

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT  
SWAN BRIDGE, PARSON DROVE,  
CAMBRIDGESHIRE.  
1995**

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## INTRODUCTION

A programme of archaeological evaluation was commissioned by Hunting Gate Anglia Ltd at Swan Bridge, Parson Drove, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, in an area of proposed housing construction. It was carried out between the 9th and the 14th of February 1995.

The area under evaluation covered approximately 0.5 hectares of (levelled) modern agricultural buildings with associated yards, open spaces and tree cover. The proposed development comprises the construction of 20 bungalows and houses with access roads, services and landscaping. Any archaeological deposits within the development area will be severely disturbed.

The principal aim of the evaluation was to determine the nature, extent, date and state of preservation of any surviving archaeological remains within the development area. Within this a particular objective was to investigate the presence or absence of a putative Romano-British droveway, seen as a cropmark on aerial photographs crossing the site NW-SE, and to identify any settlement/field system elements associated with it.

A requirement of the evaluation was that excavations would not proceed below a depth of one metre from the surface in the vicinity of proposed foundations.

### *Site location and geology*

The site is located at the western end of the village of Parson Drove, 9 kilometres due west of Wisbech in the north-eastern corner of the County. The southern boundary of the site is formed by a deep open drainage ditch, leading west to east into a large N-S canal cut which separates the site from the village itself. The bridge which crosses the canal is the Swan Bridge. Directly to the west and east are agricultural and residential buildings and to the north open fields.

Parson Drove lies within the far northern part of Cambridgeshire, with the Fenland based upon marine silt deposits known as the Terrington Beds. These silts, laid down around the southern margins of the Wash, overlie peat and earlier Flandrian silt deposits, and are thought to be Iron Age in origin (Hall and Coles 1994). The surface geology of the silt fen is complex, with alluvial silts and clays deposited by marine incursions cut by extensive former river systems which drained the Fenland to the south and west. Between these deposits peat growth has developed with depths of a few centimetres to several metres.

The area lies above sea level with only occasional spot heights on roads attaining 5m. The height of the field surface on the site is approximately 3.50m OD. though it was impossible to ascertain exactly.

### *Aerial Photographic reconnaissance*

An assessment of aerial photographs was commissioned to examine the environs of the development area in order to identify areas of archaeological potential and provide a wider context for the Swan Bridge site. No cropmark evidence was available for the site itself, it being beneath farm buildings. A rectified plan was produced at a scale of 1:10000. (Appendix 1)

Features mapped were divided into two main periods as, potentially, Romano-British or Medieval in origin. The Medieval was represented by a series of parallel ditched field strips (dylings) to the north-west of the area. Roman features were ascribed on the basis of their location and similarity to others of known date in the surrounding area. The principal feature revealed, directly relevant to the development area, was a double ditched trackway, aligned from the NW for some 900m towards the Swan Bridge site. Definition is lost beneath the built-up area but the trackway reappears, for 200m, to the SE, south of Parson Drove. The track, or droveway, would appear to link a ditched field system to the north-west with a settlement complex in the south-east. The droveway does not appear to be an integral part of the settlement area, which may suggest more than one phase of construction.

### *Archaeological and historical background*

With a relative lowering of sea level the silt fens are known to have attracted large-scale Romano-British settlement activity during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, the newly available area providing rich agricultural land, primarily pasture.

An important feature of the Fenland landscape are the roddons, the raised silt beds of former river channels. Settlement patterns in the Fens have to a large extent been conditioned by their existence from prehistory up until the 19th century. They have long provided relatively high, dry, stable ground among the lower lying Fens. The village of Parson Drove, and the Romano-British settlement site to the south-east, lie upon a broad, high roddon some 500m wide. The droveway which is seen on aerial photographs to cross the Swan Bridge site leads from the roddon onto lower lying ground where it may become an integral part of the cropmarked field system to the north-west. The site lies immediately to the south of a, probably, Romano-British settlement (SMR 03794) part of an extensive area of settlements, farmsteads and field systems.

No potential archaeological sites were located in the immediate vicinity by the Fenland Survey during fieldwalking, but several concentrations of Romano-British settlement debris were located to the south-east and west (Hall forthcoming). This recent fieldwork has revealed 20 settlement sites on and around Roddons to the west of Wisbech, probably connected with livestock farming as suggested by extensive cropmarks of droveways and enclosures (Hall and Coles 1994).

There may have been some abandonment of settlement sites in the immediate post-Roman period but generally occupation has been continuous up to the present day (Taylor 1973). There is considerable potential for Saxon and Medieval archaeology in the area, two Middle Saxon sites having been recently located to the north-east at Tydd St. Giles (Hall forthcoming), and it is likely that there was continuity of settlement from the Roman period with, in some cases, direct Saxon occupation of Roman settlement sites. The economy of the Medieval occupation of the area was primarily based upon the raising of livestock, with settlements strung out along an extensive system of droveways and upon the higher roddons (Hall and Coles 1994).

The Post-Medieval drainage of the area was effected by the cutting of the North Level Main Drain, and its associated ditches, in 1834 (Taylor 1973). The cut runs west to east to Parson Drove and then turns north-east until it joins the River Nene. The N-S canal cut at Swan Bridge, and the large open ditch at the southern boundary of the site, are part of this system and presumably date from the same period.

## METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

### *Trench excavation*

All trenches were positioned to gain the maximum stratigraphical information whilst avoiding modern foundations, mounds of vegetation and building rubble and the many trees which covered the southern and western parts of the site. Trenches were excavated by machine, removing destruction debris, topsoil and, where necessary, sufficient underlying natural substratum to ensure that early features were not masked by subsequent silt deposits. The trenches were 1.5m wide.

An initial trench (Trench I), c. 50m in length, was excavated along the western boundary of the site, primarily to determine the presence or absence of the driveway ditches. Trench II, 14m in length, was placed 20m to the east to cut across the projected alignments of two parallel ditches observed at the northern end of Trench I. A double-width trench (Trench III), 9m x 3m, was excavated some 15m to the east of Trench II to investigate the relationship between the projected alignments of the southernmost of the parallel ditches and a third ditch observed at the south of Trench I. Trench IV, 25m in length, was placed to the north of the parallel ditches to identify any associated features; field boundaries or possible settlement areas.

From Trench I further machining, in 3m wide strips, was required, immediately to the east of the three ditches, to better reveal their alignments and widths in plan. At the northern end of Trench II, where the northernmost of the parallel ditches was not seen, areas were machined to east and west to determine the width of the presumed break, or gateway, in the ditch. A further area, 2m x 4m, was exposed at the eastern end of Trench IV.

In total 220m<sup>2</sup> was exposed, a little over 4% of the evaluation area.

### *Excavation and recording*

The Unit-modified version of the Museum of London recording system was used to describe the excavated features (Spence 1990). Discrete layers, fills and cuts were assigned individual context numbers, indicated in the text in square brackets (e.g. [001]). Feature numbers were also assigned (e.g. F.1) as a descriptive aid defining a ditch etc. and its component contexts.

Linear features were sample excavated in 1m or 1.5m sections. No discrete non-linear features were identified. The trenches were base-planned at 1:50 and all sections drawn at 1:10.

## INVESTIGATION RESULTS

### Descriptions of soil horizons

[001] Topsoil;

A mid brown, heavy, silty clay loam, sticky, becoming dense and compact towards the base where clay becomes more prevalent. Inclusions; Occasional Post-Medieval to Modern pottery sherds, brick fragments, iron, glass, charcoal flecks and small to medium stones. A ploughsoil with modern disturbance and intrusions. Its depth was variable, from 25 to 40cm.

[002] Subsoil;

Overall pale mid grey, sticky compact clay silt with mixing and intrusions from [001] above. Inclusions; Very occasional Post-Medieval and Modern pottery sherds, charcoal flecks and brick fragments. Natural clay silt ([008]) with plough and root disturbance. Depth to 20cm.

[008] Natural substratum/alluvium;

Pale grey to yellow-grey, dense compact clay silt, frequent disturbance from roots and possible cracking but no inclusions. Occurs over the western part of site, in trenches I and II. Below [008], which at the south of Trench I is 40cm deep, is a thin band of peat, overlying a second blue-grey clay layer.

[028] Natural substratum/alluvium;

A pale yellow, occasionally mottled with orange and grey, friable fine sandy silt. Occurs over the eastern part of site, in trenches III and IV.

### Descriptions of excavated features

**F.1:** Along the southern edge of the area, roughly parallel to the large open drainage dyke which borders the site, was a broad U-shaped ditch, aligned west to east. Two 1m sections were excavated across the ditch but no finds were recovered, however, by its alignment and state of preservation it can be presumed to be Post-Medieval in origin.

#### Context descriptions:

Cut [033]; A deep, broad U-shaped ditch cut, 1.60m wide and 60cm deep, sides steep, to 50°, base rounded. Good preservation of sides and base with only slight weathering of natural subsoil [028].

Fill [034]; Pale to mid brown silty loam, light and friable (slightly plastic). No inclusions. Slightly denser with some iron staining towards base.

**F.2 and F.3:** Two parallel ditches, aligned NW-SE, enclosed a narrow strip 6m wide. The ditches survived to a depth of 50cm in places, F.3, the northernmost, being the more substantial of the two. The ditches were observed over 28 metres, in Trenches I and II. In F.3 a break, or gateway, occurs, 2.5m wide. The butt ends on either side were rounded and steep-sided, and it was here that the ditch survived to its maximum depth and where the sides were seen to be best preserved. Both ditches in Trench I, and F.2 in Trench II, showed relatively well

preserved edges at their 'outsides' (i.e. the south of F.2 and the north of F.3), with shallower, disturbed edges on their insides. The underlying natural clay [008] is also seen to be lower between the ditches, approximately 20cm, with remnants of a possible buried soil layer, [039], seen in Trench I beyond the northern edge of Trench I.

Two 1.5m sections were excavated in F.2, along with one 1.5m section, and both butt ends at the entranceway, in F.3. Whilst producing small quantities of degraded bone, no datable finds were recovered.

## F.2

### Context descriptions:

Cut [035]; Fairly shallow but broad linear cut, aligned NW-SE, width to 1.90m, depth to maximum 30cm. South side steep, to 80°, slightly curving flat base, north side shallower and disturbed. Both ditch edges and the base show signs of root disturbance.

Fills [036, 037]; A dark brown, blocky, friable (slightly plastic) clay silt with a high organic content. No inclusions except pockets of yellow/grey silty clay mixed from above and below. Some weathering and root disturbance at the sides and base.

Buried soil [039]; A dark brown, blocky, friable clay silt with a fairly high organic content, mixed with dirty yellow/grey clay silt. Very similar to fills [036, 037]. Depth to 10cm.

## F.3

### Context descriptions:

Cut [024]; A broad U-shaped linear cut, aligned NW-SE, width to 1.90m, depth to maximum 50cm. North side steep, to 85°, slightly curving flat wide base, south side steep but disturbed and shallower in parts.

Fills [025, 026, 027]; Overall a dark brown, blocky, compact but friable clay silt, high organic content. No inclusions, some weathering from sides and base and root disturbance.

No further features were observed in Trenches I, II and III except for modern intrusions, pits and pipe trenches. In Trench IV a series of modern features cut into the natural subsoil- building foundations, pipes and cables. At the eastern end of the trench a large area of *in situ* burning occurred from which two sherds of 1st-2nd century Roman pottery were recovered in cleaning its surface. However, on excavation the burning was clearly modern in origin, containing frequent 19th and 20th century pottery sherds, and the Roman material was therefore residual.

## DISCUSSION

All three ditches revealed have been truncated to some extent by subsequent ploughing and modern disturbance, attested to by the Post-Medieval and Modern pottery sherds recovered towards the base of the clay silt subsoil [002]. The depth of ploughsoil is greater to the west and north, away from the open ditch at the south of the site, with the natural substratum correspondingly lower. F.1 at the southern edge of the site, and probably Post-Medieval in origin, has not suffered the same degree of plough truncation as the ditches to the north. It is possibly a field boundary ditch laid out as part of the 19th century drainage of the area.

The two parallel ditches, F.2 and F.3, correspond to the projected positions of those seen as cropmarks to the north-west and south-east. They would have formed a narrow track or droveway, primarily for the movement of livestock, with ditched fields or enclosures on either side. The break in ditch F.3 being an entrance to one of these fields. In Trench III, F.2 the southernmost of the two ditches, should have been visible in the natural substratum, revealing its relationship with F.1 which crosses its line. However, it was not seen and it is possible that this indicates a second, larger, break in the southern droveway ditch. The droveway would have been at a slightly lower level than the surrounding fields, probably due in part to erosion of the surface by the passage of animals, and the insides of the ditches also show disturbance in concordance with that. While there is no direct evidence to place the droveway in the Romano-British period, it has been assigned such a date because of its relationship to surrounding, typically Romano-British cropmarks. However, a medieval date cannot be ruled out. Further excavation at its southern end, where it lies within the settlement area, would be necessary to provide confirmation.

There was no evidence of actual occupation on the site but it is probable that the residual Roman pottery from Trench IV has not been transported very far, it lay within a layer of redeposited natural sand/silt directly above an area of modern burning, probably used as a fire dampener.

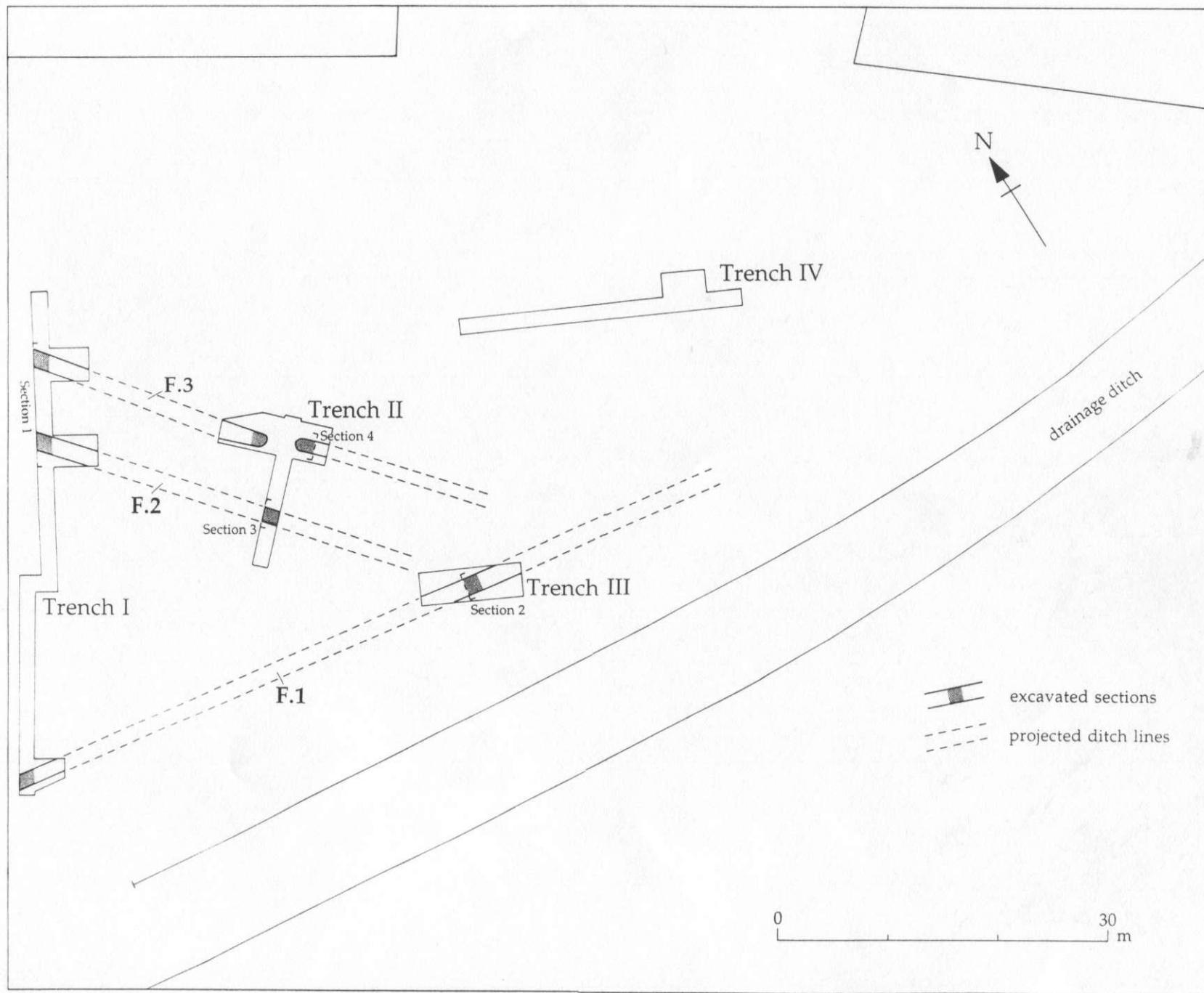
The sand and clay silt natural substrata, [008] and [028], are alluvial deposits and, as seen in Trench I, overlie peat layers and further clay deposits. Any archaeology beneath the alluvium has not been investigated in this evaluation. It is possible that the silts are a Post-Roman deposit and that the droveway ditches which cut into them are of Saxon or Medieval date. To ascertain this much deeper excavation of the trenches would have been necessary, to depths in excess of 1m, and a considerably longer programme required.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archaeologists were Cassian Hall, Paul Masser, Richard Mortimer and Paula Whittaker. Lesley McFadyen processed the finds and Chris Evans reviewed the text. R. Mortimer prepared the graphics. Thanks to Phil the digger driver and apologies to Paula for the car.

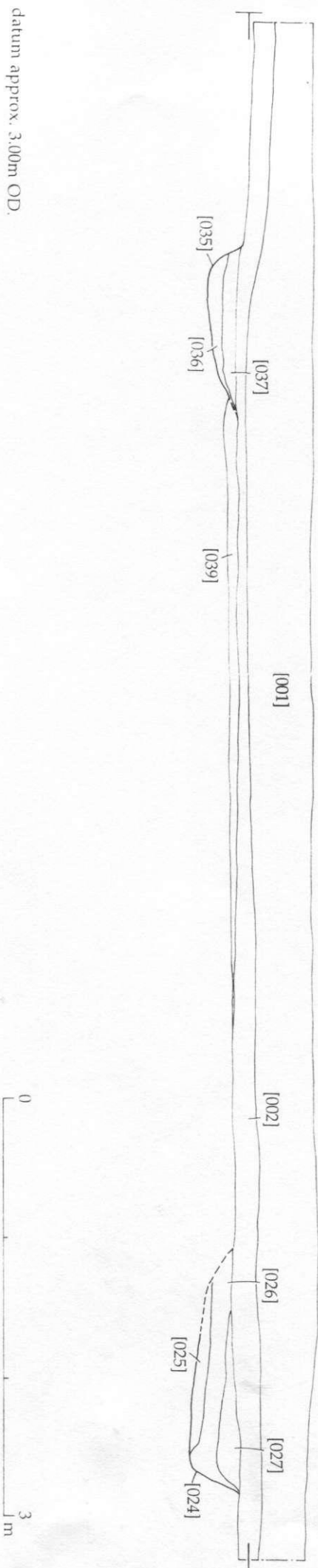
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- Hall, D. and Coles, J. 1994. *Fenland Survey: An essay in Landscape and Persistence*. London.
- Hall, D. forthcoming. *The Fenland Project Number 10: The Isle of Ely and Wisbech*. East Anglian Archaeology.
- Taylor, C. 1973. *The Making of the English Landscape: The Cambridgeshire Landscape*.
- Spence, C. 1990. *Archaeological Site Manual*. London: Museum of London.

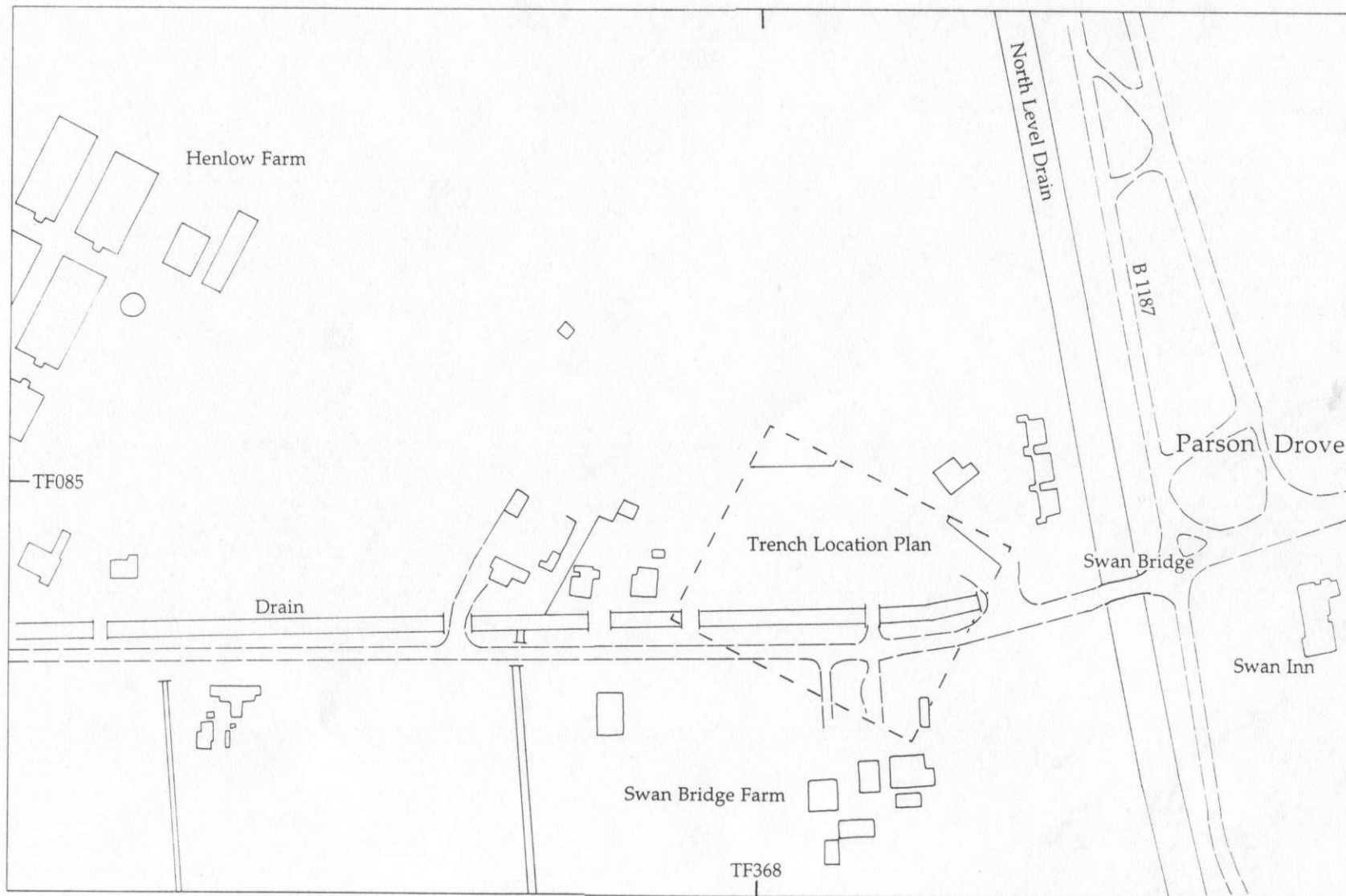


Location of Trenches

Section 1: F.2 and F.3, south-east facing.

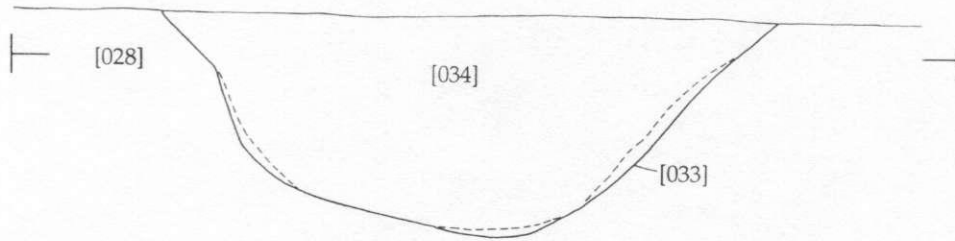


datum approx. 3.00m OD.

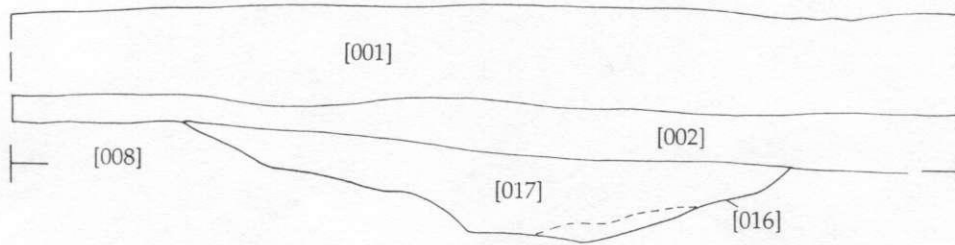


Site Location

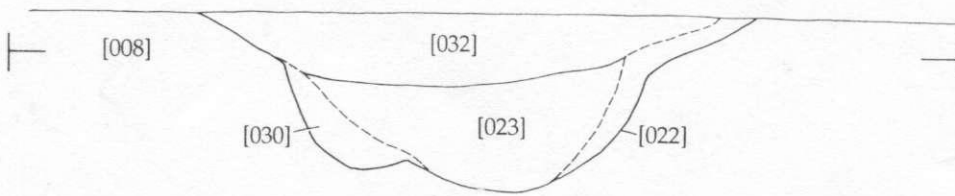
Section 2: F.I, east facing.



Section 3: F.2, south-east facing.



Section 4: F.3, north-west facing.



datum approx. 3.00m OD.



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**SWAN BRIDGE,  
PARSON DROVE,  
CAMBRIDGESHIRE**

**AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT**

**FEBRUARY 1995**

COMMISSIONED BY

CAMBRIDGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT  
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY  
DOWNING STREET  
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**SWAN BRIDGE, PARSON DROVE,  
CAMBRIDGESHIRE:  
AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT**

**Rog Palmer MA MIFA**

**INTRODUCTION**

This assessment of aerial photographs was commissioned to examine a half-hectare area and its environs in order to identify areas of archaeological potential and provide wider context for the Swan Bridge site. Mapping was to be at 1:10000.

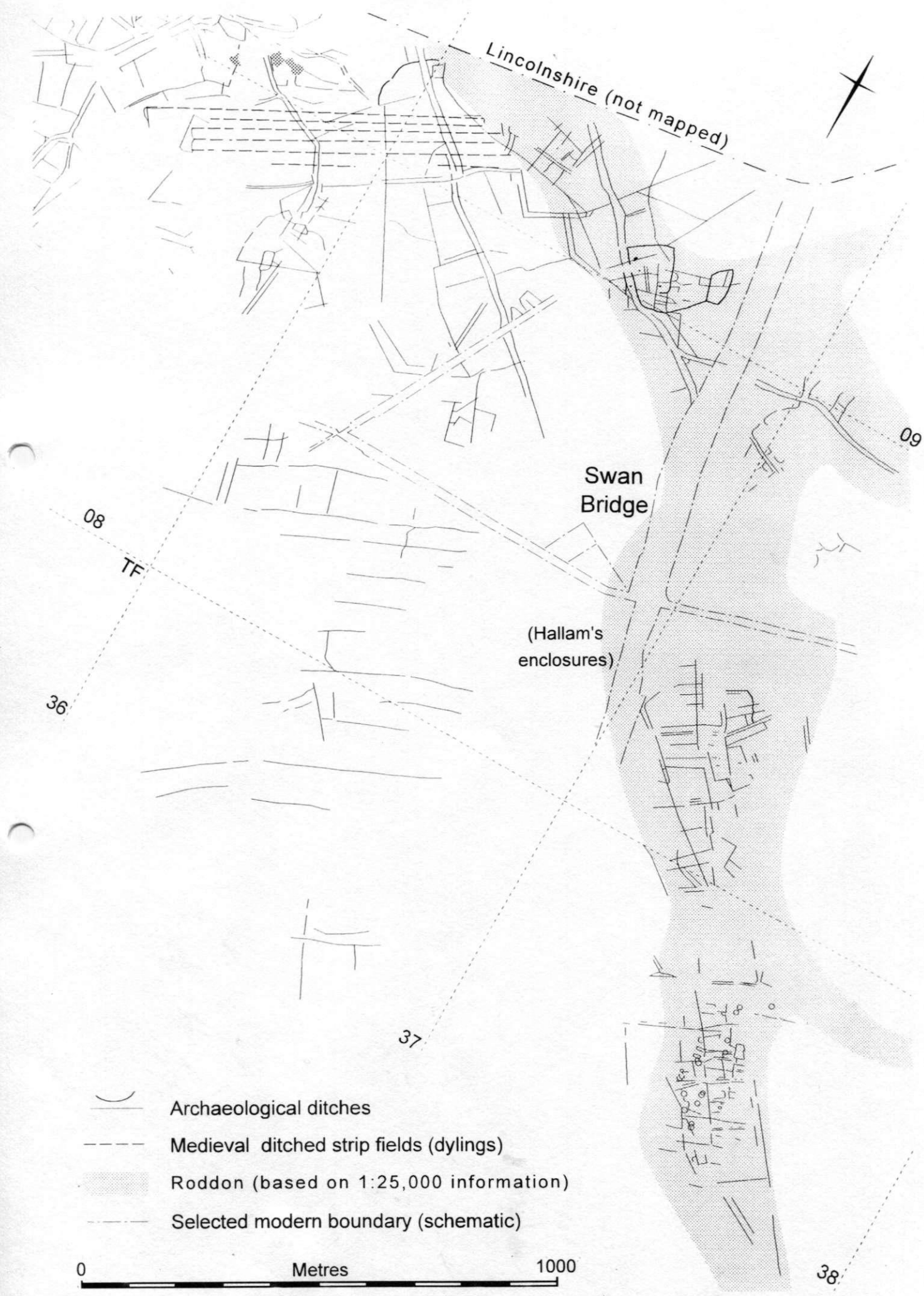
**PHOTO INTERPRETATION AND MAPPING**

The assessment site is in an area of the Cambridgeshire Fenland that was recently mapped at 1:10560 as part of the Fenland Project (Hall, in the press). Photographs used in that work included those from the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs (CUCAP) and specialist obliques held by the National Library of Air Photographs (NLAP), Swindon. Vertical photographs in the NLAP were not examined. For this present assessment it was considered sufficient to enlarge the previous mapping to 1:10000 and to redraw with reference back to CUCAP prints only. These appear to record the majority of mapped archaeological features.

All photographs consulted are listed in the Appendix to this report.

For the earlier work the photographs were examined by eye and under 1.5x magnification. Vertical photographs were also examined using a 1.5x magnification stereoscope. Features identified were marked on the prints and checked with photographs of other dates and finally mapped at 1:10560 using either computer rectification (Haigh 1993) or controlled sketching. The digital files retain values for error of control point matching and, over the area redrawn for this assessment, these lay within a mean value of  $\pm 5.0\text{m}$ .

It should be emphasised that the figure includes an amount of sketched detail. In particular the track to the northwest of Swan Bridge was recorded on only one highly oblique photograph that did not show sufficient control information for computer rectification and could only be sketch mapped. However, the features to the southeast of Swan Bridge include what may be construed as a continuation of the track and this part has been rectified by computer. The coincidence of alignments are sufficiently good to suggest continuity and linking in the past, and this track may pass through the assessment area.



## COMMENTARY

The features mapped can be divided into two main periods – Roman and medieval – with the latter represented by the series of long parallel strips (dylings) in the northwest of the area (TF359090). The Roman features are ascribed dating on the basis of their location and similarity to others of known date. In this area they reflect the appearance of 'normal' consolidated silt fen settlement of the period but also show suggestions of more than one phase of construction. The track that may pass through the assessment area does not have the appearance of an integral component of the settlement area southeast of Swan Bridge (TF376076) yet to the northwest it may be a fundamental part of the ditched system (TF363089). On morphological grounds there is no reason to think that this ditched system is other than of Roman date. The route of the track can be followed from the high roddon in the southeast to the lower ground northwest of Swan Bridge. This is unusual, but not unparalleled, in the silt fens and suggests its construction and use during a period of low water table. Traces of axial fields west of Swan Bridge (area TF365080) are also cut into the silt and demonstrate that settlement activity did extend into those areas.

No 'sites' were located by the Fenland Survey during field walking within the area mapped for this report but to the southeast and west were several concentrations of Roman settlement debris (Hall in the press, figure 95). The parts of Lincolnshire immediately north of Parson Drove were not investigated as part of the work in that county (Hayes and Lane 1992, figure 2) and can provide no surface evidence for continuity of occupation. However, mapping by Hallam (Phillips 1970, map 10) shows clearly that the crop-marked ditch systems illustrated in this report continued to the north. It remains unknown whether Hallam visited this area on the ground but no dating evidence is included in her map or gazetteer.

Hallam's map 10 differs from that in this report. Most significantly her map includes the 'suggestion of a group of enclosures' (Phillips 1970, 297) as site 3607. Those enclosures on her map (at TF368082) show no suggestion of any extension into the present assessment area but may be taken as indicative of settlement activity close to Swan Bridge. Nothing of archaeological significance, coincident with Hallam's site 3607 could be identified on the photographs examined for this assessment. The source photographs for these features are verticals taken by the RAF, now held at the NLAP, and which were not examined for this assessment.

Silt circles have been recorded at the site centred TF376076 and Hallam notes others in the area of her site 3609 – although these remain unseen on photographs examined for recent work. Such circles are of uncertain function and date but are usually accepted as stack rings resulting from either Roman or medieval farming (Riley 1946; Wilson 1978; Hall in the press). The circles mapped at TF376076 could be of either date as they coincide with what are likely to be Roman features (in places superimposition occurs) and also are located within land farmed in medieval times (Hall and Coles 1994, figure 91). Those suggested at 3609 are likely to be on the roddon and therefore intermingled with Roman features. All of 3609 lay in the medieval fenland (west of the North Level Drain) but the presence of dylings attests use of the land during those times and the circles may be associated with that.

## REFERENCES

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- Wilson, D.R., 1978. 'Groups of circles in the Silt Fens' in D. Hall 'Elm: a field survey', *Proc Cambridge Antiq Soc* 68, 41-46.

## APPENDIX

### *Aerial photographs re-examined*

*Source: Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs*

#### Oblique photographs

RS 31-37	22 March 1955
AED 15-17	7 May 1962
CPC 56-61	28 July 1981

#### Vertical photographs

RC8-EF 13-15	25 March 1982	1:10000
RC8-EF 94-96	25 March 1982	1:10000

### *Aerial photographs previously examined and listed as principal sources for mapping*

*Source: National Library of Air Photographs*

#### Specialist collection

TF3508/2/77-84  
TF3509/8/89-92  
TF3607/1/34-38  
TF3607/2/277-278  
TF3608/3/275-276  
TF3608/4/303-307  
TF3608/5/274-275  
TF3608/6  
TF3609/1-25  
TF3707/1/88-91  
TF3708/2/30-31  
TF3708/10/222-223  
TF3708/11/224-228  
TF3709/1/255-256