

# SEDFORD: EXCAVATIONS OF A RURAL SETTLEMENT IN NORFOLK

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The Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project (SHARP) is an unfunded, volunteer staffed project which began in 1996. SHARP's remit is the study of the full extent of human settlement and land use within the parish of Sedgeford, NW. Norfolk (Fig. 1a–b). The project has worked on many different aspects of the study area, including surveying the parish church and excavating within the post-Conquest settlement, but the main focus of work has remained a field to the south of the River Heacham. Known as Boneyard Field, it is here that the Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon phases of the settlement are to be found, and a contemporary Christian burial ground (Fig. 1c). This is the site that forms the subject of this paper.

The later medieval phases of Sedgeford cluster around the Norman parish church in the west of the settlement (Fig. 1b). Boneyard Field, a focus of Early-medieval settlement, lies on the opposite side of the river in an area that has remained undeveloped. The only later feature to have affected the site is a dam across the river, created at around the time of the Norman Conquest, which flooded the area upstream to create fishponds and reed beds, and to protect the growing settlement-area downstream. The investigation of the reasons behind this settlement shift remains one of the project's main research objectives.

## EARLY WORK ON BONEYARD FIELD

The earliest reference to archaeological features in Boneyard Field dates from 1913. The owner of Sedgeford Hall, Holcombe Ingleby, wrote of his discovery of eight inhumations at a location he described as being 'near my house'. He also commented that 'many skeletons have from time to time been exhumed along the side of the stream that runs through Sedgeford Valley', although he gave neither sources for these earlier discoveries or their locations.<sup>1</sup> When his daughter donated some of the human remains to the Royal College of Surgeons, she produced a map showing the location of the site (marked with a cross). The position given for the burials coincides with the area of the Boneyard Field, and it is assumed that they were a part of the burial group discussed below.

The first assessment of the archaeological potential of the Boneyard Field was in 1954, when ploughing revealed human remains. The Norfolk Research Committee

<sup>1</sup> H. Ingleby, *The Charm of A Village* (London, 1920).

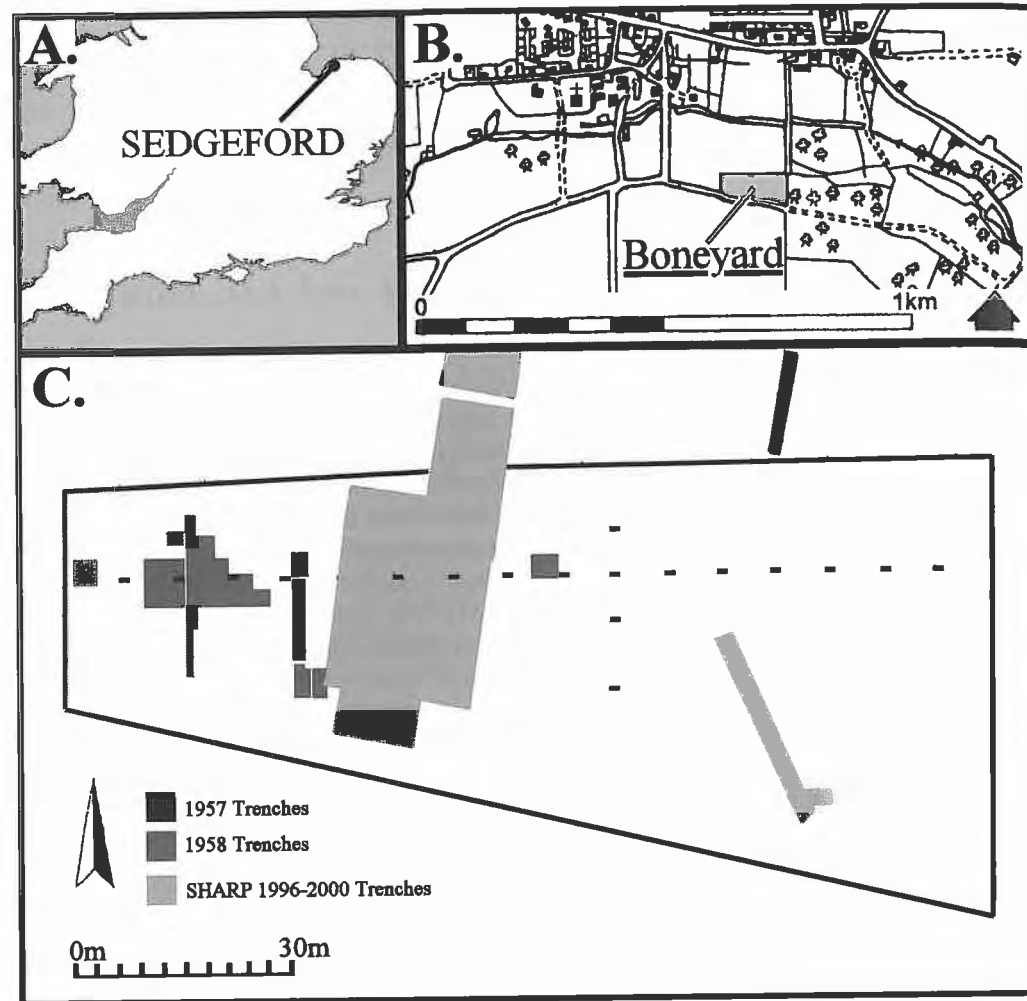


FIGURE 1. Location map. (a) Site location; (b) Boneyard Field, Sedgford; (c) Areas of excavation in Boneyard Field.

evaluated the site and limited excavations identified the existence of a Middle or Late Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery.<sup>2</sup> A newspaper account at the time reported that the remains were 'equally spaced, [and] showed no signs of hasty burial'.<sup>3</sup> Although it has not yet been possible to examine the material archive, there is no doubt that these inhumations should also be considered a part of the Boneyard Field skeletal assemblage.

Further excavations were carried out in the Boneyard Field in 1957 by J. G. Hurst. Two rows of trial trenches were dug across the field, one running N.-S. and

<sup>2</sup> MONARCH Database No. 641022.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ancient graves found at Sedgford', *Eastern Daily Press*, 6 April 1954.

the other E.-W. (Fig. 1c). A number of skeletons were unearthed from the eastern side of the field and settlement evidence in the form of wattle-and-daub and midden debris was located in the western side. It was decided that more extensive excavation was required and this was conducted by Dr Peter Jewell in the summer of 1958.

Jewell's excavation was never fully published, but SHARP was fortunate enough to obtain his notes and a draft excavation report before his death in 1998.<sup>4</sup> Guided by the 1957 test pits, he excavated areas of both cemetery and settlement (Fig. 1c). Although he was unable to link the two areas stratigraphically, he identified several phases of activity within each zone. He noted that several of the excavated skeletons were stratified above a horizon containing sherds of Ipswich Ware and that all of the burials were oriented W.-E. in unfurnished graves. He concluded that they were Christian burials of a Middle Anglo-Saxon date. None of the excavated burials were overlain by any discernible settlement deposits, although Jewell was confident that there 'was little doubt that the cemetery was contemporary with the habitation'.<sup>5</sup>

Jewell also detected two phases of activity in the settlement area of the site. The first phase was a series of interconnected gullies, one running E.-W. with several smaller gullies running off it, down the slope to the north. A second phase of activity which post-dated the silting up of these features involved the construction of a long timber building, half of the foundation trench of which was completely excavated. Traces of burnt daub were found within the foundation-trench and the building had a doorway which was 2 m wide, flanked by large post pits along its southern side. Jewell stated that the first settlement phase — the gullies — could be dated to the Middle Anglo-Saxon period by Ipswich Ware (produced from the early 8th to mid-9th centuries),<sup>6</sup> but he was less confident about the date of the foundation trenches of the timber building. These contained more Thetford-type Ware (produced from the 9th to late 11th centuries) than Ipswich Ware, suggesting a Late Anglo-Saxon date for when they fell into disuse.

#### THE RECENT EXCAVATION

The geology of the Boneyard Field consists of a loose glacial subsoil of sand and gravel. The subsoil grades to a fine sand towards the bottom (N.) of the valley. The site has produced large numbers of Middle Anglo-Saxon to Late Anglo-Saxon features. Interpretation of the site is complicated by a number of post-depositional processes.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> D. M. Wilson and J. G. Hurst, 'Medieval Britain in 1958', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 3 (1959), 298.

<sup>5</sup> P. A. Jewell, 'The Excavation of a Middle Saxon Occupation Site and Burial Ground at Sedgford, Norfolk' (unpubl. rep., nd.), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson and Hurst, op. cit. in note 4.

<sup>7</sup> Boneyard Field presents various problems in interpretation. The slope of the site from south-east to north-west has resulted in colluvial build-up varying in depth from 0.4 m in the south to almost 2 m in the north. This has mixed artefacts and transported pottery downhill. It can be difficult to recognize cut features above the level of the natural sand, some of which must have been cut through earlier colluvial layers. Damming of the river has stained areas of sand a dark grey colour, making the detection of cuts especially difficult. There has also been significant bioturbation of the site by rabbits, while deep ploughing has truncated the archaeology along the top of the slope.

The current excavation, which has uncovered an area measuring 65 m x 25, has produced evidence for a number of phases. The earliest phase is represented by large quantities of residual late Iron-age pottery (Belgic-type wares) and by one or two datable Iron-age features.<sup>8</sup> Following this, the site seems to be abandoned for some time.

The main Early-medieval phases are:

1. Middle Anglo-Saxon Christian burial;
2. Two main phases of Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon structural and drainage features;
3. A Late Anglo-Saxon midden, and an area possibly relating to some informal industrial process.

#### *The Middle Anglo-Saxon cemetery*

The earliest phase of the Anglo-Saxon site consists of 161 inhumations in varying degrees of preservation (Fig. 2a). These burials are oriented W.-E. and are without grave goods, consistent with Christian burial practice. The arm- and leg-positions of many burials suggest tight shrouding. In the east of the excavation area there are also coffin burials, which exhibit more 'bone tumble' and occasionally have iron coffin-brackets *in situ*. It is not clear whether these burials were also shrouded inside the coffins.

The most concentrated area of burial is to the north of the site, near to the river and on fairly flat ground. Here, a total of 61 burials has been excavated, with at least four intercutting phases, within a 5 m x 10 trench. Although the extent of the cemetery has not yet been defined, this would appear to be the most densely occupied burial area. This area was certainly reused, whereas burials further up the slope rarely intercut. None of these burials are dated by association with artefacts, but an initial radiocarbon date from a burial early in the sequence has provided a date of cal. A.D. 600-760 (GrN-25159).

A Middle Anglo-Saxon start date for the cemetery, possibly as early as the 8th century, is well supported by the artefactual evidence from the later settlement phases. The majority of the small finds date to the 8th and 9th centuries, providing a useful *terminus ante quem* for the burials, but it must be remembered that there is considerable post-depositional disturbance.

#### *The Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement*

The two phases which immediately post-date the cemetery appear to represent the margins of an area of residential or light industrial occupation (Fig. 2b). The lighter shaded features form the earlier phase, while the darker ones truncate them, but artefactually they are of very similar character. Jewell also observed two main phases of cut features in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup> The earlier phase appears to include elements of severely truncated structures and N.-S. drainage gullies. The structural evidence has

<sup>8</sup> It is envisaged that this phase will become a focus of SHARP research in the next few years. Publication of the 2003 Sedgeford hoard is in hand.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. in note 5.

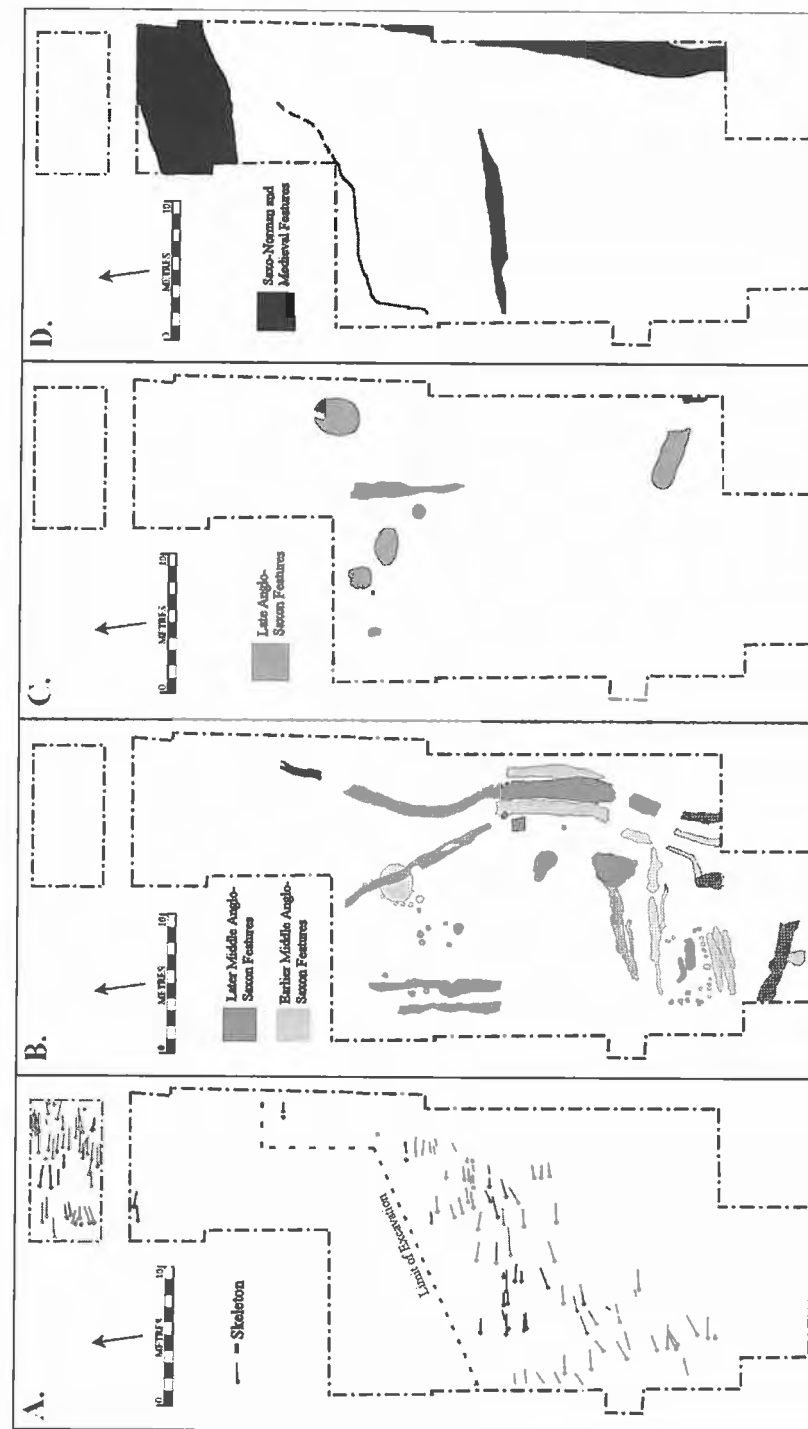


FIGURE 2. Features in the boneyard field trench (1996-2000). (a) Burials; (b) Middle Anglo-Saxon features; (c) Late Anglo-Saxon features; (d) Saxo-Norman and post-Conquest features.

been highly disturbed but clearly falls into two concentrations. To the south of the site there is a relatively flat, possibly terraced area, where there are two E.-W. gullies, the northernmost of which has four post-depressions within it. This is associated with twenty-two small post-holes. The features to the south, which appear to have been truncated by erosion or deep ploughing, may be part of a timber 'hall', or various rebuilds of a smaller structure. The post-holes appear to be too small to represent structural timbers and may represent the remains of an internal division, the gullies themselves forming the beam slots. The surface within this structure appears to be devoid of flint, as if it has been cleared, whereas other areas contain dense flint concentrations. This structure, although severely truncated, fits well into the timber hall type and is closely paralleled at other sites in Norfolk.<sup>10</sup>

The second structural concentration, towards the centre of the main trench, consists of a shallow pit-like feature and a number of scattered post-holes. This may represent a structural element similar to the pits associated with sunken-featured buildings, but in this case it is apparently within a larger hall structure. Alignments in the post-holes are inconclusive, and this structural area remains enigmatic. The features contain only Ipswich Ware, indicating that they are of Middle Anglo-Saxon date.<sup>11</sup>

It seems likely that the ditch complex to the east of the site has a drainage function, and the later gully is riverine in appearance (Fig. 2b). The feature provides a useful stratigraphic indicator, as it truncates earlier burials.

The features from these phases have very similar artefactual assemblages, being dated by quantities of both Ipswich and Thetford-type Ware. Associated post-cemetery layers have produced artefacts which are predominantly of 8th- and 9th-century date, including bone-comb fragments, dress pins and an Anglian silver penny of King Eadwald (769-798). Two styli have also been recovered from these post-cemetery layers, as well as fragments of decorated vessel glass, which may be indicative of 'higher status' use.

Some features in the supposed later phase contain only the earlier Ipswich Ware, which in isolation would suggest a Middle Anglo-Saxon date. However, these features are clearly stratigraphically later than gullies which contain both Ipswich and Thetford-type Wares. In all of these largely homogeneous fills the proportions of the Ipswich to Thetford-type Wares is 1:4 which suggests a date for some of the fills later in the Anglo-Saxon Period. However, the overall Ipswich-ware assemblage is unusually large (around 2,000 sherds), suggesting an earlier date. Further excavation of the upslope area may show that much of the Thetford-type Ware is derived from a later settlement nucleus in this location. In the absence of further information, it is not yet possible to date these phases more closely.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A. Rogerson, *A Late Neolithic, Saxon and Medieval site at Middle Harling, Norfolk* (East Anglian Archaeol., 74, Gressenhall, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Ipswich Ware is now dated c. 720-850 (Paul Blinkhorn, pers. comm.).

<sup>12</sup> This date-range will probably only be further clarified by a systematic programme of radiocarbon dating, which is being undertaken as funding permits.

#### *Late Saxon settlement* (Fig. 2c)

After the Middle Anglo-Saxon to Late Anglo-Saxon phase there is a small amount of colluvial build-up and the site seems to have changed character and function, possibly becoming a marginal area at the edge of a Late Anglo-Saxon settlement. Deposits associated with this phase contain vast quantities of animal bone (mostly butchered), and mixed Late Anglo-Saxon pottery, forming an archetypal midden. The most extensive feature in this area consists of layers of cobbling (possibly to consolidate an area that was becoming increasingly waterlogged) and pits containing large amounts of burnt clay which may be oven linings or rake-out. These pits may represent an informal industrial process and it is interesting to note that our only samples of bread wheat come from this phase. The nucleus of activity would appear to have shifted during this last settlement phase to somewhere beyond our current area of excavation. One tantalizing glimpse of the scale of the settlement activity is a ditch-terminal, which is about 1.5 m wide and the same measure in depth. The ditch has fourteen re-cuts and clearly relates to a much-used, well-kept part of the Late Anglo-Saxon settlement.

#### *Saxo-Norman/High-Medieval drainage*

Finally, there are a number of Saxo-Norman and later Medieval features (Fig. 2d). A large N.-S. ditch truncates all of the other features, but may still in theory be of Late Anglo-Saxon date (stratigraphically being very late). The boundary of the marshy area, used for the cultivation of reeds after the 13th century, is represented by an E.-W. cut and re-cut at the northern extent of the trench which truncates burials. The line to the south of this represents a large natural 'cut' caused by erosion due to marshy conditions or flood action after the Anglo-Saxon Period. This may well truncate features that might otherwise have given more detail to the Middle Anglo-Saxon to Late Anglo-Saxon structural features.

#### SEDFORD IN CONTEXT

A number of sites which have produced evidence through excavation or field walking appear to be similar to the Boneyard Field site. Of those where excavation has taken place, the best known examples are Brandon in Suffolk and Flixborough in Humberside.<sup>13</sup> Other sites include Cottam and West Heslerton in Yorkshire,<sup>14</sup> and Bawsey in Norfolk (where a Time Team investigation recorded six styli and four series R sceattas).<sup>15</sup>

Brandon and Flixborough, which provide the closest parallels, are both large excavations, many times larger than the Boneyard Field trenches. Although the

<sup>13</sup> R. D. Carr, A. Tester and P. Murphy, 'The Middle Saxon settlement at Staunch Meadow, Brandon', *Antiquity*, 62 (1988), 371-7; C. P. Loveluck, 'A high status Anglo-Saxon settlement at Flixborough, Lincolnshire', *Antiquity*, 72 (1998), 146-61.

<sup>14</sup> J. D. Richards, 'Cottam: An Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds', *Archaeol. J.*, 156 (1999), 1-110; D. Powlesland, 'Archaeological excavations 1987-1990: an interim report on the Anglo-Saxon village at West Heslerton, North Yorkshire', *Medieval Settlement Res. Group Ann. Rep.*, 5 (1990), 37-40.

<sup>15</sup> Time Team/Channel 4, *1999 Series Report* (London, 1999).

quantity of evidence available from the various sites is very different, this may represent the different extent to which they have been investigated. Boneyard Field has a lower number of features than the larger excavations, but the feature density in many areas could be about the same. The same is true of the finds assemblage: excavations at Brandon produced three styli, while Boneyard Field has produced two. However, Brandon also produced 234 bronze pins, 8 sceattas, 360 glass fragments and various other 'high-status' finds. Boneyard Field has produced 23 pins and 1 sceatt. The areas of excavation are 12,000 sq m and 1,000 sq m respectively.

The Flixborough excavations did not uncover as extensive an area as those at Brandon, but the types of find are once again similar, and the structural features on some parts of the site are not unlike what we have found on Boneyard Field. This is particularly true if the current Boneyard Field trench is interpreted as a peripheral area of one of these sites. The similarly dated sites at Yarnnton in Oxfordshire and Burrow Hill in Suffolk also share similarities with the Boneyard Field such as features and finds.<sup>16</sup>

Sedgeford appears to belong to a wider group of Middle Anglo-Saxon sites which is starting to be recognized from excavation and finds recording, particularly in East Anglia. This raises questions about their nature, frequency and character. The sites of this type which have been known for longest have traditionally been interpreted as high-status, mostly on the basis that the styli which they all have in common were thought to be related to monastic literacy. Since styli have now been found on a wide range of sites, this interpretation can no longer be sustained, and the status of this type of site is still unresolved.<sup>17</sup> Sites like Cottam were interpreted as high status until they were excavated, but the structural evidence found no longer supports such an interpretation. Yarnnton also seems to fall short of what one could call high-status in terms of the building evidence, whereas both Brandon and Flixborough are on a grander scale.

Within Norfolk most of the sites that might, like Sedgeford, fit into the emerging class of 'productive' sites, are unexcavated. The term is problematic, but now chiefly indicates concentrations of metal-detecting finds. Improved recording of metal findspots in recent years has increased the available data-set dramatically, and much more is known about such sites in NW. Norfolk. Work on surface find-spots in Norfolk has identified at least seven or eight relevant places: West Walton, Congham, Rudham, Crimplasham (one stylus fragment) and Wormegay (two styli), as well as the potential complex of sites at the Burnhams.<sup>18</sup> The metalwork and pottery found on all these sites is similar to that found at Sedgeford. At present such sites cannot be placed into a category of status based on the structural evidence, and on the basis of the metal finds they tend to be described as 'important' or 'high-status' centres. Only

<sup>16</sup> 'Yarnnton Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape: Results of Excavations 1990-96' (unpubl. rep., Oxford Archaeol. Unit, 1999); V. Fenwick, 'Insula de Burgh: excavations at Burrow Hill, Butley, Suffolk 1978-1981', *Anglo-Saxon Stud. Archaeol. Hist.*, 3 (1984), 35-54.

<sup>17</sup> The identification and interpretation of styli is reviewed and discussed in detail in T. Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation: The Establishment of Religious Houses in East Anglia c. 650-1200* (Woodbridge, forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> P. Andrews, 'Middle Saxon Norfolk: evidence for settlement, 650-850', *The Annual* (Norfolk Archaeol. Hist. Res. Group, 1992).

much more extensive excavations than are currently possible would show us how well the structures on these sites fitted the metalwork assemblages. At Sedgeford it appears that such a find-assemblage can be associated with a comparatively 'ordinary' structural sequence, in a location which is not historically documented.

#### SEDFORD IN THE VIKING PERIOD

During the period of the settlement at the Boneyard Field, East Anglia experienced two major periods of Viking conquest, and was effectively under a strong Scandinavian influence from the late 9th century onwards. How do we recognize these events archaeologically and what effect, if any, did they have upon the settlement at Sedgeford?

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that in 865 '... a great heathen raiding-army came to the land of the English and took winter-quarters from the East Anglians, and were provided with horses there, and they made peace with them'.<sup>19</sup> Although the exact location of this incursion is not specified, it is generally thought to have been at least in part in Norfolk, and the record that '... the raiding-army went from East Anglia over the mouth of the Humber to York city ...' in 866 suggests that their route could have included the North Norfolk coast and The Wash. The Danes returned to the region in 869, and were still there in 879 when, under the terms of the Treaty of Wedmore, '... the raiding-army went from Cirencester into East Anglia and settled that land, and divided it up'.<sup>20</sup> The eastern Danelaw remained an independent kingdom ruled by Guthrum and his successors until it was reconquered by Edward the Elder in 917.

Given everything which has been said above about the Boneyard Field, it seems that the settlement at Sedgeford ought to have a Viking phase, showing significant evidence of having been occupied through the period of Scandinavian influence in East Anglia. That none has been recognized is a pattern familiar to excavators of other East Anglian sites but it remains a fact that the settlement was, for a period of about 40 years, within the Danelaw.

Alternatively, one might expect to find evidence for a break in occupation. It has been suggested within the project team that the end of cemetery use may represent the start of (at least partially pagan) Viking occupation. However, the edges of the burial area have yet to be identified and there is no reliable end-date for Christian burial on the site. The available evidence points to continuous settlement at Sedgeford from the 8th century, with the activity represented on Boneyard Field gradually shifting location towards the present church. Late Anglo-Saxon evidence (10th- to 11th-century date on the basis of the Thetford Ware) has periodically been uncovered alongside the church and between the two sites by SHARP and others.<sup>21</sup> The site appears to drift westwards along the valley without a clear hiatus at the time of the Danish or Norman conquests.

<sup>19</sup> M. Swanton (trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (London, 2000), 68.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> N. Cooke, A. N. Gardener and G. Thomas, 'Report of excavations at Sedgeford, Norfolk 1996', *Papers. Inst. Archaeol.*, 8 (1997), 17-37.

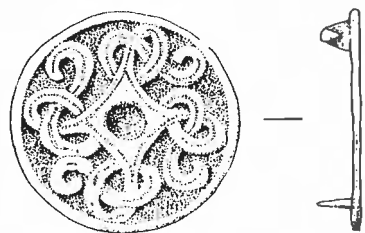


FIGURE 3. Borre-style brooch from Sedgeford.  
Scale 1:1. (Drawn by R. Ludford)

East Anglia has a large number of Scandinavian place-names, which Margeson has argued are the most concrete testimony of the Vikings' presence in Norfolk. However, a study of Scandinavian place-names has failed to find even significant field-names in Sedgeford that can be shown to be Scandinavian in origin.<sup>22</sup>

If there was a large-scale immigration of Scandinavian settlers, founding and naming settlements, then the material evidence from sites in such areas might be expected to reflect this. While Margeson has shown that the quantity of Scandinavian-style metalwork finds recovered from Norfolk reflects a far more densely populated county than has previously been supposed, her distribution maps indicate that there is very little correlation between the place-name evidence and these finds.<sup>23</sup> Some objects found in the parish are clearly of Scandinavian style, but these are few in number, and they have not been found in a settlement context. A Borre-style brooch, (now the project logo) was found during fieldwalking in an area to the south of the site which test pitting had shown to be barren of settlement (Fig. 3). An interesting Urnes-style mount, discovered by metal-detecting some years ago is also thought not to come from the settlement area. The Borre-style brooch is an object-type common in East Anglia and thought to be produced locally, possibly at Thetford. The mount, although rarer, is also thought to have been made in England rather than to be an import.<sup>24</sup>

Evidence for Scandinavian building- and burial-types is lacking throughout East Anglia, in stark contrast to other areas of known Scandinavian immigration. Pestell has summed up the situation accordingly: 'These diverse elements all tend towards the Viking involvement in East Anglia being one concentrated on the upper echelons of society in which mass immigration did not occur.'<sup>25</sup> The prevailing view, based upon the available evidence, must be that despite an undeniable Scandinavian presence in East Anglia, its impact should not be exaggerated and continuity in Christian Anglo-Saxon society should be expected.

Pestell has also argued that the similarity between the Middle Anglo-Saxon secular and religious estate centres (as far as the two can be differentiated) would have made them both vulnerable to changes in the upper levels of society, and that a change at the top might involve an administrative rather than a material change — something difficult to identify in the archaeological record. This would appear to be the case at

<sup>22</sup> H. C. P. Willcox, 'A Dictionary and Analysis of the Fieldnames of the Parish of Sedgeford' (unpubl. M.A. diss., University of Nottingham, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> S. Margeson, *The Vikings in Norfolk* (Gressenhall, 1996), figs. 3–4.

<sup>24</sup> O. Owen and R. Trett, 'A Viking Urnes style mount from Sedgeford', *Norfolk Archaeol.*, 37 (1980), 353–5.

<sup>25</sup> Pestell, *op. cit.* in note 17.

Sedgeford, where there is a continuous occupation sequence and no readily discernible change in the character of the settlement. While there is evidence of Scandinavian influence in the area, and the two surface finds mentioned above, from a material perspective the settlement appears to continue with very little disruption. There may well have been wider administrative changes within the estate associated with the settlement, but the reconstruction of this is made difficult by the lack of pre-Domesday documentary material. Sedgeford lay in the Domesday hundred of Smethdon, and it has been suggested that Sedgeford was the manorial centre of the hundred and that '... at the time of Domesday ... their jurisdiction was nearly always in royal hands'.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Sedgeford, the royal hands at this time were those of Earl Gyrrh, and Hart concluded that most local jurisdiction was permanently in royal hands from 917 onwards. If true, this suggests that Sedgeford may have been a royal estate from the early 10th century. However, this is entirely conjectural, and there is no definite evidence, historical or archaeological, for this.

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<sup>26</sup> C. Hart, *The Danelaw* (Cambridge, 1992), tab. 2.2b.

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