

## Must Farm archaeology, Cambridgeshire

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### Short description of the project

The clay pits of Whittlesey, in an area of very high archaeological potential, have been feeding the country's brick industry for decades, and as demand has grown, extraction has moved into new areas. Extraction works have been accompanied by a carefully designed programme of archaeological investigation managed by archaeological staff at Cambridgeshire County Council (as the local Mineral Planning Authority) in line with national planning policy.

The ancient river networks in the area have yielded remarkable results, and the Cambridge Archaeological Unit discovered preserved settlement remains (including evidence of food remains in pots), spears and swords with intact timber shafts and scabbards, timber platforms to match that at Flag Fen, but in 2011, the first of eight Bronze Age log boats were discovered at the base of the river channel at the Must Farm clay pits; the largest is 9m long.

Other finds from the area have included weapons that still have their organic elements (e.g. spear shafts) intact, and timber settlement platform where a catastrophic fire had seen its hurried abandonment whilst many personal items fell into the water, such as cooking pots still with their contents, and textiles.

The sheer volume and quality of archaeological finds from this area is testament not only to the skills of the excavators and the preservation afforded by the wetland environment, but also to the commitment of all those involved. It was quickly realised that this was part of the Flag Fen story, and was best presented alongside that.

Must Farm is an ongoing archaeological project, the delivery of which is linked to use of the quarry.

### What would have happened without this project?

The site is identified for mineral extraction in plan allocations, and theoretically without the regulatory framework provided the National Planning Policy Framework, these sites could have been lost. However the presence of a regulatory framework, expertise in the minerals planning authority, experienced excavators and a co-operative minerals operator ensured that the project and programme of works have run correctly, and that the maximum amount of information retrievable has been achieved.

### What has the project achieved, or difference has it made?

Although Must Farm lies inside Cambridgeshire, it was quickly accepted that these finds were part of the Flag Fen story, so an agreement was reached between all

parties under which Vivacity, the operator of culture and leisure facilities in Peterborough, accepted the remains on behalf of the City Council. The boats have been carefully transported to Flag Fen and placed in a purpose built facility, funded by English Heritage, which will allow conservation work to take place in view of the public. They will be joined by other objects as conservation work progresses, and regular talks and tours also take place.

Since the arrival of the Must Farm boats and accompanying publicity, Flag Fen has seen a 38% increase in paying visitors and a 40% increase in pre-booked tours and talks, providing very useful additional income to the centre. These numbers are set to increase as the material increases, and provide a welcome example of how developer-funded excavation, facilitated by local authority archaeologists, can bring economic benefit in the form of increased tourism numbers.

The boats in particular have acted as the 'poster boys' for an internationally important archaeological site that has firmly put north Cambridgeshire on the map, and given it a parity with Peterborough and particularly Flag Fen. In terms of boosting community interest and involvement with the historic environment, the visual appeal of the boats and other finds, plus the level of media exposure, has made a difference to the community, as was evident at an open day hosted by Vivacity at Flag Fen, marketed exclusively for residents of Whittlesey and the surrounding area.



Excavation of traps and weirs © Cambridge Archaeological Unit

### What were the main lessons learnt or challenges overcome?

This is a large and still ongoing archaeological project, and all parties are still working out how to continue to get the most out of it. We have kept good communication with all parties and resolved issues and disputes at appropriate levels.

Of especial importance is the need for the local authority archaeological adviser to keep close contact with the contractors and mineral extractors, national agencies and other interested parties, as ultimately they are best placed to ensure the maximum economic and tourism benefits can be obtained and, as employees of a local authority, are well-placed to address local issues. In particular, this project recognises the full and potential value of having historic environment as a central component of planning policy, both in terms of the benefits and awareness it can bring.

### What is the future of the project?

The boats and finds are currently undergoing post-excavation and conservation work, which on the boats is being done on site, and as objects become more available then the displays and exhibits at Flag Fen will grow. This will allow a much broader view of the prehistoric landscape to be taken, and discussions are underway between all parties as to how best to achieve this, but we envisage larger presence at local, regional and national levels in the future.

The Must Farm excavations are ongoing, and the river channel, with its boats and fish weirs is simply one phase of a larger project, and more work, with no doubt more discoveries, needs to take place.



Iron Age Sword found on site © Cambridge Archaeological Unit

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