

## *A History of the Franshams*

Fransham is a relatively large parish of c.1200 hectares on the western edge of the boulder clay plateau that dominates central and south Norfolk, and it lies just below the upper limits of the River Wensum drainage system. The modern civil parish is an amalgamation of the former ecclesiastical parishes Great Fransham and Little Fransham, which were united in 1935. Fransham has been the subject of an archaeological survey, which has allowed the development of the parish to be traced from prehistory into the post medieval period.

Fieldwalking, which involves the collection, plotting and recording of archaeological material from the surface of arable fields, has been supplemented, for the period between the late 11<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by a rich source of documentary evidence held, for the most part in the Norfolk Record Office, and by the findings of a number of metal detectorists.

The earliest evidence of human activity comes in the form of few flint tools, the oldest of which may date to any time between c.600,000 to c.150,000 BC, but the beginnings of more intense exploitation of the landscape become visible with the arrival of the first farmers of the Early Neolithic (c.4000 – c.3000) who have left rather more abundant evidence in the form of worked flints. Most of the many hundreds recovered during the survey belong to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (c.3000 – c.1500 BC), and are evidence of a Late Neolithic expansion onto the clay soils which dominate the geology of the parish.

It is impossible to pinpoint the locations of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age settlement sites from the surface evidence of flint tools and occasional pottery fragments. However, most worked flints were recovered from areas of lighter soils, and it seems likely that they would have been lost in the area where people were living. More than 80 'pot boiler' sites were recorded. These are the remains of prehistoric burnt mounds, small areas of darkened soil with

concentrations of fire-cracked flint, resulting from the large-scale heating of water, for communal cooking and steam baths. Their distribution shows that some areas of land which yielded sparse scatters of worked flint were also being exploited during this period. The later Bronze Age (c.1500 – c.800 BC) is also represented in the main by worked flint although copper alloy metal objects, knives, spearheads and axes, have been recorded, along with a small gold pendant.



*Three views of an early Bronze Age flint dagger and two views of a late Bronze Age gold pendant*

(Pictures copyright Norfolk County Council) (The scale is in centimetres & millimetres)



*“Two views of a Late Anglo-Saxon copper alloy stirrup-strap mount showing a stylised human face”.*

(Pictures copyright Norfolk County Council) (The scale is in centimetres & millimetres)

The Iron Age (c.800 BC – 43 AD) is the first period when discrete settlement sites can be discerned from surface scatters of pottery fragments. Of the six sites identified, two may have been hamlets and the others probably single farmsteads. They were almost certainly not all in existence at the same time. The inhabitants, like their Neolithic and Bronze Age forbears would have practiced mixed agriculture with pastoral farming being more important in the local economy than arable.

Fransham was quite densely settled during the Roman period (c.43 – c.410 AD), to a degree not unusual for lowland England. It is unclear how many of the eleven Roman settlements identified had their origins in the Iron Age. None was of high status and no building was of masonry, all being of timber or perhaps in some cases of earthen construction. Some sites were next to, or surrounded by, areas in which occasional pottery fragments occurred. These strongly suggest arable land manured with material that included domestic waste. Some tracts of heavier soils were probably wooded, and others would have been used for animal husbandry. The only non-agricultural activity detectable from fieldwalking was small-scale iron working, both smelting and smithing, the former using local bog iron resources.

The place-name Fransham would first have been used in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, near the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period. The first part of the name derives either from an Old English personal name *Fram*, or from *fraemde*, meaning 'strange', and the suffix *ham* suggests a place of some importance. The main settlement in the Pagan or Early Anglo-Saxon period was in Great Fransham close to the Little Fransham boundary. Its site, around which there is strong evidence of a contemporary cemetery, is also close to All Saints' church, suggesting that the church may stand on a site of pre-Christian significance. Four scattered settlement sites of the same period have been identified, although they are much smaller. It is fairly clear that there was a significant reduction in population in the transition from the Roman to the Early Anglo-Saxon period,

and no evidence was found to show that any Roman site continued in use as a settlement into Early Anglo-Saxon times.

During the 7th century the main focus of settlement shifted over half a kilometre. This new site continued to be occupied throughout the rest of Anglo-Saxon period and for a short while after the Norman Conquest of 1066.

Fransham and the adjoining parish of Wendling may once, to judge from their oval shape when combined, have formed a large land unit, perhaps the centre of a much larger estate, in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century. The new settlement lies close to the centre of this oval area. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century a settlement had also emerged in Little Fransham, close to the site of St Mary's church. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century fifteen small and isolated settlement sites, perhaps all single farmsteads, appeared on or close to the edges of what we know were areas of common pasture in the medieval period.

In c.1100 the two Anglo-Saxon sites near the two churches were abandoned and there was a rapid move to a fully dispersed pattern of settlement during the ensuing two centuries. Over one hundred separate medieval settlement sites have been identified by fieldwalking, and the tenorial history of many can be traced in documentary sources. Most lay strung out along the margins of commons and greens, and in some places the spaces between them were filled with further occupied properties so that by the end of the 1200s a number of tightly packed groups of houses had developed. The best surviving example of a common edge settlement is the main village of Little Fransham where the A47 trunk road runs along the middle of what was once a linear common. The older houses, many on the sites of their medieval predecessors, are set well back from the road, often shielded by later dwellings that have encroached upon the common.

At the high point of population in c.1300 the population may have reached c.570, a figure not to be exceeded until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 14<sup>th</sup> century many individual settlements were abandoned because of famine, plagues and agricultural changes, but by the 16<sup>th</sup> century a few new settlements were being established, again on the edges of commons. Over the next two hundred years the commons continued to play an important role, as areas of pasture and as sources of brushwood for domestic heating, until they were enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1807 when the last surviving elements of the medieval field layout were removed.

Only the two parish churches remain as standing buildings from the medieval period. Two small areas of slight ‘humps and bumps’ lie under permanent grass to mark the sites of medieval peasants’ houses, and the moated site of Kirkhams, the main manor in Little Fransham is well preserved. Some houses with elements from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries have survived. The most notable dwelling house is Little Fransham Old Hall which dates from the 1570s. Hyde Hall is an imposing mid-18<sup>th</sup> century building (its name is a play on the occupation of the owner, a tanner). Also Georgian and equally impressive is the former Little Fransham rectory built in 1805. A large majority of pre-modern buildings, both domestic and agricultural are products of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of clay lump construction.

*The archaeological and historical survey will be published in the autumn or winter of 2020. It is entitled Fransham: people and land in a central Norfolk parish from the Palaeolithic to the eve of Parliamentary Enclosure and will be in the East Anglian Archaeology monograph series <http://eaareports.org.uk>*