

Bronze Age barrow and pit alignments at Upton Park,
south of Weedon Road, Northampton



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Contents

List of Figures	ii
List of Tables.....	iv
Contributors	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Project background	1
Location and topography	2
Geological background	2
<i>by Steve Critchley</i>	
Historical and archaeological background	5
Archaeological investigations within and close to the site.....	6
Objectives and methodology.....	7
Site phasing	8
Chapter 2 The archaeological evidence	10
Period 1: Palaeochannels	10
Period 2: Neolithic (c4000BC – 2500BC)	10
Period 3: Early to early middle Bronze Age (c2500BC – 1500BC).....	11
Period 4: Late Bronze Age to early middle Iron Age (c1100BC – 400BC).....	19
Period 5: Roman (AD43 – AD400).....	59
Period 6: Medieval to post-medieval	63
Period 7: Modern.....	65
Chapter 3 Finds	66
Worked Flint	66
<i>by Yvonne Wolfram-Murray</i>	
Bronze Age pottery.....	67
<i>by Andy Chapman</i>	
Iron Age and Roman pottery	68
<i>by Adam Sutton</i>	
Post-Roman pottery	71
<i>by Jennifer R McNulty</i>	
Small finds	71
<i>by Tora Hylton</i>	
Radiocarbon dating	72
Chapter 4 Human, faunal and environmental evidence.....	74
Cremated human remains	74
<i>by Chris Chinnock</i>	
Animal bone.....	74
<i>by Adam Reid</i>	
Environmental analysis	74
<i>by Sander Aerts</i>	
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	77
Period 2: Neolithic (c4000BC – 2500BC).....	77
Period 3: Early to early/middle Bronze Age (c2500BC – 1100BC)	77
Period 4: Late Bronze Age to early Iron Age pit alignments (c1100 – 400BC)	86
Recommendations for excavation of pit alignments.....	100
Period 5: Roman (AD43 – AD410).....	100
Bibliography	102

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Site location and excavation areas (scale 1:10000)	1
Figure 1.2. Patterned ground features in the Whitby Mudstones, Field 2, Area 4	2
Figure 1.3. Cryoturbation features Field 2, Area 5	3
Figure 1.4. Palaeochannel exposure at the mid-point of the photo in Field 2, Area 1	4
Figure 1.5. Ice wedge fossil infill noted in exposures in Field 2, Area 4	4
Figure 1.6. General view over the Glaciolacustrine sediments exposed in Field 4, Area 11	5
Figure 1.7. Upton and major archaeological sites (scale 1:30000)	6
Figure 1.8. All features plan (scale 1:6000)	9
Figure 2.1. Aerial view of barrow, Palaeochannel 2 (centre) with pit alignments (background), looking north	10
Figure 2.2. Aerial view of barrow with the River Nene in the background, looking south	11
Figure 2.3. Vertical view of barrow	12
Figure 2.4. Phased plan of barrow showing excavated slots, sample and artefact/ecofact. locations	13
Figure 2.5. Barrow ditch [4059] and recut [4055], looking north-west	14
Figure 2.6. Barrow ditch [4067] and recut [4065], looking north-west	14
Figure 2.7. Section 319: barrow ditch [4137] and recut [4134]	14
Figure 2.8. Barrow ditch [4124], looking north	15
Figure 2.9. Section 318: barrow ditch [4124] and recut [4118]	15
Figure 2.10. Barrow ditch [4014] and recut [4012], looking west	17
Figure 2.11. Barrow ditch [4042] and recut [4039], looking north-east	17
Figure 2.12. Pit [6707], looking west	19
Figure 2.13. Aerial view of the pit alignments, looking west	20
Figure 2.14. Excavated pit alignments	21
Figure 2.15. Northern pit alignment during excavation, looking east	22
Figure 2.16. Pit alignment areas	23
Figure 2.17. Northern pit alignment, looking west	25
Figure 2.18. Northern pit alignment area A and southern pit alignment area Q showing artefact distribution	26
Figure 2.19. Pit [1041], looking east	27
Figure 2.20. Pit [1060] fully excavated, looking south	27
Figure 2.21. Northern pit alignment Areas B-E showing artefact and ecofact distribution	28
Figure 2.22. Taken from Pit [1129] with Ditch [1131] and Pit [1109], looking east	28
Figure 2.23. Pit [1162], looking south-west	29
Figure 2.24. Aerial view of the area with possible closure pits and alignment divergence	29
Figure 2.25. Pit [1254], looking west	30
Figure 2.26. Pit [1189], looking east	31
Figure 2.27. Pit [1287], looking south (before being fully excavated)	31
Figure 2.28. Pit [1287] section	31
Figure 2.29. Northern pit alignment area F showing where samples were taken and artefact and ecofact distributions	32
Figure 2.30. Pit [1432] and ditch [1400], looking east	33
Figure 2.31. Section 247	33
Figure 2.32. Pit [1463] and ditches [1465] and [1467], looking east	34
Figure 2.33. Section 230	34
Figure 2.34. Pit [1876] and ditch [1872], looking west	35
Figure 2.35. Pit alignment G-K showing artefact and ecofact distributions	36
Figure 2.36. Pit [2027], looking south	37
Figure 2.37. Pit [1960], looking south-east (before being fully excavated)	37
Figure 2.38. Pit [1974] cut by ditch [1971], with ditch [1969] terminating in the foreground, looking west	38
Figure 2.39. Section 443	38
Figure 2.40. Pit [2084], looking north-west (balk with ranging rod later excavated)	39

Figure 2.41. Northern pit alignment areas L-M showing where the C14 and environmental samples were taken and artefact and ecofact distributions	40
Figure 2.42. Pit [024] and ditch [020], looking east	40
Figure 2.43. Section 195.....	41
Figure 2.44. Pit [016] and ditch [018], looking north.....	41
Figure 2.45. Aerial shot of Areas L - N.....	42
Figure 2.46. Pit [052], looking north.....	42
Figure 2.47. Northern pit alignment areas N-P showing where environmental samples were taken. and artefact and ecofact distributions.....	43
Figure 2.48. Pit [63], looking west (before being fully excavated).....	44
Figure 2.49. Aerial view of Pit alignment Areas O and P.....	44
Figure 2.50. Pit [171] and ditch [173], looking west	45
Figure 2.51. Section 498.....	45
Figure 2.52. Southern pit alignment Area R showing artefact and ecofact distributions.....	46
Figure 2.53. Aerial shot of eastern end of the pit alignments with Area R in the foreground	48
Figure 2.54. Pit [1226] with ditches [1220] and [1223], looking east-north-east.....	48
Figure 2.55. Section 172.....	48
Figure 2.56. Pit [1171] cut by ditch [1173], looking west.....	49
Figure 2.57. Section 158.....	49
Figure 2.58. Southern pit alignment Area S showing location of C14 date and artefact and ecofact. distributions	50
Figure 2.59. Pit [1594], looking east.....	51
Figure 2.60. Southern Pit alignment Area T showing artefact, ecofact and sample distributions	52
Figure 2.61. Pit [1629] and ditches [1622] and [1626], looking south-east	52
Figure 2.62. Pit [1650] and ditches [1645] and [1641], looking east.....	53
Figure 2.63. Section 352.....	53
Figure 2.64. Pit [1675] and ditch [1677], looking east.....	54
Figure 2.65. Southern pit alignment area U showing where environmental sample was taken and artefact and ecofact distributions.....	55
Figure 2.66. Aerial view Area U in the foreground, looking north-east	55
Figure 2.67. Pit [1753], looking east	56
Figure 2.68. Location and artefact and ecofact distributions Southern pit alignment Area W. showing environmental sample..	57
Figure 2.69. Pit [260], looking south.....	58
Figure 2.70. Pit [220], looking east (before being fully excavated).....	58
Figure 2.71. Section 512.....	59
Figure 2.72. Pit [224], looking north.....	59
Figure 2.73. Aerial view of the Roman cobbled surface of the trackway	60
Figure 2.74. Trackway [4178], looking west	60
Figure 2.75. Trackway ditches [4231] and [4229], looking east	61
Figure 2.76. Section 371.....	62
Figure 2.77. Trackway [4109], looking north-west.....	62
Figure 2.78. Cobbles of the trackway, looking north-east.....	62
Figure 2.79. Section through the layers of the trackway	63
Figure 2.80. Section 331.....	63
Figure 2.81. SMS Area 12 and E and C Area 11, scale 1:1500.....	64
Figure 2.82. Medieval drainage ditches, looking south.....	65
Figure 3.1. A Beaker vessel of the early Bronze Age from pit [6067] (Scale 10mm)	67
Figure 3.2. Illustrated pottery	70
Figure 3.3. Radiocarbon dates	73
Figure 5.1. Pit alignments within the Upton area in relation to the main waterways	88
Figure 5.2. Geophysical survey showing the pit alignments and trial trenches and road corridor (Carlyle 2010, fig 3)	95

List of Tables

Table 1.1: Periods of activity	8
Table 2.1: Artefact, ecofact and sample distribution in the original ditch	15
Table 2.2: Artefact, ecofact and sample distribution in the recut ditch.....	18
Table 2.3: Examination of the northern pit alignment by area and artefact and ecofact distribution.....	24
Table 2.4: Artefact and ecofact distributions by area in the northern pit alignment including ditch recuts.....	25
Table 2.5: Examination of the southern pit alignment by area and artefact and ecofact distribution including ditch recuts.....	47
Table 2.6: Artefact and ecofact distributions by area in the southern pit alignment including ditch recuts.....	47
Table 3.1: Quantification of worked flint.....	66
Table 3.2: Quantification of pottery fabrics	68
Table 3.3: Feature sherds.....	69
Table 3.4: Quantification of Iron Age pottery by context.....	70
Table 3.5: Quantification of Roman pottery by context.....	71
Table 3.6: Illustrated pottery.....	71
Table 3.7: The post-Roman pottery by period, fabric/name, date, count and weight (g).....	71
Table 3.8 Summary of small finds by material and plot	72
Table 3.9: Summary of radiocarbon samples and results	73
Table 4.1: The identifications of the plant remains per fill.....	75
Table 5.1: Early Bronze Age isolated barrows in Northamptonshire.....	80
Table 5.2: Evidence for early or early-middle Bronze Age 'settlement' features in the county.....	83
Table 5.3: Percentage of pits excavated.....	87
Table 5.4: Details of pits by area in the two pit alignments	94

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Project background

MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) was commissioned by RPS Heritage to undertake a programme of archaeological excavation and strip, map and sample on land at Upton Park, south of Weedon Road, Northamptonshire (NGR SP 7140 5970), Fig

1.1). The excavation areas targeted known anomalies identified during the previous geophysical survey (Butler 2006) and trial trench evaluation (Mason 2011; Fig 1.8). Preceding reporting of this site included an assessment of the excavation (Wolfram-Murray and Burke 2020), which was then fully reported on (Wolfram-Murray *et al* 2021).

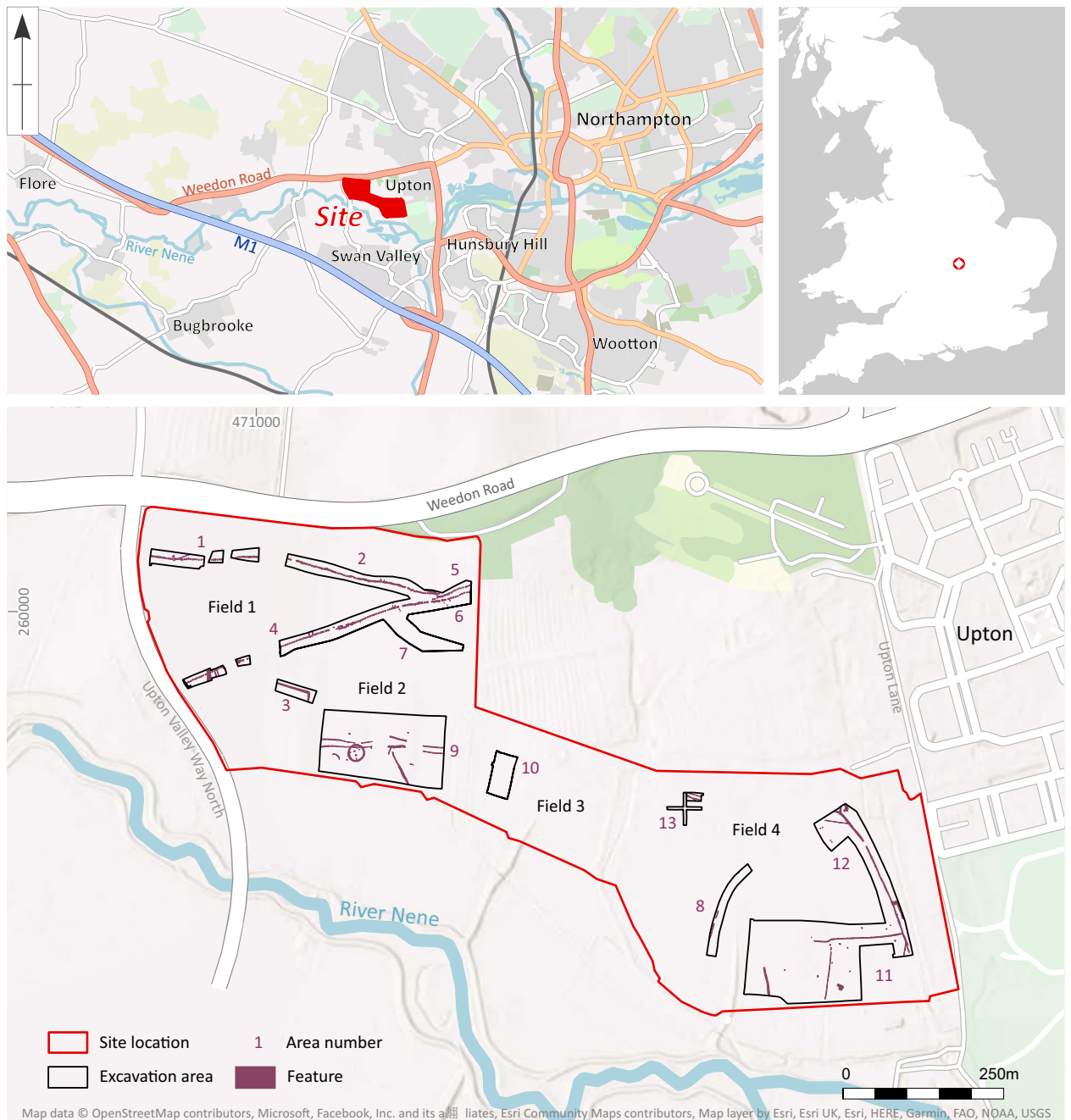


Figure 1.1. Site location and excavation areas (scale 1:10000)

A planning application for the site was passed for residential development (N/2011/997) by Northampton Borough Council with an archaeological condition attached (condition 20). The archaeological works were carried out to preserve the affected archaeological remains by record. The works were carried out in accordance with the approved Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI)(MOLA 2019).

Location and topography

The site comprised c43.8 hectares of agricultural land (Fig 1.1) situated south of the A45 Weedon Road and to the north of the Upper Nene Valley Country Park. The site was located within four fields on a gently sloping northern facing valley side overlooking the River Nene. The western boundary is on Upper Valley Way North, formally the Cross Valley Link Road (CVLR). Part of Field 1 had not been available for evaluation in 2011 due to spoil heaps and the former compound associated with the construction works of the new road (Mason 2011). The present archaeological results indicate that the disturbance was less than had been thought. The eastern boundary of the site was formed by Upton Lane. Topographically the site slopes from the north gently

down towards a tributary of the River Nene, falling from 75m aOD to 65m aOD.

Geological background

by *Steve Critchley*

The site was underlain by rocks belonging to the Lower Jurassic Lias Group. These included (in stratigraphical sequence):

- Whitby Mudstone Formation
- Marlstone Rock Formation
- Dyrham Formation

Only the Whitby Mudstones were exposed on site. The remaining rock units which underlay the southern portions of the excavation area were covered by thick superficial Glaciolacustrine sediments laid down within a former glacial lake which occupied this area in the mid Pleistocene period.

The Whitby Mudstones were marine sediments composed predominately of grey to dark grey fossiliferous laminated silts and mudstones when fresh, with minor limestones in some sections and



Figure 1.2. Patterned ground features in the Whitby Mudstones, Field 2, Area 4

INTRODUCTION

abundant limestone nodules in most exposed outcrops. Where exposed in Field 2 these were weathered to medium brown clays that had been highly altered by periglacial ground ice features such as ice wedging and cryoturbation along with general diffuse thermal ice cracks now represented as silty sandy fossil infills. Some interesting, patterned ground natural features were noted (Figs 1.2 and 1.3).

A former glacial lake occupied this portion of the Nene Valley during the Pleistocene period. Its origins are somewhat unclear though it was suggested that the lake formed within a glacially eroded depression during the Wolstonian Stage Glaciation of the Mid Pleistocene, which according to one researcher extended for some 14 miles. Examination of the extensive exposures of the lake sediments showed them to be a complex mixture of laterally variable coarse gravels, silty sands, clays and silty clays which indicated a lamination and coalescence of sediments during periods of deposition. Sediment input into such a lake system would have had a seasonal variability.

Coarser sediment input to the margins, during the spring thaw of the surrounding periglacial landscape from

active meltwater streams, forming sediment deltas and palaeochannel feeders were noted in Field 2, whilst finer sediment deposition of flocculated silts and clays would occur away from the active margins (Fig 1.4). Layers of fine clays and silts can be used to help age lake sediment by a process of counting the annual varves (micro laminations) in undisturbed sediment cores. Indications from previous researchers suggest that the lake had a lifespan of between 500 and 1000 years.

The exposures produced during the machine stripping of the site indicated the highly variable nature of the sedimentation processes that occurred during the life of this part of the lake. During its existence ice sheets would have been locally active indicated by the observation of several large boulders set within finer sediments that indicated drop stone action from melting ice rafts as a likely mechanism of deposition.

Evidence for later post lake periglacial activity was noted within the former lake sediments with numerous ground ice features such as cryoturbation and ice wedging (Fig 1.5). Drone shots of Area 11 in Field 4 revealed large-scale ice wedge polygon features towards its southern portion. (Fig 1.6).



Figure 1.3. Cryoturbation features Field 2, Area 5



Figure 1.4. Palaeochannel exposure at the mid-point of the photo in Field 2, Area 1



Figure 1.5. Ice wedge fossil infill noted in exposures in Field 2, Area 4



Figure 1.6. General view over the Glaciolacustrine sediments exposed in Field 4, Area 11

Historical and archaeological background

The excavation area had been the subject of a desk-based assessment (AECOM 2009); the following summary is partly based upon it with additions from recent work (Fig 1.7).

The area in and around Upton has been the subject of intense archaeological investigation since 1965, comprising field walking, geophysical survey, evaluation and open area excavation. Most of the works have been as a result of the western residential expansion of Northampton. Large areas in Upton have been subject to this range of archaeological examinations from desk-based assessments, geophysical survey, trial trenching and various small to large-scale excavations (see below). These have found artefacts from the Mesolithic and features from the early Bronze Age, late Bronze Age/early Iron Age, late Iron Age and Roman particularly well represented.

Prehistoric

The western side of Northampton had a proliferation of recorded sites and finds from prehistoric times. On the land on the northern side of the River Nene multiple artefacts dating from Mesolithic (HER 4939/0/0), Neolithic and Bronze Age (HER 5986/0/0) periods have been recorded (AECOM 2009; not on figure).

To the south of the River Nene lies a Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Briar Hill (Bamford 1985; 4809/1) and an Iron Age hill fort at Hunsbury Hill. Neolithic features include pits at Upton (Muldowney 2014; Muldowney 2015) and pits which contained Neolithic pottery and worked flints at the Pineham residential development more than 1km to the south (not illustrated) (Harvey and Speed 2016). The ground to the north above the Nene has recorded settlement and field divisions from the Iron Age. Some of the sites have been investigated including a mid to late Iron Age enclosure at Quinton House School (Foard-Colby and Walker 2007; Foard-Colby and Walker 2010; HER 5843) and extensive associated settlement and field divisions to the east (HER 5130). This settlement comprised several enclosures of varying sizes and plan forms, and a possible roundhouse, all set alongside a linear boundary ditch with an alignment parallel to a pit alignment.

Roman

The landscape was re-organised in the early Roman period, with the late 1st/early 2nd century AD settlement at Upton continuing through the 3rd century and into the later 4th century (Walker and Maull 2010). The Roman town at Duston, directly to the north-east of Upton, originated during the 1st century AD and was situated at the crossroads of two significant roads, one leading from *Bannaventa* (Whilton Locks),

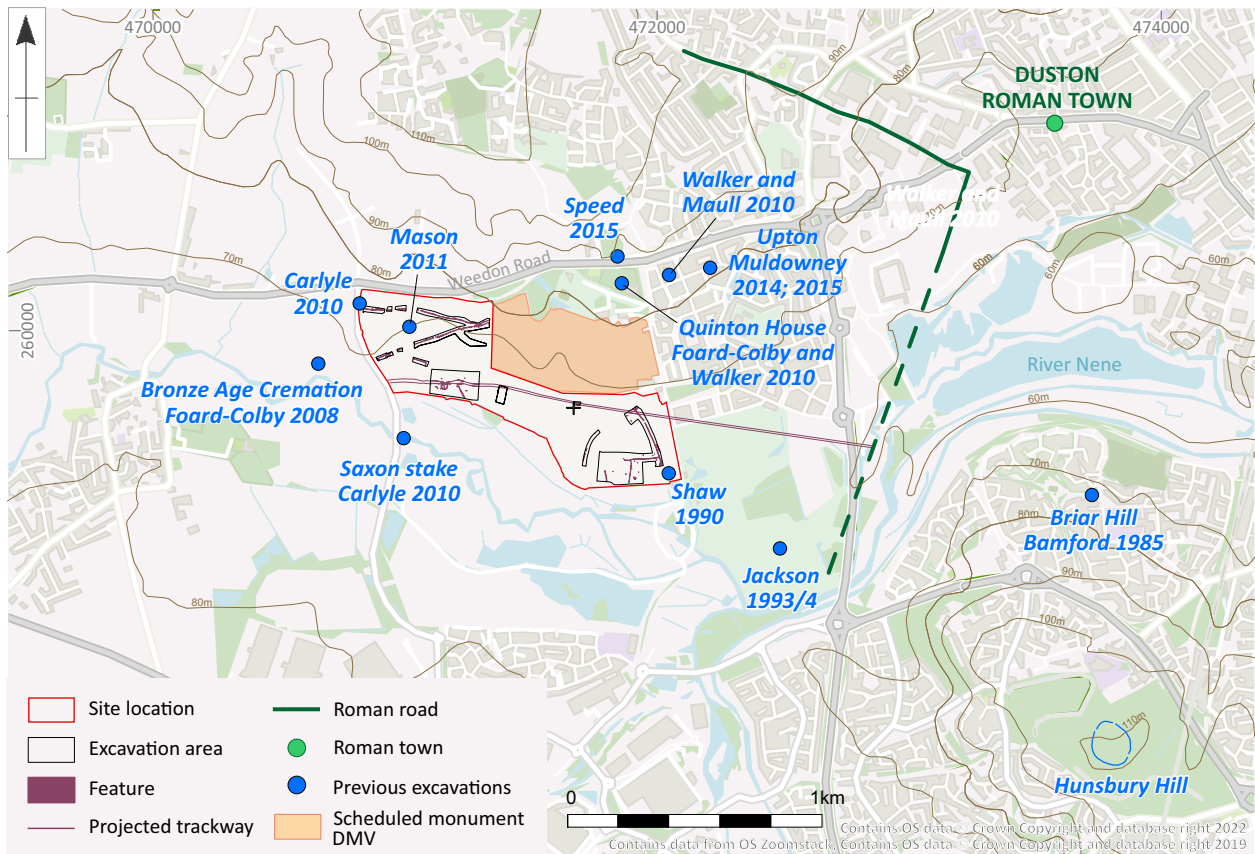


Figure 1.7. Upton and major archaeological sites (scale 1:30000)

c10km to the north-west and the other from *Lactodorum* (Towcester), c15km to the south.

Medieval

The scheduled earthwork remains of Upton Deserted Medieval Village (NHLE UID: SM 1006639; HER 5138) lie immediately to the west of Upton Lane and north-east of the current site. The DMV survives as earthworks associated with former house platforms, hollow-ways and lanes. It was thought that the present Upton Hall stands on the site of the medieval manor (Shaw 1990), although the hall itself contains no medieval fabric. The excavation carried out in the grounds of Quinton House School also revealed a medieval ditch that may indicate the northernmost extent of the medieval village (Foard-Colby and Walker 2007; Foard-Colby and Walker 2010; ENN104264).

Archaeological investigations within and close to the site

Previous archaeological investigations within and adjacent to the site

Archaeological remains were identified and examined prior to current work within the site. A possible ring ditch and trackway were known from cropmarks in

Field 2 (HER 1475/01/1-2). These two features were examined during a limited programme of trial trenching and test pit excavations as well as a number of ditches in Field 4 (Shaw 1990; Jackson 1993/4; Fig 1.8). A single trial trench was excavated through the ring ditch, but it found no dating evidence. Jackson noted (1993/4, 76), "The dark loam found in the ring ditch in Field D is not a typical fill of most barrow ditches, and it is possible that the feature is a small enclosure of Neolithic or early Iron Age date." The trackway ditches located in this field were also not dated in the evaluation, but Jackson commented that it, "may be aligned towards the Roman settlement at Duston." (*ibid*, 76).

As part of the present and related development a series of archaeological works have been undertaken within the site. This work has consisted of a geophysical survey (Butler 2006), trial trench evaluation and mitigation work (Foard-Colby 2006; Foard-Colby and Butler 2006; Carlyle 2008; Carlyle 2010; Mason 2011; Fig 1.8) and a desk-based assessment (AECOM 2009). Investigated features included a barrow, Iron Age pit alignment, Roman trackway, part of a Roman or early medieval field system and a timber stake recovered from a palaeochannel dated to the 8th century AD. Partly contemporary with these examinations were archaeological examinations for the River Nene Flood Attenuation Scheme when watching briefs were

undertaken that extended into the southern limits of the current site. From the south-western corner of Field 1 an isolated Bronze Age urned cremation was recovered (Foard-Colby 2008).

Other archaeological investigations close to the site

At South Meadow Road, 0.5km to the north of the site, a pit alignment was found near to a tributary of the River Nene (Speed 2015). Extensive excavations have been undertaken at Pineham (Brown 2007; Preece 2018). These remains lay c1km to the south-west and revealed a prehistoric landscape which consisted of a ploughed out Bronze Age barrow and late Bronze Age cremation cemetery associated with a post alignment and a possible late Bronze Age to early Iron Age field system along with Iron Age and Roman settlements. The latter excavations recorded activity from the late Iron Age c100 BC, through the Roman period until the late 4th century AD in the form of settlements that contained enclosures and domestic dwellings including evidence for two timber roundhouses and a stone-founded roundhouse. Three cremation burials were located on the periphery of the main settlement, two of which were accompanied by glass vessels and Roman finewares. A farmstead was modified and occupied continuously throughout the late 1st to early 3rd century AD and these later developments included the construction of a T-shaped drying oven. There was a decline in activity in the 3rd century AD and during the late 3rd to 4th century AD a new rectilinear ditch system was established over the previous settlement.

Excavations at Pineham Zone H (Simmonds 2019) identified four separate lengths of pit alignment and a sinuous Bronze Age ditch. In the area of the boundary ditch was a pair of tightly crouched inhumation burials one of which was radiocarbon dated to the middle Iron Age. To the north of the boundary ditch, were the remains of two sub-rectangular post-built structures. The Iron Age and Roman peripheral activity represented part of a small farmstead. A ring ditch was set within a rectangular enclosure ditch. The enclosure encompassed over 2500 sq. metres and contained two large wells. The late Iron Age settlement was directly replaced from the 1st century AD by a set of enclosures and fields defined by ditches on a different alignment. In the northern part of the enclosure were found the fragmentary remains from a burial of a sub-adult. A possible Saxon barrow was found to the south of the site. There were no surviving internal features or burials within the ring ditch but situated adjacent to it were seven inhumations; one grave contained a knife and spearhead. Between the 5th and 9th centuries a field system comprising a set of conjoined enclosures or plots was constructed on the north-facing ridge line, encompassing an area of at least 3.51ha. The individual rectangular plots themselves were defined by ditches.

Objectives and methodology

The main aim of the excavations was to preserve by record the archaeological evidence within the site impacted by the development. The Aims and Objectives have been produced with reference to the Brief (Mather 2018) and the Archaeological Project Design Document (Harrison 2018).

Research objectives

Based on the results of the archaeological works, specific research objectives were drawn from the East Midlands Research Agenda (Knight *et al* 2012, updating Cooper 2006); the current version (EMHERF 2021) can be accessed online at: <https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/>. In order to enhance our understanding of the Bronze Age to Roman activity identified within and around the development area the following specific research objectives were selected:

Prehistoric

- Why may monument complexes have developed, why were some short-lived and others of longer duration, and why do these incorporate such a wide variety of monument types? (3.6.1)
- To what extent can we relate monument types to particular artefact suites, and can such information usefully inform fieldwork strategies? (3.6.4)

Late Bronze Age and Iron Age

- To assess the prehistoric ditches and pit alignments in line with the relevant research agendas (including but not limited to 6.4.6: 4F)
- What were the economic, social or political roles of the pit alignments and linear ditch systems that characterised many areas of the East Midlands? (4.6.2)
- To understand the extent of the Iron Age occupation and activity on the site, and its landscape context and intra-regional variations (4.3, 4.4 and 4.5)

Roman

- To understand the landscape context and rural settlement patterns (5.4)
- How did field and boundary systems relate to earlier systems of land allotment, and how did these boundary networks develop over time? (5.4.4)
- What patterns can be discerned in the location of settlements in the landscape? (5.4.5)
- To understand, as fully as possible, the relative chronologies of the currently undated ditch groups or enclosures in Field 4, and to assess the activity being undertaken within them.

Excavation methodology

The development area comprised a total area of approximately 43.8ha on pasture and agricultural land. The area was subject to a targeted Strip, Map and Sample (SMS) and archaeological excavation across four former fields with 12 archaeological areas assigned (Figs 1.1 and 1.8).

The excavated areas were cleaned sufficiently to enhance the definition of features, unless it was certain that there were no archaeological remains present. All archaeological features were investigated; for the pit alignments and barrow it was suggested that they should be excavated to a minimum of 50% unless otherwise agreed. Subsequently the barrow was 50% hand excavated (Figs 2.3 and 2.4) and afterwards the entirety of the ditch fill was removed mechanically for optimum finds retrieval and environmental sample selection. A selection of the pits within the pit alignment were fully excavated, and after discussions

with the client, RPS and NCCAA a varying percentage of the other pits were examined (see Fig 2.14 for details). In all there were 257 pits with 11 unexcavated, 65 pits were 50% sampled, 56 were 60% sampled, 56 were 70% sampled, 25 were 80-90% sampled and 44 were fully excavated (Table 5.3). These figures collate to 66.36% of estimated total volume of the pits within the two alignments being excavated.

All archaeological deposits and artefacts encountered during excavations were fully recorded and all paperwork and plans displayed the Event Number ENN109451 for the site. The site will be archived at the County Archive Resource Centre at Chester Farm (NARC) and the digital archive with the Archaeological Data Service (ADS).

Site phasing

Six main periods of activity were identified across the development area (Table 1.1):

Table 1.1: Periods of activity

Phase and period	Description
Period 1: Likely to date to the Pleistocene	Two palaeochannels
Period 2: Neolithic (4000BC to 2500BC)	Background scatter of flint
Period 3: Early to middle Bronze Age (2500BC to 1500BC)	Barrow including cremation, two pits and worked flint
Period 4: Late Bronze Age to early middle Iron Age (1100BC to 400BC)	Two pit alignments
Period 5: Roman (AD43 to AD410)	Possible trackway Cobbled surface
Period 6: Medieval to post-medieval	Drainage ditches
Period 7: Modern	Construction disturbance

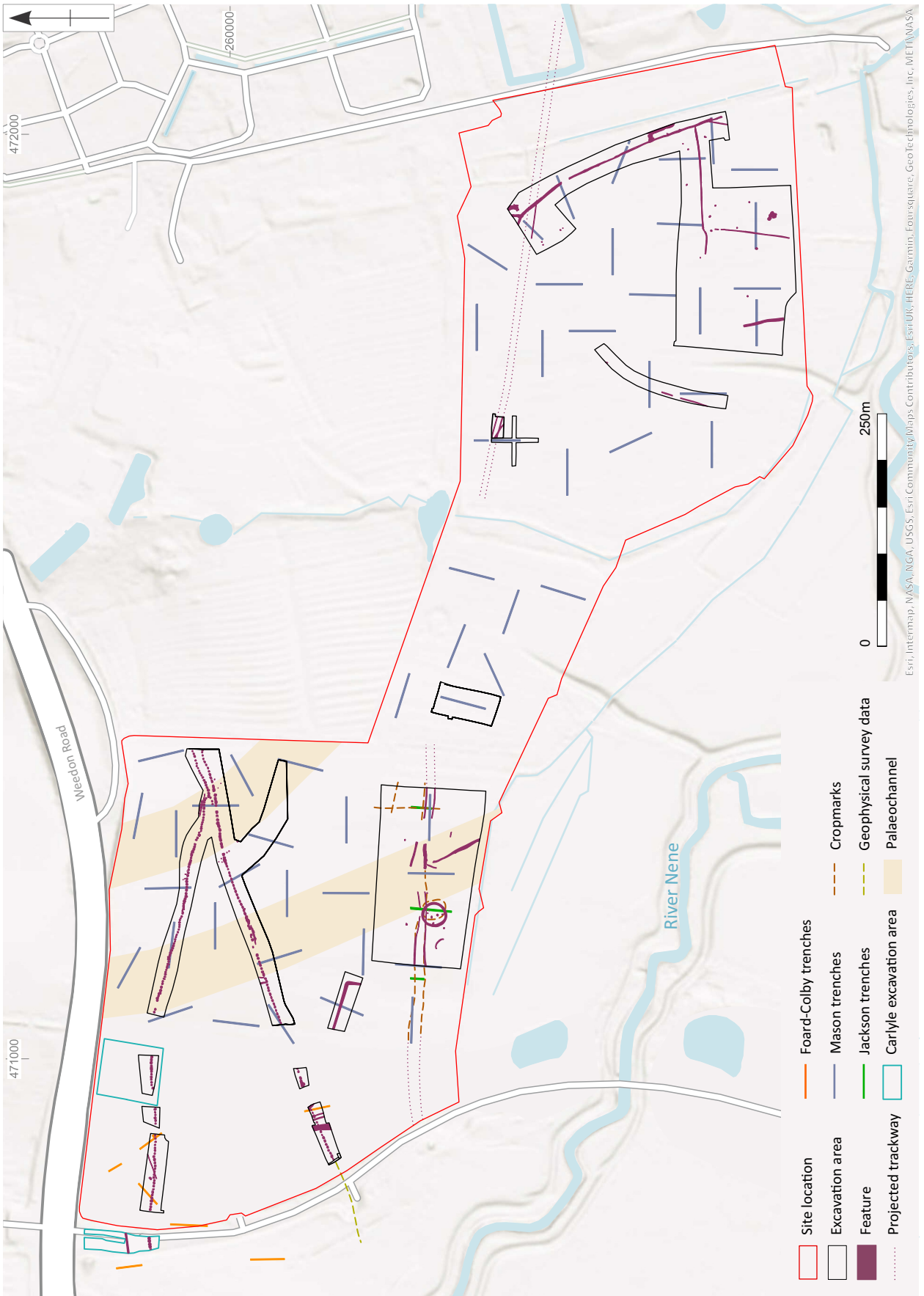


Figure 1.8. All features plan (scale 1:6000)