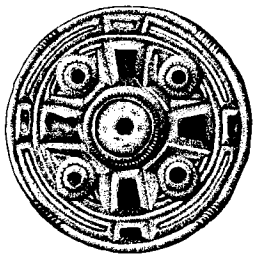

Archaeological Field Unit

Prehistoric and Roman Remains at St Neots Community College, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation

Spencer Cooper

October 2005

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No.827
Commissioned by *Mouchel Parkman*

Prehistoric and Roman Remains at St Neots Community College, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation

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October 2005

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SUMMARY

Between 1st and 8th August 2005, Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit carried out an archaeological evaluation by trial trenching at St Neots Community College in advance of construction of a tennis court. The site lies to the west of the historic town of St Neots, close to the flood plain of the Great Ouse.

From the outset it was hoped that this evaluation would identify activities associated with the nearby prehistoric landscape of the Ouse valley. Immediately to the south of the subject site lies a rich prehistoric landscape, including a Neolithic long barrow and a cursus (Ellis 2004).

This evaluation revealed a large number of undated features including ditches and pits which are possibly prehistoric or Roman in origin. Trench 1 revealed a number of undated ditches which may have related to a possible north-south droveway which formed part of larger Roman pastoral/agricultural landscape.

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Drawing Conventions

Sections

Limit of Excavation

Cut

Cut-Conjectured

Soil Horizon

Soil Horizon - Conjectured

Intrusion/Truncation

Top of Natural

Top Surface

Break in Section

Cut Number 118

Deposit Number 117

Ordnance Datum 18.45m OD N

Stone

Plans

Limit of Excavation

Deposit - Conjectured

Natural Features

Intrusion/Truncation

Sondages/Machine Strip

Illustrated Section S.14

Archaeological Deposit

Excavated Slot

Modern Deposit

Cut Number **118**

Prehistoric and Roman Remains at St Neots Community College, Cambridgeshire:An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 1814 5888)

1 INTRODUCTION

Between 1st and 8th August 2005, Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (CCC AFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation at St Neots Community College St Neots (TL 1814 5888; Fig.1). The work was carried out at the request of Mouchel Pakman in order to fulfil a Brief for Archaeological Evaluation issued by Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning and Countryside Advice (CAPCA).

From the outset it was hoped that this evaluation would identify activities associated with the nearby prehistoric landscape of the Ouse valley. Immediately to the south of the subject site a Neolithic long barrow and a cursus were observed in previous excavations (Ellis 2004).

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies to the west of the historic town of St Neots, close to the flood plain of the Great Ouse at a height of approximately 17m OD. The British Geological survey has mapped the underlying geology in the floodplain as alluvium and further to the east, on slightly higher ground, as first Terrace Gravels (BGS 1976). Aerial photographs and the topography of the site show linear undulations in the gravel which extend northwards from the main channel of the Great Ouse River. These are shallow riverine scour features possibly associated with late glacial flooding of the area (Kemp 1998). Within excavated areas alluviation was found to be restricted almost entirely to the scour channels (Kemp 1998). Excavations have uncovered former palaeochannels on the Eynesbury side of the river (Kemp 1997; Wessex 2001b).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record identifies extensive prehistoric monumental, funerary, ritual and settlement sites in the surrounding area, known through both aerial photography and archaeological investigation (*e.g*. CHER nos: 550, 567a, 567c, 8405a and CB322 *etc*.). Later archaeology

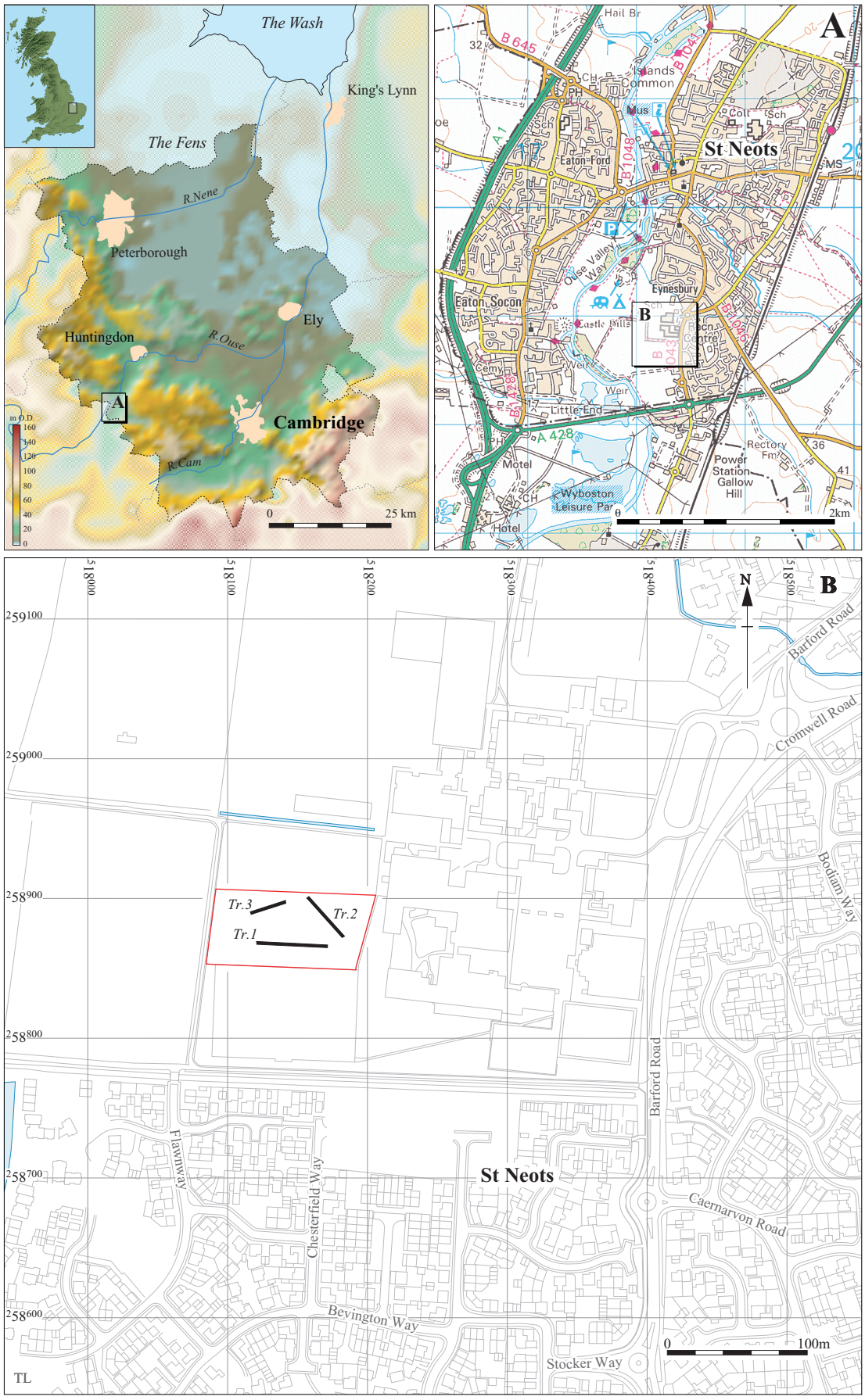

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Figure 1 *Site location showing position of trenches (black) and development area (red)*

includes a possible Roman Legionary fort (Coneygeare Common) and Pagan Saxon funerary urns to the south (CHER 392).

To the north of the subject site an evaluation (Alexander 1993) identified Roman remains in the form of simple stone buildings, ditches and pits. These features were all dated from the late 3rd century and possibly continued into the 5th century although there was residual 2nd century AD pottery. This late date may be explained by the fact that the evaluation was *c*.300m to the south-east of the fort and the settlement may have expanded outwards over many years before reaching this site. The evaluation also seems to mark the southern edge of the settlement showing peripheral buildings at the edge of the settlement leading to field systems beyond.

There is a great deal of activity in the development area in the prehistoric period from the Neolithic onwards. Cropmark evidence and archaeological work have shown that the area to the south was part of a large linear ritual landscape more than 700m long and more than 300m wide. This landscape consisted of different period monuments starting *c*.4000BC and continuing to into the Iron Age *c*.700 BC (CHER Nos. 376, 381, 447, 6150 and 11671; Kemp 1993, 1997 and 1998; Macaulay 1994; Wessex Archaeology 2001a and b).

Excavations in the grounds of the Community College include a Roman settlement immediately to the east of the college buildings (Alexander 1993) and Bronze Age remains under the present all weather pitch (Macaulay 1994).

Prehistoric settlement and burial evidence has also been recorded to the north, west and south of the site. These were excavated by both CCC AFU and Wessex Archaeology (Alexander 1993; Kemp 1993, 1996, 1997; Macaulay 1994; Wessex Archaeology 2001a and b).

The most extensive archaeological investigation relevant to the subject site is the work undertaken between July 2000 and January 2001 by Wessex Archaeology (Ellis 2004). This site lay 200m to the south of the subject site and covered an area of 12ha, revealing remains of a ritual ceremonial and funerary complex dating from the Neolithic and the Bronze Age, as well as evidence for Romano-British land use and Saxon occupation. The prehistoric complex contained two Early Neolithic cursus monuments which dated from 4150BC. An early Neolithic hengiform ring ditch was also excavated. Oak charcoal from a pit that was used to close an entrance in the ring ditch provided a radiocarbon date of 3970BC. A Neolithic long barrow with placed deposits that included human and animal remains as well as artefacts, radiocarbon dated to 2900BC (from antler recovered from the base of the ditch). A possible undated double enclosure is believed to represent another Neolithic ritual or funerary monument while discrete Neolithic pits containing placed deposits were also observed.

Later funerary activity included an Early Bronze Age urned cremation burial and a small number of unurned cremation burials, at least one of which was of

Middle Bronze Age. A large enclosure made up of 440 Late Bronze Age /Early Iron Age pits may also have been of ritual significance. In addition evidence for Late Bronze Age metalworking was uncovered.

In the Romano-British period the site was part of an agricultural landscape as evidenced by field boundaries and associated stock management and droveways.

This site also provided evidence for Saxon occupation including sunken featured buildings recorded in the western part of the site. These dated to the 7th century AD. A small number of associated features were excavated including a rubbish pit and smithing furnace.

4 METHODOLOGY

Three trial trenches were excavated under archaeological supervision using a JCB fitted with a 1.6m wide toothless ditching bucket. All exposed features and deposits were excavated and recorded according to CCC AFU standards and practises.

5 RESULTS (Figs 2-3)

General

The overburden consisted of a dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil (1) which was 0.20m deep and a pale brown silty clay subsoil (2) which was 0.40-0.50m deep across the site.

The most notable observation from the evaluation was the lack of finds recovered from the features investigated. The greatest concentration of archaeological features was uncovered in Trench 1, which included undated ditches and pits. The most important observation in Trench 1 was the identification of ditches **25** and **5** which linked to ditches **33** and **35 (**in Trench 3) to form part of a droveway system. It may be the case that this droveway was part of the same system which was identified in previous excavations and aerial photography and extends over 0.5km to the north linking up with the Roman settlement uncovered in the 1993 investigation (Alexander 1993).

Other remains include a group of undated pits in Trench 1 that display no distinctive spatial patterning but may be prehistoric in origin. The morphology and irregularity of some of these features suggests that some of these pits may be Neolithic or Bronze Age in date.

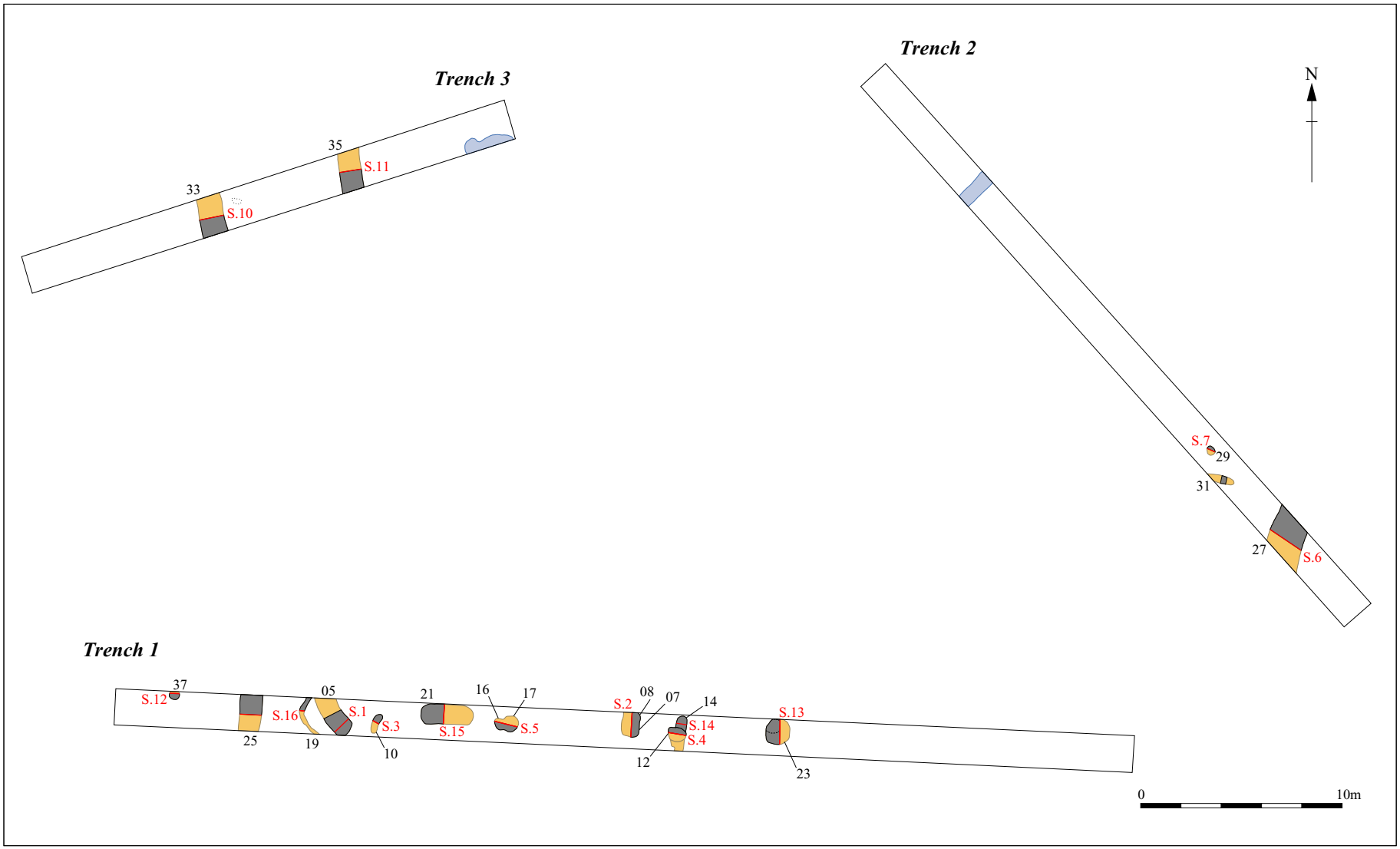

Figure 2 *Trench plans*

Trench 1

This trench was 51m long, 1.6m wide and 0.7m deep. It was located on an east–west alignment in the southern part of the development area.

The features encountered in Trench 1 are described below from west to east. In the western corner of the trench a small pit (**37**) was uncovered which contained no artefacts and was probably prehistoric in date. Pit **37** was oval with concave sides and was 0.50m wide and 0.13m deep. It contained a single fill (36) of light grey sandy silt with a moderate amount of gravel.

Three metres to the east, ditch **25** may represent a boundary ditch that equates with ditch **33** (Trench 3) to form part of a droveway system. It ran on a north-south alignment and had concave sides with a sloping base. It measured 1.10m wide and 0.25 m deep and contained a dark brown silty sand fill (24).

Two metres to the east of the possible droveway ditch was a curvilinear gully or ditch (**19**). This was sinuous in plan with concave sides and a rounded base. It measured 0.30m wide and 0.15m deep and contained a single light grey sandy silty fill (18).

Immediately to the east of gully **19** was a ditch terminus (**5**) which again may be part of a much larger droveway system, equating with ditch **35** to the north (Trench 3). Ditch **5** ran on a north-south alignment with concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 0.98m wide and 0.28m deep and contained a dark grey sandy silty fill (4).

Further to the east of the terminus ditch was an irregular curved shaped pit (**10**) which contained no artefacts. This pit had concave sides with a sloping base. It measured 0.30m wide and 0.10m deep and contained a single dark grey sandy silt (9).

To the east was a large oval pit (**2**1) with concave sides, measuring 0.91m wide and 0.30m deep. It contained a single dark brown silty clay (20).

A further 2m to the east were two intercuting pits. The earliest example (**17**) contained no artefacts but probably is prehistoric in origin. It had concave sides and a sloping base and measured 0.30m wide and 0.15m deep. It contained a single fill (39) of brown sandy silt. Pit **17** was truncated by pit **16** which contained no artefacts. Pit **16** was oval with concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 0.75m wide and 0.15m deep and contained a dark brown sandy silt.

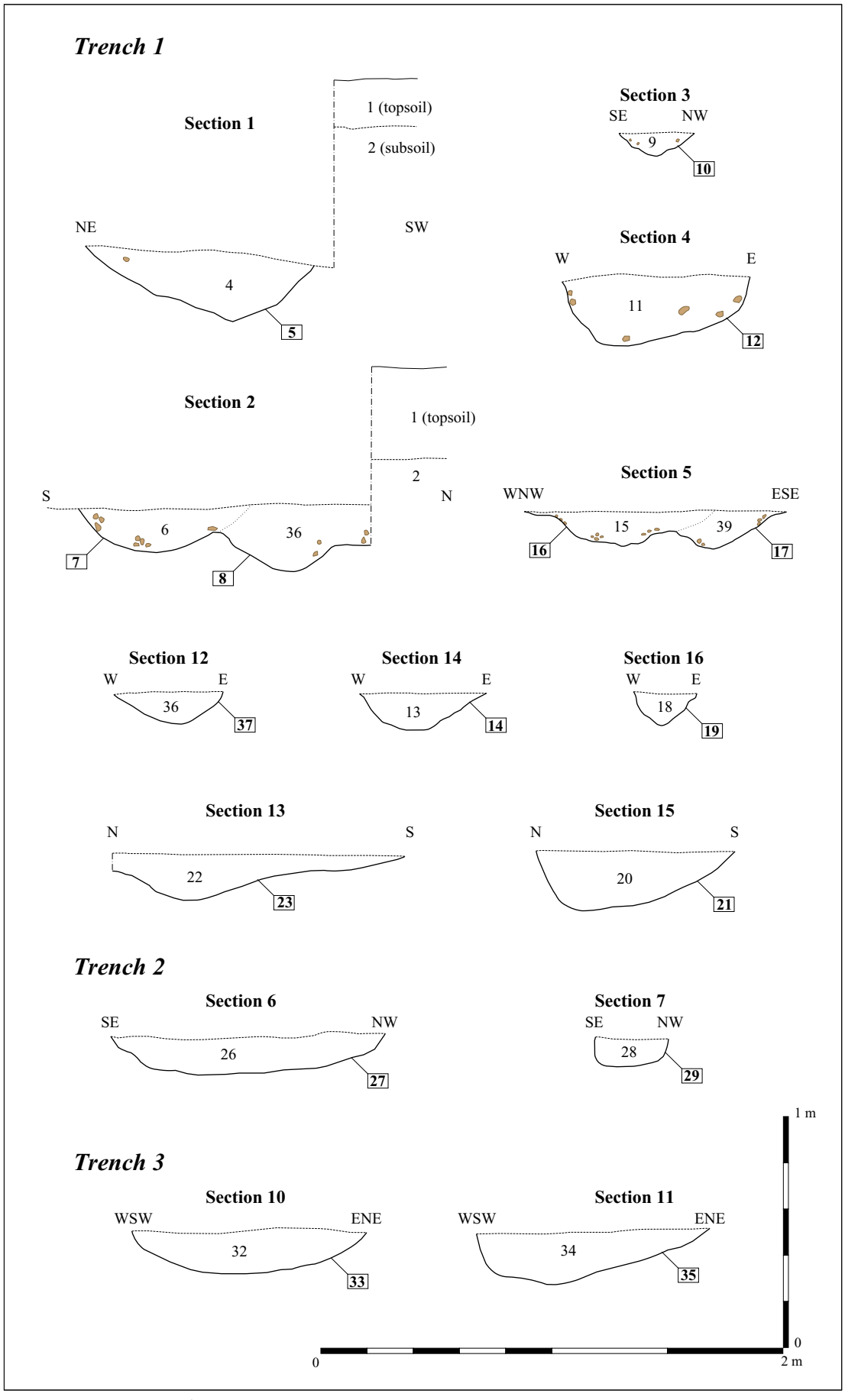

Figure 3 *Section drawings*

In the centre of the trench were two undated intercutting pits (**8** and **7**). Excavation revealed that pit **8** was the earliest and was sub circular with concave sides and a flatish base. It measured 0.90m wide and 0.30m deep and contained a dark brown silty clay (36). Pit **7** was sub-circular and measured 0.92m wide and 0.18m deep. It contained a single fill (6) of dark greyish brown silty sand which produced no artefacts.

Immediately to the east were two intercutting pits (**14** and **12**). Understanding of these features is again hindered by the lack of artefactual data. The earliest feature, pit **14** was sub-rectangular or possibly curved in plan, with concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 0.50m wide and 0.15m deep and contained a single fill a greyish brown sandy silt (13). Pit **12** measured 0.85m wide and 0.30m deep and contained a single fill (11) of light brown silty sand with a moderate amount of gravel.

Further to the east of features **12** and **14** lay pit **23**. Pit **23** was oval with concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 1.40m wide and 0.20m deep and contained a light grey silty sand.

Trench 2

This trench was 36m long, 1.6m wide and 0.79m deep. It was located on a north-west–south-east alignment in the northern part of the development area. Three archaeological features were observed in this trench including a ditch (**27**), a gully **(31)** and a posthole (**29**). The ditch probably represents a Roman field boundary that would have been part of much larger agricultural landscape which would have characterised this part of the Ouse valley.

Ditch **27** had concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 1.20m wide and 0.19m deep and contained a single fill (26) of light grey silty sand which contained occasional gravel. No artefacts were recovered.

Gully **31** had concave sides and a sloping base. It was 0.25m wide and 0.15m deep and contained a single fill 30. Fill 30 was a light brown silty clay. No artefacts were recovered from this context

Further to the northwest was the possible posthole (**29**) measuring 0.30m wide and 0.12m deep. No artefacts were recovered.

Trench 3

This trench was 36m long, 1.6m wide and 0.85m deep. It was located on a north east–south-east alignment in the southern part of the development area. Two ditches (**33** and **35**) were noted in the centre of the trench 6m apart. Ditch **33** had concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 1.0m wide and 0.20m

deep and contained a single fill (32) of light brown silty clay with occasional gravel.

Ditch **35** had concave sides and a sloping base. It measured 1.0m wide and 0.19m deep and contained a single fill (34) of brown sandy silt with occasional stones.

6 DISCUSSION

Despite the discovery of a large number of features, their interpretation was severely restricted by the lack of dating evidence. Due to the extensive archaeological investigations undertaken within environs of the subject site, however, certain assumptions can be made about the data. Based on previous excavations and existing knowledge of this part of the Ouse valley most of the ditches are likely to be part of a Roman agricultural landscape. Likewise previous excavations have indicated that many of the pits in the vicinity are likely to be prehistoric in origin. It is possible that the pits encountered within the evaluation are associated with the cursus and barrow immediately to the south of the subject site.

Ditches

The most significant features encountered in this evaluation were a number of ditches (**5, 25**, **27, 33** and **35**) running on a north–south alignment. These are on a similar alignment to the Roman droveway ditches identified in previous investigations immediately to the south of the subject site. The ditches encountered may have been part of a Roman landscape which was perhaps associated with the settlement to the north of the subject site. The major components of this agricultural/pastoral landscape would have been droveways, field boundaries and stockade pens. The whole system of land division appears to have been laid out to facilitate the easy management and movement of livestock. Within this framework the small gullies or ditches (**19** and **31**) in Trench 1 may represent elements of stockade enclosures or pen type arrangements. The ditches may represent the continuation of the droveway ditches to the north suggesting a linear pattern of landscape strung along the eastern side of the Ouse flood plain.

Pits

The pits uncovered in Trench 1 produced no spatial clustering or patterning. On the basis of the morphology and fill characteristics many of the pits may be Neolithic, Bronze age or Iron Age in date. The pits varied slightly but most were sub-circular or sub-oval plan. The curved pit (**10**) identified in Trench 1 is of classic Neolithic type. It is difficult to ascertain the function of many of

the pits encountered due to the lack of artefactual material, although this lack of material culture may discount a function for non-organic rubbish disposal.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation has made a limited contribution to the understanding of this part of the Ouse valley. The most notable observation to emerge was the presence of north–south aligned ditches which may be part of a droveway which stretched along the eastern side of the Ouse linking together various settlements. The droveways would have been one component of a Roman agricultural/pastoral system which included field boundaries and stockade pens/enclosures. Despite the lack of artefactual remains from the evaluation, this work will aid the construction of a deposit model for the landscape of this part of the Ouse Valley.

Given the proximity of such a rich prehistoric landscape, the discovery of further evidence of activity of this period in the development area was not unexpected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Mouchel Parkman who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Judith Roberts. Thanks are due to Glenn Bailey and Jon Bolderson who assisted with the fieldwork and survey.

The Brief for archaeological works was written by Kasia Gdaniec, Cambridgeshire Archaeology, Planning and Countryside Advice team (CAPCA), Adrian Scruby visited the site and monitored the evaluation on behalf of CAPCA.

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