



F·S·A·R·G

The Faversham Society
Archaeological Research Group



Community
Archaeology

Understanding Ospringe

Report for the Bier House examination and associated excavations Open Area OA65 and keyhole pit KP66

**The Bier House of the Church of St. Peter and St Paul
Water Lane, Ospringe, Faversham.**

Grid Reference TR 00107 60301

1. Introduction

The Bier House associated with the church of St. Peter and St. Paul at Ospringe has intrigued local people, even long-term residents being confused as to what it was. This confusion became increasingly evident during our period of examination and excavation when our community approach encouraged discussion with numerous people visiting and passing the church and our excavations.

Community contact was further enhanced through a fortunate overlap with a previously arranged church 'Remember When?' event. During this weekend, many local people visited the church, examining displays and photographs and talking about their memories of the village and its surroundings. To join in more fully, we moved our finds processing base activity to the grass area in front of the church. This helped attract and encourage visitors, our finds and studies giving them the triggers for their memories, which we were able to record. This was an extremely worthwhile and satisfying weekend (the plough-mans' lunches, teas, cakes and bread-pudding were also satisfying with our numerous purchases giving the church a welcome addition to their fund raising activity).

**Fig 1: Finds processing
base outside the Church.**



We had chosen the Bier House site for three archaeological reasons within our *Understanding Ospringe* project:

- A. To conduct a 'standing building' examination and record of the Bier House. In the process, to tidy the area around it to restrict plant growth damage in future.
- B. To investigate the historic spring-head and streamlet. This fed into the Westbrook which continues down the valley through Ospringe and on to become Faversham Creek, a tidal inlet of the river Swale and the Thames estuary. Worked flints, early pottery, historically active springs, sarsen stones and a church all pointed to the need to understand more about this spot, which just may be a location of major prehistoric significance.
- C. To examine the sarsen stones. Sarsens are geologically not uncommon in this area and generally across the chalk areas of southern England. They derive from the tertiary sands and gravels, mostly now eroded away, which overlay the chalk strata. These deposits still exist on Syndale and Davington hills and are the basis of the present gravel extraction industry at the Faversham quarry about two miles to the north. Hence, we would be looking for tooling marks and other signs of working on the stones and trying to establish whether they had been part of an earlier structure.

All three of these activities will be reported here, starting with the excavations of the open area behind the Bier House: OA65 and keyhole pit KP66. The sarsen examination and Bier House details will follow.

2. Location of the open area excavation

Two considerations affected the location of the open area excavation and keyhole pit KP66.

- a) The FSARG activities of 2008 in lower Water Lane indicated that early human activity was present on the western bank of the valley (reported in FSARG 2008 and 2009 reports KP52, KP55, KP59, KP61).
- b) As the church is also on this bank it may indicate that this spring location has been an area of early and continuous ritual activity.

The location of the church does need fuller consideration as it is some distance from the late medieval and present village, which is situated along Roman Watling Street with its medieval hospital (St Mary of Ospringe)¹ and more recent coaching inns. It is, however, close to the medieval manor house of Queen Court.² There is no clear indication of the earliest church building on this site but structural and historic records give dates of a church at this location in the 12th century.³

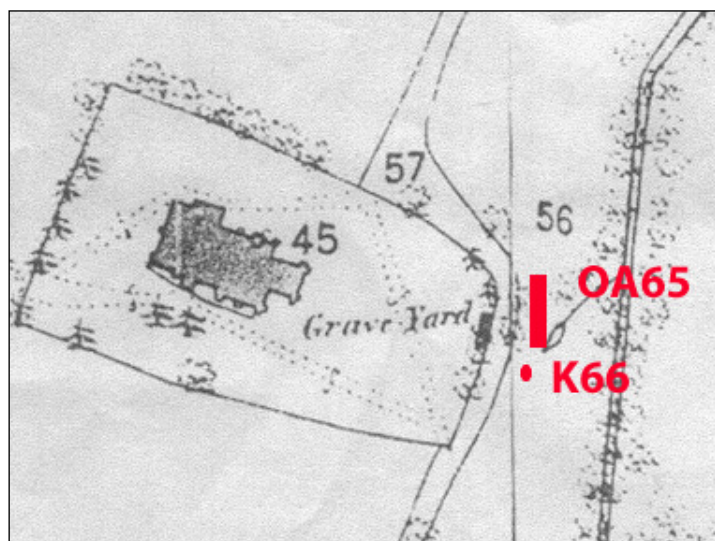


Fig 2a: Location of OA65 and K66 on the OS 1st edition of 1865.⁴

¹ Kent HER number Hospital of St Mary, Ospringe TR 06 SW 15

² Kent HER number Queen Court, Ospringe TR 06 SW 13

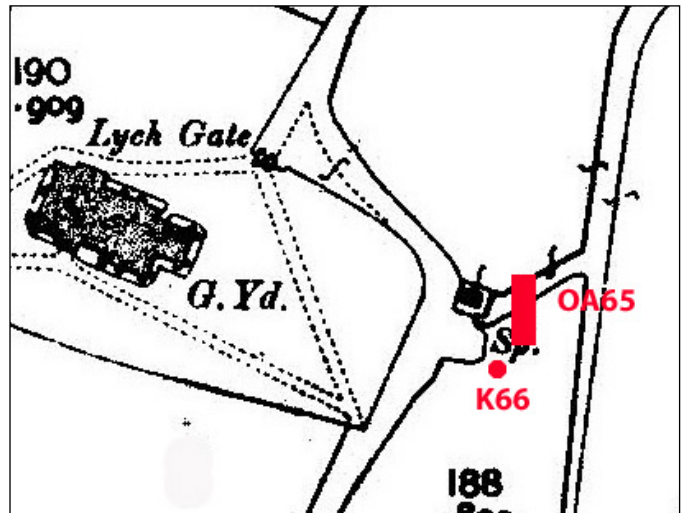
³ Kent HER number St Peter & St Paul, Ospringe TR 06 SW 14

⁴ OS 1865 (1904 reprint) Sheet XXXIV Scale 1:2500

Past maps, from Jacobs' 1774⁵ to the most recent were considered. There is no record of a structure at the Bier House site until the 1907 map.⁶ Historic references are sketchy, with no mention in Hasted. The 1865 map (**Fig 2a**) showed that a small pond existed in the area at the rear of the Bier House location, feeding into the Westbrook. This was before the Bier House was built.

The 1907 map (**Fig 2b**), showing the building, shows this pond replaced by a channel from a spring marked as being at and to the south of the Bier House. The spring and Bier House are hard against the track, now a road, running east of the church and its graveyard. The main stream is seen to be a few metres wide by probably only some 30cm to 50cm deep in flood. The depth of the channel from the Bier House is unknown.

Fig 2b: Location of OA65 and K66 on the OS special edition of 1907.⁷



This channel fed into the tree lined stream in the centre of the field. In living memory this was banked by willows. These willow beds were the source of the material used for basket making to supply the hop and fruit industries of this part of Kent and a number of photographs exist showing both the willows and the basket makers.

Fig 3: Families making baskets from willow in Ospringe, around 1910.



This picture is part of the Croseur slide collection held at the Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre, Faversham.

⁵ Jacob, E 1774 *History of Faversham* republished 1774 by the Faversham Society, Faversham

⁶ OS 1907 Sheet XXXIV Scale 1:2500

⁷ OS 1907 op.cit.

At the time of writing, but not available at the time of excavation is the interesting scene shown in **Fig 4**, looking westwards across the valley. This view dates from the 1950s and shows Brook Cottages just before demolition in the foreground. Although mostly hidden by willows, the Bier House stream seems broad and very shallow. This knowledge has been useful in interpreting the findings.

Fig 4: The middle Westbrook valley looking westwards. This photograph is the property of Arthur Percival and reproduced with his permission.



A geo-resistivity survey was performed on a 20m by 20m area of the field across the line of this channel during the preceding April (2009) and this seemed to confirm the line, indicating two branches, one from the rear of the building and one branch further to the south, possibly from the spring. It was decided to excavate across the line to the south and east of the Bier House in the hope of exposing the stream and one of its banks. The area was also surveyed to establish heights above Ordnance Datum (OD) and to fix the location to the Bier House structure. The bridge over Vicarage Road, where the stream once left the field, was also surveyed. An attempt at augering (soil sampling) within the surveyed area had to be abandoned due to the high proportion of flints in the ground.

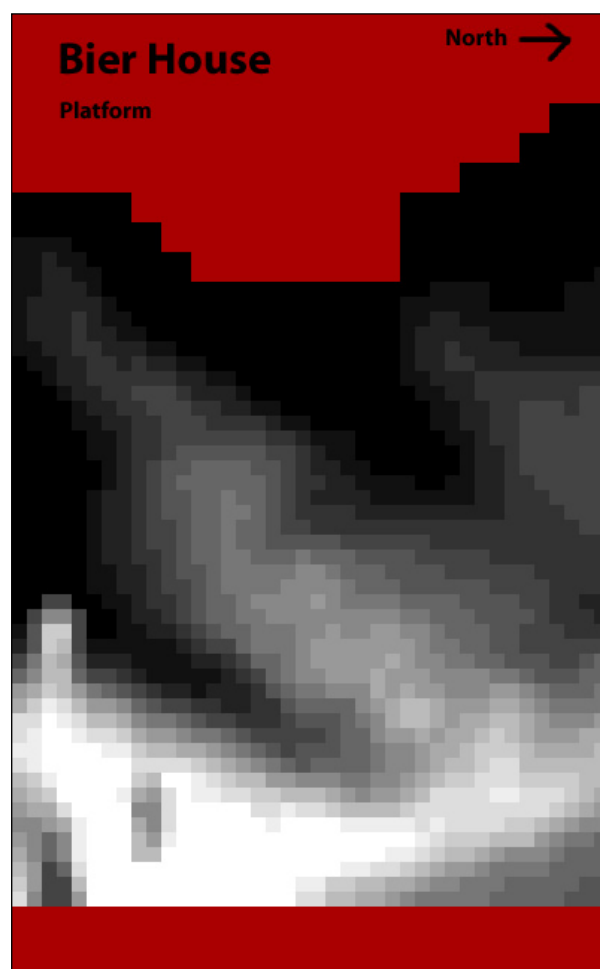
KP 66 was opened later in the excavation period in an area surveyed to approximate to the south western end of the stream pond.

Fig 5: Results of a geo resistivity survey of the area to the east of the Bier House.

Each square represents 0.25 of a square metre.

Dark shading represents wetter areas, light ones, drier areas.

OA65 was sited to cut across the pattern from north to south.



3. The procedures

In the field behind the Bier House an area was marked out using the line of the western edge of the geophysical survey area and centred on the centre line of the building. This excavation area OA65 was marked with string and was 2m by 7m. Its position was recorded by measuring to mapped corners of the Bier House and its southern side was used as the base for future measurements together with the western side as the other axis i.e. the SW corner of OA65 being 0:0.

As this was a field, not our usual garden lawn, the turf covering was poor but it was removed with reasonable care and set aside for reinstatement. Excavation was with hand tools and used single context removal of the spoil, each context was recorded. All excavated soil was examined and roughly sorted or sieved as appropriate. Whenever possible, the spoil heap was scanned using a metal detector. Finds were set aside for each context and special finds were given three dimensional coordinates to pinpoint the exact find spot. The only specific features revealed were associated with the Bier House structure itself and these were carefully recorded during the examination of that structure. Finally, the spoil was put back in, tamped down, and the turf replaced.

4. The Findings

The farm manager of this field had told us that the whole field had undergone considerable disturbance in the 1970s when the willows were removed, and the streams filled in by bulldozing the land level. No soil was introduced from outside the field during this process. This reconstructed field initially grew strawberries and beans, but is now occasional pasture for a bull and sheep.

The excavation in this flat field behind the Bier House consisted of four active parts: a 7.1m by 2m open area OA65, two keyhole pits dug within it KP65S and KP65N, and the separate pit KP66.

The valley side to the west, around and under the church, is of Head Brick earth on gravel with Thanet sands and gravels beneath these at the top of the hill. To the east the Upper Chalk, which is the basal geology of this whole valley, is near the surface under a thin topsoil layer. The chalk in the bottom of the valley is covered by a layer of large flints covered in gravel, deposited during the Pleistocene (glacial) period, and covered with soils derived from the brick earth. These Pleistocene flints and gravels were exposed at the base of our excavations in OA65S and in KP66.

The lowest level excavated was in KP65S where context [14] consisted of blackened large flints giving way to rust reddened large flints in [13] above it. The lower large stained flints and the gravels on top of them are the basal geology of the spring / stream / pond system at this Bier House location. The geology has an iron content and the anaerobic conditions at the lower level gives the flints the black (ferrous) iron oxide colouration and the more aerated upper layer the rust red (ferric). The gravel and sand of context [11] was on, not within, the lower flint matrix. Its upper part was however mixed with building brick-rubble, tile fragments and medium sized flints as context [10].

It seems that [10] was a rubbish dump in the pond / stream or is the edge of the banking of the stream / pond itself, with separate events dumping material onto it. This mixed zone continued to the north where it thinned to become the underlying sand of [11]. During excavation, it was decided that contexts [10] and [11] were evidence of the same dumping of building waste and the contexts were merged.

All of the above excavation took place in KP65S a keyhole pit 1m by 1m positioned at the southern end of the open area OA65. Above context [10] was a fine yellow-brown clay layer [07]. Although it was under 0.5cm thinning to nothing in the south, it thickened to the north of the OA65 excavation before thinning again 7.1m away at the northern end where another area of dumped building material rose through it, [09]. The surface of [07] was well defined and very level at 10.5m OD and at an average depth from the surface of 45cm. The clay may have been deposited out of solution as a sediment layer following a hill-wash storm event filling the pond. The surface of this fine clay had animal tracks indented into its surface indicating that it was either the lower surface of a shallow pond or the evaporative remains of one. The rats, or maybe water voles, had been tracking across this from the bank area at the base of the Bier House.

Above the pond surface [07] a brown soil with moderate flint content [03] covered the whole area of OA65 for 10cm to 12cm. On this surface and aligned with the Bier House, a small pit with a piece of wood at the bottom was probably the remains of a fence post. From the base of this pit to the surface of the clay [07] below it was an animal burrow of similar size to the track marks on [07]. Adjacent to this to the south were two more burrows. They all headed down but towards the Bier House.

On top of [03] the area was covered by a matrix of similar brown soil but with a much higher flint content, consisting of larger flints of between 5cm and 10cm in length [01]. These separate but similar contexts represent the field levelling and agriculture activities of the 1970s. They seem to show the initial activity moved the top soil from the neighbouring area into the pond / stream as [03] followed by [01] which was probably initially a neighbouring underlying context. This would explain the larger flints and the presence of a number of worked flints in this now surface layer.



Fig 6: Flints from context 01. Pleistocene large flint pebbles modified in the Bronze Age.

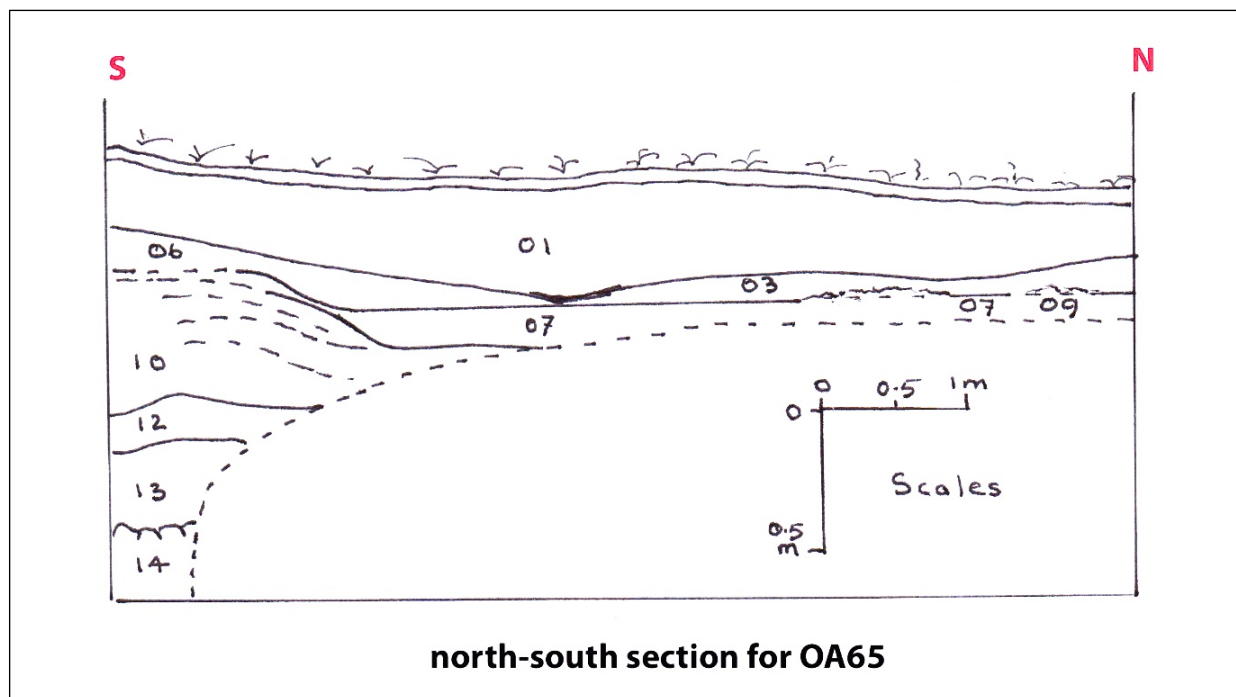
In the KP65S area, two intermediate contexts were probably early pond filling activity, soil from the adjacent willow tree removal, or fly-tipping prior to the levelling. They are; [06] a grey brown soil with numerous small pieces of chalk and small flints, and [04] a smaller area to the south-west of similar soil but with larger flints, bricks and stone.

Context [09] was the base layer of the northern end of the excavation and consisted of typical builder's rubble of flint, tile, brick and bottle glass. It was taken to be a dumped context.

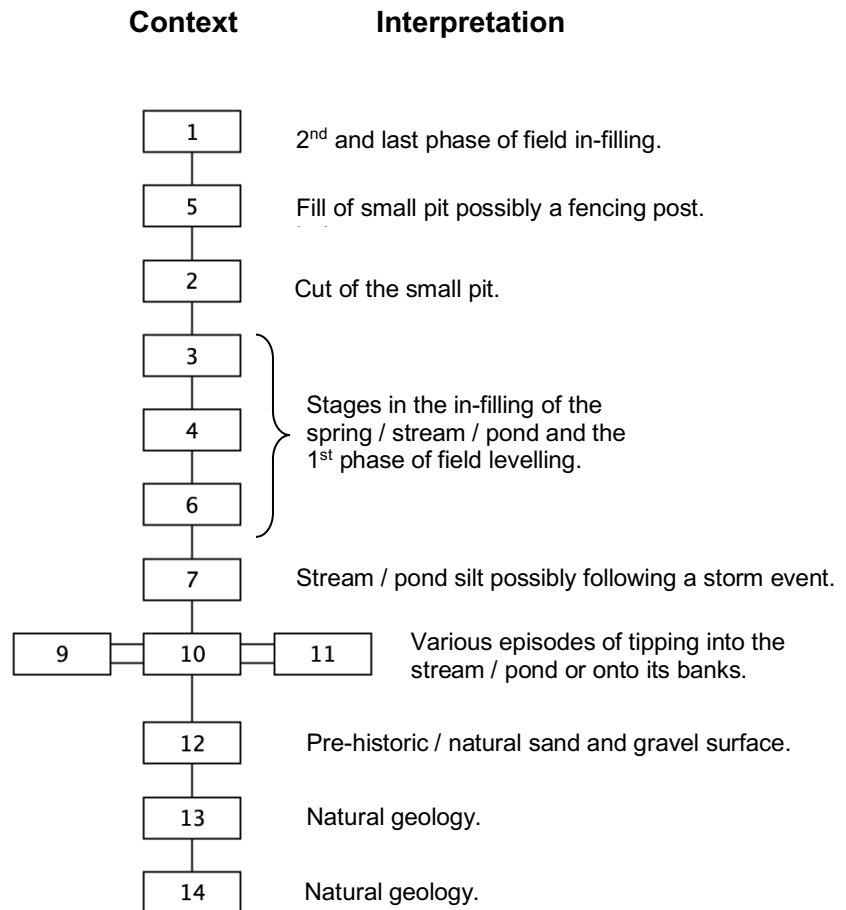
Fig 7a: Western baulk of OA65, southern section, with context labels.



Fig 7b: Scale section of whole western baulk face.



Harris Matrix



5. The sarsen stones

During the above activities and the clearing of the base of the Bier House the large sarsen stone and a smaller one were examined for tool marks or signs of working but none were found. There were no indications that these two stones formed any substantial presence at this location. This is far from conclusive evidence that they did not have some previous purpose but clearly the building of the Bier House and its repair activity has removed any evidence. The main material for the base foundation structure of the building seems to be old building material in the form of brick-work 'waster' brick debris consistent with a demolished brick garden wall or it is general building hard-core.

6. Bier House

A Bier House is defined in the National Monuments Thesaurus as a 'building containing a bier, a moveable stand on which a corpse, often in a coffin, is placed prior to burial'.⁸ It may be used because of inclement weather, lack of space in a town mortuary, remoteness from a town mortuary or simply delays in circumstances of the funeral. English Heritage lists only eleven bier houses in England, five of which are in Kent.⁹ Four of the five are in the Faversham area, at nearby Sheldwich, Selling and Boughton under Blean.¹⁰ This may have been due to the desire of the local church dignitaries, a local fashion at the time of building at the turn of the 18th to 19th century, or a functional response to need in this area. Further documentary investigation is needed.

Many local people have been able to confirm the Ospringe Bier House's gradual dereliction during the post second world war years (1940s to 1960s). They also supplied many varying tales from childhood.

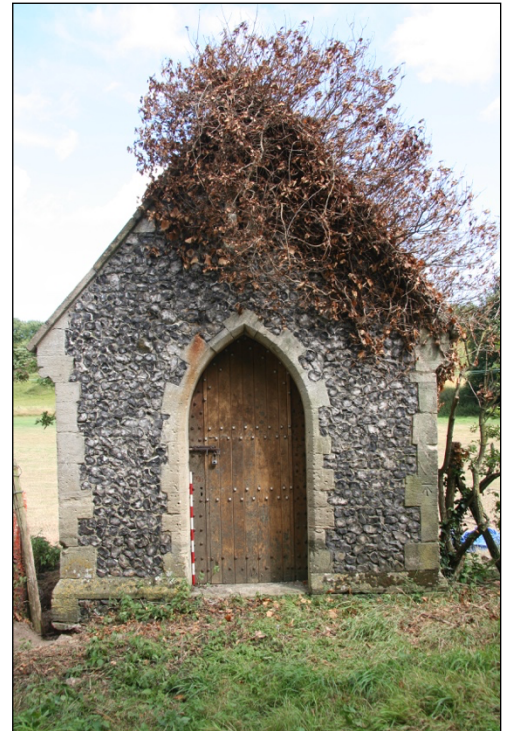
⁸ <http://thesaurus.english-heritage.org.uk>

⁹ www.imagesofengland.org.uk

¹⁰ Kent HER numbers: Sheldwich TR 05 NW 79, Selling: TR05 NW 45, Boughton: TR 05 NE106

These and the associated memory confusions added to our entertainment during the 'Remember When' weekend at the church. One of these tales was clearly a muddled childhood memory of this near ruin in the 1950s. One gentleman was recalling a vivid childhood picture of the Bier House with much detail of pulleys, sluices and a water-wheel, and summer days catching newts in the sluice pond. This puzzled us for some days until an older member of the childhood gang corrected the tale. The confusion was with a memory of the old water mill building further down Water Lane. We also had tales of fathers as young men looking through the crack in the doors and seeing the racks of bodies etc. This was all good social history but it was light on facts.

Fig 8: The Bier House, view from the road.



What we did establish was that the derelict building was repaired during the 1980s seemingly as a community project giving work / training to young people, presumably a Manpower Services project. At the present time (2009) the building is used as a store for chairs by the church as the single room is of sound fabric and the roof is in good condition. The outside however, was in danger of vegetative damage by ivy and elderberry trees. These have now been cut back or killed. A series of drawings of this flint, brick and stone building have been produced as a standing building exercise (see **Appendix 1**, Robinson, forthcoming).



Fig 9: WC with excavated culvert.

At the rear of the building is a toilet area and we found this in a poor state as a result of minor vandalism. The small open enclosure consists of a urinal wall with drain gully to the north and a water closet (WC) to the south. This drain ran through the wall and it was assumed that both areas discharged into the cesspit, now filled in with rubble, found outside the north east corner of the building. The door of the WC area was missing although a rotting door post was present. There was no sign of a toilet bowl but the floor of the eastern end of this closet, where it would have been, had broken slabs of 2cm and 1cm thick slate covering an earth and debris surface. Markings on the walls clearly indicated that the slate formed the structure of a box for the seating. Removal of the top of the earth revealed a broken drain pipe heading towards the cesspit. On examination of the outside of the building, as the nettles and shrubbery were removed, an arch had been revealed in the brickwork at ground level at the rear of this closet area. The outside and inside of this area were excavated but not the cesspit itself.

The arched brick work was examined and the ground beneath it removed to reveal the lower section of wall to have been open but seemingly later almost bricked up, leaving a small gap at the top. This meant that the area under the seat had been an open drop with the possibility that the drainpipe was a later

addition when the cesspit was installed. The area under the seating area was excavated, and the finds will be described in **Appendix 1** (forthcoming).

7. Interpretation

The WC arrangements at the rear of the Bier House do have a bearing on the interpretation of some of the excavation findings in OA65. The discovery of the drainage system under the WC area and the wastepipe system to the cesspit does indicate the probability of a change of design at some point. The presence of building material dumped into the stream area could be linked to that change.

Our survey work showed that the levels of the fine, silty clay layer [07] and the large drainage pipe under the WC area are the same. The layer [07] is, it seems, the stream level on top of a gravel and flint natural aquifer which itself is on the underlying chalk, with minimal brick earth clay being present. The bottom of the pipe is at 10.5m OD. The central section of [07] is at 10.51m and the present ground level under the centre of the Vicarage road bridge is 10.27 OD giving a probable stream and channel surface drop of between 0.25m to 0.5m across the field of direct distance 140m.

It now seems clear that the rising contexts [10] to [07] represent a channel bank consisting of dredged and dumped material. The material of [09] is not so clear but can be taken as the line of the other bank on the northern side. Further work would be required to make this clearer.

The material of KP66 is difficult to understand. It does represent dumping activity to the north but the flint in the south eastern corner could possibly be a further southern banking of the channel or an earlier bank associated with the pond. The geophysics does indicate a branching of the low resistivity plots. KP66 was on the line of this southern branch and surveyed in as the area of the end of the small pond. It is now clear that this spring, pond and stream were really no more than near surface features through most of their recent past and the sandy gravels may indicate that this has long been the case. The Westbrook below and in Ospringe has been managed extensively since the middle ages but this flat valley area in front of the church, in memory a meadow with a willow lined stream, does not seem to have been altered much over time.

8. Final comments

Further historic documentary research and contact with other local people would help to give a fuller understanding of this building and its spring. The work reported here has been able to show pre-historic, Roman and early medieval activity in the area and has contributed to our *Understanding Ospringe* project.

9. Acknowledgments

We would like to thank The Rev Ali Duguid and the church community, Gerald Hadley of Queen Court and the present and past residents of the Ospringe area, who gave us their knowledge of this field and its surrounding buildings. They also provided vivid personal memories both accurately and less so, but always willingly and entertainingly.

Jim Reid

December 2009



The OA65 team

Rebecca, Lesley, Ron, Sue, Jim, Nigel, Mo and Keith

Small Finds



SF104

Small Finds Details

SF104: The heel of a shoe, probably from a child's shoe. There are tacks and tack holes, which are corroded. There are rust traces of a metal stake. The heel is made of two layers of leather which has a layer of rust between them.