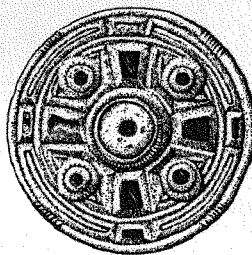


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Archaeological Field Unit

**Post-Medieval Dump Deposits on the Bank of the 'Old River':  
A Recording Brief at No.10 Priory Road, St Ives**

Ben Robinson

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**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. B18

*Commissioned By T.W.Lumley & Son Ltd*

## **SUMMARY**

*Archaeological recording during the groundworks for the construction of a new dwelling on the site formerly occupied by no. 10 Priory Road (TL 3146/7103) revealed post-medieval dump deposits. These represent a deliberate attempt to consolidate the edge of the 'Old River', a channel of the Great Ouse. Water-front remains pertaining to the medieval Priory might be anticipated in the vicinity; perhaps just below or to the north of the investigated trench.*

**POST-MEDIEVAL DUMP DEPOSITS ON THE BANK OF THE  
'OLD RIVER': A RECORDING BRIEF AT NO. 10 PRIORY ROAD, ST IVES.  
(TL 3146/7103)**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

Members of the Archaeological Field Unit carried out monitoring and recording during summer 1996 and 1997 on a plot of land on which no. 10 Priory Road stood until its demolition during 1995. The work was carried out on behalf of T.W. Lumley and Son Ltd during groundworks for the construction of a new house.

**2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

The site lies on the low-lying terrace gravels of the River Great Ouse, overlooking the junction of the present river and a lesser watercourse the 'Old River'. The latter clearly represents the remnant of a more significant channel; perhaps a part of the anastomosed natural course of the Great Ouse which has also undergone some canalisation. The alluviated floodplain of the Great Ouse begins to broaden above St Ives bridge (Hemingford Meadow), and a few miles to the north-east of the town fans out onto the fen edge.

**3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORIC BACKGROUND**

The gravel terraces of the Great Ouse in the locality of St Ives bear strong testimony to the attractions of the area for prehistoric peoples. Stray finds and finds scatters spanning the Palaeolithic to Neolithic periods are well documented (Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments Record). Recent excavations in advance of gravel extraction to the east of the town have revealed funerary monuments, field systems, boundaries and settlement of later prehistoric date (Cams. SMR; Evans, Lucas, Malim, Reynolds & Way; 171-188).

Romano-British activity in the area was similarly intensive; finds scatters representing settlement are abundant. A recent excavation examined the periphery of a cropmark complex to the north-east of St Ives which proved to be associated with third and fourth century AD industrial and domestic activity (Schlee 1995).

There are a few references to Early Anglo-Saxon finds from open ground in the vicinity of St Ives (Cams. SMR), but it is likely that Late Saxon/post-conquest settlement nucleated at 'Slepe', whose site is probably represented by the area around the town's All Saints Church.

Slepe (the Old English name deriving from its location on 'muddy low lying ground by the river' - Mawer & Stenton 1969, 222) was a holding of the Abbey of Ramsey from the late tenth century. The significance of the place was increased by the alleged discovery here of the remains of Saint Ivo (or Ivo), a bishop of Persia. It is probable that the discovery of a Romano-Britain in a stone coffin in the area was sufficient to fuel this unlikely story (Page et al 1932, 210), which was later used to justify the foundation of a cell of the Abbey (with its own church dedicated to St Ivo), and no doubt to spur the profitable development of this holding.

The grant of an Easter fair in 1110 AD and the establishment of a long market area along the river overlooking an existing bridging point greatly raised the economic significance of the settlement. It also drew the focus of the settlement from the church to the present day Broadway-Market Hill area. The fair attained a place amongst the nation's greatest during the thirteenth century; royal patronage and international merchants bolstered the lively regional trade. The large open area on which temporary booths and stalls were initially set up was encroached upon by houses and other premises. Early during the twelfth century dwellings were noted in the market area and by the late thirteenth century seventy tenants of the Abbot of Ramsey and ten of the prior of St Ives were recorded (ibid, 217). By the end of the fourteenth century the fair had declined in importance; a loss which must have stunted St Ives' urban development.

The subject area lies to the south of the priory's presumed inner precinct. 'The Priory', a nineteenth century house with small grounds preserves the name, and almost certainly the location of part of this establishment. A wall fronting priory road retains the *in situ* fabric (including some openings) of a medieval building, which has been Scheduled as the remnants of a priory barn. Medieval masonry has been noted in the garden of the Priory (Cambs. SMR 03594) and in surrounding properties. Small scale excavations soon after the war (ibid) and within the last twelve months (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust) confirmed the presence of medieval features and deposits close to 'The Priory'. The earlier excavation also yielded Roman material indicative of nearby settlement (Michael Green pers. comm.).

Pettis Survey of St Ives of 1728 (Huntingdon County Record Office, SM 16/189) depicts Priory Road and a substantial house on the approximate site of the present 'The Priory'. Houses are also shown on the site later occupied by no.10, which overlook a 'stank', 'Priory Homs' (meadow), and 'Priory Dike'. The 1887 Ordnance Survey map shows a row of small cottages with gardens backing onto the 'Old River' on the site.

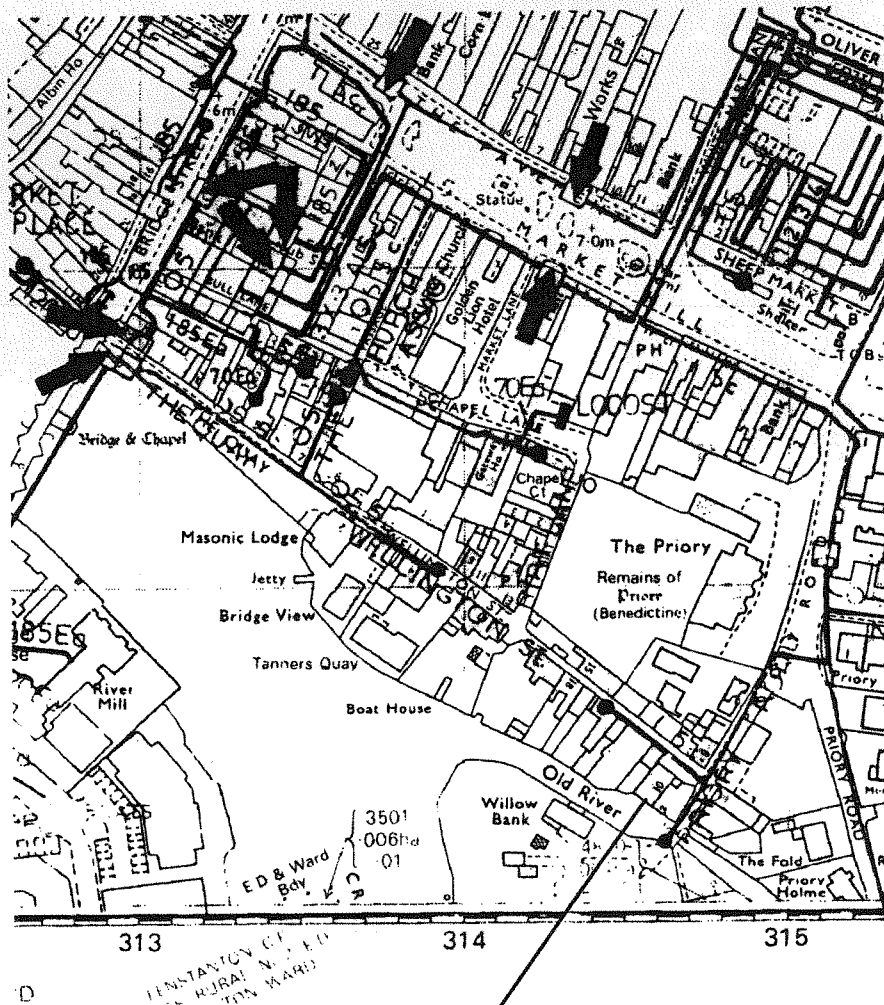
Given the importance of waterborne trade and the prominence of the Priory during the medieval period at St Ives, it is reasonable to assume that the Priory was well furnished with wharfage and that some of this would have been located close to the Priory grounds. The subject site is a prime location for the discovery of structural remains such as waterside revetments, banks, and warehouses, in addition to dumps of rubbish or any other materials which may have assisted the reclamation or stabilisation of the water-front. The low-lying nature of the site held promise for the preservation of waterlogged material.

#### 4 METHODS

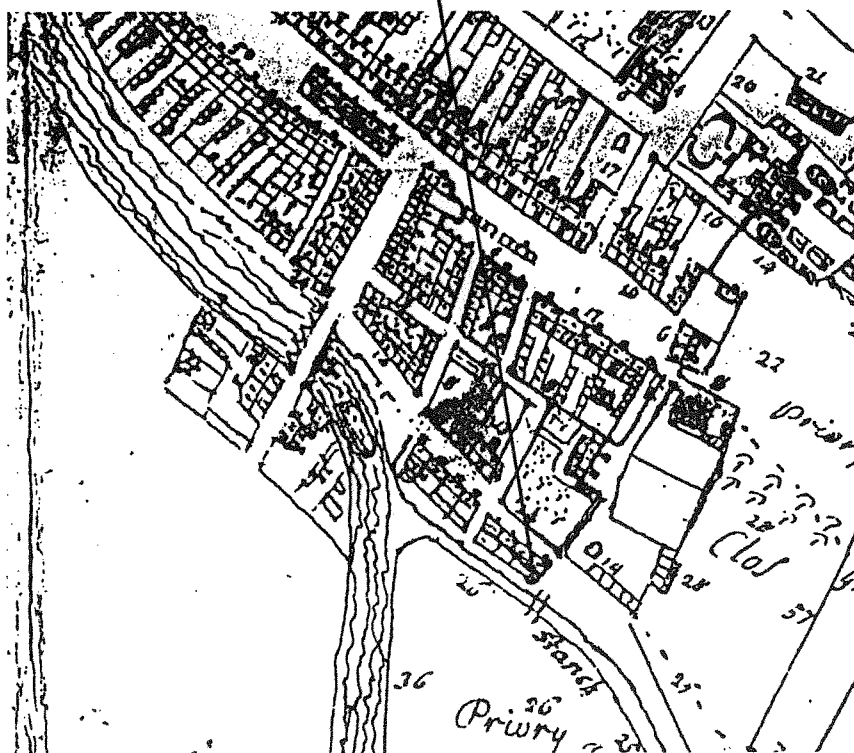
In accordance with the archaeological brief (Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section, September 1995) the archaeological works on site were limited to 'basic archaeological investigation'.

Groundworks associated with the preparation of the site and construction of a dwelling were supervised and monitored. Measured section drawings were complemented by photographs. An attempt was made to recover datable artefacts, by scanning machine-removed spoil and cleaning exposed sections.

Field visits were carried out by Niall Oakey and Ben Robinson. The archive resides at Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit Offices at Fulbourn, Cambridgeshire.



No.10 Priory Road site location



Detail from Pettis' Survey of St Ives, 1728 (Huntingdon Record Office SM 16/189)

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## 5 RESULTS

A trench was machine-excavated approximately 1m behind an existing brick revetment at the river's edge, in order to take foundations for a new (supplementary) revetment. The trench was 0.7m wide, c. 1.6m deep, and ran the length of the property (c. 20m).

The trench revealed that the brick wall between no.10 priory road and no. 26 Wellington Street, had foundations extending to a depth at least 1.6m below existing ground level. Equally deep brick foundations running perpendicular to the course of the Old River were found at 4m, 8m, and 14m south-east of the dividing wall. These comprised yellow unfrosted bricks (11cm x 22cm x 7cm), two brick widths thick, which were keyed into the river front brick revetment. They belong to the former no. 10, a building of approximately one hundred years old (but definitely constructed after 1887).

At the south/east end of the site a deposit of stiff blue-grey clay with occasional yellow brick fragments was observed at a depth of c. 1.6m below existing ground level. This extended c. 5m back (north-west) along the trench and probably formed part of the foundation for the approach to the adjacent modern bridge and lock.

Elsewhere in the trench a poorly sorted but otherwise uniform deposit (1) of very dark brown clayey, sandy silt, with gravel, yellow brick fragments, and post-medieval and modern pot sherds, was observed to a depth of c. 1.6m below existing ground level along most of the length of the property. A similar deposit (2) containing animal bone, glass, nails and brick fragments, was observed at around this depth and below. Pot sherds dating to the eighteenth century (at the earliest) were recovered from this lower level. One sherd which might date from the seventeenth century was recovered from deposit (1); this was the earliest sherd recovered from the site.

At the maximum depth of excavation (1.6m below existing ground level) the water-table was encountered, preventing any further examination of the deposits below. The tops of two pieces of worked wood were observed at this depth, however, adjacent to the brick house foundations. The first of these, a circular stake of c 10cm diameter, was left in situ. The second, the tapering squared tip of a stake (c. 50 cm long, c. 15cm maximum width), was removed. A 2cm diameter drilled hole ran through the stake, c. 45cm from its tip creating a weak point at which the stake had broken in antiquity. The stake was not a suitable candidate for scientific dating.

No features of great antiquity were revealed elsewhere on the site. The ground was 'made-up' for the excavation of the ring beam for the new dwelling; neither this excavation or those for services etc. penetrated anything other than the uppermost recent dumped deposits on the site.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The wooden stakes revealed at the greatest depth of excavation may relate to water-front structures which were in place long before the recently demolished no. 10 was constructed (for example, the remains of medieval or post-medieval wharfage or bank consolidation). Alternatively, they may have been hammered in to brace shuttering for the foundations of no. 10, or for some other purpose during its construction; in which case their re-use from earlier structures cannot be ruled out.

No. 10 was constructed on ground which had been made up with post-medieval and modern rubbish. No definitely dated medieval artefacts were observed within these deposits, suggesting that medieval deposits, if they exist in the area, have not been greatly disturbed by later groundworks.

Such characteristics bode well for the survival of medieval water-front remains in the area. The typical creeping encroachment of river edge dumping suggests that these may be encountered just below or a little to the north of the investigated trench.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archaeological monitoring and recording was commissioned by T.W. Lumley Ltd. Paul Sperry spotted the pottery.

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