The evolution of the landscape at Cotton Farm, Graveley, from Roman 'ladder settlement' to WWII airfield

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SUMMARY

In May 2012, excavations by Headland Archaeology ahead of the construction of an eight-turbine windfarm at Cotton Farm, Graveley, revealed evidence of settlement and agricultural activity dating from the early Roman period to the modern era. Analysis of excavated evidence, cropmark data and the natural landscape has enabled an increased understanding of how the landscape in this area was utilised in different periods. The factors which determined the location and layout of agricultural and settlement activity through time has also been considered.

INTRODUCTION

Excavations carried out in 2012 by Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd at Cotton Farm, Graveley uncovered evidence for Romano-British settlement, 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. This followed the compilation of a desk-based assessment carried out for an Environmental Impact Assessment (CgMs 2007). This was itself followed by a pre-determination trenching evaluation in 2007 which recorded the presence of ditches that corresponded with field boundaries shown on the 1st Edition OS map. A small quantity of Roman and late Saxon pottery was also recovered (Oxford Archaeology 2007).

In mitigation of the development impacts, additional fieldwork took place in May 2012. This consisted of open area excavation 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 (Figure 1).

Site location and description

The site is situated *c*.500m to the west of the village of Graveley, approximately 6km north-east of St Neots in Cambridgeshire (centred at TL 23540 64050). It falls within the former WWII airfield of Graveley and is bounded by Offord Road to the north-east and Toseland Road to the south-east, and covers an area of approximately 180ha. The five areas of archaeological excavation covered a total area of approximately 1.44ha (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

The site was positioned on a plateau of flat land at approximately 54mOD. Land-use was open arable farmland. The geology comprises Oxford Clay overlain by Middle Pleistocene Till. This is characterised by clay / sand mix directly below the topsoil (British Geological Survey Website).

Archaeological and historical background

There is very little evidence for prehistoric activity in the direct vicinity of the site, with the only records consisting of three Palaeolithic handaxes found in Graveley (CHER: MCB19255). Evidence for prehistoric activity has been found more widely across the landscape, including Bronze Age barrows at Buckden and Little Paxton (CHER: MCB20047; 00663a); a mid-late Bronze Age cremation cemetery at Papworth Everard (CHER: MCB18083); Iron Age field systems and settlements at Little Paxton Quarry, Papworth Everard, and Buckden (CHER: 10701, MCB17572, 00861b); and flint scatters in various locations across the landscape.

There is significantly more evidence for activity in this area dating from the Romano-British period. There are a number of Roman roads, with the principal route being Ermine Street, the major arterial route from London to Lincoln which lies some 3.5km to the east of the site (the current A1198). The projected line of the Sandy to Godmanchester road is positioned immediately to the west of the site (CHER: MCB17569), however it is not clear whether the projected route is reliable. A probable E-W aligned Roman road also exists to the south - the current A428, Margary's road 231 (Margary 1973). There are also suggestions that another Roman road crossed the eastern end of the site (CHER: 01045a and 10200). This is referenced in the 1926 RCHM Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Huntingdonshire which describes a section of Roman road and agger apparently incorporated into the homestead moat in Toseland Wood. In 1992, the apparent remains of a cobbled surface with stone foundations was anecdotally observed during the installation of a gas pipe in Toseland Village. This evidence has not yet been verified by more robust work, however the route of the purported road does match with an alignment of extant field boundaries running c.5km to the north and 6km to the south of Toseland Wood. This is aside from the numerous minor tracks and unplanned routes which would have criss-crossed the landscape and provided access for individuals, many of which may have developed from earlier routeways (Rackham 1986, 252).

Evidence for Romano-British settlement has been uncovered during excavations in this area, such as at Buckden gravel pit, Papworth Everard, Little Paxton Quarry, and a number during excavations along the A428. Other remains indicating Romano-British activity closer to this site include find-spots of Roman coins to the north-west of Graveley (CHER: 02487), a Roman flagon from Yelling (CHER: 00842), Roman roof tile and a Samian sherd from Offord Cluny (CHER: MCB 18560), and unidentified Roman finds from Toseland Wood (CHER: 04805, CHER: 01420).

There are also a number of cropmarks within the site and in the surrounding area, many of which indicate the presence of field systems and enclosures. The dates of these are unknown although some are thought to be Iron Age or Romano-British, based on their morphology (Palmer 2008-9). These include a large curved enclosure with two

entrances to the east of the site (CHER: 18889) and a D-shaped enclosure positioned in the northern part of the site (CHER: 18986).

Activity continued in this area in the Saxon and medieval periods, with the scheduled remains of a medieval moated site in Toseland Wood *c*.30m to the south of the site (SAM 27925). Another undated enclosure was recorded from aerial photographs to the east of the site (CHER: MCB06777) and was assumed to be medieval in date based on its size and shape. The remains of ridge and furrow cultivation has also been identified from cropmarks in various places in and around the site.

The site and surrounding area continued to be used for agriculture throughout the postmedieval period until it was requisitioned by the Air Ministry in 1941 for the construction of Graveley Airfield (CHER: MCB15135). This was opened in November 1941 as a satellite of 138 Squadron, although it was not greatly utilised until August 1942. The airfield remained operational until September 1946 when it was mothballed. It reopened in the 1950s as a relief landing ground for RAF Oakington but was closed completely in 1968 (Oxford Archaeology 2007, 3).

RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The archaeological investigation revealed evidence for an early Romano-British domestic settlement, concentrated in the north-western part of the site, and modified in the mid-2nd century. Evidence for medieval and post-medieval agriculture was also uncovered.

900 lithics were recovered, including cores, debitage, and tools. These came from features otherwise dated to later periods and are considered to be residual. As a group they are dated to the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and indicate that there was some prehistoric activity in this area, although no further evidence as to the character of this activity was found. A handful of pottery recovered from topsoil contexts also indicates a late Saxon presence, although it is difficult to ascertain the nature of this. A number of undated features (ditches, tree-throws, hedgerows, and boundaries) were also uncovered, however these will not be discussed here.

The text which follows is structured by period, and reference made to the differing areas (A-E) in which features were found.

Early Roman (Mid-1st Century AD)

The earliest features recorded are focused in the western part of the site. These date to the mid-1st century and consist of a series of ditches believed to represent the remains of an early Romano-British domestic settlement.

A group of ditches (G1) were recorded within Area B (Figure 2). Four ran north-northeast to south-south-west and two ran west-north-west to east-south-east. Associated with these was a curvilinear feature (on a curving northwest - southeast alignment), a small gully (aligned roughly east-west), and three pits (G2). Finds recovered from the backfill of these features include 1st century domestic pottery, with a small number of sherds indicative of a pre or peri-Conquest date (this includes a small handmade channel rimmed jar (Figure 5, C), a large handmade lid, and a storage jar in a grog and shell gritted fabric). Some early 2nd century sherds were recovered from the curvilinear feature, including vessels D-H (Figure 5), a fragment from a large necked jar in the GREY1 fabric, and a fragment from a Gallo-Belgic derived platter with a slightly inturned rim.

FIGURE 2

Two further ditches of this date were recorded in Area D (Figure 3) – one curving eastwest (G4), and one running north-south before turning east-west (G5). The shape and profile of these are more indicative of enclosure boundaries. The pottery recovered from the backfill of G4 consisted of a single large storage jar dated around the mid-1st to early 2^{nd} century (Figure 5, J), with sherds of a similar date recovered from G5. The charred grain assemblage and charcoal fragments are representative of multiple discard events of domestic waste, with the few shells recovered also supporting the suggestion of domestic waste being discarded within both ditches.

FIGURE 3

One further early Roman feature was recorded in Area E – an oblong pit (G14) measuring 1m by 0.9m and 0.2m in depth. Pottery recovered from this feature included fragments of a large shell and limestone gritted jar, dated to the mid-1st to early 2nd century AD. Some industrial waste, mainly magnetic residue, was also recovered, as well as sheep bone.

The ditches excavated in Area B fit with cropmarks of an enclosure system recorded just to the west of the excavation area (Palmer 2008; CHER: 18984). The G1 ditches follow the same WNW-ESE alignment of the cropmarks, and the morphology of the cropmarks indicate that they are a contiguous entity (see Figure 4). It therefore seems likely that these cropmarks are dated to the early Roman period, and form part of the same features excavated in Area B. This appears to be an early Romano-British domestic settlement, potentially a 'ladder settlement' based on the arrangement of the cropmarks, the positioning of the settlement just off a road to the west, and the existence of similar settlements in this part of Cambridgeshire (Papworth Everard and Childerley Gate). The other early Roman remains recorded on this site represent activity positioned on the outskirts of the settlement. The ditches in Area D possibly forming enclosure boundaries for the holding of animals, whilst the pit in Area E having may be a rubbish pit having been backfilled with domestic waste.

Mid-Roman (Mid-2nd Century AD)

Reorganisation of the existing settlement and field system took place in the mid 2^{nd} century, with the construction of ditch G3 (Figure 2). This was aligned WNW-ESE, measured 2.5m in width and 0.45m in depth, and truncated three of the ditches (G1) and one of the pits (G2).

The backfill deposits of G3 contained pottery dating to the late 2nd to early 3rd centuries AD. This included a large jar and dish with a triangular rim in the HORN fabric (Evans 1991, Fig.4.32, Fig.5.69), a fragment from a barbotine decorated beaker, samian dated to no later than AD175, a Gallo-Belgic inspired platter, a wheelmade beaker or jar with

a slightly cupped rim, a jar with a curved rim in wheel-made shell gritted fabric (cf Rollo 1994, Fig. 65.77), and a wheelmade shell gritted necked jar with a triangular rim.

Other finds recovered from the backfill deposits included snail shells of open country species, burnt and unburnt mammal bone, a small quantity of oak and non-oak charcoal fragments, and large quantities of marine shell (oyster and mussel). The backfill in G3 also contained significant quantities of magnetic residue, suggesting the presence of metalworking activity.

The alignment of this ditch fits with the WNW-ESE cropmark recorded to the west (Palmer 2008), suggesting that the ditch formed part of a larger feature which extended to the west (see Figure 4). It is on broadly the same alignment as the earlier Roman features, suggesting that it represents a minor reorganisation of the landscape and the general continuation of the Romano-British ladder settlement.

Backfilling of this ditch took place in the late 2^{nd} to early 3^{rd} century. The only evidence for activity after this date consists of one late 3^{rd} century coin recovered from the subsoil, with the next dated finds being a few sherds of late Saxon pottery found within the topsoil.

Medieval to Post-Medieval

Medieval and post-medieval activity across the site was agricultural in nature. The remains of furrows were revealed in Areas E (G6), C (G8), and A (G7). They were spaced approximately 6-7m apart with G6 orientated east-west and G7 and G8 orientated north-south. In Area C the furrows confirmed the cropmark evidence (Palmer 2008).

Associated with the furrows were two northeast-southwest aligned gullies in Area E (G9). The lack of distinction between the fills of these gullies and the associated furrows (G6) suggests that they were probably contemporary. It seems likely that they provided drainage between the ridge and furrow.

Ordinary domestic pottery types from the medieval and post-medieval periods were recovered across the site, however these were all from topsoil contexts. This included late Saxon St Neots-type ware and a few sherds of glazed or unglazed late medieval orange sandy wares. The latest pieces recovered were a 16th century unglazed fine sandy orange ware bowl rim, and a 17th-18th century Midlands blackware bowl rim.

This area therefore appears to have been utilised for agricultural purposes throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods. This fits with the evidence from the cropmarks, which shows ridge and furrow on a variety of alignments across the landscape.

Modern

A number of modern $(19^{th} - 20^{th} \text{ century})$ features were observed in excavation, and reflect the later use of the landscape for agricultural purposes, followed by its use as a WWII airfield.

Field boundary ditches were observed in Area D. The earliest of these were the two parallel ditches (G12), aligned east-north-east to west-south-west, and containing eight pieces of modern metalwork. These were truncated by a large boundary ditch (G11), which was filled with modern iron machinery parts.

Another large field boundary ditch was observed in Area A (G16). This was aligned northwest to southeast, and had a backfill deposit containing a modern horseshoe (dated by its toe clip to the mid-19th century or later) and glass fragment. Two pits were recorded cutting into the section of the backfilled ditch, and may have been dug to recover some of the backfilled material or to remove vegetation for land clearance.

The alignment of these ditches corresponds to those observed on the 1880 Ordnance Survey Map. G16 and G11 correspond to the northern and eastern boundaries of a small field. This shows that the truncation of G12 by G11 had taken place by the late 19th century. At this date, and until WWII, the site appears to have consisted of a series of small fields, similar to those surrounding the site today.

Archaeological evidence for the latest phase of activity on this site consists of the large circular shapes of culvert drains exposed in Areas A and C. These correspond with the shape of the WWII airfield aprons where the aircraft would have parked. These aprons were situated on spines off the main airfield track.

DISCUSSION

The Romano-British settlement: the excavated evidence

Excavations at Cotton Farm have revealed evidence of a Romano-British farming settlement, in use from the mid-1st century to the later $2^{nd} / 3^{rd}$ century. The regular layout of the ditches excavated in Area B, when compared with the cropmark evidence, indicates it was a 'ladder settlement' leading off the Roman road to the west, of a type regularly observed in this part of Cambridgeshire (such as at Papworth Everard and Childerley Gate). A Romano-British 'ladder settlement' would have consisted of areas of domestic activity, enclosures, paddocks, and fields, generally dominated by a single axis street or trackway, laid out in a regular way, and with different activities concentrated in particular areas.

FIGURE 4

Evidence for the earliest activity on the site is dated to the mid-1st century, and involved the construction of ditches forming the ladder settlement. Artefacts and palaeoenvironmental evidence recovered from these ditches point to domestic activity alongside the rearing of cattle, pig and sheep. Evidence for further activity dating from this period was uncovered to the east, and consisted of probable animal enclosures.

A change to the settlement occurred in the mid- 2^{nd} century, when the existing ditches were backfilled and a new ditch (G3) was constructed. Although this was a deliberate change, the ditch remained on a similar alignment to the earlier ditches. This is most likely to be a result of reorganisation of land within the wider settlement enclosure. Indeed, artefacts recovered from this ditch suggest a continuation of domestic activity,

although the presence of magnetic residues indicates that some form of metalworking activity was taking place in the vicinity at that time.

Based on pottery evidence, ditch G3 was backfilled in the late 2nd century / early 3rd century. That the ditch was deliberately backfilled rather than abandoned to naturally silt up implies that there was a continued use of the landscape during and/or following this period – possibly suggesting that the wider settlement remained in use.

The pottery recovered was largely utilitarian and locally sourced, and represents a typical early Roman domestic assemblage, similar to that recovered from the early Roman rural settlement at Little Paxton (Evans 2011). Many of the coarser wares came from within a 10 mile radius, with finer wares coming from Verulamium or Northamptonshire (within a 40 mile radius). Samian sherds and some of the other fine sherds derived from central and southern Gaul, and the amphora also had a continental origin, but these sherds were few and limited in variety and do 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 shoes.

FIGURE 5

Animal bone evidence indicates the domestication of sheep, pigs, and cattle – a typical assemblage for this period. The age of some of the sheep teeth and bones indicate that some lambs were killed young (and were therefore bred for meat), whereas others died later and may have been bred for wool. Two cattle bones had butchery marks on them, and there was some evidence for the burning of bones probably during the course of roasting.

In contrast, no evidence for agriculture or crop processing was recovered. Similarly, only limited evidence for industrial activity or craft-working was recovered. The magnetic residue from ditch G3 may indicate that some industrial activity was taking place during the later phase of the settlement.

Charred cereal grain included oat, barley spelt, and wheat spelt, all typical of a domestic site. Some wild taxa was also identified, including a single burdock. Small quantities of charcoal, mainly oak and non-oak taxa used for wood fuel, was recovered from all samples. The mollusc assemblage contained a number of species which unsurprisingly indicated an open country habitat.

Although some sherds of Iron Age and transitional wares were recovered on the site, no *in situ* Iron Age features were uncovered. This lack of Iron Age activity may imply that the farmstead did not evolve from an earlier settlement, but was simply created in the post-conquest period. Although, by itself, the sample excavation area is too small to draw such a conclusion, given that the layout of the settlement follows the projected alignment of the Godmanchester-Sandy road it is likely that this is the case.

The landscape in this part of Cambridgeshire in the early Roman period consisted of a series of small farmsteads / settlements, positioned along roads and trackways, and often organised in a ladder layout. Interestingly, many of these do not appear to have had Iron Age antecedents, as at Cotton Farm, suggesting that these settlements developed in the Roman period, possibly in relation to the Roman roads.

For example, evidence of settlement and agricultural enclosures positioned along a trackway (a 'ladder settlement'), was revealed at Summersfield, Papworth Everard, c.4km to the south east of the site (Patten 2009). At Little Paxton Quarry (c.3km to the west), a Romano-British farmstead was uncovered, which was replaced in the early 2nd century by a new settlement contained within a ladder-shaped enclosure and surrounded by ditches. This was later replaced by a new field system laid out on an entirely different axis (Jones 2011). At Childerley Gate Farm, c.5km to the south-east on the A428, a planned 2nd century ladder system was excavated (Abrams 2008).

The Roman-British settlement: location and layout

The way in which people use the landscape varies from period to period with the location, extent and layout of human activity being influenced by both natural and manmade factors. The factors affecting the layout of the Romano-British settlement and subsequent activity are considered below.

Within the man-made landscape, the Romano-British settlement is positioned *c*.5km to the south of the Roman town of *Durovigutum* (now Godmanchester) which would have been the area's main market centre. The area was served by several known Roman roads (and presumably numerous other unknown trackways), with the projected line of the Sandy to Godmanchester Road running along the western side of the site. A number of other Roman settlements have been identified in the vicinity of Godmanchester and it is notable that many of these, such as Papworth Everard and Childerley Gate Farm, are positioned along roads. It is therefore likely that a major influence on the location of Cotton Farm settlement was its close proximity to roads, which would have provided easy access to markets at Godmanchester and Sandy.

FIGURE 6

The general positioning of the Romano-British settlement was also influenced by the local topography. The site lies on a plateau at c.54mOD, with land steadily falling to the north, east, and west. The settlement enclosure was positioned at the north-western edge of this plateau, overlooking the surrounding land. Proximity to water-supplies would also have been a necessary influence on the location of any rural settlement. The stream through Great Paxton / Toseland moat is positioned c.300m to the south of the Roman-British settlement, with another stream (through Bullers Farm) only 400m to the north. One further stream is located 600m to the west of the site. These are all tributaries of the Great Ouse, the main river, some 2km to the west. The slightly elevated topography is also likely to have afforded some protection from seasonal flooding from these watercourses.

FIGURE 7

However, despite the settlement being broadly positioned on an area of higher ground, its layout does not 'fit' exactly within the plateau. If the settlement had been entirely laid out according to the lay of the land, it would be expected to be orientated east-west and potentially slightly further to the south. Instead, the alignment of the Roman ditches excavated in Area B and those identified via cropmarks is broadly west-north-west to east-south-east. This layout was set parallel with and perpendicular to the projected line

of the Roman Sandy to Godmanchester road, implying that this road had a more defining influence over the specific layout of this settlement.

The settlement was in a position of natural advantages - close enough to natural water courses to be useful, yet sufficiently elevated to avoid seasonal flooding. However, the specifics of the design and layout of the settlement were primarily influenced by the line of the Sandy to Godmanchester road, and it is this which is believed to have had the more defining influence over both the location and layout of the settlement.

The post-Roman landscape

In contrast to the Romano-British settlement, the layout of medieval ridge and furrow was entirely influenced by natural landscape features, with the furrows being aligned perpendicular to the lines of watercourses in order to facilitate drainage. This is expected when developing an agricultural landscape which needed to utilise the natural resources as effectively as possible.

Late 19th century mapping reveals that the site contained north-south aligned rows of relatively small fields which survive as sub-surface remains field boundaries (e.g. G16, G11, and G12). These were on broadly the same alignments as the extant field systems to the north and south of the airfield. The layout and alignment of this 19th century field system reflects the alignment of medieval agricultural landscape, with the area of ridge and furrow identified from cropmarks in the eastern part of the site (CHER: 18982) and the furrows revealed by excavation in Area C broadly reflecting the later post-medieval field boundaries in this area. These alignments therefore demonstrate that, despite the huge changes wrought by the process of enclosure in the 19th century, the medieval landscape still influences the layout of the extant agricultural landscape in this general area.

The most obvious feature influencing the extant layout of the site is the WWII airfield, which obliterated the previous field layout. Natural topography informed the decision to locate the airfield on this site.

CONCLUSION

Archaeological investigations at Cotton Farm revealed evidence of a landscape exploited from the Roman period through to the modern day. The palimpsest landscape evinced by cropmarks and excavated remains demonstrates that there were numerous influences on the patterns of land use and layout on this site over the course of history, with different factors being more or less important at different times - man-made features in the Roman period, natural features in the medieval/post-medieval agricultural phase, and the man-made factors which led to the creation of the WWII airfield.

Although the Romano-British settlement did take advantage of the natural geography, the road-network and transport connections to Godmanchester would have been considered vital, such that the settlement was most likely positioned with reference to roads. In contrast, the agrarian landscape of the medieval and post-medieval periods required that topography and watercourses dictated land use. Socio-economic factors reasserted themselves with the enclosure of fields in the 18th and 19th centuries, although

these changes retained the medieval alignments which made use of the natural landforms – indeed, a semblance of this layout is still reflected in fields to the north and south of the site. Most recently, the WWII airfield caused huge changes to the landscape within its boundaries, although its location and layout nevertheless made use of the natural plateau.

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