Archaeological Field Unit

Medieval Foundations at the Bishop's Palace, Little Downham, Cambridgeshire

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Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A99

Commissioned By Mr L.J. Stevens

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SUMMARY

During August 1996 members of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation and recording brief at Tower Farm, Little Downham, Cambridgeshire (TL 51935/84200). The work was funded by Mr. L.J. Stevens and undertaken in accordance with a brief designed by the County Archaeology Office.

The site lies within the grounds of the former palace of the Bishops of Ely, which dates back to the 10th century and was used until the Civil War. Remains of buildings from the 15th century palace have been incorporated into the present farm buildings. Significant archaeological remains were exposed during the excavation of foundation trenches in advance of the construction of an orangery. Three phases of archaeological activity were identified, including early stone building foundations and a later brick-built extension or renovation, both with little associated dating evidence, as well as a metalled surface probably related to the 18th or 19th century farm.

The remains were preserved in situ *after recording, using protective conservation processes which were agreed in consultation with the appropriate specialists.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

During August 1996 members of the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation and recording brief at the Bishop's Palace, Tower Farm, Little Downham (Cambs SMR 7154). The work was undertaken during the excavation of foundation trenches for an orangery and was conducted on behalf of Mr. L.J. Stevens in accordance with a specification agreed by the County Archaeology Office.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

Little Downham lies about 4km from Ely, on the B1411 which runs towards Welney (Fig. 1). The name of the village ('settlement on a hill') refers to its location on a ridge of high ground at about 18m OD - the 'Little' was added to distinguish it from Downham Market in Norfolk (Reaney 1943). The high ground comprises an outcrop of glacial sand and gravel partly overlying a tongue of Boulder Clay which runs north-west from Ely out into the Fens beyond Pymore (British Geological Survey, Sheet 173). Tower Farm itself lies on the Boulder Clay at a height of 15m OD, some 200m north of the west end of the village proper.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest evidence of occupation on the high ground around Little Downham consists of a number of Bronze Age burials (Last 1996). Some Roman pottery is also known from the vicinity (Cambs SMR 7143, 11761), but the presence of a possible Anglo-Saxon cemetery south-east of the modern village (SMR 7150) is the first real clue to the origins of Little Downham. However, any associated settlement need not have been nucleated, and there is no indication of contemporary occupation on the present village site (Roberts 1996). The development of Little Downham seems to go hand in hand with that of the Bishop's estate.

The first documentary reference to the manor records the purchase of land at Downham by Aethelwold and Abbot Brithnoth for the monastery of Ely around AD 970. Domesday Book confirms that lands at Downham formed part of the demesne of Ely and after the foundation of the see in 1109 they were allotted to the Bishop (Pugh 1953, 91). Thereafter the manor house at Little Downham became one of the main episcopal palaces and a popular residence among the Bishops, five of whom died there. By the mid-13th century the manor covered almost 11 square miles, made up largely of a 250 acre deer park and two large fen lakes. The village grew up to the south of the parkland, with considerable dependence on the wool trade and sheep farming using the seasonal fenland pastures (Haigh 1988). Drainage and reclamation of the fen was undertaken during the second half of the 13th century and more land was put under the plough. Fruit trees and vines were grown on the upland. This prosperity was

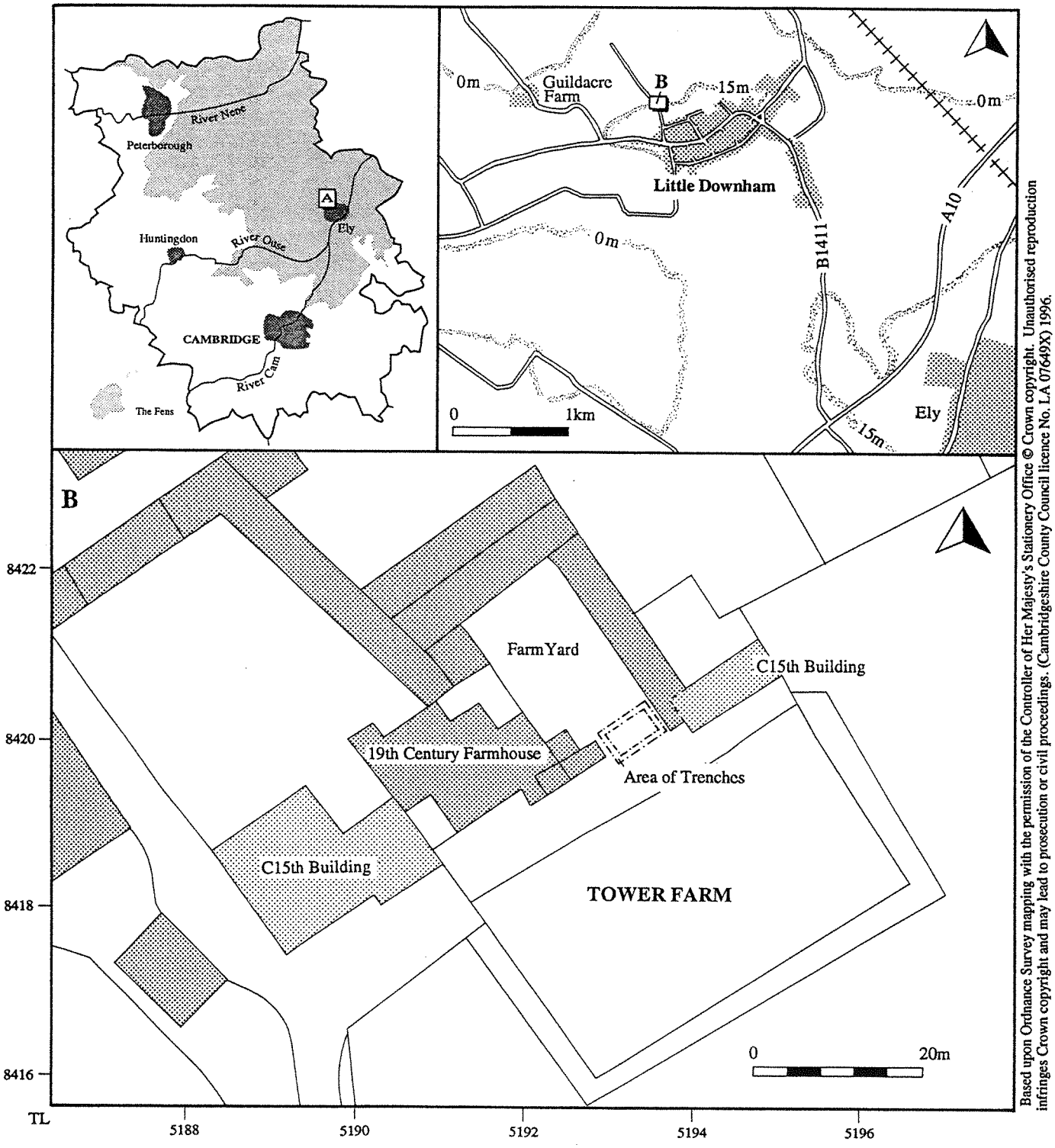

Figure 1 *Site location plan*

disturbed by epidemics in the early 14th century and the Black Death in mid-century, which brought about a major reduction in the population, dilapidation of the village and ruination of the manor house as well as the associated dovecote and orchard (Coleman 1984).

The village recovered during the 15th century and the palace was almost completely rebuilt by Bishop Alcock (1486-1500). There was a long vacancy in the see during the Elizabethan period and when occupation was resumed in the reign of James I Bishop Andrewes (1609-19) spent considerable sums on the repair of the palace. The fortunes of the estate, which had ebbed and flowed, took a decisive turn for the worse when Bishop Wren was arrested at Downham by Parliamentary forces in 1642. The manor was seized and sold off by the Commonwealth and although returned to the see after 1660, the palace had suffered damage during the Civil War and was never restored as an episcopal residence. In 1710 Bishop Patrick was granted authority for the leasing of Downham Palace and by 1746 it had been converted to a farmhouse, which was rebuilt as the present Tower Farm in the early 19th century (Figs. 2 & 3).

Despite the reconstructions the farm still incorporates portions of the fomer palace buildings (Haigh 1988, 19-20; Hall 1996, 18; Pevsner 1970, 330-1; Pugh 1953, 92). To the west of the farmhouse, the barn (now an antiques shop) comprises part of the old kitchen and hall, while a detached structure to the east is interpreted as a former chapel or gatehouse (Fig. 4). It includes a pedestrian entrance in the south wall with an ogee hood above enclosing a cock, the rebus of Bishop Alcock[1]. Both surviving palace buildings are constructed of red brick with limestone dressings, characteristic of Alcock's rebuilding work in the late 15th century. The ogee archway has a close parallel in the west range of Cloister Court at Jesus College, Cambridge (RCHME 1959, 95) - another of Alcock's projects. Other parts of the old palace at Downham which survived the construction of the farmhouse have been destroyed during the 20th century.

No previous archaeological excavation work is recorded at the Bishop's Palace, but holes dug for trees south of the present farmhouse, where earthworks are in good condition, revealed 17th century brick and rubble foundations (SMR 7154). Hall (1996, 18) records 15th and 16th century kiln pits 300m north of the farm, with a large area of burning and brick waster debris of the same type used at Tower Farm.

4 METHODOLOGY

Foundation trenching was the only sub-surface disturbance foreseen during the construction of the orangery. The four adjoining trenches were 0.7m in width and up to 1m deep; they enclosed an area of 6.8 x 4.8m just to the west of the presumed chapel (Figs. 1 & 5). The excavation of the trenches (carried out by mini-digger) was observed and the spoil was also examined. When intact archaeological deposits were encountered hand-cleaning took place. Recording followed the standard AFU single context system with scale planning and photography as appropriate.

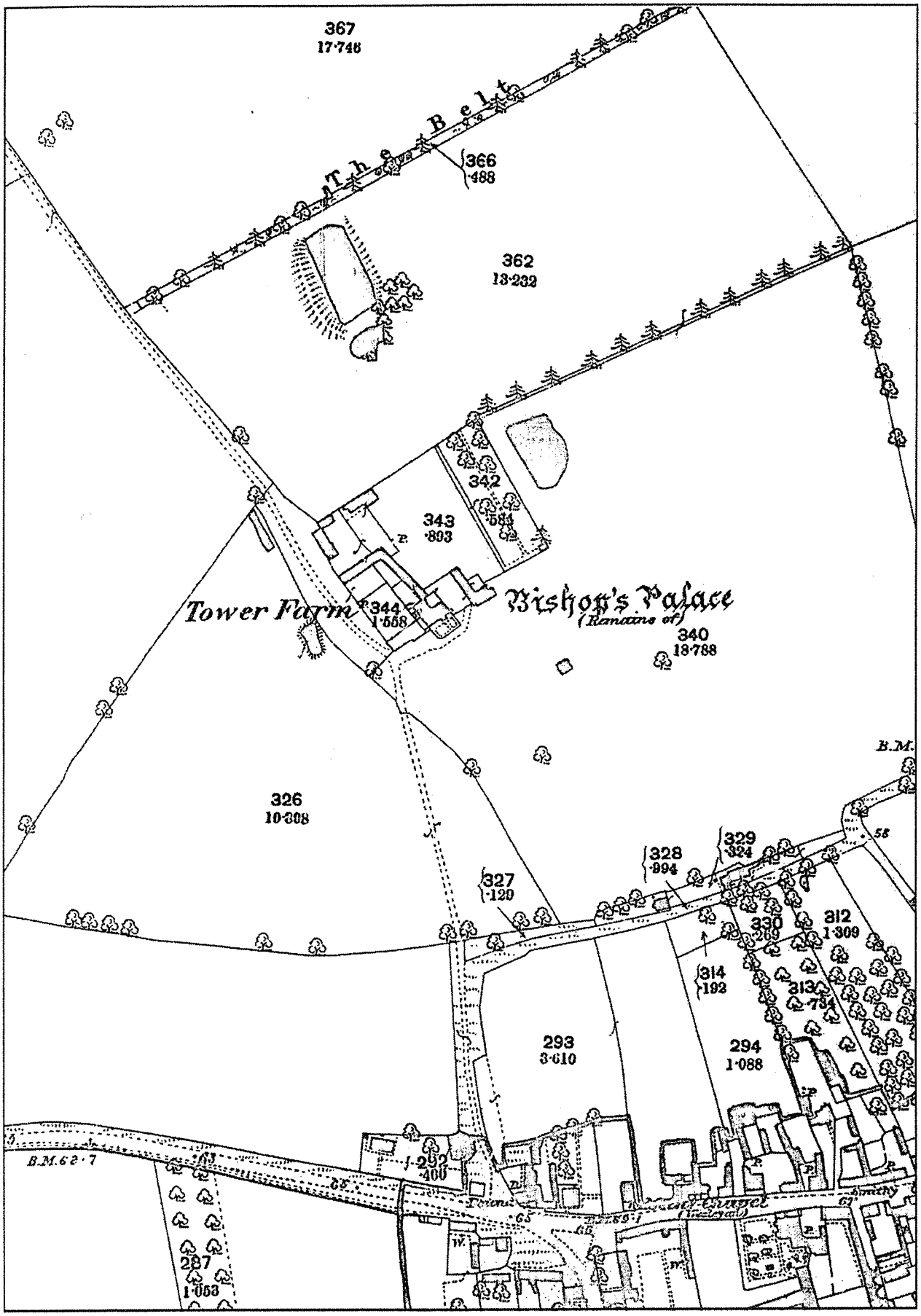

Figure 2 Extract from 1886 Ordnance Survey map showing Tower Farm (Cambridgeshire County Record Office: OS 1st edn., 25 Inch Series, Sheet XXVI.1)

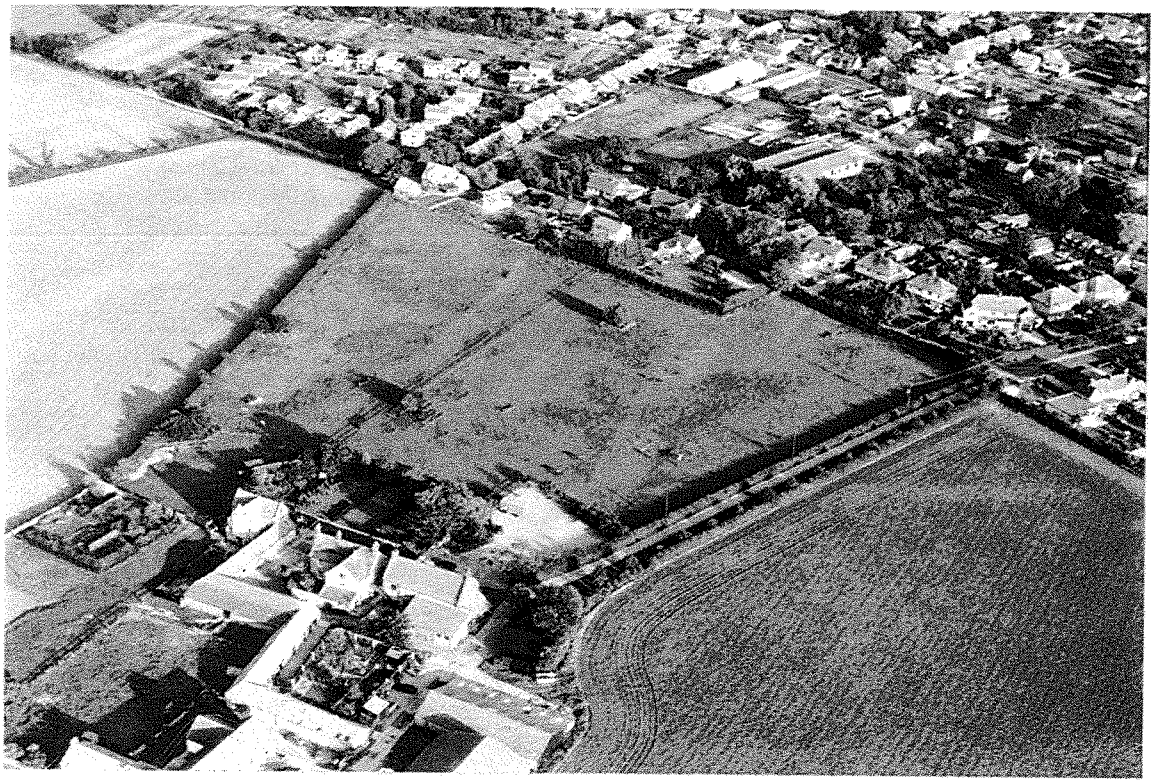

Figure 3 Aerial photograph of Tower Farm from the west (photo: Ben Robinson)

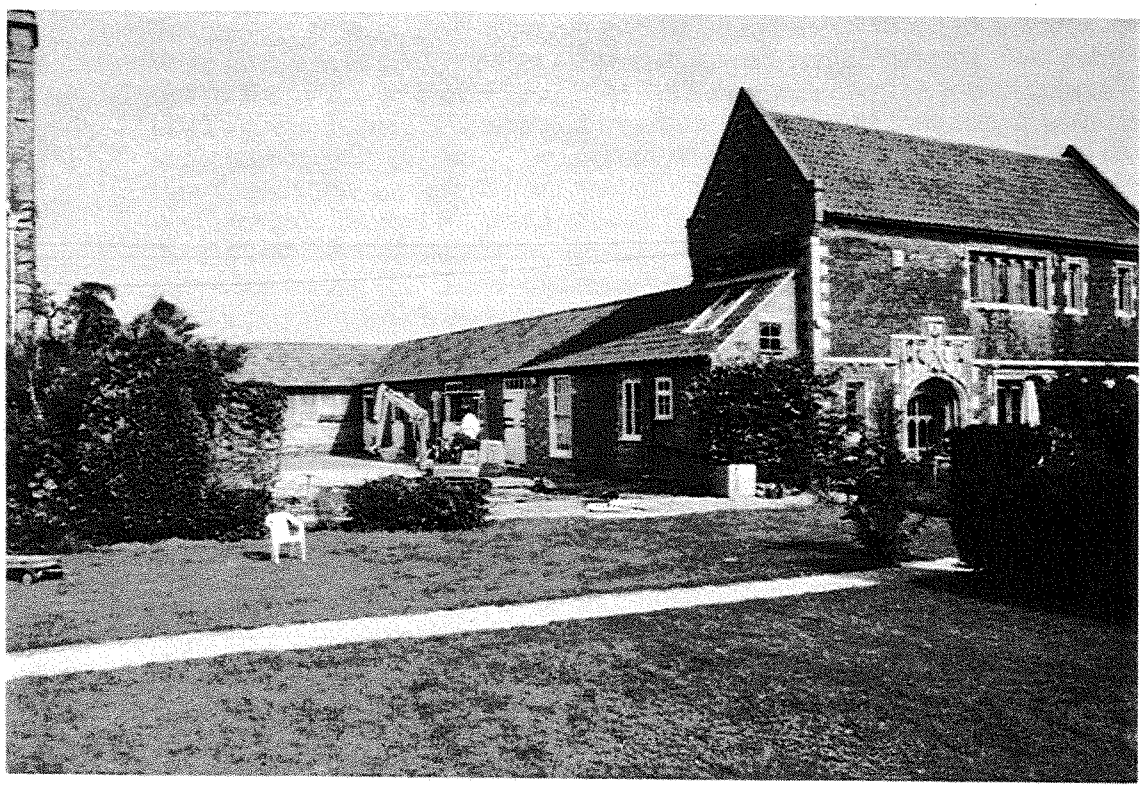

Figure 4 View of trenches from south, showing former chapel/gatehouse to east (photo: Steve Membery)

5 RESULTS (Figs. 5 & 6)

Discrete archaeological deposits were encountered in four areas of the trenches after the removal of modern deposits (1) to a depth of c 0.25m. The latter comprised surfaces of tarmac (B on Fig. 6) and cobbles (C) as well as sand and ash make-up. Where no archaeologically significant material was present beneath them, the trench was excavated to a depth of 1m.

5.1 Southern trench

Directly below the modern deposits (1), a road surface (3) composed of small rounded pebbles and larger broken, rounded or smoothed red brick fragments was revealed. This surface was apparently partially sealed by a dumped deposit of large squared, unfrogged red brick fragments (4), although the cut of a linear pipe-trench, orientated north-south (also encountered in the northern foundation trench), obscured the relationship between deposits (3) and (4). In the eastern third of the trench a dark yellowish brown clay (2), which contained a piece of peg tile (possibly medieval), red brick fragments and flecks of charcoal, was removed to a depth of 1m.

5.2 Eastern trench

Context (2) was also removed to a depth of 1m in the southern part of this trench. Further north, close to the eastern edge of the trench, a course of unfrogged red bricks (5) was revealed, aligned north-south and directly underlying deposit (2) at a depth of c 0.15m. The bricks were found to continue down for at least seven courses, reaching a depth of over 1m below the present ground level. They measured on average 240 x 115 x 55mm, and were neatly mortared together. The two lowest visible courses were stepped out to the width of half a brick. At their northern end the lower courses of bricks abutted a chalk clunch and limestone rubble wall foundation with lime and chalk mortar (6), which was 0.6m wide. Two brick courses lipped over this foundation, demonstrating that it predated the brick structure. On its northern side context (6) was set into a foundation cut (**10**). The gap between the cut and the wall foundation was filled with chalk clunch rubble packing in a silty clay matrix (8). The foundation was cut into a deposit of dark yellowish brown clay (9), which was also encountered in the northern trench.

At the northern end of the trench a dark yellowish brown clay (7) directly underlay the modern surfaces (1) and was equivalent to layer (2) in this area. Deposit (7) overlay the lower clay (9), which was slightly lighter in colour.

5.3 Northern trench

The eastern quarter of this trench exhibited the same stratigraphy as the directly adjacent north end of the eastern trench, with the modern surfaces (1) overlying deposit (7) (Fig. 6). Beneath (7) the lower clay (9) was again visible. No artefacts were recovered from context (7) in either trench but fragments of bone derived from deposit (9) in the northern trench.

A limestone and chalk clunch foundation (12), orientated north-south, was encountered 1.7m from the eastern end of the trench. This was of similar character to deposit (6), but somewhat larger, measuring 1.1m in width. The foundation was also set into a cut (**16**) which was packed with chalk clunch

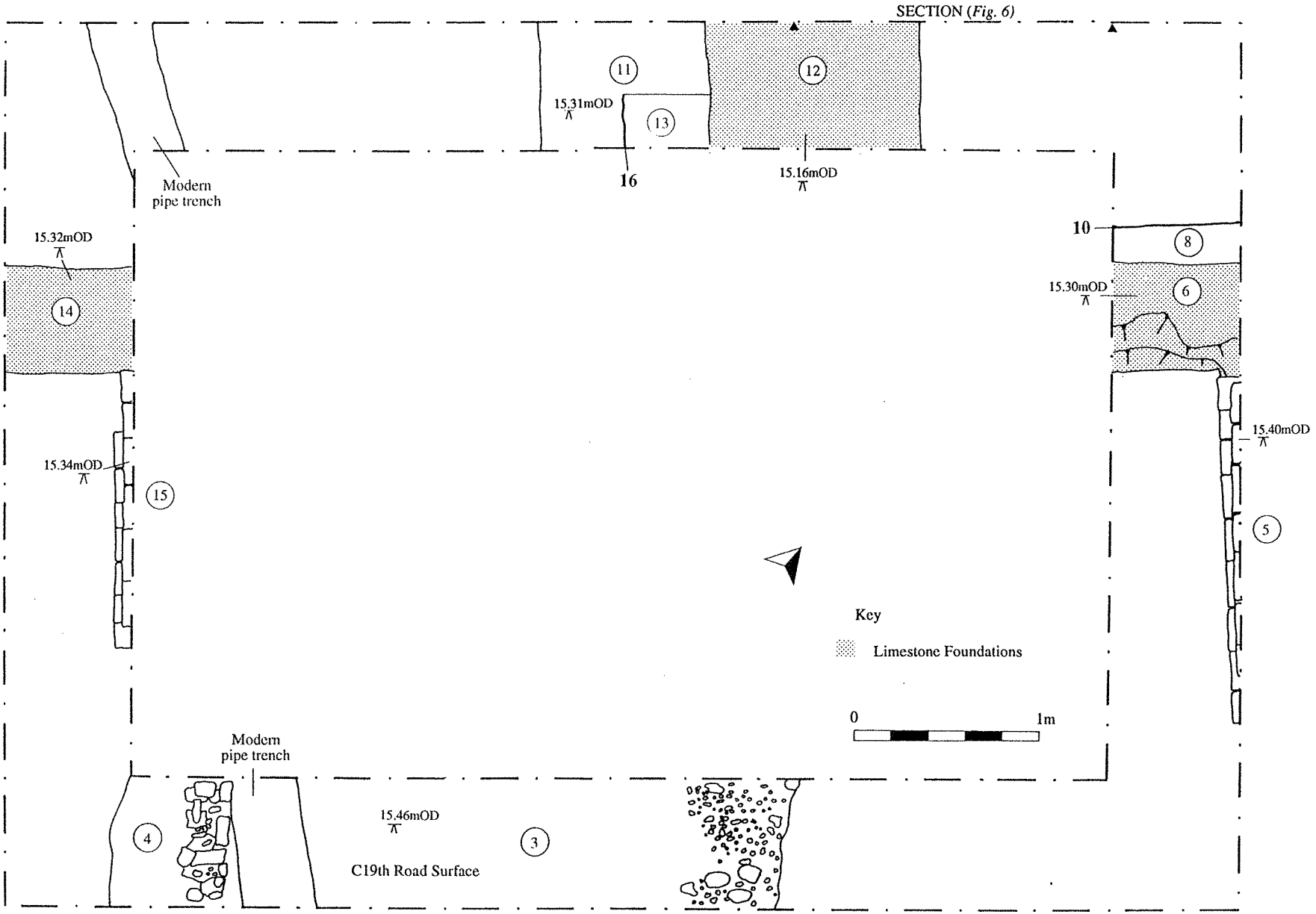

Figure 5 *Trench plan, showing architectural features*

rubble (13) similar to deposit (8) in the eastern trench. The foundation was overlain by a layer interpreted as a demolition spread (11), composed of broken red brick, mortar and sand. This deposit contained three small pieces of bottle glass, no older than the 17th century.

The pipe trench containing a lead water pipe, which had been encountered in the southern trench, was also revealed in the western end of this trench. It had disturbed earlier deposits and prevented further excavation in this area.

5.4 Western trench

After the removal of context (1) in the northern part of the trench a limestone rubble and chalk clunch foundation (14) was revealed. It was aligned with, and had the same dimensions as foundation (6) in the eastern trench, which indicates that it is likely to represent a continuation of the same wall. The trench was not excavated to a sufficient depth to reveal a foundation cut or packing for this feature. Courses of unfrogged red mortared bricks (15), of similar type to context (5) and also orientated north-south, abutted this foundation. Like those revealed in the eastern trench the lower courses were stepped out to the west and the bricks also lipped over the rubble foundation to the north.

The rest of this trench was excavated to a depth of lm, which required the removal of a dark yellowish brown clay, designated context (2) like the equivalent deposit in the southern trench. Examination during excavation and of the excavation spoil failed to retrieve any pottery or other datable material.

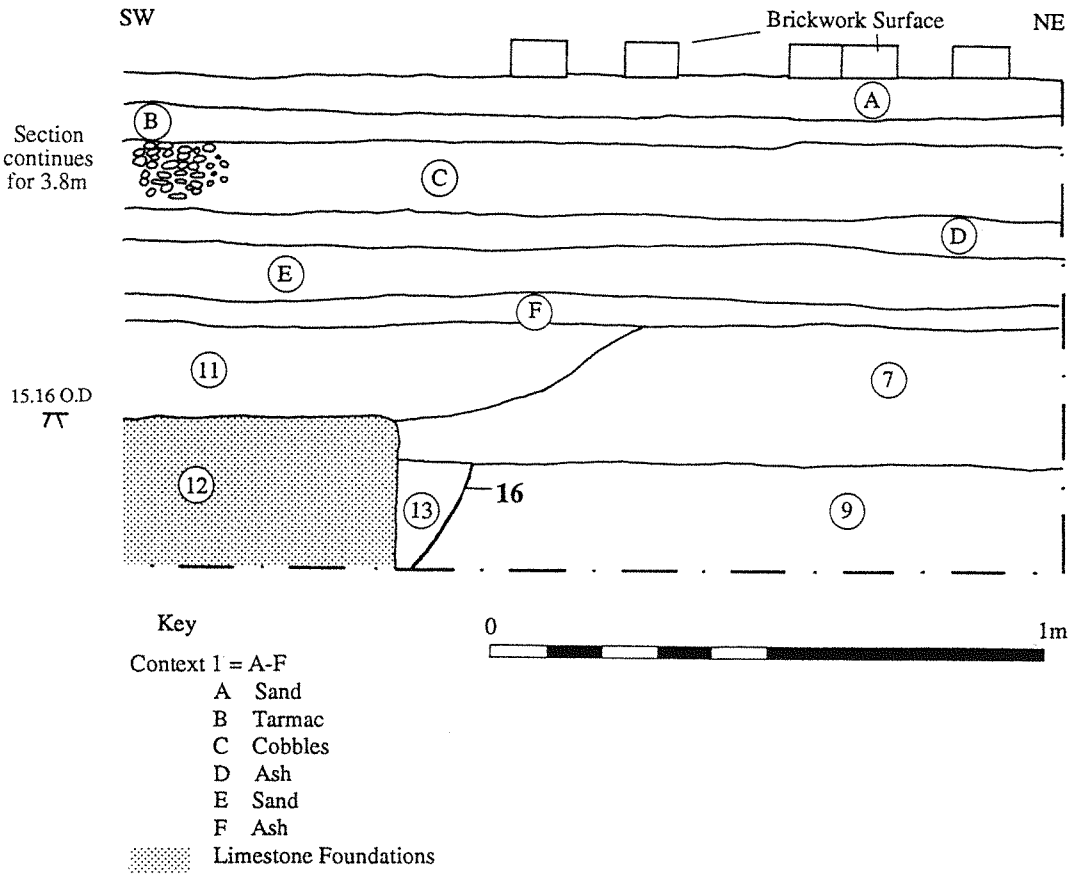

***Figure 6** South-facing section through deposits in northern trench*

6 INTERPRETATION & DISCUSSION

The earliest deposit encountered is the dark yellowish brown clay (9), extant only near the base of the trenches and through which the cuts for the limestone rubble and mortar foundations were excavated. Unfortunately no dating evidence was recovered from this deposit, which may have been laid as a levelling operation before the construction of the structure supported by the foundations (6), (12) and (14). Again these yielded no dating evidence, but the use of limestone and chalk mortar for foundations suggests the structure is of post-Conquest date. In fact foundations (6), (12) and (14) align perfectly with the north wall of the standing 15th century building to the east, the chapel or gatehouse of Bishop Alcock's palace; they presumably underlay the southern farmyard wall shown in this location on the 1886 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 2), which probably incorporated earlier masonry. The scale of the foundations suggests a substantial wall or building which, unlike Alcock's surviving brick buildings, was probably of stone. This may imply that it belongs to a phase of construction which predates the 15th century rebuilding.

The stone foundations certainly predate the brick structures revealed in the builder's trenches which overlap the original foundation. This pair of constructions are suggestive of brick buttress footings, which may have been intended to provide support for a rebuilding of the earlier structure. Alternatively they might represent a later structure which, like the new orangery, simply straddled the earlier foundations rather than removing them. If this is the case, the southern part of the construction must have been removed by the 19th century road.

The unfrogged red bricks utilised in (5) and (15) are uniform and neatly coursed, in contrast to the examples examined on the surviving 15th century buildings, which implies a slightly later construction date. Unfrogged bricks generally predate the late 18th century but this could still cover the restoration work of Bishop Andrewes (early 17th century) or the farmyard conversion (early/mid 18th century). However, the size of the bricks fits the late 16th century standard (230 x 115 x 57mm) more closely than the stipulations of the 1769 legislation (210 x 102 x 63mm) (Hammond 1981). Whether these bricks are also products of the kiln to the north is uncertain.

The deposition of the clay layer (2)/(7), overlying the brick structures, probably represents an episode of levelling associated with the initial stage of further (brick) building works. The limestone foundations were clearly left as islands, although any associated floors or surfaces were obliterated. The demolition spread (11) over foundation (12) can be approximately dated by the bottle glass to the 17th century or later.

The metalled road surface (3) depicted on the 1886 OS map (Fig. 2) was revealed above the earlier structural sequence in the southern trench, but was not apparent in the northern trench, which lies within the 19th century yard.

7 CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Archaeological conclusions

The small-scale trenching, which offers only a 'keyhole' view of the archaeological remains present at the site, has probably produced more

questions than answers. The absence of dating evidence for the early foundations is particularly frustrating since they may represent a phase of building predating Bishop Alcock's work of the late 15th century, perhaps even the early medieval redevelopment of the manor to form the palace. The brickwork footings which seem to postdate these walls and the standing 15th century buildings may be associated with Bishop Andrewes' restoration, perhaps like the foundations reported to the south, or the creation of the 18th century farm.

The excavation has clearly demonstrated the survival of building remains around the farmhouse, and other building works in the area have encountered similar footings (L.J. Stevens, pers comm.). Despite the documentary history of the palace little is known of its early medieval development or layout. No plans are extant and archaeology therefore represents the only means of reconstructing the development of this important ecclesiastical monument. A survey of the surviving buildings would be crucial for a better understanding of the site; the grounds would also be receptive to geophysical prospection, which could further elucidate the ground plan of the early buildings and the nature of their environs.

7.2 Mitigation

Considering the importance of the archaeological remains present within this area a mitigation strategy was adopted after full consultation with the County Archaeology Office, the developer's structural engineer, stone conservator V. Roulingson, and the client Mr. L.J. Stevens. Any archaeologically significant features were preserved *in situ* by means of complete coverage with heavy duty non-reactive polythene and polystyrene rafts, to act as cushioning material. This operation was observed by a member of the AFU who also participated in the conservation process and the deposition of concrete around the protected remains. This method will provide a stable environment and should therefore ensure the survival of the features.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Steve Membery would like to thank the owner of Tower Farm, Mr. L.J. Stevens, for funding the project and for his help. The finds were inspected by Phil Coplestone and Paul Spoerry. The project was managed by Ben Robinson. The map extract in Figure 2 is reproduced from an original held at the County Record Office, Cambridge.

NOTES

1. There is some confusion in the literature about the location of these features. Haigh describes "the barn to the east" as the former kitchen range and "the outbuilding to the west" with the ogee doorway as the gatehouse. A building "that may have been the chapel" is said to have been demolished in the 1960's. Hall records the 'chapel' to the east and the hall (with the ogee hood) to the west. Pugh and Pevsner both describe the possible chapel as the eastern building, and state that this has the ogee hood, while the kitchen or hall is identified as the western building. Photographs from the present project (Fig. 4) show that the latter, earlier references are in fact correct.

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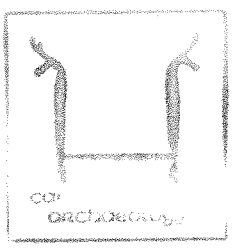

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