



Archaeological Field Unit

Cedar House Car Park, St. Neots: An Archaeological Evaluation

Judith Roberts

1997

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. B006

Commissioned by Huntingdonshire District Council

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INTRODUCTION

Between the 21st to 25th 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. H0962/95) at Cedar House Car Park, St. Neots. The work was commissioned by Huntingdonshire District Council.

GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The underlying geology is first and second terrace gravels laid down by the Great Ouse, which in its present course runs several hundred metres to the west. The surrounding area, away from the river, is comprised mainly of Boulder Clay. The land slopes gently from 25mOD in the east to approximately 14mOD beside the River Great Ouse.

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 (Addyman 1973). Ditches, postholes and pits 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 in the vicinity during the late third century, 4th century and possibly into the 5th century to the east of the river Great Ouse and south of the Cedar House car park site.

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 (Sperry 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 in St. Neots 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 east as Cedar House car park (Spoerry forthcoming, Fig 6). The town continued to develop in the later medieval and post-medieval period and expand to the north and east, on the higher land to the east of the Great Ouse.

METHODOLOGY

The site lies within the town centre of St. Neots, to the north of Cambridge Street, occupying an area approximately 0.7h at a height of approximately 16mOD. The underlying geology is first and second terrace gravels overlaying grey mudstones with infrequent stone bands. Six trenches were dug across the site (using a JCB with a 1.6m wide toothless ditching bucket). Trench 1 was 5m by 5m, the remaining trenches were between 12 and 17.5m long.

The site was covered in a 0.1m deep tarmac cover overlying 0.2-0.5m deep hard-core which in turn overlay a garden-type soil with brick rubble incorporated. Below this mixed gravels were noted. Modern intrusive features, relating to Cedar House, were noted during the machine stripping and extended to 1.65m below the present ground surface in Trench 4. In other trenches natural gravel was exposed at between 0.6 and 1.1m below the present ground surface.

RESULTS

In Trench 1, immediately to the north of Cambridge Street two shallow, linear features were cut into the gravel. These contained a friable dark greyish brown silty clay with occasional small stones. A single sherd of a medieval sandy ware (dated to between 1200-1500) was recovered from these features. Trench 2 had been heavily disturbed by modern service trenches. In Trenches 3 and 4 modern disturbance was evident with recent tree root activity, demolition and gravel quarrying beyond 1.5m deep. This disturbance is related to the demolition of Cedar House School during the 1960s and the construction of the car park. In Trench 5 a late 19th century/early 20th century drain and foundations were encountered and there had been considerable modern disturbance down to the level of the gravel. No features were noted in Trench 6.

A small quantity of human bone (from two individuals) was recovered from the disturbed sub-soil of Trench 3. These comprised two rib fragments, three vertebral fragments and bones from a foot. The bones were scattered through the subsoil, in

association with brick rubble and concrete, and are thought to have been disturbed during either the building or demolition of Cedar House.

CONCLUSION

The 1926 Ordnance Survey and earlier maps show buildings on the south-eastern part of the development site and a large amount of relatively modern disturbance was found in this area. Brick and tile rubble and foundations are related to Cedar House and its subsequent use as a school in the mid-20th century.

This evaluation suggests that the late Saxon settlement site, identified to the south of Cambridge Street during excavations in the early 1960s (Addyman 1973), did not extend as far north as the present site and that medieval street front development did not extend this far east along Cambridge Street. The high level of disturbance and truncated nature of the archaeological features makes it unlikely that substantial remains will be encountered during the development but the developer should be aware of the presence of human remains and the possibility of other burials on the site.

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ST NEOTS, CEDAR HOUSE CAR PARK 1997 - Finds Types by Weight (in grammes)

Trench	Context	Pottery Weight	<i>Pottery Count</i>	Metals Fe	Metals Cu	Animal Bone	HSR	Flint	Total Weights by Context
Tr 3	u/s			11	2		80		93
Tr 4	u/s							4	4
Tr 5	u/s	40	1			53			93
Tr 1	6	6	1						6
Total Weights by Finds Type		46	<i>2 sherds</i>	11	2	53	80	4	196



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