

# AN EVALUATION AT 14 POTTERS LANE, ELY (TL 5410 7969)

## A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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### Introduction

The evaluation of an empty plot off Potters Lane, Ely, was carried out by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit on behalf of B & S Developments from 31/5/95 to 2/3/95. The purpose of the evaluation, as defined by the County Archaeology Office's (CAO) brief, was to rapidly characterise the archaeological potential of the site in advance of the construction of a single dwelling and garages.

### Archaeological Background

The site lies at c 7.0m OD on the fen edge at the foot of the Ely highland. The underlying geology is of Kimmeridge Clay, though the site is overlooked by Lower Greensand, Boulder Clay, and glacial sands and gravels which cap the high ground to the north.

Potters Lane is mentioned in medieval documents under its present name from the mid 13th century, when it is noted as containing four messuages (Owen 1993, 19; Reaney 1943, 215). By the early 15th century this lane, running south-west towards Caldewellefen from the important Stuntney causeway, was well developed, containing sixteen tenements. One of these, on the east (downslope) side of the lane is noted as a site on which 'a potter's House was sometime situated' (Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry V, Mem 5-1). 'Stanks' (ponds or ditches) are a noted feature of the tenements on the west side of the lane at this time.

The find of pottery 100m to the east of the site (SMR 07026) is a dim reflection of the medieval occupation of this area. The discovery of the footings of a bridge (the 'Stone Brigge' of medieval documents) off Castle Hithe, however, and Speed's early 17th map confirm the preservation of medieval town's topography in the present street pattern.

Prehistoric and Roman settlement tends to be concentrated on the lighter soils of higher land on this part of the Ely highland and has not been noted in the immediate environs of the subject site. The apparent absence of evidence for any pre-medieval activity here, however, may simply reflect the masking effect of alluvial and colluvial deposits and medieval occupation debris which had accumulated at the foot of the slope.

### Methods

Trenches were machine excavated to the depth of secure archaeological deposits. Dump layers were sampled for artefacts (trowel sorted) and removed to expose the tops of negative features. Two trenches of 1.8m width totalling 11m were examined. The first of these (Trench A) was sited to test for the presence of medieval street front structures and the area proposed for house foundations. The second trench (Trench B) was sited to investigate the centre of the plot, the area on which the garages are to be constructed. At the time of the evaluation the plot was undeveloped and covered in scrub and coarse vegetation.

### Trench A

Geological stratigraphy was not encountered in this trench which was dug to c 90cm below ground level. The surface of the earliest in situ deposit (133), slopes towards the east end of the trench (at 5.79m OD), which gradually became filled with water during the course of the evaluation.

Context [139] describes the cut (through (133)) of a narrow (c 60cm wide) 'U'-shaped gully whose single dark olive grey silt fill (104) contains abundant late medieval pottery. This feature had been cut by [109], an ovoid pit (1.5m wide) whose fill contains abundant pottery of similar date. Another pit [141], isolated from the features described above, at the west end of the trench produced similar pottery.

The latest pit in the sequence [108] is a shallow ovoid re-cut of a larger rectangular pit [131]. The lower fill of [108], [102] is mostly comprised of large, unabraded, late medieval/early post-medieval, pieces of pottery (probably incorporating complete and near complete vessels) and tile. It contains very little non-ceramic waste and was apparently specifically dug to receive pottery. Pit [131] retained a hint of clay lining, its lower fill (130) a very dark grey organic silt (not bottomed), contains twigs and abundant late medieval pot.

The features described above are sealed by (101), a made ground containing abundant late medieval/post medieval potsherds, on which the brick-tiled and concrete floors (100) of cottages demolished within the last fifteen years rests. No other foundations were noted in the vicinity of Trench A, though a large modern pit, which had punctured [133], was revealed at the east end of the trench (extending to the south-west).

## **Trench B**

The Kimmeridge Clay natural (whose upper surface had oxidised to a silty yellowish-brown which merges over 10cm in depth to an olive grey clay) was encountered at 6.43m OD , 80 cm below ground level in Trench B. Four negative features cutting natural were observed.

Cut [117], a shallow ovoid pit (85cm x 1.m) containing a single fill (115) incorporating occasional mussel shells, bone, and small abraded (? late medieval) pot sherds, was revealed in the centre of the trench.

To the west of centre the butt end of a shallow (? linear) ditch [120] (1m wide) was encountered. Its uppermost fill (114) contains similar material to that within (115), though with more mussel shell and bone.

At the west end of this trench a shallow, flat-bottomed, 'L'-shaped beam slot [124] was revealed. Its single fill incorporating potsherds of similar size and character to those contained within (114) and (115). A portion of a circular or ovoid (? post-hole) feature (upper fill (112)) was exposed at the trench's west section, but not investigated further.

Beam slot [124] and fill (112) were sealed by (125), a dark greyish-brown clayey silt c 35 cm thick, which merges over 1m horizontally with (121). This deposit, though similar in consistency to (125), becomes progressively more potsherd-rich towards the east end of the trench. Here it seals a dark grey clayey deposit (116), overlying natural, which contains abundant large medieval potsherds. Similar sherds, though smaller and more abraded, occur in (121). This deposit, probably a cultivated garden soil appears to have incorporated the material dumped within the underlying deposit (116). All features and deposits in this trench were overlain by a root-riddled modern garden/cultivated soil c 45cm deep.

## **The Pottery**

Despite the limited collection policy, the evaluation produced a large amount of pottery. Only a small sample of this (taken from key contexts) has been assessed for the purposes of this report.

Fill (102) within pit [108], produced very large unabraded sherds, largely of a sandy, hard-fired, buff fabric; although some shell-tempered fabric is also represented. Large pitchers dominate, with a common decoration of thumb-applied strips and combed bands. Many vessels have washes of green glaze. A green-glaze roof tile also been noted, along with floor tiles, and lumps of kiln lining and unfired clay. Much of the pottery shows signs of differential firing, cracking, and uneven glazing. The assemblage clearly represents the waste from the kiln of late medieval or early post-medieval date (late 15th or early 16th century).

Similar vessel types, though 'chunkier' and with a softer shell-tempered fabric, are present in (116). Vessels exhibit more stabbing and slashing than is apparent in assemblage from (102). The more abraded nature of this pottery may reflect different depositional circumstances or the relative softness of the fabric. In all, however, the pottery from (116), though late medieval, would seem slightly earlier in date than (102). Whilst this assemblage contains some evidence for poor firing the evidence for direct derivation as a production waste assemblage is somewhat less than for (102). A similar assemblage is contained within (133), again with some signs of poor firing. The stratigraphic relationship between this deposit and (102) is consistent with the suggested earlier date for the pottery.

The pottery from the features at the west end of Trench B, contained sherds in markedly different condition to those encountered on the rest of the site: these had obviously been well turned over before their eventual deposition. The few diagnostic pieces suggest a similar or slightly earlier date to (116); perhaps 13th-14th century, though this could equally reflect the greater residuality inherent in a rubbish deposit which has been kicked around for sometime before lodging in an open feature, or which has been reworked into compost.

## **Interpretation and Discussion**

The later pottery on the site, dating to the medieval/post-medieval transition, reflects the waste from a production assemblage. The evaluation did not encounter kiln structures or, with the possible exception of pit [131] features which could be definitely ascribed to some part of the production process. Similarly little dumped ash or charcoal was revealed which might better betray the location of a kiln. The subject site did, however, become the recipient of waste material, which is often usefully employed during production, and which is never dumped further away from the kiln than is necessary. The longevity of production somewhere within the close environs of the subject site is indicated by the documented street name and also, perhaps, by the assemblages in (116) and (133). These contained enough stylistic associations with the assemblage from (102) to suggest that late medieval/early post-medieval production here was based on an earlier local tradition.

The medieval features in Trench B, well-spaced and possibly representing a building, associated ditched enclosure and rubbish pit, have not been well-dated, but again would seem to be earlier than the dumped assemblage in (102). Later cultivation has truncated these features and removed any surfaces that may have been associated with them.

No features indicative of medieval street front buildings were revealed in Trench A, though a well-preserved sequence of medieval and post-medieval activity, relatively free of modern damage, was revealed. The lower fill of one feature hinted at organic survival in lower-lying deposits, though the constraints of the evaluation did not permit the investigation of deposits below 90 cm. Further observation work during the excavation of the house foundations may facilitate a better look at the basal

archaeological deposits on the site, and will contribute to the characterisation of the archaeology in this area for modelling purposes.

Further analysis of the recovered pottery and appropriate publication of the results is essential. This site is one of only two investigated medieval production sites in the county. Steps will be taken to ensure that this assemblage contributes to the plugging of the considerable gaps in our knowledge of local medieval pottery traditions. The creation of local ceramic typologies from such assemblages will be of immense value to the investigation of the medieval fenland.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **References**

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