

Archaeological Field Unit

**Early-Mid Saxon Activity at Land adjacent to No. 12,  
Hillside Meadow, Fordham:  
An Archaeological Evaluation**

Rebecca Casa Hatton

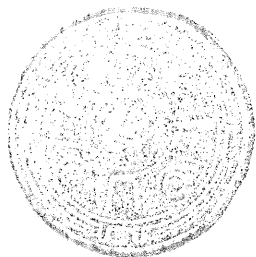
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Commissioned by Mr S. Fuller

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Archaeological Field Unit  
Fulbourn Community Centre Site  
Haggis Cop, Fulbourn  
CAMBRIDGE, CB1 5HD  
Tel: (01223) 576201  
Fax: (01223) 880946

**Early-Mid Saxon Activity at Land adjacent to No. 12,  
Hillside Meadow, Fordham:  
An Archaeological Evaluation  
(TL 6321 7057)**

Rebecca Casa Hatton MA, PhD

September 2001

Editor : Stephen Macaulay, BA, MPhil, AIFA  
Illustrator : Caroline Malim, BA, MPhil



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Cambridgeshire County Council  
Fulbourn Community Centre  
Haggis Gap, Fulbourn  
Cambridgeshire CB1 5HD  
Tel (01223) 881614  
Fax (01223) 880946

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## **SUMMARY**

*On the 24th September 2001 staff of the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on land adjacent to No. 12, Hillside Meadow, Fordham (NGR TL 6321 7057) in advance of a proposed residential development.*

*A 16m long trench was mechanically excavated in order to expose potential archaeological remains prior to groundwork.*

*The evaluation revealed at least two phases of activity. The earliest phase consisted of a boundary ditch, postholes (from post-built structures?), and gullies (property enclosures?). Finds were rare but consistent with domestic activity (bone and pottery) possibly entailing peripheral occupation within the Saxon nucleus of Fordham.*

*More recent activity was represented by a phase of levelling with the introduction of a former topsoil to the area for agricultural/horticultural use. This deposit had been cut by a ditch and a pit, and was sealed by modern topsoil.*

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**Early-Mid Saxon Activity At Land Adjacent To No. 12, Hillside Meadow,  
Fordham:  
An Archaeological Evaluation  
(NGR TL 6321 7057)**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

On the 24 September 2001 staff of the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on land adjacent to No. 12, Hillside Meadow, Fordham (Fig. 1), in advance of the construction of a bungalow.

Given the known archaeological background of the area under investigation (below), the Archaeology Office of Cambridgeshire County Council (CAO) made recommendations to the District Planning Authority for an archaeological evaluation to be undertaken.

The work was carried out by the AFU on behalf of Mr S. Fuller, in accordance with a Design Brief issued by the Acting Senior Archaeologist of the County Archaeology Office (Thomas, August 17, 2001). The nature of the work was outlined in a Specification for Archaeological Evaluation (Roberts, AUG205/01) which was submitted to the CAO before the evaluation.

The archaeological work was managed by Stephen Macaulay.

**2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

The village of Fordham is located in the Snail Valley. In relation to the village itself, the proposed development site lies to the south-west of the medieval parish church of St Peter and St Mary Magdalene.

At the time of the evaluation it comprised a flat rectangular area of some 0.05 hectares off Hillside Meadow, at approximately 11.5m AOD. It was flanked by properties to the west and south (Fig. 1). The site was disused open grassland.

The local geology consists of bedrock of Lower Chalk (Chalk Marl). The development area sits on Fourth River Gravels of the River Snail (BGS 188). Silt alluvial deposits and sands were exposed during the evaluation. Flandrian deposits of peat survive at the far north of the parish and in the Snail Valley, south of the village (Hall 1996, 89).

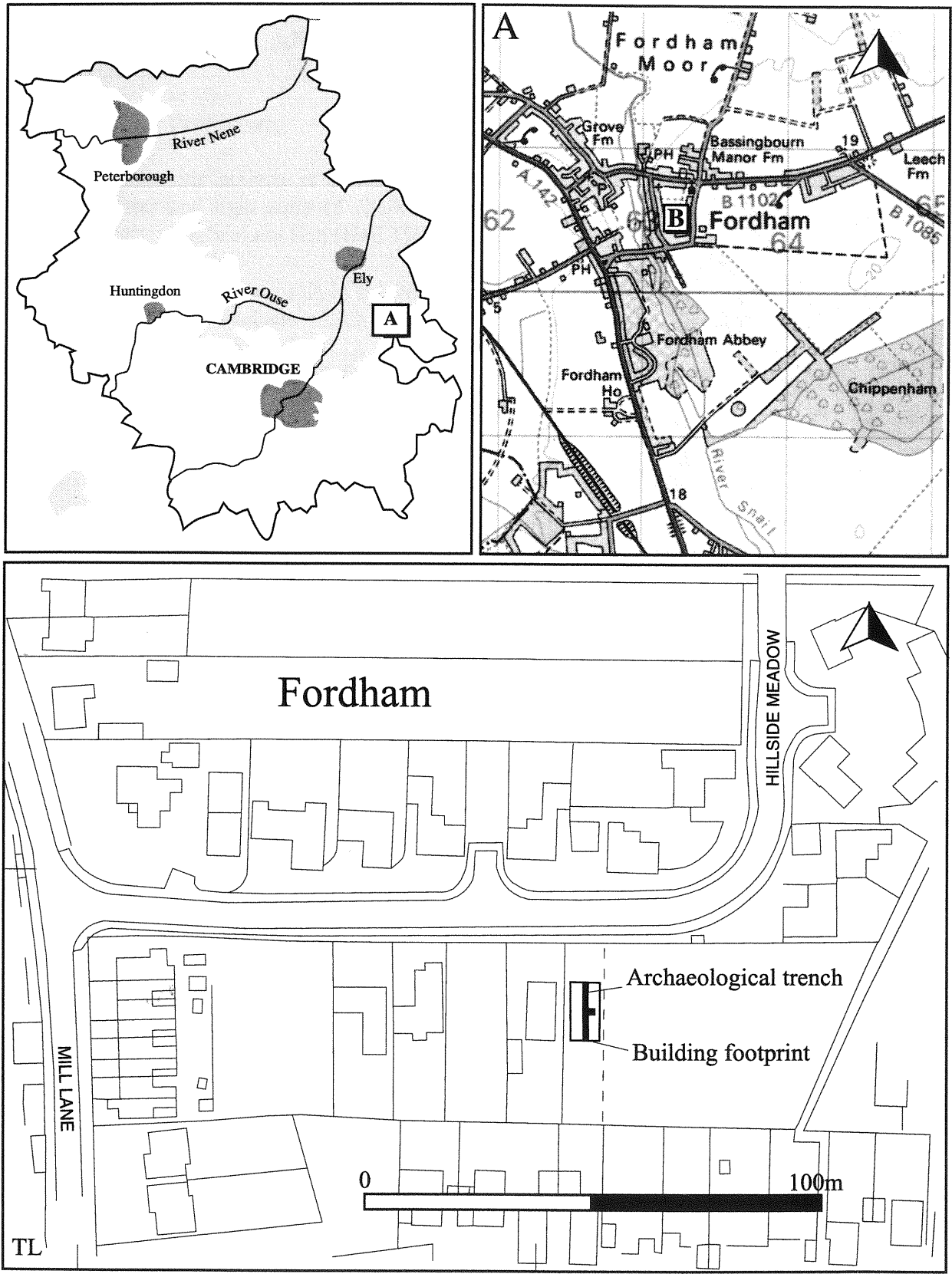


Figure 1 Trench location plan

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### 3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

#### **Early Prehistoric**

Prehistoric activity is concentrated in the Snail Valley, in close proximity to water and light soils of chalk and sand. It represents a continuation of the activity in Isleham Fen (Hall 1996, 89 ff.).

Early prehistoric finds in the Fordham area are relatively rare. They consist of stray lithic artefacts which include a Mesolithic axe (SMR 07551), Mesolithic flint blades (SMR 07511), Neolithic axes (SMR 07552 and 07548), Neolithic flint tools (SMR 07553, 07555 and 11758).

Bronze Age finds are more common, especially near the old river channel. They comprise lithic artefacts and pottery (e.g. SMR 07741). A barrow is also known in the area, as SAM258 (Hall 1996, 89). Bronze Age activity was uncovered during an excavation at Landwade Road (Connor 1996) where evidence emerged for the presence of an enclosure.

#### **Iron Age**

Three Iron Age inhumations were discovered to the east of the village in 1937 (SMR 07549). The presence of these burials may point to the existence of a settlement nearby.

A scatter of finds possibly associated with domestic occupation was found to the south-east of Fordham (SMR 11287).

Evidence for an early Iron Age settlement was uncovered further south during an excavation at Landwade Road. The excavation produced remains of round houses, several six and four post-built structures and pits containing ritual placed deposits of pottery and animal bone (Connor 1996).

#### **Roman**

Some 0.5Km to the south of the development site late Roman coins (SMR 7579) and scattered finds (from a settlement?) are evidence for Roman activity.

Further evidence in the Fordham area is well documented through chance discovery of metal finds. Villa sites are known at Block Farm (SMR02087) and Biggen Farm (SAM 80).



## **Saxon**

Fordham (meaning 'settlement by the ford') is first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of *c.* 972 (Reaney 1943). Evidence for the early Saxon origin of the village has been found at Hillside Meadow, some 100m to the north of the present development site, where three phases of Saxon occupation were identified. Occupation consisted of sunken buildings, human remains, a series of ditched enclosures and post-built structures. Artefacts comprised pottery, and 'small' finds (Mould 1999). Further to the north, evidence for Mid-Late Saxon activity emerged during excavations at Fordham Primary School (Connor 2001). There, a post-built structure was found, together with two parallel ditches on a west-east alignment which may have represented property boundaries. Finds from this site consisted of pottery, iron knives, a whet stone, a chalk spindle whorl and fragments of lava quern.

## **Medieval and Post-Medieval**

The Medieval history of Fordham is well documented. The parish church of St Peter and St Magdalene (SMR 07574) is largely thirteenth century in date. It retains some Norman elements and is likely to have had a Saxon (wooden?) predecessor. Fordham Abbey or Gilbertine Priory (SMR 7449) was also founded in the thirteenth century. None of the priory buildings survives.

Further medieval activity is known in the area from extensions of the settlement around the church (Hatton 2001).

Evidence for Medieval agricultural practices survives as ridge and furrow, together with furlong boundaries (SMR 10309), visible as cropmarks and earthworks on aerial photographs (Palmer in Cooper 2000).

Post medieval and more recent activity is visible in the present settlement, and consists of houses, farms, windmills and transport routes.

From cartographic evidence, the development site appears to have been part of a larger plot used as arable/pasture from at least the nineteenth century.

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

The objective of the evaluation was to establish the presence/absence, nature and degree of preservation of archaeological features and deposits likely to be affected by ground-works. To this aim one trench 16m long with an extension 2.75m wide and 3.50m long (i.e. *c.* 5% sample) was located across the building footprint (Fig. 1). The modern topsoil was removed to the top of the geological sand and silt deposits by means of a mechanical excavator with a

1.60m wide toothless ditching bucket. Natural deposits were encountered at a depth between 1.0m and 1.30m below the present ground surface.

A general location plan was produced to show the position of the trench within the development site. All features were sample-excavated and recorded.

The recording system and the post-excavation procedures followed the standard AFU practice in compliance with IFA guidance policy.

## 5 RESULTS (Fig. 2 )

The trench run north to south near the eastern edge of the development site. The removal of the grassed topsoil to a consistent depth of 0.30m exposed a thick dark brown 'subsoil' that contained fragments of brick. The thickness of the subsoil increased progressively from the north end of the trench (0.50m) to the south end (1.05m). The organic composition of this 'subsoil' seems to suggest a former topsoil that was imported to the area for agricultural/horticultural use. It was cut by a ditch and a pit, and sealed earlier features of uncertain date, namely a ditch, gully/slot like features and at least one posthole.

### Early features

Ditch **02**: linear feature, 2.20m wide and 1.20m deep from the base of the trench, west-east aligned, with a 'V' shaped profile. It contained one homogenous fill, 01, a mid-dark brown silt deposit that produced one sherd of Iron Age burnished pottery and one sherd of Roman grey ware (Paul Sperry, pers. comm.).

Gully/slot **04**: linear feature, 2.70m long, 0.43m wide and 0.10m deep from the base of the trench, north-south aligned, with a flat base. It contained one fill, 03, a mid-dark brown silt deposit that produced one fragment of bone.

Gully/slot **06**: linear feature, 2.40m long, 0.27m wide and 0.08m deep from the base of the trench, north-south aligned, with a flat base. It contained one fill, 05, a mid-dark brown silt deposit that produced no finds.

Gully/slot **08**: linear feature, 1m long (visible length), 0.36m wide and 0.17m deep from the base of the trench, north-west to south-east aligned, with a 'U' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 07, a mid-dark brown sandy silt deposit that produced two fragments of bone.

Gully/slot **10**: linear feature, 1m long (visible length), 0.30m wide and 0.12m deep from the base of the trench, north-west to south-east aligned, with a 'U' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 09, a mid-dark brown sandy silt deposit that produced no finds.

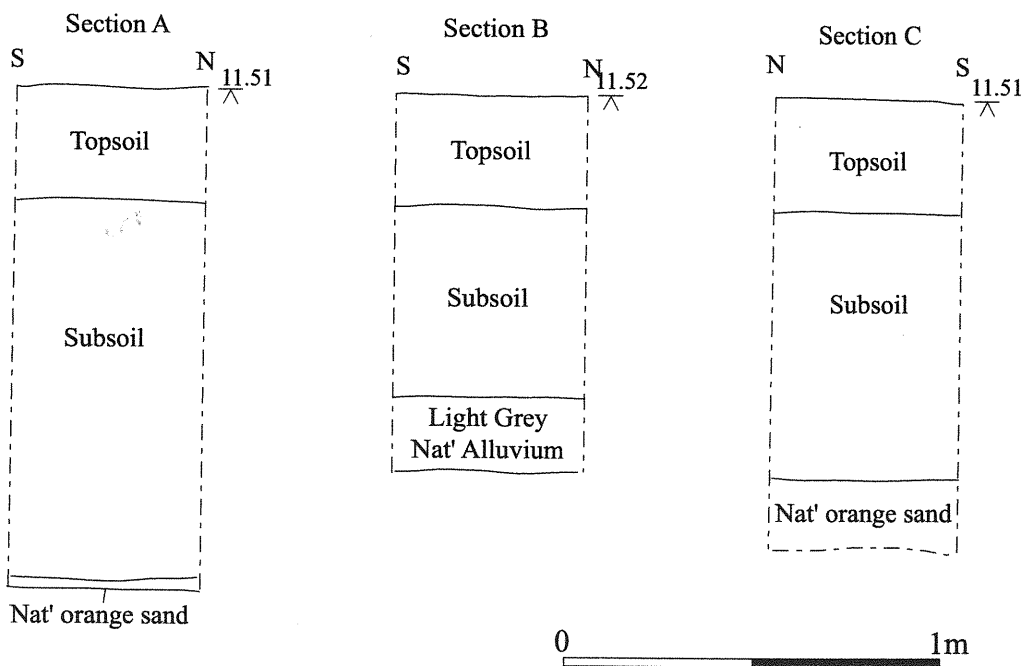
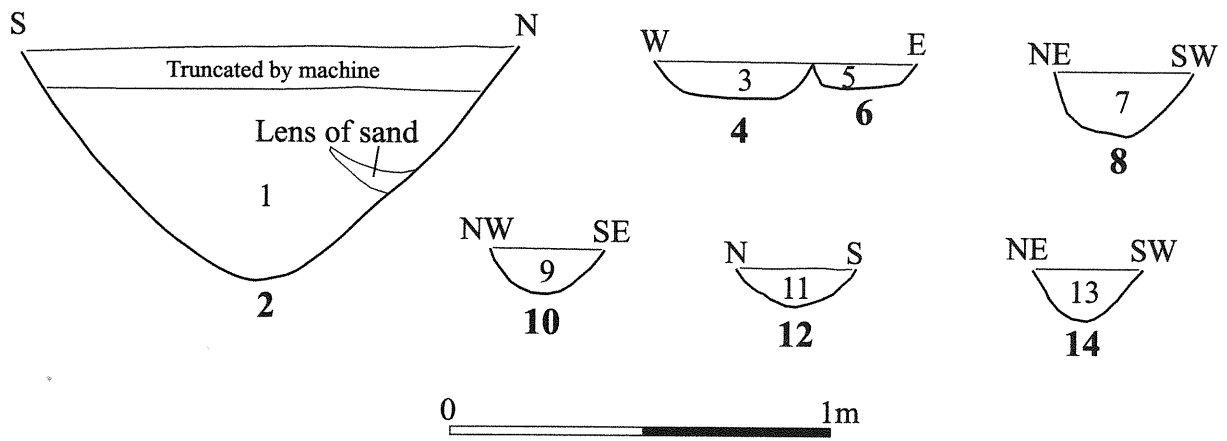
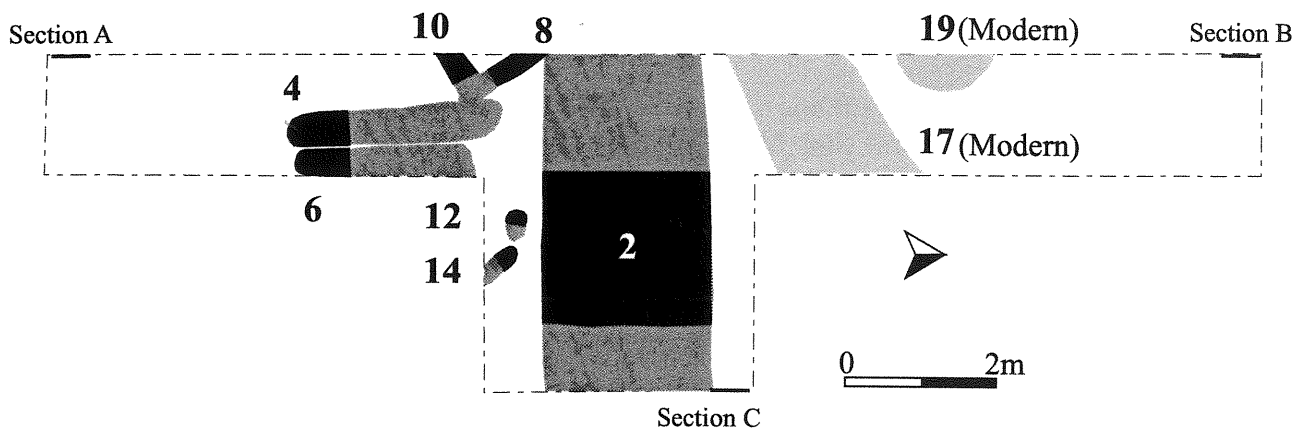


Figure 2 Trench plan and sections

Posthole 12: circular feature, 0.32m in diameter and 0.11m deep from the base of the trench. It contained one fill, 11, a mid-dark brown silt deposit that produced no finds.

Posthole/slot 14: oval feature, 0.75m long (visible length), 0.32m wide and 0.15m deep from the base of the trench. It contained one fill, 13, a mid-dark brown silt deposit that produced one fragment of bone.

#### Recent Features

Ditch 17: linear feature, 1.60m wide and 0.52m deep below the topsoil, north-east to south-west aligned, with a 'U' shaped profile. It contained two fills, 15 (upper) and 16 (lower). Fill 15: a dark brown silt deposit; fill 16: a light grey fine silt with burnt matter that produced one sherd of Early-Mid Saxon hand-made pottery (Paul Spoerry, pers. comm.).

Pit 19; circular feature, 1.25m in diameter and 0.35m deep below the topsoil, with a 'U' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 18, a light grey fine silt with no finds.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The present discussion is based on the results from a small excavated area. In absence of more conclusive evidence, interpretations are theoretical.

The earliest activity on site consisted of a substantial ditch, gully/slot like features and at least one posthole. No reliable dating evidence was retrieved, the pottery recovered during the evaluation being probably residual. This latter consisted of sherds of earlier Iron Age and later Roman ware from the boundary ditch 2, and a sherd of Early-Mid Saxon ware from one of the more recent features, 17, that had been cut through the subsoil. Despite the broad chronological range of the artefacts, similarities in the composition of the fills and the alignment of the exposed features may suggest one or, more likely, two phases of activity closely related chronologically.

One phase may have comprised structural remains such as posthole 12 and slots 08, 10, 12 and 14 consistent with post-built structures. These structural features share the same orientations, being north-west to south-east and south-west to north-east aligned. The second phase may have consisted of north-to south and west to east aligned remains. Ditch 02 is likely to have represented a substantial boundary of a property possibly subdivided into smaller enclosures by narrow gullies (04 and 06),

Finds were rare but consistent with domestic activity (bone from large and small mammals and pottery).

Comparisons with similar features of Saxon date from sites excavated to the north of the present development site may indicate that the area under investigation represented part of the development of the Saxon nucleus of Fordham.

In particular, archaeological work at Hillside Meadow some 100m to the north of the proposed development area revealed three phases of Saxon occupation (Mould 1999). The earliest phase dated to the Early-Mid Saxon period and was characterised by ditched enclosures of varying size and depth on a west-east and north-south alignment. The enclosures contained pits and sunken buildings. Postholes were found outside the enclosures. Some of the enclosures continued to be in use in the Mid-Late period (Phase 2). Four juvenile burials were found in ditches. The Late Saxon period (Phase 3) witnessed the division of land that became more extensive as it neared the site of the Norman church of St. Peter.

As with the present development site, residual prehistoric and Roman artefacts were recovered from Saxon contexts. No contemporary features were identified. Furthermore, postholes and small gullies contained no finds (Mould 1999).

The eastern and western limits of the occupation area were defined (Mould 1999). However, the spatial distribution of features suggested that the settlement may have extended beyond the northern and southern limits of the excavation, i.e. towards the present development site to the south and towards Fordham Primary School to the north. At this latter site features similar to those from both sites at Hillside Meadow (including the present development) were excavated and dated to the Mid-Late Saxon period (Connor 2001). The features consisted of a post-built structure and two parallel ditches on a west to east alignment.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site before development.

Archaeological remains have been identified on the subject site. The earliest activity consisted of a boundary ditch, postholes (from post-built structures/), and gullies (enclosures?). Finds were rare but consistent with domestic activity possibly entailing peripheral occupation within the Saxon nucleus of Fordham.

More recent activity was represented by a phase of levelling with the introduction of a former topsoil to the area for agricultural/horticultural use.

This deposit had been cut by a ditch and a pit, and was sealed by modern topsoil.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Mr S. Fuller for commissioning the work.

The work was carried out in response to a design brief issued by Andy Thomas of CAO, and monitored by Jeremy Parsons (Archaeology Information Officer). The project was managed by Stephen Macaulay (Project Officer) who also edited the present report. Dr. Paul Spoerry spot-dated the finds. Caroline Malim produced the illustrations in the text.

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BGS British Geological Survey

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#### MAPS

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*The Archaeological Field Unit  
Fulbourn Community Centre  
Haggis Gap  
Fulbourn  
Cambridge CB1 5HD  
Tel (01223) 881614  
Fax (01223) 880946*