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Isleham: a medieval inland port
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ABSTRACT

Although the importance of waterborne transport in the Middle Ages has recently become more controversial, its significance in the Cambridgeshire fens has received little detailed attention. This study of Isleham, on the north-eastern Cambridgeshire fen-edge, emphasises the primary role of communications by water in this region and takes earlier work a step further by showing how the form of fen-edge settlement is wholly oriented to the availability of waterways for transport, trade and communication.

INTRODUCTION

There was by the Middle Ages a widespread network connecting Cambridgeshire fen and fen-edge villages with major watercourses which led to large regional ports at Cambridge and St Ives or to national and international ports at Wisbech and King's Lynn. The extent of waterborne trade is the subject of some controversy at present: while J. F. Edwards and B. P. Hindle have suggested that 'there was a well integrated national transportation system of major roads and rivers', (Edwards & Hindle 1991, p. 33) John Langdon has commented that 'water transport was much more limited than Edwards and Hindle have claimed' (Langdon 1993, p. 9). All three authors are nevertheless agreed on the primary role played by water routes in the fen basin (Edwards & Hindle 1991, pp. 130-1; Langdon 1993, pp. 4-5).

However few local studies recognise the significance and impact of trade and communications along the Cambridgeshire fenland cuts and waterways. The fens' role as an economic resource and their effects on local social and economic relations have been well documented in a number of seminal works based both on landscape and documentary sources (new assessment in Evans 1987; e.g. Darby 1940; Ravensdale 1974; RCHME 1972), but apart from a tip of the cap towards waterborne transport as a feature of the medieval fens, its significance — indicated here by its effect on settlement shape and development — has not been recognised.

Considerable landscape evidence has been published, although noted without emphasis. The Royal Commission have listed large and small hythes, wharves, cuts and basins connecting the uplands with the Cam along the edge of the north-east Cambridgeshire fens from Lode to Wicken (RCHME 1972, pp. iiiv, ixriv-ixvi, and individual village entries). J. R. Ravensdale (1974, pp. 24, 127, 138, 140; 1986, pp. 149-53) in his detailed study of the medieval economy on the northern fen-edge noted cuts ending in basins at Cottenham, Waterbeach and Landbeach, which linked these villages with major waterways. Only at Burwell and Swavesey has the link been made — albeit implicitly — between the physical shape and layout of the settlement and the proximity of the fens both for economic resources and as a means of trade and communication (RCHME 1972, p. 17; Ravensdale 1972, pp. 9-29; VCH Cambridgeshire IX, pp. 390-1).

This earlier inspirational work has not, however, addressed the question of the influence of medieval waterways on the form of fen-edge settlement. It is this lack which this paper seeks to remedy through the example of Isleham, a large village on the

Fig. 1. North-East Cambridgeshire showing principal sites mentioned
north-east Cambridgeshire fen-edge, to show how important access to the water was in the physical development of settlement.

Isleham is well positioned to act as an entrepot for goods travelling between the North Sea ports and the Suffolk and Cambridgeshire uplands (see Fig. 1). It was connected via the Lark with local trading centres as well as with the North Sea, Wisbech and King's Lynn through a number of now-defunct cuts and basins extending along the fen-edge, most of which are still visible on the ground. The closest parallels to the Isleham system are at Swavesey and Burwell: at Swavesey two, perhaps three, public basins are connected by a fen-edge cut; at Burwell a long public cut connects Burwell Lode with a number of small private hythes. Isleham is more developed and more complex than either, with several public quays and at least one private wharf.

THE TOPOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

Isleham is a large village on the southern edge of the north-east Cambridgeshire fens. Where its parish boundaries cross the fen, they do so along watercourses or drains: the north-eastern boundary follows the river Lark, navigable as far as Bury St Edmunds well into the nineteenth century (Astbury 1987, p. 128), and the county boundary between Cambridgeshire and Suffolk; the north-western boundary with Soham uses post-seventeenth-century drainage courses; the western boundary with Soham is marked by a tenth-century drain, the Crooked Ditch. The southern upland boundaries with Soham, Fordham and Freckenham are indented in the characteristic manner of those parish boundaries which follow field divisions.

Most of the parish lies north of the village and is fen, lying below the 5-metre contour. The village is positioned just on and above the 5-metre contour on the northern edge of a broad chalk promontory reaching out into the fen. To the south the land rises to a maximum of 17 metres above O.D. The parish conforms well to two truisms: first, that since the mid third century A.D., the southern fen-edge has lain at about 12 feet above O.D.; and second, that parishes will seek to include as wide a variety of areas of economic exploitation as possible (e.g. Roberts 1987, pp. 105-26).

The village faces the edge of the fen. The length of earlier settlement is masked by some shift from west to east. The earliest land route entered Isleham from the west along Temple Road, continued north of West Street and south of Hall Farm on the line of the modern public footpath, and across Little London Lane to the Priory grounds, where it has been lost. The public right of way across the Priory grounds may be a folk-memory of it. The north boundary of the churchyard and the northern portion of Sun Street may continue this line to the east. This route's later successor enters the village from the west as West Street and goes out to the east as The Causeway (Fig. 2), making two sharp bends along its route. The bends are the result of a diversion of this road to the north around encroach-
ment and then its correction to the original line—cf. the continuation of West Street’s alignment by the southern boundaries of properties on the south of Church Street as far as The Causeway (Fig. 2).

Both West Street and its precursor are waterside routes. These are common in Cambridgeshire, with good examples existing either complete or in sections—for example, along the fen from Stow to Burwell or along both banks of the Ouse near St Ives.²

Characteristically the intersection between the waterside routes and those which link fen and upland occurs at the fen-edge, and the same is true of Isleham. The roads to Fordham, Chippenham and Freckenham (all shown on a pre-inclosure map of about 1800)³ fan out southwards from the village, emphasising Isleham’s position as a nodal point.

The area between the earlier fen-edge road and West Street may have been common land—the open space in front of the Priory, the width of Church Street and the property boundaries at the southern end of Sun Street are all indicative of earlier open land. This green’s previous extent may be surmised from the estate map of c. 1800 (Fig. 3) which shows open field strips ending some distance to the south of Church Street and building encroachment between open fields and the present green.⁴ If this area had been a green, it might help to explain the apparent ease with which properties along the south of Church Street have shoved their way north of their original boundaries. The possible length of this green again serves to emphasise the ribbon-like character of settlement here. Topographical analysis elucidates and emphasises Isleham’s attenuated form but does not in itself explain it.

THE LANDSCAPE EVIDENCE

There is a fen-edge ditch in every fen-edge village acting as a drain and as flood-protection. At Isleham (and other places) it has been augmented and enlarged to provide access for ships, boats, barges and punts. An extensive system of waterborne communication extends along almost the entire length of the village along and below the fen-edge (see Fig. 2).

The evidence falls into eight parts:

1. Access from the Lark to Isleham came along Waterside (now a wide lane whose distinctive name needs no further comment) to quay A. A
truncated canal from the Lark to Waterside is shown on a number of nineteenth-century maps including the early nineteenth-century estate map. It has now been entirely filled in. Waterside runs along the top of the flood bank which lay west of the canal, and the houses along its western side lie visibly lower than the road.

2. Quay A has been filled in and is a large triangular depression, similar in character to the lost hythe at Market Street, Swavesey (Ravensdale 1972, p. 14, Fig. 9, p. 15). The identification of this area with the settlement’s major hythe is supported by place-name evidence: the land to the west of Waterside was known as Hythe Closes in 1848.

3. A cut ran from quay A to quay B at the north end of Pound Lane. Today a drove lies along the flood bank north of the cut itself which survives as a ditch.

4. Quay B is now a marked triangular depression. Its northern bank is marked by the drove; its southern quayside is preserved as a public footpath. Modern structures, mostly houses, have been built within it — the earliest is a mid-nineteenth-century barn.

5. A minor cut leads up from the fen-edge to the Priory. The Ordnance Survey map of the earthworks is an accurate representation of the ground: a long, straight, wide and deep ‘hollow-way’ leading into the fen with fairly large rectangular depressions set on either side. The depth, straightness and alignment of the hollow-way towards the fen edge suggest that this is the remains of a lode bringing waterborne traffic right up to the Priory’s backdoor, while the other earthworks are the remains of fishponds and possibly robbed buildings. Ravensdale (1974, p. 124) has described similar private access to the water at Cottenham and the earthworks at Swavesey church on the site of the earlier priory also include a private cut.

6. A public footpath links Quay B with the northern end of Little London Lane; it runs along a wide ditch (now filled in but visible on aerial photographs), almost certainly the cut linking Little London Quay and Quay B.

7. On Little London Lane a small, possibly privately controlled, quay lies where the lane changes direction. Associated buildings include a cluster of seventeenth-century cottages as well as a large clunch warehouse of c. 1600 belonging to Hall Farm.

8. West of Hall Farm, an irregular ditch marks the northern boundary of the medieval tenements. This may continue the fen-edge cut to bring water traffic up to individual properties as at Burwell.

It can be seen then that the village street mirrors the waterways, whose position is determined by the fen-edge. Here, as at Burwell, the fen-edge runs relatively straight and so the village lies parallel to it; at Swavesey the fen-edge curves towards the south and so that settlement is enclosed within it. The form of the village is therefore defined by the waterline and by the need for access to the water.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

During the Roman period the course of the Lark, which had meandered west and north-west from Elderberry Farm, was channelled into a new cut from Elderberry Farm across Baskeybay to Lark Hall Farm, and then along its present course towards the Little Ouse (Astbury 1987, pp. 35-6; *V.C.H. Cambridgeshire VII*, p.13). Some high quality Roman finds, including a set of pewter dishes, have been made at Elderberry Farm and near and along the present course of the Lark, helping to date the cut and underline its importance (Astbury 1987, p. 138; *V.C.H. Cambridgeshire VII*, pp. 13, 83).

A large villa was built at TL 631 739 facing the fen-edge: excavators found mosaic, painted plaster, and roof- and box-tiles, while a mosaic of red and grey tesserae measuring 3.65 by 4.00 metres lay near by along with a concrete floor (*V.C.H. Cambridgeshire VII*, p. 44). The relationship of villa to fen and fen transport (which mirrors similar relationships at Reach and Burwell), and the high quality of associated finds and hoards in the area suggests that this might have been the estate of a local official (*V.C.H. Cambridgeshire VII*, p. 56).

There was early Saxon settlement in this area, with significant finds at Soham and Brandon, and strong indications that Isleham was part of East Anglian royal demesne, along the boundary with the South Gyrwe and Mercia. The royal centre at Thetford was quite close, and both Etheldreda and her sister are reputed to have been born at Exning, itself the site of an opulent Romano-British villa and evidently an Anglian *villa regia*. In c. 630 A.D. Felix established an episcopal see at Soham under the protection of the East Anglian kings (Munby n.d., p. 9). John Blair has shown that the earliest minsters were founded under royal protection and that although they were sometimes situated at some distance from the royal vill, their *parocbiae* were often coterminous with the *regiones* under secular control (Blair 1988, pp. 1-2); Staploe Hundred (which includes Isleham, Exning and Soham) remained in the East Anglian Diocese of Norwich, while the rest of Cambridgeshire came under the authority of the Diocese of Lincoln after the Mercian victory of 653. Soham, Isleham and Fordham (all contiguous parishes) were still part of ancient royal demesne in 1086. There were only nine vills of this kind left in 1086, and it is significant that three were concentrated along an important early boundary between East Anglia and the Southern Gyrwe (cf. Warner 1988).

Moreover their common parish boundaries suggest division along existing field boundaries, although there is a sixth-century cemetery along the Fordham/Soham boundary.

If this area was East Anglian royal demesne in the early seventh century did the villa estate continue to operate as an administrative unit within a royal multiple estate based at Exning? This possibility is given tentative support by Margaret
Gelling's suggestion that place-names which incorporate a personal name, in this case *Gisla's ham*, record the grant of an already existing estate after c. 730 A.D. (Reaney 1943, p. 192; Gelling 1976, p. 117).

Little is known of the early or middle Saxon period in Isleham. Lionel Munby has suggested that there may have been early settlement in the vicinity of the villa — the field immediately south of it is called Dunstall field: *tunstein*, 'farm place' (Munby n. d., p. 8). The medieval estate centre at Hall Farm and the tenements which lay to the west of it are very close to the villa site. It is a tempting coincidence which puts villa, Dunstall Field and Hall Farm in such proximity. Furthermore there are, as far as I know, no field-names which suggest administrative continuity? The paucity of Saxon tenements of the later estate, whether or not there was clearance from woodland in the parish. If Isleham of the earlier estate, whether or not there was incorporation of a personal name, in this case *Gisla's ham*, record the grant of an already existing estate after c. 730 A.D. (Reaney 1943, p. 192; Gelling 1976, p. 117).

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HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

By the mid eleventh century there may have been two foci to settlement in Isleham, one around the royal manor at Hall Farm and the other around the centre of commercial activity at Quay A.

The royal demesne centred around Hall Farm between the fen and the fen-edge road. The manor controlled half the estate (5 hides) directly; the rest was subinfeudated to peasant smallholders and significant members of the royal household (Rumble, ed. 1981, 1,3; 4,1; 14,72; 28,1). The main settlement lay west of Hall Farm. A few houses still stood there c. 1800. Identification of these strips with tenements is supported by the gift of 'a messuage and 7 acres' to the Templars by 1279, now Temple Close (Munby n. d., p. 15). To the south of the road and away from the fen is another block of smaller strips, perhaps those of the 10 boarders on the royal manor in 1086 (Fig. 2). This may reflect the influence of social class on planned settlement within the vill, with the free and villein tenements having direct access to the fen (cf. Social hierarchy in village plans in Roberts 1987, pp. 49-55).

The effect of the Conquest was to incorporate earlier sokeland into new mansors which also lay facing the fen. It is possible that there was continuous occupation east of the manor before the Conquest and that this was simply 'tidied up' after 1066. Norman land grants appear to have formalised the settlement pattern, in particular through the creation of two new mansors, each of which was placed along the 5-metre contour:

1. That of the Bishop of Rochester who was given the hide belonging to 12 sokemen and 80 acres of Wulfin and King's hunter (Rumble, ed. 1981, 4, 1; Spufford 1984, pp. 18-21, 121-63). The map of c. 1800 shows a block of decayed holdings north of Sun Street stretching from Quay A along the cut to Quay B.14 Rochester's church (whose earliest work is Norman)15 lies landward of this block of land (with a house known as the Manor House just north of the churchyard) — are these tenements of the 12 sokemen reduced to villeinage after 1066? If so, their position next to Quay A suggests that the quay may have formed the focus of the Danish settlement.

2. That of the Priory of St Margaret of Antioch which was established in the late eleventh century on 40 acres which had belonged to two of the king's sokemen. This block of land, on which the Priory church still stands, lies between the royal manor and the church, with the fen-edge and the earlier green (encroached on by the priory buildings) to north and south respectively. A public right of way still exists across the earthworks behind the chapel and may be a decayed remnant of the earlier fen-edge road which formed the northern boundary of the green (Rumble, ed. 1981, pp. 14, 72).

In later centuries settlement appears to have shifted eastwards attracted by the three hythes so that the village remained polyfocal with a centre at each quay:

1. By the seventeenth century, settlement west of Hall Farm had decayed and a new focus had emerged around the quay at the top of Little London Lane.16 (Although Reaney notes that 'Little London' may be a derogatory reference to sparse settlement, modern house boundaries and remaining seventeenth-century houses, together with their proximity to a hythe which was flourishing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, suggest that here the name was more descriptive than anything else (Reaney 1943, p. 357).

The place-names around Hall Farm support a sixteenth-century shift. Some tenements to the west were enclosed to become Saffron Close (a late medieval/Tudor industry), while fenland to the north of Hall Farm was reclaimed and called The Dolevers: a name not usually applied to reclaimed fenland before the sixteenth century. The boundary around the Dolevers is a wide curving one similar to those around large seventeenth-century fields in upland Cambridgeshire (Reaney 1943, p. 353; and cf. RCHME 1968, pp. 42-4).17 The volume of trade passing through this quay is emphasised by the large sixteenth-century stone warehouse which stands in the grounds of Hall Farm.18

2. The area around Quay B was open during the Middle Ages, as the manorial lords agreed in 1250 to the construction of a pound which stood in Pound Lane between the church and quay B (Munby n. d., p. 19). The earliest standing building here, 24 Pound Lane, is late sixteenth century in date and lies in the middle of this block, suggesting that the other properties grew around it.19 The irregular property boundaries between Church Lane and Pound Lane are a further indication of gradual encroachment on open space. This area
was therefore colonised from the sixteenth century onwards and buildings include a Baptist chapel first built in 1722 (Parsons, ed. 1984, p. 16) and a number of nineteenth-century cottages.

3. The open space at the northern end of Sun Street was lost by the late seventeenth century with the building of such fine houses as No. 2 Church Street — a good example of commercial premises associated with a south Fenland port — and the lovely clunch No. 2 Sun Street. 21

THE DATE OF THE WATERWAYS

There has been no excavation of the cuts and basins at Isleham. The artificial course of the Lark has been dated by inference to the Roman period. Its use as both a parish and a county boundary, together with the Romano-British finds and the analogy with Reach Lode, supports a pre-Conquest date. It is tempting to ascribe the cut from the Lark to Waterside to the Danish period, but the evidence is slight, although there is a high percentage of sokemen in the village in 1086 at more than twice the county average (just over 40 per cent of the total compared with an average of 15 per cent for Cambridgeshire, with 18 tenants out of a total of 46 being of likely Danish origin) (Darby 1956, Fig. 77, p. 284, Fig. 79, p. 288).

However, the cut linking the Priory with the waterway system was almost certainly made between 1090 and 1254: the house was founded towards the end of the eleventh century, and in 1254 the monks moved to their other house at Linton, leaving only administrative personnel behind. The cut probably fell into disuse after the Priory was suppressed in 1414 (V.C.H. Cambridgeshire V, p. 88; Haigh 1990, p. 45). This means that the cuts west of Quay B were almost certainly in existence by the late twelfth century; by inference Waterside and quays A and B must be at least contemporary. This fits in well with the national trend which would suggest a late-twelfth/early-thirteenth-century date: these years saw significant growth in trade and commerce, especially between c. 1180 and 1220 (Britnell 1992). The complex at Swavesey has been dated by Dr Ravensdale to the early thirteenth century, although Swavesey ships were being attacked in the North Sea in the late twelfth century; while at Burwell, North Street with access to Burwell Lode was first recorded in 1351 (Ravensdale 1972, pp. 9-29; V.C.H. Cambridgeshire IX, pp. 390-1; RCHME 1972, p. 17).

The end of the water-trade at Isleham is as difficult to suggest. Although associated buildings and settlement shift show waterborne trade to and from the village was thriving in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; by about 1800 quays A and B had been filled in and the canal at Waterside had been truncated to half its original length. 22

CONCLUSION

The intimate connection between the local economy and the fen (important both as a resource and for trade) is emphasised at Isleham by its focus on the fen-edge. From the Roman period onwards, the settlement has lain towards the fen. The position of the medieval manors and their associated tenements makes it clear that the 'high street' was the waterway, and priority continued to be given access to the hythes, cuts and canals as the settlement developed, expanded and shifted.

The fen provided access to a far-flung network as well as a wide range of resources to augment more conventional sources of income: fish and waterfowl, hay and grazing, peat, sedge, reeds and so on. Fen-edge settlements tend to be larger and cumulatively wealthier than many upland settlements, even though most people may not have been more prosperous than their upland counterparts (Evelyn-White, ed. n.d., Spufford 1984, pp. 18-21, 121-65). Isleham's wealth is manifest in an opulent Romano-British villa and some quality contemporary finds, in a large Domeday population of 46 tenants, 23 a rich parish church, 24 and the extensive system of cuts and lodes that continued to produce a good return well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (RCHME 1972, pp. 108-11).

And yet it would be mistaken to see Isleham as an exception in its locality. In general, its contribution to the Lay Subsidy of 1327 was much the same as those of Soham and Burwell; individually, Isleham's inhabitants contributed more per head than villagers in Soham and Burwell, but on the other hand there were upland communities, for example at Dullingham and at Chippenham, where individuals paid more (Evelyn-White, ed. n.d., pp. 2-8, 18). Furthermore, there was no market at Isleham (or Burwell or Soham), although the lords of the manor were not absent in the thirteenth century (Munby n.d., pp. 24-5).

It is in this context that Langdon's question, 'Why did medieval English people not do more to improve the quality of inland water transport?' (Langdon 1993, p. 9) becomes the more intriguing. At Isleham a considerable investment — whether at one time or over a period — had been made in improving waterborne access to the settlement. Yet on the evidence of the 1327 Lay Subsidy the return on that investment was not startling and perhaps that comparatively poor return dissuaded the manorial lord from the additional investment required for a market grant.

This raises the further question as to why, when the resources of fen and upland were combined with access to local and national trade networks, fen-edge villages did not do better. Despite its extensive system of cuts and hythes, Isleham was just one of many fen-edge entrepots with demonstrably similar village plans which served a well-developed rich hinterland.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

1. Ordnance Survey 1:25 000 series Sheet TL 67/77.
2. cf. O.S. TL46/36 (Stow cum Quy to Burwell) and TL26/36 (north and south of the Ouse near St Ives).
3. Estate map of Isleham c. 1800: Cambridgeshire County Record Office (C.R.O.), 311/P1.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
10. Also finds listed by Cambridgeshire Coun Counc Archaeol Unit, by kind permission. The RCHME has suggested that Reach, Bottisham and Swaffham Lodes are Roman in date, and that three others (including Burwell) may also be Roman (RCHME 1972, p. liv).
11. The Reach villa is thoroughly described and its plan shown in a figure in RCHME (1972, pp. 88-9). The Burwell villa was excavated by T. C. Lethbridge and the excavation reported in Proc Cambridgeshire Antiq Soc. 36 (1939), pp. 121-33.
12. O.S. TL67/77. Desmond Bonney has suggested that pagan Saxon burials on or near parish boundaries may mean that these boundaries date from the early Saxon period or before (Bonney 1979).
14. Ibid.
15. O.S. TL67/77: A Short History of the Parish Church of S. Andrew, Isleham and of the Priory Church of S. Margaret, p.3; and DoE monument 14/8, p. 4.
16. C.R.O. 311/P1 and cf. DoE monuments 14/12 and 14/13, p. 7, and monument 14/8, p. 4.
19. Ibid., monument 14/21, p. 10.
20. cf. DoE monuments 14/6, p. 3, and 9/34, p. 14. There is an excellent and well-documented example of 17th and 18th-century trade between fen and upland at Swaffham Bulbeck (RCHME 1972, pp. 108-11) with extensive premises most of which are still standing, and also correspondence, copies of which are held in the C.R.O.
22. The total modern acreage of Isleham is 5230 (Munby n.d., appendix), of which the Domesday total of arable and meadow was 1680 acres (cf. Rumble, ed., 1981).
23. DoE monument 14/8, pp. 4-5, and church guide.

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