

Archaeological Field Unit

## **St. Andrew's Church, Soham: An Archaeological Desktop Study**

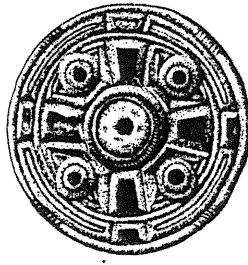
A Hatton

1998

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A136

*Commissioned by the Vicar and Parish Council of St Andrew's Church, Soham*



Archaeological Field Unit

# **St Andrew's Church, Soham: An Archaeological Desktop Study**

A Hatton

1998

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A136

*Commissioned by the Vicar and Parish Council of St Andrew's Church, Soham*

## **Summary**

*This desk top study aims to determine the archaeological potential of an area of land at St Andrew's Church, Soham, in advance of the proposed construction of offices, meeting rooms, kitchen and WC's. The study area lies immediately to the south of the Church, within the confines of the present graveyard (TL 5930 7317) and covers an area of 166 square metres.*

*Although the Soham area is rich in finds of many periods, the main interest around St Andrew's church is the location of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery which is thought to lie within or near the churchyard, and a 7th century minster and monastery, reputedly founded at Soham by St Felix. Although plausible finds of Early Saxon grave goods have been made in the churchyard, the exact location of this cemetery is unknown. Similarly, whilst tradition would place the location of Felix's early foundation near to or beneath the present 12th century church, its exact location remains unknown. A single sherd of late Saxon pottery recovered from a grave fill in the churchyard may be evidence of later occupation of the site.*

*The area around St Andrew's church has great archaeological potential. Although the digging of graves over the years may have destroyed or disturbed earlier remains, archaeological evidence relating to the Saxon cemetery or the early monastery may still be preserved within the churchyard. Any development here could have an impact on important archaeological remains, and should be preceded by archaeological evaluation, in order to determine the extent, character, date and state of preservation of remains within the specific development area.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Topography and Geology	1
3	Archaeological and Historical Background	1
	Prehistoric	1
	Roman	2
	Saxon and Medieval	2
4	Archaeology and History of the Study Area	3
5	Potential for Survival of Archaeological Deposits	4
6	Potential Impact of the Proposed Development	4
7	Conclusion	5
	Acknowledgements	5
	References	6

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Site location plan showing SMR data	7
Figure 2	location plan showing St Andrew's Church and site of proposed building works	8

**Saint Andrew's Church, Soham:  
An Archaeological Desktop Study  
(TL 59307317)**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This desktop study was commissioned by the vicar and Parish of St. Andrew, Soham in response to a brief prepared by Simon Kaner of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Office (Development Control). The study was carried out according to a specification drawn up by Judith Roberts of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit. The object of the desktop study was to determine the archaeological potential of the site before the construction of offices, meeting rooms, kitchen and WC's within the graveyard of St Andrew's Church, Soham.

The study centres on the area where the proposed new building is to be constructed, immediately adjacent to the existing south porch of St. Andrew's Church, within the confines of the present graveyard (TL 5930 7317). The proposed new building covers an area of 166 square metres. The archaeology of a wider area, however, including the graveyard as a whole and surrounding parts of the village of Soham, is also considered.

Sources consulted include the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record and various academic publications which centre on the subject site and the surrounding area.

## **2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY**

The village of Soham lies near the southern Fen-edge some 8km south-east of Ely, on the A142 between Ely and Newmarket. It is located on an irregular peninsular of chalk marl and river gravels, jutting into the fen between the Isleham embayment and the former Soham Mere (British Geological Survey, Sheet 188).

## **3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Prehistoric**

The fen-edge around Soham and the Snail Valley has a long history of human occupation, which is mainly, but not exclusively, located within the vicinity of Soham Mere.

Evidence of Mesolithic and Neolithic activity consists of a remarkable complex of lithic sites recorded to the north-west of Broad Hill, Soham. All the sites produced a large quantity of worked flints including axes, knives, and scrapers, all of which were found to be in very good condition (Hall 1996).

Eye Hill Farm yielded a large amount of worked flint during field-walking, most of which was of Bronze Age date. The flint assemblage consisted of barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, scrapers, and awls, as well as burnt worked material which may suggest settlement in the immediate vicinity (Evans, 1993).

The evidence for later prehistoric (Iron Age) activity in and around Soham is rare. One site has been located on the hilltop at Henney, on the periphery of the sites identified at Stuntney and Ely where Iron Age remains are fairly common (Hall 1996).

### **Roman**

Three Roman period sites have been investigated within the vicinity of Soham with site 2 (Hall 1996) probably being a villa, based on artefactual evidence (red tiles visible on the surface) and also the cropmark evidence. Evidence for a villa at site 2 has been increased by the discovery, in 1973, of a hypocaust and flue together with pottery sherds during the excavation of a rubbish pit (M. Young pers comm). The probable date for construction and use of the villa complex has been suggested through 3rd and 4th century coins recovered from the site. At Site 3 (Hall 1996), a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 47), occupational debris has been recovered. This includes pieces of stone from hearths and yards, domestic animal bone, fragments of quern and sherds of pottery from the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Site 5 lies rather isolated at Broad Hill and is relatively small. This site could be a small farmstead, or industrial complex if one takes into consideration the large quantity of coins and iron work recovered from the immediate area (Hall 1996).

### **Saxon and Medieval**

Saxon evidence within Soham revolved initially around the discovery of three cemeteries. One was discovered in the modern cemetery (TL 5998 7239) where artefacts recovered included six brooches, several beads and spearheads (Fox 1923) and in subsequent years further brooches, weapons and pottery have been discovered (Meaney 1964). Early Saxon grave goods have also been found in the parish graveyard, where a cruciform brooch was recovered (c. AD550) (SMR 07123a). During the excavation of four pits in preparation for the Christmas lights one body sherd of pottery dated to the late Saxon period was recovered from the south-east corner of the graveyard. This came apparently from a grave fill (SMR 11386). Another cemetery located at the Soham/Fordham waterworks was excavated during the 1930s (Lethbridge 1933, Meaney 1964). A total of 23 inhumations and two cremations were identified. All the burials were laid out in a circle which suggests that they were positioned around a barrow. Artefactual material from two of the graves suggests they

could be dated to the mid 6th to 7th century. The evidence for Anglo-Saxon burials in Soham was increased with the discovery of human and animal bone in the rear garden of a house on White Hart Lane. The human bones recovered from the garden were not from a single individual, suggesting that the remains were dragged from shallow graves within the cemetery of Felix's Anglo-Saxon monastery (Robinson 1995) (SMR 11789).

The early historical significance of Soham is attested mainly by the foundation in the 7th century AD of a monastery. This was presumably situated where the medieval church now stands (and therefore on or by the putative earlier cemetery), founded by St. Felix, first bishop of the East Angles, who was also buried here (Salzman 1948). The foundation of a minster and monastery here would have been a product of royal patronage and linked to the Middle Saxon royal estate centre at Exning. The monastery was subsequently destroyed, along with many other religious foundations in the area, during the late 9th century Danish invasions of East Anglia. Unlike nearby Ely it was not re-established during the 10th century (Salzman 1948). The manor of Soham, in fact, was among those given to the abbey at Ely, shortly after the latter's refoundation, by ealdorman Brithnoth (Conybeare 1887).

There is evidence for settlement just to the north of the present town centre from the late Saxon period onwards. At 9-13 Pratt Street, archaeological evaluation has revealed shallow gullies and a large pit containing 11th and 12th century sherds of Thetford ware pottery (SMR 11932). A posthole containing an organic-tempered sherd suggests there may have been slightly earlier occupation in the vicinity (Hatton and Last 1997). Evaluation trenches extended to within 20m of the rear of 38 Station Road where investigations produced evidence from ditches of Late Saxon or Saxo-Norman remains dating from the 10th to 12th centuries (Heawood 1997) (SMR 11985). An archaeological evaluation has also been conducted at Soham County Infant's School. A number of ditches were revealed containing an assemblage of pottery sherds of the 10th to 13th centuries, predominantly St. Neots type ware and Thetford type ware (Bray 1991). These remains correspond with a major phase of development in Soham, the 12th century parish church bearing witness to the prosperity of the village at this time (Hatton and Last 1997).

#### 4 ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY OF THE STUDY AREA

##### **Known Archaeological Remains**

The evidence for a Saxon cemetery within the graveyard of St Andrew's Church has been referred to above. The exact location of this, however, remains unknown. Likewise, the exact location of the 7th century monastery has also never been established with certainty, although it has often been presumed to lie beneath or near to the present church. The single sherd of late Saxon pottery recovered from excavations in the south-east corner of the graveyard may suggest that there was occupation of this date within or adjacent to the site, but the evidence is slight. In fact the only significant ancient artefact within the graveyard whose location is certain is the church itself.

St. Andrew's Church is cruciform in plan and dates the late 12th century. The interior exhibits Late Norman and Early English decoration. The chancel is 13th century with decorative additions dated to the early 14th century. The West Tower was constructed using the perpendicular style at about 1502. The clerestory is an addition of the Late Middle Ages (SMR 07123). The church sits surrounded by a graveyard which, as noted above, may have its origins as far back as the 7th century AD (SMR 07123a).

### **Historic Maps**

Historic maps held at the Cambridgeshire County Record Office were consulted as part of this study. The only significant map held is the 1886 edition of the Ordnance Survey (sheet XXX:16). Unsurprisingly, this shows the site with its present boundaries and reveals nothing new in terms of the location of ancient remains or possible sources of truncation of archaeological deposits. accordingly, it has not been reproduced in this study.

## **5 POTENTIAL FOR SURVIVAL OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS**

The site has been in continuous use as a burial ground for several hundred years at least, so there is every possibility that the digging of graves and the construction of tombs or vaults has disturbed or destroyed any evidence of the site's earlier uses. Nevertheless, it is possible that human remains associated with the Early Anglo-Saxon period may have survived on the subject site. There is also a possibility that ancient artefacts could be found, since this has happened before during earlier work within the graveyard (see above). There is a significant likelihood, however, that any human remains encountered within the graveyard will be of a more recent date. Furthermore, it is almost certain that disarticulated human remains in a greater or lesser quantity will be uncovered during the work. These are unlikely to be dateable and so have little archaeological significance.

## **6 POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT**

The proposed extension to St. Andrew's Church consists of a Parish Room and associated offices, kitchen, etc., located within a single building with a total ground area of 166 square metres. The location of the building is adjacent to the existing south porch of the church and is shown on figure 2. Information from the architects (Thomas Nash) suggests that the proposed building is to be built on a concrete raft foundation with a depth of 750mm. This means that the archaeological impact will occur over the whole footprint of the building, but at a restricted depth. It is possible that, owing to the site's continuous use as a burial ground, no intact archaeological remains survive here at this depth. Any remains within the footprint that are not deeply buried, however, could potentially be destroyed. It has not been possible to confirm the presence or absence of intact remains at any given depth within the development area. Thus



the precise archaeological impact of the development cannot be assessed by this desk-based study.

There is a potential additional impact from the service runs that will necessarily accompany the construction of the new building. The precise route these will follow has not yet been determined. It is suggested by the architect, however, that they may run beneath an existing path through the churchyard and out to the street where the main sewer and other services are found. The slope of the churchyard means that these services are unlikely to be buried deeply, and will probably be dug no deeper than 650 - 750mm. The statements made above about the impact of the building itself apply equally to the services.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the general archaeological context of the area and has highlighted the probable existence of archaeological remains surviving within St Andrew's churchyard. It has, however, not been possible by desk-based methods alone to give a definitive statement on the archaeological potential of, or the likelihood of survival of archaeological deposits within, the precise area of the development.

Nevertheless, the area clearly has great archaeological potential. Although much of the archaeological work carried out around the village of Soham has uncovered prehistoric and Roman material the centre of Soham has produced Saxon and medieval material. Indeed it is of particular interest that the foundation work to be undertaken in St. Andrew's graveyard may provide an answer to the question: was the location of the present parish church once the position of the minster/monastery established by Felix or was it the location of an Early Saxon/Saxo-Norman cemetery.

In view of the potential importance of remains that may exist within the area of the proposed new building, and the likely impact that the building may have on them, this development should be preceded by intrusive archaeological evaluation in order to determine the extent, character, date and state of preservation of remains within the specific development area.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the Vicar and Parish Council of St. Andrew's Church, Soham, who commissioned this assessment. Thanks also to the Sites and Monuments Records Officer, Dr. Tim Reynolds and the staff of the Cambridgeshire County Council Record Office. This study was prepared in response to a design brief produced by Simon Kaner of the County Archaeology Office.

## REFERENCES

- Bray, S. 1991 *Medieval Settlement at Pratt Street, Soham*. Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Report 28
- Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR)
- Conybeare, E. 1887 *A History of Cambridgeshire*.
- Evans, C. 1993 Sampling Settlements: Investigations at Lingwood Farm, Cottenham and Eye Hill Farm, Soham. *Fenland Research*, 8
- Fox, C. 1923 *The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region*. Cambridge
- Hall, D. 1996 *The Fenland Project., Number 10: Cambridgeshire Survey, Isle of Ely and Wisbech*. East Anglian Archaeology 79
- Hatton, A. and Last, J. 1997 *Late Saxon Features at 9-13 Pratt Street, Soham: An Archaeological Evaluation*. Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Report A107
- Heawood, R. 1997 *Late Saxon/Saxo-Norman Settlement Features at 38 Station Road, Soham: An Archaeological Investigation*. Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Report 142
- Lethbridge, T.C. 1933 Anglo-Saxon burials at Soham, Cambridgeshire. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 33
- Meaney, A. 1964 *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites*. London
- Robinson, B. 1995 Human remains at 11 White Hart Lane, Soham. Unpublished note in SMR Parish File
- Salzman, L.F. 1948 *The Victoria History of the County of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, 2. London



Cambridgeshire  
County Council

Education, Libraries  
and Heritage

The Archaeological Field Unit  
Fulbourn Community Centre  
Haggis Gap  
Fulbourn  
Cambridge CB1 5HD  
Tel (01223) 881614  
Fax (01223) 880946