

# An Archaeological Evaluation at 59 Histon Road, Cambridge



Laura James

CAMBRIDGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



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**Laura James**

Illustrations by  
Vicky Herring

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University of Cambridge  
Department of Archaeology

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## *Summary*

*An Archaeological evaluation was carried out at 59 Histon Road, Cambridge between 21<sup>st</sup> April and 6<sup>th</sup> June 2011. One linear feature was found with an east-west orientation which was seen in two of the three trenches opened. This small ditch was dated to the late Medieval period on the basis of recovered pottery. This feature was potentially a boundary marker for a property plot running back off Histon Road.*

## **1. Introduction**

As part of a planning application an archaeological evaluation was carried out in the garden of 59 Histon Road (TL 442 596; fig. 1) on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011 and the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2011. The project was undertaken by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) on behalf of Cocksedge Building Contractors and Cambridge & County Developments Ltd prior to planning permission for the development of 5 houses on the plot to an agreed specification (Standing 2011). The site code was HIS11.

### *1.1 Geology and Topography*

The proposed development area (PDA) is situated on the boundary between a ridge of superficial 1<sup>st</sup> river terrace sands and gravels and out-cropping Gault Clay (British Geological Survey; <http://maps.bgs.ac.uk/GeoIndex/default.aspx>). The PDA, located west and fronting Histon Road, slopes very gently away from the road and is situated at c. 18.6m AOD.

### *1.2 Archaeological and Historical Background*

Within the wider environs the evidence for early prehistoric activity is limited to the gravel region between the area of the University Observatory and Howe House and Palaeolithic material found respectively situated southwest, west and north of the PDA and includes evidence of mineral extraction. Although no Mesolithic finds were recorded within this wider area a scatter of Mesolithic material was recovered during the Vicar's Farm excavations south of Madingley Road (Lucas & Whittaker 2001) with Neolithic finds limited to a number of stone tools also found during gravel extraction.

Although a single Late Neolithic – and a small number of Late Bronze Age – features were identified during evaluation work on the North West Cambridge site (Evans & Newman 2010I), occupation there only appears to have begun during the Middle Iron Age and no Bronze Age material was found; however, excavations in 1975 in Girton, revealed Bronze Age material (Croft 1977) and a Bronze Age ring ditch is recorded within the wider northwest Cambridge landscape and evidence of Bronze Age activity was found on the NIAB site northwest of the PDA (Mason 2008). By the later/Late Iron Age, occupation was well established on both the gravel and clay areas of west Cambridge. At Marion Close, two large ditches were recorded and probably represent a discrete Iron Age settlement comparable to the Addenbrooke's site (Mortimer &

Evans 1997; Evans *et al.* 2009). Further Iron Age material was recovered as part of the New Hall excavations (Evans 1996) and excavation of Arbury Banks, northeast of the study area confirmed this monuments Iron Age origins (Evans 1991; Knight 1995; Evans & Knight 2002, 2005), with further evidence of later Iron Age activity recorded in the Castle Hill area (Evans & Ten Harkel 2011).

Although Iron Age occupation in the area appears to be sparse prior to the Roman Conquest, larger-scale occupation appears instead to have begun in earnest shortly after the Roman invasion in 43 AD, with the accepted picture of Cambridge during this period being one of a settlement centred almost exclusively upon the Castle Hill area (*e.g.* Alexander & Pullinger 2000). Recent fieldwork, however, is demonstrating that this interpretation is somewhat limited, with significant settlement evidence having been detected to the west of the presumed centre (Lucas & Whittaker 2001). Finds from this period have also been made to the southeast of the Roman town and there is certainly evidence of Roman activity on the riverfront (Dickens 1996) and the Park Street/Jesus Lane area (Alexander *et al.* 2003), as well as further to the south of the town (Dickens 1999). It is therefore clear that the extent of Roman settlement on the southern bank of the Cam was greater than has generally been supposed and that the southern hinterland of the town was extensive, although currently poorly understood. Further evidence of important Roman settlement activity has also been found in the Arbury area of the city and Histon Road, close to the junction with the A14 and includes inhumation and cremation burials, field boundaries and a villa; at present the precise route of the main northeast-southwest axis of Akeman Street has not been definitively confirmed, although its projected line just west of Carlton Way remains the most likely projection.

Five major Romano-British settlements were also recently identified during the trial trenching on the proposed North West Cambridge site, of which two lay on the clays: an Early Roman period farmstead on the south side of Washpit Brook and, down by Madingley Road, what is possibly a Late Roman period villa. Settlements of this period extended almost continuously along the southern side of the gravels found here and one site (Site IV; Evans & Newman 2010) covers more than 9 hectares and exhibits both 'Early' and Late Roman period components (and with an Iron Age precursor). This evidence is supported by earlier records of Roman period archaeology within the landscape and, as with the prehistoric remains, most finds of this period were found during coprolite and gravel extraction of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Significant amongst these finds were the two covered stone coffins found close together at Gravel Hill Farm in 1863. One was a male, and the other female. No grave goods were recovered in the coffins, but near the female burial was a cache of four glass bottles, a colour-coated beaker, jet jewellery and other artefacts. Cremation burials were discovered in 1861 and a number of coins and bronze objects have been found near the University Observatory and University Farm, with pottery also found.

A known Roman road, the *Via Devana*, follows the alignment of Huntingdon Road and runs from the walled Roman settlement at Castle Hill (Alexander & Pullinger 2000), west towards Girton and Godmanchester. Babington originally traced this section in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Babington 1883). The exact location of this road is uncertain and Babington states that it runs to the left of the present road; writing earlier than Babington, the Lysons state the current Huntingdon Road was turnpiked and moved north of the old Roman road (1808 [1978]; 44). It is worth noting at this point that Huntingdon Road has in the past been considered to run on or very close to

the *Via Devana*. Recent work, however, has suggested that acceptance of this route may not be so straightforward. Excavations at New Hall (Hutton 2009) indicated a section of parallel ditches that may be the line of the road.

Other Roman finds from west Cambridge include a barrow adjacent to the line of the Roman road at Howe House destroyed during construction of Huntingdon Road. There were several Roman coins within the barrow, although this does not conclusively date the feature itself. A discrete, small round rise in ground level was observed during a site visit in 2001, in the vicinity of Bunker Hill that may represent a surviving barrow; however, aerial photographic assessments of the area revealed a longer headland feature of which this may be a part. A Roman Sestertius of Marcus Aurelius was found on Woodlark Road in 1888; a number of Roman inhumations were discovered during building work along Grange Road and coins and pottery have been recovered along Madingley Road. At Girton College, in 1881, an extensive Roman and Anglo-Saxon cemetery was discovered (Fox 1923). The remains consisted principally of the contents of two square wooden boxes, the form of which was clearly traced by the nails (Babington 1883). Included in these 'boxes' were glass cinerary vessels, various metal objects, other glass objects and Samian ware and other pottery. Excavations at Brownlow Road in 1991 revealed a Roman ditch and other smaller features. Fieldwalking prior to the constructions of the A14 (formerly A45) road resulted in the collection of several stray Roman pottery finds (Kemp 1993). Other spot finds include a bronze ring found in 1904 on Huntingdon Road and pottery found in service trenches dug in 1938 on the north side of Windsor Road. Evaluation at High Cross also revealed Roman occupation evidence, probably related to small-scale settlement of the later 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries (Whittaker 2001). The much larger Vicar's Farm site, revealed an important settlement site spanning the 1<sup>st</sup> to the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, with associated cremation and inhumation cemeteries (Lucas & Whittaker 2001). Other sites are also recorded to the south, within Newnham, on Grange Road, at Newnham College and at Burrells Field, opposite Robinson College (Hall 2001; Whittaker 2000; Gdaniec 1992). These later sites imply a landscape of small-scale settlements, probably farmsteads, relatively evenly distributed within the western hinterland of the Roman town. Furthermore, recent fieldwalking in the Trinity Conduit Head area has resulted in the collection of Roman pottery (Lucas & Whittaker 2001).

Following the decline of Roman town during the 5<sup>th</sup> century the level of occupation in the area appears to have temporarily decreased, as the evidence for Early Saxon (*c.* 410-700) activity in and around Cambridge primarily comprises material recovered during the 19<sup>th</sup> century from pagan cemeteries on the outskirts of the city (*cf.* Dodwell *et al.* 2004; Cessford & Dickens 2005; Fox 1923). Very little occupational evidence from this period has yet been identified, with the exception of a small 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century settlement that was recently excavated on the western bank of the Cam around a kilometre to the south of the former Roman town (Dodwell *et al.* 2004) and the Anglo-Saxon inhumation burial and objects found during gravel extraction in 1903 (Fox 1923) recorded in addition to an important cemetery of the period found at Girton College in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Middle to Late Saxon (*c.* 700-900) activity, in contrast, appears to have been primarily refocused upon the Castle Hill area, where a 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century execution cemetery has recently been investigated (Cessford & Dickens 2005; Cessford *et al.* 2007). By the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century it is clear that some form of settlement had been re-established in the area, as this was occupied by the Viking

Great Army in 875, and the region was incorporated into the Danelaw from *c.* 886 until its conquest by Edward the Elder in *c.* 917 (Cam 1934, 39; Lobel 1975, 3). Although it has been suggested that occupation extended across both the northern and southern banks of the Cam at this time (Cam 1934: 39; Haslam 1984: 19; Hines 1999: 136; Taylor 1999: 44-50), there has as yet been little opportunity to test this theory archaeologically. Nevertheless, regardless of the settlement's precise extent, it certainly remained only an 'economically viable backwater' up until the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century (Hines 1999: 136); following this date, however, it emerged as a significant urban centre. By the late 10<sup>th</sup> century a mint had been established (Lobel 1975, 3) and the town was being linked to a group of important trading centres including Norwich, Thetford and Ipswich (*cf.* Fairweather 2005), thereby emphasising the central role played by river trade in its rapid economic growth. By the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge acted as the leading inland port in the county, through which goods and services were disseminated to many of the surrounding regional towns (Cam 1934: 43).

By this time the town was fully established on the eastern side of the river, with a smaller settlement recorded in the Domesday book around the mill area at Newnham, and was probably already enclosed by an extensive boundary work that later became known as the King's Ditch. Although the eponymous 'king' is usually interpreted as being either John (1167-1216), who repaid the bailiffs of Cambridge the costs of enclosing of the city in 1215, or Henry III (1207-72), who paid for its refortification in 1267 (Cooper 1842-53), a recent radio-carbon determination derived from the basal fill of the ditch at the Grand Arcade site indicates that the boundary was at least partially extant by the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century (Craig Cessford, *pers.com*). By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the ditch had largely silted up beyond practical use (Atkinson 1907) – despite numerous edicts having been passed for its cleaning and maintenance – and Cambridge's role as a dominant port was similarly long since over (Bryan 1999: 97). At this stage the economic wealth of the town was no longer based upon river-borne trade, as it had been throughout the Medieval period, but was instead largely centred around the University (founded in 1209). The expansion of this institution had greatly benefited from royal investment, especially from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards (*ibid.*: 94-6), and its growth was also given significant impetus by the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536-40 since many of the disbanded religious houses were subsequently converted into Colleges (*cf.* Willis & Clark 1886). Indeed the influence of these Colleges has been one of the primary factors in shaping the landscape of Cambridge ever since, with the central riverside area (once the heartland of Medieval river trade activity) having been increasingly encroached upon from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Bryan 1999: 95).

At this time, the PDA was agricultural land with a small settlement nearby, probably in the area of Howes Close (Hall & Ravensdale 1976). Evidence of Howes Close Medieval settlement was found during trial trenching beside the former University Department of Applied Biology field station buildings on Huntingdon Road. Directly related to Cambridge's Medieval agricultural practices were traces of ridge-and-furrow agriculture and a trackway found during fieldwork in these 'West Fields' (Armour 2008; Evans & Newman 2010). The mainly rural landscape of the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century landscape around the PDA is further evidenced by the presence of large amounts of ridge and furrow identified from aerial photography and the HER and it is clear from the historical and cartographic documents of the later Medieval period that

Histon Road alignment was already established by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, albeit on a slightly different orientation.

The landscape around the PDA is known to contain extensive remains of Iron Age, Romano-British, Saxon and Medieval activity (Alexander and Pullinger, 1999) as noted above and in the Project Specification, (Standing 2011). The area was relatively densely utilised in the Late Iron Age and Roman periods with evidence of occupation around Huntingdon Road (*Via Devana*), Murray Edwards (formerly New Hall College) and Castle Hill. This evidence suggests a regular distribution of Iron Age and Roman settlements across the plateau above the River Cam valley. Although there have not been many opportunities to learn more about the archaeology either side and along of Histon Road itself (with some notable exceptions), recent archaeological fieldwork nearby demonstrates that Late Iron Age/Roman activity occurred over a much wider area. Evidence for Medieval activity along Histon Road, however, is generally lacking and the development and evolution of the road system radiating from the centre of Cambridge northwards towards Histon is not clearly understood; it is assumed Histon Road is Medieval in origin as it is represented on early maps of the area, such as Braun's map of 1559, and in Hall and Ravensdale's map of the *West Fields of Cambridge* (1976), where they intimate the junction of Huntingdon, Histon and Victoria roads was established relatively early.

## **2. Research Aims and Objectives**

Research aims for this evaluation were threefold:

- Establish the presence or absence of archaeological features adjacent to Histon Road;
- Where possible, identify and date artefacts from secure contexts;
- Place any archaeological features within a local landscape context.

## **3. Methodology**

Three trenches, totalling 19.7m<sup>2</sup>, were machine excavated using a 7 ton tracked excavator using a 1.0m wide toothless ditching bucket, under constant supervision by an experienced archaeologist. All removed deposits were scanned by eye. The first two evaluation trenches measured 5.5m and 4.3m long and were 1.5m wide. The third trench was 3.5m long and was 2.0m wide. A minimum of 50% of any discrete features was excavated and 1 meter slots through any linear features.

Trenches were located to avoid known services, protected trees and boundary walls. The excavation of all archaeological features was carried out by hand. The recording followed a CAU modified MoLAS system (Spence 1990), whereby context numbers were assigned to individual contexts i.e. fill and cut, and feature numbers, (F.) to stratigraphic events. Sections were drawn at 1:10 and base plans at 1:50. A digital photographic archive was compiled. This record has been assembled into a catalogued archive in line with MAP2 (English Heritage, 1991) and are being stored at the CAU offices. All work was carried out in strict accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation and with the recommendations of SCAUM (Allen & Holt 2002).



The area was CAT scanned to identify the presence of any active services and metal detected prior to excavation.

#### 4. Results

Three trenches were cut in the garden of 59 Histon Road (table 1 and 2). In Trenches 1 and 2 a singular linear feature, **F.1**, was found oriented east-west (figs. 2 & 3). Within both trenches the feature had the same profile and followed the same alignment and is considered to be a continuation of the same feature. A single sherd of abraded pottery, a fragment of post-Medieval tile and piece of bone were the only finds recovered. The pottery sherd has been spot dated as later Medieval (Cessford pers.comm). Abraded in nature this may represent a residual object in a later dated feature.

Its singular fill was a mid brownish grey clay of firm compaction which contained moderate small gravel inclusions and rare chalk and charcoal flecks. Within the hand-excavated slots some pottery and bone was found which was dated from the late Medieval period. The ditch possessed moderate to steep sides with a sharp concave base.

No features were found within Trench 3, although some impressions were seen within the subsoil that appeared to be linear and parallel, running northeast-southwest and closely packed together. These were seen at a depth of 0.87m and were not seen at an archaeological level and were considered to be evidence of furrow cultivation.

Trench	Orientation	Length (m)	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Archaeological Feature	Type	Finds
1	N-S	5.5	1.3	1	Y	ditch E/W	None
2	N-S	4.3	1.3	0.95	Y	ditch E/W	Pot and bone
3	N-S	3.5	2	0.96	N	n/a	n/a

**Table 1:** Archaeology Present Within Each Trench.

Trench	Top-soil (m)	Sub-soil (m)	Description
1	0.45	0.25	Top-soil consisted of a friable dark grey brown silty clay. Sub-soil was an orangey grey clayey sandy with some brick and rubble; natural – light grey clay with occasional chalky marl.
2	0.45	0.30	Top-soil consisted of a dark grey brown silty Sub-soil was a mid to dark grey silty clay with moderate stone inclusions.
3	-	0.48	Top 0.48m consisted of modern backfill and rubble; no top-soil preserved. Sub-soil consisted of a mid grey to brownish grey silty clay/marl. Possible colluvium encountered at 0.88m consisting of mid grey silty clay.

**Table 2:** Trench soil profiles

## **5. Discussion**

The linear impressions, observed on an alignment only slightly different to the orientation of Histon Road and seen in Trench 3 may have been evidence of a cultivation horizon. Usefully, Loggan's 1668 map of northwest Cambridge, although not including the PDA, shows fields that were possibly strip cultivated within open-fields. As such these features may attest to such agricultural techniques that were contemporary to the establishment of Histon Road as the principal northern route out of Cambridge, effectively superseding the former Roman road of Akeman Street.

The single small ditch seen in both Trenches 1 and 2 ran almost perpendicular to the line of Histon Road. These two instances of the alignment being different to the current road may be evidence that the route of Histon road today was slightly different in the past. As this feature was oriented perpendicularly to the road it may represent a boundary ditch separating plots in the Medieval period; however, the abraded and probable residual nature of the single sherd of pottery recovered from the ditch may indicate this boundary is later in date (the inclosure of open fields in Chesterton is recorded from the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century and it is probably at this time that Histon Road attained its fixed boundaries and orientation, subject to slight adjustment through erosion and damage; Wright & Lewis 1989). As such, the recovery of the single sherd of Medieval pottery suggests that the area remained primarily agricultural until the expansion of Cambridge in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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## 7. Illustrations

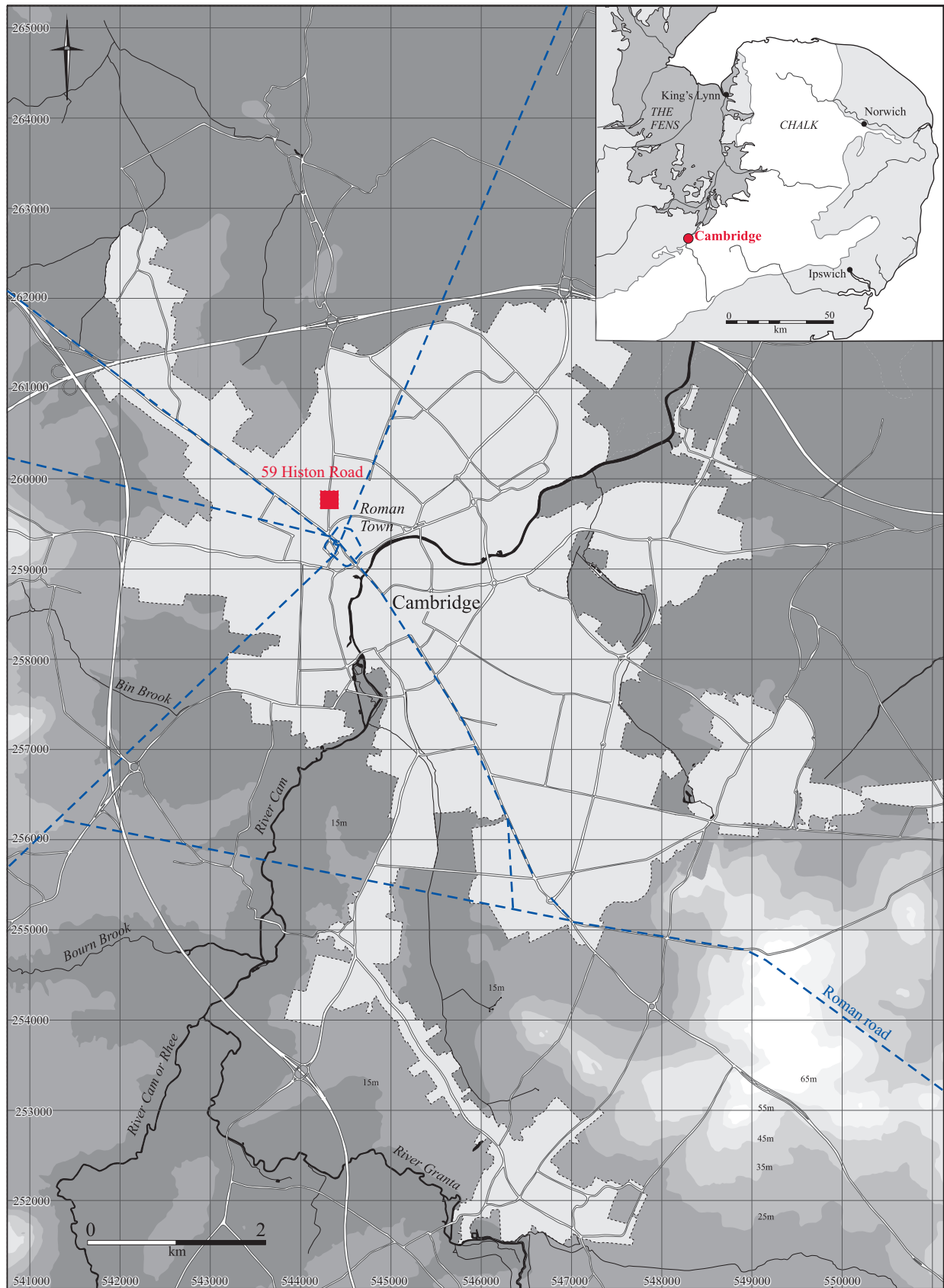


Figure 1. Site location

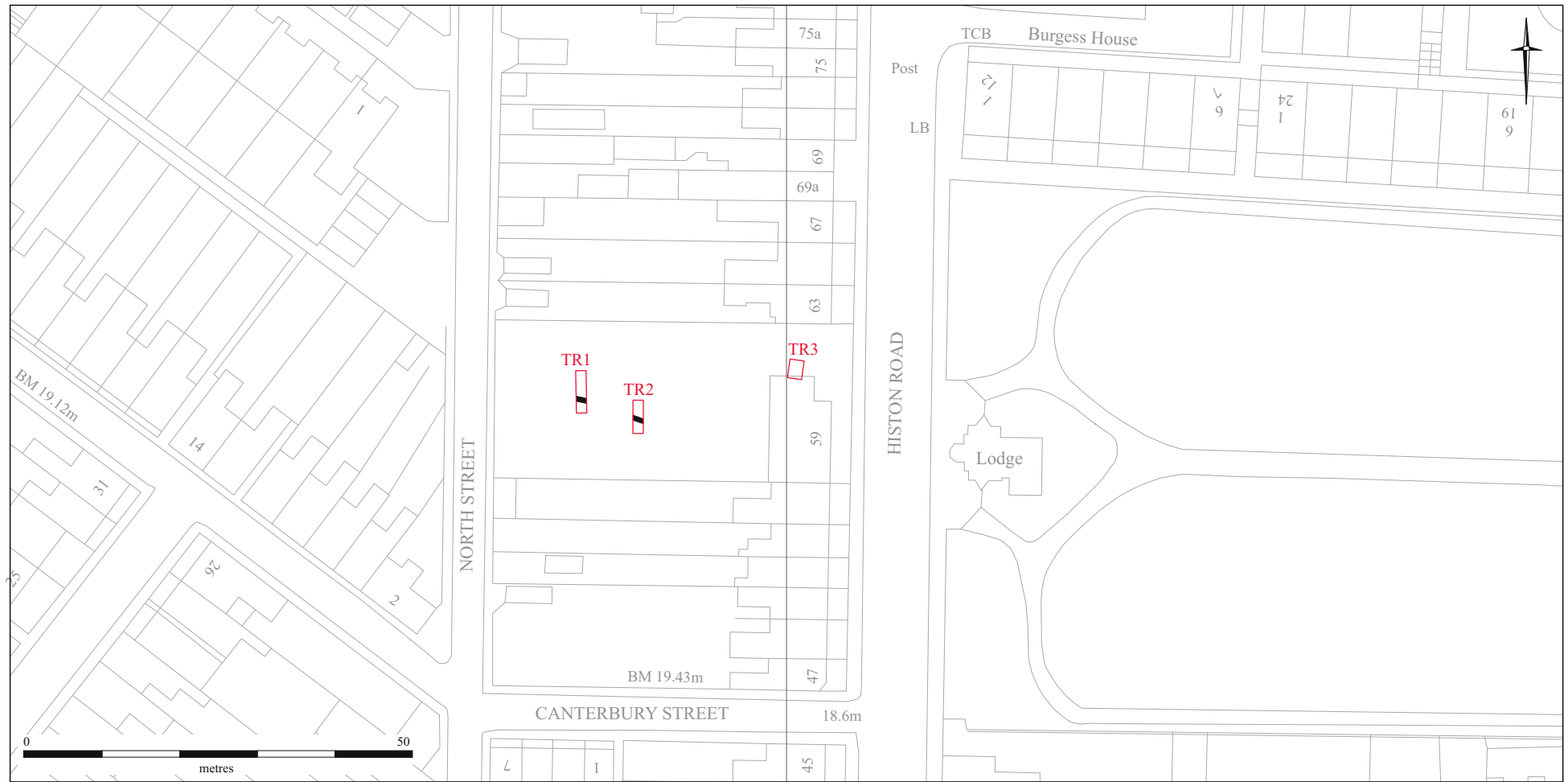


Figure 2. Trench location plan



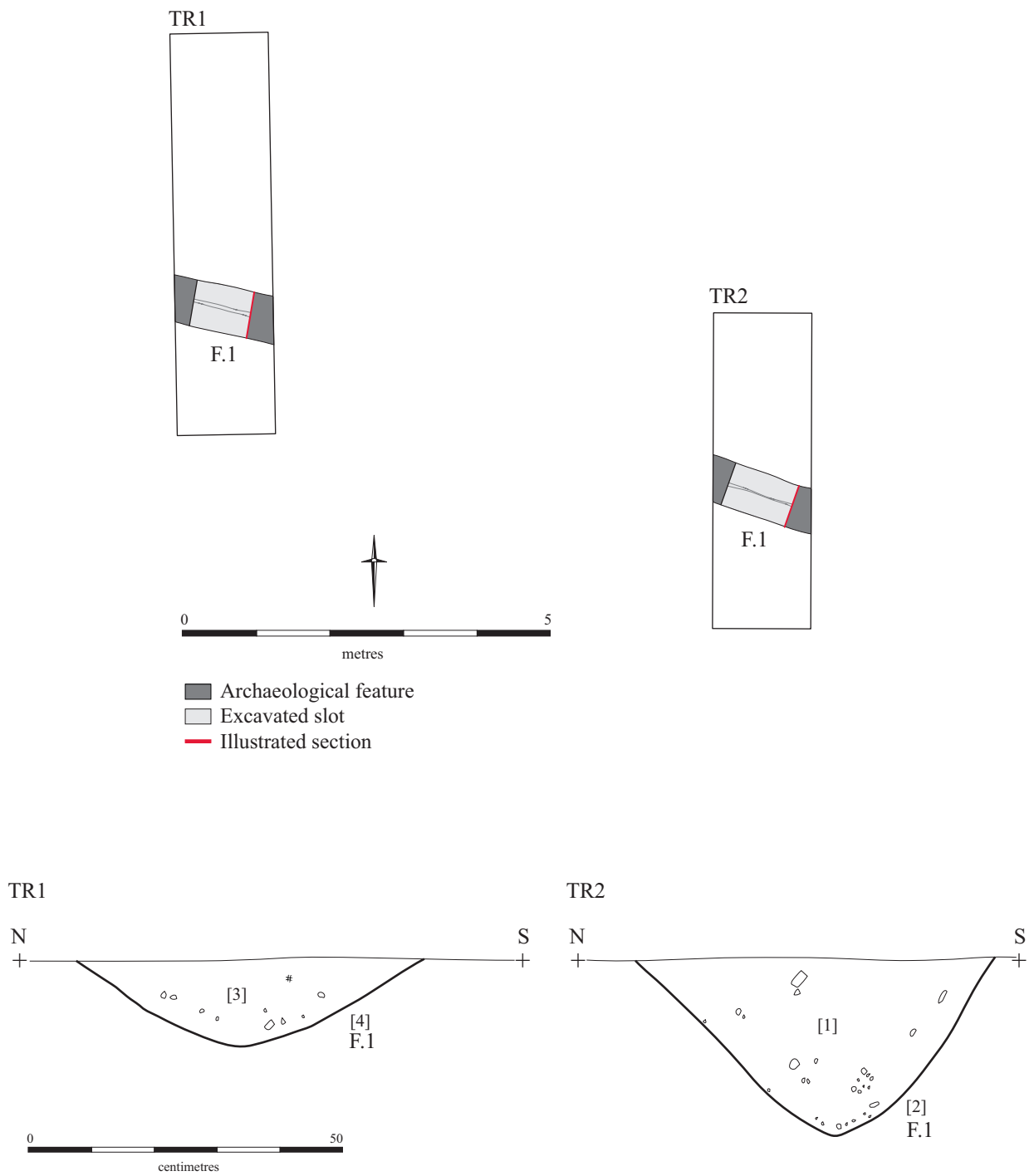


Figure 3. Plan and sections of features in Trenches 1 and 2

# OASIS DATA COLLECTION FORM: England

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**OASIS ID: cambridg3-106370**

### Project details

Project name	An Archaeological Evaluation at 59 Histon Road, Cambridge
Short description of the project	An Archaeological evaluation was carried out at 59 Histon Road, Cambridge between 21st April and 6th June 2011. One linear feature was found with an east-west orientation which was seen in two of the three trenches opened. This small ditch was dated to the late Medieval period on the basis of recovered pottery. This feature was potentially a boundary marker for a property plot running back off Histon Road.
Project dates	Start: 21-04-2011 End: 06-06-2011
Previous/future work	No / No
Any associated project reference codes	3578 - HER event no.
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	None
Current Land use	Industry and Commerce 4 - Storage and warehousing
Monument type	DITCH Medieval
Significant Finds	POTTERY Medieval
Significant Finds	BONE Medieval
Significant Finds	TILE Medieval

### Project location

Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE CAMBRIDGE CAMBRIDGE 59 Histon Road, Cambridge
Postcode	CB4 3QN
Study area	19.74 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 442 596 52.2152923724 0.110956805006 52 12 55 N 000 06 39 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 18.60m Max: 18.60m

### Project creators

Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Contractor (design and execute)

Project design originator	Robin Standing
Project director/manager	Robin Standing
Project supervisor	Laura James
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer
Name of sponsor/funding body	Cocksedge Building Contractors

### Project archives

Physical Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Physical Archive ID	HIS11
Physical Contents	'Animal Bones','Ceramics'
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Digital Archive ID	HIS11
Digital Contents	'Animal Bones','Ceramics','other'
Digital Media available	'Images raster / digital photography','Spreadsheets','Survey','Text'
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Paper Archive ID	HIS11
Paper Contents	'Animal Bones','Ceramics','Stratigraphic','Survey'
Paper Media available	'Context sheet','Drawing','Map','Miscellaneous Material','Photograph','Plan','Report','Section','Survey'

### Project bibliography 1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	An Archaeological Evaluation at 59 Histon Road, Cambridge
Author(s)/Editor(s)	James, L
Other bibliographic details	Cambridge Archaeological Report 1027
Date	2011
Issuer or publisher	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Place of issue or publication	Cambridge
Description	Comb bound report

Entered by	Grahame Appleby (gaa21@cam.ac.uk)
Entered on	2 August 2011

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