

Notes for short lecture on CNW 017

I spent all my working life apart from college and the Army working for our family building firm until I retired in 2006 at the age of 70. After I retired I painted the windows, eaves and gables of our house, and caught Lyme disease from a tick bite whilst walking the dog in the forest and after I recovered I needed something interesting to do and having been involved in archaeology through our work on historic buildings I was very lucky that this chance came along.

In early May **2009** Julian Flood our neighbour was walking over Coney Weston fen meadow with Andrew Excell the local Suffolk Wildlife warden, { they had recently purchased the fen meadow along with Market Weston fen} and they came across a small section of crumbling flintwork hidden in the long grass, Andrew said 'I wonder what that is' and Julian replied I don't know but I know someone who will, so I was brought in but actually I didn't know either. However the next day I went down to the fen with a spade and slasher and rootled about finding flint walling enclosing a rectangle about the size of a double bed and by probing found it had a cobble flint floor and walls 14 inches (225mm) thick. Fortunately soon afterwards I was doing some post-retiring estimating for John at Southwold church where I happened to meet John Ete from English Heritage whom I knew from earlier church work, we got chatting and I told him about the odd flint structure and he said 'I will be in your area next week and it sounds interesting, I would like to have a look at it'. He did and noticed some early bricks in the flintwork and he said we should contact Suffolk Archaeology about it which I did. We had a site meeting with SCCAS attended by Edward Martin their Chairman, David Gill a senior archaeologist and several others one of whom scuffed about in the nearby molehills in the area and found several potsherds which were thought to be mediaeval. This caused great excitement and they suggested that we sieve all the nearby molehills. We had just formed a local history group and we thought this might be a useful exercise for them. Thus, a couple of coincidences started what turned out to be a 10 year excavation of an hitherto unknown early mediaeval monastic site connected to the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds.

That is how it all started. I will now go through what we actually did year by year because it only makes sense that way as we never knew what was coming next. We had to guess what areas we wanted to dig each year as we needed to apply in detail to English Nature early each year as it was a SSSI, and we would

not get a reply for several months. It is just as well that we only dug one day per week otherwise it would have been impossible.

In early **2010** our metal detectorist started metal detecting the dry ground so we had some idea of the area of interest so we set out a grid 60m E--W and 80m N--S in 20m squares and sieved every molehill in each square and found over 60 mediaeval potsherds which gave us an indication where to dig, and enabled us to define the position of the subsequent finds.

Eventually at the end of the summer we got permission from E N to dig five m² test pits after a lot of correspondence with English Nature stipulating what we must and must not do because the fen was a SSSI. We found 94 potsherds, 6 coins and numerous brick fragments and animal bones.

Over the winter of **2011** I did a probing survey at 1 metre centres across the whole grid and when I plotted it I shaded in every square where all four corners hit stone at less than 300 mm deep. This showed a large stony area with an interesting looking rectangular area towards the North West corner which was not stony. Permission was obtained from EN to excavated two areas, one being this rectangular gap and the other being where metal detecting over the winter had found a Saxon girdle hanger. These formed the basis for our excavations in summer 2011. The girdle hanger trench did not reveal much more other than the sewer pipe from Hopton and an adjoining 1 m² trial pit yielded 51 potsherds but no evidence of a burial which can sometimes be revealed by grave goods such as girdle hangers but the other area was much more interesting.

The first trench along the edge of the rectangle revealed a circular clay area in the sandy soil about 400 mm diameter at about 300 mm deep with a depression in the middle, a possible post pad? Further excavation to the west revealed a second clay pad approx. 2.2 m from the first. At this stage we were pretty sure that we had found a mediaeval building but we had at that stage run out of permissions so we had to apply quickly for further permissions. By now we had good support from Suffolk County Archaeology so we did not have to wait so long and by the end of this season we had excavated both sides of the building and a large hearth in the west bay. The building was 12m x 5m and was thought to be a mediaeval house. which was later confirmed by the dating of the potsherds as 12th to 14th century.

In **2012** we borrowed a load of Heras fencing panels from R Hogg and Son which we put round all the excavations so we could leave them open and safe

from the cattle until they were completed, this was much more satisfactory than covering the trenches with boards which only seemed to attract them, and we continued to use this fencing until the project was completed.

We continued to excavate the area close to the house to check whether it was an aisled building which it wasn't and to see if there were post holes in the end walls which there weren't, and then to excavate the fireplace which was very large and contained large quantities of rusty deposits suggesting that it might have been used as a forge at some stage.

We then moved to excavate the small cell building which started the project in 2009 and the area around it which produced a large number of potsherds between it and the well to the west of it. We then excavated the well itself down to water level. It had a very well built circular flint shaft about 1.6 m deep which sat on a timber structure which had collapsed into the water but it was possible to see that it had been a substantial timber cage. Having recorded and drawn it we backfilled it as it seemed likely that the flintwork might collapse into the void below. We sent two of the timbers back to SCCAS for dating but never heard the result.

In 2013 we were hoping to get a Geophys resistivity survey of the whole area done by Britannia Archaeology but owing to technological difficulties this did not happen and after a long delay they eventually did a magnetometer survey instead which showed three large rectangular anomalies and several other possible features. One in particular was a very strong signal so we excavated it first, trench 09, it turned out to be an unexploded bomb about the size of a milk churn which is what we first thought it was. Once we saw the fins and realised what it was we withdrew quickly and called the police and Bomb Disposal extracted it that evening and took it away. They made a big hole and rather messed up the archaeology but at least we were not all blown up. We continued digging this trench which contained 357 potsherds and 3.8 kg of bones, it seems to have been a rubbish pit as the finds ceased completely at the edges of it.

We then moved on to investigate the large rectangular features which for the purpose of identification we called Tofts 1, 2 and 3. We dug a trench 08 across the east and west sides side of toft 1 which contained 169 potsherds and 1145g of bones but disappointingly no signs of any walls. So we moved onto toft 2, we didn't understand these big rectangles at that time, with hindsight we had probably excavated through the E and W doorways of a barn. We intended to return to it but we became so occupied with the other 'tofts' that

we never did. It was close to the end of the season so we dug two trenches at the West end of toft 2 where we did find the foundations of a clay wall which set up the programme for 2014.

In **2014** from January to April we excavated Knettishall brickworks which operated from the mid 18th century to the early 20th . This was a good practice exercise for the team in archaeological excavation and was of special interest to me and some of the team as our houses were built with Knettishall white bricks as were most of the houses originally belonging to the Riddlesworth estate. We recorded it all on SCCAS forms incl 17 A3 drawings which are all now deposited with the Suffolk record office.

By May we had permission to carry on excavating on the fen and we excavated and recorded the Western half and some of the Eastern half of Toft 2 which we did not fully understand at the time and at the end of the season we probed and dug a small trial pit at the NW corner of toft 3 which revealed flint walling. At this stage we did not really know the purpose and details of the building in toft 2 which seemed to be different in the East half to the west half. We went back to it in 2016 and 2017 when all became clearer.

In **2015** we concentrated on Toft 3 which was much easier to understand. We excavated most of the flint plinth of the outer walls and the aisle cross walls confirming that this was an aisled barn having overall dimensions of 30 m x 9m (100ft x 30ft) A few lengths of badly burnt sole plate remained on the East side, we had carbon dating done on the charcoal which gave a dating of 1310 to 1340 which coincides nicely with the riots against the Abbey when it is recorded that the rioting gangs burnt down 13 barns belonging to the Abbey in 1327 (We have evidence that our barns belonged to Bury Abbey which I will explain later) The absence of any repairs to the plate or plinth suggests that this barn was probably less than 50 years old when it was burnt down.

We found a short section of oak sole plate in the centre of each end wall and well below this at the south end and also underneath the south bay of the west wall we found considerable deposits of earlier mediaeval pottery. This led to a further discovery in 2017 which I will come to later.

At a meeting on 10 Sep 2015 with Edward Martin, Phillip Aitkins and David Gill it was agreed that the site was very probably the location of the Tithe barn referred to as 'The Abbots Granary' in the Pinchbeck register. Sue Anderson 's report on the pottery confirms the dating of the pottery to be C12/13 for toft 2 and C 13/14 for toft 3

At the end of the season we had an open day at which 150 to 200 people attended and were shown round by members of the team and David Gill and Jo Caruth. Ruth Beverage also from SCCAS brought the best of the earlier finds and displayed them, every one seemed very interested and it was a good day

For **2016** we went back to toft 2 where we had only excavated the western half which we now realised might be another earlier large barn. We excavated the north and south outer wall lines but owing to the downward slope of the ground the wall lines were only just below the turf and nearly lost, but by then we had enough experience to know what we were looking for. We found rows of outer and inner post holes but no signs of walling between them, meaning that this was a much earlier barn with earthbound post holes and no plinth. This made us rethink the western half and to realise that what we had excavated in 2014 was actually a later building or an extensive repair with clay plinth walls on the south and west and a brick plinth on the north. Probably the original barn with its earth fast posts was 11th or 12th C. which was confirmed by the dating of the pottery Another alternative is that the west half was built after the original was burnt down in 1327 riots. It is difficult to be certain about this although careful consideration of the potsherds and exactly where they were found might solve this.

In **2017** we did a little more excavation on toft 2 now referred to as Barn 2 which showed that it had half bays at each end probably indicating half hipped ends to the roof often found on very early barns, particularly in Essex.

We then dug a series of trenches south of the pond and found a clear-cut sloping edge between the sandy fen meadow and the marshy soil of the fen itself. This channel passed under the SW corner of Barn 3 thereby dating it as pre C13 hence the previously mentioned pottery deep below the SW corner of the barn We pursued this another 2 m to the west of barn 3 and then further in 2018 see below. We also dug two trenches north of the pond which revealed pottery and bones but no signs of any more buildings We also dug a trench across the dry ditch which we thought was probably the Eastern boundary of the monastic site. There were no finds and nothing to prove or disprove this idea.

In **2018** we dug three trenches running south from Barn 2 which we eventually combined into one long trench. There was nothing of interest close to Barn but opposite the doorway to barn three we found a flint road leading from the

doorway to the western boundary of the site heading NW towards the church. South of this and deeper we found flint paving sloping down to 1m deep at 12m from barn 2. We then extended the 2017 trench mentioned above by 2m and then another 8 m to the south west thereby getting a section across the channel leading from Barn 2 to the fen stream. This channel had flint paving on the NE side and a large flint set vertically which was possibly a mooring post. We concluded that this was probably a channel for small boat access from the fen stream to Barn 2 in the 12 and 13 th centuries.

In **2019** we completed and filled in this trench. We dug more trenches to confirm the route of the road from Barn 3 towards the church and then explored the area south of House 1 where we found evidence of another house which was unfortunately incomplete due to later gravel excavations. We found no evidence of Aisle posts and what we did find appeared to be similar to house 1. We also found a ditch running SE/NW which might have been the SW corner of the monastic site but the area was so damage by gravel extraction it was difficult to be sure of anything.

In **2020** we started late due to covid restrictions, we did a little more in the area of House 2 and with the threat of covid returning we cleared up the site, restored everything, removed the Heras fencing and closed down the project.

Throughout the 10 years we had recorded everything on SCCAS forms, about 400 A4 sheets and 180 A3 drawings, and had excavated 450 m² of trenches and sieved over 200 tons of excavated soil.

Over the ten years we had found:

5910 potsherds all recorded and identified by Sue Anderson, Iron age 1, Roman 42, Early Saxon 11, late Saxon 62, Early mediaeval 1767, Mediaeval 2843, Late mediaeval 1145, Post mediaeval 29.

20 silver coins, 3 Roman and 8 Saxon 'significant' finds i.e girdle hangers buckles etc, 83 bronze 'finds of interest', 257 other metal finds, 1255 nails 17 horseshoes, 35 kg bones, 16 Kg burnt daub 11.5Kg brick and tile fragments, 880g Charcoal 565 shells or pieces of shell, 6 pieces of quern.

Documentary evidence

During the winters we tracked down as much documentary evidence as we could find, which can be summarised as follows

Two Roman roads pass through the parish one very close to this site

Kungestuna (Coney Weston) was a middle/late Saxon Royal Vill .one of only eight in Suffolk (Keith Wade) this means that it was a site where the Saxon kings would set up camp on their travels round their kingdom.

The manor of Coney Weston and 8 acres of land was gifted to Bury Abbey under Abbot Leofstan by King Edward the Confessor in 1043 or 1044 (Francis Young, 'The Abbey of Bury St Eds' 1988)

Socage was paid to Coney Weston by 4 adjoining parishes in 1086 and 1186.

The Pinchbeck register of 1286 refers to Congeston (they weren't very good at spelling in 1286) as the Granary of the Abbot

The description of the revolt against the Abbey in 1327 (Francis Young again) refers to the burning of 13 Abbey barns which coincides nicely with the carbon dating of the burnt soleplate of Barn 3 of 1320 to 1340. Ours may not have been in the list of 13 as it was 12 miles from the Abbey but it was clearly burnt down. There is no evidence that the barns were rebuilt but with the famine in the 1320s, the and the Black death and the Peasants revolt following soon after this is hardly surprising.

However the other buildings and the later finds suggest that some reduced activity continued until the Henry VI coins were buried and possibly up to the dissolution, but after this the site seems to have returned to pasture.

What next?

At the end of the dig I combined the 10 annual reports into a 34 page summary, from which I have recently produced this 7 page precis which is obviously somewhat short on detail, but I hope covers the main points.

Currently all the documentation is with David Gill who will produce the official report for publication in due course.