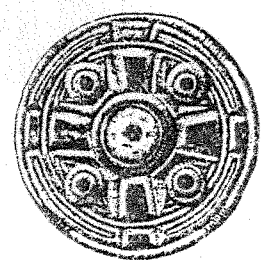
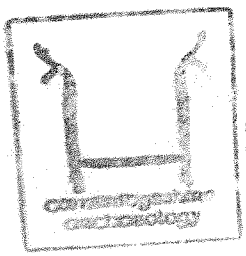


Archaeological Field Unit

Post-Medieval Activity at Land off Elwyn Road, March, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation

Rebecca Casa Hatton

2001



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Report No. A187

Commissioned by David White of Construct Reason Ltd.

Post-Medieval Activity at Land off Elwyn Road, March, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation

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July 2001

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SUMMARY

During the 27th and 28th of June 2001, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 0.75 hectares of land to the north of Elwyn Road, March (TL/4190/9666) by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council. The work was carried out in advance of a proposed residential development.

Three trenches were excavated across the site to ascertain the presence or absence of archaeological remains. Archaeological remains were uncovered in two of the trenches. These consisted of two late medieval/post-medieval ditches located in the south-eastern portion of the site, and an isolated pit of uncertain chronology, possibly Iron Age, further west. The ditches may have represented drains/boundaries defining the eastern limit of the post-medieval built-up area to the south of the bank of the Old Nene. In the northern portion of the development site evidence emerged for landscaping during the nineteenth century, with deposition of soil to contain flooding and make the area suitable for cultivation. The site was used for orchards during the nineteenth-early part of the twentieth centuries.

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MEDIEVAL OCCUPATION ON LAND OFF ELWYN ROAD, MARCH, CAMBRIDGESHIRE: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION (TL/4190/9666)

1 INTRODUCTION

During the 27th and 28th of June 2001, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 0.75 hectares of land immediately to north of Elwyn Road, March (TL/4190/9666), by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (Fig. 1). The project was commissioned by Construct Reason Limited, in advance of a proposed residential development of the land. The work was carried out following consultation with the County Archaeology Officer of Cambridgeshire County Council. Judith Roberts (AFU) managed the project.

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 to south under much of the town. The Gravels form the core of March Island, which rises to about 4m OD, and fen deposits 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.

The development site is located to the south of the Old River Nene on Boulder Clay, near the edge of Barroway Drove Beds of tidal origin (BGS Sheet 159), at an average height of 3m OD.

At the time of the evaluation, it comprised a triangular area of waste grassland (Fig. 1).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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.

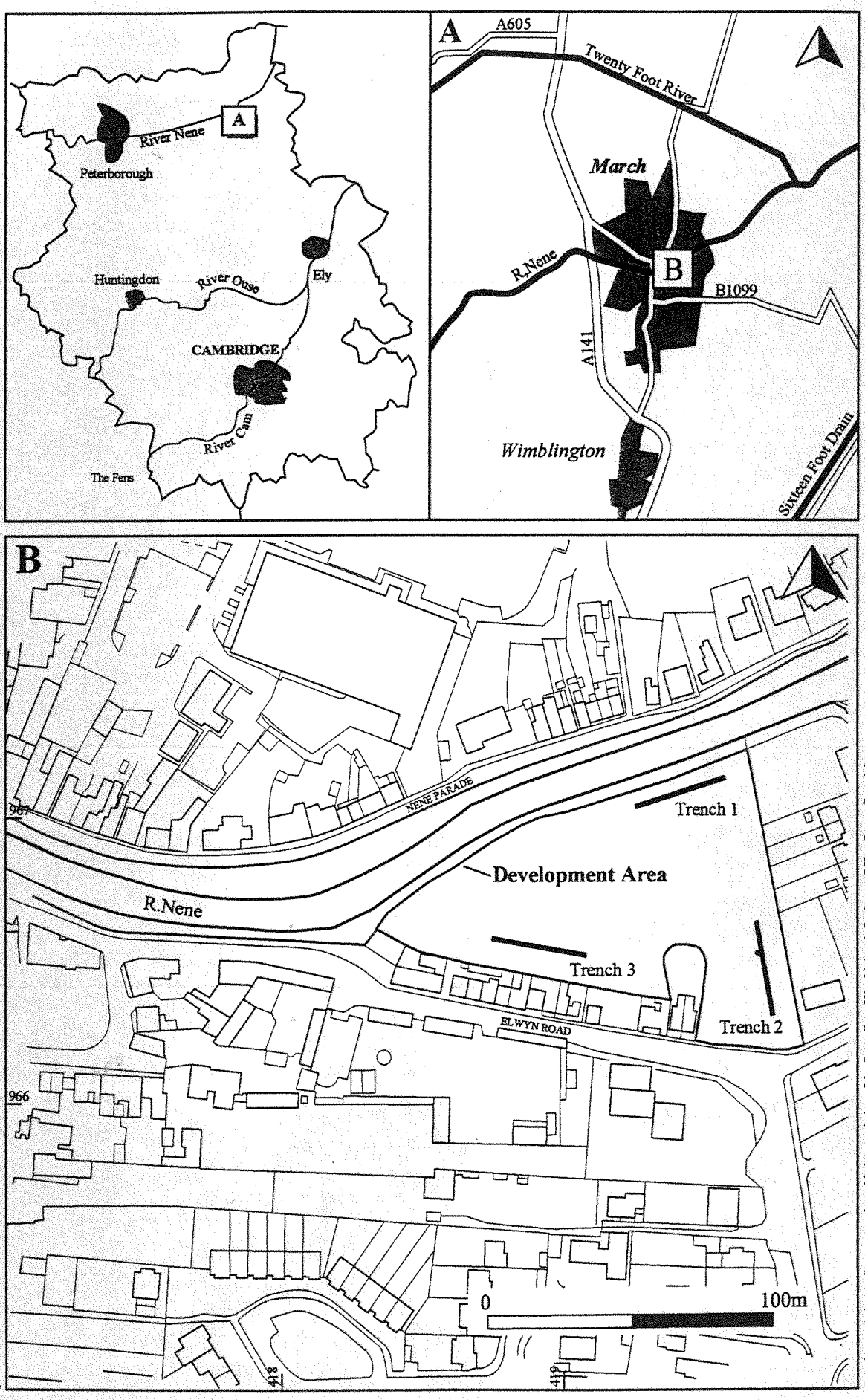

Figure 1 *Site Location Map*

As a result of this dynamic environment throughout prehistoric and historic times, this landscape would have provided a wide variety of resources that included salt from marine waters during Roman times.

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 and Neolithic

Earlier prehistoric flint artefacts have been identified within the parish. These are concentrated to the west of the town on riversides and roddons (Barroway Drove roddon), far from the proposed development site (SMR 08455, 05904, 05210 and 10913).

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 05903, 04548 and 05007).

Iron Age

During this period fen peat deposits developed around most of the island. The known Iron Age settlement sites on March Island are located to the north of the modern town. These sites are associated with later Romano-British settlements and field-systems visible on aerial photographs, as at Flagrass (SMR 08448a & 08451a) and Estover (SMR 07936a, b). Scattered finds include a hoard of silver coins found *c.* 1km to the south east of the development site (SMR 05919).

Roman

During the Roman period the dry land at March increased significantly to the north-east of the island, as marine flooding ceased. Extensive areas of cropmarks have been recognised in the north-east 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 second and fourth 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 and 08447).

Cropmarks to the south-east of March (SMR 06025, 6794, 9422 and 03796) are further indication of Roman occupation and possible rural activity. Canals ran north to south, merging with the Fen Causeway further north.

Finds scatters are also known from the March area. In particular, coin hoards (SMR 06053, 05920 and 05927) were found at less than 1km to the south of the development site.

Saxon, Medieval & Post-Medieval

In Saxon times the centre of the region moved from March to Doddington. From March itself few Saxon finds have been noted, including a cruciform brooch (SMR 03781a), found to the south of the Church of St Wendreda. Documentary evidence, however, would indicate a Saxon origin for March. The place-name is recorded in 1086 as *Merc(a)* from the Old English for *mearc* meaning 'boundary'. The exact location of the Saxon and medieval settlements is unknown at present. The medieval cross stump (SMR 05918) and church of St Wendreda's (SMR 06013a) less than 2 km to the south of the development site, off the modern High Street (Town End), are commonly thought to represent the core of the early settlement. The font in St Wendreda's church originally thought to be Perpendicular in style, appears to be Norman in date (SMR 06013), suggesting a Norman presence on the island. According to the Domesday Book, the hamlet of *Mercha* was given to the monastery of Ely *c.* 1000, as part of the manor of Doddington where it remained throughout the Middle Ages (Pugh 1967, 116 ff.).

The main topographical event of the post-Roman (Late Saxon ?) period was the diversion of the Rivers Nene and Ouse through the centre of March. The course of the river was probably diverted in order to cope with inundation and to increase drainage of the fen silts to the east of the island, following peat shrinkage during the Roman period and the rise of the land in relation to the peat (Hall 1987).

The later medieval settlement (*Mercheford*) probably owed its origins to the ford where the road between Ely and Wisbech crossed the river in its new. Late Saxon, position. Mercheford was distinguished by several *messuages* that flanked the north bank and were accessible by means of modern Nene

Parade and West End. From near the ford buildings stretched along a rough track that later became high Street/Broad Street (Bevis 1976, 8).

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth I March was a minor port probably located by the ford (Bevis 1976). Evidence for the port, however, remains elusive (Kemp 1998).

During the medieval period land north of the medieval settlement core seems to have been meadow or shallow fen that was probably used for pasture or small scale arable cultivation (Hall 1987, 47). Medieval field remains (ridge and furrow) are found in the southern and eastern parts of March (SMR 08981A, 11643 and 9460), i.e. near the settlement foci at St Wendreda's and *Mercheford.* Maps of the town dating from the seventeenth century show enclosed areas to the south of the river, including the development site. A map of March (seventeenth century) shows narrow strips of land that ran perpendicular to High Street and to the banks of the river, and may have represented remains of earlier holdings (*burgages*) (Stacey 2000). There is no reference to a market charter at March prior to 1670 (Pugh 1967, 116). It is however likely that the layout of the *burgage*-type holdings, as shown on the seventeenth century map, pre-dates the market charter (see *Appendix 1*). The focus of occupation near the ford was probably established sometime earlier during the Middle Ages, following the diversion of the River Nene and the creation of suitable conditions for the development of trading and market activities (Paul Spoerry, *pers. comm.).*

The same map depicts the Civil War fortifications (the Sconce, SMR 01997) in Cavalry Lane, to the south of the development site. The fortifications survive as low earthworks cutting across a pattern of medieval ridge and furrow (Malim 1991).

An Enclosure Act for March was passed in 1792 and the award granted in 1802 (Pugh 1967, 118). The development site is not represented on the Inclosure Map. However, it is depicted on the Tithe Map of 1840 as being subdivided into plots. By the beginning of the nineteenth century most of the common immediately to the south of the river and to the east of the '*burgages*' had been enclosed and banks erected along the course of the Nene within the town (OS Draft 1820, Tithe Map of 1840). According to the 1887 and 1927 editions of the Ordnance Survey, the development site was occupied by orchards.

Elwyn Road was created in the nineteenth century by connecting Bell Metal Lane that flanked the Market Place, Bridge Drove and Yards End Drove further east (Stacey 2000). Bridge Drove and Yards End Drove appear on the Inclosure Map of 1792.

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 Old River Nene 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.

Three trenches (Trenches 1, 2 and 3) were excavated using a mechanical excavator with toothless ditching bucket, 1.6m wide

The length of trenching was 108m, totalling 172.8msq, i.e. a 2.3% sample of 0.75 hectares. The location of the trenches was restricted by the presence of an access road across the site that had been built prior to the archaeological investigation. The trenches were spread across the remaining undeveloped area in order to obtain maximum trench coverage thus increasing the possibility of discovering any archaeological features.

The modern ground surface and subsoil were removed to a depth where the natural clay/silt deposits were exposed, between 0.75m and 0.32m below the present ground surface.

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 . 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 in accordance with IFA guidelines.

5 RESULTS

Trench 1

Trench 1 was 35m long. It was located in the northern portion of the site, parallel to the bank of the river, on a north-east to south-west alignment. The removal of the recent topsoil some 0.19m thick exposed a thick loamy deposit that contained Victorian rubbish (namely, glass and willow-patterned porcelain) on a thin layer of peat (0.20m thick). The natural Boulder clay was encountered at a depth of 0.75m.

No earlier archaeological features and deposits were encountered

Trench 2 (Fig. 2)

Trench 2 was 35.5m long and ran on a north to south alignment, parallel to the eastern boundary of the development site. It contained two ditches, **05** and **09**. A short extension (2.5m long, north-north-west to south-south-east oriented) was added to Trench 2 in order to expose a further segment of ditch **05**.

The removal of contaminated built-up soil to a depth of 0.60m at the south end exposed natural silty deposits cut by remains of modern foundation trenches and service pipes associated with a former building. At the north end the topsoil was 0.25m deep and sealed two parallel ditches that had been cut through the natural silt.

Ditch 05: north to south aligned ditch with a wide flat 'U' shaped profile, 6.5m wide and some 1.30m deep from the present ground level. Mechanically excavated It contained four fills, 02, 03, 04 and 11.

Fill 02: upper fill, dark greyish brown clayey silt with moderate small flint inclusions, 0.40m thick. It contained sherds of Medieval Ely Ware dating to the thirteenth-fourteenth century (Paul Spoerry, *pers. comm.*).

Fill 03: medium fill, dark brown clayey silt with small flint inclusions, 0.28m thick. It contained sherds of eighteenth century Staffordshire 'butter pots' (Paul Spoerry, *pers. comm.*). (

Fill 11: thin layer (0.10m thick) of reddish brown silty clay and sand. It contained no finds.

Fill 04: lower fill, black pit 0.30m thick, with well preserved disarticulated animal bone.

Ditch 09: north to south aligned narrow ditch with a wide 'U' shaped profile, 0.60m wide and 0.45m deep from the present ground level. It contained one fill, 10.

Fill 10: very dark brown peat 0.15m thick. It contained fragments of tile.

Trench 3 (Fig.2)

Trench 3 was 35m long. It ran on a west to east alignment, parallel to Elwyn Road. At the eastern end the removal of the topsoil some 0.32m thick exposed the natural Boulder clay. At the western end the topsoil was 0.57m thick.

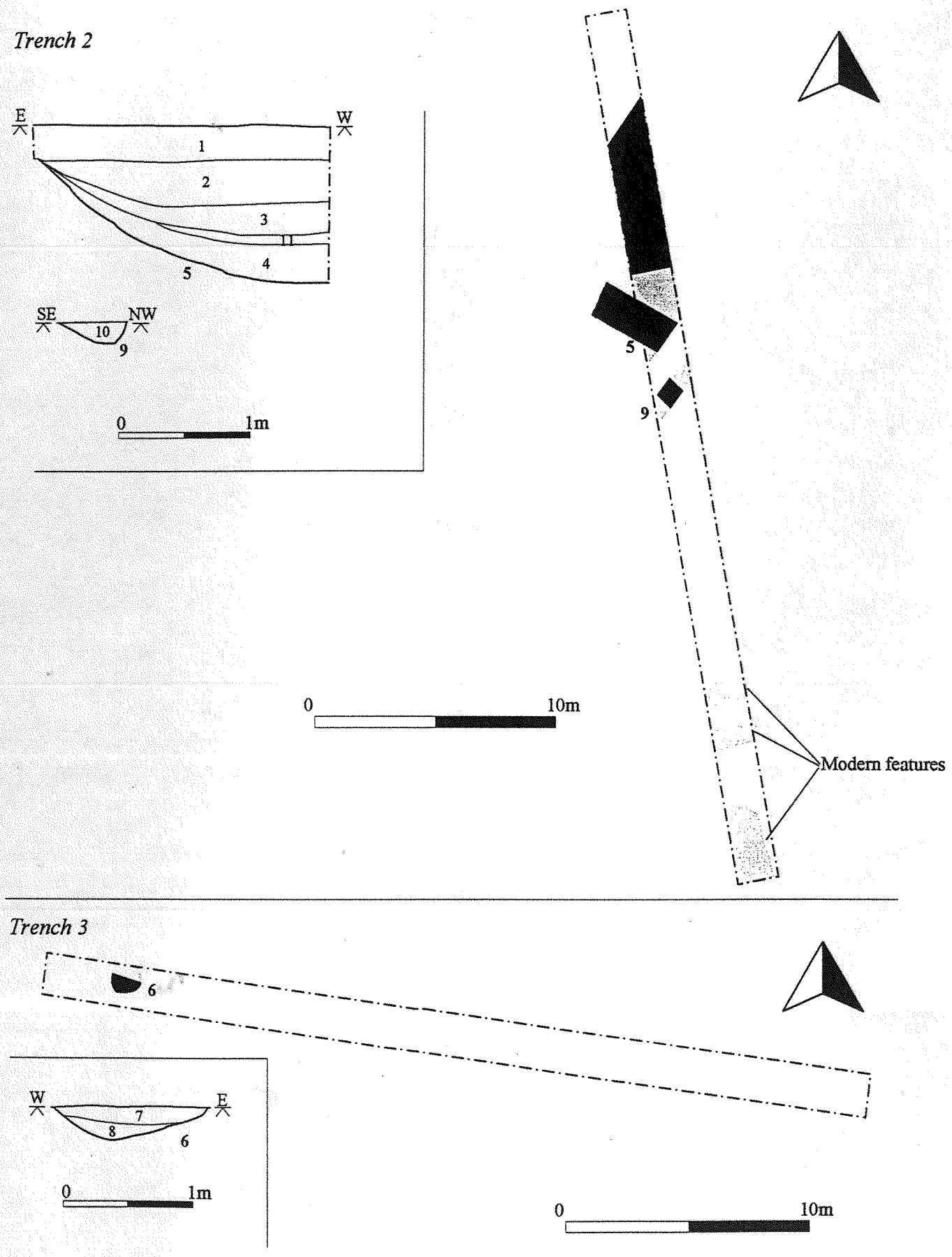

Figure 2 *Plans and sections of Trenches 2 and 3*

A concrete road, the hard core of which consisted of rubble some 0.16m thick, had cut it. The topsoil sealed the remains of a possible pit, **06**. The pit was only partially exposed in the trench.

Pit 06: sub-circular in plan with a wide 'V' shaped profile 1.30m in diameter and 1m deep from the present ground surface. It contained two fills, 07 and 0.8/

Fill 0.7: upper fill, dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional small flint inclusions. It contained fragments of bone and sherds of hand-made pottery, possibly dating to the Iron Age..

Fill 08: lower fill, greyish brown clayey silty sand with very occasional small flint inclusions. It contained no finds.

6 DISCUSSION

The evaluation revealed at least two main phases of activity. The earlier phase was characterised by the presence of two ditches, **05** and **09**, dating to the late medieval/post-medieval period. The later phase of activity emerged in the form of landscaping of the area near the river during the earlier part of the nineteenth century.

A possible Iron Age pit, **06**, was uncovered in Trench 3. The function and dating of this isolated feature are uncertain.

Late Medieval/Post-Medieval Activity

The earliest major features on site consisted of two parallel ditches on a north-east to south-west alignment uncovered in Trench 1, **05** and **09**. During the construction of the present road across the development site, the workmen observed the continuation of both features in the southern part of the site. Ditch **09** was relatively narrow and shallow. It was interpreted as representing a land boundary. Ditch **05** was 0.6m wide, and may have represented a major boundary/dyke across medieval *burgage*-like properties flanking the southern bank of the river. Whether the ditch/dyke may have provided docking facilities for loading and unloading barges is uncertain. The base of the ditch seems to have been too high in relation to the river channel. However, it is possible that locks existed near the confluence further to the north-east and that the ditch deepened here. If present, remains of docking facilities would have been obliterated by the construction of the riverine defences in the post-medieval period and by recent development of the land to the east of the evaluation site.

The seventeenth century map of March shows the development site as a triangular area subdivided into narrow strips of land off the southern bank of

the river (above). It also shows a wide ditch in the same location and on the same alignment as ditch/dyke **05** being cut by a track that was later incorporated into Elwyn Road (above). It is not clear from the cartographic evidence whether the ditch had already fallen into disuse by the time the map was compiled. The feature may have originally represented a boundary/drainage dyke defining the extent of the late medieval/post-medieval built-up area. However, by the seventeenth century it had become redundant as a boundary, as suggested by the presence of plots of land beyond the ditch itself. Finds from **05** would indicate that in-filling occurred during the post-medieval period, at the same time as the riverine defences were erected along the course of the Nene within the town. The new defences would have made the ditch redundant as a drain.

Eighteenth/Nineteenth Century Activity

Towards the river, evidence emerged for artificial raising of the land to overcome problems of flooding and create conditions suitable for land-reclamation and agricultural activities. The presence of peat at the bottom of the excavated features and near the river bank would indicate that flooding episodes constituted a problem. Artefacts from the deposits by the river indicate that landscaping occurred from the earlier part of the nineteenth century, when orchards were established on the development site (cf. early editions of the Ordnance Survey, above).

Similar post-seventeenth century depositional sequences were uncovered during evaluation at Grays Lane to the north-west of the present development site, off Broad Street (Whittaker 1998). There, artificial deposits were also interpreted as representing a measure against flooding when the plot of land was developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The earliest feature at Grays Lane was a road-side drainage ditch that had gone out of use by the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries, and was subsequently sealed by later deposits.

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. Trenches 2 and 3 produced archaeological features.

The presence of features on the development site is consistent with the known history of the area, with particular reference to the evidence for land use in medieval and post-medieval times, when the diversion of the river promoted the growth of the medieval settlement near the ford, away from the earlier nucleus of occupation. Later land-reclamation was associated with the artificial raising of the area to overcome flooding or ground saturation.

Appendix 1: Proposed Model of Settlement Growth during the Middle Ages (Dr Paul Spoerry)

Date of *Burgage*-Style Properties

The *burgage*-style plots, as shown of the seventeenth century map of March, are likely to be medieval in origin, therefore pre-dating the market charter of 1670. Planning of properties was carried out in the medieval period, speculatively without there being a charter, and was finally officially recognised in 1670.

Settlement Plan Analysis and Development

The spur for the establishment of a settlement here was the diversion of the river. The crossing point of the main north-south road then became a focus, and started to draw economic activity away from the pre-existing Saxon focus around St. Wendreda's church.

There are three major elements to the growth of properties in March ford:

- During the late Saxon period a single focus settlement grew up around the river crossing, especially on the south bank as that provides access to Old March. A proto-market place was probably established here.

- Subsequently, a straggle of properties along the riverbank developed. The form suggests that they are medieval. The irregular spacing of properties indicates that they were not part of a 'grand design' but the result of organic growth over some period of time.

- The very regular line of medieval properties on the High Street seems to contain a planned element. It started at the already existing tithe/market place and provided a frontage (along the pre-existing road) of regular properties linking March Bridge with the northernmost part of Old March

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank David White of Construct Reason Limited who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. Judith Roberts managed the project. Rebecca Casa-Hatton was the site supervisor. Andrew Hatton also worked on the site. ~~Caroline Malim~~ JON CANE? produced the illustrations.

Andy Thomas, Acting Senior Archaeology, County Archaeology Office (Development Control), visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

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MAPS CONSULTED

March Map, 17th century (Wisbech Library)
Inclosure Map of 1794 (CRO)
Tithe Map of 1840 (CRO)
OS Map of 1820 (Draft Edition) (CRO)
OS Map March XVI.1.14 (CRO)

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