

Blakeney Eye: Some Comments on Current Investigations

John Wright

Synopsis: the Chapel on Blakeney Eye has been a 'fact' of local history for centuries yet evidence of its existence is hard to come by. The BAHS recently (1998/99) carried out field work at the site and prepared an account of the surviving documents. Even more recently (2002/03) an extensive archaeological investigation of the Eye has been conducted on behalf of the Environment Agency. This note outlines the nature of the studies. Any fuller account must await the release of the detailed report on the work carried out and the interpretation of finds.

Background

'Eyes' are a feature of the marshes that lie between the villages of Salthouse, Cley and Blakeney and the sea. These Eyes (from an Old English word meaning 'island') consist of mounds of sand and gravel of glacial origin easily distinguished from the surrounding marshland, fresh marsh now, but formerly salt marshes open to the sea. On this part of the Norfolk coastline, the landward movement of the beach is a conspicuous and continuing feature as it is rolled landwards over the marsh during storm conditions. One result is that some of the Eyes, particularly at Salthouse, have wholly or partly disappeared. The same fate is in prospect for

Cley and Blakeney Eyes which lie on either side of the River Glaven as it approaches the beach. At this point the river turns westward through a man-made channel into Blakeney estuary. This channel was built in 1924 to replace one further to seaward which was filling with shingle. This process is now threatening the present channel and some action needs to be taken to provide a secure passage for the river.

On Blakeney Eye, to the west of the Glaven but actually in Cley parish, there once stood a building now represented by low mounds of turf in the shape of two adjacent rectangles, with traces of flint walls protruding. This building was depicted on the first known map of the area, dated 1586, and since then it has been described in documents as a former chapel. The general supposition is that friars from Blakeney Friary were responsible for it until the Dissolution when it may have had many uses before becoming a ruin.

The presence of these enigmatic remains and the gradual but inexorable approach of the sea led to the fieldwork conducted by the BAHS in the winter of 1998/99 and reported in *The Glaven Historian* No. 2 for 1999.¹ Resistivity and magnetometer surveys were supported by a sample survey of mole-hills – these being the only form of 'excavation' allowed on this

Scheduled Ancient Monument! The findings suggested that the building consisted of two cells, the smaller one being less substantial and perhaps built at a different date. There was little sign of any building material, except for fragments of slate associated with the smaller cell. The molehills provided some other objects but nothing that could be dated to the medieval period. Such negative evidence is not incompatible with use of the building as a chapel but it does leave room for other interpretations.

After publication of the results, samples of the slate fragments were identified by the expert on building materials at the British Geological Survey who concluded that they could not come from North Wales, Leicestershire or the Lake District and that it was highly likely they were from Devon or Cornwall as they were similar to material from Delabole.² This is particularly interesting as similar slate is known to have been used at various locations in southern England in medieval times.³ Roofing slate from this period had not so far been found in Norfolk or Suffolk but it has recently been reported from a 15th century building in Colchester.⁴ Although the use of the slate fragments on the Eye cannot be dated, it is worth noting that before the advent of rail transport slate was an expensive commodity and tended to be used only on important buildings.

The Environment Agency's Programme

Since the publication of the two articles in *The Glaven Historian*¹ a much larger study of the Eye has been initiated by the Environment Agency as part

of a wider investigation of Blakeney Freshes. The context is the need to replace the Cley Cut in the near future with an alternative channel for the Glaven. Depending on the option chosen the likelihood is that the Eye and its 'chapel' will be left to seaward of the river. The existing seabank will provide protection for a while but eventually the Eye will go the way of those at Salthouse – into the sea.

The north Norfolk marshes in the vicinity of Blakeney and Cley are at risk both from marine flooding and from the potential blocking of the river Glaven. As the statutory authority for coastal and flood defence, the Environment Agency is required to maintain flood defences and drainage and has begun a programme of studies to propose a scheme that would qualify for funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Although there are several stages yet to negotiate before funding is secured, the current expectation is that the selected scheme for re-routing the Glaven will be completed relatively soon. It will, however, need to proceed in parallel with a linked scheme for flood defence at Cley/Salthouse.

Archaeological Studies: Winter 2002/3

In the latter part of 2002 the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) prepared a Project Design setting out in some detail the archaeological work required on Blakeney Freshes including the Eye in conformity with a Brief established by the County Council's Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA). The Brief specified that the evaluation should pro-

ceed by means of geophysical survey, borehole survey, trial trenching and field observation. It also set out the research that would be necessary to place the site within its archaeological and historical context. All relevant sources were to be searched: published and unpublished reports, historical documents, maps and aerial photographs.

The geophysical work, conducted during December 2002 by Stratascan, entailed magnetometer and electromagnetic surveys of the whole 10 hectares of the Eye. A resistivity survey was not included because on the lower parts of the Eye ground conditions would have been too damp. The results have not been released but it is known that a number of potential archaeological features were identified in various parts of the Eye.

In January 2003 boreholes to retrieve palaeo-environmental samples were augered down to 15 metres but only one penetrated the underlying chalk. This was followed by trial trenching to cover some 5% of the site. Some 50 trenches, each 2 metres wide and 50 metres long, were arranged in a herringbone pattern but adjusted so as to pick up the anomalies recorded by the geophysical surveys. The 'chapel' building was to be examined by at least two trenches, on north-south and east-west axes.

BAHS Visit

Towards the end of the trenching phase the NAU's Project Director showed a group of BAHS members the work being undertaken at the 'chapel' site. At this time, 24th February, the north-south trench had been

put across the building but the east-west one had yet to be started. A tray of representative finds was put out for inspection. These included a piece of Beaker pottery from an unstratified source, a piece of Grimston ware, which could not be closely dated, fragments of slate and tile, and various pieces of iron-ware, including a door brace, gin traps and .303 bullets. The slate finds had been confined to the southernmost, smaller, cell while the tile had been concentrated in a layer in the larger cell. Around the building was a very sparse scatter of debris – bits of pot, small animal bones and oyster shells. The spoil from the trenches had been metal detected although relatively few objects had been recovered, a medieval penny being the best find at the time. For the archaeologists a most interesting find had been a small piece of rope at the base of one of the walls.

The southern cell had a brick rubble base, apparently post-medieval, with a couple of small sandstone blocks included. In the larger cell the north wall, below ground, was substantial and had a ledge and batter on the outer side, similar to examples (believed to be medieval) seen by Society members in Wiveton in recent years. Some of the wall had fallen and had sand and gravel deposits over it. No floor was visible in the larger cell although a cobble floor was subsequently revealed by the main east-west trench.

Within the larger cell, there was evidence of features in the sandy deposits sealed under the base of the building indicating earlier occupation of the site. Elsewhere, trenching had uncovered an area of prehistoric pits, some containing worked flints and some pottery

apparently of Neolithic date. Some of the other features shown up on the geophysical surveys appeared to be of geological rather than archaeological origin.

Current Position

Since the Society's visit to the site in February the trial trenching has been completed and work has continued off site. A record of the finds and features discovered during the various studies, together with an assessment of their significance, has been presented to the sponsors in the form of an Evaluation Report. The case for further excavations at the Eye is being assessed in order to elucidate the nature and significance of the long history of this site.

This note has been prepared by the author because the interpretation of findings has not been made public. It is expected that an authoritative report will appear in the next issue. In the meantime this note should be treated as a personal view written by someone observing events from the outside on behalf of the Society.

Notes

1. P. Carnell, *The Chapel on Blakeney Eye: Initial Results of Field Surveys*, *The Glaven Historian* No. 2, 1999.
J. Wright, *The Chapel on Blakeney Eye: Some Documentary Evidence*, *The Glaven Historian* No. 2, 1999.
2. Personal communication 1999, Graham Lott (BGS) to J F Peake).
3. E. M. Jope and G. C. Dunning, *The Use of Blue Slate for Roofing in Medieval England*, *The Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. 34, pp 209-217.
4. *Essex Archaeology* No. 31, p. 123. Reference supplied by Edwin Rose, NLA.



Editors' Postscript

*The photograph above was taken looking east along the trench dug through the larger cell (photo: J Peake). This shows the cross wall subdividing the cell and the cobbled floor at the west end, both possibly constructed during the post-medieval period (J Bown 2003 *Norfolk Archaeological Unit, The Quarterly* No. 50, pp 24-5).*