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Editors

David A Barrowclough
Mary Chester-Kadwell

Associate Editor (Archaeology) Professor Stephen Upex

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A reappraisal of the evidence for the 'northern arm' of the Fleam Dyke at Fen Ditton

Scott Kenney

Recent archaeological investigations to the north of High Ditch Road on the eastern edge of Fen Ditton (TL 4879 6019) have prompted a reappraisal of the evidence for the existence of the postulated northern arm of Fleam Dyke. Two evaluations were undertaken in 2006 and 2007 on land at Home Farm by Oxford Archaeology East (formerly CAM ARC). One of the core aims of the work was to determine the presence or absence of the putative element of Fleam Dyke, shown on Ordnance Survey maps as crossing the site. While ditches were observed during evaluation, they were eighteenth century in date and no archaeology earlier than the medieval period was uncovered.

Fen Ditton

Fen Ditton parish lies to the north-east of Cambridge within the old Flendish Hundred and is mentioned in land transactions before AD 991. The name itself is usually interpreted as meaning 'farm by the ditch' in Anglo-Saxon. The medieval village ran northwards, adjacent to the River Cam, with the church denoting its southern end and the manor house of the Bishops of Ely marking its northern extent. Only in the post-medieval period was the village extended eastwards along the road to Quy Mill (Wareham & Wright 2002, 118).

To the south-east of the village at Greenhouse Farm, excavations and other investigations revealed extensive Iron Age occupation and Roman kilns (Hinman, forthcoming; CHER 13023, CB14592). In the field to the north of the present site, abraded sherds of Roman pottery were found during fieldwalking prior to construction of the A45/A14 (CHER 11201A).

No finds of Anglo-Saxon date have yet come from the village, despite the name Fen Ditton having its origin in that period. The Church of St Mary the Virgin dates from the twelfth century, although no standing fabric of that period survives. While High Ditch Road is so named by 1821, the medieval field at the eastern end of the parish was already referred to by this name. High Ditch itself is indicated on an early eighteenth-century map (see below). Home Farm and

the dovecote that stands in the farmyard to the west of the site are both eighteenth century although the house may have earlier origins.

The site lies on the Cretaceous Lower Chalk (British Geological Survey 1975) and is divided by a scarp running east to west (Fig. 1). To the north of this the ground is at about 14.3m OD and to the south it is about 1m lower. The scarp becomes less pronounced to the east and west.

Fleam Dyke

The Cambridgeshire Dykes have rightly attracted much attention and debate over many years (Malim 1996, 27–122). Discussion has largely centred around their date and purpose. Three separate monuments are named Fleam Dyke and it has been suggested that they once formed part of a single boundary (Malim 1996, 58). The main part of the Dyke (also known as Balsham Ditch) runs from Dungate Farm, Balsham to Shardelow's Well at Fulbourn (Fig. 2). Here, the monument still exists as a major visible earthwork comprising a ditch and bank (Malim 1996, fig. 33).

To the north of Shardelow's Well is a putative extension which dog-legs towards Great Wilbraham Fen, but is now entirely filled in and can only be seen as a cropmark: little intrusive investigation has been carried out on this section of the Dyke. The third monument, and the subject of this article, is the High Ditch at Fen Ditton. When combined the three earthworks would have formed a lazy Z-shape across the landscape in contrast to the other dykes, which are all quite straight. High Ditch itself is indicated on a map of 1731/2 (CRO TR626/P1), lying south of the road to Quy that cut High Ditch Field in two. On later Ordnance Survey maps the ditch is shown on the north side of High Ditch Road, although there is nothing visible today.

The earliest known record of Fleam Dyke is *Flemesdich*, c. AD 1260 referring to a ditch in the parish of Teversham (Reaney 1943, 35). None of the recorded names appear to relate directly to the segment of ditch

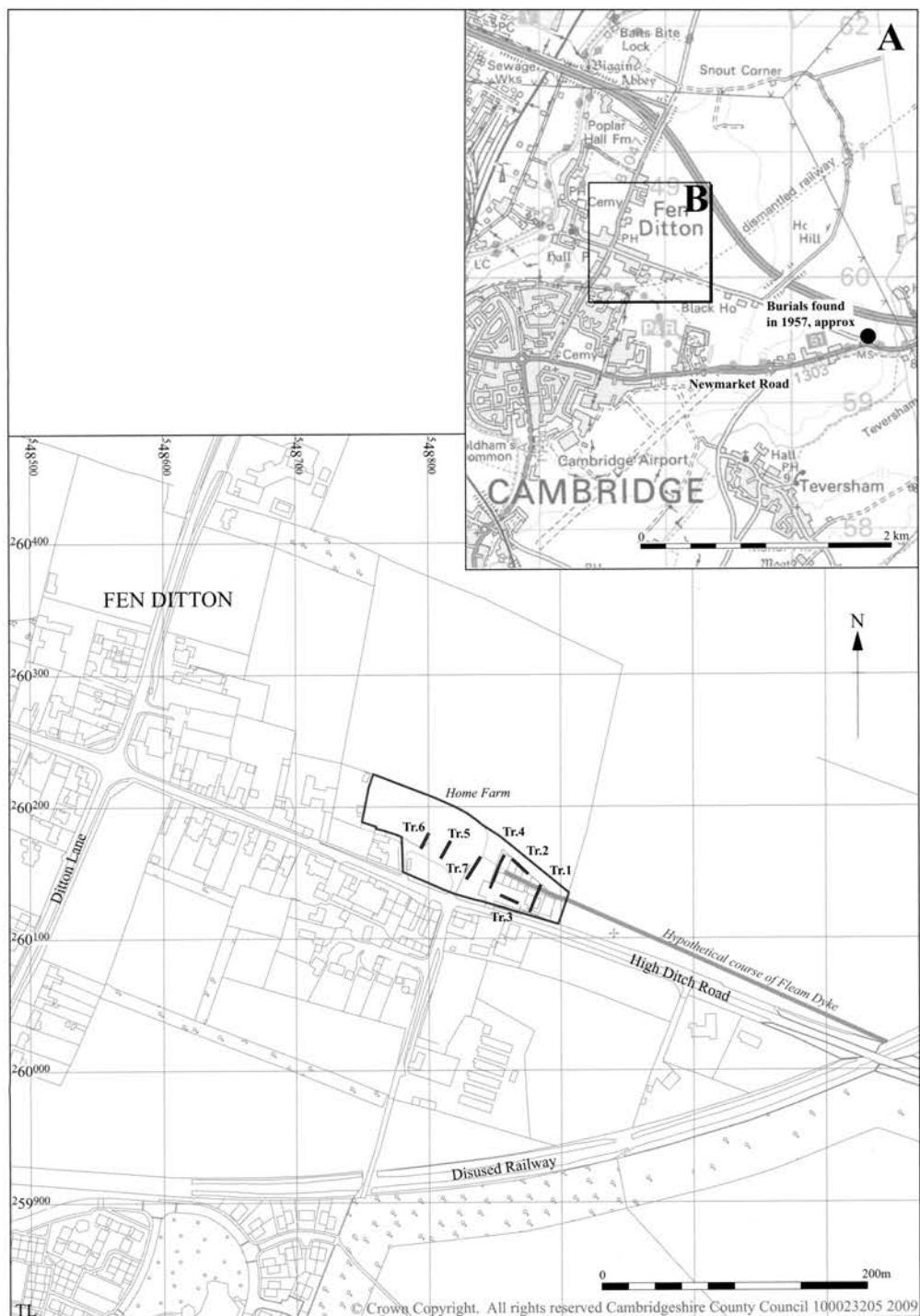


Figure 1. Location map with trenches in black.

found in Fen Ditton. By 1825 the ditch was variously known as Queens, Fleam Dyke or Balsham Ditch. It is believed that Flendish Hundred was named after Fleam Dyke which forms its north-eastern boundary where it passes between Fulbourn and Great Wilbraham. By the time it reaches Fen Ditton, however, the ditch does not form a boundary either for the Hundred or the parish.

Fox (1923, 34) proposed that the Fen Ditton sec-

tion of Fleam Dyke was probably a local defensive earthwork when it was first constructed, forming the southern boundary to the tongue of land on which Horningsea stands, with Quy Water forming its eastern boundary and the River Cam to the west. He suggested that the ditch was subsequently incorporated into the larger system that included the Fulbourn section of the Dyke, but that this may have been in name only. The hypothesis of a

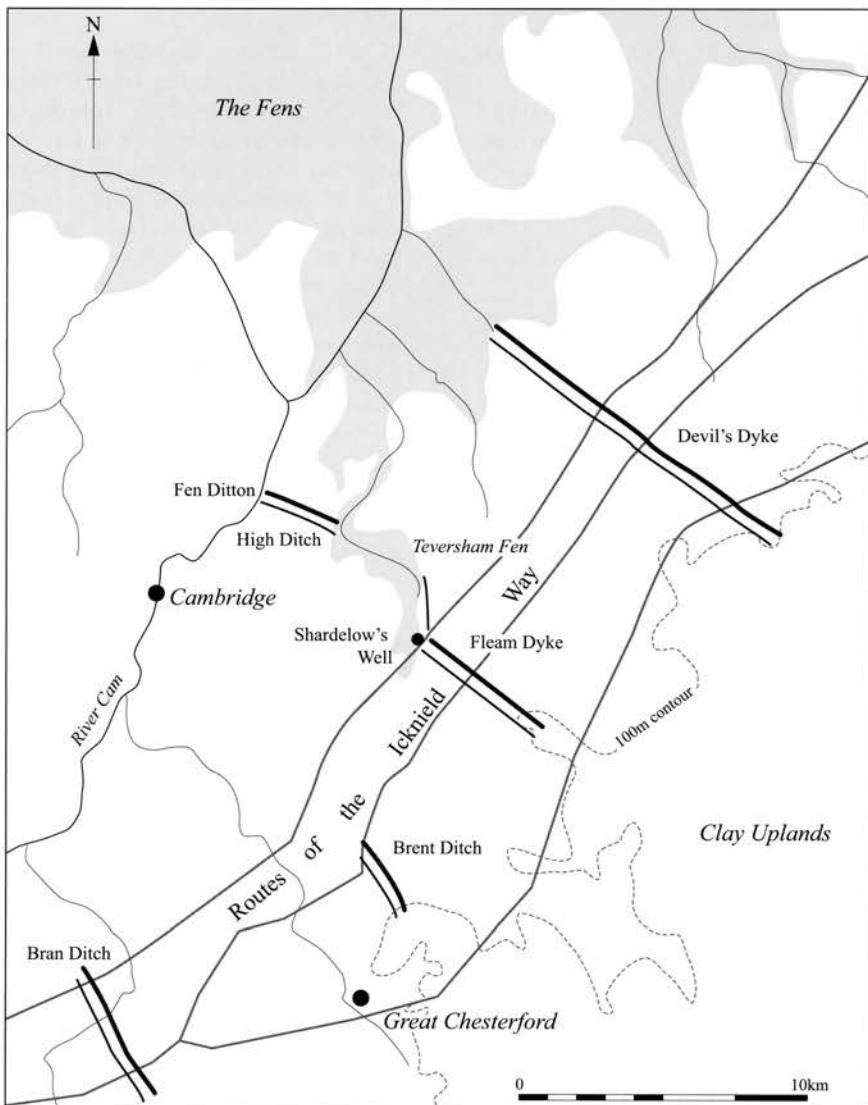


Figure 2. The Cambridgeshire Dykes.

northern arm to the Fleam Dyke (here called High Ditch), running eastwards from the River Cam at Fen Ditton to Teversham Fen is an idea that draws together several pieces of evidence, including the line and name of High Ditch Road, as well as the Anglo-Saxon name of the village. Woodditton is similarly thought to be named for its proximity to Devil's Dyke. The name High Ditch makes its first recorded appearance (as *Heyditch*) in a thirteenth-century document held at St John's College, Cambridge (Reaney 1943, 142).

Mrs V. Pritchard found and recovered human remains and associated artefacts during widening of Newmarket Road at the Bottisham Fen end of the putative northern section of Fleam Dyke in 1957 (Lethbridge 1958). The exact location is not published (the approximate position being indicated on Fig. 1), but Lethbridge was confident that the burials were Early Saxon in date and that they were buried in the top of a large ditch. This is the only archaeological investigation that has been carried out on the north-

ern arm of the proposed earthwork, although there have been several campaigns on the southern section (summarised in Malim 1996).

Discussion

Much that has been written about the supposed northern section of the Fleam Dyke simply assumes its presence which, until now, has not been tested. Cyril Fox cites the Fen Ditton segment as having been for the most part destroyed (Fox 1923, 126), but confidently claims that it continued into Teversham Fen to the east, its alignment having been preserved by the deflection of the Cambridge to Newmarket Road at this point. Recent texts continue to perpetuate the notion of a large earthwork here, referring erroneously to its survival 'in places' (Pestell 2004, 86–7). There can be no doubt from the descriptions and finds recovered in 1957 (Lethbridge 1958), that a backfilled

ditch containing Anglo-Saxon burials was indeed located close to the junction of High Ditch Road and Newmarket Road. This does not mean, however, that the ditch in question was related to the supposed northern Fleam Dyke. Interestingly Lethbridge suggested a Late Roman date for this segment of the ditch in contrast to the Fulbourn to Balsham section which is almost certainly Anglo-Saxon, and Fox (1923, 34) had already proposed that this ditch may have been an earlier local defensive earthwork.

One hypothesis is that High Ditch Road preserves the line of a sizeable defensive ditch, which was at some point backfilled, its own bank slighted and then the roadway constructed on top (Fox 1923). An alternative suggestion is that the ditch survives, probably to the south of the new road, which itself would run along the (somewhat eroded) bank. High Ditch Road does in fact stand higher than the surrounding fields, although only along the eastern end of its course to where it meets Newmarket Road. Fox does note this, although he also suggests that the scarp across the subject site preserves the line of both bank and ditch of the supposed dyke. This notion has been perpetuated unchallenged and persists even on the latest Ordnance Survey mapping.

Before the Enclosure Act of 1803 and award of 1807, the area of the lower part of the subject site was called Townsend Close Allotment, which might explain why it was evidently terraced in the late eighteenth century (as the recent archaeological work demonstrates), creating or enhancing the scarp across it (CRO R60/24/2/24). This terracing may well have necessitated a drainage channel along the break of slope between the upper field and the lower allotment in order to prevent runoff from the former flooding the latter. The eighteenth-century ditches recorded during the evaluations appear to have served just such a function.

The name Ditton is formed from two Saxon words *dic-tun*, and the meaning is usually given as 'farm by the ditch or dyke'. While the derivation of the modern name Ditton is not always identical, other examples found throughout England also attest to the fact that not all villages so named are adjacent to a ditch or dyke e.g. Ditton Priors in Shropshire (Currie 1998); Thames Ditton in Surrey (Malden 1911) and Ditton in Kent (Hasted 1797). It may be that the location of the ancient part of the village of Fen Ditton on the bank of the River Cam lent its name to the settlement.

Conclusions

The recent archaeological work recorded little archaeology earlier than eighteenth century within the development area. The scarp that runs across the site may have originally been natural and was later modified in this particular area. There is some evidence that a certain amount of landscaping has taken place to enhance and accentuate the scarp and the flat zone to the north of it. There is no evidence, however, to indicate that it was related to the putative northern

arm of Fleam Dyke.

In light of this new evidence, the concept of a continuous Dyke running from Balsham to Fen Ditton must be questioned. There is no longer a case for suggesting that the scarp seen to the east of Fen Ditton is anything other than natural in origin. At this point, the only remaining possibility is that the line of the northern arm of Fleam Dyke lies precisely below the modern road. It is rather more likely that there never was a major dyke across this landscape (notwithstanding the possible Late Roman or Anglo-Saxon ditch recorded in the 1950s), that the road takes its name from the medieval field, and that the features identified as part of the course of the 'dyke' were over-enthusiastically interpreted in the past.

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