

The voices of the past.

Archaeology of Little Abington Parish, Cambridgeshire and the potential impact of the Grange Farm development.

Introduction

Great and Little Abington occupy a prominent position on the chalklands of south-east Cambridgeshire, overlooking the upper reaches of the River Granta chalk stream and sitting directly between two of Cambridgeshire's renowned Anglo Saxon ditches, The Brent ditch and Fleam dyke. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the parish formed an important focus of human activity from the Late Neolithic through the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman periods.

The concentration of ceremonial monuments, particularly, a henge and barrow cemeteries, suggests that the area was a significant prehistoric ritual landscape whose importance continued for millennia. Recent investigations by Oxford Archaeology have substantially enhanced understanding of this landscape.

The landscape around the village has come into focus following the proposed development of a large site at Grange Farm within the parish of Little Abington. An assessment was carried out by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit in November 2021 which highlighted the principal sites across the development and surrounding areas.

The Late Neolithic Henge at Little Abington

The most significant recent discovery within the parish was the identification and evaluation of a probable late Neolithic henge monument during investigations undertaken by Oxford Archaeology East in 2016 on land subsequently developed as the Cambridge International School. Geophysical survey first detected a large circular enclosure, and trial trenching confirmed its archaeological character.

The monument comprises a substantial circular ditch approximately 65 m in internal diameter, making it one of the larger henge monuments known in eastern England. Excavation demonstrated the presence of a northern entrance and suggested the possibility of a corresponding southern entrance, creating a classic henge layout with opposed access points. The monument was constructed on a level chalk plateau at

approximately 32.5 m OD, a location that would have made it highly visible within the surrounding landscape.

The excavated sections revealed differences between the eastern and western arcs of the ditch. The western segment was larger and deeper, while the eastern ditch was narrower and more steep-sided. No surviving bank material was identified, probably due to later plough truncation, although the original monument would almost certainly have possessed an accompanying earthwork bank.

Today, it is still possible to stand in the centre of the henge and look across the Granta valley, down to the old river crossing at Bourn Bridge exactly as our forebears did 4,000 years ago.

Artefacts associated with the henge consisted mainly of struck Neolithic flint recovered from the upper fills of the ditch and small quantities of animal bone from lower deposits. Such limited artefactual assemblages are typical of many henge monuments, which are generally interpreted as ceremonial or gathering places rather than domestic settlements.

Of particular importance is the relationship of the henge to the surrounding prehistoric landscape. Oxford Archaeology noted that the monument lies within an area already known for Bronze Age funerary activity and suggested that it may represent the earliest and largest ceremonial monument in a sequence that later developed into a wider ritual landscape marked by barrows and burial monuments that extend across the development site.

The discovery is especially significant because henges are comparatively rare monuments in Cambridgeshire. The Little Abington example indicates that the parish formed part of a wider Late Neolithic ceremonial network that included major ritual centres elsewhere in eastern England.

Bronze Age Barrows at Four Went Ways and the Travelodge Site

Probably the best-known prehistoric monuments within the parish are the Bronze Age round barrows located around Four Went Ways, now partly occupied by modern roadside development including the Travelodge, service facilities and associated infrastructure.

Archaeological evaluation undertaken by Oxford Archaeology in 1994 investigated cropmarks recorded from aerial photography and confirmed that a group of ring-ditch features represented ploughed-out Bronze Age

round barrows. These monuments formed part of a larger barrow cemetery extending across the area.

The excavated ring ditches had suffered extensive agricultural erosion and no surviving burial deposits were identified. Nevertheless, the ditch circuits clearly demonstrated the former presence of burial mounds. Environmental evidence indicated that the barrows originally stood within an open grassland landscape, making them highly visible markers within the Bronze Age countryside.

Excavation also produced evidence of prehistoric flint-working within the barrow ditches. Flint nodules had been worked on site, suggesting continued activity around the monuments after their initial construction.

Today, remnants of this cemetery survive incongruously amid modern commercial development, highlighting the long continuity of use at this strategic crossroads location.

The Grange Farm Barrows

Further Bronze Age funerary monuments are known from Grange Farm. Aerial photographic evidence has identified additional ring ditches interpreted as ploughed-out round barrows.

The Historic England List (Entry 1496546) details a Bronze Age Barrow Cemetery located 440m northwest of Grange Farm Cottage. This important site is protected by law as a Scheduled Monument because it contains rare, buried remains of a Late Neolithic to Bronze Age burial ground.

If the site were developed, creating a 'buffer' to mitigate the harm to the scheduled monument would significantly reduce the available land for development. In the process, increasing the difficulty of achieving the number of dwellings necessary for the community to be self sufficient – a key justification made for the proposal.

Together, the Four Went Ways and Grange Farm monuments indicate the existence of an extensive Bronze Age ceremonial landscape rather than isolated burial sites. The distribution of barrows around the henge suggests a long-term pattern whereby later Bronze Age communities deliberately placed funerary monuments within sight of earlier ceremonial structures.

Evidence for Bronze Age activity within the parish extends beyond funerary monuments. The 2016 excavations identified several linear ditches that may date to the Middle Bronze Age. Although undated, their orientation and morphology suggest agricultural or territorial boundaries established after the construction of the henge.

Such relationships between henges and barrow cemeteries are recognised elsewhere in Britain and imply the continued significance of ancestral and ceremonial places over many centuries.

Iron Age Evidence

Compared with the rich Neolithic and Bronze Age record, Iron Age evidence within Little Abington parish is more limited but still significant. The 2016 Oxford Archaeology investigation recovered small quantities of pottery dating to the Early Iron Age. Most of these sherds came from secondary deposits within colluvial layers and solution hollows rather than securely stratified contexts, indicating nearby settlement activity yet to be discovered.

Iron Age pottery was also recovered from the ditches of the Four Went Ways barrows. These finds demonstrate that people continued to visit or utilise the area long after the barrows had ceased to function as active burial monuments. The reuse of earlier ceremonial landscapes during the Iron Age is a common phenomenon across eastern England.

Although no major Iron Age settlement has yet been excavated within the parish itself, the pottery evidence suggests occupation in the surrounding landscape. The chalk uplands around Little Abington would have been well suited to mixed farming, and future investigations may reveal farmsteads or field systems contemporary with the pottery assemblages already recovered.

Roman Period Activity

Roman-period evidence from Little Abington is relatively modest but indicates continuity of occupation and land use. Land that sits directly on the line of the Roman Road following the Icknield Way (A11) and with another Roman Road crossing it at Worsted Lodge and forming the northern boundary of the parish and the proposed development area.

The Cambridge International School excavations recovered pottery spanning the transition from the Iron Age into the Early Roman period.

Although the finds were not recovered from secure settlement contexts, they demonstrate Roman-period activity in the vicinity.

The strategic location of Little Abington near these important routeways linking Cambridge with the East Anglian interior would have encouraged continued occupation throughout the Roman era. While no substantial Roman settlement has yet been excavated within the parish, the ceramic evidence demonstrates integration into the wider Romano-British landscape.

Conclusion

Little Abington sits at the heart of one of the most important prehistoric landscapes in south Cambridgeshire. At its centre stands a newly recognised Late Neolithic henge. This monument appears to have formed the ceremonial focus of a landscape that later developed into an extensive Bronze Age funerary complex.

Subsequent Middle Bronze Age boundary ditches, Iron Age pottery scatters and Roman finds indicate that the landscape remained occupied and meaningful long after the ceremonial significance of the henge and barrows had faded.

The archaeological record of Little Abington therefore illustrates the long-term evolution of a prehistoric ceremonial centre into an agricultural landscape that defines South Cambridgeshire and that has remained occupied and utilised for more than three thousand years.

The presence of a scheduled monument within the proposed development area along with the high likelihood of further sites becoming uncovered is likely to compromise the aims of a self-sufficient community being completed in a timely manner in response to the timescales being driven by central government.

It is reasonable to assume that the proposed development would cause substantial harm to not only the scheduled monument but the other sites in the immediate vicinity. The National Planning Policy Framework (2023) directs local planning to reject such proposals unless the proposal is 'wholly exceptional'. Given the number of other potential sites in South Cambridgeshire, this proposal cannot be said to meet this standard.

Furthermore, the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan Policy NH/4 will support proposals only if they sustain and enhance heritage assets. The development proposal as it stands clearly does neither.

The parishes of Little Abington, Great Abington and Hildersham along with the others that formed the Anglo Saxon Chilford Hundred, are not museum pieces. They have embraced change in the modern era, from the Land Settlement of the Second World War to the Science Parks of the twenty first century along with substantial quantities of housing designed to enhance the villages as sustainable communities.

In the rush to meet arbitrary development targets and solve the potential headache of how to link the opportunistic Grange Farm scheme with the planned transport hub, this landscape, occupied, farmed and populated in sustainable communities is not only under threat, it is in danger of being wiped away forever.

Mass development in this region is transparently not the answer to the lack of affordable housing close to where the jobs generated by the 'cambridge phenomenon' are. Jobs in the city and to the north and west that currently draw commuters in from the only places where they can find suitable affordable accommodation.

The communities of South Cambridgeshire will continue to embrace change, but only if the voices of the past are listened to and the development is incremental and of benefit to all and not at the expense of precisely what makes the region unique and special.