
Fleam Dyke, Fen Ditton: a reappraisal of excavated evidence from 2006–7

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Investigations in 2006–7 at Home Farm, Fen Ditton, discovered an unexpected concentration of medieval features but concluded that there was no evidence to support the conjectured existence of Fleam Dyke. Although the published synthesis did not contain the evidence on which this interpretation was based, reassessment of the original grey literature reports has suggested to the author that the recorded trench sections could be reinterpreted as including a bank and ditch feature that closely resembles the scale and flat-based form typical of the Cambridgeshire Dykes. This re-interpretation identified a ditch in two trenches, which was c. 2.75m wide and survived to a depth of 1m, with a scarp and bank on the northern side which survived to a height of 2m above the top of the surviving ditch. Medieval and post-medieval artefacts were stratigraphically assigned to an earlier deposit in the original report, but an argument is presented which introduces ambiguity into the stratigraphic analysis based on discrepancies within the recorded plans and sections. Historic mapping and previous commentaries are also used to provide contextual evidence for the existence of a continuous dyke through Fen Ditton.

Introduction

The Cambridgeshire Dykes have long formed a topic of research interest to Cambridge Antiquarian Society (CAS) members from the 19th century studies by McKenny-Hughes, through 20th century investigations and debate by well-known names such as Fox, Palmer, Lethbridge etc, and thus the apparently negative results from investigations into Fleam Dyke (High Ditch) at Home Farm, Fen Ditton in 2006 – 7 (NGR TL488601; Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record MCB17521) were intriguing, as they questioned accepted wisdom as to the existence of the dyke. Such results were unexpected. The published article for this study (Kenney 2009) did not include the detailed record with the evidence gathered during the archaeological investigations, an unfortunate result of a modern policy for publishing only synthesis without supporting data. The grey literature reports (Kenney 2006; Kenney 2007), however, were kindly supplied by Oxford Archaeology East when requested, and these have also been uploaded to the OASIS web site hosted by the Archaeology Data Service in York.

Background

Examination of William Collisson's 1807 Inclosure map ([Cambridgeshire] County Record Office (CRO) R60/24/2/24) (Figure 1) provides little direct field-name evidence to suggest the presence of a linear earthwork, a dyke, running through the parish, but nonetheless does include some elements which might support the hypothetical line of the dyke. What is now known as High Ditch Road was labelled on this map as Quy Road. The division of the landscape appears to have used this road as a baseline, as the closes and modern fields formed by inclosure of the medieval open fields lie parallel or perpendicular to it. This suggests the road itself is ancient, or follows an important ancient boundary. In contrast Newmarket Road appears to diagonally cross several sub-divisions through what used to be High Ditch Field. Superimposition of the modern map with the location of the archaeological trenches over the 1807 map shows that Trenches 1 and 3 lie within plot 117 (called "Allotment by Home Close"), with Trench 2 in plot 118 ("Home Close") and Trench 4 straddling both plots (Figure 2). Trenches 5, 6 and 7, however, all lie within plot 119 ("Homestead"). Plots 79, 116, and 117 are narrow strips lying along the northern side of Quy Road, and their existence could indicate the presence of a feature which effectively separated Home Close from the road: perhaps circumstantial evidence for the dyke. Further east other narrow plots can be seen along the road, this time on its southern side, immediately after the road kinks to the north (plots 277, 280, and 281). This again could indicate the presence of a linear feature, perhaps the result of the road deviating slightly to take advantage of the bank of the dyke as the slightly wetter land of High Ditch Field was encountered towards the boundary with the Quy Water.

Wider evidence that has been used in the past to substantiate the likely presence of a dyke along High Ditch Road included not only this specific name, but also the place-name for Fen Ditton as *dic-tun*, or the settlement by the ditch (or dyke), which was questioned in Kenney's article (2009, p.72). Ditton place-names from other parts of the country were cited which have been interpreted as having meanings other than a connection with a ditch. Unfortunately Kenney's



Figure 1. Fen Ditton as shown in Collisson's 1807 Inclosure map, Cambridgeshire County Record Office R60/24/2/24).

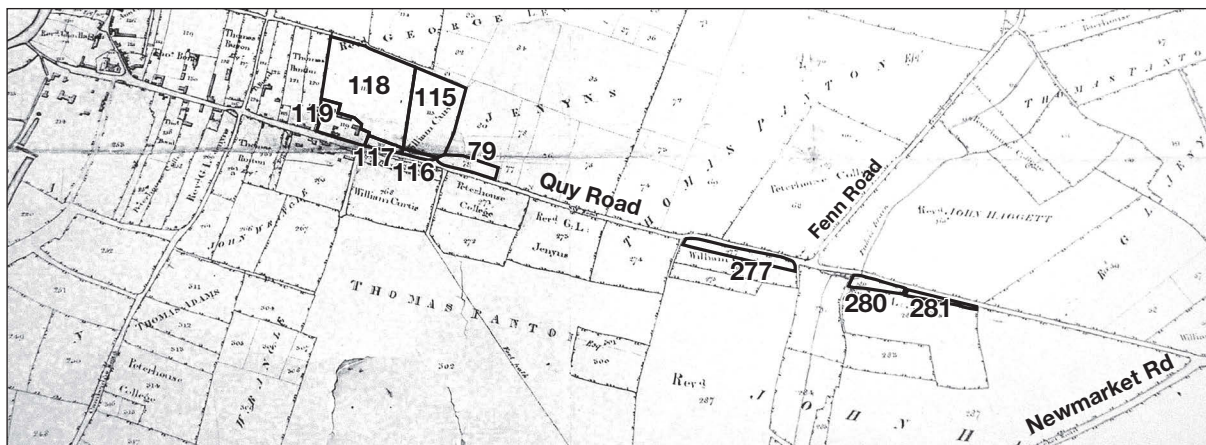


Figure 2. An excerpt from Collisson's 1807 Inclosure map showing plots suggesting the presence of a linear feature running parallel to Quoy Road, the modern High Ditch Road.

argument has not quoted etymological studies to examine the earliest examples of the names, and two of his three examples come from interpretations of earlier writers (E. Hasted in 1797 for Ditton in Kent, and H.E. Malden in 1911 for Thames Ditton in Surrey's *Victoria County History* (VCH) volume 3). Such early interpretations have often been amended by later place-name scholars using an approach based on earliest

recorded names and their subsequent deviations. For Kenney's third parallel he referred to Ditton Priors in Shropshire which C.R.J. Currie interpreted as "place near a hill" (1998, Shropshire VCH volume 10), but other studies do not agree (Gelling 1990, p.109–110; Poulton-Smith 2009, p.52) as the derivation of Ditton is shown to come from *Dodintone* in 1086, not *dic-tun*, and thus meant "farmstead of the family/followers of

Dod(d)a or Dud(d)a". Thames Ditton does not derive from *dic-tun* either as it has two entries in Domesday: *Ditone* and *Ditune* (for Thames and Long Ditton), whilst Ditton in Kent does derive from *dic-tun* as recorded by the Domesday survey, and this seems to refer to a stream running through the village.

Quy Road as depicted on the 1807 Inclosure map (and since 1821 known as High Ditch Road (Wareham and Wright p.120)) appears to run in a straight line from its junction with the Cam to the Newmarket Road, although later 19th century mapping shows some small variations in its course. The first edition 1" to the mile Ordnance Survey map (c. 1836) (Figure 3) shows that the road had a slight curve to the south, to the east of Home Farm, for example, and a probable bank feature is depicted running along the northern edge of the road, until it curves north again where it joins the fen edge lane that runs northwards to Biggin Abbey and Quy-cum-Stow Fen (called Fenn Road on the 1807 Inclosure map). The north-eastern part of the parish is described in the VCH as previously wet land that was drained and used for arable agriculture in post-medieval times, and notes that High Ditch Road runs through the centre of the parish (Wareham and Wright 2002). The south-eastern part of the parish was formed by a large open field called High Ditch Field (including the present Newmarket Road) which in medieval times would have formed a continuation of Low, Rough and High Fens which covered the north-eastern part of the parish.

Synthesis of the 2006 and 2007 reports

These two reports record investigations on neighbouring plots of land along the hypothetical course of the dyke as it was loosely described by Fox: "*The Fen Ditton Sector. This has been for the most part destroyed. The present east-and-west road through Fen Ditton roughly preserves its alignment; in the village the road represents the ditch* (a footnote here adds "*Sir William Ridgeway drew my attention to the fact that all the better-class farm-houses in the village are on the north side of the road – on*

the site of the high dry bank – and the poorer cottages on the south side"); further to the east on the outskirts of the village both bank and ditch are faintly visible to the north of the road; beyond the railway and a narrow boggy valley the road follows the crest of the bank, which is very well marked near the Newmarket Road junction." (Fox 1923 p.126). Home Farm lies in the area on the eastern outskirts of the village, north of the road.

The array of seven trenches from both evaluations are depicted in Figure 1 of Kenney's *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (PCAS)* article (2009) with trenches 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 all aligned perpendicular to the supposed course of the dyke. The eastern-most trenches, Trenches 1–4 (Figure 4), were excavated in 2006, and the western Trenches 5–7 in 2007. Of the latter, the results were briefly outlined without section drawings or photographs (Kenny 2007 p.5). Results showed that the area where Trench 5 was located had been levelled down to natural chalk by modern activities, whilst Trench 6 comprised at least 2.5m depth of 20th-century infill, capped by 0.3m of topsoil, and Trench 7 extended up to 1m in depth with soil and rubble hardcore beneath 0.3m of topsoil. The results are perhaps not surprising within the bounds of a farming complex, and demonstrate that there had been severe landscape change in the recent past. A check on Google Earth¹ showed an aerial photograph for the Home Farm complex dated 2006 which showed hard-standing and four or five large modern agricultural buildings within the western part of the site (the 2007 investigation). The eastern end of the site, however, did not contain such evidence for modern disturbance, but by the aerial photograph dated 2007 the eastern part of the site was already under development. Looking back to the 1945 aerial photograph no structures were apparent at the eastern end, although a barn can possibly be discerned in the western part of the site.

Trenches 1 and 4 were of more interest and these are reproduced here in Figures 5 and 6. Although neither are recorded with chalk forming the natural, it is assumed that this was the reason for the cessation of

¹ Accessed 27.12.12

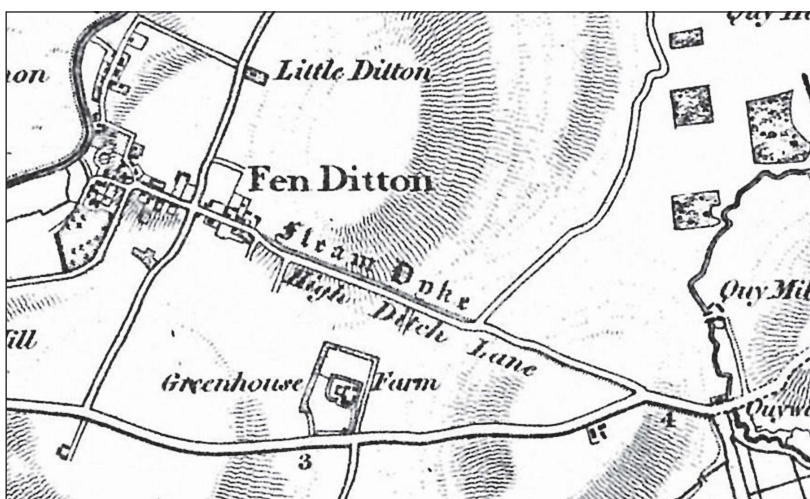


Figure 3. Excerpt from the first edition 1" to the mile Ordnance Survey map (c. 1836) showing a bank feature labelled 'Fleam Dyke' north of High Ditch Road.

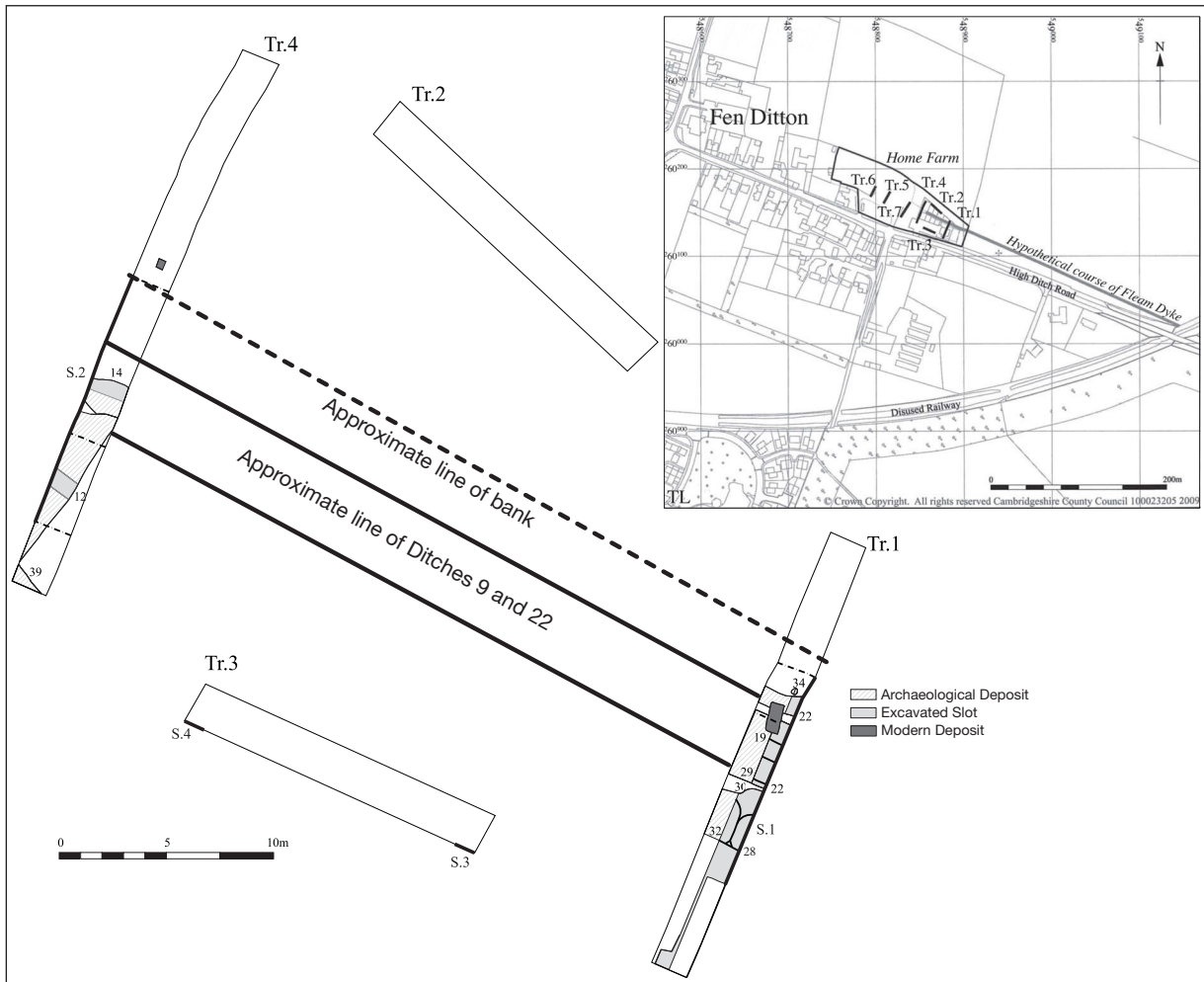


Figure 4. Kenney's Fen Ditton trenches redrawn from figure 2, Post-medieval Ditches at Home Farm, High Ditch Road, Fen Ditton, Cambridgeshire: CAM ARC Report No. 914. The lines of the bank and ditches, and an inset map showing location in the village have been added.

excavation in both trenches, except the southern part of Trench 4 which shows a dashed line within the *olive grey silty clay* fill 11 of Ditch 12. This ditch was oriented north-east to south-west, and at the south end of Trench 4 (see Figure 4) it appeared to turn towards the southeast (Cut 39). It sealed the earliest archaeological feature, Cut 14, which was described as the butt end of a ditch terminal (Kenney 2006, p.9). The report states that 18th-century pottery, brick and clay-pipe fragments were found in fill 11.

The drawn sections for Trenches 1 and 4 both show a scarp in the chalk, with the northern ends in both trenches higher than the southern ends. In Trench 1 (Figure 5) the truncated southern surface at the interface between brick rubble hard core (layer 2) and underlying archaeological deposits, is at 12.72m OD, whereas the top of the chalk beneath the *orange-brown sandy-clay silt subsoil* (layer 3) is 1m above this level, and the subsoil is mounded up *c.* 0.8m above this, whilst the archaeological sequence at the southern end extends *c.* 0.75m beneath the base of the modern hard core, making a total difference in height of 2.8m.

At the junction between higher and lower parts of the chalk a flat-based ditch (Cut 22) was recorded which also appeared to be stratigraphically later than two pits (30 and 28), and a possible earlier ditch on the same alignment (24). Ditch 22 was oriented south-east to north-west.

In Trench 4 (Figure 6) a similar pattern was recorded. The base of chalk at the northern end of the trench is a little more than 1m higher than the recorded level used for drawing the section at 12.75m OD, whereas the base of Ditch 12 is about 0.8m below this datum string-line, making a total difference of 1.8m. A second flat-based ditch (Cut 9) is recorded at the base of the slope, cutting through an accumulation of deposits and into the fill of Ditch 11. Ditch 9 was oriented south-east to north-west.

The basal widths of each of these flat-based ditches were 3m for Ditch 22 and 2.5m for Ditch 9, and the angles of ditch cut rising from the base were *c.* 121–128° for Ditch 22 and *c.* 75–136° for Ditch 9. A comparison with the average dimensions and profiles of the Cambridgeshire Dykes (Malim *et al* 1997, p.101)

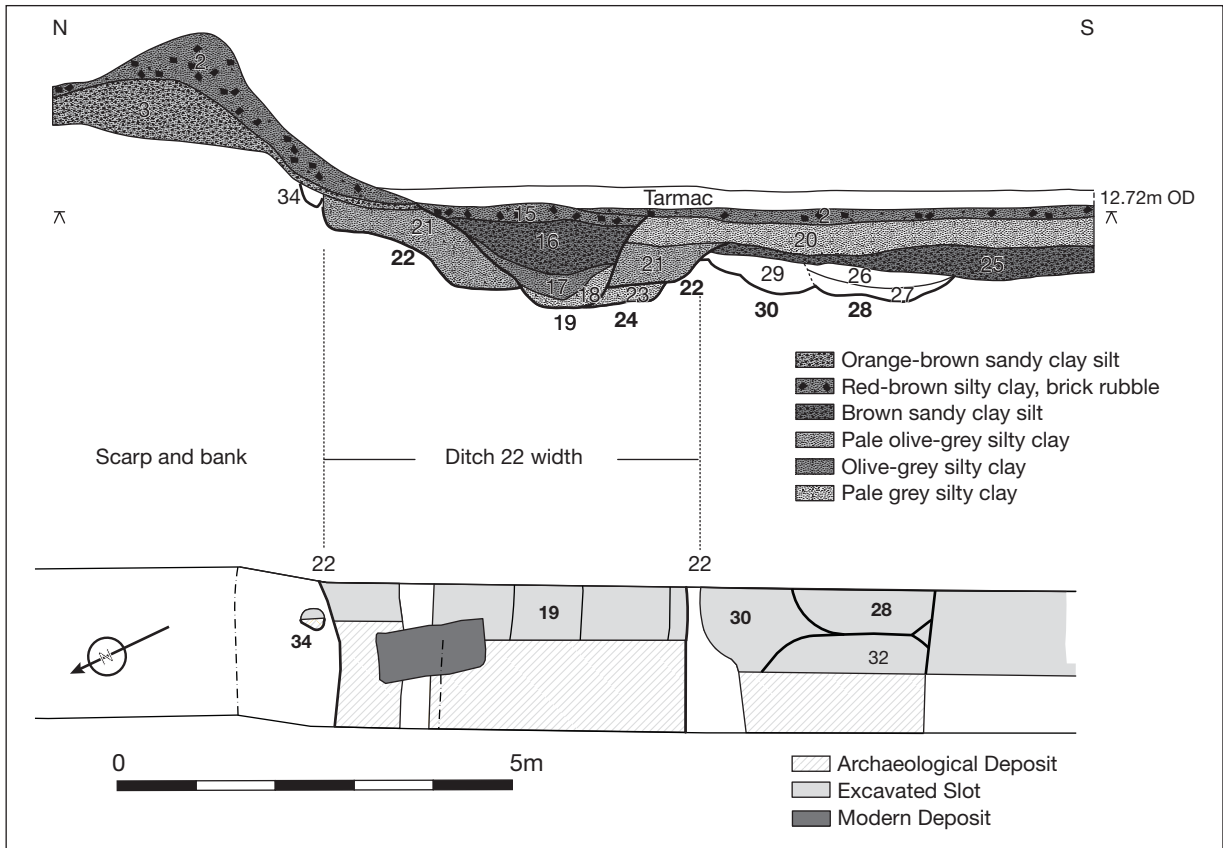


Figure 5. Kenney's Trench 1 as shown in Post-medieval Ditches at Home Farm, High Ditch Road, Fen Ditton, Cambridgeshire: CAM ARC Report No. 914. Top, Section 2 redrawn from figure 3; below, basal plan of features redrawn from trench plan, Figure 2. See also Plate 1.

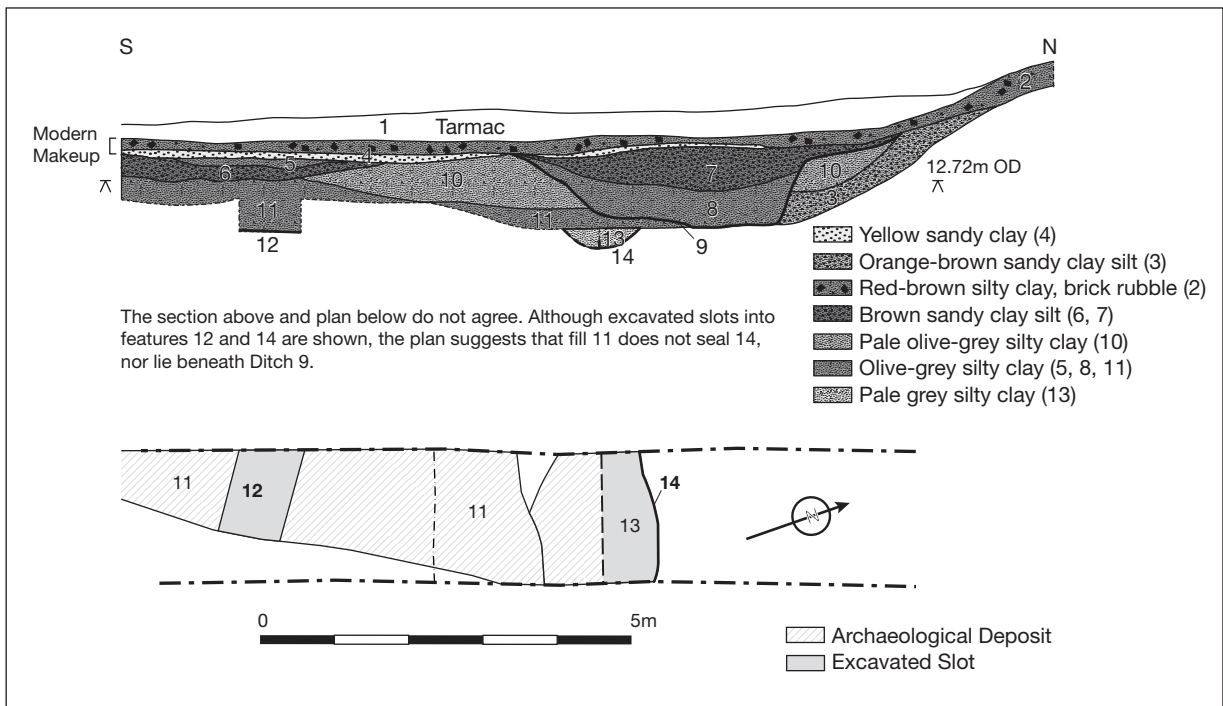


Figure 6. Kenney's Trench 4 as shown in Post-medieval Ditches at Home Farm, High Ditch Road, Fen Ditton, Cambridgeshire: CAM ARC Report No. 914. Top, Section 1 redrawn from figure 3; below, basal plan of features redrawn from trench plan, Figure 2. See also Plate 2.

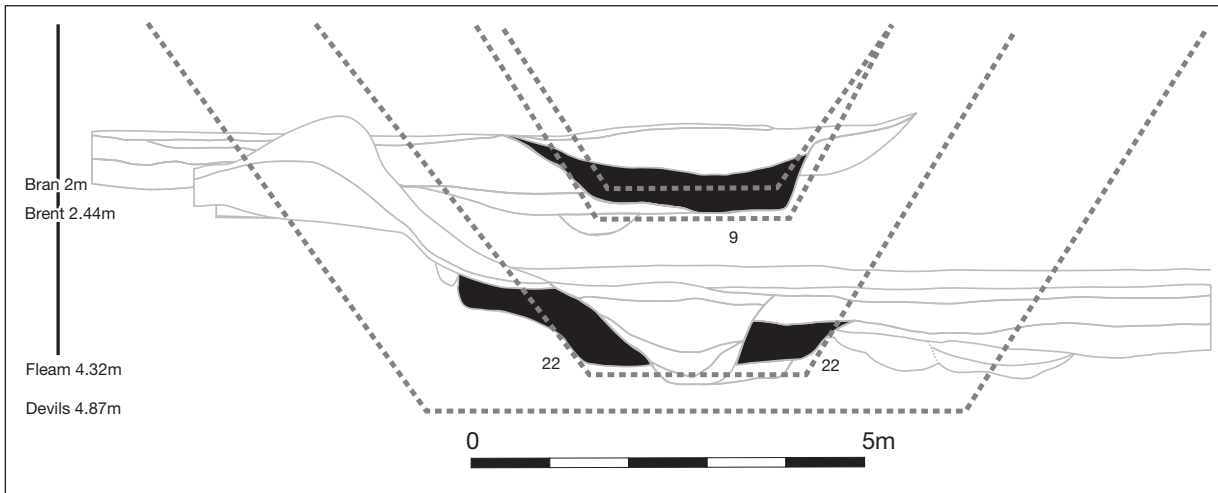


Figure 7. Profiles of the Cambridgeshire dykes superimposed on Ditches 9 and 22.

shows that the basal profiles of these two ditches are almost identical to those of Fleam Dyke and Brent Ditch (Figure 7). Flat-based ditches are unusual, and the description in Kenny's reports as V-shaped is confusing if not misleading. The interpretation for this feature was of a drainage ditch at the base of terracing accentuating the scarp between Townsend Close Allotment and a higher field to the north (Kenney 2009, p.72), but field-drainage ditches are not flat-based, they are generally cut as a V-shape because water must flow along them, and over time this will erode the base into a U-shape. The 1790 map of Fen Ditton (Wareham and Wright 2002, p.119) names a large area north of High Ditch Road to the parish boundary as Abbots Ditch Field, which is shown as an area of old inclosure in contrast to the open-field arable in Little Ditton Field south of the road, and in High Ditch Field in the south-eastern part of the parish. This distinction supports the assumption of a major boundary along which the line of High Ditch Road subsequently ran.

There is therefore much to disagree with in the published discussion and emphatic negative conclusions of the investigations of 2006–7. It appears as though there was in fact considerable archaeological evidence within the trenches excavated, including sections of a substantial flat-based ditch in both Trenches 1 and 4 which is demonstrably similar to the template for excavated sections of the Cambridgeshire Dykes. Nonetheless there is a chronological dilemma to resolve first, if an alternative interpretation for the ditch as the potential base for one of the Cambridgeshire Dykes is to be considered acceptable. Although no dating evidence was recorded within this ditch for Trench 1, within Trench 4 the report states that brick, clay pipe fragments and 18th century pottery was found in an *olive grey silty clay* (11) which filled Ditch 12, and that 18th century glass bottles and pottery were found in the *pale olive grey silty clay* (8) primary fill of the flat-based Ditch 9.

The details of the artefactual evidence are con-

tained within Appendix 1 of the 2006 report (Fletcher in Kenney 2006, p.14–16). From the primary fill of Ditch 9 “seven sherds from the base and body of a single [Post-medieval Red ware] glazed jar” were found, and “alongside this pottery were the fragments of two dark natural green glass wine bottles ... of mid to late 18th century”. From the fill of Ditch 12 (context 11) “four large relatively unabraded sherds from a [Sible Hedingham jug] a medieval glazed ware from Essex, a small sherd of Refined White Earthen ware, from a willow pattern plate, and a fragment of clay pipe stem were also identified” plus part of an 18th-century brick; it was concluded that the medieval pot was residual. Further medieval sherds were found in one of the earlier pits, the fill (31) of Pit 32 from Trench 1, which contained two sherds of a medieval Ely type ware coarse bowl of 13th – 14th century date.

Within Trench 4 the exact locations of these artefacts within contexts 11 and 8 are not reported, for example whether the finds were made at the top or the bottom of the layer, whether they were found all together, or whether they were dispersed throughout the deposits. The presence of artefacts within a ditch fill, however, does not necessarily date the feature itself. The finds can be intrusive through animal activity or root action for example, or the in-fill deposit can derive from a later event. The finds from within Ditch 12 could be the product of waste being incorporated into a fill event during the 18th century, and there is considerable similarity in description of the matrix forming deposits 8, 10 and 11 as an “*olive grey silty clay*” which suggests that some of the surrounding deposit was used for infilling the ditch, forming its primary fill (Figure 6). All these deposits are sealed by a “*brown sandy clay silt*” (contexts 6 and 7). This deposit was later cut into by modern disturbance to form a hard surface, resulting in deposition of a “*yellow sandy clay*” (layer 4) with “*red brown silty clay sub-soil, brick rubble and hard core*” (layer 2) as a foundation for a layer of tarmac. If the artefacts from context 11 (which is recorded as stratigraphically earlier than

Ditch 9) were from the top of the deposit at its southern end, then they could represent medieval and later activity which had formed the upper part of a gradual infill of a depression caused by the underlying Ditch 12, and which were then in turn disturbed and re-deposited in part as fill 8 within Ditch 9. This scenario would allow a possible explanation for the apparent chronological discrepancy between Ditch 9 if it was the Fleam Dyke or High Ditch, and the occurrence of later artefacts within an apparently stratigraphically earlier deposit. By analogy at Devils Dyke a skeleton found at the base of the fill of the ditch was radiocarbon dated to cal. AD1180–1290 (BM966) (Malim *et al* 1997, p.73 and table 11a, p.107), but this did not make the ditch and dyke Norman in date.

The similarity in the matrix of the deposits could have obscured subtle changes from lenses of accumulation, and indeed the firm lines as reproduced within the section drawings, are unlikely to have been quite so definite during recording in the field. Unfortunately the plan of the trenches shown in the 2006 report presumably only shows basal features (i.e. the base of excavation as shown in the section drawing), and a scaled comparison between the section drawing and the plan in Trench 4 shows that the two do not match up (as reproduced here in Figure 6), which does not help to test the veracity of the stratigraphic relationships from the drawn record. The plan does not agree with the section in showing Ditch 12 extending beneath where the flat-based ditch (9) should be, whereas the section drawing clearly labels a part of the fill (11) of Ditch 12 as lying beneath deposit 10 and thus beneath the flat-based ditch (Figure 6). The section also shows that this labelled part of 11 has no excavated physical connection with the deposit also labelled 11 further south (as 10 briefly forms the base of excavation between the two parts), and it was from this context 11 that the medieval and later artefacts were found. The part of 11 beneath the flat-based ditch, for example, could even have been a continuation of deposit 10, as the description of the fill for both is very similar and the base of deposit 10 slopes down into the base of excavation which on the section drawing has been labelled as deposit 11. If 11 had been wrongly labelled and should instead have been a continuation of deposit 10, then this would help explain why 11 is not shown overlying feature 14 and fill 13 in the plan of Trench 4. It is also not helpful that the section drawings and report texts do not state what formed the base of excavation, and therefore the assumption is that this would have been natural chalk, rather than further deposits or some change in geology. The plan would suggest that chalk was reached between Ditch 12 and feature 14, but the section drawing does not show the natural chalk intervening in this manner.

Trench 1 had less obvious direct chronological relationships as were evident in Trench 4, but the cut for the potential Fleam Dyke/High Ditch which formed Ditch 22 seems on the section drawing to be stratigraphically later than Pit 30 (Figure 5). A neighbouring Pit without direct stratigraphic relationship

to Ditch 22, Pit 32, contained medieval pottery, of 13th – 14th century date and the same origin as the sherds found in fill 11 in Trench 4 (i.e. medieval Ely type ware). The fill within Ditch 22 is described in a very similar way to the primary fill within Ditch 9 in Trench 4, as “*pale olive grey silty clay with small stones*”. As with Trench 4 an earlier feature, a possible ditch (cut 24, fill 23), lies beneath, but unlike Trench 4 a later ditch has been cut through the fill of Ditch 22 forming a shape more likely to be a field-drainage ditch (Ditch 19). The chalk scarp is well defined in the section drawing for Trench 1 and also shows the possible remnants of a bank, which appears to be 0.8m high when scaled-off from the drawing. This is described as “*orange-brown sandy clay silt sub-soil*” (context 3), a small band of which has slumped over the northern end of the infill to Ditch 22 and sealed post-hole 34, which may have acted as a revetment for the bank above (Figure 5). The later ditch (Ditch 19) is shown to have cut through this deposit, but was sealed by a layer of “*reddish-brown silty clay subsoil with brick rubble and hard-core*” (layer 2) which acted as a foundation for a tarmac surface. Ditch 19 is therefore a modern feature.

In summary there are attributes from both Trench 1 and Trench 4 which suggest that a feature such as Fleam Dyke/High Ditch could have run through the area. These consist of a flat-based ditch which conforms to the profile established for the other Cambridgeshire dykes, and remnants of a bank on a scarp of chalk on the northern side of the ditch (see Figures 4 and 7). There are also earlier features, including undated ditches beneath the flat-based profile in both trenches (Ditch 14 and Ditch 24). Apart from the possible evidence for Fleam Dyke, other earlier ditches (12 and 39) and pits (28, 30 and 32) with medieval pottery would appear to extend medieval settlement at Fen Ditton much further east than had previously been believed (Wareham and Wright 2002, p.120), perhaps indicating a High Medieval precursor for the 17th century building that is now Home Farmhouse. Within the keyhole investigations from trial trenching it is not surprising that we are left with a glimpse of much more complex archaeology, and that any interpretation must be tenuous until it can be tested through analysis of a larger body of evidence.

Discussion

The other dykes that run further south across the Icknield Way zone, survive today in part as both boundaries and paths (Fleam and Devils have paths along their banks and act as parish and hundred boundaries (for Fleam), whereas the course for Bran or Heydon Ditch is delineated by both parish and field boundaries). It is therefore perfectly reasonable to suggest that the present road developed from a route that followed the most direct and highest land through a predominantly wet landscape (the highest part of the causeway formed by High Ditch Road

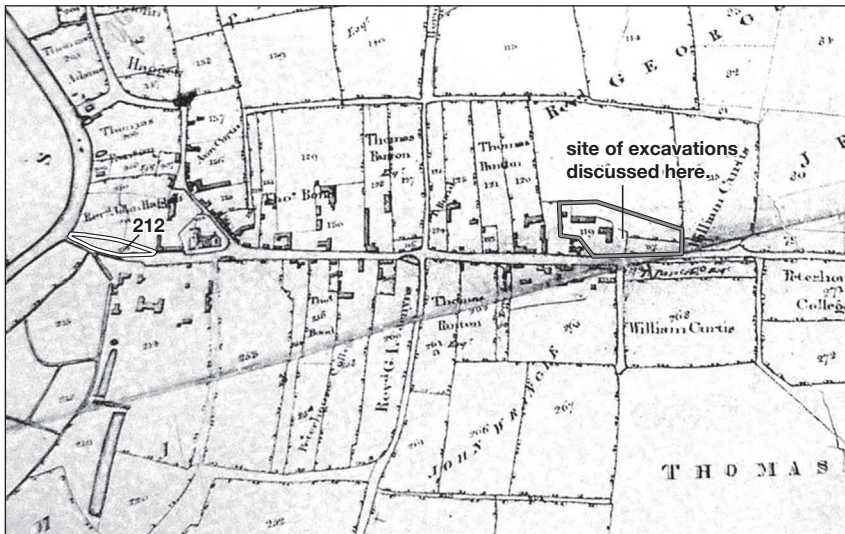


Figure 8. Location of the linear plot that may indicate a bank at the western end of Fen Ditton in relation to the excavations discussed here.

is at 13.5m whereas the parish is generally recorded as c. 6m above sea level (Wareham and Wright 2002, p.118)). At its western end an earthwork parallel to the road appears to survive within the garden of the Old Rectory, and a linear plot (212) is shown adjacent to the road on the 1807 Inclosure map (Figure 8), either of which could indicate the presence of a bank. This would benefit from further study to establish its nature and the possibility as to whether this once formed the terminus for a dyke. Near its eastern end, Anglo-Saxon weapons were found in the fill of the ditch (Lethbridge 1958; Briscoe *et al.* 1964) identified by Lethbridge as a fosse and vallum, a dyke, which he observed during road works in 1957. There is thus circumstantial evidence for the dyke's existence, with a possible banked terminus at its western end and a ditch of at least early Saxon date at its east end.

In addition and contrary to the *Discussion* section in Kenney's PCAS article, a more recent detailed survey and assessment of the dyke has been made since Fox and Lethbridge's time, published by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for North-East Cambridgeshire (RCHME 1972, p.144–147). The careful field study notes the physical remains of a bank and ditch along a reasonable proportion of the length of High Ditch Road, especially immediately to the east of Home Farm "... but at TL 49076004 the bank reappears and can be followed for 260 yds. until it reaches the outskirts of Fen Ditton village at Home Farm (TL 48846015). For the first 190 yds. of this length the bank is well marked: it is 10 ft. wide, 2 ft. high on the N. and drops steeply 4 ft. towards the road which apparently lies in the ditch. Just S.E. of Home Farm the S. face of the bank has been cut into for farm buildings and now remains as a steep scarp 5–6 ft. high with some traces of the other side of the bank in the field to the N." (RCHME 1972, 146). Contrast this with the concluding remarks in Kenney's article: "It is rather more likely that there never was a major dyke across this landscape ... and that the features identified as part of the 'dyke' were over-enthusiastically interpreted in the past" (Kenney 2009, p.72). The Royal Commission volume clearly articulates physical evidence in many

locations to the east and west of Home Farm where remnants of the dyke were visible, and where historic mapping provide documentary evidence. The volume also notes that in Baker's 1821 map of Cambridgeshire the road is labelled as High Dyke Road. It suggests that the origin of this dyke might have been earlier than the surviving earthworks across the Icknield Way zone, and was similar to some of the Norfolk dykes in that it cut off a promontory of dry land (Fen Ditton village and Horningsea) that juts out into the fen. It also suggests that the change of course at Newmarket Road was to ensure that the dyke defended the crossing point of Quy Water where Quy Bridge was later located.

Conclusions

The results from Kenney's investigations were interesting and should have been published so that readers could assess the validity of the interpretations presented in his brief synthesis. The current trend for minimising archaeological publication limited the evidence that could be presented, when what was found was so important that it should have been made more widely available for study and for academic debate. Those results leave a chronological enigma, and argue for new campaigns of investigation as opportunity allows. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to and actively stimulate that debate.

Acknowledgements

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used for analysis in black and white and greyscale for publication in PCAS. The article has also benefited from the review of the referees whose comments have helped refine this paper.

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