

Excavations at Church Piece, Tetsworth, Oxon.

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SUMMARY

A trial excavation revealed traces of 11th-14th century occupation south of the modern village of Tetsworth.

INTRODUCTION

DURING preliminary field-walking of the route of the motorway, substantial earthworks were discovered in fields on the south and west sides of Tetsworth. Trial excavations were conducted on these, and the results from Copt Hay on the west of the village are reported by Mark Robinson under Site 4. Site 5, in Church Piece (SP 687014), was in fact the first investigated, during a ten-day session at Easter 1971, under the supervision of Max Davies, W. J. Fowler, and myself. We are grateful to Mr. G. Claridge for allowing the work to take place on his land.

Church Piece is south of the church, on the southern slope of the Tetsworth ridge. The earthworks were surveyed, and the significant features are shown on Figure 1, with the location of the trenches. This figure is slightly enlarged from Mark Robinson's location plan on page 43 (Site 4, Fig. 1). The plan seems to show a pattern of crofts, separated by boundary ditches, and it is probable that these extended up the slope to the lane before houses were built along it in the 1920s. There are other visible earthworks in the undeveloped field between the north-east corner of Church Piece and the lane.

THE EXCAVATION

The first trenches were in the area to be destroyed by the road, away from the more pronounced earthworks. A low bank was chosen for investigation. Trench 1A, 3 m. square, was cut on the platform above it to look for occupation layers, and trench 1B, 5 m. \times 1.5 m., was cut north-south across it.

Trench 1A revealed only thick blue clay below the topsoil. This clay contained some small Medieval sherds and bone fragments in its upper 40 cm., but was unproductive lower down, though there was no clear definition between the natural and the deposited layers. Water level occurred at 95 cm.

Trench 1B produced exactly similar results. There was no wall, nor any other trace of a boundary division.

These disappointing results were confirmed in May 1972 during construction work, when two holes hastily dug by the Oxford University Archaeological Society at chainage point 60.50 produced a similar artificial terracing, with bone and

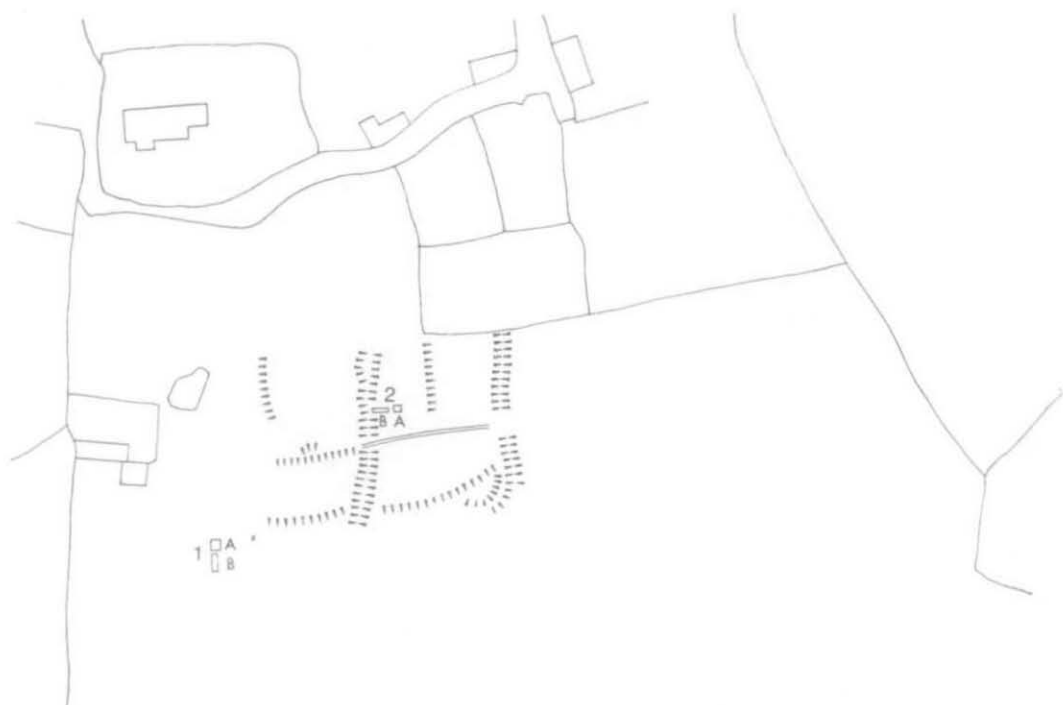


FIG. 1

Tetsworth, Church Piece (Site 5). Earthworks, and trench locations.

Medieval pottery below the topsoil, but no old ground surface, nor any sign of occupation.

Slightly to the north, at the point marked with a cross on Figure 1, W. J. Fowler recovered the base of a large 13th–early 14th century jug during the digging of a trench for an electricity cable alongside the motorway. This appeared to be in association with a layer of gravel.

As the first trenches had been so fruitless, there was a strong possibility that the other banks in Tetsworth would not justify investigation. To test this, two trenches were opened in the upper slopes of Church Piece. Trench 2A, 3 m. \times 2 m., was on the platform above a very pronounced north-south bank, and Trench 2B, 5 m. \times 1.5 m., was cut across its slope.

Trench 2A

- (1) Topsoil, 18–20 cm. deep.
- (2) Mixed clay, with 12th–18th century sherds.
- (3) Blue-grey clay with occasional patches of flint, and a possible post-hole sunk into the natural clay below. Finds were 11th century and Medieval coarse wares.

Trench 2B

- (1) Topsoil up to 16 cm. deep.
- (2) Mixed clay, with 11th-14th century sherds. Trowelling of this layer produced a line of small flints running north-south across the trench.
- (3) Thick blue clay with spreads of stone and flint. The line of flints continued down into this layer, producing a flimsy wall, formed not just of solid flint at its core, but also of large pieces of animal bone! In the area examined, there were no stake holes below this 'wall', but a fence line seems probable.

On the west side of the 'wall', after a 40 cm. 'berm', layer 3 ended abruptly in a tumble of flint and stone, and the ground was then cut away to create a north-south ditch. This was not sectioned right across, but its function was clear.

The finds from layer 3 were 12th-14th century sherds, bones, and one Roman sherd. Within the loose packing of the 'wall' were 11th century and later sherds.

CONCLUSION

Although the banks in the lower part of Church Piece were artificial, there was no sign of occupation layers except possibly in the electricity trench, and they may result from levelling of the upper slopes in the 1920s. Alternatively, they are the remains of Medieval cultivation of soil heavily manured with domestic rubbish, but the banks were not regular enough for this to seem likely.

Only a major excavation could elucidate Trench 2, which was almost certainly part of a Medievalcroft. The earliest pottery (apart from the residual Roman sherd) was St. Neots type ware, in sufficient quantity to indicate that it resulted from occupation on the site. Although none of the sherds is big enough to merit drawing, the type is sufficiently distinctive in the region to be clearly recognizable, and it is dated to the 10th and 11th centuries.¹ The latest Medieval sherd was 14th-15th century, and abandonment of the site in this period is probable. The bulk of the pottery seemed to be slightly earlier than this, however, and intensive use of the site could have ceased well before its total desertion.

The implications of the shifting of the settlement from the Tetsworth ridge are discussed in the report on Site 4 by Mark Robinson.

¹ F. Radcliffe, 'Excavations at Logic Lane, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961-2), 45-58. *Ibid.*, xxxvi (1971), 110.