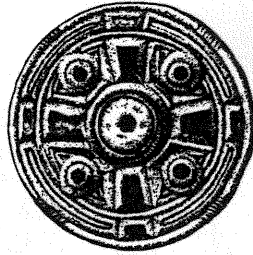


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Archaeological Field Unit

**Undated Ditches at Steeple Morden Primary School:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

S Kenney

2001

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A185

*Commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council Property and Procurement
Division*

**Undated Ditches at Steeple Morden Primary School:
An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 2856/4255)**

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SUMMARY

The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council has conducted an archaeological evaluation on 0.021ha of land at Steeple Morden Primary School, Cambridgeshire (TL 2856/4255). This was in advance of a proposed extension to replace a mobile classroom

A ditch with a complex profile was revealed in one trench, but no datable material was recovered from it. It was sealed by a post-medieval deposit, however, and may itself be medieval or earlier in date. An undated ditch running on an east-west alignment was revealed in trench 2.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY	1
3	HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND	3
4	METHODOLOGY	5
5	RESULTS	5
6	DISCUSSION	6
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	6
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
	Maps consulted	6
	LIST OF FIGURES	
	Figure 1 Site location	2
	Figure 2 Section and plan of ditch	4

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1 INTRODUCTION

On the 29th of May 2001 and the 23rd of August, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (AFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation on land at Steeple Morden Primary School, Cambridgeshire (TL 2856/4255). The work was carried out at the request of Cambridgeshire County Council Property and Procurement Division, and was in response to a brief prepared by the County Archaeology Office (CAO).

The site lies in the centre of Steeple Morden, just to the north of the Church and to the west of Hay Street. The two areas affected by the development proposals total 0.021ha. At the present time both areas are covered by tarmac.

The presence of archaeological remains was considered likely by the CAO on the basis of information contained in the County Sites and Monuments record (SMR).

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

2.1 Geology

According to the British Geological Survey, the centre of Steeple Morden sits on the Lower Beds (known as Chalk Marl) of the Cretaceous Lower Chalk ridge of south Cambridgeshire (BGS 1976). The northern part of the village lies on the Upper Beds of the Lower Chalk.

2.2 Topography

Steeple Morden lies at the southern extreme of the county, on the border with Hertfordshire, at a height ranging from 50m OD in the centre of the village to 28m OD towards the northern parish boundary. The benchmark used in this evaluation is located on the church and has a value of 50.6mOD.

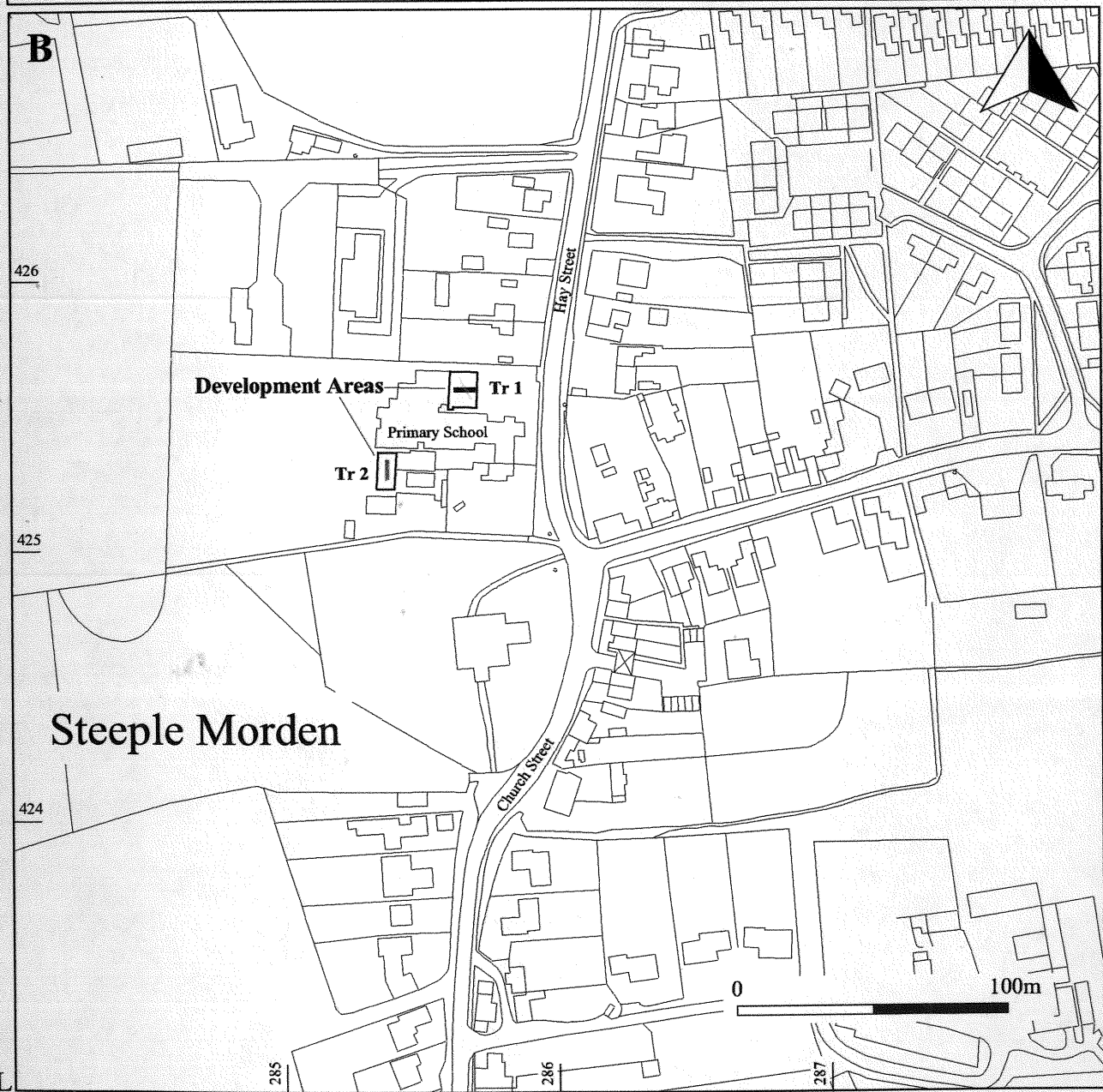
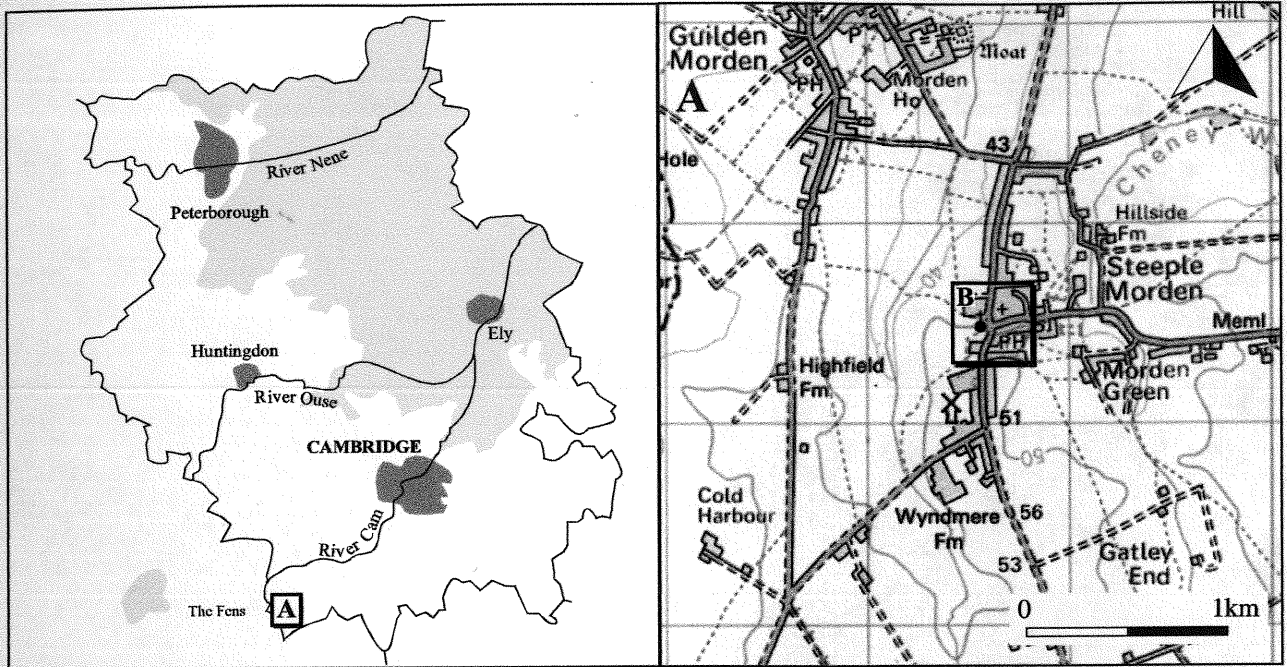


Figure 1 Site location

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Historical Background

Originally known as South Morden, since Guilden Morden is to the north, the village was known by its current name as early as 1242 (Reaney 1943). The '*Steeple*' was added because of the church steeple, probably a prominent landmark at the time. The latter part of the name means 'Marsh-hill', although whether this refers to a hill in a marsh or one with a boggy summit is unknown.

Steeple Morden lies 22km south-west of Cambridge, in a parish of some 1556ha. At the time of the Domesday survey, the village had 42 peasants and 12 *servi*, and this had risen to 95 tenants of the manors in 1279. In 1377 there were 249 adults paying the poll tax and the population probably reached its peak around 1871, when there were 1018. The modern population barely exceeds this at 1090 in 1996.

The village was composed of numerous hamlets, largely spread out along Hay Street, which are now joined following nineteenth century expansion. Two hamlets which still exist are Gatley End on Ashwell Street over a mile to the south, and North Brook End, to the north of the village.

Historically, the parish was largely dependent upon a mixture of sheep and arable agriculture until the nineteenth century, when a wider variety of both crops and livestock were introduced. In the mid-nineteenth century, coprolite digging was briefly introduced and at one time occupied 50 men. The only modern industry was introduced in 1949 when the Melbourn Whiting Co began extracting from the ancient parish chalk pit at Gatley End.

There has been a church in Steeple Morden since at least 1185, and the present building dates back to at least the thirteenth century. The steeple fell in around 1625 (VCH 1982), although other sources place the date at 1633 (SMR) and 1703 (Taylor 1997). Although some reconstruction was carried out not long afterwards, full restoration was only undertaken between 1866 and 1869.

3.2 Archaeological Background

Within the village itself, most of the references in the Sites and Monuments Record refer to medieval and post-medieval earthworks or buildings (SMR 09188, 09909, 02269, 02277). The single exception is the scatter of Roman pottery dating to the second/third centuries found within the grounds of the Primary School in 1959 (SMR 02283).

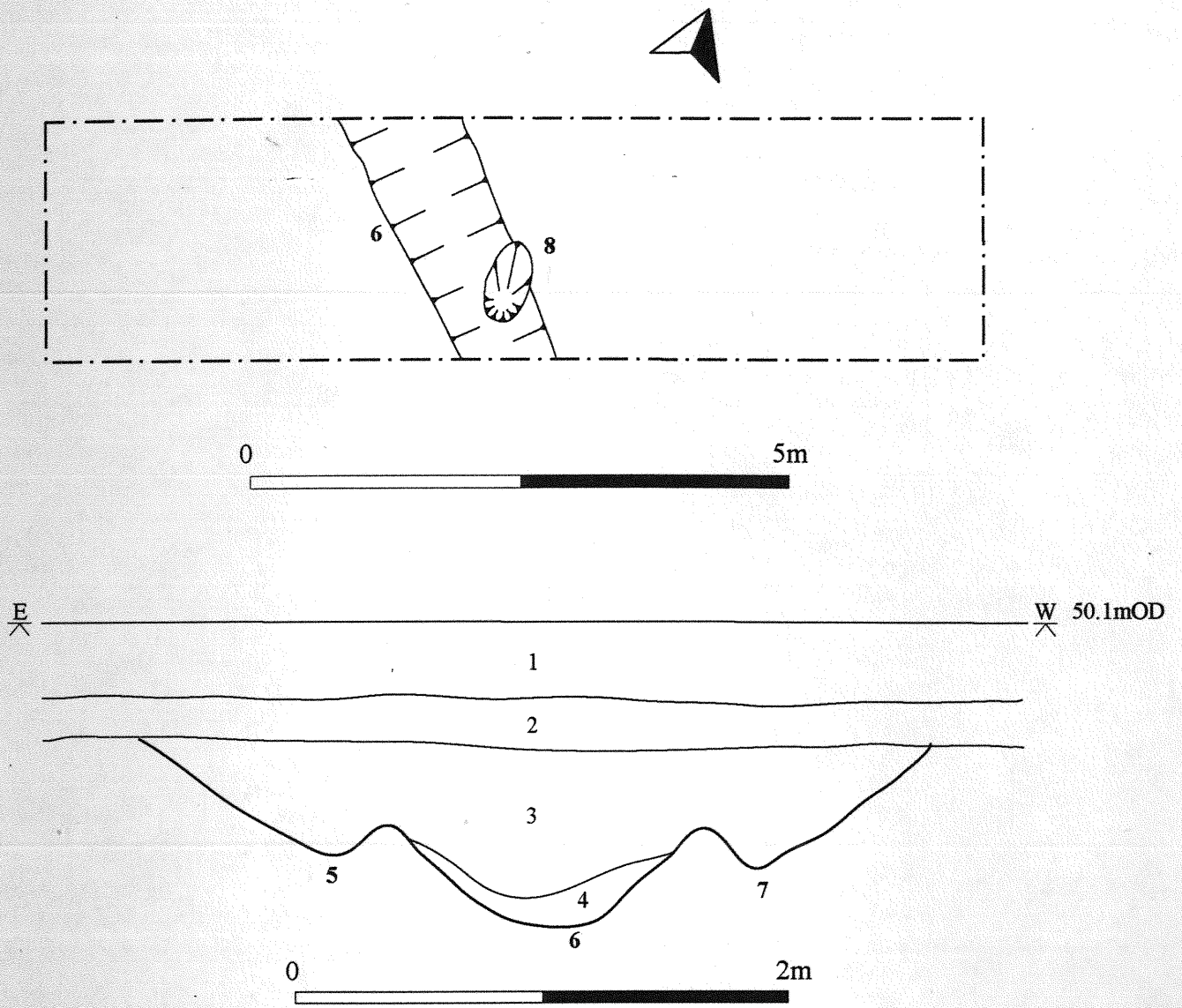


Figure 2 Trench plan for Trench 1 and section through ditch 6

4 METHODOLOGY

Two trenches with a total length of 16m were opened by a JCB using a 1.6 m wide toothless ditching bucket under the supervision of an archaeologist. They were hand cleaned, planned and photographed.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Trench 1 (overburden 0.5m deep maximum)

Trench 1 was 8m long, oriented almost exactly east-west, and revealed a single ditch crossing the trench obliquely, running north north-east-south south-west.

Layer 1 consisted of up to 0.4m of modern tarmac surfaces overlying gravel hardcore. Below this was a post-medieval makeup layer, 2, up to 0.18m deep, dated by the fragments of roof tile it contained. This makeup layer sealed the upper fill of ditch 6.

The ditch appeared in plan to be a single simple cut, but when the section was examined, 6 was clearly flanked by a gully on either side that seemed to form part of the same cut. These gullies were given numbers, 5 and 7, as it cannot be established whether or not they were dug contemporaneously to the central ditch, although the shared upper fill certainly suggests that they were in use at the same time. The upper fill, 3, was a pale brownish grey silty clay with occasional stones and chalk flecks. Animal bone was recovered from this fill. Beneath this was the lower fill, 4, a very pale brownish grey silty clay with occasional yellowish chalk lumps and moderate chalk flecks. No finds were recovered from this fill. The overall dimensions were 3.1m wide, 0.8m deep and at least 2.3m long.

While removing the lower fill, which only appeared in 6, posthole 8 became apparent, filled with the same material. It was oval, 0.54m long, 0.3m wide and survived to a depth of 0.15m. It was also apparently inclined at an angle of about 45° to the south south-west, partly causing the oval shape. No finds were recovered from this, and it would again appear functionally contemporary with ditch 6.

5.2 Trench 2 (overburden 0.40m)

Trench 1 was 8m long and 0.80m deep and located on a north-south alignment. Ditch 8 was 0.60m wide and 0.40m deep and ran on an east-west alignment. This ditch contained a single fill 9, which was composed of pale brown silty clay. No artefacts were recovered from this ditch.

6 DISCUSSION

The location of the site, close to the heart of the medieval village and only just to the north of the fourteenth century church of St Peter and St Paul, suggested that archaeological remains were likely to be encountered. It is perhaps surprising then that more features were not found during the evaluation.

This site has produced two ditches which remain undated at this time. Given the lack of any post-medieval material in the fills, and that they are sealed by a post-medieval layer, they may be medieval or earlier in date. The ditch in trench 1 does not run parallel to the present road, and as this layout may itself be quite ancient, dating to the Saxon period, the ditch could be an early feature. The complex profile is one that has been seen elsewhere in similar forms, and is thought to be a system of flood defence, where the gullies on either side of the main ditch are dug to cope with extra water during seasonal heavy rain. The local geology is chalk, which produces heavy clayey soils that are relatively impermeable, and nearby springs might also have added to the drainage problem.

The ditch in trench 2 was undated and ran on an east-west alignment. This ditch was undated and may be some kind of property boundary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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