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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: Medieval land reclamation and subsequent occupation on High Street, Ramsey TL 2870 8506**

**Kate Nicholson**

Illustrations by Caroline George

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### **Medieval fen edge deposits and 12th to 13th century land reclamation**

The lowest stratigraphic layers encountered were typical fen edge deposits comprising alternating bands of highly organic mud, inorganic alluvial silt clay and intermediate humic silt clay. This sequence indicates that until the 12th to 13th century, the area was subject to flooding and extended periods of inundation during which stagnant water conditions prevailed (Fryer in Nicholson 2005). Such conditions are consistent with the 'muddy depths' described in the 12th century Ramsey Chronicle (quoted by Darby 1940, 113). However finds including pottery (12th to 13th century), animal bone and an iron nail indicate human activity in the vicinity while the later of these deposits were forming.

The earliest archaeological features were linear ditch F1162 and its recut, F1114, both perpendicular to the line of High Street, suggesting that they marked plot boundaries as well as having a drainage function. However, continuing fen edge conditions are indicated by the alluvial lower fills of F1162 and the gleyed clays and organic muds in F1114.

After the filling in of Ditch F1114, but still in the 12th to 13th century, several deposits of sandy or clayey silt, some with a domestic waste component, were dumped, sealing both the fen deposits and the ditches. A layer of soil was also dumped into Trench AS2. It is thought that this dumping was carried out to raise the ground surface above the fen and so provide a consolidated dry surface for building, following the failure of drainage ditches to achieve this. The dumping of sandy silt on top of fen deposits in the 12th to 14th century has also been attested at Ramsey Garden Centre (O'Brien and Crank 2002), though this comprised only a single, thin deposit. Canalisation of the Great Whyte watercourse, c.70m east of the site, in the 13th century (Page *et al* 1926, 189) may have been part of the same reclamation initiative, aimed at consolidating the area west of the existing settlement (around the Abbey) prior to the construction of la White (Great Whyte), the market place and *Brigstrate*

(High Street) (Page *et al* 1926, 189). A previous archaeological evaluation has attested the laying out of plot boundaries off Great Whyte between 1250 and 1500 (Cooper 2003).

Until the time of Henry VIII, attempts at fen drainage and land reclamation were mainly on a small scale, though accounts of larger medieval drainage and reclamation projects do exist (HC 1629; Darby 1940, 43, 52). In the Ramsey area there is documentary evidence dating to 1196 indicating that fen improvement was undertaken on at least one occasion (Darby 1940, 48). There are several known accounts of land being reclaimed through being 'built up' or 'raised from the marsh' in conjunction with the containment of a watercourse in the medieval period (Darby 1940, 44 and 48–53).

### **Repeated construction and levelling in the medieval and post medieval periods**

The episode of land reclamation was followed before the end of the 13th century by construction of Structures 1 and 2. These were attested only by their floors which were of clay (Structure 2) or clay and chalk (Structure 1). During the 13th to 14th century ditches were cut through the floors of both structures, indicating their disuse. Their abandonment may have been due to continuing or repeated wet conditions, as indicated by the post-depositional waterlogging of L1081 and mineralization of L1148. Structure 3 was subsequently built just south of where Structure 2 had stood. It was attested by a mortar floor and two walls: one of limestone and one, whose course could not be determined in plan, of mortared limestone and flint clasts.

Disuse of Structure 3 by the 14th century is indicated by a dumped deposit overlying its remains and elsewhere. As the reclamation process (at least in the east of the site) seems to have been complete by this point, it is suggested that this episode of dumping was intended to level the ground surface, rather than to raise it. In the eastern part of the site this episode

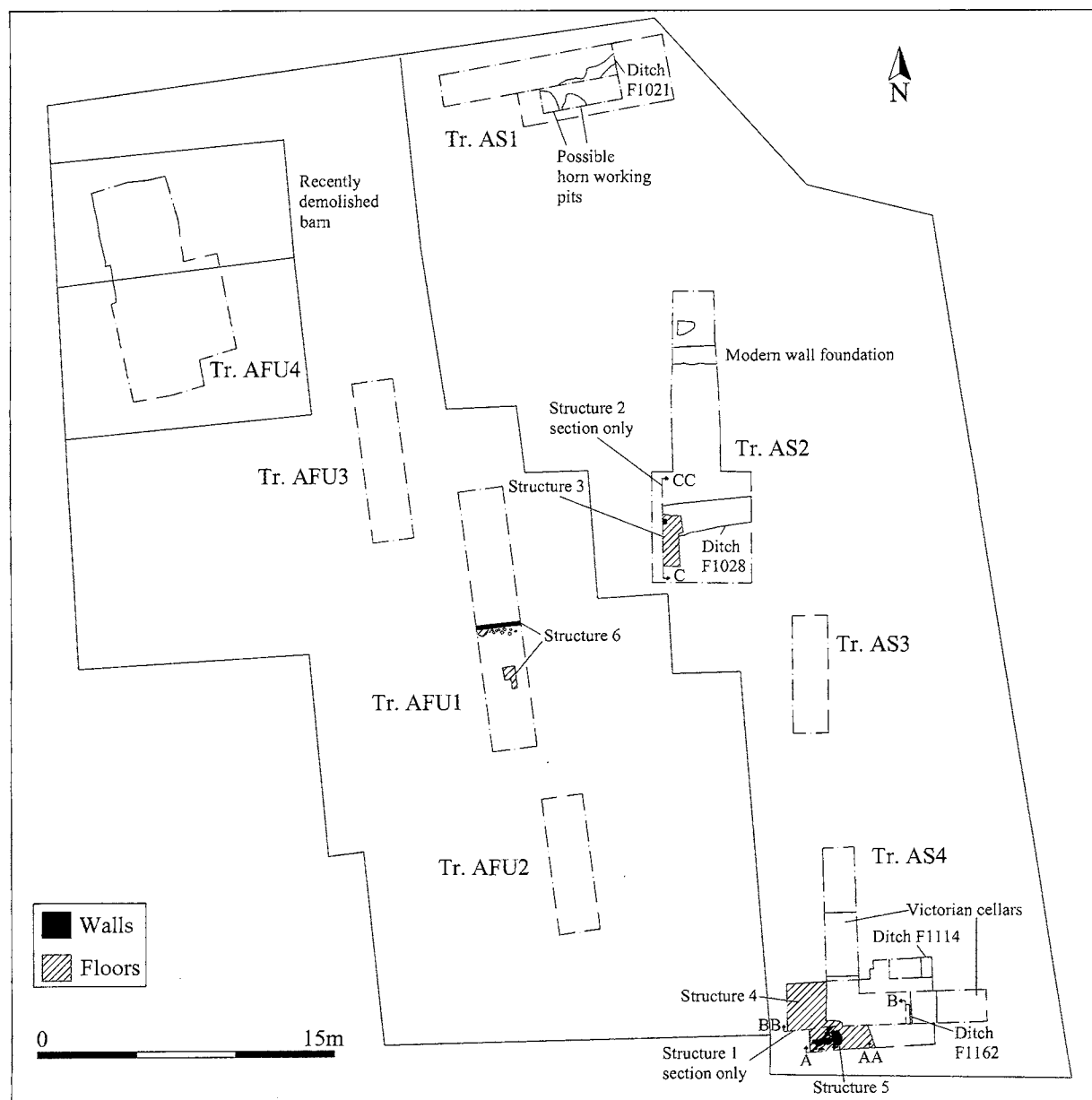


Figure 1. Site plan

of levelling was followed by the deposition of compact orange clay (L1012). A cobbled surface overlying a gleyed clay deposit and overlain by compacted sand and gravel is tentatively interpreted as an effort at land consolidation.

Two shallow pits cut in the 14th century are tentatively suggested as pits used for the soaking required for processing horn. Horn cores (goat, cattle and sheep), some with saw marks consistent with the removal of the upper part for the horn for manufacture of small items such as handles, were recovered from several contexts at the site, though not from the pits themselves (Phillips in Nicholson 2005). Antler fragments, including possible debris/offcuts from antler working and a worn antler point which may have been a simple tool, were also recovered (Phillips

in Nicholson 2005; Crummy in Nicholson 2005).

Structure 4 was built on the newly consolidated ground surface in the 14th or 15th century. It comprised an internal wall of roughly hewn limestone and sandy yellow mortar dividing two rooms one, with a mortar floor the other with two successive clay floors laid later in its use. In the 15th to 16th century, following the disuse of Structure 4, a layer of dark grey silty clay was dumped across the eastern part of the site, presumably for the purpose of levelling.

Structure 5 was built after the deposition of this layer, on approximately the same site which Structure 4 had occupied. It was attested by a clay floor and a wall of roughly hewn limestone, possibly with integral post pads indicating a timber frame set on the low limestone wall. A hearth was located at the east-

ern end of the wall but its relationship to the building is not clear. Structure 6 is the first building on the western part of the site. It was attested by a mortar floor and a wall of roughly faced limestone bonded with sticky silty clay. Both Structures 5 and 6 are dated by their stratigraphic relationships only, implying that they post date the 15th to 16th century. The dates of the overlying dumped deposits are not clear, with that sealing Structure 6 containing a sherd of 19th century bone china, but the equivalent deposit sealing Structure 5 being of 16th to 17th century date; the 19th century sherd is thought to be intrusive.

Building on the site continued into modern times, with two large Victorian cellars and a further wall foundation trench. A barn dated by cartographic evidence to at least 1824 was recently demolished.

### Construction and demolition

As indicated above, the six structures were minimally represented by their floors and fragmentary remains of their walls (Structures 3–6 only). The walls were generally of roughly hewn, mortar bonded limestone and stood only a maximum of two courses high (the exception being the five-course, clay bonded wall of Structure 6). The lack of extensive rubble deposits associated with the buildings implies that they were deliberately demolished and their materials reused, rather than being left to decay, with the site being levelled between each episode of building. The similar, near street front, locations of Structures 1, 4 and 5 (as well as the two Victorian cellars) suggest deliberate rebuilding in the same location, implying that demolition, levelling and rebuilding took place in quick succession; the coincidence in location of Structures 2 and 3 may have similar implications.

The excavated medieval and post medieval features are thought to represent domestic buildings and backyard activity. The pottery assemblage includes cooking pots and curfews, and is dominated by table wares (Thompson in Nicholson 2005), whilst the small finds assemblage includes knives, honestones and a probable ear scoop (Crummy in Nicholson 2005). The presence of oyster shell at the site, and the composition of the environmental samples and animal bone assemblages are consistent with the disposal of domestic waste (Fryer in Nicholson 2005; Phillips in Nicholson 2005).

The only industrial activity is horn and antler working (see above). Small scale, part time horn working at Bedford has been taken as an indication that the town was only partly urbanised, and that the raw materials for the craft were acquired at its markets and fairs (Grant 1984, 180). The same could be true of Ramsey, which was a small town with a primarily agricultural economic base but a more fluid population than a village (De Windt 1990). The environmental evidence suggests that, although cereal crops were grown locally, a consumer economy was in operation in this part of the town and production and processing took place elsewhere (Fryer in Nicholson 2005). The finds assemblage included only a few items imported from more than 50km away (Norwegian ragstone hones, a single sherd of Hertfordshire ware and an enamelled buckle, possibly from Limoges) (Crummy in Nicholson 2005; Thompson in Nicholson 2005). The buckle may have been from a book strap, and so possibly associated with Ramsey Abbey; the other imported items are not unusual finds for a site in this area and were probably available locally.

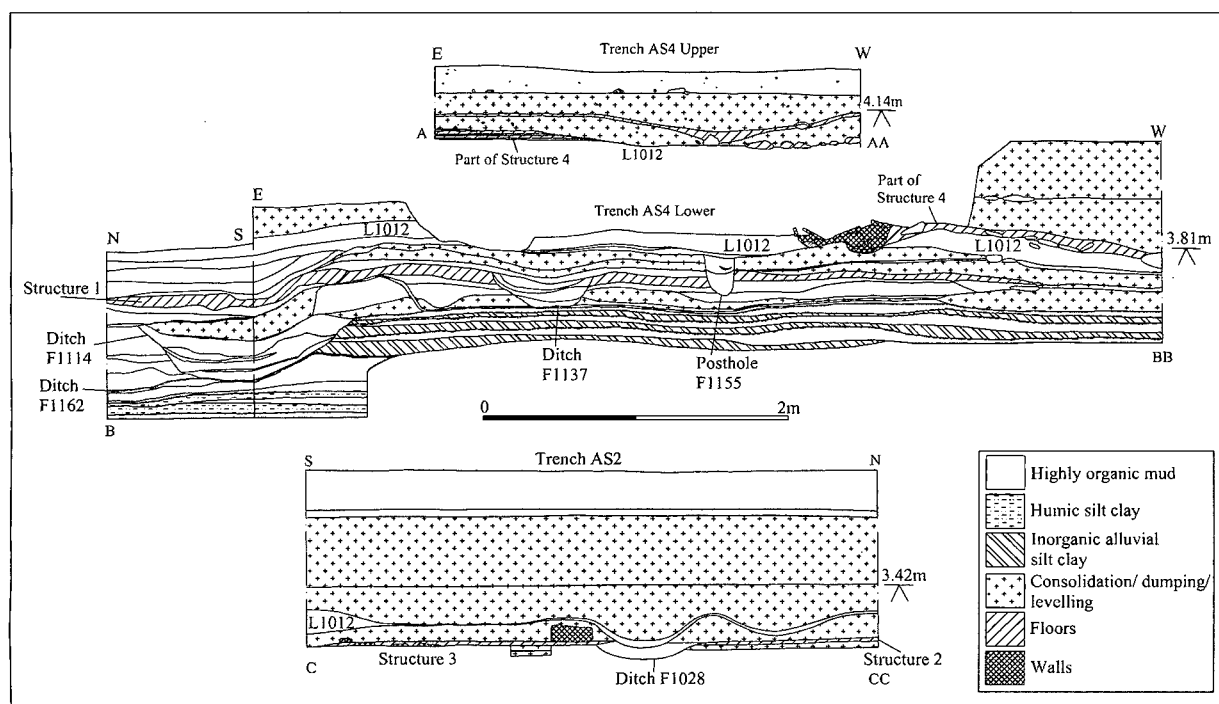


Figure 2. Sections showing the sequence of consolidation and construction.

## Conclusions

The line of the medieval fen edge around Ramsey was largely unconfirmed in 1992, when the Fenland Survey for the area was published (Hall 1992, fig 25). This investigation, along with others which have taken place in Ramsey since that date, has attested 12th to 13th century fen-edge conditions closer to the presumed area of the original settlement than had previously been suspected. Reclamation of land in this part of Ramsey was achieved by dumping to raise the ground surface above the fen in conjunction with canalisation of a nearby watercourse; this is consistent with documentary account of medieval land reclamation techniques.

The six buildings constructed at the site between the 12th and 16th centuries were apparently of similar construction, with floors of mortar, clay or chalk, thatched roofs and walls of roughly hewn limestone or timber framing set on limestone footings. These materials are typical of standing buildings of the early post-medieval period in other Fenland villages (Parker and Pye 1976, 152 and 159–60). The site appears to have been primarily domestic. The findings are consistent with DeWindt's (1990) hypothesis of Ramsey as being socially town-like in the medieval and post-medieval periods, despite its small size.

## Acknowledgements

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