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# Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCV  
for 2006



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## Archaeological Note: Romano-British buildings at Tunbridge Lane, Bottisham TL 5453 6095

Andrew Pearson and Leonora O'Brien

Illustrations by Tansy Collins

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Small intercutting rubbish pits and a linear ditch all dating to the 2nd century AD were succeeded during the 2nd and 3rd centuries by two or three small buildings and large cobbled surfaces comprising local flint pebbles in a clay silt matrix.

Structure 1 was a rectangular building (3.1 x 2.1 x 0.2m). Timber beams were placed against the sides of the cut (three of them being identified as apparent beam slots during excavation), and a further two (also apparent as beam slots) placed as cross-beams approximately 1.8m apart. The spaces between the beams were then filled with chalk (probably the material initially quarried out) which was rammed into place, to secure the beams and form Floor L2167. A large, sub-square, stone-lined central hearth (F2086) was positioned between the two cross-beams; its lining included fragments of tile and Mayen lava quern and showed signs of burning.

Structure 2 was represented by a subrectangular (5.7 x 2.8 x 0.28m) cut (F2144). The remains of a rammed floor surface (L2150) were present, but no evidence remained of wooden beams, as seen in Structure 1, or other structural components. F2144 had been backfilled with a sandy silt deposit (L2145) which contained finds including 2nd to 4th century pottery as well as significant quantities of Purbeck marble, a fragment of burnt millstone grit and *opus signinum*.

A third possible 2nd to 4th century structure was represented by two large rectilinear pits (F2092 and F2096); these were aligned parallel to Structure 1 and contained 2nd to 4th century pottery, but had shallow, concave profiles and no surviving evidence of a floor. Four postholes may have formed a post-built superstructure over the pits; one of these, F2062, contained chalk packing as well as large quantities of *opus signinum*, tile, daub and a cobble with mortar adhering to its surface. Alternatively, the postholes could represent part of a small pen or enclosure.

The site was reorganised in the 3rd to early 4th century when the buildings and cobbled surfaces fell out of use, and a series of ditches and several rubbish pits were cut. Several episodes of ditch cutting

in the 3rd or early 4th century are considered likely, but stratigraphic evidence has allowed only one subdivision, recognising an earlier and a later episode, to be made. Earlier ditches formed two sides of an enclosure around Structure 2, and a broken ditch ran parallel to one side of that enclosure. It is possible that these ditches were open while the two buildings were functional, only becoming filled with silty deposits and general debris when the buildings fell out of use. The main element of the later set of ditches was substantial right-angled Ditch F2003. Datable pottery recovered from the fills of this ditch suggest that it was cut in around AD 200 and remained open until the end of Roman activity at this site, being finally filled in the later 3rd and 4th centuries.

In the southern part of the site, all archaeological features were sealed by a dark black abandonment layer (L2007), dated by its pottery content to AD 300–370. Other finds including tile and animal bone, worked Purbeck marble and a large iron knife blade were recovered from this layer.

### Discussion

The presence of small buildings, rubbish pits and boundary ditches is consistent with the periphery of an occupied area. Finds of Purbeck marble, *opus signinum*, wall plaster and a large tile assemblage (including *tegula*, *imbrex* and box-flue fragments), all in unabraded condition, suggest a fairly wealthy dwelling nearby. The finds assemblages concur, showing the site to have been receiving goods from local, regional and extra-regional sources. Existence of a substantial building agrees with the wider evidence of settlement on the southeast fen edge, which argues for the present site being an individual farmstead (*fundus*) or villa, rather than a village or part of an imperial estate. If the occupation as a whole is dated to the mid to late 2nd century AD, the site would correspond with established ideas about the large-scale development of the fens, which is generally accepted to have taken place from the Hadrianic period on-

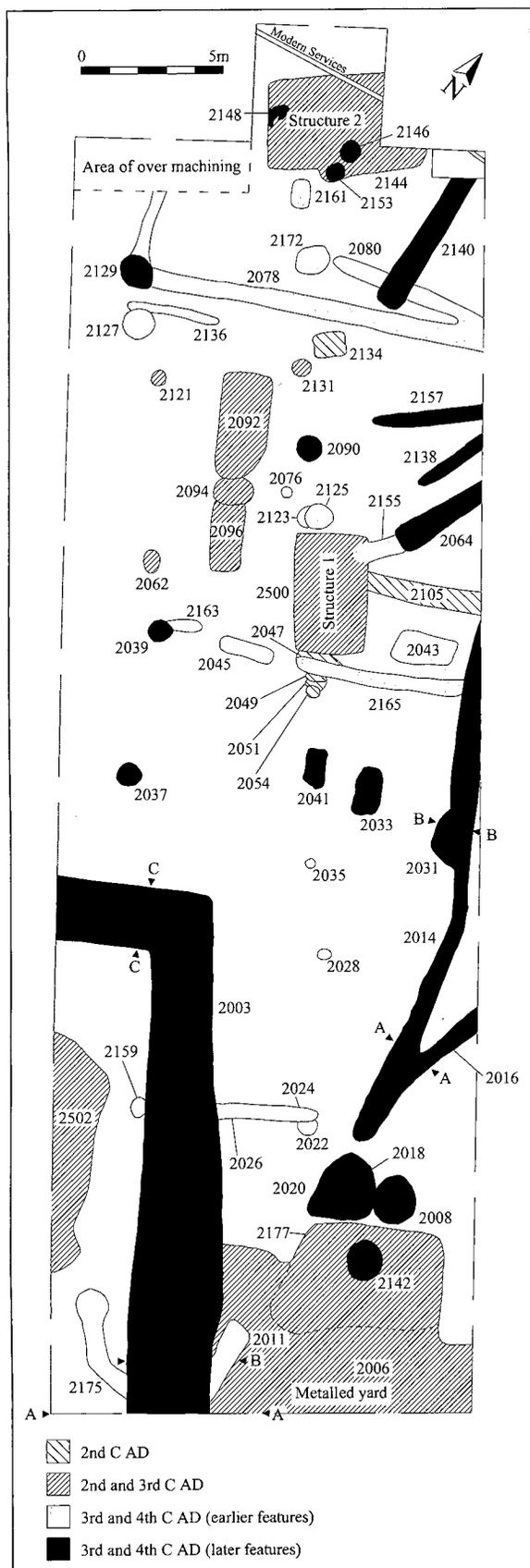


Figure 1. Phased site plan

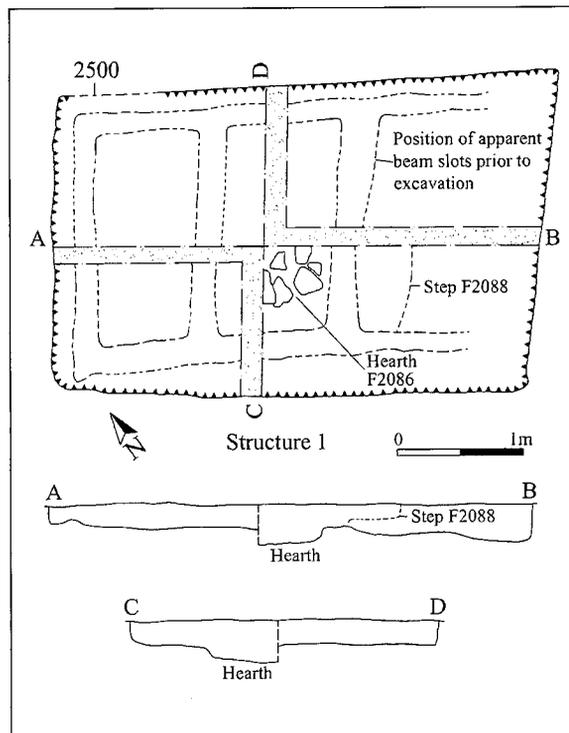


Figure 2. Structure 1, detailed plan and sections.

wards (Salway 1970; Frere 1987, 268).

There is no evidence for the use of masonry in construction of the buildings. Any roofed building would probably have been of wattle and daub, perhaps with a low turf sill wall. In support of this hypothesis it can be noted that daub was recovered from the fills of Structures 1 and 2, as well as other features on the site, although never in great quantities. The roofs would have been of pitched thatch, resting on the outer walls. The buildings are of such small size that comparable examples do not seem to be specifically discussed (see for example Morris 1979). Small rectangular agricultural buildings are described as an 'all purpose shell' (Morris 1979, 66), and there is little to suggest a precise function except to say that they are too small to be dwellings. The presence of a hearth in Structure 1 indicates that it was not used for storage, and may suggest an industrial function though a building of this size is unlikely to have been a smithy and no slag was recovered during excavation. The lack of loomweight fragments also seems to rule out wool production in this part of the settlement.

The change in land use in the later 3rd century remains unexplained; future work in the area should determine whether or not this change part of a fundamental reorganisation on a wider scale (cf Mackreth 1996). It is evident, however, that the land remained a peripheral part of the settlement, with features representing the drainage/livestock enclosures and the disposal of domestic waste; features lay mainly outside the area enclosed by the large right-angled ditch. It is also not clear whether the abandonment of this site, as represented by L.2007, relates to abandonment of the wider settlement, or whether it merely represents another reorganisation of land use.

### Acknowledgements

The excavations were undertaken by Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust (HAT, now Archaeological Solutions Ltd) in 2000 in advance of the development of the site. HAT would like to thank the doctors of the new surgery, in particular Dr M Towriss, for their co-operation and funding of the archaeological investigations. The fieldwork was undertaken by Guy Seddon. A full account and discussion of the features and finds revealed by the excavation can be found in the site Archive Report (Pearson and McDonald, 2001).

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