

Test pit excavation within currently occupied rural settlements: results of the HEFA CORS project in 2008

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This paper reports on the fourth year of the University of Cambridge Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) project which combines education and outreach (particularly within the secondary school sector) with the archaeological investigation of currently occupied rural settlements (CORS) by the excavation of 1-metre square test pits in open spaces (mostly private gardens) within areas currently occupied by settlement. Summaries of the results of the HEFA CORS project in 2005–7 have been published in earlier volumes of *MSRG Annual Report* (Lewis 2005, 2006, 2007a), while the aims and methods have been outlined and contextualised elsewhere (Lewis 2007b) and will not be repeated here.

2008

In 2008 a total of thirteen Field Academies were carried out in CORS in eleven parishes across six counties in eastern England (Fig 1). Test pit excavations were also carried out in two other counties, Kent and Derbyshire, as part of advanced HEFA courses or community-centred archaeological events. 167 test pits were excavated in total.

All of the East Anglian CORS investigated by the HEFA programme in 2008 were previously investigated by HEFA at least once between 2005 and 2007, thus the

2008 data recovered, expanded and consolidated that from previous HEFA excavations. Seven of the settlements investigated in East Anglia in 2005–7 were omitted from the HEFA programme in 2008 (Mill Green, Terrington St Clement, Hindringham, Thorrington, Thorney, Ufford and Wisbech St Mary). Further work on some of these settlements will be carried out in future years. In addition to the East Anglian sites, test pit excavations following the same methods and under the supervision of the same team were carried out in two villages outside this region: Smarden (Kent) and Castleton (Derbyshire).

This report provides a summary of the results of the HEFA CORS test pit excavations in 2008, with sites listed in alphabetical order by county and then by site name. These summaries build on those presented in earlier *MSRG Annual Reports* (Lewis 2005; 2006; 2007a) and the reader is referred to these for introductions to each settlement which are included when reporting on that place for the first time. Archive reports have been prepared for each settlement investigated in 2008 and data passed to HERs in each county. Fuller formal publication will take place at a later stage in the project.

Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire (NGR SP 995595)

Eleven test pits were excavated in Sharnbrook in 2008 (Fig. 2), bringing the total to date to sixteen. In 2008 the focus of investigation expanded further north up the

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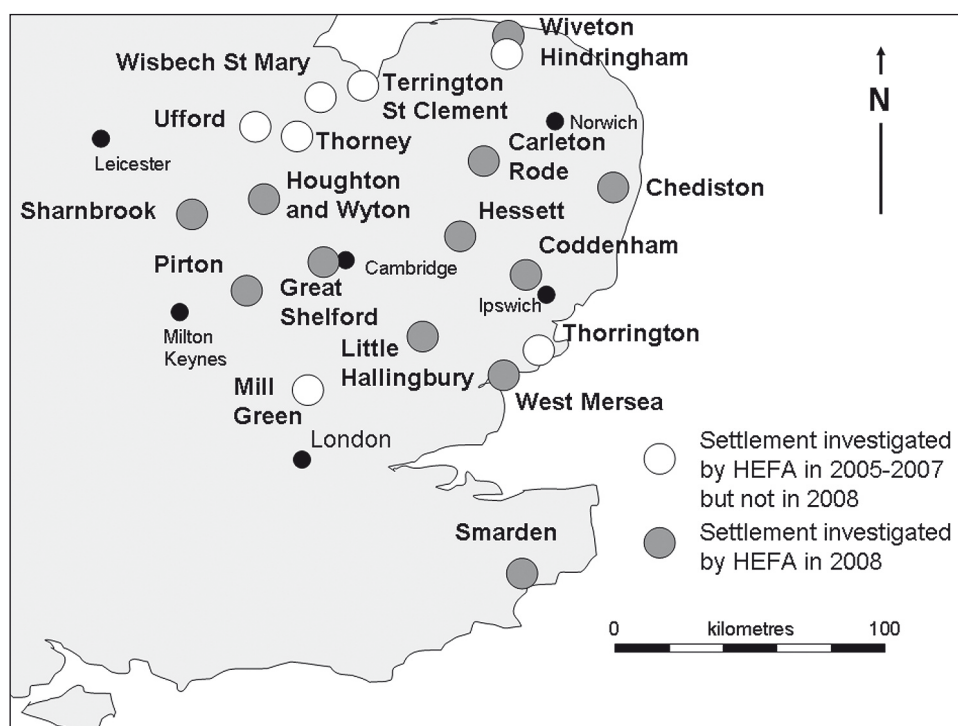


Figure 1 Map of southern England showing the locations of the 11 CORS investigated by the HEFA project in East Anglia in 2008.

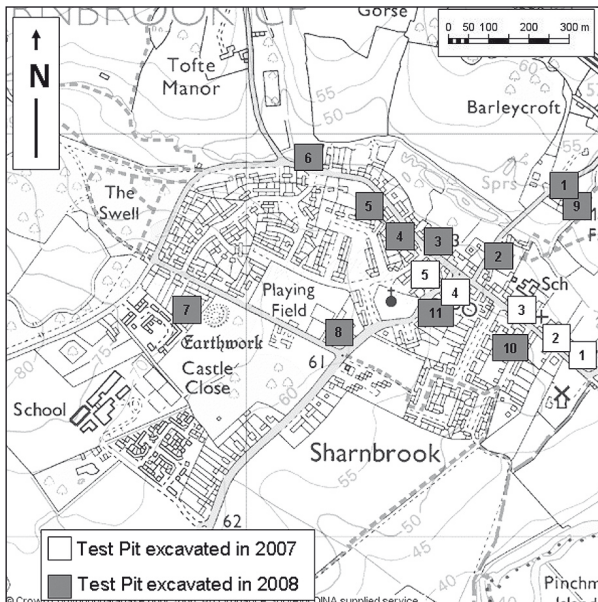


Figure 2 Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire, showing approximate locations of HEFA excavated test pits.

High Street and also encompassed other sites including one site near Castle Close, a probable medieval moated site (Beds HER 994) c. 0.5 km west of the church, and two at Manor Farm, c. 300m north-west of the present village.

As in 2007, no Roman material was recovered from any of the test pits and no further pottery of Iron Age date was recovered. Three test pits contained material dating to AD 850–1100, including Stamford Ware, Thetford ware and St Neots Ware, with pits SHA/08/4 and SHA/08/5, sited close together in the north of the High Street, producing five and four sherds respectively, suggest that this area may be a focus of later Anglo-Saxon activity in Sharnbrook. A sherd of Thetford Ware from SHA/08/1 is tantalising as possible evidence of pre-Conquest activity of some sort at Manor Farm, but this cannot with any confidence be assumed to be evidence of settlement in the vicinity without further investigation. However, eight sherds of pottery dating to AD 1100–1400 found on the same site from a single 10cm spit containing no later material (and therefore presumed likely to be undisturbed)) 70cm below the surface provides convincing evidence for settlement at this date on this spot, whose pottery sequence continues uninterrupted thereafter up to the modern day. Within the village, therefore, current evidence suggests that the settlement expanded north along the High Street in the post eleventh-century period, with the area immediately north of the cross-roads in the centre of the present village appearing to be less intensively used throughout the post medieval period. Unexpectedly little medieval pottery was recovered from the test pit near Castle Close. There is no evidence for any later medieval decline in either the village or at Manor Farm. No pottery at all post-dating AD 1400 was recovered from the Castle Copse test pit. Further test pitting will be carried out in Sharnbrook in 2009.

Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire (NGR TL 458518)

Eight new test pits were excavated in Great Shelford in 2008 (Fig. 3) by university students, adding to the twenty-three excavated in previous years. Most of these were sited in the area around High Green, in the north of the present village, c. 700m north-west of the church. Just one small (2g in weight) sherd of pottery predating the Norman Conquest was recovered, suggesting that this area is extremely unlikely to have been intensively occupied at this time, although it may well have been cultivated, with the presence of the recovered sherd resulting from manuring of arable fields. This is in notable contrast to the volume of ceramic material recovered dating to between c. 1100–1400, which convincingly indicates that this element of the settlement is a post-Conquest extension to an earlier settlement (possibly comprising two separate foci) to the south-west. The inference of post-13th-century decline, noted

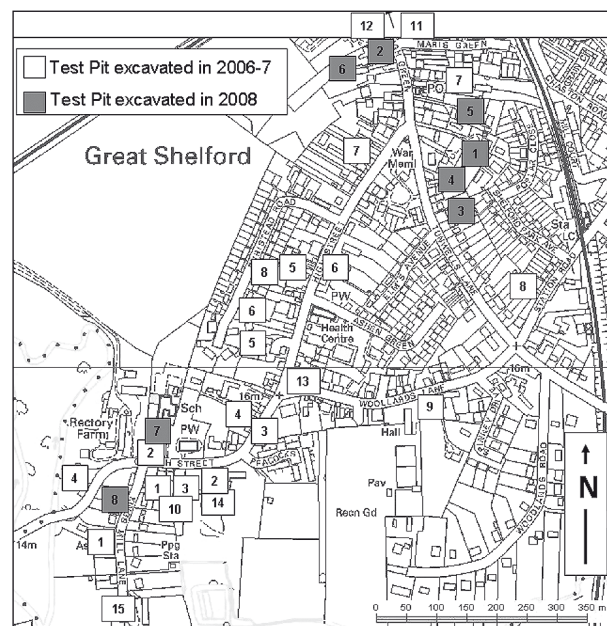


Figure 3 Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

in 2007 (Lewis 2007a, 49) was supported by data from the excavations of 2008, with almost none of the pits producing any ceramic material at all from this period. It now seems clear that Great Shelford experienced considerable contraction in the later medieval period, particularly in the then relatively newly established High Green area.

Houghton and Wyton, Cambridgeshire (NGR TL 281271)

Eighteen test pits were excavated in 2008 in the now-conjoined villages of Houghton and Wyton, bringing the total number of test pits excavated to thirty-seven (Fig. 4). An area of Iron Age activity with pottery spanning the middle and late Iron Age was identified between the two present villages, and more evidence was found for a linear spread of material of Roman date between the edge of the flood plain and the Huntingdon Road. A single

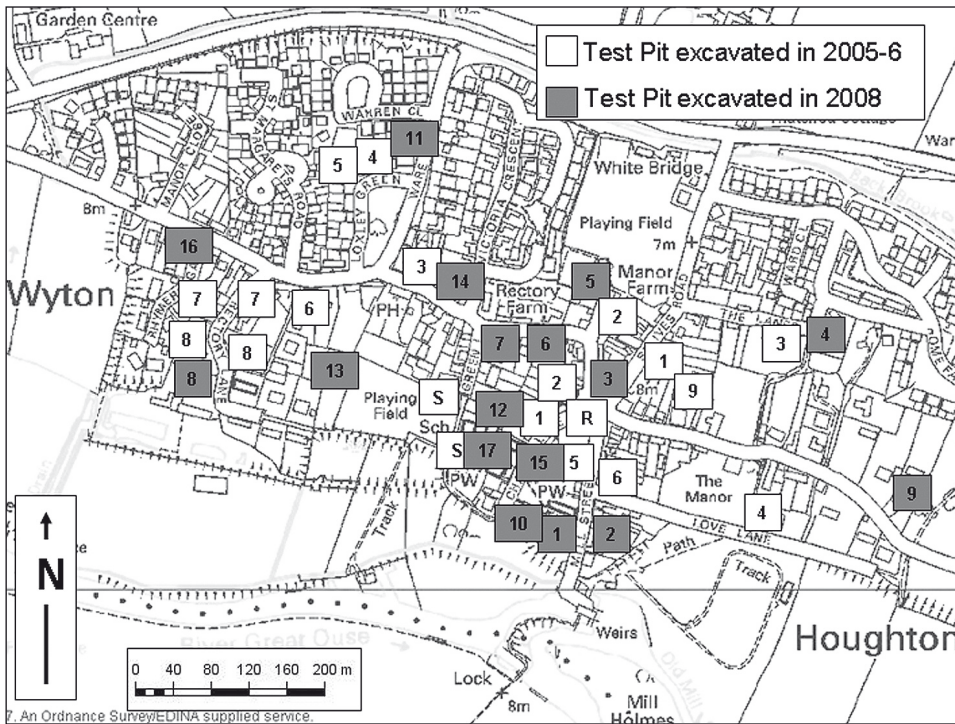


Figure 4 Houghton and Wyton, Cambridgeshire, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

sherd of early/middle Saxon ware dating to 6th–8th century AD hinted at the possibility that the earliest post-Roman settlement lay in the area immediately south-west of the present site of Houghton church. Settlement in Houghton in the 9th–11th centuries appears to have been focussed further to the north, between the church and Huntingdon Road, and seems to have been of a reasonable size, larger or more intensively occupied, it appears on current evidence, than Wyton.

Castleton, Derbyshire (NGR SK 151829)

Castleton is today a nucleated village in Derbyshire lying in the Vale of Hope in Derbyshire Peak District National Park. The village lies immediately north of Peverill Castle (SAM 13268), with the Peakshole Water river running around its west and north sides. The village thus occupies a position which is naturally both prominent and well-protected. Additional protection was afforded to the settlement in the medieval period by the Town Ditch (SAM 29937), which enclosed an area c. 1km square within which a small medieval town was regularly planned on a rectilinear gridded layout just outside the entrance to the castle. The Town Ditch is today visible as an earthwork feature on the north-west and south-east sides of the present village. Most of the rest of its former line can easily be traced in present property boundaries. The presence of the Town Ditch would also have served to emphasise the importance of the settlement which was the possession of one of the most important castles in the Peak District.

Six test pits were dug in Castleton in 2008 (Fig. 5) as part of an extended HEFA which involved secondary school participants from Cambridgeshire and Derbyshire working together. For the Cambridgeshire students, the excavation was preceded by two days exploring the surrounding landscape on foot to gain understanding of

its development over more than three millennia. The earliest ceramic material recovered was post-Conquest in date, but this was found in very small quantities: test pits CAS/09/2, CAS/09/3 and CAS/09/5 produced just a single abraded sherd each, with none found in any of the other pits. This scarcity in a village with attested medieval origins might seem unexpected, although exploratory excavations in Bradbourne in central Derbyshire produced analogous results (Cumberpatch 2008). That said, with only six pits excavated it is impossible to place any weight on any inferences from such a small sample. It is hoped that further work in 2009 will produce additional data which may throw more light on this issue.

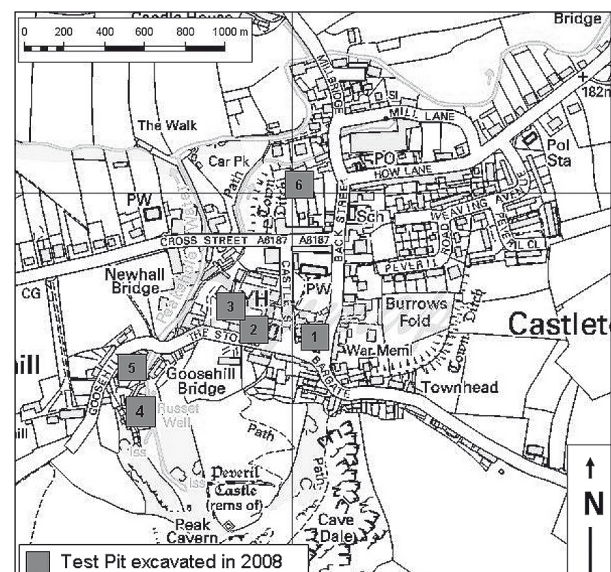


Figure 5 Castleton, Derbyshire, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

Little Hallingbury, Essex (NGR TL 503175)

Sixteen test pits were excavated in 2008 in Little Hallingbury, bringing the total to date to twenty-eight. Most of the 2008 sites were chosen in order to investigate places some distance away from the church, particularly three with ‘green’ elements to their names: Gaston Green, Wright’s Green and Mott’s Green. In contrast with the results of the 2007 HEFA CORS excavations (which produced middle Saxon pottery from two separate sites (Lewis 2007a)), no material predating the 13th century was recovered from any of the sites excavated in 2008. Later Anglo-Saxon material remained elusive: as in previous years, no evidence dating to between the 8th – 11th centuries AD was recovered from any of the excavated sites in Little Hallingbury, supporting the suggestion that activity in the later Anglo-Saxon period in the area occupied by the present village was minimal and/or non-intensive. In contrast, five separate sites (west of the church, Gaston Green, Wright’s Green, Mott’s Green and the moated site east of Wright’s Green) yielded pottery of post-conquest date, although only the latter produced more than five sherds. This hints at a dispersed pattern of activity, but possibly of a low intensity. Only in the post medieval period does activity seem to become more intensive (although apparently ceasing at Wright’s Green), to coalesce around the church and extend along the north-west to south-east oriented route which is now the main road through the village.

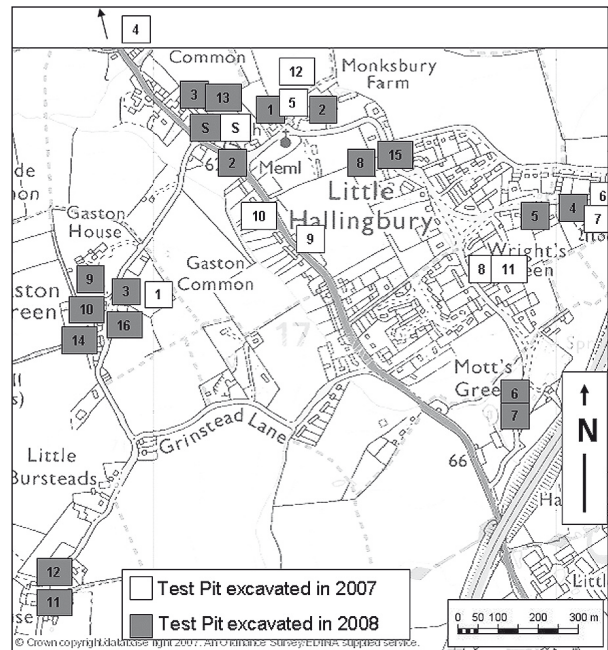


Figure 6 Little Hallingbury, Essex, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

these produced prehistoric pottery, and several yielded Roman material: activity in these periods seems to shift around within the central area of the present village, in a zone extending c. 500m north from the church. Two sites excavated in 2008 (WME/08/17 and WME/08/18) produced Ipswich Ware (c. 720 – 850 AD), derived in both cases from apparently undisturbed levels between 40–60cm below the surface containing no later material.

West Mersea, Essex (NGR TM 009125)

Twenty-two test pits were excavated in West Mersea in 2008 (Fig. 7), bringing the total to date to 38. Two of

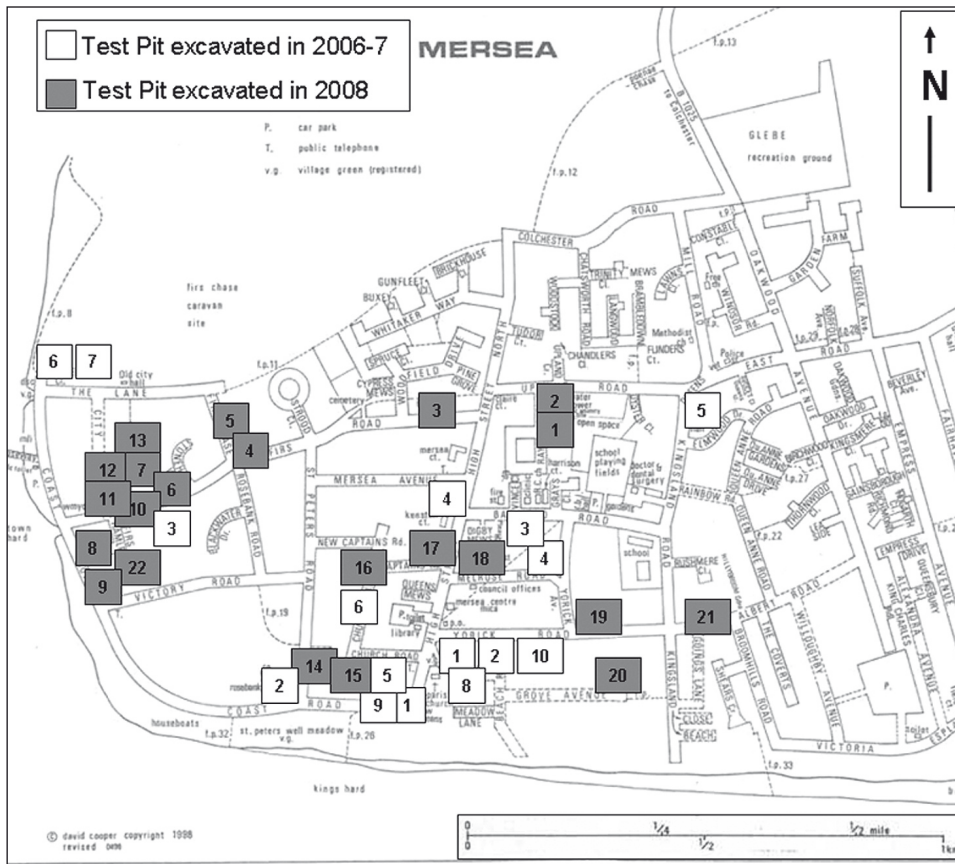


Figure 7 West Mersea, Essex, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

It seems likely this is an area of some sort of relatively intensive activity in the eighth or ninth century and might reasonably be inferred to represent settlement. Significant quantities of Roman material were residual in WME/08/18.

As in previous excavations, no material of late Anglo-Saxon date was found in any of the test pits. In the post-Conquest period activity at West Mersea seems to have been re-established, and included the area around the church and that c. 700m inland around WME/07/5. The 12th–14th century is also the earliest date for which material has been recovered from the westernmost part of the present village (most notably in WME/08/7 and WME/08/9), suggesting that this area may have come into existence at this time, with occupants probably exploiting its shore-edge location. Only one site (WME/08/9) produced more than five sherds of pottery, however, suggesting that this apparently scattered activity at West Mersea may have been of quite low intensity. In the 15th and early 16th centuries the focus of activity appears to shift to become almost exclusively seated along the shore-edge, with activity decreasing or ceasing altogether c.100m inland from the present shoreline. Pottery from the 16th century (most notably from WME/08/9) includes Dutch, Spanish and German wares, suggesting that international trade was a significant element in the economy of West Mersea at this time.

Pirton, Hertfordshire (NGR TL 145315)

Twenty-three test pits were excavated at Pirton (Fig. 8) in 2008, a considerable advance on the five dug in 2007. Many of these were excavated by local residents and members of the Manshead Archaeological Society, using the same methods and under the same University of Cambridge supervision as the HEFA test pits. Evidence for the later Anglo-Saxon period was considerably amplified compared to that recovered in 2007: eleven pits produced material of this date, including PIR/08/1,

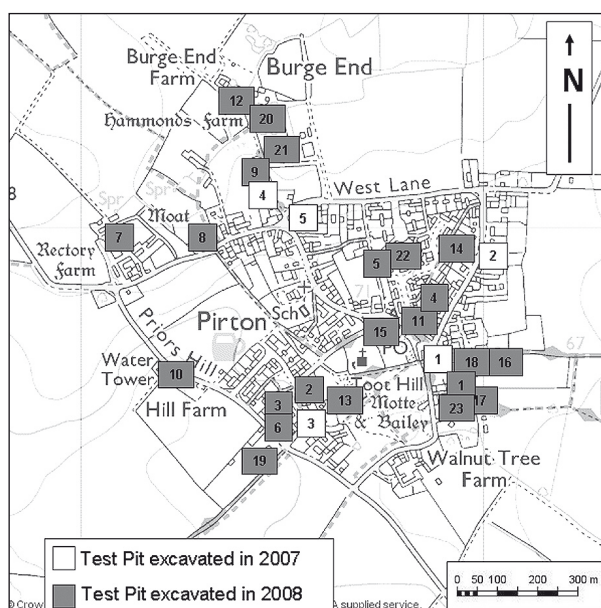


Figure 8 Pirton, Hertfordshire, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

PIR/08/17 and PIR/08/23 which all produced significant quantities (more than five sherds) of pottery dating to the ninth to eleventh centuries from undisturbed levels, strongly indicating the presence of settlement of later Anglo-Saxon date in this area. The area between the present church and West Lane also produced enough ceramic material to posit the present of some sort of more intensive activity in this area. Taken with the evidence from 2007 (Lewis 2007a), settlement at Pirton in the later Anglo-Saxon period appears to have been quite extensive, (although not necessarily continuous) and intensive in some places, in the east of the present area of settlement. It appears to be taking the form of a nucleated settlement, although its size is difficult to establish on current evidence.

The centuries following the Norman Conquest saw a dramatic expansion in both extent and intensity of activity at Pirton as represented by pottery finds, with nearly all excavated pits producing significant quantities of ceramic material dating to between AD c. 1100–1400. Notably, this is the first period for which any of the pits west of the castle have produced pottery and it is interesting to note settlement expansion and intensification coinciding with the construction of the castle. Equally dramatic is the contraction in activity in the 15th century, indicated by an almost complete dearth of pottery of this date: a total of just eight sherds have been recovered from the twenty-eight pits excavated to date. By the 17th century, however, a recovery seems to have taken place as the volume of pottery recovered is once again high from nearly all excavated test pits.

Smarden, Kent (NGR TQ 880243)

Smarden lies in east Kent c. 18km west of Ashford and c. 21km south-east of Maidstone. Smarden village is today a predominantly linear settlement centred along the High Street which kinks around either side the churchyard at its western end. The western limit of the village is defined by the River Beult, a tributary of the River Medway, which runs immediately west of the churchyard. Examination of the plan suggests that the High Street was formerly a wide triangular market place laid out east of a square enclosure around the present church. The alignment of this enclosure does not reflect the east–west alignment of the church and might thus be inferred to pre-date it. A long block of regularly-shaped rectilinear properties on the south-east side of the churchyard and market place appears to represent a planned block of settlement fronting on the market place. If this interpretation is correct, the properties which now lie on the south side of the High Street must represent infilling of the original market place. Modern development has expanded the village out along the three main roads from the church, with additional expansions set back from the main road outside of the original historic core.

The area around Smarden is quite wooded, and characterised by arable fields with numerous outlying farms. The parish contains more than 100 listed buildings of which more than sixty are situated in the village itself. (<http://abcgis1.ashford.gov.uk/website/PlanningWebA/viewer.htm> (map accessed February 2009)). Previous archaeological investigations in the parish of Smarden

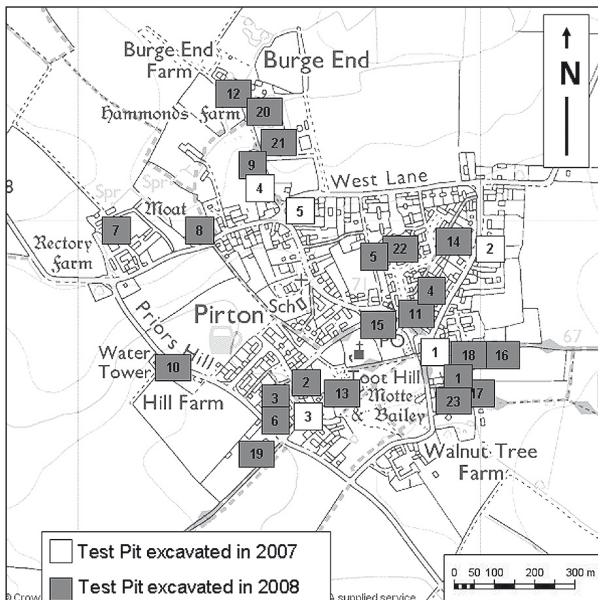


Figure 9 Smarden, Kent, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

have been very limited, although field walking c. 1km south-east of the village in a field to the east of Vesperhawk Farm, just north of the River Beult, revealed a range of artefacts including prehistoric worked flints, Roman pottery, medieval pottery and brick, with post medieval pottery and tile (Alex Ferris, Smarden Historical Society, pers comm.).

Ten test pits were excavated in Smarden in 2008 by village residents using the same methods and under the same University of Cambridge supervision as the HEFA test pits (Fig. 9). All but two of these were in the gardens of properties on the south side of the High Street in the area of the putative former market place. None of the pits produced any pottery pre-dating the 11th century, but seven of the eight produced pottery dating from 1100–1225 onwards, although material of this date was found in minimal quantities in SMA/08/1, SMA/08/3 and SMA/08/5. It is interesting to note that these all lie north of the posited edge of the triangular market place, and give tentative support to this inference. The most notable finds of medieval date came from SMA/08/1, where nearly thirty medieval and post-medieval silver coins were found between 10cm and 30cm below the surface.² Preliminary inspection by Dr Martin Allen (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) indicated that these ranged from the Short Cross coinage of 1180–1247 to the reign of Charles II. Dr Allen stated that an assemblage of this character is quite atypical of a hoard, unless the coins represent scrap silver deposited in modern times. In most respects they resemble metal detector assemblages from relatively large productive sites such as markets or fairs, except that there is a complete absence of jettons which is highly unusual in archaeological contexts with significant numbers of medieval coins (Martin Allen, Fitzwilliam

² More than 70 other coins of similar date were found in the same location around twenty years ago by children then living in the house while playing in the garden. These have been loaned to the HEFA team and passed to Martin Allen at the Fitzwilliam Museum for reporting alongside the coins found in the test pit excavation.

Museum Cambridge, pers comm.). It is notable that the great majority of the other finds in the levels in which the coins were found were of 19th or 20th century date, with only one tiny (4g) sherd of pottery predating AD 1500 found in spit 2 (10–20 cm below the surface): this would normally be interpreted as residual and unlikely to indicate intensive activity in the vicinity. On the basis of all evidence available to date, the coins have been tentatively interpreted as the remains of a deliberately and selectively assembled collection (probably of Victorian date although possibly more recent) of pre-1700 silver coins, favouring the 12th and 13th centuries. It is impossible to say whether these originally came from Smarden. It is ironic that a collection of coins from an area believed to lie within a former market whose profile fits what might be expected from a medieval market appears to be a collection of much later date which may have no connection with Smarden at all.

Carleton Rode, Norfolk (NGR TM 115925)

Another twelve test pits were excavated in Carleton Rode (Fig. 10) in 2008, bringing the total to twenty-five. The evidence from these very closely mirrored that from 2007, supporting the inferences made then regarding the development of the settlement: no Roman material was found in any of the pits, while pottery of late Anglo-Saxon date was once again found only in the Flaxlands area of the present village. Nearly all of the pits in this area produced significant quantities of post-Conquest pottery. The only entirely new discovery was a shallow cut feature which contained pottery of late Iron Age date in the upper fill and was tentatively interpreted as the drip gully of a round house. The spatial limits of the settlement in AD 1100–1400 appear to be marked by a sharp decrease in the number of sherds recovered between CRO/08/11 and CRO/08/7 (from nine in CRO/08/10 and twenty-seven in CRO/08/11 to just one in CRO/08/7 and CRO/08/8). This seems likely to mark the edge of village and the beginning of the

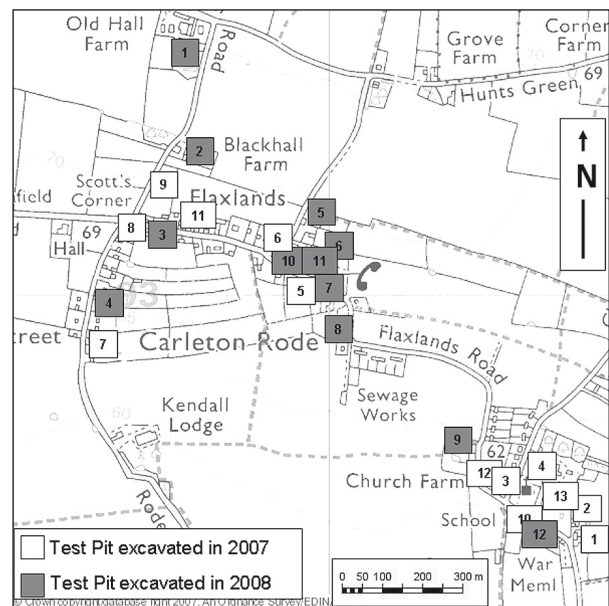


Figure 10 Carleton Rode, Norfolk, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

non-settlement land (probably the arable fields), which encompassed the area around the church which has still produced only three sherds of pottery from nine test pits. The marked decline in activity by the 15th century noted in 2007 is also clearly evident from the 2008 data, with a total of just seven sherds dating to AD c. 1400–1550 recovered from the twenty-five excavated sites.

Wiveton, Norfolk (NGR TG 043428)

Eleven test pits were excavated in Wiveton in 2008 (Fig. 11), building on the twelve excavated in 2006 and bringing the total to twenty-three. Roman pottery from WIV/08/9 complimented that found in 2006 in WIV/06/3 and WIV/06/4 and supports the suggestion that this central part of the present village was a focus of activity in the Roman period. Activity in the ninth to eleventh centuries seems to have focussed in the area west of the present church, with single finds of Thetford ware elsewhere (WIV/08/9 and WIV/06/1) interpreted as likely to result from non-intensive activity such as arable cultivation or horticulture. Excavation in 2008 supported the inference made in 2006 of considerable expansion in the post-Conquest centuries followed by marked contraction by 1400 which lasted for at least 150 years, after which the settlement saw a marked revival. The importance of trade to the economy of this settlement was demonstrated by one test pit close to the former river shoreline (WIV/08/5) which produced large quantities of pottery spanning AD c. 1100–1650, including twelve sherds of Grimston ware (c. 1100–1400) and, most notably, around 60 sherds dating to AD c. 1550–1600. The majority these was German or Dutch, and this suggests very strongly that the site was near to a wharf where these goods were unloaded, with items broken during transportation being discarded. On this site also, there are notably fewer sherds dating to AD 1400–1550, the period of inferred late medieval contraction.

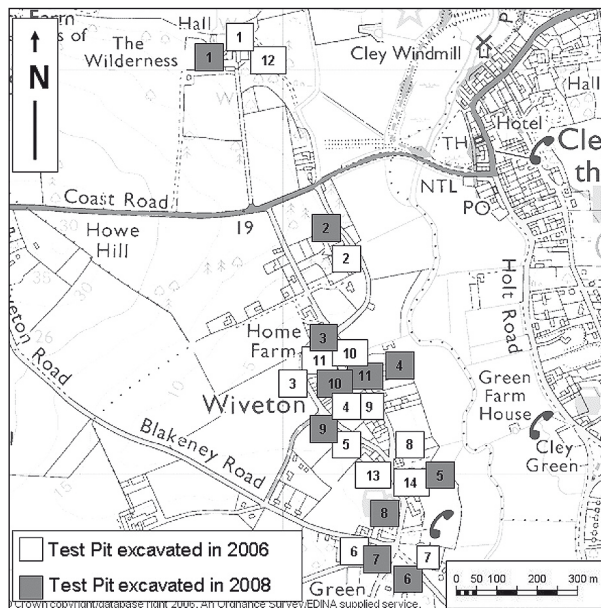


Figure 11 Wiveton, Norfolk, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

Coddenham, Suffolk (NGR TM 133545)

Nine test pits were excavated in Coddenham in 2008 (Fig. 12), bringing the total to date to thirty. New sites included two near Hall Farm, c. 600m east of the of the present village core around the church, and three at Choppins Hall, c. 1km to the north of the present village centre. Excavations in 2008 confirmed patterns noted from those in 2006 and 2007, with a core of intensive early and middle Anglo-Saxon activity likely to represent settlement north-west of the church growing in size and expanding north from the ninth century to the 14th, with marked contraction from the late 14th century not reversed until the post-medieval period. One of the pits at Choppins Hall produced two sherds of Thetford ware in a context with large fragments of animal bone and a late horseshoe dating to between AD 1000 and 1200 and was tentatively interpreted as evidence that this outlying site was occupied in the later Anglo-Saxon period, and may

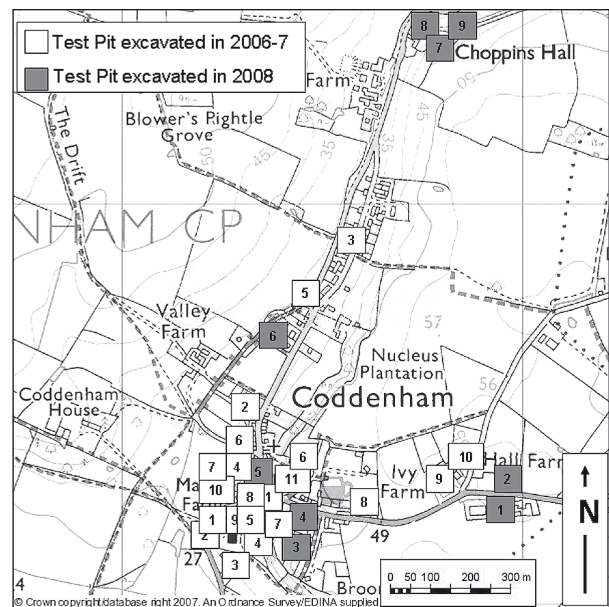


Figure 12 Coddenham, Suffolk, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

therefore have been part of a more dispersed pattern of settlement extending up the valley north of the main settlement which may have been more nucleated in form. In contrast, the earliest pottery recovered from the other outlying site, Hall Farm, dated to AD 1100–1400, the same as at the adjacent moated site of Ivy Farm, suggesting that this part of the settlement pattern may have been of post-Conquest origin.

Chediston, Suffolk (NGR TM 355775)

Nine test pits were dug in Chediston in 2008 (Fig. 13), bringing the total excavated over three years to thirty. As at Coddenham, new areas investigated in 2008 included sites outside the present village at Chediston Hall (CHE/08/1); the moated site of Chediston Grange (CHE/08/2 and CHE/08/3); Bridge Farm (CHE/08/4) and Packway Farm (CHE/08/5). With the exception of CHE/08/1, these all produced small amounts of Thetford ware (AD 850–1100). Although none produced more

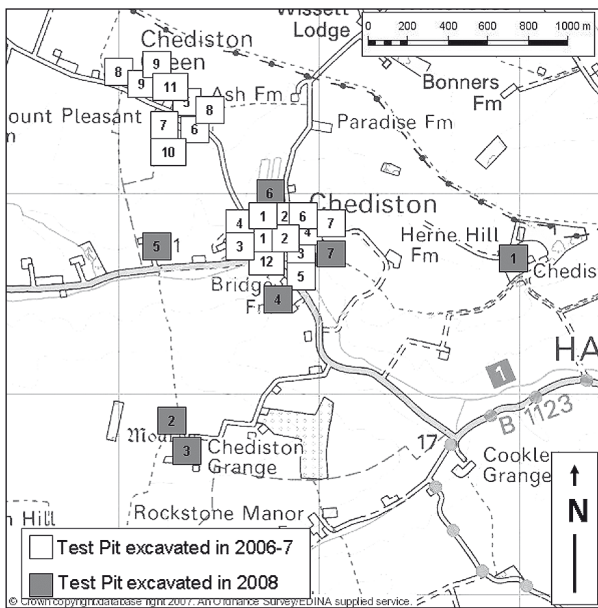


Figure 13 Chediston, Suffolk, approximate locations of HEFA test pits excavated in 2006.

than a single sherd, at Bridge Farm and Packway Farm these came from low levels with no evidence of disturbance post-1550, likely to represent undisturbed medieval deposits. It is difficult to know how to interpret these data, but they are provisionally considered to hint at the possibility that these elements of the settlement pattern may have been in existence before the Norman Conquest. Less uncertainty relates to their occupation in the post-conquest period which is well-attested by ceramic finds. All three sites also appear to have continued to be occupied throughout the later medieval period, with significant quantities of later medieval transitional ware found. Although it should be noted that a kiln producing such pottery existed in Chediston Green, it is nonetheless unlikely that it would have made its way to these sites in these quantities had they been abandoned at this date.

Further pits excavated in 2008 in the present village core near the church and in Chediston Green supported suggestions based on test pitting in 2006 and 2007 that only Chediston was occupied in the later Anglo-Saxon period, with Chediston Green coming into existence in the 11th–14th centuries, during which time it may have been of a similar size to Chediston. Neither settlement was large, with pits on the sites of the outlying farms producing as much if not more pottery than those in Chediston or Chediston Green. There is here increasingly convincing evidence for a dispersed pattern of settlement existing throughout the medieval period, growing from roots established perhaps as early as the 9th century. The site of Chediston Hall (CHE/08/1) appears to be a new introduction in the 16th century.

Hessett, Suffolk (NGR TL 936618)

Twelve test pits were excavated in Hessett in 2008 (Fig. 14), bringing the total over three years to twenty-seven. Outlying sites west of the present village included The Heath (HES/08/6–HES/08/9) and a nearby moated site (HES/08/5) were investigated as well as others within the

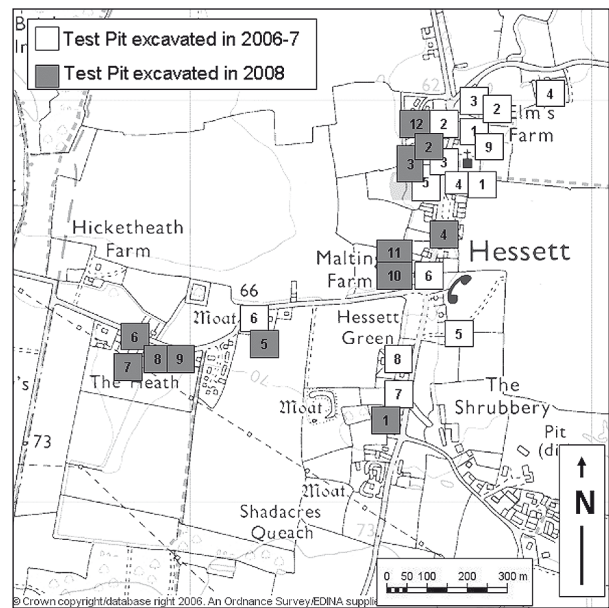


Figure 14 Hessett, Suffolk, showing approximate locations of excavated test pits.

present village. Just a single tiny sherd (1g) of Roman pottery was found, confirming earlier inferences that the area of the current settlement was not intensively used in the Roman-British period. The only sites to produce pottery of 9th–11th century date were those within c. 100m of the church, suggesting that a nucleated settlement here in the late Anglo-Saxon period may have taken the form of a single row, as few of the sites east of the road past the church have produced pottery of this date, in contrast to those on the west of the road, almost all which have done so, and in quantities likely to indicate settlement rather than less intensive use. The moated site east of the Heath, Maltings Farm, Elm Farm and Hessett Green all appear to come into existence in the 11th–14th century, with the area of the Heath only coming into more intensive use from perhaps the mid-17th century. Here then, the origins of the dispersed elements of the settlement pattern appear to date to the post-conquest period.

Conclusion

HEFA test pitting in 2008, excavating more than 160 test pits in eleven settlements, has continued and expanded investigations into English CORS which was begun in 2005 and 2006. In several instances the focus of investigation in places which have seen excavation as part of the HEFA CORS project over several years has expanded beyond the main areas of the existing settlements to encompass also outlying foci of more dispersed settlement, with interesting results. Interesting patterns are starting to emerge regarding the relationship between Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest settlement (Lewis forthcoming); the development of dispersed patterns of settlement; the character of the nucleated village; and the fortunes of rural settlements in the later medieval period. Detailed consideration of these is beyond the scope of this paper and is still premature while work on most sites is intended to continue. Archive reports (held by the Department of Archaeology,

University of Cambridge) have been prepared for each settlement, and details of the HEFA 2007 test pit sites and the pottery reports for each of the sites investigated to date are available on www.arch.cam.ac.uk/aca/fatpf/evidence.html.

Test pit investigation in most of the settlements excavated in 2008 will be continued in 2009. The results of these excavations, and those on any other sites investigated as part of the University of Cambridge CORS project will be reported in the next *Medieval Settlement Research*.

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