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Archaeological Field Unit

Fen Edge Deposits at Hardwick Close, Littleport
A Basic Archaeological Investigation

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Cambridgeshire County Council

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Commissioned By K & J Carpenter Ltd

SUMMARY

During September 1997 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out a basic archaeological investigation on the site of the proposed residential development at Hardwick Close, Littleport. The work was commissioned by K & J Carpenter Ltd. A total of three trenches were opened using a JCB, revealing a sequence of artefactually sterile fen edge deposits.

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**Fen Edge Deposits at Hardwick Close, Littleport, Cambridgeshire.
(TL 5646 / 8718)**

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 29th September, 1997 a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out a basic archaeological investigation on the site of the proposed residential development at Hardwick Close, Littleport. The work was commissioned by K & J Carpenter Ltd. in response to a brief for an archaeological investigation supplied by S Kaner of Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section (Development Control).

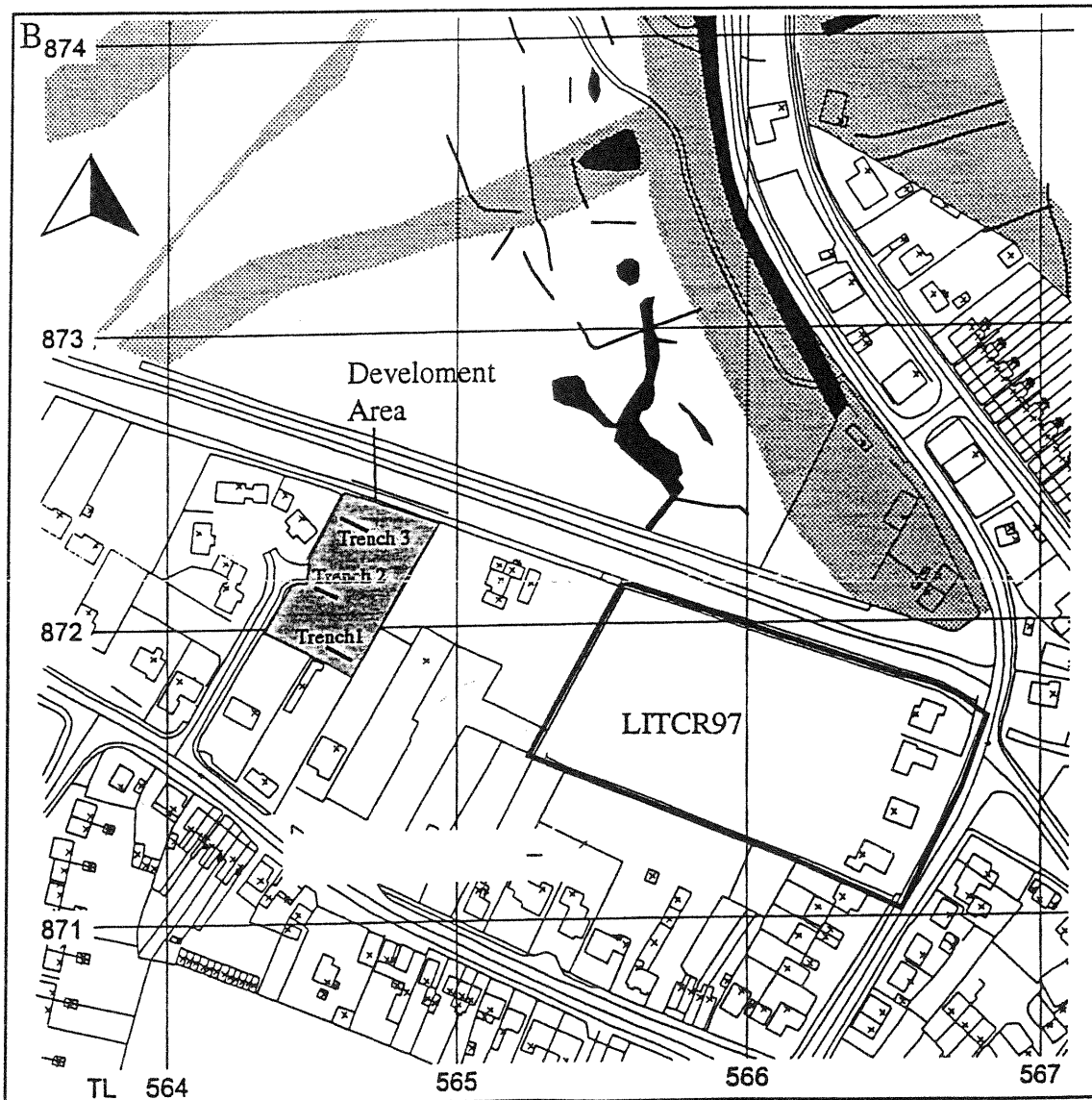
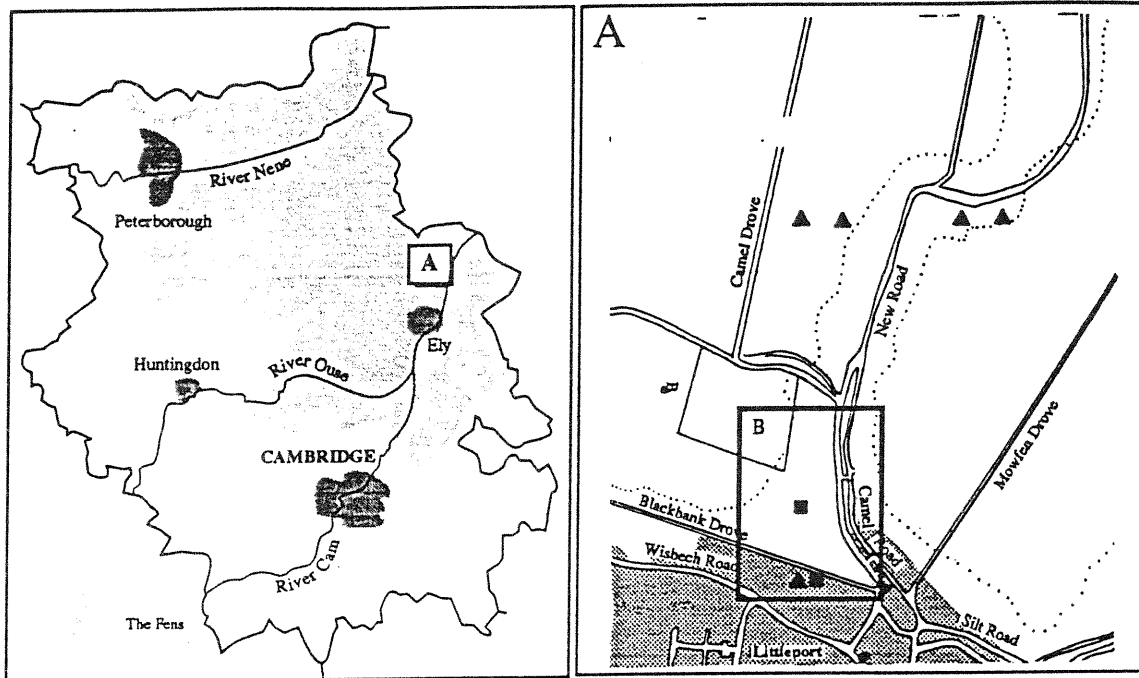
The site lies in the western part of the historic village of Littleport, to the west of Camel Road (which follows the course of the Old Croft River), occupying an area of approximately 0.2h at approximately 1.5m OD. The underlying geology is peat and alluvium overlying Kimmeridge Clay. Three trenches were dug using a mechanical digger. The trenches were between 8.50m and 10.00m long, the length of each trench being determined by the presence of a mains power cable which runs north - south across the subject site.

The site was covered by a degraded peat topsoil (0.40m deep) over alluvial deposits, peat, further alluvial deposits and finally blue clay.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The subject site lies roughly 200m to the west of the former course of the Old Croft River, which is followed by the line of Camel Road along the northern edge of the highland at Littleport to Station Road, meeting the Holme River to the east. The land slopes gently upwards from 0m OD to the north of Blackbank Drove and Drain to over 20m along Littleport High Street to the south.

The Littleport highland comprises an area of Kimmeridge Clay, capped with glacial sand and gravel surrounded by fen. The fen is traversed by The Old Croft River, formerly the main river channel in the area, which collected the waters of the south-eastern fen basin. Over the years a roddon formed, and came to stand up to 3m higher than the adjacent fen. The surrounding area has experienced peat development and periods of inundation leading to deposition of alluvium and clays. During Saxon and medieval times peat continued to form uninterruptedly (up to around the 3.5m contour) and was only checked by drainage in the late medieval and post-medieval period (Hall 1996, 19).



Based upon Ordnance Survey mapping with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. (Cambridgeshire County Council Licence No. LA 07649X 1997)

Figure 1 Site location plan

Prehistoric and Roman remains are recorded in the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) at various points in and around Littleport. Fox (1923) locates Neolithic finds on the edge of the Old Croft River, to the east of the site and reports early bronze or copper axes (*ibid.*, quoting Crawford 1912, British Museum collection and CUMAA) to the south east of site, on the highland of Littleport. The most important early prehistoric remains lie in the south-east of the parish on small rises or islands in the fen. Two sparse flint scatters on the main Littleport island are assigned to the Bronze Age with a thin background scatter of worked flint over the higher sandy ground of the highland. The surrounding Bronze Age landscape consisted of peat fen for most of the time, covering the minor roddons though the roddon of the Old Croft River and those nearby remained exposed and active (Hall, 1996, 25). Roddon silts were deposited along the edge of the channel during the Iron Age

Waterways were used for transport and communication from the Roman period. Quantities of broken pottery (including Horningsea wares) and stone are reported along the banks of the Old Croft River north of Littleport. There is an 'inferred' Roman road across the Littleport highland along the route of the present High Street to north of the site (Fox 1923). Roman settlement evidence has been found immediately to the north of the Blackbank Drain (SMR Nos. 07221, 07261 and 08425). Roman occupation around Littleport appears concentrated mainly between the 0m and 5m contours rather than on the higher land to the south. The main activity in the area appears to be related to saltern sites and transport along the Old Croft River. The salterns exploited the roddon where brackish water penetrated the small central channel. Site 19 (to the north of Blackbank drain) (Hall 1996, fig. 13) is the farthest inland of any of the known local saltern sites.

Saxon settlement at Littleport was probably based around a hithe where the Old Croft River ran close to the island, although there is at present no archaeological evidence for Saxon settlement on the island. Domesday Book records a vill and it is assumed that the present town covers part (if not all) of the medieval centre. Littleport was allotted to the Bishop of Ely on the formation of the see of Ely in 1109. The church of St. George, to the south of the site, dates from the 14th century and was almost entirely rebuilt in the 15th century and restored in 1857.

The population of Littleport in 1086 is recorded as 31. This rose during the intervening centuries and by the 1563 census the village had 80 householders. By 1676, 556 persons of communicant age lived there. The 1851 census records 3832 inhabitants of whom 2622 were natives of the parish.

During the medieval period the island of Littleport was ploughed in ridge and furrow and the whole area (except the settlement) was given over to arable farming with summer pasturing along the fen edge. Inclosure at Littleport was gradual. 1500 acres were enclosed in early 17th century and 1000 more were ready for inclosure, but final inclosure of the common fields did not take place until 1840. By the 19th century Littleport was a very large village (larger than some of the surrounding market towns) and had non-agricultural industry (Pugh 1967). There are few old secular buildings surviving in Littleport, many of the older properties date to the late 18th/early 19th century.

Drainage of the fens in the post-medieval period considerably increased the level of agricultural productivity and intensive arable farming is currently carried on in the surrounding fen.

4 METHODOLOGY

Three trenches were opened, using a JCB with 1.5m wide toothless ditching bucket. The overburden was removed in all the trenches until the upper interface of alluvium was exposed or until the clay beneath the basal peat was encountered (Trenches 1 and 3).

Although no archaeological features, deposits or artefacts were encountered vertical sections were drawn of Trench 1 and Trench 2 and photographs taken of all three trenches. Recording of individual contexts was undertaken using the pro-forma recording sheets of the Archaeological Field Unit. Conditions for excavation and recording were good, being for the most part dry and bright.

5 RESULTS

Trench 1 aligned east - west was 9.80m long and was located towards the south eastern corner of the proposed development area. No archaeological features were noted in the alluvial layers and no peat was present. Naturally lain blue clay was present 0.85m below the present ground surface.

Trench 2 aligned east - west was 8.5m long and was located towards the centre of the proposed development area. No archaeological features were noted in the alluvial layers and a peat layer 0.22m thick was present 0.50m below the present ground surface. Naturally lain blue clay was present 1.07m below the present ground surface.

Trench 3 aligned east - west ran parallel to the northern boundary of the site for 10.00m. No archaeological features were noted in the alluvial layers and a peat layer 0.35m was present 0.50m below the present ground surface. Naturally lain blue clay was present 1.40m below the present ground surface.

6 DISCUSSION

No evidence of past human activity either in the form of features, deposits or artefacts was observed during the course of the basic archaeological investigation of the subject site. The presence of a peat layer (undated) increasing in depth towards the north of the site may suggest that prior to drainage this localised area was simply too wet.

The recent evaluation of land at Camel Road (Roberts AFU Report A114) suggests that the Roman occupation, noted to the north of Blackbank Drain on the Sites and Monuments Record, is concentrated along the edge of the roddon of the Old Croft River. The finds recovered from Camel Road indicate domestic activities, with transport vessels, storage jars, food preparation vessels and table wares. From the presence of glass vessels, and tile and box flue we may deduce that a high status Roman dwelling was located nearby. Small fragments of briquetage (and possibly the angular stones and river pebbles, Daire 1991) suggest salterns in the vicinity, but no evidence for hearths was found on the subject site. Despite metal detecting by members of the AFU very little metalwork was recovered. The absence of coins implies that trading was not carried out on the site. This reinforces the domestic nature of the site, which may have supported less permanently occupied saltern sites in the fen. Roman activity at Camel Road (judging from the recovered pottery) spans the late third to late fourth centuries. The western extent of this settlement and the potential for peripheral activities relating to either domestic or industrial activities is still unknown despite investigation of the Hardwick Close site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks are also due to Michelle Bullivant who worked on site.

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APPENDIX I Context List

Context No.	Description	Interpretation	Above	Below
001	Trench 1			
002	Trench 2			
003	Trench 3			
004	Dark grey brown peaty clay silt	Topsoil	005	
005	Dark brown clayey silt	LPS	006	004
006	Light grey silt	Alluvium	007	005
007	Mid orange sandy silt	Flood deposit	008	009
008	Light grey sandy silt	Alluvium	009	008
009	Mid orange sandy gravel	Flood deposit?	010	008
010	Blue clay	Kimmeridge clay	LoEX	009
011	Dark grey brown peaty clay silt	Topsoil	012	
012	Dark orange grey clay	Flood deposit	013	012
013	Very dark brown peat	Peat layer	014	012
014	Mid grey silt	Alluvium	015	013
015	Light orange grey sandy silt	Alluvium	016	014
016	Blue clay	Kimmeridge clay	LoEX	015



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