

# Archaeological Monitoring at Senate House Court, Cambridge



Richard Newman

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With graphics by Andrew Hall

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Division of Archaeology  
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## **Summary**

*Archaeological monitoring was conducted during the excavation of an electricity cable trench situated in Senate House Court, close to the eastern façade of the Old Schools complex. Here the brick-built footings of the mid-18th century neoclassical loggia were revealed, alongside a series of contemporary made-ground deposits.*

## **Introduction**

This report presents the results of archaeological monitoring that was conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) at Senate House Court, Cambridge – grid reference TL 4476 5845 – on the 9th of January 2017. The project, which was commissioned by Estates Management at the University of Cambridge, was undertaken in order to allow the provision of subterranean power points in the court, as well as to facilitate the replacement of broken and eroded paving slabs. To this end a single north-south aligned trench was excavated, situated parallel to the eastern façade of the Old Schools complex (Figure 1). It covered an area of 24.7 square metres.

Geologically, the site is situated upon second terrace river gravels overlying Gault clay (British Geological Survey, sheet 188). Within Senate House Court the present surface height lies at c. 9.9m OD. Methodologically, the trench was excavated by the principal contractor; all stratified contexts were then cleaned by hand and recorded 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 1:10. A digital photographic archive was also compiled. 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 project was SHC17 and the event number was ECB 4936.

### *Historical and archaeological background*

The historical and archaeological background of the Old Schools/Senate House site has been discussed in two previous publications (Evans & Pollard 1999; Newman & Evans 2011). Consequently, only a brief summary is presented here.

To date, very limited evidence of prehistoric and Roman activity has been identified in the immediate area. Indeed, up until the mid-10th century Cambridge remained only an “economically viable backwater” (Hines 1999, 136). Following this date, however, the scale occupation in the town rapidly expanded, particularly to the south of the River Cam. Along the line of Trumpington Street/Kings Parade, for example – the route of the medieval High Street – the presence of a number of pre-Conquest churches indicates that a roadway had been established by the mid-11th century (Addyman & Biddle 1965, 99; Haslam 1984, 21; Brooke 1985). Parallel to the High Street, a second road was also laid out. Known as Milne Street, this was initially a significant focus of domestic settlement but its route has since been largely obliterated (although it survives in part as Trinity Lane).

Between the High Street and Milne Street, respectively the eastern and western boundaries of the Old Schools/Senate House site, a series of intensively-occupied medieval plots were established (Willis & Clark 1886 volume I, 317-21; Willis & Clark 1886 volume III, 1-9). The excavation of a lift shaft located within the former Divinity School in 2009 presented an opportunity to investigate a portion of this occupational sequence (Newman & Evans 2011). Here, the earliest evidence of settlement was 11th century in date. An initial timber-framed building had been succeeded by a series of pits; domestic occupation then continued until the late 14th century, when the site was cleared to allow construction of the nascent Old Schools complex.

The School of Theology – or Divinity School – was the first element to be completed, c. 1400 (Willis & Clark 1886 volume III, 10). In its original form it comprised a detached building with an external staircase, which also incorporated the University Senate House on its upper floor (Evans & Pollard 1999, 232-4). The additional wings of the Old Schools quadrangle, designed to house the remaining ‘superior’ faculties, were then gradually appended in a piecemeal fashion throughout the 15th century (RCHM(E) 1959 volume I, 11-18). Construction began on the west range by 1438, being completed in 1454; this contained the Canon Law School, with a library above. Next, work began on the south range in 1457, which was completed c. 1470. This range contained the Civil Law School, with a second library above. Finally, the east range was begun c. 1470 and completed c. 1480.

As the University continued to thrive and expand, these buildings became increasingly cramped. By the early 18th century, increasing pressures upon space resulted in the construction of a new Senate House. Designed by James Gibbs, this neoclassical building was completed in 1730 (RCHM(E) 1959, I, 12). Additional plans were then drawn up for the reconstruction/ modernisation of the remainder of the Old Schools complex. Whilst much of this work remained unrealised, between 1755 and 1758 a neoclassical east façade was constructed to a design by Stephen Wright (RCHM(E) 1959, I, 12). Its erection necessitated the demolition of the former medieval eastern range of the complex.

## **Results**

The single, irregular, dog-legged trench measured a total of 30.9m long by 0.8m wide, covering an area of 24.7 square metres. Running parallel to the loggia on the eastern façade of the University’s Old Schools complex, it was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.8m (to c. 9.1m AOD). A series of made-ground deposits were identified, but no datable material culture was recovered. Natural gravels were not reached.

Along the eastern side of the trench, the uppermost portion of the brick-built foundation of the Old Schools' eastern façade was revealed (Figure 2). Stepped in form, the foundation was composed of handmade unfrosted red bricks (measuring 220mm by 110mm by 45mm on average) that were bonded with tenacious off-white lime mortar. Eleven courses of brickwork were revealed, although this probably represents only a fraction of the footings' overall depth as the foundations of substantial buildings of this date were typically excavated to a depth where solid bedding was reached; most often the geological substratum. Within the north range of Old Schools, natural gravels were encountered at 7.46m in 2009 (Newman and Evans 2011, 185); around 1.6m deeper than the limit of excavation in the present trench. Where it had not been truncated, the construction cut of the loggia was backfilled with a deposit of loose mid greyish brown silty sand that contained frequent ceramic building materials (CBM) and mortar fragment inclusions.

In the western-facing section of the trench a series of deposits underlying the lawn of Senate House Court were revealed. Firstly, beneath the modern paving slabs bordering the lawn was a layer of bedding concrete that measured 0.06m thick. This in turn sat upon a layer of compacted mortar that measured 0.08m thick. These deposits overlay banded dumps of make-up material that varied somewhat along the trench's length. The most extensive consisted of friable dark grey sandy silt containing occasional to frequent CBM rubble inclusions, which overlay compacted off-white clunch rubble in a matrix of friable yellowish brown sandy mortar. Lenses of dark reddish-brown silty sand and mid reddish-brown sandy silt with frequent CBM inclusions (measuring on average 0.10m thick) were also present, interleaved amongst the more extensive layers. Despite the absence of ceramics or other datable material culture, the nature of the inclusions suggests that these deposits are most likely to have been introduced to the site in the mid-18th century, when the ground level of Senate House Court was substantially raised.

## **Discussion**

The deposits identified within the monitored trench almost certainly represent make-up/levelling material that was introduced to the site during the extensive building works undertaken in the mid-18th century. At this time, the construction of a new, modern neoclassical eastern façade to the Old Schools complex saw the ground level raised by 1.2m from 8.7m AOD (the height in medieval Cobble Court) to 9.9m AOD (the floor level of the reconstructed east range). Moreover, many of the medieval and post-medieval domestic structures that had previously occupied the area of Senate House Court were also demolished, thereby allowing a clear view of the newly-erected structure to be established (RCHM(E) 1959, I, 12).

These works can thus be viewed as a physical demonstration of a growing sense of confidence and display by the University in the 18th century. The construction of a new façade, unifying the appearance of the Old Schools with the adjacent Senate House, allied with the demolition of many of the domestic buildings which had formerly obscured these structures from view, represents the institution's adoption of a well-ordered 'public face' (Evans & Pollard 1999, 235). As with previous small-scale work conducted on the Senate House steps

(Cessford 2004), the present project has uncovered material evidence of this celebration of knowledge in the age of enlightenment.

### **Acknowledgements**

This project was commissioned by Estates Management at the University of Cambridge in advance of refurbishment. It was managed for the CAU by Christopher Evans and the fieldwork was conducted by Matt Wood, with photographs by Dave Webb. The graphics for this report were prepared by Andrew Hall. We are grateful to Mark Parsons and Douglas Bowen of Estates Management for their friendly and helpful assistance throughout.

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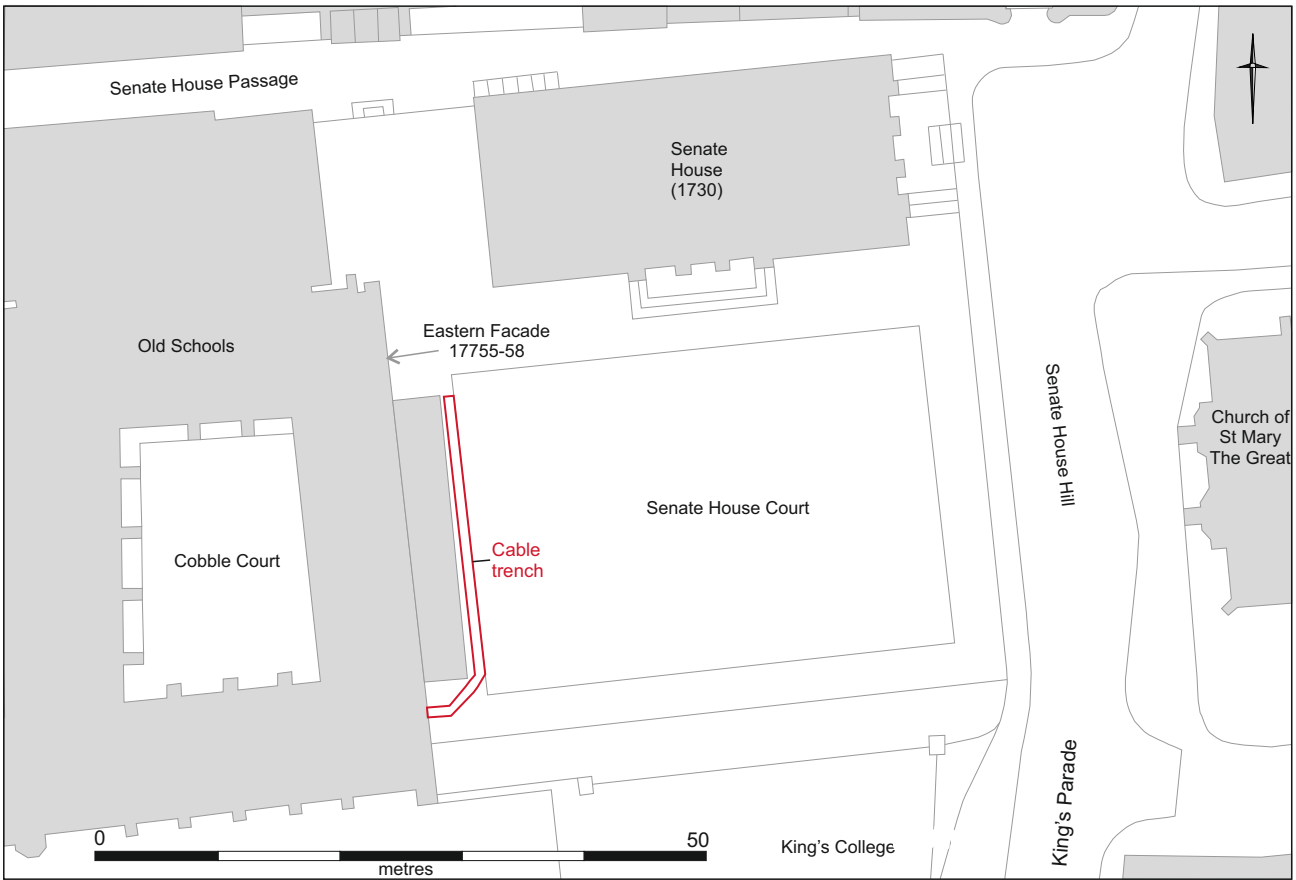
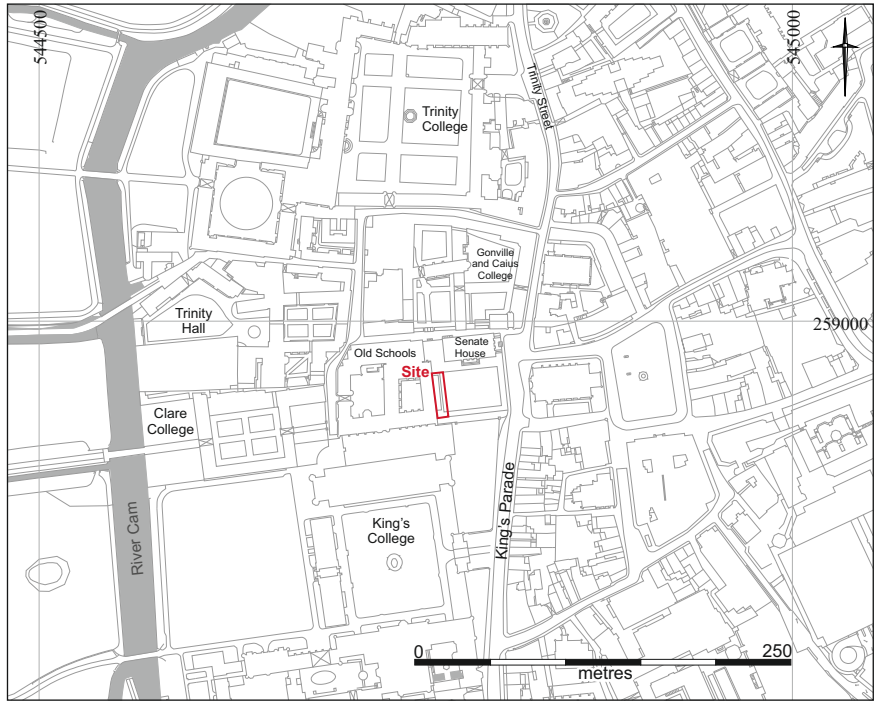
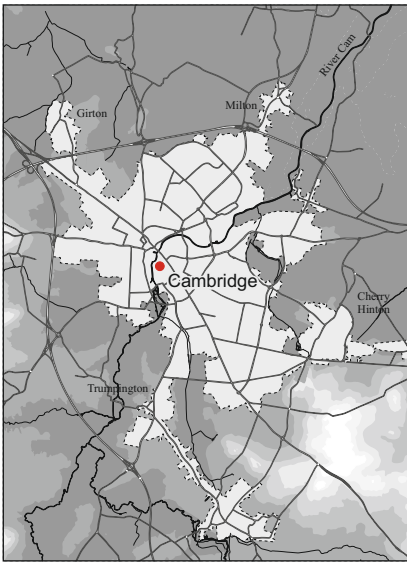


Figure 1. Site location



A



B

Figure 2. Photography, showing: (A) Footings of the mid-18th century loggia, facing west; (B) view along the base of the trench, facing southwest

## Oasis Form

<b>OASIS ID: cambridg3-274431</b>	
<b>Project details</b>	
Project name	Senate House Court, Cambridge
Short description of the project	Archaeological monitoring was conducted during the excavation of an electricity cable trench situated in Senate House Court, close to the eastern façade of the Old Schools complex. Here the brick-built footings of the mid-18th century neoclassical loggia were revealed, alongside a series of contemporary made-ground deposits.
Project dates	Start: 09-01-2017 End: 09-01-2017
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	ECB 4936 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	SHC17 - Sitecode
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	Listed Building
Current Land use	Other 2 - In use as a building
Monument type	FOUNDATION Post Medieval
Monument type	MADE-GROUND Post Medieval
Significant Finds	NONE None
Investigation type	"Watching Brief"
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16
<b>Project location</b>	
Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE CAMBRIDGE CAMBRIDGE Senate House Court, Cambridge
Postcode	CB2 1TN
Study area	24.7 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 4476 5845 52.204812103985 0.118656828061 52 12 17 N 000 07 07 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 7.46m Max: 7.46m
<b>Project creators</b>	
Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Local Planning Authority (with/without advice from County/District Archaeologist)
Project design originator	Christopher Evans
Project director/manager	Christopher Evans
Project supervisor	Matthew Wood
Name of sponsor/funding body	University of Cambridge

<b>Project archives</b>	
Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Digital Archive ID	SHC17
Digital Contents	"Survey", "other"
Digital Media available	"Images raster / digital photography", "Survey"
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Paper Archive ID	SHC17
Paper Contents	"other"
Paper Media available	"Context sheet", "Plan", "Section"
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