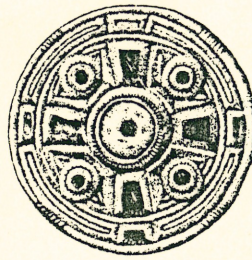


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Archaeological Field Unit

Medieval Features Outside the Town Defences at Swavesey:  
Archaeological Evaluation and Observation of Demolition at School Lane

Tim Sutherland and Andrew Hatton

1996

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 124

*Commissioned By McLean Homes (East Anglia) Ltd*



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Tim Sutherland HND, BSc, PIFA and Andrew Hatton HND, BSc

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*Report No 124*

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## **SUMMARY**

*In July and September 1995 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook two phases of an archaeological evaluation in advance of housing development at School Lane, Swavesey, Cambridgeshire (NGR TL 359/685). The work was commissioned by McLean Homes (East Anglia) Ltd and carried out in accordance with a brief designed by the County Archaeology Office.*

*The site lies just outside the defences of the medieval town of Swavesey, which developed during the thirteenth century AD. Evaluation trenches on the present site, however, found no traces of medieval settlement. This evidence and nearby remains of medieval cultivation (ridge and furrow) suggest that the site consisted of fields throughout this period. However, deposits containing medieval pottery were found in the south-west corner of the site adjacent to School Lane itself, and may be indicative of occupation in the immediate vicinity.*

*Later features on the site include the filled-in remains of a large L-shaped pond, known to exist in 1887, but the purpose of which is uncertain.*

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**Medieval Features Outside the Town Defences at Swavesey:  
Archaeological Evaluation and Observation of Demolition at School Lane  
SWA SL 95 TL 359/685**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

In July and September 1995 two stages of archaeological assessment were carried out by The Archaeology Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council in advance of the first of three proposed phases of residential development. The work was funded by McLean Homes (East Anglia) Ltd in accordance with a brief designed by the County Archaeology Office.

The Phase 1 evaluation covered an area of 2.9 hectares to the north-east of the junction between Gibraltar Lane and School Lane, Swavesey, Cambridgeshire (TL 359/685: Fig. 1). However, only 1.0ha of this was available for archaeological assessment by excavation, due to the imposition of Health and Safety restrictions which limited the available study area.

In July 1995 seven trenches were excavated across the available open part of the site, concentrating on those areas where the first stage of the housing development was planned. The remainder of the Phase 1 area was assessed through observation of demolition and limited linear trenching in September 1995. The positions of the trenches are shown in Figure 2.

**2 GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LAND USE**

The site lies in an area of First and Second Terrace river gravels overlying Ampthill Clay (British Geological Survey 1985), although all the trenches within the assessment area, apart from Trench J (see 6.3 below), lay directly on the clay.

Swavesey lies 3km to the north-east of the A14 trunk road, approximately 14km north-west of Cambridge and 13km south-east of Huntingdon. The site is generally flat and lies 500 metres to the south-south-west of the village core, at an average height of 5.00m OD. It has a small area of water in its centre which is all that remains of a larger pond shown on the 1887 County Series Ordnance Survey map.

School Lane runs in a south-west/north-east direction adjacent to the narrow south-eastern end of the site, which therefore represents a portion of frontage onto this road. The remains of ridge and furrow cultivation lie on a meadow to the south-west, and land presently under arable continues to the west. To the north, an extensive area of land is left unused except for a large tyre dump, whilst industrial buildings lie between the present village and the eastern part of the site.



### 3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The site lies close to the planned and defended town of Swavesey (Fig. 1), an area of dense activity and high archaeological potential from the medieval through into the late medieval periods (Phase 3 of the development will be almost wholly within the medieval town). The layout of the settlement appears to have been formalised during the thirteenth century, with the town possessing more than 1000 inhabitants by 1278 (Ravensdale 1984). The dry-land access to this fenland port was along the present High Street, and it is known that suburban development around Cowfen Green, which predates the High Street, was in existence by perhaps the fourteenth century (e.g. Ryders Farm). Previous archaeological work in Swavesey has suggested a thirteenth century date for the town ditch (Haigh 1985) and revealed agricultural and settlement features going back to the Late Iron Age (Evans 1990).

The present site, lying as it does only 50-200m outside the medieval town defences, and fronting onto the Fen Drayton road at the old T-junction with Gibraltar Green, has significant archaeological potential, both for the study of medieval suburban development around the system of access roads and associated Greens, and also for investigation of the infield land-use immediately outside the formal town boundaries. The close proximity of ridge and furrow systems to the north-west may provide a context for the interpretation of the landscape feature found in Trench E (see 5.5 below).

The site appears to be located just off the gravel island on which most of Swavesey stands, which would have represented a favourable settlement site within the fen-edge zone throughout the later prehistoric periods. It also lies in close proximity to known Romano-British field systems, to the north and west.

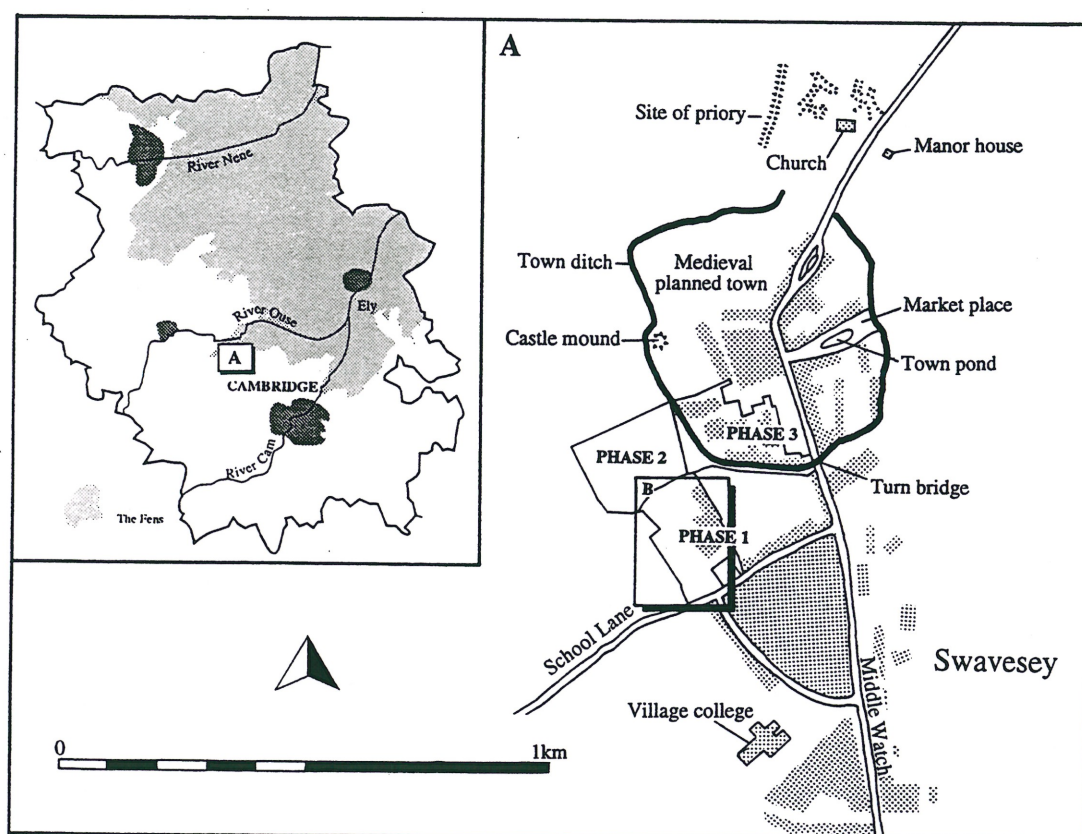
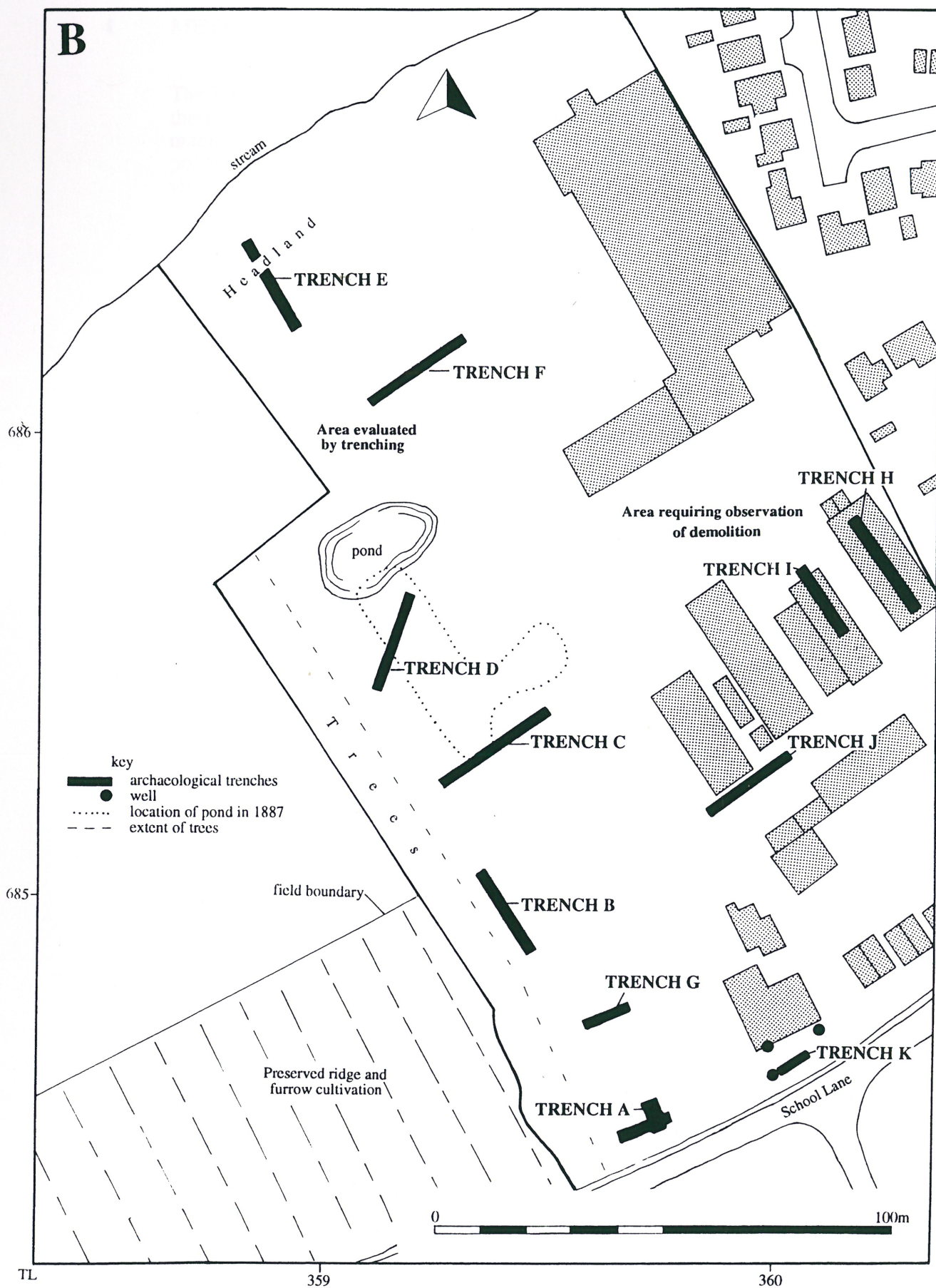


Figure 1 Site Location





**Figure 2** Location of Trenches



## 4 METHODOLOGY

The July 1995 evaluation involved placing seven trenches across the site, five of them around 25m in length and two about 10m. They were excavated by machine, using a 1.8m wide toothless ditching bucket. The trenches were positioned to evaluate the available open areas and, wherever possible, to assess visible anomalies across the site.

The topsoil, and a subsoil that appears to be related to former cultivation on the site, were carefully removed in each trench to reveal any identifiable anomalies, very few of which were found cut into the natural clay. Areas of archaeological interest were then excavated by hand, photographed, and recorded on plan and in section.

The September 1995 assessment consisted mainly of observation of demolition since the eastern part of the site was almost completely covered by buildings and hard standing, thus preventing the use of most other evaluation techniques. The work in this area was further complicated by the presumed presence of a 1940's anthrax pit in the centre of the site. Excavation strategy had to take account of the specialised health and safety problems stemming from this, which further impeded evaluation of the site's archaeological potential.

## 5 RESULTS OF JULY ASSESSMENT

The soils over the clay natural averaged 0.5m in depth and consisted of a virtually stone-free, olive-grey clay loam. This generally produced very little pottery, although large quantities of industrial refuse, such as thin steel plating and insulated electrical wire, were found just below the surface in several areas. The pottery which was evident ranged from several sherds of late medieval/early post-medieval wares to occasional sherds of twentieth century fabrics.

Four trenches (A, C, D, F) produced features cut into the natural clay, whilst one (E) revealed archaeological remains within the topsoil itself. The remaining two trenches contained no features other than very recent geological test pits excavated prior to this evaluation.

### 5.1 Trench A (Fig. 3)

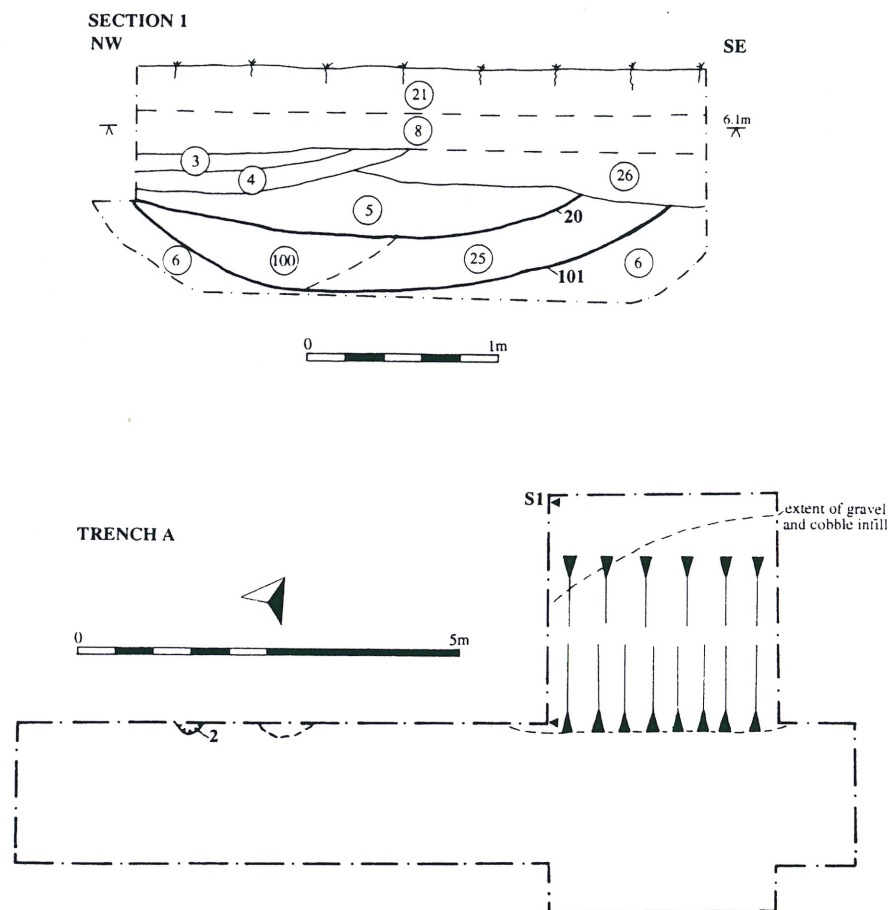
This consisted of an 11 metre long trench which ran in a north-east/south-west direction parallel to, and 5 metres from, School Lane. It was excavated in this position in order to test for roadside activity, including occupation, and contained by far the most extensive archaeological remains from the evaluated areas. Towards the eastern end of the trench a very thin layer of brick rubble (7) lay on the western edge of a thin, convex deposit of small pebbles (3), which was seen in both sections spreading above a thicker layer of larger cobbles (4) to form a pronounced, raised metallised area. Below, and sealed by, these stones was a 0.30m thick layer of mottled silty clay (5), in which a very large sherd of thirteenth century green-glazed pottery was found.

A 5m long extension to Trench A was then cut perpendicular to its eastern end. This revealed that the metallising (3) & (4) thinned out to the north after just over a metre. It also appeared to lie stratigraphically above a row of round ceramic field drains which cut fill (5) below and could be dated to approximately the late



eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. The trench was carefully stripped down in 30mm spits to reveal olive-green/brown mottled patches in fill (5), which contained an abundance of late medieval pottery of differing types dating to the mid-thirteenth to fourteenth centuries (see Appendix C, below). This fill appeared to lie in a broad shallow depression [20], which could be seen to overlie in turn a 0.5m deep by 1.5m wide U-shaped cut [101]. The latter was filled with a slightly darker hard clay (100), which in turn contained more medieval pottery dating to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The natural clay (6) into which this feature was cut appears to have slumped on its north-western side, since it contained several sherds of pottery similar to those in fills (5) and (100).

Trench G (see 5.7 below) was excavated 25m to the north-west in order to check the possibility that the metallurgy formed part of a track. However, no such evidence was discovered.



**Figure 3** *Trench A Plan and Section through Medieval Ditch 101*

## 5.2 Trench B

This consisted of a 19 metre long trench running north-west/south-east, which was placed along the south-western side of the site. On the western edge of the trench, 10m from its southern end, the vertical cut of a pit could clearly be seen in its base and section, as well as on the adjacent ground surface. This coincides with the position on the site plans of a geological test trench excavated by the developers.

### 5.3 Trench C

Trench C consisted of a 27 metre long excavation running across the centre of the site in a south-west/north-east direction. It was positioned to investigate an area of nettles which are known to thrive on disturbed soils with high nitrate content. The trench revealed a deep deposit of silty clay (23) in its north-eastern end. This was approximately 0.75m deep and lay over a thin layer of orange sandy gravel. These deposits were found to be fills of a cut [27], 12m from the eastern end of the trench. This feature had a flat base and sides that rose steeply to level out on the natural clay below the sub-soil, which lay 0.54m deep along the rest of the south-western part of the trench. The uppermost layers of fill (23) contained many decaying branches and the remains of twentieth century industrial refuse. Some large cut sandstone blocks, approximately 0.30-0.40m square, were found in the north-eastern end of the trench in what appeared to be the upper fills on the eastern side of the feature. They were presumably reused from a structure elsewhere and are of uncertain date.

Three linear field drains, two 0.1m wide lying either side of one 0.2m in diameter, were found in the southern section 9m from the western end of the trench. They ran in a north-north-easterly direction slightly over the edge of cut 27. A modern plastic pipe, 0.15m in diameter, was superimposed over these drains, running north-west/south-east. No other features were evident.

### 5.4 Trench D

Trench D was 22 metres long and ran in an approximately north/south direction. It was positioned in order to evaluate the possibility that features existed associated with the southern part of the extant pond (Fig. 2), and to examine a depression to its south-east.

A feature very similar to that observed in Trench C was found: a deep, steep-sided cut [28] in the natural clay, 2m from the northern end of the trench. This lay approximately 0.25m below the surface and ran in a south-south-easterly direction towards the other cut. Its fill (29) contained a mixture of decaying trees, roots and an abundance of twentieth century industrial refuse. The deeper fills were not examined due to the nearby water levels and modern contamination which may have represented a health hazard.

### 5.5 Trench E

Trench E was located in the extreme north-west of the site in order to investigate a broad linear anomaly of very pale grass on raised ground which ran in a south-west/north-east direction. The trench was 22 metres long and contained an area of very slightly differentiated soils (16) & (18), in that they were lighter and drier in the region of the anomaly. To the north of the linear feature the soil (19) was darker and appeared to be more waterlogged. A circular field drain could be seen 0.5m below the surface apparently running parallel with the linear feature. No other features were evident in the trench.

### 5.6 Trench F

Trench F was located to the south-east of Trench E over an area of nettles and thistles which formed an isolated patch within a field of generally long couch grass. The trench was 25 metres long and ran in a north-east/south-west direction. The 0.55m deep topsoils were removed and the natural clay excavated



to a maximum of 0.9m, but no distinct archaeological features were revealed. A 1m wide very hard dark clay linear anomaly [15], which ran in a north-west/south-east direction, was investigated but due to its irregular shape and its very even, hard fill (13) it was considered to be a natural palaeochannel. This may represent a former course of a tributary of the stream now 'canalised' to the north of the field (Fig. 2).

## 5.7 Trench G

Trench G was excavated 25 metres to the north-west of Trench A in order to locate a possible continuation of the stony feature found in the latter. The trench was 10 metres long and contained no features either in or below the 0.40m deep topsoil, other than the obvious fill of a modern geological test trench.

## 6 RESULTS OF SEPTEMBER ASSESSMENT

Once demolition commenced it became apparent that many categories of archaeological remains would not be identified within the constraints of the work taking place. Demolition and breaking of hard standing, leaving much rubble *in situ*, did not allow for easy observation. Thus it was decided that a small amount of linear trenching would be carried out on an *ad hoc* basis, to test areas where it was felt that there was some archaeological potential, but where demolition observation had not been entirely satisfactory in testing such suppositions.

The northern part of the site was not deemed worth evaluating with extra trenches as very deep foundations were removed by the contractor, providing difficult conditions and probably removing any archaeology present.

A 360 degree excavator was 'borrowed' from the sub-contractors and four linear trenches (H-K) were opened up through the demolition rubble. Their locations are shown on Figure 2.

### 6.1 Trench H

This consisted of a 22 metre long trial trench running 5 metres from, and parallel to, the north-eastern boundary fence demarcating the area to be developed during Phase 1 of house construction. The topsoil was removed by mechanical excavator to the top of the naturally occurring clay subsoil at a depth of 0.30m. No archaeological features were revealed.

### 6.2 Trench I

Trench I was located 19 metres to the south-west of Trench H and ran in a north-west/south-east direction for a distance of 14 metres. The reduced length of this trial trench can be attributed to the position of the anthrax pit to the north-west, and large amounts of concrete debris to the south-west.

The topsoil was removed by a mechanical excavator down to the top of the subsoil at a depth of 0.32m. In so doing a modern brick-built drain was revealed, cut into the natural clay. No other archaeological features were identified during the excavation of this trench.



### 6.3 Trench J

Trench J consisted of a 22 metre long excavation running in a north-easterly direction from the tree line at the western edge of the demolition area. The removal of the topsoil to the top of the subsoil, a depth of 0.34m, revealed a change in the underlying geology from the clay found elsewhere on the site to gravel. This may indicate the edge of the gravel spur on which the village of Swavesey is located. Unfortunately, no archaeological evidence was uncovered during the excavation of this trial trench.

### 6.4 Trench K

Trench K consisted of an 8 metre long excavation, reduced in size due to a lack of space in which the mechanical excavator could physically work.

This trench was positioned to discover whether or not the archaeological remains found in Trench A during the earlier assessment were indicative of a general zone of medieval activity along the street frontage. Removal of the topsoil to the top of the subsoil, a depth of 0.80m, revealed no archaeological remains apart from the discovery of the third modern well in this area of the redevelopment (Fig. 2).

## 7 DISCUSSION

The excavation evidence suggests that the majority of the site has been fields for most of the past few hundred years. The raised feature in Trench E may represent a headland for ridge and furrow cultivation, supporting evidence for which can be seen in the field to the south-west of the site, where ridge and furrow earthworks on a similar alignment are evident (Fig. 2).

Figure 2 also shows the location of a pond shown on the 1887 OS map. This pond appears to be an earlier, larger version of the one still extant. The steeply cut features observed in Trenches C [27] and D [28] are likely to be another early version of the same feature, although the locations of the edges of these cuts do not correlate with the western edge of the pond as illustrated on the OS map. The reasons for this are not clear, but it is possible that the amorphous feature mapped by the OS did not relate to the below-ground cut of the pond even then; or alternatively, there may have been a mapping error. A final possible explanation, that the pond had filled in and was then recut in a different location, does not fit with the excavated sequence recording the cut as being through natural rather than earlier pond deposits.

The features in Trench A appear to be different phases of a linear ditch, which has subsequently been filled in and over which a metalled surface was later laid, presumably in order to form hard standing at the entrance to a field. This metalling was possibly carried out some time after the eighteenth century, judging by the field drain which appears to be sealed by it. However, the large assemblages of pottery from the ditch fills, apparently dating between the twelfth and mid-fourteenth centuries, imply a medieval date for the latter feature.



## 8 CONCLUSIONS

No evidence of significant archaeological remains was found across any part of the site except for Trench A, where recovered material suggests that activity, if only ditch construction and medieval rubbish deposition, had taken place along the lane frontage. The evidence from Trench K suggests that these medieval remains are limited to the south-western end of the site. The fact that such a large and well-preserved group of medieval pottery has been recovered at such a distance from the known medieval occupation on the High Street and within the Town Ditch suggests that there is likely to be a closer source for this refuse material. The most likely explanation is that there is a much nearer occupation site on another part of the School Lane frontage.

The former large pond observed in Trenches C and D and known from the 1887 OS Map does not appear to contain deposits of any value in the areas so far exposed. The large cut stone blocks observed on its edge in Trench C derive from a building of some considerable size, but are presumably reused in this location. The original L-shaped pond, which lay to the south-east of and adjoined the present oval pond, may have partially enclosed a significant piece of land immediately to the north-east, which was not evaluated due to restrictions of access. There is a possibility that this may have formed part of a previously unidentified moated site; however, no evidence for nearby occupation was recovered from Trenches C, D or F. It is unfortunate that standing trees and fencing delimiting the compound within which potential anthrax contamination existed prevented the location of a trench directly over this area.

No archaeological remains of any importance were identified during demolition observation in the eastern part of the site. Only limited observation was possible in the northern part of this area, but no indication of significant archaeological remains had been found in those trenches opened in the northern area during the first evaluation stage (Trenches E & F). This may suggest that this zone is generally devoid of archaeology, but such statements must be made with caution as the northern corner of the site is only about 30m outside the medieval town ditch.

The clays, rather than gravels, on which the site actually stands would presumably not have been regarded as a favourable settlement location within the fen-edge zone until much of the surrounding land had been successfully drained. The lack of evidence for early occupation on the site certainly suggests this was the case. The possible headland seen in Trench E is only extant as a very ephemeral earthwork, and has no observable sub-surface archaeological presence. It may therefore represent part of a field system, which endorses the hypothesis that settlement activity was primarily concentrated on the gravels.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank McLean Homes East Anglia Ltd. for the funding of this work, Judith Roberts for working on the site, Paul Spoerry the Project Manager, and Melodie Paice for work on the illustrations. The brief for this report was provided by the County Archaeology Office.

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## APPENDIX A

### Context Descriptions

Context & Trench	Description	Nature	Depth	Below	Above
1 A	Fill of 2	Fill of shallow depression, 7.5YR4/1 (dark grey) silty clay	0.08m	8	2
2 A	Cut	Shallow depression filled by 1	0.08m	1	Natural clay
3 A	Layer	Layer of small pebbles <0.02m in sandy silt	0.08m	7	4
4 A	Layer	Layer of medium sized pebbles <0.10m in sandy silt	0.10m	3	26
5 A	Fill	Fill of ditch 20, 10YR3/1 (very dark grey) clay	0.32m	26	20
6 A	Layer	Layer of 2.5Y5/4 (light olive brown) natural clay	0.24m	101	/
7 A	Layer	Layer of brick rubble	0.04m	8	3
8 A	Layer	Subsoil, 10YR3/1 (very dark grey) sandy silt	0.10m	21	7
9	Not used				
10 F	Layer	Topsoil, 5Y4/2(olive grey) clay loam, many roots	0.10m	/	11
11 F	Layer	Topsoil, 5Y4/2 (olive grey) clay loam, few roots	0.20m	10	12
12 F	Layer	Subsoil, 5Y4/3 (olive grey) clay	0.26m	11	13
13 F	Fill	Fill of ?Palaeochannel, 5Y3/2 (dark olive grey) very hard clay	0.27m	12	15
14 F	Layer	Very mottled 2.5Y8/6 (yellow), 6/8 (olive yellow), 4/3 (olive brown), 3/3 (dark olive brown) natural clay	/	15	/
15 F	Cut	Cut of palaeochannel, filled by 13	0.27m	13	14
16 E	Layer	Topsoil, 2.5Y3/1 (very dark grey) clay silt loam	0.20m	/	17
17 E	Layer	Layer of 10YR5/6 (yellowish brown) clay	0.13m	16	18
18 E	Layer	Layer of 10YR3/3 (dark brown) clay silt	0.38m	17	Nat.
19 E	Layer	Layer/lens in 18, 10YR3/3 (dark brown) clay silt	0.34m	18	18
20 A	Cut	Cut or recut of ditch, filled by 5	0.30m	5	100
21 A, C	Layer	Topsoil, 10YR3/1 (very dark grey) sandy silt	0.20m	/	8, 22
22 C	Layer	Subsoil, 7.5YR4/1 (dark grey) sandy clay silt	0.42m	21	23
23 C	Fill	Fill of pond, 2.5YR3/1 (very dark grey) organic silt	0.62m	22	27
24 C	Layer	Natural clay, 2.5Y4/3 (olive brown) clay	/	27	/
25 A	Fill/ Layer	Fill or layer of 2.5Y3/3 (dark olive brown) clay	0.30m	20	101

26	A	Layer	Layer of 2.5Y3/2 (dark greyish brown) silty sandy loam	0.24m	4	5
27	C	Cut	Cut of pond edge, filled by 23	0.60m	23	24
28	D	Cut	Cut of pond edge, filled by 29	>0.8m	29	24
29	D	Fill	Fill of pond, 2.5Y3/1 (very dark grey) organic silt	<0.8m	30	<b>28</b>
30	D	Layer	Topsoil, 10YR3/1 (very dark grey) sandy silt loam	0.25m	/	29
100	A	Fill	Fill of linear ditch, 5Y3/2 (dark olive grey) clay	0.32m	<b>20</b>	<b>101</b>
101	A	Cut	Cut of linear ditch, filled by 100 and 5	0.32m	100	6



## APPENDIX B

### Site Matrix

Trench A	Trench B	Trench C	Trench D	Trench E	Trench F	Trench G
21	Topsoil	21	30	16	10	Topsoil
8	Subsoil	22	29	17	11	Subsoil
7	Natural	23	28	18	12	Natural
3		27	Natural	19	13	
4		Natural =24		Natural	15	
26					Natural =14	
5						
20						
100						
25						
101						
Natural =6						

## APPENDIX C

### Pottery Report

By P. Spoerry

A preliminary assessment has been made of the pottery from the only two well-stratified contexts on the site, that is the ditch fills from Trench A, (5) and (100).

Both groups contain shelly wares, some of which appear to be a developed St. Neot's Ware variant.

(5) Few developed St. Neot's sherds, sandy wares, which possibly have some affinity with early Colne (?) products. Also glazed, decorated fine wares which are from Essex and are either Sible Hedingham or Mill Green products. Also about twenty fragments of one vessel with a thumbbed cordon which has a reduced black fabric with some shell temper. This assemblage is from the mid-thirteenth century or later (i.e. 1230-1350).

(100) Developed St. Neot's, and orange buff sandy ware, the latter not being a recognised fen-edge type, but is presumably fairly local. The date is assumed to be possibly twelfth or thirteenth century (i.e. 1100-1300).

The pottery lies in a stratigraphically correct sequence, that is (5) post-dates (100) typologically, and therefore the assemblage could represent gradual accumulation over the period concerned.



## APPENDIX D

### Finds Quantification

SWAVESEY, SCHOOL LANE 1995 - Finds Types by Context										
Trench	Context	Pottery Weight	Pottery Sherds	Tile & Brick	Fired Clay	Clay Pipe	Field Drain	Quern	Glass	Total Weights by Context
A	1				1					1
A	5	1062	74	150				330		1542
A	100	418	28							418
A	21	273	25	520	257					1050
B	Topsoil	12	3	1375					1	1388
C	21	82	9	787						869
D	30	232	3	481						713
E	16	85	4	157		4	225			471
F	10 & 11			9						9
G	Topsoil	7	3							7
Total Weights by Finds Type		2171	149 sherds	3479	258	4	225	330	1	6468



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