

Connecting the new South Cambridgeshire Police Station with the community through archaeology

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In 2021 Cambridgeshire Constabulary was granted planning permission for a new headquarters to serve southern Cambridgeshire. The new premises, to be located next to the Park and Ride facility in Milton on the northern outskirts of Cambridge, will replace the outdated facilities at the existing police station in central Cambridge. One of the planning conditions was to undertake an archaeological excavation prior to starting construction works. Work on site, though, was delayed for various reasons, including the impact of the Covid pandemic and increases in project costs when compared with initial budget estimates. During this time the site for the new police station lay vacant.

In spring–summer 2023 Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) excavated what transpired to be part of a Roman farmstead. As limited public information was available concerning progress to create the new police station, consultation had taken place with Cambridgeshire Constabulary about how ARS Ltd could help raise public awareness of their plans and timetable for the new facility. Activities were therefore planned from the outset to engage residents in the region with the site and the new police station development. A weekly ‘dig diary’ highlighting discoveries was produced and disseminated as web and social media posts by both ARS Ltd and Cambridgeshire Constabulary. This helped engage the local and regional press with the site, with news that ‘archaeological dig begins at Milton site earmarked for new police station’ appearing in the *Cambridge Independent*, *Cambridgeshire Live* and *Cambridgeshire Times*, as well as being broadcast on BBC East.

Towards the end of the excavations a small exhibition featuring a selection of artefacts was staged at the nearby Denny Abbey and Farmland Museum, and two open days were organised for local residents and the wider community to visit the site. The open days comprised information panels about the site, stalls with displays of objects and finds experts on hand to discuss them, a Roman history expert dressed as a Roman soldier, and crafts activities (for example, making and decorating pottery), as well as a site tour and various on-site archaeological activities such as fieldwalking. The archaeologists excavating the site and representatives of Cambridgeshire Constabulary talked with visitors and guided them round the site. From the feedback received from visitors, it is clear that being able to see the site and hear archaeologists explain what had been found provided an enjoyable and informative experience for those who attended.

The open days attracted further press coverage in *Cambridgeshire Live* and the *Ely Standard*, as well as providing further social media opportunities for Cambridgeshire Constabulary’s communications team to inform the local community about the future home of their upcoming police station and the Roman remains unearthed at the site.

Discussions with teachers at schools in the vicinity of the site took place during the excavations. Planned site visits towards the end of the summer term did not take place because of industrial action taken by teaching assistants. Instead, a visit to one of the primary schools in north Cambridge was planned for the autumn term when one of the year groups was studying the Romans as part of the history curriculum. This involved giving presentations and leading finds-handling sessions for a day at the school. The feedback from the school visit indicated that the schoolchildren had not only learnt about the archaeological discoveries and the development of the site, but also talked afterwards about the site with their parents and carers. A talk on the Roman farmstead was given to the South Cambridgeshire Archaeology Group. Discussions have also taken place with Cambridgeshire Constabulary about setting up permanent exhibitions at both the new police station and at appropriate publicly accessible venues nearby, for example The Farmland Museum.

Evaluation of the public engagement activities that took place showed that people are very much interested in and enjoyed finding out about how people lived in the past through archaeology: it enhances their association with the area they live in. The archaeological works generated social value for the Constabulary by enabling them to connect positively with their local community and to share details of when the new police station will open, as well as to play an active part in recording and respecting the history of the area. From ARS Ltd’s perspective, with the exception of the school visits that could not take place, we delivered all the activities we planned to undertake during the five-month excavation and achieved the public engagement impact that we anticipated for Cambridgeshire Constabulary. For future excavations of a similar or longer duration, we would also liaise with the client at the end of the excavation to explore the opportunity to continue delivering a programme of regular news updates, as well as talks to community groups, while post-excavation analysis and report writing takes place.



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The Roman history display at the Milton open day.
Credit: Archaeological Research Services Ltd



The entrance (top left) to the open day at Milton and orange netlon fencing to guide visitors. Credit: Archaeological Research Services Ltd

The displays and activities at the entrance to the open day at Milton.
Credit: Archaeological Research Services Ltd



The finds display at the Milton open day. Credit: Archaeological Research Services Ltd

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Robin is Research Associate at Archaeological Research Services Ltd. He worked as a field officer with the University College London Institute of Archaeology (now Archaeology South East) in the mid-1980s. He then joined Luton Museum Service, initially as Keeper of Archaeology and subsequently as Museum Director, and also established Luton Borough Council's Archaeological Development Control Service and HER in 1996 when the Council became a unitary authority. Before joining ARS Ltd in 2012 he was Assistant Director at the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry. He served as chair of ClfA's Registered Organisation Committee 2013–2020.

