

May Farm, Littleport, Cambridgeshire

Archaeological Monitoring and Recording



Hayley Roberts

CAMBRIDGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



**Archaeological Monitoring,
May Farm, Littleport**

Hayley Roberts

Illustrations by Bryan Crossant

**Cambridge Archaeological Unit
University of Cambridge
Department of Archaeology**

April 2012

**Report No. 1086
Event No. ECB 3700
Site Code MFL11**

Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	4
<i>Location, Topography, Palaeoenvironmental History</i>	4
<i>and Geology</i>	
<i>Archaeological Background</i>	4
<i>Methodology</i>	5
Results	6
Discussion	7
Conclusion	7
References	12

List of Figures

Figure 1. Location Map	8
Figure 2. Section showing environmental deposits	9
Figure 3. Images demonstrating the variety bog oaks	10
Figure 4. A small tree throw	11

Summary

In April 2012 a programme of archaeological monitoring and recording was instigated at May Farm, Littleport. The excavation of deep water lagoons allowed for the observation of the fen deposits although no buried soil horizons, archaeological features or artefacts were encountered.

Introduction

From the 10th to the 19th of April 2012 Cambridge Archaeological Unit undertook a scheme of Archaeological Recording and Monitoring at May Farm, White House Road, Littleport. This was commissioned by CgMS Consulting, on behalf of Barway Farms, in advance of the development of a mushroom farm and anaerobic digestion plant. It was a response to a request by Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Team (planning application ref 11/00447/FUM, Gdaniec 2011). The recording and monitoring followed a specification set out by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (Beadsmoore 2012) and CgMs (Flitcroft 2012).

Location, Topography, Palaeoenvironmental History and Geology

The site is located approximately 3km from Littleport, north of the Junction of Mildenhall Road (A1101) and White House Road (Figure 1). It is situated within low lying arable fenland, with an approximate height of -2m OD and is part of an area known as Burnt Fen. The Little Ouse is currently located approximately 3km to the north east although aerial photographs show former watercourses running close to the site. The actual site itself is within a basin, edged by rodden and sand and gravel banks.

Previous work by Waller (1993) and Wheeler (1992) have shown that across this landscape early deposits of peat were laid down by fen carr woodland followed by sedge reed bed. Marine conditions were then created by the inundation of water, which laid the 'Fen Clay'. As the area started to dry out this was then followed by a further growth of peat. From the C17th onwards a program of drainage across the fens resulted in the drying out and shrinking of the final peat layer, which has left a thin layer of dark peaty soil remaining as topsoil. A more detailed summary of the palaeoenvironmental history of this area of the fens is further detailed in Farrell & Lillie 2011 and Smith & Lillie 2011. The underlying geology is Kimmeridge Clay.

Archaeological Background

The archaeological background for May Farm has been documented by Flitcroft (2011) in a desk-based assessment for the development.

During early prehistory much of the landscape would have been wetland (Fen Carr and Sedge Fen). The landscape would have also been characterised by open watercourses and isolated areas of slightly higher, drier land on the sand and gravel ridges. Peacocks Farm is a site of some note about 3km away. It demonstrates the potential for early prehistoric (Mesolithic and Neolithic) archaeology to remain preserved below the stratigraphic layers on a sand ridge. Neolithic flint artefacts have also been discovered as stray finds within the vicinity of the development.

As part of the Fenland Survey roddens and ridges in the area were field walked but no evidence was found for archaeological activity in the areas closest to the site under investigation (Waller 1993).

Around 4350BP marine flooding covered the area creating marshes and mud flats. Although this event was not asynchronous across the fens it is assumed that it is roughly true for May Farm. This landscape would also have been quite inhospitable, making any rises in the landscape the focus for human activity.

During the Anglo Saxon and Medieval period the sea receded allowing the formation of peat again. The area was drained in 1652 when the land was first used for agriculture.

Evidence of land management for agricultural purposes during the C18th-19th was found during an evaluation of the proposed development area (Boyer 2011). May Farm itself was established from at least the beginning of the C20th.

Methodology

The work was carried out in full accordance with the IFAs Codes of Conduct (IFA 2009) and Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs and Excavations (Gurney 2003). It was completed according to the specification prepared by Emma Beadsmoore (2012), which in turn was a response to the written scheme of investigation (Flitcroft 2012).

The program of works consisted of monitoring the extraction of a deep water lagoon of about 3500 m². A 29 tonne machine was used with a large but flat bladed bucket to remove the deposits. The layers were monitored for archaeological remains and the sequences uncovered recorded. The spoil heaps were searched for artefacts and the base of the excavation monitored for negative archaeological features.

Health and safety concerns caused by scale of the extraction, the height of the excavation sides and the size of the machine slightly hindered the monitoring process but did not affect the final results.

Results

The palaeoenvironmental sequence was profiled across the excavation area and does not vary significantly from that outlined by Smith & Lillie (2011) within the excavation area (Boreholes 8, 12 & 13).

Directly on top of Kimmeridge Clay was a band of coarse grey sand. In places this was mixed in the clay and is thought to be of fluvial glacial origin. It had an average thickness of 0.20m. No archaeological features or artefacts were observed to be cutting these layers and no artefacts were found associated with it.

On top of this sand was a layer of peat averaging 0.70m thick. It was a bright brownish orange in colour, which faded to a much darker brown upon contact with the air. The peat also had a particularly pungent sulphurous odour, indicating the semi decomposed nature of the organics. Within this peat were large quantities of reeds as well as several large 'bog oaks'. These varied in shape and dimension, some up to 7m long and intact with roots and branches. These were often lying horizontal in the peat, although a couple were upright and visible in the lower alluvial layer- see Figure 3. Measuring the root systems accurately was not possible, as they were always discovered and removed by machine before inspection was practical, they did not appear extensive. Occasionally they had reached through the peat into the clay and created a thin organic deposit consisting of dark grey sandy silt. This was recorded where it appeared to represent individual trees- see Figure 4. None of the timbers showed evidence of human working. No artefacts or features were observed within this layer.

On top of the peat was Fen Clay was visible in two bands, both averaged 1m in thickness. The lower was grey blue, fine silt with evidence of lamination. Above this the clay was courser, with a higher sand content and appeared orangey brown (oxidised) with clearer laminations. Some organics were also visible. Cutting into the upper clay were several modern field drains, of both ceramic and plastic varieties.

The most recent deposit was the peaty topsoil, dark brownish grey, very organic clayey silt. No archaeological features were present.

Discussion

The excavation of such depth into fen deposits creates a chance to observe any evidence of archaeological activity that may still remain preserved below and within the environmental deposits. Buried soil horizons can be particularly informative and will remain preserved by the deposits above them. Their relationship to the peat and Fen Clay can be particularly helpful in trying to date events within the fen landscape.

On this occasion no horizons or archaeology activities were observed, supporting the theory that this particular part of the landscape was unattractive to prehistoric people and that although they may have passed through they did not settle or leave any trace of their presence. This is probably due to the inhospitable conditions; the lack of dry land as evidenced by the peat and fen clay. This is in contrast to Peacock's Farm at Shippea Hill where the drier (and higher) land surfaces created a much more attractive and practical place to spend time (Clark 1935).

Conclusion

No evidence for buried soil horizons was revealed and no archaeological features or artefacts were discovered within the excavation area. The palaeoenvironmental evidence complements previous work and the understanding of the site. No further investigation within the excavation area is required.

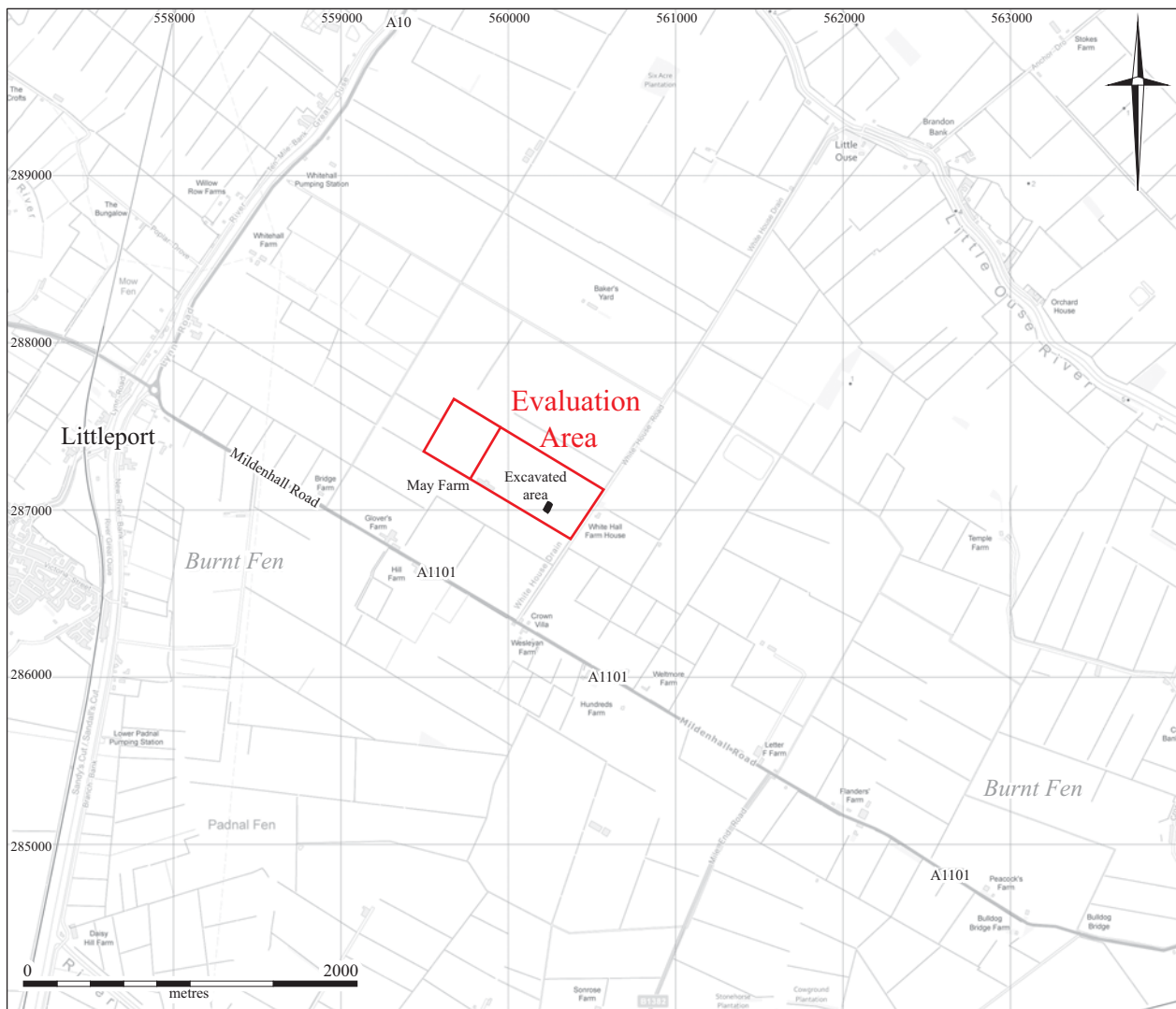


Figure 1. Location plan.

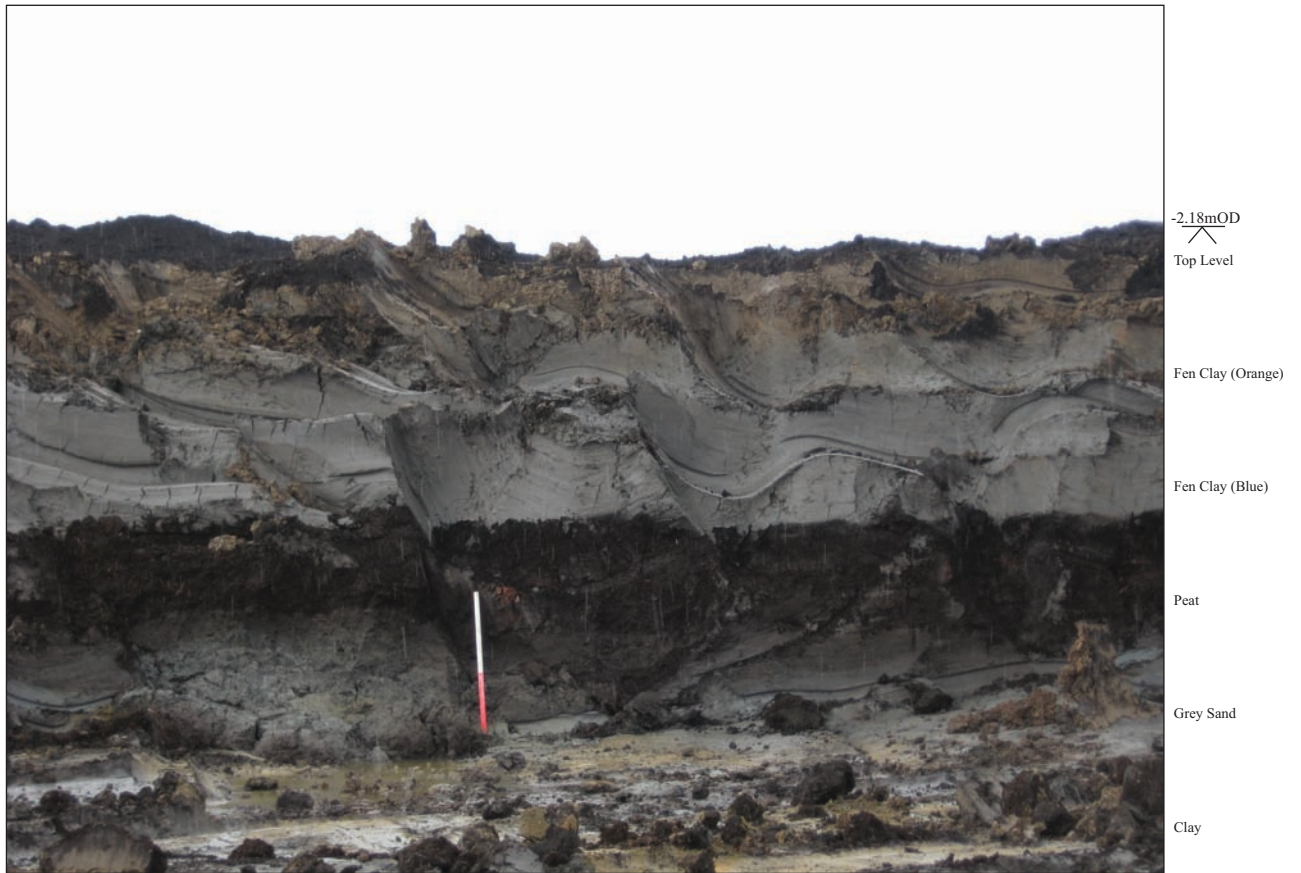


Figure 2. Photograph of representative section, East facing (top soil removed).



Figure 3. Examples of the bog oaks.



Figure 4. Photograph of tree throw.

References

- Beadsmoore, 2012. A Specification for a programme of Archaeological Works. Land at May Farm, Littleport, Cambridgeshire. Cambridge Archaeological Unit.
- Boyer, P. 2011. May Farm, Mildenhall Road, Littleport, Cambridgeshire. Pre-Construct Archaeology.
- Clark, JGD, Godwin, H & Clifford, MH, 1935. Report on recent excavations at Peacock's Farm, Shippea Hill, Cambridgeshire. Antiquity 15, 284-319
- Flitcroft, M. 2011. Archaeological Desk Based Assessment: Land at May Farm, Littleport, Cambridgeshire. London: CgMS Consulting Limited.
- Flitcroft, M. 2012. Written Scheme of Investigation for a Programme of Archaeological Works. Land at May Farm, White House Road, Littleport. CgMS.
- Gdaniec, K. 2011. Brief for Archaeological Evaluation, May Farm, Mildenhall Road, Littleport. Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Team.
- Gurney, D. 2003. Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England. EAA Occasional Paper No. 14.
- Institute for Archaeologists. 2009. Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Brief and Excavations. Institute for Archaeologists.
- Smith, R. & Lillie, M. 2011. Geoarchaeological Investigation on Land at May Farm, Littleport, Cambridgeshire. London: CgMS Consulting Limited.
- Farrell, M. & Lillie, M. 2001. Sedimentological and Palynological Investigations at May Farm, Littleport, Cambridgeshire. Wetland Archaeology and Environments Research Centre, University of Hull.
- Waller, M.1993. The Fenland Project, No. 9: Flandrian Environmental Change in Fenland. East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 70. Cambridge: Cambridgeshire County Council 137-41.
- Wheeler, A.J. 1992. Vegetational succession, acidification and allogenic events as recorded in Flandrian peat deposits from an isolated Fenland Embayment. New Phytologist 122: 745-56.

OASIS DATA COLLECTION FORM: England

[List of Projects](#) | [Manage Projects](#) | [Search Projects](#) | [New project](#) | [Change your details](#) | [HER coverage](#) | [Change country](#) | [Log out](#)

Printable version

OASIS ID: cambridg3-124000

Project details

Project name	Archaeological Monitoring at May Farm, Littleport
Short description of the project	In April 2012 a programme of archaeological monitoring and recording was instigated at May Farm, Littleport. The excavation of deep water lagoons allowed for the observation of the fen deposits although no buried soil horizons, archaeological features or artefacts were encountered.
Project dates	Start: 10-04-2012 End: 19-04-2012
Previous/future work	Yes / Yes
Any associated project reference codes	ECB3700 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	11/00447/FUM - Planning Application No.
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	None
Current Land use	Industry and Commerce 1 - Industrial
Monument type	BURIED LAND SURFACE Uncertain
Significant Finds	ALLUVIUM Uncertain
Significant Finds	PALEOSOL Uncertain
Methods & techniques	'Visual Inspection'
Development type	Extensive green field commercial development (e.g. shopping centre, business park, science park, etc.)
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPS
Position in the planning process	After full determination (eg. As a condition)

Project location

Country	England
---------	---------

Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE LITTLEPORT May Farm, Littleport
Postcode	CB6 1EE
Study area	3500.00 Kilometres
Site coordinates	558500 287500 558500 00 00 N 287500 00 00 E Point
Lat/Long Datum	Unknown
Height OD / Depth	Min: -7.00m Max: -2.00m

Project creators

Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Local Authority Archaeologist and/or Planning Authority/advisory body
Project design originator	Emma Beadsmoore
Project director/manager	Emma Beadsmoore
Project supervisor	Hayley Roberts
Type of sponsor/funding body	Landowner
Name of sponsor/funding body	Barway Farms

Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Digital Archive ID	MFL11
Digital Contents	'none'
Digital Media available	'GIS','Spreadsheets','Text'
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Paper Archive ID	MFL11
Paper Contents	'none'
Paper Media available	'Context sheet','Notebook - Excavation',' Research',' General Notes'

Project bibliography 1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	Archaeological Monitoring at May Farm, Littleport
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Roberts, H
Other bibliographic details	Report no 1086
Date	2012
Issuer or publisher	CAU
Place of issue or publication	Cambridge
Description	Short ring bound report

Entered by Hayley Roberts (hr270@cam.ac.uk)
Entered on 20 April 2012

OASIS:

Please e-mail [English Heritage](#) for OASIS help and advice

© ADS 1996-2012 Created by [Jo Gilham and Jen Mitcham, email](#) Last modified Wednesday 9 May 2012

Cite only: <http://www.oasis.ac.uk/form/print.cfm> for this page