

Death and Taxes

The archaeology of a Middle Saxon estate centre at Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire

by Alan Hardy & Bethan Mair Charles

with contributions by

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Summary

Between 1993 and 2003, Oxford Archaeology (formerly Oxford Archaeological Unit) undertook a major programme of survey and excavation on the northern outskirts of the town of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire, uncovering extensive remains dating from the Middle Bronze Age to the late medieval period. This volume deals with the Anglo-Saxon and medieval remains.

Post-Roman occupation began as early as the mid to late 5th century, with scatter of Sunken Featured Buildings and a few associated pits. No obvious evidence was found to indicate any continuity between the late Roman and early Saxon occupation.

A possible brief interval in the 7th century was followed by the establishment of a large 8th-century complex of enclosures and buildings, along with other structures including a large malting oven. It is argued that this represents the infrastructure of a purpose-built tribute centre for a royal estate, a type

of site not hitherto recognised in England. While the quantity of material evidence of this period is modest, the character of it indicates that a wide variety of produce came into complex and was then redistributed rather than consumed on site. Evidence of other functions of the complex were revealed in the form of human remains – interpreted as execution victims, found in parts of the enclosure ditches.

At around the end of the 8th century the evidence suggests that the complex was abruptly and completely destroyed and the landscape cleared. The chronology as determined by the material evidence was augmented by a programme of radiocarbon and archaeomagnetic dating.

Starting in the 9th century, occupation resumed in the area, in the form of a scatter of farmsteads. Evidence was also found of a substantial pottery industry producing Late medieval Reduced Ware.

Acknowledgements

Any project that extends over more than a decade of fieldwork and post-excavation is bound to draw on the services of many people.

Most importantly we are pleased to gratefully acknowledge the central part played by the Duchy of Lancaster throughout the project. It speaks volumes for Duchy's appreciation of heritage and the importance of archaeology that it supported the work so generously through the years, right up to and including this publication. The Duchy's initial representative was Ken Parsons, who helped formulate the initial project strategy. His successor, Roger Whalley, saw the archaeological project through the fieldwork stage – his cooperation, patience and forbearance in the face of the increasingly complicated archaeology (and the increasingly complicated archaeologists!) were crucial to the success of the project, and our thanks are profound. Roger was succeeded by Nick Dart, who has overseen the final stages of the project with similar understanding and support.

The cast of archaeologists involved in the projects is long and varied. The project was initiated by David Miles, then director of Oxford Archaeological Unit, and was initially managed by Bob Williams. The later stages of the fieldwork were managed by Alan Hardy. A number of Site Managers have been heavily involved; Klara Spandl, David Score, Steve Lawrence, Emily Glass and Gerry Thacker all deserve our appreciation for maintaining such high archaeological standards in what were sometimes very difficult circumstances.

On the curatorial side the East Northamptonshire Planning authority was initially represented by Glen Foard, who was the architect behind the formulation of a research strategy for the project, and contributed much to the formulation of working hypotheses during the excavations. Latterly, his successor, Myk Flitcroft coped with the increasingly complex project, deftly walking the tightrope between client and archaeologist, between what was and what was not possible, and making valuable contributions to the understanding of the site.

The post-excavation programme drew on the wisdom and skills of a number of people apart from those credited. John Blair and the late Patrick Wormald directed their talents to the Middle Saxon puzzle, ensuring that the archaeological interpretation could fit into the historical and political context of the time. Andrew Reynolds' help in unravelling the puzzle of the woman's burial is much appreciated. Last but not least, Helena Hamerow read the draft text and offered wise and valuable advice.

The original post-excavation programme included specialists' contributions that were superseded by later work. Nevertheless, the efforts of Umberto Albarella of Durham University and Matthew Canti of English Heritage are not forgotten.

The authors are pleased to express their thanks to three metal detectorists who participated over the years, Mick Gardener in the early days, and more recently Mark Davis and John Grey. They contributed significantly to the understanding of the site, demonstrating that it is possible for archaeologists and detectorists to work together for the common good.

Alan Hardy would like to personally thank Paul Blinkhorn and Steve Lawrence for their efforts above and beyond their formal obligations.

To an archaeologist it is always rewarding when the local community lend support to a project such as this. On the evidence of the number of local volunteer diggers (among whom John Richardson deserves a special mention), the attendance both at the site Open Days (one of which took place on one of the coldest days for years), and at the subsequent evening lectures, the community of Higham Ferrers is due a large vote of thanks for their support. Alan Hardy would particularly like to thank Olwen Mayes, of the Chichele Society for her inexhaustible enthusiasm and energy, maintaining the local interest in the site long after the digging stopped. Thanks must also go to Doreen Holyoak, for valuable information on the origin of Kings Meadow Lane.

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