

A Landscape of Plenty
Excavations on a Roman Estate, Cambridgeshire



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Summary

A large open area archaeological excavation of 3.56ha was undertaken in 2023 prior to the construction of the new Cambridgeshire Southern Police Station on a site directly west of the village of Milton, 4.2km north-east of the historic core of Cambridge. The fieldwork was undertaken by Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) on behalf of Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

The earliest human activity on the site was represented by seven prehistoric worked flints, probably datable to the Middle Neolithic period or later, but all residual in features of Roman or later date. Middle to late Iron Age occupation was evidenced by a ditch, a circular gully, perhaps a drip gully for a roundhouse, a pit and a well containing waterlogged wood at its base (Period 1). The circular gully contained evidence for small-scale localised crop processing. These features probably represented a peripheral part of a larger Iron Age settlement.

A scatter of pottery and a few other finds of early to middle Roman date, including a couple of coins, a copper-alloy bow brooch of Colchester Derivative type and several glass vessel fragments, were found residual in late Roman features and presumably derived from a contemporary settlement in the vicinity of, but beyond, the excavated area.

The Roman period features could be sub-divided into three distinct phases or periods, each with three sub-phases, based on a combination of stratigraphy, spatial analysis, artefactual dating and scientific dating. The main features revealed in the investigations on the Police Station site were ditches that formed part of an extensive and complex series of intercutting Roman enclosures with associated boundary ditches, trackways, small timber structures, pits and other features, such as waterholes or wells, a pond and an oven (Periods 2–4). Pottery, coins, other finds and radiocarbon dates indicated that these features dated to late in the Roman period, probably beginning in the mid 3rd century AD (Period 2), with activity on the site apparently peaking in the mid to late 4th century AD and possibly extending into the 5th century AD (Periods 3 and 4).

The compartmentalised layout of these enclosures indicated that corralling of livestock was a significant activity at the site. This was supported by a substantial and well-preserved assemblage of over 5000 animal bones from Roman contexts. These bones primarily represented cattle (65.7% of main domesticates by number of identified specimens), with a smaller proportion of sheep (22.4%), some horses and possible donkeys/horse-donkey hybrids (9.4%), with a very small amount of pig (2.5%). The relative proportions of the animals remained fairly similar throughout Periods 2–4. There was evidence for local breeding of cattle, sheep and possibly horses/equids in Periods 3 and 4. Examination of the bones indicated that cattle were primarily raised to provide traction, i.e. for ploughing and transport, and presumably manure, to support arable farming. The cattle and sheep would also have provided meat and milk/cheese, but probably for fairly local consumption rather than for export. Cheese production at the site was indicated by fragments of four cheese presses or strainers.

Analysis of environmental samples from Roman contexts showed a high quantity of cereal grains as well as glume fragments from late-stage crop processing activities. This indicated that cereals, predominantly spelt wheat and to a lesser extent emmer wheat, were being produced for export to a wider area, rather than just for consumption by the local community. Further evidence of crop processing at the site, the grinding of grain into flour, was provided by many worn fragments of probable rotary querns.

The features recorded on the site clearly represented a late Roman intensive agricultural working area, which may well have formed part of a Roman villa estate. There is evidence from the site and its vicinity that a villa likely lay nearby, most probably in the unexcavated area immediately to the south. Many fragments of Roman ceramic building material, comprising tegulae, imbrices, brick and flue tiles, were found scattered in ditch fills across the site. Several fragments of building stone were also recovered from Roman contexts, including two stone roof tiles (one with a nail hole),

a possible flagstone and a large piece (weighing c.27kg) of roughly-shaped masonry in a light cream-buff fossiliferous limestone, which would have been imported to the site from further afield. A previous excavation c.200m to the south at Milton Landfill in 1994, also revealed roof tiles, box tiles and worked stone — thought to represent destruction material from a villa — in the fills of Roman ditches in the northern part of that site (Reynolds 1994).

The Milton Police Station site may have formed part of one of many late Roman villa estates known from the area around Cambridge and to the south of the Fens. It was evidently involved in the production of crops on a considerable scale for export and was well connected to potential distribution and consumption centres by waterways, such as the River Cam, which lay just 1.75km to the east, and an artificial Roman canal (the Old Tillage/Car Dyke), which ran north-north-west from the River Cam near Waterbeach (c.3km east-north-east of the site) to a former tributary of the River Great Ouse. The Roman road (Akeman Street, also known as Mere Way; Margary 1973, Road 23b) which ran north-east from Cambridge into the Fens passed just c.500m to the west of the site. The nearby Roman nucleated settlement/small town of Cambridge may well have served as a distribution centre for agricultural products from the surrounding area via state supply and marketing networks.

The large Roman pottery assemblage (nearly 7000 sherds, weighing about 140kg) recovered from the Police Station site suggested basic, utilitarian occupation and activity with a domestic element. A few vessels, however, provided possible evidence for higher-status habitation in the vicinity. These were a rare and unusual costrel-like vessel and fragments of four flagons decorated with human faces.

A fairly large assemblage of 68 Roman copper-alloy coins was recovered from the Police Station site, a quantity perhaps more in keeping with a villa site rather than a farmstead. Coin use at the site seems only to have become widespread at a relatively late date, sometime between AD 330 and 350, instead of the late 3rd century AD as is typical on other nearby rural sites. In apparent contrast to most other local farmstead sites, coin use continued on a considerable scale into the late 4th century AD and down to the end of the Roman period, a trend also evident at some other villa sites in the region.

Other Roman copper-alloy objects included a well-preserved plate brooch of octofoil form with a pronounced central boss and red and blue enamel decoration, several late Roman bracelet fragments and

a dining spoon, which may originally have been silver plated. Whilst by no means exceptional, these objects possibly indicate 'higher-status' occupation in the vicinity of the site and some may have been worn or used by the inhabitants of a postulated adjacent Roman villa.

Roman ironwork comprised dozens of nails and hobnails, as well as a few structural pieces, tools and knives, consistent with what might be expected from a working agricultural rural site. Several bone and antler objects were also recovered, mostly of a fairly utilitarian nature, such as handles and very rarely identified bone cases for iron sewing needles, but also including a simple, undecorated, double-sided composite antler comb of a well-established local type, datable to c.AD 350–425, as well as an antler pestle and a possible wall hook in antler. There was also evidence for small-scale bone and antler working, which appeared to reflect the manufacture of pins and handles respectively. A small assemblage of glass vessels included fragments of two 4th- to 5th-century AD beakers. A poignant discovery was a burial of three infants of the same age, very likely triplets, in a pit cut into the inner side of an enclosure ditch, probably in the late 4th century AD.

The late Roman agricultural working area/probable villa estate at the Police Station site appears to have gone out of use around the end of the Roman period, c.AD 400 or shortly after. The enclosure and boundary ditches were all filled up at about this date, or in the following decades, either through gradual silting up following the abandonment of the site, or by deliberate infilling that perhaps marked a shift to larger open fields. This probably related to the wider political, military and economic circumstances at this time. Britain left the Empire in AD 409 and after this date state payments to Britain were no longer made and army pay ceased. In the wake of this a dramatic economic collapse followed and the villa estate system, of which the Police Station site at Milton was probably a part, likely broke down. This opens up important questions about how the landscape was used during the post-Roman period and into the Anglo-Saxon period. Did woodland regenerate or were fields still tilled or given over to grazing. The infilling of the ditches suggests that land divisions, and potentially ownership or tenure, were deliberately changed as new systems of control, governance, coercion and military and political dominance took hold.

No features or finds of Anglo-Saxon date were recorded in the excavation, but a large number of parallel ditches and/or furrows on a very similar alignment to the Roman features related to the use of this area as an agricultural field in the medieval/post-medieval periods (Period 5).

A Landscape of Plenty Excavations on a Roman Estate, Cambridgeshire

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Summary

A large open area archaeological excavation of 3.56ha was undertaken in 2023 prior to the construction of the new Cambridgeshire Southern Police Station on a site directly west of the village of Milton, 4.2km north-east of the historic core of Cambridge. The fieldwork was undertaken by Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) on behalf of Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

The earliest human activity on the site was represented by seven prehistoric worked flints, probably datable to the Middle Neolithic period or later, but all residual in features of Roman or later date. Middle to late Iron Age occupation was evidenced by a ditch, a circular gully, perhaps a drip gully for a roundhouse, a pit and a well containing waterlogged wood at its base (Period 1). The circular gully contained evidence for small-scale localised crop processing. These features probably represented a peripheral part of a larger Iron Age settlement.

A scatter of pottery and a few other finds of early to middle Roman date, including a couple of coins, a copper-alloy bow brooch of Colchester Derivative type and several glass vessel fragments, were found residual in late Roman features and presumably derived from a contemporary settlement in the vicinity of, but beyond, the excavated area.

The Roman period features could be sub-divided into three distinct phases or periods, each with three sub-phases, based on a combination of stratigraphy, spatial analysis, artefactual dating and scientific dating. The main features revealed in the investigations on the Police Station site were ditches that formed part of an extensive and complex series of intercutting Roman enclosures with associated boundary ditches, trackways, small timber structures, pits and other features, such as waterholes or wells, a pond and an oven (Periods 2–4). Pottery, coins, other finds and radiocarbon dates indicated that these features dated to late in the Roman period, probably beginning in the mid 3rd century AD (Period 2), with activity on the site apparently peaking in the mid to late 4th century AD and possibly extending into the 5th century AD (Periods 3 and 4).

The compartmentalised layout of these enclosures indicated that corralling of livestock was a significant activity at the site. This was supported by a substantial and well-preserved assemblage of over 5000 animal bones from Roman contexts. These bones primarily represented cattle (65.7% of main domesticates by number of identified specimens), with a smaller proportion of sheep (22.4%), some horses and possible donkeys/horse-donkey hybrids (9.4%), with a very small amount of pig (2.5%). The relative proportions of the animals remained fairly similar throughout Periods 2–4. There was evidence for local breeding of cattle, sheep and possibly horses/equids in Periods 3 and 4. Examination of the bones indicated that cattle were primarily raised to provide traction, i.e. for ploughing and transport, and presumably manure, to support arable farming. The cattle and sheep would also have provided meat and milk/cheese, but probably for fairly local consumption rather than for export. Cheese production at the site was indicated by fragments of four cheese presses or strainers.

Analysis of environmental samples from Roman contexts showed a high quantity of cereal grains as well as glume fragments from late-stage crop processing activities. This indicated that cereals, predominantly spelt wheat and to a lesser extent emmer wheat, were being produced for export to a wider area, rather than just for consumption by the local community. Further evidence of crop processing at the site, the grinding of grain into flour, was provided by many worn fragments of probable rotary querns.

The features recorded on the site clearly represented a late Roman intensive agricultural working area, which may well have formed part of a Roman villa estate. There is evidence from the site and its vicinity that a villa likely lay nearby, most probably in the unexcavated area immediately to the south. Many fragments of Roman ceramic building material, comprising tegulae, imbrices, brick and flue tiles, were found scattered in ditch fills across the site. Several fragments of building stone were also recovered from Roman contexts, including two stone roof tiles (one with a nail hole),

a possible flagstone and a large piece (weighing c.27kg) of roughly-shaped masonry in a light cream-buff fossiliferous limestone, which would have been imported to the site from further afield. A previous excavation c.200m to the south at Milton Landfill in 1994, also revealed roof tiles, box tiles and worked stone — thought to represent destruction material from a villa — in the fills of Roman ditches in the northern part of that site (Reynolds 1994).

The Milton Police Station site may have formed part of one of many late Roman villa estates known from the area around Cambridge and to the south of the Fens. It was evidently involved in the production of crops on a considerable scale for export and was well connected to potential distribution and consumption centres by waterways, such as the River Cam, which lay just 1.75km to the east, and an artificial Roman canal (the Old Tillage/Car Dyke), which ran north-north-west from the River Cam near Waterbeach (c.3km east-north-east of the site) to a former tributary of the River Great Ouse. The Roman road (Akeman Street, also known as Mere Way; Margary 1973, Road 23b) which ran north-east from Cambridge into the Fens passed just c.500m to the west of the site. The nearby Roman nucleated settlement/small town of Cambridge may well have served as a distribution centre for agricultural products from the surrounding area via state supply and marketing networks.

The large Roman pottery assemblage (nearly 7000 sherds, weighing about 140kg) recovered from the Police Station site suggested basic, utilitarian occupation and activity with a domestic element. A few vessels, however, provided possible evidence for higher-status habitation in the vicinity. These were a rare and unusual costrel-like vessel and fragments of four flagons decorated with human faces.

A fairly large assemblage of 68 Roman copper-alloy coins was recovered from the Police Station site, a quantity perhaps more in keeping with a villa site rather than a farmstead. Coin use at the site seems only to have become widespread at a relatively late date, sometime between AD 330 and 350, instead of the late 3rd century AD as is typical on other nearby rural sites. In apparent contrast to most other local farmstead sites, coin use continued on a considerable scale into the late 4th century AD and down to the end of the Roman period, a trend also evident at some other villa sites in the region.

Other Roman copper-alloy objects included a well-preserved plate brooch of octofoil form with a pronounced central boss and red and blue enamel decoration, several late Roman bracelet fragments and

a dining spoon, which may originally have been silver plated. Whilst by no means exceptional, these objects possibly indicate 'higher-status' occupation in the vicinity of the site and some may have been worn or used by the inhabitants of a postulated adjacent Roman villa.

Roman ironwork comprised dozens of nails and hobnails, as well as a few structural pieces, tools and knives, consistent with what might be expected from a working agricultural rural site. Several bone and antler objects were also recovered, mostly of a fairly utilitarian nature, such as handles and very rarely identified bone cases for iron sewing needles, but also including a simple, undecorated, double-sided composite antler comb of a well-established local type, datable to c.AD 350–425, as well as an antler pestle and a possible wall hook in antler. There was also evidence for small-scale bone and antler working, which appeared to reflect the manufacture of pins and handles respectively. A small assemblage of glass vessels included fragments of two 4th- to 5th-century AD beakers. A poignant discovery was a burial of three infants of the same age, very likely triplets, in a pit cut into the inner side of an enclosure ditch, probably in the late 4th century AD.

The late Roman agricultural working area/probable villa estate at the Police Station site appears to have gone out of use around the end of the Roman period, c.AD 400 or shortly after. The enclosure and boundary ditches were all filled up at about this date, or in the following decades, either through gradual silting up following the abandonment of the site, or by deliberate infilling that perhaps marked a shift to larger open fields. This probably related to the wider political, military and economic circumstances at this time. Britain left the Empire in AD 409 and after this date state payments to Britain were no longer made and army pay ceased. In the wake of this a dramatic economic collapse followed and the villa estate system, of which the Police Station site at Milton was probably a part, likely broke down. This opens up important questions about how the landscape was used during the post-Roman period and into the Anglo-Saxon period. Did woodland regenerate or were fields still tilled or given over to grazing. The infilling of the ditches suggests that land divisions, and potentially ownership or tenure, were deliberately changed as new systems of control, governance, coercion and military and political dominance took hold.

No features or finds of Anglo-Saxon date were recorded in the excavation, but a large number of parallel ditches and/or furrows on a very similar alignment to the Roman features related to the use of this area as an agricultural field in the medieval/post-medieval periods (Period 5).