Digging into the past at college

An archaeological dig at one of Cambridge's colleges has unearthed signs of a Roman settlement.

An excavation in Newnham College's gardens has also discovered evidence of a 16th or 17th century farmhouse that could date back to the reign of Henry VIII.

The findings were made during a dig supervised by Cambridge University archaeologists Catherine Hills and Carenza Lewis.

A group of 20 sixth-formers from the region came to the college to help with the excavation.

Dr Hills said: "We knew there was a Roman settlement, but we had no idea of the size.

"The village has been buried for nearly 2,000 years and may have seen the Roman conquest. The 16th-century farmhouse was a complete surprise."

The site became of interest in the 1930s when skeletons, said to be Anglo-Saxon, were found while air raid shelters were being dug in readiness for the Second World War.

FINDS: Excavation work at Newnham College

Headed by renowned archaeologist Dorothy Garrod - the university's first female professor - a team of women from the college excavated the graves using spoons and toothbrushes.

After the war, the shelters were covered with soil and the exact location of the graves was lost. But when Dr Hills heard about the story, she was keen to find out more about the mysterious skeletons.

Dr Hills, Dr Lewis, and college staff saw a chance to involve students in the hunt for the skeletons. But the dig unearthed unexpected finds.

Large amounts of Roman pottery convinced Dr Hills and Dr Lewis they had dug through to the remains of a 2,000-year-old settlement.

Dr Lewis, who has appeared regularly on Channel 4's Time Team, said: "East Anglia is rich in Roman and medieval remains.

"We are starting to realise the huge extent of Roman settlement around this area."

Meanwhile, the mystery of the skeletons remains.