

103-107 Grantchester Meadows, Newnham, Cambridge

An Archaeological Evaluation



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With a contribution from
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Summary

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken on the site of proposed development at 103-107 Grantchester Meadows. Three test pits were excavated to maximum depth revealing the presence of deeply stratified quarry backfill deposits that were judged to be of a pre-19th century date. Historic cartography and local information demonstrates that there was extensive quarrying on the western side of Newnham Croft prior to the extensive building of houses during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was carried out by Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) on the 9th September 2008 on land off Grantchester Meadows Road, Newnham Croft, Cambridge. The evaluation aimed to establish the presence, date, state of preservation and significance of any archaeological remains. The evaluation was undertaken in accordance with an archaeological specification written by the CAU (Standing 2008) in response to a brief by Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning and Countryside Advise (CAPCA). It was approved and monitored by an Archaeological Officer from CAPCA.

Location, topography and geology

The Proposed Development Area (PDA) is c.400m² in size and comprises two proposed building extensions and a detached dwelling located within the grounds of 103-107 Grantchester Meadows, Newnham Croft, approximately one kilometre south west of Cambridge City Centre and 150m northwest of the River Cam (Figure 1), centred on TL 4412/5709. The underlying geology is Third Terrace river gravels (British Geological Survey 1994) and lies at approximately 10m OD.

Archaeological Background

The site lies in an area of archaeological potential being located on a gravel terrace above the river floodplain. This potential is clearly demonstrated on the opposite side of the river from the PDA, where an extensive complex of crop-marks and parch-marks is recorded around River Farm, denoting Iron Age / Romano British field-systems and settlement on the gravel terrace (HER 05031, 09601). No such observations have been possible for the PDA owing to it having been developed before the earliest dates of aerial photography.

The crop-mark remains around River Farm may be associated with nearby antiquarian finds on Latham and Chaucer Roads comprising elements of Roman structures associated with pottery, coins, bronze brooches and an extensive cemetery (Walker 1910, Lethbridge et al 1935). It has been postulated that the dense activity in this area was associated with a major Iron Age to Roman trackway and a possible crossing point of the Cam situated between Newnham and Grantchester (Mackay 2004).

A presumed rich prehistoric presence on the river terrace gravels is indicated only by an Iron Age burial located some 300m to the north east of the PDA, equidistant between the PDA and Barton Road (HER 05161).

Anglo-Saxon burials are recorded in the vicinity of the Grange Road/Barton road junction (HER 04997) and finds of later medieval pottery have been found nearby (MCB 16929). A long history of settlement is also well documented at Grantchester with excavations in the 1970s finding an Early Saxon house as well as later phases of medieval development (Alexander and Trump 1972)

On the earliest systematic cartography from 1830, the PDA is part of a large enclosed orchard with four farm buildings occupying part of the street frontage (outside of the

PDA). By the time of first series OS mapping in 1886, the existing dwellings 103-107 had been constructed along with associated gardens, pathways and outbuildings (date of construction appears to be c.1870). To the east of the PDA, Grantchester Street is recorded as 'Gravel Pit Lane' in 1830, the contemporary pits appearing to be the block of land that is now diagonally cut by Eltisley Avenue (developed around 1900).

Methodology

Originally planned as a programme of three, five meter long trenches, these were subsequently shortened to three meters long and treated as test pits due to the great depth of deposits (Figure 2). Each test pit was situated within the footprint of one of the proposed three new structures.

Topsoil and underlying deposits were removed under archaeological supervision with a tracked 360⁰ three ton machine using a 1.80m wide toothless ditching bucket which had a reach of two meters. The recording followed a CAU modified MoLAS system and a digital photographic archive was compiled. All work was carried out in strict accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation. The site code is GMN 08

Results

Test Pit 1: Located in a gravel car park to the rear of no.105, Test Pit One was 3m long by 1.80 wide by 1.90m deep (Figure 3). Three distinct layers were present within the test pit: top soil which was dark brownish grey sandy silt with common building rubble and stone inclusions. Depth 0.30m; a layer of probable made ground which was dark brownish grey sandy silt with common building rubble and stones. Depth 1.20m. A layer of soft, yellowish, very loose, sand and fine gravel probably representing quarry backfill. Depth >0.40m (excavated to maximum depth of machine reach).

Test Pit 2: Located under trees adjacent to house no. 107, Test Pit Two was 3m long by 1.80m wide by 1.96m deep (Figure 3). Four distinct layers were present within the test pit: top soil, which was heavily rooted, dark grey/black sandy silt. Depth 0.45m; a layer of made ground that was soft, very loose yellow sandy gravel that contained 19th century brick/tile and tobacco pipe. Depth 0.43m; a layer of dark orangey brown sandy silt with common gravel possibly representing the former sub soil. Depth 0.78m. A layer of disturbed/redeposited natural probably representing quarry backfill that was loose yellow sand and fine gravel mixed with brown silt patches. Depth >0.30m.

Test Pit 3: Located adjacent to house no. 105, Test Pit Three was 3m long by 1.80m wide by 1.0m deep (Figure 3). Two distinct layers and two phases of probable quarrying were present within the test pit: Top soil, which was dark greyish brown sandy silt with occasional gravel inclusions. Depth 0.30m. Subsoil, which was mid brown sandy silt with common gravel inclusions. Depth 0.40m. Underlying these two layers were two distinct quarry pits. One had been backfilled with the same loose yellow sand/fine gravel seen in Test Pits One and Two, this truncated another quarry pit that had been backfilled with mixed mid brown and dark greyish brown sandy silt

– possibly former top and subsoil. Both pits yielded probable 19th century brick fragments.

Discussion

The PDA appears to have been subject to intensive gravel quarrying prior to the 19th century. On Baker's map of 1830 (Figure 4a), the road leading to the PDA was labelled as 'Gravel Pit Lane' and is bordered by a large field which is cut by a diagonal causeway. Although no topographic detail of gravel pits are recorded on this survey, mapping of 1886 suggests that this land to the east of the PDA (now under Eltisley Avenue) was quarried at this time. At the time of the 1830 survey, the PDA is shown as orchard and farm buildings suggesting that the extraction was more likely to have been undertaken during the 17th or 18th centuries. It may be surmised that subsequent local quarrying (such as that to the east) provided the deeply-layered backfill that is now found within the PDA. Local information suggests that further gravel diggings were found during the construction of dwellings to the rear of number 103-105 in the last 15 years (A. Nix *pers comm.*) This would suggest that the entire area shown as orchard in 1830 was probably an in-filled quarry and that any archaeology present would have been truncated at that time. Recent observations at Millington Lane between the PDA and Barton Road (HER MCB 17785) suggests another unrecorded quarry in this area, indicating that quarrying must have been extensive across the western side of the area now known as Newnham Croft.

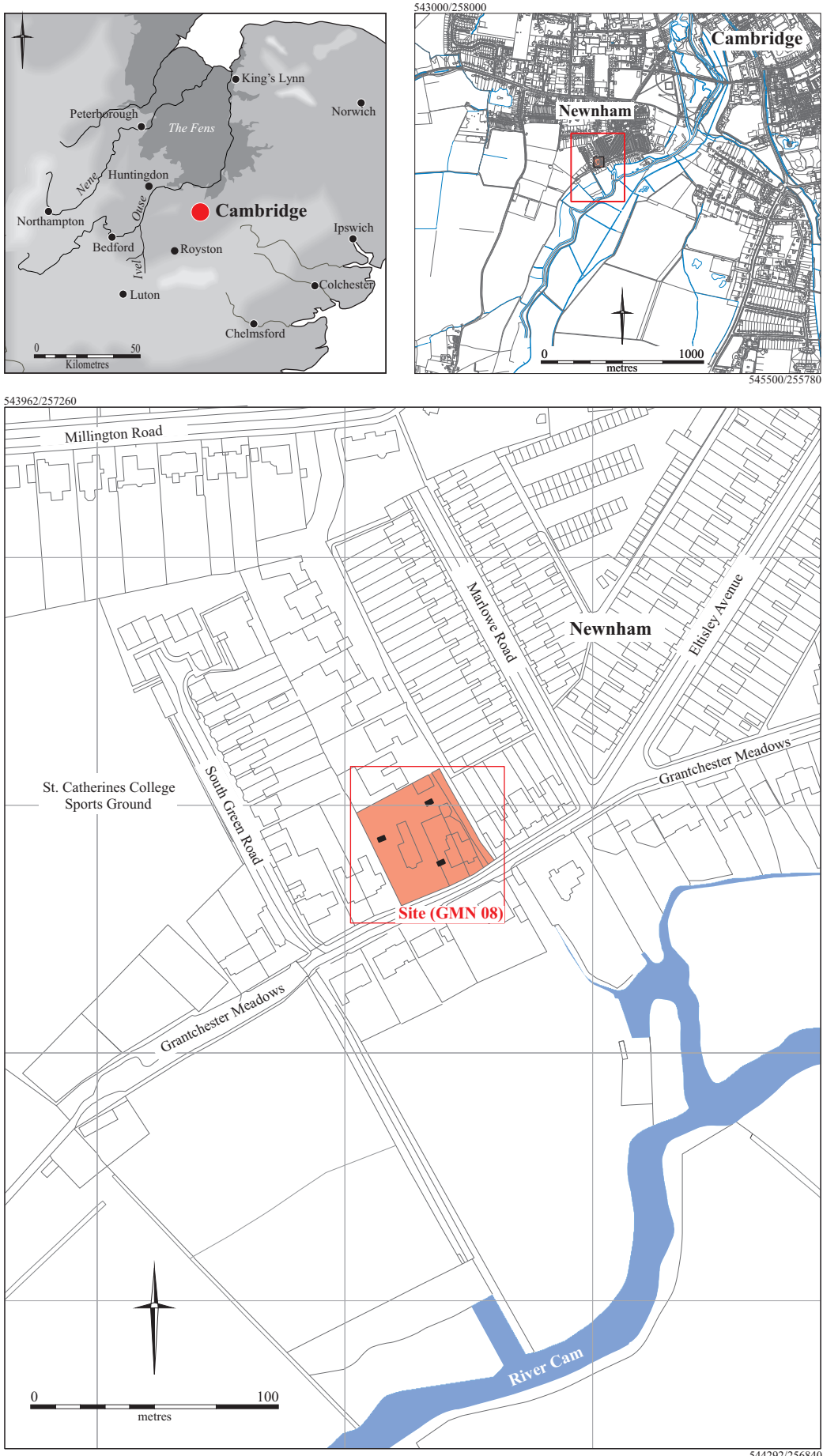
Although the PDA lies within an area of archaeological potential, the lack of any residual finds from the quarry backfill, other than those from the post medieval period would seem to suggest that there may not have been any large Roman settlements in the near vicinity. This contrasts with other sites in Cambridge, such as the Kavli Institute for Cosmology, off Madingley Road (Newman 2008) where, although intensive 18th and 19th century quarrying had taken place leaving little trace of features, large quantities of residual pot dating from the Iron Age and Roman periods was recovered.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1. Location plan.



Figure 2. Trench plan.



Test Pit 1.



Test Pit 2.



Test Pit 3.

Figure 3. Photographs of test pits 1, 2 and 3.

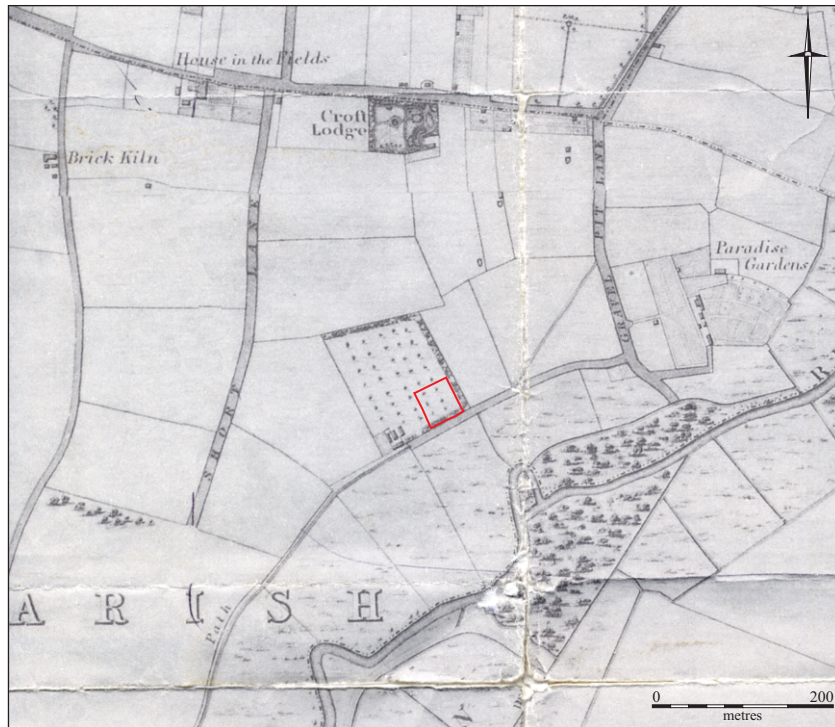


Figure 4a. Extract from Bakers' (1830) map of Cambridge 1830 with modern site overlay.

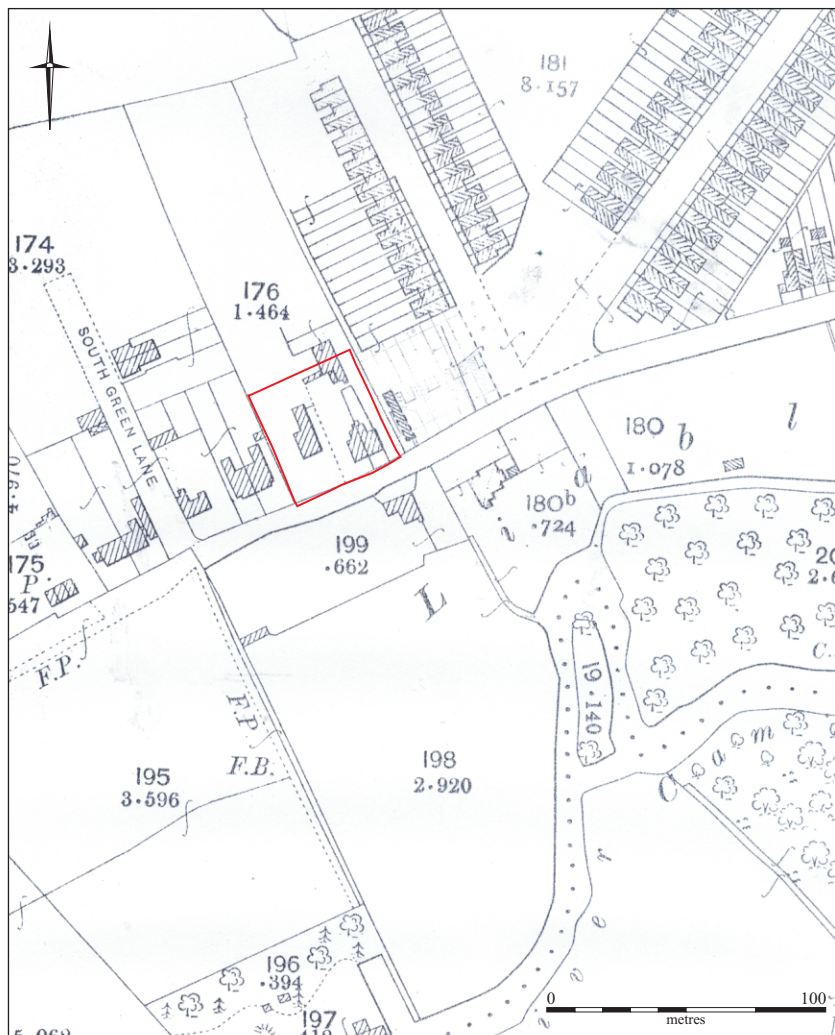


Figure 4b. 1901 OS map with modern site overlay.