

Audley End, Saffron Walden, Essex

Archaeological Monitoring of Flood Alleviation Works



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AUDLEY END, SAFFRON WALDON, ESSEX:

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Summary

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook archaeological monitoring of works to alleviate the flooding of parkland to the east of the Barn and Stable yard complex within the grounds of Audley End House, Essex, between the 18th and 25th June 2013. No archaeological remains or artefacts predating the late post-medieval period were observed.

INTRODUCTION

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook the archaeological monitoring of works to alleviate the flooding of parkland to the east of the Barn and Stable yard complex within the grounds of Audley End House, Essex, between the 18th June 2013 and 25th June 2013. The monitoring was commissioned by English Heritage with the aim of establishing and recording the presence, date, condition and significance of any archaeological remains.

Location and Topography

The area of works was located approximately 200 metres north of Audley End House and 100 metres to the east of the River Cam (TL 524 384; figure 1). The Audley End estate is located on the chalk escarpments of North Essex with the house, grounds and ancillary buildings being situated in the base of the Cam valley. The river Cam flows northwards at this point forming a narrow alluvial silt plain with adjacent outcrops of poorly sorted gravels on higher ground (British Geological Survey Sheet 205). The slopes of the valley are formed by chalk deposits. The northward flow of the Cam at this point may have been the result of glacial action during the last Ice age altering the southwards flow of the river network at this point towards the River Stour (Sparks 1957) to a northerly flow.

Archaeological and Historical Background

The area of works lies within the grounds of the English Heritage property of Audley End House (SAM 84, HER 401). A full description of the archaeological potential of the Audley End site is given in the conservation plan (Oxford Archaeological Unit 2001); further details of the Gardens, Yards and associated outbuildings are given in Standring and Williams (2005) and Webb (2010). A brief summary only of the archaeological background is given here.

The earliest activity recorded for Audley End in the Essex HER records is a Mesolithic tranchet axe (HER 400). Cropmarks recorded to the north of the Audley End Gardens are possibly that of a Bronze Age ring-ditch, although they have not been tested by excavation (HER 7308). In the vicinity of the ring-ditch, field walking has recovered lithic scatters (HER 6749, 6750), indicating the potential of the Cam-side gravels for prehistoric settlement and ritual activity. Later prehistoric settlement is evidenced by Ring Hill Camp (SAM 20726, HER 151), an oval hillfort c. 0.6km to the west of the site, thought to date to the Early Iron Age. Iron Age pottery was also recovered during field walking in the 1980s by T. Williamson (Way 2004) c. 300m to the north of the hillfort (HER 6734, 6735, 6736) and thought to indicate the presence of nearby settlement.

The Yards and Gardens of Audley End lie just to the east of the projected route of a Roman road (HER 17338). Fieldwalking to the west of the road at TL 5160 3870 identified scatters of Roman pottery thought to relate to a settlement (HER 6737, 6738, 6739). Undated crop marks c. 300m to the north of the Mill Yard may also date to the Roman period (HER 7308), indicating the potential for encountering roadside activity to the east of the projected road course. Roman activity on the east bank of the river Cam in the vicinity of the Lion Lodge is evidenced by the discovery of coins, pottery and possibly a pottery kiln in the immediate vicinity of Audley End House (HER 399). Although no remains of the Saxon period are recorded nearby, the floodplain of the River Cam is known as an area of high potential for Early Saxon settlement.

Audley End house occupies the site of the Benedictine Abbey of Walden, originally a priory founded in 1139, becoming an abbey in 1190. The Abbey was rebuilt and new buildings added in the 13th and 14th centuries. Following the dissolution in 1538 the buildings passed to Sir Thomas Audley who remodelled the buildings to form his private house. The building passed to his grandson Thomas Howard (first Earl of Suffolk and Lord Treasurer) who rebuilt the structure to allow for entertaining James I. At this point the house was on the scale of a great royal palace. The house was purchased by Charles II in 1668 for his use when attending the races at Newmarket. After neglect by the King the house returned to the Suffolks in 1701. Major phases of remodelling followed involving demolition of the outer courtyard reducing Audley End to a manageable country house rather than a palace. In 1762 Sir John Griffin inherited the house and employed Robert Adam to do works on the house and some garden monuments, largely creating the grand house seen today. Despite the changes, it is known that parts of the house rise from the walls of the Benedictine church and cloister, suggesting continuity between the Abbey and both phases of the house. The extensive grounds and gardens have seen many phase or remodelling including formal 17th century gardens, the creation of the extensive parkland by Capability Brown in the 18th century, and the construction of the Victorian Parterre gardens. The route of the River Cam/Granta was fortified during World War Two as part of the GHQ stop line which was designed to halt mechanized invasion. Bridges across the river at Audley End were fortified and mined, including the Tea Bridge to the immediate west of the Mill Yard (HER 10220, 10221). The HER records concrete anti-tank blocks that would have been used to block Duck Street. The House was used as the headquarters of the Polish Section of the Special Operations Executive with the Stable Block being employed as an explosives store.

Methodology

The objective of the watching brief was to determine the presence or absence and character of any surviving archaeology within the area of works. The pits and trenches were excavated by hand by the contractor. All work in archaeologically sensitive areas was carried out under archaeological supervision. Any potential archaeological features were investigated. The recording was carried out following the CAU modified MoLAS system (Spence 1990) of archaeological site recording. All work was carried out in accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation and with the recommendations of FAME (Allen & Holt 2002). In total an area of approximately 36 square meters (two channels 25m x 0.4m, one channel 40m x 0.4m) was monitored.

RESULTS

The works monitored comprised of three parallel channels aligned northeast – southwest, approximately 25 metres in length and 0.40m metres in width. The function of the channels was to accommodate the installation of pipes to drain a low-lying area of standing water within the parkland. The initial cutting of the channels, to a depth of 0.25 metres, allowed the standing water to drain into an adjacent watercourse. This initial cut exposed a silty humic topsoil. The only material encountered during this phase of work was residual late post-medieval and modern construction debris.

As the level in the area of standing water dropped it was required to deepen the channels to more effectively drain the area. The two eastern most channels were excavated to a depth of 0.40m exposing the top of sub soil in places however, as water was still flowing through the channels detailed study could not be undertaken.

Although the eastern half of the low-lying area was drained, the western section still retained standing water. Investigation by the contractors revealed a further area of standing water to the south that was probably the result of faulty drainage and most likely the source of the water flowing into the area being worked. To remedy this situation the most westerly channel was extended to 40m long and its depth increased to 0.70m. Once the works were completed the site was left to dry out for several days.

Upon returning to the site the area of standing water had largely dried out with a slight flow remaining through the westerly channel. Examination of the dried out channels revealed a silty topsoil overlying a sandy silt with occasional fragments of building debris within it. Further examination of the central channel by hand excavation revealed a layer of compacted building rubble overlying a chalk surface.

At the north-eastern end of the exposed chalk surface a thin lens of chalk was observed in the section; excavation of this layer at its northern extent revealed an underlying grey silty clay layer. At the southwestern end of the channel the exposed chalk surface continued to a depth of at least 0.40 metres. Whilst these observations were being made the manager of the contractors team returned to the site and confirmed the man made nature of the underlying strata with a comment that he remembered "capping an area of swampy ground with a D9 about thirty years ago" (Steve Todd pers. comm.). The nature and composition of the exposed layers would match the outlined scenario. The extent of the chalk layers revealed in all three trenches would suggest that other than the area immediately adjacent to the water course and occupied by reed beds, all the ground was in the main made-up ground of recent origin. Further archaeological investigation of the chalk surface was discontinued.

DISCUSSION

The work revealed no findings earlier than the late post-medieval period, however the shallow depth reached and the evidence of previous disturbance in the area mean that the results cannot be projected to imply a lack of earlier archaeology per se.

Acknowledgements

Field observations were made by the author, the project was managed for CAU by Alison Dickens. The work was arranged for English Heritage by Justin Bain and monitored by Debbie Priddy. Thanks to the contractors, who were immensely helpful, particularly Steve Todd.

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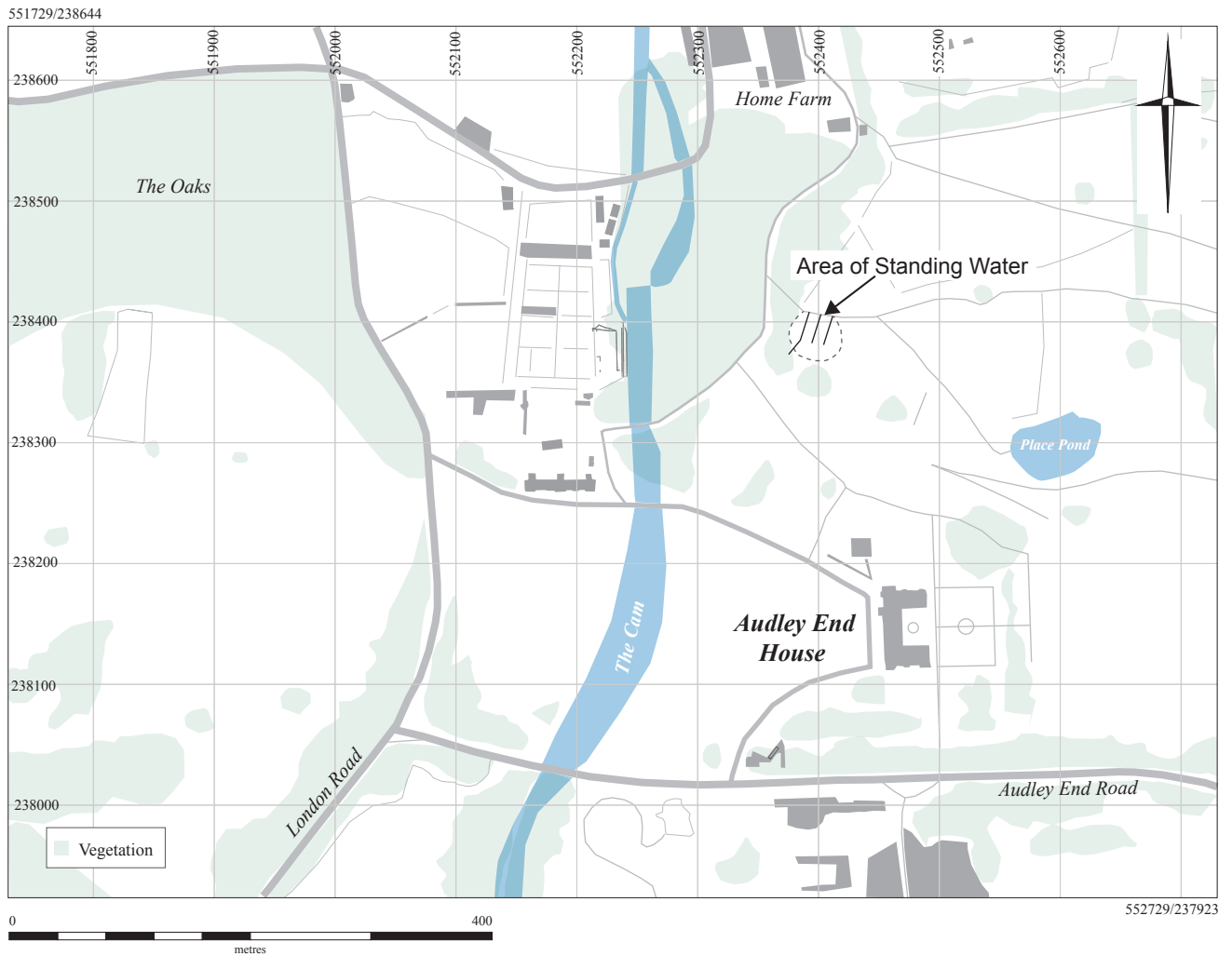


Figure 1. Location Within Audley End Estate



Figure 2: View of area of standing water looking south towards Audley End house. Source of leak is under trees to the right of the frame



Figure 3: Section showing compacted chalk surface overlain by building debris in middle channel

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Project details

Project name	Archaeological Monitoring of Flood Alleviation Works at Audley End, Saffron Walden, Essex
Short description of the project	The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook archaeological monitoring of works to alleviate the flooding of parkland to the east of the Barn and Stable yard complex within the grounds of Audley End House, Essex, between the 18th and 25th June 2013. No archaeological remains or artefacts predating the late post-medieval period were observed.
Project dates	Start: 18-06-2013 End: 25-06-2013
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	AUD13 - Sitecode
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	Scheduled Monument (SM)
Current Land use	Community Service 2 - Leisure and recreational buildings
Monument type	NONE None
Significant Finds	NONE None
Investigation type	"Watching Brief"
Prompt	Requested by English Heritage

Project location

Country	England
Site location	ESSEX UTTLESFORD SAFFRON WALDEN Audley End House
Postcode	CB11 4JJ
Study area	0 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 524 384 52 0 52 01 21 N 000 13 17 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 49.00m Max: 49.00m

Project creators

Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	English Heritage/Department of Environment
Project design originator	Alison Dickens
Project director/manager	Alison Dickens
Project supervisor	David Webb
Type of sponsor/funding body	English Heritage
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