

St. Catharine's College Basement, Cambridge

An Archaeological Watching Brief



Richard Newman

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With illustrations by Vicki Herring

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University of Cambridge
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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was conducted at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge. This monitored works undertaken within the adjoining basements of the former Master's Lodge (1674-76) and the Ramsden Building (1757). Here, two test pits were excavated. In both instances, a limited number of medieval features were identified below the extant basement floor level. These features represent the last remaining vestiges of an initially 3m deep stratigraphic sequence.

- Introduction -

An archaeological watching brief was conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, between the 25th of July and the 1st of August 2014. The development area, which is centred on TL 4475 5817, is located within the adjoining basements of the listed former Master's Lodge and Ramsden Building (Figure 1). Here, two test pits – each measuring 0.8m square – were excavated. In addition, the partial reduction of the basement floor within the Ramsden Building was also monitored (Figure 2). The watching brief was undertaken as part of the project's listed building consent and was monitored by Dan McConnell, Development Control Archaeologist at Cambridgeshire's Historic Environment Team (CHET). The work was commissioned by Andrew Henderson of RH Partnership Architects on behalf of St. Catharine's College in advance of redevelopment of the basement space.

Landscape and Geology

St. Catharine's College is situated on the southern periphery of the historic core of Cambridge. Prior to the commencement of the present works, the external ground surface at the site lay at 9.84m AOD, whilst the floor of the basement lay at 7.85m AOD. Geologically, the site lies on second terrace river gravels overlying Gault clay (British Geological Survey 1976). During the course of the watching brief, the highest surviving natural gravels were encountered at 7.46m AOD.

Methodology

Modern concrete and brick floor surfaces, along with any associated make-up/levelling deposits, were broken out and removed by the principal contractor prior to the test pits' excavation. All archaeological features and deposits were then excavated by hand and recorded using the CAU-modified version of the MoLAS system (Spence 1994). Base plans were drawn at a scale of 1:20, whilst sections were drawn at a scale of 1:10. A digital photographic archive was also compiled. Throughout the following text, context numbers are indicated by square brackets (*e.g.* **[101]**) and feature numbers by the prefix F (*e.g.* **F.01**). 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 the excavation was **SCB14** and the event number was **ECB 4249**.

Historical and Archaeological Background

The historical and archaeological background of the development area's environs has been discussed in detail in two previous desktop assessments (Alexander 1996; Dickens 1999). Consequently, only a brief summary is presented here. To date, limited evidence of prehistoric and Roman activity has been identified in the area. The primary focus of occupation during the latter period was centred around Castle Hill, to the north of the development area (Alexander & Pullinger 2000; Evans & Ten Harkel 2010). Subsequently, up until the mid-10th century, Cambridge remained only an "economically viable backwater" (Hines 1999, 136). Following this date, however, it emerged as a significant urban centre. By the late 10th century, a mint had been established (Lobel 1975, 3; Haslam 1984, 21) and the town was being linked to a group of important trading centres including Norwich, Thetford and Ipswich (Cam

1934, 43). This emphasises the central role played by river trade in Cambridge's rapid economic growth. By the end of the 10th century, occupation had expanded to the south of the River Cam and, by the first half of the 11th century, the presence of a number of pre-Conquest churches indicates that Trumpington Street/Kings Parade – the route of the medieval High Street – was well-established (Addyman & Biddle 1965, 99; Haslam 1984, 21; Brooke 1985). Finally, by the mid-12th century, the suburban fringe had been sub-divided from the main urban core by the creation of a substantial ditched boundary known as the King's Ditch.

At a more immediate, site-specific scale, the development area is located within the precinct of St. Catharine's College. The history of this institution has been covered in depth in a number of published sources (*e.g.* Willis & Clark 1886 II, 69-114; Browne 1902; Jones 1936; Jones 1951; Rich 1973; Edis & Baker 1997) and, as such, will not be reiterated in detail here. Initially one of the smallest colleges in the University, St. Catharine's was founded in 1473 by Robert Woodlarke, Provost of King's College (Willis & Clark 1886 II, 70-72). Its historical development has been described as "unusually gradual, and the relations of several of the pieces composing it to each other are extremely obscure" (*ibid.*, 69). This situation has been exacerbated by the fact that little of the original fabric of the medieval college remains extant. The present buildings primarily date from a major rebuilding campaign that was undertaken in 1673-1704. The three ranges surrounding Main Court, including the college chapel, were all completed at this time; a fourth and final range was also conjectured, but never actually constructed (*ibid.*, 100). During the present investigation, Test Pit 2 was located within the basement of former Master's Lodge (which was constructed between 1674-76) while Test Pit 1 was located within the basement of the Ramsden Building (which was constructed in 1757). Both buildings lay to the south of the original 15th century college precinct. This area was formerly occupied by a number of tenements and *messuages* (larger properties, potentially containing a number of buildings) that fronted onto Milne Street; the original medieval name of Queens' Lane. Formerly situated in a thriving mercantile district, within the urban core enclosed by the King's Ditch, these properties were gradually acquired by the college in order to facilitate its subsequent expansion (*ibid.*, 70-86).

- Results -

Two test pits were excavated. The first, Test Pit 1, was located within the basement of the Ramsden Building (Figure 1). Prior to its excavation, the concrete floor within the western part of this basement was broken out and removed (Figure 2). Beneath an earlier, 19th century brick surface and its associated hardcore, this reduction revealed a layer of primary make-up material ([100]) which was left *in situ*. Excavation of this layer within Test Pit 1 produced two sherds of 18th century pottery, confirming that it is most probably contemporary with the construction of the basement in 1757. Sealed beneath this deposit within the test pit were two medieval pits. The latest, **F.01**, contained a sherd of 14th-15th century Ely ware alongside a moderately sized faunal assemblage. The latter, which was dominated by cattle horn cores, indicates the presence of specialised craft activity in the area. The earliest feature, **F.02**, was heavily truncated and contained no finds.

Layer [100] was composed of mid to dark brown silt, with occasional gravel inclusions. It measured 0.10m thick. This material overlay, and may well have been deposited within a cut that partially truncated, pit **F.01**, which was sub-oval in form. The pit's cut, [104], had near-vertical

sides that had partially undercut due to the friable nature of the underlying natural gravels (see Figure 3). It measured 0.80m+ by 0.78m+ in extent and a minimum of 0.53m+ deep. Fill [103] consisted of a banded deposit, which was composed of dark brown clay silt with occasional gravel inclusions with an interleaving lens of collapsed natural yellow sandy gravel. A sherd of medieval Ely ware and a moderately sized faunal assemblage were recovered from this feature. Beneath F.01, the partial remnant of a second feature was identified. This pit, F.02, measured a minimum of 0.80m+ by 0.22m+ in extent and 0.58m+ deep (see Figure 2). Its fill, [105], consisted of dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional to rare gravel inclusions. No finds were recovered.

The second test pit, Test Pit 2, was located within the basement of the former Master's Lodge (Figure 1). Unlike the basement within which Test Pit 1 was excavated, however, this example did not comprise part of the original 17th century design of the building, but was instead a later addition. This is clearly demonstrated by the nature of the wall that is exposed along the southwest side of the Ramsden Building's basement (Figure 2). Here, a remnant of the original, below-ground trench-built footing has been revealed by later excavation; such an element would not originally have been visible. Removal of the modern concrete floor surface within Test Pit 2 revealed a second make-up deposit, [200], that is most probably 18th or 19th century in date. Beneath this, a single feature was encountered. This consisted of F.03, an undated pit of probable medieval origin.

Layer [200] consisted of a banded make-up deposit, which was composed of finely banded interleaving layers of mortar and trampled charcoal/coal-rich silt. It was most probably 18th or 19th century in date and measured 0.10m thick. This overlay F.03, the construction cut for the wall of the former Master's Lodge. The cut of this feature, [202] had concave sides and a concave base. It measured 0.18m+ deep, but had been substantially truncated by the later insertion of a basement into this building. Based upon the remnant trench-built footing that extended partway up the basement wall, it originally measured 1.68m+ deep and had been excavated down to – and partially into – the natural second terrace gravels. Aside from the brick-built Lodge wall itself, it was filled by [201]; a dark brown clay silt deposit with occasional to frequent CBM and mortar fleck inclusions. Finally, also present was pit F.04. This was sub-circular/sub-oval in form, with its cut [204] measuring 0.64m+ by 0.62m+ in extent and 0.34m+ deep. It was filled by [203], a relatively friable deposit of dark brown to black sandy silt with occasional to rare gravel inclusions that contained no finds.

- Material Culture -

A small assemblage of material was recovered. This group, which consisted of pottery and faunal remains, has been subdivided by material type and is discussed in detail below.

Pottery

A small pottery assemblage, consisting of only three sherds weighing 117g, was recovered. The earliest material was recovered from pit F.01. This consisted of a single sherd of medieval Ely ware (weighing 72g) of 14th-15th century date. Two further sherds were recovered from make-up layer [100]. These consisted of plain red coarseware (weighing 27g) and iron-glazed earthenware (weighing 18g). Both sherds are most probably 18th century in date.

Faunal Remains

A small quantity of faunal remains – comprising 21 fragments, weighing 1,238g – was recovered. This assemblage was entirely derived from F.01. Almost entirely composed of cattle remains, this group included four horn cores (20%) alongside metapodia and vertebrae. Therefore, although the overall sample size is limited, it appears likely that this group incorporates waste derived from a specialised craft activity alongside potential domestic debris. Horn cores are often associated with hornworking (MacGregor 1991, 372-73) and tanning (Cherry 1991, 295-96), for example.

- Discussion -

Based upon the archaeological sequences previously encountered at other nearby sites, it appears that occupation first commenced in the area surrounding St Catharine's College during the Saxo-Norman period (10th-12th century). The earliest evidence of Post-Roman settlement to the south of the River Cam has been discovered further to the north, at the Corfield Court and Old Divinity School sites. Here, occupation was established during the mid-late 10th century, but expanded markedly during the early 11th century (Newman 2008, 74-77; Cessford 2012, 11-12). At Hostel Yard, Corpus Christi College, meanwhile – much the most significant excavation to have been undertaken in the vicinity of St Catharine's College (Figure 1.1) – settlement activity was found to have commenced during the late 11th or early 12th century (Cessford 2005, 6). Highly comparable Saxo-Norman features were also encountered during the nearby investigations conducted at No. 7 St. Edward's Passage (Mortimer 1995), Bene't Court (Edwards 1996a), the Master's Garden of Corpus Christi College (Edwards 1996b; Figure 1.3) as well as at the Fitzwilliam Museum (Whittaker 2001). Within the development area itself, activity was originally focused along the primary frontage of Milne Street; which ran parallel to – and was most probably established contemporaneously with – 11th century Trumpington Street/Kings Parade. During the 12th and 13th centuries, this area comprised a bustling mercantile district, associated with the nearby waterfront. From the 14th century onwards, however, waterfront activity gradually declined and Milne Street became the focus of increasing collegiate occupation. Such was the success of these latter developments that, by the 16th century, the majority of Milne Street – along with many of its associated side-streets and the domestic properties they contained – had been obliterated (see Willis & Clark 1886).

Very little direct evidence of this long occupational history remained extant beneath the basement floor. This is because, during the mid-18th century, the area had been 'scalped' down to – and potentially a little below – the original natural ground surface. In 1757, when the Ramsden Building was constructed, a basement was incorporated into the structure. Designed by the celebrated architect James Essex, the Ramsden Building was originally known as The Yorkshire Building, as it was originally intended to house Fellows and Scholars from Yorkshire (Willis & Clark 1886 II, 106). It was also most probably at this time that a basement was inserted beneath the adjoining Master's Lodge. Alternatively, however, this latter event may have occurred in 1875 when a new, replacement Lodge was constructed; the old Lodge was subsequently converted into three sets of Fellow's rooms (*ibid.*, 108). The creation of these basements removed almost all trace of the preceding archaeological sequence. Nevertheless, an excavation conducted in 2012 within nearby Chapel Court (Newman 2012) provides an excellent comparator for the truncated portion of the sequence. As Figure 3 reveals, around 3m of deposits were originally present in the area of the Ramsden Building and this is closely comparable to the depth of the Chapel Court sequence. The disparity in contemporary ground height, and concomitant basal depth, between the two areas can be attributed to undulations in the underlying second terrace gravel ridge. Consequently, although the archaeological remains within the development area itself had been very heavily truncated, within immediately adjacent areas – such as the former Master's Garden, for example – it is likely that a relatively deep and well-preserved sequence remains extant.

Acknowledgments

The project was commissioned by Andrew Henderson of RH Partnership Architects on behalf of St. Catharine's College. It was monitored by Dan McConnell, Development Control Archaeologist at Cambridgeshire's Historic Environment Team (CHET) and managed for the CAU by Christopher Evans. The fieldwork was undertaken by Richard Newman and the graphics for this report were produced by Vicki Herring. The finds processing was managed by Justin Wiles; the text was kindly proof-read by Iona Robinson.

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- 1 Hostel Yard, Corpus Christi
- 2 Free School Lane
- 3 Corpus Christi Master's Garden
- 4 52-54 Trumpington Street
- 5 St. Catharine's College Chapel Court

Figure 1. Site location and previous CAU investigations



Figure 2. The basement of the Ramsden Building, facing southwest, showing the exposed footing of the former Master's Lodge (top), and Test Pit 2, facing east (bottom)

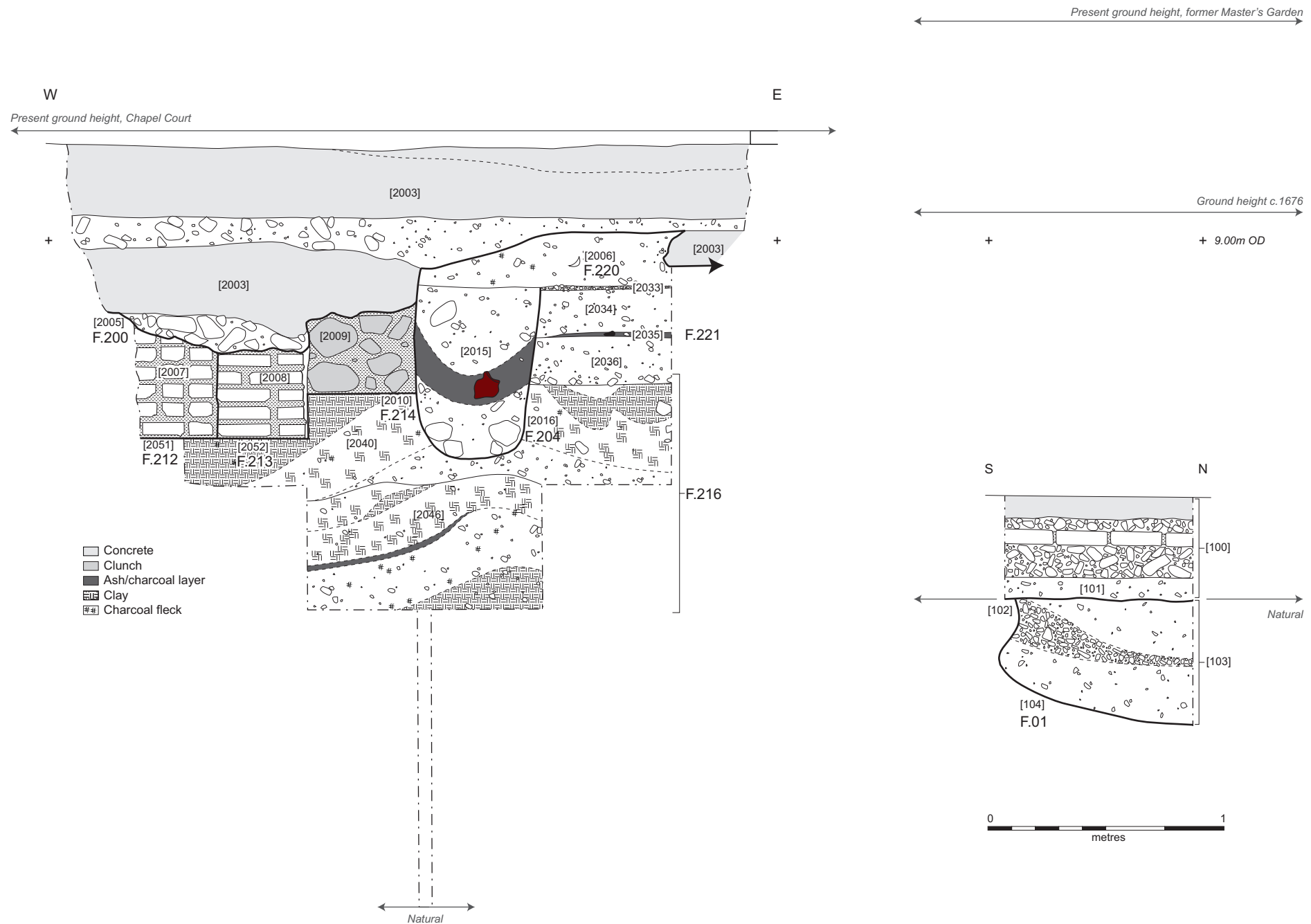


Figure 3. Chapel Court sequence (Newman 2012) compared to that from Test Pit 2 (Ramsden Building)

- Oasis Form -

OASIS ID: cambridg3-186978	
Project Details	
Project name	St. Catharine's College Basement, Cambridge
Short description of the project	An archaeological watching brief was conducted at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge. This monitored works undertaken within the adjoining basements of the former Master's Lodge (1674-76) and the Ramsden Building (1757). Here, two test pits were excavated. In both instances, a limited number of medieval features were identified below the extant basement floor level. These features represent the last remaining vestiges of an initially 3m deep stratigraphic sequence.
Project dates	Start: 25-07-2014 End: 01-08-2014
Previous/future work	No / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	ECB 4249 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	SCB14 - Sitecode
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	Listed Building
Current Land use	Other 2 - In use as a building
Monument type	PIT Medieval
Significant Finds	POTTERY Medieval
Methods & techniques	"Test Pits", "Visual Inspection"
Development type	Building refurbishment/repairs/restoration
Prompt	Listed Building Consent
Position in the planning process	After full determination (eg. As a condition)
Project Location	
Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE CAMBRIDGE CAMBRIDGE St. Catharine's College Basement
Postcode	CB2 1RL
Study area	100.00 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 4475 5817 52.202298866 0.118390888234 52 12 08 N 000 07 06 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 7.35m Max: 7.46m
Project Creators	
Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief	Local Planning Authority (with/without advice from County/District)

originator	Archaeologist)
Project design originator	Christopher Evans
Project director/manager	Christopher Evans
Project supervisor	Richard Newman
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Name of sponsor/funding body	St. Catharine's College
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Physical Archive ID	SCB14
Physical Contents	"Ceramics"
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Digital Archive ID	SCB14
Digital Contents	"Animal Bones","Ceramics"
Digital Media available	"Spreadsheets","Text"
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Paper Archive ID	SCB14
Paper Contents	"Animal Bones","Ceramics"
Paper Media available	"Context sheet","Photograph","Plan","Report","Section"
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