

Must Farm, Whittlesey 2010

Palaeochannel Investigations



Interim Statement

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Excavation of a 60m length of the Must Farm palaeochannel exposed a whole new set of preserved wooden structures and objects including felled trees, fish-traps and fish weirs. Situated to the west and upstream from the Must Farm platform site, the channel also produced a new collection of late Bronze Age metalwork finds including a bronze spear still attached to its haft, an unusual tin cone and a decorated 'pewter' strap-end. The quality of preservation and contextual detail continue to emphasise the extraordinary potential of this deeply buried prehistoric water course.

Introduction and Background

In 2006 the timber platform site that survived within the southern edge of the Must Farm quarry pit was assessed in fine detail within a single north-south transect (Trench B; Gibson & Knight 2010). The trench demonstrated that the site comprised an intricate pattern of vertical piles and posts built across a later Bronze Age palaeochannel. It also demonstrated that the quarry pit had removed almost all of the northern side of the channel along with any associated structures or deposits. Consequently, the trench presented a perpendicular plan and section of only one part of the southern half of the palaeochannels former profile. Despite offering only half of the story, the trench did reveal a vivid sequence of 'natural' channel sediments interspersed with residues of 'cultural' events connected with the vertical posts. Collapsed structural timbers, fish traps and preserved footprints represented some of the early events, whilst higher up, a mass of charred timbers and burnt objects including whole pots, metalwork and textiles, marked a dramatic end to the sites inhabitation. Subsequently, thick bands of riverine sediments ensured that the site remained waterlogged.

Crucially, the sheer density or complexity of features and deposits meant that it was not always possible to separate those discrete to the platform, in all of its various manifestations, from those related to the channel at large. That is, because our focus was very much on the platform, everything we found in its vicinity was understood as being related to the platform rather the channel in general.

The 2009 palaeochannel investigations (Figure 1) presented a chance to explore the character of the channel away from the platform (Knight 2010). It also represented the first real opportunity to excavate a complete sequence across the whole width of the former water course. The investigation area was situated on the adjacent western edge of the old quarry pit and about 100m upstream from the platform. In 2004 an evaluation trench was positioned across the same section of the channel in order to assess its archaeological potential and in particular to see if it contained similar structures to those revealed at the platform site. The trench located the channel and demonstrated an absence of uprights or obvious archaeological deposits but, because of problems with inrushing water, it only achieved a rudimentary record of the channel and its sedimentary history.

In 2009 the channel was excavated using a tracked 360⁰ machine. The methodology involved stripping blocks across the channel down through the deposits in controlled spits. Each spit was metal detected and control baulks were established at regular

intervals. The stepped nature of the excavation also enabled the establishment of a 'master' section to articulate the channel history and at the same time allow a full environmental/preservation sample sequence.

The 2009 stretch of channel turned out to be archaeologically quiet. Absent were the oak piles or enclosing palisades and absent were the rich arrays of fire affected artefacts and floating structural debris. Apart from a couple of small diameter stakes, a lump of worked wood (a possible barrel stave) and eight pieces of disarticulated human bone the most impressive aspect or achievement of these investigations was the production of a full channel section. The scale of the concurrent quarry working enabled a section through the entire fen sequence and demonstrated the relationship between the channel, the roddon and the underlying fen deposits.

The 2010 palaeochannel investigations employed the same methodological approach as before. In roughly 9m wide blocks, the channel was machine excavated in controlled 40cm spits (the depth of the spits being determined by the 'reach' of the metal detector). This was carried out over a length of 60m with 'control' baulks being left *in situ* at approximately twenty metre intervals. Based on the results of the 2009 investigation the principal aim was to establish a complete sediment sequence and at the same time locate any associated anthropogenic features or deposits.

Summary of results

As previously the channel was perched off-centre at the top of the roddon. Its profile was asymmetrical (steep southern edge and a gentle northern edge) and a slight step in its basal profile mirrored by an asymmetrical infill sequence which demonstrated that the channel had migrated northwards over time. The deposition sequence suggested that an exaggerated meander in the stream course had caused silts to accumulate along its inner edge (south) whilst the channel cut or eroded its outer edge (north). The migration of the channel was also reflected in an upwards as well as sideways movement which resulted in the final channel profile being situated high-up and tight to the northern edge of the section. Its fill sequence included a twig-rich basal fill followed by a thick, relatively sterile, silt band. This in turn was covered by a shell-rich deposit before bands of silt, crushed shell and woody masses formed. Above these layers lay a laminated sequence made up of thin bands of silt, crushed shell and preserved willow leaves. By this point the channel had moved from south to north and a 'bed' of articulated mussel shells lined its base. Cleaner silts accumulated above the shells until finally a dark grey silt deposit choked the last vestige of the channel. The temporal dynamic or trajectory to the channel fills was both northwards and upwards. The dynamic worked in such a way that features and deposits found close to the surface along the southern side of the channel could be much earlier in time than those at the bottom of the channel along the northern side (Figure 2).

Unlike the previous year, the 2010 metal detecting survey immediately located several pieces of metalwork including a bronze spear still attached to its haft (Plate 1), a small thin metal cone, two bronze rings and a hollow lead/tin alloy bag-shaped strap-end remarkably similar to three pewter pieces found at the Flag Fen, Power Station excavations (Coombs 2001). All of the metalwork came from above the first shell-rich horizon at about -2.00m OD.

Below the shell-rich deposits a series of wooden posts were encountered and these were found to be part of an arrangement of fish weirs that crossed the main body of the channel. Preserved sections of wattle hurdles were located between the uprights and these formed the principal barriers for the weirs (Plate 1). Some of the uprights had been driven deep into the base of the channel and were of such a diameter that they were comparable to some of the major posts associated with the platform to the east.

Sections of the fish weirs clearly superimposed a set of four fish-traps located along the centre and southern side of the channel. The traps had a collapsed or split-open basket appearance and three of the traps were triangular in plan (Plate 1). Excavation of two of the examples showed them to be baskets within baskets.

Also located against the southern edge of the channel and at about the same level as the traps were a collection of felled trees all of which were oriented along the stream edge (Plate 1). These comprised whole trunks measuring up to 9m in length with felled ends and trimmed side branches. The trees varied in diameter (0.30-0.70m). Bark was missing from the exposed surfaces of the trees but present where they had settled in the underlying silt. As well as finding posts within the channel, two posts were found cutting into the top of the southern roddon bank.

The asymmetric sediment sequence was mirrored by the levels of preservation. So, for instance, the fish weirs were at their most intact along the southern half of the channel where the early silts were also at their deepest. Similarly, an absence of fish traps along the northern side could actually be an attribute of the erosion caused by the channel migrating northwards. In this sense there was an apparent lop-sidedness to preservation which consistently favoured things located on the southern side of the channel.

The 2010 palaeochannel excavations produced the most complete or best understood channel section to date and at the same time presented a remarkable 'off-site' or off-platform view of inhabitation of a late Bronze Age stream. Components of this off-platform world corresponded with elements of the platform demonstrating an important relationship between the two sites (Figure 3). Commensurate with the main phases of the Flag Fen post-alignment and platform the Must Farm palaeochannel continues to demonstrate the intensity and density of wetland timber architecture and associated deposition within the Flag Fen basin during the later Bronze Age.

References

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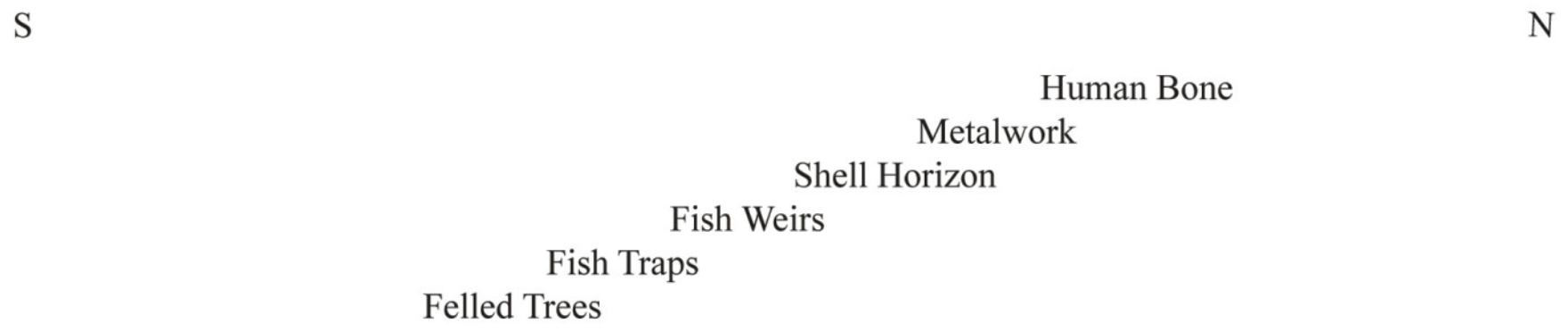
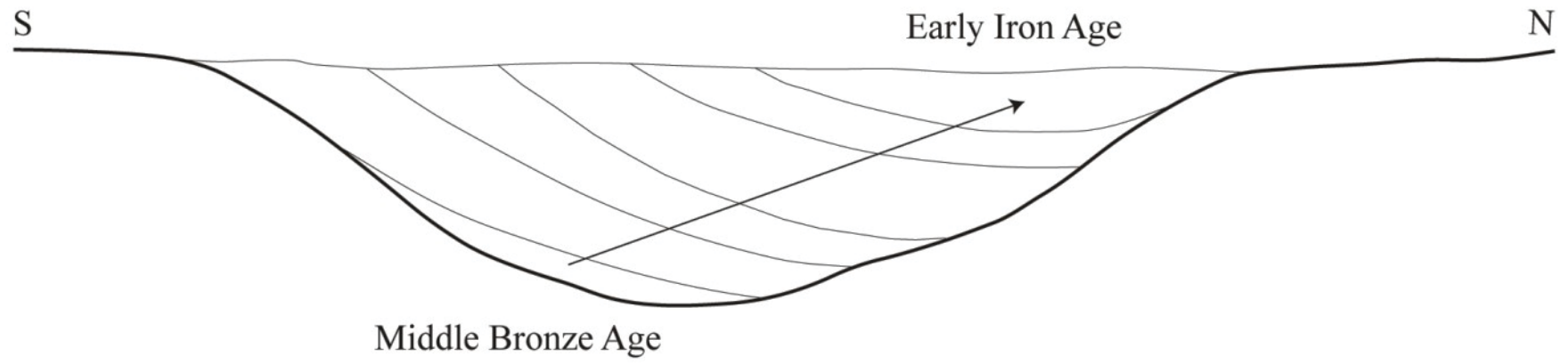


Figure 2: 'Meander' chronology and feature/deposit sequence

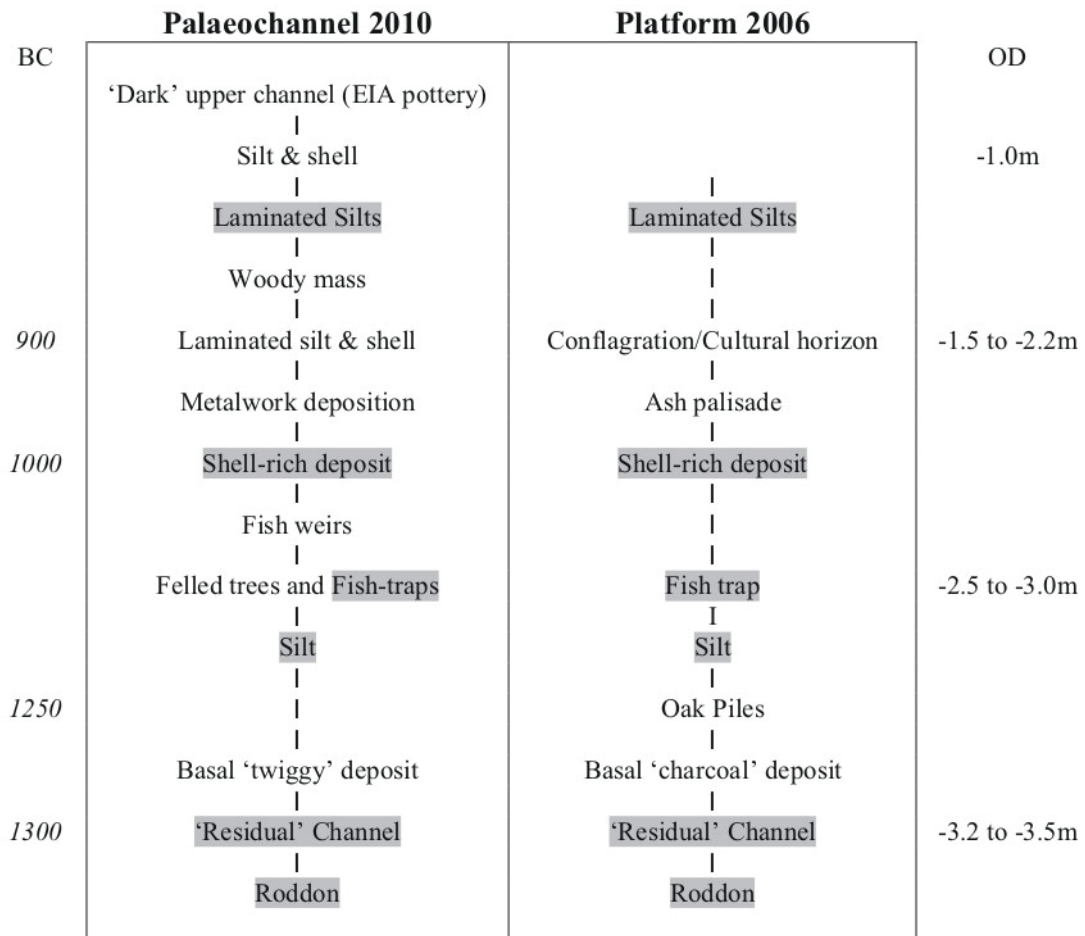


Figure 3: Deposit correspondence between palaeochannel (2010) and platform (2006)



Plate 1: Hafted Spear (top), Fish Weir (middle), Fish Trap & Felled Tree (bottom)