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Cambridge Street, St. Neots, Cambridgeshire An Archaeological Assessment 1996

by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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CAMBRIDGE STREET, ST. NEOTS, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

An Archaeological Assessment 1996

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CAMBRIDGE STREET, ST. NEOTS, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

An Archaeological Assessment 1996

1.0: SUMMARY

This report provides an archaeological assessment of approximately 0.8 ha. of land located at 26 Cambridge Street, St. Neots, Cambridgeshire, which is currently used as a car showroom and garage. The sources consulted for this assessment include the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record, the Huntingdonshire Record Office, the library of the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography, and relevant published archaeological reports and synthetic works.

The zone surrounding the study area contains evidence of activity dating from the palaeolithic period. The study area probably lies within a Late Saxon settlement, defined by an encircling ditch. Evidence of timber-framed buildings, rubbish pits and other settlement features within this settlement have been uncovered by archaeological excavation in the vicinity of the study area. Cambridge Street, one of the four main medieval streets in the town, was probably laid out in the 12th-13th century. In the post-medieval period, the western part of the study area formed part of the grounds of Hall Place, an imposing late 17th-18th century mansion. More recently, much of the study area was used for market gardening.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

2.1: The report

This report provides an archaeological assessment of approximately 0.8ha. of land located at 26 Cambridge Street (hereinafter called the study area: centred on NGR TL 186603; Figs 1-3), located to the west of St. Neots town centre. Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by D.H. Barford & Co. to provide an archaeological assessment of the study area, in accordance with the requirements of the Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of the Environment 1991). This assessment follows the methodology set down in a brief prepared by Cambridgeshire County Council (Austin 1995), and a Specification prepared by BUFAU (Jones 1995), both dated November 1995. This report was compiled in accordance with the guidelines set down in the 'Standard and Guidance for Desk-Based Assessments' (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994).

2.2: Aims

The aims of this assessment (Jones 1995) were:

- (1) To collate the existing archaeological and historical information available, and consider the potential for the discovery of hitherto unrecorded archaeological remains within the study area. In particular, it was intended to establish the potential of the study area to contain remains of the Saxon and medieval periods.
- (2) To assess the potential for the survival of archaeological features and deposits within the study area.
- (3) To provide an assessment of the context of the archaeology of the study area, and to identify relevant research priorities if appropriate.
- (4) To propose a detailed strategy of cost-effective archaeological field evaluation.

2.3: Sources

A number of sources were consulted for this assessment.

The primary source of archaeological information for the study area and its setting is the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for Cambridgeshire. The SMR contains an up-to-date record of all reported archaeological sites, and the recorded find-spots of individual artifacts. This information derives from discoveries made during archaeological fieldwork, or from reports by amateur fieldworkers. Another important source of information comprises published archaeological reports.

The primary cartographic sources consulted include antiquarian and estate maps, and editions of Ordnance Survey maps (Fig 4). Secondary historical sources consulted include the relevant volume of the Victoria County History. A list of sources is set down in Section 7 below.

No geotechnical information was available at the time this report was prepared.

2.4: Topography and land use

The study area (Figs 1-3) is located approximately 0.5km to the east of the River Great Ouse. The site occupies a plateau, which slopes gently from north to south (at approximately 16.10m AOD) towards the valley of the Hen Brook to the south, a tributary of the River Great Ouse. The underlying geology of the area is Tertiary in age, comprising Jurassic Oxford Clay consisting of clay and shales, with Jurassic Kellaway Beds which are mainly sands (Edmonds and Dinham 1965).

The study area presently comprises car showrooms, and associated garage facilities. The buildings are mainly concentrated within the eastern half of the study area. The remainder of the study area comprises garage forecourt facilities, and car parking to the rear.

There are no Scheduled Ancient Monuments within the study area.

3.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SETTING (Fig 2)

This section is concerned with a discussion of those sites of archaeological interest, or find-spots of individual artifacts, which are located <u>outside</u> the study area but which are relevant to an understanding of the archaeological setting of the study area

3.1: Prehistoric

Evidence of prehistoric activity, dating from the Palaeolithic period, is mainly provided by the recovery of artifacts during archaeological excavation, quarrying, or construction groundworks.

Of particular interest is the recovery of a Mousterian disc flint scraper, associated flakes, and bones of Red Deer, Rhino and Bison (Cambridgeshire SMR No. 568: Tebbutt 1925, 166), during small-scale gravel extraction immediately to the south of the study area. An undated skeleton (SMR No. 567a), of possible prehistoric date and a Palaeolithic flint scraper (SMR No. 567c) were also found to the southeast of the study area. Other artifacts of prehistoric date are recorded in the St. Neots area, and a settlement of Iron Age date (SMR No. 520) is recorded to the west of the Great North Road.

3.2: Roman

The earliest discovery of Roman pottery in the near vicinity of the study area was made by Tebbutt (1933, 148), during the monitoring of gravel extraction to the east of the study area. Addyman (1973, 58) excavated a group of Romano-British features, dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries, to the south of the study area. However, it is not possible to speculate if this activity relates to a settlement or activity on its periphery.

Other evidence of Roman activity has been found in the St. Neots area, notably at Ernulf School (Alexander 1993), and at the Brickhills Estate (Rudd and Daines 1968). More widely, evidence of Roman farming activity has been recorded on the River Great Ouse gravels at Little Paxton, to the north of St. Neots (Greenfield 1969, Tempus Reparatum 1992, Ferris and Jones 1994). A Roman temple complex was also recorded at Little Paxton (Alexander n.d.).

3.3: Saxon

One of the most notable previous archaeological discoveries in St. Neots is that of the Late Saxon settlement, excavated by the local antiquarian Tebbutt and later by Addyman. Tebbutt (1933) recorded a group of features, comprising pits and drainage ditches, and an inhumation, located just beyond the eastern boundary of the study area (Tebbutt 1933, figs 4-5). Addyman (1973), working to the south of the study area, recorded a complex of timber-framed buildings, including a possible granary, and rubbish-pits, also of Late Saxon date (SMR No. 567).

The western boundary of this settlement was formed by a deeply-cut ditch (Rudd and Tebbutt 1973, fig 12), which was recorded at three locations along the western side of Church Street (SMR No. 565). Excavation at The Cross, in the angle between Cambridge Street and Church Street, confirmed that this ditch turned the corner from Church Street into Cambridge Street. However, the westwards course of this ditch was not traced for any length along Cambridge Street. Tebbutt and Rudd (1966, 158) have suggested that the infilling of the ditch in this angle, in the 12th-13th century, was in preparation for the layout of the present streets. The southeastern boundary of the Late Saxon settlement could have been formed by the Hen Brook.

Evidence of Saxon activity has also been recorded outside the ditched limits of this settlement, notably on the east bank of the Hen Brook (SMR No. 567: Tebbutt and Rudd 1964), and in the vicinity of Avenue Road, to the north of the study area, where a Saxon cemetery has been identified (SMR No. 574: Addyman 1973, 41: not illustrated). Evidence for activity to the south of the Hen Brook is provided by the recovery of sherds of St. Neots Ware from the site of Eynesbury School (Tebbutt 1978), although recent evaluations (Jones 1994, Jones 1996) adjoining the Hen Brook have not produced evidence of Saxon activity. More widely, evidence of Saxon settlement and activity has been recorded at Eaton Socon (Addyman 1965), and at Little Paxton, to the north of St. Neots (Addyman 1969).

3.4: Medieval

The Priory of St. Neots was founded c. AD 972-5 (Horton and Wait 1990, 64), but any relationship with the Late Saxon settlement is not proven. The earliest pottery and buildings on the priory site probably date to its re-founding, after the Norman Conquest (Addyman 1973, 30). St. Neots originally formed part of the parish of Eynesbury, a separate parish for the town being created in 1113, following the grant of the surrounding manor to the priory (VCH 1932, 337).

The re-founded priory stimulated the growth of early medieval St. Neots. St. Neots also profited from water-bourne traffic along the River Great Ouse, which was navigable to this point in the 12th century (Addyman 1973, 30). Moreover, the emergent town and priory were well placed for trade and commerce, being at the axis of important roads to Bedford, Cambridge, Kimbolton and Huntingdon. The market place was laid out in the 12th century, following the grant of weekly markets and fairs by Henry I, and the layout included planned streets radiating from the market. An alternative interpretation of the town's growth, propounded by Tebbutt, suggests that the medieval settlement developed from a nucleus based on The Cross, at the west end of Cambridge Street (Addyman 1973, 31).

The layout of Cambridge Street, in the 12th-13th century (Tebbutt and Rudd 1966, 158) may have resulted from the increased prosperity of the town. Church Street and Huntingdon Street are described in documents of the 13th century, while the first documentary reference to Cambridge Street itself is in the 15th century (VCH 1932, 338).

Addyman's excavations to the south of the study area (1973, 60) also identified a number of rubbish-pits and a latrine-pit, which may have been associated with activity to the rear of Church Street. A late medieval fishpond (Addyman and Marjoram 1972), which went out of use around 1600, was also recorded immediately to the south of the study area.

Evidence of medieval industry is also provided by excavation. Trenching by Tebbutt and Rudd (1966, 158) at The Cross recorded a group of 13th century metalworking furnaces. Traces of possible medieval tanning were recorded during trenching to the south of the Hen Brook (Jones forthcoming).

3.5: Post-medieval

In the early post-medieval period the town owed its prosperity to the draining of the River Great Ouse, and improvements to the bridge, which resulted in extensive rebuilding (VCH 1932, 338). A number of properties along Church Street, and at the western end of Cambridge Street, date to this period of rebuilding (Tebbutt 1978, 167). This prosperity was also represented by local industry, such as tanning, recorded by excavation (Jones forthcoming), to the south of the Hen Brook.

Hall Place, an imposing 17th-18th century mansion, was located off Church Street. It was sufficiently important to be represented on Gordon's map of Huntingdonshire (Fig 5), the only individual building, except the church, to be so represented. Gordon's mapping indicates that the Church Street and Cambridge Street frontages were built-up in the early 18th century. Hall Place was sold in the 1760s and demolished (Addyman and Marjoram 1972, 71).

A number of timber framed houses of 17th-early 18th century date are recorded in Cambridge Street (RCHM 1926, 227, nos 20-23).

A Gazetteer of later post-medieval St. Neots (Tebbutt 1978) indicates that a number of the buildings on the eastern side of Church Street, immediately to the west of the study area, were used for small-scale industrial activity, including a smithy and a blacksmith's shop. Ordnance Survey mapping (1882/7, 1900, 1924) indicated that the majority of the Church Street and Cambridge Street frontages were built-up, with the exception of the area to the north of the Vicarage on Church Street. The land to the rear of the buildings on the south side of Cambridge Street remained largely undeveloped to 1924, although part of this area has been quarried (1924 map: Sand Pit)

4.0: THE STUDY AREA

4.1: Archaeological and historical evidence

The recorded location of the find-spot of a mesolithic flint artifact (SMR No. 569), now lost, is the only archaeological information relating to the study area held within the Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments Record.

The evidence discussed in Section 3 above suggests that Cambridge Street was laid out in the 12th-13th century, following the line of the northern ditched limit of the Saxon settlement. The surviving timber-framed houses of 17th century date recorded in Cambridge Street (outside the study area) may belong to an extensive period of re-building. Gordon's map of 1730 (Fig 5) suggests that the street frontage within the study area may have been built-up by that time, although some caution is required in the interpretation of the evidence provided by this somewhat stylised map.

Following the demolition of Hall Place, part of the present study area may have become incorporated into a market or nursery garden (Fig 4A-C), which continued, despite a change of ownership, until 1957, when the business was closed (Tebbutt 1978, 264). Much of the land to the rear of the Cambridge Street frontage was open ground, although a number of greenhouse ranges, belonging to this horticultural business, are recorded on Ordnance Survey mapping dated 1882/7, 1900 and 1924.

The First Edition Ordnance Survey map shows a range of buildings in the extreme east of the study area (Fig 4A). These are interpreted by Tebbutt (1978, 264) as stables, a coach house, grooms' quarters, and a carriage yard belonging to Old Hall (later confusingly re-named 'Hall Place') to the east. These outbuildings are depicted in more detail on a plan of Hall Place dated 1889 (Fig 7). Most of the remainder of the street frontage of the study area was not built over, with the exception of the greenhouse ranges. The western part of the study appears largely undeveloped by 1882/7 (Fig 4A), with the exception of a single rectangular building situated inside the western boundary of the study area.

4.2 Archaeological survival

Examination of the Ordnance Survey maps suggests that little of the study area was built over in the later 19th and early 20th century. Similarly, the more recent use of the western zone of the study area as hardstanding may have limited disturbance to buried archaeological deposits. It is unlikely that this hardstanding will have been formed at or above the former ground-level. It is more difficult to assess what disturbance may have been caused to below-ground archaeology by the showroom and garage buildings, although it may be suspected that their construction may have caused some degree of truncation to any below-ground archaeological deposits. Although small-scale gravel extraction is recorded to the south and east of the study area (Figs 2 and 4C), the extent of such small-scale activity is not known, and the possibility that this quarrying may have extended into part of the study area should not be dismissed.

5.0: DISCUSSION

5.1: Prehistoric

A number of prehistoric artifacts have been recovered in the vicinity of the study area. It is possible that some of these artifacts may be stray finds, although the possibility of prehistoric settlement in the near vicinity should not be dismissed.

5.2: Roman

There is presently no evidence of Roman activity within the study area. However, the identification of features of Roman date to the south of the study area (Addyman 1973, 58), could suggest that this activity may have extended into the study area. Because only a small area of this Roman feature group was investigated by Addyman, it is impossible to determine if the features belonged to a settlement, or were peripheral.

5.3: Saxon

The study area lies wholly within the bounds of the Late Saxon settlement, as defined by the south side of Cambridge Street, Church Street and the Hen Brook. The northern boundary ditch of this settlement will have crossed the area of the modern street frontage. Examination of the ground-plan of Tebbutts excavation, located immediately to the east of the study area (Fig 2) suggests that the two ditches he recorded (Tebbutt 1933 figs 4-5), aligned northeast-southwest, probably extended westwards into the study area. The study area could also contain evidence of timber-framed buildings and rubbish-pits, such as those recorded by Addyman to the south of the study area (1973, fig 2).

5.4: Medieval

The evidence from excavation in the angle between Church Street and Cambridge Street (Tebbutt and Rudd 1966, 158) suggests that the ditch encircling the Late Saxon settlement was infilled in the 12th-13th century, preparatory to the layout of Cambridge Street, which respected the alignment of the Late Saxon ditch. The street frontage may have contained a number of house plots, with plot boundaries extending to the rear.

The late medieval fishpond partly exposed by Addyman and Marjoram (1972) probably extended into the southern part of the study area.

5.5: Post-medieval

It is possible that a number of medieval properties along Cambridge Street were rebuilt in timber during the 17th-early 18th century, at the time of the town's peak of prosperity. The western part of the study area may have been incorporated within the grounds of Hall Place. Following the demolition of this mansion, much of the study area was given over to market gardening, a trade which continued unbroken until 1957. This land-use also provides a reminder of the importance of the market to the economic prosperity of the town. The eastern zone of the study area contained outbuildings associated with Old Hall, later Hall Place.

6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

6.1: The evidence

Although no archaeological evidence was available for the study area itself, archaeological excavations conducted by Tebbutt and Addyman to the south and east of the study area have elucidated its Saxon, medieval and post-medieval context. Analysis of later post-medieval mapping has suggested much of the site remained largely undisturbed into the present century, including, significantly, part of the street frontage area. Only a limited amount of information has been recovered from analysis of the air photograph information.

6.2: Implications

Based on the evidence presently available, three areas of archaeological potential may be defined following the present assessment. The definition of the extent of these areas is necessarily somewhat arbitrary from the information presently available. These areas comprise:

Area A

This area includes the zone immediately adjoining the Cambridge Street frontage.

It is probable that the line of the ditch defining the northernmost limit of the Saxon settlement lies within the present street frontage area. It is thought (Tebbutt and Rudd 1966), although not proven, that the line of this ditch is perpetuated by the line of Cambridge Street. This frontage area may also contain evidence of Late Saxon settlement, or of medieval dwellings or shops, laid out following the presumed infilling of the Late Saxon ditch.

Examination of the Ordnance Survey mapping (Fig 4) suggests that substantial areas of the frontage, principally in the western part of Area A, have not been built over in the later post-medieval period, and some of the structures, such as greenhouses, occupying the zone adjoining the street frontage were of slighter construction. Conversely, construction of the modern showroom adjoining the street frontage could have caused a degree of localised disturbance to buried archaeological deposits.

Area B

This area comprises the eastern half of the study area, to the rear of the buildings on the present street frontage.

This area, lying within the Late Saxon settlement, as defined by its northern ditch, (within Area A) may contain evidence of contemporary settlement and activity. The possibility that this area could contain evidence of Roman activity is suggested by Tebbutt's excavations (Tebbutt 1933, figs 4-5). Examination of the plan of Tebbutts excavation located immediately beyond the eastern boundary of the study area suggests that a number of the linear features recorded, interpreted as ditches or gullies, may have continued into the study area. Other features, such as the pits and timber-framed buildings excavated by Addyman to the south of the study area, may also have continued into Area B (Addyman 1973). More generally, this backplot area could also contain evidence of medieval and post-medieval plot boundaries, rubbish disposal and also perhaps evidence of small-scale industrial activity.

This area appears to have suffered comparatively little disturbance from more recent land use.

Area C

This area comprises the western half of the study area, to the rear of the buildings on the present street frontage.

The archaeological potential of this area to contain Late Saxon features is similar to that of Area B, with the exception that there is no excavated evidence of such Saxon features, whose recorded alignment suggests their continuation into the study area. However, information from excavations at Hall Place (Addyman and Marjoram 1972) suggests that the late medieval fishpond, partly located to the south of the study area, probably extended within the study area.

Examination of the Ordnance Survey mapping suggests that Area C, located within the nursery, may have been little disturbed, except by shallow-footed buildings, such as greenhouses.

Areas A-C

Based upon the density of finds of prehistoric and Roman artifacts in the surrounding area, documented in the Sites and Monuments Record and in the archaeological literature, it should be noted that the study area has some potential for the recovery of remains of pre-Saxon settlement or activity. Possible features of Roman date were also found by Tebbutt (1933) and Addyman (1973) to the east and south of the study area.

6.3: Potential and significance

Area A

The northern ditched boundary to the Late Saxon settlement, if surviving, could contain waterlogged deposits including plant macrofossils, pollen and insect remains which could provide important data concerning the contemporary environment. Important artifact assemblages, notably pottery could also be preserved. This area could also contain evidence of structures dating from the 12-13th century onwards, including possibly the remains of timber-framed or stone-footed structures. Evidence of floor surfaces and associated features, such as rubbish-pits and wells, could also be forthcoming.

This information could allow a reconstruction of the sequence of building on the street frontage, and possibly elucidate the standard of living of the inhabitants from a study of the artifactual evidence. On a broader scale this information would contribute towards an understanding of the development of the medieval town of St. Neots, and the standard of living and trading contacts of its inhabitants.

Areas B and C

These areas lie within the area of the Late Saxon settlement. The location of features of Saxon date by Tebbutt (1933) on the eastern edge of the study area indicates a high potential for the continuation of contemporary activity into the study area itself. Evidence of such activity or settlement would probably take the form of negative features, such as pits, ditches and evidence of timber-framed buildings, all cut into the gravel subsoil. This information could contribute towards an understanding of the overall plan of the Saxon settlement, its development and economy.

During the medieval and post-medieval periods this area would have been laid out as a number of back-plots, which could have contained evidence of rubbish disposal and small-scale industrial activity. Such features could contribute towards our understanding of medieval and post-medieval trading patterns and small-scale industry. If waterlogged deposits were present in features such as pits and ditches, an extended range of environmental information, including pollen and insect remains, could be recovered.

Multi-period archaeology

Of particular importance is the potential of the study area to contribute towards the origins and development of the town over an extended period of time, from the prehistoric period onwards. Information concerning the Roman-Saxon transition and the Saxon-medieval period would be of particular importance to an understanding of the evolution of settlement patterns on a local and regional level.

Further work would be required to identify the areas of archaeological potential within the overall study area, and in particular to determine the extent and nature of disturbance caused to the buried archaeology by recent land use.

6.4: Proposals

Given that no details of the proposed development are available at the present time, general proposals are provided below for the further archaeological appraisal of the study area, which should comprise the following elements:

(1) Further documentary analysis.

More detailed documentary analysis, which was beyond the scope of the present exercise, could provide further information concerning the post-medieval use of the study area.

(2) Monitoring of geotechnical test-pits.

The observation and recording of geotechnical test-pits by a suitably experienced archaeologist would permit a rapid assessment of the study areas's potential. Ideally, these test-pits would be located to examine the study area as widely as possible.

However, care should be taken to ensure that such excavation does not cause significant disturbance to the buried archaeology.

(3) Trial-trenching.

Trial-trenching should aim to sample, by a combination of hand and machine excavation, those areas of the site which would be affected by its proposed development. Ideally such trenching should cause the minimum disturbance to intact archaeological deposits and features. This could be achieved in part by emptying recent service and foundation trenches, to provide 'windows' to assess the depth, complexity and significance of earlier archaeological deposits. As a minimum, such trenching should comprise the following:

- (A) Examination of Area A, to test the survival of archaeological features and deposits in areas which have been built upon and where little disturbance may be anticipated.
- (B) Examination of Area B, to test the survival of features associated with the Late Saxon settlement and with the medieval and post-medieval use of the backplot area for rubbish disposal and possibly for industry.

Although sampling by hand-excavation of intact archaeological features and deposits should be limited, sufficient hand excavation should be undertaken to test the survival of features, and to provide datable artifacts, and sampled for environmental analysis. Particular attention should be paid to the sampling of waterlogged features for pollen, plant macrofossils, and insect remains.

<u>Aims</u>

The purpose of such trial-trenching would be to identify the location, extent and significance of archaeological deposits affected by the development. This information would permit an informed strategy to be devised to mitigate the effect of the development upon the buried archaeological deposits, by modification of

foundation design or archaeological recording in advance of development ('preservation by record').

Demolition

It should be noted that the demolition of the present buildings on site and the removal of floor slabs and exterior hardstandings should be monitored by an experienced archaeologist to ensure that archaeological features and deposits are not disturbed.

7.0: REFERENCES AND MAP SOURCES

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Abbreviation

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Map sources

- 26

Huntingdonshire County Record Office

1757 General plan of the estate belonging to Sir Stephen Anderson.

1757 Popes Bridge Closes in the Manor of St. Neots.

1757 St. Neots Priory lands.

1882/87 Ordnance Survey map 25 inch/mile.

1900 Ordnance Survey map 25 inch/mile.

1924 Ordnance Survey map 25 inch/mile.

St. Neots Library, Local History

1730 Gordon's Map of 1730 (illustrated in Tebbutt, C.F. 1978).

1889 Plan of Old Hall and cottages etc. with details

1938 Emergency edition of Ordnance Survey map, 1:10560.

1970 Ordnance Survey map, 1:2500.

1980 Ordnance Survey map, 1:2500.

Photographs

University of Cambridge: Committee for Aerial Photography

1958 WL 96 (black and white oblique) and RC8Kn-BF 212 (colour vertical).

1959 XT 10 (black and white oblique).

Huntingdon County Record Office

1929 St. Neots (No.2) from the air. Aerofilms Series 28950 (Huntingdon CRO, PH 69C/77/1)

1929 St. Neots (No.5) from the air. Aerofilms Series 28947 (Huntingdon CRO, PH 69A/77/1)

Both photographs are black and white obliques.

8.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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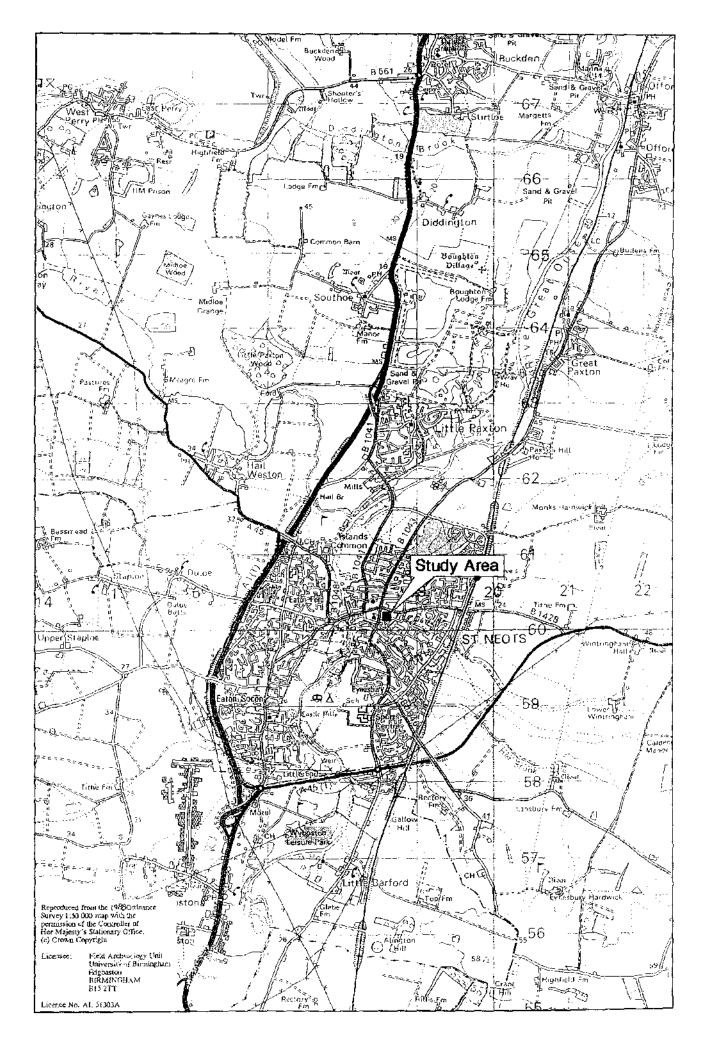


Fig.1

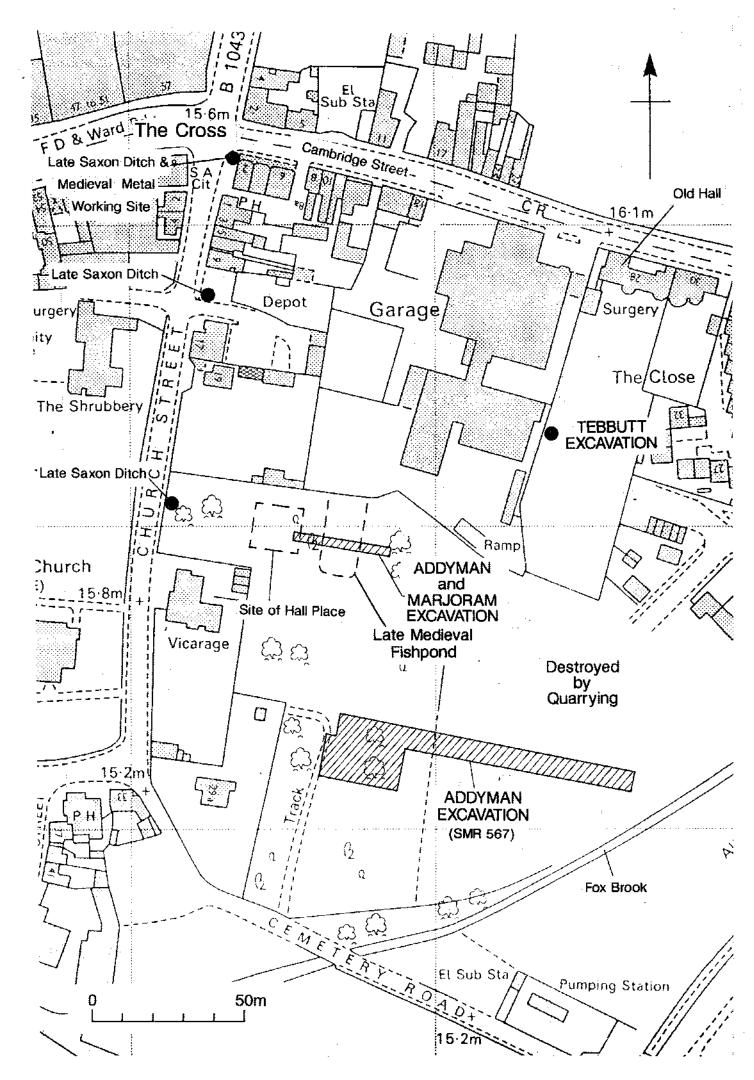


Fig.2

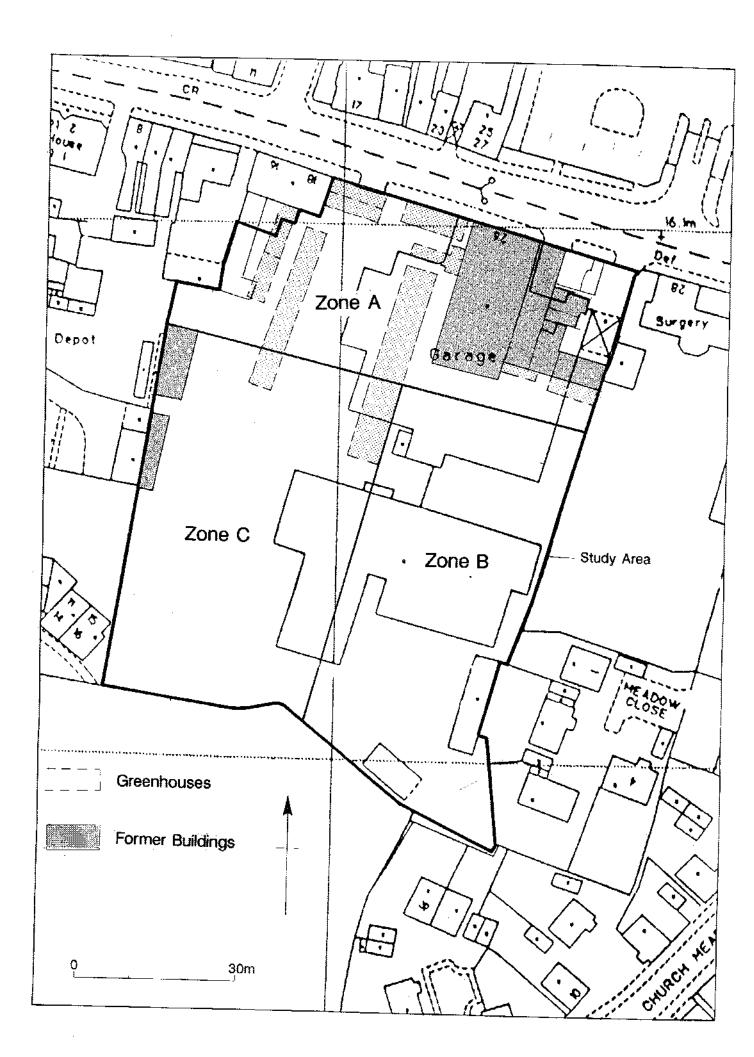


Fig:3

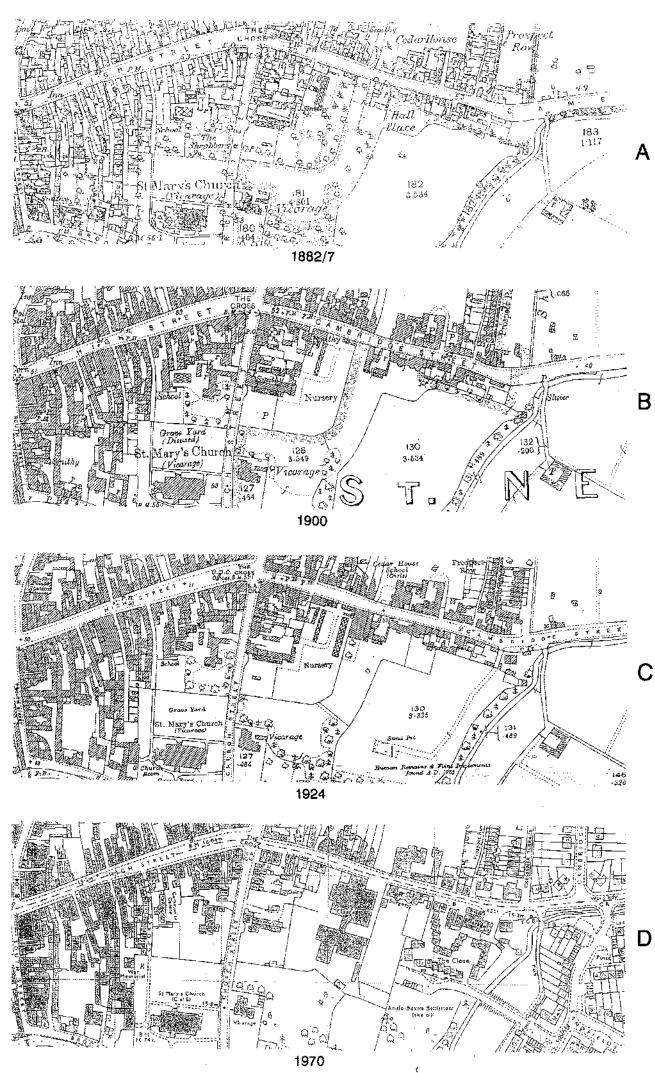
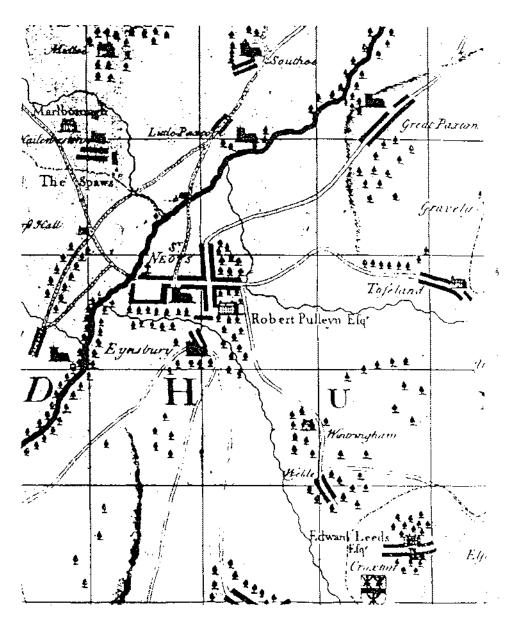
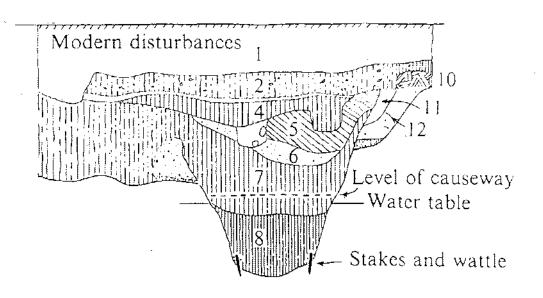
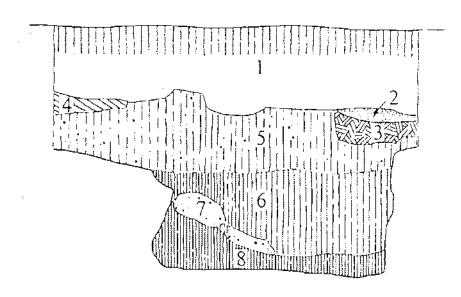


Fig 4



Gordon's Map of 1730





0 2 Metres

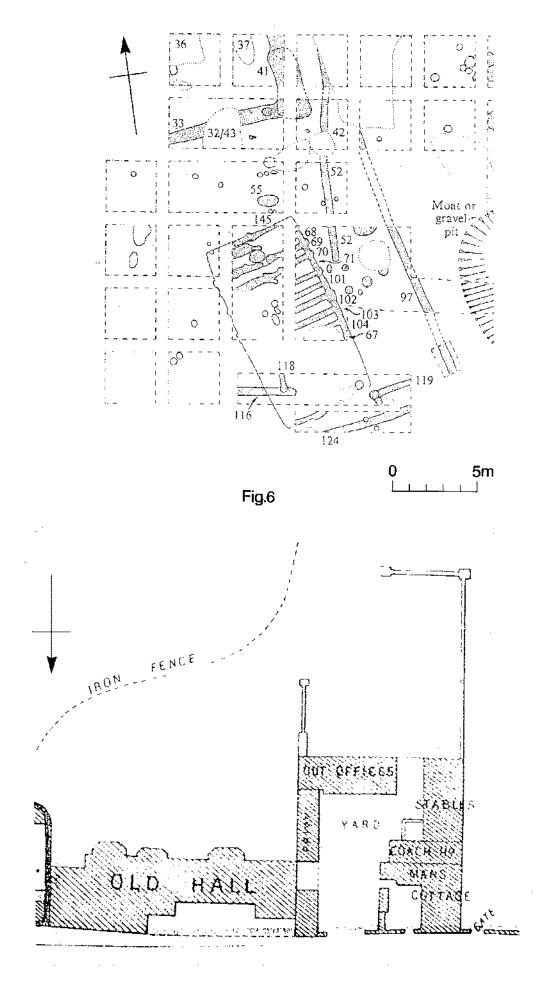


Fig.7

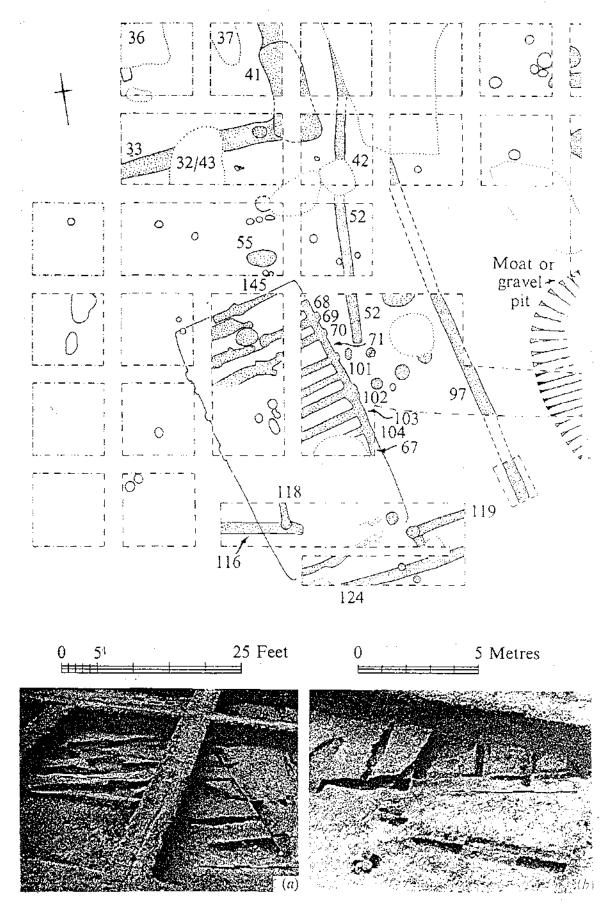
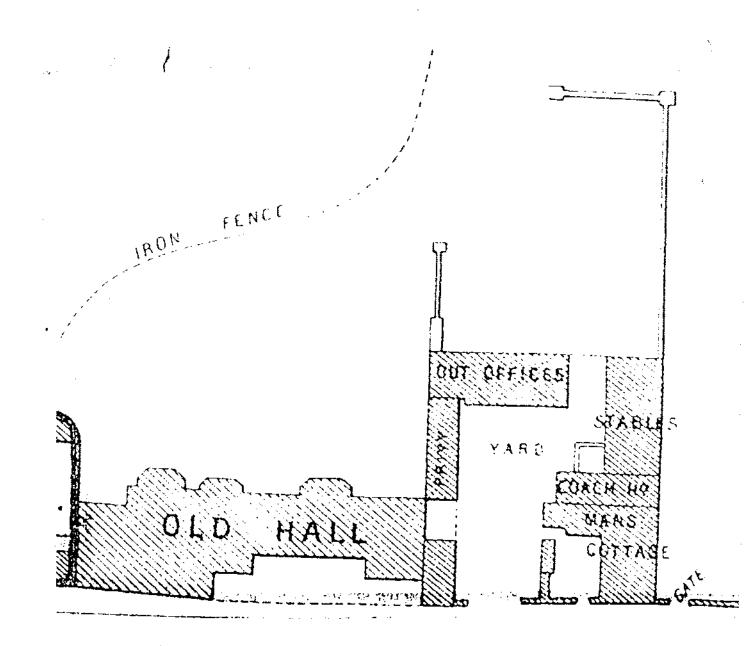


Plate 1

Fig.8



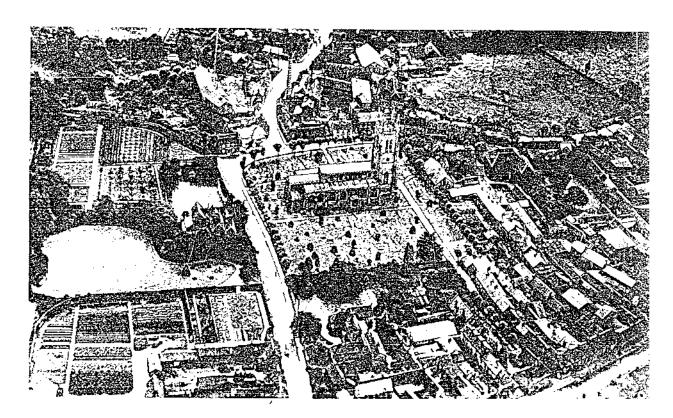


Plate 2

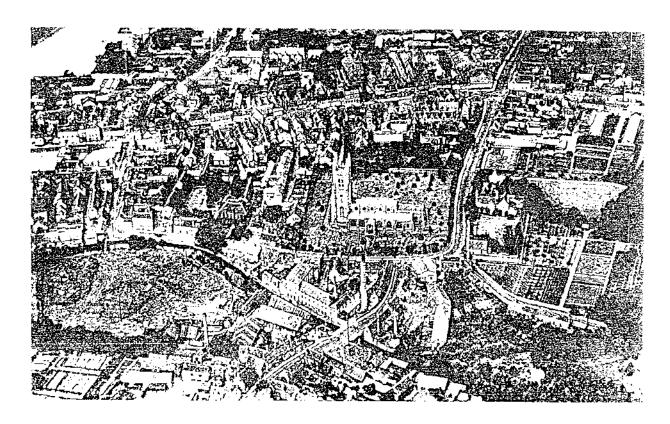


Plate 3