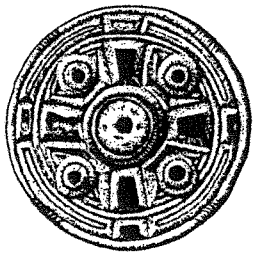

Archaeological Field Unit

Archaeological Investigations of Land Adjacent to Mount Pleasant Farm, Chatteris.

S.N.Kemp

1999

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. B57

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 Sixteen Foot Drain TL430/886 which was proposed for the location of a new irrigation reservoir.

Three trenches totalling 75m in length within a 0.6 ha area were machine excavated. Archaeological remains are sparse and it the main features are either recent in date or the result of natural phenomena indicating the absence of occupation

The results of the archaeological trenching programme show that the area was beyond the area of prehistoric, Roman and medieval settlement as suggested 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 the fens.

Further archaeological work is unlikely to be appropriate.

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

Archaeological Investigations of Land Adjacent to Mount Pleasant Farm, Chatteris.

INTRODUCTION

The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council was commissioned by Geoff Beel Consultancy on behalf of his client Mr Bradshaw to investigate the archaeological potential of land adjacent to the Sixteen Foot Drain TL430/886.

Archaeological investigations consisted of desk-based research the results of which are outlined under the archaeological and historical background and also field work undertaken on the 10th and 19th of August 1999.

LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The development involves the construction of a new irrigation reservoir of 1.5 ha in size and lies on the eastern side of the Sixteen Foot Drain at TL 430/886. Honey Farm lies to the north and Mount Pleasant Farm to the west 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.

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 at the proposed reservoir provide a clear indication of the stratigraphy and thereby the types of archaeology likely to be encountered. On the eastern side of the Sixteen Foot Drain the stratigraphy is likely to be up to 0.60m of clayey peaty topsoil immediately overlying Ampthill Clays.

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

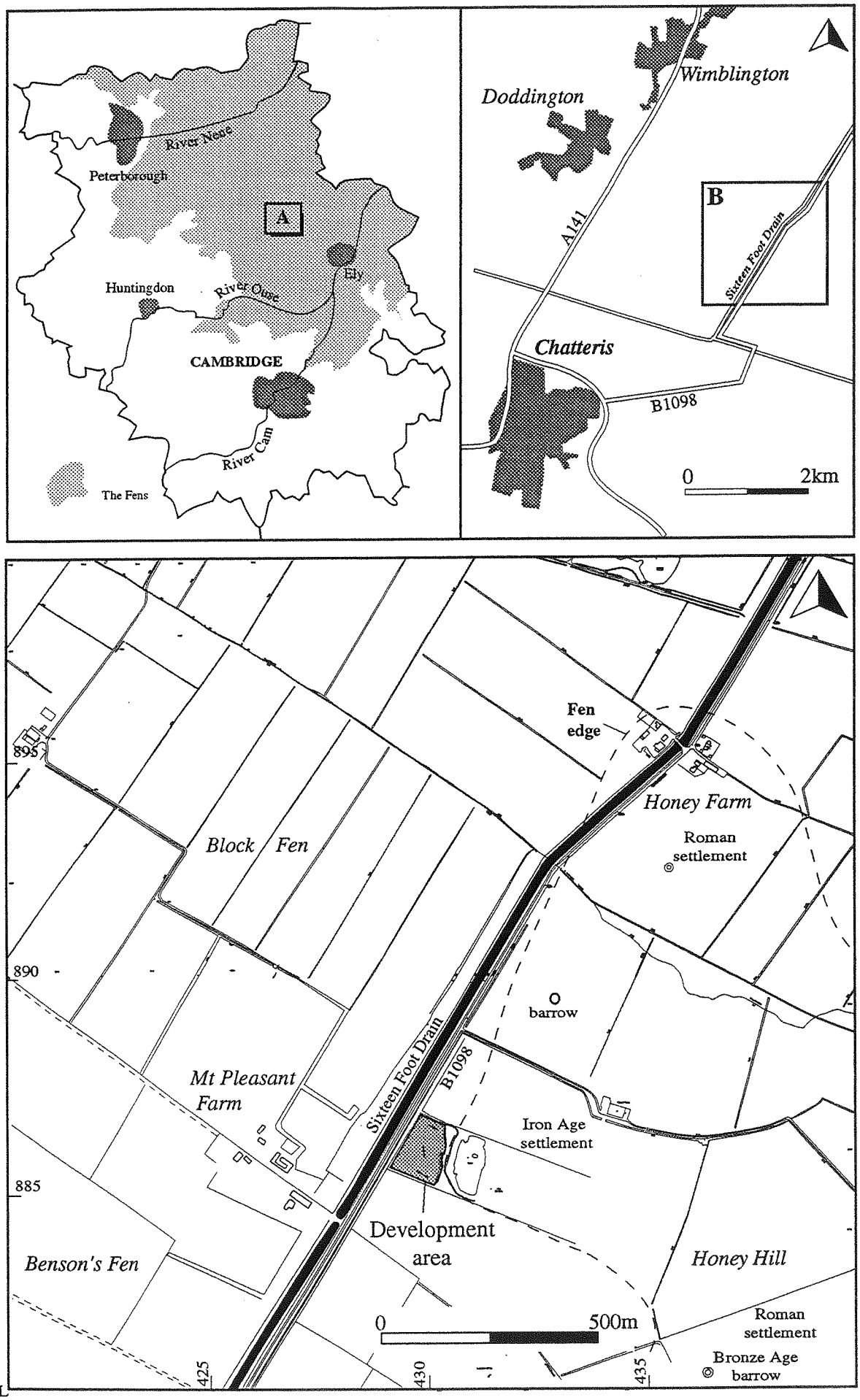

Figure 1 *Site Location Plan showing location of archaeological trenches in relation to development area*

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 changes which resulted in the Barroway marine inundation and the growth of the fresh water peat began in the Bronze Age between 2750 and 2450 BC. Peat growth resulted in settlement sites and activity areas which formerly lay on the margins of the fens becoming rapidly buried. These sites could potentially contain important environmental remains. Peat growth continued to affect the occupiable space of the island until the post-medieval drainage schemes of the seventeenth century.

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 reservoir. However, searches have highlighted the abundance of archaeology in the immediate vicinity of the 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. This 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 shows 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 had 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. At this time the eastern boundary to the site, now marked by a ditch, was probably the limit to the fens. Since then drainage has resulted in the desiccation and erosion of the peat land surfaces.

Hall has suggested that the sinuous boundary ditch which lies on the eastern side of the site is the medieval fen edge (Hall pers. comm.). In such a case, although a medieval manorial site lies close by, and presumably medieval field systems were associated with the site, the reservoir is unlikely to have had intense medieval activity areas.

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 outlined above this investigation entailed machine excavation of trenches totalling 75m in length at 1.8m in width (Figure 1).

All of the linear trenches were excavated down to expose the natural clays or gravels.

On exposure archaeological features were cleaned to clarify stratigraphic relationships. Hand excavation occurred to inform on the nature and date of the archaeology encountered. Excavated features were recorded using a combination of photography, and a written contextual descriptions.

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).

RESULTS

Trenches 1 and 2 revealed approximately 0.2 of topsoil over a mottled orange clay. These trenches contained plough marks and evidence of pan-busting which occurred several years earlier according to Mr Bardshaw. Trench 3 had a thin layer of gravel, likely to be the March Gravels, which lie over, and are mixed in with the Ampthill Clays at the eastern end of the trench. The gravels extended two thirds of the way along the trench and then petered out into clay.

A bipartite field drain ran north-south across Trench 1. In Trench 3 a line of blue-grey clay had been brought to the surface possibly as a result of drainage works. As this deposit appeared to be fairly 'in tact' this is probably further evidence for recent small scale disturbance. A further area of disturbance was seen in the trench. Investigation showed that this contained traces of organic material (probably straw) and thus is probably very recent in date

Two amorphous areas of burning were seen at the western end of Trench 1. Flecks of burnt organic material, not dense enough to be charcoal of a diameter greater than 5mm, and heated clay were found, but no artefacts were present. The irregular shape and the 'glassy' ash slag residue found nearby suggests a lightening strike on a tree some time in the past. These remains were very broken up and had obviously been heavily disturbed by the plough, therefore no further investigation occurred.

CONCLUSIONS

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.

The topsoil was relatively thin and there was no evidence of peat surviving in any of the trenches on the site.

The area has been marginal to settlement and has shown no evidence of occupation. Archaeological remains are sparse and it the main features are either recent in date or the result of natural phenomena. Further archaeological work is unlikely to be appropriate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly I wish to thank all of the members of the Archaeological Field Unit who have been involved in the project, particularly Judith Roberts who undertook the field work for this part of the project, Steve Ouditt who assisted with the survey and Jon Cane who prepared the illustrations.

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