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Late Saxon Features at 9-13 Pratt Street, Soham:  
An Archaeological Evaluation

A. Hatton & J. Last

1997

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A107

*Commissioned By Kanagan Developments*

**Late Saxon Features at 9-13 Pratt Street, Soham:  
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## **Summary**

*In September 1995 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation of a plot of land off Pratt Street, Soham (TL 5927/7346), on behalf of Kanagan Developments. Three linear trenches totalling 55m were excavated, revealing linear and curvilinear ditches, pits and postholes of a Late Saxon date (10th-12th centuries AD). However, the level of the water table restricted the opportunity to recover datable artefacts from many of the features. In addition to the medieval features, the two trenches nearer to the street frontage contained late 19th or early 20th century rubbish pits.*

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**LATE SAXON FEATURES AT 9-13 PRATT STREET, SOHAM  
(TL 5927/7346): AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

The archaeological investigation of a plot of land off Pratt Street, Soham, was undertaken during September 1995 by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council on behalf of Kanagan Developments. The purpose of the investigation, as defined by the County Archaeology Office's brief, was to rapidly characterise and evaluate the archaeology of the subject area, and to follow this with limited recording of features likely to be disturbed during groundworks for a new housing development.

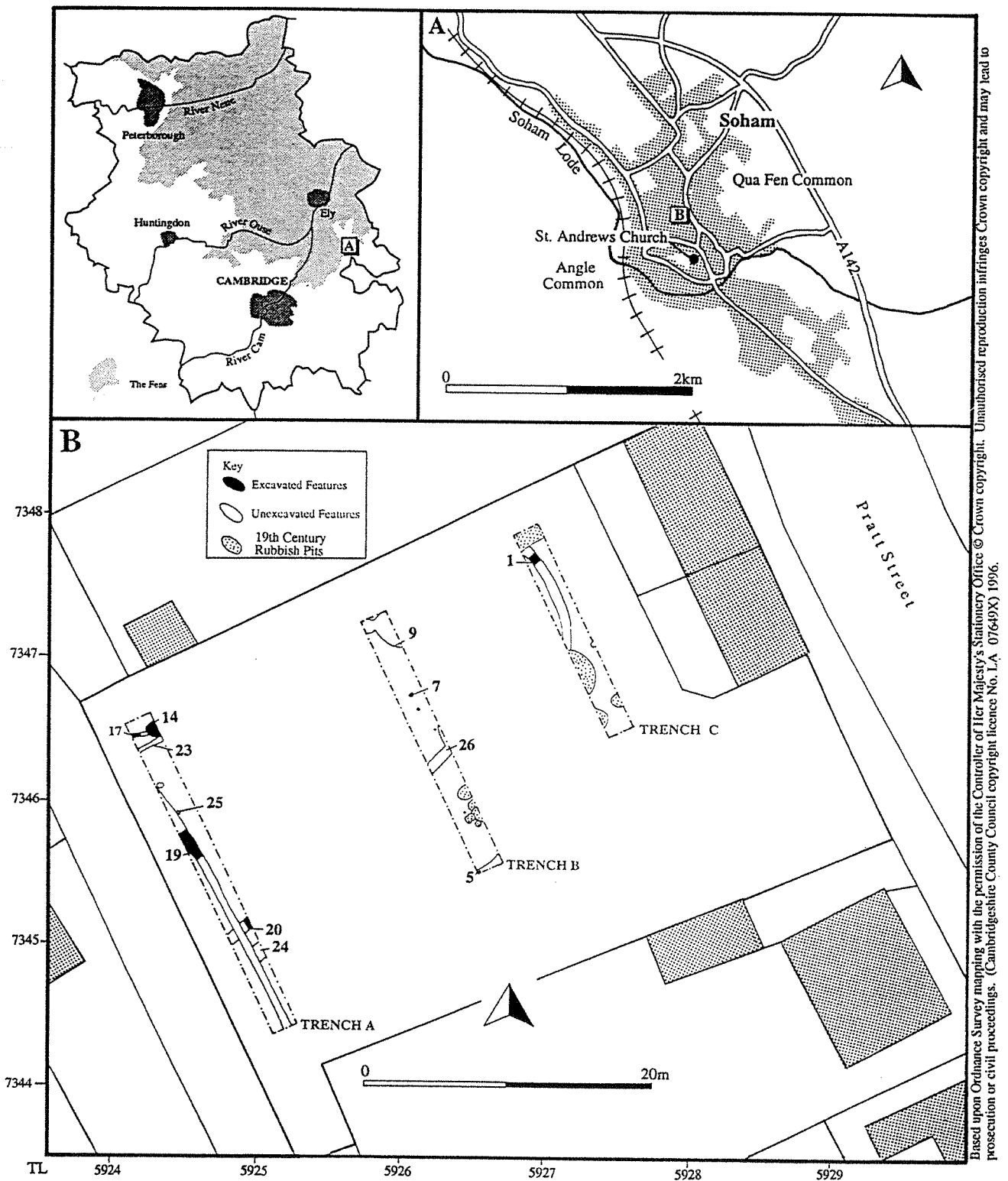
**2 GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY & LAND USE**

The village of Soham lies near the southern Fen-edge some 8km south-east of Ely, on the A142 between Ely and Newmarket (Fig. 1). It is situated on an irregular peninsula of chalk marl and river gravels, jutting into the Fen between the Isleham embayment and the former Soham Mere (British Geological Survey; Sheet 188). The evaluation area, of about 0.2ha, is located near the centre of the village, some 300m north of St Andrew's church, at a height of c 9m OD. It comprises building foundations near the Pratt Street frontage to the east, and overgrown gardens behind. The underlying geology of the site varies between chalk marl, identified in Trenches B and C, and 3rd Terrace river gravels and sand, in Trench A, illustrating within a small area the geological diversity of the Soham peninsula.

**3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

The Fen-edge around Soham and the nearby Snail valley have a long history of human activity (Hall 1996: 72-81; and see Appendix 2). Prehistoric finds in the vicinity of the evaluation area include Mesolithic tranchet axes (Cambs SMR 7098), Neolithic flint and polished stone axes (SMR 7087, 11019) as well as Bronze Age flints (SMR 7101) and ring-ditches (SMR 4456). Possible Iron Age and Roman burials are known within Soham (SMR 6971, 7086, 7100) and a large number of sites including a probable villa (SMR 7578) lie to the east and south-east of the village.

A striking concentration of early Anglo-Saxon activity includes a number of cemetery sites in and around Soham. One of these apparently lay in the vicinity of St Andrew's church (SMR 7123a) and an Anglo-Saxon spearhead found near the High Street (SMR 2086) may support this identification. Another burial site has been revealed south-east of the village (SMR 7027). Further along the Fordham road a number of inhumations and cremations of mid 6th to 7th century date were found in close proximity, perhaps indicative of a ploughed-out barrow (Lethbridge 1933). Pagan Anglo-Saxon barrows are rare in Cambridgeshire, although one was excavated last century in Bottisham (Taylor 1981: 113). Secondary interments within prehistoric barrows are also known, but there was no evidence at Soham for a primary Bronze Age burial.



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Figure 1 Site Location Map and Trench Plan

It is possible that a spear from Down Field to the south-east of the village (SMR 7585) relates to this site. Further metalwork finds came from Angle Common west of the village (SMR 7093-4), though one of these spearheads was apparently of a Late Saxon (10th century) date.

The early historical significance of Soham is attested mainly by the foundation in the 7th century AD of a monastery, presumably situated where the medieval church now stands (and therefore on or by the putative earlier cemetery), by St Felix, first bishop of the East Angles, who was also buried here (VCH II, 141).

Soham appears to have been at the centre of the see for a short while until it was relocated to Dunwich (SMR 7124). In the area around White Hart Lane, 300m south-east of the present site and just east of the church, several finds of human remains have been recovered during building work. These may represent a major burial ground belonging to the abbey during the 7th to 9th centuries (Robinson 1995). The monastery was subsequently destroyed, along with many other religious foundations in the area, during the late 9th century Danish invasions of East Anglia. Unlike nearby Ely it was not re-established during the 10th century round of local refoundations (VCH II, 142). The manor of Soham, in fact, was among those given to the abbey at Ely, shortly after the latter's refoundation, by the ealdorman Brithnoth (Conybeare 1897, 71).

At the time of the Domesday Book survey, the Abbot of Ely held 1/2 hide of land in Soham (VCH I, 364) but the manor was largely a royal estate, held by William I as it had been by Edward the Confessor. Seven fishermen are recorded, producing 3500 eels (*ibid.*, 360).

Settlement activity at this time is evidenced by the results of an archaeological evaluation in the grounds of Soham County Primary School, immediately east of the present site on the other side of Pratt Street (Bray 1991). Aerial photographs revealed two circular enclosures (SMR 7099), one of which is probably represented by a curvilinear ditch seen in one of the 1991 trenches and dated between the 10th and 13th centuries. Further evidence of activity at this time was provided by other gullies, ditches and pits which contained unabraded sherds of pottery, animal bones, and a spread of fired clay with twigs that could be interpreted as the remains of wattle walling. These remains correspond with a period of major development in Soham, the 12th century parish church bearing witness to the prosperity of the village at this time. Pratt Street itself may take its name from landowners called Prat, recorded in the village during the early 14th century (Reaney 1943, 197).

#### 4 METHODOLOGY

Three trenches (Fig. 1, A-C) of 15-20m in length were excavated to the level of secure archaeological deposits or to the top of natural horizons by a mechanical excavator using a 1.5m toothless ditching bucket. The trenches were sited to provide a reasonable coverage of the development area; Trench C was positioned as close to the street-front as limitations of access would allow, in order to test for the presence of structures there. Any archaeological features found were planned and, where possible, sample excavated.

## 5 RESULTS

The archaeological deposits were sealed by a subsoil (12) some 0.5m deep, underlying a topsoil layer which varied in depth across the evaluation area from 0.8m in Trench A to 0.25m in Trench C, where it was covered by foundation rubble. Hence the depth of machining varied across the site from c 0.95m to 1.4m.

### 5.1 Trench A

Trench A, which measured 20.5m in length, was positioned along the western boundary of the development area. It revealed a 15m long segment of a slightly curving ditch (cut **19**), 0.60m wide and 0.27m deep, which cut two linear features (**20** and **24**) and a posthole (**25**). The fill (18) of ditch **19** contained animal bone, including a cattle mandible, and sherds of Thetford ware dated to the late 11th or early 12th century.

The two linear features both ran in a north-east/south-west direction. Cut **20** was 0.60m wide and 0.22m deep while **24**, which was not excavated, was 1.0m wide. The latter apparently did not continue to the south-west beyond its intersection with ditch **19**, whereas **20** not only did do so but possibly also appeared to the north-east in Trench B, albeit in a very ephemeral fashion, as cut **26**. The extent to which it continued to the south-west could not be tested. No finds came from the fill (21) of feature **20**.

At the north end of the trench was a series of intercutting features. These included two small gullies (**17** and **23**) as well as a large pit (**14**). The latter was 1.04m wide and approximately 0.40m deep, while the gullies measured, respectively, 0.30m wide by 0.20m deep and 0.40m wide by 0.08m deep. Pit **14** is stratigraphically the latest feature in this group, but the absence of artefacts within the fills of the pit and gullies (15, 16 and 22) meant none of them could be dated. Their relationship with ditch **19** also remains unknown.

### 5.2 Trench B

Trench B measured 19m in length and was positioned slightly to the east of the centre of the site in order to avoid causing future subsidence problems with the planned houses. The repositioning of the trench closer to the road offered the possibility of locating boundary ditches used to demarcate individual garden plots, though in the event none were encountered.

The mechanical excavation of the trench revealed at its northern end a large pit (cut **9**), at least 2.5m across. Although the high water table made it impossible to investigate the feature further, a sherd of Thetford ware, dated to the 11th or 12th century, was recovered from its upper fill. Approximately 3m to the south of pit **9** a small posthole (**7**) was excavated, measuring 0.30m in diameter and 0.15m in depth. A single sherd of pottery recovered from the fill (8) has been identified as a Saxon vegetable-tempered ware (Paul Spoerry, pers. comm.). While the chronological range for this fabric runs from the 7th to the end of the 10th century, a Late Saxon date (post-900 AD) is preferred on the basis of other sherds of that period found across the site. All the remaining features, with the exception of **26** (see 5.1 above) and **5** (5.3 below), were identified as being either modern postholes or rubbish pits.



### 5.3 Trench C

Trench C measured 15m in length and was positioned 2m behind the gardens of the houses fronting on to Pratt Street. As with Trench B the initial intention was to locate and record any activity associated with medieval development along the street.

The mechanical excavation of the trench revealed a segment of a curvilinear ditch (1), 0.80m wide, which was also visible at the most southerly point of Trench B (as cut 5). Unfortunately, due to restrictions of space, Trench A could not be extended in order to investigate the possibility of the ditch returning, which would have allowed a diameter measurement to be estimated. No artefactual evidence was retrieved from the ditch surface and the high water table again prevented further excavation of the feature.

The remaining features recorded in Trench C were identified as 19th century rubbish pits; they were not investigated further.

## 6 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The limitations imposed on the extent of archaeological recording at the site present certain problems for the interpretation of those features which were investigated. Nevertheless, the evidence for Late Saxon enclosure ditches conforms well with the features excavated at the Primary School site across Pratt Street (Bray 1991), and the material from the latter site implies a settlement of this date lies close by. It remains a matter of conjecture whether this occupation represents sprawl along the historic Pratt Street, away from the supposed early medieval centre of Soham around the church to the south, or indicates a separate settlement focus. Only further archaeological investigation in the town will help to resolve these issues.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPENDIX 1: Summary Context Descriptions

No.	Trench	Type	Description	Below	Above
1	C	Cut	Curvilinear ditch	2	Natural sandy gravel
2	C	Fill	10YR 4/1 (dark greyish brown) sandy silty clay	12	1
3	C	Cut	Posthole	4	Natural sandy gravel
4	C	Fill	10YR 4/1 (dark greyish brown) sandy silty clay	12	3
5	B	Cut	Curvilinear ditch	6	Natural
6	B	Fill	10YR 4/1 (dark greyish brown) sandy silty clay	12	5
7	B	Cut	Posthole	8	Natural sand
8	B	Fill	10YR 4/2 (dark greyish brown) sandy silty clay	12	7
9	B	Cut	Pit	10	Natural sandy gravel
10	B	Fill	10YR 4/1 (dark greyish brown) silty clay	12	9, 13
11	All	Topsoil			12
12	All	Subsoil		11	
13	B	Cut	?Linear feature	10	Natural sandy gravel
14	A	Cut	Pit or ditch terminal	15	16, 22
15	A	Fill	10YR 4/2 (dark greyish brown) sandy clay silt	12	14
16	A	Fill	10YR 4/2 (dark greyish brown) sandy silty clay	14	17
17	A	Cut	Linear feature	16	Natural sand
18	A	Fill	Greyish brown silty clay	12	19
19	A	Cut	Linear feature	18	21
20	A	Cut	Linear feature	21	Natural sand
21	A	Fill	10YR 4/2 (dark greyish brown) silty clay	19	20
22	A	Fill	Dark yellowish brown sandy silty clay	14	23
23	A	Cut	Linear feature	22	Natural sand

24	A	Cut	Linear feature	(Fill)	Natural sand
25	A	Cut	Posthole	(Fill)	Natural sand
26	B	Cut	Linear feature	(Fill)	Natural sand

## APPENDIX 2: Selected SMR Sites Around Soham

### **TL 58-/72-**

- 7093 - Anglo-Saxon spearhead
- 7094 - Anglo-Saxon spear

### **TL 59-/72-**

- 1068 - Medieval moat
- 7027 - Anglo-Saxon cemetery

### **TL 59-/73-**

- 2086 - Anglo-Saxon spearhead
- 6945 - Windmill
- 6971 - Roman skeletons (but see Robinson 1995)
- 7086 - Early Iron Age burial (or possibly Saxon)
- 7087 - Neolithic polished stone axes
- 7090 - Cinerary urns (date uncertain)
- 7097 - Roman coins
- 7098 - Mesolithic tranchet axes
- 7099 - Medieval ditched enclosures
- 7100 - Roman pottery and skull
- 7101 - Bronze Age (Beaker) flints
- 7102 - Cropmark ring-ditch (date uncertain)
- 7123a - Anglo-Saxon cemetery (6th century) by present church
- 11019 - Neolithic flint axe
- 11019a - Late Bronze Age or Iron Age razor
- 11019b - Anglo-Saxon brooch (6th century)

### **TL 59-/74-**

- 7103 - Medieval pottery

### **TL 60-/71-**

- 7585 - Anglo-Saxon spearhead
- 7603 - Anglo-Saxon strap end, rivets and buckles
- 7604 - Roman bronze brooch and Anglo-Saxon brooch
- 7682 - Roman coins and pottery

### **TL 60-/72-**

- 5668 - Roman bronze objects
- 7503 - Iron Age pottery from river
- 7560 - Iron Age and Roman pottery from pits
- 7584 - Roman bronze objects
- 7594 - Roman pottery
- 7602 - Iron Age coin and Roman finds
- 7605 - Roman bronze objects
- 7605a - Bronze Age bronze spearhead
- 9041 - Cropmark ring-ditches (date uncertain)

### **TL 60-/73-**

- 4456 - Prehistoric finds scatter including scrapers
- 4456a - Two Bronze Age ring-ditches
- 4456b - Iron Age gold coin
- 4456c - Roman coins
- 4456d - Early Anglo-Saxon brooch
- 4843 - Roman brooch
- 7578 - Roman villa
- 7580 - Roman fibula
- 9044 - Two ring-ditches (date uncertain)

### **TL 61-/71-**

- 7506 - Anglo-Saxon burials (Lethbridge 1933)



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