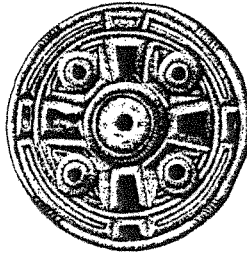


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**Geo-Technical Test Pitting, Ambury Road,  
Huntingdon: An Archaeological Watching Brief**

Joe Abrams

October 2000

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. B 79

Commissioned by Muir Group Housing Association

# **Geo-Technical Test Pitting, Ambury Road, Huntingdon: An Archaeological Watching Brief**

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2000

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## **SUMMARY**

*On the 13 October 2000, an Archaeological Monitoring and Recording Brief was undertaken at Ambury Road, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire (TL 5239 2722). The work consisted of observation during the excavation of five geo-technical test pits in advance of the proposed development of housing within the subject site.*

*No archaeological features at all were encountered in any of these test pits. Although based on documentary and topographical information the archaeological potential of the subject site remains high.*

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**Geo-Technical Test Pitting, Ambury Road, Huntingdon: An Archaeological  
Watching Brief  
NGR TL 5239 2722**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

On the 13 October 2000, an archaeological Monitoring and Recording brief was undertaken at Ambury Road, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire (TL 5239 2722). The work consisted of observation during the excavation of five geo-technical test pits in advance of the proposed development of housing within the subject site. The Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit undertook the work. Muir Group Housing Association commissioned the project.

**2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

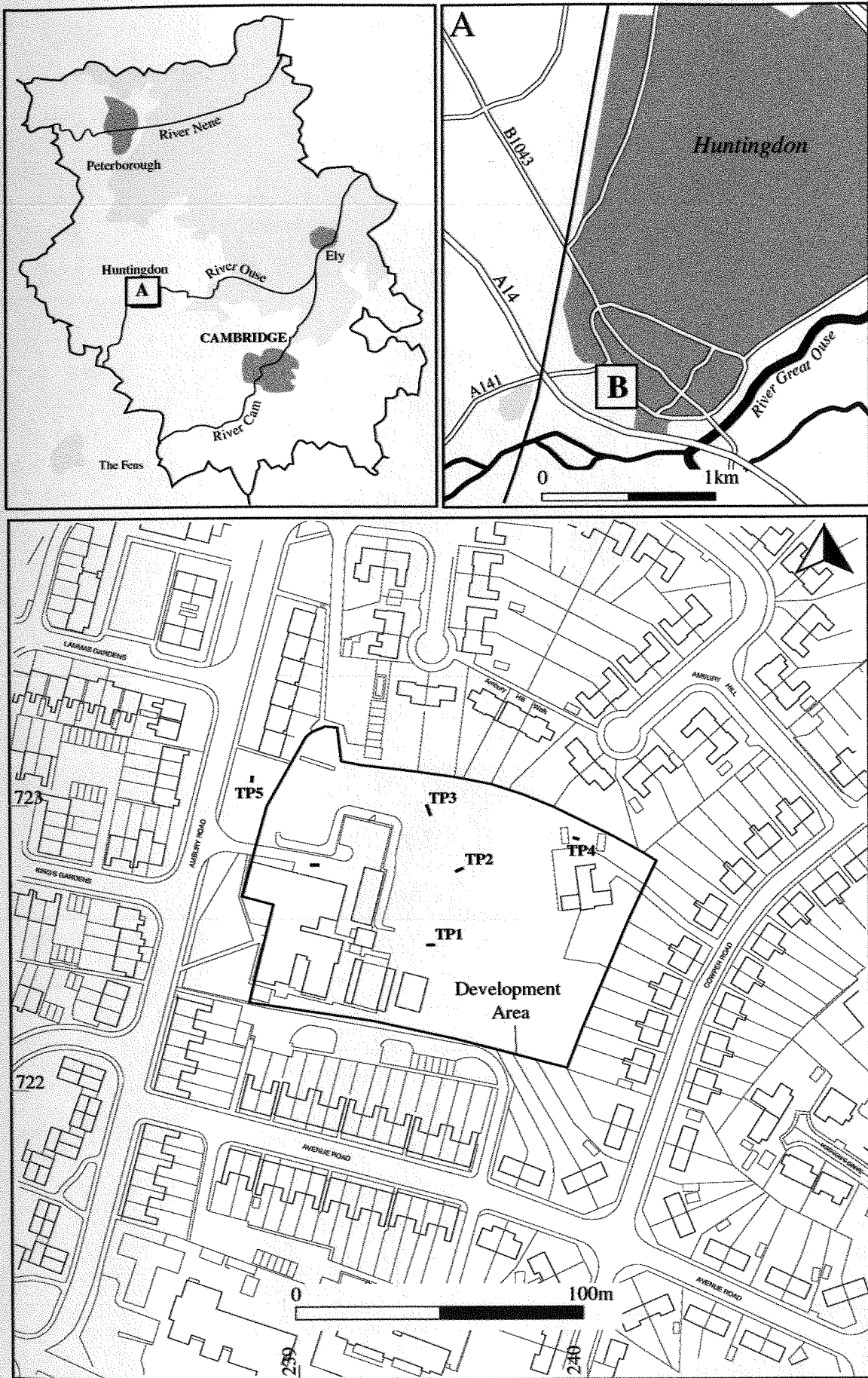
The subject site is situated at the top of Ambury Hill. It is bordered on the west by Ambury Road, to the north by back gardens associated with housing in Ambury Hill Walk. To the east by back gardens associated with housing in Cowper Road, and to the south by back gardens associated with housing in Avenue Road. A spot height in Ambury Road is 14.60m OD. Other spot heights in the area confirm the position of the subject site as occupying the highest point in the immediate topography. To the south-west of the subject site in Ambury Road, the spot height is 11.5m OD, to the north-west it is 12.7m OD and to the north-east in Priory lane it is 14.31m OD. However, the height above Ordnance Datum in the subject site reaches a peak next to Test Pit 3 at the extreme north-central part of the site (see Fig.1), where it is approximately 15.00m OD. The site slopes to the south, east and west from this point, and this is reflected in the depth and types of deposits encountered in the 5 Test Pits discussed below.

**3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

*Prehistoric*

The major river systems within Cambridgeshire have been the focus for much of the prehistoric activity within the County. The results of aerial photographic studies and excavations have shown the Ouse Valley to be particularly rich. Palaeolithic remains have been found set deep within the terrace gravels of the river system and with the occasional surface finds





TL

**Figure 1** Site location and trenches

recovered during excavation and casual collection. Mesolithic and Neolithic finds appear to be sparse in comparison to the later Neolithic and Bronze Age, however, this may be the results of low population densities with wide ranging territories and in the main a delicate material culture (pottery, animal bone, hides, wood etc.) result in low level finds activity areas. In contrast, during the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age, major ritual complexes sprang up and evolved along the course of the Ouse and although much of the material culture no longer survives these monuments are highly visible from the air as cropmarks. These ceremonial complexes cover extensive territories and are distributed relatively evenly at 5-6km apart (Malim 1999). Late Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial complexes are commonly respected by Iron Age settlement activity which appears to occupy lands away from the river system. This is probably as a result of the episodic alluviation along the Ouse during the Iron Age and Roman periods. Ceremonial complexes are therefore commonly built into the Iron Age farming systems as at Eynesbury and Brampton as they lay on the lowlands adjacent to the river systems.

Within Huntingdon artefacts of prehistoric date have been found and reported to the SMR. These are largely of Neolithic and Bronze Age date. The presence of such artefacts is unsurprising given the preference of early prehistoric populations to low lying gravels and the major late Neolithic ceremonial complex at Rectory Farm Godmanchester which lies about 1km to the south-east of the development area. The site consisted of a huge rectilinear "horned" ditch enclosure approximately 6.3ha in area, with an internal bank and 24 posts arranged regularly along the perimeter of the enclosure. Radio-carbon dates from the site suggests a late Neolithic date of between 5050  $\pm$ 80BP and  $\pm$ 4850 80BP. Excavations by the AFU south of the enclosure indicate that the activities associated with the monument were of a wide spread nature (Hinman & Kenney 1998).

To the west of Huntingdon lies the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ceremonial complex of Brampton. Mortuary enclosures, cursus monuments and ring ditches have been identified. In 1992 an Iron Age settlement was identified to the west of the main complex, whilst a Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement was excavated by the AFU at the Huntingdon Racecourse (Malim & Mitchell 1993, Macaulay forthcoming).

Iron Age finds have been found within Huntingdon and at Godmanchester, where they are commonly found in association with Roman remains. In addition to the settlement remains at Brampton excavations discovered a middle and late Iron Age settlement with associated ritual deposits adjacent to Hinchinbrooke Park Road (Hinman 1997, Hinman & Abrams 2000).

Results of the SMR investigations suggests that the potential for prehistoric deposits in the general area around Huntingdon is high, particularly as artefacts of these periods have been uncovered within the town. Archaeological investigations of prehistoric sites within the local area suggests that the visibility of any such remains in the landscape will have been affected by the types of prehistoric activity remains preserved, erosional and

depositional regimes of the River Great Ouse. Palaeolithic sites were much affected by Quaternary channel movements, whilst, more recent prehistoric remains have been blanketed by alluvium as the course of the Ouse has become more stable. Except where excavations have occurred, the visibility and therefore the accuracy of any predictive modelling for the prehistoric resource within Huntingdon is reliant on the discovery of casual finds and feedback to the SMR.

At c15.0m O.D at its peak the site lies above the floodplain and although a potential site of Prehistoric activities or occupation, such remains have not been protected by the blanket of alluvium within the existing town. It is therefore likely that prehistoric remains, if they were present, have been disturbed by the medieval and modern developments. However, c50m to the south an archaeological evaluation recorded the existence of a palisade-type feature with associated Bonfire/Hearth features, which were prehistoric in character although artefactual evidence was lacking (Cooper & Spoerry 1998).

### ***Roman***

The town of Huntingdon lies on the major Roman route Ermine Street, the line of which is followed, more or less, by the High Street. Romano-British period finds in the town are mostly confined to the area around the former Roman ford (near the castle) and along the line of Ermine Street and mostly suggest occasional graves along the roadside. In addition there was a villa excavated on Mill Common in the late 1960s (Davison, unpub.) which lay on the high ground above the river bank, whilst some 'roman roofing tile' found close to the river at the northern edge of town (SMR 27330 hints at the presence of another structure. A bronze key, believed to be Roman, was found 100m west of the development site (SMR 2613). Also, recent work at Watersmeet, Huntingdon, provided evidence of Roman activity in the area. The features encountered suggested activity related to a bridgehead over the nearby Ouse river, amongst the artefactual evidence was a burial of likely Roman date and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD pottery (Cooper & Spoerry 2000). However, it is suggested that the topographical location next to the river is considered key to the existence of Roman remains. In conclusion there is little to suggest there will be Roman period remains on this site.

### ***Saxon (Pre-Conquest Medieval)***

Recent research seems to suggest that the late Saxon settlement of Huntingdon is located in the southern part of the area later enclosed by the medieval town ditch in the north-east and the *bar dyke* in the south-west (Spoerry in press, Cooper & Spoerry 2000). This is, however, a general suggestion rather than a certainty and this area may not in fact include *all* elements of pre-Conquest Huntingdon. In particular there is much dispute as to the location of the late ninth/ early tenth century Danish burh. One model, although not the most favoured, is based on the comparative situation at Stamford (Mahany 1982) and would place the burh at a defensible location north of the river crossing, as

opposed to around the river crossing which tends to form the basis of other interpretations.

The Stamford-type model is given credence at Huntingdon by the presence of the place name 'Ambury Hill' which is found in both the 1572 Survey (Dickinson 1972) and the town parish enclosure maps, and represents the rise described below in the central north part of the subject site. If the area given this name has had boundaries at any point in the past then they are most likely to have persisted in the topographically-derived curvilinear form of the fields south of the Horse Common Lane and east of the water course from Spring Common. This parcel of land has its natural southern boundary at the town ditch and its east side may well have been at Priory road. This latter was formerly called Priory Lane and Straight Lane, and in the medieval period was probably the north western edge of the Priory Precinct. Thus the site forms a piece of a much larger area of land that has distinct boundaries and had the general name of Ambury/Ambry Hill or Smore/Smer hill in medieval documents. The 'bury' part of this place name is the significant piece of evidence. This could be purely a toponym recognising the higher ground; however, it may instead recall a defence work of some sort, presumably utilising the natural rise. If this were the case then it is either a medieval description of the surviving earthworks of a prehistoric enclosure, or it is a medieval memory of the Danish burgh defences.

The complete absence of any SMR information in the whole of the Ambury Hill area (except one late medieval token which represents casual loss in the fields) does not necessarily disprove that burghal remains, or any other archaeological site, were present. It must be said, however, that the lack of any records of finds from earlier building works does suggest that the discovery of a burghal site must remain only a remote possibility.

### *Medieval (Post-Conquest)*

The date at which the stream that pre-dates the town ditch was formalised into the town limits/defences is not known, although a twelfth century charter identified this as 'the kings ditch' (Hart 1966). By this time it must therefore have already been a recognisable property boundary delimiting the lands of the Priory of Huntingdon to the north, from a quarter of the town called 'Berneys' to the south.

Archaeological, documentary and landscape historical evidence points to this location being undeveloped throughout the post-conquest period. Fieldwork suggests activity along secondary street frontages on the west side of town in the period prior to the mid-fourteenth century; e.g. at Orchard Lane (Oakey & Spoerry 1997) and along Hartford Road (Connor 1996 and Welsh 1994), however, the large area of land encompassed by the town ditch was probably not completely filled with structures, even at the town's height. Thus, a location such as this which was peripheral to the settlement, and lay outside of its recognised limits, is unlikely to have experienced development. Except the straggling buildings that appear to have extended northwards along the old



line of Ermine Street (present in the post-medieval period, but also suggested by the presence of the probable St Peter's and St Michael's church sites) no suburban sprawl has been identified in medieval Huntingdon. If this were to have existed then it may have congregated around the roads into town. The old line of Stone Field Lane runs adjacent to the western limit of the site. This must have been provided with a bridge/ford over the town ditch as it continued as Corbet's Lane, Stoney Lane or Fryers Lane, depending on the map/source.

### *Post-Medieval*

Cartographic and excavated data (for the latter, e.g. Connor 1996, Oakey & Spoerry 1997 and Roberts 1999) suggest a very major contraction of Huntingdon in the late medieval period). This ties in with the documentary sources which emphasise the poverty of the town following a particularly severe experience of plague, and economic eclipse by St Ives and other centres further downstream (Page, Proby and Ladds 1926). It therefore seems unlikely that occupation remains will be found on this site on the urban periphery, dating to the centuries from the late medieval period until the nineteenth century school buildings were built.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

Five test pits were excavated in order to provide information on the depth and character of the geology of the subject site in order to determine the type of building foundations which would be necessary, should the proposed housing development go ahead. The excavation was carried out using a wheeled mechanical excavator with a toothed ditching bucket of 0.60m, in the presence of an archaeologist.

The test pitting resulted in the removal of topsoil and natural geological layers. The natural geology varied from sand and gravel, which occurred in all the pits, to clay, which was revealed in all except test pit 3. In all cases the clay occurred below the gravel, as would be expected. The spoil from the test pits was scanned by eye in order to obtain artefacts.

After machining sections and plans of all five test pits were hand drawn at a scale of 1:50.

## 5 RESULTS

### Test pit 1

Test pit 1 was 2.0m long, 0.60m wide and 2.40m deep. It was aligned E-W, and located in the south central part of the subject site (see Fig. 1).

The topsoil 1 was a medium brown fine sand layer 0.45 m deep. Below this was 2, a dark orange layer, this was a mixture of coarse sand and gravel in equal parts. This layer was 1.15m deep. Below this was 3, a layer of greyish blue clay, this was 0.80m deep at the limit of excavation. Ground water was only encountered at the base of this test pit. No archaeological features at all were encountered in this test pit.

### Test pit 2

Test pit 2 was 2.45m long, 0.60m wide and 2.50m deep. It was aligned ENE-WSW, and located in the central part of the subject site (see Fig. 1).

The topsoil 1 was a medium brown fine sand layer 0.50m deep. Below this was 2 a dark orange layer, this was a mixture of coarse sand and gravel. This layer was 2.10m deep. Within this layer, two distinct bands of rounded, medium flint pebbles were visible, these were sloping steeply from the SW-NE, between these two bands was a seam of clean dark orange medium sand. These appeared to be natural geological deposits rather than archaeological features. Towards the base of this layer were some large cobbles of rounded flint c0.40m diameter. Below this was layer 3 a light grey clay, this was 0.15m deep at the limit of excavation (see Fig. 2). No ground water was encountered at the base of this test pit. No archaeological features at all were encountered in this test pit.

### Test pit 3

Test pit 3 was 3.10m long, 0.60m wide and 3.10m deep. It was aligned NWN-SES and located in the north central part of the subject site (see Fig. 1).

The topsoil 1 was a medium brown fine sand layer 0.30m deep. Below this was 4 a dark orange layer of compacted natural gravel this was 0.60m deep. Below this was 2, a medium orange layer, this was a mixture of coarse sand and gravel in equal parts, this layer was 2.10m deep. Within this were lenses of white clay, seams of coarse gravel, a seam of light orange clay/gravel and a deposit of sand and pebbles. These may be interpreted as typically riverine deposits. Ground water was encountered at 2.40m below the ground level. The natural clay layers 3 or 4 were not reached in this test pit despite its considerable depth. No archaeological features at all were encountered in this test pit.

#### **Test pit 4**

Test pit 4 was 3.20m long, 0.60m wide and 1.40m deep. It was aligned WNW-ESE and located in the extreme western part of the subject site (see Fig. 1).

The topsoil 1 was a medium brown fine sand layer 0.30m deep. Below this was 2 a dark orange layer, a mixture of coarse sand and gravel in equal parts, this was 0.20m deep. Below this was 3 a dark grey clay layer, which sloped from 0.20m deep in the east to 0.75m deep in the west. A lens of medium orange sand and gravel 1.50m long and 0.20m deep occurred at the interface between layers 3 and layer 5 which was stratigraphically below 3. Layer 5 was a light grey clay 0.65m deep at the limit of excavation. No archaeological features at all were encountered in this test pit.

#### **Test pit 5**

Test pit 5 was 3.60m long, 0.60m wide and 2.15m deep. It was aligned NE-SW and located in the north-western part of the subject site (see Fig. 1).

The topsoil 1 was a medium brown fine sand layer 0.30m deep. Below this was 6, a brownish dark orange layer of clay/ fine sand with frequent rounded flint pebbles. This was 0.65m deep. Below was layer 7, a dark orange clay/ fine sand layer with no inclusions. Below was layer 4, a light grey clay layer, this was 0.70m deep. No archaeological features at all were encountered in this test pit.

Layer 6 may be associated with a previous alignment of Ambury Road, which ran across the land in which test pit 5 is located this is reflected in the present day western land boundaries of the St Michaels Adult Training Centre and of the subject site (see Fig. 1).

## **5 DISCUSSION**

Of the five test pits, TP 3 lies at the highest point in the topography, despite being excavated to 3.00m, the base of the gravel deposits were not reached and the clay layer found at the base of all the other test pits was not encountered. This suggests that the topography of Ambury Hill is determined by the thickness of the natural gravel deposits occurring on it, this is typical of the geology of Cambridgeshire. The other test pits confirmed this, as they lie down slope from TP3. TP2 lies to the south of TP3 and clay was reached at a depth of 2.35m, TP1 lies further to the south and clay occurred at a depth of 1.60m. To the east was TP4 and clay was encountered at a depth of just 0.50m, to the west was test pit 5, in which clay occurred at a depth of 1.40m.

The only possible archaeological deposit identified was layer 6 in test pit 5, which is potentially part of a make up layer for the old route of the Ambury road, which ran across this area. This land lies outside the proposed development area.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

There are several theories as to the root of the name Ambury Hill, (see Archaeological and Historical Background) and it was hoped, that although the test pitting outlined above involved a very minimal sample of the subject site, that they may have provided evidence related to the history of Ambury Hill. Unfortunately the results of this series of geo-technical test pits have provided no evidence of archaeological features or artefacts. They have, however confirmed the potential of this site to provide a dry, topographically high location near to the Ouse valley river system, and the historical town of Huntingdon. This would have made an ideal location for a settlement or fortification in any period. The potential of further archaeological work for answering some of the questions mentioned in the above discussion, and for discovering other, earlier remains, perhaps associated with those found in the nearby Brookside site c50m to the south, remains a possibility. It is likely, given the position of the site within an area of archaeological sensitivity, that any future ground disturbing developments on or in the vicinity of it would have a high probability of encountering important archaeological remains.

## **7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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