
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCIV
for 2005



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Editor Alison Taylor

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Editorial

These Proceedings take us on the usual chronological tour of Cambridgeshire's past, from scant traces of Neolithic occupation at Fenstanton to the impact of 19th century entrepreneurship and 20th century planning on Cambridge's Victorian New Town. As ever, we aim to bring you the most significant results of the latest archaeological excavations, together with the Society's parallel interest in historical and landscape studies. Residents of Cambridge should feel especially well served by the painstaking work represented both in Philomena Guillebaud's reconstruction of the events and effects of enclosure of the West Fields, and Bryan and Wise's analysis of one area of post-enclosure development — as they say, a microcosm of development quite typical of Cambridge in an exceptionally dynamic age. Anthea Jones literally lets the past speak for itself, through the letters of the wife of an Ely bishop, whose domestic concerns were little affected by her husband's daunting ecclesiastical responsibilities.

Outside the normal running of an active local society, CAS has been involved in a peripheral but deeply concerned way with the heritage service (including archaeology, archives and museums) of the County Council. Regular readers will be aware of the concerns we have expressed over the years at what we have seen as a general failure to support excellent staff by providing the right resources. This spring, financial matters became significantly worse, and CAS joined a substantial body of protest which at least postponed for one year one tranche of cuts (worth £100,000). This cut will however go ahead in 2006, leaving Heritage Services to face a 30% budget reduction from £927,000 to £650,000, even though Cambridgeshire is already well below neighbouring counties in funding these services. A consultants' (Kentwood Associates) discussion paper notes among other things that one decision that has caused most damage to the Council's reputation is the abolition of the post of the County Museums Officer, and CAS knows how much John Goldsmith, a vastly effective supporter of local museums since 1975, would be missed (August 2005). They note too that proposed cuts will require far-reaching policy decisions to withdraw from non-statutory services which would have 'a major impact, both for the public directly and on the ability of those services to lever additional — and often substantial — funding from external sources'.

The consultants are particularly flattering about archaeology. 'We believe this to be an outstanding example of a County Council Archaeology Service. Its archaeology and countryside advice services are held in high regard by planners, developers, other local authorities, and regional and national organisations. The service has an enviable track record in obtaining external funding... The outreach programme — particularly work with schools — is exemplary.' The report is concerned that such work is not put at risk, and it is critical of the current short opening hours of the County Record Office, of the County's failure to provide public access to historic buildings information since 2002, and the loss (August 2005) of a valued mentor for small museums. It is also worried that, if a proposed new Historical Resource & Cultural Centre is built with PFI money, there would not be funding to staff it adequately for the hours the public would reasonably expect.

There are clearly frightening times ahead, not least for our small, mostly voluntary, museums. This is very sad at a time when there is so much public enthusiasm for the past and so many new sources that can be tapped if the right support and advice are available. CAS has already filled some gaps, for example by taking responsibility for *Conduit* and publishing 'Recent Fieldwork' without grant support, and we are hoping to reinstate some financial support for local archaeological groups. We will continue of course to co-operate with the County Council through advice, by offering joint working and by fruitful liaison with their over-worked staff. We hope this coming year will see some solutions rather than additional problems, and a better atmosphere of hope and confidence. CAS is certainly willing to give all the support it can.

Just as these *Proceedings* were going to press, we heard the sad news that Rev Prof William Frend had died, at the age of 89. His had been a long and distinguished career (or perhaps series of careers, as theologian, soldier, priest and archaeologist), and he did outstanding work on early Christianity. In his later years in Cambridgeshire he impressed and worried us in turn with his continuing excavations, which were fruitful to the last. He has already submitted the results of this work to CAS for publication, and I am guilty in not having yet edited them for publication. The next *Proceedings* (2006) will include a full obituary for William, with his excavations at Great Wilbraham and accounts of Christian artefacts from Roman Cambridgeshire.

Alison Taylor
Editor

Quy Water, Little Wilbraham River and the Fleam Dyke

William Potts

The natural courses of fenland rivers are remarkably convoluted. The roddons mapped by Fowler (1933 and 1934) or the Fenland Project (1988) show that original courses were two or three times longer than the path of a well motivated crow. A straight, or fairly straight, fenland river is the work of man.

Hawkins (2000) commented that '[the] present course of the Little Wilbraham River is clearly artificial and bears no relation to the underlying drift geology' (Fig 1) and aerial photographs show that the whole of this fen is a complex of earlier courses of the Quy Water-Little Wilbraham River and of cryoturbations, though today the river cuts an almost straight course from TL 510 594 to 535 578. It must therefore be largely artificial. Furthermore, the west end of the River is immediately adjacent to the east end of the Fen Ditton section of Fleam Dyke and is aligned with it, while its eastern end is within a stone's throw of the north-west end of the Balsham section (Fig. 2). Although the River generally follows the direct line between these

two points it makes a detour around a promontory of higher land west of the Caudle Ditch, about TL 516 589, suggesting that defining the alignment was a more important consideration than drainage when the River was realigned. It is noteworthy that a map of c. 1680–1700 shows a feature, probably a water course, following the alignment across the tip of the promontory (Fig. 3) though nothing is visible today.

It is therefore difficult to avoid the conclusion that the River was cut as an integral part of the Fleam Dyke which, when complete, ran continuously from the Cam to the eastern end of Balsham parish. It might be argued that a bend in the River at TL 510 594, where the River cuts through the gravel ridge now followed by the Cambridge to Newmarket Road, is an obvious point on which to base the Dyke. However, the eastern end has no distinguishing natural feature and the north-western section of Balsham dyke could have been shortened if it had been aligned to meet the fen further south.

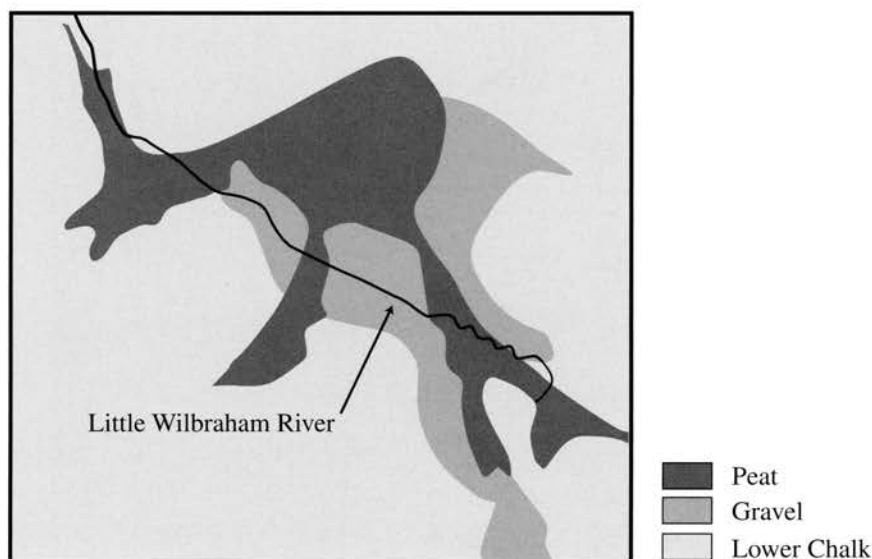


Figure 1. Drift geology of Little Wilbraham, Fulbourn and Teversham Fens. From Hawkins (2000 Fig. 16) by kind permission of the author.

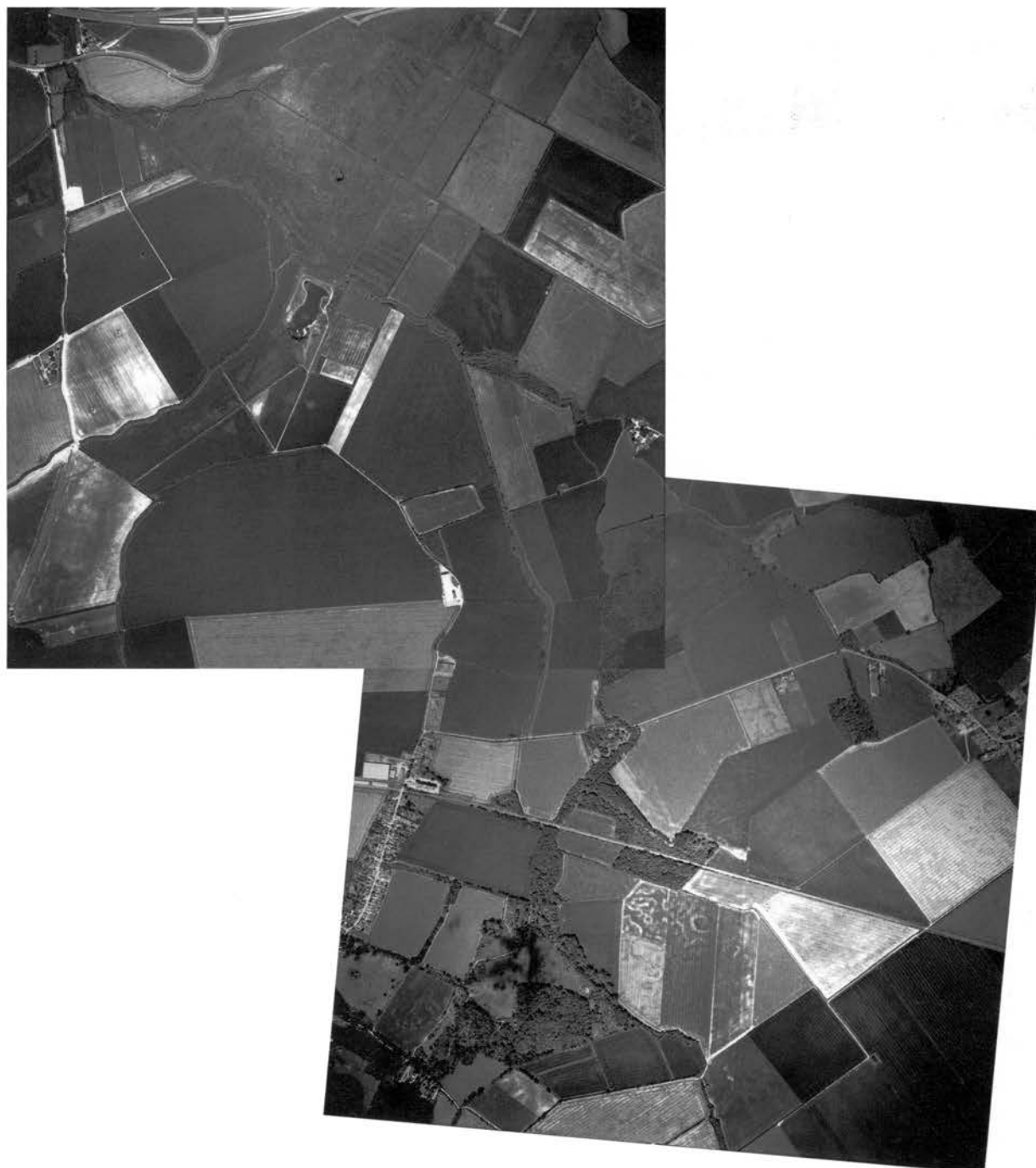


Figure 4. Parts of Wilbraham Fen, Fulbourn Fen and the course of the Little Wilbraham River, June 1987, taken at 1:10,000. Copyright reserved Cambridge University Collection of Air Photos.

Hawkins (2000) suggested that the present course of the River dates only from the 17th century, arguing that Hayward's 17th century map shows the original course. However this 'original course' appears to be the stream that still skirts the northern edge of the fen, north of the Short and Long Droveways. Hayward's map does show the River entering the fen but curiously omits the course across the fen. It should be noted however that it also omits the courses of all the rivers once they have entered the fens.

There is no trace of a bank across the fen; but before the fen was drained the water table in winter would be level with, or above, the top of the ground and the peat would have had the consistency of thick porridge. A bank would have rapidly sunk and slumped back to the level of the fen. A water-filled ditch, in a wide fen, might be a more effective barrier to an army, or to cattle raiders, than the bank and ditch on the chalk uplands.

The present course of Quy Water-Little Wilbraham

River is not exactly straight but it is likely that the minor deviations have developed in the soft ground since it was dug. A straight river is inherently unstable unless the gradient is very steep, and a geological irregularity, or the confluence of a tributary, may throw the stream slightly to one side. That side will then be eroded into a bend which will throw the water into the opposite bank further down stream. This will then erode in turn, and the process will be repeated. The river will therefore return to a sinuous course. The meanders at the eastern end of the Wilbraham river have probably developed as a result of the major tributary flowing from Shardelows Well. The upper end of the river has also been diverted to power Hawkes Mill (Hawkins 2000). Roman canals, such as Reach Lode, which have maintained a straight course, are more substantial works and have few or no tributaries. In addition Reach Lode has been artificially widened and the flow is consequently slow. In contrast the Little Wilbraham River flows quite vigorously.

The stretch of Fleam Dyke which ran north from Shardelows Well to the east end of Little Wilbraham River was mapped by the first Ordnance Surveyors (Fig. 2). It is still visible from the air and even on the ground as a distinct rise in the Fulbourn to Little Wilbraham road at TL 535 573. Unfortunately Fox (1923) doubted its existence and it was consequently removed from later maps. Even Homer nods. It has recently been reinstated on some archaeological maps (eg Malim *et al* 1966).

The Balsham section of Fleam Dyke must have been constructed first. The Fen Ditton section, the Quy Water-Little Wilbraham River and the northern extension from Shardelows Well would appear to be later but the Balsham section was raised several times and the extensions may well be contemporary with one or more of these episodes. When completed the whole dyke, from the Cam to the east of Balsham, would have been eight miles long, compared with the seven and a half mile of Devil's Dyke (Fig. 4).

The effort required to construct the Fen Ditton section of the dyke and to straighten the Little Wilbraham River seems disproportionate to the area of land thus secured, although Horningsea was a minster church and the area may have been of unusual importance.

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