SITE 4: ‘EMPINGHAM WEST’ IRON AGE AND ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT

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Introduction (Fig. 21)
During the Autumn of 1971, the activity of mechanical scrapers on the north side of the valley at SK 9372 0795, immediately south of Sykes Lane (76m contour) exposed a complex of archaeological features, appearing as cuts into the underlying ironstone, which were excavated periodically until Autumn 1972 under the direction of M.S. Gorin. The site (code EPW 1971/72) was located on slightly sloping ground, of about 5% dip to the south, and both ploughing and the machine damage may have caused considerable truncation of some features.

The excavated features fall into two clearly defined areas, both spatially and chronologically (fig.21), which can be summarised as follows:

Phase 1
Iron Age occupation consisted of three house structures indicated by penannular eaves-drip gullies, and a number of associated pits and post holes. Two subphases were identified, 1a and 1b.

Phase 2
Early Anglo-Saxon occupation comprised two sunken-featured buildings and associated pits and ditches, lying (with the exception of Pit C) upslope and to the west of the Phase 1 settlement.

Phase 1: The Iron Age Settlement

Phase 1a
The evidence for this subphase comprised a single pit (Pit D, fill AF), and possibly the adjacent Pit E, which lay to the north of the later Building 2 (fig. 22). Pit D was cut by Pit A of Phase 1b, and its contents suggest that it predates the rest of the occupation evidence. It had a maximum diameter of 1.0m and following the deposition of a single, large and complete jar, the pit was rapidly backfilled entirely with ironstone, with no loam accumulation in the fill. The single vessel (p.67, No.1), which probably broke as a result of the backfilling process, did not contain any bone or charcoal and so does not appear to have been a cremation deposit. The form and the band of thumbnail impressions suggests an earlier Iron Age date. The adjacent Pit E is of uncertain date, as it is cut by...
neither Pit A nor D. It has a maximum width of 0.7m, and the fill contained only flint and bone.

**Phase 1b**
This subphase comprises the remaining features of Iron Age date.

**Building 1**
Only about 50% of the ground plan of this building was exposed, the north-western half lying beneath the ungraded area (fig. 21). The internal diameter of the eaves-drip gully circuit is estimated at 10m, but the dimensions of the gully itself were not recorded. A central hearth was recorded as a circular setting of burnt stones 0.5m wide.

**Building 2**
This structure lay to the south of House 1, and a full ground plan was exposed (fig. 22). It was defined by a narrow circular eaves-drip gully, 0.25m wide, and 0.25m deep, which had a fill of dark soil. The south eastern part of the circuit was interrupted by an entrance. The gully terminal on the south side of the entrance was clearly defined and at this point it had been filled with burnt limestone which may have acted as a hard-standing for a door frame. A one metre length of the gully fill was excavated at this end and a small amount of scratch-decorated pottery was retrieved. However, the gully terminal on the north side was indistinct due to the disturbance caused by the grading machinery. The eaves-drip gully circuit had an internal diameter of ranging from 9.8m north-south to 10.4m east-west.

No evidence of internal post settings was recorded, but a probable hearth was indicated by a 0.5m wide circular setting of burnt soil and stones towards the centre of the area enclosed by the gully.

**Features in the Area of Building 2**

**Pit A (Fill AA) (Fig. 22)**
This was the largest of the group of three pits lying immediately north of House 2, and the only one that would appear to have been contemporary with it. It cut Pit D, and was sub-round in plan, ranging in diameter from 1.4m to 1.6m, with a depth of 0.35m.

**Post holes**
A pair of circular pits or post holes was recorded lying 3m apart, 1 metre to the north of pits A, D, and E. The easterly of the two was 0.65m in diameter and was filled with burnt limestone fragments up to 0.25m in size, which were pitched on edge. The west pit was 0.5m in diameter, and was also filled with burnt limestone fragments of the same size. These may have acted as stone foundation settings for timber uprights, but no further evidence for an associated structure was recorded. A single post hole of similar size lay 2m south of Building 2, but the lack of any artefactual evidence in the fill made it impossible to ascertain if it was contemporary with the building.

**Building 3 (Fig. 23)**
This building was isolated on the south edge of the site and evidence comprised an eaves-drip gully and 13 associated post holes. The gully appeared to have been recut completely or at least modified on two separate occasions. The entrance opening to the south-east was maintained throughout, and the recutting would appear mainly to have been in order to widen the gully, judging by the narrowness of the original cuts.

The existence of the recuts was only apparent at the points where the gully terminates either side of the entrance, where the later cuts diverged from the original line in order to increase the overall diameter of the dwelling. The original cut was clearest on the north side of the entrance, with a 1.5m length of a 0.3m wide gully visible. The first recutting of it was 0.5m wide, and a 5m length of it was visible, along the western part of its circumference. The southern terminal of this recut was also indicated. The final cutting of the gully, widened it...
considerably, giving it a maximum width of 1.5m, tapering to 0.9m at the terminals either side of a 4.25m wide entrance.

**Internal Features**

A hearth was indicated by a 1.5m wide circular spread of burnt soil and stones, lying at the centre of the structure. Additionally (but not recorded on the excavation plan) a pear-shaped feature was recorded 2.1m west of the hearth. It was 0.8m wide, and was 0.6m deep at the tapered end and 0.47m at the rounded (south) end.

The thirteen internal post holes varied in diameter from 0.25-0.6m, but it was difficult to identify a truly coherent pattern. Post holes 7, 9, 10, 13 (and possibly 5) may have formed a coherent circular pattern, and 12 clearly belonged to the final phase of rebuilding, as it cut the earlier gully fills. However, the remaining post holes did not appear necessarily to relate to the circular structure. Post holes 2-5 ran in a straight line across the western half of the building, and the fact that no.2 cut the final recut of the gully indicates that they may have formed the west wall of a later rectangular building superimposed over the circular structure. In support of this, post holes 6 and 8 may have belonged to the north wall of such a building.

**Discussion of Phase 1**

Poor conditions of excavation did not allow for a full appreciation of the extent of Iron Age occupation on the site, but the three identified round houses represent the only such structures to be excavated in the valley. There is no evidence that the buildings were enclosed in any way, although the length of east-west ditch to the south of the site could feasibly be of Iron Age date rather than Anglo-Saxon as postulated below. If it is part of an enclosure, then Building 3 would appear to have lain outside it.

Analysis of the pottery, which came predominantly from Pits A and D, and Building 3, indicates that the site was occupied initially in the Early Iron Age, giving rise to Pit D (c. fifth-sixth century BC), and most intensively in the Middle to Late Iron Age, the period to which the other pits and three round houses belong. These later features consistently contained handmade, shell-tempered, Scored Ware which dates from the beginning of the third century BC to the end of the first century BC (Elsdon, 1992). The forms represented within the assemblage suggest that they belong to the latter part of the production period, indicating that Phase 1b probably lies in the first century BC. Comparison with other assemblages from Leicestershire sites, namely the adjacent site at Whitwell (Todd 1981), Enderby (Elsdon 1992) and Tixover in the Welland Valley (Elsdon forthcoming) would tend to bear this out.

Further Late Iron Age settlement evidence was detected during the excavation of Empingham II Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery 250m north-west of Site 4 (Fig. 21). It comprised a trackway, better described as a hollow-way, which later formed the southern boundary of the Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Significantly, the sections excavated across it are the only reminder of Rutland Water's archaeology still visible today to those visiting the Anglian Water leisure area at Sykes Lane. Additionally, a number of other associated features were detected, including ditches, pits and a hearth. In common with the trackway, the fills of these features contained pottery of Later Iron Age and Early Roman date (Timby 1996, 14)

In addition to this site, there is evidence for two others in the valley. Firstly at Whitwell, where the corner of a possible enclosure was encountered together with a number of shallow pits which were not considered to be structural (Todd 1981, 7 and fig.3). Secondly, the existence of an Iron Age enclosed farmstead is indicated by cropmark evidence from the Hambleton Peninsula (SK 919 069), which appears to contain at least two circular buildings (Fig 64 no.16). Fieldwalking of the site in April 1992 yielded only two sherds of Scored Ware, alongside a large assemblage of late Roman pottery, which tends to indicate that firstly, the lower fills of the enclosure ditches have not yet been disturbed by ploughing, and secondly that settlement continued on the site right through the Roman period, which is in contrast to the evidence from Site 4. The excavation of the enclosure at Enderby, four miles south of Leicester, remains the only detailed analysis of a farmstead of this type (Clay 1992).

**Phase 2: The Early Anglo-Saxon Settlement** (Fig. 21)

A series of occupation features of Early Anglo-Saxon date were recorded in the area immediately north west of the Phase 1 Iron Age settlement, and slightly upslope of it, closer to Sykes Lane. They comprised one certain sunken-featured building (SFB 1) on the northern edge of the site, and one less certain sunken-featured building (SFB 2) 15m to the south. The two were separated by a 40m long straight ditch (Feature F), which ran east-west across the site, continuing to the north of the Iron Age Building 1. A 4m length of gully (Feature FG) ran southwards away from the south side of SFB 1, to meet Ditch F at right angles. A large pit (Pit J) lay 5m to the west of SFB 1.

**Sunken-Featured Building 1**

This sunken-featured structure was rectangular in shape, with rounded angles, 4m east-west x 3m north-south. Grading had probably truncated the top of the feature, but the structure had only been cut very shallowly into the underlying ironstone, the depth up to a maximum of 0.2m. The depth of topsoil removed from over the ironstone in this area was up to 0.2m, giving a maximum possible feature depth of 0.4m (not allowing for hillwash or plough erosion).

The superstructure was supported at the west end by a single large timber post placed centrally, and set into a substantial post hole approximately 0.3m in diameter, cut into the ironstone to a depth of 0.2m, immediately outside the line of the sunken feature itself, and appearing to cut it slightly. The support at the eastern end of the structure was less clear with a possible corresponding post hole located centrally at the east end of the hut.

Gully FG, cut the rectangular feature of SFB 1, and continued to cut deeper into the ironstone to a depth of 0.2m. The gully varied in width from 0.5m-0.75m, and ran for a
length of 4m, entering the east-west ditch F. The function of the gully would appear to have been for drainage, as it ran downslope, and cut deepest where it left the sunken feature, in order perhaps to collect water accumulating in the sunken area of the structure.

Sunken-Featured Building 2
This would appear to have been of similar dimensions to SFB 1, being rectangular, with the long axis east-west, and parallel with it, perhaps suggesting that they are contemporary. The feature remained unexcavated.

Ditch F
A 40m length of this ditch was recorded, running east-west, and it appears to have been the continuation of a 17m length of ditch recorded in 1971 to the north of Iron Age Building 1. The ditch was 1.0m in width, and excavation of a small section of the ditch in 1971 yielded only two small sherds, one of Iron Age and one of Early Anglo-Saxon date. However, more extensive excavation of the ditch in the area of the sunken feature buildings in 1972 yielded only Early Anglo-Saxon material, which supported an Early Anglo-Saxon attribution. A second length of ditch was also recorded in 1971, running east-west for an unrecorded (but similar) distance, 30m to the south of House 2. The width varied from 1-1.5m. It would appear to run in parallel with Ditch F, some 65m to the north. No excavation was undertaken so its relationship to the other features remains uncertain.

Pit J
This feature lay approximately 5m to the west of SFB1, and was 1m in diameter. Its initial function is uncertain, but its secondary use was clearly for rubbish disposal, as its fill (BM) contained the largest group of Anglo-Saxon pottery from the site, as well as animal bone.

Pit C
This pit was located 50m south-east of the main focus of the observed settlement, about 10m south of Iron Age Building 2. It was 2m in diameter, and of shallow depth. Its fill (AD, AG, and AH) indicated that it had been used for rubbish disposal, as Early Anglo-Saxon pottery, animal bone, a bone comb and a clay spindlewhorl were retrieved from it (see p113 nos. 31 and 37).

Discussion of Phase 2
Analysis of the pottery from the Early Anglo-Saxon features indicates that the area of settlement excavated was probably of later fifth and early sixth century date, making it broadly contemporary with the settlement evidence from Site 3, but earlier than that from Site 7 at Tickencote. In common with those sites, it is considered likely that the recorded evidence represents only a fraction of what was probably a much larger settlement, and that over time the area of occupation gradually shifted, with disused house structures and pits becoming dumping grounds for domestic rubbish. While this situation can only be conjectured for Sites 3 and 7, there is evidence to support the idea on Site 4. Observations were made by a local amateur archaeologist Bill Thomas in 1973, at the time that the area immediately north of Sykes Lane was being graded by machinery, which indicated that the excavated area of Site 4 may have formed the southern part of a much larger settlement. In the area between Sykes Lane and Empingham II Anglo-Saxon cemetery (not discovered until 1974) approximately 20 possible sunken-featured buildings, as well as hearths were observed. Unfortunately, no excavation was undertaken and no written or photographic record made, since the evidence was completely destroyed the following day. However, while such information must be treated with caution, it cannot be dismissed out of hand.

It is logical to assume that this settlement generated the individuals occupying the 135 burials recorded at Empingham II Anglo-Saxon cemetery in 1974 and 1975 (Timby 1996), the dating of which spans the early fifth to the early seventh century. The portion of the settlement represented on Site 4 would thus be one of the earliest parts occupied.