

Cover Images

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**Ramsey Abbey School, Ramsey, Cambridgeshire: Archaeological
Recording and Monitoring.
(TL 2917 8504)**

Site Code: RAS ABS 06
HER No. ECB 2334
Excavated: 11th and 13th July 2006
Report Number: 893
Excavator: Alexandra Howe
Client: The Office of Corporate Services, Property and Asset
Management, Cambridgeshire County Council

SUMMARY

On the 11th and 13th July 2006, Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit carried out an archaeological watching brief at Abbey School, Ramsey (TL 2917 8504). The monitoring was carried out during excavation of trenches for a new drain and foundations for a small extension.

Between three and five layers of uncertain date were observed along the length of the trenches. One contained worked stone and plaster but no pottery. A feature backfilled with un-worked stone, sand and gravel was cut into the upper layers. It contained no finds therefore remains undated. Two further possible features were identified.

1 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site overlies March Gravels, (British Geological Survey 1995). The Abbey lies at approximately 5m OD.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Ramsey Abbey

An earlier evaluation in 1996 opened 10 test pits within the initial proposed development area (Macaulay 1996). These revealed the presence of archaeological remains dating to the Late Saxon and medieval periods. The test pits revealed the foundations of walls, perhaps part of the inner court of the abbey, which were sealed by a 16th-century demolition layer. As a result of these findings the proposed building was moved. A second evaluation programme was undertaken in September 1997 (Last 1997). Two trenches revealed the foundations of a clunch-built wall, deep layers of soil that overlay medieval features, medieval ditches/foundation and a rubble demolition layer. All artefacts were dated to the 13th 14th centuries. Medieval archaeology was present but to a lesser extent than in the original evaluation.

The present knowledge of the ecclesiastical archaeology of the Abbey is very poor. Following its dissolution in 1539, most of the buildings were demolished. The accurate location of the monastic buildings, including the cloisters, Abbey Church and inner/outer court boundaries are not known, such was the scale of the demolition. Various theories persist, based upon the interpretation of these surviving buildings. These include the present day Parish Church of St Thomas a Becket, thought to be the original infirmary built in 1180-90 (Fig. 1, no.1), however this may also have been the guest house (hospital); the 16th-century gate house, 13th-century chapel, buildings incorporated into the cellars of the present school building and some walls survive (Fig. 1, nos. 2-5). The 1998 excavation and 1996 test pitting are shown as nos. 6 and 7 (with test pit locations individually numbered). The 2002 excavation is shown as no. 8.

There has been a series of archaeological works directly to the north-east and east of the watching brief (Fig. 1, Nos. 6 and 8; Macaulay and Atkins forthcoming). These works found four main phases of Saxo-Norman to Medieval activity. Directly to the east of the watching brief site, in the Saxo-Norman period, there were remains of three small timber buildings possibly associated with metal working which were probably within a field boundary ditch. By the early medieval period these small buildings went out of use and were replaced by a short lived large enclosure with a large internal watering hole. Boundary ditches and a slot and posthole building were built to the north-east of the watching brief area.

In the third phase there was a total change in features found due to upheavals which affected Ramsey in the Anarchy period. In Stephen's reign the house suffered severely with Geoffrey de Mandeville taking over and fortified the house. Within the area to the north-east of the watching brief site there was a large defensive ditch built more than 4.6m wide and surviving nearly 2m deep which cut features of earlier phases. There was evidence for trackway leading from the defensive ditch to a large building possibly an aisled barn. This barn survived into the later medieval period. There were a few domestic pits in this period. A large canal/lode was built up to 8m wide which stopped c.50m to the north-east of the watching brief - presumably this connected with the loads around Ramsey and allowed trade to the abbey. There was a crane for off loading goods on the west side of the canal and drainage ditches fed into the canal, keeping the canal topped up with water. At the dissolution period the canal was backfilled with domestic rubbish from the abbey and demolition rubble was strewn across the site. In the post-medieval period the site became fields. Stone walls and stone drains, using former Ramsey Abbey stone, were constructed to the east and north-east of the watching brief and this area remained agricultural land to modern day when it became part of the land belonging to Ramsey School.

2.2 Ramsey Town and Island

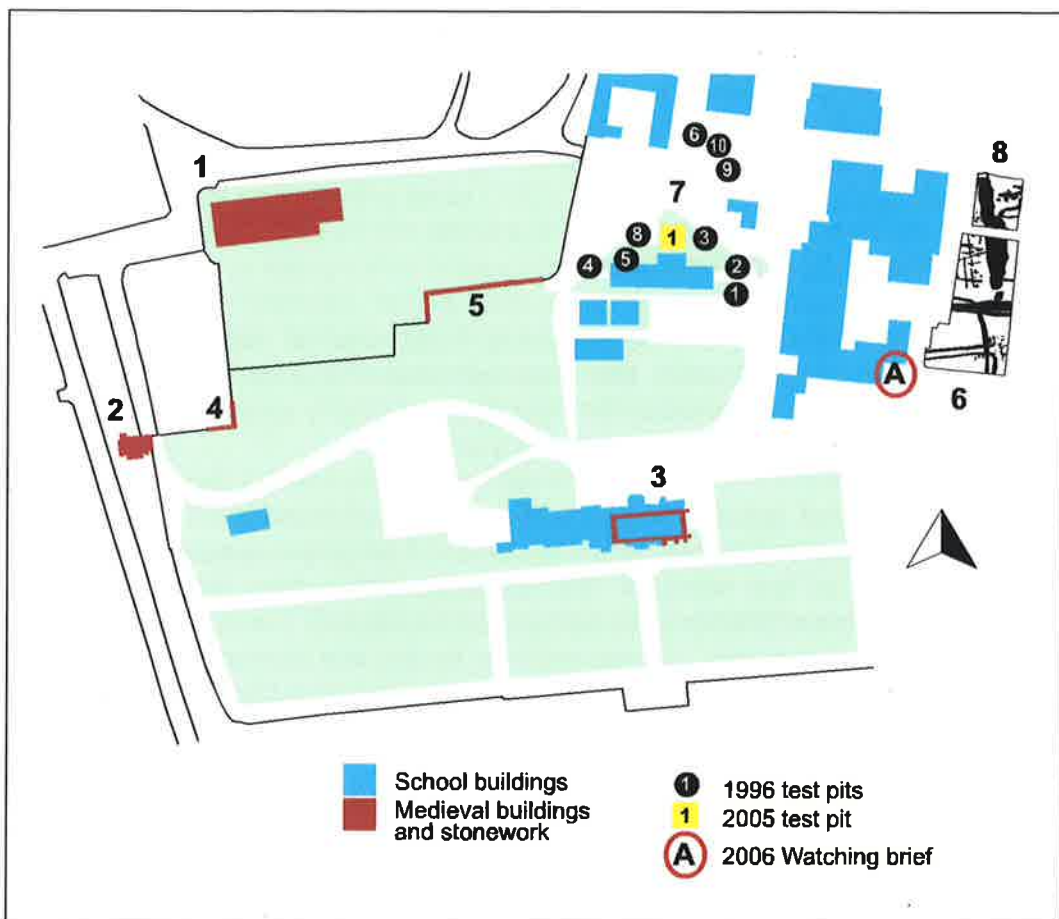


Figure 1 Location of current and previous archaeological interventions

Although a Palaeolithic axe was discovered in Victoria Road, Ramsey, this has been interpreted as a chance glacial find, and no other significant prehistoric finds have been recorded on Ramsey Island (Hall 1992). No Early or Middle Saxon activity is known from Ramsey or its vicinity. The historic town of Ramsey owed its entire existence to Ramsey Abbey, which was founded in AD 969. Edward the Confessor seems to have given *banlieu* rights to the abbey for a distance of a league around it, meaning that the abbey was able to control this area with court rights (Page *et al* 1932, 187).

Very little archaeological work has been carried out within the town of Ramsey until recently. Saxo-Norman occupation was found at 52 High Street (Archaeological Solutions forthcoming). Medieval occupation has been found on several sites. All of these interventions indicate that the sites were made useable by levelling up the land and thereby reclaiming wet, low-lying areas (Atkins 2004a and 2004b; O'Brien and Crank 2002; Membery and Hatton 1996; Pearson and McDonald 2000). Subsequently in the post-medieval period there was further levelling up of areas (Atkins 2004a).

This low-lying land may be a reason why the town did not expand further in the medieval period. Furthermore, Ramsey was situated on the edge of the fens and was not on a main traffic route. As a consequence it never rose above the position of a small market town serving the needs of the immediate neighbourhood. A broad range of crafts is documented as having been carried out in Ramsey, being dominated by leatherworking until the 15th century when the cloth trade took precedence.

3 METHODOLOGY

The objective of this watching brief was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the development area.

The Brief required that the excavation of foundation trenches and a drain be monitored and recorded. The improvements to a second drain at the front of the building within the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) were not carried out due to the discovery of a large area of concrete. It was decided by the site manager that they would use the existing drainage network and no new trenches needed to be excavated.

The area of investigation was located adjacent to the school building and was underneath a paved area which had to be removed by machine before trenching started. The foundation trenches were excavated using a JCB type excavator with a 0.6m toothed bucket to a depth of 1.5m. The drain was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.2m.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using CCC AFU's *pro-forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales digital photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

Site conditions were good, although the trenches were too deep and narrow to clean the sections. Recording was also carried out in variable light conditions

4 RESULTS

Trench 1 ran from north to south and was 1.55m deep. It contained a 5cm thick pale sand/concrete mix layer (1 and 7) used for levelling the paving stones. This did not occur across the whole area as some of it was removed by machining. Beneath this was a very dark bluish grey clay with very occasional angular stones and no finds (2 and 8). Within this layer there was a possible feature (4). It was identified by a greater density of rounded and angular stones and occasional charcoal. There were no finds therefore it is not possible to ascertain date. Layer 5 was a dark grey silty slightly organic clay, 0.35m thick

with occasional charcoal and rare bone fragments (not kept). Layer 6 appeared to be a natural firm greyish orange clay with occasional chalk inclusions. It occurred at a depth of 0.94m.

Trench 2 ran at a 90° angle from the south end of trench 1 on an east to west alignment. The upper layers 1, 7, 2, 8 and 5 were the same in this trench. A U-shaped feature was identified in this trench (11) it was filled with bright orange sand, gravel and un-worked stone (9) with a thin dark clay layer in the base (10). There were no finds but due to the colour and depth of the feature it is thought to be modern in date. Layer 12 was a mid greyish brown silty clay 0.4m thick. Layers 13 and 16 were mid orangey brown clay with occasional charcoal flecks. Another possible feature (15) was identified having cut from layer 12. It was filled by 14 which was slightly darker than 13 and 16 but again contained no finds. The basal layer was the same as trench 1.

Trench 3 was located along the line of feature 11. It contained layers 1/7 and 12. It contained a new layer 17 which lay below 11. 17 appeared was a dark grey silty clay with frequent inclusions of plaster, worked stone, occasional brick fragments and charcoal but no pottery. It was 0.3m deep. The natural (19) was more yellowish clay here.

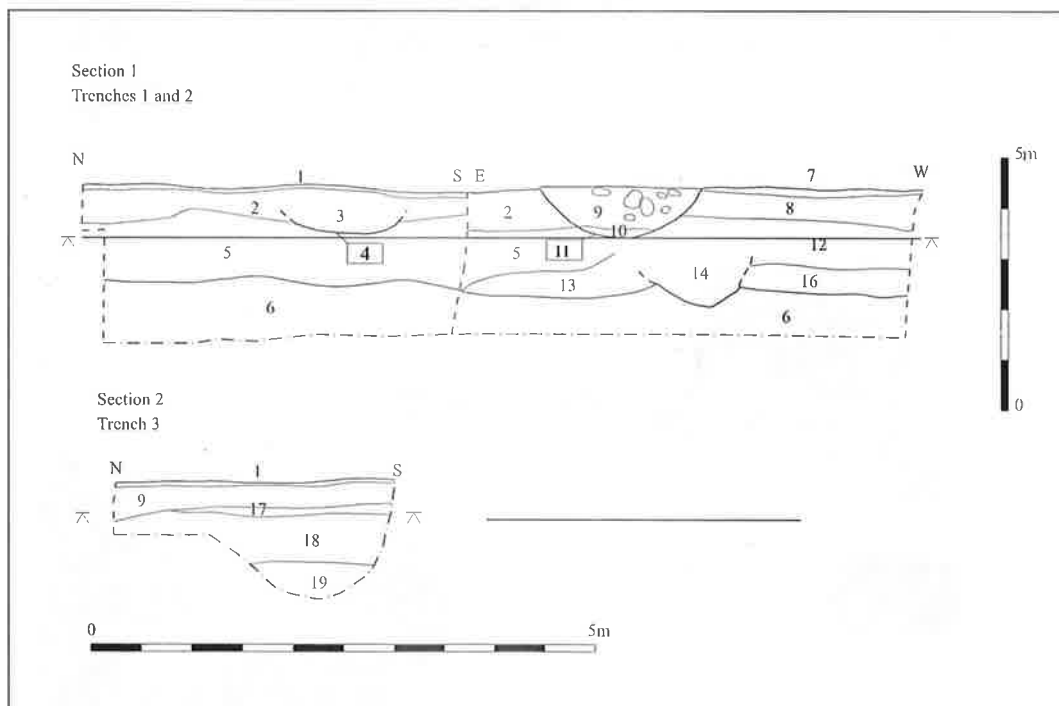


Figure 2: Sections

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The absence of finds in this area limits the conclusions that can be drawn from this watching brief, however it does suggest that perhaps the trenches were located towards the periphery of major activity on

the site. The deep layers that were observed within the trenches were also discovered during the 1998 excavation only 50m away from the current development area. The deep overburden was then interpreted as sub garden soils. Macaulay (1998) also noted an organically rich area in the southern end of the 1998 excavation area which would be relatively close the current area of investigation.



Plate 1: Section of Trench 3



Plate 2: Development area

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