Potter's Oven, Castor

By Donald Mackreth

The field named Potter's Oven lies in the north-east angle of High Street at the highest point of Castor village and appears to be land taken in from the open fields of Castor. At the end of 1972 the site was being developed for housing and the first stage was to use a machine to scrape away the topsoil from the intended road-lines. Fragments of stone and Roman tile were noted there by Mr F.Sismey, but, contrary to the hopes which these brought, the site proved to be mediaeval.

There was little pottery which dated definitely to before the Norman Conquest, but parts of the site examined could go back to Saxo-Norman times. There seems to have been a slow development from what could be described as a peasant's house to something which must have looked like a small manor. The original buildings were entirely in timber and there were at least two phases of these. The final one was a conversion to a slightly more substantial house, using stone in places to make the wall-bottoms firm. That the walls were not just cladded timber is inferred from their great width. This suggests that the walls may have been of cob throughout. The plans of the earliest buildings look like long-houses, except that no traces of internal divisions were found.

When Building I was converted into a more solid-looking structure, the site was already becoming more complex than a peasant's dwelling. Unfortunately the slow growth from this phase through to the final recognisable layout cannot be described, as so much lies hidden under the turf left behind for pavements and gardens by the contractors. Evidence for the intervening periods therefore is slight. Moreover, there were no real foundations to any walls at that time, and once the walls themselves had been robbed or had disintegrated, there was only a slight mark left on the original ground surface, easily eliminated by later activity.

The development of the site was towards the north of Building I, and its final form was of a house along the north side with ancillary buildings of unknown plan down the east side. The house had what could be described as a 'best chamber' at the west end with a fireplace set in the east wall. Very little can be told about the plan of the room owing to the general lack of walls; its limits are roughly indicated by an outside surface around the probable north-west corner. There may have been a door through the wall on the north side of the fireplace.

This room should have been the main chamber of the house, but unfortunately the site was heavily disturbed here and nothing was found of a south wall or of any partitions or posts. There were certainly no major partition walls running south from the north wall between the 'best chamber' and the kitchen complex. It is very tempting to read into the plan a screens passage at the east end, entered from the south and opening into the east end of what should be a hall. But there was no proof that this was the arrangement. Ideally, there should have been a door from the kitchen directly into the passage, with some signs that there was a buttery and pantry attached; but there was no real indication that such a formal layout existed.

The most impressive remains belonged to the kitchen. Because of the fire-risk and the necessity of providing good structural backing for the internal fittings, this room was of stone throughout the lower part and was presumably stone all the way to the roof. The only certain entrance was at the west end of the south wall, where a stone surface was laid through the wall and across the kitchen in its latest phase. In the north wall was a fireplace set between two ovens, with a third built into the east wall next to the north-east oven. These ovens were graded neatly in size: the largest lay to the left of the fireplace, the next largest to the right, while the one in the east wall was strictly a 'petit four'. This was the original internal arrangement, but at some stage it became plainly inadequate and another large oven had been added in the south-east corner. This, however, went out of use before the last phase, as it was deliberately demolished and a floor laid over it.

To the east, again, was another room, this time timber-framed. The floor was badly damaged at the south and north, and heavily worn in the centre, but the east edge was laid to a very neat border, probably against a timber ground-sill.

There were traces of extra rooms attached to the south of the east end of the building, but these were heavily damaged and largely obscured by the unremoved turf. The date-range for the habitation of the site seems to be from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. Thereafter no other buildings seem to have existed and the site was left open and untouched, except for the digging of at least one gravel-pit in the south-east corner of the field and at least one pond in the area of the possible hall—the pond removing the vital evidence for the interpretation of the latter. A series of other holes was dug along the north and east of the complex, possibly for surface-water drainage; for the ground falls away here. It is tempting to think that, had
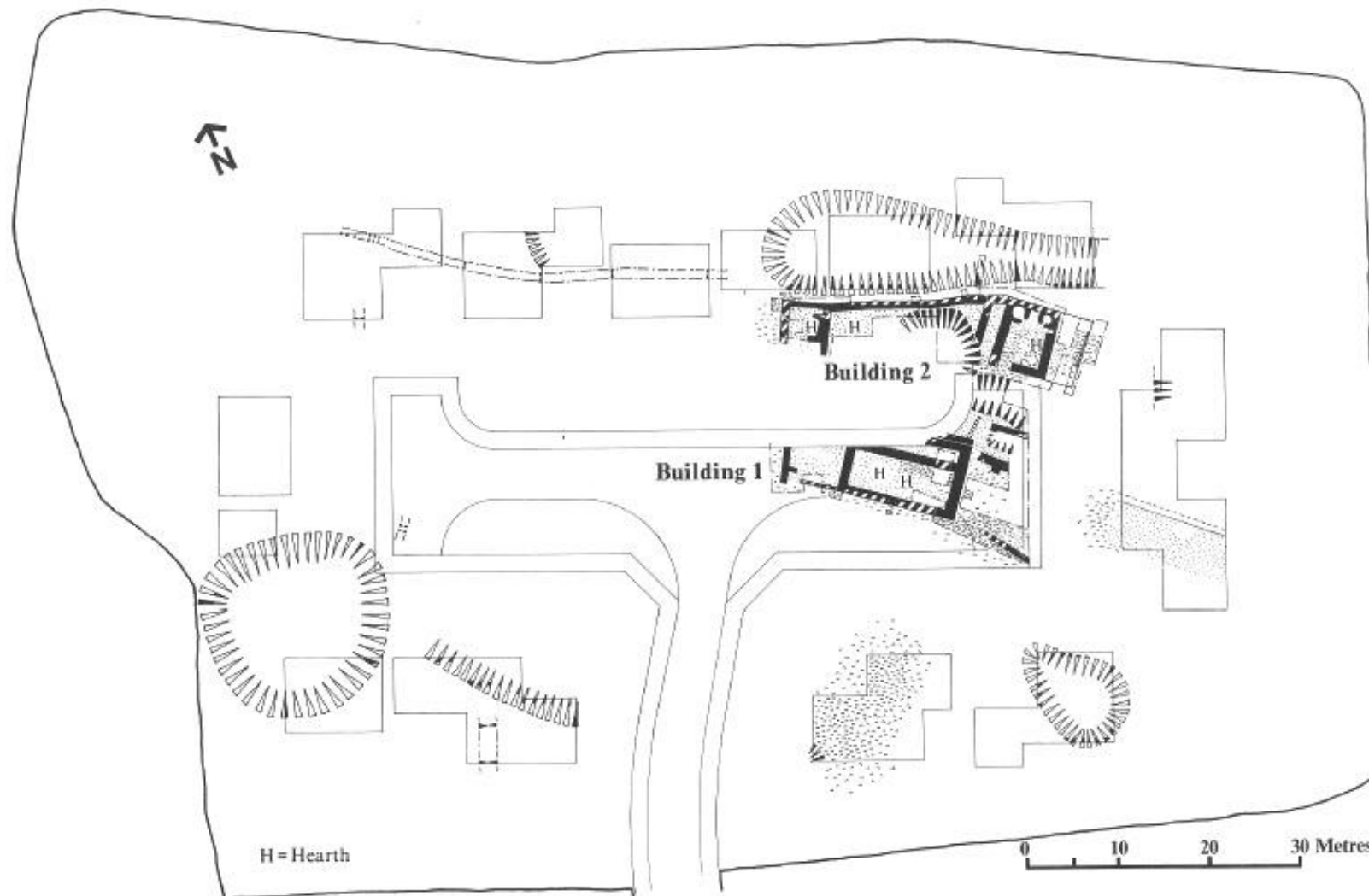
Fig 6 General plan of the mediaeval site at Potter's Oven, Castor

H = Hearth

0   10   20   30 Metres

the site continued with more and more of these large ponds being dug, it would have eventually looked like a partially moated site.

The existence of the site demonstrates that caution is needed before one interprets similar enclosures attached to the core of a village as intakes from the open fields. No sign was found here of early agriculture and it is clear that Potter's Oven should be seen as an abandoned part of Castor.

I am very grateful to the Netherton Construction Company and especially to Mr N.Holver and his bulldozer driver for their help during the rescue work.
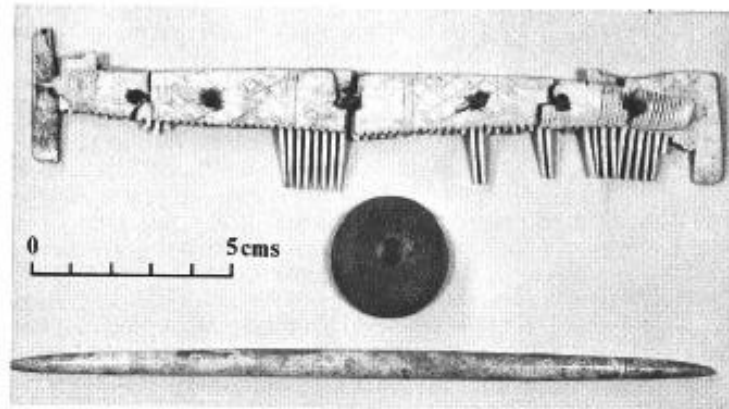

Fig 7
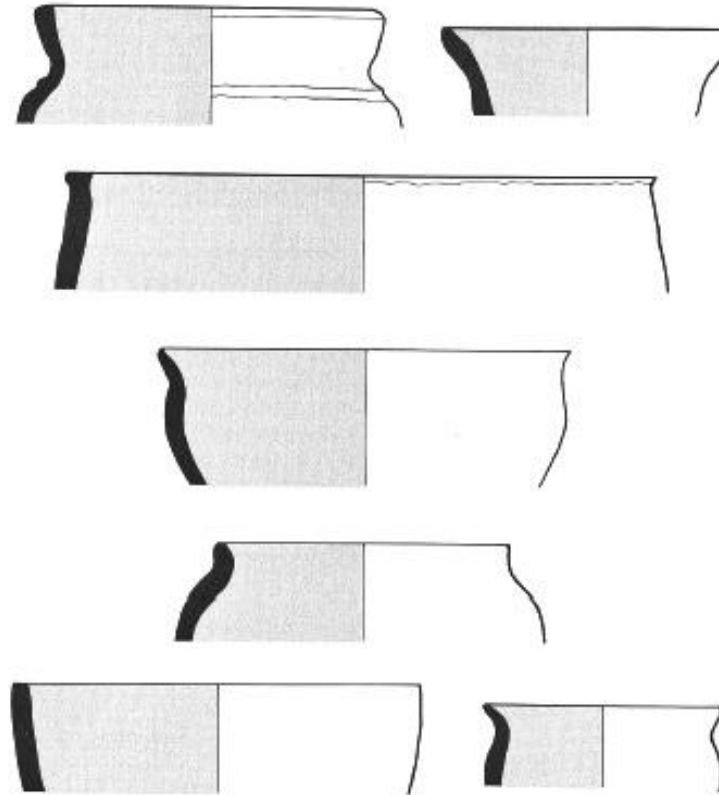A decorated bone comb from the nunnery at Castor and other small finds

Fig 8
Some 7th and 8th Century pottery from the nunnery at Castor. In the top left hand corner is a vessel in 'Ipswich Ware', the rest are hand made locally.