

Buried Sites in the Peterborough Fens

by Francis Pryor

We finished excavating the Fengate complex of sites in 1978, and then spent two years or so writing it up. Our next project was at Maxey, some 10 miles north of Peterborough, where we dug a large and very exciting multiperiod prehistoric and Roman site. This work led to the investigation of the Etton causewayed camp (discussed in this issue, p.8) and, via Etton, to the Fens proper, some 3-5 miles further east. My interest in the Fens was aroused many years ago, while still working at Fengate; but travel to and fro across the Atlantic (I had a full-time job with the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto) meant that I could not be in the Fens during winter. Winter is the only time of year when one can carry out field-survey in the Fens: crops show a minimum of growth or the earth is bare, and dykes are being cleaned out between October and May. In other words, conditions are ideal.

The Fenland Committee at Cambridge, chaired by Professor John Coles, is attempting the very daunting task of a complete surface-survey of the Fenland, in all four counties (Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk). The work was started by David Hall (see *Durobrivae* 8, 1980, 13f.; 7, 1979, 16f.) and he in many ways is its inspiration. Our approach is somewhat different. We build on the surface-survey by walking along freshly cleaned drainage dykes, and there plot sites buried beneath the peats and clays that form the superficial Fen deposits. Obviously, there is more to our work than just looking at dyke sides, but we don't have space to discuss that here.

Many doubts were expressed when we first suggested the dyke survey; but the Department of the Environment decided to back us, and for that it deserves all credit. We started work in October 1982 and have been down dykes, on and off, all winter. Our discoveries have been extraordinary – indeed I simply could not have predicted that we would have uncovered such a wealth of material in so short a time. I thought the doubters had common sense on their side and that we would find nothing. Instead, we have shown that a ten-acre enclosure near Peakirk is not a ditched Mediaeval monastic site, but is instead a superbly preserved Iron-Age ring-fort, with its interior entirely buried beneath clay and all its floors etc still intact. The bank and ditch that surround it, too, are intact and the defensive ditch is waterlogged. Consequently, survival conditions will be

comparable with those at Etton. It must be among the most important Early Iron-Age sites in Britain.

Near Eye we demonstrated that the Fens hid an intact land surface perhaps 5,000 years old, today spread across some 5 square kilometres of country. It produced good evidence for human occupation. Moving south, towards Fengate, we found numerous buried sites in the 'skirtland' surrounding the gravel island of Northey, immediately north of the (modern) course of the River Nene. One of these sites was placed on the extreme edge of the island, and produced animal bone, flint, pottery and worked wood. About a hundred yards out into the newly-forming Fen (Flag Fen) we found the remains of a wooden artificial 'island'. This 'island' was large (at least 80 metres across) and constructed from woodwork laid down on the Fen muds in a crude lattice-pattern. Many of the timbers seem to have been re-used from buildings (see Maisie Taylor's paper, p. 12). The landward approach to the site was defended by a zone of vertical piles which had been driven deep into the Fen muds beneath. The photograph (fig. 5) gives some idea of the site's sheer size (woodwork spreads along the water's edge to the far ranging-pole; the two figures are standing below the remains of a gravel-dump Roman road which passes across the site at this point, but is separated from it by about 50cm of peat and clay). At one particularly wet point the 'island' had been built upon ash tree-trunks laid directly on the bottom; a piece from one of these trunks can be seen atop the dykeside in the photograph.

We plan to attempt a survey of the site's true extent in the summer of 1983, and will carry out larger-scale excavations, if all goes well, in the following two years. Our small dykeside 'cleaning' operation produced 500 timbers. Heaven knows what future full-scale excavation might produce.



Fig 5 Flag Fen: general view along the modern drainage dyke showing timbers near the water's edge. The water level is a few centimetres below modern sea level