

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### INTRODUCTION

The original project research design presumed (with good reason in the light of the available information at the time) that the site was that of a single settlement evolving – possibly without interruption – through five centuries. At the time the generic process of transition from early Saxon settlements through to prototypical nucleated ‘villages’ was a keenly debated issue. Concepts such as the ‘Middle Saxon shift’ – first espoused by Arnold and Wardle (1981) were attempts to explain the apparent absence of mid-Saxon and early Saxon antecedents for late Saxon nucleated settlements and early medieval villages. They suggested a shift of settlement from light to heavy soils, and a concurrent coalescing of scattered settlement into nucleated sites, driven by changes in land use (ibid. 149). The pre-excavation assessment of the evidence at Kings Meadow Lane appeared to show a well-preserved example of this process, displaying evidence of an organic evolution, and visible ‘shift’ of settlement, over a period of at least five centuries.

Over the last decade or so, the great amount of early and middle Saxon settlement excavation has emphasised the fluidity of early Saxon settlement; maybe the term should be more Middle Saxon ‘coalescence’, describing a period (broadly from the mid 7th century to the 9th century) when a number of distinct but interrelated factors caused rural society to agglomerate (see Hamerow 2002, 123-4).

Ironically, the archaeological evidence from Kings Meadow Lane shows more radical changes in settlement and land use between the 5th and 10th centuries than was first surmised, and on the face of it supports the scenario of a more abrupt settlement shift. However, it will be argued, that this has more to do with politics than with social economics.

The following discussion examines the evidence in a broadly chronological sequence. The evidence as a whole points to intermittent settlement and/or activity in the area of Kings Meadow Lane, with little in the way of continuity of settlement. The essential character of each phase is distinct in itself, and in each case, appears to have had little direct influence on subsequent occupation. Such similarities that are apparent arguably owe most to the overall topography of the area, namely the geographic factors of the two routes bracketing the area, and more broadly, the River Nene itself. Therefore, as the archaeological narrative of the Kings Meadow Lane area is essentially episodic, it is best to structure the discussion to suit.

### EARLY SAXON SETTLEMENT (MID 5th CENTURY TO LATE 6th CENTURY)

#### Research context

As Reynolds (forthcoming) says, the framework of early archaeological research into early Saxon settlement and the course of migration was governed by the almost exclusive reliance on the most easily identified evidence, that is, the grave goods of pre-Christian burial sites. As is now accepted, grave goods may be as much about cultural shifts or fashion as genuine demographic movements. The development of DNA analysis may well in time enable such issues to be clarified, but as Miles argues, it is not as yet a ‘magic wand’ and it cannot yet determine without doubt whether a burial is that of an immigrant or a British native, regardless of what shape their brooch is (Miles 2005, 174-5).

The traditional view, inspired as much from a romanticised vision of the past as from hard evidence, that the incomers represented an organised invasion, with ‘ready-to-rule’ dynasties, poised to take over from the helpless and hapless natives, has long since been discredited by archaeological evidence (Yorke, 2001, 13). However, researchers instinctively persist in looking for an overall pattern – however nebulous – for the beginnings of early Anglo-Saxon settlement.

The sites at Kings Meadow Lane have provided an excellent example of one of the varieties of transition from Roman to Anglo-Saxon settlement. The subject is one that – after decades of debate – still evades any easy consensus, and various scenarios have been enthusiastically championed at different times. For a period in the 1980s it became popular to argue that there were instances of Anglo-Saxon incomers taking over working Romano-British villas – in other words – that there was a conscious effort to maintain key elements of the Romano-British infrastructure, and to imply an almost seamless process whereby a working Roman villa became an Anglo-Saxon one. The correlation between some of the Roman and Anglo-Saxon features on the site at Barton Court Farm, in Oxfordshire is particularly interesting and has been used by Hodges (1989, 17) to imply the continuity of a working estate, and, more recently, by Reynolds (1999, 41) to argue the opposite, that respecting some of the pre-existing landscape features was purely pragmatism on the part of the incomers.

However as the available database of sites and evidence has accumulated in the last few decades, the reality begins to look much less uniform than earlier scenarios would have it, and researchers seem to be moving perhaps reluctantly towards the conclusion that the transition process was more influenced by small-scale circumstance, the personalities of the incomers, and the reception accorded them by the native population. By their nature such factors cannot easily be deduced from the archaeological record. In this context, the evidence from Higham Ferrers points to such a opportunistic re-settlement, with Saxon incomers moving into a probably deserted, and possibly cleared area, but showing no interest in the relict Romano-British infrastructure.

### **Chronology of the Higham Ferrers settlement**

It is not within the remit of this volume to examine in detail the decline and abandonment of the Roman settlement (Lawrence and Smith, forthcoming), but the evidence seems to point to a definite interval between the end of the Roman town and the advent of the Saxon settlers. The artefactual evidence seems to indicate that the Roman town was no longer a functioning small town by the end of the 4th century. No Roman-British coinage dating to the second half of the 4th century was found, although it is accepted that the importance of this factor can be overstated – it does not necessarily represent conclusive proof of abandonment, only the breakdown of the money economy. As the Roman town ‘centre’ was situated to the south of the excavated areas, there is no certainty that the entire town was deserted, but it seems most probable the Saxon incomers were confronted by a derelict and overgrown site, all but deserted for the previous few decades.

As a whole the artefactual dating from the SFB deposits – suggested by the presence of early Saxon decorated pottery – indicates that Saxon occupation in the area of Kings Meadow Lane began no earlier than the mid 5th century and, in its first phase, extended well into the 6th century. Interestingly, the pottery from the secure contexts of the SFB fills suggests that the incomers settled in the area of Sites 1 and 2 at first, well away from the Roman settlement, and only later was there settlement within the derelict Roman town itself. This reinforces the impression given by the location of the SFBs identified on Sites 9 and 10 that they were not sited with particular consideration to the layout of the Roman settlement itself, although it may be significant that two of the SFBs were situated either side of the road. It would be tempting to deduce that they were respecting an existing, and perhaps still used, road, but it may just mean that they were using the margins of the derelict road as relatively clear areas within which to site their buildings, and in the case of the SFB to the east of the road, its location may have been a response to the shelter afforded by the Roman building to the north-east.

Notwithstanding these uncertainties of detail, overall the site of the early Saxon occupation and its character is consistent with a scenario of a family or small group of possibly first-generation immigrants making their way up the Nene Valley to a suitable spot – perhaps attracted by the easy river crossing at this point – ignoring the remains of the Roman town, and building their own community on cleared land further up the dry valley to the south-east.

### **Extent of the settlement**

The SFBs fall into three spatial groups, on Site 1, on Site 4, and thirdly loosely scattered across the Roman settlement to the west, on Sites 9 and 10. Given the incomplete coverage of the fieldwork over the project area as a whole, and the occasional finds of 5th- and 6th-century Saxon pottery sherds in areas away from the known SFBs, for instance on Site 7, it would be a mistake to assume that these three groups represent all the Phase 1 activity in the area of Kings Meadow Lane.

Early-middle Saxon hand-built pottery has also been found at Wharf Road, approximately 1 km to the south of Kings Meadow Lane (Blinkhorn 2003b), and this included a single small fragment with combed decoration, indicating an early Saxon date. Other finds of early Saxon pottery have been recovered from later Saxon or medieval assemblages from sites within the historic core of the town (Jones and Chapman 2003, 132-3; see Blinkhorn, Chapter 4). While no focus of settlement or structural evidence have yet been identified, it is very likely that early Saxon occupation continued sporadically along the high ground along the southern bank of the Nene to the south of Kings Meadow Lane, just as it appears to have done to the north (see below).

### **Character of the settlement**

Once settled, there is no archaeological evidence to suggest that any effort was spent in reviving or maintaining the boundary ditches of the Romano-British field system, at least not that part evident in the investigated areas.

It has been argued on the basis of recent research that the laying out and maintenance of carefully demarcated fields and property boundaries was a consequence of the creation of nucleated settlements. Where there was ample land and no competition, and a greater reliance upon low energy pastoral subsistence farming, rather than organised cereal farming, there was no need to expend effort in marking out land boundaries (Miles 2005, 183). The ownership of land did not represent status or identity; status derived from the portable wealth of personal adornments and livestock, and identity was derived from kin, or tribal group.

The lack of interest that the incomers showed towards the attractions of the Roman way of life is less of a puzzle when one considers, as Barnwell suggests (2003, 6), that the settlers were themselves,

or just one or two generations removed from, immigrants from the northern fringes of the Roman empire on the continent, and as such had never become familiar with, or adapted to Roman ways in their homeland.

There is no overall focus to the early Saxon settlement at Kings Meadow Lane, although loose groupings are evident on Sites 1 and 4. Whether this represents two contemporary and distinct family groups or the same family group moving from one area to another is impossible to determine on the basis of the finds evidence. However, SFBs 6057 and 6356 are worthy of further consideration, given their close relative proximity and alignment (Pl. 3.2). On these grounds it is reasonable to suggest that the two SFBs were contemporary and functionally related. The distinct difference between the carefully sculpted deep pit of SFB 6057, and the shallow rudimentary pit, combined with a complex arrangement of structural postholes of SFB 6356, suggests that each was specifically designed for a different role. It is tempting to suggest that SFB 6057 was the family sleeping quarters, and SFB 6356 the family workshop, although this is based upon no hard artefactual evidence.

A notable absence from the catalogue of buildings in Phase 1 at Higham Ferrers is evidence for any 'halls', or rectangular post-built buildings. It cannot be ruled out that they may have been sited in unexcavated areas, although this seems a rather contrived explanation. Given the typically lightly-founded nature of such buildings, truncation by later ploughing might be a consideration if it were not for the evident survival of several Middle Saxon post-built buildings in the same general area.

Instances of buildings in settlements of this period being restricted to SFBs are not uncommon in the same broad region, as for example at Melford Meadows, Brettenham (Mudd, 2002, 113) or Brandon Road, Thetford (Dallas 1993, 13-14). A recently published suite of Early and Middle Saxon SFBs and halls found at Yarnton, north of Oxford, was subjected to an extensive programme of radio-carbon testing, showing that, while there were instances of SFBs in existence alongside halls as late as the 8th century, there were no instances of hall buildings being contemporary with the Early Saxon SFBs (Bayliss and Hey, 2004, 263).

Where SFBs and 'halls' co-exist, as at West Stow, for instance, the temptation is strong to assign specific roles to the two types of building; most conveniently that the halls were dwellings, and the SFBs were associated craft workshops. It was argued that the craft could be determined from the evidence within the pit. The fairly common occurrence of textile-related objects – particularly loomweights – within SFB pits led some to conclude that SFBs were weaving sheds. To support this Ahrens (1966, 224-5) suggested that the pit of an SFB would provide a more humid atmosphere which was a benefit in textile manufacture. Incidents such as the discovery of loomweights in a number of SFB pits at

Mucking seemed to reinforce the idea, although Hamerow maintained a cautious circumspection (Hamerow 1993, 19). Experiments at West Stow have since shown that the sunken pit of an SFB does not significantly increase the humidity within the building, so weaving could have taken place as easily in a hall as in an SFB (Tipper 2004, 171-2). Furthermore, the restricted light and space available in a traditionally conceived SFB would have surely hampered a craft like weaving. It is worth noting at this stage that no loomweights were found at Higham Ferrers; two spindle whorls and a pinbeater were the only weaving-related tools found in the early Saxon phase of settlement.

Once it is accepted that the fill of an SFB – most likely deposited *after* the building had gone out of use – may have no connection to the SFB's role (Tipper 2004, 184), then, with the advantage of a greatly increased body of data, it can now be confidently argued that SFBs could have had a variety of different roles, both domestic and 'industrial'. The basic design was modified to suit whatever function was required for a particular building at a particular time (ibid, 185).

If the possibility that the footprints of Phase 1 post-built buildings were destroyed by later plough erosion is discounted then it is difficult to see that the SFBs at Kings Meadow Lane were exclusively workshops or small stores. The absence of halls at this time may have had more to do with the requirements and resources (both timber and human) of the inhabitants. An early Saxon settlement comprising solely SFBs may not have had sufficient population to build a hall, nor need to do so (Hamerow 2002, 51).

### Material culture of the settlement

In terms of the economy of this settlement, the evidence from the material remains, almost exclusively recovered from the SFB hollows, is unremarkable. The assemblage is entirely consistent with the settlement detritus of a self-contained group or extended family. Blinkhorn points out that no reconstructable pots, or large parts thereof, were recovered from any SFB hollow. This suggests that the source of the refuse within the hollows derived from secondary deposition, originating in domestic middens of some description.

Moffett (see Chapter 4) argues that the charred plant material from the SFBs on Sites 1 and 4 suggests some variation in associated activities. Little in the way of cereals was recovered from the SFBs on Site 1, suggesting that if cereals were being processed, it was not in the immediate vicinity. This absence of cereal remains could imply an emphasis in this part of the settlement on animal husbandry rather than cereal cultivation. In contrast, the relative abundance of clean cereal remains in Site 4 SFBs suggests that preparation for consumption was the activity carried out in or near the buildings. Does this varied evidence imply divisions of labour,

or distinct roles in different parts of the settlement, or for different family groups, or just variations in domestic practice over time? All that can be said is that any or all of these options are possible.

The animal bone evidence (see Evans Chapter 4) suggests that numbers of cattle, sheep and pig were present in broadly similar proportions. The relatively high proportion of pig (compared to later phases) could suggest a more wooded landscape, and suggests that pig was the principal source of meat.

**Regional context**

In terms of the character of the settlement represented by the dispersed scatter of SFBs on either side of the Lane, there is little that sets it apart from other 5th- and 6th-century settlements in the region. The fieldwalking and excavation results from the extensive Raunds Project, 6 kilometres to the north-east (Fig. 5.1), also suggest a development of scattered settlement on the slopes above the River Nene, and alongside lesser watercourses in the area, avoiding both the wet floodplains, and the heavy Boulder Clay of the uplands (Parry 2006, pages).

**Structural evidence of the Sunken Featured Buildings**

Across the entire development area a total of eleven definite Sunken Featured Buildings (SFBs), and one probable SFB, were identified and except in two cases, fully exposed and excavated. There was some variation in the preservation of the SFBs, and the clarity of their groundplan. Two of those within the Roman settlement were particularly difficult to define against the background ‘noise’ of Roman features and layers; one other had been truncated by a modern service trench.

These exceptions aside, generally the features of each SFB, comprising the pit and associated postholes (both within the pit and in close proximity) had suffered only moderate disturbance from medieval and modern ploughing.

**Current thinking**

The argument over the form and function of SFBs in this country has developed over the last 80 or so years, and will not be revisited in detail here. However, the evidence from Higham Ferrers, along

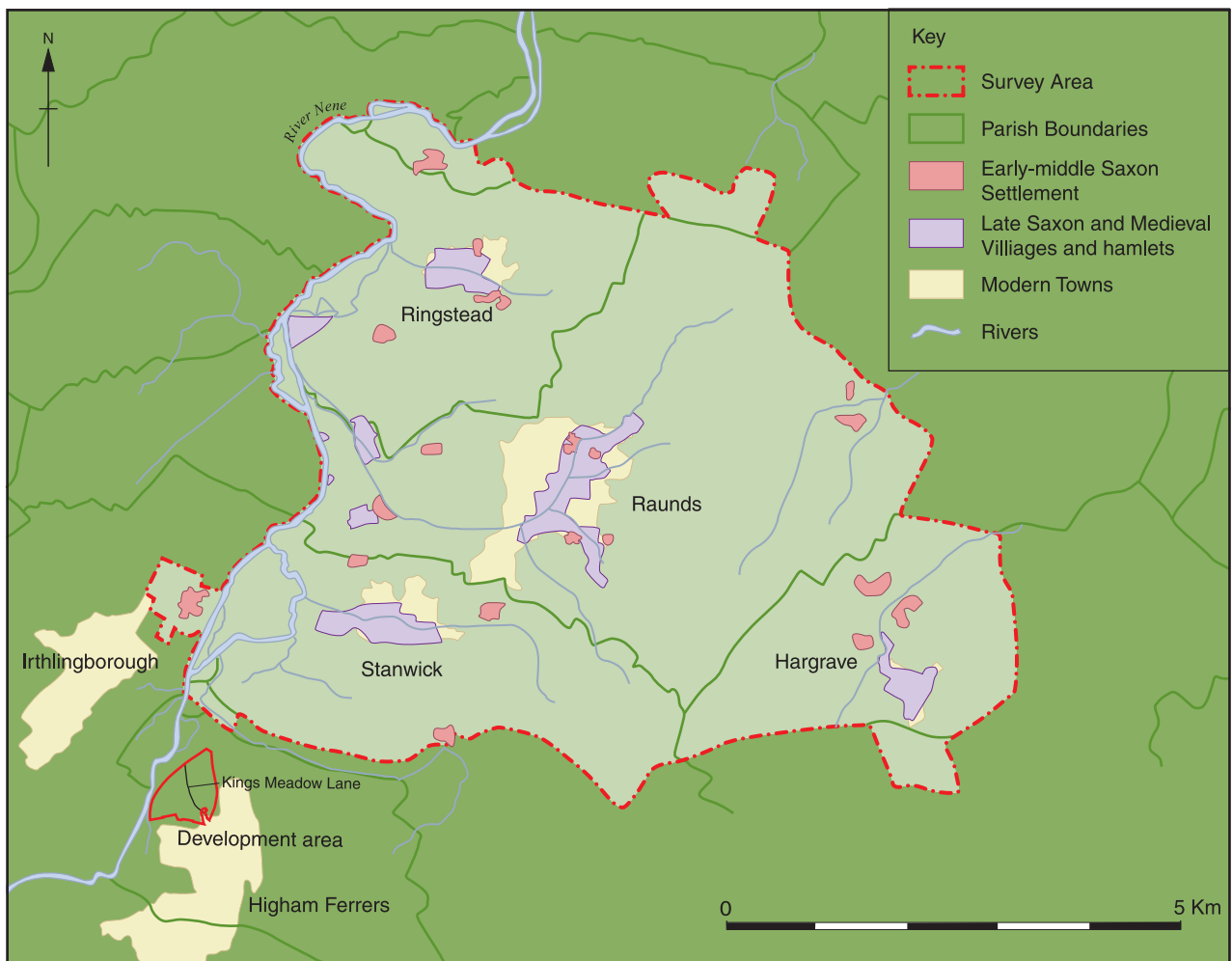


Fig. 5.1 The Raunds survey: extent of Early, Middle and Late Saxon settlement (after Parry 2007)

with recent advances in their understanding (see Tipper 2004), make at least a brief resumé of the evolution of the subject worthwhile, to set the Higham Ferrers evidence within a meaningful context.

The earliest identification in the archaeological record of the *Grubenhaus* type of building, later to be known as the Sunken Featured Building was made by ET Leeds in the 1920s, from his excavations at Sutton Courtenay (Leeds 1923). In the prevailing ethos of the time, his conclusion that the incoming Saxons were poverty stricken wretches who lived in total squalor in scruffy holes in the ground rather set the tone of interpretation for decades to come. Only in the late 1950's did this disparaging view come under serious question, initially through the seminal paper of Radford (1957), which argued the need for area excavation as the only way to understand Anglo-Saxon settlements. In the ensuing decades, many hundreds of SFBs have been excavated, and their presence seems to be fairly ubiquitous in the 5th and 6th century, and yet their form and function still cause problems, principally centring round the debate as to whether the pit feature represents the sunken floor of the entire structure, or a space beneath a suspended wooden floor at ground level. Until the excavation work and reconstruction experiments at West Stow (West 1985), the tendency was to accept that the base of the pit was the floor, despite the difficulties of fitting a believable entrance into the hypothetical structure. In recent years the consensus has been moving towards the suspended wooden floor hypothesis, but it is not unanimously accepted (Tipper 2004, 17). The debate is not ended and it is worth bearing in mind that against this view, Hamerow (2002, 31) cites the numerous Northern European examples where there is no doubt on the part of the excavators/interpreters that buildings had sunken floors. Significant support for this view comes from modern examples, for example in Poland (*ibid*, 35, fig. 2.14)

The Higham Ferrers SFBs certainly add fuel to the debate on form and function, although the

evidence is not decisive one way or the other. As Table 5.1 shows, six of the twelve SFBs at Higham Ferrers were of the 'two-post' construction, but there were enough variations in the detailed evidence from all twelve to suggest a degree of individual preference, or idiosyncrasy, on the part of their builders, or perhaps variation based on the different use or function of the buildings.

On the question of the sunken floor, none of the Higham Ferrers SFBs contained any evidence for either laid or trampled floor surfaces in their pit bases. If it is argued that the SFB pit was a sub-floor storage area, what use could be made of the very shallow pits under some SFBs? Two of the Higham Ferrers SFBs (1256 and 6356) had very shallow pits. While there is a slight uncertainty about the degree of feature truncation in the case SFB 1256, the shallowness of SFB 6356 is not due to later ploughing, since it was sited close by SFB 6057, which had a pit depth of 0.43 m. The positions of SFBs 6057 and 6356 in relation to each other, and the proximity of the exterior postholes (6564, 6566, 6568 and 6570), strongly suggest that these two structures were contemporary and related. It can be argued that the shallowness of some SFB pits may indicate that they were not intended for storage, but simply to provide an air-space under a suspended wooden floor. This would promote a drier and warmer atmosphere in the building and prevent, or at least delay, the onset of rot in the floor itself.

Such a hypothesis raises the question why sunken areas are apparently not found within other timber buildings such as halls. It could be argued that, where a wooden floor was required in a hall building, a space between floor and ground surface – whether for storage or ventilation/insulation – could be achieved more easily by raising the floor than by lowering the ground level. It is suggested that Building 7023 IIs (phase 2b) may have had just such a suspended floor (see below).

SFB 6057 also contained evidence of what may have been an ad hoc repair to a sagging floor. In the middle of the pit there was an arrangement of flat

Table 5.1 Dimensions of Sunken Featured Buildings

SFB	Site no.	Length (m)	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Subsoil	Principal postholes	Subsidiary postholes
1256	1	2.6	2.5	0.09	Silty clay/ironstone	4	1?
1263	1	3.5	2.3	0.5	Silty clay/ironstone	2	
1266	1	3.3	2.8	0.32	Silty clay/ironstone	3	
1253	1	3.9	3.1	0.35	Silty clay/ironstone	4(6)	5
6057	4	2.9	2.4	0.43	Silty clay	2	
6345	4	4.5	2.35	0.22	Silty clay	0	
6356	4	2.3	2.18	0.12	Silty clay	2	8
6630	4	n/a	1.44	0.24	Silty clay	1	
8222	9	3.12	2.87	0.28	Sandy silt	2	
10210	10	3.25	2.5	0.3	Silt and ironstone	2	
12740	10	3.97	2.14	0.22	Silt/ironstone/RB occupation layer	0	
12800	10	3.84	3.04	0.32	Silty clay/ironstone	2	

stones. These showed no signs of burning, and are not thought to be related to a fire or hearth base. It is suggested they could have formed a post pad for a central floor support. It would probably have been a lot easier to remove part of the floor and set a post on stone pad than to have dug out a new deep posthole.

There are sufficient numbers of SFBs with only one 'gable' posthole, or no 'gable' posthole, to suggest that the term 'gable posthole' is actually misleading. Tipper (2004, 192) suggests that, where they occur, they may have been merely scaffolding, to be removed once the ridged roof structure was assembled and was self-supporting. Many of these postholes are too large in size to be interpreted simply as scaffold holes. West (1985, fig. 290) offered a variant of the suspended floor idea, when he showed a suspended floor supported by a longitudinal joist that was keyed into two gable end posts supporting the ridge. A more recent discovery at Dorchester, Oxfordshire has been interpreted as a 6th-century SFB, with slots preserved in the base of the pit possibly indicating the joists of a suspended floor (Keevill 2003, 323-4, 357 and fig. 8).

A further step along the same line of thinking, taking into account Tipper's recent researches, dispenses altogether with the roof support function of the gable postholes. Instead it is suggested that the hole, or holes, contained short stout posts to support a longitudinal floor joist over a storage pit (P. Lorimer pers. comm.). Plate 5.1 depicts a possible interpretation of this idea. The planks of a suspended wooden floor would most likely have spanned the shortest distance across the pit – from side to side, and without some central longitudinal support in the form of a joist, the planks could flex and twist independently of each other, making the floor impractical and hazardous in use.

The SFB postholes at Higham Ferrers are of substantial size and depth. If these posts had simply been for scaffolding, or even to support a ridge pole, they would surely have not needed to be so substantial. If, on the other hand, the postholes were

intended to support a floor joist, then they would have needed to be of substantial thickness and well-anchored in the ground to avoid sideways movement and being driven into the ground by the weight of objects and people above. Would the absence of gable end posts compromise the roof? Not necessarily; at Catholme the interpretation of the roof structure of one of the earthfast post-built buildings suggested that a ridge plate was unnecessary. Racking – that is collapsing together of the roof rafters – could be prevented by the presence of thatching laths or withies (Losco-Bradley and Kinsley 2002, 99).

An added complication to the discussion is the possibility that the SFB pit could have represented only a fraction of the internal area of the building. If the external walls of the building had been lightly founded, then all trace of the overall footprint of the building could be erased by later ploughing. The example of the structure of SFB 1256 (Site 1 – Fig. 3.5) may be significant in this respect. In addition to the structural postholes close to either end of the pit, a further isolated large posthole (1354 – see Fig 3.3) was identified approximately 2.3 m to the north-east of the SFB, and on the same axis. Posthole 1354 may be completely unrelated chronologically – no finds were recovered from its fill – but it is possible that it represents a gable end of a much larger building, of which the SFB pit was only a feature of one end.

Another aspect of SFB 1256 that is worthy of note is that, alone of all the SFBs, the structural postholes appeared to be situated outside the SFB pit. In this instance it is not certain whether this represents a different design and construction technique, or the result of truncation by ploughing. The fact that the pit was very shallow and its edges indistinct suggest that ploughing may have played a part. That the other three SFBs in Site 1 do not show signs of severe truncation need not necessarily be an obstacle. The 18th-century estate map (Pl. 1.3) indicates a field called 'Vine Hill' at this location. There is a suggestion from the map that it contained



*Plate 5.1 Conjectural early Saxon SFB reconstruction*

ridge-and-furrow cultivation oriented WSW-ENE. It is therefore quite possible that the area of SFB 1256 had been eroded by a furrow, while leaving SFB 1263 to the north, and SFB 1253 to the south-east, undamaged and protected by a 'ridge'.

### Structural parallels

Table 5.2 catalogues the variation in dimensions of the SFBs from a number of sites of varying size across central and southern England. The variations in sizes of the Higham Ferrers SFBs seems slightly less than elsewhere, although as a group they fit comfortably within the general range of sizes observed on the other sites.

### Associated features

In the area of Site 1 a single datable pit was found in the vicinity of one of the SFBs (Fig. 3.3). A scatter of postholes was also identified, planned as soil marks, and a sample excavated. No dating material was found in their fills, and no coherent structure(s) seemed to be defined. Although they could well belong to the Phase 1 activity, the evidence of some prehistoric activity on the site sounds a note of caution.

On Site 4, to the south and west of the group of SFBs, an arrangement of postholes pits and short gullies appeared define small paddocks and possibly some structures although no clear patterns were identifiable (Fig. 3.35). A line of substantial pits (7326) extended to the north-west; each contained a noticeable proportion of charcoal and burnt silty clay, although in no case did this burning appear to have taken place in situ.

A large scatter of postholes was identified to the south of the SFB group. They have been assigned to Phase 2b, in association with Building 7327, immediately to the south, but it is quite possible that some of the postholes belong to Phase 1, though none produced any dating evidence.

The shallow gully across the south-west end of Site 4 (7306) has been assigned to Phase 1 on stratigraphic grounds alone. Its north western end faded out beyond the line of the Phase 2b enclosure exten-

sion ditch, and its south-east end extended beyond the trench. While it might represent a boundary differentiating the SFB group to the north-east and another (unrevealed) group to the south-west of the site, the absence of other boundaries of such nature in Phase 1 raises the possibility that it could be an early element of the Phase 2a activity (see below).

## THE MIDDLE SAXON EVIDENCE (7th–9th CENTURY)

### Introduction

The Middle Saxon period, from around the end of the 6th century to the 9th century has tended to suffer in the eyes of researchers through its relative lack of easily identified material remains, in comparison to the early Saxon period, and its lack of easily understood social structure. Attention traditionally focussed on pagan burial studies of the early Anglo-Saxon period, later augmented by studies of their buildings, in particular the Sunken Featured Buildings. Research interest has also focussed on the Later Saxon period, but from the standpoint of the immediate post-Conquest state of English society, and looking back to the roots of nucleated village society.

The intervening period has proved the most elusive and difficult to characterise. The temptation has been (as it surely is with any archaeological period) to look for patterns and models by which the evolution of settlement structure can be explained. However, as Reynolds argues (2003, 99) this has led to a few classic sites, for instance West Stow, Mucking and West Heslerton, being used to explain all lowland settlement forms. Reynolds argues that it is as unrealistic to look for uniformity in Anglo-Saxon society as it is in society of any age (2003, 99). If anything uniformity is surely more unlikely in a Middle Saxon context, at a time of fluid, evolving kingdoms based upon quite disparate groups with different cultural and political agendas, dealing with very unpredictable circumstances.

In this context it is worth bearing in mind (but not unquestioningly accepting) parallels drawn

Table 5.2: Comparison of 5th–7th century SFB dimensions (after Tipper 2004, Table 21)

Site	No. of SFBs	Geology	Length (m)	Width (m)	Depth (m)
Abbots Worthy (Dorset)	5	Chalk	2.5 - 3.1	1.75 - 2.75	0.11 - 0.95
Barrow Hills (Oxon)	45	Gravel	2.8 - 6.5	2.1 - 4.45	0.11 - 1.03
Bishopstone (Sussex)	3	Chalk	3.7 - 4.4	2.7 - 4.0	0.4 - 0.9
Mucking (Essex)	207	Gravel	2.18 - 7.47	1.7 - 5.4	0.1 - 0.9
Old Down Farm (Hants)	6	Chalk	2.4 - 3.76	1.7 - 2.9	0.2 - 0.72
Puddlehill (Beds)	9	Chalk	3.6 - 11	2.45 - 4.55	0.2 - 1.0
West Heslerton (Yorks)	130	Various	1.65 - 6.59	1.01 - 5.4	0.07 - 1.19
West Stow (Cams)	69	Sand	2.4 - 5.8	2.0 - 4.9	0.15 - 1.1
Higham Ferrers (Northants)	12	Various	2.3 - 3.97	2.14 - 3.04	0.09 - 0.43

from cultural anthropology. Studies of the transition of egalitarian groups and tribes to hierarchical chiefdoms highlight the ways in which increasingly complicated social structures develop, and inevitably encourage more central control and social organisation (see for instance Diamond 2006, 265-92). Although for each small group this process may well move at a different rate to its neighbours, sooner or later all groups will be drawn in.

**Archaeological context and current research (Fig. 5.2)**

Increasingly through the 7th and 8th centuries power or influence was expressed not just by personal loyalty but by territorial control. In archaeological terms, this is most often evident in the use

of ditches and linear earthworks, from the peasant's fence and gully separating the edge of his paddock from his neighbour's, up to the grand boundary of Offa's dyke, the most spectacular surviving middle Saxon expression of power and control. In some cases the ditches define the settlements, in the sense that they provide a sense of where the settlement is and how far it extends. Some display a discipline and rigour in their layout that would not go amiss in a fully-nucleated medieval village, as for example Wicken Bonhunt (Essex) or Cottenham (Cambridge-shire).

However, it is suggested that the evidence from Higham Ferrers points to a more politically motivated rationale for the ditches and earthworks, to create both a controlled and exclusive space, and to present a visually impressive spectacle to outsiders.

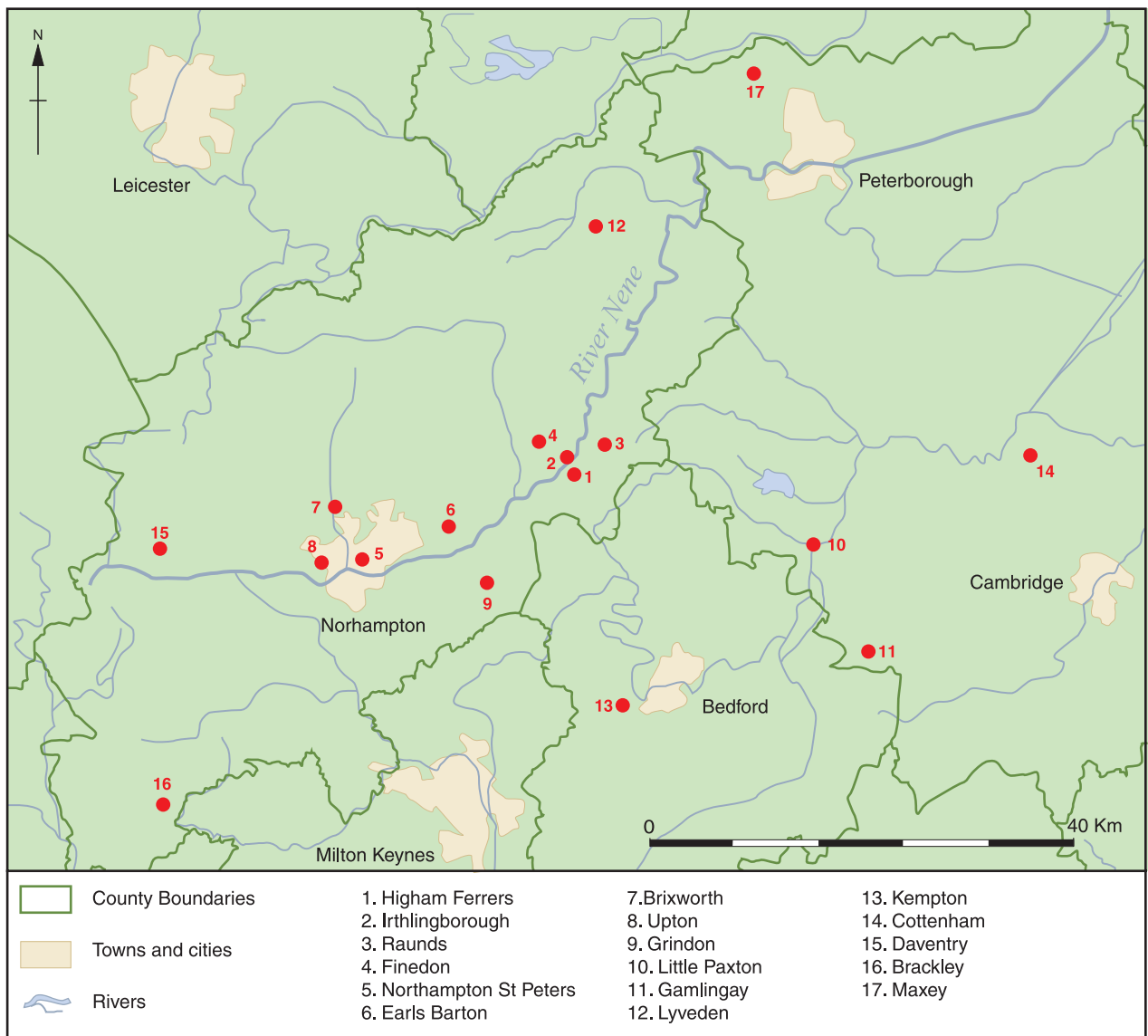


Fig. 5.2 Middle Saxon sites in the region mentioned in the text



### Chronology of the evidence

There is no stratigraphic evidence that can demonstrate that the activity assigned to Phase 2 post-dates the SFBs, but the artefactual evidence supports the contention that the SFB groups, or at least the grouping on Site 4 and mostly probably all the SFBs, were deserted before the Phase 2 complex was established. The pottery dating shows a clear absence of (non-intrusive) later pottery in the SFB pit fills of Site 4, and only a few sherds of early pottery in later features. Arguably, this supports the idea that there was a significant gap, possibly around half a century, between occupation phases, as suggested by the pottery itself. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the activity of Phase 2 begins, on what was effectively a 'green' site, with the construction of the horseshoe enclosure, and the first building(s). At the end of Phase 2 the archaeological indicators point to the enclosure complex and all associated elements being dismantled, filled in, or destroyed in a single operation. In essence the 'green' site is restored.

To fix chronological dates to the start and end of Phase 2 is less straightforward, but, as Figure 5.3 shows, a combination of artefactual and scientific dating applied to the stratigraphy allows the overall

chronology to be proposed with reasonable confidence.

From this it is possible to suggest that the site was laid out at sometime between the late 7th century and the early 8th century, and that it was dismantled and totally cleared towards the end of the 8th or early in the 9th century. The Maxey Ware pottery has a distinctly earlier date range, but almost none of it came from within the complex itself, unlike the Ipswich Ware. Nearly all of the Maxey Ware came from a context that may represent the redeposition of midden material (see below).

The end date of Phase 2 is defined by radiocarbon dates for human remains deposited in the enclosure ditch during its backfilling. Combined with the radiocarbon date for the last use of the malting oven, the dating of the Ipswich Ware pottery (Blinkhorn Chapter 4 above), and in the light of the known history, a date of the late 8th century to the early 9th century is a reasonable estimate for the end of Phase 2. As is noted in Chapter 2, while the beginning and end of the complex is fairly well defined, determining the boundaries of the sub-phases within Phase 2 is more problematic. The limits suggested in Figure 5.3 are cautiously proposed.

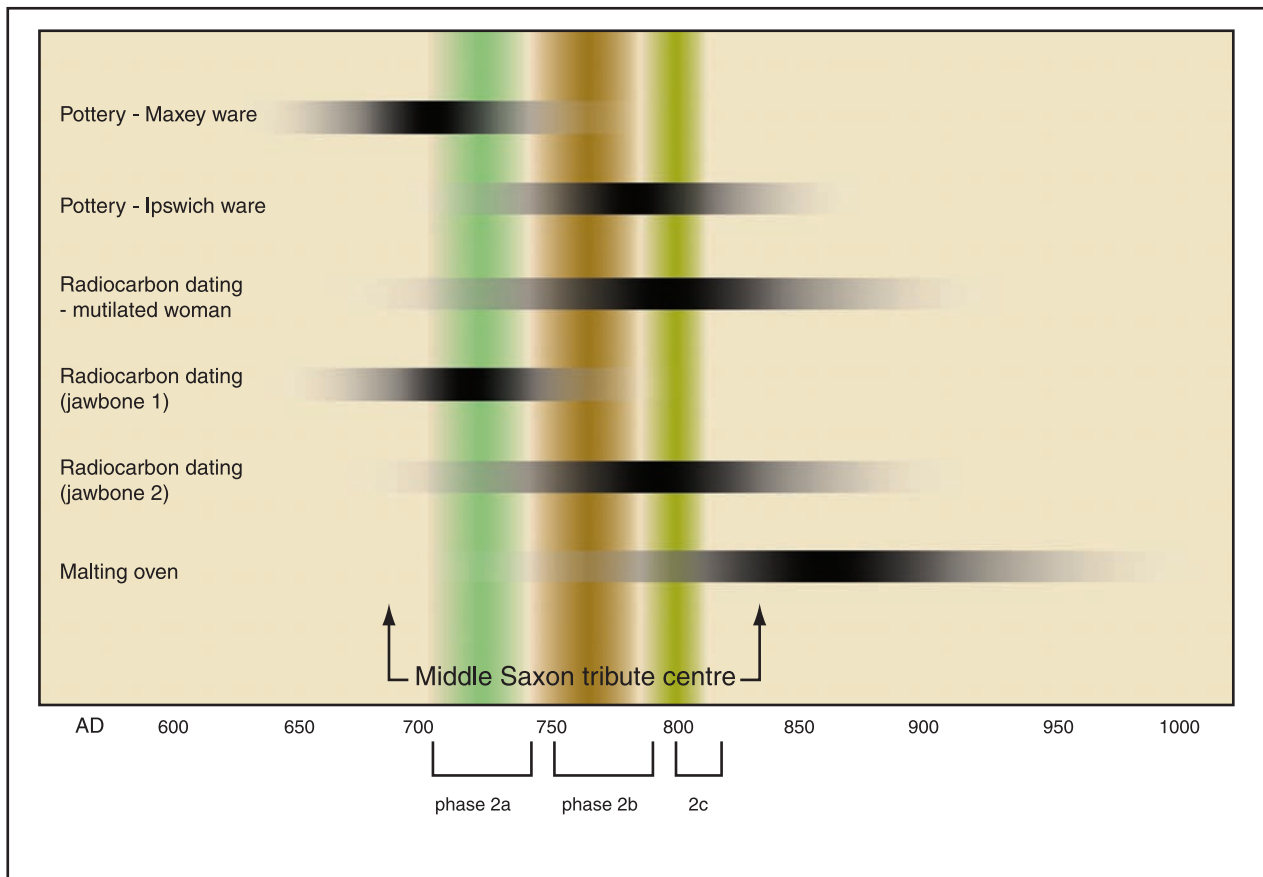


Fig. 5.3 The suggested chronology of the estate centre and associated artefactual and scientific dating ranges

### **Extent of the complex**

The area around Kings Meadow Lane lay at the junction of important routes to the north and south along the Nene, and to the south-east. It is suggested that the presence of such a complex at a nodal point in the region was highly significant. It does, however, pose the question: did the route network pass through Higham Ferrers because of its importance or was it important because of the junction of major routes? It may well be that, in the larger scale of things, the Middle Saxon complex influenced the roads as much as they influenced the complex. (Foard and Ballinger 2000, 12).

The target areas of development project meant that – with the exception of Site 5 and the immediate surroundings of the malting oven, no part of the area to the south-west of Kings Meadow Lane was available for area investigation. It is considered most likely that the western enclosure extension ditch terminated at the line of the Lane. The small excavation alongside the north-eastern side of the Lane confirmed that the ditch ran at least that far (see section 595 Fig. 3.22), although there was no opportunity to excavate a similar slot on the south-west side of the Lane, or investigate the land immediately to the south-west of the Lane. The only observation that can be made is that there was no evidence in the geophysics plot, or in the area stripped around the malting oven, for a ditch comparable in dimensions. The linear feature revealed alongside the oven may in fact be earlier or later in date. It can be concluded with confidence therefore that if the enclosure complex did extend to the south-west, and did have similarly substantial perimeter ditches, they did not cross any of the areas examined.

Nevertheless, the presence of the malting oven on the south side of the Lane is a strong indicator that there were other elements of the complex on that side too. If so, how far to the south could the complex have extended? The land in question has never been available for archaeological investigation, so all that can be surmised is that the Lane may have acted as an armature, with buildings and structures associated with the complex on both sides of the Lane.

### **Elements of the complex**

#### *Ditches*

The large horseshoe shaped enclosure of Phase 2a and its extensions and alterations in Phase 2b and 2c were clearly fundamental elements of the complex. Its idiosyncratic shape is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the enclosure was laid out on a 'green' site, and not carved out of an existing field system. In that sense its shape may well be specifically related to its intended function. Moreover, it is arguable that its situation was not an accident either. It is suggested that the enclosure was situated so that the interior would be visible from the royal site of

Irthlingborough across the river. The authors confirmed that this was the case at the time of the excavation, during the short interlude between the cutting down of the woodland on the eastern side of the river and the construction of the housing. The importance of the enclosure's visibility is considered further below.

While the original horseshoe ditch enclosed a large area of some 0.8 ha, even allowing for later truncation by plough damage, the ditch was modest in its dimensions, at no point wider than *c* 2 m or deeper than *c* 1 m. Unless the ditch was intended as no more than a nominal marker, it is reasonable to suggest that there was a bank, very possibly augmented by a fence or hedge. Only on the east side of the enclosure in Site 8 was there evidence of redeposited subsoil – on the outside of the ditch – that could be construed as the remains of a bank. A fence or hedge would have been necessary to augment any bank, if the interpretation of the enclosure as a stock-holding corral, is correct. A fence could have comprised close-fitting posts, although wattle screens would have served adequately, if not as impressively, as would a hedge, once it had grown.

While all the identified buildings of this period were located to the south of the horseshoe enclosure or between the extension ditches, there is some evidence that there was also a focus of occupation to the north of Site 8, outside the enclosure. Evaluation Trench 14 picked up the enclosure ditch and a significant quantity of Maxey Ware sherds from its fill. Interestingly, the composition of the vessel forms suggested domestic cooking use, whereas the Ipswich Ware, the predominant ware from within the complex, was generally in the form of pitchers and large storage vessels (see Blinkhorn, Chapter 4 above). The presence of this relatively early Maxey Ware in the late fill of the recut of a small stretch of the ditch, coupled with its almost complete absence from either the rest of the ditch or the north end of Site 8, could suggest that the pottery may represent redeposited material from a midden of a small farmstead pre-dating (or conceivably co-existing with) the enclosure complex in phase 2a. Further support for this hypothesis comes from the assemblage of lava quern fragments from the same evaluation trench (see Roe, Chapter 4 above)

The modification of the enclosure complex in phase 2b suggests that the whole area to the south of the horseshoe enclosure was now incorporated within the controlled space, and with the additional substantial buildings, a much more elaborate and sophisticated operation is implied. However, no subdivisions of the area were evident, except for the enclosure against the south-west end of the western extension ditch, around building 7023.

#### *Buildings*

There is a problem in the dating of the hall buildings discovered in Sites 2, 4, and 6. SFBs typically provide significant assemblages of material from

the pit deposits, although it is becoming increasingly accepted that these deposits accumulate or are deposited (probably from surface middens) after the building goes out of use and is dismantled (Tipper 2004, 184). Nevertheless they can provide a fairly accurate date for the building, and clues to the activities going on in the vicinity.

In contrast, hall buildings, typically defined by lines of postholes and sometimes beamslots, rarely produce sufficient artefactual material to allow close dating of the structure. Furthermore, in many cases, there are few if any pits or other cut features that can confidently be associated with the individual halls. It is a problem that is well known and not open to easy solution (Reynolds 2003, 102). Attempts to devise a comparative chronology based on building styles (for instance James *et al* 1984) are difficult to sustain as more regional variation becomes apparent, and in this respect at least the halls at Higham Ferrers are a good example, demonstrating a fair degree of consistency in groundplan, but a variety of building styles within what is a broadly contemporary group (Table 5.3). It is reasonable to suggest that the buildings must owe their differences to intended function and/or status, although it should not be forgotten that the individual skill or preference of the builder(s) probably played a part as well.

In contrast to the variety of building styles in evidence, Table 5.3 highlights a striking consistency in the building width – around 6 m. The reason for this may be purely down to practicalities. The most common timber frame material was oak, derived from fairly young trees growing among underwood. The underwood suppressed the growth of the lower branches of the tree, resulting in a straight trunk up to approximately 6 m tall, from where the crown branched out (Rackham 1987, 87). If the tie-beams running across the building at eaves height could be fashioned from a single straight timber it would make for a much stronger structure.

#### *Buildings 2664, 2665, and 2666 (Figs 3.19, 3.24-3.25)*

These three buildings are best seen as a related group, the first two representing an original building (2664) and its rebuild and repositioning (2665), to accommodate the third building 2666.

*Building 2664 (Site 2)* – This is the first building in the sequence. The evidence of the best preserved end of the building suggests that the side walls consisted of earthfast posts, with the spaces between likely to have been infilled with plastered wattle panels. There was no evidence that a sill beam was incorporated into any of the walls. A central line of aisle postholes is clear, possibly denoting a fairly substantial roof structure. There was no evidence of an internal hearth, although it is accepted that the scouring effect of medieval and post-medieval ploughing may have removed the evidence for one.

Only the western part of the building was clearly identified and excavated. Among the scatter of the planned but unexcavated postholes to the east can be defined a possible continuation of the north wall, although this is uncertain, as they could also represent – along with a line of postholes to the west of the building – a fenceline across the open end of the horseshoe enclosure. The distinct gap in the posthole line of the south wall of Building 2664 appears to represent a (central) doorway, which would be consistent with a total length of the building as shown.

*Building 2665 (Site 2)* – This building seems to represent a rebuilding of 2664, slightly shifted to the north to accommodate building 2666 (see below). If the prime motive was to move Building 2664 out of the way of the intended site of Building 2666, than it as much represents recycling as rebuilding. The east end wall of 2665 is as difficult to accurately locate as that of 2664 due to later activity, but again there is a clear gap along the south wall denoting a central doorway.

The construction of building 2665 appears to involve an elaboration of the construction technique applied to 2664, at least with regard to the side wall construction. There is clear evidence of a sill beam along the north wall of 2665, and from the estimate of likely plough truncation, a corresponding beam along the south wall can be postulated, although no trace remains. The relationship of the upright wall timbers to the sill beam does deserve special attention. The postholes do not align squarely along the centreline of the beam slot, but against the inside edge. Although it cannot be proved, it is possible

Table 5.3: Dimensions of Phase 2 post-built buildings

Building	Site	Phase	Length (m)	Width (m)	Internal hearth?	Number of postholes	Average posthole depth (m)
2664	2	2a	12.0	6.0	N	50	0.18
2665	2	2b	12.0	6.0	N	21	0.20
2666	2	2b	20.0	5.0	Y	26	0.30
7023	4	2b	19.0	6.5	N	51	0.22
7237	4	2b	18.0	6.5	N	30	0.11
9184	6	2b	9.0?	6.5	N	9	0.16

therefore that the uprights were lap-jointed over the sill beam, spreading the wall and roof load along the beam, but avoiding the more complicated and time-consuming process of cutting mortises for each wall upright.

However, the ends of the uprights continued down below the beam, as there is clear evidence of dark silt-filled postpipes in the north wall postholes, in contrast to the lack of similar deposits in the beamslot itself. Evidently, when the building went out of use, the sill beam was salvaged, whereas at least the bases of the uprights were left in situ, presumably because they were rotten.

As with building 2664, there was a central line of aisle postholes. It is no coincidence that building 2665 half-overlaps the footprint of building 2664. Re-use of the aisle posts of the earlier building as part of the new outer wall is possible, and it may be that, being 'interior' posts, that they would be in better condition than the exterior wall posts, being less exposed to the elements. Of course, it is also possible that the in situ southern side posts of 2664 were reused in the centre line of building 2665, although it is unlikely as they would probably be shorter than required. Such an overlap between one building and its successor is possibly not unique; at Hartlepool, excavation within the monastic precinct revealed the partially overlapped beamslot trenches of possible monastic cells (see figure 86 in Welch 1992, 124; and Daniels 1988, figs 14 and 21). In that case, the relative position of the two buildings suggests that the outer wall of the later building was set over the centre line of the earlier building.

The similarity in layout and the lack of hearth or other evidence of domestic occupation suggests that Building 2665 served the same function as Building 2664. Both buildings produced no artefactual evidence but the high concentration of cereal remains from one of the posthole fills (see Moffet, Chapter 4 above) suggests a storage function would be likely.

*Building 2666 (Site 2)* – This appears to be the third building in the sequence, set at an angle to Building 2665, and aligned with the western extension to the enclosure. The alignment of 2666 with the extension ditch puts its construction into Phase 2b, along with Building 2665. The two buildings are associated by their close proximity, but the design and construction method of Building 2666 is very different from 2665 or its predecessor.

All four walls in the essentially rectangular structure are defined by beamslots with postholes of various sizes. As for interior features, the layout is similar to its companion buildings, namely a central doorway on one side, and a line of aisle posts, incomplete due to the truncation by Phase 3 ditch 2547. A patch of fire-reddened subsoil between two of the aisle postholes was identified as the probable site of the hearth in the northern part of the building.

The most intriguing feature of building 2666 is that the beamslots and postholes on the south-east side, or front, of the building are much more substantial – both in plan and section – than those on the north-west side or back (see Fig. 3.25). It should be remembered that the truncation caused by ridge-and-furrow cultivation in this area cut across Building 2666, rather than along it, and therefore it cannot be responsible for this structural characteristic.

One possibility was that the back wall appears to be less deeply founded because it was dug into a long-since eroded bank that ran along the east side of the enclosure ditch. It is true that there is a 3 m wide margin devoid of features between the ditch and the building, but elsewhere along this ditch the margin between ditch and structures was much less (see Building 7023, below), and all the indications from elsewhere in the enclosure complex are that if there was a bank it was on the outside of the ditch.

The possibility is that this building was constructed with an imposing facade to the front, the east side, while the back and end walls were more rudimentary. This has been a common characteristic of English architecture since the medieval period. A modern – if exaggerated – parallel might be a film or theatre set.

*Buildings 7023 and 7327 (Site 4) (Figs 3.27-3.28)*

These two buildings were sited at a right angle to each other and very probably should be treated as a pair, comparable to Buildings 2665 and 2666 above.

*Building 7023* – As with the other hall buildings, there is an almost total lack of artefactual evidence recovered from the postholes. The exceptions are two small fragments of residual Phase 1 pottery, doubtless deriving from the focus of Phase 1 activity to the north-east. Consequently, the dating for the building relies upon its proximity to the ditch and the material derived from it. There is a discernible preponderance of both pottery and animal bone in the phase 2b and 2c fills of the ditch alongside the building, suggesting that it was in use possibly from the mid 8th century to the early 9th century. The fact that the human remains also came from the area immediately alongside the building may not be coincidental; this aspect is discussed further below.

To judge from the posthole arrangement, the building was the most substantial and elaborate in its construction, and had two distinct rooms. While they were possibly built separately, there is some evidence to suggest otherwise. A doorway midway along the east frontage of the building is possibly represented by the gap between postholes 6457 and 7211 (Fig. 3.27). Another doorway is suggested in the south end wall by the gap between postholes 6898 and 6900.

The northern room of the building displays some different characteristics from its southern counterpart. The posthole spacing is noticeably closer, possibly

implying a different, and perhaps more lavish, construction. A possible doorway may be represented by the gap between postholes 6934 and 6936.

At the time of excavation, there was a distinct slope in the ground surface across the footprint of the building; the drop in level from the north-east corner to the south-west corner measured in the region of 1.2 m. If the ground in the immediate area was originally levelled up to form a platform before construction began, and has since been eroded away by ploughing, one would expect the downslope postholes to be much shallower features than those at the upslope end; this is not the case, the variation in the depth of the postholes is between 0.15 m and 0.30 m at both ends of the building. Therefore it would seem that the building was laid out and the postholes dug on a site that was on a similar slope to today. An internal floor surface with such a slope would surely have been very impractical. It can be suggested that a suspended wooden floor would have been a way around such a problem, and could have rested upon a ring beam attached to the wall posts. Such an arrangement could also help to explain the central beamslot, which could have housed a longitudinal joist to support the suspended floor itself, assuming, as is likely, that the floorboards ran across the building rather than along it. Alternatively, or perhaps as well, it could have supported a line of posts or a partition wall intended to strengthen a ceiling or conceivably a first floor. The evidence of structure B at Maxey could be interpreted in this way (see Addyman 1964, fig. 11, reconstruction B2).

In contrast to the other possible 'high status' building (2666) there was no evidence of an internal hearth in building 7023. Such an absence is not at all rare in middle Saxon building footprints, and it is usually assumed that later ploughing has removed the hearth base. The presence of just such a hearth signature in building 2666 requires that the issue be given more thought. One proposed solution to this problem has been the construction of hearths set in soil-filled wooden trays resting on the suspended floor of a hall, as seen in the reconstructions at West Stow. Setting the hearth in a raised bed of soil prevents heat damage to a wooden floor, and gives a bed to stand pots on. Of course, such an arrangement has yet to be discovered in the archaeological record, but it does suggest a simple answer to the problem of absent hearths.

The apparent large gaps in the north-west wall are almost certainly due to the difficulties of identifying postholes in plan where they were cut into the Roman ditch fill. The internal postholes, while broadly respecting the building's alignment do not seem to clearly define one structure; they are most likely to be supplementary structural supports or internal screens or partitions.

*Associated features* – There is clearly a close relationship between Building 7023 and the enclosure extension ditch to the west. Possibly comple-

menting this, and separating this building from the others within the complex, is the interrupted ditch 7308/7309, which terminated, or petered out, just before the enclosure ditch, and included what can be interpreted as a gateway or entrance, defined by the two postholes 6126 and 6122. The curving orientation of the two ditches suggests that they continued to the south, possibly linking up with the Lane. In this way building 7023 was part of the complex, and yet divided from it within its own exclusive area.

*Building 7327* – To the north-east of Building 7023, and orientated at right angles to the enclosure extension was a large, but relatively insubstantial building 7327, judging by the modest dimensions of the wall postholes. Not all posts were identified, although whether this was a result of the excavation conditions or truncation is unclear. The interior of the building revealed just one aisle posthole, and although there may originally have been more, it is clear this structure was much more lightly built than some of the other buildings.

The building's proximity and alignment to the enclosure extension ditch and Building 7023 suggests it should belong within Phase 2b, although no clear artefactual evidence was recovered from the building's postholes. Judging by the lightweight nature of the construction, and the absence of an internal hearth or other evidence of domestic activity, Building 7327 seems most likely to have been a storage barn of some sort.

The extensive scatter of postholes to the north-east and south-east of the building are cautiously assigned to the same phase, if only because the scatter does not encroach upon the building's footprint, implying that they were contemporary. However, it is quite possible that some may relate to the Phase 1 SFBs to the north-east of the scatter (see Fig. 3.35).

*Building 9184 (Site 6) (Fig. 3.29)*

The building was partly exposed under the north baulk of Site 6. The combination of beamslot and posthole construction, evident in the southwest end wall, is similar to that adopted in Building 2665 (see above), although in this case the degree of later truncation was such as to remove any meaningful sectional detail. The other notable aspect of this building is the central linear feature. While this could be some sort of footing for a central support, it is doubtful as it only extends a short distance along the line of the building. The scarcity of finds and the absence of signs of domestic use (charcoal, burning etc) might lead to the tentative conclusion that it is a storehouse or barn. However it is pertinent to note that an environmental sample from the beamslot produced a very similar result to a sample from Building 7023, namely, a scarcity of plant remains in general and cereals in particular. It is therefore possible that Building 9184 and 7023 had a similar role in the complex.

### ***Purpose and longevity of the buildings***

It is reasonable to suggest that the six revealed buildings of Phase 2 broadly fall into one of two groups; those intended for occupation (living/working/meeting), and those intended for storage of material or livestock. If one accepts that the evidence of a hearth implies human occupation, then only one of the six buildings (2666) was occupied. However, the possibility of a raised hearth (see above), means that Building 7023, which is the most elaborate building, can also belong to that group. In both cases these buildings were situated alongside the Phase 2b/c extension ditch, which provided a convenient rubbish dump for domestic refuse. The other four buildings displayed very simple layouts, and, by comparison, relatively lightweight construction, encouraging a conclusion that they were most likely storehouses, or possibly animal shelters.

Aside from the presence or otherwise of evidence for a hearth, the difficulty of distinguishing between an occupied dwelling and a barn may explain why so few have been apparently identified as barns in this country. However, parallels have been found abroad, for instance at Odoorn (5th century) and at Gasselte (9th century) both in Drenthe, in the modern Netherlands (see Hamerow 2002 fig. 2.15). Typically the buildings displayed central doorways and no internal features other than a single line of (roof-supporting) central posts. Occasional finds of large quantities of carbonised grain support their identification.

How long the buildings of the Kings Meadow Lane complex stood or remained in use is not easy to determine, except possibly by association with ditches that are dated by artefact assemblages or scientific methods. If we exclude the example of Building 2664, which was dismantled for a functional reason, the life of a post-built timber building at this time would be very largely dependent upon ground conditions: Hamerow has suggested a lifespan of around 30-35 years for the timber halls at Mucking (1993, 90). Welch (1992, 29-30) has suggested that social custom could also have been a factor; halls would have been rebuilt once a generation when a son inherited the estate from his father, or approximately every 40 to 50 years. So on the reasonably well-drained soil of the slopes above Kings Meadow Lane, there is no reason why the buildings belonging to the enclosure complex could not have lasted throughout sub-phases 2b and 2c – perhaps as long as 70-80 years.

### **Material culture of the complex**

No contemporary rubbish pits were identified near any of the buildings or indeed anywhere in the Phase 2 complex at all. While rubbish pits have been found in close association with hall buildings on a number of sites, they are usually interpreted as being originally small quarry pits or water holes – for instance at Maxey (Addyman 1964, 68). The

extension ditches at Kings Meadow Lane, while open, appear to have been generally kept reasonably clear of domestic rubbish, although adjacent to Buildings 7023 and 2666 the ditches appear to have been used as rubbish dumps. The amount deposited was fairly meagre in each case, however, which either suggests a disciplined rubbish disposal regime (to a point or area beyond the site) or suggests that there was not a great deal of routine domestic activity going on in the enclosure complex. Judging by the assemblages of metalwork, worked stone, worked bone, and animal bone (see Chapter 4), we are looking at a resident population seemingly modest in numbers and neither routinely engaging in crafts typical of a self-supporting settlement, such as weaving, nor apparently indulging in conspicuous consumption.

However, the pottery assemblage invites a very different interpretation. Blinkhorn argues that the Middle Saxon pottery – measured by the prevalence of Ipswich Ware – is suggestive of a very important site, and high status trade coming into it. Yet perhaps the most telling part of Blinkhorn's conclusion is that, despite the scale of incoming high status trade, whatever was being traded was passing through, not being consumed on site, or at least not in such a way as to leave any archaeological signature.

### **Historical context**

#### ***Middle Saxon administration in the region of Higham Ferrers***

Although no known contemporary documentary sources specifically identify Higham Ferrers, ('Heihham' is mentioned in 1050) or refer to settlement at this site, there are aspects of the known history of Higham Ferrers that could represent 'echoes' of its Middle Saxon significance. Offa's confirmation of a charter at Irthingborough in 786 is clear evidence of its royal status. Though the medieval importance of Higham Ferrers has never been in doubt, recent research – in particular by Glenn Foard (1985), and David Hall (1988) – has sought to shed light on Higham Ferrers's pre-Conquest past by looking for a legacy of its Middle Saxon role in its late Saxon and early medieval manorial organisation and administration.

Foard (1985) has suggested that the judicial role of the royal estate, originally centred on Irthingborough, but by 1086 on Finedon, is hinted at by the 'thing' element of the medieval version of 'Finedon' – Thingdene (Jamison 1923, 196). Hall has shown (1988, 106-7) that in the late Saxon period Higham Ferrers was a multiple estate, and included – amongst other elements – Raunds (itself a multiple estate). Did the late Saxon and early medieval importance of Higham Ferrers derive from its associative role to the 'twinned' site of Irthingborough, across the river?

Foard also raises the possibility that the importance of Higham Ferrers may have its origins as far

back as the Roman period. Some evidence suggests a correlation between Roman small towns and middle Saxon estate centres, implying that

*although the imperial administrative system, which we must assume was based upon the walled towns, did not survive the 5th century, a subsidiary system of administration, in some ways related to the unwall'd 'small towns', did survive.* (Foard 1985, 202).

This was written before any meaningful excavation of the Roman site; provisional results from the modern excavations suggest that it was in fact a centre of some considerable importance (Lawrence and Smith, forthcoming).

### ***Politics and power in the region in the 7th and 8th centuries***

In considering the broader view of the political situation in the region in the Middle Saxon period, it must be accepted that, frustratingly, the area of the East Midlands which includes Higham Ferrers is arguably the most obscure and poorly understood area of Lowland England at this time, principally because of a dearth of any detailed historical framework – in contrast to, say, Northumbria or Wessex.

There are two principal accounts of the middle Saxon period; Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* was written in the early 8th century in the monastery at Jarrow, and understandably very much from a Northumbrian point of view. As such it is very sketchy about events in Mercia. The second great surviving 'history' is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a modern term of convenience applied to a corpus of annals originally compiled under the orders of King Alfred in the late 9th century from aural histories and other documentation. Although the Chronicle purports to trace the story of England from the time of Julius Caesar, it is clear that it is by no means comprehensive or dispassionate. Alfred was attempting – at a time of great external threat – to legitimise the role of Wessex as the rightful heir to the embryonic nation state.

In terms of its geopolitical location, it would appear that Higham Ferrers lay towards the south-east edge of what is called Outer Mercia – secondary territories absorbed by Central Mercia in the 6th or 7th centuries. The extent of those areas is defined as much by elimination of the known areas surrounding Outer Mercia. Between Outer Mercia and East Anglia lay the ill-defined territory of the Middle Angles, a collective term for a number of groups or tribes, whose names we know, but whose geographical extent is also a matter of conjecture.

### ***Political evolution of kingdoms (Fig. 5.4)***

The key to understanding the emergence of the Middle Saxon kingdoms in general, and Mercia in particular, is that the geographical extent of a

kingdom was defined not by territory but by acceptance. The definition of a member of the Mercian kingdom in the 7th and 8th centuries was not a person who lived in a defined geographical area but one who accepted the authority of the Mercian king. As Bede defined it, a gens like that of the Mercians was ruled by a king, and everyone who recognised his authority was a member of his provinciae (Yorke 2001, 20-1). It therefore follows that the power of a king, whether it derived from military force, personality or charisma, was critical to the fortunes of a kingdom. As long as the king and his descendants and heirs maintained a strong, assertive profile the identity of the kingdom would be clear. But it would only take a slight interruption of succession, or the reign of an inadequate king, for the security of the kingdom to be under threat, both from rival factions within the kingdom and from enemies without. Such befell Mercia in the short space of time between the death of Offa and the accession of Coenwulf, with the attempts by Kent and East Anglia to secede from Mercian control. Although, through the efforts of Coenwulf, that attempt was largely unsuccessful, the precedent had been set, and within a few decades Mercian power collapsed (Williams 2001, 304).

### ***Aethelbert, Offa, and Coenwulf***

It is in the nature of the fluid and fluctuating Middle Saxon kingdoms that – like the groupings of the early Saxon period – their government was relatively untrammelled by fixed conventions, structures and institutions. The personality, longevity and strength of a king, coupled with good luck, were critical to both his and his kingdom's fortunes. A ruler needed to be strong and assertive if he was to last for any time at all, but if he was he could still to a large degree fashion the practicalities of government of his kingdom to his own design.

The proposed lifespan of the enclosure complex coincides more or less with the reigns of three Mercian kings; Aethelbald (716-757), Offa (757-796) and Coenwulf (796-821), who ruled Mercia during its age of supremacy in the tripartite contest with Northumbria and Wessex. (Beornred, Aethelbald's immediate successor, ruled for a few months in 757 before he was expelled by Offa, and Offa's son, Ecgrith, ruled for 141 days in 796 before making way for Coenwulf.)

Aethelbald's style can best be summed up as selectively aggressive abroad and reasonably enlightened at home. He was personally somewhat self-indulgent and disrespectful, until encouraged to modify his dissolute lifestyle by the increasingly influential church. As Zaluckyj says, the very fact that the church was able to criticise him says much for their growing power and confidence and his acknowledgement of that (Zaluckyj 2001, 142). It is possibly significant that relations between Mercia and the East Angles appear to have reached something of a high point of cordiality during Aethelbald's reign. From this we may infer that

Higham Ferrers and its region, situated between the two, must have been in a relatively stable situation, stable enough to allow the establishment and development of royal estate centres. However, Aethelbald's reign was eventually ended by his assassination at the hands of his own bodyguard in 757. Possibly the killing was part of a dynastic coup by his successor Beornred (Zaluckyj 2001, 143).

Offa, probably a second cousin to Aethelbald and therefore technically of the same dynasty, removed his predecessor Beornred and set about consolidating Mercian power. He was the first Mercian king to pay close attention to developments on the continent, and sought to emulate the renown of

Charlemagne. The two were friends of a kind, although Offa needed Charlemagne far more than Charlemagne needed Offa (ibid. 158). In contrast to his lofty ambitions for the future role of Mercian kingship, Offa was quite willing to go to any lengths to remove actual or potential threats to either his, or his designated heir's, security. He can be seen as a combination of ruthless gangster and aspirational ruler, and this has resulted in widely differing judgements of his rule by modern researchers. Zaluckyj calls his rule 'truly innovative and forward looking' (ibid, 162), while in contrast Keynes (1999, 341) argues that he was driven by nothing more sophisticated 'than a lust for power, not a vision of



Fig. 5.4 The geopolitical landscape of England in the 8th century



*English unity; what he left was a reputation, not a legacy*. It has been suggested that the Mercian kings of the 7th and 8th centuries never developed their concept of kingship beyond that of earlier times, and that Mercia never really evolved beyond a confederacy of sub-kingdoms, with an inherent tendency to go their separate ways if the power of the king weakened (Keynes 1999, 307). However, this may be due to an inherent lack of unity at the heart of the Mercian kingdom. Offa adopted an aggressive stance beyond Mercia, and a ruthless stance within it, trying to secure the throne from ever more threatening actions. However, the practice of setting up sub-kings or ealdormen to rule over the newly annexed Mercian provinces, a practice harking back to the 7th century, sowed the seeds of its own demise, as by the late 8th century the descendants of these ealdormen having some pedigree behind them, expected and sought a larger share of the ruling power (Yorke 1990, 126). Perhaps, as Yorke suggests, the very fact that no single all-powerful dynasty appeared in Wessex until the middle of the 9th century, and then under the pressure of the Viking threat, meant that inter-dynastic rivalry always had a low level outlet, and never reached the intensity that it did in Mercia (ibid. 178).

The last of the three kings, Coenwulf, has tended to be lost in the glare of his notorious predecessor, yet he maintained the integrity of Mercia, and only in his later years did his failure to reach a *modus vivendi* with the church become a serious flaw in Mercia's hegemony over subject territories, like the restless territory of Kent (Yorke 1990, 121). However despite these shortcomings, the heartland of Mercia was essentially maintained and it was not until the years after Coenwulf's death that the kingdom was riven by both external and internal threats and began to disintegrate.

### Purpose of the complex

In considering the evidence for Phase 2, there are some very clear indicators that this is not a settlement that evolved organically from an earlier Saxon core. There is no clear stratigraphic relationship between the Phase 1 SFB groups and the Phase 2 activity, and the pottery assemblages from the two Phases give at least some support to the contention that there was a gap of around 50 years, or perhaps more, between the two Phases. When the complex was laid out in the late 7th or early 8th century, it was on a 'green' site. This in itself suggests that the complex was built to plan and with a predetermined design, and this implies that there was a clear purpose for the complex – the control of the resources.

The motivation for such an enterprise at that time is clearly a key to understanding the site. Broadly speaking it could derive from three sources: regional social and economic pressures, the church, or political administration. It seems unlikely that

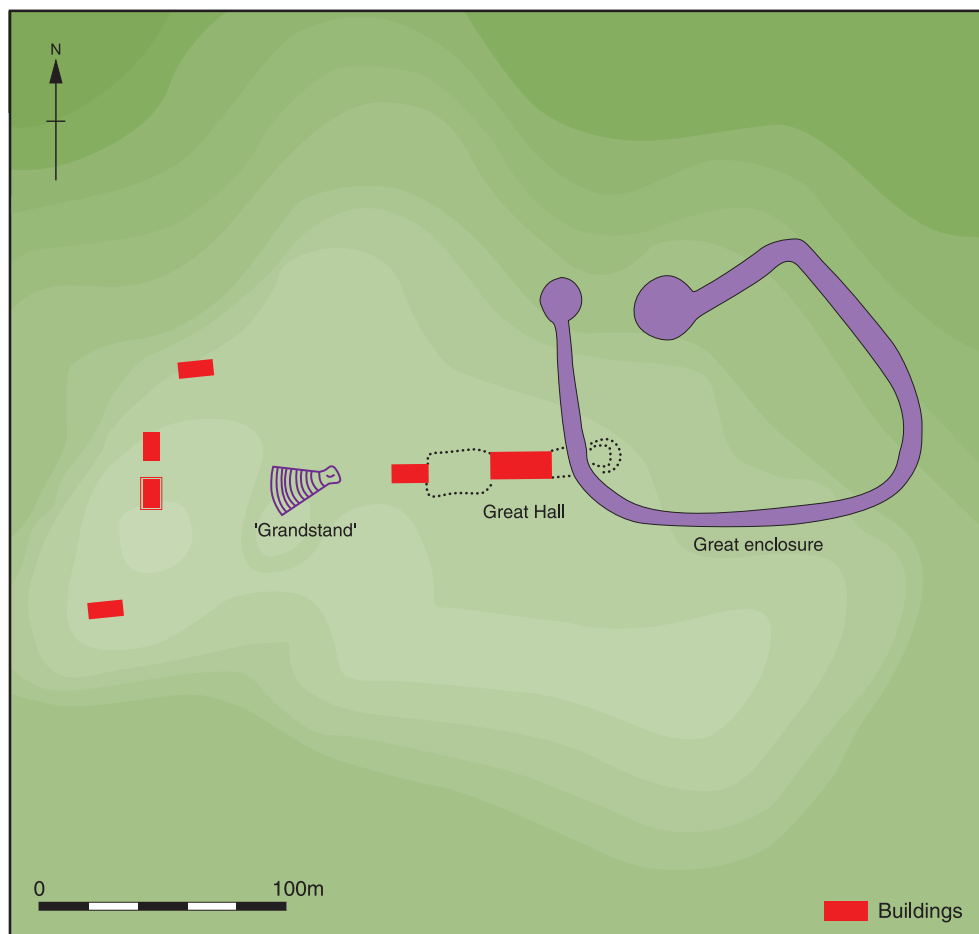
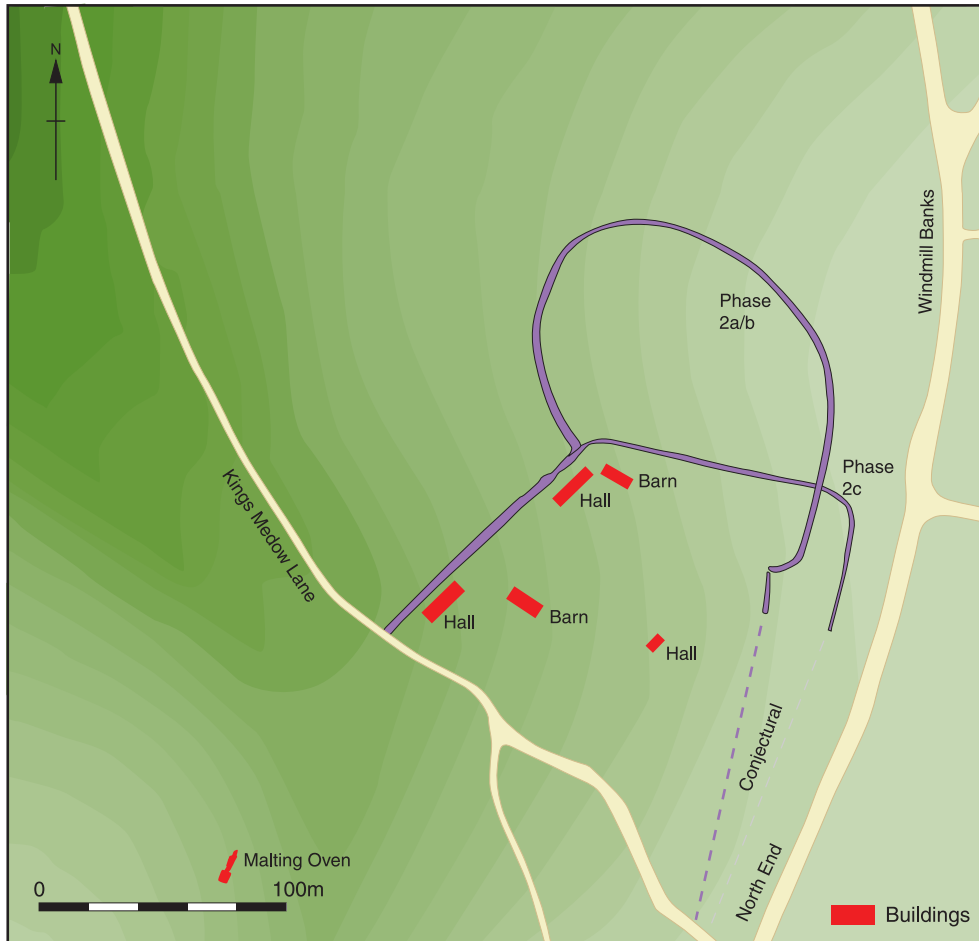
the motivation for such an enterprise would have come from social and economic pressures. These factors do not appear overnight, and would tend to make their influence felt over a period, encouraging evolutionary change to a settlement.

Before any fieldwork took place in the area, one of the hypotheses suggested by Brown and Foard, based upon the fieldwalking and cropmark evidence, along with the early evaluation results, was that the Higham Ferrers horseshoe-shaped enclosure bore resemblance to the large oval churchyard enclosures sometimes evident in Northamptonshire, for instance at Daventry (Brown and Foard 1998, 77, fig. 9, D). While there was no indication of a minster or Christian shrine within the enclosure, could it nevertheless have been a sacred site of some kind? Although the fieldwalking did not identify any concentration of finds within the enclosure – in fact quite the opposite (see Fig. 2.1) – the area was intensively trenched to test for any signs of contemporary structures or other activity (Fig. 3.17). This revealed no finds, and no contemporary structural evidence.

A more prosaic explanation is that the enclosure was a stock pen, but it is questionable whether a single farmstead would require an enclosure of this size. The human resources required to dig an enclosure ditch on this scale would surely have been well beyond the capabilities of even an extended family.

While the number and range of rural settlements of this period that has been investigated has grown impressively in the last few decades, so that we are no longer solely reliant upon the traditional type sites of West Stow and Mucking, seeking a parallel for the Middle Saxon complex at Higham Ferrers has thus far been a rather fruitless task. One of the problems is that, while large enclosures have been identified by aerial observation and photography, and their dates provisionally established by fieldwalking, the sites are rarely excavated, and when they are it is often on a very small scale. At Barton-on-Humber a large oval, and apparently empty, enclosure has been identified to the east of the Anglo-Saxon church (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 290, fig.4). Its defensive potential has been noted (Reynolds 2003, 117), but how much its role was tied to the church and what that role was, is open to question. Also, in cases such as Bramford, Cottam, and Poundbury, the enclosures themselves are essentially complete – not open-ended as at Higham – and surround at least some of the associated buildings, suggesting that the role of the enclosures may have had a defensive element. Other examples show settlement and parts of large linear ditches as at Wickham Bonhunt in Essex (Reynolds 1999, fig. 62). In this instance the ditches clearly extend beyond the site – and beyond the settlement, but do they form any sort of unified enclosure? Without further investigation it is impossible to know.

The 7th-century enclosure at Yeavinger seems to offer the only other fully revealed parallel to that at Kings Meadow Lane (Fig. 5.5). Yeavinger was



excavated in the 1950s and 1960s, and essentially comprises a very large ditched enclosure, as at Higham Ferrers devoid of any internal structure, and in conjunction a group of specialised buildings, some apparently of very high status. Dating to the mid-7th century, the complex is interpreted as a royal centre, a temporary residence for a peripatetic king and his retinue. (For a summary see Gittos 1999, 497.)

Figure 5.5 compares the basic layout of the two sites. However, aside from the most obvious point of comparison – the large empty enclosure – the differences between Higham Ferrers and Yeavinger are too pertinent to ignore, and argue against the two sites operating in very similar ways. At Yeavinger there is a strong ritual/religious aspect to the distribution of the buildings, and one is tempted to suggest that the so-called ‘Great Enclosure’ is as much a personal statement of royal prestige as are the buildings and the ‘grandstand’. The structural evidence at Higham Ferrers seems to point towards a high-status occupation and powerful motivation, but the artefactual evidence is somewhat ambiguous. There is little evidence of high-status consumption on the site itself, and yet the elaborate malting oven alone indicates that the relatively large scale production of ale was an important activity, and this must have been for someone in the vicinity. In other words, the landscape elements – the large ditches, the timber hall buildings, the malting oven – would all have required substantial human and material resources to create and develop; they were designed to provide, in a controlled part of the landscape, certain services for an authority.

One aspect of consumption patterns on Anglo-Saxon sites which one might expect to indicate an elevated status is the frequency or otherwise of mammal or bird bones as the residues of hunting. Interestingly, most middle Saxon sites – even those that are evidently of elevated status such as royal hunting lodges (Bond 1999, 244) – produce very low percentages of deer bone, often less than 1%. This is curious, as hunting was very much celebrated in culture of the time. Maybe the chase was more important than the prize!

At Higham, there is a sharp increase of wild bird bones in Phase 2, but a very meagre percentage of deer bones (four of the six red deer fragments from Phase 2 were of antlers, and so may have found their way on site as a by-product of antler working). The evidence suggests that there may have been hunting as a means to supplement the diet, but that it was opportunistic and cannot really be classed as evidence of high status hunting expeditions. The larger game animals and the larger game birds were very much the preserve of the royal elite (Hagen 2006, 139) and the evidence as a whole suggests the

ruling authority was not resident in this part of the complex.

From the archaeological evidence and the possible parallels, it is suggested that the enclosure complex at Higham Ferrers represents part of a royal centre, which included Irthlingborough situated directly across the River Nene. The complex at Higham Ferrers functioned as a collection centre for tribute from the region, the enclosure acting as a stock pen, and most of the buildings serving as storehouses or barns for the collection of other goods. The tribute – or rent – was essentially to sustain and benefit the king and his retinue, who could number well over a hundred, during their sojourn in the royal centre. Such was the traditional importance of the feast in Saxon culture that the king had to ensure all the necessary supplies. As Hagen says ‘*The king could not have his status compromised by attending a feast at which the supplies were insufficiently lavish, or the mead might run out*’ (2006, 409). However the control of the food supply and its distribution in the kingdom would also be a very effective political lever. Similarly donations of rents received (or the rights to collect them) reinforced the loyalty of, say, churches. Offa granted his food rents for two days per year for three years to the Church of Worcester (Loyn 1970, 304).

The presence of a substantial stock of cattle sheep and pigs in the vicinity of the enclosure seems to be reflected in the animal bone assemblage for Phases 2a and 2b (Fig. 4.30), although this cannot shed light on any process of the onward redistribution of animals that may have taken place. The presence of all three major species in some numbers supports the idea that the enclosure was probably partitioned, presumably by system of moveable hurdles. As for other goods and commodities, that would have been stored or passed through the site there is no direct archaeological evidence to hand, only the presence of evident storage capacity in the form of large storage buildings. We can only speculate on the types of goods collected and stored in this complex; itemised rents from the period suggest a wide variety, mostly in the form of food or drink, but other forms of tribute might be wool, cloth or leather. The king’s lifestyle was indeed ‘a moveable feast’; a peripatetic king would have no use for items such as iron pots – often required as rent in medieval times by static landlords such as monasteries. A list from the Laws of Ine in the late 7th century includes ‘ten vats of honey, three hundred loaves, twelve ambers of Welsh ale, thirty of clear ale, two full grown bullocks or ten wethers, ten geese, twenty hens, ten cheeses, an amber full of butter, five salmon, twenty pounds of fodder and a hundred eels’ (Robertson 1939, 58); the royal food rent at Berkeley in 883 required clear ale, beer, honey, bullocks, swine and sheep (Finberg 1972, 49-50).

Fig. 5.5 (facing page)

Comparison of the enclosure complexes at Higham Ferrers (8th century), and Yeavinger (7th century)



Plate 5.2 Reconstruction of the malting oven

The most vivid evidence of the importance of food processing on the site was the malting oven (Pl. 5.2; see Chapter 4 for structural and operational analysis), surely far too elaborate and substantial a structure to have been part of someone's domestic brewing operation. Malt and ale are often cited in Saxon rents demanded by secular and church authorities (Finberg 1972, 208-9). It would be far more efficient for the tribute payers to bring their grain for malting at a central place, where the process could be properly controlled. Other beverages that could have formed part of the tribute, as brought or processed on site, include wine, mead, and beer, the first being the most prestigious (ibid. 199).

Butter does not appear to have formed a common element of food rents – presumably because of its short 'shelf life', whereas cheese – most stable, protein-rich, easily preserved and

portable – did form a notable element. It is probably no surprise therefore that Offa took forty cheeses as part of the food rent for an estate at Westbury, Gloucestershire, granted to the church (Hagen 2006, 304, from D. Whitelock *English Historical Documents Vol.1*, 467)

An early signifier of a society's progression from disconnected groups or tribes is the growing central control of the provision and distribution of food (Diamond 1997, 90). A person's social identity, once expressed at the tribal level by military service and the giving and receiving of gifts, is increasingly expressed – at the level of the kingdom – by the routine giving of a defined tribute or tax, in the form of foodstuffs and other materials to sustain the kingdom's ruler. The Higham Ferrers complex can therefore be seen as an early form of regional administrative centre.



Plate 5.3 Reconstruction of the enclosure complex in the mid 8th century



The resident population of the complex was probably not numerous, and it is possible that the complex was uninhabited for parts of the year. From the remains of the malting oven and the human remains from the final phase of the complex (see below) it is clear that the complex provided other services, in the form of ale production and the administration of the law as well as tribute collection.

Plates 5.3 and 5.4 show how the complex could have appeared in the second half of the 8th century. Alongside Kings Meadow Lane, access is restricted by a fence to a formal entrance way; the emphasis in the excavated evidence seemed to be on the delineation of a controlled space, so some form of physical barrier would have been likely along the road.

### **Final phase of the complex**

At some point in the second half of the 8th century the complex was fundamentally reorganised. The oval enclosure was abandoned and allowed to silt up; the western enclosure extension ditch was re-cut and extended to run eastwards across the site, and then turn and head to the south, parallel with the line of Windmill Banks. The overall shape of the enclosure was changed dramatically, but the exclusivity of the enclosed area remained. Does this change imply cessation of any animal penning function for the complex? That is possible, although it is notable that the number of cattle bones remains high during this final phase (see Fig. 4.31), which might suggest that stock penning was still a function, but relocated. However, many of the cattle bones of this final phase were found in a single dump of bone in the backfilling material of the enclosure extension ditch. Conceivably the opportunity was taken while clearing and dismantling the complex to slaughter and butcher the remaining cattle in one operation.

### **End of the complex**

The stratigraphic evidence strongly suggests that the third and final version of the enclosure complex went out of use abruptly, either at the end of the 8th century or perhaps as late as the early 9th century. This date range is derived from the radiocarbon dates from human remains found in the backfilled enclosure ditch, and the comparable date recovered from the last firing of the malting oven. By the late 8th century the horseshoe-shaped enclosure (Phase 2a and 2b) had long since been abandoned and possibly allowed to silt up naturally. However the evidence of the Maxey ware assemblage from the ditch section on the north-east of the enclosure suggests that at least part of the horseshoe ditch was deliberately infilled.

All the stratigraphic evidence suggests that the Phase 2c enclosure ditch was backfilled in its entirety in one operation. On the east side of the complex (Site 8), similar signs of a sudden infilling

of the ditch are apparent. The group of eight bone needles (SF 4003 – 4010, Pl. 3.4), probably tied together with a thong through the eyes, was dropped or thrown into the ditch before its backfill, possibly as a termination deposit.

It is suggested, although it cannot be clearly demonstrated, that those timber framed buildings that still survived were dismantled or demolished in the same operation. It is accepted that the dating of the buildings is difficult; however there is indirect support for thinking that at least the principal hall building (7023) survived until the end; the sections cut through the Phase 2c ditch alongside the building produced significantly more pottery and animal bone from both the middle and upper layers, than did the sections to the north-east or south-west of the building. If the building had continued in use after the infilling of the ditch a further deposit of domestic rubbish might have been expected in the upper fill of the ditch, which represented silting in the post-backfill subsidence; this was not the case. Furthermore, the suggested use of this building (see below) implies also that it would have remained in use until the very end of the complex.

Not only were the ditches and the buildings on the north-east side of the lane backfilled and dismantled, but the evidence suggests that the malting oven to the south-west of the lane was deliberately destroyed, rather than simply abandoned to decay slowly. All of the fired clay fragments found within the oven chamber displayed unabraded surfaces and breaks, suggesting a deliberate demolition rather than slow erosion of an abandoned structure by the elements. The radiocarbon dating of the grain (Cal 662 -1014 at 98% confidence – 710 to 963 at 78% confidence), representing as it does the final use of the oven (see Moffett Chapter 4), is consistent with the suggested end date of the complex.

The completeness and abruptness of the complex's demise suggests a premeditated decision and action, rather than a gradual 'shutting down'. To dismantle and clear all traces of the complex from the landscape surely suggests more than a simply abandonment. A political motive is a strong possibility, perhaps symbolically representing the removal of the political status hitherto enjoyed by the royal estate, or the incumbent thereof. However, the archaeology evidence of the end of the complex is given an intriguing twist by the contents of the enclosure ditch backfill alongside Building 7023.

### *The woman in the ditch and the end of the enclosure*

A large amount of information has been recovered from the skeletal remains and the circumstances surrounding their presence in the ditch. The detailed osteological report on the human bone can be found in Chapter 4, but it is worth summarising the findings here, along with the circumstances surrounding the burial, before attempts are made to

arrive at any conclusions.

The partial skeleton of a woman aged approximately between 30 and 40 years was found at the base of the final backfill of the enclosure ditch. The body was in a prone, foetal position, quite possibly due to her being bound and contained within a sack. Some parts of the skeleton were missing, including the head, both arms, shoulder blades, and the 4th lumbar vertebrae. Tooth puncture marks, probably caused by a small dog, were found on the vertebrae adjacent to the missing one. A radiocarbon date of Cal 770AD–890AD at 68.2 % confidence or Cal 680AD–900AD at 95.4% confidence was recovered from the skeleton; this date is consistent with other indicators of the end of the enclosure complex.

In the same backfill, within a few metres, were found two adult male mandibles. Radiocarbon dates were recovered from both jaws; one produced a date almost identical to that of the woman – around the late 8th century, the other produced a date about 70 years earlier. Three more disarticulated human bone fragments were recovered from the same ditch fill a few metres to the south-west, in amongst a dense deposit of animal bones, comprising mainly cattle.

Two articulated dog skeletons were also found in the ditch backfill (see Evans Chapter 4). In both cases, the close grouping of the bones suggested that each body was contained in a bag.

It is suggested that the bodies or parts thereof had been brought to the ditch in sacks. To explain the partial dismemberment of the woman's body, and the evidence of gnawing by animals, it is argued that she was the victim of an execution. After her death her body was left hanging and exposed – possibly for a few weeks – before her burial. With one of the jawbones producing a radiocarbon date significantly earlier than the other dated human bones, and yet being deposited in the same fill of the same ditch under the same circumstances, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the bodies or body parts were collected from a single site, and that the site is likely to have been a formal execution site and an integral part of the estate centre. It follows that, if as seems likely, the process of backfilling the enclosure ditch was part of the total clearance of all elements of the estate centre, then this clearance also included the clearance of a nearby execution site.

The presence of the two partially articulated dog skeletons in the same backfill adds further intrigue

to the scenario; like the human remains, the skeletons are incomplete, and appear to have been collected up and dumped in bags, although neither dog displayed obvious signs of being deliberately killed. It is reasonable to suggest that the dogs' carcasses derive from the same place as the human remains. One of the dogs had suffered severely from rickets, suggesting that it was never a 'working' dog. Indeed, it must have been closely cared-for to have survived at all. Could it have belonged to the woman? It is not beyond the bounds of possibility, though it cannot be confirmed through archaeology, that the woman's crime was witchcraft, and that the deformed dog representing something akin to a 'familiar'.

The study of Anglo-Saxon burial practices has only recently begun to focus on what has been termed as 'deviant burials' – a term coined first by Helen Geake (1992) – meaning those burial remains of an atypical or non-normative character, as determined by their archaeological remains. More recently this area of study has been developed to examine the judicial character of Anglo-Saxon England (Reynolds, forthcoming), and how that may be represented in the archaeological record. Reynolds argues that historically the assumption has been that Anglo-Saxon judicial organisation existed only in urban centres, and that where 'deviant' burials were found, they were considered to be random acts of war, murder, or unspecified ritual probably associated with overt or furtive paganism.

It is increasingly evident that a sophisticated judicial system could be maintained, responsible to a central authority yet decentralised in its operation (ibid). The geography of judicial administration was dependent on the principal judicial agents, that is kings and kings' officials, wherever they may be, rather than a institution or building in a particular urban centre.

In some instances evidence of this judicial administration comes before any indication of urbanism in a region:

*The centralised functions of 'folk' significance like Sutton Hoo and Yeavinger evidently gave way during the middle Anglo-Saxon period to dispersed administrative functions, a process no doubt driven by the increasingly geographical extent of kingdoms and the need for more formalised systems of governance." (Reynolds forthcoming)*

Table 5.4: Radiocarbon dates associated with the end of the complex

Material	Radiocarbon Date recovered
Mutilated woman	Cal 770AD - 890AD at 68.2 % confidence. Cal 680AD - 900AD at 95.4% confidence
Jawbone 1	Cal 774AD - 811AD at 65% confidence. Cal 683AD to 889AD at 98% confidence
Jawbone 2	Cal 656AD-690AD at 47% confidence. Cal 641AD -772AD at 92% confidence
Malting oven grain	Cal 710AD to 963AD at 78% confidence. Cal 662AD -1014AD at 98% confidence

Once executed, the dismemberment of criminals, and the display of the whole body (or parts thereof) for all to see, was not at all unusual (Meaney 1995, 30), and there is no evidence to suggest that women could not be subject to the same treatment as men. The display of the body of an execution victim would be intended as a warning to others, and therefore the body would be sited where it could not fail to be seen. This was often on a hill – for late Saxon and medieval examples see Steane 1985, 27 – but to achieve the same effect the ‘display’ site could be alongside a road. What better place to display those who had committed a crime against the royal authority than alongside the road that ran through the royal centre?

The fact that the human bone evidence suggests that execution victims were left to be dismembered by scavengers raises the implication that execution victims were not routinely buried soon after death. Perhaps exposure and dismemberment were reserved for the perpetrators of particularly severe crimes. That the execution and subsequent slow bodily decay, encouraged by scavengers, was seen as a dreadful fate is described with suitably mordant relish in a 10th-century poem ‘The Fortunes of Men’ included within the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Chapter Library, MS 3501, quoted in Reynolds 1999, 104):

*One shall ride the high gallows and upon his death hang until his soul's treasury, his bloody bone-framed body, disintegrates. There the raven, black of plumage will pluck out the sight from his head and shred the soulless corpse – and he cannot fend off with his hands the loathsome bird of prey from its evil intent. His life is fled and deprived of his senses, beyond hope of survival, he suffers his lot, pallid upon the beam, enveloped in the midst of death. His name is damned.*

In conclusion the archaeological evidence suggests that the woman was executed – probably for a serious crime, and quite possibly for reasons relating to events surrounding the end of the estate centre. Within weeks of her execution, the decision was taken, not just to abandon the complex, but to eradicate all elements of it from the landscape, including the buildings and other structures like the malting oven. During the process of clearance, the execution site, an established permanent site within the complex, and possibly situated close to the trackway, was also cleared, and the human remains lying there were bagged up and dumped in the ditch.

### Conclusion

If the parallels of the Higham Ferrers complex with that at Yeavinger are valid, does this imply that an outdated and obsolete form of regional administration was still being used by the most renowned king of Mercia more than a century later? The answer might be a (cautious) ‘yes’ if we could be sure that similar estate centres did not exist – either in Outer

Mercia or indeed in Northumbria – in the intervening period. It is true that there are no known lowland English parallels for the complex at Higham Ferrers, but that doesn't mean they never existed. Had the principal focus of the late Saxon settlement at Higham Ferrers not been established a kilometre to the south, it is highly likely that the enclosure complex, along with all of its constituent parts and buildings, would have been completely destroyed by later development, or at very least left as unintelligible islands of archaeology. It is quite possible that sites already excavated and interpreted as (say) rural settlements might in fact be surviving elements of something on the scale of the complex at Higham Ferrers.

Rural settlement archaeology almost inevitably focuses on the development of the settlement through its economic development. The site therefore becomes understood in this way only. Higham Ferrers has offered the possibility that the socio-political development of Middle Saxon rural society may also be accessible through archaeological remains.

In this instance the authors believe that at Higham Ferrers, for a large part of the 8th century, there existed as complete an example of the administrative part of a Middle Saxon royal estate centre as has been revealed in modern times. It is certainly not suggested that the Higham Ferrers complex was unique, far from it. It may well be that small sites that have uncovered a few Middle Saxon buildings could have partially revealed similar administration centres. Such is the confidence and clarity with which the Higham Ferrers enclosure complex was laid out in the landscape, it is difficult to countenance the idea that it could have been a one-off design.

## LATE SAXON SETTLEMENT

### Introduction

The clearance of the landscape and structures of the complex produced something akin to a clear canvas upon which subsequent settlers could define their own boundaries. The new settlement appeared to comprise piecemeal and opportunist development, principally situated towards the high ground to the north, and with an increasing tendency to align with the north-south road.

### Chronology of Phase 3

As with the other phases, the dating range for this period is qualified by the usual restraints, although in general sufficient stratigraphic relationships are evident, which, combined with the concentrations of fairly distinct Late Saxon pottery (principally St Neots ware), allow buildings and other features to be assigned to this phase with reasonable confidence.



### Structural evidence

The evidence suggests that a focus of structural activity lay in the north-eastern part of Site 4, with associated activity in Site 2, and comprises at least two, and possibly three buildings, and a spread of small ditches, possibly defining paddocks.

#### *Building 6811 (Site 4)*

The building was situated in the north-east part of Site 4, and displayed what appeared to be an L-shaped layout, despite heavy truncation by later ploughing over the northwest corner of the building has removed enough of the postholes on the north-western side to make confirmation of the L-shape difficult. There was no evidence that the structure was originally a rectangle, later augmented with a cross-wing. There are very few examples of late Saxon buildings originally laid out in this way, although one of the later (9th-century?) buildings at Catholme was interpreted as one originally laid out in an L-shape (see Building AS43 in Losco-Bradley and Kinsley 2002, figure 3.58 and 3.87).

A sequence of well-used hearths was suggested by substantial spreads of burnt silty clay and ash in the north wing of the building, implying that at least part of the building served as a dwelling.

#### *Building 7321*

To the north-west of Building 6811, and on the same alignment, the structure 7321 is distinctive in the evidence of the apparent use of a combination of beamslots and what appear to be raking struts, at least on the south wall. The absence of internal features, and the presence of a cluster of postholes and a hearth around the east end of the building hints at a workshop function rather than a dwelling.

There is no suggestion that the complex of buildings is aligned on any boundary running across from the Lane to the north-south road. Also, there is no real evidence that the landscape has been formally divided at all at this stage.

#### *Building 15300 (Site 8)*

The east-west oriented pit of a Sunken Featured Building was first identified in the evaluation (Site 3), and the exposed (eastern part) was subsequently fully excavated in the excavation. It displays some of the hallmarks of Early Saxon Sunken Featured Buildings – a flat-bottomed pit with a posthole set in the approximate mid-point of the revealed east end. Were it not for the fact that the pit was cut into the infilled Phase 2 ditch, the two sherds of St Neots ware pottery dating to the 10th or 11th century, recovered from the pit fill, may have been assumed to be intrusive.

Late Saxon SFBs are not uncommon, but in England they are found almost exclusively in urban contexts, where space was at something of a premium, and the pit represented a proper cellar (Tipper 2004, 14). Many

of these features show evidence for more sophisticated details, like shuttering for the pit walls, and trodden or even cobbled sunken floors. Neither of these elaborations was evident with Building 15300. However, Hamerow cites examples of sunken floored weaving sheds dating to as late as the 12th century in Saxony (2002, 33), so their demise in (rural) England may be a lot less abrupt than is thought. It seems likely that Building 15300 was intended for a specific function, although there is precious little evidence to indicate what that may be. Only an iron object (SF 4029) of indeterminate (but possibly intricate) function was found in the pit fill (see Fig. 4.21, 64).

A scatter of small ditches appear to relate to Building 15300, although again they do not obviously indicate formal planning of property boundaries. To the south the circular structure – possibly representing a drainage gully surrounding a hayrick built around a central post – may also be associated with this building (although it could equally well be part of the complex centred on Building 6811).

Little can be said about the southern group of Phase 3 features. They suggest a possible focus of activity south of Site 4, alongside the Lane, but the absence of similar activity to the south-east in Site 7 suggests that the development alongside the Lane at this time was piecemeal and low-density.

### Historical context

It is during this phase that Higham Ferrers is first mentioned (in Domesday as a manor that in 1066 belonged to Gytha, Countess of Hereford). Hall has shown (1988, 106-7) that in the late Saxon period Higham Ferrers was a multiple estate, and included – amongst other elements – Raunds (itself a multiple estate). He has also asserted that it is in this period that the strip field system was developed, overriding the remnants of the middle Saxon land division. Interestingly there's no archaeological evidence to suggest that happening on the site in Phase 3. As Hall suggests, less attractive (or unneeded) land could be left as pasture or scrub, to be incorporated into the field system at a later date (ibid, 108). The fact that there's no real indication until Phase 4 that the area is being formally partitioned may be due to the fact that, once the late Saxon settlement was established to the south (where the present centre of Higham Ferrers is) the relatively remote vicinity of Kings Meadow Lane may not have been particularly attractive.

The contention that the settlement shifted (either abruptly or slowly) from the Kings Meadow Lane area to its medieval core site was largely based upon the pre-excavation understanding. However, there is a case for saying that, as the Middle Saxon complex was an administrative establishment, there was no settlement to move after the destruction of the complex. Therefore it could be said that the medieval core is on the site of the original village settlement, and is not a transposed one.

Whether the present settlement was established before the demise of the Kings Meadow Lane complex is a difficult question to answer. The presence by 1086 of a priest and a market (attached to the manor) seems to be proof that the medieval church and market place were in place by the conquest, and therefore cannot realistically be considered representative of a new foundation – usually of a post-conquest date. It is not surprising that little archaeological investigation has been possible in the historic core of the town. Foard argues (2000, 13) that the most likely context of the settlement shift is part of the general re-planning undertaken at that time, evident in the adjacent villages in the Raunds area (Parry 2006), and possibly even driven by the fragmentation of the Irthlingborough estate.

Archaeological evidence from within the medieval core of Higham Ferrers to support this

scenario is unsurprisingly scanty, given the keyhole nature of the fieldwork that has taken place (see Chapter 2). However, a relatively recent excavation at College Street, on the northern outskirts of the historic core, revealed some helpful results. The excavators concluded that occupation on the site was not established until the 12th century (Jones and Chapman 2003, 129). Crucially, no early Saxon pottery, and only very few sherds of middle Saxon pottery were found, implying a presence in the near vicinity, but no more than that. A small assemblage of late Saxon pottery was found, suggesting that later occupation was centred to the south (ibid. 132-3). This seems to confirm that the origin of the settlement lay to the south, and occupation spread northwards in the late Saxon period.

Hall's examination of the 1567 fieldbook for Higham Ferrers shows that, in addition to the three open fields, there remained a large block of

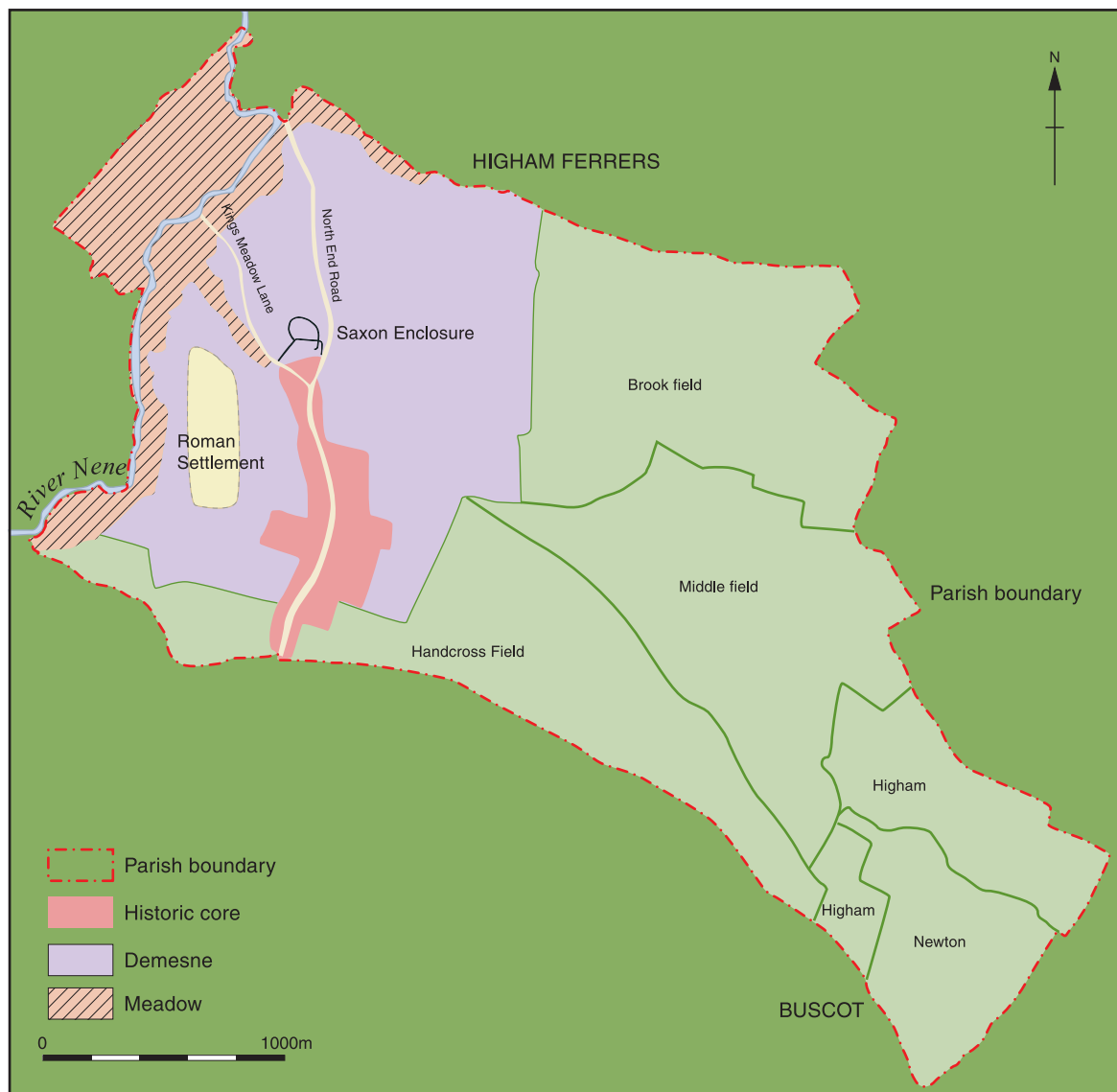


Fig. 5.6 Extent of the medieval parish of Higham Ferrers

demesne – the manorial home farm. The proportion of the demesne to the open field is the same as stated in Domesday, and from this Hall concludes that the arrangement visible on the ground in 1567 is essentially the same as that of the Late Saxon period. He speculated that the intact block of demesne could represent the continuation of a Roman estate belonging to the settlement overlooking the Nene on the western outskirts of Higham Ferrers. With the hindsight of the excavations, one might equally well speculate that the demesne defined by Hall owes as much to the presence of the Middle Saxon complex. Figure 5.6 shows the extent of the demesne in relation to the open fields and to the Roman and middle Saxon sites.

### Character of the settlement

The evidence suggests that the Phase 3 activity could be characterised as essentially roadside sprawl on re-colonised waste ground, beginning to align with both the northern route, as well as the north-western route. The relative influence of the two roads – Kings Meadow Lane and Windmill Banks roads is beginning change, although at this stage one might suggest that the two roads are equally important.

The archaeology is certainly consistent with an unplanned and opportunistic accretion of sprawling farmsteads. How much of a hiatus there may have been between the end of Phase 2c and the beginning of occupation in Phase 3 is impossible to say. It seems unlikely that reoccupation would have taken place within less than a generation or two, and it is not inconceivable that part or all of the site may have been considered a taboo area, in the light of what had transpired there at the end of the 8th century.

The identity of these early medieval settlers is worthy of consideration. By the 10th century this area had been effectively subsumed into the sphere of influence of the Danish incomers. Two metal finds, both from the vicinity of the Phase 3 activity on Site 8, hint at Norse influences, if not an actual Norse presence. An irregular shaped fragment of copper alloy sheet (Sf 4014: Cat.No. 46; Pl. 4.1) displayed a small area of interlace design, possibly Scandinavian in origin. The other is a Viking coin of St Edmund (SF 4028) dating to AD 885-915 (Pl. 4.2).

### *Child burial (Pl. 5.5)*

That this part of the northern outskirts of the formative Higham Ferrers must have been somewhat remote is perhaps given support by the neonatal



Plate 5.5 *Child burial*

burial situated on Site 2, towards the north-western edge of the complex of small paddocks. The grave was little more than a scoop in the ground, and, possibly due to animal disturbance, or maybe because of the truncation by post-medieval ploughing, there was some disturbance to the bones (see Witkin Chapter 4). The surviving bones were radiocarbon dated, producing a date of 780 – 1030AD (95% confidence). The earlier end of this range just overlaps with the possible date range of Building 2666 (see above), so it is technically possible that the burial took place inside a standing building.

While there are a handful of examples of foetal or neonatal burials in early Saxon SFB pits – such a practice seems to have largely died out by the 8th century (see Hamerow 2006, fig. 1). How far these are instances of special deposition or ‘foundation deposits’ with a ritual or quasi-religious motive is unclear, but by the later Saxon period the growing authority of the Church brought pressure to bear to abandon what were considered pagan practices. It should be noted that there is a continental tradition of infant burials in NW European longhouses as late as the 10th century. Nevertheless, a burial date around the end of the 10th century (Phase 3) for the Higham Ferrers examples seems much more likely.

This burial is characteristic of the discreet interment of an unbaptised and possibly stillborn child (see Witkin, Chapter 4). The church taught that a baby who died before baptism would not reach heaven, and many believed that its spirit would return to trouble the living. Law 2 of King Ine of Wessex at the end of the 7th century gives us an idea how important it was to the newly Christian kings for their subject people to accept the new religion.

*A child shall be baptised within 30 days. If this is not done, 30 shillings shall be paid in compensation. If it dies without being baptised, he [the father] shall pay everything he owns.* (quoted in Crawford 1999, 85)

By the 10th century the scale of the penalty was reduced, but it was still a penalty. It seems that, in this case, the unbaptised (stillborn?) child was taken to a secluded spot and buried surreptitiously, away from view in a very shallow and rudimentary grave, just beyond the edge of the paddocks.

## MEDIEVAL – 12th TO 14th CENTURY

### Introduction

The processes of settlement migration begun in Late Saxon period are fully realised by the 12th century, and this applies not only to the migration of Higham Ferrers as a whole to the new (and present) focus on the high ground to the south, but also – within the project area – to the concentration of occupation close to the two roads, and particularly the N-S route, Windmill Banks.

It is also during this phase that the land divisions evident in their developed form in the 1737 map are

first identified archaeologically in their embryonic form (Pl. 1.3). From this point on there is a clear distinction between the agricultural land to the west and settlement (of whatever character) to the east. Archaeologically, this means that the occupation evidence is confined almost exclusively to Sites 7 and 8, with traces of field ditches and or plough furrows in Site 4. While both Sites 7 and 8 contain evidence of occupation activity, the character of occupation on both sites is distinct. The implications of this are considered below.

### Nature of the settlement

#### Site 7

The arrangement of ditches evident in this Phase suggests an orientation onto Kings Meadow Lane, with the curve of the Lane at this point being echoed by the composite gully 9371/9385. Two possible enclosures were partially revealed. In the northern one, the single identified building (9528) showed no sign of being a dwelling, and, given the meagre scatter of pottery and bone in the vicinity, a likely function is a small barn or outbuilding, dating to early in this period, perhaps associated with a house fronting onto the Lane. Any building(s) associated with the southern enclosure were presumably beyond the site boundary.

While the impression gained from the evidence on Site 7 in this period (as in all the other periods on this site) is somewhat clouded by the safety problems surrounding its excavation (see Chapter 3 – Phasing), the interpretation is that the roadside settlement represented here is fairly low status overspill from the new centre to the south.

#### Site 8

In contrast to the southern area (Site 7), there are plenty of signs of domestic and craft activity, in the form of well used surfaces, hearths or oven bases, and well-constructed drains. The provisional suggestion, based on the limited results of the evaluation (Site 3), was that the evidence represented an ad hoc ‘squatter’ dwelling. Clearly the more comprehensive evidence recovered at the excavation stage suggests a much more elaborate and sophisticated establishment.

The purpose of the quarrying is worth consideration. Further down the slope to the south, the natural subsoil varies from pockets of silty clay to beds of ironstone. The distinctions are reasonably clear, and the quarry pits (of Phase 5) invariably are targeted on the clay. On Site 8 – and particularly the central area – the character of the natural is a lot more intermixed, with bands of limestone sealed or interspersed with pockets and/or layers of silty clay. This suggests that the pits represent stone quarrying. Whether this quarrying was to provide material to construct buildings on the site or nearby is unclear, but despite the lack of clear structural

evidence, these quarries do not seem to have been far from domestic activity. The presence of pieces of daub in the quarry backfill, close to the oven 15294, suggests the contemporaneity of domestic activity and quarrying.

The only reasonably coherent building identified on the site was the small rectangular structure 15294. It had what appeared to be a sunken stone surfaced floor (possibly a hearth base) at one end. The drain that crossed the building (falling from east to west) is higher than the sunken floor, which either suggests the building goes out of use before the drain is constructed, or the buildings function changes, not longer requiring a sunken floor. The drain appears to be emptying into the ground over the infilled Phase 2b ditch, but there's no evidence to indicate where the drain is emptying from.

The absence of clear evidence of substantial buildings other than 15495 is made more puzzling by the number of well constructed stone-lined drains, mostly surrounding or incorporated into, a central cobbled yard surface to the north of building 15495. Why would they need drains like this on what must have been at least reasonably well-drained ground? Assessing the direction of fall of the drains gives some clues to determine where they were draining from and to. In the northern part of this area, over the infilled quarry pits two drains are running eastwards into a large pit or sump, but in neither case is there any evidence of what each drain was leading from.

In the southern area, around Structure 15495, the drains appear to be running to the west, to the area over the infilled Saxon ditch of Phase 2b. Was this still a slightly lower area, and did it serve as a sump? One is drawn inevitably to the conclusion that there was some fairly elaborate building or range of buildings on the site or nearby, and associated yards (a farmhouse and outbuildings?). For reasons which are not clear, the activities underway on this site required an elaborate surface water drainage system (although it should be pointed out that that the area in question did not in any way appear to be susceptible to waterlogging during the excavation).

The finds evidence from this area at this time shows an unremarkable assemblage of metal items, principally of a domestic and personal character, in association with an equally unremarkable pottery assemblage. Indeed, if it were not for the elaborate yard surfaces and drains, the original evaluation interpretation, that it represented a short-lived 'squatter' dwelling would still be valid. As a piece of roadside development the sense of isolation from Higham Ferrers (or even Kings Meadow Lane) is artificially heightened by the destruction of all the archaeological deposits in a broad roadside swathe from Site 8 down to Site 7. It is surely most likely that other dwellings and tenements would have accumulated alongside the road in between.

#### Site 4

The evidence from Site 4 indicates the continued use of the area as arable land, albeit now in a more planned way in comparison to Phase 3, with the addition of boundary ditches, the orientation of which appears to be influenced by the line of Kings Meadow Lane and a possible NE-SW boundary linking the Lane and Windmill Banks, inferred from the ditch 7239 and that of ditch 6854. The junction of the latter with ditch 7024 (see Fig. 3.35) is the location of a possible building (7025) – interpreted from the lack of finds in its vicinity as an outbuilding, although serving what domestic focus is hard to determine.

#### Historical context

Historically, this period sees Higham become known as Higham Ferrers, become the borough and a property of the Duchy of Lancaster and reach something of a zenith of popularity and regional dominance. The development of the castle, the establishment of Chichele College, and the burgeoning prosperity of the borough seems to jar with the archaeological evidence in the Kings Meadow Lane area. Even though the character of the remains on Site 8 is difficult to determine, it is safe to say that it is not especially high status, or representative of extensive occupation. The historical documentation seems to indicate that, through design or circumstance, the north end of the borough became something of an enclave for the agricultural tenements, while those with commercial or industrial interests clustered round, and to the south of, the medieval market square. By 1591 the northern borough boundary was established well to the north of the project area, and yet the area known as Bond End seems to have been considered as vitually a separate community, with its own bakehouse, prompting the suggestion from Foad and Ballinger (2000, 34-5), that in the early medieval period (before the borough was established) Bond End could have been a separate settlement.

#### LATE MEDIEVAL PERIOD (14th and 15th CENTURIES)

##### **Kilns and the Higham Ferrers pottery industry** *by Paul Blinkhorn and Alan Hardy*

The archaeological evidence of this period is – on Sites 6 and 8 – almost entirely related to the activities surrounding the pottery industry, and associated processes (clay quarrying). On Site 4 there is finally clear evidence of a boundary ditch linking Kings Meadow Lane and the Windmill Banks, and on Site 7 a suggestion that the property orientation is beginning to swing to the south, implying the creation of the triangular green in the junction of the two roads, later to be known as Walnut Green.

## *Structure of the kilns*

### *Kiln 1*

This was by far the best-preserved of the kilns. It comprised a pit with a central pedestal, and two opposed stoke pits, each separated from the firing-chamber by a flue arch. While the roof of the firing chamber was missing, the two flue arches survived in situ (Pl. 3.9) The kiln is a classic example of Musty's type 2c (ibid. – see McCarthy and Brooks 1988, figure 16). A number of examples of kilns of this type are known from the medieval Britain, with Musty's corpus showing that they are limited to the midlands and south of England, including one from Brill in Buckinghamshire which is dateable to the 14th – 15th century (Jope 1953-4).

Within the firing chamber the flat top of the pedestal is clearly far too small to have accommodated more than a handful of pots, so one must conjecture some arrangement of ceramic fire bars, spanning the gap around the pedestal. No evidence of these bars was found in the kiln or the surrounding area, so it must be assumed they were removable.

The question of the nature of the superstructure of the Higham Ferrers kilns is a vexed one. While past assumptions – based on post-medieval or Mediterranean examples past and present, has assumed that the kiln chamber was topped with a clay (or brick) dome, in virtually all cases there is no archaeological trace of a superstructure.

While there is a believable case for there having been no more substantial covering to the kiln chamber on Site 6 than a pile of turves, there is

support for a 'rigid roof' hypothesis from two principal areas at Higham Ferrers. Both kilns were producing Reduced Ware. To achieve the sufficient and consistent reduction during firing it must have been possible to seal the chamber as efficiently as possible (McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 52). Arguably this would be difficult to achieve with a loose covering of turves.

Several large pieces of structural daub – each with a smoothed side, were found among the waster dump in the both the central chamber and the stokeholes of Kiln 1. They may have come from a superstructure, although it is accepted that some parts of the firing chamber lining and the central pedestal had fallen off, and therefore may account for some of the recovered pieces. The reconstruction (Pl. 5.6) shows the full clay dome with just a central chimney or vent. This would be very effective in maintaining both the heat and the reduced oxygen environment, although access to the chamber could be difficult. However, Musty (ibid.) argued that a permanent clay dome was not necessarily an obstruction to stacking the pots in the kiln prior to firing. He cited experimental pottery-making which showed that it was possible for an individual to crawl into the kiln through the firing-arch, and then stack the kiln by having pots passed in through the arch and the vent at the top of the dome. This could be a time-consuming method, however, taking many hours, and it was more efficient to have some sort of removable clay 'door' at the flue entrance to allow the potter to walk into the kiln. An open-topped kiln with a temporary roof would have facilitated stacking and removing the pots still further.



*Plate 5.6 Reconstruction of the medieval pottery kiln*

Musty (1974, 54) cites experimental firings where reduced pottery was made in an open-topped kiln which was sealed with clay plates and sods, and then sealed with clay when the desired temperature (c 900°C) was reached. Certainly, high temperatures and a low-oxygen firing environment could not have been achieved without some form of capping on the kiln, but it cannot be said with certainty if the kilns found on Sites 6 and 8 had temporary or permanent roofs.

The kiln was most probably fuelled with faggots (tightly-bound bundles of thin brushwood). The charcoal report (see Thompson and Francis, Chapter 4) notes the predominance of twig material from fruit trees (including apple) within the samples taken from the floor of Kiln 1 and the floor within the building 9008, immediately to the west of the kiln. Le Patourel (1968, 117) noted that at Laverstock in Wiltshire, manorial records show that men with the surname 'Potter' were purchasing roods of brushwood from a number of manorial centres, and there is a record of 14th – century tile-makers purchasing 1,000 faggots for the firing of ten tile-kilns. The 'Potter' surname also applied to some metal workers, usually those involved with copper alloys, although they would not have required large quantities of faggots for any of their processes. Faggots would have a double advantage over large pieces of timber in that they were considerably cheaper, and would have burned quickly and thus at a higher temperature. This method of fuelling the kiln seems to have been used at both Brill (*ibid.* 18) and at Lyveden in north-east Northamptonshire (Musty 1974, 56), although in the case of the latter, a single large diameter (c 175mm) piece of oak was also noted. The environmental evidence (see Challinor Chapter 4) shows that most of the charcoal fragments from the kiln were 1 – 9 mm in diameter, indicating that brushwood faggots were indeed the source of fuel.

There seems to be very little consistency in the wood species exploited for fuel. The Lyveden potters utilised hawthorn and oak, whereas those at Laverstock used oak, willow, hazel and birch (*ibid.*). The fact that most of the identifiable wood from Kiln 1 at Higham Ferrers was species of fruit tree would suggest choice was more a reflection of the local availability than species preference.

#### *Kiln 2*

While very little of the kiln in Site 8 survived, it is reasonable to conclude that it was of very similar construction to kiln 9200 in Site 6. The fact that it was constructed at ground level, not within a purpose-built pit, is worthy of note (and explains why so little has survived). Typically, the sinking of the stoke holes and chamber below ground was done to improve the efficiency of the firing and avoid the depredations of the elements. Why this was not done at Site 8 is unclear, especially as its location (further up the slope) is arguably even more exposed to the elements than Kiln 1 on Site 6.

Setting the base of the kiln at ground level necessitated the construction of a lining for the stokeholes – in this case of limestone blocks, some of which survived.

Possibly the effort of sinking it below ground was considered excessive – which begs the question, is it actually the case that medieval kilns were typically sunken below ground, or is that an erroneous impression influenced by the fact that above-ground kilns are much more likely to be heavily (or completely) truncated by later activity?

#### *1965 "kiln" reconsidered (Fig. 5.7)*

A small excavation (c. 40 sq m) was carried out by David Hall in 1965 in the corner of Chamberlain's factory car-park, in response to factory development. The location of the site was immediately to the west of Site 6. Various stone features and cut features were revealed in a sequence of interconnected excavation trenches or sondages, along with large quantities of Reduced Ware pottery. The features were interpreted as a stone-built kiln and associated stokehole, and contemporary features including a NE-SW wall and ditch, and a square pit to the north-west. The great quantity of recovered wasters gave a consistent typological date of the early 15th century.

Brief publication of the discovery, including a description and summary quantification of the pottery, but excluding a site plan appeared some years later (Hall 1974). Copies of the original site drawings have been obtained, and are sufficient to understand the basic layout of the features discovered.

The excavation of Site 6 and the extensive structural remains of kiln 9200 prompts a reconsideration of the interpretation of the remains discovered in 1965. The circular stone shaft was interpreted as the kiln itself and a shallow ditch extending to the south-west was considered to be the remains of a single flue. The fact that the bulk of the pottery was recovered from these two features clearly influenced the interpretation. The circular stone shaft (FI) and the slight gully running to the south-west bear some similarity to a Musty Type 1 kiln and flue, but does not fit comfortably with any known late medieval kiln type, and bears no similarity at all with the kiln discovered in 2002.

Therefore, benefiting from the full excavation of kiln 9200, it is possible to offer an alternative interpretation of the 'kiln' features from the 1965 excavation. From the available data, the circular stone feature has some of the characteristics of a stone-lined well, although the excavator asserts that it was too shallow to be a well (Hall, pers. comm.). If not a well, the circular stone feature could have been for storing clay, or possibly where the clay blunging was carried out to remove impurities and stones (McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 19). Alternatively it is possible that the circular feature could have been, for instance, a lead-lined cistern; a means of storing water, close to the



Fig. 5.7 Site 6 with the 1965 excavation plan superimposed

workshop, would have been necessary;. It is suggested that both the stone feature and the shallow gully were exploited as convenient dumps for kiln waste when the production site was abandoned and cleared. It is significant to note that the character of the wasters recovered in 1965 is indistinguishable from those recovered from the vicinity of Kiln 1 (see Blinkhorn, Chapter 4).

Unfortunately, the location of the site on the original 1965 drawings is insufficiently precise to accurately locate it in relation to the excavation of Site 6. It must be assumed that the 1965 site lay very close to the northern edge of Site 6, as no trace of the 1965 excavation was found during the latter work, although some modern disturbance was noted in the north-west part of Site 6. Two of the features revealed in the 1965 excavation appear – from their dimensions and orientation – to be continuations of features revealed in Site 6. A SW-NE oriented wall (F2), and a parallel ditch (F3) appear to correspond to features 9005 and 9206 respectively. Figure 5.7 depicts the conjectural location of the 1965 features in relation to the 2002 excavation.

### *Medieval pottery industry in Higham Ferrers*

#### *Extent of the industry*

While two definite kilns were positively identified, there is some archaeological evidence that more may have been situated in the area between Kings Meadow Lane and Windmill Banks. The occurrence of Reduced Ware sherds in the vicinity of the northern kiln (15275) showed a definite concentration of material to the south of the kiln, towards the southern edge of Site 8, which may suggest that a further kiln or kilns once existed in the area since terraced by the 20th century factory construction.

Two pieces of documentary evidence, from the Hundredal Court Rolls, shed light on the Higham Ferrers pottery industry in the 15th century. In 1436 William Potter 'took a messuage not built, together with a selion of land in an adjacent croft, in which croft there is a kiln for making pots and other earthen vessels' (Sergeantson 1917, 44). This seems to imply that he took over a going concern, with the intention of expanding the business. Repairs to a pottery kiln are also mentioned in 1467 (Sergeantson 1917, 37). The archaeomagnetic date range for the last firing



obtained from Kiln 1 on Site 6 is 1385 – 1435 (95% confidence), slightly at odds with the documentary reference to William Potter, although conceivably the kiln cited is Kiln 1 on Site 6.

Other than William Potter himself, how many other people were involved in the pottery business at Higham Ferrers? Blinkhorn (Chapter 4) shows that there were distinct differences between the range of vessel sizes made in Kiln 1 and Kiln 2, and suggests that two different potters may have been at work. Was William Potter one of them, or did he subcontract out the actual potting?

In the late medieval period pottery production was a fairly low-status industry, providing only at best a moderate income, and attracting workers from the lower end of the social scale. Certainly, in medieval Britain, few potters appear to have had sufficient wealth and status to enable them to reach the rank of Freeman, and there was never an earthenware potters' Guild (see McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 77). In prospering towns, such a low status business, inherently filthy and carrying the risks of fire, would have been exiled to the peripheries of the built-up area. It is no surprise that pottery production at Higham Ferrers was situated well to the north of the town centre. However, this may have been as much due to the preference of the potter as to discrimination by his industrial peers. The efficient functioning of the kilns required a plentiful (and convenient) supply of wood and clay.

Analysis of the petrology of some large fragments of clay from the collapsed structure of Kiln 1, in addition to samples of the pottery from both Kiln 1 and the assemblage recovered in 1965 has provided some pertinent details of the material used (Vince, forthcoming). There was some variation in the clay used to make the pots, suggesting that – even if the 1965 site did not reveal a kiln as such, the pottery recovered was not part of the same waster dump as that found in and over Kiln 1. The analysis has also shown that the clay used in the kiln structure was not the same as that used to make the pots. One of the samples contained moderate sized fragments of calcareous rocks, shelly marl and calcareous sandstone. This may suggest (not unsurprisingly) that the superstructure was constructed of clay either derived from less 'pure' deposits, or less thoroughly washed before use than that used for the pots themselves.

Some idea of the economics and logistics of obtaining clay for potting can be found in the details of medieval clay-digging licences. The potter usually had to pay the lord of the manor for licence to dig clay, but the physical nature of clay-pits varied considerably. Le Patourel (1968, 114) noted some of the more common descriptions of clay-workings, which included pits from four feet square up to twenty feet square, and other pits in the form of long ditches from two to four feet wide and up to four perches long. Clearly, on mixed subsoil as at Higham Ferrers, the pit size and shape would tend to be influenced by the depth and extent of the clay

'seam'. Clay pits were often – as at Higham Ferrers – dug in the open fields; at a time of low grain prices, a licence to dig clay could earn a lord more than growing corn on the same land (*ibid.*).

It is suggested that the croft or tenement that contained the kiln on Site 8 fronted onto the north-south road, Windmill Banks, although it still not clear where the line of the road falls in relation to its modern position. Judging by the continued absence of significant features in the eastern part of Site 8 in the late medieval period, and the impression given by the 1737 map, it was still a rough and undefined driveway, rather than a precisely delimited road.

The abandonment of the kilns appears to have taken place by late in the 15th century. There is some evidence to suggest that the first in the sequence of NE-SW boundary gullies that clip the side of Kiln 2 was dug soon after, as its fill contains a high proportion of wasters from the pottery operation. It is reasonable to suggest that the two ditches identified along the south-east side of Site 4 represent the continuation of this boundary definition down to the line of Kings Meadow Lane.

However much activity and industry there was in the late medieval period, it is far from clear that the area of Kings Meadow Lane was considered to be any part of urbanised centre of Higham Ferrers, despite it still being part of the borough. Regardless of the cartographic accuracy of the Norden map of 1590, the northern extent of Higham Ferrers is depicted as the junction of what is now College Lane and Kimbolton Road; Kings Meadow Lane is not even shown. It seems that once the pottery industry had closed down the area quickly reverted to waste ground or agricultural use.

## 17th CENTURY – 20th CENTURY

### Introduction

With the disappearance of the pottery industry, the archaeology shows that the Kings Meadow Lane area reverted to farmland, bordered by sporadic settlement along the north side of the Lane and the west side of Windmill Banks. The correlation between the archaeological evidence of buildings and boundary ditches and the earliest maps of the area (including Pl.1.3) is reasonably consistent.

### Site 7

In the south-east corner of Site 7 the stone footings of one of the cottages that fronted onto Walnut Green from the 18th century were exposed, with associated cobbled surfaces and a large feature (not fully excavated, that nevertheless produced a substantial quantity of horn cores.

### Site 8

In the south-east corner of Site 8 remains were found of cobbled yards, and a stone lined well. Both

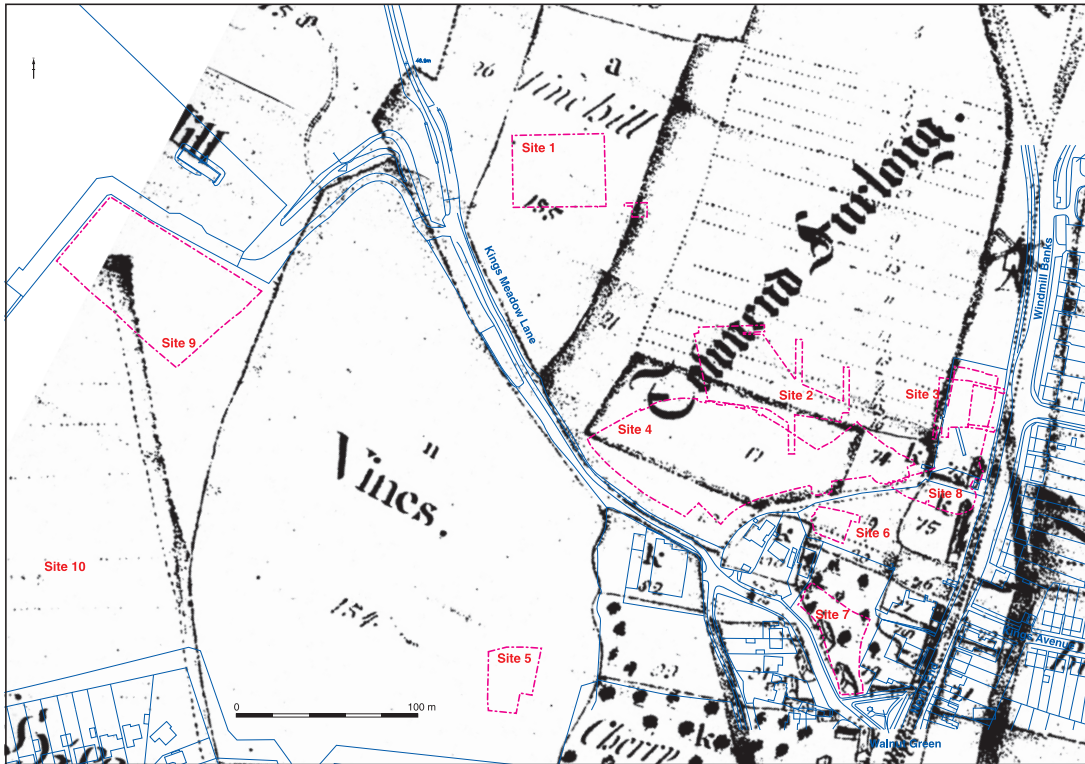


Plate 5.7 Detail of 1737 estate map and with superimposed site outlines (Northampton Record Office, Map 1004, reproduced with permission of Sir Philip Naylor Leyland Bt. and the Milton (Peterborough) Estates Company)

dated to the 19th century, and would appear to have been back yard elements associated with roadside cottages – presumably situated to the east of the site.

Of interest is the eventual definition of the line of the north-south road, implied by the archaeology in Site 8, evident in the 1737 estate map (Pl. 1.3) and the Inclosure Map of 1839. The road is entitled Kettering Turnpike Road in the latter, which might explain the more precise delineation of the road by this time. More recently the road was renamed Windmill Banks, on account of the 18th century windmill built at the top of the hill (and shown in the 1737 map). The name remains to this day, although the windmill is has long since been demolished.

Comparison of the principal elements of the post-Roman archaeology and the estate map of

1737 throws up some interesting elements. In the first instance the correlation between the Phase 6 archaeology and the cartographic display is reasonably accurate and informative, although it is notable that what could be construed from the map as substantial boundary ditches are not necessarily deeply cut features. One aspect that influenced pre-excitation interpretations of the relationship between the Phase 2 horseshoe enclosure and later activity was the apparent correlation between the east side of the horseshoe enclosure ditch and the east side of the Townend Furlong. From the archaeology of Phases 3 and 4 it is clear that the enclosure ditch did not survive as an earthwork beyond Phase 2. Any correlation must therefore be circumstantial.



*Plate 5.8 Aerial view of development area after the Saxon and medieval excavations, looking north-west  
(Duchy of Lancaster copyright)*

