SITE 2:
EMPINGHAM NORTH ROMANO-BRITISH VILLA

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Introduction
The site (code EPN 71) was located 400m north of Site 1 on the opposite side of the Gwash Valley (SK 942 081), and now lies under the crest of the reservoir dam at its north end. It was first discovered during fieldwalking in 1970 when it showed up as a dense concentration of Romano-British pottery. The area of the scatter was trial trenched in late October 1970 which indicated the need for further work. In July 1971 topsoil was removed by machine and excavation, directed by M.S. Gorin, continued periodically into early autumn. The pace of development meant that there was insufficient time to excavate the site completely.

Two phases of activity were identified. Phase 1 dates to the later Roman period and comprises a masonry building of aisled plan constructed probably during the later third century but possibly as late as the mid-fourth century. Phase 2 sees the area of the aisled building reused as a Christian cemetery in the middle Anglo-Saxon period and may imply that the building was remodelled into a church or chapel.

Note: in common with Site 1, the on-site recording system comprised a series of two letter codes from AA, AB, AC,... to ZZ, assigned to each finds tray and preceded by the year of excavation (i.e. 70 or 71). Several codes may therefore relate to the excavation of one feature or area of the site.

Phase 1: The Aisled House (Fig. 8)
The earliest identified phase of occupation on the site is represented by a large rectangular building measuring at least 21m east-west by 11m north-south, with rooms arranged into an aisled plan. Plough damage removed all evidence of flooring within the building, and the plan revealed is essentially the below-floor masonry foundations (fig. 8). The building was constructed of limestone, with courses of faced blocks infilled with rubble alternating with courses of pitched blocks, to create a herring-bone effect. Wall thicknesses varied from 0.75m along the west gable-end wall, down to 0.6m along the north and south external walls. The internal walls varied between 0.45m and 0.55m in thickness.

[Diagram of Site 2 Phases 1 and 2]
The plan was divided internally into at least eight identifiable rooms. Unfortunately, much of the eastern half of the building was lost due to plough damage, so the overall plan is not clear. However, the plan appears to have been conceived as a nave and aisle arrangement with ranges of rooms along the north and south aisles of similar width, either side of a central nave which was subdivided to form a central hall (Room 7). Whether this phase represented an upgrading of an undivided aisled building, similar to that on Site 1, was not demonstrated due to the lack of time to undertake stratigraphic excavation. A coin of AD 330-337 (p.124, Site 2 no.13) is described in the site records as having been found in the north wall of the building, while other coinage and pottery dates to the beginning of the third century. However, the majority of the pottery dates to the later third and fourth century.

**The North Aisle**

The north aisle was subdivided into at least three, or probably four, identifiable rooms of near equal size (Rooms 1, 5, and 6), with a narrow corridor (Room 4) running north to south between Rooms 1 and 5. Room 1 had internal dimensions of 3.4m east-west by 2.4m north-south and did not share exactly the same south wall alignment as the others. Room 5 was 2m by 3.5m, Room 6 was 2m by 3.3m, and the conjectured fourth room was 2m north-south. Room 4, which appears to have acted as a corridor, was 7m by 2m and probably provided access between Rooms 1 and 5 and the nave area.

**The South Aisle**

The south aisle would appear to have been similarly subdivided into rooms of similar size although only two (Rooms 3 and 8), at the western end, could be identified. Room 3 was 5m east-west and 3m north-south while Room 8 was 2.5m by 4.5m. Room 8, lying towards the centre of the aisle, was a hypocausted room with evidence for a pilae-supported floor. The room exhibited a series of modifications, but the exact sequence of construction is unclear from the existing records. It is possible that Rooms 3 and 8 were originally joined, to form a continuous south aisle, as the partition wall and, possibly, a replacement north wall to both rooms would appear to have been inserted at a later date, perhaps when the hypocaust system was built. The south aisle is wider than the north aisle.

The installation of the hypocaust involved the excavation of the underlying ironstone in order to create the under floor space needed. Nine of the original tile pilae remained in situ in the under floor space, standing in parts on a floor of limestone slabs over a bed of ironstone. The dimensions of the room were 2m north-south and 4.5m east-west. However, there was evidence for a small southern extension to the room which may possibly have been a bath since a stone-lined drainage channel ran southwards away from the building at this point for a distance of 4.0m.

The hypocaust system was supplied with heat from two furnaces situated on the east and north sides of the room. The flue of the eastern furnace was 1.25m long and 0.5m wide. It was lined with tile and faced limestone blocks exhibiting intense scorching, which were backed by irregular limestone blocks. The floor of the flue was formed of limestone slabs. At its east end, the flue gave way to a circular stoke pit 1.5m in diameter, and the scorching of the underlying ironstone which formed the floor of the stoke pit, extended in a 0.5m arc around the mouth of the flue. The stoke pit had a fill of black ashy soil, presumably derived from the raking out of the flue.

The insertion of the northern furnace, the stokehouse of which extended into Room 7 to the north, necessitated the addition of a double thickness to the north wall of the room, perhaps to support a new floor, and to act as a lining wall for the hypocaust. The flue of the north furnace appeared narrower and longer than that in the east wall, being 1.75m long and only 0.4m in width. It was again lined with tile and faced limestone blocks which were backed by a rubble mixture of tile and limestone bonded with opus signinum. The stoke pit at the north end was rectangular and measured 1.0m by 0.6m, the walls surviving to four courses of masonry. This rectangular structure may have represented a modification, possibly to support a hot water tank, as an area of burning of the underlying ironstone extended in an arc to the east underneath the stone structure. To the west, the space behind the west wall was filled with black ashy soil containing broken tile and limestone fragments. The stoke pit itself had a similar black fill containing broken tile.

**The Nave**

The central portion of the building, at least 18m in length, was subdivided into three portions; a large, central room or hall (Room 7), the continuation of the proposed corridor (Room 4), and Room 2 at the western end. Room 7 was at least 4.5m x 11m and is best interpreted as a central hall. Room 2 was almost square in plan (3.6m x 4.0m), but nothing is known of any internal features.

**The Wall**

A square, stone-lined well was situated just outside the building on the south side and was 3.6m deep. It appeared to have been stone-lined all the way down, with a pitched course surmounted by three flat courses at the bottom. The water level was just 0.5m above the bottom, and the fill at this level contained bone, pottery and burnt stone. Between 3.1m and 2.9m depth, larger stones in a black and yellow sediment had been dumped in, and this was capped by 0.1m of clayey brown fill. From 2.8m-1.4m depth the well was filled with large masonry blocks in a dark grey/black fill. A coin of Claudius II (AD 268-270) was found at a depth of 2.4m. There were no details recorded about the fill above this point. The well head was roughly square with internal dimensions of 0.59m by 0.57m. The aperture was surrounded by flat-edged tiles, the uneven outer edges being infilled with small cobbles, and this gave the structure overall dimensions of 1.2m by 1.4m. In common with the well on Site 1, there is no evidence for any timber superstructure.

**Other Phase 1 Roman Period Activity in the Vicinity of Site 2**

**Agricultural**

A key-hole shaped corn drier similar to that found on Site 1 was discovered in April 1972 during the construction of the north collector drain, about 30m east of the building. It was orientated in the opposite direction to that on Site 1, with the stoke-hole at the west end. The flue entrance had been blocked with large limestone slabs, and the interior had also been filled with stones in the same fashion as the example on Site 1. It appeared to have been renovated towards the end of its period of use, as some of the stones used for the walls had been replaced, showing little sign of burning. The lower fill of the corn drier flue comprised a thin layer of charcoal. The discovery of the corn drier would indicate that Site 2 was not
purely residential in function, and that subsidiary buildings may have lain to the east.

**Burial**

Between the Autumn of 1971 and the Spring of 1972, Bill Thomas recorded two areas of burial associated with Site 2. The stratigraphic details are described below, while discussion of the skeletal evidence is to be found on p. 56. The first group lies 50m south-west of the building, and comprises four, or perhaps five, burials (nos. 7-11), one of which was interred in a limestome coffin. The second group of eight burials lies 80m east of the building (nos. 12-19), but their Roman date cannot be confirmed.

**Burial 7R**

In common with burial 5R, located directly opposite on the south side of the Valley, burial 7R was interred in a stone coffin, at a shallow depth of 0.5m. It was located about 40m west of Site 2 on the north side of the river, and was one of a group of five contemporary and later intercutting burials. Although this placed it 425m north of burial 5, the two coffins were orientated along exactly the same north-north-west alignment. The coffin was also of Barnack stone, and of very similar dimensions to 5R. Externally it was 2.19m long, and 0.68m wide (0.65 at north end), with a depth estimated at 0.44m. Internally it was 2.01m long and 0.51m wide, with a depth of 0.36m. The lid was too damaged to allow measurement, while the walls were between 70mm and 90mm in thickness. The coffin contained the skeleton of an adult male over 45 years old, with head to the north. This orientation means that the body was literally facing that in burial 5R. Also, in common with burial 5R, two similar ceramic vessels had been placed one inside the other at the foot of the grave (south end), outside the coffin. Again no small finds were present inside the coffin.

**Burial 8R**

Located 1m west of 7R, parallel to it, except for the fact that the head was at the south end. There were no coffin remains detected, and the lower left side of the skeleton was missing, having probably been disturbed by the insertion of Burial 9R. A small colour-coated ware vessel lay on the left hand side of the chest (fig. 44 no. 136). The individual interred was a probable male adult.

**Burial 9R**

This burial, probably an adult male, was made in a later cutting of burial 8R, and had an east-west orientation with the head to the east. The skull of 9R lay across the pelvis area of 8R, and the feet, which were missing would probably have overlain the pelvis area of burial 10R which lay parallel to 8R. The burial had suffered plough disturbance, and only parts of the skeleton were present. No pottery was found, but two iron nails were found to the left of the skull, and could be the remains of a coffin, though it is not clear if they belong to burial 8R or 9R.

**Burial 10R**

This burial, probably an adult male of at least 45 years old, lay 1.5-1.75m west of, and parallel with 8R, though in common with 7R, the head was to the north. The central part of it was disturbed by the later cutting of 9R. A few sherds of colour-coated ware were associated with the burial, as were two iron nails to the right of the skull, suggesting the presence of a wooden coffin.

**Burial 11R**

This burial lay 2-3m north of burial 7, and was reported by Phil Morris, the driver of the scraper, who saw a skull and two limb bones in his load, but did not recover them.

**Burials 12R-19R**

This group of burials was located 80m to the east of Site 2 and was discovered by Bill Latimer while supervising the widening of the North Collector Drain. He reported to Bill Thomas that the machines had exposed a ditch containing 8 burials, spaced evenly over a distance of 20m. All the burials were orientated east-west, with their feet to the east, and were only 0.5m deep. Unfortunately the skulls had all been machined away earlier, and the bones were apparently too crushed to be retrieved. However, some Roman pottery was retrieved from around and underneath the burials. Cleaning of the ditch section at the south end showed it to be 2.5m wide and 0.75m deep. The general direction of the ditch was running north-south across the drain, but it appeared to curve away south westwards and north westwards at either end, creating a crescent shape.

**Discussion of Phase 1 Roman Period Activity**

The aisled masonry structure excavated represents the final phase of building on the site and, although nothing is known of any structures that may have preceded it, it is conceivable that an undivided aisled barn with timber-posted aisles may have been remodelled, as is more apparent on Site 1. In common with the structures on Site 1, the availability of suitable stone makes it likely that the building was constructed entirely of masonry, and the evidence for collapsed walling at Drayton II villa in the Welland Valley (Connor 1993) and Redlands Farm, Stanwick in the Nene Valley (Keevill 1996, 44) also within the ‘stone belt’, supports this.

The security of the context for the coin of AD 330-337 described as having been found in the north wall of the building must be open to question given the disturbance to the site but would otherwise indicate that the final structure was not built until the middle of the fourth century at the earliest. Evidence for earlier occupation might be indicated by coinage and samian pottery dating to the beginning of the third century, but what little samian there is of this date, is not supported by the presence of similarly dated British finewares such as those from the Lower Nene Valley which would be expected. The pottery is otherwise consistently of later third and fourth century date, and it is therefore most likely that the building was constructed and modified over this period. If earlier structures existed, then evidence for them has been masked and any absence of earlier artefactual material must be attributed to the lack of excavation of such features.

Within the life of the masonry structure visible there is clearly at least one phase of remodelling which concerns the insertion of a bath suite into Room 8. The presence of two furnaces might appear unusual but there is no clear evidence of one succeeding the other that might be suggested by blocking. It is conceivable that one was used specifically for heating water and the other for the hypocaust although this would seem inefficient. Their location on internal walls does not necessarily present a problem. The eastern furnace was probably housed...
within a specific furnace room accessed directly through the south wall as indicated at Welwyn, Herts. (Rook 1988, 15), whilst the northern furnace could have been accessed through the proposed corridor (Room 4), with smoke exiting through the roof of the central hall as it would have from a domestic hearth. The option to have hypocaust furnaces on internal walls seems to be confined to developed aisled building, as presumably in this architectural form the central hall is still open to the roof. A useful parallel is found at Winterton villa, Lincs., in Phase 2 of aisled Building B (Stead 1976, 28, fig.16).

On the basis of the limited preservation and excavation of the site, the function of the building would appear to have been purely residential, with the discovery of the corn drier to the east indicating the existence of a subsidiary timber buildings with an agricultural function. The lack of extant flooring in the building makes it difficult to judge the likely social status of its inhabitants. Although at least one of the rooms possessed a hypocaust, and so presumably a concrete floor, there are no records of tesserae being excavated, however over 12kg of painted wall plaster was retrieved from the rubble layers associated with the bath suite (p.128).

There are many examples of aisled buildings that appear to have a wholly or partly residential or domestic function, and where an originally undivided timber-aisled plan has been modified in order to create suites of rooms acting as ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ ends to the building in a fashion comparable to medieval hall houses (see Taylor forthcoming and Site 1 discussion above). Hingley (1989) has reviewed the evidence for this idea, citing the examples of North Warnborough, Hants., and Combley, Isle of Wight (1989, 40 fig.17 a and d), and it is feasible that Site 2 fits into this class of developed aisled house or more broadly into the category of hall-type villas defined by J.T. Smith (1978 a and b). The Site 2 building does not appear to divide nicely into ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ ends, but the hypocausted Room 8 may have been part of a private suite of rooms (perhaps along the western part of the south aisle) used specifically by the head of an extended family and the immediate nuclear family (Hingley 1989, 42). The corridor (Room 4) could in effect have separated a working area (or accommodation for other members of the household) in Rooms 1 and 2 from the rest of the house while still allowing access to the central hall (Room 7) for communal activities. A similar through passage was recognised by Todd in the plan of the masonry building at the adjacent site of Whitwell (1981, 14 and fig.8).

Comparable examples of aisled buildings within the Corieltauvian territory have been collected together successively by Todd (1973, 87, fig.20) and Whitwell (1982, 110 and Fig. 19), and the distribution map produced by Hadman (1978, 188, fig.16) illustrates that the area of the Nene and Welland valleys (the Gwash being a tributary of the latter) possesses the densest concentration of this building type within the province. While Hadman points out that the concentration may well reflect an uneven pattern of archaeological discovery, it could equally be genuine. Aisled buildings are often found in a developed form as subsidiary to the main dwelling house within a villa establishment, as for example at Winterton, Lincs. (Stead 1976), but an increasing feature of the Corieltauvian examples indicates that in many cases they themselves formed the residential part of the farming establishment. This feature was first recognised by J.T. Smith (1964, 75-104) during excavations at Denton 15 miles to the north, and is also a possibility at Great Casterton, just three miles downstream from Empingham, although in both cases there may be reason to believe that the main residence remained undiscovered (Whitwell 1982, 102 ; 111). However, a clearer example comes from the Welland Valley, 12 miles to the south west, where excavations at Drayton II villa, Leics., from 1988-1993 have revealed a large, aisled, masonry building, incorporating two bath suites (with a further external one to the north). The majority of rooms possessed hypocausts, often with tessellated flooring, and from the evidence of excavation and field walking, it appears to stand alone as the major dwelling house, with lesser structures adjoining the north side (Cooper et al 1989, Pollard 1991, Connor 1993).

The evidence of human burial from the area surrounding Site 2 suggests the existence of a coherent cemetery related to the household similar to that found close to Site 1. Where dateable objects accompany the burials they are generally of fourth century date and so are broadly contemporary with the Phase 1 building, while the intercutting of burials 8R, 9R, and 10R might also imply that more than one generation is involved.

Phase 2: The Middle Anglo-Saxon Cemetery (fig. 8)

Context of the Burials

The latest phase of activity on the site comes in the form of a group of five burials which lay below Roman floor levels, and by inference must have been cut through the flooring of the Phase 1 Roman building. However, the lack of extant flooring makes this impossible to demonstrate conclusively from the grave cuts. The implications of their location are discussed below.

Note: to avoid confusion with burials from the other sites, those from this site are given the suffix ‘MAS’ (Middle Anglo-Saxon) in the skeletal report (p.55). This section describes the layout of the cemetery.

The Burials

Though fragmentary, the skeletons in Burials 1-3 were all substantially complete.

Burial 1 (plate 6)

This burial contained a subadult male and was located on the south side of the building, immediately south of the well. The body was supine with its head at the west end.

Burials 2, 3 and 4 lay in a group in the north-west corner of the building.

Burial 2

This contained an adult female under thirty years of age,
supine with head to the west. The position of the burial crossed the wall line previously separating Rooms 1 and 4. Presumably the wall had been previously removed, although footings for it were preserved to the north of the burial.

Burial 3
Located within Room 2 this contained the skeleton of an adult male which was supine with its head to the east.

Burial 4
By comparison, the remains in Burial 4 were very fragmentary. No detailed plan of the burial was made, and the photographic evidence indicates that it was very badly disturbed. There is considerable doubt therefore whether it represents an actual burial or a scatter of bones derived from another burial, the position of which is unknown. The position of the burial between Burials 2 and 3, would appear logical, but the fact that it overlay extant wall footings between Rooms 1 and 2 (71 NN) is not, given that none of the other burials do. The disturbed nature of the burial is also indicated by the fact that the bones of a large hand which probably belong to it were originally incorporated with those of Burial 2 immediately to the north. The occupant was probably an adult male.

Burial 5
This appears to have been isolated from the other burials located in the north aisle of the building and is the only burial to be accompanied by grave finds. This part of the building was the last to be investigated and under the prevailing rescue conditions no plan or photographic record was made of the burial. However, the written record states that a number of finds were located under and around the head and neck area. These comprised a copper alloy pin with a jewelled head set in a silver mount, a copper alloy Maltese cross, a glass bead, a jet object, and an object of silver. Unfortunately, all but the copper alloy pin went missing at the time of the excavation. The detailed discussion of this object is to be found elsewhere in this volume (p.107 no.11), but its mid-to-late seventh century date provides the only dating evidence for this burial, and by inference, the rest of the group.

Discussion of Phase 2
Middle Anglo-Saxon Activity
The presence of the mid- to late seventh century pin in Burial 5, implies that these burials are of Middle Anglo-Saxon date and, in addition their east-west orientation and general lack of grave finds, would suggest that they represent Christian interments. If it is accepted that the burials lay below the Roman floor levels, then three possible interpretations exist. Firstly, the burials could have been cut into the floors of a largely intact building, which may have been refurbished or modified (involving the removal of partition walls) for specific reuse as a religious building. Secondly, the burials could have been made through the rubble and into the floors of a partially demolished building which was reused, or held some focal significance, without removing the rubble from the original floors. The third possibility is that the building had been entirely levelled and overgrown by the time the burials were made, and that as a convenient piece of waste ground, the site of the villa building coincidentally became a cemetery.

Accepting the third option would be an easy way of avoiding the possibility that the reuse of the building occurred. However, a number of factors weigh against it. Firstly it is unlikely that the building would not still have featured in the landscape to some extent, since it was clearly occupied until the early fifth century and there was no subsequent reason for its masonry to be robbed during the following two centuries. Secondly, the closer alignment of the burials to the walls of the building rather than precisely east-west must be of considerable significance, and suggests that the walls were to some extent upstanding. Third is the fact that cutting the graves would have involved digging through building rubble and opus signinum flooring, which is likely to have deterred all but the most persistent Anglo-Saxon gravedigger, when soft soil lay only metres away.

These factors would support the possibility that the building was still upstanding in the seventh century and was perhaps being reused as a church. No further burials were noted outside the building during topsoil machining after the excavation had been prematurely ended, although it is quite possible that previous ploughing may have destroyed evidence for them. Their presence might have supported the possibility that a cemetery had spread fortuitously over the area of the building or instead, that the building was indeed acting as the focus of a cemetery which made a social differentiation between burials inside and outside the building. Their apparent absence, while supporting the contention that the building was reused, does suggest
that the cemetery was rather small and the duration of reuse was perhaps short. The amount of stray human bone excavated does suggest that there were more than five individuals buried in the building, but not many more.

The reuse of villa buildings for burial purposes has been widely recognised on the Continent, not only in France and Belgium where there are hundreds of examples, but also in the Rhine and Danube provinces (Percival 1976, 183, Ripoll and Arce 2000). In his examination of the Continental evidence, Percival acknowledges that in some cases the coincidence of burials and villa buildings is fortuitous, particularly where the cemetery surrounding a nearby church happens to spread over the ruined villa building, but in the vast majority of cases villa buildings have clearly been chosen as a focus for burial either because of previous religious significance or because the building's shape and orientation have made it suitable for conversion into a church. In the absence of any evidence to support the former, the Empingham example would fit the criteria for the latter.

However, the reuse of villa buildings as churches has rarely been demonstrated, and although Percival (1976) cites Continental examples where parts of French villa building plans have been incorporated, for example at Martres-Tolosane (Haute Garonne), there are no definite British examples, despite the fact that the last two decades has seen a gradual rise in the number of recognised examples of burial in villa buildings. In 1972, Applebaum was only able to list six examples, to which Percival added two more (1976, 217), and Rodwell and Rodwell (1985, 106) a further 11, while noting that further examples could be added from recent excavations (Morris and Roxan 1980). There are probably numerous potential examples of the reuse of villa buildings as churches or cemetery sites which have gone unrecognised simply because the burials, which are rarely accompanied by dateable finds, were not considered to be significant at the time of the excavation and were broadly identified as 'medieval', as (correctly) in the case of those found in the aisled Building D at Winterton, Lincs. (Stead 1976, 49).

Approaching the problem from the other direction, Morris and Roxan (1980) have examined the evidence for extant medieval churches that appear to lie on or near the site of a Roman villa building or other Roman building, or have had Roman building materials incorporated into their structure. While there are numerous examples (Morris and Roxan 1980, Appendix 1), actually demonstrating the direct reuse of an underlying villa building is often precluded by the presence of the church itself or modern burials, as the example of Rivenhall clearly illustrates (Rodwell and Rodwell 1985, 84). Locally the church at Ab Kettleby is thought to lie on the site of a Roman villa (Allsop 1998, 162).

In attempting to explain the relationship between villa buildings and churches it has been observed that the majority of English churches are proprietary in origin, owing their foundation to the initiative of lay lords (Morris and Roxan 1980, 191), and that their location might indicate those villa estates that continued into the Anglo-Saxon period and maintained the same administrative centre. Such an argument could be put forward to explain the evidence from Site 2, despite its apparent 'abandonment' during the later fifth and sixth centuries. The site may then join the growing list of examples where the progression from villa to parish church was arrested at an early stage, when for reasons which are not attestable archaeologically, the focus of activity shifted elsewhere, perhaps to Empingham itself. Parsons has recently suggested that if Site 2 did represent a place of Christian worship, then perhaps it was used by British rather than Anglo-Saxon Christians, the latter choosing to establish a separate system of church organisation, along the lines of the pattern already recognised in the West Midlands by Steven Bassett (Parsons 1996, xx).