



**CCC AFU Report Number 894**

**A possible location for the  
Ramsey Abbey precinct and  
docks: Excavations at Ailwyn  
Community School, Ramsey,  
Cambridgeshire**

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Richard Mortimer MIFA

With contributions by Rachel Fosberry  
and Claire Martin BA

Site Code: RAS AIS 05/06  
CHER Event Number: ECB 2097 & 2334  
Date of works: Dec 2005 & Mar 2006  
Grid Ref: TL 2948 8489 & 2958 8492

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## **Summary**

Two small excavations were carried out to the south and east of the Ramsey Ailwyn Community School over the winter of 2005/6 in advance of the construction of a new science block and new hard play area. Both areas are situated close to the 5m contour (the medieval fen edge) at the extreme southeast of the area known to have been occupied by Ramsey Abbey.

Three ditched boundaries and a few small quarry pits were recorded. None of the three boundaries are well dated but using map evidence alongside the small finds assemblage they can potentially be assigned to the medieval (or late medieval), post-medieval and modern periods. The two later ditches appear to be direct, or near direct, replacements for the one that went before.

Tying the earliest, medieval or late medieval, version of this boundary (a wide, curving ditch) into the available aerial photographic and map evidence the Abbey Precinct has been extrapolated for most of its course. The precinct appears ovate, measuring some 800m north to south and 550m east to west and encloses an area of roughly 35 hectares. There is evidence for a road or trackway that circumnavigates the precinct boundary.

In addition a suggestion can now be made as to the location of the Abbey's docking facilities and the lode that fed them.

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# Drawing Conventions

Sections	Plans
Limit of Excavation	Limit of Excavation
Cut	Deposit - Conjectured
Cut-Conjectured	Natural Features
Soil Horizon	Intrusion/Truncation
Soil Horizon - Conjectured	Sondages/Machine Strip
Intrusion/Truncation	Illustrated Section <span style="color: red; font-size: small;">S.14</span>
Top of Natural	Archaeological Feature
Top Surface	Archaeological Deposit
Break in Section/ Limit of Section Drawing	Excavated Slot
Turf	Tree Throw
Cut Number	Gravel Surface
Deposit Number 117	Field Drain
Ordnance Datum $\frac{18.45m}{\times}$ ODN	Cut Number <b>118</b>
Stone	Small Find
Gravel	
Clay Lens	
Cable	
Pipe	

## **1 Introduction**

This archaeological monitoring and excavation was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Kasia Gdaniec of the Cambridgeshire Archaeology, Planning and Countryside Advice team (CAPCA; Planning Application H/5018/04/CC), supplemented by a Specification prepared by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (CCC AFU).

The work was designed to assist in defining the character and extent of any archaeological remains within the proposed redevelopment area, in accordance with the guidelines set out in *Planning and Policy Guidance 16 - Archaeology and Planning* (Department of the Environment 1990). The results will enable decisions to be made by the Local Planning Authority with regard to the treatment of any archaeological remains found.

Area B was excavated over nine days in late November/early December 2005 and Area A over four days in March 2006.

The site archive is currently held by CCC AFU.

## **2 Geology and Topography**

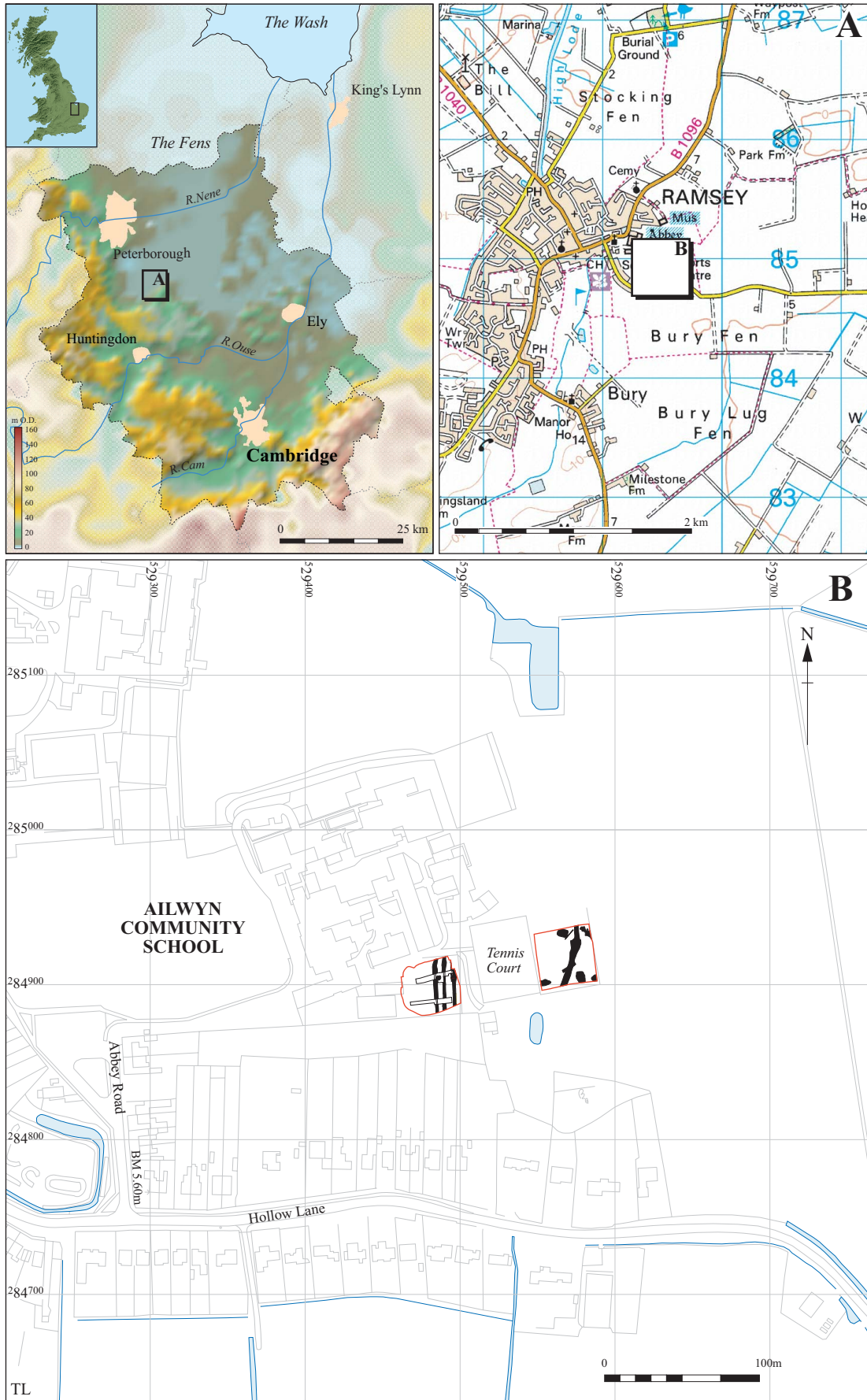
The site overlies March gravels (British Geological Survey 1995, Sheet 172) at around 6m OD towards the southeastern edge of the Ramsey peninsula approximately 150m north of Hollow Lane which defined the medieval fen edge.

## **3 Archaeological and Historical Background**

The site lies to the southeast of Ramsey Abbey Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 114) and conservation area.

### **3.1 Pre-Medieval**

Although a Palaeolithic axe was discovered in Victoria Road, Ramsey (Hall 1992), this is seen as a chance glacial find, and no other significant Prehistoric finds have been recorded on Ramsey island (*ibid*). The exception to this is a Bronze Age barrow group which lies 3km north of Ramsey Abbey, located along a spur protruding into the fens. No archaeological remains of any period were discovered at Ramsey which pre-dated the Saxon occupation.



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Figure 1: Location of Areas A and B

### 3.2 Medieval & Post-Medieval

The site is the location of the important Benedictine monastery of Ramsey Abbey and the 1998 investigation (Macaulay 1999) represents the first significant *archaeological* work conducted within the environs of the monastic precinct. Other investigative work has centred on the *historical* documentation of the Abbey and this has been considerable.

The present knowledge of the archaeology of the Abbey is very poor. Following its dissolution in 1539, most of the buildings were demolished. The accurate location of the monastic buildings, including the cloisters, Abbey church and inner and outer court boundaries are not known, such was the scale of the demolition. Various theories persist, based upon the interpretation of surviving buildings which include the present day parish church of St Thomas a Becket, thought to be the original infirmary built in 1180-90. This structure, however, may also have been the guest house (*hospital*). Other survivals include the 16th century gate house and the 13th century chapel, known as the 'Lady Chapel' which is incorporated into the cellars of the present school building known as Abbey House, itself a 16th century building.

Ramsey Abbey was founded as a regular Benedictine monastery in AD 969 by Ailwyn (foster brother to King Edgar), and by AD 974 a wooden church was recorded and dedicated. Substantial land grants led to the church becoming one of the richest not only in the fens, but in the country and was to earn the name of 'Ramsey the Golden'. The Abbey continued to flourish throughout the 11th century, surviving both the Danish invasion and Norman Conquest. In the 12th century the monastic buildings and the church were rebuilt using stone from Barnack (nr Peterborough). It was also in the 12th century that the monastery was seized and fortified by the Essex Baron Geoffrey de Mandeville, in the period known as the 'Anarchy'. His son abandoned the abbey shortly after Geoffrey's death in 1144. The abbey continued to flourish up to its dissolution in 1539, when the its land, titles and buildings were bought by the Cromwell family who saw to its destruction. Much of the abbey stone is known to have been used to build several Cambridge Colleges (Kings, Trinity, Gonville & Caius) as well as the gate house at Hinchingsbrooke House.

### 3.3 Previous Archaeological Work

In 1998 and 2002 archaeological excavations were undertaken within the grounds of the Abbey School (Macaulay 1999; Macaulay and Atkins forthcoming). This investigation uncovered remains from the Late Saxon or Saxo-Norman period (10th-11th century AD), a 12th century (probable Anarchy) fortification ditch, 12th-14th century buildings and a putative lode or canal with associated cranes, loading



areas and drainage features. Later demolition and masonry fragments were also recovered pertaining to the Abbey's dissolution in the 16th century.

There are records (Eames 1980) of a medieval tile kiln (Ramsey Abbey was renowned for its decorated tiles) excavated in the 1960s. A kiln was discovered in the grounds of the Ailwyn School in 1966 and excavated by Elizabeth Eames, John Cherry and the master and pupils of the school. The precise location of the kiln is not known but it probably lies close to the small copse along Hollow Lane to the southeast of the school buildings.

In 2004 a trench evaluation was conducted on the area of the proposed development at the Ailwyn School by the CCC AFU (Cooper 2004). This investigation uncovered a single, large ditch over 5m wide and 1m deep, of indeterminate date. The nature of the fills and remains indicated that this land was marginal in the medieval period but little else could be ascertained. The extent and quality of the surviving remains mark this area as significantly different to the archaeology encountered in the two seasons of excavation at the Abbey School in 1998 and 2002.

## **4 Methodology**

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

The development comprised the construction of a new science block (Area A = c.800 sq m) on an existing hard play area, and the relocation of the Hard Play Area further to the east (Area B = c. 800 sq m).

Area A was stripped to the construction level 0.50m below ground level under archaeological monitoring. At this level some archaeological features were visible within the subsoil but were not well-defined. Two east to west trenches were excavated across the area to better define these features and to prospect for further, hidden archaeological features beneath or within the subsoil.

Area B was stripped under archaeological monitoring to beneath the construction level (of 0.40m) and to an overall depth c. 0.75m below ground level.

Machine excavation was carried out under constant archaeological supervision with a tracked 360° excavator using a toothless ditching bucket. Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All metal-detected and hand-collected finds were retained for inspection, other than those which were obviously modern.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using CCC AFU's *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.

Environmental samples had been taken from the major features during the evaluation stage and only one further sample was taken during the two excavation stages. The results of all three stages are summarised in Appendix 2.

Site conditions were difficult throughout. The ground was low-lying and the water table high; both Areas were excavated over the winter of 2005/6 and water initially lay in both Trenches 1 and 2 in Area A and within all excavated features across both Areas. During rain the entire site was subject to inundation and became unworkable.

## **5 Results**

### **5.1 Area A (Fig. 2)**

Area A measured approximately 38m x 34m. The area was stripped to the construction level 0.50m below ground level under archaeological monitoring. At this level some archaeological features were visible within the subsoil but were not well defined. Two east to west trenches (Trenches 1 and 2) were excavated across the area to better define these features and to prospect for further, hidden archaeological features beneath or within the subsoil. Two pits and three ditches were recorded, the latter running on a north to south alignment.

Trenches 1 and 2 were machined to a maximum total depth of 1m and 1.3m respectively below ground level. Trench 1 was 25m long and 3.8m wide, widened out to 6.5m to accommodate a large pit or tree throw. Trench 2 was 27m long and a maximum of 3.5m wide.

Four environmental samples were taken from within Area A, three of these during the evaluation phase: sample 2 from subsoil layer 122, samples 3 and 4 from ditch 135 and sample 5 from quarry pit 116.

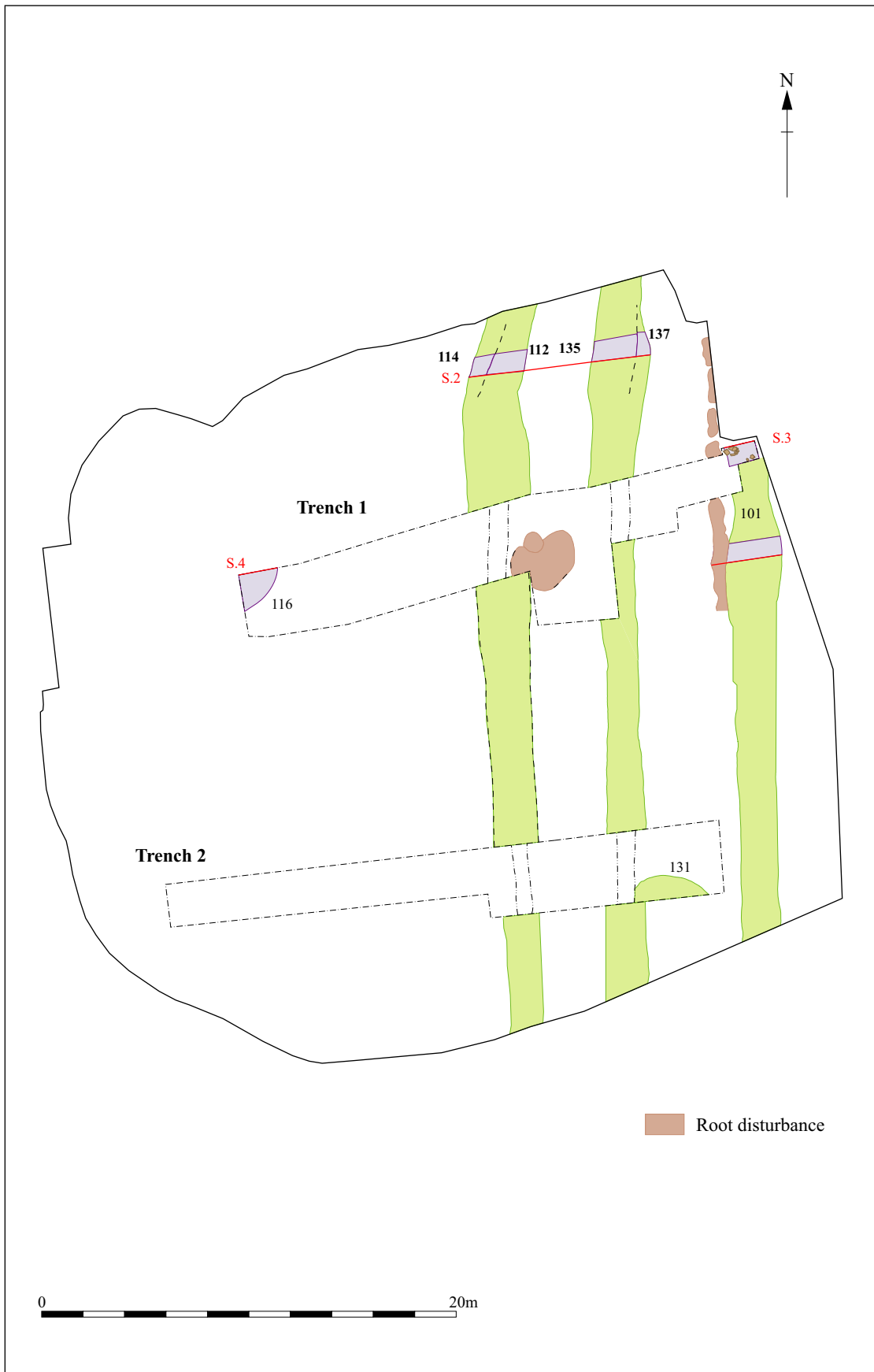


Figure 2: Area A

### **5.1.1 Subsoil (Figure 4, Section 4)**

Four subsoil layers were recorded in section along the length of Trench 1, they were, from upper to lower:

Layer 121, a modern, very dark brown, very organic clay loam with frequent roots.

Layer 120, a redeposited natural grey clay levelling dump.

Layer 119, a fine, compact dark grey organic clay silt with occasional pea grit, small stones and charcoal fragments. Represents wet soil growth, silting and possibly occasional ponding. This layer was truncated by all the ditches within the area.

Layer 122, a dense yellow-brown, slightly gritty clay silt. A lower soil horizon. Truncated by pit 116.

The two lower layers, 119 and 122, were present in slightly varying form across the whole area. The upper two layers were intermittent.

### **5.1.2 Pits**

Two pits were recorded in Area A, one in each trench – neither was visible from the level of the subsoil and thus their full extent is not known. Both were sealed by layers that were truncated by ditches **112** and **135** (see below). No finds were recovered from either feature.

#### **Pit 116 (Fig. 4, Section 4)**

Possibly circular or sub-circular, maximum known dimensions 1.60m wide, 0.50m deep (0.80m from subsoil level). Steep-sided and flat bottomed. The pit was sealed by subsoil layers 119, 120 and 121.

Upper fill 118, a dark grey fine silty clay with occasional pea grit and small stones. The fill was anaerobic with a high organic content, which oxidised quickly on exposure.

Lower fill 117, a pale brown clay silt with very frequent gravel and grit inclusions representing rapid wash, collapse and weathering.

#### **Pit 131**

Possibly oval or sub-circular, maximum known dimensions 4.00m wide, c. 1.00m deep from subsoil level though the feature was underwater and remained unexcavated. Recorded in section at limit of excavation and seen to be partly truncated by ditch **135/137**.

Upper fill 132, as 118 above.

### 5.1.3 Ditches

#### Ditches **114** and **137** (Fig. 4, Section 2)

Two shallow, parallel ditches aligned north to south lay immediately to the west of ditch **101** and a maximum of 4.50m apart at the outer edges. These ditches were subsequently recut by ditches **112** and **137**.

They each contained a single fill (113 and 136 respectively): a light-mid brown-grey clay silt with a moderate amount of small to medium sized stones. The full extent of the fill and cut are unknown due to a truncation of each ditch, but appear to extend to no more than 0.30m in depth. Two contexts were assigned to each feature and no finds were recovered from either.

#### Ditches **112** and **135** (Fig. 4, Section 2)

The deeper recuts of ditches **114** and **137** were both cut along the inner edges of the earlier features. Both had steep to gently sloping sides with concave bases extending to a maximum 2.8m in width and 0.7m in depth.

##### Lower fills 111 and 134

Homogenous dark brown-grey clay silt with occasional small to medium sized stones. Deposition through natural weathering and silting.

##### Upper fills 109, 110 and 133

Light to dark grey brown, silt-clay with rare small stone inclusions, again representing a natural organic silting process.

Four contexts were assigned to ditch **112** and five to ditch **135**. The only finds recovered from the two features were ceramic land drain fragments (respectively 628g and 159g).

Further material (CBM, animal bone and possible building stone) was recovered from within ditch **135** during the evaluation phase. See Cooper 2004 for further discussion.

#### Ditch **101** (Fig. 4, Section 3)

Aligned approximately north to south, 2.20m wide and 0.70m deep with a stepped U-shape profile. Excavated in two slots, the ditch contained 12 recorded fills.

##### Upper fill 102

A pale, blue-grey clay, compact and clean with no inclusions. This material was a deliberately dumped infilling of natural clay, direct from source. A fragment of a late 19th – early 20th century stoneware bottle, a fragment of post medieval bottle glass and two peg tile fragments were recovered.

Central fills 103, 104 (123, 124, 126, 128 not shown in section)

Mainly compact mid brown silty clays, with few inclusions. These fills mainly lay along the edges of the ditch and represent phases of natural silting. Two sherds of late 19th or early 20th century white glazed pottery were recovered from fill 128.

Central fills 105 (125 not shown in section)

A mid grey compact clay silt containing fine and medium organic matter and very occasional stone and charcoal inclusions. This was the main central fill of the ditch and represents a relatively quick phase of organic silting. A fragment of peg tile and a fragment of floor tile were recovered.

Lower fill 108 (127 not shown in section)

A dark grey clay silt with charcoal, gravel and clay inclusions. Much of this fill was the organic, waterlogged base fill of a secondary re-cutting of the ditch, rapidly deposited following the insertion of a drainage pipe.

Basal fill 106

A fairly loose, yellow-orange silty clay with washed gravel and occasional clay inclusions.

At the western edge of the northern of the two excavated slots was a small group of reused Barnack stone building blocks, 107. They sat on, and slightly within, the natural subsoil in a rough circle and appeared to have represented post-packing, though no cut could be seen. Further blocks were recovered from the lower fills of the ditch at this point.

Contexts	Pot (no)	C.B.M (g)
14	3	269

The remains of a narrow hedge line ran parallel to ditch 101 along its western side, indicated by a series of dark organic root bowls.

## 5.2 Area B (Fig. 3)

Area B was an open area excavation 36m square. It was initially stripped under archaeological monitoring to the construction level (of between 0.40m and 0.50m). At this level a large ditch was faintly visible within the subsoil and a further strip was necessary to clarify this and feature and to prospect for others hidden within the subsoil. The overall depth following this second stage was c. 0.75 - 0.80m below ground level.

A single large ditch, a short length of a shallow ditch or possible rut and five large, amorphous pits were recorded.

One environmental sample was taken from the evaluation phase from the large ditched feature (ditch 4). See Cooper 2004 for further discussion.

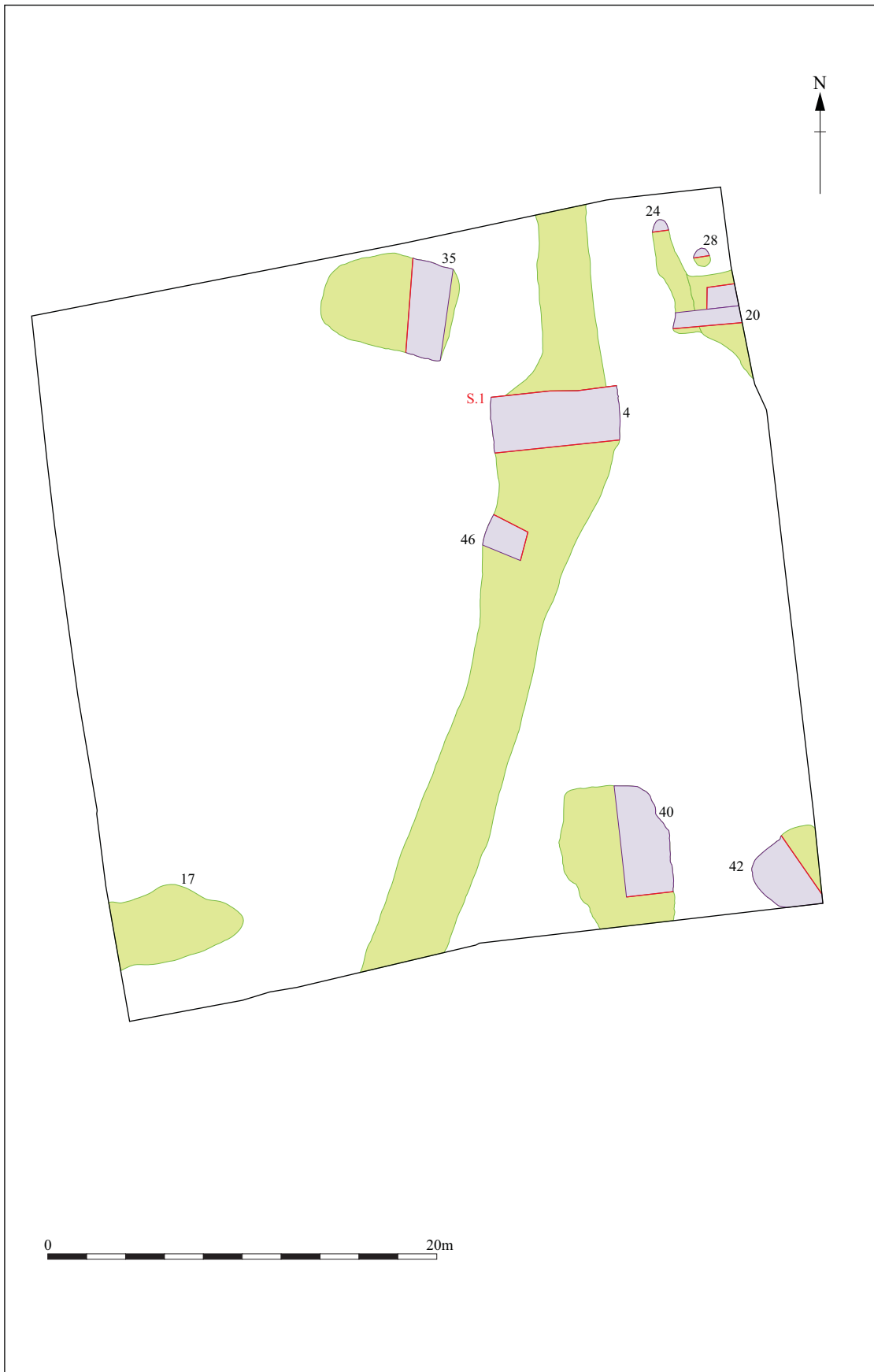


Figure 3: Area B

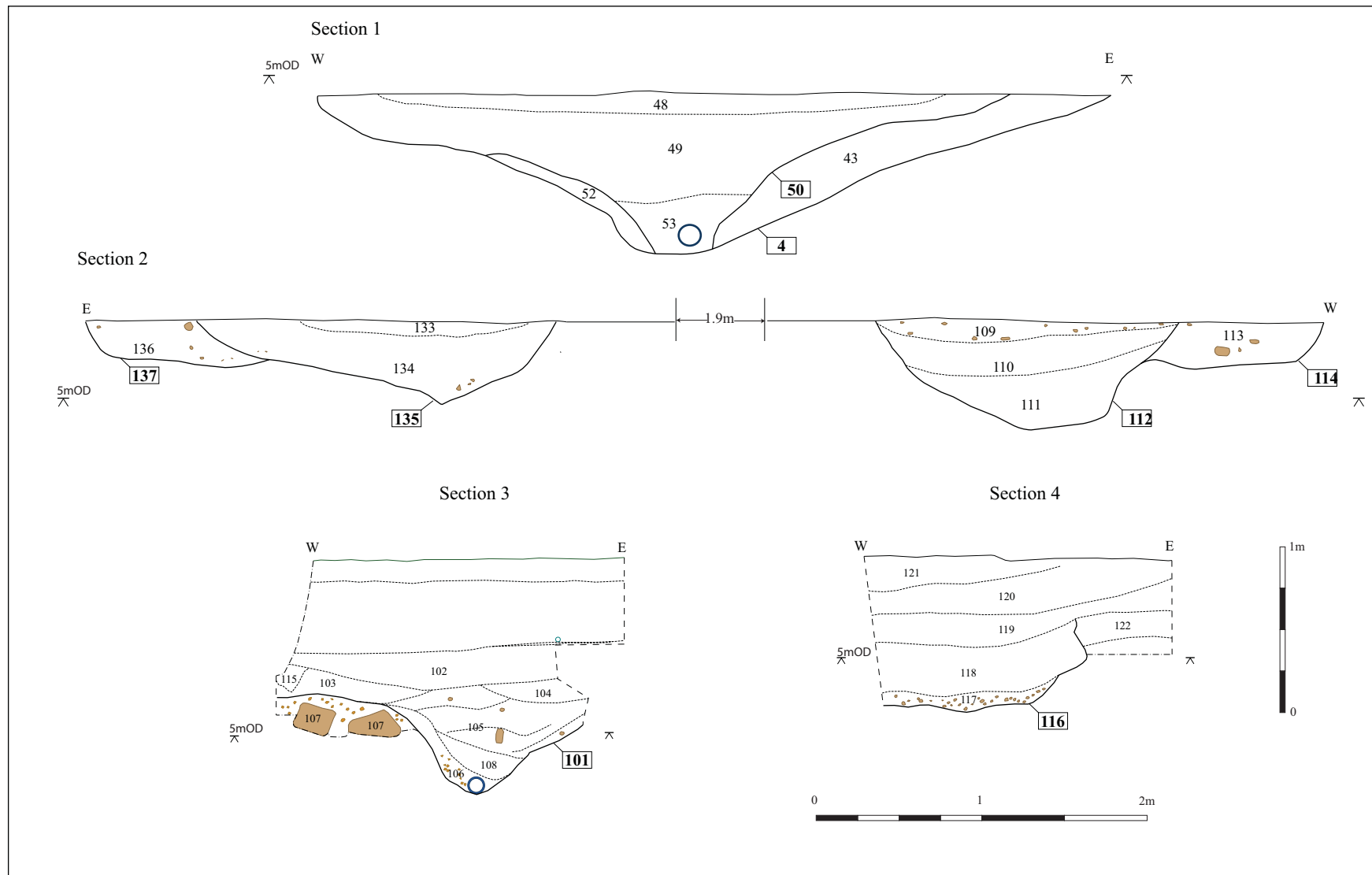


Figure 3: Section drawings



### 5.2.1 *Subsoil*

A single layer of subsoil was recorded, and remained unexcavated in patches across the area.

Layer 29, a fine, compact dark grey organic clay silt with occasional pea grit, small stones, tile fragments and charcoal. Represents wet soil growth, silting and possibly occasional ponding. The only finds recovered were small fragments of peg tile and ceramic drain (107g).

### 5.2.2 *Pits*

Five large, and generally sub-rectangular pits were recorded across Area B, four of which were partially excavated. All were very similar in nature. A further, smaller pit was excavated in the northeastern corner of the area (**28**).

#### **Pit 17**

Unexcavated but approximately linear, west to east, and a minimum of 6.60m long by 3.40m wide. 1 large fragment of peg tile (1.023kg) and 1 cattle leg bone (150g) were recovered from the surface.

#### **Pit 35**

Sub-rectangular, 6.60m long, 3.00m wide and 0.98m deep. Upper fill 33 and lower fill 34 were both orangey brown silty clays with occasional gravels and small to medium sized stones. A small quantity (256g) of peg tile was recovered.

#### **Pit 40**

Sub-rectangular, 7.20m long, 4.00m wide and 1.00m deep, concave and flat-bottomed in section. Light-mid grey brown fills (36-39) with occasional gravels throughout. A single fragment of peg tile was recovered (370g).

#### **Pit 42**

A known maximum of 3.60m across and 0.70m deep, the profile and fills (41 and 47) were the same as for pit **40** above. No finds were recovered.

#### **Pit 20**

At the edge of the excavation area, maximum known dimensions 5.60m x 2.80m and 0.80m deep. Very steep sided with a flat base and contained three fills.

Main fills 18 and 19

The lowest recorded fill was 19, a yellowish grey silty clay, moderately compact with small inclusions of stone and fragments of CBM. These were at the western side of the feature towards the top and were possibly related to the ditch or gully **24**. Fill 18 was a mid-dark brown, peaty clay silt, friable with inclusions of small stone, very frequent fragments of CBM and frequent animal bone. The entire bone assemblage was the heavily butchered fragments of an adult horse. Fill 18 also contained two sherds of highly abraded pottery; one small Grimston sherd and one red sandy ware.

## Upper fill 14

Similar to fill 18, a dark brown, clay silt, friable with small stone and CBM inclusions.

Contexts	Pot	Bone (g)	C.B.M (g)
4	2	951	4174

## Pit 28

A sub-circular pit or hollow, shallow with concave sides, a gradual break of slope and a flat base. Far smaller than the other pits, measuring only 0.70m in diameter and 0.12m deep. It contained a single fill, 27, a greyish brown friable silt-clay with occasional stone inclusions. No finds were recovered.

## 5.2.3 Ditches

## Ditch 4 (Fig. 4, Section 1)

Ditch 4 was aligned approximately north-northeast to south-southwest and at its maximum extends to a width of 5.00m and 1.00m deep – both these measured from the natural surface. The cut had gradually sloping sides and a concave U-shaped base. A wide recut (50), up to 4.00m wide, had removed most of the earlier fills; at its base was a post-medieval or modern drainage pipe.

## Early Fills 43 and 52

Light brown, friable silty clays with occasional gravel inclusions. These fills survived along the edges of the broader sections of the feature where not truncated by re-cut 50. The only finds recovered from these fills was a single large oyster shell.

## Main Fills 11 (not shown on section), 49 and 53

Fills of re-cut 50. Dark grey silty clays with occasional gravels. Friable and organic in nature they represent the natural accumulation of silts within the ditch. The pipe at the base of the feature was almost certainly cut in through the overlying fills, though no cut was visible.

## Upper Fills 3 (not shown on section) and 48

Very similar to the main fills, a dark brown silty clay with some gravel inclusions. Nearly 3.5kg of peg tile fragments and a single, unabraded sherd of Bourn D pottery were recovered. The pottery dates from the late 15th to early 17th century.

Contexts	Pot	Mortar (g)	C.B.M (g)	Stone (g)	Oyster shell (g)
11	1	60	3445	130	120

## Ditch/ Rut 24

A ditch or rut was aligned approximately north to south, 6m long, 0.80m wide and a maximum of 0.20m deep. The northern terminus of the feature and a slot toward the south were excavated. The whole length of the feature contained a large number of dumped roof tile fragments.

## Fill 23

A light brown silty clay. Thirty fragments of peg tile and two fragments of floor tile were recovered from the surface (13) and from within the feature (1.069kg).

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Ditches

Four ditches were recorded, representing three different phases of the same north to south boundary.

The earliest boundary, ditch **4**, was the largest and deepest in the sequence. It curved round from south-southwest to due north within Area B. It has been dated by a single sherd of unabraded pottery in its upper fill (Bourn D: late 15th to early 17th century), and by the fact that, unlike the later features, it does not appear on either the 1824 or 1891 Ordnance Survey maps (see Figs. 5 and 6). Two further sherds of pottery, one Roman and one later medieval (Grimston ware) were recovered from above the ditch in the evaluation stage (Cooper 2004).

The feature was broad but not significantly deep, though with such a high water table across the area this is perhaps unsurprising. None of the four large ditched features was greater than 1.00m deep, and the average depth of the large pits was 0.78m deep. The excavations of Areas A and B both took place in winter and the water table was consistently higher, and frequently far higher than 0.80m, the bases of all features being under water. The evaluation stage (Cooper 2004) was conducted in July and the water table was not significantly lower, these same features still being waterlogged.

Within ditch **4** all the finds (principally peg tile fragments), with the exception of a single oyster shell, came from the upper fill, within the top 0.10m of the ditch, suggesting a period of deliberate backfilling and levelling. The single pottery sherd may date this to around the 16th century, and this could therefore relate to the changes that would have followed the Abbey's dissolution in 1539. If the feature was levelled in the 16th century, and shows evidence of having been recut, then it is likely to have been dug sometime in the medieval or late medieval periods. This dates the origin of the feature no closer than between the 11th and 15th centuries.

The second boundary in the sequence was the double-ditched hedgebank of ditches **112/135**, and their precursors (**114/137**). No clear dating evidence was recovered from any of these features, they contained a scatter of peg tile and land drain fragments. The feature is shown on the Old Series Ordnance Survey map of 1824 as a broad boundary (a on Fig. 5), and on the 1st Edition OS map of 1891 as a remnant hedgebank or tree line (a on Fig. 6) with a further ditched boundary immediately to its east (b). It is possible that this feature replaced the earlier, medieval boundary after reorganisation following the dissolution. It lies some 80m to the west of the early ditch, and straightens what appears to have been a widely curving boundary. In the 1998 excavation (Macaulay 1999) there was similar evidence of

such continuity, with medieval ditches persisting long into the post-medieval and modern periods.

The last boundary in the sequence was the post-medieval or modern ditch **101**, cut immediately to the east of hedgebank **112/135** and clearly shown on OS maps from the 1st edition 1891 (b on Fig 6) until the construction of the school. There was a drainage pipe at the base of the ditch and the upper part had been deliberately infilled with dumped redeposited natural clay that contained pottery dating to the early part of the 20th century. There was a strip of root disturbance outside the western edge of the ditch that appears to represent a narrow, grubbed-out hedgeline. This hedgeline may have continued as the boundary marker after the ditch was backfilled.

The short length of narrow, shallow ditch **24** ran parallel to ditch **4** and c. 4m to its east. The feature was partially infilled with peg tile fragments. As a ditch this feature makes little sense and an alternative interpretation could see it as a wheel rut, packed full of dumped tile fragments used as hardcore. It seems possible that a trackway (or a series of trackways) lay outside this ditch until relatively recent times (see Conclusions below).

## 6.2 Pits

Seven large pits were recorded across the two Areas. They contained no clearly datable finds - the main assemblages of floor and roof tile being only very loosely datable to the late medieval period. In Area A at least, however, they were clearly earlier than the double-ditched hedgebank boundary **112/135**.

The pits were scattered across the area, with no discernible patterning, and they appear to represent small-scale, piecemeal quarrying. The material that was being removed was a clay/gravel mix containing too much gravel to be used as ceramic clay and too much clay to be used as gravel. The piecemeal nature of the quarrying, and the character of the material being quarried, suggests occupation close by – this kind of material could be used in the construction of buildings, ovens, kilns etc. or building platforms. The site of the medieval tile kiln, excavated in the 1960s, is believed to lie between 50 and 100m to the south and, if the pits were of medieval origin then this may have been where this material was being utilised.

Many features in Area B contained relatively large quantities of peg tile fragments (and occasional floor tile) in their backfilling, and some of these show evidence of burning and distortion. It seems likely that this material was being redeposited, as levelling, from waste heaps of misfired and broken tile from within the kiln site.

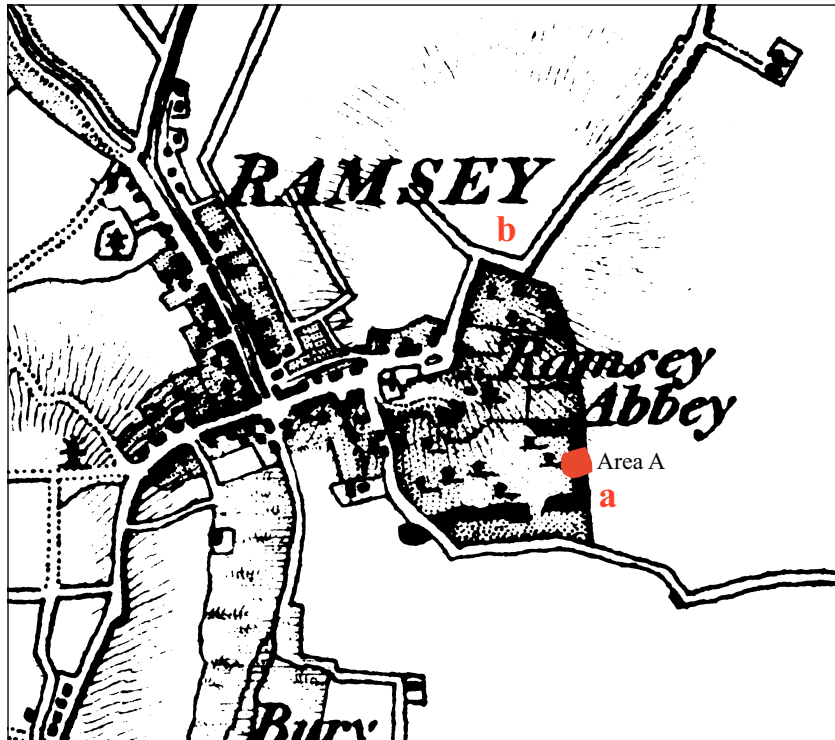


Figure 5: 1824 Old Series OS map showing location of Area A

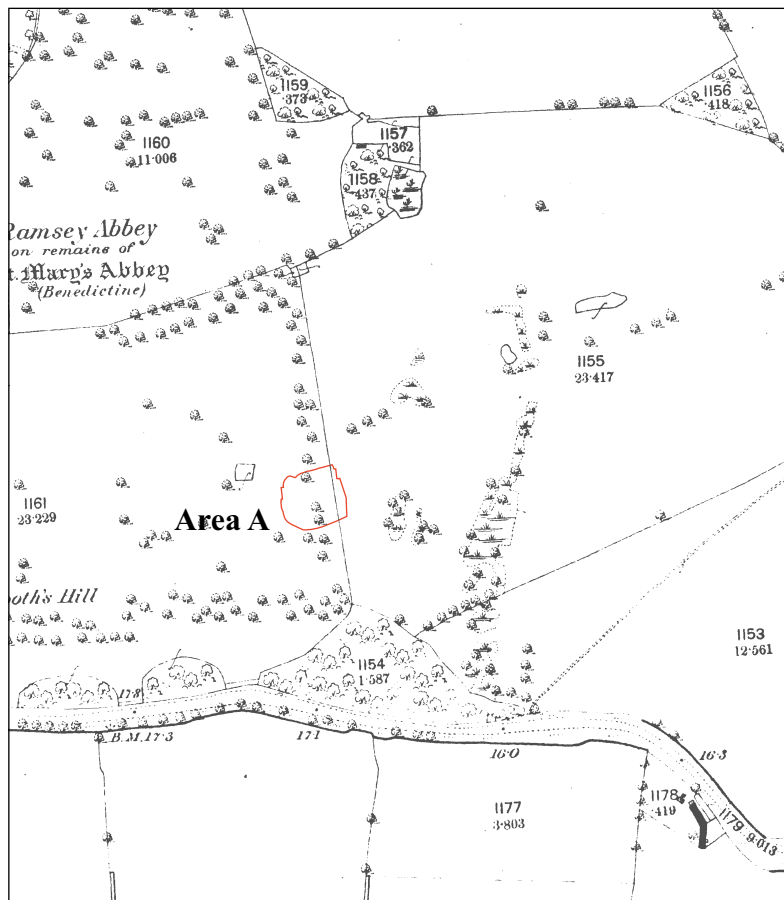


Figure 6: 1891 1st Edition OS map showing location of Area A

## 7 Conclusions

The three ditched boundaries recorded, while not clearly dated, would appear to have their origins in three separate periods; the medieval or late medieval, the post-medieval and the modern. The latter, probably late 19th century, ditch was a direct replacement of the double ditched hedgebank seen on the first (1824) OS map. This was shown as a major landscape feature and may have been in existence for some time. The hedgebank itself would appear to have been a realignment, and a straightening, of the large early ditch further to the east (ditch 4). This realignment probably took place sometime after the dissolution of the monastery and the appropriation and reorganisation of its lands. If the single pottery sherd in the levelling of the early ditch dates this realignment, it would date to the 16th or first half of the 17th centuries.

When the large early ditch is plotted on to the 1st Edition OS map it is seen to form the southeastern part of a large oval enclosure (A on Fig. 7), lining up with a curving woodland boundary at the south-southeast (B) and marked by the line of Hollow Lane around the south and west (C). From the woodland round almost to the High Street the boundary follows the 5m contour.

There is a break in the enclosure at the west where the church and Church Green, within the enclosure, face on to the old market place and the town beyond it. It then continues for a short length along part of New Road to the north of the market (D) where it crosses the 5m contour and the continuous curve of the enclosure ends.

The Royal Commission for Historic Monuments (RCHM) recorded the more obvious earthworks within the Abbey environs in the 1960s, a plan of which appears in the Victoria County History (Page *et al* 1932). They recorded Booths Hill, the Anarchy fortification, at the extreme south of the Abbey precinct (E), and at the extreme north a cluster of very large rectangular 'pits' (F) one of which was still shown as a pond. These lay at the northwestern terminus of a large earthwork ditch that curved around to the east and south and would form the northeastern part of the enclosure (G). This earthwork is labelled '*Remains of Precincts of Abbey*' on the RCHM plan.

From these pond-like earthworks to the end of the western side of the enclosure at New Road corner the enclosure ditch is replaced by the line of a ditch or channel (H) that runs below and parallel to the 5m contour (at approximately 3m OD) and has the affect of flattening off the enclosure's northwestern side. This channel either feeds into, or out of the large pond-like earthwork complex.

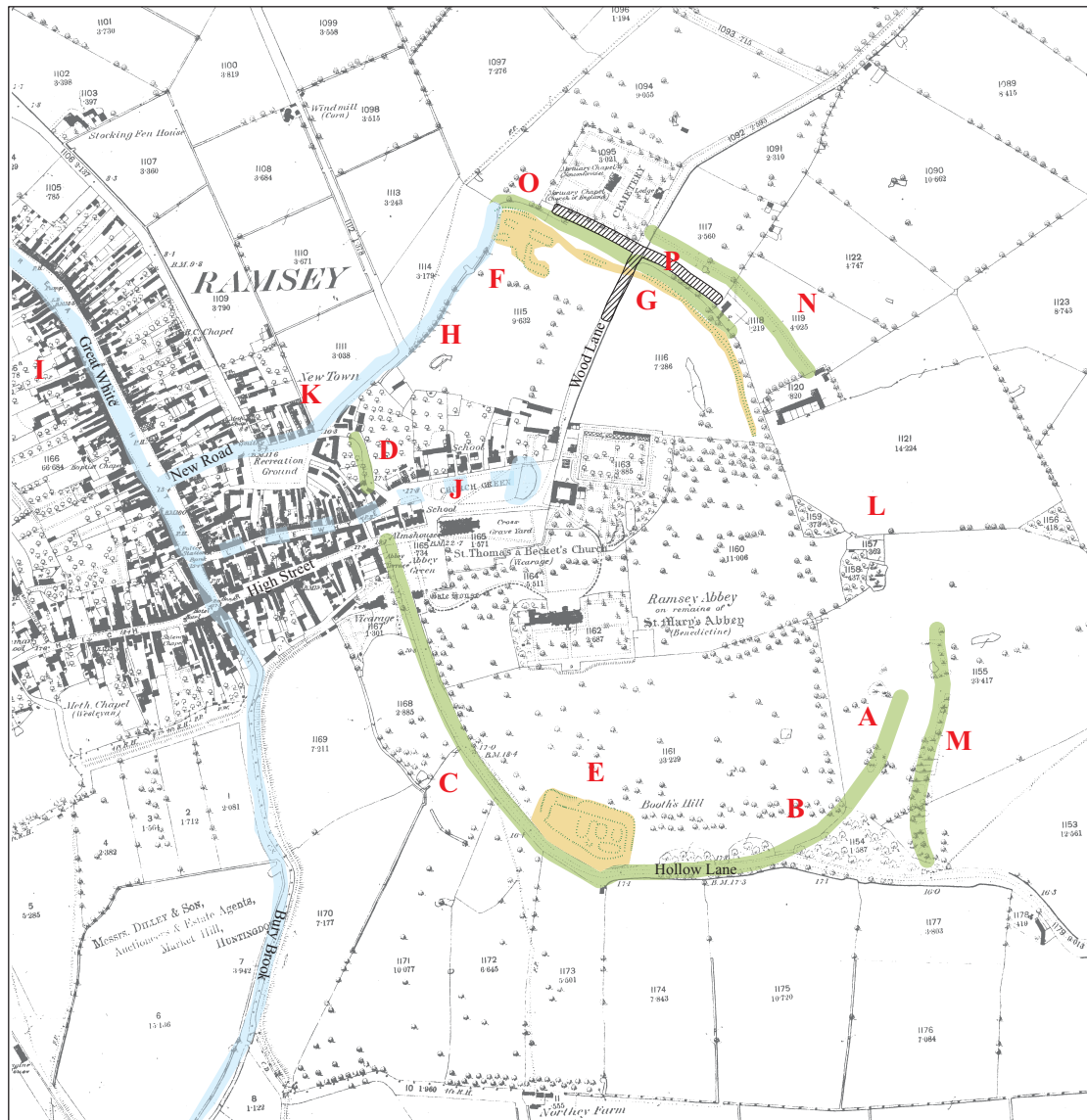


Figure 7: Interpretive map showing enclosure elements and possible lodes mentioned in the text

This large oval enclosure would appear to represent the Abbey precinct boundary, undated but medieval or late medieval in origin. Booth's Hill lies within this boundary at the south, and could either be seen to have been set within it (dating the enclosure to before the Anarchy period – c. 1135 -1150) or to have been deliberately enclosed by it (dating it to sometime after the Anarchy period).

The location of Booth's Hill is somewhat puzzling. Fortifications such as this were generally built to command the principal land and/or water transport routes, to control the movement of goods and people. Booth's Hill would appear to protect neither the main road nor water routes into the Abbey, if it is assumed that the main crossing point from the mainland onto Ramsey Island would have been heading due east along what is now the High St (see Fig. 8), and as this area also overlooks the principal waterway (see below). However, as the terrain model shows (Fig. 8), there is a band of relatively high ground within the fen that separates Ramsey from a small island to the south (no name is shown but Northey Farm sits at its northeastern limit and it can therefore be assumed to be Northey Island) and on to the peninsular occupied by Bury. Bury was the principal settlement before the relatively recent growth of Ramsey and a direct route across, via causeways, to Ramsey would give landfall at Booth's Hill. Unlike the crossing from the mainland to the west, this route would not involve a crossing of the Bury Brook. This route would also provide a reason for the siting of Booth's Hill, and has been suggested before (David Cozens pers. comm.). Parts of this route may be fossilised in the footpaths that still run to the east of the Bury Brook between Bury and Ramsey.

It is known that the causeway to the mainland due west from the Abbey was in place by the middle or end of the 12th century, and it is possible that until this route was constructed the main route onto the island was direct from Bury to the south. The causeway would not only have had to cross deep fen but also the course, or multiple courses, of the Bury Brook and it may be that the canalisation of the Bury Brook was begun at this time – a causeway would necessitate the closing off of all but one course of the stream, and also the construction of a bridge. The early bridge would have been of wood, but by the 13th century this had been replaced by a stone bridge.

The channel that runs along the northwestern side of the precinct is of further interest. There has been some debate as to where the Abbey docks or hythes could have been located. It is known that the channel that ran up the Great Whyte (I on Fig. 7), a canalised stream called the Bury Brook, was tidal and that river traffic came from the Nene and the Ramsey Lode up to the town by this route. The Abbey would almost certainly have had separate docking facilities however, and the traditional theory has been that there was an off-shoot lode which ran up the Little Whyte (J), parallel to the High Street and up to the pond at



the back of Church Green, and that this pond represents what remains of the lode terminal.

The Bury Brook was culverted in 1852-4 and the road that now sits high above it lies at c. 3.60m OD, implying that the Brook itself cannot ever have risen to more than 2.50m even with the banks artificially raised. To the east of the Great Whyte, along the Newtown Road that runs parallel, the land falls away rapidly to just 2m OD. The obvious problem with the traditional route for the Abbey lode, up the Little Whyte to the pond on the Green, is the height difference between the two areas. The land around the pond is at 6.40m OD, which means that the water level of any lode running off the Bury Brook would have been at least 4m below ground height by the time it reached here, with the base of the lode a metre or more lower still. This would seem impractical in the extreme for unloading the low-lying barges that would have come up the Bury Brook.

A second location for the Abbey docking facilities has been suggested recently, only 150m further east but on the other side of the island. What appeared to be a wide lode with a tripod crane to one side was recorded during excavations by the CCC AFU in the grounds of the Abbey School (Macaulay & Atkins forthcoming). However, this land also lies at well above the 5m contour and again it is difficult to see how a lode would have reached this area without a system of locks to bring the barges up.

The large earthworks that lay at the northern tip of the enclosure are here suggested as an alternative location for the abbey docks. They were both regular and extensive, covering an area of some 75m by 60m, and they were set on and below the 5m contour at the end of a channel that survived until recent times. It is possible that they represent yet more ponds, in these situations normally assumed to be fishponds, but the island is dotted with relict, and extant, ponds and the location of these, at the only part on the precinct circuit easily accessible to the Brook, argues for a different purpose.

There are (admittedly vague) records of many other channels and waterways, lodes and hythes, within the town, most long since infilled or culverted. To quote *Ramsey: The Lives of an English Fenland Town, 1200-1600* (DeWindt and DeWindt 2006):

'..the whole island as well as the mainland...was riddled with waterways of various types, shapes and sizes. The great lade that flowed through the middle of the Great Whyte was obviously the most prominent, but others cut through properties, many of them emptying into the great lade itself. For example, a lade led to New Field, with its adjacent lane...'

New Field, and its adjacent lane cannot now be located, however, one possibility may be New Road leading into New Town (K on Fig. 7) – there were, until recent times, very few roads or lanes in what was a very small town, most building being along the Great Whyte, the High

Street and Bridge Street. The route from the Great Whyte up New Road and along the northwestern side of the Abbey precinct is an obvious one for a lode to take, following the contour at well below 5m OD. The second half of this route was followed by both a large ditch and a trackway until very recently, and remains a property boundary to this day.

The construction of the houses within the Abbey grounds to the west of Wood Lane, along Abbots Close, which would have destroyed most of these earthworks, took place in the early 1970s. The western extension to this estate, Abbey Fields, would have removed the remainder of the earthworks and was built much later in the late 1980s. To the east of Wood Lane, in 1983, during the construction of houses along Oates Way and Lawrence Road, limited rescue excavation work was carried out by Basil Dennis, a local amateur archaeologist. This work revealed cess pits, large pits or ponds, ditches and large amounts of relatively unabraded medieval pottery, principally of the 13th and 14th centuries, along with stone objects and a lead seal (unpublished notes). These excavations, necessarily very limited, can only have exposed a fraction of the archaeology that was present on this site. This estate was built right up to the earthwork along the northeastern precinct boundary recorded by the RCHM. There was clearly a lot of activity within this northern part of the enclosure in the medieval period - what it may have related to, however, is unknown.

The precinct enclosure is almost certainly more complex than it appears at first glance. The eastern, central part of the circuit is unclear, the enclosure ditches are seen at the northeast and southeast, where they cut across the high island ridge, but are not visible at the centre across the bay of low-lying fenland that separates them (L on Fig 7). The straightened post-medieval and modern versions, on the line of the hedgebank and ditch recorded in Area A, appear on the Old Series OS map and, with one gap, on the 1st Edition OS. There is no map or excavation evidence however, for the continuation of the earlier, wider boundary, and it is possible that this low-lying area was still deep fen in the medieval period and that some other form of boundary, such as a fence or causeway, would have crossed it.

At both the southeast and northeast there is some evidence (stronger at the southeast) for the existence of a double boundary, or of different versions of the precinct. At the southeast, a second, and possibly even larger ditch can be seen on aerial photographs and on the OS maps, running parallel about 40m to the east (M on Fig 7). On the OS maps this appears as a wide but clearly linear marshy hollow, lined by trees. At the northeast the 1st Edition OS also shows the remnant of a possible second curving boundary, preserved as a trackway, and approximately the same distance further out to the east (N).

This possible preservation of the boundary as a trackway is of interest. The precinct boundary at the south and west survives for a great length as Hollow Lane, and a trackway ran along the northwestern part of the boundary (H) until the modern houses were built. At the northeast of the precinct the old route of Wood Lane is shown on the Old Series OS map, before it was shifted to its present location (b on Fig 5). As the road came out of the precinct boundary from the southwest it originally formed a T junction, turning left (O on Fig 7), around the precinct boundary and down to the Fen (and, perhaps more significantly, to the putative Abbey docks) and right (P), around the boundary for a distance before turning to the northeast and continuing up the island ridge. This latter section, before turning to the north, can be little other than a relic of an outer-precinct 'ring-road' – it has nowhere else to go.

Further to this, at the southeast, between the excavated inner boundary (A) and the earthwork outer boundary (M), a small, square patch of land has, for unknown reasons, been left unimproved within the surrounding playing fields. This patch, immediately south of Area B, is now covered in trees, but on aerial photographs taken in 1998 still showed as rough grassland with a hedgeline along its eastern side. In this rough ground a series of what appear to be trackways can be seen, parallel to the two ditches to either side. It seems possible that there were trackways still surviving here, leading into the fields from Hollow Lane, until very recently indeed. These (a), along with the slight earthworks of both the inner and outer ditches (b and c), can be clearly seen on the aerial photograph shown as Plate 1. It is possible that the shallow 'gully' recorded in Area B, infilled with tile fragments, represents a deeper rut within of one of these trackways.

Also visible on Plate 1 is a third ditch, a further 50m to the east (d). This ditch appears to cut straight across the Island, cutting off a small peninsular to the east, and links into the system of drainage dykes to the north and east. All these features are also clearly visible on the later 2003 series of aerial photographs.

In conclusion, the results of the excavations conducted at the Ailwyn School, though unremarkable in themselves, appear to have far wider implications. From the series of medieval and post-medieval boundaries an attempt can be made to establish the circuit of the medieval Abbey precinct, and from this follows the suggestion of the location of the Abbey docks and the hypothesis of a trackway circumnavigating the precinct boundary.

The precinct itself would measure approximately 800m north to south and 550m east to west, with the long axis aligned north-northwest to south-southeast, and would enclose an area of roughly 35 hectares. The area enclosed at Ramsey compares well with other Abbey precincts, both Benedictine and Cistercian. The precinct of the Benedictine Abbey at Peterborough is 600 x 250m, and those at the

Cistercian Abbeys of Fountains, Rievaulx, Furness and Byland are all comparable at between 800 - 1000m by 400 – 700m (Aston 1993, 92-95). All bar one of these also have their main gate at the centre of the western side of the precinct.



*Plate 1: 1997 aerial photograph, showing earthworks/cropmarks and location of Area B*

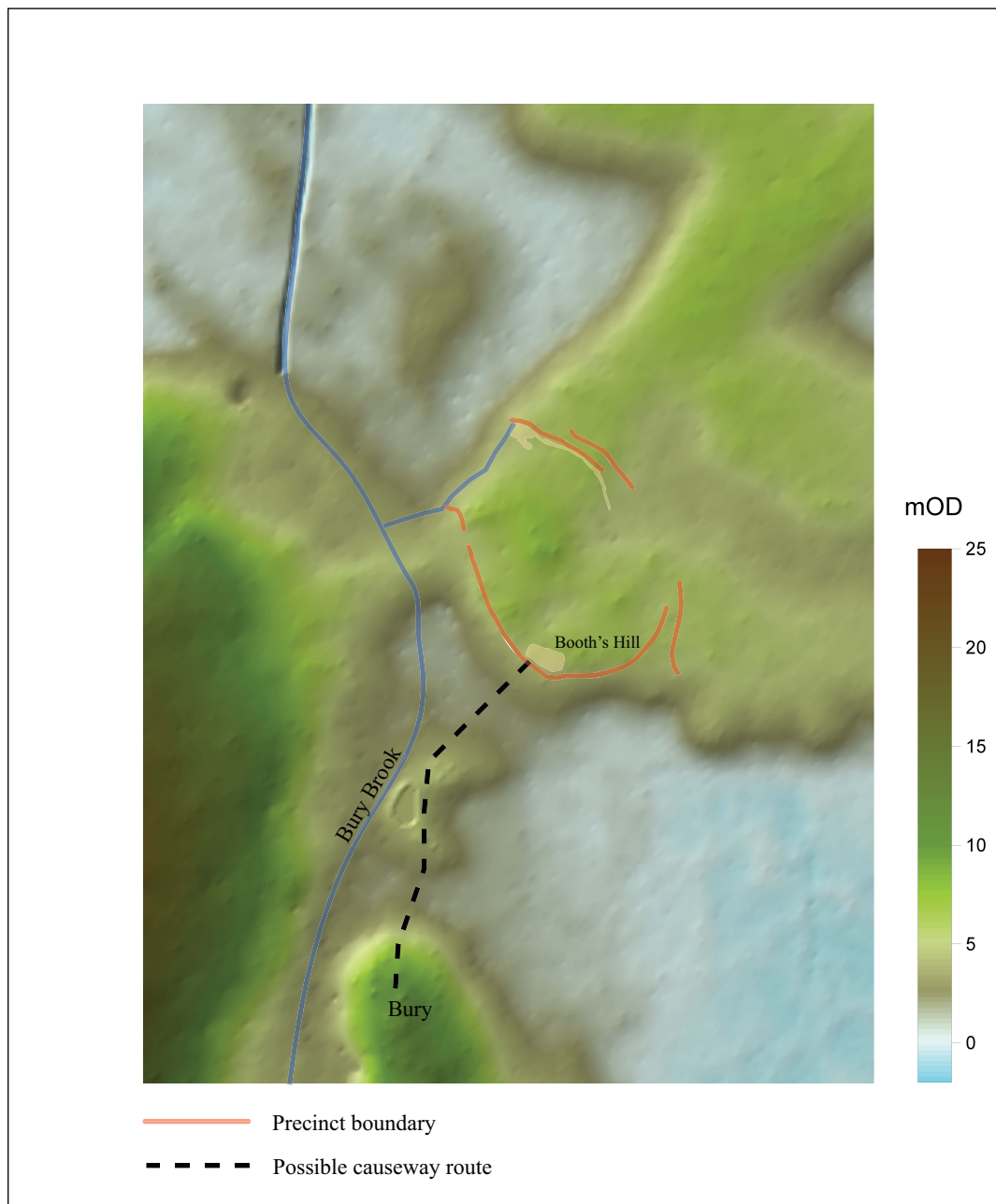


Figure 8 : Terrain Model

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Niall Inman and Dean Clark of Property and Procurement, Cambridgeshire County Council, who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. Spencer Cooper supervised the excavation of Area B and the archaeologists on site were Claire Martin and Dennis Payne; the author supervised the excavation of Area A and the archaeologists on site were Claire Martin and Chris Thatcher. The project was managed throughout by Stephen Macaulay. The illustrations are by Crane Begg, Séverine Bézie and Alex Howe. Thanks to Chris Faine who identified the animal bone and to Claire Martin for her assistance in the initial post-excavation work. The brief for archaeological works was written by Kasia Gdaniec, who visited the sites and monitored the excavations throughout.

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## Appendix 1: The Finds

Area	Context	Cut	Type	Object	W (kg)	Description
B	3	4	ditch	Vessel	0.016	1 sherd Bourn D, unabraded, slip decoration. Late 15th to early 17th C
B	18	20	pit	Vessel	0.021	1 sherd very abraded Grimston, 1 sherd very abraded red medieval sandy ware
A	102	101	ditch	Vessel	0.231	Late 19th/early 20th C stoneware bottle
A	102	101	ditch	Vessel	0.004	1 fragment PM bottle glass
A	128	101	ditch	Vessel	0.013	2 sherds late 19th/early 20th C white glazed pottery
A	99999			Vessel	0.036	1 large sherd late medieval Ely ware

Table 1: Pottery

Area	Context	Cut	Type	Object	W (kg)	Description
B	3	4	ditch	CBM	0.101	Overfired/burnt peg tile fragments
B	3	4	ditch	CBM	3.344	30 abraded peg tile fragments, 2 brick fragments (yellow & orange)
B	13	24	ditch	CBM	0.852	30 abraded peg tile fragments, 1 abraded floor tile fragment
B	13	24	ditch	CBM	0.217	Floor tile fragment, very abraded
B	16	17	pit	CBM	1.023	3 large, fresh orange peg tile fragments
B	18	20	pit	CBM	0.041	Yellow peg tile
B	18	20	pit	CBM	4.133	50 yellow and orange peg tile fragments
B	29		layer	CBM	0.600	1 large peg tile fragment
B	33	35	pit	CBM	0.107	3 peg tile fragments
B	34	35	pit	CBM	0.149	peg tile fragments
B	36	40	pit	CBM	0.370	Abraded, rough, red floor tile fragment
A	102	101	ditch	CBM	0.112	2 abraded peg tile fragments
A	105	101	ditch	CBM	0.157	1 fragment peg tile, 1 fragment floor tile
A	134	135	ditch	CBM	0.054	2 abraded peg tile fragments
A	138	112	ditch	CBM	0.628	Ceramic land drain fragment
A	139	135	ditch	CBM	0.105	Abraded peg tile fragment
B	99999			CBM	0.816	9 peg tile fragments

Table 2: Ceramic building material

Area	Context	Cut	Type	Object	W (kg)	Description
B	16	17	pit	Bone	0.146	1 cattle leg bone
B	18	20	pit	Bone	0.951	Lots of small pieces of a single horse
B	18	20	pit	Shell	0.003	mussel
B	18	20	pit	Bone	0.436	Lots of small pieces of a single horse
B	43	4	ditch	Shell	0.115	Large oyster shell

Table 3: Faunal remains

Area	Context	Cut	Type	Object	W (kg)	Description
B	3	4	ditch	Mortar	0.060	Very hard lime mortar, painted black
B	3	4	ditch	Stone	0.127	White sandstone fragment

Table 4: Stone and mortar

## Appendix 2: Environmental remains

By Rachel Fosberry

Over the course of the three archaeological interventions – Evaluation (2004), Area B (2005) and Area A (2006) – five environmental samples were taken and processed. Ten litres of each sample were initially processed and the results of this assessment were so poor that no further work was undertaken. Apart from traces of charcoal the only macro-botanical evidence recovered was a single nettle seed.

Sample	Area	Context	Cut	Type	Results
1	B (eval)	equivalent to 49	4	ditch	Slight charcoal
2	A (eval)	equivalent to 122	layer	subsoil	Single nettle seed
3	A (eval)	equivalent to 133	135	ditch	Nothing recovered
4	A (eval)	equivalent to 134	135	ditch	Slight charcoal
5	A	118	116	pit	Nothing recovered





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