

A Salvage Excavation at Huncote, Leicestershire

by Patrick Clay

Disturbed burials and wall foundations discovered during a watching brief at Cheney End, Huncote, led to a salvage excavation. This revealed timber and stone phases of an ecclesiastical building believed to be the Chapel of St. James, a Chapel of Ease with a mother church at All Saints, Narborough.

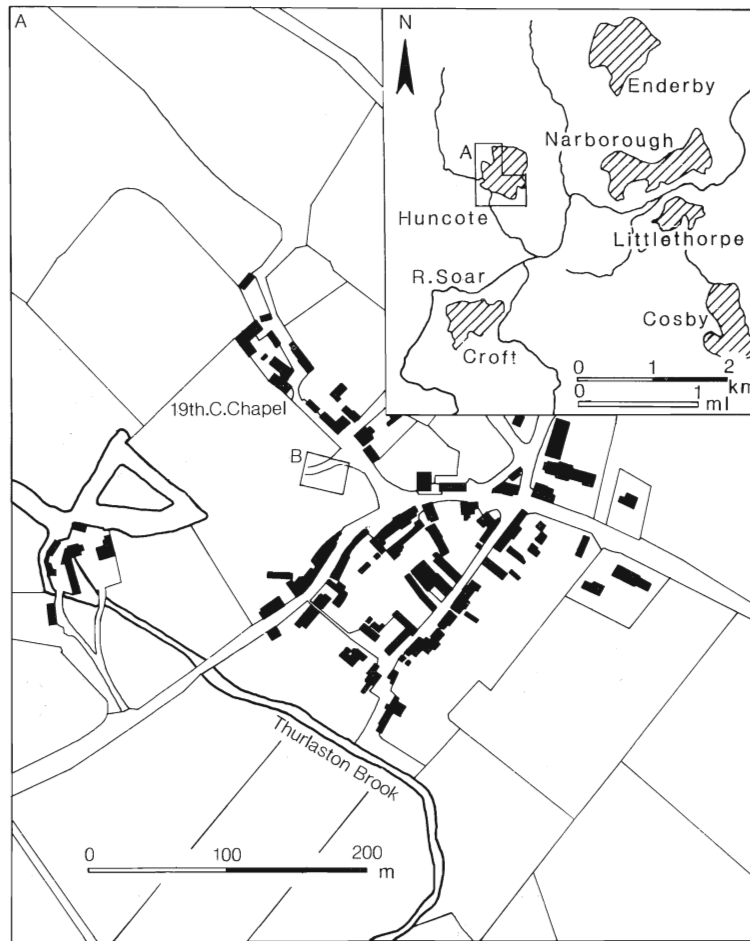
Introduction

In February 1990, human bones were discovered during topsoil removal by Hassall Homes Ltd. in advance of a housing development on the site of Hall Farm, Cheney End, Huncote. Leicestershire Museums, who had already arranged to undertake a watching brief, were then contacted by the site foreman. The bones were located within an area of 0.5 sq.m. in a shallow pit, and, from their disarticulated state, appeared to have been redeposited. Fragments of medieval tile, pottery, wall plaster and painted window glass were recovered from the area around the bones. The human bones were taken for examination by the police who, after consultation with the Department of Anatomy in the University of Leicester, confirmed that they were over 200 years old. A watching brief, undertaken by R.P.Jarrett for Leicestershire Museums, revealed another disarticulated burial and, to the north, stone foundations associated with worked stone, roofing slate, painted window glass, wallplaster and medieval ridge tile. In view of this, Hassall Homes Ltd very kindly suspended work in the area of the foundations to allow investigations by Leicestershire Archaeological Unit with the help of an Employment Training team and volunteers. This work was undertaken over two weeks in March 1990, directed by Patrick Clay, with the emphasis on excavating and recording features which would be entirely destroyed by the development. The finds and archive are deposited with Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service (Accession No. A26.1990). Some subsequent recording during the excavation for a gas main was undertaken by Mr B Shore and part of this is included here (illus.2 Areas B-H).

Location (illus.1)

Huncote is situated 5 miles (8.5km) to the south west of Leicester and 1 mile (1.5km) west of Narborough, on the western side of the Soar Valley immediately to the north of Thurlaston Brook, a tributary of the Soar, at a height of 76m O.D. Cheney End is located to the west of the present village (SP 515 974). The substratum of the site was a fine alluvial sand with some pebble inclusions.

The name Huncote derives from an Anglo-Saxon personal name Huna and Cot(e). However, in this context 'cote' need not mean cottage or cottages but may represent a



1. Location plan

short form of 'cotlif' meaning village. It is possible that the present day parish of Huncote represents a land grant to a 'Huna' during the 10th or 11th century (J.Bourn pers.comm.).

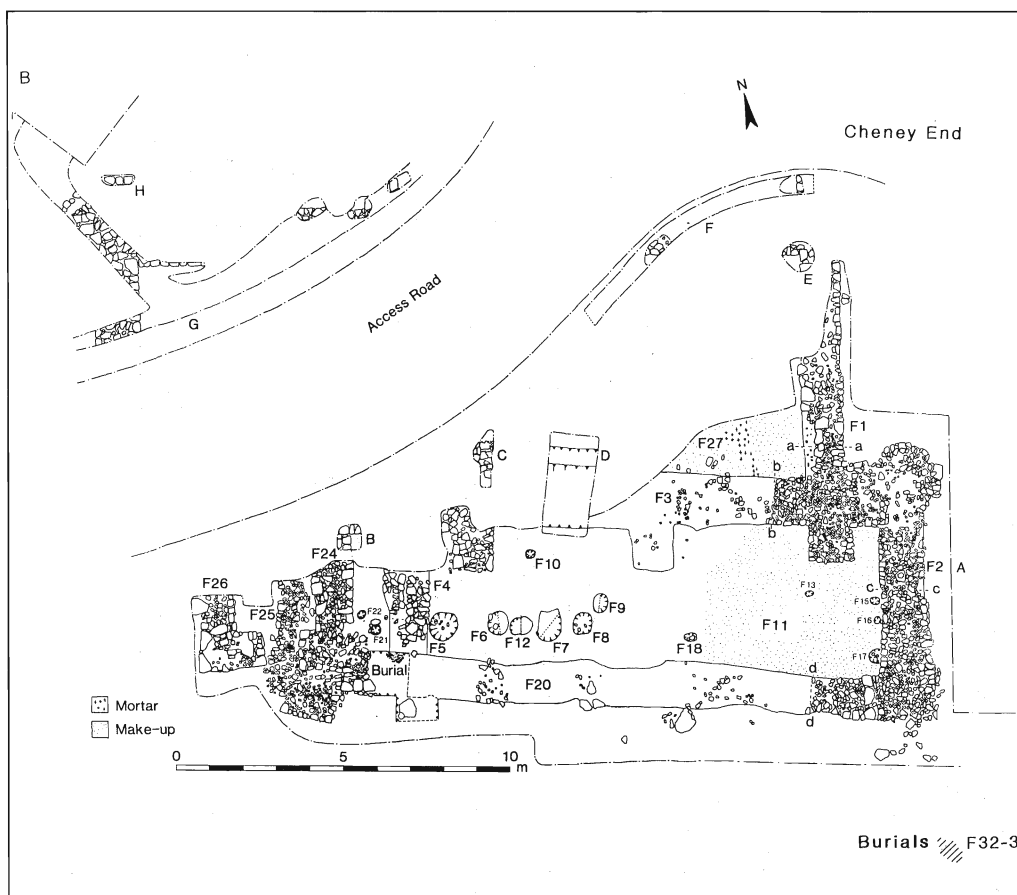
The Excavation (illus 2)

Although only a small area (250 sq.m.) was examined, a possible sequence might be suggested as follows:

Phase 1

Post holes: F12 (27,57); F21 (32,59); F22 (31,60); F5 (19,44); F6 (18,45); F7 (16,46); F8 (15,47); F9 (14,48); F10 (13,49); F18 (26,56)

The earliest archaeological features revealed on the site consist of a group of ten post



2. Plan of areas excavated

holes located to the south of the Phase 2 buttressed building. These varied between 0.25m and 0.60m in diameter with a surviving depth of 0.15-0.45m. Nine of these formed a line orientated east-west. The only material located within the fine clay loam fills of these features consisted of a single sherd of Potters Marston pottery dating from c.1100 and roof slate from F5, and a fragment of slag from F22.

Phase 2

Foundation trenches: F1 (6,12,40); F3 (11,36,42); Floor: F27 (33); Make up: F11 (4,5,7)

Stone foundations were located to the north of the site bounded by a new access road south west of Cheney End. These consisted of a wall (F3), partially robbed to the west, with three buttresses, on an east-west orientation. The foundations were 1.4m wide and 0.7m deep and consisted of granite blocks and flint pebbles with clay and mortar bonding. To the east the wall turned to the north (F1) with another buttress opposite the east-west wall (F3). F1 again consisted of granite blocks, pebble and clay bonding with

the remains of a superstructure to the wall perhaps surviving as large ashlar blocks located along the eastern edge of the foundation trench. To the north west, mortar floor and rubble foundations (F27) were partially revealed, containing two sherds of Potters Marston pottery dating from the 12th or 13th century, whilst spreads of construction debris, F11, were present to the south. Two fragments of 13th century ridge tile (Chilvers Coton and medieval sandy ware) were recovered from the foundation trench of F1.

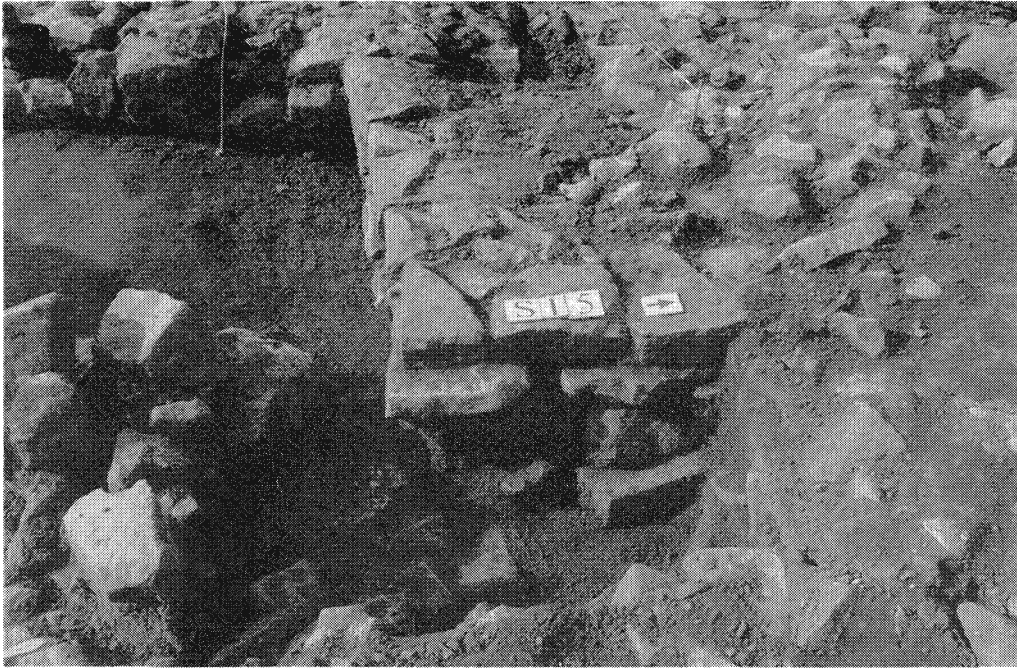


3. East end of the building looking south, showing Phase 3 extension, F2, (left) with possible staircase base (lower left)

Phase 3

Foundation trenches: F2 (3,41); F20 (29,58); F25 (63); F4 (9,43) Post holes: F13 (21,51); F15 (23,28,53); F16 (24,54); F17 (25,55)

Wall foundations were revealed of a rectangular building orientated east-west abutting the eastern buttress of F3. This consisted of wall foundations (F2, F20 and F25), of



4. End of Phase 2 buttress, F3, to east with Phase 3 extension, F2, partially removed

granite with sand and clay bonding 1.55m wide by 0.65m deep which had been extensively robbed along the east-west orientated wall to the south. Rounded corners, possibly indicating staircase bases, were revealed to the north east and south west. The foundations differed from F1 and F3 in the use of smaller and more irregular facing blocks along the edges. Mortar bonding was not present within these foundations. The only datable material from these foundation trenches consisted of a sherd of Saxo-Norman Stamford ware. Post holes F13, F15, F16 and F17 adjacent to F2 and F20 may have been associated with construction of the stone building. To the west a narrow partition wall, F4 running north from F20 was located. This had very shallow foundations 0.30m deep and consisted of unbonded granite rubble and pebble. A possible robbed buttress was present opposite F4, south of F20.

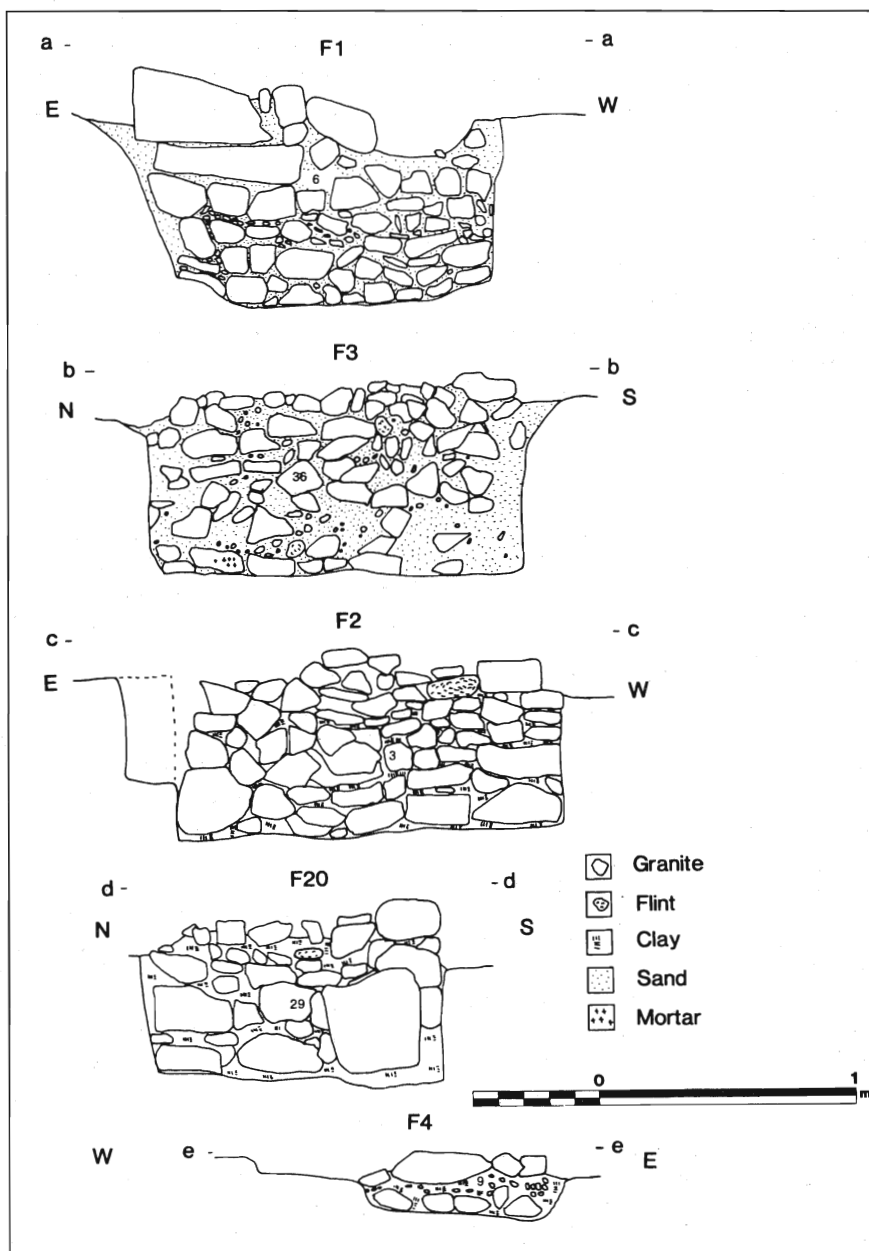
Phase 4

Wall foundations: F24 (62); F26, (64)

Overlying the wall foundations of F20 to the west, two further walls (F24, F26) 1.3m wide were located. These formed a rectangular area 4.5m wide with a gap 1m wide in the southernmost wall which might be interpreted as an entrance.

Phase 5

Wall Robbing: F20 (1,34); F3 (10,20); F4 (30,67) Burials: F32 (65); F33 (66)



5. Sections through wall foundations

Robbing of the wall foundations is evident in walls F3, F4 and F20. Material from these robbing phases includes slate, plaster, window glass, medieval and post-medieval pottery and tile and a medieval bone parchment pricker (see below p20). A redeposited group of human bones was revealed in the robbing phase of F20 adjacent to F4 whilst cranium

fragments from a child were also located in F20 to the east. The redeposition of the burials (F32, F33) first located on the site may have taken place during the phase of abandonment indicated by the robbing. It may be inferred from the presence of some post medieval pottery in F20 (see below p21) that some robbing may have taken place as late as the 19th century.

Discussion

The limited excavation revealed the south eastern corner of a stone building. Further observations by B. Shore suggest that the stone foundations were also present 5m to the north and 10m to the north west. Assuming that these foundations were associated with those revealed in the excavated area, a Phase 2 building c.6m wide by 20m long might be postulated. The limited dating evidence recovered from the excavation, might suggest the following sequence. Phase 1 consisted of post holes perhaps suggesting a timber building phase dating to c.1100. This was replaced no earlier than the 13th century by a stone building with buttresses (Phase 2). The building was extended to the south by the addition of an annexe (Phase 3) which was later rebuilt to the west with the addition of further stone walls (Phase 4). From their form and location these Phase 4 foundations may be evidence of a tower. Material recovered from the site suggested that the building was constructed of local Croft granite with predominantly slate roofs and ceramic ridge tiles. Painted window glass and painted wall plaster were also incorporated into the building. Scorch marks on the window glass and wall plaster might suggest that the building was burnt during its abandonment.

Although only a small part of this building was revealed and any interpretation as to its function and chronology must be tentative, there is some evidence for its use and identification. The presence of burials, albeit disturbed and of unknown date, together with a substantial stone building associated with painted window glass and wall plaster suggests that this is probably an ecclesiastical building. As scribes were often members of the clergy the presence of a parchment pricker (see below p20) might reinforce this interpretation.

The location of this building indicates that it may be a medieval chapel which, it is believed, was situated close to this area. Oral information from Huncote residents suggests that the ruins of the chapel were still visible in the early 19th century (Leicester Mercury, 1954). This might be confirmed by the excavation where a single sherd of 19th century pottery was present in the robbed wall trenches (see above). However Hall Farm is also within the grounds of a manor house and earthworks are present to the south west. A further stone building has been revealed to the south (M Shore pers.comm.) which may be associated with the manor house complex.

The first known reference to a chapel at Huncote dates from 1143 when it is recorded as having been given to Leicester Abbey: 'Of the gift of Roger (Beaumont) Earl of Warwick the church of Narborough (Narburch) with its chapel of Huncote (Hountecote) and all its appurtenances, and was charged with a pension 20s' (Thompson, 1949, 6). A 1220 reference is known from the Matriculus of the Archdeaconry of Leicester which mentions that All Saints Church, Narborough had a chapel at Huncote which used to be served three days in a week from the mother church (Lincoln Record Soc 3, 243). Further references are known from the fourteenth century (Nichols, 1811, IV ii, 819) including one of 1346 to the 'chapel of St. James at Huncote'. A gift to the chapel of Huncote is also mentioned in a will of the 2nd August 1527 (Lincoln Wills II). The Chantry Certificates for Leicestershire for the years 1545-6 mention that the Chantry

Priest for Huncote owned land which might reflect that he was priest for an important building (A.A.S. 30, 528). By 1622 the chapel is described as “ruinated and decayed” and the site retained the name of Chapel-yard (A.A.S. 30, 820). Reference is made to a visit to the site of the chapel in 1634 (A.A.S. 29, 513).

Chapels attached to mother churches are sometimes known as Chapels of Ease although they are usually found in areas where the daughter settlements are a long distance from the mother (J Bourn pers. comm.). In the case of Huncote the mother church is in the adjacent parish of Narborough. This ecclesiastical relationship between the church at Narborough and the chapel at Huncote suggests that Narborough was the earlier settlement, although Huncote is mentioned in Domesday Book while Narborough is not (Morgan, 1979, 9-10).

The size of the building revealed during the excavation might appear to be very substantial for a chapel attached to a mother church. However the size of the chapel would be dependent upon the population it was serving and the wealth of the diocese. Similarly the presence of the burials might appear curious as the normal practice would be to bury the dead at the mother church. However there is no evidence that this was strictly enforced and the burials, all of which were disturbed or redeposited, cannot be securely dated.

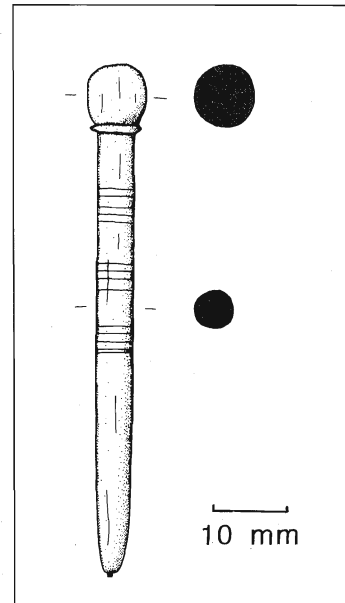
The location of this chapel might have influenced the later siting of the Victorian chapel of St. James the Greater constructed in 1898 on Chapel Lane only 50m north west of the site. Granite was used in the construction of this building which still stands, although only the chancel and two bays of the nave were completed (Pevsner, 1984, 182). It might be speculated that the granite used in this building derived from the nearby foundations of the abandoned chapel of ease.

The Finds

A Bone Parchment pricker

A bone parchment pricker was recovered from the fill of the robbed phase 5 wall F20 (illus 6). This has been lathe turned and has a spherical head with incised line decoration around the shank. An iron point is present at the tip. These objects are known from various medieval contexts including Norwich, (Clarke and Carter, 1977), London (Tatton-Brown 1974) and Bordesley Abbey (Rahtz and Hirst, 1976) and have been described as styli. However a more plausible explanation is that they were parchment prickers as discussed in MacGregor (1985,125). These were used to help space out the columns and horizontal lines used as guidelines for medieval scribes. A series of small pricked holes along the edge of the manuscript would then be joined by ruling with another point. Great care was taken in the layout of these manuscripts and the use of parchment prickers allowed several leaves to be laid out identically at the same time.

Although pre-Conquest examples are known, most similar items are from 13th or early 14th century contexts.



6. Bone parchment pricker, scale 1:1

The Post Roman Pottery and Tile

Deborah Sawday

The excavation produced eleven sherds of stratified medieval pottery, one sherd of post-medieval stoneware, eight fragments of medieval ridge tile and nine fragments of roof tile, as well as over 50 sherds of unstratified pottery and 23 unstratified tile fragments.

The fabrics are described in Woodland 1981 and Woodland 1987, save for the Stamford ware which corresponds to fabric A at Stamford, where it was the most common of the Stamford fabrics from the early 10th to the late 11th century, (Kilmurry 1980). Not surprisingly, the bulk of the material consists of Potters Marston ware- the site being approximately 2.5km (1.5 miles) from the 13th century kilns at Potters Marston (Haynes, 1952) - though the industry is now thought to date from c.1100 if not earlier on typological grounds. An unstratified straight sided bowl rim in this fabric may well be 12th century in date.

The unstratified material also includes a ridge tile with a looped type V crest, thought to date to the 14th century (Allin 1981), in medieval sandy ware 3.

Table 1:

The Post Roman Pottery by fabric with: minimum vessel no./sherd no./weight (grams)

Phase	1	2	3	5
Feature/Context	F5(19)	F27(33)	F2(3)	F20(1,34) F4(30) F3(10)
Medieval				
Stamford 3			1/1/2	
Potters Marston	1/1/10	2/2/10		3//3/57 1/1/27
Chilvers Coton 1				1/1/5
Cistercian 2				1/2/5
Post Medieval Stoneware				1/1/5

Table 2:

The medieval ridge tile by fabric with: minimum tile no./fragment no./weight (grams)

Phase	2	5	modern
Feature/Context	F1(6)	F3(10)	(2), (8)
Potters Marston			1/3/160
Chilvers Coton 1	1/1/7		
Chilvers Coton 2		1/1/7	
Medieval Sandy 3	1/1/45	1/1/60	1/1/22

Table 3:

The late medieval – early post medieval roof tile by fabric with: minimum tile no./fragment no./weight (grams)

Phase	2	5	
Feature/Context	F27(3)	F3(20)	F4(30)
Medieval Sandy 3 Earthenware	1/1/3	1/1/105	3/7/257

The Skeletal Material

Identified by Ian Baxter

In addition to the human burials mentioned above (p13) fragments of a disturbed burial of a child were found in F20 (phase 5). Bone from cattle and sheep or goat was present in the robbed fill of the wall F3 (phase 2), possibly indicating the use of the robber trench for rubbish disposal.

Acknowledgements

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