

Churchill College, Cambridge

An Archaeological Evaluation



Richard Newman

Land at Churchill College, Cambridge

An Archaeological Evaluation

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University of Cambridge
Division of Archaeology
January 2014
Report No. 1203
Event number: **ECB 4043**

Summary

A trench-based evaluation was conducted upon land at Churchill College, Cambridge, in advance of proposed development. Four trenches – covering a combined total of 78 square metres – were excavated, and in each instance a two-part sequence was revealed. At the base, a series of waterlain, anaerobic contexts were present. These were contained within one or more hollows or depressions of probable anthropogenic origin. The resultant pond-like features were most probably associated with the partial draining of the area following the inclosure of the former open fields in 1805. They appear to have been largely infilled during the late 19th century. Subsequently, during the early 1960s a substantial body of made-ground material measuring up to 1.6m in depth was introduced. This latter deposit, which comprehensively sealed the preceding horizon, was associated with landscaping activity undertaken in conjunction with the construction of Churchill College itself.

Introduction

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook an archaeological trench-based evaluation on a 0.18 hectare area of land located in the northwestern part of the city of Cambridge on the 16th of December 2013. The Proposed Development Area (PDA), which is centred on TL 435 593, is situated within the grounds of Churchill College. It lies a short distance to the southwest of extant College buildings, in relatively close proximity to Madingley Road (Figure 1). Here, four trenches – covering a combined area of 78 square metres (or 4.3% of the PDA) – were excavated (Figure 1). Arranged predominately around the perimeter of the development area, their disposition was determined by the presence of a number of standing trees along with a concrete drainage culvert. The project followed the specification issued by the CAU (Beadsmoore 2013) and approved by Dan McConnell, Development Control Archaeologist at Cambridgeshire’s Historic Environment Team. It was commissioned by Andy Thompson of Beacon Planning Ltd. on behalf of Churchill College, Cambridge, in advance of proposed development.

Landscape and Geology

The present-day topography of the site reflects a widespread programme of landscape alteration that was undertaken during the establishment of Churchill College in the early 1960s. A series of terraces were created at this time, thereby allowing the establishment of a number of sports fields. Towards the perimeter of the area, a number of sweeping banks were also established. Prior to the commencement of the investigation the ground height in the immediate vicinity of the PDA varied between 14.92m and 14.33m OD. Geologically, the site lies upon Gault Formation Mudstone, which comprises part of a much broader clay plain extending to the west of Cambridge (British Geological Survey 1976; see also Figure 2). The highest surviving natural clay was encountered at 13.22m OD.

Methodology

Modern deposits and overburden were removed by a 360° mechanical excavator using a 2.0m wide toothless bucket. Due to the depth of mid-20th century made-ground material, associated with the landscaping of the college grounds, it was necessary to introduce a 1.0m wide step into each trench at a depth of 1m in order to ensure its stability. Excavation then continued within a narrower, 2.0m wide central slot. All recording was undertaken using the CAU-modified version of the MoLAS system (Spence 1994). Base plans were drawn at a scale of 1:50, whilst sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. Throughout the following text, context numbers are indicated within the text by square brackets (*e.g.* [001]), and feature numbers are denoted by the prefix **F.** (*e.g.* **F.01**). The photographic archive consists of a series of digital images. All work was carried out with strict adherence to Health and Safety legislation, and within the recommendations of FAME (Allen & Holt 2010). The sitecode for this project is **CHC 13** and the event number is **ECB 4043**.

Historical and Archaeological Background

The historical and archaeological background of the development area has been covered in depth in a previous desktop assessment (Dickens in Whittaker 2000) while the wider background of Cambridge itself is reviewed in several published sources (*e.g.* Bryan 1999; Cam 1959; Taylor 1999); neither is therefore reproduced here in full. Nevertheless, it is necessary to briefly outline the background of the area in order to situate the site securely within its wider context. This process is rendered particularly significant due to the extent of the investigations that have recently been conducted in the wider vicinity. Important large-scale excavations have been undertaken at the North West Cambridge (Evans & Newman 2010; Evans & Cessford *in prep.*), Vicar's Farm (Lucas & Whitaker 2001), NIAB (Luke *et al.* 2013) and West Cambridge sites (Timberlake 2010; Slater 2012), amongst others (Figure 2).

The earliest recorded material known from the area is Palaeolithic in date. Indeed, a relatively sizable palaeolith assemblage has been recovered from the Observatory Gravels, a substantial head deposit situated to the north of the present site (Griffith 1879; Babington 1883, 11-13; Marr 1920; Clark 1938; Browne 1974, map 10.35). Neolithic material is also well represented from this same area (Marr & Burkitt 1923; Evans & Newman 2010). Although a moderate degree of Bronze Age activity has been encountered, principally situated upon the Observatory Gravel ridge (*e.g.* Slater 2008, 6-10; Evans & Cessford *in prep.*), a more significant level of Iron Age occupation has been identified. In closest proximity to the present site, an Iron Age presence was identified within the grounds of the University Observatory to the west (Masser 2000; Newman 2008a), at the Vicar's Farm and Nano-Fabrication Building sites to the southwest (Lucas & Whitaker 2001, 17; Armour 2001) and within the grounds of New Hall College to the northeast (Evans 1996). Further afield, Iron Age settlement activity has also been identified at Marion Close (Mortimer & Evans 1997) and at the West Cambridge (Timberlake 2010) and North West Cambridge developments (Evans & Cessford *in prep.*). It was during the Roman period that the most intensive activity in the area occurred, however.

The prevailing picture of Cambridge during the Roman period has been one of a settlement centred almost exclusively upon the Castle Hill area to the east (*e.g.* Alexander & Pullinger 2000; see also Evans & Ten Harkel 2010). Previously the site of a minor Iron Age settlement of 'village proportions', this hilltop location became occupied by a small Roman fort in the 1st century AD that subsequently developed into a small walled town around three centuries later. Recent fieldwork, however, is demonstrating that this 'single locus' interpretation is somewhat limited as evidence of a significant hinterland has now been detected at some distance from the presumed centre. To the southeast, Roman occupation has been identified on the riverfront (Dickens 1996) and in the Park Street/Jesus Lane area (Alexander *et al.* 2004), as well as extending out along Bridge Street (Newman 2008b). Of more direct relevance to the present study, key sites have also been excavated to the west at New Hall (Evans 1996),

Trinity Hall Playing Fields (Wills 2004), North West Cambridge (Evans & Cessford *in prep.*) and – perhaps most importantly – Vicar’s Farm (Lucas & Whittaker 2001). The latter site, which is situated on the Gault clay plain some 350m to the west of the PDA, consisted of a regularly laid-out rectilinear system of ditched enclosures and semi-open fields. Situated at the centre of the site were an aisled building, a timber-post circle and numerous quarry pits and wells, whilst located towards the fringes of the settlement were two cemeteries (the southernmost consisting of *c.* 30 inhumations and the northernmost seven cremations and two infant inhumations). A trackway was also present, with a metalled path leading off it into the settlement core. The site was occupied for over 350 years and produced substantial assemblages of ceramic and faunal remains, in addition to some 350 coins.

As a result of the on-going fieldwork, it is now clear that a network of interconnected settlements was present across the western hinterland of Roman Cambridge, spanning both the gravel ridge and the clay plain below. Given their close spatial distribution, visible in Figure 2 – and even taking into account the possible extent of temporal variability – it is apparent that the town’s western hinterland was relatively intensively occupied at this time. Two possible villa sites are known in the vicinity, for example, lying beneath Girton College (Scott 1993, 37; Taylor 1997, 53) and Madingley Park & Ride (Evans & Newman 2010, 105-20) respectively. Moreover, this pattern of intensive occupation closely mirrors that which has previously been identified within Cambridge’s contemporary southern hinterland (Evans *et al.* 2008). By way of contrast, the primary evidence of Saxon activity in the area is sepulchral in origin. Firstly, around 600m to the southeast of the present site – beneath a tennis court located in St. John’s College’s playing fields – a large 5th to 7th century mixed cremation and inhumation cemetery was investigated in 1888 (Fox 1923, 242-43). Secondly, an important Early Saxon cemetery has been excavated within the grounds of Girton College. A minimum of 100 inhumations and 200 cremations were recovered from this site, along with a substantial number of finds including many cinerary urns (Hollingworth & O’Reilly 1925, 2; Rogerson 2007, 28). In addition, a small number of inhumations of Anglo-Saxon date are also known to have been disturbed by coprolite quarrying in the wider area during the 19th century (Fox 1923, 244). Despite the wealth of mortuary evidence in this vicinity, however, no settlement evidence of Anglo-Saxon date has yet been identified (see Cessford with Dickens 2005).

During the succeeding medieval period the site remained some distance outside Cambridge’s urban core, which was focused now upon the opposite, eastern bank of the Cam. It was instead situated within the town’s West Fields; an extensive agricultural fringe within which open-field, strip-type practices were conducted. Divided into individual *lands*, or long narrow strips, which were in turn grouped into larger *furlongs*, the surrounding landscape at this time was intensively cultivated. The primary documentary resource for this part of Cambridge during the medieval period is the Corpus Terrier (or *Terrarium Cantabrigiae*) a manuscript recording the tithes due from the West Fields that was compiled *c.* 1360 (see Hall & Ravensdale 1976). This source

reveals that the area now occupied by Churchill College originally comprised two furlongs named ‘Muscroft’ and ‘Stipell’. These open fields were eventually inclosed in 1805 (Guillebaud 2005, 187), and the wider post-enclosure history of West Cambridge has comprised the subject of a number of recent studies (Guillebaud 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009).

In direct relation to the present site itself, during the first half of the 20th century it was incorporated into a tenanted farm. During the second half of the 20th century, however, the usage of the space altered dramatically following the foundation of Churchill College. The establishment of this new institution, founded by and named for the eponymous former prime minister, was first mooted in 1955. In 1958, a 42 acre (c. 170,000 square metre) site was purchased in order to house the College. The first postgraduate students were admitted to the society in 1960, and the first undergraduates a year later; full College status was received in 1966. Construction work was not completed at the site until 1968, however. Designed by Richard Sheppard, the architectural form of Churchill College comprises nine main residential courts, along with separate graduate flats and a large central building housing the dining hall, buttery, combination rooms and offices. The principal college buildings and courtyards are arranged around a large central space, in which the library is situated. In 1992, the Møller Centre for Continuing Education was also added to the Churchill site. The first of two archaeological investigations to have been conducted within the College grounds was undertaken at this time. Trenches inserted prior to the Møller Centre’s construction revealed limited evidence of 18th to 19th century agricultural activity along with later landscaping deposits (Evans 1990; Figure 2). Subsequently, in 2000, a further investigation was undertaken at 44 Storey’s Way in advance of the construction of additional student accommodation (Whittaker 2000; Figure 2). Here, four chalk quarry pits of 17th to 18th century date were encountered; these were probably associated with the production of lime for use in construction.

Results

Broadly comparable sequences were encountered in all four trenches excavated at the site (Table 1; Figures 3 & 4). In each instance, two distinct horizons were identified. The upper horizon pertained to the introduction of substantial made-ground deposits during construction works conducted in the early 1960s; the lower horizon represented the earlier, pre-landscaping material that had been sealed beneath.

	Trench 1	Trench 2	Trench 3	Trench 4
Present ground height (OD)	14.92m	14.54m	14.60m	14.33m
Depth of made-ground	1.12m	1.04m	1.60m	1.42m
Depth of organic material	0.54m	0.72m	0.74m+	0.96m
Top of natural (OD)	12.82m	13.22m	12.98m	11.92m

Table 1: Comparative depths of deposits in all four trenches

Stratigraphically, the earliest surviving deposit to be encountered at the site comprised sealed/buried soil horizon [308] in Trench 3. This material – which consisted of a relatively firm deposit of mid to bright greyish brown clay silt with few inclusions – appears to represent a fragmentary vestige of the original ground surface. Unfortunately, due to the absence of associated material culture, its date could not be established, although it was not necessarily of great antiquity. By way of contrast, in Trenches 1, 2 and 4 the lowest extant deposits – [104], [105], [203], [204] and [405] respectively – were much darker and more organic in nature. Moreover, they extended beyond the limits of excavation in every direction, so that it could not be determined whether this material represented an extensive horizontal layer or the fill of a discrete feature (or features). A more nuanced sequence was present in Trench 3, however. Here, it was apparent that near-identical organic deposits [305] and [306] were contained within a discrete cut ([307]; Figure 4A). This feature, which had irregular moderately sloping sides, truncated buried soil [308]; its base was not reached. The absence of gradual erosion/slump deposits, allied with the ‘clarity’ of its cut, indicates that the feature was most probably anthropogenic as opposed to natural in origin. It thus appears highly likely that the basal deposits encountered within the three remaining trenches were similarly contained within the same – or perhaps a series of closely comparable – feature(s).

In Trenches 1 and 2, the very lowest deposits in the sequence – [105] and [204] – consisted of pale brown finely sorted and partially laminated silty clay. This material represents the residue of a process of waterlain deposition, although neither layer appears to have remained a sealed anaerobic context; thus suggesting that the area was initially subject to a pattern of seasonal inundation and drying out. Overlying these deposits, and extending to the base of the sequence in Trenches 3 and 4, were layers [104], [203], [305], [306] and [405]. Consisting of dense, finely laminated mid to dark bluish grey silty clay, these latter deposits contained a moderate degree of organic material alongside rare CBM fragment inclusions. Finally, in Trenches 1 and 4, the uppermost portion of the waterlain sequence was capped by discrete lenses of dense organic matter – [103] and [404] – which principally consisted of partially decayed leaves and reeds/twigs, intermixed with moderate quantities of CBM.

The only material culture to have been recovered from these pond-like feature(s) was 19th century in date. Firstly, a small quantity of ceramic building materials was present towards the base of the sequence in each trench. In Trenches 2 and 3, however, discrete lenses containing large amounts of brick and tile fragments – [202] and [304] – were also encountered (Figures 3B & 4A). Effectively ‘capping’ the organic deposits beneath, these lenses were most probably associated with the partial infilling/reclamation of a previously wet and potentially bog-like environment.

Layers [202] and [304] consisted of moderately firm mid to dark brown humic silty clay with frequent CBM fragment inclusions. The latter included both frogged and unfrogged bricks and several varieties of peg tile.

Overlying these reclamation deposits – although not necessarily directly succeeding them – was a substantial layer of made-ground/levelling material. Present within all four trenches (as represented by [101], [102], [201], [301], [302], [401], [402] and [403]), this made-ground also contained substantial quantities of mid 20th century ceramic

building materials that had clearly been derived from the construction of the adjacent College buildings. The sequence was then finally sealed via the introduction of a substantial layer of dark humic topsoil ([100], [200], [300] and [400]).

Made-ground deposits [101], [102], [201], [301], [302], [401], [402] and [403] were partially banded in form, and principally comprised moderately firm intermixed bluish grey silty clay (which represents redeposited natural derived from the nearby terracing works). Within this material a substantial quantity of CBM fragments were present, alongside segments of ceramic salt-glazed sewer pipe and large fragments of concrete measuring up to 2m in diameter. Finally, overlying the made-ground layer was topsoil [100], [200], [300] and [400], which consisted of humic dark brown clay silt with few inclusions. This deposit varied between 0.22m and 0.38m in thickness.

Material Culture

A relatively sizable quantity of ceramic building materials (CBM) was encountered during the evaluation. Two discrete groups of material were identified:

The lowest of the two groups, elements of which were encountered in Trenches 2 and 3 ([202] and [304]), appears to have been backfilled into the basal organic deposits as hardcore. The majority of this material was diagnostically 19th century in date, and included fragments of frogged and unfrogged machine-moulded bricks in both pink and yellow fabrics, along with numerous peg-tile fragments. The second group – which was present within made-ground deposits [101], [102], [201], [301], [302], [401], [402] and [403] – was clearly more recent. Predominately comprising pinkish red frogged bricks stamped with the logo of the London Brick Company, this latter material was almost certainly derived from the construction of the adjacent College buildings. None of the ceramic building material assemblage has been retained.

Discussion

No definite evidence of pre-modern activity was encountered during the evaluation. Whilst – given the limited scale of the investigation – certainty is perforce impossible, it nevertheless appears likely that this absence is directly associated with the topographical and geological nature of the site's locale. Situated towards the base of a natural slope in the underlying Gault plain, the resultant hydrological conditions almost certainly rendered the area damp and unsuitable for the majority of activities in the past. It does however appear that some attempt was made to control and channel this water. The distinct form of the basal depressions that were encountered, allied with the lack of associated erosion, implies that they were anthropogenic as opposed to natural in origin. Yet the date at which this attempt was made is less clear. Given the number of Roman settlements that are known to have existed in the area, for example – along with the extent of their associated fieldsystems – it is by no means impossible that some attempt was made at hydrological control during this period. More likely, however, is that such features were associated with the post-enclosure conversion of this portion of the former medieval open fields into a working farm. As such, they probably comprised part of a more widespread programme of landscape management/reorganisation that was undertaken at some time during the 19th or early 20th century (with the balance of probability suggesting that they belong to the earlier part of this period).

The first reliable cartographic depiction of the area – the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map, which was published in 1885 – shows no trace of ponds or similar, water-related features. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that they were not considered substantial or significant enough to warrant inclusion; the second is that the area had already been infilled. This latter explanation is certainly possible, given the nature of the CBM that was used for the infilling, but remains unprovable due to the long-lived and frequently reused nature of the constituent materials. In either case, however – and despite the high level of organic preservation that was encountered – it is very unlikely that additional investigation would provide further significant clarification of these issues. Overall, therefore, the site does not possess a high degree of archaeological potential.

Acknowledgments

This evaluation was commissioned by Andy Thompson of Beacon Planning Ltd. on behalf of Churchill College, Cambridge, and was monitored by Dan McConnell of Cambridgeshire County Council's Historic Environment Team. It was managed for the CAU by Emma Beadsmoore and the fieldwork was directed by Richard Newman with the assistance of Alisdair Wright. The graphics for the report were produced by Bryan Crossan.

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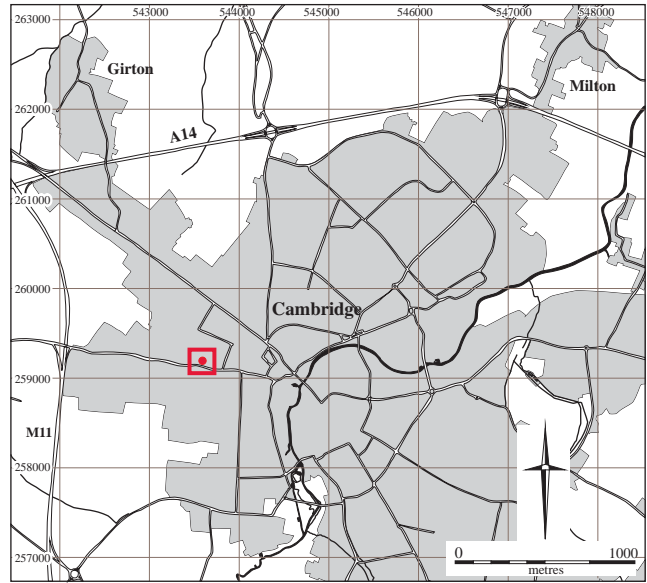
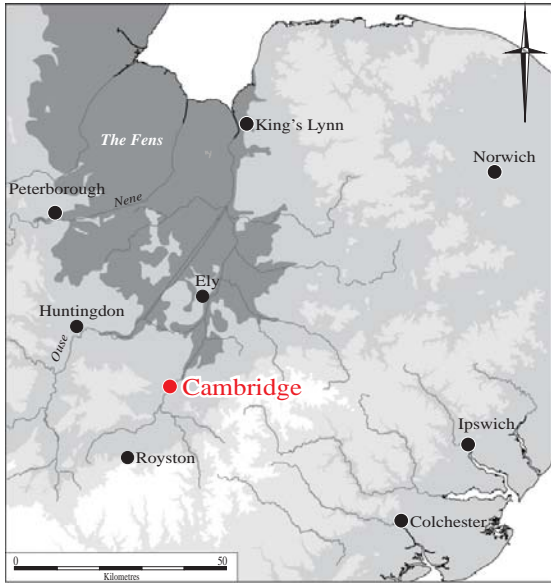
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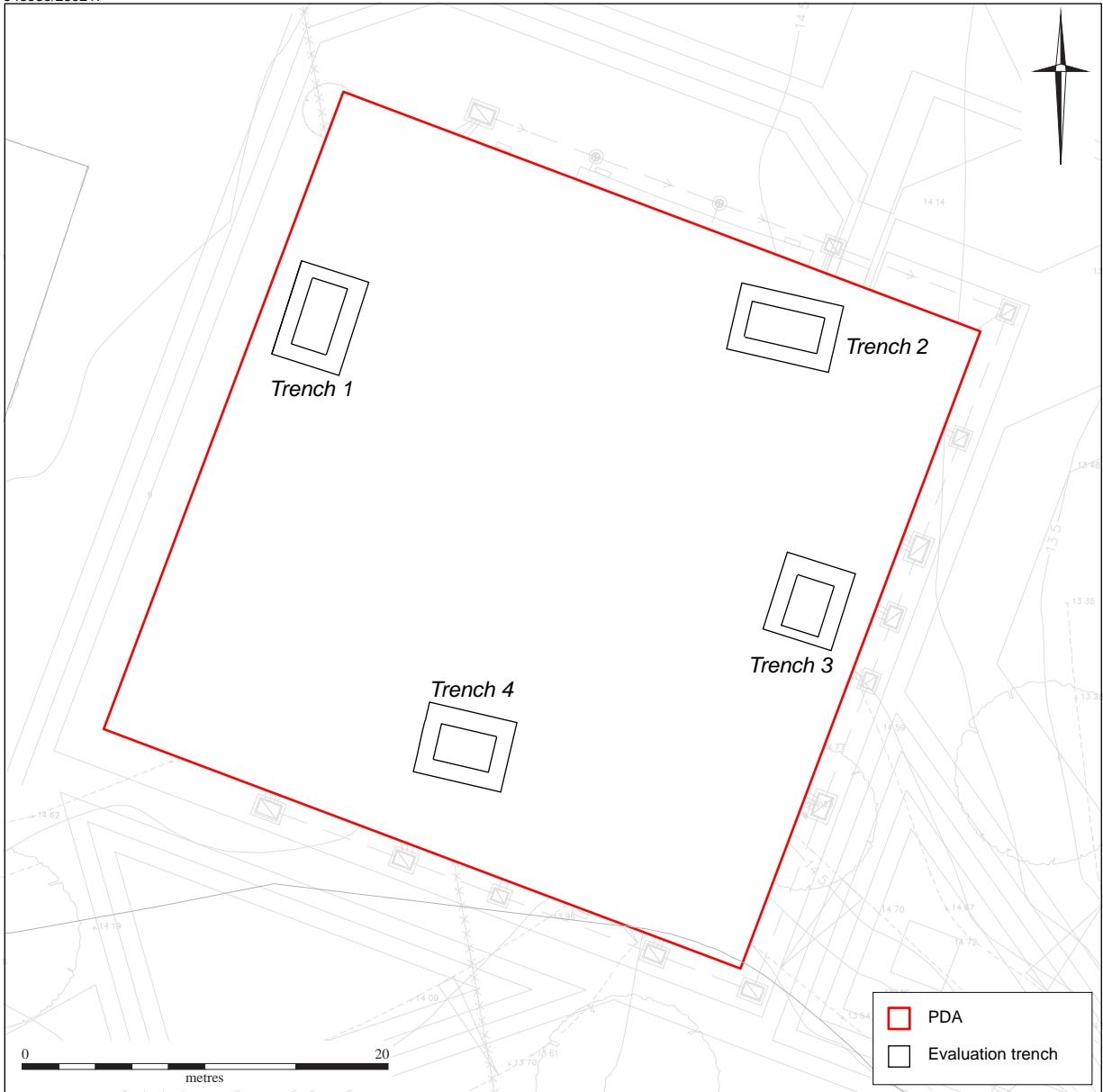
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Figure 1. Location plan.

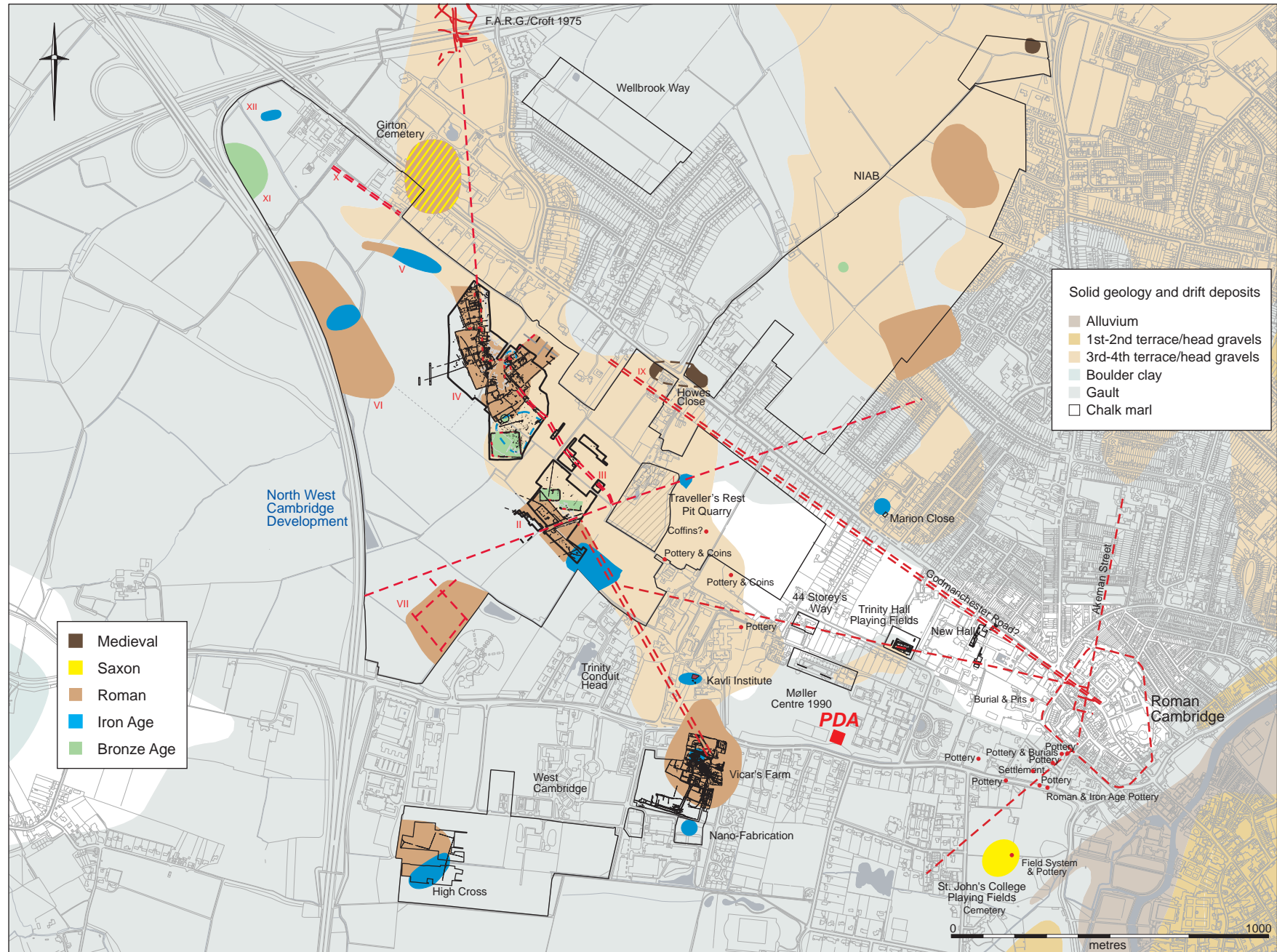


Figure 2. West Cambridge hinterland, showing sites of significant interest.



A)



B)

Figure 3. A) Trench 1, facing east B) Trench 2, facing south.



A)



B)

Figure 4. A) Trench 3, facing east; B) Trench 4, facing south.

Oasis Form

OASIS ID: cambridg3-168750	
Project Details	
Project name	Churchill College, Cambridge
Short description of the project	A trench-based evaluation was conducted upon land at Churchill College, Cambridge, in advance of proposed development. Four trenches - covering a combined total of 78 square metres - were excavated, and in each instance a two-part sequence was revealed. At the base, a series of waterlain, anaerobic contexts were present. These were contained within one or more hollows or depressions of probable anthropogenic origin. The resultant pond-like features were most probably associated with the partial draining of the area following the inclosure of the former open fields in 1805. They appear to have been largely infilled during the late 19th century. Subsequently, during the early 1960s a substantial body of made-ground material measuring up to 1.6m in depth was introduced. This latter deposit, which comprehensively sealed the preceding horizon, was associated with landscaping activity undertaken in conjunction with the construction of Churchill College itself.
Project dates	Start: 16-12-2013 End: 16-12-2013
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	ECB 4043 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	CHC 13 - Sitecode
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	None
Current Land use	Residential 2 - Institutional and communal accommodation
Monument type	POND Post Medieval
Significant Finds	N/A None
Methods & techniques	"Targeted Trenches"
Development type	Urban residential (e.g. flats, houses, etc.)
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPS
Position in the planning process	After full determination (eg. As a condition)
Project Location	
Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE CAMBRIDGE CAMBRIDGE Land at Churchill College, Cambridge
Postcode	CB3 0DR

Study area	0.18 Hectares
Site coordinates	TL 435 593 52 0 52 12 46 N 000 06 02 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 11.92m Max: 13.22m
Project Creators	
Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Local Planning Authority (with/without advice from County/District Archaeologist)
Project design originator	Emma Beadsmoore
Project director/manager	Emma Beadsmoore
Project supervisor	Richard Newman
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer
Name of sponsor/funding body	Churchill College
Project Archives	
Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Digital Archive ID	CHC 13
Digital Contents	"other"
Digital Media available	"Images raster / digital photography", "Survey", "Text"
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Paper Archive ID	CHC 13
Paper Contents	"other"
Paper Media available	"Context sheet", "Plan", "Section"
Project Bibliography	
Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	Land at Churchill College, Cambridge: An Archaeological Evaluation
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Newman, R.
Other bibliographic details	Cambridge Archaeological Unit Report No. 1203

Date	2014
Issuer or publisher	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Place of issue or publication	Cambridge
Description	An A4 wire bound document with plastic laminate cover. It is 18 pages long and has 4 illustrations.
Entered by	Richard Newman (rn276@cam.ac.uk)
Entered on	15 January 2014