Watching Brief on Drainage Works at Isleham Priory Cambridgeshire

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Client: Cambridgeshire County Council
(East Highways)

OA East Report No: 1250
OASIS No: oxfordar3-102767
NGR: TL 6420 7435

June 2011
Watching Brief on Drainage Works at Isleham Priory, Cambridgeshire

Site Code: ISLPDR 11

CHER No.: ECB3549

Date of Works: 14th-16th March 2011

Report No: 1250

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Client: Cambridgeshire County Council (East Highways)

Report Date: June 2011
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Summary

Between 14th and 16th March 2011, Oxford Archaeology East carried out an archaeological watching brief at Isleham Priory, Isleham, Cambridgeshire (TL 6420 7435).

The watching brief was undertaken to monitor the excavation of a pipe trench and manhole pit for a new drainage scheme along the boundary of Isleham Priory, a Scheduled Monument (SM27101) with an extant Romanesque church (Listed Building 48821).

During the ground works two undated pits and a single post-hole were observed, sealed by a dumped deposit containing late medieval/post-medieval finds. The features may be contemporary with the priory whilst the dumped deposit may derive from demolition material from one of the later monastic buildings.
1 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

1.1.1 The village of Isleham lies at the south-eastern Fen edge, at a height ranging from 18m OD in the southern part of the parish to 3m OD towards the northern Fen edge. It sits on the Lower Chalk ridge of south Cambridgeshire. The far north of the parish has a basal peat overlain by ‘fen clay’, a grey clayey marine deposit (Hall 1996, 82; Gallois 1988).

1.1.2 The subject site is located at the northern edge of the village of Isleham and is situated on ‘zig -zag’ chalk formations at an average height of 5m OD.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1.1 The alien Benedictine priory at Isleham was founded in c.AD1100 and is notable for the survival of its small Romanesque church dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch, which unusually has never been extended and is little altered from its original form. The scheduled site comprises the priory church (Listed Building 48821; CHER 07529; Plate 1) and associated earthworks (SM27101; CHER MCB14478; Plate 2; Figs 1 and 2). It is likely that the features that underlie these earthworks, which are interpreted as fishponds, channels, building platforms, a hollow way and a pillow mound associated with the priory, also extend beyond the scheduled site and possibly within the watching brief area.

2.1.2 There have been a number of archaeological investigations within and around the historic core of Isleham, including a site at No.12 West Street, which identified ditches and earthworks associated with the priory (Knight 1997).

2.1.3 An evaluation and watching brief was undertaken on land 100m south-west of the site (TL 6400 7405) (ISLWS99; Macaulay 2000) where a large boundary ditch and a number of smaller medieval property boundary ditches were recorded. In addition, several horticultural beds and/or terraces were observed, but there were notably no remains of definite monastic origin.

2.1.4 An evaluation comprising five trenches was carried out c.600m south-west of the site (TL 6392 7384; Kenny 2001) and revealed only a single pit of undetermined prehistoric date.

2.1.5 Medieval features, including a quarry pit and later post-medieval levelling deposits were, however, uncovered during an evaluation undertaken c.500m south of the site (TL 6439 7391; Kenny 2004). Taken together the quarry pit and associated post-holes probably indicate that the plot of land was in use as a croft in the early medieval period, similar to examples seen further north of the village.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1.1 The archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with a brief issued by Dan McConnell of Cambridgeshire County Council, dated 26th January 2011, supplemented by a specification prepared by OA East (Mortimer 2011).
3.1.2 The objective of this watching brief was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the development area.

3.1.3 The Brief required that no ground penetration could take place without a suitably qualified and experienced archaeologist present. The area of investigation was located immediately west and north-west of the priory church (Fig. 1).

3.1.4 The watching brief entailed monitoring of the excavation of a single pipe trench measuring 67m long, 0.5m wide and 0.9-1.3m deep. In addition, a 2m x 1m and 1.30m-deep manhole pit, located at the southern end of the trench and to the west of the church, was also investigated (Fig. 2; Plate 3).

3.1.5 During the groundwork excavations a series of sections (Fig. 3, S1-11) were recorded along the length of the trench. The trench was excavated from north-west to south-east for 55m, before turning southwards for 12m towards the entrance to the field next to an existing manhole (Fig. 2).

3.1.6 All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using OA East's *pro-forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and digital photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

3.1.7 Site conditions were generally fine; the trench was located within a slightly undulating pasture field.

4 Results

4.1.1 The broad stratigraphy of the trench comprised natural chalk (3, 6, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 31 and 39) recorded at a depth of 0.45-0.80m, overlain by a 0.20-0.50m thick subsoil (2, 5, 8, 11, 15, 19, 23 and 29). Above this, in the northernmost (0-55m) section of the trench, was a 0.15-0.2m-thick turf/topsoil layer (1, 4, 7, 10, 14, 18 and 22), whilst in the southernmost 55-67m of the trench this changed to a 0.2-0.35m-thick mixed turf/hardcore layer (28 and 36).

4.1.2 Two pits (26 and 32) and a post-hole (34) were investigated that cut the natural chalk towards the southern angle of the trench. All contained single mid-pale brown silty clay fills that were devoid of finds. Pit 26 (Fig.3, S.8; Plate 4) measured 0.95m wide and 0.25m deep and was revealed at a depth of 0.68m below ground level. Pit 32, 0.58m wide and 0.18m deep, and post-hole 34, 0.25m wide and 0.42m deep, were recorded at a depth of 0.72m (Fig. 3; S.9, Plate 5).

4.1.3 At 20m along the trench a spread of material 0.18-0.38m thick (contexts 12, 16, 20, 24, 30 and 38) was encountered at a depth of 0.45-0.55m. This deposit, which sealed the pits and post-hole, contained a large quantity of fragmented roof tiles of late medieval to post-medieval date and occasional sherds of pottery. This may represent a levelling material which is backfilling a possible sunken feature or natural hollow (Fig. 3, S.3; Plate 6).

4.1.4 A redeposited natural chalk (37; Fig. 3, S.11) overlaid the levelling deposit at the southern end of the trench, close to the existing gateway/entrance into the field. Above this were hardcore deposits (28 and 36), all presumably laid to stabilise the ground for farm vehicle access.
Finds Summary (Appendix A)

4.1.5 A very small assemblage of finds was recovered, all of which has been quantified. The assemblage comprises 0.06kg of pottery (mostly medieval and late medieval to post-medieval but generally the sherds are too small to be diagnostic, Carole Fletcher *pers. comm.*), 2.14kg of CBM (late medieval to post-medieval roof tile, Rob Atkins *pers. comm.*), 0.3kg of animal bone (largely from subsoil and dumped layer) and 0.003kg of oyster shell.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1.1 The watching brief revealed a small number of undated, but probably medieval, features that could be contemporary with the priory given their proximity to the extant church. The demolition layer sealing the features contained a mixture of late and post-medieval finds, largely roof tile fragments, and may represent tile dumped from a demolished building or buildings associated with the priory which may backfill a natural hollow or feature. The nature of this deposit and the presence of late medieval or post-medieval building material indicates that this is a post-Reformation demolition or levelling layer.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Gavin Wiseman and Cambridgeshire County Council, Highways who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Richard Mortimer.

The site contractor W S Atkins were very helpful, in particular Mike Flanders, Billy Gipp and all their site staff.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Dan McConnell, Cambridgeshire Archaeology, Cambridgeshire County Council, Planning & Countryside Advice.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


### APPENDIX A. FINDS SUMMARY

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APPENDIX B. OASIS REPORT FORM
All fields are required unless they are not applicable.

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OASIS Number: oxfordar3-102767
Project Name: Watching Brief on land at Islam Priory
Project Dates (fieldwork) Start: 14-03-2011 Finish: 16-03-2011
Previous Work (by OA East) Yes Future Work Unknown

Project Reference Codes
Site Code: ISL PDR 11 Planning App. No. N/A
HER No.: ECB 3549 Related HER/OASIS No.

Type of Project/Techniques Used
Prompt: Scheduled Monument Consent

Please select all techniques used:

- Field Observation (periodic visits)
- Part Excavation
- Salvage Record
- Full Excavation (100%)
- Part Survey
- Systematic Field Walking
- Full Survey
- Recorded Observation
- Systematic Metal Detector Survey
- Geophysical Survey
- Remote Operated Vehicle Survey
- Test Pit Survey
- Open-Area Excavation
- Salvage Excavation
- Watching Brief

Monument Types/Significant Finds & Their Periods
List feature types using the NMR Monument Type Thesaurus and significant finds using the MDA Object type Thesaurus together with their respective periods. If no features/finds were found, please state "none".

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Project Location

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| District:     | ECB 3549                                       |
| Parish:       | Isleham                                        |
| Study Area:   | 66.50X0.60M Pipe Trench                       |
|              | National Grid Reference: TL 6420 7435          |
### Project Originators

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<tr>
<td>Project Brief Originator</td>
<td>Dan McConnel Cambridgeshire County Council</td>
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<td>Project Design Originator</td>
<td>Richard Mortimer OA East</td>
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- X Survey
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- X Virtual Reality

### Paper Media

- Aerial Photos
- X Context Sheet
- Correspondence
- X Diary
- X Drawing
- X Manuscript
- X Map
- X Matrices
- X Microfilm
- Misc.
- Research/Notes
- X Photos
- X Plans
- X Report
- X Sections
- X Survey

### Notes:
Figure 1: Site location with position of trench (red)
Figure 3: Section drawings
Plate 1: General shot of the priory church

Plate 2: General shot of earthworks
Plate 3: Part of excavated pipe trench

Plate 4: Section 8, Pit 26
Plate 5: Section 9, pit 32 and post-hole 34

Plate 6: Section 3, north-west edge of spread 12
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