Excavations in Bishopstone 2003: Second interim report on the Bishopstone Valley Archaeological Research Project

Excavations undertaken by the Sussex Archaeological Society in 2003 to the north of St Andrew’s churchyard, Bishopstone, sampled an abandoned zone of occupation dating to the Late Anglo-Saxon and Saxo-Norman periods. Particularly striking is the density and planned regularity of occupation which extends up to and beyond an early phase of St Andrew’s churchyard marked by a zone of extra-mural burials of pre-Conquest date. A minimum of nine timber structures was represented within the excavated area, a total which doubles the number of contemporary examples hitherto excavated within Sussex. The structural remains included a selection of rectangular buildings of different sizes, the majority of ‘post-in-trench’ construction. More unusual, and setting Bishopstone apart from standard rural settlements, was an elaborate apsidal-ended latrine which can be compared to related structures from a select group of Late Anglo-Saxon royal, 'thegnly' and ecclesiastical sites. Other components of the settlement included a series of rubbish pits, possible fenced enclosure boundaries, and a curving section of ditch. Artefactual remains were dominated by stratified assemblages of animal bone, marine molluscs and pottery, the latter including the first collection of Late Anglo-Saxon ceramics from the Ouse Valley and East Sussex. A small number of unstratified finds, including coins and a decorated hooked-tag, reinforce the 10th-12th-century dating provided by the pottery and other type-fossils such as bun-shaped loom-weights.
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1 Objectives and methodology

A test-pitting survey undertaken in 2002 as part of a multi-disciplinary investigation into the origins of Bishopstone, East Sussex, successfully located two zones of Late Anglo-Saxon/Saxo-Norman occupation within the core of the village (Thomas 2002b). The largest of these two areas, the village green to the north of St Andrew's church, yielded structural remains for a timber building (in the form of two parallel wall trenches), a large oval pit, preliminary interpreted as a cess-pit, a wide scattering of post- and stake-holes, and an inhumation burial located a short distance beyond the boundary wall of the churchyard.

This coherent zone of early medieval occupation and activity was selected as the target for the 2003 excavation, the chief aims being to expose fully the ground-plan of the post-in-trench building, to establish the layout and spacing of neighbouring structural/occupational features, and to examine the relationship between the occupational remains and the extra-mural burial. In reaching these objectives it was hoped that the excavation might cast light on the character and layout of the Late Anglo-Saxon settlement and the role played by the minster church of St Andrew's in influencing the form and early development of the village.

At a more general level, the excavations were designed to address the dearth of physical evidence for Late Anglo-Saxon/Saxo-Norman rural settlement within East Sussex and, in doing so, provide a starting point for comparing the phenomenon of village formation within the Ouse Valley with better documented and researched areas, including its westerly neighbour, the Adur Valley in West Sussex (Gardiner 2003, 157-8).

The excavation trench comprised a 15m x 15m square, laid out to embrace the estimated ground-plan of the timber building identified in 2002 and a 15 x 5m southern extension to examine the link between the domestic occupation and the fluctuating extent of St Andrew's cemetery (Fig. 1). The turf covering the excavation was cut mechanically, and watered regularly throughout the season in fulfillment of an agreement to reinstate the village green to its natural 'Downland' condition. The topsoil was removed with an eight-ton tracked JCB revealing the surface of the chalk bedrock at the southern end of the site and the surface of colluvium further downslope; all subsequent excavation was undertaken by hand. Once exposed across the full extent of the excavation the surface of the chalk bedrock was trowelled to define archaeological features which were subsequently planned at a scale of 1:20.

2 The character and limitations of the evidence

Despite being located within the heart of a living settlement the area of the excavation has suffered similar levels of erosion to downland sites occupying isolated spurs and ridges. A contributing factor appears to have been an episode of medieval ploughing evidenced by plough-ruts scored across the grain of the slope at the southern, uphill, side of the excavation. The severity of the truncation on this part of the site is also reflected in the shallowness of negative features, especially two burials, which, due to the care afforded to other aspects of the burial ritual, must have originally been laid to rest at a significantly greater depth relative to the contemporary ground surface (see below). Features within the northern portion of the site fared slightly better due to the accumulation of a layer of hillwash (colluvium), however, this was still insufficient to save floors, occupation horizons and hearths.

One of the major challenges which accompany such shallow sites is separating out the palimpsest of truncated negative features into a temporal sequence. Needless to say this task is contingent upon the identification of stratigraphic relationships between intercutting features and the discovery of associated artefacts which carry an acceptably narrow date-range (see Cunliffe 1976, 3-5). Bishopstone scores poorly on both these criteria. The task of identifying stratigraphic relationships between features was seriously hindered by the uniformity of their chalky-loam fills. As to dating
evidence, the 200-year date-range attached to locally-produced Saxo-Norman pottery (the only category of datable find from the features) may well swallow up a greater part of the occupation sequence (see below).

3  The occupation evidence

3.1  The structures

One of the greatest revelations of last season's work was that the area under investigation preserved foundation-level evidence for not one (the example identified in 2002) but a minimum of nine timber structures, although in most cases only a partial view of the ground-plan was obtained (Fig. 2). The Bishopstone structures employ three types of earthfast foundation, wall trenches (either continuous or discontinuous), individual post-holes, and a combination of post-holes and wall trenches, a range seen at other contemporary rural settlements including Faccombe Netherton, Hants (Fairbrother 1990).
Unsurprisingly, with only a 5.0m-wide window exposed, structural elements discovered within the southern arm of the excavation pose the most difficulties for interpretation, especially since this was also the most heavily truncated part of the site. Included within this area were a concentration of wall trenches and sub-rectangular slots relating to one or more structures laid out on an approximate E-W orientation. The interpretation offered here, identifying Structure A, together with associated features, is preliminary and may be overturned by future excavation.
The principal elements of Structure A comprised two parallel lengths of wall trench (15) and (31) spaced 5.20m apart. When first exposed, a perpendicular trench (19) was originally interpreted as an end wall to this structure but this seems unlikely in view of a gap between it and the terminals of the long walls. This revision need not be an obstacle to this interpretation as end walls are frequently absent from the ground-plans of post-in-trench buildings which chiefly relied upon their longer walls for load bearing.

An alternative explanation for (19) is that is associated with the east end of a separate structure, a different phase of which is represented by series of conjoined sub-rectangular post-settings (21) (25) (27) and (283), possibly cut to receive timber planks. The inter-cutting configuration of (18) and (289), possibly the southernmost of the post-settings within this wall alignment, suggest that the SE corner post of the structure had been replaced during this phase. With such a limited exposure it would be unwise to speculate further on these features, although, in all probability, they relate to a further structure, potentially on an axial alignment to A.

Occupying the space defined within the long walls of Structure A, and on the same alignment, were three additional features: a pair of axially aligned sub-rectangular post-holes (303) and (294), and, to their north, a shallow slot (261) measuring 1.75 x 0.40m. The fact that the post-holes are set precisely mid way between the outer wall-trenches strongly suggests that they are structurally related to the building, perhaps representing supports for a central ridge purlin of a gable-ended roof. The offset positioning of (261) demands an alternative explanation. A distinct possibility taking into account its dimensions, the recovery of a fragment of human femur from its fill, and the discovery of two burials within the southern extension of the excavation, is an exhumed grave, potentially from the fringes of a pre-existing cemetery (see below).
**Structure B**

This structure, orientated N-S and measuring 6.0m x 5.20m externally, employed post-in-trench foundations for its long walls and individual post-holes for its exposed, northern, end wall. The NW corner of the building was truncated by ditch (68). The fully exposed eastern long wall displayed two deeper post settings, one at the northern terminal and a much shallower example located which could represent one side of an offset doorway. Two post-holes or small pits (177) and (39) discovered on, and adjacent to, the end wall post-hole alignment respectively, were notable for containing the truncated remains of whole Saxo-Norman cooking-pots. The use of such pots to secure the base of timber uprights within the end wall, while not impossible, seems impracticable, and it is perhaps safer to conclude that they belong to a different phase of occupation and are therefore external. The latter proposition would open them up to comparison with buried pots or pottery-lined pits such as those found at Bullock Down, Eastbourne, East Sussex, and Botolphs, West Sussex, which, depending upon their size, may have functioned as feeding troughs for stock or fowl (Gardiner 1990, 237).

![Diagram of Structure B](image)

**Structure C**

This rectangular structure, measuring 6.25m x 4.30m externally, mimics the alignment of Structure B and similarly utilises a combination of post-in-trench foundations for its long walls and post-holes for its end walls, although in this case the latter are much less clearly defined. The highly truncated remains of deeper post-settings, penetrating the base of the wall trenches, indicate opposing entrances placed mid-way along the building. A limited number of post-ghosts betraying the position of further timber uprights were also identified during the excavation of the wall trenches. The western wall displays a short internally projecting trench (60) with a post-setting at its terminal; this appears to be prohibitively close to the end of the building for a partition so may be stratigraphically unrelated. The character of the eastern wall trench (82), notable for both its irregularity and width, suggests either that the wall was completely replaced during the lifetime of the building, or, alternatively, that two buildings of different phases shared the same wall alignment.
Structure D

Structure D, measuring 9.0m x 5.0m externally and orientated on a perpendicular alignment to Structure C (WSW-ENE), proved to be the largest and best preserved of the rectangular buildings exposed with the 2003 excavation. The structure employed post-in-trench foundations, continuous for three of its sides, and discontinuous for its eastern end wall. Despite the careful excavation of spits through selected portions of wall trench and the planning of spit surfaces in detail, evidence for the timber uprights in the form of post-ghosts was tenuous and it may be that the timbers were extracted when the structure fell into disrepair. The position of timbers was otherwise recoverable from deeper post-settings revealed at the bottom of the trenches. These included paired settings (479)/(450) and (425)/(427) for opposed entrances offset slightly towards the eastern end of the building. Whilst the location of several other posts, placed hard up against the inside edge of the long-walls, was also identifiable, the most complete evidence for post-spacing came from the western end wall where the post-settings were considerably deeper, presumably to provide additional support the downslope side of the building. As with the post-alignment to the west of Structure A, there was evidence that one of the corner posts for this wall - comprising the inter-cutting settings (418) and (440) - had been replaced.

A radiocarbon determination from a fragment of charcoal recovered from the base of post-setting (446) gave a range of cal. 885-980AD at the 68% confidence and 885-1005 at 95% confidence (Beta-188374).

A characteristic which is particularly marked in the long walls of Structure D is the differential care taken to cut the internal as opposed to the external sides of the wall trench; the straight and vertical face of the former contrasting with the irregular and sloping face of the latter. A recent nationwide survey of early medieval timber buildings by Mark Gardiner and Emily Murray of Queen's University, Belfast, has indicated that this is a recurrent feature of post-in-trench buildings. They suggest that the angled outer edge would have been used to help slide pre-assembled sections of wall
plate into the bottom of the trench whereas the vertical inner edge would have ensured that the prefabricated sections were aligned accurately (Mark Gardiner pers comm.).

Structure E

The identification of this structure rests upon a single wall trench (231), 5.20m in length, which runs in parallel to the base of a prominent E-W scarp (225) at the extreme north of the site. Two rectangular post-settings (234) and (470) penetrated the base of the trench. Although more work is required to verify this identification, it appears that the slope may have been artificially terraced to create level building platform, a practice that is widely attested on the South Downs throughout prehistory and the post-Roman period. Such landscaping, indicative of an attempt to maximise the area available for occupation, clearly has implications for an assessment of the intensity of settlement on the village green (see below).

Structure F
The SE corner of further rectangular post-in-trench structure, represented by wall trench (70), was exposed adjacent to the western baulk of the excavation. Only the portion lying to the south of the modern sewer trench was excavated, revealing a deeper sub-circular post-setting (238) located hard up against the inside edge of the wall trench.

**Structure G**

The identification of this structure rests upon a single interrupted length of wall trench which extended for a distance of 10.50m on a similar alignment to its westerly neighbours, Structures B and C. Intersecting with ditch (68) and the south walls of Structures D and H respectively, the trench was penetrated by a series of five deeper sub-circular post-settings which are placed towards its western edge (447), (452), (475), (477) and (478). This trench is much cruder in execution than the long walls of Structure E, and the lack of a straight, vertical face, is a hindrance to defining the interior of the building, a matter that can only be resolved through further work to ascertain whether a parallel long wall lies beyond the eastern limits of the excavation. Whilst the position of doorways is not universally reflected in the foundations of post-in-trench buildings (Mark Gardiner pers. comm.), the gap of 1.10m in the wall trench is difficult to interpret in any other meaningful way.

**Structure H**
Structure H, measuring 3.50 x 3.60m externally, was orientated on a similar alignment to G and was cut by the northern wall of Structure E. It has a highly distinctive ground-plan featuring a curving, apsidal northern end which intersects with the exposed wall of Structure F. A pair of post-settings (122) (482) for an offset doorway were located in the straight southern wall trench; evidence for the position and spacing of posts was otherwise absent.

Enclosed by the northern apsidal end of this structure was a large oval pit (271) (sampled in 2002 by one of the test-pits) measuring 1.25m x 1.98m in plan and 1.18m deep. This produced comparatively few finds and was filled with alternating layers of clayey loam (the lowest with a lightweight 'cessy' texture), and chalk and flint rubble, a sequence which led to the feature's preliminary identification as a cess pit in 2002.

Discussion of Structure H

This combination of features places Structure H within a small group of Late Anglo-Saxon latrines exclusive to high-status settlements including the royal residence of Cheddar, Somerset, the episcopal seat of North Elmham, Norfolk, and the manorial complex of Faccombe Netherton, Hants. The latter has produced the best parallel in the form of Structure 10, associated with a period 5 (c. AD 980-1070) hall. Despite being marginally smaller than the Bishopstone example, measuring 2.44 x 3.05m, and employing post-holes rather than posts set in a continuous foundation trench, there is a striking resemblance in the way the back-end of the structure is curved to mimic the contours of the oval cess pit (Fairbrother 1990, 144, fig. 14.18).

Whilst fairly uniform in dimensions and morphology this small group of latrines display a variety of constructional details. The two examples from North Elmham, Norfolk, for example, have sunken floors perhaps originally spanned by a wooden floor supported on ground sills connecting the principal corner posts of the latrine superstructure (Wade-Martins 1980, 128-131, figs 113, 114 & 115). The Bishopstone representative is so far unique in its employment of a continuous trench for foundations, although this should be taken as a reflection of the general interchangeability of post-hole and post-in-trench construction during this period, as evidenced by other functional categories of building, especially timber halls.
It is instructive to note that in the case of Cheddar and Faccombe Netherton there is a close physical relationship between the latrine and an associated timber hall interpreted as the principal residence (Rahtz 1979, Fairbrother 1990, fig. 4.11), a pattern which is also echoed in the close spacing (and in some cases actual conjunction) of halls and garderobe pits within the sequence of Saxo-Norman manorial residences at Goltio, Lincolnshire (Beresford 1987, 80, fig. 83). In the former instances, the latrines are laid out in axial alignment to the halls with the pits positioned at the end furthest away from the residential structure. On the basis of such a comparison, one may speculate, tentatively, that the Bishopstone latrine served a building located to the south, one contender being Structure G which shares the same alignment.

**Post-hole complex I**

The confusing array of post-holes discovered at the northern end of the site, especially those clustered within and around the ground-plan of Structure D, is exceedingly difficult to interpret in light of the probability that a series of superimposed structures is represented, some only fragmentarily.

Ongoing analysis of the small amounts of pottery yielded from sealed examples holds some hope for separating out the forest of post-holes although such intricacies will be postponed until the dating evidence and stratigraphic information has been fully synthesized. For present purposes it will suffice to highlight a comparatively discrete grouping of post-holes which describe a structure measuring 3.50 x 3.50+ externally (Structure I). The post-holes forming the eastern and southern sides of the structure were located within a very shallow depression (309) which could represent the heavily truncated remains of a foundation trench. The diminutive proportions of this structure suggest that it may have served an ancillary function, perhaps for storage.

![Diagram of Structure I](image)

It is possible that some of the post-holes clustered to the north of the northern wall trench of Structure E represent raking supports to buttress the downslope side of the building. This may especially be the case of a series of rectangular examples which are of a similar size and shape to the post-settings penetrating the base of its wall trenches.

**3.2 Other features (see Fig. 2)**

**Fences**
Shallower versions of the trenches used for building foundations may relate to fenced property boundaries. A strong candidate for one such fence is (259) which projected beyond the SW corner of Structure D up to the western baulk. The mid-11th-century phase of occupation at North Elmham, Norfolk, provides a good parallel for fenced boundaries which similarly intersect with buildings (Wade-Martins 1980, fig. 140).

Linear alignments of small post-holes and stake-holes, such as that immediately to the east of Structure B, may relate to flimsier fenced boundaries.

**Pits**

Other overtly domestic features included three sub-rectangular pits (5), (7) and (233) of a form ubiquitous to Late Anglo-Saxon rural settlements. The largest example (7), measuring 1.4m x 0.9m and 0.8m deep, produced a near complete Saxo-Norman vessel and an important faunal assemblage. Interestingly, all three pits are located at the extremities of the excavation, however, whether this is purely coincidence or the product of contemporary planning is impossible to distinguish on current evidence. Two very regular cylindrical pits (9) and (160) (both approximately 0.75m in diameter) may have originally served a more specialised usage, perhaps as storage containers; the latter produced a large assemblage of burnt daub presumably from a nearby structure.

**Ditch**

A curving section of a shallow, flat-bottomed ditch (68) extended across the site; its continuation beyond the eastern baulk of the excavation is evidenced by a discernable E-W earthwork. The ditch cut structures B, C, and G and confirmation that it represented one of the latest features on the site was provided by a small assemblage of late 12th-century pottery recovered from its uniform chalky fill.

**Burials**

With two season's of fieldwork completed the total of extra mural burials currently stands at four: three from the village green and the remaining example from an area investigated to the west of the church (see Thomas 2002b). The two burials from the 2003 excavation were found side-by-side on the surface of the chalk bedrock approximately two metres beyond the boundary wall of the churchyard, a similar distance to the previous year's find on the village green. Both burials shared an E-W alignment with their heads placed at the west end of the grave. The cramped skeletal position of one of the burials, preliminary identified as a middle-aged women, suggests that she had originally been wrapped in a shroud. The other burial was much more heavily disturbed and was of a male of 40-60 years of age.

A radiocarbon determination from the female shroud-burial gave a range of cal. 890-1000 AD at 68% confidence and 855-1020 at 95% confidence (Beta-188373)
Discussion of the burials

Despite receiving confirmation of a pre-Conquest date it is impossible to determine a precise temporal relationship between these burials and the domestic occupation which extends up to, and potentially beyond, the churchyard boundary, as indicated by the southerly location of pits (5) and (7). However, a clear sequence was established for a similar overlapping zone investigated to the west of the church in 2002, supporting the theory that part of the settlement had expanded to fill a vacuum created by a contraction in the bounds of the pre-Conquest cemetery (Thomas 2002b). This explanation receives support from a recent study which has shown that the early developmental phases of churchyards in both England and northern France frequently encapsulate this very sequence (Zadora-Rio 2003).

4 General discussion

Dating and the origins of Bishopstone

The dating evidence currently available suggests that the occupation on the village-green site was relatively short-lived, perhaps extending from c.900-1150AD. This attribution is based chiefly upon
the stratified assemblage of pottery recovered from wall trenches and rubbish pits. Although the amount of stratified pottery is small it nevertheless comprises the first Late Anglo-Saxon assemblage from the Ouse Valley and as such helps to fill a notable East Sussex void in the distribution map. The ceramic dating is reinforced by bun-shaped loom-weights and unstratified metal-detector finds made over the past two seasons. In addition to the 10th-century disc-brooch and 11th-century Normandy denier discovered in 2002, the corpus of pre-Conquest finds has now grown to include a cut halfpenny of Aethelred II (Crux Issue 991-7), and a copper-alloy hooked-tag with incised decoration.

For the reasons set out in the introduction it is impossible to determine a broad, site-encapsulating sequence for this occupation. However, opportunities for reconstructing localised, intra-site, phasing nevertheless exist, principally in situations where vertical stratigraphic information can be married with horizontal relationships. Such extends to the isolation of two phases of what may tentatively identified as the residential focus of the occupation; the earlier represented by the latrine and associated section of wall trench, Structure G, which was superceded by Structure D constructed on a perpendicular alignment.

The cessation of occupation within this focal position of the settlement (the reasons for this are currently obscure) ushered in a period of agricultural usage evidenced by plough marks and indicators of accelerated erosion. The ceramic sequence from the layers of hillwash displays a notable 13th-14th-century peak followed by a Late/Post-Medieval decline, perhaps suggesting a changeover from an agrarian to a pastoral regime or a direct transition to the non-agricultural usage which has pertained for the past 300 years. Against this background it is instructive to note that the only datable later medieval features from the excavation included pits containing a multiple sheep and cow burial respectively; similar isolated animal burials, though undated, were found at Market Field, Steyning (Gardiner 1993, 36).

The failure of recent fieldwork to produce firm evidence for Middle Saxon occupation indicates that the core of the present-day village sampled thus far does not represent the direct successor of the Early Anglo-Saxon settlement on Rookery Hill which appears to have been abandoned in the 7th or possibly 8th centuries (Bell 1977). However, this is not to say that an earlier settlement focus remains to be found in some other part of the village: the transition from Early Anglo-Saxon settlements to nucleated villages - the so-called 'Middle Saxon shift' - is characterised by fluid episodes of settlement drift (e.g. Mortimer 2000). This expectation draws upon compelling evidence, historical, architectural and artefactual, for the establishment of a minster at Bishopstone during the pre-Viking period, a religious focus which is likely to have attracted settlement from its inception (Thomas 2002a; Coombes 2003). The village-green occupation at Bishopstone should
perhaps be seen as a secondary development and interpreted within the context of settlement nucleation observed with the Adur Valley, West Sussex, the core period for which appears to have been the 10th century (Gardiner 2003, 157-8).

Organisation and layout

One of the most striking aspects of the site is its highly regular, 'criss-cross' configuration, derived from the alignment of timber structures and other features on two perpendicular orientations, approximately E-W and N-S.

Due to the difficulties in phasing it is impossible to determine the extent to which this distinctive plan relates to the shifting alignment of structures throughout the occupation sequence. Whilst it is clear that some of the buildings relate to distinct phases, complexes of contemporary buildings set out at right-angles to each other, in some cases around a farmyard or courtyard, are a recurrent feature of the later Anglo-Saxon settlement record (c.f. Reynolds 1999, 111-142). The variation in the size and character of the Bishopstone structures, denoting a range of functions (most demonstrably in the case of the latrine), suggests that part of the layout may relate to one such complex.

Whatever the precise arrangement of buildings within any one phase, their strict adherence to one of two perpendicular alignments clearly demonstrates deliberate and careful planning over the period of occupation. St Andrew's church, consciously sited to take full advantage of the prominence of the chalk spur within the local landscape, may well have had an influence on this structured layout given the E-W orientation shared by several of the structures.

Density of occupation

Also contributing to the distinctiveness of the site, as revealed by the plan and aerial views, is the comparatively close spacing of structures across the full extent of the excavated area, although it should be remembered that the exact number of buildings in simultaneous use cannot be determined. The evidence for terracing reviewed above, if interpreted as a measure designed to accommodate additional structures within the topographically constrained zone to the north of the church, could also be taken to be reflective of an intense level of occupation.

Preliminary comparison with contemporary rural settlements suggests that this level of intensity is unusual, at least within a Sussex context. Excavations undertaken at Botolphs, West Sussex, in a comparably proximate location to a parish church, produced a total of seven timber structures, with a maximum of five rectangular buildings to Bishopstone's seven (Gardiner 1990). While it was noted that contemporary occupation extended beyond the limits of the excavation, the area stripped was nevertheless over twice the size of Bishopstone 2003.

The results of several archaeological interventions within the town of Steyning, West Sussex, the only other settlement within the region to have produced contemporary structural remains, reinforces this impression. At Coombe Court, for example, a maximum of three Saxo-Norman timber buildings were confined to a corner of an excavation similar in extent to Bishopstone 2003 (Gardiner & Greatorex 1997). This relatively low level of occupation and activity, repeated throughout the settlement (even within the core area surrounding the minster church of St Andrew's) is seen as a reflection of Steyning's 'small town' status on the eve of the Norman Conquest, a category physically more redolent of rural settlements than larger centres of urban status.

It should also be stated that in this respect Bishopstone also contrasts strongly with enclosed sites of the Later Anglo-Saxon period, including Market Field, Steyning, and Wraysbury, Berks, which are characterised by single or small groups of structures confined to a small area of the enclosed space (Gardiner 1993; Astill and Lobb 1989, 84).

5 Conclusion and outline of future work
While the proximity of the occupation to the church alone is insufficient to support a high-status attribution, religious or otherwise, certain traits reviewed above would appear to set Bishopstone apart from typical agricultural settlements of the Late Anglo-Saxon and Saxo-Norman periods. Such attributes include the latrine, exclusive to sites representing the higher echelons of the settlement hierarchy, and, rather less demonstrably, the density and highly planned regularity of the buildings. The dearth of high-status metalwork and personal possessions from Bishopstone should not be seen as necessarily contradictory to this view since excavations within Sussex and beyond have shown that finds assemblages from rural sites of this period are characteristically modest, certainly in comparison to those of their Middle Saxon predecessors (Gardiner; Astill & Lobb 1989, 88).

Preliminary assessment of the finds assemblage indicates that Bishopstone has so far failed to produce imported pottery: one further category of evidence that is usually taken to denote high status occupation. This may be more a reflection of sampling, however, as the sherd-counts of imported pottery from Market Field, Steyning and Botolphs (where the excavated area was considerably larger than at Bishopstone) were very low, numbering only fifteen and six sherds respectively (Gardiner 1990, 255; 1993, 41). In the absence of ceramic evidence we can at least turn to the Normandy denier discovered in 2002 which represents equally tangible evidence for the lively cross-channel contacts and trade between Sussex and Northern France during the 10th and 11th centuries (Gardiner 1999).

It would be premature at this interim stage to speculate further on the character of the occupation sampled in 2003 especially in light of the ongoing analysis of the faunal assemblage and other ecofactual remains which may, in the absence of ostentatious metalwork and imported pottery, provide a subtler means for exploring the economy and status of the Late Anglo-Saxon and Saxo-Norman settlement (Astill and Lobb 1993). Notwithstanding this statement of caution, with so few extensively excavated rural comparanda from either Sussex or beyond, the archaeological data recovered from Bishopstone can only help to increase our cloudy understanding of the physical dimension to village formation.

A further season of excavation, to be undertaken under the joint auspices of the University of Kent and the Sussex Archaeological Society, is planned for 2004. The primary objectives of this work will be to resolve some of the ambiguities surrounding the discoveries of 2003, by tracing the full extent of Structures A, E and G and, more generally, to test whether the same level of occupation density continues further to the east. At the time of writing permission for this work to take place has been sought and granted from the landowners and the Bishopstone community at large.

6 References


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