

A Roman and Saxon Farm at Walton, North Bretton

By Richard Jones

In August and September 1973 a site was dug rather hurriedly on the Marholm Road, now in Walton parish, but destined to be known as North Bretton. It consisted of a Romano-British farm, which went out of use in the late fourth century, and a Saxon one which succeeded it. There was limited time before a service road was due to be started in early September, to be followed by industrial development. So excavation was restricted and it was possible to examine thoroughly only a small part of the threatened field and to make a very limited investigation of the rest. Thanks are due to the Peterborough Development Corporation, both for the initial permission to dig on the site and for continued help and interest.

A small amount of material dated before A.D. 70 suggests some sort of occupation in the first century, but the earliest definite evidence of the farming activity comes a little later. Two distinct ditch systems were found, one of which was deliberately filled with household rubbish and burnt material, probably towards the end of the second century (fig 16). The later ditches seem to have remained open at least until the late fourth century. As it was impossible to strip the topsoil from the whole field, no full plan of the ditch systems could be obtained, but it was clear from the areas opened that it extended over most of the field.

One building was identified, but it was badly damaged by the Saxon activity and by more recent ploughing. Only two walls could still be recognised. Its overall dimensions were probably about 8 metres by 16 metres. These proportions suggest that it was of the aisled barn type, if rather small, although no post-bases survived. At the northern end there were two adjacent areas of paving with large flat stones, which were taken to mark a double entrance, in all some 5 metres wide.

Fine building stone, roof-tile, hypocaust-tile (some with mortar still adhering to it), and tesserae were found in various parts of the site, but in a greater concentration near this building. In the absence of another candidate, the possibility cannot be ruled out that this material is derived from the building. Probably the occupants were reasonably prosperous farmers, who might not have been able to aspire to a full scale *villa urbana*, but could afford to live in some comfort.

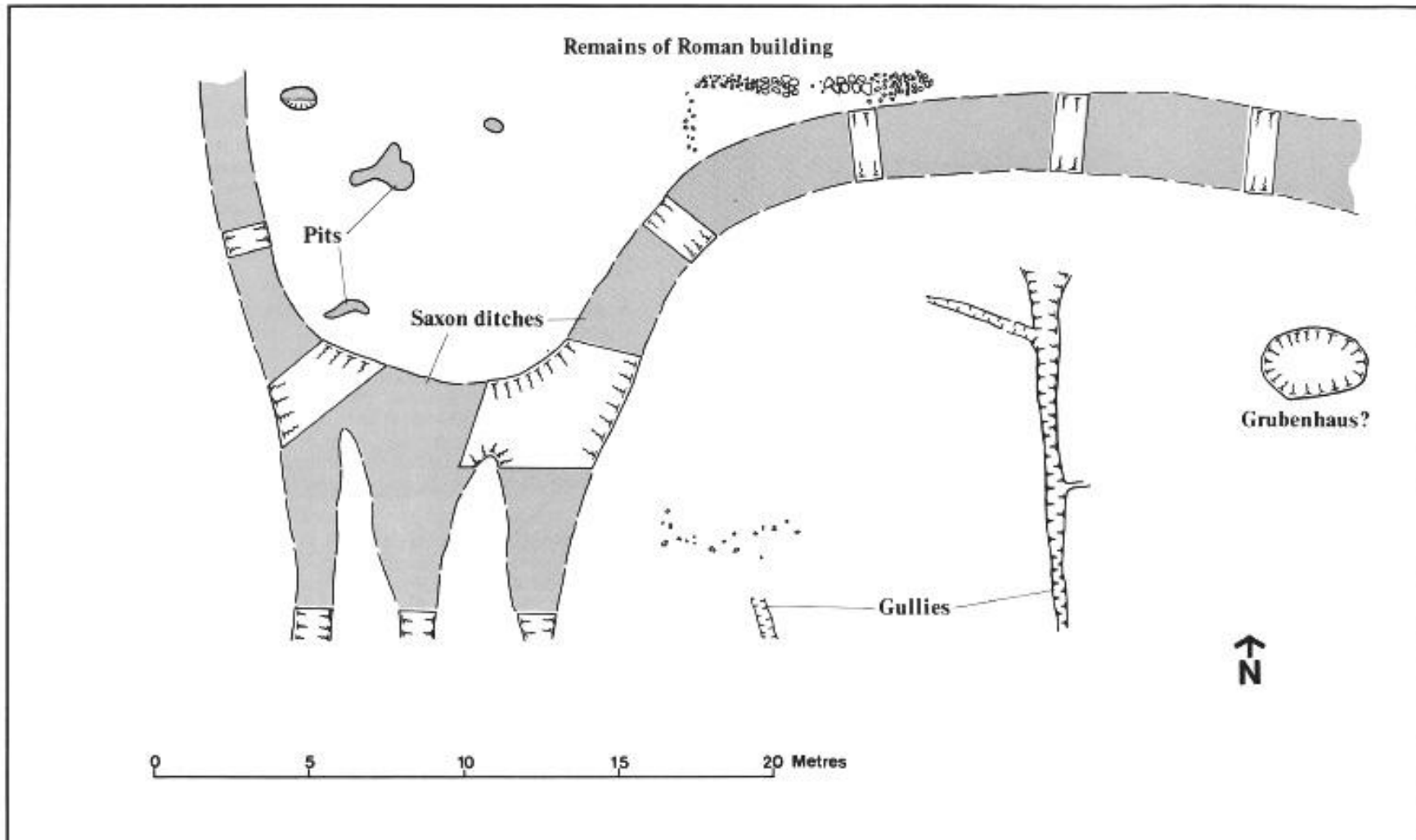


Fig 16 Part of the Roman and Saxon Farm at Walton, North Bretton, 1973

Nearby was an area of natural cornbrash which had been levelled off with small pebbles to make a better surface, perhaps to act as a threshing floor. It is clear that corn was grown, since several broken querns were also found. The common farm animals, cattle, sheep, and pigs, were all present, as well as some goats whose horns had been sawn off.

How the building fell out of use was not clear. The northern wall had been partly demolished, and in the rubble were a coin of Gratian (A.D. 367-75) and distinctive brooch of the very early Saxon type. This shows a Saxon presence on the site at the time of demolition, but there was no sign of any burning or other violent destruction. Perhaps the Romano-British occupants had already left. Otherwise the latest coins from the site were of Constantius (A.D. 348-59) and of Constans (A.D. 348-50). The probable date for the end of the Romano-British occupation is thus in the last quarter of the fourth century, perhaps as early as A.D. 380.

The Saxons seem to have cleared the site of loose rubble and household objects of no use to them. These appear in their ditches and pits with their characteristic pottery. The latter is distinguished by having small stone grits and is hand-made and black in colour. Quite large quantities of Saxon pottery were found, including some decorated pieces. The Saxon sherds were always with at least an equal number of Romano-British ones in each feature, and were often greatly outnumbered, suggesting that the Saxon occupants had more than a residual supply of Romano-British pots available to them. The features of the Saxon period were again mostly pits and ditches, laid out without concern for the existing system. One ditch cut across where the Roman building had stood. A large pit, 3 metres by 2.5 metres by 50cm, may possibly have been a *Grubenhaus*, or sunken hut. It had two layers of filling, natural silting beneath a deposit of burnt debris which also extended to seal one of the ditches; but no positive structural remains were found.

As at Hall Farm, Orton Longueville (see p. 19) there was no direct evidence here for an overlap in the two phases of occupation; but it seems likely that the Saxons were in close contact with the local Romano-British population. It may well be that this area would have been one of the first to have been settled by the Saxons, as it lay outside the Nene Valley proper, yet not quite in the Welland Valley, and it appears to have been much less densely occupied than the river

gravels in the Roman period. The Saxon farm itself does not seem to have lasted very long; there were relatively few features, each of one phase. Perhaps it spanned only one generation of settlers.

