

BARNET AND DISTRICT RECORD SOCIETY

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EXCAVATIONS AT PANCAKE HALL, WELHAM GREEN

In the summer of 1950, the Barnet and District Record Society extended its activities by undertaking the excavation of the site of a mediaeval moated farmhouse. Although important work has been done elsewhere by local historical societies, mediaeval Hertfordshire has hitherto remained in an archaeological backwater. Despite the large number (over 200) of moated farmsteads of this period, only two have been examined. One of these at *Nuthampstead, had never been completed or inhabited. The description of the other, particularly as regards finds, was totally inadequate. The need for the excavation of a typical Hertfordshire site therefore remained, and when it was learned that an example at Welham Green was being disturbed by cultivation, it was decided that work should begin there.

Sites of this character are purely domestic, and in no sense military. The moat, though pretentious in width, is often of negligible depth, and it was frequently dug only round the side of the dwelling facing the entrance. Since it was not defensive, it was probably a mark of wealth and social distinction. The moat is generally nearly square in shape, though a few, for example those at Astwick Manor, near Hatfield, and Broad Colney, are irregular.

The moat at Welham Green is situated in Fifty Acre field, beside Dixon's Hill Road, in an area known locally as Pancake Hall. It is an irregular quadrilateral, whose sides vary in length between 95 ft. and 135 ft. surrounded by a moat about 20 ft. wide on three sides, widened to 60 ft. on the N.E. side. This peculiarity which I have noted nowhere else was proved to be an original feature when the upcast mound from it was found to be about twice the size of the others and uniform in consistency. The water, which still fills three sides of the moat, seems originally to have come from a now largely filled-in pond across the road. Beside this is a shallow well and there was, no doubt, formerly a spring here. The overflow runs from the W. angle, the lowest point of the site, to a small stream flowing in the direction of North Mymms. Although recut in recent times, it evidently represents the line of an original feature, such as is usual on these sites.

* Antiquaries Journal 26 (1946) pp.138-144.

Bad weather and cultivation restricted the work, but it was possible to date the occupation closely and also give a picture of the main building in two stages of its existence. Trenches dug across the filled-in side of the moat proved that it had been very shallow. The slope of the ground is such that if the ditch had contained more than two feet of water, the back of the site would have been flooded. Although no evidence of dating was found here, the structural sequence was clear. Above an accumulation of 15 inches of silt lay, in one area, a mass of fragments of tile, and above this, another 8 inches of silt. This debris represents a re-roofing of the main building with tile some time after its original construction, when it had presumably been thatched or shingled. This interpretation was confirmed by finds at the W. corner, where a mass of broken tiles overlaid, and was therefore later than a shallow pit containing a considerable quantity of pottery. The peg-holes of many of these tiles had not been properly pierced, and they therefore represent discarded or broken material, and not debris from the house after its destruction. Among them were a number of curved ridge tiles. These were, of course, not pegged to the roof, but each had a square hole in the middle, intended to receive an ornamental cresting.

The whole building may have been rebuilt at the same time, but cultivation prevented the examination of the foundations to determine this. No brick was found, and the only dressed stone discovered was a small block of limestone. It is therefore almost certain that the buildings were of timber, perhaps with stone dressings round the doors. The point at which the moat was crossed has so far eluded us. On the S.W. side about three-quarters of the way towards the S. angle, we encountered a patch of gravel about 10 feet wide and some 9 inches thick. This was perhaps the track, which would have been carried over the moat by a wooden bridge. Attempts to trace this in the field outside were frustrated by the weather. An equally probable site is at the E. angle on the S.E. side, where the remains of an iron-bound door and an iron latch-lifter of indeterminate date were recovered from the moat.

The finds fixed the date of occupation to the first half of the 14th. century. The pottery was mostly found in two rubbish heaps, one near the W. angle, the other about one-third of the way down the S.W. side. It is remarkably homogeneous in character and can scarcely represent the development of more than a few decades.

There was a complete absence of the wall-sided pottery made of gritted clay, such as is characteristic of mediaeval sites of 13th. century date, and the only vessel deriving from a form of that period, a cooking pot with a tripod base, was found trodden into undisturbed clay below the other finds. With a single exception, the rims of all the cooking pots were boldly out-turned and rounded, unlike the small, square rims found in London and the south east. They no doubt represent the products of local kilns, perhaps at Potters Bar, where I have noted surface finds of similar pottery, including a glazed waster.

A date between 1300 and 1350 for the occupation is confirmed by the close correspondence of the glazed wares to those found at Pachenesham, near Leatherhead, in levels dated by documentary evidence to after 1296. A coin said to have been found on the site, but since lost, was minutely described to me by the finder, and seems to have been a silver penny issued between 1279 and 1335. The large rubbish heap by the W. angle produced one other find of outstanding interest. This was a small pair of shears - the ancient equivalent of scissors - of London Museum type II, to which was found rusted the gilt blade of an iron knife. Further search produced fragments of the bone handle, and it was possible to clean and restore both articles. Together with the other finds these have been generously presented by the owner of the site to the Barnet Museum.

Documentary evidence of the name of the site has so far not been found, though it may be the unidentified *Aberdenecroft, mentioned in 1333 and 1338.

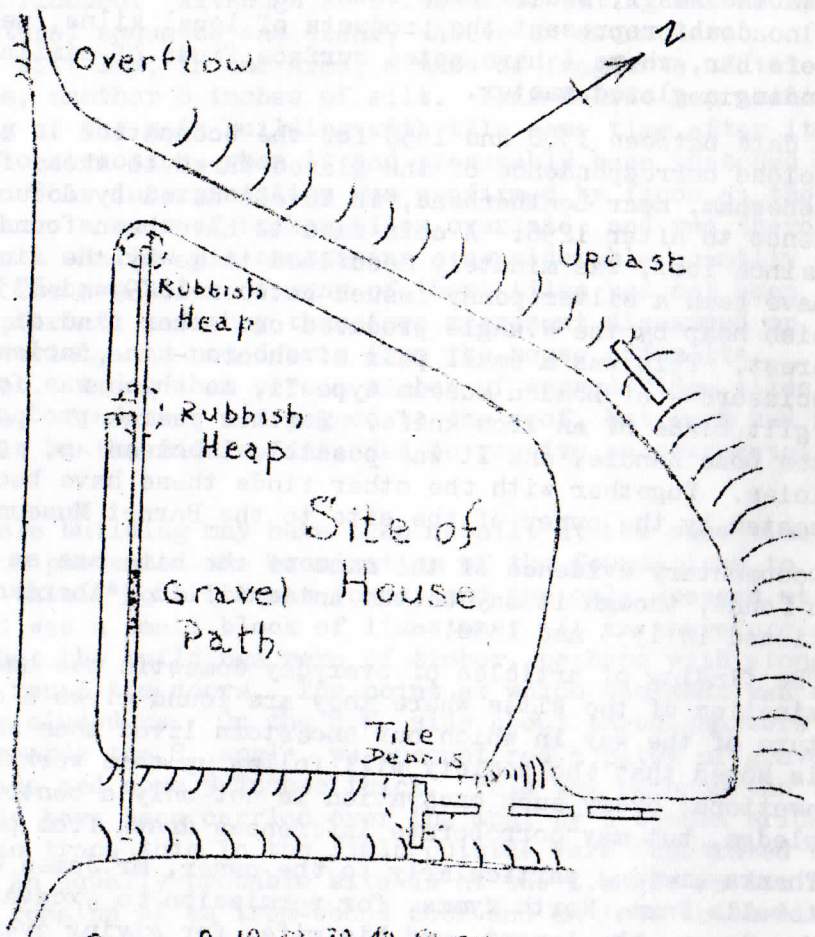
The finding of articles of everyday domestic use and the examination of the sites where they are found gives a clearer picture of the way in which our ancestors lived than any other source. It is hoped that the society will follow up this work with similar excavations; every such excavation is not only a contribution to knowledge, but may corroborate inferences drawn from previous work.

Thanks are due particularly to the owner, Mr. James Crawford of Potterells Farm, North Myms, for permission to excavate; and also to Mr. Green, the tenant, and his wife, for giving every possible facility and help; also to Messrs. D.F. Remm and G.R. Gillam, without whose active help the excavation could not have been carried to its successful conclusion.

J.P.C. KENT.

* Place-names of Hertfordshire p.66(Westminster Abbey Muniments).

PANCAKE HALL, WELHAM GREEN



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JPKK