

# The Car Dyke

by *Arnold Pryor*

The present note gives the results of a survey of the Car Dyke between the rivers Nene and Welland. The purpose of the survey was to see if the conclusions reached by Mr Brian Simmons about the Dyke north of Bourne could be upheld in the section south of the Welland. Brian Simmons and the Car Dyke Research Group had found that the behaviour of the Dyke's bed between Bourne and the River Witham precludes its use as a canal. The survey of the Dyke described here corroborates this view.

The bed and banks of the Dyke were surveyed along as much of its length as possible. Three readings were taken at 100m intervals. Inevitably, some stretches of the Dyke had been substantially altered by re-cutting or backfilling, but the greater part can be taken as reflecting reasonably consistently the original contours of this impressive earthwork.

It is clear from fig 15, a, that the most impressive factor is the watershed between the two rivers. North of the watershed, the Dyke drains into the Welland, while to the south water drains into the Nene. Today the Dyke is fed by many land-drains and by the natural stream known as Werrington Brook which breaches the bank at TF 17650415. That the direction of flow of the Dyke changes in the region of the watershed is apparent from the longitudinal section of the bed.

The present theory on the function of the Car Dyke is that surplus water from the uplands was channelled into the nearest major water-courses, the Nene and the Welland, before it could reach the Fens. Accurate surveying would have been an absolute necessity to create adequate gradients for an effective catchwater, and, looking at the long section of the dyke (fig 15, a), they were obviously present. In plan the Dyke follows the 25ft contour very closely. The contour itself defines the Fen Edge and the fall in land-level to the east is for the most part dramatic. Obviously, the purpose of any drain is to rid itself of water as quickly as possible, and conversely the function of a canal is to retain a constant level of water to facilitate the movement of vessels. This means that, if the Dyke as actually constructed was full as it crossed the watershed, the banks near the north and south extremities would be overflowing and the central section would be dry.

The Car Dyke cannot be considered in isolation, and factors such as settlement and exploitation of the Fenland and the consequent effect on Fen Edge development must be taken into account. One should note the rapid second-century expansion in the Silt Fens for evidence of the scale of the whole settlement programme which was made possible simply by effective drainage. The saltern sites near the Car Dyke (fig 15) may suggest that there are more Romano-British sites beneath the Peat Fens. They also serve to remind us of the importance of salt in the Roman world.

Although there is no evidence for centuriation of the reclaimed Fenland, the Car Dyke and the drainage of the Fens were undoubtedly the results of official Roman planning, as they would have been far too expensive for any other source to finance. The Fenland is likely to have been public land.

The early second-century appears to be the most likely context for the construction of the Car Dyke. In spite of the dearth of dating material, this period is suggested by the new stable political and economic climate in the South-East. Fieldwork shows a sudden expansion in the number of small farmsteads in the Silt Fens and on the gravel promontories and islands of the Fens in the early second-century. Allowing for a drying-out and de-salination period of 10-20 years after drainage, one may even push the construction date for the Dyke back to the late first century.

Much has been written about the Car Dyke and most of it is based on an idea promulgated by Stukeley that the Dyke was a canal used for shipping grain to the army at York. All the archaeological evidence, however, supports the theory that the primary function of the Car Dyke was as a catchwater.

I would especially like to thank Mr Brian Simmons, the Car Dyke Research Group and the farmers (too numerous to mention), who allowed access to their land and showed an interest in this survey.

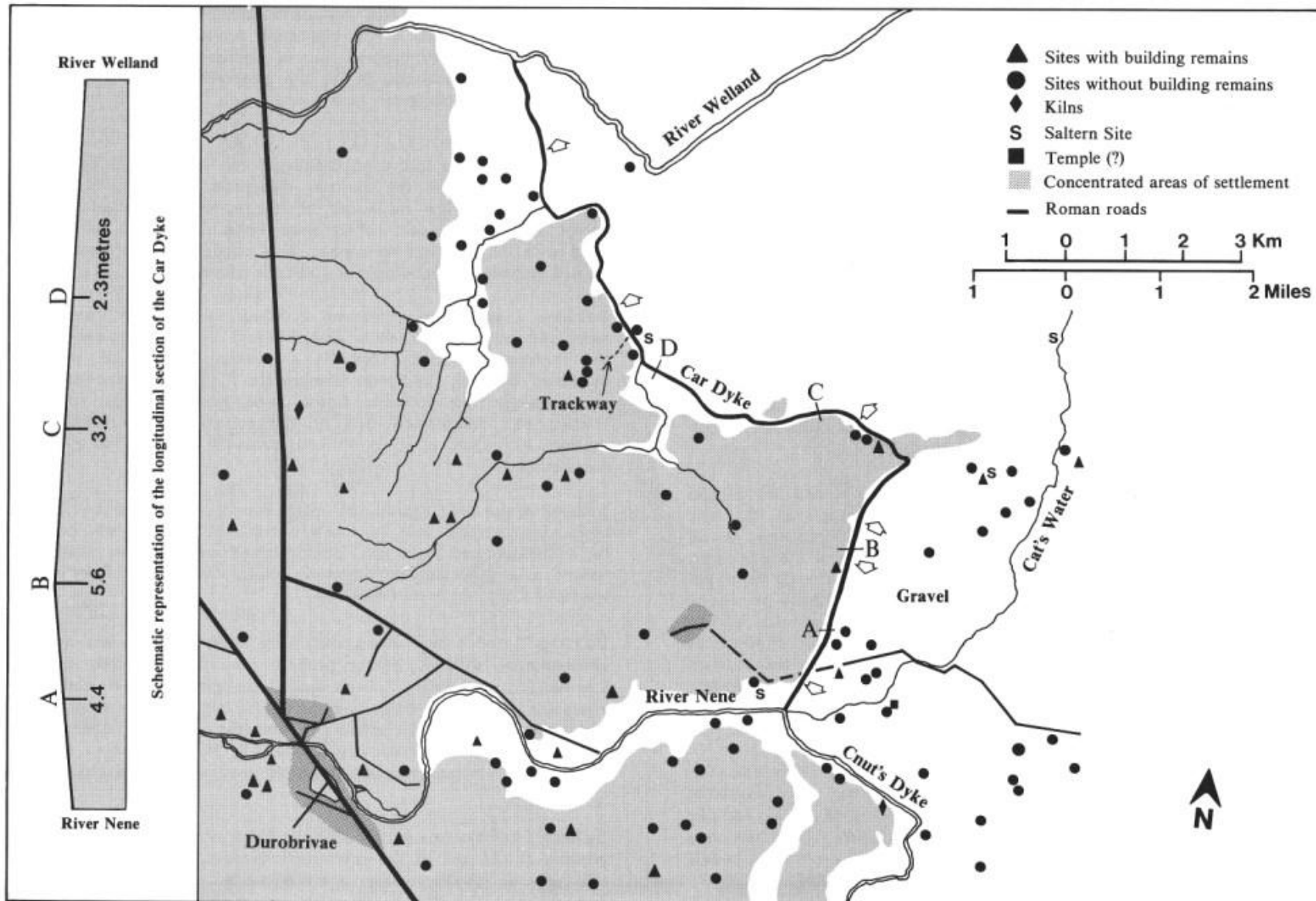


Fig 15 The Car Dyke between the Welland and Nene (with levels)