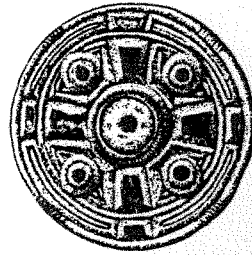


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**Swan Bridge Farm, Fen Road, Parson Drove,  
Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation**

Rebecca Casa-Hatton

2001

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. B86

Commissioned by John Martin and Associates

# Swan Bridge Farm, Fen Road, Parson Drove, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation

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May 2001

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Report No. B86

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## **SUMMARY**

*On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2001, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 0.475 hectares of land off Fen Road, Parson Drove (TF 3676 0840) by staff of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit. The work was carried out in advance of a proposed housing development.*

*Eight trenches were excavated across the site to ascertain the presence or absence of archaeological remains. Besides the evidence for nineteenth and twentieth century activity in the form of a roadside ditch and land drains, no archaeological remains and/or deposits were uncovered. Lack of archaeological evidence is likely to be due to the location of the development site away from the roddons that had been occupied in Roman and medieval times.*

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>RESULTS</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>7</b>
	<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	
	<b>Figure 1: Site Location Plan</b>	<b>2</b>

# **Swan Bridge Farm, Fen Road, Parson Drove, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation (TF 3676 0840)**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2001, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 0.475 hectares of land off Fen Road, Parson Drove (TF 3676 0840) by staff of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (AFU). The project was commissioned by John Martin and Associates in advance of a proposed housing development (Planning Application No. F/YR01/0104/F). The work was carried out according to a brief for archaeological evaluation issued by the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Officer (Thomas 2001). The project was managed by Judith Roberts (AFU).

## **2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

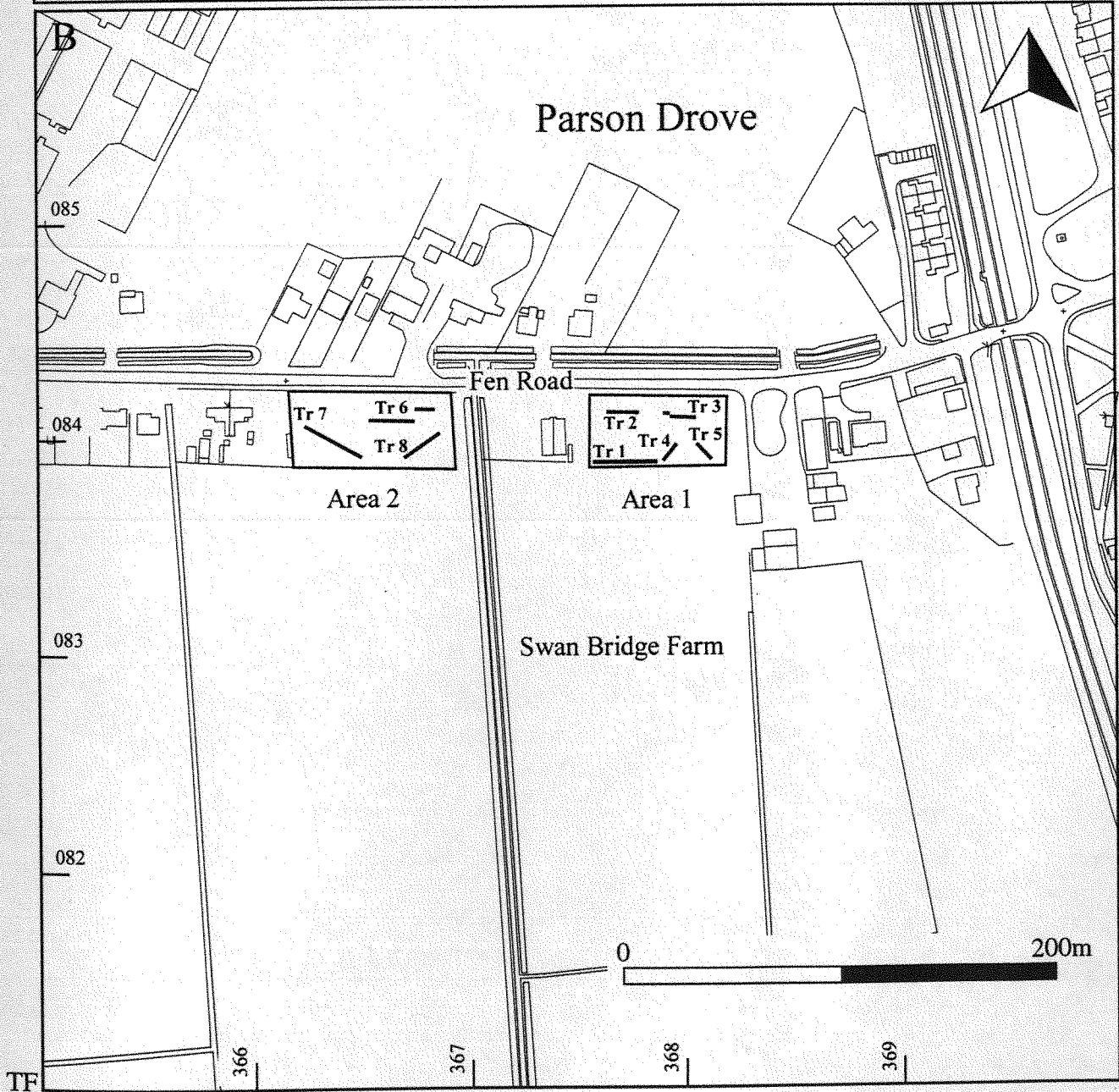
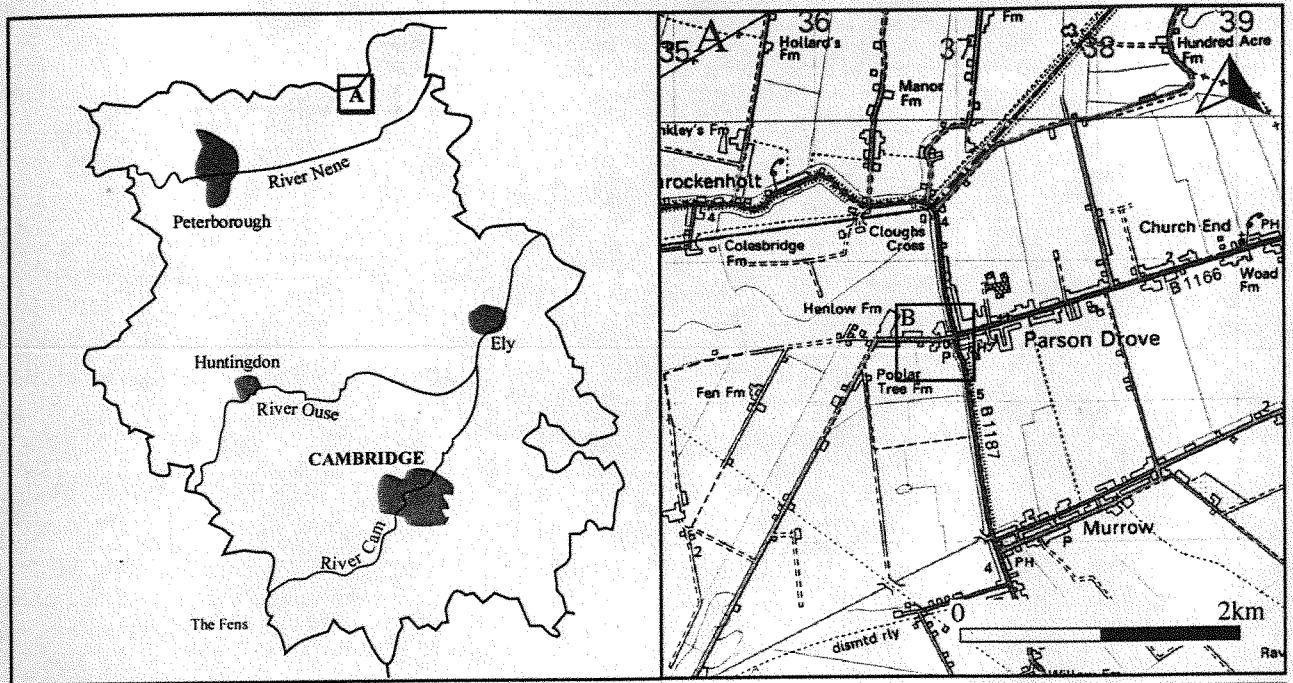
The geology around Parson Drove consists of Flandrian deposits (mostly marine silty clays) that cover the whole of the present surface. A freshwater phase caused deposition of peat on the edge of the silts and clays. Brown silt occurs on top of the peat.

Parson Drove is a linear village located *c.* 10km west of Wisbech and 7km south-west of Leverington in the north-west part of Cambridgeshire. The proposed development site lies at the western end of Fen Road, the main route through the village, at a height of 2.25m OD. At the time of the archaeological investigation it comprised two rectangular areas (Area 1 and Area 2) of 0.475 hectares in total, presently separated by a private property (Fig. 1).

## **3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Sites and Monuments Record of Cambridgeshire County Council (SMR) shows a number of archaeological remains within the parish of Parson Drove. In addition, aerial photographic surveys of the area have identified a series of cropmarked settlement sites dating to the Roman period (references in SMR and Hall 1996).





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Figure 1 Site location

Finally, field-walking surveys have located finds from many cropmark sites known from aerial photographs, confirming a Roman date (Hall, 1996). The combined archaeological evidence suggests a long period of predominantly rural activity. In particular, there are records of intense Roman occupation at the fen-edge on the higher silts of the roddons that were used as communication routes. The medieval system of narrow and long ditched fields altered the Roman landscape with the introduction of artificial drains and banks.

### **Prehistoric**

Earlier prehistoric finds (namely lithic implements) are known in very small numbers from the Wisbech region. They are concentrated on the pre-Flandrian gravel outcrops at Greys Moor, in the parish of Elm. Elsewhere in the silt-lands of the Wisbech region the Flandrian deposits were unable to support human habitation until the Roman period (Hall 1996, 164 ff.).

### **Roman**

During the Roman period the earliest phase of occupation occurred on the marine silts that, by then, had emerged from the sea. Cropmark remains on the firm silt of the roddons are indicative of settlements. In particular, droveways and small enclosure systems appear to have been associated with a livestock-based economy that exploited the grazing resources of the fen-edge. For instance, in closer proximity to the development site are SMR 3802, SMR 3794, SMR 10588 and SMR 10628. Uncertainty rests on the interpretation of the finds at Swan Bridge where two parallel ditches (a droveway?) of unknown date were uncovered together with Roman pottery. Circles visible as soilmarks could have represented drainage-gullies for corn and hay stacks (Hall, *ibid.*). An example is represented by SMR 3805 to the south-east of the development site. The crop-marks include a cluster of circles near linear ditches of a field-system.

Besides the evidence of field-systems and livestock management, a possible saltern with evidence for *briquetage* has been identified on a roddon some 1.5km to the west of the development site (SMR 10583; Hall 1996, Site 6).

A site of uncertain interpretation is located c. 1.5km to the east of the site (SMR 06325; Hall 1996, Site 14). It does not lie on a roddon and is not associated with cropmarks or saltern remains. The site produced complete pots as early as the first century, being possibly associated with a perished wooden dwelling.

The main settlement type at Parson Drove is in contrast with the situation for the western areas of the Wisbech region where evidence suggests an economy dominated by salt production (saltern) that benefited from the presence of

brackish water in active roddons and peat for fuel. The absence of evidence for saltern and the presence of field-systems could indicate that some of the roddons in the Parson Drove area were no longer active by the time of the Roman occupation.

The absence of villa-estates and/or major farmsteads, together with the presence of the Fen Causeway across March and the southern part of the Wisbech region (linking *Durobrivae* to Caister by Norwich), has been taken as evidence that the local economy may have been controlled from the large sites in the March area (Hall, *ibid.*).

## Medieval

Besides the evidence of early Saxon funerary activity from Wisbech, mid Saxon settlements have been identified on slightly raised silty areas north of Parson Drove, in the parish of Tydd St Giles. Based on documentary records, Elm and Wisbech may have had pre-Norman origins (Reaney 1943). The best evidence for a Saxon presence in the core of the Wisbech area is represented by the surviving remains of inner phase of a field system. Pottery from the surveyed fields would indicate a late Saxon date (Hall, *Ibid.*).

Elsewhere, the linear settlement plans and the field systems seem to point to a medieval origin for most of the villages in the Wisbech region. The village of Parson Drove sits on the higher silt of a roddon. Its origin is probably linked to a second stage of land reclamation, as suggested by the presence of fourteenth century pottery from larger outer fields. The reclamation may have started in the twelfth century, as part of a large scale plan implemented by the bishop and convent at Ely that owned the region at *Domesday* (Hall, *Ibid.*). Evidence for a fourteenth century origin for the village of Parson Drove is further corroborated by the place-name that first appears in documentary sources of that period. 'Drove' derives from the Old English *draf*. Uncertainty rests over the origin of the first element, Parson, possibly deriving from the name of the owner, as with many droves in the area (Reaney 1943, 277).

The medieval landscape is also characterised by an artificial drainage and flood defence system. In particular, the village of Parson Drove (with the eastern part of the Wisbech region) was defended against fresh water by the Fen Bank. Its main brook, the Sea Dyke on the southern border of the parish ran through the Sea Bank that kept out marine flood water on the west.

The original village nucleus developed to the east of the Fen Bank, the now redundant parish church of St John the Baptist (thirteenth century) representing the *fulcrum* of development (SMR 3824). Parson Drove was originally a township and chapelry of Leverington and became a separate ecclesiastical district under the Leverington Rectory Act of 1870. Its manorial history is linked to that of Leverington, with the exception of Throckenholt. According to documentary sources, Throckenholt, a County Farm Estate (Malim 1990) to the north of the development site, was granted by the bishop of Ely to Thorney Abbey in the twelfth century. A chapel (or hermitage) was



built on the site of the present Trockenholt farm house (SMR 09944). It was demolished sometime after the middle of the sixteenth century (Pugh 1967, 197 ff.). The chapel/heritage is the traditional site of the burial place of a local saint, St Godric.

### **Post-medieval**

The only event affecting the landscape was the enclosure of the droves. An Act of 1841 was issued to deal with the droves, commons, banks and wastelands of some of the parishes in the region. The enclosure of Leverington, of which Parson Drove was a township (above), was completed in 1843 (Hall, *Ibid.*). The enclosure of pieces of common land beside Fen Road (formerly Parson Drove) reduced the size of what was originally a green and wide road (Pugh, *Ibid.*).

Much of the highest ground of the early medieval fields is now planted with orchards. The origin of the fruit industry in the Wisbech region dates from the middle of the nineteenth century after the introduction of the railway system (Hall, *Ibid.*).

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains prior to development of the land.

Seven trenches (Tr. 1-7) were excavated using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket 1.6m wide. The presence of a modern roadside ditch made it necessary to shift the position of Trenches 3 and 6 away from the original layouts. The length of trenching was 160m, totalling 256sqm, i. e. a 5.4% sample of 0.475 hectares. The trenches were spread across the area of the proposed development in order to obtain maximum coverage thus increasing the possibility of discovering any archaeological features. On request of the contractor, the central portion of Area 1 was not evaluated in order not to interfere with the foundation of the proposed dwelling to be erected between plots 6 and 7.

The modern ground surface and subsoil (when present) were removed to a depth where the natural silty clay deposits were exposed, between 0.60m and 0.35m below the present ground surface.

A general plan of the site was produced to show the location of the excavated trenches within the development area, and a photographic record compiled which consisted of colour slides, colour and monochrome prints.

All trenches excavated during the evaluation were described, giving details of topsoil, subsoil and natural geology visible in the base of the trenches.



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

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

### **AREA 1**

#### **Trench 1**

Trench 1 (15m long) ran east to west, parallel to the south boundary of Area 1. The removal of the topsoil and subsoil to a depth of 0.50m (west end) and 0.36m (east end) exposed the natural silty clay deposits.

There was no evidence of archaeological features and/or deposits.

#### **Trench 2**

Trench 2 (30m long) ran east to west, parallel to the north boundary of Area 1, i.e. Fen Road. The topsoil and subsoil were removed to a depth of 0.50m (west end) and 0.56m (east end).

The excavation of the trench revealed the presence of a nineteenth century roadside drainage ditch that had been cut through the subsoil. The ditch was 3.5m wide and 0.70m deep.

#### **Trench 3**

Trench 3 (15m long) ran east to west, parallel to Fen Road, east of Trench 2. It consisted of a short portion (3m long) on the same alignment as Trench 2 that revealed the continuation of the roadside drainage ditch. A longer portion was located 1m further south in order to expose the southern edge of the feature and determine its width. The topsoil and subsoil were removed to an average depth of 0.50m.

#### **Trench 4**

Trench 4 (10m long) ran north-east to south-west. It was located to the east of Trench 1. The removal of the topsoil and subsoil to an average depth of 0.35m exposed the natural silty clay.

There was no evidence of archaeological features and/or deposits.

#### **Trench 5**

Trench 5 (10m long) ran north-west to south-east. It was located to the east of Trench 4. The removal of the topsoil and subsoil to an average depth of

0.35m exposed the natural silty clay.

There was no evidence of archaeological features and/or deposits.

## **AREA 2**

### **Trench 6**

Trench 6 (30m long) ran east to west, parallel to Fen Road. It consisted of a shorter portion (8m long) on the same alignment as Trench 2 in Area 1 that revealed the continuation of the roadside drainage ditch. A longer portion (22 m long) was located 4m further south to avoid the feature, the presence of which had already been established in the shorter portion further north. The topsoil and subsoil were removed to a depth of 0.55m (west end) and 0.59m (east end).

Besides the drainage ditch, there was no evidence of archaeological features and/or deposits.

### **Trench 7**

Trench 7 (30m long) ran north-west to south-east. It was located in the south west corner of Area 2. The removal of the topsoil to an average depth of 0.35m exposed the natural silty clay.

There was no evidence of archaeological features and/or deposits.

### **Trench 8**

Trench 8 (20m long) ran north-east to south-west. It was located in the south east corner of Area 2. The removal of the topsoil to an average depth of 0.35m exposed the natural silty clay.

There was no evidence of archaeological features and/or deposits.

## **6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

A series of land-drains and a roadside drainage ditch parallel to Fen Road (Trenches 2, 3 and 6) represented the only identifiable activity on the proposed development site. All features were sealed by the humic topsoil of recent formation.

The absence of archaeological remains on the development site is consistent with the known archaeological and geological background of the area, with particular reference to the evidence for land use and settlement on roddons in Roman times. The development site is located on lower silt, off the

surrounding roddon system that offered better settlement conditions in Roman times, as suggested by the presence of dense cropmarks.

The development site is located to the west of the flood bank, the Fen Bank, that defined the edge of the original medieval settlement. The presence of the Fen Bank and its main brook to the south, the Sea Dyke, indicates that the area was threaten by fresh water floods. As in Roman times, the site was marginal, being possibly used as sheep pasture, the higher silt of the roddons providing drier and firmer soil conditions suitable for settlement occupation and, with the advent of the railway system in the nineteenth century, for the Wisbech-based fruit-growing and market-garden industry. The presence of nineteenth and twentieth century drains across the development site is further evidence that fresh water floods were still affecting the area to the west of the Fen Dyke.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to thank John Martin and Associates who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Judith Roberts. Rebecca Casa-Hatton was the site supervisor. Bob Hatton also worked on the site. The illustrations were produced by Scott Kenney.

The brief for archaeological evaluation was written by Andy Thomas, County Archaeology Officer, who visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

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