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Archaeological Field Unit

Lancaster Way Business Park, Ely: An Archaeological Desk-top Study

S. Leith

1995

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 117

Commissioned By CMC Architects on behalf of Grovemere Property Ltd

Lancaster Way Business Park, Ely: An Archaeological Desk-top Study

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1995

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Report No 117

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SUMMARY

This study attempts to define the archaeological potential of land on the Lancaster Way Business Park, Ely (TL 515 785) and to determine the potential impact of development proposals. The site is located to the south-west of Ely, to the south of the A142 on part of the site of the WWII airfield. The study is largely based on existing sources, and the results of recent excavations in the vicinity.

The site's greatest potential lies in the large amounts of Roman pottery found on the site itself. This could indicate a settlement of some significance.

The proximity of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery and of a scatter of Saxon artefacts indicating a possible settlement could suggest further activity of this period within the study area. During the medieval period, the area was part of the common fields of Ely, and traces of ridge and furrow are visible as cropmarks.

The study area is on part of the WWII airfield, and some wartime structures, including Nissen huts and other buildings, survive.

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LANCASTER WAY BUSINESS PARK, ELY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK-TOP STUDY

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This desk-top study was commissioned by CMC Architects on behalf of Grovemere Property Ltd in order to define the archaeological character of land on the Lancaster Way Business Park, Ely and to define the potential impact of development proposals.
- 1.2 The site is located to the south-west of Ely, to the south of the A142 on part of the site of the WWII airfield (TL 515785). The proposed development involves the construction of business units, warehouses, etc. with associated access, services, and landscaping, on several plots between existing units (Fig 1).

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

2.1 The site lies on the 'island' of Ely, an area of upland within the southern Fens, on superficial Boulder Clay overlying Kimmeridge Clay. It is located on some of the highest ground on the island, on a wide plateau of 15m to 20m OD which falls away relatively sharply into Grunty Fen to the south-west, and more gradually towards the River Ouse to the east. A tongue of peat fen extends almost to the A142 to the north-west. This was formerly part of a sinuous natural drainage connection with Grunty Fen, which was formalised by the Grunty Fen Drain (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet 173; Gallois 1988).

3 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORIC CHARACTER OF THE STUDY AREA

3.1 Early Settlement

- 3.1.1 Occupation in the later prehistoric period (late Neolithic/Bronze Age onwards) was generally concentrated on the fen edge in this area, and on the light Lower Greensand soils around Ely (Hall forthcoming). An outcrop of Lower Greensand is found just to the south of the airfield, overlooking Grunty Fen. Here a stray find of a Bronze Age macehead may be the first indicator of settlement during this period (SMR 06911). An archaeological assessment of a pipeline along the A142 near the junction with the A10, carried out by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit, indicated late Neolithic to early Bronze Age settlement on the Fen edge (Alexander 1994).
- 3.1.2 The heavy soils on the marginal clays were generally not cultivated until the Late Iron Age. It was at this time that agricultural technology improved sufficiently for local communities to begin to exploit the heavy soils which were prone to waterlogging (Hall & Coles 1994, 92).

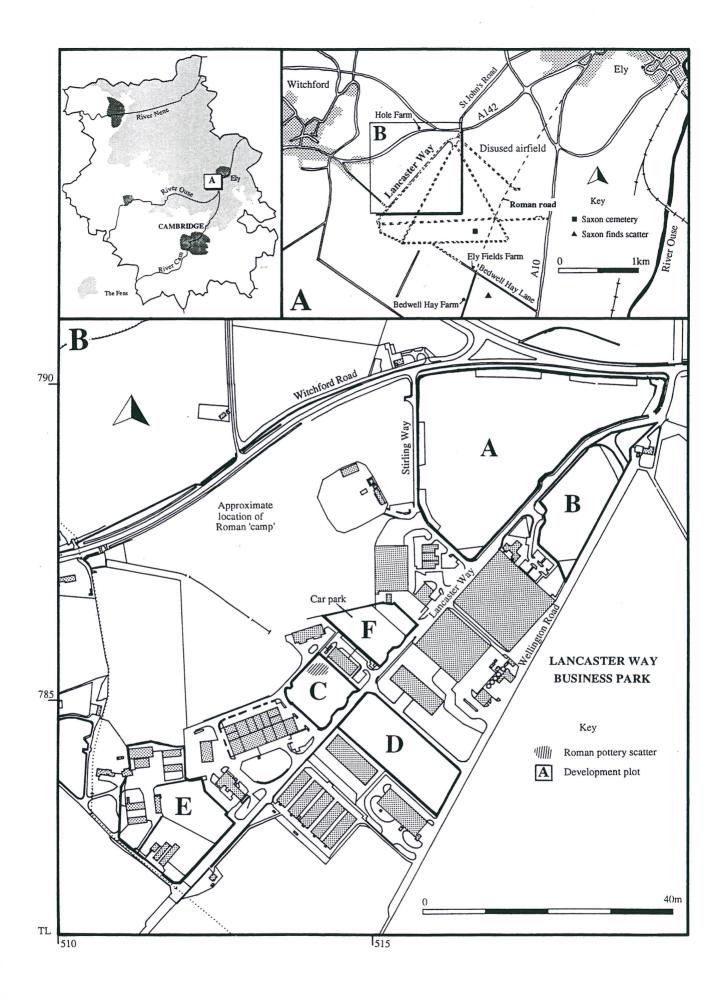


Figure 1 Site Location Plan

Very few settlements of this period had been found or excavated in this part of the Fens until recently. Late Iron Age pottery sherds and other artefacts have been found around Witchford during the Fenland Survey (*Idem*, 103), indicating possible settlement sites. Recent work by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit nearby at Little Thetford (Gdaniec 1994) revealed a Late Iron Age - Romano-British settlement on the junction of the Kimmeridge and Boulder Clays.

3.2 Romano-British

- 3.2.1 The Roman road known as Akeman Street ran from Cambridge through Ely towards Littleport and beyond. To the south of the study area, the line of the road is followed by the A10, which deviates off its course at Stretham. According to Margary, the Roman road would have continued in a straight line from Stretham, across the eastern edge of Grunty Fen towards west of the centre of Ely (Margary 1973, 209). Its line is visible as a track in front of Bedwell Hay Farm, and it would have crossed the south-east corner of the airfield.
- 3.2.2 Roman pottery has been found on several occasions on the development site itself. It was first recorded on the OS map of 1886, but more finds have been made more recently. In 1977-78, one individual is recorded to have collected Roman pottery "by the bucketful" on the site, including much Samian and some coarseware (SMR 06912). Walker's map of Roman roads in Cambridgeshire (Walker 1910, 176) indicates a 'camp' in approximately this location. It has been suggested that this may indicate earthworks which have since been destroyed, however there is no other evidence to support this. Palmer (Appendix I) suggests that Walker may have misinterpreted the remains of medieval headlands and fields as a Roman camp. Nevertheless, the amount of pottery found on the site does suggest a Roman settlement of some significance.
- 3.2.3 Fowler reported finding sparsely scattered Romano-British pottery sherds before the construction of the airfield, on a slight rise from Bedwell Hay Farm via Ely Fields Farm, Emery Barn Farm, to Hole Farm on the A142 (Fowler 1948, 71). The owner of the latter farm had also found eight Roman coins in the same area, dating to the late first to late fourth century AD. The widespread area of this scatter of artefacts might suggest manuring of fields during the Roman period, however sparsely dispersed settlements are also possible. Therefore, Roman remains should not be expected to be limited to the point indicated on the OS map and SMR, but other sites could be expected anywhere upon the plateau where the airfield is located.

3.3 Saxon

- 3.3.1 An Anglo-Saxon cemetery was revealed in 1947 during levelling off of the airfield, just north of Ely Fields Farm. A bulldozer revealed about 30 graves which had originally been about 3 ft deep, with no common orientation. Some of the skeletons were accompanied by grave goods, including a sword, brooches, glass and amber beads, etc. of Early Saxon date, c 450-650 (SMR 02104; Fowler 1948; Murray & Garrood 1954; Meaney 1964, 64).
- 3.3.2 This cemetery may have been associated with the lost village of Cratendune, the pre-Ely settlement reputed to have been located about a mile south of the city (Bentham 1771, 54n). The Saxon King Ethelbert I (who reigned from 560-616) was said to have founded a church in a village named Cratendune (Clements 1868, 6). The church was later destroyed in the war between Anna, King of East Anglia, and Penda, King of Mercia. Anna's daughter, Etheldreda,

later intended to repair the ruined church at Cratendune but chose instead the site of the present cathedral at Ely to found her monastery in 673. Cratendune is said to have been abandoned soon after in favour of resettlement at Ely (Pugh 1953, 33).

- 3.3.3 At the time when the *Liber Eliensis* was written in the late twelfth century, the site of Cratendune was only visible as a scatter of iron utensils, coins and "other indications of its having been formerly inhabited" (Bentham 1771, 54n). During Bentham's time, the village name was preserved by the field name "Cratendon", but even then "the exact situation of it (was) hardly discoverable" (*Ibid*).
- 3.3.5 Recent work as part of the Fenland Project has identified a site next to Bedwell Hay Farm on a low sand-capped hill which could correspond to the lost Cratendune. This site has produced Roman and Early Saxon pottery sherds, and its situation fits well the *dun* (hill) element of the old village name (Hall & Coles 1994, 128).

3.4 Medieval

- 3.4.1 At the time of the Domesday Survey, Ely was still a small, agricultural community. Its development as an important medieval town began after the construction of the cathedral and the creation of the bishopric in 1109. The canalisation of the Great Ouse in the twelfth century provided it with important trade links, establishing the town as a major trade and market centre (Owen 1993, 8).
- 3.4.2 The area south-west of Ely down towards Grunty Fen was part of Ely's open or common fields. The common field system was in existence in this region by at least the fourteenth century (Taylor 1975, 92). Broad open lands were divided into large fields cultivated in common in the form of long, narrow strips. The remnants of this medieval cultivation is still visible in places as ridges and furrows, where they have escaped destruction by modern ploughing.
- 3.4.3 Within the study area, no ridge and furrow survives in the form of earthworks, but some are visible as cropmarks in arable fields where they have been ploughed flat (Appendix I). A headland aligned east-west, the bank created where the farmers turned their ploughs, is clearly visible, associated with the ridge and furrow to the south. It is probable that the whole of the study area was once covered with ridge and furrow.
- 3.4.4 During the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, a new class of yeoman farmers who owned or leased their land began to emerge. At the same time, sheep farming was becoming more profitable, and gradually took over from grain as the basic agricultural produce. Sheep farming was the prime cause of enclosure at this period, when some individual farmers began to put hedges around blocks of pre-existing common field strips. There is evidence that there was a thriving trade in wool at Witchford in the fourteenth century (Taylor 1975, 147).
- 3.4.5 One of the largest enclosures of the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries on the fen islands was at Bedwelhaye (now Bedwell Hay Farm) just to the south of the airfield. This farm belonged to the monastery in Ely in 1302, and by 1548 it had become episcopal property let on lease (Pugh 1953, 49). In 1548 it was recorded that 120 acres near the farm had been enclosed during the reign of Henry VIII. This land had probably been part of the common fields of Ely, and their enclosure was still a cause of considerable complaint in 1548 (Palmer 1936).

Figure 2 Ordnance Survey Draft 1" Map, 1811

3.4.6 On the 1811 draft OS map, a series of enclosed fields is visible along the north edge of Grunty Fen around Bedwell Hay Farm and extending into the study area (Fig 2). These probably correspond, at least partly, to the fields enclosed by Bedwell Hay Farm before 1548.

3.5 Post-medieval and Modern

- 3.5.1 The practice of piecemeal enclosing of parts of common fields was continued by both large and small farmers until the mid eighteenth century when parliamentary enclosure began to sweep away the remaining common fields in the region. This was encouraged by the larger farmers, for example Bentham who wrote *The Fens near Ely with a Proposal for Enclosing and Dividing the Common called Gruntifen* in 1778. He put forth the proposal for draining and enclosing Grunty Fen, lamenting the "waste and destruction of good and profitable land" (Bentham1778, 7). Grunty Fen was enclosed and drained in 1857 (Taylor 1975, 203), Witchford parish (which then extended into the study area) by 1838 (Pugh 1953, 176), and Ely St Mary by 1844 (Inclosure Map 1844).
- 3.5.2 Many farmsteads were built on these newly enclosed fields in the nineteenth century. Such are Ely Fields Farm, named for the erstwhile common fields of Ely (Taylor 1975, 148), Emery Barn Farm, whose name indicates the land was part of the endowment of the almonry of Ely (Reaney 1943, 218), and Manor Farm, all of which had been built by 1886. Manor Farm was located to the south of Bedwell Hay Lane, now the south-east corner of the airfield, and Emery Barn Farm was located at the junction of Dean's Lane and Dean's Lane Way. These lanes were also created after enclosure, and are marked on the OS map of 1886 (sheet XXX.1). Dean's Lane followed the line of the east/west headland mentioned above, and Dean's Lane Way ran north/south from the A142 at the junction with St John's Road, down to Bedwell Hay Lane to the south. Dean's Lane Way is clearly visible as a cropmark, cutting across the earlier ridge and furrow (Appendix I).

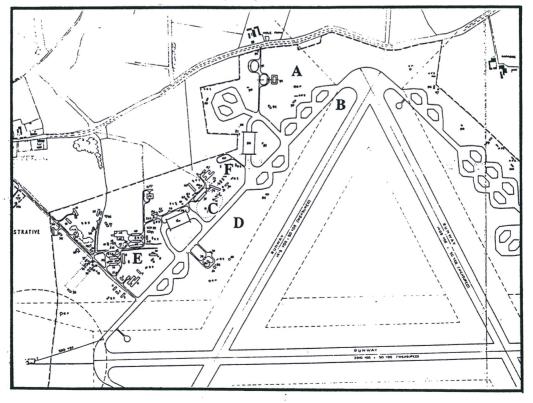


Figure 3 Plan of Witchford Airfield, 1944 (Cambs. Coll. C.45.7), showing development plots

- 3.5.3 The construction of Witchford Aerodrome began in 1941. Four farms and six farm cottages are said to have been demolished in order to build the aerodrome (West 1980), this would have included Manor Farm and Emery Barn Farm mentioned above. The site was levelled using draglines and excavators, and brick rubble brought by train from London was laid under concrete for the runways (Whetstone, pers. comm.). A new water supply main was laid from Ely to a tower constructed on the airfield.
- 3.5.4 The airfield was comprised of two 'T' hangars, one 'B1' hangar, three runways, and perimeter tracks and hard-standing loop dispersals. Bomb stores were located to the south of the airfield, and on the west side, adjacent to the perimeter track which is the present Lancaster Way, were a number of brick and concrete buildings, Nissen huts, blast shelters, etc. Witchford airfield was reputed to have been "as muddy as any airfield could ever be" (Bowyer 1987, 136), and many large drains were constructed, particularly on either side of the runways, in order to aid drainage (Whetstone, pers. comm.).
- 3.5.5 The airfield was opened in June 1943 under 3 Group, and was the base for 196 Squadron with Wellington Xs, later re-equipped with Stirling IIIs. It became part of Waterbeach 33 Base in September 1943. From November, 1943 it was the home of the Lancasters of 115 Squadron, who left Witchford in August 1945. The station closed in March 1946, and a hangar was used as a storage depot by the USAF in 1950-52. The land was gradually cleared and converted back to arable fields. Of the wartime structures, one converted hangar and a few Nissen huts and brick buildings remain.
- 3.5.6 The present Lancaster Way Business Park is located adjacent to an original runway, now narrowed, and on either side of the western perimeter track. Several warehouses, units, and car parks have been constructed. The most recent construction on the site was subject to an archaeological watching brief, carried out by the Archaeological Field Unit in July 1995 (Robinson 1995). No archaeological features were visible, but a few abraded sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered.

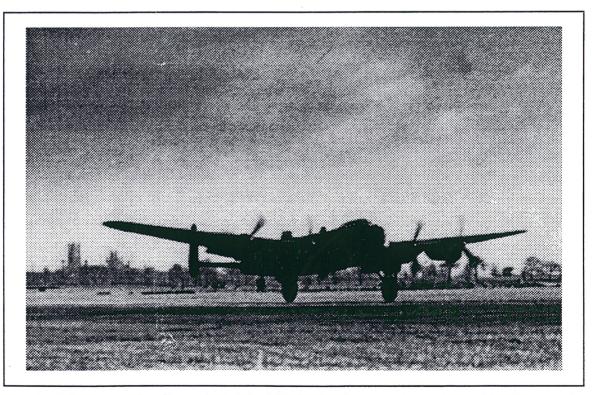


Plate 1 A Lancaster landing at Witchford Airfield (Photograph courtesy of Ely Museum)

4 THE POTENTIAL SURVIVAL OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS

- 4.1 Most of the study area has been arable fields until about eight years ago. It is likely that any archaeological deposits will have suffered some horizontal truncation due to ploughing, however it is difficult to estimate the degree of truncation without opening any testpits. During the recent watching brief on the site, Robinson recorded the depth of topsoil and ploughsoil overlying the Boulder Clay as 0.45m (Robinson 1995, 2). The medieval cultivation is likely to have penetrated deeper into the subsoil in the furrows, but similarly the ridges will have protected any underlying archaeology. This was the case revealed at Little Thetford where the ridges provided up to 0.50m of protective soil cover (Gdaniec 1994, 3).
- 4.2 The creation of the airfield is bound to have had an impact on any underlying archaeology in certain areas. When the area of the airfield was levelled off there may have been some truncation, but it is possible that this only disturbed the topsoil and ploughsoil. The fact that large amounts of Roman pottery continued to be found on the site into the late 1970's suggests that there were still significant Roman remains surviving below the ploughsoil.
- 4.3 Many of the airfield structures on the site would have been temporary buildings and as such probably had very shallow foundations, if any. However, there were also more substantial brick structures which would have had deeper foundations (Fig 3). In addition to the structures included on the military plan, there would have been numerous drains, services, etc.
- 4.4 The development plots B and D had no known airfield structures, apart from a large drain and the original width of runway. Plots A, F, and C contained structures now demolished, including a gun emplacement, petrol installations, blast shelters, huts, and other buildings. A also contained the hard-standing loop dispersals on the edge of the perimeter track. E contained several huts and blast shelters since demolished, as well as several Nissen huts and brick buildings which are still standing.
- 4.5 Plot F is used at present as a car park, and the natural slope to the south has been levelled by building up the area with hardcore under tarmac. It appeared that the ground level had been mostly built up towards the south rather than dug away to the north. The rest of the development areas are at present under grass, apart from the buildings in Plot E mentioned above. In some plots, A and B in particular, slight earthworks were visible which are probably the remnants of WWII structures.
- 4.6 In summary, archaeological remains are only likely to survive as negative features beneath the former ploughsoil across the site.

5 THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Based on the results of Robinson's watching brief, any excavation below c 0.45m, the depth of the former ploughsoil, has the potential to destroy archaeological deposits.

- 5.2 The proposed car parks and access roads will probably not threaten underlying archaeology if ground disturbance is limited to a depth of less than 0.45m.
- 5.3 The excavation of service and foundation trenches poses a significant threat to any surviving archaeological remains.
- 5.4 Any landscaping which involves the excavation to a depth of more than 0.45m poses the same threat. Movement of plant in wet conditions could also damage archaeology.
- 5.5 In Plot E, the proposed development also involves the demolition of several WWII Nissen huts and brick buildings.

6 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF THE STUDY AREA

- 6.1 The aerial photographic survey (Appendix I) revealed traces of medieval cultivation in the form of cropmarks of ridge and furrow and headlands. It is probable that the whole study area was once covered with ridge and furrow. No pre-medieval features were apparent, however ridge and furrow can effectively cover any earlier sub-surface archaeological features. The conditions for the development of cropmarks on clay are more critical than on other lighter soils, and therefore the absence of evidence of sub-surface features does not necessarily mean an absence of archaeology.
- The site's greatest potential lies in the probable Roman settlement indicated by finds scatters. The location of the site on the upland plateau and near to the Roman road, suggests a strategic situation to the settlement, although references to a 'camp' may be misleading. The amount of pottery recovered from the site could indicate a settlement of some significance.
- 6.3 There is unlikely to be any medieval or later archaeology, apart from cultivation remains, within the study area. However, there is the possibility of Saxon remains related to the cemetery to the south-east, and to the lost village of Cratendune. Settlement nucleation was a gradual process occurring throughout the Saxon period. Activity in this period may not only have been centred on the site located by Hall, but there is the possibility of other dispersed 'hamlets' in the area.
- 6.4 World War II structures are rapidly disappearing as a consequence of re-development. A recent nationwide initiative supported by English Heritage, the Fortress Study Group, the Council for British Archaeology, and others, has encouraged the recording of military buildings in order to provide an inventory and archive for future research. The buildings remaining on Witchford Aerodrome should be recorded to an acceptable (RCHME defined) standard prior to their demolition.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 A photographic building survey and limited recording of the remaining WWII buildings should be undertaken prior to their demolition.
- 7.2 Geophysical survey, to map sub-surface features, is not recommended for this site as scrap material from the demolition of the aerodrome, cables, drains, etc. are likely to limit the efficacy of most geophysical techniques.
- 7.3 Evaluation trenching of a representative sample of the development areas would determine the character, date, extent, and state of preservation of any archaeological remains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Ely St Mary Inclosure Map, 1844, CRO 283

Ely Tithe Apportionment Map, 1846, CRO 439/P14

OS Map, 1885, sheet XXVI.13

OS Map, 1886, sheet XXX.1

Air Ministry, Airfield Record Site Plan: Witchford (Ely), 1944, Cambs Coll. C.45.7

LANCASTER WAY BUSINESS PARK, ELY, CAMBRIDGESHIRE: area centred TL515785 AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT

Rog Palmer MA MIFA

INTRODUCTION

This assessment of aerial photographs was commissioned to examine an area of development centred TL515785 in order to identify and accurately map archaeological and natural features and thus provide a guide for field evaluation. In view of the archaeological content in the area it was agreed that mapping should be at 1:10000.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL FEATURES FROM AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Sub-surface archaeological features – including ditches, pits, walls or foundations, and banks – may be recorded from the air in different ways in different seasons. In spring and summer features of natural and anthropogenic origin may show through their effect on crops growing above them. Such indications tend to be at their most visible in ripe cereal crops, generally in June or July in this part of Britain, although their appearance cannot accurately be predicted and their absence cannot be taken to imply evidence of archaeological absence. In winter months, when the soil is bare or crop cover is thin (when viewed from above) features may show by virtue of their different soils. Upstanding remains are also best recorded in winter months when vegetation is sparse and the low angle of the sun helps pick out slight differences of height and slope.

This assessment area is part of a block of land that has been the subject of specific archaeological aerial reconnaissance since 1992. This work, carried out by Air Photo Services (APS) in collaboration with the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, has sought to examine the L-shaped area of clay between Sutton, Ely and Littleport. This land, as most clay, is extremely unproductive of crop marked information of any kind although a small number of new features have been recorded. None of these is in, or close to, the assessment area.

PHOTO INTERPRETATION AND MAPPING

Cover searches were obtained from the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs (CUCAP), Cambridgeshire Record Office (CRO), the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) and the National Library of Air Photographs (NLAP), Swindon. All prints examined were from routine vertical surveys taken on after construction of the airfield. Neither CUCAP or NLAP held any oblique photographs of archaeological targets that are likely to extend into the assessment area nor had any been taken by APS.

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Photographs held at CRO included material taken in 1946 and 1969. NLAP also held copies of the same photographs along with others taken between those dates. The information already interpreted from the CRO prints suggested it to be unlikely that inspection of NLAP material would benefit this assessment. Accordingly no use was made of that collection.

Photographs examined are listed in the Appendix to this report.

All photographs were examined by eye using a 1.5x magnification stereoscope. Features identified were marked on overlays to the prints and checked with photographs of other dates and finally mapped at 1:10000 using controlled sketching. This information was digitised and merged with the background OS map provided by Cambridgeshire Archaeology. It appears in this report as Figure 1 and has also been provided on disc.

COMMENTARY

All photographs identified post-dated construction of the airfield by which time the surface remains of past landuse had been effectively levelled. Slight traces of medieval agriculture (ridge and furrow) were visible on 1:10000 verticals taken by CUCAP in 1982 for the Fenland Survey. Those prints also recorded a small number of banks and possible old boundaries, some of which could also be identified on later prints. None of these appeared likely to be of pre-medieval origin although some of the banks may be headlands related to the medieval fields.

It is probable that ridge and furrow once covered the entire area mapped. Photographs also show it to continue in all directions. The headland (or bank) aligned east-west is clearly associated with ridge and furrow to its south. At a later date it became one of the access ways to Emery Barn Farm, located near the centre of the airfield and now marked only by the junction of the east-west and north-south banks. A pre-airfield edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:25000 map (undated and used as an air photograph index at CRO) shows these banks to have been Dean's Lane (east-west) and Dean's Lane Way (north-south). The parish boundary, crossed by the airfield's western tracks, was also an earlier track (Bedwell Hay Lane) of which slight traces could be identified on some aerial photographs.

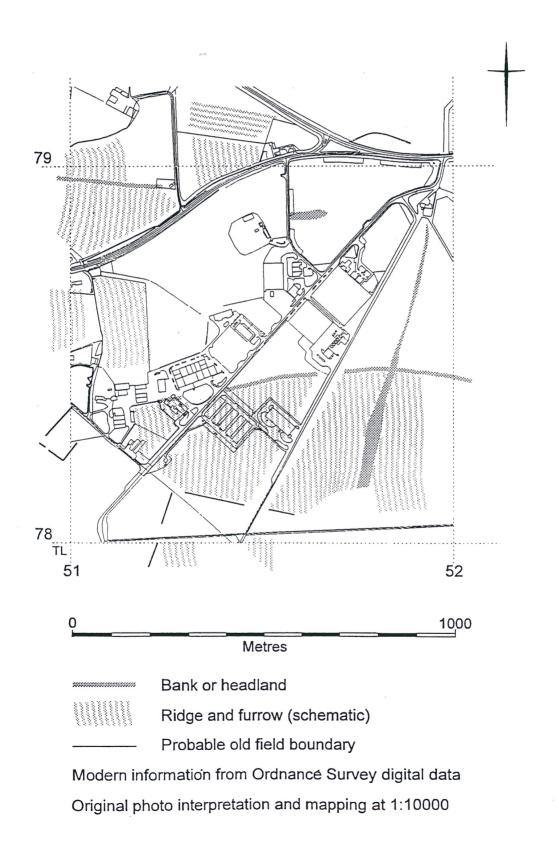
Some of the medieval fields remained as slight earthworks on the earliest photographs examined and it is probable that their survival was considerably better before the airfield was constructed. If that was the case it may be that the Roman camp suggested by Walker (map from PCAS 14 supplied by Cambridgeshire Archaeology) was a mis-identification of medieval headlands and fields. Unless earthworks were substantial, medieval agriculture has proved to be an extremely effective means of levelling and/or covering earlier sites. Many of these, especially on clay land, are only now becoming visible (through their effect on crop growth) as the ridge and furrow is, in turn, levelled by modern cultivation. No hint of any sub-surface archaeological feature was apparent on any of the photographs examined. However, conditions for the development of crop marks on clay are considerably more critical than those for better drained soils and the absence of any such evidence cannot be taken as definitive. Surface finds of Roman material from the area may arise from cultivation cutting into unseen pits, ditches or occupation levels.

All but the smallest fields within the area mapped have been recorded in arable conditions on the photographs examined. On dates when crop-marked features (usually land drains or agricultural marks) have been visible in adjacent fields there has been no evidence of such within the assessment area. The smaller fields have been pasture in which no archaeological evidence was visible either as earthworks or through any differential crop growth.

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Lancaster Way Business Park, Ely, Cambridgeshire

Figure 1: Evidence from aerial photographs



APPENDIX

Aerial photographs examined

Source: Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs

Vertical photographs

RC8-EB 139-142	24 March 1982	1:10000 (good quality)
RC8-EB 207-208	24 March 1982	1:10000 (good quality)
RC8-KnBM 86	16 July 1988	1:10000 (good quality)
RC8-KnBO 68	26 August 1988	1:10000 (masked by cloud shadow)
RC8-KnBO 207-209	30 August 1988	1:10000 (good quality)
RC8-MD 52-52	14 January 1991	1:4000 (extreme W of area only)

Source: Cambridgeshire County Council, Record Office

Vertical photographs

106G/UK/1589: 3058-3062	12 July 1946	1:10000 (poor quality)
Meridian 56.69:110-114	9 June 1969	1:10000 (good quality)
Meridian 56.69:146-149	9 June 1969	1:10000 (good quality)

Source: Agricultural Development and Advisory Service

Vertical photographs

75/67: 28-30	20 May 1975	1:10000 (good quality)
76/157: 59-63	17 August 1976	1:10000 (good quality)
130 232	6 June 1983	1:10000 (single print, good quality)

ADAS photographs from 1975 and 1976 were examined stereoscopically as monochrome negatives.



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