



Archaeological Field Unit

**An Iron Age or Roman Burial at  
Barnwell Road, Cambridge:  
An Archaeological Evaluation**

Scott Kenney

April 2005

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. 802

Commissioned by Flagship Housing Group

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## SUMMARY

*The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council has conducted an archaeological evaluation on 0.15ha of land behind the shops, 1-23 Barnwell Road, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire (TL 4790/5928). This was in advance of a proposed housing development.*

*The evaluation revealed a single burial and an undated pit. No finds were recovered that would date the burial, but it is likely to belong to the Iron Age or Roman periods.*

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# Drawing Conventions

## Sections

Limit of Excavation 

Cut 

Cut - Conjectured 

Soil Horizon 


Soil Horizon - Conjectured 

Intrusion/Truncation 

Top of Natural 

Top Surface 

Break in Section 

Cut Number 

Deposit Number 117

Ordnance Datum  $\frac{18.45m}{\wedge}$  ODN

## Plans

Limit of Excavation 

Deposit - Conjectured 

Natural Features 

Intrusion/Truncation 

Sondages/Machine Strip 

Illustrated Section 

Deposit 

Excavated Slot 

Cut Number 118

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TL 4790/5928**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

On the 29th of March 2005, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) on a plot of land behind 1-23 Barnwell Road, Cambridgeshire (TL 4790/5928) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Flagship Housing Group in response to a brief set by the Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning & Countryside Advice (CAPAC), in advance of a new housing development.

The site is located approximately 3km east of the historic core of the city of Cambridge, 500m northeast of Coldham's Brook. To the west is Barnwell Road and to the north lies Newmarket Road. The development area has a proposal for residential development (housing block) with attendant parking and services, within a roughly rectangular area of 0.15 hectares.

Due to the high archaeological potential of the site, CAPAC advised that an archaeological evaluation of this site was necessary. The presence of archaeological remains was considered likely by CAPAC on the basis of information contained in the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (CHER). It records Iron Age and Roman remains to the east of the site, as well as prehistoric find spots in the vicinity.

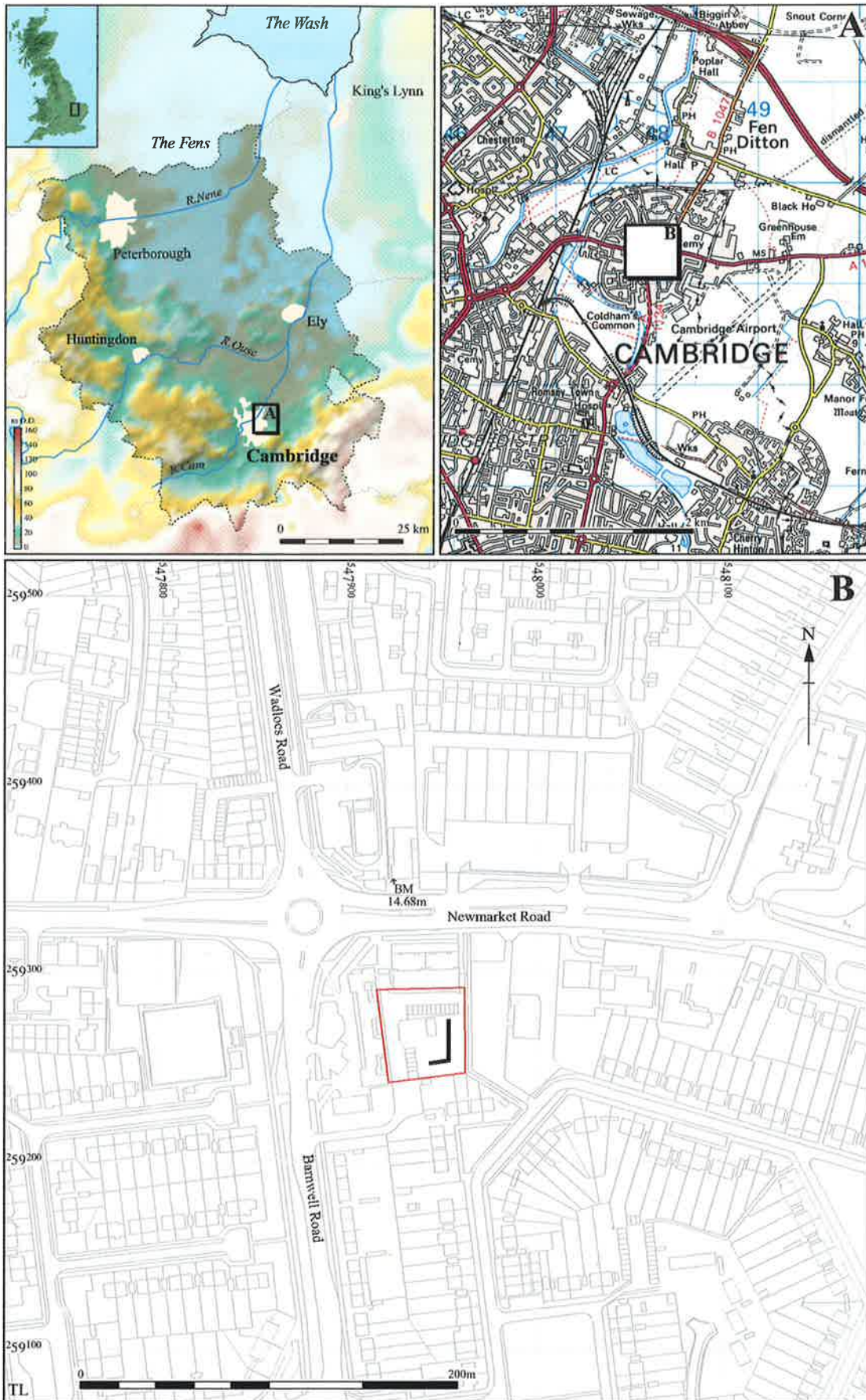
**2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

**2.1 Geology**

According to the British Geological Survey, the geology of the site is 4th Terrace gravel deposits overlying Lower Chalk (BGS 1981).

**2.2 Topography**

At this point, Newmarket Road lies at around 14.4m OD, while Barnwell Road falls from that height to around 7.7m OD.



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

### 3      **ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

This area of Cambridge has not been subject to any modern archaeological investigations, however a number of investigations conducted along Newmarket Road since the early 1990's (c500m to 1km from the development area) have all demonstrated the presence of substantial Iron Age and Roman activity (pottery kilns and settlements being most notable at the ECB 108 & 181 - Greenhouse Farm sites, ECB508 - new cemetery extension, ECB 15129 Cambridge Airport).

Prehistoric remains (Palaeolithic and Neolithic stone tool finds spots) have also been recovered in the vicinity of the development area (within 500m).

### 4      **METHODOLOGY**

A single L-shaped trench was opened by a JCB using a flat-bladed ditching bucket 1.6m wide, under the supervision of an archaeologist. Originally, it was proposed to excavate two trenches, however this proved impossible due to limitations of space and the trenches were combined into one. Although the entire development area encompasses some 0.15ha, only around 0.07ha, less than half, was available for evaluation. The total length of the trenches was 32.2m and constitutes a 3.7% sample of the development area.

Once it had been recorded, the skeleton was recovered with spoil and plastic sheeting to protect and identify the remains.

### 5      **RESULTS**

#### 5.1    **Trenches**

**Trench 1** was 22.3m long N-S, 10m long E-W and contained a grave and a single pit. 0.3-0.35m of very dark brownish grey sandy clay silt topsoil overlay the upper fill of grave **5**.

Grave **5** was subrectangular in plan, but only part of the feature was visible within the trench. The visible portion was 1.1m long, 0.75m wide and 0.48m deep. The sides were steep and slightly concave, merging smoothly into the somewhat uneven, flattish base. The fill, **3**, was a fairly soft greyish brown sandy clay silt with occasional flints. This in turn overlay the skeleton, **4**, of which only the lower legs and feet were visible. The skeleton lay in a supine extended position. No finds were recovered from the fill. Grave **5** cut through the subsoil **2**.



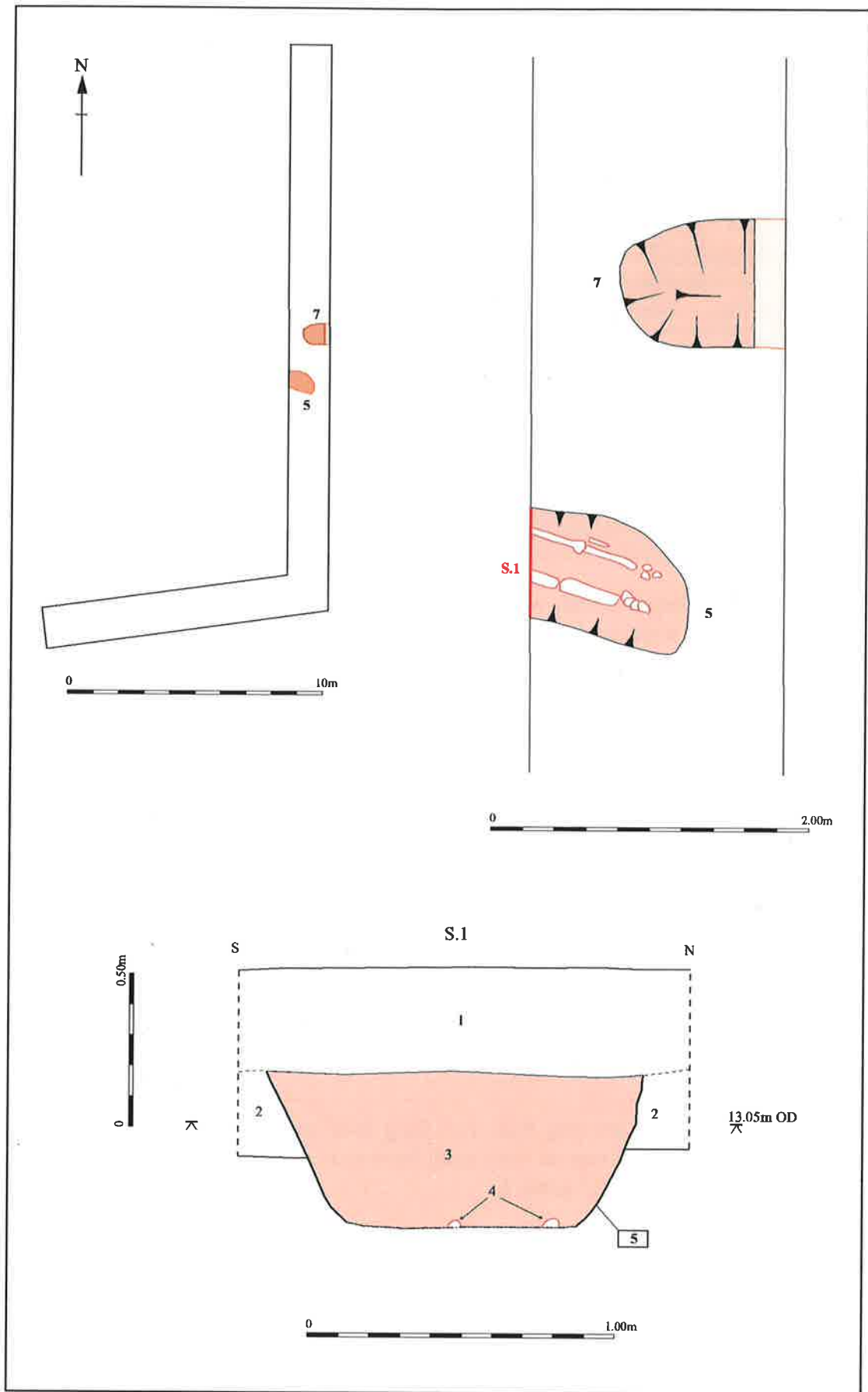


Figure 2 Trench plans and section

Subsoil 2 was a greyish brown sandy clay silt 0.2-0.35m thick, which sealed the fill of pit 7.

Pit 7 was possibly subrectangular in plan, but only part of the feature was visible within the trench. The visible portion was 1.05m long, 0.75m wide and 0.28m deep. The sides were relatively steep and slightly concave, merging smoothly into the uneven, concave base. The fill, 6, was a firm greyish brown sandy silty clay with occasional flints. No finds were recovered from the fill. Pit 7 cut into natural geology.

## 6 DISCUSSION

From the size of the leg bones, the burial seems to be that of an adult, sex unknown. No grave goods or other finds were recovered from the partial cleaning around the bones. Since this area was historically open fields and the only extensive nearby settlement dates from the Iron Age and Roman periods, it seems likely that the body dates to a similar time. Extended burials are rare in the earlier prehistoric periods and uncommon even in the Iron Age. The northwest-southeast alignment of the body may also indicate that the burial is pre-Christian.

The other feature may date from a much earlier period as the subsoil through which the grave was cut sealed it. It is difficult to ascribe a potential function to such a feature, but it may have been used for storage, since there is no evidence of rubbish disposal.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

A single inhumation was identified of possible Iron Age or Roman date. Additionally, an undated pit of an earlier period was recorded.

If the burial is Iron Age, it could be part of a group, but these would often be dispersed, with little organisation, and sometimes include extended and flexed (crouched) burials and cremations. Iron Age burials are rare, despite several examples being found in Cambridgeshire in the last 10 years, and this would be a significant find, if proven to be of this date.

If the burial is Roman in date, it may also be part of a cemetery, although usually these are located close to roads. In the later Roman period, the Romans also practiced isolated burial, often in association with field systems, and usually without grave goods.

In conclusion, the presence of a human burial within such a small sample is clearly significant and is likely to indicate the presence of other archaeology nearby.

The objective of the project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site in advance of development. The evaluation has been successful in these aims.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to thank Flagship Housing who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Stephen Macaulay. Rob Atkins worked on site and Crane Begg produced the illustrations.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Kasia Gdaniec, CAPAC. Andy Thomas of the same office visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

### **Cartographic sources**

British Geological Survey Sheet no 188, Cambridge, Solid and Drift edition, 1981

Ordnance Survey digital maps, 2005



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