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EVALUATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF SEDIMENT AT THATCHAM, BERKSHIRE

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Summary

Planned water-table management works at the Thatcham Reed Beds Site of Special Scientific Interest, Berkshire, necessitated the coring of a 400 metre transect south of the existing Moor-Ditch. The general stratigraphy consisted of 1.5-2.0 metres of peat overlying gravel, broadly agreeing with previous work in the area. Apart from some disturbed stratigraphy in one core, no evidence was found for human activity along the transect.

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EVALUATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF SEDIMENTS AT THATCHAM, BERKSHIRE

by M.G. Canti and S. Payne

1. Introduction

Excavations for water-table management are to be carried out by English Nature at the Thatcham Reed Beds Site of Special Scientific Interest, near Newbury, Berkshire. The first phase of the intended work consists of a single 400m ditch to be dug a few metres to the south of the existing Moor-Ditch. In the past, three main episodes of archaeological excavation around 300 - 500m to the north-east have produced evidence of extensive Mesolithic flint working (Peake and Crawford, 1922; Wymer, 1962; Healy et al., 1992). For this reason, it was decided to carry out a rapid evaluation by augering along the course of the proposed ditch (see Figure 1). Hand operated gouge augering was eventually chosen because of the difficulty of access for heavier equipment and the softness of the land surface in many places.

2. Geological Background

The relevant area of Thatcham Reed Beds is mapped as occurring on the alluvium of the River Kennet (BGS Sheet 267 Hungerford). Undated gravels and brickearth are found about 200 metres to the north-east, and Reading Beds outcrop around 300 metres to the south-east. Referring to Figure 1, all three of the archaeological excavations have been on (1958-61 and 1989) or very close to (1920) the mapped gravel and brickearth terraces. Studies of the superficial geology and drift deposits were carried out by Churchill (1962) close to the 1958-61 excavations, and by Holyoak (1980) on a large area mainly to the west of the proposed ditch.

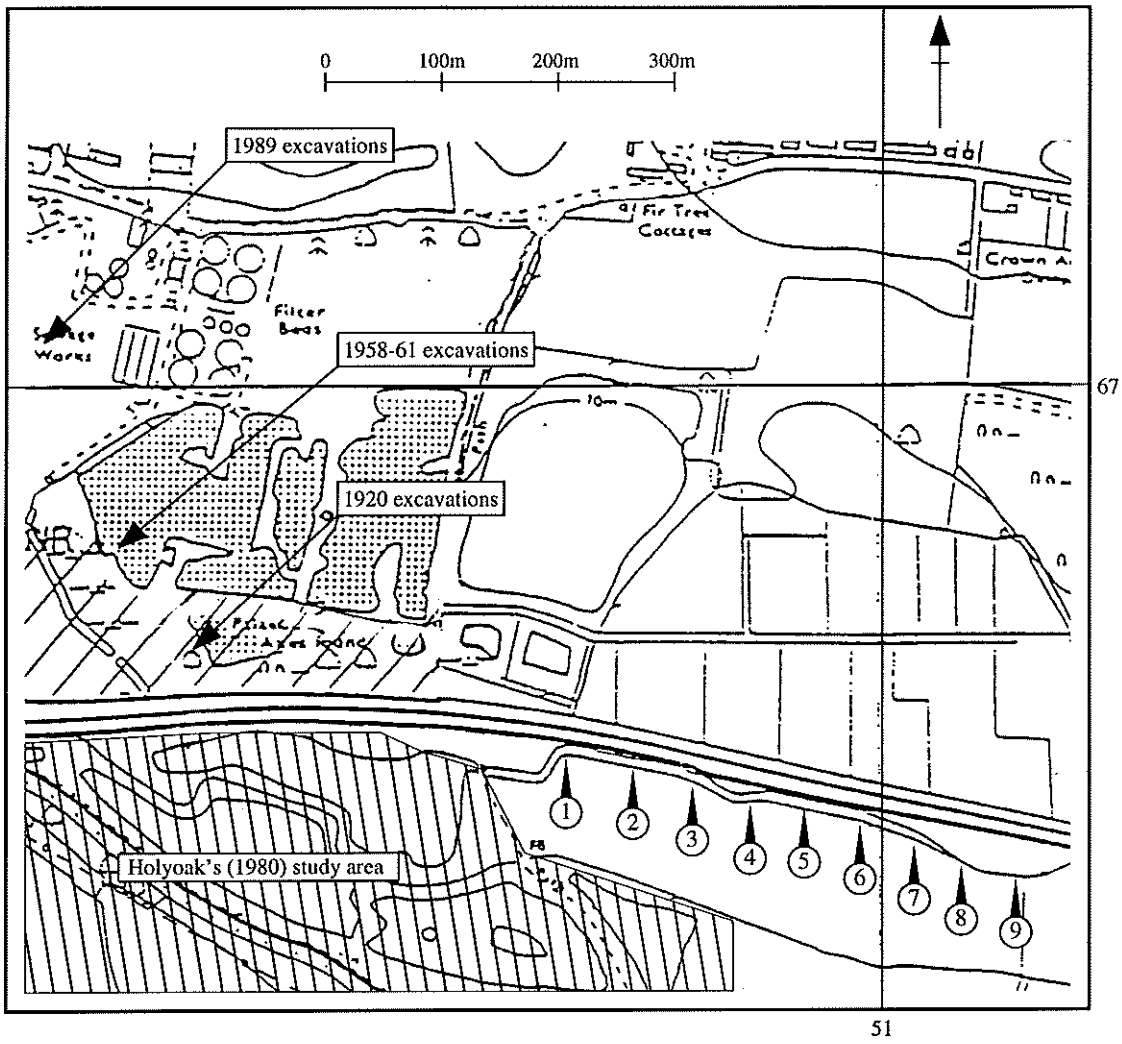

Figure 1. *Map of the site showing core positions and locations of previous archaeological and stratigraphical work.*

3. Results

In all, 9 cores were taken and described from roughly 50 m intervals along a 400 m line cleared for the ditch digging (Figure 1). A few samples were taken to check identifications in the laboratory; these are marked on the core descriptions (Figure 2). In some areas, it was not possible to retrieve part of the core due to the wetness of the sediment; these are marked 'Lost'. Core 9 was stopped at 3 m, as this is well below the intended 1.5 m depth of the ditch. All the remaining cores were stopped by gravel but this was usually not penetrable and could not, therefore, be retrieved and described.

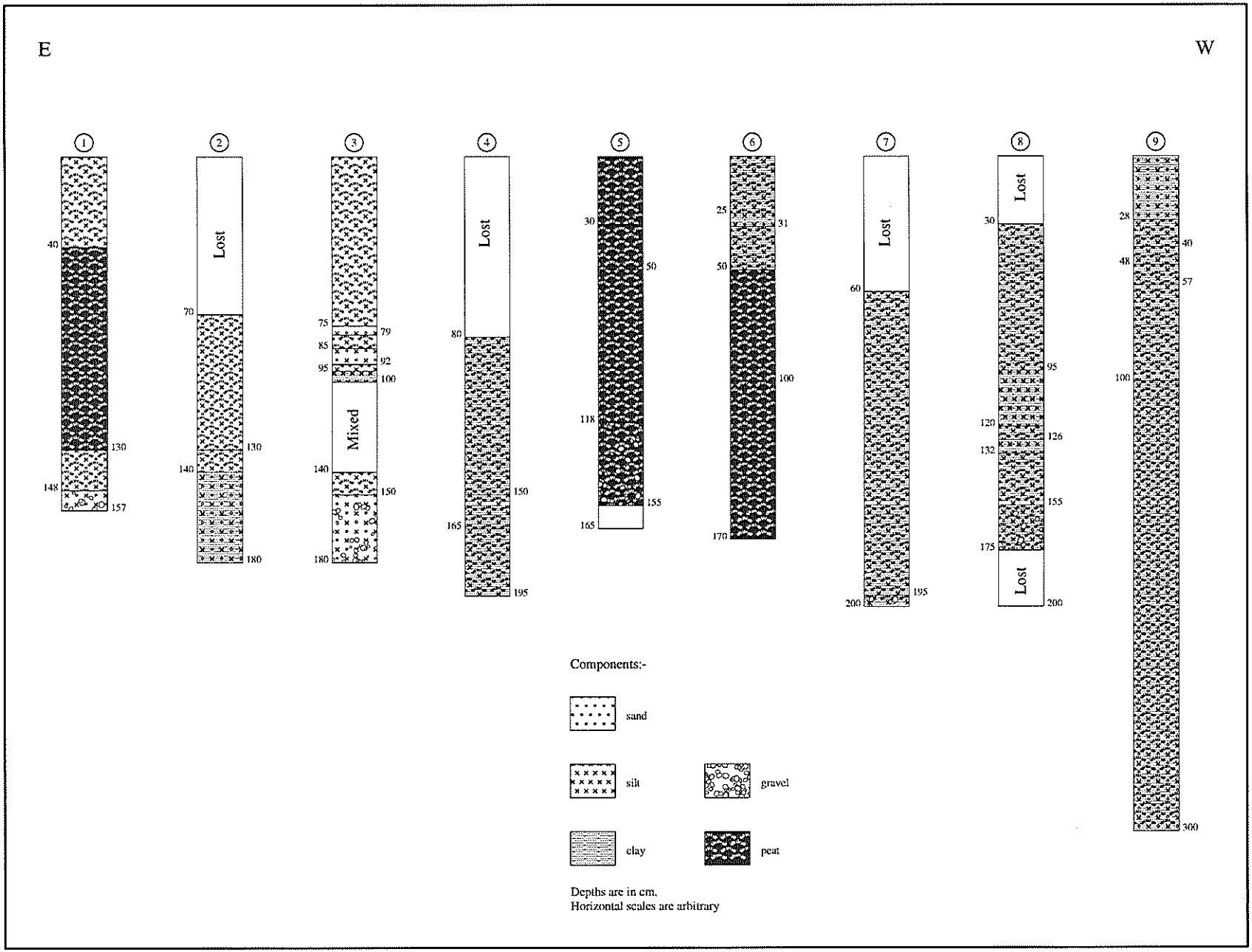

Figure 2. *The stratigraphy of cores 1 to 9*

Core 1

0 - 40 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 5 cm boundary to:-
40 - 130 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peat. 5 cm boundary to:-
130 - 148 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty sandy silt loam. 10 cm boundary to:-
148 - 157 cm	Dark greyish brown (10 YR 4/2) sandy silt loam with 10% 1 - 2 cm flint fragments and calcium carbonate. Soil sample mostly sand sized quartz, organic matter and micritic calcium carbonate.

Core 2

0 - 70 cm	Lost.
70 - 130 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty sandy silt loam. with rare chalk fragments. 5 cm boundary to:-
130 - 140 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty sandy silt loam. 1 cm boundary to:-
140 - 180 cm	Grey (10 YR 6/1) loamy sand. Soil sample at 150 composed of sand-sized quartz grains and micritic calcium carbonate.

Core 3

0 - 75 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 0.5 cm boundary to:-
75 - 79 cm	Brown (10 YR 5/3) sandy silt loam matrix with 20% white (10 YR 8/2) chalky detritus, and 20% 1 - 2 cm aggregates of very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. Soil sample consisted mainly of calcite and organic matter. 0.5 cm boundary to:-
79 - 85 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 0.5 cm boundary to:-
85 - 92 cm	Brown (10 YR 5/3) sandy silt loam matrix with 90% white (10 YR 8/2) chalky detritus, 5% 1 - 2 cm aggregates of very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 0.25 cm boundary to:-
92 - 95 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 0.5 cm boundary to:-
95 - 100 cm	Brown (10 YR 5/3) silty clay matrix with 90% white (10 YR 8/2) chalky detritus, 5% 1 - 2 cm aggregate of very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 0.5 cm boundary to:-
100 - 140 cm	Mix of discrete <5 cm aggregates of very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam, and brown (10 YR 5/3) silt loam with chalk. 5 cm boundary to:-
140 - 150 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silt loam. 10 cm boundary to:-
150 - 180 cm	Dark greyish brown (10 YR 4/2) sandy silt loam (as base of Core 1) with 5% flint fragments.

Core 4

0 - 80 cm	Lost.
80 - 150 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay. 10 cm boundary to:-
150 - 165 cm	Dark greyish brown (10 YR 4/2) peaty silty clay. 10 cm boundary to:-
165 - 195 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay.

Core 5

0 - 30 cm	Black (10 YR 2/1) peat.
30 - 50 cm	Dark greyish brown (10 YR 4/2) peat. 10 cm boundary to:-
50 - 118 cm	Black (10 YR 2/1) peat. 10 cm boundary to:-
118 - 155 cm	Black (10 YR 2/1) peat with 5% flint fragments, 0.5 - 3.0 cm. Flint sample at 155.
155 - 165 cm	Lost.

Core 6

0 - 25 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay. 2 cm boundary to:-
25 - 31 cm	Dark grey (10 YR 4/1) silty clay loam. Flint sample at 30 cm. 5 cm boundary to:-
31 - 50 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay. 5 cm boundary to:-
50 - 100 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peat. 5 cm boundary to:-
100 - 170 cm	Black (10 YR 2/1) peat with occasional woody remains.

Core 7

0 - 60 cm	Lost.
60 - 195 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peaty silty clay. 10 cm boundary to:-
195 - 200 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peaty silty clay with 40% flint fragments 0.5 - 2.0 cm.

Core 8

0 - 30 cm	Lost.
30 - 95 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay. <5% patches of white chalky powder. 10 cm boundary to:-
95 - 120 cm	Dark grey (10 YR 4/1) silty clay. 5 cm boundary to:-
120 - 126 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay. 2 cm boundary to:-
126 - 132 cm	Dark grey (10 YR 4/1) silty clay. 2 cm boundary to:-
132 - 155 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay and dark grey (10 YR 4/1) silty clay mixed. 1 cm boundary to:-
155 - 175 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty clay loam with fine flint fragments. 3 cm boundary to:-
175 - 200 cm	Lost (onto gravelly materials at 175 cm)

Core 9

0 - 28 cm	Dark greyish brown (10 YR 4/2) silty clay loam with 30% 1 - 2 mm gravel. A few dark yellowish brown (10 YR 4/6) mottles. 5 cm boundary to:-
28 - 40 cm	Black (10 YR 2/1) peaty silty clay. 2 cm boundary to:-
40 - 48 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peaty silty clay matrix with patches of chalky gravel. Soil sample consisted mainly of sand sized quartz and micritic calcium carbonate. 2 cm boundary to:-
48 - 57 cm	Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) peaty silty clay. 2 cm boundary to:-
57 - 100 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peaty silty clay matrix with patches of chalky gravel. 2 cm boundary to:-
100 - 300 cm	Very dark grey (10 YR 3/1) peaty clay loam with brown (7.5 YR 5/4) in patches (decayed wood) increasing towards base. Bottom of sequence not reached.

4. Discussion

The basic stratigraphy along the transect consists of 1.5 - 2.0 m of peat or peaty silt/clay materials overlying gravels, sands and silts, deepening slightly to the east. It appears to have been disturbed around core 3 (represented by the complex interlayering between 75 and 100 cm), but was intact elsewhere. No indications were available as to the age of the disturbance event at core 3.

Holyoak (1980) recorded around 1 metre of tufa overlying gravels at a point about 100 m to the west of core 1. This was, however, a lens which thinned out rapidly to the west and was replaced by stratigraphy consisting mostly of approximately 1 metre of peat over gravel. Thus, the findings presented here (including the suggestion that the peat deepens to the east) broadly concur with those of Holyoak (1980). Churchill's (1962) work around the Wymer (1962) excavations showed a considerably more complex picture involving peat over tufa on blue clay (swamp sediments), or tufa on clayey silts with a layer of desiccated peat (terrace sediments). This stratigraphy is probably too distant to be easily related to the current boreholes without considerable extra evidence from the intervening area.

The gravelly basal materials probably result from high-energy Devensian discharges, and, potentially, the later breakdown of the terraces to the north. Holyoak (1980) considered that the Kennet had probably become a system of braided channels by the end of the Devensian. Peat growth then started in the Pre-Boreal (Healy et al., 1992) around ~9000 bp.

Two possible worked flints (from Cores 5 and 6 at 155 cm and 30 cm respectively) were examined by Andrew David. One showed no evidence of human modification; the other was thought unlikely to be modified and was also naturally worn.

Apart from the disturbance at core 3, these cores have revealed no evidence for past human activity.

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