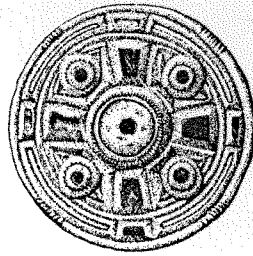




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Archaeological Recording along the Babraham - Sawston Water Main

A. Hatton

1995

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A76

Commissioned By Cambridge Water Company

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Editor: Tim Malim BA

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SUMMARY

In September 1995 a watching brief was carried out on behalf of The Cambridge Water Company an archaeologist from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council who were laying a new water main between Babraham and Sawston (TL 499-514). A section of the pipeline route was chosen for intensive monitoring due to its proximity (c.100m) previously recovered building material and associated artefacts dated to the Roman period (Figure 1). The removal of topsoil down to the top of the subsoil, along the pipeline easement revealed no Roman activity in the form of features or artefacts along the section of the pipelines route which was closely monitored during topsoil stripping (Figure 1).

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1995 Cambridge Water Company began work on a new water main. They notified the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council of the removal of topsoil along the pipeline route between Babraham and Sawston (TL 499-514). The pipeline passed within 100 metres of building debris and artefactual remains associated with the Roman period (see below) which necessitated the need for the monitoring of topsoil removal (*Figure 1*).

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

The field to the north of the river Granta was considered to have the greatest archaeological potential considering the position of a Roman building as marked on the OS map (*Figure 1*) and associated building material and artefacts (SMR 04849, see appendix). To the east of the Roman Building a sparse scatter of Roman (?) roof tiles, a large sandstone block and a possible building stone were observed which seems to reinforce the SMR record, and may be evidence of Romano-British buildings continuing in an easterly direction or as a rubble spread from the main occupation area to the west. Romano-Celtic temples are known to occur at the confluence of rivers, and the indication of a high quality building and unusual intensity of metal artefacts suggested the possibility that this site might be that of a temple. The Granta and a tributary meet c. 200m to the south-west of the buildings remains.

Located to the south of the River Granta (*Figure 1*) was fresh water spring which could have formed a focus for ritual activity, taking the form of votive offerings deposited in wet places and the worshipping of Celtic deities, a practice that may have continued on into the Romano-British period. The routes taken by each of the trackways emanating from the surrounding settlements cross on 'Babraham Common' within the vicinity of the spring (*Figure 1*), which may indicate that the area continued to be of ritualistic importance at least until the medieval period.

METHODOLOGY

Initial study was carried out using SMR information which located the position of any archaeological finds or monuments that could have been directly or indirectly affected by the route of the pipeline.

Prior to the construction work commencing CWC excavated two test pits immediately north and south of the river, in order to investigate the underlying geology. The excavation of the test pits was observed by Tim Malim (CCC Archaeology Field Unit) in order to identify any archaeological remains positioned alongside the river (see below).

The sequence of pipeline laying was that a 5m wide easement was stripped of topsoil, then a 0.6m wide trench excavated for the pipe to a depth of 1.5m, a depth well below any archaeological remains in this area. This trench would have destroyed any archaeological remains, as would the stripping of the easement and

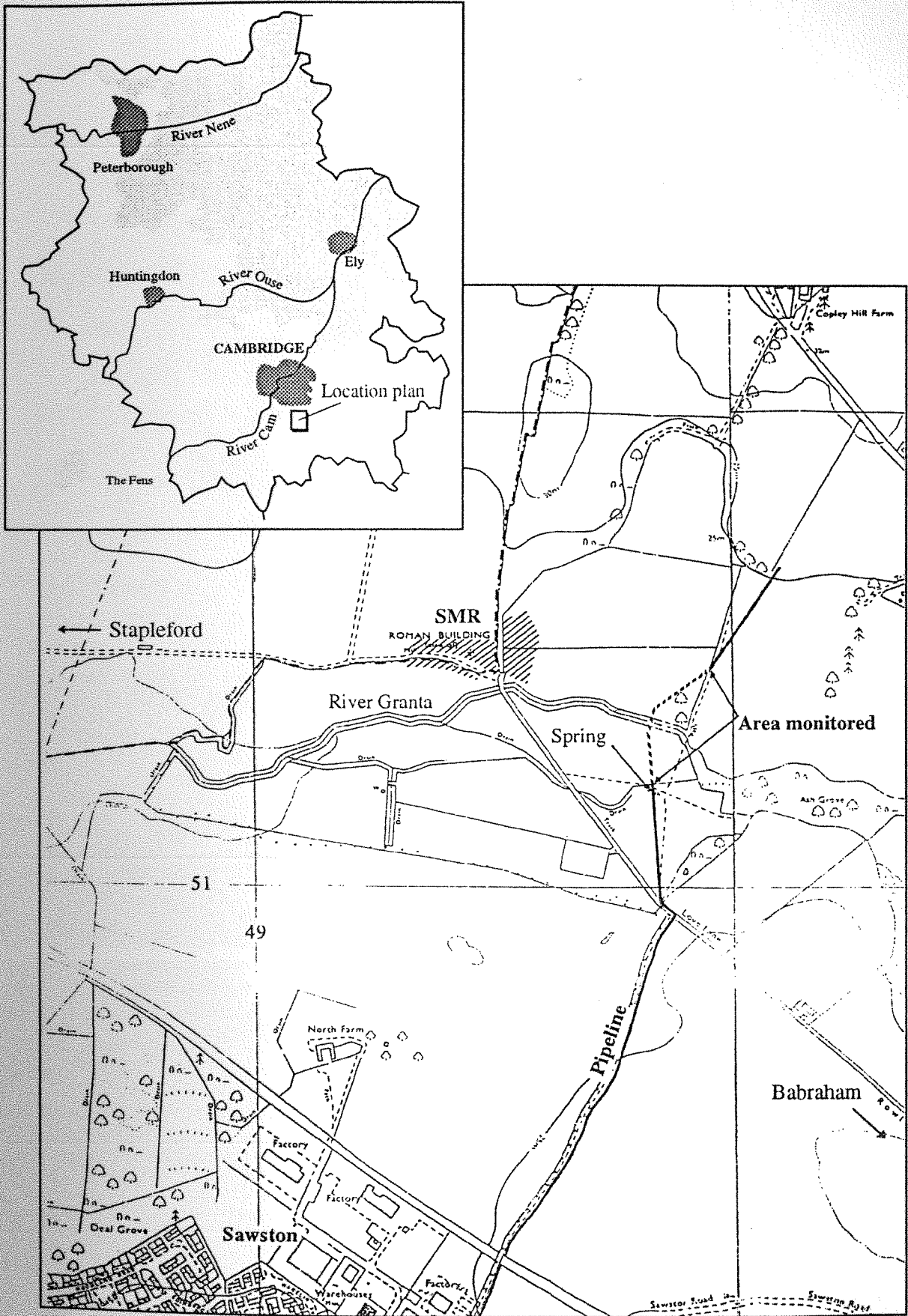


Figure 1 Location plan

subsequent passage of machines. After the pipe had been laid, the trench was back-filled and the topsoil replaced. Such a process of trench excavation, pipe laying and back-filling is very rapid.

The first stage of fieldwork was to strip the topsoil down to the top of the subsoil with a mechanical excavator supplied by the contractor. Normally it is at this interface between topsoil and subsoil (especially in heavily ploughed fields), that archaeological remains can be most easily identified. Subsequently work was to have been to excavate and record any archaeological features uncovered by topsoil stripping.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The test pit positioned to south of the river was excavated to a depth of 3m revealing a topsoil thickness of c. 300mm, c. 1m of yellow alluvium, c. 1m of grey clay, moving down on to a thin band of marl (top of river bed) then on to sand and gravels; the water table varies according to the river level. The test pit positioned on the north side of the river was only excavated to a depth of 2m, and followed the stratigraphical sequence observed in the previously excavated pit south of the river.

However, subsequent easement stripping of the topsoil on the land to the south of the river revealed a change in the geology from the yellow alluvium found next to the river to sand and gravel at a distance of c.15m, which might give the true position of its ancient southern bank. The same geological differences are not so apparent to the north of the river, where the land is low lying and prone to seasonal flooding eradicating any evidence of the original northern river bank.

Unfortunately, the stripping of the topsoil along the pipeline route revealed no artefactual material or features associated to the Prehistoric or Romano-British period on the north or south side of the River Granta.

Although the evidence associated with this period south of the River Granta is scarce, the same cannot be said for the medieval period: a network of footpaths criss-cross 'Babraham Common' (see below) which would appear to give direct access to the land from Sawston in the south, Stapleford to the north-west, Babraham in the east and possibly from the area around Copley Hill Farm to the north.

Although there is no absolute evidence pertaining to the use of 'Babraham Common', it is possible that the land had a dual role to play concerning local communities, above and beyond the obvious inter-commoning of the area for the neighbouring medieval parishes.

A possible ritualistic aspect of the 'Babraham Common' landscape has been identified in the background research. One route taken by a pathway (now partially modernised) runs in a north/south direction, and passes close to a known Roman building (SMR 04328), across the River Granta and continues on to either Sawston or Babraham with a slight deviation in the direction of the fresh water spring. Evidence from the study of Roman Temples and Shrines indicates that 21 per cent of the total investigated were found to be in isolation either on hilltops or near springs and streams (Woodward 1992. p19), so it is not impossible to suggest that the spring located on 'Babraham Common' might have been religious place. The implication that the natural spring continued to be a focus for the local population may also be shown in the routes taken from each of the surrounding settlements (Babraham, Stapleford, Sawston and Copley Farm) which all seem to converge on the spring (fig 1) showing continuity with the earlier Roman population.

With the adoption of Christianity during Roman times and the apparent decline in the worship of paganistic symbols there may have been a change in this focus of use for 'Babraham Common' to an economic focus during the medieval period. In 1335 a Monday Market was granted to John of Gaunt (Duke of Brittany), which would have necessitated the use of a parcel of land within the boundaries of Babraham; however, there is no written or physical evidence for the exact location of a market in the village. The alternative for the market could be the Common with its fairly central position and good access points established by previous generations. If we consider the Common was not only used for the grazing of livestock, but was also the location of the Monday Market place the economy of the surrounding area would grow, benefiting not only John of Gaunt but also the local inhabitants.

CONCLUSION

Although no archaeological remains were found during the water-main programme, the proximity of important archaeological finds made it necessary that an archaeologist monitored the works. Because of this involvement useful supplementary data has been added to the Sites and Monuments Record, and tentative interpretations to the ancient landscape have been put forward which may pose research questions for future study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCE

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