

# MILL COMMON, HUNTINGDON

## - AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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*Report no. 59*

*An aerial photograph of Mill Common, Huntingdon*



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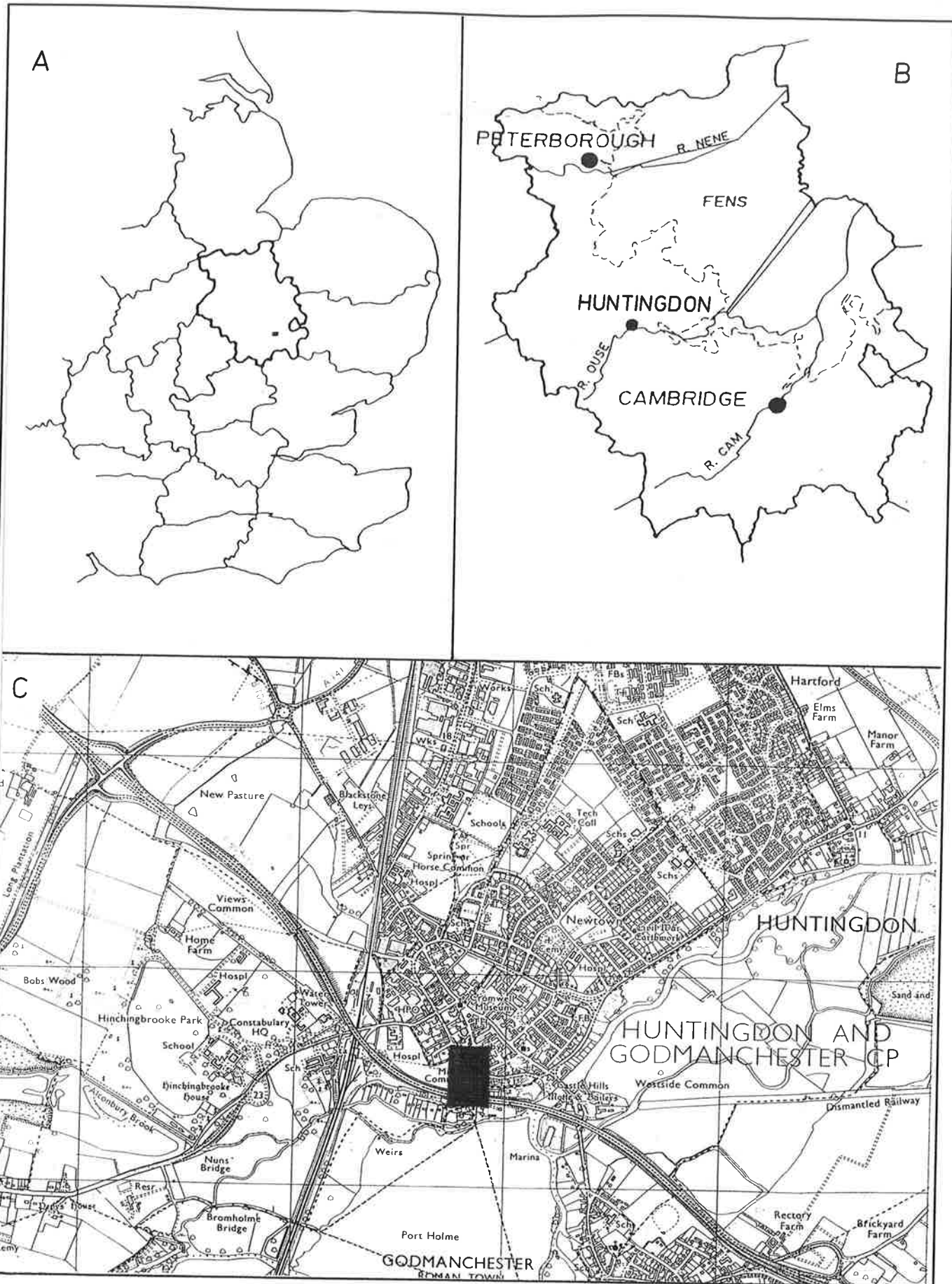
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Shaded area - area of fig. 2.

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## **Summary**

*Four 1m x 1m test pits were hand-excavated in the eastern part of Mill Common, Huntingdon to a maximum depth of 1.5m. Two of the four test pits encountered early medieval deposits that contain Saxo-Norman and early medieval pottery dating to the 10th to 13th century. These early deposits appear to be due to medieval infilling of old quarries. Three of the four test pits revealed large amounts of modern in-fill, demonstrating that recent dumping has occurred over the site.*

## **Introduction**

An archaeological assessment of Mill Common, Huntingdon was undertaken by the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section from June 12th to June 19th 1992 under the direction of S. Leith. The work was commissioned by Huntingdon District Council prior to their extension of the existing car park. The assessment was intended to examine the depositional history of the site and to assess the impact of the development on the archaeological deposits. In addition, the investigation was expected to clarify the nature of the earthworks on the site, particularly in relation to those in the main area of Mill Common.

## **Geology and Topography**

Geology of this site consists of First Terrace river gravels overlying Oxford clay.

The site is located to the south-west of Huntingdon's town centre, at the junction of Mill Common Road and Castle Hill (Fig. 1 and 2). It centres on NGR TL 2388/7148 and is immediately east of the main area of Mill Common. Mill Common is located in the valley of the Great Ouse River, to the north of the river itself. It lies immediately outside the medieval town, as shown on John Speed's map of 1610, in an area of rough land that appears (from his sketch) to be used for hunting and other informal activities. However, it lies within the area thought to be defended in late Saxon times.

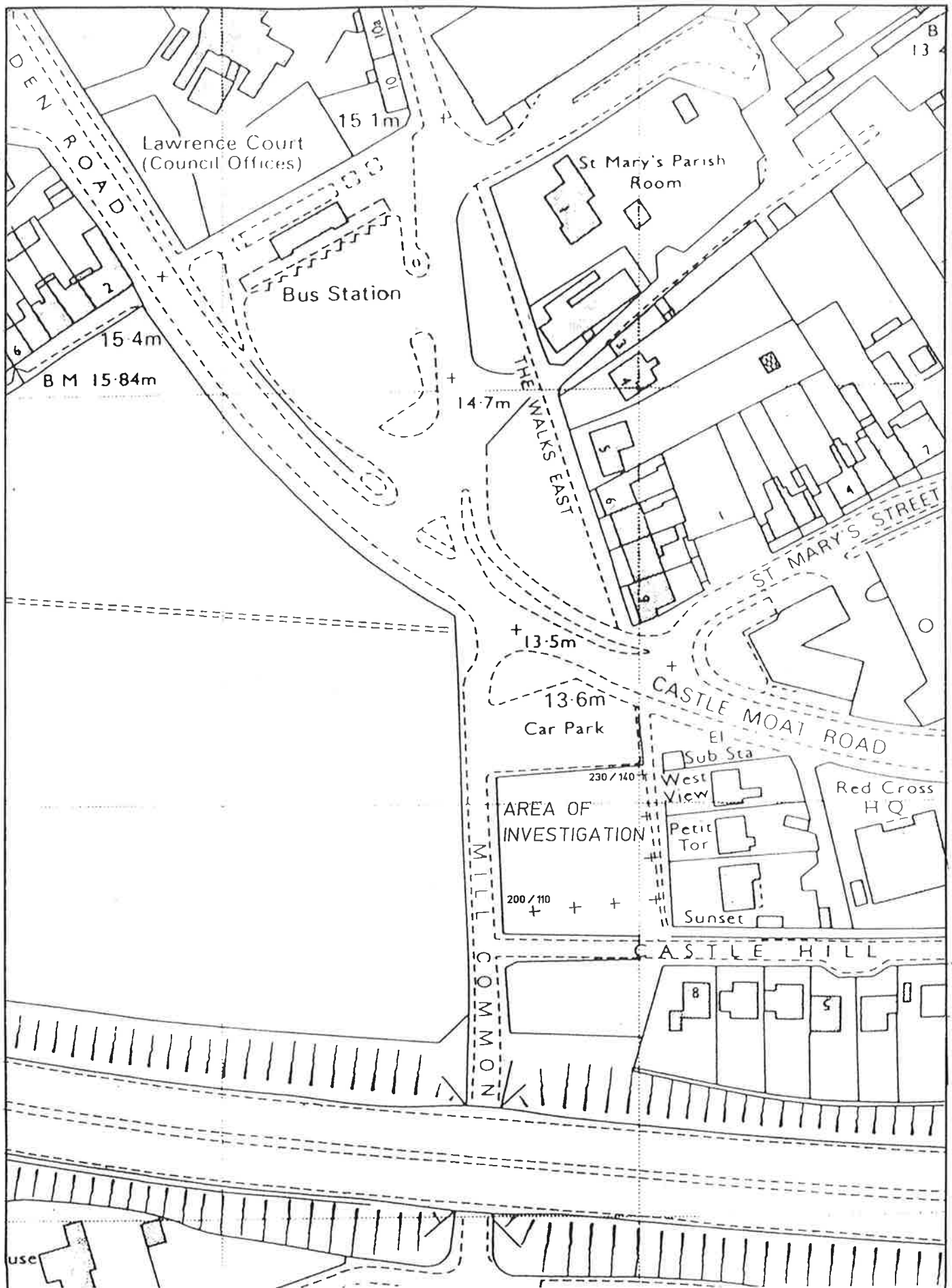
## **Archaeological Background**

The site contains earthworks of possible archaeological significance: a raised area to the west, a depression to the south, and a bank along its northern edge (Fig. 3). In contrast to these problematic earthworks, the main area of Mill Common contains a medieval ridge and furrow field system (Frontispiece & Fig. 4).

An earthwork on Mill Common is included on the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments map of Huntingdon (1926, p. 157). It is labelled as a well-defined bank and ditch of unclassified date. This earthwork is also mentioned in the Victoria History of the Counties of England (Wade, 1926, p. 290) and is dated tentatively to the Civil War period (1642-1649). The two perpendicular arms of this earthwork follow two medieval ridge and furrow headlands. However, it is possible that the existing "bank and ditch" of the ridge and furrow were later exaggerated by digging out the furrow and piling up the ridge. This could then have served as part of the Civil War defence system that surrounded Huntingdon.

The medieval ridge and furrow field system on Mill Common is cut in two places by later quarrying. There is historical evidence of clay quarrying on Mill Common in the 18th century (Huntingdon Common Council, 1772 and 1776), and of gravel extraction on the Commons in the 19th century (order of Huntingdon Town Clerk, Dec. 1849).

No previous archaeological work has been conducted on this site.



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Initials	Date
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**FIG. 2 LOCATION OF AREA  
OF INVESTIGATION**

## Historical Background

Huntingdon begins to figure as a significant settlement by the 10th century when it had the status of a market town with its own mint. As a frontier town of the Danelaw, it was successively taken, occupied and defended by Anglo-Saxon and Danish forces. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that in 921 Edward the Elder took the 'burh' of Huntingdon in the war against the Danes. As in other areas he regained, he organised Huntingdon as the military and administrative centre of its shire, and the town was extensively re-built and defended.

*'When this division of the English levies went home, the other came out on military service and occupied the fortress at Huntingdon: acting on orders from king Edward, they repaired and rebuilt it where it had been destroyed; and all the original inhabitants who had survived in the district submitted to king Edward, and sought his peace and protection'. (The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)*

In 1068 William the Conqueror visited the town and built the Norman castle. By the 13th century Huntingdon had grown and boasted sixteen parish churches and six religious houses. Economic changes and the Black Death took their toll in the 14th century, greatly reducing the population. The decay continued through the 15th and 16th centuries, when only four parish churches remained.

Huntingdon's strategic position on an important river crossing gave it an active part in the Civil War. In 1644 the town was occupied by the Parliamentary forces, and it is probably at this time that a large encompassing ditch was created as a defensive earthwork. Huntingdon was taken by the Royalists in 1645. The town suffered from the attacks of both sides during this period. By the 18th century, Huntingdon had become a flourishing coaching town that also served as an administrative centre although as a market town it was greatly overshadowed by St Ives.

## Methods

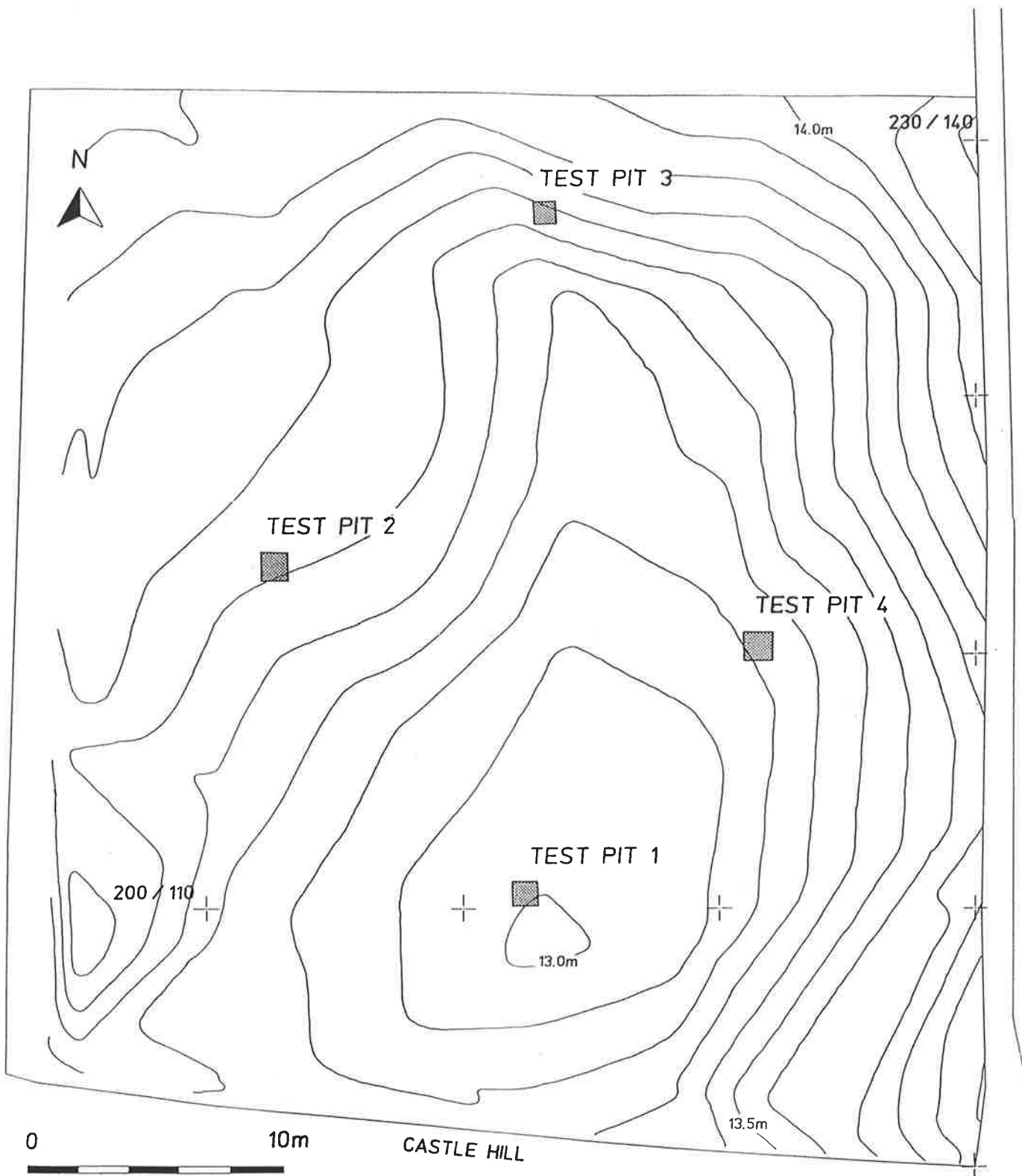
The purpose of this investigation was to assess the presence or absence of archaeological deposits and to determine their nature. The impact of the proposed development on these deposits was to be estimated. In addition, it was intended to examine the earthworks on the site.

The use of heavy machinery was not recommended for this site because of its size and the possibility of buried structures. Therefore, in order to minimize disruption of the site, excavation was limited to four 1m x 1m hand-excavated test pits. The positions of the test pits were chosen to investigate the earthworks and to form an overview of the depositional history of the site as a whole (Fig. 3). An earthwork survey of Mill Common was originally included as part of the research design, but after an inspection of the site and consultation with the County Archaeologist's Office it was decided that a sketch would suffice (Fig. 4).

The test pits were dug in approximately 0.2m spits as stratigraphy cannot be accurately followed during such excavation. Recording was undertaken using the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section's standard single context recording system and sections of the test pits drawn.



MILL COMMON ROAD



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LOCATION OF TEST PITS

5

FIG. 3

Initials

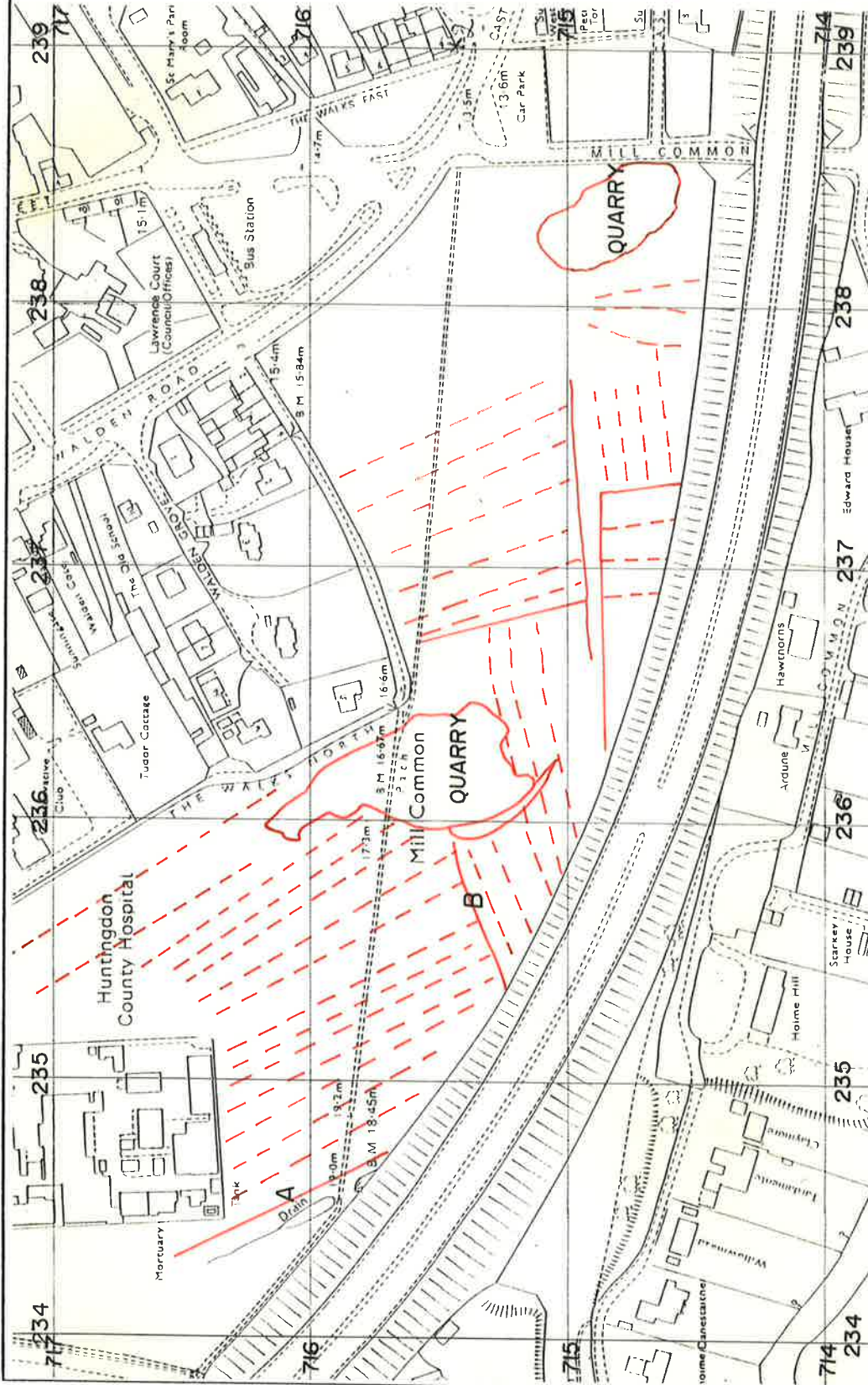
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Fig. 4



BOTTOM OF FURROW  
HEADLAND  
HEADLANDS MENTIONED  
A / B IN TEXT

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PLAN OF EARTHWORKS ON  
MILL COMMON

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Scale 1 : 2500		
Initials	Date	
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## Results

### *Test Pit 1 (Fig. 3 & 5)*

This test pit was located in the area of low ground in the south part of the site (Fig.3).

Below the topsoil and the thin gravel subsoil, the upper layers excavated (003 to 006) contain a large amount of modern building material. This includes brick, mortar, tarmac and iron, as well as modern pottery sherds and glass. These deposits seem to correspond to the in-filling of the site which, according to local residents, occurred forty years ago in order to raise the ground level. Similar modern in-fill is also apparent in Test Pits Nos. 2 and 3.

Below this, layer (007) contains modern debris including glass, porcelain sherds, animal bone and coal. In addition, there is one sherd of well-abraded Thetford ware. An ash layer (008) containing brick, slag and melted glass appears to be the lowest modern layer.

The lowest layers excavated (009 to 013) to a depth of 1.5m below ground level contain material dating from the early medieval period: animal bone, oyster shell and pottery sherds (Fig. 5). The animal bone is primarily cow and sheep, with some pig, and bears signs of butchery. The pottery is of St Neots-type ware, Stamford ware, and medieval coarse ware. This gives a date of roughly 11th to 13th century (Appendix).

### *Test Pit 2 (Figs. 3 & 5)*

This test pit was located in the western part of the site and was intended to investigate an area of raised ground.

All contexts excavated to a depth of 1.46m below ground level contain modern pottery sherds and building material. The upper layers (017, 018, 020), occurring immediately under the topsoil and thin gravel subsoil, contain a high concentration of modern building material. This includes brick, tile, tarmac, concrete and iron, as well as modern pottery and glass. These layers represent the modern in-fill used to raise the ground level in recent years, and also occurs in Test Pits Nos. 1 and 3.

Below this all layers excavated contain modern pottery sherds and other modern debris. A vertical-sided linear ditch cuts through these modern layers and therefore post-dates them. The ditch was not excavated to its full depth (Fig. 5).

### *Test Pit 3 (Figs. 3 & 5)*

This test pit was located in the northern part of the site in order to investigate the bank running parallel to the edge of the present car park .

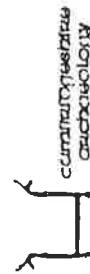
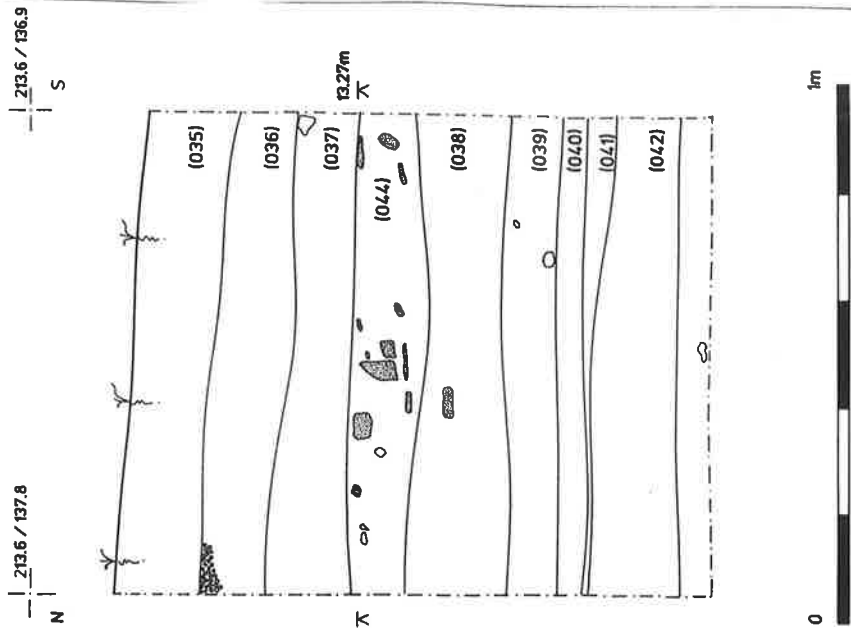
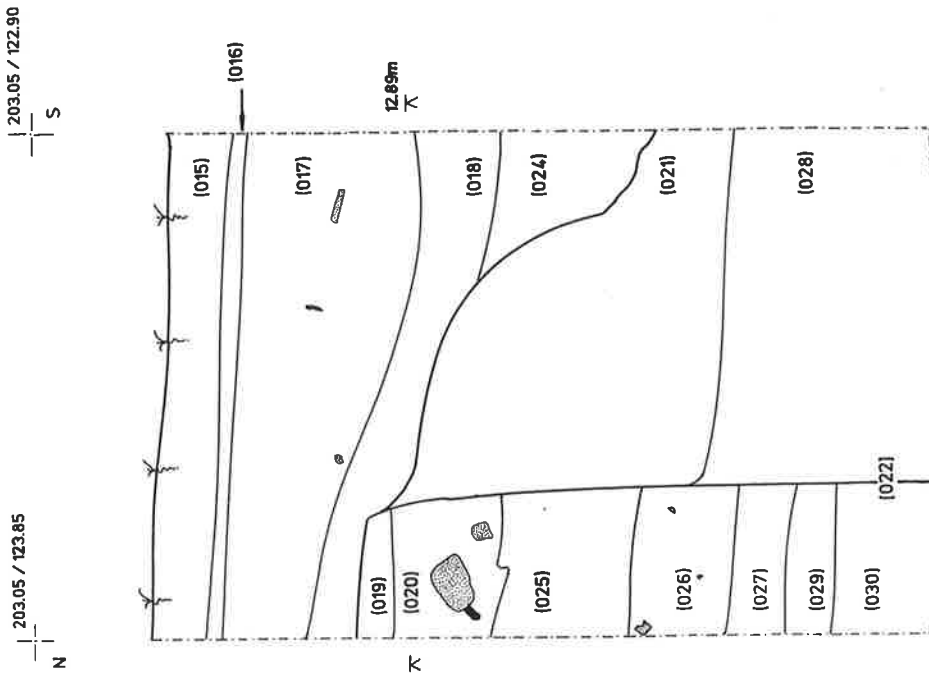
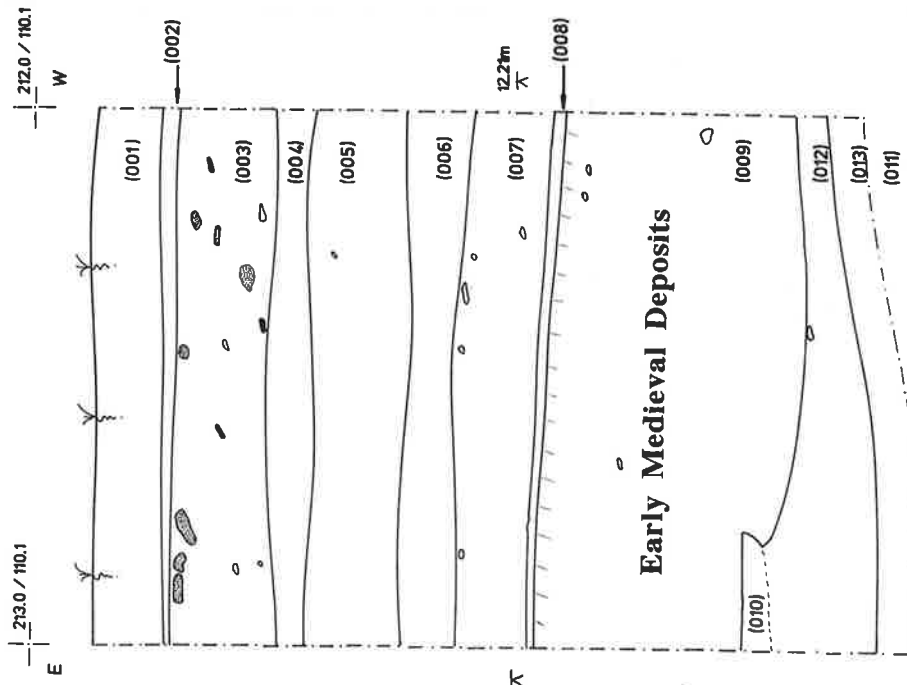
All contexts excavated to a depth of 1.07m below ground level contain modern pottery sherds and other modern debris. The upper layers (036, 037 and 044) contain a high concentration of modern building material, including brick, tile, slate, tarmac and iron, as well as modern pottery sherds and glass (Fig. 5). This corresponds to the relatively recent in-fill of the site also apparent in Test Pits Nos. 1 and 2.

The lower layers excavated contain modern pottery and other modern debris. Context 028 contains, in addition to a large quantity of modern porcelain sherds, one well-abraded sherd of residual medieval coarse ware (see appendix).

# TEST PIT 1

# TEST PIT 2

# TEST PIT 3



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SECTIONS OF TEST PITS 1, 2 & 3

Building Material

Pottery

Iron

Stone

Fig. 5

Initials

Date

S. L.

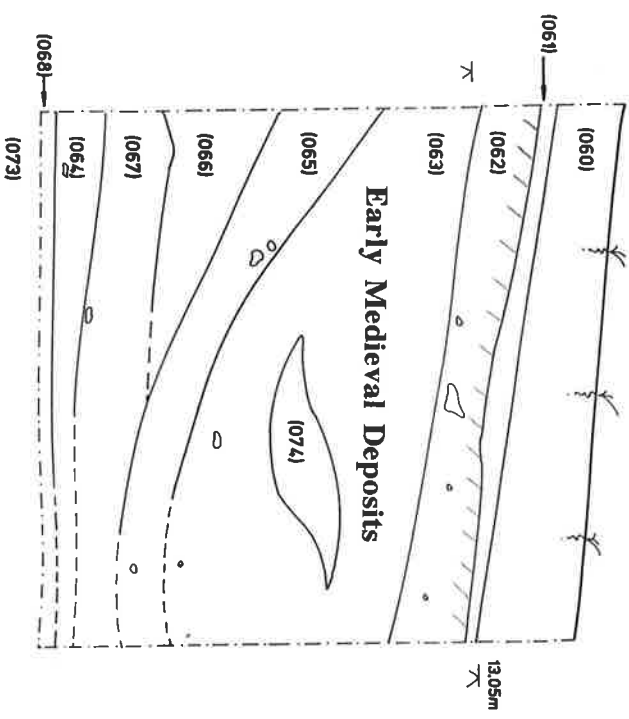
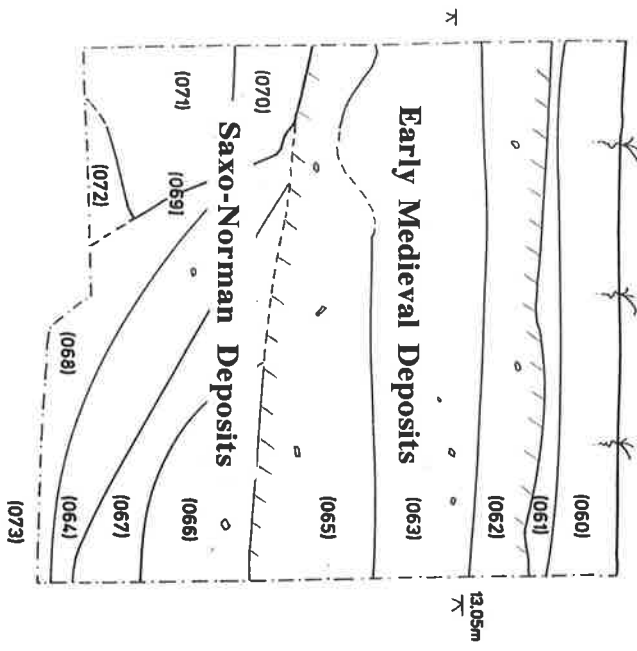
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221.95 / 120.75  
N

221.95 / 119.75  
S

221.95 / 119.75  
E

220.95 / 119.75  
W



-  Building Material
-  Pottery
-  Iron
-  Stone



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SECTIONS & PLAN OF TEST PIT 4

Fig. 6	
Initials	Date
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### *Test Pit 4 (Figs. 3 & 6)*

This test pit, located in the eastern part of the site, did not encounter the layers of modern in-fill apparent in the other test pits. Below the topsoil and thin gravel subsoil, are layers (062, 063 and 065) containing domestic debris dating to the early medieval period. This includes animal bone (of the same species as in Test Pit 1), oyster shell and pottery sherds. The pottery is of St Neots-type ware and medieval coarse ware. The lowest of these layers overlies a ditch [069] (Fig. 5). The ditch was 1.1m below ground level at its deepest and had sloping sides and a stepped base. The ditch fills (064, 066, 067 and 068) contain early medieval material including animal bone, oyster shell and pottery sherds. The pottery is of St Neots-type ware, coarse ware, and Stamford ware. The layers cut by the ditch (070, 071, 072, and 073) contain pottery sherds of St Neots-type ware. The pottery from this test pit dates between the 10th and 13th centuries (Appendix). The lowest 0.2m contains only late Saxon and Saxo-Norman sherds.

### **Conclusions.**

Test Pits Nos. 1 and 4 contained early medieval deposits which can be dated roughly between the 10th and 13th centuries. Most of the site, with the exception of the eastern part, appears to have been in-filled relatively recently in order to raise the ground level. Thus here the earthworks are entirely modern in origin. As one area of post-medieval quarrying on Mill Common is adjacent to this site, it is more than likely that this area was also quarried. This might explain the need for raising the ground level.

The proposed car park extension entails the stripping of a maximum of 40 cm over the entire site. This should cause disturbance to the medieval deposits over the majority of the site. However, in the eastern portion where medieval build-up was excavated an archaeological watching brief would be advisable during soil removal, and soil stripping should be minimised. However, in the southern part of the site two manholes will be excavated to a depth of approximately 1.8m and four drains from 1 to 1.5m in depth. This would be an opportunity for archaeologists to hold a watching brief during the excavation. As this will be in the region of Test Pits Nos. 1 and 4, it is hoped that further evidence will add to our understanding of the archaeological deposits, and that the nature of the ditch in Test Pit No. 4 will become clearer.

The site archive and finds are presently stored with the archives of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Section.



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## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks are due to Peter Lummis for his assistance and cooperation, to Karen Fox and Richard Heawood for their work in the field, to Gavin Lucas for his advice on the pottery, and to Ben Robinson and Tim Reynolds for their comments and support.

## **Appendix: Saxo-Norman Pottery from Mill Common, Huntingdon**

Test Pits Nos. 1, 3 and 4 produced a collection of Saxo-Norman pottery dating from the 10th to 13th centuries. The pottery was chiefly of St Neots-type ware and of medieval coarse ware; in addition, a few sherds of Stamford ware, Thetford ware, and some unidentified glazed and unglazed sherds were found.

The St Neots-type ware sherds were of a moderately hard fabric with a soapy texture and contained an abundance of medium-sized fossil shell inclusions. The colours varied from black to red and pink, but black was the most common. The examples from this site range in date from the 10th to the early 12th century.

The early-medieval coarse ware sherds were of a hard fabric with sand temper and frequent quartzite inclusions. They ranged in colour from buff to grey.

Three examples of Stamford ware were found, each of a fine, hard fabric with no visible inclusions. The colour of the fabric ranged from off-white to buff. These sherds sport three glaze types: a thin, yellow glaze, a thick green glaze with dark spots, and a thin orange-pink glaze. The first two types range in date from the 10th to the 13th century, and the third type from the 11th to the 13th (Kilmurry, 1980).

One sherd of Thetford ware was found, of a hard grey fabric tempered with frequent quartzite inclusions. It appears to be a body sherd from a large storage jar, with an applied rib. This type of decoration gives the sherd a date of circa 11th to 12th century.

A summary of the pottery listed by context follows. Unless otherwise stated, the sherds are of moderate size and unabraded.

### **Test Pit 1**

- (007) - 1 well-abraded sherd of Thetford ware: body sherd of large storage vessel with applied rib, 11th to 12th century.
- (009) - 4 small tile fragments.
  - 1 sherd of Stamford ware with thin yellow glaze.
  - 6 sherds of coarse ware, including: 5 body sherds (one with scratched decoration), and 1 everted rim from a small cooking pot or jar.
  - 11 sherds of St Neots-type ware, including: 5 body sherds, 2 sherds from flat-based bowls, 2 rim sherds from cooking pots (one with finger dimples giving it an early 12th century date), and 2 rim sherds from bowls, both simple upright rims, one with a carination. The last two sherds, with a high-fired fabric, date to the 11th to early 12th century.
- (010) - 2 sherds of coarse ware.
  - 4 sherds of St Neots-type ware, including: 2 from carinated bowls.
  - 1 sherd of ?Stamford ware with orange-pink glaze.
- (013) - 2 sherds of high-fired dark grey fabric with a spot of green glaze, of unknown source.

### **Test Pit 3**

- (042) - 1 well-abraded coarse ware sherd: from everted rim of cooking pot.
- unstratified - 1 sherd of green-glazed Stamford ware.

#### Test Pit 4

- (062)
- 7 small tile fragments.
  - 5 sherds of coarse ware.
  - 3 sherds of St Neots-type ware, including: 1 rim sherd from a small cooking pot, 1 rim sherd from a ledged cooking pot, approximately 38 to 40 cm in diameter. The large size of the latter gives it an early 12th century date.

#### Level 3 (063 and 065)

- 2 tile fragments.
- 1 small sherd of residual Roman Samian ware.
- 10 sherds of coarse ware, including: 1 body sherd from a carinated bowl, 1 rim sherd from a carinated bowl.
- 5 sherds of St Neots-type ware, including 2 body sherds from carinated bowls.

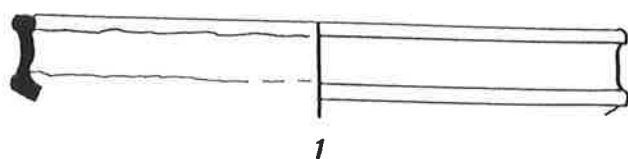
- (064)
- 1 small sherd of St Neots-type ware.
  - 4 sherds of coarse ware.
  - 2 sherds of Stamford ware with green glaze over lines of white slip.

#### Level 4 (064, 065, 066, 067, 068, 070, 071)

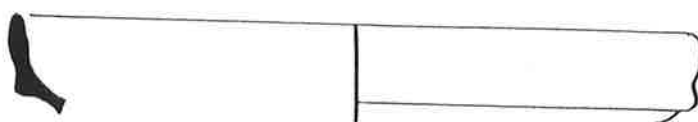
- 4 tile fragments.
  - 1 sherd (possibly from a tile) with green-brown glaze.
  - 6 sherds of coarse ware.
  - 1 sherd of St Neots-type ware.
- (072)
- 2 body sherds of St Neots-type ware.



Plate 1. Selected Medieval Pot sherds.



1



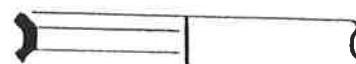
2



3



4



5

- 1 TP4 Level 3 (063)/(065) Medieval coarseware, oxidised surface wall-sided bowl
- 2 TP 1 (009) Hard, red Developed St Neots wall-sided bowl
- 3 TP 1 (009) Medieval coarseware grey-brown surface jar
- 4 TP 1 (009) Hard, red Developed St Neots jar with finger impressions on inner rim.
- 5 TP 1 (009) Hard buff/red Developed St. Neots jar.



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Fig. 7 Selected Rim Sherds from Mill  
Common.

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