



EXCAVATION ON A DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE AT CASTERNE HALL, ILAM, STAFFORDSHIRE

Kate Mapplethorpe and James Brightman

In August 2011 Archaeological Research Services Ltd undertook an archaeological excavation in the grounds of Casterne Hall, Ilam, Staffordshire, during groundworks for a new equestrian ménage. The grounds of Casterne Hall contain the partial earthwork remains of a deserted medieval village, and the features of key interest were two stone building platforms and their relationship with both a large pit and the wider earthwork enclosure which bounded the building platforms. The volume of pottery finds and animal bone from both within and above the structure was highly suggestive of domestic occupation and activity. The second platform was of a different construction and is more likely to represent an area of hard standing, though the material culture is very similar to that from the domestic structure suggesting contemporaneity. A large pit was stratigraphically sealed beneath one of the stone platforms testifying to at least two phases of activity associated with the deserted medieval hamlet. A radiocarbon date from the pit with a broad date range centred on the late 12th century AD, provided a terminus post quem for the visible earthwork remains and the pottery evidence places the domestic occupation in the 13th-14th centuries with possible abandonment occurring within the 14th century - the century within which the Black Death took place.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In August 2011 Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) undertook an archaeological excavation at Casterne Hall, Ilam, Staffordshire (Fig. 1) during groundworks for an equestrian ménage. The site is centred at SK 1237 5245 and the work focused on the earthwork remains of the deserted medieval village (DMV) of Casterne, comprising lynchets and banks defining possible building platforms, enclosures, yard boundaries and extensive earthwork remains of cultivation terraces, boundaries and lanes.

Previous Work

Prior to the excavation, ARS Ltd had undertaken an analytical field survey of the earthwork remains (Burn and Eadie 2011), which revealed that well-preserved earthwork remains of medieval dwellings (tofts) within regular enclosures (crofts) were discernible. At least two of these enclosures were visible with a possible further five building platforms identified. In addition, a natural gully appeared to have been modified to function as a holloway through the site extending beyond the northern extent of the surveyed field. Likely medieval cultivation

terraces were also visible in the north-west corner of the area of interest, one of which had been modified, possibly during an episode of later quarrying or possibly as part of a landscaped garden for the 18th century hall.

Following the analytical earthwork survey, ARS Ltd undertook an evaluation based upon the initial results (Davies and Mapplethorpe 2011). Three trenches were excavated in targeted locations to examine the condition and significance of the medieval features (Fig. 1). The evaluation trenches revealed a number of the features discussed below, including the later cattle burial and Structure 1. In addition a small quantity of medieval pottery was recovered, which is incorporated within the discussion of the wider pottery assemblage below. Subsequent to the evaluation trenching a single excavation trench was cut over the southern portion of the site.

STRATIGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION (FIG. 2)

The topsoil covered the whole of the site to an average depth of 0.2m. It consisted of a fine grey-brown silty soil with inclusions of small stones. Beneath

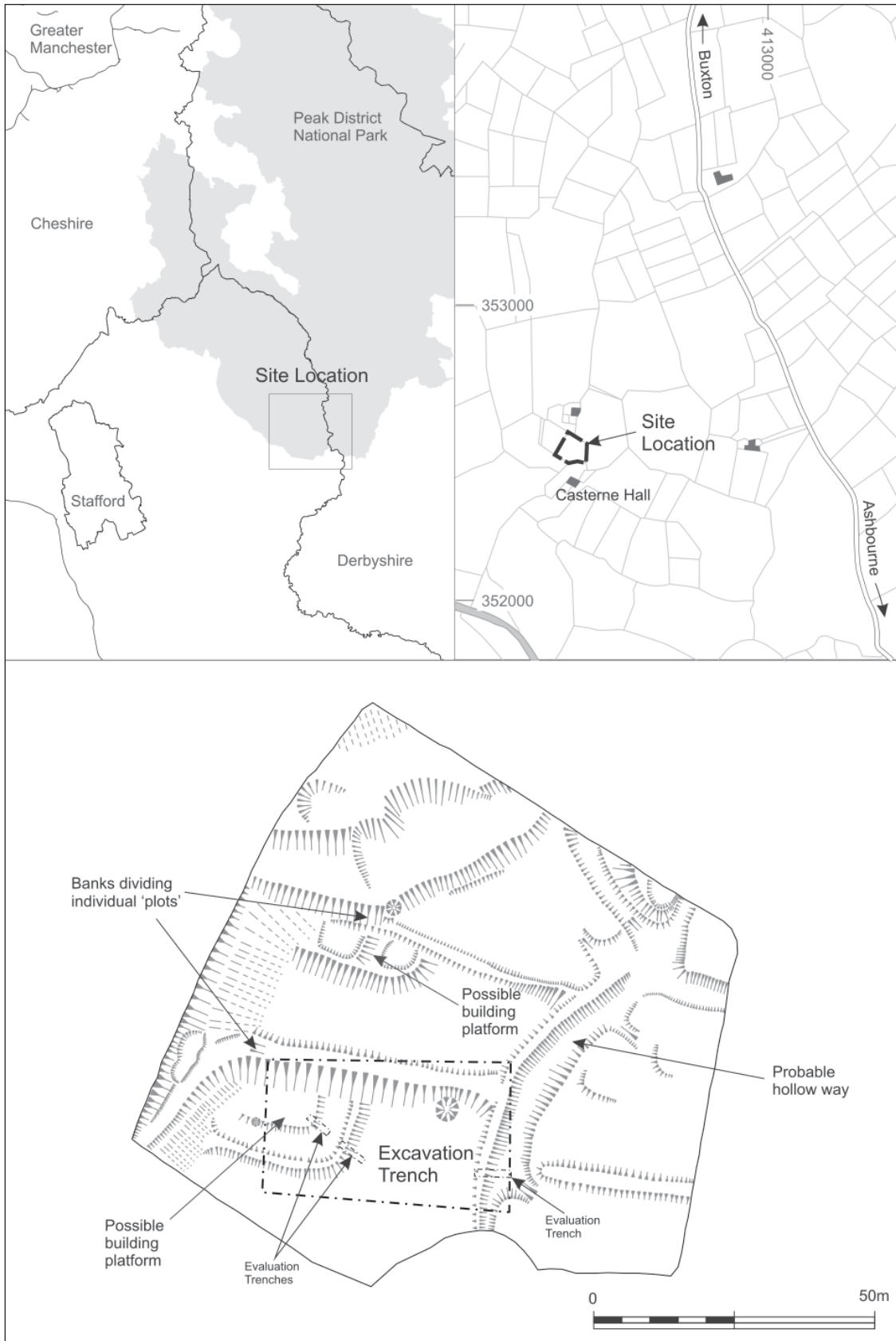


Figure 1 Location of Casterne Hall with earthwork survey and excavation trench location.

this, the subsoil consisted of a yellowish brown clay-heavy deposit. The greatest volume of small finds derived from this layer, which capped the majority of the archaeological features excavated. The natural substratum on the site, into which the lower archaeological deposits were cut, was a glacial till deposit in a variety of red, yellow and blue shades.

Cattle Burial

A bovine skeleton was uncovered below the topsoil towards the west of the site, in pit (104). This was partially uncovered during the previous evaluation, and the remainder was excavated during the watching brief. This animal burial is associated with the later, probable post-medieval use of the site and a full analysis of the remains is presented in the faunal assessment in section 4.

Structure 1

Two masonry structures, or probable building platforms/yard surfaces, were uncovered on the site: Structure 1 (106) was located at the western edge of the excavation, and Structure 2 (150) was located at the north-west corner.

Structure 1 was constructed of flat limestone slabs of varying sizes, packed with small stones and rough gravel. Around the edges of the platform smaller, more-angular stones were placed haphazardly but well compacted, possibly indicating a wall foundation. Fragments of bone and pottery were found in both the subsoil sealing the platform (105) and between the stones of the platform. A patch of burning (141) was found below the stones at the western side of the feature, indicating what appeared to be an earlier hearth.

From within the body of Structure 1, 24 sherds of pottery were recovered, predominantly medieval Iron-rich Sandy Ware, a local pottery type dating to the 11th-14th centuries. Other fabrics present were Buff Gritty Ware and Developed Stamford Ware, likely dating to the 12th-13th centuries, and a probable sherd of Lincoln Fine Shelled Ware which dates to the late 11th century, on the cusp of the Norman Conquest. A small assemblage of animal bone relating to domestic agricultural species was also recovered including cattle, sheep/goat, pig and domestic fowl.

Extending south from the structure was a drainage gully that emptied after flaring out into a further east-west gully which ran into the western trench edge.

Once the stones of the structure had been removed, a further pit (145) and stake-hole (149) were revealed sealed beneath the later structure. The pit was located below the southern extent of the platform and measured approximately 1m by 1m, with a depth of 0.75m. The stake hole was situated below the northern extent of the platform, close to the possible hearth and measured 0.25m by 0.35m.

The finds assemblage from the pit showed a similar profile to the assemblage recovered from the platform structure itself. The four ceramic sherds recovered were all of 11th-14th century Iron-rich Sandy Ware, and a small assemblage of animal bone comprised cattle, sheep/goat and pig. Assessment for botanical macrofossils revealed charred wheat grain and grass seed within the pit fill and the wheat grain was submitted for radiocarbon dating. The grain returned a date of cal AD 1040-1220 at 95.4% confidence (890 ± 30 bp, SUERC-38830). This date lies in the early part of the medieval period.

Structure 2

Structure 2 (150) was located at the highest point of the excavated area, in the north-west corner, and consisted of an area of small angular stones packed into the clay substratum, with a broken line of large flat slabs running along the edge. There was a noticeable difference in form with Structure 1 and it is possible that Structure 2 may represent a yard surface or similar. The sloping setting of Structure 2 also suggested that it was unlikely to represent a dwelling. A large amount of bone and pottery fragments were found resting on and within the stones and no features were found below the deposit.

The pottery recovered from Structure 2 comprises almost entirely medieval Iron-rich Sandy Ware, as was noted for Structure 1 above. In addition to this material, datable to the 11th to 14th centuries, there was a single sherd of Midlands White Ware, which dates more tightly to the period from the late 12th to the 14th centuries. A final sherd of Shell Tempered Ware has been noted as potentially of Roman date, although this is only a tentative potential identification, and it is considered more likely that this represents a badly-abraded medieval shell-tempered sherd than indicating material from a Roman horizon being incorporated into later deposits. A small assemblage of animal bone relating to domestic agricultural species was also recovered that included cattle, sheep/goat and goose.

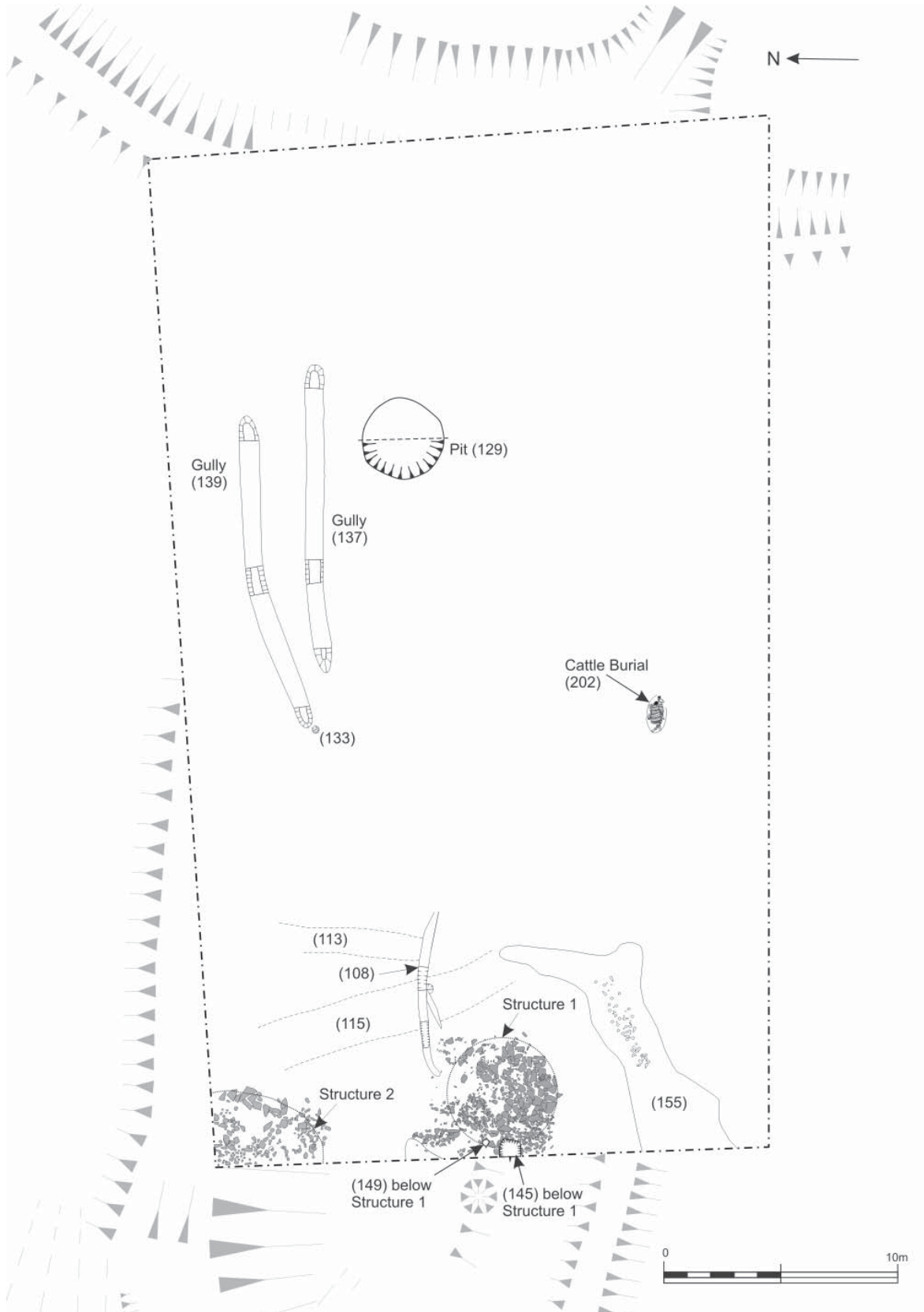


Figure 2 Plan of trench showing all features.



Fig. 2 The stone floor of Structure 1 after cleaning (scales - 1m).

Gullies

Three drainage gullies were identified cut into the clay substratum towards the northern edge of the site: (108), (137) and (139). Each gully was positioned running east-west and all three were of a similar size – between 0.75m and 1m in width and 0.25m in depth (likely to be heavily truncated). (108) was situated towards the north-west of the site and was spatially related to (115), which appears in plan as an offshoot of the larger (108). Cutting (115) is a probable posthole (117), which was cut in turn by (108). Gullies (137) and (139) are close to each other, with (139) approximately two metres north of (137). The gullies contained only a small assemblage of pottery fragments, though the styles represented were in keeping with the wider site assemblage. From this, it is uncertain whether the gullies represented drainage associated with the medieval settlement remains, or are a feature of later land management into which the medieval material has been re-incorporated. The presence in gully (109) of a small amount of bread wheat, oat and other indeterminate cereal grains, however, suggests contemporaneity with some nearby agricultural processes.

Isolated Pit

Immediately south of gullies (137) and (139), there was a substantial pit feature which, due to a profile of fine sediment siltation fills, was tentatively interpreted as a ‘water hole’ but is referred to here as a stratified pit (129). This feature was circular, with a diameter of approximately 3m and a depth of 2.1m. The primary fill of the pit consisted of a silty clay with frequent flecks of charcoal and appeared to be the result of siltation rather than purposeful backfilling. The secondary fill was very similar in form and composition but had experienced greater bioturbation. The upper fill consisted of silty clay with significant burnt inclusions and it is likely that it derived from a dump of burnt material into the partially silted feature. The pit experienced further siltation after this with another lens of silty clay. The final deposit prior to the subsoil consisted of a clay with stony inclusions. This appears to be a deliberate dump of relatively homogenous material, possibly as an attempt to fill in the remaining hollow. There was no material culture recovered from any of the deposits within this pit, and given the prevalence of animal bone and pottery from other features on the site, it is possible that this feature was not associated with the medieval occupation, or that as it was a water hole it was kept clear of domestic debris.

SPECIALIST ANALYSES

Radiocarbon Dating

Gordon Cook and James Brightman

A single sample of charred wheat grain, recovered from the fill of pit (145) sealed beneath Structure 1, was submitted to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) for radiocarbon measurement (Table 1 and Fig. 4).

Although the taphonomy of the pit fill can mean that dating such material cannot always be used as an analogous date for the feature itself, the material was selected because it was a single entity, short-lived specie directly associated with farming activity, and therefore it was considered the most suitable sample

for obtaining a *terminus post quem* for the overlying structural remains.

The sample dates to the early part of the medieval period, at which point there is a plateau in the radiocarbon calibration curve, hence the wider calibrated date range than would be usual for other periods. Whilst the overall span at 95.4% probability ranges from 1041-1217 cal AD, the probability is that the actual date is probably within the second half of the 12th century. This is in overall agreement with the material culture evidence found on the site.

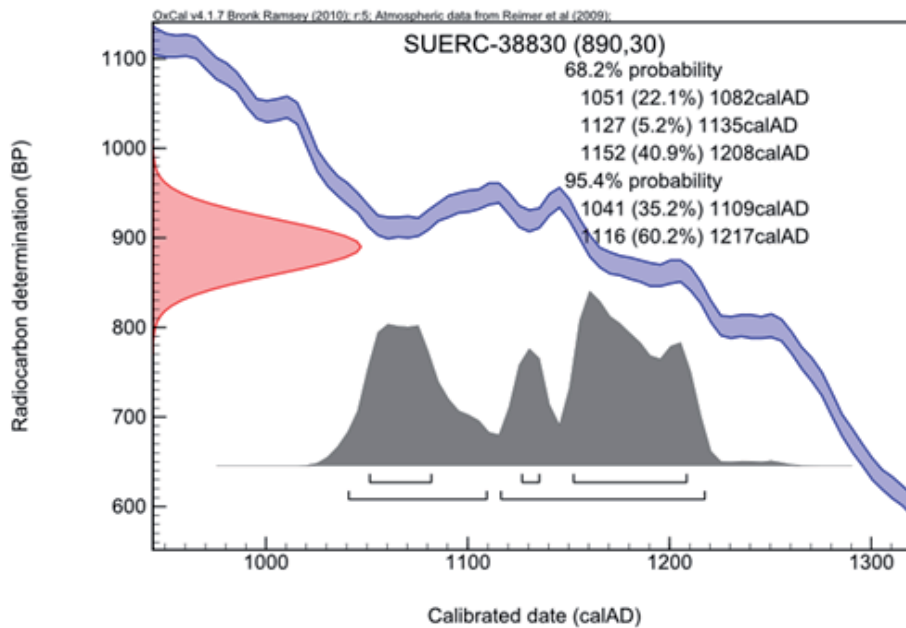


Fig. 4 Radiocarbon calibration graph.

Sample	Feature Number	Material	Conventional Radiocarbon Age	13C/2C Ratio	Calibrated Age at 2σ 95.4% probability
SUERC-38830 (GU-26557)	145	Charred Grain - Wheat	890 ± 30 bp	-22.7 ‰	cal. AD 1040-1220

Table 1 Radiocarbon dating results.

Palaeoenvironmental Assessment

Lorne Elliott

All three hand-collected charred samples comprised small fragments of charcoal. The only identifiable charcoal fragment was of hazel from pit (145). A fragment of diffuse-porous charcoal (short-lived species) was noted in the fill of gully (108), although the small size and poor condition prevented further identification. The charcoal from Structure 2 was too small to identify and of insufficient weight for dating. Traces of semi-vitrified fuel waste were also noted in the fill of gully (108).

The flint samples comprised few charred plant remains. Gully (108) included oat, wheat and indeterminate cereal grains and a rose family fruitstone. A wheat grain and grass seed were present in pit (145) and a sheep's sorrel seed was recorded in deposit (153). The wheat grains from (108) had the characteristic shape of *Triticum aestivo-compactum* (bread wheat).

The low numbers of charred plant remains prevent firm conclusions from being drawn about the age and nature of the deposits or crop husbandry practices, although the results of the small assemblages suggest wheat and oats were used at the site. Diagnostic chaff was absent, although the wheat grains from (108) had the characteristic shape of *Triticum aestivo-compactum* (bread wheat). The presence of oats and cf. bread wheat is typical of medieval and post-medieval sites in England (Greig 1991; Huntley and Stallibrass 1995).

Faunal remains

Louisa Gidney

Preservation of the bones from the site is moderate, ranging from good to very poor. The consistent presence of loose teeth, particularly of cattle, indicates decay of the surrounding bone, and many of the teeth are disintegrating with the enamel flaking away from the dentine. Loss of mineral content has rendered many bones brittle with flaking surfaces. In contrast, some contexts contained bones from infant calves, lambs or piglets, which rapidly decay in hostile soil conditions. Since these juvenile bones occur in the subsoil contexts (103) and (105), they would appear to be of comparatively recent origin.

Dog-gnawing marks were noted where there was extensive damage to the bone. Butchery marks are present in the assemblage but, again, only major damage was noted. The variable surface condition of the bones has probably obscured many minor

butchery and gnawing marks. There are no intact measurable bones from which withers heights may be estimated. The majority of the identifiable faunal remains were recovered from the topsoil and subsoil contexts and are likely to be of comparatively recent origin, with a noticeable concentration in the subsoil. The stratified deposits associated with the DMV produced roughly a quarter of the identifiable fragments. In addition, a cattle burial was recovered from the subsoil context (104) and a further group of bones, interpreted as burial, was found in context (203), below topsoil. Both of these finds appear to be relatively recent.

Eleven contexts, mostly associated with building platforms or gully fills, produced some 45 identifiable fragments. These are predominantly from cattle and sheep, with pig, domestic fowl and goose also represented. There are almost equal numbers of cattle and sheep fragments but this is more likely to reflect the enhanced survivability of teeth than any medieval pattern of husbandry.

Medieval and Post-Medieval Pottery

Chris G. Cumberpatch, Jonathan Goodwin and Jane Young

The pottery was classified and recorded with reference to Ford's review of medieval pottery in Staffordshire (1995) and with the assistance of Jonathan Goodwin (Senior Planning Officer, Stoke-on-Trent). This report is a summary of the key findings of the assessment and analysis, and does not include the full catalogue of the assemblage, which is included within the archive report for the excavation (Maplethorpe and Brightman 2012).

The medieval wares identified included Iron Rich Sandy Ware (irsw), Midlands White Ware, Midlands Purple Ware with occasional sherds of Stamford type Ware, Cistercian Ware and a small group of shell-tempered wares. The latter were sent to Jane Young for identification and her comments have been incorporated into the text. Post-medieval wares (other than Midlands Purple and Cistercian Ware the manufacture of which extends from the later medieval into the post-medieval periods) were limited to Slipware and Blackware and it is possible that some of these were in fact of early modern date. This is certainly the case for the Mottled Ware, Late Blackware and Slip Coated Ware all of which appeared to be of standard 18th century type. Small quantities of Creamware and Edged Ware spanned the later 18th and early 19th centuries. The most recent wares were of 19th century date and included a range of

transfer printed Whitewares and the ubiquitous Cane Coloured Ware. Utilitarian wares included Brown Glazed Coarseware and Stoneware with broader date ranges.

The medieval pottery assemblage was dominated by wares of the very diverse Iron Rich Sandy Ware group. As defined by Ford, this group consists of two principal sub-groups indicated by the suffixes; –u and –t. In the first case this indicates utilitarian wares, mainly jars and cooking pots, defined by their sandy texture and absence of glaze. In the second case the suffix indicates tableware and includes jugs and other glazed vessels. Within the group as a whole the range of variation in fabric is considerable, as described in detail by Ford (1995, 32). More recently Ratkai has proposed a finer series of fabric-based definitions (2006, 27) but at the time of writing little of her detailed work had been published and as a result it was decided to employ Ford's established system for the recording of the current assemblage.

In terms of the range of vessel forms, jars, cooking pots and possibly bowls dominated the irsw-u group but they showed considerable diversity in the details of rim and vessel shape. The illustrated examples (Fig. 5) show something of the range of variation but many of the sherds were too small or abraded to draw. A common factor was the presence of small flanges internally (Fig. 5 Vessels 1 and 2; cf. Ford 1995, Figure 9, 29-33) which seem to be a distinctive characteristic of the industry. This feature seemed to have been elaborated in the case of the unusual rim (Goodwin pers. comm.) shown on Vessel 3 (Fig. 5), but was not always present (Fig. 5 Vessel 4). Decoration was limited to a small number of sherds bearing combed wavy lines (102 and 150; cf. Ford 1995, Figure 10, 34-7) and a rather larger number with groups of shallow parallel impressed lines on the body (e.g. Fig. 5 Vessel 5). One small rim sherd showed deliberate thumb impressions on the external angle of the rim (102). Wheel-thrown vessels predominated but hand-made sherds were also noted in (102) and (112).

The tableware group (irsw-t), although smaller in size than the utilitarian ware group, also showed a wide range of diversity in both form and fabric. Fabrics were generally finer and denser in texture than those in the utilitarian ware category and glaze was commonly present. Both splashed and suspension patterns were noted and while this may indicate chronological variability within the group, the details of the move from splashed to suspension glaze in the area are unclear. Drawing an analogy with other

areas, it is suggested that the splashed wares are earlier than the suspension glazed wares and this has been reflected in the date ranges ascribed in the data tables. The suggested date ranges are tentative and must await verification with reference to a more extensive study of the ware type. Identifiable vessel types were limited to jugs but the fragmentation of the assemblage meant that few vessels were positively identifiable. Both strap and rod handles were present, with the rod handles from (102) bearing a close resemblance to examples from Burley Hill near Derby (Cumberpatch 2003; 2004; see also Ford 1995, Figure 12, 51-7 for local parallels). A base from (150) resembles an example illustrated by Ratkai (2006, Figure 10, 1) and, like the rod handles, bears a close resemblance to examples from Burley Hill. A small, heavily abraded fragment from a tube-spouted jug (102) bore an unusually bright green glaze. Examples of similar spouts have been published by Ford (1995, Figure 13, 67-8). Decoration, other than glaze, was limited to combed wavy lines (102 and 106) and rare examples of applied pellets and finger impressed strap handles (150).

Other medieval wares were present in very small quantities. Midlands Whiteware appeared to be represented by only two (possibly three) sherds from (150, 303 and probably 102). The small handle fragment from context 303 is shown on Fig. 5 Vessel 6.

Midlands Purple Ware was only slightly more common than the Midlands Whiteware from (102 and probably 101) and included three sherds with an unusually fine texture, very close in appearance to Martincamp stoneware.

Shell tempered ware was represented by seven sherds (102, 105 and 106) although in all but two cases the shell temper had been removed in solution. One sherd was of the Lincoln Fine-Shelled type (106; see Young and Vince 2005, 81-88 for description and discussion) while two (102 and 105) were of the as yet unsourced Derbyshire Medieval Shelly Ware type. The sherd from (150) was of an unusual and unidentifiable type. It may be of Roman date although the condition of the sherd precluded a definite identification. A sherd in a fine sandy greyware fabric (102) may also be of Roman date although again, the identification is not a definite one.

Other medieval wares were also represented by small numbers of sherds. These included Stamford-type ware from (102) and (106) although it is possible that these sherds represented finer versions of Midlands Whiteware. A possible sherd of Stafford-type ware was identified in (303), most probably residual in a

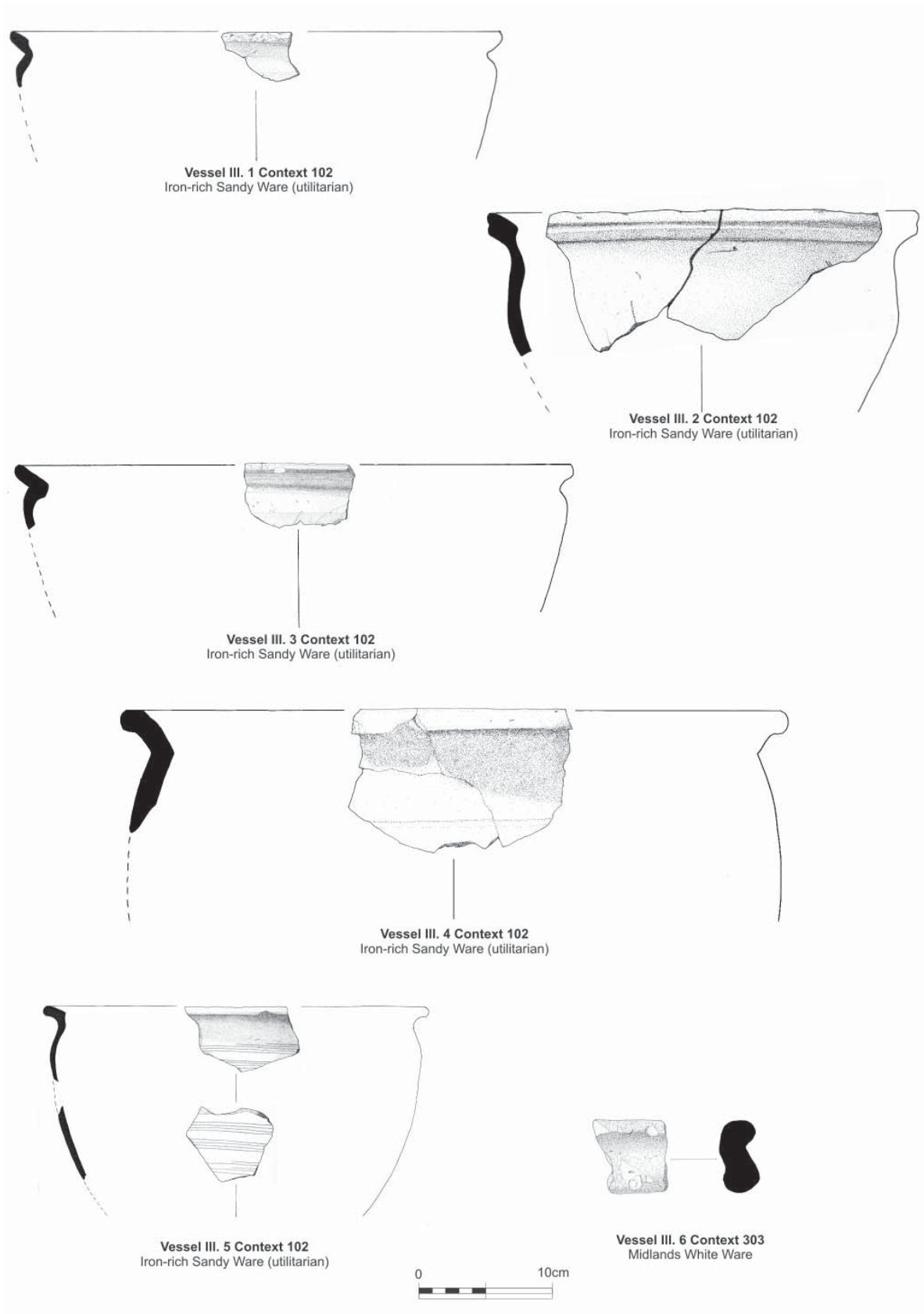


Fig. 5 Selected sherds from the medieval pottery assemblage

later context. A small number of sherds were given generic names, reflecting their unusual character and distinctiveness when compared with the irsw group.

As noted above, post-medieval, early modern and recent wares were represented by well-known and well-described ware types. They were recovered exclusively from (101) and (102), the topsoil and subsoil contexts. Such a distribution is common on rural sites and while it indicates activity in the area during these periods, it is difficult to be certain as to the nature of the activity.

Broadly speaking the assemblage seems to have a good deal in common with that recently published by Ratkai from the Lawn Farm moated site (Boothroyd 2006). The pottery consists of a range of typical local products which are found widely on domestic sites of all types. As usual with medieval pottery there is no element which can be identified as of anything other than mundane status. Regional imports were limited to the possible sherds of Stamford type ware and even these may be of local origin now that the link between Stamford Ware and the eponymous Lincolnshire town has been broken.

DISCUSSION

The features of key interest on the site are Structures 1 and 2, and their relationship with the pit sealed beneath Structure 1. Although not completely clear in form, Structure 1 most likely represents the stone flooring of a small circular building, and its position within an area bounded by low earthwork banks is indicative of occupation. The volume of pottery finds and animal bone from both within and above the structure is highly suggestive of domestic occupation and activity. Structure 2, close by to the house feature, is of a slightly different construction and, considering its position across the top of the earthwork bank, is more likely to represent an area of hard standing or truncated stone packed walkway. Nevertheless, the material culture, and particularly the ceramic assemblage, is very similar to that from Structure 1, suggesting at least broad contemporaneity between the features.

The pit feature which is sealed beneath Structure 1 illustrates there are at least two phases of activity associated with the deserted medieval village. The radiocarbon date, with the highest probability of it lying in the late 12th century AD, provides a useful terminus post quem for Structure 1. Along with the pottery evidence, this places the domestic occupation, represented by the earthwork remains and

revealed features, probably in the 13th-14th centuries. The pottery evidence suggests the abandonment of the settlement occurred within the 14th century as there has been little material dating to later periods recovered. Whilst it is tempting to align a 14th century abandonment with the principal outbreak of the Black Death in 1348-9, there are a significant number of other, more-prosaic tenurial changes which can also influence the abandonment and shrinking of medieval hamlets. The emergence of new manors, churches and changes in land ownership can all result in the movement of settlement foci. A corollary of this is that a short-lived hamlet, such as that observed at Casterne, may have shifted towards the subsequent hall or been replaced by an emergent settlement focus (e.g. Ilam) for a number of reasons.

The work undertaken at Casterne Hall has added a significant amount of new information to our corpus of knowledge about the site, and should also contribute to the overall picture of deserted medieval hamlets and villages in the region, especially in light of the chronology derived from the pottery assemblage and radiocarbon date.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Archaeological Research Services Ltd would like to thank all those involved in this project, in particular the landowners Charles and Caroline Hurt and Sarah Whiteley of the Peak District National Park Authority.

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