

Notes and Field Reports

The UCL Institute of Archaeology Field School 2024: from villas to Victorians at St Andrew's Church and the Old Rectory, Norton, Suffolk

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The UCL Institute of Archaeology field school 2024: from villas to Victorians at St Andrew's Church and the Old Rectory, Norton, Suffolk

Murray Andrews, Stuart Brookes and Lucy Sladen

Abstract

This article presents an overview of recent fieldwork by the Institute of Archaeology at St Andrew's Church and the Old Rectory, Norton, Suffolk. The investigations identified the foundations of a previously unrecorded Anglo-Saxon church tower, which probably forms part of a tenth or eleventh-century elite residence associated with Eadgifu the Fair, wife of Harold Godwinsson. Trace evidence relating to a probable Roman villa was also recorded on the site, together with a significant quantity of finds and environmental remains associated with the documented medieval and later church and rectory sites. The excavations have also provided an important venue for undergraduate fieldwork training and public engagement, and will continue into 2025.

Keywords: medieval archaeology, Britain, Suffolk, church archaeology, Roman Britain, early medieval Britain, elite settlement

Introduction

Fieldwork has long been an important part of the teaching curriculum at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. Undergraduate students must complete a mandatory 70 days of funded field training as a requirement of their degree, a significant portion of which is achieved in the first year of study through a two-week summer placement on the annual departmental field school. This placement provides an early opportunity for students to gain intensive hands-on experience of archaeological methods and techniques, which are developed in the context of a real-world research project integrating staff and students from the Institute of Archaeology and Archaeology South-East.

In 2023–4, one of the Institute's field schools was based in Suffolk, where nearly 100 students participated in a programme of targeted survey and excavation within a multi-period rural landscape at Norton, near Bury St Edmunds. The investigations, which were co-directed by Dr Stuart Brookes and Professor Kevin C. MacDonald, aimed to examine

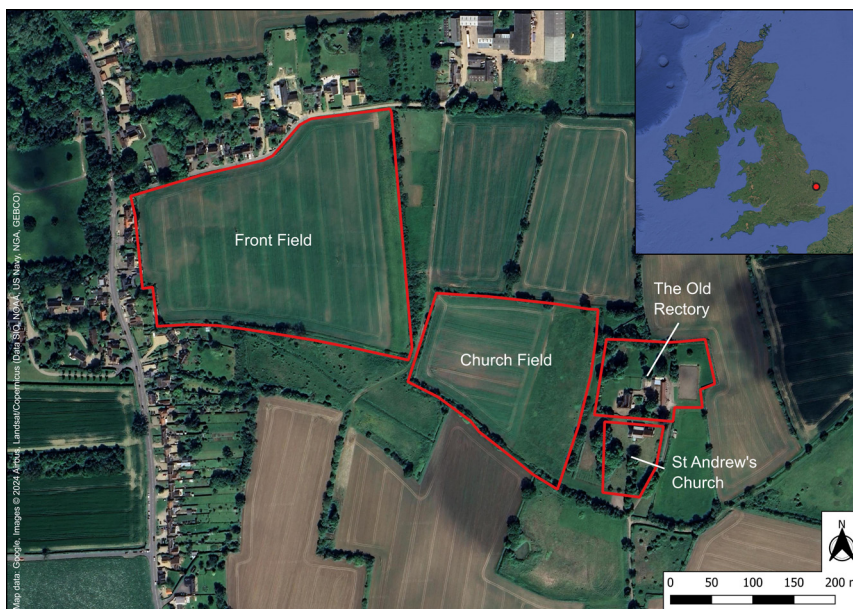


Figure 1 Location map showing sites investigated as part of the Institute of Archaeology’s field school in 2023–4 (Source: Murray Andrews)

aspects of settlement in the parish over the *longue durée*, with a special focus on a possible Roman villa complex first excavated in the mid-2000s. Fieldwork undertaken by the Institute in 2023–4 has centred on four land parcels located in and around the suspected villa site (see Figure 1). The principal focus has been Church Field, where two seasons of geophysical survey and evaluation trenching have revealed numerous Roman features including wells, a corn-drying kiln, boundary ditches and an aisled building. Additional fieldwork was also undertaken in 2024 on land to the east and west at Front Field, St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory, which sought to clarify the nature and dating of potential archaeological features identified through geophysical and topographic survey.¹

While further investigations at Norton are scheduled in 2025, the results of the 2023–4 seasons are the subject of an ongoing programme of collaborative post-excavation assessment and analysis. This work will generate a series of defined research outputs over the coming years, including journal articles, an excavation monograph and undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations. In the meantime, this article aims to provide a preliminary overview of the results of the Institute’s 2024 investigations at St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory, where fieldwork has produced new evidence of settlement and landscape change from the Roman period to the present day.

Norton St Andrew’s: a persistent place in an ancient landscape?

St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory (NGR TL 962 663) are situated in the north of the parish of Norton and occupy a locally prominent area of high ground amid the rolling fields of the East Anglian claylands (see Figure 2). Though isolated from the historic village

core, which lies 500 m to the south-west along the line of the Ixworth and Ashfield roads, the two adjacent sites have played a central role in local religious life for much of the past millennium. First recorded in 1086, the Grade II*-listed church of St Andrew dates mostly to the fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries and functions as the principal place of Christian worship in the parish to the present day. Though not wholly untouched by later reformers and restorers, the church retains a surprisingly large portion of its historic fixtures and fittings, including fine examples of late medieval window glass, wall paintings and carved woodwork, as well as some important seventeenth- and eighteenth-century monumental tombs and gravestones (Munro Cautley 1982, 335). While the benefice was of relatively modest status in the high and late Middle Ages,² its incumbents reaped the benefits of unappropriated tithes, which by 1254 were sufficient to sustain a rectory on land immediately north of church. This property, now represented by the Grade II*-listed Old Rectory, saw several phases of rebuilding and alteration between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Bettley and Pesvner 2015, 443) and, though no longer in church hands, has a venerable history of service as the home of Norton's parish clergy.³ With nearly 1,000 years of documented use as a place of worship and high-status clerical residence, the two sites at Norton St Andrew's are a textbook example of what Schlanger (1992, 97) calls a 'persistent place': a physically and culturally distinct location repeatedly used and re-used during the long term occupation of a particular region.

While St Andrew's Church and the Old Rectory have formed a well attested focal complex since at least the Norman Conquest, there is reason to suspect that their significance builds on a longer tradition of high-status activity in this part of the local landscape. Fragments of Roman brick and tile reused as *spolia* in the fabric of St Andrew's Church hint at the presence of substantial earlier buildings in the immediate vicinity, a suggestion reinforced by discoveries of ceramic building material (CBM) and oyster shells during pond digging at the Old Rectory in the early 2000s (A. Mason, personal communication, 10 July



Figure 2 Persistent places in the Suffolk landscape: north-east-facing view of the Old Rectory (left) and St Andrew's Church (right) (Source: © Bob Jones via Geograph.org.uk, CC BY-SA 2.0)

2024). By far the most significant evidence, however, derives from fieldwork undertaken in the area by Nick Carter, which began as an undergraduate dissertation project at the Institute. Between 2005 and 2013 Carter led a programme of fieldwalking, geophysical survey and trial trenching in the fields adjoining St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory, which revealed a possible Roman bath house and a large quantity of associated finds, including high-status structural elements like box-flue tiles, painted wall plaster and mosaic floor *tesserae*. Buildings and artefacts like these are uncharacteristic of the modest rural settlements that dominated Roman East Anglia (Smith 2016, 212–15), and instead point towards a more substantial villa site, perhaps akin to those known locally at Ixworth and Pakenham (Maynard and Brown 1936; Scott 1993, 174). While Carter did not locate any in-situ evidence for the villa’s principal buildings, the distribution of material suggests that these lay immediately east of Church Field – that is, beneath the sites of St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory. If correct, this suggestion would extend the time-depth of occupation at Norton St Andrew’s by as much as 1,000 years, and would raise new questions about the connections between the earlier villa and the later church – a well-trodden field of enquiry in British archaeology, with broader implications for understanding continuity and change between the Roman and medieval worlds (Bell 2005, 104–23; Morris 1997, 29).

The questions raised by Carter’s (2006) fieldwork at Norton are amplified by the discovery of a possible c. 1 ha D-shaped enclosure surrounding St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory. This feature is at least partially visible on the ground and on LiDAR survey as a sunken curvilinear bank and ditch (see Figure 3), which follows a north–south alignment immediately east of the churchyard through the rectory garden, before turning east in the north-west corner of the rectory grounds. Since the ditch runs across boundary features first illustrated on the 1840 tithe map, it is presumably of early date.⁴



Figure 3 Simple local relief model showing the D-shaped enclosure derived from 1m (DTM) LiDAR data (Source: © Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2015. All rights reserved) (figure produced by Kathryn Grant Reis); inset: east-facing view, looking towards the west edge of St Andrew’s churchyard. The bank and ditch are marked by the line of trees (Source: Lucy Sladen)

Exactly how early, however, remains unclear, and in lieu of dating evidence, two competing hypotheses can be presented. One possibility is that the ditch delineates a late Iron Age or Roman enclosure around the villa site, analogous to those recorded at Gorhambury (Hertfordshire) (Neal et al. 1990, 35–82) and Keston (Kent) (Philp et al. 1991). This would be of considerable significance in East Anglia, where few enclosed Roman villas have been recorded, and where enclosed rural settlements are usually of much smaller size (Smith 2016, 219–22). Alternatively, it might define the extent of a late Anglo-Saxon thegnly residence associated with a pre-Conquest church, like those identified at Earls Barton (Northamptonshire), Jevington (East Sussex) and Broughton (Lincolnshire) (Shapland 2019). This proposal is of particular interest in the light of evidence from St Andrew's Church, which contains architectural elements that stylistically predate the twelfth century, including herringbone flintwork in the north wall of the chancel and long-and-short quoins visible at the interface of the nave and tower – the latter of which is misaligned with the body of the church (see Figure 4). A pre-Conquest focus at the site would fit well within an East Anglian context, where isolated hall-and-church complexes formed the main form of elite residence between the tenth and twelfth centuries (Martin 2012, 230–4). While neither theory is proven, they reinvigorate discussion about the nature of Norton St Andrew's as an East Anglian 'persistent place', whose origins might lie far beyond recorded history.



Figure 4 Interior view of St Andrew's Church nave looking west. The diagnostic late Anglo-Saxon long-and-short quoins of the earlier tower are clearly visible in the west wall (Source: Stuart Brookes)

The excavations

The potential for previously unidentified Roman and/or early medieval archaeology provided the immediate rationale for excavations at St Andrew's Church and the Old Rectory, which were undertaken as part of the Institute's second field season at Norton in June to July 2024. Given their exploratory nature, these works were deliberately limited in scope and involved the excavation of two targeted evaluation trenches. Despite their small scale, the results were highly significant, providing fresh evidence of activity from the Roman period to the early twentieth century.

St Andrew's Church

The evaluation trench at St Andrew's Church was positioned immediately west of the medieval church tower, and sought to identify, record and date potential archaeological features relating to the suspected pre-Conquest church and/or earlier Roman villa. It measured 4.7 m long and 3 m wide, and was excavated to natural geology at a maximum depth of 1.06 m.

The investigations revealed a complex sequence of features and deposits that spanned the early medieval to modern periods, with earlier Roman activity suggested by residual finds in later contexts. By far the most significant of the early features (see Figure 5) was a masonry wall, which was partially observed in the east side of the trench. This feature measured at least 4.5 m long and 0.78 m wide, and followed a linear north-east to south-west alignment before returning to the south-east and continuing beyond the trench edge. It was built of medium to large flint nodules, which were irregularly coursed and bonded with possible lime mortar and had been levelled and capped with cement during the nineteenth century (see Figure 6). From its shape, size and orientation, it is clear that the wall represents the western foundations of an early church tower, which must predate the extant fourteenth-century tower. While minimal dating evidence was recovered from the foundation trench, this structure almost certainly dates to the late Anglo-Saxon period: its orientation matches that of the long-and-short work observed in the nave, and its abutting layers contained high medieval pottery and a mid-thirteenth-century coin.

The north end of the suggested late Anglo-Saxon tower wall was observed to cut through a north-east to south-west aligned linear feature, which measured 3.3 m long and 0.7 m wide and is provisionally identified as a beam slot. It adjoined a 1.1 m-long ovoid feature, possibly a grave, that contained a small quantity of early and high medieval pottery. Unfortunately, due to conditions and time constraints, neither feature was fully excavated, and their exact nature and stratigraphic relationship remain unclear. Later features were also recorded in the trench, including late medieval and post-medieval ditches, a cut for a nineteenth-century levelling deposit and two unexcavated post-medieval or modern graves.

The excavation produced a moderately sized assemblage of 285 finds (61.9 kg) and 60 specimens (0.51 kg) of animal bones and terrestrial shells. The finds dated mainly to the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries and consisted principally of pottery and CBM. Most of the pottery was locally made medieval coarseware, although a small amount of imported

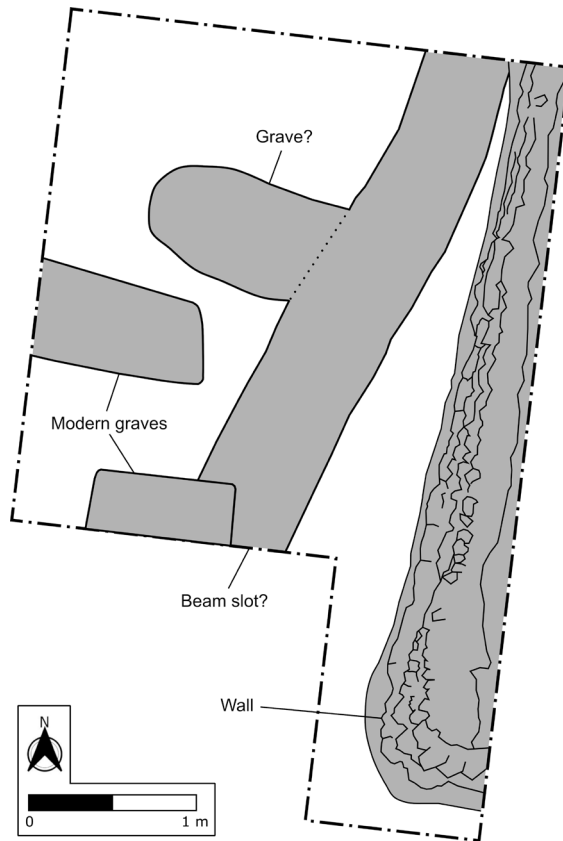


Figure 5 Plan of the principal excavated features at St Andrew's Church. The dotted line denotes an uncertain stratigraphic relationship (Source: Murray Andrews)



Figure 6 South-east-facing view of excavated features at St Andrew's Church (Source: Kris Lockyear)

material was recovered, including sherds of early post-medieval German stoneware. This mix of local and non-local ceramics is typical of East Anglian village sites (for example, Stowupland, Suffolk: Webb 2020, 662) and reflects the growing extent of urban–rural integration during and after the medieval ‘commercial revolution’, which was facilitated locally by the development of weekly markets and annual fairs at centres like Bury St Edmunds, Ixworth and Woolpit (Letters 2005). The CBM, meanwhile, was dominated by medieval/early post-medieval peg tiles, probably the residue of church roofing. Other key finds included four pieces of lead came and two fragments of window glass, possibly relating to the extant medieval windows, and a silver cut halfpenny of Henry III minted at Canterbury in 1251–72 (see Figure 7). ‘Background radiation’ from the possible Roman villa was also recorded in the form of residual CBM – mostly fragments of *tegulae* and *imbrices* – as well as a contemporary copy of a copper-alloy Constantinian *nummus* dated 335–41.

Interestingly, 27 fragments (57.6 kg) of broken eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gravestones were recovered from a make-up layer overlying the late Anglo-Saxon tower. Most were made of limestone or sandstone, decorated with moulded scrolls, cherubs and urn motifs. Three fragments came from inscribed footstones, which bore the legends ‘[...]R/[1]808’, ‘[...]R/[18]45’ and ‘[...]◆T/[17]7[...]’ (see Figure 8). The combination of dates and initials allow us to make tentative links with individuals recorded in the parish burial register: the first two probably belong to Robert Ranson (1749–1808) and Lettice Ranson (1769–1845) or Robert Rice (1761–1845), while the third might belong to one of several members of the local Turner or Tyrell families buried at the church in the 1770s.⁵

The environmental assemblage mostly came from medieval layers and had a relatively high degree of fragmentation. Most of this material consisted of animal bones derived from the three main domestic taxa and reinforces the impression of the Suffolk claylands as a region of historic mixed farming (Dyer 2007, 3). Cattle elements were especially well represented, and one appendicular fragment shows evidence of potential skinning, providing evidence of a rural leatherworking industry that is only poorly attested in written sources. Horse elements were also present, as was a single fragment of a garden snail shell.



Figure 7 Roman, medieval and post-medieval coins found during fieldwork at St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory (Source: Murray Andrews)



Figure 8 Fragments of inscribed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century footstones found during excavations at St Andrew's Church (Source: Murray Andrews)

The Old Rectory

The evaluation trench at the Old Rectory was positioned across the west wing of the D-shaped enclosure and aimed to provide information relating to its primary phases of construction and use. It measured 9.25 m long and 3.95 m wide and was excavated to natural geology at a maximum depth of 1.6 m.

Despite its considerable size, the trench produced only limited results, due in no small part to the presence of a substantial modern recut (see Figure 9). This feature was 5.06 m long, 3.95 m wide and 1.2 m deep, and had moderate to steeply sloped sides and a flat base. Though perhaps intended to redefine the ditch as a landscaped garden feature, it had obliterated all but a small section of the west side of the earlier ditch. Nevertheless, the surviving section is sufficient to establish at least part of the original profile, which had moderately sloped sides and a 0.55 m+ deep concave base. Due to the recutting, the date of the earlier ditch could not be conclusively established, but stratigraphic evidence confirms that it is clearly of pre-nineteenth-century date.

The investigations at the Old Rectory produced a small assemblage of finds (363 objects, 4.9 kg) and environmental material (58 specimens, 0.33 kg), most of which derived from the fills of the modern recut. In addition, a subsidiary assemblage of 17 finds (3.9 kg) was also recorded, which consisted of miscellaneous artefacts found in the rectory garden by the current landowner. Both finds assemblages were dominated by refined whiteware potsherds, many of them from blue transfer printed tablewares, although modest amounts of industrial slipware, English stoneware, yellow ware and porcelain were also recorded. These mass-produced ceramics were the ubiquitous forms of Victorian household crockery, and probably represent domestic waste from the nineteenth-century occupation of the Old Rectory; similar material is known from a contemporary cess pit at Hempstead Rectory (Norfolk; Licence 2015, 68–104). Significant quantities of CBM were also recovered, which were mainly of medieval/early post-medieval peg tiles and later post-medieval/modern brick and roof tiles. Other finds included nineteenth-century glass beer, soda and medicine bottles, clay tobacco pipes, buttons, lead toys, an iron knife, a fifteenth-century copper-alloy thimble, a clipped silver sixpence of Elizabeth I dated 1561, as well as a quantity of coal and clinker. While this material clearly relates to the known

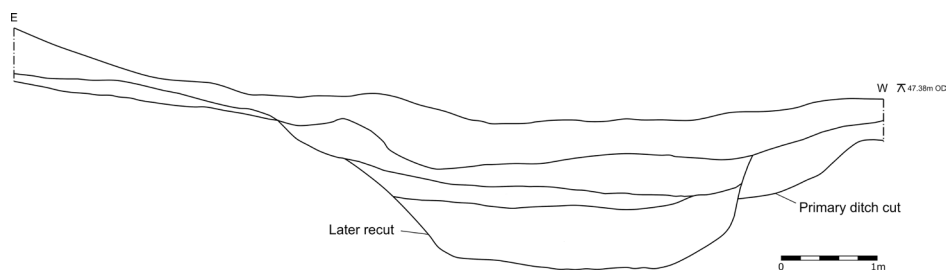


Figure 9 South-facing section of the enclosure ditch at the Old Rectory (Source: Murray Andrews)

historic occupation of the Old Rectory, there was also a modest amount of residual Roman material that probably derives from the earlier villa buildings, including a small amount of pottery (mostly Hadham oxidised and Wattisfield reduced wares), fragments of *tegulae* and *imbrices*, three pieces of cubic *tesserae* and a third-century *antoninianus* of Tetricus II.

Like the finds, most of the environmental material from the Old Rectory came from the nineteenth-century ditch recut and consisted of animal bones derived from the three main domesticates as well as dogs, cats, a goose and a rabbit. The shells included specimens of marine and terrestrial species, which were identifiable as native oysters and garden, brown-lipped and white-lipped snails. The presence of oysters so far inland is interesting and reflects their nineteenth-century proliferation as a low-cost ‘mass food’ transported in barrels cross-country by road, railway and canal (Freeman 1989).

Discussion

Taken together, the findings from the 2024 excavations in St Andrew’s Church and the Old Rectory provide good, if not conclusive, evidence for an earthen ringwork associated with a tower of tenth or eleventh-century date. Such features would be consistent with residences of the type commonly associated with a class of secular elites who emerged throughout western Europe at this time, and who developed such sites in a manner designed to amplify their prestige (Reynolds 1999; Williams 2003). Of the two elements commonly paired in such seigneurial complexes, the evidence for a pre-Conquest tower-church has been convincingly shown through the UCL excavations, while that for a defended residence remains highly probable.

Who these local potentates may have been is hard to say. In 1066, the manor of Norton was held by Eadgyth (Williams and Martin 1992, 1190); probably the same powerful landholder – Eadgifu the Fair – who held a large number of estates in Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire before the Norman Conquest (Carter 2006, 37–9). Norton’s Domesday valuation makes it particularly large and important, suggesting it was one of several comital estates, including Exning and Great Sampford, that had been granted to Eadgifu by her husband Harold Godwinson while he was Earl of East Anglia in the 1040s. Such personal associations would elevate the manor at Norton to the upper tier of aristocratic late Saxon holdings. It would also explain why it suffered such a rapid decline after the Norman Conquest. At this time Eadgifu’s estates were split up, passing first to Ralph, Earl of East Anglia, and subsequently to the king, following Ralph’s unsuccessful rebellion of 1075



Figure 10 Open-day event at St Andrew's Church, 14 July 2023. Three events held during the 2024 season saw 200 visitors from the local community, primary schools and regional heritage groups learn about the UCL excavations (Source: Stuart Brookes)

(Carter 2006, 18). To William the Conqueror, small local power centres such as Norton served little practical purpose, and it may have been around this time that the manor was downgraded and the church re-dedicated to more parochial functions, serving the medieval settlement of Norton 500 m to the south-west.

Whatever the final interpretation of the evidence, it is clear that the Institute's field school at Norton has enabled students to engage in archaeological fieldwork, learning new skills and making connections with local heritage. In a very tangible way, students were able to combine standing building recording, below-ground archaeology, landscape survey and finds analysis to contribute directly to the project aims. Furthermore, they participated in public outreach events held in conjunction with the excavations at St Andrew's Church (see Figure 10), guiding visitors and school children through the results of the fieldwork and engaging those communities with their local history. In a small but significant way, UCL students have helped promote interest in the history and archaeology of this small corner of rural Suffolk.

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Notes

- 1 During the 2024 field season, the excavations in Church Field were directed by Professor Kevin C. MacDonald, while the excavations in Front Field, St Andrew's Church and the Old Rectory were directed by Dr Stuart Brookes.
- 2 Norton St Andrew's was valued at £14 13s. 4d. in the late-thirteenth-century *Taxatio* of Pope Nicholas IV, only marginally above the average valuation of £14 10s. 2d. for the 265 assessed Suffolk benefices (Astle, Ayscough, and Caley 1802).
- 3 By far the most notable resident was Rev. John Ashburne, who pressed the rectory into service as a private mental asylum – only to be murdered by a patient in 1661 (Mason 1994).
- 4 Kew, The National Archives, IR 30/33/305.
- 5 Suffolk Archives FL612.

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