

Archaeological Field Unit

**An Anglo-Saxon Pit at Spinney Abbey, Wicken:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

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Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No.A207

Commissioned by Mr. R.J. Fuller

SUMMARY

On the 2nd of September 2002, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on land at Spinney Abbey farm, Wicken, Cambridgeshire (TL5550 7184). Mr. R.J. Fuller commissioned the work.

Four trenches with a total length of 45m were opened, constituting a 5% sample of the development area. Archaeological features were found in all four trenches. These consisted of ditches and pits. The only dating evidence to be recovered was from a small pit in Trench 4, pottery provisionally dated as Anglo-Saxon. The remainder of the finds comprised animal bones and daub fragments that were recovered from the small pit in Trench 4 and animal bones from a small ditch in Trench 2.



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An Anglo-Saxon Pit at Spinney Abbey, Wicken: An Archaeological Evaluation (TL 55518 71845)

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 2nd of September 2002, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on land at Spinney Abbey farm, Wicken, Cambridgeshire (TL5550 7184). The work was commissioned by R.J. Fuller. The evaluation was conducted in response to a brief prepared by Andy Thomas of the County Archaeology Office (CAO).

The site lies northeast of existing farm buildings of Spinney Abbey, approximately 50m to the south of the A1123. It is bounded to the southeast by a farm track and to the north and west by pasture. The site is roughly rectangular and approximately 0.14ha in area. A building that stood on the site (a tractor shed) and rubble were removed prior to the evaluation taking place. A section of the foundations of the tractor shed was uncovered during the evaluation and left in situ. A recently redirected drainage ditch was also uncovered and partially removed during excavation.

The presence of archaeological remains was considered highly likely by the CAO on the basis of the close proximity to the C13th-C15th Priory and other associated buildings and earthworks. There also existed a potential for lithic implements (Lower Palaeolithic-Early Bronze Age) a number of which have been unearthed at several sites around Spinney Abbey.

All four Trenches contained potentially archaeological features. Only one feature, occurring in Trench 4, had datable finds; several shards of (provisionally) post Roman pottery.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies on an area of Gault Clay overlain by Boulder Clay according to the Institute of Geological Sciences (map188 Cambridge). This was confirmed during excavation. There was also a considerable percentage of yellowish sand and gravel well mixed in with the Boulder Clay.

The sites topography showed a gentle slope from the Northeast corner of the field down to the Southwest. The drop-off was recorded as 0.80m from the northern end of Trench 4 (7.12m AOD) to the western end of Trench 1 (6.32m AOD).

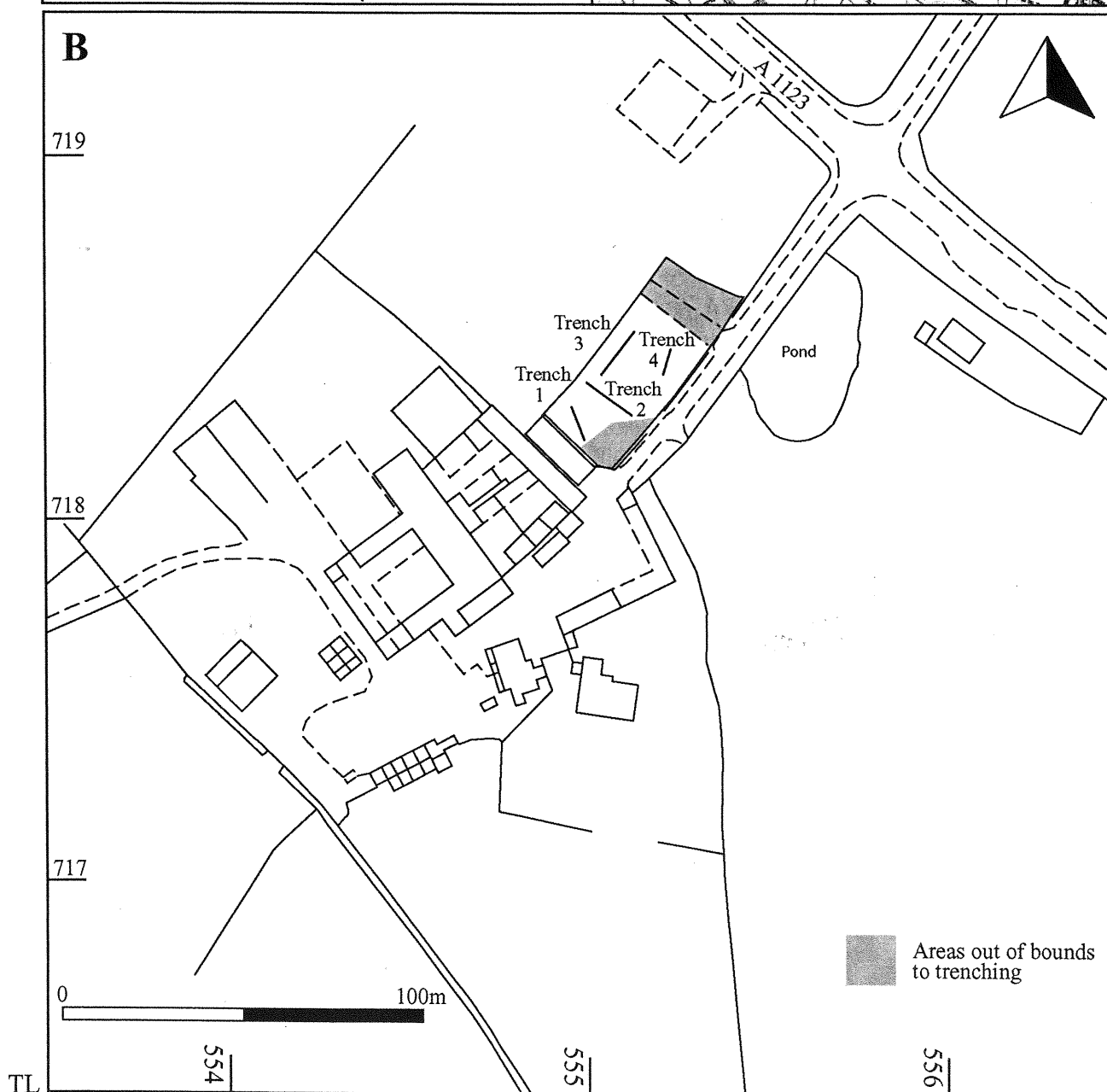
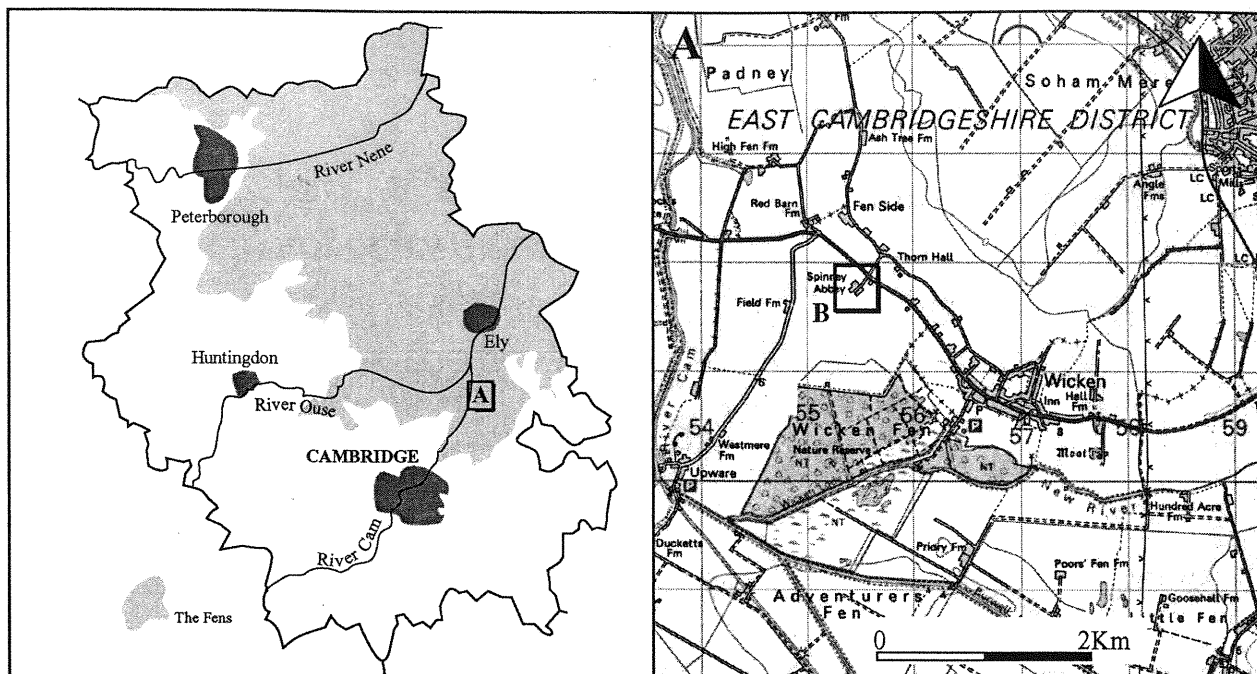


Figure 1 Site Location Plan

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Spinney Abbey is the site of a medieval Priory. The Priory was founded before 1228 AD. Nothing remains of the priory buildings in the present house that is dated to 1775 although a number of 14th century carved fragments of Barnack stone lie in the gardens (Haigh, 1988, The Religious Houses of Cambridgeshire).

The earliest archaeological remains recovered from the parish of Wicken are Mesolithic flint artefacts. Similar Neolithic flint scatter sites are also present. Evidence for Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement was recovered from close by during archaeological excavations at Dimmock's Cote Quarry between 1992 and 1997.

Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments Record shows cropmarks to the north and south of Dimmock's Cote Quarry indicating field systems and possibly settlement of late prehistoric or Roman date (SMR CB12107) adjacent to Spinney Abbey. There is evidence of medieval settlement to the west (SMR CB12460), and Roman settlement to the south-west (SMR CB8423) of the Quarry. Spinney Abbey (SMR CB8450) is some 2km west of the medieval settlement at Wicken.

Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments Record also demonstrate evidence of a locally extensive range of lithics, both spatially and temporally. Neolithic polished axe heads (SMR CB8480) were recorded approximately 0.6km to the southwest of the site. A "substantial scatter" of worked flint and debitage, including a blade and an end scraper, dated Early Palaeolithic to Early Bronze Age (SMR CB8481) were found approximately 0.7km NNE of the site.

Three complete and one partial skeletons were removed from the NE corner of the farmhouse (to the SE) during under-pinning work carried out during the 1930's. This was recorded in photograph and written form in a local booklet show to the author by Mrs. Fuller.

4 METHODOLOGY

Four trenches were opened using a mechanical excavator with a 1.6m toothless bucket, under the supervision of an archaeologist.

The positioning of the trenches was restricted by several factors. The presence of an active drainage ditch, overhead cables, a fence, trees, building foundations and a field access track in different areas of the field limited potential choices for trenches.

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Four trenches with a total length of 45m were opened, constituting a 5% sample of the development area. Archaeological features were found in all four trenches. These consisted of ditches and pits. The only dating evidence to be recovered was from a small pit in Trench 4, pottery provisionally dated as Anglo-Saxon. The remainder of the finds comprised animal bones that were recovered from the small pit in Trench 4 and a small ditch in Trench 2.

The trenches were machine-cut using a toothless bucket and subsequently cleaned with hoe and/or trowel. The trench bases were planned by hand and photographed after cleaning and excavation.

5 RESULTS

Trench 1

Trench 1 was 11m long, 1.6m wide and contained one feature. Up to 0.33m of modern makeup overlay ditch 5.

Ditch 5 oriented E-W, was 0.28m wide and 0.12m deep. It contained a single fill of mid grey silty clay with moderate small angular stones. No finds were recovered from this fill. The feature was cut into dark orange-yellow gravel sand.

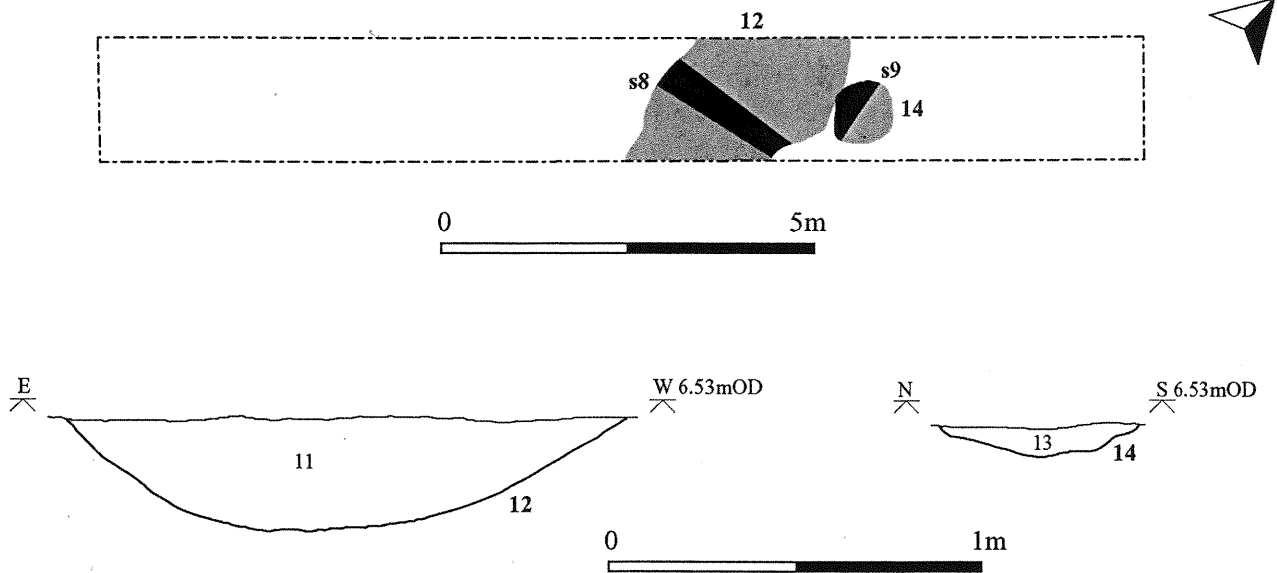
Trench 2

Trench 2 was 14m long, 1.6m wide and contained two features. A large quantity of stone and brick was exposed and removed whilst cutting this trench. This rubble was part of a farm track constructed in recent times by the farmer for access to the demolished building. The farmer supplied this information in person and the strong smell emitted by the stones was due to their being used in sugar beet processing prior to dumping.

Ditch 7 was 0.56m wide and 0.15m deep. It contained two fills; the lower fill, 8, light brown with orange lenses, a silty sand with occasional small rounded pebbles and frequent sub-angular flint and chalk. Fill 6 occupying the upper c.90% of the ditch was mid brown slightly sandy silty clay with occasional sub-angular flint pebbles. Finds in this fill were one limb bone fragment and a horn core with skull fragment attached. Both were from a medium to large mammal.

Ditch 10 was 1.75m+ wide and 0.29m deep. Its sole fill was a mid-brown clayey sandy with occasional medium-sized rounded and sub-angular flint pebbles.

Trench 3



Trench 4

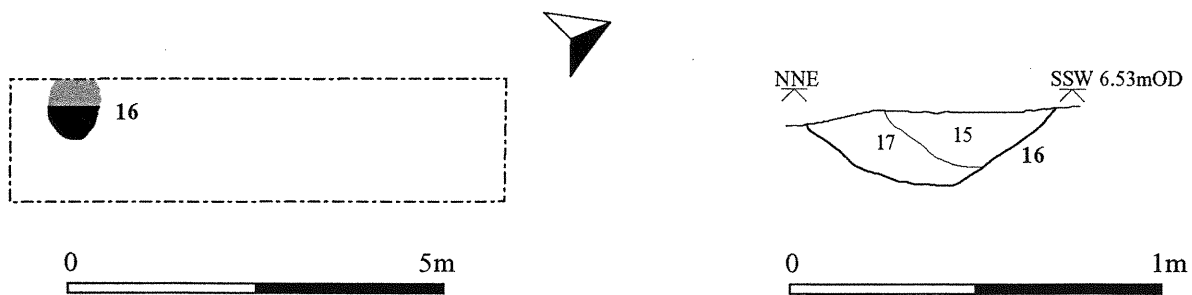


Figure 2 Plan of trenches 3 and 4 with sections

Trench 3

Trench 3 was 13.5m long, 1.6m wide and contained two features.

Feature 12 was 1.50m wide and 0.30m deep (in section). Its sole fill, 11, was a mid-brown clayey silty-sand with occasional medium-sized sub-angular flint pebbles spread throughout the deposit. The extent of this feature was unclear and therefore its classification cannot be assured. No artefacts were found.

Pit 14, a shallow, sub-circular feature lay adjacent to the N side of feature 12. Its fill, 13, was very similar to 11. No artefacts were found.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was 6.5m long, 1.6m wide and contained two features. The position of this trench was adjusted following the removal of the topsoil due to the presence of extensive foundation of the demolished tractor shed. One feature was found to be a small modern posthole containing wood fragments. The second, 16, was a small sub-circular pit. It contained two fills, 15 and 17. Fill 17 occupied the lower and southern half of the pit and was mid orange-brown sandy silt with occasional small sub-angular pebbles and medium sized clunch fragment. The secondary, upper fill, 15, was dark brownish grey clayey silt with occasional small sub-angular pebbles and clay lumps.

6 DISCUSSION

The aim of the excavation was to establish the character, date state of presentation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site.

Weather conditions were good with a fairly strong contrast between geological and archaeological features. The presence of extensive dumping on the site did lead to some initial problems in trenching the site. This was overcome with the helpful advice from the machine driver's first-hand knowledge of the site. As a result the confidence rating of results is judged to be high.

The two larger, broad ditches (10 and 12) in Trenches 2 and 3 respectively, bore similarities in profile and overall dimensions. Their alignment, as much as it could be judged seemed to be roughly at right angles.

The small pit (or posthole) containing Saxon pottery may indicate possible occupation of that period.

Quarrying and road building very heavily disturbed Trenches 1 and 2. This puts into question the reliability of the features therein. The ditch in Trench 2 was so close to the modern road disturbance that it is very doubtful that it can be judged to be an undisturbed archaeological feature.

7 CONCLUSION

The Ordnance Survey records indicate the location of the Abbey to be different from the physical remains recorded in the SMR. This led to some concern during excavation and may need addressing in view to any further excavations in the area.

Despite proximity to the extensive Spinney Abbey and associated buildings there was a general paucity of features in the evaluation trenches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank R.J. Fuller who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. Aileen Connor managed the project. Thanks also to David Crawford-White (Site Assistant), Sue Holden (Illustrator) Dr. Paul Spoerry (Pottery specialist).

Andy Thomas, County Archaeology Office, wrote the brief for archaeological works and Jeremy Parsons monitored the evaluation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Haigh,D. 1988: The Religious Houses of Cambridgeshire, Cambridgeshire County Council

Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record

British Geological Survey Cambridgeshire Map 188

Appendix A: Context list

Context No.	Trench No.	Description	Finds
1	3,4	Topsoil	None
2	1,4	Subsoil	None
3	1,2,3,4	Rubble/Redeposited Chalk	None
4	1	Ditch Fill	None
5	1	Ditch Cut	None
6	2	Ditch Fill	Bone-inc.horn core
7	2	Ditch Cut	See above
8	2	Ditch Fill	None
9	2	Ditch Fill	None
10	2	Ditch Cut	None
11	3	Fill	None
12	3	Cut	None
13	3	Pit Fill	None
14	3	Pit Cut	None
15	4	Pit Fill	Bone frags-inc.teeth of medium/large mammal Six Mid.Saxon pot shards Two daub frags
16	4	Pit Cut	None
17	4	Pit Fill	None