
Pits and Plots: 'Backyard' Activity at Chequers Court, Huntingdon and its Implications for Understanding the High Medieval Expansion of the Town

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The medieval core of Huntingdon, which extended along the re-aligned Ermine St, bounded by the Norman castle to the south and the 12th century Priory of St Mary to the north, was laid out within typical burgage plots. The surviving evidence for this system of land tenure is particularly notable along the High Street. Beyond this core, however, evidence of medieval town planning is less well defined, especially in areas of late medieval/post-medieval abandonment and subsequent, early modern development. This paper presents the findings of an archaeological investigation at Chequers Court, some 100m to the north-east of Huntingdon High Street, and discusses them with respect to the medieval expansion of the town. In so doing, it is driven by two regional research priorities regarding medieval towns in the East of England; namely, the need to investigate 'the development of towns' and 'changes in their internal layout' (Medlycott 2011, 70).

Introduction

In 2014, Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) conducted an excavation at Chequers Court, Huntingdon (NGR TL 2400 7184; Figs. 1–2). The excavation preceded a programme of urban redevelopment and followed a trial trench evaluation, also conducted by AS (Mustchin 2015; Smith 2014). The project revealed a dense concentration of high to late medieval pits – including several wells and possible gravel quarries – and the remnants of a burgage plot boundary, all broadly dated to the 11th/12th to 15th centuries AD. This type of 'backyard' activity is typical of medieval urban sites across East Anglia and suggests settlement expansion to the north-east of Huntingdon High Street at some point in the high medieval period. Medlycott (2011, 70) states that the study of individual burgage plots can help to address questions regarding dates of occupation and any change in the patterns of urban settlement over time (*ibid.*).

Background

The historic market town of Huntingdon is located some 24km to the north-west of Cambridge and c. 7km to the west of St Ives (Fig. 1). The Chequers

Court site sits within the Huntingdon Conservation Area (Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) 2007), some 100m to the north-east of the High Street and the town's medieval core. The River Great Ouse passes approximately 450–470m to the south/south-east of the site. Historically, Huntingdon developed from an Anglo-Saxon port and commercial centre to become a bustling and affluent market town, but records and archaeological evidence indicate it went into decline early, probably by the late 13th century. A motte and bailey castle was first constructed by the Normans and the Priory of St Mary was established at Huntingdon by the 12th century AD (Page and Proby 1926, 393); by the 14th century the town included up to 16 parish churches and six religious houses. The medieval town covered much the same footprint as Huntingdon in the mid-20th century (Page *et al.* 1932), although a decline in fortunes from the 14th century or earlier resulted in significant settlement contraction. The 1363 charter records that the town was 'so weakened by mortal pestilences and other calamities' that one-quarter lay deserted (after Page *et al.* 1932). This decline continued into the post-medieval period, with no appreciable revival until the early modern era. The Chequers Court site, however, appears to have remained largely undeveloped until the construction of Huntingdon Brewery in the late 19th century. At the time of excavation the site comprised a brownfield development which had, until recently, been part of a 20th century shopping complex.

The evidence

The excavation revealed concentrations of intercutting and discrete pits, mostly dated to the 11th/12th to 15th centuries AD (Fig. 2). Two medieval ditches (F2071 and F2079) were also encountered and are thought to have represented part of a burgage plot boundary. Five medieval wells were also present, although none included conclusive evidence of a lining or superstructure. Regardless of primary function, most of the medieval features contained material typical of domestic rubbish disposal. A small number of late 16th/17th to 19th century and later features were also encountered but are not discussed in this paper.

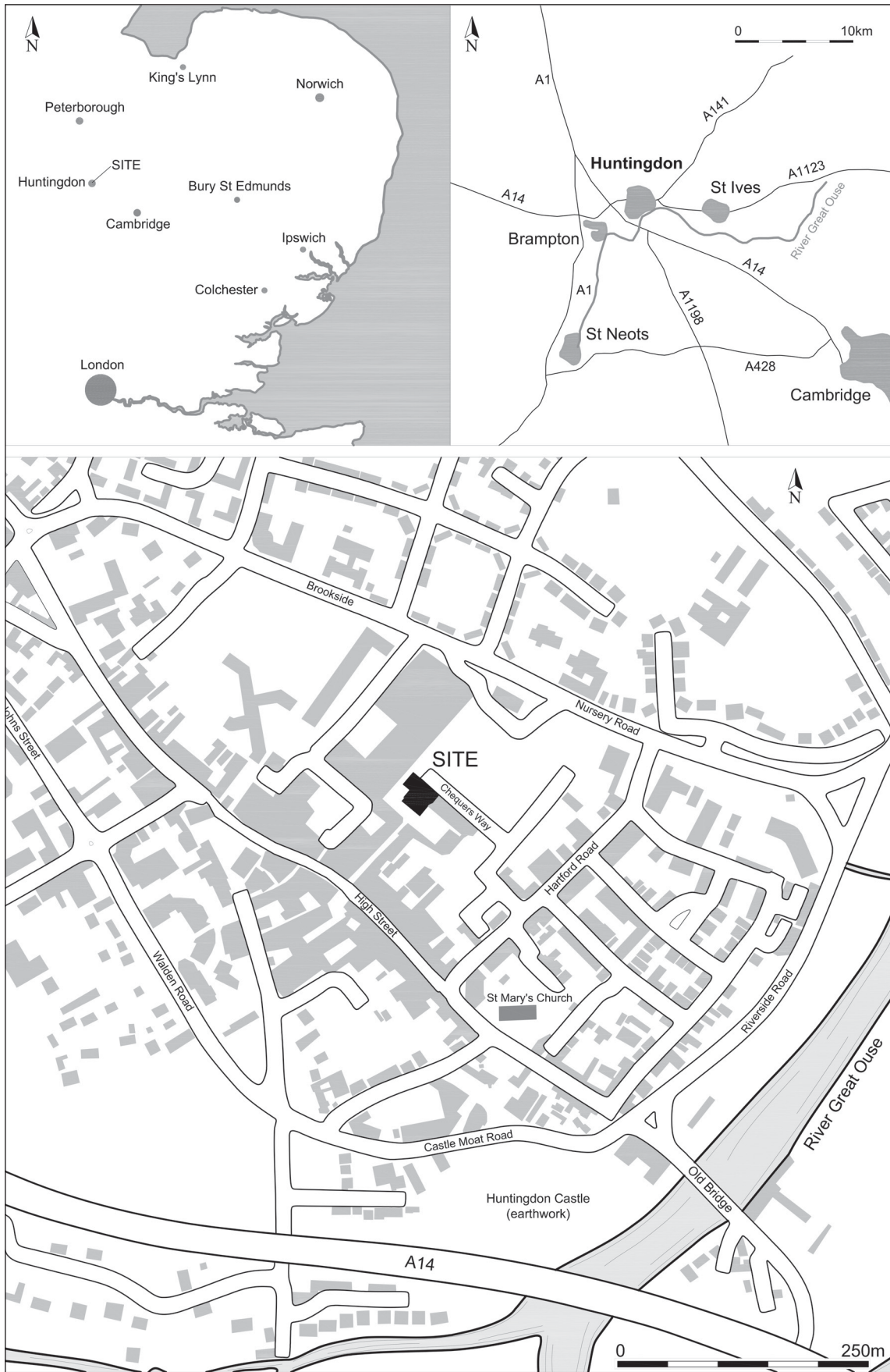


Figure 1. Site location plan.

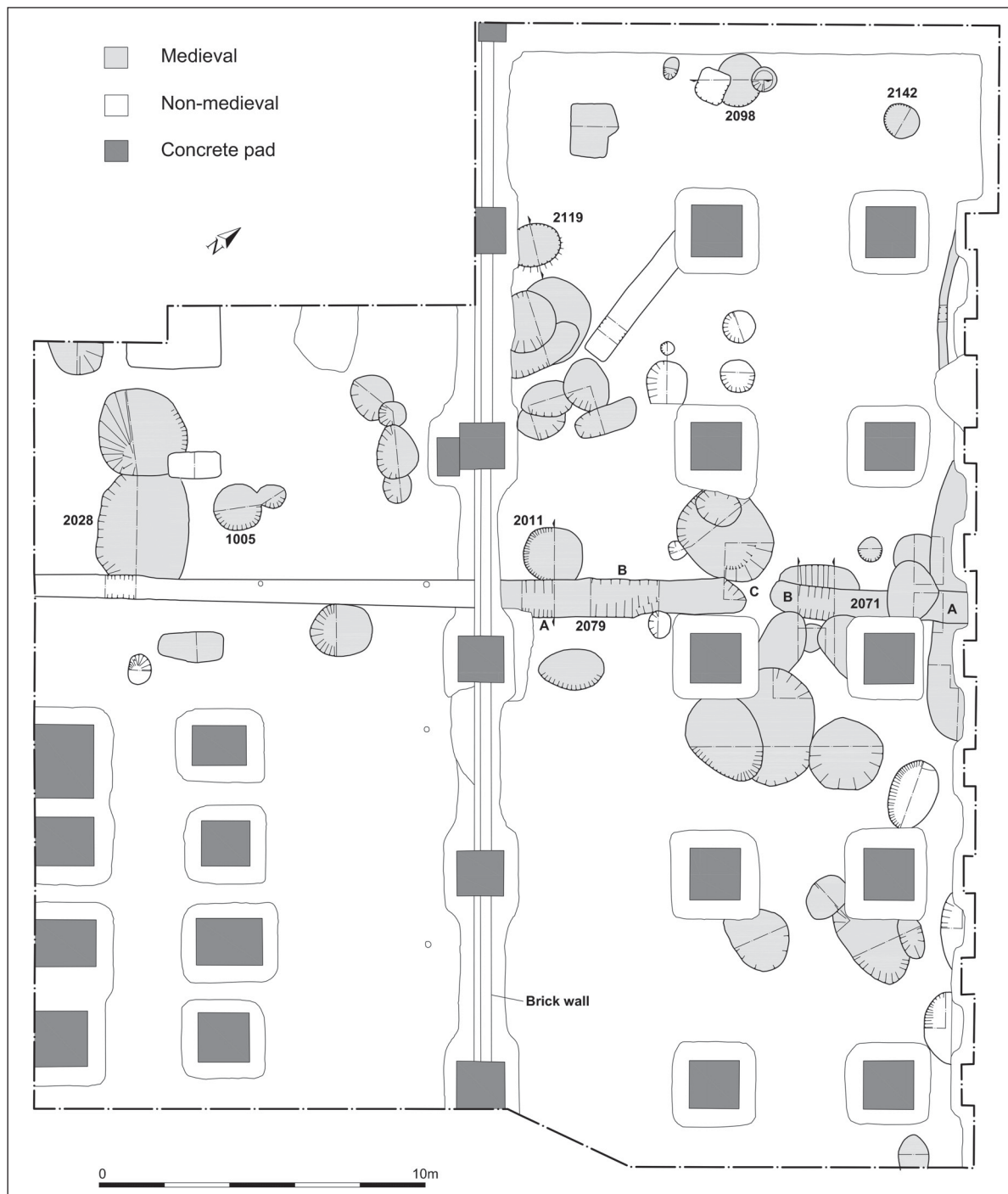


Figure 2. Medieval phase plan.

A full account of the project findings, including specialist reports and raw data is presented elsewhere (Mustchin 2015).

Forty medieval pits were identified. The majority were intercutting with some possible clusters, especially around a gap, possibly a gate, in the boundary ditch. However, it does not appear much conscious effort was made to confine pit digging to any particular area(s). The pits varied greatly in terms of their size (in plan), although the majority were quite

shallow. Less than a third of the pits were over 0.50m deep. No clear correlation between pit size and depth was apparent. It is likely, however, that many of the medieval features were originally deeper; the medieval horizon was sealed by regular, ubiquitous layers of modern made ground. The deeper pits may have originally been intended as gravel quarries (e.g. Pit F2028; Fig. 3); the site occupies the river terrace gravels of the Great Ouse (Edmonds and Dinham 1965) and quarried gravel would have had a number of

uses, not least for the metalling of roads (e.g. Youngs *et al.* 1988, 255).

Five of the larger medieval pits (F1005, F2011, F2098, F2119 and F2142) are thought to have been backfilled wells (Figs. 2–3; Plate 5). These features were all sub-circular in plan with vertical sides and flat bases. They displayed little variance in depth (mean = 0.65m), suggesting that they were all dug to a uniform level, probably coinciding with the medieval water table. No evidence of *in situ* linings or superstructures remained, although flint cobbles within the backfill of Well F2119 (Fig. 3) may represent redeposited lining material. A chalk block rubble lining was recorded within a medieval well at the Cambridgeshire site of Duxford (Lyons 2011, 105) and it is possible that the material from F2119 originally fulfilled a similar function. Despite lacking any *bona fide* structural evidence that one might associate with wells (e.g. Quinn and Newton 2012, 10–11), similarly crude examples are known from other regional sites including Church Farm, Brettenham, Mill House, Darsham (Suffolk) and Fordham Road, Isleham (Cambridgeshire) (Mustchin *et al.* 2015; Newton 2006). Although timber-lined examples have been recorded at a number of sites (e.g. Newton *et al.* forthcoming), Johnston (2011, 713) notes that in many instances medieval wells were little more than holes excavated to the water table.

Also present were two south-west to north-east aligned ditches in the north-eastern area of the site (F2071 and F2079; Fig. 2). These are thought to have represented a discontinuous boundary feature – probably a burgage plot boundary – incorporating a c. 0.80m wide entrance. The ditches were straight, running at right angles to the line of Huntingdon High Street and parallel to nearby routes marked on the historic cartographic sources (e.g. John Speed's 1610 Town Map of Huntingdon; Fig. 4). Both features yielded comparable finds assemblages, including me-

dieval pottery, ceramic building material and animal bone, although F2079 displayed a more complex series of fills (Fig. 3). It is probable that the boundary represented by these ditches, if genuine, demarcated areas of pit digging and other activity to the rear of street front properties. No evidence of structures was identified within the excavated area (see below). Similar plots also define the medieval cores of many other towns across England, including East Anglia, for example Norwich (e.g. Woolhouse 2013) and the Cambridgeshire market town of St Neots, to the south-west of Huntingdon (HDC 2006, 13).

The finds

With the exception of pottery, finds from the medieval features were scarce. Notable small finds are two imported whetstones – both from pit fills – including a Ragstone example from Eidsborg in Norway (Moore and Oakley 1979, 280). The second whetstone is either Norwegian or German in origin and the trade in both is dated between the 10th and 15th centuries AD (*ibid.*). Metal finds from the site, consisting of fragments of carpentry nails and two pieces of iron sheet, together with a droplet of lead, probably relate to construction or demolition debris in the near vicinity. However, the paucity of this material does not suggest the primary deposition of such waste. Similarly, recovered ceramic building materials – principally composed of moderately to highly-fragmented 13th to 16th century peg tile – attest only to chance incorporation within features. No obviously structural features or feature arrangements were identified.

The Saxo-Norman to medieval pottery assemblage, totalling 599 sherds (18,030g), includes some large well-preserved pieces. Of particular note is a large bowl base in 'late St Neots ware' with thumb impressed clay strips from Pit F2119 (L2124) that probably served as a curfew – a fireguard (McCarthy and

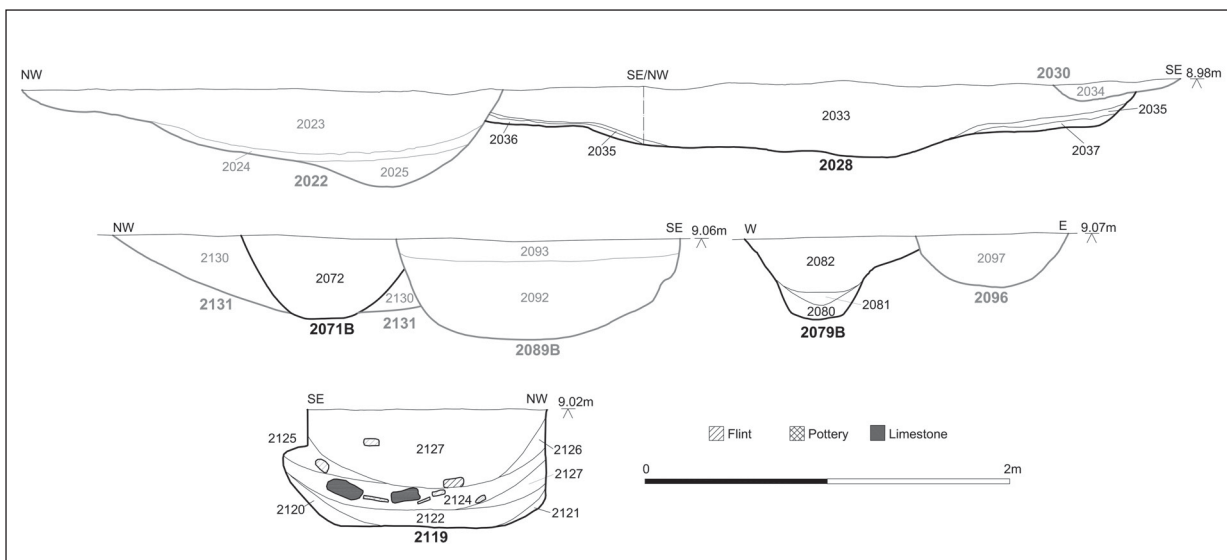


Figure 3. Selected sections.

Brooks 1988, 117) (Plate 6). Although no exact parallels could be found, similar items have been reported from the Post-Office Terrace site, Cambridge (dated to the late 11th/early 12th century; Addyman and Biddle 1965) and Colchester, Essex (dated between the 13th and early 14th centuries; Cotter 2000, 54–5). The assemblage lacks pre-Conquest sherds and in its later phases was dominated by Ely/Huntingdonshire type wares and medieval shelly wares; overall, it broadly matches assemblages from other Huntingdon sites, e.g. the Former Bus Depot, Stukeley Road (Rees 2009).

The economic and environmental evidence

Huntingdon occupies a pastoral, riverine landscape (Page *et al.* 1932, 121), the soils of which are well suited to agricultural exploitation (Soil Survey of England

and Wales 1983, 7, 12 and 18). The town's agrarian backdrop is likely to have changed little since the medieval period. The Domesday record for Huntingdonshire suggests it was only moderately wooded (Darby 1971, 348) and recent analysis has included the county in a central zone which was the least wooded zone of Roman and early medieval Britain (Rippon 2015, 219). Higgs (2009, 8) notes that the post-medieval farmland surrounding nearby Godmanchester was cultivated by 'allotment and rotation', a medieval system that remained essentially unaltered until the 19th century. Huntingdon's medieval hinterland would have been fundamental to supplying the town's population with basic consumables as well as the raw materials for various crafts and industries.

Previously reported faunal remains from medieval Huntingdon indicate a predominance of sheep/



Plate 5. Well 2119. See also colour Plate 5.



Plate 6. Late St. Neots ware curfew. See also colour Plate 6.

goat, with lesser numbers of cattle and pig. Remains found to the west of the town centre (Webster 2011, 19) attested to the exploitation of sheep/goat and cattle for meat, while an abundance of sheep/goat lower limb bones was thought to indicate the processing of hides. Secondary evidence of medieval tanning was also recorded to the rear of Walden House and at the Model Laundry site on Ouse Walk (Clarke 2005; 2006), while a water tank with a possible industrial process was excavated at the Old Music Hall and Drama Centre on Brookside (Gilmore and Spoerry 2007, 36). Remains from the current site demonstrate a similar predominance of sheep/goat – principally butchering/food waste. The assemblage also includes secondary evidence of tanning, with possible waste products of this industry including goat horns/skull fragments. Traded goat skins would often retain their heads as an indicator of age, being removed prior to processing. The evidence for such exploitation is scant, however. The presence of domestic fowl in the assemblage may indicate on-site rearing, while the marine mollusc assemblage comprises three edible species and attests to at least a limited medieval trade with the coast.

Previous environmental sampling in the town has produced charred remains of food plants; predominantly cereal grains (e.g. Fosberry 2011). The carbonised remains from Chequers Court, although relatively low in density, tell a similar story, with the range of cultivars indicating a cereal-based medieval diet focussed on bread wheat. Lesser quantities of barley, oats and pulses were also consumed. A lack of evidence for processing suggests that cereals were imported to the site as a fully cleaned product, with incorporation into the archaeobotanical record reflecting routine processing, preparation and consumption at a domestic level. The terrestrial mollusc assemblage (sampled from medieval features) suggests grassy/waste ground conditions, while a limited presence of slum aquatic taxa (*Anisus leucostoma* and *Lymnaea truncatula*) also indicates some standing water within 'open' features.

Discussion

The medieval site is thought to have represented part of a system of burgage plots. Medieval ditches F2071 and F2079 were interpreted as part of a possible plot boundary and entrance, aligned with routes depicted on the early cartographic sources, perpendicular to the line of Huntingdon High Street (Fig. 4). If fronting the High Street itself, the plots would have been unusually long. The plot(s) contained features and finds typical of medieval 'backyard' activity, including abundant refuse pits, possible gravel quarries and backfilled wells. The *Huntingdon Conservation Area Character Assessment* (HDC 2007, table 1) states that 'buildings along the High Street ... were established on typical burgage plots'. Beyond this core, however, evidence of medieval town planning is less well defined.

The site's location away from the High Street, coupled with the general lack of earlier evidence, suggests that it was not subject to significant development before the 12th century expansion of the town (see above). The large number of medieval features at the site suggests a substantial increase in the density of nearby settlement activity from around this time. A similar link between increased pit digging and 12th century settlement expansion was suggested at St Nicholas' Street, Norwich (Andrews 1999, 12). Like Chequers court, the St Nicholas' Street site lacked structural evidence, although this was thought to reflect its position, set back from the street frontage and any associated buildings (*ibid.* 26). The same is suggested in this case.

Established models for the expansion of medieval towns include the spread of housing and other building types along approach roads and watercourses (Schofield and Vince 2003, 34–5). Religious complexes and important secular buildings also formed a focus for any increase in settlement activity (*ibid.*). The established model for pre-Conquest Huntingdon is for possible '... ribbon development along Ermine Street north of ... the Ouse' (Spoerry 2000, 40), although the Chequers Court site occupies an area of properties laid out perpendicular to the High Street and medieval market. This part of the town was probably defined by roads/routes marked on later maps, including John Speed's 1610 Town Map of Huntingdon (Fig. 4). The medieval 'Old Bridge' at the southern end of Huntingdon High Street, some 450m from Chequers Court, was in place by the early 14th, having been preceded by a wooden construction (HDC 2002; White 2012, 111), and would have been an obvious focus for any settlement activity (Fig. 2). The castle, some 400m to the south of the site, would no doubt have been similarly attractive (Spoerry 2000, 40). This grouping of properties close to the town entrance/river crossing is mirrored by the Wigford area of Lincoln (Keene 1990, 112), while Stourbridge fair in Cambridge may have acted as an important focus for 13th century expansion (Beresford and St Joseph 1979, 139).

The contraction of Huntingdon from the late medieval period appears to have led to the eventual abandonment of the site, after which it remained largely undeveloped until the late 19th century. This scenario is based largely on cartographic evidence, supported by limited excavation (e.g. Gilmore and Spoerry 2007, 37; House 2011, 17; Woolhouse and Williamson 2005, 11, 47). Although post-medieval/early modern features were scarce within the excavated area, it is likely that much evidence was lost to the 20th century development of the Chequers Court shopping complex. Nonetheless, the general dearth of residual post-15th century material at the site suggests that it had once more become peripheral to the core of settlement.

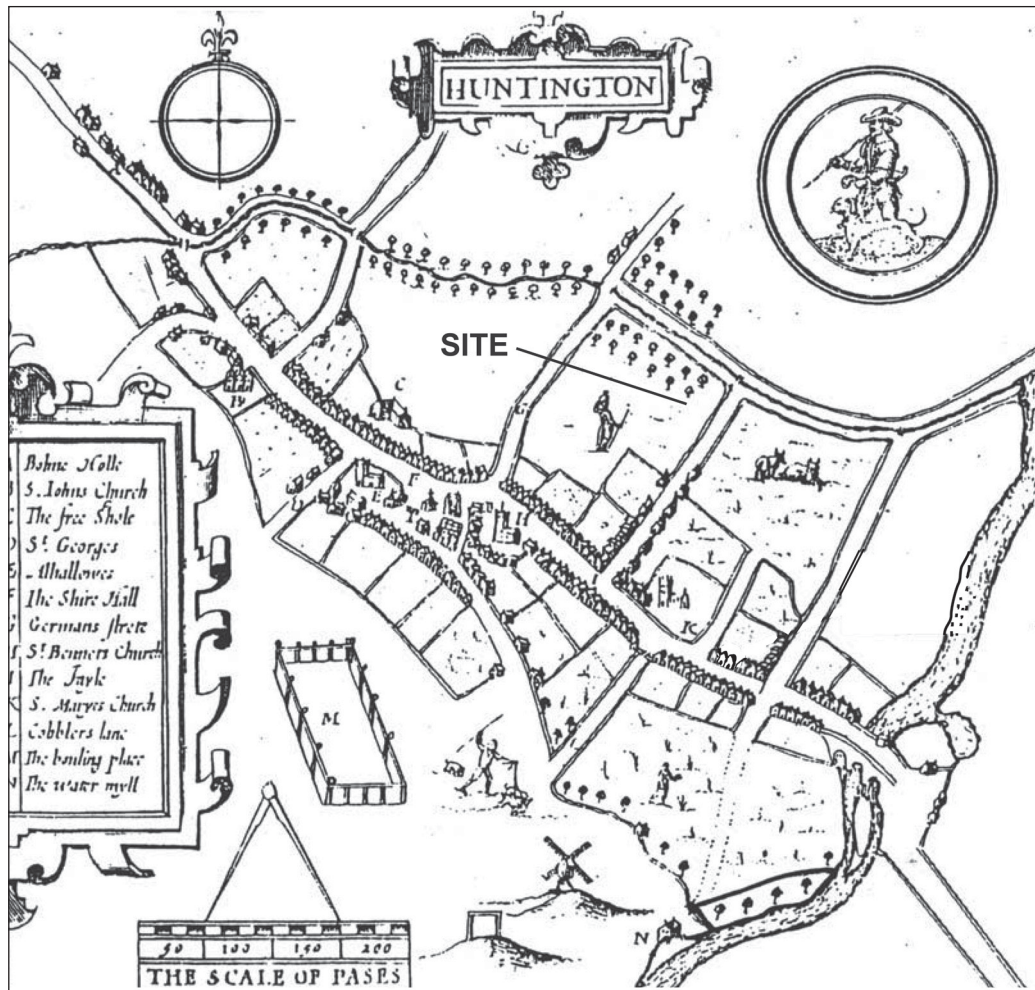


Figure 4. John Speed's 1610 Town Map of Huntingdon.

Conclusion

The evidence from Chequers Court provides an interesting insight into the high medieval (c. 12th century) expansion of Huntingdon. Like the neighbouring High Street area, medieval settlement at the site appears to have been within burgage plots, with areas away from the street frontages being defined by typical 'backyard' activity. This settlement pattern is characteristic of many English towns. The spread of settlement into this part of Huntingdon was probably linear, along pre-existing routes or newly established roads, the general focus of which may have been entities such as the town's castle or the crossing point over the River Great Ouse.

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A copy of Speed's 1610 Town Map of Huntingdon was provided by Cambridgeshire Archives.

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Plate 5. Well 2119 as shown in Pits and Plots: 'Backyard' Activity at Chequers Court, Huntingdon and its Implications for Understanding the High Medieval Expansion of the Town.



Plate 6. Late St. Neots ware curfew as shown in Pits and Plots: 'Backyard' Activity at Chequers Court, Huntingdon and its Implications for Understanding the High Medieval Expansion of the Town.