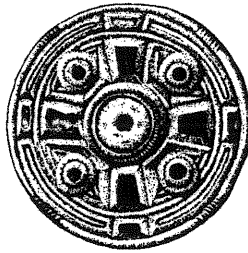


Library



Archaeological Field Unit

Roman Building Debris at Castor Primary School An Archaeological Evaluation

Andrew Hatton

October 2001

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A 196

Commissioned by Peterborough City Council

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SUMMARY

In September and October 2001 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken at Castor Primary School, Castor, Peterborough (TL 1248 9845) which is known to lie within the boundaries of high status Roman buildings, perhaps representing a 'palatial complex'. The work consisted of a single area (7m x 4m) stripped down to a depth of approximately 0.30, which is the maximum needed for the construction of a concrete raft. The concrete raft would then function as the foundation for a new library.

The reason for the excavation of the area was to ascertain the presence or absence of archaeological remains. The excavation revealed a layer of Roman debris, consisting concrete, tile fragments, animal bone and occasional sherds of pottery (probably 3^d century). A single Roman narrow linear ditch was also identified as well as a large oval pit of unknown date.

It is likely that the remains are contemporary with other high status Romano-British buildings known to exist within the envelope of Castor village.

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Roman Building Debris at Castor Primary School
An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 1246 9843)

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 29th, 30th September and 1st of October 2001 an archaeological evaluation at Castor Primary School, Castor, Peterborough (TL 1246 9843) was undertaken in advance of a new library being constructed work was carried out by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) on behalf of the Property Services Division of Peterborough City Council in accordance with a design brief drawn up by Ben Robinson of Peterborough City Council Archaeological Services (PCCAS), Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery (16th June 2001).

The main archaeological interest of the site itself lay in its proximity to the nationally important Roman-British buildings known to exist in the centre of Castor (Fig. 1) which has Scheduled Ancient Monument status (Camb) 93.

A single area was excavated in order to assess the presence/absence and quality (i.e. degree of preservation) of any archaeological remains prior to the construction of a concrete raft.

2 TOPOLOGY AND GEOLOGY

Castor village sits on the interface of clay-capped limestone 'uplands' which forms the northern boundary of the Nene valley, and the terrace river gravels of the valley. The church occupies a prominent position at c. 17m OD near the top of the limestone slope, whilst the southern end of the school playing field, some 100m south of the church, lies at only 9m OD. River terrace gravels extend into this central portion of the village.

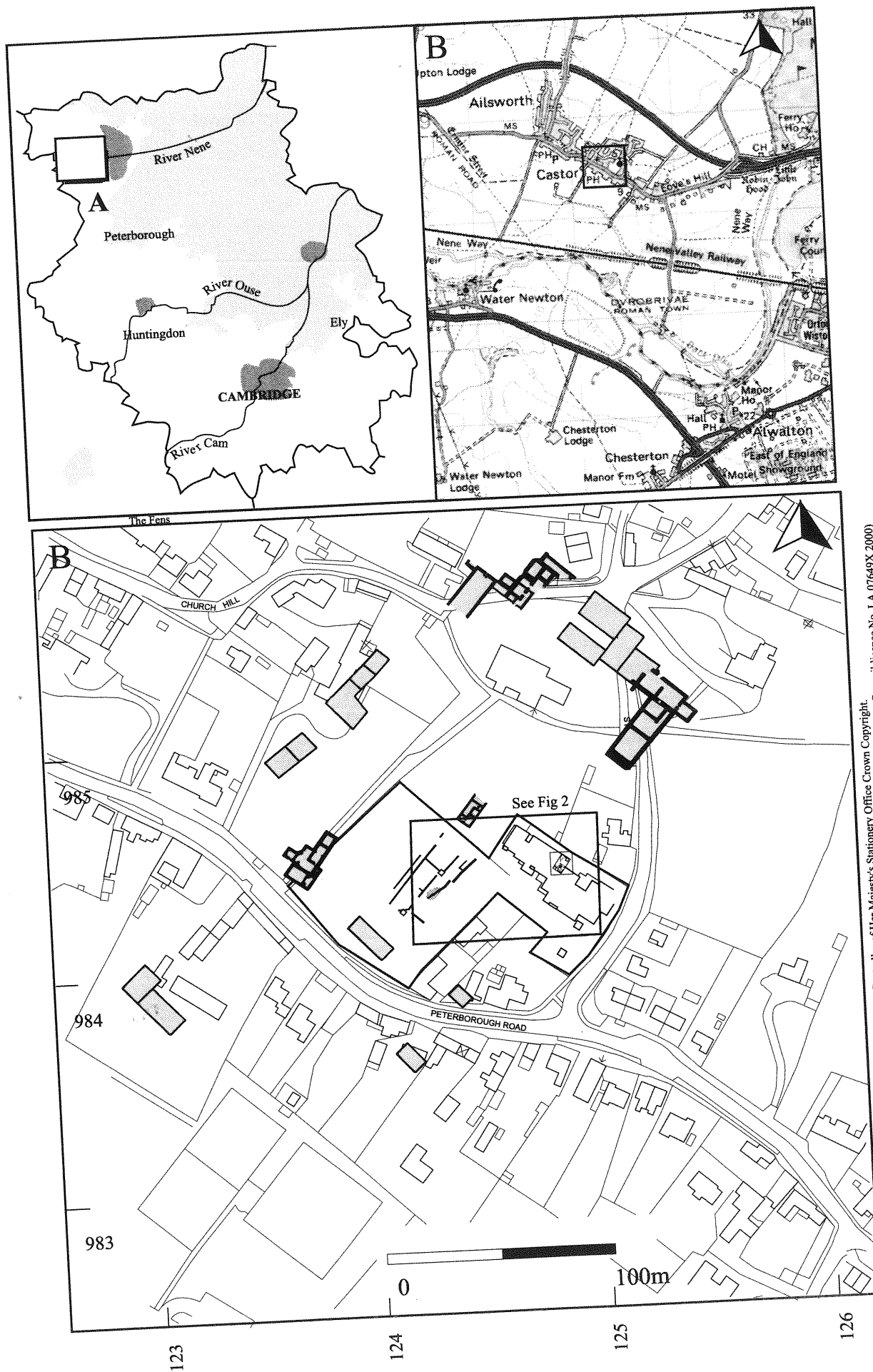


Figure 1 Site Location showing position of Roman building remains (after Mackreth, 1995)

3 **ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

E.T. Artis first drew attention to the complex of high status Roman-British buildings within Castor village. A series of excellent illustrations published in his *Durobrivae of Antoninus* (1828) depict the on-going excavation of substantial masonry buildings in the vicinity of the church and within the school grounds. A plan of the buildings, which he located in this area, suggested a complex based on an open courtyard; east and west wings projecting down slope to the south-west.

Subsequent investigation has provided further evidence for this interpretation, and has led to the suggestion that the site constitutes a single great 'palatial' complex; the seat of some (as yet) unidentified Roman dignitary (Mackreth 1984). The monumental aspect of the complex is apparent in the scale of the building foundations, their prominent location, and evidence for the methodical terracing of the hillside.

Castor has been associated with St Kyneburgha's seventh century nunnery. Excavation at Elmlea, immediately to the north of the churchyard, has produced Middle Saxon material consistent with monastic occupation. Further Middle Saxon remains have been encountered to the south of the church near the school (Dallas 1973). Recent evaluation in advance of the construction of the Benefice Centre produced evidence of early Saxon occupation and the robbing of Roman masonry during the Middle Saxon period (Lucas 1998).

St Kyneburgha's is a very fine 12th century church. Exceptionally, a dedication inscription above the south door of the chancel records its consecration in 1124. Fragments of decorated stone and cross indicate a pre-conquest ecclesiastical presence on the site. Castor parish included the hamlets of Ailsworth, Milton, Upton and Sutton. The central role of St Kyneburgha's, its antiquity and splendour, further suggest the early significance of the site.

Immediately north of the school field, excavation during the 1950's in advance of a cemetery extension revealed substantial well preserved Romano-British building remains, and early-middle Saxon activity (Green, et al 1988).

A small excavation in advance of the construction of an office at the school revealed more building remains and a Roman period grave (Meadows 1991).

More recently a number of test pits were excavated both on the school playing field and immediately to the south of the schoolhouse. These revealed structural remains of probable 3rd century date, which consisted of robbed-out walls, one in situ wall and demolition debris all dating to the Roman period (Hatton and Spoerry 2000).

4 METHODOLOGY

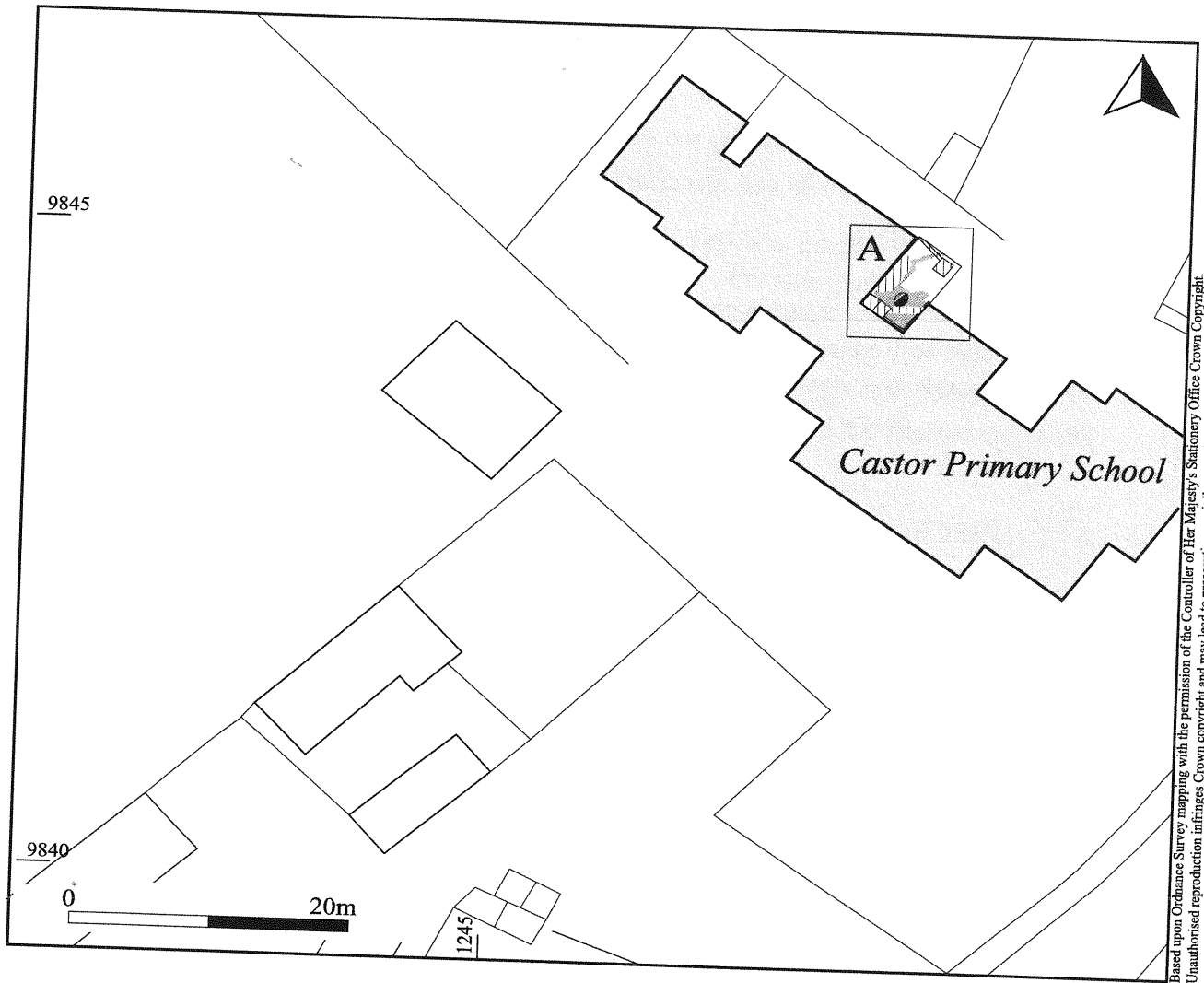
A single area (4m x 7m) was excavation using a mini mechanical excavator to an approximate depth of 0.30m. The area was cleaned by hand to allow feature and deposit recognition. Where archaeological features and deposits were encountered, standard recording systems were employed in accordance with the Design Brief.

5 RESULTS

Area 1 (Fig. 2)

Area 1 was located immediately to the north of the school and as a consequence was enclosed on three sides by modern buildings. The area measured 4m x 7m and had an approximate depth of 0.30m.

The section revealed a layer of tarmac (0.08m in depth) which overlay a layer of foundation material (0.20m in depth) which consisted of sandstone rubble and sand together with fragments of Roman tile and Roman pottery. Removal of the foundation material revealed a large amount of Roman tile fragments, concrete and pottery which was found to cover virtually all of the southern half of the exposed area (1). A single oval pit 2 (1.20m wide) was observed cutting through the Roman debris layer. On excavation the pit 2 was found to be 0.65m in depth and contained a single dark greyish brown fill (3) from which fragments of Roman pottery and tile fragments were recovered. Despite the fact that Roman material was recovered from pit 2, the pit itself was not considered to be Roman in date as it cut through the debris layer (1). Importantly, the sides of the excavated pit 2 revealed the Roman debris layer to



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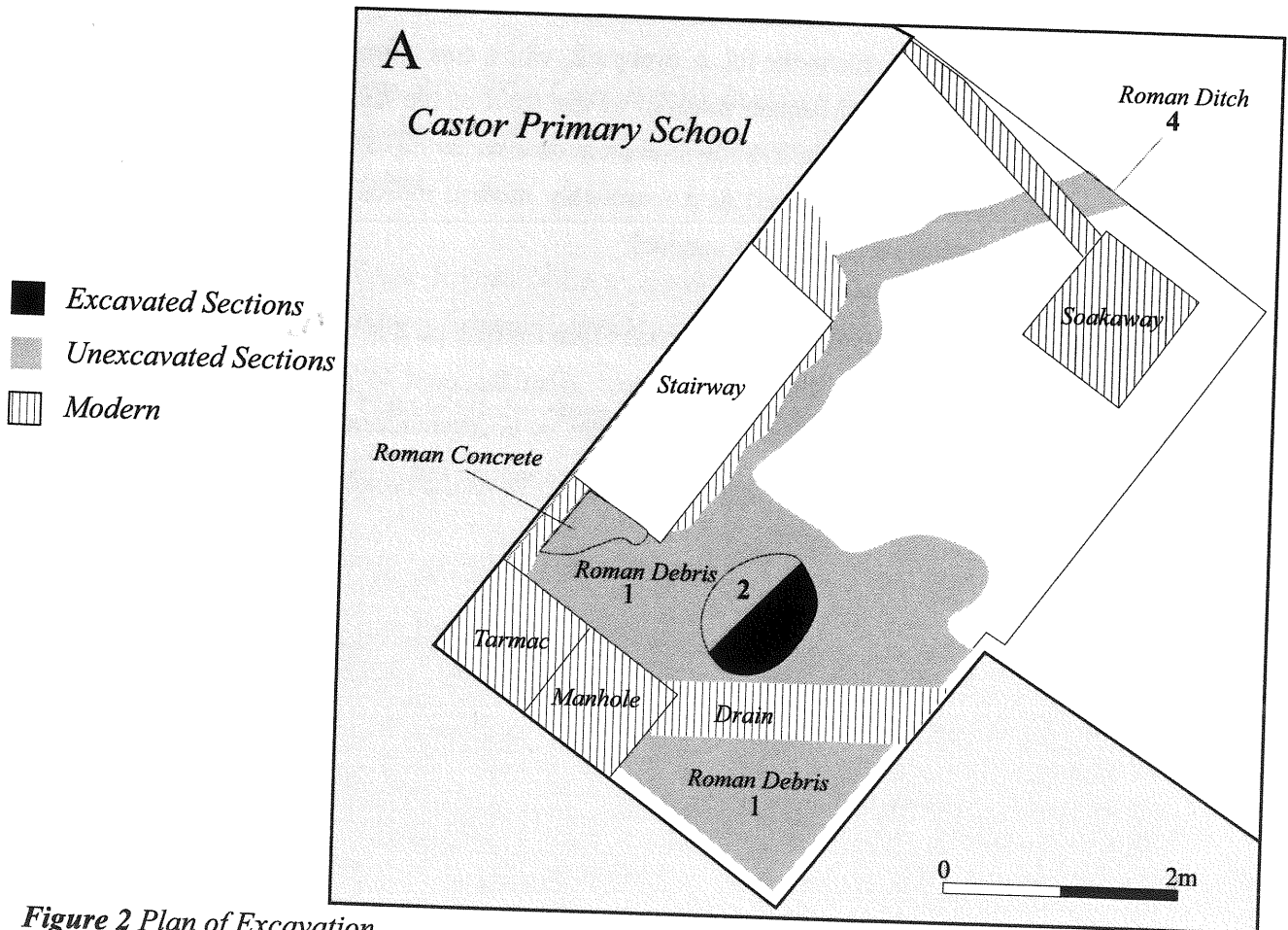


Figure 2 Plan of Excavation

be 0.15m thick and overlay the silty clay, which could possibly be hill wash. More recently a man-hole and associated drainage pipe was also excavated through the Roman debris.

The remaining area not covered by Roman debris showed a single ditch (4), which could be Roman in date (unexcavated) together with modern drainage pipes and a possible soak-away.

6 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

It is very difficult to draw any definite conclusions from the excavation of a small area; however, comparisons can be drawn from Test Pit 4 where Roman debris was also identified (Hatton and Sperry 2000). As with the 2000 excavation; large amounts of Roman tile and concrete were identified together with small amounts of Roman pottery sherds. However, no evidence of structural remains was identified during the excavation of Area 1.

Two cut features identified in the exposed area consisted of a narrow linear ditch (4) which, although not excavated was considered to be Roman in date, considering the presence of Roman tile in the fill. A oval pit 2, which cuts through the Roman debris was found to contain Roman material in the form of tile and pottery. However, feature 2 was not considered to be Roman in date, as the fill (3) was very humic and could possibly be considered as a reasonably modern topsoil, suggesting that the Roman material recovered was residual.

Attributing a function for either the ditch (3) or the oval pit 2 is difficult due in part to the restricted area of the investigation. Also the need to preserve in situ any archaeological remains identified with little or no examination through excavation below the recommended 0.30m depth of the concrete raft.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Ben Robinson, of Peterborough City Council Archaeological Services (PCCAS), Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery (16th July 2001), who visited the site and monitored the evaluation, wrote the brief for archaeological works.

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