

Archaeological Field Unit

**Medieval Remains at Priory House, Swavesey  
An Archaeological Evaluation**

Spencer Cooper and Scott Kenney

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**Cambridgeshire County Council**

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Commissioned by Cowper Griffith Associates on behalf of Mr and Mrs J. Newsum

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2001

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## SUMMARY

*On 7<sup>th</sup> September, 4<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2001 archaeological evaluation was undertaken at Priory House, Swavesey by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council. The work was carried out in advance of house extensions and stable refurbishment.*

*The significance of the site is derived from the fact it lies within the boundary of eleventh century priory. St Andrew's church, to the east, and earthworks on the remaining three sides of the site are visual remains of the priory.*

*Trench 1 revealed a single undated pit and a Victorian wall. Trench 2 revealed a section through a bank which appears to be part of an earthwork associated with the priory. The bank runs on a north-east-south-west alignment and may relate to a canal and a docking area. The bank sealed an undated ditch that ran on an eastwest alignment. Trench 3 revealed a post-medieval pit and a ditch that ran on a northsouth alignment. A medieval architectural fragment was recovered from the ditch.*

*This work represents the first intrusive archaeological investigation of Swavesey Priory and the associated earthworks and has produced significant findings.*

*Observation of the foundation trenches for the extension to the main house revealed another ditch, running obliquely beneath the current back wall. This feature was oriented in the same general alignment as the surviving priory earthworks and suggests the continuation of a known enclosure.*

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An Archaeological Evaluation  
(NGR TL3618 6938 )**

## **INTRODUCTION**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> September and 4<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October 2001, archaeological evaluation and monitoring was undertaken at Priory House Swavesey, Cambridgeshire by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (AFU). The project was commissioned by Cowper Griffith Associates on behalf of Mr. J. Newsum. The proposed development includes house extensions and stable refurbishment. (Planning Application No. S/100/0668/0). The work was carried out in response to a brief for archaeological evaluation issued by Andrew Thomas of the County Archaeology Office (CAO). The project was managed by Paul Spoerry of the AFU.

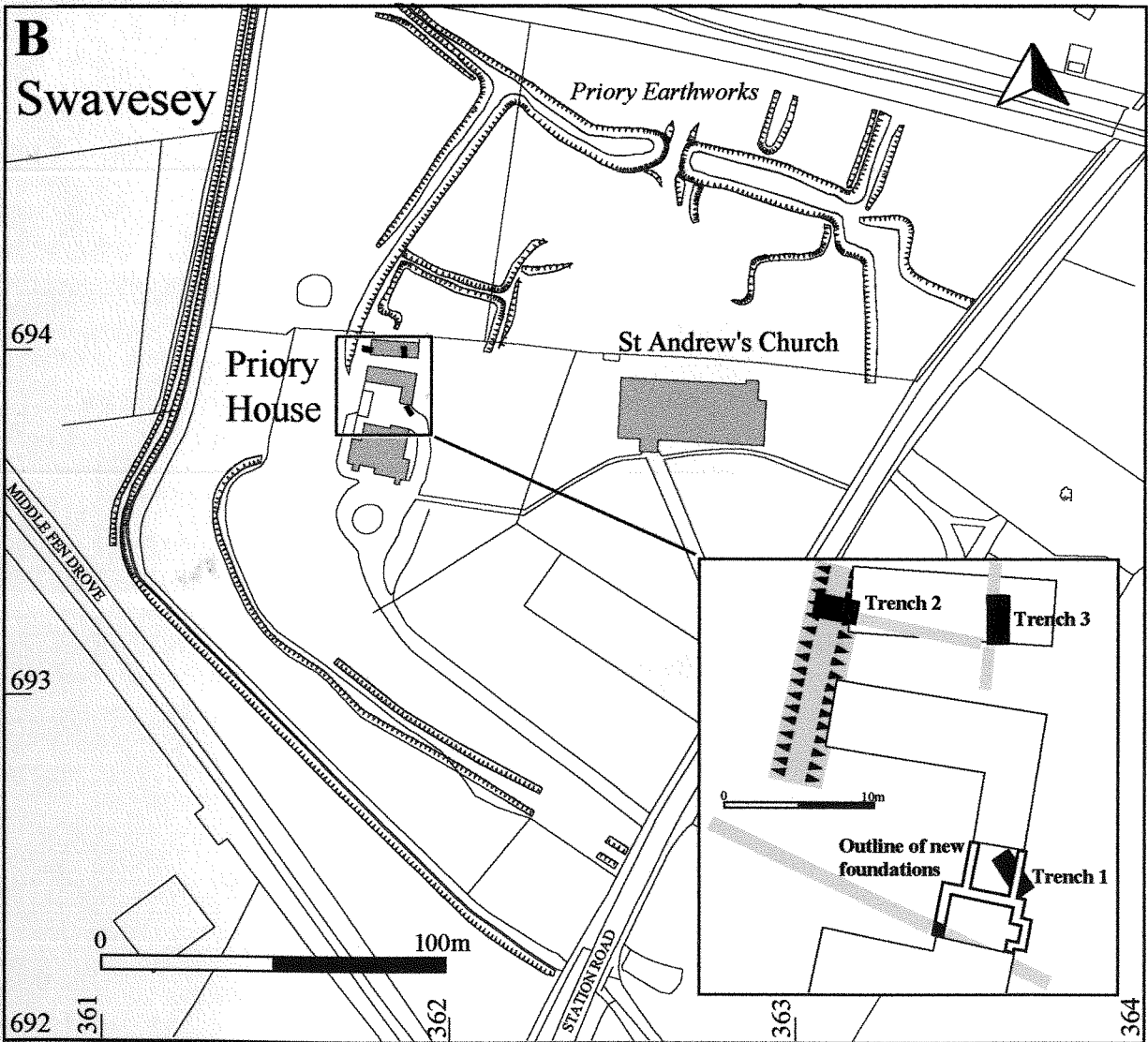
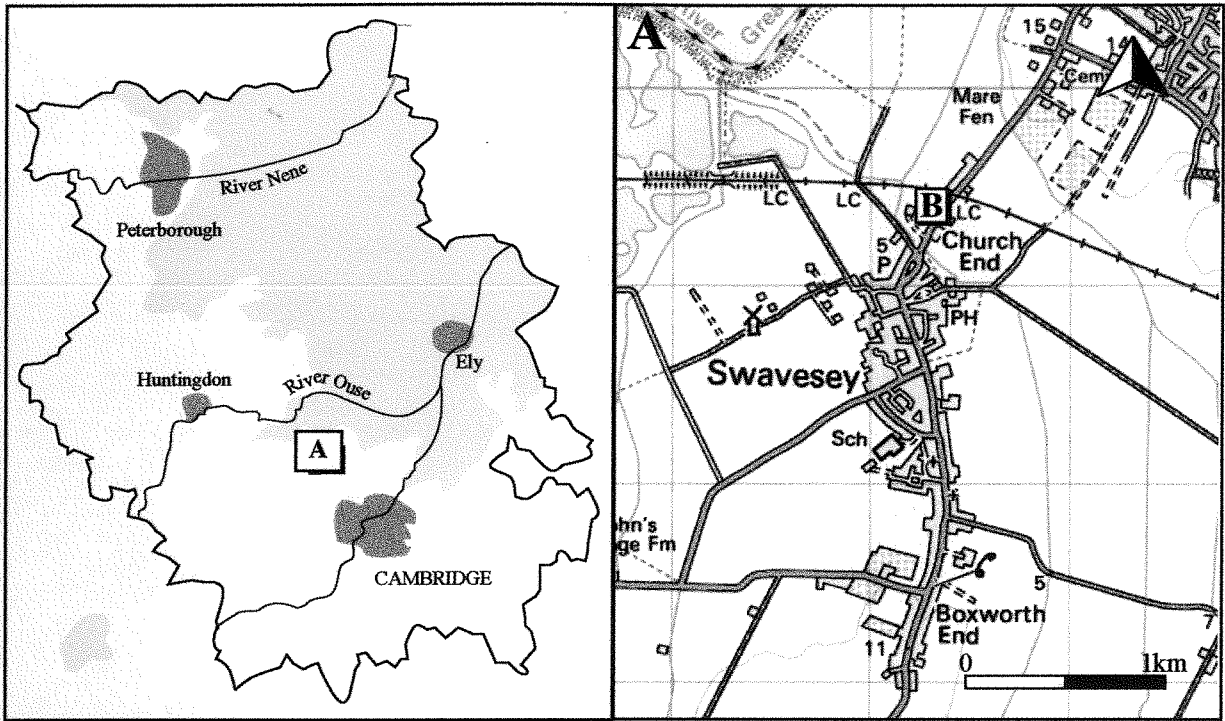
Swavesey lies 3km to the north-east of the A14 trunk road, to the north-west of Cambridge.

The site is to the south of scheduled earthworks (SAM No. 38), which relate to the eleventh century Benedictine Priory. It was hoped from the outset that the evaluation would answer basic questions concerning the extent and presence of priory remains.

## **GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

The site is on the northern edge of the village next to the parish church of St Andrew at around 7.5mOD.

The parish of Swavesey is in the south-western hinterland of the fens with the village built on a promontory and two 'islands' of Ampthill clay capped with terrace gravels. These 'uplands' extend into the fen where the Great Ouse valley joins the fen basin. The site is on the more northerly of the two islands and was a prime fen-edge location for occupation. The surrounding area has been subject to seasonal and periodic flooding with major water management features and in the historic period the settlement was well served by water transport.



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Figure 1 Trench location plan. Inset box shows extrapolations of features found in trenches

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Prehistoric

In 1990 evaluation trenching by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (Evans 1990) identified Iron Age enclosure systems oriented north-west-south-east together with pits, post holes and a kiln 500m to the south of the subject site. In 1994 geophysical survey by Toyama University and the CAU (Maekawa, Sakai, Uno and Kaner 1994) revealed Iron Age ditch alignments and a post-built structure (probably Saxon or medieval) half a kilometer to the south of the subject site. Excavations at Black Horse Lane (Roberts 2001) revealed Iron Age presence in the form of ditches, pits, pottery kilns and human remains

### Medieval

The priory (SMR No 3488) was founded by Alan of Brittany who held a Manor at Swavesey shortly after the Norman Conquest (Haigh 1988). He gave the church at Swavesey, three hides in Dry Drayton and part of the tithes from his estates in Barham, Papworth, Wimpole, Toft and Landbeach to the Benedictine Abbey of Saints Sergius and Bacchus at Angers in France. In return the monks were to establish a Benedictine priory at Swavesey, which they duly did some time before 1086, when the Domesday Survey records a small priory there.

The monks had the right to graze their cattle with Alan's own on the common pasture an important benefit when grazing land was scarce. After Alan died his successor, Stephen, gave the monks a piece of land just outside the gate of the priory with the tithes of his fishery there and also of his mill at Newnham, outside Cambridge. Further small grants were made during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but mostly of property (buildings) rather than of land (Wright and Lewis 1989).

The house always remained small and although the Prior was still appointed from Angers there was less and less interference in the regulation of the priory affairs (Haigh 1988). As a result, although the assets of a number of alien priories were seized during the French campaigns of 1325, Swavesey was one of those that were spared.

The house was seized briefly in the 1350s and again in 1369 when a survey was made that showed how poor the house really was. The tithes from the estate at Swavesey were only worth £13/13/4d and there were another £2/14/4d from rents.

In 1393 Richard II persuaded the Prior to agree to the effective demise of the priory by giving the principal estate to the new Carthusian priory that he wished to endow in Coventry. In 1411 the priory or church of Swavesey was finally granted, with the rest of its possessions to the Carthusians at Coventry who ran these estates as manors until the dissolution in 1539.

The church of St Andrew (SMR No 03419), which lies to the east of the subject site

may be Saxon in origin. The church is built of field stones, ironstone conglomerate and coarse limestone rubble with ashlar dressings (Wright and Lewis 1989). It has a chancel with north aisle and vestry south chapel, an aisled and clerestoried nave with south porch and an aisled west tower. Long and short quoins of the early (eleventh century) date were formerly exposed in the chancel south wall and similar quoins on the south-east and north-east corners of the nave are still visible. The present nave, which is poorly set out and tapers markedly from west to east, may, in part follow the lines of its eleventh century or earlier predecessor. The church was repeatedly enlarged in the thirteenth century. Soon after 1200 the nave was rebuilt at a length of 22.5m in length.

Anglo-Saxon pottery and a spindle whorl (SMR No3483) were recovered from the graveyard of St Andrew's church.

Earthwork traces of banks and ditches in the pasture field north of the church include features that may date to its eleventh century origins as a Minster with a canal that linked the church and priory to the Ouse. Apart from an unpublished geophysical survey of the earthworks (Kaner and Shell pers. comm.) there has been no systematic analysis of the earthworks and this evaluation will contribute to their understanding.

No buildings are shown within the subject site on the 1838 Enclosure map, thus it appears that the present buildings are Victorian.

Archaeological excavation to the west of Swavesey High Street has provided evidence of medieval settlement extending along the gravel capped 'upland' from the tenth century. The extent of the village has fluctuated in relation to the building of Swavesey castle, half a kilometre to the south and changing environmental conditions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the areas to be affected by ground-disturbing development. Trenches were excavated using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket 1.6m wide. The total length of trenching was 8.7m. A general plan of the site was produced to show the location of the excavated trenches within the development area, and a photographic record compiled which consisted of colour slides, colour and monochrome prints.

All trenches excavated during the evaluation were described, giving details of topsoil, subsoil and natural geology visible in the base of the trenches. The recording system and the post-excavation procedures followed the standard AFU practice.

For the observation stage a mechanical excavator (with toothed buckets 0.6m and 0.45m wide) was used to open the foundation trenches, which were then hand cleaned where appropriate and the sections and plan drawn to scale.



## **RESULTS (Figs 2 and 3)**

### **General**

Trench 1 revealed a single pit, 7, and a Victorian wall, 5.

Trench 2 revealed a section through the bank (37) of one of the main earthworks associated with the priory. This bank appears to be part of an earthwork that runs on a NW–SE alignment and may be an embanked canal. The bank sealed an undated ditch that ran on an E–W alignment.

Trench 3 revealed a post-medieval pit, 32, and a ditch, 28, which ran on a N–S alignment. A medieval architectural fragment was recovered from ditch 28.

Observation of the foundation trenches revealed a single ditch, 51, which ran WNW–ESE.

### **Trench 1**

Trench 1 was in the southern part of the development site next to Priory House, the former vicarage. Trench 1 was 2.7m long and 0.98m deep.

#### **East-facing Section 7**

Topsoil 1 was 0.18m deep and consisted of silty clay and contained modern bricks. It sealed wall 5.

Wall 5 was 0.80 m wide and was 0.81m deep and ran on a N–S alignment. It was composed of machine made Victorian bricks and cut layer 2.

Layer 2, a dark grey silty clay, was 0.32m deep.

#### **South-facing Section 8**

Topsoil 1 was 0.20m deep and consisted of silty clay and contained modern bricks. It sealed layer 2.

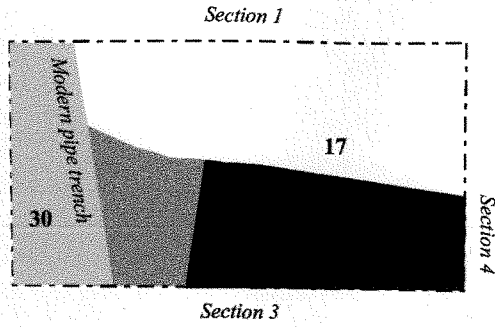
Layer 2, a dark grey silty clay, was 0.30m deep. Beneath this, in the northeast corner of the trench, a pit was revealed.

Pit 7 was 0.70m deep, 0.50m wide and contained a single fill 6, a dark grey silty clay that produced no artefacts.

### **Trench 2**

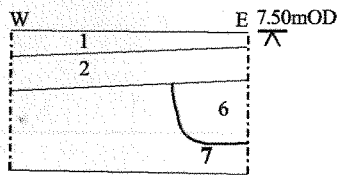
Trench 2 was located in the western part of the development area on an E–W alignment. This trench was 3m long and 1.30m deep. Trench 2 revealed significant

**Trench 2**



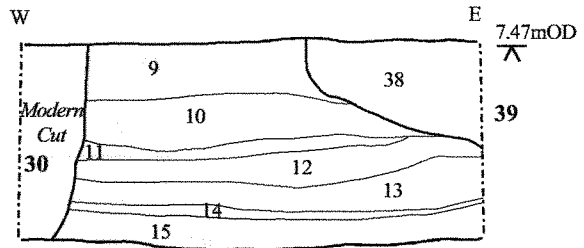
**Trench 1**

Section 8

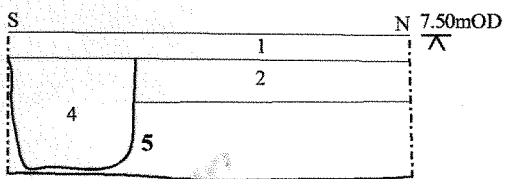


**Trench 2**

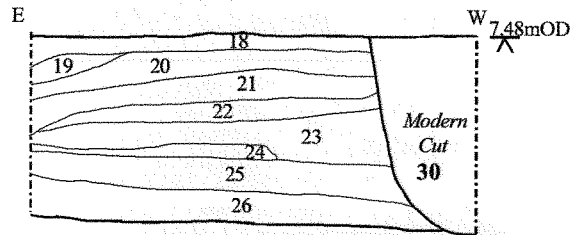
Section 1



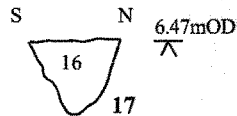
Section 7



Section 3



Section 4



**Figure 2** Trench plans and sections

remains including a ditch and a bank that relates to the adjacent earthwork. The trench revealed the make up layers of an earthwork that ran on a N-S alignment. Layers 9-26 formed part of the earthwork.

A modern pipe trench, 30, truncated the earthwork and ditch 17. It appeared in both Sections 1 and 3.

### **South-facing Section 1**

This section revealed make-up layers that form the bank (37) of the earthwork.

Pit 39 was 0.60m deep and over 1.2m wide and contained a single fill, 38. Fill 38 consisted of a dark grey silty clay and produced modern brick. The pit cut layer 9.

Layers 9-15 were observed in the south facing section. Layer 9 was the latest deposit observed within the sequence. This was a dark grey silty clay which was 0.40m deep. Below 9 was 10.

Layer 10 was 0.30m-0.40m deep and consisted of a light grey silty clay. This layer contained animal bone. Below 10 was 11.

Layer 11 was 0.12m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 11 was 12.

Layer 12 was 0.13m-0.15m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 12 was 13.

Layer 13 was 0.18m deep and consisted of a light grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 13 was 14.

Layer 14 was 0.10 m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay with gravel. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 14 was 15.

Layer 15 was 0.20 m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty gravel. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 15 .

### **North-facing Section 3**

This section revealed make up layers that form the bank 37. Layers 18-26 were observed in the north-facing section. Layer 18 (a dark grey silty clay) was the latest deposit observed within the sequence.

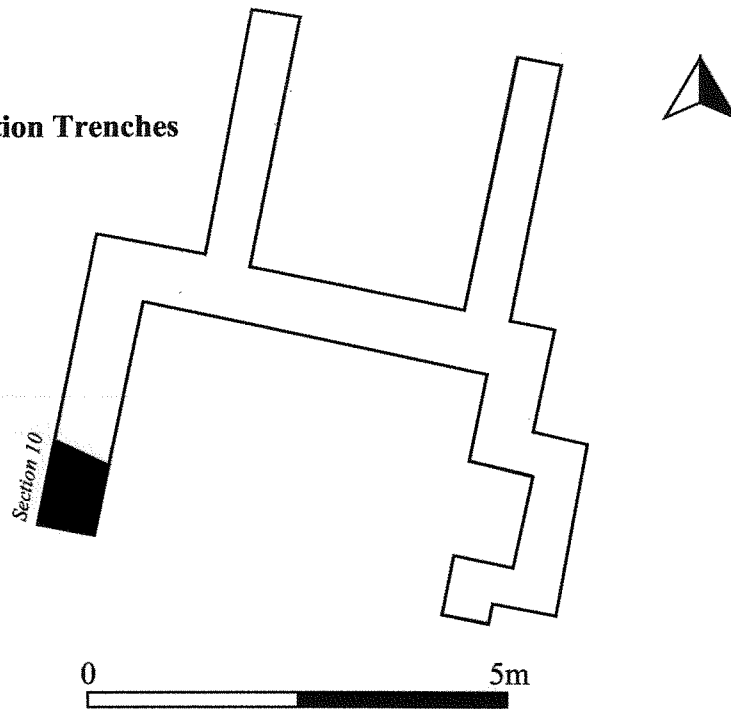
Below 18 was layer 19, a dark grey silty clay which was 0.40m deep.

Layer 20 was 0.30m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. Below 20 was 21.

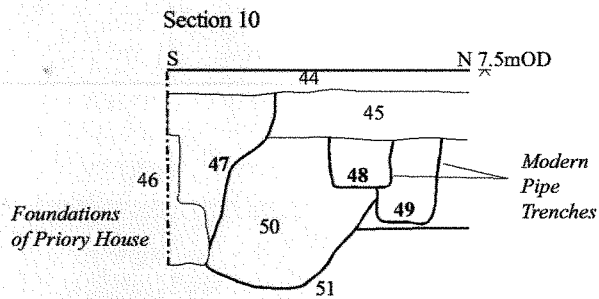
Layer 21 was 0.32m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 21 was 22.

Layer 22 was 0.18 m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay with gravel. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 22 was 23.

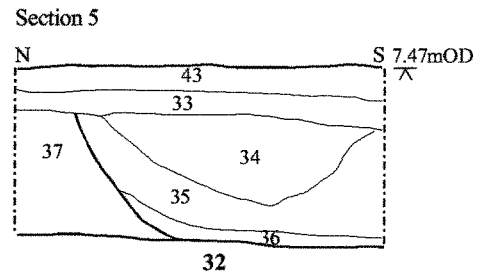
**Outline of Foundation Trenches**



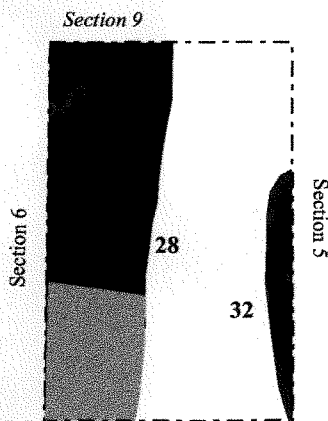
**Foundation Trench**



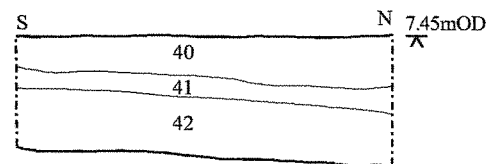
**Trench 3**



**Trench 3**



**Section 6**



**Section 9**



**Figure 3** Trench plans and sections

Layer 23 was 0.4 m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay with gravel. No artefacts were observed in this layer. Below 23 was 24.

Layer 24 was 0.14 m deep and consisted of a light grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. This may be the equivalent to layer 12 in Section 1. Below 24 was 25.

Layer 25 was 0.20 m deep and consisted of a light grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. This may be the equivalent to layer 13. Below 25 was 26.

Layer 26 was 0.20 m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. No artefacts were observed in this layer. This may be the equivalent to layer 15.

#### **East-facing Section 4**

The earthwork sealed a ditch 17 which ran on an east–west alignment. Ditch 17 was 0.60m wide and 0.50m deep. Fill 16 was a dark grey silty clay that produced no artefacts.

#### **Trench 3**

Trench 3 was in the north-eastern part of the development area on a N–S alignment. This trench was 2.5m long and 1.20m deep. Trench 3 revealed a ditch that contained a medieval architectural fragment, and a post-medieval pit.

#### **West-facing Section 5**

In the west-facing section a post-medieval pit, 32, was revealed. Pit 32 was 1.60m wide and 0.80m deep. It contained three fills 34, 35 and 36. Fill 34 was 0.38 m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay which produced post-medieval sherds. Fill 35 was 0.22m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay which also produced post-medieval sherds. Fill 36 was 0.20m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay again containing post-medieval sherds. The overburden observed in the west-facing section consisted of two layers 33 and 43. Layer 43 was 0.20m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. Layer 33 was 0.20m deep and consisted of a light grey silty clay.

#### **East-facing Section 6**

The overburden observed in the eastern facing section consisted of three layers, 40, 41 and 42. Layer 40 was 0.39m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. Layer 41 was 0.21m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay. Layer 42 was 0.39m deep and consisted of a dark grey silty clay.

#### **South Facing Section 9**

Ditch 28 (0.60m x 0.10m), approximately N–S oriented, extended beyond the western edge of Trench 3. It contained a single fill, 27, a dark grey silty sand. A piece of worked/dressed fine shelly limestone was recovered from fill 27. This appeared to be part of a column (diameter 0.12m, height 0.15m) with one end flattened. The other end had been broken.

## **Observation of Foundation Trenches**

The foundation trenches were excavated immediately to the north of the back wall of Priory House. Numerous service runs crossed the excavated area, some of which had to be diverted by workmen during the excavation process, however a single feature was identified that was definitely not modern.

### **East-facing Section 10**

Concrete 44 was 0.14m deep and overlay foundation trench 47.

Foundation trench 47 was 1.3m deep, at least 0.7m wide, contained wall foundation 46 and cut layer 45.

Layer 45 was a greyish brown silty clay 0.32m deep, containing modern brick and tile fragments. It sealed modern pipe trench 48.

Pipe trench 48 was 0.42m wide and 0.32m deep and cut another pipe trench 49.

Pipe trench 49 was 0.44m wide and 0.56m deep and cut ditch 51.

Ditch 51 was 1.02m deep and at least 1.10m wide. It ran WNW–ESE and contained a single fill, 50 (a dark greyish brown sandy silt with frequent gravel) from which no finds were recovered.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This evaluation, which represents the first invasive archaeological investigation of Swavesey Priory and the associated earthworks, has produced significant findings.

Trench 1 revealed a single undated pit, and a Victorian wall.

Trench 2 revealed a section through a bank – one of the main earthworks associated with the priory. This bank accompanies the open ditch earthwork immediately to the north and west which was a major water management feature in the medieval period. The earthwork has been interpreted as a canal with the bank forming a flood-defence or levee. Monastic sites frequently include water management features for both domestic functions (reredorter, etc.) and craft/commercial ones (mill leets, fishponds, etc.). The earthworks at Swavesey could have been dug as a canal with associated drains with the dual function as a precinct enclosure ditch with boundary bank. The bank sealed an undated ditch which ran on an east–west alignment.

Trench 3 revealed a post-medieval pit and a very shallow ditch or ‘gully’ which ran on a north–south alignment and may have been a drain leading into the ditch just to the north. The architectural fragment is probably a segment of limestone column from the medieval priory.

The observation uncovered a substantial ditch running on a north-west–south-east alignment. This feature may also have been associated with monastic water management, feeding into the major boundary ditch to the west.

The lack of artefactual material from the deposits has hampered attempts at dating but the bank in Trench 2 indicates levelling up of the land to build the Victorian Rectory.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank Cowper Griffith Associates who commissioned the archaeological work on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Newsum. The project was managed by Paul Sperry. The illustrations were produced by Caroline Malim and Scott Kenney.

The brief for archaeological evaluation was written by Andy Thomas, County Archaeology Office, who monitored the evaluation together with Quentin Carol and Tim Reynolds.

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## **Maps**

Enclosure Map 1838 Cro Q/QRDc50



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