Neolithic pits, late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pit alignments and Iron Age to Roman settlements at Wollaston Quarry, Northamptonshire

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The original archaeological work was monitored by Sandy Kidd and Glenn Foard at Northamptonshire County Council. Ian Meadows was the Project Manager for Northamptonshire Archaeology with the different stages of fieldwork largely supervised by either Sean Steadman or Michael Webster and work carried out by a team which included Rob Atkins, Tony Baker, Ian Fisher, Lou Huscroft, Tora Hylton, Chris Jones, Nick Owen, Linda Marzyniak, Peter Masters, Stephen Morris, Dave Murdy, Joe Prentice, Tim Sharman, Alex Thompson, Paul Thompson, Pete Harris and Franz Agar. The work on the watching brief areas were largely carried out by Chris Jones and Ian Meadows. Steve Critchley routinely carried out systematic metal detector surveying throughout the project across all the excavation and topsoil stripped areas. Rob Atkins has written most of the non-specialist sections of this report with comments and guidance by Ian Meadows. Stephen Parry, Tracy Preece and Mark Holmes have kindly edited and proofread this publication.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Project background

MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) formerly Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out excavations on behalf of Pioneer Aggregates UK, now part of Hanson UK at Wollaston Quarry, Northamptonshire. The site (Fig 1.1) lies 2km to the west of the small town of Wollaston just above a wide floodplain to the east of the River Nene. The area was known for the quality of the cropmarks produced by the gravel soils that had been recorded by aerial photography and archaeological excavations have occurred there for many years in advance of gravel extraction by various aggregate companies (RCHM 1979).

An archaeological evaluation in 1990 for Pioneer Aggregates was carried out on 45.21ha of land north of Hardwater Road and comprised 122 trial trenches (Jackson nd; Jackson 1991). This work took place within eight fields (Figs 1.1 and 1.3) and was subsequently largely excavated between 1993 and 1994 with the project completed 1995/6.

Pioneer Aggregates decided to extend their quarry within land to the south-west of this original area and submitted a Planning Application (WP/94/439c) on land to the south of Hardwater Road. On the advice of Northamptonshire Heritage, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken prior to the determination of the planning application. The work conformed to an archaeological brief by Northamptonshire Heritage (Kidd 1994).

The new area comprised 71.01ha of arable land within seven former fields located at or just above the floodplain of the River Nene (Figs 1.1 and 1.4). An archaeological evaluation was carried out in two stages (Meadows 1995; Parry and Audouy 1995). The first stage consisted of a desktop assessment supported by a programme of air photographic evidence, fieldwalking and geophysical prospection (Meadows 1995). The second stage involved a magnetometer survey at five locations with a total area of 4.5ha assessed as well as eight individual trenches with a total length of 390m (Parry and Audouy 1995).

As a result of the evaluations a recording action brief was provided by Northamptonshire Heritage (Kidd 1995). Figure 1.2, which had been attached to the Brief, shows the thought processes after the evaluation stage of both Northamptonshire Heritage and Pioneer Aggregates UK by detailing areas needing quarrying and thereby identifying areas for preservation and where this could not be achieved excavation. This Brief outlined the justification for further investigation, recording and publication of the archaeological remains. The brief stipulated; 'pre-emptive excavation of three Iron Age/ Roman settlements and a combination of targeted small-scale excavation ahead of topsoil stripping, an intensive watching brief during stripping, salvage excavation following stripping and environmental sampling to investigate the coaxial field system and other significant remains.'

It was accepted that the areas for excavation or preservation in the Brief (Fig 1.2) were not fixed and they were changed by the Pioneer Aggregates UK based on commercial requirements. The actual archaeological areas excavated are recorded in Figure 1.1. In addition, more geophysical survey work was undertaken in the quarry than had been originally envisaged including at point 4 on the plan and the area of the southern vineyard. There were also areas of pre-emptive excavation which had not been originally designated including at the southern vineyard.

The Brief stated that an appropriate level of investigation should take place within all parts of the site which were subject to topsoil stripping. It stated that there had to be a watching brief and contingency with 160 person days allocated for salvage recording if any unidentified remains of county or national importance were revealed within the site (Kidd 1995, section 2.5).

Two small parts of the archaeological work at Wollaston Quarry, which were both of national interest, have been published in some detail (the pollen analysis from the northern vineyard and the Saxon Pioneer burial). At the northern end of the quarry the first proven Roman vineyard from Roman Britain was discovered, comprising an extensive system of pastinatio trenches some of which were found to contain vitis pollen (Meadows 1996; Brown *et al* 2001). The Saxon burial was announced widely within the media. This started with a press conference chaired by Professor Rosemary Cramp and Ian Meadows which resulted in a slew of publicity from 23rd April 1997 with television including Blue Peter recording the event as well as articles in national and local newspapers. Interim reports on the northern vineyard and Pioneer burial were published in Current Archaeology (Meadows 1997b) and Northamptonshire Archaeology journal (Meadows 1997a). A client report on the Pioneer burial

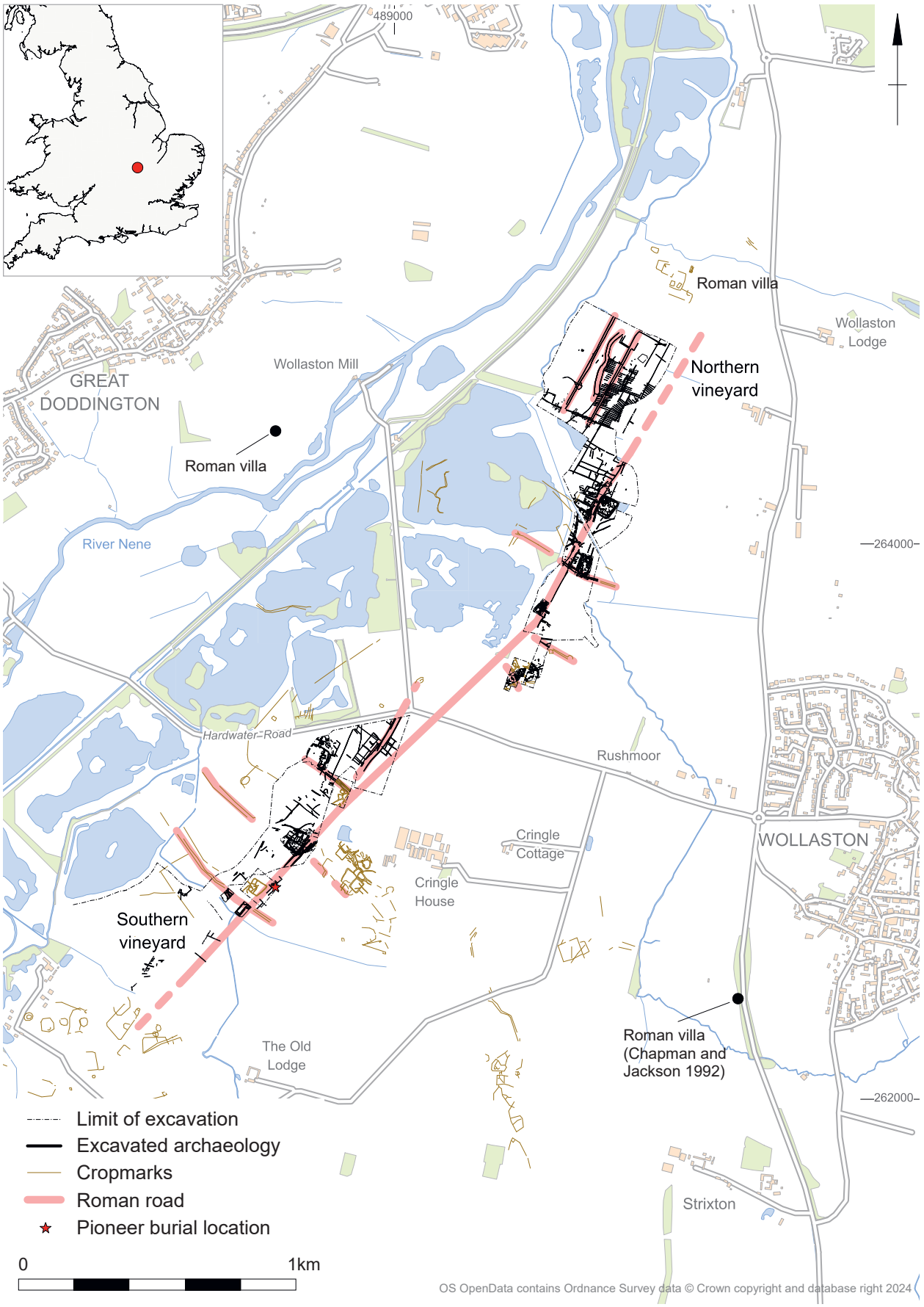

Figure 1.1. Excavations within Wollaston Quarry and its environs with Roman road and cropmarks located (1:20000)

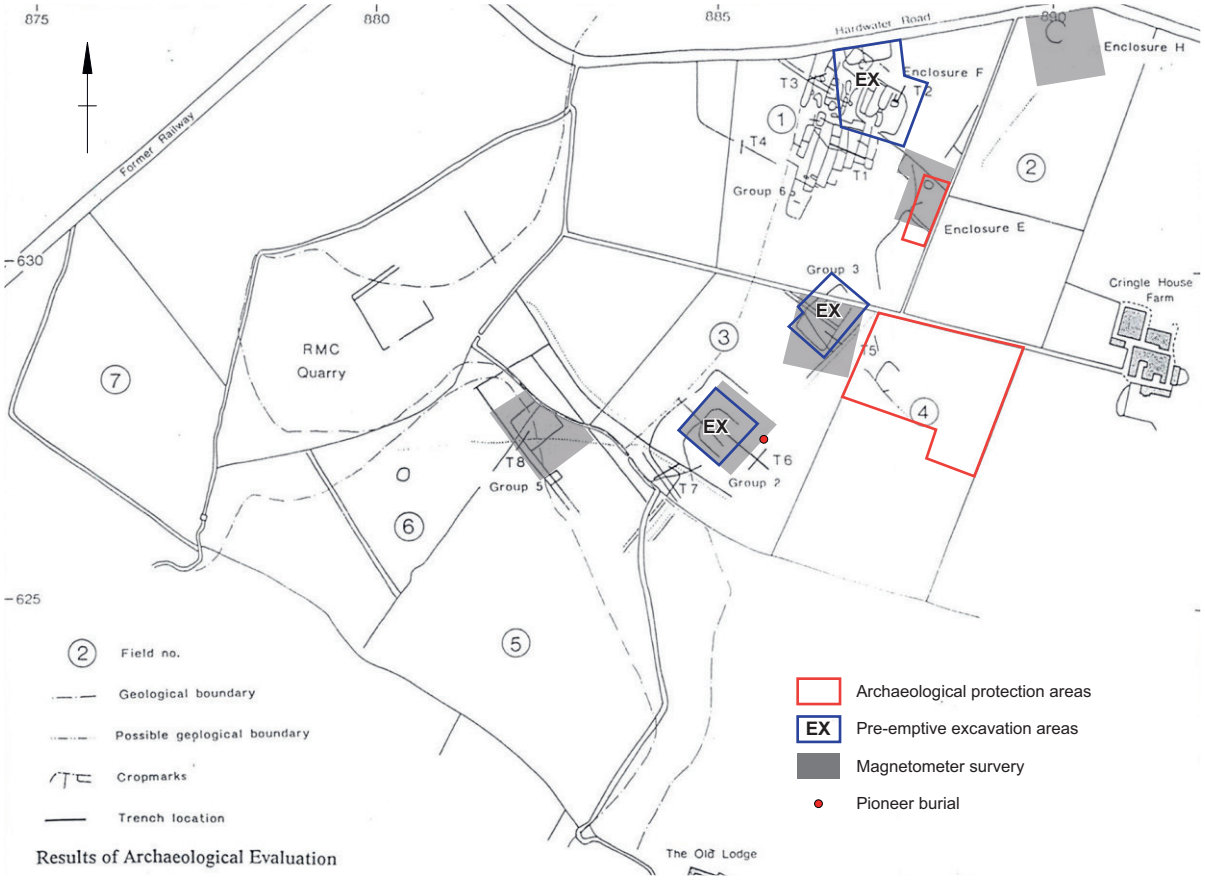

Figure 1.2. Areas to be excavated and protected areas within the site with Pioneer burial location recorded (after Kidd 1995)

was produced for the archaeological work to satisfy the planning requirements (Meadows 2004). This burial was later reassessed with significant new work and has been recently published as an Archaeopress monograph (Meadows 2019).

The large majority of the archaeological work within Wollaston Quarry has not been reported, even as interim assessments. A minority of the finds and ecofacts had been sent off for preliminary reporting in the 1990s. After 1997, with the exception of the client report on the helmet (Meadows 2004), archaeological analysis of the remains had not been carried out. The project was restarted in 2018 by Stephen Parry, Director of MOLA Northampton, when he approached Mark Page of Hanson about funding (see acknowledgements). As a result Mark kindly provided funding after the project had been dormant for more than 20 years. Since this restart the Pioneer burial was analysed further and published in 2019. This book was nominated by *Current Archaeology* as one of the best archaeological books for 2019.

At this stage, work was also started on the other archaeological remains uncovered within the quarry. It was thought that phasing the various sites and thus producing plans of these areas was the most important single aspect to understanding the archaeological remains in the quarry. This publication report has concentrated on this with only a few plans of some of the more interesting individual features and the occasional section or photograph.

To achieve a phased plan of the quarry area the examination of the pottery assemblage was seen to be significant. Apart from this pottery analysis, the examination of the querns and millstones and the polissoir were the only artefacts to be examined afresh. Any previous specialists reports/preliminary assessments carried out in the 1990s have been included (with some editing), a quick recent overview of small finds has been undertaken by Ian Meadows but no other work has been carried out on the finds or ecofacts. This has meant that the small finds, all the ceramic building material, some of the human bone, all the animal bone and most of the other environmental material recovered have not been analysed to any significant extent.

The Wollaston Quarry archive (paper and artefacts/ecofacts) will be held at the Northamptonshire Archaeological Resource Centre at Chester Farm Estate, Northamptonshire. It is hoped that these will be examined in the future and thus any new work will fill in any inevitable gaps not examined in this publication.

Archaeological background

The site lies within the central part of the Nene Valley, adjacent to the Rive Nene. An overview of the historical and environmental nature of the river has been analysed from the earlier prehistoric times (Meadows *et al* 2009). The nearest study of the River Nene to the site was directly to the west of it by Professor A Brown and the second closest has taken place 2km to the north of the site and a soil column (at SP 897660) from a former river channel has provided dates to the second and third millennia BC (NA 1994; Meadows 1995, 1). Directly to the north-west of the site archaeological work had also noted that the course of the River Nene had altered over time (O'Hara 1990).

Prehistoric ceremonial and burial complexes have been found *c*1km to the south of the Pioneer burial. Here a Neolithic mortuary house, twelve Bronze Age round barrows and a possible long enclosure ceremonial monument as well as some pits containing four Bronze Age urns were excavated at Grendon Pit between 1974 and 1980 (Gibson and McCormick 1985; Jackson 1995). Pollen analysis of an archaeological section next to the River Nene to the north-west of the site has indicated that the floodplain was densely wooded in this period (Brown and Ellis nd; Meadows 1995, 3).

Iron Age and Roman settlement sites have been recorded across the parish (RCHM 1979, 179-180). Cropmarks in the immediate area around the excavations are extensive and include a villa directly to the north-east of the quarry (Fig 1.1). A second Roman villa had been recorded *c*1.5km to the east of the quarry with a bathhouse and other features found during work for the Wollaston bypass (Chapman and Jackson 1992). A further Roman villa was recorded 1km to the west, in Great Doddington parish adjacent to the west of the River Nene (Fig 1.1; RCHM 1979, fig 40). The Wollaston bypass project also found an early Saxon site including a Sunken Featured Building (SFB) dating to the late 6th to early 7th century (Chapman and Jackson 1992).

In the parish there was a single probable middle Saxon site immediately to the south-west of the then limits of Wollaston village, 2km to the east of the quarry. Within the village occupation evidence dating from the 5th to the 14th centuries were found at Dando Close (Ashworth and Semmelmann and 2003). Four other sites in the village which produced middle Saxon pottery were at the churchyard, Beacon Hill, Priory Road estate, and the paddock behind Cromwell House in London Road (Hall 1977, 17).

Wollaston was recorded as Wilavestone in the Domesday Book which derives from Wulflāf's farm, v. tun (Gover *et al* 1975, 197). Wulflaf was a personal Old English name possibly representing the settlement's founder (Hall 1977, 21). Wollaston had two manors in 1066, Bury Manor which had five hides and was held by four thegns under Edward the Confessor and Hall Manor, about a quarter of the parish, which had been held by Stric in the same period (*ibid*, 47-49). The Wollaston Quarry area in the medieval period was within the parish's field system within Nether Field (Hall 1977, 138). Extensive ridge and furrow cultivation systems were recorded in a map of 1774 (Wollaston Enclosure Award). Meadows noted that within the quarry, the ridges had been removed by modern cultivation but related headlands survived as earthworks in Fields 1, 2, 3 and 4 (Meadows 1995, 5 and fig 3). In Fields 5 and 6 traces of medieval ploughing could be discerned on air photography but no headlands survived in these two fields (*ibid*, 5). No cultivation of this period survived in Field 7 (*ibid*, 5).

Topography and geology

The site predominantly lay on an area just above the broad flat river floodplain at about 46m OD, less than 1km to the south-east of the present River Nene, along the edge of alluvial cover (Fig 1.1; NGR SP 8855 6275). The underlying geology is largely First Terrace Gravels (Meadows 1995, 1). The geology within the excavations areas largely comprised a light brown sandy silt with small quantities of gravel. Alluvium was recorded on land to the north of Hardwater Road within the western sides of Fields 1, 2, 5, part of 6, 7 and 8. In the land to the south of Hardwater Road alluvium was recorded in the quarry sides next to Settlement 5 and in Fields 6 and 7.

Most of the land between the present excavations and the River Nene had already been quarried and these areas had been left as water features (Figs 1.1 and 1.3). The present excavations lay on largely flat land near the base of the valley bottom, parallel to the south-east of the former quarried areas. The ground rises to the south-east beyond the excavation area (as does the land to the north-west of the River Nene (Fig 1.3)).

Summary of sites and site chronology

The various archaeological sites have been renamed in this publication for simplification and have been named Settlements 1-11 as well as the northern and southern vineyard areas (Table 1; Figs 1.4 and 1.5). This renaming had to be done to avoid complications due to duplications of site names (including those from geophysical surveys), field numbers and context numbers given during archaeological work at the quarry over many years. Table 1.1 has also listed these former site details. The retention of this original nomenclature is to allow concordance with the archive.

Figure 1.3. Settlement 3, looking north-west with former quarried areas and valley sides in distance

Table 1.1. Archaeological work within Wollaston Quarry by publication site name

Publication name	Year of excavation	Site name; context details	Geophysical survey	Pit alignment	Date of activity/ settlement
North of Hardwater Road					
Settlement 1	1994	Field 6/Site 6; contexts 6/6001-6/6708; 7/8001-8281, but also earlier contexts in 7/3001-7/3088; 6/3501-3530; 7/4001-4127; Geophysical survey Site 8	Yes (part). Has not been reproduced as it does not add to the information from the excavation	Yes	Early Iron Age settlement; middle Iron Age to late Roman settlement
Middle Roman field system of Settlement 1	1993	Field 6; a few contexts between 7/8001-8281	No	No	Middle Roman
Settlement 2	1994	Field 7/Site 5; contexts 7/5001-7/5567; a small minority of contexts in 7/8001+ e.g 7/8053-7/8062	No	Yes	Early Iron Age residual pottery; Middle Iron Age to late Iron Age settlement
Settlement 3	1993	Field 8/Site 1; contexts 8/1001-1421; Geophysical survey Site 8-1	Yes (results poor and have not been used)	yes	A single early Iron Age pit. ?middle to late Iron Age field system; late Iron Age to latest Iron Age/early Roman settlement

Publication name	Year of excavation	Site name; context details	Geophysical survey	Pit alignment	Date of activity/ settlement
Settlement 4	1993	Field 8/Site 2; Excavation area contexts 8/2001-8/2279;watching brief 8/8274-8281; Geophysical survey Site 6	Yes; only part of the site but more extensive than the excavation areas	No	Middle Iron Age activity? Late Iron Age oval enclosure; latest Iron Age to late Roman unenclosed settlement
Northern vineyard	1993	Fields 1-4; contexts 4/8282-3/8576	No	Yes	Middle Roman
South of Hardwater Road					
Settlement 5	1996	Site 1; contexts 1/1-1/414. Mostly examined as an excavation area; periphery in the watching brief	Yes; more extensive than the excavation and watching brief area	Yes, but the settlement does not respect it	Middle Iron Age to late Iron Age unenclosed and enclosed settlement; sparse Roman features
Settlement 6	1996	HWR 96/WB; contexts 3000-3020; 3031	No	Yes	Middle to late Roman
?Settlement 7	-	Geophysical survey Site GEOHWR2	Yes; no excavation	?	? Late Iron Age and/or early Roman + settlement
Settlement 8	1996	Geophysical survey Site GEOHWR3; Site 2; contexts 2/502-2/1065; watching brief: contexts 3021-3030; contexts 4030+	Yes (part)	Yes	Middle to late Roman
Settlement 9	-	Geophysical survey Site 2	Yes; no excavation	?	? Late Iron Age and/or early Roman + settlement
Settlement 10	-	Geophysical survey Site GEOHWR4	Yes; no excavation	Yes	? Middle Iron Age to late Iron Age settlement
Routeway junction	1996	Sites 3A and 3B; contexts 3060s-3099	Part excavation	Yes	Roman
Southern vineyard	1996		Part excavation	?	?Middle and/or late Roman

Site phasing

The dating of the various sites has largely been achieved through pottery dating and stratigraphic comparisons. Activity and/or occupation have been assigned to seven periods with some of these have at least partly been sub-divided:

Period 0: Lower Palaeolithic to early Mesolithic (c200000-7000BC)

Period 1: Late Mesolithic/early Neolithic to middle Bronze Age (4000-1100BC)

Period 2: Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age (1100-400BC)

Period 3: Middle to late Iron Age (400BC-100BC) (in Settlements 1 and 5 this has been divided into Periods 3.1 and 3.2 but the exact dates of these sub-divisions are uncertain)

Period 4: Late Iron Age (100BC-AD43)

Period 5: Latest Iron Age to late Roman

Period 5.1: Latest Iron Age to earliest Roman (cAD0-mid 1st century AD)

Period 5.2: Early Roman (mid-1st century AD - 2nd century AD)

Period 5.3: Middle Roman (late 2nd century AD – 3rd century AD)

Period 5.4: Latest Roman (fourth century AD)

Period 6: Saxon

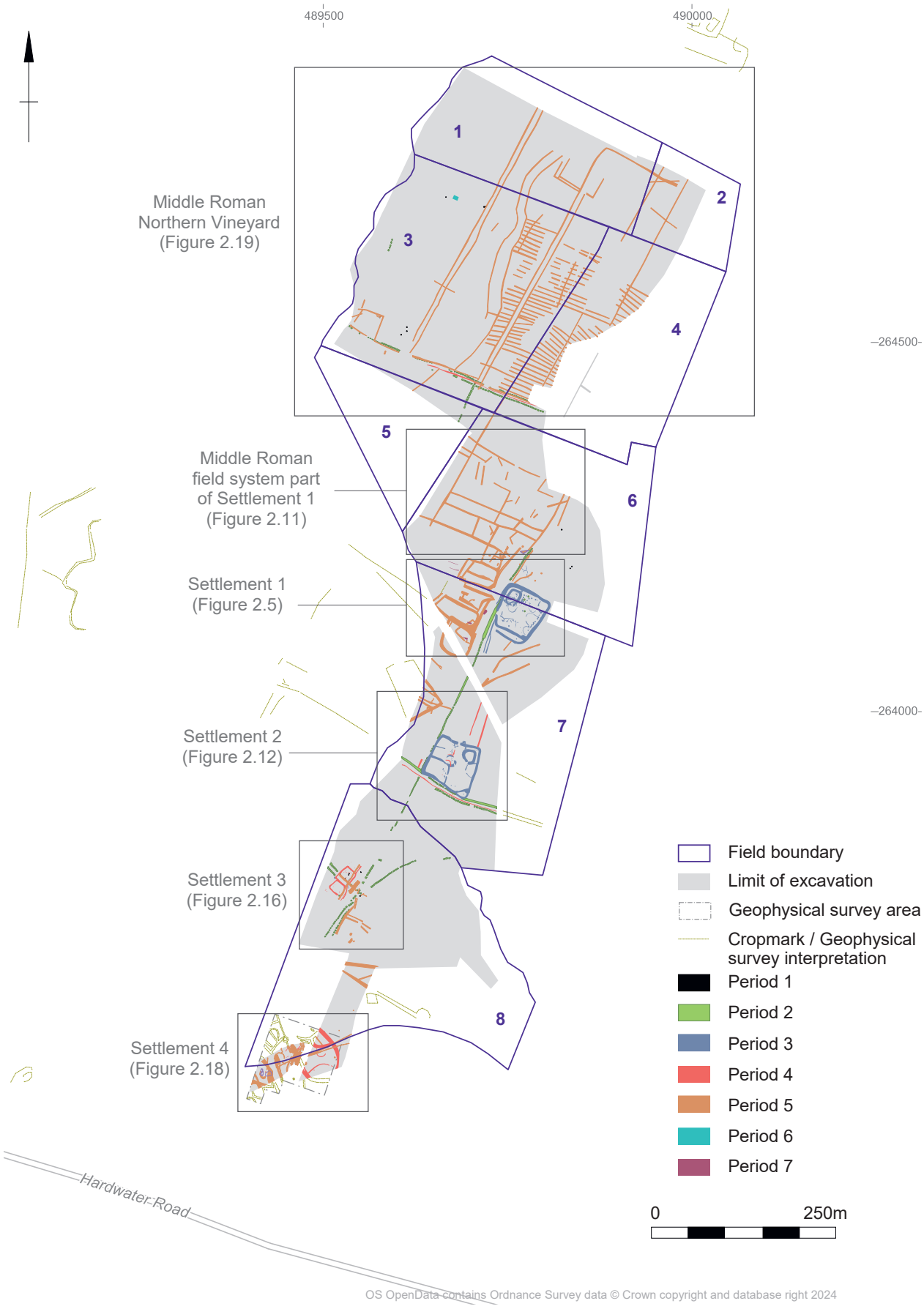

Figure 1.4. Archaeological excavations to north of Hardwater Road (1:7500)

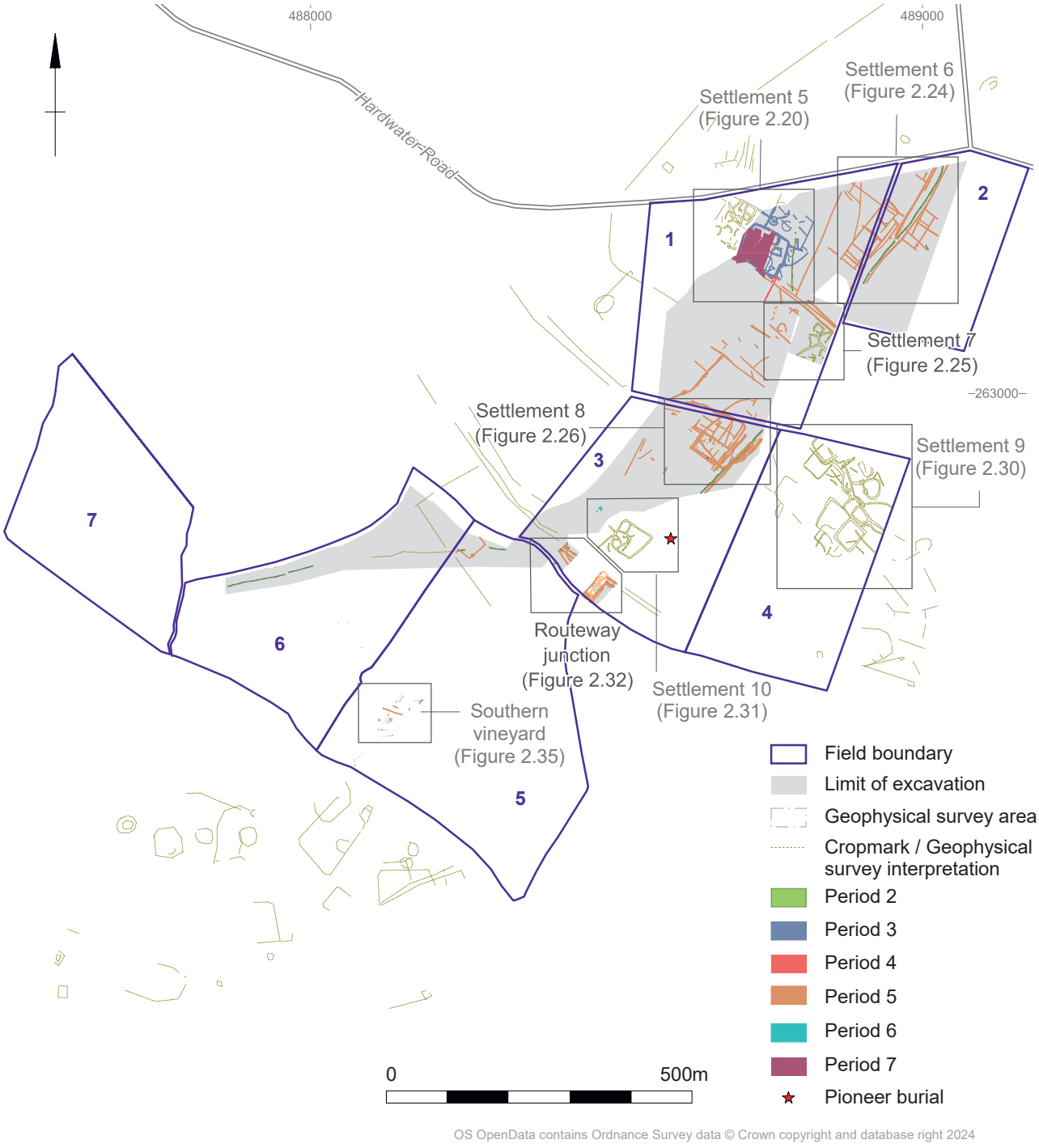

Figure 1.5. Archaeological excavations to south of Hardwater Road (1:10000)