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A Romano-Saxon Farmstead and possible 12th-century Dovecote or Windmill: Community excavations at Spring Close, Boxworth, TL 350 645

Aileen Connor

With Ian Baxter, Nina Crummy, Carole Fletcher, Stephen Kemp, Alice Lyons and Ian Taylor; illustrations by Gillian Greer and Crane Begg

A series of earthworks was examined by CAM ARC and the Boxworth Village Research Group in 2004 at Spring Close in Boxworth, south Cambridgeshire. The investigations provide the first evidence for transitional Late Roman/Early Saxon occupation in the parish and the finds suggest a nearby domestic dwelling of moderately high status associated with a ditched field system, perhaps a farmstead. A substantial circular structure of probable 12th-century date may have been a dovecote or windmill.

Introduction

Boxworth occupies the summit of a ridge overlooking the Cambridge to Huntingdon road (now the A14) and the southern part of the fens, some 11km to the west of Cambridge (Fig. 1). The southern end of the village lies at around the 50m contour, falling to the north-west into a double valley containing two streams. Previous discoveries in the parish generally date to the medieval period, with a few find spots of Iron Age and Roman material, despite the presence of known Roman roads to the north and south; the *Via Devena* (from Cambridge to Huntingdon, now the A14) and the Cambridge to St Neots ridgeway. At Domesday, Boxworth was referred to as *Bochesuuorde* or Bucc's Enclosure (Reaney 1943, 164) and the land was divided between the Abbot of Ramsey, Count Alan of Brittany (William the Conqueror's son-in-law) and various others, the largest portion of the village being in the domain of Hardwin de Scales (Taylor 1997, 23; Williams and Martin 1992, *passim*).

Two manors are known in Boxworth. The larger was the manor of Overhall, the earthworks of its manor house being located on the edge of the parish. The second manor was known as Huntingfields in the 13th to late 14th century, and was originally a Saxon estate taken over by Picot, sheriff of Cambridge (Wright 1989, 270). The site of the original Huntingfields manor house is probably an earthwork that lies a little to the south of the investigation area (Taylor 1997, 23). It probably moved in the 17th century to the site of the present Manor House Farm on Manor Lane. Much of

the 17th-century village was located along the north side of this route. At this time, several closes (a close being an enclosed field or area; Bennett 1987, 234) lay to the southwest of the lane (i.e. the land now known as Spring Close) and were largely empty except for three or four farmsteads (Wright 1989, 269). Boxworth was subject to enclosure and the Award of 1840 gave the majority of the land to George Thornhill who also owned 804 acres of closes. The newly enclosed land was then arranged into four large farms including Church Farm (600 acres) (Wright 1989, 276) which today names Spring Close amongst its holdings.

Spring Close is shown on an 1855 estate map of the lands belonging to George Thornhill (HRO 148/LR368). It is a triangular shaped area of ground surrounded by roads on two sides – High Street and Manor Lane – and a hollow way (the former High Street, named Old Lane on the 1855 Thornhill estate map) to the south. The land may once have formed part of the larger of two village greens (Wright 1989, 269; Taylor 1997, 24) and is now much reduced in size having been enclosed after 1650 and later bisected by the High Street in 1839 to link to the main Cambridge to Huntingdon road (Wright 1989, 269). An estate map of 1640 (CRO TR373 P1; Fig. 2) shows a different road pattern; Spring Close comprised several closes in the southeast corner of a trapezoidal plot of land bounded by School Lane to the west, the former High Street (now a hollow way) to the south, Rectory Lane to the north and Manor Lane to the east. It is clear from the 1640 map that Manor Lane was also a later addition as it cuts diagonally across three fields.

A watercourse flows across Spring Close approximately parallel with the hollow way to the south (Fig. 3). It rises around the 40m contour near Mermaid Spinney and flows across School Lane and the High Street into two possible medieval fish ponds known as View Ponds (cf. the views c. 1840 Tithe Award; Reaney 1943, 165) – and thence across Spring Close to Manor Lane where it flows into another group of fish ponds, after which the course is lost.

The recent excavation formed the major component of a community project funded by the Local Heritage

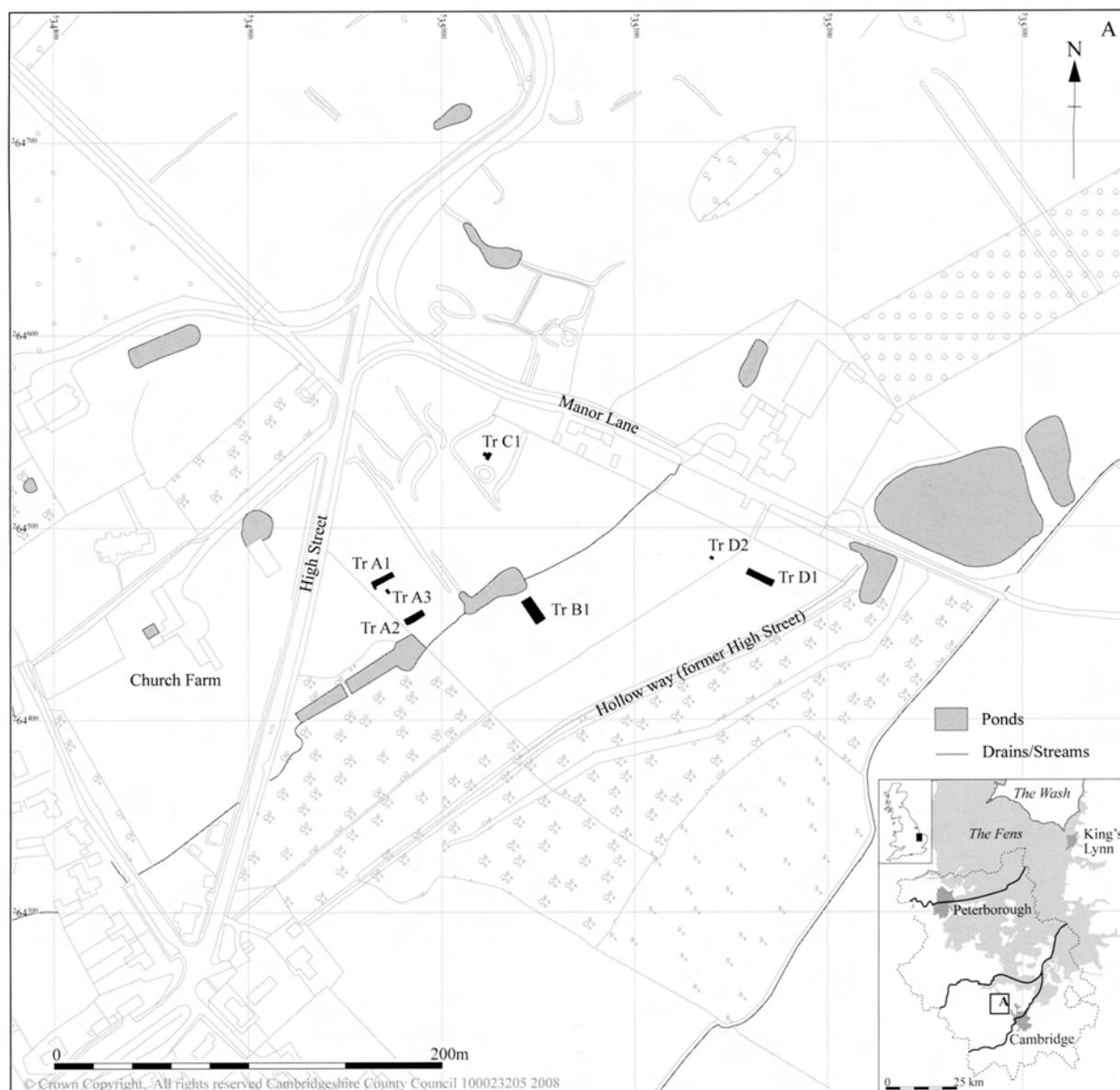


Figure 1. Site location showing excavated areas.

Initiative and was initiated by Mr Ian Taylor (Boxworth Village Research Group; BVRG) after chance discoveries of three Roman coins and Romano-British pottery, followed by limited test pitting as part of the 2003 *Time Team Big Dig* project (Taylor 2003). The site is not under any immediate threat being given over to pasture and the owner, Mr Christopher Parish (a former president of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society) is sympathetic to the archaeological remains being a keen supporter of the BVRG. Work began with geophysical and earthwork surveys (Fig. 3), followed by limited excavation by trenching to test anomalies highlighted by the geophysical survey (Butler and Fisher 2004, 3). The BVRG carried out the work under the direction of CAM ARC staff.

Prehistoric

A pre-Roman component to the site is suggested by two ditches (in Area A2), one of which was curvilinear, as well as a few sherds of Iron Age pottery and several worked flints found residually in later contexts. Most of the flint tools came from the trenches to the north of the stream and they include scrapers, knife blades, an axe fragment and other tools that are generally late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date. A saddle quern found in topsoil is the only evidence for possible prehistoric activity to the southeast of the stream. Other finds include a bone awl of probable Bronze Age or Iron Age date and a woodcock bone recovered from one of the possible prehistoric ditches.

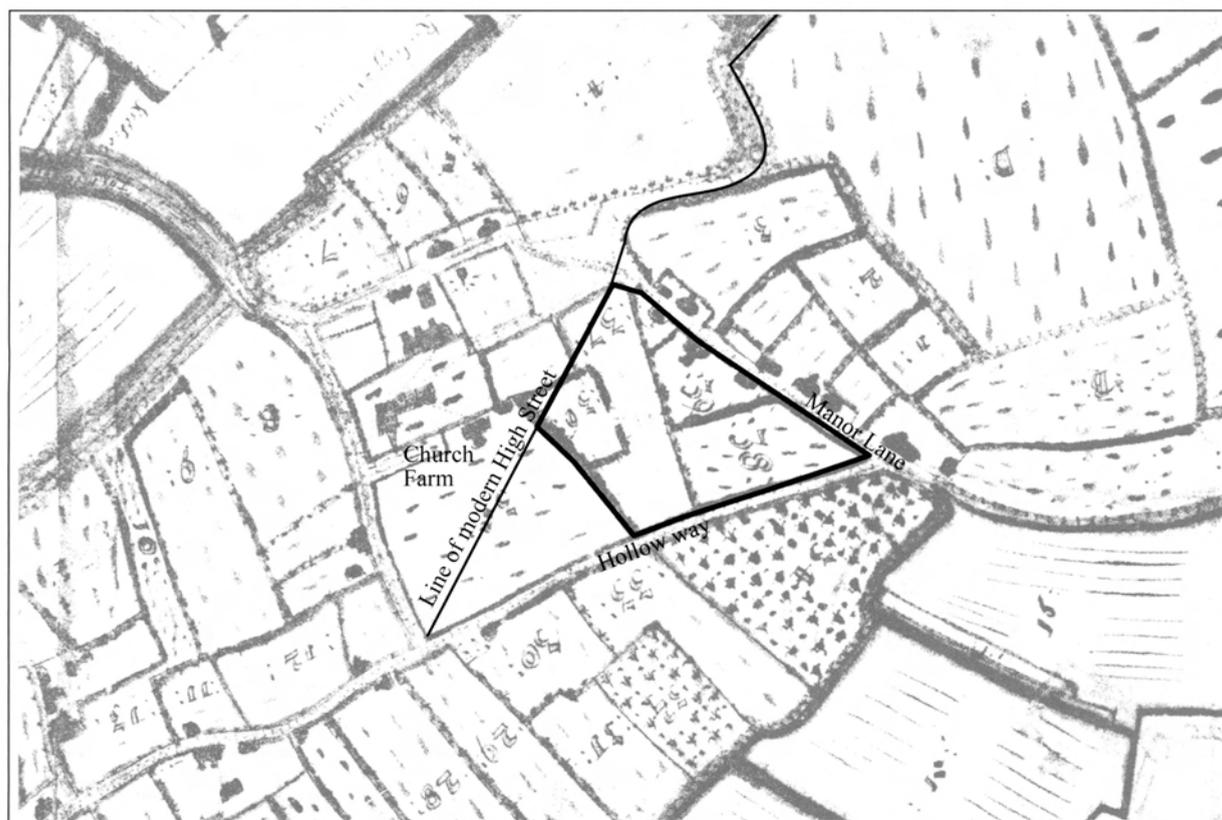


Figure 2. Estate map of Boxworth (1640), showing the original road pattern in the vicinity of the excavations (CRO TR373 P1; courtesy of Cambridge Records Office).

Early Roman?

A possible pottery kiln was discovered in the north-west corner of the field (C1) as a result of geophysical survey and was carefully exposed and recorded by plan and photograph (no excavation was attempted at this time). The probable firing chamber was oval, aligned northwest to southeast, with internal dimensions of 1.7m long by 1m wide (Fig. 4). Surrounding this chamber was a burnt clay lining that measured between 0.20m and 0.40m thick. Leading into the ?kiln from the southeast was a suspected flue and/or stoke pit which was 0.25m wide and 1.35m long (extending beyond the edge of excavation).

Ten fragments of kiln debris including part of a possible kiln bar were found associated with the ?kiln and a further five including three kiln bar fragments were recovered from elsewhere on the site (B1). It is suspected several phases of kiln construction and use may be present. The date of the kiln is uncertain; finds from the overlying topsoil included pottery of Romano-British date (204 sherds, 1.434kg) the majority of which (156 sherds, 1.080kg) is 2nd to 4th century and Early Saxon (15 sherds, 0.135kg), but the presence of baked clay kiln bar fragments suggest that this feature may be Early Roman. The feature lies in an area of earthworks close to a large hollow that may have been a source of clay, although there was no evidence of waste products. Adjacent to the kiln and a little to the south is what appears to be a hollow way – this

may have been used to transport the finished goods, although it may be of later date.

Romano-British (3rd to 4th century)

It was from the Middle Roman period onwards that the site saw the greatest activity. Features included pits or post holes, a possible buried soil or hillwash, and ditches, one of which contained a cow burial (A1). Although the site seems to have been largely agricultural and peripheral to settlement at this time the finds, including ceramic roof and box-flue tiles, stone floor tiles and several basalt lava quern stone fragments hint at a nearby dwelling, possibly of moderately high status. Other finds that hint at the presence of domestic settlement are a bone gaming counter and part of a shale armlet: both are Roman although not closely dateable. A sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) femur from a later Roman context may indicate the activities of a hawker, although, as this is a common bird, it may be an incidental inclusion.

Most of the Romano-British pottery (990 sherds, 7.406kg) dates from the 3rd or 4th century with frequent examples of wares produced in the industrial complex of the Lower Nene Valley, including colour coats, white wares, parchment wares, grey wares and shell-gritted material. In contrast, other very Late Roman fine wares are rare, as are specialist wares of any type, with only one amphora sherd identified and a few Nene Valley white ware and Oxfordshire red



Figure 3. Location of excavated trenches, showing the results of the magnetometer survey.

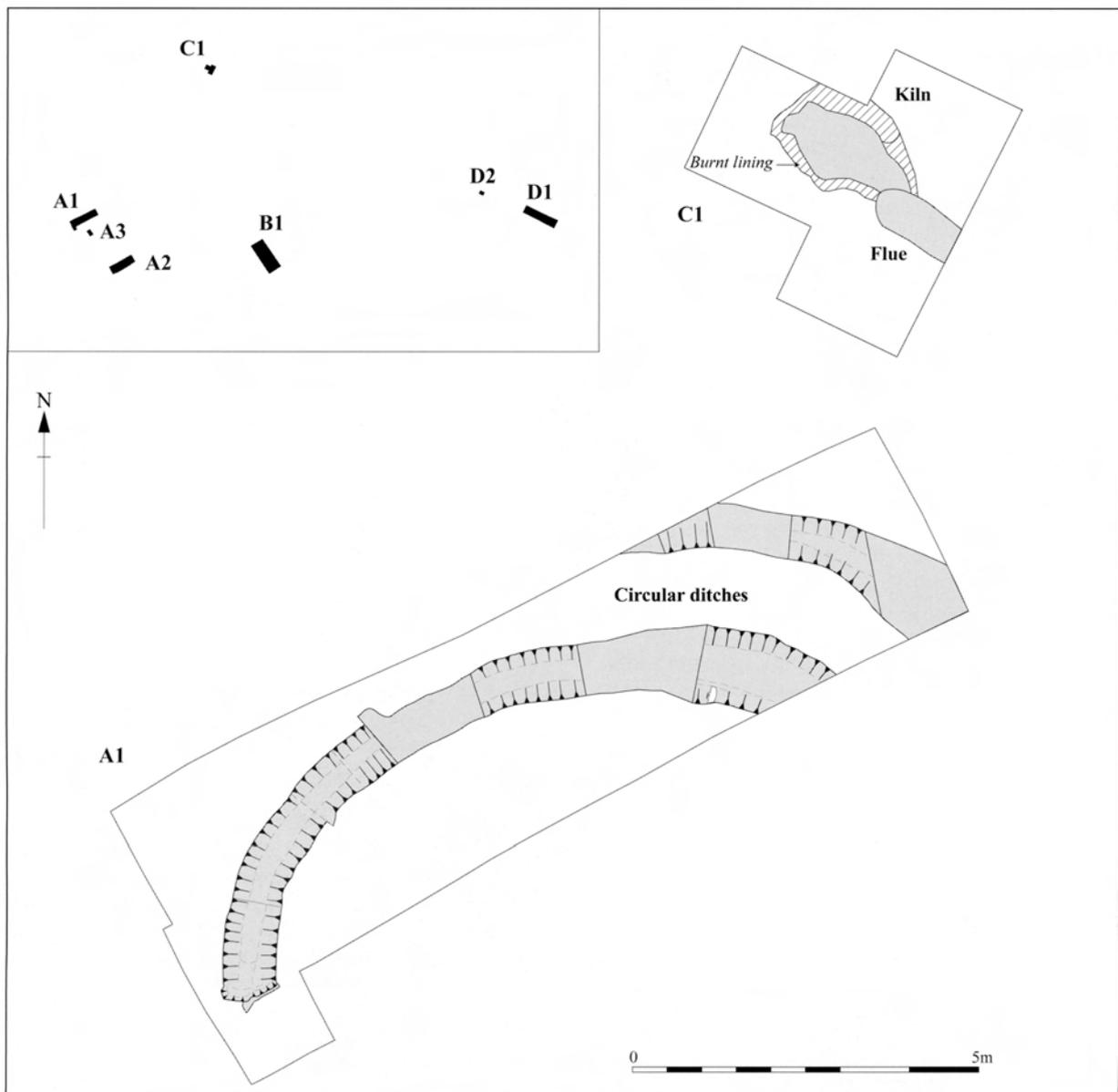


Figure 4. Plan of kiln (Trench C1) and circular ditches relating to a windmill or dovecote (Trench A1).

ware mortarium sherds noted. This heavy reliance on locally-produced utilitarian coarse wares, supplemented by products from a nearby regional pottery production centre, is typical of the later Roman period when the monetary economy was collapsing and the pottery industries that had previously thrived were beginning to decline, reducing the range of products produced (Tyers 1996, 77–78; Going 1997, 41).

Late Roman/Early Saxon Transition (4th to early 5th century)

Agricultural activity and land division occurred in the later Roman/Early Saxon period across all parts of the site, when a ditched rectilinear field system was laid out; this appears to have been heavily influenced by the local topography, particularly the stream that flows across the site from southwest to northeast. The

date at which the field system was first laid out may, however, be much earlier since there is at least one ditch on this alignment (A2) that appears to have been open in prehistory.

Along with Late Roman sherds, a significant quantity (128 sherds, 1.542kg) of Early Saxon hand-made coarse ware was recovered comprising wide-mouthed jar and body sherds, very plain and undecorated. In several instances evidence of use in the form of soot-ing had survived on the external surfaces of these vessels. The discovery of this assemblage is perhaps one of the most significant results from the project; research into the Late Roman/Early Saxon transition has clear potential for studying the effect the end of Roman administration in Britain had on local populations in this part of Cambridgeshire.

Late Saxon to Norman (10th-12th century)

There was an apparent hiatus in activity between the Late Roman/Early Saxon and Late Saxon periods. Subsequent remains were largely confined to the area to the northwest of the stream, which coincides with an area of earthworks in the northwest corner of the field, suggesting these may in part date to the Late Saxon to Norman periods. The stream continued to exert its influence: the hollow way that bounds Spring Close to the southeast runs approximately parallel to it while a second possible hollow way in the northern half of the site ran approximately perpendicular. A single ditch (in A2) cut on the same alignment as its Late Roman/Early Saxon predecessors was apparently still being backfilled after the 10th century, when it perhaps remained visible as an earthwork. This might imply that the field had been turned over to more open grazing.

An obvious feature of the local landscape during this period would have been the structure built on a pair of circular ditches (measuring respectively 0.75m wide, up to 0.62m deep by 11m in diameter and 0.6m wide, up to 0.4m deep and 13m in diameter) located on one of the highest spots (33.36m OD) in the field (A1; Figs 3 and 4). Pottery from both these ditches clearly suggests a 10th- to 12th-century or later date for their backfilling. Their purpose is unclear although there are several possible interpretations including dovecote, haystack and windmill (see below).

Finds from this period are relatively few by comparison with earlier periods: only 295 sherds (2.341kg) of the pottery recovered from the site dates to the 10th to 12th centuries. The earliest material in the group consists of the normal range found on Cambridgeshire rural sites (coming from St Neots, Stamford and Thetford), while some of the later medieval material derives from Northamptonshire, Norfolk and Essex. All of the pottery appears to be domestic and unremarkable.

The few other finds that can be dated to this period notably include a bone whistle fragment (from A2); this is of typical end-blown form which could be played one-handed while the other hand was used to beat a drum (pipe and tabor playing). Examples occur chiefly in Late Saxon to 13th-century contexts and are often made of hollow bird bones, with swan, crane, goose and domestic fowl all identified at sites such as Thetford, London, York and Exeter. One or two of those found in Exeter were made from sheep tibia, as may be an example from Colchester and the fragment from Boxworth (Lawson 1984; Pritchard 1991, 207; Egan 1998, 287; MacGregor *et al* 1999; Megaw 1984, 349, no. B.6-7; Crummy 1988, 47, no.2110).

Medieval to Modern

Occasional sherds of medieval and post-medieval pottery and other finds show that low-level activity continued on Spring Close to the present day, although this has almost certainly been confined to agricultural use, probably pasture, interrupted by only a brief period of cultivation during World War II.

Discussion

The nearby spring would undoubtedly have made the area attractive to prehistoric communities, although later events had clearly obscured or removed much of the slight evidence for early activity. A clear preference for the south-facing slope to the north of the stream is shown by the distribution of prehistoric finds. Although limited, the finds show that a number of settlement-related activities were taking place. Leather or textile working is suggested by the presence of flint scrapers and a bone awl of probable Bronze Age or Iron Age date, perhaps used to pierce leather before stitching or as a pin-beater (which separated warp threads between throws on a warp-weighted loom). A saddle quern suggests that crop processing was taking place nearby, supplemented by exploitation of local wild resources.

The discovery of a possible Early Roman pottery kiln at Boxworth is significant; two other pottery kilns of similar date have recently been discovered close by to the north-east at Swavesey (Lyons forthcoming; Evans 1990). Published kilns of this early date are rare in Cambridgeshire and the Boxworth kiln potentially adds significantly to the available data. Pottery kilns were first introduced into this region during the 2nd quarter of the 1st century (Thompson 1982, 23) and continued in use through out the 1st century AD (apparently unchanged by the Roman conquest) and sporadically through most of the 2nd century (Swan 1984, 63). These kilns were usually internally furnished with a central pedestal from which numerous baked clay kiln bars radiated to form a temporary oven floor. However as portable furniture was generally unstable, fixed interiors became more popular over time. In Cambridgeshire, although kilns with permanent internal fittings were introduced at the time of the conquest (Greenhouse Farm Group 2, kiln F238; Gibson and Lucas 2002, 116), permanent features did not become the standard until the late 1st/early 2nd century, after which time they continued in use until the end of the Roman period (early 5th century). Pottery kilns fell out of fashion during the Early Saxon era and were only gradually reintroduced during the Late Saxon and early medieval periods (11th century). Remarkably, the design of pottery kilns over this 1,000 year period remained almost unchanged. It was not until the late 18th and 19th centuries (during the time of the Industrial Revolution) that the technology associated with pottery firing made any significant developments.

Perhaps one of the most significant results of the work has been the discovery of rarely recognised Late Roman/Early Saxon transitional occupation. Few settlements of this date have been found or excavated. Recent work at Tilbrook, 15 miles to the west of Boxworth, has revealed settlements dating to the Early/Middle Roman period (2nd to 3rd centuries AD) and Early Saxon to Late Saxon periods (6th to middle/end 9th centuries AD) but no sign of continuity from Roman to Saxon was found (Atkins 2007). Similarly, excavations in Willingham revealed

evidence of Roman and Early Saxon settlement that was not continuous. A rare example of continuity has been excavated at Thetford in Norfolk, however, where evidence suggests that a Late Roman farmstead developed into an Early Saxon settlement (Atkins and Connor forthcoming).

The circular ditchwork at Boxworth is also of interest. Interpretation of this 12th-century structure as a windmill is particularly appealing given its proximity to Church Farm, where a *graffito* of a windmill was discovered scratched onto the timber post of a 17th-century barn (Fig. 5). Four windmills are documented in Boxworth from as early as 1229 (Wright 1989, 276). Elsewhere in England windmills are documented from around 1180 onwards, with one of the best examples coming from the 1191 *Chronicles of Jocelyn de Brakelond* which records a dispute between Dean Herbert and the Abbot of Bury St Edmunds regarding a windmill (Gimpel 1988, 25; Hills 1996, 37). A 12th-century date for the ditches would therefore put the Boxworth structure amongst the earliest windmills known. The size and diameters of the ditches, however, are perhaps too small to be consistent with excavated examples such as that at Boreham Airfield in Essex (Clarke 2003, 22–26), Tansor Crossroads

in Northamptonshire (Chapman 1998, 19), Great Linford in Buckinghamshire (Mynard and Zeepvat 1992), or more recently at Burwell (Muldowney 2007) and Milton (Hounsell in prep.) in Cambridgeshire.

There are many examples of circular dovecotes and this interpretation is also worthy of consideration. The excavated ditches at Boxworth (with flat bases and near vertical sides) could have held timber beams. The two ditches may even have worked together to create a cavity into which the nest-boxes could have been inserted, although the distance between them is perhaps too great (at nearly a metre); nest-boxes generally require less than half a metre of depth (Brunskill 1987, 87).

Both windmills and dovecotes were normally linked to relatively high-status farms. The right to the latter was restricted to elite groups such as landlords, monasteries and the clergy (Brunskill 1987, 84), and the former were evidently extremely important sources of income, causing their owners to resort to desperate means if threatened by competition (Gimpel 1988, 25).

Another possible interpretation is a stack stand: protection and drainage rapidly built around stacks of hay or corn. Such features have been identified by

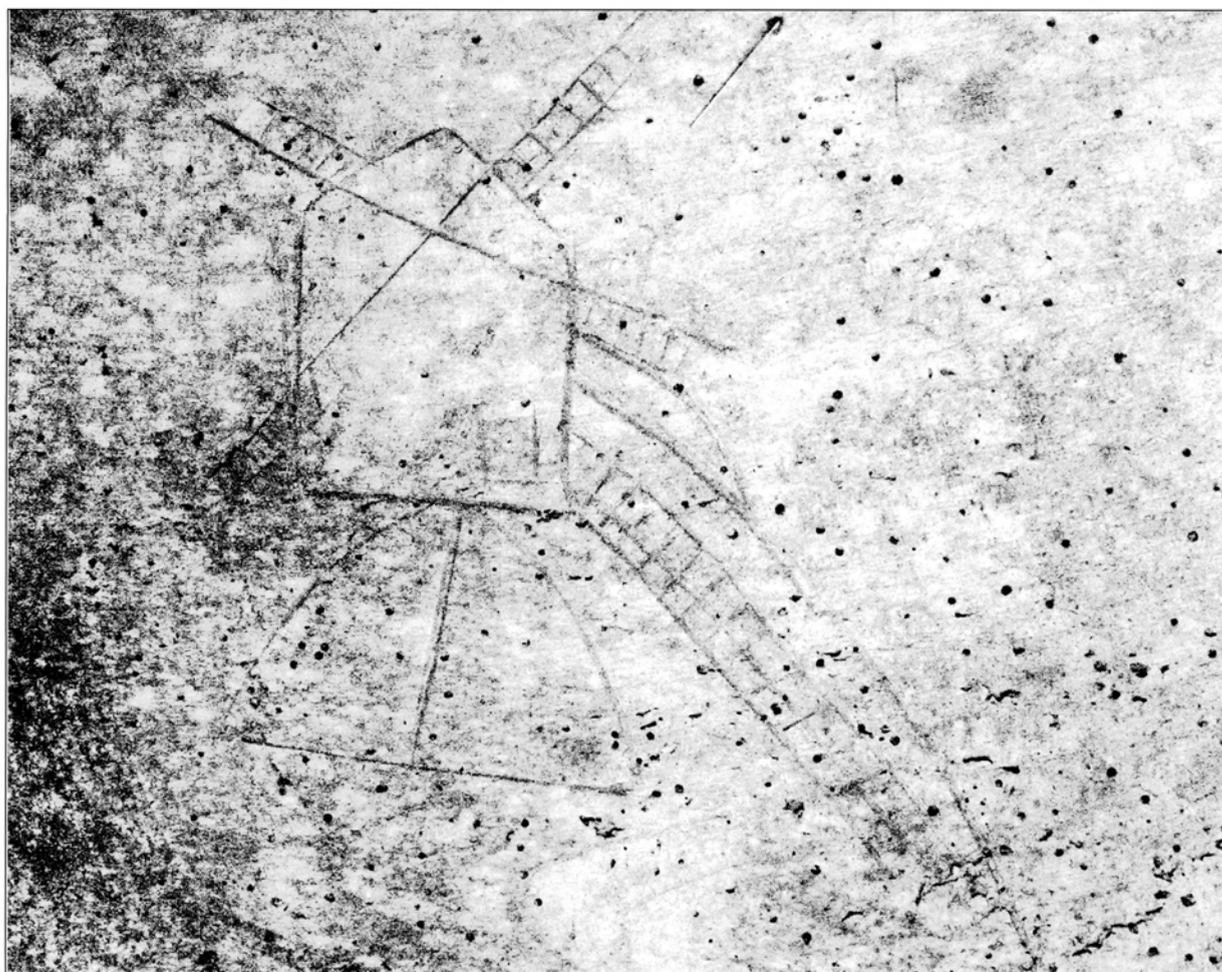


Figure 4. Graffito of windmill in a 17th-century barn at Church Farm, adjacent to Spring Close.

aerial photography, particularly in the East Anglian Fens, and usually had very narrow ditches (c. 0.3m wide) between 9m and 16.5m in diameter; they sometimes comprise double concentric circles (Wilson 1982, 91). Some may have been more permanent structures, perhaps used year after year. Whilst the Boxworth example fits two of these criteria, the individual ditches may be too wide and regular, and an entrance or break in the ditch such as that found in the excavated example does not seem to be a feature of the crop-mark examples. Little if any excavation has been carried out on this type of feature to date, however, making comparison problematic.

Conclusion

The investigations at Boxworth have shown that the surviving earthworks on this site probably relate to the Late Saxon to Norman period and were abandoned in the 12th century. The discovery of a Late Roman/Early Saxon transitional settlement is particularly significant given their current rarity in the excavation record and further research excavation would be valuable to the study of this period.

These investigations have improved knowledge and understanding of past land-use of the village of Boxworth. Although limited, the excavation has highlighted a number of important questions about the site that warrant future investigation should resources become available or should future changes in land-use threaten the archaeological remains here. Currently the land is under no imminent threat, although the ground is subject to fairly severe bioturbation by winter grazing cattle and there is a large population of rabbits, the activities of which provided the initial impetus to investigate this area (Taylor 2003, 4).

Acknowledgements

Permission to undertake the excavation was given by the owner of Spring Common, Mr Christopher Parish. Quinton Carroll and Sarah Poppy supported the application for a Local Heritage Initiative grant. The excavation was carried out by CAM ARC, Cambridgeshire County Council (formerly the Archaeological Field Unit) and the Boxworth Village Research Group. Geophysical survey was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology. The excavation was managed by Aileen Connor, while the site was excavated by BVRG members under the direction of Rachel Clarke with assistance from Taleyna Fletcher and Helen Fowler. Additional training was given by Paul Spoerry, Carole Fletcher and Stephen Macaulay, while school visits were organised by David Crawford-White. Each of the contributing specialists is thanked for their reports. Full discussion of the results can be found in the archive report (Connor and Taylor 2007). This article was prepared for publication by Elizabeth Shepherd Popescu.

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Cartographic Sources

- Estate map of Boxworth, 1640, CRO TR373 P1
- 'Plan of the Estate of the Parish of Boxworth, Cambs belonging to George Thornhill esquire 1855', HRO map 148/LR368

[The following text is extremely faint and illegible due to low contrast and scan quality. It appears to be a multi-column document, possibly a book or a technical manual, with several columns of text visible.]