. C. Shell in May 1989 on the lawn immediately west of the rectory building. Some linear areas of low resistivity, possibly forming a rectangle and suggesting possible ditches, were found in the southeast corner of the survey area. A small area of high resistivity was also found just west of the rectory building.

Strategy

It was decided, on the basis of the survey above, to carry out a trial excavation which would cut through at right angles two linear bands which produced low resistivity readings. A trench 17m long and 1.5m wide was laid out north-south, with the southern end running up to and perpendicular with one of the flower beds (see location plan).

After removal of turf, the topsoil and subsoil, which had a combined depth of approximately 40cm, were excavated with a mini-digger. Below the subsoil was a layer of mid brown sand containing frequent fragments of clunch and mortar, and pieces of roof and floor tile, mainly of the post-medieval period. The density of these inclusions varied greatly across the trench. At the south end, for one metre, there was a band of darker, more humic soil which seemed to correspond with one of the areas of low resistance found in the survey by C. Shell. This feature was excavated by hand, and a ditch was revealed. One area approximately 3 metres from the north end had a particularly dense scatter of mortar and clunch on the surface. A test pit 3m long from north to south, with a width of 60 cm was laid out across it and excavated by hand. A robbed out wall foundation was found at the north end and a small pit was seen to the south of it, with a thin band of mortar lying directly above which ran up to the edge of the wall foundation (see below for further information on these features). Three other small test pits were excavated at intervals along the trench.

It became clear at this stage that a deeper trench was required in order to find further features of the kind mentioned above. In particular, if the robbed out wall foundation represented one side of a building or room, we might expect another parallel foundation further along the trench. A mini digger was used to excavate a narrow trench, one bucket's width (c. 90cm) along the east side of the original trench, down to the level of natural, sterile sand.

Results

As it was expected, another wall foundation was found 7m to

the south of the first, this time only partially robbed out. Three pits and a well were revealed between the two foundations as well as a discontinuous, thin layer of mortar which may have been a floor. The features found are described in detail below.

The topsoil [1] is dark brown silty loam, with occasional pebbles, flecks of mortar, charcoal and clunch. There are very occasional fragments of brick and tile. Most of the inclusions are near the bottom. It has a depth of c. 30cm, except where roots are found just below this level. The subsoil [2] is mid-brown silt with occasional pebbles and fragments of clunch and mortar. There are more artefacts here than in no. [1], many of which date to the post-medieval period. Layer [3] directly below is a lighter brown and has a sandier texture. It contains frequent flecks of mortar and fragments of clunch up to 5cm across, as well as pieces of floor, roof tile and brick, mainly of the post-medieval period. The density of these inclusions varied greatly across the trench. This layer can be interpreted as post-medieval building debris, which could be linked to the restoration of the rectory in the 19th century.

The trench was dug to the level of natural sand, which is coarse and compact with a striking red colour. A sondage was dug into it to check that it was sterile. Above this is a thick layer of compact, red sand [10] which does not have such a bright colour and contained a very small number of pottery sherds.

The remaining features are described below, starting at the south end and working northwards. A shallow ditch [5] was revealed at the south end which would appear to run N-S. It has a width of at least 1.3m, (the south edge is beyond the limit of excavation), a depth of c. 40 cm and contains mid-dark brown humic silt with few inclusions. It has been cut from the top of the subsoil [2], suggesting that it is a relatively modern feature, perhaps a former flower bed. Underneath [5] but only along the southern limit of excavation was a band of grey-brown clay from 50cm to 85cm below ground surface. This was not investigated further as it would have meant digging in the flower bed.

Moving beyond feature [5], subsoil [2] lay above [3] (mentioned above), which lay above [4], a band of red brown silty sand. Both [3] and [4] sloped up towards the north before reaching the southern wall foundation [15] and [16]. It is worth noting that [3] contained frequent clunch cobbles from 0m to 1m from the wall foundation, which no doubt fell from the wall.

The southern wall foundation

The southern wall foundation, orientated E-W is up to 1.05m wide and stands up to 1m high. It can be divided into two sections: the northern two thirds [15] comprises clunch cobbles up to 15cm across in yellow mortar, and the southern part [16] is made up of grey clay and mortar with moderate pebbles and flecks of clunch. Unit [15] looks like a 'proper' wall and has a straight, smooth north face. The division

between [15] and [16] is very clear and distinct. [15] could be the original wall, while the southern side has been robbed of clunch cobbles, leaving debris in its place. This is unlikely as the same sticky grey clay and mortar is seen at the base of the north face, underneath [15]. Also, the dividing line between [15] and [16] on the top surface is so straight that it does not seem likely to have been formed accidentally by robbing the wall. Alternatively, [15] could be an original wall, while [16] is a secondary 'facing' added to the outside, although the function of such a face is uncertain. The two different constituents of the wall, therefore, remain something of an enigma. No foundation trenches can be seen for the construction of this wall. It is therefore likely that vertical foundation cuts were made and the wall foundation material packed closely against them.

Between the southern and the northern wall foundations

The south and north wall foundations are parallel and 7m apart. The stratigraphy between the two is relatively complicated and only a full-scale excavation will be able elucidate the nature and extent of these features and their relationships to each other. Since a vertical trench was cut with a mini-digger, it was also difficult to allocate the finds to particular features, thus producing a relative dating problem, although the few artefacts found below layer [3] do appear to be medieval. The following gives an account of what was seen along the south section.

A discontinuous layer [7] of cream-coloured mortar, 2-4 cm thick is seen between the two foundations, below layer [3]. Compacted mortar floors were used in the medieval period, so this is a plausible explanation. There can be seen in places, a band of mid brown sand with fragments of clunch and mortar below the mortar layer [7]. It looks similar to [3], but does not contain tile and may be the make-up level for the floor. Where [7] does not exist, it is particularly difficult to distinguish between this layer and number [3].

Three pits and a well can be seen in the section. The well [9] has a perfectly spherical cross-section, with a diameter of 84 cm. The sides are vertical and straight. The edge of the well has been cut by the east section of the trench. There are two types of fill: the top 40 cm consists of very dark grey silt and charcoal and below that is a deposit of gray-brown silt-sand. Very few artefacts were found in these deposits, mainly a few small fragments of bone. Excavation of the well was stopped at an arbitrary level and it may continue down for several metres. The level from which the well was cut is unclear; the probable floor layer [7] is broken above the well, and it is difficult to say whether the layer containing clunch and mortar is the make-up level for the floor or [3]. It is most likely to be the former, in which case the well is early, pre-dating the floor.

Between the well and the southern wall foundation, is a pit, [11], with a smaller pit, [12] cut into it. Both pre-date mortar layer [7]. Pit [12] is 84 cm wide and 30cm deep, with shallow, sloping sides and a pointed base. The fill is very mixed, with areas of burning along the edge which contain

charcoal, ash and burnt red brick. Elsewhere, the fill consists of dark grey-brown silt with moderate fragments of mortar. Pit [13], 70 cm deep and 90 cm, across has a rounded, but irregular profile and contains mid grey-brown silty sand.

There are two pits north of the well. The first, [11] is cut from a high level, (within subsoil [2]) and cuts through mortar layer [7]. It must, therefore, date to the post-medieval period. The fill consists of dark grey-brown clay, with flecks of mortar, clunch, tile, bone and charcoal. It is a strange shape, with lips at the top of each side; the top is irregular, and the sides and bottom slightly curved. The maximum width is 1.6 m and the depth approximately 50cm. Immediately to the north is the second pit. This is covered by mortar layer [7], so probably dates to the medieval period. It is relatively small, 1.1m wide and 34 cm deep, with a fill of mid grey-brown sand.

The Northern Wall Foundation

The northern wall foundation [6] appears to have undergone more disturbance than the southern wall foundation. It has a maximum width of 1.3m (at the top) and a depth of 70 cm. The sides are neither straight nor vertical. The main constituent is grey mortar and clay, containing pebbles and flecks of clunch, similar in fact, to part [16] of the southern wall foundation. It is interspersed, however, with a couple of layers of clunch near the top, and four layers of red sand below these. At the top is a thin band, 1cm thick, of greyish mortar which does not appear to be the same as no. [7]. A section of this foundation was excavated by hand. The texture was mixed; sticky in some parts and very hard in others. At the bottom of the foundation and just lipping up the sides, was a little dark brown earth, which can be interpreted as primary silt. The layers of interspersed red sand were identical to the surrounding red sand [10] and may have been deposited during the robbing activity. There is what appears to be a cut immediately to the north of the foundation, with a fill of mid-dark brown silty sand. This could be a foundation trench, but such an interpretation is perhaps premature at this stage. Immediately south of the wall on the west side (not drawn) was a thick deposit of grey ash with fragments of burnt red brick. This is probably part of a destruction level and a soil sample was kept.

There is little worth noting beyond the northern wall foundation. The layer containing mortar, clunch and tile (still layer [3]?) is relatively thick, up to 30cm and lies above compacted red sand containing few artefacts.

The Finds

As mentioned above, the method of excavation used meant that it was not always easy to separate finds by context. A full excavation, where features are excavated stratigraphically and by hand will be needed to isolate finds by context and date the features more precisely.

Tile was by far the most common artefact from this excavation. Roof and floor tile of the Post-Medieval period and floor tile

of the Medieval period were found. The Medieval floor tile has a green and yellow glaze and was found throughout the excavation. The most frequently found type was Post-Medieval, probably dating to the 18th or 19th century. It has a black fabric with sand and shell temper, a pink exterior and a very brittle texture. Other types of tile found were as follows; cream with pink exterior, pink with red exterior and grey with white exterior.

The pottery was mainly of the Medieval period, with some sherds attributed to the Post-Medieval period. There were no finds of the Anglo-Saxon period or earlier. Other types of artefact found include animal bone, oyster shell, iron nails, glass and clay pipe stems.

It is hoped that the finds from this trial excavation can be analysed in detail with those from a future larger-scale excavation.

Discussion

The trial excavation in the garden of Stretham Rectory has produced two parallel wall foundations, 7m apart, and each approximately 1m wide. Such substantial wall foundations were to some extent unexpected, since they were not found in the resistivity survey carried out by Dr. C. Shell, and there is no evidence for them on the ground surface. There is a series of features between the walls, including pits, a well and a possible floor, most of which are likely to be contemporary with the walls. The small amount of pottery from sealed contexts suggests a Medieval date for this building. Its function is not known at this stage, but it is much too substantial for an ordinary domestic dwelling. There are no documentary records to suggest a building of this sort here and the nature of this building remains uncertain. Rumours of an Anglo-Saxon church cannot be proven, and the pieces of ecclesiastical masonry which have been reused as garden monuments are of later periods.

Nonetheless, such a substantial building of uncertain nature merits a full-scale excavation, to be carried out on this site before it undergoes re-development. This would include revealing the extent of the building and defining its nature. Such an excavation would provide important information about the origin and development of the village of Stretham.

Provisional Finds List

The following finds were found during the trial excavation.

Layer 1

Medieval and post-medieval tile

19 post-medieval sherds

14 medieval sherds

animal bones (cow, horse and sheep)

5 oyster shells

4 clay pipe stems

1 iron nail

2 glass frags

1 spherical object of cream-coloured stone, c. 1cm dia.

Layer 2

Medieval and post-medieval tile

4 medieval sherds

11 animal bones (horse and sheep)

1 oyster shell

1 clay pipe stem

Layer 4

Tile (probably medieval)

6 medieval sherds

5 animal bones (cow and sheep)

1 oyster shell

1 iron nail

Feature 5

1 medieval sherd

1 sheep bone

Feature 12

4 medieval sherds

1 probable medieval sherd

2 pig incisors

burnt brick

Feature 13

Many fragments of sheep cranium

Machine dug trench, north half

Medieval and post-medieval tile

2 post-medieval sherds

6 animal bones (sheep and cow)

bottom of machine-dug trench, north end

1 medieval sherd

1 sheep bone

Machine-dug trench, south half

Medieval and post-medieval tile

5 medieval sherds

10 animal bones (mainly sheep)

1 oyster shell

Four test pits through layer 3, and below

Medieval and post-medieval tile

8 medieval sherds
5 probable medieval sherds
24 animal bones (cow, horse, sheep and pig)
1 possible human bone
1 iron nail

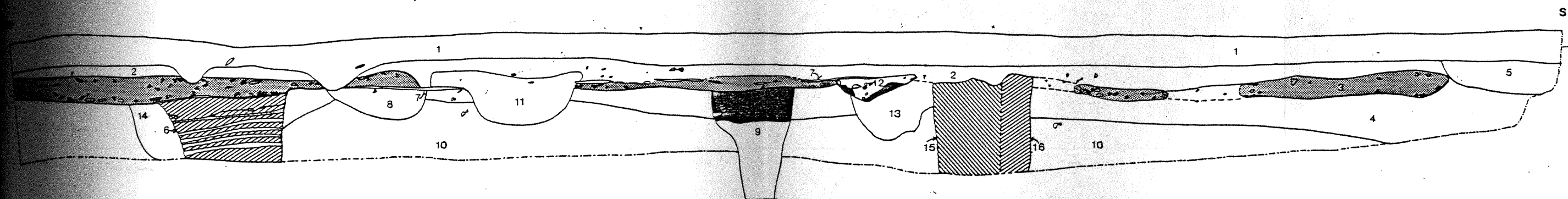
unstratified

medieval and post-medieval tile
1 post-medieval sherd
1 probable medieval sherd
9 animal bones (cow and sheep)
2 glass fragments
1 clay pipe stem
1 fragment fired clay
1 fragment coal







STRETHAM RECTORY 1989

East Section

Scale: 0 1 2 3 4 5m



Key

-  layers with clunch & mortar
-  areas with charcoal or burning
-  clunch & mortar wall foundation
-  wall foundation (clunch robbed)
-  mortar fragment
-  clunch fragment

STRETHAM RECTORY RESISTIVITY SURVEY

FROM DR. C. SHELL

MAY 1989

