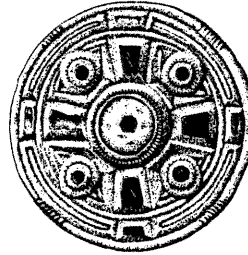


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Back Orchard, Bassingbourn: An Archaeological Evaluation

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1998

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. B 31

Commissioned By Wimpey Homes

Summary

Between 27th May and 5th June 1998, staff from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation at Back Orchard, Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire. The work was commissioned by Wimpey Homes in advance of construction of a proposed housing development on the site. A desk-based assessment carried out in advance of field evaluation failed to reveal any previously-known archaeological interest on the land. linear trial-trenches revealed a small number of archaeological features, mostly ditches and mainly concentrated near the south-western edge of the site. No artefacts were found in any of the features, apart from a single small sherd of ?medieval pottery in a linear feature in trench 3. Some of the archaeological features encountered may result from the site's previous use as an orchard; others, however, probably represent a series of boundaries dividing up various plots of land in the outlying parts of medieval or post-medieval Bassingbourn. It may be, therefore, that the evaluation has indicated the location of the north-eastern limits of the medieval or post-medieval village.

Back Orchard, Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation (TL 335 441)

1 INTRODUCTION

Between 26th May and 5th June 1998, staff from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (AFU) carried out an archaeological evaluation at Back Orchard, Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire. The work was commissioned by Wimpey Homes in advance of construction of a proposed housing development on the site, and was carried out according to a design brief written by Simon Kaner of the Cambridgeshire County Council County Archaeology Office - Development Control.

A desk-based assessment of documentary, cartographic and other sources carried out in advance of field evaluation failed to reveal any previously-known archaeological interest on the land. The site appears on the Inclosure map of 1806 with boundaries apparently very similar to those it has today, and the 1885 OS map shows the plot as an orchard.

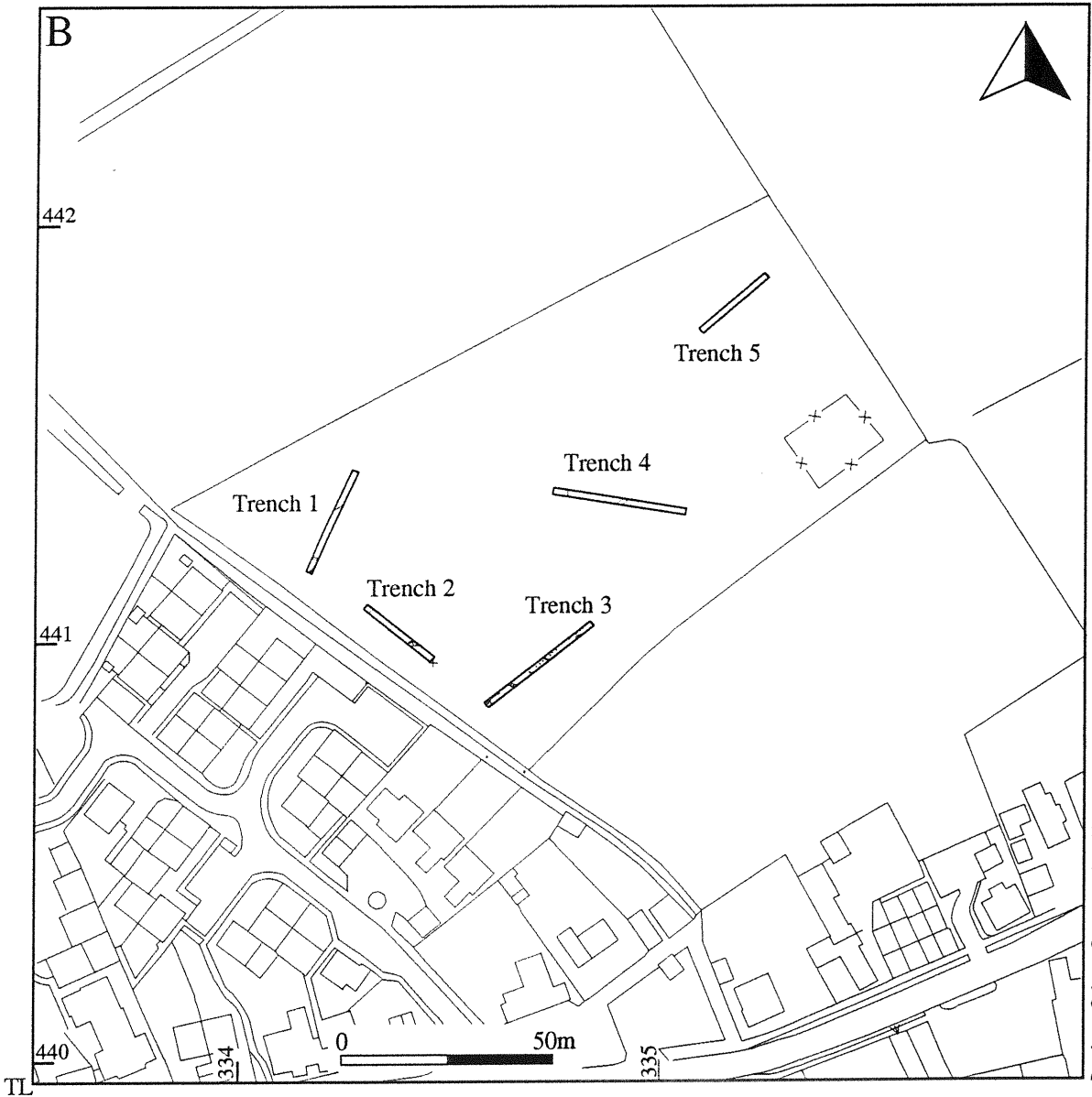
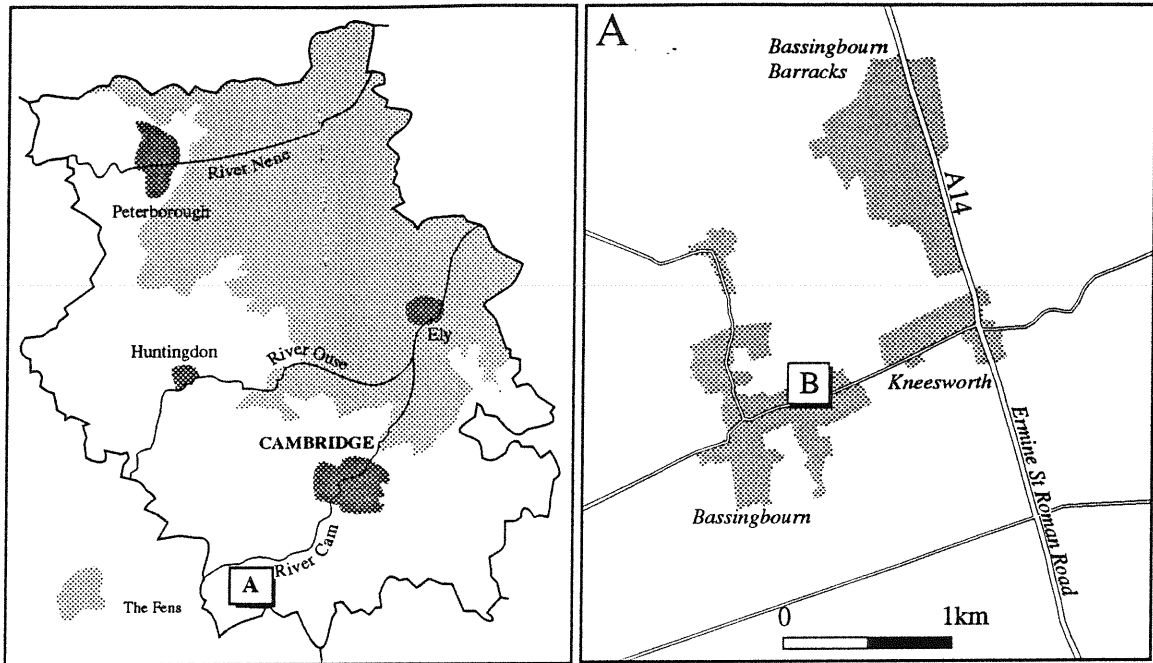
linear trial-trenches revealed a small number of archaeological features, mostly ditches and mainly concentrated near the south-western edge of the site. No artefacts were found in any of the features, apart from a single small sherd of ?medieval pottery in a linear feature in trench 3.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site lies on the north-eastern edge of the present village of Bassingbourn, about 400m west of the parish church. The land here is at about 30m OD and slopes away very gently to the north. The present land use of the site is as a piece of rough grassland. The underlying geology is Chalk Marl over the whole site.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The village of Bassingbourn has a complex history. It lies to the north of an ancient trackway (Ashwell Street) and west of the Roman road, Ermine Street. Isolated finds of Roman and Saxon material are known from the parish, but none from areas near to the present site. During the Middle Ages, the village developed from several different foci and there is a profusion of ancient earthworks, mainly moated sites which probably mark the locations of former manor houses in several of these early foci. The nearest of these is several hundred metres away from the present site, however. The nearest of the village foci to the present site lies along High Street, which runs about 70m to the south.



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Figure 1: Site Location Map

4. DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT

As part of a desk-based assessment of known archaeological and historical sources pertaining to the site, the following sources were consulted: Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record, Relevant Victoria County History volumes, maps held at the Cambridgeshire Record Office, material from the Cambridgeshire Village Earthworks Survey held at the AFU office in Fulbourn and archives of recent archaeological and historical work undertaken in the area by the AFU and others.

Reassessment and replotting of aerial photographs had been requirement of the design brief (Kaner, 1997, paragraph 3.2). Following initial consultations with a suitably qualified specialist (Rog Palmer of Air Photo Services, Cambridge), however, it was considered unlikely that this would yield worthwhile information owing to the lack of suitable air photographic coverage (Palmer, pers comm.). Further work on aerial photographs was not therefore undertaken.

Although a considerable amount of work has been done on the historical records of Bassingbourn (Way, 1997), little of this can be linked directly to the present site. Much of this work focused on the moated site at Church Close, which lies some 250m the west.

The site appears on the Inclosure map of 1806 with boundaries apparently very similar to those it has today, although this map shows no detail within these boundaries, and the site was then presumably an arable or pasture field. The 1885 OS map shows the plot as an orchard (1885 OS map, sheet LVIII.1), which was presumably planted, therefore, some time between 1806 and 1885.

5 METHODOLOGY

A total of 133.5m of linear trenching was excavated within the development area to provide a 2% sample of the site (*Figure 1*). Five separate trenches were opened using a JCB-type wheeled excavator with a 1.6m wide toothless ditching bucket.

Since no previously-known archaeological remains were revealed during the background study, trenches were positioned across the site in order to ensure an even spatial coverage of the whole area. Trenches 1 to 3, however, were positioned along the western perimeter of the site, closest to the core of medieval Bassingbourn, primarily to investigate whether there were any features relating to the development of the village. Trench 4 was located near the centre of the site, aligned west to east, and trench 5 was positioned in the north-eastern corner, aligned north-north-west to south-south-east. The south-east corner of the field was unavailable for trenching due to the presence of a settling pond and associated spoilheap which had already been excavated before archaeological work began.

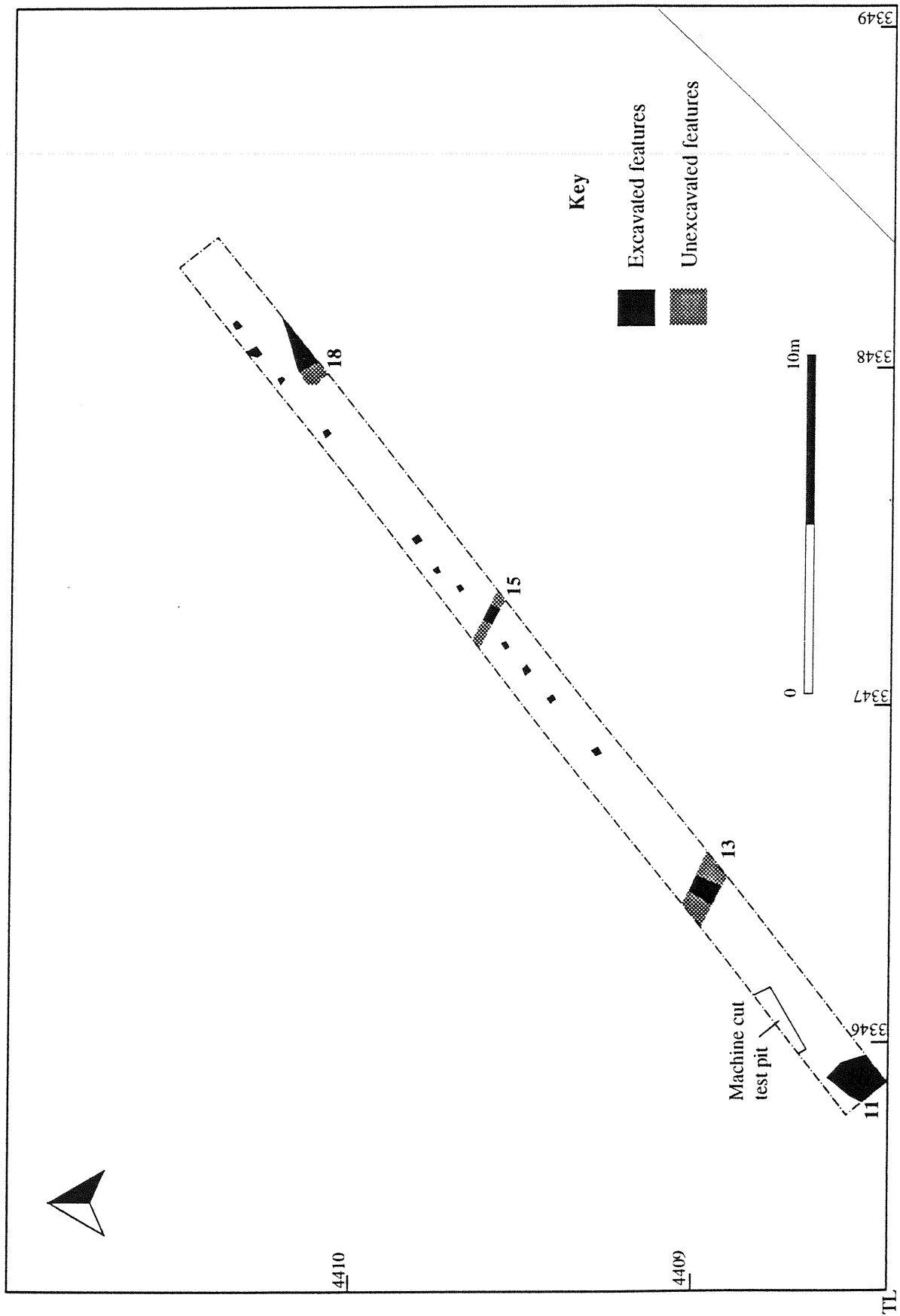


Figure 2: Trench 3 , plan of excavated features

Excluding the remains of field drains, 23 features were recorded. Selective excavation of features was undertaken to try to obtain representative dating and environmental evidence. Features were recorded using the Archaeological Field Unit's standard recording system. A base plan of all trenches was produced by Zeiss RecEltA Total Station. The site archive is held at the AFU office in Fulbourn.

6 RESULTS

Chalk marl, light grey in colour, was found in the bases of all trenches. The topsoil 1, was found to be a uniform depth of 0.35m across the site. This sealed a subsoil layer, 2, which varied in depth between 0.50m at the western and 0.45m at the eastern end of the site. The subsoil was found to overlie the natural geology in all the trenches except 2 and 3. In these the subsoil was found to seal a dark brown, organic layer 0.1m thick (layer 7). This has been interpreted as possibly being formed during the site's use as an orchard.

Trench 1 was 30m long and 1.6m wide and aligned north-east to south-west it was machined to a depth of 0.85m at the west end, and 0.7m at the eastern end. A total of 2 linear features were recorded in the trench. The topsoil was found to overlie the subsoil, which was 0.5m thick and sealed the natural chalk marl.

Ditch **9** (8). *Unexcavated*. A linear 0.40m wide aligned north-west to south-east. Sealed beneath the subsoil 2, it was filled by 8, light olive brown, silty clay. No artefacts were recovered.

The remaining feature was aligned east to west, 0.30m wide and cut from directly beneath the topsoil. Filled by a loose chalky rubble, it has been interpreted as a recent service trench.

Trench 2 was 20.5m long, 1.6m wide, aligned north-north-west to south-south-east and machined to a depth of 0.75m. A single linear **4**, was recorded in the trench, aligned west to east and turning southwards through ninety degrees on the trench edge. Two postholes were recorded along the northern edge of the ditch.

Ditch **4** (3) ran west to east, then turned southwards through ninety degrees; it was 1m wide and 0.1m deep with steep sides and a flat base. The fill, 3, was a greyish brown clayey silt with occasional small (<0.08m) angular stones and a few flecks of charcoal. No finds were recovered. The ditch possibly forms one corner of an enclosure lying to the south.

Posthole **6** (5). A circular posthole, 0.3m in diameter, steep sides and a flat base. It was filled by 5, a dark grey clayey silt with rare small rounded stones, a few flecks of charcoal and no artefacts. Another posthole was recorded to the immediate west of the feature and although it was not excavated it had similar dimensions and fill and it is suggested that they represent a fence enclosing the ditch **4**.

Trench 3 was 30m long, 1.6m wide and aligned north-east to south-west, and machined to a depth of 0.3m at the north-eastern end and 0.8m at the south-western end. The topsoil was found to continue along the length of the trench, and at the east end it overlay the natural geology. At the western end it sealed the sub-soil, 2, which sealed layer 7, a dark brown organic layer 0.1m thick. No dating evidence of any kind was recovered from layer 7.

A total of 17 features were recorded (see figure 2). Thirteen of these were an alignment of recent postholes, forming a fenceline. A square cut feature at the west end filled by a loose chalky clay rubble was cut from directly below the turfline and has been interpreted as a machine-dug geological test pit.

Two parallel linears, **13** and **15**, aligned north-north-west to south-south-east were found sealed beneath layer 7.

An additional ?linear feature **18**, was recorded at the eastern end of the trench aligned north-east to south-west extending into the southern trench edge.

Ditch **13** (12). Aligned south-south-east to north-north-west, 0.84m wide and 0.25m deep with steep sides and a flat base the ditch contained a single fill 12, light olive brown silty clay with occasional small stones, charcoal flecks and a single small sherd of ?medieval pottery.

Ditch **15** (14). Aligned south-south-east to north-north-west, 0.45m wide and 0.1m deep with steep sides and a flat base the ditch contained a single fill 14, a greyish brown silty clay with occasional small angular stones and no artefacts.

Cut **18** (16, 17). A linear? feature aligned west-north-west to east-south-east along the southern edge of the trench. It appeared to terminate within the trench and was >2.7m long, >0.8m wide and 0.42m deep with steep sides and concave base. Two distinct fills, 16 and 17 were recorded within the cut.

Fill 17 was a soft grey silty clay with occasional chalk flecks. It represents the primary episode of silting across the base of the feature. This was overlaid by fill 16. No artefacts were found.

Fill 16 was a very dark grey silty clay with occasional small chalk flecks, snails and no artefacts.

Trench 4 was 33m long, 1.6m wide and aligned west to east, and machined to a depth of 0.5m. A sondage was excavated at the western end to a depth of 1m. The natural chalk marl was found to extend to the base of this sondage.

A single feature, **19**, was found. This appeared at first to be a possible linear aligned north-north-west to south-south-east across the trench, but on excavation proved to be a very shallow, irregular feature about 2m across and about 0.05m deep. It was filled by 20, a light olive brown firm silty clay. No artefacts were found. The base of the feature was also quite irregular, and it has been interpreted as a tree-throw or a similar feature, associated with the site's use as an orchard.

Trench 5 was 20m long, 1.6m wide and aligned north-north-west to south-south-east and machined to a depth of 0.65m at the western end and 0.6m at the eastern end. A layer of subsoil, 0.25m deep was found at the eastern end of the trench but had disappeared within 10m of the western trench end. The base of the trench was a chalk marl. No archaeological features were found.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The almost complete lack of finds makes the results of this evaluation rather inconclusive, in that it is not possible securely to date any of the archaeological features found. The single sherd of pottery recovered suggests that at least one of the ditches may be medieval or later, but the vast majority of features contained no clues to their date. Nevertheless, the distribution of features is

interesting, and this, together with the types of features encountered, may permit some tentative inferences to be drawn.

Significantly, the located archaeology clusters on the south-western edge of the site, nearest to the historic core of the village. Most of the features are linears, probably ditches. It seems most likely that what has been uncovered are a series of boundaries, dividing up various plots of land in the outlying parts of medieval or post-medieval Bassingbourn. The paucity of artefacts suggests that activity was never intense here, and in the north-eastern half of the site almost nothing at all was found. It may be, therefore, that the evaluation has indicated the location of the north-eastern limits of the medieval or post-medieval village.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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