

Babraham Research Campus, Nursery Building

Archaeological Monitoring And Excavation



Simon Timberlake

CAMBRIDGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



Babraham Research Campus, Nursery Building
Archaeological monitoring and excavation

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Cambridge Archaeology Unit
University of Cambridge
October 2010

Report No. 966

ECB 3460

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit carried out archaeological monitoring and excavation of a small area (100 m²) which formed the footprint for a planned new nursery building at TL 514506 within the Babraham Research Campus. The existing nursery lies at the north end of the small housing estate adjacent to the eastern end of the campus some c. 400m distant from an extensive Roman cemetery and settlement. Initial testpitting showed that the chalk outcrop here lay beneath a shallow cover of colluvium, the lowest 20-30cm of this subsoil surviving below the level of plough disturbance. Archaeological features including a shallow NW-SE linear and an earlier truncated E-W ditch segment were identified within the top of this lower subsoil; charcoal plus a single abraded Late Iron Age - Roman pot sherd were recovered from the base of the later ditch. As no other features were encountered, it was difficult to determine whether or not these were part of an earlier field system, or for that matter to be certain of a date. However, the balance of probability is that these are agricultural features and related to the occupation of the Babraham Romano-British settlement.

Introduction

Archaeological monitoring and excavation was carried out as a condition of planning consent in advance of the construction of a new permanent nursery building, an extension link to the existing nursery, and the construction of a soakaway (NGR TL514506). This fieldwork was undertaken by the CAU between 30th September and 6th October 2010 working in conjunction with the contractors (SDC Construction) on behalf of Babraham Bioscience Technologies in accordance with a project design approved and monitored by the Archaeological Officer at Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning Countryside Advice (CAPCA).

The site located behind one of the residential houses on The Close (Babraham) lies alongside the southern edge of the Cambridge Road (A1307) at an altitude of around 30m AOD; the situation of the latter lying close to the beginning of the gentle rise in the chalk at the foot of the Gog Magog Hills (Poppy Hill) (Figure 1). The underlying geology here consists of the Holywell Nodular Chalk Formation forming the base of the Middle Chalk. The slopes above and to the east consist of Middle Chalk (the New Pit Chalk Formation). Overlying this in places are small patches of glaciofluvial chalky sand and gravel and pockets of Lowestoft Till. More extensive surface deposits of Holocene colluvium (hillwash) fringe the lower slopes of the chalk.

Archaeological background

Since 1994 the CAU has carried out a significant amount of archaeological work within the grounds of Babraham Research Institute (Butler 1994; Robinson 1995; Regan 1995; Wills 2004; Swaysland 2005; Armour 2006, 2007; Timberlake & Armour 2006; Timberlake *et al.* 2007; Armour *et al.* 2007; and Collins 2007) (Figure 1 shows sites of archaeological excavation). Prior to the main phase of archaeological excavation (i.e. the period 2003 – 2007) the archaeological background to this site was covered by a CAU desktop assessment (Hall 2003). However, a much more thorough account of the archaeology of can be found in the forthcoming East Anglian Archaeology monograph *Babraham – A Roman Cemetery and its Associated Settlement* (Timberlake *et al.* *forthcoming*).

Prehistoric archaeology within the vicinity of the Hall is limited to evidence for the *ad hoc*. Neolithic – Early Bronze Age exploitation of flint on the gravel terraces located close to the edge of the former palaeo-channels of the river (Timberlake and Armour *ibid.*). More significantly there appears to have been a concerted (and predominantly Neolithic) extraction of flint associated with a number of flint-filled periglacial solution features (perhaps originating as ice-filled polygons or pingos) such as the one found and sampled along the route of the new Campus Access Road (Armour 2006) and also the depressions of Hollows A and B investigated during excavations carried out prior to the construction of the ARES Building (Armour *et al.* *ibid.*). The former (and nearest) of these periglacial-solution features associated with flint quarrying and working is located just to the north of the ARES Car Park, approx. 400m WNW of the present development. The recent find of a Late Neolithic oblique flint arrowhead (identified E. Beadsmoore) within woodland near the Sewage Works also suggests the incidence of prehistoric flintworking activity directly to the south of here towards the

river. In August 2009 an archaeological trench evaluation was undertaken approx. 100m due north of the Minerva Building and some 200m from the river in advance of the construction of Building 270. At the western end of this site the remains of a series of at least four eroded-out and subsequently silt-filled hollow ways was discovered, further evidence for this feature being provided by a 1953 air photograph. No dating evidence was recovered from this, though it seems possible that it may well have had Late Prehistoric origins. These parallel tracks appeared to be heading down towards the river in a north-east to south-west direction – at its northerly end this track would probably have passed within 120 m of the new nursery site; perhaps the closest known incidence of archaeology within this relatively sparsely sampled corner of the campus grounds.

Within the forthcoming Babraham publication it has been suggested that a Late Iron Age – Romano-British settlement (perhaps one associated with a small villa or major farm) lay some 300m to the north-east of the current evaluation area. Associated with this was a small Roman (2nd- 4th century AD) cemetery found just beneath and to the west of the present campus road (Timberlake et al. *ibid*). Meanwhile, the northern fringes of the subsequent Early Medieval settlement lay just to the south of this and to the west of Babraham Hall (Armour 2007). In fact the westernmost edge of the Medieval settlement appears to coincide with the line of the Roman-Medieval road which probably crosses the river just to the west of St. Peter's Church founded in the 12th century AD. A small part of this same riverside area was excavated in advance of the construction of the Minerva (Biosciences) Building in 2004 (Wills 2004). This excavation revealed a somewhat confusing complex of Early-Late Saxon, Medieval and Post-medieval pits and ditches which appeared to increase in density towards the river's edge; amongst other things this included a single Early Saxon building (*grubenhaus*) from which a gilded brooch was recovered. Significant however was the fall-off in archaeology northwards towards the area of Building 270, and presumably beyond that towards The Close.

In 1994 archaeological evaluation of the area immediately to the east of the Hall (thus approximately 300m to the south-west of the campus nursery on The Close) revealed a similar paucity of Medieval or earlier features; the only remains found being a brick paved yard surface associated with the demolition of an 18th century building alongside other 19th century roadway and possible garden features associated with the occupation of Babraham Hall (Butler 1994). The remains of garden features associated with this Postmedieval landscaping were also detected during the evaluation of the area beneath Building 270 (approx. 250m to the south-west of the nursery). This included a series of shallow gullies (perhaps associated with hedge planting), some planting pits, a shallow well, and the compacted surface of a north-south post-medieval chalk-metalled road or path. Beneath the latter lay a couple of circular pits, including one lined with probable 17th-18th century brick. These may have been drains or soakaways connected with the construction of the road. There was no particular evidence here to suggest that this garden landscape extended northwards into the area of The Close.

Although originally established in 1580, the third (and present) Babraham Hall was not built until 1837, at which time there was also considerable expansion and re-landscaping of the gardens; both those of the formal lawns and beds located immediately behind and in front of the Hall, but also of the parkland and drives which

lay a little further distant. Hidden by trees approx. 350m to the south of the current development lies the old Babraham School and Almshouses originally constructed in 1730.

The Institute of Animal Physiology was founded in 1948, following which new single story asbestos-roofed laboratory buildings and workshops were constructed on site, including Buildings 201 and 210 and the water tower (built circa. 1953). The latter buildings are still standing today some 370m distant from the current development.

The area occupied by The Close with its associated residential housing built for the employees of the Institute can already be seen on a circa. 1955 Aerofilms photograph. This includes the northern arm of the estate road and the houses including that of the nursery. It seems evident that previous to this, this was an area of agricultural land.

Methodology

The footprint of the proposed new nursery building consisted of an area of up to 120m² which was machine excavated as an open area under full archaeological supervision down to the level of the natural (chalk) (Figure 2). This stripping was undertaken in four stages. First the concrete foundation pads and a concrete raft beneath the now demolished portakabin building were removed and the underlying topsoil/upper subsoil surface was scraped clean. Following this, two large 2m x 2m testpits were to be dug in the opposing north-east and south-west corners of the square in order to assess the possible existence and levels of archaeology and the variation in the depth of subsoil and depth to natural. Thirdly, the subsoil was carefully stripped down to the potential archaeological (pre-modern disturbance) horizon. Finally this area was taken down to the natural, and the chalk surface cleaned in order to determine the presence or absence of what might have been still earlier archaeological features cut into the natural alongside any periglacial/ solution features of geological origin. The footprint of the extension link from this building to the existing nursery, plus that of the soakaway, were to be examined (if this was still required) at a later date. The exact area to be stripped (which excluded the baulk left intact along the southern edge as this still retained live services) was in fact equivalent to c. 95m². This area was stripped using a tracked 360° machine using a 2.0m wide toothless ditching bucket, with topsoil and underlying deposits being removed under archaeological supervision. The exposed archaeological features and spoil from these were subsequently metal detected, planned, sample excavated and sectioned. A bucket-sampling exercise was also carried out on some of the removed lower sub-soil in order to determine the extent of any background archaeological activity. This was undertaken following the hand excavation a 1m² testpit dug to try and characterise this buried soil and to try and ascertain the presence or otherwise of residual worked flint.

Excavation of archaeological features was carried out using hand tools. The recording followed a CAU modified MoLAS system (Spence 1990), whereby feature numbers, F. were assigned to stratigraphic events, and numbers (fill), or [cut] to individual contexts. A plan was drawn at scale 1:50 whilst the feature sections were recorded at a scale of 1:10. Sketch section testpit logs and plans were recorded within a site notebook. A small digital photographic archive was compiled. All work was carried

out in strict accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation and with the recommendations of SCAUM (Allen & Holt 2002). The CAU site code was RCB 10 (3).

Results

Two 2m x 2m testpits were dug by machine in the south-east and north-west corners of the building footprint.

Testpit 1 West-facing section

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Paving with modern concrete and CBM rubble base | 0 – 0.27m |
| Spread of crushed chalk + flint (probable upcast from digging of foundations) | 0.27 – 0.5m |
| Disturbed colluvium (light brown earth and silt) containing charcoal + CBM | 0.5 – 0.65m |
| Colluvium containing angular black flint but no anthropogenic (lower subsoil) | 0.65 – 0.75m |
| Chalky soil (palaeosol) and eroded chalk surface with buff marly sand lenses | 0.75 – 0.8m |
| Chalk bedrock (uneven surface with shallow E-W erosion gullies and solution) | 0.8 – 0.85m |

Testpit 2 East-facing section

| | |
|--|------------------|
| Concrete | 0 – 0.15m |
| Dark brown humic topsoil | 0.15 – 0.35m |
| Mixed colluvium and topsoil (modern disturbed soil with some CBM) | 0.35 – 0.5m |
| Disturbed brown earth colluvium with thin line of gravel at base (ploughsoil?) | 0.5 – 0.7m |
| Lighter brown coloured silty colluvium | 0.7 – 0.8m |
| More compact reddish brown colluvium with inclusions of chalk, becoming small pea-size round waterworn clasts of chalk as a 'gravel' component within silt towards base: this contained land snails along with old rootlet holes at the top of a buried soil | 0.8m – 0.9 -1.3m |
| Eroded chalk bedrock with E-W erosional channel features and infill of poss earlier periglacial solution features with a buff col marly sand and flint | 0.9 – 1.3m |

A potential archaeological (pre-modern) horizon was identified at the top of the lower subsoil at between 0.65m and 0.8m depth. The top of this horizon was planned and levelled following the stripping of the overburden. This buried soil/ colluvium formed an undulating surface which ranged between 29.44m and 29.80m AOD in height; in general terms this sloped from east to west, but was slightly lower within the middle.

Archaeological features were encountered within the top of this horizon (the pre-modern undisturbed subsoil) during the course of stripping the central part of the site (Figure 2). These features were comprehensively sampled in four 0.5m long slots for the recovery of datable finds.

F.1 A 10.25m+ long SW-NE shallow linear ditch varying in width between 0.5-0.6m and 0.15 – 0.2m in depth (truncated). The ditch possessed a well-defined gently-sloping concave U-shaped basal profile [02] which in places was steeper along its western side with a markedly steeper basal BOS (this is more noticeable at its northern end). The depth of the base of this ditch/gully appears to be defined by the underlying outcrop of the eroded top of a quite compact flinty chalk (this is in marked contrast to the SSW-NNE trending modern plough scrapes which cut into it). Three 0.5m long slots were dug into this feature along its length in order to try and characterize it and recover datable finds (Slots 1, 3 & 4).

At its south end (Slot 1) the ditch contained a single fill (01) consisting of a soft light brown coloured silt with moderate flint gravel (<30mm) inclusions and occasional charcoal lumps, plus some rare broken fresh black flint. At its northern end (Slots 3 & 4) the same fill was dominant, yet a lower basal horizon (03) up to 80mm thick consisted of a slightly more compact light brown sandy silt containing moderate numbers of small pebbly chalk inclusions (<10mm), alongside small lumps of charcoal, a fine (pea grit size) gravel, and old rootholes (Figure 2). From this horizon a single abraded sherd of Late Iron Age – Roman pottery and a small fragment of burnt clay were recovered. Damp but not wet conditions within the base of this ditch were suggested by the presence of mollusc shell (land snails). A bulk environmental sample was also taken from the ditch fill (01 + 03) adjacent to Slot 3.

F.2 A short (2.5m long) segment of an earlier E-W ditch was preserved at the point where this was cut by the linear F.1. Almost certainly truncated away to the east and west of this junction, the cut of the ditch profile [05] where this was recorded in section (Slot 2) proved to be shallow (< 100mm), with gently sloping sides (but marginally steeper on the south side), and approx. 450mm wide (Figure 2). The single fill (04) consisted of a soft light brown clay and sandy silt with occasional small (<10mm) inclusions of patinated flint gravel plus occasional small patches of a softer cream-white marl material.

The only other features observed cutting this lower subsoil were the bottoms of a number of SSW-NNE trending plough scrapes, the traces of which could be seen crossing the shallower eastern half of the area at 0.5 – 0.6m intervals. The sharp profile of these and the intense fracturing of the flint within their bases suggest the action of modern machinery.

A further 1m² testpit (Testpit 3) was hand-dug through the lower subsoil and carefully sampled (sifted) to check for the presence of residual worked flint within the (pre-modern) buried soil/colluvium (see Figure 4). This vertical section was also carefully recorded as part of the characterisation of this potential archaeological horizon.

Testpit 3 North-facing section: top at c.29.7m AOD

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Mid-chocolate brown coloured and moderate loose sandy silt with occ chalk inclusions, broken angular black flint, rootlet. Sterile | 0 – 0.2m |
| A light brown silty sand with marginally more chalk and peagrit-size flint gravel inclusions | 0.2 – 0.25m |
| Slightly rounded (waterworn) clasts of chalk (<30mm) within a breccia consisting of a matrix of light brown-grey compact calcreted silt with some flint | 0.25 – 0.35m |

Testpit 3 South-facing section

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Mid-chocolate brown coloured and moderate loose sandy silt with occ chalk inclusions, broken angular black flint, rootlet. Sterile | 0 – 0.25m |
| A light brown silty sand with chalk and peagrit-size flint gravel inclusions | 0.25 – 0.30m |
| A tufa and calcrete layer coating the rubbly upper surface of an eroded and brecciated chalk. Where thicker this includes lenses of a buff-coloured sandy tufa horizon beneath | 0.30 – 0.35m |

The excavation and cleaning of the eroded chalk surface beneath the 0.2 – 0.3m thick lower subsoil revealed the detail of the shallow and irregularly defined surface run-off (erosion) gullies cutting through still earlier solution pockets within the chalk, and subsequently, the redeposition of lime over this surface from spring water, the latter issuing from the foot of the chalk slopes above. These geological features reveal

something of the Late Pleistocene – Holocene history of this valley-edge site prior to the deposition of the colluvium.

The final stripping off of the lower subsoil revealed a flat but moderately dissected surface of chalk bedrock and chalk breccia (a naturally calcreted rubble). Most of the slope run-off gullies encountered here were relatively minor (i.e. <50mm deep) - consisting of low velocity inter-digitating channels suggestive of some distance and a low angle of slope between here and the main fall of the chalk scarp. However, one much larger channel (palaeochannel) was encountered close to the northern edge of the stripped area. This natural NE-SW feature, of which only the eastern edge was found, was examined (re-examined) both in the east-facing section of Testpit 2 and in a small slot re-cut back into the opposite face of this testpit. This revealed an irregular but generally rounded concave X-section for this channel which was approx 1m wide and 0.3-0.5m deep. The latter was filled with colluvium with thin lines or lenses of chalk breccia within it representing possible cold phases followed by increased erosion and solifluction. Three such phases were identified; the lowest (earliest) consisting of a part calcreted brown colluvium associated with a buff coloured sandy tufa enclosing angular chalk clasts. The latter sat on the base of the scoured channel, although beneath this in places could be detected a thin lens of pea-grit size gravel, sand and silt representing the traces of earlier alluviation. No archaeological finds were made.

Discussion

Only a small amount of archaeology was found during the course of this monitoring, all of it associated with the top of the buried subsoil.

Based on the rather limited evidence for the alignment of these ditches, their profile, the single Late Iron Age – Roman sherd and absence of flint or more modern pottery inclusions, the likelihood here is that we may be witnessing the traces (perhaps the extremities) of a Romano-British field system associated with the original Babraham settlement. Although the NNW-SSE orientation of ditch/gully F.1 is not a common archaeological alignment here, the NW-SE orientation of ditch segment (F.2) can be related in some way to the axial alignments encountered within the near-settlement fields and paddocks that have been identified close to the ARES and Car Park (excavated) areas of Roman Babraham (see Timberlake et al. *forthcoming*). The alternative explanation, that this is the remains of Medieval ridge and furrow, seems somewhat improbable based on its dimensions and profile. More significantly, the fill of this feature (F.1) did not share any of the visual characteristics of a worked (cultivated) soil.

Little more can be drawn from the pottery evidence, except to say that this feature could be LIA – Early Roman in date, or alternatively, that there was activity of this date somewhere close by from which pottery had become dispersed and then residually introduced into the fill of the ditch – perhaps many years later. Iron Age pottery is rare at Babraham; most of the evidence for Late Iron Age – Conquest period activity takes place close to the earliest focus of settlement near Enclosure A on the ARES Building site, the latter being some 450 – 500m due west of The Close

(Armour 2005; Timberlake et al. *forthcoming*). Whilst it is potentially interesting, the current find can not really be interpreted in the absence of any further archaeological discoveries in this area.

The absence of worked flint within the colluvium suggests, at the very least, low density occupation or utilisation of the hillslopes above here during the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. This adds to the picture of very localised occupation during this time close to available resources, with flint extraction and working being highly localised to the best sources such as those on the margins of flint-filled periglacial/solution features (an example of one was encountered on the route of the Campus Access Road in 2005) and on the exposed gravel terraces of the floodplain (such as the flint bars between palaeochannels investigated on the Riverside site (Timberlake 2006)).

Although no earlier archaeological features were found, the traces of periglacial/solution features, and subsequently erosion in the form of shallow E-W run-off gullies and a more substantial channel cut into the chalk beneath the colluvium provide us with an interesting geological background for the site. The erosional features may be interpreted as Late Pleistocene/ Early Holocene meltwater run-off/ seasonal alluviation from the slopes of the Gog Magog hills followed by phases of colluviation interspersed with freezing, solifluction, and the formation of chalk breccias. The episode of colluviation which corresponds with the lower subsoil *may* date to the Later Prehistoric period, yet it appears to be completely devoid of anthropogenic evidence.

Acknowledgements

Archaeological monitoring and excavation was undertaken for the client Babraham Bioscience Technologies. Ted Deverson (Development Director) initiated and facilitated our work on site. The archaeological work was monitored by Kasia Gdaniec (CAPCA). Robin Standing was CAU Project Manager. Jacqui Hutton assisted in the machining and excavation of features. Vicki Herring produced the graphics for this report. Katie Anderson undertook the pottery identification. The contractors SDC Construction (Peterborough) carried out the machining and made their welfare facilities available to us.

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APPENDIX

RCB10 (3) Pottery (Katie Anderson)

A single sherd of pottery weighing 6g was recovered from the evaluation. The sherd was a body sherd from a sandy vessel, which is Late Iron Age/early Roman in date.

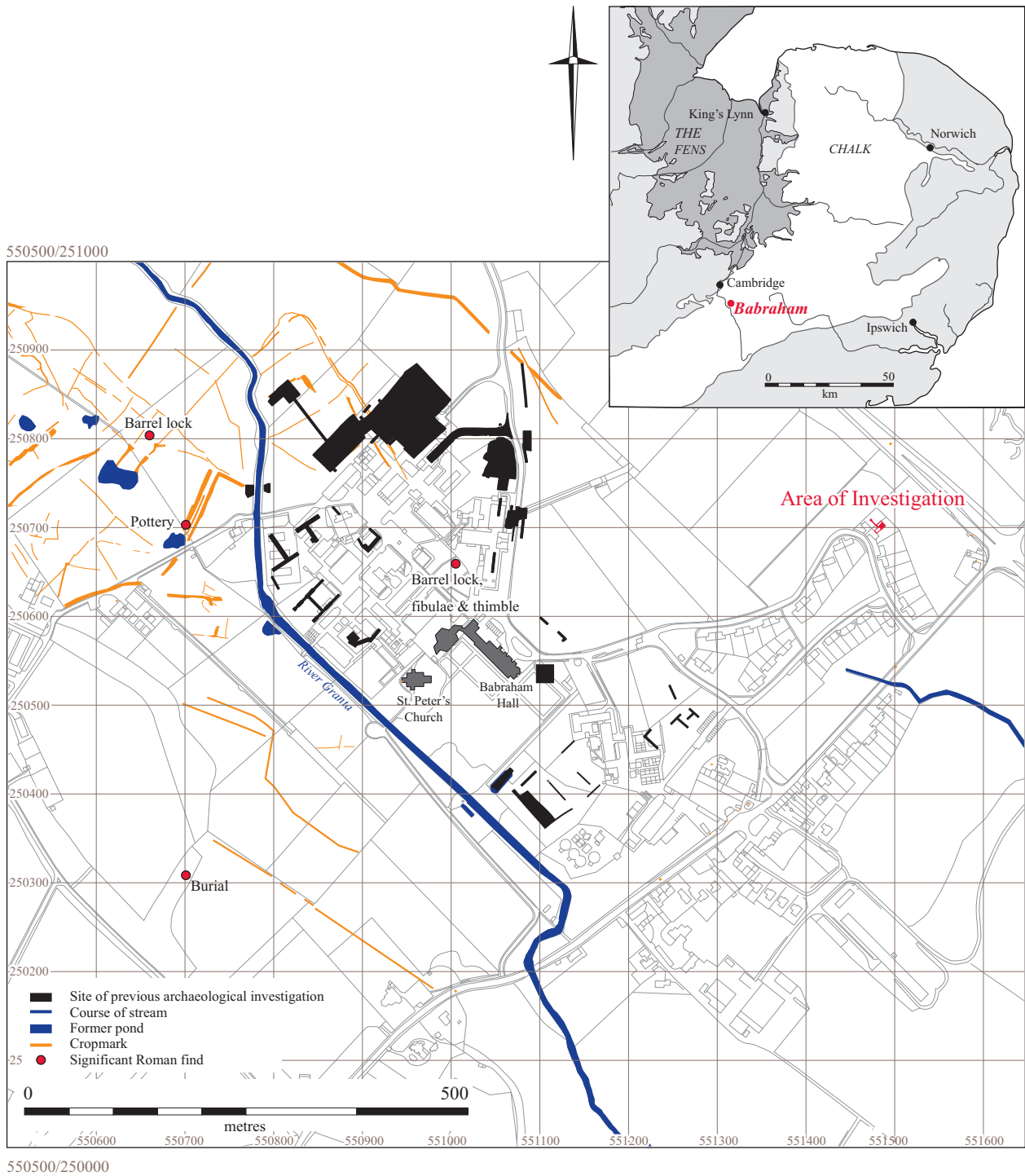


Figure 1. Location map showing previous archaeological excavations and cropmarks in the vicinity.

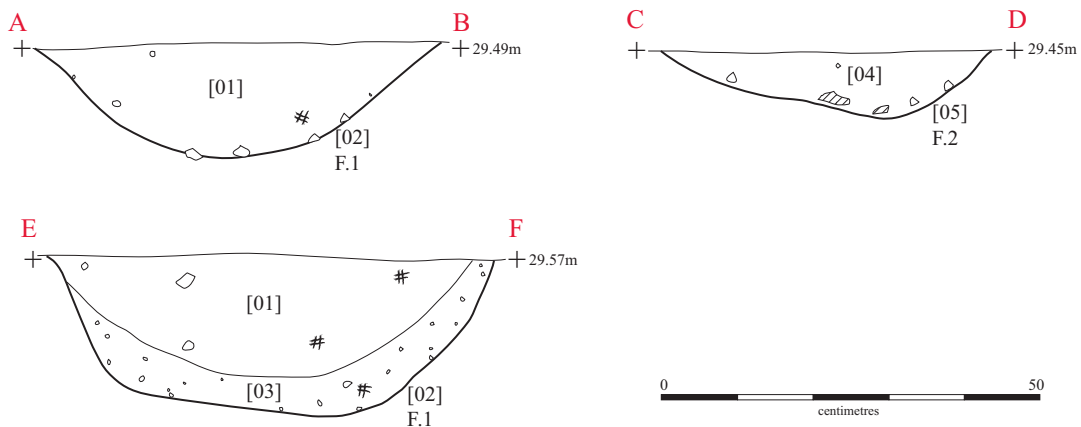
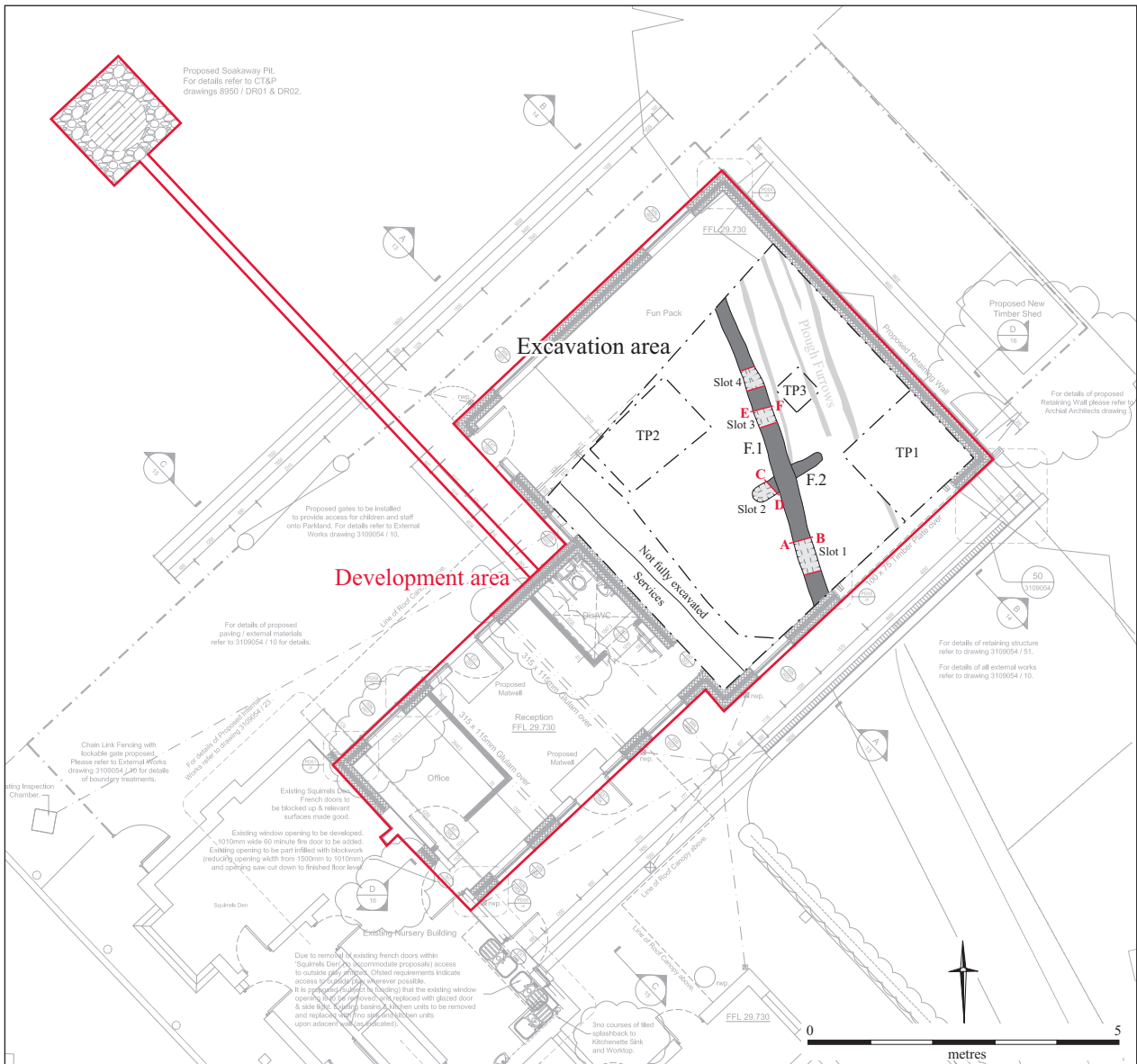
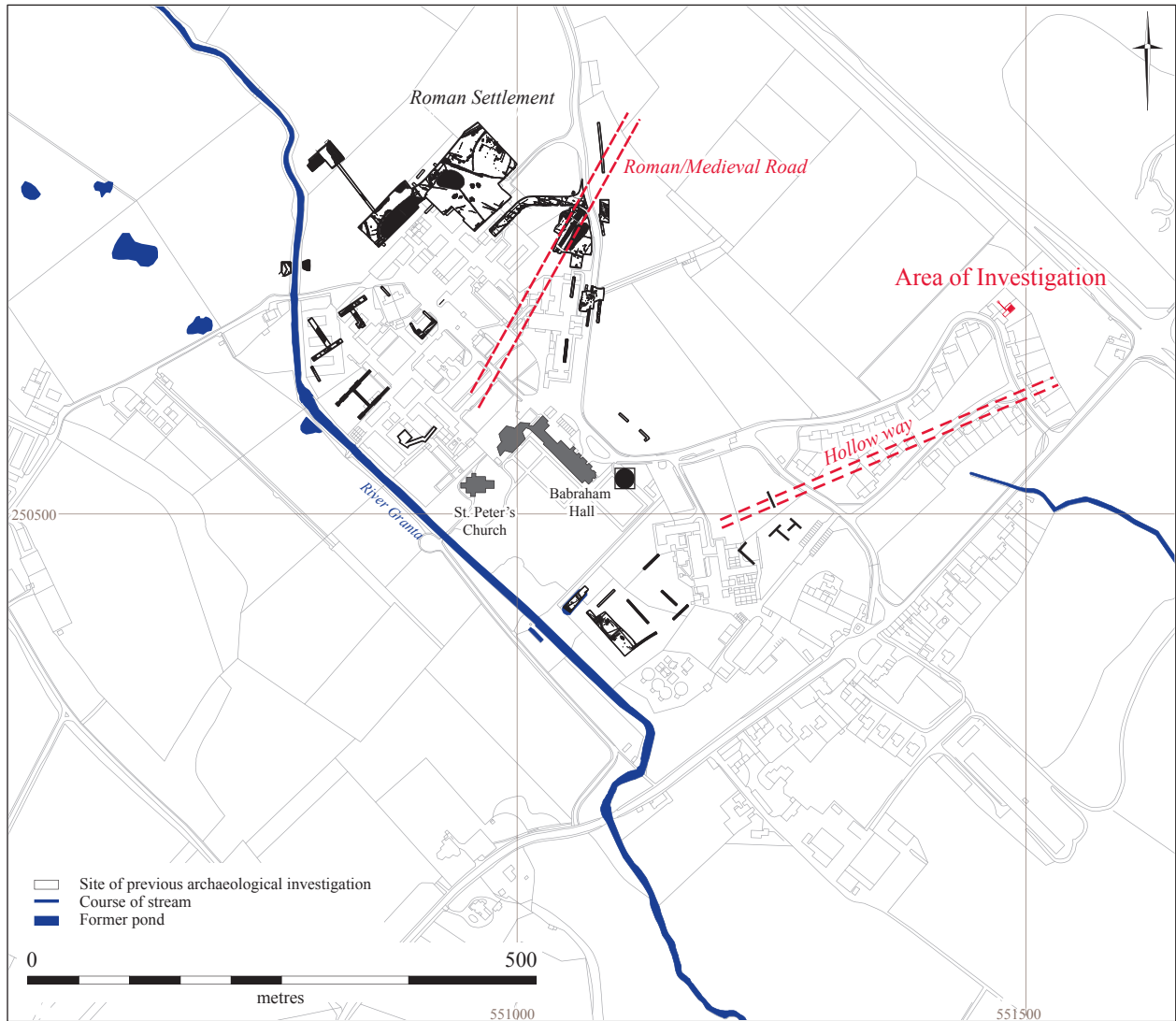


Figure 2. Archaeological results located on the development proposal plan (top) and sections through archaeological features (bottom)

550500/251000



550500/250000

Figure 3. Plan showing the course of the Hollow Way located during work in 2009 and the Roman/Medieval road seen in excavations in 2006.



Figure 4. Photographs of F.2 (top) and Test Pit 1 (bottom)
- both looking North

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OASIS ID: cambridg3-109065

Project details

| | |
|--|--|
| Project name | Babraham Nursery - Archaeological Monitoring and Excavation |
| Short description of the project | The Cambridge Archaeological Unit carried out archaeological monitoring and excavation of a small area (100 m2) which formed the footprint for a planned new nursery building at TL 514506 within the Babraham Research Campus. The existing nursery lies at the north end of the small housing estate adjacent to the eastern end of the campus some c. 400m distant from an extensive Roman cemetery and settlement. Initial testpitting showed that the chalk outcrop here lay beneath a shallow cover of colluvium, the lowest 20-30cm of this subsoil surviving below the level of plough disturbance. Archaeological features including a shallow NW-SE linear and an earlier truncated E-W ditch segment were identified within the top of this lower subsoil; charcoal plus a single abraded Late Iron Age - Roman pot sherd were recovered from the base of the later ditch. As no other features were encountered, it was difficult to determine whether or not these were part of an earlier field system, or for that matter to be certain of a date. However, the balance of probability is that these are agricultural features and related to the occupation of the Babraham Romano-British settlement. |
| Project dates | Start: 30-09-2010 End: 06-10-2010 |
| Previous/future work | No / No |
| Any associated project reference codes | RCB10(3) - Sitecode |
| Any associated project reference codes | ECB3460 - HER event no. |
| Type of project | Field evaluation |
| Site status | None |
| Current Land use | Residential 1 - General Residential |
| Monument type | DITCH Late Iron Age |
| Monument type | DITCH Roman |

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Significant Finds | POTTERY Late Iron Age |
| Significant Finds | POTTERY Roman |
| Significant Finds | BURNT CLAY Uncertain |
| Methods & techniques | 'Sample Trenches','Test Pits' |
| Development type | Rural commercial |
| Prompt | Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16 |
| Position in the planning process | After full determination (eg. As a condition) |

Project location

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Country | England |
| Site location | CAMBRIDGESHIRE SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE BABRAHAM Babraham Research Campus |
| Postcode | CB22 3AQ |
| Study area | 100.00 Square metres |
| Site coordinates | TL 514 506 52.1322222222 0.212222222222 52 07 56 N 000 12 44 E Point |
| Height OD / Depth | Min: 29.00m Max: 30.00m |

Project creators

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Name of Organisation | Cambridge Archaeological Unit |
| Project brief originator | Local Authority Archaeologist and/or Planning Authority/advisory body |
| Project design originator | Robin Standring |
| Project director/manager | Robin Standring |
| Project supervisor | Simon Timberlake |
| Type of sponsor/funding body | Developer |
| Name of sponsor/funding body | Babraham Bioscience Technologies |

Project archives

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Physical Archive recipient | Cambridge Archaeological Unit |
| Physical Archive ID | RCB10(3) |
| Physical Contents | 'Ceramics','other' |
| Digital Archive recipient | Cambridge Archaeological Unit |
| Digital Archive ID | RCB10(3) |
| Digital Contents | 'Ceramics','Stratigraphic','Survey','other' |
| Digital Media available | 'GIS','Images raster / digital photography','Survey','Text' |
| Paper Archive recipient | Cambridge Archaeological Unit |
| Paper Archive ID | RCB10(3) |

Paper Contents 'Ceramics','Stratigraphic','Survey','other'
Paper Media available 'Aerial Photograph','Context sheet','Notebook - Excavation',' Research','
General Notes','Photograph','Plan','Report','Section','Survey '

Project bibliography 1

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