

Archaeological Field Unit

**A Roman Ditch and Post-Medieval Pits at
36b St John's Road, Ely: Archaeological Observation**

S Kenney

2002

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A197

Commissioned by Freshwater Estates (UK) Ltd

**A Roman Ditch and Post-Medieval Pits at
36b St John's Road, Ely: Archaeological Observation**

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October 2002

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SUMMARY

Archaeological observation has been carried out at 36b St John's Road, Ely, Cambridgeshire (TL 5337/8024) during the construction of nine dwellings and associated garages. The work was carried out by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council between 11th June and 19th December 2001.

An archaeological evaluation was conducted on the site during November 2000, and this revealed the presence of Late Iron Age and post-medieval remains.

All service trenches were examined for the presence of archaeological features, particularly where they crossed the line of the evaluation trenches. A ditch and two pits were observed, the former of which produced pottery dating from the early Roman period. These features, together with other recent finds nearby at West End and Chiefs Street, add further to the emerging picture of Roman Ely, of which little is currently known.

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**A Roman Ditch and Post-Medieval Pits at 36b St John's Road, Ely:
Archaeological Observation**

(TL 5337/8024)

1 INTRODUCTION

Archaeological observation was carried out at 36B St John's Road, Ely, Cambridgeshire (TL 5337/8024) during the construction of nine dwellings, their garages and associated services. The work was carried out by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council between 11th of June and the 19th December 2001. It was commissioned by Freshwater Estates in response to a Brief set by the County Archaeological Office (CAO).

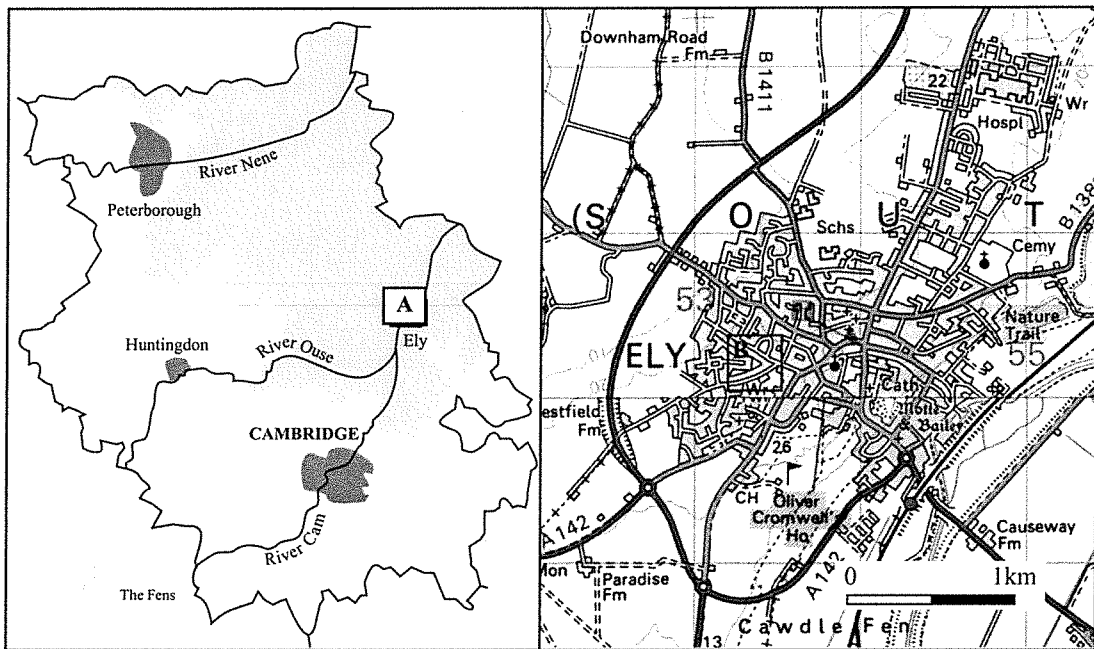
An archaeological evaluation was carried out on the site in 2000, which revealed the presence of Late Iron Age and post-medieval remains (Abrams 2000). This work informed a mitigation strategy specified in the Brief by the CAO, which included observation of the intrusive service trenches.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies on the western side of the centre of Ely, 500m southwest of the Cathedral and within 50m of the site of the medieval hospitals of St John the Baptist and St Mary Magdelene. The site is located on uneven ground, sloping downwards from 20.82m OD, in the southern part of the site, to 20.48m OD to the north. The temporary benchmark located in the centre of the site was 21.03m OD.

The subject site was bordered on its northern, eastern and western edges by the gardens of adjacent residential properties. In the south it was bordered by St John's Road.

According to the British Geological Survey, the centre of the city lies on the Lower Greensand that caps the Ely island, the bulk of which is composed of Kimmeridge Clay (BGS Sheet 173, 1980). As has been observed on numerous occasions on the island, a layer of stone exists just below the top of the Greensand and some features have this stone as their base, while others are cut through it.



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Figure 1 Site location map showing outlines of new buildings with observation areas where features were located shown in black and 2000 evaluation trenches shown in grey

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The background to this work is included in the evaluation report (Abrams 2000), and will not be reiterated here.

4 METHODOLOGY

The service runs were excavated by the developer's JCB using a 0.6m wide toothed bucket. These runs were then hand cleaned and inspected by an archaeologist for the presence of archaeological features. Any features thus located were excavated to recover dating evidence, drawn, photographed and recorded using the AFU's single context recording system. The features were located using survey information kindly supplied by the client

5 RESULTS

11th June 2001

Observation was carried out on the scrub clearance across about two-thirds of the site. A handful of sherds of pottery were recovered that date to the medieval period or earlier. Numerous sherds of post-medieval pottery, glass, slate, brick and tile were also present, and no features were evident at this level.

Following this, and not under archaeological observation, hardcore was laid at the front of the site, adjacent to St John's Road, and the concrete slab formed on top of it. At no time during this were intrusive works carried out, and no archaeological deposits were damaged.

18th June 2001

Observation was carried out on the removal of two trees from the site. A handful of sherds of pottery were recovered that date to the medieval period or earlier. Numerous sherds of post-medieval pottery, glass, slate, brick, tile and a golf ball were also present, and no features were evident, even in the trenches cut to break the roots of the trees.

20th June 2001

Observation was carried out on the levelling of the back part of the site, before hardcore was laid in preparation for the laying of the concrete slab. This involved the removal of approximately 0.1m of topsoil from the northwestern part of the site, gradually lessening to nothing to the east. Several modern features were noted, including tree boles and at least one rubbish pit or spread. Again, only a few pieces of post-medieval or earlier pottery were recovered, and no earlier features were revealed.

1st November 2001

Observation and subsequent hand cleaning of the service runs revealed the presence of a ditch running northwest-southeast close to the original location of evaluation trench 5 and roughly parallel to the line of it. This ditch cut a shallow, irregularly shaped pit.

2nd November 2001

Excavation and recording were carried out on the ditch and truncated shallow pit revealed the previous day.

The features were sealed by two layers, topsoil 2, which was 0.2m deep and subsoil 3, which was 0.3m deep.

Ditch 6 was 1.2m wide, 0.4m deep, at least 5m long, and was oriented northwest-southeast. It contained two fills, the upper of which was 4, an olive brown sandy silty clay with moderate gravel that contained sherds of early Roman pottery. Below this was 5, an olive grey clay silty sand with frequent gravel that contained numerous sherds of Roman pottery. Ditch 6 had a wide, flat-based V-shaped profile and truncated pit 8.

Pit 8 was irregular in plan, and only two sides of it were visible in the area available for excavation. It was 0.2m deep, at least 1.2m long by 0.7m wide, and contained a single fill, 7, a pale olive brown sandy silt with frequent gravel that contained sherds of Roman pottery. Pit 8 had steep sides gradually blending into a flat base.

7th November 2001

Observation of the service runs revealed no new features.

8th November 2001

Observation of the service runs revealed no new features.

9th November 2001

Observation of the service runs revealed no new features.

19th November 2001

Observation of one of the drain junctions revealed the presence of two pits. A square hole 1.5m by 1.5m was excavated down to the level of the stone present in the Lower Greensand, a depth of approximately 1.7m. The features were only clearly observed in two of the four faces of the resulting pit.

The features were sealed by two layers, a rubble and hardcore deposit 9, and an earlier makeup deposit 10, which had significantly slumped into the top of pit 14, suggesting that it may have been laid to consolidate this area of the site at some time in the post-medieval period.

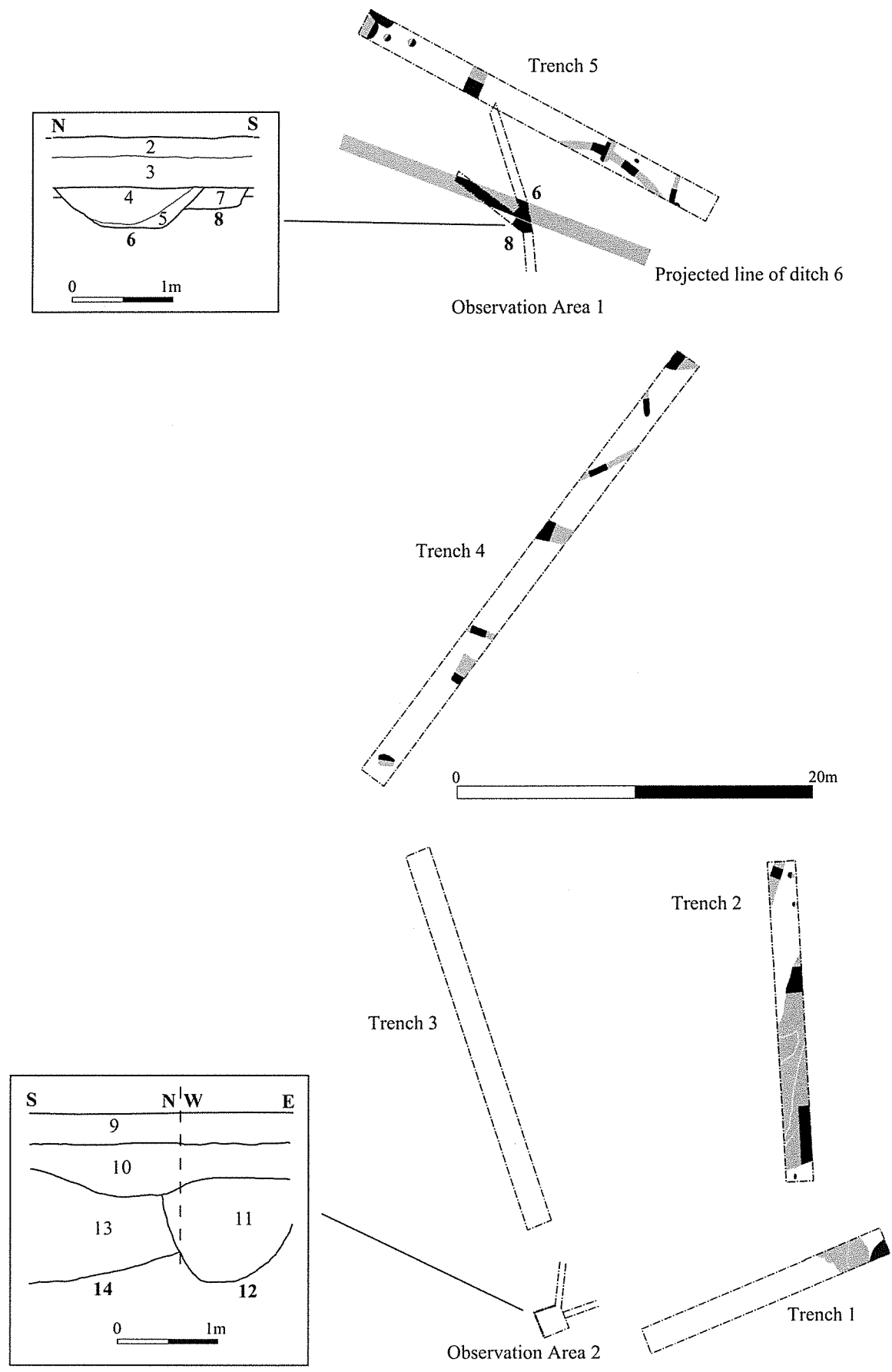


Figure 2 2001 observation areas and 2000 evaluation trenches with excavated sections in black .

Pit 12 was 1.05m deep, at least 1.1m long and 0.5m wide. It contained a single fill, 11, a dark olive grey sandy silty clay with occasional intermittent lenses of orange silty gravel. No finds were recovered from the fill. Pit 12 was steep sided and flat based, due to the layer of stone mentioned above, and cut the fill of pit 14.

Pit 14 was 1.15m deep, at least 1.7m long and 0.6m wide. It contained a single fill, 13, a dark olive grey sandy silty clay. No finds were recovered from the fill. Pit 14 was steep sided and flat based, due to the layer of stone at the base.

19th December 2001

Observation of the service runs revealed no new features. This was the final visit to the site.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The features found during the observation phase of this project are somewhat difficult to relate to those found in the evaluation, since no Roman features were located during that phase of investigation, and no pits were found in the southwest corner of the site. Nearby sites at West End and Chiefs Street have revealed evidence of a Roman presence on the summit of the Ely island and it is not surprising therefore that another Roman feature has been found in this vicinity. The pits may be post-medieval in date, and relate to the other pits found in Trench 1 during the evaluation.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Freshwater Estates (U.K.) Ltd who commissioned and funded the work, in particular Jeremy Nicholson for his interest and good humour, but also the entire site workforce for being unfailingly polite and helpful. Thanks are also due to Judith Roberts who managed the project and edited the report.

The project was carried out in response to a brief produced by the County Archaeology Office (Development Control).

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**APPENDIX A – ELYSJR 01, St Johns Road, Ely, Cambridgeshire
Ceramic Report by Stephen Macaulay**

Roman Pottery

An assemblage of 1773g of pottery was recovered from the observation at St John's Road, Ely, Cambridgeshire (ELYSJR01). All of the material was Roman.

The principal fabric types are: Local Grey ware, Coarse Sandy ware, Oxidised Sandy ware and Grey ware Black Burnished copy 2.

The Roman pottery is un-diagnostic and comprised almost entirely of local coarse wares. There are no fine wares, Samian or even mortaria, indeed the absence of material (rather than presence) most probably indicates an early date, pre 2nd Century AD. The pottery traditions, with a predominance of sandy wares, suggests a Norfolk/Essex origin for the material, and is unlikely to have been derived from sources to the west.

The assemblage was dominated by sandy wares. Forms present were cooking jars, wide necked jars and bowls. A single sherd of a Hadham Red ware flagon was recovered.

The pottery is relatively un-abraded with some large fragments suggesting good survival in situ.

Although the assemblage is small, it is of interest since Roman pottery is very rare in Ely. The pottery is from a domestic assemblage, most probably early Roman in date (c50-120 AD).

Context	Feature	Description	Total Wt.	Context Date Range
4		GW bs & rs inc. cooking jar, GW (oxidised) bs & rs, CSW rs & bs, CSO bs, (single wide necked jar), Hadham Red ware flagon sherd.	1684g	Roman (early)
5		GW bs (sandy fabric), BB2	78g	Roman
7		CSW bs	11g	Roman

GW =grey ware, CSW = coarse sandy ware, CSO = coarse sandy oxidised, BB2 = black burnished copy 2, rs = rim sherd, bs = body sherd



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