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**Proceedings of the  
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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)  
**Volume LXXXVIII**  
for 1999

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**Roman Cambridge**

**Excavations on Castle Hill 1956–1988**

John Alexander and Joyce Pullinger



*This volume is dedicated to more than 400 volunteers who worked in their free time on the excavations and post excavation work, and to those contributors to the final work who did not live to see the results: Don Allen, Bernard Denston, Ray Farrar, Chris Godfrey, Rex Hull, Joan Liversidge and John Scott.*

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# **Roman Cambridge: Excavations on Castle Hill 1956–1988**

**John Alexander and Joyce Pullinger**

With contributions by: D Allen, G Allen, G Bailey, M Blackburn, B C Burnham, P Croft, C B Denston, P de Jersey, B Dickinson, C Evans, R A H Farrar, R Flood, F Gardiner, D Haigh, B Hartley, K Hartley, M H C Hassall, M Henig, M R Hull, J Liversidge, A Rotherham, M F Sekulla, A Taylor, G R Thoday, F Weatherhead, P White, M Woudhuysen

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Photography by John Scott, the authors, the editor and others

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## XII. Summary of excavations post-1988

C Evans

Since the mid 1980s, and particularly the application of PPG 16 planning legislation in 1990, there have been a remarkable number of excavations within the city. The majority of these have been undertaken by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit of the University (CAU), with other investigations by the County Council's Archaeological Field Unit. Most have been small exposures and, only providing limited plan information, their results serve more to question established models of the town's development rather than provide well-mapped alternatives. Yet this is nothing new and the archaeology of Roman Cambridge has been dogged by the scale of its investigations, which have generally been too limited to firmly establish alignments.

This overview will be largely restricted to Castle Hill and its immediate hinterland, with other recent sites only discussed as they directly relate to understanding of the context of Cambridge's Roman settlement.

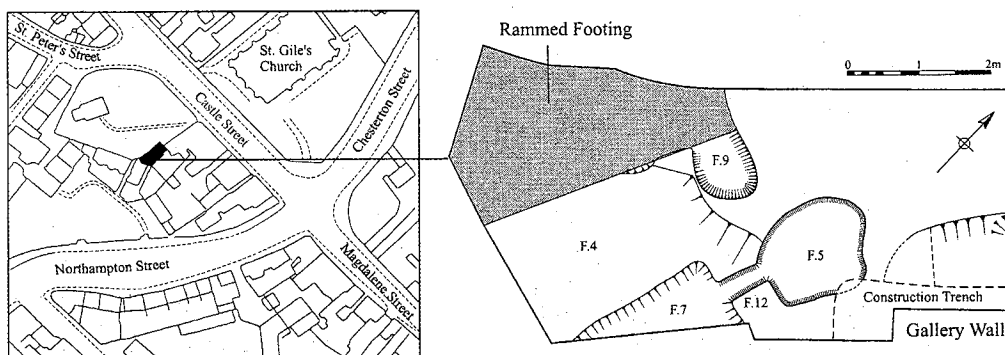
### Upper Town Sites

An important recent discovery within the Roman town itself came from the evaluation at 17–35 Castle St in 1996 (Alexander 1996). Like the Law Court site opposite, the plot had probably been terraced and, subject to extensive later disturbance, no definitely early features were identified. Important assemblages were nevertheless recovered and, aside from Middle Saxon

wares, include quantities of early Roman pottery (7kg; c. 500 sherds), largely dating to c. AD 60/70. A small quantity of later 4th century material was also present.

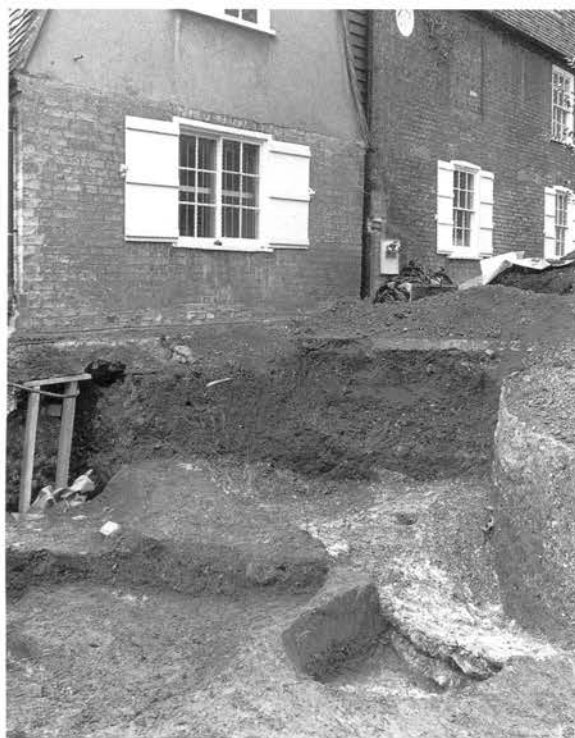
Previously, in 1994, watching brief monitoring occurred during the construction of shallow-footed housing at 75–83 Castle St (Butler 1994), the same site where Haigh undertook his 1988 excavations. There was limited archaeological exposure and what was revealed in section largely confirmed the results of the earlier investigations. Apart from evidence of slight 1st/2nd century AD timber buildings (the depth of Roman strata surviving to c. 0.8m), medieval inhumations associated with the Church of All Saints by the Castle were recovered and a trench was cut across the line of the 12–13th century outer bailey ditch of the castle. Subsequently, due to these findings the site was sealed by geo-textile matting to minimise disturbance through construction. In 1997 a single test pit was excavated in the garden behind 71 Castle St where c. 0.6m depth of Roman strata was recorded; (Heawood 1997).

Further down Castle Hill, a recording brief in 1994 within the passageway along the northern side of Kettle's Yard was largely directed towards the retrieval of medieval inhumations as the area originally lay within St Peter's churchyard (Evans 1994). Substantial Roman features were nevertheless revealed at the base of the sequence. Certainly the most important was a large rammed marl and limestone footing, whose stonework was locally laid edge-up in



XII.1 Plan and location map of Kettle's Yard investigations, 1994

a herringbone pattern (fig. XII: 1–3). Extending over 4 x 2.3m(+) and surviving 0.35m deep, the top of this feature lay 0.10–0.2 m below the top of the sandy silt natural, suggesting a total depth of at least 0.55m.

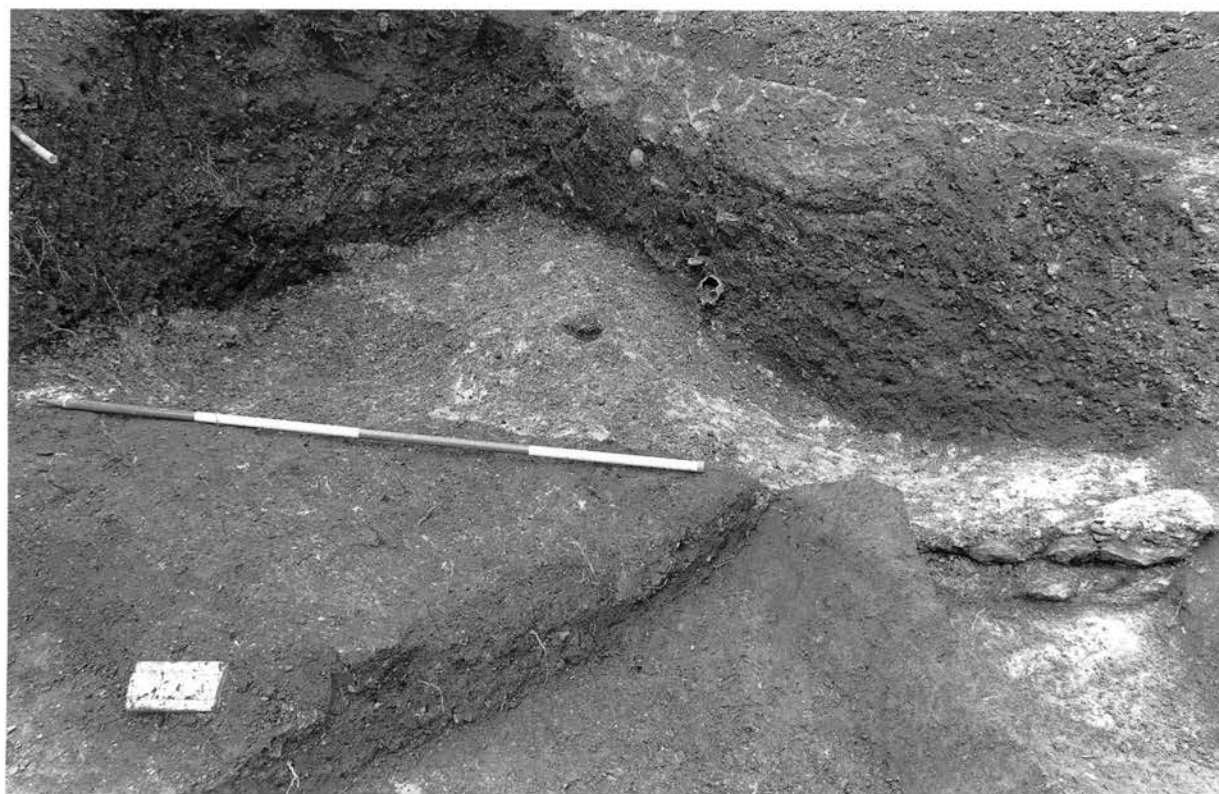


*XII.2 Kettle's Yard 1994, with the rammed footing extending beneath the gallery and St. Peter's churchyard*

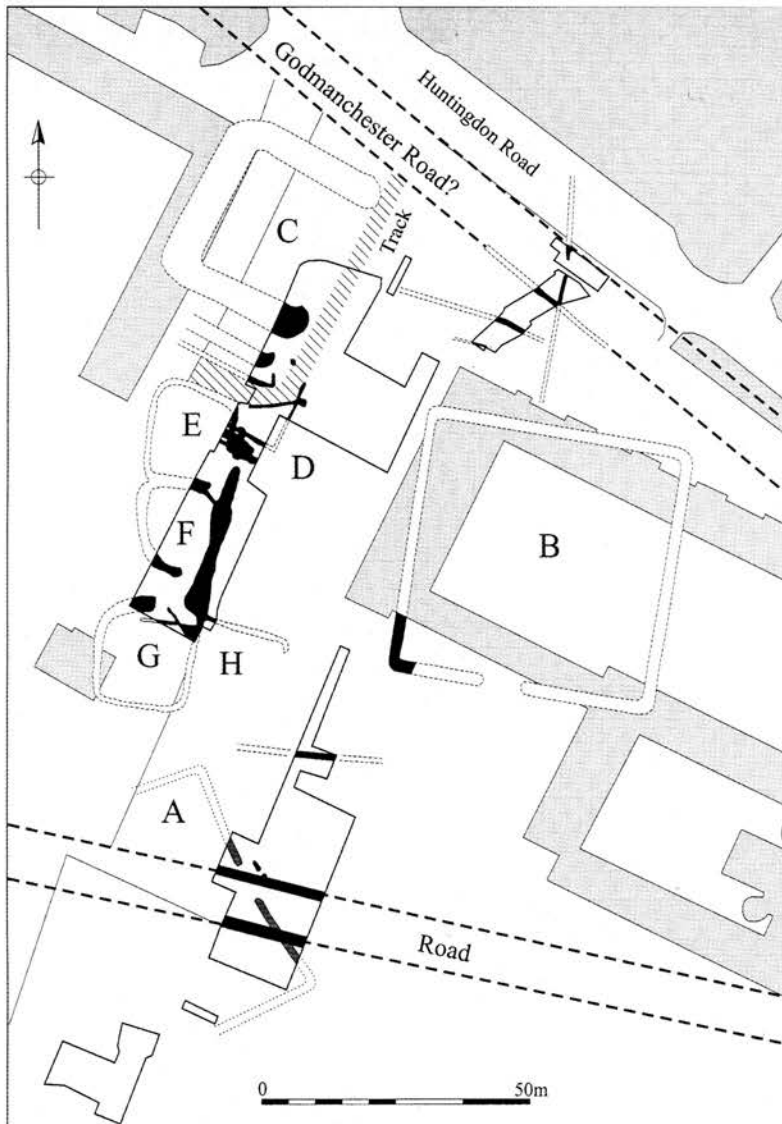
Aside from broad truncation cuts, probably quarries, what seemed to be a vertically-sided well was also excavated (1.5m+ deep; F. 5). South from this ran a trough (F. 12) linked to a flat-based, 'tank-like' feature 0.30m deep (F. 7). All seemingly interrelated, while these may attest to some manner of water-based processing (?flax), given their regularity and complementary layout with the rammed footing a structural function is another possibility. However, only in the upper fill of F. 5 was there a sufficient quantity of building rubble to suggest the demolition of nearby masonry.

The masonry pad follows the alignment of the Roman road (and not the town's walls). This is remarkable given that, when the gallery was first constructed, the late Roman town wall was apparently identified only some 7m to the east (Kettle's Yard 1984). No features within the 1994 investigations followed its alignment and little 4th century material was recovered (the pottery generally spans the 2nd to later 3rd centuries). It is difficult to account for this 'mass' masonry feature. Although it could just be the rammed floor footing of a very impressive building, the location suggests that it may conceivably relate to the town's defences (i.e. a gateway and/or bastion). If so, it would be difficult to 'square' its date and alignment with the line of the eastern circuit as earlier identified and here reconstructed (Fig. 6.1).

A programme of test pitting undertaken in 1991 along the southeastern side of Shire Hall car park discovered a substantial ditch of Roman attribution (Robinson 1991). Running northwest-southeast, its alignment would seem close to that of the western



*XII.3 Kettle's Yard 1994, detail of the rammed footing*



**XII.4** The 1994 New Hall excavations with projected alignments and conjectured enclosure plans shown dashed

town wall and it may even directly relate to the defences. The recovery of tile, brick, mortar and opus signinum fragments could, at the very least, suggest the existence of substantial Roman building in the area.

Aside from these, the only fieldwork that has occurred within the area of the town has been primarily concerned with the location of the Castle ditch (eg Malim & Taylor 1992; Roberts 1996).

### The Western Hinterland

The largest recent excavation within Cambridge was undertaken by the CAU at New Hall in 1993/94. With more than 2,000 sq m investigated, the site extended across the width of the western College grounds and some 290 features, producing c. 16,000 finds, were excavated (Fig. XII: 4; Evans 1996 and forthcoming). Aside from the broader insights the site provides, the programme allowed for the full analyses of its assem-

blages and environmental remains (C14 dating, pollen, plant macros and soil micromorphological study) – a first for Roman Cambridge. Situated some 250m west of the line of the Roman town, the site strictly falls within its hinterland. Yet it seemed to be a 'place' in its own right and the discoveries made directly reflect upon the early history of the town itself, challenging the definition of its boundaries and even its main approach.

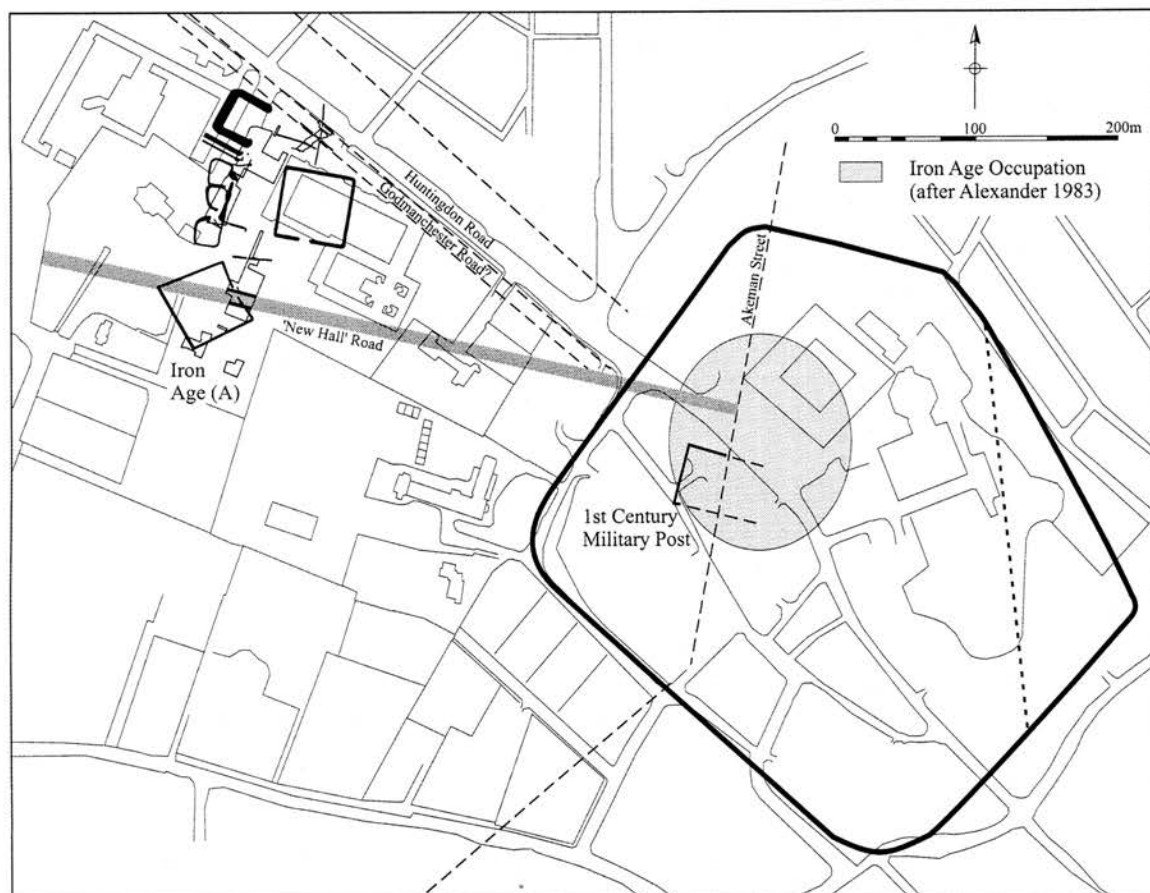
Much worked flint, including Neolithic material, was recovered as well as some 40 sherds of pre-Iron Age pottery. Most of the latter would seem to reflect Bronze Age occupation and a substantial ditch of this date was excavated. A significant cluster of prehistoric features occurred at the southern end of the excavations where a 22m length of a large enclosure ditch of later Iron Age attribution was excavated (oriented northwest-southeast; Enclosure A).

Probably the most important discovery of the excavations was a major early Roman road. Running northeast-southwest, it crossed the line of the Iron Age enclosure and, as defined by its flanking ditches, would be c. 7m across. By its projected alignment it would continue east to bisect the western line of the Roman defences and meet the Akeman St crossroads (Fig. XII: 5). Unfortunately in trenches later cut across the road's projected route within the grounds of Buckingham House on the east side of the College indicated that the entire area had been massively truncated

through 19th century coprolite quarrying, eradicating any early features (Lucas 1999).

In the course of watching brief monitoring at New Hall, the southwestern corner of a large early Roman enclosure extending beneath the College's western court was exposed (Enclosure B). Aligned with the town approach road 45m to the south, its large ditches had 'V'-shaped profiles c. 2.4m wide and 1.05/1.2m deep, which could suggest a military association (a harness/belt fitting of probable military attribution was recovered from the site). Two quite minor ditch lines also lay on the same alignment; one northeast-southwest south of Enclosure B and, the other, continued on the return axis north to and beneath Huntingdon Road. Within the northern Huntingdon Road-side area of excavation (III) the latter ditch line was cut by ditched boundaries that could, conceivably, relate to a Cambridge/Godmanchester Road. Their evidence is much more tenuous than for the southern road and, if





*XII.5 Roman Cambridge showing a projected alignment of the New Hall road in relationship to the Akeman Street crossroads*

existing on this line (on a more southerly approach axis than has been postulated), it would continue southeast to meet the southern College road at, or just before, the town's western gate and not at its main crossroads. In other words, the Godmanchester route would be secondary to the southern College road which would itself correspond with the route to St Neot's crossing the line of Ermine St at Caxton Gibbet (Margary route 231; 1967; see also Wilkes & Eltrington 1978: 16, 26).

The swathe between the southern and northern roads (Area I) had been extensively quarried for gravels in Roman times. Nevertheless a series of sub-square ditched paddock enclosures (C–H), whose northeastern side was eventually delineated by a line of six later Roman inhumations, were distinguished. Generally the paddocks reflect an organic layout (ie irregular and conjoining). However, the northernmost seemed to be more regular and was laid out as a double-ditch square open on its eastern side where it was bounded by a north-south metalled track (separating it from the main quarry field) which returned along its southern perimeter. In the southeastern terminal of its inner ditch had been dumped a great quantity of pottery – 80kg of later 1st/2nd century date (approximately half of all the pottery from the site). It is difficult to understand the nature of this enclosure. While by its plan a quasi-military function could be

postulated (ie commanding the town's western approach), a series of processing pits were excavated and the effects of industrial 'pollution' were identified within the site's environmental samples (eg pollen sooted). Given this, one possible explanation is that the site represents some manner of military supply base of later 1st–2nd century date that was eventually replaced by a domestic roadside settlement (later 2nd–mid 3rd century AD).

With only nine sherds of Roman pottery recovered (2nd–4th century), the results of an evaluation undertaken across the grounds of St Edmund's College in 1996 (Dickens 1996a) could only be considered disappointing in the light of the New Hall discoveries. Although much of the northwestern quarter of the area had been lost through quarrying, apart from what was probably a Roman inhumation, no pre-Medieval features were present. This negative evidence is particularly noteworthy as Roman burials are known to have been found within settlement features during the construction of the Chapel in 1936. (Apparently recorded by 'JB' – probably John Bromwich – the archive of this work cannot be located. However, appraisal of the pottery then recovered indicates a later 1st/early 2nd century date; Lucas in Evans forthcoming). Similarly, a very small-scale trench evaluation south of The Grove within Fitzwilliam College produced negative results – only

a few scraps of Roman pottery – the grounds having been subject to extensive 19th century landscaping (Gdaniec 1991).

Can the negative recovery pattern at Fitzwilliam and St Edmund's Colleges be considered representative? Whereas the former investigations were so limited as to not be indicative of College Ground-wide recovery, the St Edmunds' investigations were considerably more extensive. Given the obvious occurrence of an early Roman settlement and a small cemetery at the latter, what this may be telling us is that the hinterland of Roman Cambridge was a localised phenomenon at best (at least on its western side). Suggesting dispersed semi-rural enclaves, certainly it does not attest to intense 'strip-type' suburban settlement. Even more important, in terms of understanding the density and potential status of the Roman town itself, is the localised nature of its cemeteries. The results from New Hall, St Edmunds and also recent negative evidence from St John's School on Grange Road (Mortimer 1995) – the latter thought to be the site of a major road-side cemetery based on Walker's findings earlier this century (Walker 1912) – suggest that the interred population numbers have been over-estimated and that the town's cemeteries were not extensive.

It was by chance that within two years of completing the New Hall excavations an opportunity arose to test the existence of the postulated line of the Cambridge/Godmanchester route (at least how it was then projected, see Fig. 5; Alexander 1983). Construction at 138 Huntingdon Road/Marion Close led to the cutting of a 30m long trench across the road's putative north-of-Huntingdon-Road line (Mortimer & Evans 1997). Of course it is always difficult to conclusively prove a negative result, but absolutely no evidence of an early road was forthcoming, nor were any Roman remains present whatsoever. Instead, the extreme southwestern arc of a massive Middle/late Iron Age enclosure was found. Producing substantial finds assemblages (340 sherds, 250 pieces of bone and much daub), this was evidently settlement-related. Its circuit had been recut and, at its most impressive, the ditch was 6m across and 2.25m deep. At this scale it is comparable to the circuits of the Arbury Camp and Wandlebury 'forts', and was also possibly defensive; a palisade trench was found to run interior to the main circuit. Although due to landscaping and house cover the enclosure's circuit has not been visible from the air, it must be large. When combined with the evidence of Iron Age occupation at New Hall it seems remarkably fortuitous that another enclosure of this date should have been located given how sparse the excavation sample has been in the area of Huntingdon Road. Moreover, if this is another 'great' defended enclosure, then it suggests an extraordinary frequency of such sites within the wider Cambridge environs (Evans 1992).

### Southern Hinterland

There has been a swathe of development along the terraces south of the Roman town and west of the river, where eight evaluations have occurred. Applying consistent sampling methodologies throughout, within this programme the provision of negative evidence is considered equally important to positive results (ie where there are no traces of early settlement). Perhaps the most significant finding of these 'west bank' trial trenching programmes was the discovery and subsequent excavation of Roman ditch systems at Burrell's Walk (where a probable Bronze Age enclosure was also identified; Gdaniec 1992). Considerable quantities of Roman later 1st/very early 2nd century pottery were recovered (60 sherds). Given this and the site's layout, it would appear to fall on the northeastern margin of a substantial settlement, possibly extending under Robinson College. An evaluation in 1996 behind the University Library only detected one probable early feature – a ditch on the Burrell's Walk settlement alignment (Gibson 1996). Probable Roman field systems have also been recovered during the cutting of service trenches in St John's Playing Fields (Evans 1991).

Otherwise no other material of this date has been found in the west Cambridge sites. Of the lower town opposite, Roman finds have been recovered from trenching across the King's College Lawns (1991) and, later, at the Bateman Building, Gonville and Caius excavations (M Alexander 1995). Whereas all the Roman material from the former was in residual context (though this is unsurprising given the narrowness of its exposures), at the Bateman site two features of this date and nine Roman sherds were recovered. Their occurrence could correlate with the 'Roman pits' recorded by Babington in the gardens of Trinity College close to Garret Hostel Lane (Babington 1883) and during the building of Trinity Hall itself, and perhaps suggest the location of a Roman riverside settlement. Yet this cannot have been continuous along the eastern bank of the river upstream to the ford as three recent campaigns of excavation in the grounds of Trinity College have produced only negligible Roman finds and no features of that date. However, in 1992, later 4th century Roman floodplain strata, including a metalled surface and associated gravel pitting, were exposed in the St John's College Library site just above the bridgehead (Dickens 1996b). Of the c. 5 kg of Roman pottery recovered, only some 50 sherds derive from contemporary contexts with the remainder being residual within later features.

Roman pottery has also been recovered from the many excavations within Jesus College (c. 20 sherds; Evans *et al* 1997; Whittaker 1999). Yet, without direct feature association, these need only attest to 'incidental' usage of the Cam terraces (eg arable manuring).

Widening the scope of recent Cambridge environs investigations, noteworthy would be Tempus Reparatum's work at Alexander's earlier King Hedge's Villa site, the County Council's excavation of Iron Age and Roman settlement systems at the Milton

Landfill site and the CAU's excavations at Arbury Camp and Greenhouse Farm. Lying immediately north of the airport, the latter is of particular interest as imposed upon a late Iron Age settlement were 11 kilns of immediately post-Conquest date (Gibson forthcoming). When combined with the evidence of the Horningsea and Cherry Hinton kilns this suggests that a remarkable amount of industry may have occurred within the environs of Roman Cambridge.

## Discussion

In a recent review of Late Iron Age mortuary practices within southern Cambridgeshire (Hill *et al* 1999), from the distribution of probable burial sites the Cambridge/Newnham area can be highlighted as an important centre in the 1st century BC. However, after this period its fortunes seem to have waned and the centre of focus shifted southward. The recent recovery of further Iron Age enclosures immediately northwest of the town at both New Hall and Marion Close (when seen in the light of Alexander's earlier Castle Hill discoveries) would suggest a relatively high density of settlement. However, aside perhaps from the Marion Close enclosure, it would not seem to have been particularly significant and the term 'village' may be too grand to refer to the later Iron Age (Castle) hill-top settlement itself. Reviewing Alexander's evidence there is nothing that necessarily attests to the latter's survival into the post-Conquest period. The recovery of substantial quantities of early post-Conquest material from the 17–35 Castle St site would indicate a considerable early Roman presence.

Due largely to the limited scale of its exposure (from which in most cases definite alignments cannot be established), published plans of the Roman town have been irregular and unconvincingly 'messy', with individual streets drawn at a variety of angles (eg Wilkes and Elrington 1978: 40). The main source of this disparity has been the weak determination of its east-west axis (and a route to Godmanchester being considered necessary by antiquarians in the light of the town's broader topographic setting). As the town's grid has been reconstructed in this volume it still does not mesh. While the line of the Via Devana west of Akeman St has been positioned further southwest than previously (cf Alexander 1983; Burnham & Wachter 1990: Fig. 81), it still is well off line with the north-south streets (and the early Roman 'fort'; Fig. 3.1). Of course, Roman streets need not have been laid out as a grid-iron and extraneous factors would give rise to local variability. Yet, if projected on this route the western road would run through the middle of the New Hall site which it most certainly did not. By swinging the line from the crossroads to the right-angle with Akeman St (and Streets 2 and 3), it meets with the New Hall road and the town 'works'. Exposures of this road surface were limited to observations in watching briefs and the site where it exited the gateway, leaving considerable ambiguity concerning its alignment.

Recognition of the southern New Hall road as the

town's main northwestern approach – the Via Devana – suddenly brings a regularity to its plan with all the north-south streets more or less laid out on its and the Akeman St./Street 1 axis (Fig. XII: 2). However, two issues arise from this 're-ordering'. Firstly, when comparing the layout of Alexander's early Roman enclosures within the area of Ridgeons Gardens and Shire Hall with Enclosure B at New Hall the question must be raised whether these are semi-continuous and if the line of the later western wall represents a retraction of the town's extent in the 1st/2nd centuries AD. The second point highlighted is the apparent absence of any inner-town features (the walls aside) laid out on alignment to the river crossing. The only real evidence of its existence remains Walker's 1911 observations of what seemed to be a causeway within the grounds of Magdalene College. This seems a rather spurious basis to focus the Roman town upon and, based on the street grid, there is nothing that would denote the location of the crossing and it is conceivable that it fell further downstream.

Roman Cambridge was a very minor settlement. Its sequences are not intense (ie shallow strata), its cemeteries evidently small and its east-west axis can be walked in less than four minutes. The ultimate question to be posed in this context is, of course, whether it was in fact a town *per se*. The apparent occurrence of a later Roman kiln within its core (viz. prohibitions on inner-town industry) and the paucity of public buildings must cast some doubt on its status. Given the destruction to the town's (upper) core through the expansion of Shire Hall in the mid 1980s, it seems unlikely that much further light will be shed on the issue of its public facilities. Instead, in the future every opportunity must be taken to examine its still hopefully surviving 'extremes' – the walls and its riverside facilities (eg ?docks and the exact location of the crossing). The welcome publication of Alexander and Pullinger's sites emphasises how many issues concerning the early town are still unresolved. These, however, are unlikely to be addressed through further 'keyhole-scale' exposures.

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