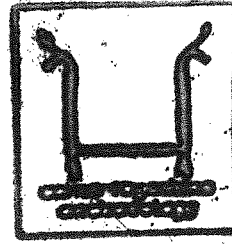
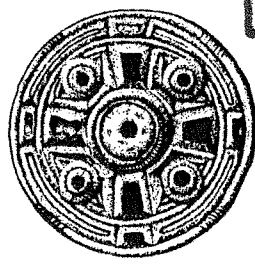


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Archaeological Field Unit

# Roman and Medieval gravel pits along the Avenue, Cavalry Park, March.

S.N.Kemp

1999

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A147

*Commissioned by Construct Reason Ltd*

**Roman and Medieval gravel pits along the Avenue,  
Cavalry Park, March.**

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September 1999

Editor: Dr Paul Spoerry  
Illustrator: Jon Cane BA



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

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## SUMMARY

*Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August 1999 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook field investigations at Cavalry Park, March. Archaeological investigations were undertaken in advance of a housing development by Construct Reason Ltd.*

*Nine trenches totalling 220m in length were machine excavated. In all cases bar Trench 1 which was the furthest from The Avenue, a series of large pits of about 14m in diameter were identified. These are likely to be quarry pits for the extraction of sands and gravels. In the main they appear to be of medieval or post-medieval date, although one is probably Roman.*

*The quantity of Roman pottery recovered from the quarry pits indicates that Roman settlement was not solely located on the northern reaches of March Island as suggested by the cropmark evidence. The finds and archaeological features also suggest that the alignment of the Avenue and the north to south routeway which passes through March, may be much older than originally thought. The routeway may have linked settlements on the south and central parts of March Island and even areas further to the south and close to the Fen Causeway which crossed the fens east to west.*

*In addition to the quarry pits three ditches were identified. Two of these run parallel with the modern field boundaries and are presumed to be medieval or post-medieval although no dating evidence was found. A further undated ditch was identified, orientated southeast to northwest. If the ditch is pre-medieval in date little is likely to survive given the intensity of quarry pit excavation in the medieval period.*

*Gravel extraction continued throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods. During modern times the land has been used as gardens and allotments.*

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**Roman and Medieval gravel pits along the Avenue,  
Cavalry Park, March (TL 416 957)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council were commissioned by Construct Reason Ltd to investigate the archaeological potential within Phase 15 of their housing development programme at Cavalry Park, March (TL416 957).

Archaeological field investigations were undertaken between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August 1999.

**2. LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

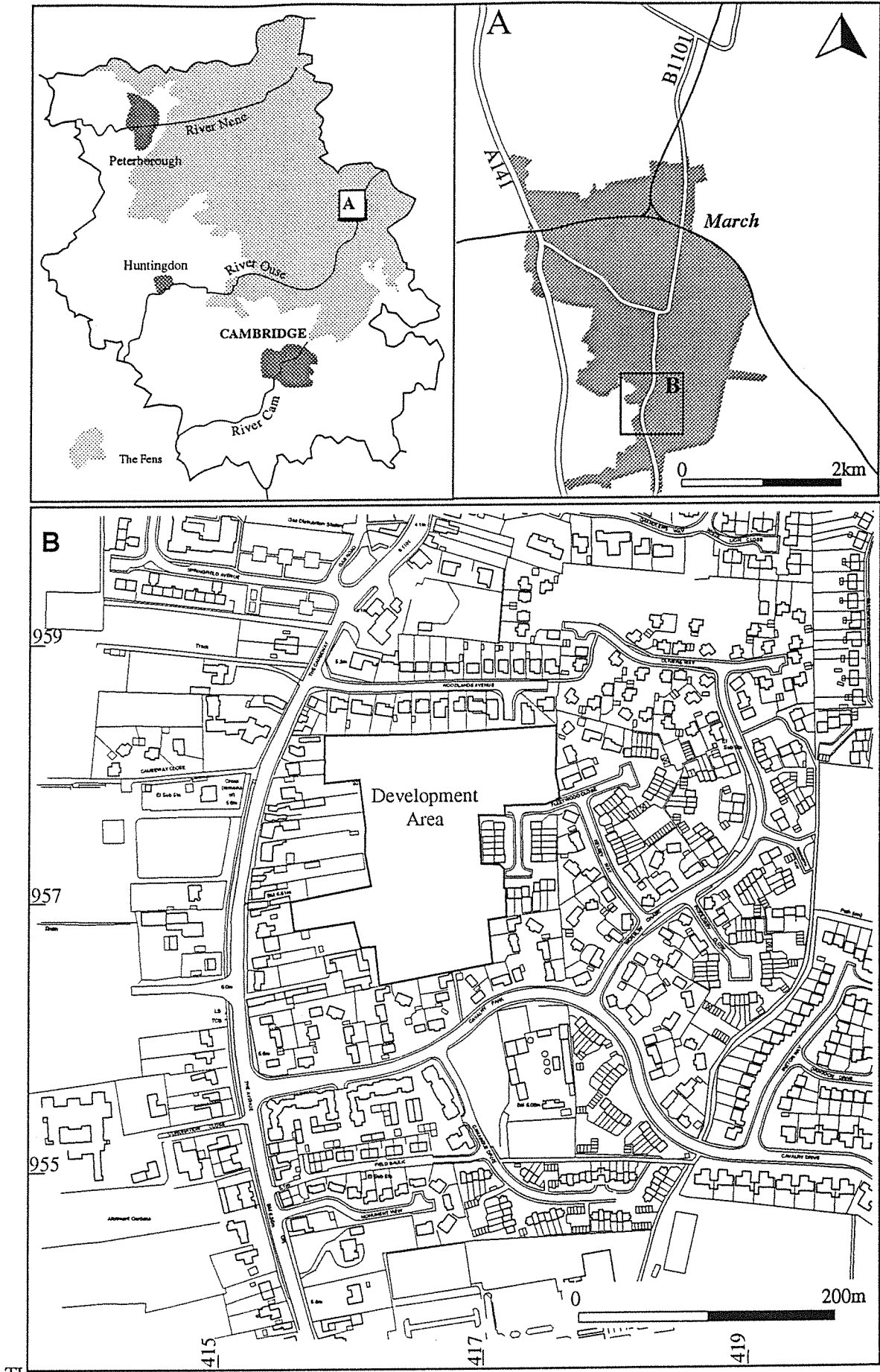
The proposed development is for 58 bungalows, plus access roads, services and landscaping on a plot of approximately 2.2 hectares.

The development site lies to the east of the Avenue and to the south of the town centre of March. Immediately to south of the site lies Town End an area of medieval settlement centred around the church of St. Wendreda (Figure 1).

**3. GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

The development site is located on Anglian Boulder Clays and the March Gravels at around 7m OD. Fen deposits surround much of the gravel island, these deposits are complex due to the migration of the Ouse and Nene Rivers which cut across the region.

The palaeogeographic history of the area indicates that the core of the island on which the development site lies has been dry land since at least the early Neolithic. In comparison the environment around the island would have seen considerable changes in landscape form resulting from sea level rise/fall, peat growth and degradation as well as the migration of local rivers. As a result of this dynamic environment a wide variety of resources would have lain close by influencing the location and permanency of settlement.



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Figure 1 Location plan

Existing ground conditions were uneven, with areas of dense brambles adjacent to areas of former allotments and gardens with mature trees. Modern spoil heaps and disturbed ground were largely located on the eastern side of the development area. Two footpaths presently cross the development site.

#### **4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) shows only a few early archaeological remains on the March Island. Records of Iron Age, Roman and Medieval activity are most common. Earlier prehistoric activity appears to lie close to the margins of the March Island and adjacent to the former rivers, whilst much of the evidence Iron Age and Roman settlement lies to the north of March.

##### **4.1 Early Prehistoric**

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic artefacts have been found in the parish with flint scatters identified on the gravels adjacent to Gaul's Road (SMR 05210 and 08455). Neolithic sites are few. In addition to sites along Gaul Road another site is known from Stonea (SMR 05162). The majority of lithic material discovered at March is Bronze Age in date and lie around the Bronze Age fen margins (SMR 04548, 05007 and 08459). These sites commonly overlook areas of active roddons which were prone to flooding or adjacent to fen and marshlands (Hall 1987). A small Bronze Age barrow cemetery lies within Stonea and Wimblington located close to the Bronze Age boundary between fen and dry land.

##### **4.2 Iron Age**

During the Iron Age period fen peats developed around most of the island. The Fenland Research Project has shown that there were many sites of this period on the central fen islands and the islands are considered to have been slightly larger in area than in the medieval period. Stonea camp lies to the west of March and is an Iron Age fort which is believed to have figured prominently in the Boudican revolt.

On the March Island there are two known Iron Age settlement sites which lie to the north of the development area, these sites are believed to have had a riverine connection with Stonea Camp (SMR 08448 and 10575). Occupation continued into the Late Iron Age as indicated by the occurrence of Icenic coins at these sites and March island may have been an area into which the Celtic tribes retreated in advance of the Roman conquest (Hall 1987). At Field Baulk Farm, which lies close to the development area, an important Icenian coin hoard was found (Potter 1996).

### **4.3 Roman**

During the Roman period the occupiable land increased to the northeast of the island as marine flooding ceased. Extensive areas of Roman cropmarks have been recognised in the northeast corner of March and also on Stonea Island. These ditch systems appear to represent field systems and enclosures associated with occupation sites of Roman date which lay on, or adjacent to, the newly exposed land surface. Much of the rest of the Island remained surrounded by peat. In the middle of the 3rd century AD flood deposits reached 2m OD and lead to the temporary abandonment of many sites in the Fenlands including SMR 10575 at Grandford.

The three main settlement sites at March are at Grandford (SMR 10575), Flaggrass Hill Road (SMR 08448) and Stonea Grange and they appear to have developed adjacent to the late Iron Age settlements mentioned above. The Fen Causeway runs east to west through the Fens and across the northern part of March Island where Grandford and Flaggrass are situated.

A number of sites lie on the silt roddons (former Roman canals) to the north of March and were associated with salt production. Peat would have been the main fuel for this activity and, as with the other raw materials required for salt production, its availability restricted processing to the fen edge and tidal water courses. Large turbaries of up to 60 ha. lay to the east of March in the parish of Upwell.

During the Roman period March was an important cross fen staging post with its major industry based on salt production. The island population appears to have expanded into newly acquired and reclaimed land. Few remains are known from the south and central areas of the Island. Where Roman finds have been reported in these southern areas they have tended to be the occasional stray finds of pottery suggesting that the gravel uplands of the island continued as an area of low intensity activity, possibly associated with arable cultivation. Work within the town in the early nineteenth century yielded a skeleton of Roman date (Whittaker 1998) which suggests that Roman settlement activities were a lot more extensive than the cropmark evidence indicates. Existing knowledge suggests that where occupation does occur it appears to have lain close to the edge of the silt bed to the north of March. Recent archaeological work is likely however to lead to a reassessment of the Roman settlement patterns for March.

### **4.4 Saxon and Medieval**

The exact whereabouts of the Saxon and Medieval settlements of March is unknown, although the cross stump and church of St Wendreda, which is commonly thought to be the early centre of March, lies about 0.5 km southwest of the development area. St Wendreda's Church has fabric dating to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and received a papal indulgence in 1343, however, the church is believed to have Norman origins (Hall 1987; Wright 1991). It is likely that the settlement around the church is pre-conquest



in date and may have extended as far northwards as the stone wayside cross (SMR 05918) which lies close to the north-western corner of the development area.

It is likely that the existing course of the Nene through March was constructed during the late Saxon period, possibly in the tenth century, in response to peat shrinkage and subsequent drainage problems (Hall 1987). By the late sixteenth century a minor port was recorded, although no traces were found during archaeological work at the new March Library (Kenney 1998). The bridge has existed in its present location since at least 1544 (Bevis 1976).

#### **4.5 Post-Medieval**

Evaluations undertaken at Grays Lane by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit would appear to support the late development of the land adjacent to the crossing over the River Nene. Here much of the archaeology is post seventeenth century and the sequence of deposits has been interpreted as the intentional raising of the ground level to mitigate against flooding or ground saturation. The presence of 2 sherds of Medieval pottery from this site and a sherd from Creek Road by BUFAU could possibly indicate the proximity a former settlement which may prove to be the evidence for the original focus around which the Post-Medieval town development.

### **5. METHODOLOGY**

The aims of the evaluation were to report on the presence, nature and condition of any archaeological remains within the development area. This investigation entailed machine excavation of trenches totalling 220 m in length and 2m in width providing a 2% coverage of the development area (Figure 2). On the developers request the trenches were located to avoid the proposed house foundations. Within this constraint trenches were placed to strike the areas of potential archaeological interest.

Trenches were excavated down to expose the natural which were a combination of sands, gravels and clays, except where archaeological remains could be clearly defined at a higher level.

On exposure any archaeological features were cleaned to clarify stratigraphic relationships and planned. Hand excavation occurred to inform on the nature and date of the archaeology encountered. Excavated features were recorded using a combination of photography, section drawings and a written contextual description, as was outlined in the specification for archaeological works.

Trench plans are the result of a local co-ordinate survey undertaken with a Zeiss Recelta total station. The survey was rectified for presentation along with the Ordnance Survey digital map for the site.

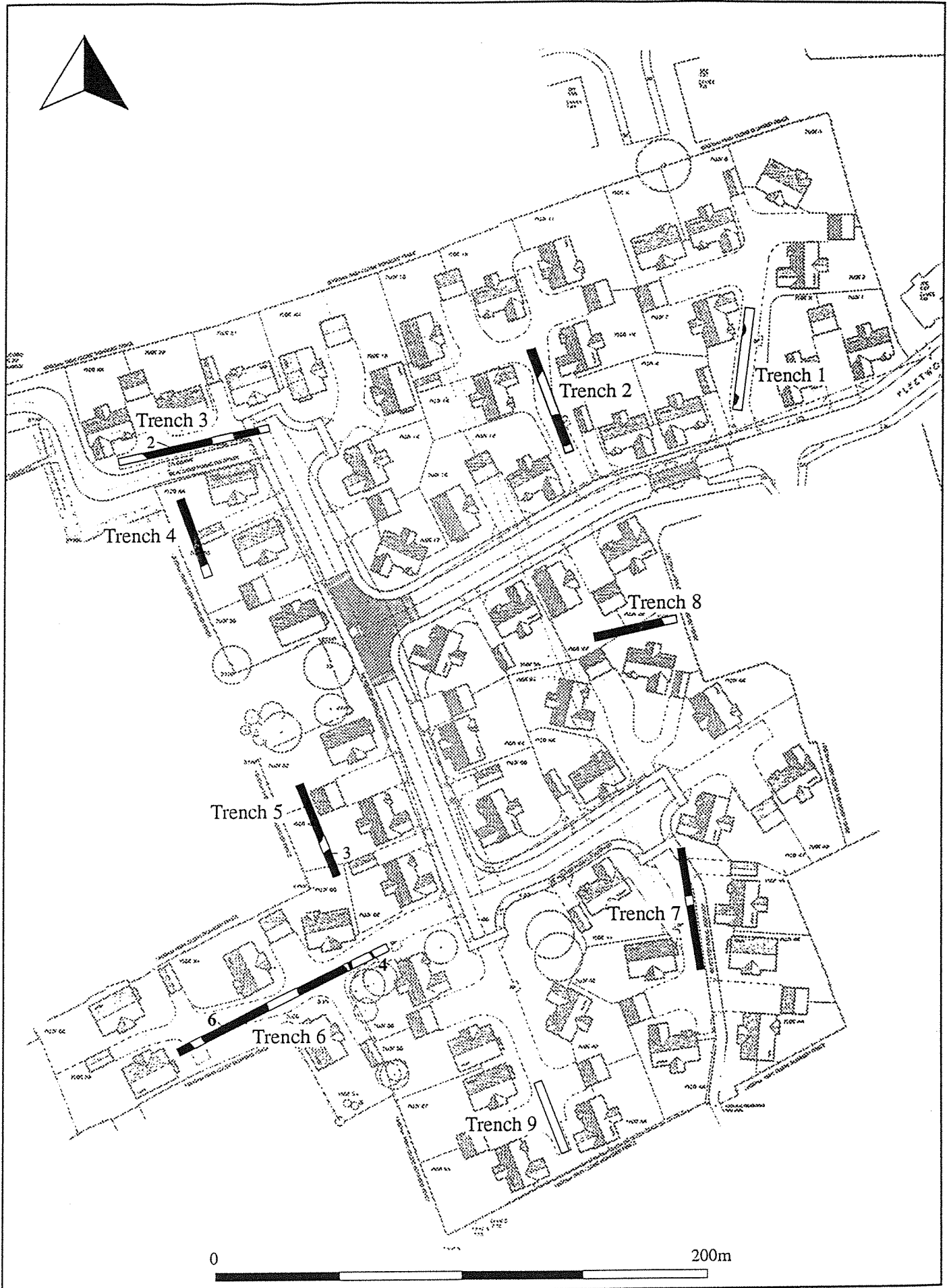


Figure 2 Plan showing trench positions and building footprints

## 6. RESULTS

The basic stratigraphy in every trench was a sandy silt top soil of between 0.20 to 0.30m in depth, overlying a similar subsoil which was between 0.30 and 0.40m in depth, which in turn overlay natural sands and gravels with occasional clays.

Trench 1 was 21m in length and located in the northeastern corner of the development area adjacent to the existing Cavalry Park development (Figure 2). 0.45m of disturbed ground was removed prior to exposing natural gravels and two modern pits.

Trench 2 was 21m in length and located on the northern side of the development area (Figure 2). Topsoil was 0.30m in depth. Natural gravels were encountered at 0.70m below ground level. Two large, undated pits were identified, both cut through the subsoil. Only one of these pits was exposed entirely in plan and indicated a sub-circular feature of about 9m in diameter. No finds were recovered.

Trench 3 was 32m in length and was located in the northwest corner of the development area (Figure 2). 0.28m of topsoil over lay the archaeology and gravels were found at a depth of 0.64m. Two large pits were exposed, both cut through the subsoil. The largest of the two pits (context 2) was about 14m in diameter and the other 8m (1). Machine excavation yielded Medieval and post-Medieval pottery and clay pipe stems from the pit fills. A single large sherd of Roman grey ware was found in the larger of the two pits (2).

Trench 4 was 16m in length and was located in the northwest corner of the development area, running north-south and parallel with the property boundaries along the Avenue (Figure 2). Topsoil depth was 0.20m and the natural gravels lay at 0.66m below the surface. A single pit of over 15m in diameter and cut by modern features was identified. No finds were recovered.

Trench 5 lay 40m to the south and continues the alignment of Trench 4. Trench 5 was 20m long (Figure 2). Topsoil was 0.20m in depth with the natural sands and gravels 0.51m below the surface. Two pits were identified below the topsoil, the largest of the two being over 12m in diameter. Exposure of pit (3) indicates that it was at least 6m in diameter, however, it did not extend into Trench 6. Limited hand and machine excavation of the pit fills (3) yielded animal bone and Roman pottery; grey wares and colour coated pottery. No other finds were recovered.

Trench 6 was 46m in length and lay in the southwest corner of the site (Figure 2). Topsoil was 0.28m in depth and gravels were exposed at a depth of 0.68m below the surface. Three large pits of 12, 13m and >4m in diameter were uncovered. No finds were recovered from any of these. Three ditches were identified, two of which ran parallel with the existing boundaries. Two of the ditches were excavated and found to be filled with sandy silts with a very small percentage of flint gravels. No finds were recovered. Ditch 6 which runs parallel to the existing field boundaries was flat-based

with concave sides. The ditch was 0.75m in width and 0.30m in depth. The other ditch (4) was orientated southeast to northwest and was 0.55m in width, 0.23m in depth and v-shaped with concave sides.

Trench 7 was 23m in length and occupied the southeast corner of the development area (Figure 2). Topsoil was 0.27m in depth with gravels occurring at 0.97m below the surface. Pit fills lay below the topsoil and exposure of the gravels indicated the presence of two pits. No finds were recovered from either of the pits.

Trench 8 was 16m in length and was located on the eastern side of the development area close to the existing Cavalry Park development (Figure 2). Topsoil was 0.30m in depth and natural gravels were exposed at a depth of 1m. A single pit of over 12m in diameter was exposed. No finds were recovered.

Trench 9 was 15m in length and was located close to the southern boundary of the site (Figure 2). Topsoil was 0.30m in depth and gravels were exposed at a depth of 0.48m. A single pit of over 10m in diameter was exposed. No finds were recovered.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The results of the archaeological fieldwork indicate a long period of pit excavation within the proposed development area. Apart from three ditches, two of which are unlikely to be particularly old and a number of modern features no other archaeological features are present.

The proximity of these pits suggests that pit excavation in the area was intense, however, it is unlikely that all of these features were open at any one time. The presence of pits and the March Gravels suggests that this area was a suitable source of sands and gravels presumably also with a good transportation network.

The presence of Roman, Medieval and post-Medieval pottery suggests a long period sand and gravel extraction from this area with the materials possibly used for construction and maintenance of the roads such as the Avenue. The presence of sherds of Roman pottery in one pit and uncontaminated by more recent finds may suggest either suggest that some of these large pits are Roman quarries or that medieval quarrying has disturbed Roman settlement which lay in the immediate area. An alternative is that the Roman material occurring in the backfill deposits of the quarries was brought in from elsewhere when the site was levelled.

If, as suspected, some of the quarrying is of Roman date the gravels may have been used in the Roman period to construct and maintain the Avenue and its continuation north-south through the March. This routeway would have provided a link between any Roman settlements on the southern side of March Island with those in the north

and also to the Fen Causeway which was a major routeway across the fens in Roman times.

The evidence for Roman activity adds much to our existing knowledge of the development of March. The results indicate that, as suspected Roman occupation was not solely located around the larger farming and industrial centres on the northern side of the Island, but occupation should be expected throughout the Island and particularly on the light sandy soils overlying the March Gravels.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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I have also appreciated the assistance of the Paul Spoerry the Project Manager who has managed the archaeological work.

Finally, I wish to thank Construct Reason Ltd for funding the archaeological evaluation.

This project was carried out in response to a brief drawn up by the County Archaeology Office.

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Archaeology

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