

Archaeological Field Unit

The New March Library, March: An Archaeological Evaluation

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SUMMARY

In October 1998, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on the site of the proposed new March Library, off Acre Road, March, Cambridgeshire (TL4159/9668). The work was commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council.

No archaeological features were found in the three trenches excavated, and the deposits encountered close to the river almost certainly relate to the demolition of Acre Mill, a corn mill which once stood on the site, adjacent to The Acre public house. This Post-medieval buildup may indicate that any archaeological remains have been removed.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Between 12th and 16th October 1998, the AFU carried out an archaeological evaluation on land just off High Street, March (TL4159/9668). The work was carried out at the request of Cambridgeshire County Council, in advance of the construction of the new March Library, and was in response to a brief set by the County Archaeology Office (CAO).

The site lies to the southwest of March Bridge, on the south bank of the River Nene (Old Course). This is close to the town centre, just off the High Street, and less than 50m from the Market Place. It is irregular, bounded to the north by the Nene, to the west by the George Campbell Pool, and to the east by housing, shops and The Acre public house which all front onto Acre Road. To the south is the Eastern Electricity March Primary Substation. The area affected by the development proposals covers approximately 0.7 ha., and consist of the library building, a new access road, parking, and landscaping works.

The presence of archaeological remains was considered likely by the CAO on the basis of information contained in the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), and the results of a recent desk-based assessment by the AFU (Kemp 1998). They both record few finds from March town itself, but numerous remains from the edges of the island and the surrounding fen.

Following deturfing by hand, three linear trenches with a total length of 75m were opened by machine, and subsequently hand cleaned, photographed, and base planned.

Apart from demolition layers probably associated with the former Acre Mill, no archaeological features or deposits were encountered.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

2.1 Geology

Although the majority of the town lies on the March Gravels which form the core of the March island, the site lies partly on an incursion of the Barroway Drove Beds, and partly on Boulder Clays, beneath which lies Kimmeridge Clay.

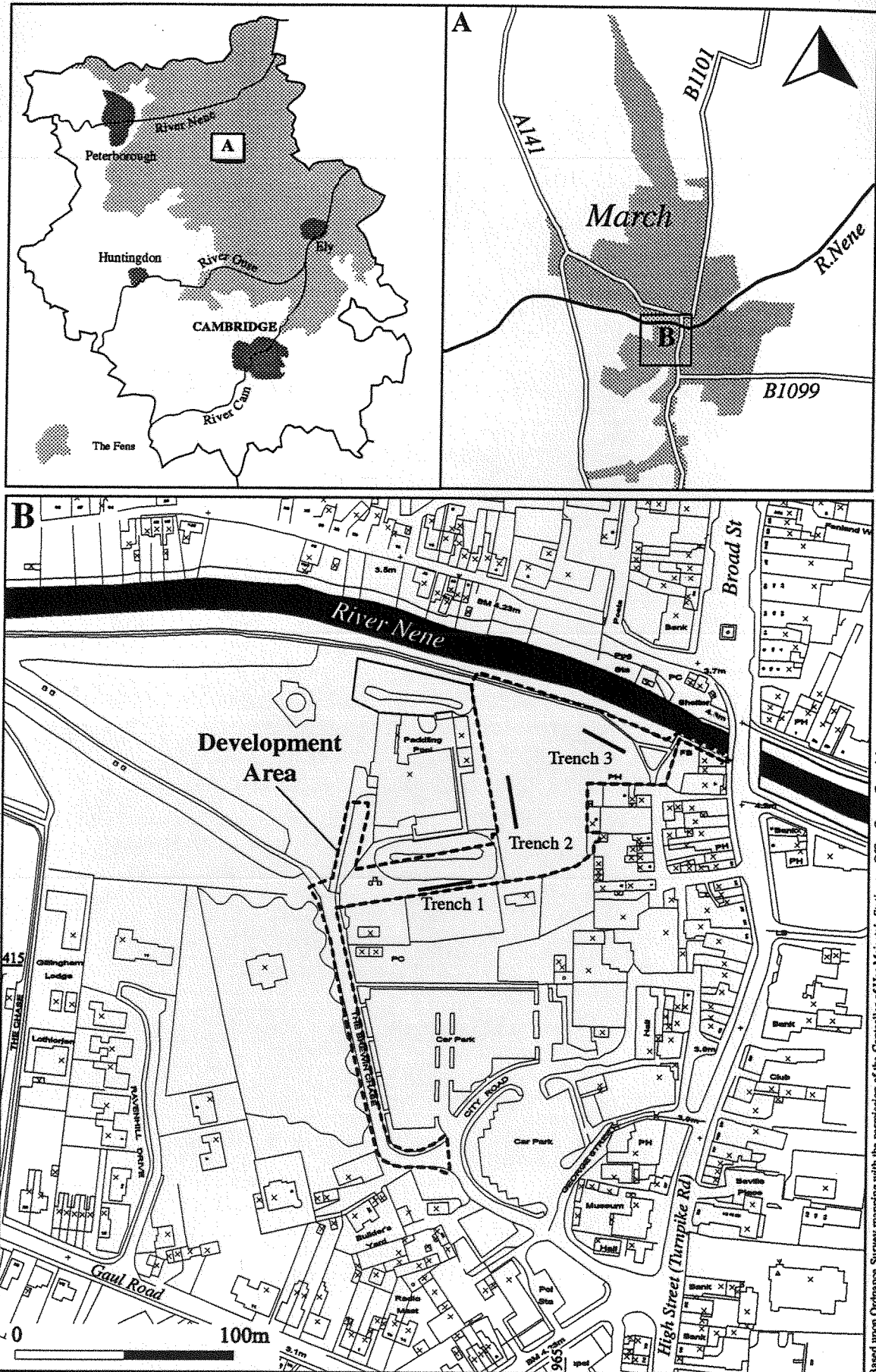


Figure 1 Site location map showing archaeological trenches and development area

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2.2 Topography

March island rises out of the fen to just over 5m OD; the benchmark used during this evaluation is on March Bridge and has a value of 5.82m OD. The existing course of the Nene is a possible tenth century canalisation of an earlier stream which followed the low-lying ground cutting the island in half.

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Historical Background

Identified as early as 1086 as *Merc*, meaning "boundary" (Reaney 1926), March is located some 13km south of Wisbech, in the Fens, on the gravel island mentioned above. It was once a mere hamlet in the parish of Doddington, but soon outstripped both its parent and the other surrounding villages. It probably owes its origin to the ford on the old course of the Nene, where the road between Ely and Wisbech crossed the river. However the actual early settlement seems to have been concentrated to the south, around St Wendreda's church.

It is thought likely, as outlined above, that the existing course of the Nene was constructed during the late Saxon period, possibly in the tenth century. The bridge has existed in its present location since at least 1544, and in the reign of Elizabeth I, March was a minor port. This activity may have provided the focus for the later northwards expansion of March. Since the introduction of the railway, this expansion has continued apace.

In 1563, the population was around 1000, and this had risen to about 5,600 in 1861. By 1891, March had outstripped Whittlesey, and Ely also by 1911. In 1951 the population stood at 12,993.

3.2 Archaeological Background

3.2.1 Palaeolithic and Mesolithic

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic flints have been identified within the parish. Mesolithic scatters were found on the gravels adjacent to Gaul Road and to the west of the development area (SMR 08455, 05210).

Neolithic and Bronze Age

Numerous finds of flint artefacts dating from the Bronze Age have been located in the vicinity. Several finds scatters have been located on the Bronze Age margins of the island (SMR 04548, 05007, 08459).

Iron Age

Stonea Camp is an Iron Age fort and is located to the west of March. Two settlement sites are known from the March island which lie over 2km north of the development area. The Icenian coin hoard from Field Baulk Farm was located 1km to the south of the new Library site.

Roman

The Fen Causeway crosses the northern part of the March island and there are extensive cropmarks to the northeast around Flaggrass. A Roman skeleton was found on Robin Goodfellows Lane early in the nineteenth century, indicating that further remains of this period may have gone undetected in the town.

Anglo-Saxon

No definitively Saxon finds have been attributed to the area around the town, but St Wendreda's church is believed to be close to the focus of the early settlement. The site lies close to the Post-medieval bridge, but there was probably an earlier crossing in the same place, perhaps originally a ford.

Medieval

Stray Medieval finds have been found during excavations at Grays Lane on the opposite bank of the river from the current site.

Post-Medieval

The development of the town is documented in numerous maps, and the development area is indicated as low lying and in need of drainage. However, there might still have been wharves in the area associated with the port in Elizabethan times, but these may have left only ephemeral traces. Until the construction of Acre Mill, which stood on the site until at least 1963, there seems to have been no stone or brick structures built within the development area.

4 METHODOLOGY

Before the evaluation phase, a desktop study was undertaken which revealed information about the historical and archaeological background of the site, the results of which are detailed elsewhere in a separate report (Kemp 1998).

Using the desktop study in conjunction with the development proposals, a scheme of intrusive trenching was devised to test the archaeological potential of the site. The first trench was located along the new access road, the second within the footprint of the proposed building. The third was placed within the area of landscaping, closer to the river, identified as having a high archaeological potential in the desktop study.

The footprints of the trenches were deturfed by hand and the turf stored for later reinstatement. Three trenches were opened using a mechanical excavator

with a 1.5m toothless ditching bucket, under the supervision of an archaeologist (see fig. 1).

The trenches were cleaned by hand, photographed, base planned and located in plan with reference to The Acre public house and vertically in relation to the benchmark on March Bridge.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Trench 1

Trench 1 was 25m long and contained no archaeology. 0.25m of topsoil overlay 0.2m of dark brown silty sandy clay subsoil with occasional small stones. This contained one or two sherds of nineteenth or twentieth century pottery. Below this was dark yellowish brown natural sandy clay with occasional olive grey clay patches.

5.2 Trench 2

Trench 2 was 25m long and contained no archaeology. 0.2m of topsoil overlay 0.1m of dark brown silty sandy clay subsoil with occasional small stones. This contained one or two sherds of nineteenth or twentieth century pottery. Below this was dark yellowish brown natural sandy clay with occasional olive grey clay patches. This in turn overlay yellowish brown sand with occasional medium to large flints. The latter two deposits are almost certainly both natural.

5.3 Trench 3

Trench 3 was originally intended to be 25m long, but became truncated to 21.6m because of services crossing the line of the trench. Certain sections were so unstable that they had to be immediately backfilled. Excavated to the maximum legal depth, it contained no archaeology. 0.15m of topsoil overlay 0.2-0.4m of rubble and hardcore. This contained one or two sherds of nineteenth or twentieth century pottery. Below this, and up to 0.8m thick, lay a very variable mixture of ashy layers, coke, rubble and brown silty clay containing numerous brick and tile fragments. At the eastern end of the trench, this overlay a purplish-black organic silty clay, possibly the Barroway Drove Beds, while at the western end, a brown silty clay lay beneath the rubbly layers. It is not certain that these latter deposits were natural, however, the development is unlikely to impinge upon any archaeological deposits still sealed below this depth.

6 DISCUSSION

Despite the favourable location of the site close to March Bridge, SMR entries, nearby recent excavations, and documentary sources, no archaeological features were found in any of the trenches. Trenches 1 and 2 were excavated to only a shallow depth before encountering natural. Trench 3, by contrast, showed evidence of considerable recent buildup, probably relating to the demolition of the Acre Mill, which stood in that area until at least 1963. Since the area around trench 3 is earmarked for a programme of landscaping works, which will not be particularly intrusive, any archaeological remains still sealed below the level of deepest penetration during this evaluation, will be preserved. There is also the possibility that Post-medieval activity has truncated the natural stratigraphy in this area and thus removed any archaeology as well.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

No further archaeological works are recommended at this time before construction takes place.

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