Archaeological Test Pit Excavations in Shillington, Bedfordshire, 2015

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Pottery reports and comment by Paul Blinkhorn
Introduction
In June 2013, Shillington History Society arranged for the archaeology of the village to be investigated using a series of 1 metre square test pits excavated in contexts (layers) of 10cm depth. The Society received advice from Access Cambridge Archaeology (University of Cambridge) and the excavation was co-funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) under their All Our Stories funding stream and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under their Connected Communities programme, Cambridge Community Heritage. Sixteen of the test pits were dug by family groups and friends and supervised by Access Cambridge Archaeology with 7 more dug by a group of amateur archaeologists, some of whom lived outside the village but had experience of test pitting in other locations.

This group resumed digging in 2014 with seven more test pits and brought the total to 35 with another five in 2015. Those taking part in 2015 were Derek Turner, Nigel Harper-Scott, Kevin Jorgannsen, Ivor Davis, Alison Graham, Sally Stapleton, Dave Rickett and Clare Richmond.

Most of the “non-natural” materials (except for those that are obviously modern with little historic value) have been retained, cleaned and recorded in ‘Excavation Records’ booklets. Pottery specialist, Paul Blinkhorn (PB), analysed all of the pottery finds which are shown in a table for each test pit and his comments are incorporated into the report for each test pit.

In 2013 when a substantial grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the University of Cambridge (Cambridge Community Archaeology) facilitated the digging and analysis of 23 test pits, experts analysed the faunal finds which showed that those bones that could be identified came mainly from animals that were likely to have been slaughtered for their meat (cattle, sheep &/or goats, pigs, poultry). Further bones that have been found since then have not been examined professionally but appear to represent a similar range of species.

Summary
This report presents the results of a programme of archaeological excavation of 5 one metre square test pits in the Bedfordshire village of Shillington in summer 2015. Two of the five test pits had to be abandoned early due to water ingress. In most cases, the quantity of pottery recovered was disappointingly small. No pottery older than Late Saxon was found during 2015.

Consequently, the pottery distribution maps for different periods have not been updated and there is little to add to the conclusions reached in the 2014 report.
Results

Test Pit 1 (SH15/1)
Shillington War Memorial, High Rd, Shillington, SG5 3LL, TL
28 - 29 March 2015
This was dug in the grounds of Shillington war memorial in an area on the E side of High Road, about 70m N of it’s junction with Church St, where no test pits had previously been excavated. Its location is shown by a small, mauve square dot towards the bottom of the map below. (The other dots represent test pits SH15/2 and SH16/4 that were yet to be dug.)

The excavation took advantage of a site that had been under the canopy of bushes that had been felled and was due to be replaced by a new flower bed. The NW corner of the test pit was only 1.8m from the pavement on the SE side of High Rd and close to the village hall. The site appears to be
close to buildings shown on the 1817 Enclosure Map including the 17th C property at 29, High Rd, 50 m to the north-east and the 17th C Green End Farmhouse (see Test Pit 2), 50 metres away to the north on the opposite side of the road.

Test pit 1 was excavated to 50cm and a further 40% to 60cm before water seeping in from the sides, possibly from the fill of a former roadside ditch, led to its abandonment and the re-instatement of the site. (DT)

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The pottery from this test-pit is mostly Victorian, but it also shows that the site had a marginal use throughout most of the medieval and post-medieval periods. (PB)

The soil had been disturbed and the quantity of earlier pottery was disappointingly small. Other finds included pieces of clay pipe, bones, oyster shells, corroded metal, glass and construction materials but none of these appeared to be from much earlier than the Victorian period. The presence of a little Early Medieval Ware suggests possible settlement in the vicinity after about 1100AD and later pottery hints at intermittent settlement thereafter.
Test Pit 2 (SH15/2)
Green End Farmhouse, High Rd, Shillington, SG5 3LP
23-24 May 2015

This was dug 6m from the SE corner of 17th C Green End Farmhouse in a part of the former farmyard that had been resurfaced with pebbles. The location is marked by a small, mauve, square dot in the top lefthand corner of the map below. (The other dots mark test pit SH15/1 and the yet-to-be-dug test pit SH16/4.)

To the N, and on slightly higher ground behind a modern garden wall, is a lawn. Nearby to the E & SE are farm buildings, running parallel to High Rd, that have been refurbished for other uses.

Excavation soon revealed that the soil was greatly disturbed and contained the footings of a brick wall along its N edge, demolition rubble, corroded metal and a piece of semi-rotten wood of uncertain origin. Only 3 pieces of pottery were found before excavation was stopped at 55cm after 3
contexts without any pottery finds. With groundwater starting to seep into the pit, it was filled in and the surface was re-instated. (DT)

This test-pit produced very little pottery and it is all Victorian, indicating that the site was not used by people before that time. (PB)

Bearing in mind the age of the house, it was disappointing that very little pottery was found and that none was below 30cm depth. It seems likely that the test pit was in an area where the original soil and subsoil had been removed and replaced by demolition rubble. Sadly, the finds from this test pit revealed no additional evidence about settlement in this area.
Test Pit 3 (SH 15/3)
26a, Apsley End Rd, Shillington, SG5 3LX
16 - 18 July 2015

This excavation was in the lawn about 5m south of the garage of a bungalow built in the 1970s and is shown on the plan below by the lowest of the small, mauve, square dots. (Other dots show test pits SH14/3 and SH14/8.)

The site is shown as orchard on the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map published in the 1890s and is situated about half way between a 17th C house about 60m to the N and an 18th C cottage to the S. Test pits have previously been excavated within 120m of here at 44, Apsley End Rd (SH 14/5) and the Musgrave Arms (SH 14/8).
The test pit yielded finds to 40cm depth included pieces of pottery, building rubble, clay pipe, corroded metal, glass, bone, oyster shell and an animal tooth. It was abandoned when nothing further was found below this to 60cm deep and filled in. (DT)

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The small amount of pottery from this test-pit suggests that the site had a marginal use in the medieval and early post-medieval periods, but was then abandoned until the Victorian era. (PB)

The pottery included a few pieces of Early Medieval Ware and Hertfordshire Greyware, but not enough to confirm settlement on this site in the Early to High Medieval period. These pottery types were found in much greater quantities 120m away at 44 Apsley End Road (Test Pit SH14/5) suggesting occupation was likely there or close by. One piece of Late Medieval Ware pottery complements small quantities found at the Old Court House (SH 14/1) and 44, Apsley End Rd (SH14/5) and suggests possible small scale occupation in this area in the late Medieval period. The absence of pottery from after 1500 and until modern times suggests that this site was used as farmland or orchard for some 450 years before the current property was built. (DT)
Test pit 4
April Cottage, 1, Bury Rd, Shillington, SG5 3NU
26-27 September 2015

The test pit was dug in the lawn, 3m from the porch on the S side of the house, in the only area not directly under tree canopies. The location is shown by a small, mauve, square dot on the W (left) side of the map below. (The location of TP13/2 is on the E (right) side.)

The house was built after 1817 on a narrow strip of land immediately above and to the E of the flood plain with a section of the brook canalised at about the same time immediately to the W. On the E side is Bury Rd, just N of its junction with Hillfoot Rd and with Hanscombe End Rd which crosses the brook on a bridge that is likely to have replaced an earlier ford nearby.

The finds were dominated by pieces of red brick, mortar, tile, slate and glass- probably pieces of building materials from when the house was built. Others included pieces of pottery, clay pipe, charcoal, corroded metal, animal bones and oyster shell as well as a tooth and broken brass hook.

The lowest pieces of pottery was between 50 and 60cm below ground and apart rom a single piece of animal bone, no further finds were found to 90cm where the pit was abandoned and refilled.
The pottery from this test-pit is mostly Victorian, but it also shows that the site had a marginal use in the early medieval and early post-medieval periods. (PB)

While it is not unusual for earlier settlement to occur close to where roads cross rivers, just 3 small pieces of Early Medieval Ware and Hertfordshire Greyware are not enough evidence to confirm any on this particular site. It seems likely that this plot was not occupied before the current house was built. It could be worth looking for another location for a test pit nearby but slightly further from the edge of the flood plain.
Test Pit 5
All Saints Vicarage, Vicarage Close, SG5 3LS
24 - 25 July 2015

The test pit was excavated in the lawn on the W side of the Vicarage, close to the boundary with the path known as the Twitchell. The location is shown on the map below by the small, square, mauve dot in the lower left-hand side of the map. (The other dots represent test pits SH13/5 and SH13/6.)

Vicarage Close was built in part of the grounds of the Old Vicarage and this house was built in 1981 to replace it as accommodation for the incumbent of All Saints Church. The natural hill slopes steeply here from N to S and there were signs that the ground had been dug away at the upper end of the garden and built up on the lower part to provide a level platform for and around the house. The test pit location was selected in an area where it appeared that the ground level had not been altered significantly. The Enclosure Map of 1817 shows no buildings in this area between Church St and High Rd other than those at Parsonage Farm 50m to the W of the test pit site.
The test pit produced no pottery between 10 and 20cm depth and no finds of any kind below 40cm. It was dug to 70cm depth and then abandoned and filled in. It produced many pieces of modern construction material, presumably dating from when the current house was built. Also recovered were pieces of pottery, clay pipe, charcoal, animal bone, oyster shell and plastic.

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This site appears to have been occupied in the late Saxon period (AD 1,000 - 1,200), but was then more or less deserted until the 19th century, other than perhaps having a marginal use in the medieval and early post-medieval periods. (PB)

The mixture of late Anglo-Saxon and modern pottery in the same contexts shows that the soil had been greatly disturbed and it would seem that despite the care taken in choosing the test pit position, the original soil here was dug up and replaced, possibly with soil from elsewhere in the garden, when the house was built.

Apart from the Glazed Red Earthenware and Victorian pottery, there is little correlation between the pottery finds here and those from 91, Church St (see SH 13/6), 40m to the NW and up the slope from here. In particular, no Saxon pottery was found there, although it was present in the test pit at 77, High St (SH 13/5) about 80m away to the NE.

Assuming that all the disturbed soil came from within the site’s boundaries, the late Anglo-Saxon pottery indicates settlement here up to three centuries before the current church building was constructed between 1333 and 1401. There is not enough pottery evidence for subsequent use of the site before the current house was built.
Discussion

The 2015 excavations started badly with both of the first two test pits having to be abandoned early due to flooding. Also, the five test pits yielded a disappointing quantity of pottery from periods earlier than Victorian and none from before the late Anglo-Saxon period. On the plus side, the results do not detract from the general conclusions reached in 2014. Looking back on three seasons of test pit digging, it is possible to summarise occupation in Shillington for each period as follows.

Prehistoric period ~1,200BC - 0
The earlier discovery of a Bronze Age tanged flint arrowhead (HER 18535) indicated local human activity in Shillington at this period and the 2013 discovery of 11 sherds of Bronze Age pottery in the Old Vicarage test pit strongly suggested the presence of a settlement on that site. The single sherd from Shillington Bury test pit 4 in 2014 is inadequate on its own to indicate a second area of settlement and further evidence will be required to prove this.

Both of these test pits also yielded pottery of Roman and many other periods pointing to possible continuous occupation of these sites for over 3,000 years. No Iron Age pottery has yet been found in Shillington test pits although likely field boundaries of this period are visible in aerial photographs near Shillington Bury. It is recommended that more test pits should be dug in this area to seek further evidence of early settlement.

Roman period ~0 - 450AD
Eight test pits produced Romano-British pottery in small quantities in 2013 and 2014 and no further finds were made in 2015. The finds are dispersed in several parts of the village although none have been found so far in any the 8 test pits dug in Apsley End. It is possible that the dispersed nature of the Roman finds relates to dispersed areas of settlement at this time. However, the pottery may have been distributed when arable fields were manured with material brought in from elsewhere.

Anglo-Saxon period ~850 - 1050AD
No pottery that is obviously early Saxon was found this year but finds of late Anglo-Saxon pottery at the Vicarage (SH 14/5) can be added to the 11 other previous sites and seem to be indicative of dispersed settlement at this time.

To date, six of the 12 test pits with Late Saxon pottery have also produced Roman pottery (2014 test pits SH14/4 and SH14/9 and 2013 test pits SH13/11, SH13/22, SH13/25 & SH13/26). If these finds genuinely demonstrate occupation of these sites in both periods, this would indicate that 50% of those places occupied during the Roman period continued to be inhabited in Anglo-Saxon times. Furthermore, these 10 test pits are situated in the central core of the village as well as in Bury, Hanscombe, Hillfoot and Upton Ends. If so, it is tentatively suggested that these parts of the modern village may be based around sites occupied in the Roman period. It will be interesting to see if this pattern continues when more test pits are dug.

High medieval period ~1050 - 1400
Four of the 5 test pits have produced pottery of this period, albeit in small quantities, and it has been found in most parts of Shillington where test pits have been dug.

The High Medieval was a period of rapid population growth implying that some of the outlying areas, perhaps based around earlier farms, had become quite substantial settlements- or ‘Ends’- in their own right. The first record of the Hanscombe name in 1223 suggests that more pottery of this period should be discovered when further test pits are dug in Hanscombe End. No test pits have yet been excavated in the northern half (or upper part) of Bury Road in areas as Woodmer End and Bury End, or off the southern part of Hanscombe End Rd around Green Farm. Test pits in the other
‘Ends’ have produced plenty of High Medieval pottery and it will be interesting to see if this is the case with these areas.

**Late medieval ~1400 - 1550**
A single sherd of this age appeared in two of the five test pits this year. The paucity of such finds compared with the High Medieval period echoes similar evidence from previous years and supports the theory that a substantial decline in the population has occurred. (This is also seen in other villages across East Anglia where test pits have been dug). It is likely that a deterioration in the climate at this time was responsible, affecting food production and causing famine, illness and economic depression. The plague or Black Death first reached England in 1348 and it probably reached Shillington within a few years, with further recurrences during the next 300 years or more. A particularly severe outbreak affected Shillington in 1560 and is said to have killed one in seven people- 14% of the population.

Overall, the distribution of pottery of this age points to the probable abandonment of settlement in most of the outlying parts of Shillington (the ‘Ends’) with plague survivors retreating to the core of the village.

**Post medieval ~1550 - 1800**
Several substantial houses that were built in Shillington before 1700 survive to this day suggesting that there were several families present then with the means to build new homes. It would seem likely that these houses have been occupied for most of the time since they were built. If so, the pottery from this period appears to be significantly under-represented.

This could suggest that Shillington’s population was still struggling to recover from earlier setbacks, especially in the outlying parts of the village, but there may be other explanations relating to the habits of residents. Perhaps sites were kept ‘cleaner’ than previously, with rubbish incorporated in manure heaps and cleared away regularly? Maybe it was dumped in discreet areas away from where test pits have so far investigated. Many properties have also been substantially modified or extended several times during their lifetimes which may have buried or destroyed much Post-Medieval pottery.

**Modern- post 1800**
If the quantity of pottery finds reflects the size of the population with much accuracy, Shillington did not regain its High Medieval population level until well into the Victorian period. Modern pottery from 1800 onwards appears- often in large quantities- in all of the test pits suggesting that those parts of Shillington that had been depopulated due to the Plague had been extensively re-settled.

**Conclusion**
The test pits continue to build up useful archaeological evidence about the development of Shillington. Shillington is a dispersed settlement and some parts of the village have received little attention yet such as the south-eastern side of High Rd, the upper (northern) section of Bury Rd and particularly Hanscombe End where several farmhouses are 400 years old or more. More test pits are required in these areas.

Most test pits have, so far, been located in gardens but there are earthworks that may represent former settlements that are visible in certain pastures in Hanscombe End, Upton End and, further away from the village centre, at Chibley Farm. None of these have yet been investigated. Future test pits in these areas could give useful evidence about when they were occupied and abandoned.
APPENDIX 1

Pottery from the Shillington Test-pits (Site SH 15)

SN: St Neots Ware. Made at a number of as-yet unknown places in southern England between AD900-1200. The early pots are usually a purplish-black, black or grey colour, the later ones brown or reddish. All the sherds from this site date to AD1000 or later. The clay from which they were made contains finely crushed fossil shell, giving them a white speckled appearance. Most pots were small jars or bowls.

SHC: Early Medieval Shelly Ware: AD1100-1400. Hard fabric with plentiful fossil shell mixed in with the clay. Manufactured at many sites in western Bedfordshire. Mostly cooking pots, but bowls and occasionally jugs also known.

EMW: Early Medieval Sandy Ware: AD1100-1400. Hard fabric with plentiful quartz temper. Manufactured at a wide range of generally unknown sites all over eastern England. Mostly cooking pots, but bowls and occasionally jugs also known.

HG: Hertfordshire Greyware, Late 12th – 14th century. Hard, grey sandy pottery found at sites all over Hertfordshire. Made at a number of different places, with the most recent and best-preserved evidence being from Hitchin. Range of simple jars, bowls and jugs.

LMT: Late Medieval Ware: Hard, reddish-orange pottery with lots of sand mixed in with the clay. Made from about 1400 – 1550 in lots of different places in East Anglia. Used for everyday pottery such as jugs and large bowls, and also large pots (‘cisterns’) for brewing beer.

GRE: Glazed Red Earthenwares: Just about everywhere in Britain began to make and use this type of pottery from about AD1550 onwards, and it was still being made in the 19th century. The clay fabric is usually very smooth, and a brick red colour. Lots of different types of pots were made, particularly very large bowls, cooking pots and cauldrons. Almost all of them have shiny, good-quality orange or green glaze on the inner surface, and sometimes on the outside as well. From about AD1680, black glaze was also used.

MB: Midland Blackware. AD1550 – 1700. Similar to GRE, but has a black glaze on one or both surfaces. Vessels usually tall cups, jugs and bowls.

HSW: Harlow Slipware. Similar to glazed red earthenware (GRE), but with painted designs in yellow liquid clay (‘slip’) under the glaze. Made at many places between 1600 and 1700, but the most famous and earliest factory was at Harlow in Essex.

SWSG: Staffordshire White Salt-Glazed Stoneware. Hard, white pottery with a white glaze with a texture like orange peel. Made between 1720 and 1780, pots usually table wares such as tea bowls, tankards and plates.

VIC: ‘Victorian’. A wide range of different types of pottery, particularly the cups, plates and bowls with blue decoration which are still used today. First made around AD1800.