



OFFICE COPY

ARCHAEOLOGY 4

Cambridge - King's Ditch 1989

Tim Malim

HOLIDAY INN SITE

TL45085825

KING'S DITCH, CAMBRIDGE

The building of a Holiday Inn on a small area of land just south of the City Centre gave an opportunity to observe whether the Saxon or Medieval King's Ditch crossed this point and whether there was evidence for Medieval expansion outside the old town limits.

The area under development was approximately a third of a hectare bordered by Corn Exchange Street, Downing Street, St. Tibb's Row, and the multi storey car park of the Red Lion Square complex (see fig.1). It is 10.70 metres O.D. on the south side, and slopes down to the north with a sharp drop over the last 10 metres.

History of the site.

Most recently it has been used as a gravel and tarmac area for parking, having been abandoned after the rest of the complex to the north was developed.

The west side of the site was traditionally an open beast market, as shown on many early maps of Cambridge, with the street on the west side called Slaughter House Lane. This was changed to Corn Exchange Street when this building was erected on the site in 1842. The area then became known as St. Andrew's Hill. After the construction of a new Corn Exchange in 1876 the function of the building on St. Andrew's Hill changed firstly to that of a shopping arcade and then that of a music hall. Later it became used as a bicycle repair shop, and finally a garage before demolition in 1951 (Petty 1989).

The east side of the site had been heavily built on much earlier. Old maps of the town show that by the late 18th century the area had been developed, and Richard Lyne's map of 1574 shows that part of the site already was occupied by a building at this early date. It is presumed that Medieval expansion between this area and St Andrew's Street would have occurred early on.

Hobson's Conduit built in 1610 was designed to flush out the King's Ditch and supply the town with fresh water. A branch of this was constructed underground that passed across the Holiday Inn site going north to the fountain head in the Market Place (R.C.H.M. 1959, p.307-8).

Archaeological work.

Excavations funded by English Heritage were carried out in late January 1989 to see if the site would touch on the King's Ditch, an impressive defensive feature of the Saxon or early Medieval period. However the line of the Ditch can be traced through previous excavations to pass just north of the Holiday Inn site, and in fact the area under study was just outside the old Medieval centre, and used for centuries as the beast market. Consequently wherever the King's Ditch in this area has been sampled large amounts of bone and horn have been found in black, oozy, organic silt deposits.

J.T. Design Build, the developers, lent a mechanical digger to assist in the archaeological work. Seven trenches were cut with this, which effectively sampled the available area. Space was limited because huts and general building accessories had been dumped in many parts of the area (see fig.2).

Long continuous trenches or large open area excavations were not permitted as they would have interfered with the running of the building site, which constantly had vehicles fetching and carrying to all parts. This meant trenches had to be relatively short and narrow, restricting observation and reducing the amount of information that could be recovered. The trenches were too deep to allow access without shoring (except in locations 5 and 6) but even so the changes in stratigraphy were clearly visible. These changes were more or less uniform in each trench (see fig.2).

In all the trenches the basic stratigraphy appeared to follow this pattern: 0.60 - 1.00 metre of modern disturbance with metal pipes and bricks; up to 0.40 of a metre more of disturbed ground with broken brick, mortar and sand; then 0.70 - 1.00 metre of silty clay made-up ground containing charcoal flecks and post-Medieval pottery. The natural came in two layers, firstly sands and gravels, and then a stiff, battleship-grey coloured clay. (See Addyman and Biddle, 1965 for similar descriptions).

Some minor features were spotted, including pits or ditches cut down into the post-Medieval ground, but Victorian disturbance generally did not go very deep.

In trench 5 the back of the old Corn Exchange/garage was identified (brick and mortar foundations set in a clay filled trench), as was also a pit reeking of petrol beneath a layer of large cobblestones. The natural was reached at 2.00 metres depth from the surface, with 1.00 metre of grey-brown silty clay deposited by human activity above it.

Trench 6 was located as near to the position of the King's Ditch as we could safely get, and a small open area was dug here. Beneath 0.80 of a metre of general rubble there was a compacted homogeneous deposit some 0.60 - 0.70 of a metre in depth. This was composed of dark grey-brown very fine sandy silty clay with gravel, flint, bone, charcoal flecks, coal, soft brick and tile fragments, and pottery. It appeared to have been undisturbed by Victorian activities. Objects were found to be lying horizontally in the deposit.

Between 1.00 and 1.20 metres depth two parallel lines of light grey silty clay were apparent running north - south. They were separated by a dark grey-brown silty clay containing many animal bones. This deposit was also on either side of them, and contained much flint and gravel. No cut could be seen through the overlying homogeneous layer, so this feature must be sealed. It could represent a wall slot filled on either side by the grey silty clay. The total width of the two marks and infilling was 1.00 metre, and only 80 millimetres in depth. 17th century pottery and roof-tile fragments were found in the light grey slots.

Probably this feature was very transitory and rests upon a similar dark grey-brown sandy silt as the homogeneous deposits above it.

At 1.50 metres below the surface sands and gravels were encountered, which led on to stiff dark grey clay.

Trench 7 uncovered deep Victorian cellar foundations at the south end, but at the north end there was a dry-brick lined well, surrounded by a coating of thick clay. These two features were separated by a 2.00 metre length of the usual stratigraphy, with the grey-brown silty clay deposit seemingly undisturbed by the Victorians.

Interpretation.

Victorian development has not destroyed all previous levels. However the grey-brown silty clay deposit containing much human debris does not appear to be very old. Some Medieval pottery was discovered but post-Medieval finds predominated even in the lowest levels. Pottery later than the 17th century was not found and brick or tile fragments were very rarely noticed in this deposit. Therefore a tentative date for this deposition would be late 17th - early 18th century. The dry-brick well could be also of this time, and perhaps it was positioned to take advantage of Hobson's Conduit. Such features as were detected in this deposit seemed short-term, and the impression is of gradual build-up of earth and occupational rubbish. Pits and rubble tipping were not apparent. The many animal bones and horn cores are only to be expected on this site, but it is surprising there were not much greater quantities seen, and therefore the remains from slaughtering must have been taken off somewhere else to be dumped.

Summary of results.

Deposits of made-up ground were dated to the 17th century or later, and features were few and unimpressive. No inkling of the King's Ditch was found.

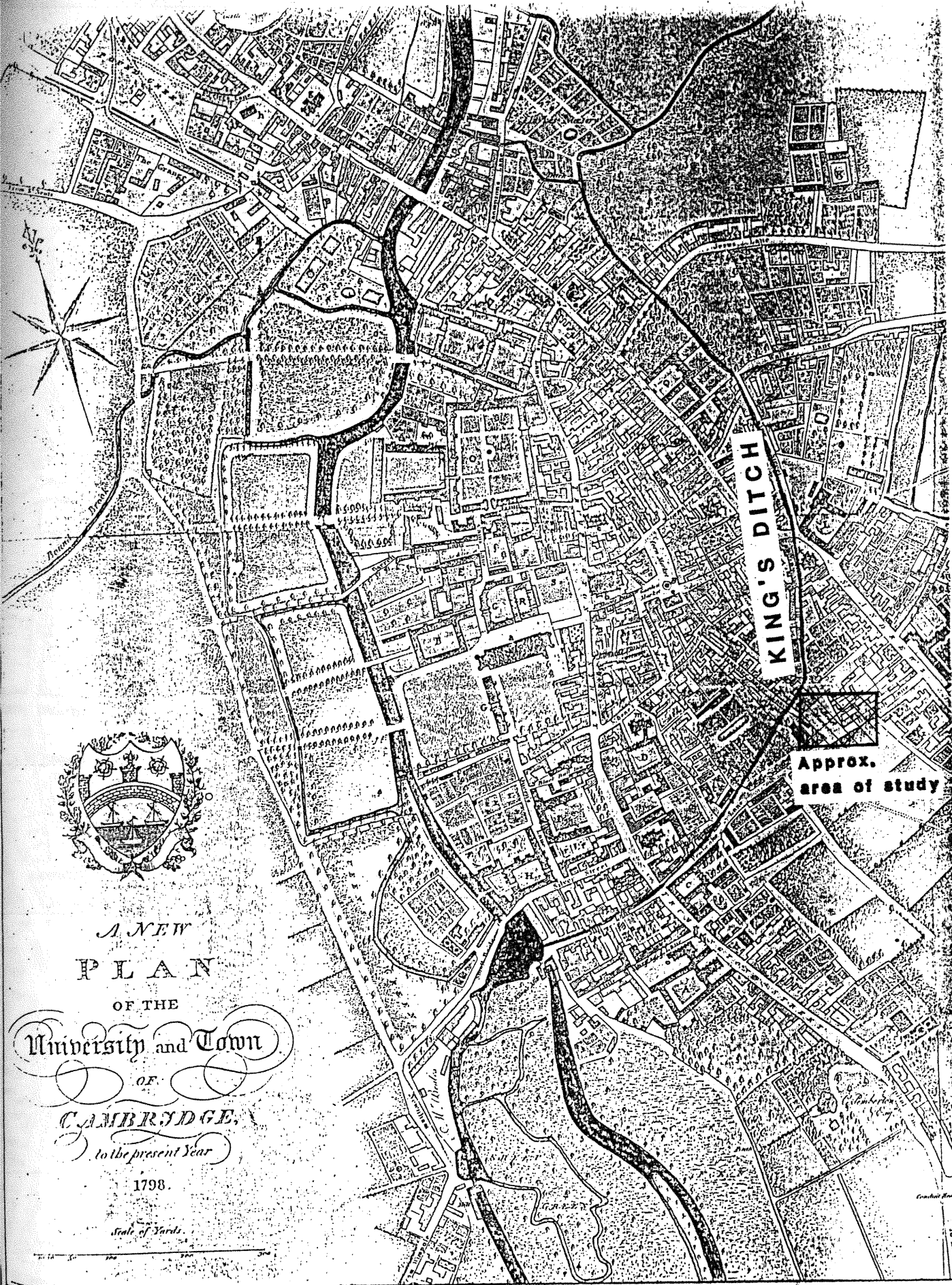
Bibliography

Addyman P.V., and Biddle. M., 1965
Medieval Cambridge: Recent Finds and Excavations. Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society Vol.LVIII, pp.74-137.

Lobel M.D., 1974 Historic Towns - Cambridge. (Scolar Press).

Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, 1959
A Survey of Cambridge Vol.2, pp.306-307.

Tim Malim
Cambridgeshire County Council
March 1989



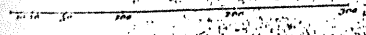
KING'S DITCH

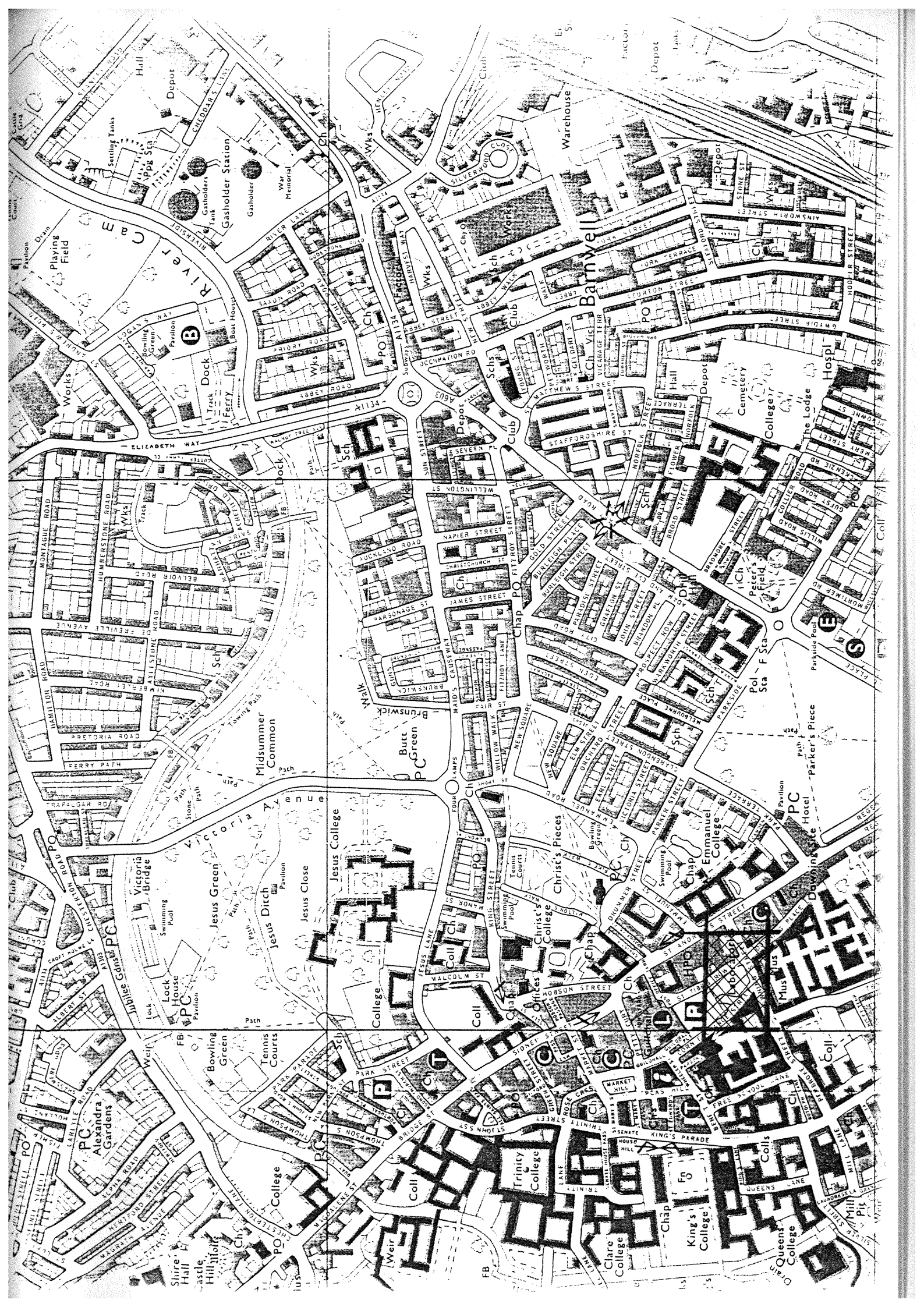
Approx.
area of study



A NEW
PLAN
OF THE
University and Town
OF
CAMBRIDGE,
to the present Year
1798.

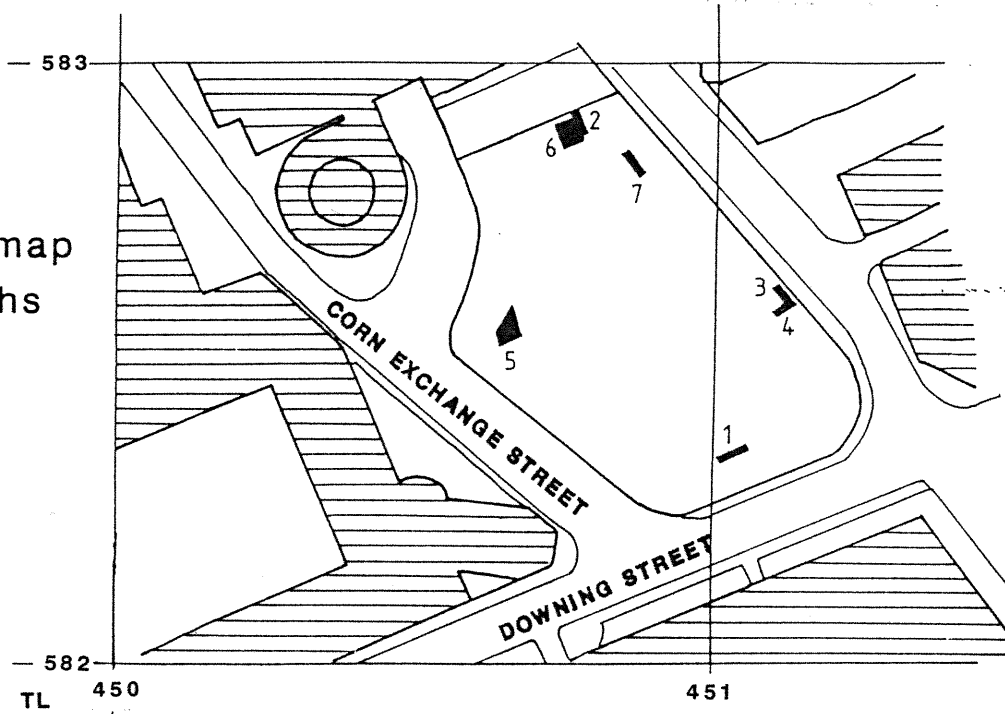
Scale of Yards.



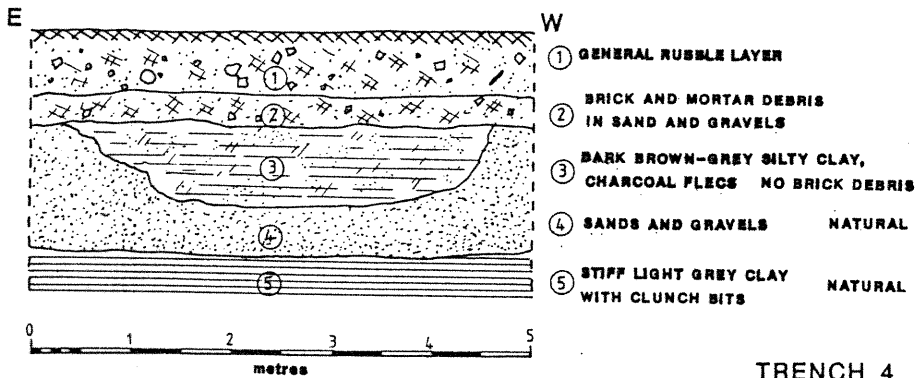


Holiday Inn site, Cambridge

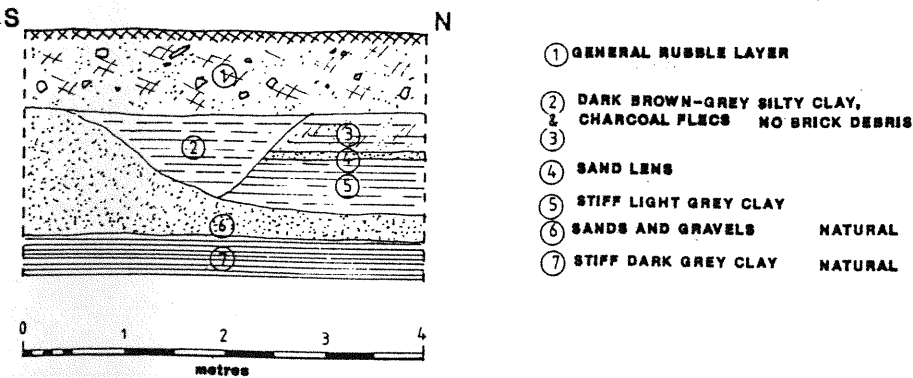
Location map
of Trenches



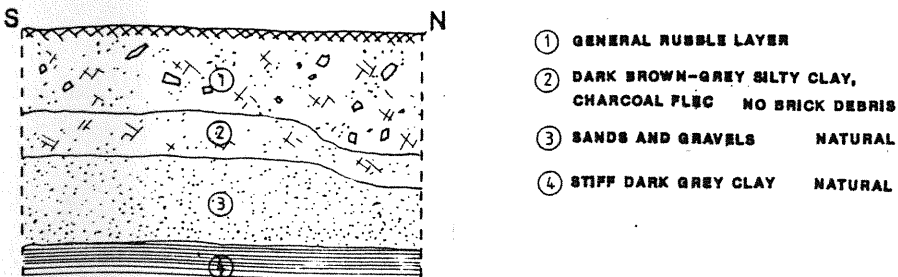
NCH 1



NCH 2



NCH 3



TRENCH 4

