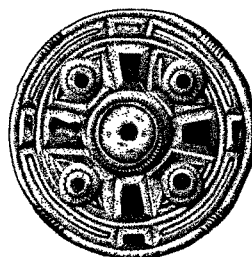


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Archaeological Field Unit

**Archaeological Recording at Butcher's Hill Farm,
Littleport (TL 532/903)**

R Heawood

1993

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No A 13

Commissioned By P J Thory Ltd

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING AT BUTCHER'S HILL FARM, LITTLEPORT (TL 532/903)

NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The first phase of an archaeological Recording Brief was conducted in May 1993 on 0.6 hectares of arable land in Littleport Parish at TL 532/903. The work was undertaken by Cambridgeshire Archaeology for P.J. Thory Ltd. in advance of the proposed extraction of clay for river bank strengthening. Topsoil was removed by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision, and five dark areas of potential interest were located, including two very shallow rings of c 9.5m diameter. All these features were cut into, or lay directly over, the natural boulder clay found immediately beneath the topsoil. On further investigation, all were found to be of probable modern origin or of natural derivation. The area examined represents the total area that the client wished to strip of topsoil in the first phase of works. It remains possible that after August 1993 a second phase of stripping will be required, with attendant archaeological monitoring, increasing the extraction area to a maximum of 2.4 hectares.

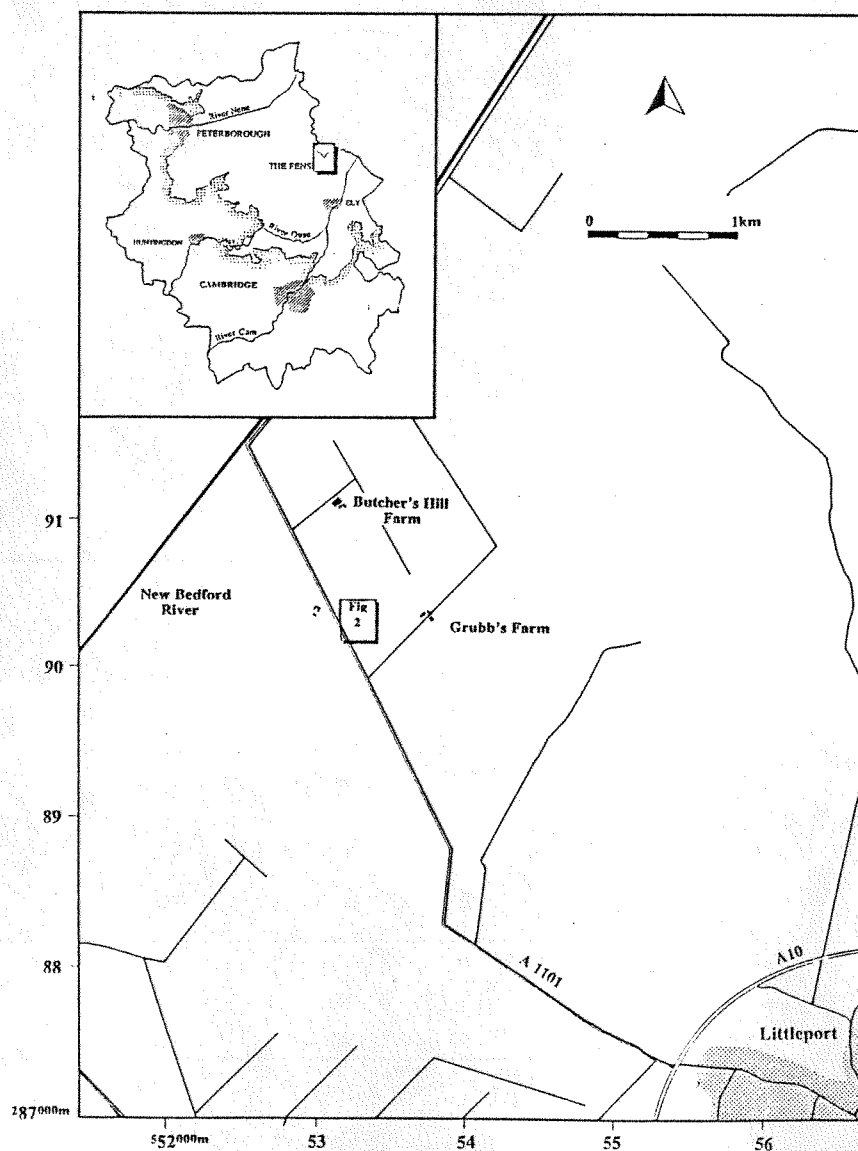


Figure 1 Location Map

2 INTRODUCTION

Between 30th April and 26th May 1993 an archaeological Recording Brief was carried out on arable land in Littleport Parish. The work was conducted for P.J. Thory Ltd, who plan to extract clay from the area and were in the process of topsoil stripping.

The site, some 0.9 hectares in extent, is situated 1.2km south-east of the New Bedford River at TL 532/903 (Figure 1). There is much evidence of prehistoric and Roman activity concentrated nearby, and the area must be considered one of high archaeological potential.

3 BACKGROUND

The site lies at *c* 1.5m OD on the edge of a shallow deposit of Boulder Clay, with a narrow strip of Ampthill Clay immediately to the south. Together, these clay deposits form an 'island' rising almost imperceptibly above the surrounding peat fen to a height of *c* 2m OD. However, the nature of the topsoil and of the soil profile visible today is largely a product of twentieth century agricultural practice rather than of the underlying geology. The farmer indicated that earlier this century the field was stripped by mechanical scraper, and the topsoil exchanged with that from a field 2 miles to the north which had proved susceptible to wind erosion.

The locality is covered by the English Heritage sponsored Fenland Project (Hall forthcoming), and it is clear that this area of Boulder Clay has been an important focus of past activity and must be regarded as being rich in archaeological potential. Close to Butcher's Hill Farm, *c* 0.5km to the north, a cluster of discrete prehistoric and Roman sites has been identified, one of which has produced evidence for settlement in the form of a dark 'occupation' earth dated to the late Bronze Age by a large number of associated pottery sherds (Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) No 08577, a,b,c; Hall forthcoming). The SMR identifies the location of a group of Romano British huts *c* 1km east of the extraction area at TL 5439/9030.

4 METHODS

The site was visited at the commencement of topsoil stripping, and the first half day of machining observed. It was agreed that topsoil would be removed to its maximum depth using a 360 degree tracked excavator, and that machines would not be driven over the cleaned area. No features were seen on the first visit.

When the stripping had been completed, the underlying surface was inspected for archaeological features. Areas of apparent potential were marked, and later planned and sample portions of features hand excavated.

It had been assumed that removal of any subsoil would also have to be performed under archaeological supervision. However, on initial topsoil stripping it became clear that the present dark greyish brown clay silt topsoil was lying immediately over mixed yellowish brown and mid grey clay natural (Boulder Clay), with a very sharp interface between the two. It must be supposed that any subsoil that had developed was removed during stripping earlier this century, making observation of all but the initial topsoil stripping unnecessary.

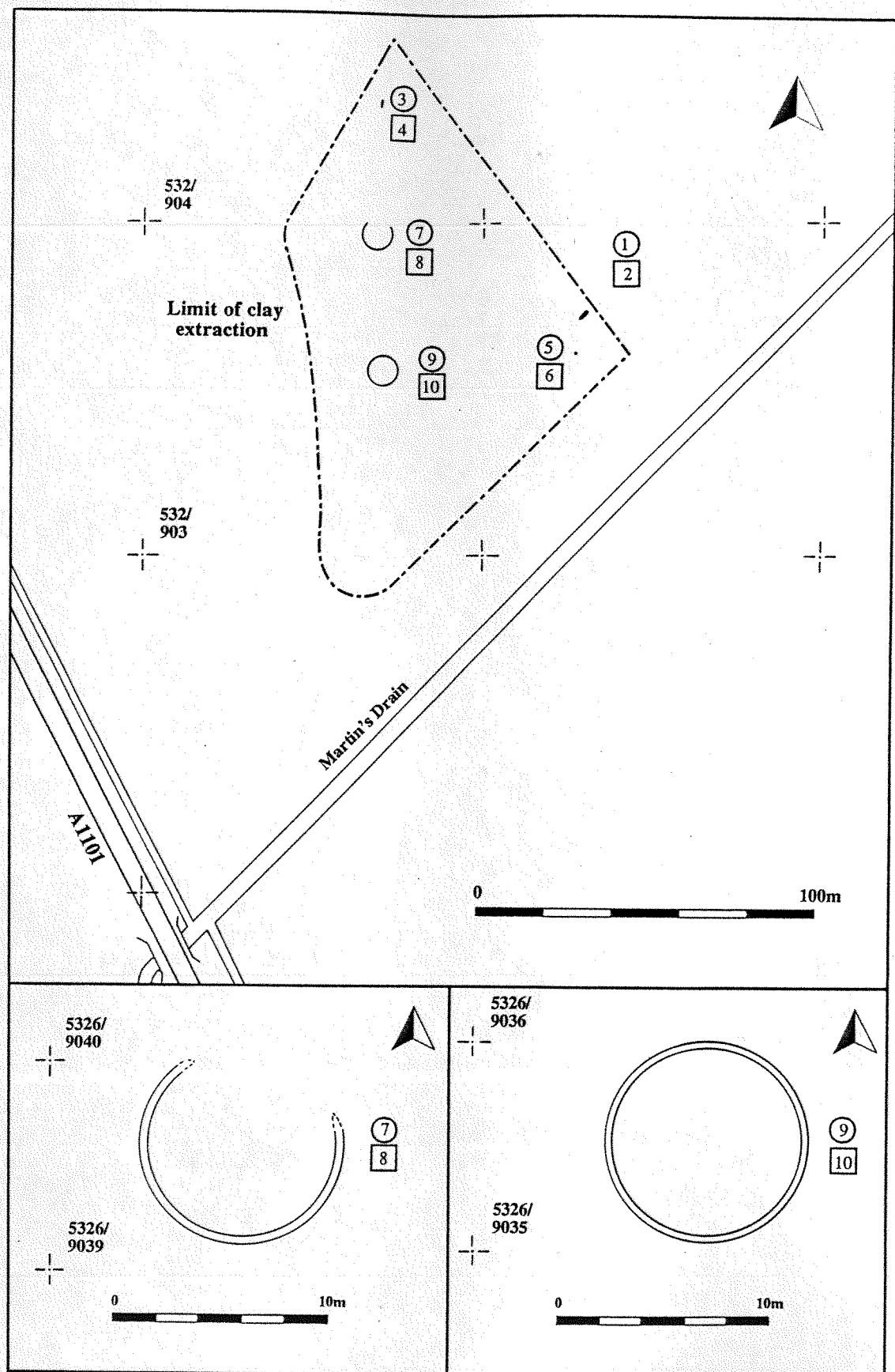


Figure 2 Extent of Proposed First Phase of Clay Extraction

5 RESULTS

A total of five features were observed beneath topsoil 0.25-0.30m deep. Of these, one was a modern cut and two were possibly natural features, but the remaining two at first appeared to be of greater archaeological potential.

Modern An elongated cut with one very square butt end, 3.4m x 0.8m x 0.7m deep (Cut 2, Fill 1). The fill was a dark greyish brown sandy clay silt, and included a piece of 'waxed' paper and a small fragment of brick. The profile strongly suggested that the feature had been dug by machine bucket.

Undated A short irregular linear feature 1.3m x 0.4m x 0.4m deep (recorded as Cut 4, Fill 3). It was observed as a very dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit, very distinct from the surrounding Boulder Clay, but the irregular shape and under cutting sides suggested a probable natural origin

A shallow circular feature 0.6m x 0.5m x 0.2m deep (recorded as Cut 6, Fill 5). It was observed as a distinct dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit, but on excavation its irregular edges indicated probable formation by root action.

A very shallow indistinct cut in the form of an incomplete ring, a maximum of 0.40m wide x 0.04m deep and *c* 9.5m in diameter (Cut 8, Fill 7, Figure 2). The fill was a dark greyish brown sandy clay silt. A sample length of 1.0m was excavated, but no finds were recovered. The feature appeared very regular, where present the ring being almost an exact circle: the dimensions were 9.5m along the north-west/south-east axis, and 9.7m south-west/north east. Although not observed as a complete ring, the shallowness of the cut suggests that the feature may once have been present to the north, with truncation possibly causing its disappearance.

A shallow and indistinct cut in the shape of a complete ring, a maximum of 0.35m thick x 0.05m deep and 9.5m in diameter (Cut 10, Fill 9, Figure 2). The fill was a mid brown sandy clay silt; a sample length of 1.0m was excavated and no finds were recovered. The ring appeared to be almost exactly circular.

6 DISCUSSION

The two 'ring' features observed lie *c* 30m apart, and were almost identical in size having a diameter of *c* 9.5m. Cut 10 was recorded as being circular, whilst Cut 8 was slightly oval, measuring 9.5m x 9.7m, but the similarity in shape, and the regularity, is still striking. Conversation with the farmer gave no indication of any recent agricultural or military use of the field that might account for these rings, and so initially an archaeological explanation was considered. The features might be thought to bear some resemblance to eaves drip gullies around Iron Age timber structures; they are of an appropriate diameter, and limited natural truncation might explain their shallow and indistinct form. However, in view of the lack of positive dating evidence, the objections seem overwhelming. A diameter approaching 9.5m would appear to indicate a structure of considerable size, and yet there is no evidence for any other cut features such as postholes associated with the shadowy circles uncovered, nor for any activity in the surrounding area. In addition, the fills excavated were composed of a sandy clay silt similar in matrix to the imported topsoil above. A recent origin seems the most probable, perhaps connected with the known soil stripping operations earlier this century.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Although the area around Butcher's Hill Farm is one of known archaeological potential, no features securely dated to any period prior to the twentieth century were recorded.

This report has been concerned with an area of c 0.9 hectares stripped by the client in May 1993, part of a total possible extraction area of 2.4 hectares. Should the client decide to extend clay extraction into the remainder of the area, Cambridgeshire Archaeology will continue to monitor the work on behalf of the client in accordance with the terms of the brief supplied by the County Archaeology Office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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