Archaeological & Historical Research Undertaken by the Sedgeford Historical & Archaeological Research Project in Sedgeford Parish (1996 – 2017)

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Introduction

Since its formation in 1995, the Sedgeford Historical & Archaeological Research Project’s (SHARP) central research objective has been the study of human settlement and land usage within the parish of Sedgeford. Research has been undertaken primarily through archaeological excavation but also includes test-pitting, fieldwalking, geophysical survey, standing building survey and desktop research.

SHARP has published a monograph of their first eleven years’ research – Digging Sedgeford: A People’s Archaeology, along with numerous interim reports and academic papers. Publication of three further monographs, which will focus on the Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement and cemetery, is ongoing.

This summary report outlines SHARP’s archaeological research to date, firstly by historical period and then by locality within the parish.

The Historical Timeline of the Parish

**Late Mesolithic (6000 – 4000BC)**

Our knowledge of human settlement within Sedgeford during the prehistoric period remains scant, with no known evidence for settlement occurring prior to the Late Iron Age (100BC – 42AD). However, close to 600 pieces of worked flint have been recovered from the Boneyard/Reeddam site, although none were recovered from sealed contexts. Some of the most distinctive pieces found from the site are microliths dating from the Late Mesolithic period. The Boneyard/Reeddam site is located towards the bottom of the Heacham River valley, which would have been a much more substantial feature in the landscape during this period, and may well have been the site of a temporary hunting camp during this period.

**Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (3000 – 2,350BC)**

The archaeological footprint from this period is also limited within the parish. A number of ploughed-out round barrows are located to both the north and south of the Heacham River. A small assemblage of worked flint artefacts from the Late Neolithic period have also been recovered, again mostly from unsealed contexts.

In 2009, while excavating the Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement site in Chalkpit Field, a crouched burial, containing the skeleton of a young adult was discovered. Subsequent radiocarbon dating dated the skeleton to 2458-2200 cal. BC. It was not able to determine the sex or height of the skeleton but the person would have been around 20 years old at the time of death. Research has shown that the person had suffered delayed skeletal development, likely to have been caused by periods of severe malnutrition or bouts extended illness. Two objects were found within the grave fill; a large flat-topped flint with rounded corners and a part of a worked red deer antler.

**Iron Age (700BC – 60AD)**

Thus far, we have not been able to date any Iron Age settlement activity at Sedgeford before the Late Iron Age (100BC – 60AD). In 2010, a further crouched burial was discovered close to the previous year’s Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age burial. The grave contained the skeleton of an approximately 50 year old female. Also found within the grave fill was a cow scapula and another flat-topped flint nodule. The grave fill also contained six bead-like objects, one being a man-made amber bead, another was of baked clay and the rest being fossils. Nine sherds of pottery were also found within the grave fill; an intrusive Anglo-Saxon sherd from an upper fill, the rest being Iron Age from lower fills. Radiocarbon dating gave a date of death of 373 – 203 cal. BC, making this solitary Middle Iron Age burial an unusual one for the region.
However, a wealth of further evidence discovered by excavation, fieldwalking and metal detecting, suggest an elevated status for Sedgeford during the Late Iron Age period. The first discovery of note occurred in Polar Breck field back in 1965. The Sedgeford Torc was discovered by agricultural machining. Although damaged, a terminal was missing and the rest of the torc had been twisted out of shape, the torc remains one of the finest examples discovered from the period. In April 2004, during a SHARP field survey, a metal detectorist discovered the missing terminal, thus reuniting the two fragments.

It was closer to the River Heacham valley, several other discoveries have been made, suggesting the area’s use as a river edge sanctuary during the Late Iron Age. In the late summer of 2003, during the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery, metal detectors were used to make a final sweep of the site before it was shut down for the season. In a particularly waterlogged area an exposed cow’s femur emitted a signal to a metal detectorist. The source of the signal was carefully examined, with the bone found to have been hollowed out, exposed within it was a gold coin. The bone was carefully lifted and subsequent forensic examination found it to contain a further 19 coins, all gold Gallo-Belgic E staters, minted during the early to mid 1st century BC in northern Gaul. In total 39 coins were recovered from the surrounding deposit.

This hoard of coins was not the only Iron Age discovery of note to be found in the Boneyard/Reeddam area. Again, while excavating the Anglo-Saxon cemetery, a horse burial was discovered beneath the Anglo-Saxon burial layers, with a fully-articulated horse having been buried in a pit 0.5m in depth. Osteological analysis of the horse found it to be a stallion of eight years old, in good health and standing 13 hands high. A large section of the animal’s cranium was missing; the position of the missing bone, fracture lines and lack of post-trauma healing, suggesting that the injury was caused by a hard blow with a heavy-bladed instrument. The Boneyard/Reeddam site contained a number of other Iron Age features; pits and gullies and a couple of postholes. Four of these locations contained a number of broken part-pots; substantial parts of single vessels were found in individual deposits, inferring deliberate and careful placing of the vessels.

In 2006, a trench was opened in the south-east corner of Chalkpit Field; a junction of four fields on the chalk downland south of Sedgeford. The site having been previously identified by fieldwalking and geophysical survey. The excavation uncovered a small number of Iron Age features – pits and two curving ditches (the larger of the two appearing to be an outer enclosure ditch) – representing a small farmstead on the site. The Iron Age farmstead appears to have suffered abandonment (as did many such sites in Norfolk) during the period following the Boudican Revolt around AD 60/61.

**Romano-British (60 – 400AD)**

Within the 2006 excavation trench in Chalkpit Field, features relating to the successor site to the abandoned Iron Age site were uncovered. After a hiatus of around 50 years, a Romano-British farmstead is established within the area; in a slightly different location and with a radically new layout. Pottery assemblages from the site’s deposits suggest a long period of activity; from the late 1st century through to at least the mid-3rd century. During the mid to late 3rd century, the site undergoes significant remodelling. This reorganisation may be linked with the probable establishment of a Roman villa, located on the northern bank of the Heacham River, to the west of the modern village. Certainly, this restructuring would chime with similar changes in the British landscape into villa estates; a line of such sites runs along the Greensand ridge of north-west Norfolk.

New ditch features were cut on the site during the latter part of the 3rd century, forming new enclosures. One of these bounding a working area where a grain-drying oven was located, with what appears to have been two successive oven-flue systems. During the early-mid 4th century, the site’s
layout undergoes further modification. Central to this being the rebuilding of the grain-drying oven and an associated four-post structure. The oven appears to have been designed to carry hot air to a raised granary which was defined by the four postholes.

The latest coin from the site dates to the mid-4th century and it was at some point during this period that the oven was fired for the final time. Although, not without incident. Within the furnace, a layer of burnt ash and charcoal contained fragmentary remains of a complete human skeleton. Subsequent osteological reconstruction and analysis showed the body had been stuffed into the oven and then subsequently raked after the fire had de-fleshed the bones. The bones were of an adult male, approximately 40 years old. Later radiocarbon dating determined that the age of the body was AD 225-383.

**Anglo-Saxon (c.400/450 – 1100AD)**

There is negligible archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon period at Sedgeford, with settlement evidence remaining elusive. During the 19th and early 20th century, three cremation urns were found within the parish. The evidence for where the urns were found is contradictory at best. The first urn to be discovered, found in 1826, is of decorated design and was found during work in a gravel quarry ‘north of the river’. The second is a plain cremation urn, also found during the 19th century. Both urns are held at Norwich Castle Museum. The third urn is again of plan design but with three bands around the shoulder. More than 180 artefacts have been found by metal detector to the west of Sedgeford, adjacent to a known Early Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery. Both this cemetery and the probable locations of the cremation urns are both a distance away from the Middle Anglo-Saxon site.

Since the formation of SHARP, the Middle Anglo-Saxon period has been the focal point of the project’s research. Earlier archaeological investigations at Sedgeford, undertaken during the 1950s, by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works under the direction of Dr. Peter Jewell, had determined that the substantial quantities of bone which were being disturbed by mechanised ploughing in the Boneyard, were in fact human bone. His work at Sedgeford over two short seasons encompassed the excavation of around thirty skeletons from an Anglo-Saxon cemetery, along with an area of settlement towards the western limit of the cemetery. A further excavation by Don Brothwell in 1960 took the total number of skeletons lifted from the Boneyard cemetery to 126. These skeletons were deposited with the Duckworth Collection at Cambridge University, where they remain today. No comprehensive report on these sets of bones has yet been published.

SHARP’s first season in 1996 began by revisiting the Boneyard cemetery to undertake a large-scale excavation of the site, with the aim of determining its character and chronology. That first season saw the opening of a 20m x 15m area between the backfilled trenches of Jewell and Brothwell. In addition, four test pits and an evaluation trench were opened in the Reeddam. In the following years, a larger trench was opened into the Reeddam, as well as expanding the original Boneyard trench. By 2001, an additional trench in Boneyard was opened, both trenches were subsequently united. At its greatest extent, the Boneyard-Reeddam trenches measured 50m x 40m.

The Boneyard-Reeddam site was excavated for eleven years. During this period, SHARP excavated 291 discrete individuals, as well as copious disarticulated human bone. Our best guess is that these burials, along with those from earlier excavations, represent somewhere between a quarter and a half of the total population of the cemetery. The burials appear to follow a Christian rite, aligned west to east and not containing any grave goods. The burials fall into two types; coffined or uncoffined. Evidence for the former was found in the recovery of iron coffin-fittings and nails. Eighty coffin fittings were found during the Boneyard-Reeddam excavations, although not all of these were found within grave cuts. The more common burial rite was uncoffined burial; the body appearing within the grave cut in a more constricted form than that of a coffined burial.
Our in-depth study of the burials suggests that the cemetery was in use for around 200 years (650/725 – 850/875AD). The population appear to have had a hardworking life, sustained by a varied terrestrial and marine diet. All ages and sexes are represented, although young children less so. A small number of male skeletons show evidence of trauma injuries but not to any scale to suggest that this would have been a common occurrence.

The people buried in the Boneyard-Reeddam cemetery lived further up on the southern edge of the valley, in what is today Chalkpit Field. In 2007, after fieldwalking the area and undertaking an extensive magnetometer survey, we opened five evaluation trenches close to the northern boundary of the field. In a variety of ways, all trenches delivered evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement activity. Between 2008 and 2016, large open area trenches were excavated across the northern end of the field. The excavations have uncovered a number of structures, dating from the early 8th century through to the early 11th century. We believe that the settlement had its origins around 700AD at the latest. We can further speculate that some kind of central authority – secular or ecclesiastical – may have been imposing a formal layout to the site. The original settlement was surrounded by a curvilinear ditch and appears to have lacked internal plot boundaries. We do not know much about the buildings. In addition to the cemetery, the settlement also had an industrial scale cereal-processing plant, probably for malting.

Around a century later, the settlement was radically remodelled on a grid pattern, with hall-type buildings sitting inside rectilinear plots bounded by ditches. The cemetery remained in use, but the cereal-processing plant had been abandoned, and the overlying soil, which had accumulated quickly, was now being ploughed. By the start of the 10th century a high-status complex was established on the southern edge of the settlement.

In 2013, research began towards the eastern boundary of Chalkpit Field on a series of geophysical anomalies which had been highlighted on the earlier magnetometer survey. A 10m x 10m evaluation was opened but it was not until machining had reached a depth of 2m before archaeological features were uncovered. These features appeared as the truncated baked clay foundations of what appeared to be large oven structures, cut into the subsoil. Further excavation has ascertained that the site sits within a large north-south aligned, post-glacial river valley, which runs downhill to join the Heacham River. The valley has been filled over thousands of years with numerous washed-in ploughsoils, dating back to the Iron Age.

During subsequent years, the trench has been extended to reveal a further two oven features and associated clay floors. To the south of the oven features, a large clay-lined pit has been revealed. Dating from these features place them during the Middle Anglo-Saxon period. Evidence of burnt structures has been found adjacent to the some of the ovens.

Research into the oven features and associated structures is ongoing and forms the focal point of SHARP’s current excavations. Although our research into this site is incomplete at the time of writing this report, strong indications suggest the ovens were being used for industrial cereal processing during the 8th century; the use of surpluses being a sign that the settlement was operating far above subsistence level. Intriguingly, several of the features within this trench show signs of truncation by mouldboard ploughing during the later Middle Anglo-Saxon period. If confirmed, this will make Sedgeford the only Middle Anglo-Saxon site within the UK with evidence for this type of agricultural cultivation.
Medieval (1100 – 1500)
At a point, somewhere in the latter half of the 11th century, the settlement centre at Sedgeford shifts. Moving north across the river and forming the basis of today’s village. The reasons for the move are uncertain. What we know is that the settlement moved to a point around the contemporary West Hall, south of the Early Medieval parish church of St. Mary the Virgin. Excavations carried out between 1996 – 2000 in the adjacent West Hall Paddock uncovered the remains of a structure’s foundation. Three nearby, west-east aligned, grave cuts inferring the religious nature of the building. Radiocarbon dating from one of the burials produced an age of between 1010 -1180.

The modern-day church of St. Mary the Virgin lies close to the West Hall Paddock site but across on the north bank of the Heacham River. The earliest documentary evidence for a church in Sedgeford dates from 1205. None of the surviving fabric of the current building dates to before the 13th century. The church grew considerably throughout the Medieval period while Sedgeford enjoyed strong links with Norwich Cathedral Priory.

First World War
In 2009 research began on the site of a WWI aerodrome, located to the east of Sedgeford. The aerodrome began life in the spring of 1915 as a night landing ground for the Royal Naval Air Service; this was a modest operation with only one aircraft on site and primarily acting as a satellite base for the R,N,A,S, Great Yarmouth, South Denes. During 1916 the site was to take on a much more substantial role when it became a training station for the still fledgling, Royal Flying Corps. Tasked with producing pilots for front line combat, a range of buildings and structures were quickly constructed on the site. The buildings largely fell into three categories – technical, domestic and regimental - and were essentially constructed using either timber-framed or ceramic brick.

Throughout the First World War, the aerodrome continued to expand; at its peak, more than 1,200 personnel were stationed at the site. By 1918, Sedgeford aerodrome had become a three-squadron training station. At this time, the site contained over one hundred buildings and even more were in the process of being constructed at the time of the Armistice in November, 1918. At this point building was halted and the aerodrome, while still continuing its training function, was gradually scaled back before it was operationally closed at the end of 1919.

At the end of the war the site was extensively cleared of many of its buildings and structures. Timber-framed buildings, which would have at best left an ephemeral footprint, show no trace today of their presence. Some of the brick-built technical buildings, along with some aircraft hangars, remained in situ until after World War Two, when the site was used as a day and night-time (Q/K) decoy for nearby RAF Bircham Newton.

Assisted by original documentary archives and aerial photographs of the site, since 2009 SHARP has undertaken one of the most comprehensive archaeological surveys of a British First World War airfield. Some of the aerodrome’s original buildings are still standing, others have been stripped down to their foundations, others have been lost to almost 100 years of agricultural activity. However, nearly all of these buildings and structures have been surveyed and plotted on to the site. From this we have been able to phase the development of the site – from its modest roots as a night landing ground, to a two and then three-squadron training station during the First World War, a day and night-time decoy airfield during World War Two and then back to post-war agricultural use, with some residential dwellings also being located on the site.
A Summary of Archaeological Evidence by Location Within the Parish

Although, the majority of SHARP’s excavation has been undertaken in Boneyard/Reeddam and Chalkpit Field, many other areas within the parish have been investigated. These investigations have taken the form of evaluation excavations, test-pitting, fieldwalking and standing building survey. The following are a list of locations where SHARP has undertaken research, along with summary findings:


This site was the main excavation for the first eleven years of the project. Evidence recovered dates from the Late Mesolithic through to the Early Medieval period (when the existing Reeddam was formed by the damming of the River Heacham. Our estimation is that only half of the Middle Anglo-Saxon cemetery has been excavated, leaving potentially a further 400 burials within Boneyard Field and part of the Reeddam.

**Chalkpit Field (2007 – to date)**

Since 2007, the Anglo-Saxon settlement and industrial processing sites towards the northern edge of the field have been the main focal points of the project. Approximately half of the settlement site has been excavated and recorded and for the moment, SHARP do not have immediate plans to revisit the settlement site. The industrial processing site will require a further three to four years excavation to conclude research into the Middle Anglo-Saxon period. Fieldwalking and metal detecting within the field suggest further archaeological activity across the entirety of the field; a Late Iron Age farmstead and Romano-British farm/agricultural processing centre were excavated in the south-east corner of the field in 2006.

**Hall Field (2017)**

Following fieldwalking carried out during 2016, a magnetometer survey was carried out in the southwest corner of Hall Field. Both surveys delivered significant evidence of settlement activity, suggesting continuity of features identified during the 2006 excavation in Chalkpit Field.

**Polar Breck (2005)**

Excavation was carried out during 2005, following earlier fieldwalking and metal detected finds. Evidence suggests that this field was an area of some ritual activity during the Late Iron Age period.

**Shernborne Breck**

Magnetometer survey and fieldwalking carried out in 2017, suggest possible archaeological features within the northern extent of this field. However, mechanised ploughing may have truncated any remaining evidence.

**Sedgeford Hall (2000)**

In 1913, the then owner of Sedgeford Hall, Holcombe Ingleby, was having a bowling green created 150 yards north west of the hall. Construction uncovered a large assemblage (identified by photographic assessment) of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery. An evaluation project, comprising of four test pits, was carried out by SHARP during 2000, with the test pits located adjacent to the original bowling green. A few small sherds of Iron Age pottery being recovered.

**West Hall/Ladywell Field (1996 – 2000)**

A series of evaluation and open area excavations were carried out in the gardens of West Hall House during 1996 to 2000. Pottery evidence recovered suggests a prolonged Iron Age activity in this area but becomes abandoned, due to heavy water-logging, during the Late Roman period. The late Anglo-Saxons eventually settle the higher southern part of the site away from the river floodplain. A 10th/11th
century building and three grave cuts (radiocarbon dating from one of the burials produced an age of between 1010 -1180), interpreted as a chapel, was excavated in West Hall Paddock, although it is uncertain whether the church of St. Mary the Virgin is its direct replacement.

**Church of St. Mary the Virgin (1996 – 1999)**

A complete standing building survey of the church was carried out between 1996 and 1999.

**Heacham River**

Numerous surveys have been carried out along the course of the river as it flows within the parish. Predominant research has been to locate the locations of Anglo-Saxon mill sites and the canalisation of the river to avoid these obstructions.

**Sedgeford Carr**

On the north bank of the river, above Sedgeford Carr, is the site of a part-scheduled Roman villa. The evidence for location being an actual villa site is scant (the site was scheduled during the 1950s). No record has been found of any previous archaeological excavation having been carried out on the site. Numerous sherds of Romano-British pottery have been found at the site and crop markings within the field hint at features being present, although their role is ambiguous. The field above this site has been fieldwalked and numerous sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered at the base of the field’s incline. At the northern edge of the field (on the opposite side of the road from the contemporary cemetery) a large, square-shaped cropmark has been identified on a post-WWII aerial photograph.

**West Hall Field**

Several fieldwalking surveys have been conducted on this field. Each showing possible settlement evidence from the Late Iron through to the Early Medieval period.

**Sedgeford Aerodrome (2009 – to date)**

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**Village Survey (2003 – 2004)**

During 2003 and 2004, SHARP excavated 49 test-pits in gardens and open areas within the village. The principal objective being to date the development and expansion of the earlier settlements into what is today, the modern village. Sedgeford can be defined as a ‘polyfocal agglomeration’ - in that the village contains more than one centre and represents an amalgamation of several small
settlements. Analysing the pottery typologies recovered (almost exclusively Late Anglo-Saxon onwards) identifies four distinct bursts of the village’s development:

1. The establishment of West Hall in the 11th century
2. The spread to Cole Green and Eastgate in the 12th and 13th century
3. Further development towards Littleport and Sedgeford Hall in the 16th and 17th centuries.
4. The expansion of housing development post-1945.

Conclusions

SHARP’s research, still ongoing, has produced one of the most comprehensive narratives of any Norfolk parish. Some of the archaeological evidence from Sedgeford is of at least international significance and helps form our understanding as to how successive generations (some local, some from further afield) have shaped this typical Norfolk parish. By no means unique, Sedgeford does have the extremely useful characteristic of a village that has ‘shifted’ over time. This allows research to be carried out (with the support of landowners) in this ‘vacant’ areas.

Although we have carried out 22 years of research in the parish, our picture of the village is still an incomplete one, with many research questions remaining:

- The underlying reason for the shift from south to north Sedgeford during the 11th century.
- Identifying the nucleated Early Anglo-Saxon settlements.
- What were the reasons for the Early Medieval development of the nucleated settlements from its centre at West Hall and can common features be identified in their buildings?
- How much is still to be discovered in the areas to the north and east of the village?
SHARP Village Survey Test Pit Locations