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# Former Allotments, Fordham Road, Soham: A Desktop Study

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April 2001

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**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A180

Commissioned by Lacy Scott and Knight

**Former Allotments, Fordham Road, Soham:  
A Desktop Study  
(TL 6025 7250)**

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2001

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## **SUMMARY**

*This Desktop Assessment was undertaken by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit as part of the requirements prior to residential development of former allotments to the north of Fordham Road, in the southern part of modern Soham (TL 6025 7250). The first stage of the evaluation requires an archaeological desktop study. The results of this study are presented in this report.*

*The present study shows that the area lies within a rich archaeological landscape, being surrounded by sites of Roman and Saxon date. Although no finds are known from the subject site itself, its archaeological potential can be considered moderate to high, with particular reference to the evidence for Roman rural activity and Saxon burial practices.*

*Although the land has been cultivated as allotments since 1896, the development site does not appear to have been affected by modern development or disturbance. The state of preservation of any archaeological remains and deposits that may be encountered during excavation is likely to be good.*

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# **Former Allotments, Fordham Road, Soham: A Desktop Study (TL 6025 7250)**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This desktop assessment was undertaken by the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council as part of the planning requirements prior to development of a plot of land (Former Allotments) to the north of Fordham Road, Soham, Cambridgeshire (TL 6025 7250). It was commissioned by Lacy Scott and Knight.

## **2 SITE BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Planning Background**

A Planning Application (No. E/00/0787) was submitted by Lacy Scott and Knight. The proposed development is for business use of a plot of land referred to as Former Allotments, Fordham Road, Soham. Given the known archaeological background of Soham (below), the possibility of there being Roman and, in particular, Saxon remains within the application area determined the requirements for an archaeological evaluation. A Design Brief was issued by Andy Thomas, Cambridgeshire County Council, County Archaeology Office (25 January, 2001). In response to it, a Specification was produced by Aileen Connor (Connor, Jan179/01).

The first stage of the evaluation requires an archaeological desktop study. The results of this study are presented in this report.

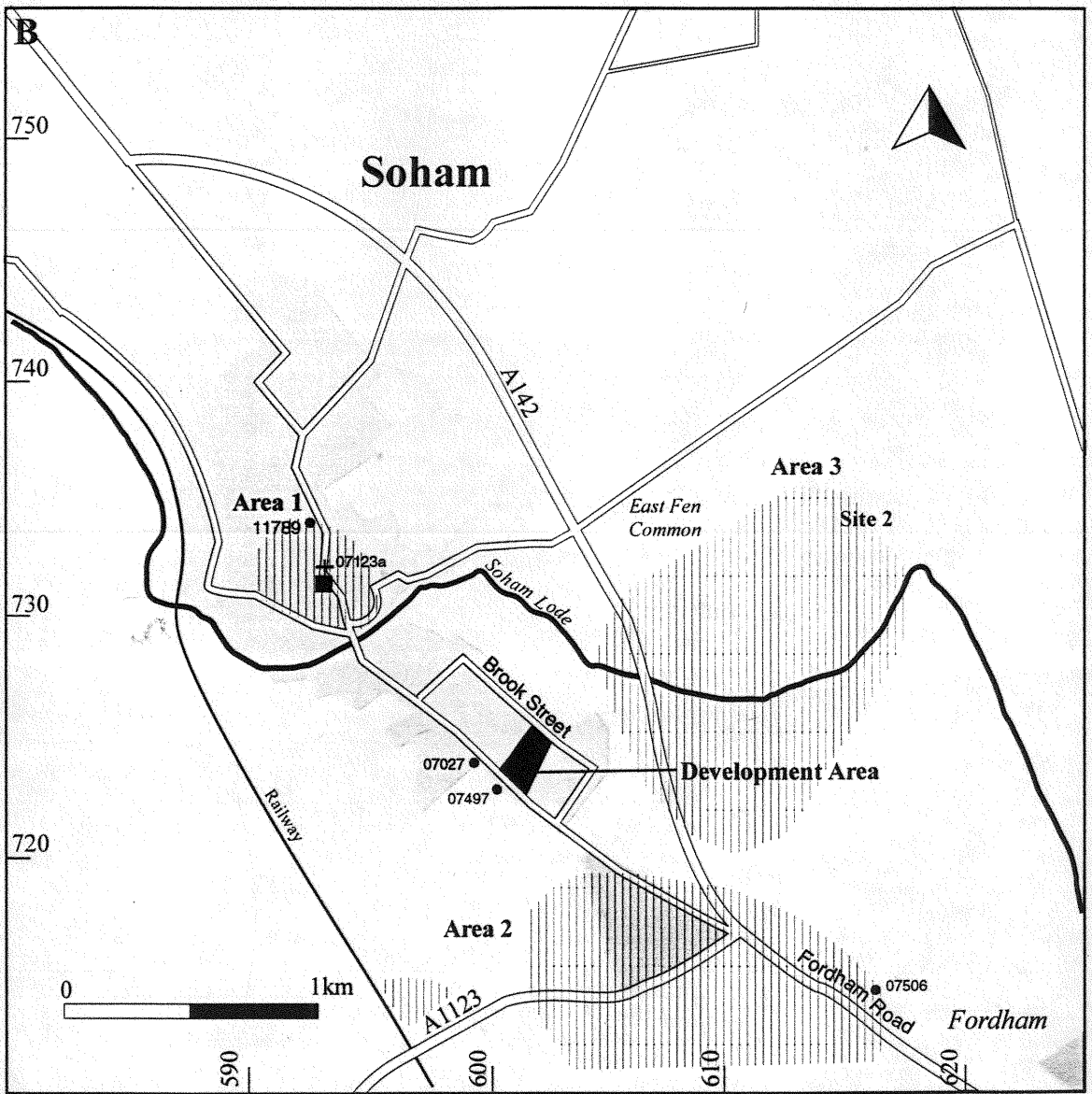
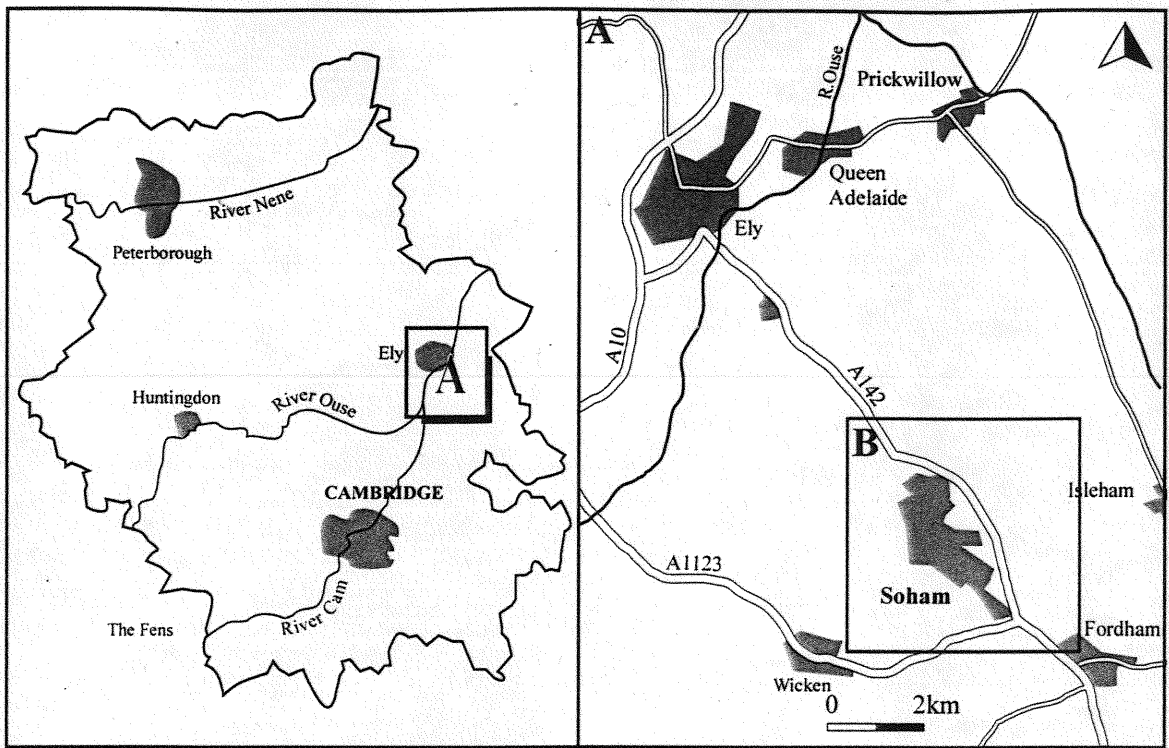
### **2.2 Topography and Geology**

The village of Soham sits near the southern Cambridgeshire Fen-edge, some 8km south-east of Ely, on the A142 between Ely and Newmarket. In relation to Soham, the development site is located in the southern part of the village, north of Fordham Road. It is flanked by properties on Brook Street to the north and off Fordham Road to the south-west. To the east there is a developed plot.

The site is centred on NGR TL 6025 7250, at a height of 10m OD. It comprises an area of 2 hectares formerly used for allotment gardens since 1896 (Fig. 1).

The village of Soham is located on an irregular peninsula of Bedford Lower Chalk and 3rd gravel terrace, which projects north-west from Fordham into the Fens, between the Isleham embayment and the former Soham Mere (British Geological Survey, Sheet 188).





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**Figure 1 Site Location Plan showing development area and zones of archaeological interest based on SMR references (hatched)**

### **2.3 Historical and Archaeological Background**

The present account follows the results from desktop evaluations undertaken in the past (Hatton 1998a; Macaulay 1999).

The results have been integrated with information from recent excavations and from a revised documentary search of the area within 1km radius centred on the development site. Information was obtained from the following: Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record Office (SMR) and Cambridgeshire County Council Record Office (CRO). SMR Parish Files and overlay maps of aerial photographs were consulted, together with cartographic evidence and available documentary sources.

#### **Early Prehistoric**

The Fen-edge around Soham and the Snail Valley has a long history of human activity.

Mesolithic and Neolithic remains have been recorded to the north-west of Broad Hill, where a large quantity of worked flints, including axes, knives and scrapers, was recovered (Hall 1996, 72, ff.). Immediately to the north-east of the village of Soham the SMR records Mesolithic to Late Bronze Age stray finds, namely lithic artefacts (SMR 07077,07098,07101, 07102, 11019 and 11019a).

A number of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites and artefacts scatters have been located on the light sandy soils to the west of Soham Mere (SMR 07037, 07039, 07040, 07041, 07044, 07061, 07061a, 07482, 09230).

A Bronze Age settlement was located at Eye Hill Farm during field-walking. The flint assemblage consisted of barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, scrapers and awls (Macaulay 1999).

Further evidence for Bronze Age activity was uncovered during an archaeological investigation at St Andrew's House, off High Street. Prehistoric activity was represented by a shallow ditch that produced Bronze Age flint déblitage (Casa Hatton 2000).

Prehistoric stray finds dating to the Bronze Age have been recovered 1km to the east of the development site (e.g. SMR 07805a: a bronze spearhead tip). In addition, cropmarks visible on aerial photographs include two Bronze Age ring ditches and linear features (SMR 04456a). Undated ring ditches in the same area may also belong to the Bronze Age (e.g. SMR 09041) (Fig. 1, Area 3).

Further scatters of Bronze Age finds, namely pottery, have been located 1km to the south of the development site (SMR 07482 and 07493) (Fig.1, Area 2).

#### **Late Prehistoric**

The evidence for later prehistoric and, in particular, Iron Age activity in and around Soham is scanty. One site has been located on the hilltop at Henney, on the periphery of Stuntney and Ely where Iron Age remains are fairly common (Hall 1996, 76).

Iron Age finds scatters are located less than 1km to the east of the development site where pottery sherds were uncovered from possible pits

(SMR 07560). Further finds spots include SMR 07503 (pottery sherds), SMR 04456b (a Trinovantian gold coin) and SMR 07602 (an Icenean silver stater) (Fig. 1, Area 3). To the south, Late Iron Age coins were found by metal detecting (Fig.1, Area 2).

## **Roman**

Cropmarks dating to the later Roman period have been identified to the south and south-east of Soham, and interpreted as representing a probable villa (Hall 1996, Site 2, 3rd-4th century), and farmsteads/industrial sites (Hall 1996, Site 3 [SAM 47], 2nd-3rd century, and Site 5). Roman occupation appears to have occurred during the 2nd-4th century, the traditional date for Romanisation in the Fens. As in prehistoric times, Roman sites are located on the light sandy soils at Soham, Wicken and Padney, probably attracted by the presence of the River Cam and the nearby crossing point at Fordey

Site 2 is located in an area of dense Roman activity approximately 1km to the east of the proposed development. It seems to have represented a villa-estate with evidence for buildings (hypocaust and flue tiles) and associated enclosure-systems and tracks visible as cropmarks on aerial photographs (Hall 1996, 76). The SMR entries for the area are consistent with the presence of a rural site of relatively high status (e.g. SMR 07560a: flue-tiles; SMR 07584, 05668, 05668a, 07602, 07605, 07580: bronze objects, including *fibulae*; SMR 07594: Samian pottery and querns; SMR 04456c: Roman coins, *fibulae* and Samian pottery). Undated cropmarks including irregular small enclosures (SMR 09042) and a mound-pond-bank (SMR 09043) may have been associated with Site 2 (Fig. 1, Area 3).

To the south and west of the development site, finds scatters including coins, pottery and brooches (e.g. SMR 07502, 07682, 10142, 07581a, 07586, 09233, 07604, 07104, 07603a) are further indication of Roman activity. Mosaic *tesserae* (recorded on the SMR OS Map, no SMR Number) may indicate the presence of a villa building nearby (Fig. 1, Area 2).

## **Saxon and Medieval**

Early Saxon occupation at Soham is documented by funerary remains from three cemeteries. Burials were discovered in the graveyard of the church of St Andrew (TL 5998 7239) where grave-goods and stray finds included brooches, several beads and spearheads (Fox 1923, Meaney 1964) (SMR 01723a), and pottery (SMR 11386). Further Anglo-Saxon inhumations (SMR 11789) were uncovered in the rear garden of a house located on White Hart Lane. Evidence suggested that they had been re-buried, and may have originally belonged to the same cemetery as the burials from the Church graveyard (Robinson 1995).

Two major Saxon cemeteries have been uncovered away from the core of the late Saxon and medieval settlement at Soham. Both sites are located to the south of the village, off Fordham Road. In particular, SMR 07027 is situated in the modern cemetery, opposite the development site. There, furnished inhumation burials were uncovered in the later part of the nineteenth century. The grave-goods comprised pots and brooches, some of which were acquired by the British Museum in London. The second cemetery is located some 1.5km further south, at the Soham/Fordham Waterworks (SMR 07506). During excavations in the 1930s 23 inhumations (male and female adults, and children) and 2 cremation burials were uncovered (Lethbridge 1933, Meaney 1964). The former were west-south-west to east-north-east aligned and were mostly unfurnished. Only 9 graves were accompanied by goods in the form



of tools (a hammer and a whet-stone) and ornaments (brooches). There was only one weapon-burial. The cremations were contained in urns deposited by the side of an inhumation, suggesting a possible family correlation. All the burials were laid within a circle suggesting they had been placed around a barrow (later destroyed by ploughing). The cemetery as a whole was assigned to the pagan period and dated to the mid sixth-seventh century on the basis of the gravegoods from 2 inhumations.

Besides the funerary practices, further evidence of Saxon activity has emerged in the form of stray finds and scatters of artefacts along Fordham Road (e.g. SMR 07603: a bronze/silver strap-end, silver rivets, a bronze/silver tag-end depicting two winged beasts; SMR 07585: a spearhead; SMR 07604: a brooch; SMR 07586a: a brooch and coins) (Fig.1, Area 2).

Saxon Soham is also known through documentary sources. The place name is derived from Saegham (11th century, AS Wills), probably meaning 'ham by the lake'. It is recorded as 'Soeham' or 'Seaham' in the Domesday Book. The name Soham first appears in 1294 (FF) and, later, in 1353 (Min Acct et passim) (Reaney 1943, 196,197).

Further documentary sources refer to the foundation in the 7th century AD of a monastery by St. Felix, first bishop of the East Angles, who was buried in Soham. The monastery was destroyed during the Danish invasions of East Anglia (late 9th century) along with many other religious foundations in the area, never to be re-established (Salzman 1948). The manor of Soham was given to Ely abbey shortly after the re-foundation of the latter in the 10th century (Conybeare 1887). The exact location of the monastery is unknown, although it is possible that the Parish church of St Andrew's (late 12th century) was founded on the site of the Saxon predecessor.

Evidence for occupation during the late Saxon-early Norman period has emerged through recent excavations. During an archaeological investigation at St Andrew's House, off High Street Late Saxon evidence emerged from a boundary ditch that was re-cut at least once. It may have represented the rear boundary of properties flanking High Street. During the medieval period 13th-14th century boundary ditches may have represented the re-definition of the Late Saxon predecessor. Postholes and associated slots of 13th-16th century date found at both the northern and southern end of the site may have represented comparatively insubstantial boundaries. In the northern portion of the site there was evidence for quarry pits dating to the 14th-16th (Casa Hatton 2000).

At 9-13 Pratt Street, an archaeological evaluation has revealed shallow gullies, a posthole and a large pit containing 11th-12th century sherds of Thetford Ware (Hatton and Last 1997).

Evaluation trenches at the rear of 38 Station Road produced evidence of ditches dating from the 10th to 12th centuries (Heawood 1997).

An archaeological evaluation was conducted at Soham County Infant's School, where several ditches were revealed. The features contained an assemblage of pottery sherds (10th to 13th century), predominantly St Neots and Thetford Ware (Bray 1991).

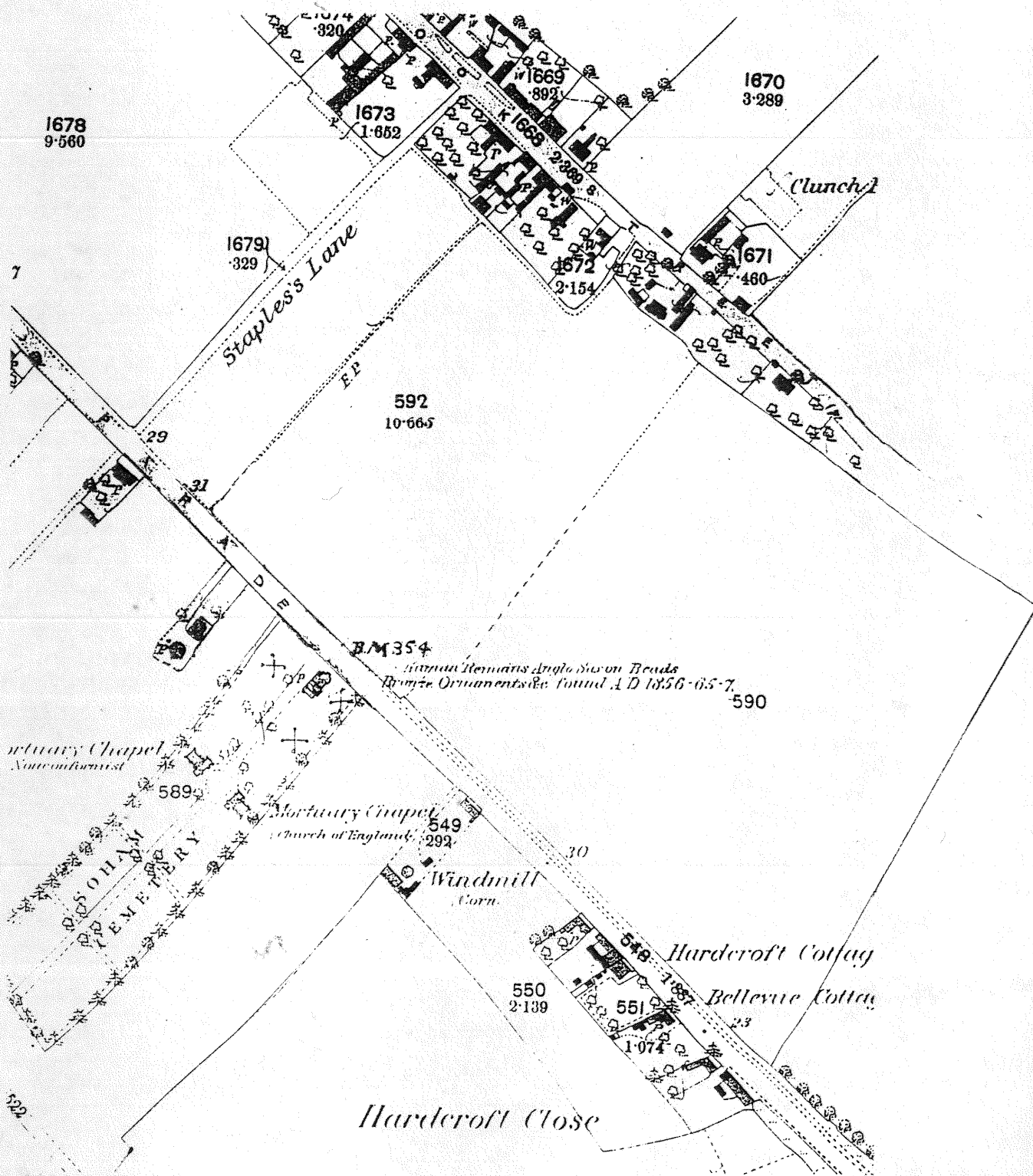


Fig. 2: Extracts from OS Map 1886, Sheets XXX.16 and XXXV.4



Evidence for activity, mainly in the form of unstratified pottery dating from the 10th century, has also emerged immediately to the east of the development site, at High Street/Clay Street (John Samuels Archaeological Consultants 2000).

The remains from the Infant's School (and from High Street/Clay Street) are consistent with a major phase of development and prosperity that is attested by the construction of St Andrew's Church in the late 12th century (Hatton & Last 1997).

Finally, evidence for medieval occupation was uncovered at Cloverfield Drive where pits and ditches contained pottery dating between 1150-1550 and mainly consisting of Ely Ware (Hatton & Macaulay 1999).

### **Post Medieval**

Soham was enclosed after 1793 (no Inclosure Award). However, many fields around the village remained open and persist today as remnants of the medieval field-systems.

Windmills and pumps for drainage are depicted on the Tithe Map (1845) and OS Maps, as in the case of SMR 07497 which was probably part of Mill Croft to west of the development site (Tithe Map) and, later, of Hardcroft (OS 1886).

According to the Tithe Map of 1845, the proposed development site was part of *Cote Piece* (Plot 2108), off Butcher's Causeway (modern Fordham Road). It consisted of arable land and was occupied by Trustees of Lakenheath School.

The OS Map of 1886 (Fig. 2) refers to the development site as plot 590 to the north of King's Parade (former Butcher's Causeway). Additionally, the map shows the new cemetery across the road, marking the position of the Saxon burials found between 1856 and 1867 (above).

At some stage, the plot was acquired by Gowards Charity from which it was hired by the Council for the purpose of allotments in 1896 (Sue Neville, Archivist, CRO, *Per. Comm.*). Later OS Maps (e.g. OS 1902 and OS 1926) refer to the plot as *Allotments/Allotment Gardens*.

## **3 SOURCES AND CONFIDENCE RATING**

### **3.1 Sites and Monuments Records (SMR)**

The SMR of Cambridgeshire County Council records several finds in and around Soham. Most entries refer to chance discoveries through farming practices and metal-detecting. With reference to the development site, entries also relate to excavations undertaken during the nineteenth century. In particular, there are records of the Saxon cemeteries located to the west and south of the proposed development.

The information provided by the SMR is affected by the following:

- Absence of archaeological excavations in the southern part of Soham.

- Distribution of finds with a bias towards periods which are well represented by material culture
- Random and biased collection of finds through chance discovery

Bearing these limitations in mind, the SMR represents a fairly reliable source of information for the areas around the development site. There are no entries within the site itself.

### 3.2 Aerial Photographs (CRO) and Overlay of Aerial Photographs (SMR)

The SMR has a collection of maps showing overlays of aerial photographs. Aerial photographs for the southern part of Soham (Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs, CUCAP) show a very high density of undated features to the east of the development site. Some of the cropmarks and earthworks have been dated during the Fenland Survey (below).

Aerial photographs of the development site taken in the mid 1940s show remains of the garden allotments (Sue Neville, Archivist, CRO, *Per. Comm.*). There are no further cropmark/earthwork features within the development site.

### 3.3 Documentary Sources

Soham is known through regional and local documentary sources. However, these tend to be biased towards:

- The medieval ecclesiastical history.
- The medieval origin and development of the village with little, if any, information on the rural surroundings.

Monographic studies also exist that tend to concentrate on specific research topics, from place-names to ancient burials, *etc.*

Soham has not been included in the Victoria County History of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely (VCH) nor has been published in the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) series.

As a whole, the documentary sources provide reliable background information, with particular reference to the history of Soham from the medieval period onwards.

### 3.4 Archaeological Sources and Surveys

Due to its position near the Fen-edge, Soham has benefited from the Fenland Survey conducted in the 1980s. The Fenland Survey provides information on the changing environmental conditions and its effects on both the natural and human landscape. It is based upon information and maps of the Soham area compiled by the BGS of England and Wales.

As a whole, the Fenland Survey is a very accurate source of information. However, it needs to be updated and cross-referenced with the SMR entries.

There are no finds from the survey within the development area.

Finally, no archaeological excavations have been conducted in recent times in the southern part of Soham.

### 3.5 Cartographic evidence (CRO)

Cartographic evidence of Soham from Elizabethan times is contained in estate maps of royal, manorial and ecclesiastical properties within and around the village, together with land disputes (Bendall 1992). The first comprehensive map of the village is the Tithe Map of 1845. Soham does not have an Inclosure Map. Later maps include OS surveys from the end of the nineteenth century onwards.

As a whole, the available maps provide useful information for the post-medieval history of Soham, with particular reference to changes affecting land ownership and boundaries. From the Tithe Map onwards, the cartographic sources provide details of the development site showing no major disturbance or alterations affecting the area (Fig. 2).

## 4 ASSESSMENT OF THE EVIDENCE

The aim of the background research was to obtain information regarding the location, extent, survival and significance of the known archaeological and historical remains in the vicinity and within the development area. All available local sources were consulted and discussed above.

Notwithstanding the impact caused by chance discovery (namely metal-detecting and ploughing) on the distribution of prehistoric finds away from the nucleated village, systematic fieldwalking in recent years has shown that the location of sites by the fen-edge at Soham forms a consistent pattern (Hall 1996). Further south, early prehistoric activity seems to be confined to Bronze Age finds scatters and cropmarks to the east and south of the development site, despite the presence of prehistoric route-ways through the area to ford the Cam to the Isle of Ely (Malim 200, Ch. 11). Given the relative absence of finds away from the fen-edge, the potential for the recovery of prehistoric remains on the development site is relatively low.

To date, there is no record of Iron Age remains in the vicinity of the development area, with the exception of stray finds to the east and south (above). The apparent absence of Iron Age features may be due to chance. However, even accounting for some degree of truncation caused by medieval/post-medieval agricultural practices, recent fieldwalking surveys have failed to locate Iron Age remains along the Soham fen-edge, the hilltop site at Henney representing a southern extension of the sites at Stutney and Ely. With reference to the southern part of Soham, it is possible that some of the undated cropmarks to the east and south of the development site may belong to the Iron Age period. Furthermore, the presence of Iron Age finds in areas of dense Roman occupation may suggest a pre-Roman origin for some of the later Romano-British rural sites. As a whole, lack of archaeological excavations in the Soham area (and of large artefacts assemblages indicative of activity or occupation) may be partly responsible for the fragmentary picture concerning the Iron Age period.

With reference to the Roman period, the presence of villa/farmstead sites known from aerial photographs and scatters of finds may indicate that the development site lies either in the context of villa estates, or in an area of relatively intense rural activity. The distribution of finds and sites along Fordham Road may be indicative of a road-system. Tracks identified in the

context of Site 2 (above) may have stemmed from a major route across the Soham peninsula. Whether this major route may have followed the same course as the medieval predecessor to Fordham Road through Soham is uncertain. No forts or *mansiones* are known in the Soham area.

Saxon Soham is well known, with particular reference to the evidence for funerary practices. Formal cemeteries have been identified near St Andrew's Church. The presence of pagan Saxon cemeteries further to the south, together with scatters of finds from chance discovery, could indicate early occupation away from the medieval nucleated village.

Saxon activity in the core of Soham is still elusive and consists primarily of funerary remains near St Andrew's Church, i.e. in the context of the monastery traditionally associated with St Felix. By contrast, Late Saxon occupation is known to have occurred to the north, east and south of the Church. Although the Saxon monastery had by then disappeared, the distribution of known sites and scatters of finds seem to indicate that whatever attracted the Anglo-Saxon burials was still acting as a focal point.

During the medieval period occupation took place over a wider area, with St Andrew's Church becoming the fulcrum of the settlement from the late twelfth century.

The survival of medieval and post-medieval remains on the site is highly probable, with particular reference to evidence for agricultural practices, as suggested by cartographic evidence.

## 5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Based on the assessment of the archaeological potential of the development site (above), rating can be described as follows:

Mesolithic/Neolithic/Bronze Age	low
Iron Age	low
Romano-British	moderate/high
Anglo-Saxon	moderate/high
medieval	moderate/high
post-medieval	moderate/high

The present study shows that the development site lies within a rich archaeological landscape, being surrounded by sites of Roman date, albeit not in the immediate vicinity. Closer to the area under investigation are funerary remains from a Saxon cemetery the extent of which is presently unknown.

The development area does not appear to have been affected by modern development or disturbance. The state of preservation of any archaeological remains and deposits that may be encountered during the evaluation should be good, notwithstanding the possibility of some degree of truncation caused by ploughing during the medieval and post-medieval period.



## 6 CONCLUSIONS

An assessment of the surrounding archaeology would suggest that the proposed development is in an area with substantial archaeological potential, with particular reference to the evidence for Romano-British field-systems in the context of villas/farmsteads, and funerary remains dating to the Saxon period.

With reference to the former, geological conditions and expected archaeology might be conducive to reasonable results with magnetometry, but resistivity survey would not be recommended for study of an extensive field-system.

There is no guarantee that pre-trenching magnetometry would resolve features deriving from agricultural rather than occupational origin. Furthermore, the use of the development site for allotments since the late nineteenth century is bound to produce anomalies. Similarly, aerial photographs would probably show features associated with the allotments and existing photographs of the mid 1940s support this (Sue Neville, Archivist, CRO, *Per. Comm.*).

It may therefore be more appropriate to only consider use of geophysics and aerial photographic surveys following particularly positive results from trial trenching.

Given the potential of the development area and the lack of disturbance by modern interventions, an archaeological evaluation aimed at areas most likely to be affected by the proposed development should provide confident results.

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