Excavation near the Bishop's Palace
at Nettleham, 1959

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THE site of the Bishop's Palace lies on the south side of Nettleham High Street and spreads over a considerable area. Near the street was an apparently open space between the visible remains of buildings, and here the Welton Rural District Council proposed to erect some houses. Before this was done, the Ministry of Works undertook a short excavation within the limits of the area concerned, from 19th to 31st October, 1959. This was done by a system of trenches planned to avoid the actual positions of the proposed houses and to explore the parts which would be taken up by gardens and approach roads.

Thanks are due to the Church Commissioners (the landowners) and to Mr. Wood of Lodge Farm (the tenant) for permission to excavate, and to the Welton Rural District Council for their co-operation.

Thanks are also due to the late Mr. and Mrs. Baker of Fir Tree Cottage, Nettleham, who helped in innumerable ways during the dig, and to Mr. F. T. Baker of the Archaeological Research Committee, Lincoln, for valuable advice.

THE SITE

Several buildings are still clearly indicated by turf covered banks 2' 0" to 3' 0" high, and are shown on the 25" Ordnance Survey map LXI. 16. The most extensive remains are on relatively high ground some 100 yards south of the High Street. The ground slopes down from them towards the north. In the north-west corner, between the westerly arm of an L-shaped wall and a rectangular building, the ground levels out, and it was on this part of the site that it was proposed that houses should be erected.

STRATIFICATION

The site lies on Lincolnshire limestone (p1 on the O.S. geological map). The sub-soil varied considerably from one part to another, being of limestone fragments and sand in differing proportions, while the colour of the sand ranged from a dirty yellow-brown to a tawny red. In a few places blue lias clay was reached beneath the limestone.
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Above this was a layer of dark brown rather sandy soil from 12" to 15" in depth. No old turf line was visible and the ground may have been turned by cultivation, a suggestion which is borne out by the mixture of sherds throughout this layer. The latest pottery obtained was of 15th century date, though the majority of sherds were from the 14th century or earlier. Covering this layer, over the whole area, was a band of similar soil mixed with small weathered limestone fragments. This appeared to come from the destruction of wall 1 (see plan), as it lay on the top of the surviving part of the wall, and the quantity of stone in the layer was greatest in the vicinity of the wall. The layer decreased in thickness from 9" by the wall to 4" at the point furthest from it. Turf and top-soil averaging 9" in depth completed a total of from 2' 0" to 2' 6" above the sub-soil.

The stratification described above was uniform over the whole area except in the immediate neighbourhood of structures.

ROMAN PERIOD

Sixteen sherds were found in widely scattered parts of the site, the majority dating from the 3rd - 4th centuries, but a few possibly from the late 2nd century. It is possible that the wall described below in the Saxo-Norman section may be of Roman construction, but in the absence of any dateable level, and in view of the fact that only three Roman sherds were found nearby compared with twenty of later date, it seems better to include it tentatively in the description of the Saxo-Norman period.

MIDDLE SAXON PERIOD

This period was represented by nine sherds. They were found singly in scattered parts of the site, except for three which came from Cutting XII.

SAXO-NORMAN PERIOD

The earliest traces of building which were seen can probably be assigned to this period. Part of a massive stone wall 3' 9" wide (wall 2) was found in Cutting VI. It consisted of a single un-mortared course of very large facing stones along the south edge and rather smaller ones along the north, laid directly on to the sub-soil; the filling was of soil and rubble. Only a 6' 0" length survived, the ends being broken. In the next Cutting, VII, was a post-hole 2' 8" x 3' 6" with an off-centre core 1' 4" in diameter. The core was nearly on the line of the south edge of the wall. A sherd of coarse Saxo-Norman pottery was found near the bottom of the hole. Two post-holes in Cutting III and a shallow pit containing some burnt material in IV represent the only other possible structure. There did not, in either case, appear to be any occupied level associated with them, and as stated above it seemed likely that later cultivation had destroyed the stratigraphy. Pottery in the surrounding soil ranged from Roman to 14th centuries, with a preponderance of 11th to 12th century sherds. Limitations of time and of the area available did not permit a search for further evidence of these structures.

Saxo-Norman sherds, mostly in small quantities, were found in every cutting, but by far the greatest concentration came from the lowest layer of Cuttings X and XIII, against the western wall. Two clay loom weights which were also found in X suggest a nearby habitation, but little charcoal or other signs of occupation were seen, so it appears likely either that the houses had been ploughed out or that the main settlement was further west in the adjoining field. No evidence could be obtained from outside the wall owing to the recent disturbance of the ground by the laying of an electric cable; but it was reported that similar sherds were found when this work was in progress.
MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The appearance of the area before excavation was that of a level, open space bounded on the west by wall 1, on the south by a slightly raised terrace; on the east by the rectangular building shown on the O.S. map, and the continuation northward of its west side; and on the north by the abrupt drop to the street. Within this area, the only structure later than those assigned to the Saxon-Norman period which was found was a well in the north-east corner. Only a few fragments of roofing tiles or of likely building stones were seen. It therefore seems probable that this was in fact an open space, though it must be emphasised that by no means all the area was tested. Nothing resembling a metallated or even well-trodden surface was found, which again tends to prove the theory that prior to the destruction of wall 1 the ground had been cultivated.

The well was finely built and, except for the curbing at the mouth, in excellent preservation. It was 4' 6" in diameter and went down 11' 0" into natural blue lias clay (13' 9" below turf). The stones lining it were laid in regular courses 3½" to 5" thick. It seems probable that the top courses had been destroyed by ploughing, as the well had early gone out of use and had been deliberately filled in; a layer of soil 1' 6" to 2' 0" thick lay over it and beneath the layer of weathered stone which sealed the whole area.

Almost all the finds from the well came from the bottom 2' 0". These included parts of four green-glazed pots dated to the earlier 14th century and two green-glazed ridge tiles. They lay in an accumulation of leaf mould, wood, soil and small rubble, which filled the lower 6' 0" of the well. The top 5' 0" contained soil and larger stones which was clearly a deliberate infill. The latest sherds in this infill were of 14th century date.

Wall 1 runs along the west of the area, and at about 210' from the street it turns east nearly at a right angle. It was uncovered in Cutting II, where it was shown to be well constructed with a maximum of six courses surviving to a height of 2' 3". The outer (west) face was vertical and the inner had a slight batter, giving widths of 2' 3" at the top and 2' 6" at the base. Mortar had been used in the construction, but this had largely decayed and in one or two places the joints had been reinforced with daub. The footings were formed by thin stones set nearly vertically. It is not possible to date the erection of this wall, but it must have been considerably later than Wall 2 described above, as its lower course was a foot higher and was set in accumulated soil. The weathering layer associated with it sealed nothing later than 15th century pottery, and the earliest dateable objects found over this layer were from the 18th century, so it seems that the decay of the wall must have taken place between these two dates.

The Terrace which appears to form the southern boundary, lay outside the area threatened by building and was not excavated. It runs parallel to the east-west arm of Wall 1 referred to above and about 55' 0" north of it. This, and a second terrace which runs between the two, may be later than Wall 1, as they run up to it and not beyond, but the junctions were not examined.

Wall 3. It appeared before excavation that another terrace, but this time forming a drop from the area instead of a rise above it, marked part of the eastern boundary. This proved to be caused by a stone wall which had acted as a retaining wall. It was of slighter construction than Wall 1 and the stones were laid on soil without any footings. Two courses survived, and the small amount of rubble lying near suggests that it did not at any time stand very much higher. It appeared to have been abandoned at the same time as Wall 1. The terrace formed by it continued the line of the west wall of the rectangular building, but the junction lay outside the scope of the excavation and could not be investigated.
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Northern Boundary. The present northern edge of the site is formed by a retaining wall built in modern times. It is said locally that when the ground was being cut back to allow road widening, a flight of stone steps was found leading down from the site to below road level. So it is probable that the original boundary was not far from the present line.

Post-Medieval

The layers above the weathering layer from Wall 1 provide little evidence of later activity. There is a complete absence of dateable objects after the early 15th century, until the late 17th century, which is represented by the handle of a týg and a clay pipe, followed by only seventeen sherds of the 18th century, compared with two hundred and seventeen of earlier date.

Conclusions

The excavation of this small part of the site has shown that in all probability there was an early Saxon settlement near, if not on, this area. There may have been buildings here up till the 14th century, judging by the amount of pottery found and by the presence of the well, but if so, no traces remain. After that date the ground appears to have been cleared and cultivated, and the main buildings may then have been at the top of the hill where remains can still be seen, or in other parts of the village.

There is documentary evidence to show that there was a manor at Nettleham from Saxon times onwards. Domesday Book records Nettleham as belonging to Queen Edith in the time of King Edward, and the manor continued under the Crown until 1171, when it was given to the Bishops of Lincoln. It is clear from many references that it was in fact a manor and not a Bishop’s Palace.

In 1536 the Bishop’s house at Nettleham was despoiled in the course of the Louth uprising. In 1630 it is stated that it has “‘for three score years and more been deserted and not habitable’”, and a recommendation is made that it should be demolished. In 1637 a survey made by the Parliamentary Commissioners notes that all the buildings have been demolished, except a few which are listed. Among the exceptions are “The Courtyard, Courtilage, Barnyard, Woodyard and the low passage there, all now used for herbage and being included, with stone walls in good repair contain 1A. 3r. 1p.” This raises a speculation as to whether the Courtyard is the area with which this report is concerned, though the acreage creates some difficulty as the area is rather less than half an acre, and the remainder seems a great deal to allow for the Courtilage, Barnyard, Woodyard, and passage. But if this identification should be correct, it would date the decay of the wall to between 1637, when it was “in good repair”, and about 1800, since the destruction layer was shown above to have been formed by some time in the 18th century.

The Pottery by Stephen Moorhouse

The excavations revealed little stratification in the areas examined, only the cistern producing an associated group of material; hence the majority of the pottery can be regarded as residual and for this reason has been described and discussed in period groups, each subdivided into respective fabric groups. The sequence of pottery suggests a continuous occupation in the general area of the Palace from Roman through to late medieval times, the somewhat sporadic continuity being explained by the relatively small areas examined.
ROMAN (Fig. XVIII nos. 1 to 5)

The excavation produced twenty-one sherds of Roman pottery including those illustrated. None of the features could be related to this period. They suggest that the Palace lies on or close to a Roman settlement site, as there are too many sherds to be explained by agricultural manuring.

1. Rim in a hard fine sandy fabric with bluey grey core and darker surfaces, burnished a light grey internally.
2. Rim in a very hard uniformly grey sandy fabric.
5. Rim in a smooth light brick red fabric with a partial light bluey grey core and very smooth partly flaked grey burnished surfaces.

MIDDLE SAXON (Fig. XVIII nos. 6 to 15)

A number of sherds distinct from both Roman and Medieval material from the site can be related to an ever increasing group of similar wares now known to have a wide distribution in Lincolnshire. These have recently been termed 'Maxey Type Wares' on their similarity in form and fabric to the Group III assemblage from the Middle-Saxon settlement site at Maxey, Northants. Another fabric possibly of Saxon date is represented by two thick body sherds in a hard, coarse brown sandy fabric with smooth brown surfaces. The existence of eight loom weights confirm Saxon occupation of the site. The majority are of the Intermediate type while nos. 14 and 15 are nearer in form to the Bun-shaped examples. This implies a date somewhere in the 7th or 8th centuries, the absence of the earlier Annular type suggesting occupation did not commence in the area examined until that date. The Intermediate type have been found on the Middle Saxon settlement site at Normanby-le-Wold, Lincs.

6. Rim in a smooth non-sandy black ware with burnished waxy surfaces. Maxey Type Ware.
7. Rim in a very smooth soft fabric with soft limestone inclusions, grey core and black burnished leathery surfaces. Maxey Type Ware.
8 to 15. Fragments from eightloom-weights, some nearly complete. All are in an extremely homogeneous fine powdery dark buff fabric with smooth surfaces, occasionally with a pink tinge (nos. 12, 13 and 15). Nos. 8 to 13 are of the Intermediate type while nos. 14 and 15 are nearer to the bun shaped form, and all date to the 7th - 8th centuries.

SAXO-NORMAN AND MEDIEVAL (Fig. XVIII nos. 16 to 30, Fig. XX nos. 31 to 35 and Fig. XIX nos. 36 to 47)

Two distinct fabric types covering this wide period occur on the site; 'shelly wares' and sandy jug fabrics. The differences within these respective groups are not sufficiently distinctive to form separate fabric types.

'SHELLY WARES'

This fabric comprises the more domestic vessels on the site, i.e. bowls and cooking pots. It has recently been shown that at least one of the fabrics of Middle-Saxon pottery of Lincolnshire, occurs in a fabric barely dis-similar from later wares of 'shelly' type. Evidence from
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the north west of the county shows them to be continuing into the 15th century and groups from the south, at Boston, at least into the 14th century. An extremely long life span is therefore evident for the type in Lincolnshire. Little work has been carried out on defining regional types and their respective dates, but generally the Middle Saxon pottery is thick and hand made with shell inclusions while the later pottery is relatively thin and wheel thrown with limestone inclusions.

As the Nettleham material is unrelated, it is therefore extremely difficult to assign individual sherds to a precise date. Only one or two small body sherds are possibly oxidised Maxey Ware Type, unlike the reduced versions of nos. 6 and 7, and as a few sherds were found in the cistern along with a group of jugs dating to the first half or middle of the 14th century, a date range through the Saxon-Norman period to the 14th century could be suggested for them. The group has been arranged in typological order, based on evidence of the development of 'shelly wares' from the adjoining areas, the characteristic small everted rim of St. Neots type (no. 16) possibly being amongst the earliest in the series. It must await a more detailed study of these wares and their respective date ranges in Lincolnshire before a more precise date can be suggested.

16. Rim in a smooth brown shell filled fabric with smooth soapy surfaces, fire blackened all over with soot still adhering inside the rim.
17. Rim in a smooth shell filled fabric with grey core, brown surfaces and fire blackened externally, and inside the rim where soot is still adhering.
21. Rim in similar fabric to No. 20 but fire blackened externally.
22. Rim in a soft purplish brown limestone filled fabric with light grey core.
24. Rim in a similar fabric to No. 23 fire blackened externally.
27. Bowl rim similar fabric to No. 22.
28. (?) Jug shoulder with a raised cord in a smooth soft light brown fabric with a dark grey core and limestone inclusions.
29. Shoulder in a similar fabric to No. 28 though darker with finer inclusions.
30. (?) Pedestal lamp base in a hard dark purplish-brown fabric with a dark grey core and shell inclusions.
32. Bowl rim, much abraded in a brown fabric with a grey core and sparse limestone inclusions.
33. Large fragment from the upper part of a bowl with a flat topped hammer-head rim in a hard though soapy dull pinky brown fabric with a grey dark core and heavily tempered with large limestone inclusions.
34. Rim fragment from a socketed bowl with a small junction of the socket still surviving, in a very soft smooth dull red-brown fabric with a dark grey core, many fine shell inclusions and fire blackened all over.
35. Large fragment from a socketed bowl in a bright red-brown fabric with limestone inclusions and heavily fire blackened externally. There are faint traces of diamond notched rouletting on the rim top carried out before the socket was applied.
JUG FABRICS

The jugs from the site show, with very few exceptions, a marked uniformity in both fabric and basic rim form, suggesting a common source, possibly amongst the large number of kilns suspected to have been working along the extensive clay belt of mid-Lincolnshire, running from east to west. A number of kilns are known from this belt but the Nettleham material cannot as yet be related to any of these and possibly comes from a group of kilns, yet to be located, in the neighbourhood of Lincoln for similar types have been found there.

THE CONTENTS OF THE CISTERN

This is the only group of associated finds from the site. It comprises three near complete jugs together with fragments of similar jugs and sherds of 'shelly ware' presumably from contemporary cooking pots as no other more domestic wares are present amongst the material. The group can be regarded as being rubbish thrown into the cistern after it had out-lived its usefulness and can be regarded as of the same relevant date. The dating of the group is difficult as few similar deposits from the area are known. Sherds of similar fabric are known in groups of the second half of the 14th century at the Dominican Friary, Boston displaying similar decorative motifs but not the rilled convex neck so characteristic of the present jugs. A date generally in the 14th century is almost certain but to be more precise at this stage is difficult; possibly the first half or middle of the century as the jugs retain some ornate shapes of the 13th century while the more debased plain forms of the 15th century are not so apparent. It is of use to have 'shelly wares' in this deposit, although only in small sherd form, confirming their continued use into the later middle ages as shown elsewhere in the county. That they are not residual is amplified by the complete lack of more developed ceramic culinary vessels in the material from the site.

36. Near complete jug in a very hard thin grey sandy fabric. Six groups of triple thumbing surround the base angle. The handle is crudely applied with two deep thumblings, one on either side below the rim and two large vertical thumblings at the base with internal fingering; the top of the handle also has a deep central thumbing as a termination of the central strap formation. Covered all over on the upper half of the pot in a dull matt olive green glaze, patchily on the lower half showing the bright pinky red surface beneath.

37. Major part of a slender jug in a thin hard sandy fabric, similar to No. 36 with a bright pinky red surface and a dark grey core with a light blue margin below the outer surface. Four groups of triple thumbing surround the base angle. The rod handle is neatly applied with two side thumblings below the rim and two vertical thumblings at the base. The upper part of the body is decorated with slightly diagonal body covered strips of clay, under a bright deep green glaze down to the maximum girth of the pot.

38. Lower part of a jug, complete as drawn, in a hard thin sandy grey fabric with a dark grey core, light blue below the outer surfaces. There are four unequal groups of thumblings round the base angle; two of four, and one each of five and six thumblings. The decoration is of rouletted strips of body coloured clay in vertical lines with alternate zig-zag strips between them, under a patchy shiny deep green glaze on the upper half of the pot, one vertical streak running towards and under the base, otherwise the glaze is semi-fluxed on the lower half of the pot. The underside of the base has half a jug rim scar adhering to it suggesting it was not stacked directly on top of another jug during kiln firing, but astride two in an upright position.

39. Large ribbed handle in a hard sandy light pinky red fabric with a dark grey core, covered all over on the upper part but only on the back towards the base, in a thick glossy deep green glaze.

40. Jug rim in similar fabric and colouring to No. 37 covered all over externally in a thick glossy deep olive green glaze, darker in the base of the cordons.
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MISCELLANEOUS

42. Jug rim in similar fabric to No. 41 but lighter and with a spot of deep leaf green glaze on the outer surface.
43. Body sherd in hard fine sandy slightly micaceous fabric with a light brown inner surface, a well defined dark grey core and a light blue margin below the outer surface. Decoration of (?) horizontal rows of applied pellets, under a slightly mottled dull matt olive green glaze.
44. Thick body sherd from a (?) large jug in a fine sandy coarse textured light grey reduced fabric with a whitish inner surface. Decoration of body coloured applied strips and (?) pellets under a shiny olive green glaze.
45. Body sherd in a fine smooth fabric with a fine mica content, dull light brown surfaces and a dark grey core. External decoration of horizontal and wavy incised lines.
46. Small body sherd in a fine sandy bright pink fabric with a darkening inner margin and surface. External decoration of vertical body coloured thin applied strips and fine overlapping pellets under a mottled olive green with a yellow tinge.
47. Fragment from a skilet or pipkin handle with centrally ribbed top, in a fine sandy smooth fabric, with pinky buff markings fading into a bluey grey core and dull pinky red smooth surface.

17TH CENTURY MATERIAL (Fig. nos. 48 to 50)

A small group of 17th century material was found. As with the majority of the rest of the material it was not associated but can be individually dated to the 17th century. All pieces of this date are illustrated.

48. Centrally ribbed handle from a cup of Cistercian ware derived type in a hard smooth bright red fabric with dull purple surface and covered in a shiny dull purple near black glaze.
49. Thirteen fragments from a globular flask of type III¹¹ in a hard red earthenware with a grey core and reddish purple inner surface, unglazed. These have been defined and discussed by J. G. Hurst and can be assigned to a general 17th century date and probably of northern French or north Italian origin.
50. Two joining fragments from the folded base of a bowl or beaker in a badly flaked sea green glass with creamy external weathering and flaking.

JETTONS by S. E. Rigold

Two jettons were found during the excavations, both Nuremberg Jettons of Hans Krauwinkel, (Fl. 1580 - 1610). Normal type. 3 crowns and 3 lys/Reidsapfal in trilobe. diam. 22 mm.

FROM TRENCH VIII
Gott allein die Eere Sei¹².

FROM TRENCH X
Gotes Segen macht reich.
NOTES

1 I am indebted to Mr. E. Greenfield for the dating of the Roman pottery.
2 Two similar loom weights were found in 1940 in the field to the west of the site.
3 For all historical information I have drawn on Mrs. F. L. Baker, The History of Nettleham (1957).
6 Med. Arch. III, 1959, 23-5 where the typology is defined.
7 Ibid.
8 Addyman and Whitwell op. cit. in note 4 above p. 99 fig. 2, nos. 21 and 22.
9 Dennis C. Mynard "Excavations at Somerby Lincolnshire, 1957" Lincs. History and Arch. I No. 4 (1960) fig. 4 and fig. 7, nos. 62-4, all from Gully 6. It was thought that the latter jugs were intrusive in Gully 6, but further evidence from other sites in Lincolnshire and southern Yorkshire suggest a continuance of 'shelly' wares into the later 14th and early 15th century, and the Somerby group can therefore be regarded as homogeneous and of likely late 14th-early 15th century date.
12 For both these jettons see F. P. Barnard, The Casting Counter and the Counting Board (1916), pl. XXXIII, 84.