

**Cromwell Road/South Brink, Wisbech:
A Desk-top Assessment**

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SUMMARY

The area being considered for development, covers an area of approximately 3.68 hectares (TF 4535 0865), and lies to the east of the canalised course of the River Nene. The site lies in an area of potentially rich archaeological remains. There are prehistoric and Roman remains in the vicinity but nothing is known from the site itself. The site appears to have been agricultural or horticultural over the last two centuries. Apart from Selwyn Farm on South Brink and a house in the north-western part of the area there does not appear to have been any development during the past century and recently it has been under grass. To the north of the site there has been housing development and to the east a superstore has been built in recent years. The evidence of past activity in the area and the lack of recent development on the site implies a high potential for preservation of any remains within the development area.

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**Cromwell Road/South Brink:
An Archaeological Desk-Top Assessment
(TF 4535 0865)**

INTRODUCTION

This study was commissioned by Construct Reason Limited to define the archaeological potential of the area and to consider the impact of development on any archaeological remains in the area between South Brink and Cromwell Road.

The site (an area of approximately 3.68 hectares), is to the east of the River Nene, between South Brink and Cromwell Road, one of the main arterial routes into Wisbech from the south-west (Fig. 1). The site is centred on TF 4535 0865.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

Wisbech is approximately 40 miles north of Cambridge with the River Nene flowing south-west to north-east to the west of the site. The area under consideration is to the south of the town and is relatively flat and low-lying, sloping from approximately 5m on South Brink to 2.7m on Cromwell Road. The area is part of the silt fen which overlies Jurassic Amphthill clay and pre-Flandrian gravels have been observed in the vicinity below -15mOD (Waller 1994).

The position of Wisbech on low lying ground close to major water courses made it prone to flooding and other climatic variations (see below). Investigations associated with construction of the A47 revealed that peat growth occurred from the Late Bronze Age near Wisbech, and may have continued into the Romano-British period (Waller 1994). The settlement pattern in of the area has been dictated by the variable Flandrian sequence of marine transgressions and river channel (or roddon) formations. These have lead to the deposition of a thick accumulation of silts, clays and peats. Peat underlies much of Wisbech and was observed during roadworks in 1982 (Waller 1994 and Johnson 1986). The latest deposits in the area are sandy silts in the old estuary which were not reclaimed until the eighteenth century. Freshwater and salt-water flood deposits have been noted during geological and archaeological investigations.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this desk-top assessment is to provide information concerning the location, extent, survival and significance of the known archaeological remains in the vicinity and on the site as well as assessing the potential for further archaeological remains to survive.

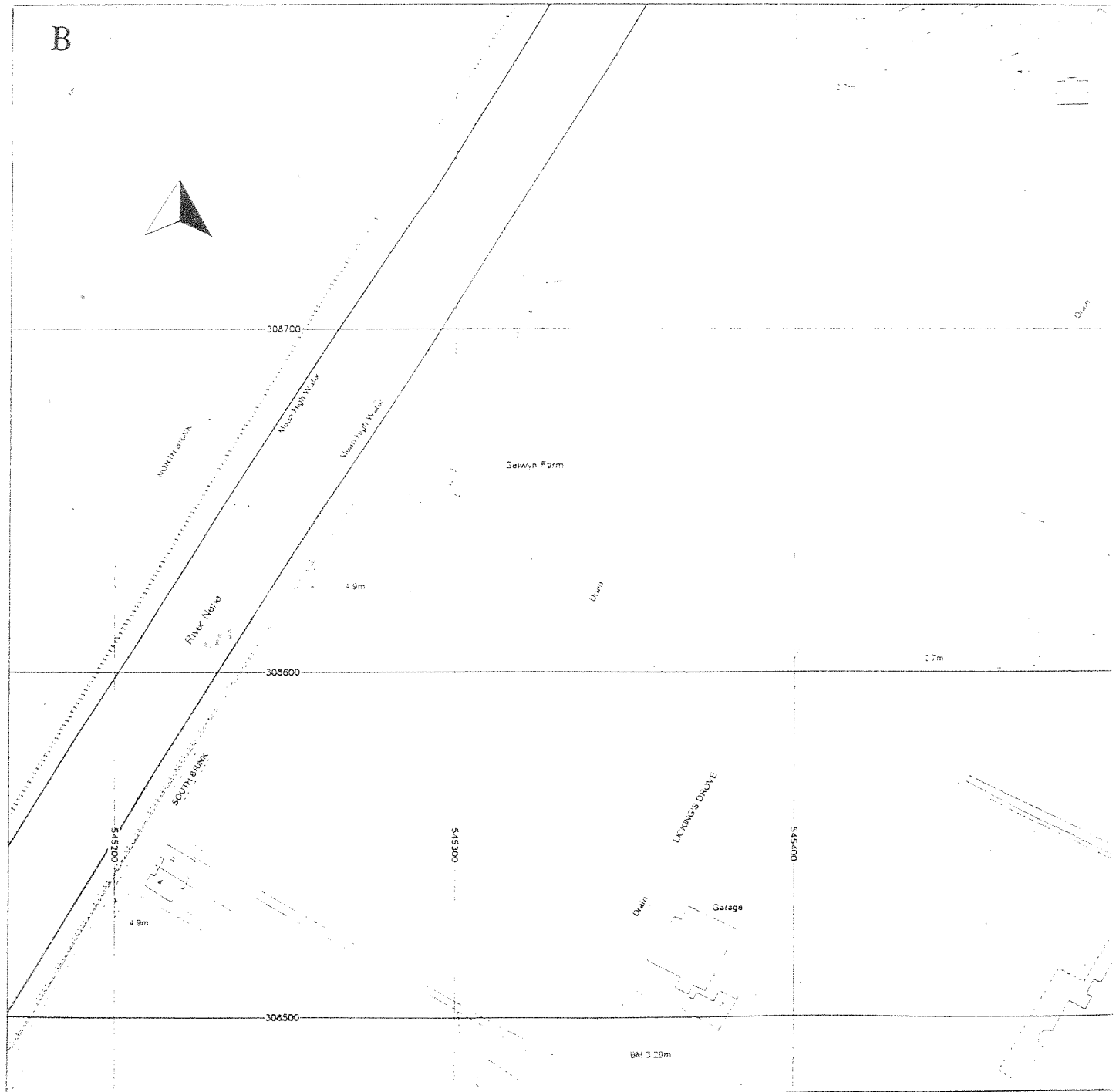
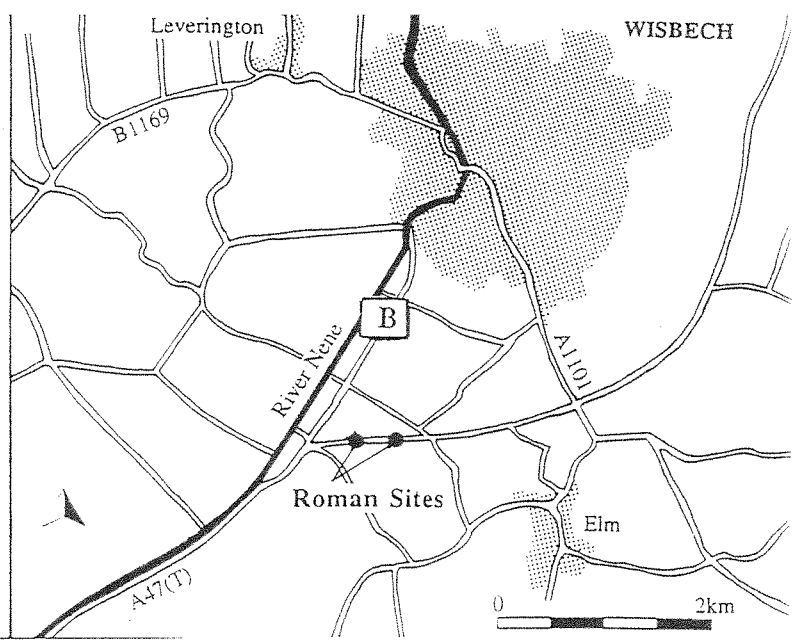
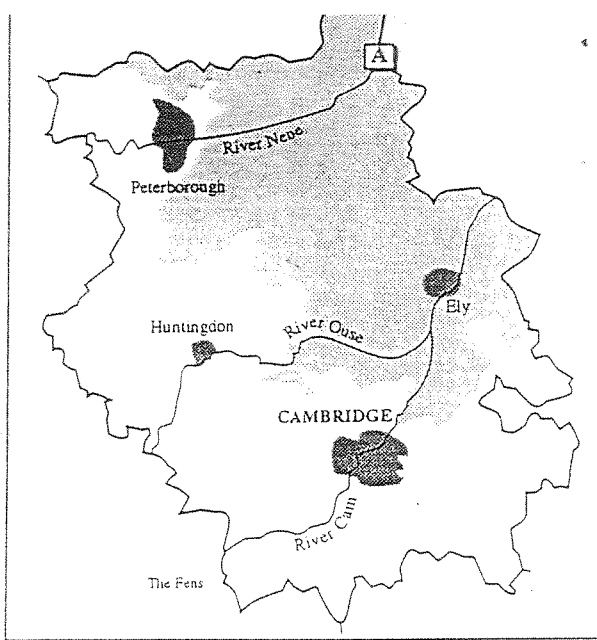


Figure 1 Location map

In order to map the potential for survival of archaeological remains at South Brink/Cromwell Road, Wisbech the investigation concentrated on the accessible archaeological and historical resources held by Cambridgeshire County Council Record Office and Sites and Monuments Record and documentary sources held by the CCC Archaeological Field Unit. Aerial photographic assessment was not carried out as part of this report although crop marks have been identified to the south. Aerial photographic techniques have not proved particularly useful in recognising archaeological remains within the environs of the site (Palmer, pers. comm.).

Additional published resources such as the Victoria County Histories and the Fenland Survey were examined. Reports and archives on excavations carried out the area were consulted. This work was supplemented by consultation of the Ordnance Survey maps of the area. The modern landscape appears to retain boundaries and holdings set out in the post-medieval period.

No geotechnical information has been provided, thus it has not been possible to assess the condition and status of buried deposits or identify local geological conditions on the site.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prehistoric

Prehistoric remains from the vicinity tend to have been mainly stray finds and are relatively rare. No settlement remains have yet been identified. No prehistoric remains have been found close to the development site. The absence of early prehistoric remains recovered from the area may be an indication that the land was marginal or uninhabitable in these periods. Peats in the area started to form during the late Bronze Age (radiocarbon dates from peats in the area range between 2710 ± 60 and 2100 ± 50 BP) followed by a period of marine inundation (Waller 1994). The effects of high water levels greatly reduced the land available for occupation before the Roman period. Iron Age finds include coins and a sword and scabbard (SMR nos. 3906, 3907 and 4008). It has been suggested (Hall 1996) that these may have been curated or lost from a boat as the area was probably inundated during the Iron Age. Further to the west a Bronze Age axe (SMR no. 5946) was reported but the exact place it was found was not noted. Similarly prehistoric boats (SMR no. 3880) were found during the seventeenth century at nearly 3m below the current ground surface. These were reportedly "overwhelmed with silt" and are thought to be prehistoric.

Roman

The Roman period is the earliest phase of settlement on the marine silts with occupation along the roddons to the south of Wisbech and settlements on the high silts. Salterns were also located along the roddons. The County Council Sites and Monument Record records the presence of two Roman sites to the south west of the area under investigation (SMR nos. 9238 and 8182). Both were discovered during construction of the Wisbech By-pass in 1983 (Johnson 1986). These sites revealed pits and ditches containing pottery from the first to fourth centuries AD. Areas of burnt soil and fragments of briquetage suggest saltmaking in the area. It was not clear

whether the ditches noted during these studies were related to drainage or were associated with the saltmaking.

Fragments of Roman pottery and tile have been found along South Brink, to the north of the study area (SMR nos. 3883 and 3884) and considerable amounts of Roman occupation remains are reported to the south (SMR nos. 3871A, 3904, 4010) and in the surrounding fens. Settlements tended to be based on the roddons with grazing in the surrounding fen (Hall 1996). Many of the settlements in the area were small farmsteads controlled by one of the main centres of occupation at Stonea, March or Durobrivae. They concentrated on animal husbandry, salt-making and peat-cutting and maintained many of the natural drainage channels to reduce the risks from flooding. Salt produced in the salterns could have been used to preserve meat as well as being exported from the fens as a condiment.

The fen in this area was used for pasture and stock enclosure – the land being less suitable for cereal production because of its high salt content. This is reflected in the shape of the fields. It has been suggested (Hall 1996) that where fields were being cultivated they tend to have a longer, rectangular shape more suited to ploughing. Where they are being used by animals or for hay the fields tend to be square.

There was evidence of post-Roman marine inundation and it appears that the estuary near Wisbech was much wider during earlier periods. Environmental remains suggest the area was sedge fen and fen carr during the Romano-British period with a sudden return of marine conditions subsequently.

Anglo-Saxon

Saxon remains have been found in Wisbech town (SMR no. 4012) and it has been suggested that there was a timber pre-cursor to the Norman castle (Hall 1996). No Saxon remains have been found in the vicinity of South Brink but fragments of Anglo-Saxon pottery (Thetford ware) were found during investigations along the Wisbech by-pass (SMR no. 4491). It is known that during the post-Roman/medieval period droves ran along the roddons and stray Saxon/medieval finds have been found along these droves. In the surrounding villages evidence for linear settlements developing along the roddons/droves has been found.

Medieval

The only remains of the post-Roman or medieval date in the vicinity (SMR no. 11813) indicate the land was sufficiently far from the medieval centre of Wisbech not to have been settled at this time although it appears to have been cultivated or used as pasture (Kemp 1995). The low lying nature of the site suggests it was subject to periodic flooding and many episodes of marine and freshwater flooding are recorded in historical documents and in borehole evidence along the by-pass (Waller 1994).

To the south, along Cromwell Road, there is evidence of quarrying and drainage/boundary ditches associated with medieval cultivation on the newly reclaimed silts. Ditches noted in earlier excavations (Kemp 1995) indicate gradual infilling with flood deposits which may accord with historical records for the town which refer to flooding following breaches of coastal defences and river banks.

Post-medieval

As Wisbech developed in the post-medieval period the settled area included more land to the south of the medieval town.

Cromwell Road was constructed parallel to Licking's Drove after 1888 but before 1927 and now links Wisbech with the A47(T). Before the construction of Cromwell Road the development site formed part of a larger field extending westwards to the River Nene (see below).

Following Enclosure modern drainage patterns and field boundaries were set out. Post-medieval, nineteenth century and early twentieth century Ordnance survey maps indicate that the area was under cultivation (mainly for orchards and horticulture) in the recent past. Development of adjacent areas has been carried out but the Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments does not yet record archaeological remains from these sites.

Degradation of the peats by the nineteenth century increased the tendency to flooding but with the development of steam pumps improved control over the drains – the Sites and Monuments Record lists six drainage pumps in the parish.

Historical/Documentary Background

Wisbech, meaning stream or valley of the river Wisse (either the Wissey or the Ouse), is first recorded in 1013 (Hall 1996) and Wisbech St. Peter is first mentioned in 1284 (Reaney 1943). The area is close to (and may indeed have fallen within) the Great Bolness Field - a pre-enclosure field to the south of Wisbech town and to the east of the Nene. The name means 'bulls' wooded hill' and first appears in the records in 1334, it is called Bolnehyrst Field in 1438. South Brink - meaning river bank - was probably in existence from 1312 and there are records of the term brinck/brinke from 1429-1615. Licking's Drove, which runs through the eastern part of the site, parallel to Cromwell Road is first recorded in 1312 and comes from the word – Lykkyng(g)e – from the old English *liccian* 'to lick' but it is not known why the name was used!

An extensive historical synopsis of Wisbech town is given in Hoyland (1992) and will not be repeated here as the area under consideration is outside the town itself and beyond the scope of that report.

Historical research presented in the Victoria County Histories (Pugh 1967) and Darby (1983) indicates the vulnerability of the area to flooding in medieval and post-medieval times. In 1236 flooding destroyed the Norman Castle and market and increased the incidence of ague in the fens. Further records show that in 1331 large areas were regularly flooded. Flooding was caused by a series of agencies – marine inundation, breaches in river banks, increased precipitation and cooler temperatures during the late medieval/early post-medieval period, thawing snow and silting up of the drainage system – all of these added to the tendency for area to flood. With the gradual silting up of the water the importance of Wisbech as a port declined. Various Committees were set up to ensure the drains and waterways were cleared and that defensive banks were maintained to reduce the incidence of flooding but it is evident that silting and the consequent flooding was a continual problem. In the 1570s the river at Wisbech was scoured but in 1607 and 1613 the area was subject to destructive sea floods.

Further drainage projects from the early seventeenth century were developed to drain the land, canalise waterways and reduce effects of flooding and produced proposals for reclamation. Flooding, however, continued to be a problem and in 1647 large areas of the fens were inundated and again in the late seventeenth century with severe freshwater floods in 1673.

An agricultural system was developed to cope with environmental fluctuations and preserve areas of cultivable land. This involved a method of strip cultivation similar to ridge and furrow where ditches were dug at intervals that varied between 12m and 20m apart to drain the intervening strip. Evidence of this 'darland' system was discovered during archaeological evaluation in Cromwell Road (Kemp 1995).

Once the cultivable land was stabilised, from the eighteenth century onwards, mustard, hemp, woad and flax were grown extensively on the drained land around Wisbech. The drained land also produced superior pastures. From the 1850s orchards and market gardens were developed around the town (Darby 1983) using the railways for transport to major cities.

Map Evidence

Early maps of the area are of a small scale and do not show details of the town or the area to the south. A map of 1657 shows buildings in the area but not sufficiently precisely to identify the site. Other early maps (including Hayward's 1604 map and Vermuyden's map of 1642) show Wisbech in the bend of the river close to the edge of the salt marshes (Darby 1983), again these lack detail. In the 1720s map the area is known as South Fenn and shows buildings in the vicinity.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

The aim of this desk-top assessment is to provide information concerning the location, extent, survival and significance of the known archaeological remains in the vicinity and on the site as well as assessing the potential for further archaeological remains to survive.

The Wisbech area is rich in archaeological remains of all periods. Few prehistoric sites are recorded due to environmental conditions but sites from Roman and medieval periods are well known in the area.

From the study of historical records and known archaeological remains it is clear that the development site has the potential for survival of archaeological deposits. The absence of recorded remains in the vicinity should not be interpreted, at this stage, as an indication of the absence of archaeological remains on the site. Rather it may be indicative of the development history of this part of southern Wisbech.

IMPACT OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Given the requirements of development and the disturbance likely to be caused by ground works development will have a major impact on any buried archaeological remains on the site. The area is potentially archaeologically sensitive. No details of present soil depth or ground water are yet available but excavations to the south, on Cromwell Road revealed archaeological features sealed by topsoil and cut into peat (which was noted at 0.7m OD). Trenches excavated during the 1994 evaluation were, on average, approximately 1.6m deep.

Proposals for mitigation strategies are beyond the scope of this report. The site has moderate archaeological potential but preservation by record or *in situ* may be considered, depending on the precise nature of the development. Deep deposits may be preserved through architectural or engineering measures. Given the nature of the site intrusive evaluation may uncover extensive remains or demonstrate that no archaeology exists. Without physical investigation this cannot be predicted, in spite of the documentary research already carried out.

CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological potential of the land between South Brink and Cromwell Road can be described thus:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| • mesolithic, neolithic, Bronze Age | low |
| • Iron Age/Romano-British | moderate |
| • Anglo Saxon | low/moderate |
| • medieval | moderate |

The study has demonstrated that the subject site lies within a rich archaeological landscape, surrounded by sites of Roman date and sites with evidence of medieval/post-medieval activity, albeit not in the immediate vicinity. Whilst no archaeological sites or finds are known from the subject site itself, its archaeological potential may be considered moderate. If archaeology is encountered on the site conditions for preservation are likely to range from good to very good and there appears to have been little ground disturbance in recent centuries.

CONFIDENCE RATING

The sources consulted give a good indication of the potential presence and survival of archaeological remains in the area although the absence of evidence for the proposed development area itself is due more to a lack of precise information on the site rather than absence of remains. As there appears to have been little ground disturbance on the site in recent years it is likely that any remains will be well preserved.

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APPENDIX I

Sites and Monuments around the subject site

SMR No.	Grid Ref.	Date	Form
1060	TF 476 091	medieval	moat
2830	TF 440 091	Roman	settlement remains
3870	TF 46- 09-	medieval	hospital
3880	TF 45- 09-	prehistoric	surface and boats
3882	TF 45- 09-	Roman	coins
3883	TF 45- 09-	Roman	pottery
3884	TF 45- 09-	Roman	tile
3889	TF 458 092	Roman	pottery
3890	TF 460 850	Roman	coin
3891	TF 46- 09-	Roman	pottery
3904	TF 431 087	Roman	cropmarks
3906	TF 45- 09-	Iron Age	coin
3907	TF 45- 09-	Iron Age	coin
3910	TF 46- 09-	Roman	coins
4008	TF 46- 09-	Iron Age	sword & scabbard
4010	TF 450 063	Roman	settlement remains
4012	TF 459 096	Anglo-Saxon	stray find
4468	TF 455 074	Roman	pottery & briquetage
4491	TF 457 075	Anglo-Saxon	pottery
5570	TF 45- 09-	medieval	moated manor
5946	TF 440 093	Bronze Age & Roman	finds scatter
5951	TF 449 099	undated	crop mark
8119	TF ? ?	Roman	moulded bricks
8182	TF 450 074	Roman	pottery
9238	TF 455 074	Roman	pottery
11813	TF 450 077	medieval	ditches

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