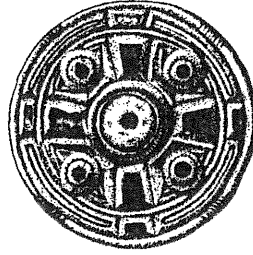


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Archaeological Field Unit

**A Medieval Oven and Ditches at the Railway Mission,
Silver Street, Ely:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

S Kenney and R Casa-Hatton

2000

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A159

Commissioned by The Olive Tree Fellowship

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March 2000

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SUMMARY

Between the 24th and 27th of January the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridge County Council (AFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation on land located to the rear of the former Railway Mission at Silver Street, Ely.

No evidence emerged for occupation in the form of ribbon development along the current course of Silver Street, however, it is possible that the medieval road took a slightly different route. Archaeological features were encountered which suggest that the area may have been close to agricultural activity, possibly part of a farmyard. The features consisted of boundary ditches including a probable enclosure, pits and post-holes, together with an oven or corn-dryer for domestic or agricultural use. Based on artefactual evidence, they were dated to the 13th-14th century. Thick post-medieval make-up layers sealed the archaeological features.

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**A Medieval Oven and Ditches at The Railway Mission, Silver Street, Ely:
An Archaeological Evaluation
TL 5390/8005**

1 INTRODUCTION

Between the 24th and 27th January 2000 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (AFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation on land located to the rear of the former Railway Mission at Silver Street, Ely. The work was carried out at the request of The Olive Tree Fellowship, in advance of construction, and was in response to a brief set by the County Archaeology Office (CAO).

The site is located on the south side of Silver Street, between numbers 15 and 15b, close to the heart of medieval Ely, 200m south-west of the Cathedral, and 100m west of the site of the Norman motte and bailey castle at Cherry Hill (Fig. 1). At the time of the evaluation the development site comprised a rectangular area of grassed open land covering some 46m².

The presence of archaeological remains was considered likely by the CAO on the basis of the site's location near the centre of the historic city, and information contained in the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

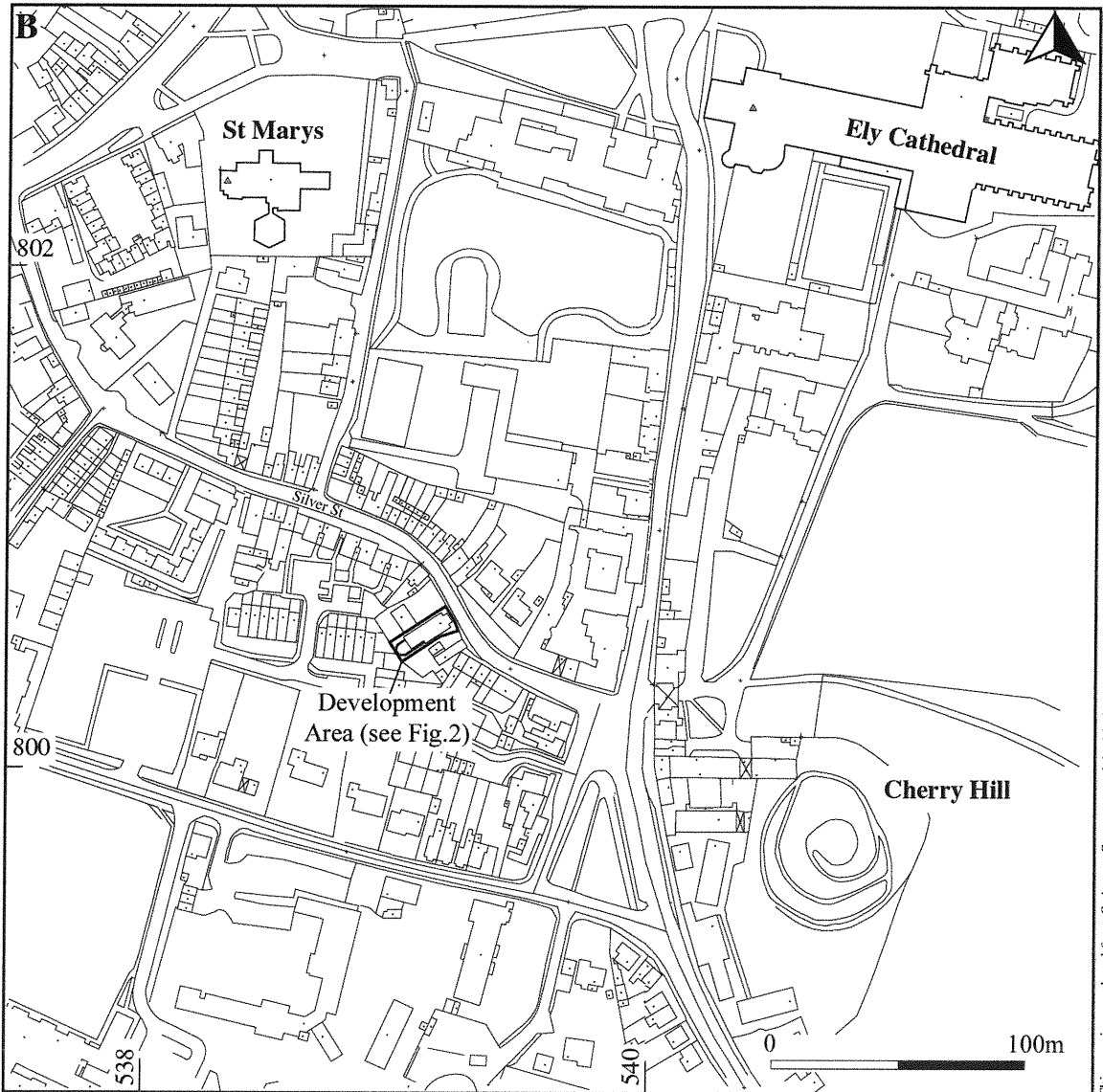
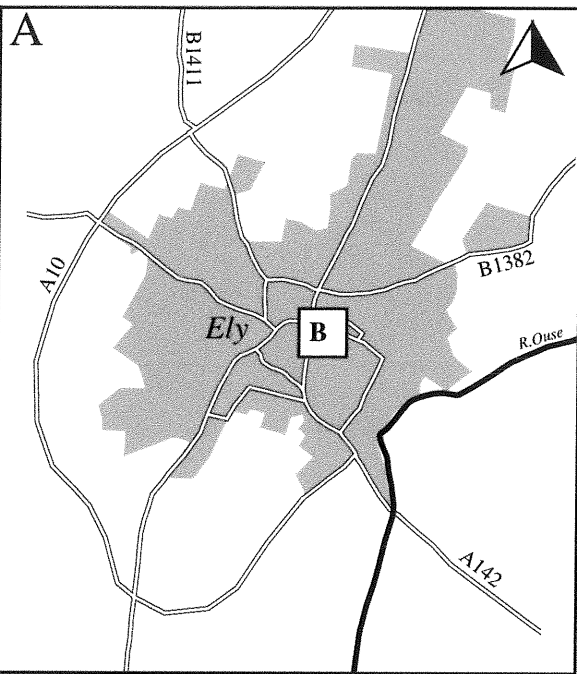
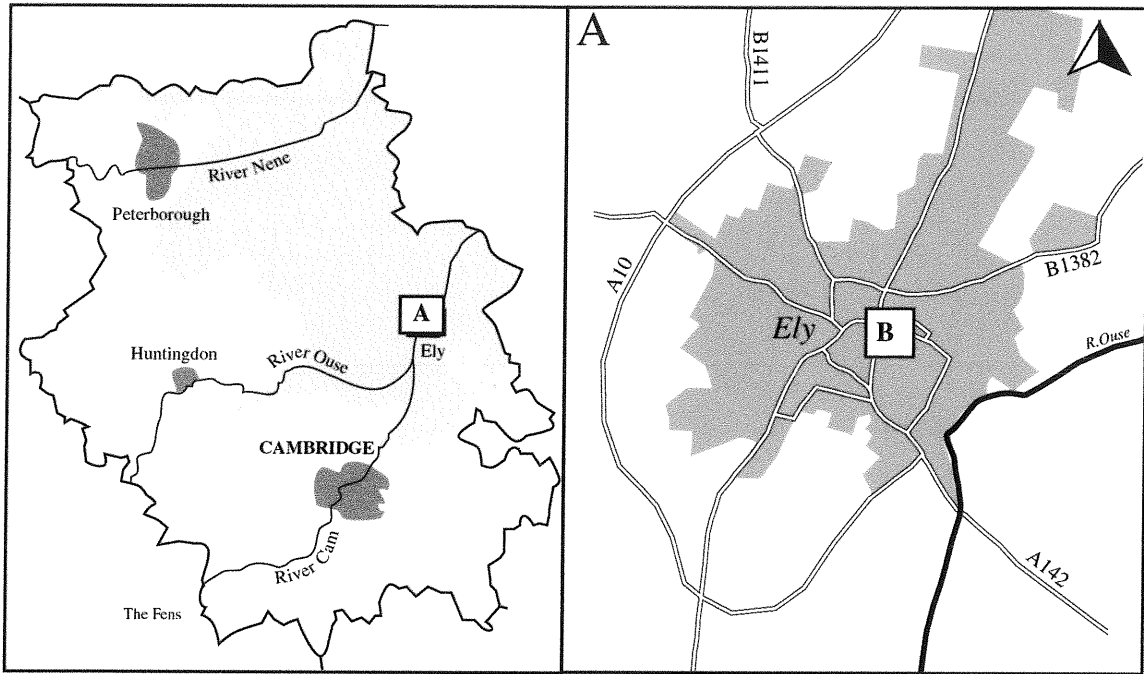
Five contiguous segments of foundation trench were opened by a mini-excavator. All the segments contained archaeological features in the base.

Weather conditions during the fieldwork were fine, and there were no factors that are likely to have had an adverse effect upon context recognition. Accordingly, the confidence rating to be applied to the results is judged to be high.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

According to the British Geological Survey, the centre of the city lies on the Lower Greensand which caps the Ely island, the bulk of which is composed of Kimmeridge Clay. The top of the Lower Greensand as exposed during this evaluation was composed of orange to olive brown silty clay sands.

The site is centred upon TL 5390/8005 at an average height of 19.27mOD, on some of the higher ground on the Island of Ely.



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Figure 1 Site Location Map

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Historical Background

Lying 23km north-east of Cambridge on the river Great Ouse, Ely was mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086 AD) as a small agricultural settlement. Its development as an important medieval town began after the construction of the cathedral on the site of an earlier monastery. At the same time, the canalization of the river provided important trade links.

Silver Street is called *Swaleuyslane* in 1280, i.e. Swallows Lane, and later becomes *Walpoleslane* by 1331, after the family of Henry de *Walpol* (Reaney).

3.2 Archaeological Background

The earliest evidence for occupation on the summit of the Ely island is in the form of Mesolithic flint artefacts from the Bray's Lane excavation (SMR 10175,a ,b ,c ,d). Later occupation from the Iron Age was found just south-east of the Cathedral. Late Saxon pottery was found at St Mary's Lodge in St Mary's Street in 1993 (Robinson 2000). The Cathedral itself dates from the 1080's. What is not known is the exact size and form of Middle and Late Saxon Ely. Numerous excavations in Ely have produced medieval finds, and evidence has been found in several locations of medieval structures. Some standing buildings have medieval fabric within them, including the farm buildings, formerly the hospitals of St John the Baptist and St Mary Magdelene, at the northern end of St John's road (SMR 07342,a, b, c, SMR 08435). The location of the site near to the heart of the ancient city, close to one of the main through routes, and only 100m from two medieval hospitals suggested an area with high archaeological potential. Ely is well known as a pottery production centre in the medieval and post-medieval periods, and quantities of the local wares have been recovered from sites all over the city. Over the past few years, several production sites have been examined and the local wares are currently the subject of detailed study

Following recent archaeological work in the city, both the shape and extent of the medieval town are becoming increasingly clear. However, very little is known for the Middle and Late Saxon periods.

Cratendune, supposedly the precursor settlement to Ely, was always thought to have been located about a mile to the south of the present city. Recent findings from the west of the city may point to a site on that side as the origin of the Saxon settlement.

Recent excavations within the city to the north and north-west of Silver Street (Kenney 1998, 1999, forthcoming) have provided evidence for Middle- and Late-Saxon occupation which nevertheless remains ill-defined towards the Cathedral precinct.

Saxon remains are not presently known from the general location of the site under investigation. An archaeological evaluation carried out at 12 Silver Street (SMR 10477) in 1991, almost opposite the current site, revealed only post-medieval make-up layers. Additionally, patterns of medieval ridge and furrow can be seen 100m to the south at Barton Farm (SMR11881).

4 METHODOLOGY

Prior to the evaluation a suitable level of documentary research was undertaken in order to assess the archaeological potential of the site. The results of the background study were not formally presented in a separate form but incorporated into the present report.

Given the relatively small size of the area under investigation, together with the health and safety implications of working in very cramped conditions, it was agreed to remove the topsoil over the whole of the new building footprint, and thence to proceed with the excavation of the foundation trenches. Removal of the topsoil revealed an obviously post-medieval make-up deposit containing twentieth century metal debris.

The foundation trenches were excavated using a toothless ditching bucket 0.60m wide. They were cleaned by hand to allow feature and deposit recognition. Each feature and deposit was allocated a unique reference number (single context recording). Relevant sections and detail plans were drawn at 1:10 and 1:20 respectively. A top plan of the excavated foundation trenches was also produced at 1:50 scale to show the location of the exposed and sampled archaeological features.

Feature sampling criteria were determined by the nature of the archaeology encountered, and partially by the limits of space. However, the most significant features were excavated to provide an accurate evaluation of the archaeological remains on site. Finally, a photographic record was compiled which comprised monochrome and colour photographs of trenches and excavated features.

The recording system and post-excavation procedures followed standard AFU practices, a modified form of the Museum of London Archaeology Service system.

5 RESULTS

Following the removal of the turf and modern topsoil (layer 1) to an average depth of 0.30m, the foundation trenches were excavated through a deposit of post-medieval make-up (layer 2) some 0.60m thick. Archaeological features were encountered beneath this deposit. They appeared to be cut through an

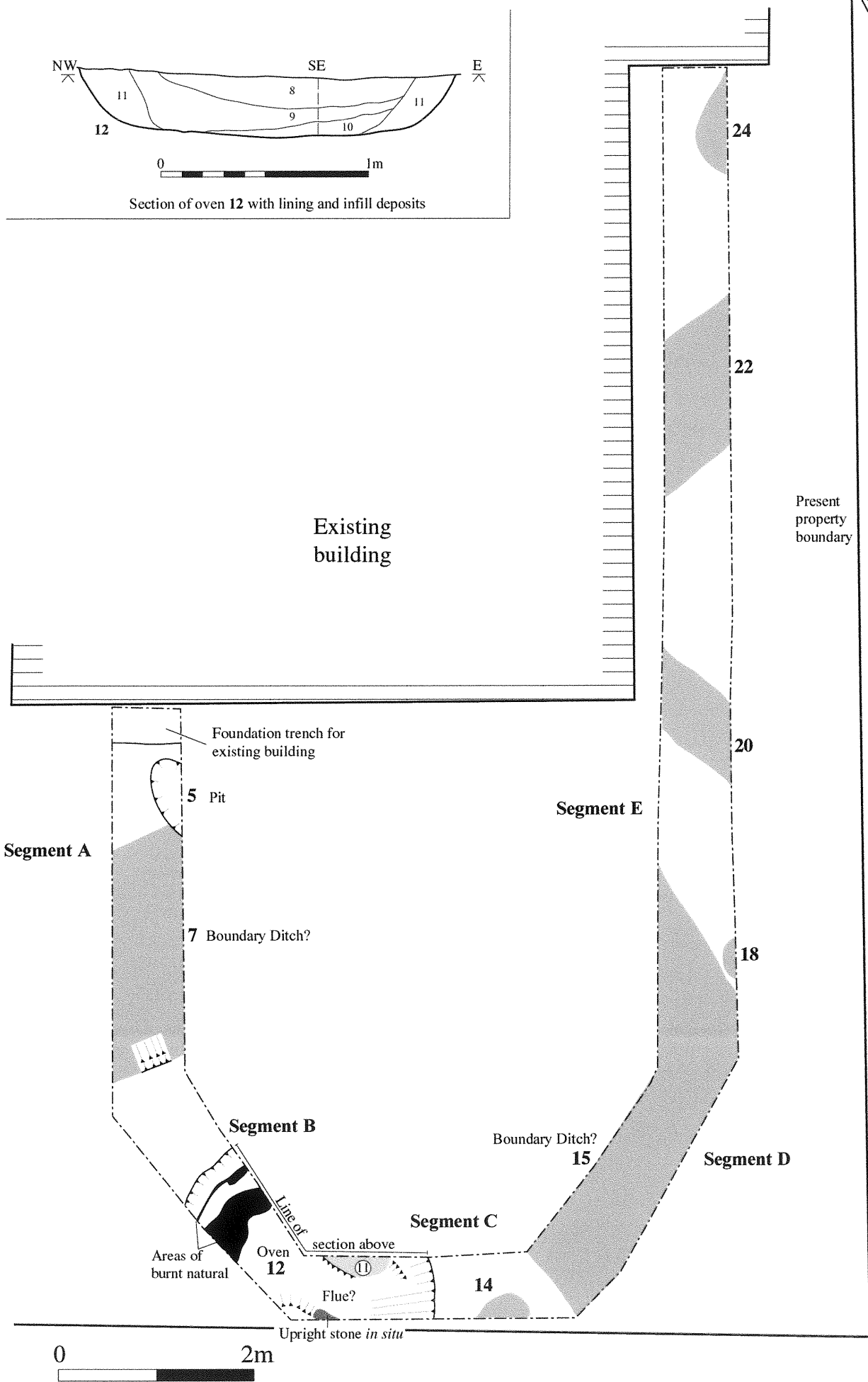


Figure 2 Plan of trench showing archaeological features (unexcavated sections shown in tone).

earlier cultivation layer (layer 3). The trenches were between 0.6 and 0.7m wide, and consisted of five contiguous segments (referred to as A, B, C, D and E) which formed a 'U' shaped layout.

Segment A (4m long) (Fig. 2)

The excavation of Segment A revealed the presence of a small oval pit 5, 0.1m deep and at least 0.8m long and 0.5m wide, which seemed to truncate the north edge of a major boundary ditch on an east west alignment. This ditch, 7, 2.1m wide and at least 0.3m deep, was partly excavated to establish whether it might have represented the remnants of a furrow. Its substantial depth and the steep side, however, pointed to the presence of a boundary ditch. Fragments of bone and residual prehistoric flint were recovered from the fills of both features, together with few sherds of medieval and residual Roman pottery.

Segments B (2.75m long) and C (2.75m long) (Fig. 2)

The excavation of Segment B (adjacent to Segment A) together with Segment C revealed the remains of a partially burnt feature, 12, which was interpreted as an oven. It was at least 2.50m long, and probably around 2.00m wide (Fig. 2). At the south end there was a distinct channel formed on the east side by the edge of the lining and on the west side by an upright slab of sandstone which was buried in the side of the trench. In the trench edge section there was some suggestion of ash having been dragged or raked out of the pit. No evidence emerged for industrial activity which was directly associated with it. This may indicate that the feature had a domestic function and could have represented a baking/drying oven. The cut was lined around the sides with fill 11, a layer of chalky clay. On the almost flat, burnt base of 12 lay 10, a thin layer of light grey burnt ash. This was sealed by 9, an olive brown sandy clay with frequent dark red partially burnt clay and chalk lumps, possibly parts of a collapsed superstructure. At some stage the oven fell into disuse and was allowed to silt up with 8, an olive brown sandy silty clay. Fragments of tile, mid 13th-mid 14th century pottery, residual prehistoric flint, together with burnt bone and shells, were all recovered from fill (10). In addition to this, an iron 'bill-hook' or 'draw-knife' (Cane pers. comm.) was found in the same deposit.

Next to the oven a possible post-hole 14 was uncovered which was not excavated. A further possible post-hole was observed in the area (18 in Segment E, below). Both were 0.45m in diameter. Due to the limited nature of the archaeological intervention, it was not possible to establish any functional association between these features.

Segments D (3m long) and E (9.75m long) (fig. 2)

Segment D contained another major boundary ditch that was partly visible in Segment E. This ditch 16, 3.00m wide, was on a north-south alignment. It probably formed the corner of an enclosure by joining the projected outline of ditch 7 in Segment A at a right angle. No finds were recovered from the surface of the fill, 15, which was unexcavated.

Finally, Segment E contained a series of ditches on different alignments and a possible posthole. Immediately adjacent to the eastern edge of 15 was possible posthole 18. Linear feature 20 was 0.60m wide, and oriented NNW-SSE,

whereas ditch 22 was 1.25m wide on an E-W alignment. At the north-east end of the trench, pit 24 was subrectangular, at least 0.8m long and 0.45m wide.

None of the features in Segments D and E were extensively excavated, however test pitting into them to determine their character and date produced no finds. Unstratified artefacts were retrieved from the spoil heap during excavation of the trenches. These consisted of flint, medieval and post-medieval pottery and animal bone.

6 DISCUSSION

The grassed topsoil overlay a layer which consisted of post-medieval make-up, and sealed the archaeological features. These features were themselves cut into a probable early medieval cultivation soil. Given that few potentially structural features were located, the nature of the features was consistent with the interpretation of the site at Silver Street as being peripheral to a dwelling with a possibly agricultural function. In particular, boundary ditches forming at least one possible enclosure could point to stock corrals, and would suggest that the area may have been a farmyard. This would be consistent with the interpretation of oven 12 as a bread oven or corn-dryer.

The orientation of the ditches conforms to the general pattern of property boundaries in the surrounding area, which is probably a survival of the medieval layout. Where the site is located on Silver Street, there is a distinct dog-leg kink, and while the present building is aligned perpendicular to the road, the archaeological boundaries are not. This suggests that the present shape of Silver Street may not represent the original course of the medieval road, and that it may have run further to the north, continuing the alignment of the current road to the west of the site. This would place the site further from the road frontage than at present and adds weight to the notion of activities associated with a borderline agricultural zone.

Besides the ditches, pits and possible post-holes were identified. Unfortunately, due to the limited extent of the archaeological excavation it was not possible to determine their function.

The finds from all excavated features provided a fairly homogenous assemblage of pottery (mid13th-mid14th century), bone and metal objects, namely a bill-hook or draw-knife for crop processing. From a quantitative point of view, the distribution and concentration of the artefactual remains were consistent with the previously stated interpretation of the site. Residual artefacts were also recovered. These consisted of a few sherds of Roman pottery and prehistoric flint.

All the archaeological features were cut through (and were therefore later than) a thin deposit which was interpreted as representing remnants of an earlier cultivation soil. This would indicate that the earliest usage of the site for which

there is any surviving evidence was agricultural. Patterns of ridge and furrow observed near Barton Farm, c. 100m to the south of Silver Street indicate the proximity of cultivation during the medieval and post-medieval periods.

An archaeological evaluation carried out at 12 Silver Street in 1991 revealed the presence of post-medieval make-up layers which bear close similarities with those from the present site. No earlier features were found during the work.

No evidence emerged for occupation in the form of ribbon development along the road frontage, probably for the reasons suggested above-that the alignment of Silver Street has altered. At the time, the settlement focus was located further to the east, i.e. towards the site of the extant motte and cathedral.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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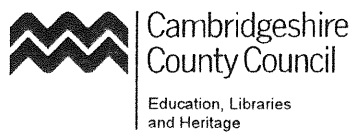
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