

New light on an old farm: test pit excavations at Hillgrove, Ombersley

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In 2021-22 the North Worcestershire Archaeology Group (NWAG) undertook test pit excavations at Hillgrove, Boreley Lane, Ombersley (SO 8238 6395; Fig 1). This work aimed to identify and record potential archaeological features, deposits, and finds at the site, including those associated with the nearby Roman settlement at Holt Fleet Caravan Park and the documented historic farmstead of Hillside Cottage. The fieldwork (WSM77662) was led by Margaret Burrows, and involved the investigation of 18 test pits, which were excavated using the methodology developed by the Currently Occupied Medieval Rural Settlements (CORS) project and more recently used by the Worcestershire Archaeological Society's 'Small Pits, Big Ideas' project.¹

Four periods of activity were revealed by the excavations. Period 1 was defined by a scatter of later prehistoric and Roman finds, which offer glimpses of riverside occupation along the Severn gravels. This was followed in Period 2 by a small but sharply defined assemblage of early post-medieval finds, which relate to the occupation of a small farm known as Aylwards or Halwards. The farmhouse survives in the north-east of the site as the 17th- and 18th-century Hillside Cottage. Periods 3 and 4 are characterised by continued occupation into the late post-medieval and modern periods, and are associated with the remains of brick outbuildings, garden and horticultural features, as well as a large assemblage of pottery, glass, and other artefactual and environmental material.

Topography and geology

The site is located on a gentle south-east facing slope, decreasing from 35m Above Ordnance Datum (AOD) in the north near Bennetts Lane to 33m AOD in the south near Holt Fleet Lane. The bedrock geology consists of Helsby Sandstone Formation sandstone, formed in fluvial settings up to 247 million years ago during the Anisian age of the Triassic period.² No superficial deposits have been recorded on the site. The soils consist of freely draining and slightly acidic loams and clays.

Archaeological and historical background

Hillgrove lies at the eastern edge of an area of prehistoric and Roman occupation along the Severn gravel terraces at Holt Fleet, represented in the present day by scattered flints and potsherds and the crop-marks of ancient trackways and rectilinear enclosures. The nearest of these lies 350m south-west of the site at Holt Fleet Caravan Park, where evaluation trenching in 2020 revealed a 0.5m deep ditch filled with a large quantity of Roman pottery.³ The nature and extent of Roman settlement in the area remains unclear, but might conceivably relate to a riverside farming community exploiting the fertile soils and waters for crops, animal grazing, and salmon fishing.

During the medieval period the site lay in the central part of Ombersley (OE *Ambres + leah*, 'Ambre's clearing'), an estate purportedly granted to Evesham

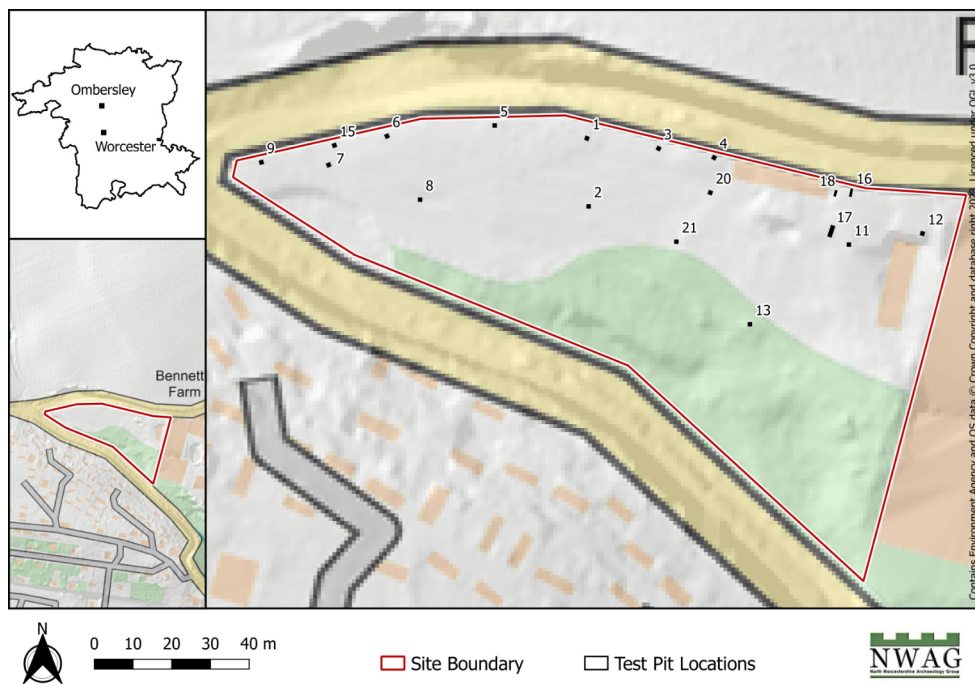


Fig 1: Site location



Fig 2: Reconstruction of the development of the site, based on field observations, household inventories, manorial surveys, the 1840 tithe map, and 19th- and early 20th-century Ordnance Survey maps

Abbey by the Hwiccan *subregulus* Æthelweard in 706.⁴ Evidence from Domesday Book, place names, and pre-Conquest charters suggest that the landscape was extensively wooded, and it was not until 1229 that Ombersley would be officially disafforested by royal charter.⁵ Medieval settlements were gradually carved out of the woodland through a process of assarting, and by the early 14th century Ombersley had a relatively large population of c.630-940 dispersed across hamlets like Acton, Hadley, Ferehampton, and Uphampton.⁶

Manorial records trace the history of the site as far back as 1360, when one John Pach is recorded entering 'one messuage and one nook' in Ferehampton, a customary holding once called Bornewall but known by the 15th century as Aylwards or Halwards.⁷ This holding is coterminous with the property now known as Hillgrove, and formed the locus of a peasant farmstead that by 1436 included a dwelling house and associated land. The property had a complex tenorial history, passing through the hands of the Pardoe (1529-1734), Wright (1734-78; 1802-30), Watkins (1778-1802), Dudley (1830-32; 1862-68), Nash (1832-62), Sandys (1869-1918), Arkell (1918-30), Ward (1931), Barnett (1932-58), and Coe (1958-) families before its acquisition by the present owners.⁸ Most of the occupants were of middling to lower social status, and are described as husbandmen, yeomen, or agricultural labourers.

The physical evolution of the post-medieval farmstead can be traced through historic maps, documents, and observation of the extant Hillside Cottage (Fig 2). Erected on the site of the earlier medieval house during the 'Great Rebuilding', the 17th- and 18th-century farmhouse was originally a two-bay, two-storey half-timbered building with an L-shaped plan, which was augmented with an upper storey by 1739. Though much remodelled, traces of this structure are visible from the exterior and interior of the cottage, which preserves the original hall - a square-panelled box-framed building with a queenpost roof truss - and contains two fireplace mantels bearing apotropaic taper-burn marks (Fig 3). By 1606 the curtilage also contained a three-bay barn, a half-

bay stable, an orchard and a garden.⁹ While the exact location of these outbuildings is unknown, comparison with other post-medieval farmsteads in Worcestershire suggests that they would have been arranged in a courtyard fashion, and probably lay immediately south of the extant farmhouse.¹⁰

While the property was largely unaltered for much of the 18th century, it was subject to several phases of development in the 19th and 20th centuries. By 1820 the curtilage had been divided into three separate garden and orchard plots, and by 1840 the east wing of the farmhouse, the barn, and the stable had all been demolished.¹¹ This process of division continued into the 1860s, by which time the farmhouse had been split into two cottages and the three curtilage plots further subdivided into five, the latter of which included orchard grounds and an osier bed.¹² Many of these developments were reversed in the late 19th century, and by the 1900s the cottages and curtilage were reunited into a single unit.¹³ By 1910 the property is recorded as consisting of a half-timbered building of brick and tile, in poor condition yet equipped with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a pantry, and was accompanied by a pigsty, hovel, and privy.¹⁴ The most recent alterations date to the mid- to late 20th century, and involved the remodelling of the cottage's south façade, the creation of a new cross wing on its east side, the demolition of the southern outbuilding, and the construction of new outbuildings to the east and south-east of the cottage.



Fig 3: South-west facing view of Hillside Cottage

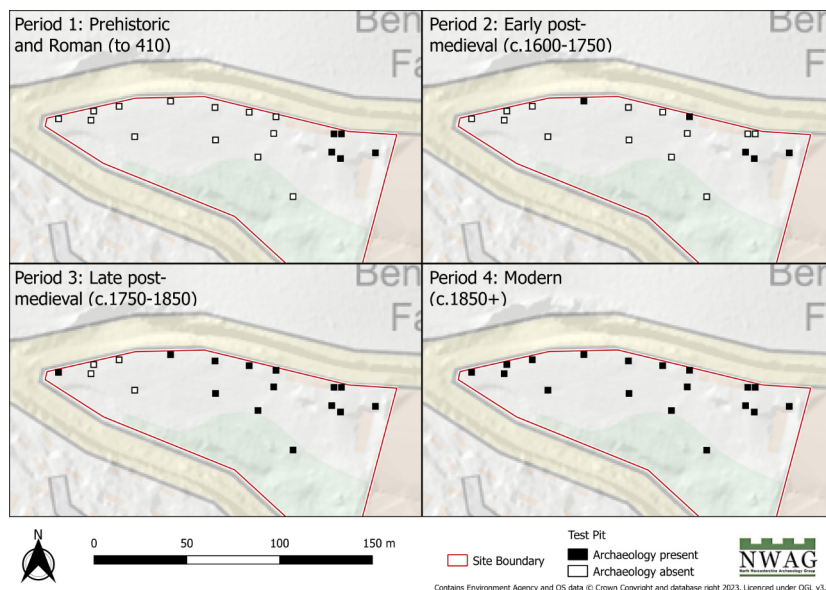


Fig 4: Distribution of dated archaeological finds by test pit

The archaeological sequence

Most of the test pits contained simple stratigraphic sequences, consisting of overlying layers of brown sandy silt topsoil (0.1-0.3m thick), reddish- to greyish-brown sandy clay subsoils (0.2-0.6m thick), and natural geology of red sandy clay (0.3m+ deep). Archaeological features and deposits were recorded in four test pits, including a brick floor in test pit 3, a probable bean trench in test pit 8, a post-hole alignment in test pits 17 and 18, and a charcoal-rich deposit in test pit 17. The topsoil and subsoils of all the test pits contained artefactual and environmental material datable to the later prehistoric to modern periods (Fig 4), whose size and condition was typical of manuring waste scattered in an area of documented historic pasture, orcharding, and garden land.

Period 1: Prehistoric and Roman (to 410)

Evidence of early activity at the site was represented by a handful of finds from test pits 11-12 and 16-18, which were all located on an area of high ground in the north-east corner of the site. The oldest of these are 12 pieces of worked flint (40g), including three flakes, two blade-like flakes, two flake cores, and five fragments of knapping waste (Fig 5). These objects were manufactured from good to high quality flint, which was probably sourced from cobbles found on the banks of the River Severn. Most of the flints are technologically undiagnostic, and can only be broadly dated to the later prehistoric period, but technological features of the two blade-like flakes suggest an association with the deliberate blade-producing industries of the Mesolithic and early Neolithic.¹⁵ Roman activity, meanwhile, is indicated by a single abraded sherd (3g) from a Reduced Severn Valley ware dish or platter (Fig 6). The dearth of Roman finds suggests that the site lay beyond the bounds of the nearby settlement at Holt Fleet Caravan Park, and might instead have formed cultivated farmland during this period.

Period 2: Early post-medieval (c.1600-1750)

Test pits 4-5, 11-12, and 17 produced glimpses of early post-medieval activity in the north-east of the site around the extant 17th- to 18th-century Hillside Cottage (Fig 7). The earliest find from this period is a sherd (19g) from a Raeren stoneware 'Bellarmine' or Bartmann jug, a type of globular drinking and storage vessel produced in the Rhineland between the late 15th and early 17th centuries. Bartmann jugs were among the most popular forms of imported pottery in Tudor and early Stuart England, and similar jugs have been found at Droitwich and Worcester, including one from Sidbury that may have been used as a 'witch bottle'.¹⁶ Thirty-three fragments of clay tobacco pipe (78g) were also datable to the 17th and early 18th centuries, including three Broseley type bowls dated c.1660-80 and another dated c.1660-1730 (Broseley type 2 x3; type 2-5 x1), one of which has a distinctive 'T I' heel stamp that matches a find from Newport Street, Worcester.¹⁷ Other notable finds of this period include a copper alloy shoe buckle dated c.1650-1720 and a 16th- to 17th-century copper-alloy mount, probably from a strap or horse harness, which features two opposing rivets and a circular openwork design of three alternating circles and cusped trefoils.¹⁸ The quality and variety of these objects portray modestly comfortable livings, matching Hillgrove's status as a husbandman's farm held by the Pardoe family.

Period 3: Late post-medieval (c.1750-1850)

Later post-medieval activity was well-represented at Hillgrove, with diagnostic finds recorded in test pits 1-5, 9, 11-13, and 16-21. There is a noticeable growth in the volume of material dated c.1750-1850 compared to c.1600-1750, which must at least partly reflect the growing availability of consumer goods that were increasingly mass produced on an industrial or semi-industrial basis. However, there is also an expansion in the spatial distribution of late post-medieval finds, which occur not only in the vicinity of Hillside



Fig 5: Selected later prehistoric flints from Hillgrove Cottage but also in test pits located further to the south and west.

The late post-medieval pottery assemblage consisted of 275 sherds weighing 1.2kg, most of which were from post-medieval redware/blackware vessels (782g). Smaller quantities of creamware (127g), creamware with annular or ‘mocha’ slip decoration (130g), Staffordshire-type marbled (98g) and combed (23g) slipware, pearlware with ‘encrusted’ (7g) and underglaze polychrome-painted (39g) decoration, and Staffordshire-type mottled brown-glazed ware (14g) were also recorded. The diagnostic forms were domestic in character, including dishes, jars, platters, and hollow ware vessels, and resemble the late post-medieval household assemblages from Furnace Farm in Shelsley Walsh and Newport Street in Worcester.¹⁹

Other late post-medieval finds offer windows into the lifestyles of the Wright, Watkins, Dudley, and Nash families, who held Hillgrove after Thomas Pardoe surrendered the property in 1734. Twelve fragments of clay tobacco pipe (23g), including two Broseley type 8 bowls dated c.1780-1840 (Fig 8), speak of bad habits and modest comforts, while dress accessories like six copper-alloy buttons (one silver-gilt and decorated with a chained rose) and a shoe buckle reveal efforts to balance the demands of fashion with a middling income.

Period 4: Modern (c.1850+)

Modern activity was extremely well-represented at Hillgrove, with diagnostic structures, cut features, and artefacts recorded in all 18 test pits. Excavations in test pit 3 revealed a floor surface composed of unfrogged bricks lain in a stretcher bond, which was directly overlain by a 0.1m thick layer of topsoil

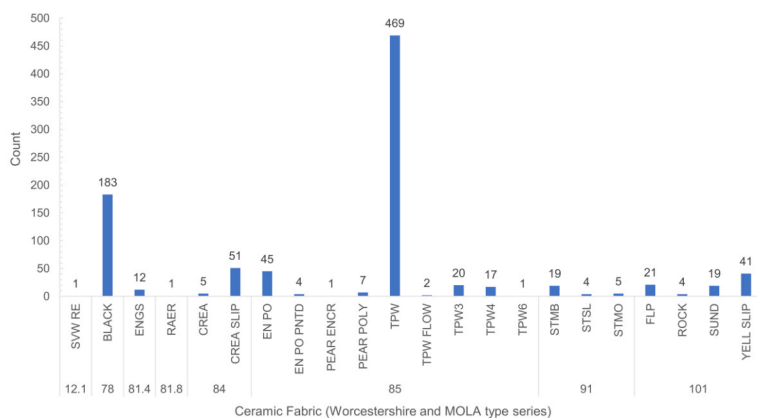


Fig 6: Quantification of pottery by sherd count, classified by MOLA and Worcestershire Ceramic Fabric codes

containing modern pottery and glass. Its appearance and location suggest that it formed part of a pigsty, hovel, and privy complex recorded in the Lloyd George Valuation Survey of 1910. Individual post-holes recorded in test pits 17 and 18, meanwhile, might be the remains of a former fence line positioned to the east of Hillside Cottage. Probable horticultural activity was recorded in test pit 8 in the form of a north to south orientated ditch with vertical sides and a flat base, probably a bean trench, which was cut into a subsoil layer filled with modern pottery and glass.

Modern artefacts were exceptionally common at the site. The pottery assemblage consisted of 655 sherds weighing 1.5kg, roughly four-fifths of which were from refined white ware vessels with underglaze transfer-printed decoration (986g). Ninety-one blue transfer-printed sherds featured diagnostic patterns, including 44 decorated with ‘Willow Pattern’ (c.1780+) and 47 with ‘Asiatic Pheasants’ (c.1850+) designs, and one ‘Willow Pattern’ sherd from test pit 17 bore the mark of Dudson, Wilcox & Till, who operated the Britannic Works manufactory at Hanley, Staffordshire, in c.1902-26.²⁰ These were supplemented by a small amount of English porcelain, including 45 undecorated sherds (139g) and four with overglaze polychrome-painted decoration (4g). The modern china was entirely composed of table and hollow wares, including bowls, dishes, saucers, and teacups. Handfuls of other modern fabrics were also recorded, including 41 sherds of slip-decorated yellow ware bowls and mugs (99g), 21 sherds of modern flowerpots (75g), 19 sherds of Sunderland-type slipware hollow wares (75g), 12 sherds of English salt-glazed stoneware preserve pots (116g), and four sherds of Rockingham ware teapots (28g). This selection is fully consistent with a 19th- and 20th-century farmworkers’ cottage, and resembles the pottery assemblage found on the site of Victorian workers’ houses at Shelsley Walsh.²¹

Other modern finds provide further insights into the daily lives of Hillgrove’s residents in the 19th and 20th centuries. While most of the 332 fragments of glass (1.37kg) came from cylindrical beer, cider, and spirit bottles, a small number were designed for non-alcoholic beverages and medicines, including a Codd-

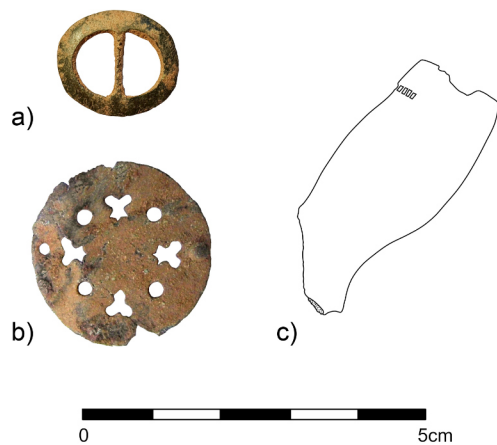


Fig 7: Selected early post-medieval finds from Hillgrove: a) shoe buckle; b) strap or horse harness mount; c) Broseley type 2 clay tobacco pipe

type soda bottle dated 1875-1930 and a bottle of 'Essence of Coffee & Chicory', a liquid compound manufactured in Shieldhall, Glasgow, by the Scottish Wholesale Co-operative Society in c.1900.²² Tobacco consumption is again reflected in 43 fragments of clay tobacco pipe (62g) dated c.1850+. Seen alongside other finds like a bone-handled iron knife, a copper-alloy zoomorphic mount, a pipeclay marble dated 1885-1910, and a copper-alloy pen nib made by Hinks, Wells & Co. of Birmingham (1836-1929), these objects paint vivid portraits of working class rural households at work and at play.

Environmental remains

The excavations also produced a modest environmental assemblage (233g), including 79 fragments of animal bone and two pieces of marine shell, which shed light on the economy and landscape setting of Hillgrove in the post-medieval and modern periods.

Most of the animal bones belonged to domestic cattle (*Bos taurus*), pigs (*Sus sp.*), and sheep/goat (*Ovis aries/Capra hircus*), which were represented by loose teeth and post-cranial bones from test pits 1, 4, 11-13, and 17. Some displayed butchery marks, including a cleaved astragalus from a disarticulated beef hock and a sheep/goat radius with two transverse distal cuts, probably caused by the preparation of mutton foreshank. While the sample is too small to be conclusive, ageing data suggests that the cattle, pigs, and sheep/goat were all managed according to different husbandry strategies: most of the pigs, for example, were culled as sub-adults for meat purposes, while the cattle and sheep/goat seem to have come from mixed-age stock kept for meat, dairy, wool, and traction. Similar mortality profiles have been seen in the post-medieval animal bone assemblage from Deansway in Worcester, and correspond with evidence from the 1615 probate inventory of Thomas Pardoe of Halwards, which describes a mixed-age herd of six cattle - two kine, two heifers, one yearling, and one weanling - as well as 36 sheep and two pigs.²³

Other species were also present at the site. Four chicken (*Gallus f. domestic*) limb bones are from hens kept for meat and eggs, like the 'poultry' recorded in Thomas Pardoe's 1615 probate inventory. Three rabbit (*Oryctolagus sp.*) bones, meanwhile, probably come from meat stock raised on local warrens, which are documented in the Ombersley district throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods.²⁴ The two specimens of oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) shell, however, almost certainly came from further afield, and relate to a trade in Kentish and European oysters recorded in Worcestershire by the mid-19th century.²⁵ The only wild animal bone from the site is a crow (*Corvus sp.*) humerus, probably from a bird nested in the hedges or orchard trees.

Conclusion

The test pit excavations at Hillgrove have revealed evidence of human activity from the Mesolithic to the modern day, and cast significant new light on the development of a historic farmstead known as Bornewall in the 14th century and Aylwards or Halwards from the 15th to 20th centuries.

Evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity is sparse and concentrated on the area of high ground in the north-east corner of the site, a naturally favourable location that was later occupied by the medieval and post-medieval farmstead. Lithics hint at an occasional human presence from the Mesolithic onwards, while Roman pottery probably represents the manuring of farmland. While these finds add to a growing body of evidence for early occupation on the Severn gravel terraces around Holt Fleet, the scarcity of Roman material is interesting, and suggests that the excavated Roman settlement at Holt Fleet Caravan Park did not extend much further than Holt Fleet Lane.

While documents show that the site contained a peasant farmstead from at least the mid-14th century, no identifiable medieval finds, features, or deposits were found in any of the test pits. This discrepancy is

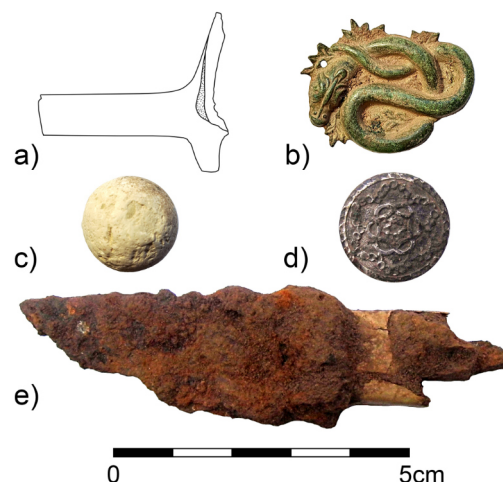


Fig 8: Selected late post-medieval and modern finds from Hillgrove: a) Broseley type 8 clay tobacco pipe; b) zoomorphic mount; c) pipeclay marble; d) silver-gilt button; e) bone-handled iron knife

striking, and mirrors observations at Wichenford, where test pitting on documented medieval farms also failed to produce medieval finds.²⁶ While this could be partly explained by off-site refuse disposal, it might also have a simple landscape explanation: Ombersley was extensively wooded in the middle ages, and the lack of medieval finds may well reflect the siting of most test pits in areas of former early woodland to the south and west of the medieval farmhouse.

By contrast, post-medieval and modern occupation at the site is illustrated by a rich corpus of finds and features spanning the 17th to 20th centuries. The distribution of material changes noticeably over the early (c.1600-1750) and late (c.1750-1850) post-medieval and modern (c.1850+) periods, with a gradual expansion west and south of the settled area around Hillside Cottage. This almost certainly reflects changes in land use, which involved the progressive clearance of woodland for conversion into orchards, gardens, meadow, and pasture. This process mirrors a wider trend for woodland clearance in the post-medieval West Midlands, which was driven by efforts to expand the acreage of meadow and pasture and by the growing industrial demand for woodland fuel and resources.²⁷ On the other hand, it also reflects the growing popularity of farmhouse orchards in western England, which provided an important source of side revenue for smaller farms in pastoral areas like Ombersley.²⁸ The conversion of woodland to orchard and pasture might explain the frequent presence of charcoal in the test pits, which could reflect slash-and-burn clearance.

The post-medieval and modern remains at Hillgrove illustrate four centuries of continuity and change on a single Worcestershire farmstead. The early post-medieval finds reveal the modestly comfortable livings of husbandmen like Thomas Pardoe, whose farming incomes would have allowed for minor luxuries like imported pottery, tobacco, and fashionable dress accessories. Despite the declining fortunes of small farmers in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Pardoe's successors were able to reap at least some of the benefits of an increasingly rich material world, filling their cupboards with decorated industrial ceramics and clothing themselves in fancy buttons and buckles. That they could do so is testament to rural adaptability, achieved firstly by creating new income from orchards and pasture laid on freshly-cleared woodland, and later by the division and sub-letting of the farmstead as cottages.²⁹ While the farm workers that occupied Hillgrove in the late 19th and 20th centuries were of decidedly lower status than their post-medieval forebears, their living standards were nonetheless relatively good, and finds from the site offer glimpses of working class households with gradually improving facilities and increased access to consumer goods, recreation, and the written word.

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