

A Watching Brief at Parkside Fire & Rescue Station, Cambridge (CAU Report No. 1124; addendum to CAU Report 1049, ECB 3675)

Richard Newman

Introduction

A watching brief was undertaken at the Parkside Fire & Rescue station site, Cambridge, on the 18th of September 2012 (TL 4572 5822). At this time a single trench – measuring approximately 28m in length by 10m in width, which had been excavated to a depth of 1.3m – was inspected (Figure 1). This had been excavated by the principal contractor prior to the commencement of the watching brief in order to allow the insertion of a large soakaway and related drainage works. The present watching brief comprised the third phase of investigative work to have been undertaken at the site, following on from the insertion of an initial test pit in 2010 (Newman 2010) and a trench-based evaluation that was conducted in 2011 (Newman 2011; see also Figure 1). The background history of the site has also been reviewed in-depth in a previous desktop assessment (Dickens & Appleby 2006)

Results

The soakaway trench was situated in an area that was unavailable for investigation during the 2011 trench-based evaluation. Situated in close proximity to the principal frontage of the street-block, its location represents perhaps the most likely locus for early activity at the site. Upon entering the trench, however, it was immediately apparent that this area had been subjected to intensive quarrying activity. In all four sections closely aligned, near-vertically sided pits were visible. Due to their depth these features also extended across the base of the trench, where their elongated sub-rectangular form revealed them to be characteristic of post-medieval gravel quarries. Because of the profusion of these features, a representative 2m section was selected and recorded (Figure 1). Here, the earliest feature comprised a heavily truncated pit that measured 0.52m+ in depth. This contained a relatively homogeneous deposit of mid yellowish brown silty sandy gravels, with occasional lenses of mid to pale brown sandy silt and relatively few inclusions. It is therefore most likely to represent the remnant of a gravel quarry pit, which was backfilled with discarded upcast material. Truncating this feature to both the northeast and southwest were two substantial, near-vertically sided pits. Both features contained banded/slumped deposits consisting of collapsed/redeposited pale yellow sandy gravels and pea grit, mid orangey brown sandy silt with occasional to rare gravel and charcoal inclusions, and mid brown sandy clay silt with occasional gravels and rare charcoal fleck inclusions. These bands were pitched at steeply sloping angles, indicative of rapid redeposition/backfilling (see Figure 1). Measuring 0.74m+ in depth, these features also extended across the base of the trench, thereby revealing their close parallel alignment. Overlying the strip-quarries was a relatively homogenous deposit of mid greyish-brown clay silt, with occasional gravel and charcoal fleck inclusions. This layer, which measured 0.48m thick, represents a probable ‘garden-soil’ deposit. Overlying this, and capping the sequence, was a final layer of off-white concrete that measured 0.13m thick.

Discussion

The above results accord very closely with the pattern of activity that was previously identified during the trench-based evaluation undertaken at the site in 2011 (Newman 2011). At this time a widespread sequence of quarrying activity was revealed, in which an initial phase of haphazard, sub-oval pits was later succeeded by a horizon of features indicative of a more intensive, 'strip-type' extraction technique. Overall, quarrying activity appears to have begun here during the medieval or early post-medieval period but reached its apogee in the first half of the 17th century. The earliest surviving features comprised an extensive horizon of pits that shared both a similar morphology and a distinctive fill. Although very heavily truncated by later features, these pits were nevertheless identifiable as gravel quarries. Their rather haphazard pattern, allied with their relatively small size and the paucity of material culture they contained, suggests that in its initial form this activity may have been somewhat *ad hoc* and sporadic in nature. But this situation was soon to change. By far the most common feature-type encountered during the evaluation was the so-called 'strip-quarry', of which a large number of examples were identified. These features – which are characterised by their elongated, sub-rectangular form and close parallel alignment – all appear to have been created during the first half of the 17th century. Their distinctive shape resulted from a process of 'worm-like' excavation, during which waste material was discarded to the rear of an ever advancing working-face. In effect, therefore, they represent the vestiges of an early form of open-cast mining. The vast majority of the features that were visible in the sections of the soakaway trench correspond to the residues of just such a process. This indicates that the entire site was subject to intensive quarrying at this time, and strongly suggests that no contemporary occupation was present. Furthermore, it is probable that such intensive stripping has entirely obliterated any potential evidence of earlier activity in the vicinity.

Once the intensive quarrying phase had been concluded, a pitted, almost 'lunar' landscape appears to have predominated across much of the site. Evidence of this surface irregularity, in the form of upcast mounds of waste material, was clearly visible in the sections of the 2011 evaluation trenches. Although partially denuded, the scale of the surviving upcast indicates that the site did not return to horticultural use following the conclusion of the intensive phase of extraction. Instead, the irregularities only appear to have become sealed in the early 19th century when the area was occupied by a suburban villa known as Peters Field (or Petersfield) House. In its initial form, this structure – which was relatively high-status in nature – was situated almost immediately to the northeast of the soakaway trench (see Dickens & Appleby 2006, fig. 4). The surrounding grounds were also landscaped at this time, and transformed into an extensive garden (thereby providing the most likely context for the homogenous 'garden-soil' deposit that was encountered). Although additional buildings were then added throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, no structural remains were identified during the present watching brief. This implies that they were situated entirely above-ground, and were most probably removed in 1963/64 when the site was cleared to allow the construction of the original Fire & Rescue station. This latter phase in the site's usage was represented archaeologically by the remnants of a concrete floor.

Bibliography

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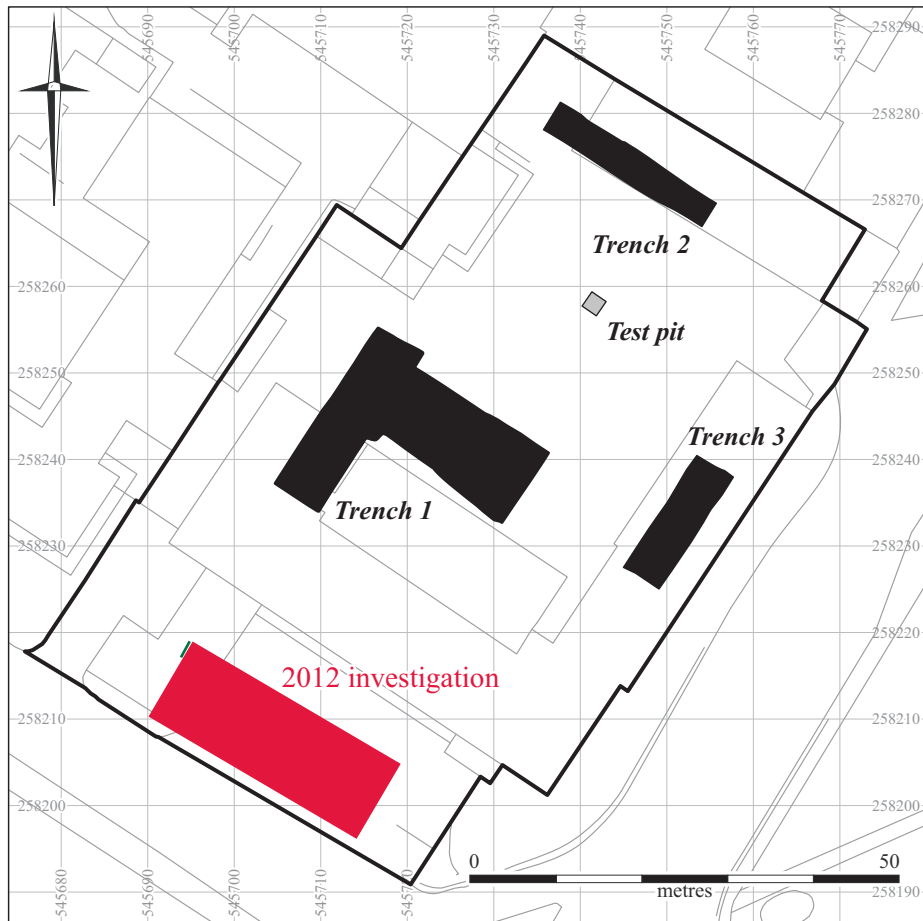


Figure 1. Location of investigations, and south-east facing section