
Short Report:

An early Roman farmstead at Cotton Farm, Graveley

Emma West

With contributions by James Newbould, Nuala C Woodley, Julie Franklin,
Ian Rowlandson, Gwladys Monteil, Nick Holmes, and T M Walker.

Illustrations by Anna Sztromwasser

Excavations by Headland Archaeology ahead of the construction of an eight-turbine windfarm at Cotton Farm, Graveley, revealed evidence of an early Roman farmstead and medieval to modern agriculture. The farmstead was established in the 1st century AD in the hinterland of Godmanchester and in direct reference to the surrounding road network. It was occupied for around 150 years before being abandoned in the later 2nd/3rd century, possibly as part of the consolidation of landholdings into larger agricultural estates and the establishment of a villa estate at the nearby A14 site TEA 20.

Introduction

Excavations carried out in 2012 by Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd at Cotton Farm, Graveley uncovered evidence for a Roman farmstead alongside medieval, post-medieval and modern agricultural activity. This work was undertaken as a condition of planning consent in advance of the construction of an eight-turbine windfarm. Open area excavation took place within the footprint of three turbines, the compound area, and the widening of the intersection of two trackways in the western part of the site – a total area of 1.44ha (Fig. 1).

The site is situated c. 500m to the west of the village of Graveley, approximately 6km northeast of St Neots in Cambridgeshire, and within the former WWII airfield of Graveley (centred at TL 23540 64050). It is positioned on a high plateau of flat land at approximately 54m AOD, overlooking the floodplain of the River Great Ouse c. 2.5km to the west. The geology comprises Oxford Clay overlain by Middle Pleistocene Till.

This report focuses on the archaeological evidence for the Roman farmstead. It places the excavation results in their regional context, in reference to Godmanchester, the surrounding road network, the findings of the Roman Rural Settlement Project, and the recent excavations along the A14 Improvement Scheme. The full site report is available via OASIS (headland4-127596) and deposited with Cambridge Historic Environment Record (ECB 3793).

Archaeological Background: the Roman Period

The Roman farmstead at Cotton Farm lies within one of the most intensively excavated landscapes of the Roman world, with archaeological investigations revealing large numbers of broadly contemporary settlements (Smith *et al.* 2016, 193). There was significant disruption in the 50 years or so following the AD43 conquest, part of a wider transformation which also included the development of the road network and establishment of local nucleated centres such as that at Godmanchester. The Cotton Farm site was located in Godmanchester's 'hinterland' and surrounded by Roman roads: Ermine Street c. 3.5km to the east; the projected line of the Sandy to Godmanchester road immediately to the west (recently excavated in the A14, TEA 21); Margary's Road 231 following the line of the current A428 to the south; and a possible road through Toseland and Toseland Wood to the immediate east (Fig. 4).

Archaeological evidence for Roman farmsteads and fields has been uncovered on sites close to Cotton Farm, particularly at Little Paxton Quarry (Jones 2011), Loves Farm in St Neots (Hinman and Zant 2018), Papworth Everard (Carlyle and Kajewski 2009; Fisher 2006), and during the recent A14 excavations (MHI 2019, particularly TEA 20 and TEA 21). Cropmarks within the site and in the surrounding area indicate the presence of further enclosures and field systems, some of which, based on their morphology, are thought to be Iron Age or Roman in date (Palmer pers. comm.).

Results of the investigation

The archaeological investigation revealed evidence for a small farmstead which was established in the mid-1st century AD, modified in the mid-2nd century and abandoned during the later 2nd/3rd century. The excavated evidence comprised a series of ditches and pits, which tie into the surrounding cropmark evidence for Roman settlement and fields. Evidence for medieval and post-medieval agriculture was also uncovered.

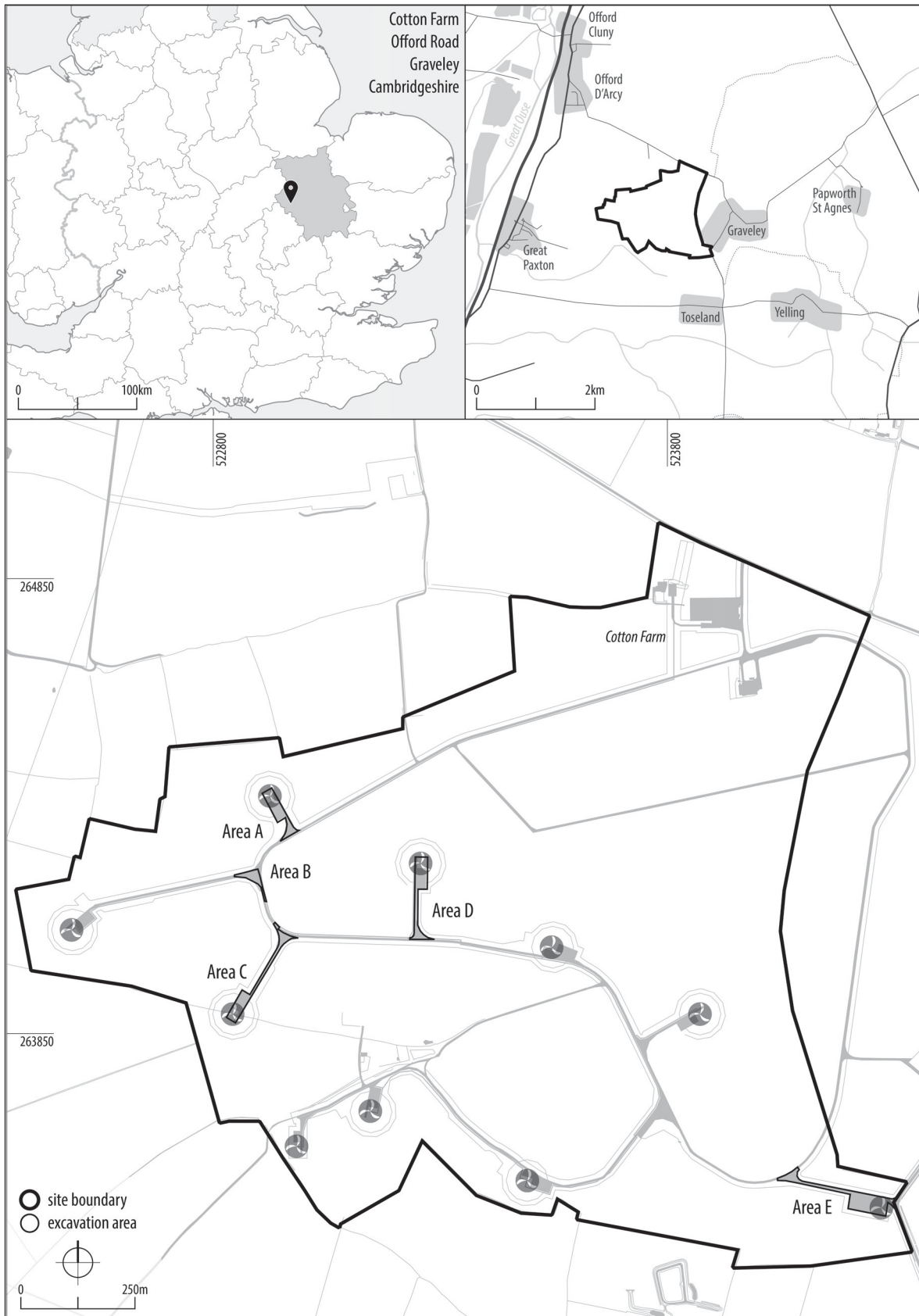


Figure 1. Site location.

Prehistoric Activity

A total of 900 lithics was recovered, including cores, debitage and tools. These are dated to the Neolithic and Bronze Age but are residual, with no prehistoric features identified. Nonetheless, this suggests that there was some prehistoric activity in this general area, most likely of a transient nature.

A small number of late Iron Age/transitional pottery sherds were recovered, however no Iron Age features were identified. This lack of Iron Age activity suggests that the farmstead did not evolve from an earlier settlement but was established during the early post-conquest period.

Early Roman (mid-1st century) farmstead

The archaeological evidence for the early Roman farmstead was concentrated within Area B, in the western part of the site. This comprised a group of ditches (G1) aligned NNE-SSW and WNW-ESE, a curvilinear feature, a small east-west gully, and three pits (G2) (Fig. 2). These ditches correspond to cropmarks

of an enclosure system recorded just to the west of the excavation area (CHER18984), (Fig. 3). This appears to be a 'ladder settlement' leading off the Roman road to the west, of a type regularly observed in this part of Cambridgeshire such as at Childerley Gate (Abrams and Ingham 2008, 52–64).

Other evidence for Roman activity, outside the main settlement area, comprised two ditches within Area D (one curving east-west and one aligned north-south before turning east-west), and an oblong pit in Area E.

Mid-Roman (mid-2nd century – early 3rd century)

Reorganisation of the existing settlement and field system took place in the mid-2nd century, with the backfilling of the earlier ditches and the construction of ditch G3 (Fig. 2). This was aligned WNW-ESE, measured 2.5m wide and 0.45m deep, and truncated three of the earlier ditches (G1) and one of the pits (G2).

The alignment of this ditch fits with the WNW-ESE cropmark to the west (Fig. 3). It was on broadly

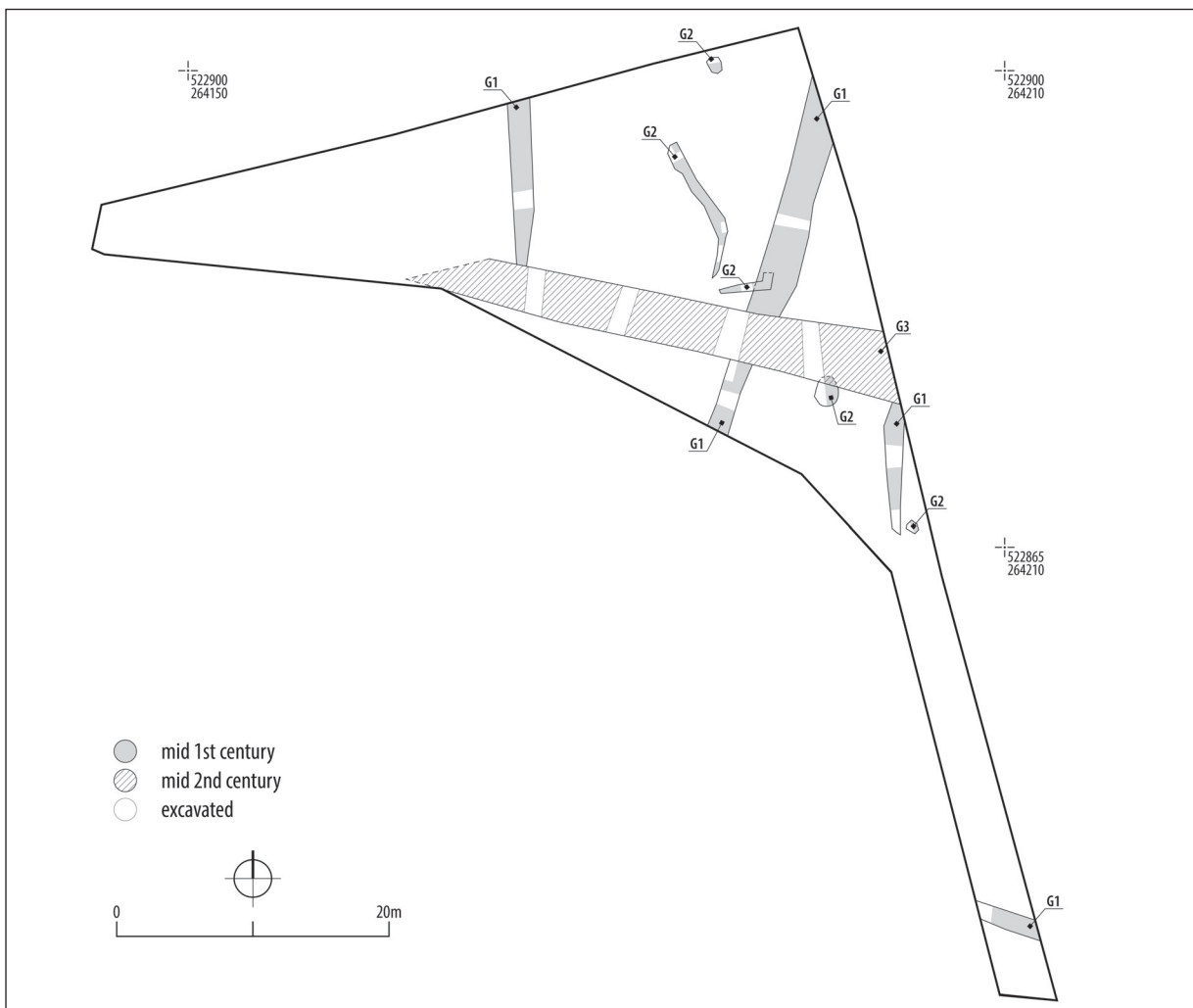


Figure 2. Plan of Area B.



Figure 3. Plan of Area B and cropmarks.

the same alignment as the earlier Roman features, suggesting that it only represents a minor reorganisation of the landscape, possibly the reorganisation of land within the wider settlement enclosure, rather than a wholesale reworking of the site.

Ditch G3 was backfilled in the late 2nd to early 3rd century. That the ditch was deliberately backfilled rather than abandoned to naturally silt-up implies that there was continued use of the landscape during and/or following this period – possibly suggesting that the wider settlement remained in use, or at least that the land remained under agricultural use. The only evidence for Roman activity after this date was a single late 3rd century coin.

Roman finds and environmental assemblage

The pottery recovered from both phases of the Roman farmstead (972 sherds, 11.087kg) was largely utilitarian and locally sourced, and represents a typical early Roman domestic assemblage, similar to that recovered from the early Roman settlement at Little Paxton (Evans 2011). Many of the coarser wares came from within a 10 mile radius, with finer wares from Verulamium or Northamptonshire, within a 40 mile radius. There were only a few imports: eleven sherds of Samian ware, two sherds of amphora, and one colour-coated sherd from the Central Gaulish Blackware

industry. This does not point to regular access to imported commodities. Finds other than pottery were rare, numbering only a single 3rd century coin and a handful of nails deriving from woodworking and hobnails from shoes.

Animal bone evidence (463 fragments, NISP 66) indicates the domestication of sheep, pigs and cattle, a typical assemblage for this period. Two cattle bones had butchery marks on them and there was some evidence for the burning of bones, probably during roasting. A small and poorly-preserved charred cereal grain assemblage was recovered, including oat, barley and spelt wheat.

Evidence for industrial activity or craft-working was limited, comprising just a small quantity of magnetic residue from ditch G3.

Medieval to Modern

Medieval and post-medieval activity across the site was primarily agricultural in nature, comprising medieval furrows, drainage gullies, and 19th century field boundaries. The archaeological evidence for the latest phase of activity consisted of the circular culvert drains, which correspond to the shape of the WWII airfield aprons.

The Cotton Farm Roman settlement in its regional context

Evidence from cropmarks had already suggested a settlement of Roman date at Cotton Farm, and the current excavations provided an opportunity to investigate its date and character. Of particular interest is how the settlement relates to other known Roman sites in the vicinity, particularly with reference to the Roman town of *Durovigutum* (Godmanchester), the nearby 'villa' site on the A14 at TEA 20 c. 3.5km to the NNW, and the surrounding Roman road network (Fig. 4).

The lack of Iron Age activity at Cotton Farm is unusual. All of the identified Roman settlements within a 3km radius of the site on the Roman Rural Settlement Project database contained evidence for Iron Age activity (Little Paxton Quarry, Loves Farm, Papworth Everard Hospital Car Park, and Papworth Everard Business Park; Allen *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, in a case study of the wider Cambridgeshire Fen edge area, just 20% of the 48 early Roman settlements identified were similarly newly-established in the early post-conquest period (Smith *et al.* 2016, 196). More recently fourteen out of fifteen Roman settlements investigated as part of the A14 excavations

contained evidence for preceding middle/late Iron Age settlement (MHI 2019). The Cotton farm settlement is, therefore, somewhat unusual, apparently being established 'from scratch' after the Roman Conquest. This 'new' establishment of the settlement may be because it was located directly on the Sandy to Godmanchester Roman road, which was probably established, or at least 'engineered', shortly after the conquest.

The farmstead was occupied continuously from the mid-1st century until the late 2nd/early 3rd century AD. In contrast, preliminary dating of the nearby TEA 20 settlement suggests that there was a hiatus between the abandonment of the late Iron Age settlement in the 1st century AD and the establishment of the Roman settlement in the 2nd century. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the establishment of the Cotton Farm settlement appears to sit within the 'hiatus' of the TEA 20 settlement.

A major influence on the location, and indeed existence, of the Cotton Farm settlement was its proximity to roads, which would have provided easy access to markets and probably agricultural distribution hubs at Godmanchester and Sandy. This is supported by the alignment of the Roman ditches in Area B and those identified via cropmarks (WNW-ESE), which

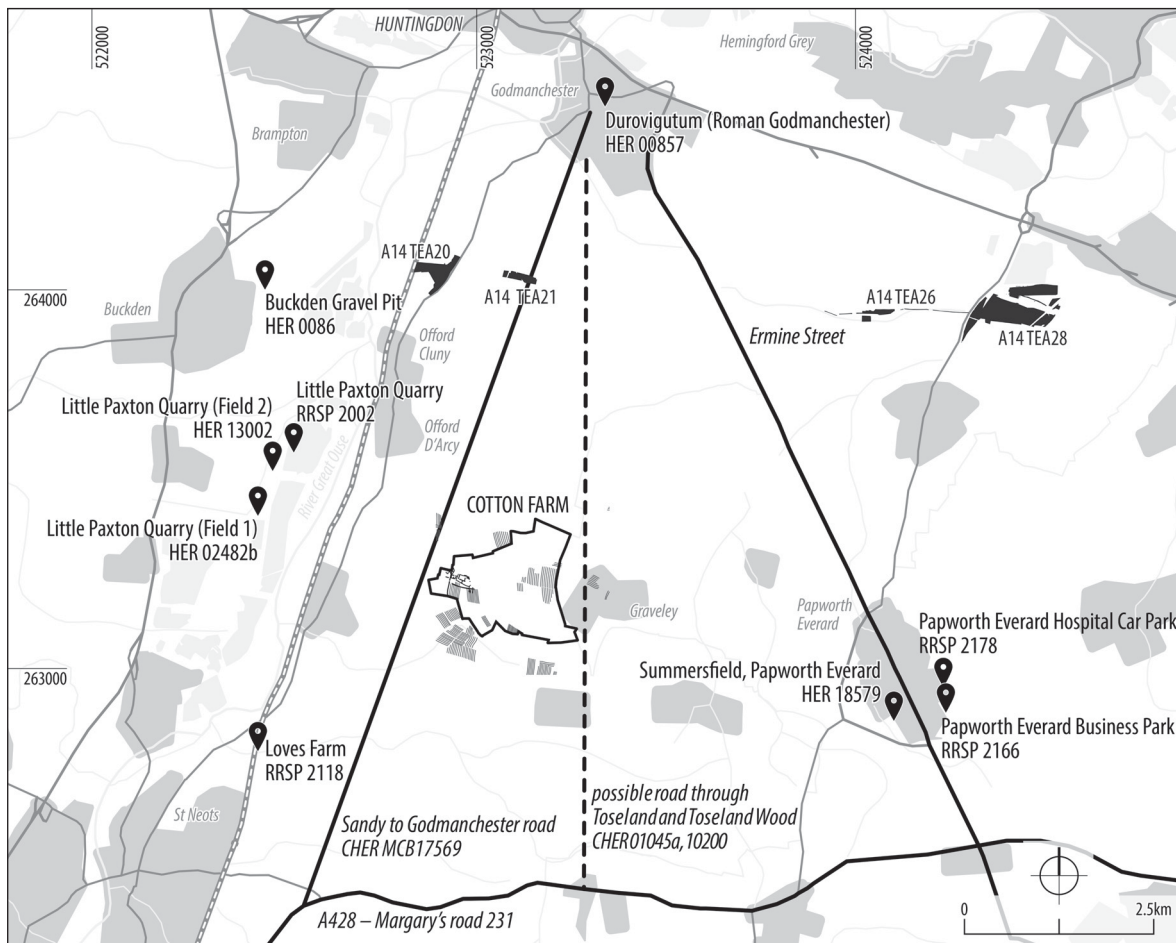


Figure 4. Plan of site in relation to Roman sites in the vicinity.

are parallel with, and perpendicular to, the projected line of the Sandy to Godmanchester road. It is this which is thought to have had the most defining influence over both the location and layout of the settlement.

The farmstead was also deliberately positioned with reference to topography and watercourses. It was located on the north-western edge of a plateau, at c. 54m AOD, with the land steadily falling to the north, east, and west. However, its layout did not 'fit' exactly within the plateau: if positioned only in reference to the plateau, it would be orientated east-west and slightly further to the south. Other natural factors, particularly the proximity to water, would also have influenced the location of this settlement, with the numerous tributaries of the River Great Ouse providing a ready water supply for the inhabitants.

As only a small part of the Roman farmstead was excavated, little can be said regarding the nature or character of activity (agricultural and domestic) at this settlement. The finds assemblage is a fairly typical utilitarian assemblage and the limited animal bone and charred plant remains suggest that the inhabitants practiced a mixed agricultural regime. There was certainly no evidence for the 'bedding trenches' which are often found on the clays in this part of Cambridgeshire (e.g. at A14 site TEA 21, c. 3km to the north).

Although there is evidence for changes in the mid-2nd century AD with the establishment of ditch G3, this appears to have been a relatively minor reorganisation of the land within the wider settlement enclosure, rather than a wholesale reworking of the landscape. This suggests a general continuity of activity over the 150 or so years that the settlement existed.

The abandonment of this settlement in the late 2nd/3rd century correlates with the general chronological pattern identified in this part of the country. Settlement numbers reached their height at this time, after which many went out of use or were transformed in some way, including increased development of 'villa' architecture (Smith *et al.* 2016, 148, 195, 201). This is likely to be related to changes in farming practices, with the consolidation of landholdings into larger agricultural estates (Allen *et al.* 2017, 147). Preliminary dating of the TEA 20 Roman site suggests that there was a significant reorganisation in the 3rd century, probably into a villa complex. This may have been one of the factors leading to the abandonment of the smaller-scale agricultural settlement at Cotton Farm.

Conclusion

The excavation of this early Roman farmstead has enabled the investigation of part of one of the many crop-mark-complexes in the hinterland of Godmanchester. This has demonstrated that this settlement was established shortly after the Roman Conquest, probably in direct reference to the Sandy-Godmanchester road

which crossed the western part of the site. It was occupied for a relatively short period of time (c. 150 years), before being abandoned in the later 2nd/3rd century, probably as landholdings became consolidated into larger agricultural estates, and possibly in direct reference to the development of the villa estate at nearby TEA 20.

Acknowledgements

Headland Archaeology is grateful to RENERCO for funding the work, particularly Marlene Buchinger for her support throughout. Thanks are extended to Andy Thomas who monitored the work on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council.

Further thanks to Stephen Coleman, Historic Environment Record Officer at Central Bedfordshire Council, for his provision of aerial photographs; and Rog Palmer, APS Cambridge, for his help and information in interpreting the cropmarks.

Excavation was carried out under Project Officer Nuala Woodley. Excavation and recording on site was carried out by John Kaines, James McNicoll-Norbury, and Mark Sycamore. Processing and preliminary recording of the finds was undertaken by Julie Franklin (Finds Manager), while soil samples were processed by Steve Roe. Analysis was undertaken by the following specialists: Ian Rowlandson, Gwladys Monteil, Julie Franklin, Nick Holmes and T M Walker. The illustrations were produced by Anna Sztromwasser and managed by Caroline Norrman. Documentary research was carried out by Sarah Bultz in the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record Office (CHER). James Newbould managed the project for Headland Archaeology.

References

- Abrams J and Ingham D 2008, *Farming on the Edge: Archaeological Evidence from the Clay Uplands to the West of Cambridgeshire*. East Anglian Archaeology [EAA] 123, Cambridge.
- Allen, M, Lodwick, L, Brindle, T, Fulford, M and Smith, A 2017, *The Rural Economy of Roman Britain*. New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain Volume 2 Britannia Monograph 30. London.
- Allen, M, Blick, N, Brindle, T, Evans, T, Fulford, M, Holbrook, N, Lodwick, L, Richards, J D, and Smith, A 2018, *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain: an online resource*. [Internet] <<https://doi.org/10.5284/1030449>> [23 December 2019].
- Carlyle, S and Kajewski, P 2009, *Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Papworth Everard, Hospital Car Park, Cambridgeshire: Assessment and Updated Project Design*. Northamptonshire Archaeology. Unpublished.
- Evans, J 2011, *The Roman pottery from Little Paxton*. In Jones, A, *Prehistoric and Roman-British landscapes in the river Great Ouse valley: excavations at Little Paxton Quarry, 1992–1998*. BAR British Series 545, Oxford.
- Fisher, I 2006, *An Archaeological Evaluation at Papworth Everard Business Park, Plots 7, 9 and 10*

Cambridgeshire. Northamptonshire Archaeology.
Unpublished.

Hinman, M, and Zant, J 2018, *Conquering the Claylands: Excavations at Love's Farm, St Neots, Cambridgeshire*. EAA 165, Cambridge.

Jones, A 2011, *Excavations at Little Paxton Quarry, Cambridgeshire, 1992–1998*. Birmingham Archaeology Monograph Series 10, BAR British Series 545, Oxford.

Margary, I 1973. *Roman Roads in Britain*. London.

MOLA Headland Infrastructure (MHI) 2019, *A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: Post-Excavation Assessment Vol.1*

Simmonds, A 2007, *Cotton Wind Farm, Offord D'Arcy, Cambridgeshire: Archaeological Evaluation Report*. Oxford Archaeology.

Smith, A, Allen, M, Brindle, T and Fulford, M 2016, *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain: Volume 1: The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain*. New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain Volume 1 Britannia Monograph 29, London.