



Archaeological Field Unit

**Medieval Field Systems at Sir Harry Smith Community College,
Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation**

Glenn D. Bailey, with Stephen Macaulay

July 2005

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 812

Commissioned by *Mouchelparkman* on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council

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Summary

Between 31st May and 2nd June 2005 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken at Sir Harry Smith Community College, Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire (TL 2762 9738) by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC AFU). Three trenches were excavated to evaluate the development area, totalling 123m in length.

The only archaeological features exposed were shallow ditches which indicated the survival of a medieval field system in the field immediately to the north of the present college. Pottery recovered confirmed the date of these furrows as late medieval. The route of a previous fence and hedge line also crossed the site.

The topsoil contained 19th- and 20th-century debris, including pottery. No further archaeological features were revealed. The trench sections showed that the area had undergone significant landscaping in the recent past in an attempt to level the area.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY	1
3	ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	3
4	METHODOLOGY	4
5	RESULTS	5
6	DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION	8
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	9

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1:	Location of trenches and development area	2
Figure 2:	Trench plans	6
Figure 3:	Section drawings	7

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 $\frac{18.45\text{m}}{\times}$ ODN

Plans

Limit of Excavation 

Deposit - Conjectured 


Natural Features 

Intrusion/Truncation 

Sondages/Machine Strip 

Illustrated Section 

Archaeological Deposit 

Excavated Slot 

Modern Deposit 

Cut Number 118

**Medieval Field Systems at Sir Harry Smith Community College,
Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 2762 9738)**

1 INTRODUCTION

Between 31st May and 2nd June 2005 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken at Sir Harry Smith Community College, Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire (TL 2762 9738) by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC AFU).

The proposed development includes the construction of an all-weather sports pitch and tennis court. The development area covers approximately 5050m². Mouchelparkman on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council commissioned the project.

The evaluation was undertaken in response to a brief issued by Andy Thomas (Thomas 2005; Planning application no F/02004/05/CCC) of the Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning and Countryside Advice, Cambridgeshire County Council (CAPCA). The HER event number for this work is ECB1911.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The geology of the site is March Gravels overlying Oxford Clay (British Geological Survey, sheet 158). This sequence was borne out by excavation, where the natural soils exposed were a complex mix of marine / estuarine sand and gravels. Within one trench (Trench 2), some disturbance associated with a recent fence line, revealed small patches of redeposited Oxford Clay.

Topographically, the site was very flat due in part to levelling for use as a school football pitch.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Historical Background

Whittlesey is a former gravel island that was once surrounded by ancient river tributaries to the south and east and open water to the north. The gravel island (interglacial gravels overlying Oxford Clay) formed a secure crossing



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

for a 2nd-century Roman road – The Fen Causeway – that crossed the fenland between Peterborough and Denver, Norfolk. The significance of this road is undisputed and has been discussed elsewhere (Hall and Coles 1994), but seldom investigated. While information about its construction is reasonably well known, evidence of roadside activities (a typical association of Roman road systems) is less well understood. Settlements at the north-western and north-eastern edges of the island have been investigated to some extent, where internal roads that may have linked to the major fen route were in evidence. Definition of how frequently the road was a focus of roadside activities, at least on the former island crests, is a high priority for the regional research agenda.

The development site is on the March gravels in an area of high archaeological potential close to the line of the Fen Causeway Roman road (HER no 11048).

3.2 Archaeological Background

Although no archaeological remains are known at present from the site itself, a considerable amount of archaeological remains are known from the surrounding area.

Prehistoric finds are known from the area around Whittlesey, their distribution along the fen edge emphasising the economic importance of the fen as an essential grazing resource.

The Bronze Age is characterized by both ritual activity and domestic settlement. Barrow mounds have been identified at Eldernell and Suet Hill, to the south of Whittlesey. Recent excavations between Whittlesey and Fengate to the west of the development site have revealed evidence for settlement that had not been identified through aerial and field surveys. At Kings Dyke West excavations (Knight 1999) revealed the presence of a short-lived Late Bronze Age settlement consisting of five roundhouses, four post structures and pits. Henges, ring ditches and an urned cremations were also found.

Iron Age material has been reported from the brick clay quarry 4km to the west of the development site (Hall 1987).

There is a strong possibility that the development area is located on the route of the Roman Fen Causeway. The projected course of this route from Peterborough to Grandford near March crosses the north of Whittlesey. It enters the island from Flag Fen and Northey, where portions of the gravel road have been recorded (Hall 1987). Excavations at Stonald Field to the west of the subject site have confirmed the route of the Roman road in the eastern portion of the parish (Knight 2000).

The Whittlesey area is not particularly rich in Saxon and early medieval remains. Approximately 500m to the west of the development area an Anglo-

Saxon cemetery consisting of seven inhumations was uncovered in the 19th century (HER No. 10594). All of the skeletons were orientated on a east to west alignment.

The place name of Whittlesey indicates a Late Saxon origin, being recorded in 972 as (*W*)*itlesig*, meaning 'Wil(t)el's island' from a personal name (Reaney 1943)

Later medieval finds have been discovered from the central area of Whittlesey. The churches of St Andrew's and St Mary's appear to be relatively late in date, having been erected during the 13th century.

An investigation in 2003, by CCC AFU (Fletcher 2003), also within the grounds of the Sir Harry Smith Community College, failed to uncover any significant archaeological remains. Two undated ditches were identified, which are likely to relate to nearby drainage systems.

4 METHODOLOGY

The County Archaeological Office required archaeological monitoring of the proposed development area. In this particular case, monitoring was restricted to the area around an existing football pitch, but within the area of development.

Three 1.6m wide trenches, totalling 123.2m in length were opened within the footprint of the proposed area of development. Two of the trenches were orientated east to west and one north to south. This strategy was adopted to maximise the potential of revealing any features crossing the proposed development area. A 180° mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.6m toothless bucket was used to dig the trenches, in order to expose the geological horizon, and reinstate the trenches to a very high standard.

No services were expected or found during the evaluation although a potential service trench was visible, running east to west, immediately to the north of trench three. This lined up with a concrete service marker post located at the north-east corner of a cemetery boundary fence.

Professional archaeologists hand-excavated all features to ascertain their antiquity.

Artefacts within the soils were retrieved for dating evidence, record and comparison. All hand-excavated sections were cleaned, drawn and photographed to the standards of the CCC AFU to establish their nature and enable an assessment of their character.

All trenches were recorded, planned and photographed. Recording conditions were generally good.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Trench 1 (Figs 2 & 3)

Trench 1 was located along the southern edge of the site, orientated east to west. The trench was 42.2m long. The topsoil (01) was 0.50m thick and overlay a subsoil (02) of 0.20m. The reason for the additional ten centimetres of topsoil, when compared to the two other excavated trenches, is that it accommodates a gentle slope to the slightly higher schoolyard. Below the subsoil natural sand and gravels were exposed. The sequencing of these deposits became increasingly complex towards the western end of the trench.

Artefacts recovered from the machined spoil showed that the topsoil was mixed, having probably being imported to that location during levelling of the site. These topsoil artefacts were 18th- to 20th-century ceramics.

Feature 04 was located some 17.5m (in plan) from the eastern end of the trench, measuring 3.20m wide by 0.20m deep. Excavation revealed that this was a broad, shallow furrow. There was a very slight depression of the subsoil overlying this furrow; a result of gradual subsidence. The pottery retrieved from the single fill was shown to be of medieval origin, more specifically a Bourne 'A' ware type pottery bowl fragment from the 13th to 14th century. Bone from this deposit was fragmented and from small cattle-sized mammals. Most of the bone appeared to have been deliberately split, possibly for the extraction of marrow.

5.2 Trench 2 (Fig. 2)

Trench 2 (43.0m long) was located along the western edge of the site, orientated north to south except at the southern end, which had a 2m extension to the west. The topsoil (01) was 0.40m thick and as in Trench 1 it overlay a subsoil (02) of 0.20m depth with natural sand and gravels below. The complexity of the natural deposits was most notable in this trench. A linear feature extending the entire length of the trench was investigated and shown to be a modern fence line that had slightly disturbed the underlying Oxford Clay. There was extensive disturbance along this feature that was the result of root action.

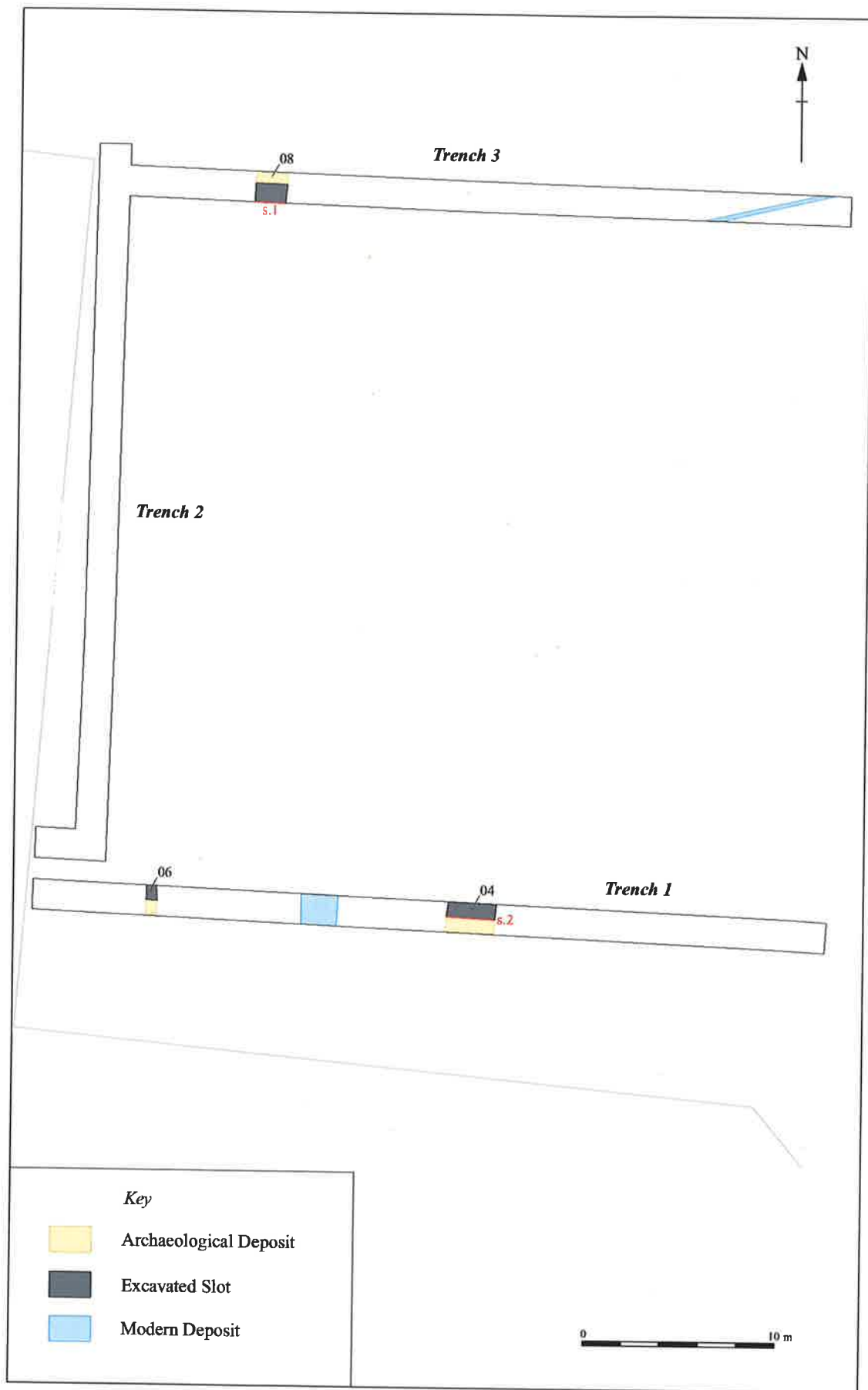


Figure 2 Trench plans

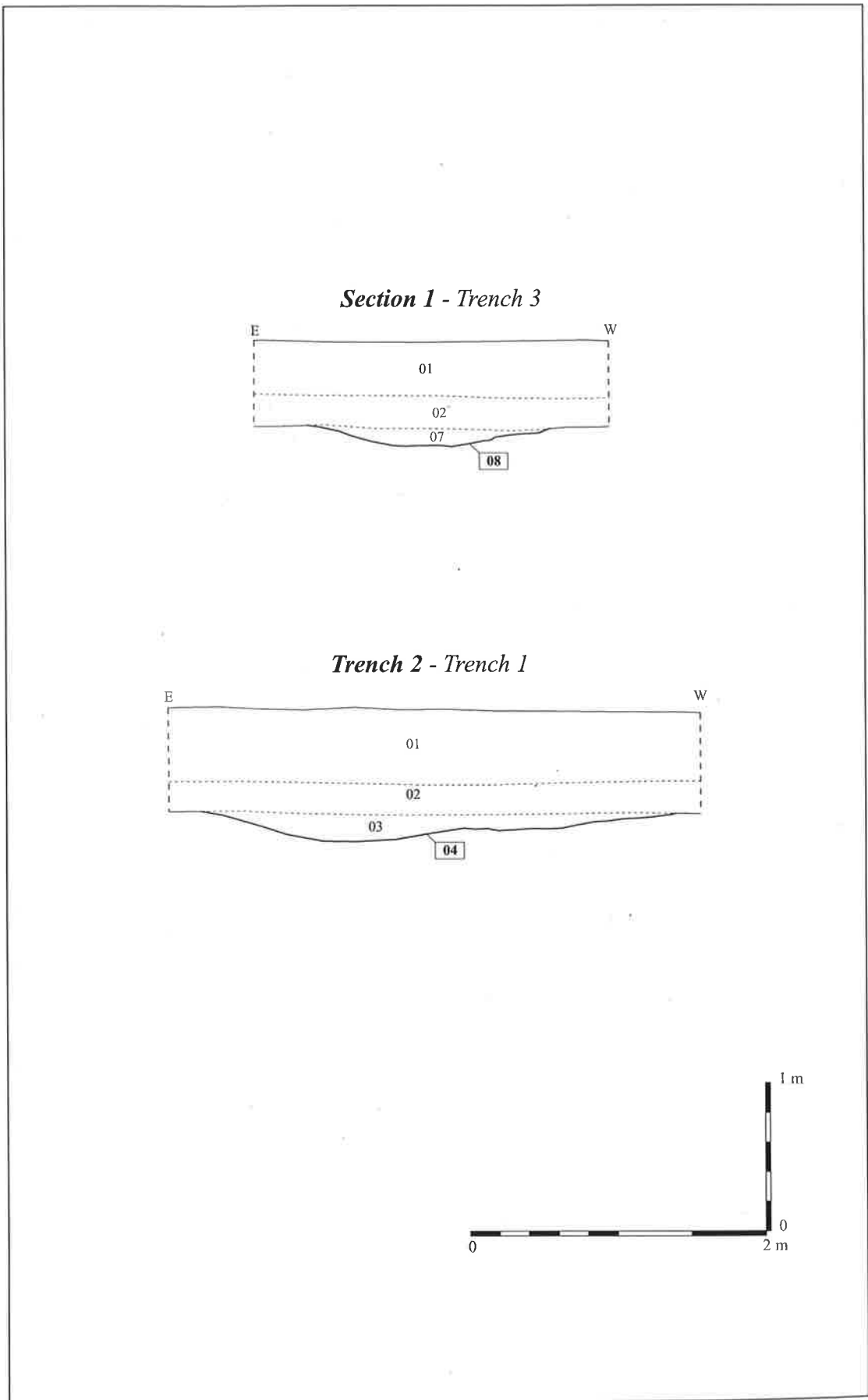


Figure 3 Section drawings

The unstratified artefacts were of the similar type and date to those recovered in the other trenches and included sherds of post-medieval date. The additional fragments of modern materials such as concrete posts and fence wire were extracted directly from the linear feature.

5.3 Trench 3 (Figs 2 & 3)

Trench 3 ran directly from the northern end of Trench 2 eastward for 38.3m. This trench formed the third side of an incomplete rectangle of trenches. Again, the character of the topsoil (01) at 0.40m thick, subsoil (02) 0.20m thick and natural were essentially the same as found in Trench 1 and 2.

The topsoil artefacts were the same types as in the other trenches (*i.e.* post-medieval and modern).

Feature 08 was located some 30.0m from the eastern end of the trench. Excavation revealed that this was another broad, shallow furrow. The pottery retrieved from the single fill was shown to be of medieval origin, more specifically a Bourne 'A' ware type pottery bowl fragment from the 13th to 14th century. Bone from this deposit was fragmented and from small cattle-sized mammals. Most of the bone appeared to have been deliberately split, possibly for the extraction of marrow.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of the evaluation project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the proposed development site. Information from this evaluation will allow an assessment of the proposed developments archaeological implications and to inform an appropriate mitigation strategy.

The project has been successful in achieving its objectives. Despite the investigation occurring in an area of known and rich Roman archaeology, the only ancient remains on the site were the remnants of a medieval field system (ridge and furrow).

The modern feature that was revealed in Trench 2 showed that a fence line had been relocated in the recent past, probably at the same time as the field was levelled and the cemetery fence was re-established.

No other archaeological features were present within the evaluation trenches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Stephen Wyard of Mouchelparkman who commissioned the evaluation and Cambridgeshire County Council who funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Stephen Macaulay. Site work was carried out by the author and Dennis Payne, while illustrations are by Crane Begg.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Andy Thomas, Principal Archaeologist of the Cambridgeshire Archaeology Planning and Countryside Advice, who visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

Thanks also to the staff of Sir Harry Smith Community College and in particular the caretaker Mr Jubb and deputy headteacher Mick Mitchell.

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