

## **Cambridge University Botanic Garden, Cambridge: An Archaeological Evaluation**

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### ***Summary***

*Two trenches at Cambridge University Botanic Garden failed to reveal any significant archaeological deposits. The only features encountered were of 19<sup>th</sup> century date and related to horticulture.*

### ***Methodology***

Two trenches (Figure 1) were excavated by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2003 prior to the proposed construction of a Plant Growth Facility and Herbarium (TL 45555730), in line with a written specification (Evans 2003). The trenches were opened using a mechanical excavator with a 1.2m wide toothless ditching bucket supervised by an experienced archaeologist. The standard CAU excavation and recording system based upon the Museum of London single context recording system (Spence 1990) was used.

### ***Background***

The area of the development was covered in an earlier desktop study (Dickens 1999). The only previous discovery from the immediate vicinity is a Roman coin just to the south (Babington 1883), while the Roman road leading to Cambridge the *Via Devana* follows approximately the line of Hills Road to the east (Babington 1883). Recent work to the south at the Former Government Offices site at Brooklands Avenue has revealed dispersed evidence of a Roman field system and possible Iron Age activity (Armour 2002; Dickens and Patten 2003; Kenney 2000).



Figure 1: Trench location plan.

## ***Results***

### *Trench 1*

Trench 1 (centrepoint grid reference 545592257248) was 5.4m long, aligned north-south and contained no archaeological features. The current ground surface lay at between 12.76 and 12.73m O.D. Part of the trench was machine excavated to a depth of 1.0m to confirm the natural geological sequence. The deposits encountered were:

Topsoil (0.00-0.22m below current ground surface): dark brown sandy loam containing frequent small fragments of coal and occasional fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery and clay tobacco pipe.

Disturbed subsoil (0.22-0.30m below current ground surface): mottled layer of dark brown silt and yellow clayey sand containing frequent small fragments of coal and occasional fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery.

Natural (0.30-0.95m below current ground surface): deep yellow clayey sand. Very clean and sterile apart from a little root and worm action.

Lower natural (0.95m+ below current ground surface): pale whiteish yellow chalky sand with occasional darker yellow mottling.

## *Trench 2*

Trench 2 (centrepoint grid reference 545610257291) was 15.2m long, aligned west-east and the current ground surface was between 12.59 and 12.54m O.D. The topsoil (0.00-0.20m below current ground surface) and disturbed subsoil (0.20m+ below current ground surface) identified in Trench 1 were also found in Trench 2. Within the disturbed subsoil were two phases of features related to 19<sup>th</sup> century horticulture. The earlier phase consisted of a range of around twenty poorly defined irregular shallow features aligned broadly north-south with light yellowish brown sandy silt fills. These contained small fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery, clay tobacco pipe and ceramic building material. These features appear to be the base of digging related to 19<sup>th</sup> century horticulture, rather than being archaeological features *per se* they are probably just slightly deeper areas of more general areas of digging.

The later phase consisted of two groups of rather better defined features. On the northern edge of the trench were a group of eight cut features. These were regularly spaced, 0.4m wide and 0.3m deep with vertical sides and flat bases and appear to be the ends of a series of parallel linear features on a west-north-west to east-south-east alignment. These features were all filled with a loose dark brownish grey loamy silt containing frequent small charcoal flecks and occasional fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery and clay tobacco pipe. The pottery consisted of small highly abraded fragments of finewares and larger fresher fragments of horticultural wares. These features are interpreted as a group of planting trenches. At the eastern end of the trench there were a group of four postholes containing fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery.

## ***Discussion***

No features or even residual artefacts earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century were discovered. Although the limited amount of trenching makes definitive conclusions difficult this suggests that Roman activity associated with the *Via Devana* to the east and the field system to the south did not extend into this area. The lack of Medieval evidence confirms the prevailing interpretation of this general area as fields in Cambridge's agricultural hinterland. The two phases of 19<sup>th</sup> century horticultural activity can be linked to the University Botanic Garden. The land for the Botanic Garden was purchased in 1831, although it was not opened until 1846. The quantities of coal fragments in the later phase suggest that this post-dates the arrival of the railway in Cambridge in 1845.

At an on site monitoring visit by Kasia Gdaniec of the County Archaeology Office it was agreed that there were no significant archaeological deposits and that as a result only a brief statement of the work was required and that all finds could be discarded on site.

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