

Iron Age and Roman settlement at Highflyer Farm, Ely, Cambridgeshire

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Project background

Archaeological mitigation was undertaken at Highflyer Farm, Ely between January 2018 and May 2018 by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) who were commissioned by RPS on behalf of Redrow Homes prior to construction of a residential development.

Previous archaeological works comprised a desk-based assessment (Dawson 2010), a geophysical survey of the entirety of the site (Walford 2010) and two trench evaluations (Taylor 2011 and Brown 2011). A Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was produced for the excavations by MOLA (Atkins and Muldowney 2017) which followed the Heritage Management Plan by RPS (Dawson 2013) and project brief by the Cambridgeshire County Council Senior Archaeologist (Thomas 2017).

The excavated area covered approximately 4.5ha with linear exclusion zones having to be established due to two live utilities (water and overhead power). This mitigation aimed to investigate features that had been identified by the geophysical survey and also to look for the continuation of an early Iron Age to late Roman settlement located to the south that was excavated in 1999 and 2000 at Prickwillow Road (Atkins and Mudd 2003). In addition to the mitigation area, three evaluation trenches were excavated which were spaced evenly between the northern limit of the mitigation area and the treeline forming the current boundary in order to investigate a driveway that was identified during the evaluation works (Taylor 2011).

Location, topography and geology

The site was located to the north-east of Ely, north of Kings Avenue, south of the village of Chetisham, situated on a broad ridge of land which sloped gradually to the east (Fig 1.1). The topography varied across the site; at the southern extent the area had an average height of 19m above Ordnance Datum, rising to 20m in the northern extent and the eastern extent was 14.41m above Ordnance Datum. These heights were similar to the continuation of the settlement excavated to the south at Prickwillow Road which lay at between 21.7m and 17.9m OD (Atkins and Mudd 2003).

The underlying geology ranged from the Lower Cretaceous, Woburn Sands Formation of the Lower Greensand Group, the underlying Kimmeridge Clay Formation of the Upper Jurassic Ancholme Group and

the overlying Mid Pleistocene Anglian Tills. A water course lies 150m to the east along the areas boundary roughly aligned north to south. A paleochannel with peat silting was recorded in Trench 2 adjacent to the boundary (Taylor 2011, 29)

Historical and archaeological background

Neolithic and Bronze Age

Lithics have been found around Ely as either findspots or during archaeological works. Numerous findspots were found along the Ely bypass and in its vicinity (CHER06137, 07168, 07254, 07263). The excavation at Prickwillow Road recovered 97 flints as well as Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery (CB14805, Atkins and Mudd 2003). Findspots of Bronze Age artefacts are rarer, a bronze rapier (CHER07209) and a socketed bronze axe (CHER07207) were both found 1.6km to the north-west of Highflyer farm at Padnal Fen. The excavation of a multi-period site on Cam Drive investigated a middle Bronze Age enclosure system and possible contemporary structures (MCB23517, Phillips and Morgan 2015). Further posthole structures along with pits and a waterhole were found west of Lynn road, c850m north-west of the Highflyer Farm (Moan and Phillips 2018).

Burials dating to both the Neolithic and Bronze Age have also been found. Two Bronze Age inhumations with grave goods (CHER07245, NMR375276) were found 1km to the south during quarrying at Old Pits, Springhead Lane, in 1914. A Neolithic burial with Beaker and flint scrapper was discovered during drain works for housing to the west of the site (NMR375274).

Iron Age and Roman period

Excavations directly to the south of this mitigation in 2000 identified Iron Age and Roman burials and settlement remains (Atkins and Mudd 2003). The site, at Prickwillow Road, identified part of a rural settlement occupied from the 5th to the 3rd century BC and through to the late 4th century AD. They showed that a single sub-circular enclosure of Iron Age date was replaced by a more extensive complex of rectilinear enclosures during the Roman period. The settlement was recorded as continuing to the north-west and to the north (into the Highflyer site area). Iron Age activity comprised a rounded enclosure, a few pits, two

IRON AGE AND ROMAN SETTLEMENT AT HIGHFLYER FARM, ELY, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

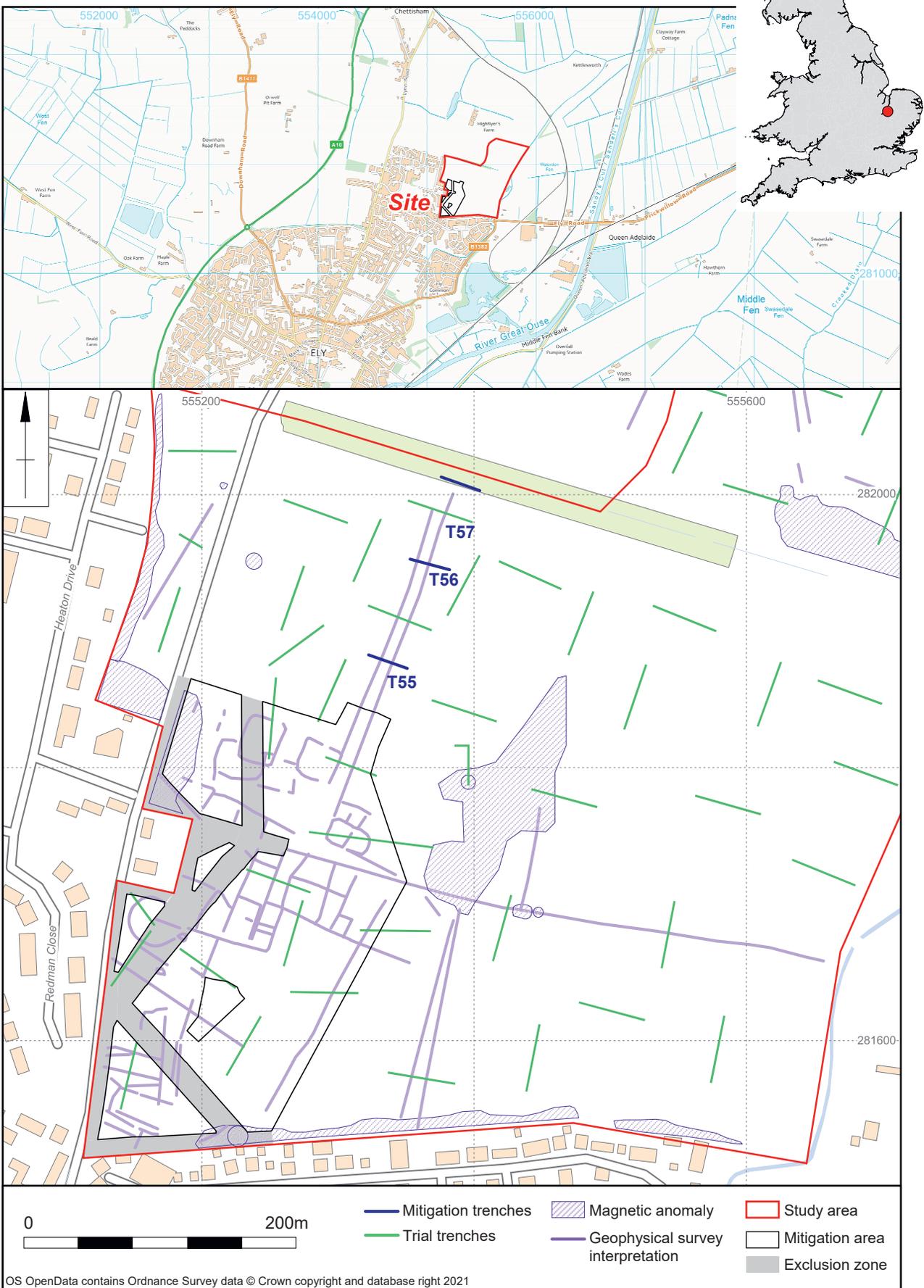


Figure 1.1. Site location (scale 1:4000)

crouched inhumations and a midden. The enclosure was used into the early Roman period, when an enclosure and field system was created. Along with these was a small mixed cemetery containing both cremations and inhumations that was probably in use from the 2nd to 4th century AD.

An Iron Age settlement was also discovered during the construction of the Ely to Littleport bypass, 1.8km to the north of Highflyer farm site (NMR 1143868). Roman sites have been found in numerous locations notably during the Fenland Survey (Hall 1996); during developments at High Barn c250m to the south (CHER10259, 11906 and NMR1388201) and again during the construction of the Ely Bypass (CHER07167). Works in 2017 west of Lynn Road, c850m to the north-west of Highflyer Farm, found Roman cultivation strip laid out next to a Roman trackway (Moan and Phillips 2018).

Saxon and medieval

Two Saxon cemeteries were also found at the Lynn Road site, one was positioned within the limits of the Roman trackway and comprised 20 furnished inhumation burials and a two urn cremation burials. The majority of the inhumations matched the orientation of the trackway, being aligned north-east to south-west. The second was a smaller group of eight inhumations to the south-east of the first and was mainly contained within the limits of a small Roman enclosure abutting the trackway. An early Saxon cemetery was also encountered c600m to the south-west of the site in 1959, during housing development at High Barns (CHER02074). Around Ely smaller amounts of evidence of Saxon activity has been found during numerous small archaeology works.

On the west side of Ely south of West Fen Road excavations revealed extensive Saxon and medieval settlement. The settlement looked to have been established in the 8th century and showed continued use and development until the 15th century (CB15478, Mortimer *et al* 2005)

Archaeological work within the area

A geophysical survey of land within the site was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology between August and October 2010 (Walford 2010).

The survey recorded a large complex of ditched enclosures and settlement activity covering an area of approximately 3.7ha. This formed the northern part of the occupation recorded at Prickwillow Road (Atkins and Mudd 2003). The results of the survey showed that the remains within the site followed a similar pattern to the Prickwillow Road, with rectilinear enclosures of probable Roman date predominating (Figs 1.1 and 5.4). The geophysical survey results also suggested that the settlement continued to the west of the site but this area was already occupied by 20th century housing.

Two trial trench evaluations were undertaken in the area surrounding Highflyer Farm. A total of 103 trial trenches were excavated within and adjacent to geophysical survey anomalies (Taylor 2011; Brown 2011). The evaluation works undertaken within the area of this present excavation (Taylor 2011) targeted the enclosure complex and the driveway. It also investigated a driveway to the north-east of the mitigation that lead to another enclosure system at its northern end. It revealed a chronological sequence of activity broadly parallel to that seen to the south at Prickwillow Road and confirmed Highflyer Farm as a continuation of it. A peak of activity occurred during the 2nd and 4th centuries AD when a more structured and densely spaced complex of rectilinear enclosures developed (Fairclough 2019; Fairclough 2020).

During the excavation members of the public were shown around the site (Fig 1.4).

The other phase of evaluation (Brown 2011) targeted an enclosure system north-east of the present Highflyer Farm excavation. Two main phases of activity were noted, pits and enclosures were predominantly dated to the late Iron Age becoming abandoned before the Roman period. However, in the late Roman period, mid 3rd to 4th centuries, another group of enclosures were established. These were abandoned by the late 4th century; with a possible coin hoard found being contemporary with this end phase.

Site phasing of the present mitigation

The stratigraphic analysis combined with the pottery has enabled a chronological sequence to be established which is summarised below (Table 1.1; Fig 1.5). The archaeological features are discussed by period.



Figure 1.2. Dated and undated features plan (scale 1:1750)



Figure 1.3. Drone shot of site, looking south-west



Figure 1.4. Site shown to the general public



Figure 1.5. Phased plan (scale 1:1750)

Table 1.1. Summary of site chronology and significant archaeological features

Period		Features
1	Late Neolithic to early Bronze Age (3000BC to 2000BC)	Two pits
2	Early Iron Age (600BC to 400BC)	Pits Postholes Ditches
3	Middle Iron Age (400BC to 100BC)	Ditched enclosures Ring ditch Pits Burial
4	Late Iron Age (100BC to AD50)	Ditched enclosures Pits
5	Early Roman (AD50 to AD150)	Ditched enclosures Pits Post structure
6	Middle Roman (AD150 to AD300)	Ditched enclosures Routeways Pits Post structure
7	Late Roman (AD300 to late 4th century)	Ditched enclosures Pits
8	Latest Roman (Up to a least AD400?)	Ditched enclosures Pits
9	Early Saxon	Sunken-featured building Waterhole Ditch
10	Late Saxon to medieval	Ditches
11	Post-medieval and modern	Ditches Postholes