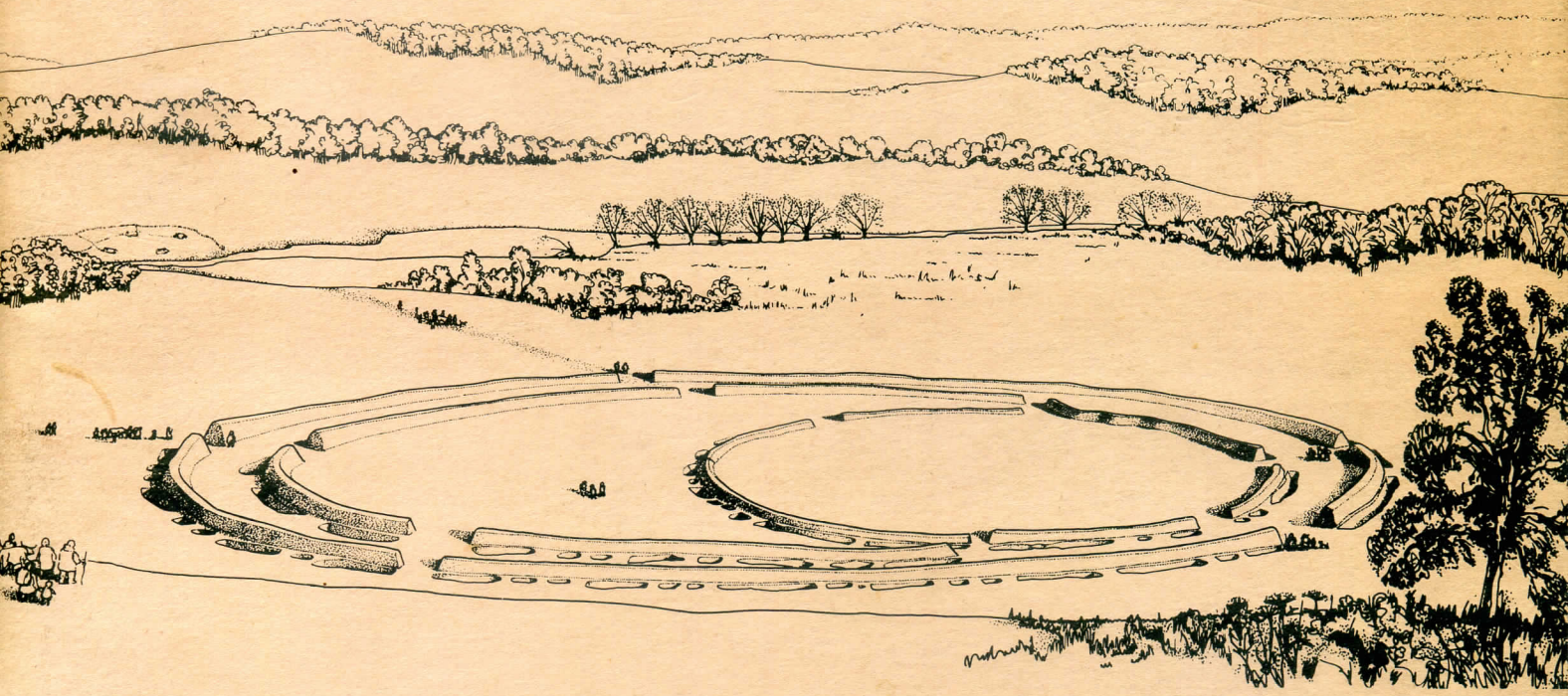
Northampton- the first 6000 years



Northampton- the first 6000 years

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Introduction

Northampton, situated in a fertile basin at the heart of England, has been a route centre for thousands of years. The river Nene, flowing into the Wash, has from earliest times provided a ready means of access to the Midlands for new settlers from the continent arriving on the East Coast. A major line of communication in prehistoric times ran along the Jurassic ridge which stretches from Dorset in the south-west north-eastwards to the Lincolnshire Wolds. A further route developed, probably in Saxon times, from Southampton through Oxford, Northampton and Leicester and on northwards.

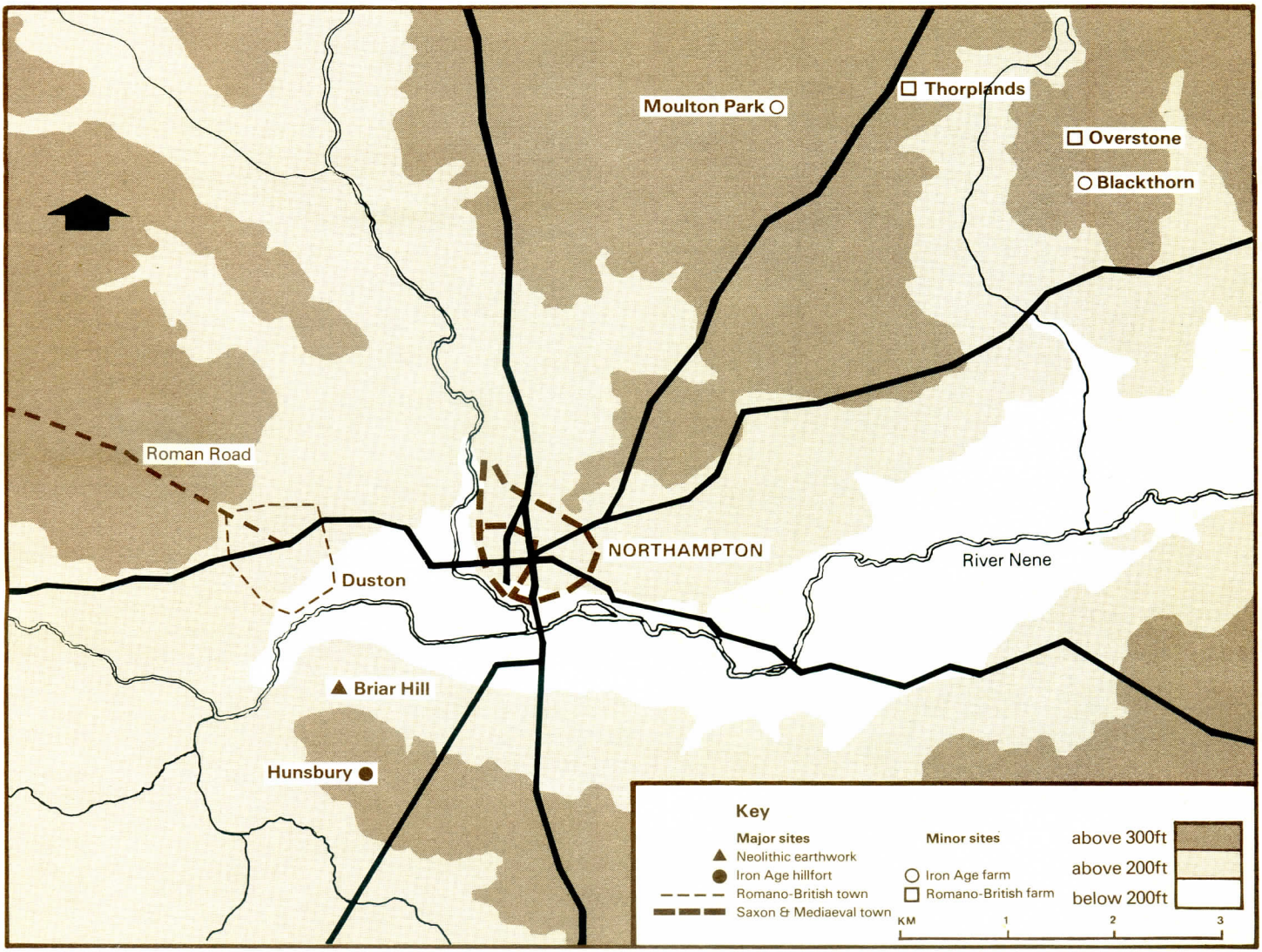
Northampton's continuing importance as a focal point can readily be appreciated. In the Neolithic period there was an impressive 'causewayed camp' on Briar Hill, in the Iron Age the hillfort at Hunsbury dominated the river crossing, after the Roman Conquest a small town grew up at Duston and finally in the Saxon period settlement became firmly established on the site of the later town which in the twelfth century could pride itself as being among the six most important towns in the kingdom of England.

Archaeological finds relating to Northampton's past have been collected over the years, notably during Victorian ironstone quarrying, and there are fine collections in Northampton Museum of Iron Age material from Hunsbury and Romano-British material from Duston.

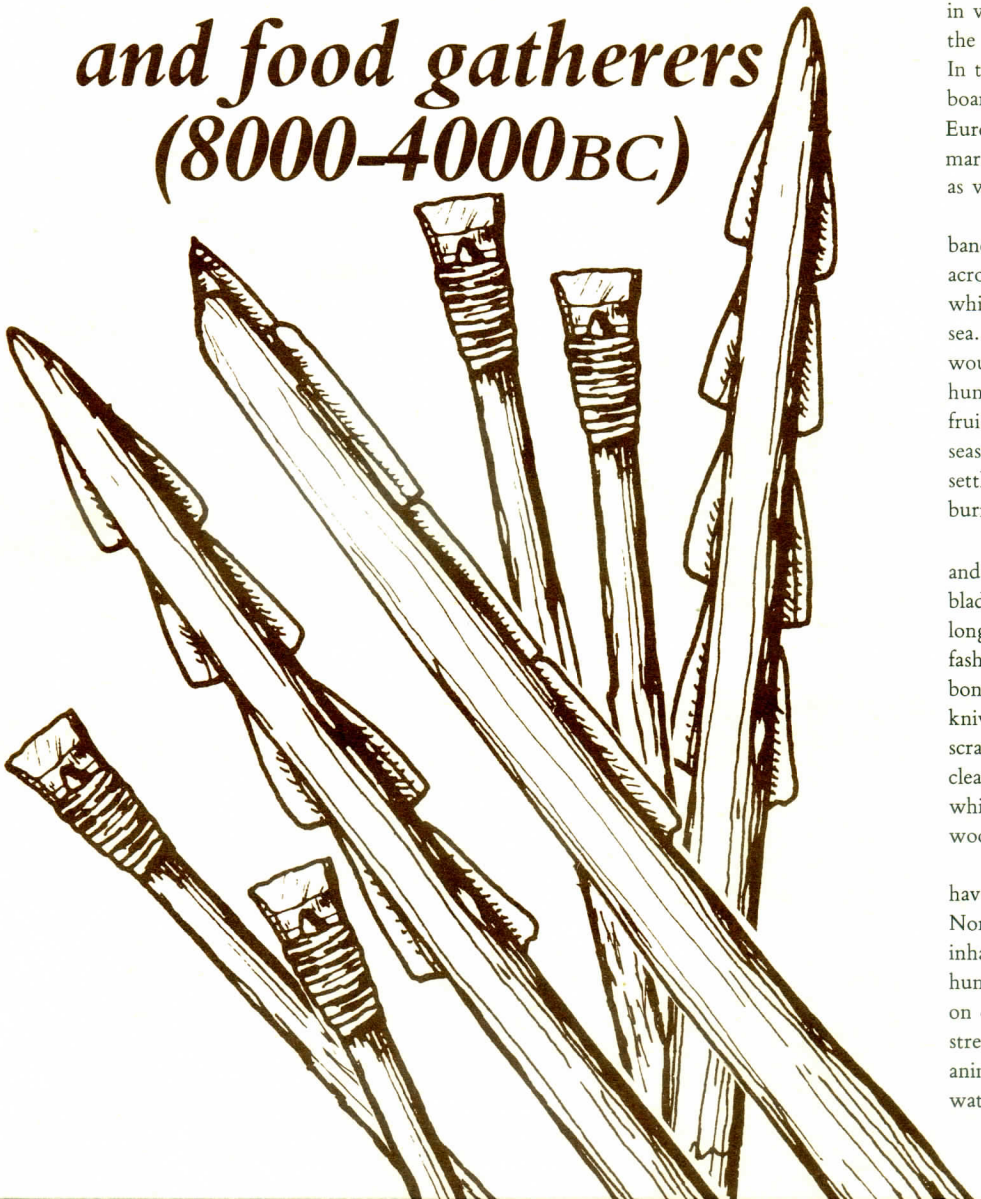
In 1965 Northampton was designated an area of considerable expansion under the New Towns Act of 1946. As a result Northampton Development Corporation was established to carry out the proposed development in partnership with Northampton Borough Council. In 1970, mindful of Northampton's extremely rich heritage, the Development Corporation set up an archaeological unit to investigate, through excavation, sites which would be destroyed by the town's expansion. This programme of 'rescue excavation' has made most significant contributions to our

understanding of Northampton's past and, in fact, has radically altered established views of certain historical periods. Detailed reports of the work are published in the Development Corporation's Archaeological Monograph Series and in Northamptonshire Archaeology, the journal of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society. This booklet attempts to give a general picture of Northampton's growth from earliest times to the sixteenth century, paying particular attention to the results of the archaeological investigations of the last eight years.

Archaeological sites in the Northampton area.



Mesolithic hunters and food gatherers (8000–4000BC)



Britain between 10000 and 6000 years ago had a pleasant climate, relatively dry to begin with and becoming warmer, though wetter, than that of today.

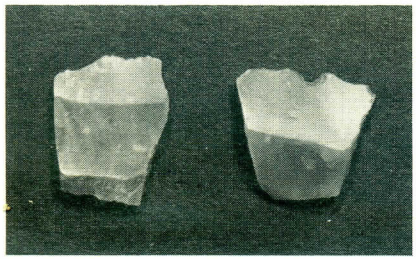
The ice sheets of the last ice age had started to melt some 4000 years earlier and, as the weather grew milder, trees had begun to grow in what had once been frozen desert until almost the whole country was covered in thick forest. In this forest lived animals such as deer, wild boar and aurochs, the great wild cattle of Europe, now extinct; and in the river, pools and marshes there were beaver, otter and wild fowl as well as fish.

The forest was also inhabited by man. Small bands of people migrated from the continent across what is now the English Channel but which had not then been covered entirely by the sea. They followed the abundant game and would have been able to live comfortably by hunting and fishing, and by gathering wild fruits and edible plants, building temporary or seasonal camps rather than permanent settlements, and chopping down trees or burning the forest to make clearings.

They used flint to make many of their tools and hunting weapons, fashioning tiny points and blades known as 'microliths' often less than 1cm long, which they often used in composite fashion, mounted in rows in shafts of wood or bone to make barbed spears and harpoons, or knives. Other types of flint implement include scrapers, which they might have used for cleaning animal skins or in woodwork, awls, which could have been used for working either wood or hides, and crude but efficient axes.

Worked flints of these characteristic types have been found on several sites in and around Northampton, proving that the area was inhabited during this period by one or more hunting bands. They evidently preferred to live on or near the banks of the River Nene and the streams which run into it, probably because the animals they hunted would congregate near water. An area near Duston, between the

Weedon Road and the river, and another area around Hunsbury appear to have been favoured places, since many hundreds of microliths and other typical flints have been found there. Microliths have also been found in Northampton itself, on a site excavated to the north of Marefair.



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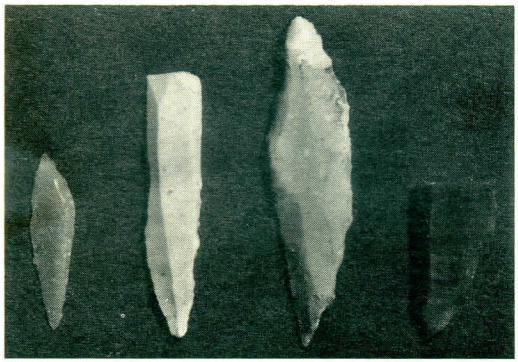

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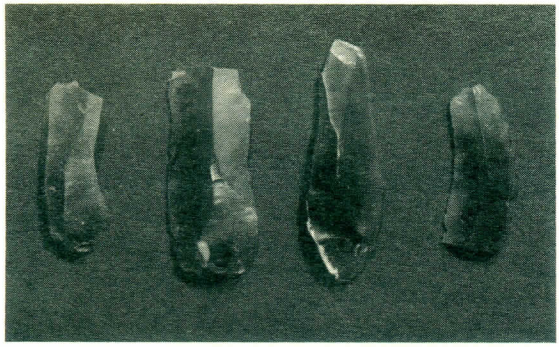

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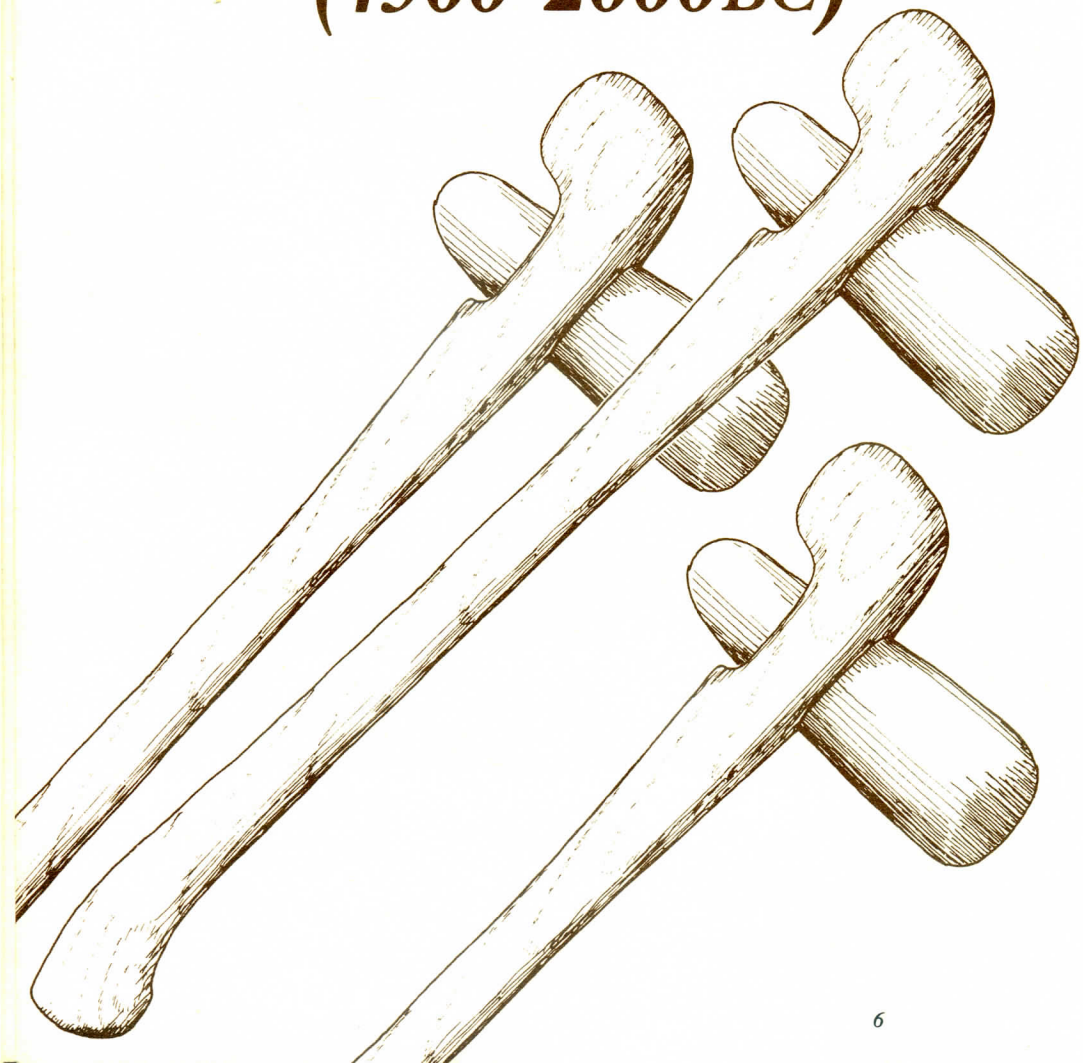
ARROW
Arrows with chisel-like flint tips would have been used for hunting wild fowl and small game.

SPEAR
Small delicately chipped flint points were mounted as tips or barbs on hunting spears and harpoon heads.

KNIFE
Sharp edged bladelets may have been mounted end to end in wooden hafts as knives or used to give a cutting point on spears.

Neolithic farmers (4500-2000BC)



More than 6000 years ago (c4500BC) parties of colonists with a very different way of life began to cross from Europe. They must have come by boat, for by this time the sea had covered the former land bridge and Britain was an island.

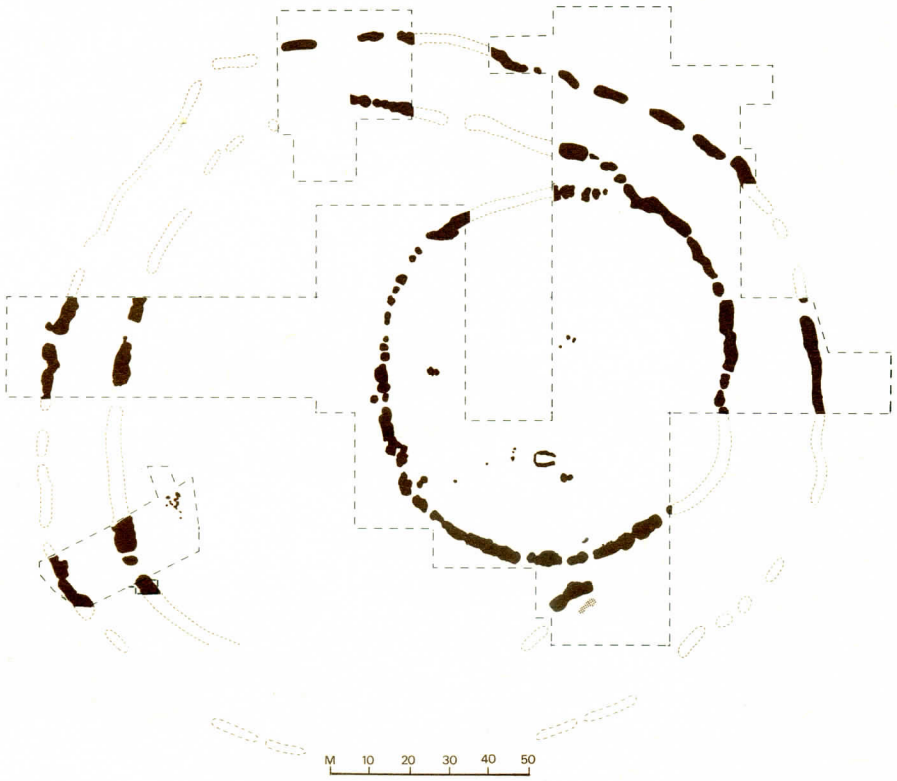
These people who are often described as 'Neolithic', meaning 'of the New Stone Age', were farmers, and they must have begun at once to prepare land for cultivation and for their settlements. Their animals were probably stalled or tethered at first and fed on foliage cut from suitable forest trees. They prospered, for by 4300BC or thereabouts they had become numerous and were clearing large tracts of forest.

Study of pollen grains preserved in deposits of that day shows that there was a sudden decrease in the numbers of trees in many areas of the country, and a corresponding increase in grasses and weeds, as well as the appearance for the first time of the pollens of cultivated wheat and barley.

Being farmers they would have been tied to the land, at least during the growing season, and tended to build more substantial and permanent settlements than their Mesolithic predecessors. They also seem to have begun early on to establish something like tribal territories.

These Neolithic people were probably well established in the Northampton area by around 4400BC, and the centre and focus of their life here as a community seems to have been an earthwork on Briar Hill which has been the scene of a major excavation lasting over four years. This important site, situated on the south side of the Nene Valley overlooking present day Northampton, was a circular enclosure of about 7 acres, surrounded by two concentric circuits of large, elongated, closely spaced pits up to 12m long and between 1m and 2m deep, forming discontinuous ditches. The earth and stone dug from these pits would have been piled up to form banks around the enclosure. Inside this enclosure, on the east side, is a smaller, inner enclosure formed by the spiral end of the inner ditch circuit.

Briar Hill Neolithic enclosure.

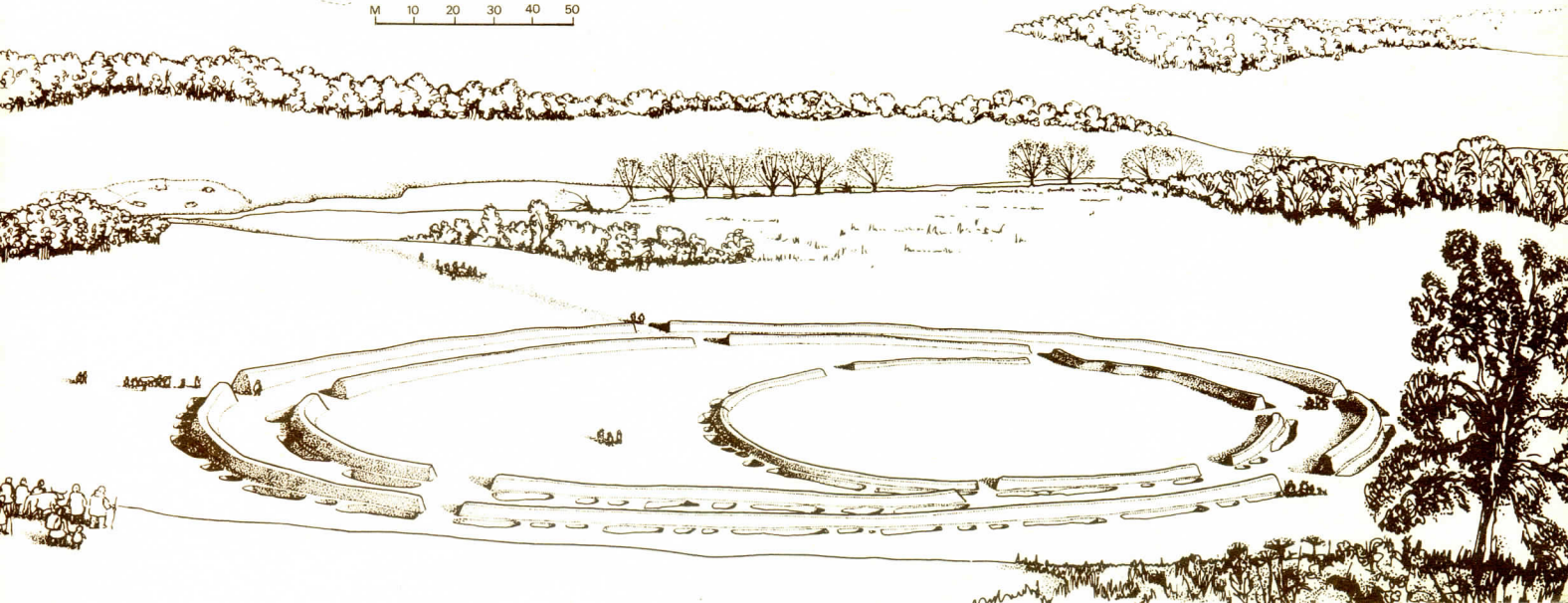


The plan of the earthwork shows the two outer concentric ditches and the small inner enclosure on the east side. It also shows how the ditches were dug in short separate lengths.

Key

- Area uncovered
- Features excavated
- Features plotted from magnetometer survey and aerial photography

An artist's impression shows Briar Hill earthworks as they may have looked originally. In the background is the River Nene.



The construction of an earthwork of this size, dug from the ironstone bedrock, was a tremendous undertaking for people whose only digging tools were picks made of deer antler, shovels of wood or the blade-bone of an ox, and baskets to move the spoil. A work force of 100 men would probably have taken several months to complete the task.

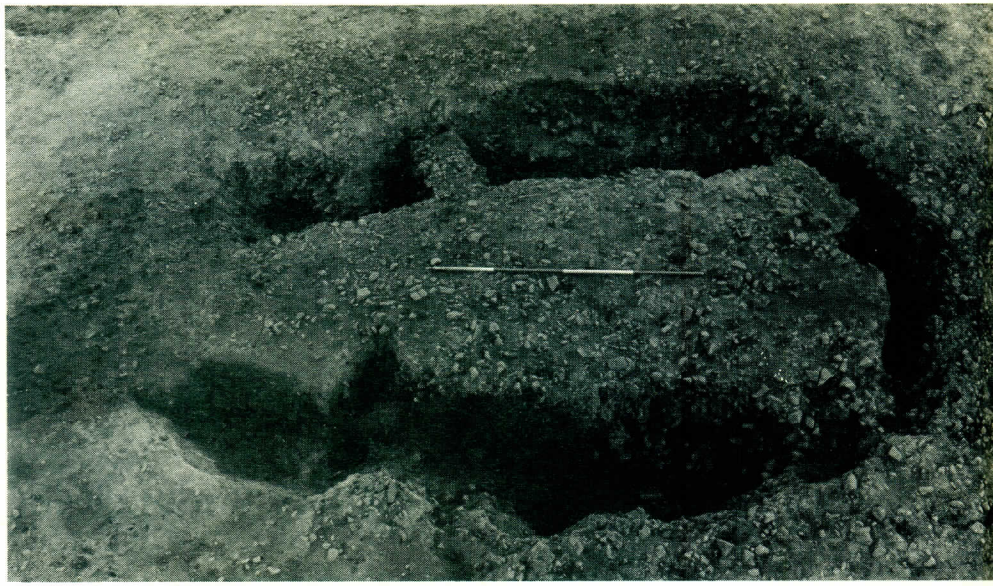
According to dating evidence found in the recent excavations the enclosure may have been built as early as 4350BC. Over many years the pits of the ditch circuit filled up with soil and stones weathered from their sides or washed in from the banks. The excavators discovered that when this happened the pits had been cleaned out again or re-dug, and that this had been done several times, sometimes following long periods of neglect. In this fashion the site probably continued in use for more than 1000 years.

The enclosure was not constructed as a practical defensive fort, nor was it the site of a permanent village, although people evidently camped there on occasions. Sites of this kind, which archaeologists refer to as 'causewayed camps' are thought to have been religious centres of some kind, perhaps used for the celebration of seasonal festivals and tribal ceremonies. These events would, no doubt, also have been occasions for meeting friends and relatives, arranging marriages and other social transactions, and bartering trade goods. The length of time over which the site was used is an illustration of the deeply traditional way of life of the Neolithic people, which changed little over 2000 years.

People lived dispersed in settlements, most of them probably too small to be dignified with the name of village, on either side of the Nene Valley in the region of what is now Northampton. Here light, easily worked soil and good natural drainage provided ideal conditions for their primitive agricultural methods. The wetter land in the bottom of the valley may have been used for pasture.

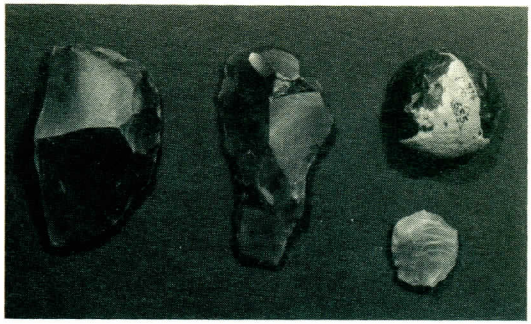
The Duston area seems once again to have been a favoured spot for settlement, and many thousands of Neolithic implements of flint and stone have been found there. There were probably several settlements also in the area immediately round the Briar Hill causewayed camp.

The sites of former settlements are often marked on arable land by the presence of many worked flints in the ploughsoil. Typical finds from any Neolithic site include scraping tools, knives, sawblades, tools for piercing and boring hides and wood, and finely worked arrowheads of a characteristic leaf shape. Many axes of polished flint or stone have also been found in Northampton and the area round about and fragments of such axes were found on Briar Hill. These are quite serviceable for cutting

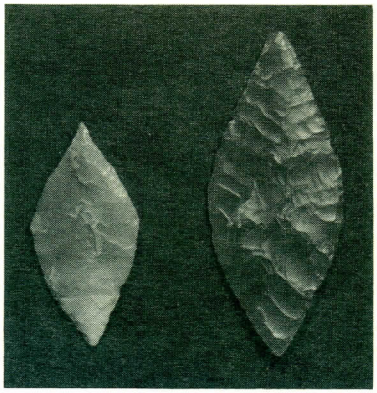


Above *The foundations of a small timber building found in the inner enclosure of the earthwork. Trenches dug into the ground were originally footings for the upright posts of the walls. Radiocarbon dating and pottery from this foundation suggest that the building was constructed in the Late Neolithic period. (Scale pole graded in half metres).*

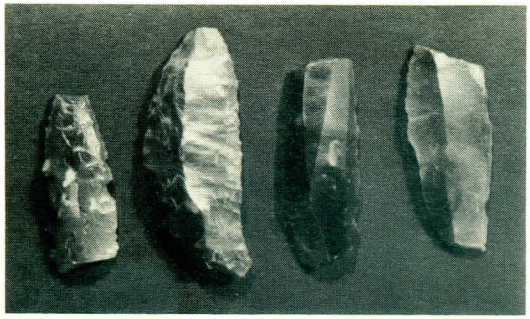
Left *A short length of the inner ditch. Alternate quadrants of the separate ditch segments were excavated so as to leave standing vertical cuts through the ditch infill. In these sections evidence was preserved of the way in which the ditches had silted up and been redug. (Scale poles graded in half metres).*



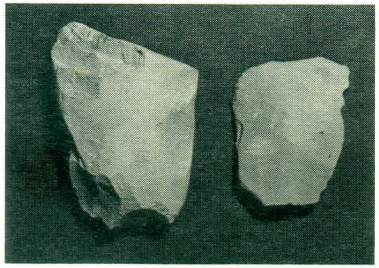
SCRAPERS
(Scale approx 1:2)



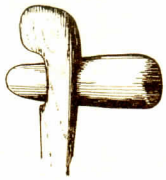
ARROW HEADS
(Scale approx 1:1)



KNIFE BLADES
(Scale approx 1:2)



AXE-HEADS
(Scale approx 1:3)

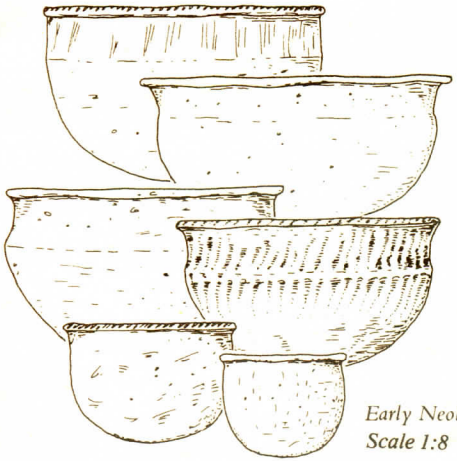


down trees and may well have been used in the initial clearance of the land for settlement.

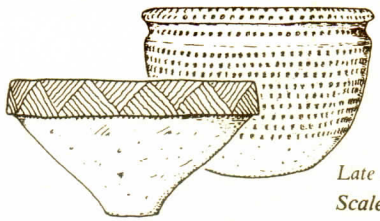
The ordinary small tools were almost certainly made of flint obtained from gravel deposits near the river, but flint suitable for making larger implements such as axes may have been imported. The axes of stone tell an even more interesting story. The hard, tough, fine-grained rocks of which they are made do not occur locally at all, and when examined under a microscope many of them can be seen to be identical with rock from outcrops in the Lake District, North Wales, Cornwall and other locations, from quarries which are known to have been worked in Neolithic times. The axes were chipped roughly into shape at 'factories' near the quarries and traded to places all over the country. They were finished by being ground and polished to a sharp cutting edge, and a grindstone used for this purpose was found on Briar Hill.

The Neolithic people were the first in Britain to make pottery, and many fragments of plain, round based, hand-made earthenware bowls were found on Briar Hill.

This style of pottery was in use for some 2000 years. Various kinds of more elaborate, highly decorated pots began to be made towards the end of the Neolithic period and, these also were found on Briar Hill, as well as on the site of a small settlement near Ecton.



Early Neolithic bowls.
Scale 1:8

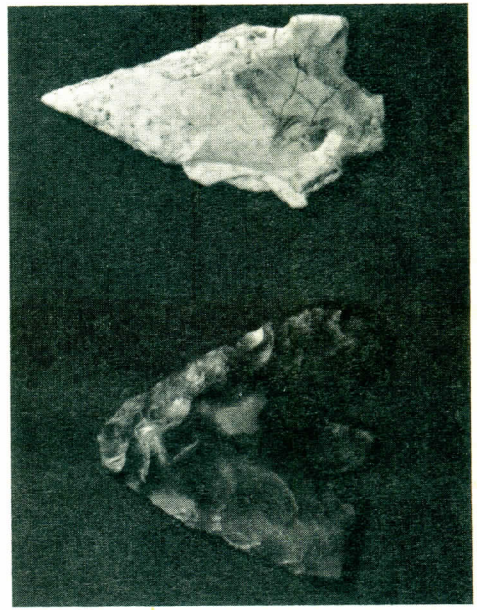


Late Neolithic decorated pottery.
Scale 1:8

The Bronze Age (2500-700BC)

The first people in Britain to use metal tools seem to have been immigrants who came here nearly 4500 years ago (2500BC) from the region of the Lower Rhine in what are now the Netherlands and West Germany. They are usually referred to as the Beaker Folk because of their distinctive pottery, and some of them made knives of simple design and personal ornaments of copper.

The newcomers settled amongst the older established Neolithic population and seem to have co-existed fairly peaceably, although they retained their separate identity as a people for several hundred years. Their remains, including barbed and tanged arrowheads and fragments of their decorated earthenware beakers have been found in the Northampton area near or sometimes on the sites of Neolithic settlements, including Duston and the one at Ecton. They even visited Briar Hill, although by that time

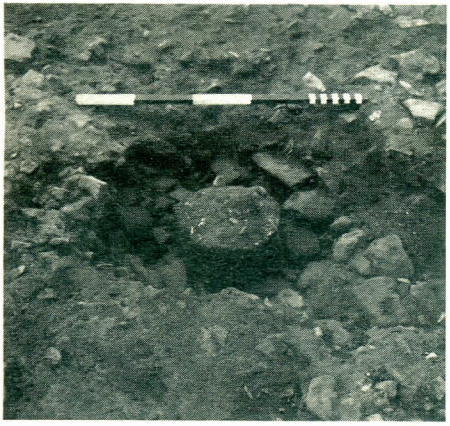


Early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowheads from excavations in Northampton. The top arrowhead was discovered in the Briar Hill cremation cemetery. (Scale approx 1.5:1)

the neglected ditches of the enclosure can have been visible only as shallow, overgrown depressions in the ground.

The ores of copper and tin, which was added to copper to make bronze, are found in only a few parts of the country, as opposed to flint which is readily available almost everywhere, and flint continued to be used for the manufacture of many domestic implements, including scrapers, knives and arrowheads. As knowledge of the use of metal spread amongst the descendants of the Late Neolithic and Beaker people of Britain, systems of manufacture and distribution evolved, more complex than the Neolithic axe trade, to exploit the sources of metal and meet the demand for the new and more efficient tools and weapons. The majority of people remained farmers, living directly off the land, but society now included classes of more mobile specialists and craftsmen – prospectors and miners, bronze founders and smiths. Through the trade in metals and metal objects regular contacts were established between Britain and Ireland and northern and western Europe, and through these contacts new ideas spread quickly. The slow-changing, self sufficient world of Neolithic Britain gradually disappeared.

Briar Hill cremation cemetery. An arrowhead damaged by the heat of the fire was found buried with one cremation. (Scale pole graded at centimetre and ten centimetre intervals).



Briar Hill cremation cemetery. Lower part of crude earthenware pot containing cremated ashes. (Scale pole graded at centimetre and ten centimetre intervals).

People of importance amassed wealth of bronze and even gold, and a grave mound or barrow excavated near Earls Barton and found to cover remains which included a splendid bronze dagger was probably built to commemorate one such local chieftain.

During the earlier part of the Bronze Age, until at least 1400BC, people continued to inhabit the same territories as their Neolithic ancestors. Good evidence exists of extensive settlements and burial grounds dating from this period to the north and east of Northampton, and the site of Northampton itself must have been settled also, although the evidence is less plentiful. Records exist of mounds which may have marked Bronze Age burials at Abington and St. James End. There is another such mound near Upton, and the excavators of Briar Hill found that a small area within the enclosure had been used for burial of the cremated ashes of perhaps 20 individuals in pots or other containers. Although there does not seem to have been any barrow mound, the method of burial was normal amongst early Bronze Age people, and one of the cremations was accompanied by a flint arrowhead of typical Bronze Age design. That particular place may have been chosen because a tradition had persisted that the site was in some sense hallowed, but undoubtedly there was a settlement not too far away.

Direct evidence for farms and settlement of the later Bronze Age, between 1400BC and 700BC, is almost non-existent in the Northampton area. A few finds of bronze axe-heads and a spear head from Upton are the only certain relics of the time which have been recorded. Such discoveries are comparatively rare and probably represent accidental losses, for the metal was too precious to throw away and scrap was normally bought up by the bronze smiths to be melted down for re-use.

This was a period of increasingly rapid technological progress in metal-working and of great social change during which the first hill-top fortifications were built as chieftain's strongholds. Nothing has been found, however, to suggest that the hill fort at Hunsbury was occupied at this time.

The Iron Age (700BC-AD43)

The knowledge and use of iron spread from the Continent to south-east England about 700BC. Because of this advance in technology, with the ready availability of iron tools, life became easier and more settled and stable farming communities developed. The structure of society became more complex and whilst the economy was still basically at subsistence level there was increasing local and long distance trade. Certainly by the end of the Iron Age most of England was divided into tribal areas, the origins of which stretch back into the Bronze Age. Northampton fell within the territory of the Catuvellauni with their capital near St. Albans. The territory of the Coritani stretched from the Humber estuary south to just north of the Nene Valley.

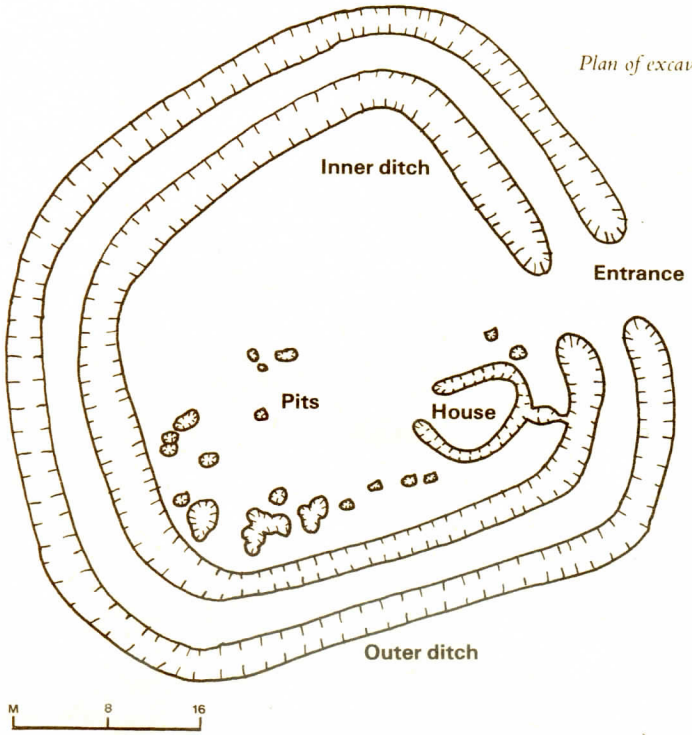
Increasingly powerful local chieftains led a warrior aristocracy and built strongholds such as the hill fort at Hunsbury. The hill fort was defended by a massive rampart and ditch. Excavations by Professor Atkinson showed that the rampart was initially of 'box' type, faced on both sides with stone blocks and held together by a timber framework. Later there was only a large bank. A considerable part of the interior was quarried for ironstone at the end of the nineteenth century and rich finds were recovered during the actual quarrying. These included a sword and iron and bronze pieces of scabbard, bridle bits and other horse trappings, iron chariot fittings, bronze brooches, glass beads and bone weaving combs. Much pottery was also recovered among which were bowls inscribed with graceful curvilinear designs. This type of pottery, subsequently found elsewhere, is now referred to by archaeologists as 'Hunsbury curvilinear type'.

Most of the population, however, lived by farming on a small scale in scattered communities. There are numerous finds of Iron Age material both in the immediate vicinity of the Hunsbury hill fort and elsewhere within the Greater Northampton area.

A typical little farmstead at Blackthorn, situated on the light, well drained soils of the

Blackthorn Iron Age farm.

Plan of excavated features

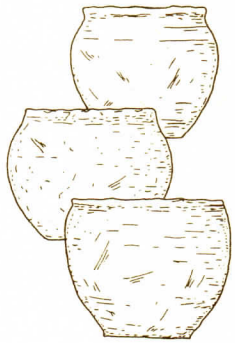


An artist's impression of the farm with fields for growing crops in the background. The enclosure bank within the ditches was probably topped by a hedge.

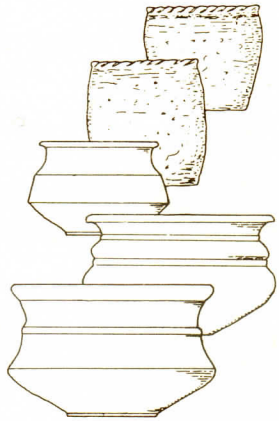
Excavation in progress on the causeway at Moulton Park with the facing of fine herring-bone stonework clearly visible.

Northampton Sands, was probably occupied by a single family sometime between 200BC and AD0. The family lived in a small oval-shaped wooden hut, measuring 5 × 3.5m in an enclosure surrounded by a bank and double ditch which probably served as much to keep animals in as for defence. The inner ditch was *c* 3m across × 1.5m deep and the outer ditch *c* 2m × 1m deep. Pits dug within the enclosure were probably used to store grain grown in the fields surrounding the farm. A rotary quern found on the site would have been used to grind the grain. Pottery from the site included hand-made globular cooking pots and two fragments of 'Hunsbury' bowls.

A farmstead, similar to the one at Blackthorn was set up at Moulton Park *c* 50BC. A circular dwelling hut *c* 7.5m in diameter and defined by a horseshoe-shaped drainage gully lay within a circular enclosure surrounded by a single ditch *c* 3m wide × 1.5m deep. Hunsbury curvilinear – decorated pottery and coarse globular cooking pots were found. Early in the first century AD the settlement expanded and several more circular huts were built and further enclosure ditches dug. It is probable that a large family group or perhaps several families were now living here. One of the ditches was crossed by a well-built causeway of herringbone stonework most unusual at this date. The pottery from the later buildings was quite different from the earlier type. The new style, known as 'Belgic' was in use in this area about the time of the Roman invasion of Britain. The pots were wheel-thrown and decorated with cordons and corrugations – a kiln producing such pottery has been found near to Hunsbury Hill. Also found were pieces of clay weights which may have been used on upright looms. Bones of sheep, cow and pig show the kind of animals kept on the farm. Deer bones suggest that the farmers also hunted for meat.



Late Iron Age pottery ***Scale 1:8***



'Belgic' pottery ***Scale 1:8***

The Romans (AD43-400)

In AD43 the Romans invaded Britain. Initial resistance was small and the Emperor Claudius could soon march triumphantly into the important stronghold of Colchester. As the Romans advanced northwards they consolidated their position with a series of forts well placed along their renowned straight roads. It is quite possible that there was a fort at Duston connected with the early military advance with further forts at Towcester, Irchester and Whilton Lodge. Conclusive proof is lacking but a few sherds of early Roman pottery have been found.

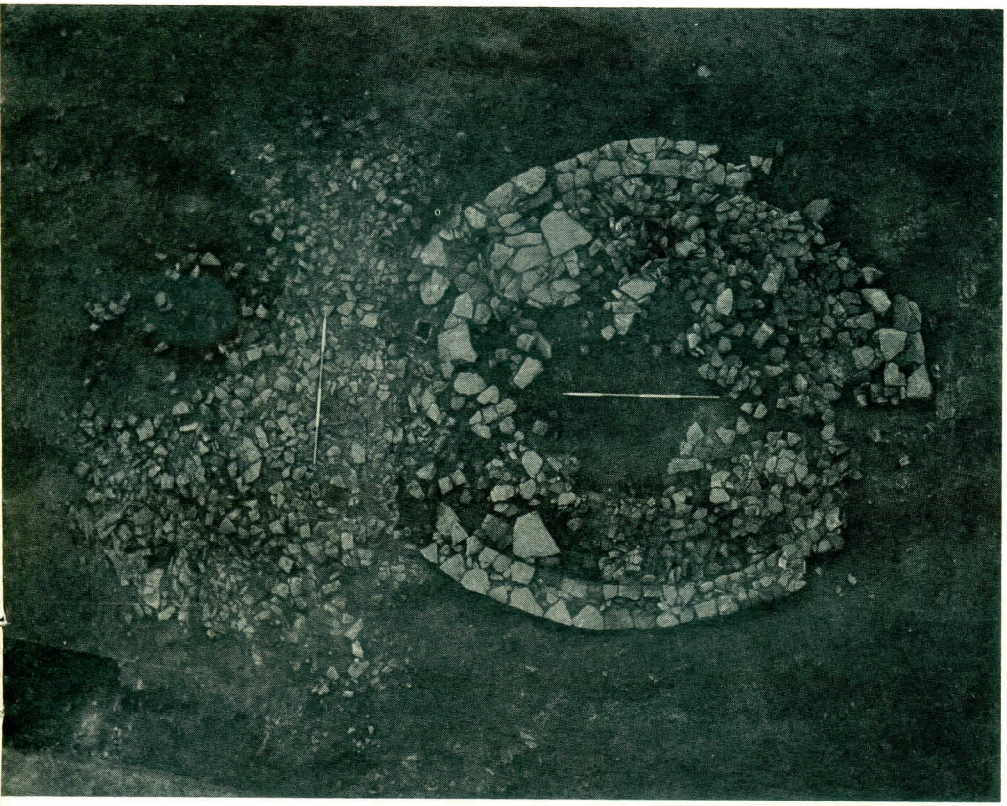
Roman 'civilization' was soon introduced – stone buildings with mosaics and underfloor central heating, baths, towns adorned with fine buildings, villas in the countryside – trade and industry were encouraged and a thriving commercial life developed. Northamptonshire was not at the centre of Romano – British affairs but Duston prospered as a small town covering at least 20 acres. A large part of the site was quarried during nineteenth century ironstone extraction but excavations in 1974-5 indicated fairly scattered timber and stone buildings and part of a cemetery. One rectangular stone building had a corn drying oven at its centre. An interesting find was a hoard of 45 coins of the second half of the third century contained in a pot. The coins were presumably buried for safe keeping. There is no indication of the formal planning, public buildings and close packed houses and shops as at the great centres such as Verulamium, Wroxeter and Cirencester.

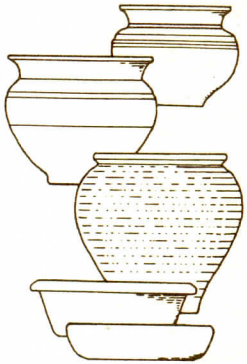
Surface scatters of pottery found during 'field walking' of ploughed fields around Northampton clearly testify to dense settlement in the Nene Valley during the Roman period. The Northampton area has no really rich villas but villas with tessellated floors are known near Hunsbury Hill and at Buttocks Booth. Smaller romanised farms have been excavated at Thorplands and Overstone, the latter a real 'rescue' dig along the line of Talavera Way with giant earth moving machines roaring away within feet of the excavations.

The buildings on both sites were not much more sophisticated than those found in the preceding Iron Age and, in fact, on each site one building, initially constructed in timber but later re-built with at least the foundations in stone, adopted the native circular plan. There were also rectangular stone buildings. The widespread development of trade in Roman Britain even on such comparatively small sites can be seen not only in the presence of coins but also of pottery from the Peterborough area, Warwickshire, Oxfordshire and even from France.

Roman coins from Duston

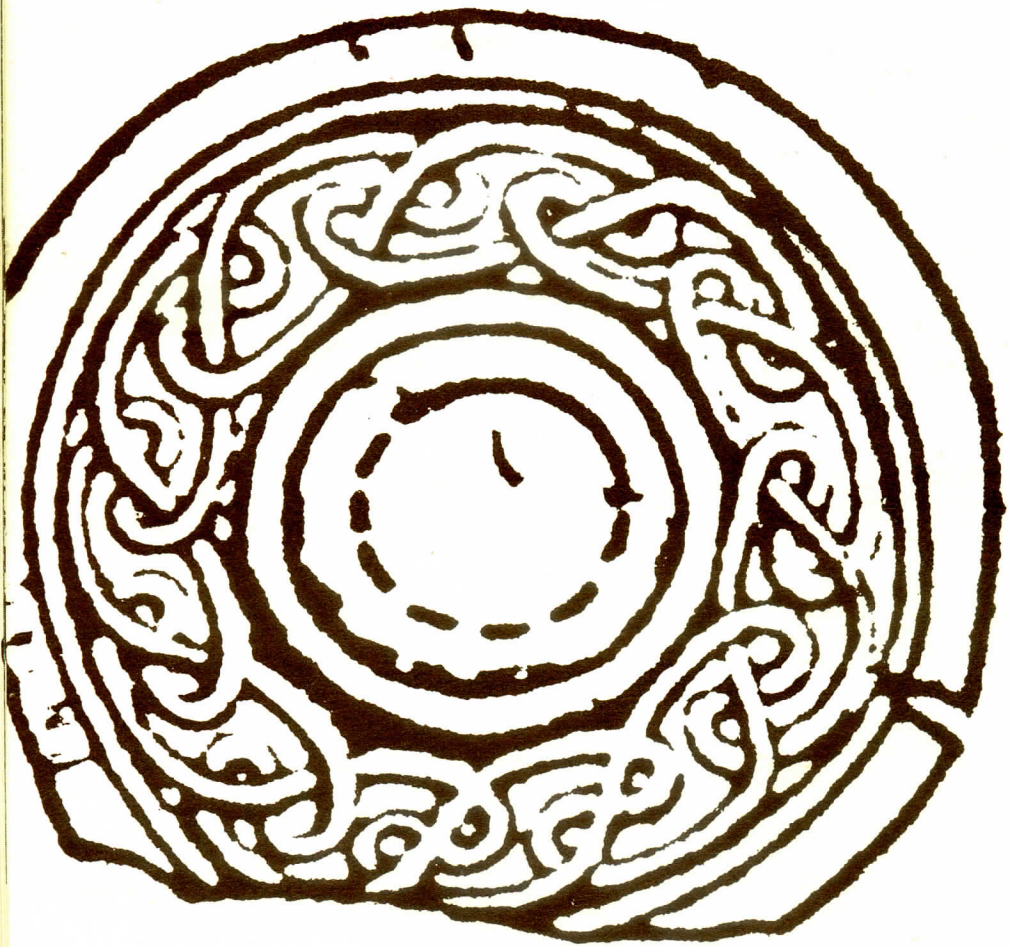
The stone circular building at Thorplands. (Scale pole graded in half metres).





Romano-British jars and dishes **Scale 1:8**

The Early and Middle Saxon period (AD400-850)



Early in the fifth century with the growing threat of the warlike Germanic tribes along the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, the Roman armies in Britain were withdrawn to mainland Europe. Britain itself was now exposed to increasing attacks by the Anglo-Saxons. The central administration, developed over four centuries of Roman rule, crumbled and with it went the other outward signs of Roman civilisation. Villas and towns fell into disrepair and were abandoned and trade and commercial life declined. From the middle of the sixth century, however, the political situation in England began to stabilise and kingdoms such as Northumbria, Kent and Mercia started to emerge. In 594 St Augustine came to England and commenced the process of converting the country to christianity.

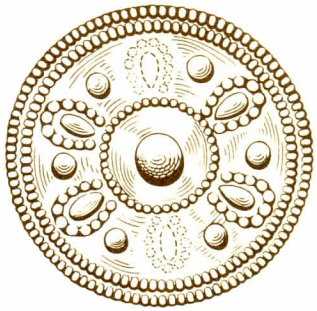
The historical and archaeological evidence for this period is everywhere far from plentiful and the story of Northampton at this time is cloaked in mystery. The small Romano-British town at Duston seems to have been deserted by soon after AD400 but an Early or 'Pagan' Saxon cemetery a little to the west suggests the presence of Germanic settlers in the fifth and sixth centuries. Four sunken-floored huts or 'Grubenhäuser', which have been excavated on Briar Hill in the area of the Neolithic causewayed camp, were also perhaps part of a small village. These rather squalid dwellings measuring 3-4 × 2-3m had their floors cut into the subsoil and were covered with a simple ridged roof of thatch or branches. Finds were few – some fragments of pottery, two iron knives, a couple of lead (?) loom weights – life would have been fairly hard. No buildings of this period have been found on the site of Northampton itself although in the vicinity of St Peter's church a considerable scatter of the characteristic black gritty pottery including sherds from decorated bossed urns indicate occupation in that area. Indeed it is possible that the local chief resided in Northampton for there is something of a concentration of both cemetery

Early and Middle Saxon Northampton.

and occupation sites in the surrounding countryside – nineteenth century discoveries of burial urns and rich brooches from the cemeteries of St Andrew's hospital and Duston can now be seen in Northampton Museum.

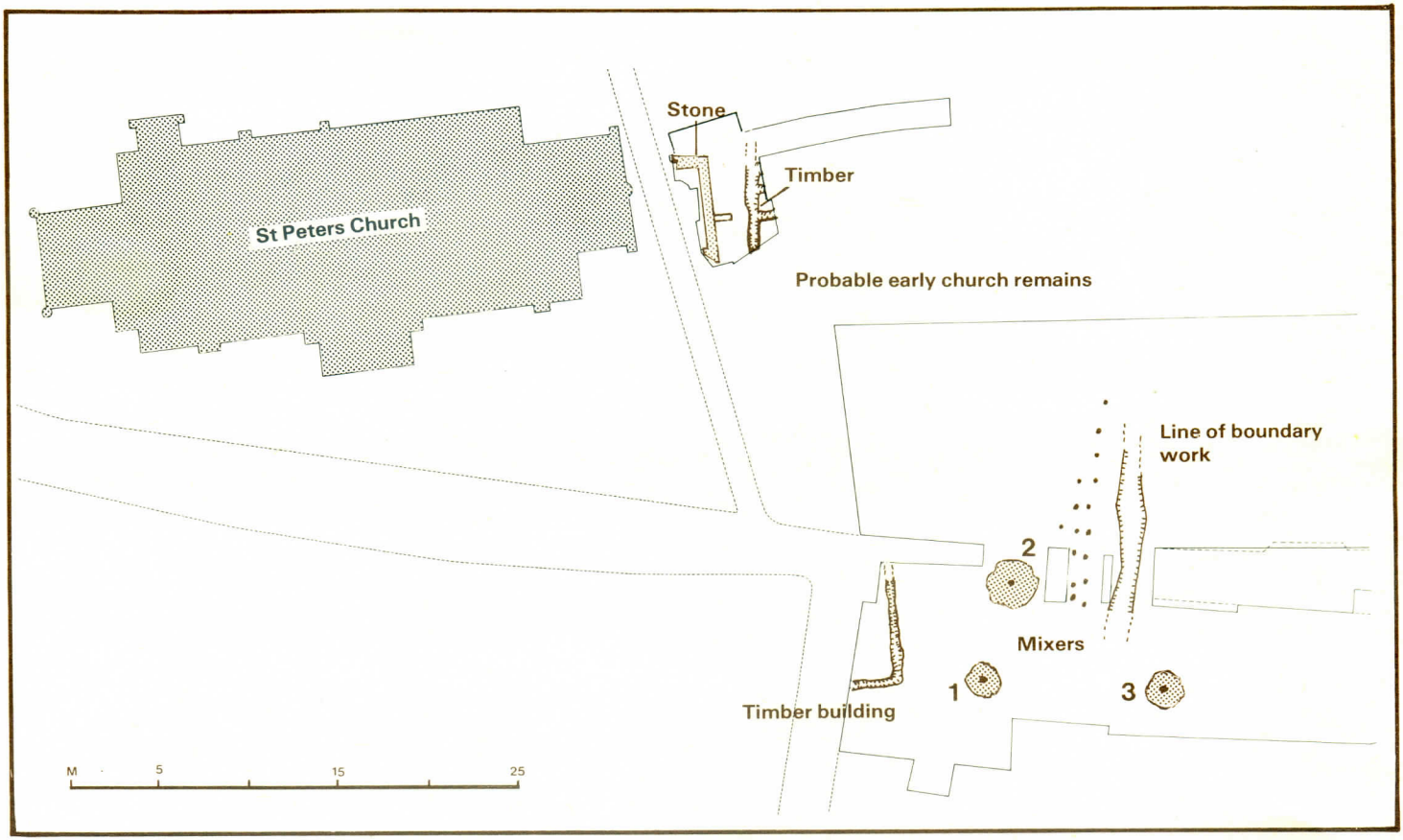
A fine fifth-sixth century disc brooch of Frankish style was found in the St Peter's Street excavations.

A series of discoveries relating to Northampton in the Middle Saxon period (AD650-850) is proving of immense significance. In 1973 the fossilised remains of three mechanical mortar mixers, which probably required at least four men to drive them, were found in St Peter's Street, then, in a small trench immediately to the east of St Peter's church, the east end of a stone building was discovered which used the same mortar as that in the mixers. This building, 6m across and probably no more than 20m long, was almost certainly an early predecessor of the present St Peter's church. A little further east a possible boundary work comprising a bank and small ditch defined the area attached to the church. Objects such as a bronze shrine fitting possibly of Irish origin, a bronze stylus or pen, a



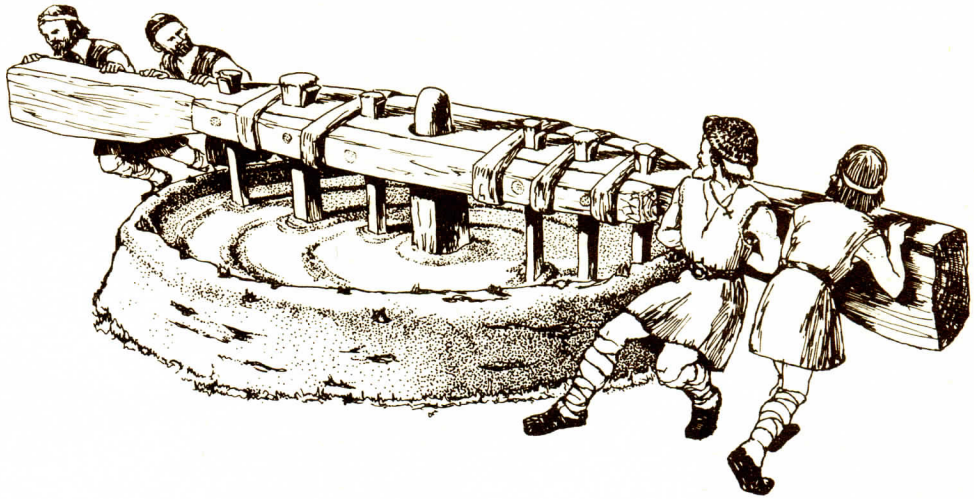
The fifth-sixth century disc brooch from St Peter's Street. (Scale 1.5:1)

Plan of the St Peter's Street area in the eighth century.

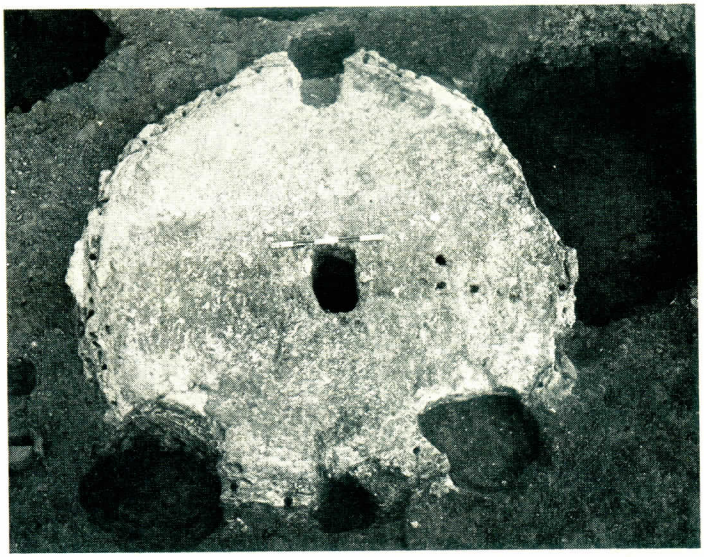


The foundations and the floor of the early eighth century stone church can be seen in the side of the trench below later building levels. The east wall of the present St Peter's church is visible in the background. (Scale pole graded in half metres).

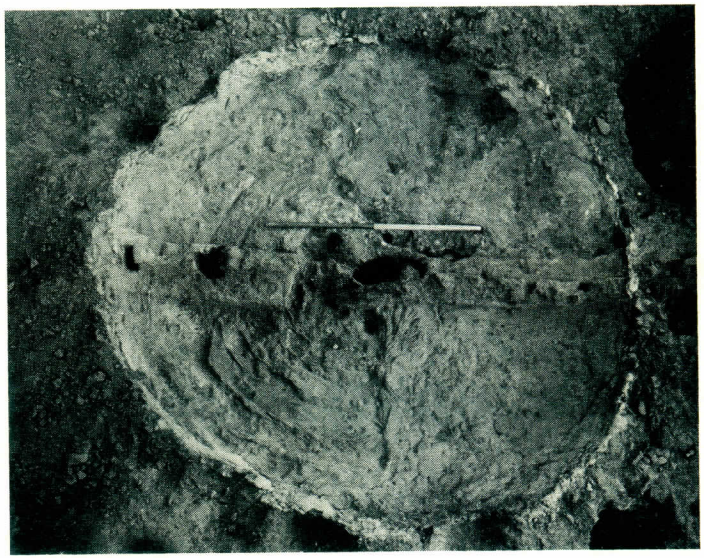
An artist's impression of the construction of the first stone church of St Peter.



An artist's impression of one of the mortar mixers from St Peter's Street.

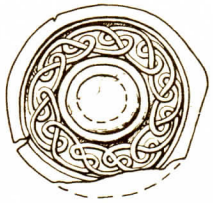


Mortar mixer 1 showing the position of the central post and peripheral wattle-work fossilised by the residual lime deposits within the mixer bowl. (Scale pole graded at centimetre and ten centimetre intervals).

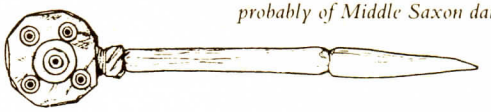


Mortar mixer 3. Concentric grooves in the lower mortar residue line up with the voids where the paddles finally came to rest. The grooves and the paddle holes with their indications of rotary motion enable us to reconstruct how the mixer worked.

decorated bone pin and a fragment of glass vessel also indicate the presence of a church. To the north of St Peter's and extending over an area including the site of the later castle more Middle Saxon pottery was found as well as the remains of a rectangular building with walls 0.80m thick of earth packed between timber framing. Animal bone found in association with the mortar mixers and the church was used to provide radio-carbon dates which suggest that the church was constructed around AD700. This is still very much in the period of Conversion and indicates that Northampton was a site of some importance at this time for stone buildings were still very rare. But what was the status of the site? The church could have been monastic and documents tell us that Bishop Wilfrid, a famous missionary, was in the area at about this time. Alternatively the church could have been attached to a Saxon royal or lordly residence, the centre of an estate. For although the area of settlement was fairly extensive Northampton was not yet a town. This development was reserved for the Late Saxon period.



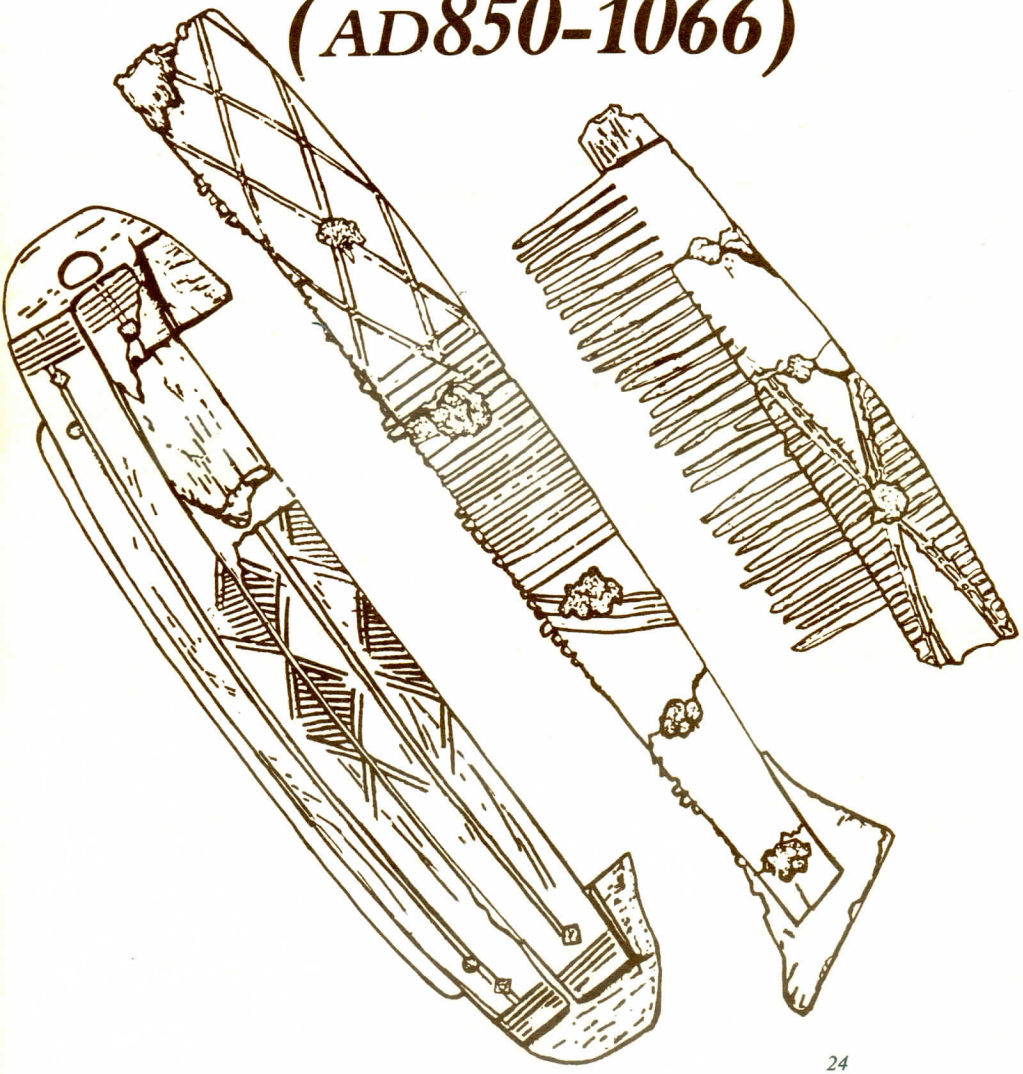
Shrine mount — Decorative bronze mount from a shrine casket with a relief design of interlace knots. The mount dates to the late eighth century and is probably of Irish manufacture. **Scale 1:1**



Disc headed bone pin with ring and dot decoration and probably of Middle Saxon date. **Scale 1:1**

Bronze stylus used for writing on waxed tablets. The triangular head with its interlace decoration probably dates the stylus to the eighth century. **Scale 1:1**

The Late Saxon period (AD850-1066)



England's steady economic growth was interrupted in the ninth century by Viking raids from across the North Sea. Some of the attackers settled in the eastern part of England, which came to be known as the Danelaw, and began to press westwards until checked by King Alfred and his successors in the later ninth and early tenth centuries. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the Saxons and Danes gradually came together and the country became united under one king. England now prospered as one of the strongest kingdoms in northern Europe.

Northampton lay on the western edge of the Danelaw and was an administrative centre for the Danish army in the late ninth and tenth centuries, but nothing diagnostically Danish has yet been found in archaeological excavations. It is interesting, however, that Northampton's town court throughout the Middle Ages, the 'Hustings Court', was a Danish institution. In AD913, so the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us, Northampton was captured by the Saxon King Edward from the Danes and from this time, if not earlier, rapidly developed as an economic and political centre – the chief town of the 'shire' and a market of some importance. Additionally by the middle of the tenth century it had its own mint producing coins.

The town as it then was, although naturally defended by the river and marshy ground to the north and west, was probably enclosed at some time in the tenth century by defences consisting of a timber revetted earthen bank and ditch. The line of the defences can now be traced on the ground, fossilised by the survival of a double ring of streets which ran inside and outside the defences. The area within the ramparts would have covered some 60 acres. The main east-west and north-south streets of the town are also preserved in Marefair and Gold Street and Horsemarket and Horseshoe Street. As the town developed, suburbs possibly grew up outside the east gate on the road to Kettering and beyond the north gate towards Leicester.

Two extensive excavations, in St Peter's

Late Saxon Northampton.

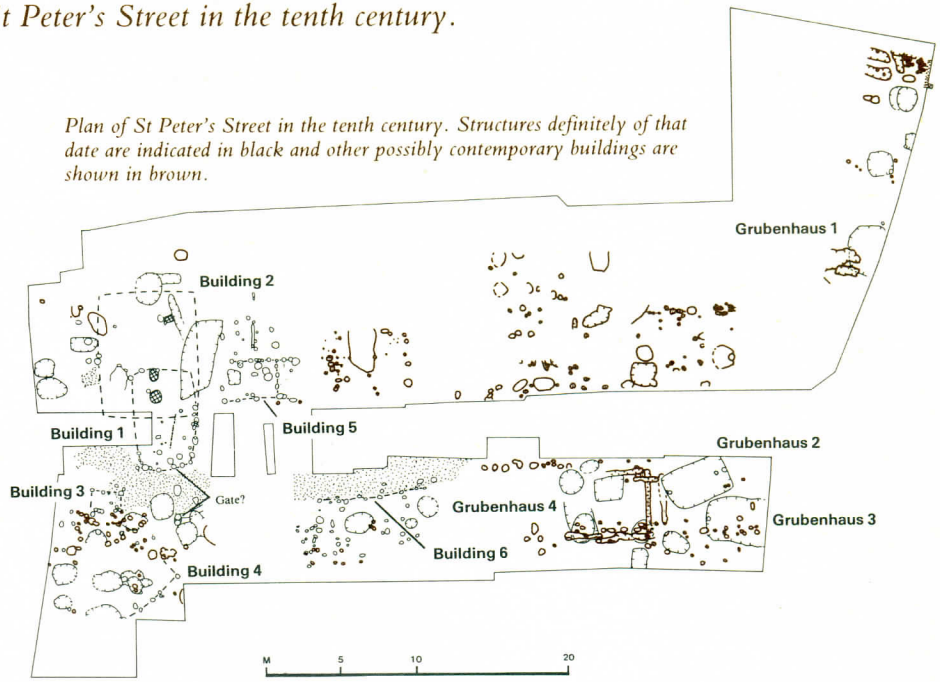
Street and in Chalk Lane, on the site of the later castle, have given us a glimpse of what life was like in Late Saxon Northampton.

St Peter's Street as such did not exist but a metalled lane meandered east-west across the excavated site. To the west, near St Peter's church was a group of simple, single storeyed timber-framed buildings probably containing only one room where everyone lived, cooked, ate and slept. These buildings were set around a yard and probably enclosed by a fence, forming a self-contained unit. The buildings were reconstructed and repaired several times. Slag and the remains of at least two furnaces show us that iron-smelting and working were carried on – perhaps the manufacture of knives and other tools found on the site. Pieces of sawn antler indicate that combs and other artefacts were made. Spindle whorls and bone weaving tools suggest textile production.

At the east end of the site and separated from the western building complex by an area of open ground were found sunken-floored huts or Grubenhäuser similar to those of Early Saxon

St Peter's Street in the tenth century.

Plan of St Peter's Street in the tenth century. Structures definitely of that date are indicated in black and other possibly contemporary buildings are shown in brown.



An artist's impression of Northampton in the tenth century. Although Northampton now fulfilled many of the functions expected of a 'town', its plan was far more open than in the later, Mediaeval period.

date on Briar Hill. Considerably meaner than the timber framed structures they may have been used as sheds or workshops and probably belonged to buildings which stood outside the excavated area. Pits, containing broken pottery and other rubbish, were found all over the site. Animal bones from them show that cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens and geese were all kept and eaten.

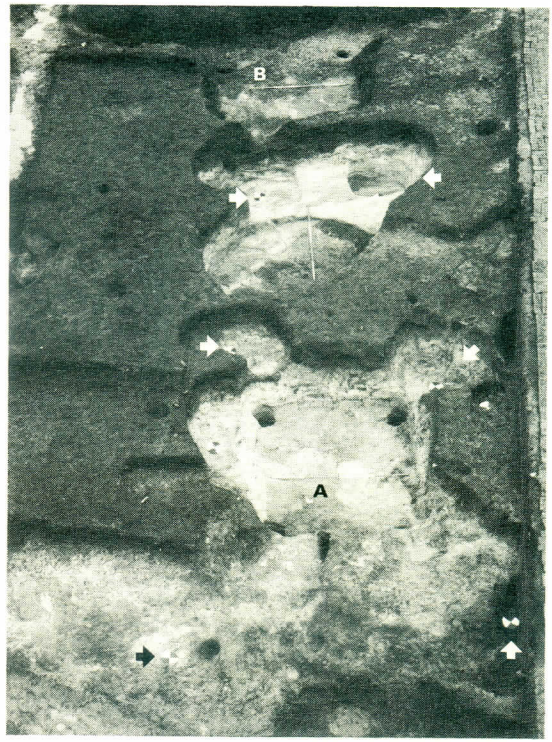
On the Chalk Lane site, beneath the inner bailey of the later castle, an interesting series of buildings was excavated. At the beginning of the tenth century a timber hall 10 × 3-4m was erected the walls of which were defined by large holes for upright posts at each corner and midway down each side; at one end there was a small square cellar 3 × 3 × 1m deep set within the building and at the other end, outside, lay another large sunken-floored building.

In the late tenth or early eleventh century these structures were replaced by another timber hall, the walls now being formed of closely set upright timbers. Immediately to the west of the building was a yard, to the north was a pitted area where rubbish was disposed of and to the south was cultivated ground. Slag was again plentiful and fragments of crucible used in the melting of copper alloys were also present.

On both sites pottery was now much more prolific than in earlier times and included a large number of fragments of 'Northampton ware'. The remains of a kiln producing this pottery, mainly bulbous cooking pots in a sandy grey fabric, were found in 1971 during the widening of Horseshoe Street. Increasing trade is suggested by the presence of pottery brought in from further afield e.g. Stamford, and some sherds may even have come from the Continent.

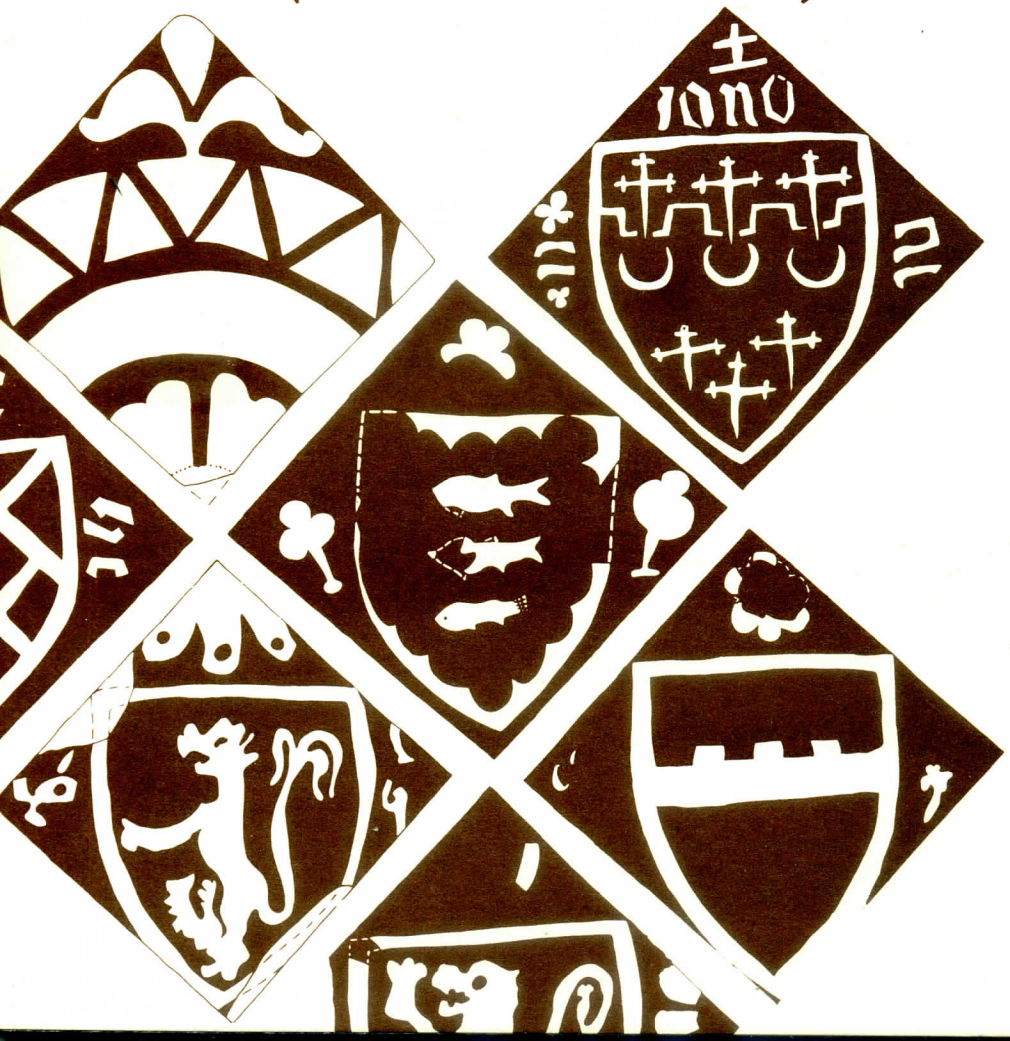
Northampton, then, in the Late Saxon period was a prosperous place – an administrative centre and a focus for trade – but it probably did not look like what we regard as a town. The street frontages were probably not densely built up except perhaps around the market place or places but buildings were arranged rather in economic or family groups. Although there were specialist tradesmen such as weavers or smiths it is possible that part of the population was still engaged in farming the open fields around the town and that the farms themselves lay in the town.

Typical Late Saxon cooking pots, bowls and storage jar. ***Scale 1:8***



Chalk Lane — The excavated remains of an early tenth century six-post structure. The three posts on either side of the building, which were its main structural members are arrowed. Towards the bottom of the photograph is a four-post square cellar (A) in which an Edmund memorial penny of c.AD 900 was found. Also shown is a sunken floored building (B). To the left of the buildings was an open yard. (Scale graded in half metres).

Mediaeval Northampton (AD1066-1540)



After the Norman Conquest Northampton's position was perhaps consolidated by the marriage of Waltheof, the Saxon earl of Northampton, to Judith the niece of William the Conqueror. Waltheof was executed in 1076 for conspiracy but his daughter Matilda married Simon de Senlis 1 in 1089 and it is to the three Senlis earls and Matilda's second husband David, King of Scotland, that many important works and general prosperity in Northampton are attributed. The castle was founded in the late eleventh century and Dr John Alexander's excavations in the early 1960's uncovered, beneath the later inner bailey ramparts, the remains of a probable motte of an early motte-and-bailey castle. Most of the castle, reconstructed and modified over many centuries of use, was removed in the late nineteenth century to make way for the railway goods depot. Few records remain of the castle structures. During the Middle Ages the castle was sometimes in the hands of the Earl and sometimes held directly by the King. Simon de Senlis 1 also founded the Cluniac priory of St Andrew in the late eleventh century on a site to the north of the present Grafton Street. The presence of St Andrew's is remembered by such names as Lower Priory Street. Part of the cemetery of the priory was excavated in 1970.

Although these once proud buildings can no longer be seen Northampton can boast in St Sepulchre's one of only five Norman round churches in the country and St Peter's has some exquisite Romanesque stone carving.

When King William compiled his great national census, the Domesday Book, in 1086 Northampton was recorded as a town of approximately 300 houses (population 1500-2000?) rendering a 'farm' or tax to the king of £30.10s which was approximately the twentieth highest borough farm in the country and placed Northampton roughly equivalent to such towns as Nottingham, Derby, Torksey (Lincs) and Worcester. Many people prominent in royal circles, such as the Count of Mortain

Mediaeval Northampton.

Plan of Northampton in AD 1610 drawn by John Speed.

and the Bishop of Coutances, held property in Northampton and a 'new town' of French settlers had been established beside the old pre-Conquest borough.

During the twelfth century Northampton flourished and taxation returns under King Henry II in the late twelfth century show that Northampton was at that time probably among the six most prosperous towns in the country – cloth manufacture was probably an important industry. The status of the place can also be seen in the large number of royal and religious councils held in Northampton.

Tradition attributed to Simon de Senlis 1 the construction of the town walls as seen on Speed's map of 1610. This is by no means certain but it is quite possible that the walls were originally built during the twelfth century and subsequently modified and repaired as witnessed by thirteenth century 'murage grants'. The line of the defences can still be traced on the ground along a large part of its circuit: St George's Street, the Mounts, York Road, Cheyne Walk, Victoria Promenade. A small excavation in 1973, to the north of the Mounts picked up a ditch *c* 8m wide × 2m deep and ironstone rubble below the pavement probably comprised the foundations of the town wall.

The area within the walls covered some 245 acres. Only the walls of London and Norwich enclosed larger areas.

Within the town settlement may not have been dense initially for the Franciscan and Carmelite friars did not acquire their sites (respectively on the site of the Grosvenor Centre and to the north of the new bus station) until the middle of the thirteenth century and in 1235 the site of the present Market Square was described as waste land. Times change, however, and the rows of buildings on the south and west of the Market Square were probably encroachments on to the original market area brought about through commercial pressures. By the fourteenth century, however, Northampton had faded and in a ranking of towns based on taxation returns in 1334 Northampton had fallen below fiftieth position. By 1484 the town was in 'great desolation and ruin'.

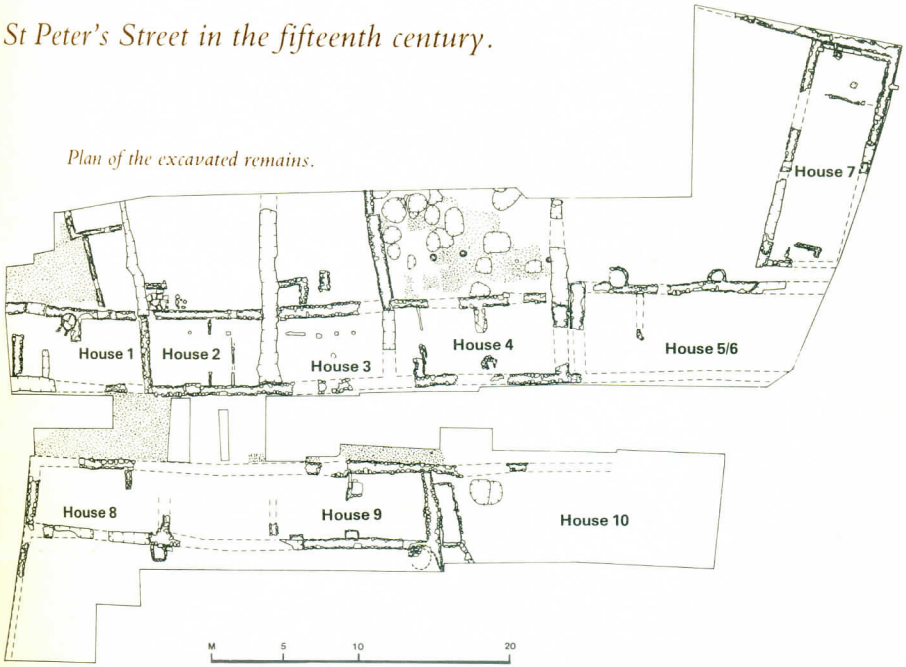
The excavations in St Peter's Street have thrown interesting light on life in Mediaeval Northampton. After the Norman Conquest the street was laid down on its present line and timber houses were erected on either side.

The houses were still fairly basic single-storeyed structures with earth floors and we cannot be certain how densely the street was packed with buildings at any one time. About the year 1250 two houses were re-built, their ground storey well constructed in stone and probably with an upper storey of timber. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries further stone houses were erected and then, early in the fifteenth century the whole street was reconstructed – perhaps all the properties belonged to a single landowner. The houses, measuring 8-12m × 6m and with their long sides fronting the street, were divided into two rooms on the ground floor. They were probably artisan's dwellings, being fairly substantial but not really grand enough for merchants houses.

There was a number of indications of industrial activity along the street. Bronze waste and a number of pins perhaps suggest bronze-

St Peter's Street in the fifteenth century.

Plan of the excavated remains.



View of north side of street from the east. (Scale poles graded in half metres).

An artist's impression of the street at that time.

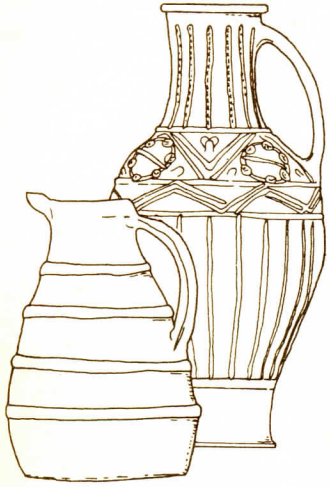
working or pin-making; several spindle whorls were found; horn cores contained in several pits were probably the residue from horn-working. Of particular interest were two drying ovens cut down into the bed-rock and lined with neat stone walling. The grain or whatever to be dried would have laid on a tray of green branches covered with a horse-hair sheet within the oven and a fire lit underneath. Burnt grain was found in the stoke hole.

Pottery was found in abundance. Vessel types were becoming more elaborate with some highly decorated jugs perhaps imitating the metal ones used by the well-off. Although local wares made within a radius of ten miles of Northampton at places such as Potterspury, Olney Hyde and Ashton still predominated other pottery was coming in at various times in the Middle Ages from Oxfordshire, Lyveden (north-east Northants), Stamford, Nottingham, Surrey etc. Another indication of flourishing trade, this time in perishable foodstuffs, is provided by the bones of cod, ling and herring, all marine fish, found in rubbish pits. Northampton is some 60 miles from the sea. Indeed in its heyday Northampton's fair was one of the four or five great fairs of England and purchases of cloth and furs by the king are regularly recorded.

Oven used for roasting malt and drying cereals. The stoke hole can be seen in the foreground with the oven beyond. (Scale poles graded in half metres).

Mediaeval pottery from Northampton. ***Scale 1:8***

Religion played an important part in Mediaeval Northampton and, as elsewhere, gifts both large and small were given to the Church in order to secure a passport to heaven. There were probably seven parish churches within the walls; All Saints, St Peter's, St Giles' and Holy Sepulchre still survive but St Gregory's, St Michael's and St Mary's all disappeared in the sixteenth century. As regards monasteries, St Andrew's priory has already been mentioned but additionally there was a Cluniac nunnery at Delapre (the building was subsequently converted into a mansion and is now the County Record Office) and also an Augustinian priory, St James', to the west of Northampton, hence St James' End. In the thirteenth century a new religious movement sprang up as a reaction against the enclosed orders of monks who had withdrawn from the world to an increasingly comfortable way of life. The friars as they were called relied solely on alms for subsistence and



Decorated thirteenth/fourteenth century jugs made at Brill (Buckinghamshire) and Lyveden (north east Northants) and found in Northampton. ***Scale 1:8***

went out to preach to the people at large and minister to the poor and needy. They were thus attracted to the towns, the centres of Mediaeval population. Northampton had friaries belonging to all four major orders, – the Greyfriars, the Whitefriars, the Blackfriars and the Augustinian friars – as well as the Friars of the Sack. The site of Greyfriars was excavated in 1972 in advance of the construction of the Grosvenor Centre and parts of the church and cloister, floored with decorated tiles, were uncovered. Several burials were excavated in and adjacent to the church. The town also contained hospitals for the sick and needy. St Thomas' and St Leonard's have since disappeared but part of St John's remains as the Catholic church at the bottom of Bridge Street.

About 1540 Henry VIII appropriated the revenues of the monastic houses and a large number of their buildings were demolished. Dramatic evidence of this was found at Greyfriars, in particular the kiln where lead from the roof of the church was melted down for re-use elsewhere. All the monastic property in Northampton fell into lay hands. The records relating to this period provide a rich source of information and indeed we can see just before the Dissolution of the Monasteries that approximately two thirds of all property in Northampton was in the hands of the Church.

Northampton, however, was now an ordinary provincial market centre, a county town with a fairly diversified economy (population 3,000). The leather trades were beginning to emerge but no one interest really dominated the town. Times were fairly hard and Dr John London reported to the King in 1539:—

'I see, in Northampton, notable decay, first of the houses, whereof part belonged to the religious houses there lately suppressed, which were evil repairers of their lands, and part to gentlemen of the country, who extort as much rent as they can and leave all repairs to the tenants who now let their housing fall in ruin to the great deformity of the town'.

A fragment of Mediaeval painted glass from Greyfriars.

A seal inscribed 'Sigillum/:mathis/boifchop', (seal of Matthew Bishop) probably late fourteenth/fifteenth century.

Pilgrim badge from the shrine of King Henry VI at Windsor. Badges like this were mass produced in lead or pewter as souvenirs to be brought by pilgrims at shrines and holy places.

After the Dissolution

As we get nearer the present, historical records increase and so archaeology cannot make such large additions to our knowledge as in earlier periods. Archaeological work in Northampton has, therefore, concentrated on the growth of Northampton up to the Dissolution. An interesting late sixteenth to early seventeenth century tannery was, however, uncovered in St Peter's Street. This is one of our earliest indications of the growth of the leather trades in Northampton. Six rectangular and two circular clay lined pits would have been used to soak the skins in tanning liquor as part of the process of converting them into leather. Bearing in mind that tanning is a comparatively lengthy process the output would have been extremely low but it would appear that throughout the Mediaeval and Post-mediaeval periods one-man tanneries were extremely common.

Historical sources show us that after the Dissolution Northampton continued as a middling provincial centre. In the seventeenth century, however, it experienced a series of natural disasters, with bouts of plague followed by the great fire of 1675 which destroyed large parts of the town, but great resilience was displayed as at other times in its history, and Daniel Defoe could describe Northampton as 'the handsomest and best built town in all this part of England'. So the town ambled on but the arrival of the canal and railway once more provided an economic stimulus to the town and the construction of the M1 and Northampton's designation in the 1960's as an area of considerable expansion have also furthered its economic growth.

As with many towns Northampton seems to have enjoyed a cyclical development as its prosperity ebbed and flowed but its strategic importance has not really changed during over 6000 years of history.

The work of the Archaeological Unit is continuing and it is hoped that more of Northampton's most interesting past will be uncovered.

The clay lined pits of the Post-mediaeval tannery in St Peter's Street in which the skins would have been soaked in tanning liquors and converted into leather. (Scale pole graded in half metres).

Further reading

Victoria History of the Counties of England: Northamptonshire volume 3.

Various articles in Northamptonshire Archaeology (the Journal of Northamptonshire Archaeological Society).

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The Early Development of the Town of Northampton by J. H. Williams, pp. 131-154 in Mercian Studies, ed. A. Dornier, 1977.

St Peter's Street, Northampton, Excavations 1973—1976 by J. H. Williams, Northampton Development Corporation Archaeological Monograph No 2, 1979.

Northampton
middle england

character
prosperity
& growth

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