

Archaeological Field Unit

**Prehistoric Field Systems at Northern Office, March.
An Archaeological Evaluation**

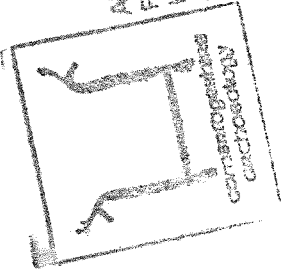
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Prehistoric Field Systems at Northern Office, March: An Archaeological Evaluation

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March 2001

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SUMMARY

Between 26th and 30th March 2001, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 1.2 hectares of land immediately to the east of All Saints Primary School, March (TL 4151 9770) by staff of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit. The work was carried out in advance of a proposed housing and office development.

Three trenches were excavated across the site to ascertain the presence or absence of archaeological remains. Archaeological remains were uncovered in all trenches. Besides the evidence for nineteenth and twentieth century activity in the form of a ditch and a pit, undated features may have belonged to the prehistoric period.

The prehistoric features were characterised by a double posthole (as part of a post-built fence?), parallel ditches (droveways?) and ditched enclosures (paddocks for livestock?).

Absence of finds would be consistent with an early chronology for the site. Given the known archaeological background of March and the presence of Bronze Age and earlier finds at Estover, 1km north-east of the development area, the features uncovered during the present evaluation could be early prehistoric. Furthermore, the evidence would be indicative of clearance of land on the high Gravels of March Island and management of livestock, possibly as early as the Neolithic period.

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Prehistoric Field Systems at Northern Office, March: An Archaeological Evaluation (TL 4151 9770)

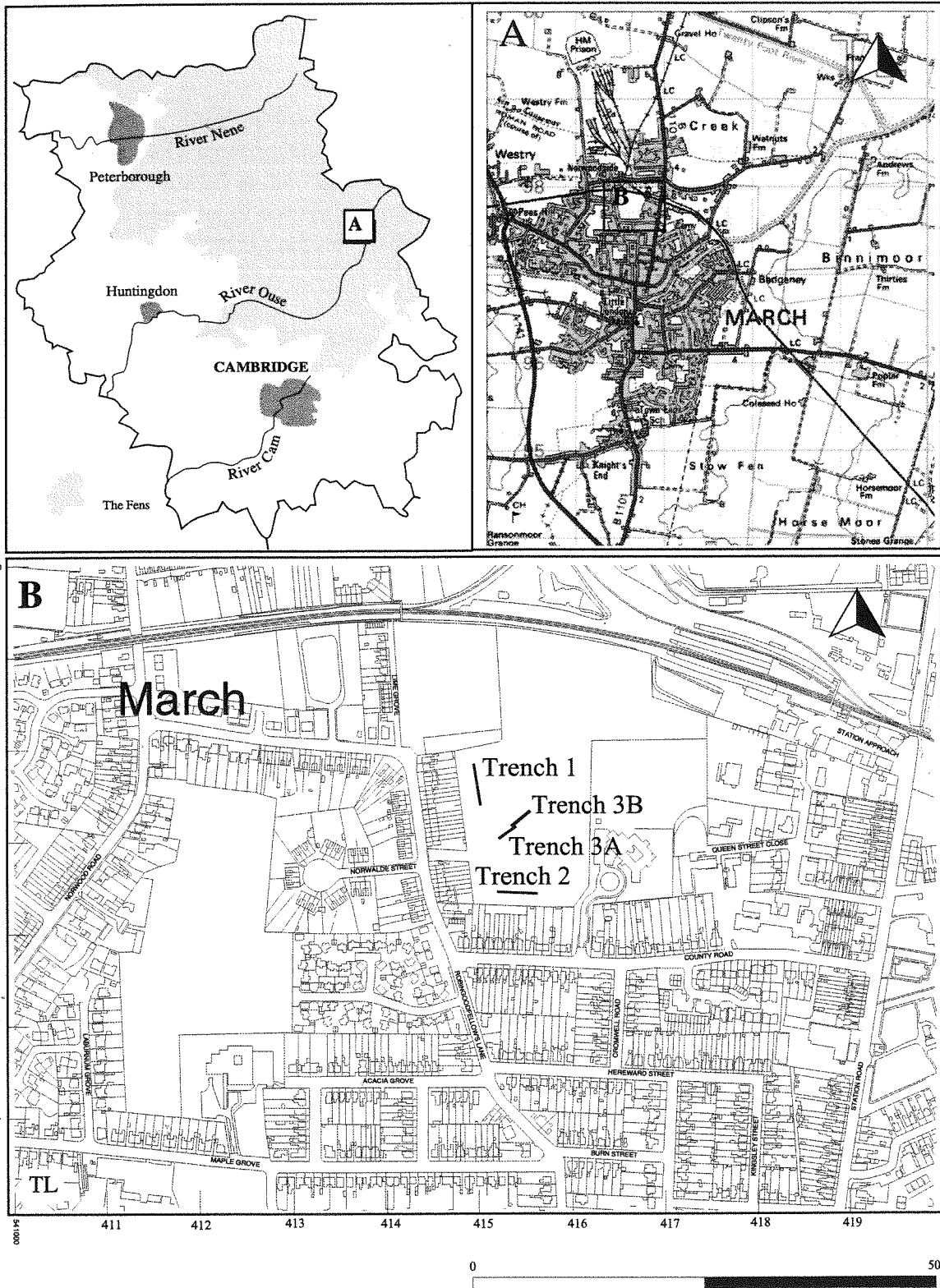
1 INTRODUCTION

Between 26th and 30th March 2001, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 1.2 hectares of land immediately to the east of All Saints School, March (TL 4151 9770), by staff of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit. The project was commissioned by the Property & Procurement Division of Cambridgeshire County Council (Allan Cook, project Manager), in advance of a proposed re-development of the land. This entails the construction of County Council offices and houses. The work was carried out according to a brief for archaeological evaluation issued by Cambridgeshire County Council County Archaeology Office (Kaner Feb 2001). The project was managed by Stephen Macaulay (AFU).

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The geology of March is composed of Kimmeridge Clay overlain by Anglian Boulder Clays and Hoxnian interglacial Gravels generally known as the 'March Gravels' which run north-south under much of the town. The Gravels form the core of March Island which rises to about 4m OD, and surround much of the island on which modern March lies. The formation of the fen deposits around March is complex due to the migration of the channels of the Rivers Ouse and Nene that cut across the region.

Located in the centre of March Island, the palaeogeographical history of the site would suggest that this part of the island has lain above the fen boundary during the Holocene (i.e. since the Neolithic). Archaeological evidence indicates that March town has been occupied since at least the early Neolithic period. The environment around the island has seen major changes in the landscape resulting from sea level rise/fall, peat growth and degradation, and alterations in the riverine systems. As a result of this dynamic environment throughout prehistory and historic times this landscape would have provided a wide variety of resources for its occupants which included salt from marine waters during Roman times.



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Figure 1 Location plan

At the time of the evaluation, the proposed development site comprised a partially fenced area of waste grassland, used *de-facto* as a public open space. It is located to the east of All Saints Primary School. To the south and west are gardens of houses (Fig. 1). The 1885 ordinance survey shows the land as farmland, most probably under arable cultivation.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) shows few archaeological remains within and immediately adjacent to the town of March. The archaeological evidence suggests a long period of dispersed activity around the island until the medieval and post-medieval development of the town. Records of Iron Age, Roman and medieval activity are most common on the island, whilst earlier prehistoric activity appears to lie close to the margins of March Island and adjacent to former rivers. Past investigations into the prehistoric settlement on the March Island have been restricted by the historic expansion of the town. Areas of light soils (March Gravels) commonly favoured by early farming populations are entirely contained within the modern town and have therefore not been accessible to the extensive survey work undertaken by the Fenland Project (Hall 1987).

Palaeolithic, Mesolithic & Neolithic

Earlier prehistoric flint artefacts have been identified within the parish. These are concentrated to the west of the town on riversides (Barroway Drove roddon), far from the proposed development site (SMR 08455 & 05210).

Bronze Age

Bronze Age lithic scatters have been recorded on March Island. As with the earlier prehistoric artefacts, these are concentrated on the old roddons to the west of the town (SMR 04548 & 05007). A small urn with cross-hatched decoration (SMR 05924) was found immediately to the north of the site, under the modern railway line (north of March station). Bronze Age activity is also known some 1.5km north of the site on the fen edge of the island (SMR 08459) and, closer to the development area, at Estover (SMR 07936b).

Iron Age

During this period fen peat deposits developed around most of the island. There are only two known Iron Age settlement sites on March island (SMR 08448a & 08451a) and these lie over 1 km to the north-east of the proposed development site. Both sites are associated with the later Romano-British settlements and field-systems at Flaggrass. Similarly, excavations conducted at Estover, 1km to the north-east of the development site, revealed a Late Iron Age/Early Romano-British droveway beneath the Fen Causeway (SMR

07936a), and ditched enclosures (aligned on the driveway and not on the Fen Causeway) that survived into the later Roman period (SMR 07936).

Roman

During the Roman period the dry land at March increased significantly to the northeast of the island, as marine flooding ceased. Extensive areas of cropmarks have been recognised in the northeast corner of March (around Estover (SMR 07936) and Flagrass Hill Road, SMR 08449) and these appear to have developed from earlier Iron Age settlements (see above). The Fen Causeway Roman Road runs through these settlements and across the north of March, some 0.5km north of the development site. The Fen Causeway connected Peterborough with settlements such as March across the fens to Denver in Norfolk. Most other Roman sites on the Island are small and have been interpreted as farmsteads. These tend to date between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD. A number of sites lies on the silt roddons to the north of March and are thought to be associated with salt production (e.g. SMR 8446).

Saxon, Medieval & Post-Medieval

The exact location of the Saxon and medieval settlements of March is unknown at present, although the cross stump and church of St Wendreda are commonly thought to represent the core of the Saxon settlement. This lies over 2 km south of the development site.

During the medieval period land north of the River Nene (in March) seems to have been meadows or shallow fen on the basis of place names (Hall 1987).

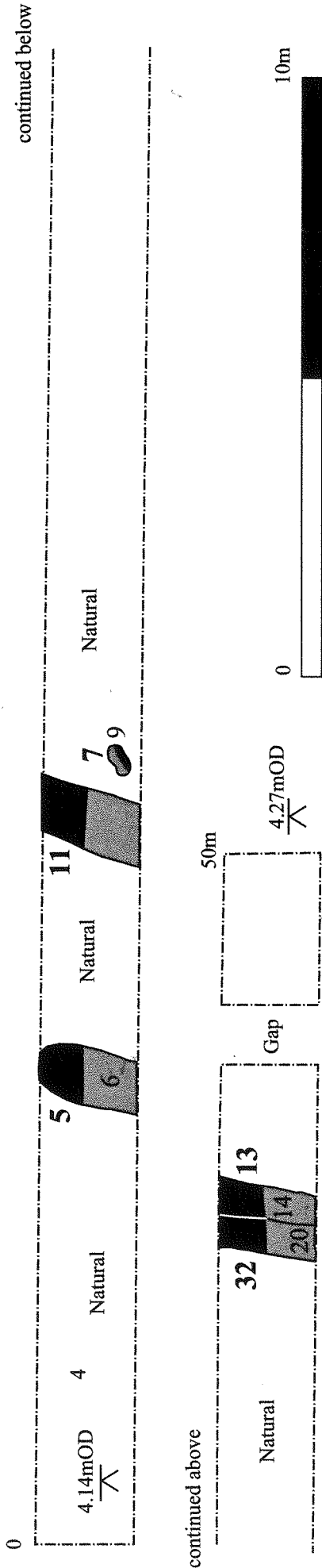
Historic maps indicate a similar pattern of low lying land which may have been used for pasture or small scale arable cultivation dating back to at least the 1680's. The site lies between the medieval fields of Norwalde Green (to the east) and Poutes Hirne (to the west). The pre-Inclosure Map drawn up in about 1680 (CRO R51/23/3) does not record the site in question. The draft 1819-1820 OS and 1840 Tithe maps show the land to be enclosed farmland, lying between Norwood Side (to the south) and Norwood Common (to the north).

The modern development of March has extended the urban growth in all directions and the development site lies within the modern town. It is surrounded by housing-estates and by the railway to the north.

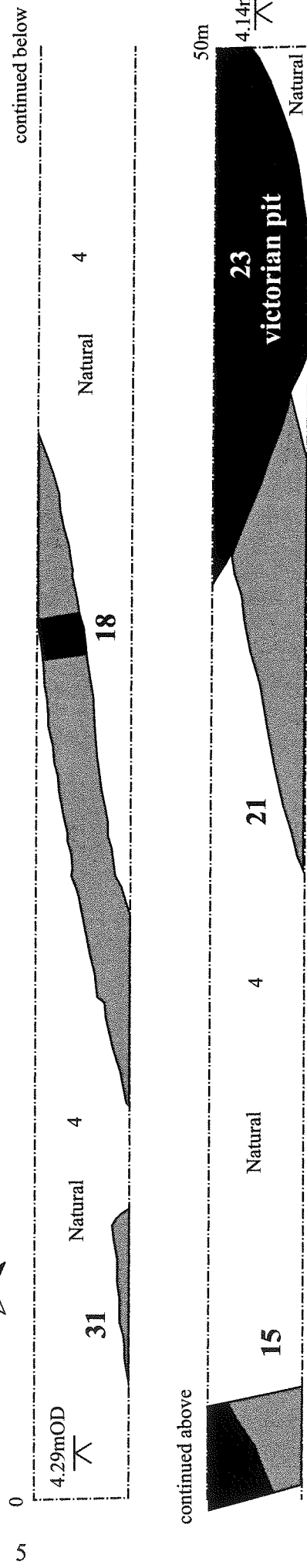
4 METHODOLOGY

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains prior to development of the land.

Trench 1



Trench 2



Trench 3B (end of)

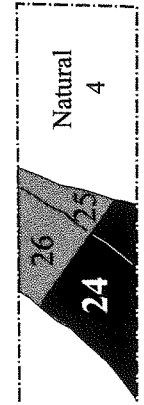


Figure 2 Plans of trenches showing archaeological features

Three 50m long trenches (Trenches 1, 2 and 3) were excavated using a mechanical excavator with toothless ditching bucket (1.6m wide). Trench 3 consisted of two segments, 3A and 3B. The presence of land-drains in 3A made it necessary to shift the position of the trench 1.0m away from the original layout. The northern portion of the trench was therefore referred to as 3B (Fig. 2). Trenches 3A and 3B have been discussed together as Trench B (below).

The length of trenching was 150m, totalling 240m², i. e. a 2% sample of 1.2 hectares. The trenches were spread across the area of the proposed development in order to obtain maximum coverage thus increasing the possibility of discovering any archaeological features.

The modern ground surface and subsoil were removed to a depth where the natural gravel or clay/silt gravel deposits were exposed, between 0.65m and 0.45m below the present ground surface. Once excavated, the trenches rapidly filled with ground-water due to the very high levels of rain-precipitation over the winter/spring 2001 causing the water table to rise. The trenches had to be drained by pumping before hand-excavation could commence.

The trenches were subsequently cleaned by hand to allow feature and deposit recognition, and planned at 1:100 scale.

Within the trenches, each feature and deposit was allocated a unique reference number (single context recording). Relevant vertical sections were drawn at 1:20 and 1:10 scale. A general plan of the site was also produced to show the location of the excavated trenches within the development area. Finally a photographic record was compiled which consisted of colour slides, colour and monochrome prints.

All trenches excavated during the evaluation were described, giving details of topsoil, subsoil and natural geology visible in the base of the trenches.

The recording system and the post-excavation procedures followed the standard AFU practice.

5 RESULTS

TRENCH 1

Trench 1 was located in the north-west corner of the development area. It ran north to south, parallel to the west boundary of the site, at a height between 4.14m OD (north) and 4.27m OD (south). The removal of the topsoil and subsoil to a depth of 0.60m (north end) and 0.58m (south end) exposed a series of parallel ditches on a west to east alignment, and a double post-hole.

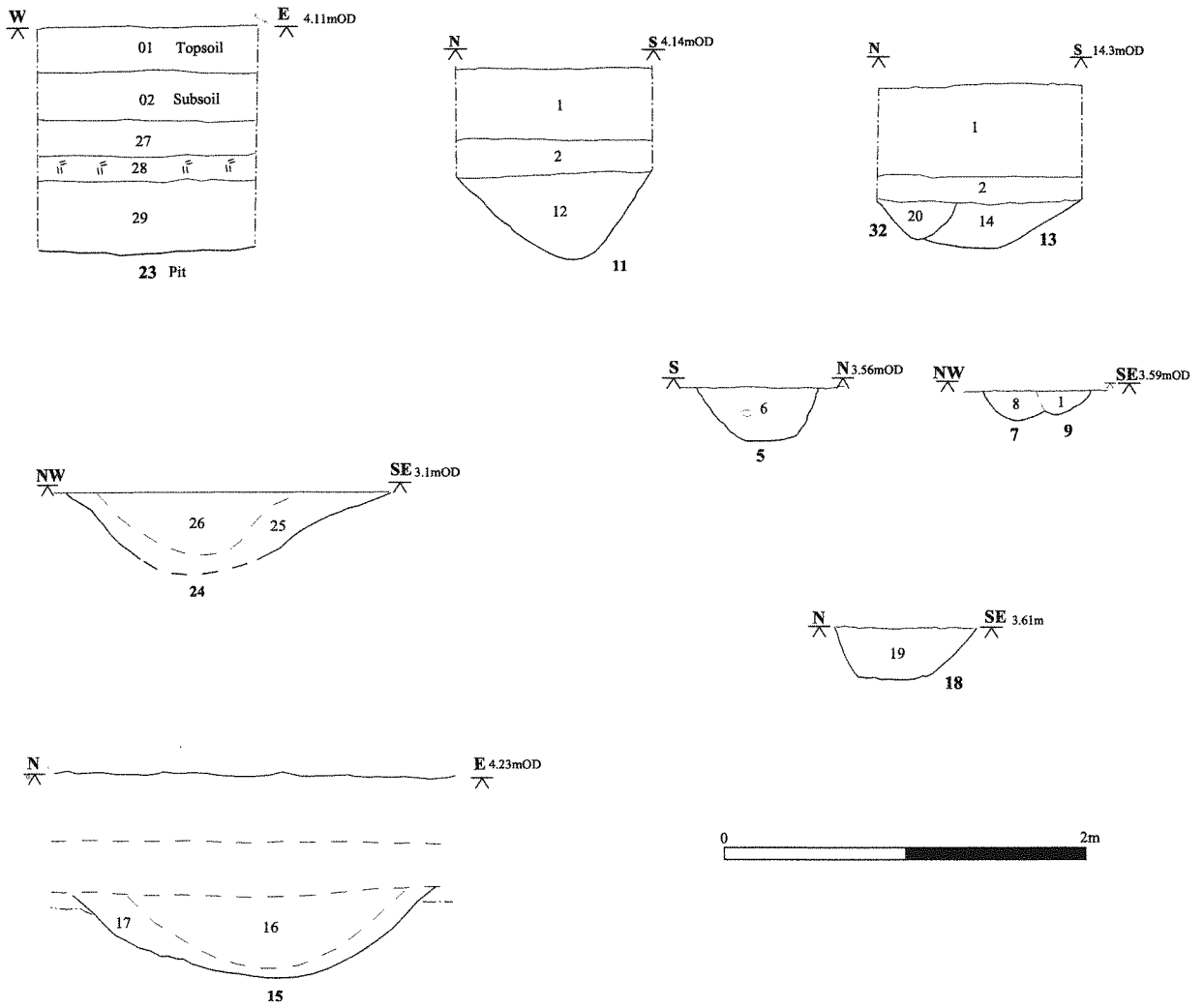


Figure 3 Sections through archaeological features

The archaeological features were cut through the natural gravel and silt/clay gravel deposits.

The topsoil was 0.38m thick at the north end of the trench and 0.45m thick at the south end. It sealed the subsoil of recent formation the thickness of which also decreased towards the south end of the trench.

West-East Aligned Ditches

Cut 05: linear ditch with *terminus*, 0.68m wide and 0.31m deep (from the base of the trench), with a 'V'-shaped profile. It contained one fill, 06.

Fill 06: homogenous light greyish brown clayey silt, with no finds.

Cut 11: linear ditch, 1.06m wide and 0.31m deep (from the base of the trench), with a 'U' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 12.

Fill 12: homogenous greyish brown clayey silt, with occasional small flint gravel inclusions. It contained no finds.

Cut 32: linear ditch, 0.44m wide and 0.24m deep (from the base of the trench), with a 'V' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 20.

Fill 20: homogenous greyish brown clayey silt, with occasional small flint gravel inclusions. It contained no finds.

Cut 13: linear ditch, 1.10m wide (truncated width) and 0.26m deep (from the base of the trench), with a flat 'U' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 14.

Fill 14: homogenous light yellowish brown sandy silt, with frequent small flint gravel inclusions. It contained no finds. It was re-cut by ditch 32.

Postholes

Cut 07: Circular posthole, 0.35m in diameter and 0.15m deep (from the base of the trench), with a 'U'-shaped profile. It contained one fill, 08.

Fill 08: homogenous light greyish brown clayey silt, with no finds. It was cut by posthole 09.

Cut 09: Circular posthole, 0.30m in diameter and 0.12m deep (from the base of the trench), with a 'U'-shaped profile. It contained one fill, 10.

Fill 10: homogenous greyish brown clayey silt, with no finds.

TRENCH 2

Trench 2 was located in the south-west corner of the development area. It ran west to east, parallel to the southern boundary of the site, at a height between 4.14m OD (east) and 4.29m OD (west). The removal of the topsoil and subsoil to a consistent depth of 060m throughout the trench exposed 19th century features (a pit and a ditch) together with a series of earlier ditches on different alignments. All features were cut through the natural gravel and silt/clay gravel deposits.

The topsoil was 0.30 thick at the east end of the trench and 0.15m thick at the south end. It sealed the subsoil of recent formation (some 0.30m thick) over a thin layer of light brown silt visible in the western portion of the trench.

Early ditches

North-east to south-west aligned ditch

Cut 30: linear ditch, 0.40m wide (visible width) with *terminus* on a north-east to south-west alignment. It was only partially exposed and could not be excavated due to its close proximity to the edge of the trench.

Fill 31: light greyish brown clayey silt. No finds were visible on the surface.

Cut 18: linear ditch on a north-east to south-west alignment, 0.74m wide and 0.30m deep (from the base of the trench), with a flat 'U' shaped profile. It contained one fill, 19.

Fill 19: homogenous light greyish brown clayey silt. It contained no finds.

North-west to south-east aligned ditch

Cut 15: linear ditch on a north-west to south-east alignment, 2.0m wide and 0.26m deep (from the base of the trench), with a wide 'U' shaped profile. It contained two fills, 16 (upper fill) and 17 (lower fill).

Fill 16: greyish brown silty sandy clay, with occasional small flint gravel inclusions. It contained no finds.

Fill 17: light yellowish brown silty clayey sand, with moderate small flint gravel inclusions. It contained no finds.

Nineteenth/Twentieth Century Features

Cut 21: linear ditch on a north-east to south-west alignment, 1.65m wide. It was not excavated.

Fill 22: dark grey silty clay with occasional small gravel inclusions. Finds visible on the surface consisted of fragments of glass and sherds of porcelain dating to the Victorian period. The ditch was truncated by pit 23.

Cut 23: circular (?) pit, only partially exposed, with an estimated diameter of some 20m. It was mechanically excavated to a depth of 0.70m (from the base of trench) onto the top of ditch 21. It contained three fills, 27 (upper fill), 28 (mid fill) and 29 (lower fill).

Fill 27: dark grey clayey silt with no visible finds.

Fill 28: dark greyish brown clayey silt with no visible finds.

Fill 29: dark grey silty clay with occasional fragments of bone.

TRENCH 3

Trench 3 was located between Trench 1 to the north and Trench 2 to the south, at an average height of 4.15m OD. It consisted of two contiguous segments, 3A and 3B (see above), on the same north-west to south-east alignment and 1.0m apart.

The topsoil was 0.35m thick in Trench 3B and 0.45m thick in Trench 3A. It sealed a modern subsoil 0.10m thick in Trench 3B and 0.20m thick in Trench 3A.

The removal of the topsoil and subsoil to a depth of 0.45m (north-east end) and 0.65m (south-west end) in Trench 3B exposed a wide linear ditch. This was cut through the natural gravel and silt/clay gravel deposits.

North-west to south-east aligned ditch

Cut 24: linear ditch on a north-east to south-west alignment, 1.80m wide and 0.45m deep (from the base of the trench), with a wide 'U' shaped profile. It contained two fills, 25 (lower fill) and 26 (upper fill).

Fill 25: Light yellowish brown silty sand with occasional small gravel inclusions. It contained no finds.

Fill 26: light greyish brown silty sand, with occasional small flint gravel inclusions. It contained no finds.

6 DISCUSSION

The evaluation revealed at least two phases of activity. The early phase was characterised by the presence of undated features, i.e. a double posthole and linear ditches, referred to as 'Early Features'. The later phase included a ditch dating to the 19th century and a later pit.

Early Features

The early features on site consisted of two inter-cutting postholes (Trench 1) and a series of ditches on three main alignments, namely north-east to south-west (Trenches 2 and 3), north-west to south-east (Trench 2) and west to east (Trench 1).

Phasing/Grouping

No datable evidence was recovered from the features. Furthermore, the evaluation trenches only covered a small percentage of the development area. As a result, it was not possible to establish sequences of events (or phases) nor to determine association between features (or groups). Based on the

alignments, the ditches could have belonged to two separate phases. Alternatively, they could have all been contemporary, variations in their alignments being possibly due to function. One phase (or group) could have comprised the parallel ditches on the same west to east alignment in Trench 1 (droveways?). The other phase (or group) could have been characterised by the north-west to south-east oriented ditches in Trenches 2 and 3 and, perpendicular to them, the north-east to south-west ditches in Trench 2, as part of a system of field-enclosures (paddocks for livestock?).

Topographic factors do not seem to provide a satisfactory explanation for variations in the alignment of the ditches (to facilitate drainage or to prevent soil erosion, for instance). Bearing in mind that the present landscape is the result of modern interventions, the contour of the land appears to be fairly uniform.

The interpretation of the postholes remains uncertain. Their proximity to the side of one of the ditches in Trench 1 could indicate that they represented a post-built boundary fence.

Chronology

As stated above, no finds were recovered from the features uncovered during the present evaluation.

Although the site is located close to an area of known Roman activity, with particular reference to the evidence for agricultural practices (above), the complete absence of finds from this period does not appear to be consistent with a Late Iron Age/Roman date for the development site. All known areas of Late Iron Age/Roman activity within and around March have produced artefactual evidence, including sites located away from the main *foci* of occupation. As seen above, excavations at Estover 1km to the north-east of the development site revealed a Late Iron Age/ Early Romano-British droveway beneath the Fen Causeway (SMR 07936a), and ditched enclosures that survived into the later Roman period (SMR 07936). Dating evidence was confined to a few sherds of Late Iron Age and Roman pottery (James & Potter, 1996, *passim*).

An early Saxon chronology for the features uncovered during the present evaluation has not been excluded, as early-Saxon artefactual evidence can be rare. However, based on what is known of Saxon March (above), evidence of occupation would be expected south of the centre of the town, near the church of St Wendreda (above). Furthermore, in Saxon times the centre of the region was at Doddington]an early medieval parish that absorbed the island of March (Hall 1987, 46).

Alternatively, absence of artefacts from both post-holes and ditches on site would be consistent with an early prehistoric date (Neolithic/Early Bronze-Age). Although the main areas of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity have been located around the fen-edge, with particular reference to the roddon to the

west of March (above), finds from the gravels of March Island are not unknown (above). For instance, the excavation at Estover (James and Potter 1996, *passim*) has revealed the presence of two pits with domestic and Beaker pottery, together with an overall scatter of flintwork. Earlier excavations in 1962 at the playing fields 300m to the south-east of the Estover site and north of the present development area, yielded evidence of small ditches associated with pre-Roman pottery and flints (James and Potter 1996, 49). The finds from Estover and the playing fields, together with the results from the present evaluation, may indicate the presence of neolithic/Bronze Age settlements and associated field-systems and enclosures on the gravel parts of March Island, i.e. away from the fen-edge.

Nineteenth/Twentieth Century Features

A ditch and a pit represented the latest activity on site. Both features were sealed by the subsoil of recent formation. The pit appeared to truncate the ditch that contained datable evidence (nineteenth century glass and pottery). The function of the ditch is uncertain. It may have represented a drainage-ditch running north-east to south-west across the site. The pit was only partially exposed. It was relatively shallow and some 20m in diameter (reconstruction). It could have represented a gravel pit. It contained no finds, suggesting that the feature was back-filled (lower fill) and had no secondary use once it had fallen into disuse. The upper fills still contained grass. They may have represented remnants of old topsoil and subsoil that were used as part of the in-filling and levelling sequence of the quarried area.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site prior to development. All trenches produced archaeological features. Besides the evidence for 19th century activity, undated postholes and ditches may have belong to the prehistoric period.

Notwithstanding the absence of dating evidence, the presence of features on the development site is consistent with the known archaeological background of the area, with particular reference to the evidence for land use in pre-Roman times. In particular, the finds from the present evaluation could indicate that the higher gravelly parts of March Island had been cleared and were managed from as early as the Neolithic period. This interpretation would be consistent with the existing evidence from the high land south of the River Nene in the Peterborough area (Pryor & French 1985, *passim*).

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The brief for archaeological works was written by Simon Kaner, County Archaeology Office. Andy Thomas, County Archaeology Office, visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

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