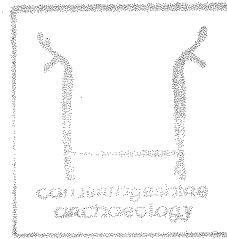
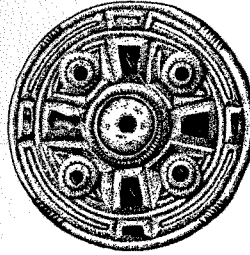


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Archaeological Field Unit

Archaeological Investigations at London Road, Godmanchester

K Welsh

1994

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No A30

Commissioned By Andrew S Campbell Associates

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

During March 1994, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological assessment at London Road, Godmanchester (TL 2510 6974). The work was carried out at the request of Andrew S Campbell Associates on behalf of their clients as part of the planning process.

The site is adjacent to the presumed route of Roman Ermine Street and only about 0.5km south of the Roman town. Because of the common Roman practice of locating their cemeteries along the approaches to towns, it was felt that the site held significant archaeological potential.

A series of features running parallel to London Road proved to contain 19th century ceramic field drains. No features of earlier date were present.

1 INTRODUCTION

From 14th-18th March 1994, a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological assessment of a plot of land adjacent to London Road, Godmanchester (*Figure 1*). The work was carried out on behalf of Andrew S Campbell Associates following a brief provided by the County Archaeology Office. It is proposed to build residential housing and an associated access road on the site.

London Road is thought to follow the line of Roman Ermine Street, running towards the Roman town of Godmanchester roughly 0.5km to the north. By law, cemeteries were placed outside towns during the Roman period, and it was common practice for burials to be situated alongside the approaches to a town. It was felt, therefore, that the site held significant archaeological potential, with the presence of extra-mural burials a distinct possibility.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site, with an area of about 1.6ha, lies on Boulder Clay just to the south of the river gravels of the Great Ouse valley.

The field has a moderate slope from the south, with a height of about 20m OD, to the north at about 15.5m OD. It is roughly rectangular and the north-eastern boundary is formed by London Road.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 The history and development of the town of Godmanchester is excellently reviewed in a booklet by H J M Green entitled *Godmanchester*, based upon over 40 years experience excavating and researching the town and its environs. Other information for this summary is derived from the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

3.2 Prehistoric and Early Historic Godmanchester to AD1100 Dr Gerald A Wait

Godmanchester is situated on the gravel terrace of the River Great Ouse which reveal a great variety and concentration of cropmarks dating to prehistoric and later times. Some of the most significant cropmark sites that have been excavated in the area are at Brampton and close by, at Rectory Farm, Godmanchester. River valleys were occupied early in prehistoric times as the rivers provided transport routes and the surrounding valleys had fertile soils which were easily cleared of vegetation for farming. Early prehistoric occupation around Godmanchester is indicated by flint tools in both Mesolithic and Neolithic forms. A Mesolithic camp, and a later, Neolithic farmstead, were located just east of the town by excavations in 1990 (Wait 1992). Contemporary with the latter is the extensive and obscure ritual complex of a giant enclosure and cursus recently excavated near Rectory Farm (McAvoy, interim report in CCC SMR). A mortuary enclosure at the end of a cursus has been excavated just west of Brampton (Malim 1991). Bronze Age barrows (or ring ditches) at Brampton (White 1966) and at Rectory Farm (McAvoy op. cit.) have also been excavated. Many other sites, probably

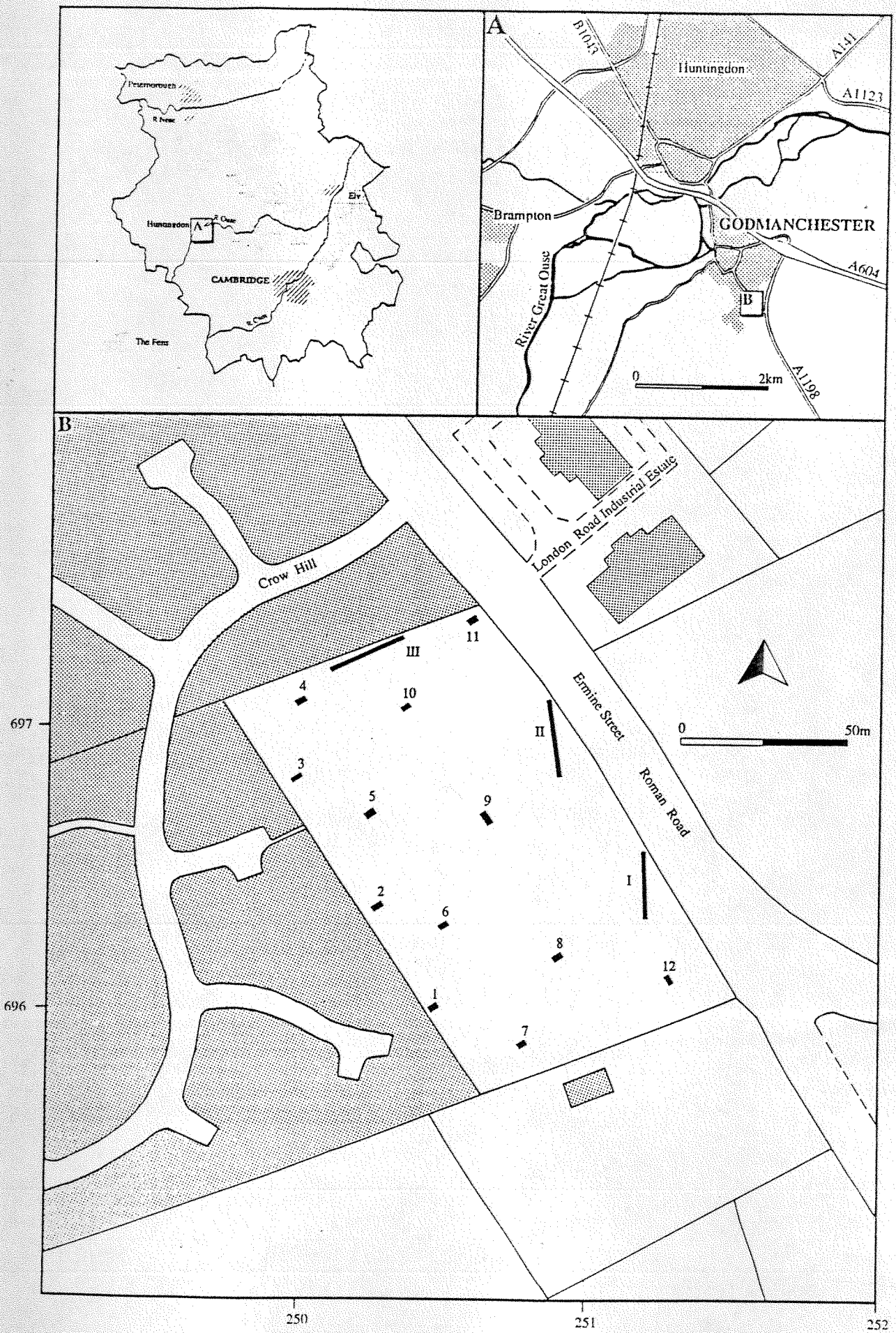


Figure 1 Site location showing position of trenches

farmsteads, are likely to have been scattered over the four by one kilometre gravel terrace upon which Godmanchester sits, exploiting the light, free draining soils so amenable to early farming technology. Such sites are known only through collections of flint tools.

Later prehistoric settlement is relatively better understood, not least because Iron Age pottery survives much better than earlier pottery. One such farmstead has been sample excavated just east of the town (Wait 1992) and others are known from under modern Godmanchester by the appearance of the typical roundhouses and ditched enclosures encountered below Roman occupation.

3.2.1 Roman Godmanchester

The Roman conquest of East Anglia is represented in Godmanchester by a legionary fort built c. AD 44, to command the two new roads (Ermine Street and the Cambridge to Leicester Road) where they crossed the River Great Ouse. The fort was abandoned within a few years as the frontier moved north, but an associated civilian settlement or *vicus* survived. During the Flavian period the *vicus* expanded and flourished. By the Hadrianic period (ca 117-38) a *mansio* and baths were designed and built in the centre of the town, near the central crossroads. These were very large and elaborate buildings reflecting, in both their design and furnishings, the progressive Romanisation of the inhabitants. *Mansiones* were originally connected to the imperial postal service, providing overnight accommodation and fresh horses. This role later expanded to include facilities for other imperial travellers and later served as both a police post and a tax collection centre. The Godmanchester *mansio* as eventually built was one of the largest in Britain, at over 100 metres long, including stabling. The *mansio* was built around a colonnaded courtyard with bedrooms along two sides, along with kitchens, dining rooms, etc. Both *mansio* and baths were substantially built with masonry walls and were half-timbered above the ground floor. Floors were tessellated and walls were of painted plaster. Somewhat later (shortly after ca AD200) the town centre was redesigned and a formal *basilica* or town hall was built, indicating that Godmanchester may have achieved the formal status of *Vicus*, with a legal constitution and rights of self-government (possibly following an edict of Caracalla in AD214 which granted Roman citizenship to all free-born members of the community). The main building was of six bays, with an aisle on the east separated from the hall by an arcade. The new *basilica*, the *mansio* and the public baths were located in an *insulae* or small compound demarcated by ditched boundaries, and with them was a small temple apparently dedicated to a god named Abandinus, not known elsewhere and so possibly a local deity.

The general prosperity of the second century in Godmanchester was marred by a period of extensive flooding of land below about 10 metres OD. In the mid second century an extensive fire destroyed large tracts of the town and necessitated a massive rebuilding programme. This, plus continual resurfacing and up-grading of the principal Roman roads, required large supplies of gravel and sand, quarried locally from the underlying river terraces.

During the third century the town was enclosed within masonry walls some three metres thick, backed by a clay rampart, and pierced by gates where the roads entered the town. The wall was fronted by a ditch, reaching impressive dimensions where defending the gates. Later, during the fourth century, towers for defensive artillery were added at corners, and the external ditch re-cut. The *basilica* and *mansio* were demolished, apparently at this time and following a disastrous fire, possibly as a source of masonry for the refurbished defences. In apparent contradiction to the provision of such effective defences, Green believes the town was less prosperous during the third century.

Also during the third century the pan-Empire custom of inhumation burial was adopted at Godmanchester, and large cemeteries were established, in typical Roman fashion, outside the town walls and along the roads approaching the town. Cemeteries are

known from the following areas: along both sides of Park Lane, just west and south of the parish church, between Cambridge Street and Linden Road, along the Cambridge road, and with possibly the largest stretching from the west end of Pipers Lane south and east to Ermine street near Porch Farm. Burials associated with this latter cemetery have recently been exposed at Sweetings Road, Godmanchester (Macaulay pers comm).

The *territorium* governed from Godmanchester as a *vicus* is unknown, but Green has speculated, on the basis of landscape features and artefact scatters, that it may have approximated to the modern parishes of Godmanchester and Offord Cluny. The town's prosperity was based on agriculture, though Green's excavations do document the practice of essential crafts like iron smithing and pottery production.

A massive fire of the end of the third century may have been the result of an attack and sack of the town. Civic buildings were never rebuilt, and although the town was certainly rebuilt and reoccupied it was in less elaborate style and on a smaller scale. Some of the fourth and early fifth century occupation is associated with early Anglo-Saxon pottery. The last resurfacing of Ermine street was in the fourth century, and is virtually unworn and covered with fourth century rubbish. Side roads and private homes continued to be maintained within the town.

3.2.2 Anglo-Saxon Godmanchester

Fifth century occupation of Godmanchester is poorly documented; perhaps more a reflection of the state of archaeological excavation and interpretation than any true representation of the town's development. Coin issues and distinctive pottery styles cease ca AD400, and therefore ditches and pits which cut fourth century layers may date anytime from ca. 400 to 550 when more diagnostic pottery becomes common. However, stray finds of early and middle Saxon date do occur from many places within and around the town, and it is likely that the town continued to be inhabited. The late inhumation cemetery along Cambridge Road contains evidence of Saxon settlement. Middle Saxon pottery (eg Ipswich ware, dated ca. AD650-850) and settlement evidence appears to focus on the area around the Roman southgate.

3.2.3 The Danish Period

Between 865 and 879 the area suffered raids by roving Danish armies, culminating in permanent occupation by Guthrum after 879. The army was based at Huntingdon, and was responsible for administering the district later called Huntingdonshire. Danish occupation is known from Godmanchester, and Green speculates that this was focused on a district enclosed within large ditches appended to the Roman walled area on both sides of West Street and along the river. In 917 Edward the Elder recaptured Huntingdon and Godmanchester, and refortified both places as strong defensive points controlling the Ouse. It was Saxon policy to appropriate land under Danish ownership to the Saxon/English Crown. This would appear to have occurred in Godmanchester. During this period the old Roman road (Ermine St) was abandoned through the town and the hexagonal ring roads of East St (Cambridge St), the Causeway, London St and Earning St were laid out, as wall streets with internal lanes to aid in defence.

3.2.4 Early Norman Godmanchester

Godmanchester appears in the Domesday Book of 1086 as crown land held by Edward the Confessor, and it later became a self-governing manor responsible directly to the crown (chartered 1212). In 1086, Godmanchester had 80 villeins and 16 bordars with a total population of about 450 people. It also had three water mills - whose positions can

still be plotted - based upon extensive water engineering works that may have originated in the Danish period.

4 METHODS

A combination of linear trenching and test-pits was employed to sample the assessment area (*Figure 1*). The ploughsoil was removed using a mechanical excavator with a 1.8m toothless ditching bucket. Two 30m trenches were positioned obliquely to the road and a third along the northern margin of the site. The remainder of the area was sampled using 2x2m test-pits. Where necessary, the test-pits were extended to fully expose potential archaeological features within them.

After opening, the trenches and test-pits were cleaned, by hand where necessary, photographed and planned. A limited number of archaeological features were identified and these were partially excavated and recorded using the standard techniques, and appropriate *pro formas*, of the Archaeological Field Unit.

5 RESULTS

The ploughsoil, a very dark greyish brown, slightly silty clay, varied in depth across the site from 0.25-0.45m. It contained frequent 19th and 20th century pottery sherds, fragments of modern brick and tile, as well as fragments of roof-slate, glass, and clay tobacco pipes. This overlay a yellowish brown clay containing frequent small fragments of chalk, flint and limestone along with occasional larger fragments - the natural Boulder Clay.

Linear features cut into the Boulder Clay and running parallel to London Road, were seen in Trenches I and II, and in Test-Stations 5, 9, and 12. Upon excavation, all proved to contain ceramic land-drains of a type commonly used in the 19th century. Pottery sherds and clay tobacco-pipe fragments dating from the same period were recovered from the back-fill of these features.

Test-Station 1 contained a small rectangular feature. After removal of the upper fill it became clear that it contained the remains of someone's pet cat in a wooden box and, judging by its state of preservation, it had been buried within the last forty years or so. It was promptly re-buried.

No other features were observed.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The site lies on heavy, poorly drained Boulder Clay and in the prehistoric period this may have led to it being passed over in favour of the nearby river gravels where lighter, more easily cultivable soils would have developed.

Although lying only about 600m from the walls of Roman Godmanchester, and less than 300m from a Roman cemetery at Porch Farm, no evidence of any activity of the period was found.

The only archaeological features were the ceramic field drains of the 19th century. During this period they were laid in huge numbers and are frequently found on archaeological sites.

The large quantity of modern artefacts, especially building materials, found in the ploughsoil suggest that the area has been used as an unofficial dumping ground in recent years.

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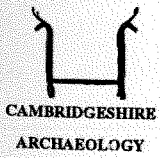
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