

Archaeological Field Unit

**The British Racing School, Snailwell:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

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SUMMARY

On the 28th March 2003 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on land at The British Racing School, Snailwell, Cambridgeshire (TL 6487 6584) in advance of construction of a student accommodation extension.

A 13.5m long trench was excavated within the 0.04 hectare site. No archaeological features were found during the evaluation.

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(TL 6487 6584)**

1 INTRODUCTION

An archaeological evaluation was carried out by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council on 28th April 2003 at The British Racing School, Snailwell, to fulfil the requirements of a planning application (E/00/0832/F) in advance of construction of student accommodation. The work was carried out to fulfil a Brief for archaeological evaluation issued by the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Office. No archaeological features were found during the evaluation.

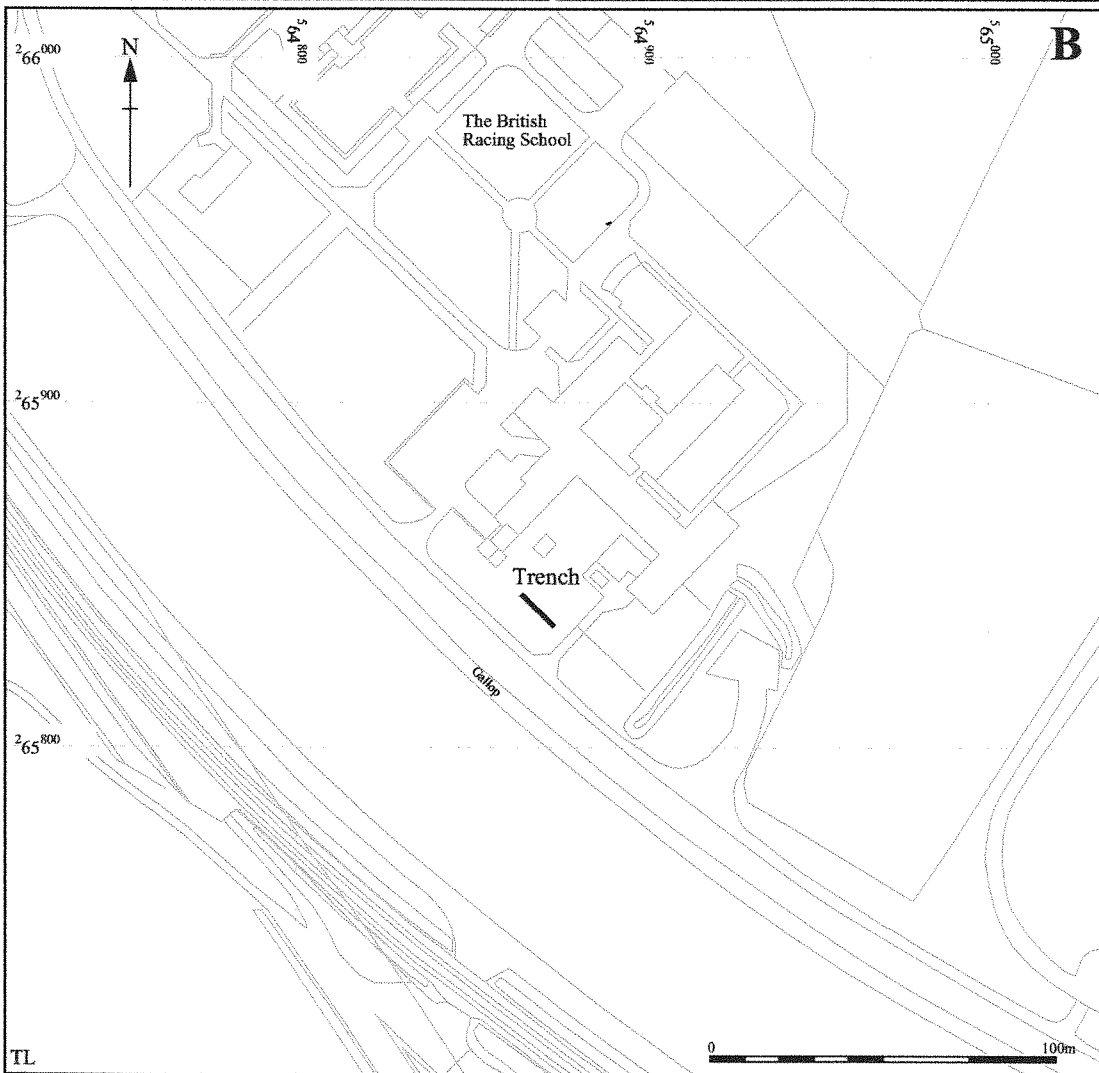
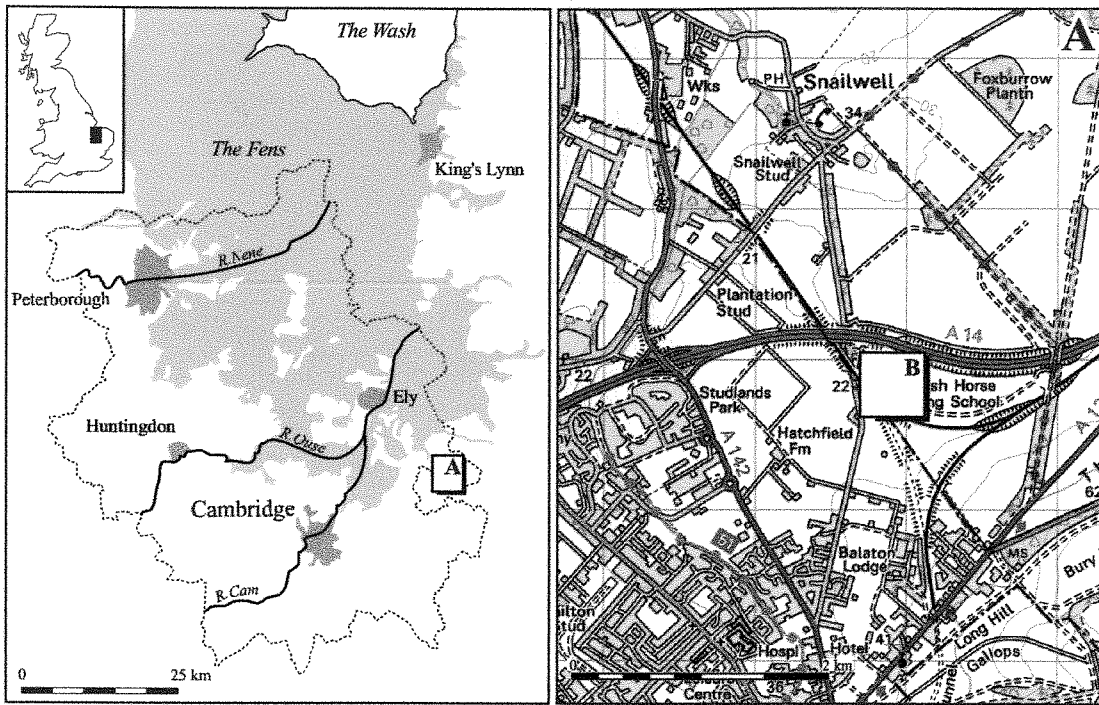
2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The land lies on Middle Chalk with pockets of flinty sand and sandy gravel (river terrace deposits). The site is generally flat, sloping gently down towards the north. The area was landscaped for an airfield in 1940 and lies at approximately 21mOD (taken from a benchmark of 21.6m on 5 Newmarket Road, Snailwell). It is mainly grass heathland used by the British Racing School as gardens and gallops.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Settlement in this area, in the past, has centred around sources of water (including the nearby river Snail) with barrows on the more marginal dry land. No early prehistoric remains are known from Snailwell although palaeolithic, mesolithic and neolithic flint tools have been found in the sandy soils of Chippenham, to the north.

The earliest evidence of occupation at Snailwell is a group of ten barrows (SMR no 1696, 7473 and 10178) (excavated in the 1940s) to the south and south-east of the present development site, close to the ancient Icknield Way. Recent fieldwalking has produced fragments of prehistoric pottery in the vicinity of the barrows (Hall 1996). All the barrows produced cremations or inhumations, or in some cases both. Four of the cremations were in Collared Urns, twenty eight were without urns, and there were four crouched adult inhumations, fifteen children, and one supine mutilated adult burial (Lethbridge 1950). The barrows also contained a variety of artefacts,



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Figure 1 Location of Evaluation Trench.

including bone pins, tubes, an awl, stone knives and a piece of antler. A burial discovered in 1880 (SMR 7437) has been associated (by Lethbridge) with the barrows he excavated in 1940.

It would appear that the higher, dry, chalklands were used for burials and other rituals with evidence of domestic activity being confined to areas around sources of water.

Snailwell has several Iron Age sites (SMR 7742), all located near the Snail (Hall 1996). Two of the sites are within the village and appear to be settlement related with house sites and domestic artefacts. Two further settlement sites are to the north of the village on the skirtland and appear to have continued in use into the Roman period. A rich Iron Age cremation (SMR 7420) was discovered to the north of the development site, in the village, in 1952 (Lethbridge, 1954).

Three Roman sites are known from Snailwell, all to the north of the development site. Two of these had continued in use from the Iron Age and include settlement remains (SMR 7440 and 7743). A cremation in a coarse vessel with a Samian barbotine dish (SMR 7434) was ploughed out in 1978.

Saxon material has been found in the village area of Snailwell, together with later medieval evidence. As with the earlier remains the settlement was concentrated around sources of water. Between 1086 and 1299 four fish ponds (SMR 1188) were established in wet ground near the church and continued in use until 1910. Other medieval earthworks are still visible in the village and surrounding area. The field patterns and furlong boundaries (SMR 10315) suggest that the parish was created as a planned operation in an open landscape (Hall 1996).

By the time of the Domesday survey the village is recorded as having 18 peasants (VCH 2002) and the population has fluctuated considerably with the greatest number of adult inhabitants, 323, in 1851. Since that date the population has declined to approximately 165 in 1991. In the post-medieval period arable land bordering the heath reverted to heath and has been used for grazing (by sheep and subsequently by horses) since then.

Between 1941 and 1946 much of the subject site was used by the American Air Force and RAF with air-raid shelters and underground facilities which were well preserved through to the end of the twentieth century. The British Racing School was established on the site in 1983.

4 METHODOLOGY

A single trench 13.5m long and 1.6m wide was excavated using a JCB with a flat bladed bucket. The position of the trench was determined by the proposed

layout of the accommodation extension (Fig. 1). After machining the trench was cleaned, photographed and recorded using the AFU standard contextual recording system. The spoil heap was scanned visually for artefacts.

5 RESULTS

The topsoil was composed of grey/brown chalky silt, 0.25-0.30m thick with chalk fragments and patinated flints. The topsoil sealed a well developed sandy silt with frequent chalk fragments and flints.

The trench was excavated on a south-east-north-west alignment in the 'foot-print' of the proposed building. A modern cable trench was excavated approximately 5.75m from the south-eastern end. The base of another modern service trench was noted 9.25m from the south-eastern end of the trench. An irregular, sandy, natural hollow was excavated to a depth of 0.88m. No artefactual material was recovered from the topsoil or any of the excavated features.

6 CONCLUSION

No archaeological features were found by this evaluation. It is possible that the area was truncated during landscaping when the airfield was developed. Large scale earth moving during the 1940s is evident from the nearby bunker, which is to be levelled as part of the current development.

In view of occupation evidence from the surrounding area and the shallow soils on the chalk it is likely that if there had been any activity on the site in the past it would have been evident in the evaluation trench.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Brief for archaeological work was written by Andy Thomas, County Archaeology Office, who visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

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