



A short history of Tasburgh Earthworks

A few miles to the south of Norwich, in the beautiful valley of the River Tas, lies what is perhaps the most enigmatic of the properties owned by the Trust, Tasburgh Earthworks. The earthworks gave the village its name: from *taese*, an Old English word meaning *convenient, advantageous, or pleasant* and *burgh* meaning a ‘defended place’ or ‘fort’.

The roughly oval-shaped earthwork enclosure extends beyond NAT’s current site - the area around the church to the south of the present-day lane lies within the earthwork enclosure and the southern side of the fort coincides with the southern edge of the present churchyard.

In places the earth rampart survives to a height of 3m. We do not know when it was built. Possibly it was an earthwork fort dating to the Iron Age (c. 700 BC–AD 43), and thus of roughly similar date to the fort owned by NAT at Bloodgate Hill, South Creak.

Excavations and geophysical survey show that Anglo-Saxon settlement started on the site adjacent to the church around AD 700. It is possible the earthworks were built then – but it is also possible that settlers re-used the pre-existing enclosure.

It is also possible that the earthworks were thrown up during the time of warfare and disorder in the 9th century AD when Danish Viking armies were wreaking havoc in East Anglia. Excavations near the church in the 1980s found a low flint structure which dates from the time of Viking invasion. But the flint-work was probably added to the old earthworks by descendants of the Anglo-Saxon settlers, to improve the fort defences.

By 1200 the settlement had become more dispersed and had developed away from the church. The old earthworks were quarried for materials and in some places ploughed out by farmers.

The enclosure may once have been roughly oval, but we are not sure. The northern side today appears relatively straight. The eastern side does not survive, having been quarried away. Early visitors to the site such as Camden (c. 1600) and Blomefield (in the 18th century) described the site as square. The earthworks enclosed an area of c. 6.2 hectares. The curved western side of the bank is clearly visible but has been ploughed down and

was once much taller. On the north side the bank is c. 1.5m high and topped by an old hedge and by trees. The outer ditch which accompanied the bank has everywhere been infilled.

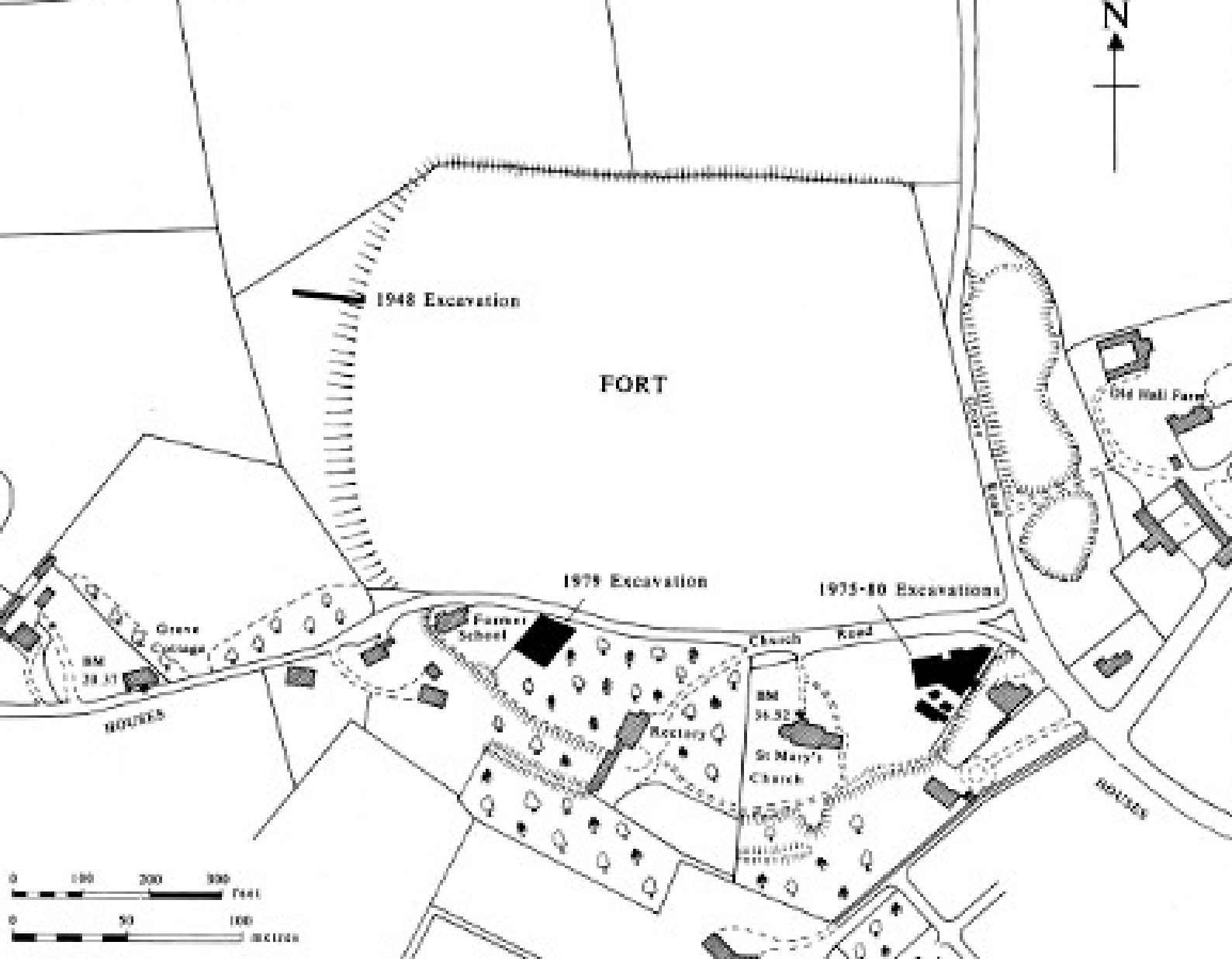


Plan of the Tasburgh enclosure, showing the surviving banks, the location of the church and the excavation trenches (East Anglian Archaeology 54)

Excavation and research

There has been very little excavation on or near the site. A section across the western bank and ditch in 1948 showed that the ditch had once been 3m deep, with a flat bottom, and there were signs of a ‘paved pathway’ on the bank but no dating evidence was found.

Excavation on the other side of the road took place at various times in 1975–80, before the churchyard was extended to the



east. Here were found the remains of a number of timber buildings and many artefacts, including pottery dating to the Middle and Late Saxon periods (c. AD 650–1066).

In February of 2017, geophysical survey (magnetometry) within the northern portion of the enclosed area at Tasburgh Hillfort revealed a complex pattern of magnetic anomalies relating to former settlement and land-use at the site. The surveyed section of the western defences revealed the course of the defensive ditch and that of the clay rampart and/or associated gravel pavement recorded during excavations in 1948, along with a possible entranceway. The location of the 1948 excavation trench was identified some 55 m south of its reported location. Within the central section of the enclosed area tentative evidence for an early network of ditches was revealed along with the presence of a significant kiln and associated debris, most likely dating to the Late Saxon period. To the south the partially surviving remains of a rectangular enclosure were recorded, orientated towards the hypothesised SW entrance to the hillfort and tentatively ascribed an Iron Age/Romano British date on morphological grounds. A substantial network of ditches were recorded within the southern portion of the surveyed area, enclosing an area of c. 0.6 ha to the north of Church Hill. Within the enclosed space significant settlement remains were recorded, including numerous pits, internal sub-divisions, two small hearths, a possible post-build structure and possible Sunken Feature Building (SFB). Collectively these are likely to represent the north-ward extension of the Mid to Late Saxon settlement coalescing around the parish church, recorded during excavations south of Church Hill lane.

Norfolk Archaeological Trust ownership

The site was bought by the Trust in 1994, so that it could be taken out of cultivation and put down to grass to protect what remains of the earthworks and below ground archaeology.



Air view of the enclosure from the north-west (Derek A. Edwards, © Norfolk County Council)

Further reading

Online:

Rogerson, A. and Lawson, A.J., 1991. 'The Earthwork Enclosure at Tasburgh', in Davies, J.A. *et al.*, *The Iron Age Forts of Norfolk*, East Anglian Archaeology 54, 31–58 <http://eaareports.org.uk/publication/report54/>

Imagined Land: Tasburgh Hillfort geophysical survey Author: David Bescoby MCI fA30th March 2017 <https://sites.google.com/site/imaginedlandprojectnorfolk/tasburgh-research>

**Location:**

Tasburgh Enclosure, Church Hill, Norwich, NR15 1NB



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