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## Short Report:

# Roman, Medieval and post-Medieval to Modern archaeology at Mount Pleasant House, Cambridge

Andrew A S Newton

with Rebecca Sillwood, Andrew Peachey and Julie Curl

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*In July and August 2017 Archaeological Solutions (AS) carried out an archaeological excavation of land at Mount Pleasant House, Castle Ward, Cambridge on behalf of St Edmund's College. The excavation followed a trial trench evaluation (Barlow 2017) and was itself followed by a programme of archaeological monitoring and recording conducted by Archaeological Solutions Ltd during removal of the remaining foundations of Mount Pleasant House between December 2017 and March 2018.*

*The work identified archaeological remains and deposits of Roman and medieval date which accord with what was previously understood about the history of this part of Cambridge. These investigations demonstrated that the site has been subject to significant disturbance in the later post-medieval and early modern periods and that the site may be characterised by the disturbed nature of its deposits. The site may have been subject to 19th or early 20th century investigation to test its suitability for coprolite extraction. It was the location of a garage or engineering works from 1938 to 1955 which also caused significant disturbance.*

### Introduction

Mount Pleasant House is located at the junction of Mount Pleasant and Huntingdon Road on the western edge of the core of Cambridge (NGR TL 44295 59370; Fig. 1). Until recently, it comprised a large 1970s office block and extensive car park, which had been terraced down into the surrounding relief.

The site lies at the western gateway to the Roman fort and later town of *Durolipons/Duroliponte*, and within the core area of the preceding mid 1st century Iron Age oppidum (Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (HER) MCB6364 and MCB10226 respectively). Huntingdon Road shadows the line of the major Roman road of the *Via Devana* between Chester and Colchester. The road has been recorded recently at Murray Edwards College, running parallel but to the south west of the current Huntingdon Road (Evans and Ten Harkel 2010, HER MCB20374). It may have run across the Mount Pleasant House plot. The Roman town developed on Castle Hill, and investigations in the 1960s, 1970s and more recently have recorded extensive dense Roman occupation of the area, as well as medieval occupation in areas such as Mount Pleasant, Shelley Row, Haymarket Road, St

Peter's Street and elsewhere (HER MCB 1297, 4926, 4940, 6367 etc). Evidence of Roman cemeteries outside the town has also been found (Alexander *et al.* 2004, Graham and Lyons 2018) with inhumation burials south of Mount Pleasant House and the St Edmunds College grounds (HER MCB 6162 and 15881).

Evidence of Iron Age, Roman and Norman activity and Civil War fortifications has also been found at depth in this area below cellar levels in 68 Castle Street and King's Keep (HER ECB1689 and 1934) and below basement levels in Shire Hall (HER ECB4415). Medieval buildings may also have existed around the crossroads here. The Ashwickestone/Ashwycke stone (HER MCB5690), one of two medieval stone crosses in the vicinity of Cambridge Castle, is understood to have been located near here. Cartographic evidence from the 19th century shows housing in this area.

### Archaeological Investigation

Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) conducted a series of archaeological investigations at the site between 2017 and 2018.

In an archaeological evaluation in May 2017 (Barlow 2017) seven test pits, each c. 2.50m x 2.50m, were excavated in the car park and undercroft car park below the existing office block. Two trenches were also excavated in the south-western corner of the site (Figs. 1, 2).

Rubble-rich make-up layers, late post-medieval (18th–19th century), and modern features were present within each test pit and trial trench. These features consisted of wall footings, pits, and ditches. Roman features consisted of a ditch (F1009) and Pits F1031 and F1017. The Roman pottery was in a highly fragmented but only slightly abraded condition. The assemblage is relatively homogeneous, dating to the mid 2nd to 3rd centuries probably with a focus on the latter half of the 2nd century. Associated finds consisted of animal bone and charred plant remains. A fragment of human bone, and a possible second fragment were found in F1003 and make-up layer L1038.

The archaeological evaluation was followed by open area archaeological excavation (Figs. 1, 3). Following excavation archaeological monitoring and recording was carried out during the removal of the foundations of the former Mount Pleasant House.

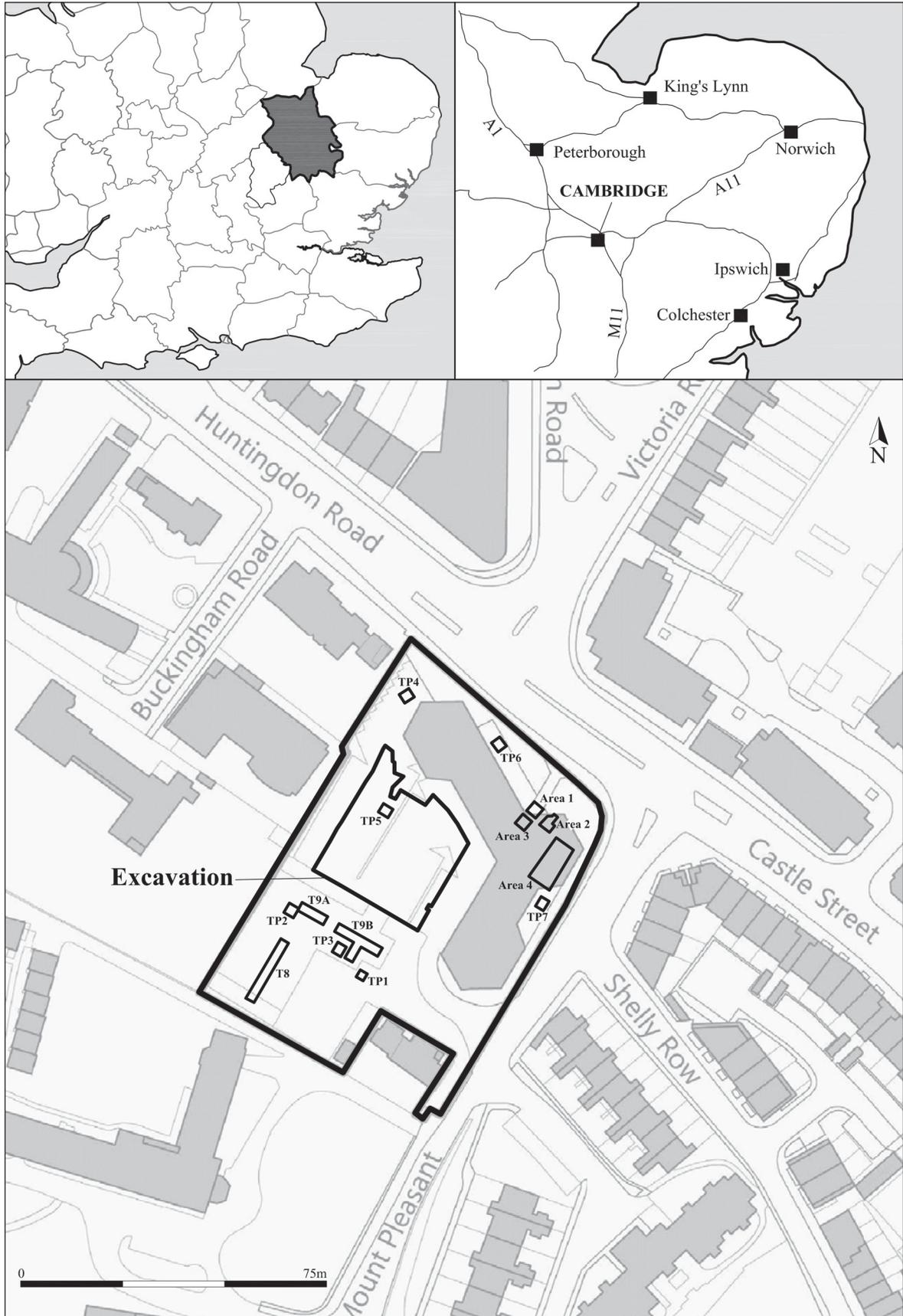


Figure 1. Site location and plan.

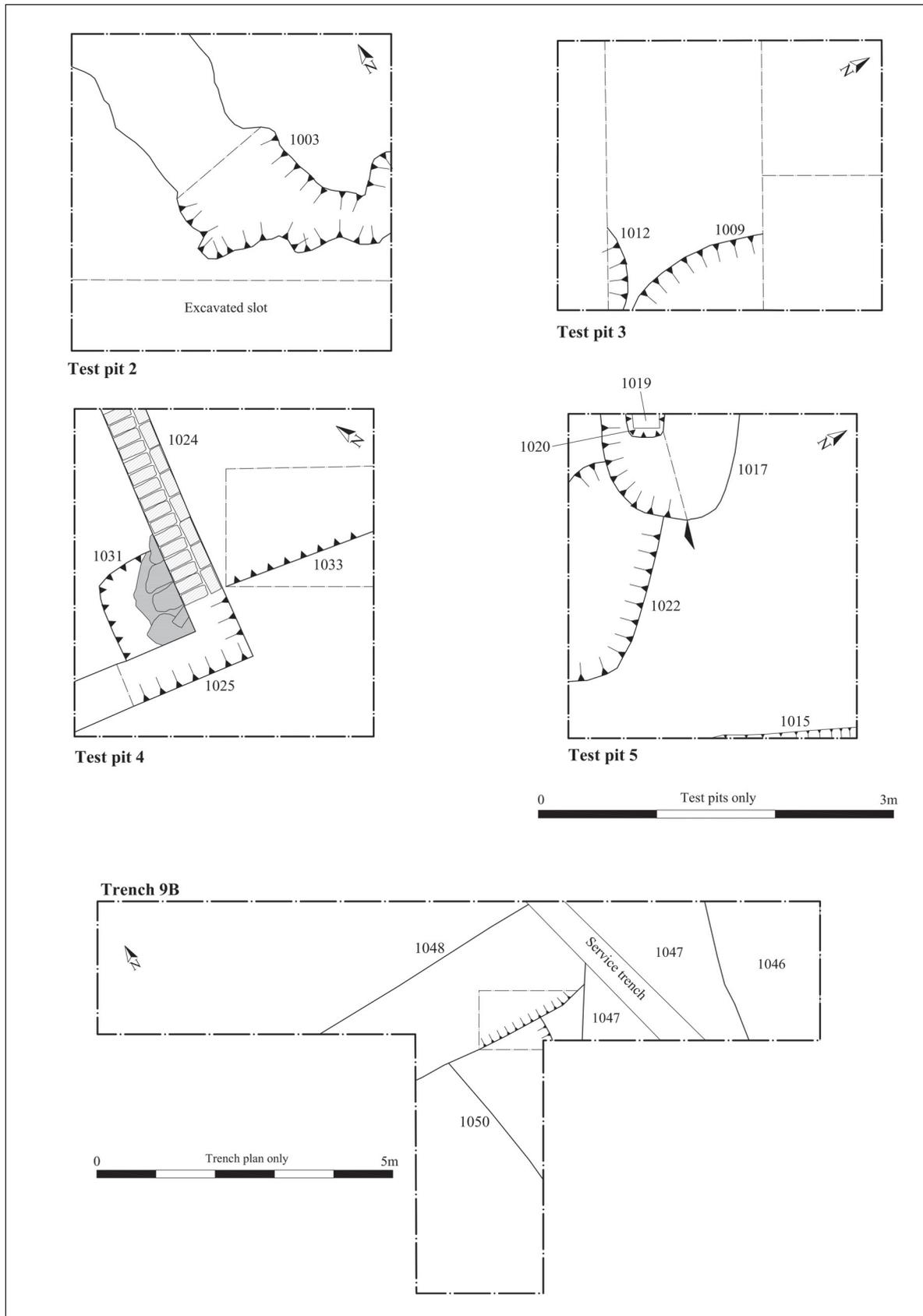


Figure 2. Test pits and trial trench plans.



Roman pits were identified. The first of these, F2056 (Fig. 3), contained a sandy grey ware pottery vessel (V2054) which held a small quantity of pig bone. Vessel V2054 was initially considered to represent an urned cremation but no human bone was found in association with it. The vessel was presumably deposited complete. Approximately 60% of the vessel survived 19th/20th century disturbance, with non-cross-joining body sherds in nearby deposits almost certainly also part of this vessel. The vessel comprises a small ovoid jar (Fig. 4) with a short plain everted rim and burnished lattice decorating the upper-mid body, with the area above burnished to a smooth finish. This type of jar was produced at Horningsea (Evans *et al.* 2017: type J6.6), and is common in late 2nd to early 3rd century AD groups previously recorded on Castle Hill, Cambridge (Hull & Pullinger 1999, 233: vessels 246–52).

V2054 was in the tertiary fill of the pit, above two fills which contained very few finds and beneath one which contained a large quantity of artefactual material. This sequence and pattern of infill might indicate deliberate and structured deposition, although the fragmentation of the vessel might indicate that it was not in its original context. Structured deposition has been described as the placing of deposits in features in a structured and recurring manner (Cunliffe and Poole 1995, 83) or ‘the deliberate deposition of specially selected ‘packages’ of objects of different kinds, repetitively and sequentially in certain positions within the fill matrices of certain features’ (Lally 2008a & b). The use of refuse material in acts of structured deposition is noted in prehistoric contexts, particularly in the Neolithic and late Bronze Age and has also been suggested at sites of Roman date.

Symbolic activity has been recorded elsewhere in Roman Cambridge. To the north-east of the current site, a series of ritual pits were recorded (Taylor 1999, 79). The smashed samian, flagons, amphorae and other imported wares, whole layers filled with oyster shell, several thousand iron objects, unusual animal bones such as cat, hare and chicken, as well as the normal pig, cattle and sheep, recovered from these features are suggested to represent high status feasting, possibly associated with funerary rites. The presence of the remains of three complete dog skeletons with iron collars forming a triangle around a pot is comparable to the pot containing pig bone at Mount Pleasant. It is possible, therefore, that the deposition of Vessel V2054 represents a deliberate act.

Pit F2094 (Fig. 3), which was located to the south of F2056, extended beyond the limit of excavation to both the east and south but was clearly a feature of some size with the excavated area measuring 3m in length and over 1.5m in width. Only one fill was observed in this feature and only a minimal finds assemblage was recovered.

The pottery assemblage is indicative of a date in the mid/late 2nd to early 3rd centuries AD (Peachey 2018a) although coins recovered from the site are possibly of 4th century date (Sillwood 2018). During the 2nd century, reorganisation of the western part

of the Roman settlement took place, involving levelling the fort and infilling the Iron Age pits and ditches. Single-room wattle and daub houses, most with fenced or ditched gardens and gravelled yards, were built, and there were numerous pits and timber-lined wells (Alexander & Pullinger 1999, 35). By the 3rd century there was evidence of dereliction in the Mount Pleasant area where quarrying for gravel took place among the houses. The quantity of rubbish in some of the large pits suggests that the settlement was flourishing elsewhere and that a system of rubbish disposal was in operation. Most of the small houses and yards seem to have been disused, with the rubbish pits and quarry features dug through them (Alexander & Pullinger 1999, 49). The ceramic evidence and the character of the archaeology recorded during the recent excavation at the site is consistent with use of the area for the disposal of refuse material.

Diagnostic sherds are limited, but the assemblage includes central Gaulish samian ware characteristic of the mid to late 2nd century (Plates 9 and 10), with low quantities of east Gaulish samian ware possibly arriving until the mid 3rd century AD. Several beakers in Lower Nene Valley colour-coated ware also conform to types manufactured no later than the 3rd century AD, while the supply of coarse wares remains dominated by the products of the Horningsea kilns. The assemblage also includes mortaria, predominantly from the Lower Nene Valley with a single example from Oxfordshire, and imported Baetican amphorae, consistent with the supply pattern to the urban settlement at Cambridge during this period.

Other classes of material may also be representative of refuse disposal, such as the faunal assemblage which was derived from the main meat animals and displayed evidence for butchery, suggesting that it represents food waste. Overall, the faunal assemblage suggests disturbed finds and residual remains. It does, however, contain some interesting elements. The bulk of the dog bone at this site appears to be from one small, short dog, which had suffered from arthritis. Such small dogs were first seen in Britain during the Roman period (Smith 2006; Crockford 2000) and these animals may have been pets, but could equally have been working animals, perhaps used for herding or hunting. Such a dog might be similar to ancient breeds like the Swedish Vallhund which, like modern Corgis, were cattle herders or Dachshunds that were used for hunting badgers. There was no indication of earlier domestic activity on the site prior to the refuse deposition.

### *Phase 2. Medieval activity*

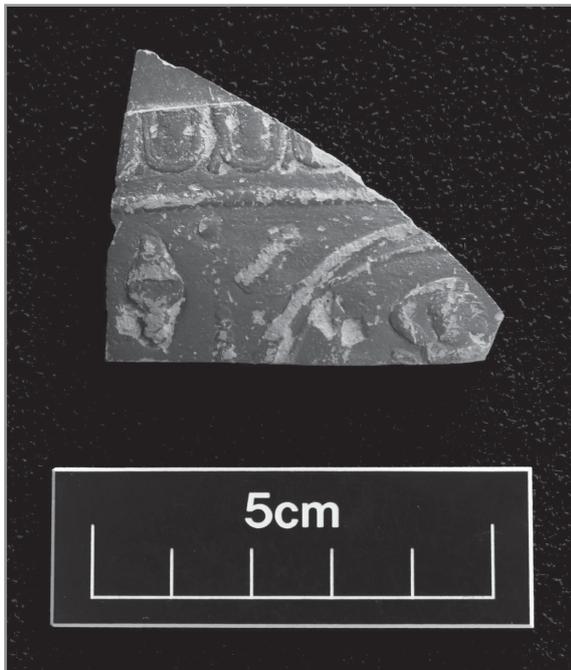
The site lies in an area, close to the castle, in which medieval activity is well attested. The Ashwickestone or Ashwycke Stone, one of two medieval stone crosses in the vicinity of Cambridge Castle, was located on the western side of Huntingdon Road/Castle Street at its junction with Mount Pleasant (Clark 1907, xx–xxi; Stokes 1917, 23) and medieval occupation may have



*Left, Figure 4. GRSW jar containing pig bones.*

*Below left, Monochrome Plate 9. Decorated samian ware.*

*Below right, Monochrome Plate 10. Decorated samian ware.*



existed in this area. Medieval wells and earthworks have previously been recorded at Mount Pleasant (HER 05240a).

In the northern part of the site were four pits which can be assigned a medieval date. The stratigraphically earliest of these was F2017 (Fig. 3). This contained both medieval and Roman pottery, as well as a Roman copper alloy stud (SF1), CBM, struck flint, animal bone, and oyster shell. The western side of F2017 was cut by Pit F2025 (Fig. 3) which contained four sherds of Roman pottery but which must, on the basis of its stratigraphic position, be of medieval date. The northern edge of F2017 was cut by F2021 which was cut in turn by Pit F2010 and the large post-medieval/modern feature F2117. F2021 contained 30 sherds of pottery from which a late 2nd to mid 3rd century spot date was defined but this feature must have been of medieval date due to its relationships with F2010 and F2017. Other finds from this feature consisted of CBM, which was of post-medieval date and may have been intrusive from the large post-medieval feature which cut the edge of F2021, animal bone, and oyster shell.

Pit F2010 (DP 39) was the most stratigraphically recent of the medieval features, cutting F2017, F2021 and F2025. It was cut by the large post-medieval/modern feature F2117. A large proportion of the pottery assemblage recovered from F2010 was Roman and therefore residual. The density of archaeological activity present at the site appears to have resulted in much disturbance and redeposition.

In that part of medieval Cambridge to the north of the river, the dominant feature was the castle, closely followed by the churches of St. Peter, St Giles, and All Saints. Aside from these, the main activities undertaken in this part of the city during this period were agriculture and quarrying for gravel and marl, although there is some evidence for small-scale domestic occupation (Cessford and Dickens 2005, 95). The presence of pottery and peg tile of medieval date, and animal bone within the medieval features, suggests domestic occupation. The heavily abraded character of the pottery might indicate that the material represents refuse deposits dumped at this location after accumulation elsewhere; perhaps the castle or the domestic occupation sites in the area. However, this degree of abrasion may be the result of the repeated disturbance the site has undergone and which has clearly led to significant levels of residuality and intrusiveness amongst the finds assemblages.

### *Phase 3. Late post-medieval to modern*

The earliest indications of post-medieval activity are 15th–16th century peg tile and three copper alloy jettons (SFs 2 and 3 and another example found in L2053). The jettons are all from roughly the same period in the 16th century. All are likely to be the Rose/Orb type jetton, but all appear to have been made by a different master. One was certainly made by Domianus Krauwinkel (SF2), whilst another was definitely a Hanns Krauwinkel (SF3), the last example is more worn, but maybe an example of Hans

Schultes' work, and this example has also been neatly perforated in the centre. The perforation of this piece is slightly enigmatic as, if this had been perforated for suspension, you would expect the hole to be close to an edge and not in the centre. This object was clearly used in a different manner after its usefulness as a reckoner was over, perhaps as a decoration, or to weigh something down in the manner of a spindle whorl, though the lightness of the piece would argue against this use. The dating of these coins is post-1543, but could be as late as 1650, though a date in the mid-late 16th century seems most likely. None of the cut features could be assigned such a date because most of these items were residual. Nonetheless, the presence of finds of this date suggests some degree of 16th century activity at this location, masked by the substantial later activity.

Several features contained artefactual evidence suggesting a broad late post-medieval to modern date, possibly spanning the late 18th to 20th centuries.

At the most northerly part of the excavation area was F2069. This was a large feature but it was not fully-excavated due to problems associated with the high water table at this location. It was interpreted as a possibly Victorian chalk/clunch or coprolite extraction pit. A similar interpretation was applied to a large feature located slightly to the south-east. This was Pit F2058 and, unlike F2069, it contained three fills, the uppermost of which, L2059, contained a moderate quantity of pottery, animal bone and CBM. Both of these features were truncated by a much larger feature which was variously recorded as F2023, F2027, F2051, and F2067 and consolidated under the single number F2117.

To the south-east of these features, two post-medieval to modern deposits were recorded. These were L2045 and L2046. They appeared to partially overlie the deep, sub-rectangular, near-vertical sided feature F2036 (Fig. 3). This contained multiple fills which yielded finds of Roman, medieval, and post-medieval/modern date. The entire human bone assemblage present at this site was recovered from Pit F2036. The date of this feature suggests that this human bone must represent residual material, disturbed and redeposited from elsewhere when the feature was back-filled. Like the features slightly further to the north, it appears that it may have been a quarry pit. The mixed character of the artefactual assemblage attests to the density of previous activity in this area but the overall character and the latest date indicated by the finds suggests a date of 19th to early 20 century. It lay in close proximity to a very similar but undated feature, F2071 (Fig. 3).

South-east of F2036 was the very similar F2075 (Fig. 3). This too contained multiple fills, was of significant depth (the base was not reached due to the high water table), and had steep, near vertical sides. In comparison, however, this feature contained fewer finds, all of which indicated a late post-medieval to modern date.

Cessford and Dickens (2005, 95) note that the area to the north of the river Cam was subject to quar-

rying for gravel and marl in the medieval period and it is possible that this is represented by the pits from Phase 3. However, coprolite mining is another explanation. During the 19th century it was found that the Cambridge Greensand, upon which the city lies, a sandy facies of the Upper Gault, which marked a non-sequence at the base of the Chalk Marl, was particularly rich in phosphatic nodules (Ford and O'Connor 2009, 96). These phosphatic nodules, often referred to as coprolites (an inaccurate term as they do not solely consist of fossilised faecal matter), can be treated with sulphuric acid to produce a mixture of calcium mono-, di-, or tri-hydro-phosphate and calcium sulphate which makes an effective fertiliser. From the middle of the 19th century Cambridgeshire became the centre of the coprolite industry with areas to the south-west and north-east of Cambridge particularly prominent (Ford and O'Connor 2009, 96–97, fig. 7). In order to extract the coprolites, the depth and extent of each bed had to be determined and this was initially done by digging a coffin-like pit (O'Connor 2001, 49). The steep sided F2036 and F2071 (although undated) might be considered to conform to this description. Full-scale coprolite extraction would have caused much more severe disturbance to the site as, once the seam was located, removal of the material was carried out using open-cast methods and whole fields were torn up (Ford and O'Connor 2009, 98). It is unlikely that extraction of this type was carried out here but it is feasible that the site may have been investigated for its potential coprolite yield.

The site was formerly occupied by an engineering works or garage and between 1938 and 1955 underground storage tanks associated with this establishment were constructed (AOC 2016). It is possible that some of the more regular features (such as F2036 and F2071) are the pits in which such tanks were sunk or other elements of the engineering works.

#### *Modern features*

The excavation was followed by a programme of archaeological monitoring and recording associated with the removal of the foundations of the demolished Mount Pleasant House which was constructed in the 1970s. This recorded features which were more recent than the 1930s–50s engineering works. They consisted of three pale blue grey concrete pillar bases (L3007, L3009, and L3011), each measuring 3m x 3m. In addition to this, a single modern pit was recorded, observed in section only. It measured in excess of 11m in width and 1.4m in depth and contained demolition rubble. This feature probably pre-dated, or was associated with, the construction of the 1970s Mount Pleasant House.

#### **Conclusions**

Archaeological work conducted at Mount Pleasant House by Archaeological Solutions between 2017 and 2018 has identified archaeological remains and

deposits of Roman and medieval date which accord with previous investigation conducted in the vicinity (Alexander & Pullinger 1999, 35) and with what is currently understood about the history of land use in this area. These investigations demonstrated that the site has been subject to significant disturbance in the later post-medieval and early modern periods, relating to probable 19th/early 20th investigation of the site to test its suitability for coprolite extraction and to significant disturbance in the 20th century, through the construction (and operation) of an engineering works/garage, and then in the 1970s with the construction of the large Mount Pleasant House building. The site is characterised by the disturbed nature of its deposits and the fact that much of the artefactual assemblage recovered during archaeological investigation may not have been in its original depositional context.

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