

Coton Park, Rugby, Warwickshire: A Middle Iron Age Settlement with Copper Alloy Casting

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Front cover: View of ring ditch RD3, which produced the copper alloy and bone working debris, looking north.

Back cover: A triangular crucible for copper alloy casting, top, and a sprue-cup from a lost wax investment mould, bottom.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

The Iron Age settlement at Field 13, Coton Park, Rugby, Warwickshire (SP 513 778, Fig 1.1) was one of two sites of archaeological interest identified by geophysical survey (Fig 1.2) and trial trench evaluation within an area of some 100ha on the northern outskirts of Rugby proposed for a mixed residential and commercial development (Warwickshire Museum 1997).

The Warwickshire County Planning Archaeologist, Douglas Moir, considered that the development would severely damage or destroy the archaeological remains present and he advised the planning authority, Rugby Borough Council, that an excavation should take place. A brief for an archaeological excavation was compiled by Andy Josephs, Principal Archaeologist for Entec UK (Entec 1997).

Northamptonshire Archaeology, now MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), Northampton, was commissioned by Entec UK, acting for the developers, to carry out the excavation. Work commenced in March 1998 and all fieldwork was completed before the end of June 1998, a total of 16 weeks including a week lost to waterlogging during the widespread flooding that occurred across much of Midland England through March and April 1998 (Figs 1.3-1.6).

An assessment report was prepared (Chapman 1999) and a subsequent interim report (Chapman 2000), but a final report was not completed in the years following excavation, although much of the finds reporting included here was completed in the early to mid-2000s. The final preparation of the report for publication was carried out in 2019-20, following the retirement of the principal author, with publication through Archaeopress Archaeology sponsored by MOLA, Northampton.

The site archive has been deposited with Warwickshire Museums under accession number T/1031.

Part of the deserted medieval village of Coton, which lay 1.0km to the north (Fig 1.1: NGR SP 517 788), was also excavated by Northamptonshire Archaeology in 1998, from July onwards, in advance of further development works (Maull 2001). This site also produced Bronze Age pits, a small Bronze Age cremation cemetery and a small complex of late Iron Age and early Roman settlement. These are described in Chapter 11 of this volume.

Location, topography and geology

The site lies to the north of Rugby, immediately east of the A426 at its junction with Newton Manor Lane, and just over 1.0km south of the M6 motorway (Fig 1.1). At the time of excavation housing development had extended up to Newton Manor Lane to the south and up to the eastern field boundary. The field within which the settlement was situated lay partly within Rugby and partly in the parish of Churchover, although formerly it was fully within the parish of Brownsover.

The Iron Age settlement lay on high ground towards the top of an east facing slope on a north-south ridge, at between 127.0m aOD and 124.5m aOD. It lies on the eastern margins of the valley of the River Swift, with the river some 700m to the west and flowing southwards to join the River Avon some 1.4km to the south. To the immediate east of the settlement, a deep hollow associated with former ponds and a probable spring line, descended to 121.0m aOD (Fig 1.2). It appears to be the head of a former incised valley running eastward to the River Avon, where the valley floor is at just under 90.0m aOD.

The underlying geology is Boulder Clay over Lower Lias (British Geological Survey 1974).

Objectives

The broadly stated objective of the excavation was to 'gather information on the Middle Iron Age open settlement'. This was to be achieved within a framework of open area excavation and selective sampling of features as defined in the brief and further specified within the Project Proposal prepared by Northamptonshire Archaeology (1998).

The available information on the site gathered by previous archaeological field evaluation comprised a geophysical survey by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford (Survey No: 97/18) (Shiel and Stephens 1996) (Fig 1.2), and trial trench excavation comprising seven trenches, carried out by Warwickshire Museum in August 1997 (Warwickshire Museum 1997). This work had identified and confirmed the broad nature and date of the site and located the main areas of activity, although the open area excavation was to show that activity extended well beyond the limits of these earlier investigations.

Methodology

Machine excavation

Machine stripping of the topsoil commenced at the beginning of March 1998. As a result of the exceptionally wet weather, leading to floods in many places, including Northampton, it was not possible to run dumper trucks (Moxy articulated tipper trucks) across the field, and the planned strategy had to be revised. A 360° excavator was used to open individual areas centred on and encompassing the main groups of structures and enclosures identified through geophysical survey (Figs 1.2-1.4). Seven areas were opened; the four larger areas took in the known structures on the western and northern parts of the field, while three smaller areas took in parts of the boundary system and isolated structures to the north-east and south. The excavated topsoil was dumped adjacent to each area in temporary spoil heaps.

By the middle of May the ground was dry enough to permit the use of heavy machinery. A 360° excavator and two dumper trucks were used to remove the temporary spoil heaps to spoil dumps along the western margin of the field. The topsoil was then stripped from between the individual areas on the western and northern parts of the site using a 360° excavator operating to the same standard as for the initial areas, to create a single open area. At the south-western corner of the site the natural surface had been disturbed by deep wheel ruts resulting from the use of this area as the main dumper truck access to the western spoil heaps, resulting in a loss of detail in the area of ring ditches RD27 and RD28 (Fig 1.4).

Across the remainder of the eastern and southern parts of the site, where there were few known features, the topsoil was removed by box scraper working systematically either west-east or south-north to maintain the maximum area of cleanly scraped surface (Fig 1.7). This ensured that no major ditch systems would escape detection, although in the disturbance caused by the machine tracks any smaller features would have been missed. This work revealed a series of previously unknown enclosures and ring ditches to the east, all with clean fills that had not fully registered on the geophysical survey and which produced few finds.

Hand excavation and recording

With the ring ditches and enclosures, all intact terminals were excavated by hand along with all major ditch intersections and further sections spaced evenly around their circuits (Figs 1.5 and 1.6). A few terminals or major intersections were not excavated due to disturbance caused by either the furrows or field drains.

The overall aim was to achieve a relatively consistent level of feature sampling across the site. There were a few exceptions to this. Ring Ditch RD3 and part of Enclosure E1 were sampled more intensively to recover the majority of a localised assemblage of bronze working crucibles and mould fragments, as well as bone and antler working debris. The lowest level of sampling was on the 'empty' enclosures E9 and E12 and on ring ditch RD29, in the south-eastern group, where at the time of excavation the clean and compact fills were both intransigent and unproductive of finds, and subsequently the area was too waterlogged to excavate.

In general, excavation of the entire site was hampered by the exceptionally wet spring and early summer, which on clay natural resulted in frequent flooding, so that after any rainfall it was necessary to bail out all partially excavated features. The level of the local watertable also fluctuated with the weather. At best it fell to c.1.0m below ground level, so that only the deeper ditches were constantly wet. At its worst the site was waterlogged to the point of saturation, when the clay natural had the consistency of jelly and excavation became impossible. These conditions made it particularly difficult to obtain full sections of the deep boundary ditch at the northern end of the site.

The site was planned by hand at a scale of 1:50, and sections of excavated features were drawn at a scale of 1:10 or 1:20. The broader context of the excavations and their relationship to the surrounding landscape was recorded by field survey using a total station theodolite with automatic data logging.

In order to reduce the quantity of paperwork and to speed the recording process, a modified system of single context recording was employed. Each discrete feature and each feature within a single sectioned length of a linear or curvilinear ditch complex was given a unique context number in a single continuous sequence, and sometimes these single numbers also encompassed recuts not visible on the surface. Layers within these features were identified by a decimal suffix to the feature number (eg. ditch 120 would have fills 120.1, 120.2, etc), rather than by separate context numbers. As a result the entire context record fits in a single lever-arch file, and comprises 570 numbered features. During excavation context descriptions were written directly onto the section drawing sheets rather than the context sheets. Especially given the inclement weather during so much of this period, this recording methodology gave a considerable saving of time. All finds were recorded to context and layer suffix, when clearly identified during excavation. The intention was to transfer the context descriptions to the context sheets during post-excavation, but no assistants were made available to achieve this.

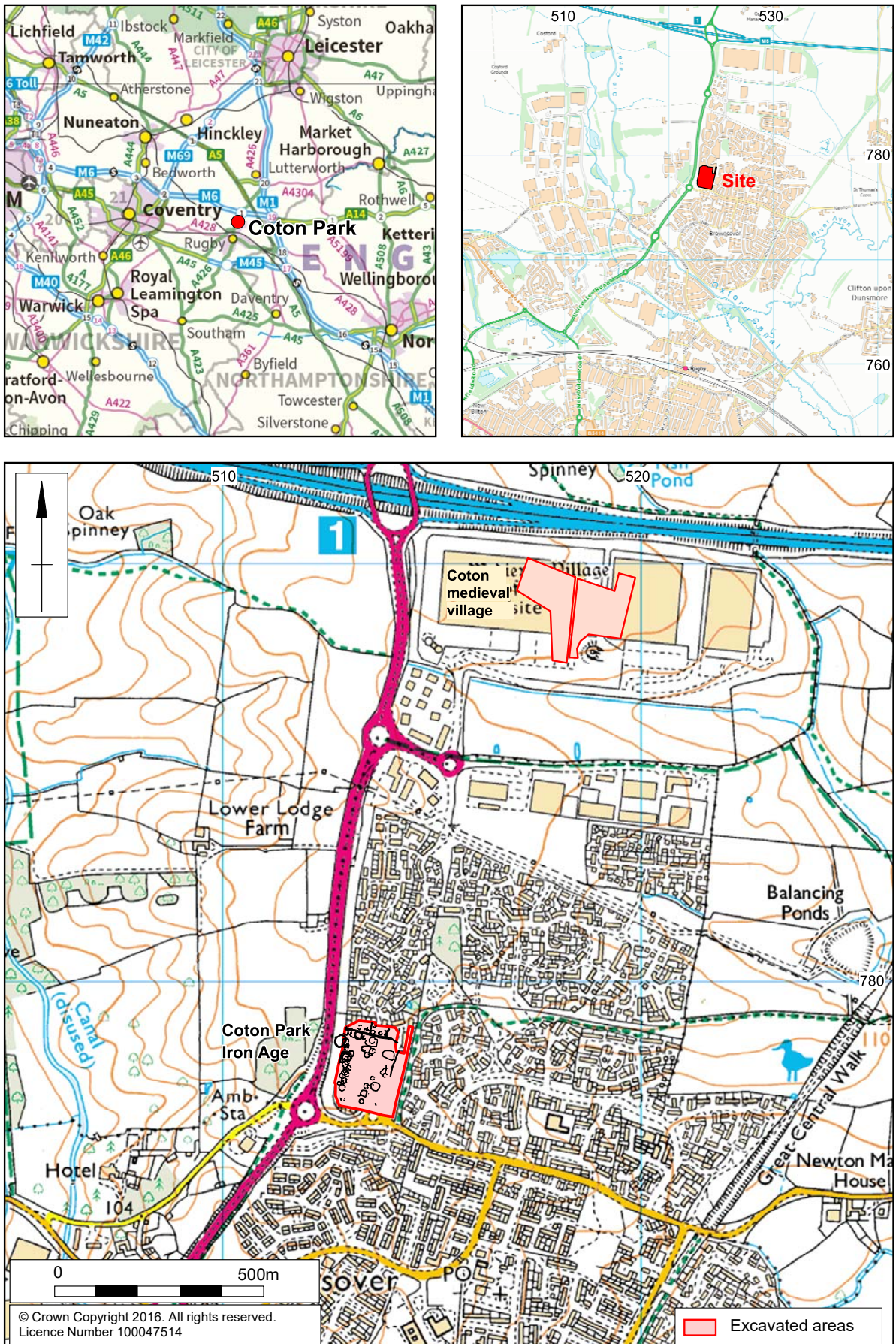


Figure 1.1: Site location

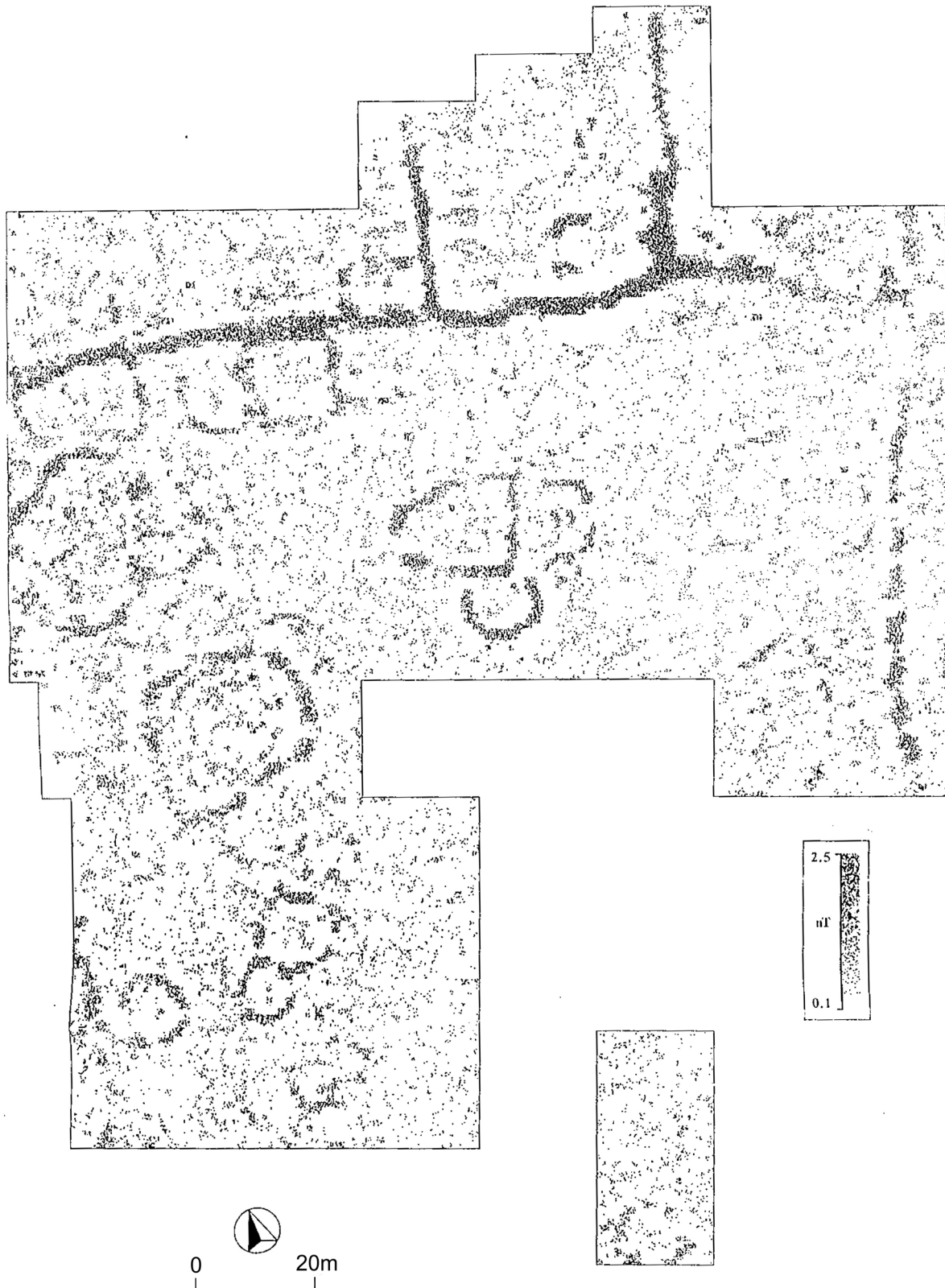


Figure 1.2: Results of geophysical survey, showing major structures (by Geophysical Surveys, Bradford, from Warwickshire Museum 1997)

Later disturbances

Across the entire site the Iron Age features were overlain by a regular system of furrows, the ploughed out remnant of the medieval field system (Fig 1.4). These both obscured and truncated the Iron Age features. In addition, the site was crossed by numerous ceramic field drains inserted over the past 150 years (see Chapter 9 for further details).

Excavation around the margins of the deep hollow to the north-east had shown that the upper alluvial clays within it overlay features of Iron Age date, and these features had been truncated prior to the deposition of these clays. The furrows of the

former field system ran across the alluvial deposits, indicating that they pre-dated the establishment of the medieval field system.

As the Iron Age features were evidently truncated, and presumably lost further down slope, the area of the hollow was not fully excavated. A test pit excavated at the centre of the deposits revealed tenacious blue grey alluvial clays beneath the upper clays, but no organic deposits were located. The alluvial clays were not bottomed due to the depth of the excavation and the incoming water, but they appear to denote the former presence of a pond in this area. These deposits lay below the depth of any likely disturbance from the proposed development.



Figure 1.3: Aerial view of the northern half of the site, looking north, showing major Iron Age structures and the furrows of the medieval field system (original images by Andy Holland)

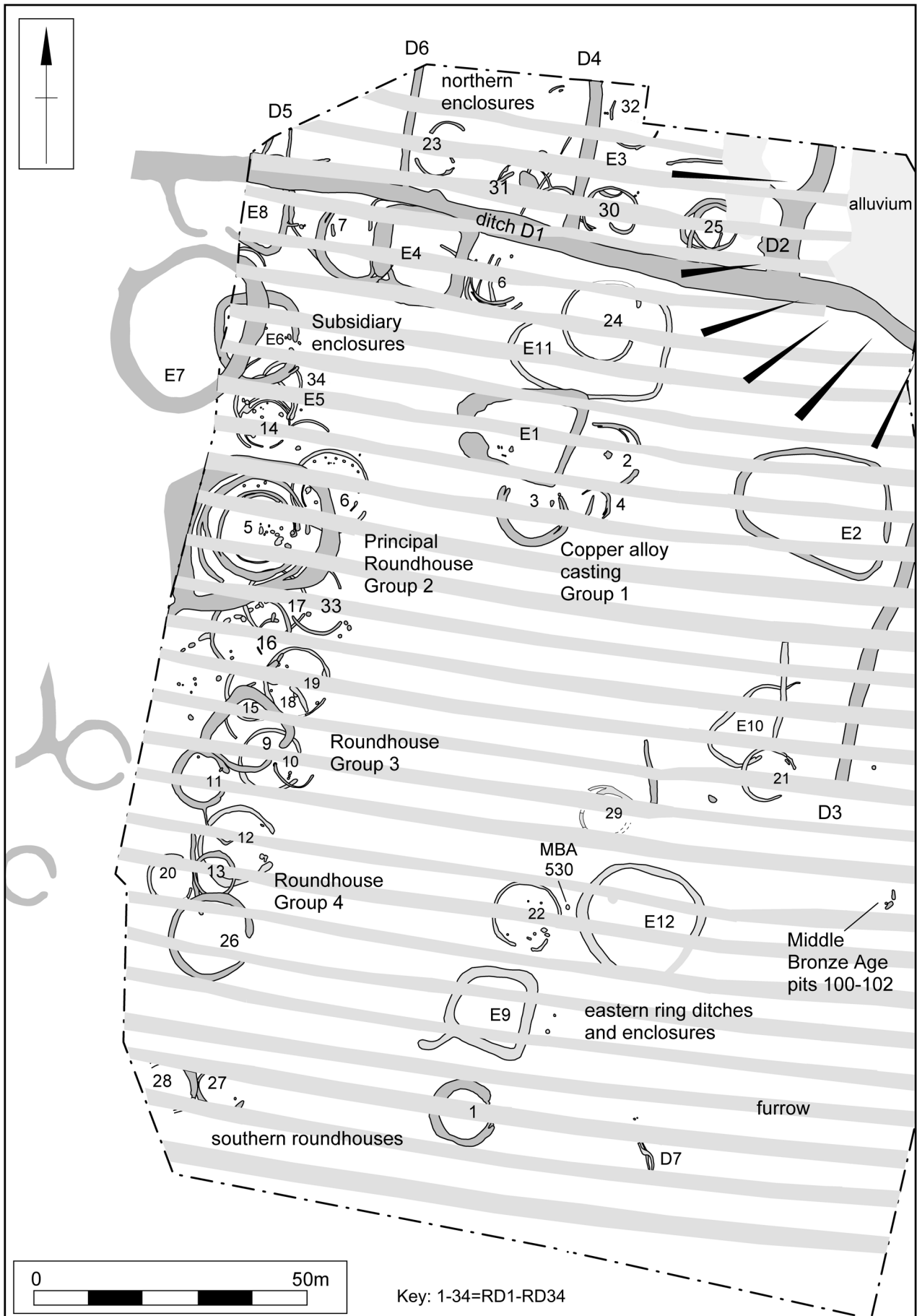


Figure 1.4: General site plan, showing the prehistoric features and the overlying furrows of the medieval field system



Figure 1.5: Looking north-east across enclosure E4 to the linear boundary ditch D1, showing the water-filled features following the flooding during March and April 1998



Figure 1.6: Excavation of enclosure E1, producing copper alloy casting debris; maintaining progress by use of barrow runs across the wet surface and bailing out features as necessary



Figure 1.7: Near the end of the excavation, looking towards the north-east corner of the site, with the machine stripped areas to the left, centre and top, and the box scraper stripped areas to the centre-right and foreground