

Archaeological Field Unit

**Archaeological Investigations of Land Adjacent to  
Honey Farm, Chatteris.**

S.N.Kemp

1999

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. B56

*Commissioned by Geoff Beel Consultancy*

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## **SUMMARY**

*The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council was commissioned to investigate the archaeological potential of land adjacent to the west of the Sixteen Foot Drain TL431/891 which was proposed for the location of a new irrigation reservoir.*

*Five trenches totalling 160m in length within a 12 ha area were machine excavated. Archaeological remains were sparse and the main features are either recent in date or the result of natural phenomena, and indicate the absence of historic or prehistoric occupation.*

*The results of the archaeological trenching programme show that the area was beyond the area of prehistoric, Roman and medieval settlement as indicated by the desk-based research. Although the cropmarks suggest that later prehistoric settlement may have occurred very close to the fen edge the evaluation shows that at no point did the settlement extend in to what in medieval times was an area wet fen.*

*The evaluation did however locate areas of pre-Barroway Drove Bed peats in which numerous bog oaks still survive. These were once part of an ancient forest which covered much of the Fenland during the early Flandrian. During the Bronze Age sea levels rose and the forest became too wet to support tree growth, however an ideal environment for the preservation of organic remains replaced the forest.*

*Further archaeological work is unlikely to be appropriate.*

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# Archaeological Investigation of Land Adjacent to Honey Farm, Chatteris

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council have been commissioned By Geoff Beel Consultancy on behalf of his client Mr R and J Gowler to investigate the archaeological potential of land adjacent to the Sixteen Foot Drain TL431/891.

Archaeological investigations consisted of desk-based research the results which are outlined under the archaeological and historical background and also field work undertaken on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July 1999.

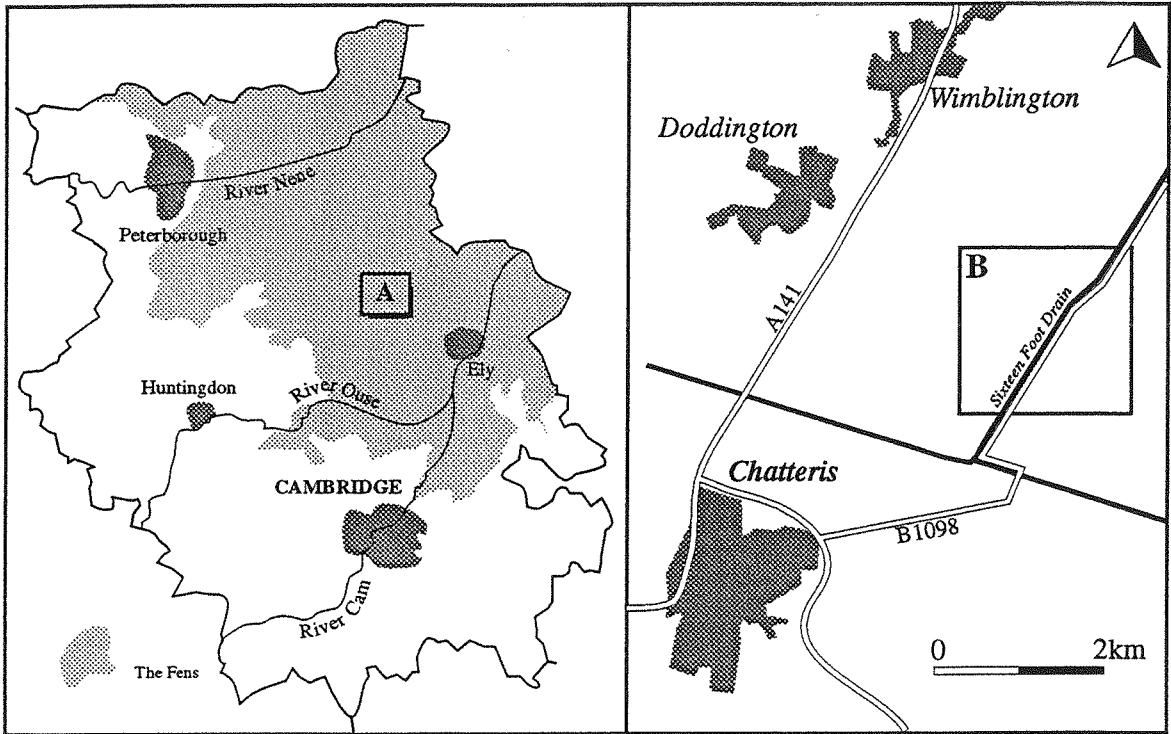
## 2. LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The development will involve the construction of a new irrigation reservoir of 12 ha in size which will lie on the western side of the Sixteen Foot Drain at TL 431/891. Honey Farm lies to the north and Mount Pleasant Farm to the south of the proposed location of the reservoir.

The site of the irrigation reservoir lies about 3km to the north-east of Chatteris on the eastern edge of a broad expanse of low lying fen known as Benson's Fen and Block Fen. The site is overlooked by Honey Hill to the east and lies just above the 0m OD contour. Honey Hill is at about 5m O.D at its highest point and throughout the Holocene has formed part of Chatteris Island.

## 3. GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The geology of Honey Hill consists of March Gravels and Ampthill Clays which in areas are overlain by Anglian Tills (Gallois 1988). Boreholes taken within the location of the proposed reservoir provide a clear indication of the stratigraphy and the types of archaeology likely to be encountered. On the western side of the drain the stratigraphy is likely to be a clayey peaty topsoil overlying the Barroway Drove Beds, the latter formed by a Bronze Age marine inundation dating from about 3500 to 2800 BC (Hall and Coles 1994; 14). These beds in turn immediately overlie the



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**Figure 1** Site Location Plan showing location of archaeological trenches in relation to development area

Amphill Clays. The Barroway Drove Beds occur at about 0.50m below the surface and are approximately 0.70m in depth.

During the Flandrian changing environmental conditions led to wetter and drier periods and included the Barroway marine inundation in this part of the Fenlands. The dry land on which settlement was possible was therefore at times limited. Honey Hill is situated on the far north-eastern peninsular of Chatteris and it is likely that more extensive settlement areas would have been available further to the south. However, Honey Hill lies at about 5m O.D at its highest point and has been dryland over the last 9000 years and thus has always had the potential for settlement.

The climatic and environmental alterations which resulted in the Barroway marine inundation and the fresh water peat growth began in the Bronze Age between 2750 and 2450 BC (Hall 1987). Peat growth resulted in settlement sites and activity areas on the former fen edge becoming rapidly buried. Such sites could potentially contain important environmental remains. Peat growth continued to impact on the occupiable space of the island until the impact of the seventeenth century drainage schemes was felt.

#### **4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The archaeological and historical resources used for this assessment include:

Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photographs  
Sites and Monuments Record (SMR)  
OS maps: 1:25,000 - 1:50,000 1926 to 1999.  
Victoria and County History. Vol. IV.  
Fenland Project. Vol. 2, 6, 9 and the English Heritage Fenland Survey volume.  
Fenland in Roman Times.  
Borehole Logs  
British Geological Survey. Map 173 and associated Memoir.

An investigation of the SMR and archaeological resources for the area indicate that no archaeology is known from within the proposed irrigation reservoirs. However, searches have highlighted the abundance of archaeology in the immediate vicinity of the proposed reservoir.

Prior to the Bronze Age a major watercourse ran through Benson's Fen. Roddons associated with the Prehistoric river system have been plotted from aerial photographs and shown in the Fenland Project volumes. Analysis by the Fenland Project suggests that much of Benson's Fen was marsh land, either tidal or inter-tidal, at this time (Hall 1992; 87). In the Neolithic much of the parish was dry land, even so

the soils appear to have been inappropriate for settlement (Hall 1992; 84). Certainly during the Bronze Age many of the sites were restricted to the higher March and Terrace Gravels suggesting that marine incursions played an important part in defining the pattern of prehistoric settlement.

Three Bronze Age barrows lie on Honey Hill and form part of a larger dispersed barrow field which lies on the eastern side of the Island. Even though one of these barrows is a scheduled monument the site has been ploughed since the 1950's (Hall 1992; 89). Finds include the remains from this monument of a collared urn and several areas of burning and charcoal lie in proximity. Although flint artefacts are known from these areas there are not enough finds to suggest occupation. Evidence for occupation on Chatteris Island is sparse, where it occurs it is on higher land away from the barrows which are consistently close to the fen edge (Hall 1992; 89).

One of the largest Iron Age sites on the Island, totalling 2.5 ha., lies about 1km to the east of the research area and has areas of intense burning, bone and pot concentrations. The largest known Iron Age site (10 ha) lies about 3km to the south at Langwood fen. The site was evaluated in 1995 by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit and showed the presence of houses, compounds/yards pit clusters with artefact rich layers within houses and a sheep/goat burial (Evans 1995). Two other smaller Iron Age sites lie on Honey Hill. Both have traces of paddocks parts of which seem to integrate with the later Roman sites which lie in the area.

The SMR show the complexity of Iron and Roman archaeology in this area with cropmarks covering Honey Hill and extending down to the Sixteen Foot Drain. Five Roman sites are known from Honey Hill. The richest of these lies adjacent to the large Iron Age site mentioned above. One of the Bronze Age barrows on Honey Hill is suspected to be a Roman Temple (Hall 1992; 94). Directly to the north-east of the largest of the reservoirs lies the scheduled ancient monument 23, a large Roman settlement which in the 1940's consisted of earthworks of 15 earthen rings interpreted as houses. Excavations at the site in 1924 found houses, hearths and pottery. The site has since been ploughed (Hall 1992; 94). Recent cropmark evidence shows that these remains extend to the western side of the drain and directly to the north of the reservoir.

Hall suggests that Wimblington and Chatteris were dominated by a regional centre at Stonea Grange with smaller agricultural sites and salterns around. Chatteris itself was away from the salterns which occupied tidal areas and the economy of the sites adjacent to the proposed irrigation reservoirs was most likely to have been based on stock management (Hall 1992; 72 and 94).

The Fenland Project found no Saxon remains and none are listed on the Sites and Monuments Record for Honey Hill. A manor site belonging to the Wendy family is believed to lie about 0.5 km to the east of the proposed reservoirs. Thirteenth and fourteenth century finds have been recovered from the manorial site. By the seventeenth century the peat in the surrounding fens had risen to 3.5m OD and in the



mid-seventeenth century the Sixteen Foot Drain was excavated to drain the fens around Chatteris. Since then drainage has resulted in the desiccation and erosion of the peat land surfaces.

## **5. METHODOLOGY**

The aims of the evaluation were to report on the presence nature and condition of any archaeological remains present within the development area. In addition to the desk-based research above this investigation entailed machine excavation of trenches totalling 160 m in length and at 1.8m in width (Figure 1).

All trenches were excavated down to expose the natural Ampthill clays.

On exposure any archaeological features were cleaned to clarify stratigraphic relationships and planned. Hand excavation occurred to inform on the nature and date of the archaeology encountered. Excavated features were recorded using a combination of photography, section drawings and a written contextual description as was outlined in the specification for archaeological works.

Trench plans are the result of a local co-ordinate survey undertaken with a Zeiss Recelta total station. The survey was rectified for presentation along with the Ordnance Survey digital map for the site (Figure 1).

## **6. RESULTS**

Five trenches were excavated of variable length. All were excavated down to expose the Ampthill clays.

The basic stratigraphy in every trench was up to 0.30m of topsoil which overlay a mottled grey brown sandy silty clay of between 0.50 and 0.75m in depth known as the Barroway Drove Beds. Below these deposits a layer of desiccated peat with little organic structure overlay the Ampthill clays. The peat was between 0.20 and 0.50m in depth and contained frequent bog oaks commonly aligned with the prevailing wind direction which is from the north-east.

Only in Trench 1 were archaeological remains identified. The archaeology consisted of three parallel north-south orientated ditches. All were shallow, about 0.30m in depth and cut into the Barroway Drove sediments. Their only surviving fills were of a dry fibrous peat. Although no finds were found, the nature of the fills within these

ditches suggests that they are medieval or post-medieval in date as prior to this the area would have been too dry for any peat growth at this site.

A line of peat-filled claying pits extends along most of the length of Trench 1. These features result from attempts to stabilise the soil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not found within the other trenches.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The results show that the area was beyond the area of prehistoric, Roman and medieval settlement as suggested by the desk-based research. The rapid change from archaeologically-rich areas to sites such as this suggest a strict delineation between occupiable and unoccupiable space. This may have much to do with the geology, the fen edge and the types of activities which could have occurred in the zone between settled areas and the wet fens. It is apparent that the March gravels were particularly important to the occupation of the area during the prehistoric and early historic periods. Honey Farm is situated on the gravels and this is the western-most limit of the archaeology recorded by aerial photography. It is apparent that this division is real and that archaeological remains have not in this location been masked by the build-up of peat. Further archaeological work is therefore unlikely to yield any additional evidence for prehistoric or historic utilisation of this landscape.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly I wish to thank all of the members of the Archaeological Field Unit who have been involved in the project, particularly Scott Kenney who assisted with the survey and Jon Cane who prepared the illustrations.

I have also appreciated the assistance of the Tim Malim the Project Manager who has managed the archaeological work.

Finally, I wish to thank Mr Gowler for funding the archaeological evaluation and providing an insight in to the wider geology of his farmland and Mr Geoff Beel for his assistance.

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