2.2 The Historical Development of Cambridge

The City of Cambridge is located on the River Cam, where a ridge of higher ground (Huntingdon Road) finally meets the valley of the River Cam. It also lies at the lowest possible crossing point of the Cam before it outflows to the Fen basin.

The river terraces of the River Cam formed slightly higher and better drained areas of flat or gently sloping land high enough above the river level to be far less prone to flooding. These geographic factors had a considerable influence on the town's early growth and layout.

There is evidence of human settlement in the Cambridge area since at least the Bronze Age. These settlements mainly comprised scattered houses and farmsteads, and it was the Romans who first had an impact on the morphology of the town.

The earliest Roman activity was the construction of a small military camp on Castle Hill, overlooking the crossing point across the River Cam. This was in response to the revolts of the Iceni before 62AD, and it was abandoned 20 years later. By 120AD, a small settlement had grown up in its place, at the cross roads of the Via Devana and Mere Way/Akeman Street.

Apart from the hill top town, Roman settlement stretched beyond into the area of the historic core, especially along the Cam waterfront and Jesus Lane, and especially south of the core towards Addenbrookes. The full extent and nature of settlement on the east bank of the Cam is undefined and poorly understood but is probably more extensive than previously assumed.

During this time, the River Cam was navigable as far as Cambridge and was the northernmost point where transport from East Anglia to the Midlands was practicable. A river crossing has been in existence on, or very near to, the site of Great (Magdalene) Bridge since Roman Times. All routes, both local and long-distance, had to converge on this crossing point, giving it strategic importance. The convergence of both land and river routes at that crossing was the single most important factor in the growth of early Cambridge. The town's value as an inland port giving access to the North Sea and the Continent via the Cam, Ouse and Wash, gave it valuable commercial and strategic potential.

The Roman town and accompanying settlement appears to have been abandoned, like so many others, after the removal of Roman authority and rule c.410 AD. By the 7th century the settlement's condition was evidenced by Bede, a monk who called it a "little ruined city" where monks from Ely rowed to in order to find a suitable sarcophagus for their venerated Abbess, Aethelthryth.

Early Anglo-Saxon activity (450-650AD) is known from the city but again not from the core. Excavations have shown that settlements and cemeteries arose on the gravel terraces overlooking the Cam floodplain along West Road and the Backs, suggesting a riverside settlement focused on the main means of communication with the surrounding area – the river. Such activity may survive on the opposite bank within, the core but has not been revealed.

Saxon activity did move from the terraces back across the river by 850AD when there is evidence of burials and other remains. Excavations at the Grand Arcade however have shown that certainly this area of the core remained fields until at least the late 11th century. However it is known that the ‘Great Army’ of Viking invaders stayed over winter here in 875AD, presumably taking advantage of the river access and wide open areas along the banks.

The full extent of settlement pre-1000 is again uncertain. The hypothesis is that settlement stretched from the Castle Hill top area to the river, then across and along the river banks on the eastern side. The Vikings may well have dug a defensive ditch around their winter camp, but again topography suggests this is more likely to be on the east side, in the area of the core.

Whatever disruption was caused by the Vikings was not long-lived, and after 917 Cambridge and its surrounding area was back under Saxon control. Cambridge itself began to evolve into the roots of the mediaeval town. Possibly six or so churches were established, of which St Bene’ts is a notable survivor, and although others retain fabric of that date, such as St Peter’s, and Little St Mary. Cambridge possessed a mint, something that could only occur is a fortified centre, and also a ‘Guild of Thegns’, or a fraternity of local lords.

Whilst activity in this period (950-1100) is still centred along Castle Hill, increasingly the eastern area, or the current historic core, is gaining importance, with a line of churches stretching from the river crossing then along Bridge Street, Trinity Street, Kings Parade and to the northern end of Trumpington Street. With the continued importance of waterborne trade to the county and East Anglia, Cambridge was an importance centre of commerce that was starting to evolve into the mediaeval town visible today. The earliest castle dates from 1066/7, one of three ‘Royal’ castles built in the county; some 30 houses were demolished to make way for it.

By the end of eleventh century, the core of the town was visible in its current shape with a bridge at the loop in the river linking the old Roman-founded centre with the emerging main town. A key feature of the mediaeval town was the boundary feature known as the King's Ditch. This was created to mark the emerging urban boundary and assist with the protection of the town by creating a significant feature to complement the barrier provided by the river.

The Kings Ditch is so named because it has been associated with either Kings John or Henry III, both of whom are recorded as having paid for defences at Cambridge during their reigns. However recent excavations at Grand Arcade, where the ditch was identified have provided dating evidence to the late 11th or early 12th century, but event his could have been a reworked Saxon burgh earthwork from the 10th century – as the home of a mint, Cambridge must have possessed burghal status. The route of the King's Ditch can still be traced, albeit hypothetically in some cases, along the line of Mill Lane, Pembroke Street and St Tibbs Row, then along Sidney Street and down to the river opposite Magdalen College.

During the medieval period Cambridge continued to develop as a leading inland port in the region. Many churches and other religious houses were founded, and Edward I rebuilt the castle using the latest in military design.

The Round Church is probably the most famous survival from this time, but other religious houses formed the bases of later colleges: Jesus College was founded on the Nunnery of St Radegund and St John's founded on the hospital of the same name.

The excavation at the Grand Arcade also identified that immediately inside the Kings Ditch there had been little activity prior to the digging of the ditch itself. However, the late 11th century not only saw the construction of the ditch but also the ‘formalisation’ of the landscape with ditches and gullies being dug to create property subdivisions. Given the probable existence of a north-south axis following the churches along Bridge Street and Kings Parade, this likely represents the point at which ‘planning’ can be seen in the development of the mediaeval town core, creating today's street-pattern, with the main north-south routes converging near the Round Church. The first town charter was granted by Henry I to Cambridge between 1120 and 1131.

By the thirteenth century, Cambridge was developing rapidly. The town was tightly encircled by the river, waterlogged areas and open fields, yet was not overcrowded. The Grand Arcade excavations showed that the landscape just inside the Kings Ditch had elements of urban and rural settlement, suggesting a more open landscape than may be thought. Also, the religious houses inside the area defined by the ditch were able to acquire open land to enclose, provided they kept access to the ditch. This does not suggest huge pressure of land, at least in the earlier period.

The Market Place and St Mary's Church formed the core commercial hub, and a guildhall, gaol and 'rows' named after the crafts carried out there sprang up adjacent to the market. The number of religious orders continued to increase. Royal Charters of 1201 and 1207 established the town as a corporation whilst the first migration of scholars from Oxford marked the origins of Cambridge University which was founded in 1209, with the oldest college, Peterhouse being founded in 1284.

As a result of the harsh effects of the Black Death on Cambridge during the fourteenth century, the traders' economy became unbalanced and the University and Colleges seized the opportunity to step in and acquire property. Subsequently, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the growth of the University, often over the hythes and lanes of the townspeople which had spread upstream of Great (Magdalene) Bridge to the Mill Pool on the river's east bank. The river's course was originally further west than its present position. It has been suggested that it was canalised in the fourteenth/fifteenth centuries in order to aid the river trade (and enable the construction of the hythes and wharves) and possibly to maintain a powerful water supply to the mills.

The construction of the Royal Colleges (Trinity, King's & St John's) in particular, gradually erased most of this commercial area and this fuelled the 'town and gown' disputes which were to rage for many centuries. The street layout of the town was significantly altered with the construction of Henry VI's King's Chapel over Milne Street an important north-south route initially a significant focus of domestic settlement but now largely obliterated (only surviving in part as Trinity Lane).

The early colleges, which were outside medieval Cambridge, were surpassed in architectural quality by the burgeoning religious foundations. This was to end abruptly with the Reformation and the colleges often took over the religious buildings throughout the sixteenth century. The wealthy town attracted rural migrants and increased pressure on land can be seen as, with the exception of some development along St Andrew's Street and Trumpington Street, the town boundaries were much as they had been in medieval times.

Concern at the state of the town, which had buildings split into tenements or built close to or even within graveyards, and outbreaks of plague saw controls over the type of development allowed. Thatched buildings were outlawed in 1619 because of the potential fire risk, the market was paved and the Hobson's fountainhead erected to bring water into the market place. The last thatched property in Cambridge was demolished for the construction of the Park Street car park. Also in the seventeenth century, Trinity College exchanged Parker's Piece for some land to the rear of the College and this together with land acquired by St John's was the origin of 'The Backs'.

By the 17th century the Kings Ditch appears to have been allowed to fall into disrepair and was finally backfilled piecemeal, sometimes deliberately, ranging from 1574 on Mill Lane to 1795 along Corn Exchange Street, and sometimes as a consequence of rubbish deposition. However throughout the post-mediaeval period the core of Cambridge expands and infills, becoming more densely built over and probably crowded.

The Town had been the headquarters of the Eastern Association of Parliament during the Civil War, with the Castle site being modified into an artillery fortress, earthen redoubts replacing the stone walls. A line of defences for the town was constructed that roughly follows Victoria Avenue, Emmanuel Road, Parkside to Parkers Piece, then diagonally across the Piece to Lensfield Road and down to the river. This is an area far larger than that enclosed by the Kings Ditch and may indicate the size and importance of the town in the mid-17th century.

Cambridge's anti-Royalist stance meant that the municipality began to lose power after the monarchy was restored. Although some grand timber-framed and brick houses continued to be built, there was a marked contrast between the college's towering gatehouses and the dingy courts with mean houses behind.

The eighteenth century saw a greater spirit of cooperation between the townsfolk and the University. Although Hawksmoor's plans for the area around King's College were never realised, the improvements around the Old Schools and Senate House saw the demolition of hovels, and King's Parade and Trumpington Street were widened as King's and St Catharine's Colleges bought up property. A botanic garden was laid to the south of the market and major public buildings such as Addenbrooke's Hospital, a sessions house, town hall, great bridge and workhouses were erected. All this was largely within the confines of the medieval town, which continued to be surrounded by commons, open fields and marshes. Most of this land was in the ownership of religious institutions and the university/colleges or cultivated as part of the open field system and this meant that building was constrained.

This was to change, however, in the nineteenth century when the huge eastern and western fields were enclosed and subsequently built upon. When developed, the character of the two 'fields' would be completely different. The east was built with high density terraced housing as the town's population grew, whilst the west comprised large houses and college sports grounds. Because of the density of the core (as well as 'social' reasons), the new women's and theological colleges had to be built on the edge of town. The university's expansion caused the relocation of the Botanic Garden further south to allow for the development of a new science campus.

Due to the power of the University, when the railway came in 1845, the station was a mile from the city centre so as not to tempt students to the fleshpots of London. The coming of the railway also finally signalled the end of the River Cam as the economic artery of the town, although the railway's location means that few industrial uses from this period are evident in the core area as they tended to be located near the railway (e.g. Foster's Mill).

Cambridge was granted its city charter in 1951 in recognition of its history, administrative and economic importance. Although many twentieth century developments were in the suburbs, there were some major impacts on the centre. These often involved the expansion of the colleges; perhaps the most significant and earliest being in the Bridge Street area to allow Magdalene and St John's Colleges to grow. The lack of space in the centre meant many colleges sought ingenious ways of housing students. Sidney Sussex developed Sussex Street with ground floor shops and students above in the 1930s and more recently Trinity College has concealed the blocks of Blue Boar Court behind and above retained historic buildings. The city gained its second University in 1992 when Anglia Polytechnic became Anglia Polytechnic University renamed Anglia Ruskin University in 2005. Commercial development included the Grafton Centre in the edge of town Kite area, and the redevelopment of the area around Petty Cury as Lion Yard and later the Grand Arcade. These developments had a major impact on street patterns.

The motorcar, as in other towns, made its mark on the character of the core in the twentieth century. Obsolete building lines are evidence of never-materialised road plans of the 1960s whilst Queen Anne Terrace and Park Street car parks were more tangible evidence of the impact of the car. Latterly, the trend has been to discourage cars from entering the historic core.

Statement of Archaeological Potential

Although the historic core of Cambridge contains much rebuilding and expansion up to recent years, excavations have shown that because of the build-up of ground associated with urban development, the extent of archaeological survival can be surprising, even in places that experienced basements or cellars in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Of particular relevance to this are the excavations at the Grand Arcade, which provided the largest piece of fieldwork into the mediaeval and later town, beneath construction dating from the 18th to the 20th centuries. Excavations following the demolition of the early 20th century Old Exams Halls on the New Museums site exposed remains of the Augustinian Friary.

Additionally, Roman remains have been found beneath the lower ground floors of properties along Jesus Lane. In many cases, the proximity of the water table and river has resulted in exceptional states of preservation.

It must be assumed that ANY location with the historic core and area immediately around the core is of high archaeological potential and therefore the possibility of causing harm to the historic environment is significant. Any development proposal must therefore have the input of archaeological advice at the earliest stage, including consulting the Historic Environment Record and entering into discussions with the Council's archaeological advisers.

Cambridge is one of the most historic urban centres in England, and failure to make such provision for the historic environment could not only result in significant harm to the historic environment, bit also compromise and/or delay development proposals.

(note: Change script. Number paras. Insert maps from consultation version. Insert new title "Statement of Archaeological Potential" (see end here) into Contents page.)