

Archaeological Field Unit

A Roman Ditch and Pit at Tan Yard, St. Neots

Judith Roberts

1997

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A111

Commissioned by Granville Building Company Ltd

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Judith Roberts, MA

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Editor Paul Spoerry, BTech, PhD
Illustrator Carole Fletcher, HND, BA

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Archaeological Field Unit
Cambridgeshire County Council
Fulbourn Community Centre
Haggis Gap, Fulbourn
Cambridgeshire CB1 5HD
Tel (01223) 881614
Fax (01223) 880946

SUMMARY

During April 1997 a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an evaluation excavation on the site of a proposed development at Tan Yard, St. Neots. Modern intrusive features, possibly dating to the 19th century, and archaeological features were noted. The archaeological features included a northeast-southwest running ditch and a shallow feature which was either a pit or the butt end of a ditch. Both of these contained locally made grey wares, some fine wares and a sherd of colour coated pottery all dated to around the 3rd century AD. They also contained quantities of animal bone and a fragment of Roman roof tile. No Saxon or medieval material was recovered during the excavation.

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A Roman ditch and pit at Tan Yard, St. Neots
(TL 182 604)

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 3rd and 4th April 1997 a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an evaluation excavation on the site of the proposed development (Planning Application No. 96/0680) at Tan Yard, St. Neots. The work was commissioned by Granville Building Company Ltd.

The site lies within the town centre of St. Neots, to the north of the Market Square, occupying an area approximately 30m by 12m at a height of 16mOD. Approximately 34 sq.m. of trench was opened. Modern features were noted in places to a depth of 1.1m where gravel natural was encountered, this was cut by archaeological features. These features contained locally made grey wares, some fine wares and a sherd of colour coated pottery all dated to around the 3rd century AD. They also contained quantities of animal bone and a fragment of Roman roof tile. No Saxon or medieval material was recovered during the excavation.

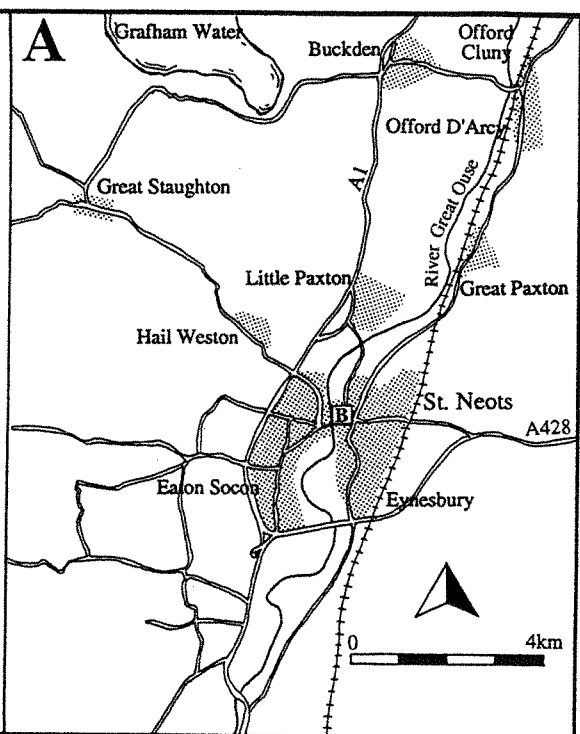
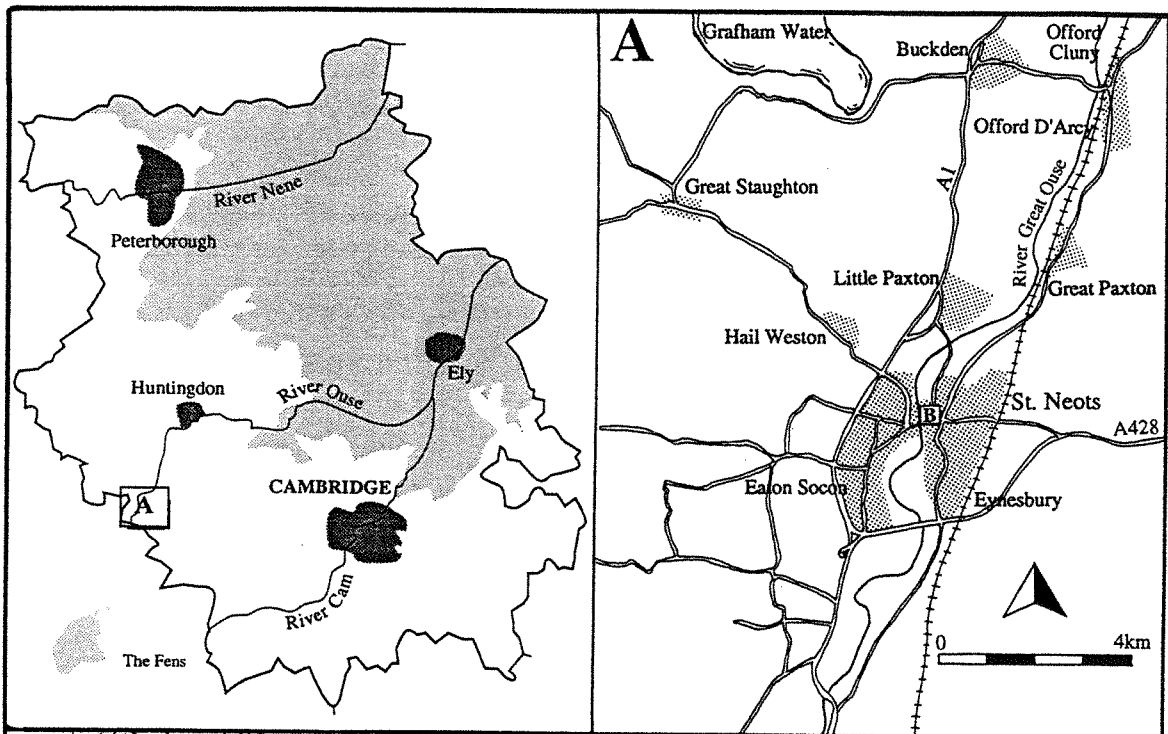
The 1926 Ordnance Survey map shows a small outbuilding at the western end of the development site and a large amount of relatively modern disturbance was found in this area. Brick and tile rubble at the eastern end of the trench probably represents 19th century wall foundations.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAHY

The underlying geology is first and second terrace gravels laid down by the Great Ouse, which in its present course runs a few hundred metres to the west. The surrounding area, away from the river, is comprised mainly by Boulder Clay. The land slopes gently from 25mOD in the east to approximately 14mOD beside the River Great Ouse and the 1926 Ordnance Survey Map shows that the land to the west of Tan Yard (formerly West Street) was open and un-developed.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prehistoric and Roman remains are recorded on the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) at various points in and around St. Neots. Iron Age and Roman settlement evidence has mainly been found to the south of St. Neots at Eynesbury and Conygeare (Kemp 1993 and Alexander 1993), but stray finds (mainly coins) have been found in the town and the SMR reports a Roman cemetery on open land to the north of St. Neots. A considerable amount of residual third to fourth century Romano-British pottery was recovered from many of the Late Saxon features excavated in 1961-2 to the south of Cambridge Street and east of Church Street (a few hundred metres to the south east of Tan Yard). Ditches, postholes and pits



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Figure 1 Site location plan

suggest timber buildings but it would appear that this area was subsequently abandoned and left open for a long period. The evidence is indicative of dense rural activity and associated settlement during the late third century, 4th century and possibly into the 5th century to the east of the river Great Ouse.

A Roman road runs between Sandy and Godmanchester to the east of the Great Ouse, and also to the east of St. Neots and Eynesbury. It has been suggested that there is a possible east-west crossing point of the river at St. Neots (Margary 1967). Its exact route has not yet been found but it is thought to be a few hundred metres north of the medieval bridge in the area of Islands Common (Spoerry 1994).

There is evidence of pagan Saxon occupation in the St. Neots area with increasing evidence for mid and late Saxon settlement and, by the medieval period St. Neots, was well established within the parish of Eynesbury. Traditionally there was a pre-Conquest religious foundation associated with the remains of St. Neot, but there is no record of the priory in 1066 nor any claim to estates made by Ely in the Domesday book (Haigh 1988) although the Benedictine priory was certainly established by the early 12th century.

By 1180 the medieval settlement was well developed, with a bridge at the crossing point, to the south of the priory and north of the market place, and the settlement growing up around the Priory on the eastern bank of the Great Ouse.

None of the Priory buildings survive but excavations by C. F. Tebbutt during the mid-20th century are claimed to have located various parts of the Priory precinct and other parts of the medieval town have been located in more recent excavations. Excavations in 1993 (Alexander 1994) failed to locate the line of the precinct wall. It is possible that in this period the medieval town did not extend as far north as Tan Yard (Spoerry 1994, Fig 6). The town continued to develop and expand to the north and east, on the higher land to the east of the Great Ouse.

4 METHODOLOGY

A 16m trench was dug, running east-west across the site, using a JCB with 1.5m wide toothless ditching bucket. There was also a north-south extension of approximately 6.5m at its western end, giving a total area of approximately 34 sq.m. The overburden was removed until a sandy gravel was revealed containing archaeological features. After initial cleaning the trench was photographed.

Archaeological features were partially excavated and were recorded using the pro-forma recording sheets of the Archaeological Field Unit, and were then drawn and photographed. Context numbers are here given in brackets, fill numbers in plain text and cut numbers in bold. Vertical sections and plans were drawn of the main features. All site levels are above Ordnance Datum, taken from the 16.42m benchmark on the south wall of 27 New Street. Conditions for excavation and recording were good, being dry and bright.

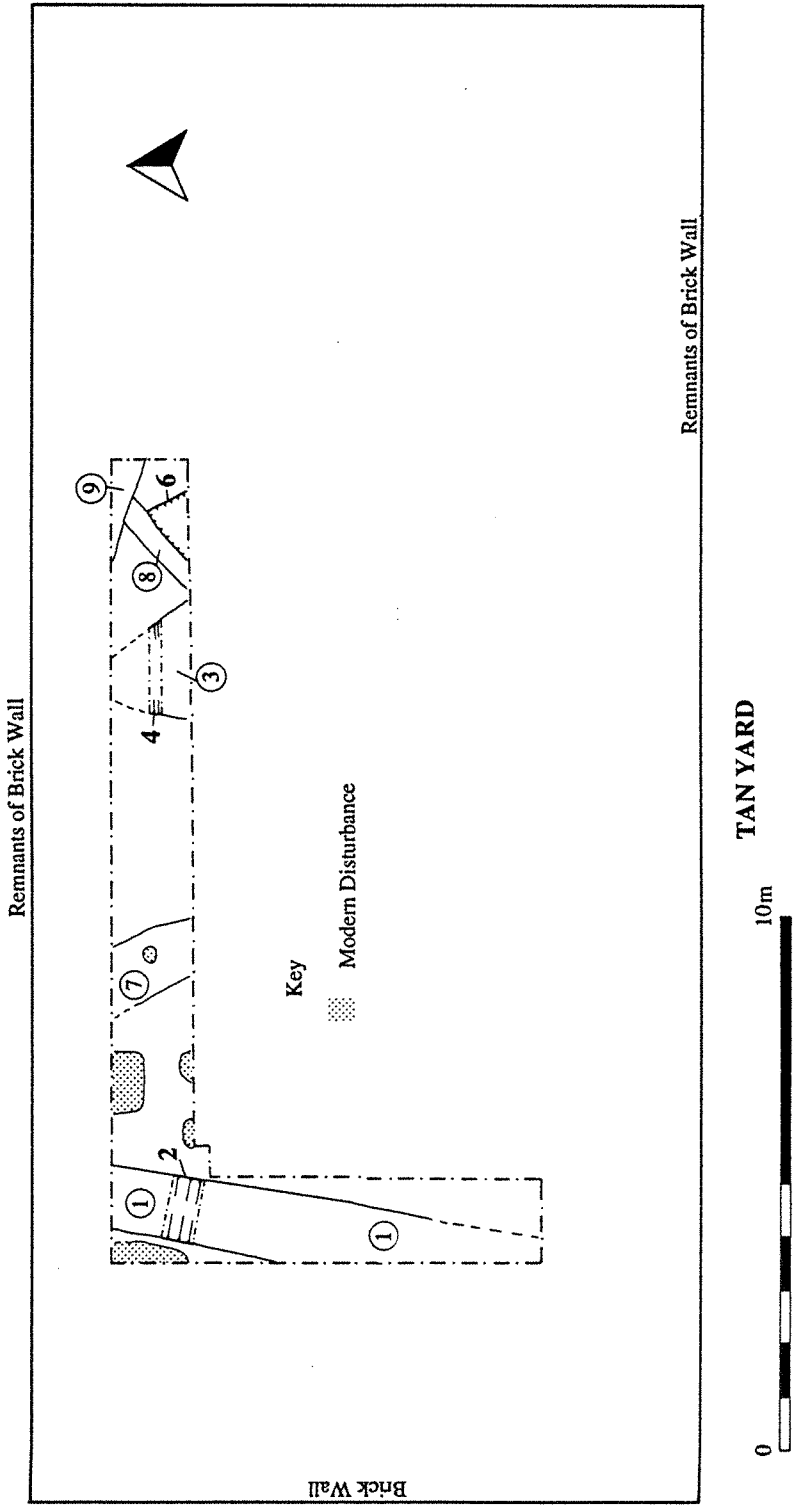


Figure 2 Trench plan

5 RESULTS

The overburden (approximately 0.2m deep) was heavily disturbed with limestone hard-core and tarmacadam overlying a mixed silty clay soil with brick and tile debris (0.3m deep). This sealed a layer of mid olive brown silty sandy clay (0.4m deep) which had been cut in several places by modern, possibly 19th century, features containing building rubble probably related to the property boundary and small building at the west end of the site and building foundations at the eastern end of the trench (9). The base of the trench revealed sandy gravel natural.

Two bands of a light grey clay (7) and (8) were noted in base of the trench. These contained no artefactual material and were cut from relatively high in the section.

Archaeological features were revealed at approximately 1m below the present ground surface. These features included a northeast-southwest running ditch (2) 1.07m wide which had a rounded base and was 0.3m deep. The single fill (1) was a mid-grey brown silty sandy clay with gravels and charcoal fragments and 5 sherds of 3rd century Roman greyware pottery and 4 fragments of animal bone.

The second feature was either the butt end of a shallow ditch or the edge of shallow pit. The cut (4) had gently sloping sides and a flat base. The single fill (3) was a dark brown sandy silty clay containing occasional fragments of charcoal, locally made grey wares, some fine wares and a sherd of colour coated pottery all dated to around the 3rd century AD. It also contained small quantities of animal bone and a fragment of Roman roof tile. No Saxon or medieval material was recovered during the excavation.

Surface cleaning of the trench failed to produce evidence of medieval occupation of the site although further fragments of Roman pottery and two worked flints were recovered.

6 CONCLUSION

Roman remains in the form of a ditch and pit (or possibly 2 ditches) were identified. These are likely to represent part of a low density of Romano-British occupation, or form elements in a Romano-British field system.

The 1926 Ordnance Survey map shows a small outbuilding at the western end of the development site and a large amount of relatively modern disturbance was found in this area. Brick and tile rubble at the eastern end of the trench probably represents 19th century wall foundations and other features cut from relatively high in the section contained similarly modern material.

The underlying subsoil was a mid-brown silty sandy clay with no obvious artefactual remains. This may represent an area that was open land (possibly part of the priory precinct) which was not manured or built on in the period between the Roman occupation and the post-medieval period.

7 DISCUSSION

The high level of disturbance and truncated nature of the archaeological features makes it unlikely that substantial remains will be encountered during the development of the site. The low-density presence of features dated to the Roman period supports the proposal that this was an area of rural activity and associated settlement.

The absence of Saxon or medieval material suggests that this area was possibly outside the area of the Saxon settlement or within the priory grounds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Granville Building Company Ltd. who commissioned the work and the Development Control Office of Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section who prepared the brief. Thanks also to Trevor Marsden who worked on site and Paul Spoerry who was the Project Manager and who edited this report. The trench plan was drawn by Carole Fletcher and pottery identification was carried out by Phil Copleston.

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Cambridgeshire
County Council

Archaeology

The Archaeological Field Unit
Fulbourn Community Centre
Haggis Gap
Fulbourn
Cambridge CB1 5HD
Tel (01223) 881614
Fax (01223) 880946