



**CCC AFU Report Number 905**

## **A Medieval Boundary Ditch on Land to the Rear of Nos 33 to 35 New Street, St Neots, Cambridgeshire**

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**An Archaeological Evaluation**

David Brown

October 2006



## Cover Images

Machine stripping, Soham	On-site surveying
Roman corn dryer, Duxford	Guided walk along Devil's Dyke
Bronze Age shaft, Fordham Bypass	Medieval well, Soham
Human burial, Barrington Anglo-Saxon Cemetery	Timbers from a medieval well, Soham
Blue enamelled head, Barrington	Bed burial reconstruction, Barrington Anglo-Saxon Cemetery
Aethusa cynapium 'Fool's parsley'	Medieval tanning pits, Huntingdon Town Centre
Digging in the snow, Huntingdon Town Centre	Beaker vessel
Face painting at Hinchinbrooke Iron Age Farm	Environmental analysis
Research and publication	Monument Management, Bartlow Hills

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**A Medieval Boundary Ditch at  
Land to the Rear of Nos 33 to  
35 New Street St Neots**

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**An Archaeological Evaluation**

David Brown BA

With a contribution by Rachel Fosberry

Site Code: STN WES 06

CHER Event Number: ECB 2355

Date of works: 24th to 25th August 2006

Grid Ref: TL 1830 6045

Editor: Richard Mortimer MIFA

Illustrator: Séverine Bezie MA

## **Summary**

On the 24th and 25th August 2006, Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (CCC AFU) undertook an archaeological evaluation by trial trench on land to the rear of Nos 33 to 35 New Street, St Neots (TL 1830 6045), in advance of the proposed construction of four maisonettes with parking.

A large medieval ditch was encountered which may be part of a precinct boundary belonging to St Neots Benedictine Priory (established 972-5, dissolved 1539), which lies c.100m to the south-west of the New Street development area.

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## Drawing Conventions

### Sections

Limit of Excavation	- - - - -
Cut	—————
Cut-Conjectured	- - - - -
Deposit Horizon	—————
Deposit Horizon - Conjectured	- - - - -
Intrusion/Truncation	- · - · - · -
Top Surface/Top of Natural	—————
Break in Section/ Limit of Section Drawing	- - - - -
Natural Deposit	· · · · ·
Cut Number	118
Deposit Number	117
Ordinance Datum	18.45m OD X
Inclusions	⊗
Sample Number	◇

### Plans

Limit of Excavation	—————
Deposit - Conjectured	- - - - -
Natural Features	—————
Sondages/Machine Strip	- · - · - · -
Intrusion/Truncation	- · - · - · -
Illustrated Section	————— S.14
Archaeological Feature	□
Excavated Slot	□
Machine Cut Sondage	□
Auger Sample Location	⊗
Cut Number	118

## **1 Introduction**

This archaeological evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Kasia Gdaniec of the Cambridgeshire Archaeology, Planning and Countryside Advice team (CAPCA; Planning Application H/06/01035/FUL), supplemented by a Specification prepared by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (CCC AFU).

The work was designed to assist in defining the character and extent of any archaeological remains within the proposed redevelopment area, in accordance with the guidelines set out in *Planning and Policy Guidance 16 - Archaeology and Planning* (Department of the Environment 1990). The results will enable decisions to be made by CAPCA, on behalf of the Local Planning Authority, with regard to the treatment of any archaeological remains found.

The site archive is currently held by CCC AFU and will be deposited with the appropriate county stores in due course.

## **2 Geology and Topography**

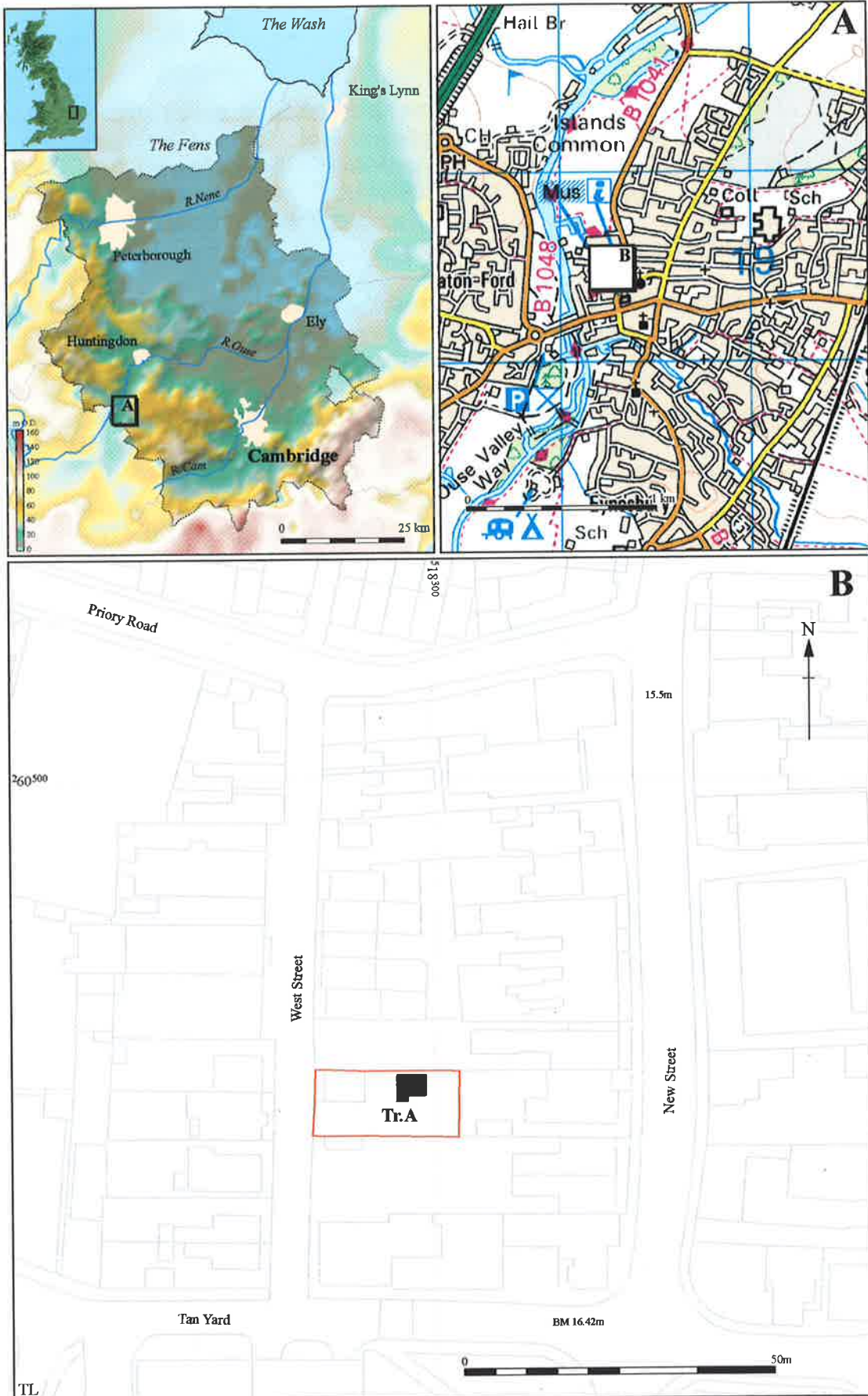
The underlying geology is First and Second Terrace gravels laid down by the River Great Ouse (BGS sheet 187), which in its present course runs 250m to the west. The surrounding area, away from the river, is comprised mainly of Boulder Clay. The land slopes gently from 25m OD in the east to approximately 14m OD beside the River Great Ouse. The land to be developed lies at a little over 15m OD.

The site is located on the outskirts of the medieval core of St Neots. The Scheduled Ancient Monument of St Neots Benedictine priory (SAM 101, DCB21, est. AD 972-5) lies c.100m to the south of the development area.

## **3 Archaeological and Historical Background**

Prehistoric and Roman remains are recorded on the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (CHER) at various points in and around St Neots. Iron Age and Roman settlement evidence has been found to the south of St Neots at Eynesbury and Conygeare (Kemp 1993, Alexander 1993), but stray finds (mainly coins) have been found in the town and the HER reports a Roman cemetery on open land to the north of St Neots. Some 500m to the east considerable quantities of residual Roman pottery were recovered from Late Saxon features excavated in 1961/2 to the south of Cambridge Street and east of Church Street (Addyman 1973).





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Figure 1: Location of trench (black) with the development area outlined (red)



The evidence is indicative of dense rural activity and associated settlement in the vicinity during the late 3rd and 4th century and possibly into the 5th century AD.

A Roman road runs between Sandy and Godmanchester to the east of the Great Ouse, and also to the east of St Neots and Eynesbury. It has been suggested that there is a possible east-west crossing point of the river at St Neots (Margary 1967). Its exact route has not yet been found but it is thought to be a few hundred metres north of the medieval bridge in the area of Islands Common (Spoerry 1994).

There is evidence of Early Saxon occupation in the St Neots area with increasing evidence for Mid and Late Saxon settlement and, by the medieval period, St Neots was well established within the parish of Eynesbury. Traditionally there was a pre-Conquest religious foundation associated with the remains of St Neot, but there is no record of the priory in 1066 nor any claim to estates in St Neots made by Ely in the Domesday book (Haigh 1988) although the Benedictine priory was certainly established by the early 12th century.

By 1180 the settlement was well developed with a bridge to the south of the priory and north of the market place, and the settlement growing up around the priory on the eastern bank of the river.

None of the priory buildings survive but excavations by C. F. Tebbutt during the mid 20th century are claimed to have located various parts of the priory precinct and other parts of the medieval town have been located in more recent excavations. The town continued to develop in the later medieval and post-medieval period and expanded to the north and east.

Recent excavations around the development area have revealed mixed undated (CB331), Roman (CB919) and medieval to post-medieval remains (CB324 and CB50), including burial evidence relating to the priory.

#### **4 Methodology**

The objective of this evaluation 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 at least 5% of the development area should be subject to trial trenching. Initially, a single trench (Trench A) measuring 3.5m by 5m was excavated to fulfil this requirement. An additional 2m by 1m extension was excavated to further investigate the archaeological remains encountered. Unfortunately, during the

extension to the original trench a post-medieval rubble-filled land drain was damaged causing flooding within the trial trench. It was necessary to machine excavate a sump immediately adjacent to the breached drain to accommodate the water.

Machine excavation was carried out under constant archaeological supervision with a wheeled JCB-type excavator using a toothless ditching bucket.

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

Bulk soil samples were taken from relevant contexts to test for environmental indicators - it was thought there may have been potential for a high degree of preservation due to water logging. One sample was taken from the hand-excavated investigation, and one from a deeper deposit exposed by the machine-excavated sump (see Figure 2). The results of the post-excavation analysis are included below (Appendix 3).

The placement of the trial trench was restricted by a concrete pad at the western end of the site and by root disturbance, from a recently removed tree of considerable age, on the eastern part of the site. The weather was overcast and wet, and the rainfall in the preceding weeks had been substantial. As a result the water table was encountered at the level of the natural sand and gravel terrace. This affected the depth to which the archaeological features could be excavated. To ascertain the depth of the archaeology encountered an auger survey was carried out.

## 5 Results (Fig. 2)

Trench A (which includes the small extension) was 1.10m deep. At this depth one archaeological feature was identified.

The topsoil (1) was 0.12m thick. It was a dark orangey brown clay silt and quite disturbed and compressed. Beneath this were a number of deliberately dumped levelling and make-up layers (2 and 9 to 11) ranging in thickness from 0.30m to 0.14m. They contained Victorian glass and pottery and ashy lenses. Particularly notable was a thick dark brownish yellow gravel dump (9). These contexts were removed by machine and no finds were retained.

Beneath these layers at a depth of 0.72m, was a mid orange brown buried soil layer (3). It varied in thickness from 0.24m to 0.10m. The natural sand and gravel terrace (4) lay beneath the buried soil at a depth of 1.10m.

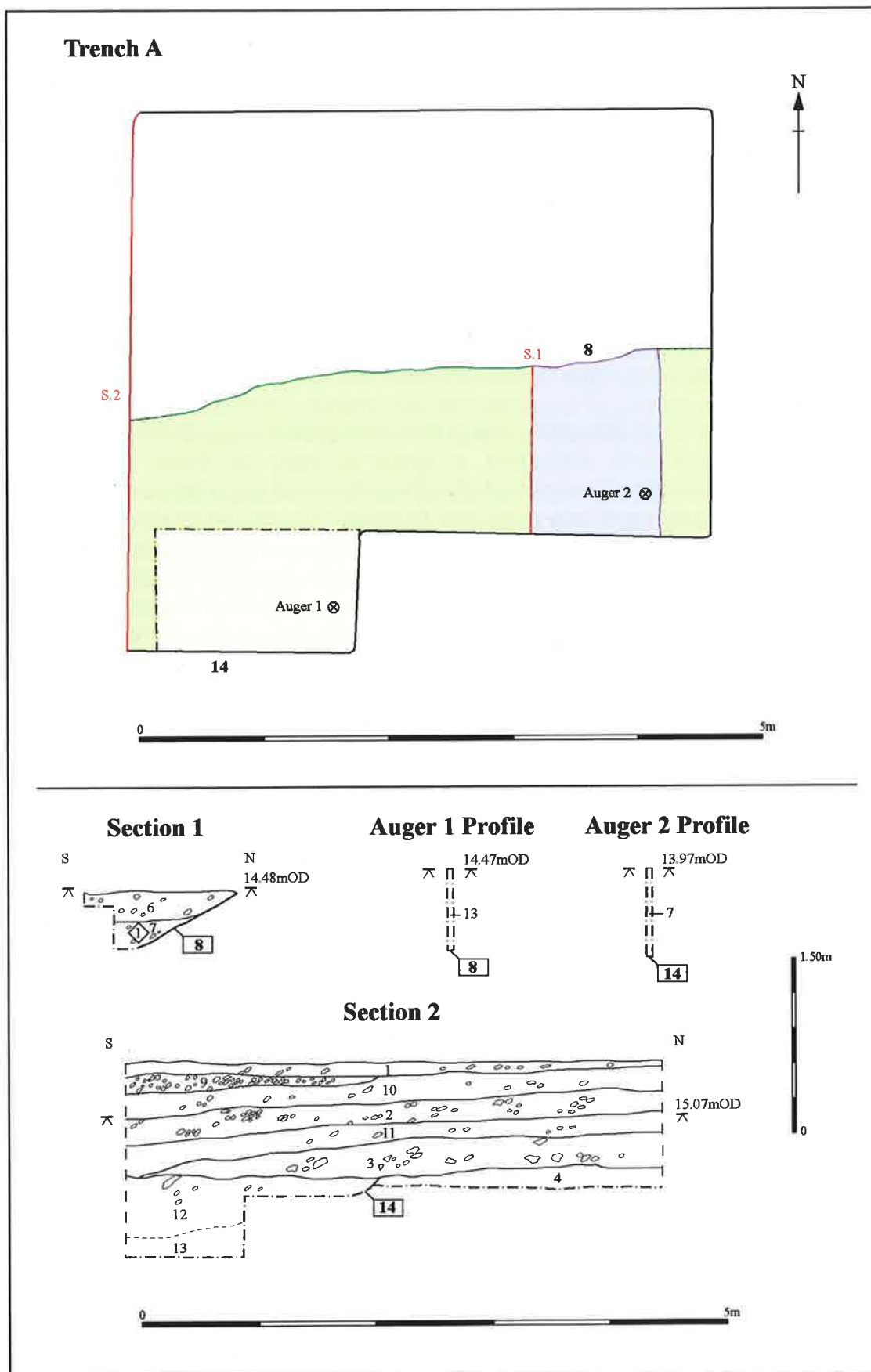


Figure 2: Trench plan and section drawings

Cut into the natural was a substantial ditch (8/14) (see Fig. 2). The ditch had an east-west orientation and ran the length of the southern side of the trench. Its southern extent was not seen, despite the 1m trial trench extension. The total exposed width of ditch 14 was 2.25m.

It was not possible to fully excavate the lower fills of the ditch due to the high water table; pumping the water out of the feature was impractical. The earliest excavated fill (7/13) was a dark grey silty clay, 0.22m thick, to the lower limit of excavation. It was dug by hand at the east of the feature and machined out in the sump at the west. An environmental sample was taken from both contexts 7 and 13 as they appeared to have a degree of organic content. No finds were recovered.

The upper fill of the ditch was a firm mid brown clay silt (6/12). It was 0.25m thick and contained a small quantity of finds. The finds assemblage consisted principally of ceramic building material: a single piece of well-made late medieval floor tile (heavily worn and with soot deposition around its upper edges) two pieces of handmade brick and five pieces of roof tile of probable late medieval or post-medieval date. The only more closely datable find was a single sherd of abraded 12th to 14th century sandy ware pottery. A single fragment of animal bone, part of a dog humerus which had no signs of butchering or cut marks, and an iron nail (SF No. 1) were also recovered.

The excavated and augered profile of the ditch (see Section 1, Fig. 2) suggests that its centre was towards the southern extreme of the excavation area. The centre of the ditch was approximately 1.35m deep from the level of the natural sand and gravel.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusions

The sole archaeological feature encountered was the large ditch 14, estimated to be between 5m and 6m wide, though comparatively shallow at approximately 1.35m deep. However, the base of the ditch was at 13.30m OD and, cut into the gravel terrace there would have been natural inundation by ground water (the present course of the River Great Ouse, 250m to the west, flows at c. 14m OD). The ditch would have functioned as a very effective boundary, firstly forming a barrier to the movement of people and animals and secondly making a strong statement of ownership and the power to restrict access.

That the ditch was water-filled is substantiated by the results of the environmental analysis on the two samples (Appendix 3). They contained egg cases of water flea, waterlogged seeds of elderberry and numerous waterlogged seeds of dock and sedge. There are no cereals or other food plants present to suggest any nearby human habitation.

The relatively small finds assemblage means few conclusions can be drawn. The finds recovered from the upper fill of the ditch show that it probably dates to the medieval period. Find type and frequency suggest the immediate area was not within the core of the medieval town, though small quantities of this kind of material are indicative of refuse being scattered quite widely in the vicinity.

This substantial medieval ditch, water-filled and, at best, on the periphery of settlement, should be considered as a possible precinct boundary to St Neots priory. It is reminiscent of other such boundary ditches, for instance that recently discovered at Ramsey Abbey (Mortimer 2006). The medieval Ramsey precinct boundary was also c.5m wide, a little over a metre deep, and water-filled. The St Neots ditch is certainly substantial enough, and its period of disuse could be consistent with the date of the priory's dissolution.

The influence of the ditch seems to have continued long after it became infilled. The land, which became Nos 33-35 New Street, was left conspicuously empty of development during the period from 1885 to 1926 (Ordnance Survey First Edition 1885, Second Edition 1901 [Fig. 3] and Third Edition 1926), while all around buildings were constructed as St Neots town developed northwards. Attempts to raise and consolidate the land were noted in the sequence of dump layers (2 and 9-11). It may be that the ditch retained moisture to such a degree that the land above it was unstable and therefore undeveloped. The building present on the site today is of 1930s date and appears to be the first substantial development on the plot.

Furthermore, the line of the boundary may be reflected in the layout of later property boundaries (see Fig. 3). The street and property orientation of the immediate area, for example Russell Street and Bedford Street, have not been offset from any of the obvious lines of reference (High Street, New Street or Huntingdon Street), rather they retain the east-west orientation of the earlier medieval boundary.

Recommendations for any future work based upon this report will be made by the County Archaeology Office.



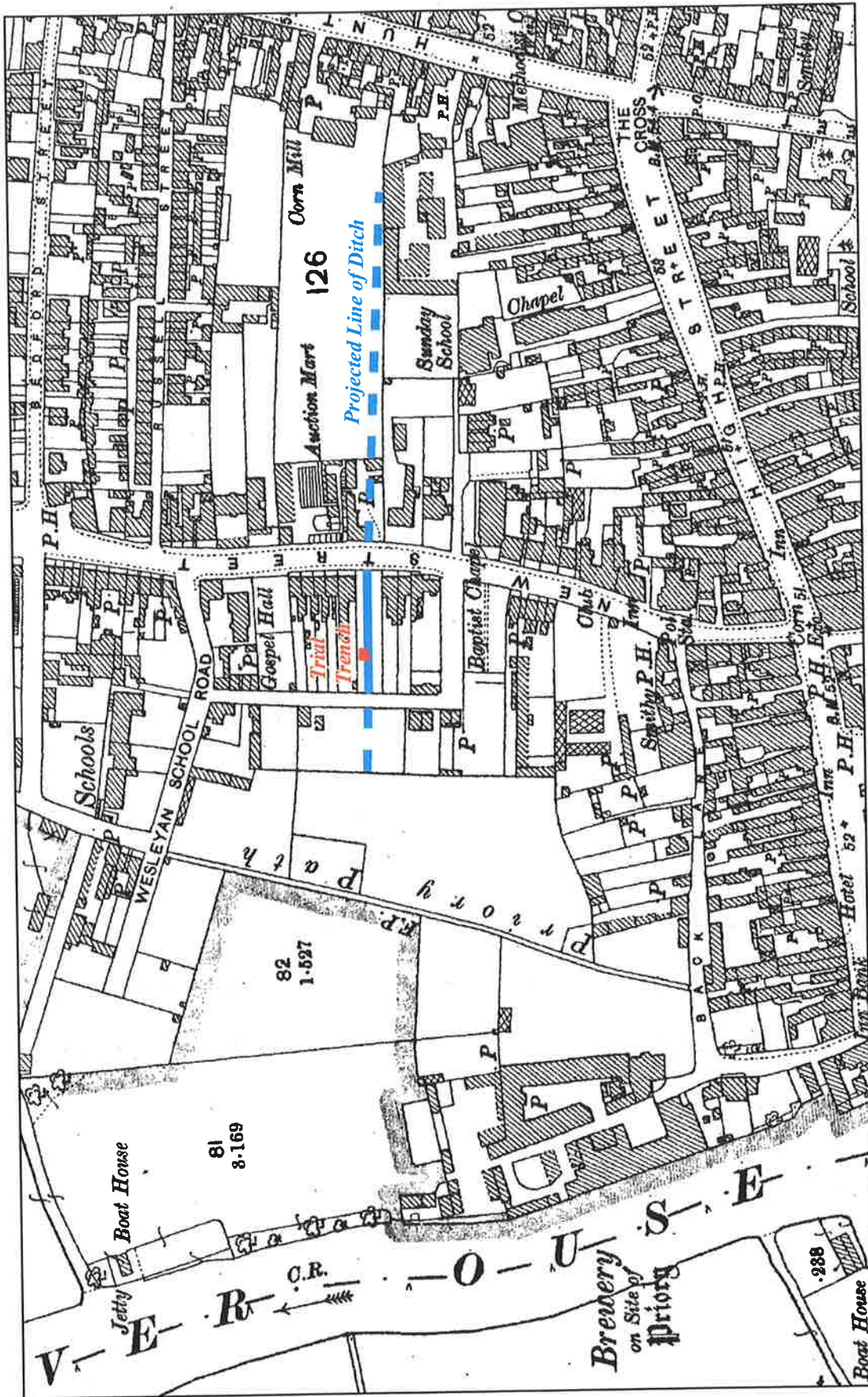


Figure 3: Projected continuation of the medieval boundary (2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Map 1901)





*Plate 1: Trench A*

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the Jarda Partnership who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The archaeologists who excavated and interpreted the site were Will Punchard and the author. Richard Mortimer managed the project and provided much appreciated input to the report.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Kasia Gdaniec. Adrian Scruby visited the site and monitored the evaluation.



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- |                |      |  |
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## Maps Consulted

- British Geological Survey, 1976, Sheet 187
- Ordnance Survey First Edition, 1885
- Ordnance Survey Second Edition, 1901
- Ordnance Survey Second Edition, 1926

## Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context Number	Cut/Fill/Layer	Fill of	Equivalent to	Description
1	Layer	-	-	Topsoil- firm orangey dark brown clayey silt
2	Layer	-	-	Occupation build up- loose brownish mid grey ashy silt
3	Layer	-	-	Buried soil- firm orangey mid brown sandy silt. Moderate occurrence of medium sized rolled pebbles and flint nodules
4	Natural	-	-	Compact brownish light orange gravelly clay
6	Fill	8	12	Firm mid brown clayey silt. Frequent medium flint nodules.
7	Fill	8	-	Compact dark grey silty clay. Occasional flint nodules.
8	Cut	-	14	Linear, E-W orientation. South side unseen. Moderate sides, moderate break of slope at top. Base unseen
9	Layer	-	-	Occupation build up- Loose brownish dark yellow sandy silt. Very frequent fine & medium sized rolled pebbles.
10	Layer	-	-	Occupation build up- Loose brownish dark grey sandy silt. Moderate occurrence pebbles and charcoal flecking.
11	Layer	-	-	Occupation build up- Firm greyish mid brown silt. Moderate fine sized pebbles. Occasional charcoal flecking.
12	Fill	14	6	Firm mid brown clayey silt. Moderate flint nodules.
13	Fill	14	-	Firm brownish dark grey silty clay.
14	Cut	-	8	Linear, E-W orientation. South side unseen. Moderate sides, moderate break of slope at top. Base unseen

## Appendix 2: Finds Summary

Context	Material	Object Name	Weight in kg
6	Bone	Bone	0.019
6	Ceramic	Vessel	0.005
6	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.917
6	F (iron)	Nail (SF No.1)	-

## **Appendix 3: Environmental Appraisal**

by Rachel Fosberry

### **1 Introduction and Methods**

Two bulk samples were taken from features within the evaluated areas of the site in order to assess the quality of preservation of plant remains and their potential to provide useful data as part of any further archaeological investigations.

Ten litres of each sample were processed by bucket flotation for the recovery of charred plant remains, dating evidence and any other artefactual evidence that might be present. The flot was collected in a 0.5mm nylon mesh and the residue was washed through a 1mm sieve. Both flot and residue were allowed to air dry. The dried residue was passed through 5mm and 2mm sieves and a magnet was dragged through each resulting fraction prior to sorting for artefacts. Any artefacts present were noted and reintegrated with the hand-excavated finds. The flot was examined under a binocular microscope at x16 magnification.

### **2 Results**

Preservation is by waterlogging and is generally poor. Both samples contain egg cases of *Daphnia* sp. (water flea). Waterlogged seeds of *Sambucus nigra* (elderberry) are present in sample 1 (context 6) and Sample 2 (context 13) contains numerous waterlogged seeds of *Rumex* sp. (docks) and *Carex* sp (sedges). Sample 2 also contains several twigs and woody fragments including bark.

### **3 Conclusions**

The quantity of plant remains was moderate with only limited species diversity. Typical ditch flora is represented with a bias towards the survival of woody material and more robust seeds such as elderberry. Water fleas are small zooplankton that inhabit slow flowing streams, ponds and ditches. There are no cereals or other food plants present to suggest any human habitation and the conclusion is that this assemblage represents the accumulation of locally growing flora in a water-filled boundary ditch.



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