INVESTIGATING THE ORIGINS OF GREAT EASTON, LEICESTERSHIRE: COMMUMITY ARCHAEOLOGY MEETS THE ‘BIG DIG’.

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On Sunday June 22nd 2003, the inhabitants of Great Easton in the Welland Valley, in southeast Leicestershire, together with professional archaeologists from the University of Leicester and Channel 4’s Time Team, undertook a one-day field work investigation to try to establish the origins of their village and to chart its subsequent development. In conjunction with geophysical survey, a total of 41 metre-square test pits and two machine-excavated trenches were opened up across the village and dug to a maximum depth of 0.6m or until archaeology or natural was encountered (Fig. 1). Pits 14, 23, 35 & 44 were not excavated.

Although most of the archaeological features recorded were modern (with the notable exceptions of a late Roman or Early Anglo-Saxon cobbled surface from Test Pit 3 and medieval plot boundaries in Trench 40) the artefactual material from the investigation has added considerably to the existing body of knowledge gathered by the Great Easton Fieldwork Group (Burningham and Wallis 2004, Fig. 1) over the last 20 years. This, along with more recent developer-funded opportunities, allows us to trace this focus of settlement back to the Roman period or later Iron Age (Fig. 2).

Analysis of the pottery assemblage and its distribution has confirmed and complemented the findings of earlier work, which suggested the existence of a Roman period settlement (probably with an Iron Age antecedent), in the north-eastern part of the village, on higher ground around the church and immediately to the north in Lount’s Crescent. The presence of an Iron Age settlement is based on previous findings of two sherds of scored ware and two of shell-tempered pottery of this date from the area of the cemetery behind Lount’s Crescent. Added to this was the recent discovery of a beehive quern from the garden of 6, Church Bank as well as a single sherd of scored ware from the Brook on the southern edge of the village. However, a developer-funded evaluation of land at between Clarke’s Dale and Brookside Farm on the south-western outskirts of the village in 2006 produced an assemblage of 26 sherds of Iron Age pottery, and together with material from a separate watching brief in the adjacent area of the farm in 2004, produced eight Roman sherds, one early Anglo-Saxon, thirteen Saxo-Norman sherds and 27 of medieval date.

The greatest concentration of Roman period pottery from previous work had been from the churchyard and from Lount’s Crescent, totalling 40 sherds
Fig. 1. Location of 'Big Dig' test pits in Great Easton, June 2003.
Fig. 2. Collated distribution of pottery by period from the 'Big Dig', previous fieldwork by the Great Easton Group, and subsequent developer-funded work by University of Leicester Archaeological Services.
including a second century samian ware bowl, although two other concentrations are worth noting. The first of these was a group of twenty-one sherds from a plot on the corner of Broadgate and the High Street at the north end of the village about 100m west of Lount’s Crescent. The second comprises thirteen sherds, which were recovered from beside the Brook on the southern edge of the village, close to where Banbury Lane runs down to it, in the same location as the Iron Age sherd mentioned above. The finds by the Brook might suggest erosion of middening activity rather than actual buildings in this low lying location, but significantly the scatter also contained an early Anglo-Saxon sherd, six Saxo-Norman, and twenty medieval sherds.

During test pitting roman pottery was recorded from Church Bank, Cross Bank and in the north west of the village on Broadgate, as well as the Backfield. Pottery of this date had not previously been recovered from Church Bank or the Village Field. These isolated findings could represent the results of the manuring of infield plots surrounding the settlement.

The early Anglo-Saxon pottery from Test Pit 3 in Lount’s Crescent, whilst consistent with earlier finds from that garden and the adjacent churchyard, needs to be put in the wider context of earlier, field-walked finds from the modern cemetery and fields, immediately to the northeast of this site, and fields to the north of the village (see Liddle 1994, Figs. 9.1 and 9.2), close to the proposed line of a Roman road). The association of very late Roman pottery with early Anglo-Saxon pottery in the same contexts in Test Pit 3 is suggestive of continuity of the Roman period settlement into the Early Anglo-Saxon period (c. AD450–650). The good condition of the four Saxon sherds suggested that the surface being exposed was a feature of that date and that the abraded Roman material was residual.

The subsequent development of the Early Anglo-Saxon settlement and its exact relationship with the eleventh century settlement documented in Domesday, is difficult to trace. This is because we cannot identify pottery, which is diagnostically from the period c.650–850 (the Middle Anglo-Saxon), and hence we cannot identify sites of this period. It may be that the region simply does not use pottery during this period (becomes aceramic), or that the pottery fabrics continue unchanged from the Early Anglo-Saxon period. The situation becomes clearer in the Late Anglo-Saxon period with the beginning of production at nearby Stamford, Lincs. However, analysis of the present assemblage by Deborah Sawday only identified one example of the earliest products of the industry, which came from Pit 28 at 5, Cross Bank (dated 10th-12th century). It would appear then, that the majority of the material belongs to the very late Anglo-Saxon and Norman period c. AD 1050 to 1200, and that there is therefore a potential gap of up to 400 years in the village’s early development that we cannot fill archaeologically, although documentary evidence suggests that the origin of the church is much earlier than the Norman and 13th century fabric suggests.

The Saxo-Norman pottery assemblage from the test pits is nevertheless impressive. Previously, about forty Saxo-Norman sherds (predominantly Stamford Ware) had been identified from various parts of the village, but particularly to the rear of properties along the southern side of Cross Bank, including the Sun Inn (12
 sherds), and along the west side of Brook Lane (10 sherds), but none along the line of High Street itself. The previously known distribution of medieval sherds intensified the impression that most activity lay at the south end of the village and beside the Brook, with a further concentration continuing up around the church. However, finds from the test pitting programme have demonstrated that Saxo-Norman and medieval activity was widespread throughout the village and, importantly, was indicated in the rear of properties along the line of High Street, Church Bank, Cross Bank and Broadgate.

There was a significant concentration of Saxo-Norman pottery from the Village Field. Most of this derived from the long machine trench (Trench 40), mainly from contexts (3) and (4), identified as possible boundary features or early furrows, and so is a reflection of volume of deposit removed rather than actual concentration. The crucial point is that rubbish was accumulating in plot boundaries in the eleventh century, and that land division within the village was already well established by at least this time. How much earlier it was actually established is a moot point. Detailed survey in the adjacent parishes (the Medbourne Area Survey, Liddle 1996, 5) has established a pattern where Stamford ware is not present on any of the sites which we recognise as Early Anglo-Saxon, unless they subsequently become medieval villages. This would indicate that a reorganisation of the landscape takes place during the Middle Anglo-Saxon period (the eighth and ninth centuries), which leaves many of those sites abandoned whilst the remainder become the nucleated villages around which field systems are developed. The distinct lack of settlements that we can recognise as Middle Anglo-Saxon is probably due to the fact that they lie underneath the present day villages.

During the post-Conquest period and the following three centuries, pottery supply appears to continue to come largely from the south and east, particularly from the Stanion-Lyveden production area in Northamptonshire, rather than from contemporary Leicestershire producers such as Potters Marston to the west.

The distribution of medieval pottery is less concentrated in the Village Field area and is more evenly distributed through the entire village. One possibility is that the Village Field may have gone over to permanent pasture, or that changes in rubbish disposal patterns saw greater organisation of the manuring of the surrounding open fields, alongside limited disposal in rear garden plots. One notable gap in the distribution of medieval material is the area on the north side of Cross Bank in southern centre of the village which confirmed suspicions of earlier work and may suggest that this area was within a larger, open centre (green) of the village which was reduced in size later on.

The general medieval distribution pattern is echoed in the occurrence of distinctive later medieval fabrics such as Midland Purple and Cistercian ware dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth century, none of which was retrieved from the Village Field. It is interesting to note that these wares are being supplied from areas to the north and west at some greater distance than in previous centuries (e.g. Ticknall on the Leicestershire/Derbyshire border).

During the post-medieval and modern periods rubbish disposal, which given the huge rise in consumption, must have become a problem, began to be organised
more centrally with the establishment of specific rubbish tips by the Victorian period as discovered to the rear of Church Bank.

The Big Dig is a unique example of a one-day investigation of a medieval village on this scale and might be usefully compared to longer term pieces of fieldwork employing the same methods as on the Whittlewood Project in Northamptonshire (Jones 2004). The survey throws up more questions than it answers, and it would clearly be advantageous to continue work in the village, particularly in areas around the church, as well as the north-western part of the village which was not comprehensively sampled, but has produced material in the past. The study does show the potential for application of this technique in other villages and acts as a model for the involvement of the public in discovery of their own heritage to go alongside the longer term benefits of ‘community archaeology’ programmes such as that already running in Leicestershire for the last 25 years (Bowman and Liddle 2004).

NICOLAS COOPER and VICKI SCORE are both members of the ULAS team.

REFERENCES


Burningham, B. and Wallis, A., 2004 The work of two local fieldwork groups, in Bowman and Liddle, 10–11.


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