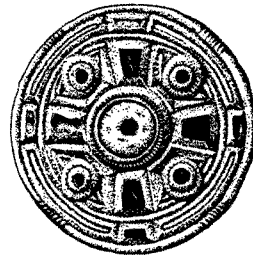


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Archaeological Field Unit

A Post-Medieval Dovecote at Oxcroft Farm, West Wrattling:  
An Archaeological Recording Brief

B Robinson and T Sutherland

1995

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No A120

*Commissioned by Roger Lynn Associates on behalf of Mr John Smith*

**A Post-Medieval Dovecote at Oxcroft Farm, West Wrattling:  
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## SUMMARY

*A recording brief was undertaken by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit staff at Oxcroft Farm, West Wrating (TL 5916 5132) during building works throughout the summer of 1995. The refurbishment of a Grade II Listed dovecote was observed, and trial trenches excavated in advance of landscaping. The dovecote proved to be a brick structure dating from the eighteenth century which had been converted to a dwelling during the nineteenth century. The 1995 refurbishment left the shell of the original dovecote intact but stripped away modern domestic extensions. A medieval ditch was located and sectioned.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LAND USE	1
3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	1
4 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY	3
5 EXCAVATION RESULTS	4
5.1 Trench 1	
5.2 Test Pit 1	
6 THE DOVECOTE	4
7 DISCUSSION	8
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
REFERENCES	9

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Location map and trench plan	2
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## LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1 The dovecote c. 1930	5
Plate 2 The dovecote from the west	5
Plate 3 The dovecote from the east	7
Plate 4 The dovecote from the north-east	7

# **A POST-MEDIEVAL DOVECOTE AT OXCROFT FARM, WEST WRATTING: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING BRIEF**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

During the late spring and summer of 1995 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook a recording brief at Oxcroft Farm, West Wrating (TL 5916 5132). The archaeological work was undertaken at the request of the County Archaeology Office (Development Control) in advance of the re-development of a Grade II Listed dovecote. Development works included the dovecote's refurbishment as a dwelling, the construction of a new wing (requiring substantial foundations) and some landscaping.

The archaeological recording was commissioned by Roger Lynn Associates on behalf of the site owner Mr J. Smith.

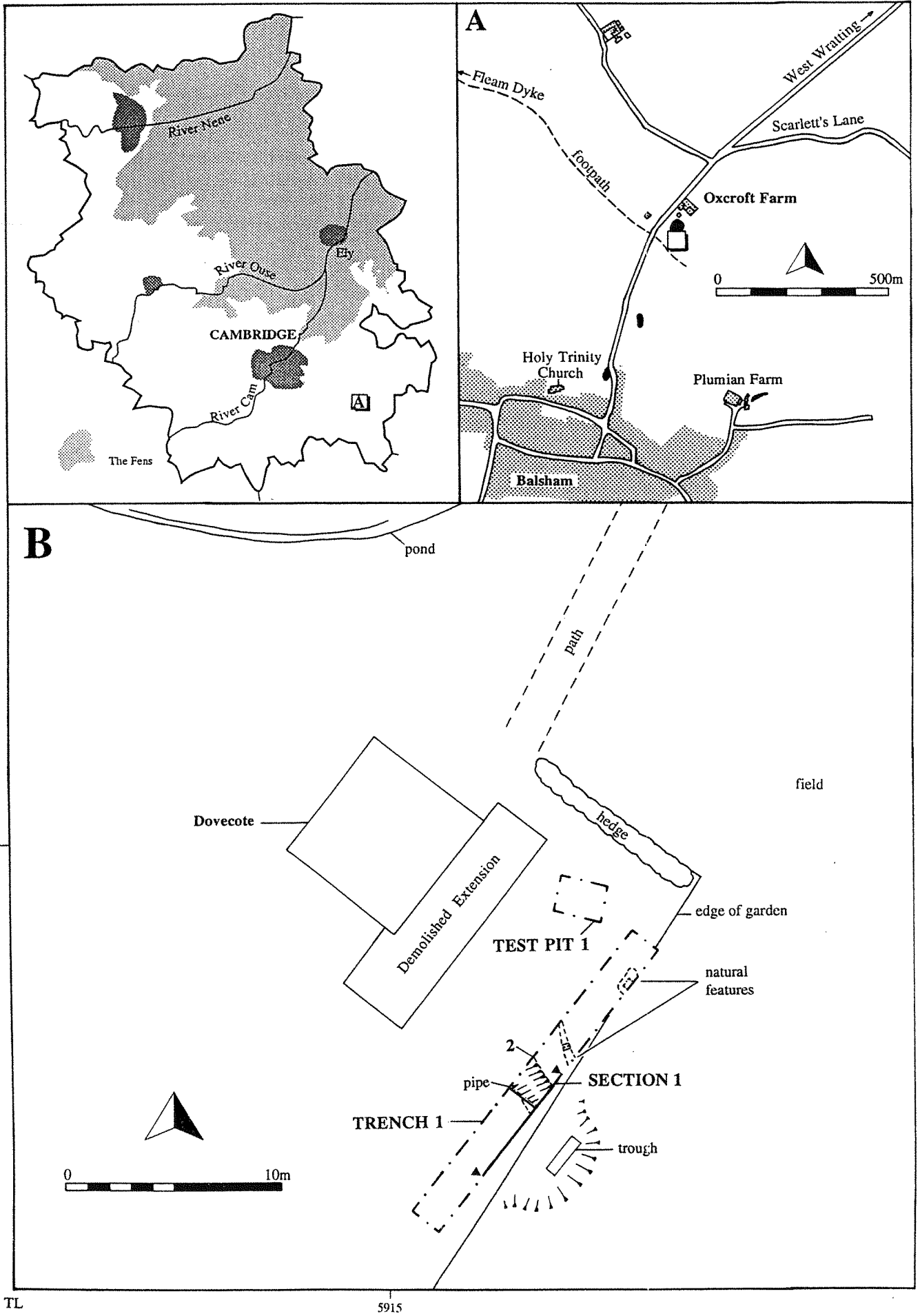
## **2 GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LAND USE**

Oxcroft Farm lies within the parish of West Wrating close to its boundary with Balsham parish. The farm falls within the south Cambridgeshire Chalky Boulder Clay zone at its interface with the underlying Upper Chalk (Institute of Geological Sciences, Sheet 205). The subject site lies at 97 m OD, within a slight valley, through which a small stream flows to fill a large pond within the farmyard. The land rises gently to the south-east and north-west on either side of the farm.

West Wrating Lane runs in a south-west to north-east direction, 60m to the west of the site, and meadows lie to the south and east. Domestic gardens lie adjacent to the west of the dovecote, and the pond lies to its north. Several agricultural buildings form the core of the farmyard beyond the pond to the north.

## **3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The current parish boundary, which continues the line of Fleam Dyke and runs alongside the subject site, may well date to the tenth century (Wright 1978, 191). Oxcroft manor, whose centre was at Oxcroft Farm (ibid, 194; SMR 06308), has a recorded pedigree dating to 1086. The Domesday survey noted that it was held by Count Alan of Brittany and comprised one and a half hides in Wrating and forty acres in Balsham. Its long medieval history is well recorded and it survived as a large unit until its dispersal amongst several owners during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (ibid).



**Figure 1** Location map and trench plan

The present 'Oxcroft House' (mid nineteenth century) lies north-west of the dovecote across West Wrating Lane. Cartographic evidence suggests that the earlier principal dwelling was situated closer to the surviving dovecote. An estate map dating to 1771 (Cambridgeshire Record Office 305/p1) shows a rectangular building on the site of the dovecote (either the square dovecote with an outshot or an earlier building) and nearby a single range rectangular building running perpendicular to the line of West Wrating Lane. The latter is probably the 'Oxcroft Hall' sold in 1773 (Wright 1978, 194). An inclosure map of 1813 (County Record Office p184/26/2) shows the square dovecote and the same (?) building in greater detail. Short wings, which project in opposite directions, may be seen at either end of the long range. By 1886 this building had disappeared (County Record Office 1886 1:2500 OS sheet LV.8).

The existing large pond and the feeding stream which runs between the house and dovecote are common to all the maps mentioned above. The pond may be associated with the recorded fourteenth century manorial fishery (Wright 1978, 191). The farmyard to the north consists of L-shaped configuration of buildings on the earliest maps and a three-sided courtyard by 1886.

In addition to Sites and Monuments Record entries for the site of Oxcroft Manor (SMR 6308) and the dovecote (SMR 10464), a scatter of probable medieval and post-medieval pottery is recorded in a field 500m to the east of the farmyard (SMR 10995). No archaeological investigations have been carried out previously in the immediate vicinity of the farmyard.

#### 4 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the recording brief were to sample excavate and record any archaeological features associated with the historic manor which were brought to light during groundworks and refurbishment. A specific aim was to investigate the suggestion raised in previous surveys (Davies 1987, 80; SMR 10464) that the dovecote incorporated an earlier (perhaps late medieval) timber-framed building.

A trial trench and test pit were dug under archaeological supervision within an area of proposed ground level reduction, on which the foundations for the new wing would be dug. Trench 1 (Figure 1) was excavated with a mechanical excavator using a 1.8m wide toothless ditching bucket, to an average depth of 0.3m. The topsoil was removed and the trench excavated in 0.1m spits until either archaeological features became evident or the natural geological deposits were revealed. Two metres from the south-east wall of the dovecote a 2m by 1.8m test pit was machine excavated in the same way (Figure 1).

The dovecote was inspected internally and externally for evidence of structural alteration both before and during refurbishment. Measured sketches (1:50) were completed detailing this evidence and photographs were taken of relevant features.

## 5 EXCAVATION RESULTS

### 5.1 Trench 1

A 2m wide, 0.6m deep ditch ( 2 ) with a U-shaped profile lay below the topsoil (of up to 0.4m depth) in the centre of the trench. It ran in a north-west to south-east direction and was filled with a very hard, dark yellowish-brown homogeneous silty clay which had very few coarse inclusions.

A small (< 1.5cm ) sherd of an orange sandy ware pottery, belonging to a thin walled medieval vessel, probably pre-dating the 15th century (Spoerry pers. comm.) was recovered from the approximate mid point of the ditch profile. A sherd of chalk tempered, dark brown coarse ware pottery was recovered from near the base of the ditch. Although very difficult to date precisely, this sherd certainly pre-dates the period of the Norman Conquest, and is probably either Middle or Late Saxon (Spoerry pers. comm.).

The limited view of the ditch and the small amount of pottery recovered from it do not allow a detailed interpretation. The homogeneity of the fill (suggesting post-depositional re-working) prevents us from attributing too much to the relative position and dates of the pot sherds. Nevertheless, the absence of later material suggests that the ditch is medieval.

A 2cm diameter galvanised steel water pipe (3), which ran from the dovecote in the north-west to a galvanised steel cattle trough 2 metres to the south-east, had been cut into the west edge of ditch 2. The cattle trough lay in a small depression which had been cut into the hillside, the spoil from which had been placed down-hill to form a small platform. The structure of this platform could be seen in the south-eastern section of Trench 1.

No other archaeological features were seen in the trench, although two features which were probably formed by root activity were noted.

### 5.2 Test Pit 1

No archaeological remains were discovered in the test pit, although a greater depth of topsoil and colluvial overburden sealed the natural geology than was seen in Trench 1.

## 6 THE DOVECOTE

The demolition of a modern wing, and on-going alteration of the dovecote, allowed glimpses of parts of the original structure which had been hitherto hidden. These revealed that the shell of the dovecote had survived later alteration relatively intact. The original dovecote was a near square structure (6.6m long on its north-west and south-east faces and 6m long on its north-east and south-west faces), which stood 4.5m high from ground floor to eaves (7.5m from floor to the apex of the roof). The building was constructed with eighteenth century hard-fired red bricks, largely in Flemish bond. This brick structure did not enclose a timber frame as had been previously suggested (Davies 1987, 80; SMR 10464). Brick foundations run to twelve courses below current floor level.



*Plate 1* The dovecote c. 1930 (photo. taken by Cambridge Antiquarian Society, glass plate negative held at Cambridgeshire Collection).



*Plate 2* The dovecote from the west (showing scar of porch and new door position), 1995



The structure is crowned by a plain tiled double gablet roof (or saddle backed roof); the gablets facing the north-east and south-west. Two large transverse timber beams support the roof. These run from the north-west to the south-east and rest on top of the brick walls. They appear to be secured to the walls with iron brackets. Both beams support posts (two and three, respectively) of which the outer pairs are slightly splayed outwards to the point where the gablets are formed in the roof. The beams have several notches cut from their vertical faces which may signify the presence of earlier partitions within the first floor area. Alternatively, they might indicate that the timbers originally belonged to a different structure.

Short diagonal braces were observed at the four corners of the walls at eaves level. These may be original features, for example to allow ladders to rest at the corner of the building. No features such as flight holes, louvres, nest boxes, flight platforms, or loft, however, were noted during this current refurbishment.

The main entrance has been moved from an earlier location in the centre of the north-west elevation to one side in order that two windows could be inserted on the ground floor. This central position was probably the site of the original entrance to the dovecote, and was later adopted for the site of the front door and porch during its conversion to a dwelling (see below). A door-sized patch of brickwork was also noted in the west corner of the south-west wall on the ground floor; this would be a curious position for an opening and therefore probably simply represents a repair.

A photograph dated 1930 (Cambridge Antiquarian Society Village Survey 1914-30, Balsham 61, Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library, reproduced as Plate 1 above) shows the doorway in the centre of the north-west elevation and no ground floor windows on this elevation. This photograph also clearly shows the south-west elevation, and reveals that the present ground floor window is larger than the former insertion. The windows on the upper floors, on both elevations, remain in the same position. The photograph also shows a wooden out-shot on the south-eastern elevation where a later brick extension stood until demolished on the 16th May, 1995.

The north-eastern elevation has three inserted windows, one in the centre of the first floor and two on the ground floor. These three windows appear to be contemporary with each other and with the window in the upper floor on the south-western elevation. Although all four windows have inserted galvanised steel frames they also have timber lintels as opposed to the brick lintels of the other windows and so may represent the positions of earlier insertions.

The south-eastern elevation has seen the most drastic additions to the building. A chimney stack was constructed with very few, if any, ties to the main structure. The stack was built of very soft sandy brick and has subsided slightly on its south-west side. It is probably as a result of this that the top nine courses have been rebuilt. Bees have constructed several nests in the brickwork thereby weakening the stack still further. The foundation to the stack runs to six courses below current floor level.



*Plate 3* The dovecote from the east (showing extension demolished 1995)



*Plate 4* The dovecote from the north-east (showing inserted windows and new door position)

Some time after 1930, this elevation had an extension added to it, and judging by two breaks in the bonds on its south-east face, this may have been in two phases. An initial phase appears to have been a two storey extension to the dovecote. Later, two extensions were added to each side of this addition; one on the south-western end with a ridged roof and one on the north-eastern side which had a lean to or single sloping roof adjoining that of the initial extension.

The internal divisions within the dovecote also reflect the conversion of the structure into a dwelling and its continued alteration. One wall has been inserted on the ground floor to divide it into a hall and a living room. Stairs have been inserted into the hall against the north-eastern wall, partially blocking the window. A second fire place has been added in the angle of the eastern corner of the living room, partially blocking an earlier fireplace. Doorways have been knocked through the south-eastern wall in the southern and northern corners to link the living room and hall with the later extension. Running across the centre of the ceiling in the living room in a north-east to south-west direction is a large supporting beam for the first floor. It has a chamfer on its lower face, which stops near the wall on its northern end. It was probably inserted when the structure was first converted to a dwelling. On the first floor, a wall which runs north-west to south-east has been inserted to form two rooms. The northern room is slightly smaller as an area on the landing has been blocked off to form a cupboard. A false ceiling which is supported by very modern sawn timbers has been inserted into the roof space.

## 7 DISCUSSION

The flesh and eggs of pigeons were important variations within the medieval and post-medieval diet. The presence of such foodstuffs close to hand and in great quantities provided welcome security at a time when the supply of food was far more susceptible to the vagaries of nature and politics than it is today.

The keeping of pigeons, and the erection of structures to house them was, however, the prerogative of the rich, the powerful, and the church during medieval times. Oxcroft manor may have gained this privilege, but the structure which still survives at Oxcroft Farm is later in date. Few conventional dovecotes were built after 1762, when an Act of Parliament permitted a greater range of individuals to erect dovecotes (even tenants with landlord's permission). After this time, new dovecotes were typically incorporated into other structures (Brunskill 1987, 85) such as the gables of barns.

The architectural style indicates that this dovecote was built during the eighteenth century, probably before the Act, when the pigeon trade still flourished, and such purpose-built stand-alone structures were still common. Its near-square plan conforms to the dominant form of such buildings within south Cambridgeshire (Davies 1987, 67).

Examination of the wall thickness, where openings have been driven through, and at one corner of the building, has shown that the brick dovecote does not encase an earlier timber-frame structure.

The dovecote was believed to have been converted to a domestic dwelling during the mid-nineteenth century (John Smith pers. comm.), a date corroborated by the brickwork of the stack and earliest inserted windows. At West Wratting the population grew from 541 to 912 during the first four decades of the nineteenth century (in 1728 it had been c 250; Wright 1978, 191). Such rural population expansion often resulted in the conversion of dovecotes for labourers cottages.

The building seems to have remained generally unaltered until the second half of the twentieth century when the original doorway was blocked and an alternative one was cut through the northern part of the north-west wall. Several windows were inserted or altered and a large extension added to the south-east elevation.

The current phase of development left the shell of the original dovecote structure intact, although few original internal features have evidently survived earlier alterations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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