



## Stapleford – What's Beneath our Village?

*Finds and discoveries from 33 test pits dug in and around the village.*

Studies have shown that humans have been in the Stapleford area from pre-historic times. Flints from the Mesolithic era (9,000 – 4,300BC), and the Neolithic Causewayed (3,900 – 1,700BC) closure around Little Trees Hill are evidence of this, but it is in the late Anglo-Saxon period before there are signs of settlement. Although a Roman road runs through the Parish, the Via Devana (Worstead Street.), there have been no finds of Roman settlement here. The Stapleford

settlement was presumably defined at the latest by 970AD: the inclusion of the manor of Bury, in the endowment of the monastery at Ely, implies that it was by then a known entity.

Stapleford is sited on a chalk bed protruding into the alluvial and river terrace deposits bordering the River Granta, on the NW slope of a chalk down that rises steadily to over 70m. At its highest points it is partly overlaid with glacial gravels.

The village was never large before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, though the setback from the Black Death was perhaps less dramatic than in many places. Growth accelerated after the arrival of the railway, but reversed with the agricultural depression of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century: there was substantial emigration to Australia. The population jumped in the 1950s with the development of extensive additional housing. The agricultural industries continued to decline.

The first edition 6-inch to 1 mile Ordnance Survey map shows Stapleford to be a discrete settlement arranged as an interrupted row along winding lanes east and west of the church, with a slightly more continuous ribbon of housing arranged along lanes which loop south of the church and run along the main valley bottom road (now the A1301) linking Great Shelford and Sawston. The settlement included several farms, Vine Farm, Stapleford Hall, Greenhedges Farm and Manor Farm as well as a rectilinear moated site, (within the School grounds) and overall had a distinctly dispersed character.

The Test Pitting - some questions we hoped to address.

Can any light be cast on where the population lived, who built and used the substantial prehistoric monuments?

The location of the village is attributed to development alongside a fording point on the river: can any additional detail be added from archaeological sources? [The name is attributed to the staple, an obsolete word for a column or stake that marked the ford across the Granta]

The village today has no obvious core or centre; has an initial core been lost or did the village develop in some other way?

The church, which exhibits Norman architecture and contains some Anglo-Saxon stonework, stands on the northern edge of the village: was its location always peripheral, or has the settlement shifted?



## Test pits

The methodology of 1m<sup>2</sup> test-pitting, is to try to further establish the pattern of the village, and this has been carried out in conjunction with Access Cambridge Archaeology (ACA) and the findings added to the Cambridgeshire Environment Historical Record. Pits have been dug in around 24 Cambridgeshire villages and 33 in Stapleford between 2013 and 2017. The 2013 excavation was organised and run by ACA and involving year 9 pupils as part of the Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) programme. The 2014 -2017 ones by members of Stapleford History Society using the HEFA Methodology: costs covered by funds raised by the Society.

<http://historysociety.staplefordvillage.org.uk/>



## Did the excavations answer our questions? Yes and No.

The programme of test-pitting has shown that people were present at least intermittently in the area of the current village from the Mesolithic onwards. It has not found evidence in the village area, of prehistoric activity of any intensity, or for the relationship between the human presence there and the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age monuments at Wandlebury and Little Trees Hill.

In the Romano-British period, the scatter of finds suggests more systematic use of the village area. The test-pitting evidence suggests that the village area participated in an agrarian economy, though at a level perhaps best described as peripheral.

The first suggestion of settlement in the current village area comes from the late Anglo-Saxon period. At this time there was a manor supporting the monastery at Ely, and probably a parish church. The test-pitting evidence suggests at most one farmstead in this area: the bulk of the population were presumably to be found in small dispersed settlements among the fields.

Stapleford first emerges as a population centre in the high medieval period, shortly after the Norman Conquest. The test-pitting did not provide new evidence as to why the development occurred in this particular location. The test pits near today's river bridge, for example, did not provide information about any earlier river crossing or the possible path of the Icknield Way. The test-pitting suggests that the village started around the church and in a band from there south down to the river.

Geology and topography would have provided reasons to favour this area: there was dry ground around the church, located on a gravel spur, while the river would of course have provided water and convenient grazing for horses and cattle. Why the church stands on the edge of the village was not elucidated: more investigations in the fields abutting the churchyard to the north might cast some light on this apparent anomaly. There is no suggestion of a planned village structure. The area of activity expanded through the middle ages and the early modern period. However, this was not a story of straightforward and uninterrupted growth. The expansion was accompanied by episodes of reduced activity at various locations scattered across the village area, most visibly following the Black Death but at other moments as well. The earliest maps confirm that the settlement density remained sparse at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The railway connection from 1845 prompted the spread of houses along the existing streets, though many still backed onto fields and paddocks which were only infilled in the twentieth century. Among the finds, little or nothing stands out as representing high status or wealth. The manorial farm was occupied by tenants of the monastery or latterly the cathedral at Ely, rather than being the home of a resident squire. The only grand house was the mansion at Wandlebury, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, - an echo of the prehistoric importance of the hill-top area. The integration of the village in the busy economic hinterland of Cambridge appears a relatively recent phenomenon. The test-pitting confirms a picture of a relatively peripheral settlement, conveniently positioned between the river and the dry chalky fields until the nineteenth-century package (railway, mechanically-assisted farming, artificial fertilisers) prompted connections and growth. The project has also enabled us to see more clearly than previously how the area was used over the millennia, and how the village started 1000 years ago and slowly took shape.

**Examples of the types of Pottery found in Stapleford Test Pits**  
(Note that these are not actual finds from Stapleford Pits)



**RB: Roman.** An assortment of common types of Roman pottery: *finds at Dukes Meadow (coin), Haverhill Road, Mingle Lane (3 sites) Gog Magog Way, Church Street, Bury Rd, London Rd, Priams Way, Poplar Way, St Andrews Cl, Greenfield Cl*



**SN: St Neots Ware.** 900-1100AD. The pots are usually a purplish-black, black or grey colour, a white speckled appearance: *finds at Forge End*



**ST: Stamford Ware.** Made in Stamford in Lincolnshire 850 - 1150AD. By 1000AD, the vessels smooth, with a glaze on the outside, the first glazed pots in England; found all over Britain and Ireland: *finds at Forge End*



**EMW: Medieval Sandy Ware.** 1100-1400AD. Mostly cooking pots, but bowls and occasionally jugs also known: *finds at Forge End*



**HG: Hertfordshire Greyware.** Late 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century. Range of simple jars, bowls and jugs: *finds at Forge End*



**ELY: Ely Ware.** 1150 – 1350 AD. Made at a number of sites in Ely in Cambridgeshire: *finds at Dukes Meadow*



**HED: Hedingham Ware:** Late 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century. Fine orange/red glazed pottery, made at Sible Hedingham in Essex: *finds at Gog Magog Way, Church St, Greenfield Close, Poplar Way*

**CBM: Ceramic building materials**



**GRIM: Grimston Ware.** 1250-1500AD Made at Grimston, near King's Lynn. It is found all over East Anglia and eastern England: *finds at Forge End*



**LMT: Late medieval ware.** 1400 – 1550AD. Hard reddish-orange pottery. Pale orange and dark green glazes, wide range of everyday vessel types: *finds at Forge End, Slaughterhouse, Haverhill Rd, Gog Magog Way, Mingle Lane, Granary*



**CIST: Cistercian Ware.** 1475 – 1700AD found all over England: dark brown or purplish black lead glazed earthenware: *finds at Mingle Lane*



**GRE: Glazed Red Earthenwares.** Made from about 1550 AD onwards, and it was still being made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From about 1690AD, black glaze was also used: *finds at Mingle Lane (2 sites), Johnson Hall, Bar Lane (2 sites), Slaughterhouse, Haverhill Rd, Gog Magog Way*



**WCS: Cologne Stoneware.** 1600 AD onwards. Hard, grey pottery made in the Rhineland region of Germany Still made today, mainly as tourist souvenirs: *finds at Dukes Meadow, Slaughterhouse*



**SWSG: Staffordshire White Salt-Glazed Stoneware.** 1720-1780AD. Delicate white pottery usually for tea cups and mugs: *finds at Church St, Greenfield Close*



**VIC: First made around 1800AD.** A wide range of miscellaneous mass-produced 19<sup>th</sup> century wares, particularly the cups, plates and bowls with blue decoration which are still used today: *finds in all sites except Poplar Close*

<https://jgsawcamb.org/2-content/167-artefact-identification-guides>

[http://www.meldrethhistory.org.uk/documents/pottery\\_identification\\_guide.pdf](http://www.meldrethhistory.org.uk/documents/pottery_identification_guide.pdf)

**Mingle Lane** (Vicarage Garden) 15<sup>th</sup> century and later pottery with late medieval ware and glazed red earthenware; 1p coin dated 1967



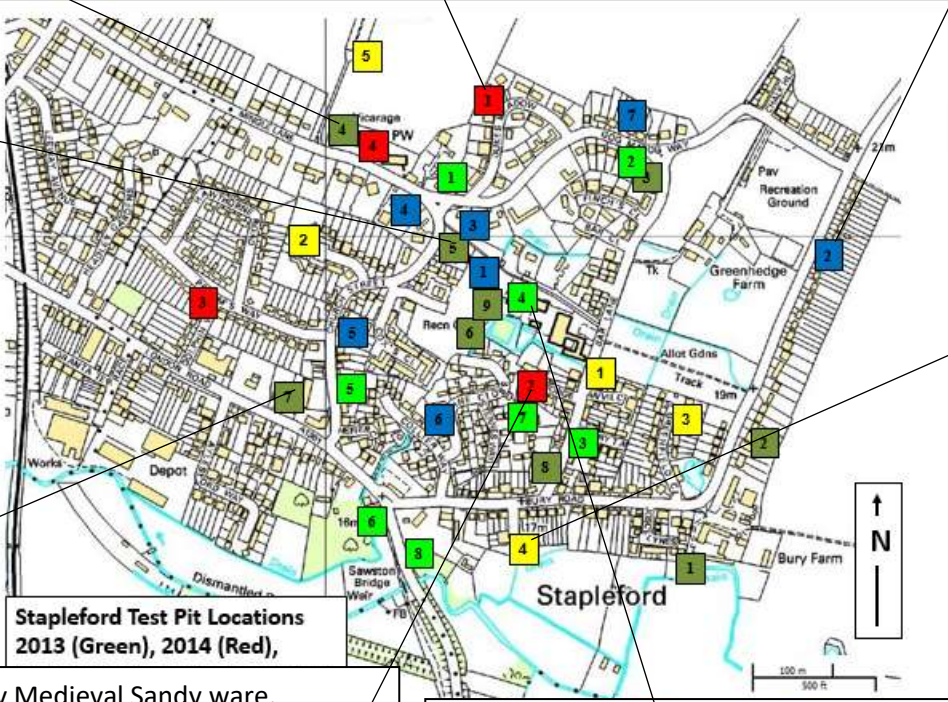
**Duke's Meadow** 19<sup>th</sup> C 'Victorian' wares; single sherd of post medieval Cologne Stoneware; 2 sherds of medieval Ely war and one of Roman pottery. A small and much worn metal coin, possibly a Roman minim of 4<sup>th</sup> C. The Roman finds suggest that the northern limits of the village may have been marginally used in the Roman period.



**Haverhill Rd** Roman pottery together with 15<sup>th</sup> C and later medieval ware as well as an assemblage of prehistoric flint suggest different uses of land. It seems likely that land to E of village was incorporated into it after the Black Death



**Vine Farm** Brick wall excavated High medieval pottery suggesting some limited activity at that time SE of the Church. Fragment of burnt flint may be of a late prehistoric date



**Stapleford Test Pit Locations 2013 (Green), 2014 (Red),**

**Poplar Way** The single sherd of Roman-British pottery may have indicate a S and E spread of Roman Period activity. 14 sherds of high medieval pottery point to a settlement on site between 12<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> C. Likely that a shift in settlement and change in land use led to abandonment after which it remained open fields. There were finds of animal bone, oyster shell, charcoal and 2 horseshoes. Rich humic soil and closeness to water suggests an natural site at any period.



**London Rd** 16<sup>th</sup> C and later pottery with sherds of glazed red earthenware and Chinese Porcelain with large amount of 'Victorian' wares Single sherd of Roman pottery.



**Forge End** Early Medieval Sandy ware, Hedingham Ware, Hertfordshire Greyware, Ely ware, Grimston Ware. 2 sherds of late Anglo-Saxon pottery – Stamford and St Neots ware and 10 sherds 'Victorian' ware. Suggests the original focus of the village may have been around here.

Grass next to **Vicarage Lane** mid-16<sup>th</sup> century pottery; sherds of German Stoneware and Delft Ware; Victorian wares; a large number of finds relating to 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> C disturbances; concrete, modern tile, CBM, glass, plastic, milk bottle tops, headless toy plastic soldier, brown Bakelite plug switch, possible whet-stone fragment.

