

Huntingdon Racecourse

An Archaeological Evaluation



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Huntingdon Racecourse, Brampton

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[GR TL 2073 7220]

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken adjacent to the existing south stand of the Huntingdon Racecourse [TL 2073 7220], Brampton (OASIS id: cambridg3-52764) in advance of a planned extension to and modernisation of this building undertaken by the client (The Jockey Club). Two trenches totalling 13m were excavated in the turf adjacent to the tarmac standing and offset from the electricity sub station. These encountered the underlying natural gravels at a depth of between 0.9 and 1m, yet there was no evidence for any truncation within this area. No archaeology was present, though a single tree throw was found.

Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by the CAU on Monday 10th November at the Huntingdon Racecourse, Thrapston Road, Brampton, Cambridgeshire (Figure 1) following a brief issued by CAPCA (Planning Application no. 0801153FUL). The archaeological impact of this development was not expected to be significant, though the discovery of Neolithic – Iron Age occupation a short distance to the south of here on racecourse lands raised the possibility of there being archaeological remains in this area.

Two 1.8m wide trial trenches, of 10m and 5m respectively, were laid out in the form of a 'T', as a sample of the 1200 sq m PDA for the South Spectators Stand replacement and extension (TL 2073 7220). The area of trenching here was restricted by a complex of existing services which included an electricity sub-station located a short distance to the north-east. A 5m stand-off from this sub-station defined the northern limit of the planned 10m long trench, whilst a wooden viewing stand adjacent to the track restricted any extension of this to the south.

A total of only 13m trenching could be undertaken on account of the flooding problems encountered during the evaluation. For example, the digging of the main NW-SE trench had to be abandoned after only 8m on account of the ingress of water. However, the necessary information on the depth and contexts of the sub-soil and natural were adequately recorded.

Geology, soils and topography

The racecourse is situated on the floodplain of the Alconbury Brook, a flattish area of alluvium and terrace gravels overlying the Oxford Clay (British Geological Survey Sheet 187 (1946)). The water table here appears to be locally high (at shallow depth) due to a combination of factors. This included the presence of an impermeable sub-surface geology, a large catchment area for rainwater run-off which was associated with the higher ground to the north and east, and finally, the relatively low elevation of the site. The elevation of the PDA was at approx. 11m AOD.

The racecourse, and in particular this low-lying area of it, seems to be prone to rapid flooding during periods of heavy or persistent rain; the river level backing up when high tide coincides with the more extreme conditions of surface water discharge. The result is the inundation of the low-lying areas of the site.

Archaeological background

A search of the Cambridgeshire HER was undertaken for records of all archaeological sites within an area of 750m radius around the PDA

On the southern fringes of this area, on the opposite side of the A14, lies a rectangular Iron Age enclosure [CHER 02117a]. This was associated with Late Iron Age occupation in the form of hut traces and a gateway, plus part of a Bronze Age round barrow complex. The site was excavated in advance of a building development in

1966 (White 1966). To the south of this, just outside of the 750m area of interest, lies the scheduled site of a Bronze Age barrow cemetery consisting of a possible ring ditch, conjoined barrows, and an oval enclosure [CHER 02117b]; all of the latter discovered through aerial photography and subsequently plotted on CUCAP air photos (R Palmer 1983 and 1990).

Some 200m to the north of this, and just within the current area of archaeological interest, lies the site of a 300m long NW-SE aligned Neolithic cursus monument [CHER 02117c]. This feature, which is centred on grid reference TL 203 715, was evaluated during excavations undertaken between August and October 1990. Associated neolithic flints were picked up during the fieldwalking of the site, whilst radiocarbon dates of 3910 +/- 70 yrs BP and 4140 +/- 140 yrs BP were obtained from charcoal associated with V-cut ditches and a posthole (Malim 1990). Further excavations were carried out here in 1991 to reveal a complete plan of the monument including a horseshoe-shaped ring ditch within the eastern terminal, along with pits with contained evidence for burning, several fine flint tools, sherds of Neolithic pottery, plus environmental evidence consisting of ritually deposited foodstuffs (Malim 1992). The excavated ring ditch was subsequently interpreted as a Neolithic mortuary enclosure. To the west of this cursus, and just to the south of the Thrapston Road (A604) a 4+ hectare area (centre TL 201 715) was evaluated by geophysics and trial trenching in advance of a housing development. Here an Iron Age settlement enclosure [CHER 1074] was found that contained the eaves drip gully of at least one roundhouse (7.5m diameter) plus an associated ditched field system (Malim & Mitchell 1993). Within the same evaluation area a series of parallel ditches were encountered which were thought to be Neolithic [CHER 1074A]. These were interpreted as being boundary markers, perhaps ones associated in some way with the landscape surrounding the cursus.

During the first phase of evaluation undertaken in 1990 within this same area of Birds Land Farm, a number of shallow east-west aligned Roman field ditches [02117D] were sampled (centre TL 204 716). Roman pottery was also recovered during the course of fieldwalking in this vicinity, whilst finds of both medieval [02117E] and post-medieval pottery [02117F] at the same location implies the presence of later settlement or agriculture (Malim 1990). Just 500m to the east of here on the south side of the Alconbury Brook (and immediately to the east of the racecourse entrance located at TL 209 716) lies an area of medieval ridge and furrow [CHER 09258] which was identified from air photographs (Malim 03/1989). These strips can also be discerned on the ground when driving down onto the racecourse; the ridges can be seen particularly well when the meadows are waterlogged and the slightly higher bits of ground are left exposed above the waterline.

Some 200m to the west of here within the area of the access road and bridge across the A14 a 3-4 hectare area of Meadowview Farm (centred upon TL 206 715) was first evaluated by geophysics (magnetometer survey) and subsequently by trial trenching. This investigation revealed a pattern of enclosures and a field system which seemed to be associated with a 1st century – 4th century AD Roman settlement [CHER 10172]. Associated with this were a series of pits and ditches, whilst on the north side of the site closest to the river were found some fine cobbled surfaces, perhaps a floor surrounding a quern stand, whilst nearby gullies may have been the flues for grain-drying kilns. Considerable evidence was also found for building activity, much of

which lay strewn across the site. This included shaped stone, flue-box tile and roof tile, though no trace of any domestic building was found within the features examined (Robinson 1991). This settlement area still appeared to be confined to the south side of the Alconbury Brook.

North of the Alconbury Brook, and only 300m to the south-east of the PDA on the edge of the racecourse complex, an archaeological trench evaluation was carried out in May 1993 on the 2-3 hectare site allocated for a proposed hotel (at TL 2095 7195). The excavations undertaken here revealed (in contrast to the above sites) little in the way of archaeology. Only two undateable archaeological features were identified; a posthole and a shallow scoop [CHER 11075], neither of which contained any artefacts (Macaulay 1993).

In June 1993 a further two areas of the racecourse were excavated in advance of planning permission for gravel extraction. That undertaken within the larger of the two areas (A) located within the centre of the racecourse track at the south-eastern end (an area of approx. 7 hectares centred on grid reference TL 206 720) revealed, over most of this area, a landscape of buried soil cut by a relict stream channel and some, but relatively few archaeological features. Amongst these were various pits and ditches as well as a shallow pit containing burnt cobbles (perhaps a cooking pit) and a single sherd of Iron Age pottery. However, within the north-western part of this same evaluation area were encountered a relatively high density of Bronze Age features. This included a pit, ditch, posthole and round barrow [CHER 11134]. These features contained charcoal and other burnt material, as well as two sherds of Bronze Age pottery and some struck flint flakes. However, the analysis undertaken on organic samples from here did seem to indicate a lack of associated cereal remains (Welsh 1993; CCCAFU 1995). Although no Neolithic remains were found within this central area of gravel extraction (now represented on the site by a permanent lake), the other 2 hectare Area B located to the north-west of the race track (centred on TL 200 723) revealed areas of burning suggestive of Neolithic land clearance, as indicated by the presence of several struck flakes and a fragment of a Neolithic polished stone axe. Two palaeochannels and over 300 potential tree holes were identified, 15% of which were tested and sampled. Only one recovered lithic could be linked to the fill of a tree hole (Welsh 1993; Macaulay 1994).

The nearest area of archaeology to the PDA being investigated is undoubtedly that identified within Area A of the Huntingdon Racecourse 1993 evaluation (Figure 2). Most likely this includes the dense concentration of Bronze Age (Early Bronze Age?) features uncovered at the NW end. At the very minimum, these features are probably to be found within 100m (to the south-west) of the centre of the current PDA, at the maximum they may be up to 250m distant. It is not inconceivable therefore that this area of prehistoric landscape extends much further to the north and east, encompassing the area of the current racecourse stands and spectators enclosure, thus the site of the proposed evaluation trenches.

There is only one standing post-medieval building of any significance within the area of archaeological interest. Approximately 650m to the north of the PDA at Waterloo Farm there is the Grade II listed building; the 17th century Waterloo Farmhouse [CHER 54617]. This is a timber framed and half rendered farmhouse, with two gabled additions at the rear (RCHM Hunts p.266).



Figure 1. Location Map

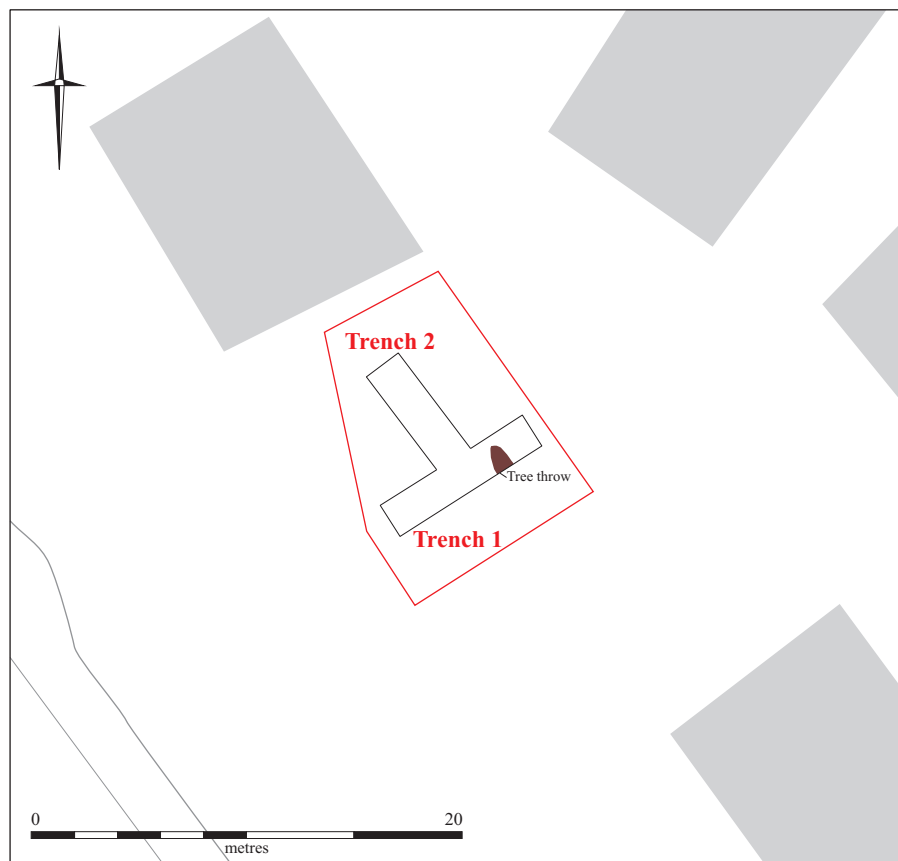
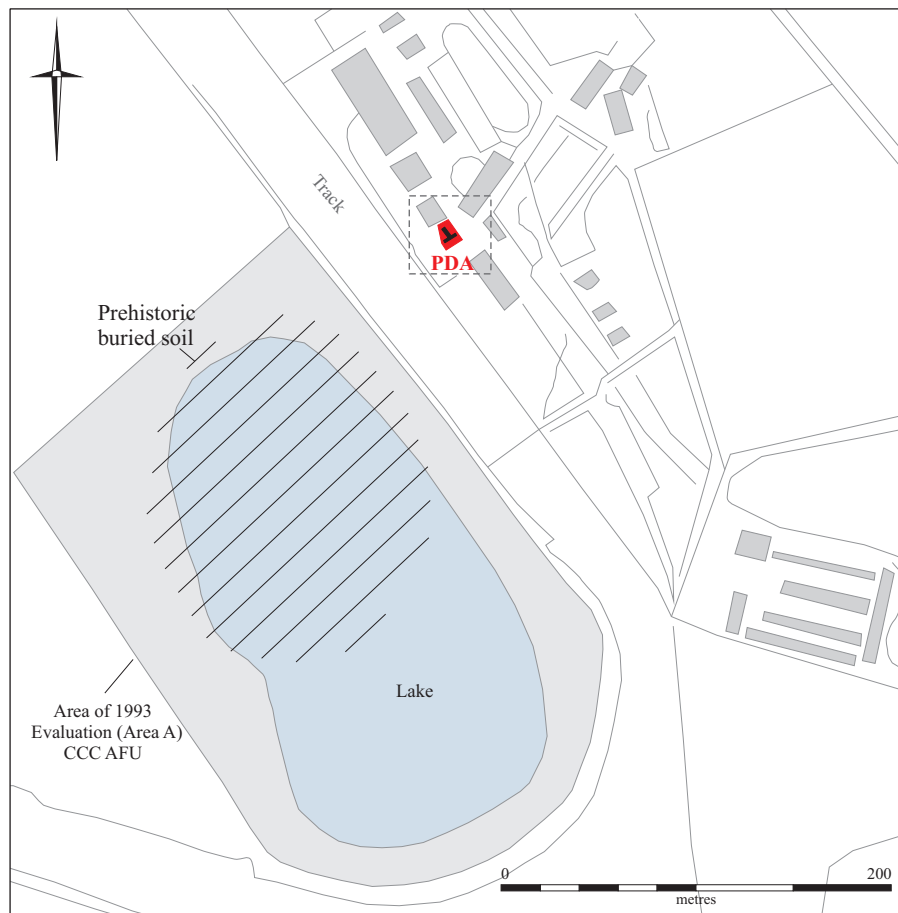


Figure 2. Plan of south part of racecourse, showing area of 1993 evaluation and lake on the site of a former gravel quarry, with trench plan below

Method

The two trenches were laid out by hand using a 50m tape, and positioned at right angles to one another on the turf, each parallel to the square sides of the adjacent tarmac standing, and together forming a 'T' shaped excavation. This excavation consisted of Trench 1 (8m x 1.8m) and Trench 2 (5m x 1.8m).

The trenching was carried out using a 7 ton JCB with a 1.8m wide ditching bucket mounted on the back. The trench was CAT scanned for services before digging. Topsoil and turf were dumped separately from the subsoil, and potential features were examined by hand. Samples of trench spoil were then scanned with a metal detector.

On account of the ingress of water during machining, a 2m deep sump was dug at the southern end of Trench 1 after first checking to determine the absence of archaeology. An additional step was then added to the trench at the opposite end as a means to enter this safely in order to examine a potential feature.

Wherever possible the base of the trenches were cleaned to reveal any archaeological or modern features present, and then base planned at 1:50. Representative sections of these trenches were drawn at the same scale. The degree of truncation of the natural and any buried soils was recorded in each case. GPS survey levels (both metres OD and OS coordinates) were taken for each of the four corners of the two trenches (both top and bottom), and also at intervals along their sides.

Results

Trench 1

No archaeology was encountered, although part of an elongate-shaped tree throw was visible in the surface of the natural between 1.6m-2m from the north end of the trench (see Figure 3: top). The light brown clayey silty fill of the tree throw contained a small amount of slightly burnt (reddened) flint, but no evidence of worked flint. It was not possible to properly sample (section) the tree throw on account of the imminent flooding, thus the profile and depth of this remain unknown. The ground surface at the top of the trench (north-facing section) was at 9.56m AOD.

There seemed to be no evidence here for any truncation of the natural, the presence of an intermittent and very thin (<10cm) thin peaty buried soil horizon above this seemingly reflecting the actual patchiness of this rather than its removal. The top of the clean natural was encountered at a depth of between 1m and 1.1m. The surface of this rose ever so slightly to the north-east, suggesting the presence of a possible basin and deeper buried soils to the south. No traces of any worked or burnt flint were recovered from the thin buried soil. The traces of faint NE-SW aligned plough scars were visible in this and the top of the natural.

The only find came from the junction of the topsoil and sub-soil. This consisted of a complete clear glass (mineral water) bottle with its glass stopper in place which had been turned upside down and pushed down vertically through the turf. The bottle was probably late 19th – early 20th century in date.

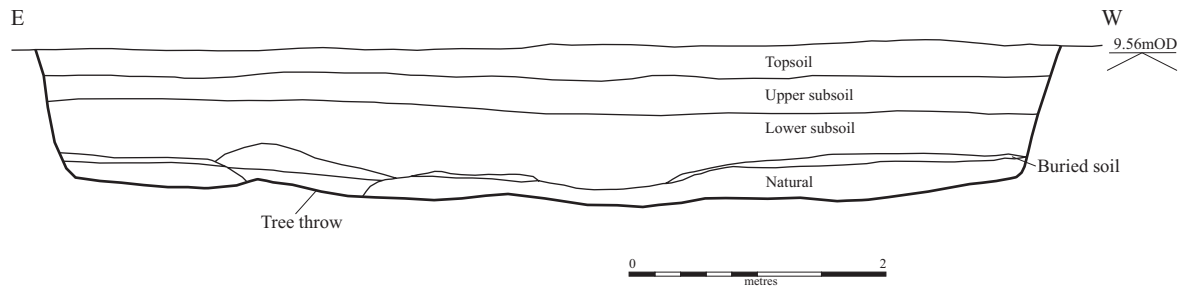


Figure 3. North facing section of Trench 1 and photographs of Trench 1/ 2 (looking south), and photograph of site flooding

N facing section

0cm	Topsoil (turf over light brown compact silty soil with thin gravel horizon @ 20 cm)
20-25cm	Upper sub-soil (yellowish silty-sandy clay)
40-50cm	Lower sub-soil (yellow-brown silty-clay)
90-100cm	Lenses of thin peaty soil (interface layer)
100-110cm	Fine gravely sand (gravel <10mm clasts), with gravel consisting of whitish chalky coloured flint, both angular (70%) and rounded waterworn (30%). The gravel is more marly in places. Natural.

Trench 2

A very similar profile consisting of topsoil, an upper and lower sub-soil, and an intermittent buried soil resting on top of the gravel was noted in this trench. However, the surface of the natural was encountered at a slightly shallower depth (0.9m) at the north-western end. The height of the top of the trench (at ground level) was the same as for Trench 1. No archaeological features or tree-throws were encountered.

No ferrous or non-ferrous artefacts were recovered from the spoil following metal detecting around the edges of both the trenches. Bucket sampling of the spoil also detected no worked flint or flint-working waste.

Discussion

Whilst it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from the evidence presented by such a small sample exposure of the buried land surface, the absence of archaeology here, or indeed of any signs of human occupation, would seem to suggest that the site lies beyond the area of prehistoric activity and Bronze Age occupation shown to be present within the already evaluated area inside of the race track circuit (some 100-200m to the south of the PDA).

The account of there being a large area of (probably peaty) buried soil within the central area excavated in 1993 accords with the evidence recovered during the current evaluation. Here just beyond the northern margins of the racecourse we appear to be on, or just beyond the edge, of a basin of preserved soil representing the original and possibly Bronze Age land surface. Little can be interpreted from the presence of a single tree throw here, except to say that there seemed to be no evidence to suggest that this was modern.

The occurrence of plough scrapes across the top of the natural and remnant buried soil does raise the question as to whether there has been any truncation of possible archaeology in this area, though the distinct layering present within the sub-soil does not really support this idea. No evidence for strip cultivation (ridge and furrow) could be seen within the soil section, the most likely explanation being that the plough soil here was post-medieval.

The purposeful insertion of an upturned bottle into the turf may relate to the earliest horse racing on site, though it is difficult to draw any sort of conclusion from this.

Given the evidence provided by this evaluation, the probability of there being any significant sub-surface archaeology present within the area destined for development seems slim.

Acknowledgements

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