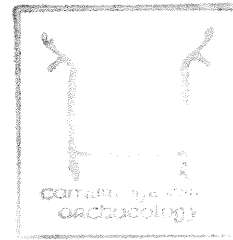
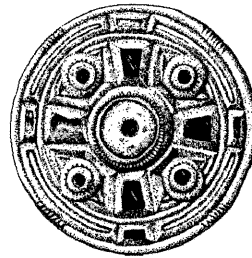


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Archaeological Field Unit

## Archaeological Recording Adjacent to The Old Croft River: The New Sports Field, Camel Road, Littleport

Ben Robinson and David Mitchell

1994

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No.A42

*Commissioned By 'Leisure and Sport For Littleport'*

**Archaeological Recording Adjacent to The Roddon of The Old Croft:  
The New Sports Field, Camel Road, Littleport**

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1994

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*Report No A42*

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## SUMMARY

*A recording brief was undertaken during drainage work at the sports field, Camel Road, Littleport (TL 563 877). A surface collection survey, and examination of sections of the pipe trenches failed to locate any cultural material or structures pre-dating the post-medieval period; however, a small roddon (relict stream channel) was noted and its position mapped.*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit undertook a recording brief during drainage works at the sports field, Camel Road, Littleport (TL 563 877) as a response to a brief set by the County Archaeological Office. The work was carried out on behalf of 'Leisure and Sport for Littleport'.

## 2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The sports field lies on the peat fen to the north of the Boulder Clay-capped, Kimmeridge Clay highland at Littleport. A canalised section of the Old Croft river (formerly known as Welney Water, Wellstream or Old Wellenhee) can be seen as a dry earthwork in fields abutting the sports field to the east.

A marine transgression which began between 2,600 and 2,000 years ago caused former Fenland creeks and streams to become tidal rivers. The Old Croft was sufficiently brackish during the Romano-British period to support salt production. Surface collection surveys (as part of the Fenland Survey) have revealed a marked concentration of saltern sites along the course of the Old Croft. One such site, to the north of the sports field, was inspected by the Ely and District Archaeological Society during topsoil stripping; evaporation dishes and feeder channels were noted (SMR 7223).

To the south-east of the sports field a large quantity of second to third century AD pottery sherds and tile fragments, indicative of Romano-British settlement, has been recovered (SMR 8425). South of this scatter another saltern has been identified (SMR 10939; *Figure 1*). A spread of Romano-British material in the field immediately to the west seems to have resulted from dredging and dumping rather than *in situ* activity (SMR 11066), but nevertheless denotes activity in the vicinity.

In 1331 an obstruction of the Well Creek (which linked the Ouse to the Nene north of Littleport) necessitated the Old Croft's use as a roundabout diversion for traffic across the fen. The canal became, if only temporarily, part of the important route from the seaport at Lynn, to the market towns at the western edge of the Fens, and the East Midlands (Darby 1983, 34-35). The diversion clearly made use of an existing navigable waterway, however, albeit one which had declined in importance since the demise of the Wisbech outfall in the fourteenth century. Prior to this, the Old Croft, in combination with the Ouse, would have been an important link between the coast at Wisbech, the highland at Ely, and the southern fen edge.

The Old Croft remained active (though probably not as a navigable waterway along its entire length) until the early seventeenth century, taking its name from a continuous line of smallholdings (or crofts) abutting its course (Fowler 1934, 24). Its complete demise was occasioned by mid seventeenth century (and later) reclamation campaigns.

The earthwork bordering the sports field to the east preserves the line of this canal as it approaches Littleport. Its course towards The Hythe, skirting the highland, is probably approximated by Camel Road and Silt Road (*Figure 1*). The curious name, Camel Road, ('Camhale' in 1251) seems to derive from the words 'nook' (or 'corner') and 'crooked' (Reaney 1943, 226). Such an effect would be caused by following, or crossing, the meandering course of the Old Croft. 'Camoll Loode', (clearly referring to the navigable the Old Croft), is recorded in 1563 (Reaney 1943, 226).

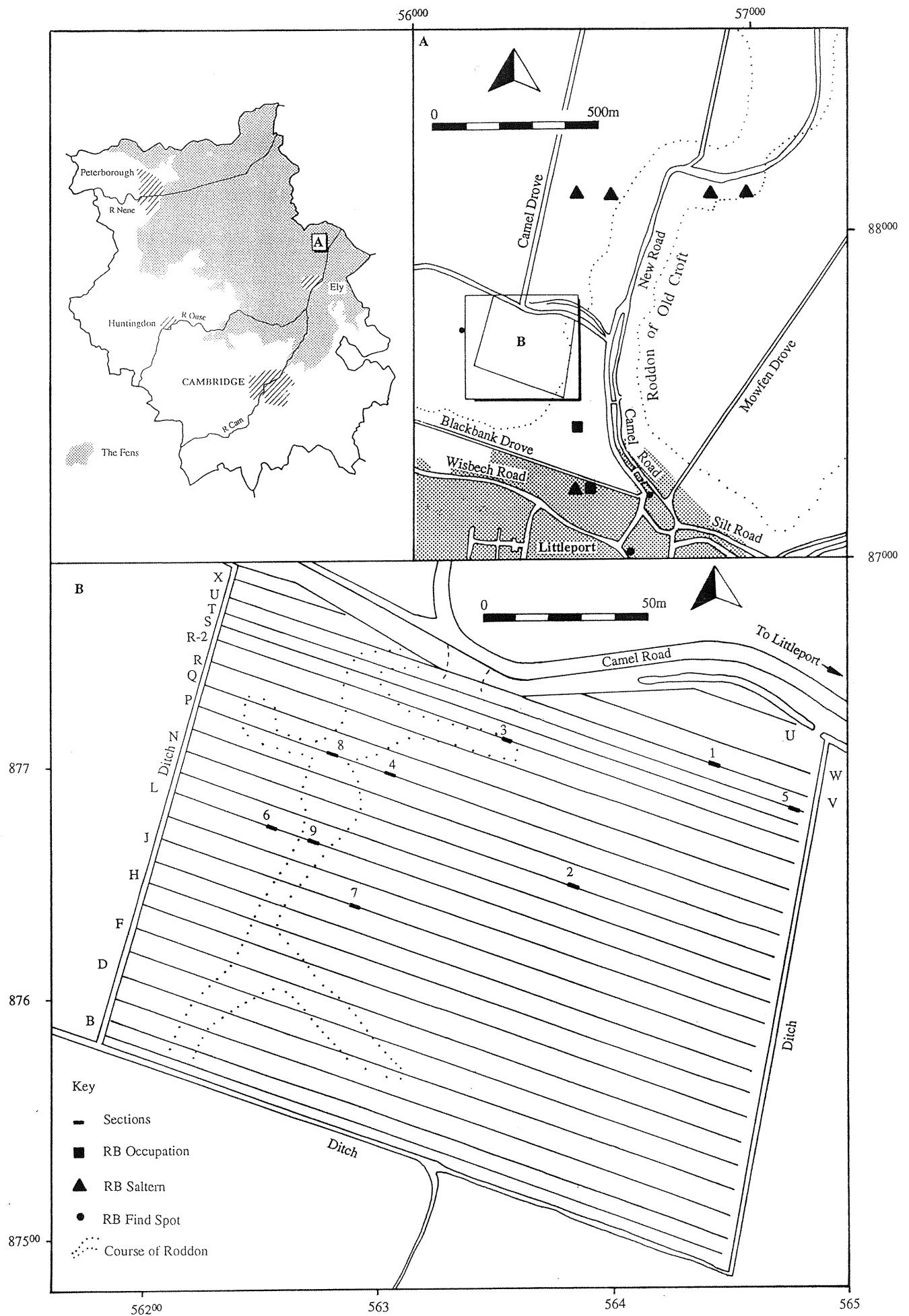


Figure 1 Location plan, and plan of pipe trenches

### 3 NATURE OF GROUNDWORKS

The subject site (formerly cultivated) was prepared for use as a sports field by laying plastic drains. The cut for each drain was *c* 40cm, 1m in depth and was made by a Masterbroek HIAB pipe-laying machine. The pipes were sealed with gravel, and trenches back-filled with the soil extracted from them. The field was traversed by 24 pipe trenches which used an existing drain to the west as an outfall (*Figure 1*).

### 4 METHODS

The drainage scheme allowed for the examination of narrow sections across the entire site. Given that there were no known archaeological remains across the site but a potential to encounter Roman-British or medieval activity connected with the Old Croft, (or perhaps prehistoric activity pre-dating the Nordelph Peat formation), this provided a fairly satisfactory general reconnaissance exercise. The method should have allowed for the identification and mapping of structures (cut features and so forth) and former land surfaces.

Sections were drawn at 1:50 to show variations in stratigraphy across the site. Levels were only to be given for cultural features; all other measurements were taken from the current land surface. The examination of sections was supplemented by a surface collection survey based on the upcast spoil of a sample of the pipe trenches (those examined are noted on *Figure 1*).

Fieldwork was carried out on the 18th, 19th and 20th of May 1994.

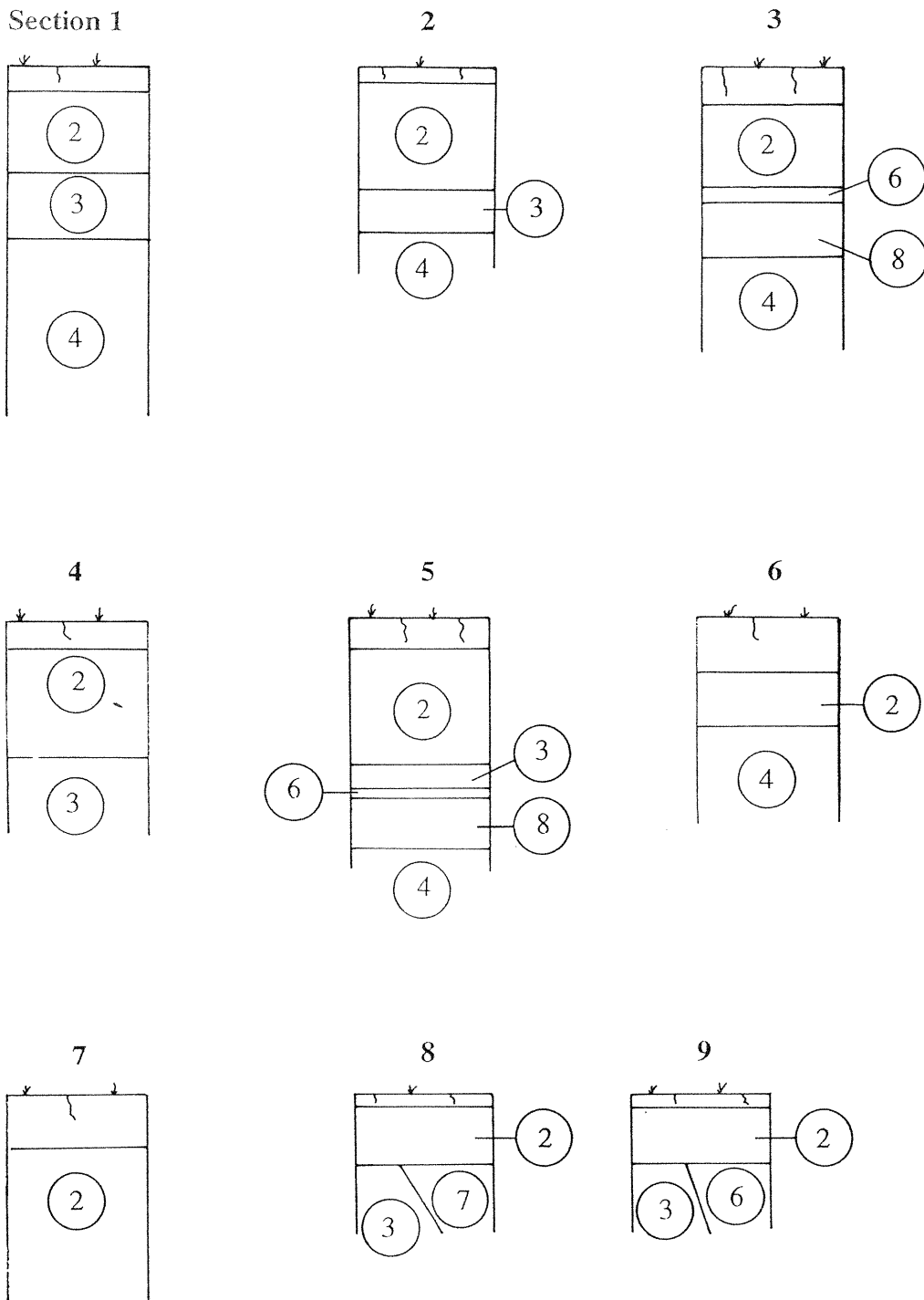
### 5 RESULTS

#### 5.1 Surface Collection

Finds were limited to post-medieval material such as glass, brick fragments and clay pipe stems. A concentration of brick and tile against Camel Road (*Figure 1*) marks the position of a causeway of dumped material which was intended to lessen the gradient between the road and the lowered field surface, caused by peat wastage.

#### 5.2 Sections

No cultural features were observed in section. Slight ridges and light coloured ploughsoil, however, marked the position of a roddon (relict stream channel) whose presence was confirmed in section. The roddon was comprised of a sandy clay, varying in colour between light brownish grey ('Munsell' colour 10YR 6/2) and strong brown (7.5YR 5/6) with occasional grey mottles (deposits **6** and **7** respectively). There were no signs of a central peat-filled channel, commonly observed in such features. The roddon, where not exposed by wastage, was sealed by a dark brown (10YR 3/3) clayey peat ploughsoil, deposit **2**. Its observable interfaces with a desiccated, greyish brown (10YR 5/2) slightly clayey peat, deposit **3**, varied between a diffuse, near vertical, cut at the western edge of the channel, to a thin overlying stratum on the eastern periphery of its course. Here it overlay another thin band of peat, deposit **8**. It is not known whether the roddon silts penetrated the underlying soft grey (10YR 5/1) clay, deposit **4**, visible in deeper sections.



Scale 1:50

**Figure 2** Sample of recorded sections

The positions of a sample of the recorded sections are shown on *Figure 1*, along with the observed course of the roddon.

The following interpretation of this stratigraphy is based on field observation only and has not been made with reference to micro-analysis of the deposits in question. Such analysis, given the lack of direct cultural evidence from the sports field, would have been beyond the remit of the present project. The dates suggested are intended as a very broad guide to deposition episodes which are not uniform across the Fens, but which could have been retarded or accelerated significantly due to local factors (*cf* French 1993,5 -16)

The deepest stratum exposed, deposit 4, would seem to conform to deposits of the Barroway Drove Beds, probably formed in an salt-marsh c 4,000 years ago. The slightly clayey, desiccated peats deposits 3, and 8), are the remnants of the wasted Nordelph Peat whose deposition marked the growth of freshwater (*Phragmites*) reed swamps across the former salt marsh. A period of marine transgression which began c 2,600 to 2,000 years ago resulted in the deposition of the intertidal Terrington Bed silts, especially along existing watercourses such as the Old Croft (Gallois 1988, 77-83).

The small roddon observed here probably belongs to this later episode and may have been active along with the channel of the Old Croft in Romano-British times.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The absence of Romano-British structures in the subject field may have been due to the activity of the small roddon and/or the low-lying aspect of the site. The absence of evidence for a turbarry (peat cuttings to fuel salt evaporation, often sited adjacent to salterns) in this field does not, however, rule out the possibility of preserved salterns in the pasture field to the east (SMR 07261). Its associated turbarries could have been sited elsewhere.

The impact of the localised drainage works in the sports field on the archaeological resource of the area has been minimal. It should be noted however, that the pasture field to the east (centred on TL 565 875) may contain well preserved evidence for Romano-British settlement and salt making, as well as a section of one of the Fenland's most important early medieval waterways.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The author wishes to thank 'Leisure and Sport for Littleport' for funding the recording brief, and their consultant engineers J.C. Smith of Ely for information regarding the drainage scheme. The fieldwork was undertaken by Sarah Hinds and David Mitchell (who also prepared Figure 1).*

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