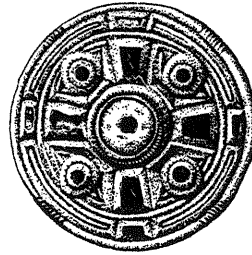


ARCHAEOLOGY FIELD OFFICE  
FULBOURN COMMUNITY CENTRE  
MAGGIS GAP, FULBOURN  
CAMBRIDGE CB1 5HD TEL 991814

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Archaeological Field Unit

## Possible Roman Clunch Quarries at Swaffham Bulbeck Primary School. An Archaeological Evaluation.

Aileen Connor

1998

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A130

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Edited by Tim Malim  
Illustrations by Jon Cane

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© Archaeological Field Unit  
Cambridgeshire County Council  
Fulbourn Community Centre  
Haggis Gap, Fulbourn  
Cambridgeshire CB1 5HD  
Tel (01223) 881614  
Fax (01223) 880946

### *Summary*

*An archaeological evaluation in the playground of Swaffham Bulbeck Primary School has shown that quarrying for clunch took place on the site in the past. Roman finds from one of the quarries suggests a possible earliest date in the Roman period. The presence of worked pieces of clunch in the quarries suggests that the clunch was being quarried for use nearby. This may indicate a substantial Roman building in the vicinity, although the finds may be residual and there are several buildings still standing in Swaffham Bulbeck which use clunch in their construction, including the 13th century church and parts of the school buildings and village hall. Other undated possible structural features were also encountered in the trenches.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken in the playground of the Primary School at Swaffham Bulbeck (TL5564 6238) during February 1998 by the Cambridgeshire County Council, Archaeological Field Unit. The evaluation was part of a scheme of work required by the County Archaeology Office to fulfil a planning condition in advance of the redevelopment of the site for a new school hall. There follows a summary of the archaeological information gathered about the site in order to help determine the scope of any further work which the CAO may require to fulfill the archaeological planning condition.

## 2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Swaffham Bulbeck Primary School lies close to the heart of the medieval village of Swaffham Bulbeck, the 13th century clunch built Church of St. Mary stands to the south of the school playground adjoining the school playing fields. Lordship House, also 13th century has walls of clunch and brick and is associated with earthworks but lies some distance to the north of the primary school (RCHM 1972). There are a number of other historic houses in the village dating to between the 15th and centuries, several are constructed from clunch (RCHM 1972). The earliest map consulted for the village is the 1768 map of the parish by J. Chapman (CRO TR274/P13), this shows there to have been two buildings on the plot. The enclosure map of 1800 (CRO L87/3) is clearer and shows that the school and its grounds stands on what were two plots, 99 and 100. One L shaped building stood on plot 99 and two rectangular buildings on plot 100, all three buildings appear to be very close to the street front. There are a number of references to medieval settlement nearby and stray finds of Roman date have been found around Swaffham Bulbeck, eg SMR95. There are no early aerial photographs plotted for the vicinity of the school.

## 3 METHODS

Two trenches were machine excavated in the playground of the school, the 1st was an L shaped trench placed within the footprint of the proposed new hall. This trench showed that the tarmac playground has a depth of approximately 0.30m and seals an 0.20m thick deposit of clay soil, possibly a plough soil. This plough soil overlay weathered chalk to a depth of 0.20m and sealed a number of features cut into the chalk. The weathered chalk overlay solid chalk at 8.97 metres OD. A second trench, 5 metres in length was machined parallel to the first to check the interpretation of a large feature in trench 1.

## 4 RESULTS

### Trench 1

No archaeologically significant features or deposits were found in the north end of Trench 1. At the south end of the trench there were a number of undated features and a large, deep feature which contained a small quantity of abraded Roman pottery and tile.

### Possible Roman Feature

Cut 6, a large feature cut into the chalk, with vertical sides, at least 1 metre deep, and 2 metres wide by more than 1.5 metres long. This feature appeared to be linear on an east-west orientation on initial investigation. It was backfilled by two deposits, the latest, 4, was 0.40 metres thick and consisted of large lumps of chalk in an olive grey clay matrix, probably directly derived from the chalk natural. Pottery and shell were recovered from the base of this deposit and a lump of dressed clunch was found within it. This layer overlay a dark grey charcoal flecked clayey silt with frequent small chalk fragments from which a small number

of sherds of Roman pottery and tile were found. The thickness of this deposit was at least 0.50 metres and continued beyond the base of the excavation.

#### Post-Medieval Features

Mortar structure 19 was a sub-rectangular structure lying in the top of feature 6, only a small area was uncovered in the trench, but it was a very compact mortar overlying a very soft dark grey silty clay. It was 1.40 metres wide by an unknown length by 0.20 metres thick. The brick structure of similar width in trench 2 is unlikely to be the same feature since the two are not on the same alignment.

An un-numbered modern sewer pipe ran diagonally across trench 1 and cut through linear feature 16.

#### Undated Features

Pit 1, a 1m diameter, shallow, flat bottomed pit from which 2 Iron nails were recovered

Pit 10, a shallow, oval pit, no finds recovered

Linear 16, a possible gully, shallow ditch or shallow, broad pit, no finds recovered.

Post hole 14, possibly a double post hole, no finds recovered.

#### Trench 2

This trench was excavated to test the possibility that cut 6 may be a linear feature such as a ditch. Two shallow, undated pits were found in this trench to the north of a large deep feature which may be a continuation of 6, although on plan the features do not appear to be continuous.

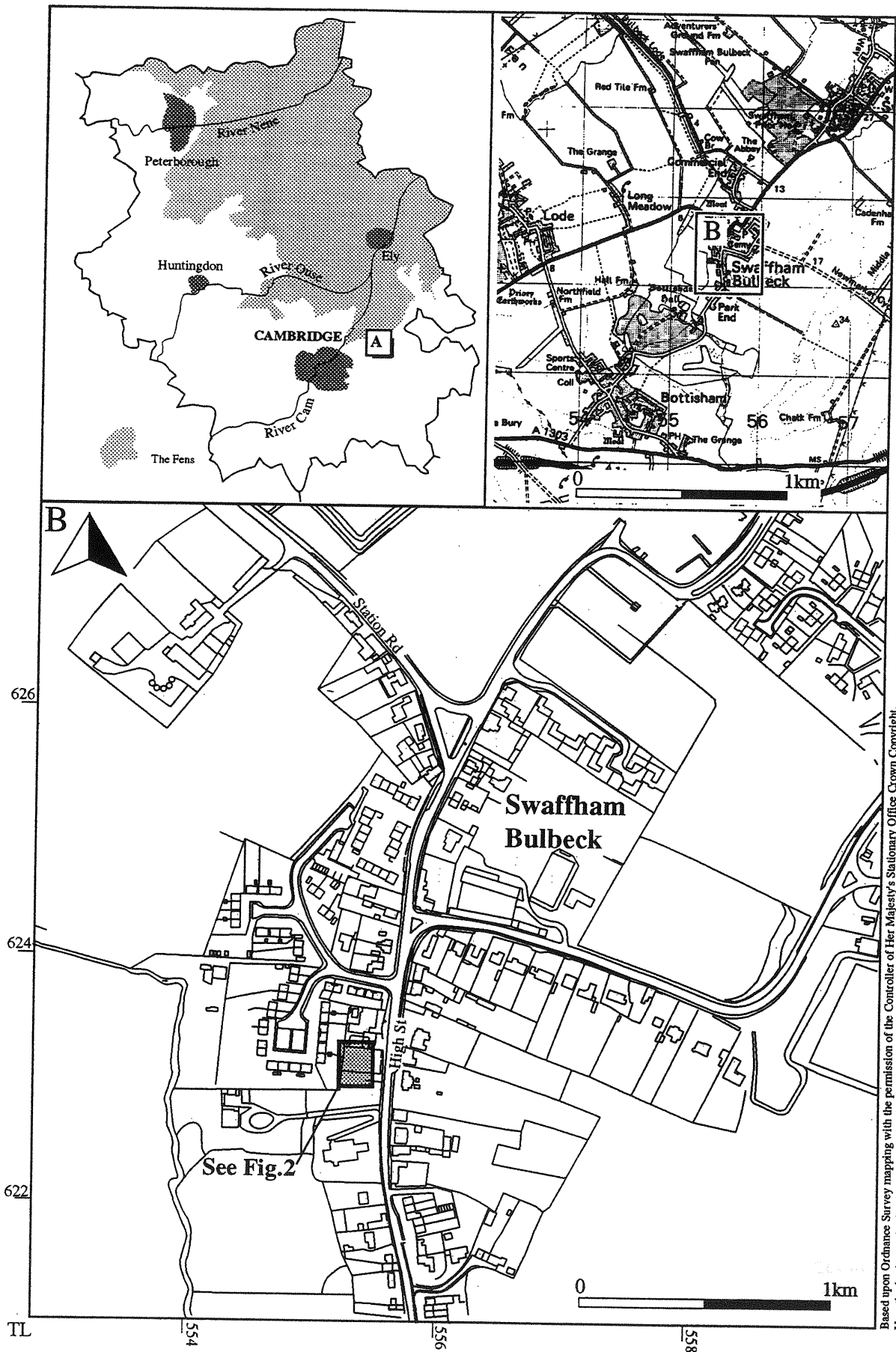
#### Undated features

Cut 27 was possibly subrectangular in shape with vertical sides, stepping in towards the base. The full dimensions of the feature are not known, but it was at least 1.25 metres deep. The feature may be the same as 6, but there was a suggestion in plan of two large intercutting pits. The fill of these pits was partially excavated by machine and was an homogeneous fill of chalk rubble in a greenish grey clay matrix, similar to 4 and probably directly derived from the weathered chalk natural. No dateable finds were recovered although it should be noted that very little hand excavation was undertaken of this feature. One lump of clunch was recovered from the pit which had been dressed on three sides.

#### Post-medieval features

An un-numbered brick structure in trench 2 was observed cutting into the top of possible quarry 27, this structure was initially believed to be a continuation of 19 in trench 1, however, the two features are not aligned and are, therefore, probably separate features.

Two un-numbered pits were observed to the north of 27, these both contained a very dark grey clay loam which had the appearance of recent topsoil.



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Figure 1 Site Location Maps

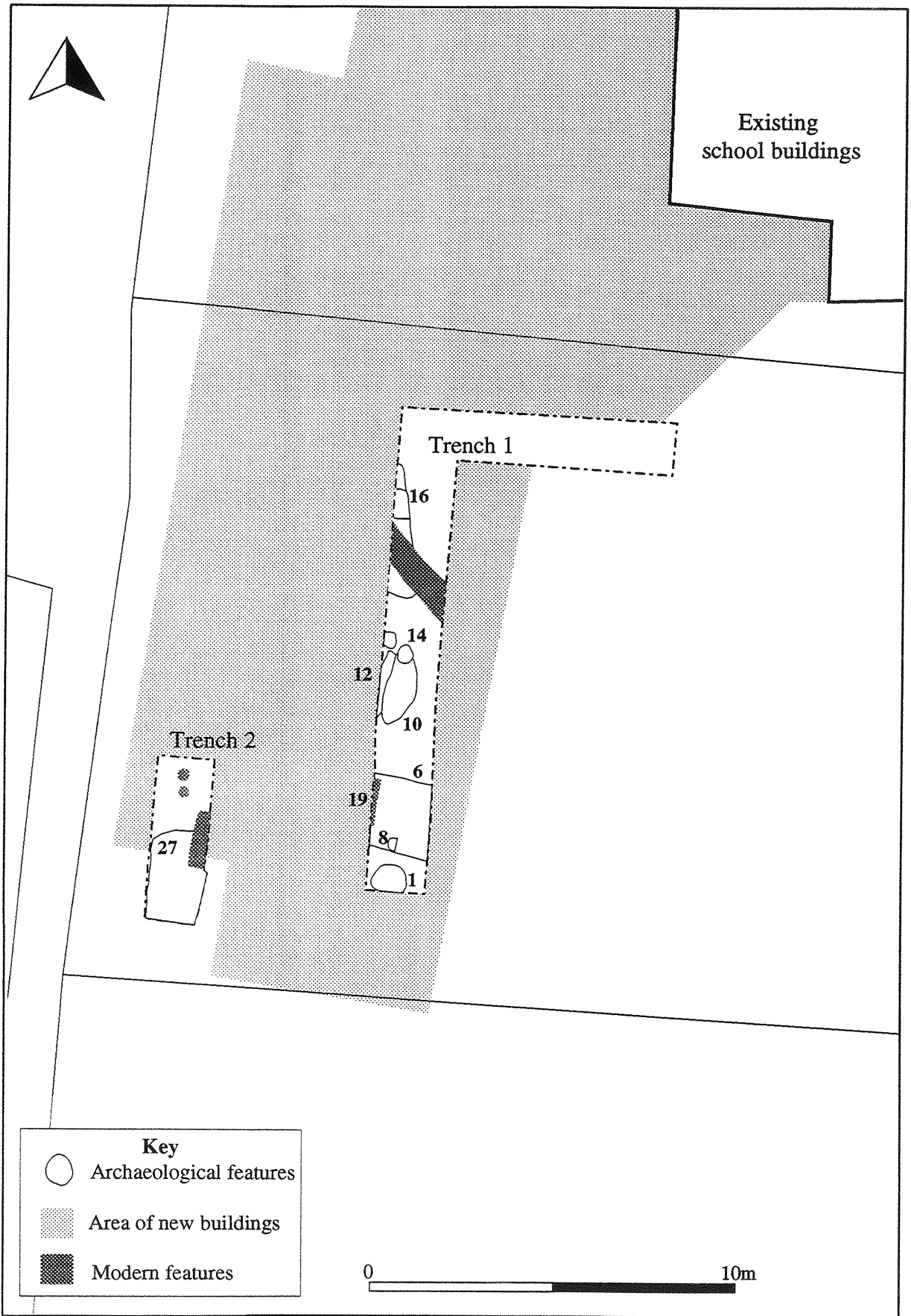


Figure 2 Plan of Trenches and Archaeological Features

## 5 DISCUSSION

The features 6 and 27 observed in trenches 1 and 2 may be associated but are not necessarily the same feature. The more organic fill observed lower in feature 6 was not seen at all in feature 27, although the upper fills in both features were very similar, with the appearance of a material derived directly from the chalk natural, which is likely to have derived from quarrying of the chalk, leaving the unwanted waste material in the quarry pit. The presence of worked stone in both pits suggests the probability that the stone was being quarried for nearby buildings and may even have been worked at the quarry pit before being transported to the final construction site nearby. The clunch stone found in both trenches suggests that it may well have been a clunch quarry. The general shape of the feature or features suggests that they functioned only as quarries, although this interpretation is by no means conclusive, and given the small area of the trenches, and the obviously large size of the features there is a slight possibility that the feature also functioned as the corner of an enclosure.

The date of the feature is also contentious, Roman pottery and tile from the feature in trench 1 suggests a Roman date in the absence of any other dateable finds, however, it is possible that the feature is much later in date and the pottery residual. If the feature is interpreted as Roman it is significant since it suggests the presence of a possibly substantial Roman building somewhere nearby, although probably not very close as only a small amount of pottery and tile was recovered.

If the quarries relate to a later period, however, there are a number of buildings both standing and demolished which are likely to have used locally quarried stone, including the Church immediately to the south.

No other features in these trenches could be dated, a number appeared to have a structural function, such as post holes, but did not form any coherent pattern. They cannot be dismissed in such a small area as it is very difficult to reveal features such as post hole buildings in evaluation trenches, however, it may never be possible to date the features given the paucity of artefacts in both trenches.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation showed the presence of a number of archaeological features sealed beneath the school play ground and beneath an earlier plough soil in trench 1. Only one of these features, a deep, probable quarry pit contained evidence for a possible Roman date, although the pottery and tile was very abraded and may be residual. Quarrying was observed in both trenches 1 and 2 and may be part of the same feature, a secondary function may have been as a ditch or enclosure although this seems unlikely. Fragments of worked stone from the quarrying in both trenches suggests that the stone was being used for buildings nearby, but it was not possible from this evaluation to locate the specific building or buildings. The 1768 and 1800 maps both show that earlier buildings had existed on the site, it is possible that the quarrying may relate to these.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cambridgeshire  
County Council  
Archaeology

The Archaeological Field Unit  
Fulbourn Community Centre  
Haggis Gap  
Fulbourn  
Cambridge CB1 5HD  
Tel (01223) 881614  
Fax (01223) 880946