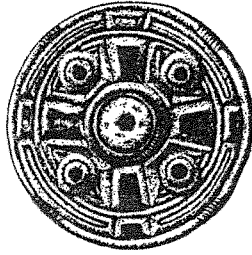


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Archaeological Field Unit

**Land at the Rear of Millpit Furlong, Littleport, Cambridgeshire.
An Archaeological Evaluation**

Mark Hinman

March 1999

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. B45

Commissioned by Buckingham and Sparrow Ltd.

SUMMARY

During March 1999 Mark Hinman of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out a basic archaeological investigation on the site of the proposed residential development on land to the rear of Millpit Furlong, Littleport, Cambridgeshire (TL 566/863). The work was commissioned by Buckingham & Sparrow Ltd. A total of three trenches were opened using a JCB, revealing a sequence of artefactually and archaeologically sterile deposits.

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Land at the rear of Millpit Furlong, Littleport, Cambridgeshire.
An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 566 863)

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 8th of March, 1999 Mark Hinman from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation on the site of the proposed residential development on land to the rear of Millpit Furlong, Littleport. The work was commissioned by Buckingham & Sparrow Ltd. in response to a brief for an archaeological investigation supplied by A Thomas of Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section (Development Control).

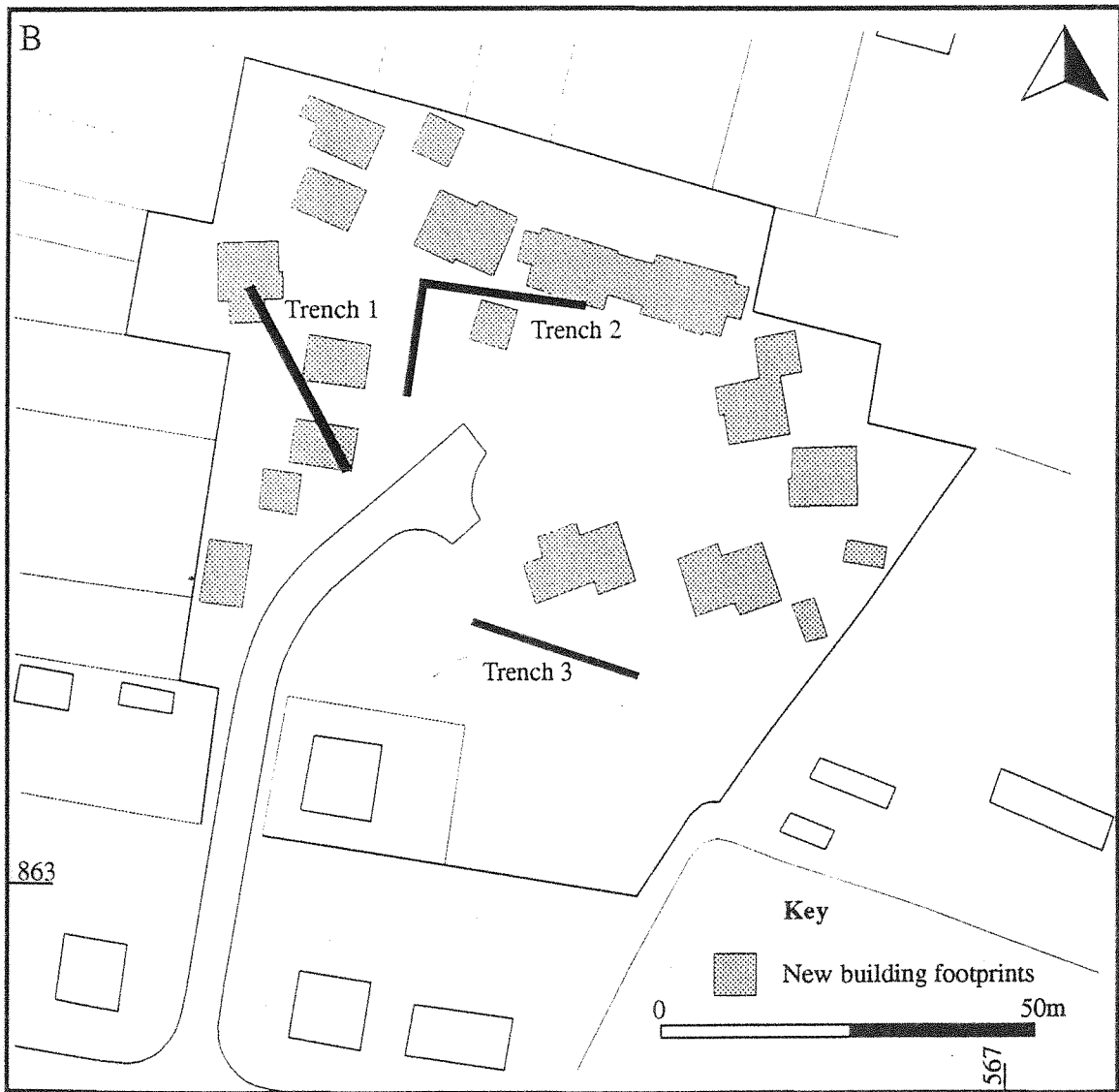
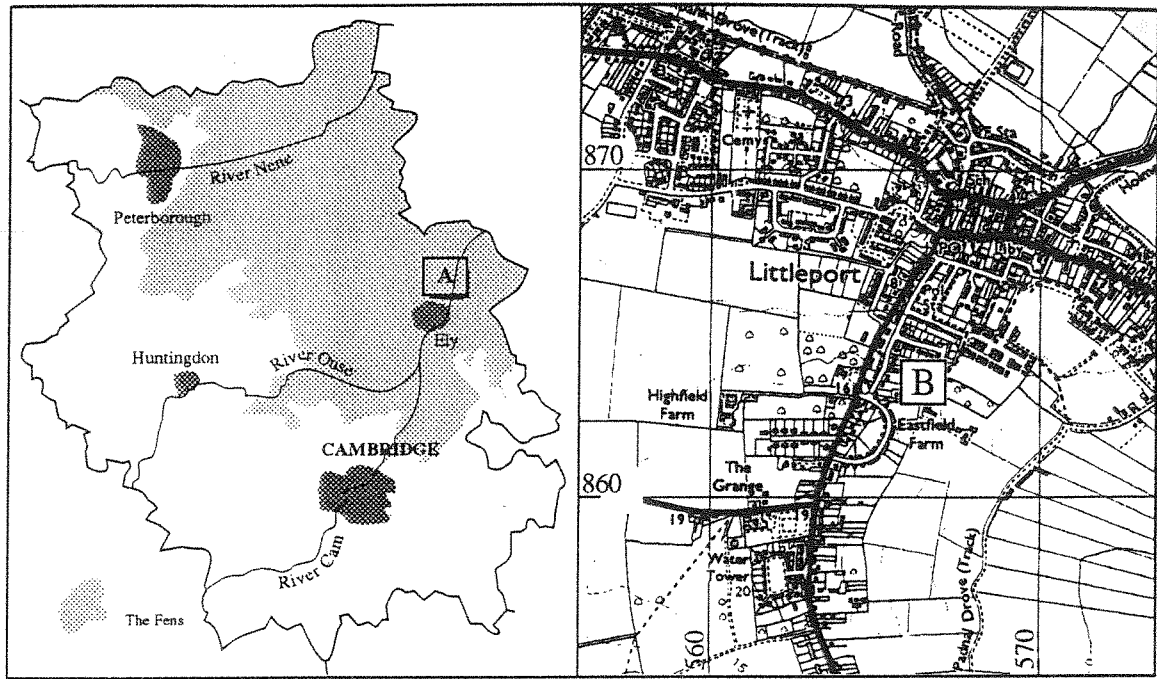
The site lies towards the southern limit of the historic village of Littleport, occupying an area of approximately 0.57ha at approximately 15m OD. The underlying geology is a mixed clay and gravel overlying Kimmeridge Clay. Three trenches were dug using a mechanical digger. The trenches were between 24m and 39m long, the length and position of each trench being determined by the location of dwellings within the proposed development area. The intended layout of Trench 2 was modified slightly due presence of a substantial dump of domestic debris and garden waste within the centre of the area available for investigation.

The site was covered by a clay silt topsoil (0.40m deep) over a single colluvial deposit (0.40m deep), sealing a uniform naturally deposited mixed clay and gravel.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The subject site lies to the south of the historic core of Littleport to the south of Eastfield farm and west of Padnal Drove. The land slopes gently downwards from 15m OD to the west of the site to 10m OD to the east.

The Littleport highland comprises an area of Kimmeridge Clay, capped with glacial sand and gravel surrounded by fen. The fen is traversed by The Old Croft River, formerly the main river channel in the area, which collected the waters of the south-eastern fen basin. Over the years a roddon formed, and came to stand up to 3m higher than the adjacent fen. The surrounding area has experienced peat development and periods of inundation leading to deposition of alluvium and clays. During Saxon and medieval times peat continued to form uninterruptedly (up to around the 3.5m contour) and was only checked by drainage in the late medieval and post-medieval period (Hall 1996, 19).



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Figure 1 Site location and position of archaeological trenches

Prehistoric and Roman remains are recorded in the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) at various points in and around Littleport. Fox (1923) locates Neolithic finds on the edge of the Old Croft River, to the east of the site and reports early bronze or copper axes (*ibid.*, quoting Crawford 1912, British Museum collection and CUMAA) to the south east of site, on the highland of Littleport. The most important early prehistoric remains lie in the south-east of the parish on small rises or islands in the fen. Two sparse flint scatters on the main Littleport island are assigned to the Bronze Age with a thin background scatter of worked flint over the higher sandy ground of the highland. The surrounding Bronze Age landscape consisted of peat fen for most of the time, covering the minor roddons though the roddon of the Old Croft River and those nearby remained exposed and active (Hall, 1996, 25). Roddon silts were deposited along the edge of the channel during the Iron Age.

Waterways were used for transport and communication from the Roman period. Quantities of broken pottery (including Horningsea wares) and stone are reported along the banks of the Old Croft River north of Littleport. There is an 'inferred' Roman road across the Littleport highland along the route of the present High Street to north of the site (Fox 1923). Roman settlement evidence has been found immediately to the north of the Blackbank Drain (SMR Nos. 07221, 07261 and 08425). Roman occupation around Littleport appears concentrated mainly between the 0m and 5m contours rather than on the higher land to the south. The main activity in the area appears to be related to saltern sites and transport along the Old Croft River. The salterns exploited the roddon where brackish water penetrated the small central channel. Site 19 (to the north of Blackbank drain) (Hall 1996, fig. 13) is the farthest inland of any of the known local saltern sites.

Saxon settlement at Littleport was probably based around a hithe where the Old Croft River ran close to the island, although there is at present no archaeological evidence for Saxon settlement on the island. Domesday Book records a vill and it is assumed that the present town covers part (if not all) of the medieval centre. Littleport was allotted to the Bishop of Ely on the formation of the see of Ely in 1109. The church of St. George, to the south of the site, dates from the 14th century and was almost entirely rebuilt in the 15th century and restored in 1857.

The population of Littleport in 1086 is recorded as 31. This rose during the intervening centuries and by the 1563 census the village had 80 householders. By 1676, 556 persons of communicant age lived there. The 1851 census records 3832 inhabitants of whom 2622 were natives of the parish.

During the medieval period the island of Littleport was ploughed in ridge and furrow and the whole area (except the settlement) was given over to arable farming with summer pasturing along the fen edge. Inclosure at Littleport was gradual. 1500 acres were enclosed in early 17th century and 1000 more were ready for inclosure, but final inclosure of the common fields did not take place until 1840. By the 19th century Littleport was a very large village (larger than some of the surrounding market towns) and had non-agricultural industry (Pugh 1967). There are few old secular buildings surviving in Littleport, many of the older properties date to the late 18th/early 19th century.

Drainage of the fens in the post-medieval period considerably increased the level of agricultural productivity and intensive arable farming is currently carried on in the surrounding fen.

An examination of the first edition OS 1 inch map 1824, (Sheet 65, Downham) appears to show open ground, presumably in agricultural use within the development area.

Previous archaeological investigations within Littleport have identified the presence of extensive, well stratified Romano-British remains adjacent to Camel Road, (Macaulay AFU report series forthcoming). Earlier work at Camel Road (Robinson and Mitchell, 1994 AFU Report A 42) and Hardwick Close (Hinman, 1997, AFU Report B013) produced negative results.

4 METHODOLOGY

Three trenches totalling 91m in length (2.4% sample) were opened, using a JCB with 1.5m wide toothless ditching bucket. The overburden was removed in all the trenches until the upper interface of glacially lain deposits was exposed. The underlying boulder clay was not exposed during the course of this evaluation.

Although no archaeological features, deposits or artefacts were encountered photographs were taken of all three trenches. Recording of individual contexts was undertaken using the pro-forma recording sheets of the Archaeological Field Unit. Conditions for recording were poor, being undertaken in the midst of a prolonged period of wet weather. However, at no time did these conditions threaten to affect observation of possible archaeological remains within these trenches.

The decision was taken, after consultation with A Thomas of the CAO, to backfill immediately as the open trenches presented a potential safety hazard for local residents due to the wet weather and rising water levels.

5 RESULTS

Trench 1 aligned south-east - north-west was 28.00m long, located towards the western limit of the proposed development area. No archaeological features were noted and glacially laid sandy gravelly clay was present at between 0.60m (south-east) and 0.80m (north-west) below the present ground surface.

Trench 2 formed an 'L' shape in plan and was located towards the centre and north of the proposed development area. The trench ran from south to north for 16.00m before turning eastwards through 90° and continued on an east-west alignment for a further 23.00m. No archaeologically significant deposits were noted in the base of the trench. Naturally laid sandy gravelly clay was present 0.80m below the present ground surface throughout the trench.

Trench 3 aligned east - west ran parallel to the southern boundary of the site for 24.00m. No archaeological features were noted. Naturally laid sandy gravelly clay was present at between 0.70m and 0.80m below the present ground surface throughout the trench.

The depth of topsoil covering the site remained a consistent 0.40m in depth across the development area.

6 DISCUSSION

No evidence of past human activity either in the form of features, deposits or artefacts was observed during the course of the basic archaeological investigation of the subject site.

The evaluation of land at Camel Road (Roberts 1997, AFU Report A114) and subsequent excavation (Macaulay forthcoming) suggests that the Roman occupation, noted to the north of Blackbank Drain on the Sites and Monuments Record, is concentrated along the edge of the roddon of the Old Croft River. The finds recovered from Camel Road indicate domestic activities, with transport vessels, storage jars, food preparation vessels and table wares. From the presence of glass vessels, and tile and box flue we may deduce that a high status Roman dwelling was located nearby. Small fragments of briquetage suggest salterns in the vicinity, but no evidence for hearths was found on the subject site. Despite metal detecting by members of the AFU very little metalwork was recovered. The absence of coins implies that trading was not carried out on the site. This reinforces the domestic nature of the site, which may have supported less permanently occupied saltern sites in the fen. Roman activity at Camel Road (judging from the recovered pottery) spans the late third to late fourth centuries. The southern extent of this settlement and the potential for peripheral activities relating to either domestic or industrial activities is still unknown despite investigation of the Millpit furlong site. However, investigations are currently being conducted by Archaeological Project Services (APS) on land to the west of this evaluation which have located evidence of Romano-British activity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Buckingham and Sparrow Ltd who commissioned the work, A Thomas of the County Archaeological Office of Cambridgeshire County Council who prepared the brief and to William Wall of the AFU who managed the project.

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Cambridgeshire
County Council

Archaeology

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