

MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES AT CHURCH STREET, MILBORNE PORT

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SUMMARY

A watching brief and limited excavation of service trenches was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) at a site north of Church Street, Milborne Port, during the construction of 14 houses by The Milborne Port Partnership between February and July 2000. The site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 10388). The development partially revealed a small number of discrete features including postholes, ditches, quarry pits and a small section of unmortared wall, mostly dating to the 12th and 13th centuries. There was limited evidence for late and post-medieval occupation.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The area to the north of Church Street, Milborne Port (NGR ST 667185), covers about 0.42 ha, and lies at the heart of the historic core of the town, immediately east of the church of St John the Evangelist, on gently sloping ground between the High Street and Church Street (Fig. 1). It has remained largely undeveloped since medieval times, mostly being used as gardens, with the exceptions of a wartime shelter to the north-west (Fig. 2) and a modern bungalow ('Davlen') positioned centrally.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Milborne Port was situated on the edge of a royal estate and seems likely to have functioned as a market centre during the late Saxon period; there was a mint at the town during the period 997–1003, and again in the period 1023–35 (Aston 1984). At the time of Domesday Book it was the third town of Somerset, with 56 burgesses, and may have had a population of as many as 350 people. Little is known about the origins, growth, and recession of the town in the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, its topography or street plan, but the historic core probably extends over an area of approximately 8ha (Aston and Leech 1977, map 38). It is generally assumed that the origins of the town lie around the historic parish church of St John the Evangelist, which is located roughly 100m west of the present development site. The church was probably established as a minster (or 'mother') church during the mid or late Saxon period, although the earliest surviving fabric in the present building dates from around the Norman Conquest. The town seems to have maintained its prosperity until the 14th century, perhaps

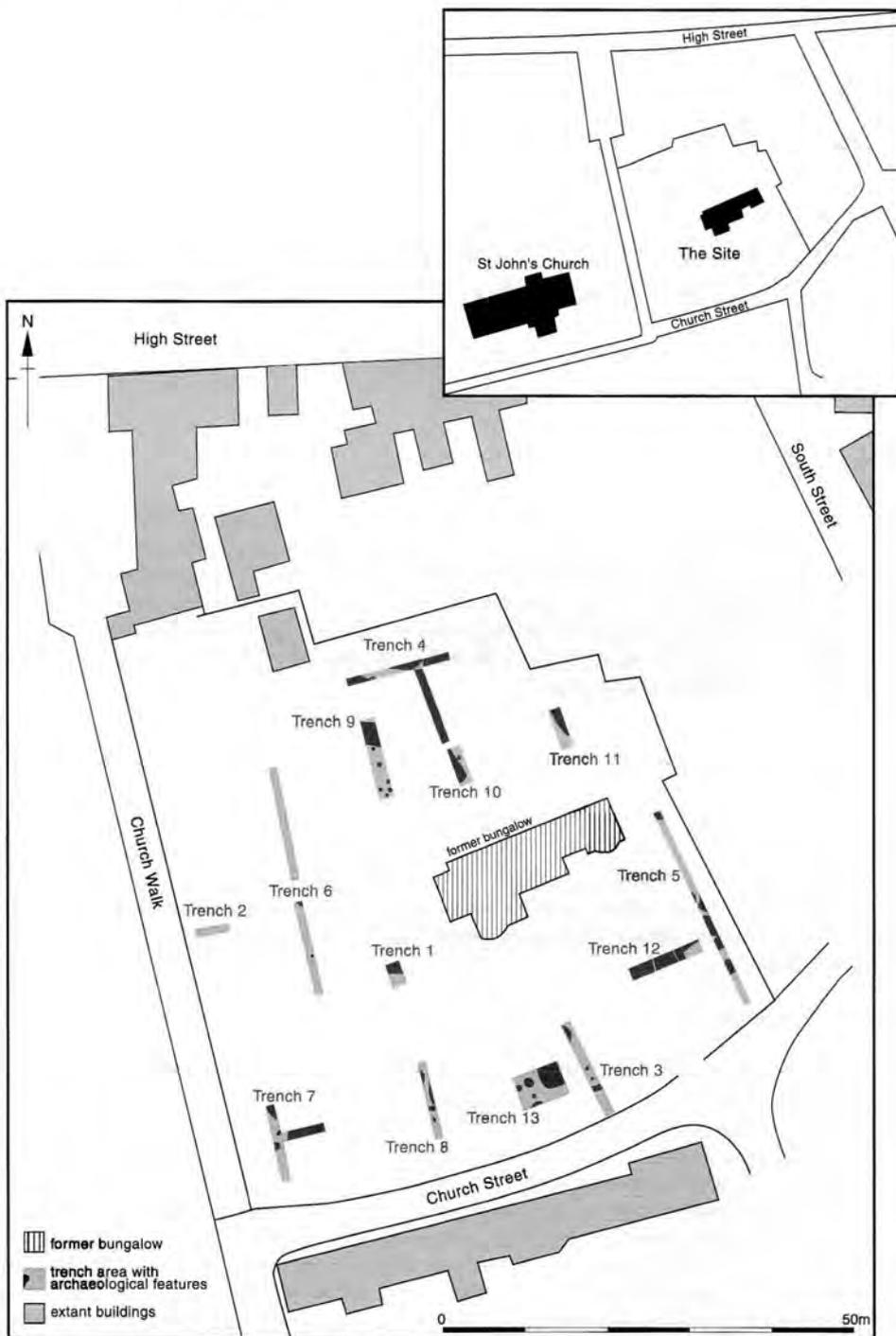


Fig. 1 Site location showing previous excavations

(from the evidence of the Lay Subsidy of 1324) on the basis of the cloth industry. Thereafter it appears to have been eclipsed by Sherborne, Yeovil, and Wincanton and to have gone into decline.

PREVIOUS PLANNING HISTORY

Plans for the development of the site were initially put forward in 1989 by Beechcroft Homes Ltd. An archaeological evaluation carried out in that year by Wessex Archaeology suggested that the proposal would have a significant impact on areas of surviving archaeology (WA 1989). Furthermore, the archaeology was deemed important enough for the site to be made into a Scheduled Ancient Monument (see below). The development was subsequently redesigned; and a second evaluation carried out by OAU in November/December 1991 determined that this new scheme would lead to a very substantial reduction in archaeological impact, although the proposal was subsequently withdrawn (OAU 1991). A development scheme for the site was revived in 1997, and the site was acquired by the present developers, The Milborne Port Partnership, in June 1999. OAU subsequently carried out an archaeological watching brief on behalf of The Milborne Port Partnership in August 1999, during investigations of ground conditions (OAU 1999a). Planning permission for The Milborne Port Partnership proposals was granted in October 1999, and Scheduled Monument Consent was obtained in January 2000. OAU subsequently carried out a watching brief and limited excavation on the site between February and July 2000; all archaeological works were carried out in accordance with the outline method statement contained in the archaeological statement produced in support of the revised application for Scheduled Monument Consent (OAU 1999b).

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Archaeological investigations at Church Street, Milborne Port, by Wessex Archaeology (WA) in 1989 revealed a range of domestic and non-domestic features across the site (trenches 1–8; Fig. 1). Much of the pottery was of 11th to 12th-century date, including an unusual 11th-century decorated pottery dish. The limited quantities of late and post-medieval ceramic material suggested a relative lack of activity at the site since the 13th century. The significance of the Saxo-Norman deposits revealed by the WA evaluation ensured that the site was made a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 10388).

A further five trenches were dug in an OAU evaluation in 1991 (trenches 9–13; Fig. 1), revealing pits, postholes, a stone wall footing and a probable ditch section. The evaluation mostly confirmed the findings of the WA assessment, in that for the most part, the archaeology consisted of discrete features cut into limestone, mostly of Saxo-Norman and medieval date. Most of the pottery recovered was of 12th–13th century date, with less of the 11th-century material found in the previous investigation. In August 1999 OAU conducted an archaeological watching brief on behalf of The Milborne Port Partnership during investigations of ground conditions, although no archaeologically sensitive material was found (OAU 1999a).

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT INVESTIGATIONS IN 2000

An archaeological watching brief and limited excavation of service trenches was carried out during the construction of the new housing development. The work was carried out at various times from February to July, whenever the development was likely to affect the archaeology, although the mitigation strategy was designed to minimise any archaeological impacts. As a result, most of the important archaeological remains on the site have been preserved *in situ*,

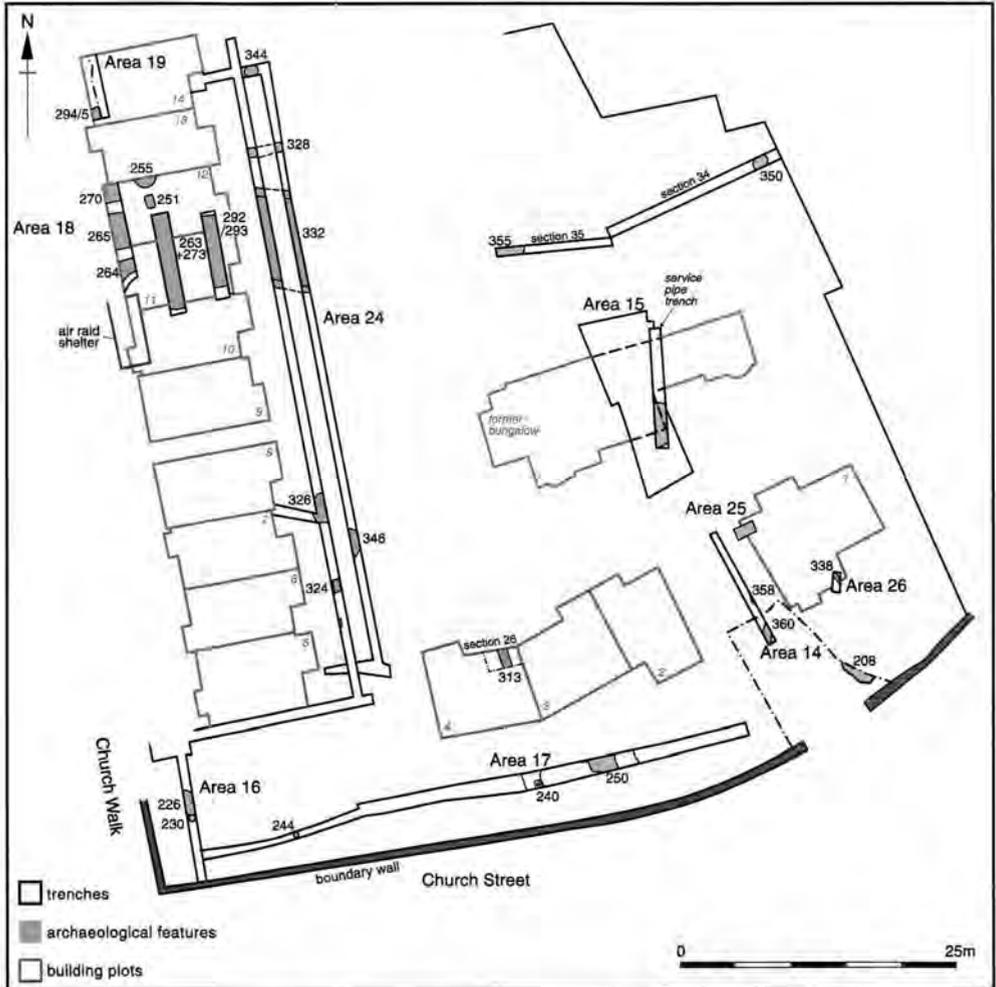


Fig. 2 Location of OAU excavations in 2000

and the development had only a carefully targeted and small-scale effect. The corollary of this was that the archaeological information obtained from the site was very limited, being restricted to sampling of small areas during the evaluations, and limited excavation and recording in a series of narrow service trenches during building works. The location of the archaeological trenches, and recorded features, is shown on Figure 2.

An account of features by area is given below.

AREA 14

An area in the south-east corner of the site was machined down under archaeological supervision to provide site access. It revealed the top of a limestone cobbled surface (208), thought to have been part of the internal floor of a cottage shown on the 1819 Inclosure Map (SRO CR/137, reproduced in OAU 1991, fig. 10). No earlier features were excavated until a service trench

was later cut through the area, which revealed part of a possible 12th to early 13th-century ditch or robbed wall (360). A modern rubbish pit (358) was found further to the north.

AREA 15

A service pipe trench underneath the foundations of the modern bungalow was cut down to just 0.2m below ground level and no archaeology was found above this level. Limited further excavation revealed a possible large cut feature, containing a very small amount of post-medieval pottery.

AREA 16

An electricity service trench in the south-western corner of the site revealed part of a large pit (226) containing 12th to early 13th-century pottery and bone, which cut a much smaller pit or posthole (230) devoid of finds.

AREA 17

This was the main east–west service trench (*c.* 55m in length), running along the southern boundary near Church Street. Only a few features were revealed, all beneath a probable medieval cultivation layer containing 12th to early 13th-century pottery. The most significant archaeological feature was part of a large north–south unmortared stone wall (240) with a possible doorway, associated with 12th to early 13th-century pottery. Further east was an irregular pit (250) filled with limestone and mortar rubble, which was not excavated.

AREAS 18 AND 19

The north-west of the site was an area quite disturbed by modern activity, including a wartime shelter. Four construction trenches were dug, revealing a number of quarry pits containing pottery ranging from the 12th to 14th centuries. One of these (292/293) was very substantial, and may either represent a large ditch cut or a quarry scoop, of 12th to 13th-century date. Other features in the area comprised a modern rubbish pit (251) and a small section of a post-medieval quarry pit (255). A trench excavated just to the west of plots 12 to 14 (not shown on plan) revealed medieval cultivation soil cut by traces of an unmortared north–south wall. This is thought to have been part of the old churchyard wall, which is still standing further south.

AREA 24

A storm drain trench and service trench running north–south for *c.* 60m just to the east of plots 1 to 14 contained a number of archaeological features. At the southern end, in front of plot 6, a complete dog skeleton was found (324), surrounded by soil containing 12th to early 13th-century pottery. Also dated to this period were pits 326 and 332 and ditch 328. Two further pits (346 and 344) were undated.

OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

Most other archaeological features from the site were of post-medieval or modern date, including part of a limestone wall (338) in Area 26, which was probably part of the post-medieval building shown on the Inclosure map. Features of earlier date comprised a ditch with medieval pottery in its fill (section 26; 313), and part of a large quarry pit, which contained probable 11th-

century pottery (section 35; 355). It was probably the same pit as that identified in WA trench 4 (Fig. 1), which had finds suggesting an 11th to 12th-century date.

THE FINDS

POTTERY Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 562 sherds with a total weight of 6,699g. The estimated vessel equivalent (EVE), by summation of surviving rimsherd circumference was 3.70. A total of 28 sherds (390g) was modern, the rest medieval or early post-medieval. The range of pottery types present is fairly similar to other sites in the vicinity, although the chronological range suggests that the main period of occupation was the 12th–14th centuries, thus indicating that this area of Milborne Port was initially occupied later and subsequently for longer than other medieval parts of the town.

The present report summarises the main findings of the pottery analysis, and full details are available in the project archive. All statistical analyses were carried out to the minimum standards suggested by Orton (1998–9, 135–7).

Fabrics

- F1 Coarse flint.* Sparse to moderate angular flint up to 2mm. Sparse to moderate sub-angular calcareous material up to the same size, sparse sub-rounded quartz up to 1mm. Rare sub-angular red ironstone up to 2mm. Sherd colours generally browns and greys. 132 sherds, 1893g, EVE=1.13.
- F2 Fine sandy flint.* Fine sandy ware with few visible inclusions except for rare angular flint up to 2mm (most < 1mm), sparse black ironstone up to 0.5mm. Fabric version of F1? Glazed sherds also noted, dull sage green glaze. Jugs have decorated strap handles (see Fig. 3). Hermitage type? 292 sherds, 3018g, EVE=1.62.
- F3 Fine sandy.* Very fine, slightly micaceous sandy ware with smooth surfaces. Generally grey with brown surfaces. Some sherds have glaze splashes. 4 sherds, 22g, EVE=0.
- F4 Oolitic limestone.* Moderate to dense oolitic limestone up to 2mm, rare sub-rounded ironstone up to 1mm. Dark grey and/or brown. Some vessels glazed and decorated. Probably of local manufacture. 29 sherds, 371g, EVE=0.42.
- F5 Sandy ware.* Moderate to dense fine sand up to 0.2mm, sparse mica. Very similar to F3, but lacks the smooth surfaces. Grey fabric, some vessels with orange surfaces, some sherds have glaze splashes on the outer surface, others an even coating. 30 sherds, 209g, EVE=0.53.
- F6 ?Somerset whiteware.* White fabric, moderate to dense white sub-rounded quartz up to 1mm. Glossy, variegated yellowish-green and green glaze, applied pads in a brown-firing slip. 1 sherd, 4g, EVE=0.
- F20 Red earthenware.* Brick-red fabric, petrologically virtually identical to F5. Internal orange glaze, some sherds have slip-trailed decoration. 44 sherds, 784g.
- F21 Tin-glazed earthenware.* 1 sherd, 8g.
- F1000 Miscellaneous 19th/20th-century wares.* Mass-produced white earthenwares, horticultural pottery, stonewares etc. 29 sherds, 390g.

The range of fabric types noted is similar to that found at previous excavations in the area (WA 1989; OAU 1991). Flint fabrics similar to those from this site were noted at Sherborne Castle (Harrison and Williams 1979) and Ilchester (Pearson 1982). The oolitic limestone fabric is present at early sites in Somerset. The sherds in the fine sandy fabric with the sparse flint inclusions (F2) noted at this site are very similar in both form and fabric to the material from the kiln site at Hermitage in Dorset, although that material was dated to the 13th–15th century

(McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 340–1, fig. 207). Some of the sherds from this site appear to be earlier, with the 12th century seeming the most likely date for the appearance of the material.

The single sherd of ?Somerset White ware is worthy of note. The material does not appear to have been found at any of the other excavations in Milborne Port, but similar wares occurred in 13th–14th-century deposits at Launceston Castle in Cornwall, where petrological analysis indicated that the most likely source of the material was the Coal Measure clays of Somerset (D. Brown, pers. comm.). Despite the paucity of 13th–14th-century pottery from other excavations at Milborne Port, it is clear that activity did continue into this period, and the presence of the ?Somerset White ware sherd may simply be due to the length of occupation rather than any other considerations.

Chronology

The pottery was seriated using the system proposed by Elaine Morris (WA 1989) for the material from previous excavations at the site, as follows:

CP1 ?11th century. Mainly oolitic limestone tempered wares, although flint-tempered wares can form a major component of any assemblage of this period. Generally small vessels with simple forms. It is possible that assemblages dominated by oolitic fabrics may be pre-Conquest, whilst those comprising mainly flint-tempered wares may be of post-Conquest date.

CP2 ?12th–?early 13th century. Dominated by flint-tempered fabrics. Some wheel-thrown wares, small quantities of sandy glazed wares.

CP3 ?13th–14th century. Sandy wares are well-represented, although flint fabrics are still present. Oolitic sherds residual. Glazed sherds more common.

CP4 Late 15th–18th century. Late and post-medieval wares (e.g. Red Earthenwares, Tudor Green, Cistercian ware, Tin Glazed Earthenware). Most of the groups from this phase at this site appear to be of 16th or 17th-century date.

CP5 19th–20th century. Modern wares.

The logic for this dating is based largely on that for similar wares at other sites in the region, such as Sherborne Castle (see above).

The data in Table 1 indicates that the main period of activity at this site (at least in terms of ceramic deposition) appears to have been during CP2, with the site then declining during the medieval and early post-medieval periods. The total lack of Tudor Green and Cistercian type wares at the site indicates that activity had all but ceased by c. 1400, and that there was little further occupation until the mid to late 16th century.

Table 1 Pottery occurrence per Ceramic Phase by weight (in grams). Medieval and post-medieval fabrics only, expressed as a percentage of the phase total

Phase	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F20	Total
CP1	0	0	0	100%	0	0	0	15g
CP2	41.9%	48.8%	0	5.6%	3.4%	0	0	3243g
CP3	24.0%	63.2%	1.2%	6.5%	4.8%	0.2%	0	1774g
CP4	7.7%	21.6%	0	2.8%	1.3%	0	66.5%	1128g
Total	1871g	2948g	22g	356g	209g	4g	750g	6160g

Saxo-Norman groups appear to be largely absent. Some of the groups ascribed to CP2 and comprising sherds only in F1 may be of such date but it is difficult to be certain of this. Certainly, at the other sites in the town, such early groups contained a proportion of oolitic wares (F4).

CP3 groups do appear to be a little more common at this site than the other excavations discussed above. As noted above, the only sherd of ?Somerset White ware from the area came from this site, showing that there was activity here during CP3.

Vessel Use

The range of vessel types in use over time is shown in Table 2. The pattern is fairly typical of medieval sites generally: during the early medieval period, jars dominate, with jugs becoming more common over time. The presence of a lamp sherd (Fig. 3.5) in a CP3 group is a little unusual, as such vessels tend to be early rather than late medieval. Later examples are known however. The absence of jugs in CP3 is somewhat surprising, although this is probably due to the small assemblage size rather than functional considerations. Bodysherds from jugs were present in assemblages of this date, and so the paucity of rimsherds is most likely due to the vagaries of archaeological sampling, although the partially residual nature of the assemblage may be a factor.

Table 2 Vessel occurrence per medieval Ceramic Phase by EVE

Phase	Jars	Bowls	Jugs	Lamps	Total EVE
CP1	100%	0	0	0	0.07
CP2	91.1%	1.9%	7.0%	0	2.13
CP3	82.2%	4.2%	0	13.6%	1.18
Total	2.98	0.09	0.15	0.16	3.38

Catalogue of Illustrations (Fig. 3)

- Context 271, F6, CP3. Bodysherd from decorated glazed jug. White fabric, applied pad in a brown-firing clay, dot of body clay in centre of pad. Glaze appears copper-spotted yellowish-green over body clay.
- Context 253, F2, CP2. Jug rim. Grey fabric with orange-brown inner surface. Glossy green glaze on both surfaces.
- Context 285, F2, CP3. Decorated jug handle. Grey fabric with orange-brown surfaces. Dull green glaze on outer face of handle.
- Context 290, F4, CP2. ?Jar rim. Uniform grey fabric with splashes of dull green glaze on the outer surface.
- Context 285, F1, CP3. Rim of lamp bowl. Grey fabric with orange-brown surfaces, thick patches of soot on inner surface.
- Context 275, F2, CP2. Jar rim. Light grey fabric with darker outer surface.
- Context 261, F1, CP2. Jar rim. Light grey fabric with orange-brown surfaces.
- Context 256, F20, CP4. Rim-to-base profile of pancheon. Brick red fabric with orange-brown internal glaze.

OTHER FINDS

The limited quantity of additional finds recorded from the excavations consisted for the most part of post-medieval or undiagnostic artefacts. The metal objects comprised five copper alloy artefacts, including a coin of George IV, a buckle plate and a fragment from a cast buckle frame, and four iron nails in poor condition. The 19 fragments of glass consisted mostly of 19th and 20th-century window glass, tableware and bottle fragments. One wine bottle fragment probably dates from the 18th century. All 2450g of ceramic building material was post-medieval in date.

A total of 232 fragments (2308g) of animal bone was hand-recovered during fieldwork. Only 113 elements (49%) could be identified to species, the majority deriving from the main domesticates (cattle, sheep and pig), with three fragments of bird bone and a dog burial. No wild mammalian bones were identified. Although a good percentage of bone was recovered from contexts datable to the 12th and early 13th centuries, the low number of identifiable fragments has prevented detailed analysis of this group.

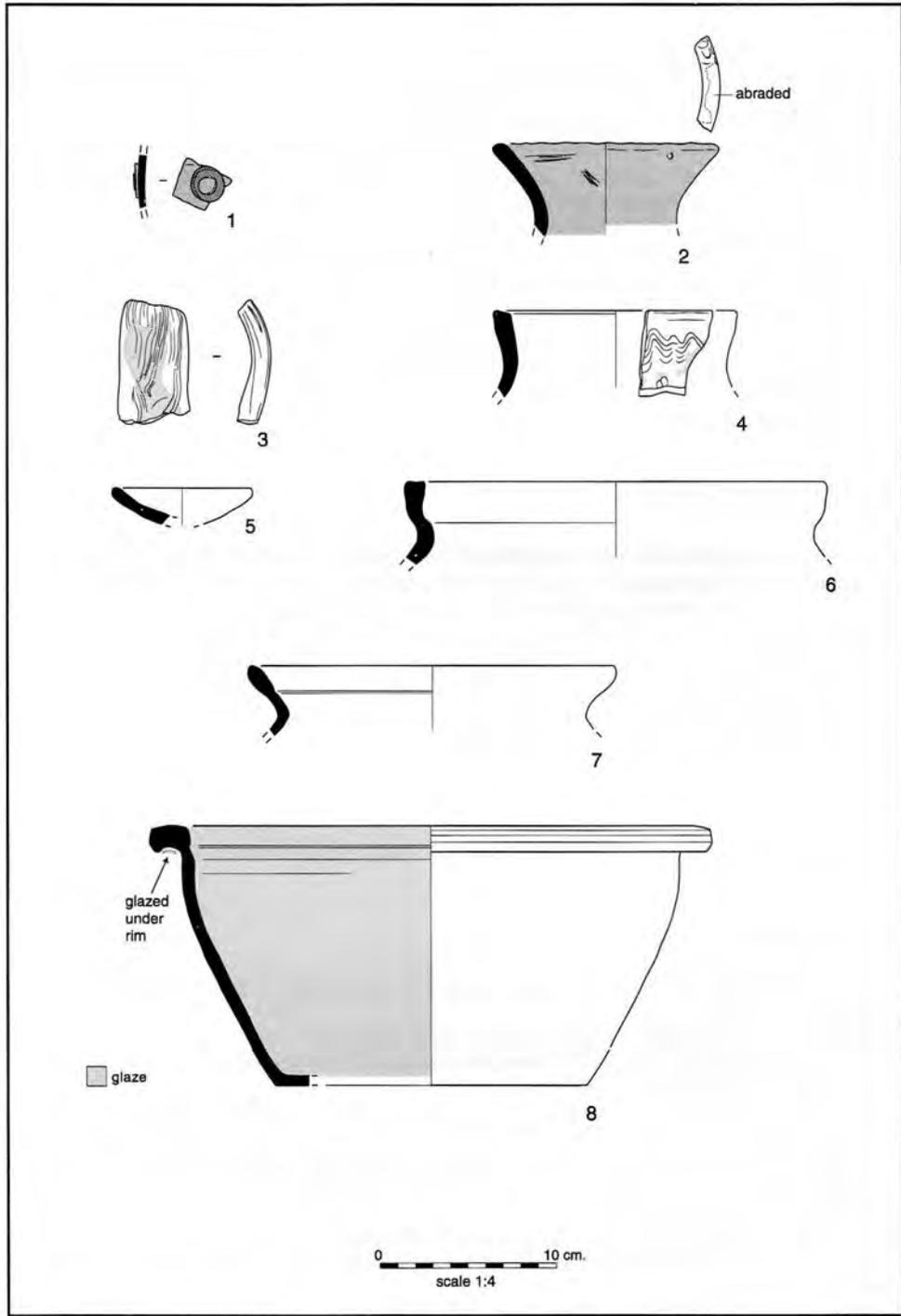


Fig. 3 Medieval pottery

DISCUSSION

The earliest activity found at the site dates to the Saxo-Norman period (11th–12th century), although the OAU investigations in 1991 and 2000 both contained significantly less 11th-century material than the earlier Wessex investigations. The significant archaeology of 11th to 12th-century date is concentrated along the Church Street frontage. The quantities of domestic material, together with pits, postholes and a small section of unmortared limestone wall, suggest that this area contained domestic dwellings fronting onto Church Street, although no coherent structures were recognised. Behind these, further to the north, there was a series of large pits and substantial linear features that seem to be connected with limestone quarrying. These were subsequently infilled with domestic rubbish. Most of the occupation/floor levels of the Saxo-Norman period do not survive to any considerable extent, because the later use of the land as a garden has resulted in most of the vertical stratigraphy being removed. After the 13th century, activity appears to lessen, although further quarry pits probably date to the later medieval and post-medieval periods. A cobbled surface and layer found in the south-east corner of the site probably belong to cottages shown on the Inclosure Map of 1819.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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