

Archaeological Field Unit

**A Medieval Ditch at The King's School, Ely:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

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SUMMARY

On the 23rd October 2002 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological evaluation at the King's School, Ely (TL 53788 79834). The proposed development entailed the construction of a new classroom block together with associated services.

A single trench was excavated within the proposed building footprint in order to ascertain the presence or absence of archaeological remains. The subsequent investigation of the trench revealed a single narrow ditch. Dating evidence retrieved from the excavation of the ditch consisted of a single sherd of pottery and three fragments of tile all from the medieval period. The ditch may have functioned as a drainage channel and be associated with Barton Farm.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------|
| 1 INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 2 SITE BACKGROUND | 1 |
| 2.1 Planning Background | 1 |
| 2.2 Geology | 1 |
| 2.3 Topography | 1 |
| 3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND | 3 |
| 4 METHODOLOGY | 4 |
| 5 RESULTS | 4 |
| 6 DISCUSSION | 5 |
| 7 CONCLUSIONS | 5 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 6 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 6 |
| LIST OF FIGURES | |
| Figure 1 Location Plan | 2 |
| Figure 2 Trench plan & sections | 4 |

**A Medieval Ditch at The King's School, Ely:
An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 53788 79834)**

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 23rd October 2002 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological evaluation at King's School, Ely (TL 53788 79834). The work was carried out to satisfy a planning condition in advance of a proposed development. The work was supervised on site by the author (A. Hatton) and the project was managed by Stephen Macaulay.

2 SITE BACKGROUND

2.1 Planning Background

The proposed development entailed the construction of a new classroom block within an area of 450m² together with services. Given the known archaeological background of the area (below), the possibility of there being Saxon and medieval remains within the application area determined the requirement for an evaluation.

The work was carried out by the AFU on behalf of Hollins Planning Consultants, in accordance with a Brief produced by Cambridgeshire County Council County Archaeology Office.

2.2 Geology

The local geology consists of boulder clay (BGS sheet 173)

2.3 Topography

The site lies on the south-western side of the Isle of Ely at 21m OD on land sloping down to the River Great Ouse.

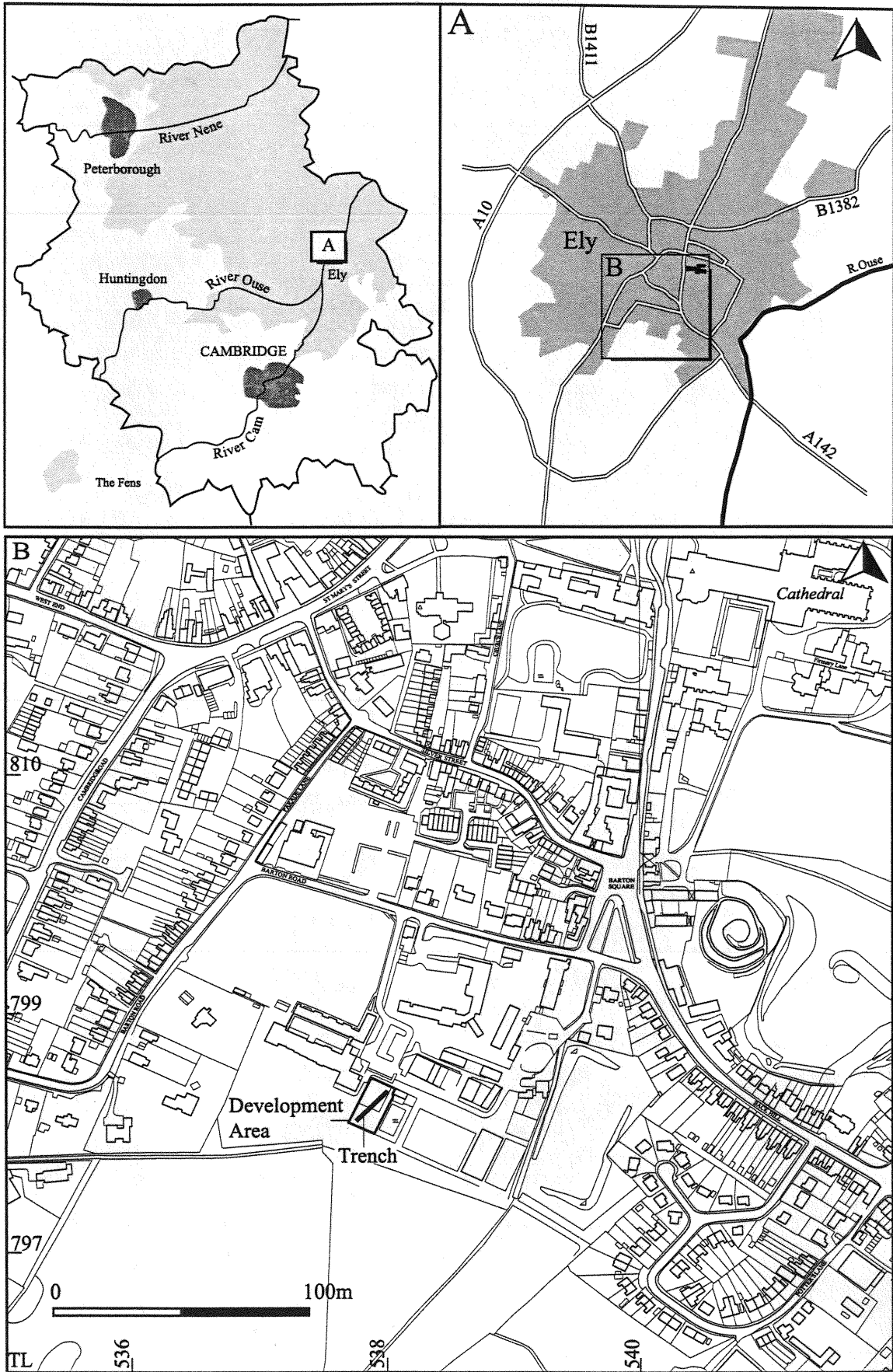


Figure 1 Site Location Map.

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL 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. The submission of Ely (aftermath of the Norman Conquest) during the 1060s led to the construction of the castle (Cherry Hill, SMR 01764, SAM 39) by William I in 1070 (VCH 1967, 30). Ely's 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 canalisation of the river provided important trade links. By the time of the survey of Episcopal properties in 1251 Ely had trebled in size. The variety of trades described indicates a settlement of mixed rural and urban economy with commercial growth focusing on the Market Place and along the hithes between Broad Street and the River Ouse (Owen, 1993, *passim*).

The earliest evidence for occupation on the summit of the Isle of Ely is a Mesolithic flint scatter 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 of medieval structures has been found in several locations.

Two evaluations and one excavation have occurred within the grounds of the King's School. In July 1999 a 'Watching Brief', carried out 25m to the south-west of Cherry Hill (see above), produced no archaeological evidence due to the fact that the foundation trenches were not cut deep enough to affect any archaeological features (Hall 1999). Whereas, excavation undertaken during December 1999, located next to the Heywood theatre, revealed substantial remains of a building that pre-dates the 14th century, as well as deposits ranging between the 14th-16th century (Whittaker 1999). The third evaluation (SMR 11881) was undertaken immediately to the west of the subject site adjacent to the site of Barton farm (Leith 1996). This farm was part of the manor of Barton, which was already in existence by 1109 when it became part of the bishop of Ely's endowment (Owen 1993, 11). The evaluation revealed evidence of agricultural activity in the form of ridge and furrow cultivation.

Further archaeological work outside the area of the King's School, was undertaken. Investigation of areas along Silver Street produced evidence of agricultural activity, dating to the medieval period (Kenney & Casa-Hatton, 2000). Also a considerable depth of post-medieval build-up was identified but no structures (Evans 1991).

4 METHODOLOGY

A single trench 18m in length, giving a 5% sample, was located within the area of a proposed new classroom development. Topsoil and modern overburden was removed using a wheeled mechanical excavator with a flat-bladed ditching bucket (1.6m wide), under the full time supervision of an archaeologist. The trench was located to give a representative sample of the available area.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Trench 1

Trench 1 (18m x 1.6m) north-east/south-west oriented. The trench was located across the footprint of the proposed new classroom. This allowed for maximum coverage of the area to be disturbed during construction. At the north-eastern end of the trench, dark brown topsoil (0.25m thick) overlay mid-brown silty clay subsoil (0.30m thick). Removal of the subsoil revealed the boulder clay natural geology. This sequence was seen at the south-western end, although the topsoil depth decreased to 0.20m whereas the subsoil depth increased to 0.38m.

A single ditch was observed cutting into the natural geology.

Cut 2 (0.60m wide, 0.20m deep), linear ditch, aligned north/south, contained one fill: fill 1, greyish brown silty clay, contained a single sherd of medieval pottery and three fragments of medieval tile.

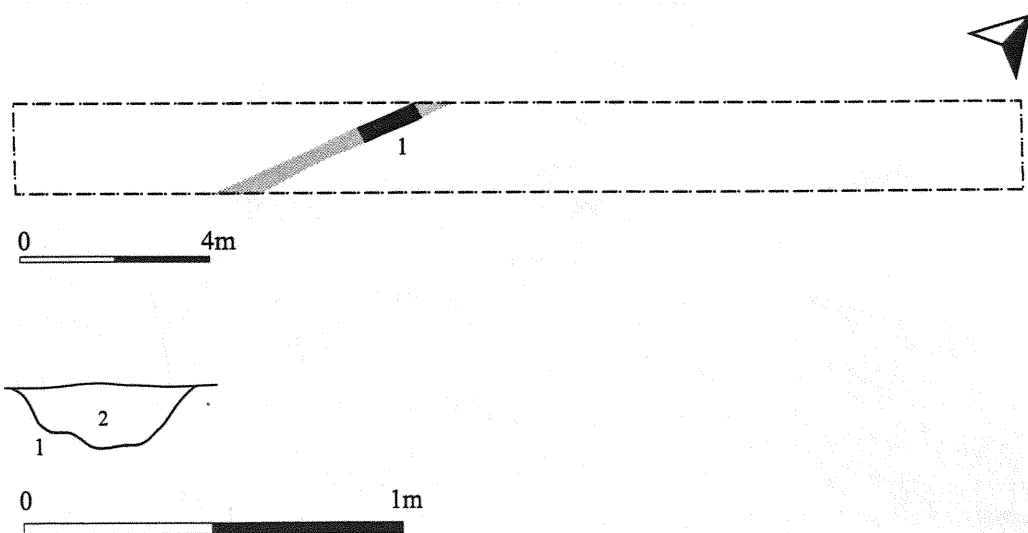


Figure 2 Trench plan and section of Ditch 1

6 DISCUSSION

The key issues specific to the site relate to its location near to the historic (medieval) centre of Ely. A single ditch identified in the trench produced a sherd of pottery and three fragments of tile all dating to the medieval period. The location of the site, being on slightly sloping ground would suggest that the ditch functioned as a drainage channel possibly associated with Barton Farm (see above). The remains do not appear to indicate that the subject site was part of the medieval urban core of Ely.

7 CONCLUSION

The objective of the project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site in advance of development. Information from the evaluation will allow an assessment of the proposed development's archaeological implications and to inform an appropriate mitigation strategy.

The project has been successful in achieving its objectives. A single medieval ditch was identified, and this appears to be most probably linked to nearby agricultural activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Hollins *Planning Consultants* who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. Thanks are also due to Jo Pinnock, for her hard work on site in the most dreadful of conditions. The project was managed by Stephen Macaulay.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Andy Thomas, County Archaeology Office. Monitoring of the site work was carried out by Jeremy Parsons also of the County Archaeology Office.

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