# Stratton, Biggleswade

## *1,300 years of village life in eastern Bedfordshire from the 5th century AD*


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# Digital Appendices

These can be accessed at DOI https://doi.org/10.5284/1090503:

Appendix A1: Copies of all the structural plans included in the printed volume, and the complete contextual hierarchy
Appendix A2: Documentary research, by Paul Courtney†
Appendix A3: Pottery (with illustrations), by Jackie Wells
Appendix A4: Ceramic building material, by Jackie Wells
Appendix A5: Other Artefacts (with illustrations), by Holly Duncan with contributions from Vera Evison†, Andrew Harris, Ed McSloy and Quita Mould
Appendix A6: Human bone, by Teresa Jackman and Harriet Jacklin
Appendix A7: Animal bone, by Mark Maltby
Appendix A8: Charred and waterlogged plants, by Lisa Moffett and Wendy Smith
Appendix A9: Waterlogged plants and insects, by Mark Robinson
Appendix A10: Waterlogged wood, by Rowena Gale
Appendix A11: Wood charcoal, by Rowena Gale
Appendix A12: Soil micromorphology and chemistry and palynology, by Richard Macphail and Gill Cruise

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The fieldwork was carried out between 1990 and 2001, with the post-excavation work beginning concurrently and continuing throughout the following two decades. A generation of archaeologists who passed through the Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (now Albion Archaeology) in those years contributed to one aspect of the fieldwork or another, whether taking part in the excavations on site, tackling the mountain of finds that needed to be processed, or trying to tame the database and GIS software that were still in their infancy as analytical tools when the post-excavation process began. Too many were involved to name them individually, and too many are no longer with us, but the authors' sincere appreciation goes out to them one and all.

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A few contributions in the later stages of the post-excavation programme also helped to nudge the authors in the right direction. John Blair's input was especially beneficial: his work on grid-planning at Stratton (reproduced in Figure 3.5) helped to identify a middle Anglo-Saxon field system out of what had previously been labelled as a problematic series of Roman enclosures. Historic England's refereeing process provided a wealth of useful input for improving specific aspects of the final publication, and comments from Duncan Wright on several of these were gratefully received. Thanks are also due to the *Feeding Anglo-Saxon England: The Bioarchaeology of an Agricultural Revolution* project team from the Universities of Oxford and Leicester (funded by the European Research Council under grant agreement No. 741751), specifically for their provision of additional radiocarbon dates, and in general for sharing some of the initial results from their work on Stratton. A final mention is due to Catrina Appleby, who copy-edited this printed volume; any remaining errors in the text are to be blamed on the authors.

# Preface

*Caveat lector*. Despite the vast amount of work by a huge number of individuals which is duly acknowledged above, be under no illusion that this publication represents a comprehensive, definitive synthesis of more than 1,300 years of settlement at Stratton. Ten years of excavations have provided a fascinating insight into the development of a village from its origins as an Anglo-Saxon hamlet to its ultimate decline, but aside from the usual limitations on what archaeological evidence can reveal, funding shortfalls and the nature of the remains have still left considerable gaps in our understanding of the settlement, and many questions that remain essentially unanswered. This is hardly a situation unique to Stratton, but it is worth remembering while reading this publication that the constraints on fieldwork frequently resembled those of rescue excavations in the 1970s more closely than those of the decade in which this volume has at last been published.

While the level of financial input provided by Bedfordshire County Council and English Heritage into the early excavations was considerable, especially for an excavation that was designed before the advent of PPG16 revolutionised the planning system's approach to archaeology, the unanticipated extent and density of archaeological remains in the southern half of the site made it impossible to investigate them with the same thoroughness that could be employed in subsequent years. Not all features were excavated, including whole timber buildings and pit clusters: not only does this mean that the site phasing was established on sometimes tenuous and circumstantial evidence, but the recovered assemblages of artefacts and other finds – as large as they are in some cases – are unevenly represented across the excavations. The authors have endeavoured to take this bias into account in their interpretation of the remains, but the disparities still exist in the bald data, ready to trap the unwary researcher.

The duration of the fieldwork and post-excavation programmes has also led to an unevenness in the level and character of detail that was recorded. Steps were taken to ensure a consistency of approach, but changes in personnel over the years inevitably hampered this, while advances in computer technology meant that strategies were adapted in order to take advantage of options which initially had not been available. The sheer scale of the datasets involved should also not be overlooked, especially when the early excavations took place in a fundamentally analogue era: large archaeological excavations in advance of infrastructure projects abound in the present day, yet the scale of the 1991–92 excavations alone was exceptional at the time. The story of Stratton had to be patched together in a piecemeal fashion as the datasets were broken down into manageable chunks, and it was not until the post-excavation programme was in its latter stages that the pieces could be reassembled and a composite picture of the village's development began to shine through. One might speculate what different image of Stratton might have been constructed if the excavations had taken place 20 years later, with twice the budget and an ample dose of hindsight – but in this respect at least, Stratton is far from exceptional.

Despite all this, the authors believe that their interpretation of the evidence at Stratton as a whole is valid. Individual elements may well have been misinterpreted or incorrectly dated, but the overall picture that has emerged from the last 30 years of work forms a coherent narrative. We by no means wish to deter the reader, merely to encourage thoughtful consideration of the information presented, rather than blind acceptance. It is rare to be able to examine the bulk of an entire village's development from start to finish, and the evidence from Stratton offers much valuable insight into ordinary life in the English countryside. What we wish even more fervently, however, is that the publication of this volume will represent not so much an end as a new beginning – that researchers will use the data and evidence presented here to take the story further, revising and enhancing the image that we have tentatively elicited so far, and developing a wider synthesis of the pre-Industrial East Anglian countryside that lies beyond the scope of this publication.

# About this publication

### Structure

The publication is divided into two parts: a printed monograph, and a set of digital appendices.

Printed monograph: this volume presents the project background in Chapter 1, followed by a chronological summary of the evidence in Chapters 2–6. More detailed discussions of the building forms represented, the artefacts recovered, the archaeobotanical evidence, and the faunal assemblage are contained in Chapters 7–10 respectively, with a thematic discussion of the overall evidence in Chapter 11.

Digital appendices: full copies of the specialist reports on each type of dataset, plus artefact illustrations and the full phasing hierarchy, can be found on the Archaeology Data Service website at DOI: https://doi.org/10.5284/1090503.

### Terminology and abbreviations

Archaeological features are referred to by their Group number, abbreviated to G1, G2, *etc*. Groups may represent either a single feature or several associated ones, such as the postholes of a building; where the latter applies, an individual feature within that Group is identified by its Feature number if required. Associated Groups are referred to as Land-use areas, abbreviated to L1, L2, *etc*.

Pottery mentioned in the text is usually referred to by its relevant fabric code within the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series (maintained by Albion Archaeology). Some types of other artefact are assigned an RA (Registered Artefact) or OA (Other Artefact) number: those prefixed with OA are specifically discussed or illustrated in the text, whereas numbers prefixed with RA relate to the number sequence within the archive.

ABG = associated bone group
HER = Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record
SFB = sunken-featured building

### Figures and Tables

Illustrations and tables are numbered in their own unique sequence, *e.g*. Chapter 3 illustrations are numbered Figure 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, *etc*. and Chapter 3 tables are numbered Table 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, *etc*. Table and illustration numbers in the digital appendices are prefixed by the letter 'A' and their appendix number, *e.g.* tables in Digital Appendix 3 are numbered Table A3.1, A3.2, A3.3, *etc*.

### Date of writing

While Chapter 11 was written in the year of publication, the preceding chapters were compiled as part of the draft publication submitted in 2016. Specific points within these chapters have been updated since then, but no systematic attempt was made to do so. The digital appendices contain original specialist reports which in some cases were written as far back as the 1990s; the year in which it was written is included in each.

### Location of the archive

The Higgins Art Gallery and Museum, Bedford will be the repository for the physical archive of finds, site records and original post-excavation reports. Access to the digital archive can be gained via the Archaeology Data Service.

# Summary

Plans for large-scale development on the south-eastern edge of Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, led to the planning of a major archaeological excavation to investigate and record the deserted medieval village of Stratton, which lay partly within the affected area. Following evaluation in 1990, open-area excavation began in 1991, but it quickly became apparent that the medieval village was surrounded by the remains of its Anglo-Saxon precursor. Thus began a decade of excavations, exploring the village's development from its origins in the 5th century AD through to its demise in the 18th. They covered 12ha in total, exposing roughly half of the medieval village and representing one of the largest excavations of an Anglo-Saxon settlement to have taken place in England, certainly at the time.

The village had modest origins, situated on previously uninhabited land and occupied by perhaps no more than two or three families at a time in the 5th and 6th centuries. Its expansion began in the 7th century, when the imposition of an extensive field system suggests the influence of the Church, and a greater and more complex array of domestic structures can be identified. A new field system was set out in the middle Anglo-Saxon period, before a radical change in the settlement's layout was imposed in the 9th century. This occurred at roughly the same time as the Danelaw was established in this part of the country, although a direct causal link remains elusive.

Changes to the layout of the settlement continued to be made throughout the Middle Ages, but its overall form had largely crystallised by the 11th or 12th century under the influence of the two manors which held land in Stratton. The capital messuage of the main Stratton manor is preserved as a scheduled site to the south-east of the excavation area. Part of another moated site and the two dovecots that were revealed represent a direct link with the medieval manors, while a substantial, high-status timber building may have been associated with one of their late Anglo-Saxon precursors. The other medieval buildings – mostly timber, though a few had masonry foundations – would have been inhabited by tenants of the manors. Documentary sources suggest that the resident lords of the manors gradually began to reduce the number of tenants in the late 17th or early 18th century, remodelling the village into the classic estate landscape of Stratton Park.

The excavations revealed a settlement that was constantly in flux, when viewed from the perspective of its life over more than a millennium, but which in many ways remained remarkably constant over that period. Stratton was not a wealthy village, existing as a dependent township within the parish of Biggleswade, and the focus of the excavations lay primarily on the homes and activities of the ordinary villagers rather than the social elite. This publication chronicles 1,300 years of a small, low-status farming community – the crops they grew, the animals they reared, and the goods they traded or made themselves.

The scale of the excavations means that only a summary of the data and a discussion of its significance can be presented within this bound volume. A range of more detailed specialist reports can be accessed online as digital appendices to this volume.

# Chapter 1.
# Introduction

## Introduction

The Stratton Project was prompted by the residential development of *c.* 40ha of land on the south-east fringes of Biggleswade, Bedfordshire. It comprised a multi-stage archaeological investigation undertaken by the Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (BCAS; now Albion Archaeology), with the fieldwork element conducted between 1990 and 2001. Evaluation of the overall development area led to approximately 12ha of detailed excavation in total, with each sequential main phase of development preceded by archaeological clearance. The archaeological remains were plough-truncated but in places appeared as a dense, multi-period palimpsest of features. In essence, the project has produced evidence for the evolution of a rural settlement from its creation in the early Anglo-Saxon period to its disappearance as a result of post-medieval emparkment.

## Location, topography and geology

The parish of Biggleswade is located in eastern Bedfordshire, in the middle Ivel Valley within the Great Ouse catchment (Figure 1.1). The former township of Stratton occupied the eastern third of the parish, with the settlement itself lying south-east of the modern town, centred roughly at TL 2050 4380. It occupied a slight ridge running north–south (*c.* 40m OD) between the Ivel, which flows *c.* 2km to the west, and one of its minor tributaries. London Road, immediately west of the settlement, marks the course of the former Roman road from Baldock to Sandy, which went on to join Ermine Street at Godmanchester.

The solid geology beneath Stratton comprises the Woburn Sands Formation. The constituent sand may be loose or cemented into ferruginous sandstone, which provides a fairly soft and easily dressed building stone, suitable for walling (Moorlock *et al.* 2003: 9–11). The superficial geology of the Biggleswade district comprises glaciogenic deposits of the Lowestoft Formation, deposited by the Anglian ice sheet some 400,000 years ago; these consist of till (Chalky Boulder Clay) and associated outwash sands and gravels (Moorlock *et al.* 2003: 13–14). Stratton sits on one of the smaller spreads of the latter mapped near Biggleswade.

The local soils formed on the underlying sands and gravels comprise free-draining, sandy, argillic brown earths of the Sutton 1 association (Hodgson 1983). They provide good arable land which can be easily worked in both spring and autumn (Cranfield University 2014). To the east of Stratton there are calcareous clay soils of the Evesham 3 soil association, which are more prone to seasonal waterlogging, while alluvium occurs to the west in the Ivel Valley.

## Project background and nature of the investigations

The site fell within the Stratton Residential Development Area (SRDA) – *c.* 40ha of largely arable land on the south-east fringes of Biggleswade, designated for development by Bedfordshire County Council. Stratton was already characterised by the Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record (HER) as a deserted medieval village (HER 518): aside from the place-name and documentary evidence, physical traces of the former settlement included a scheduled moated site; medieval pottery and tile in the ploughsoil; and cropmarks of a second moated site and a number of close boundaries.

The first phase of evaluation took place in 1990. This was just before the implementation of *PPG16: Archaeology and Planning*, which effectively established the principle of developer-funded archaeology; the initial evaluation was therefore slightly less extensive than the subsequent phases were required to be. Bedfordshire County Council owned the land, and paid for the evaluation and the initial stages of detailed excavation on Phase 1 of the development area, but when the scale and significance of the archaeological remains became clear, additional funding was sought from English Heritage to complete the Phase 1 work. Evaluation of the Phase 2 and 3 areas was again funded by the County Council; Phase 3 was largely devoid of archaeological remains and required no further work, but a developer-funded excavation of the Phase 2 area was carried out. An indication of the relative size (by context count) of the principal episodes of fieldwork is shown in Table 1.1.

Anticipating the large scale of the proposed work, the original project designs (BCAS 1990; 1992) highlighted the need to investigate when the settlement was established and abandoned, how it shifted across the landscape through time, how it was laid out, how it was organised both socially and economically, and how it fitted into the regional settlement pattern.

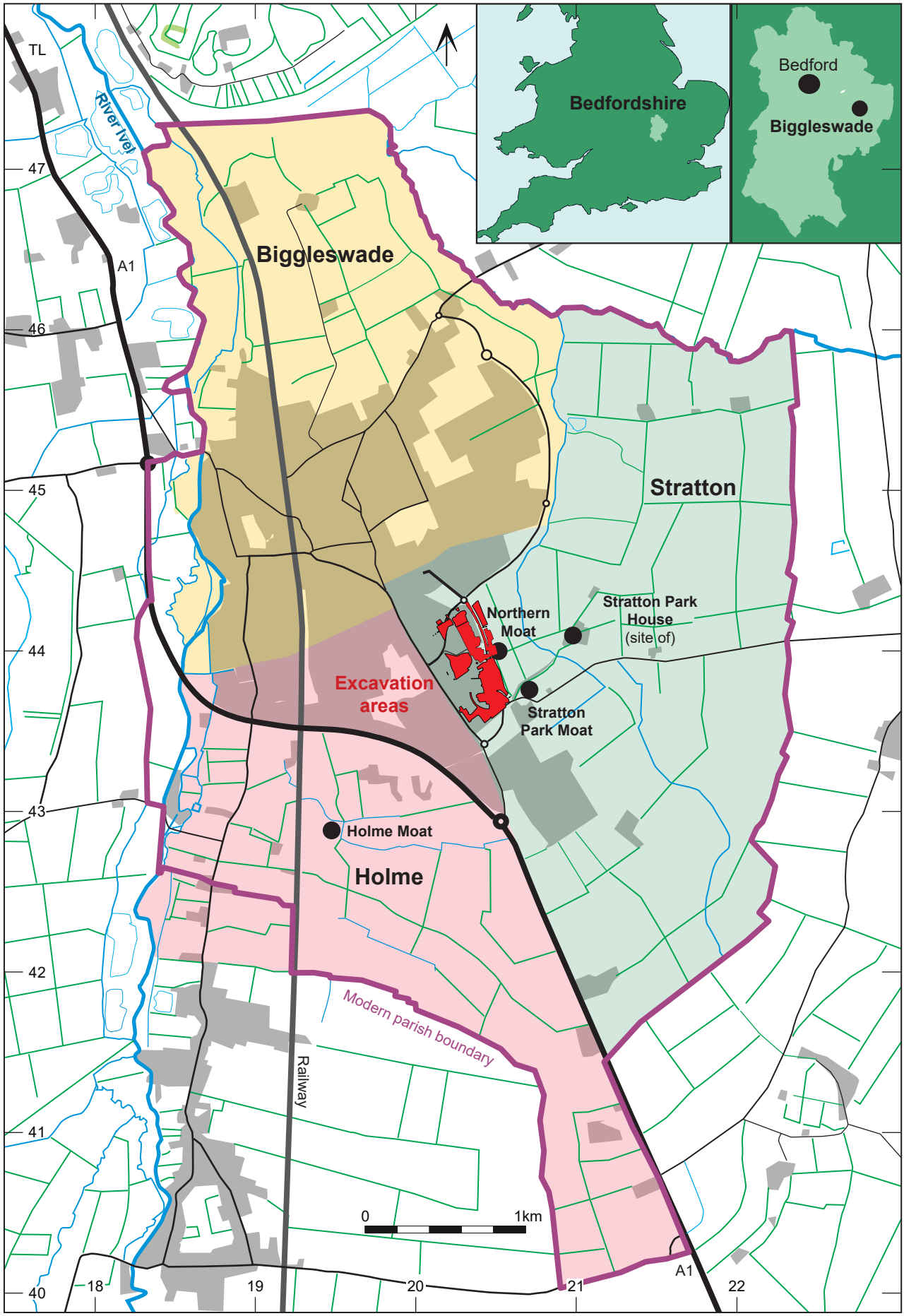
TL
River Ivel
47
A1
46
45
44
43
42
41
40
18
19
20
21
22
A1
Biggleswade
Stratton
Holme
Northern Moat
Stratton Park House (site of)
Stratton Park Moat
Holme Moat
Excavation areas
Modern parish boundary
Railway
0
1km
Bedfordshire
Bedford
Biggleswade

Table 1.1: Date and relative sizes of the individual excavations

| Project code | Year | Open-area excavations | Contexts | % of total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SV91 | 1990–91 | Phase 1A housing and infrastructure | 15,965 | 62 |
| SV95 | 1995 | Phase 2 leisure centre | 4355 | 17 |
| SV401 | 1995 | Phase 2B housing | 671 | 2 |
| SV429 | 1996 | Phase 1B social housing | 2113 | 8 |
| SV472 | 1997 | Phase 2 gas main | 250 | 1 |
| SV505 | 1998 | Phase 2 spine road | 734 | 3 |
| SV598 | 1999 | Phase 2 local centre | 869 | 3 |
| SV698 | 2001 | Phase 2 tree belt | 937 | 4 |
| **Total** | | | **25,894** | |

### Nature of the post-excavation analysis

With English Heritage funding, the results of the initial phase of excavation (SV91) were assessed for their analytical potential and an updated project design (UPD) was produced (Albion Archaeology 1994); appended to it were the results of the evaluation of the Phase 2 area. The UPD established an analytical framework for the subsequent developer-funded elements of the investigations, the most important of which were also subject to assessment – SV598 (Albion Archaeology 2000) and SV698 (Albion Archaeology 2003).

From the outset, it was recognised that a single publication would be preferable to a series of individual reports on each element of the investigations. Accordingly, integrated, synthetic analysis of the data was deliberately deferred until all fieldwork was complete, in order that continual updating of work could be avoided. The final element of the fieldwork within the SRDA had been scheduled to take place in 2007, but when the proposed Biggleswade Medical Centre development ultimately did not take place, Albion Archaeology (2010) submitted a project design to English Heritage for the completion of the integrated analysis and dissemination of the results of the fieldwork. Plans had previously been drawn up for a concise, one-volume monograph accompanied by a digital version on the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) website that contained hyperlinks, to allow an element of non-linear usage by giving access to a web-mounted digital resource. However, it was subsequently realised that the benefits of digital publication could be enjoyed with a less-complex, more cost-efficient approach (e.g. Piercebridge: Cool and Mason 2008). The project design therefore envisaged a printed monograph (this volume), with the bulk of the data available through the ADS website as digital appendices.

Figure 1.1 (opposite page): Site location, showing former dependent townships of Biggleswade and the modern parish boundary

### Nature of the phasing structure and contextual hierarchy

The lengthy sequence of excavations at Stratton generated a total of 26,603 context numbers. As a result, it was necessary to place them within a contextual hierarchy in order to help analyse the data, and also to help the reader get to grips with what was found. This programme of contextual analysis was undertaken over many years by an even greater number of people, and spanned the period in which the systematic use of computer databases and GIS software developed from being revolutionary new techniques to fundamental tools of post-excavation analysis. Increasing familiarisation with these new techniques, and periodic changes of personnel, meant that the resultant contextual hierarchy lacked a certain element of standardisation over time. However, this is most apparent at Group level, whereas the Land-use areas, Phases and Periods by which this volume is primarily structured received an overhaul during the final stages of contextual analysis, in order to make them more consistent and intelligible. A brief description is given below of what each of these hierarchical elements symbolises:

G (Group): this ranges from a single deposit within the overall fill of a ditch, to the construction cut and

all the fills of a ditch; from the construction cut of a single posthole, to the cuts and fills of all the postholes that formed a single building. Only the most significant Groups are referred to in the text, but a full copy of the structural hierarchy is contained in Digital Appendix A1.

L (Land-use area): collections of broadly contemporary and spatially coherent Groups, e.g. a farmhouse, its associated pens and enclosures, and any pits or outbuildings within them; or a broad expanse of agricultural or industrial activity that occupied a relatively discrete part of the landscape. Some of the Land-use areas represent individual farmsteads, which are likely to have had single owners (or tenants), whereas others are likely to have been inhabited or used by a number of families.

Phases: divisions of Periods in which greater precision has been possible, in some cases, to place particular remains within the settlement's chronological or stratigraphic hierarchy. Period 4, for example, is split into Phases 4, 4a and 4b. Within the overall chronological span of Period 4, the features within Phase 4a are earlier than those in Phase 4b, based primarily on the available stratigraphic evidence. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Phase 4a represents the first half of Period 4, and Phase 4b the second, and the features in either phase could be earlier than, contemporary with, or later than those features assigned just to Phase 4, for which there was less-precise dating and/or stratigraphic evidence. Where only two Phases are present within a Period, however (i.e. Periods 6 and 7), Phase 6a does indicate a range of activities that were broadly earlier than those in Phase 6, and those in 7b were broadly later than those in Phase 7. The relationship between Periods and Phases is given in Figure 1.2 in the form of a stratigraphic matrix.

Periods: broad, chronological divisions. The dates that are given are no more than approximations, based on artefactual and scientific dating, and numerous features such as wells and buildings may have remained in use during subsequent Periods. These divisions are meant to give an overall indication of how the settlement at Stratton developed, rather than an exact date at which the developments occurred – the dating evidence is insufficiently precise in the vast majority of cases to allow that.

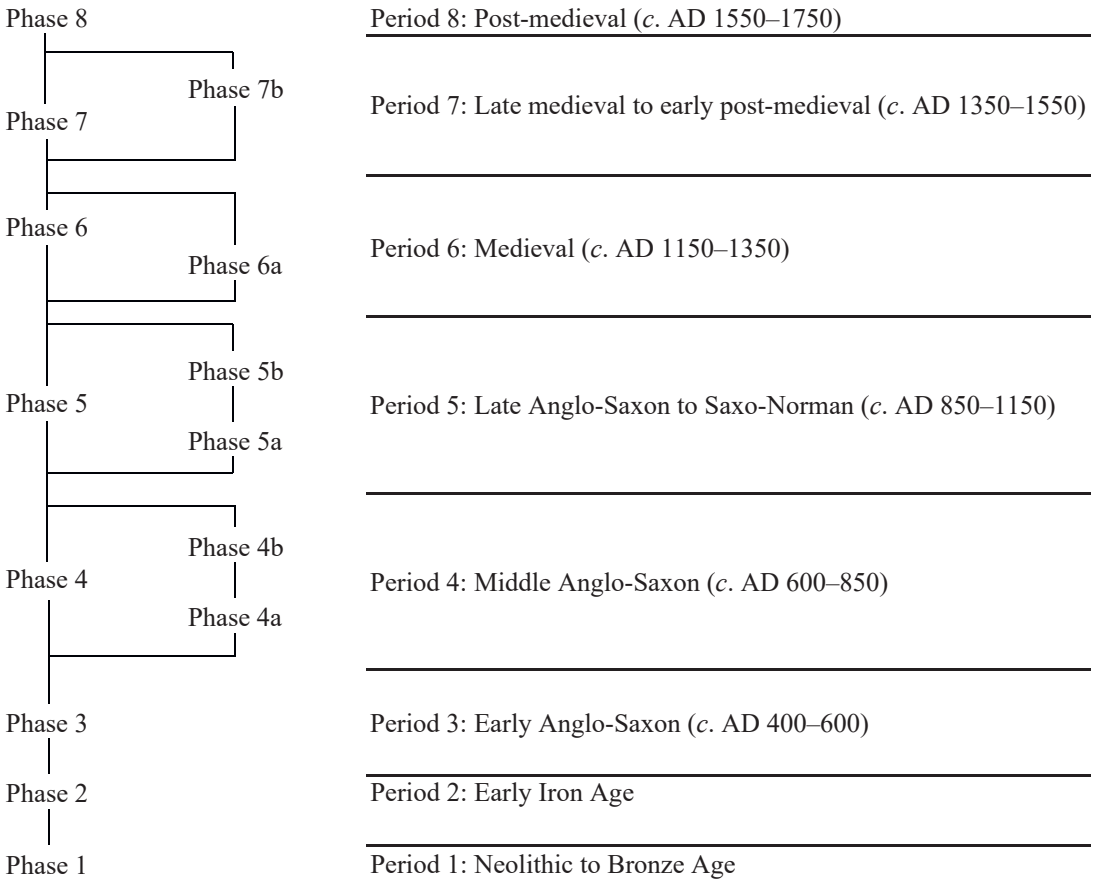


Figure 1.2: Contextual phasing hierarchy

## Archaeological background

### *Earlier prehistoric*

Within Bedfordshire, significant quantities of Palaeolithic flintwork, mainly hand-axes, have been recovered from gravel deposits associated with the River Great Ouse and the River Lea, but fewer such discoveries have been made in the Ivel Valley. Amongst them, however, is a 'bout coupé' hand-axe from Sandy Quarry, *c.* 2km north of Biggleswade – a form typical of sites associated with Neanderthal activity in Britain before the Last Glacial Maximum (Stephens *et al.* 2010). Similarly, dispersed spreads of lithics from Sandy Quarry (Dawson and Maull 1996: 60) are the only material of Mesolithic date within the Ivel Valley.

The start of the Neolithic period is traditionally associated with the introduction of agriculture into the British Isles. Initially, at least, it is likely that settled farming augmented, rather than replaced, the existing hunter-gatherer economy. Remains of Neolithic settlement are very sparse in the Ivel Valley, usually consisting of small scatters of flint tools or occasionally small clusters of pits. Sandy Quarry again provides evidence for this: two pits there produced 850 sherds (11.3kg) of Carinated Bowl pottery, the first appearance of which has been dated to *c.* 3500 BC, together with a variety of flint artefacts and animal bone (Albion Archaeology 2015: 21). Broom Quarry to the west of Stratton also sees earlier 4th-millennium BC occupation in the form of scattered pits and tree-throws containing earlier Neolithic artefacts (Cooper and Edmonds 2007: 42).

A small cluster of late Neolithic pits was identified next to Potton Road, north-east of Biggleswade (Jones 2009), and a Neolithic cursus (Abrams 2010), with a cluster of probable Bronze Age ring-ditches at its eastern end (Field 1974: 71), is known on the gravel terrace to the north of the town. A Bronze Age ring-ditch and associated cremation burials have been excavated within the King's Reach development, immediately north of Stratton (Albion Archaeology 2016: 18–19), while there is a cropmark of a presumed prehistoric ring-ditch (HER 16159) to the south of Dunton Lane.

### *Iron Age and Romano-British*

Settlement in the middle Ivel Valley increased throughout the Iron Age, as the area developed into a densely settled, intensively managed landscape in the late Iron Age / Romano-British period.

A well-ordered late Iron Age / Romano-British landscape with an extensive system of boundaries, droveways and settlements has been revealed at Broom Quarry on the gravel terraces to the west of the Ivel (Cooper and Edmonds 2007: 147, figs 5.2 and 6.4). A similar settlement density has been revealed within Sandy Quarry to the north of Biggleswade (Albion Archaeology 2015; Dawson and Maull 1996: 62–3), with the Roman small town of Sandy lying beyond this. The town was established in the late 1st / early 2nd century (Dawson 1995) on the Baldock to Godmanchester road, which passed within *c.* 200 m of the later settlement of Stratton and probably followed a late Iron Age (or earlier) communication route. Roman Sandy probably developed from a late 1st-century BC Catuvellauni political centre; Baldock itself was also one of the Catuvellauni's principal *oppida* (Williamson 2010: 50).

### *Anglo-Saxon*

There are different views on both the date of the Tribal Hidage and the identity of the overlord who had it drawn up (Featherstone 2001: 29). However, what the document neatly illustrates is the emergence of the Ivel Valley into history as part of the 7th- to 9th-century Mercian hegemony (Hart 1977: 44–7). The Gifla – i.e. the tribal group occupying the Ivel Valley – are assessed at 300 hides, the smallest unit of assessment in the document and the same as that of the Hicca who occupied the tributary Hiz Valley to the south. Both were part of Middle Anglia, the collective name for a group of some 15 smaller territorial units forming a broad frontier zone from the Wash to the River Thames, between the kingdoms of Mercia proper and those of the East Angles and the East Anglo-Saxons (Dumville 1989: 127). Bede tells us that Peada, son of the Mercian king Penda, was sub-king of the Middle Angles in AD 653–55 and that the Irish missionary priest Diuma became the first bishop of the Middle Angles and Mercia at that time. A separate diocese for the Middle Angles was established in AD 737 with the see at Leicester (Dumville 1989: 130–1; Hill 1981: figure 238).

The unique, early 9th-century gold coin of Coenwulf (AD 796–821) found on Biggleswade Common, to the north of the town, should also be considered in this political context. Its unusual, excellent state of preservation suggests it was in near-mint condition when it went into the ground (Williams and Cowell 2009: 36). Hart (1977: 58) notes how earlier Mercian kings made an annual royal progress between Tamworth and London, and it is tempting to speculate that the loss of the coin was associated with just such a journey by the king or one of his ealdormen along the former Roman road that crossed the Common.

Although not as extensive as for the preceding late Iron Age / Romano-British period, there is plentiful archaeological evidence for the people recorded in the Tribal Hidage. In addition to Stratton itself, a number of significant sites have been found on the gravel terraces between Sandy and Biggleswade.

Early Anglo-Saxon burials are known from the environs of the Roman town of Sandy, although the circumstances of their discovery during 19th-century railway building make it difficult to assess their significance and, in particular, their relationship to the earlier settlement. At least 13 Anglo-Saxon urns, dated to the 5th/6th centuries, and a number of other artefacts are known to have come from Sandy (Kennett 1970). There is little middle Anglo-Saxon evidence from the town, however, and by the late Anglo-Saxon period the focus of settlement had switched to the west bank of the River Ivel, close to the parish church. As a market and hundredal centre it was Biggleswade, rather than Sandy, that developed into the middle Ivel's only medieval urban centre.

Evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement on the eastern margins of the ancient parish of Northill has been found at Ivel Farm (within Sandy Quarry), *c.* 2.5km north-west of Stratton (Albion Archaeology 2015). The settlement comprises a dispersed, north–south-aligned spread of sunken-featured buildings (SFB) and pits, covering a distance of *c.* 450m on the gravel terrace west of the River Ivel. Artefact dating indicates that the excavated part of the settlement, at least, did not survive into the middle Anglo-Saxon period. Further north within Sandy Quarry, late Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence includes a large timber building, fence lines, paddocks and rubbish pits. Hurdle linings preserved in a series of intercutting pits are likely to have been associated with flax processing or fish/eel trapping (Dawson and Maull 1996: 63–5).

At King's Hill (within Broom Quarry) in Old Warden parish, two prehistoric monuments became the focus for 7th-century activity in the form of a small community cemetery and a rectangular building, interpreted as a shrine or mortuary structure (Cooper and Edmonds 2007: 205–7, figs 6.5 and 6.6). A late Anglo-Saxon burial (radiocarbon-dated to cal. AD 878–938) was also inserted into another barrow, *c.* 500m to the north-west (Cooper and Edmonds 2007: 71). These remains lie *c.* 3.5km west of Stratton, on the west side of the River Ivel.

### *Medieval*

A scheduled ringwork or castle sits on a low gravel island to the east of Brookland Farm, *c.* 350m west of the Ivel in Old Warden parish, surviving partly as a cropmark and partly as an earthwork. It has a circular platform, 30–35m in diameter and surrounded by two concentric rings of ditches, with two baileys on its western side. Limited investigation has suggested a 12th-century date for the structure (Addyman 1966; Petre 2012: 70–1). The ringwork would have simultaneously controlled river traffic and an east–west routeway that led to a ford near Ivel Mill in the centre of Biggleswade.

## Historical background

Paul Courtney†

A more in-depth version of this abridged section, fully cross-referenced to the primary sources, is to be found in Digital Appendix A2.

### *Introduction*

Stratton and Holme were both hamlets or townships, each with its own field system, within the parish of Biggleswade, the manorial and parochial centre. It is hoped that setting Stratton in the context of this wider estate complex will shed more light on its development. A wider perspective should also partly compensate for the poor survival of early-modern manorial records, and especially the rarity of surviving deeds for all three townships in Biggleswade parish, a problem often associated with dependent townships. However, Bedfordshire is fortunate in the wide range of published primary sources, such as monastic cartularies, produced by the county historical society. The earliest map to cover the entire Biggleswade parish in detail is the tithe map of 1838, at which time all three townships were fully enclosed except for a few remnant strips in Biggleswade. This map does not give the separate township boundaries, but these can be readily determined from the pattern of land-ownership, field names (e.g. Holmside in Biggleswade), and the topography of the commons and field boundaries.

### *Domesday estates*

The largest holder of land in Stratton at the time of Domesday Book was Ralph d'Isle, who also held land in the Biggleswade and Holme townships (Table 1.2). Archbishop Stigand of Canterbury held these lands in 1066. Both Stratton and Holme were chapelries of Biggleswade in the post-Conquest period, which suggests that all three townships were once closely linked manorially, presumably forming either a single estate or a fragment of an even larger estate.

It has been suggested on the grounds of township size that Stratton was the original centre of this estate and was replaced after the Conquest by Biggleswade (Dawson 1994: 131–3). The ecclesiastical organisation argues against this idea, however, as it would have been highly unusual for Stratton to slip from parochial to chapelry status. The smaller size of Biggleswade may reflect a degree of economic specialisation, with its emphasis on meadowland apparent in both Domesday and the Hundred Rolls. Domesday records meadow there for 10 ploughs and 5s income from hay; it should be noted that meadowland was often valued at six times the worth of arable in 13th-century extents. Domesday Biggleswade was assessed for geld at 10 hides compared

Table 1.2: Domesday lords (with their antecessors in 1066)

| **Biggleswade 10 hides** | **Stratton 7 hides, 1 virgate** | **Holme 7 hides, 1½ virgates** |
|---|---|---|
| Ralph d'Isle 10h (Ab Stigand) | Ralph d'Isle 4h (Ab Stigand) | Ralph d'Isle 2h (Ab Stigand) |
| | Walter of Flanders 1 h, 1v (Leofwine, thane) | Walter of Flanders 1h (2 sokemen) |
| | Walter Gifford 1h, ½ v (3 sokemen) | Wm of Eu 3v (Aelfeva, Askell's man) |
| | Countess Judith 3½ v (Alwin, Edward's man) | Hugh de Beauchamp 1v (1 sokeman under Askell) |
| | | Nigel of Aubigny 1h, ½v (7 sokemen) |
| | | Countess Judith ½h (Alwin-Edward's man) |
| | | Countess Judith 1v (Godwin- Edward's man) |
| | | Alwin, King's reeve 1½h (Aelfric & Leofmer – beadles) |

Table 1.3: Taxation and ploughs on Ralph d'Isle's Biggleswade estate in 1086

| | **Hides** | **Ploughlands** | **Tenant ploughs** | **Demesne ploughs** | **Demesne hides** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biggleswade | 10 | 10 | 7 | 3 | 5½ |
| Stratton | 4 | 8 | 7* | - | - |
| Holme | 2 | 5 | 5 | - | - |

* 'and could be an eighth'

with the 7¼ hides of Stratton and 5½ hides of Holme. It also had 5½ hides of land in demesne with 3 demesne ploughs and two mills, although some of this demesne, the tenantry of which comprised 7 villeins, 10 bordars and 3 slaves, may have lain in the townships of Stratton and Holme. As in some other counties, for example Huntingdonshire, the demesne was hidated and not tax-exempt. The ploughland has been a matter of long controversy. Roffe (2000: 149–65) argued that it was an assessment of the extent of the taxable arable (warland) made in 1086, with the intention of measuring the potential for increased future taxation or geld. Certainly, the close coincidence of figures for ploughs and ploughlands on the estate of Ralph d'Isle tends to suggest there was little or no hidden land, as is sometimes the case with land held by sokemen or freemen (Table 1.3).

Bordars were peasants with little or no land who largely subsisted through wage labour. The association of a high proportion of bordars and slaves is typical of major manorial centres and represents the workforce on the demesne (Faith 1997: 70–5, 83–8). A high proportion of bordars is also found at Stratton, but these may have found work on the lands of the soke tenants there (Table 1.4). An association between high numbers of bordars/cottagers and small manors, which were heavily reliant on paid labour, was noticed by Kosminsky (1956:

Table 1.4: Recorded peasantry in 1086 (all estates)

| | **Biggleswade** | **Stratton** | **Holme** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Villeins | 7 | 11 | 18 |
| Bordars | 10 | 11 | 3 |
| Slaves | 3 | - | - |
| Named (?free) men | - | - | 3 |
| **Total** | **20** | **24** | **32** |

256–82) in his classic study of the north Bedfordshire hundred rolls.

The structure of Domesday Book leaves little doubt that Biggleswade was the ancient caput of these three townships; less certain is whether it was once part of an even larger manor. Certainly, it gave its name to the hundred of Biggleswade, first recorded in Domesday Book. Hundredal meeting places could be on the edge of early territories rather than at their administrative centres, though there is no evidence to suggest that possibility here. In addition to the above-mentioned holdings, there were a number of small manors within Stratton and especially Holme. These all had in common the fact that they were held prior to the Conquest by sokemen or other freemen, all of whom seem to have had the right to sell or grant their lands. Sokemen are virtually absent from the three townships in the Domesday inquest, though this is most likely a reflection of the way Domesday was compiled – often ignoring free subtenants – rather than being due to their eviction (Walmsley 1968; Roffe 1990: 332). Even the 1066 figures may have underestimated the number of sokemen; for instance, the lands in Stratton of Leofwine, a thane, are likely to have been subtenanted.

Large numbers of the Bedfordshire sokemen appear to have held their lands from the crown in 1066 (Abels 1996: 20–2). Late-Saxon sokemen, in addition to paying rent or dues to a lord, were also often commended to a second lord who could act on their behalf in the courts; it was the successors of these commended lords who laid claim to the royal sokemen in Bedfordshire after 1066. This opportunistic slicing-up of the royal soke resulted in many Bedfordshire estates or townships, including Biggleswade, having such a multiplicity of small manors in Domesday. The sokemen presumably found their freedom to sell their lands curtailed after the Conquest, though they probably continued to owe suit at the hundred court. Brown and Taylor (1989; 1991) have traced back some of the numerous moated homestead sites in north Bedfordshire, an area of dispersed woodland-pasture settlement, to Domesday soke holdings.

### *Later manorial history*

#### *Biggleswade manor*

Henry I granted the manor of Biggleswade to Bishop Alexander of Lincoln in 1132 (Table 1.5). In 1215, King John granted the Bishop of Lincoln the right to have a weekly market and three to four days of fairs on all his manors. Henry III confirmed John's grant in relation to Biggleswade and Thame (Oxon) in 1227, and at the same time closed the market at Old Warden (Beds), a potential competitor to Biggleswade. A survey from *c.* 1220–28 records 54¾ burgages, held by 38 named burgesses, on the bishop's estate in Biggleswade, as well as two smithies and a 'place' or empty plot. An account roll of 1509–10 records 123 burgages paying a shilling each – £6 3s in total – with no decayed rents recorded. This growth is most likely to have taken place in the last three quarters of the 13th century, before the demographic crisis of the Black Death (Harvey 1991: 6–7). The absence of decayed rents in 1509–10 may indicate that Biggleswade was able to recover well in the late Middle Ages, taking advantage of its favourable

Table 1.5: Descent of Domesday Book fees

| Domesday Book fees | 13th-century fees | Manors/lands |
|---|---|---|
| Ralph d'Isle | Bishop of Lincoln | Biggleswade manor with hamlets |
| Countess Judith | Huntingdon | Stratton manor |
| Countess Judith | Huntingdon | Sutton manor with hamlets |
| Walter of Flanders | Wahull | Langford, Stratton and Holme manor |
| Nigel d'Aubigny | Abingdon Priory | Holme and Stratton lands |
| Walter Gifford | Pembroke | Millow, Dunton and Stratton manor |
| Hugh Beauchamp | Beauchamp | Holme (tenanted by Abingdon) |
| William d'Eu | Pembroke | Holme |
| King | King | Holme: sergeantry land |

location on the Great North Road with access to the London food market.

It seems likely that Biggleswade's urban development represents a deliberate attempt by the Bishop of Lincoln to capitalise on its role as a hundredal and market centre, favourably sited for commerce on a branch of the Great North Road. The place-name element *-wade* in 'Biggleswade' indicates a ford, while 'Stratton' derives from Old English elements meaning the settlement on the 'street', i.e. a Roman road (Mawer and Stenton 1926: 101–2). A field in the north-east corner of Holme township, adjacent to the Great North Road, bears the name Gallows Ditch (first documented in 1546); this presumably marks the site of a gallows, a reminder of the bishop's former juridical authority. The site marks the convergence of the bounds of Biggleswade, Holme and Stratton (Cole 1917: 139–41). The bishops' urban foundation at Biggleswade, like those of many secular lords, took advantage of a potentially favourable site and the growing population and economy in the 12th and 13th centuries (Britnell 1978; 1981; Beresford 1967; see Godber 1969: 50–62; Beresford and Finberg 1973: 65–6 for Bedfordshire). The only evidence of a formal charter is the claim in 1294 by the burgesses of Biggleswade that they could decide the inheritance of their burgages. The conclusions of an investigation ordered by the bishop are unrecorded, but freedom of inheritance is a major characteristic of burgage tenure and was the norm in post-medieval Biggleswade.

The bishop's manor of Biggleswade also included lands in Stratton and Holme (see below): the survey of *c.* 1220–28 notes 37 customary tenants holding 22 virgates in Biggleswade and 16 customary tenants holding 11¼ virgates in Stratton and Holme. A notable feature of the early 13th-century survey is the marked expansion of customary tenants from Domesday, when only seven villeins are recorded, implying, at most, seven standard holdings or virgates (commonly 20–40 acres (8–16ha) each). This would seem to imply that about 15 virgates of demesne were transferred to tenant use. Population expansion and partible inheritance probably accounts for the further population increase and subdivision of virgates. However, it is possible that the Biggleswade population was not as high as these figures suggest and that the newly tenanted demesne was largely taken up by burgage holders. Indeed, the offer of land in the open fields may have been one of the attractions to lure burgage tenants to settle.

In 1547, Bishop Henry of Lincoln exchanged the manor of Biggleswade with Edward VI for other lands. At this time, Biggleswade parish (including Stratton and Holme) was stated to have 550 housling people or communicants (Brown and Page-Turner 1908: 6–7). In 1563, 166 families are listed in the bishop's returns for the parish, including Stratton and Holme.

*The Huntingdon manors: Sutton and Stratton*

The lands held by Countess Judith, the Conqueror's niece, formed the honor of Huntingdon in the 12th and 13th centuries; the honor was dismembered through forfeitures in the 14th century (Farrer 1923–25: ii, 296–301). The Huntingdon estate had two separate manors, with lands intermingled with the Biggleswade estate: some of these lands may have been acquired from another post-Domesday lord, thus explaining the overlapping manorial organisation in Stratton. The manor of Sutton had attached hamlets in Stratton, Holme and Potton, and passed through several families in the 12th and 13th centuries (Farrer 1923–25: ii, 383–7; Page 1912: ii, 247).

The subsequent history of Stratton 'hamlet' is obscure, although the Enderbys (see below) appear to have held it in the 15th century. Account rolls of 1425–27 upon the death of the Earl of Westminster, then the feudal overlord of Sutton manor, record two tofts, two orchards and 40 acres (*c.* 16ha) of arable in Stratton. This closely coincides with the statement of a 1488 inquisition upon the death of Richard Enderby that the same holding then comprised a capital messuage and 40 acres.

There was also a separate Stratton fee in the honor of Huntingdon, held in 1242–43 as one knight's fee by Robert del Hoo, who married Amia Rikespald. The 1297 taxation indicates that Stratton manor was held by Margaret Rikespaud, who in 1322 granted a messuage, 2 carucates and 28 acres (11ha) of land, 12 acres (5ha) of meadow, and £3 15s 6¼d of rents in Stratton, Millow, Dunton, Biggleswade, Holme and Potton (clearly held of several manors) to William Latimer. The fact that this was done by foot of fine suggests that she did not hold by knight's tenure. In 1381, upon the death of William Latimer's grandson, the manor of Stratton comprised 160 acres (*c.* 65ha) of arable worth 26s 8d per annum, and rents of assize of 33s 4d.

A number of de Strattons, presumably free peasants, appear in such sources as charter-witness lists from around 1200, though it is far from clear that this was a surname at this stage as opposed to statement of the place of habitation. John de Stratton, a free peasant who held lands in Stratton in 1276, and Matilda de Stratton, listed under Holme in the 1297 taxation, are potential ancestors (Fowler 1919: 15). John de Stratton is recorded as being a yeoman of the Black Prince in the years 1359–64 (Emmison 1944), rising from the peasantry (albeit the highest stratum) to high office probably as a reward for military service during the Hundred Years War, first under the Black Prince and then Richard II.

The inheritance of the manor of Stratton in 1403 by John Neville (Baron Latimer) reunited Sutton and Stratton manors in the same hands again. The Enderby family

was leasing the manor in the 1390s, and acquired it in perpetuity sometime between 1412 and 1427, appearing to have dwelt actually in Stratton. An estate that was granted in 1450 to John and Maud Enderby of Stratton comprised a messuage, two tofts called 'Whitbredes', 200 acres (81ha) of land and 20 acres (8ha) of meadow in Stratton and Holme; it is clear that these lands were held freely, but the lordship to which they were attached is not clear. The Enderby family thus dominated Stratton through both their manorial possessions and their permanent residence there. The manor passed by marriage to the Pigott family in the 16th century before being sold to the Andersons in 1588, whose chief residence was at Eyworth, Bedfordshire. The freehold of the above lands, and probably the customary tenants, appear to have been acquired by Sir Edmund Anderson II prior to his death in 1638; certainly the 1838 tithe map and accompanying apportionment indicates that the manor of Biggleswade no longer had any lands in Stratton. In 1764, the Stratton estate was purchased by the Barnetts, who were the chief landowners in the 19th century (Page 1912: ii, 211; Webb 1985); the smaller 'Sunderland' estate in Stratton was held in 1838 by Sir George Cornwall and the Rev. Arthur Annesley.

***Ecclesiastical organisation***

For the purposes of ecclesiastical governance in medieval England, dioceses were subdivided into archdeaconries, which in turn were subdivided into rural deaneries, groups of parishes similar in size to hundreds or wapentakes. The origins of this system are unclear, but it appears to have evolved in the late 11th or 12th century and was recorded in the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291. The boundaries of the archdeaconries and rural deaneries in eastern England generally corresponded with units of the secular local government hierarchy (Winchester 1990: 69–75). In accordance with this pattern, the archdeaconries within the diocese of Lincoln mostly corresponded with shire boundaries, as was the case with the Archdeaconry of Bedford; there was also a close correspondence between the rural deaneries and hundredal boundaries in neighbouring Huntingdonshire (Huxley-Robinson 1992: 11, figs 1–2). However, the situation in Bedfordshire was quite different (Godber 1969: 37, figure 11), and it is likely that the residual influence of early minster church territories was a determining factor in the establishment of the boundaries of the rural deaneries.

The middle Anglo-Saxon minster at Elstow was centred on a *parochia* whose boundaries were later preserved in the rural deanery of Bedford (Haslam 1986). Similarly, the rural deanery of Fleete may represent the territory of Flitton minster, for which late 10th-century documentary and archaeological evidence exists (Crick 2007: 91–100; Wardill and Shotliff forthcoming). Eastern Bedfordshire – essentially the drainage basin of the Ivel Valley – was covered by the rural deanery of Shefford, at the centre of which lay Biggleswade. It is tempting to see this rural deanery as an echo of the boundaries of a minster *parochia* centred on Biggleswade.

There can be little doubt that Biggleswade already had a church at the Conquest, despite the lack of explicit documentation: the question is whether it was a minster church. There is little in the current street plan of Biggleswade to indicate the presence of a former minster precinct, but the church is perched over the River Ivel near an important early east–west routeway – a common topographical location for a minster church. Archaeological work within the graveyard identified four phases of burial, with the graves on a variety of alignments (Jones 2009; Winter 2009: i): this suggests a prolonged period of use, although without radiocarbon dating the longevity of the sequence remains unknown. There are also reports of undated burials 100m south of the present-day graveyard; again, it is unknown whether or not these represent burials within a wider minster precinct that subsequently shrank under the pressure of urban development.

In 1132 the church was granted to the Bishop of Lincoln as a prebend to support one of the cathedral canons, a fate of many old minsters (Blair 2005: 364). The fact that Biggleswade was held by Archbishop Stigand in 1066 may also be an indication of its value, given his reputation for acquiring personal wealth at the expense of the church: Smith (1994: 206) estimates that at least one third of his landed interests were accumulated from ecclesiastical houses. Domesday Book records Stigand as holding 361 manors, the great majority in East Anglia but with seven estates in Bedfordshire, including Biggleswade and the largest manors in Stratton and Holme.

The appointment of vicars to serve the church of Biggleswade is recorded from 1277 onwards, and Biggleswade is recorded as the most valuable church in the Ivel Valley in the late 13th-century *Taxatio Ecclesiastica*. In 1379, the clerical poll tax records a rector (Robert de Stratton) as well as a vicar and eight chaplains (one of whom presumably served Stratton), indicating a collegiate structure; this may reflect its pre-Norman status as a minster, or it may have been a 12th/13th-century attempt to provide for an expanding urban population.

Among the sources of income specified for the vicar was the right to any gifts made to the 'trunks' or coffers of Stratton and Biggleswade, implying the existence of a chapel at the former (*Rot. Graves* (Davis 1925: 209)). In 1317, Thomas de Northfleet, a canon of St Paul's, left money for the repair of the chapel of St Mary in Stratton; a papal indulgence was granted to those who gave alms towards the repair of the chapel. There is no

contemporary evidence, however, that the chapel of St Mary had any burial or baptism rights.

### *Economy and demography*

#### *Medieval economy and social structure*

In the absence of any agricultural accounts for the Middle Ages, the most revealing document for the agrarian economy is the taxation on moveables. Uniquely, the local rolls of assess for 1297 survive for several of the Bedfordshire hundreds and towns, listing crops, stock and other moveable goods. Furthermore, they have been published in translation by Gaydon (1959). The rolls, however, present several problems. The returns for crops and livestock are clearly too low to be realistic (Gaydon 1959: xx–xxi, xxxi), leading Willard (1934: 84–5) to suggest that the crop figures only included crops available for sale after allowance for subsistence. Meanwhile Gaydon suggests that evasion is the explanation for the unrealistically low livestock figures. The taxation data, while a valuable source, still needs to be used with caution.

The roll for Biggleswade vill only partially survives, while Holme has been combined with Astwick. Nevertheless, a few features clearly emerge about the rural economy of the Biggleswade estate. The most important crops in Biggleswade, both on the bishop's demesne and on the tenants' lands, were rye and drage (an oats/rye mixture) and barley; no mention is made of wheat. Hay and/or straw are also listed on the demesne (10s of hay) and on three out of eight peasant holdings; Domesday valued the hay on the d'Isle manor of Biggleswade at 5s. This cropping regime seems to reflect Biggleswade's geology, with its alluvial and gravel soils. The demesne had 30 sheep and 10 lambs, while the largest of the tenant flocks recorded comprised 16 sheep and 4 lambs, though these are likely to be gross underestimates given what is known of medieval stocking rates in general.

By contrast, Stratton's roll survives in full. The manorial lord William Latimer is listed under Sutton, where he has the highest valuation of the surviving rolls at £25 4s 6d and a sheep flock of 91 'muttons'. The demesne in Stratton appears to be held at this date by Margaret Rikespaud and is valued at £3 5s 2d. Wheat predominates in Stratton, followed by drage and only small amounts of rye, which may suggest richer soils. Hay is only noted (valued at 2s) on the holding of Margaret Rikespaud, although hay and/or forage are recorded on some of the larger holdings. No sheep are mentioned at all on Margaret's holding, and the largest tenant flocks were 11 ewes with 4 lambs and 12 ewes with 4 lambs respectively. The pattern in Holme and Astwick is similar. Peas were grown on most holdings across all three townships, while mares, cows and oxen are also widely recorded. Although few medieval manorial account rolls survive from Bedfordshire, analysis by Campbell *et al.* (1993: 46, 54, 68) suggests that at least the eastern fringes of the county lay within the area regularly supplying London with grain in the late 13th and early 14th century.

Analysis of the 1297 taxation reveals a binary distribution of wealth within Stratton and its neighbours (Tables 1.6 and 1.7). This undoubtedly reflects the basic division evident in Domesday between villeins and sokemen, although the distinction had no doubt become more complicated in the interim due to an emerging land market and manorialisation. A dower agreement of 1508–09 for Anne Enderby indicates that some of the holdings in Stratton manor, almost certainly free or sokeland, were over 100 acres. The largest customary

Table 1.6: Analysis of the 1297 taxation in Stratton

| | <10s | 10s–14s 11d | 15s–19s 11d | 20s–29s 11d | 30s–39s 11d | >40s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bishop's tenants | 1 | 7 | - | 1 | - | 2 |
| Other tenants | - | 8 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| **Total** | **1** | **15** | **1** | **4** | **3** | **4** |

Table 1.7: Analysis of 1297 taxation in various vills

| | <10s | 10s–14s11d | 15s–19s11d | 20s–29s11d | 30s–39s11d | >40s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Holme and Astwick | 4 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 7 |
| Biggleswade | - | 4 | 1 | 1 | - | 3 |
| Stratton | 1 | 15 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 4 |

Table 1.8: Lay subsidies: number of tax payers with assessment

| | 1309 | 1332 |
|---|---|---|
| Biggleswade | 37 (£6 12s 0d) | 39 (£5 2s 6d) |
| Stratton | 21 (£2 5s 8¾d) | 29 (£2 9s 8½d) |
| Holme and Astwick | 24 (£3 17s) | 34 (£3 9s 4d) |

Table 1.9: Taxation rankings of Stratton within Biggleswade hundred

| | 1309 | 1332 |
|---|---|---|
| Wealth | 13 | 14 |
| No. of taxpayers | 12= | 9= |
| Total no. of vills | 14 | 15 |

tenant (i.e. a villein) of the bishop in Stratton was Geoffrey Palmer, whose estate was valued at 39s 8¾d and who was a resident of Stratton.

*Taxation rankings and demography*

In 1297 Stratton was ranked 11th out of 15 taxation vills in Biggleswade hundred in terms of monetary assessment. Unfortunately, the lists of taxpayers are incomplete for several vills. Tables 1.8 and 1.9 summarise lay subsidies for the years 1309 and 1332 (Hervey 1925: 68, 112), in which Stratton was ranked, on numbers of taxpayers, equal 12th out of 14 vills in the hundred, and equal 9th out of 15 vills respectively. No records survive for Biggleswade or Stratton from the 1377, 1379 or 1381 poll taxes. In the 1334 lay subsidy, Stratton was assessed at £2 13s 8d, ranking 14th out of 15 vills in the hundred (Glasscock 1975: 1–2).

The *Nonarum Inquisitiones* of 1342 record contraction of arable lands in 49 out of 111 vills in the county. However, only two vills out of ten in Biggleswade hundred – Potton and Tempsford – had any reduced arable (*frisc*) recorded (Baker 1970), just as there is evidence elsewhere for increased leasing of demesnes and for a growth in pastoral farming in the later Middle Ages. However, Bedfordshire did not experience much late medieval or Tudor enclosure, and deserted villages are rare. Lay landlords who kept a proactive interest in their lands were able to increase their wealth in the 15th century, even though Bedfordshire slid down the rankings of richest counties between 1334 and 1515. Its population recovered slowly after the 14th-century crisis compared to other areas, and as late as 1563 may not have exceeded that of 1334 (Harvey 1984: 178–92; Cornwall 1959: 264).

Unfortunately, the detailed returns from the 1524/5 lay subsidies do not survive for Biggleswade hundred. Total hundred returns suggest it fell midway in wealth between the poorer north-west of the county and the rich Chiltern edge (Sheail 1998: i, 61–2; ii, 9–11). In 1666, 98 out of 168 households listed in Biggleswade had only one hearth, compared to 9 out of 20 in Holme and 4 out of 18 in Stratton (Table 1.10). Of the 168 Biggleswade households, 50 were excused (discharged) from paying tax on grounds of poverty and a further five for being empty. The reduction of households from 168 to 151 in Biggleswade between 1666 and 1670 is probably due to evasion or recording differences rather than any real decline (Table 1.11). However, in the case of the 1670 hearth tax for Holme it is explicitly recorded that seven 'several habitations' had been pulled down before Lady Day 1669. The published 1670 hearth tax recorded 15 tax payers in Stratton as well as two persons receiving constant alms who were exempt from the tax (Marshall 1933: 78). The 1670 hearth tax listed 56 hearths in total in Stratton, of which 17 belonged to Sir John Cotton.

Using a multiplier of 4.25, the 1670 tax suggests a population of 72 in Stratton and 60 in Holme, or 132 combined. These figures can be compared with those of 80 and 64 (144 combined) recorded for the two townships in the 1801 census (Table 1.12). Stratton and Holme experienced a slight estimated population growth of 9% between 1670 and 1801. However, this was during a period of marked general increase in population. Marshall, using the same 4.25 multiplier on the 1670 figures, estimated an overall increase in Bedfordshire population of just over 60% between 1670 and 1801 (Marshall 1933: 13–14). However, he made an

Table 1.10: 1666 hearth tax statistics

| | Households listed | Taxpayers | Discharged/empty households | Hearths, inc. exempt | One-hearth households |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biggleswade | 168 | 113 | 50/5 | 339 | 98 |
| Stratton | 18 | 15 | 2/1 | 61 | 4 |
| Holme | 20 | 15 | 3/2* | 47 | 9 |

* one forge and one newly built house not charged

Table 1.11: 1670 hearth tax statistics

| | Households listed* | Taxpayers | Receivers of constant alms | Discharged households | Hearths** | One-hearth households | Population estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biggleswade | 151 | 125 | 15 | 11 | 311 | 70 | *c.* 642 |
| Stratton | 15 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 56 | 2 | *c.* 72 |
| Holme | 14 | 10 | 4 | 0 | 33 | 2 | *c.* 60 |

* includes those on constant alms
** includes those exempted from tax

Table 1.12: 1801 census statistics

| | 1801 houses | 1801 empty houses | 1801 families | 1801 population |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biggleswade | 298 | 3 | 241 | 1650 |
| Stratton | 8 | 0 | 9 | 80 |
| Holme | 11 | 2 | 12 | 64 |

error in taking the 1801 population figure for Stratton as the combined figure for both Holme and Stratton, thus suggesting a falling population (Marshall 1933: 27, 78).

*Stratton*

A foot of fine of 1199–1200 relates to land lying in the North and South Fields of Stratton. However, only one other reference naming a field in Stratton has been found – a deed relating to land in Stratton's North Field in 1336–37 (Fowler 1919: 20). It thus seems likely that it had a two-field system like Holme, though the evidence is not conclusive. Surveys of the manor of Stratton were made during the reign of James I (i.e. 1603–05) and in 1639; these surveys have unfortunately been lost, but both documents are said to have been made with a view towards enclosure, implying that the township was still unenclosed in 1639. The inquisition post-mortem of Sir Edmund Anderson II (d. 1638) refers to land in the South Field (formerly Ash Field), which may be a further indication of open-field survival. In 1802, Stratton was said to be fully enclosed except for 2 acres belonging to Lord Spencer; this can be identified with the 3 acres (*c.* 1ha), tenanted by Mr Rudd, which were said to lie in Stratton field in the 1722–44 survey.

The medieval documentation sheds little light on the layout of the village. As noted above, a chapel and an adjacent cottage (granted to Harrold Priory) are documented. In 1275, a coroner's court recorded that Robert le May of Stratton died while digging with a pickaxe into the wall of a building in William le Bole's courtyard, in order to demolish it. Unfortunately, the wall collapsed upon him and he died two days later (Hunnisett 1961: 64). The Huntingdon manor of Stratton almost certainly had a manor house in the village by this time, perhaps even with a late Anglo-Saxon antecedent, though it was probably occupied only on an occasional basis by its early lords. In the late 13th and early 14th century it was held by Margaret Rikespaud, but probably not by knight's tenure.

The Enderby family's acquisition of the main Stratton manor around the end of the 14th century seems to have marked the transition to a permanent lord living in the village (Hervey 1925: 115–16). The larger of the two moated sites in Stratton was probably the site of the main Huntingdon manor of Stratton; the more northerly moat may perhaps have been associated with the Sutton sub-manor in Stratton, though this is far from certain. The exchequer reported in 1568 that a labourer digging in a tenement called the Well Yard in Stratton had found a hoard of gold coins, including 36 nobles, 13 half-nobles and a single quarter-noble. The treasury noted the finding of a further coin hoard in 1770, which came from the former site of Stratton manor as it stood in 1636.

The 1838 tithe map shows Stratton House lying within its park, with an outlying huntsman's house and kennels behind a hedge. The lodge later became Kennel Farm and was described as 'mainly built of timber with thatched and tiled roofs' in a 1910 sales catalogue, though it had largely been rebuilt by 1930 (Webb 1985: 14). Both the Stratton moats had been turned into copses by 1838. Lines of trees in the landscape look as though they were positioned to improve the view from the mansion as well as act as wind breaks. Beyond the park, the rest of the Barnett estate was divided between

Table 1.13: Numbers of Holme and Stratton wills 1600–1799

| | 1600–24 | 1625–49 | 1650–74 | 1675–99 | 1700–24 | 1725–49 | 1750–74 | 1775–99 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Holme | - | 2 | - | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Stratton | 1 | 1 | 3 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 3 |

four tenant farms, with two further farms on the 'Sunderland' estate. Stratton manor had a water mill in 1436, but it is not otherwise recorded.

***Conclusion***

Very little research has been done on early modern agriculture in Bedfordshire. This no doubt reflects the fact that few probate inventories have survived, though a surviving suite from the Jacobean period has been published (Emmison 1938). Apart from the dispersed settlement area of the north, the county was dominated by a champion landscape of villages and Midlands-style open fields. Enclosure was mostly late, achieved by Acts of Parliament in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Batchelor 1813: 217–75; Stone 1794: 25–7). Bedfordshire seems to have been a prosperous county of mixed agriculture in the early modern period, with London providing an important market. In the early 18th century, Daniel Defoe noted its export of wheat and barley malt to London as well as the shipping of wheat from Bedford to King's Lynn and on to the Netherlands. He also recorded the importance of the lace and straw-hat-making industries in maintaining prosperity in Bedfordshire. One branch of the Great North Road ran through Biggleswade, which was an important droving route to London, bringing livestock from the grasslands of the Midlands and the fen country (Cole and Browning 1962: (2), 113, 123, 130).

A published collection of Bedfordshire inventories for the years 1617–20 suggests that cereals were the dominant crops, with a few pulses and flax. Yeoman farmers commonly held 20–30 cows and 50–60 sheep, the latter folded in the open fields. Thomas Stone in 1794 noted the fattening of calves for the London veal trade in the south of the county, a practice which Thomas Batchelor in 1813 stated as being concentrated in the Biggleswade area. Stone also noted the importance of butter production in the southern part of the county, again for the London market. By contrast, Batchelor noted dairying as being concentrated in the Woburn and Ampthill area in the west of the county (Stone 1794: 28–9; Batchelor 1813: 525–6). After the coming of the railway in 1850, market-gardening became a major part of the local agrarian economy. An article in the *Biggleswade Chronicle* of 25 July 1947 reported that a lot of flax used to be grown on Stratton Farm, and that some of the pits used for retting could still be seen.

The desertion of Stratton and shrinkage of Holme seem linked to improvement of the landscape in the 17th and 18th centuries. Both townships had resident lords and developed into 'closed' villages, where the lord had a great deal of social and economic power. Such closed villages tend to be marked by their tight control of settlement laws, a lack of squatting, and an absence of non-conformist chapels (Holderness 1972; Mills 1980).

The dating of enclosure and desertion in Stratton is unclear. The 1670 hearth tax suggests that the main process of village desertion post-dates this document, though it may already have been underway. By 1801, the census suggests that the number of tenant houses in the township had halved since 1670. Table 1.13 analyses the chronological distribution of wills in the Bedfordshire Records Office index assigned to Stratton and Holme. Unfortunately, it is uncertain how much this pattern reflects the extent to which wills were differentiated from Biggleswade, the site of the parish church, while the pattern of wills may also be a reflection of social and age structures rather than overall population. If it is real, the post-Restoration increase in will-making may reflect increased prosperity and an increased use of wills.

The pattern of Stratton wills (Table 1.13) is suggestive of a gradual decline in the population from the end of the 17th century to the middle of the 18th century, though these patterns should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the Cotton family would seem to be the likely candidates for the remodelling of Stratton into a classic estate landscape in the late 17th or early 18th century, although it may have taken several decades to achieve. Certainly, the account given by the Lyson brothers indicates a long-term policy of buying out freehold and copyhold tenancies. The former Stratton Hall Farm (listed Grade II and now a hotel), with its 17th-century timber element, may represent a sole survivor from the original village layout.

There is no indication that Stratton and Holme were particularly struggling in the later Middle Ages or early modern period. Nevertheless, they were subsidiary townships to a large manorial and hundredal centre, as a result of which they were small in size and population. This was probably a major factor in facilitating both enclosure and depopulation, though these are not inevitably linked (Yelling 1977: 51–2, 218). The most

important factor of all in their desertion appears to be the motivation of individual resident-landlords in both Holme and Stratton. Despite the complex medieval lordship patterns, ownership was split by the early modern period between the enclosers and a single lesser landlord in each township. The social structure and ownership patterns are difficult to work out in detail, but there appear to have been a number of large farms already in existence in both Holme and Stratton. These probably owe as much to their origins as large soke holdings as to the later land market. Consolidation of the townships into large and mostly compact estates was thus made relatively easy. At the other end of the spectrum, at least in Holme, there appear to have been a number of relatively small landholders, whether genuine cottagers or small copyholders, who were vulnerable.

Landlords consolidated and enclosed their estates for a mixture of economic and aesthetic reasons (Clay 1985: 177–85). There has been a long debate, indeed since the time of early modern enclosures, as to what effect enclosure had on the cottagers and rural poor. The most comprehensive recent reassessment by Snell (1985: 138–227) came to the conclusion that cottagers did indeed suffer overall through both loss of common rights and the paucity of wage labour. In some areas the impact of enclosure was undoubtedly mitigated by opportunities for wage-work in industry, but this was not the case for males in the Biggleswade area. In both Holme and Stratton, enclosure seems to have led to the disappearance of the small copyhold farmer from the landscape, while cottage tenants disappeared entirely from the landscape of Stratton. The 1838 tithe apportionment still records that some Biggleswade cottages had rights of common, but the post-enclosure landscape was dominated by large consolidated tenant farms, no doubt seen as a better long-term investment by the landowners. It also seems likely that there was a shift after enclosure, at least initially, towards more grass for dairy production for the London market.

The destruction of cottages was probably also encouraged by a desire to escape the imposition of poor rates. Thomas Stone in 1794 noted, 'There is a scarcity of comfortable cottages for the poor in this county [i.e. Bedfordshire]; and the farmers are more studious to prevent this very necessary class of men making settlements upon them, than to provide them useful and profitable employment' (Stone 1794: 56). Social reasons may also have played a part, notably the desire to rid townships of a social group seen as potentially dissolute and/or radical.

The 1801 census figures point to population stagnation rather than depopulation in both Holme and Stratton. However, the population statistics may hide a change within the lower strata of these townships' populations from permanently resident small farmers or cottagers towards household and farm servants who lived-in. Many people in the early modern period served as servants for only part of their life cycle, prior to marriage. Certainly, both townships seem to have seen the targeted displacement of the cottager and small landowner. It is unclear how closely it was linked to the process of enclosure as such, as the main documented episode of cottage clearance in *c.* 1666–69 occurred a couple of decades after enclosure. Both phenomena should be seen as elements in a wider process of landscape 'improvement' motivated by a mixture of economic, social and aesthetic concerns. The landowners and their stewards deliberately destroyed the local village community marked by its socially disparate inhabitants and communally run open-fields. In their place emerged a landscape of the country house and its park, surrounded by discrete and enclosed tenant farms.

By 1830, service had largely died out in southern England, a process which contributed to the subsequent rural population decline as farm workers clustered in the small towns and 'open' villages (Snell 1985: 67–103; Armstrong 1981). The 1838 tithe map shows that Stratton, with its resident lords, continued to be a cottage-free zone until two pairs of estate cottages were built in 1889 and 1907 (Webb 1985: 8–9, 25, 32). These brick-built cottages reflect the improved standards of accommodation often provided for farm workers from the middle of the 19th century. This was a reaction to both the increasing scarcity of rural labour, associated with the growth of urbanism and industry, and landlords' new awareness of their moral duties as a result of the Evangelical Revival within Anglicanism (Horn 1987: 147–90).

# Chapter 2.
# Pre-Settlement Landscape

**Neolithic to Bronze Age (Period 1)**

Despite the size of the area that was excavated, little evidence was found of activity predating the Iron Age (Figure 2.2). The single feature dating to the Neolithic period (L1) is suggestive of temporary settlement, but the Bronze Age remains (L2) appear restricted to funerary activity. The recovery of a Mesolithic axe from late medieval deposits points towards earlier activity within the overall landscape, but no features from this period could be identified.

The only feature in L1 was a large, irregularly shaped, flat-bottomed pit or hollow with a deeper, 1m-wide pit near its centre (Figure 2.1:a). Small quantities of early–middle Neolithic Peterborough Ware were present throughout its fills, as well as a flint assemblage that appears to be contemporaneous.

A heavily truncated ring-ditch (Figures 2.1:b and 2.2) exposed near the northern edge of the excavated area (L2) is likely to be Bronze Age in date, although this is based on purely typological grounds – one small sherd of late Bronze Age / early Iron Age pottery was the only artefact recovered. The ditch formed a slightly oblate circle in plan measuring *c.* 15m in diameter along its outer edge; its circuit appeared to be unbroken, although truncation by later features may have masked a causeway to the south-west. No contemporary burials were identified in association with this round barrow, although a late Anglo-Saxon / Saxo-Norman burial was dug into the ditch (L42, Phase 5b); the only burial dating to the Bronze Age was an un-urned cremation *c.* 300m to the south (Figure 2.2), the bone from which has been radiocarbon dated to 1740–1500 cal. BC (95% confidence, 3320 ±40BP, SUERC-30101).

**Early Iron Age (Period 2)**

The earliest remains relating to widespread settlement date to the beginning of the Iron Age, though these were fragmentary and occurred at a relatively low density (Figure 2.2). Most of the remains were located in the central part of the excavated area, including a four-post structure G5205, fence line G800, and a thin layer of soil G303 that may have accumulated through occupation activity. There were also two cremation burials G6017 and G6018, the former urned, which were revealed in a trial trench near this central area.

The contemporaneity of the Period 2 features is uncertain, due to a lack of resolution in ceramic typologies for this period and the recovery of most of the datable artefacts from just a few features. These features may in fact represent a low level of activity stretching from the late Bronze Age to the middle Iron Age.

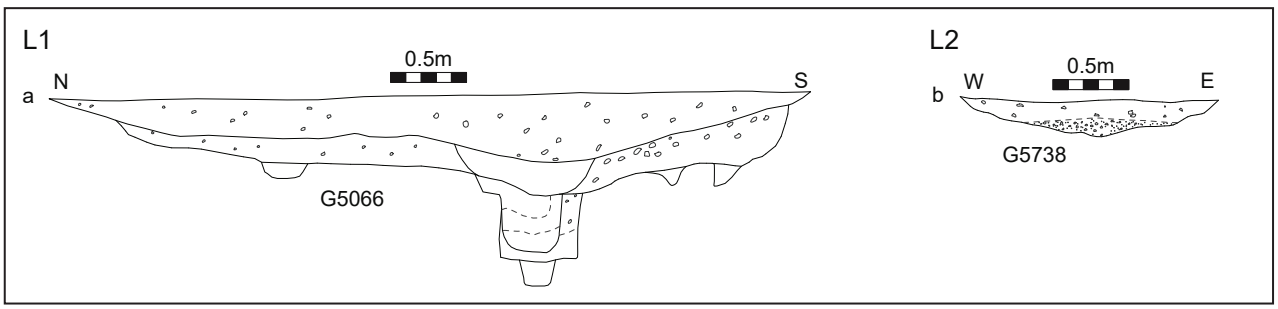


Figure 2.1: Selected section drawings from Period 1 and 2 features

Figure 2.2 (opposite page): Plan of all excavated remains from Periods 1 (Neolithic to Bronze Age) and 2 (early Iron Age)

TL
0
100m
1:2500
L2
b
44200
a
L1
44000
L2
43800
Period 1
Period 2
20200
20400