

**NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT**

Report No. 811

**An Archaeological Evaluation  
at Read's Flour Mill, King Street, Norwich**

**Interim Report**

38040 N

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April 2003

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Location: Spooner's Wharf, Read's Flour Mill, King Street, Norwich  
Grid Ref: TG 2377 0782  
SMR No: 38040N  
Date of Fieldwork: 17th February to 21st March 2003

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## **Summary**

*Two trenches were excavated in the northern part of the Read's Flour Mill site, King Street Norwich. The trenches ran approximately at right angles to the King Street and the River Wensum.*

*Trench 1 was closest to the river and contained at least two major phases of revetment and foreshore reclamation evidenced by timbers, including fragments of reused boats and a range of other well preserved organic material. The earliest phase of revetment was probably 12th-century in date and the later phase possibly 14th-century.*

*Trench 2 was adjacent to the street frontage. Tantalising evidence of prehistoric activity was found along with a complex sequence of medieval timber buildings. In the post-medieval period the western part of the trench was occupied by a large cellared building and the eastern part by a poorly built flint and mortar structure, possibly a warehouse. The cellared building was probably demolished in the very late 19th or early 20th century.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Figs 1 & 2

Two trenches were excavated by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) in the northern part of the Read's Flour Mill site during February and March 2003. This archaeological evaluation was commissioned by John Samuels Archaeological Consultants acting on behalf of P. J. Livesey Group Ltd. The trenches lay in an adjacent to what was in 1885 called Spooner's Wharf. This was the clear block of land north the terraced cottages at 231-235 King Street and the boathouse behind them. This work was the second archaeological intervention to be carried out within the former City Flour Mills site the first being a trench excavated further to the south adjacent to the former flour mill office block (Site 26467, Hutcheson 1997a). The proposed redevelopment by P. J. Livesey Group Ltd. at present also encompasses Cannon Wharf (the former coal yard north of Read's Flour Mill and south of the recently built Novi Sad Friendship Bridge) and what was until May 2001 the Kingsway public house, adjacent to Carrow Bridge. Canon Wharf was also the subject of archaeological investigation in 1997 (Site 26467, Shelley 1997).

This archaeological evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: 07/01/03/ARJH) and a Specification prepared by John Samuels Archaeological Consultants ( Ref: JSAC 0124/03/02).

## 2.0 Methodology

The objective of this evaluation was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence or absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the proposed development area.

The Read's Flour Mill site had been abandoned for a little under a decade prior to the commencement of fieldwork. The open area where the trenches were to be located was very overgrown with shrubs, brambles, ivy and other undergrowth. This and an accumulation of detritus including hypodermic syringes, were rapidly cleared using a 7-tonne tracked hydraulic 360° excavator. This material was not removed from site and remains stockpiled in the north-east corner of the plot. During this clearance operation it became apparent that parts of the wall that formed the southern boundary of the site were very unstable. This wall was largely made of flint rubble and soft 'Norfolk red' type bricks. It formed the western two-thirds of the southern boundary of the plot and was up to 2.5m high. This wall, was at the earliest, late 18th-century in date. After photographic recording it was demolished with the excavator bucket.

After this clearance operation the easternmost trench, Trench 1, was initially machine excavated to a depth of c.1.35m below the modern surface. The excavator was fitted with a toothless bucket and was under constant archaeological supervision. After cleaning and recording, the base of the trench was mechanically excavated further to a depth of c.1.9m below the modern surface. Steel sheet and hydraulic waling-beam shoring was then installed by specialist contractors. Hand excavation was then undertaken in a longitudinal slot measuring 6m east-to west and 1.2m north to south. This slot was initially excavated to a depth of 1.1m below the final machined depth, c.3.0m below the extant surface. Following this the step around the top of the slot was lowered by c.0.7m and a further set of hydraulic waling-beams were installed. A further 0.5m of material was then hand excavated from the central slot.

Initially all but the easternmost 2m of Trench 2 was also machine excavated to a depth of 1.35m. The western end of this trench was deeply cellared. At this stage the walls ([73] and [74]) that formed this cellar were left standing to their full surviving height. Both survived to within 0.3m of the modern surface. Following cleaning and recording two sondage were dug. One against the western end of the northern face of the trench, the second in the centre of the eastern end of the trench. Following the recording of the sondage the trench was machine excavated to it's full length and the cellar walls ([73] and [74]) were removed. After further excavation and recording in the north-west corner of the trench installation of shoring was attempted. Following the partial removal by machine of the remaining c.0.4m of cellar rubble infill ([69]), efforts were made to drive steel sheets into the north-east and north-west corners of the trench. This proved impossible due to the relatively high level of natural chalk which was encountered c.0.3m below the cellar floor. Not only was it unfeasible to drive the sheets through the chalk bedrock, largely due to its flint content, such attempts also caused the collapse of the loose rubble cellar fill ([69]) and the cracking of the thin concrete slab ([84]) above. It was then decided to abandon shoring the western end of this trench on health and safety grounds. As probable early medieval features were found in the north-west corner of the trench 0.45m to 0.55m higher than the basal level of the cellar construction cut [118] any negative features cut into

the natural gravels or chalk across the most of the western half of the trench would have partially or wholly been truncated by the construction of the cellar.

East of wall [74] shoring was successfully installed and a further c.0.5m of material was machine excavated from the base of the trench, making it's depth 1.85m below the modern surface. The remaining c.0.6m of deposits in this trench were then hand excavated.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NAU *pro-forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour and monochrome photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

Within the limits imposed by working in trenches with steel shoring and on a former industrial site plentiful in modern metal objects and debris spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. Few finds which were not obviously modern were recovered.

A level was transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark of 5.04m on the brick pillar which forms part of the reveting wall just south of the junction of King Street and Southgate Lane, less than 50m south of the site. A non-permanent temporary benchmark (2.43m OD) was used on site. This was located on top of the concrete retaining wall for the boathouse in the south-east corner of the site.

Once the area around the trenches had been cleared of shrubs conditions for excavation and recording were generally good. No adverse weather conditions were experienced during the project.

Following the completion of the excavations, both trenches were mechanically backfilled with the material that had been removed from them. This material was summarily compacted with the bucket of the mechanical excavator. It is likely that if left for any length of time the material backfilled into the trenches will compact under its own weight leaving slight depression within the footprint of the trenches. At present it is inadvisable to try to bring any non-tracked vehicles across the area where the trenches were dug.

This report is strictly an interim statement. The results and interpretations given have been reached without the benefit of information from detailed background research, full examination and characterisation of artefactual and ecofactual data. Interpretations of the evidence described below may change radically in light of this and other information. A full evaluation report follows in due course.

### **3.0 The Results**

Fig. 2

#### **Introduction**

Both trenches measured approximately 3m by 9m. Trench 1 was excavated to a maximum depth of c.3.5m below the modern ground surface (-1.2m OD). The final depth of Trench 2 was approximately 2.4m beneath the extant ground surface (1.0m OD).

For the sake of convenience of description throughout this report it will be assumed that the trenches are east-to-west aligned rather than their true alignment which is much closer to northeast-to-southwest.

## Trench 1

When considering the basal deposits in this trench it is probably wise to suspend the conventional archaeological notion of what is 'natural' geological material and what are cultural deposits. The earliest material found in this trench were early Holocene grey river gravels ([76]) of geological origin. These were only seen at the far western end of the slot in the base of the trench. This deposit was saturated and had a discernible flow of groundwater running through it. Stratigraphically above the 'natural' river gravels was a remarkable deposit ([115]) made-up of partially decayed mosses and other plant material. The mosses and other material, such as holly leaves retained their green colour. This deposit was almost certainly a pre-medieval natural river foreshore accumulation, although its date is at present unknown. This deposit was sampled for plant macrofossils. Above this lay c.0.55m of laminated river silts, sands and peats. Six alternating bands of peats and silts were seen ([109], [110], [111], [112], [113], [114]) varying in depth between 0.05m and 0.2m. These were probably in essence pre-medieval 'natural' accumulations. These strata were column sampled for potential pollen, diatom or geoarchaeological analysis. This should help to characterise and perhaps even date these deposits and will potentially add to the growing body of paleoenvironmental data for the early history of the Wensum Valley.

Above this the earliest definite evidence for cultural activity was located. The peats and silts were truncated away sharply by the construction cut for a river revetment foreshore reclamation structure. A series of roundwood coppice pole stakes ([81]) were driven vertically into churned or redeposited peats and silts ([105] and [107]). Above this a larger timber, formed from a half or three-quarter round smallish (c.0.2m radius) split log [82], was driven in to the river gravels at an angle a little shallower than 45°. This timber was sampled for potential dendrochronological dating. Adjacent to this was a near complete blade of a rudder or steering oar, also found in the same deposit ([82]) was a lozenge shaper rigging spacer or block. These timber elements were overlain by a further dump or redeposited silty peat ([75]). On top of this a considerable quantity of chalk ([48]) had been dumped, which extended eastwards to cover the top of the driven stakes [81]. In front of this, and driven from a higher level, a north-south wickerwork or hurdle revetment ([45]) had been constructed which possibly served to protect the chalk in main body of the structure from water erosion. Behind this revetment a further deposit of peat/silt ([31]) was encountered. It is at this stage it is uncertain if this was a dump or a more natural accumulation augmented with refuse. Plant macrofossil analysis may help in this regard. This deposit contained pottery of possibly 12th-century date.

Only c.1.8m east of wicker revetment ([45]) a second similar structure ([83]) was found. This was made of somewhat stouter stakes and witheys. Another fragmentary mat of well preserved mosses and other plant material ([106]) lay just to the west of revetment [83]. Below this deposit was a layer of disturbed river silt ([108]) which contained some cultural material. This deposit was the basal deposit excavated in the eastern three-quarters of the trench. Auger soundings indicated that these riverine silts extended at least 1.5m below the lowest excavated level. These deposits became with depth progressively cleaner and freer of cultural material.

At present it is difficult to judge the exact chronological and physical relationship between the two wattle revetments. It is also probably better to think of this first phase of revetment not as a quay onto which boats and ship would moor but where

vessels were beached and the revetment structures allowed dry access and hard standings from which goods could be unloaded via gang planks. It is possible that all or parts of the revetment structure were planked over with damp voids underneath allowing the build-up of deposits such as [31].

In between the two wattle revetments and to the east of structure [83] a substantial deposit of silt and peat ([34]) was seen. This material was up to 0.8m thick and contained possible 12th- to 14th-century pottery. It was difficult to ascertain whether this deposit, which certainly contained dumped refuse, was a 'natural' build-up through plant growth and peat formation or was dumped make-up. A combination of these processes seems likely. Underneath this deposit, towards the eastern base of the trench were four fragmentary well worked planks, possible from a clinker.

Above this deposit a further 0.4m of peat and silt deposits ([71], [72], [30] and [23]) were seen. The lowest two of these deposits ([71] and [72]) were almost pure clayey silts and may have resulted from an inundation episode. Capping these deposits was a fairly unambiguous dump of peat ash ([63]) which was up to 0.25m thick.

Approximately 3.0m west of the eastern end of the trench these deposits were removed by cut [68] to allow the construction of a second major revetment structure. The base of this was lined with brushwood within a silty peat matrix ([50]). Above this a mass of gravel ([47]) had been dumped. The purpose of the brushwood was doubtless to stop the heavier gravel-rich deposit disappearing into the soft silt below. The eastern side of this initial construction cut was in turn truncated by a secondary construction cut ([152]) with a skim of chalk ([153]) laid directly on it's base. Above this chalk at the far eastern end of the trench a structure of interlaced horizontal oak roundwood timbers had been deliberately laid, in what could be described as a 'log cabin' manner. These timbers had a diameter of c.0.15m. Two timbers were recorded in section but not removed. They probably formed the rear (western) side of the riverside part of this phase of revetment.

On top of this timber base lay dumps of redeposited peat and silt ([46] and [169]). Through this material an oak pile ([43]) had been driven. The pile was made of a log with a diameter of 0.21m, complete with sapwood and bark unworked except for its sharpened point. This pile had been driven well down into the underlying river silt. After its extraction it was sampled for dendrochronology. Around this pile a mass of small upright timbers ([43]) c.1.0m long had been driven around the pile probably to stabilise it. These consisted of:

1. Part of the keel or stern section of a smallish boat
2. Fragments of strakes from a larger boat complete with roves, peg holes and pegs
3. Two large planks still fixed together with a scarf joint
4. Two smaller planks still fixed together with a scarf joint

These fragments came from at least two clinker-built boats; one smallish rowing boat sized vessel and one larger boat probably closer to the size of barges or wherries. A sample of the luting, the animal hair packing from between two of the boat planks, was also recovered. Further analysis of this sample and the boat timbers is ongoing.

In addition to this three non-boat timbers were found. One was a cleft section or a radially-split oak branch or small trunk, slightly pointed at one end; the second an oak

offcut. The third was a partially shaped piece of cleft semi-roundwood, contorted by the post-depositional compaction of deposits above.

On top of the timber interlacing and around the pile a mass of chalky material ([52] and [53]) had been dumped. These deposits had more randomly set timbers within them, such as [61]. This material was possible spoil from terracing or chalk and flint mining activities that took place further to the west on the scarp of the Ber Street ridge.

To the west two further pieces of structural evidence seemed to tie in with this second phase of revetment. Approximately 3.0m west of the eastern end of the trench a north-to-south aligned gravel path, road or surface ([26]=[56]) was seen. This feature could have been up to 3.0m wide. The gravel had been rammed to such an extent that it had compacted the peaty material ([34]) below it. Probably later than this and possible contemporary with timber pile [43] a series of parallel sub-circular chalk patches ([62]) were seen which ran in lines either side of the sondage. It is possible that they represented post-pads and that oak-pile [43] was a corner or major load bearing pile for an aisled barn-like structure. Some sort of timber warehouse, possibly with open sides, seems possible. The exact spatial and chronological relationship between these features and the second phase (easterly) revetment awaits clarification through further stratigraphic analysis.

At the far western end of the trench deposits related to the first phase revetment were truncated by a large regular late-medieval pit ([41]). Two of the fills of this pit, ([36] and [38]) contained much well preserved organic matter and plant remains. One of the deposits within this pit ([36]) was basically a mat of preserved reeds or straw, possibly discarded floor covering material. It was characteristically similar to the fill of an analogous pit of the same date recently excavated in a waterfront location at St. George's Street in Norwich (Percival 2002). At St. George's Street the pit was interpreted as having originally fulfilled an industrial purpose, possibly basting, a process whereby wood bark is soaked for long periods in order to make rope or cord. Analysis of plant macrofossil samples from the fills of the Read's Flour Mill pit is needed before any similar conclusions can be drawn.

The upper fill of this late medieval pit, the second phase revetment and associated structural feature were overlain by a mass of post-medieval make-up ([7]). This deposit was a mid-grey brown silt clay up to 0.85m thick and contained occasional fragments of pantile. Above this an approximately east-to-west aligned flint, brick rubble and mortar wall ([1]) was seen. This was an extremely poorly constructed piece of masonry. A similar north-to-south aligned return wall ([17]) was seen 3.0m from the eastern end of the trench. A chalk and mortar floor ([2]) was probably associated with these walls which were probably no earlier than mid 18th-century in date. They may have formed part of one of the elongated ?warehouse buildings that ran at right angles to the river, seen on Anthony Hochstetter's map of 1789 and on the Ordnance Survey 1885 plan. An associated east-to-west aligned wall ([165]=[166]) was seen on the southern edge of Trench 2 (see below).

Above these walls the top 0.8m-1.1m of the trench was made up of a series of very late post-medieval or Victorian dumps of make-up layers, interspersed with brick or flint cobble surfaces. These layers were much cut by 20th-century services. The only notable feature from this phase was a north-to-south aligned wall ([24]) seen at the far eastern end of the trench. It was made of soft 'Norfolk red' type brick set in an English cross bond and generally presented a 19th-century appearance. This wall



had a roughly built flint and brick rubble wall ([25]) on top of it. The brick wall seemed too substantial and well built to be merely a foundation for the slight flint wall above. It perhaps formed the main river revetment wall in the early 19th-century at the time of the construction of the north mill building.

## Trench 2

The earliest deposit within this trench was at first thought to be below natural orange gravels ([100]) at the eastern end of the trench. A 0.1m thick layer of dark grey sands and gravels ([186]) were seen which contained some general combustion debris and fire crazed flints. This deposit was overlain by c.0.3m of remarkably 'clean' redeposited natural orange sand and gravel ([185]). The dark grey sands and gravels ([186]) were probably the result of prehistoric activity possibly involving clearance of trees and vegetation (using fire) beside the river margin. The orange sands and gravels ([186]) are possibly the result of a landslip or other mass movement, perhaps accelerated by the clearance of the area. Not enough of the dark grey sands and gravels were exposed to enable an uncontaminated bulk sample to be taken.

The redeposited orange sands and gravels ([186]) were cut by structural features of possibly early medieval date. These included two post-holes, one large ([175]) with a diameter of c.0.3m, and one smaller example ([177]) with a 0.1m diameter. A beam slot ([194]) was also recorded. These features were overlain by a soil build-up ([172]=[193]) which was also possibly of early medieval date.

Probable early medieval structural features also survived in the north-west corner of the trench, to the north of the deepest extent of the construction cut of cellared building ([73]/[74]) two post-holes ([97] and [80]) were found. The earliest of these ([97]) was cut into a layer of possible Saxo-Norman buried soil ([102]). The second post-hole cut a layer of ashy dumped material ([101]). A further dump of ash ([94]) and a possible fragmentary chalk and mortar floor ([98]) was also found associated with these post-holes.

The probable early medieval soil build-up ([172]=[193]) seen in the eastern half of the trench was overlain by evidence of a possible flood episode ([184]) and by dumps of clay, peat ash and other rubbish ([182], [183], [205], [206]). Above this more deliberate make-up layers ([171] and [195]) were deposited. A medieval timber building, evidenced by a chalk post-pad ([198]) and a chalk mortar floor ([181]), sat on top of this make-up. The constructional techniques used in this building bear a superficial similarity to those of the structure formed by chalk post-pad [62] and timber pile [43] in Trench 1. Further analysis is required to confirm any links between these two structures.

The chalk post-pad building in Trench 2 was refloored with clay and chalk ([170]). This floor had a dump of peat ash ([179]) on top of it. The destruction of this building is marked by the digging of two substantial robber pits ([200] and [208]). The smaller of these ([208]) undoubtedly removed the post associated with post-pad [198]. After this the eastern half of the trench seems to have become an open area. The building destruction and robbing episode was sealed by an extensive layer of ?late medieval make-up ([33]=[207]).

In the western end of the trench the early medieval post-hole structures were replaced with a building floored with chalk and mortar ([93]). Not much can be said about this structure other than the chalk and mortar floor may have been replaced

with a tile floor as thin sandy bedding layers ([91] and [92]) overlaid it. No traces of any floor tile nor any structural features associated with this building were found.

The building in the eastern end of the trench evidenced by chalk floor [93] seems to have been destroyed at much the same time as the building associated with post-pad [198]. In the western end of the trench a possible terracing cut ([103]) was seen filled with crushed chalk ([88]). This cut seems to have been connected with the deposition of ?late medieval make-up deposits ([87], [89]=[32] and [33]=[207]). After the deposition of this raft of material the area of was probably left open and free of buildings for a period of time. A small cess pit ([122]) was dug in the north-west corner of the trench close to the street frontage.

After this a more robust terracing operation ([168]) probably occurred. This was the precursor to the construction of the large cellared building formed by walls [73] and [74]. It at first appeared that the east-to-west aligned wall [73] clearly butted north-to-south aligned wall [74] and thus belonged to a later phase of construction. Subsequent excavation however, proved that the two walls were built at the same time and had always formed part of the same structure provisionally dated to between the very late 16th- or 17th-century. Further analysis of this structure is required.

To the east of wall [74] part of a probable later post-medieval warehouse building was seen. A poorly constructed flint wall ([165]=[166]) which contained many pantile fragments, ran along the south edge of the trench. A chalk and mortar floor ([131]) was found associated with this wall. The constructional characteristics and alignment of this wall strongly indicate that it was part of the same building as walls [1] and [17] in Trench 1.

The cellared building seems to have been in use for several centuries. It is probably this building that can be seen on the Ordnance survey 1885 plan, with the post-medieval warehouse building behind. Several alterations, which were at the earliest late Victorian, were made to the cellared building. These included blocking an opening at the southern end of wall [74] with soft 'Norfolk red' type bricks. To the east of wall [74] similar, if not the same, cobble and brick surfaces to those seen in the upper levels of Trench 1 were seen. These were capped by a concrete and Portland cement floor ([136]=[158]). It is unlikely that this floor is any earlier than late 19th- or early 20th-century in date.

The demolition of the cellared building, evidenced by extensive rubble cellar infill ([69]) certainly took place after 1885 and could have been as late as the 1930s. Further background research should refine this date. The rubble deposit [69] did contain one whole, and two fragmentary limestone ashlar blocks, as well as a fragment of late medieval window. This architectural fragment is too late in date to be connected to St. Olaves's Chapel, the site of which is said to have been under Albion Mills (Fig. 2). It is likely to have come from St Peter Southgate church, c.65m south of Trench 2. This church was late 12th- or 13th-century in date and was probably rebuilt in the late medieval period (Ayers 1994, 77). It was demolished in 1887 (Hutcheson 1997b, 1).

## 4.0 Organic Preservation

During the excavation of Trench 1 it was suspected by the author that the organic preservation in the trench had recently begun to decline and decay set in. Subsequent on-site consultations with a range of specialists, including Dr Peter Murphy (English Heritage Regional Archaeological Science Advisor), Richard Darrah, (independent archaeological timber specialist) and Dr. Francis Green (NAU pollen and diatom specialist). thoroughly disproved this notion. Suspicions arose due the noticeable presence of hydrogen sulphide. In fact this gas forms chiefly under condition of slow anaerobic decay and had probably been contained with the excavated deposits for many centuries. Initial assessment of the wood show that its preservation was excellent. The presence of moss and holly leaves which still retained their green colour from context [115] at the basal western end of the Trench also points to extremely good organic preservation.

## 5.0 Preliminary Conclusions

In general both the quality and quantity of the archaeological remains in both trenches was excellent. Of particular interest was the well preserved organic material, with both wood and plant remains surviving well. The potential for future fieldwork and analysis to produce meaningful results is extremely high. More detailed analysis of the results of this evaluation will be presented in a future report.

### **Acknowledgements**

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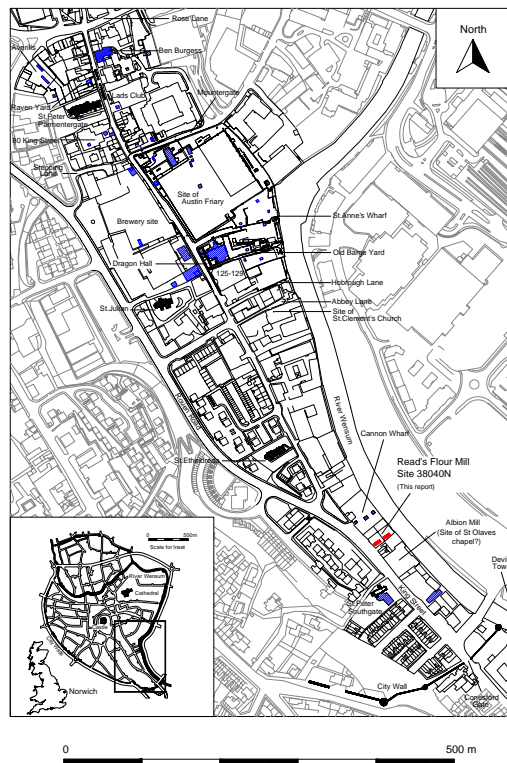


Fig. 1 Site Location, also showing churches and previous archaeological interventions. Scale 1:4000



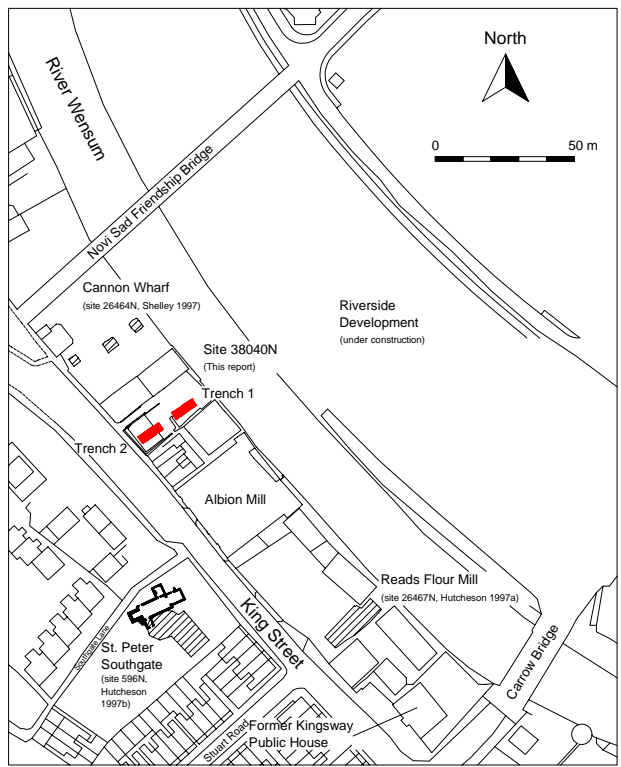


Fig. 2 The proposed Read's Flour Mill development site showing trench locations and previous archaeological investigations.  
Scale 1:1250

