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The Sconce, March Civil War Fortifications



Report no. 34

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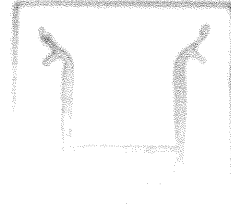


Cambridgeshire
County Council

Rural Strategy

The Sconce, March Civil War Fortifications

Tim Malim
1991



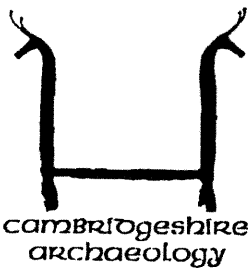
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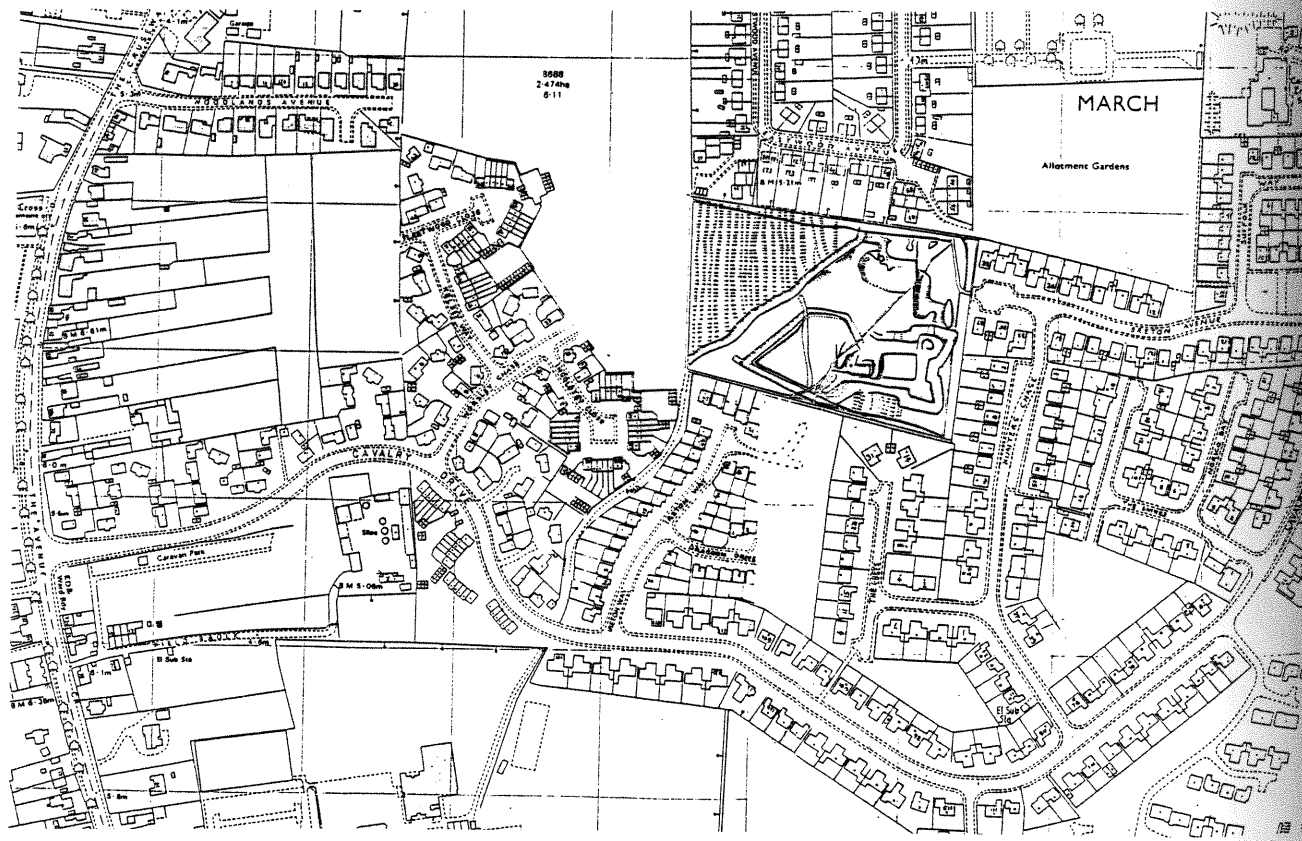
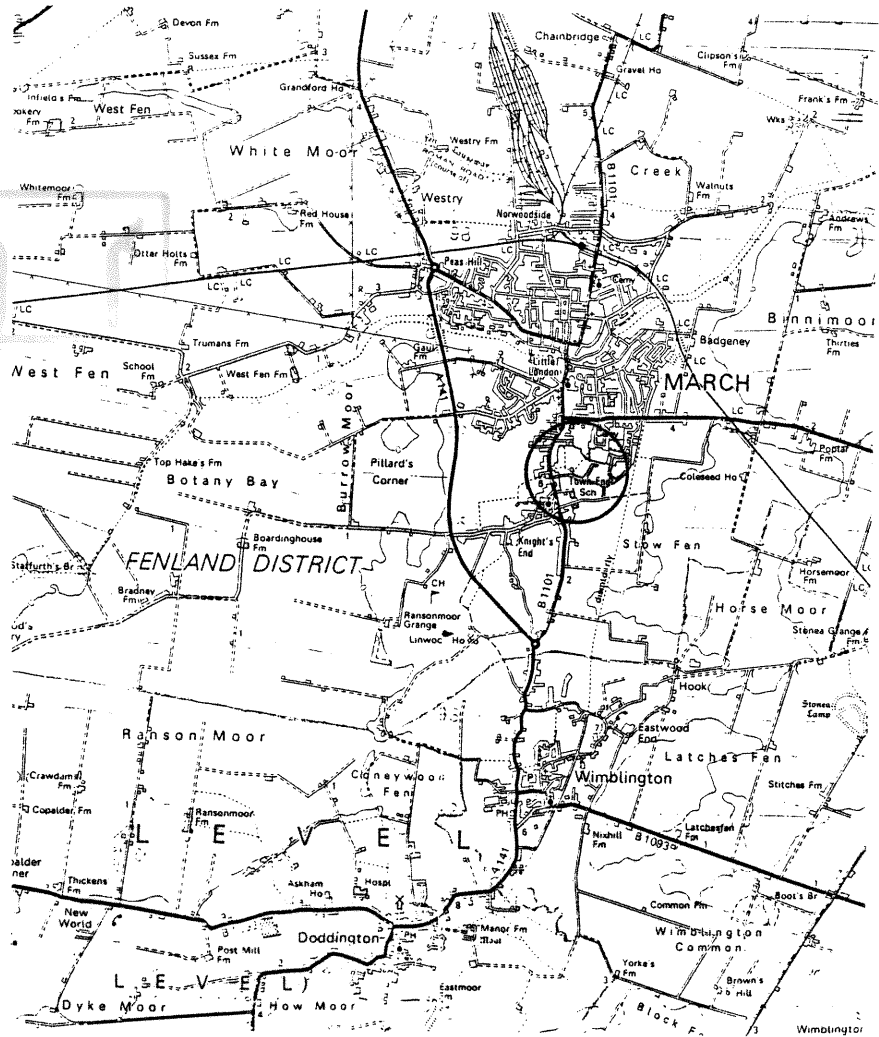


Fig.1 Location plan of the earthworks surrounded by modern housing.

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THE SCONCE MARCH, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

TL420957

Tim Malim

Civil War fortifications at Cavalry Barn, March, survive as low earthworks cutting through a pattern of Medieval ridge and furrow, and an isolated toft. The siting of a fort close to the fen edge not only commanded the eastern approaches to March island from Stonea and Upwell, but also controlled passage along Doddington Leam, and the main north-south road between Ely and Wisbech as it ran through March island (Ireton's Way).

Introduction

The site consists of a rectangular field approximately 2 hectares in extent, south of Eastwood Avenue. It lies on Boulder Clay at some 4 metres OD. Two hundred metres south-east lies the Medieval and later fen edge (1841 Tithe Apportionments and Map). The site contains low earthworks, part of which is known as the Sconce, a scheduled ancient monument.

The Sconce and adjoining Medieval earthworks survive as low rises and hollows approximately 1 metre high. They are examples of Medieval agriculture and of specific historic events that have become "fossilised" in the landscape, a phenomenon extremely rare in the (mainly arable) fenlands. They have been under pasture for many years but from their low profiles appear to have been ploughed at some time in the past. Rubble and fly-tipping have been occurring in the ditches, and presently erosion is being caused by bicycles and unofficial paths across the site.

Recent expansion of housing in March has been massive, with an area around the monument under-going particularly large-scale development. To maintain open spaces for recreational use Fenland District Council acquired the present site in 1990, aided by a grant from English Heritage, with a condition that an overall management plan would be produced which would include a survey and documentary research of all earthwork remains in the field. English Heritage asked Cambridgeshire County Council, Archaeology Section, to undertake this survey in March 1991, and made available a small grant to fund the works.

During the 1970s the Sconce itself had been surveyed by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHM) (Brown & Taylor 1980), but little had been noted of other earthworks, and the accompanying discussion was useful but brief. In particular, Medieval and Post-Medieval land-use had not been examined, nor had the fort been put into context with the local pattern of events during the 1640s.

Methodology

A plane-table survey at 1:1000 was conducted of previously unrecorded earthworks north and west of the Sconce, using tapes, ranging rods, and an alidade. Approximately 500 points were taken, with sets of four readings across ridge and furrow, recording junction of furrow with ridge, top of ridge on either side, and then junction of ridge with furrow on far side. Eight such sets per strip were adequate for giving detailed form to the field system. House platforms, quarries, and a sinuous ditch required more intricate plotting. This survey was then tied in to the northern and western boundaries of the field and to certain characteristic points of the earthworks that had been surveyed previously. It was considered unnecessary to re-survey work of the Royal Commission although some extra details were added, especially features that showed up as changes in vegetation. As noted in their report, evidence of a building on the Sconce could be seen amidst the earthworks.

When the data was drawn-up and integrated with the RCHM survey, it was found that the plot did not fit correctly into the field boundaries on the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map of the area. Much soul-searching followed until it was realised that field boundaries on the previous survey were inaccurate in length and the angle between them. Chris Taylor kindly explained that the survey completed by RCHM had been conducted by students using only tapes and a hand-held optical square, which therefore accounted for the inaccuracies. In conclusion it was assumed that the internal survey of the Sconce was sufficiently accurate, and therefore in the combined plot of both surveys we have used our own field boundaries and skewed the RCHM survey of the Sconce to fit in with these real field sides.

Historical research included consultation of early charters and Domesday, analysis of place names, and reference to leading studies on the region. Mostly this work was from secondary sources, but primary sources were examined at times, especially in the case of early maps. Background information on military campaigns in Cambridgeshire during the Civil War was supplied by A J Baggs (pers. comm.) and Cromwellian Fortifications in Cambridgeshire, (M. Osborne 1990).

Historical Background

Archaeological fieldwork has shown that occupation of March island extends back into Palaeolithic times (Hall, 1987; 39-40). Scatters of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic flint tools have been found near Gaul Road, on either side of a roddon. Bronze Age sites have been found on gravel areas at Cherry Holt and in the north of the island, where the majority of Iron Age and Roman settlement also occurred. Gravel parts of the island, especially where modern March is situated, would have been the most attractive areas for farming on the upland, but urban development has given scant opportunity for archaeologists to find traces of earlier periods.

During early Medieval times March was a hamlet dependent on Doddington, as were settlements at Benwick, Wimblington and Stonea. The unusual size and 3 chapelries of the parish of Doddington, (Haigh 1988, 19) leads David Haigh to suggest there was a Saxon minster church here, although so far there is no firm archaeological or documentary evidence. Various charters dating between 955-1010 A.D. refer to exchanges and leasing of fisheries at Wimblington and Stonea, with an estate at March being cited in the will of Oswi who died at the battle of Ringmere in Norfolk in 1010 (Hart, 1966; 46, 219-221). These references to March island emphasise the importance of land rights there, and the interest that ecclesiastical foundations took in them. It has been suggested that the present course of the River Nene through March island is an artificial cut made by the Saxons, presumably organised through the power of Ely monastery (Hall, 1987; 46), which was given land at March in c.1000 A.D. by Oswi and Leofleda (Pugh, 1967; 118).

In Domesday it is written that the Abbot of Ely held the manor of Doddington including "March, where there are 12 villagers with 12 acres each" (DB 5:45). During the following centuries the Doddington estate flourished, being given to the bishop of Ely in 1191 (Haigh 1988; 19), and a moated Bishop's Palace was built at what is now Manor Farm, Wimblington. Much of the demesne land would have been used for grazing, but an important grange existed at Stonea, and special cattle farms are recorded for Stonea, Dereford (Dartford Road, March), and Westrae on the north-west of the island (Haigh, 1988; 19). In addition, Great and Little deer parks were created, the position of which can be seen surviving on a 17th century map (CRO R51/23/3). Woods also show on this map, and assarting of fenlands by a process of drainage added to the overall size of the estate. The abbot of Bury St. Edmunds also held a small estate in March.

Originally settlement at March centred around St. Wendreda's church (Town End), and close to Hatchwood and Knights End, to which the position of the church, stone cross, street pattern, early maps, and archaeological finds (Hall, 1987; 46) all give evidence. In the 15th century it had several guilds (Pugh, 1967; 116) and the magnificence of the church bears witness to the success of the community. Over the succeeding centuries settlement moved north along the Ely-Wisbech road where a spur of higher land runs (5 metres OD), and the focus of the town appears to have changed to the river Nene and the bridge across it. A 17th century map (CRO R51/23/3) shows only 30 houses near St. Wendreda's, with a further 25 houses at the western ends of narrow lands, which fronted on to the road as ribbon development spreading northwards towards the Nene. Virtually no buildings are apparent along the south bank, but approximately 80 structures, some of which are terraced, cluster along the north bank. This pattern of settlement remained remarkably stable, for the 1886 Ordnance Survey map of March shows buildings in much the same locations. Although still assessed (for taxation purposes) with Doddington, the population of March appears to have been about 1000 (Pugh, 1967; 117)

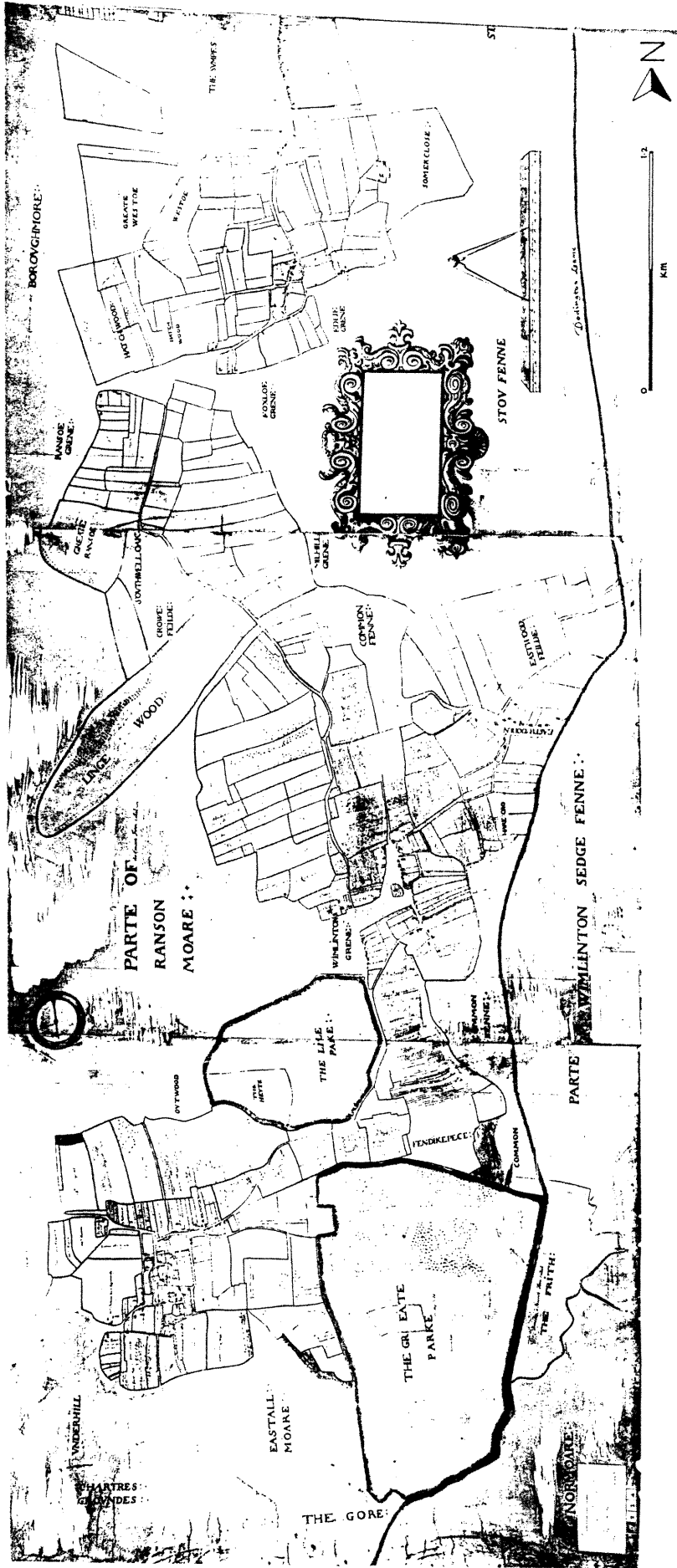


Fig. 2 Part of 17th century map of March island. North is to the right of the picture. Note Somerclose, and the field containing the Sconce, situated above the original scale, whilst 'Doddington Leam' can be seen to the south of it. Also note direction of the old road from Town End to Wimblington on an alignment further west than today.

in 1563 when it was a minor port, and by 1639-40 it appears to be greater in size than Doddington and Wimblington combined. A market was first granted in 1670 with two annual fairs (Pugh, 1967; 116), and officially March was enclosed by a public Act in 1792 (Tate, 1940; 82), although even more considerable enclosure had gone on in the previous century (Pugh, 1967; 119). The pattern of open field systems becoming enclosed can be seen clearly on a 17th century map of March island (CRO R51/23/3), and it is on this newly enclosed land that the Sconce is situated.

Several times I have referred to a detailed and illuminating map dating to the 17th century (Figs. 2 and 3). This map is in the possession of Grounds and Co. of March, and is a fascinating document. It shows individual houses and property divisions with the names of all owners, as well as those of field names, woods, closes, greens, and fens. It has been variously dated to c.1680 (Cambridge University Library) and to c.1630 (Reaney, 1943; 256. Hall, 1987; 47), but unfortunately it is untitled and undated. However a map very similar in design and execution exists for Stonea, produced by Ben Hare in 1637, commissioned by "Robert Paiton" (CRO L39/3). The Peyton family were important local landowners from the beginning of the 17th century, and in 1669 entered into an agreement with their 165 March tenants for 4,440 acres to be set aside for common pasture (Pugh, 1967; 119), part of which was immediately east of the Sconce. It is very probable that the map of March island is a product of another survey by Ben Hare, possibly also for the Peyton family. Although this does not give a date to the map it would seem more likely that this was also drawn-up in the 1630s. However it is interesting to note that those areas designated common pasture in 1669 have no boundaries but do have descriptions to this effect ("The Common Fenne called Poutes Hirne") written on the map, which suggests it post-dates such an agreed division of the land.

Two other aspects that this map shows are roads and watercourses. In the vicinity of the Sconce two lanes appear to head towards the east, to Stow Fen, Horse Moor, and perhaps to Upwell (now named as Barker's Lane and Upwell Road). The main Ely-Wisbech road runs north-south through March island, but interestingly this map shows it running west out of old March (Town End) and then south to Wimblington. The present road is more direct and further east of the one shown, but a study of the Tithe Apportionments and fieldwork shows that this newer route crosses a fen inlet (Hall, 1987; fig. 25). This would explain why the road originally was located further west, so as to run on higher ground.

Doddington Leam passes north-south through Stow Fen, separating it from Binnimoor to the east, both areas set aside as common pasture in 1669. This leam flows into the Nene, and is now called Horse Moor Drain. Tracing it back to source, it passes within 1 km of the Sconce, but further south skirts the island itself, beginning at Hook and Eastwood End. From there it continues south and west past Hare Croft through the "common fenne" immediately east of Wimblington village. It joins the eastern boundary of the Great Park at the Frith, a point where several waterways converge, then continues south alongside the park. At the south end it joins with the Old Ea "now decaid" until it passes into Chatteris Land, or Charters land. A map of 1604 by William Hayward shows it as "The Leam" (Darby, 1983; 58-9), and it seems probable that it is Medieval in date, perhaps a product of Doddington Manor and Ely monastery. A map by H.Hondius in 1632 clearly shows this leam continuing south to circle round the north and west of Chatteris island, ultimately joining with the contemporary West Water of the Ouse (Darby, 1983; 49), which used to meet with the Old Nene near to Ramsey. When put together all these plans of the leam suggest that it was a major watercourse designed to connect the Ouse

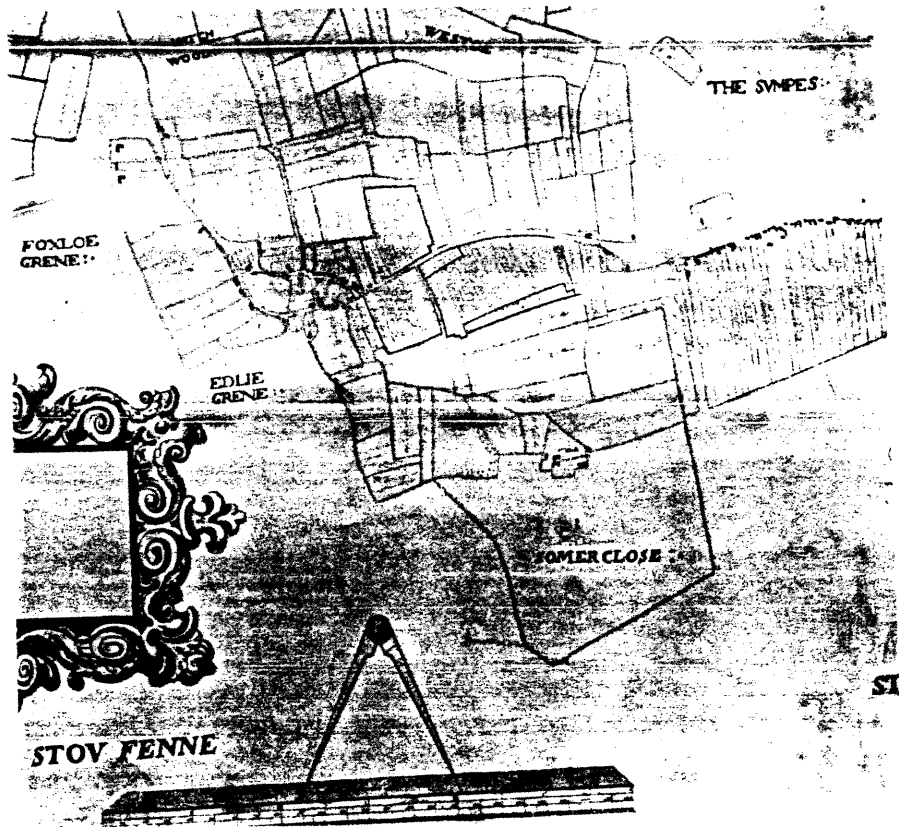


Fig.3 Somerclose with the field containing the Sconce and associated buildings clearly seen as an upside-down V-shape. Most of the surrounding enclosed land bears the name of Mr Hinde.

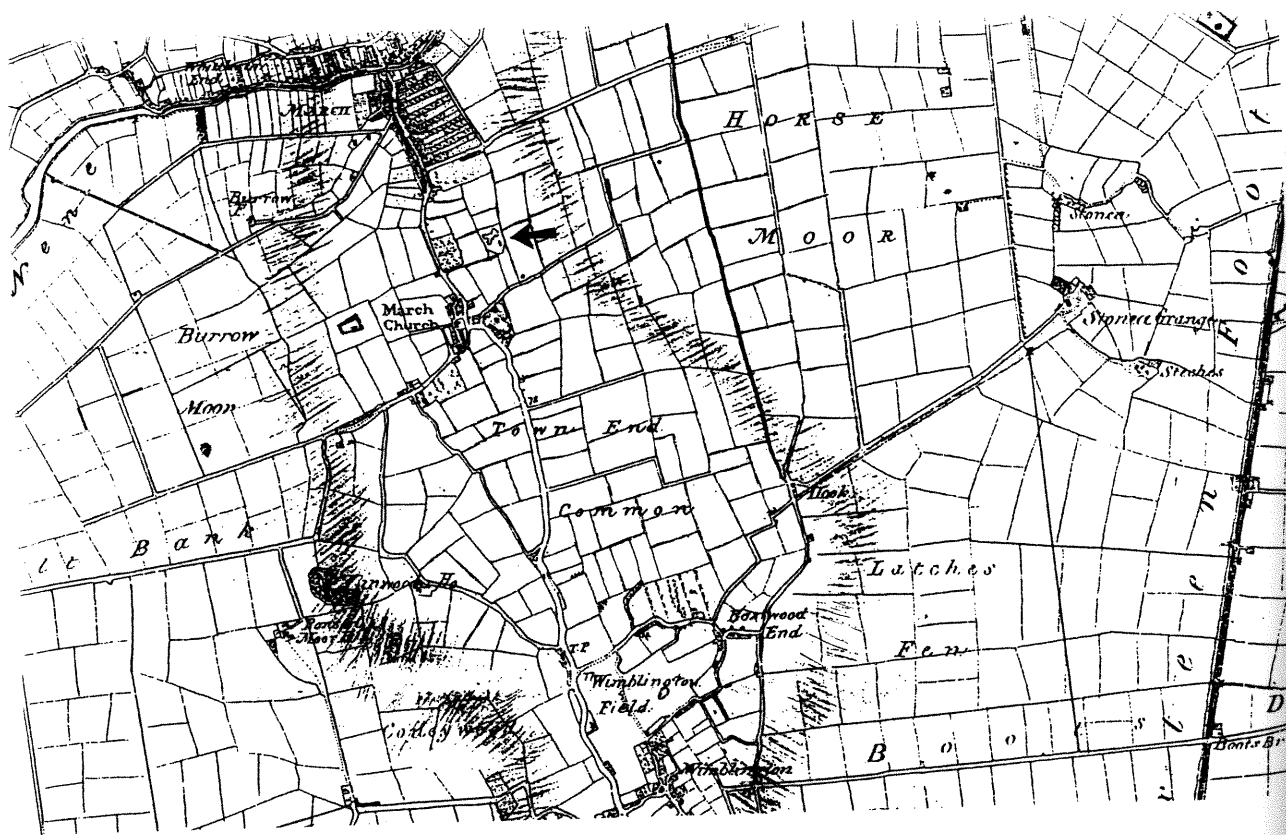
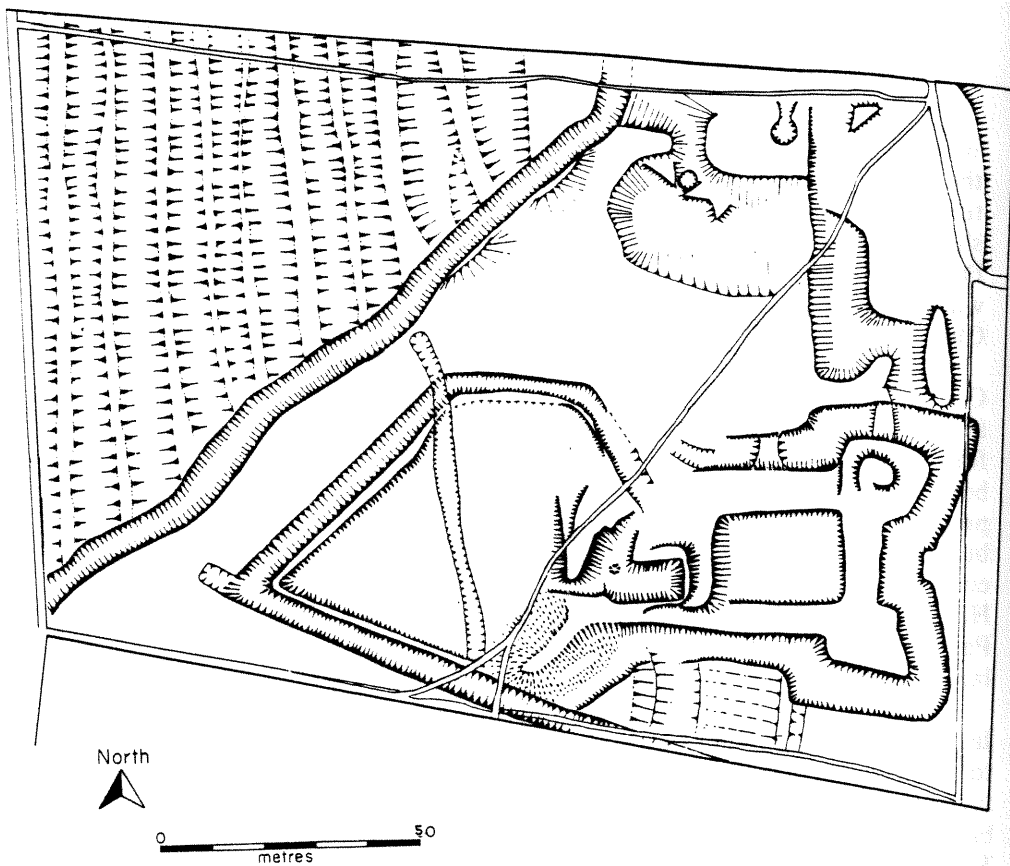


Fig. 4 1820 O.S. map. Note the Sconce shown 2 fields north-east of March Church. The Fen edge is shown as a hatched area around the island.

west of Chatteris with the Nene east of March, and thus cut out a long loop to the west of the island that would have been necessary for navigation in earlier times. Continuation through to Wisbech can be seen by way of Elm Leam as shown on the 1604 map. Further east of Doddington Leam the Sixteen Foot Drain from Chatteris - Three Holes (Upwell) was not constructed until 1651, a waterway which then provided a more direct means of navigation between Chatteris and the ports on the Wash.

On the detailed 17th century map of March island a peculiar sideways V-shape at the west end of the Sconce shows clearly, and immediately east of this lie four buildings enclosed by a very deliberately kinked field boundary. Field boundary shapes and position of buildings tie in so remarkably well with the pattern of earthworks still visible on the ground that there can be little doubt but that the same parcel of land is being depicted. This land, and much of the enclosed fields around it, are shown by the 17th century map to belong to Mr Hinde, and by co-incidence in 1643 a Robert Hynde was an employee of the Parliamentarian Sequestration committee, a man who reputedly managed large-scale fraud to line his own pockets (Holmes, 1974; 131).

In 1820 an Ordnance Survey draft edition was produced at a scale of 2 inches to the mile which shows March island rising from the fen at approximately 0 metres OD. Although the field divisions are not very accurate, what appears to be the Sconce itself is marked, seemingly complete with all bastions (Fig. 4). The map also shows that roads eastwards to Horse Moor and Upwell have become formalised, whilst the road south through Wimblington has changed to follow the same route as the present road, developing the pattern of communication that could be suggested from the 17th century map. The south-eastern bastion of the Sconce also appears on the 1886 O.S. 1:2500, but associated buildings do not appear on either of these maps.



THE SCONCE MARCH



Fig. 5 *Top* Earthwork survey showing ridge and furo at top left and Civil War fort bottom right.

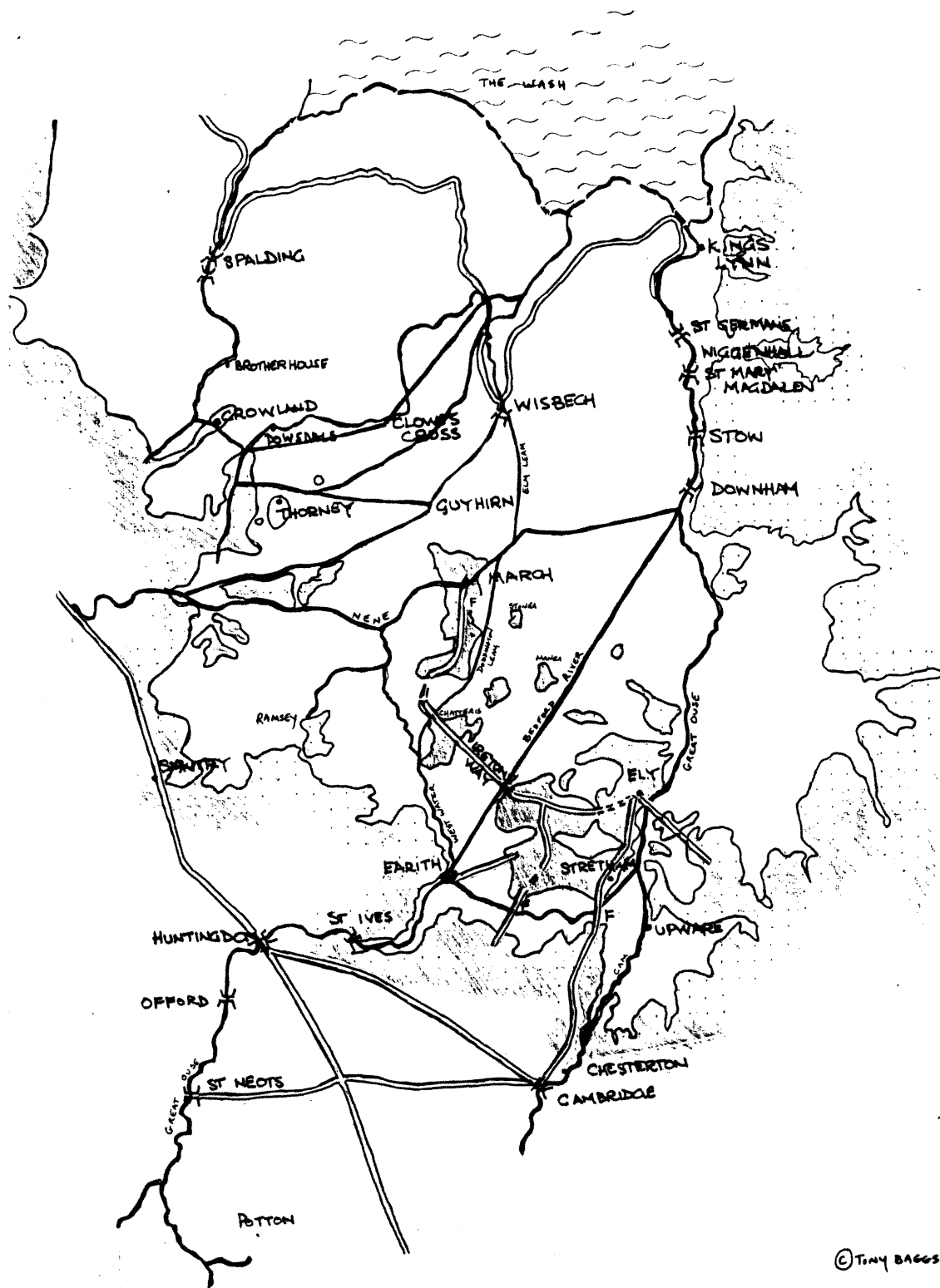
Bottom The Bulwark, Earith from the north. Note the curious V-shaped projection extending northwards beyond the main earthworks, similar to that at the Sconce. (Photograph by Ben Robinson).

Discussion

Earthworks that were disturbed by construction of the Sconce divide into two groups, agricultural and domestic. Agricultural remains consist of ridge and furrow, the product of Medieval ploughing. According to the 17th century map were apparently enclosed pasture by the time the Sconce was built. Ridge and furrow runs north-south and would have fitted into the open field system operated by Medieval villages. Each parish had rights not only to arable fields (open fields) but also to common grazing, woodland, and fenland resources, and it appears that in the island north of the Nene the land was not used for arable production. At March this system was centred on St.Wendreda's Church and Town End. Hall (1987; 47) remarks that the field patterns and strip sizes are exactly comparable to Midland systems, and it would be possible to reconstruct the Medieval landscape and perhaps the rotation system of individual villagers and the demesne. This pattern of ridge and furrow was not only disturbed by the Sconce, but also by house platforms and quarries. A building can be seen on the 17th century map in the same place that a house platform occurs on our survey. Therefore we have evidence for post-Medieval domestic encroachment on the open field system.

The politics and history of the area during the mid 17th century are dominated by two events, civil war and fenland drainage. Both involved cost in wealth, rights, and life. Riots against drainage and enclosure of fenland are recorded in March during March and April 1636, and November 1655, and an attempt to riot under the guise of a football match is recorded for the area in as late as 1699! (Lindley, 1982; 86,185,232). During the Civil War the Cambridgeshire fens were part of the Parliamentary Eastern Association, but just north of them parts of the Lincolnshire fens and Kings Lynn were Royalist. Much fighting took place around Peterborough, Crowland and Kings Lynn during 1643-4 and a string of forts was constructed to defend the fens from Royalist incursions (Osborne, 1990; 15). These forts or sconces were constructed on pockets of dry land along the main lines of communication, which effectively controlled movement in the fens. They were thus of strategic importance.

The Sconce at March typologically fits with Civil War fortifications. Brown and Taylor (1980; 114-5) argue that it was never completed, as the bastions were flat-topped with no banks to defend cannons, and it was without a north-west bastion. In this bastion's position a later ditch had been cut which formed a distinct sideways V-shape beyond the western end of the Sconce. They conclude that it was a training work built by unskilled soldiers who did not understand the complexities of contemporary military engineering. Osborne (1990; 30) sees it as a functioning fortification, guarding the main magazine of the island (data from Clive Holmes, gathered at the PRO, s.p. 25/152), and defending the Nene. Certainly the complete pattern of all bastions can be traced on the ground when the vegetation is long, as stinging nettles fill low patches such as the ditch forming the true west end of the Sconce. They also grow around what appears to be the north-western bastion (Figs. 5 and 7c). In addition, the sideways V-shaped ditches at the western end form a pattern similar to that at Earith Bulwark (Fig. 5), where aerial photographs show V-shaped ditches on the north side of the fort, connecting the north-eastern bastion with the end of the western avenue. Perhaps these could be outer defensive ditches, or communication trenches, at both forts. When seen in relation to other small fortifications along main communications in the fens (Fig. 6), the function of the Sconce at March is clear. It undoubtedly had a strategic purpose, and that was control of the important north-south through-routes at March. Brown and Taylor see no tactical point in facing bastions



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Fig. 6 The Fens during the Civil War, showing the main roads and watercourses, including Doddington Leam. "F" is for fort; named forts have dots beside them. (Reproduced by kind permission of Tony Baggs).

east towards undrained fenland, but it is evident that Doddington Leam formed part of a vital link in the complex of fenland waterways, creating a short-cut between the Ouse and the Nene. Without defence of this Leam, access to Huntingdon from Kings Lynn and the Wash would have been relatively easy, avoiding touching land at March or Chatteris. By positioning the Sconce 1000 metres from the leam to the east, and within 500 metres of the main road to the west, this fortification could effectively control and protect both main arteries, as well as the two roads that headed east from March towards Upwell, between which it is situated. Cannons of the period could fire shot up to 2 kilometres and beyond in range (Osborne, 1990; 8-11), and the Sconce would therefore have had no problem in fulfilling such a protective role. It is located within 200 metres of the fen edge, but nonetheless on some of the highest ground in the island, and earthen ramparts (for which there is no surviving evidence at March) could have been substituted by gabions made of sticks, reeds, sandbags or even wool, as a defensive wall for the cannons.

In conclusion, even if uncompleted, the Sconce appears to have been deliberately placed and built as part of an overall strategy of defence in depth for the fens. The names of Battery Hills and Cavalry Barn are not shown on either the 17th century map or the 1886 O.S. maps of the area, and we must assume these are folklore memories of the Sconce. Although it would not have defended the River Nene itself, it would seem logical to guard this main crossing point and small port, and a second fort close to the bridge, may have fulfilled such a role. With the urban development of the past century traces of such a structure would have disappeared, as have the archaeological remains of earlier periods. Thus requirements of static defence do argue for construction of a fort at the site of the Sconce, although this may never have been completed. Finally, why would the Sconce have been left unfinished? Perhaps an answer can be found by looking at who owned the land on which it is situated. If Mr. Hinde is the same as the Robert Hynde mentioned for fraudulent activities, or even a relation of his, perhaps the money that was budgeted for the Sconce and its upkeep went astray, and made the Hinde family a little richer.

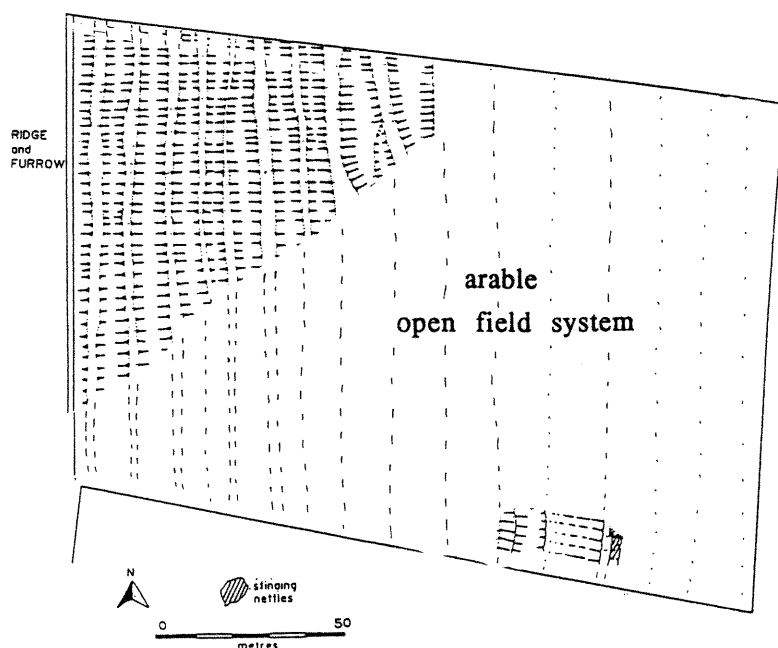


Fig. 7a Plan of earthworks: Medieval phase

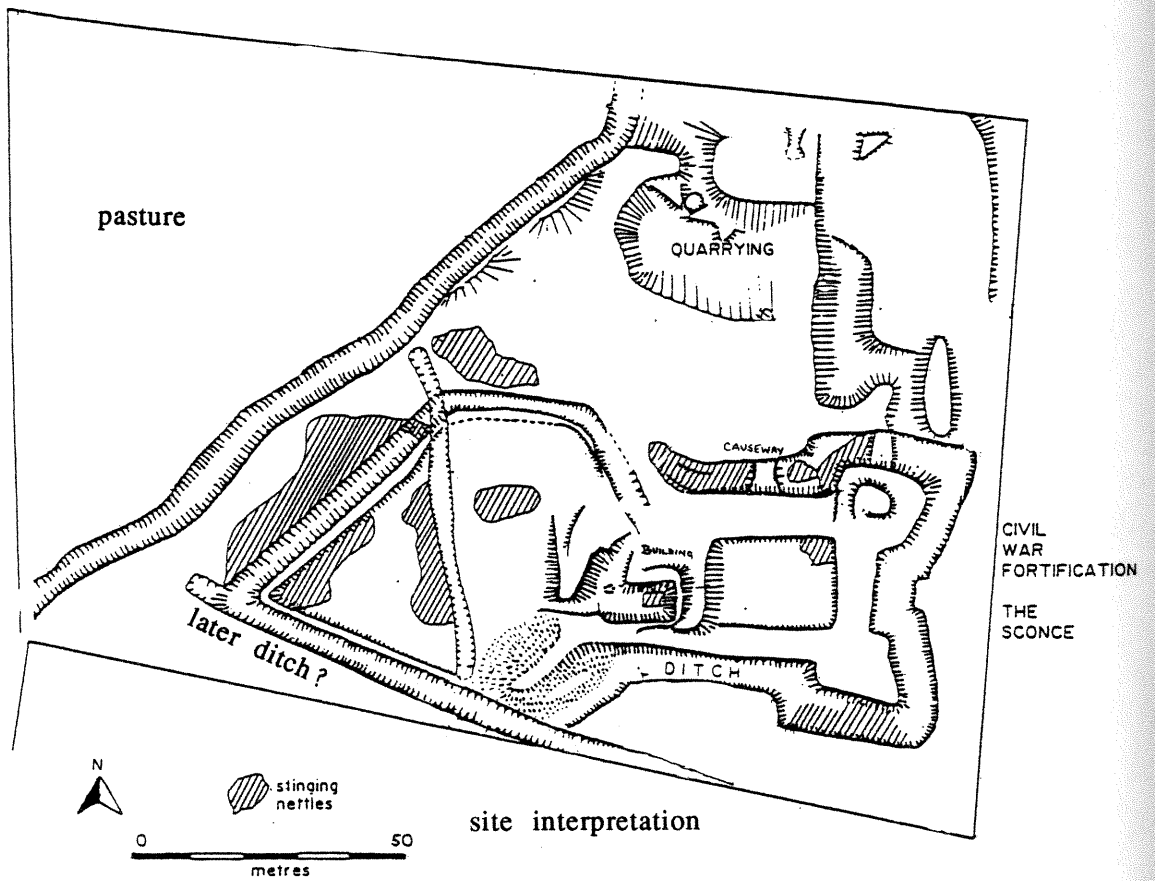
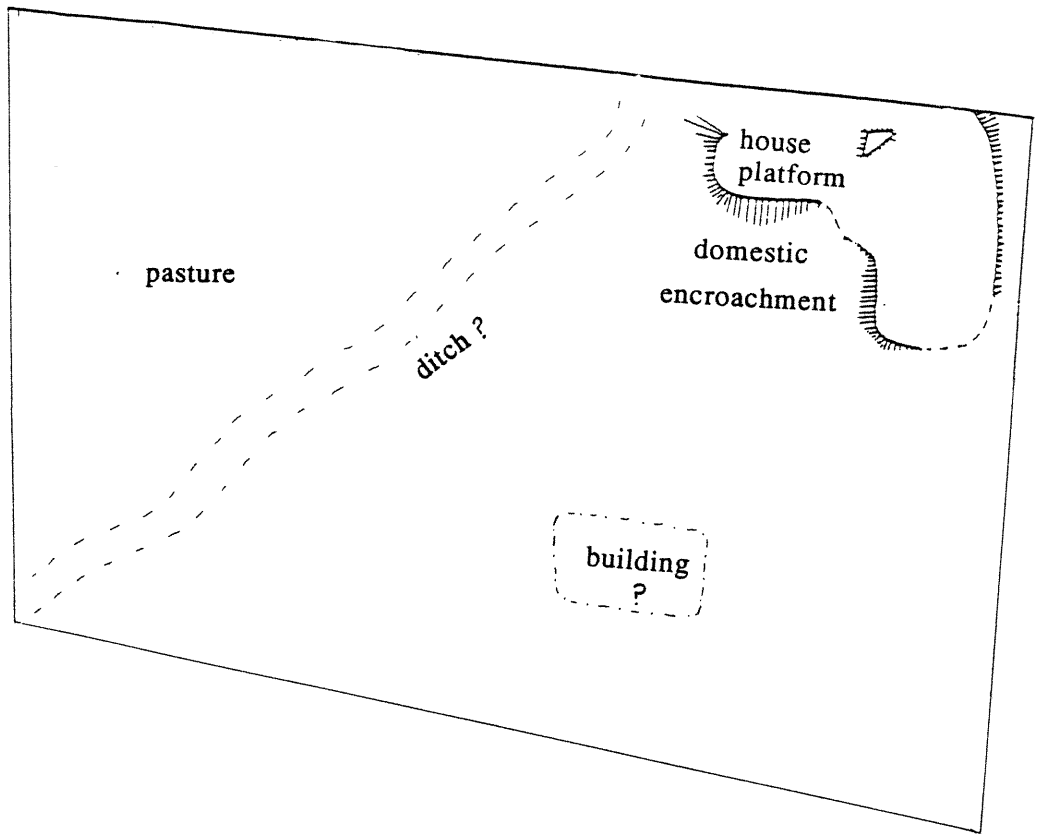


Fig. 7b *Top* Plan of earthworks : Post-Medieval phase

c Bottom Plan of earthworks : 17th century

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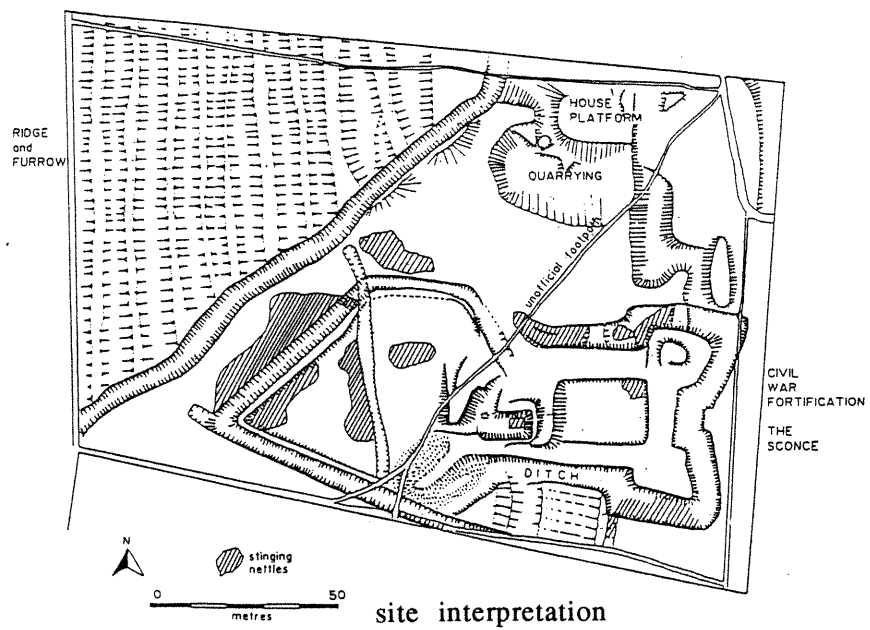


Fig. 8 top Complete earthwork survey with 'desire lines' and main areas of nettle growth, suggestive of disturbed areas from pits, ditches and other activities in the past.

bottom Air photograph from the east. The ditches around the Sconce, and ridge and furrow beyond it, can clearly be seen. (Photograph by Tim Malim and Ben Robinson).

Site Management

The Sconce is representative of a type of monument tied closely to a very important period of our national history, a class of site becoming increasingly rare as land comes under pressure for development and from mechanised agricultural activities. Once part of a chain of fortifications, few now survive, and indeed the destruction of at least three (at Chesterton, Upware, and Braham's Farm, Little Thetford) have been observed in the past twenty years. This emphasises the increased threat to our monuments by modern day pressures.

Little excavation has been conducted on Civil War fortifications in general (Harrington, 1987; 47-8) and our understanding of the way local examples functioned from documentary or excavated evidence is limited. Buildings stood inside the Sconce at March, but we do not know if they are contemporary with it, whilst infill of the ditches and possible slighting of the banks and bastions over the centuries make it difficult to establish a firm plan of all apparent activity in the field. Excavation of the site would enhance our knowledge considerably, and as such the Sconce remains an important resource for future study. However non-destructive survey work using geophysical surveying, and infra-red aerial photography, might be illuminating and help in any current interpretation.

Earthworks at this site have survived for many hundreds of years because they have been kept under a non-arable regime, and have been away from the main areas of habitation and development until very recently. The form of the earthworks themselves, and all below ground archaeological remains, should continue to be protected by such management, under a beneficial regime of grass cover, grazed or mowed regularly to keep it short.

Sub-surface activities and erosion must be prevented. Shrubs and trees will disturb archaeological features both above and below ground, and these should not be allowed to establish themselves.

In order to protect the monument from erosion and sub-surface disturbance the following management is recommended :-

Grass should be mown throughout the growing season sufficient to maintain a good turf cover. Three times a year (March, June/July, September) should be adequate, but vigorous growth in some years may warrant extra cuts. Mowed grass should be raked and removed from site.

Regular paths should be laid using appropriate mats allowing grass to grow, whilst preventing erosion by people and bicycles.

Fly-tipping is likely to be a problem. Dumping of rubble, rubbish, garden debris and soil should be prevented or quickly cleared away.

On site interpretation is required so that the significance of this recreational area and its history is made clear. Fenland environment, drainage, Medieval occupation and farming, and the Civil War should all be included in such interpretation. Its status as a scheduled ancient monument also needs to be advised, and that any damage to it, or use of metal-detectors, is against the law.

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