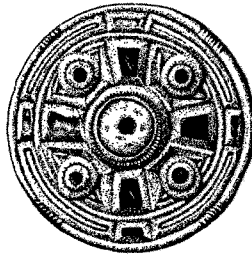


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Archaeological Field Unit

A Recording Brief at Ship Lane, Ely

Sarah Hinds

1994

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No A32

Commissioned By Hereward Housing Association, Ltd.

A Recording Brief at Ship Lane, Ely (TL 5449/7996)

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SUMMARY

In March 1994 Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Field Unit undertook an archaeological watching brief at Ship Lane, Ely, prior to the construction of new public conveniences. The work was carried out on behalf of Hereward Housing Association Ltd. A series of modern, early twentieth century, deposits were revealed, related to levelling and dumping activity, and the construction of a boundary wall and drain. No earlier archaeological features were observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

During March 1994, contractors for Hereward Housing Association Ltd began work at Ship Lane to lay foundations for new public conveniences. The location was slightly to the north of Ship Lane, in a car-parking area adjacent to a modern red brick wall (Figure 1). A series of trenches were dug by the contractors to a depth of 1.25 metres below ground level and the work was monitored by Sarah Hinds on behalf of the Archaeology Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council between Wednesday 9th March and Thursday 10th March.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

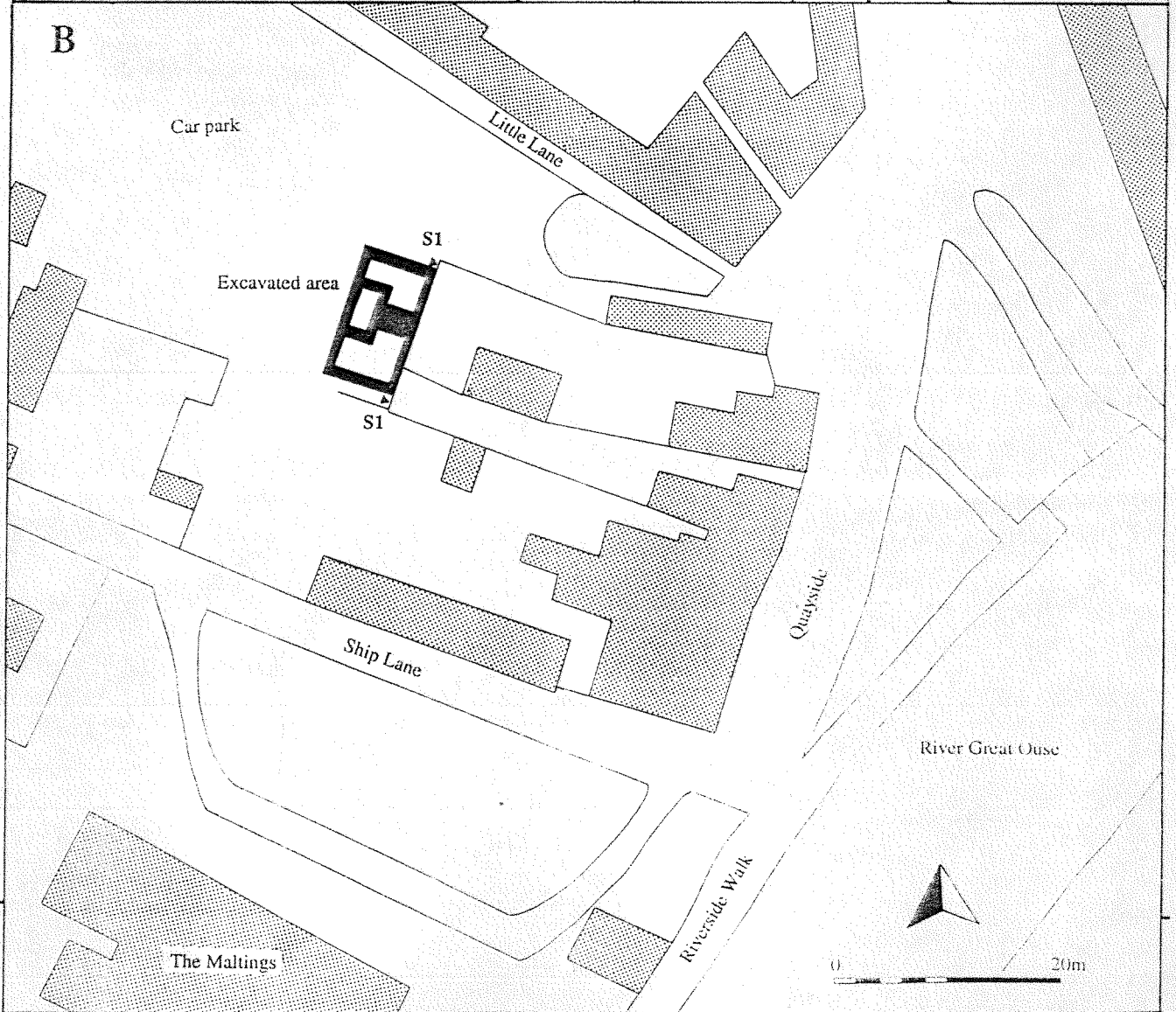
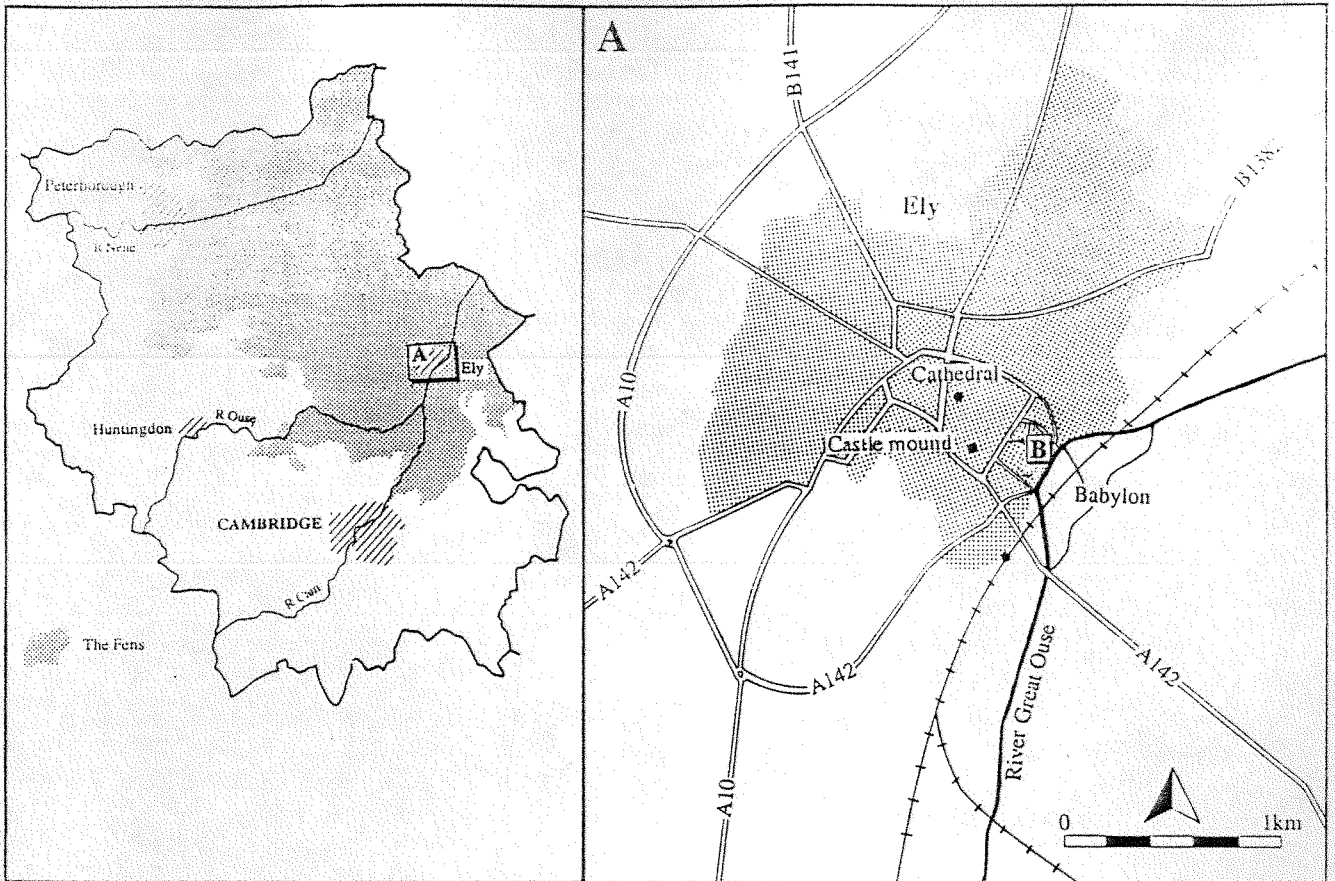
The underlying geology of the site comprises Kimmeridge clay, which forms part of the fen 'island' on which the City of Ely is situated. The site is approximately 40 metres north-west of the River Great Ouse, whose present course was probably established artificially sometime in the twelfth century (Reynolds 1994). The site is surrounded by buildings of eighteenth and nineteenth century date and lies on roughly level ground at around 4.70 metres above ordnance datum. The area was levelled during the recent past and paved with tarmac to create car-parking space.

3 BACKGROUND

The earliest prehistoric activity in the area is indicated by the recovery of Palaeolithic artefacts from Shippea Hill. Recent excavations within the city have revealed possible Neolithic agricultural activity and Bronze Age settlement. A beaker burial cemetery was disturbed by quarrying at Springhead Lane during the early years of this century.

Evidence for Iron Age and Romano-British settlement has been supplied by isolated occasional small finds and field walking surveys. Recent excavations have located field ditches of this date on the higher ground of this part of the island.

The city's name probably derives from its topographic situation and the abundance of eels in the area (Reaney 1943). Bede asserts that the city owes its origin to the foundation of a double abbey under Etheldreda in the late seventh century, since which time the fortunes of the city have been inextricably linked to those of the abbey and bishopric. Settlement remained rural in character, however, until the thirteenth century when improvements in river communications aided the growth of the town's commercial activities (Robinson 1993).



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Figure 1: Site Location Map

Several hithes are recorded from the early thirteenth century onwards (for example, 'Bradehide', 'Castelhide', 'Monkeshith', 'Stokhith'). Waterfront defences are also documented in the twelfth century, close to the Ship Lane site, built to control the Soham causeway (Davison 1962, Owen 1993). Recent excavations at the Maltings (*Figure 1*) revealed a fourteenth century clay bank constructed as part of a continuing effort to stabilise the river bank (Reynolds 1994).

The development site falls between 'Baldokes Lane' and 'Barkers Lane' (Ship Lane), both recorded in the early fifteenth century as leading from Broad Street to the water front (Robinson 1993). Trade and industry dominated the area in the fifteenth century. Brewing is recorded, as well as several tenements, a warehouse known as 'Segwyk' and a stone yard close by (Owen 1993).

The dominance of industrial activity continued into the present century. On the south side of the river, on the island known as Babylon, osiers were common, encouraging crafts such as basket making. Babylon, whose first documented occupation was in the fourteenth century, was linked to the Isle of Ely by a ferry which operated until the mid-twentieth century.

The development site itself lies a short distance away from the Quayside and is shown on the nineteenth century Ordnance Survey Map of Ely as part of a linear land-holding. It is depicted as a walled garden, perhaps with a further brick built structure to the north-east. Part of the boundary wall is still standing (*Figure 2*). It is possible that this land unit reflected and preserved earlier medieval land divisions.

4 METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the development site was located in a tarmac parking area. Initial work therefore involved stripping the tarmac from the overall area of the site, approximately 13 metres by 7 metres, to a depth of about 6 cm. A series of trenches (*Figure 1*) were then dug through the underlying hard core and rubble, which was approximately 30 cm deep, as far as the natural Kimmeridge clay, which lay about 1.10 metres below the surface. The trenches were dug to a uniform depth of 1.25 metres, slightly below the water table. This process was closely observed, in case any intact archaeological features were revealed.

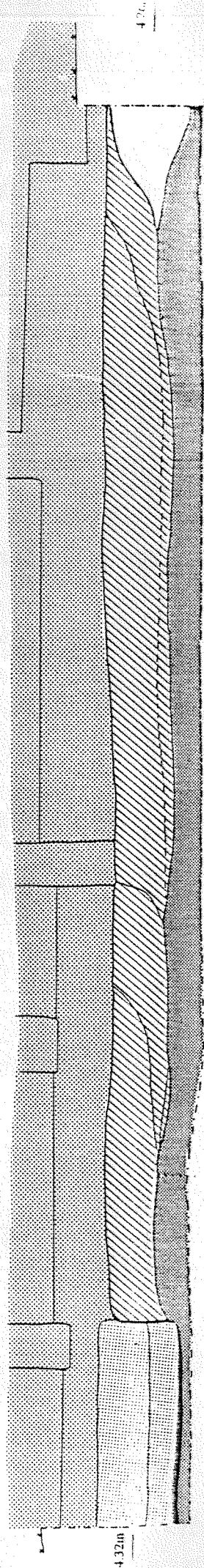
Recording was undertaken using the Archaeology Field Unit's standard single context system. No features were hand dug, due their recent date (see below). Artefacts were recovered during machine digging and subsequent cleaning of the trenches.

5 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

A single representative section was recorded, namely the north-west facing section along the line of the brick wall (*Figure 2*). A total of fifteen context numbers were assigned, details of which are held in the archive by the Archaeology Field Unit.

Little of archaeological importance was exposed by the excavation of the trenches. The standing brick wall was apparently of early twentieth century date, with large amounts of blue and white china fragments sealed in the foundation layers, and a pre-First World War galls bottle in an underlying dump deposit. At its north-east end, a deeper foundation had been dug, consisting of regular yellow and red rectangular bricks above a layer of rubble and perhaps related to a small building shown on the nineteenth century Ordnance Survey map. A drainage ditch ran perpendicular to the wall and exposed in the side of the north-east trench at a depth of 80 cm (not illustrated).

SECTION I. NORTH-WEST FACING









- Key:
-  Natural clay
 -  Modern boundary wall
 -  Modern ground levelling
 -  19th century dump
 -  19th century foundation trench
 -  19th century foundation/soil



Figure 2 North-west facing section

Below the brick wall was a series of dump deposits, apparently part of a ground-levelling exercise, probably during the early twentieth century. These truncated the underlying natural clay, approximately 50 cm below ground level. Relatively large amounts of late eighteenth and nineteenth century material were recovered from these deposits, including blue and white china, brown-glazed pottery, possibly 'Babylon' ware, clay pipe fragments, and pieces of tile and brick. A green glass bottle was also recovered, dating to the early twentieth century. Several fragments of residual late medieval material were also recovered, including a sherd of salt-glazed ware and the base of a vessel with internal green glaze. The soils were uniformly compact clay silts, varying in colour between mid and dark grey-brown, with flecks of coal and chalk and occasional sandy lenses. This series of deposits cut an earlier, but again post-medieval, deposit of mottled grey-brown clay silt, itself cut down to a depth of approximately 90 cm into the natural clay. This dump contained a similar variety of clay pipe fragments, brick and tile, blue and white china and brown-glazed pottery. The brick wall sat on the level surface provided by these layers, with no evidence of a separate cut foundation trench. This suggests that the wall and the dump layers are contemporary eighteenth/nineteenth century features. The few sherds of late medieval pottery found within these layers suggest earlier activity in the area, but any related archaeological features have been thoroughly truncated and destroyed by the ground levelling.

Observation of the remaining trenches revealed a similar picture of extensive ground levelling, truncating the natural clay. These modern deposits had in turn been truncated by the construction of the car park and laying down of some 30 cm of rubble and concrete hard-core.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Documentary research indicated that the development in Ship Lane was in the heart of the medieval and post-medieval industrial riverside complex. Unfortunately, substantial ground levelling carried out in the early twentieth century has removed all traces of any early archaeology in the area. The ground levelling was fairly extensive and seems to have been related to the construction of a brick boundary wall and a sewer. The presence of residual late medieval material in the ground levelling deposits evidently relate to earlier activity at the site. It is possible that the standing brick wall at the site itself preserves part of the line of medieval land divisions and further documentary study may be of value in this respect.

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