

An Iron Age settlement and Roman complex farmstead  
at Brackmills, Northampton





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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD  
Summertown Pavilion  
18-24 Middle Way  
Summertown  
Oxford OX2 7LG

[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978-1-80327-686-1  
ISBN 978-1-80327-687-8 (e-Pdf)

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Front cover: Initial machine strip of the excavation area nearing completion, looking south-east.  
Back cover: Structure S4, looking south-east

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## Acknowledgements

MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) are grateful for the generous support of our clients RPS Heritage. Steven Weaver and Nick Cooke are both thanked for their advice and assistance throughout the project. Barry Clarke (Winvic) provided on-site logistical support. Additional thanks are due to Lesley-Ann Mather and Liz Mordue, Archaeological Advisors to Northamptonshire County Council, who monitored the archaeological works throughout.

MOLA project management was undertaken by Adam Yates and Antony Maull. The report has been prepared by Chris Chinnock, with useful advice and editorial comment provided by Yvonne Wolfram-Murray and Rob Atkins.

Finally, as always, MOLA are indebted to the many staff who undertook the archaeological fieldwork. A significant portion of the site was directed by Project Officer Sam Egan. Conor Murphy was Site Supervisor for much of the project. Joanne Clawley provided survey and archaeological planning support throughout. Carol Simmonds (MOLA) led an earlier phase of topographic survey. The rest of the archaeological team comprised project assistants from MOLA, Albion Archaeology, and In-Site Archaeology (see below).

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## Background

The development area, totalling 3.55ha, is located on land to the south of Bedford Road, Brackmills, Northampton, Northamptonshire (NGR SP 7880 5890; Fig 1.1). The excavation was undertaken on behalf of CgMs Heritage (now RPS Group PLC) acting on behalf of their clients Roxhill Developments Ltd. They have been granted planning permission by Northampton Borough Council (N/2016/0412) for the demolition of a farmhouse and associated building followed by

the construction of two warehouse and distribution units with ancillary office accommodation together with earthworks, landscaping and other associated infrastructure.

## Location and topography

The site was bounded to the west by a public footpath, which borders the present extent of Brackmills industrial estate. To the south the development area is marked by the line of the disused Northampton to

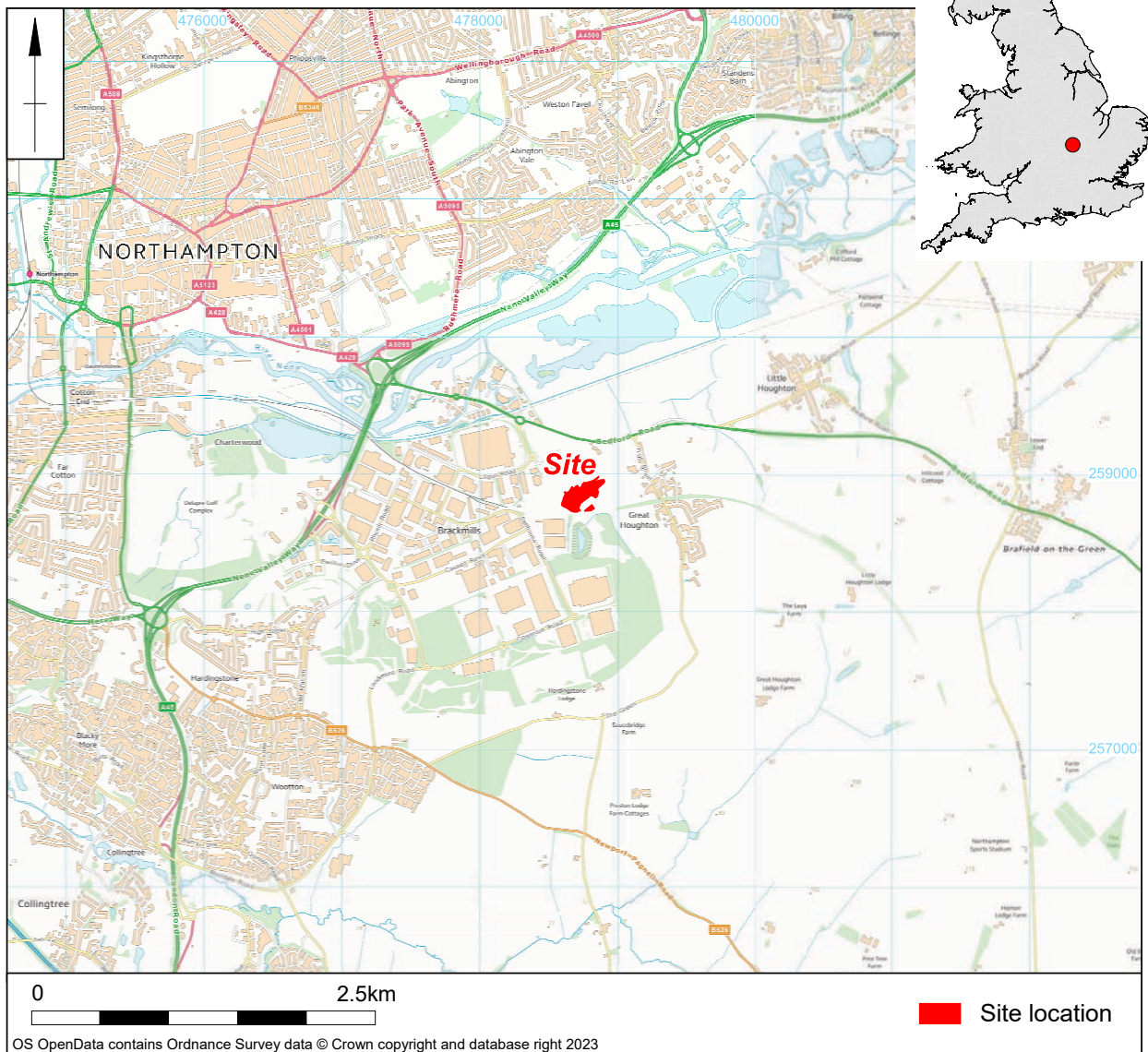


Figure 1.1 Site Location

Bedford railway and to the east lay the paddocks and residential properties of Great Houghton village. The development area comprised pasture fields with extant ridge and furrow earthworks present throughout the area. The site occupied a relatively flat plateau at the southern edge of the site, standing at around 71m above Ordnance Datum (aOD). The land then sloped steeply down to the north-west to approximately 58m aOD.

### Geology

by Steve Critchley

On the hill top abutting the former rail line were exposed beds of the Lower Jurassic Northampton Sand Formation and these were observed to be oolitic and sideritic ironstones, weathering to limonitic sands often displaying areas of a characteristic box like structure with a harder sandstone frame with internal deposits of soft sandy to clayey material. There were also some interbedded fossiliferous calcareous to ferruginous limestone and patches of off white to brownish kaolinitic clays.

Underlying these beds downslope were thick layers of mudstones belonging to the Whitby Mudstones Formation. The junction between the two horizons was obscured by periglacially derived clay rich solifluction deposits and later layers of sandy silty clays best described as general hill wash deposits.

### Historical and archaeological background

by John Walford

#### Previous archaeological work

The site was identified through a programme of archaeological evaluation, comprising a desk-based assessment (DBA) (Weaver 2013), geophysical survey (Prestidge 2013) and trial trench excavation (Hughes 2014) (Fig 1.3). The DBA noted a moderate potential for prehistoric remains and a moderate to high potential for remains of Roman date, and these conclusions were born out by the geophysical survey results. A dense palimpsest of enclosures and other settlement remains was detected on the high ground in the south east of the survey area with a sparser configuration of ditches



Figure 1.2 Engineering excavations in the Stage 1 area following completion of the archaeological works, shows the broad geological stratification, looking north



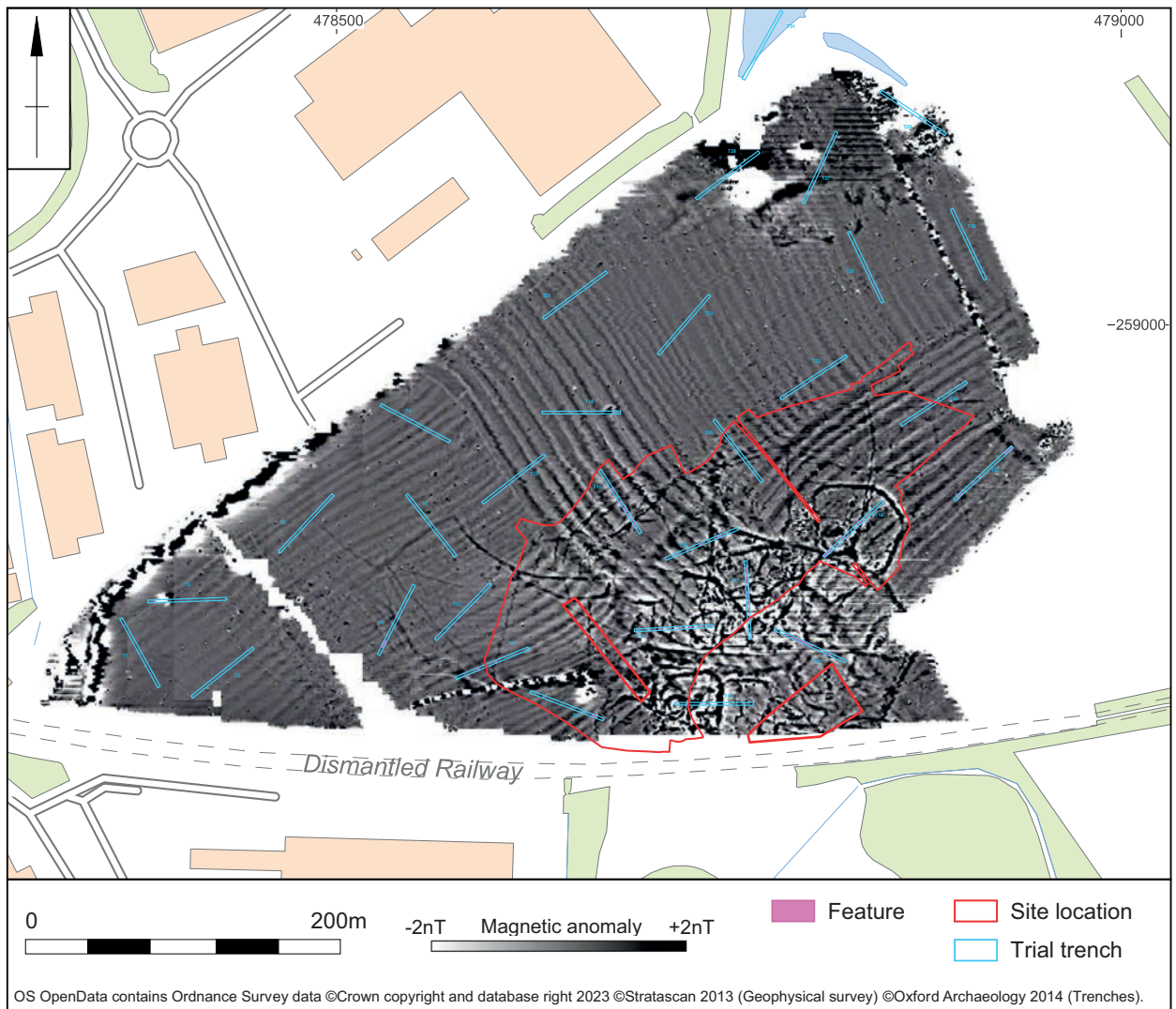


Figure 1.3 Excavated trial trenches overlying geophysical survey results

defining probable fields and trackways to the west and north-east. The trial trench excavation broadly confirmed the survey results and showed that the earliest of the remains dated from the middle Iron Age whilst the majority were Roman in date.

The excavation has been written up as an assessment report (Chinnock 2019) and as a full report (Chinnock 2021).

#### **Summary of local evidence relating to pre-Iron Age activity**

##### *Neolithic to Bronze Age*

An early Neolithic pit containing charcoal and worked flints was excavated c600m north-west of the excavation site in 2013. It was radiocarbon dated to 3530 - 3370 cal BC (Beta-354939, 4680 +/- 30 BP, 95% probability) and was perhaps contemporary with two nearby pits for

which no direct dating evidence was available (Clarke 2013). Five hundred metres south-east of the excavation site is a probable ring ditch, identified from cropmarks, which is likely to denote a round barrow of Neolithic or Bronze Age date (HER 5039).

Worked flints, the majority of which will be Neolithic or Bronze Age in date, are relatively common finds across the local landscape. An extensive fieldwalking survey of land to the south and west of the excavation site resulted in the recovery of at least a few worked flints from every one of the seven fields available for investigation (Shaw 1990) and the HER has records of other flints being found to the east and south-east of the site in various fields surrounding Great Houghton (HER 5034, 5036 and 5039). The nearest such finds to the site come from c200m to its south-east (HER 5036). There are also two flint axes recorded from the vicinity; one found in a pipe trench to the north-east of Great Houghton (HER 5054) and the other unstratified from

an excavation south-west of the village (Chapman 2001, 21).

### ***The Iron Age and Roman context of the site***

The upper Nene Valley was densely settled in the Iron Age and Roman periods, as evidenced by the abundance of recorded cropmarks, chance finds and excavated sites. An especially high concentration of Roman remains extends intermittently eastwards along the valley side from the excavation site past Great Houghton and Little Houghton towards Cogenhoe. A useful, if rather dated, summary of this complex is provided in the Royal Commission inventory of sites in central Northamptonshire (RCHME 1979, 84-87), which ranks the part of the complex focused around Little Houghton as one of Roman Northamptonshire's 'large settlements' (*ibid*, xliii-xlvii). One of the notable characteristics of the complex is its pottery industry, evidenced by the discovery in multiple locations, of kiln bars and other kiln furniture. Towards the eastern end of the complex, between Little Houghton and Cogenhoe, roof tiles have also been found, suggesting the presence of Roman buildings (*ibid*, 86).

There is a record of Roman pottery and possible Roman iron slag in two locations between 200-300m south and south-east of the excavation site (HER 5036 and 5040). Further south, c600m from the excavation site, a group of predominantly early to middle Iron Age remains were excavated prior to the laying of a water mains in 1996 (Chapman 2001). The excavated remains comprised two small enclosures together with unenclosed pits and postholes, a roundhouse and a unique burial of a woman wearing a lead torc around her neck. Cropmarks show that this site is one of a series of broadly Iron Age or Roman sites strung along the high ground at the top of the valley slope, with a complex of enclosures recorded north-west of Saucebridge Farm (HER 5843), a large rectangular enclosure south of Hardingstone Lodge (HER 4631).

There is much less evidence for Iron Age or Roman settlement directly west of the excavation site, across the large block of land now occupied by the Brackmills industrial estate. The only records relate to a few possible Roman ditches observed during groundworks (HER 4973 and 5041) and one group of unstratified Iron Age and Roman finds (HER 4968). Whilst this could reflect the paucity of archaeological investigation prior to the development of this land, it more probably reflects topographic and geological factors. There is a broad embayment in the valley side here, and it has been suggested that the lower lying ground, floored by Lias clay, may have been less attractive for settlement than the valley side and ridge crest to the south (Shaw 1990, 5).

It has been suggested, based on equivocal earthwork evidence, that an Iron Age valley fort or promontory fort lies on the valley side to the west of Great Houghton, c1km east of the excavation site (HER 9093). However, the HER record cites only a single personal opinion in support of this interpretation, and the recent Atlas of Hillforts project categorised the site as 'unconfirmed' (Lock and Ralston 2017).

### ***Summary of local evidence relating to post-Roman activity***

#### *Saxon*

Part of a cemetery of middle Saxon date was excavated c800m south-east of the site in 1996, during the laying of a water main (Chapman 2001). This was apparently a Christian cemetery, with unfurnished burials aligned east to west, one being covered by a timber mortuary structure or shrine. An earlier fieldwalking survey (Shaw 1990) had recovered a notable quantity of early medieval pottery from the field in which the cemetery lay, suggesting it may be part of a more extensive complex of remains. Further early medieval remains probably lie under the historic core of Great Houghton, c500m east of the site, but the only recorded archaeological evidence for this is two early medieval potsherds dug up in a garden (HER 5046).

#### *Medieval to post-medieval*

The site lies outside of any known focus of medieval or post-medieval settlement, in the former open fields of Great Houghton. Prior to the excavation, it contained ridge and furrow earthworks which were well preserved except for a small area of disturbance by post-medieval quarrying. The present pattern of fields was established in 1612, when the open fields of the parish were enclosed (Hall 1979).

### **Scope of mitigation works**

The purpose of the archaeological works was to mitigate against the impact of the development on the archaeological deposits through preservation by record. The first piece of work undertaken comprised a full topographical survey of the entire site area (17.3ha; Fig 1.5). Prior to excavation the targeted areas were split between full excavation, and strip, map and sample (SMS). Initially, the proposed excavation area totalled c1.4ha and the SMS area c1.8ha.

Throughout the course of the excavation and following discussion with the archaeological consultant and NCC Archaeological Adviser, additional areas were required to be excavated (Fig 1.4). Similarly, some small elements specified in the WSI were removed from the scope of

works, namely a single trial trench in the southern part of the development area.

Due to ecological constraints the excavation was conducted in four parcels/phases, summarised as follows:

- Stage 1 – 0.95ha (includes an extension to reveal the full extent of the prehistoric pit alignment)
- Stage 2 – 0.88ha
- Stage 3 – 0.99ha
- Stage 4 – 0.69ha
- Stage 5 – 0.04ha

The area immediately to the south-east of Stage 5 was subject to two phases of archaeological observation, described here as 6a (0.18ha) and 6b (0.59ha) (Fig 1.4).

## Methodology

### Earthwork survey

A detailed measured earthwork survey was undertaken in January 2017; surveying conditions were good over the survey zone. The works were undertaken in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) (Muldowney 2017) and national guidelines (HE 2017). A measured survey of earthworks and natural slopes was undertaken by means of a Leica Viva Global Positioning System (GPS) to a 3D accuracy of +/- 0.05m (using SMARTNET real-time corrections). The tops of the ridges and bases of the furrows were surveyed, alongside the tops and bottoms of slopes (for headlands) in order to generate a series of line and hachure plans. An interpretive plan of the remains is presented in

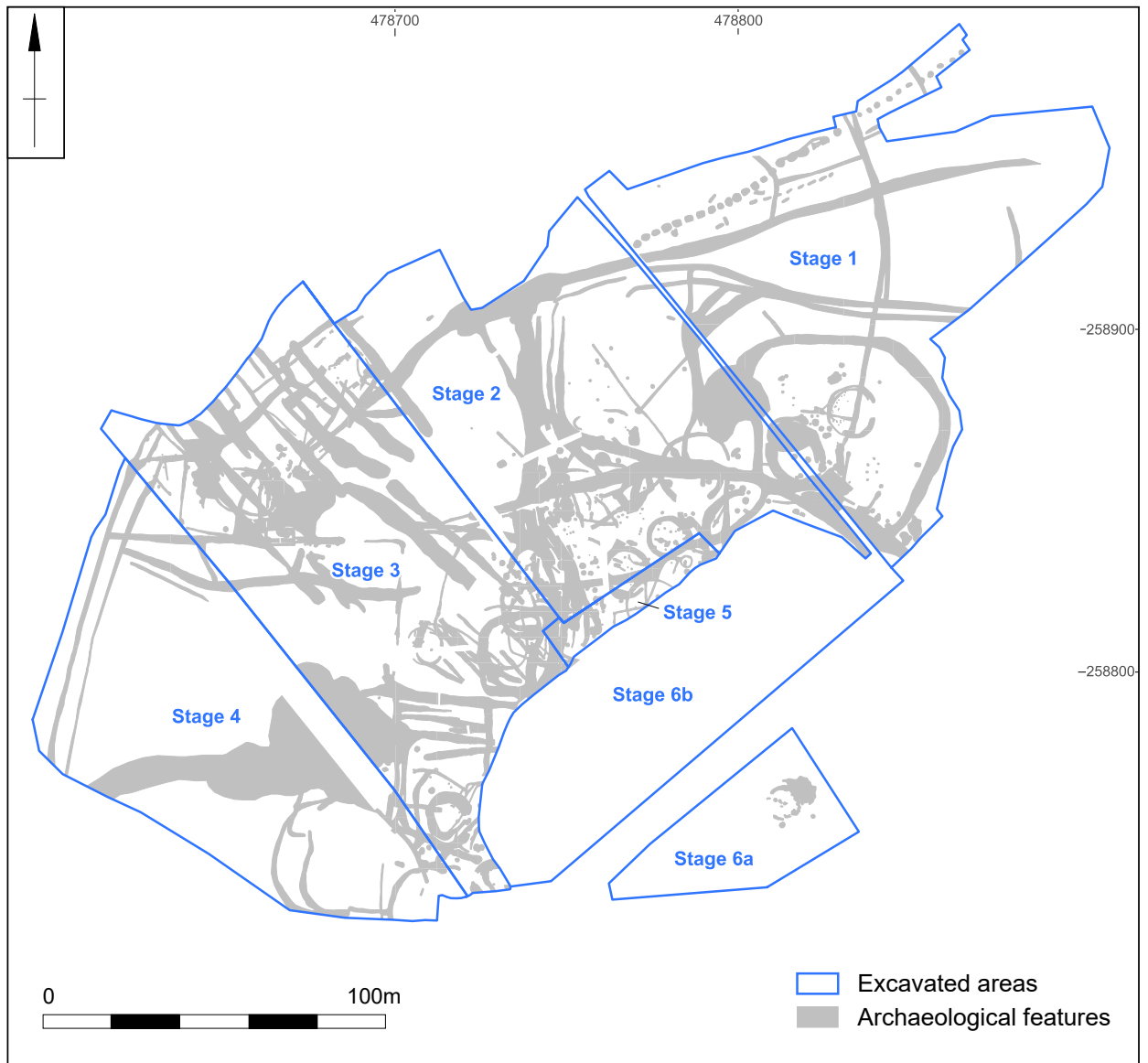


Figure 1.4 Plan of excavated areas





Figure 1.5 Development area, looking south-east, during earthwork survey prior to excavation

Figure 4.191. These were supplemented by a series of profiles (Figs 4.193-4.195). The results of the earthwork survey are discussed in further detail with the medieval remains in Chapter 4 of this report.

### **Excavation**

The excavation was split arbitrarily into four main phases to allow for the systematic management of topsoil and subsoil. A small fifth phase was added towards the end of the project to accommodate an amendment to the development plans. A metal detector survey was undertaken by Steve Critchley during the removal of the overburden and repeated at regular intervals once the machine stripping was complete.

### **On-site challenges**

In terms of identifying the archaeological features themselves, the variable geology and composition of the backfill material meant that features ranged from clear to extremely ephemeral. The impact of the ridge and furrow cultivation was significant, making it difficult to clarify the extent and character of some of the archaeology, particularly in the western and north-eastern parts of the excavation area. To mitigate this, efforts were made on site to remove as

many of the furrows as possible without damaging the underlying archaeological remains. The steep break of slope made mechanical removal of the furrows and other overburden challenging in places. Despite these efforts in places remnant furrows continued to be an obstacle across parts of the site. In addition, where the ground began to slope down to the north and north-west a thick layer of colluvial material had built up in several parts of the site. This was particularly evident in the northern part of Phase 1 area where just such a layer had sealed much of the pit alignment. The layer itself comprised friable dark brown silty sand and had archaeological features cut into it. This necessitated a more nuanced approach to its excavation and resulted in a staged process of hand excavation and subsequent mechanical removal following discussions with the Planning Archaeologist and Archaeological Consultant.

Another obstacle was encountered when, part way through the excavation, a Ringed Plover (protected bird species) nested in the recently exposed and cleaned remains of the late Roman stone building (S4), in the north-western part of Stage 3 area. On the advice of the project ecologist an exclusion zone was erected around the nesting site and the area abandoned until the nesting season had concluded. Unfortunately, during that time copious amounts of vegetation had begun



INTRODUCTION



Figure 1.6 Initial machine strip of the excavation area nearing completion, looking south-east

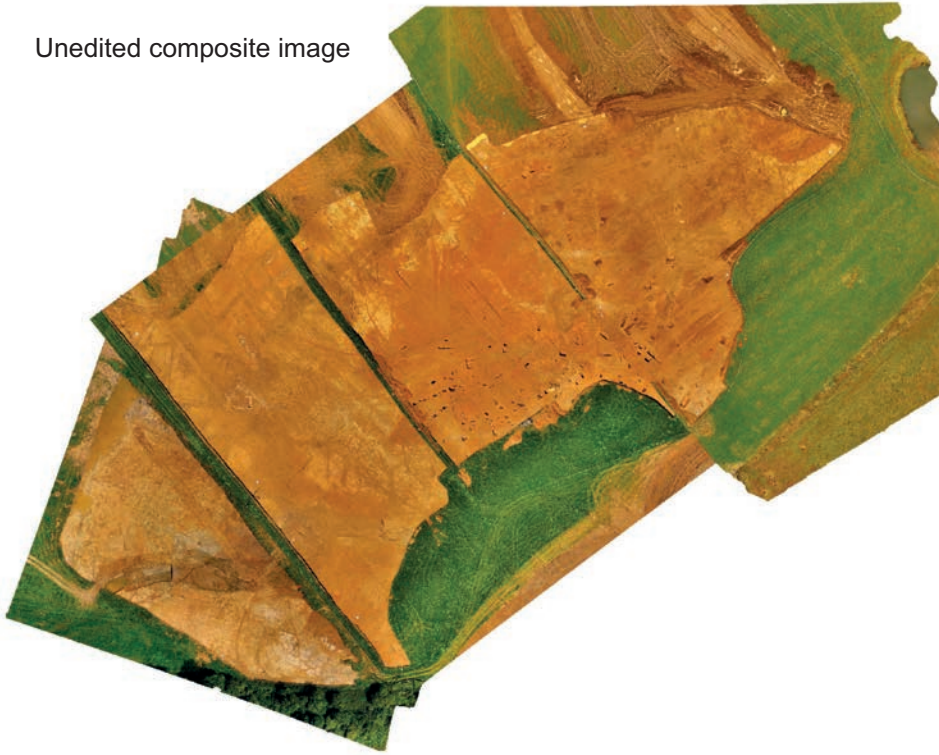


Figure 1.7 General shot of site showing areas most prone to flooding at the north-western edge of site, looking north-east





Unedited composite image



High contrast composite image

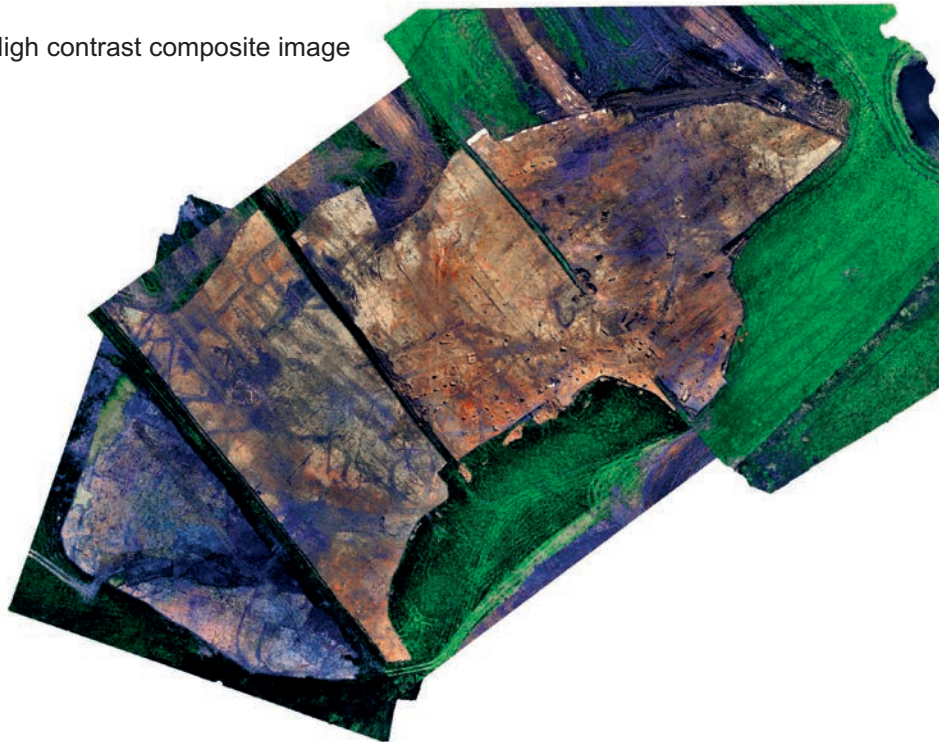


Figure 1.8 Comparison of high contrast and unedited composite drone images

to grow across the area and due to the nature of the archaeological remains in this area, re-stripping the area without damaging the remains was not possible. Archaeological excavation in this area then required targeted areas of hand cleaning to expose and excavate key relationships and areas of importance and/or where a more complex stratigraphical sequence was present.

Due to the length of the project inclement weather, both extremely wet and extremely hot/dry conditions, were experienced throughout the excavation. The steep slope and the wet weather resulted in regular washes of silt across large parts of the site which further obscured the archaeological remains and encouraged further vegetative growth across the site. Furthermore, the north-western edge of the site prevented the rainwater from draining away and large areas of the north-western parts of Stage 3 and 4 were prone to flooding, adding further logistical and archaeological challenges (Fig 1.7).

Efforts have been made to utilise available technology to maximise the amount of information recoverable from those areas where the archaeological features were most ephemeral. Both broad and detailed drone imagery was captured for most of the site. The standard images, whilst useful to a degree, further highlight the difficulty in identifying some of the archaeological remains on site. Comparison of the final plan with the data from the trial trench evaluation would suggest the same problem was encountered during the archaeological evaluation of the site (Hughes 2014). Manipulation of the images to produce high contrast

copies enabled archaeological features to be identified more clearly, which were only partially visible on the ground or in some cases not at all (Fig 1.8).

An important point to consider throughout the report is that the 'site' constitutes a much larger area than the excavated area. For reference, the term 'site' is used to refer to the limits of the archaeological evidence as determined by a combination of the geophysical, trial trench evaluation and excavation data, rather than just what was observed within the excavation/development area. For at least part of the occupation of the site, the core of the settlement lay beyond the south-eastern limit of the excavation area (Fig 1.3). Where features that lay at the edge of the excavation area, attempts have been made to relate them to features observed in the trial trench evaluation and/or the geophysical data. Occasionally, foci of activity within the excavation area are described. However, some of these features may have been peripheral to the nexus of activity within the site. Chapter 8 attempts to bring the evidence together further to discuss the development of the site as informed by all of the archaeological work to date.

### **Site archive**

All archaeological deposits and artefacts encountered during excavations were fully recorded and all paperwork and plans displayed the Event Number ENN107950 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).