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## Short Report:

### A Roman farmstead at Paston Reserve, Peterborough

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*Fieldwork by Pre-Construct Archaeology in 2017 identified a Roman farmstead located c. 150m south of Car Dyke, consisting of a series of ditch segments which formed enclosures and field systems; no evidence for structures was identified.*

*Two phases of ditch alignments are present indicating that the farmstead was extant for a sustained period of time, in a location close to the Legionary fort at Longthorpe (Monument Number 364099) and Car Dyke (Monument Number 1034621).*

*Pits were recorded, some with large assemblages of pottery. Three of the pits contained redeposited burnt material and one contained an assemblage of iron slag, indicating industrial activity. Associated with the pits were several watering-holes.*

*This farmstead may have been related to the settlement excavated at Manor Drive (Fletcher 2008).*

#### Introduction and Background

The site is located in Paston, c. 4.5km north-east of Peterborough. It is bounded by the Car Dyke to the north, Norwood Lane to the south, Newborough Road to the east and a modern housing development to the west (Fig. 1).

The underlying geology consists of the Oxford Clay formation overlain by River Terrace deposits of sand and gravel (British Geological Survey; Peterborough Sheet 158). The site slopes downwards from 13m OD in the south to 8m OD at the northern limit nearest to the Car Dyke. The site occupied a small plateau of locally higher ground, 11.12–11.82m OD. Prior to the excavation the site was undeveloped agricultural land totalling an area of c. 0.6ha.

A trial trench evaluation (Porter 2016) identified a number of small pits/post-holes and boundary ditches. Immediately to the west of the site an evaluation (Fletcher 2007) and subsequent excavation (Fletcher 2008), identified Iron Age and Roman features relating to settlement possibly linked to the current site.

This article describes the principal results of the excavations. The archive report (Jones 2020) is available at Peterborough City Council Historic Environment Record (PCCHER) and downloadable from the

Archaeology Data Service website. The site archive will be deposited at the Peterborough Museum Store.

#### Site Chronology

Aside from residual finds of prehistoric material the earliest sustained activity on the site was Early Roman (AD 30–120) in date. At this time a plateau of higher ground became a focus for a small Roman farmstead. This period also saw the establishment of a system of north-south and east-west aligned ditches forming enclosures or boundaries. The presence of the Legionary fortress, built in Longthorpe Peterborough (Monument Number 364099), may have influenced the establishment of the farmstead at this time.

By the Middle Roman period (AD 120–200) there was a sharp increase in activity on the site, reflected in the marked increase in the amount of pottery recovered. The field boundaries also saw a slight shift in alignment. Larger pits, including at least one watering hole, were constructed during this period. The increase in the fortunes of the farmstead may have been tied to the construction of Car Dyke, located c. 150m to the north of the site, which would have facilitated the movement of produce.

By the Mid-Late Roman period (AD 200–400) the farmstead was on the peripheries of the settlement, probably returning to open fields.

#### Discussion

##### *Foundation: Early Roman (AD 30–120)*

The site occupies a rich agricultural landscape on the peripheries of the naturally marshy ground. The farmstead would have had access to plentiful resources: prime agricultural ground suitable for arable and pastoral usage as well as access to the seasonal resources prevalent in marshland environments (Hall 1987).

No evidence for domestic structures was identified on the site but this does not mean that they were not



Figure 1. Site location.



present. Features such as areas of pitting, or features with large pottery assemblages, indicate occupation, whilst the presence of buildings can be deduced by identifying areas of 'blank space' between these areas of activity – such as the space defined by DITCHES 8, 10 and 11 or near to the pitting in the north of the site (Fig. 2). The ditches associated with this period form a system of boundaries or enclosures, probably reflecting a combination of pastoral and arable agricultural practices.

The animal bone assemblage for this period consists entirely of cattle. Dominance of cattle is often seen as an indicator of Roman influence, and is by no means an isolated occurrence in this region: cattle-rich assemblages are recorded on other local sites, including Longthorpe (King 1978), Haddon (Hinman et al 2004), Jobs Lane (Jones 2018), Prickwillow Road (Atkins and Mudd 2003) and the A428 (Abrams and Ingham 2008).

The arrival of the Roman army may have necessitated an increase in agricultural produce within the region, and the farmstead was probably established as a direct result of the construction of the fort at Longthorpe (Monument No. 364099), as part of a series of farms which fulfilled the agricultural requirements of the fortress.

#### *Expansion: Middle Roman (AD 120–200)*

The farmstead continued to develop into the Middle Roman period, due in part to the rich agricultural landscape it occupied and the presence of the newly established Car Dyke. The presence of newly dug ditched boundaries implies the need to keep land drained. At Orton Hall Farm, a similarly wet landscape, Mackreth notes that "once the centre had been firmly established; there would have been a degree of inertia at the thought of moving to drier quarters" (Mackreth 1996, 220).

No clear evidence for structures was identified within the farmstead. Again, this does not mean that they were absent, it is more likely that ephemeral structures have been removed by later land use. Plausible locations for domestic buildings can be identified using settlement related features, finds assemblages and areas of apparent 'blank space'. For example, around the intercutting pits in the eastern part of the site (Fig. 2).

At this time sheep replaced cattle as the most represented domesticated, which differs from the more general trend for cattle to remain important throughout the Roman period. Sheep do not require overwintering in barns and thus are significantly less labour intensive than cattle. The apparent lack of cattle during this period may reflect some degree of specialization related to a market-based economy, or that the resources to maintain cattle were not available. This adds credence to the site being a small-scale farmstead, lacking the man-power required to tend to large herds of cattle. A small-scale, possibly single-family run farmstead fits the general pattern for the region, with Monument 97 and Werrington

being two examples of similar family unit settlements (Mackreth 2001, 1988). From the predominance of older animals in the bone assemblage it can be suggested that secondary products such as wool and milk were more valuable than meat.

Some small-scale industry was also noted, potentially representing domestic production as opposed to trade. Iron working appears to have taken place on the site during this period, probably for local needs rather than more intensive industry: making functional iron objects such as items for shoeing livestock. Iron working sites are present nearby but are by no means widespread along the course of Car Dyke, for example at Morton Fen (Hayes and Lane 1992).

The proximity of the farmstead to Car Dyke (constructed between AD 100–130) is likely to have had a positive impact on its growth: it provided the means to transport resources, even if only short distances, as well as providing drainage for agricultural land. At present there is debate as to whether Car Dyke was navigable or merely a catch water drain unsuitable for navigation (Simmons 1979, Simmons and Cope-Faulkner 2004, Macaulay and Reynolds 1994). It was likely, however, that at least parts of the Car Dyke were used as canals as it would have been easier to transport materials over short distances by water than by land. Macaulay notes that the discrepancies in profile between the Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire stretches of the Car Dyke suggest different functions: primarily a canal in the south and for drainage within Lincolnshire (Macaulay and Reynolds 1994, 15).

The expansion of the farmstead may also have been tied to the consolidation of the road system. Drainage of the area allowed the construction of the Fen Causeway which went from Water Newton through Peterborough and March to Denver (Margary 1955, 202). Other major roads in the region include Ermine St and King St.

Proximity to Car Dyke and the Roman road network would have enabled the transport of goods and the movement of people and livestock 'on the hoof' a trend observed in the region, such as at Haddon (Hinman 2003).

#### *Decline: Mid-late Roman (AD 200–400)*

During this period there was decreased activity suggesting either a reduction in size and intensity or a shift in settlement focus, possibly towards the Manor Drive site (Fletcher 2008). During this period the site appears to have a more agricultural bias, evidenced by the decrease in the pottery assemblage as well as the presence of more characteristically agricultural features, such as waterholes, and the dearth of settlement related features. The site at this time was on the periphery of the settlement, likely to have been open agricultural land. This is paralleled by local sites such as Monument 97 (Mackreth 2001), Orton Hall Farm (Mackreth 1996), and Haddon (Hinman 2003) all of which demonstrated hiatuses in activity or shifts of foci.

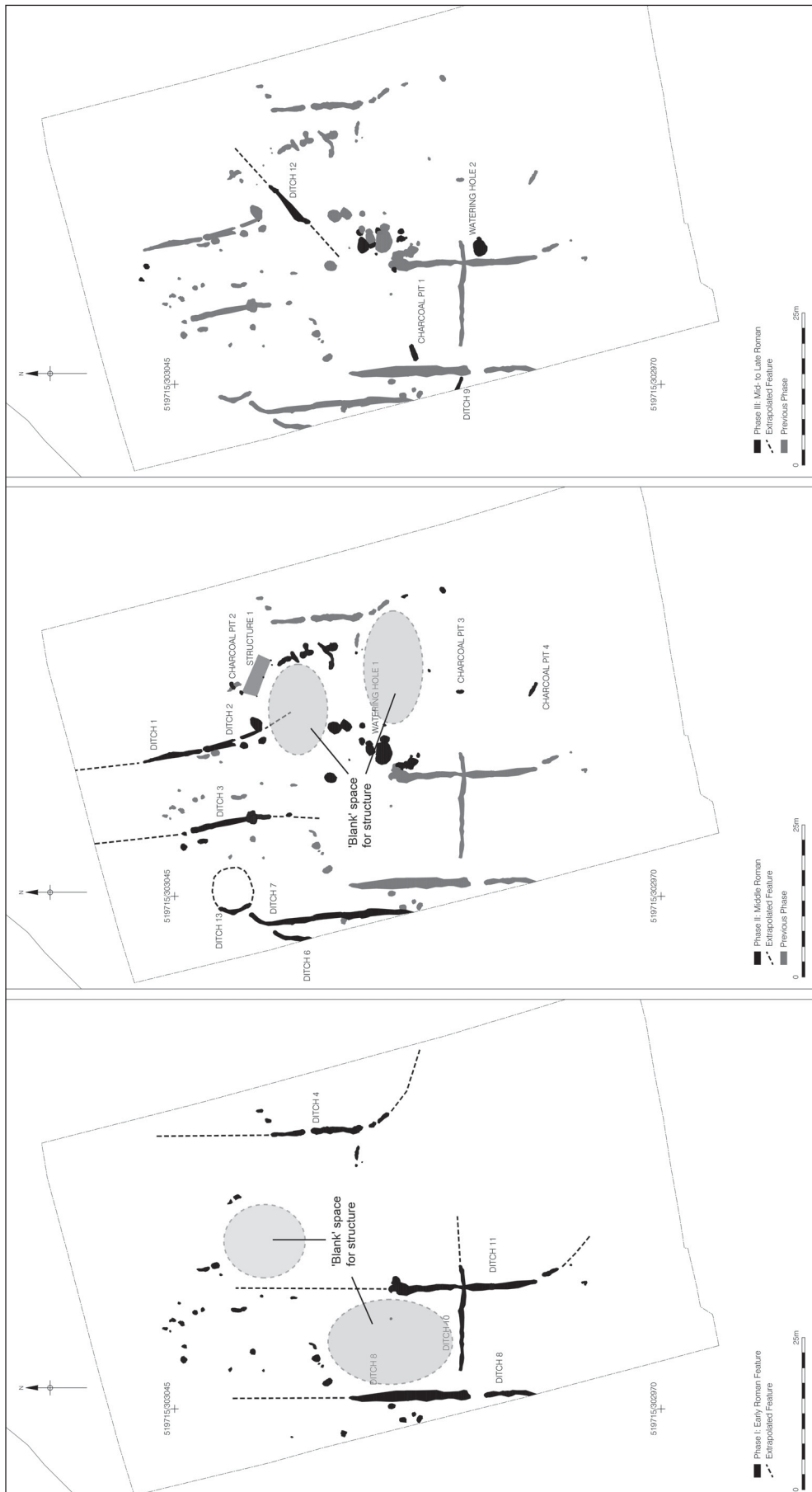


Figure 2. Phase plans with shading indicating the possible location of structures.

By the end of the second century the Car Dyke had become silted up and apparently unnavigable, therefore incapable of transporting goods. This may in part explain the apparent decline of the Paston site, which fits within the general pattern of decline in late Roman settlement densities in the region (Smith et al 2016, 205–7).

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