



Archaeological Field Unit

**Newnham Croft Primary School, Cambridge:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

Richard Mortimer
August 2005

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 811

Commissioned by *Mouchel Parkman (for Cambs. County Council)*

Newnham Croft Primary School, Cambridge: An Archaeological Evaluation

(TL 4452 5732)

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August 2005

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SUMMARY

On the 30th of June 2005, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation within the area of a proposed development at Newnham Croft Primary School, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire. The development comprises an extension to the playground and the construction of an all-weather sports pitch.

Two trenches were excavated, totalling thirty-seven metres in length. A single feature was recorded; a shallow, undated ditch aligned northeast-southwest.

Datable artefactual material was recovered from the topsoil only – a few very heavily abraded Romano-British pottery sherds and a larger quantity of 17th to 20th century material including clay pipes, pottery, nails, a gun flint and objects relating to the more recent land-use as school grounds.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY	1
3	ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	1
4	METHODOLOGY	3
5	RESULTS	3
6	DISCUSSION	7
7	CONCLUSIONS	8
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	9
	LIST OF FIGURES	
	Figure 1: Location of trenches and development area	2
	Figure 2: Trench plans and section drawing	4
	LIST OF PLATES	
	Plate 1: The site prior to excavation	10
	Plate 2: Trench 2 from the northeast showing ditch 004	10
	LIST OF TABLES	
	Table 1: All finds from Context 001	7

Drawing Conventions

Sections	Plans
Limit of Excavation	Limit of Excavation
Cut	Deposit - Conjectured
Cut-Conjectured	Natural Features
Soil Horizon	Intrusion/Truncation
Soil Horizon - Conjectured	Sondages/Machine Strip
Intrusion/Truncation	Illustrated Section S.14
Top of Natural	Archaeological Deposit
Top Surface	Excavated Slot
Break in Section	Cut Number 118
Cut Number	
Deposit Number 117	
Ordnance Datum $\frac{18.45m}{\times}$ ODN	
Stone	

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1 INTRODUCTION

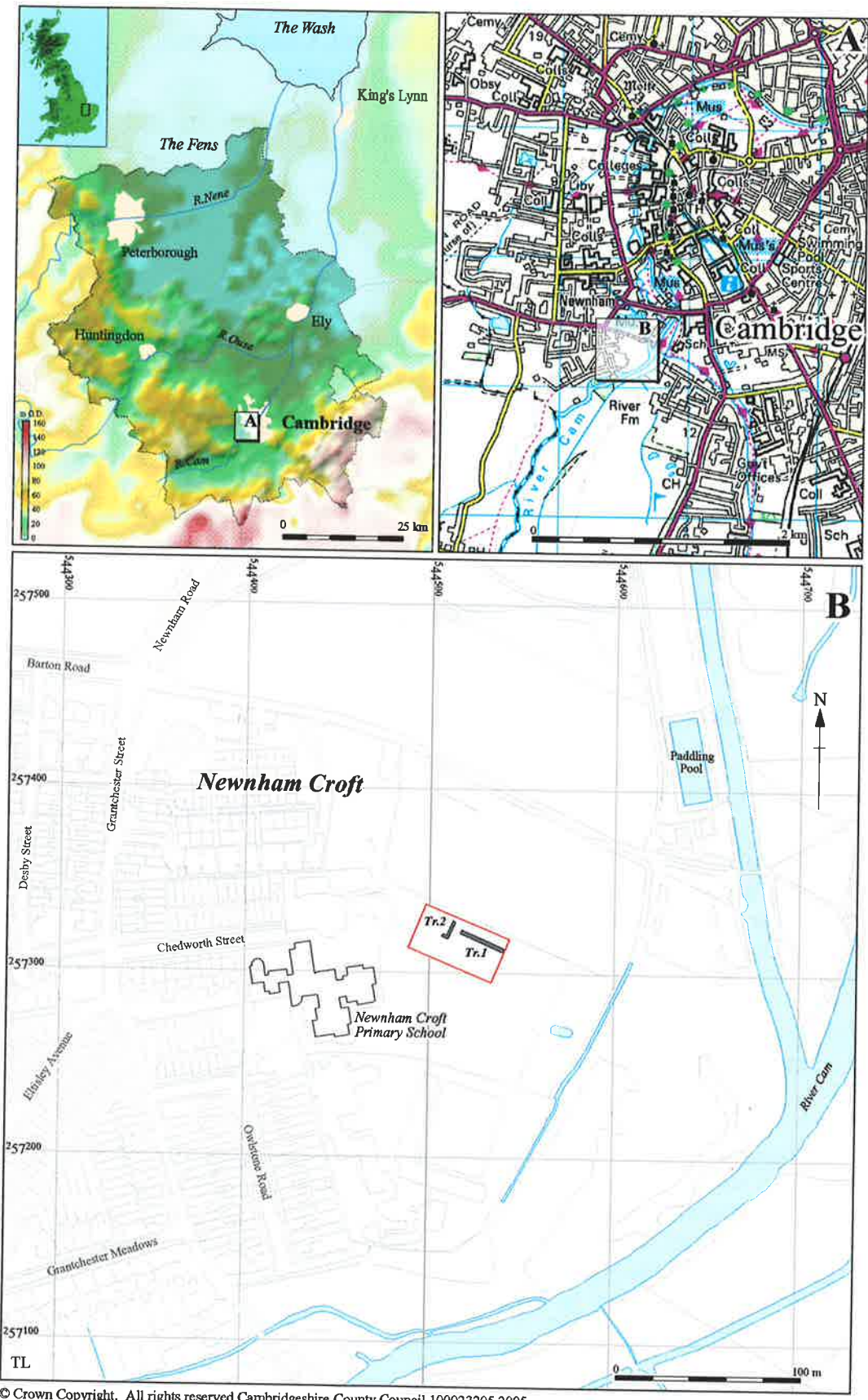
On the 30th of June 2005, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCCAFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation within the area of a proposed development at Newnham Croft Primary School, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire. The development comprises a small extension to the playground and the construction of an all-weather sports surface with associated drainage services. The evaluation was in response to a brief produced by Kasia Gdaniec of Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning and Countryside Advice (CAPCA) and the Cambridge Historic Environment Record Office reference number is ECB1973. The work was commissioned by Mouchelparkman for Cambridgeshire County Council.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site is located on the western bank of a large meander loop of the River Cam, opposite the Vicar's Brook confluence (see Fig. 1). It lies within the floodplain of the Cam on 1st Terrace River Gravels overlying Gault Clays. The investigation area lies approximately 1km south-southwest of the medieval town core and 200m west of the river. The area lies at approximately 7.50m OD.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During housing construction in the 19th and 20th centuries major finds were made relating to the Romano-British and Saxon settlements within the area. Saxon burial grounds and a single Iron Age inhumation were found at Newnham and Newnham Croft (around Hardwick Street, Barton Road and at Newnham College: CHER MCB6200, 5363, 6272) and Romano-British burial grounds were found in Latham Close and Chaucer Road, Trumpington (MCB6081, 5991).



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Figure 1 Location of trenches (black) and development area (red)

4 METHODOLOGY

The evaluation area covers approximately 870 square metres. Two trenches were excavated totalling 37m in length or 59.20 square metres, equalling a 6.8% sample. The trenches were excavated to the depth of the geological horizons by a JCB with a 1.60m wide toothless ditching bucket. A plan of the proposed trenching strategy was sent to CAPCA for approval before trenching began.

Trench 1 was aligned west-northwest/east-southeast and was 25m long. Trench 2 was aligned north-northeast/south-southwest and was 10m long (see Fig. 2). On locating a possible linear feature within Trench 2 a small extension, 2m in length, was excavated to the west of the trench's southern end.

Topsoil and subsoil were kept separate on either side of the trenches and were intensively scanned for artefactual material.

The exposed surfaces at the base of the trenches were cleaned by trowel and hoe as necessary in order to clarify located features and deposits.

Site records comprise survey, drawn, written and photographic data. The drawn record comprises trench plans at scales of 1:100 (Trench 1) and 1:50 (Trench 2). Trenches and features are tied in to the OS grid. A single section was drawn at 1:10. The written record comprises context descriptions on CCCAFU pro-forma context sheets. The photographic record is made up of digital photographs.

5 RESULTS

Three soil layers were recorded within the trenches:

Topsoil 001 (Trenches 1 & 2): A very dark brown sandy silt with occasional to common gravel inclusions.

Subsoil 002 (Trenches 1 & 2): A pale-mid orange-beige sandy silt with common gravel inclusions.

Possible buried soil 003: (Trench 1): A very pale beige sandy silt with occasional to common gravel inclusions and chalk/lime patches.

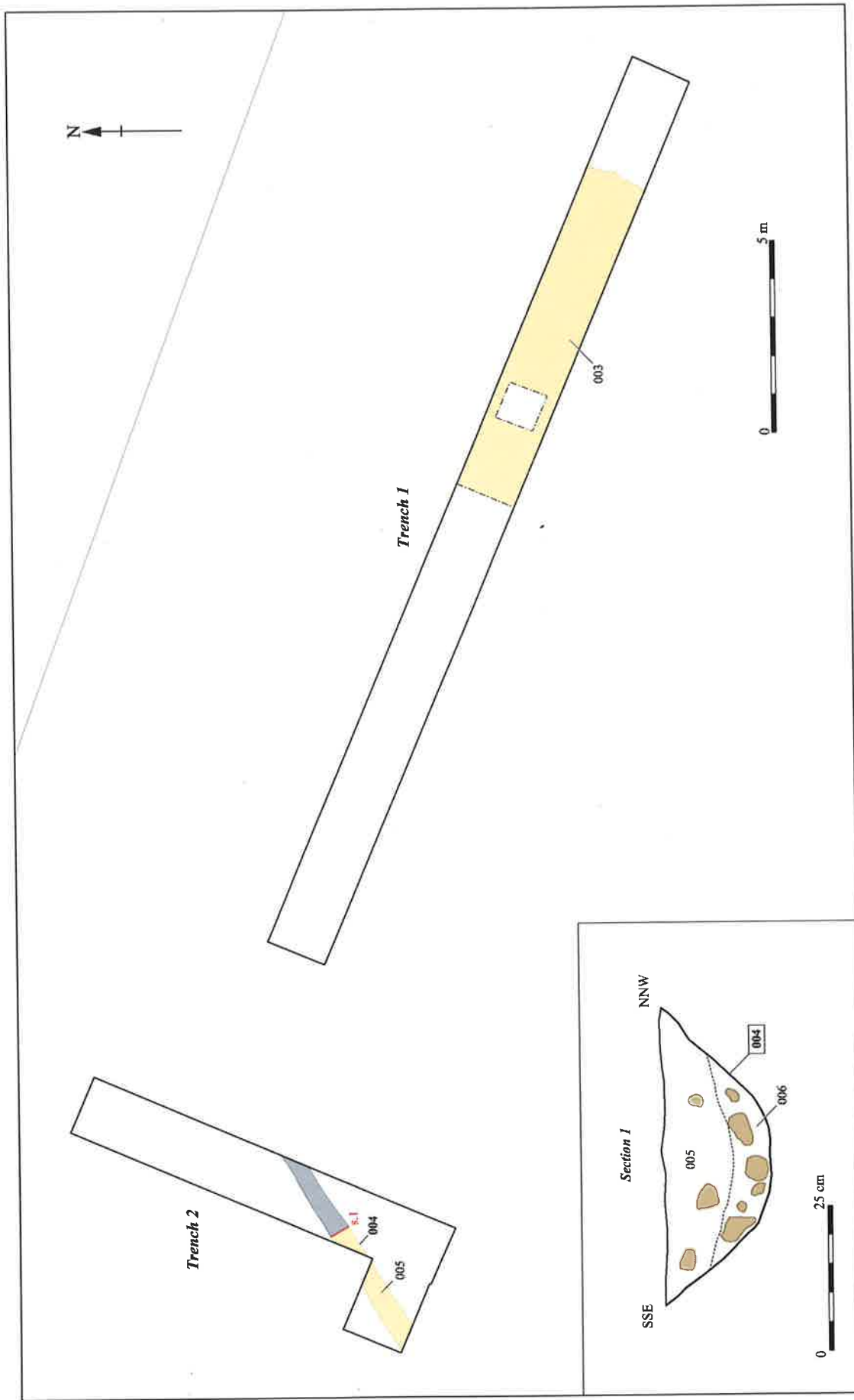


Figure 2 Trench plans and section drawing

5.1 Trench 1

The topsoil was 0.20m deep at the eastern end, deepening to 0.28m at the centre and to the west. The subsoil was 0.26m deep at the eastern end, deepening to 0.38m at the centre and to the west. There was a natural gravel rise at the far eastern end of the trench which accounts for the shallower topsoil and subsoil at this end. No archaeological features were recorded within the trench.

A possible buried soil, or lower ploughsoil – 003 - was observed towards the eastern and central sections of the trench and *c.* 9m were left *in situ*. No finds were visually evident within either this or the main subsoil layer. However, a metre square test pit was hand excavated through 003 for artefact sampling. No artefacts, or ecofacts, were recovered.

5.2 Trench 2

The topsoil was 0.26m deep throughout. The subsoil was 0.22m deep at the northern end, deepening to 0.36m to the south. The possible buried soil (003) was not apparent in this trench but there was a slight natural rise in the level of the underlying gravels at the northern end of the trench.

A single archaeological feature was recorded - a very faint, narrow ditch aligned northeast-southwest (004). The ditch was clearly visible in the main body of the trench, where it cut through silty gravels, but less clear in the small trench extension where cutting through mixed silt patches.

Ditch 004 was approximately 0.50m wide and 0.18m deep from the level of the natural gravel and was traced for 6.00m of its length across Trench 2 and the extension. Upper fill 005 was similar to subsoil 002 - a mid orange-beige sandy silt with common gravel inclusions. Lower fill 006 was composed principally of fairly compact small-medium gravels in a fine silt matrix. The shallowness of the ditch suggests that both these fills are in fact primary fills – consisting of initial gravel wash and primary silting - the upper fills having been truncated within subsoil 002.

Just over 2.50m of the ditch was excavated. No artefactual material was recovered and the fills appeared completely sterile. The ditch can just be made out, prior to excavation, appearing near-vertical at the centre of the picture on Plate 2.

5.3 Topsoil Finds

Both during machining and after, the topsoil and subsoil were intensively scanned for artefactual material – initially as part of the archaeological investigation but increasingly, as it became evident that little of archaeological

value was forthcoming, to gather a finds collection that would be of use and interest to the school and its pupils.

The earliest material recovered is of Roman date – eight small and very heavily abraded sandy coarseware body sherds, none of which are from the same vessel. There is a good amount of post-medieval pottery, principally Glazed Red Earthenwares dating from the 17th to 19th centuries and a considerable number of roof tile fragments. Of interest is a single, small clay pipe bowl dating to the first half of the 17th century, and a gun flint of broadly the same period. While made from good quality flint, it is half flint and half cortex and does not appear to be of the quality of manufacture of those that were made in bulk in the Brandon area of Norfolk. It is perhaps a homemade rather than a bought item.

The material recovered dates to two main periods of activity (albeit only the dumping of rubbish) in the 17th/18th centuries and in the late 19th/early 20th centuries. All this material can be described as general domestic waste, even the fragments of roof tile. There is a considerable amount of material, some fairly fresh and unabraded, and it is more likely that it represents direct dumping of rubbish from farms or houses in the vicinity than manuring of fields further away.

‘Manuring’, as used here, is in some respects a misnomer. Farms would transport manure from barns and sheds and farmyards out to the fields to add nutrients, organic matter and bulk to the soil, but along with this they would bring all manner of general household and farmyard rubbish – broken pots, roof tiles, bricks, kitchen waste (that could not be eaten by pigs), old bones, stones *etc.*, and it is this material that survives to be recorded by archaeologists as manuring scatters.

There is very little modern (late 20th century) material within the topsoil. A couple of modern tile fragments may date to the construction of the school and there are two items lost or discarded by children within the last few years – a small pink hairband and a faded Toby the Tram Engine plastic sticker.

No material was recovered, unambiguously, from within subsoil 002 (some artefacts, retrieved from the spoilheaps, could possibly have come from within the subsoil, none were found, however, during machining).

A list of all finds appears below in Table 1.

No.	Date	Material	Description
8	Roman	pottery	small abraded coarseware sherds
1	17th C	ceramic	clay pipe bowl
2	17th C	glass	opaque window glass fragments
1	17th C	stone	gun flint
1	17th C	pottery	Ely Babylon ware
2	17th/18th C	glass	green glass bottle frags
28	17th/19th C	ceramic	roof tiles fragments
12	17th/19th C	pottery	Glazed Red Earthenwares
31	17th-19th C	ceramic	clay pipe stems
9	17th-20th C	shell	oyster shells
18	17th-20th C	bone	animal bone fragments, including chicken leg, lamb leg, possible dog leg and sheep's tooth.
2	17th-20th C	ceramic	fired clay
5	18th/19th C	ceramic	non-diagnostic
1	19th C	glass	clear glass bottle neck
2	19th C	glass	green glass bottle bases
4	19th C	pottery	unglazed red earthenware
1	19th C	pottery	stoneware
2	19th C	pottery	bone china
2	19th C	pottery	fine white stoneware
1	19th C	pottery	yellow glazed Staffordshire
25	19th/20th C	pottery	blue & white transfer printed
1	19th/20th C	glass	perfume/poison bottle with dipper
3	19th/20th C	glass	fine green bottle/glass fragments
1	20th C	ceramic	white glazed wall tile
1	20th C	ceramic	odd glazed stoneware
1	20th C	other	bakelite ?record fragment
1	20th C	other	plastic Toby the Tram Engine sticker
1	20th C	other	pink elastic hair band
2	20th C	glass	clear window glass
2	unknown	stone	small burnt flints

Table 1: All finds from Context 001

6 DISCUSSION

The single ditched feature (004) recorded on the site cannot be assigned a secure date. It is clearly - by its clean fill type, depth, lack of finds or occupation material *etc.* - an older rather than more recent feature. The complete lack of medieval pottery or other finds in either topsoil or subsoil indicates that this area is likely to have lain under pasture during the medieval, and probably post-medieval, periods. Had this land been regularly ploughed there would have been evidence in the form of pot and tile sherds from manuring the fields. The assemblage of Roman material recovered - small, worn sherds from different vessels - does however suggest that the land may have been ploughed during the Romano-British period, as this is precisely the

kind of assemblage expected from manuring scatters. It is not an assemblage that suggests proximity to a settlement site. The ditch could therefore be interpreted as a Romano-British field boundary, although the absence of contemporary material within it perhaps makes this unlikely.

However, the alignment of the ditch – northeast/southwest – is also what would be expected of an earlier type of boundary ditch, a Bronze Age ‘Field System’ ditch. The pale, clean, sterile fills of the ditch, and the lack of related occupation debris, may back up this interpretation. These ditches have been recorded along the western and southwestern edge of the Fens through Cambridgeshire (seen at Barleycroft, Whittlesey *etc.*; Evans & Knight 1997; Knight & Gibson forthcoming) and into Bedfordshire (at Broom Quarry; Mortimer 1997 & 1999). Recently they have also been recorded to the east of the Fens at Fordham (Mortimer 2005). When revealed in open landscape (*e.g.* on large quarry sites) the field systems are seen to be aligned on earlier Bronze Age monuments, principally round barrows, and on burnt flint, or burnt stone mounds along the fen edge. These field systems often have later Bronze Age settlements set within them.

7 CONCLUSIONS

A single ditched feature, of unknown date, was recorded. It is thought that the ditch may represent part of a larger Middle Bronze Age field system laid out across the gravel terraces of the Cam at this point. However, these systems have not yet been recorded along the Cam Valley and this interpretation has to remain just a possibility. The ditch could equally be part of a wider Romano-British field system – it is unlikely to be a later feature than this.

The lack of medieval finds suggests that this land, low-lying along the Cam, was kept as pasture, and the quantity of post-medieval material suggests direct dumping from nearby farms or houses perhaps relating to 17th century settlement expansion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The project was managed by Stephen Macaulay. The finds were processed by Shannon Cliff and the illustrations were prepared by Carlos Silva.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Kasia Gdaniec, Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning and Countryside Advice (CAPCA), and thanks are extended to Adrian Scruby of CAPCA who visited the site and monitored the evaluation. The trench excavation and backfilling was undertaken by Borehams of West Wrating.

Thanks are also due to Headteacher Sue Howells, Assistant Head Peter Hughes and Caretaker John Playford for their interest and assistance throughout, and to the school's pupils for asking lots of questions, not all of which had an easy answer.

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Plate 1: The site prior to excavation



Plate 2: Trench 2 from the northeast showing ditch 004



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