

The Itter Farm Site, King's Dyke

by Adrian Challands

The 'island' of Whittlesey has been virtually continuously occupied by man since at least the later Neolithic. Since Whittlesey 'island' was created by a hump of Oxford Clay with a capping of marine sand and gravel which protrudes through the Fens, it has been a prime site for the exploitation of brick-making clay and gravel since the early nineteenth century.

Our attention was drawn to areas at the western end of the 'island' at King's Dyke by reports of previous finds of archaeological material and the close proximity of the Fen Causeway Roman road. Accordingly, one of the first rescue excavations to be carried out by the newly-formed Archaeological Field Section of Peterborough Museum Society was at Itter Farm, King's Dyke (fig 20). The excavations were directed by the late Mr G. F. Dakin and Mr E. Standen during the early Winter of 1958 and early Summer of 1959.

An area 28m by 15m was completely excavated and revealed a series of ditches, one large pit and a smaller pit dug into gravel below the top-soil layer. The plan and selected sections of this system are shown in fig 20. The ditches represent parts of three different drainage systems, but common to all was a slight east-west fall.

The first was a system to the south. This comprised a single ditch (no. 7 on fig 20), which was falling towards Pit 5. The pit was just over 1.5m deep and its sandy loam filling contained third and fourth-century Nene Valley colour-coated sherds, mixed with residual first-century coarse pottery and a few Antonine samian sherds.

The second system included a large pit (3), 6m across by 2m deep, which was presumably the receptacle for drainage from Ditch 6 which ran into it from the north-west. A considerable quantity of artifacts was recovered, mainly from the silty organic lower filling of the pit. These included over 1000 Romano-British Nene Valley pottery sherds of late third to early fourth-century date as well as flint implements, Roman coins, fragments of millstone-grit quern,

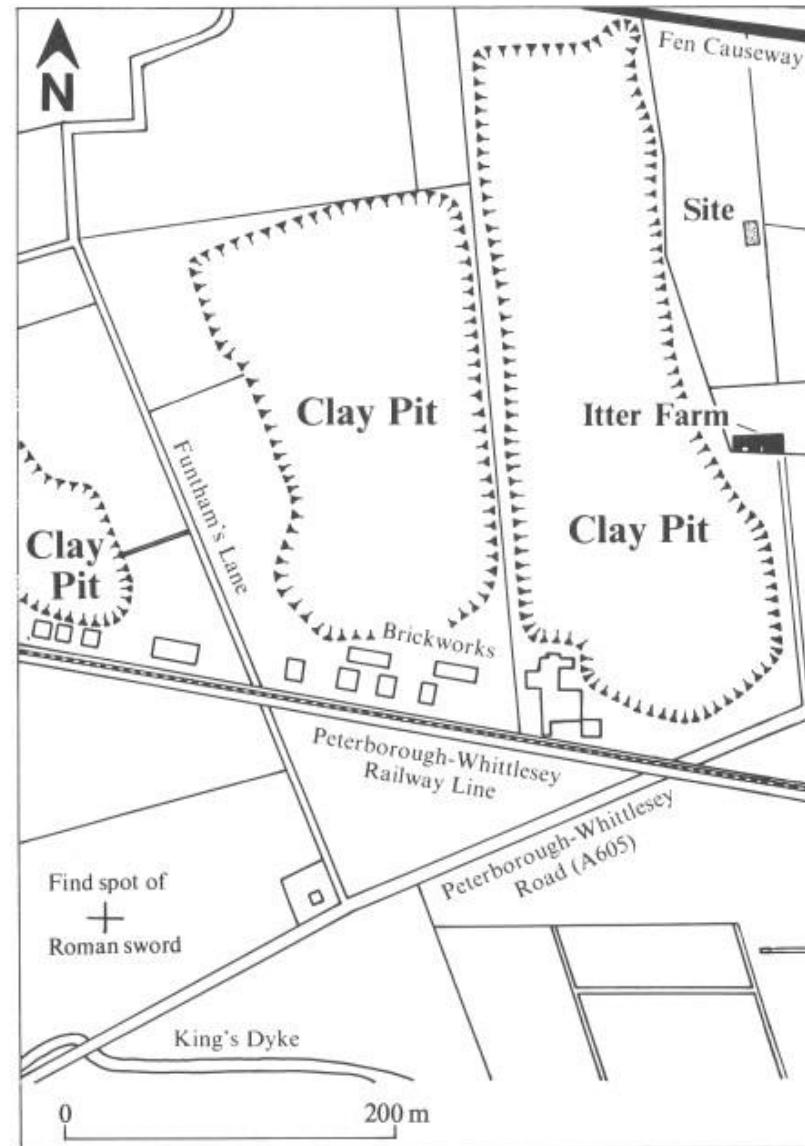


Fig 19 The Itter Farm site, King's Dyke, Whittlesey

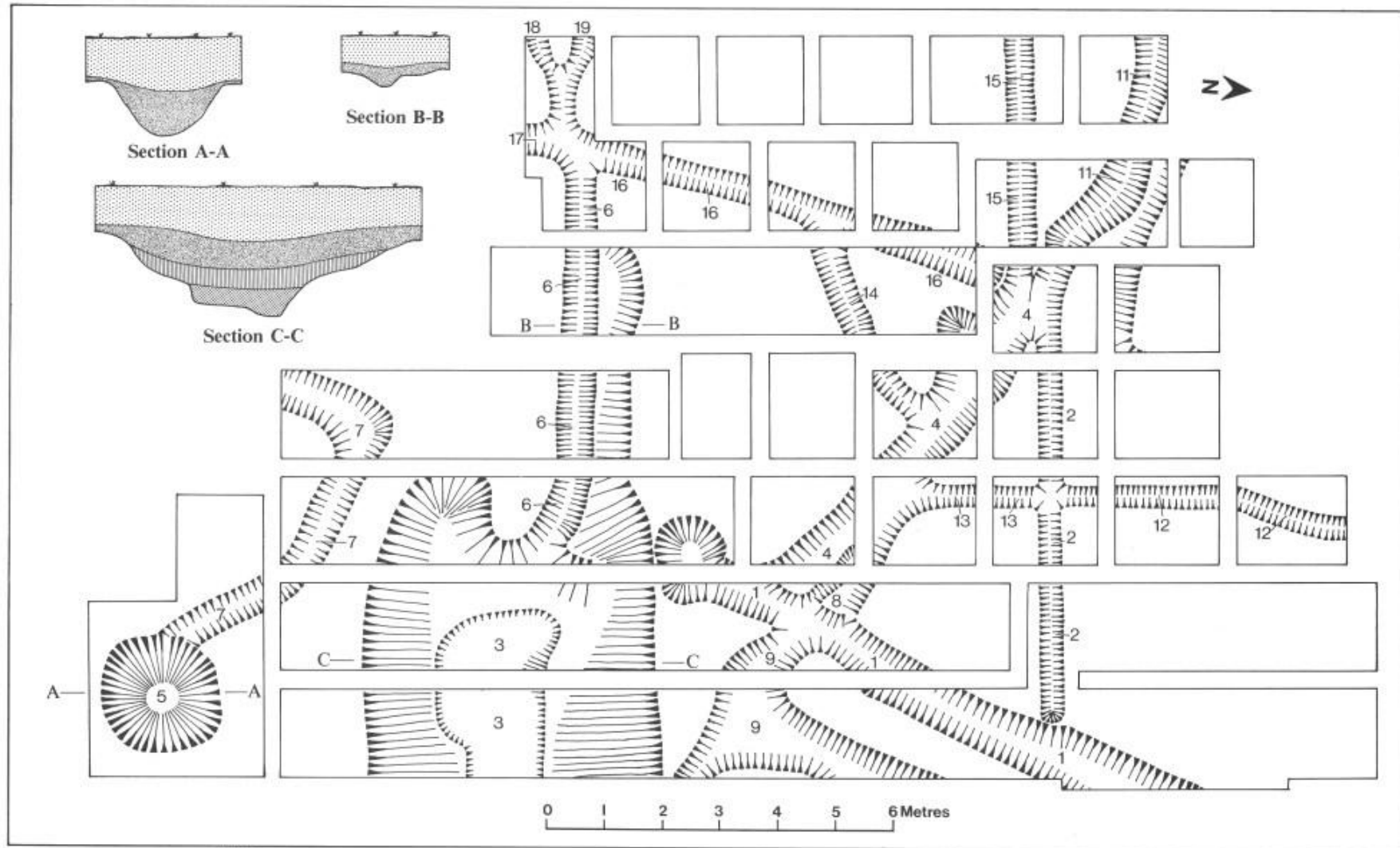


Fig 20 Plan and sections of the excavations at Ifter Farm, King's Dyke

bone pin and a faceted jet bead. In addition, quantities of animal bones representing cattle, sheep and goats were present.

The northern group of ditches (1,2,4 and 8-19) comprised the third system, which was more complicated than the other two. They were linked by a north-south ditch (16) to Ditch 6 in the second system. Ditches 1 and 4 were broader and in places deeper than any of the other ditches excavated on the site, and whilst only first-century pottery was recovered from Ditch 4, it was linked to other ditches which contained sherds of pottery dating from the first to the fourth century.

A total of ten Roman coins was found. The earliest was a heavily-worn bronze of Domitian (A.D. 81-96) and the latest a scarcely-worn specimen of Constans (A.D. 337-350).

From the evidence provided by the pottery and coins it can be assumed that this part of Whittlesey 'island' was occupied from sometime in the first century to at least the middle of the fourth century A.D., although occupation need not have been continuous. It is quite clear that only part of the system of ditches was excavated; this was confirmed by several facts. Evidence of surface finds and features to the south-west and south-east of the site indicated that the settlement had once been more extensive. In addition, ditch sections were noted in the quarry face to the west when sand and gravel was removed prior to working the underlying clay. After the site had been vacated by the Field Section, observations were made by the directors while mechanical diggers were removing the clay overburden. They noted that pits, ditches and stone-packed post-holes were being revealed to the north of the site, which covered an area at least three times as great as that excavated.

It may be that the site represents part of a Fen-Edge Romano-British farm and, although no buildings were found, the domestic utensils and post-holes give some basis for the view that there were dwellings in the vicinity. The ditches may not have bounded enclosures; for they do not enclose particularly useful-sized plots and must be presumed to have been cut at different times, but perhaps over a short period. They were probably cut as a result of rising water-tables which led to the abandonment of some sites in the Fens, such as Hockwold-cum-Wilton (*Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* LX, 1967, 39), in the mid third-century A.D. Although the Itter Farm site, lying as it does between 4.6 and 6.0m O.D., does not exhibit any evidence of flooding, the pottery datable to around the mid

third century exhibits a fall-off in quantity, but there is an increase in vessel numbers in the late third to early fourth century.

It is difficult to postulate the farm's economy, whether arable, pastoral or both, although other Roman farm sites in the Fens have primarily a pastoral economy. A similar system of ditches was excavated some 10km west at Lynch Farm (*Durobrivae* 1, 1973, 20), where the system laid out in the third century has been interpreted as belonging to the pastoral component on marginal land of a much larger farming unit.