

Archaeological Field Unit

**Houghton Mill, Houghton and Wyton, Cambridgeshire:
An Archaeological Watching Brief.**

T Way

1998

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. B38

Commissioned by The National Trust East Anglia Region

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T Way BSc, MA, PhD

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INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Houghton Mill, Houghton and Wyton (TL 282 719) by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council between the 5th and the 8th of September 1998. The work was undertaken for The National Trust, East Anglia Region, and involved two site visits.

The proposed development comprised the construction of a new flood alleviation channel and turbine pond close to the Mill itself, which construction involved site clearance, topsoil stripping and some excavation work to a maximum depth of c.2.5m below the present water level, or about 3m below present ground level.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Houghton Mill is a National Trust property and listed building located beside the River Great Ouse at Houghton, between Huntingdon and St Ives. The mill is a large timber-built watermill placed on an island on the River Great Ouse, 2 miles downstream from Huntingdon and about 100m south-east of Houghton church.

A mill at Houghton is recorded as being given by Earl Ailwin to Ramsey Abbey at its foundation in 969, and from then onwards there are frequent references to a watermill at Houghton (VCH 1932, 179). The present building is probably of 17th century date and is of three storeys with attics; the building is timber-framed and weather-boarded with tiled roof (RCHM 1926, 144). Much of the machinery is of 19th century date and is intact and operational on milling days.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to the commencement of the watching brief removal had already taken place of an overburden of former floodbank material on the site. Following this site clearance, topsoil stripping and excavation to a depth of about 3.00m below present ground level was carried out by plant. An archaeologist was on-site during all groundworks. Site archive, comprising written and drawn records supplemented by photographic record, are held by the Archaeological Field Unit.

RESULTS

Inspection of the spoil resulting from the removal of the overburden across the site revealed modern materials, brick, and concrete within a mixed stony 'topsoil'. It is suggested that this material did not result from localised dredging but was imported onto the site.

Initial excavation in the area to the east of the mill casement revealed further relatively modern material, dating to the 19th/20th centuries. Removal of this material revealed a 19th century revetment, and earlier walls and foundations set within a blue/grey clay backfill. This backfill was truncated at about 3.00m below the present ground surface.

Supported by, and keyed into, the wall foundation was a yellow sandstone block measuring 1.00m x 1.20m x (minimum) 2.00m, partially obscured by concrete. This block may be interpreted as a support for the northern axle of the mill wheel. The wall foundation was of greyish-white lime mortar with an inclusion of broken yellow brick. A stretch of north-south wall, also composed of yellow bricks, ran across this area to

join to the east-west wall forming the north side of the mill race. This structure is interpreted as forming part of the considerable 19th century repairs and rebuilding of the mill.

CONCLUSIONS

Following removal of modern overburden and disturbed upper deposits, excavation revealed 19th century structural elements relating to the restoration and rebuilding of the mill at that date. These elements included foundations, walls, and supporting block for the mill wheel to the immediate north of the mill leat.

These 19th century works resulted in the truncation of any deposits and structures relating to earlier phases of mill construction to beyond the depth of the present excavations.

Although no pre-19th century features were recovered within the area of the present development it should be noted that this does not preclude the possibility of archaeological remains relating to earlier phases of mill construction existing beyond the present area of development.

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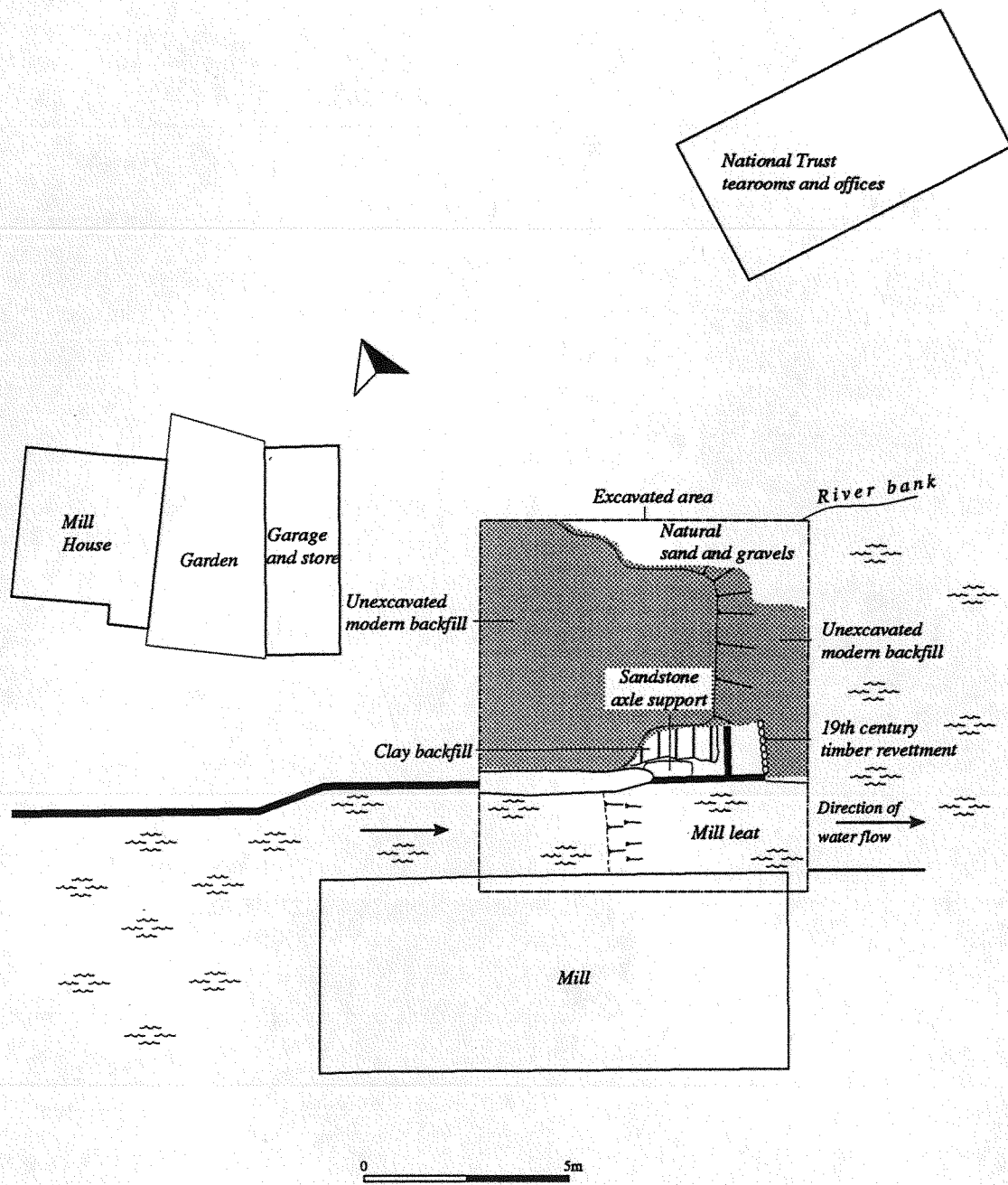


Figure 1 Location of excavation area and 19th century archaeology



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