

The Case for Recognizing and Preserving The Hythe, Reach, Cambridgeshire as a site of heritage and archaeological importance

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The Hythe today

The Hythe, Reach, Cambridgeshire [TL 56491 66458] is a small peninsula of land, more than 100m long and almost 50m wide that projects northwards into the Fenland from the fen-edge and centre of Reach village. It is bordered to the east and west by artificial channels, which join to form Reach Lode, a navigable waterway and tributary of the River Cam. Although a small obsolete Anglian Water sewage works occupies part of the site, The Hythe once formed the centre of Reach Port, a large complex of channels, docks, wharves and warehouses that formed the Medieval heart of the village.

Current protection status

It recently became apparent that The Hythe was not protected in any way as a site of archaeological or heritage importance. This situation appears to have arisen because it was judged that a peninsula of Chalk cleared of standing archaeology and occupied by a sewage work probably had little of interest left to protect. It is perhaps for this reason that most of The Hythe, although recognized as Village Green, remains outside the Conservation area envelope.

The Hythe - An artificial structure

The past failure to recognise The Hythe as a site of significant archaeological or heritage interest seems to stem from the simple misapprehension that the site is a natural promontory of land sticking out into the fen landscape upon which the port of Reach was once built. In fact, The Hythe and the lode banks surrounding it are entirely artificial, being made of Chalk rammed-down on to the underlying fen peat. This was proved during the construction of the sewage works in 1968 (see *Royal Commission on the*

Historical Monuments of England – Vol 2, North East Cambs, 1972, p. 89). Indeed it is clear that the entire structure is in itself a piece of standing archaeology worthy of protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, just as much as the adjacent Devil's Dyke, which was constructed in a similar fashion. On the east side a watercourse led to an 80ft (24m) x 15ft (4.5m) basin serving the Manor House (op.cit.,p.89, and map, Fig.78). This basin is now filled in, and forms a large part of the garden of North View House, which, situated as it once was between two arms of the lode, is most likely also constructed of rammed-down chalk creating a second smaller artificial promontory.

Medieval Reach Port

It is incontestable that Medieval Reach Port was a centre for commercial activity and by the 14th Century developed a more than local importance for trade in large quantities of locally quarried clunch, timber, iron and local agricultural products (see *Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England - North East Cambs*, 1972, p. 86), (Ely Sacrist Rolls, *passim*). The use of the wharves, basins and channels for trade continued into the 18th and early 19th Centuries. The construction of the present iteration of The Hythe is Medieval or early modern, but certainly before 1743 (Cole MSS, British Library Addit. MS 5804, 120).

LIDAR imaging has revealed a complex a complex of hitherto undiscovered basins on The Hythe containing well-preserved organic sediments (proven by trial hand auger holes). There are very few undisturbed such complexes in the entire Fen basin. LIDAR imaging also reveal a trace of the now demolished part of Devil's Dyke. It is known that before the encroachment of houses, the Dyke Fair Green extended down as far as The Hythe, and that the 'commune of Reach' was reported in 1279 for breaking down the northern part of Devil's Dyke (*Victoria County History – History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, Vol 10, p224), and the Cole papers in the British Library indicate that between Cole's two visits in the 1730-40s the Dyke had been levelled to make Fair Green, and the part that led down to the Hythe destroyed.

The Roman canal, Devil's Dyke and earlier times

Fowler (1933) and Astbury (1957) point out that the line of Reach Slade, an extinct Roman canal, runs adjacent and parallel to the western side of the modern course of Reach Lode from Reach to Upware. The bed of this abandoned channel is apparently filled up with *Chara* marl, and due to desiccation and peat wastage has become raised above the surrounding fen. It has long been known that the Saxon Devil's Dyke was aligned with the end of the Roman canal. It seems that The Hythe overlies the position of the Roman wharf or waterhead that served the important villa at TL 57260 65180. In addition, there is a strong likelihood that the Saxon ditch and bank structure in that vicinity was re-modelled in the Medieval or later period to form the existing artificial peninsular and the lode banks that we see today. Several trial hand auger holes sunk on The Hythe have shown that there is well-preserved undisturbed fen peat below almost two metres of rammed-down chalk rubble. The rarity of survival today of such peat makes this area of potential importance for palaeoclimatic and palaeobotanical research, particularly since it could well date from the Iron Age, Bronze Age or even late Neolithic periods.

Conclusion

To summarise; The Hythe is clearly an artificial structure built over well-preserved fen peat and is not a natural promontory. As such it is a piece of standing archaeology, the fen-edge extension of Devil's Dyke and deserving of recognition and protection for that reason alone. It conceals a hitherto unknown Medieval dock, and was constructed in the approximate position of a Roman wharf. The Saxons chose to end the Devil's Dyke at this point, and further, Medieval villagers pulled down part of the dyke to create Fair Green and much of the existing hythe.

The fact that the site itself likely comprises Medieval, Saxon and Roman remains, and protects a peat sequence that may have accumulated in the Iron Age, Bronze Age or even Neolithic makes it potentially a pivotal and important East Anglian site. The land to the east of The Hythe appears to be a similar artificial promontory, which was once bounded on two sides by navigable water courses, and thus may very well contain a similar level of archaeological interest.

References

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