

Archaeological Field Unit

**PRIOR'S FEN, BANK FARM, THORNEY, PETERBOROUGH  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

Rebecca Casa Hatton

September 2000

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**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. B 76

*Commissioned by Mr Andrew B Dennis on behalf of P J Thory Ltd*

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Dr. Rebecca Casa Hatton

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## SUMMARY

*Between the 5th and 8th September 2000 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCCAFU) undertook an archaeological evaluation on land located in Prior's Fen, north of Bank Farm, in the Parish of Thorney, Peterborough, some 2.5km north of Whittlesey.*

*The site is located near the Fen Edge in an area of known archaeological activity, with particular reference to the presence of Bronze Age round barrows. Therefore, the aim of the archaeological evaluation was to identify and interpret deposits (namely buried soils) and features in the context of the prehistoric landscape.*

*The evaluation comprised an assessment of the desk-based sources including aerial photographs followed by the excavation of 1260m of linear trenching.*

*Notwithstanding the presence of prehistoric finds in the proximity of the proposed development, no archaeological features or deposits (including buried soils) were encountered. The apparent absence of archaeological features is consistent with the results from the aerial photographic evaluation. Even allowing for some degree of disturbance caused by modern farming, sites still would have been preserved by partial burial under fen deposits. On the whole it seems that the evaluation area was never occupied.*

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**PRIOR'S FEN, BANK FARM, THORNEY, PETERBOROUGH**  
**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**  
**(NGR TF 264 006)**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

Between the 5th and the 8th of September 2000 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological evaluation on land at Bank Farm, Prior' s Fen, Thorney, Peterborough (**Fig.1**). The work was carried out to satisfy a planning condition in advance of development.

**2 SITE BACKGROUND**

**2.1 Planning Background**

The proposed development entails the creation of an irrigation reservoir (Planning Application No. 99/00993/MMFUL) in an area of 8.4 hectares. Given that the site is located near the Fen Edge in an area of high archaeological potential (below), the possibility of there being prehistoric remains within the application site determined the requirements for an archaeological evaluation.

The work was carried out by the AFU for Andrew B Dennis, Land and Water Consultant, on behalf of P. J. Thory Ltd, in accordance with a brief produced by Mr Ben Robinson of Peterborough City Council Archaeological Services (PCCAS), Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery (Brief for Archaeological Evaluation, 26/07/2000).

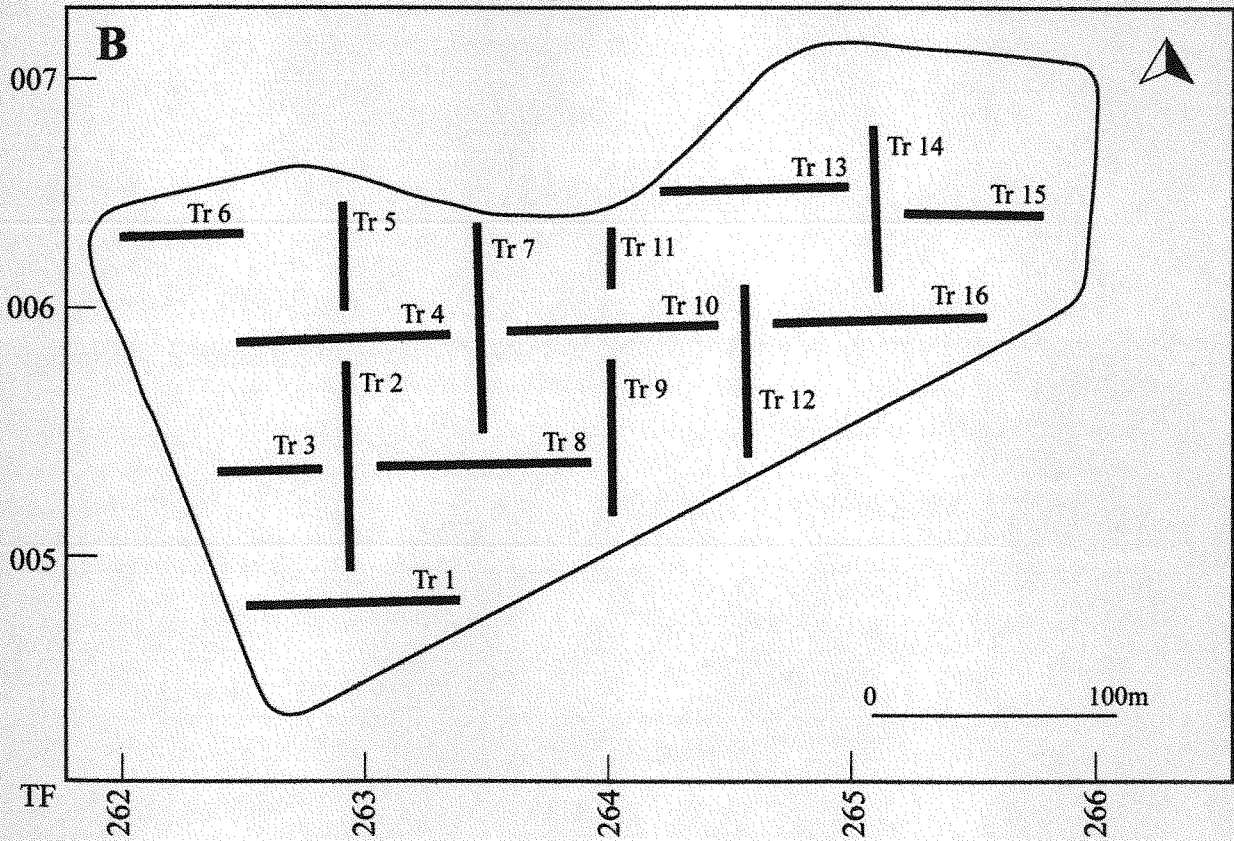
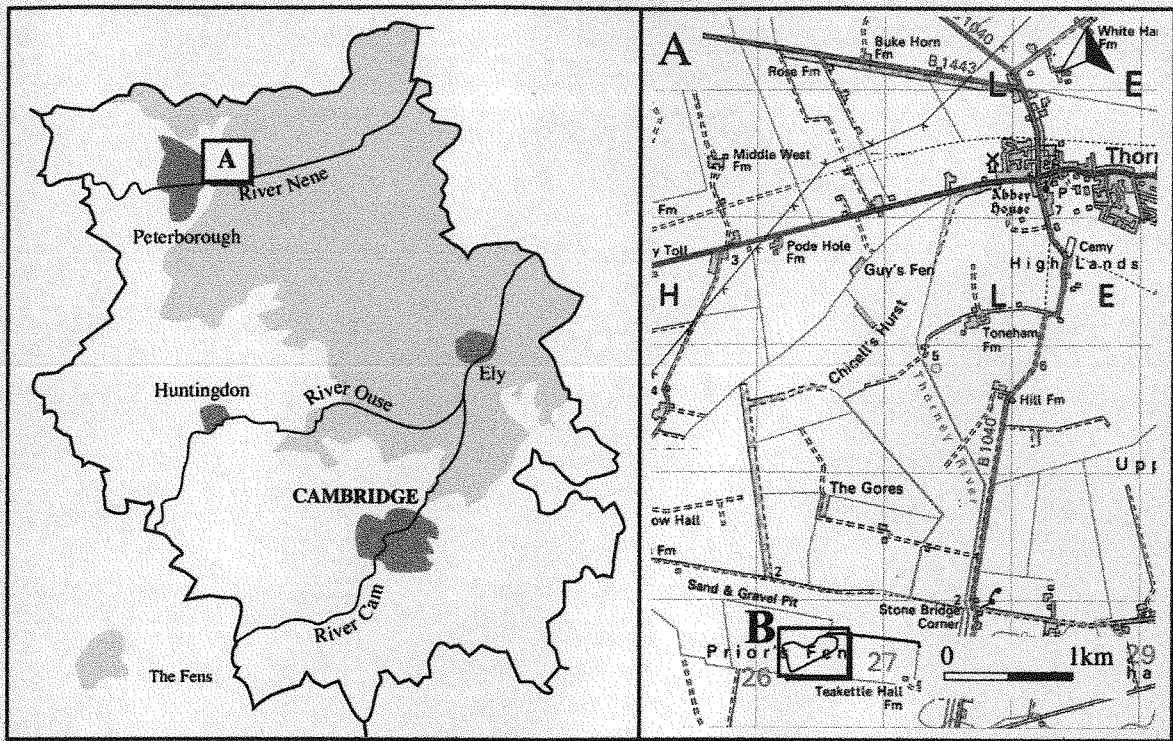


Figure 1 Trench location plan

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## 2.2 Topography and Geology

At the time of the archaeological investigation the development site comprised c. 8.4 hectares of well drained land that was under cultivation.

It is centred on NGR TF 264 006 at an average height of 2m AOD.

The local geology consists of Kellaway Beds and Oxford Clays which are overlain by a sequence of Flandrian deposits (Lower Peat, Barroway Drove Beds and Nordelph Peat, the latter intermittently overlain by Terrington Beds in the northern margins of the parish), and Quaternary gravel deposits (including the March gravels of Thorney Island itself) (Horton 1989, BGS Sheet 158).

The borehole survey conducted in the western portion of the development site shows a consistent sequence with black (peat) soil to a depth of 0.30-0.40m, and brown-orange clay (becoming sandier to the east) to a depth of 0.80m-1.0m, on top of brown sand and gravel (T G Drilling Ltd 1998)<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.3 Historical and Archaeological Background

Thorney is a large parish of 8813 hectares, having acquired some 1600 hectares from Whittlesey in 1933 (Pugh 1967, 219). As a result, Northey was severed and Prior's Fen became part of Thorney.

Thorney formed the north-west corner of the Isle of Ely in the old County of Cambridgeshire. Tradition has it that it was the site of a Saxon anchorite cell founded in the 7th century by Saxulf, founder and Abbot of Peterborough. After the Danish incursions, the island was abandoned and overgrown with thorn bushes until St Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester, founded a monastery in the 10th century (Haigh 1988, 86).

The original name of Thorney, *Ancarig*, meaning 'anchorite island', is recorded in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle and refers to the presence of the anchorite. It later became *Tornige*, i.e. 'thorn island' (Reaney 1943).

During the Middle Ages Thorney was the demesne of the abbey. Parts of the monastic buildings were converted into a church long after the Dissolution of the monasteries. After the Dissolution, the estate became the property of the

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<sup>1</sup> The report was kindly provided by Mr Andrew B Dennis, Land and Water Consultant, for P. J. Thory.

Dukes of Bedford. The family earned a reputation for enlightened estate management. The first proposal for the complete drainage of the Fens was made at the beginning of the 17th century under the aegis of the Duke of Bedford. The Dukes also provided brick cottages for their tenants, together with water supply and schools for the village.

Evidence of early prehistoric settlements at Thorney is scanty and limited to chance discovery. In particular, 1 Km to the south of the site a Mesolithic handaxe (PCCSMR 05376a) and a Neolithic flint scraper (PCCSMR 05376b) were recovered during the Fenland Survey (Hall 1987). The apparent absence of settlements is probably due to the fact that most of the Thorney Fens are now covered by deposits which mask the Neolithic landscape. This latter was based on a roddon-dominated system (Hall 1987, 48)

During the Bronze Age Thorney was part of an extensive peninsula of land stretching from Eye through Borough Fen where creek and river systems once operated, to Thorney Island itself.

The Bronze Age landscape is characterised by the presence of small clusters of round barrows spaced out along the contemporary Fen Edge, on deposits of Upper Barroway Drove silty clays and, in most cases, on mixed gravel-clay soils. The distribution of the barrows indicates that the fen edge acted as a *focus* due to its significance as an essential grazing resource (Hall 1987, 49).

The PCCSMR records a number of such barrows.

To the south of the site:

- PCCSMR 05376, some 38m in diameter and 1m high (Hall, *ibid.*; CUCAP).
- PCCSMR 05388, some 20m in diameter 0.3m high (Hall, *ibid.*).
- PCCSMR 05065, some 26m in diameter and 1.2m high (Hall, *ibid.*).

To the west of the site, at less than 1.5km away:

- PCCSMR 05064, a round barrow some 23m in diameter and 0.3m high (Hall, *ibid.*).
- PCCSMR 06851, a round barrow together with a ring ditch, linear ditches, enclosures and a hut circle (Hall, *ibid.*; CUCAP).
- PCCSMR 10916, a round barrow together with a scatter of lithic finds (Hall, *ibid.*; CUCAP).

To the north of the site, less than 1km away:

- PCCSMR 05041, a round barrow 23m in diameter and 0.5m high, and a ring ditch (Hall, *ibid.*).
- PCCSMR 05042, a round barrow 30m in diameter and 1m high, together with a ring ditch and lithic tools (Hall, *ibid.*; CUCAP; Palmer 1992).
- PCCSMR 03109, a round barrow some 30m in diameter and 0.5m high,



later stage, sometime during the Romano-British period, a farmstead was established with associated fields and enclosures. The fields appear to have respected the site of the barrow (Cutler & Ellis 2000).

Only a limited area of dry land under the present village was available during the Saxon period. Drainage of land may have started at that time, with the construction of the Catswater canal<sup>2</sup>. Some reclamation of land continued in the course of the Middle Ages when agriculture was only possible on the upland of Thorney island. Evidence for agricultural practices survives in the form of earthwork strips in pasture fields.

### 3 AIMS AND METHODS

Due to the site's position in an area of archaeological potential, with particular reference to the evidence for prehistoric occupation (above), the aim of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence and quality (i.e. degree of preservation and significance) of archaeological remains within the subject site.

Prior to fieldwork, an informal desktop assessment was undertaken in accordance with the brief produced by Mr. Ben Robinson of PCCAS. The results of the assessment have been incorporated in the present report.

Additionally, an aerial photographic appraisal was commissioned to Air Photo Services by the CCCAFU as part of the same requirements. The text of the appraisal has been reproduced in *Appendix II*.

Both the desktop assessment and the aerial photographic appraisal aimed to provide information necessary to determine archaeological strategies, with particular reference to the location of the evaluation trenches.

Sixteen evaluation trenches were excavated for a total length of 1260m using a toothless ditching bucket 1.80m wide. They were located across the site on a regular grid, in order to provide maximum coverage of the proposed development area.

Trench sections were cleaned to test for the presence of buried soils. The natural stratigraphic sequence exposed in each trench was described. A scale

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<sup>2</sup> Uncertainty rests over the origin and dating of the Catswater canal.

plan of the site was drawn showing the location of the excavated trenches within the development site. Finally a photographic record was compiled which consisted of colour slides, colour and monochrome prints. Due to the absence of archaeological features and deposits, no further recording was undertaken.

The recording system and the post-excavation procedures followed the standard AFU practice.

#### **4 RESULTS (Fig. 1)**

All sixteen trenches were excavated to the top of the natural gravel. The trenches were all 1.8m wide and between 50m and 100m long; their depth varied from 0.55m to 1.2m. No archaeological features or deposits were found in any of the trenches. Trenches 13 and 15 contained evidence of possible palaeochannels (ancient filled-in river channels) on an approximately north to south orientation. Ditches were observed in Trenches 5 and 10, both cut through the topsoil, suggesting that they were relatively recent. Traces of recent field boundaries were also observed in aerial photographs (*Appendix II*), and the ditches recorded in the trenches may be part of that same system.

In addition, a series of parallel ditches on a north to south alignment had been recently hand dug through the topsoil and through a white-light yellowish brown silty deposit underneath it. They were spaced at regular intervals of 1.50m-2.50m, their depth varying according to the thickness of the topsoil and the silty deposit through which they were cut. The ditches were dug in relatively recent times in order to bring clay to the surface to mix with the light peat topsoil, and improve water retention. Their presence was noted in all the evaluation trenches.

Detailed descriptions of all the trenches are listed in *Appendix I*.

#### **5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Natural deposits of river-born alluvium were encountered at a depth ranging between 0.50m and 1.20m throughout the site, their formation entailing the presence of creek and river systems that operated in the prehistoric Fen.

Notwithstanding the presence of prehistoric finds in the proximity of the



proposed development, no archaeological features or deposits (including buried soils) were encountered. The apparent absence of archaeological features is consistent with the results from the aerial photographic assessment (*Appendix II*). Even allowing for some degree of disturbance caused by modern ploughing and the recent attempts to improve the soil, sites still would have been preserved by partial burial under fen deposits. On the whole it seems that the site was never occupied in the past.

The apparent lack of prehistoric activity on this site may be explained by flooding episodes and deposits of river-borne alluvium associated with the presence of palaeochannels which rendered Prior's Fen unsuitable for occupation. The distribution of finds, especially Bronze Age round barrows, indicates that *foci* of activity may have been confined to the higher gravels along the Fen Edge.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the following people for their valued assistance in respect of this evaluation report: Mr Andrew B Dennis for P. J. Thory Ltd. who commissioned the project and co-operated during the work; Mr Ben Robinson of PCCAS, Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery, who monitored the project; Mr Roger Kilham of Fen Farming Co Ltd who offered his assistance.

Thanks are also due to the staff of the AFU and, in particular, to Ms Aileen Connor, the liaison officer in charge of the project, who managed the project and also edited the present report; Mr. Andrew Hatton who supervised the archaeological work, and Caroline Malim who drew the illustrations in the text.



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NVRC         Nene Valley Research Committee

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## MAPS

OS TF 20SE 1978, 1:10000

AP Overlay (based upon OS TF 20SW 1978 1:10000)

BGS 158, 1:50000

## *Appendix I: Trench Descriptions*

All trenches were 1.8m wide.

Trench 1 (100m long), west-east oriented. Located in the south-west corner of the site and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.50m (west end) and a maximum depth of 0.90m (east end). Dark peat topsoil 0.5m thick sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.15m thick) in the eastern half of the trench only. It sealed a layer of light brown clayey silt (0.35m thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Trench 2 (100m long), north-south oriented. Located to the north of Trench 1, perpendicular to it, and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.75m (north end) and a maximum depth of 0.9m (south end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.43m thick at the south end and 0.2m thick at the north end) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.18-0.25m thick). It sealed light brown clayey silt (0.22-0.27m) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Trench 3 (50m long), west-east oriented. Located to the west of Trench 2, perpendicular to it and excavated to a depth of 0.85m. Dark brown peat topsoil (0.35m-0.4m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.17m thick at the west end and 0.3m thick at the east end). This sealed an earlier deposit of light brown clayey silt (0.15m thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Trench 4 (100m long), west-east oriented. Located to the north of Trench 2, perpendicular to it and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.6m (east end) and a maximum depth of 1.22m (west end). At the west end dark brown peat topsoil (0.6m thick) sealed a layer of light yellowish brown silty clay (0.23m thick) above a white-light yellowish brown silty deposit (0.13m thick). The latter sealed a layer of light brown clayey sand over natural sand and silty clay. At the east end of the trench the topsoil was 0.3m thick and sealed a white-light brown silty deposit over natural gravel and silty clay.

Trench 5 (50m long), north-south oriented. Located to the north of Trench 4, perpendicular to it, near the north edge of the site. It was excavated to a minimum depth of 0.7m (north end) and a maximum depth of 1m (south end). At the south end of the trench dark brown peat topsoil (0.4m thick) sealed white-light brown silt (0.34m thick) above light brown silty clay (0.26m-thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay. At the north end of the trench the peat topsoil was 0.33m thick. It sealed the same light yellowish brown silty clay layer (0.12m thick) observed in the western portion of Trench 4, and a deposit of light brown sandy clay (0.25m thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Some 20m from the north end a ditch crossed the trench on a north west to south east alignment. The ditch was 1m wide and cut through the topsoil and the natural gravel. It may represent a former boundary.

Trench 6 (60m long), west-east oriented. Located to the west of Trench 5, perpendicular to it, in the north west corner of the site, and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.8m (east end) and a maximum depth of 0.9m (west end). At the west end of the trench dark brown peat topsoil (0.35m thick) sealed white-light brown silt (0.25m thick) above a light brown sandy deposit (0.25m thick) over natural sand. In the eastern portion of the trench the peat topsoil was 0.45m thick. It sealed the same light yellowish brown silty clay layer (0.35m thick) observed in the western portion of Trench 4 and in the northern portion of Trench 5, that overlay natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Trench 7 (100m long), north-south oriented. Located to the east of Trench 4, perpendicular to it, and excavated to 0.65-0.7m deep. At the south end of the trench dark brown peat topsoil (0.3m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.25m thick). It sealed a layer of light brown silty clay (0.15m thick) over natural gravel and clay. In the northern portion of the trench the topsoil was 0.35m thick. It sealed the white-light yellowish brown silt (0.3m thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Trench 8 (100m long), west-east oriented. Located to the south of Trench 7, perpendicular to it. It was excavated to a minimum depth of 0.6m (west end) and a maximum depth of 0.8m



(east end). At the west end of the trench dark brown peat topsoil (0.32m thick) lay over white-light yellowish brown silt (0.28m thick) on natural gravel mixed with silt, sand and clay in variable concentrations and extents. At the east end of the trench the topsoil was 0.4m thick. It sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.25m thick) which was above a layer of light brown silty clay (0.15m thick) over natural clay and gravel.

Trench 9 (75m long), north-south oriented, and excavated to a depth of 0.75m. In the southern portion of the trench dark brown peat topsoil (0.35m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.18m thick). This sealed a layer of light brown clayey silt (0.1m thick) and a layer of silty clay (0.12m thick) on natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay. In the northern portion of the trench the topsoil (0.3m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.25m thick) which overlay a layer of light brown silty sand (0.2m thick) over natural sand and gravel.

Trench 10 (100m long), west-east oriented, and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.65m (east end) and a maximum depth of 0.85m (west end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.45m to 0.5m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.45m thick at the west end and 0.15m thick at the east end) over natural sand and small patches of gravel (with large pebbles up to 10cm in diameter).

Near the east end a ditch crossed the trench on a north west to south east alignment. The ditch was only partially visible in plan. It cut through the topsoil and the natural gravel, and may represent a former boundary.

Trench 11 (25mx1.80m), north-south oriented. Located to the north of Trench 10, perpendicular to it, and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.72m (north end) and a maximum depth of 0.8m (south end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.43m to 0.38m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.37m to 0.34m thick) over natural silt and sand, and small patches of gravel (with large pebbles up to 80mm in diameter).

Trench 12 (100mx1.80m), north-south oriented. Located to the east of Trench 10, perpendicular to it, and excavated to between 0.67m (south end) and 0.7m deep (north end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.32m to 0.38m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.16m thick). It sealed a deposit of light brown silty sand (0.16m to 0.18m thick) over natural gravel mixed with silt, sand and clay in variable concentrations and extents.

Trench 13 (90mx1.80m), west-east oriented. Located to the north of Trench 12, perpendicular to it, near the north edge of the site, and excavated to 0.7-0.75m deep. At the west end dark brown peat topsoil (0.3m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.23m thick). This overlay a light brown silty sandy deposit (0.22m thick) on natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

At the east end the topsoil (0.35m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.25m thick). This overlay a deposit of silt that was interpreted as the fill of a palaeochannel some 28m wide, on a north to south course. The eastern side of the palaeochannel was located at approximately 21m from the east end of the trench.

Trench 14 (100m long), north-south oriented. Located to the east of Trench 13, perpendicular to it, near the west edge of the site. It was excavated to between 0.75m deep (south end) and 0.9m deep (north end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.35m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.25-0.35m thick). This sealed a layer of light brown silt (0.15- 0.2m thick) on natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

Trench 15 (60m long), west-east oriented. Located to the east of Trench 14, perpendicular to it, and excavated to a minimum depth of 0.55m (east end) and a maximum depth of 0.7m (west end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.25-0.3m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.1m to 0.15m thick). It sealed a layer of light brown silt (0.2m to 0.25m thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay. This overlay another deposit of silt which was interpreted as the fill of a palaeochannel of uncertain width on a north to south course. The western side of the palaeochannel was located at approximately 5m from the east end of the trench.

Trench 16 (100m long), west-east oriented. Located to the south of Trench 14, perpendicular



to it, near the south-east corner of the site. It was excavated to a minimum depth of 0.7m (east end) and a maximum depth of 0.95m (west end). Dark brown peat topsoil (0.3-0.35m thick) sealed white-light yellowish brown silt (0.22m thick at the west end and 0.1m thick at the east end). It sealed a layer of light brown silt (0.31-0.38m thick) over natural gravel mixed with variable silt, sand and clay.

*Appendix II: The Aerial Photographic Appraisal (by Roger Palmer MA MIFA)*

*Photographs examined*

Cover searches were made at Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs and of my own collection (Air Photo Services, Cambridge). Specialist archaeological photographs had been taken of features west and south-west of the Assessment Area between 1949 and 1990. On those flights, nothing was recorded closer than 250m from the Assessment Area. Land within the Assessment Area was recorded only on routine vertical photographs.

*Source: Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs*

Vertical photographs

RC8-AT 108-109	25 March 1975	1:13650
RC8-AT 137-139	27 March 1975	1:13650
RC8-EF 142-144	25 March 1982	1:10000
RC8-KnBH 224-226	13 June 1988	1:10000

*Base maps*

A base map at a scale of 1:10000 was available and used for this rapid appraisal and provides the background for the figure in this report. (Background reproduced from part of Ordnance Survey 1:10000 sheet TF20SE, © Crown copyright. Air Photo Services Cambridge, Licence AL 52788A0001.)

*Photo interpretation and mapping*

All photographs were examined using slight (1.5x) magnification and viewing them as stereoscopic pairs when possible. Natural and recent features were sketched on to the 1:10000 base map and later transferred to a digital copy. Ditched features, representing adjacent archaeological features mapped as part of the Fenland Survey, were digitally transferred to the final drawing reproduced in this report.

COMMENTARY

*Soils*

The Soil Survey of England and Wales (SSEW 1983) shows the area to be glaciofluvial drift (soil association 873) in a larger area of marine alluvium and fen peat (soil association 851a). The soils and geology are described in greater detail by Hall (1987, 48) and French and Pryor (1993, 94).

*Archaeological features*

No archaeological features were identified within the Assessment Area – the closest being some 250m to the south-west where they form part of an extensive system of fields and droves which continue west and north of the features shown in this report. Hall's maps (1987, figures

29-33, 35) explain the absence of archaeological features in the Assessment Area as they show it to have been 'dry land' only in the neolithic period – a time from which little remains that can be identified from the air.

#### *Non-archaeological features*

Traces of what may be roddons, or former water courses, have been mapped. These show as light-toned bands which most probably indicate silt-filled channels. Part of a fen edge is also mapped, showing its location combined from information recorded in 1975 and 1982.

A series of parallel ridges is mapped on land west of the Assessment Area. These are most likely to result from 'recent' cultivation and include what is almost certainly a former field boundary which does extend into the Assessment Area.

A small pond(?) was cut across the drain on the south side of the Assessment Area (at TF26540038) between 1982 and 1988. On its north side is a broadening of the north-south drain and together the two features may have been cut to provide an earlier mini reservoir.

#### *Land use*

All fields within the study area have been in arable use on all dates of photography.

### RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that no further examination of aerial photographs is undertaken for this assessment.

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