

An Archaeological Desk-top Assessment
of the land between St John's Road
and West Fen Road Ely

David J. Gibson
BA

Cambridge Archaeological Unit
University of Cambridge
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Non-Technical Summary

Situated on the western side of the Isle of Ely, the site appears to have been primarily agricultural since Roman times. Prior to this it may have seen prehistoric activity, specifically Iron Age occupation. In summary, the nature of the archaeology is probably characterised by Romano-British/Medieval ditches and possible Iron Age/Romano-British settlement.

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1.0 Background

1.1 This desk-top study provides a detailed archaeological assessment of land between West Fen Road and St Johns Road, Ely (TL 530 805; Figure 1). It has been compiled by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) for Ashwell Group Ltd in response to a brief issued by the Cambridgeshire County Archaeological Office (CAO; Kaner 1997).

1.2 *Sources Consulted*

- Cambridgeshire County Council SMR
- Ordnance Survey maps
- University of Cambridge libraries
- Cambridge City Library - Local Studies Collections
- Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs
- National Library of Air Photographs, Swindon
- Soil Survey of England and Wales

2.0 Site Description and Geology

2.1 The proposed development area covers an area of c. 22.6 ha., due west of the historic city centre of Ely. It is bounded on the north by West Fen Road; on the west by the A10 bypass; on the east by the western suburb of Ely; and to the south by St Johns Road (Figure 2).

2.2 The site slopes gently westwards to the fen, falling from c. 10m to c. 6.5 m OD by the A10 bypass.

2.3 The underlying bedrock of the proposed development area is Kimmeridge Clay. A deposit of Cretaceous sand and sandstone overlies the clay across most of the proposed development area.

3.0 Previous Archaeological Work

3.1 During the 1980's English Heritage commissioned the Fenland Survey to identify and map the extents of archaeological sites across the Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire Fenland area. During this campaign, fieldwalking recorded Roman and Medieval pottery on the northern edge of the proposed development area. No other previous archaeological investigations have been carried out within the enclosed area of the proposed development. Nonetheless, several isolated finds spots are recorded in the vicinity, and archaeological

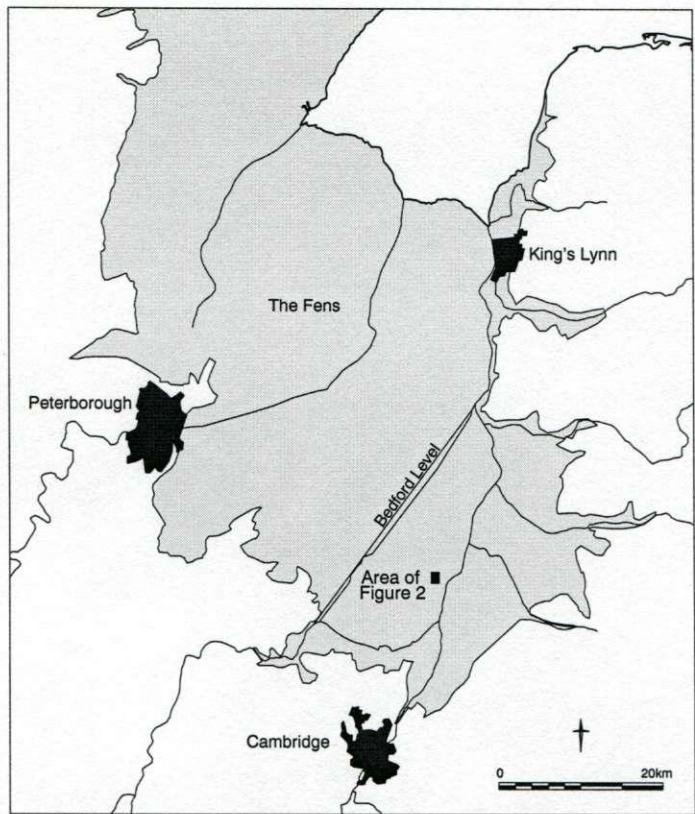


Figure 1 Location within Cambridgeshire

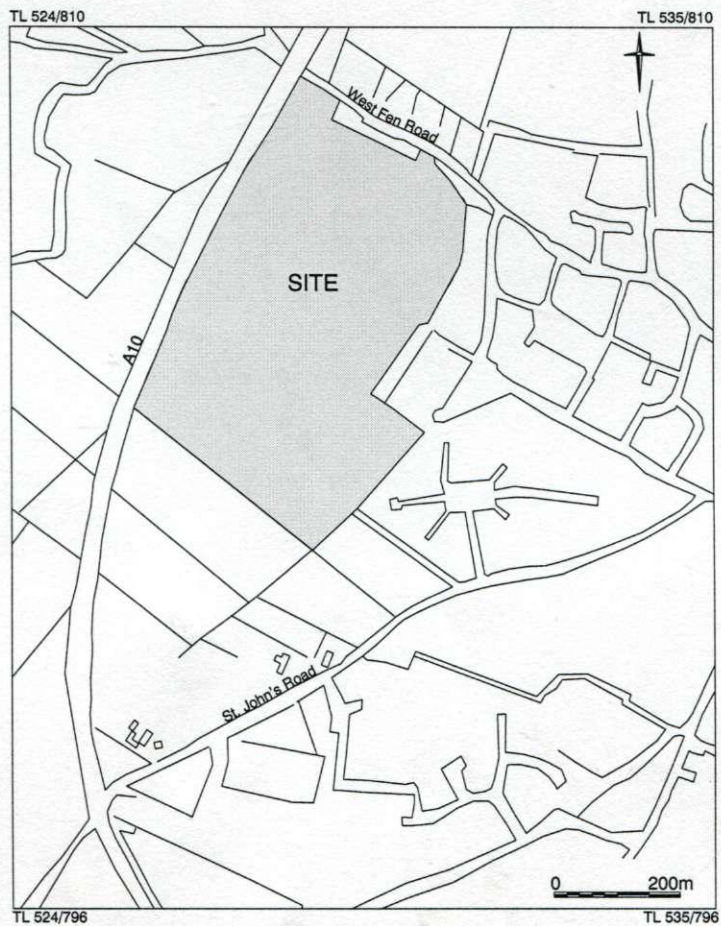


Figure 2 Location within Ely

investigations to the north of West Fen Road and to the south of the site indicate the nature of the potential archaeology.

4.0 Land Use History

4.1 Isolated find spots recorded on the Cambridgeshire SMR indicate a continuous scattering of activity from prehistoric through to modern times. For ease of reference a gazetteer of the SMR sites in the vicinity of the development area has been compiled in Appendix 1. Figure 3 shows the location of the gazetteer sites.

4.2 Early Prehistory

4.2.1 Due to the heavy nature of the clay subsoil it has previously been suggested that the lower slopes of Ely were avoided for settlement in the earlier prehistoric period (Hall 1996, 30). However findspots such as (7), part of a pressure flint flaked tool, attest to activity. Recent work undertaken by the CAU at Prickwillow Road and West Fen Road, Ely on these heavy clay soils provided unexpected evidence of late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic flint knapping activity (Whittaker 1997) and Late Iron Age Settlement (see below).

4.2.2 A Bronze Age presence is also represented in the vicinity by activity north of West Fen Road (1) where apart from major Late Iron Age settlement (see below) a single angular small flared pottery rim of Middle to Late Bronze Age date was recovered, as well as achronologically Late Bronze Age flint assemblage (Gibson 1995).

4.2.3 To the north-west of the site lies an area of earthworks (2) including ring-ditches and linear ditches of potential prehistoric date.

4.4 Iron Age

4.4.1 Archaeological evidence for Iron Age occupation at and around Ely is well substantiated, *e.g.* Wardy Hill, Coveney (Evans 1992) and Little Thetford (Lucas 1998). The CAU's excavation immediately north of West Fen Road (1) identified further settlement remains. Here the site was heavily ploughed out, and no horizontal occupation strata nor a buried soil horizon (former land surface) survived. The West Fen Road evidence consisted of large quantities of pottery, animal bone, daub/oven material and also two decorated items: a bone gouge and a impressed clay plaque of unknown function. The quantity of finds recovered in a relatively small excavated area indicated the intensity of activity relating to a substantial phase of settlement (Figure 4).

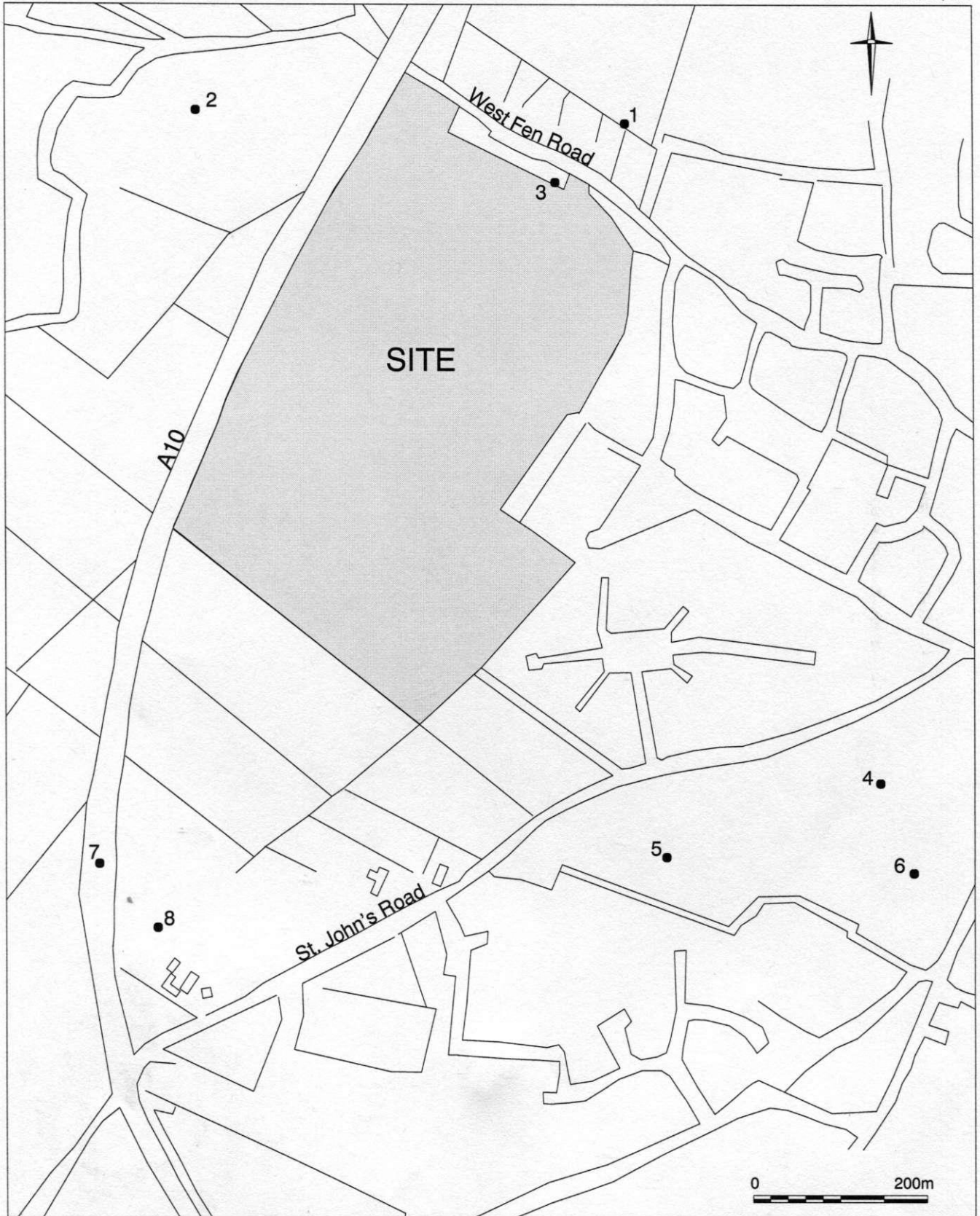


Figure 3 Gazetteer findspots

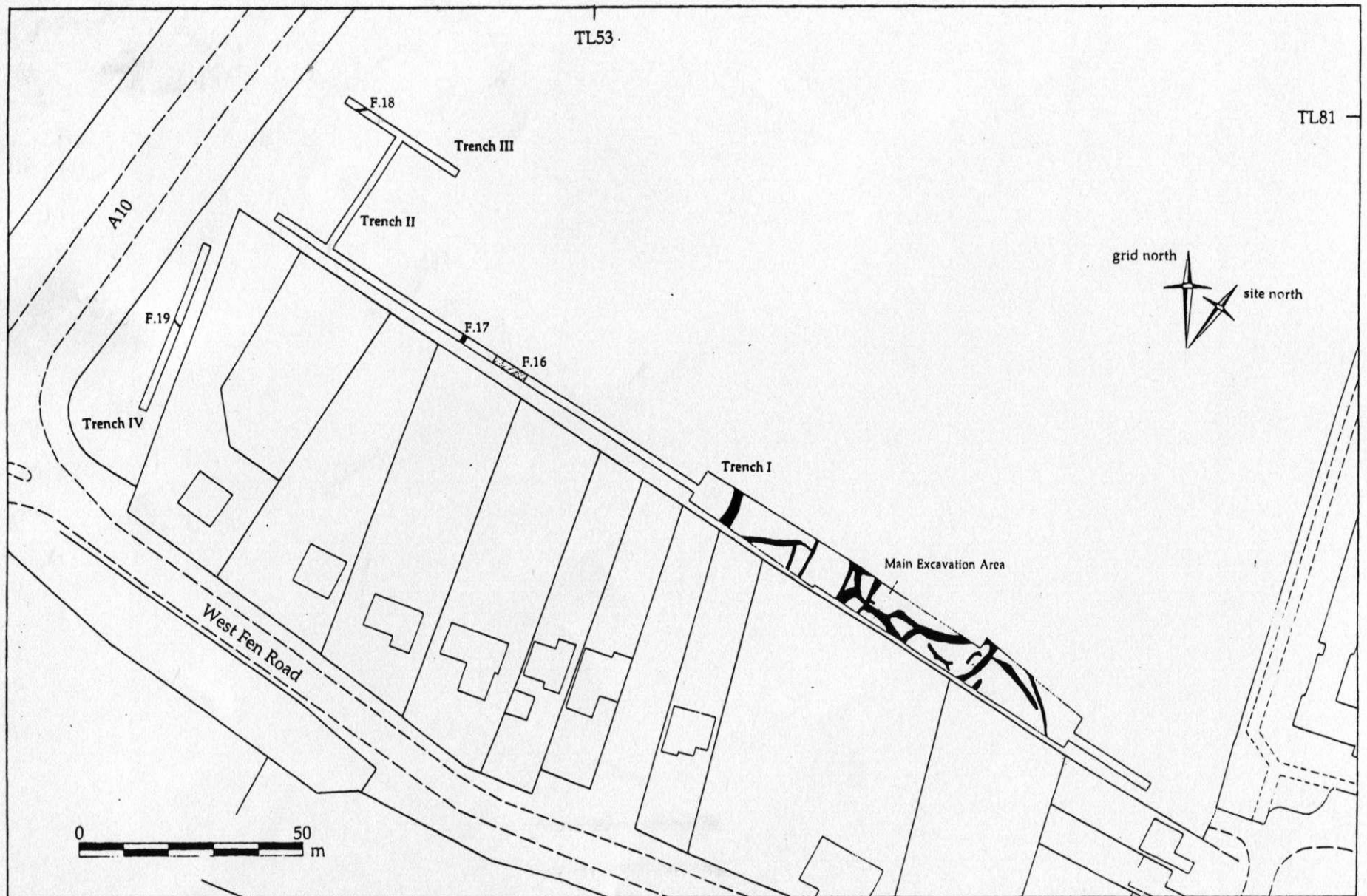


Figure 4: Excavation Area north of West Fen Road

4.5 *Roman Period*

- 4.5.1 Immediately north of the development area, evidence of a dark soilmark area with occupational debris including late colour coated wares is known (3).
- 4.5.2 Field system ditches of Romano-British date were recorded in the excavations immediately north of West Fen Road. At the time of excavation these were thought to be related to the site (3). Similar ditches may extend into the development area.

4.6 *Saxon and Medieval*

- 4.6.1 The city of Ely is first recorded by Bede in c. 750 as *elige* when it was used as a regional name. The modern city of Ely covers most of the medieval area. An outlying exception to this are the standing buildings at St Johns Farm (4, 5).
- 4.6.2 There are three buildings with medieval components surviving. Two are thought to have been the chapels of St Mary Magdalene and St John the Baptist. The third constructed of Barnack stone was converted into a dovehouse in the 18th Century. These buildings were part St John's Hospital formed by the amalgamation in c. 1240, of the two closely situated hospitals, St Mary Magdalene (recorded in 1162) and St John the Baptist founded by or before the early 13th century.
- 4.6.4 The hospital ceased to function in 1500 and in 1561 it was suppressed, the site being granted to Clare College, Cambridge. It is now a private dwelling.
- 4.6.5 Cobbett and Palmer (1936) suggest a possible Saxon date for some of the fragments of masonry located within the fabric of the 13th century buildings, with their interpretation of a piece of sculpture which has been tentatively given an Anglian date. Is this sculpture a fragment of the monastery founded by Etheldreda in 673 and which lasted until destroyed by the Vikings in 870?
- 4.6.6 The recovery of medieval ceramics on the northern edge of the development area (3) suggest that the extreme western suburban development of medieval Ely may have extended this far (Hall 1996).
- 4.6.7 Almost all earthwork/cropmark features identified in, or adjacent to, the assessment area were the ridges, furrows, and associated headlands remaining from medieval cultivation.

4.7 *Post-Medieval Land Use*

4.7.1 The proposed development area was enclosed in 1844 and a copy of the inclosure map is included in Appendix 3. There was little change by the time of the production of the First Ordnance Survey in 1885. By the present day a number of the small enclosed fields have been amalgamated for the purposes of modern agriculture.

4.7.2 Due to the current agricultural tenancy, no access was possible to the proposed development area for a site visit. However the aerial photographic evidence shows all apart from the most north easterly field being in arable agriculture by 1988.

4.7.3 The evidence of medieval agriculture in earthwork form recorded on aerial photographs of the pasture fields in the 1940's have now been all virtually levelled and as the fields are in modern arable use.

5.0 **Constraints**

5.1 *Services*

5.1.1 Electricity, Gas and Water service companies have been contacted to provide information concerning the development area. At the time of issue of this report no reply had been received.

5.2 *Public Access*

5.2.1 There are no footpaths or rights of way across the site.

6.0 **Archaeological Potential**

6.1.1 Normally the lack of aerial photographic evidence would suggest that the area was archaeologically quiet, but as the excavations north of West Fen Road recorded substantial archaeology which had not been visible on aerial photographs, archaeological remains may be anticipated. Archaeological features on clay subsoils can be difficult to detect from the air, unless seen under near-drought conditions.

6.1.2 Ridge and furrow, even when levelled, can also have a masking effect on sub-surface pre-medieval features (Palmer 1996).

6.1.3 At present the plot of the proposed development area is archaeologically blank, at least from visible cropmark or earthwork evidence. However, given the evidence of settlements occurring immediately north of the area, elements or parts of

these settlements could be expected to extend into the development area indicating that the site may be of moderate archaeological potential.

6.1.6 Archaeological remains in the form of field boundaries related to St John's Hospital may also extend into the proposed development area.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1.1 In summary the archaeological potential of the application area can be described as follows:

- Probable Iron Age/Romano-British activity at the north of the development area.
- Possible earlier prehistoric activity in parts of the development area
- Possible medieval activity in parts of the development area

7.0 Bibliography

- Cobbett, L & Palmer W. 1936 *The Hospitals of St John the Baptist and St Mary Magdalene at Ely* *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* XXVI 58-108 .
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**LAND OFF WEST FEN ROAD, (centred TL530805), ELY,
CAMBRIDGESHIRE:**

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC APPRAISAL

Rog Palmer MA MIFA

INTRODUCTION

This appraisal of aerial photographs was commissioned to examine an area of land (centred TL530805) between the A10 ring road and Ely in order to identify archaeological features and thus provide a guide for field evaluation. Mapping was to be at 1:2500 if relevant.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL FEATURES FROM AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

In suitable cultivated soils, sub-surface archaeological features – including ditches, banks, pits, walls or foundations – may be recorded from the air in different ways in different seasons. In spring and summer these may show through their effect on crops growing above them. Such indications tend to be at their most visible in ripe cereal crops, in June or July in this part of Britain, although their appearance cannot accurately be predicted and their absence cannot be taken to imply evidence of archaeological absence. In winter months, when the soil is bare or crop cover is thin (when viewed from above), features may show by virtue of their different soils. Upstanding remains are also best recorded in winter months when vegetation is sparse and the low angle of the sun helps pick out slight differences of height and slope.

The most informative aerial photographs of archaeological subjects tend to be those resulting from specialist reconnaissance. This activity is usually undertaken by an experienced archaeological observer who will fly at seasons and times of day when optimum results are expected. Oblique photographs, taken using a hand-held camera, are the usual product of such investigation. Although oblique photographs are able to provide a very detailed view, they are biased in providing a record that is mainly of features noticed by the observer, understood, and thought to be of archaeological relevance. In the collections searched, no obliques were held of the assessment area.

Vertical photographs cover the whole of Britain and can provide scenes on a series of dates between (usually) 1946-7 and the present. Unfortunately these vertical surveys are not necessarily flown at times of year that are best to record the crop and soil responses that may be seen above sub-surface features. Vertical photographs are taken by a camera fixed inside an aircraft and adjusted to take a series of overlapping views that can be examined stereoscopically. They are often of relatively small scale and their interpretation requires higher perceptive powers and a more cautious approach than that necessary for examination of obliques. Use of these small-scale images can also lead to errors of location and size when they are rectified or re-scaled to match a larger map scale.

PHOTO EXAMINATION AND MAPPING

Photographs examined

Cover searches were made at the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs (CUCAP) and the National Library of Air Photographs (NLAP), Swindon. A selection was made from the latter listing to eliminate those taken during usually uninformative seasons (generally immediate post-harvest months). All photographs were taken during routine vertical surveys.

Source: Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs

Vertical photographs

RC8-EB 142-144	23 March 1982	1:10000
RC8-EB 202-205	23 March 1982	1:10000 (204-5 missing)
RC8-KnBL 214	14 June 1988	1:10000
RC8-KnBO 68, 70	26 August 1988	1:10000

Source: National Library of Air Photographs (selected from cover search 503597)

Vertical collection

106G/UK/1589: 1061-1062	21 June 1946	1:10000
106G/UK/1634: 1437-1439	9 July 1946	1:10000
CPE/UK/1952: 1080-1083	25 March 1947	1:10000
F21.58/1337: 61-63	11 January 1954	1:10000
F21.58/1337: 92-94	11 January 1954	1:10000
F21.58/2688: 163-165	25 January 1959	1:9600
F21.58/2688: 294-295	25 January 1959	1:9600
OS/68133: 64-66	31 May 1968	1:7500
OS/68133: 81-82	31 May 1968	1:7500

Base map

A base map at a scale of 1:10560 was available and used for this rapid appraisal. This showed the area with its pre-ring road field divisions, as did the majority of photographs examined.

Photo interpretation and mapping

All photographs were examined using a 1.5x magnification stereoscope. Features identified were added to the base map either schematically or by sketching. Land use was also noted. These maps are not copied here, but remain with the project archive.

COMMENTARY

Soils

The Soil Survey of England and Wales (SSEW 1983) shows the area to be situated on an island of Jurassic and Cretaceous clay (series 411c) upon which, covering most of the assessment area, is shown a deposit of Cretaceous sand and sandstone (series 541A). The junction of these deposits is visible on some aerial photographs. Hall (1996, 30) adds detail this description.

Archaeological features

Assessment of land immediately north of the present assessment area was the subject of an earlier report (Palmer 1995) which also examined the immediate environs using photographs available in Cambridge collections.

Almost all features identified in, or adjacent to, the assessment area were the ridges, furrows, and associated headlands remaining from medieval cultivation. In places these were seen in earthwork form in pasture fields in the 1940s but virtually all are now levelled and in modern arable land. Ridge and furrow, even when levelled, can have a masking effect on sub-surface pre-medieval features (Palmer 1996). On clay these can also be difficult to detect from the air, requiring near-drought conditions to allow differential crop growth to develop and then recording from the air during – usually – the few critical days very late in the growth season. To my knowledge, the latter has not taken place over the assessment area.

At TL52638070, immediately west of Area A [on map supplied via CAU by TP Associates] and most likely now under the ring road, is a sub-circular feature recorded on one set of photographs (CPE/UK/1952 series) in slight earthwork condition. It lay in two modern fields (one arable, one pasture), which shows it to be of some antiquity, although its apparent link (via a curving ditch) to what is assumed to be post-medieval drainage/field divisions in land west of Field 1 (field centred TL527809) makes it probably of similar date. No similar, or related, features could be traced into the assessment area.

Military features

In a field south of the assessment area (triangular field centred TL528799) were three circular mounds which had been constructed on earthwork ridge and furrow. These were probably the site of second world war defences associated with Witchford airfield to the south. Unidentified features of this date may lie in (then) pasture fields within the assessment area (see *land use*, below).

Land use

Most fields in the assessment area have been in arable use on all dates of photography. Exceptions are those abutting West Fen Road: Field 1, which was pasture until between 1959-1968; and Field 2, which remains (1988) in permanent pasture. Field 5 was pasture up to, and including, 1982; and Field 7 included an orchard in its northern part, which was removed between 1969 and 1982.

Houses were being constructed immediately east of Field 2 in 1946 and east of Field 3 in 1988. The estate in the field centred TL531802 (east of Field 4) had a curious history, with trenches (apparently unassociated with the present layout) and scattered huts visible in a pasture field 1946. Roads were laid by 1952 and the houses built by 1954. The trenches may be drainage for the estate or may show military activity in the immediate post-war years. These features could not be seen beyond the field now occupied by the housing estate.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that no further examination of aerial photographs is undertaken for this assessment.

REFERENCES

- Hall, D.N., 1996. *The Fenland Project, Number 10: Cambridgeshire Survey, Isle of Ely and Wisbech. East Anglian Archaeol.* 79.
- Palmer, R., 1995. *West Fen Road (TL52938097), Ely, Cambridgeshire, aerial photographic assessment*, for Cambridge Archaeological Unit. Air Photo Services Report 73.
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- SSEW, 1983. *Soils of England and Wales: sheet 4: Eastern England (1:250,000)*. Soil Survey of England and Wales, Harpenden.

Ely St. Mary Inclosure
1844 map.

283/

Littleport Downham District Calcewater drain

Henry Lawrence

Private Rd N^o 10

40 ft

H^o Kante

Henry Lawrence

Henry Lawrence

N^o 2

10.1.17

John Haybeck Senior

The Field Side Road

Right of way 15ft wide

MARK SHEPHERD

N

283

5-850

E L Y

172
19-945

B.M. 19-8

182
10-549

180
14-96

201
4-856

200
21-410

20
4-0

202
2-297

216
2-036

217
2-806

Fieldside

229
1-166

230
1-708

228
1-485

227
1-865

231
1-833

1885 First Edition OS

