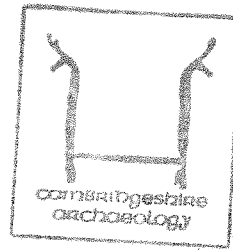


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Medieval Property Boundaries and Rubbish Pits to the South of High Street, Somersham

Judith Roberts

1996

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A92

Commissioned By Keith Hurst Design

**Medieval Property Boundaries and Rubbish Pits
to the South of High Street, Somersham**
(TL 3588 7791)

Judith Roberts MA

June 1996

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Report No A92

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SUMMARY

In March 1996 an evaluation was carried out at 100 High Street, Somersham (TL 3588 7791) by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council on behalf of Keith Hurst Design. The evaluation was carried out in response to a design brief from Development Control (Archaeology Section), Cambridgeshire County Council, following a planning application for a proposed residential development. Trenches and a test pit revealed medieval property boundaries and rubbish pits, post-medieval building and modern orchard clearance.

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Medieval Property Boundaries and Rubbish Pits to the South of High Street, Somersham (TL 3588 7791)

1 INTRODUCTION

In March 1996 an evaluation was carried out to the rear of 100 High Street, Somersham (TL 3588 7791) by the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council on behalf of Keith Hurst Design. The evaluation was carried out in response to a design brief from the Development Control Office (Archaeology Section), Cambridgeshire County Council, following a planning application for a proposed residential development.

The subject site covers approximately 0.4 hectares, comprising a tarmacadamed lorry park and barns in the north, and to the south open ground, part of which had been orchard in the early years of this century. The whole of the southern part had reputedly been under the plough until three years ago, although air photographs indicate the area was grassland in 1979, 1982 and 1988. An air photographic assessment, undertaken by Air Photo Services highlighted linear patches of poor growth which were interpreted as possible recent minor field divisions; it was considered unlikely that they indicate archaeological features. Five trenches were opened in the field and a test pit dug in the lorry yard behind the current street front.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The northern and eastern part of the parish is low lying fenland (at or near sea level), rising towards the south and west to over 25m OD. The geology is comprised river terrace gravels overlying a bed of Oxford Clay. There are gravel pits to the north of the village. Much of the land in the parish is arable, with some pasture. Formerly there was a fair amount of woodland and orchard but this has been considerably reduced in recent years.

The subject site lies on gently rising land, from approximately 9m OD in the south eastern corner (with low-lying former medieval ponds and marshy areas to the south-east of the site) to higher land (at approximately 11.5m OD) to the north and north east, by the church and High Street.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The subject site lies in an area rich in archaeological remains. There are Neolithic sites approximately 5km to the east and north east, on the fen edge (Hall and Coles 1994, 33) and stray prehistoric finds in the parish. A fragment of a Neolithic axe was found near the south eastern corner of the subject site (SMR 01848). Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman stray finds have been recovered in the village (SMR 03605, 01454, 01789, 01453).

The name of the village may derive either from a personal name ('Sumor's homestead') or from a 'homestead of the south mere' (Mawer and Stenton, 1969, 222-223). The first recorded reference can be traced back to around the 10th

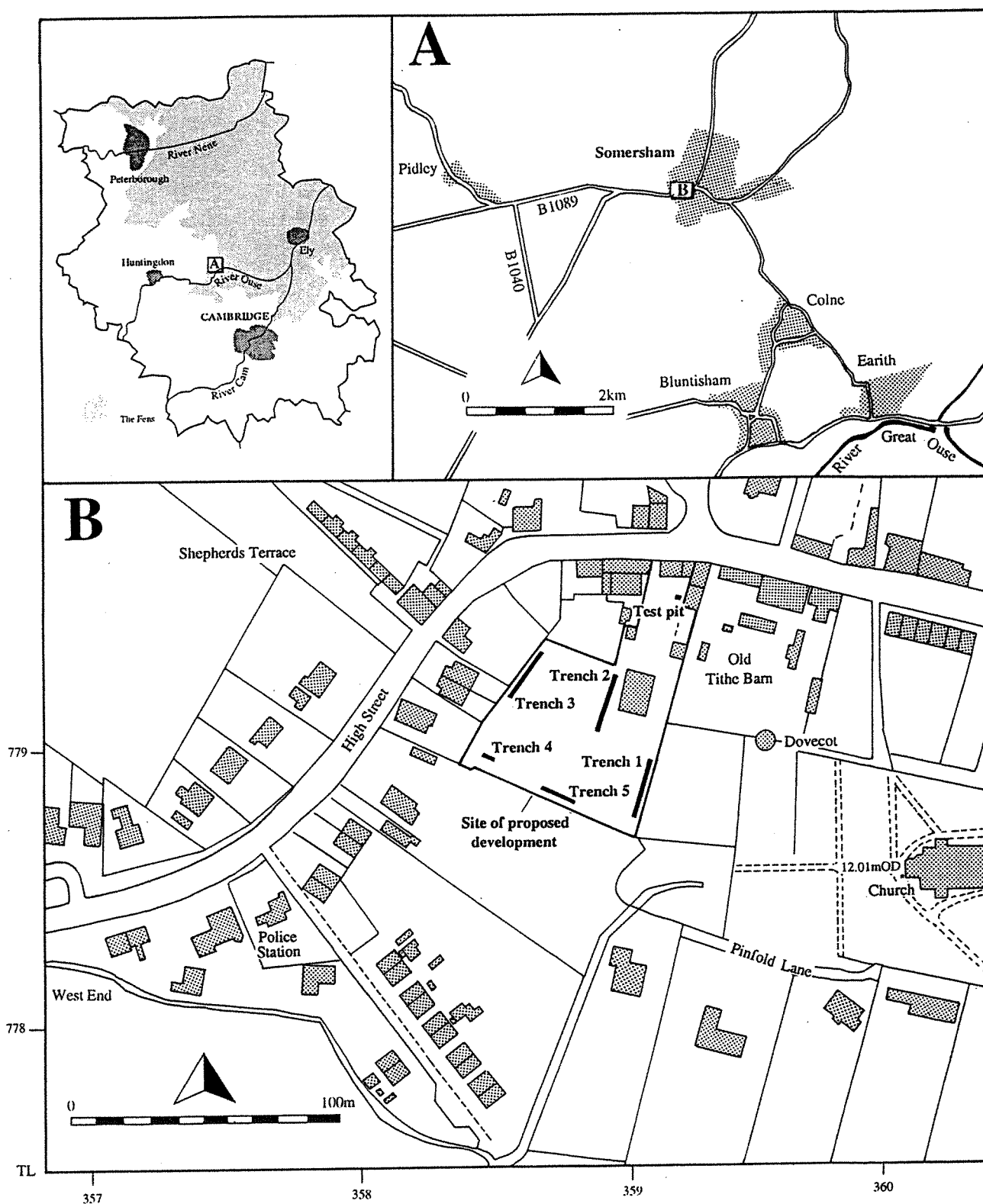


Figure 1 Site location plan

century. The manor of Somersham was acquired by the abbey of Ely in 991, and became part of the bishop's endowment in 1109 (Page *et al*, 1974). On the southern edge of the village lies the site of the medieval bishop's palace and associated moat, fishponds and deer park (SAM 199). The medieval church and site of the medieval rectory lie to the east of the development site (SMR 0609, 03565).

The village stands on higher ground, rising from the fen edge in the north, and extends along the roads from Huntingdon and St. Ives to Earith and Chatteris. The High Street is crossed in the middle of the village by a road from the south, which now only leads to the former site of the palace of the bishops of Ely, but which formerly joined Bluntisham Heath road, forming the approach to the palace from the south (ibid). A medieval market was held at the crossing. The layout of the medieval village is discussed further below.

4 METHOD

Five trenches and a test pit were excavated by mechanical digger to a depth at which either natural deposits or archaeological features were reached. In the southern part of the field clays were encountered below the former plough soil, but there were mixed gravels and clays rising to sandy gravels immediately to the south of the High Street (the northern part of the site). Trenches were cleaned and a selection of archaeological features were hand-sectioned and recorded using the Archaeological Field Unit's standard single context based methods. Feature and trench plans were produced using a Total Station EDM with internal data logger and ProSurveyor software.

5 RESULTS

The depth of topsoil across the site fluctuated between 15 and 30cms. It was dark organic rich soil with small quantities of post-medieval rubbish suggestive of long use as garden plots or small scale agriculture in close proximity to the village. Below topsoil up to 10cm of light brown silty clay (a possible remnant of a former cultivation/garden soil) sealed medieval features in the northern part of the subject site.

The trenches in the southern part of the field and along the eastern boundary (Trenches 1, 4 and 5, see Figure 1) showed considerable disturbance, which is assumed to be associated with the clearance of the orchards which occupied this part of the site in the first half of the 20th century. Residual pottery (Colne type wares) recovered during surface cleaning and from the spoil was dated between 1200 and 1400. The southern and eastern parts of the trenches were excavated to approximately 0.5m below the present ground level, at which depth water began to seep into the trenches. No features, other than those related to the clearance of trees, were visible in these trenches. The area of reduced grass growth, noted in the aerial photographic survey (see Appendix I) towards the southern hedge line can be related to a dump of building material and glass, possibly the remnants of a former greenhouse.

Two trenches (Trenches 2 and 3), running north-east to south-west revealed archaeological features. Trench 2 contained a linear feature, 6, with a possible gully in the base, which ran north-east to south-west and approximately follows a property boundary marked on the Ordnance Survey 1927 Edition (Huntingdonshire Sheet XIX.2). The excavated width was 1.10m and the depth 0.45m; the eastern side was beyond the trench edge. The fill comprised a silty clay containing a few St. Neots type ware sherds (dated to 900-1100) and animal bone (mainly cattle and sheep). At its northern end it was cut at right angles by a further linear feature, 2. This feature contained medieval pottery (small abraded sherds of 13th to 15th century date) and animal bone. Both features 2 and 6 were cut by apparently steep sided, sub-circular pit features, 8 and 10, with

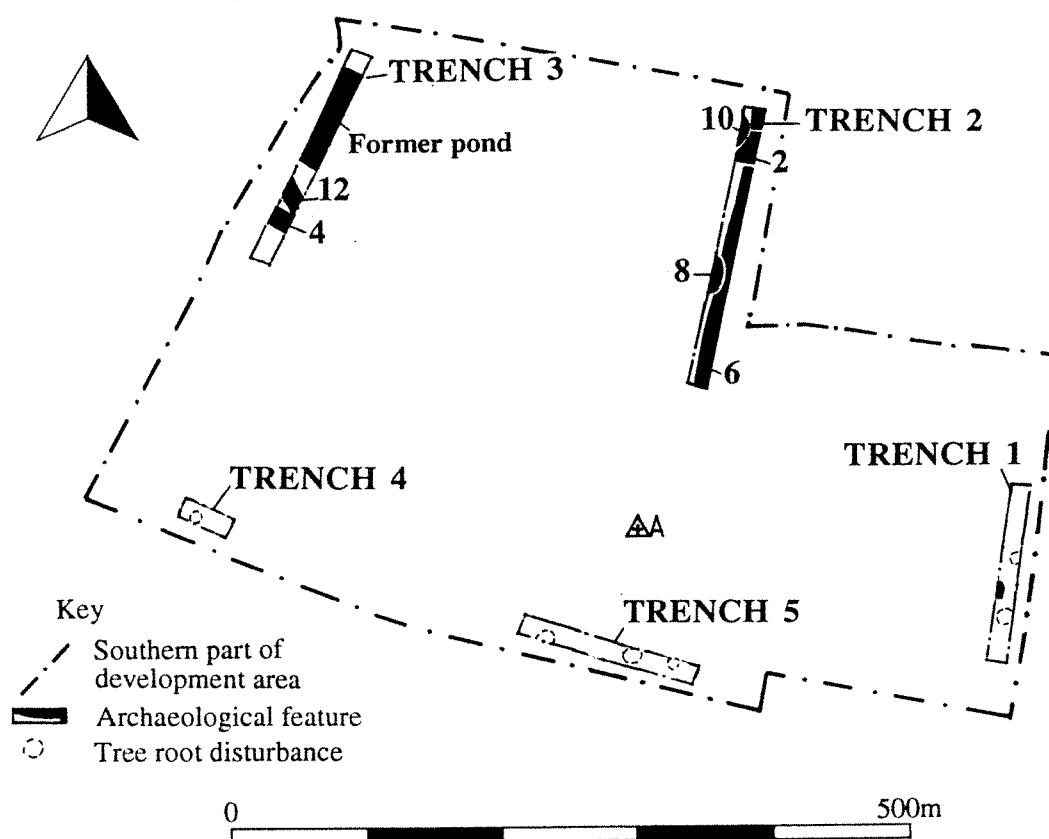


Figure 2 *Trench Plan*

with more organic fills containing later medieval pottery types (Colne type wares) and animal bone (mainly cattle and sheep).

Trench 3 contained a linear feature, 4, 1.55m wide and 0.37m deep with almost vertical sides and a rounded base. This ran approximately north-west to south-east with a single dark olive brown silty clay fill, 3, containing medieval pottery (Colne type wares) and animal bone. A further, narrow, linear feature running off to the north-west was revealed. This was not excavated but appeared to contain a very similar fill to 3 above. The northern part of the trench contained a dark grey silty clay with no clearly defined edges. This, together with subsidence along and adjacent length of garden wall, suggests the former presence of a large in-filled pit or pond in this part of the field.

A test pit was excavated to a depth of 1.25m below the present ground level (10.01m OD) in the lorry park to determine whether evidence of medieval street front properties remained. The area has been heavily disturbed by post-medieval building, to a depth of 0.6m. Beneath this was a mixed silty gravel deposit containing fragments of animal bone, brick and iron. A small spread of cockle shells and a clay tobacco pipe was found immediately above the natural sandy gravel deposits. No medieval or earlier presence could be detected.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Investigation suggests that the archaeological features revealed in Trenches 2 and 3 relate to the rear of medieval street front properties. The absence of similar features in Trenches 1, 4 and 5 provides evidence for decreasing medieval activity away from the High Street, towards the lower land to the south.

The features are well sealed and animal bone survives in a good state of preservation. Wet conditions at the southern end of the area may have led to waterlogged deposits in any deep features which are present here.

The evaluation was designed to provide a preliminary examination of the character of the archaeology of the subject site and was necessarily limited in scope. Despite the obvious dangers of basing interpretations on small samples, however, it is worth briefly examining the implications of the revealed medieval archaeology and reviewing interpretations of the development of the village.

Taylor suggests that the development of the palace grounds, gardens, ponds, and associated deer park, carried out under the auspices of the Bishops of Ely, was driven by aesthetic and leisure considerations. It is argued that such considerations may have led to the selection of less than ideal situations for the large fish ponds (ornamental lakes) and the re-location of Somersham village to the north of its original site (cf Taylor 1989, 211-224). Taylor argues that the original main street axis may have run to the south of the church (and our subject site) and is partly preserved in the line of Pinfold Lane (Figure 1). Two dates are offered for the re-organisation of Somersham: early during the twelfth century, soon after the estate had been transferred from abbey to Bishop, and late in the twelfth century, when the village was granted a market.

The ditch revealed in Trench 2, apparently pre-dating 1100, and not extending into Trench 5, suggests that properties may have already existed on the High Street by this date. Does the High Street respect an earlier estate enclosure or landscape feature? Were the seeds of the impressive palace sown during the period of the abbey's ownership of the manor during the preceding century or so?

Although it is unlikely that medieval street front buildings have survived later disturbance, the excavation of the proposed access road may provide an opportunity to trace other medieval features (pitting and plot boundaries) closer to the street front. Examination of these would help to firmly date the period of the establishment of the High Street. Similarly the excavation of house plots, if taken down to the level of natural clays and gravels, would allow a view of the full extent of the early medieval boundary features and late medieval pitting.

Such evidence would make a significant contribution to the understanding of the development of the early medieval village at Somersham, and of the role of its ecclesiastical lords in organising the medieval landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Keith Hurst Design for commissioning the work, Cambridge County Records Office and Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record Office for their co-operation, Ben Robinson for managing the project and editing this report, Bob Hatton for his work on site and Melodie Paice for the illustrations. The work was carried out and the report prepared in response to a brief issued by the County Archaeology Office, (Development Control).

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**SOMERSHAM HIGH STREET: TL35887792,
CAMBRIDGESHIRE:**

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC APPRAISAL

REPORT No: R89

MARCH 1996

COMMISSIONED BY

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD UNIT
CAMBRIDGESHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
FULBOURN COMMUNITY CENTRE
HAGGIS GAP
FULBOURN
CAMBRIDGE CB1 5HD**

PARTNERS: ROG PALMER MA MIFA CHRIS COX MA MIFA

Archaeological consultants for aerial photographic interpretation, accurate mapping and oblique aerial photography

SOMERSHAM HIGH STREET: TL35887792,

CAMBRIDGESHIRE:

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC APPRAISAL

Rog Palmer MA MIFA

INTRODUCTION

This appraisal was commissioned to examine an area of some 0.4 hectares (centred TL35887792) in order to assess the potential of aerial photographs for recording identifiable archaeological features as a guide for field evaluation. This work was to be based only on photographs held in the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs (CUCAP) and, at this stage, mapping was not required.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL FEATURES FROM AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Sub-surface archaeological features – including ditches, pits, walls or foundations, and banks – may be recorded from the air in different ways in different seasons. In spring and summer features of natural and anthropogenic origin may show through their effect on crops growing above them. Such indications tend to be at their most visible in ripe cereal crops, generally in June or July in this part of Britain, although their appearance cannot accurately be predicted and their absence cannot be taken to imply evidence of archaeological absence. In winter months, when the soil is bare or crop cover is thin (when viewed from above) features may show by virtue of their different soils. Upstanding remains are also best recorded in winter months when vegetation is sparse and the low angle of the sun helps pick out slight differences of height and slope.

PHOTO INTERPRETATION AND MAPPING

A search was made for photographs in the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs (CUCAP). This identified three vertical surveys, taken on different dates, but no obliques resulting from specialist archaeological reconnaissance. A check was also made of photographs resulting from my own flights, but none had been taken in this area.

Photographs consulted are listed in the Appendix to this report.

All photographs were examined using a 1.5x magnification stereoscope. Notes were made of general land use in and around the assessment area. This allowed an estimate of the potential of the photographs to show archaeological and natural features and established whether conditions may be suitable for their identification within, or adjacent to, the site. Marks identified were sketched on to a copy of a 1:2500 plan.

COMMENTARY

The mid-village location of the assessment area means that it is situated within an area of small fields. On the dates of photography not all of these were under crops suitable for revealing sub-surface features. This series of small 'windows' also reduced the possibility of identifying any features adjacent to the assessment area that may extend into it.

Photographs recorded the area on three dates: May 1979, March 1982, and June 1988. On all these dates the land use within the assessment area appeared to be similar. The narrow plot fronting the High Street seemed to be surfaced while the larger (south) area was under grass. The photographs taken in March 1982 were the most informative, providing good stereoscopic modelling and showing changes in the crop in the south field. These changes – which appeared to be linear patches of poor growth – have been sketched at 1:2500 but may represent nothing more than indications of very recent land use: the angled feature on the west side of the field is suggestive of the end of a former plot, while others may indicate minor field divisions. The 'central' dividing feature is also visible on the 1988 prints. Even though these have been highlighted by sketching, it is improbable that they indicate archaeological features. Such marks in grass usually only develop at the end of an extreme summer drought. However, their formation must be attributable to something....

On all three dates crop and/or soil response to sub-surface features in the area was good. Linear features associated with nearby fish ponds and moats showed clearly as did traces of medieval fields and some more recently removed boundaries. No features were identified that appeared likely to extend into the assessment area.

RECOMMENDATION

A two phase approach was suggested in the original quote for work on aerial photographs, with continuation into phase two to be decided on the basis of results from this first phase.

Past use of the area was noted as having been orchard (early this century) followed by annual ploughing until recently. The fact that the orchards are not shown on the final edition of the OS 1:10560 map [there is no date on my copy, but probably representing survey undertaken in the 1950s] suggests that the field may be visible in its ploughed phase on early vertical photographs held at NLAP, Swindon and the County Record Office (presumably Huntingdon for Somersham).

Examination of these is not recommended for the following reasons:

- 1 Use of the field as an orchard is likely to have disturbed the soil sufficiently to mask or blur any evidence visible from the air (this is assuming the features sought are more likely to represent dwellings and their plots than major ditched features);
- 2 Other verticals are more likely to be of 1:10000 scale than larger. Their use for detecting such small features is limited and may be further handicapped by the date of photography being other than optimum for archaeological purposes.

3 The surrounding pattern of small fields, under a range of crops, makes it difficult – although not necessarily impossible – to identify adjacent alignments that may intrude into the assessment area.

Further examination of the photographs could be used to provide a broad context for the assessment area, but although this may give academic satisfaction it will not directly assist work within the site.

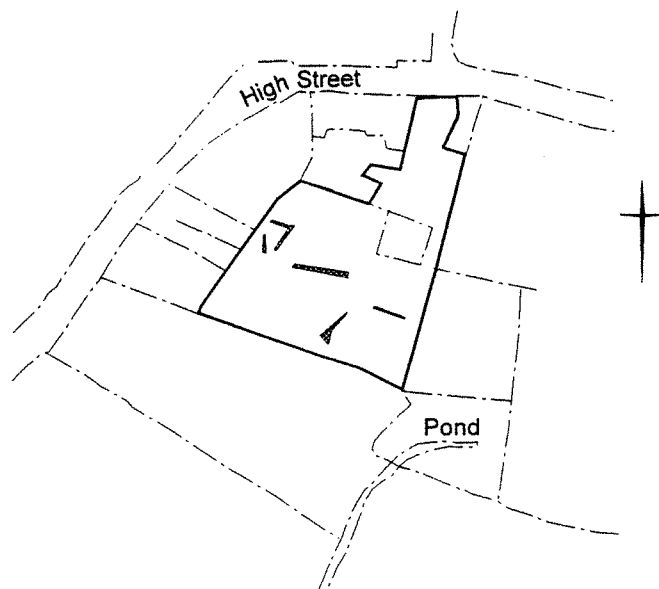
APPENDIX

Aerial photographs examined

Source: Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs

Vertical photographs

RC8-CX 176-178	13 May 1979	1:20000
RC8-EC 244-245	24 March 1982	1:10000
RC8-EC 259-260	24 Mach 1982	1:10000
RC8-KnBM 102, 104	16 June 1988	1:10000



0 Metres 100
(approx)

- Assessment area
- ▨ Reduced growth of grass

Somersham High Street. Sketch map showing marks identified on aerial photographs.

somersh.pdw

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TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Air Photo Services have produced this appraisal for their clients, Cambridgeshire Archaeology, subject to the following conditions:

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That transcriptions, documentation, and textual reports presented within this assessment report shall be explicitly identified as the work of Air Photo Services.

Air Photo Services has consulted only those aerial photographs specified. It cannot guarantee that further aerial photographs of archaeological significance do not exist in collections that were not examined.

Due to the nature of aerial photographic evidence, Air Photo Services cannot guarantee that there may not be further archaeological features found during ground survey which are not visible on aerial photographs or that apparently 'blank' areas will not contain masked archaeological evidence.

That the original working documents (being interpretation overlays, control information, and digital data files) will remain the property of Air Photo Services and be securely retained by it for a period of three years from the completion date of this assessment after which only the digital files may be retained.

It is requested that a copy of this report be lodged with the relevant Sites and Monuments Record within six months of the completion of the archaeological evaluation.

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APPENDIX II

CONTEXT LIST

Trench 2

Context	Description	Nature	Below	Above	Finds
1	Fill	Silty clay	10	2	13-15thC pot
2	Linear		1	5	
5	Fill	Silty clay	2 & 8	6	10-12thC pot
6	Linear		5	Natural	
7	Fill	Silty clay	1000	8	13-15thC pot
8	Pit		7	Natural	
9	Fill	Silty clay	1000	10	13-15thC pot
10	Pit		9	1	

Trench 3

Context	Description	Nature	Below	Above	Finds
3	Fill	Silty clay	1000	4	13-15thC pot
4	Linear		3	Natural	
11	Fill	Not excavated	1000	-	-
12	Linear	-	-	-	-

All fills contained pottery and animal bone.
1000 represents a sub-soil/cleaning layer.

Trenches 1, 4 and 5 had no excavated features.

SOMERSHAM, HIGH STREET 1996 - Finds Types By Context (ver.7/6/96)

Trench/ Location	Context	Pottery Weight	<i>Pottery Weight</i>	Clay Pipe	Animal Bone	Worked Bone	Shell	Total Weights by Context
u/s	Test Pit			14	4	10	42	70
u/s	1000	132	6		221			353
2	1	85	14		145			230
3	3	32	4		73			105
2	5	75	7		60			135
2	7	41	12		31			72
Total Weights by Finds Type		365	43 <i>sherds</i>	14	534	10	42	965



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