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# Roman Burials and Post Medieval Clay Tobacco Pipes at Merton Hall, Cambridge

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## Summary

*Refurbishment and repair of Merton Hall North Wing, Cambridge was accompanied in 2008 by monitoring of the construction groundworks and the investigation and recording of archaeological remains. The groundworks revealed human skeletal remains dating to the late Roman period, and a sizeable assemblage of post-medieval clay tobacco pipe and fragments of fine tablewares.*

*The Roman remains included a complete inhumation burial of a female and the disturbed remains of a juvenile burial with fragments of Nene Valley ware. The disarticulated remains of a minimum of a further eight individuals were recovered from a make-up layer underneath Merton Hall.*

*These findings, along with archaeological evidence of burials encountered during previous and recent building work in the School of Pythagoras and the Cripps Building, confirm the presence of a Roman cemetery in the area.*

*Radiocarbon dates obtained from the human bones and ceramic evidence place the cemetery in the late 3rd and 4th centuries. The burial ground therefore adds to the evidence from other late Roman cemeteries outside the Roman settlement of Cambridge, most notably in Jesus Lane and Park Lane on the eastern side of the River Cam.*

## Introduction

Between July and September 2008 Albion Archaeology undertook archaeological investigations during the refurbishment and repair of Merton Hall, Northampton Street, Cambridge. Merton Hall lies to the north-west of the Cambridge town centre and the River Cam, and is centred on grid reference TL44490 58940 (Figure 1). Both the Hall and adjoining School of Pythagoras building are part of St John's College.

The results of the investigation can be placed into two categories: the first is evidence for Roman burials below the make-up layer underneath the modern floors of Merton Hall, the second is an interesting post-medieval finds assemblage, relating to the use of the hall as a private residence.

## Background

Merton Hall lies 60m south of Northampton Street and c. 250m south-west of the Castle Hill area of the modern city which was the location of the Roman town. The focus of the Roman town from the 1st to the 4th century lay in the area of the present day Shire Hall, at the crossing of two main Roman roads, Akeman Street and the *Via Devana*. Roman Cambridge reached its largest extent in the 4th century when the town was surrounded by a wall, bank and ditch. Using modern street names as a reference, this extended approximately from the junction of Histon Road and Victoria Road in the north to Northampton Street in the south and from Mount Pleasant and Pound Hill in the west to Magrath Avenue in the East. A western gate to the 4th century walled town may have been situated at the junction of Mount Pleasant and Albion Row (Alexander and Pullinger 2000, 36 and 50).

A number of archaeological investigations in the area, mainly to the north of Northampton Street, have uncovered remains from the Roman period onwards.

Roman ramparts, industrial and other deposits were found along with medieval features at two sites off Pound Hill in 1982 and 1983 (Pullinger 1984). Roman and medieval remains have also been found at Kettle's Yard (Evans 1994), and work at the Cambridge Folk Museum in 2002 located a Roman burial and structural remains dating to the Roman and Saxon periods (Cessford 2003).

At St Peter's Street, excavations at various sites during the early 1980s and 2001 found the Roman town wall, Roman and early medieval pits and ditches and a medieval road (Pullinger 1984, Dickens 2002).

## Roman burials to the south and west of the Roman town

Roman cemeteries and burials were by law required to be outside settlements and are often found on the main roads leading in and out of towns. To the south and west of Roman Cambridge this pattern is reflected by the evidence for several burial grounds.

Excavations in the cellars of three terraced houses in Jesus Lane, to the south of the Roman town, re-

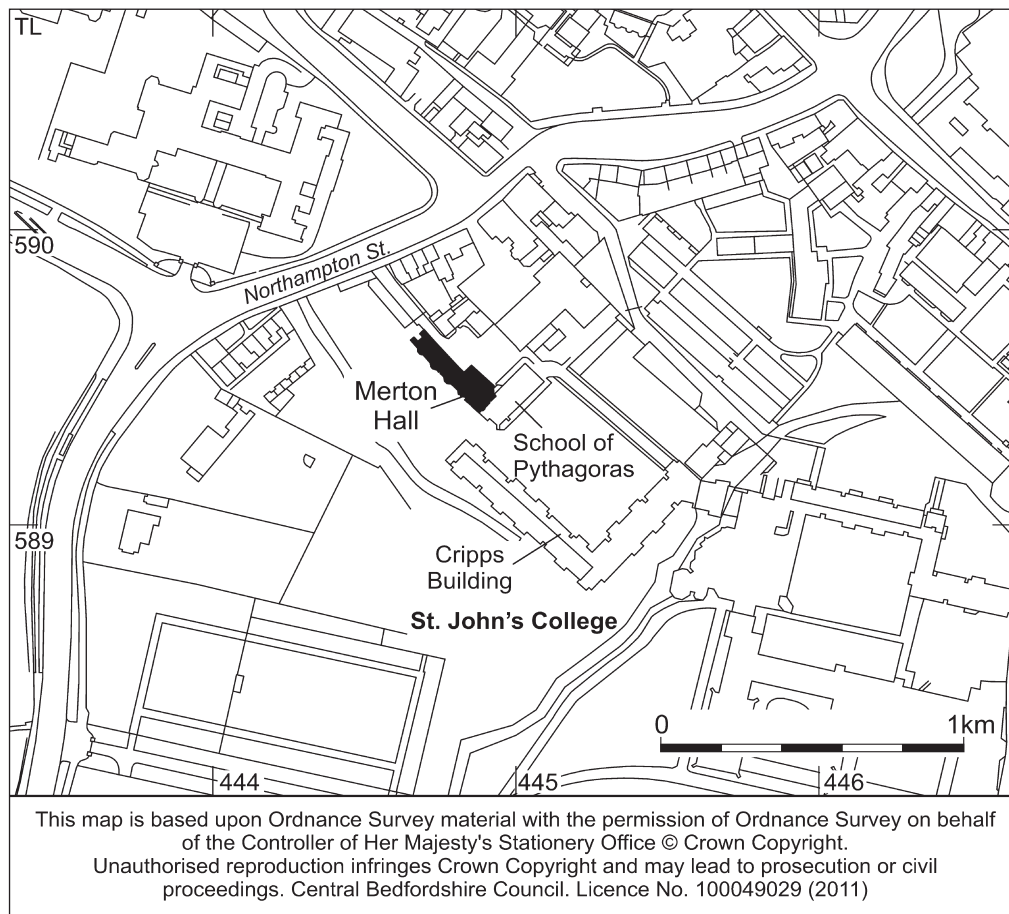


Figure 1. Site location.

vealed a late Roman inhumation cemetery with a total of 32 inhumations, some buried in shrouds and with modest grave goods. The nature of the burials and the ceramic evidence suggested a date of the late 3rd to 4th century. It is possible that the Jesus Lane cemetery may have extended to include the human remains found at Park Street, 230m to the north-west, where two adults and several neonates were excavated (Alexander *et al.* 2004).

Six inhumations, one with a possible late Roman 4th century antler comb were revealed during excavations at Murray Edwards College, c. 250m west of the northern gate of the Roman town (Evans 1996). Closer to Merton Hall undated skeletons and Roman artefacts, possibly from burials, were found during earlier work near Mount Pleasant and Lady Margaret Road (Browne 1974).

In St John's College cricket fields along Grange Road, c. 450 m west of Merton Hall and on the projected line of Akeman Street, an Anglo-Saxon cemetery contained evidence for Roman burials, and there are further findspots of at least one inhumation and Roman and Anglo-Saxon artefacts along the same road. Unfortunately the burials are often difficult to date due to the mixing of artefacts during excavation in antiquity (Liversidge 1977).

Previous work within the School of Pythagoras building to the south uncovered an inhumation believed to be Romano-British in date (Graham-Campbell 1968). Four skeletons of uncertain date were also recovered in the mid-1960s during the construction of the Cripps Building which lies immediately to the south-east of Merton Hall (Boys-Smith 1964).

#### Merton Hall

Merton Hall is a Grade II\* listed building and consists of a long, narrow, two storey timber frame and brick building that now forms the north wing of the School of Pythagoras, a Grade I listed 13th century stone hall. In the 16th century this hall was turned into a granary and Merton Hall added as a manor or farm house to its north. Merton Hall itself was extended in the 17th century (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England 1988).

Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century until 1959 Merton Hall was a private residence and belonged to Merton College, Oxford. There were two brief interludes when it housed a boys' boarding school from 1807–1811 and the society which was the precursor to Newnham College, Cambridge, from 1872–74 (Roach 1959). Since 1959 it has been part of St John's College, Cambridge, and

used for graduate student accommodation (English Heritage 2007).

## Results

The refurbishment and repair works at Merton Hall principally comprised underpinning the walls and replacement of the floor in its three ground floor rooms (Rooms RG1, RG4 and RG9 with its ancillary room RG10). This involved the reduction of the ground level within the building by around 0.45m and the excavation of trenches around all walls. In addition, excavations for pads for temporary supports were carried out at various locations throughout the building and a duct trench was dug in Room RG9. A modern extension on the north-east side of Merton Hall was demolished as part of the refurbishment works (Figure 2).

Full context and finds details of all periods as well as the specialist reports and radiocarbon dating can be found in the archive report (Albion Archaeology 2011) deposited with the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (CHER).

Merton Hall is a complex structure that has been subject to additions and modification since its construction in the 16th and 17th centuries to the present day. This complexity was visible during the archaeological monitoring in the disturbed nature of the ground surface within the building and remnant structural elements uncovered during ground reduction.

Following removal of existing floor and sleeper walls, a compact and very mixed sand, silt and clay make-up layer was uncovered in all rooms. Context numbers (7), (12), (26) and (39) were given for the layer. The layer was approximately 0.30–0.40m thick and contained a variety of finds including pottery of Roman, post-medieval and modern date along with roof tile, animal bone and disarticulated human bone.

The excavation of the make-up layer (39) within room RG9 as well as layer (47) below a modern brick surface in room RG10, a small, ancillary room coming off room RG9, revealed a large quantity of locally manufactured clay smoking pipe fragments, along with other artefacts dating to the Roman and later periods.

Within room RG1 a grave [35] containing a human burial (SK36) was revealed underneath the make-up layer cutting the natural sand and gravel. The grave was aligned roughly E–W and contained the skeleton of an adult female. The skeleton was flexed and lying on its right side, with the head to the east. No remains of a coffin were detected and there were no accompanying grave goods.

A probable grave [95] of a child (SK101) was partially uncovered during underpinning excavations adjacent to the fireplace in RG9. Fill (94) in the exposed section of the grave contained a fragmentary skull and vertebral fragments, and fragments of a Nene Valley grey ware straight rimmed dish (com-

monly called “dog dish”), dating to the late Roman period.

During excavation of the duct trench in Room RG9 a large quantity of human skeletal remains (SK 70) from a single individual were recovered, possibly indicating the presence of a disturbed grave.

A large amount of disarticulated human skeletal material was recovered from the make-up layers (7), (12), (26) and (39). Analysis of the material identified adult and subadult remains of three further individuals in RG1 and of four individuals in RG4.

Groundworks in the modern extension to the east of the hall revealed no evidence for human remains. In all rooms the make-up layer overlaid natural geological deposits of yellow/white sand and gravel.

## Modern extension and external works

No features or deposits of archaeological interest were identified during the demolition of the modern extension located on the north-eastern side of the building.

## Radiocarbon Dating

A human bone sample from the complete burial (SK36) found in room RG1 and the large deposit of bone found in room RG9 (SK70) were radio-carbon dated at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC). The results of analysis from Burial SK36 indicate a date of 320–540 cal AD (91.7% probability) ( $1645 \pm 40$  BP). The samples from SK70 produced a date of 230–420 cal AD (95.4% probability) ( $1720 \pm 40$  BP). Both indicate a late Roman 3rd or 4th century date for the remains.

## Artefacts

The pottery assemblage comprises 70 sherds weighing 1.1kg. Forty-five Roman sherds (64%) are broadly datable to the 2nd century, and the remainder are of post-medieval and later origin. Pottery of all periods survives in good condition, although a low average sherd weight of 16g indicates its fragmentary nature. The pottery assemblage is summarised in the tables (1 and 2) below.

## Other finds

A collection of 165 clay tobacco pipe fragments was recovered, the majority (147 fragments) deriving from layer (47) in Room RG10 with a smaller quantity (18 fragments) deriving from layer (39) in a location adjacent to the eastern wall of room RG9. The assemblage comprises 41 bowl and 124 stem fragments. Twenty-two of the latter are stamped ‘Pawson Camb’, indicating the manufacturer James Pawson (and later his widow Ann) who operated from premises at nearby 11 Sidney Street during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Flood 1976, 34). Five spurs are stamped with small stars. A small selection of the stamped pipe stem fragments and spurs is shown in Figure 3.

The clay tobacco pipe assemblage may be compared to the assemblage from other sites in Cambridge such as the Grand Arcade, where, amongst a total of 1501

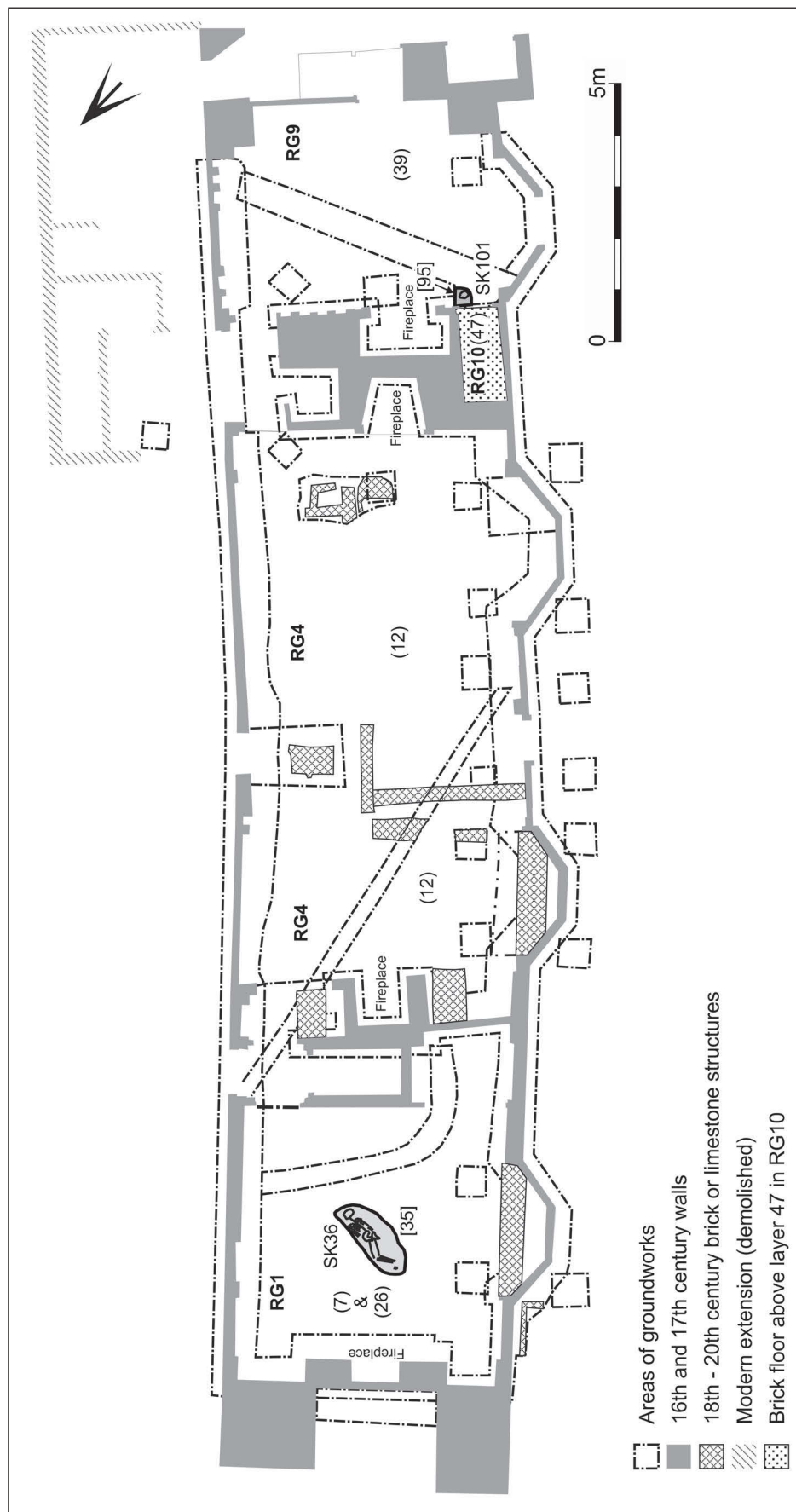


Figure 2. Floor plan of Merton Hall indicating features and grave.



Fabric	(Context): Sherd No.	Comments
Shelly coarse ware	(39):2	Base sherd
Coarse grey ware	(7):1, (39):23	Everted rim jar; flanged bowl; modified base sherd
Fine grey ware	(12):1, (39):2, (94):1	Burnished jar; 'dog dish'
Black-slipped grey ware	(39):2	Everted rim jar; plain rim bowl
Sandy black ware	(39):4	Body sherds
Oxidised sandy coarse ware	(39):1	Body sherd
Buff sandy ware	(39):1	Jar base
Nene Valley grey ware	(39):1, (94):1	Flanged bowl; 'dog dish'
Nene Valley Colour Coated ware	(7):1, (39):4	Beaker base

**Table 1.** Roman Pottery Type Series (45 sherds: 724g).

Fabric	(Context): Sherd No.	Comments
Medieval shelly ware	(12):1	Body sherd
Late medieval sandy ware	(39):2	Body sherds
Glazed red earthenware	(7):10, (12):1	Shallow bowl
Frechen stoneware	(7):1	Body sherd
Tin-glazed earthenware	(39):1	Albarelo
Nottingham stoneware	(39):1	Body sherd
White salt-glazed stoneware	(7):1, (39):1	Body sherds
Creamware	(39):3	Body sherds
Stoneware	(39):1	Ink bottle
Porcelain	(39):2	Tea bowl

**Table 2.** Post-Roman Pottery Type Series (25 sherds: 415g).

clay pipe fragments dating from the 16th to early 20th century, a small number also bore the Pawson Camb maker's mark (Cessford 2007a). Other sites with notable clay tobacco pipe assemblages are the Christ's Lane development at Bradwell's Court (Cessford 2007b) or the St. John's Triangle site, where an assemblage of 208 fragments of late 16th to late 18th century dates was revealed (Cessford 2008).

Vessel glass comprises eight translucent olive green wine bottle fragments, including shoulder and body sherds, and a single base. The latter derives from a mid-18th to 19th century cylindrical bottle. The remainder are from vessels of indeterminate form, broadly datable to the mid-17th to 19th centuries.

## Discussion

The archaeological works carried out during the refurbishment of Merton Hall identified archaeological remains dating to the Roman period and revealed some of the development and occupational history of the building.

### Roman burials

The remains of at least 10 individuals were excavated during the groundworks at Merton Hall. The surviving grave cut of burial (SK36) was very shallow and it is likely that neighbouring graves could have been disturbed during the construction of Merton Hall in the 16th century, leading to the incorporation of dis-

articulated human remains within the make-up layer underneath the floor of the building. The post-mortem fracturing but generally fairly good preservation of the bones indicate that they were disturbed post-deposition but probably did not move very far from their original burial location.

Radiocarbon dating of SK36 and the disarticulated individual SK70 in RG9 indicate a late Roman date for the remains. A late Roman date is also suggested by the fragments of Nene Valley grey ware ("dog dish") within burial (95) in RG9. "Dog dishes" are flat wide-bottomed dishes with a simple upturned rim which were part of the Nene Valley coarse ware pottery production and often occur in late Roman domestic assemblages.

Residual fragments of Roman pottery were found in the later make-up layers of Merton Hall, with by far the largest number recovered from the make-up layer (39) in RG9. It is possible that these originate from disturbed grave good vessels.

A plan from the hall dating to c. 1820 (available in the St John's College archive) shows that several extensions existed in this part of the hall in the 19th century. It is possible that the construction and demolition of these, and the subsequent construction of the modern extension, removed all traces of further human remains.

### Merton Hall north wing

Post-medieval ceramic artefacts recovered from all floor layers within the building support historical evidence that Merton Hall was a private residence and



Figure 3. Clay tobacco pipe bowls, spurs, and stems stamped "Pawson Camb". See also the cover of this volume.

manor house throughout most of its history. Most of the 18th century pottery consisted of finer tablewares denoting a middle to high status occupant and the sherds were largely concentrated in room RG9. The assemblage of 165 clay tobacco pipe fragments is notable, as it comes from a fairly small area which is the southern room RG9 and its ancillary room RG10.

The plan of *c.* 1820 shows the occupant of the southern part of Merton Hall as a "Mr. Eaden" and on a later plan (printed in Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) 1988) this room is labelled as "Dining Room". It is possible that it carried this function for a couple of centuries.

### Conclusions and significance

The archaeological works carried out during the refurbishment of Merton Hall identified significant archaeological remains dating to the Roman period and revealed some of the development and occupational history of this architecturally important building.

The recovery of the remains of at least 10 individuals from the excavations at Merton Hall, together with the finds of human skeletons during building work in the School of Pythagoras to the east and the Cripps Building to the south in the 1950s and 1960s suggests that a cemetery existed not far outside the southern walls of the 3rd/4th century fortified Roman town.

This has now been confirmed by recent work

at the School of Pythagoras by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU), which revealed a large Roman cemetery, extending from the School of Pythagoras towards the River Cam (Dickens pers. comm. and CAU in prep.).

At this stage it is difficult to draw any wider conclusions as to the nature, relation and demographic of the burial ground or indeed Roman Cambridge on the basis of a single complete burial and a number of highly fragmentary remains. What is possible to conclude is that the presence and location of the human remains at Merton Hall add to the data available from other late Roman burial grounds outside the Roman settlement, most notably the contemporary cemetery at Jesus Lane to the east of the River Cam. This may underline the suggestion that Cambridge remained a significant centre throughout the 4th century (Alexander *et al.* 2004).

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All artefacts and data gathered during the field-work have been consolidated into an archive and deposited at Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Store.

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