

The Old Fire Station, Huntingdon Street, St. Neots, Cambridgeshire

An Archaeological Evaluation



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Non-Technical Summary

An archaeological evaluation consisting of twenty trenches covering 277.8m² was conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit on the site of the proposed development of the former Old Fire Station, former Household Waste Disposal Site, Car Park and Recreation Ground, St. Neots, Cambridgeshire in July 2011. The earliest features encountered were Saxo-Norman with some form of activity probably beginning in the 12th century AD and continuing until around the 14th century. There was possibly a roadside ditch along Huntingdon Street, and in close proximity to this were postholes relating to a fence or building, a pit or well and various other features. These remains appear to represent a short-lived expansion of St. Neots, with domestic occupation fronting onto Huntingdon Street. Further to the east there was also evidence of contemporary sand/gravel quarrying and strip-agriculture. Activity apart from strip-agriculture appears to have ceased during the 14th–15th centuries, and activity only resumed in the 18th–19th centuries.

Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) between the 14th and 22nd of July 2011, on the site of the former Old Fire Station, former Household Waste Disposal Site, Car Park and Recreation Ground at St. Neots, Cambridgeshire (centred on TL 1868 6039) (Figure 1). In addition the results of a subsequent phase of geotechnical investigation undertaken between the 2nd and 11th of August 2011 have also been incorporated into this report where archaeologically relevant (RSA Geotechnics 2011). The evaluation was conducted for Januarys on behalf of Turnstone Estates, in response to a planning proposal relating to new buildings including a cinema, car parking, roadways and associated services. The work was intended to provide suitable evidence of the archaeological potential of the area and its significance to be submitted as part of a planning application and to inform a planning decision. In total twenty trenches covering 277.8m² were excavated (Figure 2), these constitute 2.7% of the 10,310m² proposed development area (PDA), excluding the area of Cressener House which will be largely unaffected.

Topography and Geology

The current topography of the site varies between 15.29 and 16.55m OD, with markedly different current conditions at the former Old Fire Station Site, former Household Waste Disposal Site, Car Park and Recreation Ground. The solid geology comprises Kellaways Formations and Oxford Clay, overlain by superficial drift deposits of sand and gravel (British Geological Survey 1975).

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted following a brief for archaeological evaluation produced by Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team (Gdaniec 2011) and a specification produced by the CAU (Standring and Dickens 2011). Where necessary tarmac and concrete were sawn and then broken by machine. A 7.5 tonne tracked machine with a 2.0m wide toothless bucket under constant archaeological supervision was utilised to remove the overburden (19th–20th century layers, topsoil and subsoil) until archaeological features and/or natural were encountered. A metal detector survey of the machined overburden and exposed features was undertaken; this failed to reveal any material other than 19th–20th century nails and other detritus. ‘Bucket sampling’ was also conducted on the machined topsoil and subsoil, this failed to produce any material other than 19th–20th century ceramics and glass, although visual scanning of the machined material did reveal some earlier finds.

The excavation of all encountered archaeological features was carried out by hand. A plan of each trench was drawn at a scale of either 1:20 or 1:50 and sections were recorded at a scale of 1:10. The recording followed the CAU modified MoLAS system (Spence 1994), whereby numbers were assigned to individual contexts (e.g. **[001]**) and stratigraphic events (e.g. **F.01**). All work was carried out in strict accordance with statutory health and safety legislation and recommendations of the Federation of Archaeological Managers & Employers (Allen and Holt 2010). The site code is **OFS 11** and the HER event number is **ECB 3611**.

Archaeological, Historical and Cartographic Background

The archaeological, historical and cartographic background of the PDA is fully considered in a CAU desktop assessment (Appleby 2010). This material will not be re-iterated in this document, but will be discussed where relevant. Although a considerable quantity of small-scale developer-funded archaeological investigation has taken place in St. Neots in recent years the most useful synthesis and overview of its archaeology and development remains Spoerry's work (Spoerry 2000). Subsequent to the desktop assessment, an archaeological geophysical survey was undertaken in the area of the Recreation Ground (Bartlett 2011). This revealed various modern pipes or services, some '(very uncertain) possible pit-like features' and 'strong magnetic disturbances consistent with the presence of an infilled former pit or quarry occupying all except the westernmost third of the survey area'.

Results

Twenty 2.0m wide evaluation trenches, with an overall length of 138.9m were excavated across the site. The trenches were located to maximise exposure of sub-surface archaeological deposits, although the presence of numerous live buried services restricted the location and length of some trenches. Additionally, the trenches in the Car Park had to be relatively small-scale to minimise disturbance. The PDA is divided into four areas (Areas A–D) based upon the current divisions of the site, these will form the basis for the discussion of the results of the archaeological evaluation:

- Area A: Former Old Fire Station Site
- Area B: Former Household Waste Disposal site
- Area C: Car Park
- Area D: Recreation Ground

Trench	Length (m)	Orientation (approx)	Area	Current ground surface (m OD)	Typical height of natural (m OD)	Typical depth of overburden (m)	Archaeological features present
1	6.9	north-south	A	15.29–15.39	14.93	0.3	Yes, significant
2	7.1	west-east	A	15.29–15.39	14.88	0.35	Yes, significant
3	2.2	n/a	A	15.78	14.88	1.3	Yes, modern
4	5.5	north-south	B	15.64–15.74	Wholly truncated	1.2+	Yes, modern
5	2.0	n/a	B	15.72–15.85	15.01	0.8	No
6	10.0	north-south	B	15.78–16.02	15.05	0.85	Yes, modern
7	12.0	north-south	B	16.01–16.12	14.95	1.1	Yes, modern
8	18.0	west-east	B	16.06–16.28	14.95	1.2	Yes, significant
9	2.0	n/a	C	16.22–16.27	15.30	0.95	No
10	2.0	n/a	C	16.45–16.55	15.40	1.05	No
11	2.0	n/a	C	16.31–16.37	15.25	1.05	No
12	2.0	n/a	C	16.22–16.23	15.25	1.0	No
13	18.0	north-south	D	15.84–15.98	15.24	0.65	No
14	18.0	west-east	D	16.01–16.04	15.36	0.65	No
15	7.0	west-east	D	15.53–15.77	15.15	0.5	Yes, modern
16	2.0	n/a	D	16.01–16.05	15.36	0.65	No
17	2.3	north-south	D	16.02–16.07	15.45	0.6	Yes, undated
18	2.8	north-south	D	15.48–15.63	Wholly truncated	1.2+	Yes, modern
19	5.0	west-east	D	16.15–16.18	15.23	0.9	No
20	12.1	west-east	B	15.77–15.85	15.23	0.6	Yes, significant
Total	138.9						

Table 1: Evaluation trench details (all trenches 2.0m wide)

Area A: Former Old Fire Station Site

The investigations in Area A consisted of three trenches (Trenches 1–3) with a combined length of 16.2m, covering 32.4m² (Figure 3). Trenches 1–2 lay within the footprint of the former Old Fire Station, this building had been demolished and removed some time previously leaving few traces apart from some concrete slabs near the frontage and a robbed out wall foundation (F.31). After this process the area was covered by a layer of imported fenland topsoil c.0.3–0.35m thick. There were a range

of features within Trenches 1–2 including a possible pit or well (**F.9**), some postholes (**F.10–14**), a gully (**F.15**), two possible ditches (**F.16** and **F.18**) and two pits (**F.17** and **F.19**).

Located closest to Huntingdon Street was a group of three intercutting features (**F.16–18**) (Figure 4). Stratigraphically, the earliest feature in this group **F.16** appears to be a ditch running parallel to Huntingdon Street, although the limited exposure possible meant that this interpretation remains open to doubt. **F.16** contained no datable material, although the nature of its fills indicate a medieval or earlier date, and it was cut by a pit **F.17**, which contained a single piece of 13th–14th century grey coarseware. **F.17** was in turn cut by shallow curving linear feature **F.18**, which appears to be a ditch or gully of some kind that contained no dateable material.

Lying to the east of these features were a number of postholes (**F.10–14**), none of which contained any dateable material. Four of these postholes (**F.10–13**) appear to form a rather irregular line running roughly west-east, although not perpendicular to the current alignment of Huntingdon Street, and the other (**F.14**) could be a perpendicular return. The postholes may represent a fence line or could be the remnants of a timber building, unfortunately the degree of truncation makes them difficult to categorise. The nature of the fills of these postholes suggests that they are medieval or earlier in date. One of the postholes (**F.10**) contains a distinctively darker fill, similar to the fills of an adjacent Late Medieval pit or well (**F.09**), suggesting that the postholes may well be Late Medieval in date. One of the postholes (**F.11**) appears to cut through a shallow gully (**F.15**) running parallel to Huntingdon Street. This gully contained no datable material, but the nature of its fills suggests that it is of medieval or earlier date. Located at the eastern end of the trench was a substantial feature (**F.09**) containing 10th–13th century pottery (Figure 5 and front cover). This may be a pit; however, the size and form of the feature suggest that it is probably a wattle-lined well, although its depth precluded confirmation of this during the evaluation. If it is a wattle-lined well then it is likely to have had a relatively prolonged existence, with evidence from other medieval sites indicating that it would probably have been constructed in the 12th century if not earlier. This putative well appeared to truncate what may be another medieval pit-like feature (**F.19**), located at the edge of the trench.

There is no cartographic evidence to indicate that the part of Huntingdon Street covered by Trenches 1–2 was occupied by buildings prior to the 20th century (Appleby 2010, figures 2–4) and no remains of any buildings earlier than the Old Fire Station were uncovered.

The much smaller Trench 3 located to the east had been disturbed by some concrete footings (**F.05**) and an associated posthole (**F.07**), plus a 19th–20th century pit (**F.06**). Apart from these the area appeared relatively undisturbed, with a thick layer of mid brownish grey sandy silt (**F.08**, layer [011]) containing a sherd of 13th century grey coarseware. This deposit apparently represents a surviving subsoil plus topsoil with evidence for reworking, suggesting that it is a ‘garden soil’.

The results from Trenches 1–2 indicate that although the area has been impacted by the construction and demolition of the former Old Fire Station archaeological features do survive, although these are relatively vulnerable to further disturbance given the

shallowness of the material covering them. There is a sequence of intercutting features beside Huntingdon Street that includes a potential roadside ditch (**F.16**), a pit (**F.17**) and a curving gully (**F.18**). To the east of these are a gully (**F.15**), a substantial pit or more probably well (**F.09**), some postholes suggesting a fence line or timber building (**F.10–14**) and a possible pit (**F.19**). Although not all of these features can be independently dated they appear to relate to a single phase of activity. Some of this activity can be dated to the 13th–14th centuries, but the nature of some of the features and the presence of earlier pottery indicates that activity began in the 12th century if not earlier. The nature of this occupation is uncertain; it lacks the density of features and material culture usually associated with medieval towns, indicating that it is not truly ‘urban’ in character. The features can tentatively be identified as dispersed urban fringe or suburban activity on the periphery of the medieval town, probably comprising domestic occupation fronting onto Huntingdon Street. The evidence indicates some survival of waterlogged remains in the bases of deeper features.

F.09 (fills **[015]–[019]**, cut **[020]**) was a substantial oval or square feature with steep partially undercutting, but effectively almost vertical, sides that was 1.46m+ by 1.0m+ in extent and *c.*1.45m deep. The presence of a distinct steep sided outer fill **[018]** is suggestive of the presence of some form of decayed wooden lining. The lower fills of the feature (**[016]**, **[017]** and **[019]**) produced no material later than the 13th century. The uppermost fill (**[015]**) contained some 15th–17th century pottery, this deposit may well relate to a depression caused by gradual compaction of the lower fills. This suggests a 13th–14th century date for the backfilling of **F.09**. The fills of this feature were generally mid-dark grey brown sandy silt, which was noticeably darker than the other features in Trenches 1–2 with the exception of the adjacent posthole **F.10**. The lower *c.*0.2–0.3m of this feature appeared to be waterlogged, indicating the potential for survival of waterlogged plant remains and artifactual material.

Circular posthole **F.10** (fill **[021]**, cut **[022]**) was 0.37m in diameter and 0.40m+ deep, with a dark fill akin to adjacent pit or well **F.9**. **F.10** produced no dateable material.

Oval posthole **F.11** (fill **[023]**, cut **[024]**) was 0.30m by 0.27m in extent and 0.14m+ deep. The posthole appeared to cut **F.15**, although this relationship was not entirely certain. The posthole was filled with a pale-orangish brown silty sand, which represents a mixture of the nearby natural and subsoil and contained no dateable material.

Oval posthole **F.12** (fill **[025]**, cut **[026]**) was 0.36m by 0.26m in extent and 0.07m+ deep. The posthole was filled with a pale-orangish brown silty sand, which represents a mixture of the nearby natural and subsoil and contained no dateable material.

Oval posthole **F.13** (fill **[027]**, cut **[028]**) was 0.33m by 0.30m in extent and 0.09m+ deep. The posthole was filled with a pale-orangish brown silty sand, which represents a mixture of the nearby natural and subsoil and contained no dateable material.

Circular posthole **F.14** (fill **[029]**, cut **[030]**) was 0.32m in diameter and 0.20m+ deep. The posthole was filled with a pale-orangish brown silty sand, which represents a mixture of the nearby natural and subsoil and contained no dateable material.

F.15 (fills **[031]–[032]**, cut **[033]**) is a north-south aligned linear feature with straight and parallel edges, moderately sloping sides and a rounded base that was 0.45m wide and 0.38m deep. **F.15** produced no dateable material, but appear to be cut by posthole **F.11** and the nature of its fills which were pale brown or orangish brown silty sands suggests a medieval or earlier date.

F.16 (fill **[034]**, cut **[035]**) appears to be a shallow curving linear feature aligned broadly south-southeast to north-northwest, which is 0.9m wide and 0.09m deep. It was filled with mid grey brown sandy silt suggesting a medieval or earlier date and produced no dateable material. **F.16** truncated **F.17**.

F.17 (fill [036], cut [037]) was a roughly square steep almost vertically sided and flat bottomed pit 0.9m+ by 0.9m+ in extent and 0.67m+ deep. The orangish brown silty fills of the pit indicate a medieval or earlier date and it contained a single piece of 13th–14th century grey coarseware. **F.17** was truncated by **F.16** and in turn truncated **F.18**.

F.18 (fill [038], cut [039]) was only just revealed in the trench, but was 0.68m+ by 0.30m+ in extent and c.0.7m deep with steep angular sides. **F.18** was truncated by **F.17**, contained pale brown silty sand and produced no dateable material. Although **F.18** may simply be a pit, the nature of its sides suggested that it was more likely to be a north-south aligned ditch running along the side of Huntingdon Street.

F.19 (fill [040] cut [041]) was only revealed in the edge of the trench, but appears to be a pit that had been truncated by pit or well **F.09** and modern robbing **F.31**. The nature and extent of **F.19** are impossible to determine from the limited exposure.

The geotechnical investigations revealed c.1.35–1.5m of ‘made ground’ in Area A, as the overburden was only typically 0.30–0.35m deep this indicates that archaeological features were encountered. These depths compare well to the 1.1–1.25m of **F.16–18**, but are less than the 1.95m of **F.09**. Groundwater was encountered at depths of between c.1.7–2.7m, confirming the archaeological evidence that deeper features may contain waterlogged deposits.

Area B: Former Household Waste Disposal site

The investigations in Area B consisted of six trenches (Trenches 4–8 and 20) with a combined length of 59.6m, covering 119.2m² (Figure 6). The typical overburden in Area B was c.0.8–1.2m thick and consisted of modern tarmac or concrete plus associated hardcore sealing a thick layer of dark silty material with 19th–20th century material in it. There were archaeological features in Trenches 4, 6, 7, 8 and 20, although significant features were restricted to Trenches 8 and 20. These indicate the presence of medieval ridge and furrow (**F.28**) with evidence of substantial 14th–15th century sand/gravel quarries (**F.29**, **F.32** and **F.34**), and associated postholes (**F.33**) and gullies (**F.30**) (Figure 7). The thickness of the overburden in Area B and the width of the trenches, which could not practically be expanded, combined with the extent and depth of the sand/gravel quarries meant that although these features could be evaluated it was not possible to fully characterise them. There does, however, appear to potentially be a relatively dense zone of Late Medieval archaeology, with waterlogged basal fills. A single prehistoric, probably Neolithic, struck flint was identified from the machined deposits of Trench 6.

Trench 4 contained a large modern pit or perhaps more general levelling event (**F.25**) covering most of the trench. This was too large to accurately determine its nature in the trench, but was 4.6m by 2.0m+ in extent and c.0.9m deep. **F.25** contained large quantities of modern brick and tile, indicating a 19th–20th century date.

Trench 6 contained a large modern pit (**F.21**), which was 2.6m by 2.0m+ in extent and 0.6m+ deep with straight and parallel edges and vertical sides. The pit contained a large quantity of modern brick and tile indicating that it had been backfilled in the 20th century; however a substantial proportion of the brick was of a 17th–18th century fabric, suggesting the demolition of a nearby structure of this date.

Trench 7 contained a circular posthole **F.24** (fills [043] and [044], cut [045]) 0.5m in diameter and 0.29m deep, with clearly visible clay post-packing around the post-pipe. This feature produced no dateable finds; however its similarity to **F.27** in Trench 8 and its appearance and nature suggest an 18th–20th century date.

Trench 8 contained several features including a modern pit (**F.22**), a modern posthole (**F.27**), the possible remnant of a medieval furrow (**F.28**) and a medieval pit (**F.29**). Pit **F.22** was a square or rectangular vertically sided feature with straight and parallel edges that was 3.7m by 1.3m+ in extent and 0.5m+ deep. The pit contained numerous sherds of whiteware pottery, indicating a date of *c.*1830+.

Circular posthole **F.27** (fills **[046]** and **[047]**, cut **[048]**) was 0.59m in diameter and 0.14m+ deep with clearly visible clay post-packing around the post-pipe. Excavation of **F.27** produced a single sherd of Staffordshire white salt glazed pottery of *c.*1720-70. **F.28** (fill **[049]**, cut **[050]**) is a rather poorly defined roughly north-south aligned linear feature of unknown width that was 0.18m+ deep and filled with firm friable mid-pale brown very sandy silt.

A rather amorphous linear feature **F.28** was cut by 18th century or later posthole **F.27** and the nature of its fill indicates a medieval of earlier date. It seems likely that **F.28** is the base of a medieval agricultural furrow. Although Trenches 7–8 were severely affected by modern activity, nonetheless there were other even less well defined traces throughout both trenches indicating the presence of similar ephemeral remnants of furrows. The 1757 plan of St. Neots Meadows shows the entire PDA covered by strip-agriculture (Appleby 2010, 3 and figure 2) and it is likely that **F.28** is a remnant of this.

F.29 (fill **[052]** cut **[053]**) was located at the extreme western end of Trench 8, but appears to be a small portion of a large vertically sided pit 2.0m+ by 0.6m+ in extent, which augering revealed to be *c.*1.35m deep. The pit was filled with a mid to dark greyish brown sandy silt and excavation of a small slot in this feature produced several sherds of 10th-14th century pottery and some tile, suggesting a 14th-15th century date. The lower *c.*0.2–0.3m of **F.29** appeared to be waterlogged, indicating the potential survival of waterlogged plant remains and artifactual material. Although only a small portion of this feature was revealed it appears to be similar in character to pits **F.32** and **F.34** in Trench 20.

Trench 20 contained several features including a modern brick-lined cellar (**F.26**), a probably medieval or later gully (**F.30**), two large medieval pits (**F.32** and **F.34**), a medieval or earlier posthole (**F.33**), a modern pit (**F.35**) and a possible medieval pit (**F.36**). The modern brick-lined cellar **F.26** ran along the northern side of Trench 20 and was 7.8m long and 0.8m+ deep, it was constructed of 19th century bricks and there was a brick floor lying over it. The location of **F.26** corresponds to a structure depicted on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1884–89 (Figure 6).

North-south aligned gully **F.30** (fill **[054]** cut **[055]**), which runs broadly parallel to Huntingdon Street, had straight and parallel edges, concave sides and a flattish base and was 0.55m wide and 0.28m+ deep. The gully contained no dateable material; however it was filled with a mid to dark greyish brown sandy silt that was broadly similar to the fills of the nearby Late Medieval pits **F.32** and **F.34**, suggesting a similar date. The evaluation trenches excavated at Cedar House in 1997, although heavily disturbed revealed two shallow linear features containing a single sherd of medieval pottery in Trench 1 (Roberts 1997). These are broadly similar in character to gully **F.30** and may be part of a single general pattern of activity.

Pit **F.32** (fill **[059]** cut **[060]**) was too large to accurately define in the trench, but was 3.0m+ by 1.4m+ in extent and 0.5m+ deep. This pit appears to cut pit **F.34** and had a range of fills, varying from mid to pale brown sandy silt to mid to dark greyish brown sandy silt. These fills contained a number of sherds of 10th-14th century pottery and some tile, suggesting a 14th-15th century date. The relatively small slot that was excavated also produced a considerable quantity of animal bone, including two fragmented but substantially complete cattle skulls. It seems likely that **F.32** is broadly similar to the adjacent pit **F.34** and is also likely to have been dug at least initially as a sand/gravel quarry.

Posthole **F.33** (fill **[061]** cut **[062]**) was 0.55m by 0.32m+ in extent and 0.18m+ deep. Although the posthole contained no dateable material it was cut by pit **F.32** and is therefore medieval or earlier in date.

Pit **F.34** (fill [063] cut [064]) was too large to accurately define in the trench, but has the appearance of being roughly rectangular with rounded corners and irregular undercutting sides that show signs of collapse in the unstable sandy gravel natural. Pit **F.34** was 5.2m by 2.0m+ in extent and augering indicated that it was *c.*2.4m deep. It was filled with a mid to dark greyish brown sandy silt, the upper portion of which produced a number of sherds of 10th-14th century pottery and some tile, suggesting a 14th-15th century date. The lower *c.*0.4m of the augured fills appeared to be waterlogged and the basal *c.*0.25m had an organic semi-peaty appearance indicating the potential survival of waterlogged plant remains and artifactual material. In appearance **F.34** appears to be a sand/gravel quarry pit, although the possibility that it also served an additional secondary function can not be ruled out.

Pit **F.35** was an irregularly shaped 19th-20th century rubble filled feature 1.0m by 1.8m+ in extent and 1.2m+ deep.

F.36 is a tentatively identified pit, which was only revealed in a small area of the section of the trench and produced a sherd of 13th-14th century grey coarseware.

The geotechnical investigations revealed *c.*1.0m of 'made ground' in Area B, as the overburden was typically *c.*0.8-1.2m it is unclear if archaeological features were encountered. Groundwater was encountered at a depth of *c.*2.8m, this compares well to the archaeological evidence which indicates the presence of waterlogged deposits beginning at a depth of 2.6m in pit **F.34**.

Area C: Car Park

The investigations in Area C consisted of four trenches (Trenches 9-12) with a combined length of 8.0m, covering 16.0m². The typical overburden in Area C was *c.*0.95-1.05m thick and consisted of tarmac and makeup of the current car park lying over a thick dark soil layer containing 19th-20th century material (Figure 8). No archaeological features were identified in Area C, although this may in part be due to the restricted nature of the investigations. The geotechnical investigations revealed up to *c.*1.4m of 'made ground' in Area C, which may indicate that an archaeological feature was encountered.

Area D: Recreation Ground

The investigations in Area D consisted of seven trenches (Trenches 13-19) with a combined length of 55.1m, covering 110.2m² (Figures 9-10). The typical overburden in Area D was *c.*0.5-0.65m thick and consisted of the current grassed over topsoil, a lower buried topsoil and subsoil. There were archaeological features in Trenches 15, 17 and 18, although none were of particular significance. These consisted on a single undated posthole, a modern posthole and two 19th-20th century gravel quarry pits. There was also some unstratified 10th-14th century pottery in the topsoil of Trench 13. Severe quarrying of the eastern part of the recreation ground was anticipated in the desktop (Appleby 2010, 8) and indicated by the geophysical survey (Bartlett 2011). This has been confirmed by the evaluation, which indicated that the area of quarrying is restricted to the eastern third of the recreation ground and is thus rather less extensive than suggested by the geophysical survey.

In **Trench 15** there was a modern posthole (**F.04**) with the base of its timber post still preserved *in situ* and a large gravel quarry pit (**F.03**, fill [006]). This pit was too large to accurately determine its nature in the trench, but it was 4.9m+ by 2.0m+ in extent and augering indicated that it was *c.*1.65m deep. Excavation produced several sherds of whiteware pottery indicating a date of *c.*1830+.

In *Trench 17* there was a single undated oval posthole (F.01, cut [004] fill [003]) 0.05m by 0.45m in extent and 0.10m+ deep with a pale greyish brown silty fill with moderate charcoal. Although F.01 did not contain any dateable material its appearance indicated that it was probably pre-modern in date.

In *Trench 18* there was a large gravel quarry pit (F.02, fill [005]). This pit was too large to accurately determine its nature in the trench, but was 2.8m+ by 2.0m+ in extent and augering indicated that it was c.1.7m deep. Trial excavation produced several sherds of ceramic building material, whose fabric indicates that they are late 18th or 19th century in date.

The geotechnical investigations revealed c.0.7–0.9m of made ground at western end of Area D rising to c.1.0–1.2m in the centre and c.2.3m at the east. This conforms well to the archaeological results which revealed 0.65m of overburden at the western end of Area D and intense pitting at the eastern end which reached depths of c.2.25–2.4m

Finds and environmental evidence

Flint, Craig Cessford, from comments by Lawrence Billington

A single piece of struck flint <002> [001] weighing 8g was recovered from the machined overburden of Trench 6. This was a soft hammer struck secondary flake probably from a primary chalk source. The piece has fine dorsal scars and some platform trimming, suggesting that it dates to the Neolithic.

Pottery, David Hall and Craig Cessford

The evaluation produced a small assemblage of 10th–19th/20th century pottery totalling 96 sherds weighing 1,280g. The earliest material consisted of 20 sherds weighing 180g dating to the 10th–12th centuries, this consisted of the three fabrics commonly present in this region at this date: Thetford-type ware (12 sherds, 121g), St. Neots-type ware (7 sherds, 58g) and Stamford ware (1 sherd, 1g).

There were also 26 sherds of pottery weighing 167g dating to the 13th–15th centuries, this consisted of a range of coarsewares whose sources are unknown (12 sherds, 65g) plus some 13th century pink shelly ware (10 sherds, 73g), some of which shows affinities to Developed St. Neots-type ware and Lyveden ware. There was also some material produced at Potterspury (4 sherds, 29g).

A small amount of Post-Medieval pottery dating to the 16th–17th centuries was recovered (3 sherds, 18g). This consisted of iron glazed material (1 sherd, 3g) and plain redware (2 sherds, 15g).

The modern pottery (47 sherds, 915g) consists almost exclusively of 19th–20th century fabrics, and is dominated by whiteware which came to dominate ceramics for food preparation, dining and tea and coffee drinking after c.1830. There was also a small amount of yellowware, which was used in small amounts from c.1830 onwards principally for a range of large food preparation vessels and came to dominate the market nationally by c.1880. There was also a sherd of late unglazed earthenware from a flower pot. The only earlier material was a single sherd of Staffordshire white salt glazed stoneware of c.1720–70.

Feature	Context	Fabric	Date	Count	Weight (g)
03	006	Late unglazed earthenware	1700–1900	1	1
03	006	Whiteware	1830+	1	7
06	007	Whiteware	1830+	1	133
06	007	Yellowware	1830+	1	54
22	051	Whiteware	1830+	34	497
23	042	Whiteware	1830+	7	211
27	047	Staffordshire white salt glazed stoneware	1720–70	1	1
N/A	005	Yellowware	1830+	1	11
Total				47	915

Table 2: Modern pottery from investigated features and layers

Tile, Craig Cessford

The evaluation produced a small assemblage of ceramic building material from features; this consisted exclusively of medieval peg tile fragments which are usually only found in contexts of the 14th century or later. A number of 19th–20th century features contained large quantities of 18th–20th century brick and tile fragments, but these were not retained.

Feature	Context	Count	Weight (g)
09	016	1	19
29	052	4	92
32	056	6	297
32	057	4	176
32	058	2	58
34	063	3	78
Total		20	720

Table 3: Medieval peg tile from investigated features

Animal bone, Craig Cessford from comments by Vida Rajkovača

Animal bone was recovered from several of the investigated features; it was generally in a good state of preservation although some of the material was fragmented. The bone consisted of a range of elements from both cattle and sheep/goat.

Environmental remains, Craig Cessford

Visual examination of sediment from the investigated features revealed extremely low densities of charred plant remains, dominated by charcoal. The few features that contained higher densities of material were generally the deeper 14th–15th century features. As only the uppermost fills of these were available for sampling this was deemed inappropriate at the evaluation stage. A number of the deeper 14th–15th century features that were augered appeared to indicate that the survival of waterlogged plant remains is likely in their basal fills (F.09 and F.34) and this is

supported by the recorded heights of groundwater in the geotechnical investigations. Any future investigations should prioritise the sampling of such deposits.

Discussion

This archaeological evaluation has revealed two concentrations of archaeology in Areas A and B (Figure 11), whilst demonstrating a lack of pre-modern archaeological features in Areas C and D and significant disturbance by quarrying in the eastern third of Area D. Both concentrations of archaeology lie within the footprints of buildings as currently envisaged in the layout of the proposed development. Although some prehistoric material is known from the vicinity of the PDA the single prehistoric, probably Neolithic, flint recovered during the evaluation is a stray find and there is no evidence to indicate a significant prehistoric presence. No Roman features or material was identified, indicating a lack of settlement of this date. In addition, no remains that can be attributed to the Early Anglo-Saxon period were discovered, demonstrating that the cemetery known to exist to the north of the PDA (Figure 11; Appleby 2010, gazetteer 2 and 4) did not extend this far south.

The first extensive settlement at St. Neots dates to the Saxo-Norman period (10th–12th centuries); this was focussed upon St Mary's Church located c.300m southwest of the PDA, with its western and northern sides apparently defined by Church Street and Cambridge Street respectively, although it is believed that Huntingdon Street and Cambridge Street were both in existence as route ways by this date (Addyman 1973; Spoerry 2000, figure 12.6). No features could be conclusively dated to this period, although if **F.09** was a well then it may have been created in the 12th century or even earlier. It is also quite likely that the putative roadside ditch along Huntingdon Street (**F.18**) also dates to this period. There was also some pottery that can be dated to the 10th–12th centuries, although not great in quantity (20 sherds) given the scale of investigation this does indicate some level of activity in the area. Although the scale of the evaluation makes firm conclusions impossible this could indicate some form of minor ribbon development along the side of Huntingdon Street.

The earliest securely dated activity identified in the evaluation dates to the 13th–14th/15th centuries. The evidence indicates probable domestic occupation of some kind in Area A, with pit or well **F.09** continuing in use in association with a fence line or timber building. This occupation was on a limited scale and was not 'urban' in character. To the east of this there was quarrying for sand/gravel and strip-agriculture in Area B. The main focus of medieval St. Neots clearly lay to the southwest of the PDA, although it is believed to have included some occupation to the north and east of Huntingdon Street and Cambridge Street extending into the vicinity of Trenches 1–2 (Spoerry 2000, figure 12.6). The Late Medieval evidence is probably best provisionally characterised as dispersed urban fringe or suburban features on the periphery of the town with domestic occupation fronting onto Huntingdon Street.

This phase of occupation ceases in the 14th or 15th centuries and there follows a hiatus when the area appears to have been given over solely to agriculture, perhaps indicating a degree of shrinkage of St. Neots in the Late Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. Cartographic evidence indicates that this ended in the late 1750s or 1760s, with the construction of several substantial buildings in the western half of the PDA

(Appleby 2010, 8). None of these buildings fell within the trenches excavated, although two postholes with clay packing (F.24 and F.27) may relate to this phase of activity and the large quantities of brick of this date in pit F.21 are probably linked to the eventual demolition of one of these structures. The continued expansion of St. Neots in the 19th century is represented by a range of features, particularly in Area B and the eastern third of Area D, none of which are of particular significance (Figure 12).

The evaluation indicates that the PDA contains two zones of Late Medieval activity, which have the potential to shed some light on this period of St. Neots development, and that Late Saxon features are probably also present. Although peripheral to the main development of Late Saxon and medieval St. Neots the archaeology of such ‘suburban’ areas is of particular importance as their expansion and contraction provide useful barometers of the fluctuating fortunes of a town (Keene 1976; Schofield and Vince 2003, 66–68), with sites located on principal suburban streets such as Huntingdon Street identified as a priority for investigation (Perring 1986). The site also has the potential to address the current lack of significant artifactual and environmental assemblages from medieval St. Neots, particularly given the likely presence of waterlogged material.

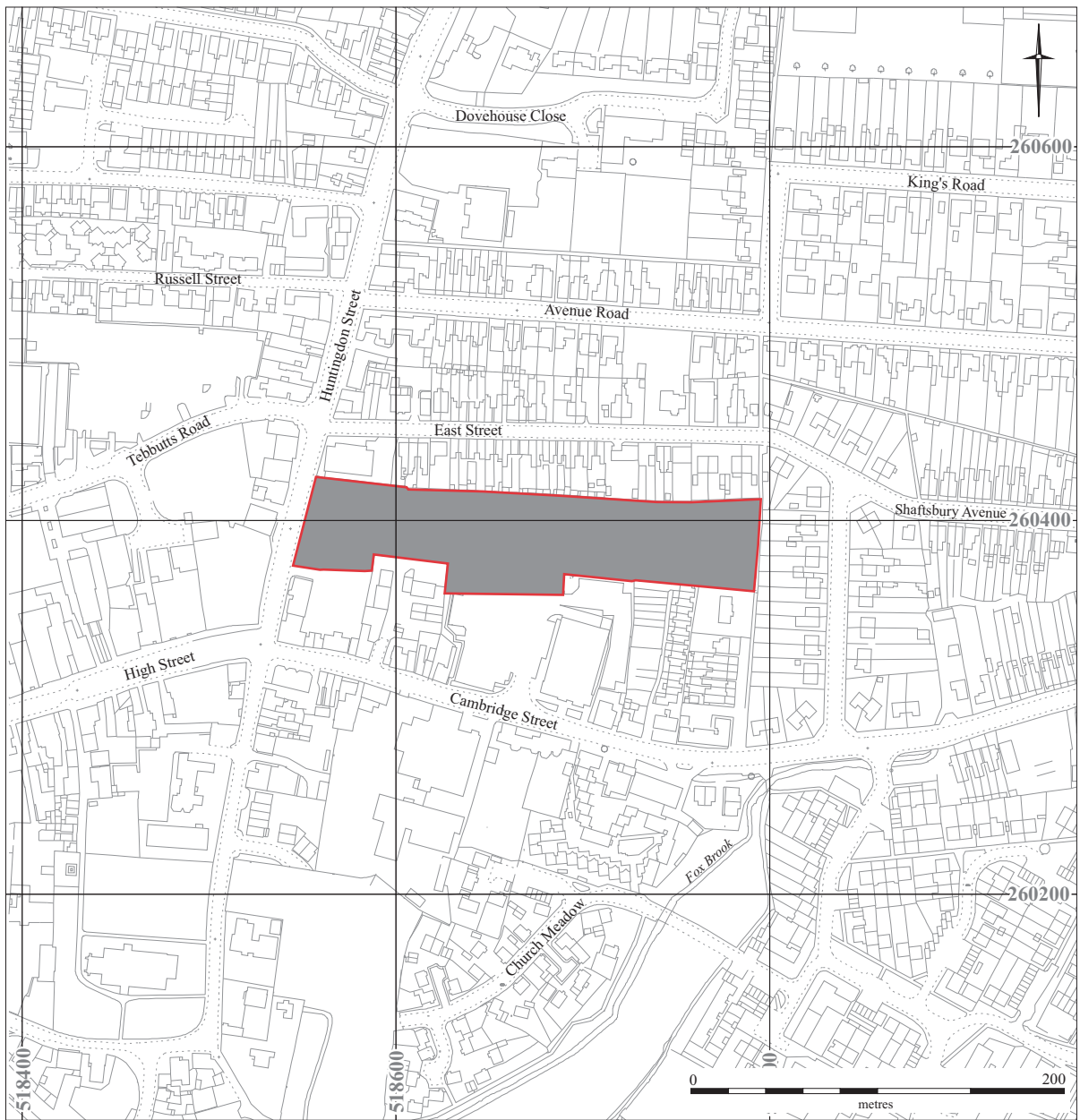
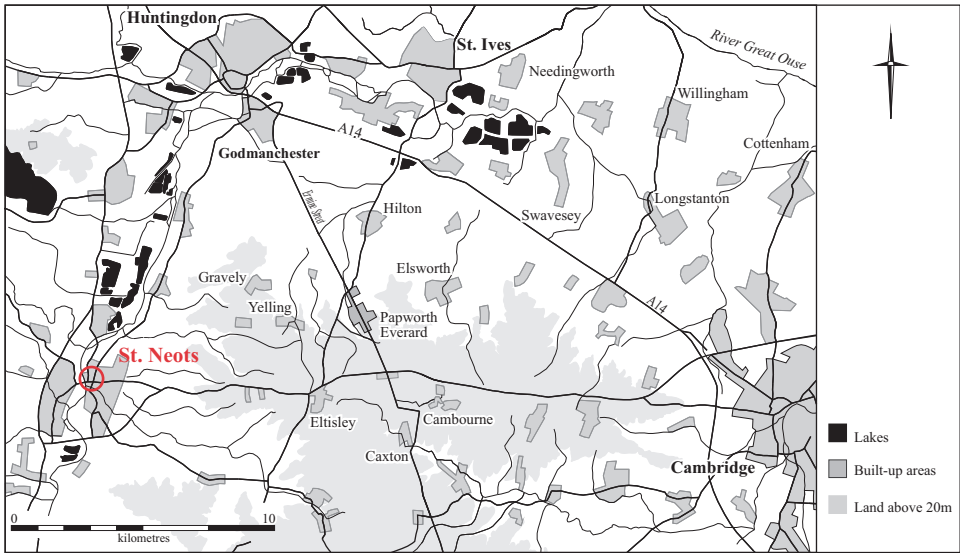
Acknowledgments


The evaluation was undertaken by Tony Baker and Craig Cessford and the project manager for the CAU was Alison Dickens. The site was surveyed by Iain Forbes, the plans were digitised by Donald Horne and the graphics are by Vicki Herring. The pottery was spot-dated by David Hall, while Vida Rajkovača and Lawrence Billington commented upon the animal bone and flint respectively. The site was monitored by Kasia Gdaniec, Senior Archaeologist of the Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team (formerly CAPCA). Thanks are due to Paul Belton of Januarys for his assistance and to Steve Buckley of Mott MacDonald for making the geotechnical information available.

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 Proposed development area

Based on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map
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Figure 1. Site location

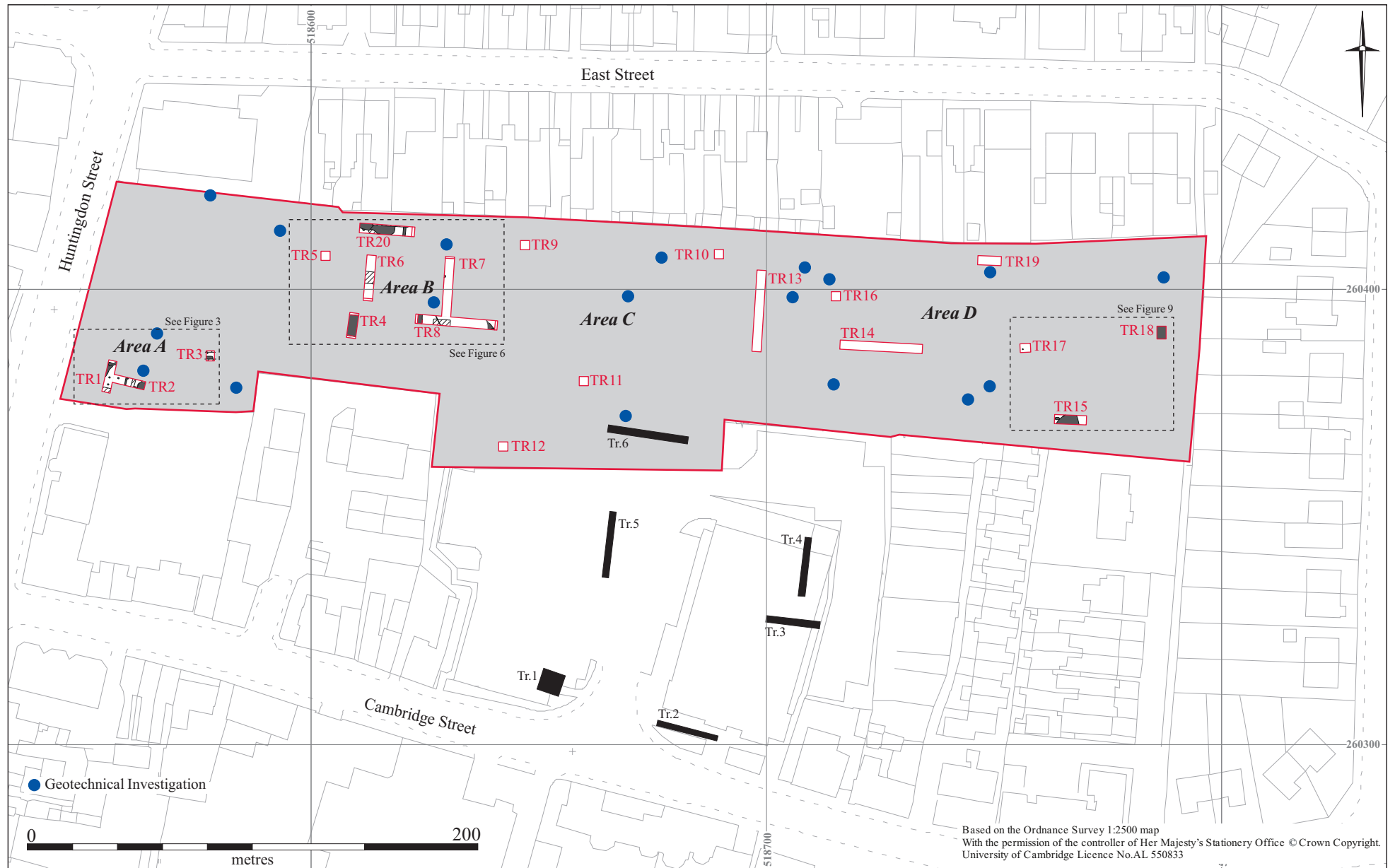


Figure 2. Trench Location plan also showing geotechnical investigations, and the 1997 Cedar House Excavations in black (Roberts 1997)

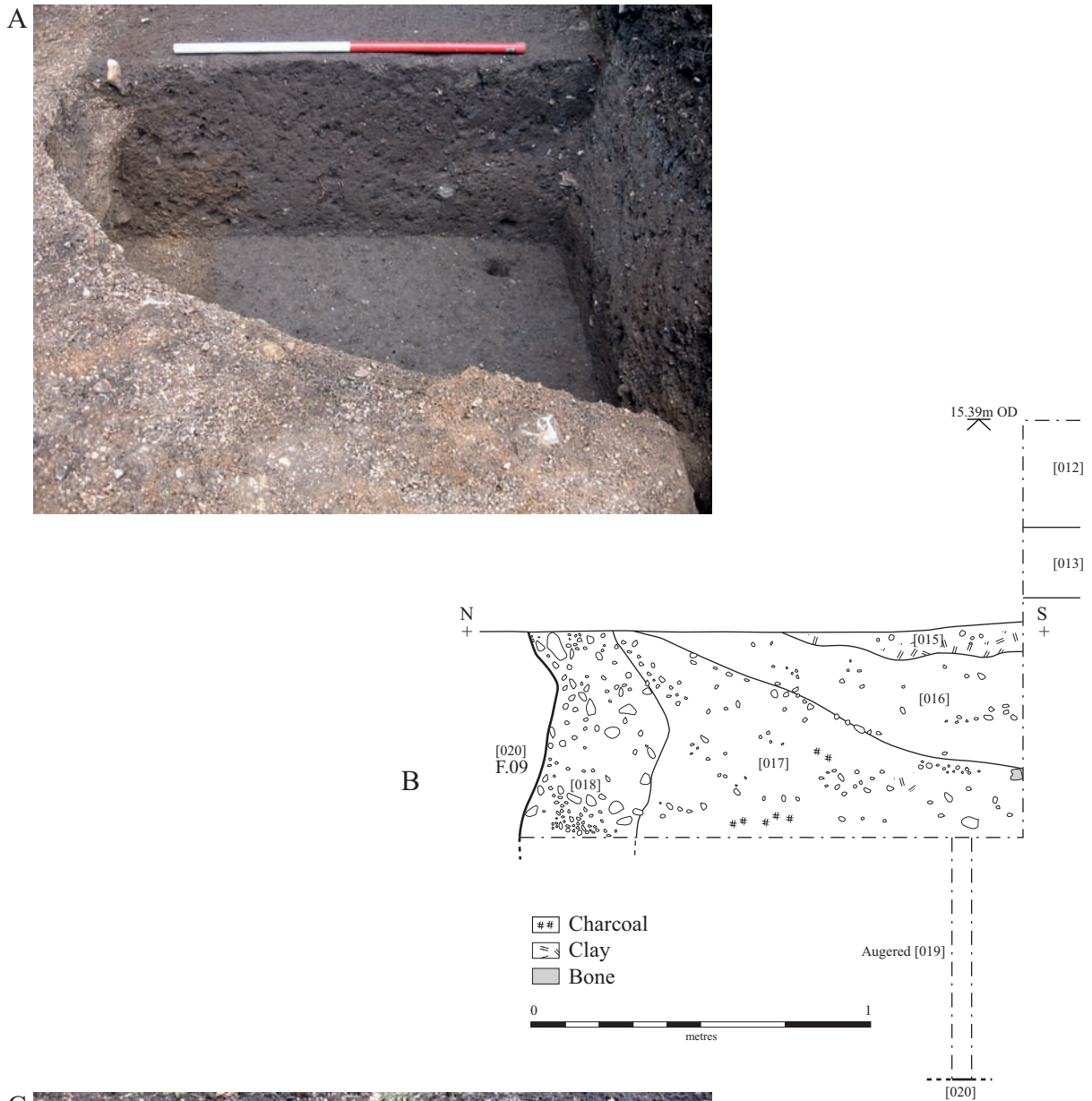


Figure 5. Pit or well F.09 in Trench 2; A) Photograph of F.09 facing east B) West facing section of F.09 C) Photograph of F.09 facing south

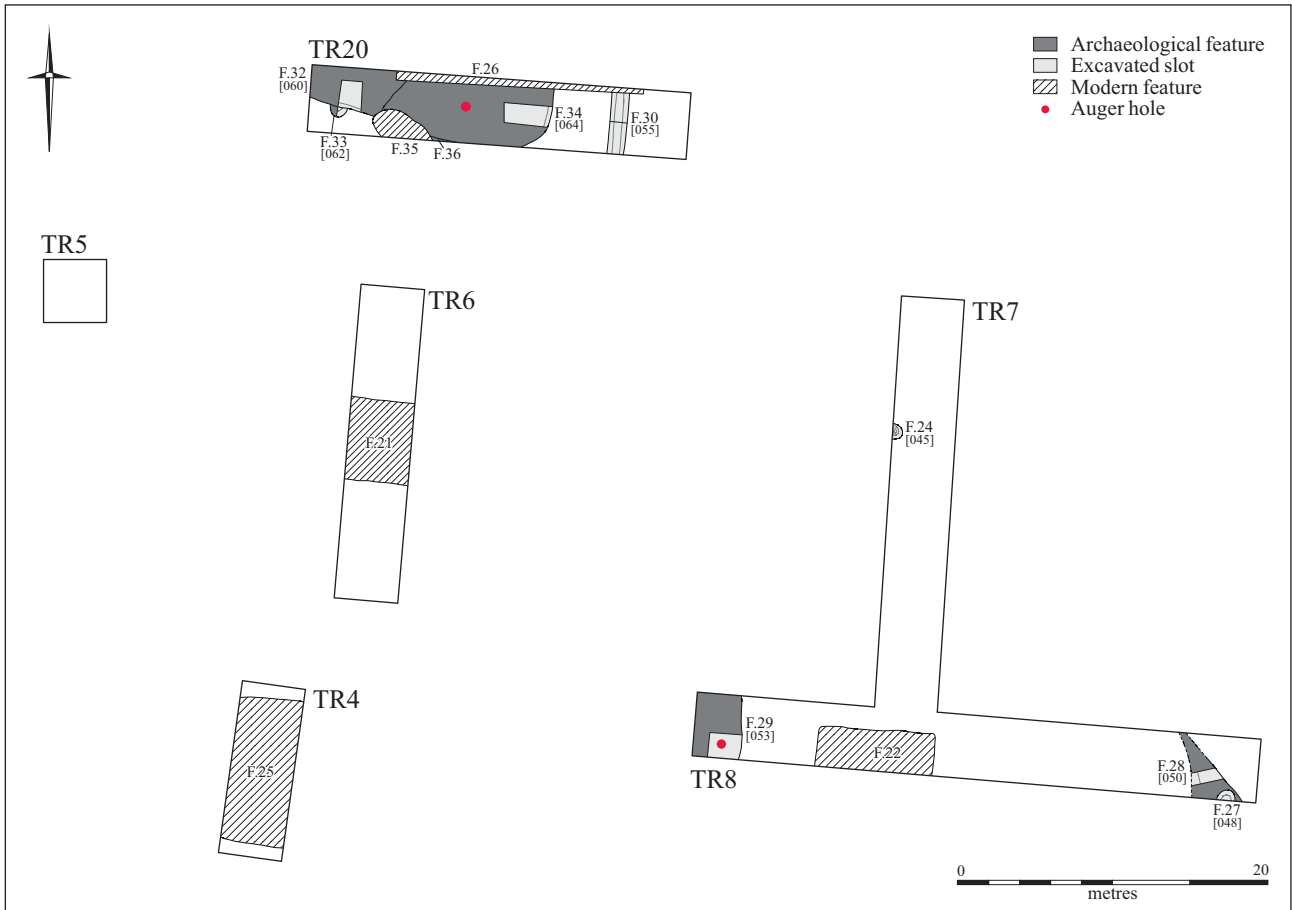


Figure 6. Features in Area B



A



B



C



D

Figure 7. Photographs of Area B, A) Trench 7 facing south B) Trench 20 facing east with scale over pit F.34 C) Gully F.30 facing south D) Augering pit F.34 facing east-southeast



Figure 8. Photograph of Trench 9, facing north

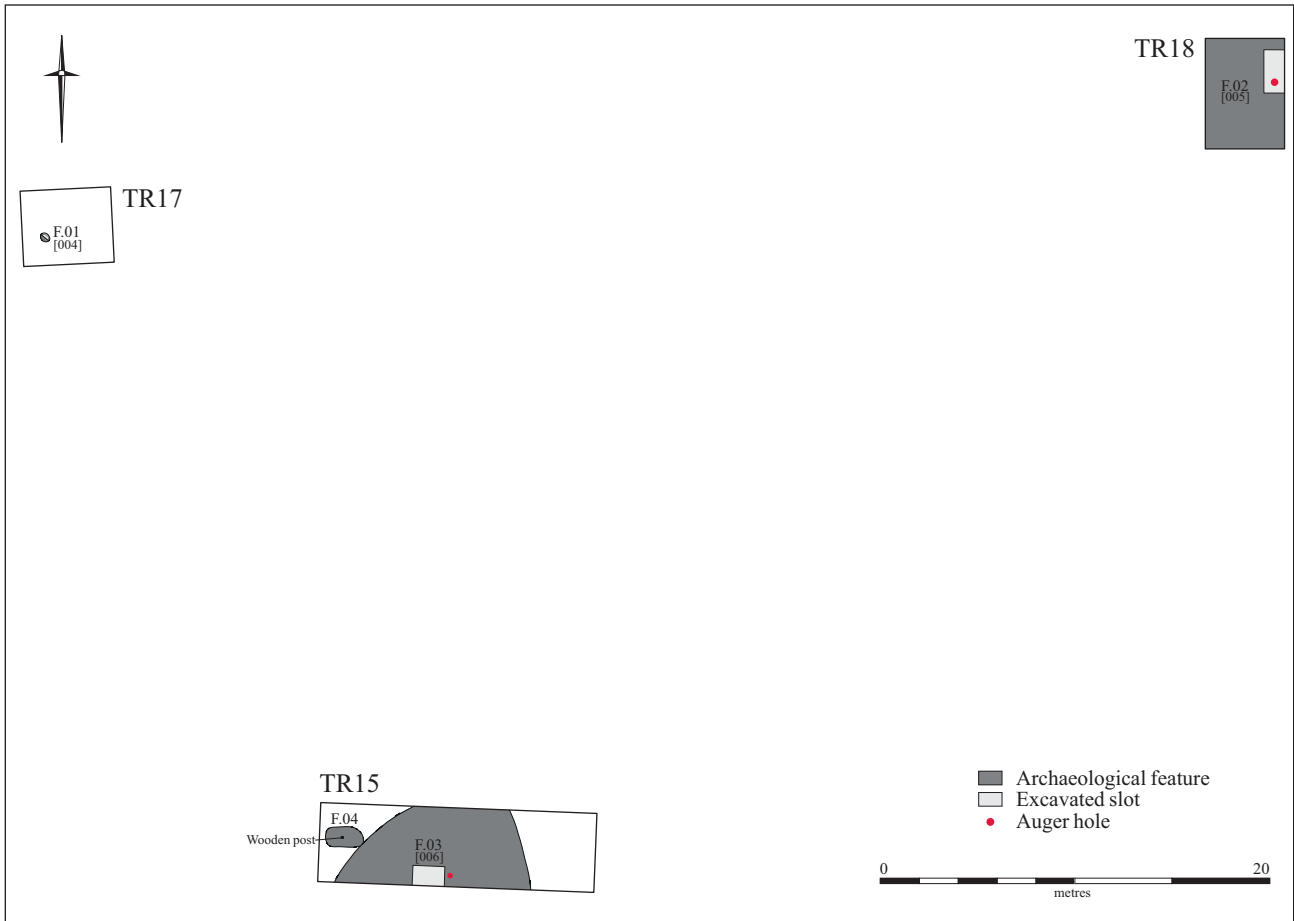


Figure 9. Plan of features in Area D



Figure 10. Photograph of Trench 14, facing west

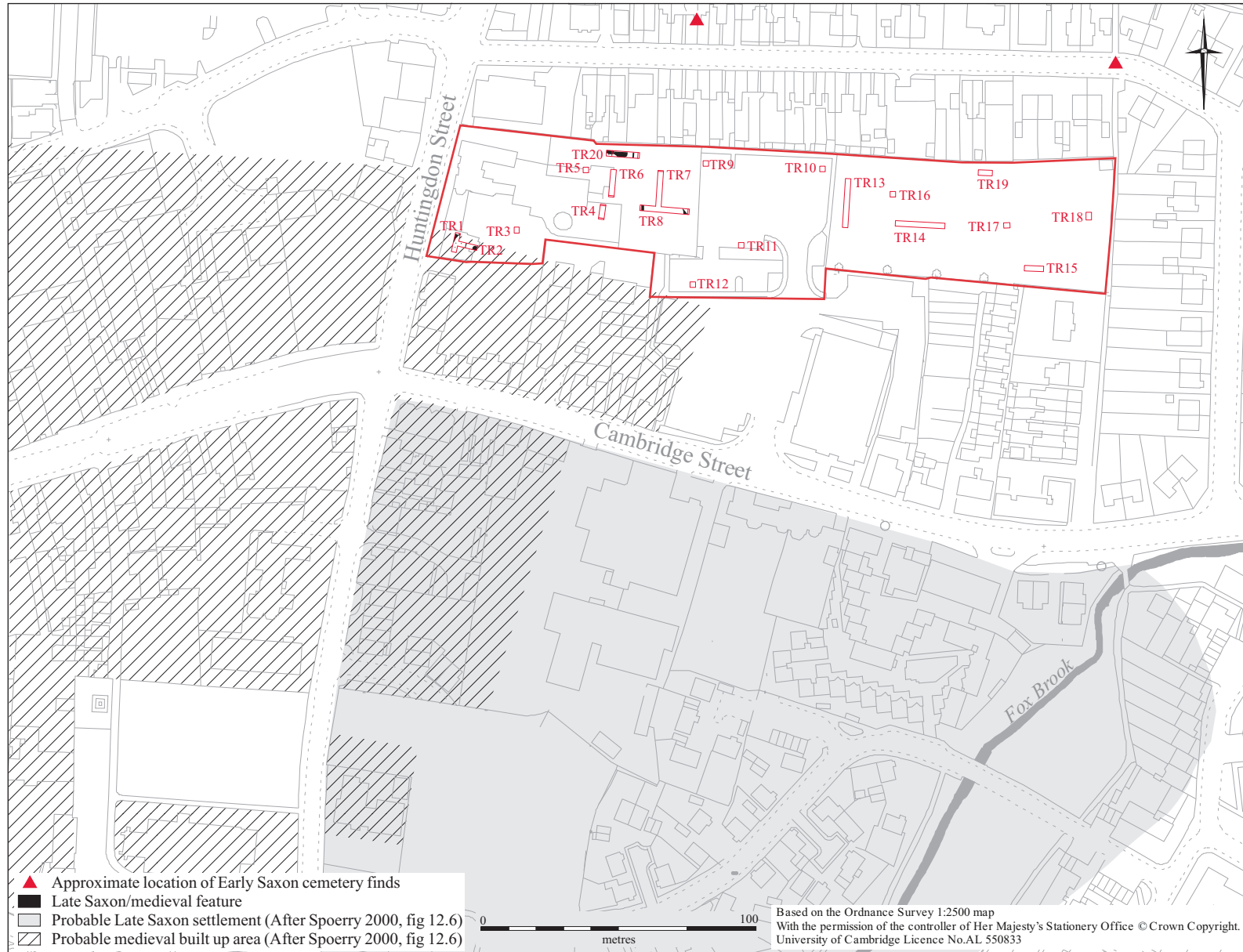


Figure 11. Plan of Late Saxon and medieval features and believed extent of Late Saxon and medieval occupation

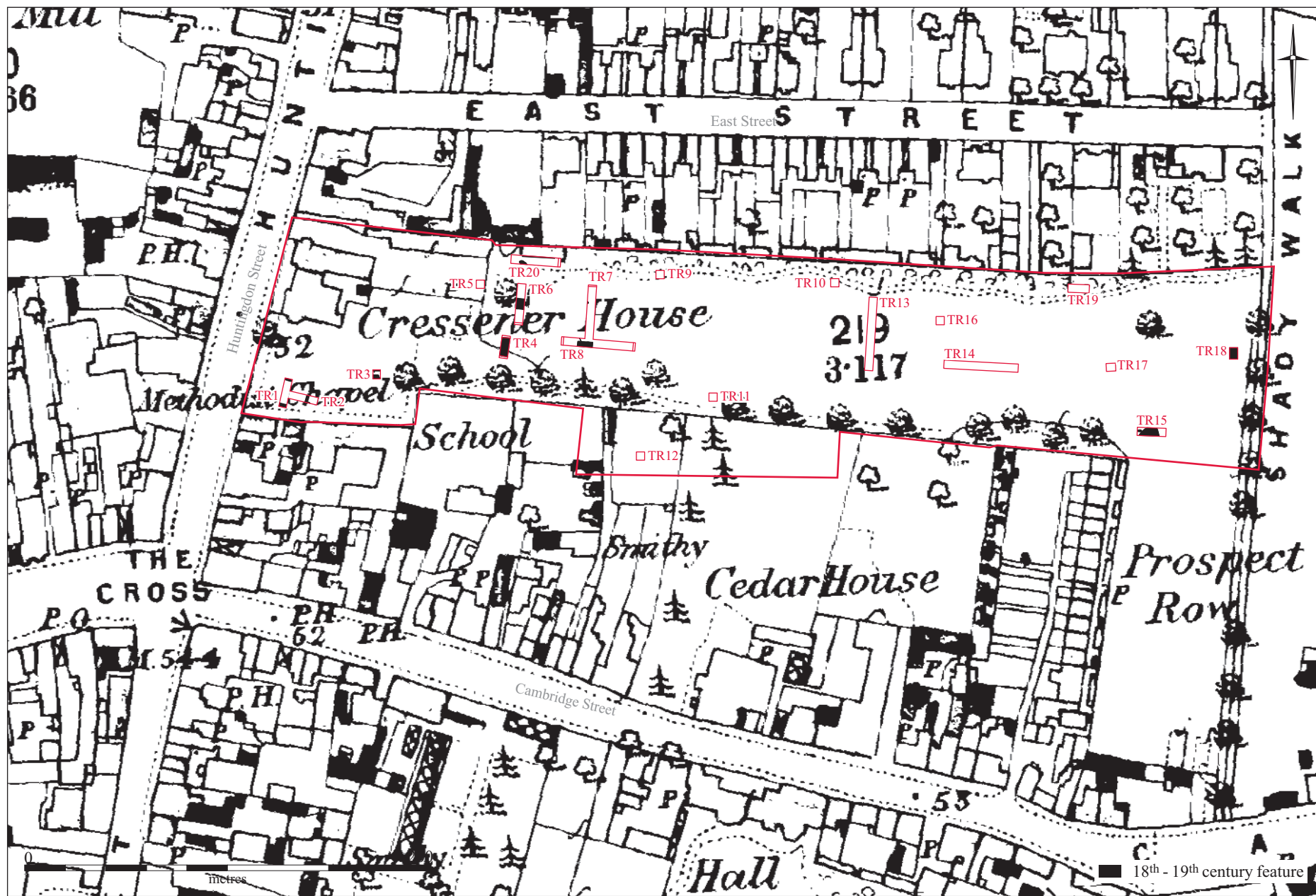


Figure 12. Plan of 18th - 19th century features overlaid onto the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map, 1884-89

**Old Fire Station Site
Huntingdon Road, St Neots
Cambridgeshire**

Report on Archaeological Geophysical Survey 2011

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Old Fire Station Site Huntingdon Road, St Neots, Cambridgeshire

Report on Archaeological Geophysical Survey 2011

Introduction

This magnetometer survey was carried out as part of an archaeological evaluation of a proposed development site in the centre of St Neots, Cambridgeshire. The site is a playing field adjacent to the former fire station to the east of Huntingdon Street, and is centred approximately at NGR 518750 260390.

The survey was commissioned from Bartlett Clark Consultancy, Specialists in Archaeogeophysics of Oxford, by Cambridge Archaeological Unit, and fieldwork was done on 3 March 2011.

The Site

The full evaluation area extends in total to c. 1.1ha, and includes the former fire station, a car park and other properties as outlined in red on figure 1 (and on the inset aerial photograph). The survey covered an open grassed area at the east end of the site, as indicated by cross hatching on figure 1.

The survey area contains some children's play equipment, and there is an electricity sub station in the NE corner. We have not been told of any previously recorded archaeological findings from the site, although there is a clear likelihood that former settlement or other features could be present in an urban location of this kind. Part, if not all, of the site is reported to have been quarried. This is thought to be particularly likely at the eastern end of the playing field.

The site is a short distance from the River Ouse at approximately the location where the river terrace gravel gives way to Boulder Clay (above a bedrock of Oxford Clay). Previous magnetometer surveys at comparable locations along the Ouse valley have on a number of occasions provided clear evidence for the presence of archaeological features.

Survey Procedure

The survey was carried out following standard magnetometer survey procedures. Magnetometer readings were collected using Bartington 1m fluxgate magnetometers, and are plotted at 25cm intervals along transects 1m apart. The results of the survey are shown

as a grey scale plot at 1:625 scale in figure 2, and as a graphical (x-y trace) plot at 1:500 scale in figure 3. An interpretation of the findings is shown superimposed on figure 3, and is reproduced separately to provide a summary of the findings on figure 4.

The survey plots show the magnetometer readings after standard treatments which include adjustment for irregularities in line spacing caused by variations in the instrument zero setting, and slight linear smoothing. The readings in the grey scale plot have additionally been subjected to weak 2D low pass filtering, which is applied to reduce background noise levels.

Colour coding has been used in the interpretation to try and distinguish different effects. Magnetic anomalies which perhaps represent pits or other individual features of possible archaeological significance are outlined in red, with recent disturbances in dark brown. Magnetic anomalies within the densely disturbed eastern part of the site (which are probably caused by the modern fill of the former quarry) are shown in a light brown/green. Some other small strong magnetic disturbances which are likely to be caused by scattered iron objects are outlined in blue, and possible pipes or services are also indicated in blue.

The survey grid was set out and located at the required national grid co-ordinates by means of a GPS system with differential beacon correction. The architects' site plan which is used as a background map in the survey plans was also tied to the OS grid by means of GPS measurements to site boundaries and structures. OS co-ordinates of map locations can therefore be read from the AutoCAD (.dwg) version of the plans which can be supplied with this report.

The magnetometer survey was supplemented by a background magnetic susceptibility survey with readings taken at 15m intervals using a Bartington MS2 meter and field sensor loop. Plots of the readings are inset in figure 4.

Susceptibility readings can indicate whether soil conditions at the site are likely to be strongly responsive to a magnetometer survey, and so assist the interpretation of the survey. Variations in response may sometimes relate to the presence of previously occupied or disturbed areas in which burning associated with past human occupation has enhanced the magnetic susceptibility of the topsoil, although the readings may be affected by a number of non-archaeological factors, including geology and land use.

Results

The magnetic susceptibility readings from the site are relatively strong (in a range 40-90 x 10⁻⁵ SI). Readings are higher in the quarried area to the east, but remain within this range in the western part of the site, where it is possible that an original ground surface survives. This suggests that the site is on a gravel rather than clay soil, and also confirms that conditions should be favourable for the magnetic detection of surviving archaeological features. The actual findings visible in the survey plots are, however, limited.

This in part is because much of the survey data is strongly disturbed, as would be expected

if part of the site has been quarried and backfilled. Readings from the eastern 2/3 of the site (as seen particularly in the graphical plot, figure 3) are highly variable, as would be expected from the filling of a pit which perhaps contains brick rubble, ferrous objects and other debris.

The background response from the remaining western part of the site is relatively quiet, but there are strong disturbances near fences and boundaries (as indicated in brown), as is usual at an enclosed urban site. There are only a few remaining findings which do not clearly relate to the quarry or other recent disturbances. Individual magnetic anomalies which could (in part) be interpreted as pit-like features of potential archaeological interest are outlined in red (as at A, B, as labelled on figure 4). In each case they are near to other stronger disturbances, and so this interpretation remains uncertain.

We are told there is likely to be an underground electricity cable somewhere within the site. This would not necessarily respond if it is of copper and plastic composition, although any ferrous joints or sheathing may be detectable. Such findings may be obscured by the disturbed response from the quarry infilling, but possible linear sequences of magnetic anomalies are perhaps visible (particularly in the grey scale plot) at C, and (more doubtfully) D. The very strong disturbances (as outlined in blue) around C could indicate a length of iron pipe, although it does originate near the sub station. A weaker sequence of (mainly negative) magnetic anomalies at E could indicate joints between the sections of a non-ferrous pipe.

Conclusions

The survey has produced findings which include strong magnetic disturbances consistent with the presence of an infilled former pit or quarry occupying all except the westernmost third of the survey area.

It is probable that various pipes or services are present, including a strong linear disturbance near the sub station at C, and a possible non-ferrous pipe or cable in the less disturbed part of the site at E.

It is difficult to identify any findings of specifically archaeological interest, although some (very uncertain) possible pit-like features have been outlined (in red). The possibility cannot be excluded (particularly given the disturbed response from much of the site) that archaeological features which are not necessarily strongly magnetic (such as stone wall footings, shallow foundation trenches or post holes) could be present in the unquarried part of the site, but remain undetected.

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20 June 2011

The fieldwork for this project was done by R. Ainslie and S. Ainslie. Plans were prepared by F. Prince.

Oasis Data Collection Form

OASIS ID: cambridg3-110892

Project Details	
Project name	The Old Fire Station, St Neots
Short description of the project	An archaeological evaluation consisting of twenty trenches covering 277.8m ² was conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit on the site of the proposed development of the former Old Fire Station, former Household Waste Disposal Site, Car Park and Recreation Ground, St. Neots, Cambridgeshire in July 2011. The earliest features encountered were Saxo-Norman with some form of activity probably beginning in the 12th century AD and continuing until around the 14th century. There was possibly a roadside ditch along Huntingdon Street, and in close proximity to this were postholes relating to a fence or building, a pit or well and various other features. These remains appear to represent a short-lived expansion of St. Neots, with domestic occupation fronting onto Huntingdon Street. Further to the east there was also evidence of contemporary sand/gravel quarrying and strip-agriculture. Activity apart from strip-agriculture appears to have ceased during the 14th-15th centuries, and activity only resumed in the 18th-19th centuries.
Project dates	Start: 14-07-2011 End: 22-07-2011
Previous/future work	No / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	ECB 3611 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	OFS 11 - Sitecode
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	None
Current Land use	Industry and Commerce 2 - Offices
Current Land use	Other 14 - Recreational usage
Current Land use	Other 13 - Waste ground
Monument type	PITS Medieval
Monument type	DITCH/GULLY Medieval
Monument type	POSSIBLE WELL Medieval
Significant Finds	POTTERY Medieval
Methods & techniques	'Sample Trenches'
Development type	Urban residential (e.g. flats, houses, etc.)
Development type	Urban commercial (e.g. offices, shops, banks, etc.)
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPS
Position in the planning process	Pre-determination
Project Location	
Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE HUNTINGDONSHIRE ST NEOTS The Old Fire Station, St Neots
Postcode	PE19 1BG
Study area	10310.00 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 1868 6039 52.2284949190 -0.262149566782 52 13 42 N 000 15 43 W Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 14.88m Max: 15.45m

Project Creators	
Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Local Authority Archaeologist and/or Planning Authority/advisory body
Project design originator	Alison Dickens
Project director/manager	Alison Dickens
Project supervisor	Craig Cessford
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer
Name of sponsor/funding body	Turnstone Estates
Project Archives	
Physical Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Physical Archive ID	OFS 11
Physical Contents	'Animal Bones','Ceramics','Worked stone/lithics'
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Digital Archive ID	OFS 11
Digital Contents	'other'
Digital Media available	'Images raster / digital photography'
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Paper Archive ID	OFS 11
Paper Contents	'other'
Paper Media available	'Context sheet','Matrices','Plan','Section'
Project Bibliography	
Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	The Old Fire Station, Huntingdon Street, St Neots, Cambridgeshire: an archaeological evaluation
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Cessford, C.
Other bibliographic details	Cambridge Archaeological Unit Report No. 1029
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