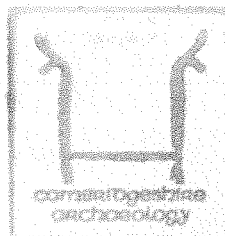
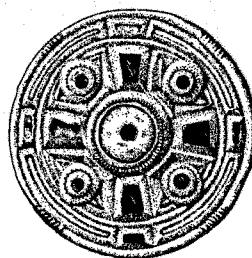


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Archaeological Field Unit

Archaeological Investigations at Witchford Road, Ely

K Welsh

1994

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No A29

Commissioned By Abbey Developments Ltd

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

During February, 1994, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological assessment of land between Witchford Road, St John's Road, and the A10 bypass, on the south-western outskirts of Ely (TL 527 796). The work was undertaken at the request of Abbey Developments Ltd as part of the planning consent for the site.

In the absence of known archaeological finds, a grid of thirty-eight test pits was excavated by machine in an attempt to obtain a representative sample of the site.

No archaeological features pre-dating the 18th century were found. However, evidence of 18th- or 19th-century gravel extraction was recorded in the southern part of the site. A small number of shallow drainage ditches and ceramic field drains (probably dating to the 19th-century) were also present in all parts of the site.

INTRODUCTION

From 7th to 11th February, 1994, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological assessment of an area of land on the outskirts of Ely. The work was carried out at the request of Abbey Developments Ltd, who own the land, following a brief provided by the County Archaeology Office. Planning permission has been granted to construct a residential development across the whole site.

The site, with an area of 8.36ha, lies to the south-west of Ely (*Figure 1*), between Witchford Road and St John's Road, and adjacent to the A10 bypass (TL 527 796). Finds made during the construction of the latter include Medieval pottery and worked flints. Two undated cropmark sites also lie 500m to the south. It was therefore felt that the site had significant, if unquantified, archaeological potential.

GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The assessment area lies largely on Boulder Clay, although at the southern end of the site it was overlain by a thin layer of glacial gravel.

The site lies towards the south-western end of the area of high land on which Ely itself lies. The limits of the site are formed by St John's Road to the north, the A10 bypass to the west, and Witchford Road to the south. The eastern limit is partially formed by existing field boundaries. The land slopes gently from the north, at about 27m OD, to the south, at about 23m OD. The area is sub-divided by several, fairly shallow, drainage ditches.

BACKGROUND

The Isle of Ely, upon which the site lies, is an area of upland within the southern Fens. Its position, close to the fen edge, has given rise to a long history of occupation. Archaeological material retrieved from the area dates from the Mesolithic period to the present day. However, most archaeological work in the area has occurred in the City itself, in response to urban development. Ely rose to prominence after the foundation of a religious establishment during the Anglo-Saxon period and after re-establishment in the Medieval period. There is a paucity of archaeological information from much of the rest of the Isle, but this is probably due to limited fieldwork rather than to a true lack of settlement. There is now a proposal, from the Cambridge Archaeological Unit, to undertake a survey of the Isle, which would include the assessment area.

No evidence exists for the site itself, but during limited field walking along the route of the bypass (carried out by the Ely District Archaeological Society) finds of Medieval pottery and struck flints were made nearby. Approximately 500m to the south, two cropmark sites include enclosures and field boundaries. Finds of flint artefacts, and Roman and Medieval material in the area may be associated with these sites.

METHODOLOGY

Following a recommendation from the County Archaeology Office (Hurley, 1993), a strategy of sampling was developed following that used by the Cambridge Archaeology Unit at, for example, Hinxton Quarry (Evans, 1993). A series of thirty-eight 4m square test-pits was opened on a staggered 50m grid (*Figure 1*), using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket. In addition, extra linear trenching could be employed, as necessary, to

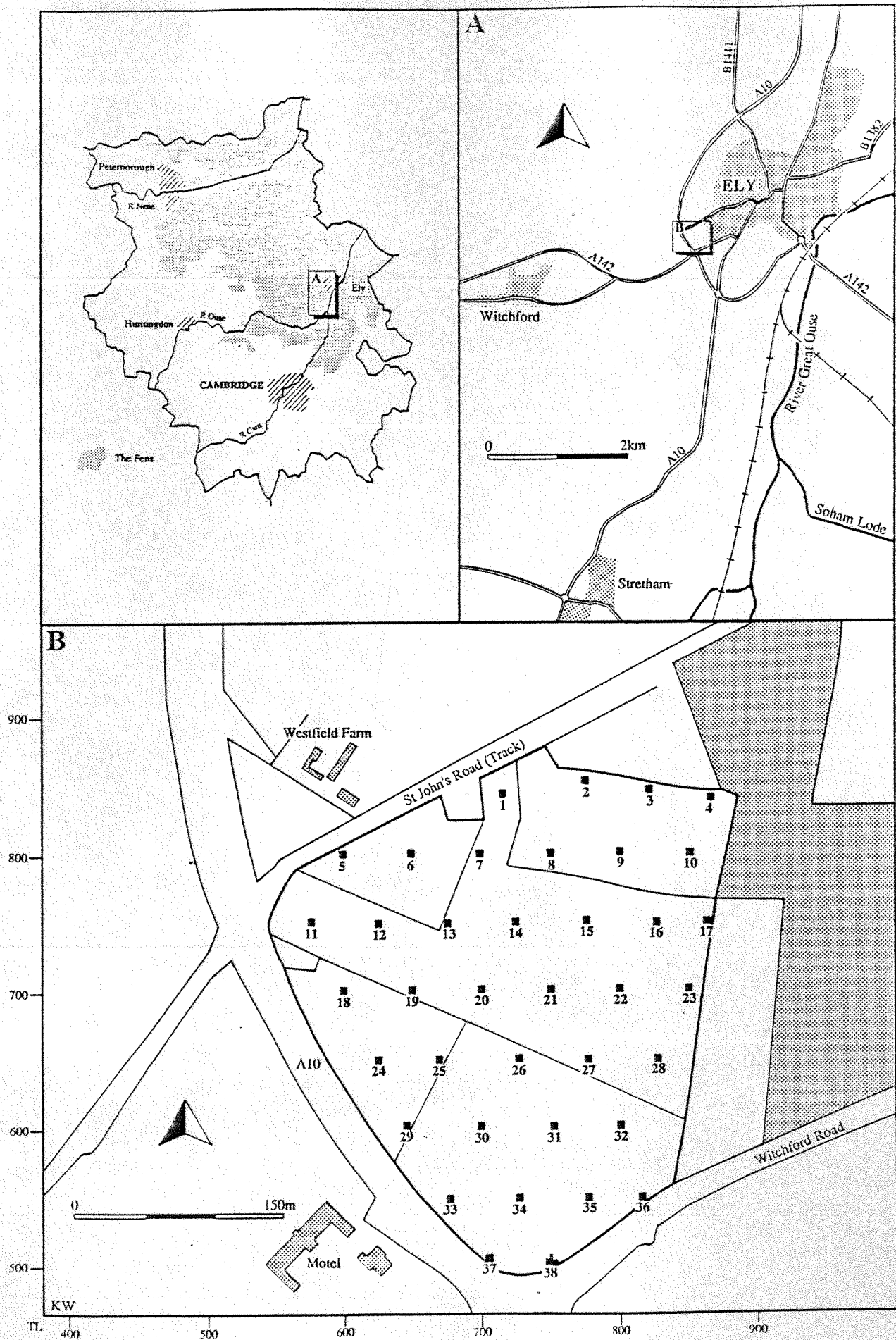


Figure 1 Location Maps

investigate any archaeological features so revealed. It was proposed that spoil from a 1x1m area of each Test Station should be sieved for artefacts (Reynolds, 1993). In practice, because of the heavy clay soil, this was not possible. Instead, a proportion of the spoil was sorted by hand during machining. It was also proposed that areas where Test Stations revealed high artefact densities should be ploughed and walked in order to enhance the information gained. However, due to the absence of artefacts from the Medieval period or earlier, this option was not employed.

A limited number of features were revealed in the Test Stations, and they were recorded and selectively excavated, using the standard techniques, and appropriate *pro formas*, of the Archaeological Field Unit.

RESULTS

The ploughsoil, a dark greyish brown, silty clay, was 0.25-0.35m deep across the entire site. It overlay a sterile, orange brown, clay (in places, slightly silty) containing occasional small chalk fragments (the upper, weathered surface of the Boulder Clay). In the south of the area (Test Stations 35, 37, and 38), there was a shallow layer (up to 0.4m thick) of glacial gravel overlying the clay. Linear features were observed in Test Stations 1, 14, 15, 16, 19, 22, 24, 28, and 38. Those seen in Test Stations 15, 16, and 22, proved to contain ceramic field drains, dating to the 19th or early 20th century. Those in Test Stations 19, 24, and, 28, were shown to be shallow ditches containing pottery and clay tobacco pipe dating to the 18th century or later.

In Test Station 1, a series of features was observed cut into the gravel, and so it was extended to the north and to the east. The earliest features were two parallel, straight-sided, linear cuts, 7 and 13, orientated north to south, and separated by about 0.1m. Cut 7 was more than 2.3m wide and 7m long. Cut 13 was more than 4.5m wide and 6m long. Both were 0.4m deep, with a flat base formed by the surface of the natural clay. They were filled with dark-brown, silty clay with frequent small flint pebbles, as well as occasional clay tobacco pipe, brick, and white-glazed pottery. Two parallel cuts, orientated north-north-east to south-south-west, were cut into the top of these and proved to contain ceramic field drains similar to those seen in other Test Stations. Cutting across all of these was a recent, machine-excavated slot, presumably dug in connection with the present development plans.

CONCLUSIONS

The most noticeable characteristic of the site was the lack of artefacts or features pre-dating the 18th century. Even after that date, very little evidence of activity is present, other than a small number of drainage ditches and field drains.

Test Station 38 was located next to Witchford Road and it seems likely that the two substantial cuts represent small scale gravel extraction, presumably used for road-building. The pottery and tobacco pipe-stems found in the back-fill, suggest a date in the late 18th or early 19th century.

All the other features encountered proved to be field drains or shallow drainage ditches dating to the 18th century or later.

No evidence of earlier occupation was encountered and it is possible that the heavy, poorly drained soils, that developed on the Boulder Clay, discouraged settlement in the immediate vicinity. The nearby cropmark sites lie on Lower Greensand, over which has developed a well-drained soil, and this may have been more conducive to settlement and agriculture.

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