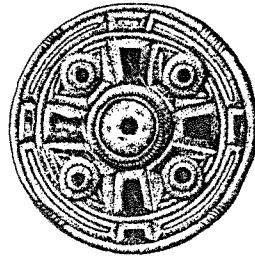


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Archaeological Field Unit

Nineteenth Century Almshouses at Oundle Road, Alwalton:
An Archaeological Investigation

A. Hatton

1996

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A100

Commissioned By Peterborough Homes Ltd

**Nineteenth Century Almshouses at Oundle Road, Alwalton:
an archaeological investigation**

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SUMMARY

During January and February 1996 an archaeological investigation was carried out by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council at Oundle Road, Alwalton (TL 134/958), on behalf of Peterborough Homes Ltd.

Although the site held archaeological potential because of its location close to the Great North Road (A1), no evidence was recovered showing use of the land prior to 1802. This is the date of construction of four cottages (Almshouses), the groundplans of which were found during the course of the investigation, in addition to drains and wells serving them.

NINETEENTH CENTURY ALMSHOUSES AT OUNDLE ROAD, ALWALTON (TL 134/958): AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

1 INTRODUCTION

During January and February 1996 work was started on construction of eight dwellings, access roads and services by Peterborough Homes Ltd at Alwalton (Fig. 1), which lies on the river Nene c 6km west of Peterborough, directly east of the A1. The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council was notified of work commencing and carried out archaeological recording on the site.

2 GEOLOGY

The subsoil is mainly Oxford Clay, with some Cornbrash and Great Oolite limestone.

3 BACKGROUND

The archaeological record shows evidence, although sparse, of early human activity on the land now occupied by the village of Alwalton. More conclusive evidence of occupation has emerged from a field situated to the north of the subject site on the southern bank of the River Nene. The field contained evidence of upstanding earthworks (interpreted as ramparts) and Roman bricks which may indicate the presence of a building in the immediate vicinity. Additionally, a double inhumation burial of a male and a female was recorded (SMR 00912, 05714). The grave was accompanied by a Samian cup, a coin of Alexander Severus and two bronze bangles.

Located on the western side of the A1 at Chesterton, directly opposite Alwalton, is the site of a further possible Roman building. Traces of a stone building were identified in a drainage ditch perhaps associated with the Roman Ermine Street. The finds included sherds of colour-coated wares but little dating evidence was recovered. However, a stone coffin had earlier been uncovered in close proximity to the possible Roman building. This contained the skeletal remains of a man and associated grave goods including items of

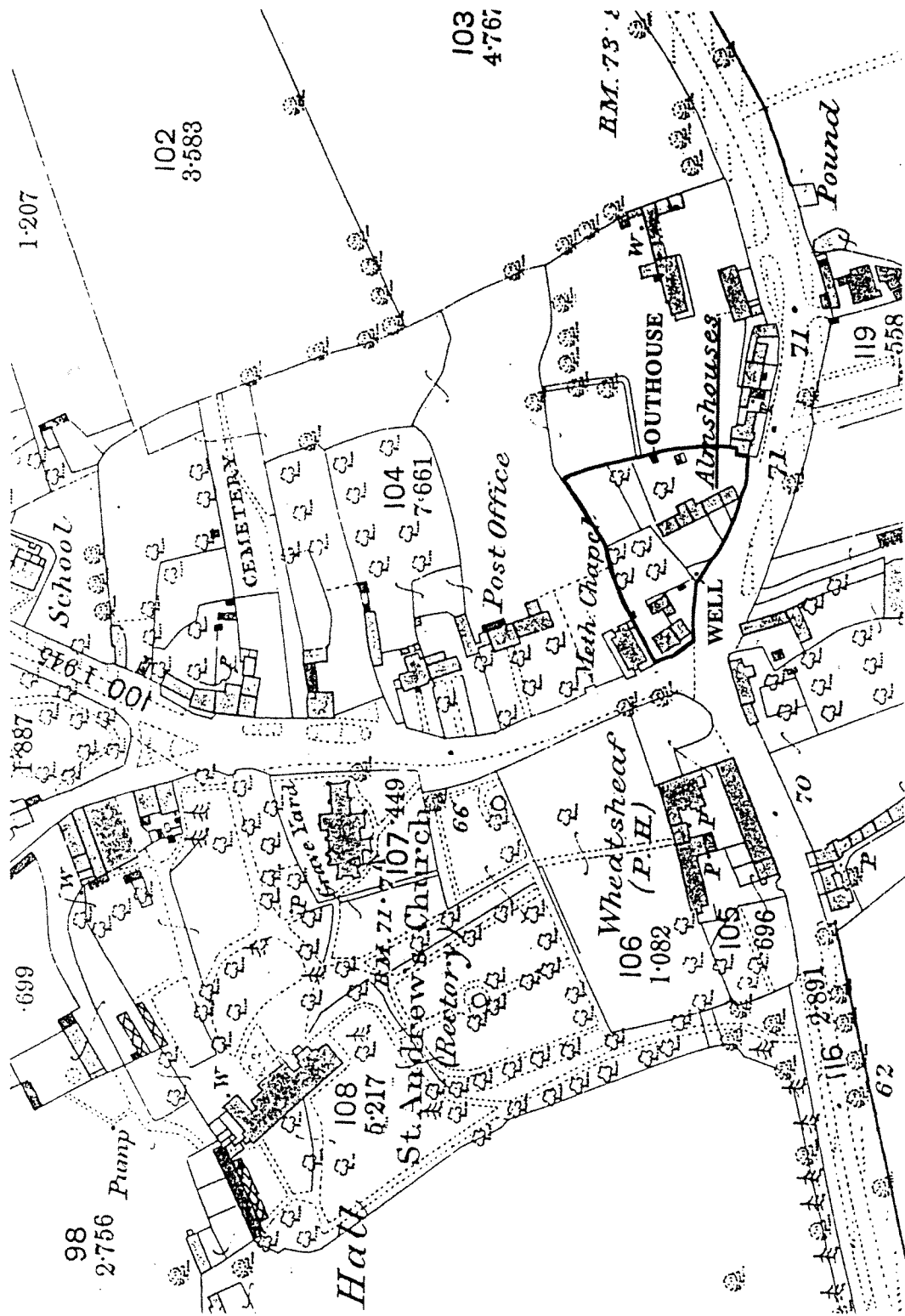


Figure 1 Site Location Map (extracted from 1926 OS map)

military memorabilia, objects of personal ornament and an assortment of coins, the latest issue being dated to the early to mid 4th century AD (SMR 01881).

The historical and archaeological record of the post-Roman period at Alwalton is somewhat elusive, until a written historical record began to be generated during the 10th century. The post-10th century written record of Alwalton describes in some detail the various owners of the manor and also the constructional changes taking place within the village (VCH 1936).

The documents also show a charity donation of £90 given by the wealthy of the parish in 1802 towards the construction of four cottages (Almshouses) on the site under investigation (Fig. 1, lower right). These were to be let to widows for 1s per week. The Almshouses later fell into disrepair and were eventually demolished in 1972.

4 METHODOLOGY

Initially all the vegetation was removed from the development site in order to create a surface on to which the outline of each housing unit and the access road could be marked prior to the groundwork commencing. Following the marking out of each unit the foundation trenches were excavated to a pre-determined depth in accordance with official housing regulation, which allowed for changes in geology and moisture content.

The objective for each working day was to mechanically excavate 1.5 units of foundation trench (which ranged in depth from 1m at the western end of the site to 1.85m at the eastern end) closely followed by the pouring of the foundation concrete. This procedure restricted the time allowed for archaeological recording and the recovery of artefacts. After the completion of the foundation trenches the topsoil remaining within each unit was removed down to the top of the concrete in order to produce a working surface.

5 RESULTS

The groundwork commenced with the excavation of the access road located at the extreme eastern boundary of the site. The depth of topsoil removed in

order to create the road varied in accordance with the inclination of the land, from 150mm at the southern end to 350mm where the first phase of road construction ended, 20m to the north.

During the removal of soil along the line of the access road a small building was uncovered (Fig. 1, labelled as outhouse) which had a rectangular shape in plan with a small side cell built into its northern wall (Plate 1). The side cell was excavated to a depth of 300mm, which turned out to be the maximum possible because the water table hindered any further excavation. The soil removed from the cell contained a large amount of coal, rusty metal and occasional fragments of modern pottery; the removal of the soil also uncovered the fine dry stone wall construction of the building.

The excavation of the first 1.5 units resulted in the discovery of a well (Plate 2), as shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1926 (Fig. 1). The well was approximately 6m deep and 1m wide; it dates to the early 19th century which would make the construction of the well contemporary with the building of the Almshouses in c.1802. Further excavation of the foundation trenches revealed a covered stone-built land drain running in a northwest-southeast direction (Plate 3). The drain's construction consisted of sandstone slabs positioned to create a flat-based 'V' shape. Because the drain could not be excavated, owing to the depth at which it was uncovered (1.7m) and the unstable nature of the baulks created by the excavation of the foundation trenches, the feature was recorded photographically.

Excavation of the remaining foundation trenches for the new houses revealed the footings for more of the early 19th century Almshouses. These appeared to have fairly insubstantial foundations, with only a single-course wall remaining *in situ*, giving an approximate wall width of 500mm.

After the completion of the foundation trenches and the subsequent pouring of concrete, the soil was removed from each of the unit interiors. This process uncovered further evidence of the footings associated with the Almshouses, including a large stone slab (1m long by 750mm wide) which turned out to be the only remaining indicator of the interior floor after the almost complete demolition of the Almshouses and removal of the rubble in 1972. The interior of the Almshouses showed no evidence of room divisions, probably because each dividing wall was constructed entirely of wood, with upright posts resting on the stone floor so that the excavation of post-holes was not



Plate 1 Outhouse with side cell



Plate 2 Nineteenth century well

required, thus reducing the need for frequent replacement of rotting timber uprights. Although the archaeological record (SMR 00912) provides a written document of Roman activity in the vicinity of the subject site, no further artefactual or structural evidence was obtained when the topsoil had been removed from the area of investigation.

There should have been a second phase of archaeological work at Alwalton, which entailed observing the removal of the topsoils within the boundaries of the car park area behind the new houses; unfortunately, due to a breakdown in communication the AFU was not contacted and so did not observe this phase of work.



Plate 3 Stone-built land drain

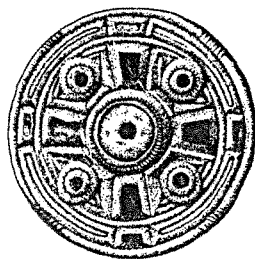
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank David Holmes and Colin Harrison (Peterborough Homes Ltd) for commissioning and funding the work, as well as Les and Norman for their invaluable help. Thanks are also due to Tim Malim, the Project Manager, for his helpful comments during the writing of this report, and to Melodie Paice for help and advice concerning the illustrations. This project was undertaken in response to a brief drawn up by the County Archaeology Office.

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