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Great Wilbraham Roman Villa & Fleam Dyke



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GREAT WILBRAHAM ROMAN VILLA AND FLEAM DYKE

DUNGATE PIPELINE SCHEME

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Report no. 87

Excavations of Great Wilbraham Roman Villa



CONTENTS

SUMMARY	1
PART 1 THE DUNGATE PIPELINE SURVEY	3
1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 Topography and Geology	3
1.3 Archaeological Background	3
Prehistory and Cropmarks	3
Roman	4
Anglo-Saxon	5
1.4 Methodology	5
1.5 Results	6
Southern Section	6
Eastern Outfall	6
Western Outfall	9
Fleam Dyke	9
1.6 Discussion	9
PART 2 GREAT WILBRAHAM VILLA	10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Archaeological Background	11
2.3 Methodology	11
2.4 Results	12
The Building	13
Altar Pit	16
Courtyard and Dump Area	17
2.5 Summary and Discussion	18
Acknowledgements	19
Bibliography	19

FIGURES

Figure 1	Location Map of the Dungate to Great Wilbraham Pipeline	4
Figure 2	Fleam Dyke as shown on Ordnance Survey Map 1822	7
Figure 3	Maynard's Map of British and Roman Roads in Cambridgeshire	8
Figure 4	Location of Roman Remains at Great Wilbraham	10
Figure 5	Trench Plan showing Villa Remains	12
Figure 6	Plan of Building	14
Figure 7	Section through beam slot 39, facing west	15
Figure 8	Section through beam slot 40, facing south	15
Figure 9	Section through post hole 37, facing north	15
Figure 10	Section through Altar Pit	17
Figure 11	The Artifacts	21
Figure 12	Fragments from the Altar Pit	22-3
Figure 13	The Pottery	25

PLATES

Front Cover	Excavations of Great Wilbraham Roman Villa	
Plate 1	The Altar projecting from the Surface of the Pit	16
Plate 2	The Column and the Cornice in the Pit	16
Plate 3	Pewter Plate during Excavation	20

APPENDICES

Appendix A	The Artifacts	
Appendix B	Fragments from the Altar Pit	
Appendix C	The Pottery	

SUMMARY

A Roman villa dating from the first to the fourth centuries AD was identified at Great Wilbraham in the summer of 1990 by John Etté, Assistant County Archaeologist for Cambridgeshire. The villa lay on the route of a new water pipeline to be laid by the National Rivers Authority. Excavation revealed a series of rectangular rooms with rammed chalk floors, one of which had substantial flint and mortar foundations, and a second which was retained by timber post holes and wall slots. There was a circular pit located some 13 meters to the south of the building, cut into a square, rammed chalk platform. This pit contained an intact Roman altar, only the third to be found in Cambridgeshire, and below the altar further architectural fragments including the base of a column. The project also recognised an extension of Fleam Dyke, and Anglo-Saxon defensive earthwork, between Great Wilbraham and Fen Ditton.

PART 1 THE DUNGATE PIPELINE SURVEY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section were notified in 1990 of a proposal from The National Rivers Authority for the construction of a new water pipeline in Southern Cambridgeshire. In accordance with The Water Act 1989 ("Code of Practice on Conservation Access and Recreation") arrangements were made by the NRA for archaeological monitoring of the project.

The proposal for the so-called Dungate Pipeline was part of a wider project, the Lodes Granta Scheme. This was part of the Great Ouse Groundwater Scheme, which aimed to increase water supply in Southern Cambridgeshire by "managing" the chalk aquifer (a natural underground reservoir). Additional water would be taken from the chalk not only for public supply and local agriculture, but also to preserve river flows, improve river water quality and maintain local amenities. The Dungate pipeline was to run between Dungate Farm, on the Fleam Dyke, and the villages of Fulbourn and Great Wilbraham (Figure 1). The route divided into an eastern and western branch south of the road bridge crossing the Newmarket to Cambridge railway line.

The linear nature of pipelines, crossing large tracts of land, often result in the discovery of new archaeological sites. A number of archaeological sites were recorded on the County Sites and Monuments Record along the proposed route, and there was potential for the discovery of more during the course of the project. Monitoring was therefore recommended not only for areas of identified archaeological interest but also for the remainder of the route.

1.2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The underlying geology for the scheme was the Lower Chalk formation, with the exception of the western outfall of the pipeline. This was located at the boundary of the Lower Chalk and the peat deposits forming the First and Second Terrace of the Little Wilbraham River. The slightly undulating topography of the area is currently given over to intensive arable cultivation. The villa is adjacent to natural freshwater springs and beneath a high scarp which is used by Street Way. It is sited close to the southern Cambridgeshire fen edge.

1.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A number of archaeological sites were recorded on the County Sites and Monuments Record along the proposed route (Figure 1). These included crop mark sites of unknown date and finds of mostly Roman material. The earliest dated piece found along the route was the chance find of Neolithic axe just to the north of Dungate Farm, close to the borehole site (SMR 6262).

1.3.1 Prehistory and Crop Marks

The crop marks included an enclosure complex south of the A11 at the Great Wilbraham Cross-roads (SMR 9345) and a ring ditch adjacent to the Great Wilbraham Road, possibly the remains of a Bronze Age barrow (SMR 9315). Nearby, a soil mark is recorded, of unknown character

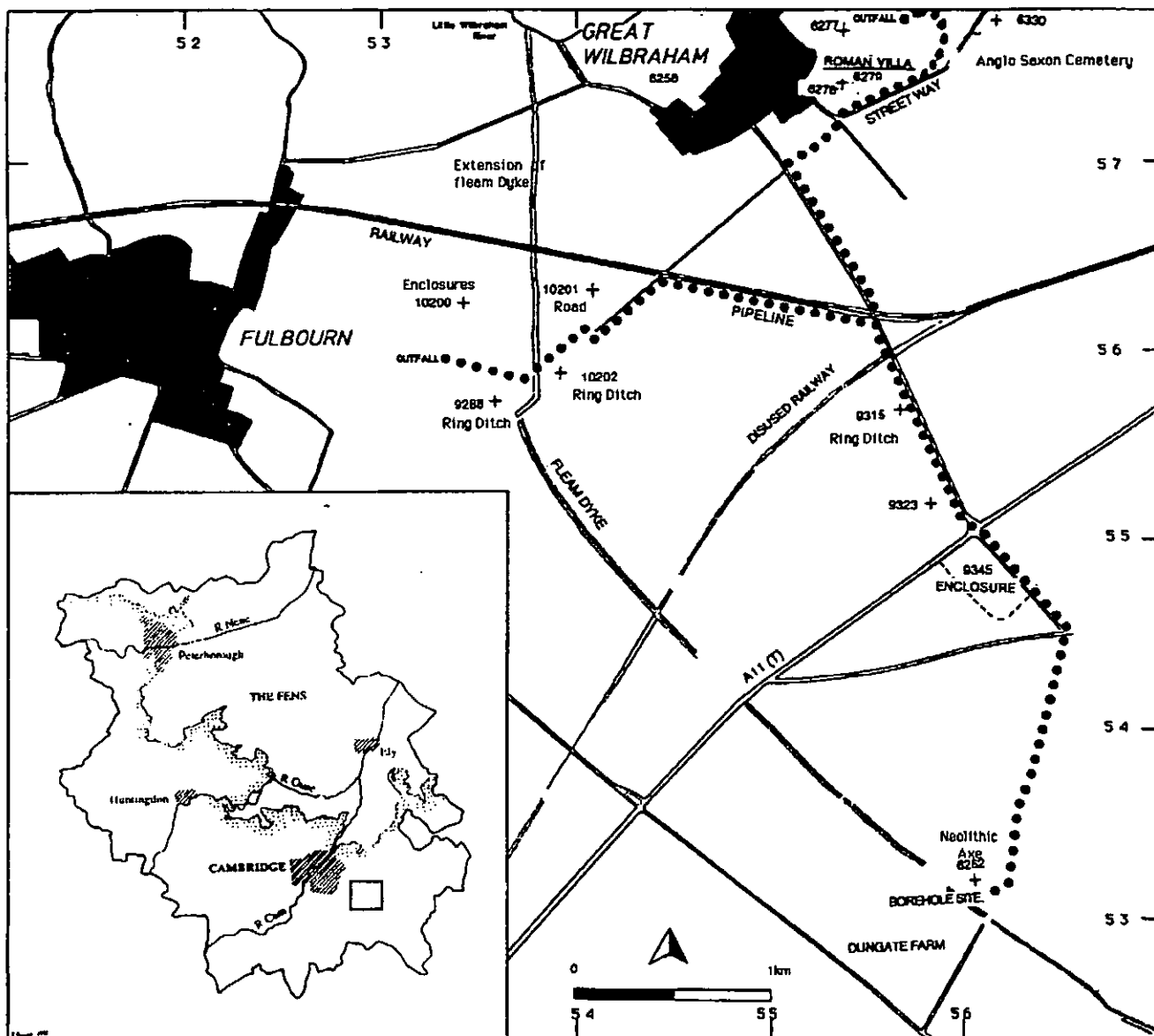


Figure 1 Location Map showing the Dungate to Great Wilbraham Pipeline

(SMR 9323). Near the western outfall of the pipeline, three further crop marks are known. One indicates a small ring ditch, immediately adjacent to the pipe-trench, and is perhaps the ploughed site of a Bronze Age barrow (SMR 10202). The second consists of small rectangular structures within a number of enclosures and field ditches, and may indicate buildings (SMR 10200). The third is a ring ditch with two small enclosures (SMR 9288).

1.3.2 Roman

The area is rich in Roman material, including the section of a Roman road, believed to be on the course of the present A11 (SMR 10201). Another Roman route is Street Way, which survives today as a green lane for several miles, and skirts Great Wilbraham. Fox suggests this was a prehistoric track straightened and metalled by the Romans (Fox 1923: 149-150). It is likely that it was one of a series of routes which collectively formed the Icknield Way. Street Way is well documented in the medieval period, with thirteenth century references to "Strateway". It ran from south of Cambridge to Newmarket and beyond into Chippenham Fen (Reaney 1943: 30).

Evidence for a Roman villa was found east of Great Wilbraham, close to the Springs Plantation (SMR 6279, TL 55 57). Finds included samian pottery, jewellery, weights and coins, as well as a fragment of a lead vat above a cobbled floor, discovered by a metal detector user. Nearby, there are also two wells (SMR 6278, TL 55 57) and finds of Roman coins (SMR 6277, TL 55 57), as well as evidence for a Roman building to the west of Great Wilbraham (SMR 6258, TL 54 57) (Taylor 1985). Elsewhere, discussions with a tenant farmer suggested that a Roman settlement and possible cemetery was located close to Fleam Dyke. Metal detecting, not previously reported to the County Archaeology Section, had resulted in the recovery of a number of coins and bronze fragments, as well as cremated bone and samian pottery vessels.

1.3.3 Anglo Saxon

To the north and east of Great Wilbraham is a large Anglo-Saxon cemetery, with at least three hundred inhumation and cremation burials (SMR 6330). Grave goods include brooches, swords and much pottery.

Fleam Dyke, believed to be an Anglo-Saxon defence, was crossed by the western section of the pipeline. The dyke extends from the fen edge between Fulbourn and Little Wilbraham southeast for a distance of about five miles (VCH Cambs II 1948: 9-10). It continues for a further 2 miles beyond this point, but is diminished in scale and visible only as a embanked hedge. The dyke is one of several in the region which appear to have formed a series of defensive barriers, namely Devil's Dyke, Fleam Dyke, Brent Ditch and Bran Ditch. The dykes were typically constructed across areas of dry chalk land between the natural barriers of high, wooded land in the south and wet fenland in the north. Fox discovered that Fleam dyke was of post Roman date, and suggested that it had formed a continuous barrier from the wooded areas to the fens (Fox 1923: 45-51). Recent excavation by the staff of the Archaeological Section, Cambridgeshire County Council, has confirmed the post Roman date of the dyke. The earthwork was shown to be massive in scale, with a ditch originally 4.5 metres deep and 8 metres wide. At least 2 phases of ditch and 3 phases of bank were observed, showing a long period of ditch maintenance and cleaning (Wait 1991).

1.4 METHODOLOGY

Field walking of the route prior to soil stripping operations was not possible due to the height of the crops and the location of much of the route within roadside verges. Therefore, the soil stripping operations themselves were monitored, especially in areas close to identified sites.

Topsoil stripping took place between June and July 1990. It was undertaken by Breheney's, the contractors for the scheme, in preparation for the digging of the pipe trench. The width of the stripped surface varied, according to the proximity of roadside verges. Where the pipeline crossed arable land, an easement width of approximately 8 metres was maintained, with the topsoil stripped to between 5 and 6 metres. Topsoil was removed to a depth of between 200 and 400 mm. Lengths of the stripped surface were examined and any potential features investigated by hand and, in addition, spoil heaps were scanned for artefacts.

The pipe-trench was generally cut well in advance of pipe-laying and backfilling operations, thus providing an opportunity to observe considerable lengths of open trench at one time, often in excess of 100 metres. The underlying chalk geology greatly assisted the identification of cut features. These were generally revealed by the contrast between the predominantly dark infilled archaeological features and the white chalk sub-strata.

A metal detector survey was undertaken at the eastern outfall site in advance of topsoil stripping, where previous finds suggested the potential for this technique, but was unsuccessful due to the height of the stubble and the unsophisticated equipment used. A metal detector was also used after soil stripping in some areas, to check for archaeological material within spoil heaps.

1.5 RESULTS

The survey results are discussed below. For the most part, little archaeological material was recovered. However, by the Springs Plantation at Great Wilbraham, sections of a Roman villa were exposed by the soil stripping, and required excavation. This is discussed in detail in the following section. A northeast extension to Fleam Dyke was identified by aerial photography close to the western outfall of the pipe line and observation on the ground.

1.5.1 Southern Section

The pipeline was not monitored between Dungate Farm and the Cambridge to Newmarket railway line, due to lack of communication between the site engineer and the County Archaeological Office. Most of this section of the line lay within roadside verges and, as no archaeological sites were noted, it is unlikely that significant cultural deposits were affected.

There was some opportunity for observation next to the A11, a possible Roman road, where extensive soil stripping took place in preparation for thrust boring works below the modern road surface. The area cleared extended some 60 metres south of the A11 and 10 to 15 metres to the north, with surfaces stripped down to the subsoil, approximately 320 mm. No archaeological features were visible, although several crop mark sites are recorded nearby (SMR 9345, 9315 and 9323). A metal detector survey of the stripped area and spoil heaps proved equally negative. This suggests that any features associated with the crop marks did not extend as far as the modern road, or that they have been removed by post-depositional disturbance.

Before the insertion of the Dungate pipe in its trench, thrust boring pits were excavated on either side of the A11, approximately 10 metres by 5 metres and 2.5 metres deep. It was hoped that these might reveal evidence of a Roman highway in the form of Roman road surfaces or adjacent "agger" ditches. As this was not the case, it seems that such features may survive within the narrower band of the existing two-lane carriage way, or else have been removed by successive road improvements.

1.5.2 Eastern Outfall

The eastern route of the pipe line ended at an outflow on the northern side of Springs plantation, Great Wilbraham. Here, architectural remains of a Roman villa were exposed and excavated, as is discussed below. These included the remains of two rooms with rammed chalk floors, a courtyard area and a separately dug pit containing an intact Roman altar and part of a column. The presence of a villa was previously suspected on the basis of stray finds in the area (see 1.3.4).

The pipe line also followed a section of Street Way, joining its course south of Great Wilbraham Village. The pipeline was inserted in this area without notification so no observations were made apart from an ad hoc walk-over survey of the easement. No archaeological material was noted, so no further light was thrown on the nature and age of Street Way.

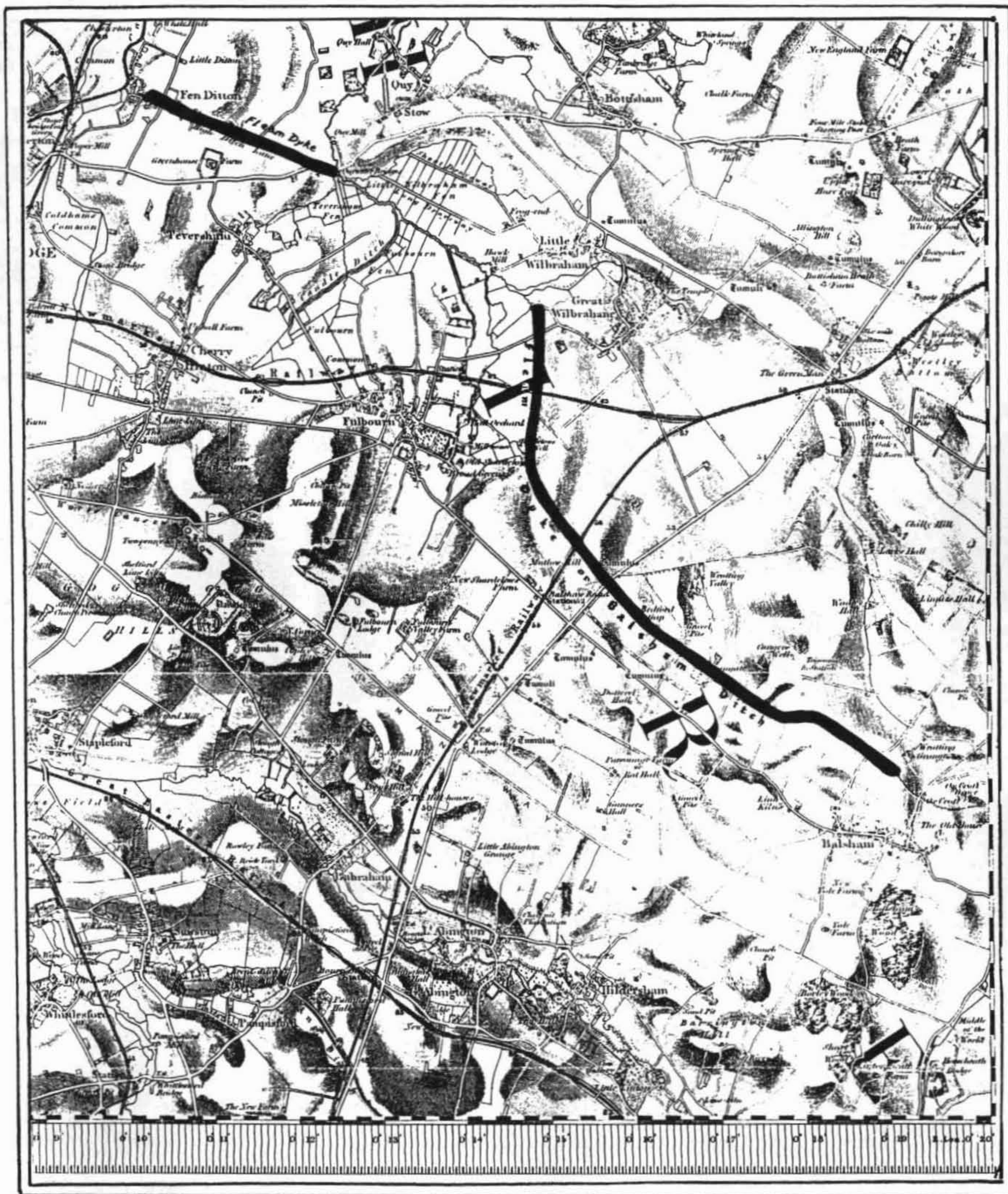


Figure 2 Fleam Dyke as shown on Ordnance Survey Map 1822 (Scale approx. 1:50,000)

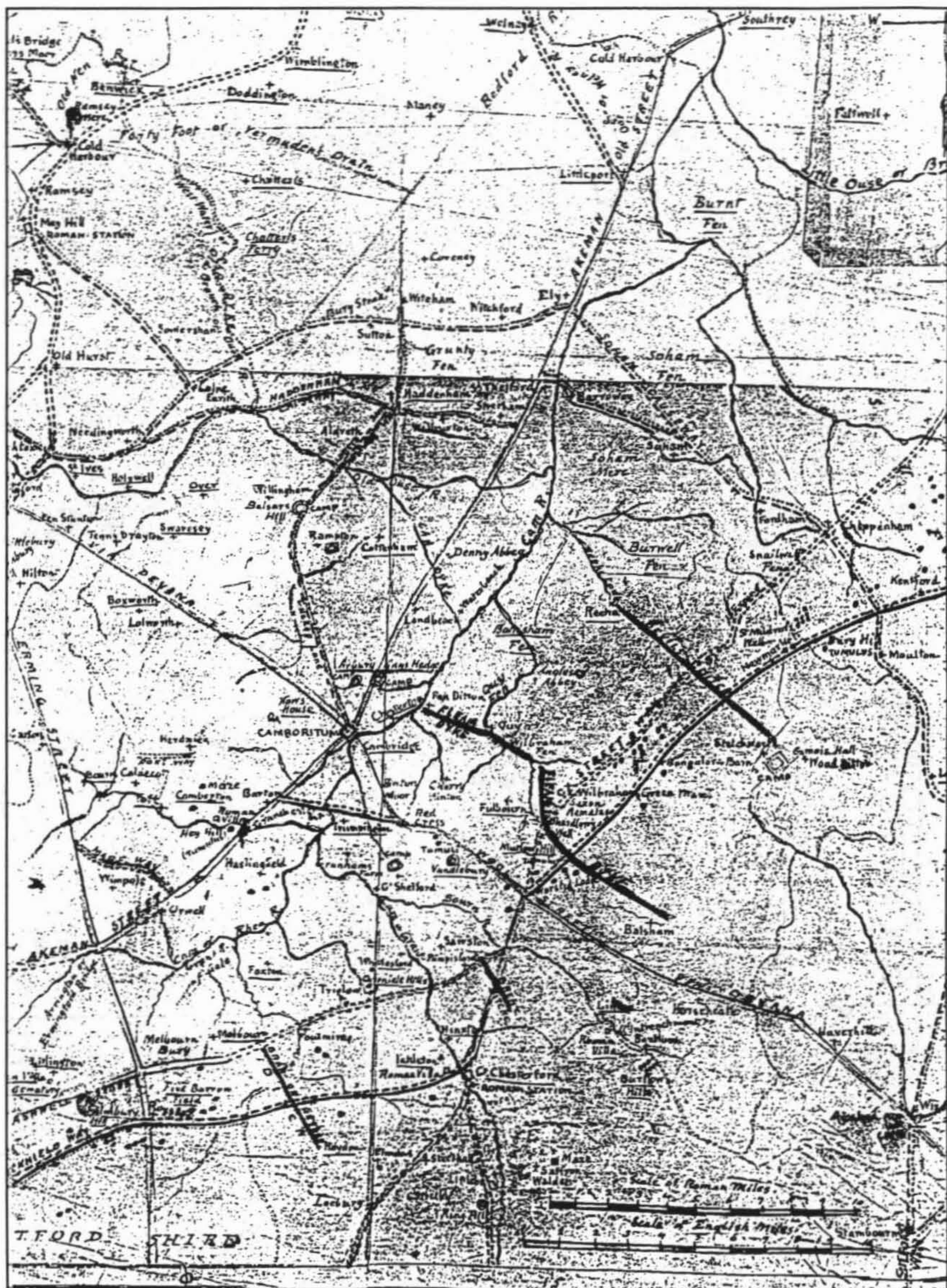


Figure 3 Maynard's Map of British and Roman Roads in Cambridgeshire (1852)

1.5.3 Western Outfall

Nothing of archaeological value was noted along the western section of the Dungate pipeline between the railway line and the top of the hill slope northeast of Fleam Dyke. On the scarp slope close to Fleam Dyke a scatter of slightly abraded Romano-British pottery sherds was located below the plough soil (TL 539 542). Other finds included burnt flint cobbles, fired clay fragments and a few struck flint artefacts (TL 538 559 to TL 539 542). These indicate Prehistoric and Romano-British activity but cannot be characterised further as they were not related to archaeological features. A series of irregular soil marks was observed near to the end of Fleam Dyke, but were not more than 0.10 metres deep and contained no archaeological material, suggesting that they were probably natural in origin.

1.5.4 Fleam Dyke

Of more significance was the identification of a section of Fleam Dyke, connecting the Balsham to Fulbourn section with Fen Ditton. A linear crop mark feature had been revealed on aerial photographs taken by Ben Robinson, and a linear feature on the same alignment was identified on the ground during construction of the pipe trench (Figure 1). Excavation showed this to be a cut approximately 1 metre deep and 10 metres wide. No archaeological material was produced. The identification of this feature as part of Fleam Dyke is supported by evidence from nineteenth century maps.

The Ordnance Survey map for 1822 (1:50,000 series) shows Fleam dyke running north-west from Balsham to Fulbourn, and then continuing to meet the Little Wilbraham River, some 2.5 miles to the north-east (Figure 2). A further section of the dyke is shown between Wilbraham Fen, near Quy-cum-Stow, and Fen Ditton.. Maynard's map (Maynard 1852) also clearly identifies Fleam Dyke as curving north from Fulbourn to join the river at Wilbraham Fen (Figure 3). The Victoria County History (VCH Cambs II 1948: 9) does not mention this section of the dyke, referring only to the lengths between Balsham and Fulbourn, and between Stow-cum-Quy and Fen Ditton. Neither does the Royal Commission (RCHM Northeast Cambs: 144-147 HMSO 1972) refer to the intervening section. It seems that the Fulbourn to Wilbraham stretch of the dyke had been forgotten by the 1940s.

Fleam Dyke apparently joined the Little Wilbraham River at its confluence with a tributary (TL 537 577), at which point the bed of the original river survived as an earthwork forming a relict channel some 25 to 30 metres wide. This was identified during field investigation by John Ette and Gerry Wait in 1990. The meeting point between the dyke and the river would have combined the defensive properties of the man-made dyke with the natural topography. The recognition of the Dyke extension, and the location of its end point at the river, highlight the original extent and intention of Fleam Dyke as a large scale defensive earthwork.

1.6 DISCUSSION

Identification of the continuation of Fleam Dyke resulted from the survey and the Roman Villa at Great Wilbraham was exposed and excavated. Details of this excavation are in the following section. For most of its length, however, the Dungate Pipeline disturbed little in the way of cultural remains. No material was found that related to the crop mark sites along its route, nor to the two roads crossing its path.

PART 2 GREAT WILBRAHAM VILLA

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Roman villas form a widely known type of field monument in Britain which have been the subject of intense study over the last hundred years (Todd 1978). Their complexity and diversity make general characterisation difficult. It is clear that villas served many functions and took many forms. For the sake of this discussion, they are defined as a structure or group of buildings associated with a Romanised country land holding or estate. The buildings generally conform to a rectangular plan, but may vary significantly in size and plan. The main range of buildings is often associated with a range of outbuildings and enclosures that form the centre of the land holding (Collingwood et al 1969).

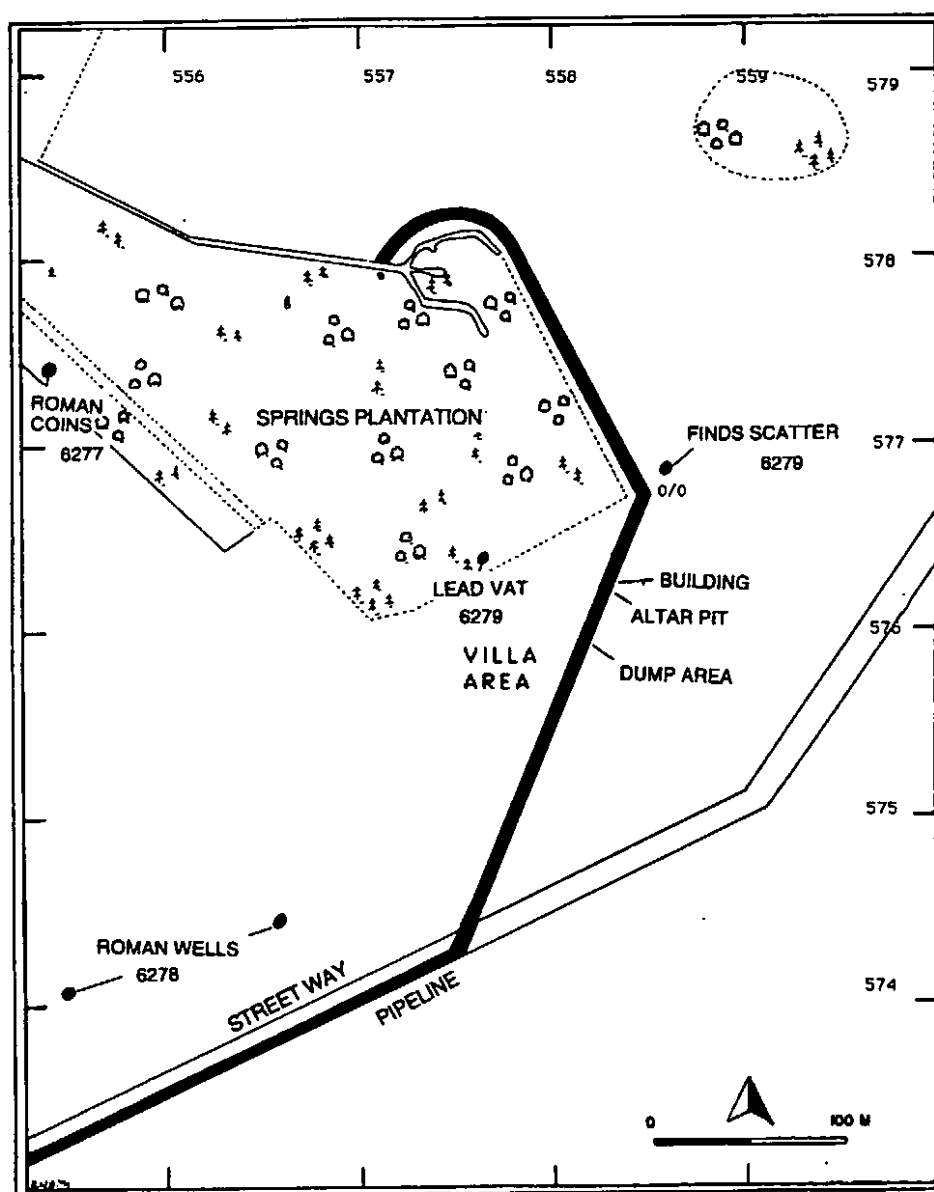


Figure 4 Location of Roman Remains at Great Wilbraham

Villas were built in Britain between the first and fourth centuries AD and are dated mainly from objects recovered in stratified contexts (Miles 1986). These may include pottery, tile, metalwork (including coins) and sometimes fragments of mosaic flooring. The buildings often show evidence for morphological change through time, indicating personal alterations made by the occupants over the course of several hundred years. The buildings tend to be long and low, grouped around a yard. The main building range was generally divided into a series of square or rectangular rooms accessed by a corridor or off a main hall. These were constructed from a variety of materials, often incorporating stone foundations and timber posts and wall panels. Tile was widely used for roofing.

2.2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

As described earlier in the report, there was considerable evidence of Roman activity in the area of the Wilbraham villa (Figure 4). Roman artefacts were recorded close to the Springs Plantation, including pottery, coins and a lead vat fragment. The Roman route along Street Way runs nearby, and the putative Roman road beneath the modern A11. With this in mind, two stretches of the pipeline easement at Great Wilbraham were metal-detected before the contractors started work. This was not successful, as it was June and the crops were high. Modern metal objects such as horse shoes were found.

The villa was first identified after soil stripping when a few cobbles and a small area of dusty chalk were exposed. The contractors assisted in machining off a further 50-100 mm of disturbed subsoil over a 50 metre length of the pipe-trench. Following this soil stripping, metal detectors were used to check spoil heaps (See Appendix A). This was a precautionary measure, as the site was vulnerable to elicit treasure hunting. Local metal detectorists systematically scanned the top-soiled easement and spoil heaps by a series of machine sweeps. The positions of artefacts were recorded allowing distributions to be plotted for both trenches, but were not assigned to context. In the southern trench three distinct clusters of material were discovered, two corresponding to the building and the series of refuse pits respectively. A third concentration was on a terrace nearer to Street Way with no obvious surface features. In the northern trench, where there were no visible features, but finds included a number of Roman coins, brooch fragments, a bronze bracelet, pin, spoon, ring, an iron key and axe head, and a pewter vessel.

2.3 METHODOLOGY

The villa remains were exposed in the machine dug trench for the pipe line. Excavations of the Roman villa were limited by time and resources available, therefore attention was focused in areas likely to be destroyed by the pipe trench. A plan of archaeological features was completed, and key contexts and features selectively excavated.

2.4 RESULTS

Excavations at Great Wilbraham discovered a suite of rooms oriented north-west / south-east and with rammed chalk floors (Figure 5). A circular pit containing an intact altar, fragments of a pillar and cornice stone, and an iron object of uncertain type, was dug through a chalk platform some thirteen metres to the south of the house. Between these features was a cleaned, compacted courtyard area, while beyond the pit was an area of domestic rubbish pits and ditches. Pottery from the site, and coins located by metal detecting, suggest a construction date in the second century AD and destruction or abandonment of the villa during the late fourth or early fifth century AD.

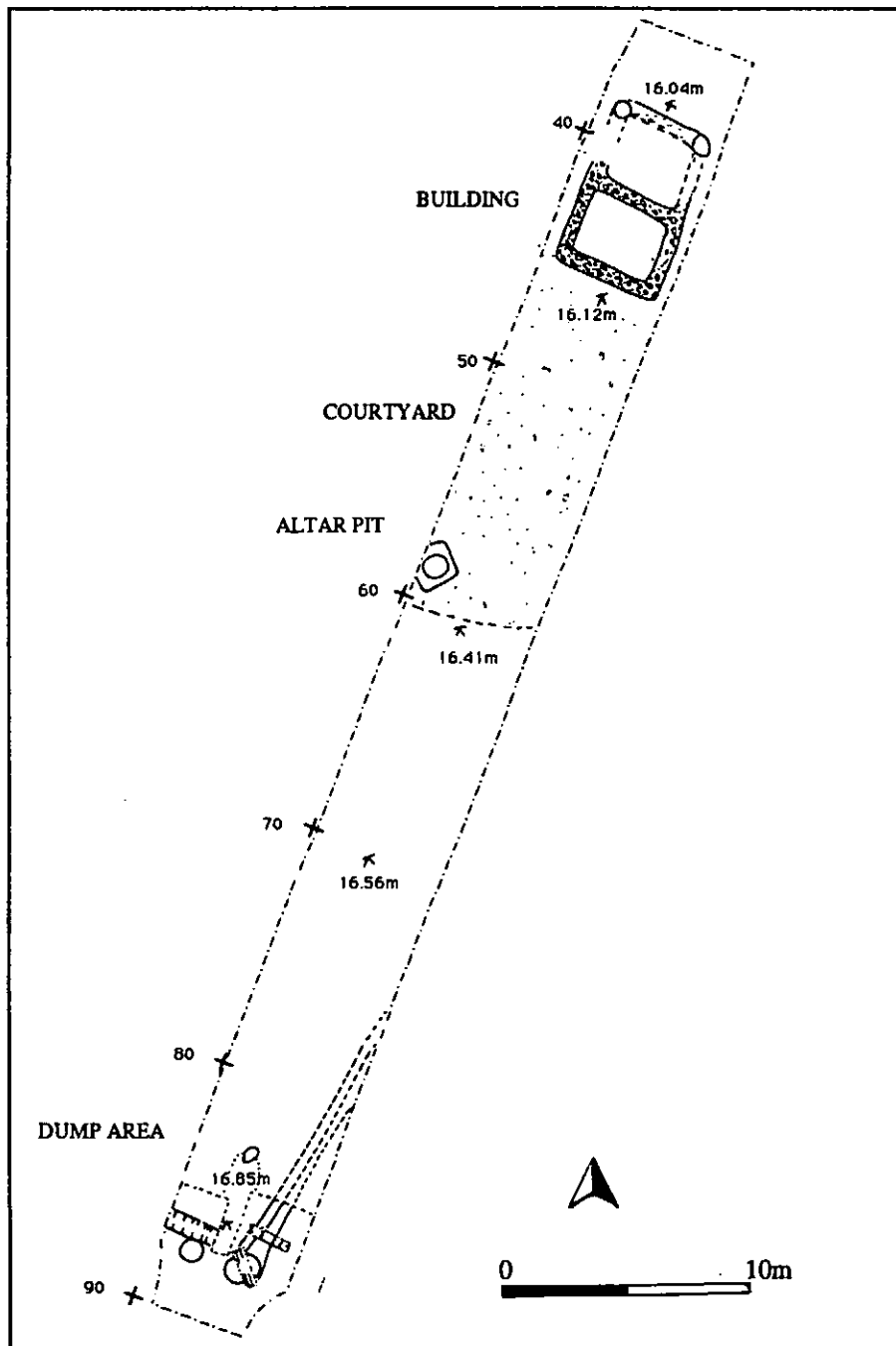


Figure 5 Trench Plan showing Villa Remains

2.4.1 The Building

Initial cleaning of Trench 1 revealed features such as ditches, pits and traces of walls. Further cleaning exposed part of a rectangular building, two rooms of which were contained within the stripped area (Figure 6 and front cover illustration).

Room 1 measured approximately 4 metres by 3 metres externally, and was defined by flint and stone wall foundations ([17] and [7]). The substantial size of these foundations suggests that the building could have had a second storey. They were 500 mm thick, and formed by loosely infilled stone rubble with crude courses of flint nodules. Other materials such as tile and pottery were also incorporated, including South Gaulish, Antonine and samian ware. The flint coursing was set into a thick mortar deposit located above the more irregular rubble layer. Contained within the foundations was a "puddled" or "rammed" chalk floor, approximately 180 mm thick [6]. Occasional dirty orange silty patches and charcoal lay above the floor surface. The undulating nature of the chalk suggests that the original surface had been much eroded. It was particularly worn close to the northwest corner of the room, perhaps indicating a threshold. The surface was scored and damaged by modern plough furrows. Below the chalk floor surface was a thin charcoal-rich layer, which may have been part of an earlier floor.

A second layer of chalk flooring lay immediately to the east of the wall foundation, and continued into the eastern edge of the trench [24]. This respected the width of the defining rubble foundations of the adjacent room, and was clearly part of the same structure even though it lacked its own rubble foundations to the north-east and south-west. Further wall foundations extended to the west, and there was evidence of other floor surfaces [27]. These were not of chalk but of compacted silty loams. The foundations here appeared to abut the rectangular chalk floored room, although the coursing was much less obvious. The rubble deposit was slightly nearer to the surface and consequently more disturbed by ploughing. There was not enough time available to excavate and resolve satisfactorily the area south of the rectangular room, but there was no evidence for further structures.

To the north lay a second room where an irregular shaped area of chalk flooring was exposed [9]. This measured 3.3 metres by 2.9 metres and was between 20 mm and 100 mm thick. An irregular ovoid gravel area in the south-east corner of the room proved on excavation to be an area where the chalk floor had eroded away to expose an underlying gravel deposit. This extended beneath the room and may have been a foundation deposit. The floor of the room was cut by a single plough furrow to a depth of 120 mm, perhaps caused by a pan-buster or other deep ploughing episode.

The north and east limits of the room were defined by a series of post holes and shallow linear features, probably beam slots ([39] and [40], Figures 7 and 8). The north side was defined by two large stone-packed post holes [36], one at each corner. These were shallow and packed with large cobbles, bone and tile. The rammed chalk flooring extended to these post holes, suggesting a wall at that point. It is also possible that the area was a covered porch or apse, as there was no clear evidence of a beam slot foundation connecting the post holes, nor obvious robber trenching. The western side of the room was defined by a north-south aligned beam slot [40]. The chalk surfaces extended beyond it, and a threshold may be indicated. A series of three small post holes were cut into the floor surface in the centre of the room [35]. Two of these were excavated, but their function remains unclear. The post pipe of one was packed with tile. A further post hole excavated in the south of the room [37] (Figure 9) and a nearby pit [41] are likewise of uncertain function. These features probably represent a separate and later phase of activity.

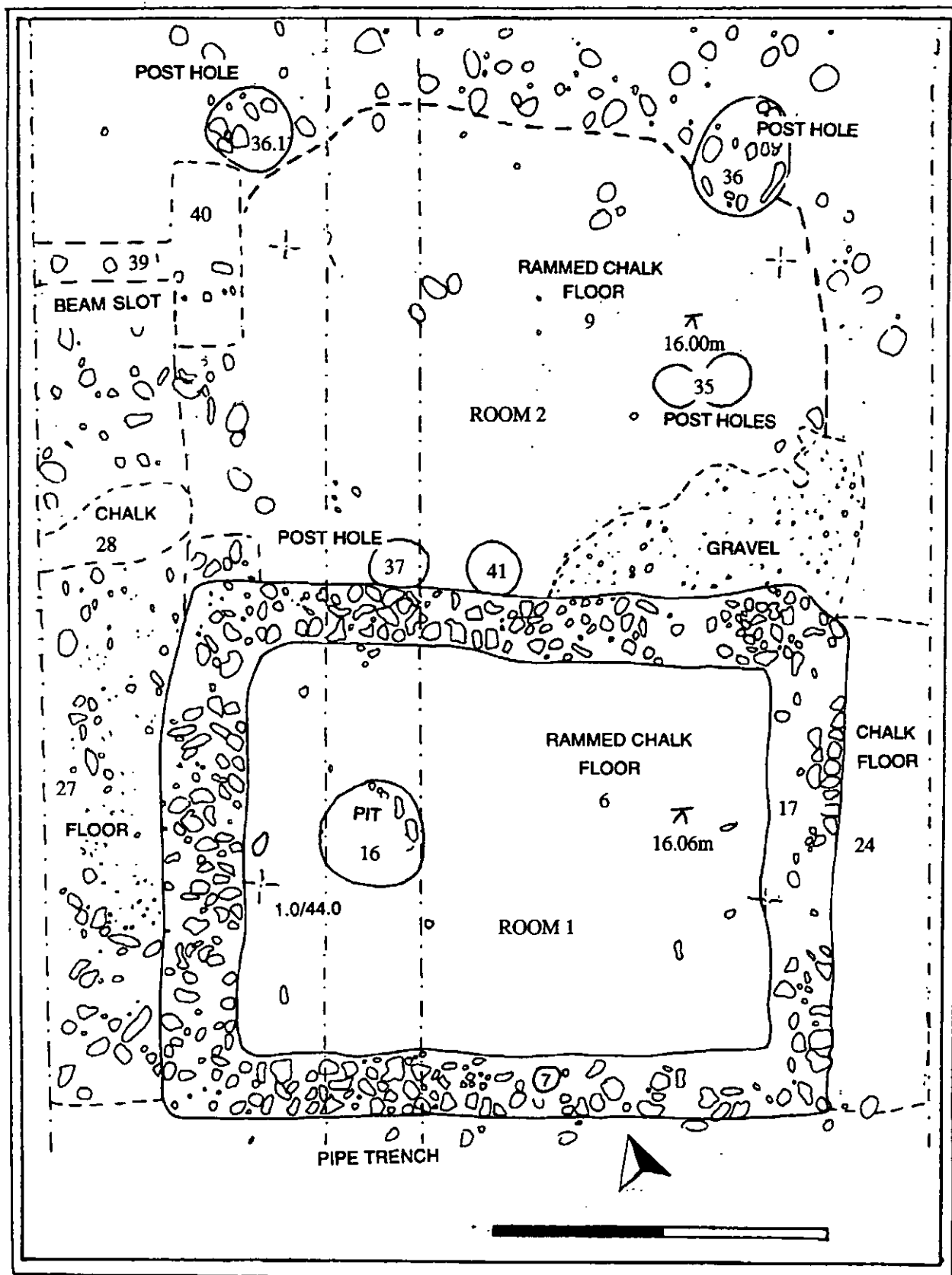


Figure 6 Plan of Building

The rammed chalk floors in these rooms were examined in section. A 500 mm wide slot was excavated through the centre of the building on the course of the projected pipe-trench. The chalk varied in thickness between 100 mm and 180 mm in the south room, and between 20 mm and 100 mm in the other. This may reflect a functional difference between the rooms or different phases

of construction but post-depositional erosion and the irregularity of the surface limit interpretation. Beneath the chalk was a soil layer approximately 300 mm thick, perhaps an earlier floor or the foundation make-up for the chalk itself. In the northern room, a bronze handle was recovered from this lower layer. This may have been deliberately placed as a foundation offering, which is also possible for the globular beaker fragment with "cut glass" decoration, Antonine in date, recovered from the foundation of the wall. Alternatively, both could simply be accidental losses.

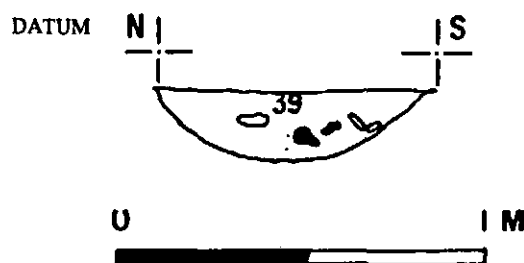


Figure 7 Section through beam slot 39, facing west

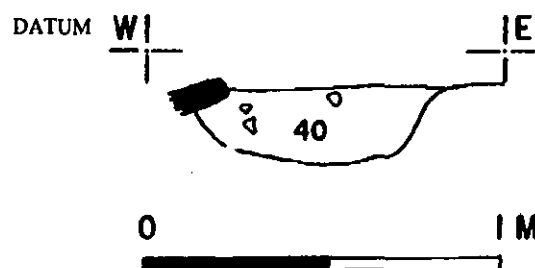


Figure 8 Section through beam slot 40, facing south

Excavation of the mixed deposits downslope to the north-east of the building produced copious amounts of tile, pottery and other miscellaneous occupation debris, including fragments of box flue tile probably from a hypocaust structure. The pottery included a late Antonine flanged bowl, fragments of probable second century coarseware, and fragments of local ware from around 270 AD, confirming the second and third century occupation of the villa. The soil was charcoal rich and is likely to have accumulated following the abandonment, levelling or destruction of the building. No structural remains were encountered.

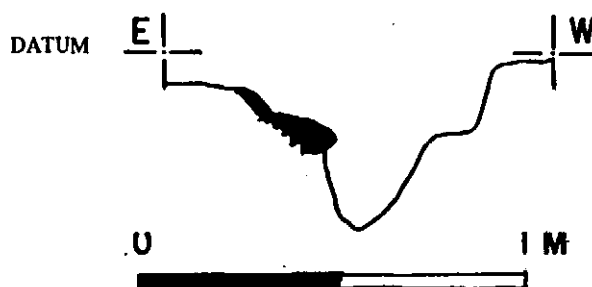


Figure 9 Section through post hole 37, facing north

Dating evidence for the buildings is scanty. Ceramic evidence points to an Antonine foundation date, with destruction in the later third to mid-fourth century. There are some coins from the second century AD, and a concentration in the third century. The latest coins are late fourth/early fifth century, hinting at a slightly later date for the villa's abandonment (see Appendix A).

2.4.2 Altar Pit

Approximately 13 metres south-west of the building was a smaller, sub-rectangular area of compacted chalk and gravel, measuring some 2.3m by 1.9m. Initially thought to be the rear wall of the villa compound, this, in fact, formed a small platform or plinth. It was made up of compacted "puddled" or "rammed" chalk about 400 mm thick and within a larger, flat-bottomed construction cut. There were inclusions of medium and large flint nodules, but no particular structure or coursing (Figure 10).



Plate 1 The Altar projecting from the Surface of the Pit



Plate 2 The Column and the Iron Object in the Pit

A circular pit 1m in diameter was cut into the centre of the chalk plinth. An intact Roman altar projected slightly above its surface (Plate 1). The altar may have been originally covered entirely by the chalk plinth, and exposed only by modern activity. It had sustained some damage by the plough or during machine topsoiling. The altar was excavated rapidly and removed for safekeeping overnight, because of the threat of "treasure hunters". The altar was carved out of shelly limestone, a rectangular post with four chamfered steps to the upper moulding. There was a raised circle on the top of the altar where libations and offerings could be made (Appendix B).

Beneath the altar, other architectural fragments were recovered, namely a column base and a fragment of stone cornice (Plate 2, Figure 12). The column was at a 45 degree angle with its base on the bottom of the pit, suggesting a single deliberate rapid backfilling episode. Its base had two flat sided torus mouldings, with a central incised line divided by a plain drum. The diameter of the shaft, 230 mm, suggests that the column may not have been much longer than the fragment recovered, perhaps a plinth for a statue. This would be consistent with its burial with the altar. The fragment of cornice was recovered lying against the column base. It featured a "quirked square head" projecting at an angle above a shallow corvettio moulding. The return of the mouldings to the depth of the stone indicate that the cornice is probably from the head of a door, window or alcove. Another find from close to the centre of the pit appears to confirm the unusual nature of the artefacts recovered. A twisted iron object with projecting prongs may be the remains of a standard, or possibly candle holders, but has so far eluded formal identification (Figure 12.3).

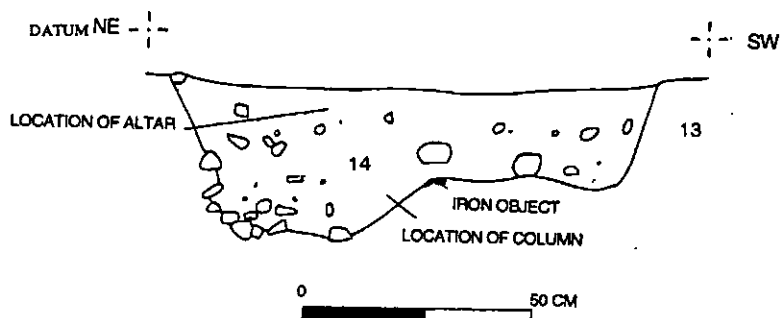


Figure 10 Section through Altar Pit

The pit had a rounded top profile and steeply sloping sides, with a slightly concave base. The fill of homogenous grey silty loams, indicates a single backfilling episode. There were occasional flint and chalk pebbles and larger cobbles probably derived from the plinth structure. Fragments of charcoal were recovered throughout the fill, but flotation of a bulk sample recovered only one degraded fragment of carbonised seed, which rules out a purely domestic purpose for the pit. The pottery suggests that the pit was cut around or shortly after, the middle of the fourth century AD (Appendix C). Mid to late fourth century pottery came from the upper levels, while material from lower levels gave little dating information.

2.4.3 Courtyard and Dump Area

Between the building and the chalk plinth there was a compacted surface largely devoid of finds or features (Figure 5) and interpreted as a courtyard area intentionally kept clear and "clean". A test slot established that the mid grey-brown silty loam layer was some 50 mm thick, and homogenous throughout, lying above archaeologically sterile gravel. There were few finds, and a noticeable lack of abraded material. Pottery included Nene Valley white ware dated to between 250 and 350 AD. The restricted width of the excavated easement prevents conclusive interpretation, but it seems likely that this area was an integral part of the building complex, acting as a garden or yard and separating the building from the altar "sepulchral" area.

Beyond the altar pit there was an area of pits and shallow ditches (Figure 5). The contrast between this and the yard surface was marked. Cut features formed a series of V shaped slots and small pits, delineating a separate section of the villa complex. The adjacent area comprised at least two wide, shallow pit features, characterised by a rich dark organic fill. It was impossible to excavate these within the time allowed but the pipe-trench section cutting the deposits enabled a section to be drawn. The pits held large quantities of oyster shell and animal bone, as well as tile and pottery, suggesting that this was a separate and special area for the disposal of household waste.

2.6 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Part of a villa complex was revealed, including a suite of rooms, a burial pit perhaps ritual or sacred in nature containing an altar and other architectural fragments, and an area for the disposal of domestic waste. The restricted area of excavation limits interpretation, but the villa seems to have been substantial. The spatial separation of the building, yard, pit and rubbish dumps indicates the careful organisation of the complex but the overall plan remains unclear.

The site may best be interpreted as a fairly minor fen-edge villa or farm, although it is possible that the main suite of rooms has yet to be located. There is no evidence for unusual wealth or luxury in the form of fine metal objects or mosaic pavements. The flint and mortar foundations could suggest a two storey building, although the function of the excavated rooms is unclear. The presence of flue tiles from a hypocaust heating system indicate that the villa was comfortable, for the occupants if not for those stoking the hypocaust.

The ceramic evidence suggests that the Great Wilbraham villa was occupied from the first century AD to the late fourth century. Most of the pottery was from local production sites at Horningsea, the Nene Valley, in Essex and Bedfordshire, but there were also vessels imported from the samian kilns of Central and Southern Gaul, and oil amphorae from the Guadalquivir region of Beatica. The numismatic evidence was derived largely from surface deposits, with only fifteen coins from the first to later third centuries AD, more from the fourth century, and many from the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD. Activity on the site seems to have continued in to the early fifth century. There is fifth century material from the nearby Anglo Saxon cemetery, but no clear evidence of continuity. Faunal remains from the site reflect a range of domesticates, such as cow, horse, pig and sheep or goat, again giving the impression of a typical Roman country establishment (see Appendix D for details of finds).

The objects in the altar pit were apparently buried towards the end of the fourth century, not long before the abandonment of the villa. It perhaps indicates an orderly withdrawal from the site, as it was clearly a careful and deliberate deposit. The architectural fragments would seem to come from a small, perhaps family, shrine or chapel. A similar Roman building and putative religious site was excavated at the site of Bottisham, 3km away, during the construction of an NRA pipeline. There was a pit containing various metal objects, perhaps with ritual connotations which may be a parallel for the pit at Wilbraham (Robinson 1992).

The Wilbraham villa is well placed, adjacent to the fresh water springs that give the modern Springs Plantation its name, and to a stream. These would presumably have served both domestic and agricultural needs, although there is no direct evidence for the extent and nature of land use and control linked to the villa. The villa lies on a spit of gravel in an area of chalk, just to the south of the fenlands and is topographically situated to take advantage of a sheltered valley side location. It is one of eighteen villas in the South Cambridgeshire region, and thus part of a rich Roman landscape. It lies close to Street Way and some two kilometres Northwest of a putative Roman road on the course of the modern A11 and seems to be strategically sited to make use of these nearby transportation routes.

In conclusion, the excavations at Great Wilbraham discovered a Roman villa of fairly modest size. The remains were of a range of buildings in use between the first and early fifth centuries AD, occupied by people aspiring to a Roman rural lifestyle and enjoying the new agricultural opportunities of the fen edge in southern Cambridgeshire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their thanks to Mr Wright, the owner of Great Wilbraham Villa, for permission to excavate at the site, and for his subsequent generous donation of finds to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Downing Street, Cambridge. Thanks are also due to the National Rivers Authority for funding the project, in particular Mr B Barton, the Project Engineer, who provided much support and assistance, and to Mr M Loughlan of Breheny's, for their flexibility and co-operation during the pipeline's construction, allowing time for archaeological recording. Mr B Parkinson and Mr D Glover helped with metal detecting during the project.

Special thanks are reserved for the excavation team: George Taylor, Nick James, Wendy Horton, Andy Boyce, Jez Meredith, Simon Bray and Gavin Lucas, and also for Chris Evans and Nick Otway, who provided invaluable support throughout the excavation. Lastly, thanks to the specialists, Gerry Wait, Chris Godfrey, Jessica Hale, Chris Going and Gavin Lucas for their valuable contributions.

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APPENDIX A THE ARTIFACTS

Dr G A Wait

Illustrations by G Taylor

The rescue excavations at Great Wilbraham produced a total of 125 coins and 71 other small finds. Nearly all were located by a local metal-detectorist and are archaeologically unstratified. The objects have all been identified (archive report by J Pluviez) and distributions of the find spots are in the archive, held by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology.

The Roman coins were generally badly corroded; 83 were identifiable and a chronological histogram is in the archive. There are only 15 coins from the first to later third centuries, suggesting coin use (or loss) was virtually non-existent prior to Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-80). Thereafter the coin-loss pattern is "normal" for settlement sites, with a higher percentage of coins ca. AD 388-402 than is common in the area. Site activity is thus suggested into the beginning of the fifth century AD.

The remaining collection of small finds includes a number of lead fragments such as dribble and spill, suggesting use on site for building, roofing and repair of pottery and pipes. Personal objects are represented by bronze spoons, various pins, brooches, bracelets, tweezers, beads etc (see Figure 8). Iron tools are present, such as an iron axe-head and a pruning knife, as well as numbers of nails, rods and strips. The brooches include a Knee brooch (ca. second-third century AD) and a Crossbow brooch of the fourth century. There is also one nearly complete pewter plate and a fragmentary smaller plate or bowl.

This collection is typical of a "villa" settlement in southern Britain, but the lack of stratified provenance limits interpretation.



Plate 3 Pewter Plate during Excavation

Illustrations (11.4 is glass. Other illustrations show bronze alloy objects. SF is small find number in archive.)

- 11.1 Crossbow Brooch. Onion-shaped terminal knobs, the side ones joined to the arms, the top one held on a pin through the top of the bow. Arms rectangular in section, increasing in height towards the bow and cut to a zigzag on the upper face. The hinge of the pin concealed within the arms. Narrow bow, trapezoidal in section, with single central groove in the upper face, and moulded ridge on three sides near the junction with the foot. The foot is flat with excised triangular notches in angle pairs along the long sides and small notches across the end. The catchplate opens on the opposite side to normal. The pin is bent but complete. A fairly unpretentious example of the standard fourth century type. SF 105.
- 11.2 Bronze Spoon. Mandolin shaped bowl and offset junction with handle. Two grooves on top of handle end. SF 15.
- 11.3 Knee-type brooch, bent with small broken headloop. Plain D Section, tapered bow with upturned foot. Spring held on cross pin between lugs at arm extremities. Mid 2nd-3rd Century. SF 59.
- 11.4 Glass Melon Bead. Turquoise frit. Common Roman type, generally first and second century AD. SF 4.
- 11.5 Bronze pin. Small biconical head, shaft bent and point missing. Fourth century. SF 72.
- 11.6 Bronze pin. Small biconical head and shaft tapered and bent. Fourth century. SF 34.
- 11.7 Bronze Handle. Drop handle, pointed terminals, two grooves below terminals and single groove each side of handle, octagonal section. SF 5. From interface [8] and [38].

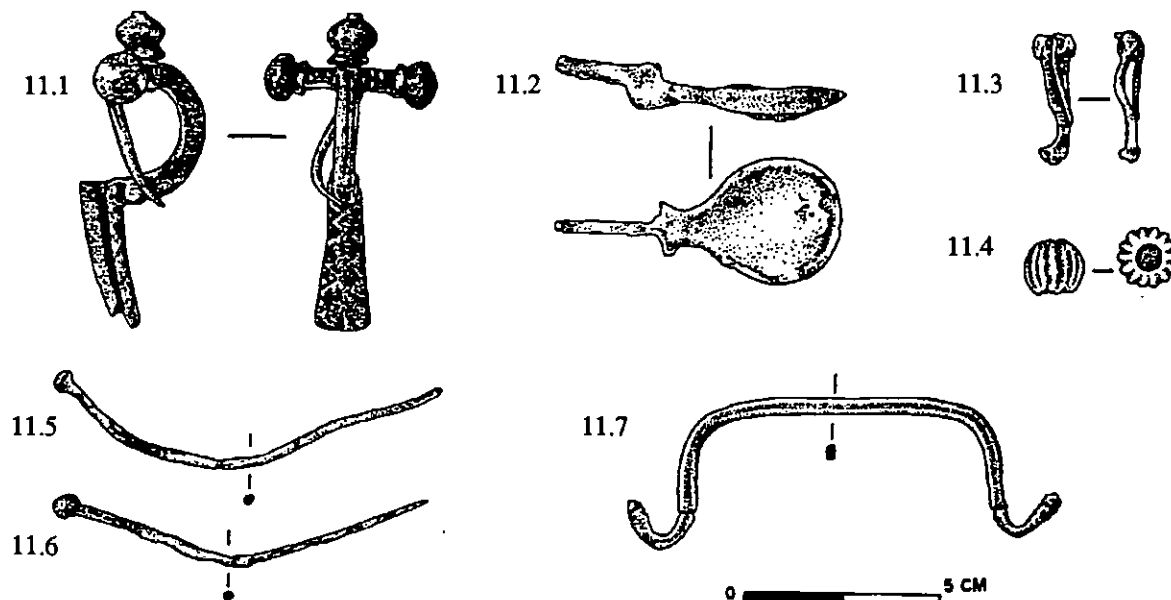


Figure 11 Artifacts from Great Wilbraham

APPENDIX B FRAGMENTS FROM THE ALTAR PIT

C R Godfrey

Illustrations: Altar - A. Boyce, Cornice and Column - G. Taylor

The Altar This is a simple rectangular post. There are four chamfered steps to the plinth. The upper moulding has 3 chamfered steps with the third section splayed out to the top followed by a hollow mould under the top and fourth section. This has a rolled edge with recessed rectangular top. Tangential to the longer sides is a raised circle with raised clasps over the centre of the two shorter sides. The stone is a shelly hard limestone, presumably from the quarries at Barnack, near Peterborough.

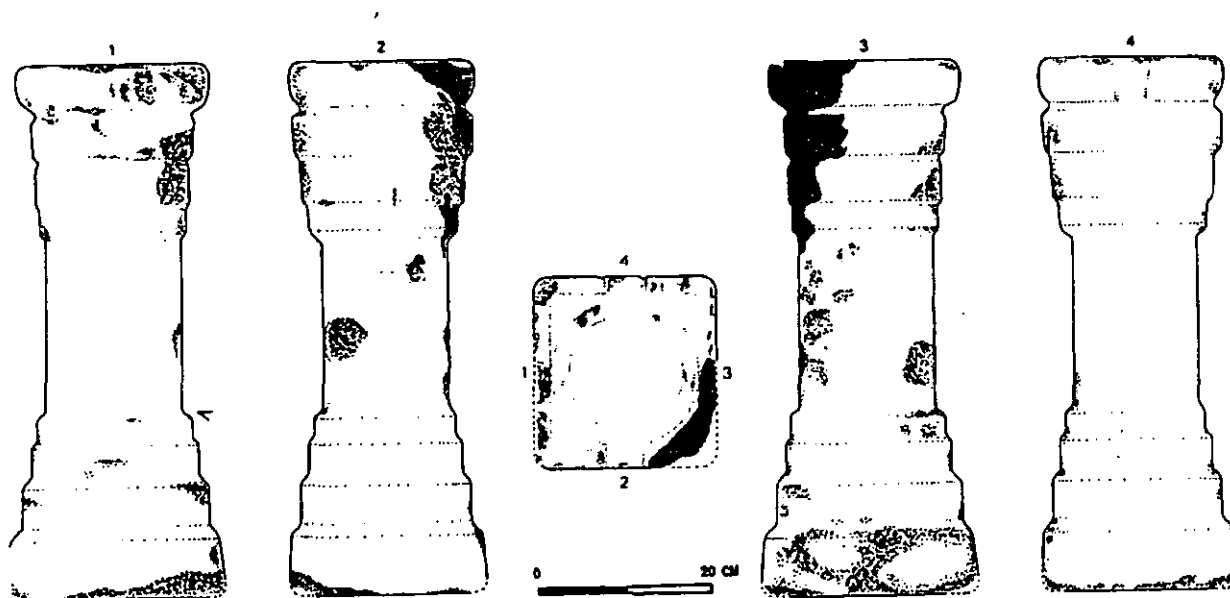


Figure 12.1 The Altar

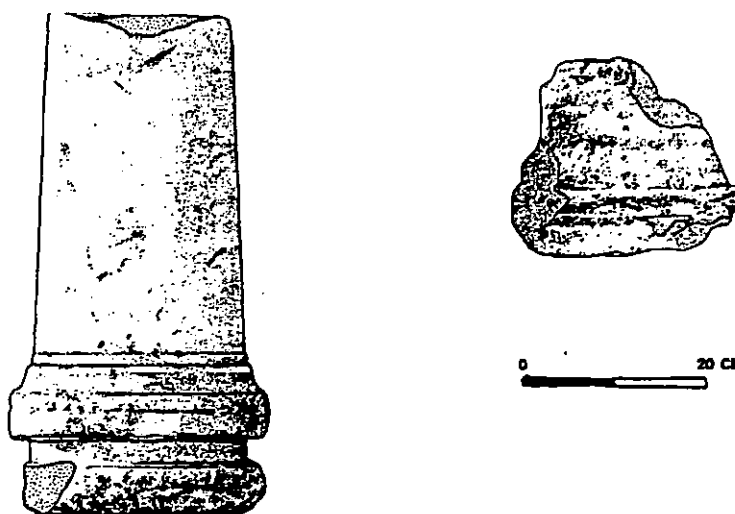


Figure 12.2 The Column and the Cornice

The Column The base of the column consists of two flat sided torus mouldings with central incised line divided by a plain drum; the lower torus has an incised line on its upper face and the upper torus has a pendant half round moulding. From the dimensions of the shaft, it seems unlikely that the column was more than twice its present height, and probable that it constitutes a round plinth, perhaps for a statue, of approximately its present dimensions.

The Cornice A quirked square bead projects at an angle above a shallow cavetto moulding. The latter turns out slightly above a small rounded moulding with the remains of a small bead at the bottom. All the mouldings are returned at "A" which has been damaged at the top corner. "B" is the top. The return of the mouldings to the depth of the stone make it almost certain that this is the end of a cornice within the plane of a wall rather than at a corner. It is probably therefore the head of a door, window or alcove.

The Iron Object This consists of four now separate elements. There are two pieces of twisted iron, heavy and thick at the base with a narrow, sharp top. Two other pieces have sharp spikes at the top and what may be a tripod arrangement at the base. It is possible that these fitted together to form two objects, perhaps candlesticks or a fire dog, but formal identification has not as yet been possible.

- a Twisted piece of iron 170 mm long, and 50 mm wide at widest point.
- b Twisted piece of iron 140 mm long and 45 mm wide at widest point.
- c ?Tripod. 140 mm long and 50 mm at widest point. Central straight prong with projecting arms at base.
- d ?Tripod. 140 mm long. Arms 60 mm, 50 mm and 50 mm long.

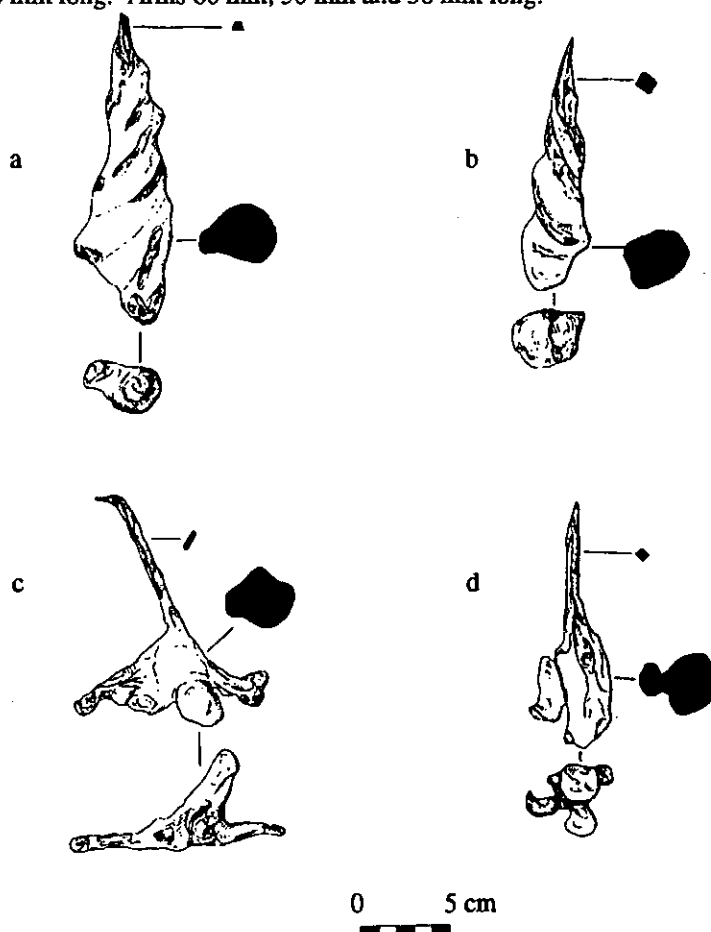


Figure 12.3 The Iron Object

APPENDIX C THE POTTERY

C Going

Illustrations by G Lucas

Introduction The Romano-British ceramic assemblage produced by the excavation (c 5 kg) comprised a fairly catholic collection of material spanning the first to later fourth centuries AD. The bulk of it comprises local coarse wares which must have emanated from nearby kiln sites such as Horningsea (and doubtless elsewhere).

More distant provincial sources of supply included the Nene Valley (?self-slipped reduced wares, colour coated fine table wares and white ware mortaria), Colchester (colour coated wares), much Hadham (oxidised wares and ?reduced ware), the Essex/Thames mouth region (BB2) and Harrold in Bedfordshire (shell tempered wares). Continental sources observed include the samian kilns of central and south Gaul, and one or two sherds of oil amphorae from the Gualdaquivir region in Baetica.

The lack of relative stratigraphy and the generally small size of the assemblage (no contexts merited quantification) rather restricts its value other than as dating evidence.

The Building The ceramic evidence is slight. From the pre-building make up [8] came a featureless body sherd in a reduced ware of Roman date (no closer division is possible). Wall foundation cuts [18], [39] and [40] produced nothing, but foundation [7] produced a samian rim scrap of probably Flavian date, and sherds from a small self-slipped grey ware globular beaker (possibly from the Nene Valley), decorated with 'cut glass' decoration. This unusual form, which may be the remains of a foundation offering, is likely to be of Antonine or slightly later date. If this material is contemporary with the construction of the building (rather than material deposited in robber trenches) it provides us with a clear Antonine *terminus post quem*. Evidence from within the building was also scarce. The floor levels [6], [9] and [24] were all apparently unsealed. [6] produced some fourth century material, [9] produced nothing, but [24] produced a base sherd from a Nene valley colour coated platter in the characteristically later Roman thick white ware.

Perhaps more informative were the destruction levels, [10], ?[15], [27-9]. The material from these spanned the later third and fourth centuries AD [15], the fourth century [10], after c. AD 240 [27] and into the post mid-fourth century [29]. This suggests a post mid-fourth century date for the destruction / robbing of the building, though by how great a margin it is impossible to estimate.

Associated Features Among the features associated with the building were three pits. Shallow pit [20] contained material of the Antonine period, suggesting a mid second century date. Among the pottery from this feature was the rim of an unusual open form. The two remaining features of note belong to the fourth century. The midden [26] produced ceramic material but the only diagnostic piece was datable to the fourth century (a Nene Valley colour-coated dish). The most important of the associated features, however, was the "altar pit" [14]. Material from the lower reaches of the feature was not particularly closely datable, and included some anonymous looking fragments of fired clay and a large sherd of a samian f.45 bowl, probably of early third century date. From the upper levels of the pit came a sherd of a Hadham ware carinated bowl with stabbed decoration on the rim. The form is characteristically mid to late fourth century in Essex and is probably of similar date here. This, and other material of the same date from the pit top [12]

probably of similar date here. This, and other material of the same date from the pit top [12] suggests that the pit was cut around or shortly after the middle of the fourth century AD. While this feature clearly contained a remarkable deposit, the pottery from it is pedestrian and scanty, with no religious tenor.

Post-building activity, though clearly late, is hard to date. The features of this late phase are post-holes [16] and [35] and post hole/pit [42]. Each cuts into the floor [9]. None produced datable pottery finds.

Conclusion The meagre pottery data adds little chronological detail to the excavation evidence. Material from the features associated with the construction of the building point to the Antonine era (or after) for its initial construction and for its use into the post mid-fourth century; the earliest possible date for the destruction levels.

Therefore pits [20] and [26] almost certainly belong to the lifetime of the building, while pit [14] with its equivocal contents, is also either contemporary with the building itself, or dates to the time of its destruction.

The post building activity is undatable. None of the features cutting into the building levels contained pottery and in consequence their dating, while late, remains unknown.

Elsewhere in the pipe-trench, finds of Roman pottery datable as late as the latter half of the fourth century were noted (see archive), but there was no clear trace of immediately post-Roman material. The only later ceramics were some Mediaeval and post-Mediaeval wares, but these were in the top and plough soils.

Illustrations (Drawn at Scale 1:2)

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 13.1 | Neck of single-handled flagon. Nene Valley brown colour coated ware, perhaps 4th century [26] |
| 13.2 | Nene Valley colour coated dish. From cleaning of outer midden. |
| 13.3 | Hadham orange ware. Narrow base flaring to bulbous body. Flagon. Late 3rd / 4th century [6] and [10]. |
| 13.4 | Hadham orange ware. Imitation samian Dr.35 cup with grooved and stabbed rim. Late 3rd / 4th century. [14] |
| 13.5 | Hadham/Oxfordshire colour coated ware. Fine oxidised fabric, traces of red slip. Oxfordshire necked bowl, later 4th century. From stripping of outer midden. |
| 13.6 | Nene Valley Grey ware. Small necked jar. Shoulder rouletting, and vertical stem motif. Antonine [7] |
| 13.7 - 9 | Late shell tempered ware. Vessels with undercut rims. From stripping of outer midden. |
| 13.10 | Lid of sandy grey ware. Local, probably Horningsea. Characteristic dark grey / black burnished slip [2] |
| 13.11-13 | Flaring rims in sandy grey ware. As 10.10 [12] and [26]. |
| 13.14 | Sandy grey ware. Vessel with everted rim. As 10.10 [12] |

- 13.15 Sandy grey ware. Vessel with triangular rim. As 10.10 [12]
 13.16-17 Sandy grey ware. Vessels with flanged rims. As 10.10. [22] and [36].
- 13.18 Fine grey ware. Base of small jar. hard, fine sandy grey fabric, buff to brown margins or surfaces, mica, air pockets and quartzite grains. Fine gritty texture, smooth surfaces. Unknown origin. [12]
- 13.19 Unsourced mortarium. Hard, fine, sandy orange fabric with grey core and moderated angular quartzite grains, occasional grog and calcite [20].

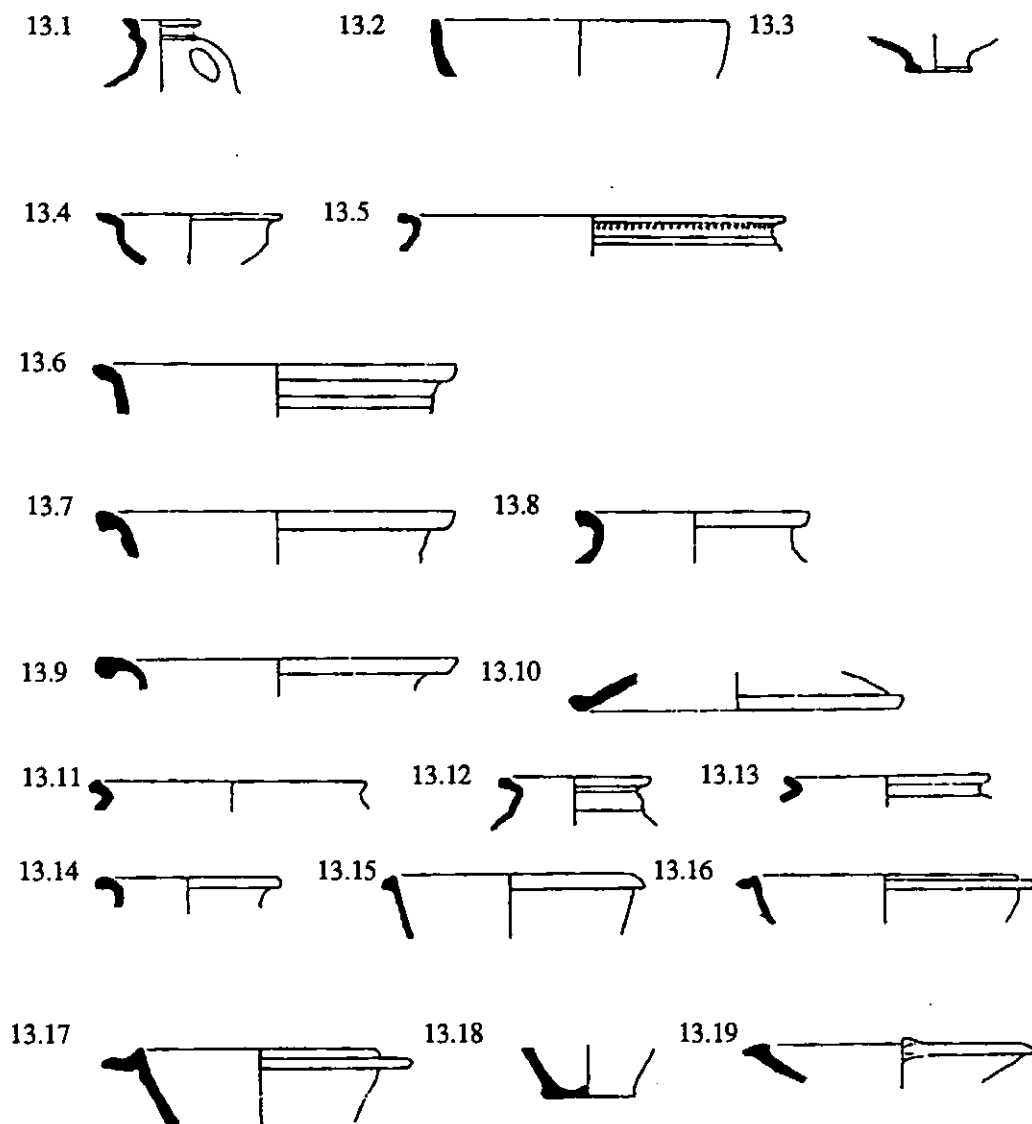


Figure 13 The Pottery (Scale 1:2)

APPENDIX D FAUNAL REMAINS


J Hale

In general, the bones from the site are very poorly preserved and fragmentary, including much damage caused during excavation. This, combined with the small number of bones, make any elaborate treatment inappropriate.

SUMMARY STATISTICS

Species	Number	Percent	Percent of Identifiable bones
Cow	25	12	44
Horse	3	1	5
Pig	11	5	19
Sheep/Gt	16	8	28
Dog	2	1	4
Unident.	145	73	-
Total	202	100	100

As far as it is possible to say anything about such a limited assemblage, the species representation at Great Wilbraham is not untypical, being comprised of the main domesticates to be found on any rural site of the period. Perhaps of note is the somewhat high proportion of pig relative to cattle and sheep / goat. This might, in other circumstances and combined with the overall predominance of cattle, be interpreted as indicating high status, but once again, it cannot be stressed too highly that little faith can be placed on any interpretation based on such limited material.



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