North West Cambridge: archaeology, art and mud

The university’s truly huge scale North West Cambridge development covers 150ha. The evaluation fieldwork, conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) over much of the last decade and entailing some 15km of trenching, discovered nine major sites. The land around the city is generally heavy clay, but in the north it is crossed by a higher gravel ridge. Not surprisingly, most of the ancient sites were on the gravels.

It is the gravel ridge that also booksends the area’s history of research and which, in effect, charts time’s arrow. At the south-eastern end was the Traveller’s Rest Pit Quarry, where in the early 20th century Miles Burkitt and John Marr recovered quantities of palaeolithic material. Its far north-western end lies opposite Girton College, with its renowned Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Outstanding Roman sculptural fragments were also found there in the late 19th century.

Research made possible by the development programme provided unparalleled insights into the sequence of ‘inland’ colonisation, that is beyond the region’s focus on pre-middle bronze age river-valleys (before 1500 BC; see for example feature on Must Farm, Mar/Apr 2012/123). Issues of water supply are paramount. This is not said without some irony. The gravels were created by a former Pleistocene river, resulting in a perched water table and, locally, waterlogging of deep-cut features. Over what proved to be two very wet fieldwork winters there was ample demonstration that, at times, the ancient river can still flow, and the gravels quickly became saturated. These conditions give rise to spring-lines at the gravel/clay edges, which at points were peppered with recut wells and waterholes. If you lived there, achieving regular water in winter and spring would have posed no problem. But in dry summer months means had to found to guarantee a water supply, which evidently proved a critical settlement location factor.

Teams of 10–25 staff excavated across 18ha over two years. Currently there are 800 pages of site assessment literature available to download from the unit’s website. There you can read about, for example, the excavation of a medieval drovers’ hamlet that straddles a parish boundary (Howe’s Close, Site 1x); and, down on the clays and extending beneath the city’s Madingley Road park-and-ride, a probable Roman villa (Site vii), which was test-investigated and will be preserved within the development.

The ridge’s main colonisation, however, occurred during the middle bronze age (1500–1150 BC), with a series of rectangular paddocks and associated ring-ditch monuments (at the largest, part of its cremation cemetery still survives). Notwithstanding a bronze spearhead and a stone macehead, there were generally few finds of this era. Moreover, with no deep well water-sources, usage then may well have been seasonal.

Permanent occupation arrived with four ensuing late bronze/early iron age settlements (1150–450 BC). Surprisingly, there was only one middle iron age site (450–100 BC), at the Traveller’s Rest sub-site. The next significant horizon was during the late iron age (100–AD43), comprising Site vi on the off-ridge clays, a series of linked compounds in the core of Site iv, and continuing settlement at the Traveller’s Rest. In all three instances these were directly ancestral to Roman-phase settlements.

Roman settlement traces extended along most of the length of the ridge. Leaving aside the Traveller’s Rest site (little of which was exposed), what essentially amounted to a model farm, Site 11, straddled a major north-east/south-west road line. Replete with a corn drier and ditch-marked building, it was only used in the later first and second centuries, and was probably abandoned when Site vii’s villa was established; its layout thus remained relatively pristine.

The main Roman settlement was at...
Site 1v/v, with an extraordinarily complex sequence. It appears to have expanded out from three separate early cores (each with a cemetery, as at Site 1v) to eventually become one very large and rather unwieldy configuration. In total it covered more than 5.5ha, probably comparable to that of walled Roman Cambridge itself – its complexity should not be unexpected.

It would essentially seem to have been agriculturally based. That said, there were hints within its north-central paddocks – such as large building stones and mosaic fragments – that a high status building lay nearby. It was probably towards what would have been the Cambridge to Godmanchester road-frontage, some 100m north-east of the limits of excavation.

As mentioned, the settlement’s...
central portion developed from a late iron age farmstead – the only one of the ridge’s settlements to be continuously occupied until late Roman times. Its later-phase layout consisted of a network of interlinked curvilinear enclosures across its central swathe. By then the settlement’s character seems to have changed. There was much evidence of ironworking (metal finds included military equipment, presumably for recycling, but likely to derive from the walled town’s army detail). With its clear industrial function, it had become more hamlet-like. Did this happen in a clientage relationship to Site vii’s villa? Or did the latter’s establishment – and probably with it, the displacement of, at least, Site vii’s inhabitants – lead to an influx of population into Site iv/v? This will be resolved only through detailed post-excavation analysis.

Beyond the basic site sequence, there are many interesting facets of the Roman archaeology. In Site v there is what in effect amounts to an unprecedented irrigation system with connected wells, ditches and planting beds (see Britain in archaeology May/Jun 2014/136). Site iv has made a completely unexpected contribution to Roman furniture studies. Wood preserved in its waterlogged well included not only half of a four-legged stool, but also a fine lathe-turned finial – arguably a chair fitting or the like – which, remarkably, is of imported Mediterranean oak. We hope to explore these other aspects of the project’s findings in a future article as post-exavation progresses.

**Working mud**

The excavations included a major outreach component, co-ordinated by Hayley Roberts. On some of the sub-sites this involved weekly site tours, with a special schools-visits week also arranged. The main event was a well-advertised public open day in late March 2015. With a display marquee and a team of Roman reenactors – plus metalworking and other demonstrations – the high point was meant to be a competition between two
half-size replica catapults, launching basketballs down the site’s Roman road. On the day, though, it started snowing early and kept on. As the snow built up, the catapults had to be cancelled as they could not be manoeuvred onto the mire. In the end, we could only mark the road’s line with balloons. It nevertheless proved a terrific success, and more than 600 attended.

Another component of the project’s outreach programme was a two-week local community excavation. This occurred in very wet and cold winter months, and the conditions were atrocious. Our artists in residence, Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope, participated and came away convinced that archaeologist live (and wear) mud, an experience that obviously influenced the nature of their work.

After long deliberation, they finally hit upon the idea of cob building, and duly attended courses to master its techniques. They opted to construct a 1/12.5-scale model village-of-the-future of the development’s masterplan. Intended vaguely to evoke such Edwardian model villages as Bekonscot, Buckinghamshire, this was certainly ambitious. It required stripping down another half hectare to gravels conjoining our Traveller’s Rest sub-site, with some of the scale cob monoliths standing more than 2m high.

They had volunteer teams of six to ten, each working for a week over six weeks concurrent with our final month’s excavation. There was something pleasantly surreal about it:

as we dug out the circular iron age compound ditches, in the same basic materials – mud and soil – beside us they were building up the block-like forms of the miniaturised future development. Meanwhile, the new schools’ footprint, a large donut-like ring, had an oddly henge-like quality.

The end result, named Tomorrow, Today, is one of the largest art and archaeology projects yet attempted. It is difficult to characterise. Some parts have the feeling of giant Lego or Monopoly houses, while others are reminiscent of Star Wars desert-scene sets. Having had its official launch event and viewing weeks, the work will be left to weather for a year and then buried. It has proven insightful to see just how solidly cob dries. With careful backfilling, the piece should survive (at least for a while given the immediate area’s development schedule), hopefully to generate some absurd aerial photographs: much of the real campus will by then have been built, with its miniature neighbour visible as a cropmark.

There were unexpected spin-offs. One occurred out of an evening tour to the site by the Friends of Sedgwick Museum. Among those attending was Simon Crowhurst, who works for the museum and is a talented artist in his own right. He apparently came away from the visit so inspired that he decided to paint two reconstruction murals of the site – NW Cambridge 100 BC, and NW Cambridge 100 AD – on the hoardings flanking the Division of
Archaeology’s Downing Street entrance. They effectively went up overnight, and are still there today, Banksy-like, with a really charming, almost naïve quality. They are completely different from Pope and Guthrie’s take on the site: it is appropriate that excavation can solicit a variety of responses.

Another outcome of Pope and Guthrie’s residence is that they were asked by the city’s Kettle’s Yard Gallery to mount an exhibition of their work. With a huge excavation photograph hung behind, centre stage in this was a reduced-scale version of a portion of their site model (ie a model version of a model). Its construction involved a cobbling team working late into the nights – duly mudding the gallery space on a grand scale – with humidifiers blasting away to dry it for the opening.

Concurrent with their show, in the gallery’s annexe space there has been an exhibition of Issam Kourbaj’s installation, Unearthed. Composed of reworked and variously arranged old book covers, it explores memory in the light of events in Syria, his homeland, using the metaphor of excavation. We have collaborated on other occasions with Kourbaj, first on the Cambridge Palimpsest’s map-series of layered town-history puzzles that was commissioned for the University’s 800th anniversary.

The CAU’s connections with Kettle’s Yard also go back some time. In 1991 Mark Edmonds and Christopher Evans co-curated an exhibition, Excavating the Present, which led to artist Cornelia Parker holding a brief residency on our Wardy Hill, Isle of Ely excavations. Later, in 2005, through Colin Renfrew we collaborated with Kate Whiteford on a piece at Jesus College. Via Lord Renfrew we got to know a number of leading artists over the years. For instance, in the mid 90s Andy Goldsworthy toured our King’s College Lawns site. Taken down a 3m-deep moling pit, on seeing its stratigraphy he was bowled over by its layering, as he had never appreciated deep urban sequences before.

There may or may not be any underlying message or meaning in Pope
and Guthrie’s landform. What matters is that it amounts to a different way of seeing the sites’ landscape. It was stimulating to have them there, with collaborations of this sort fulfilling the CAU’s long-held belief that major excavations have the capacity to be great events in their own right, and to provide a platform for a variety of things. These need not directly influence our own work, but they add a breadth of other interests, audiences and voices. That is only positive for all involved.

Christopher Evans is executive director, and Craig Casford is senior project officer, Cambridge Archaeological Unit. See www-cau.arch.cam.ac.uk/nwc.htm for dig reports.

Karen Guthrie reflects on a year as artist in residence on the North West Cambridge site

Many artists and curators cite a teenage archaeological experience as their creative epiphany, so Nina Pope and I were keen to find out first-hand what’s so hot about this thing called archaeology. It just might be The New Black. Or The New Rock ‘n’ Roll, what with Richard III and all that.

My previous experience consisted of dusty field-trips when at the British School of Rome in the 90s. Erudite scholars took artists to some Very Important Sites: but while brambles and indistinct rock piles reminded us of Piranesi etchings, we failed to grasp the experts’ anticipation of what lay (possibly) beneath.

Under the milk-white sky on the outskirts of Cambridge, at first glance I was reminded of building sites I have (unfortunately) known: white vans, site huts, portaloos, high-vis jackets, shovels, barrows, boots, sandwiches and lunchtime banter. And mud, my God, the mud. The sticky Cambridge clay coats everything it makes contact with, and then everything those things contact.

The archaeologists were muffled in layers of muddy clothing, genderless and ageless from afar, like Arctic explorers on the windswept, moon-like landscape. On closer inspection they had none of the physical characteristics of builders: with fine hands and quick eyes, they must be able to dig for long periods while delicately unearthing treasures. In one site hut studious young archaeologists, heads down, drew on large boards with real pencils. Impressive – I hadn’t seen that since art school 20 years ago.

We were enthralled by the process of the archaeology. I was quickly aware of how much more interested I was in objects found in the very soil I’d been toiling in, than had I encountered them cleaned up and labelled in a museum case. It matters when you intimately know their origin.

We were caught up by the enthusiasm and expertise. Somehow the archaeologists were able to transport themselves (and us) back in time, and really imagine how the area may have been hundreds of years ago. Meanwhile in spite of lots of virtual fly-throughs, models and talks, we seemed to find it very difficult to imagine what those fields might look like even five years into the future!

Our experience on the dig led directly to Tomorrow, Today. The project engages with the site’s present nature, and the fleeting, unique archaeological access to the past, as well as encouraging reflection on human transience and future communities. Our week on site was very muddy and extremely cold. But we wouldn’t have missed it for the world!

Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope studied together at the Edinburgh College of Art, and worked in public art and film making. To view Tomorrow, Today, which is expected to remain on site until summer 2015, see directions at somewhere.org.uk/projects/tomorrow_today.