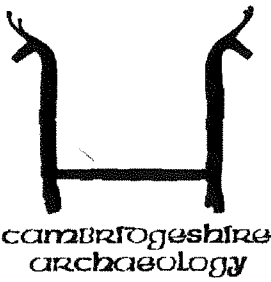


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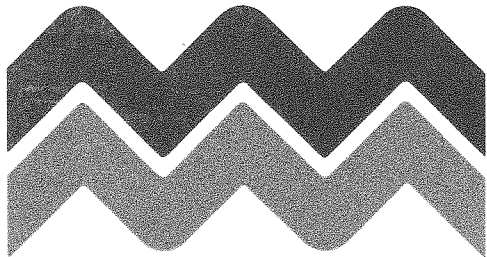


**An Archaeological Assessment
at Eye, near Peterborough, 1992**

Ken Welsh

On behalf of
Peterborough City Council

Report No. 2



**Cambridgeshire
County Council**

Ken Welsh

1992

Summary

In December, 1992, Cambridgeshire Archaeology carried out an archaeological assessment of land to the north of Eye High Street, and adjacent to the former fen edge. Five trenches were opened using a mechanical excavator. Three prehistoric pits, a ditch and several modern features were recorded in the southern half of the site. The lower, northern end, proved to be waterlogged and had to be left after initial machining.

Introduction

From 14th to 19th December, 1992, work was carried out to assess the archaeological potential of an area of land on the fen edge at Eye (*Figure 1*) for Peterborough City Council who plan to construct housing on the site.

The site (*Figure 2*) is situated immediately to the north of the properties which line the High Street and lies on a north-facing slope running down to the new by-pass and Borough Fen beyond. Archaeological potential of the site was suspected due to the known concentration of prehistoric and later activity along the fen edge. The proximity of the Roman canal, Car Dyke, raised the possibility that the area was used for associated purposes, for example storage of goods intended for transportation.

Background

The site is located on the edge of a peninsula and lies on Oxford clay overlain by mixed boulder clay and fen gravels. The situation of Eye, almost completely surrounded by fen, gave rise to its name from Old English *eg*, meaning 'island'. Work by the Fenland Project (Hall, 1987) has demonstrated that the position of the fen edge here has altered little since prehistory, moving only a little further south in the Medieval period. This is due to the relative steepness of the edge of the peninsula on the north side of Eye.

Little material of early Prehistoric date has been found although a few chance finds of Mesolithic and Neolithic flint tools have been made. Several Bronze Age barrows have been located (*Figure 1*, 1, 2 and 3) on the Eye peninsula along with quantities of late Bronze Age pottery (4). The Iron Age is represented by cropmarks of linear ditches and possible hut circles (5) but these may have been Romano-British, and an occupation area producing pottery sherds and bone (6).

Several sites of Roman date occur in the area. At least three of these have produced finds which had been described as saltern material. However, Gurney (1981) has reassessed the material and has concluded that the recorded bricks and firebars were used for other purposes. A site to the south-east (7) produced roof-tile and pottery as well as a small cemetery. To the north-east of the village, three sites have been identified; one was fairly large (8) and produced roof tiles, pottery and other material; the others (9, 10) were small and may have been agricultural. The major Roman feature is Car Dyke which skirts the western edge of the village. For many years considered to be a Roman canal for transporting fen produce, it has also been interpreted (Simmons, 1979) as a catchwater which would have protected fenland grazing from flooding. Two sites have been discovered adjacent to Car Dyke in this area. At the first (11), large quantities of tile are present and it may represent a kiln site or dumped material from a wharf. The

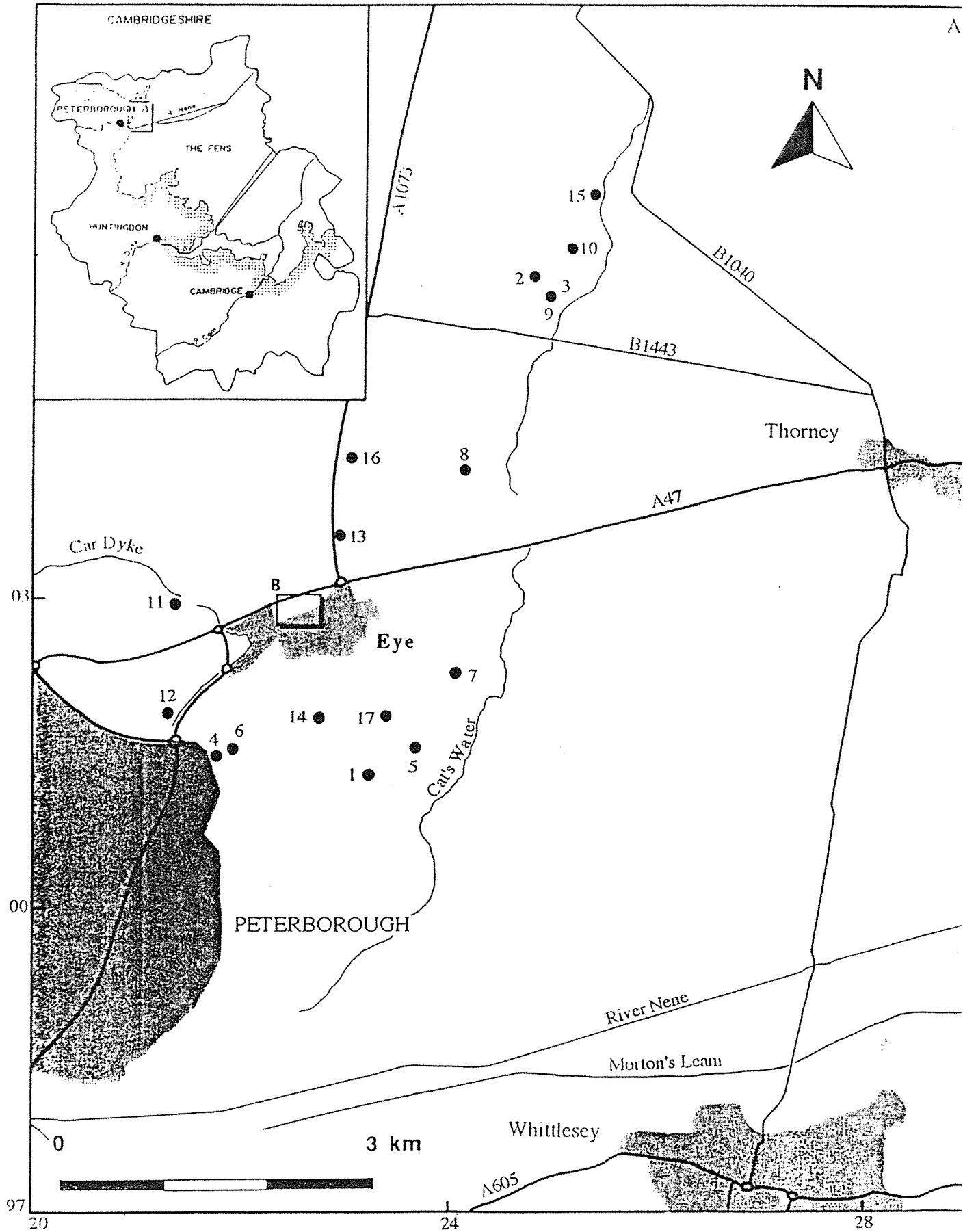


Figure 1: Site location and archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

second site (12) was a chance discovery of two skeletons, one on top of the other, found during clay extraction.

An early Saxon cemetery (13) was discovered to the north of Eye, at Eye Green, during gravel extraction in 1908. A further Saxon burial was recently found forming a secondary use of one of the Bronze Age barrows mentioned above (1). Eye was not mentioned in the Domesday book. Although probably in existence by this time, it was most likely included in the return for Peterborough. The influence of Peterborough Abbey can be seen in the presence of 4 monastic settlements in the area; at Eyebury (14), Singlesole (15), Northolm (16) and Tanholt (17). Figure 2 shows the position of the fen edge before drainage and the site lies in an open field known as Sledgeham Field in 1829. Until recently, a brickyard occupied the south-west corner of the site.

Methods

It was originally intended to carry out a magnetometer survey of the site in order to identify areas of particular archaeological interest before trial excavation. However, after an initial visit, it was decided that a survey of this sort was not appropriate because of the presence of wire fences and dumped building material which would have adversely affected the results.

Five trenches (Figure 2) were opened by mechanical excavator using a ditching bucket without teeth. The machine was monitored by an archaeologist during this process to identify any archaeological features revealed. All the trenches were photographed and planned. Trenches A and E were cleaned by hand and one section in each trench drawn. The features were recorded, and selectively excavated, using the standard techniques of Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section. Unfortunately, wet conditions meant that excavation was very difficult and some features had to be left unexcavated. This was done if, in the opinion of the excavator, the feature was modern. Trenches B, C, and D immediately filled with water making proper recording impossible. However, it was possible to draw the section in trench C before it became too wet.

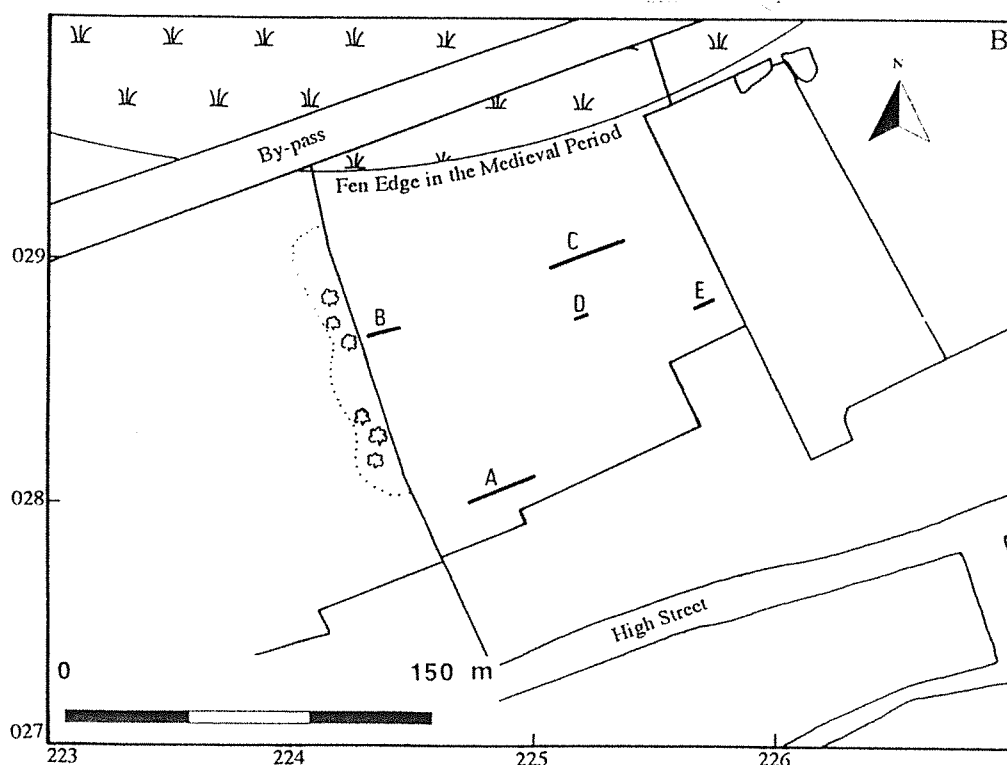


Figure 2: Location of trenches.

Results

Trench A (*Figure 3*). A series of land drains ran south-north across the trench. These were still functioning and were probably laid within the last 40 years. Three other features were recorded in the eastern half of the trench. Cut 7 contained frequent sherds of late 19th century pottery, brick and tile fragments. The other two features, cuts 3 and 17, were undated, but one of them was cut by, and therefore earlier than, a land drain but both appeared to be relatively recent. In the western half, considerable quantities of brick rubble and other dumped material indicate the presence of a brickyard which existed on the site until fairly recently. This was bounded on the east by south-north ditch, 9, containing a ceramic drainpipe. The layers of dumped material overlay, and partly truncated, a small, undated pit, 11. This contained no pottery, but a small quantity of cow bone was retrieved (minimum number of individuals represented, 1. Weight 175g). A second feature, 12, was observed to cut through the brickyard deposits and is therefore modern. Length of trench 29.0m. Width 1.8m. Height of ground surface above Ordnance Datum 8.71m.

Trench B. When this trench was opened, water immediately began welling up from the sub-soil and the trench flooded in spite of efforts to create a sump. However, a darker mark was seen against the brownish yellow boulder clay. Whether this was simply a variation in the natural or a pit or other feature was not clear. Length of trench 15.0m. Width 1.9m. Height of ground surface above Ordnance Datum 4.87m. Maximum depth of trench 0.55m.

Trench C, A series of south-north field drains, in working order, ran across the trench. No other features were observed. However, the topsoil contained a considerable amount of modern iron work, plate glass and sherds of 20th century, stoneware jugs. Length of trench 33.0m. Width 2.0m. Height of ground surface above Ordnance Datum 4.51m. Maximum depth of trench 0.62m.

Trench D. No features were observed and the trench rapidly filled with water. Length of trench 5.9m. Width 1.9m. Height of ground surface above Ordnance Datum 5.81m. Maximum depth of trench 0.56m.

Trench E (*Figures 4 and 5*). After the trench had been cleaned by hand, a series of features was observed at the east end of the trench. Pit 30 appeared in plan to be a ditch, but it was clear from the section that it was the base of a large, shallow pit. It contained a few fragments of post-Medieval pottery. Pit 25, cut by pit 30, was partially excavated but produced no dating evidence. A short length of ditch, 32, was cut to the north by pit 30 and contained a very small fragment of pottery. This sherd may date from the Bronze Age but could equally well be Romano-British (pers. comm. C. French). Pit 21 produced a very similar fragment of pottery but again it was too small to be very useful for dating purposes. Length of trench 9.7m. Width 1.5m. Height of ground surface above Ordnance Datum 6.00m.

Conclusions

It might be expected that any settlement, of whatever date, would be centred on the top of the slope leading down to the fen, i.e., under the modern village of Eye. That being the case, the area under consideration would be a subsidiary area of the settlement where rubbish pits, drainage ditches, and possibly small scale industrial activity and other out buildings might be located.

The evidence uncovered during the assessment points to this being the case, with possible rubbish pits such as pits 11, 21, 25 which may be of considerable antiquity, and pit 30 of post-Medieval date. A number of recent drains were exposed and ditch 32 may be an older drainage ditch. No remains of any structures were discovered.



Figure 3: Plan of features in Trench A.

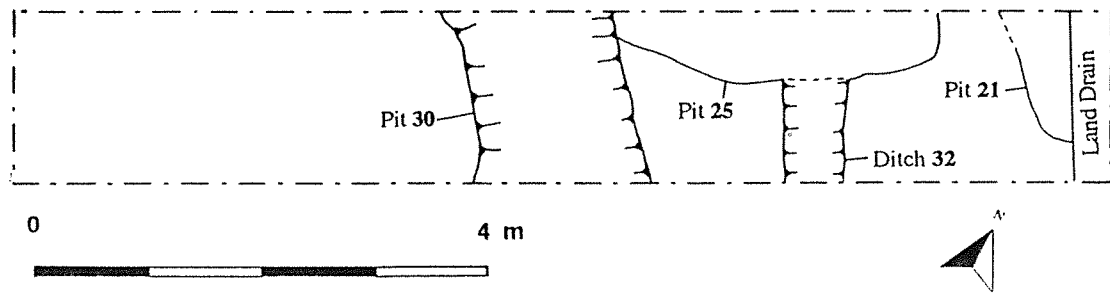


Figure 4: Plan of features in Trench E.

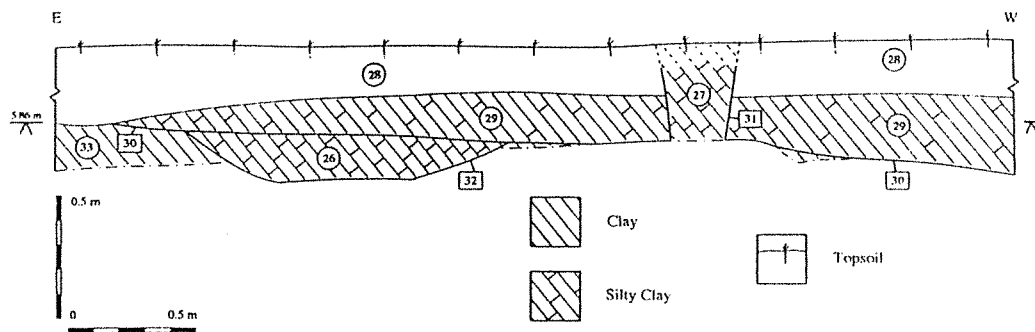


Figure 5: North-west facing section, Trench E.

It is worth noting the presence of a perched water table on the impermeable mixed boulder clay and fen gravels which caused so many problems with flooding in the downslope trenches. The wet conditions would enable good preservation of archaeological deposits if any exist yet to be uncovered. However, the degree of waterlogging has, according to local residents, greatly increased since the construction of the by-pass in the 1980s.

A further problem encountered was a certain degree of contamination from oil or petrol, seen as a film on standing water. Empty car battery cases on site could point to further contamination by electrolyte fluid. Concern was also voiced by the excavators over the not infrequent smell of sewage noticed in the trenches nearest to the houses on the High Street.

Recommendations

Although the assessment produced limited evidence of early features in the south eastern part of the site, the peripheral nature of these deposits makes it unlikely that further excavation would reveal a great deal of new information. Evaluation of the northern half of the site was barely adequate because of the high water table. However, more detailed investigation of this area would involve the constant use of pumps, which, combined with contamination of the site, and the lack of archaeological features observed while machining, makes further work unlikely to be very productive.

If, on the other hand, it is necessary to strip large areas of the site during construction, it would be useful to have an archaeologist present to monitor the work.

Acknowledgements

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