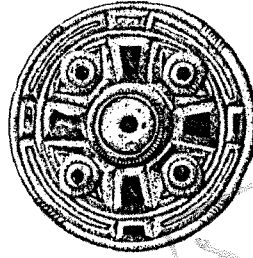


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Archaeological Field Unit

Post-Medieval and Earlier Ditches and Pits
at 106 Low Road, Burwell:
Archaeological Recording Work

S Kenney

July 1996

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A88

Commissioned By M A Jennings (Fenstone)

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July 1996

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Post-Medieval and Earlier Ditches and Pits at 106 Low Road, Burwell: Archaeological Recording Work

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 22nd and 25th January 1996, the AFU carried out archaeological recording on land at 106 Low Road, Burwell (TL5852/6678). The work was carried out at the request of M.A. Jennings (Fenstone), and was in advance of the construction of a three-bedroomed bungalow with adjoining garage.

The site is rectangular, approximately 0.1 ha in area, and was formerly in use as an orchard. It lies on the western side of Burwell, 400m from the Fen Edge.

The presence of archaeological remains was considered likely on the basis of information contained in the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). It records a 17th century farmhouse and moat immediately to the south (SMR 01121) at Tunbridge farm.

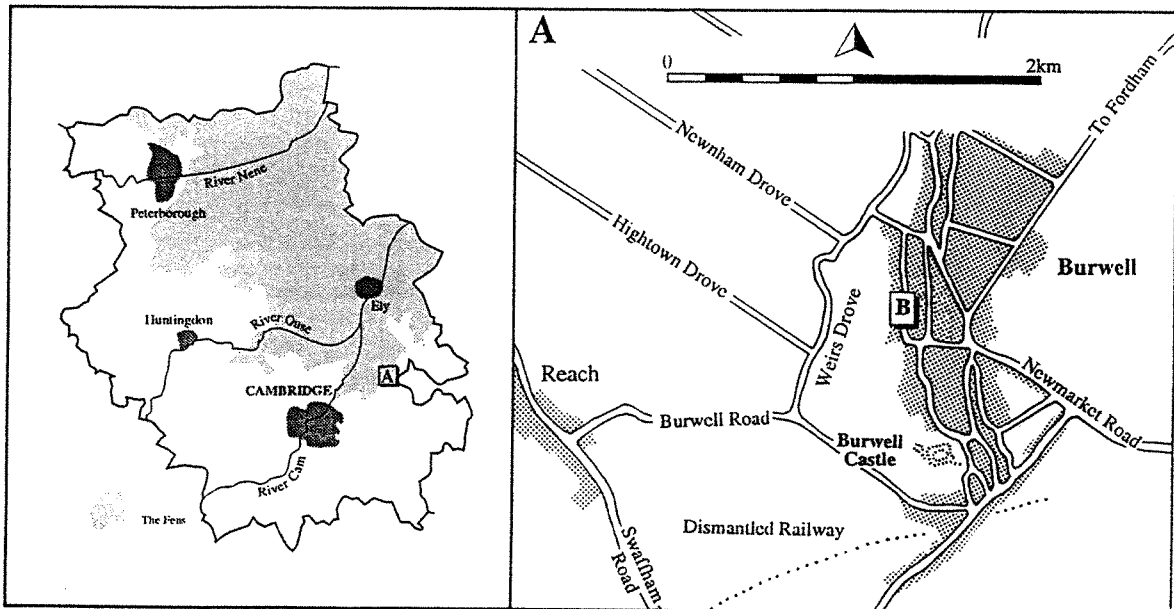


Figure 1 Location plan

2. GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies on the Lower Beds of the Lower Chalk, described as Chalk Marl. To the southwest is an outcrop of Totternhoe Stone (called locally Burwell Stone), upon which Burwell partly stands, and beyond that, the Upper Beds of the Lower Chalk extend towards Exning.

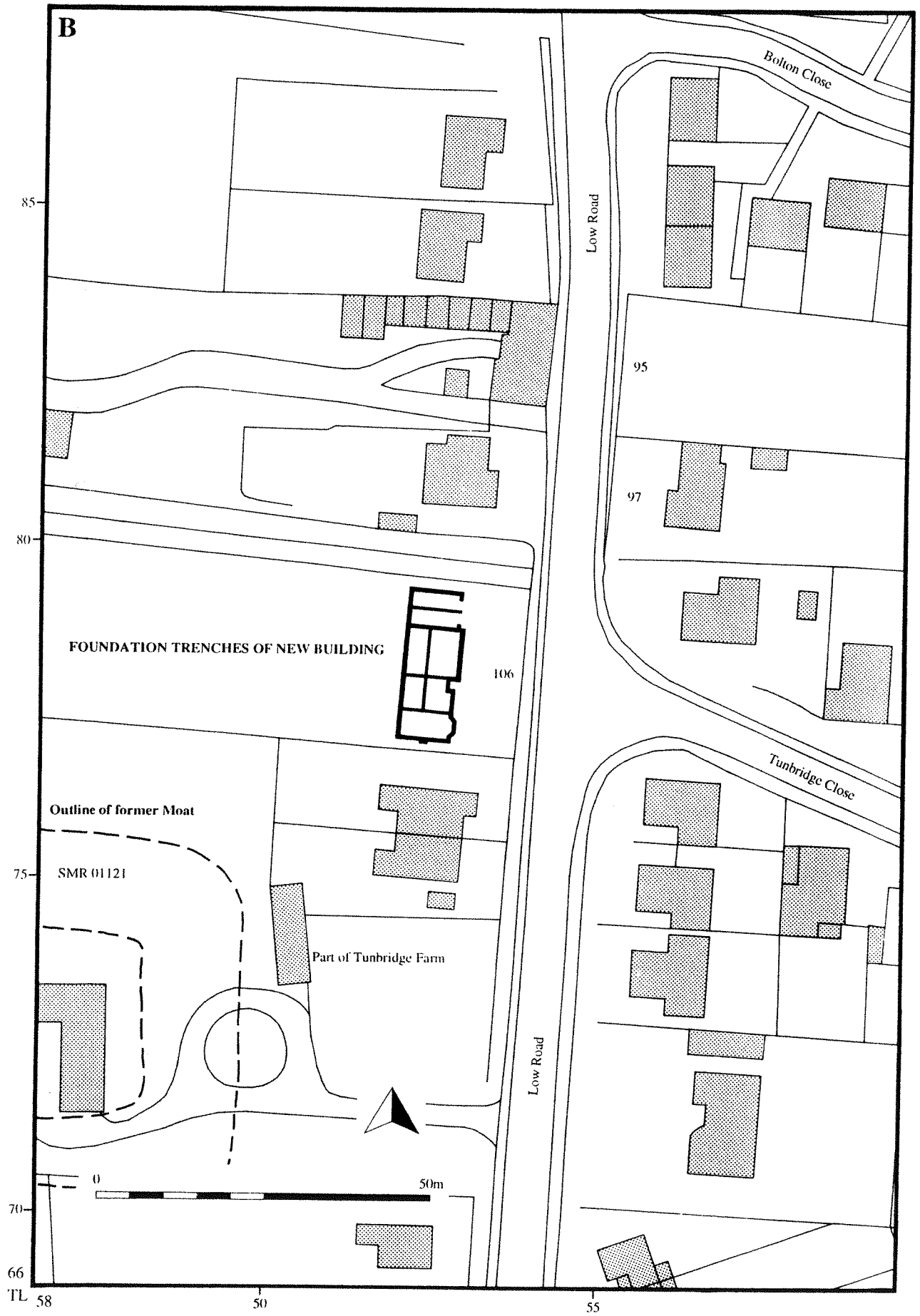


Figure 2 Trench location plan

Southern Burwell stands on gently rising ground at the southeastern edge of the Fens. Some of the village is above 20m OD, but the site, however, is on the western side of the village, within 400m of the Fen Edge. Low Road is at 5m OD, and Weirs Drove, on the Fen Edge is at 4m OD.

3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Historical Background

Lying some 13km northeast of Cambridge, and 5km northwest of Newmarket, Burwell, meaning 'the fort by the spring' (Reaney 1943), is a village comprising three distinct areas of settlement. The southern part, known as High Town, was the original nucleus of the village. It contains St Mary's church, and the remains of Burwell Castle, which was under construction on the orders of King Stephen, when, in 1144, it was attacked by the rebel Geoffrey de Mandeville. Geoffrey was wounded by an arrow during the attack, and died later at Mildenhall. The rebellion failed upon his death, and since the castle was intended to defend against this threat, it was abandoned, unfinished.

At the North end of Burwell lies the area called North Street, containing St Andrews Church, and originally separated from High Town by a mile of open fields. Like the latter, it probably grew in Saxon times from an original Roman settlement. The name is first recorded in 1351. North Street was joined to High Town by the track known as The Causeway.

Between these two, off to the west of the High Street, is the quadrangle of lanes known as Newnham. Bounded on the west by Low Road (formerly Newnham Street) itself, and on the east by the path called The Leys, which linked North Street and High Town, Newnham consists of five narrow lanes. Its layout is very regular, and it appears to be the result of deliberate planning. The name is first recorded in 1445-6, but the settlement is probably earlier.

3.2 Archaeological Background

3.2.1 Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic

The earliest archaeological find that has been recorded from the area is a Palaeolithic axe (SMR 01775b) from the environs of the Castle.

Numerous examples of Mesolithic and Neolithic axes have been found, almost exclusively just to the west of the village, in the Fen itself. An exception is the Neolithic axe (SMR 06477), discovered slightly to the north of the site.

3.2.2 Bronze Age

A Bronze Age hoard (SMR 06475), including an axe and a spearhead, was unearthed in the grounds of St Mary's Church. Bronze Age occupation (SMR 06736a) was discovered northwest of Newnham, along with material from several other periods.

3.2.3 Iron Age

Iron Age ditch systems (SMR 06736b), were found at the same location mentioned above.

3.2.4 Roman

A hoard of Roman bronze vessels.(SMR 06736), was similarly found in the same area. Roman settlement remains (SMR 06807), were also found beneath the Castle, the debris covering an area of 2.5 ha.

3.2.5 Anglo-Saxon

Despite the presence of a predominantly Christian, Anglo-Saxon cemetery (SMR 06764) on the east of the village, little occupation from this period has been recorded. It has been suggested that a fortified settlement existed at the core of what is now High Town, and that the line of the defences is preserved in the curving shape of the modern roads.

To the southwest of Burwell lies the extensive linear earthwork known as the Devil's Dyke or Ditch (SMR 07801). It is mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 902-5, but is usually considered to be early 7th century in date. There is evidence to suggest that the Dyke was constructed along an ancient border, dating back at least as far as the Iron Age.

3.2.6 Medieval

The remains of numerous Medieval habitations have been found. Of particular interest in the area around the excavation are the moated sites to the south (SMR 01121), and to the southwest (SMR 01122a) at Hall Farm. Nearby, Parsonage Farm is claimed to be all that remains of the Priory of St John (SMR 06864). To the east of High Town, Clunch pits are still evident, some containing lime kilns (SMR 10889). Evidence of 12th century houses and gardens was found beneath the spoil heaps of the unfinished Burwell Castle (SMR 01775). Later, the same area was probably also the location of the Manor House of the Abbot of Ramsey.

4. METHODOLOGY

The foundation trenches were opened using a mechanical excavator with 0.6m and 0.4m toothed buckets, under the supervision of an archaeologist. Due to construction regulations, the trenches had to be a minimum of 0.9m deep. Work was begun at the southern end of the site for logistical reasons.

All of the trench sides were cleaned and examined. Features were excavated and then the trenches were taken down to their full depth. Where it was deemed appropriate, features were part excavated, the trench taken down to its full depth, and then the features completely emptied.

Recording was undertaken using the AFU's standard system, including three types of photography, plans, and section drawings.

5. RESULTS

Below the topsoil, a greyish brown silty clay deposit (101) was encountered in the first section of trench to be opened, and assumed to be a similar subsoil to that previously seen on the opposite side of Low Road. Further excavation proved this to be incorrect when the deposit was recognised to be the fill of a large linear feature running east-west along the southern boundary of the site.

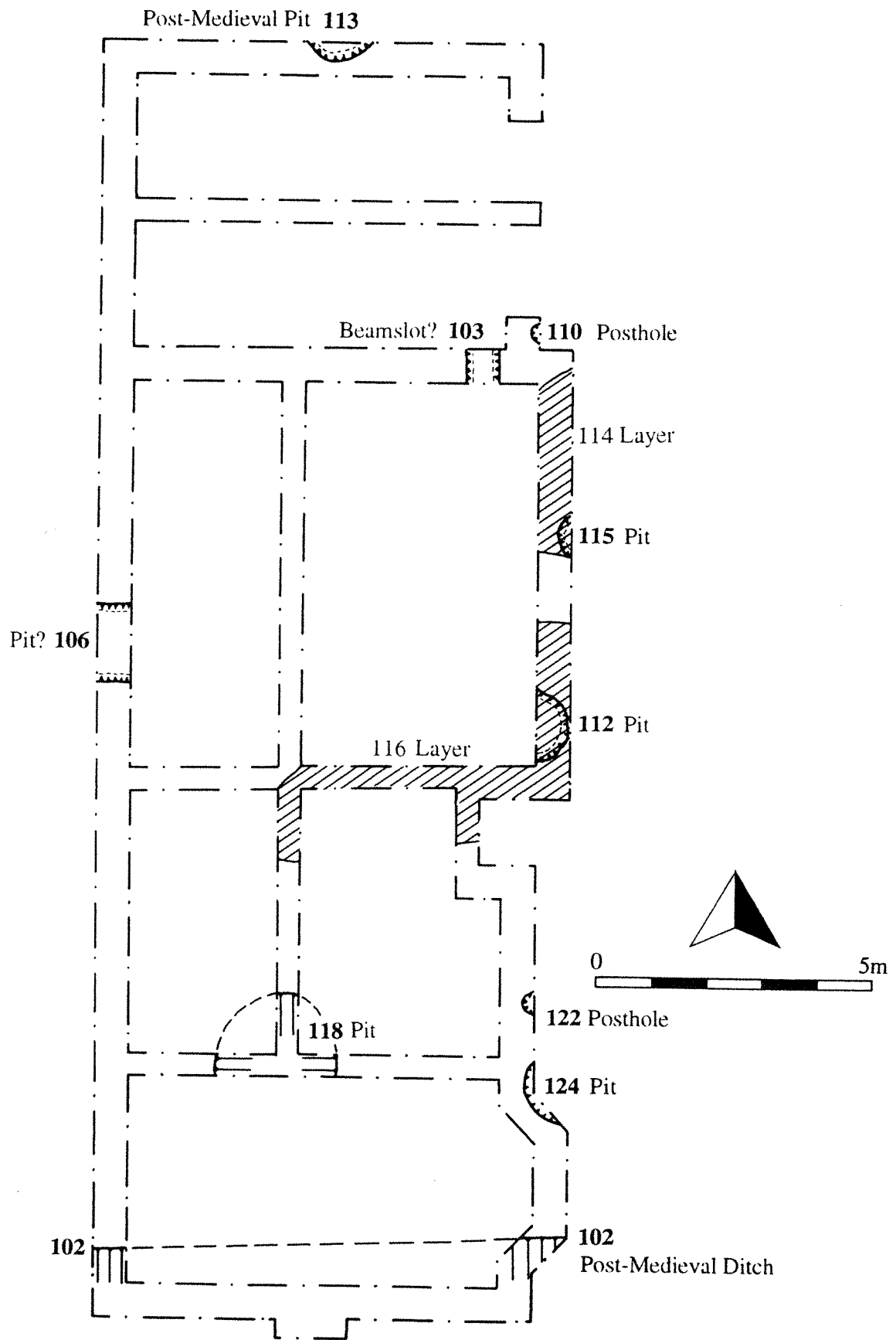


Figure 3 Feature location plan

Further features were uncovered in several other areas of the foundation trenching, mostly directly below the topsoil. No subsoil was subsequently identified in any part of the site.

Portions of several pits were uncovered, as well as two probable post-holes, a ditch, a possible beam slot and a possible ditch.

In separate parts of the site, two layers (114, 116) were uncovered below the topsoil, sealing earlier features.

Layer 114 was a very dark greyish brown silty clay with frequent charcoal flecks towards the base and occasional chalk flecks throughout. It was firm, slightly sticky and plastic, 0.2m deep, at least 3.1m long and at least 0.4m wide. No finds were recovered.

Below 114, 115 was a small, probably oval pit, with vertical, slightly convex sides and a flat base. The break of slope from surface was gradual, and was fairly sharp to the base. It had a single fill, 119, a dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional small clunch fragments throughout, but increasing towards the base, where they sometimes form intermittent lenses. It was indurated and contained small fragments of burnt sandstone. 119 filled cut 115, which was 0.8m deep, at least 0.8m long and at least 0.3m wide.

Layer 116 was a very dark greyish brown sandy silty clay with frequent clunch fragments up to 0.1m increasingly common towards the base, and occasional charcoal flecks throughout. It was firm, slightly friable, sticky and plastic, 0.4m deep, at least 5.3m long and at least 3.5m wide. No finds were recovered.

Below 116, 112 was a pit, probably oval, with steep, slightly irregular sides, both concave and convex in different places, and a flat base. The break of slope from surface was sharp and the break to the base was gradual. It had a single fill, 111, a very dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional small chalk flecks throughout, increasing towards the base and sides. It was indurated and contained two pieces of burnt and crazed flint. 111 filled cut 112, which was 0.8m deep, 1.26m long and at least 0.5m wide.

All other features were stratigraphically below the topsoil.

Cut 102 was a straight linear ditch with c40° sides and a flat base. The break of slope from surface was sharp, and the break to the base was gradual. It had a single fill, 101, a light brownish grey silty clay with occasional chalk and charcoal flecks. 101 was very firm, slightly friable, sticky and plastic. Several sherds of 17th century pottery were recovered, as well as small quantities of brick, tile and stone. 101 filled cut 102, which was 0.6m deep, at least 8.5m long and at least 1.5m wide. It was oriented E-W along the southern plot boundary.

Cut 118 was a large, probably oval pit with c50° slightly concave sides and a flat base. The break of slope from surface was sharp, and the break to the base was gradual. It had a single fill, 117, a greyish brown silty clay with occasional chalk flecks. 117 was firm, slightly sticky and plastic. No finds were recovered. 117 filled cut 118, which was 0.5m deep, at least 2.3m long and at least 1.5m wide.

Cut 124 was a small, probably oval pit with 45° sides and a flat base. The break of slope from surface was sharp, and the break to the base was gradual. It had a single fill, 123, a very dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional charcoal flecks. 123 was quite loose, but sticky and plastic. No finds were recovered. 123 filled cut 124, which was 0.56m deep, at least 1.1m long and at least 0.3m wide.

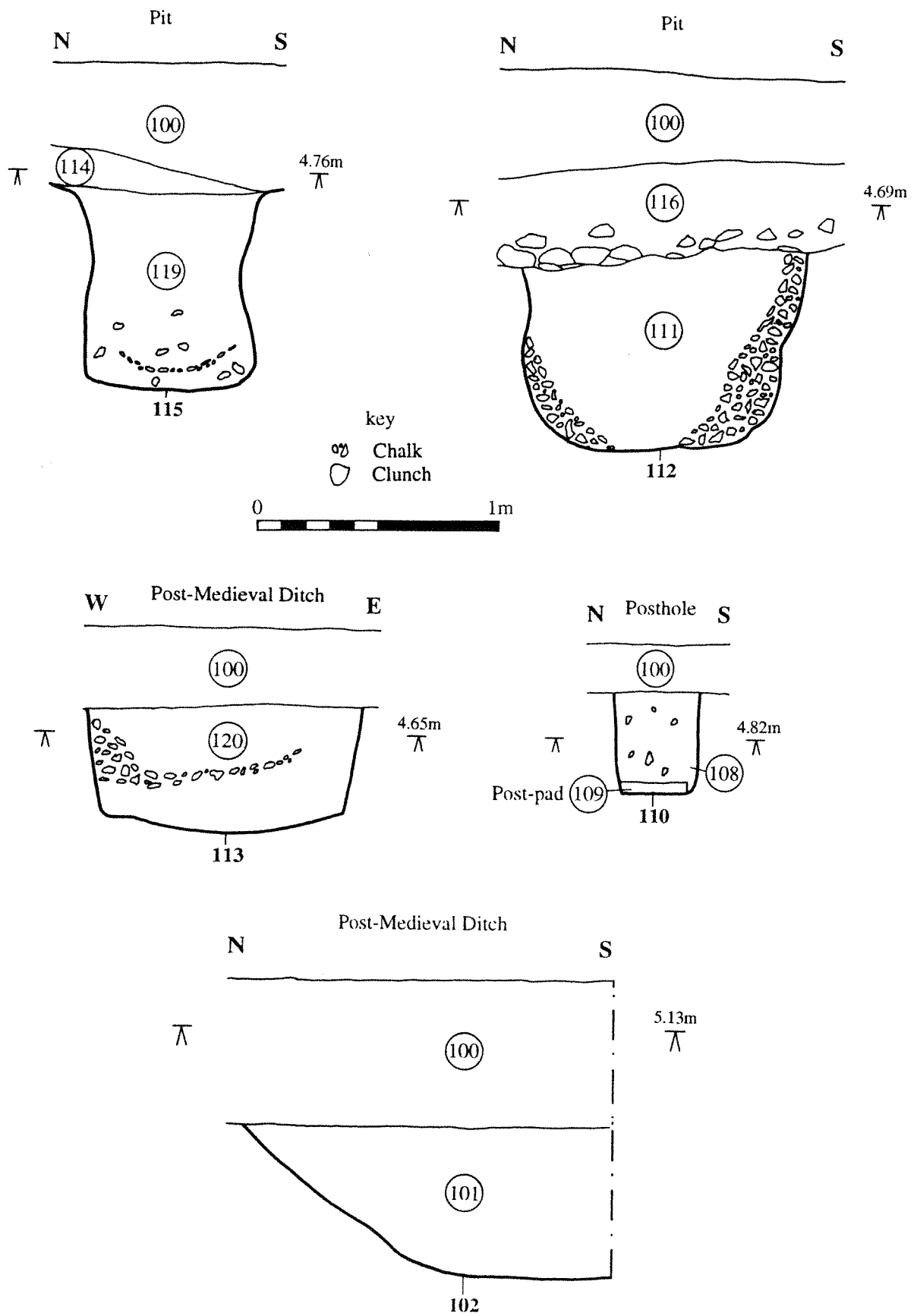


Figure 4 Sections of selected features

Cut **122** was a subcircular post-hole with vertical sides and a flat base. The break of slope both from the surface and to the base was sharp. It had a single fill, 121, a dark greyish brown silty clay with moderate chalk flecks. 121 was firm, slightly sticky and plastic. No finds were recovered. 121 filled cut **122**, which was 0.4m deep, and 0.34m in diameter.

Cut **106** was probably a small pit or shallow ditch, with straight vertical sides and a flat base. The break of slope both from the surface and to the base was sharp. It had two fills, 105 and 107. The upper fill, 107 was a light olive brown silty sand. It was soft, 0.02m deep, at least 0.6m long, and at least 0.34m wide. The lower fill, 105, was a dark greyish brown silty clay with moderate small clunch fragments. It was firm, sticky and plastic, 0.18m deep, 1.38m long, and at least 0.6m wide. **106** was 0.2m deep, with dimensions of 1.38m by at least 0.6m. Assuming it was a linear feature, it was oriented E-W.

Cut **103** was a straight narrow beamslot or ditch, with near-vertical sides and a flat base. The break of slope both from the surface and to the base was sharp. It had a single fill, 104, a dark greyish brown silty clay. 104 was firm, sticky and plastic. No finds were recovered. 104 filled cut **103**, which was 0.26m deep, at least 0.6m long and at least 0.6m wide.

Cut **110** was a subcircular post-hole with vertical sides and a flat base. The break of slope both from the surface and to the base was sharp. It had two fills, 108 and 109. The upper fill, 108 was a dark greyish brown silty clay with frequent small clunch fragments. It was firm, slightly sticky and plastic. No finds were recovered. The lower fill, 109, consisted of a single piece of clunch 0.04m thick, 0.26m long and at least 0.1m wide, laid flat on the base of the post-hole. **110** was 0.4m deep, 0.26m long and at least 0.1m wide.

Cut **113** was an oval pit with near-vertical sides and a slightly concave base. The break of slope both from the surface and to the base was sharp. It had a single fill, 120, a dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional chalk flecks and a lens of chalk flecks 0.2m from the base. 120 was firm, slightly sticky and plastic. Sherds of 17th century pottery and fragments of brick and tile were recovered. It filled cut **113**, which was 0.52m deep, 1.1m long, and at least 0.4m wide.

All the fills had suffered minor intrusion by smaller roots, but the larger ones seemed limited to the topsoil.

6. DISCUSSION

Other than ditch **102**, it would be futile to assign a definite function of many of the features uncovered. Few of them produced any datable material, or indeed any artefactual evidence at all. Ditch **102** contained sherds of 17th century pottery, as did pit **113** and the topsoil. The ditch is likely to have been a boundary to the north of Tunbridge Farm, probably as much for drainage as any other function. Pit **113** may have been a rubbish pit, mostly because of its size, although there is very little evidence to support this; the only animal bone came from 101, the fill of the ditch.

Some of the other pits may have been abortive quarries or test digging for clunch, while post-holes **122** and **110** (which appears to have a clunch postpad in situ), and beamslot **103** are by their very definition structural elements, although they do not form parts of a coherent structure within the limitations of the narrow foundation trenches opened for the present work.

It is interesting to note that layer 114, sealing the filled pit 115, slopes down and terminates at the southern edge of 115, suggesting that the layer may have the same limit to its extent as the earlier pit. There is also a marked similarity in morphology between the two pits with indurated fills, 112 and 115, and features excavated on the opposite side of Low Road by the author in 1995. These features remain undated at present, but are likely to be pre-Medieval, possibly Iron Age

Taken as a whole, the site does not indicate the presence of substantial structures in the footprint of the new building, although the postholes and beamslot could indicate that a timber structure occupied the area at some point in the past. More substantial buildings might also have existed closer to the property frontage on Low Road. The two layers (114 and 116) contain material which would be consistent with a phase of demolition, and some broken fragments of clunch form a rudimentary boundary on the surface, along the present frontage under the hedge, which then extends west along the plot boundary. Given the small area exposed by the current works, a significant amount of archaeological features were encountered, with considerable variety in form (and function), and some indication of different phases, possibly separate periods. This evinces a relatively rich area of activity, though on present evidence, not of domestic use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank M. A. Jennings (Fenstone) for commissioning and funding the work, particularly Sean for his interest and humour. Thanks are also due to Tim Malim, the Project Manager, Andrew "Bob" Hatton and Carole Fletcher for hard work in sub-zero temperatures. This project was undertaken in response to a brief drawn up by the County Archaeology Office.

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APPENDIX A

List of Contexts

<u>Context</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Below</u>	<u>Above</u>
100	Topsoil	10YR 3/1 very dark grey sandy silty clay	-	116, 101 104, 107 108, 114 116, 117 120, 121 123
101	Fill	2.5Y 6/2 light brownish grey silty clay	100	102
102	Cut	Straight linear ditch	101	Natural
103	Cut	?Beam slot	104	Natural
104	Fill	2.5Y 4/2 dark greyish brown silty clay	100	103
105	Fill	2.5Y 4/2 dark greyish brown silty clay	107	106
106	Cut	Ditch/pit	105	Natural
107	Fill	2.5Y 5/3 light olive brown silty sand	100	105
108	Fill	2.5Y 4/2 dark greyish brown silty clay	100	109
109	Fill	Clunch slab	108	110
110	Cut	Post-hole	109	Natural
111	Fill	2.5Y 3/2 very dark greyish brown silty clay	116	112
112	Cut	Pit	111	Natural
113	Cut	Pit	120	Natural
114	Layer	10YR 3/2 very dark greyish brown silty clay	100	119
115	Cut	Pit	119	Natural
116	Layer	10YR 3/2 very dark greyish brown silty clay	100	111
117	Fill	2.5Y 5/2 greyish brown silty clay	100	118
118	Cut	Pit	117	Natural
119	Fill	2.5Y 3/2 dark greyish brown silty clay	114	115
120	Fill	10YR 4/2 dark greyish brown silty clay	100	113
121	Fill	2.5Y 4/2 dark greyish brown silty clay	100	122
122	Cut	Post-hole	121	Natural
123	Fill	2.5Y 3/2 very dark greyish brown silty clay	100	124
124	Cut	Pit	123	Natural



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