
The case for reclassifying The Hythe, Reach, Cambridgeshire as a site of historic and archaeological significance

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The Hythe today

The Hythe, Reach, Cambridgeshire [TL 56491 66458] is a small peninsula of land *c.* 3m OD, more than 100m long and almost 50m wide that projects northwards into the Fenland from the fen-edge and centre of Reach village (Fig. 1). 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, disused 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

Although known as a site of archaeological significance, in early 2016 it became apparent that The Hythe was not scheduled or 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 works 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 rubble rammed-down on to the underlying fen peat. This was demonstrated during the construction of the sewage works in 1968 (RCHM 1972, 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. Part of the Devil's Dyke was flattened

to make the medieval market place (RCHM 1972,86) and the Hythe may in fact be what is left of the original end of the Dyke.

On the eastern side of The Hythe, a watercourse once led to a 100ft (30m) x 15ft (4.5m) basin (Fig. 2) serving the Manor House. This eastern basin is now filled-in, and forms part of the garden of North View House, which was once situated between two arms of the lode: the eastern channel has now been buried. (Fig. 1). This area is most likely also constructed of rammed-down chalk rubble and partly in-filled port basins, creating a second smaller artificial promontory. A second south-eastern basin 80ft (24m) x 15ft (4.5m) (Fig. 2) also serving the Manor House was once located on the south-eastern arm of the lode (RCHM 1972, Fig.78), but is now also filled-in.

Medieval Reach Port

Medieval Reach Port was a centre for commercial activity which by the 14th century had developed a more than local importance for trade in large quantities of locally quarried clunch, timber, iron and local agricultural products (RCHM 1972, 86). Six basins constructed on various arms of the lode system and a 'common hythe' 180 yds (165m) long were reported in 1443 (VCH 2002, 225). 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 (Fig. 2) has revealed several depressions in the ground surface that may be hitherto undiscovered docks on The Hythe, in addition to those previously recorded (RCHM 1972, 89–90). These contain well-preserved organic sediments, as shown by the trial hand auger borehole BH1 (Table 1). Very few such undisturbed docks are known in the entire Fen basin. LIDAR imaging also reveals a trace of the now demolished part of Devil's Dyke at the southern end of the site. It is known that before the encroachment of houses, the Dyke 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 (VCH 2002,224). The Cole papers in the British

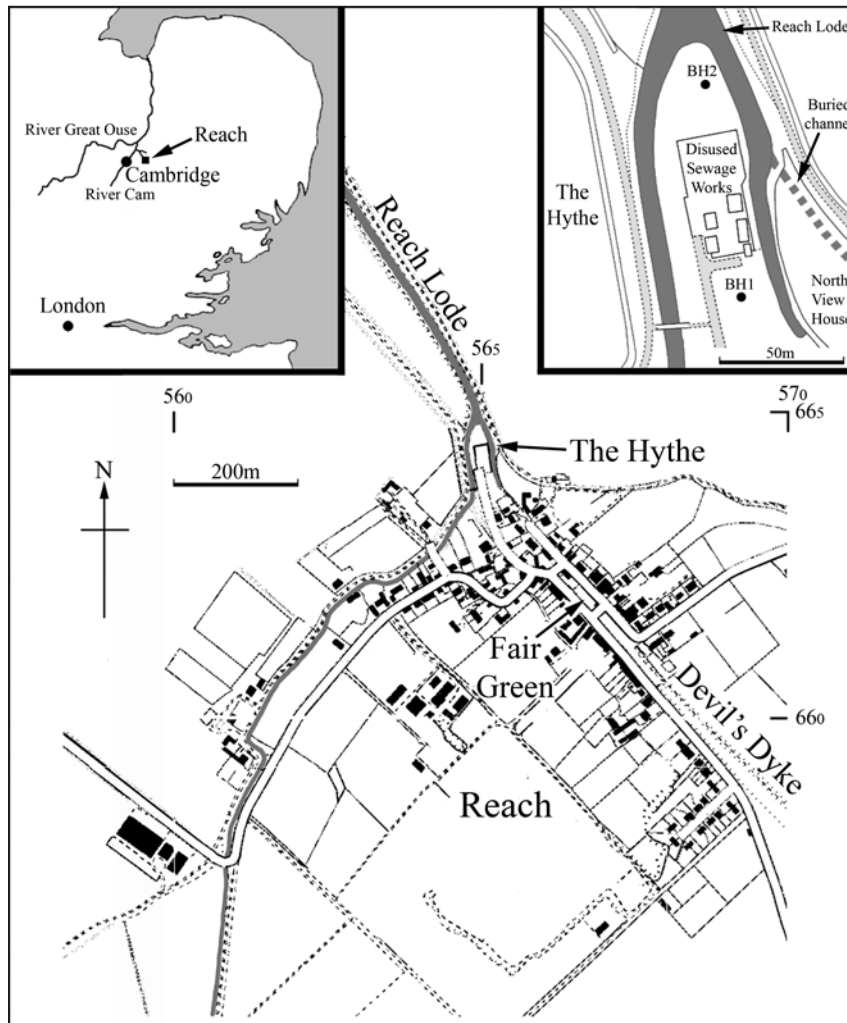


Figure 1. The location of Reach village in East Anglia (inset top left); The location of Reach Lode, The Hythe, Fair Green and Devil's Dyke within Reach village (main map); The location of boreholes BH1 & BH2 on The Hythe (inset top right).

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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 had been destroyed. (Cole MSS, British Library Addit. MS 5804, 120). Kiosks and shops on the northern part of Fair Green backing on to The Hythe, and associated with markets and fairs, were described in the century after the levelling of the northern end of the Dyke.

Table 1. Borehole Log BH1, suspected Medieval Dock [TL 56511 66392].

Depth	Lithology
0 to 20cm	Soft grey-brown sandy silt with rootlets
20 to 40cm	Stiff grey silt with charcoal fragments
40 to 95cm	Firm brown-buff organic silt
95 to 165cm	Soft dark brown organic mud with freshwater shells
165 to 170cm	Grey silt
170 to 210cm	Firm white Chalk (possibly reworked)

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 seems probable that the Saxon Devil's Dyke was aligned with the end of the Roman canal (Astbury 1957, 151 VCH 2002, 224). Thus, it seems that The Hythe may overlie the approximate position of the Roman wharf or waterhead that served a Roman settlement (TL 5750 6560), a building at TL 5705 6502) and an important villa at TL 57260 65180, all some way to the southeast of the current village centre (RCHM 1972, 85–90).

In addition, there is a strong likelihood that the Saxon ditch and bank structure in that vicinity was

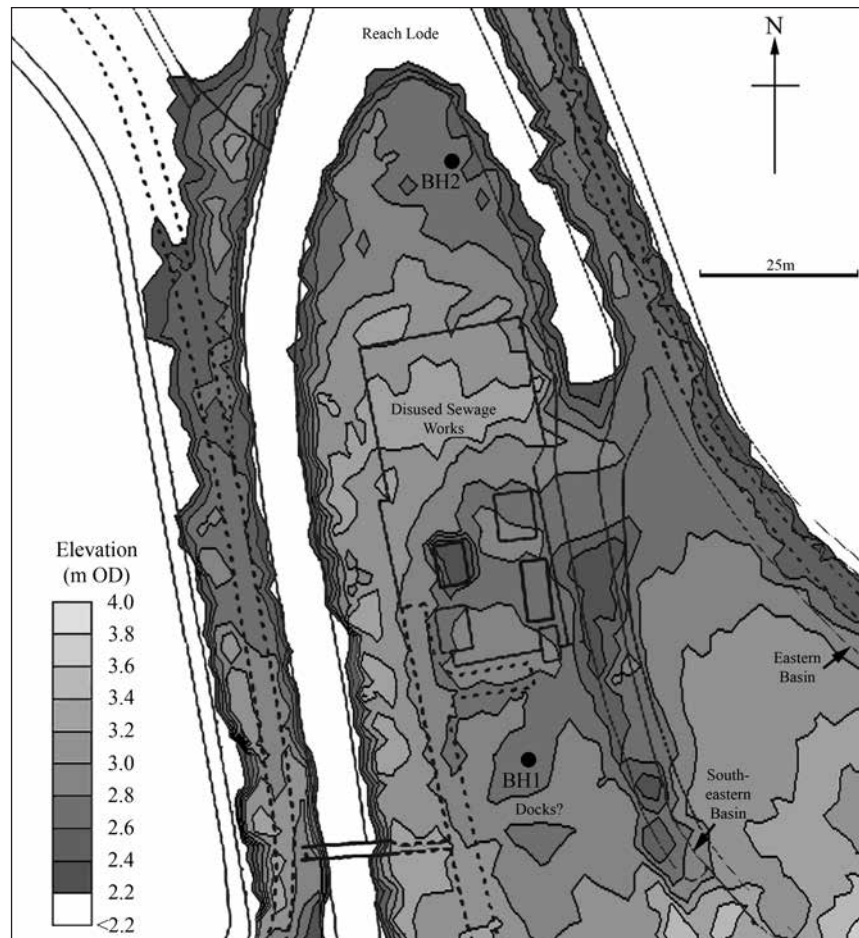


Figure 2. Interpolated greyscale contour plot of ground surface elevation at The Hythe, based on 2m LIDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) data.

Map created from DTM (Digital Terrain Model) Survey Open Data © Crown copyright and database 2016.

Table 2. Borehole Log BH2, northern end of The Hythe [TL 56496 66485].

Depth	Lithology
0 to 30cm	Soft brown silty topsoil with rootlets
30 to 50cm	Stiff white clayey Chalk
50 to 70cm	Stiff off-white 'dirty Chalk' with charcoal and wood fragments
70 to 80cm	Band of white Chalk 'clunch' clasts
80 to 110cm	Soft grey-white chalky silt with some organic inclusions
110 to 140cm	Soft grey-buff marly river silt with 'clunch' clasts and freshwater shells
140 to 165cm	Soft brown organic silt with freshwater shells
165 to 225cm	Firm dark brown reed peat with freshwater shells and wood fragments
225 to 234cm	Firm light brown organic silt with freshwater shells and wood fragments
234 to 243cm	Firm buff slightly organic marly silt with freshwater shells
243 to 262cm	Stiff grey-white Chalk

re-modelled in the Medieval or later period to form the existing artificial peninsula and the lode banks that we see today. A trial hand auger hole (BH2, Table 2) sunk on the northern part of The Hythe has shown that there is well-preserved undisturbed fen peat below more than a metre of rammed-down chalk rubble. The rarity of survival today of such peat makes this area of potential importance for palaeoclimatic and palaeobotanical research. Preliminary dating evidence suggests that the peat sequence spans the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman periods.

Conclusion

The Hythe, Reach, 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 the Devil's Dyke and deserving of recognition and protection for that reason alone. It potentially conceals a hitherto unknown medieval dock. The Saxons chose to end the Devil's Dyke at this point, and later medieval villagers pulled down part of the dyke to create Fair Green

and much of the existing Hythe.

The fact that the site itself probably comprises Medieval, Saxon and Roman remains, and protects an earlier peat sequence, makes it a pivotal and important East Anglian site. The land to the east of The Hythe is an artificial promontory, which was once bounded on two sides by navigable water courses and dock basins, and thus is of a similar level of archaeological interest.

References

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