

Medieval Walls in a Wiveton Rose Bed

By John Wright

Late in 1995 the owner of Wiveton Barn, in Leatherpool Lane, Wiveton, rang the author to say that he had found in his garden a wall below ground level while trenching for a new rose bed. It was agreed that the BHG should visit the site, extend the excavation where possible, and record the results. This article describes briefly the findings, noting as well some of the lessons learnt about how (and how not) to conduct such an excavation. In the following Spring the walls were reburied and nothing of them can now be seen.

Introduction

Towards the end of 1995 the owner of Wiveton Barn began trenching in his garden to prepare a new rose bed. To his surprise and delight his spade soon hit upon a flint wall not far below the surface. Could it be medieval? Was it part of a building? What other remains might there be in the vicinity?

At this point he contacted the author (then Secretary of the Blakeney History Group – the forerunner of the BAHS) to see if a full study might be carried out. However, the BHG did not really have the time or expertise to do anything extensive but it was agreed that additional small trenches should be opened up and a record made of what they revealed. In the event, most of the trenching was done by a gardener already employed and the recording by the author. In addition, some levelling was carried out with equipment borrowed from the Norfolk Archaeological Unit at Gressenhall, and a geophysical survey was undertaken by Dr Peter Carnell.

The results of the geophysical survey are not included in this note. At the time, Peter Carnell was still developing his own equipment and the trials at Wiveton Barn provided an important contribution to the geophysical ‘learning curve’. Interpretation of the results proved to be difficult, largely because much of the site lay in shrubbery – where tree and shrub roots can create soil moisture patterns which mask archaeological features. Readers of the earlier issues of the *Glaven Historian* will know that the methods pioneered by Peter Carnell soon bore fruit at Bayfield Church and Blakeney Eye, and he has also worked successfully on other sites in the county.

This article constitutes a record of the other work carried out at the site (plan, sections and levelling) which ought to be submitted for inclusion in the County Council’s Sites and Monuments Record at Gressenhall. It does not attempt to place the site in the wider village context as this aspect was not pursued at the time, but it does include some comments on what else might have been done.

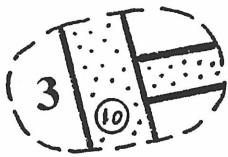


Figure 1

**LOCATION OF TRENCHES,
WALLS, SECTIONS AND
LEVELLING POSITIONS**

1 -- 5 Trenches

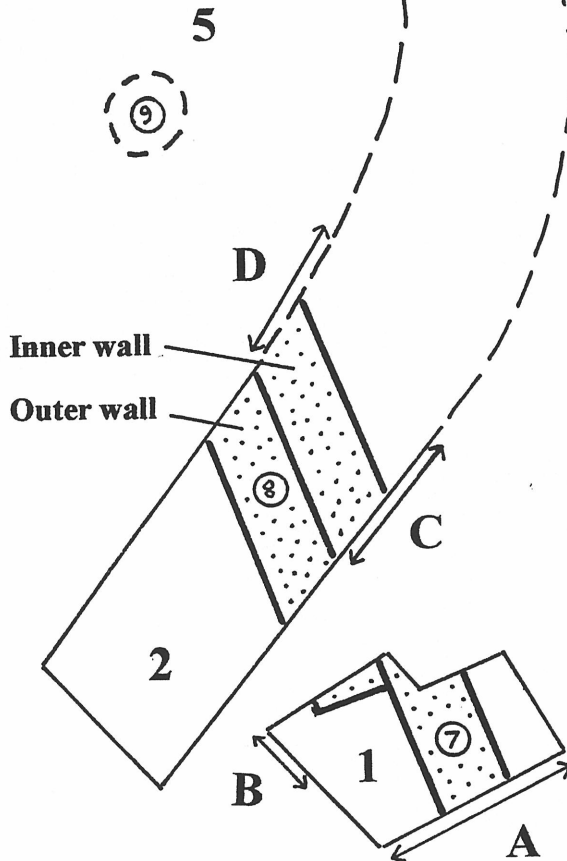
A -- D Sections

① -- ⑩ Levelling
positions

(see Fig 6)

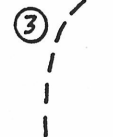
**Oriented (approximately)
for comparison with the
photographs**

Inner side of
boundary
wall along
Leatherpool
Lane



Boundary wall
curving into
site

Path



Scale

1 : 50



Magnetic north

House

Gate



TRENCH 3

Showing outer boundary wall and abutting wall (in a maze of roots)



TRENCH 2

Showing the adjoining outer (left) and inner (right) boundary walls



TRENCH 1

Showing the end of the outer wall and the northward continuation of the inner wall

TRENCH 2

**Showing the two walls
in more detail (oblique
and vertical views)**

**The outer wall (left) is
later than the inner
(right) wall**

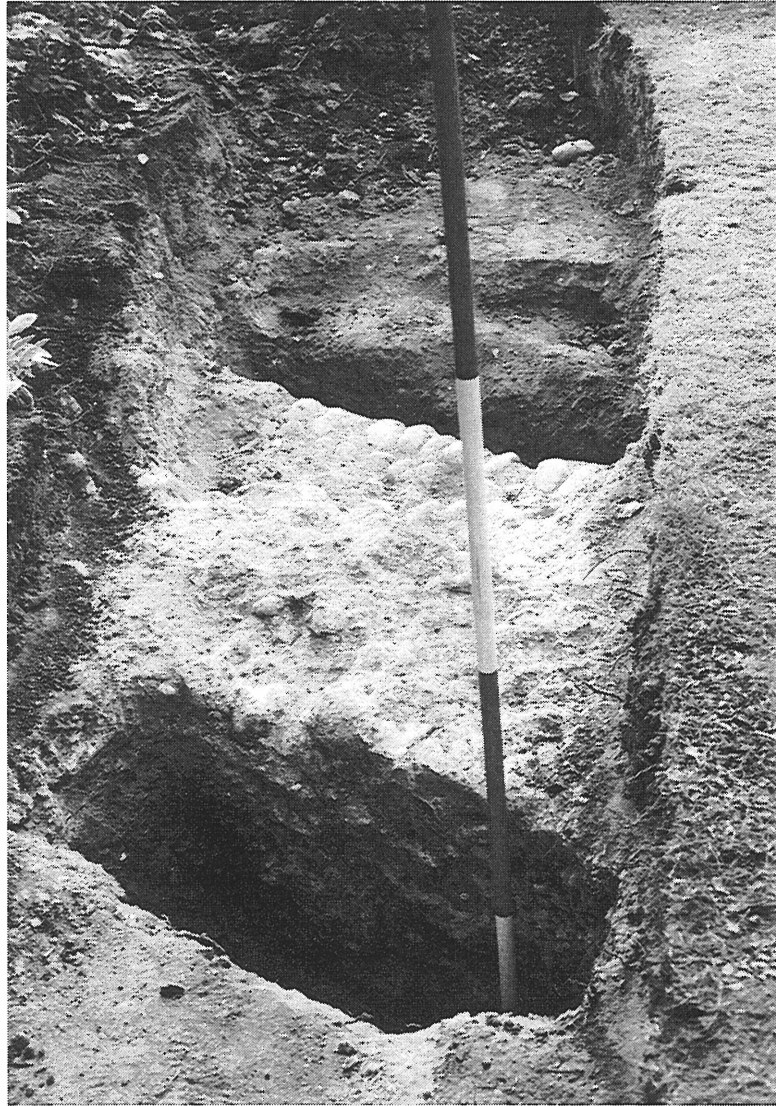


Figure 2 SECTION A (Trench 1)

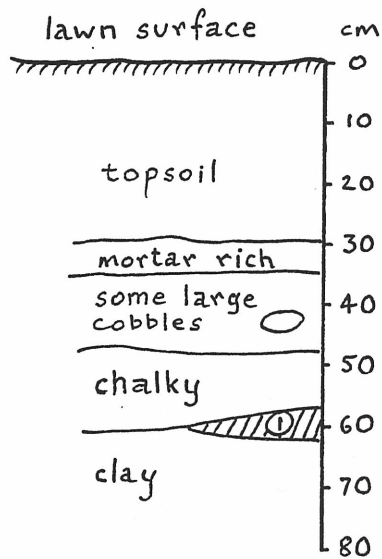
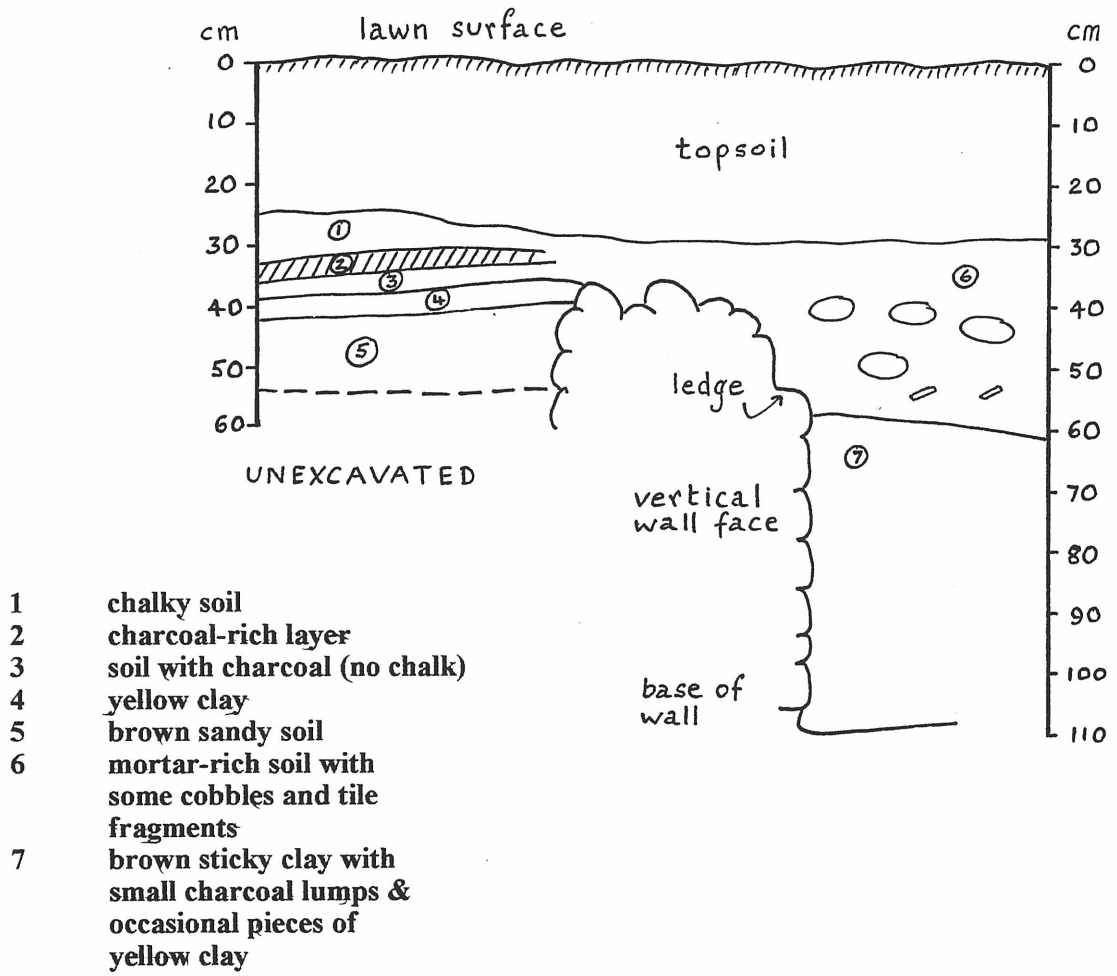


Figure 3

**SECTION B
(Trench 1)**

1 Charcoal lens

The Findings

Plan

The property known as Wiveton Barn lies on the western side of Leatherpool Lane and is bounded by a wall on that frontage. The agricultural buildings on the site were converted to residential use some time ago and the present house has been extended eastwards towards Leatherpool Lane.

Figure 1 shows the eastern end of the house and the bounding wall – which at this point leaves the line of the road and curves into the site to form the southern side of an entrance. The plan also shows the position of four trenches. The location of a fifth trench is noted but it was not planned sufficiently accurately to enable it to be plotted in the same detail as the others.

The Walls

The plan shows that three walls are present. Two of them overlap (and adjoin) in Trench 2, neither quite parallel with the present boundary wall along Leatherpool Lane some two to three metres away. For convenience, the eastern-most wall is here termed the ‘outer’ wall while the western one is the ‘inner’, this being descriptive of their position in relation to the present building. Both walls are of flint – only one fragment of brick was seen in the fabric – and both were c. 55 cm (22 in) wide. The outer wall terminates in Trench 1.

In Trenches 1 and 2 the top of the walls was c. 40-50 cm (16-20 in) below the surface of the lawn and it was evident that both had once been higher. In Trench 1 the inner wall had a ledge on its ‘outer’ (eastern) face, only some 5 cm in width but definite and continuous in character. This ledge lay about 50 cm up from the probable base of the wall. Some further details are shown on the sections below and the general appearance of the walls can be seen in the photographs.

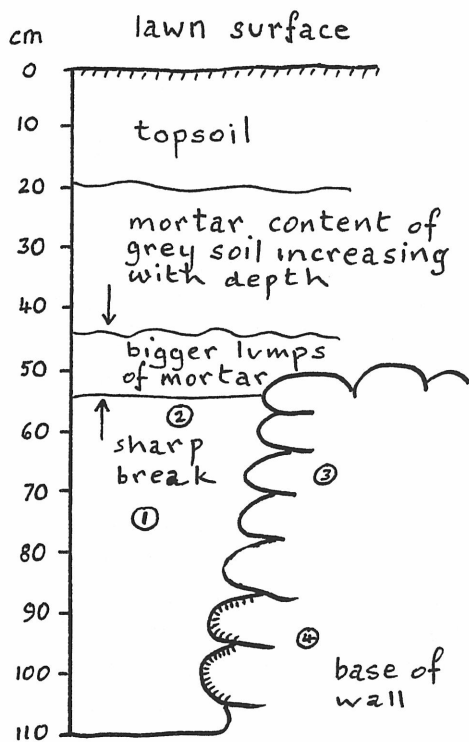
In Trench 3 the wall appears to represent a continuation of the outer wall seen in Trench 2 although the alignment is very slightly curved (or perhaps angled) rather than straight. The third wall, in Trenches 3 and 4, runs at right angles to the outer wall and butts up against it – there is no bonding at all. At the point of contact the outer wall leans outwards towards the east, and immediately to the south the top of the outer wall drops by some 40 cm.

Sections

Two sections were drawn in Trench 1 (Figures 2 and 3). The first, Section A, portrays the north-west side of the trench. The initial excavation had been taken down to c. 55 cm (22 in) below the lawn surface, and no further excavation was undertaken on the western ‘inner’ side of the inner wall. On the ‘outer’ side the initial trench was deepened to reach the apparent base of the wall at c. 110 cm (43 in).

A second section (B) was drawn to show a part of the north-eastern side of the trench, deepened to 80 cm (31 in).

The description of the sections should be treated with considerable caution as the perpetrator has very limited experience of drawing sections – and that some decades

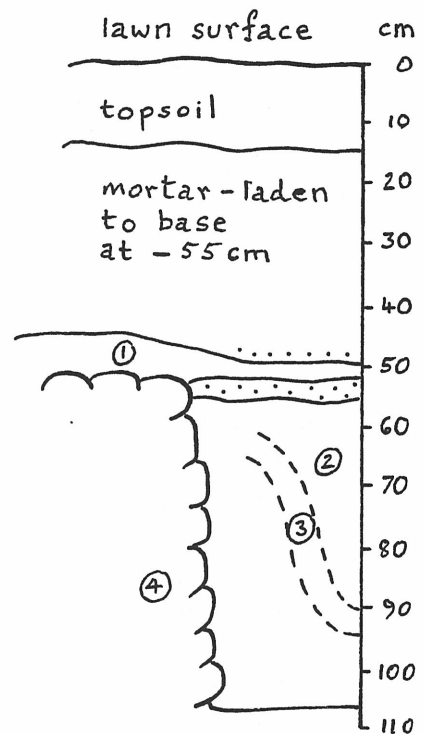


**Figure 4 SECTION C
(Trench 2)**

- 1 Relatively clean orange/brown sandy soil with occasional small lumps of clay and flecks of coal or charcoal
- 2 one ?medieval sherd under mortar layer
- 3 c. 4 courses of flattened flint cobbles (wall has c. 10 cm batter)
- 4 3 courses of bigger cobbles with red encrustation on visible surface below c. - 90 cm

**Figure 5 SECTION D
(Trench 2)**

- 1 compact orange/brown sandy soil
- 2 whiter band present in section facing the wall but not quite reaching opposite side of trench (section C)
- 3 cobbled wall shown diagrammatically
- 4



ago. Terms such as 'clay' are therefore quite subjective. Nevertheless, it is clear that the sections contain layers with very different characteristics. In particular, a flint and mortar rich layer is present on the outer side of the inner wall and at a level which suggests that the material could come from the (missing) upper parts of the wall. There were also some tile fragments. The soil layers on the inner side of the wall are quite different: much charcoal but no flint. The other main feature of the section is that on the outer side of the wall, below the flint and mortar layer, the soil is essentially a clay which extends from the base of the wall up to the ledge on its outer, vertical, face.

Figures 4 and 5 show sections taken from Trench 2, both on the inner side of the inner wall. The first (C) represents the north-western side of the trench, and the second (D) the opposite, south-eastern side.

Unlike Section A, both Sections C and D show soil with a heavy mortar content on the inner side of the wall – though cobbles which might have come from the wall are absent. Below this layer the soil is rather sandy, quite unlike the clay consistency on the outer side apparent in Trench 1. It is also clear that the inner face of the wall in Trench 2 has a batter of some 10 cm in a height of c. 55 cm with no sign of a ledge at the top, again quite unlike the outer side as seen in Trench 1.

Section C shows that there was a sharp break between the mortar-rich layer extending down to the top of the wall and the clean sandy soil below. From just below this junction, and in the side of the trench, came the only piece of pottery found in the excavations. It was about twice the size of a two-penny piece, of a hard, light grey fabric, relatively thin, and from a fairly large vessel. It has been tentatively identified as medieval.

An odd feature of Section D was a thin band of whitish (?chalky) material in an almost vertical position close to the inner side of the inner wall, perhaps implying a former ground surface in the shape of a steep bank.

No sections were completed in Trench 2 to show soil conditions on the outer side of the outer wall. Neither were any sections drawn in Trenches 3 and 4: the tangle of roots and unstable soil made this too difficult. However, some observations were made which were essentially consistent with the findings in Trenches 1 and 2. On the outer side of the outer wall (Trench 3) a 'trial' hole penetrated first the topsoil, then a layer of mortar-rich soil, and then clay. On the inner side the mortar layer was again found together with some fragments of tile, probably of more recent date than medieval. Below this were some pieces of coal and a lens of orange/brown sandy soil.

Levels

A dumpy level survey was conducted using the road surface of Leatherpool Lane opposite the vehicular entrance to Wiveton Barn as the survey datum. Figure 6 shows the stations used in a circuit from the origin northwards to a small gateway leading into the garden, southwards to take in the tops of the walls in each trench, and then out through the vehicle entrance to return to the origin. Leatherpool Lane is not level at this point for there is a rise of c. 32 cm between the two entrances to the property. The tops of the walls in Trenches 1 and 2 are c. 90 cm above the road surface at the origin, which means that the base of the inner wall lies no more than c. 40 cm above

Figure 6

HEIGHTS ABOVE ROAD LEVEL

Levelling positions:

- 1 road surface (origin)
- 2 top of steps
- 3 paved path
- 4 centre of path
- 5 road surface
- 6
- 7 wall top (trench 1)
- 8 wall top (trench 2)
- 9 wall top (trench 3)
- 10 wall top (trench 3)

(See Figure 1)

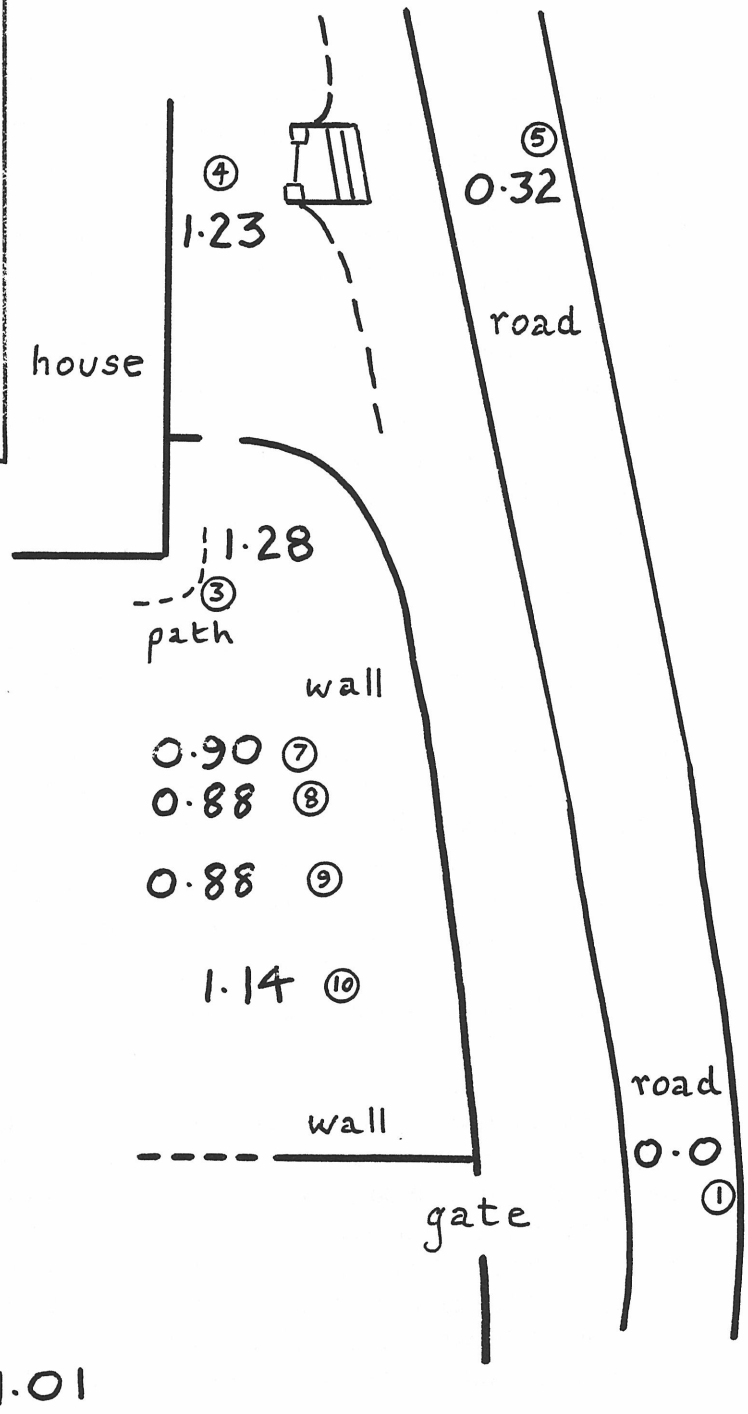
Heights in metres above road surface at the origin

30.1.1996

Scale

1 : 200

Magnetic north



the road surface. The base of the outer wall was not specifically sought during the excavation and recording. The top of the outer wall in Trench 3 was some 25 cm higher than in Trench 2 but here the base was not seen.

Interpretation

At this point there ought to be some reasoned argument based on the findings but without some further investigation one can do little more than pose questions. There is no clear evidence for a floor adjacent to the two overlapping walls so they may represent a boundary separating the Wiveton Barn property from the Glaven valley and its once tidal regime. The clay content of the soil on the 'seaward' side of the wall(s) suggests that it was deposited by water, unlike the soils on the landward side. There is little evidence that the land surface was much higher on the inner side, although there is some indication that the (inner) wall is more likely to have collapsed toward the east.

The shape of the inner wall is intriguing with its batter on the western side and the ledge facing the river. What kind of foundations did the wall have? It is usual for medieval walls to have very shallow foundations because relatively massive interlocking walls can provide stability – but does this apply to long (?unbuttressed) boundary walls? If there were a foundation trench then perhaps there was a vertical face on the eastern side against which a vertical wall was erected; it would be difficult to undercut a trench side in order to build a battered wall directly against it. The quality of the inner wall, however, suggests that the builders had access to both sides, implying a wide trench though not necessarily a deep one. Indeed, the base of the wall could even represent the ground level at the time.

What is the function of the ledge on the eastern side of the wall? It could denote the top of the foundation section of the wall and its continuation upwards as a slightly narrower wall. Yet the difference of only 5 cm (and on one side only) suggests that this is not the reason. Could the ledge have been designed to take an ashlar facing that would hide the flint construction? Whilst there is no positive evidence for this there are other walls in Wiveton which have the same kind of ledge, sometimes well above the present ground surface.

The overlapping of the two walls suggests that one was built to replace or strengthen a section of an earlier one. If so, which is the earlier? Although the supporting photograph is unclear, a note was made on site to the effect that some stonework in the adjacent walls showed that the outer, eastern, wall was built later and onto the inner one. The two walls differ in character. The inner one contains smaller flints with more regular coursing compared to the outer one with its larger, rougher flints.

Although there is no direct dating evidence the inner wall has the *appearance* of being medieval, whereas the same cannot be said of the outer one which may be medieval or may be later. The implication is that the 'third' wall, abutting the outer one, is later than either of the 'boundary' walls. Some of the few tile and floor fragments could also have been medieval. In any event they imply the presence of at least one substantial building in the vicinity, which would be expected in this waterfront location in the medieval port of Wiveton.

The possible dates and functions of walls in Wiveton are explored in a separate article in this issue of the *Glaven Historian*.¹

Comments

In retrospect, it is clear that the recording process could have been better organised although there were some difficulties to contend with. In particular, the mid-winter weather was sometimes very cold, with snow lying on some days. It was not possible to concentrate the work into a short, continuous period so that over three months or so trenches filled with water and leaves, sections deteriorated, and marker points had to be taken up and relocated several times. Despite the intention merely to record what could be seen in just a few small trenches, it is surprising how notes accumulate and there should have been one large field book into which all observations were entered – separate pieces of paper are less efficient and can get lost. All observations made during the recording should have been checked and rewritten if necessary in the field book at the end of each day, as some notes are rather less clear five years later! As everyone knows and many fail to do, photographs need to be annotated and dated – do the dark areas represent soil colour or winter shadow? Most importantly, the results should have been written up very much sooner.

It is important to absolve the landowner from any such criticisms. It was he who made his lawn and shrubbery available for study, urged the author to make quicker progress, to see the site in the wider village context, and to write up the results for discussion. He also invited a member of the Norfolk Archaeological Unit to view the site and a note of that meeting is included here as an appendix because it contains good advice for anyone contemplating a similar excavation: don't – unless you can do it properly! In the case of Wiveton Barn the trenching was already in progress to create a new flower bed and so the study became, in effect, a rescue excavation. Unlike most such excavations, however, almost nothing has been lost: the walls (though now reburied) are still there, the trenches were small in relation to the probable length of the walls, and the sections (at least in theory) could be re-created.

On the positive side, the records (whatever their imperfections) now provide a contribution to the wider study of Wiveton already initiated by the BAHS.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Professor Beresford Dew for permission to invade his garden and for his help and encouragement, Andrew Rogerson for his advice about how to proceed, and Peter Carnell for help with surveying and levelling.

References

- 1 J. Peake, 'Flint walls: a preliminary survey of walls in Wiveton', *Glaven Historian* No. 4, 2001.

No doubt there are many archaeological texts which might have given relevant guidance but the one actually used was:

Jane McIntosh, *The Practical Archaeologist*, The Paul Press, 1985.

WIVETON BARN

Extract from notes following the visit of Andrew Rogerson on 16 Jan 1996

1. Current archaeological ethos is not to dig without very good reason, ie an imminent threat to the site. Even 'research' digs run by practising archaeologists are not much in favour. It would be possible to pay for professional assistance to complete the WB dig - but it would be better not to ask.
2. The practical alternative is to continue in as professional a manner as possible, meaning that the site should be recorded properly not only in plan form but in 3D. Sections should be drawn and if at all possible heights above marsh/road level should be established.
3. The need to draw sections means that the trenches should be regular in plan with vertical faces - in particular there should be no undercutting.
4. It is important to leave a substantial amount of the site unexcavated for the benefit of future investigators, which implies that the current holes ought not to be materially extended. However, it would be acceptable to open up similar trenches ('sondages') further to the north in view of the previous excavations up the road (ie at the corner of Leatherpool Lane and the Coast Road). Non-invasive techniques should be used to the full.
5. Any site ought to be seen as part of the surrounding area. In the case of Wiveton Barn there is good reason to try to put the site into its physical, historical and documentary context - what else is known about occupation in the vicinity?
6. Interpretation of the sections to deduce a sequence of events may not be possible at present but it is essential to retain the record for the future in lieu of the actual evidence destroyed by digging.
7. Staff at Gressenhall may be able to help with materials for site recording, including the loan of a simple theodolite.

JW 17.1.96

Note

Andrew Rogerson also made some comments about the site, as he saw it on the day, which have been incorporated into the article.