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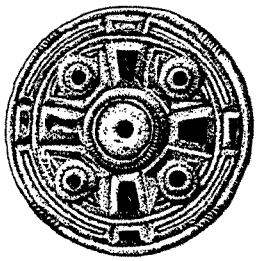

Archaeological Field Unit

Palaeochannels at Land off Park Road, Brampton: An Archaeological Evaluation

Twigs Way

1997

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A121

Commissioned By Yelcon Homes

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SUMMARY

Archaeological desk based research and fieldwork was carried out by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council at Land off Park Road, Brampton (TL 201709), during July 1997. Archaeological work was undertaken on behalf of Yelcon Homes. The proposed development involves the construction of residential dwellings, garages, services, access and landscaping.

Seven trenches of 1.6m wide, and varying in length between 12m and 50m were machine excavated with a total trench length of 212m. Trenches were positioned so as to sample the area as thoroughly as possible and with reference to the previous desktop assessment. The basic stratigraphic sequence encountered in all trenches consisted of terrace gravels overlain by varying depths of alluvial clays and silts, which was in turn overlain by topsoil with sorting indicative of pastureland. Alluvial material was considerably deeper in the south of the field (Trench V), and at the west end of Trench II. In both of these areas considerable depths of silts and peat were recorded underneath alluvial material, indicating the presence of palaeochannels. Within one of these palaeochannels possible worked wood was recovered. The alluvial material would appear to date primarily to the medieval and early modern period when the area formed part of a common marsh or wet meadowland resource.

No archaeological features were present other than the palaeochannels, and artefactual material recovered was limited to two flint flakes. Given the results of this extensive trenching strategy it is unlikely that any other archaeological remains are present within the application area.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Palaeochannels at Land off Park Road, Brampton: An Archaeological Evaluation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Archaeological desk based research and fieldwork was carried out by the Archaeological Field Unit, Cambridgeshire County Council, at Land off Park Road, Brampton, (TL201709) during July 1997. The archaeological work was undertaken on behalf of Yelcon Homes in advance of residential development. The subject site covers one hectare and is under pasture.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site is located immediately to the south of Brampton, and is bounded to the north and the south by two branches of a small brook, which joins the river Ouse to the east. The area is known as 'West End', whilst that to the immediate east is 'Brook End'.

Geology consists of terraced river gravels lying on an Oxford Clay base, overlain by varying depths of alluvial clays and silts. This alluvium is the result of seasonal freshwater flooding and standing water conditions whilst evidence of oxidisation suggests prolonged periods of dryng out, again probably seasonal. The underlying gravels rise slightly in the centre of the field, and little alluvial material is found in that area. In addition, a marked linear depression can be seen running northeast-southwest across the field, aligned parallel with the present field boundaries, running from a marked 'dog leg' or change in direction of the brook along the field boundary at the north end. This depression becomes less marked in the southern part of the field. Previous investigations in the area have recorded an intermittent poorly developed buried soil sealed by the alluvium (French, in Welsh 1993).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Brampton and its surroundings are an area rich in archaeological activity. Aerial photographic work has recovered evidence for a group of Neolithic monuments including henges, a cursus and a long mortuary enclosure, in addition to Bronze Age burial monuments and Iron Age/Romano-British field systems. Parts of this landscape have been scheduled as an ancient monument (SAM 121).

Excavations within the area have recovered material relating to prehistoric ritual activity and to Iron Age settlement as well as a Romano-British farmstead. In 1966 a Bronze Age triple ring ditch was investigated south of the Thrapston Road and a cinerary urn and 'maritime' beaker fragments of the earliest Bronze Age period were recovered from the ditches by White, who also found part of an enclosed Iron Age settlement (White 1969). Subsequent work in the same area uncovered more of the Iron Age settlement and Neolithic ditch systems (Malim and Mitchell 1993). In 1990 and 1991 an investigation of a portion of the scheduled monument (SAM 121) north of the Thrapston Road and south of Alconbury Brook found evidence for a Neolithic mortuary enclosure situated at the end of a cursus (Malim 1990).

Figure 1 Location Map and Trench Plan

More recent investigations north of the Alconbury Brook at Huntingdon Racecourse have revealed evidence of prehistoric land clearance, ritual monuments and settlement adjacent to an ancient stream channel (Macaulay forthcoming). This settlement, dating to the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age was sealed by alluvial deposits, as were all of those discussed above.

In 1997 excavations at Hinchingbrook Country Park revealed evidence of an extensive Middle Iron Age settlement and elements of an additional Late Iron Age settlement with some residual flint work (Hinman forthcoming). To the east of the scheduled monument Romano-British remains were found by Ben Robinson in 1991, consisting of timber buildings and agricultural processing areas.

In September 1993 the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit undertook an archaeological evaluation in the field immediately to the east of the subject site, again on behalf of Yelcon Homes. This resulted in the recovery of a Bronze Age Beaker vessel and associated cremation within a pit sealed by alluvium. The pottery was identified as including Clarke's style S2 (Developed Southern Beaker), dating to the first half of the second millienium (uncalibrated) (Last, pers. comm). The investigation also revealed many natural features, including an ancient stream channel lying on the south-eastern edge of the site.

Historical research based on primary and secondary documentation and cartographic sources within the Huntingdon Record Office gives a history of the site back to the middle of the sixteenth century.

At present the evaluation area comprises a single field of pasture situated on the periphery of the medieval village. The limits of the site itself are formed by two drainage ditches or small brooks to the north and south. The Victoria County History (VCH 1936, 12-19) notes that this western part of the parish was known as 'Brook End' or 'West End', whilst the junction of the two brooks to the east of the field was known as 'Bridge End'. Both the 1926 and 1887 OS Maps of the area (OS XXI.4. 1:2,500) show the field undivided, as at present, with the line of the brooks to the south and the north clearly shown. The subject site is marked as Field 157 with an area of 3.44 acres.

The tithes for the parish were largely extinguished at enclosure and thus the Tithe Map for the parish gives no relevant information (Tithe Map and Apportionment 1839, HRO 2196/3).

Enclosure of the parish took place in 1773 and both the Enclosure Map and an associated Survey (although not the full Award) survive, as well as the pre-enclosure draft map, the latter giving information on the pre-enclosure landscape (HRO LR3/309; HRO MR 10/2; HRO SF 452). The Enclosure records show the field subdivided with a boundary running north south, meeting the northern edge of the field approximately at the pronounced kink shown on the present day maps. The two fields are numbered 144 and 143.

Enclosure 144	Church Land	0a 2r 04p
Enclosure 143	Town Land	2a 3r 20p

On the draft or pre-enclosure map (HRO SF 452) there is a substantial change in the layout of the area. The entire area between the brooks is indicated as one single 'field", labelled 'March Common' (although the lettering is in very poor condition). There is some other (very faint) lettering on the area but this appears to relate to the proposals for enclosure. If this is compared with the enclosure 'survey' it can be seen that all of this area was subject to fresh copyhold allotment at enclosure (enclosures 133 and 140-144 inclusive), tending to confirm its communal holding prior to this.

'March Common' is not referred to in either the VCH or the EPNS volume dealing with parishes in Huntingdonshire (Mawer and Stenton 1926). However, a Glebe Terrier of 1712-1736 (HRO Arch. File 228) refers to an area of land within 'Fullwell Field' 'in ye furlong called 'New Breach' abutting upon a piece of common called 'ye Marsh'. Referring back to the draft enclosure documents allows us to locate Fullwell Field to the south of the then 'March Common'.

A manorial survey and rental of 1561-63 (HRO DDM 56/6) again makes reference to a furlong called 'March Ditch' located in Fullwell Field near a furlong called 'New Brack' and its common nature is confirmed by reference to customary rights relating to wood and willows in the area.

It can therefore be suggested that the subject site was held as common marsh/wood pasture from at least the mid-sixteenth century until the late eighteenth century, at which time it was subdivided and allotted to the church and the parish, remaining under pasture. There is no indication of divisions within the field prior to this period - although internal divisions not of relevance to changes in land holding may not be recorded within rentals and surveys.

Documentary material prior to the mid-sixteenth century is only held locally in the form of intermittent manorial court rolls (archived at Huntingdon Record Office, necessitating transcription) and within state records held in the Public Record Office and British Museum. Consultation of these documents is inappropriate for an evaluation of this type.

4 METHODOLOGY AND CONSTRAINTS

Seven trenches were machine excavated across the site using a 1.6m wide toothless ditching bucket. The trenches (Figure 1) were positioned to sample the area as thoroughly as possible but, at the request of the clients, avoiding the proposed foundation trenches. Examination of existing archaeological and historical records indicated a potential for preservation of early prehistoric remains and possible buried soils beneath the alluvium. Whilst medieval activity was expected to be confined to relict boundaries or agricultural earthworks. The trenches were thus positioned to sample across the range of prehistoric topography. Immediately after machining Trench V started to infill with water and after further machining in the area caused the sides of the trench to collapse, the trench was backfilled after very brief recording. Excavation was also severely hampered at the west end of Trench II by fast inflowing water and, although a pump was employed to try and empty the trench of water, working conditions were not ideal.

5 RESULTS

In each trench the topsoil and underlying alluvium was removed using the mechanical excavator.

Trench I 50m long. Topsoil was 0.12-0.15 m thick. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown silty clay alluvium of 0.42m thick which graded into a layer of brownish yellow clay alluvium with an average depth of 0.45m. 10m from the north end of the trench a small area of brown organic silts was recorded underlying the alluvium within an irregular small depression in the gravels. This organic material

contained a few fragments of charcoal and lithic material. The material appeared to have been washed in from elsewhere and deposited within the depression.

Trench II 30m long. Topsoil was 0.12 - 0.15m thick with evidence for gravel-sorting at the east end of the trench. At the west end, in the area overlying the palaeochannel, there appeared to have been some disturbance of the topsoil. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown silty clay alluvium of 0.25m thick which graded into a layer of brownish yellow clay alluvium. This layer was some 0.25m deep at the east end but at the west end attained a maximum depth of 0.50m, where it overlay a palaeochannel. This channel contained a series of grey silts and peaty deposits with a total maximum depth of 0.70m overlying a bed of clean white rolled gravels with a maximum depth of 0.20m, indicative of flowing water. Only the eastern side of the channel was investigated, as the western side was within the area of proposed foundations. However, the width of the channel may be estimated by the profile of the underlying gravels and the fact the channel did not appear in Trench I, lying 13 m to the west.
Maximum width is estimated at 12m. A marked break of slope on the western edge indicated a relict 'terrace' presumably marking a change in meander during the life of the channel. Two possible stakes were recovered from this channel, one upright and one horizontal. During excavation these were thought to show signs of working, however, further investigation and examination during post excavation, concluded that natural processes may account for details noted during excavation.

Trench III 30m long. Topsoil was 0.15m thick and displayed gravel sorting typical of pastureland. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown silty clay alluvium of 0.30m thick which graded into a layer of brownish yellow clay alluvium of 0.25m thick.

Trench IV 25m long. Topsoil was 0.12m deep. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown silty clay alluvium of 0.20m thick which graded into a layer of brownish yellow clay alluvium of 0.50m, several sand lenses were noted towards the base of this deposit.

Trench V 25 m long. This trench was located parallel to, and within 2m of, the present day stream forming the southern boundary of the site. It was deliberately placed to investigate the possibility of prehistoric activity along this possibly ancient stream line, such as that encountered at Huntingdon Racecourse (Macaulay forthcoming). Although evidence for the former course of a substantial stream channel was recovered, the rapid inflow of water, combined with the substantial depth of alluvium and unstable sides, made it too dangerous to record this trench in any detail. The topsoil over the area appeared very disturbed, possibly resulting from dredging of the present stream and maximum depth of alluvium at the west end of the trench was up to 0.90m. The sequence of peats and silts appeared very similar to that encountered in Trench II, with a maximum channel depth of 1.10m, although only a very small part was excavated. The channel deposits appeared to run along the entire length of the trench.

Trench VI 40m long. The stratigraphy in this trench was much affected by the construction site 'store' that had been placed in this area during construction of Phase 1 of the residential development. Topsoil was missing over much of the area, and the remaining alluvial horizons had a greenish colour and distinctive smell suggestive of compaction and localised anaerobic conditions. Remaining alluvial material was only some 0.25m in depth.

Trench VII 12m long. This small additional trench was positioned to provide information on the course of the palaeochannel investigated in Trench II; no channel material was recovered indicating either that the channel does not adhere to a north south alignment or that it does not extend that far south. Topsoil was 0.12-0.15m deep. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown silty clay alluvium of 0.30m thick which graded into a layer of brownish yellow clay alluvium of 0.70m thick.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Archaeological evaluation provided no evidence for settlement activity within the area at any period, whilst documentary research indicated that the area has been used as pasture/wet meadow and 'marsh' resource since at least the mid-sixteenth century. The only evidence for prehistoric activity consisted of a very small assemblage of undiagnostic flint flakes within a probable in-wash deposit sealed by alluvium.

Unfortunately no clear date can be given for the palaeochannels encountered, partially due to the problems encountered in excavation of Trench V in particular. The possibly worked wood fragments recovered from Trench II were undiagnostic and, although samples of peat and wood were taken for dating purposes, the inconclusive nature of the possible working on the wood fragments was insufficient to justify further investigation of the channel. Given the dating of palaeochannels to the north (at Huntingdon Racecourse) as Bronze Age, and to the east (in the adjoining field) as Bronze Age to pre-Medieval, a prehistoric date might be expected. These channels thus form part of the prehistoric landscape of the Brampton area.

The alluvium encountered over all of the subject area is the same as that identified in the adjoining field by previous archaeological investigations, and is the result of seasonal flooding and subsequent drying out as might be expected from an area of common marsh or wet meadowland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Yelcon Homes who commissioned the work; the Development Control Office of Cambridgeshire County Council who prepared the brief; Malcolm Reed the site agent for Yelcon Homes for help and patience throughout the fieldwork; Tim Malim for editing the report; Will Wall for help and advice in connection with the waterlogged wood remains; Duncan Schlee and Steve Kemp for help and guidance with various environmental aspects of the site, and Chris Montague who provided invaluable assistance on-site under often difficult conditions.

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