

# St. Mary's Church, Farcet, Cambridgeshire

## Archaeological Monitoring



Dave Webb

**SAINT MARY'S CHURCH,  
FARCET  
CAMBRIDGESHIRE:**

**Archaeological Monitoring**

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## **Summary**

*The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook the archaeological monitoring of works for a new rainwater system at Saint Marys Church Farcet, Cambridgeshire. The monitoring took place between the 24<sup>th</sup> March and 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2014. The works uncovered several unmarked graves a charnel pit and a background of disarticulated human remains within the churchyard, the material most likely originates from the later post-medieval period.*

## **Introduction**

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook archaeological monitoring of excavation works for a new rainwater system at Saint Marys Church Farcet, Cambridgeshire. No condition for archaeology had been placed on the works by Huntingdonshire District Council, but the Church and the Architectural Consultants (Freeland Rees Roberts) felt that monitoring of the works would be prudent given the inevitability of encountering burials within the churchyard.

The monitoring of the works took place between the 24<sup>th</sup> March and 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2014. The initial proposal of works consisted of four soakaways to be placed within the churchyard and a network of feeder pipes to carry rainfall away from the church building. Due to the density of burials in the graveyard, and the complexity of tree roots in some areas, the initial scheme was modified during the progress of the works to allow for five smaller, shallower soakaways and attendant feeder pipes to be constructed giving the same overall volume in total as the initial proposal.

## **Location and Topography**

The church of Saint Mary is located at TL20168 94639 on the west side of the B1091 on the western side of the village of Farcet between Yaxley and Stanground. The church is now enclosed within a built up area of post war housing on the west side of the B1091 with older village properties stretching out in a linear strip towards the fen edge to the east of the village. The village of Farcet is situated on a ridge of higher land near the fen edge, the ridge consists of Anglian Till chalky boulder clay with local deposits of gravel, sand and laminated clays (British Geological Survey 1995).

## **Archaeological background**

Evidence of early occupation of the landscape in the immediate vicinity of Farcet is sparse however within a wider context of the Fen edge landscape around Peterborough there is well-documented evidence of prehistoric settlement, for example at Must Farm (Evans et al. 2005), Bradley Fen (Gibson and Knight 2006) and Stonald Field (Gibson and Knight 2002).

To the south of the village, at Farcet Fen in 1976, a surface find of a Late Bronze Age socketed axe was recovered. A late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age polished discoidal flint knife of Clark's Type I was also found in the same area (CHER No: 02936). Both finds are now in the Peterborough Museum. Recent excavations in Farcet Fen to the east of Farcet recovered a sherd of Beaker pottery (Thompson et al. 2005).

To the south west of Farcet Roman pottery was recovered (CHER No: 01379). More extensive Roman remains were discovered to the east including a burial and cropmarks suggesting a settlement (EH Monument No: 367152). Further cropmarks suggesting Roman settlement were noted to the south east (EH Monument No: 367166). To the north of Farcet an earthwork was recognised as possibly being a

fragment of a Roman road connecting Ermine Street to the Fen Causeway (EH Monument No: 1044981).

During the Saxon period place-names suggest that several estates would have existed in the vicinity of Farcet, these would have most likely consisted of small settlements and farms (Kirby & Oosthuizen 2000). Farcet is first recorded in the 10th century as Faresheued, meaning 'Bull's headland or hill' (Mills 1991) suggesting the area was utilised for cattle rearing and grazing.

In the Domesday survey of 1086 there is no mention of religious structure at Farcet, but by the 12th century there was church with a chancel and an aisleless nave, with the addition of the west tower in the latter part of the century. During the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the chancel was rebuilt and a south chapel added. At a later date the south aisle was added and was extended to the western wall of the tower. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century a porch was added to the south side of the church. Restoration work was carried out in 1852 when the chancel and chapel were rebuilt, the nave roof renewed and the north aisle added. The tower was restored in 1894-7. The current structure of St. Mary's consists of a chancel, south chapel, nave, north aisle, south aisle, west tower and south porch. The walls are of ashlar and rubble with Barnack stone dressings, and the roofs are covered with stone slates and lead (CHER No: 10561).

## **Methodology**

The objective of the monitoring programme was to identify the presence and character of any surviving archaeological remains occurring within the area of investigation, and to observe the presence of human remains. In accordance with current guidelines (Mays 2005, Brickley and McKinley 2004) to recover any disturbed disarticulated human remains for immediate reburial and to identify the location of intact burials so that they could be avoided.

The excavation by machine operatives was carried out under archaeological supervision by CAU staff. Recording was carried out following the CAU modified MoLAS system of archaeological site recording (Spence 1994). All work was carried out in accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation and with the recommendations of FAME (Allen & Holt 2010). In total an area of approximately 26 square metres was investigated.

## **Results**

Five soakaway pits were excavated and monitored, the results are as follows:

### **Soakaway Pit 1**

Dimensions: Length 5.30m x width 2.20m depth 0.60m orientated east to west.

The pit was located approximately 15m to the south of the main body of the church in a location not currently occupied by marked graves.

0.00-0.20m: The topsoil was comprised of a very dark brown humic slightly clayey loam with occasional well sorted small to medium rounded gravel inclusions.

0.20-0.70m: The underlying subsoil was comprised of a dark brown silty clay with a moderate frequency of poorly sorted small to medium sub rounded gravel inclusions.

Within the southern sector of the cut frequent disarticulated human remains were recovered along with iron fragments and coffin nails. The material most likely originates from the disturbance of earlier graves by the cutting of new graves.

0.70-0.90m: Subsoil as above, at this point in-situ long bones were noted in several locations within the pit and further excavation was discontinued.

The first burial to be identified (Grave no 1a) was aligned in a north south direction and appeared to have been disturbed by the cut of a large sarcophagus immediately to the south of the grave. No obvious signs of a coffin or coffin nails were noted. Two further graves (Graves 1c and 1d) were noted aligned in an east west direction both with visible traces of a coffin and remaining coffin nails. The southern most grave (Grave no 1c) cut a small circular charnel pit (1b) that contained large quantities of disarticulated human remains including infants.

### **Soakaway Pit 2**

Dimensions: Length 2.40m x width 1.20m depth 0.70m orientated east to west.

The pit was located approximately 10m to the south of the main body of the church in a location not currently occupied by marked graves.

0.00-0.25m: The topsoil was comprised of a very dark brown humic slightly clayey loam with occasional well-sorted small to medium rounded gravel inclusions.

0.25-0.70m: The underlying subsoil comprised of a yellowish brown silty clay with a moderate frequency of poorly sorted small to medium sub rounded gravel inclusions.

At the base of the cut frequent disarticulated human remains were recovered along with iron fragments and coffin nails. Cleaning of the surface revealed four partial grave cuts (Graves 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d) aligned in an east west direction. All the grave cuts exhibited traces of a coffin structure and remaining coffin nails. Further excavation was discontinued at this point. The two partial grave cuts (2a and 2c) in the western end of the soakaway pit are most likely associated with extant grave markers to the west of the pit.

### **Soakaway Pit 3**

Dimensions: Length 2.00m x width 2.00m depth 0.90m

The pit was located approximately 5m to the north of the north aisle of the church in a location not currently occupied by marked graves.

0.00-0.30m: The topsoil was comprised of a very dark brown humic slightly clayey loam with occasional well sorted small to medium rounded gravel inclusions.

0.30-0.90m: The subsoil was comprised of a yellowish brown silty clay with a moderate frequency of poorly sorted small to medium sub rounded gravel inclusions.

The ground at this point was disturbed by extensive tree rooting. No grave cuts were encountered.

#### **Soakaway Pit 4**

Dimensions: Length 2.00m x width 2.00m depth 0.90m

The pit was located approximately 5m to the north of the north aisle of the church in a location not currently occupied by upstanding gravestones.

0.00-0.30m: The topsoil was comprised of a very dark brown humic slightly clayey loam with occasional well sorted small to medium rounded gravel inclusions.

0.30-0.90m: The subsoil was comprised of a yellowish brown silty clay with a moderate frequency of poorly sorted small to medium sub rounded gravel inclusions.

The ground at this point was disturbed by extensive tree rooting. No grave cuts were encountered.

#### **Soakaway Pit z5**

Dimensions length 2.00m x width 1.60m orientated north to south

The pit was located approximately 8m to the north of the main body of the church in a location not currently occupied by upstanding gravestones.

0.00-0.30m: Topsoil comprised of a very dark brown humic slightly clayey loam with occasional well sorted small to medium rounded gravel inclusions.

0.30-0.90m: Subsoil comprised of a yellowish brown silty clay with a moderate frequency of poorly sorted small to medium sub rounded gravel inclusions.

0.90m +: Natural comprised of pale chalky yellowish grey silty clay with occasional well sorted small to medium rounded chalk inclusions.

At the base of the cut three partial grave cuts (graves 5a, 5b, 5c) were exposed aligned in an east west direction. All the grave cuts exhibited traces of a coffin structure and remaining coffin nails.

## **Discussion**

One of the primary purposes of the monitoring was to recover any disarticulated human remains for re-internment by the church. The large quantities of human remains present in the subsoil confirms a prolonged period of use and frequent re-use of the graveyard. The use of charnel pits indicates disturbance of earlier burials with re-internment of the disturbed bones.

As excavation was stopped at the point of exposing articulated remains, detailed examination of the graves and remains was not possible. It is most likely, however, that the unmarked graves revealed belong to the later post-medieval period. The earliest marked graves within the graveyard date from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century suggesting that some of the unmarked graves encountered could have resulted from the clearance of grave markers to allow for re-use of the graveyard. Some of the unmarked graves noted may date from an earlier phase of use possibly 17<sup>th</sup> century. The north - south aligned grave 1a had no traces of a coffin possibly suggesting a non-conformist burial. Alternatively the alignment may have been due to the

pressure of space within a small graveyard as seen recently in excavations at the Old Divinity School site in Cambridge (2012).

Burials on northern side of churchyard were at a greater depth to those on the south side. The drop on outside of boundary wall to that of the graveyard level suggests that there had been a degree of landscaping to build up and level the surface.

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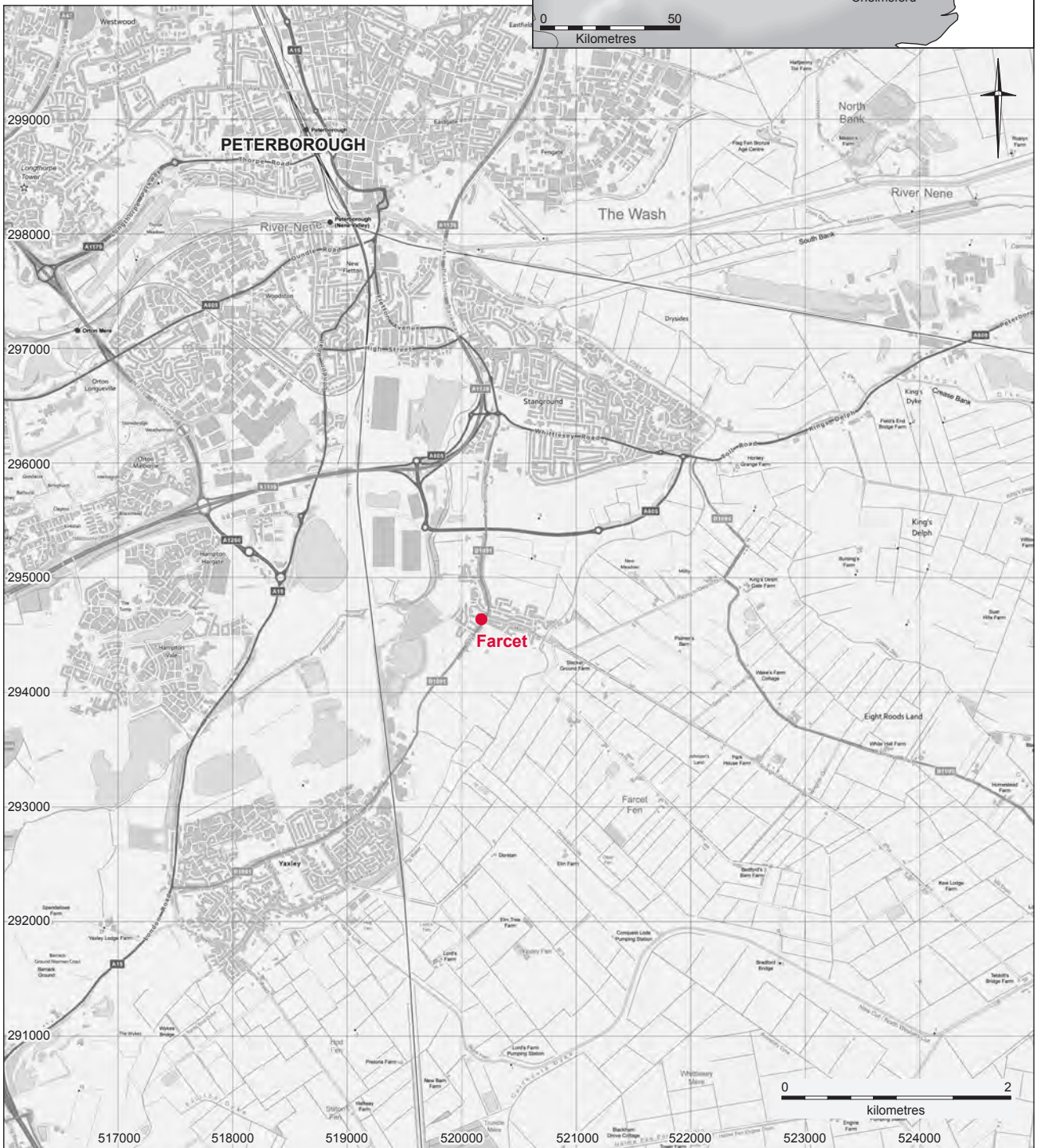
## Appendix 1: Cut features

Soakaway no.	Cut ref.	Depth	Location in Pit	Exposure	Dimensions area exposed	Visible at surface	Aligned
1	a	0.60m	SW corner	grave cut partially exposed	0.50 x 0.90m	Tibias and feet bones including Tarsals, Metatarsals, Phalanges, pelvis	N-S
1	b	0.60m	central	Charnel pit exposed, cut by grave 1c	0.90m	Charnel pit, numerous bones visible of more than one individual including infants remains	
1	c	0.60m	South side	grave cut partially exposed	2.20 x 0.60m	Coffin nails, coffin stain, skull and right femur visible	E-W
1	d	0.60m	NE corner	grave cut partially exposed	1.80 x 0.70m	Coffin nails, coffin stain and top of skull visible	E-W
2	a	0.70m	NW corner	grave cut partially exposed	0.40 x 0.30m	Clavicle, Sternum and Humerus exposed	E-W
2	b	0.70m	North side	grave cut partially exposed	1.60 x 0.30m	Grave cut visible no remains exposed	E-W
2	c	0.70m	SW corner	grave cut partially exposed	0.65 x 0.80m	Coffin nails, coffin stain and top of skull visible	E-W
2	d	0.70m	South side	grave cut partially exposed	1.60 x 0.65m	Coffin nails, coffin stain and femurs visible	E-W
5	a	1.00m	NE corner	grave cut partially exposed	0.10 x 0.50m	Grave cut visible no remains exposed	E-W
5	b	1.00m	SW corner	grave cut partially exposed	0.50 x 0.90m	Coffin nails, coffin stain visible	E-W
5	c	1.00m	SE corner	grave cut partially exposed	0.25 x 0.70m	Coffin nails, coffin stain visible and small hand bones, Phalanges, Metacarpals	E-W

Figure 1. Site location



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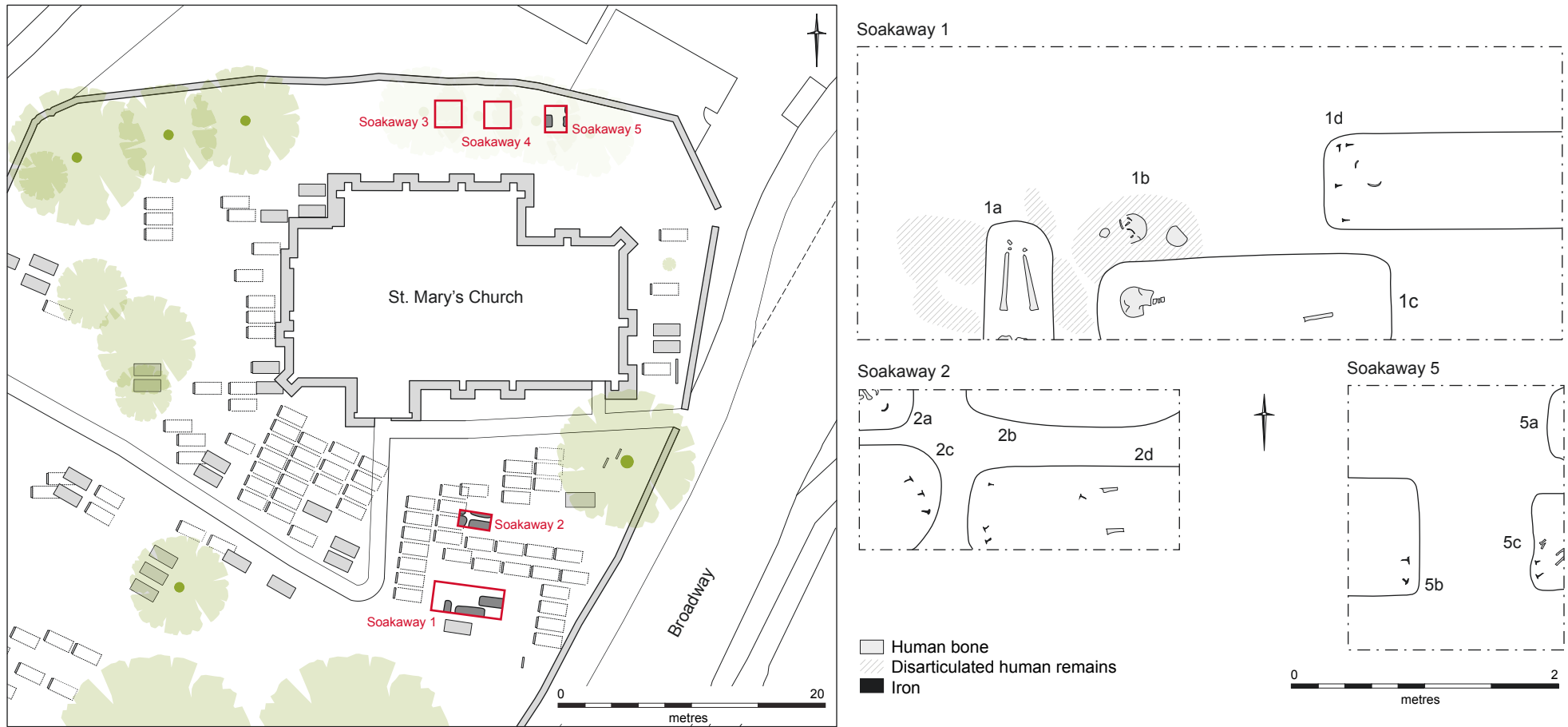


Figure 3. Trench plan



Figure 3. Soakaway 1 (top), Soakaway 2 (middle), and Soakaway 5, with 3 and 4 behind (bottom)

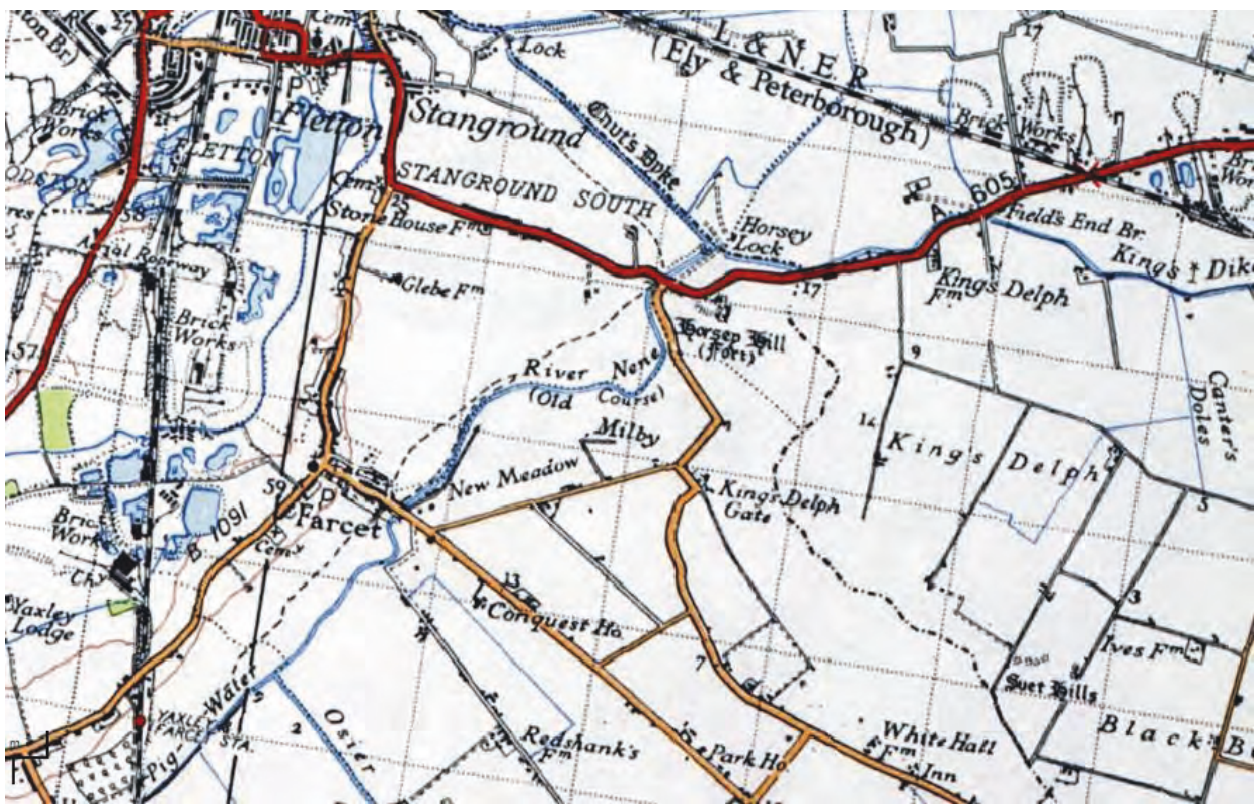


Figure 4. Historic maps: Ordnance Survey First Series N/A 64 1856 1:63360 (top), and Ordnance Survey of Great Britain New Popular Edition with National Grid 134 - Huntingdon and Peterborough 1945 1:63360 (bottom)

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### Project details

Project name	St. Mary's Church, Farcet
Short description of the project	The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook archaeological monitoring of works for a new rainwater system at Saint Marys Church Farcet, Cambridgeshire. The works uncovered several unmarked graves a charnel pit and a background of disarticulated human remains within the churchyard, the material most likely originates from the late post-medieval period.
Project dates	Start: 24-03-2014 End: 03-04-2014
Previous/future work	No / No
Any associated project reference codes	SMF14 - Sitecode
Any associated project reference codes	ECB4157 - HER event no.
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	None
Current Land use	Other 4 - Churchyard
Monument type	GRAVE Post Medieval
Monument type	CHARNEL PIT Post Medieval
Significant Finds	NONE None
Investigation type	"Watching Brief"
Prompt	Voluntary/self-interest

### Project location

Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE HUNTINGDONSHIRE FARCET St, Mary's Church, Farcet
Postcode	PE7 3BQ
Study area	26.00 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 20168 94639 52.5359630059 -0.228088947456 52 32 09 N 000 13 41 W Point

Height OD / Depth Min: 18.20m Max: 18.60m

### Project creators

Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Parochial Church Council
Project design originator	Alison Dickens
Project director/manager	Alison Dickens
Project supervisor	David Webb
Type of sponsor/funding body	Parochial Church Council
Name of sponsor/funding body	St. Mary's Church, Farcet

### Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive Exists?	No
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Paper Media available	"Notebook - Excavation',' Research',' General Notes","Photograph","Plan","Report"

### Project bibliography 1

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