



Archaeological Field Unit

Medieval occupation at River Mill, Eaton Socon

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Report No. A119

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SUMMARY

During September 1997 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation on the site of the proposed development at River Mill, Eaton Socon. The work was commissioned by Martin Grant Homes Ltd. Four trenches and five test pits were dug. Ditches and gullies were found in one trench. These contained small quantities of early medieval pottery and animal bone. The frequency of features and the nature of the ceramic and faunal assemblages imply domestic activity in the area.

| TABLE OF CONTENTS | page |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY | 1 |
| ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND | 1 |
| METHODOLOGY | 3 |
| RESULTS | 3 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 5 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 5 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 5 |
| APPENDIX I Finds assessment | 6 |
| APPENDIX II Context list | 7 |
| LIST OF FIGURES | |
| Figure 1 Site location plan | 2 |
| Figure 2 Schematic section of Trench 4 | 4 |

Medieval occupation at River Mill, Eaton Socon (TL1733 5870)

INTRODUCTION

Between 22nd and 26th September 1997 a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological investigation on the site of the proposed development at River Mill, Eaton Socon. The work was commissioned by Martin Grant Homes Ltd. in response to a brief for an archaeological investigation issued by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section (Development Control).

The site lies to the south of Eaton Socon castle and mill and to the south-east of the church and village centre, it is approximately 16mOD and covers an area approaching one hectare. The northern part is currently covered by four Atcost warehouses and retail premises and was not available during this investigation. The remaining part of the site (somewhat less than 6300 square metres) comprises an area of made ground, part of which is tree/shrub covered. This part of the site was formerly used as a garden centre. The underlying geology is alluvium overlying second terrace gravels and grey boulder clays. Five test pits were dug, in conjunction with a geologist, and four trenches were opened by mechanical digger (Fig. 1).

The area is largely covered by material dredged from the mill pond and river and also from Colmworth Brook to the west of the site. Footings from earlier, brick, buildings were encountered in the northern part of the site (identified from the 1901 Ordnance Survey map). The southern part of the site had been severely disturbed by recent pitting and trees/shrubs. Archaeological features appear to have survived in the south-western part of the site but these are relatively sparse and have been truncated by later activity. There is, however, some evidence of occupation in the vicinity between 900 and 1200 AD.

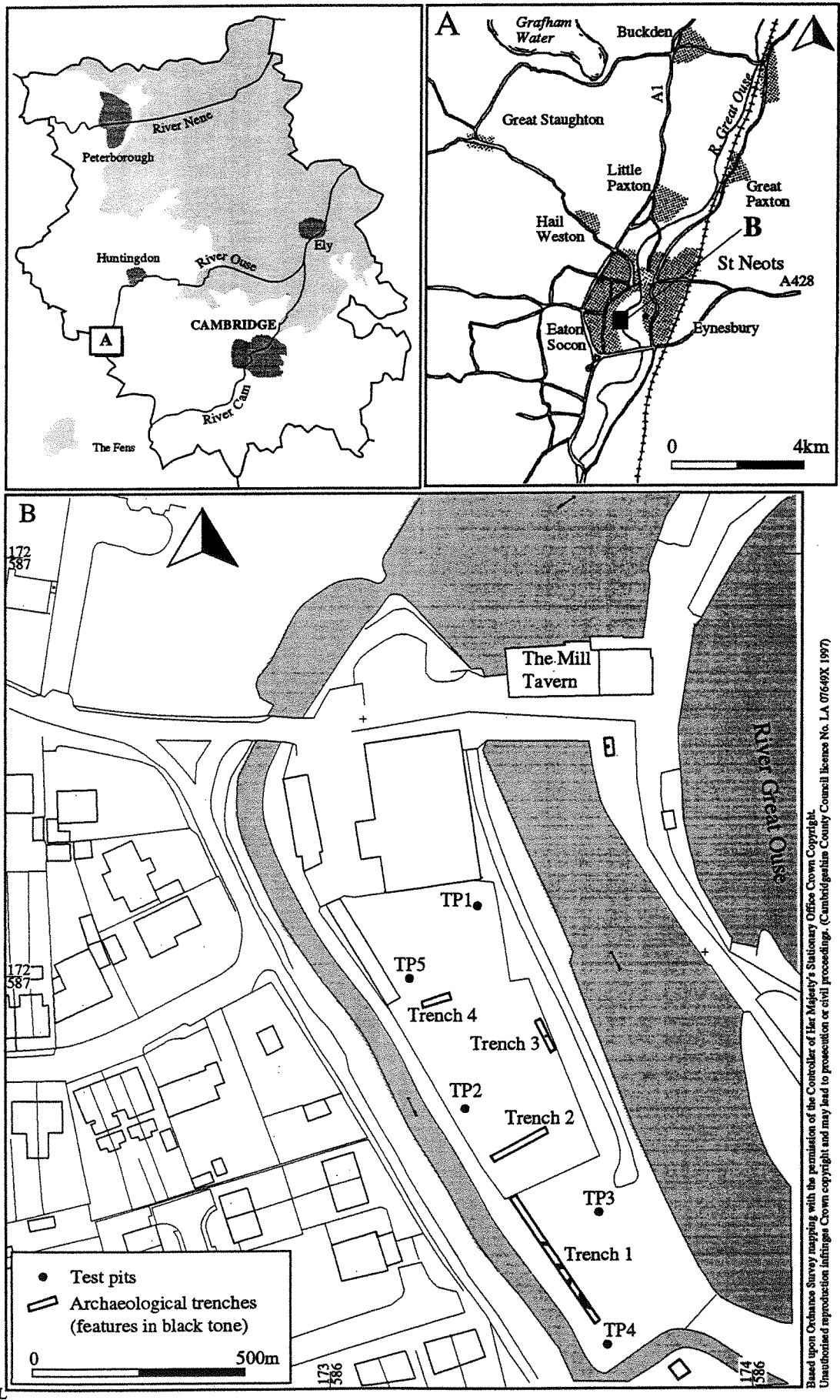
GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site is immediately to the west of the present course of the River Great Ouse. the underlying geology is second terrace gravels overlying grey mudstones (BGS 1975, Sheet 187) with patches of boulder clay to the west. The land slopes gently from the low-lying river course to the east at a height below 15mOD to the higher land several kilometres to the west at 70mOD.

The test pits revealed modern made ground and dredged silts and gravels up to 2.4m deep at the north-eastern part of the site and 1.2m deep in the south-western part.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prehistoric, Roman, Saxon and medieval remains are recorded in the Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) in the surrounding area. Extensive cropmarks occur in the field to the east of the river at Eynesbury (SMR nos. 389, 2201, 6150) and excavation has revealed prehistoric and Roman occupation (SMR nos. 373, 512 and 4253). The castle (Scheduled Ancient Monument No. 20434) and surrounding area to the north of the site (SMR no. 374) has been investigated on several occasions (Lethbridge and Tebbutt 1952, Addyman 1965) and a Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlement and cemetery have been identified.



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Figure 1 Site location plan

Eaton Socon is first mentioned in the Domesday Book although it is known to have been of considerable importance before this. It had been the head manor of the Bedfordshire thegn Wulfmar (or Ulmar) and in 1086 comprised a considerable property, including two mills. The name Eaton probably refers to an earlier farm by the river but by late Saxon times there was an extensive settlement in the vicinity. The castle site was occupied briefly during the twelfth century and a windmill was built on the castle site in the late medieval period. Lethbridge and Tebbutt (1952) suggest the windmill was built for use when the river was too slack to drive the adjoining watermill. It is not clear on what this assumption is based but it is thought that Colmworth Brook had been dug, as part of the watermill system, by the early 15th century. No clear map evidence showing the brook has been seen by the author. The northern part of the subject site had buildings along its western edge which are recorded on the 1901 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map.

METHODOLOGY

Four trenches were excavated by a mechanical digger with a 1.7m wide toothless ditching bucket. The overburden was removed in all trenches until the upper interface of the gravel was exposed into which archaeological features had been cut. The geological sequence was determined in the test pits commissioned by Southern Testing Laboratories Ltd.

A sample of archaeological features was partially excavated and recorded using the pro-forma recording sheets of the Archaeological Field Unit. Fill numbers are shown in plain text and cut numbers in bold. Vertical sections and plans were drawn of the main features and photographs taken. All site levels are above Ordnance Datum, taken from the 16.56m benchmark on the River Mill Tavern. Conditions for excavation and recording were good, being for the most part dry and bright.

RESULTS

The overburden comprised material dredged from Colmworth Brook and the mill pond, areas levelled and covered with plastic and gravel during the site's use as a garden centre and a clay silt 'garden' type soil which had been heavily disturbed by tree roots and recent human activity. The overburden was given the context number 1. Finds from the overburden included a considerable number of freshwater mussel shells, modern refuse and a residual piece of St. Neots ware.

Trench 1 (approximately 40m long and 1.2m deep) showed modern rubbish pits at its southern end and tree root disturbance along most of its length. Four features cut into the gravel were investigated. A large pit (**4**) at the southern end of the trench contained at least two fills, 2 and 3. The pit appeared, from the area exposed in Trench 1, to be sub-circular and slope quite steeply on its western edge. The base of the pit was not reached. The lower fill (3) was a grey brown silt with a small amount of clay and some sand and gravel. It was loose and friable and spread over the edge of the pit to a depth of 0.2m. This fill contained post-medieval roof tile, a sherd of St. Neots ware (dated between 900-1150) and a sand-tempered soft fabric sherd. The upper fill was a redeposited clay with a large proportion of sand and gravel, possibly the original material which had been removed when the pit was dug. This fill contained no finds but was immediately overlaid by modern rubbish. To the south of this pit was a linear feature (**6**) which had been disturbed by a modern rubbish pit at the point where it met the eastern trench section. This appeared to be a shallow gully (0.14m deep and 0.6m wide) with a steep eastern edge and a flat base, sloping gradually to the north which ran in a south-west – north-east direction. The single fill (5) of this feature was a

compact grey brown sandy silt with a small amount of clay and occasional gravels. This fill contained a small fragment of 'Niedermendig' lava, a piece of chewed/gnawed animal bone, the almost complete skeleton of a rabbit (which appeared fresh) and eight fragments of abraded pottery. Seven sherds are St. Neots ware (dated between 1000-1200) and one sherd is sand tempered. Approximately 5m to the south was a ditch (8), 1.2m wide and 0.1m deep, which ran in a south-east – north-west direction, sloping gently to the east. This appeared to be the base of a ditch with gently sloping sides and a concave base. The single fill, 7, was a compact light grey-brown sandy silt with occasional gravels. There were no finds from this feature. A further 5m south was another shallow ditch (10), running in the same direction as 8 above, approximately 0.65m wide and 0.16m deep. This also had gently sloping sides and a concave base. The single fill, 9, which was a compact grey brown sandy silt with gravel and occasional pebbles contained 2 sherds of wheel-made St. Neots ware, dated to 900-1150.

Trench 2, 12.5m long and approximately 1m deep, revealed undulating sandy gravels with chalk fragments. This was overlaid by a dark brown slightly clay silt with very little gravel, 0.46m deep. The upper level of this layer contained a plastic plant pot. Black plastic sheeting covered by 0.08m of grit sealed this layer and was in turn covered by 0.19m of grey clay with gravel and modern glass and brick, dredged from the adjacent mill pond. Above this was a layer 0.14m thick of sandy gravel with chalk fragments capped by 0.07m of topsoil. No archaeological features were noted in the basal gravel.

Trench 3, was 6m long, approximately 1.1m deep with 0.17m of humic topsoil over 0.26m of clay with modern rubbish, gravel and chalk. Beneath this was 0.08m of gravel over pieces (rather than sheets) of plastic. Underlying this surface was 0.36m of dark brown slightly clay silt with gravel and chalk fragments and at the northern end of the trench a plastic water pipe was visible in the section. The basal layer was a mixed silty gravel over clean sandy gravel which showed considerable tree-root disturbance and a modern post-hole, 12. This posthole was circular, 0.55m wide with steep sides (0.2m deep) and a flat base. The fill (11) was a loose, friable very dark brown silt with some sand and gravel.

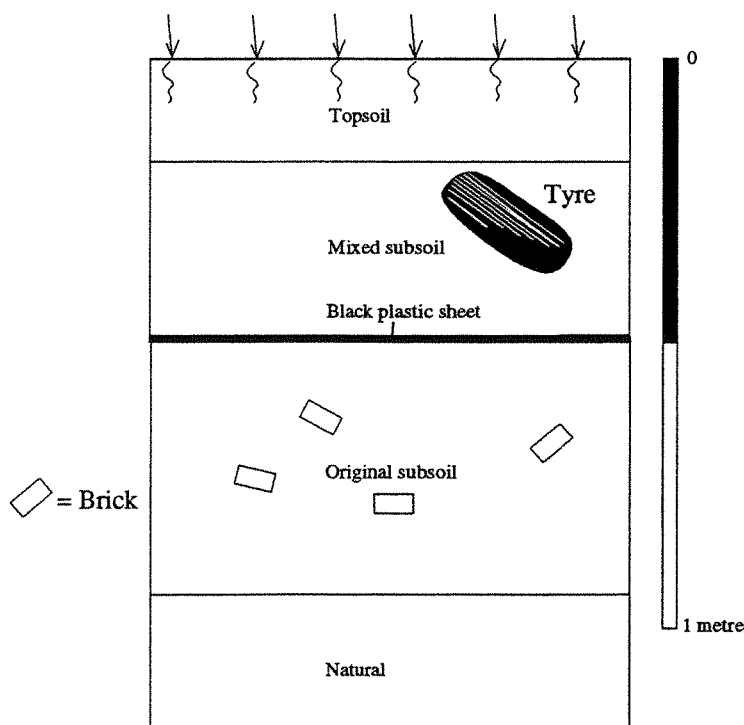


Figure 2 Schematic section of Trench 4

Trench 4, at the north-western part of the site was 5.5m long and 1.2m deep. The topsoil was 0.18m deep with large lumps of chalky clay mixed in, together with gravels. Beneath this was a very disturbed deposit (0.31m of clay silt with gravel and chalk fragments) containing modern bricks and a car tyre. This was underlain by fine gravel and black plastic sheeting which sealed 0.44m of dark brown clay silt which contained modern brick. The underlying natural is a sandy gravel with small fragments of chalk (Fig. 2). No archaeological features were noted in the basal gravel.

CONCLUSIONS

Prehistoric occupation of the east bank of the river in this area is well known from aerial surveys and excavations but no evidence for this was found on the subject site. Medieval settlement, a cemetery and castle is known to the north but the presence of small quantities of abraded domestic pottery and animal bone found on site tends to support the evidence for agricultural use of the land adjacent to the river rather than direct evidence for settlement.

Trench 1 was the only trench to reveal archaeological features although the precise dating of these has not been possible. Three of the four features excavated produced pieces of abraded St. Neots ware which may suggest these represent drainage ditches and/or property boundaries and that the pottery found in them had been imported with manuring activities during the early medieval period. The site has obviously been heavily disturbed in recent years and in the south-western part of the site modern pits have affected archaeological features.

Low lying land, prone to flooding, right next to the river would not have been a favoured location for medieval settlement. The tight date range of the pottery that has been found (without later contamination) demonstrates that this area was actively used during the Anglo-Norman period. The land was probably used for agricultural purposes but the features and finds could relate to river-front activity such as trade and river transport, warehousing or backyards, associated with a possible mill. Although there has been considerable modern disturbance and build up a wider excavation over the features found in the southern part of the site might characterise their function better. The depth of the overburden is such that these features would probably be well protected from any light building works envisaged for the site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Martin Grant Homes Ltd. who commissioned the work and the Development Control Office of Cambridgeshire County Council which prepared the brief.

Thanks are also due to Sean Damant and Steve Kemp who worked on site. Tim Malim was the Project Manager and edited this report. The illustration is by Jon Cane and the pottery identification by Paul Sperry.

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APPENDIX I – Finds assessment

Methodology

This assemblage was examined by eye as complete context groups. This enabled an overview of each context group as well as the whole assemblage to be gained. Finds types within each context group were identified.

Dates

Dating was mainly from the pottery and tile/brick within the context groups, identified by Dr. Paul Spoerry. No sherds were specifically datable but general date ranges have been given.

| Context | weight (g) | count | description | condition | date range |
|---------|------------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| 1 | 7 | 1 | shelly, wheel-made St. Neots ware | abraded | 900-1150 |
| 1 | 77 | | freshwater mussel | | |
| 3 | 10 | 2 | 1 piece shelly, wheel-made St. Neots ware, 1 piece sand-tempered | abraded | 900-1150 |
| 3 | 342 | 6 | roof tile | 1 piece abraded | post-medieval |
| 5 | 3 | | Neidermendig lava | | |
| 5 | 80 | 8 | 1 piece sand tempered, 7 pieces St. Neots. Rims from 2 bowls, 1 carinated bowl, 1 flange-angled bowl | abraded | 1000-1200 |
| 5 | 47 | | 1 piece gnawed cow bone, rabbit bone | | |
| 9 | 9 | 2 | shelly, wheel-made St. Neots ware | abraded | 900-1150 |
| | | | Pottery - 13 sherds - 108g | | |

APPENDIX II - Context List

| Context No. | Trench | Description | Above | Below | Finds |
|-------------|--------|-----------------------|-------|-------|---------------|
| 1 | | Topsoil | | | Pot and shell |
| 2 | 1 | Mixed clay and gravel | 3 | 1 | |
| 3 | 1 | Grey brown silt | 4 | 2 | Pot and tile |
| 4 | 1 | Pit | - | 3 | |
| 5 | 1 | Grey sandy silt | 6 | 1 | Bone and pot |
| 6 | 1 | Ditch | - | 5 | |
| 7 | 1 | Grey sandy silt | 8 | 1 | None |
| 8 | 1 | Ditch | - | 7 | |
| 9 | 1 | Grey brown sandy silt | 10 | 1 | Pot |
| 10 | 1 | Ditch | - | 9 | |
| 11 | 3 | Dark brown clay silt | 12 | 1 | None |
| 12 | 3 | Posthole | | - | 11 |



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