

Archaeological Field Unit

A Late Mesolithic Flint Scatter at Feoffees School,
Little Downham, Cambridgeshire

Jonathan Last

1996

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 126

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Editor: Ben Robinson BSc, MA

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© Archaeological Field Unit
Cambridgeshire County Council
Fulbourn Community Centre
Haggis Gap, Fulbourn
Cambridgeshire CB1 5HD
Tel (01223) 881614
Fax (01223) 880946

Summary

In May 1996 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation at Feoffees Primary School, Little Downham, Cambridgeshire (TL 5249/8419). The work was funded by Cambridgeshire County Council Property Management Services and undertaken in accordance with a brief designed by the County Archaeology Office.

The site lies outside the medieval village core of Little Downham but still upon the ridge of sand and gravel on which the village is located. Saxon, Roman and prehistoric finds are known from the vicinity, the most important of which is a series of Bronze Age burials. However, the most significant remains from the evaluation trenches comprised a scatter of Late Mesolithic flints from a buried (but heavily disturbed) land surface beneath the modern ploughsoil, perhaps associated with a number of small cut features of doubtful origin. A few sherds of later prehistoric, Roman and medieval pottery also derived from this level.

In addition, the trenches revealed garden features probably associated with a property known to exist on the site from the early 19th until the mid 20th century.

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A LATE MESOLITHIC FLINT SCATTER AT FEOFFEES SCHOOL, LITTLE DOWNHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE (TL 5249/8419)

1 INTRODUCTION

In May 1996 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation, by means of limited linear trenching, in advance of the construction of new classrooms at Feoffees Primary School, Main Street, Little Downham. The work was funded by Cambridgeshire County Council Property Management Services and undertaken in accordance with a brief designed by the County Archaeology Office.

2 TOPOGRAPHY, GEOLOGY & LAND USE

The evaluation area is located in the grounds of the primary school in Little Downham, about 100m north-west of Main Street and 200m west of the village church (Fig. 1). To the north-west is the site of the former deer park of the Bishop's Palace. Most of the present site lies under grass, forming part of the school playing field. It is generally level but slopes down slightly from east to west (a gradient of c 1%). The natural geology of the site comprises glacial sand with patches of Boulder Clay.

Little Downham lies about 4km from Ely, on the B1411 which runs towards Welney. The name of the village refers to its upland setting (in Fenland terms), situated at about 18m OD on an outcrop of glacial sand and gravel partly overlying a tongue of Boulder Clay which runs north-west from Ely out into the Fens beyond Pymore (British Geological Survey, Sheet 173). The special nature of the Fenland environment and landscape, well documented by Hall & Coles (1994), has ensured that relatively minor details of geology and topography have had a profound effect on the location of settlement and other activities right down to the present day, but especially during later prehistory. The clay uplands around Ely were only sparsely occupied during the prehistoric period because their heavy soils were not easily cultivated; Neolithic and Bronze Age activity is concentrated close to the Fen edge, on the lighter soils of the Boulder Clay skirtland and sandy outcrops like that occupied by the modern village of Downham. Iron Age and Roman settlement is similarly sparse on the higher ground around Ely compared to the southern Fen edge, for instance, but Late Iron Age sites have been discovered in the area of Coveney, about 5km to the south-west (Hall & Coles 1994: 98-99). Recent patterns of agriculture and Fen drainage in the Downham area have been summarised by Roberts (1996).

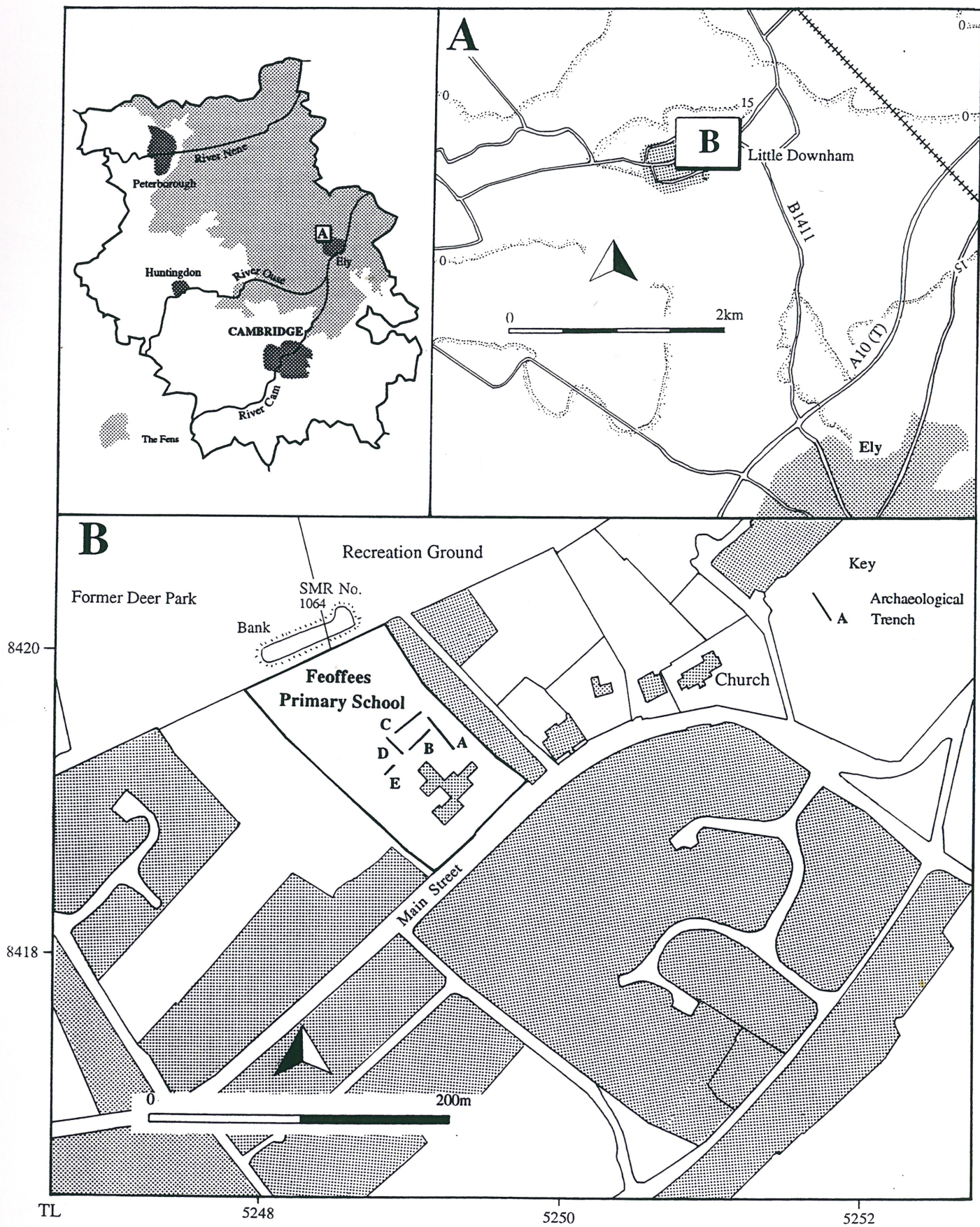


Figure 1 Site Location Plan

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Roberts (1996) lists archaeological finds from the immediate vicinity of the village, as recorded on the county Sites and Monuments Record. These make it clear that the ridge on which Little Downham village lies has witnessed activity of various types since the Bronze Age. The most significant find was a burial discovered during the excavation of a sand pit, containing a Beaker of Clarke's (1970) late Southern type, a fine flint dagger and a scraper, as well as a V-perforated button and ring of shale (Lethbridge *et al* 1935). A few years earlier a group of Collared Urn cremations was found in a similar location, about 700m south-west of the present site, presumably indicative of a ploughed-out barrow (Lethbridge 1930). The siting of Bronze Age burials close to the Fen edge reflects the general pattern in this region and suggests that the immediate area was not used for settlement. Barrows are frequently found on mixed clayey gravels, while settlement in the Bronze Age utilised the lightest gravels.

Some 200m west of the barrow, pottery finds indicative of Roman and (according to the Fenland Survey database) Iron Age occupation were found. From the other side of the village, about 500m south-south-east of the primary school, a few remains survive from a Saxon cemetery "which undoubtedly existed there" (Lethbridge *et al* 1935: 144). A settlement of this period may therefore lie in the vicinity. In the medieval period the modern village developed in association with the Palace of the bishops of Ely. Upstanding earthwork remains of the boundary of the Palace deer park are located immediately north-west of the playing field in which the present site lies.

Aerial photographic evidence yielded no indication of archaeological remains on the site (Palmer 1996). The first historical evidence for occupation comes from the 1844 Inclosure Map (reproduced in Roberts 1996) which indicates a substantial house in the south-east corner of the present school grounds, an area now occupied by a car park, with a property boundary running north-west through the area of the evaluation. Local information suggests that this formed a walled garden, in use until the house was demolished and the present school buildings constructed after the last war. The Inclosure Map also depicts a pond, situated to the north of the evaluation area.

4 METHODOLOGY

The evaluation area comprised about 1800 sq m, the south-western part of which was covered by school buildings, temporary classrooms and hard standing. Approximately 1100 sq m of the school playing field were accessible for archaeological evaluation and some 100m of linear trenches (150 sq m or about 8% of the total) were laid out in this area (Figs. 1 & 2), their location respecting the existing buildings and a gas pipe to one of the temporary classrooms.

Five trenches (A-E) were excavated down to the top of the natural sand by a JCB equipped with a 1.5m wide toothless ditching bucket. The turf was laid

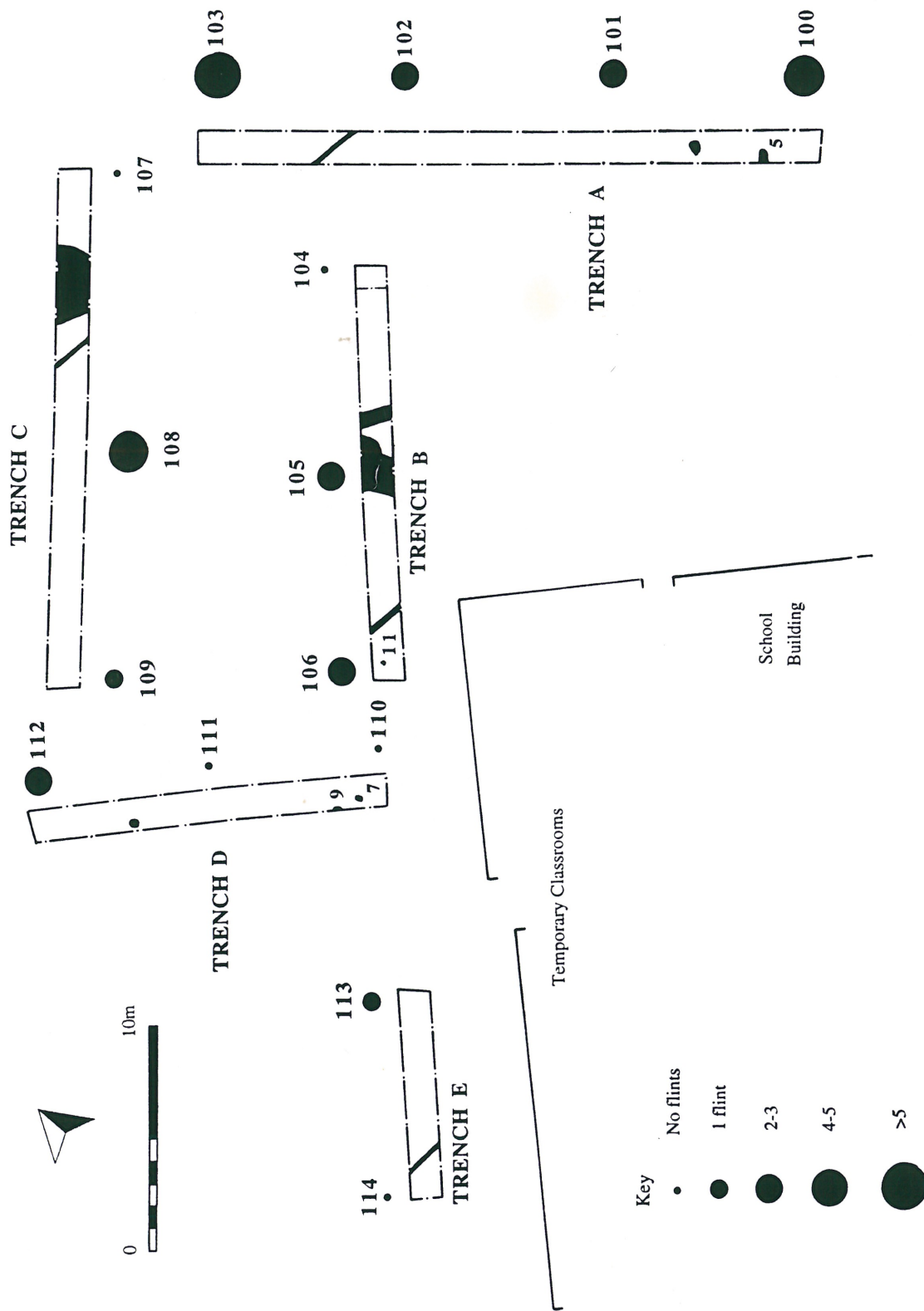


Figure 2 Trench Plan, showing potentially ancient features (numbered), modern features (unnumbered), and quantities of worked flint recovered from sieving contexts (symbols adjacent to trenches)

separately for subsequent reinstatement and the spoil was piled on the other side of the trench, directly adjacent to where it was excavated. The trenches were then cleaned by hand (using shovel and hoe, and trowels where necessary) and photographed. Any features located were recorded on plan and sample excavated. The trenches were planned by electronic theodolite, and the trench plan subsequently tied in to the national grid.

5 RESULTS

About 0.4-0.5m of topsoil and a mixed interface layer with the natural sand were removed by machine. The topsoil was a dark greyish brown (10YR 4/2) soft silty sand with occasional to moderate sub-angular flints and pebbles, and occasional chalk fragments. It was separated by a diffuse, bioturbated interface layer from the natural sand, which was dark yellowish-brown in colour (10YR 4/4-4/6) and contained occasional fragments of friable yellowish red (5YR 4/6) to strong brown (7.5YR 5/6) Lower Greensand, localised in small patches. The natural became more clayey towards the west of the site.

Modern field-drains ran through all the trenches, four of which (A-D) also revealed other recent features. Possible small prehistoric features were located only in Trenches A, B and D, but all trenches produced struck flints during cleaning. Measured soil samples from the spoil-heap were subsequently sieved in order to assess finds densities and distributions across the evaluation area (see 5.6 and Fig. 2).

5.1 Trench A

This trench measured about 28m and ran in a north-west/south-east direction along the north-eastern edge of the development area. Machining removed about 0.40m of dark greyish brown topsoil and a mixed sandy interface layer about 0.10m thick above the clean natural sand in which features were visible. A field drain was noted running approximately east/west, about 6m from the north-west end of the trench. The fill of this feature comprised a mixture of loose gravel and dark topsoil.

Initial cleaning with hoe and shovel revealed a small 'sub-triangular' feature (3) measuring 0.61 x 0.44m, filled with a dark greyish brown (10YR 3/2) soft silty sand (2). This was located on the western side of the trench, 5.6m from the southern end. Cleaning over the surface of this feature revealed a sherd of modern pottery (white glazed porcelain) and some fragments of coal; therefore it was not investigated further.

In the vicinity of this feature, however, a number of struck flints came from cleaning over the top of the natural. Further intensive cleaning in the southern part of the trench revealed a shallow oval or linear feature (5) running into the western section about 3.0m from the end of the trench. This measured 0.46m (as exposed) x 0.37m and was only 0.08-0.10m deep, filled with a soft, slightly stony medium brown (10YR 4/3) sand (4) mixed with occasional

patches of clean yellow natural sand. Some root disturbance was evident but the edges were relatively clear. No finds were forthcoming and the feature may be of natural origin, but it was the only probable pre-modern feature visible in the vicinity of the lithic concentration from the southern part of the trench.

5.2 Trench B

This trench measured about 19m and was located fairly centrally but towards the east side of the development area, running north-east/south-west. 0.40m of topsoil was removed by machine, revealing a field drain running across the trench in an east/west direction about 3m from the south-western end, and three modern features in the middle of the trench. The northernmost of these appeared to be a linear feature about 2.5m wide, running north-west/south-east, with a compact, heterogeneous fill of topsoil and redeposited natural sand. Its cut was visible within the lower part of the topsoil, confirming its modern date. Two intercutting features lay adjacent to it: a broad linear about 1.25m wide, running north-south, with a mixed sandy fill containing a quantity of modern brick rubble, which was cut on the northern side of the trench by a large pit, about 2.5m wide, with more building rubble within a dark grey topsoil-derived fill. Despite their appearance neither of the 'linears' was visible in Trench C some 18m to the north-west and they do not seem to be features of any great extent or significance. None of these features were excavated.

Subsequent cleaning of the trench by hoe and shovel located the soilmark of a possible small post-hole (11), 1.6m from the south-west end of the trench. It measured c 0.20m in diameter and was only 70mm deep, filled with a slightly stony, greyish brown to brown (10YR 4/2-4/3) friable sand, rather patchy in appearance (10). No finds were discovered. As with the potentially early features in Trenches A and D its origin must remain in doubt; the rather diffuse edges could indicate a natural root-hole, or post-depositional mixing by subsequent root or earthworm disturbance. In addition to this feature, a number of struck flints were discovered during cleaning, concentrated towards the south-west end of the trench.

At the north-east end of the trench a small slot was machined rather deeper to assess the geology of the site; this revealed that a diffuse, mixed interface separated the dark grey topsoil, here 0.38m deep, from the directly underlying natural sand, which contained patches of friable Lower Greensand fragments. The natural comprised an upper layer, 0.36m in depth, of yellowish brown sand, penetrated by frequent roots and worm-holes. This can be seen as a distinct subsoil, developing under the influence of such bioturbation. Underlying this, with a relatively clear interface, was much cleaner, still very soft, white or pale grey sand. The slot as a whole measured about 1.5m x 1.0m and was excavated to 0.88m beneath the modern land surface; no underlying clay or gravel was apparent.

5.3 Trench C

This trench measured about 24m and ran parallel to Trench B about 14m away, along the north-western edge of the development area. 0.4-0.5m of topsoil was removed. A continuation of the field drain observed in Trench A was noted, about 8m from the north-east end of the trench. To the north of this, 3-4m from the end of the trench, a large pit or linear ditch was observed, some 2.6m wide, filled with a mixture of topsoil and dark grey ash, and containing material apparently of late 19th or early 20th century date. This feature was not excavated. No other features cutting the natural were observed in this trench but a couple of sherds of possible Roman pottery were discovered during cleaning.

5.4 Trench D

This trench measured about 16.5m and ran parallel to Trench A, south-west of Trenches B and C. About 0.5m of topsoil was removed above the natural sand, which was here more clayey in patches than in the trenches to the east. A continuation of the field drain observed in Trench B was visible towards the northern end of the trench. Just north of this on the western side of the trench and about 5m from the north-west end was a small circular feature filled with dark grey silty sand and containing the remains of a modern wooden post.

Two features were discovered at the south-eastern end of the trench. Cut 7 was an irregular oval feature with diffuse edges, measuring 0.42 x 0.32m and about 0.12m deep. It was filled with dark yellowish brown silty sand (6) and contained a single find, a possible core fragment of greenish flint, similar to the material from cleaning in Trench B. This feature lay 1.4m from the end of the trench. In the western section, some 2.25m from the end of the trench, was cut 9, measuring about 0.30m in width and 0.18m deep, with a similar fill (8) to that of feature 7, but no finds. Again the diffuse edges cast the nature of this feature into some doubt. A single struck flint was also discovered during cleaning over the natural in this trench.

5.5 Trench E

Trench E measured 10m in length and ran in a north-east/south-west direction, continuing the line of Trench B but some 14m to the south-west. 0.48m of topsoil and mixed interface was removed by machine; natural sand was revealed in the eastern half of the trench, but this became far more clayey to the west. A field drain parallel to those seen in the other trenches was discovered about 2m from the south-western end. No other features were visible in this trench, but cleaning produced a blade core of dark grey flint.

5.6 Sieving & Spoil Assessment

The discovery of a number of struck flints from the top of the natural, generally unassociated with any visible features, implies that the topsoil/sand interface may represent a prehistoric occupation surface, albeit a disturbed and truncated one. It was decided to assess the density and distribution of flints by

sieving measured volumes of spoil from regularly-spaced points along each trench. In all 15 samples of 40L each were sieved through a 5mm mesh, and all finds except modern tile and brick fragments were kept. The sandy soil went through the sieve fairly well but the wet conditions hampered recovery and the more clayey soil at the western end of the site proved less friable. Nevertheless, recovery of flints and pottery from these samples should be close to 100%.

The sieved samples were numbered from 100 to 114, distributed as shown in Figure 2. The mean densities of flints from each trench were:

A	10.6 flints/100L
B	5.0
C	5.0
D	1.7
E	1.3

Hence, as with the surface cleaning, the flints are mainly concentrated on the north-eastern side of the site, but precise correlations between the sieved finds and the finds from cleaning are less clear: Trenches B and C produced equal numbers from sieving but C lacked flints from cleaning. Similarly the majority of sieved finds from Trench A were located at either end while most of those found during cleaning came from the southern part of the trench (the vicinity of sample 101).

A final assessment of the lithic assemblage was made by raking over the spoil heap between the sieved samples. This produced few finds, although a group of three flints did come from the middle of Trench A, the approximate position of the cleaning assemblage.

6 THE LITHIC ASSEMBLAGE

The flint assemblage consists of 62 pieces weighing a total of 0.394kg. These comprise 19 blades or bladelets, 21 flakes, 8 possible cores or core fragments (some are large pieces of shatter which may represent worked-out cores) and 14 other pieces of shatter or debitage. In addition a large flint nodule, which had evidently been struck but not systematically worked, was recovered from sample 110. A variety of distinct flint types is represented, with grey/brown pieces most common but reddish and honey-coloured flint also present.

Some prepared platforms are evident in the assemblage. None of the struck pieces show any clear secondary working, but one narrow blade of reddish flint with a notched end may represent a small burin. Additionally a number of pieces show edge wear, which may be indicative of utilisation or alternatively of post-depositional damage.

At least two distinct 'groups' of material are present, those from Trenches A and B. The former consists of eight blades and bladelets, one core and two other pieces from cleaning, to which three flakes from raking over the spoil-heap in the vicinity can probably be added. Most of this material, including

the core, is translucent dark grey or brown flint, although two pieces of reddish brown flint, and a couple of pieces of honey-coloured flint are also present. Only two pieces are partly cortical and there is little evidence for utilisation, except for the possible burin mentioned above. This group contrasts with that from Trench B which comprised two large flakes, two smaller flakes, three possible core fragments and two other pieces. Distinctions are visible not only in the presence of large flakes rather than small blades but also in the reduction stage, with more cortical pieces present, and the condition of the material, with 'duller', greenish flint, probably due to the effects of hydration rather than indicative of a distinctly different source. Some honey-coloured pieces are also present.

The other interesting piece from cleaning is an elegant blade core from Trench E. The sieving, in contrast, generally produced smaller pieces. From Trench A came three blades, seven flakes and seven other fragments. Seven pieces had some cortex present and four had possibly utilised edges, both attributes contrasting with the cleaning assemblage from this trench. Trench B produced six fragments but just a single bladelet. Trench C also had six pieces, but these include three blades or bladelets and two flakes. Trench D had two blades only, both possibly utilised, while Trench E produced a single small flake.

In general the presence of blades and bladelets suggests a Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic assemblage, with a Mesolithic rather than Neolithic date preferred in this case (Tim Reynolds, pers. comm.).

7 DISCUSSION

7.1 The Features

The field drains, which are parallel and regularly spaced 18-20m apart, are presumably of very recent date. One local informant recalled participating in the digging of drains in this field. The other modern pits or linears are probably garden features related to the earlier property on the site. The large features seen in Trenches B and C may indicate the edges of the walled garden depicted on the Inclosure Map. Although they do not line up exactly with the boundary as plotted, such pits would be sensibly placed close to the walls.

Features 5, 7, 9 and 11 are of a doubtful nature because of their irregular shape and diffuse edges, but the flint from fill 6 does suggest that these small features with sandy fills are prehistoric in date, if not necessarily anthropogenic in origin. They do not correlate very well with the distribution of lithics from the sieved samples, but features 7 and 9 at the southern end of Trench D and 11 in Trench B are probably related to the cleaning assemblage from the latter trench (the flint from fill 6 is in a similar 'hydrated' condition), while feature 5 lies close to the location of the assemblage from cleaning Trench A. Whatever the exact nature of these features, they seem to have some spatial relationship with the lithics from the interface layer.

7.2 The Finds

The small pottery assemblage suggests only limited activity over several millennia before the construction of the 19th century property. Two fragments of prehistoric pottery were apparent. A small sherd of flint-gritted ware with a grey core and orange exterior came from cleaning in Trench A, in the vicinity of the lithics group. From the fabric it is probably Neolithic or Bronze Age, but should not be contemporary with the flints. The flint-gritted sherd from sieved context 100 (also Trench A) with shallow fingertip impressions is also not particularly diagnostic. As Gibson & Woods (1990: 151) state, such decoration is found on vessels of all periods but "is most common on pottery of the second millennium".

The later material is also restricted to occasional small potsherds. Grey sandy fabrics of possible Roman date were recovered from Trenches A (one sherd) and C (three sherds). A flanged rim of probable medieval sandy ware was also recovered by sieving in Trench A (context 101). Other sandy fabrics of Roman or medieval date came from Trenches A, B and C (one sherd in each). Post-medieval wares were recovered from Trenches A (one rim of a stoneware jar) and B (one sherd of glazed ware), while several sherds of modern transfer-printed porcelain plates and bowls were distributed within the topsoil. Occasional nails and other iron objects were also present.

Despite the occasional sherds, however, it is only the flints which provide evidence of specific activities occurring on the site in the prehistoric period. They seem to represent the disturbed remnants of limited Late Mesolithic activity. With one exception they were not located in features but came from cleaning over the top of the natural. The relatively low density of flints and the lack of secondarily worked tools are not indicative of more than occasional knapping episodes, and the different nature and condition of the assemblages from Trenches A and B suggest at least two distinct episodes are represented. In addition, burnt flint was recovered only from Trench A, and one of the blades from this trench was also burnt.

It is less easy to assess the degree of disturbance of this material. About 50% of the finds came from topsoil (sieving and raking) which suggests some truncation of the prehistoric surface has taken place, introducing some finds into the ploughzone. The shallow nature of the small features observed also implies some truncation. However, the sieved finds do not match up well in type or distribution with the cleaning assemblage, and these either indicate the degree of disturbance within the ploughsoil or represent a separate horizon. Given that the machining erred on the side of depth by removing the disturbed interface layer, many of the flints were therefore obviously *within* the upper layer of the natural sand rather than lying on it; either trampling in antiquity or, more likely, post-depositional bioturbation could have moved finds down into the relatively soft natural matrix.

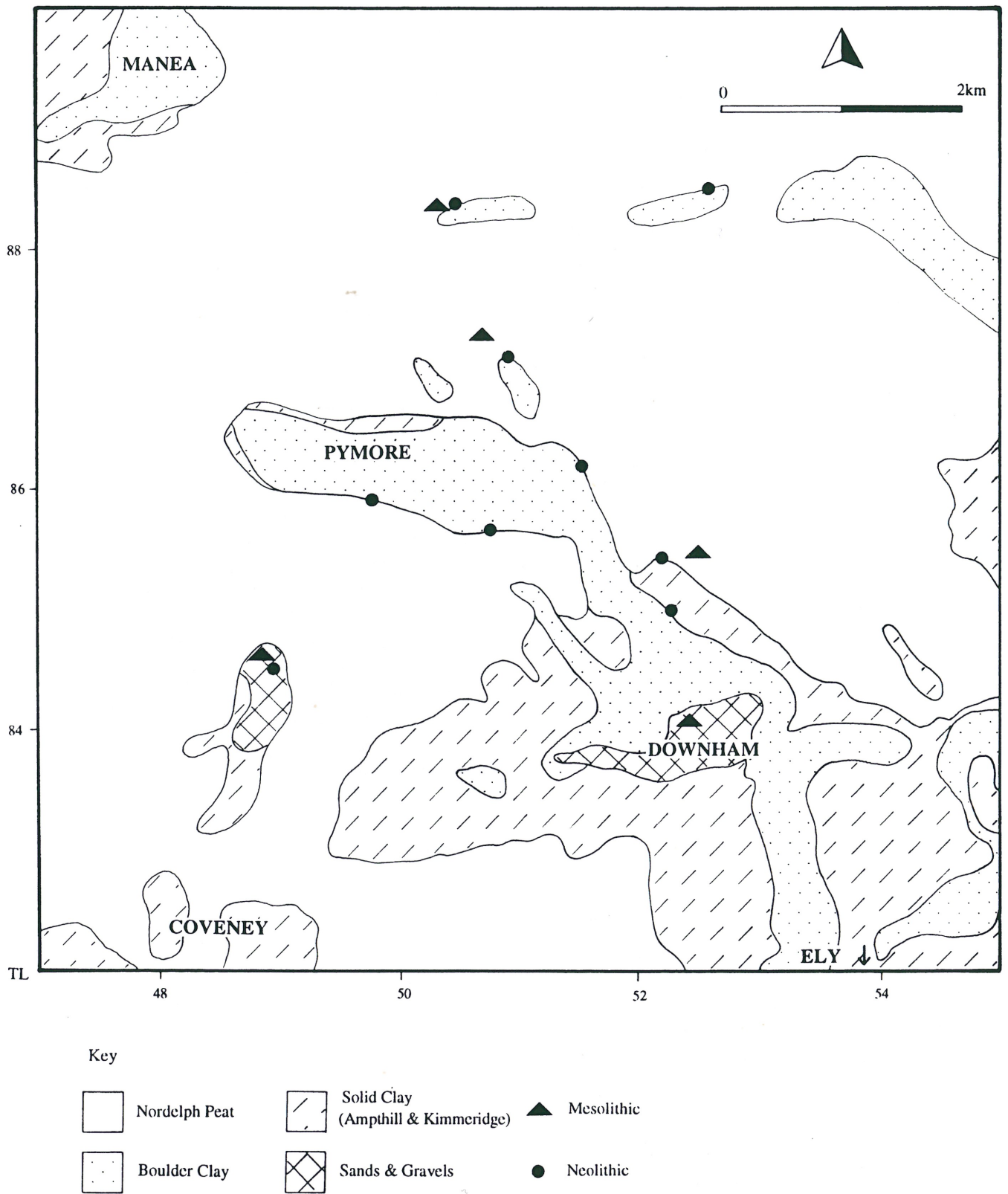


Figure 3 Flint Scatter Sites in the Downham Area, in relation to the underlying geology

8 CONCLUSIONS

8.1 The Mesolithic Landscape

In contrast to later prehistoric periods in the Fenland the Mesolithic landscape was apparently dry and well-drained by rivers ancestral to those of the present day, but in different channels. The 'islands' on which Mesolithic sites have been found during field survey therefore represent "only the slightly elevated parts of a once-extensive surface" (Hall & Coles 1994: 28). Mesolithic flint scatter sites have been located to the north of Downham by the Fenland Survey and by casual discovery, but the present site would have been several kilometres from the advancing silt fen of the 5th millennium BC river Ouse; the landscape would probably have been dry and wooded.

By the 3rd millennium, however, the peat and silt fen had encroached around the Isle of Ely (cf. Hall & Coles 1994: figs. 15, 24). Neolithic flint scatters are known from the Pymore 'peninsula' and other small islands of Ampthill and Kimmeridge Clay within the Fen. These sites form part of a larger scatter between Somersham and Pymore which follows an ancient course of the Ouse. Figure 3 shows the contrast in the local distributions of Mesolithic and Neolithic scatters, with the latter almost exclusively on the edges of the clay islands, showing a clear relationship to the modern topography and geology. On the other hand, the Mesolithic findspots lie on a variety of soil types, including the modern Fen. Around Manea significant Mesolithic flint scatters were all on pockets of sandy gravel (Hall 1992) but that does not seem to be the case here. While there does appear to be a small cluster of sites in this area the constraints of the landscape were far less than in subsequent periods, and Mesolithic patterns are primarily a function of their current visibility rather than their original distribution.

8.2 Implications for Development

Apart from indicating the occasional presence of artefacts of many periods, the site provided no remains of significance other than the flint scatter. This is probably of Late Mesolithic date, seems to represent only periodic, small-scale activity, and is not associated with any meaningful structural evidence or intact buried soil horizon. However, limited test-pitting during the excavation of foundations in the eastern part of the development area might allow the controlled recovery of further lithic samples.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The project was managed by Ben Robinson and carried out for Cambridgeshire County Council Property Management in accordance with a brief designed by the County Archaeology Office.

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APPENDIX

Finds Quantification

DOWNHAM, FEOFFEES SCHOOL 1996 - Finds Types By Context											
Trench	Context	Pottery Weight	Pottery Count	Tile & Brick	Clay Pipe	Metals Fe	Stone	Flint Weight	Flint Count	Burnt Flint	Total Weights by Context
A	1	50	2		7			18	5		75
A	2	3	1								3
A	100	9	1			1		5	5	1	16
A	101	5	3			13	4	2	3	1	25
A	102							7	3	8	15
A	103	5	2					9	6		14
A	200	1	1					60	11		61
B	1							17	2		17
B	105			8				29	3		37
B	106							29	3		29
B	200	6	2					158	9		164
C	1	23	2								23
C	108	2	1					9	5		11
C	109	3	2					1	1		4
C	200	4	2								4
D	6							28	1		28
D	112							1	2		1
D	200							1	1		1
E	1					105					105
E	113	4	1					2	1		6
E	200							18	1		18
Total Weights by Finds Type		115	20 sherds	8	7	119	4	394	62 frags	10	657



Cambridgeshire
County Council

Archaeology

The Archaeological Field Unit
Fulbourn Community Centre
Haggis Gap
Fulbourn
Cambridge CB1 5HD
Tel (01223) 881514
Fax (01223) 880946