LDHS UPDATE: NORTHSTOWE February - March 2023

LDHS is delighted to have been asked to support the ***Northstowe Arts Sculpture Project for the Heritage Annex.*** This project will use broken sherds of pottery from the Northstowe site to create a work of art for the new heritage building. In order to help local residents understand the historical context of the material being used, this LDHS Update has kindly been written by Dr Oscar Aldred of CAU and we thank him for his contribution. Dr Aldred has worked extensively on the Northstowe site for a number of years and the discoveries made by archaeologists not only explains the history of the Northstowe site but also adds to our understanding of how local communities interacted with each other, the Fen Edge and the wider local area.

Excavating the past: a short history of Northstowe's archaeology

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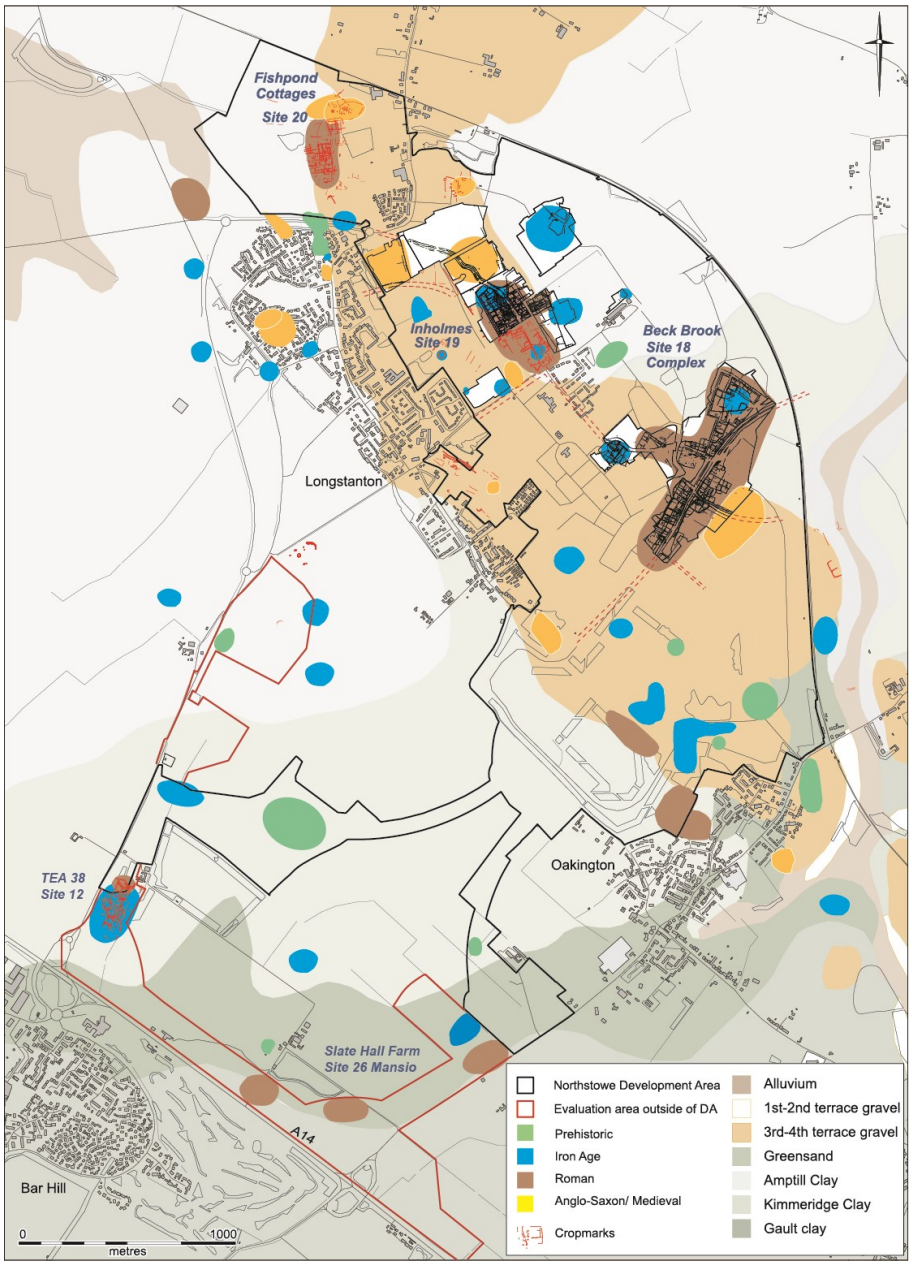
The long-term history of the communities that lived within the area covered by the Northstowe development, is told through archaeological features and finds. Fortunately, the evaluations and excavations conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit, Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge between 2004 to 2007, and 2014 to 2019 (principally Phases 1 & 2) recovered a lot of amazing material to tell this story. Starting in prehistory, artefacts, such as small flint blades from the Mesolithic period (c. 10,000 years ago) were found in later features, along with Late Neolithic (c. 6,000 year ago) objects, such as a Cornish Greensand polished axe. The objects were connected with seasonal and temporary activities. However, in the Middle to Late Bronze Age (c. 3-4,000 years ago), field systems comprising large, co-joined ditched enclosures were established, within which animals such as cattle and sheep grazed. These field systems covered the area known as Inholmes and Purcell fields (Northstowe Phase 1). In addition localised pitting dating to the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age (c. 2,800-3,000 years ago) occurred, suggesting seasonal activity with camping amongst the fields, rather than fully developed settlement. Occasionally, during this seasonal work, people died. They were buried amongst the fields, connected with a few Middle to Late Bronze Age un-urned cremation burials.



Map – Archaeological 'sites' identified across Northstowe with excavation features and airborne transcription, with main sites named.

A change from seasonal occupation to permanent settlement occurred in the Middle Iron Age to Late Iron Age period (c. 2,100-2,300 years ago). In the latter part of the period, there was an increase in the size and density of occupation – about thirty settlements have been identified so far - ranging from small, single farmsteads with single enclosures, to more complex settlement and field arrangements. This also included interconnected settlements, which were joined by long linear ditches. Large amounts of material culture were found, including pottery (used for cooking and eating food, but also for food storage), and food debris in the form of animal bone.

Worked bone tools, loom weights for weaving, worked stone such as querns, as well as precious objects such as brooches and local tribal and Roman Republic coins were also found. Communities at this time became much more organized, creating long ditches and trackways between settlements, probably helping to harness communal spaces for growing crops and grazing animals.

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The Roman invasion of Britain in the first century CE was arguably more of a cultural invasion than one involving the mass migration of people (besides the military). However, across Northstowe it produced a change in the organization of local settlement spaces, with a clear take-up of Roman material culture (things like pottery and precious objects such as coinage and brooches). Across the Northstowe development area three large Roman period settlements were established, two of which we know were on top of earlier Iron Age ones. These three were Site 18 (Beck Brook), Site 19 (Inholmes), and Site 20 (Fishpond Cottages); see map. A fourth settlement (Site 26) was a high status settlement, possibly a villa or Mansio. These settlements shaped the surrounding landscape for the next four hundred years or so. Like the preceding Iron Age settlements, they were also connected, but by a series of trackways, linking the settlements to each other but also to grazing areas (e.g., towards the fen-edge and the clay uplands), main communication routes (e.g., *via devana*) and other settlements (e.g., North-West Cambridge hinterland, Cambridge small town, Arbury Camp and King Hedges villa, Fenstanton, Cottenham, Over, Willingham, and the Earith 'port' of Camp Ground). Locally made pottery (as well as imported), animal bone, worked stone, bone tools, metal objects (e.g., coins, brooches, toiletry sets), and a complex infrastructure of drainage ditches were found at Sites 18 and 19, along with two main cemetery areas, houses, shrines, and small-scale industrial remains (e.g., corn drier oven, kiln, cistern and wells). Some special objects were found, including a copper alloy stag's head for a sceptre used in religious practices, the spout of a face flagon – the 'Northstowe lady', a Barnack stone altar, and a pewter plate; see photograph.

Photograph – A selection of 'special' Roman objects from Northstowe: (left to right clockwise) Stag sceptre head; face flagon spout 'Northstowe lady'; Late Roman pewter plate; 3rd to 4th century CE stone altar.

As the settlements progressed into the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the Roman administration that kept the systems of exchange and trade in place failed, this created opportunities for new communities to emerge (possibly the ones that occupied the Roman period settlements, but also new ones too). This period is called the 'dark ages' because there is little surviving, or it is hard to identify. However, at Northstowe there is a relatively well preserved 'dark age' presence connected with early-fifth and sixth century CE settlements and burials. This evidence sits alongside new styles of pottery and metal working, especially brooches. In many ways, these new settlements – which were open clusters of structures and pits – reverted to an Iron Age type of settlement: dispersed small farmsteads, located at the edges of the former (Roman) settlements. Eventually, from the late-seventh to eighth century CE, another period of re-organization occurred; centrally placed and permanent settlements, with enclosures and hall-like buildings. This community began the start of the medieval village of Longstanton. Probably from this time, the former prehistoric Iron Age, Roman and 'dark age' field and settlement areas were turned into Longstanton and Oakington's fields and trackways, with its familiar nineteenth century field names: Stanwell/Stanhill, Inholmes, Purcell, and Mill Field; and trackways called Great More Balk, Moor Way, Broad Way and Stanwell Way.

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit was commissioned to undertake the Phase 1 excavations by Gallagher Estates, and Phase 2 excavations by Homes England. These excavations were monitored by the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Team (CHET) at Cambridgeshire County Council.

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