THE COLLEGE OF WEST ANGLIA,
ELM HIGH ROAD, WISBECH

An Archaeological Evaluation

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Introduction

The proposed development area (PDA) comprised c.5.58 hectares of land within the College of West Anglia Elm High Road campus in Wisbech (site centre at grid reference TF 4712 0853). The land in question consists of a *c*. 350m long by 85m wide rectangular strip bordered on both sides by modern houses, and along the southern edge by an access track from the buildings and classrooms of the agricultural college at its west end, close to the main gates (Figure 1). At the eastern end of the strip a public footpath and cycle path leads to further buildings associated with Isle College.

The land being evaluated by the test pitting is currently put over to agriculture; at its western end (just east of the glasshouses) this contained a number of rows of experimental plantings of hedging shrubs, willow and fruit bushes, whilst beyond this small ploughed field put over to sugar beet cultivation, then a larger (formerly grazed) grassy field, and finally at its east end, a small area of scrub and trees. Prior to the use of this land by the college, the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps show the site as an orchard (from 1886 or before up until the 1960s), one of a number of similar parcels of land located on the south-eastern outskirts of Wisbech.

A desk-based assessment of the site was produced in September 2006 (Chadwick and Dicks 2006), following which a brief was produced for archaeological work. Given the anticipated depth of deposits, the design of the CAU project specification included the digging of twelve evenly-spaced 5m^2 archaeological test pits, with the option for a further trenching if any archaeology was determined (Standring 2008).

Archaeological test-pitting by the CAU took place between Thursday 6th and Tuesday 11th March.

Geology and topography

The recent geology of the area is dominated by the tidal creek and river silts of the Terrington Beds which are linked to a system of roddons associated with the palaeo-Nene and Ouse rivers. These rapidly accumulating sediments are of Recent (Flandrian or Holocene) age, the deposition of which probably commenced during the Late Iron Age coinciding with a marine transgression which continued into the early Roman period (1st century AD). This was repeated by a lesser transgression in the 3rd century AD, a time when many of the Roman fenland settlement sites and drainage works became inundated. There was a further marine transgression in the early 4th century, but by the medieval period sea-level was lower, coinciding with the encroachment of the peat fen.

The areas immediately either side of the roddon channels are naturally raised, perhaps as levees or sand bars (Godwin 1938). However, there are various interpretations of roddon formation, at least one being that this is a landscape of inverted relief caused by the differential consolidation of sediments as well as by the continual drainage and sedimentation along the line of the channels (Gallois 1988). In other words these sand and coarse silt-filled roddon deposits formed as constricted ribbons of dry land within

Figure 1. Site Location

an environment otherwise consisting of fresh-water peat fen being encroached upon by brackish-water salt marsh. Because of this, these areas were preferentially colonised during the Roman period, as they had been during the earlier Bronze Age during the period of marine incursions represented by the (roddons of) the Barroway Drove Beds. There is little doubt that the shrinking and wasting away of the intervening and underlying Nordelph Peat will tend to accentuate the difference in height between the roddons and surrounding fen over time (Fowler 1934), although this is unlikely to be the only cause. The deposition of the silts away from the primary channel in the form of migrating creeks will ultimately form accumulated domes of sediment, perhaps metres deep and hundreds of metres wide, either side of these channels. The re-activation and continued sedimentation from these roddon channels may have continued into the medieval period.

The fact that these roddons remained active and continued to be used in a partly canalised form for the purposes of drainage from the surrounding fen is evidenced in the late medieval and early post-medieval peat infill still visible within some of the channels, particularly those lying further to the south within the fen to the north of Ely (Gallois 1988). These roddon silts are thickly developed in the Wisbech area; this can be seen in the wide spread of this sediment facies covering the parishes of Elm, Wisbech, Wisbech St Mary, Leverington and Newton, whilst the estuarine deposits of the former Ouse-Nene system (including alluvium deposited over the last 300 years) lying to the north of Wisbech, the present river forming the boundary between the counties of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk (Hall & Palmer in Hall 1996).

During the Bronze Age - Iron Age period the topographic highs in the underlying (Late Pleistocene) gravel floor of the Fenland basin will have been exposed in a number of places as small islands. These places would have attracted prehistoric settlement and hunting, as would the roddon edge against the inland fresh-water peats and mires during the Late Iron Age – Roman period. However, Elm, particularly in the area of the present PDA, appears to lie outside of this zone. This is situated on the roddon margin where the sandy silts grade into the laminated clay-silts (indicative of a salt-marsh environment) associated with the former tidal creeks and mud flats of the Wash.

Blue-grey silty clays of the Terrington Beds (distal roddon sediments) were identified in a borehole some 400m to the south-east of the site along the route of the A47 Wisbech bypass (EAA 1994). However, below these beds within this same inter-roddon area was identified a 0.32m thick bed of freshwater peat (Nordelph Peat?), the latter probably of Neolithic-Bronze Age date. Elsewhere along the same route (i.e. 600 - 700m to the south and south-west of the site) Roman pottery was found buried beneath marine sediments. Whilst the exact location of this nearest roddon channel is unknown, it seems more than likely that this is to be found within 300-400m of the site. Most likely this was a tributary channel to the main Elm Roddon which lies several kilometres to the south.

The PDA is flat over its whole extent and lies at c. 3m AOD. The silty soils are reasonably well drained.

Archaeological background

The Cambridgeshire HER was consulted along with the Fenland Project Survey No.10 for the Isle of Ely and Wisbech (Hall 1996) and the recent desk-top study for the Elm High Road College site (Chadwick & Dicks 2006).

Prehistoric

A number of Palaeolithic hand-axes were recovered from pre-Flandrian ground levels during gravel extraction operations at Grays Moor Pit, Elm in 1942. Also on the edges of these gravel islands at Coldham were found Neolithic flint blades, and nearby evidence for Neolithic and Bronze Age flintworking at Grays Moor island (Hall 1996). Peat deposits dating to the Neolithic were recorded at between 1.2m and 1.5m below ground level along the route of the Wisbech bypass. However, no associated artefacts were found, therefore whole area would probably have been submerged, later to be covered by sterile mud flats during the Bronze Age.

Late Bronze Age finds and also cropmarks indicative of occupation have been found along the edge of the Grays Moor island, whilst Iron Age finds are equally rare; a series of Iron Age coin finds from Wisbech St Mary may represent losses from a boat on the Nene-Ouse roddon (Hall 1996). There seems to have been no dry land within this area during the Late Bronze Age – Iron Age. More significantly, there are no known prehistoric finds from anywhere within a 1km radius of the site (Chadwick & Dicks 2006).

Roman

The Roman period is the earliest phase of settlement that occurs on the marine silts. This includes both the salterns (salt-working) sites which lie on the edge of the fen closely associated with roddons, and sites which lie on the higher flat silts close to the estuary. Typically the roddons lay 0.5 to 0.75m above the adjacent silt fens, and thus were always attractive to settlement (Hall & Coles 1994).

The high silt sites include topographic rises associated with cropmarks which include silt fen ‘small circles’ as well as scatters of Roman pottery and occasional salt-making briquetage plus occasional evidence for agriculture. Conversely the roddon saltern sites include much evidence for the rough clay brine pans and supports of salt-making including bricks and columns, some of which show evidence of burning and glazing with salt. Elm parish has the largest number of sites of salterns and settlement (33) because of the association with the main channel of the Nene and an abundant flow of salt water which could easily be channelled away by canal and sluice to adjacent salt pans, alongside limitless supplies of peat fuel. Large scatters of pottery are sometimes associated with these sites, as are other indicators of domestic settlement, whilst the extensive cropmarks of the turbaries or peat-cuttings appear to conform to the Roman *actus* (a unit of measurement equivalent to 35.5m used by Roman land surveyors) and appear to be related also to navigation canals, in particular the large Fen Causeway which began as a canal and which crosses the southern part of the region through the parish of Upwell (Hall 1994). Between the saltern and settlement sites in Elm lay a complex of ditched tracks and enclosures still visible as cropmarks.

It would seem that in many places the fen peat was almost as high as the silt land, and by Roman times the width of these roddons was much reduced, yet still active as a means for draining the fen. Apart from reports of a possible shrine at Elm, villa sites are conspicuous by their absence. The major activities therefore were clearly salt-production and animal rearing, along with peat-cutting. The area of Wisbech High Fen appears to have many droves and animal enclosures; yet there is similar animal-related cropmarks in Elm alongside the turbaries and salterns.

There are very few HER records for the area around the site (within 700m radius). However, approx. 600m to the northeast of the college allotments a find was made when excavating for the railway in 1850 of two coins of Constantine the Great. These came from near 'the ancient sea bank' (flood defences?) [CHER 03934].

During investigations undertaken along the route of the A47 Wisbech Bypass three Roman sites and finds were identified. This included a Roman ditch and possible occupation horizon buried beneath 1.6m of estuarine silt and visible in the ditch side for about 40m. This site [CHER 4490] was located c. 700m to the south of the college along the Elm High Road at TF 4690 0774. There were a further two sites from which Roman pottery was recovered: one of these [CHER 04492] was found some 700-800m to the south-west of the study site at TF 4650 0760, and another [CHER 04491] some 1.3km south-west at TF 4553 0748. Geoarchaeological investigations undertaken c.400m southeast of the PDA did not identify any Roman sub-surface features or record any finds (Chadwick & Dicks 2006).

Medieval

The only early (Saxon) activity within the silt fen is represented by the discovery of Early Anglo-Saxon brooches in Wisbech in 1848 and a burial beneath the site of the present museum. Several Middle Saxon sites were found at Tydd associated with the higher land of the roddon channels.

Local villages with a medieval origin such as Outwell, Upwell, Elm, Parson Drove, Leverington and Wisbech St Mary tend to be on a linear plan on account of their lying on the edges of fossil or still active roddon channels. Associated with these, particularly on the seaward side of Wisbech (on account of the continuing marine regression) is further evidence of salt-making. Medieval salterns with associated briquetage and the remains of pottery jars for salt boiling have been found at Tydd St Giles and Parson Drove, whilst banks and dykes for the purposes of drainage, and also perhaps as sea defences are to be found all along this side of the Wash. Within the Elm parish and closer to the West Anglia College site there is much evidence for former field systems, including the ditched fields (since destroyed) at Wisbech High Fen and Elm (Hall 1996). This can be seen in the form of extensive ridge and furrow cultivation. Medieval droveways together with drainage ditches are associated with these strip fields and pastures.

Settlement at Wisbech is first recorded in 1000, with settlement at Elm not recorded until about 1200 AD following the reclamation and drainage of land (VCH 2002). Indeed local place names suggest the presence of medieval (or at least pre-Inclosure) fields within the immediate vicinity of the West Anglia College site. To the west of

the main road (A47 Wisbech bypass) the presence of common land is suggested by the place name 'Townfield', possibly a medieval field, whilst immediately adjacent to the PDA the area is referred to as 'Meadowgate', perhaps also referring to the use of this area as seasonal pasture during the medieval period. During this time the site lay close to the boundary between Walsoken and Emneth parishes, and quite probably within an area of agricultural land (Chadwick & Dicks 2006).

Close to the northern edge of Townfield (some 700m to the south of the college) was the former site of the Leper Hospital and chapel of St Peter [CHER 03912], whilst another 700m to the northeast, and just north of the Green Drove and drains there is the record for the (former) site of a medieval moat [CHER 01060] of which nothing now remains.

Post-medieval

The main event affecting this post-medieval rural landscape was the 1841 Inclosure Act which resulted in the enclosure of the common land, droveways, banks and wastelands within these parishes. Immediately post-dating this enclosure the Tithe Map of the Emneth Parish shows the western part of the (PDA) site occupied by a garden, whilst the central and western parts of the site comprised two pasture fields. The 1886 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map shows the whole area occupied by an orchard, whilst the land immediately to the south consisted of two pastures with a sheepfold in the middle. It is unknown therefore whether this particular strip of land was ploughed up in the intervening period. The land remained as an orchard up until the late 1950s – 1960s.

The HER also mentions a number of 18th and 19th century buildings including a Baptist Chapel located some 500m to the north of the site along the Elm High Road. These appear to be unconnected with any contemporary landuse activity on the college site.

Method

The test pits were dug using a tracked 360° 13-ton machine with a 2.1m wide ditching bucket and then backfilled immediately recording was finished. Each test pit covered an area of about 4m^2 down to the base of the topsoil, then was stepped to make a 2m x 3m slot within the centre of the cut to the base. Recording was undertaken away from the edge of each pit on account of problems of instability of the sides below the top of the waterlogged horizon (at between 1.3 – 1.5m below ground surface) and their fairly rapid collapse and infill. The stratigraphy of the pits were recorded by means of measured test pit logs and photographically with the aide of a 4m vertical scale (two taped together 2m long range poles). Small sediment samples were taken from some of the horizons for purposes of reference and comparison only.

One of the test pits (TP 12) was boxed and stepped in order to re-examine a ditch or channel feature. Here a 0.5m slot was excavated by hand down to a depth of 1.3m and then recorded by means of a section drawn at a scale of 1:10.

All of these sites were first CAT scanned for possible services and metal detected. The spoil from each test pit was scanned by eye and sample sifted to check for possible finds.

Results

The test pit logs record sections dug by machine through the roddon creek silts and possibly the top of the underlying salt-marsh or silt fen deposits of the Terrington Beds. The test pits were sampled from west to east (Figure 2).

Test Pit 1

Located at N end of strip of hedgerow/ bush plantings within area not previously ploughed. Top of waterlogged horizon at approx. 1.5m. Pit 1.9m deep. Ground surface at 3.00m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.2m
Orange-brown silty subsoil with brick fragments	0.2 – 0.4m
Yellow-brown sandy silt	0.4 – 1.1m
Lightly mottled orange-brown layer	1.1 – 1.2m
Light brown sandy silt	1.2 – 1.9m
Light grey-brown clayey silt	1.9m

Test Pit 2

Test pit moved 25.5m to the south to avoid fabric membrane within midst of shrub plantings. In patch of open ground. Top of waterlogged horizon at approx. 1.6m. Pit was 2.45m deep. Ground surface at 2.89m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.35m
Light brown-buff coloured silt	0.35 – 0.95m
Lightly mottled yellow-brown to grey-brown silt	0.95 – 1.65m
Mottled light grey silt	1.65 – 2.15m
Mid-grey to brown silt	2.15 – 2.45m

Test Pit 3

Test pit at N end of ploughed field. Top of waterlogged horizon at approx. 1.5m. Pit 2.1m deep. Ground surface at 2.9m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.4m
Mid-brown silt	0.4 – 0.7m
Light yellow-brown silt	0.7 – 0.9m
Light yellow-brown to grey mottling in silt	0.9 – 2.1m

Test Pit 4

Test pit at S end of ploughed field. Top of waterlogged horizon at approx. 1.6m. Depth of pit 2.3m. Ground surface at 2.93m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.45m
Mid orange-brown silt	0.45 – 1.15m
Light yellow-brown to grey mottling in silt	1.15 – 2.1m
Light grey silt	2.1 – 2.3m

Figure 2. Test pit locations

Test Pit 5

Test pit at NE end of ploughed field. Top of waterlogged horizon at approx. 1.5m depth. Pit 2.2m deep. Ground surface at 2.89m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.4m
Light brown silt	0.4 – 1.2m
Light yellow-brown to grey mottling in silt	1.2 – 2.1m
Greyish silt	2.1 – 2.2m

Test Pit 6

Test pit around middle to S end of ploughed field on east side. Top of waterlogged horizon in pit at approx. 1.5m. Base of pit at 2.35m. Ground surface at 2.8m OD.

Topsoil (with Victorian/early 20thC pottery)	0 – 0.4m
Light golden brown coloured silt	0.4 – 0.8m
Light brown sandy silt (non-laminated)	0.8 – 2.1m
Light grey sandy silt	2.1 – 2.35m

Test Pit 7

Test pit at NW end of grazed field. Top of waterlogged horizon in pit at approx 1.4m. Depth of pit 2.2m. Ground surface at 2.81m OD.

Topsoil (with 19th and early 20thC pottery)	0 – 0.35m
Light brown to buff coloured homog. silt sub-soil	0.35 – 0.55m
Thin lens of grey clay-rich silt, perhaps with fresh-water/ terrestrial snails – possibly part of a ditch or N-S channel fill	0.55 – 0.6m
Light brown laminated silts	0.6 – 1.65m
Lightly mottled grey-brown silts	1.65 – 1.75m
Brown laminated silts	1.75 – 2.05m
More distinct darker orange and grey mottled silt and clay with patches of yellow silt and sand in ?burrows	2.05 – 2.15m
Laminated grey silts	2.15 – 2.2m

Test Pit 8

Test pit at SW end of grazed field. Top of waterlogged horizon in pit at approx 1.6m (?) depth. Depth of pit 2.25m. Ground surface at 2.7m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.35m
Light brown silt	0.35 – 0.8m
Slightly more clay-rich brown silt	0.8 – 1.15m
Mottled light brown and light grey silt and clay	1.15 – 1.95m
Mottled silt with patches of orange silt within ?burrowed (bioturbated) surface	1.95 – 2.1m
Mid to dark grey laminated silt and clay	2.1 – 2.25m

Test Pit 9

Test pit within middle of grazed field. Top of waterlogged horizon at about 1.4m depth. Pit is 2.2m deep. Ground surface at 2.59m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.4m
Light brown to buff coloured silt	0.4 – 1.15m
Light brown-yellow to light grey mottled silt	1.15 – 1.4m
Light brown mottled silts	1.4 – 2.05m
Slightly more coarse silt to fine sand with darker grey silt laminations	2.05 – 2.2m

Test Pit 10

Test pit at the SE end of grazed field. Top of waterlogged horizon at about 1.6m. The pit is 2.3m deep. Ground surface lies at 2.62m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.4m
N side of E-W ditch or drain cut examined in TP 12A (F.1 ?)	0.4 – 1.15m
Upper fill (?) of brown silt	0.4 – 0.95m
Lower fill of grey clay-silt	0.95 – 1.15m
Light brown-buff coloured silt	0.4 – 0.9m
Mottled silt (natural)	0.9 – 1.4m
Light grey brown clay-rich silt	1.4 – 2.0m
Grey-brown silts with coarser dark grey-black organic laminae	2.0 – 2.3m

Test Pit 11

Test pit situated within clearing in small patch of woodland and scrub. Top of waterlogged horizon at about 1.6m. Depth of pit is at approx 2.5 m. Ground surface lies at 2.68m OD.

Topsoil	0 – 0.4m
Light brown silt	0.4 – 0.9m
Slightly more clay-rich brown silt	0.9 – 1.3m
Mottled brown-grey silt with faint orange patches suggesting bioturbation (burrowing) or presence of former Phragmites reeds over upper surface	1.3 – 2.3m
Mid – dark grey laminated silts and clay	2.3 – 2.5m

Test Pit 12

Test pit situated at S end of wooded area within clearing in front of gate. Top of waterlogged horizon at about 1.4 – 1.45m depth. Depth of pit was at 1.65m. Ground surface lies at 2.69m OD.

Topsoil (incl brick fragments)	0 – 0.4m
Mid brown silt sub-soil	0.4 – 0.8m
More clay-rich light-mid brown silt	0.8 – 1.2m
Mottled light brown to light grey silt	1.2 – 1.35m
Base of cut for possible E-W ditch drain (F.1)	1.35 – 1.45m
Grey clay and silt fill of ditch F.1with small amount of charcoal and FW-terrestrial snails	1.35 – 1.45m
Brown silts	1.45 – 1.5m
Mottled light to dark grey-brown clay-rich silt	1.5 – 1.65m

Test Pit 12 A

Boxed out section from west side of TP 12 to re-examine and properly sample F.1. Depth of box was 0.95m, the base of the sectioned feature being 1.3m. Feature **F.1** was shallow (max. 0.35m deep) with a flat slightly uneven bottom, slightly raised in the centre, with steep straight more or less symmetrical

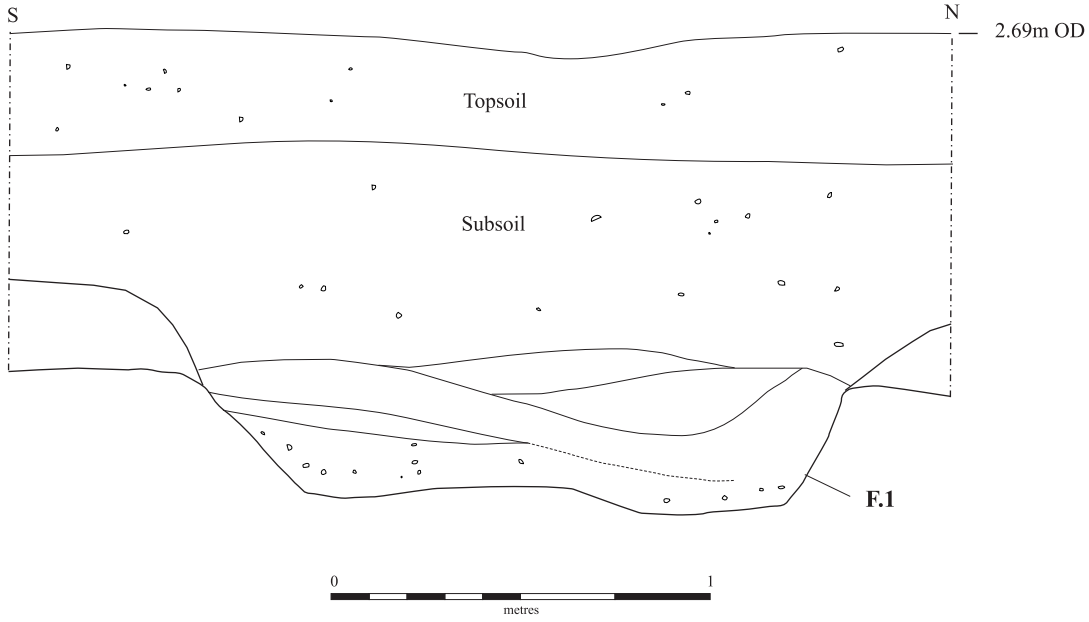

Figure 3. Photo and Section of Drainage Ditch F.1 (TP 12a)

sides and a sharp basal break of slope. This contained 3-5 fills, but the boundaries between these was indistinct (see Figure 3)

Topsoil	0 – 0.35m
Sub-soil horizon with root holes	0.35 – 0.5m
Loose crumbly silty loam (lower sub-soil)	0.5 – 0.95m
Top of feature F.1 (truncated?)	0.95m
Base of feature	1.2 -1.3m
Upper ditch fill – silty loam with voids	0.95 – 1.05m
Brown-grey clay-rich silt	1.05 – 1.1m
Orange-yellow silt lens	1.1 – 1.15m
Light grey-orange silty clay	1.1 – 1.2m
Mottled grey clay with snails (*Lymanea truncatula*)	1.15 – 1.3m
Orange-brown sandy silt (natural)	0.95 – 1.3m

Discussion

Except for Test Pits 7, 10, and 12 (and 12A) the results of the test-pitting showed a fairly uniform stratigraphy consisting of topsoil (which in most areas consisted of formerly shallow ploughed soil up to 0.4m deep), a somewhat indeterminate sub-soil horizon at the top of the Terrington Beds silts, followed by a typically uniform sequence of roddon creek silts sampled to depths of at least 2m below ground surface.

The silt horizons sampled within the test pits on the western side of the site (Test Pits 1-4) appeared to be slightly coarser, suggesting a coarsening up sequence to the west and a direction for the primary roddon channel from which these sediments were deposited. However, no clear trace of the creek channels depositing these silts could be seen in the test pits, which is perhaps what one might expect given that most of the smallest creek channels would have been shifting features. What is also interesting here is the gradual rise in the ground surface to the west. This would concord with the idea of the roddon channel lying in this direction and the sedimentary pile thinning to the east.

The lower horizons of the roddon creek silts (between 0.95 and 2m depth) show mottling of variable intensity, probably reflecting original bioturbated surfaces, but possibly also reed rootholes on surfaces around the edges of the estuarine mudflats.
Beneath this the presence of what may be a different sediment facies (but still within the Terrington Beds) can be seen in some of the easternmost test pits (Test Pits 10 & 11). These appear to be beds of laminated grey clay-silts of the true salt-marsh mudflats which here have been overstepped by the growing roddons. No shelly fauna could be seen within any of the examined silt and clay-silt horizons. However, both in Test Pits 10 and 11 darker organic laminae were preserved within these basal mud-flat sequences.

The apparent sterility of the roddon creek sediments accords with this area being off the dry ridge of the roddon and at least partially submerged within the tidal zone. It is unlikely therefore that any Roman occupation or activity areas relating to salt-making are to be found within several hundred metres of the site. The peat fen turbaries would have lain to the west of Wisbech and Elm and the current area on the side of the estuary mud flats would probably therefore have been inhospitable to pretty much any activity except fishing, at least from the Iron Age to the Roman period.

The east-west aligned linear feature (F.1) encountered within Test Pits 10, 12 and 12A remains undated, but it seems likely given the rate of accumulation of the silts that this may be a relatively late feature which could have been cut into the top of silts following the emergence of this area and the beginning of drainage of this silt fen during the Early Medieval period. By this time the Elm Roddon appears to have become inactive and the cutting of east-west drainage ditches may have become a significant feature of this landscape as it was reclaimed. The feature does not appear to be a palaeo-channel of any sort and from the limited examination of this seems to have cut sides and base. Moreover, this is clearly straight and aligned parallel to the existing but probably long-standing modern drainage network. The differential depth of this (at between 0.4 – 0.95m to the top of the cut within the two test pits examined (see Figure 4)) could be accounted for by truncation, whilst the presence of the fresh-water snails *Lymanea truncatula* (de Vareilles *pers com.*) within the clay-rich silting-up horizons suggests very slow-moving or standing water consistent with this being a wide land drain. The absence of dateable finds is perhaps not so surprising if this was in fact a medieval or early post-medieval feature at a time when there was still relatively little occupation of this area; a period during which this land was still in the process of being reclaimed.

If indeed a drainage feature of this date, this evidence would seem to support the concept of continuity of the medieval landscape (drove, drain and field strip) pattern in this area well into the modern period. As such the rectilinear plot now occupied by the College and its allotments may have origins going back hundreds of years before the 1840s Parish Tithe map.

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