

## Archaeology, human occupation and sedimentary sequences at Old House Farm, Little Comberton, Worcestershire.

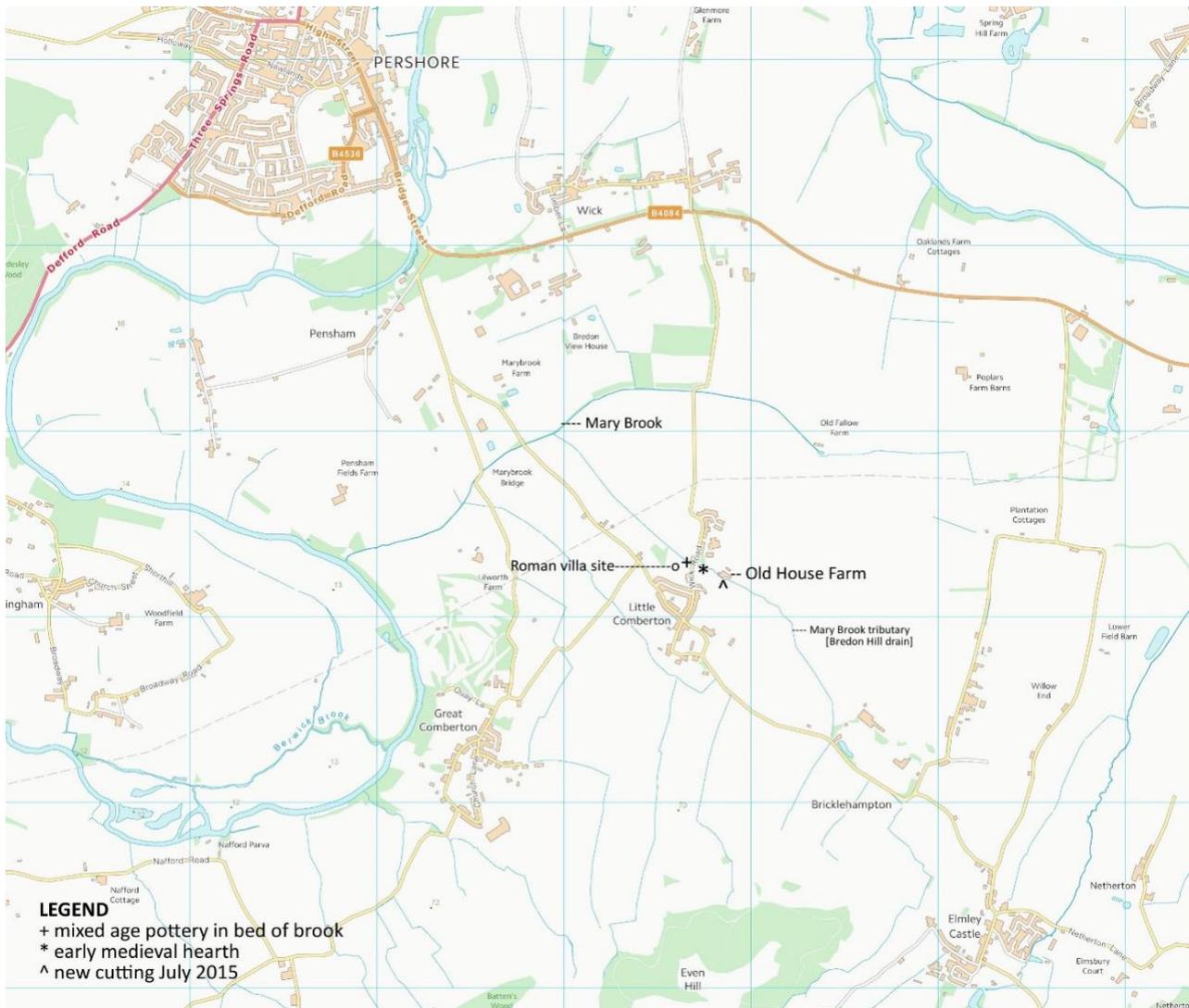
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### Introduction

Old House Farmhouse in Little Comberton, Worcestershire (Fig. 1) is a Grade II listed early post-medieval oak-framed galleried long house. Its setting, context and unspoilt condition rank it amongst the more notable domestic buildings in Worcestershire and in the Bredon Hill area.



01. Location of Old House Farm, Little Comberton and Mary Brook tributary. The adjacent site of Moor Leys Furlong to the west of Wick Road is marked by its Roman villa. Base map courtesy of Ordnance Survey orientation north to south.

The author has assembled Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, medieval and post-medieval artefacts near the farmstead. A notable Roman villa established on what eventually became unenclosed medieval furlongs at Moor Leys Furlong is marked on 01 and evidence of Saxon or early medieval occupation is now confirmed. A chronology for alluviation and canalisation of the watercourse is provided which carries with it important implications for the development of the settlement.

### Old House Farm: architectural and historic context

The oak framing of the farmhouse is rectilinear on sill-beams above a plinth of local Jurassic limestone. It clearly mirrors the medieval longhouse but is believed to have been constructed about AD1650; it is felt unlikely that it was built before AD1600. Its great hall has been infilled, mostly after AD1750, with a series of private rooms serviced by a side staircase. This evidence of evolving interlacing architectural styles has been safeguarded by recent ownerships. It is a private residence and whilst the assemblage of a contemporary

photographic record has been generously supported by the present owner no photographs of the house or its structure are provided in this account for this reason.

What makes Old House Farm so important is the closely interwoven relationship of the house, its fine brick and elm-clad outbuildings, the historic landscape to which it contributes so evocatively and now its archaeology demonstrating more or less continuous activity from the Bronze Age to the present day. It ranks amongst the oldest houses in Little Comberton and occupies a comparatively isolated position between the historic northern and southern foci (02) of the present settlement even though these have been subject to significant modification in the recent past. There is some evidence to suggest that cheese-making was undertaken and its dairy supported two Jersey cows until the 1930s; it may once have accommodated house cows. It atop the bankside of a now canalised watercourse that drains Bredon Hill and joins Mary Brook at Wick (01). Its present land curtilage includes part of Twinton Orchard, a traditional orchard regrettably now degraded (02).



02. Part of the historic southern core of Little Comberton settlement during the winter of 1982 with Old House Farm in the background. Twinton Orchard occupies the middle ground and the barn is now dwellings.

Periodically since 1984, and especially since major flooding events in 1998 and 2007, the bed of this watercourse from Old House Farm downstream to Wick Road has been dredged and its sides straightened. During this time I have examined pottery and other artefacts from those dredgings to determine what light they might throw on the history of the house but especially to determine whether this evidence might extend that history further back in time beyond AD1650.

I had been aware since March 1980 that this brook where it defines the boundary of Moor Leys Furlong contained in its bankside a record of human occupation (+ in 01). On 3 March 1980 a seam of sandy gravel 5-13 cms thick was found resting on the glutinous surface of Charmouth Mudstone beneath one metre of slumped alluvium at SO96674327. The gravels contained 18th-19th century ceramic and 12 oyster shells *Crassostrea* sp. which must be post-medieval. On its surface the underlying clay contained artefacts ranging through early Roman, Roman and medieval time (a single sherd of a locally scarce lead-glazed Malvernian jug *ca* AD1150) with the remains of small breeds of oxen and equids described *vide infra* as early medieval. It is thought that the gravels were derived by overbank flood erosion of sediments imported to form the ancient

surface of Wick Road close by; the collection of gravel by horse and cart from Old Fallow gravel pit was retained in living memory until 1973.

Immediately south of the point where Wick Road crosses the brook (Fig. 1) there is evidence of a topographical floodplain surface with historic overbank ponding depressions. To the north and north-east, this brook together with Mary Brook (Fig. 1), has created a much larger topographic floodplain at least 15 m higher than the modern floodplain of the River Avon 2.4 kms distant. Modified by intensive farming practice, villagers term this feature 'the prairie' with good reason.

A section exposed at Old House Farmhouse at SO96814322 during July 2015 (^ in 01; 03) demonstrated alluvium composed of well-structured clay-rich sediments and clayey loams, the clay derived from local Jurassic soft rocks; eventually this section enabled the chronology of alluviation to be unravelled. In this context alluvium is regarded as sediments beneath a modern floodplain which do not universally conform to the development of alluvium by slow accretion as is frequently the case in the primary lowland river drainage.



03. Sections (2 m deep at bed 3 digit) in alluvium at Old House Farm, SO968432, 7 October 2016. See numbered key below.

**Key to 03** from the base up

- 1 Bedrock.** Charmouth Mudstone not everywhere exposed with belemnites *in situ*. Glutinous water-sorted surface sediments containing artefacts including Saxon or early medieval ceramic, hearth, iron smithing-bottom slag, butchered animal bone, Roman ceramic and other artefacts in secondary context. Sediments extend widely under alluvium and explain the polarised nature of the present settlement.
- 2. Up to 65 cms** clayey alluvium with high Charmouth Mudstone content and occasional 'clasts' e.g. quartzite pebbles up to 20 cms diameter and other items of anthropogenic origin but evidently without diagnostic ceramic diffusing upwards into
- 3. Up to 1.3 m** of clayey loam with frequent unweathered broken sherds of medieval 13th century Worcester sand-tempered cooking pots and a single worn allochthonous Iron Age shell-tempered sherd. In places disrupted by post-medieval land-drainage systems or other features diffusing upwards into
- 4A. Up to 25 cms** post-medieval alluvial organic loam with post-medieval buff ware, black basalt ware, black glazed ware, Staffordshire slip ware and *in situ* coin of George II minted 1727-1740, sometimes with localised sparse pebble strings. Probably an organic marsh/overbank flood soil overlain by
- 4B. Up to 50 cms** tipped rubble and clayey sediment post-AD1750 often let down as anthropogenic features.

**A Saxon or early medieval hearth**

Dredging operations in 1984 established that large fragments of rock at one spot (\* on 01) rested on the soft clayey surface of the underlying Charmouth Mudstone at a depth of *ca* 2.1 m. Further dredging during 2015 exposed more of this feature which then became partly visible. It was found to be a hearth composed entirely of Roman querns and rubbing stone fragments which may have been part of a larger platform some of which remains *in situ*. These rocks included fragments of querns of Millstone Grit (04), micaceous Forest of Dean Carboniferous Sandstone with pecked grinding surfaces and Niedermendig or Bayen lava together with Carboniferous feldspathic sandstone rubbing stones and a fragment of ashy silty quartzose pumice. With these were quartzite and quartz boiling stones, several large pieces of light highly vesicular fuel ash

and a single piece of dense iron-rich slag 62 mm x 50 mm x 24 mm thick.

Associated closely with this feature was a scatter of animal bones and teeth and Roman pottery all of which was Severn Valley Ware that cannot be dated precisely. The querns and rubbers have all been subject to direct heat and there can be no doubt that they were carefully selected for their ability to withstand, retain and dissipate this. The hearth on which cooking and probably other activities took place was situated close to a water body. The small number of animal remains comprise fresh unabraded bones and teeth of domestic animals *viz.* a medium-sized horse, a different diminutive equid the principal metacarpus of which measures only 26 mm across the midpoint of the shaft (06), as well as sheep, ox, and pig. A notably small ox metatarsus is marked by a butcher's blade.



04. Fragment of heated Roman rotary Millstone Grit quern from Saxon/medieval hearth, Old House 15 July 1984.



05. Right lower M1



06. principal metacarpus

05 & 06

**05.** Right lower M1 and **06** principal metacarpus of diminutive equid from Saxon/medieval hearth, Old House Farm, 23 October 2015.

**The hearth: establishing a time-frame**

Apart from the Roman Severn Valley Ware the hearth yielded a single rim sherd of a coarse ware cooking pot in fresh condition (07).

Clay on its external surface retained minute fragments of structurally intact twig charcoal. Eventually small body sherds of this cooking pot (08), which retained a thick external soot deposit, were found *in situ* amongst the hearth debris.

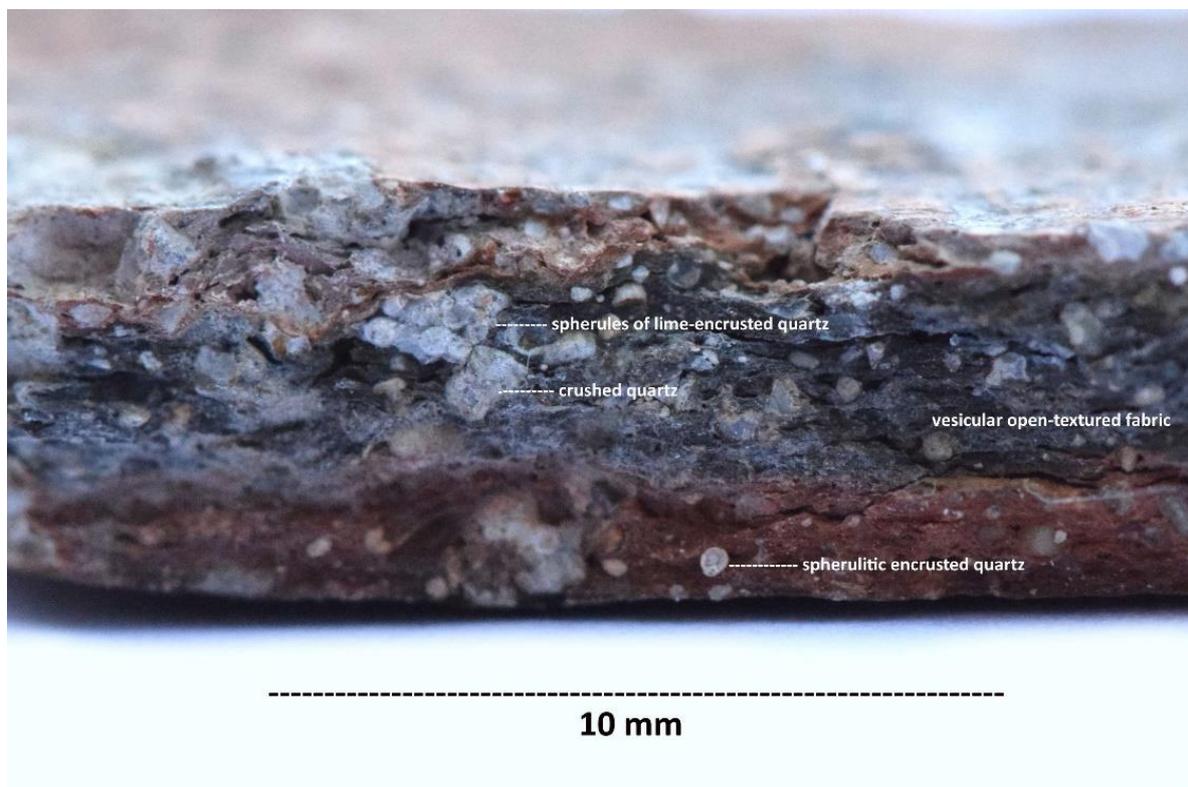
The finding of these sherds during 2015 presented me with a considerable challenge and I decided that specialist support was required. Placed under the microscope it became apparent that their dark ground mass was tempered with spherical white structures which were neither shelly nor oolitic in origin (08). They were rounded to sub-angular quartz grains each encased in a 'shell' of lime; sometimes these spherules coalesced into aggregations and were normally interspersed with small fragments of iron-rich material, quartz and calcite. An in-depth trawl of fabrics came up with no parallels. This was when I approached ceramic technologists at Worcester Archive and Archaeology Service. It was agreed by both Jane Evans and Robert Hedges that the cooking pot approximated to Worcester Ceramics on-line database fabric number 57 (<http://pottery.rigorka.net/#fabrics/list> consulted 15 October 2016) and to a known Saxon or early medieval form in a time-frame of AD800-AD1100. These specialists also answered the key question of whether or not a mass of Roman artefacts in a defined stratigraphic context could feasibly be dated to a later time-period on the basis of one directly-associated ceramic vessel. The answer to that question was unambiguously affirmative. Without this support and with so much hanging on one vessel, I would probably not have been able to date the hearth with any conviction.

The finding of lime-encased quartz grains in the groundmass is significant but cited here without parallels. The apparent rolling of sand and lime for temper could have local or chronological significance, but these are all matters which ultimately must be resolved by specialists. A fine-textured body sherd of red ground mass fabricated from Mesozoic clay is a surface find from Nash's Farm, Little Comberton (02, SO96754296) on 25 May 1978; this too is tempered with lime-encrusted quartz grains but they are extremely sparse and very widely scattered. This sherd has also been examined by Jane Evans who believes that it may be medieval.

It is therefore established that post-Roman inhabitants of Little Comberton scoured a Roman villa site close by and carefully selected items that met their criteria for the construction of hearths. A question remains about the associated large boiling stones; it is reasonable to assume that this practice was still employed in Saxon or early medieval time as it certainly was by the Roman villa inhabitants, but were these boiling stones originally also of Roman usage? Post-Roman time can be comprehended; comprehending early post-Roman ethnicity and culture is more difficult (Arnold, 1984) but one may well speculate on whether or not these people were indigenous. They were clearly familiar with local resources. According to Page & Willis-Bund (1924) the estate of Little Comberton belonged to Eadric, a free man, sometime prior to AD1086. It seems at least possible that this may refer to Eadric the Wild, a well-known wealthy landowner and thegn of Anglo-Saxon King Aethelred. Corresponding details of the tenants or serfs remain obscure.



07. Rim sherd of Saxon/early medieval wide-mouthed cooking pot, cf. Worcester series fabric number 57, hearth site, Old House Farm, 23 January 2015.



08. Cross section through body sherd of Saxon/early medieval wide-mouthed cooking pot as in.07. Spherules of lime-encrusted quartz are indicated.

**Post-medieval artefacts and ecofacts in the modern brook bed**  
(images 09-16)

It has already been noted that the brook is canalised up to a depth of ca 2 metres (03) especially at Wick Road where it traverses a topographical low or basin. As there are no houses anywhere upstream of Old House Farmhouse it is contended that the majority

of post-medieval domestic ceramic evidence from its present bed constitutes *rejectamenta* from the house which was thrown into the brook, sank into its soft sediments and has been little-transported. The bulk of it occurred no further than 100 m downstream of the house. For this thesis to be credible the brook would have had to be canalised prior to AD1700 which is here confirmed. This

association in time gains some credence by the finding of an intact valve of the rather fragile marine mussel *Mytilus edulus* L., 1758 (14) which retains its periostracum, together with several valves of the edible oyster *Ostreaa edulis* L., 1758. It may of course be argued that if the present brook alignment is early post-medieval then no earlier medieval artefacts might be expected in its bed or that they could have been removed during maintenance. This account lends some support to a view that the construction of the house and alignment of the brook were broadly synchronous events. Prior to the (?)19th century brick retaining-walls defined the brook-side against the house. A very much earlier low rubble Oolitic Limestone and Liassic Limestone wall existed inside this, the base of which was recently observed in section and photographed. This is believed to define the original alignment and canalisation of the watercourse.

In the modern brook bed there was an absence of distinctive pottery fabrics such as Tudor Green Ware (Barton, 1970) and in particular later medieval Malvernian fabrics (Morris, 1980). One incomplete strap handle with thin patchy lead glaze and grits characteristic of north Devon was found; this could be a little earlier than AD1600 but it is heavily waterworn and could be derived. It is observed that pottery of the period AD1300-AD1500 is relatively scarce generally in Little Comberton which may imply diminishing fortunes at this time. Given the position of Little Comberton and other nearby settlements in relation to the influence of unstable soft-rock slope sediments during the medieval Little Ice Age there is every possibility that its economy and population were then compromised. This may be the key that explains why the fabled Saxon recolonization of *Baenintes Burgh*, the Iron Age hillfort on the summit of Bredon Hill, occurred.

Most of the pottery, like other artefacts from the existing bed of the brook, is dominated by forms and fabrics which post-date AD1600 and are held to be *rejectamenta* from the house; they have been found in no other nearby sediments or sections and are in fresh unworn condition. They include fragments of storage jars and pancheons manufactured in the Barnstaple area of north Devon (09) and in the Ashton Keynes area of Wiltshire (11), examples of Ticknall or Cistercian Ware (10) and a body sherd of glazed Midland Yellow Ware also represents this period. Somewhat later are sherds of salt-glazed Rhenish stoneware (12) and a fragment of a Nottingham Stoneware tankard; the former includes a sherd with cobalt blue pattern glaze possibly from an 18th century chamber pot. Some fragments of sack or wine bottles with well-formed neck string-lines predate AD1700 (15). Several sherds of 18th century Staffordshire slip ware dishes were found but these dominate a phase of later activity on or near the modern land surface (03) confirmed in section which also yielded *in situ* a George II halfpenny minted no later than AD1740. All of these ceramic forms, sometimes termed 'country pottery', occur widely in the English midlands, but are less frequently associated directly with an inhabited house as they are here. A lathe-turned decorated sheep or goat metapodial is probably a 19th century needle holder (16) with a turned bone plug.

Dates given are generalised and it must be recalled that domestic wares were manufactured, utilised or stored over many decades, sometimes centuries; the dates provided are for simple comparative purposes only



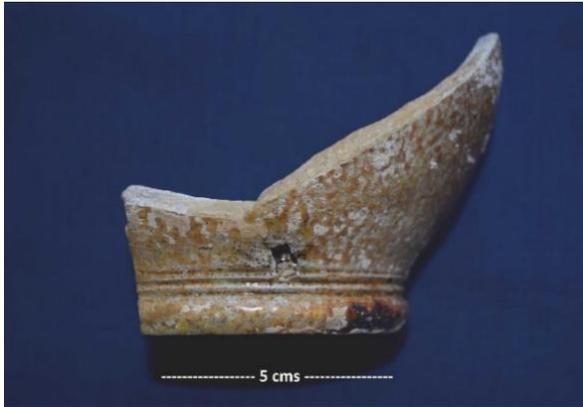
09. Rim sherd of lead glazed pancheon. North Devon gravel-tempered ware ca AD1650.



10. Body sherd of lead glazed midland yellow ware white fabric ca AD1650.



11. Left: interior, right: exterior of rim sherd of lead glazed storage jar reinforced with horizontal thumb strip. Closely matches Ashton Keynes sand-tempered ware, fabric with very dense angular to subangular quartz grains ca AD1650 matching sherd fabric from West End, Broadway (Whitehead, 2010) and Pershore.



12. Body sherd of salt-glazed jug or Bellarmine, Rhenish stoneware, ca AD1675.



13. Rim sherd of pancheon, Cistercian ware, dull purple glaze over dense hard reddish fabric ca AD1675.



14. Valve of Mussel *Mytilus edulis* L., 1758 early post-medieval.



15. Neck of wine or sack bottle with string rim ca AD1690.

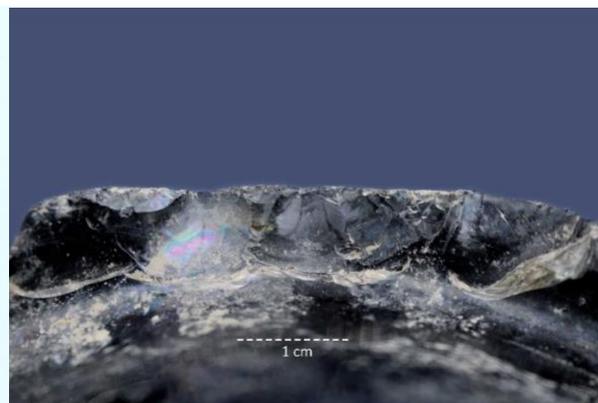


16. 19th century lathe-turned decorated bone ?needle holder.

The evidence suggests that by about AD1800 less domestic material was being disposed of randomly in the brook and more recent post-medieval pottery appears in superficial sediments in the general area of the house and elsewhere (03). Only one late post-medieval clay pipe was encountered aligning with Morris (1980). It seems clear that when Old House Farmhouse was constructed it was well equipped, its occupants were well catered for and it was likely to have been supported by considerable funding.

#### Worked or utilised glass

The base of a hand-blown black glass sack bottle (17) dredged from the brook on 2 August 2009 dates to ca AD1720. One edge of this has been trimmed, utilised and/or retouched thus creating a hand tool. A local precedent for this hitherto unknown technology was cited by Whitehead (2009) (the antiquity of this was subsequently grossly misquoted in a North American publication 'The Post Hole'). The distribution of glass hand tools in Britain is also unknown but in the earlier post-medieval period of intensely rural Worcestershire it was clearly not only the contents of such bottles that was appreciated.



17. Kicked-up base of post-medieval hand blown black glass sack or wine bottle ca AD1720 with position of (left) and detail of (right) straightened and utilised edge, Old House Farm, 2 August 2009.

**Archaeochronology and sedimentary sequence at Old House Farm**

During July 2015 part of the existing brook immediately adjacent to Old House Farm was infilled and a new channel was cut (^ on 01) slightly to the south of the original one (01). This new channel

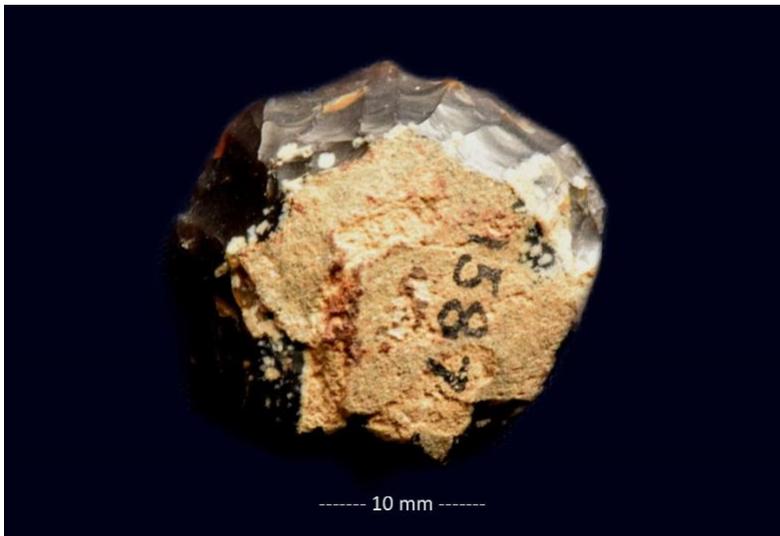
sectioned sediments from the modern land surface virtually to bedrock (03); it thus became possible to establish a stratigraphic sequence for those sediments and establish chronologies for them and their deposition on the basis of archaeology.



18. Bronze Age subquadrate thick flake scraper pale grey flint butt and two sides retouched, bed of brook, Moor Leys Furlong, 25 January 1986.



19. Bronze Age quadrate thick flake scraper pale grey flint butt and two sides retouched, land surface Moor Leys Furlong, 18 June 1991.



20. Bronze Age discoidal scraper on trimmed river gravel flint pebble, land surface, Moor Leys Furlong, 16 April 1976.



21. Thin utilised flake of honey coloured flint, bed of brook, Old House Farm, 18 July 1984.

**Working chronology at Old House Farm** (Fig. 03 refers)

1. Later Prehistoric extended regional wetland mosaic in Mary Brook catchment known to Neolithic (Whitehead, 1979) and Bronze Age people (18-20) the latter widely settled in the area (e.g. Dinn & Evans, 1990; Whitehead, 2013).
2. AD800-AD1100. Lacustrine or abandoned meander draw-down zone accessed by post-Roman inhabitants for cooking and rural industrial purposes (hearth, cooking pot, fuel ash, plano-convex smithing hearth-bottom slag, domesticated animal bones).
3. AD1000-AD1200. Site subject to episodic inundation and inwash of clay-dominated sediments.
4. AD1200-AD1300. Up to 1.3 m humified clayey loam (?Plaggen soil *sensu* Limbrey, 1975) deposited on the low floodplain almost certainly through human agency as a first move towards land reclamation. Medieval ceramic fragments are all unbedded by fluvial action and 'dumped'. Gravitational or fluvio-gravitational mass movement cannot be dismissed.
5. AD1300-AD1550. The site may have been abandoned or the population reduced by disease or other constraints.

6. AD1600-AD1700. Old House Farmhouse was built and the alignment of the brook may have been broadly synchronous. Seventeenth century pottery in good condition, not yet found elsewhere at the site, was thrown into it. Relative sedimentary stability signals climatic improvement and crop cultivation again becomes feasible.
7. AD1700-AD1850. By the farmhouse, the land surface and its undulations are draped with tipped waste material e.g. pottery, rock and clay, and the area to the south of the farm becomes Twinton Orchard (O.E. 'orchard between two farms' in this instance Old House Farm and Nash's Farm).

**Monastic influence at Old House Farmhouse**

A persistent local rumour firmly embedded in the folk-history of Little Comberton is that Old House Farmhouse once accommodated monks (there have been a number of 'unexplained sightings' by the farm of individuals in cloaked habits made by entirely reliable people over an extended time period, e.g. Ravenscroft, 2000) and this possibility should not be dismissed. After the dissolution tenants at Little Comberton still paid rent to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster who maintained rights until after AD1650 when it is believed that the farmhouse was built. Ecclesiastical involvement in

its construction cannot be dismissed and there is further albeit tenuous evidence for this.

It has already been mentioned that an edible marine mollusc (09), accompanied by at least 10 shells of edible oysters *Ostrea edulis*, mostly in very fresh unweathered condition, was found in the same context as 17th century ceramic in the modern bed of the brook. No associated bones from domestic meat-producing animals were found. Ryder (1969) argued that a dominance of marine bivalve shells over domesticated animal bones might provide evidence for a diet skewed in that way by ecclesiastical dictate. The Abbots of Westminster owned several mills at and near Pershore and their involvement at Old House Farm is not only tenable but one way to explain how such an apparently secular building may have been sustained in the 17th century; perhaps the house accommodated an estate bailiff.

In a few places the bank of the brook has been retained by vertical walls composed of good quality hand-dressed hard Liassic Limestone sets now just about traceable as a feature. This traditional medieval use of materials extends back in time to the prehistoric period and implies that the owners of Old House Farm were wealthy enough to purchase rocks from regional quarries developed to provide a resource which was not readily available nearby. This rock was also used in ecclesiastical contexts and to build tithe barns.

#### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the owner of Old House Farm for permitting this research and publication and to archaeologists at Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service for kindly examining pottery fabrics, forms and tempers.

#### Repository

Artefacts and cultural evidence from Old House Farm will be accessioned at a regional museum with full Museums Association accreditation.

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- Whitehead, P.F., 2013. An early Bronze Age flint scatter on the limestone dip-slope of Bredon Hill. *Worcestershire Record* 34:34-36.

#### Appendix 1

##### The arboreal ant *Lasius brunneus* (Latreille, 1798) (Hymenoptera, Formicidae) breeding in the oak frame of Old House Farmhouse, Little Comberton

During July 2004 a nest of the arboreal ant *Lasius brunneus* (Latreille, 1798) was observed in the sill beam of Old House Farm ramifying downwards into old mortar rendering of the sill-plinth. Probably these ants were refugees from nearby Twinton Orchard and this observation aligns with other subsequent evidence for the use of buildings by nesting *L. brunneus* (e.g. Skirrow & Trevis, 2015).

*Lasius brunneus* is most usually associated with veteran trees and frequently nests in wood mould in or close to such trees, especially oak. It may also nest underground but most usually where veteran trees are present and across its whole range it is rather an adaptable species. It occurs at altitudes of up to at least 800 m in the Carpathian Mountains and in urban parks in old medieval east European towns. In Central Europe *L. brunneus* inhabits humid montane primary *Abieta*. At Old House Farm worker ants are known to be somewhat opportunistic and to work established exotic conifers such as *Thuja plicata* cv 'Zebrina'.

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