

No.7 West Road, Cambridge

An Archaeological Evaluation



Matthew Collins

CAMBRIDGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



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Matthew Collins

Illustrations by Bryan Crossan

Cambridge Archaeological Unit
University of Cambridge
Department of Archaeology

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Contents

Non technical summary	1
Introduction	2
<i>Location, topography and geology</i>	2
<i>Archaeological Background</i>	2
<i>Methodology</i>	4
<i>Archive</i>	4
Results	4-6
Discussion	6-8
Acknowledgements	8
Appendix 1 – Feature Descriptions	9
References	10

List of Figures

Figure 1 – Site Location Map	3
Figure 2 – Test Pit and Trench Plan	5
Figure 3a – Photograph showing ditch F2 and Pit F3	7
Figure 3b – Section of quarry pit F1	7

Non Technical Summary

A total of two test pits and two trenches were excavated at 7 West Road, Cambridge, during an archaeological evaluation of the site. The test pits and trenches revealed a potentially late medieval/Post Medieval field boundary and related features, evidence for Victorian quarrying, and a residual, potentially Anglo Saxon quern stone suggesting nearby activity dating to that period.

Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was carried out by Cambridgeshire Archaeological Unit between the 10th and 12th August 2009 at No. 7, West Road, Cambridge in advance of the demolition of the existing building occupying the site and proposed redevelopment. Commissioned by Cambridge University, the evaluation aimed to establish the presence, date, state of preservation and significance of any archaeological remains. The evaluation was carried out and this report was written in accordance with an archaeological specification written by the CAU in response to a brief by Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning Countryside Advice (CAPCA). It was approved and monitored by an Archaeological Officer from CAPCA.

Location, topography and geology

The Proposed Development Area (PDA) is centred on TL 4420 5810 and covers approximately 3100m², including the proposed new buildings footprint and landscaped areas. The site currently incorporates a Victorian dwelling with several later additions, a gravelled car park and areas of lawn and mature gardens. It fronts onto West Road and is bordered to the south, west and east by Cambridge University teaching and faculty buildings (see Figure 1).

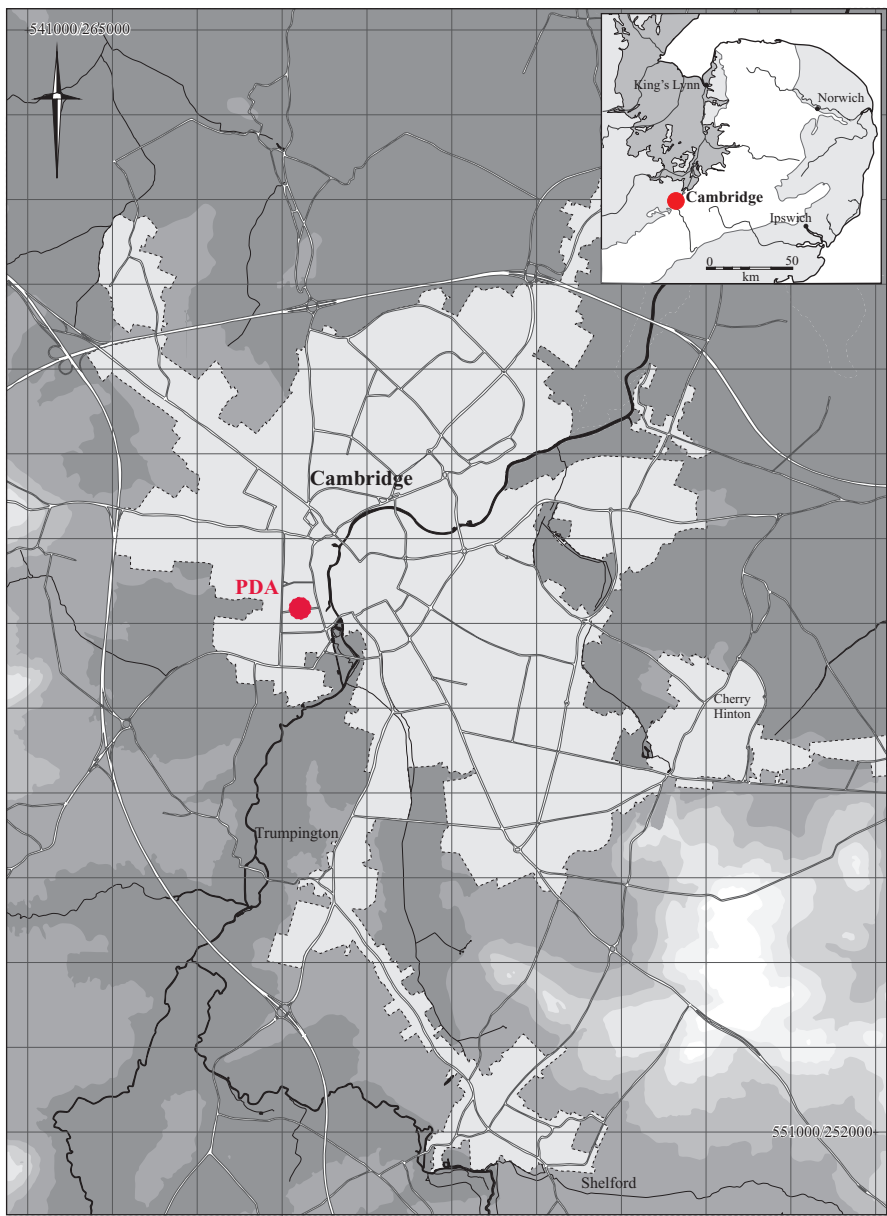
The PDA is located on land that averages 9.85m OD at the front of the property and 8.49m OD towards the rear. Underlying geology is 2nd Terrace sands and gravel overlaying Gault Clay (CAPCA 2009).

Archaeological Background

A recent CAU desktop was carried out for No.7 West Road which highlighted the archaeological potential of this site (Appleby & Webb 2009); the findings of the report are briefly summarised below.

Evidence for prehistoric activity in the vicinity is sparse and comprises several stray finds of worked flints including a Neolithic axe found several hundred metres to the south-east at TL 4445 5775 and residual Mesolithic flint recovered from a post medieval quarry just to the southwest of the PDA at TL 4420 5800. To the west of the PDA, components of a probable Roman field system were identified (Regan 2003), and approximately 200m to the southwest, a series of substantial Roman ditches containing significant quantities of finds indicated the presence of a possible nearby Roman settlement (Webb, Timberlake & Armour 2006).

Recent evaluations and excavations nearby have identified significant activity relating to the Early-Mid Saxon period; a Mid Saxon inhumation cemetery was exposed to the north-east (Dodwell 2001), whilst a Saxon settlement was revealed to the south-east, although its exact extent was not determined (Armour, Evans & Tipper 2003). Directly to the east of the PDA a small evaluation revealed possible Saxon field ditches along with evidence for later medieval agricultural activity. Whilst some 50m to the south, another small evaluation revealed a series of intercutting 19th century quarry pits, (Dickens 1993)



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 Based on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map
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Figure 1. Location Map

Methodology

The evaluation of the PDA was initially focused on four trenches totalling 36m in length (1.5% of the site area). However, due to the depths of deposits encountered and presence of potentially live services towards the front and east side of the current structure this, in consultation with CAPCA, was adapted to include two test pits and two trenches instead (see Figure 2). As a result, length was reduced to 25m, although due to the presence of archaeological features, Trench 1 was excavated to double its originally planned width in order to deal with the archaeology safely.

Topsoil and underlying deposits were removed under archaeological supervision with a 3 ton tracked 360° machine using a 1.4m wide toothless ditching bucket. Excavation of archaeological features was carried out using hand tools. The recording followed a CAU modified MoLAS system (Spence 1990); whereby feature numbers, F, were assigned to stratigraphic events, and numbers [fill] or [cut] to individual contexts. The trench plans were drawn at 1:50 and sections at 1:10. A digital photographic archive was also compiled. All work was carried out in strict accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation and with the recommendations of SCAUM (Allen & Holt 2007), and in accordance with a site specific risk assessment and the Cambridge Archaeological Unit Health and Safety policy. The site code is SWR 09 and CHER number is ECB 3250.

Archive

A total of 14 contexts were excavated from 6 features, and artefacts including ceramics, tile, a glass bottle, animal bone, worked flint and lava quern stone were recovered. Each test pit and trench generated a datasheet detailing its general information. The documentary records and accompanying artefacts have been assembled into a catalogued archive in line with Appendix 6 of MAP2 (English Heritage 1991), and are being stored at the Cambridge Archaeological Unit offices.

Results

Test Pit 1

Test Pit 1, located on the eastern side of the existing building was approximately 1.4m x 2m in size, and 1.83m in depth; the modern ground surface was 9.68m OD. The surface layer was hardcore and gravel 0.20m deep, which overlay a dark organic build up layer, up to 0.39m deep. A layer of dark brownish black silt upto 0.40m deep was underlying, which contained small quantities of Victorian ceramic and building material. Below, the test pit appeared to cut into a Victorian quarry pit backfilled with sterile mid brown silt at least 0.85m deep. Due to the unstable nature of the test pit sides at this depth and the fact any earlier archaeology would clearly have been quarried away, the base of this quarry was not reached.



Figure 2. Trench Plan

Test Pit 2

Test Pit 2, located at the front of the existing building was 1.4m x 2m in size, and 1.46m in depth; the modern ground surface was 9.98. Topsoil was 0.57m deep, with an underlying dark grey/black silt layer up to 0.40m deep containing significant quantities of Victorian rubbish including ceramics, building material and glass bottles. The underlying deposits were relatively undisturbed; the sterile subsoil was up to 0.44m deep.

Trench 1

Trench 1 was located on the western side of the existing building and was 6.5m long and 2.25m wide, orientated north-south. Topsoil was up to 0.8m deep and subsoil up to 0.4m, with the modern ground surface at 9.1m OD. Two undated ditches, F2 and F5 were exposed and an undated pit, F3, a gully F4, and an undefined feature, F6. Ditch F2 was on a NW-SE orientation and was cut by pit F3 (see Figure 3a), whilst ditch F5 was on an E-W orientation and was cut by gully F4, which in turn cut the undefined feature F6. A small quantity of coal was recovered from both ditch F2 and pit F3.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was 14.2m in length and 1.4m wide on an E-W orientation, and was located towards the south of the site, at the rear of the existing building. Topsoil was 0.5m deep and subsoil was 0.38m deep, whilst the modern ground surface was 8.49m OD. The only feature exposed was a fairly substantial Victorian quarry pit, F1 (see Figure 3b), which along with ceramic and tile contained possible fragments of degraded Anglo-Saxon lava quern and a residual Neolithic worked flint.

Discussion

Tests Pits 1 and 2 clearly show a significant build up of the ground surface towards the north and eastern sides of the PDA; the large quantities of Victorian ceramics within the layers suggest the deposits potentially built up during the Victorian period. The presence of relatively undisturbed subsoil in Test Pit 2 suggests that if archaeological deposits are in the front gardens of the existing building, they would survive, however, the test pit only revealed archaeologically sterile deposits.

The presence of coal within two of the features in Trench 1 indicates a late medieval or post medieval date, and the fairly homogenous fill types present within all the features in this trench suggest they are all potentially of a similar date. Prior to the 19th century expansion of Cambridge, this area was known as the West Fields and was primarily agricultural land, with maps from that era indicating at least one field boundary crossed the middle of the PDA on approximately a northeast-southwest alignment (Hall and Ravensdale 1976). Therefore it is possible the features found in Trench 1 form part of, and are related to, that boundary.



Figure 3a. Photograph of ditch F.2 and Pit F.3

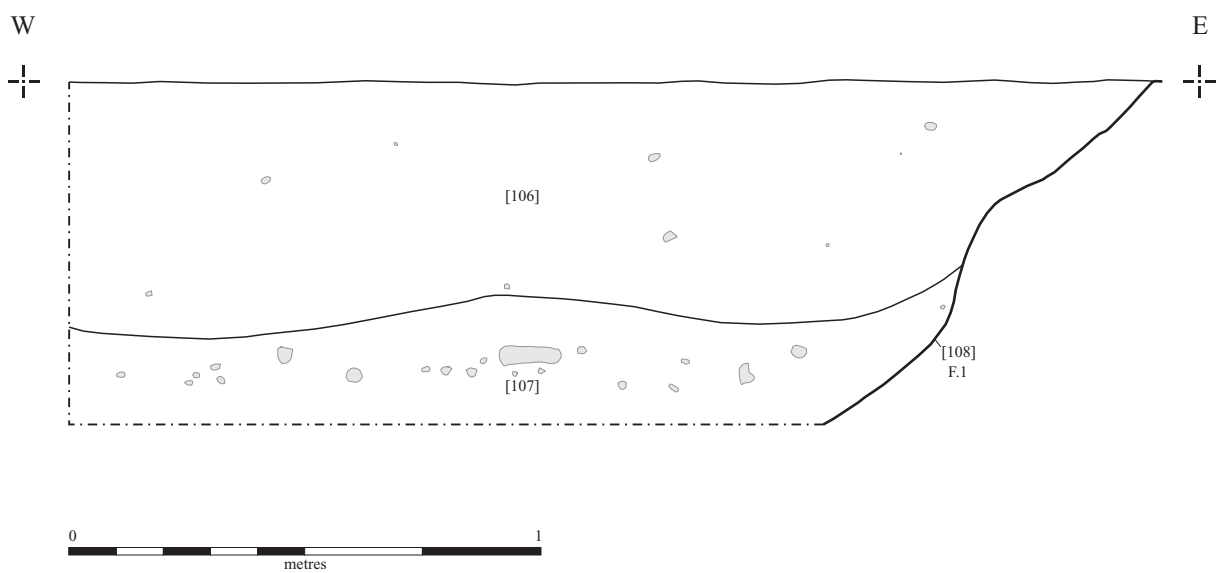


Figure 3b. Section of Victorian quarry pit F.1

The quarrying in Trench 2 is comparable to features exposed and excavated in trenches at the Law Facility less than 50m to the south (Dickens 1993) and, together with evidence from Test Pit 1, suggests the immediate area may have been intensively quarried during the 19th century. Overall this site has helped to clarify that Saxon settlement and the related activity known to exist towards the southeast and northeast did not extend into the PDA, however, the presence of a fragmentary potentially Saxon quern stone within the Victorian quarry in Trench 2 does suggest Saxon activity was close by.

Acknowledgements

The work was commissioned by Cambridge University and the site was monitored by Dan McConnell (CAPCA). Emma Beadsmoore was the project manager and thanks go to Laura James for assisting the author on site and Donald Horne for surveying the trenches and test pits.

Appendix 1 – Feature Descriptions

F1 – Trench 2. Post medieval quarry pit only partially exposed within the trench. Cuts [101] and [108] showed variable but steep sides and the base was not reached. Width was 3.5m and depth >0.70m. Fills [100] and [106-107] were backfill consisting primarily of mid to dark greyish brown sandy silt with rare small to medium sized stone inclusions and occasional charcoal flecks. Contained Victorian ceramics, tile, animal bone, residual worked flint and possible highly abraded Anglo-Saxon lava quern fragments.

F2 – Trench 1. NE-SW orientated ditch that was possibly cut by pit F3. Cut [103] had moderately steep sides leading to a slightly rounded base. Width was 1.65m and depth 0.48m. Fill [102] was mid orangey brown sandy silt with common gravel inclusions and occasional charcoal flecks. Contained a small quantity of coal.

F3 – Trench 1. Circular pit that possibly cut ditch F2. Cut [105] had very steep sides leading to a rounded base. Diameter was 1.07m and depth 0.49m. Fill [104] was mid orangey brown sandy silt with common gravel inclusions and occasional charcoal flecks. Contained a small quantity of coal.

F4 – Trench 1. E-W orientated gully that was parallel to and cuts ditch F5. Cut [110] had moderately steep sides leading to a slightly rounded base. Diameter was 0.62m and depth 0.16m. Fill [109] was mid grey sandy silt with common gravel inclusions and occasional charcoal flecks.

F5 – Trench 1. E-W orientated ditch that cut feature F6 and was parallel to and cut by gully F4. Cut [112] had moderately steep sides leading to a flattish base. Width was truncated and depth was 0.38m. Fill [111] was mid to dark reddish grey/brown sandy silt with occasional small gravel and charcoal inclusions.

F6 – Trench 1. A poorly defined feature that was only partially exposed at the edge of the trench. It was clearly cut by ditch F5. Length and width of cut [112] are unknown and depth was 0.38m. Fill [111] was mid reddish brown silty sand with occasional gravel and charcoal inclusions.

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