

**Archaeological Investigations at St Peter's Street,  
Caxton, Cambridgeshire, 1991**

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## Abstract

*An archaeological assessment was undertaken on the site of the proposed housing development on St Peter's Street, Caxton. A contour survey was conducted to record relic Medieval agricultural earthworks. Machine trenches were positioned to investigate these earthworks and to reveal underlying archaeological features. Archaeological features included ditches, dated by pottery to the 11th-12th centuries. The abundance and nature of finds excavated from these ditches suggests that they represent property boundaries associated with Late Saxon/Early Medieval occupation of St Peter's Street.*

## INTRODUCTION

A one week archaeological assessment was commissioned by Anglia (Design and Build) Limited. This was to investigate surviving Medieval earthworks (SMR no. 9960) on the site of a proposed housing development on St Peter's Street, Caxton (TL 30150/58480). Machine trial trenching was also carried out to investigate possible archaeological features under the Medieval field systems.

A detailed contour survey was undertaken to record the upstanding earthworks which consist of ridge-and-furrow relic cultivation and a headland bank running at right angles to these. A boundary sub-division, noted by the County Archaeologist, is not thought to run through the site.

Two test squares and four trial trenches were dug using a JCB (bucket width = 1.6m). In total 56m of machine trenching was dug, representing approximately 3.7% of the 2400m<sup>2</sup> site. The test squares (Test Pit 1 and 2) were dug to investigate finds densities across the site; the two trial trenches (Trenches I and II) to section the surviving earthworks. These test squares and trenches were positioned in consultation with the site developers in order to avoid areas of proposed house foundations. Two more trenches (Trenches III and IV) were subsequently dug to investigate archaeological features discovered.

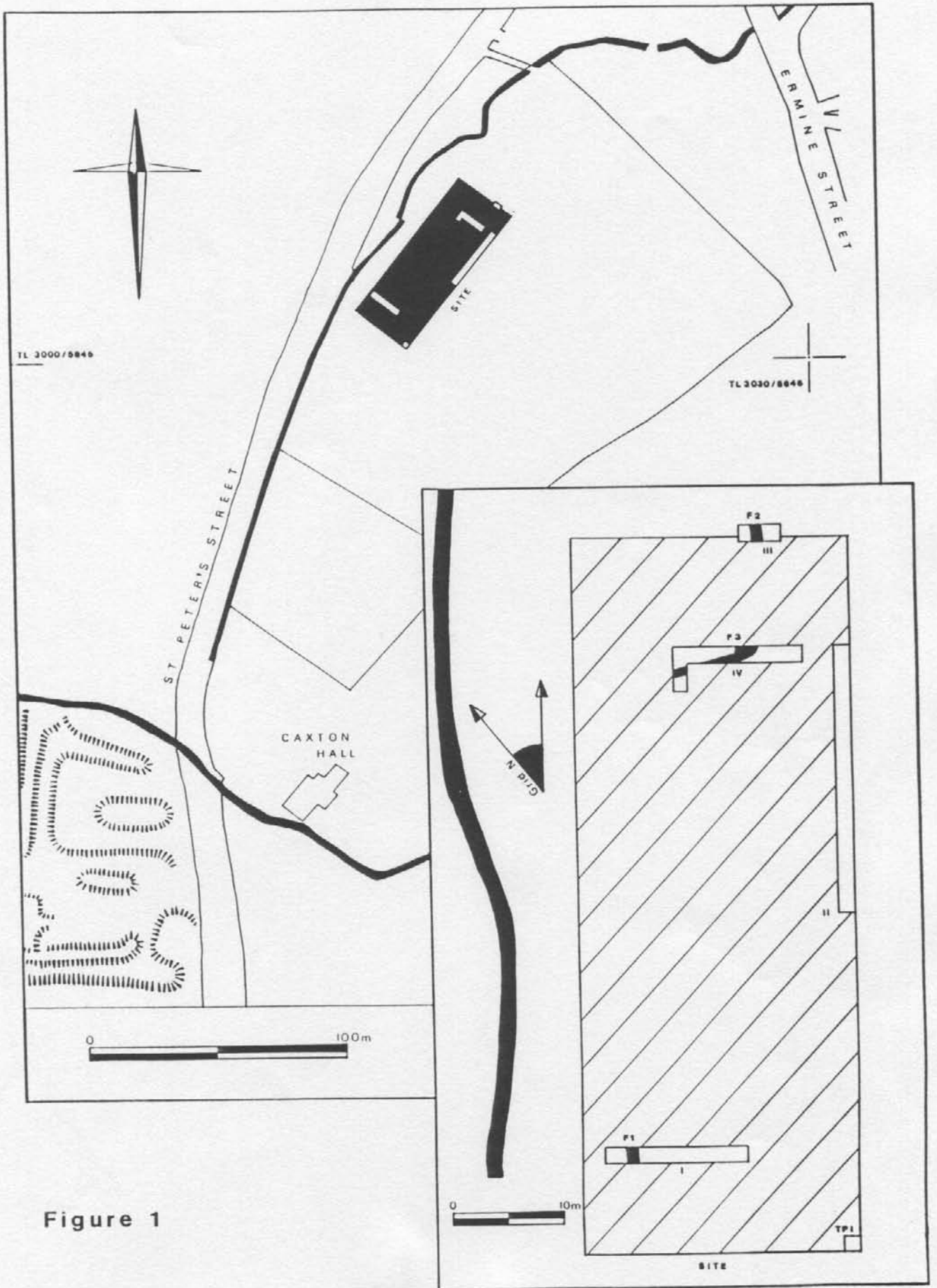


Figure 1

## Setting and Background

Caxton is situated 11 miles west of Cambridge and 7 miles east of St Neots. The geology of the area is boulder clay, giving rise to an undulating landscape bisected by a number of small brooks. The site investigated lies in a field sloping to the north-west, towards a small stream flowing along the east of St Peter's Street (see Figure 1).

Although Ermine Street, the main thoroughfare running north to south through Caxton, is of Roman origin, there is little evidence for Roman occupation in the area. Roman sherds have been recovered from a large earthwork site to the north-west of the village, known as 'The Moats' (RCHM 1968:41). As this site is probably of Medieval date, the finds are likely to be residual, and they do not indicate a substantive Roman presence in the area. Although pre-Saxon settlement is not to be expected, due to the heavy clay nature of the soils here, this is also a reflection of the lack of archaeological investigations in the vicinity of Caxton.

The foundation of Caxton was in the late Saxon period and was probably of Scandinavian origin (VCH 1973:26). At that time, the village was centred on the church of St Andrew, now to the south-west of the present village. The church still retains some of its original 11th century features. The Early Medieval settlement extended north along St Peter's Street and north-west towards 'The Moats' (RCHM 1968:35).

By the 13th century, the village had begun to move, with its new centre of focus on Ermine Street. This illustrates an instance of migration from an earlier site to the the proximity of a long-distance road (RCHM 1968:34). A market and accompanying inns were well established at this new site by the 14th century (VCH 1973:26). This is still the location of the village of Caxton.

Caxton has a number of large earthwork and moated sites, and one of these lies to the south-west of the site under investigation, on the other side of St Peter's Street. This is claimed to be the manor of Colne, dated generally to the Medieval period, but known to be abandoned by 1750 (RCHM 1968:41-42).

Medieval agricultural activity is well represented by existing earthworks in the parish of Caxton. This consists mainly of open field systems of ridge-and-furrow cultivation. Reconstruction drawings of these agricultural earthworks have been made for this region (RCHM 1968:43). The site for the proposed development lies in a field showing obvious ridge-and-furrow running down-slope to the north-west.

The Medieval open-fields were enclosed during the Post-Medieval period. This usually accompanied a shift from cultivation to a pastoral economy (Hall 1982). The degree of preservation of the ridge-and-furrow

in the area of the proposed site suggests minimal Post-Medieval disturbance or modification.

The site is located in the grounds of Caxton Hall, lying to the south. This is a two-storeyed, brick-built house of the 17th century with 18th century modifications (RCHM 1968:39-41).

## **Archaeological Recording at Caxton**

Recording of archaeological deposits by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit follows a modified version of that employed by the Museum of London. Stratigraphic events (e.g. layers, cuts and fills) were recorded as individual contexts and are expressed as three-figure numbers in square brackets ([001] - [021], see Appendix for full context list).

For clarity in this report, features numbers (F1-3) have also been used to express groups of related contexts (e.g. ditch cuts and their fills) of particular interest encountered during excavation.

The site archive, comprising context descriptions on separate context sheets, plans and section drawings of trenches and features, and finds from excavations, are held by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit, c/o Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge.

## **Acknowledgements**

These investigations were generously funded by Anglia (Design and Build) Ltd. We are grateful for their co-operation and particularly to Mr Mike Tonkins. Thanks are extended to the excavation team (Janet Miller and Sarah Tarlow) and to Julie Boast who processed the finds. Plans were by Janet Miller, the contour survey by Robin Boast, and typing by Roshan McArthur. Invaluable advice was given by David Hall and Chris Evans.

## **1991 INVESTIGATIONS**

### **The Contour Survey**

A contour survey was conducted to record the Medieval earthworks (see Figure 2). Heights above Ordnance Datum were recorded across the site on a 2m grid, and were plotted to show contours at 50mm intervals. Cardinal points mentioned in the text below refer to site, rather than OS grid, north. Site north was at 39° to the east from Ordnance Survey grid north.

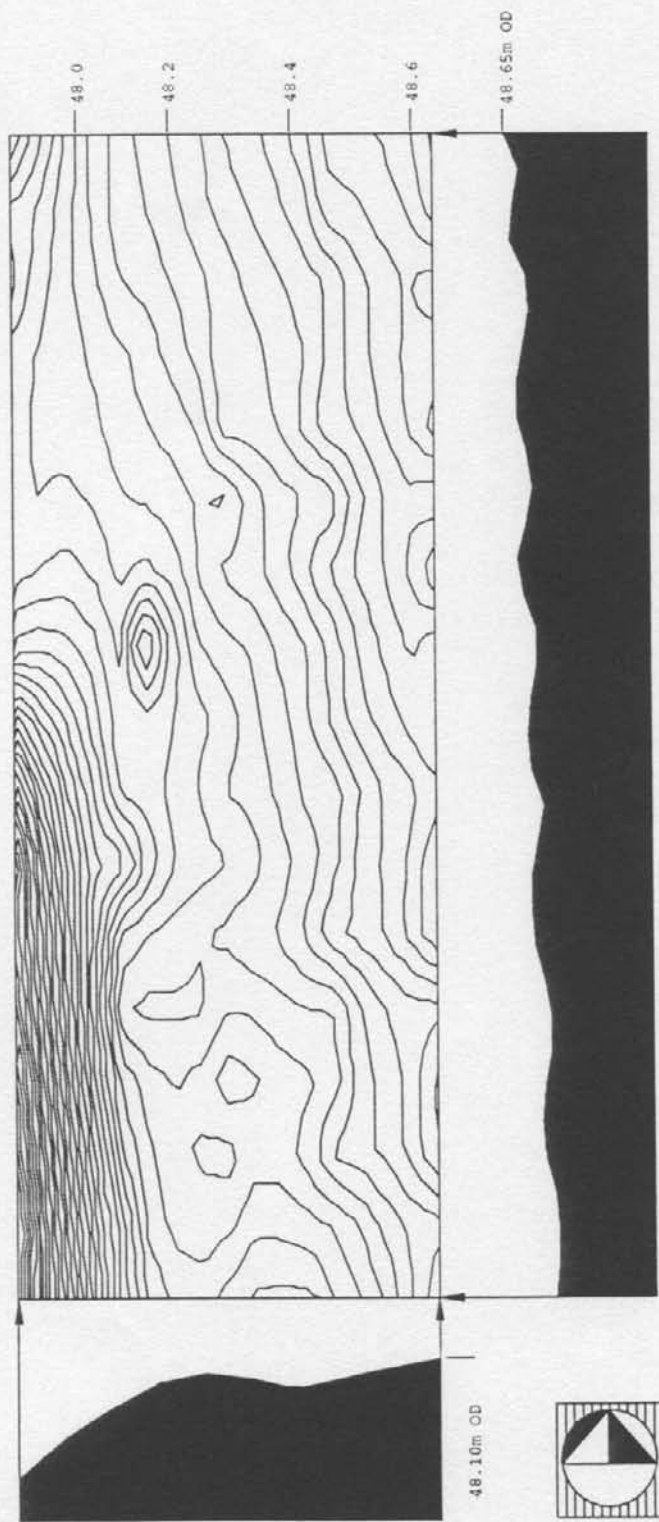


Figure 2

Generally the field which contains the site slopes from the east to the west, draining towards a brook at the edge of the field. The highest point of the site under investigation (48.7m OD) is in the north-east corner, the lowest point (46.5m OD) in the south-west corner. Superimposed on the natural slope of the hillside are seven linear banks running down slope. They extend up to 20m westwards from the east side of the site. A large bank, lying at right angles to and at the end of these ridges, extends 20m northwards from the south end of the site.

These banks represent the remains of Medieval ridge-and-furrow agriculture. Land was cultivated in strips, constant ploughing over a considerable period resulting in a thicker accumulation of soil in the centre of the strip than at the edges (Taylor 1975). The ridge-and-furrow pattern was orientated to run with the slope to facilitate drainage. Reconstruction drawings of ridge-and-furrow in the area of Caxton clearly show the south-east to north-west (O.S. cardinal points) orientation of the cultivation in the field where the site lies (RCHM 1966:43).

The ridges across the site are placed between 8 and 12m apart from crown to crown. They are not well pronounced, often the height difference between top of ridge and bottom of furrow being as little as 100mm to 150mm. It is important to note that the wider strips are found to the south of the site and seem to relate to the bank at the bottom of the slope.

Ploughing downslope often resulted in the accumulation of soil at the ends of strips. These tended to form mounds, known as heads, that could develop into large banks at right angles to the ridge-and-furrow (Hall 1982). This would result in the bank noted above, rising to a height of approximately 200mm from the surrounding ground. This bank only extends across the southern third of the site and might indicate a division between ridge-and-furrow of different spacing interval (see above).

A possible boundary sub-division running between ridges was prominent up-slope from the south-east corner of the site, but does not seem to extend into the site itself. Subsequent excavation (see below) shows Post-Medieval activity in the south-east corner of the site, possibly suggesting this feature is associated with a later period than the Medieval earthworks.

The difference of spacing interval noted above, and the discontinuity of the headland bank, might suggest that some kind of boundary did exist between the different widths of ridges. This points to differences in ploughing practice and/or laying out of strips between these two areas, which did not seem to be separated by a ditch or other boundary feature.

## The Excavation

### *Test Pits*

Two test pits were excavated by machine to determine finds concentrations across the site. Test Pit 1 was positioned in the south-west corner, and Test Pit 2 was placed on the northern edge of the site. The position of the test squares was decided to guarantee better sample coverage of the site.

The test pits were square, and approximately the width of a JCB bucket (eg 1.6 x 1.6m<sup>2</sup>). These were dug down to the top of the natural boulder clay deposits (at a depth of approximately 0.8m). Half of the subsequent machine-excavated deposits (c. 1m<sup>3</sup>) were shovel-sorted for finds. Approximately 0.008m<sup>3</sup> was carefully barrow-sorted with trowels (as the heavy clay nature of the soils and the wet conditions made sieving impossible).

The frequencies of recovered finds are presented below:

| Test Pit | Pot      | Bone     | Tile     | Fired    |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|          |          |          |          | Clay     | Brick    | Glass    | Metal    | Slag     |
| <b>1</b> | <b>9</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>1</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> |

Finds from Test Pit 1 were more abundant and generally appear to be of Post-Medieval date. In contrast finds from Test Pit 2 were scarce, and diagnostic pieces include 1 pot sherd of sandy fabric and 1 piece of tile, both presumed to be Medieval.

Test Pit 1 was positioned in the vicinity of a possible furlong boundary running between ridges. Finds from this square indicate a possible Post-Medieval date for this feature, perhaps representing a later trackway respecting the lines of the Medieval earthworks. The paucity of finds from Test Pit 2 reflect densities of material in the Medieval plough soil. This is despite the discovery of a ditch (F. 2) in the base of this test pit, containing comparatively abundant pottery and bone.

### *Trial Trenches*

Four trial trenches were dug to cross-section the upstanding Medieval earthworks and to investigate the archaeological feature encountered in Test Pit 2 (extended as Trench III). Trenches were the width of a JCB bucket and were dug to the top of undisturbed boulder clay deposits. The spoil from machine excavation was briefly shovel-sorted for finds.



Trench I, aligned on an east-west axis and 13m long, was positioned to cross-section and investigate the headland downslope from the ridge-and-furrow cultivation. This revealed that this bank was made up of accumulated plough soil, and that the bank sealed a north-south running linear feature (F. 1).

Trench II, aligned on a north-south axis and 24.6m long, was positioned to cross-section a representative section of the ridge-and-furrow earthworks. This trench was placed on the eastern edge of the site adjacent to the main area of proposed development. Machine excavation revealed a thick accumulation of humic soil above natural deposits (ranging between 0.45 and 0.6m). The ridge-and-furrow was confined to this horizon, and furrows were not cut into the top of natural as is sometimes found (see Evans 1990).

Underlying the humic deposits and overlying the natural boulder clays, was a layer of sandy-clay gravels (approximate thickness 0.1m). This layer was encountered in the base of all trenches excavated, and probably represents a later glacial event than the laying down of the boulder clays. This deposit might have allowed slightly better drainage than on other areas on the boulder clay.

Trench III, on an east-west axis and 2m long, was excavated to extend Test Pit 2 eastwards and to reveal a full profile of the feature discovered here (F. 2). This demonstrated that the feature was sealed by the overlying plough soil of ridge-and-furrow cultivation.

Trench IV was positioned 10m to the south of Trench III to see if F. 2 extended southwards, and if so, to determine its orientation. A trench of 10.5m was dug, which revealed F. 3. This feature ran north-south for a short distance, then changed direction towards the west. Therefore the trench was extended southwards a further 4m from its western end, to reveal the orientation of this part of F. 3.

The frequencies of finds recovered from machine spoil sorting are represented below:

| Trench | Pot | Tile | Metal | Tobacco<br>Pipe | Flint |
|--------|-----|------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| I      | 19  | 3    | 1     | 1               | 1     |
| II     | 2   | 0    | 0     | 0               | 0     |
| IV     | 6   | 0    | 0     | 0               | 0     |

No finds were recovered from Trench III. It is suspected that the majority of pot sherds recovered from Trenches I and IV originated from the features encountered in these trenches.

## *Features*

Three major archaeological features were discovered during machine excavation (F. 1-3). These linear features (ditches) occurred in Trenches I, III and IV.

F. 1 (contexts [009] and [010] - see appendix) was discovered in Trench I. It was a linear cut with straight sides running approximately north-south. It had concave sides and bottom, and a wide, U-shaped profile, with a base at a depth of c. 0.85m from the present ground surface. This cut was filled with a brown silty clay with occasional small chalk pieces, flecks of charcoal and fragments of fired clay (tile?).

Due to the depth of machine excavation at this part of the trench, F. 1 was only visible in the section. However, many of the larger and less abraded pottery sherds of a shelly-sandy fabric, found in the machine spoil, are suspected to have come from this feature.

Feature 2 ([003] and [004]) was revealed in Test pit 2 and, subsequently, Trench III. This was a deep, straight-sided linear cut running north-south with gently sloping, concave, upper edges becoming steeper towards the bottom. The top edges of this feature appear to be cut from above the natural deposits. Despite the vagueness of the top edges here, this suggests the presence of a buried land surface covered by later plough soil. The cut was filled with a mid brown sandy silt clay with frequent small fragments of chalk and occasional large flint pebbles. This feature was partly excavated by machine, but due to waterlogging it was impossible to record below a depth of 1.2m below the present ground surface.

The machine-excavated ditch fill was shovel-sorted for finds, which consisted of 12 pot sherds and 8 bone fragments. The pottery was notable for its comparative abundance, and was represented by St Neots Ware and other similar shelly-sandy fabrics.

Feature 3 ([016], [017], [020] and [021]) was revealed in Trench IV. This consisted of a cut with a wide, shallow, U-shaped profile, appearing to run north-south and then butt-ending in the middle of the trench. This was filled with a mid brown silty clay with moderate small fragments of chalk. Extending westwards from the butt-end (and possibly cutting the fill of this part of the feature) was a narrower cut with a U-shaped profile at a depth of c. 0.75m from the present ground surface. This was filled with a slightly paler grey-brown silty clay with occasional chalk and fired-clay (tile?) fragments.

Although the two arms of Feature 3 had slightly different fills (contexts [16] and [20]), the cuts for them ([17] and [21]) appeared to be continuous. Finds from this feature included 3 bone fragments and 11 sherds of shelly-sandy pottery.

### *The Finds (with David Hall)*

The pottery from the features underneath the ridge-and-furrow appears to be a fairly uniform group of the 11th-12th centuries. There are St Neots Wares and parts of other vessels with everted, hollowed rims that are characteristic of the period.

Of some interest are shelly fabrics not of 'normal' St Neots Ware type, even though the site lies so close to the centre of the type-source. These may derive from a north-south market movement since Caxton lies at a major cross-roads of medieval traffic.

The later medieval and post-medieval wares doubtless originate from the topsoil and may be regarded as unstratified.

The pottery assemblage is particularly notable for the large size and lack of abrasion on the sherds and the comparative abundance of pottery from the features. One large piece of St Neots carinated dish (McCarthy and Brooks 1988, no. 318) was recovered.

The nature of this assemblage (eg size of pieces, abrasion and size) suggests it originated from occupation debris from a nearby settlement, rather than from being spread on the fields through manuring.

Other finds include one flint blade, presumed to be prehistoric. A number of bones (11 fragments), some of them quite large, were recovered from features. F. 3 contained a number of fragments of fired clay, probably tile. The presence of the bone and ceramic building material might also indicate occupation debris.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the archaeological assessment of the proposed development site on St Peter's Street, Caxton, can be summarised thus:

1. The possible boundary sub-division noted by the County Archaeologist and running towards the south-east corner of the site, is suspected to be a trackway of Post-Medieval date.
2. The upstanding earthworks of the site represent Medieval ridge-and-furrow cultivation, with a headland running at right-angles to these at the bottom of the slope.
3. These earthworks cover, and thus post-date, a number of ditches of archaeological importance.
4. The pottery from these ditches suggests a Late Saxon to Early Medieval date.

5. The abundance of large, unabraded pottery sherds recovered from these features suggests that this site is at the edge of a settlement.

The site investigated in this archaeological assessment shows obvious signs of Medieval agricultural activity. Therefore it was surprising to discover that the ridge-and-furrow earthworks covered evidence of Late Saxon/Early Medieval activity. However as ridge-and-furrow field systems were usually under continual modification, what tends to survive is their final form, which can mask earlier landscape features (Taylor 1981).

Besides the discovery of a single flint artefact during these excavations and residual Roman pottery from 'The Moats', the earliest settlement of Caxton is in the Late Saxon and Early Medieval period and is associated with St Peter's Street (RCHM 1968). Features 2 and 3, which are not aligned to, and are covered by the ridge-and-furrow, seem to relate to this period. The sandy gravels overlying the boulder clays on the site might have led to better drainage and made it more attractive to settlement at this time. Ditches were revealed that cut down into a buried soil horizon, possibly associated with occupation. The density and unabraded nature of the finds from the ditches suggest the proximity of settlement. Therefore it seems highly likely that Features 2 and 3 represent boundary ditches for occupation associated with St Peter's Street.

Putting Late Saxon/Early Medieval Caxton into a wider context and comparing it to other sites on the Boulder clay, some interesting comparisons can be made. The Stansted Airport Survey in Essex (Brooks and Bedwin 1989) showed prehistoric and Roman activity was followed by an almost complete hiatus in settlement during the Early and Middle Saxon period. In Northamptonshire, the Raunds Area Project (Parry 1990), indicated that Early and Middle Saxon settlement avoided the boulder clay. The Late Saxon occupation, associated with the introduction of St Neots ware in the ninth century, saw the establishment of existing villages and now-deserted Medieval hamlets close to the River Nene and its tributaries. Caxton seems to follow a similar pattern to Raunds with colonisation of the Boulder clay in the Late Saxon period accompanied by the use of St Neots ware pottery.

Movement from the original centre to Ermine Street (RCHM 1968) probably marked the abandonment of the first phase of the site and suggests a shift in emphasis away from waterside occupation to the importance of long distance roadways and trade. The village movement was followed by the laying out of open fields for cultivation in this area. Feature 1, lying under and on the same alignment as the headland, might relate to this process. It should be noted that the ridge-and-furrow to the south of the site, associated with a headland, seems to be marked out on a different spacing interval than the four ridges to the north. It is possible

that the southern group might relate to the original settlement, and that the northern group were brought into use after the abandonment of the earlier village.

Subsequent ploughing formed the existing upstanding agricultural earthworks. Ridge and furrow were not cut into the underlying natural as expected. As much ridge-and-furrow is established by Late Saxon times (Hall 1982), this often results in furrows being cut successively deeper, eventually cutting into the top of natural deposits (Evans 1990). The shallow nature of the furrows on the site suggests: i) that the plough soil accumulated over a buried soil horizon, and/or ii) that the site was not under cultivation for a long period (eg from the 13th century to enclosure in the Post-Medieval period).

There seems to be little modification to the site since Post-Medieval times, except that part of the headland could have been levelled. Also dumping of material in the south-east corner of the site could indicate the near vicinity of a trackway relating to this period.

The importance of this site is the archaeological evidence for a possible 12th or 13th century village migration, rather than relying on historical or architectural inference. The archaeological assessment has indicated that ridge-and-furrow cultivation was preceded by possible occupation in the vicinity of the site, probably associated with St Peter's Street. The ridge-and-furrow has sealed probable settlement boundary ditches cut into a buried soil horizon, possibly representing an occupation accumulation.

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