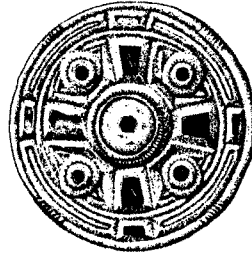


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Archaeological Field Unit

Witcham Road, Mepal: An Archaeological Evaluation

Simon Bray

1997

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No.A115

Commissioned By Construct Reason Ltd.

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SUMMARY

Between the 2 and 4 June 1997, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological assessment and earthwork survey on 2.5 acres of pasture land located on the southern edge of Mepal village (Figure 1; TL445/806). Faint traces of ridge and furrow survive on the southern part of the site. The work was commissioned by Construct Reason Ltd. as part of the planning process, before development for housing.

Located on the southern fen-edge of the Isle of Ely, the site is immediately outside the present town. The medieval town is known to have developed further inland during the 13th century. Its shift in position was caused by a devastating fire in the 1860s.

The work revealed no archaeological activity other than 17th century field drains. These results concur with documentary research which indicates that by 1851 the site formed part of the rector's garden, before which it is probable that the site formed part of the open field system.

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WITCHAM ROAD, MEPAL: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

TL445/806

1 INTRODUCTION

From the 2 to 4 June 1997, the Archaeological Field Unit carried out an archaeological assessment on 2.5 acres of pasture land located in the suburbs of Mepal (*Figure 1; TL445/806*). This was undertaken following a brief prepared by the County Archaeological Office in response to a housing development proposal.

The site is located on the southern edge of the Isle of Ely and is near to the 13th century core of the town. In addition, the southern extent of the site is covered by faint traces of ridge and furrow agriculture. For these reasons it was felt that the site held significant archaeological potential.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

Located on the southern edge of the Isle of Ely, the site lies on a spur of high ground that has Sutton on the south-eastern edge, and Ely 6 miles to the west. Mepal lies low on the north-western tip, and is divided by the main 17 century rivers, the Bedford drains. It forms the smallest of a group of 3 parishes, with Witcham sited on high ground at the centre of the spur, and Coveney, an island lying to the north of the spur.

The geology of the area consists of Ampthill Clay of the Jurassic period.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Located on the edge of the Isle of Ely, Mepal represents a typical small fenland development, with the attraction of the fen for game and the island for occupation and farming. The derivation of the name is unclear, but it seems to have tribal or personal origins (Reaney 1943, 237).

The Sites and Monuments Record has most periods represented within the parish from the Neolithic to the Post-Medieval. A Neolithic flint scatter represents the earliest activity within the parish, 1.5 kilometres to the east of the site (Mepal 2). A second site (Mepal 1) is a plough damaged undated barrow forming part of Chatteris group 18 (Hall, 1996). There is a notable concentration of Bronze-Age material.

Mepal is not referred to in documentary sources until 1217 with the establishment of the rectory, before which it is thought to be referred to as part of Sutton or Witcham (VCH 1967).

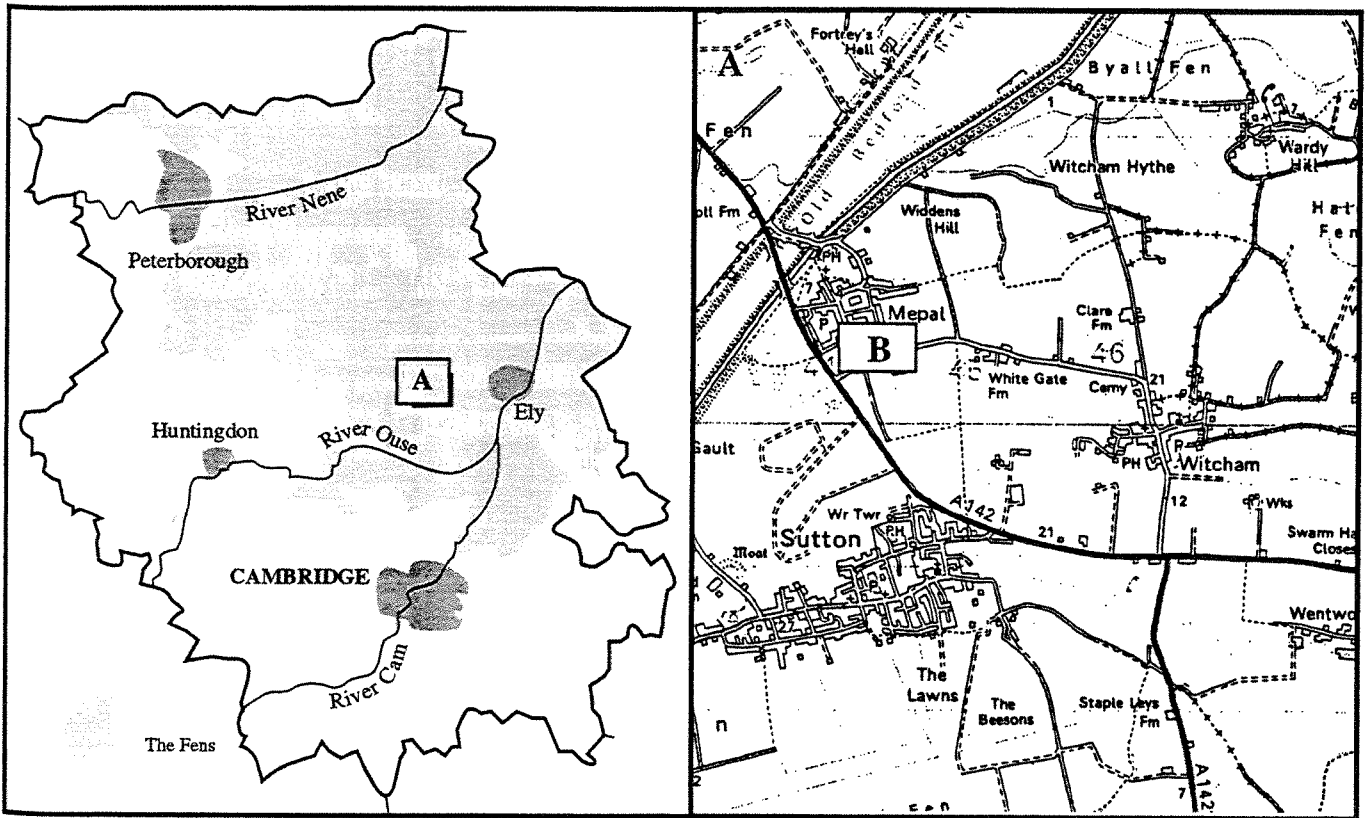


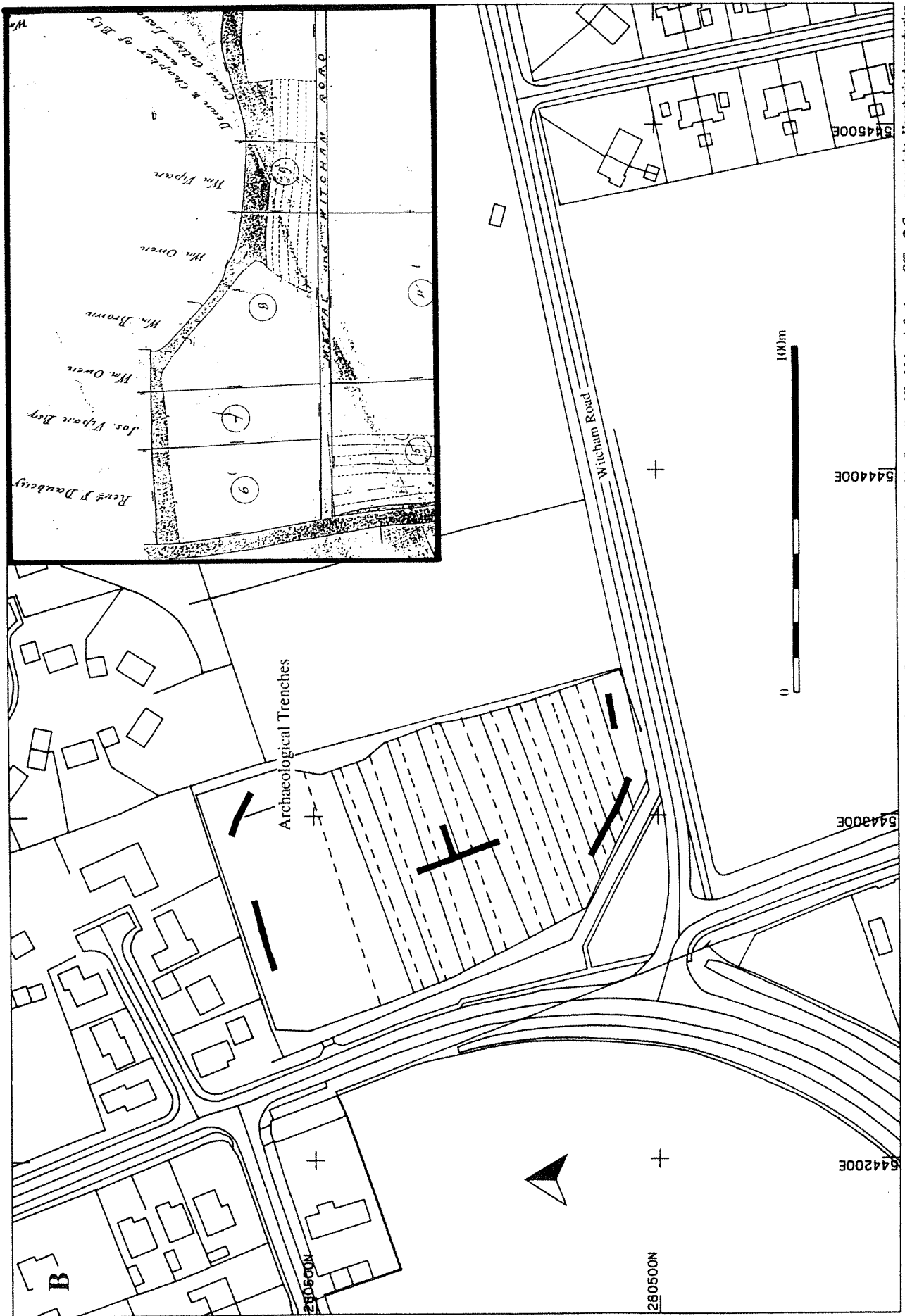
Figure 1 Site Location Plan

During the 13th century the church of St. Mary's was built on high ground and provided a focus for the development of the Medieval town. Small and very plain, the church was described by Cole as a 'very mean and poor building' (VCH 1967). It is today noteworthy as the only parochial church in the Isle without either a tower or spire. Today hidden by trees and bushes and approached only by a narrow path it conjures up vivid images of a fenland environment.

The medieval town was destroyed by a great fire in the 1860s (Hall, 1996), and rebuilt further to the south, leaving the medieval centre surviving as well preserved earthworks. As a result Mepal has few older red brick properties typical of fenland towns, and consists mainly of 19th century and later buildings.

The open fields of the parish were enclosed in 1854 under the general Act of 1845 (Figure 2; VCH 1967). The site however was enclosed by 1851 and belonged to the Rector.

The site does contain the remains of ridge and furrow, which are very faint disappearing on the northern half of the site. It is likely that the ridge and furrow is medieval as by the 19th century the site had been incorporated into the estate of the rectory.



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Figure 2 Trench Location And Earthwork Survey Of Ridge And Furrow. (insert shows extract from 1851 Pre-Inclosure map)

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 The Earthwork Survey (*Figure 2*)

A survey of the surviving ridge and furrow earthworks was completed using a Zeiss Rec Elta 15 EDM/Theodolite and AIC Pro-Surveyor software. Badly eroded, the earthworks were only discernible on the southern half of the site.

The trenching was located and planned also using a Zeiss Rec Elta 15 EDM/Theodolite and AIC Pro-Surveyor software.

4.2 Trenching

The trenching strategy for the evaluation was limited by an agreement between the developer and the development control office to five areas not targeted for any construction. Within these areas a series of five trenches (1-5) totalling 120m was located.

Trench 3 was positioned to cross the ridge and furrow at right-angles. The remaining trenches were located to cover the available area (*Figure 2*).

The trenches were opened using a wheeled JCB excavator with a toothless 1.5m wide ditching bucket under the close supervision of an archaeologist. All trenches were machined to a depth to clearly define any archaeological features. Areas of interest were cleaned by hand, and the profiles of each trench were recorded.

No archaeological features were recorded except for 17th century field drains.

All site records are held at the AFU headquarters at Fulbourn and stored under the site code MEPWR97. A copy of the report has been deposited with the County Archaeological Office, the developer and the site archive.

5 RESULTS

No archaeological features were recorded in any of the five trenches, other than the remains of ridge and furrow (Trenches 3 - 5), and 17th century field drains.

The ridge and furrow earthworks were badly eroded, so that they were barely discernible, with 0.10m between the top of the ridges and the base of the furrows.

The topsoil was found evenly spread across the site to a uniform depth of 0.20m. This was found to directly overlie the natural clay.

6 DISCUSSION

The evaluation, despite producing minimal results, has enhanced our knowledge of the development of Mepal. Although the trenching strategy was limited to areas not affected by the development it did provide a reasonable spatial cover of the area and it is unlikely that any major archaeological features were missed.

The original focus for the village was around the church, on high ground, visible now as earthworks. The site is located a quarter of a mile away which would have been marginal fen-edge land during the 13th century.

The date of the remains of ridge and furrow agriculture remains uncertain. Certainly, by 1217 the rectory was established with a large estate, including the area under evaluation. The poor state of preservation of the earthworks suggests that the land has been recently ploughed. Perhaps during the war when all available land was brought into cultivation.

The only archaeological features recorded on the site were distinctive 17th century field drains. It is possible that these were installed as a response to rising watertable resulting from climatic changes (Darby, 1974).

To conclude, although minimal, the work at Mepal has proved beneficial the site has always been on marginal land it is still high land, located in the fens; and with dry land at a premium any available space is likely to have been utilised. Therefore, any land on fen islands that are subject to development has the potential to contain archaeological remains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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