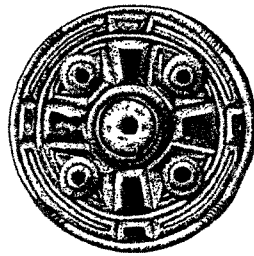


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Archaeological Field Unit

# Land off Pope's Lane, Warboys: An Archaeological Evaluation

A Hatton and W Wall

1999

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A146

*Commissioned by Persimmon Homes*

# Land off Pope's Lane Warboys: An Archaeological Evaluation

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1999

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## *Summary*

*Between 18th and 26th February 1999, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by members of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) on land off Pope's Lane in the village of Warboys (TL 305 798). The work was carried out on behalf of Persimmon Homes Ltd in advance of development and in accordance with a brief prepared by Andrew Thomas of Cambridgeshire County Council County Archaeology Office.*

*The results were limited by two factors: the very wet conditions encountered in the southern half of the site and the paucity of finds recovered. Nevertheless, it seemed that the southern half of the site had been less intensively used than the northern half and most of the features found in the south may be connected with drainage or water management. Possible furrows found in the northern half of the site did not extend to the southern half, suggesting that this was not cultivated. Three post holes, one containing sherds of medieval pottery, were found in the north-west corner of the site. The north-east corner could not be investigated because of the presence of an old orchard, which may in any case have destroyed any remains that once existed beneath it.*

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# **Land off Pope's Lane, Warboys: An Archaeological Evaluation**

## **1 Introduction**

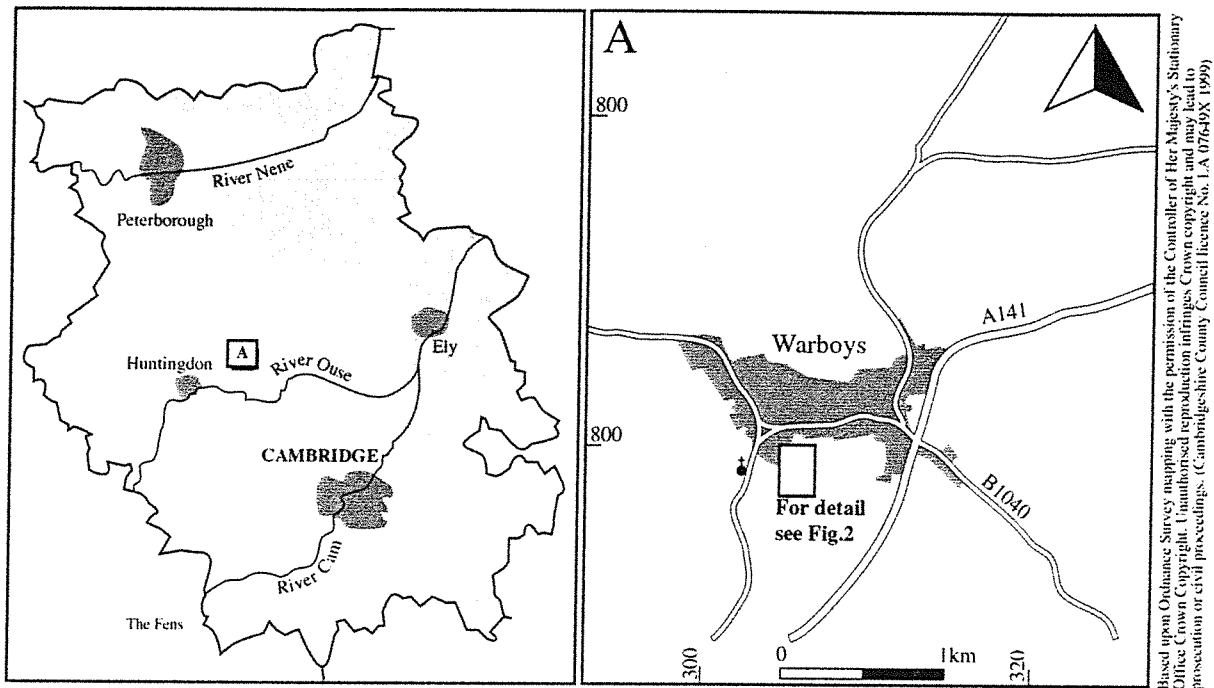
Between 18th and 26th February 1999, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by members of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) on land off Pope's Lane in the village of Warboys (TL 305 798). The work was carried out on behalf of Persimmon Homes Ltd in advance of development and in accordance with a brief prepared by Andrew Thomas of Cambridgeshire County Council County Archaeology Office.

## **2 Geology and Topography**

The landscape of the area in which Warboys lies consists of a high upland falling away sharply to the fen as a spectacular scarp some 30m high, giving extensive views (Hall 1992). The underlying geology of the upland area consists of Till, or chalky boulder clay, which may include gravel, sand and also laminated clay locally (British Geological Survey: Sheet 172). The present site lies on the southern edge of the modern village of Warboys, on the Till-covered upland at about 30m OD (fig. 1). The site is generally flat, with a gentle slope down to the south and west. The present landuse of the site is rough grassland fringing residential developments, several of which are clearly of recent origin. The north-eastern corner of the site was covered with trees, which were probably the remnants of an old orchard.

## **3 Archaeological and Historical Background**

Information about the origins and early development of Warboys is sparse. David Hall's survey of the south-western Cambridgeshire Fenlands suggests that the Boulder Clay of the upland parts of Warboys would have been densely settled in Iron Age and Roman times, as was shown in the adjacent Parish of Broughton, which had 4 sites in an area of 960 hectares (Hall 1992). The fenland survey, however, only examined a small part of the upland area of Warboys and that was well away from the village itself where the present site is located.



*Figure 1 Site location plan*

The Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record contains a few entries located in the area around the present site, but nothing on the site itself. The church of St Mary Magdalene lies about 300m west of the site; the earliest parts of the church, the chancel arch and responds of the north arcade, are of 12th-century date. North-west of the church and about 350m from the present site lies the manor house, which was built in the 17th century. South of the church there is a rectangular pond which has been described as a medieval moat (Begg and French 1992), but which the SMR describes as not being an antiquity, with no evidence to suggest that it was once part of a moat (Cambs SMR no. 01072). East of the church, between it and the present site is the Rectory, a brick-built building of the 18th century, now renamed "Moat House". In the grounds south of this building lies a medieval fish pond (Cambs SMR no. 03586). In the field to the south of this are the slight earthwork remains of possible cultivation strips, boundaries and terracing (Cambs SMR no. 10058).

Trial trenching undertaken by Fenland Archaeological Trust in 1991 on the plot immediately to the west of the present site, between it and the fish pond,

found few features beyond those apparently associated with 18th and 19th century gardens and orchards. A large, shallow ditch found running from the south-western corner to about the middle of this plot may have been a continuation of the fish pond that lies to the west. An alternative explanation offered in the report was that this feature represented a naturally low area of ground, subject to standing water and organic debris accumulation. Artefacts recovered from this feature included 19th century pottery and glass. Apart from this the only other find of note was a single late medieval ditch.

The first edition Ordnance Survey map, published in 1835, shows the area of the present site as open space on the southern fringes of the village. This map also shows a watercourse flowing north-westwards around Warboys as apparently rising along the southern edge of the present site. This is interesting in the light of the very wet conditions encountered in this part of the site during the present evaluation.

#### **4 Methodology**

Documentary research was undertaken in order to provide a suitable level of background information for the project. Aerial photographic studies were not undertaken, since consultation with an aerial photographic specialist suggested that this would not be worthwhile (Rog Palmer pers. comm.). The main reason for this was the underlying geology of the site, Boulder Clay, which does not readily show archaeological features as cropmarks.

Following background studies, intrusive evaluation was undertaken on the site. A mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket was used to excavate a total of five trenches across the site, of varying lengths but all 2m wide. The trenches were located to evaluate the available open space as an area in the north-eastern corner of the site was not available, since it was still under tree cover. Trench 3 was excavated in two separate segments to allow for the presence of in-situ trees; Trench 4 was 'T' shaped in-plan owing to the restriction on machine working areas imposed by the location of Trench 3. An additional separate small trench was also excavated in order to look for an eastward continuation of a feature seen in the north-south arm of trench 4.

In all trenches, the topsoil was removed to reveal the subsoil which was then examined for cut features; if none were found, the subsoil was removed down to the top of the sandy clay natural. Archaeological features uncovered were

then excavated by hand although in some areas, especially in the lower southern half of the site the high water table meant that excavated features and trenches soon filled with water. These very wet conditions seriously impeded excavation and recording, especially in the southern half of the site.

Recording followed the AFU's standard pro-forma recording system. Contexts were numbered sequentially, with each trench having a separate series of numbers. Finds and records are held at the AFU's offices in Fulbourn, Cambridge, under the site code WARPL99.

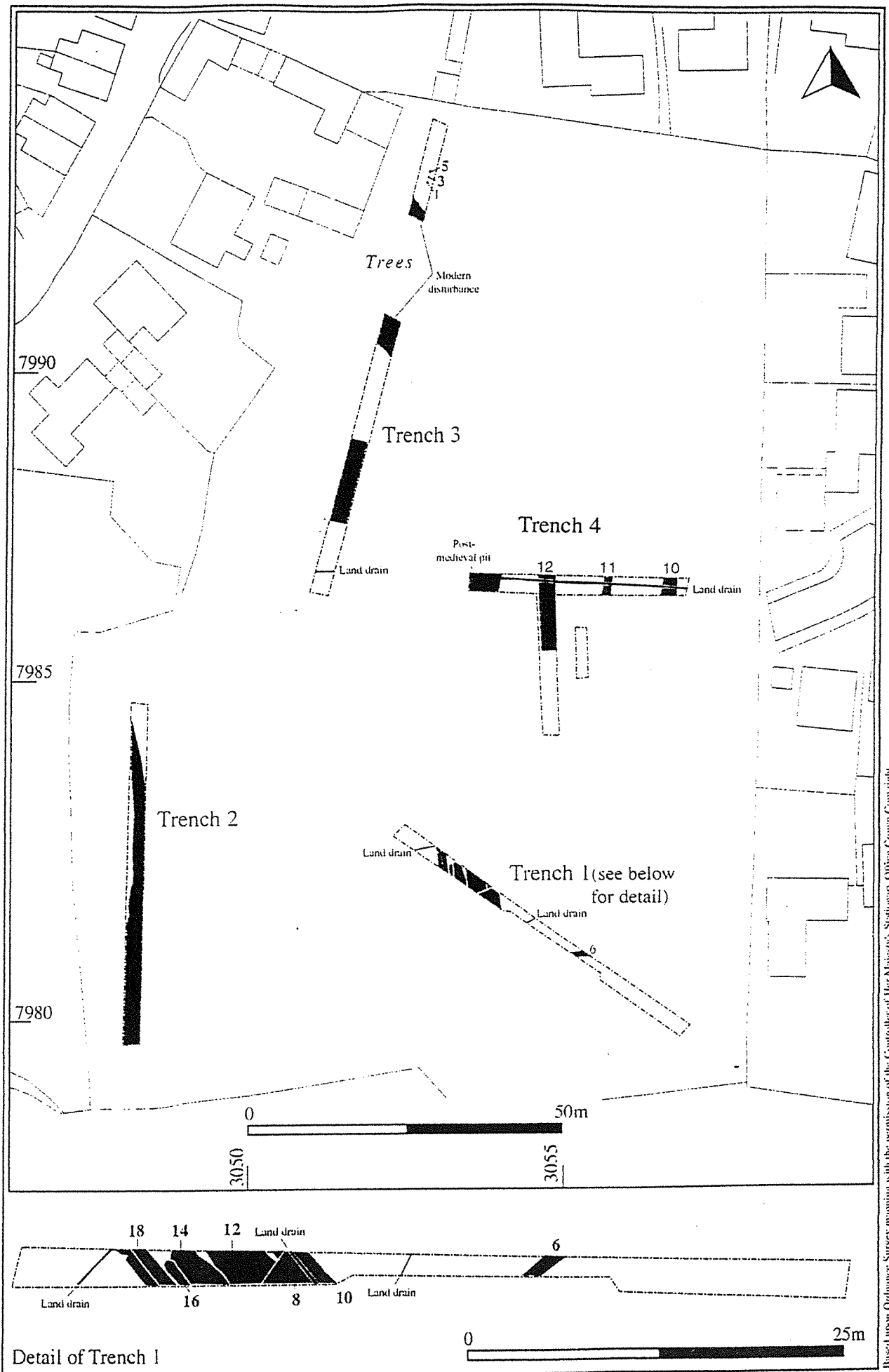
## 5 Results

### Trench 1 (fig 2)

This was 50m long and ran north-west/south-east. The trench section revealed a dark grey-brown silty clay topsoil (1) (0.30m in depth) which contained very occasional small inclusions. Removal of the topsoil revealed a mid-brown silty sandy clay (2) (0.30m to 0.40m in depth) with the thickest deposit being at the north-west end of the trench. Several cut features were exposed after the removal of the subsoil: feature 6 lay in the south-eastern half of the trench. It was 0.95m wide, 0.30m deep, linear in plan, orientated north-east/south-west, and contained one fill, 5, a mid-brown sandy clay heavily mottled with orange stains. This was 0.30m in depth. No finds were recovered from it.

In the north-western half of the trench was a block of several shallow gullies and irregular features with similar alignments. Feature 8 was the latest of these and cut two earlier features, 10 and 12. It also appeared to cut the subsoil, whilst all the other features were sealed by the subsoil layer. It was an irregular pit with no clear shape so a width measurement could not be taken; a depth of 0.42m, however, was measured before the feature filled with water. It contained one fill, 7, a mid-blueish grey sandy clay 0.42m in depth. No artefacts were recovered from this fill.





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Figure 2 Trench plan showing recorded archaeological features. (Inset shows detail of Trench 1.)

Feature 10 was cut by feature 8 and was also badly truncated by a field drain; however, a depth measurement of 0.18m was obtained. The feature was linear in plan, with a north-south orientation; it contained one fill, 9, a mid-yellowish brown sandy/clay soil (0.18m in depth) with occasional small gravel inclusions. No artefacts were recovered from this fill.

Feature 12, also cut by feature 8, was an irregularly-shaped hollow which did not allow an accurate width measurement to be taken. On excavation it was found to be approximately 0.14m in depth with a single pronounced deepening observed in the base (0.25m in depth) which could have been the remnants of a post hole. The feature contained one fill, 11, a mid-grey brown sandy clay with flecks of charcoal and small flint inclusions, and a maximum depth of 0.39m. Ceramic building material in the form of Roman brick was recovered from the top of fill 11. The location of the brick, however, suggested that it was residual. The absence of any other finds from this or any of the other features supports this.

Feature 14 was an irregular hollow 1.30m wide, 0.05m deep, aligned north-south. It had one fill, 13, a mid-grey brown sandy clay 0.05m in depth which contained flecks of charcoal and small flint inclusions. No artefacts were recovered from this fill.

Feature 16 was a shallow gully 0.60m wide and 0.10m deep which ran north-south but did not appear to run across the width of the trench. It contained one fill, 15, dark greyish brown sandy clay 0.10m in depth, which contained flecks of charcoal and small flint inclusions. No artefacts were recovered from this fill.

Feature 18 was a north-south aligned linear, 1m wide, 0.22m deep. It contained one fill, 17, a mid-grey brown sandy clay 0.05m in depth, which contained flecks of charcoal and small flint inclusions. No artefacts were recovered from this fill.

## **Trench 2 (Fig 2)**

Trench 2 was 50m long and ran north-south. It was located in order to identify any continuations of features observed during the excavation undertaken by Fenland Archaeological Trust during December 1991 (Begg and French 1992).

The trench section showed that at the northern end the topsoil depth was 0.40m, decreasing to 0.12m in depth at the southern end (the lowest point on the site), whereas the subsoil depth remained reasonably constant at 0.2m. The very wet sandy clay natural had a single feature cut into it, a ditch c. 1.5m wide which ran west-north-west/east-south-east along the trench. This was filled with a very dark greyish brown almost organic material. From the surface of the ditch fill were recovered sherds of c. 9th to 11th century St. Neots Ware, c. 12th to 13th century Ely Ware and a fragment of Late Medieval Peg Tile c. 13th to mid 15th century in date. Further excavation of this feature was not possible as the trench rapidly filled up with water.

At the southern end of the trench a large expanse of very dark greyish brown material (with an exposed width of 20m) was observed which did not appear to be within a cut feature. It was also noted that the ditch mentioned above seemed to stop at the point where the expanse of dark greyish brown material started and the boundary between them was quite indistinct. The expanse of very dark greyish brown material also remained unexcavated owing to the very high water table.

The expanse of dark material may have been a pond, or perhaps, by analogy with what Begg and French found in the adjacent field to the west, a low-lying area where standing water and organic debris accumulated. The similarity of the fill of the ditch and the dark material may suggest that the two features functioned together, draining the higher ground to the north and allowing water to accumulate in a large pond in the lower, southern half of the site.

### **Trench 3 (fig 2)**

This trench had to be split into two segments with a gap of 16m between them in order to avoid several mature trees. Both segments, however, followed the same north-south alignment. The northern segment (segment A) was 20m in length, whilst the southern segment (segment B), south of the trees, was 30m in length and followed the slope of the land to the south.

#### **Segment A**

Removal of the topsoil (0.4m in depth) revealed the sandy gravel natural into which were cut a modern, machine-dug test pit (not illustrated in fig.2), a modern rubbish pit containing large fragments of tile and brick (some of them

from modern frogged bricks) and three post holes. Two of the post holes were excavated.

Feature 3 was a roughly circular post hole 0.44m long, 0.38m wide and 0.14m deep, containing one fill, 2, a dark grey brown silty sand. Two sherds of Late Medieval Reduced Ware (c. 13th to mid 15th century) were found this fill.

Feature 5 was a sub-square post hole 0.43m long, 0.40m wide and 0.23m deep, which contained one fill, 4, a very dark brown silty sand with a moderate amount of gravel flint inclusions. No artefacts were recovered from this fill.

### **Segment B**

For the northernmost 15m of this segment, 0.25m of topsoil directly overlay the sandy gravel natural; south of this, however, a thin layer of subsoil, 0.10 in depth, was visible; this increased to 0.30m in depth at the southern end of the trench. The removal of the topsoil and subsoil revealed a large modern rubbish pit (containing 19th century brick and tile fragments) at the northern end of the segment, and also a large ditch in the middle of the segment, orientated east-west at a right-angle to the trench. Upon excavation, this was found to be 13m across and at its deepest point along its northern edge 0.8m deep. At its southern edge, however, the ditch was only 0.2m deep. A large square cut feature filled with a grey clay was identified in the base of the ditch, but could not be fully excavated due to the rapidity with which water filled the feature. No artefacts were recovered either from the fill of the ditch or the square feature.

### **Trench 4 (fig 2)**

This consisted of a 'T' shaped trench with the east-west aligned arm measuring 30m, and the north-south aligned arm measuring 20m. The east-west section showed the topsoil to have a fairly constant depth of 0.30m whilst the north-south section showed that to the south the depth of topsoil increased to 0.40m. The sections also showed the subsoil depth also increasing to the south from 0.17m in the north to 0.25m at the most southerly point of the north-south aligned trench.

With the removal of the subsoil and exposure of the sandy gravel natural, several features were observed. At the extreme western end of the east-west

arm was a rubbish pit containing 19th century pottery and glass. East of this were three linear features, all aligned north-south, one of which was excavated. Feature 10 was 1.8m wide, 0.30m deep and contained one fill, an olive brown silty clay. No artefacts were recovered from this fill

The north-south aligned arm of trench 4 was arranged so as to follow one of the three linear features to determine its extent across the site. The feature appeared to stop or possibly turn at the point where the natural sandy gravel became really wet, so an additional smaller trench was excavated to discover whether the linear feature turned, suggesting some form of enclosure, or if it did indeed stop.

Excavation of the smaller trench revealed only the sandy gravel natural directly beneath the topsoil and subsoil, suggesting the ditches were not part of an enclosure. Their parallel alignment and even spacing, and the absence of finds, suggests that they may be the remnants of furrows from former cultivation of the land. If so, it is interesting that they appear to stop at the point where the land becomes very wet. This suggests that the wet conditions encountered over much of the site during the present work may not have changed to any great degree over many centuries.

## **6 Conclusion**

The conclusions which can be drawn from this project are restricted by two factors: firstly, the very wet conditions encountered in the southern half of the site, which seriously impeded or prevented excavation of features, and secondly by the paucity of finds recovered. nevertheless, the work has characterised the depositional circumstances across the site and shown that these appear to be different in the two halves of the area, the higher, drier northern half, and the lower, wetter southern part. The relatively thin (0.40m) topsoil, which in the northern half directly overlies natural, thins further as one moves south, but is underlain by a thickening layer of subsoil. This may itself suggest that the northern half of the site was more deeply or intensively cultivated than the southern half.

The features found in trenches 1 and 2 in the southern half of the site are difficult to interpret, especially in the almost total absence of finds. They may however, reinforce the impression of a less intensive use of this area if they are

seen, as seems likely, as principally connected with drainage or water management. If the parallel linear features found in trench 4 are indeed furrows, then the north-eastern corner of the site at least would seem to have been cultivated in the past, although once again, the absence of finds means no date can be attached to this. The fact that this cultivation seems not to have extended into the southern half of the site reinforces the idea of this lower area being less intensively used generally.

The post holes found in the northern segment of trench 3 are the only real evidence found for settlement, and it may be significant that they were found near the northern edge of the site. In view of this suggestion that any earlier settlement may have occurred mainly in the higher, drier northern half of the site, it is unfortunate that the north-eastern corner is covered in trees. There are two reasons for this: firstly, because the trees prevented investigation of this area by trial trenching, and secondly, because the relatively shallow depth of topsoil found here suggests that any archaeological remains which may have existed beneath the orchard have probably been damaged or destroyed, initially by tree-planting activities and subsequently by the root action of the maturing orchard trees.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Adrian Evans of Persimmon Homes for commissioning this project. The work was carried according to a design brief produced by Andrew Thomas of Cambridgeshire County Council - County Archaeology Office, who also monitored the fieldwork. Assistance on site was provided by Tony Baker (excavation) and Steve Kemp (surveying), both of the AFU. Illustrations were provided by Jon Cane of the AFU and the authors.

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