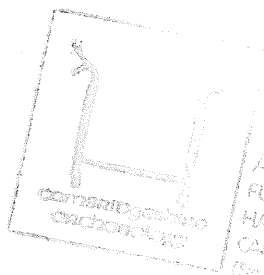
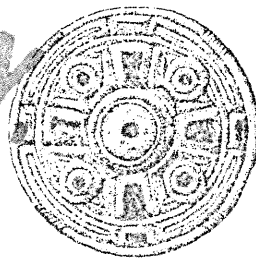


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Archaeological Field Unit

Late Saxon and Medieval Archaeology at
Ramsey Abbey, Cambridgeshire.
An Archaeological Evaluation.

Stephen Macaulay BA, MPhil, AIFA

1996

Cambridgeshire County Council
Report No. 129

*Commissioned By Cambridgeshire County Council
Property Management Services*

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Report No 129

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SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation within the grounds of Ramsey Abbey School, Cambridgeshire (TL29258515) was undertaken between the 19th and 23rd of August 1996, by the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council on behalf of the Property Management Services of Cambridgeshire County Council.

The evaluation proved conclusively that archaeological remains dating to the late Saxon and medieval periods survive within the proposed development area. Ten test pits were opened, six contained the remains of archaeology, while three could not be investigated due to the presence of modern service pipes/cables. It is worth noting that service trenches were recorded at depths ranging from 0.3m-0.7m. Archaeological deposits, in particular from the late Saxon period survive beneath these modern 20th century disturbances. Only one test pit did not contain any archaeological deposits. This was located adjacent to the present day tennis courts and was found to contain fen peat deposits.

The foundations of two walls were revealed (test pits 2 & 8), these had been partially robbed and were sealed by a demolition layer dating to the 16th century and perhaps to the Dissolution. These walls are thus likely to be part of the medieval Abbey complex. In addition a fully robbed wall/ditch (test pit 1) was also excavated, and again this contained demolition material consistent with a Dissolution period date (16th century). This ditch contained a fragment of a floor tile likely to have been produced on-site in the Abbey's own tile kilns. Further to the north, medieval demolition and sealed deposits were recorded in test pits 3, 9 and 10. Finally, the remains of a late Saxon pit, infilled with building debris and a ditch were recorded in test pit 10. These features were sealed beneath the medieval/late Saxon layer recorded in test pits 3, 9 & 10.

The evidence from the test pits shows that archaeological remains contemporary to the medieval Abbey survive and that earlier medieval/late Saxon deposits are present within the proposed development area and are likely to need consideration before the site is developed.

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Late Saxon and Medieval Archaeology at Ramsey Abbey, Cambridgeshire. An Archaeological Evaluation.

1 INTRODUCTION

An archaeological evaluation within the grounds of Ramsey Abbey School, Cambridgeshire (TL29258515) (fig.1) was undertaken between the 19th and 23rd of August 1996, by the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council on behalf of the Property Management Services of Cambridgeshire County Council.

The evaluation, utilising a test pitting strategy (fig.2), was conducted to fulfil the Brief provided by the County Archaeology Office (CAO) in accordance with the local authority's procedures regarding archaeology and development control (PPG 16).

The evaluation was required due to the nature and location of the proposed development. Situated within the limits of Ramsey Abbey's medieval precinct and within an area of known archaeological importance, the evaluation has proved conclusively the existence of archaeological deposits and features. These date to both the medieval period (at 0.45m below modern ground surface) and from earlier Saxon occupation (at a depth of 0.60m below ground surface).

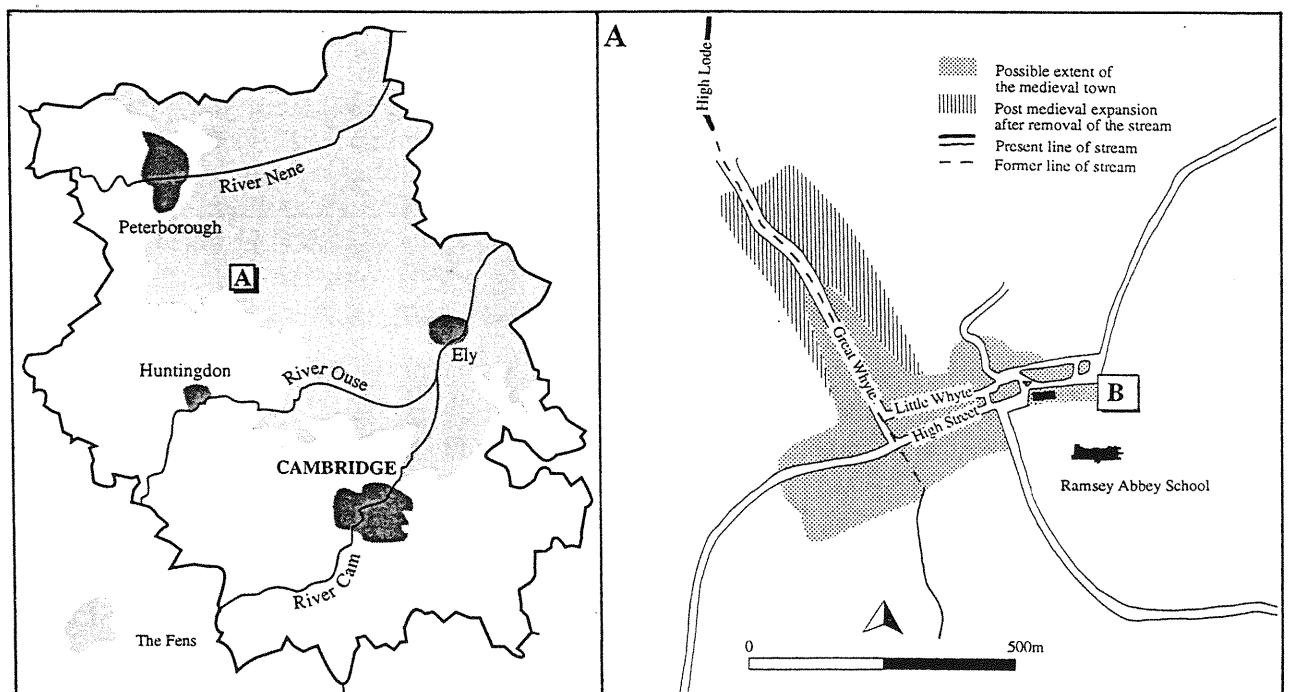


Figure 1 Location plan

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The low peninsula of Ramsey, upon which the settlement is centred, consists of Till (boulder clay) overlying Oxford Clay. There are some areas of gravel on the fen edge, the whole parish is low lying, the highest upland no more than 19m above OD (Hall 1992). The investigation site lies on land within the precinct of the medieval Abbey, on 'upland' (clay/gravel) with only the area to the east tennis court area overlying fen peat deposits. The ground level varies across the site, sloping down towards the north, but it is not uniform.

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ramsey Abbey was founded in AD 969 by Ailwyn, the foster brother of King Edgar. On the advice of St. Oswald, Bishop of Worcester, the original minister church was refounded as a regular monastery and by 974 a wooden church had been completed and dedicated (Haigh 1988). The ties to royalty led to the granting of substantial moneys and land grants which quickly made the house one of the richest in the fens, even outstripping Ely and Peterborough. The monastery continued to flourish in the 11th century, surviving both the Danish invasion and Norman Conquest, relatively unscathed. During the 12th century, the monastic buildings and the church were rebuilt in stone using material from a stone quarry bought from Peterborough Abbey.

During the reign of King Stephen, in the 12th century, the house suffered greatly in the period of the so called 'Anarchy'. Geoffrey de Mandeville seized the house and fortified it against Stephen in the civil war. When Geoffrey was killed at Burwell in 1143 and the rebellion collapsed, Ramsey was badly damaged and subsequently impoverished. By the late 13th and 14th centuries, however, a succession of wealthy abbots embarked upon a series of costly building programmes. This, coupled with the Black Death, meant that by 1349 the house owed debts totalling 2500 marks. By the end of the 14th century visitations returns suggest that house was both financially and morally decayed (Haigh 1988). However, by 1431 the monastery had been restored to its former wealth and position.

The monastery was dissolved in 1538 and most of the abbey buildings were demolished for their stone shortly after. The result of which means that little now survives, although there are some substantial fragments. The present house incorporates some of the earlier abbey buildings, notably the 13th century Lady Chapel which now forms part of the basement. The house itself was built in the 16th century, with later extensions and alterations by Sir John Soane and Edward Blore. Today this building is Ramsey Abbey School. The 15th century gatehouse survives, along with part of the east wall, north and south turrets and part of the adjoining lodge. The present parish church of St. Thomas a Becket, which was originally built c. 1180-1190 as an infirmary, still survives.

Other than these buildings no trace survives of monastic buildings or related out-buildings. The whereabouts of the original Saxon Minster is also unknown.

4 METHODOLOGY AND CONSTRAINTS

4.1 Aerial Photographic Survey (Air Photo Services Report No: R104)

The brief set out by the CAO called for an assessment of the available aerial photographic evidence. The results of this survey were entirely negative. Photographs held at CUCAP (Cambridge University) were examined and provided minimal information. Oblique photographs of the assessment area are masked by trees and only small area of grass were visible. Vertical photographs provided no information of archaeological relevance. Finally parch marks to the south (in school grounds centred TL292849) were recorded in the summer 1976, but none of these photographs showed the assessment area.

4.2 Test Pit Strategy

There were extensive constraints put on the archaeological investigation at Ramsey Abbey. The nature of the development and need to complete investigation prior to the beginning of the Autumn school term left only a 2 week window for the investigation. The test pits could only be located in existing grassed areas around the dining hall, and in a 'nature' area, between the pump station and the squash courts (see *fig 2*). There were additional constraints due to the presence of numerous utilities (electricity, gas, sewers and water) and the position of trees with preservation orders.

Initially 10 test pits were proposed, to be excavated by hand, however the depth of stratigraphy resulted in a 1 ton mini-digger being used to excavate Test Pits 7, 9 and 10. It was impossible to use the machine for the other pits, either due to physical limitation of space or the presence of service pipes and cables. The test pits measured 1m x 1m when hand excavated and 1m x 1.5m by machine.

The availability of areas suitable for test pits, i.e. clear of trees, bushes or service cables, was the deciding factor on their location. These locations of the 10 test pits are in the *only* areas suitable. It would not have been possible to open more test pits without danger to health and safety, notably from the presence of live electric cables.

Maps and plans of the position of service cables and pipes were entirely insufficient. There were numerous unrecorded services, which were only detected using a C.A.T (ground sensing device).

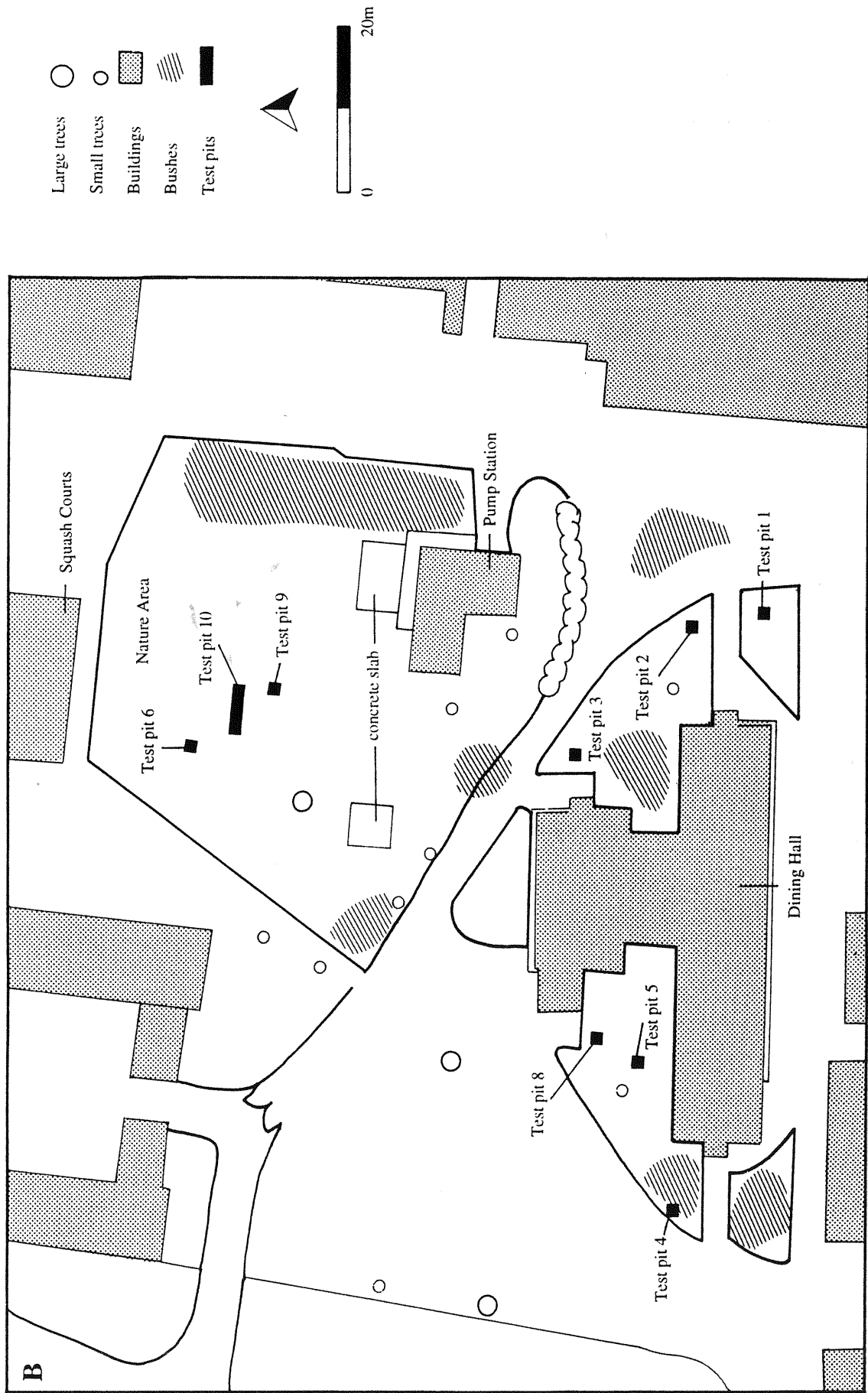


Figure 2 Test pit location plan.

5 RESULTS

A full description of the test pits and archaeological deposits is contained in Appendix 1.

5.1 Test Pit 1 (*fig 3*)

This test pit (1m x 1m) was located to the east of the dining hall, and was positioned immediately to the north of the conservation area. Below the topsoil and garden soil horizons a layer of disturbed/demolition material (3) was revealed and this formed part of the fill of a ditch (4), originally a wall, now robbed out. The ditch was 0.48m below ground level (6.15m OD), however the top of the demolition layer was at 6.33m OD. Tile (decorated floor tile) and pottery, as well as building debris were recovered. Pottery included the base of a Cistercian ware "cup", probably from Ely (1500-1650) and suggests that the wall could have been robbed during the Dissolution and may represent a wall of a monastic building.

The test pit could not be expanded due to the presence of an electricity cable immediately to the west.

5.2 Test Pit 2 (*fig 3*)

Hand excavated test pit (1m x 1m) east of the dining hall. Beneath topsoil and a lower garden soil the foundations of a wall were discovered (9). The wall still survives with stone and mortar, although all the facing has been removed, at a depth of 0.40m below ground surface (6.35m OD). The wall runs east-west and is on the same alignment as the curtain wall of the parish church. A layer (5) overlies the wall, similar to the layer (3) in test pit 1, both grey brown silty/clays. A single body sherd of orange sandy ware, with clear glaze was discovered (1500-1700). It is probable that this wall is the foundation of a monastic out-building perhaps demolished in the 16th century following the dissolution of the monastery.

As before the test pit could not be expanded due to the presence of an electricity cable immediately to the west and north.

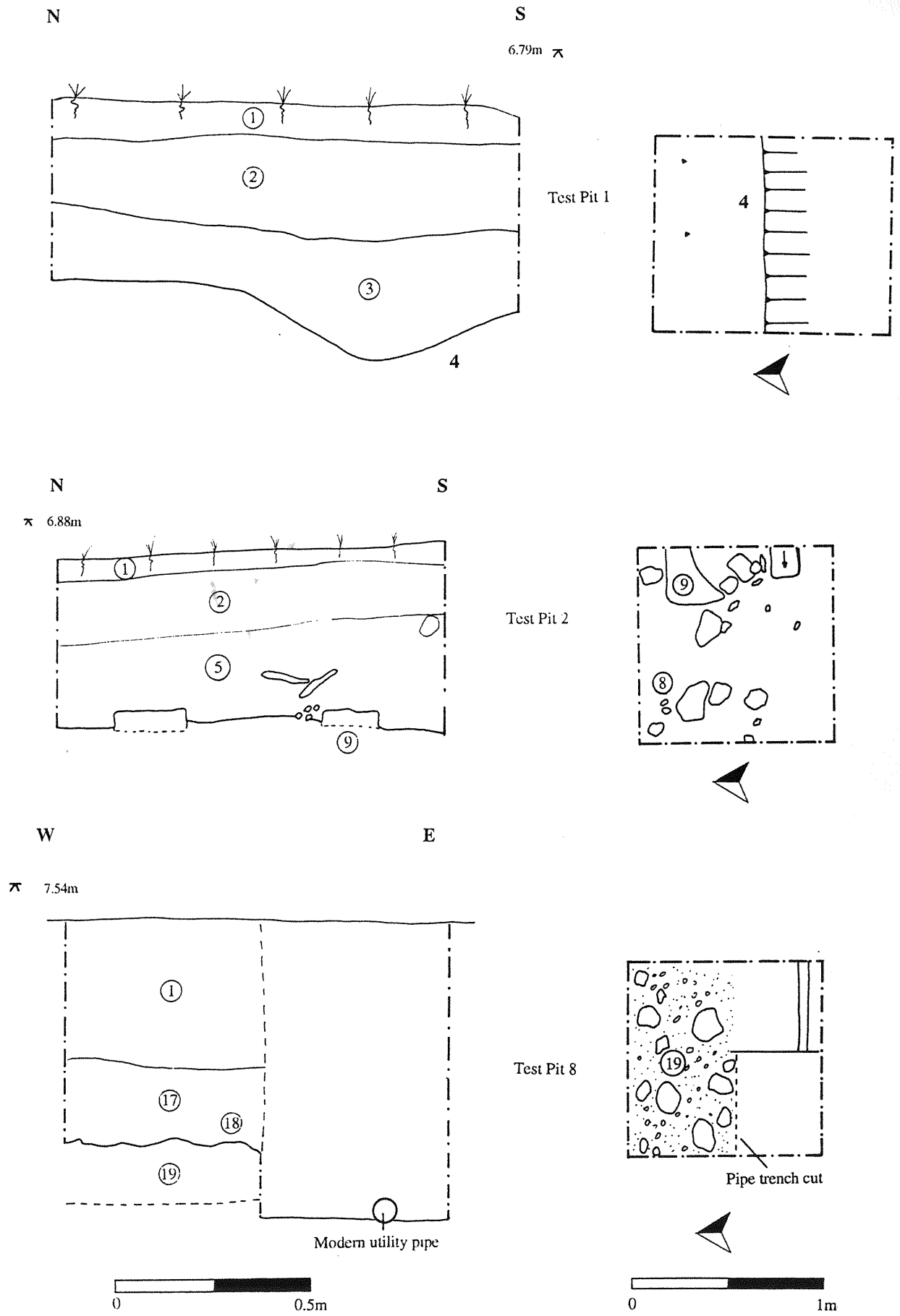


Figure 3 Sections and plans of test pits 1, 2 and 8

5.3 Test Pit 3 (fig 4)

This hand excavated test pit (1m x 1m) revealed important archaeological deposits and demolition layers which were a continuation of those observed in neighbouring test pits to the north. Beneath the topsoil and garden soils, three distinct archaeological horizons were uncovered. At 6.65m OD (0.30m below surface) an 18th century layer (light grey-yellow-brown silt/clay 6) was excavated and this contained post-medieval pottery (including English Stoneware) as well as residual medieval sandy ware. Beneath this at 6.45m OD (0.50m below ground level) an earlier medieval deposit was revealed (yellow-brown silt/clay 7). This contained demolition material including building stone and pottery suggesting a date range of 1200-1350, although there are also residual late Saxon-Norman wares (Stamford and St. Neots 900-1150). Finally, beneath these deposits another demolition layer was found to contain material from the late Saxon period (St. Neots and Thetford pottery). This dark grey-brown layer (8) was discovered at 6.2m OD (0.75m below the modern ground surface) and extended to a depth of 5.87m OD.

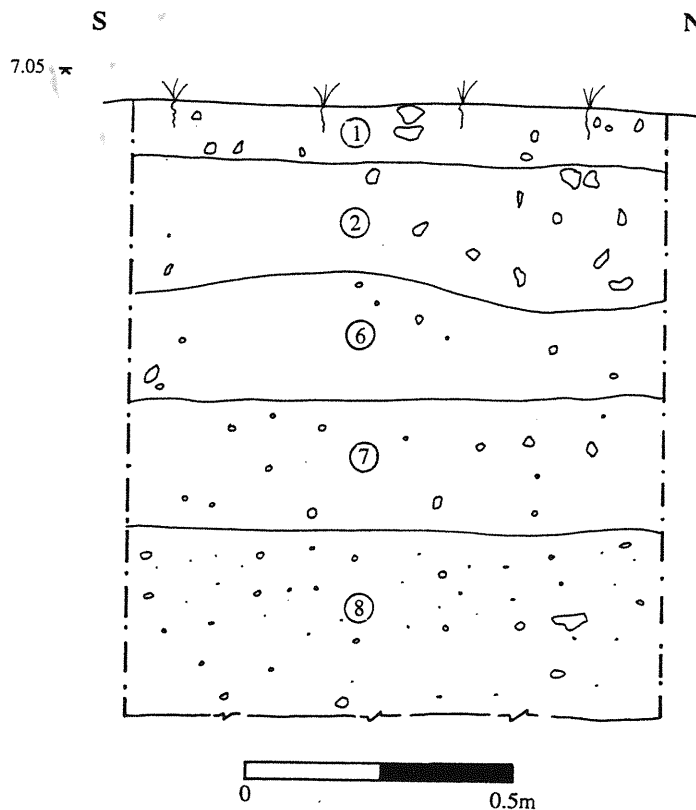


Figure 4 Section of test pit 3

5.4 Test Pit 4

Test pit (1m x 1m) opened to the west of the dining hall, however excavation ceased at a depth of 0.40m below ground level, due to the presence of an unrecorded sewer pipe.

5.5 Test Pit 5

Test pit (1m x 1m) opened to the west of the dining hall, the presence of a live electric cable caused excavation to be ceased at a depth of 0.40m below ground level.

5.6 Test Pit 6

Hand excavated (1m x 1m) test pit located in the 'nature' area. Live electric cables were encountered at a depth of 0.60m below ground level (6.29m OD). This confirmed the C.A.T. reading.

5.7 Test Pit 7

Machine excavated test pit (1m x 1m), opened near tennis courts (not shown on location map). The pit revealed fen peat deposits, beneath the topsoil and garden soils. The test pit was excavated to a depth of 0.78m, when the pit started to fill with water. No archaeology was discovered.

5.8 Test Pit 8 (*fig 3*)

Test pit excavated by hand to the west of the dining hall. The pit was 1m x 1m and 0.75m deep. The ground surface in this area is disturbed, with no real top soil, the ground surface being a garden soils/ debris mix. At the base of the test pit, the foundation of a medieval wall (18) was discovered, running east-west. The wall had been extensively robbed, although both stone and mortar was present. It survives at a depth of 0.60m below ground level (6.84m OD). Above the wall a demolition layer (17), composed of a very dark grey clayey/silt was recorded. In addition, immediately to the north of the wall, a modern sewer pipe had been dug; this also appeared in the test pit (*fig 3*).

5.9 Test Pit 9

Machine excavated test pit (1.2m x 1.4m, 0.80m deep), this pit revealed archaeology very similar to test pit 3. Beneath the topsoil and garden soil horizons at 0.50m below ground level (6.35m OD), a brown-grey silty/clay layer (25) was encountered, possibly the same as (7) in test pit 3, although no artefacts were retrieved to confirm dating. Beneath this layer, at 0.65m below ground level (6.20m OD) and extending to 5.96m OD (however natural was not reached), a possible late Saxon layer (16), a dark grey-brown silty/clay, was excavated. A single sherd of St. Neots ware (900-1150) was recovered. It is probable that this layer corresponds to layer (8) in test pit 3 (see *fig 4*).

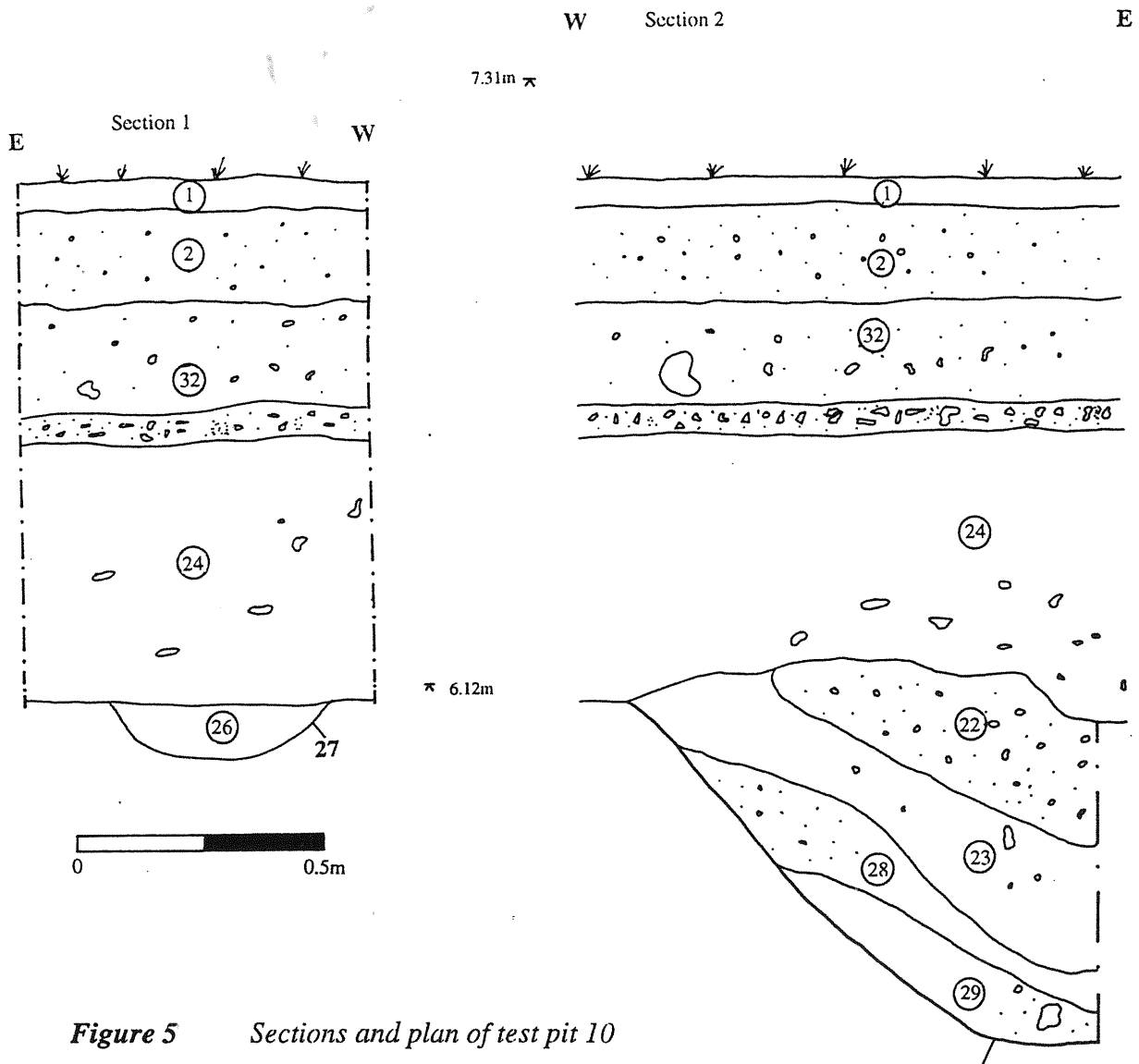
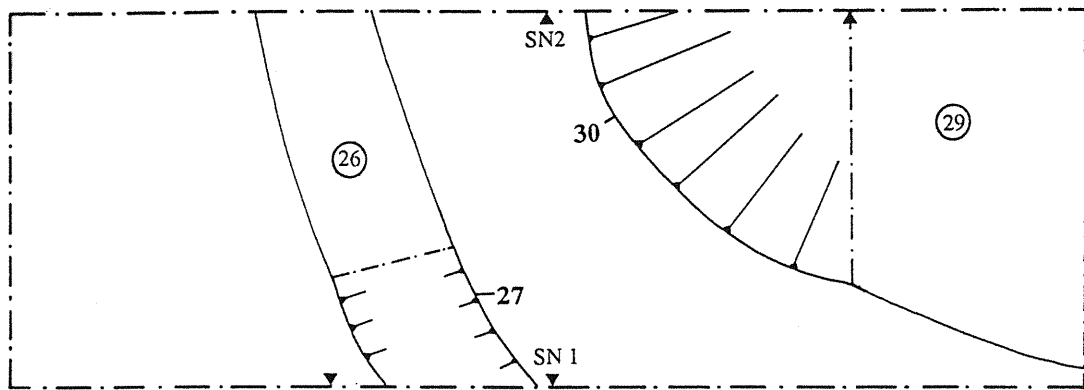


Figure 5 Sections and plan of test pit 10

5.10 Test Pit 10 (*fig 5*)

Machine excavated test pit, subsequently expanded to 4m x 1.4m, and to a depth of 1.8m. This test pit contained a modern demolition layer (32), beneath which extended a mixed medieval and late Saxon layer corresponding to those identified in test pits 3 and 9. Sealed beneath these deposits were archaeological features, a ditch and large pit, possibly of late Saxon date. The upper dark grey-brown silty/clay layer of (24), at a height of 6.27m OD, corresponds to (7) in test pit 3 and (25) in test pit 9. The lower section of (24) at a height of 6.21m OD (base at 5.97m OD) is likely to relate to (8) in test pit 3 and (16) in test pit 9. A single sherd of possibly hand made pottery was recovered from (24).

Of note in test pit 10 was the identification of features beneath the later demolition layers. The truncated remains of a shallow ditch (27), running northwest-southeast were excavated (section 1 *fig 5*), although no artefacts were recovered. A large circular pit (diameter 0.70m+, 0.70m deep) was investigated. This appears to have been deliberately infilled and contained a rubble and mortar layer (28), over which were deposits (22 and 23) which contained late Saxon and early medieval pottery.

6 POTTERY ASSESSMENT by Dr Paul Spoerry

Overall a mixed assemblage with much residual Late Saxon to medieval material in the later deposits. There are also some uncontaminated groups, which date from the post-Conquest (Saxo-Norman) period. Of note is the Late Saxon component throughout the deposits, and possibly early-mid Saxon material present in test pit 10.

7 DISCUSSION

The evidence suggests that the remains of both medieval and late Saxon archaeology may survive within the development area. The test pits located around the modern dining hall have revealed the remains of walls and foundations which, although robbed, still survive in a recognisable state. There is a 16th century demolition layer, probably associated with the dissolution of the abbey. The likelihood of a medieval (monastic?) building surviving beneath the dining hall is high.

In addition, to the north of the dining hall (test pit 3) and further north (test pits 9 and 10), within the 'nature' area (*fig 2*), demolition layers of post-medieval, medieval and possible late Saxon date were all present. These layers all contained high amounts of residual pottery, but this does suggest that there has been substantial activity in the area. The depth of these layers suggests that despite modern service trenches, archaeology will survive at depths in excess of 0.40m below the modern ground surface.

Finally, the presence of archaeological features (ditch and pit), *beneath* the archaeological layers, at depths in excess of 0.75m below ground level, indicate the survival of possible late Saxon archaeology, within the 'nature' area, to the north of the pump station.

8 CONCLUSION

It is perhaps not surprising that, in the area of a known archaeological site, that six of the ten test pits showed the presence of medieval deposits and features, surviving at lower than 0.40m, and possibly late Saxon archaeology at 0.75m, below the current ground level. Three of the test pits could not be adequately investigated due to the presence of electricity, gas and sewer trenches. Only one test pit did not reveal the presence of archaeological deposits (test pit 7).

Within the development area there almost certainly exist today the remains of a medieval building, around and beneath the modern dining hall. The foundations of the 20th century dining hall are thought to be raft construction, which may suggest that foundations may survive beneath the building itself.

Medieval and late Saxon deposits survive beneath the modern utility trenches to the north of the dining hall and pump station. The assessment has revealed the existence of remains of sufficient quality, that, should other mitigation options be deemed inappropriate, then further investigation would be necessary. Any future investigation of these deposits, prior to development, will require the removal of all electricity, gas, water and sewer trenches and cables.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX 1

Test pit and layer descriptions

All fills and layers are shown in () brackets and cuts are shown in **bold**.

Test Pit 1 (*fig 3*)

Test pit 1 was located to the southeast of the modern dining hall. It was 1m x 1m and 0.6m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, below which a post-medieval (16th century) demolition layer (3) overlaid a medieval ditch **4**. This latter is possibly the remnants of a robbed out wall, originally part of the monastic complex. The following features and deposits were recorded in this trench.

Layer (3). Excavated by hand. Dark grey brown silty clay containing occasional gravel, 60g pottery (dated 1500-1650), glass, animal bone, shell and a decorated floor tile (with *fleur de lys* motif). 0.3m depth. 6.33m OD. Forms the fill of robbed wall/ditch **4**.

Cut **4**, fill (3). Excavated by hand. U shaped ditch, limits unknown within confines of test pit. 0.7m+ wide/0.2m+ deep. 6.15m OD. Probably the remains of a robbed out wall foundation.

Test Pit 2 (*fig 3*)

Test pit 2 was located to the east of the dining hall. It was 1m x 1m and 0.43m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, below which a post-medieval (16th century) demolition layer (5) overlaid a medieval wall foundation.

Layer (5). Excavated by hand. Grey brown clayey silt. Containing Fe metal fragments, animal bone, brick and tile. 0.28m depth. 6.56m OD. Forms demolition layer.

Wall cut **9**. Excavated by hand. The wall had been partially robbed of stonework, leaving only a stone and mortar foundation. Runs east-west. 0.9m wide. 6.35m OD.

Test Pit 3 (*fig 4*)

Test pit 3 was located to the northeast of the dining hall. It was 1m x 1m and 1.13m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, below which archaeological layers dating to post-medieval, medieval and late Saxon occupation were uncovered.

Layer (6). Excavated by hand. Light grey yellow brown silty clay with frequent stones. Contains pottery 110g (dated 1700-1800), tile, brick, Fe metal fragments, stone, glass and animal bone. 0.23m depth. 6.65m OD. Later than (7).

Layer (7). Excavated by hand. Yellow brown silty clay with occasional mortar and charcoal fragments. Contains pottery 53g (dated 1200-1350), tile, Fe metal

fragments, metal slag and animal bone. 0.25m depth. 6.45m OD. Later than (8). Same as (upper 24) and (25).

Layer (8). Excavated by hand. Dark grey brown silty clay with occasional mortar, stone and charcoal fragments. Contains pottery 167g (dated 1150-1350), tile, Fe metal fragments, metal slag, stone, glass and animal bone. 0.36m depth. 6.20m OD (base 5.87m OD). Same as (16) and (lower 24).

Test Pit 4

Test pit 4 was located to the west of the dining hall. It was 1m x 1m and 0.4m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, however excavation ceased when a sewer trench was discovered at 0.4m below ground level.

Test Pit 5

Test pit 5 was located to the northwest of the dining hall. It was 1m x 1.2m and 0.4m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, however excavation ceased when a live electric cable was discovered at 0.4m below ground level.

Test Pit 6

Test pit 6 was located within the 'nature' area, north of the pump station and south of the squash court. It was 1m x 1.1m and 0.6m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, however excavation ceased when a live electric cable was discovered at 0.6m below ground level.

Test Pit 7

Test pit 7 was located to the east of the development area, near to the tennis courts. It was 1m x 1.2m and 0.78m deep. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed, beneath which a fen peat deposit (15) was encountered. No archaeological features were recorded.

Layer (15). Excavated by machine. Very dark brown black peat deposit. 0.65m+ depth.

Test Pit 8 (fig 3)

Test pit 5 was located to the northwest of the dining hall. It was 1m x 1m and 0.75m deep. A disturbed topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed beneath which a demolition layer (17) and wall foundation 18 were identified. In addition a sewer pipe had been cut into this test pit, however this did not prevent investigation. The following features were recorded in this trench.

Layer (17). Excavated by hand. Very dark grey clayey silt. 0.20m depth. 7.04m OD. Forms demolition layer.

Wall cut 18. Excavated by hand. The wall had been partially robbed of stonework, leaving only a stone and mortar foundation. Runs east-west. 0.56m wide. 6.84m OD. Wall is truncated by sewer trench.

Test Pit 9

Test pit 9 was located to the northwest of the pump station, within the 'nature' area. It was 1.2m x 1.4m and 0.8m deep. A topsoil layer (20) and garden soil layer (21) were removed, below which archaeological layers dating to medieval and late Saxon occupation were uncovered.

Layer (25). Excavated by machine. Brown grey silty clay with occasional gravel. 0.14m depth. 6.35m OD. Later than (16). Possibly same as (upper part of 24) and (7).

Layer (16). Excavated by machine. Dark grey brown silty clay with occasional pebbles. Contains pottery 6g (dated 900-1150), tile, Fe metal fragment, metal slag, stone, glass and animal bone. 0.20m depth. 6.20m OD (base 5.96m OD). Possibly same as (8) and (lower part of 24). Not fully excavated.

Test Pit 10 (fig 5)

Test pit 10 was located to the northwest of the pump station, within the 'nature' area. The test pit was opened by machine and extended. It was 1.2m wide x 4m long, maximum depth 1.8m. A topsoil layer (1) and garden soil layer (2) were removed. Below this was a modern demolition layer, containing much building debris. Sealed beneath these layers were medieval and late Saxon layers and possible late Saxon archaeological features. The following features and deposits were observed in this test pit.

Layer (32). Excavated by machine. Dark grey brown silty clay with frequent modern brick, stone and sand stone. 0.26m deep. Later than (24).

Layer (24). Excavated by machine. Grey brown silty clay with occasional pebbles. Evidence of burning and industrial debris. Contains pottery 14g (dated pre 1000), animal bone.

Cut 27, fill (26). Excavated by hand. No finds. Linear containing (26), northwest/southeast orientation. 0.45m wide x 0.12m deep. Filled by dark grey brown silty clay.

Cut 30, fills (22), (23), (28) and (29). Partially excavated by hand. Large circular pit, deliberately infilled with building debris and industrial waste. 1.7m+ diameter, 0.7m deep. Not fully excavated. Primary fill (29) brown grey silty clay, depth 0.1m, containing occasional mortar fragments and frequent pebbles. Second fill (28) yellowish brown silty clay, depth 0.14m, containing large stones, charcoal, mortar 69g. Third fill (23) dark grey brown silty clay with occasional small pebbles, depth 0.2m. Contains pottery 65g (dated 1100-1400), animal bone and shell. Final infill (22) dark yellow brown sandy clay, depth 0.3m, containing pottery 34g (dated 900-1150), tile and animal bone.

APPENDIX 2

Finds Types by Context

RAMSEY, RAMSEY ABBEY 1996 - Finds Types By Context														
Trench/ Location	Context	Pottery Weight	Pottery Count	Tile & Brick	Clay Pipe	Mortar/ Plaster	Metals Fe	Metal Slags	Stone	Glass	Animal Bone	Shell	Charcoal/ Coal	Total Weight by Context
2	2	1	1	186	3					33	18			241
1	3	60	3	170					1565	8	15	9		1827
2	5			82			114				10			206
3	6	110	15	129	1		7		16	21	81		5	370
3	7	53	15	14			5	31			34			137
3	8	167	24	3			6	32	1071	1	91			1371
9	16	6	1											6
10	22	34	7	37							3			74
10	23	65	5								8	57		130
10	24	14	1								17			31
10	28					69								69
Total Weights by Finds Type		510	72 sherds	621	4	69	132	63	2652	63	277	66	5	4462



Cambridgeshire
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