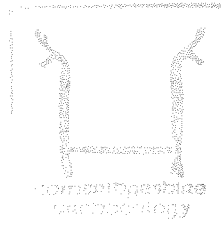
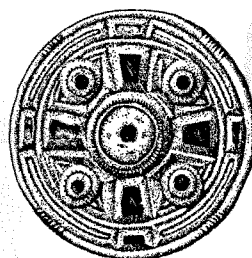


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Archaeological Field Unit

## A Beaker Pit at Park Road, Brampton

K Welsh

1993

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No A21

*Commissioned By Yelcon Homes Ltd*

# **A Beaker Pit at Park Road, Brampton**

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## ABSTRACT

During September 1993, Cambridgeshire Archaeology undertook an archaeological assessment of land at Park Road, Brompton (TL 2025/7085). The work was funded by Yelcon Homes, following a brief from the County Archaeology Office. Traces of ridge and furrow were visible in parts of the field but were not very pronounced. Covering the whole site was a layer of seasonally deposited silty clay alluvium. Beneath this layer was a small pit, probably domestic in origin, containing many fragments of Bronze Age Beaker vessel, including two handle sherds, as well as charcoal fragments and a few fragments of burnt bone. The pottery has been dated to the later Beaker period, c 1650-1450 BC.

The investigation revealed many natural features, including an ancient stream channel on the south-eastern edge of the site. These features were observed in the surface of the local bedrock, which consisted of interleaving layers and patches of clayey sands and gravels.

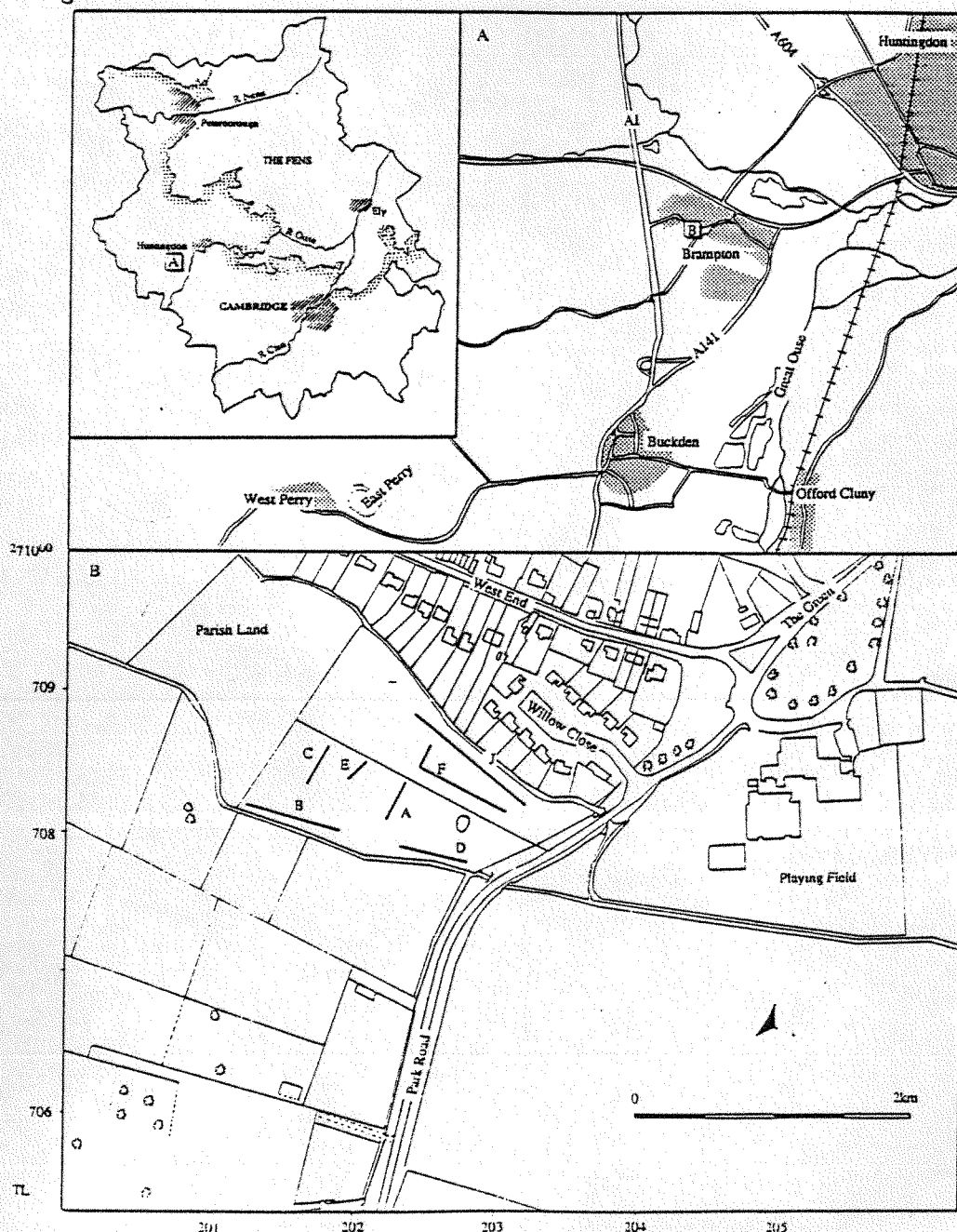


Figure 1 Site and Trench Location Map



## 1 INTRODUCTION

From 13th to 22nd September, 1993, a team from Cambridgeshire Archaeology, led by Mary Alexander, undertook an archaeological investigation on two fields at Brampton, Huntingdonshire (*Fig 1*). The work was carried out at the request of Yelcon Homes Ltd following a brief provided by the County Archaeology Office (CAO). It is proposed to build forty-two houses with associated roads and services on the site.

The Cambridgeshire river gravels are rich in archaeological remains, and recent work in the Brampton area has revealed a relatively dense prehistoric and Roman landscape. For this reason it was felt the site held significant archaeological potential.

## 2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The geology of the area is shown on the British Geological Survey 1:50000 map as 1st and 2nd river terrace gravels overlying Oxford clay. A geological survey of the assessment area, carried out by Prior Associates Consulting Engineers, identified a layer of brown silty clay overlying the river gravels. Previous investigations in the Brampton area have shown this to be the result of periodic alluviation, the upper part of which, at least, dates from the Medieval period.

The area slopes gently down towards the south-east and is bounded to the north-east and to the south-west by small brooks, to the north-west by a hedge, and to the south-east by Park Road. It is divided into two, roughly equal, parts by a central hedge running from the north-west to the south-east. Faint earthworks are visible in both parts of the site, probably the remains of Medieval ridge and furrow. There is a small pond at the south-east end of the site, adjacent to the central hedge.

## 3 BACKGROUND

Brampton and its surroundings are an area rich in archaeological activity. A series of archaeological features, interpreted as a group of Neolithic ritual monuments (including henges, a cursus and a long mortuary enclosure), Bronze Age burial monuments and Iron Age/Romano-British field systems, has been identified from aerial photographs. Parts of this landscape have been scheduled as an ancient monument (SAM).

Excavations south of the Thrapston Road in 1966 (White 1969), investigated a Bronze Age triple ring-ditch. A rectilinear enclosure was also excavated which contained Iron Age roundhouse remains. A cinerary urn and "maritime" beaker fragments were retrieved from the ring-ditches, which led Clark to argue for Early European Bronze Age contact (Clarke in White 1969). Subsequent work, to the south-west of Thrapston Road (Malim & Mitchell 1993), uncovered an Iron Age settlement containing a round house which survived as features cut into the top of the gravel. This was associated with a contemporary ditch system as well as earlier parallel ditches which have been given a Neolithic date and interpreted as territorial boundary markers. All these features were sealed beneath alluvium.

In 1990 and 1991, an investigation of a portion of the scheduled monument (SAM 121), north of the Thrapston Road and south of Alconbury Brook, found evidence for a Neolithic mortuary enclosure at the end of a cursus seen in aerial photographs (Malim 1990). Further excavations, in advance of road construction in the pasture field to the east, revealed Romano-British field ditches and evidence of agricultural processing in an

area where archaeological remains had previously not been suspected (Robinson, pers comm).

Recent investigations (Macaulay 1993, and Welsh 1993) north of Alconbury Brook, at Huntingdon Racecourse, revealed evidence of prehistoric land clearance and settlement adjacent to an ancient stream channel. Again, all these features were sealed beneath alluvial deposits and were of Neolithic, Bronze, and Iron Age date.

The assessment area comprises two fields of ancient pasture situated on the periphery of the Medieval village. The limits of the site itself are formed by two drainage ditches, or small brooks, to the north and south, Park Road to the east, and a hedgeline to the west. Cartographic evidence shows that these boundaries have remained unchanged at least since an Act of Enclosure was obtained in 1772.

#### 4 METHODS AND CONSTRAINTS

Seven trenches, totalling 386m in length, were opened using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, under the supervision of an archaeologist (*Fig 1*). This proved more difficult than expected as the original machine provided by the client was smaller than requested and was not powerful enough. Once a larger machine was obtained, on the third day of excavation, it was possible to proceed more quickly. Unfortunately, a further problem was encountered, when the replacement driver found it difficult to stop at the required depth. Consequently, the bucket of the machine frequently dug into the underlying sands and gravels.

The trenches were positioned in order to sample the area as thoroughly as possible but, at the request of the clients, avoiding the proposed foundation trench locations. It also proved necessary to avoid the north-west corner of the site because of dense hawthorn scrub.

Immediately after machining, Trenches A, B, D, and part of F, began to fill with water. In the case of Trench A, this caused the sides to collapse and it was decided, on safety grounds, to abandon it. A pump was employed to empty the other trenches of water which allowed some work to be carried out in them.

Once opened, the trenches were cleaned by hand where possible, photographed and planned so that any features so revealed could be excavated and recorded using the standard techniques of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire Archaeology. A soil assessment was carried out by Dr C A I French of the University of Cambridge.

#### 5 RESULTS

In each trench, the topsoil and underlying alluvium was removed using the mechanical excavator.

**Trench A** 30m long. Due to flooding, the sides of this trench collapsed leaving it in a very unstable condition. It was, therefore, considered too hazardous to enter.

**Trench B** The topsoil was 0.15m thick. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown, silty clay alluvium, 0.5m thick. At the eastern end of the trench, the alluvium sealed a relict stream channel containing an upper fill of grey silty clay, with a maximum thickness of 0.07m. The primary fill of the channel was a dark brown, detritus mud, up to 0.2m thick

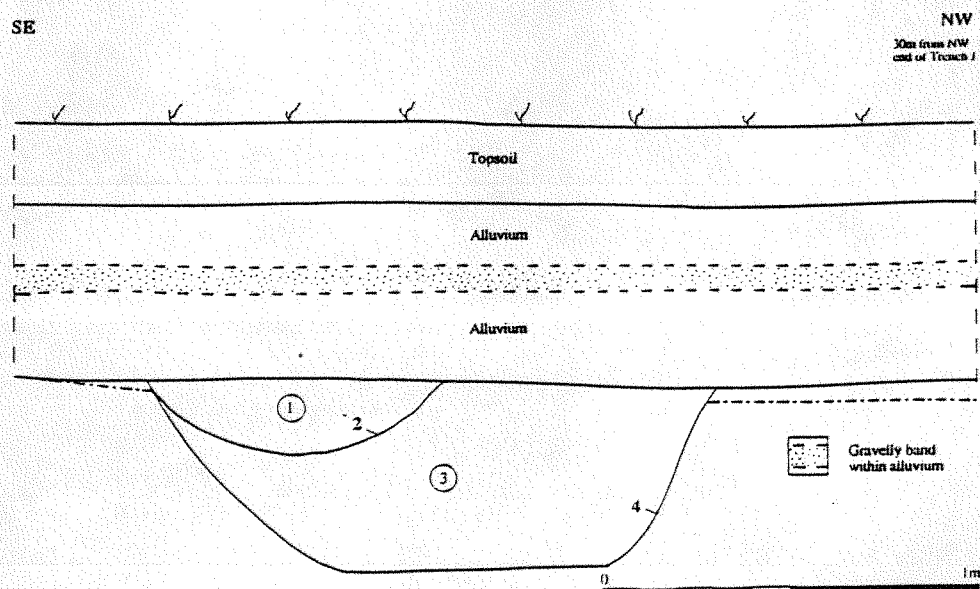
**Trench C** 70m long. Traces of possible ridge and furrow could be seen, with a width of 2.5m from ridge to ridge, and a maximum height of 0.1m. The topsoil was 0.12m thick. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown silty clay alluvium, 0.16m deep. Underlying this, but visible only in the south-east facing section, were what appeared to be a series of pits and ditches containing yellowish brown, sandy clay. However, when the trench was extended in order to investigate these features, they proved to be amorphous patches and were interpreted as natural, water-lain deposits.

**Trench D** 50m long. The topsoil was 0.20m thick. Below this was a layer of yellowish brown, silty clay, 0.45m thick, into the top of which a narrow gully had been dug and filled with animal bone. Underlying this were thin layers of sand and gravel.

**Trench E** 18m long. The topsoil was 0.22m thick. Below this was a dark brown, silty clay, upto 0.28m thick. Underlying this was a orange brown, sandy clay, with a maximum thickness of 0.48m. Appearing at the top of this layer were two natural gullies both also containing orange brown, sandy clay.

**Trench F** 88m long. The topsoil was 0.15m thick. Below this was a brown, silty clay alluvium, with grey mottling increasing with depth.

**Trench J** 100m long. The topsoil was 0.20m thick. Below this was a brown, silty clay alluvium, 0.50m thick. Within this layer was a narrow band, 0.10m thick, of small pebbles and gravel which extended throughout the trench. Below the alluvial deposits, two intercutting pits were revealed (*Fig 2*). Cut 2 was 0.75m wide, 0.21m deep, and at least 1.6m long. In plan it was curved and was, at first, taken to be a tree hole. However, on excavation, it proved to contain a grey, silty clay, Fill 1, with very frequent charcoal fragments, frequent pottery fragments, occasional struck flint flakes, and very occasional small fragments of burnt bone. A second pit, Cut 4, at least 1.6m by 0.6m, and 0.51m deep, contained a brown, silty clay and occasional fragments of pottery. It was cut by (and therefore earlier than) Pit 2.



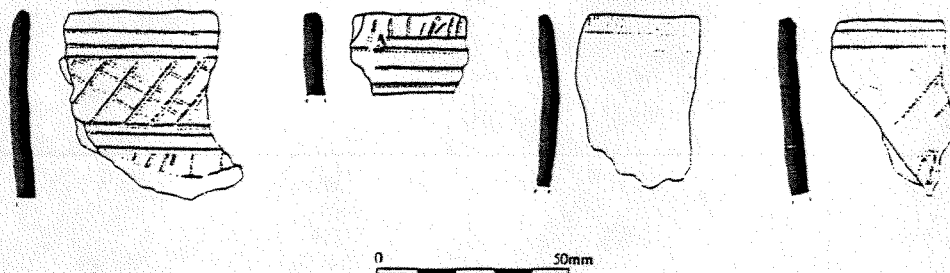
*Figure 2 Section through Pits 2 and 4*



## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The earliest activity is represented by two pits cut into the gravel subsoil. A small pit, Cut 2, excavated in Trench J, contained many fragments of Bronze Age Beaker ware (Fig 3). Usually tall, open-mouthed vessels, they are commonly covered in bands of intricate, incised and impressed, decoration. In Britain, this type of pottery generally dates from c 2700 BC onwards but it is also found throughout Europe. The earliest occurrences of Beaker ware are associated with the introduction of metalworking and this gave rise to the belief that both were brought across Europe by a particular tribe of people. More recent work indicates that both the pottery and the new technology were spread by a combination of movement of people, trade, and simple copying of ideas. It has been suggested that the popularity of the pottery style was due, not to any intrinsic merit of the pots themselves, but, rather, to what they contained - analyses of organic residues indicate that they may have been used to hold alcoholic beverages such as mead (Dickson 1978).

Past excavations in the area have suggested that seasonally waterlogged land, unsuitable for arable crops, was often used for ritual or burial purposes in the prehistoric period (eg Malim 1990). Indeed, Beaker vessels are occasionally found with cremation burials (for example, White 1969), particularly in the earlier period of their use, and the presence of charcoal and a few tiny fragments of burnt bone in the pit raises the possibility that this may have been the case here. Unfortunately, the bone fragments are too small to be positively identified as human or otherwise. However, along with rim and body sherds, two sherds of decorated handle were also present. This type of Beaker, known as a Handled Southern Beaker (Clarke 1970), appears to have developed along the southern Fen margin very late in the Beaker Period (c 1650-1450 BC). Given the presence of sherds from at least four, and possibly six, incomplete vessels (at least one complete vessel would normally accompany a cremation), and the late date implied by the handle sherds, it is, perhaps, more likely that the pit is the result of domestic rather than ritual, activity.



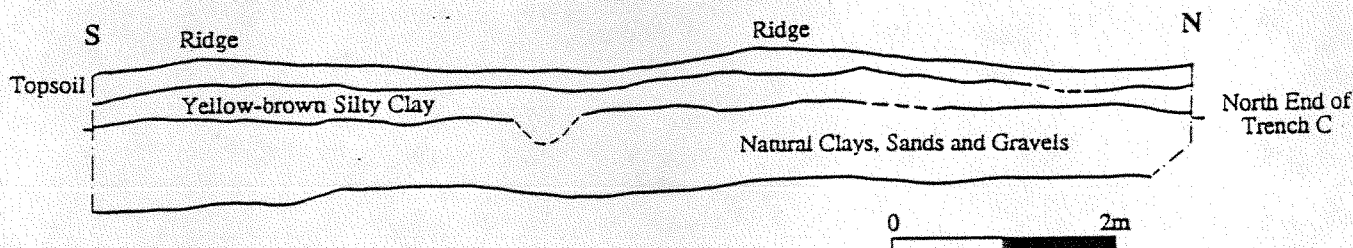
*Figure 3 Rim Sherds from the Beaker Vessels*

This pit cut a second, and earlier, pit, Cut 4, of unknown function. The pottery fragments, also Bronze Age, were undecorated and it is not possible to date them more accurately.

The assessment area, lying between two small brooks, can be expected to have been subject to seasonal flooding throughout its history. This is borne out by the yellowish brown (ie oxidised) colour of the alluvial overburden, suggesting that gradual seasonal deposition of the fine silts was followed by long periods of drying out (see Appendix). The gravelly band within the alluvium in Trench J is presumably the result of an episode of high water velocity, perhaps a flash flood. From the stratigraphic sequence (see Fig 2), it is clear that the alluvium must have been deposited after the Bronze Age



activity discussed above, but before the formation of the ridge and furrow (see *Fig 4*). If it is true ridge and furrow, then an upper date limit for deposition is established at some point during the Medieval period (it also indicates that local population pressures were such that even damp and marginal land had to be cultivated). However, the ridges are only 5m apart (very narrow for ridge and furrow) and may be the result of later activity, for example the maintenance of water meadows or drainage.



**Figure 4** *Trench C, East-facing Section*

No other features of archaeological significance were noted although, in Trench D, a gully was observed which was filled with animal bone. Cut into the top of the alluvium, it presumably dates from the post-Medieval period and is interpreted as a field drain.

The relict stream channel seen in Trench B is probably a former meander channel of the present brook forming the south-eastern boundary of the site. No dating evidence was available for this channel.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPENDIX

### Brampton Park Road : Soil Assessment

Inspection of the open trial trenches on September 16th revealed that the assessment area was generally covered by thick deposits (c 0.5-1.25m) of alluvium deposited as a result of freshwater river action. In addition, there was a substantial former watercourse running obliquely to the southern edge of the assessment area, but little in the way of convincing archaeological features except for some evidence of former, probably post-Medieval, agricultural use in the western corner of the assessment area.

The following observations were made concerning the alluvium and the conditions of deposition:

- 1) The silty clay alluvial overburden was yellowish brown in colour and therefore contained much oxidised iron. This suggests that these deposits formed as a result of gradual seasonal aggradation of fine sediment which was then subject to long periods of drying out.
- 2) The alluvium sealed a poorly developed buried soil which was developed on a sand/fine gravel subsoil. The silt and clay dominated texture suggests that it has been subject to the addition of alluvial fines throughout much of its development, and therefore subject to seasonal freshwater flooding and standing water conditions. By all accounts, the area is still prone to flooding today.
- 3) The relict stream course was probably a former meander channel of the watercourse now represented by a small stream which bounds the south-eastern edge of the assessment area. The primary fill of this stream channel is a peat-like, organic mud with much detrital mud and organic material within it. This period of infill probably coincides with the initial cutting off of this meander of the stream channel. Overlying this is a thin horizon (5-10cm) of reduced grey silty clay which probably represents a zone of standing water at the ambient groundwater table. The remaining infill of this watercourse is similar to the alluvium deposited over the whole assessment area.

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