

# Excavations at King's Low and Queen's Low



# Excavations at King's Low and Queen's Low

two Early Bronze Age barrows in Tixall,  
North Staffordshire

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and members of the  
Stoke-on-Trent Museum Archaeological Society

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*In memory of Dick Spicer*  
1947-2000





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# Preface

King's Low was excavated during the summers of 1986 to 1992, and Queen's Low 1993 and 1994, under the auspices of the Stoke-on-Trent Museum Archaeological Society (SOTMAS). The excavations and post-excavation have been funded by SOTMAS and many members of the society have formed the workforce for all activities. Gary Lock and Dick Spicer directed the work with Winston Hollins co-ordinating much of the post-excavation.

King's Low stands within an area of commercial woodland and we are indebted to Tilhill Economic Forestry and Economic Forestry Group PLC, especially Mr. David Owen, for permission to work there. Queen's Low stands within farmland and we thank Mr Robert Madders of Lower Hanyards Farm and Mr Nigel Bostock of Tixall Garden Farms for similar permission.

A considerable number of SOTMAS members have been involved in the excavation and post-excavation work and we would like to thank them all. The following deserve special mention: Dave Thomas for photography; Les Higgins for pottery and faience reconstructions; the Outram family, Helen and Derek for pottery reconstruction, the young Alan for tireless work on site and dealing with the finds at Queen's Low. Thanks also to Floss Wilkins for all drawings, unless otherwise acknowledged, and to Chris Hulin for invaluable advice.

We would also like to thank David Barker and Deb Ford of the City Museum and Art Gallery, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent for support in various ways, for displaying some of the material from the excavations and for providing a home for the site archive.

# 1 Introduction and background

## 1.1 Introduction

Gary Lock

King's Low and Queen's Low are situated in the parish of Tixall to the north-east of Stafford, Staffordshire (Fig. 1.1). At the time of investigation King's Low (Staffordshire HER PRN 851, SJ 3954 3237) was still extant and lies within Blackheath Covert whereas Queen's Low (Staffordshire HER PRN 855, SJ 3963 3238), about one kilometre to the east, was virtually ploughed-out and within a field of rough pasture.

The barrows are located on Tixall Heath, the northern most point of Cannock Chase and just within the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The topography of the immediate area is gentle with King's Low standing at 90 m OD and Queen's Low at 122 m OD, this is the 'central lowland belt' of Staffordshire with the Cannock hills to the immediate south (Pallister 1976). The barrows lie approximately 2.5 km to the south of the River Trent and its floodplain and one kilometre to the south of King's Low is the River Sow which flows eastward to join the Trent in approximately 4 km. Like much of the rest of Cannock Chase, the barrows lie within an area of superficial glacial and periglacial deposits<sup>1</sup> derived during the Pleistocene Ice Age and overlying Keuper Marls and sandstones. The surface deposits are a mixture of tills and glacio-fluvial sands and gravels with river terrace deposits in the valley of the Sow. The gravels are a mixture of pebbles and cobbles formed from a variety of rock types, most being of various quartz-rich rocks such as quartzite, vein quartz and red, brown or black chert and flint clasts. The nature of these indicates that these glacial deposits were laid down by the late Devensian Irish Sea Ice which brought debris into the Stafford area, not only from the floor of the Irish Sea, but from as far north as the Lake District and the Southern Uplands.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 A third barrow?

Gary Lock

There is a possibility of there originally being a third barrow on Tixall Heath although the early sources seem to confuse this with the finding of two, now missing, urns in the area. The second edition of William Camden's survey of Britain states that:

On Tixall heath are two barrows, called the King's and Queen's Low. Two urns found on this heath in the last

century were lately in the custody of Walter Lord Aston (Camden 1806, 511).

Camden's monumental work incorporated much material gathered by other people and for the presence of King's Low and Queen's Low he acknowledges Thomas Pennant. In Pennant's account of his journey from Chester to London in 1780 he writes: 'On leaving Tixall, I went through the park, and part of a common of the same name, on which are two *tumuli*; one called the king's, the other the queen's *Low*; but no reason is assigned for the names.'<sup>3</sup> There is no mention of a third barrow although by the early 19th century Clifford and Clifford write the following:

these urns have not been preserved nor is the account very accurate, for only twenty years ago three lows were visible, one of which has since been levelled by the plough but not until it had been dug into but without making any discovery (Clifford and Clifford 1817, 86-87).

Erdeswick's Survey of Staffordshire (1844) offers a slightly different account:

Tixall Heath is distinguished by two remarkable Tumuli: one named the King's and the other the Queen's Low. About a century ago, two urns were found near them, supposed to have been of Roman workmanship (page 70).

So, Camden mentions the lost urns being found but ascribes them to 'the heath' rather than either King's or Queen's Low specifically, Pennant does not mention the urns at all nor a third barrow and by 1817 Clifford and Clifford imply that the urns were by then lost and did not come from digging into the third mound anyway, a view supported by Erdeswick. The conclusion is that the original location of the two lost urns is unknown, as is the location of the third barrow. As part of the background work for this excavation a survey of aerial photographs covering ploughed and pasture fields and a fieldwalking survey through nearby woodland produced no evidence of a third barrow.

The only other recorded finding of pottery from the two barrows is a note in Hanley Museum by Robinson: 'two amorphous pottery sherds from the barrow at Blackheath Covert (Tixall parish). Private possession on loan to Stafford Museum (L90b, c)'. The date of finding is recorded as 'unknown' and the sherds are now in Hanley Museum

1 [http://maps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyviewer\\_google/googleviewer.html](http://maps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyviewer_google/googleviewer.html) (accessed February 6th 2012).

2 Geological information provided by Bob Roach.

3 Vision of Britain at [http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/text/contents\\_page.jsp?t\\_id=Pennant\\_C2L](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/text/contents_page.jsp?t_id=Pennant_C2L) (accessed February 7th 2012).

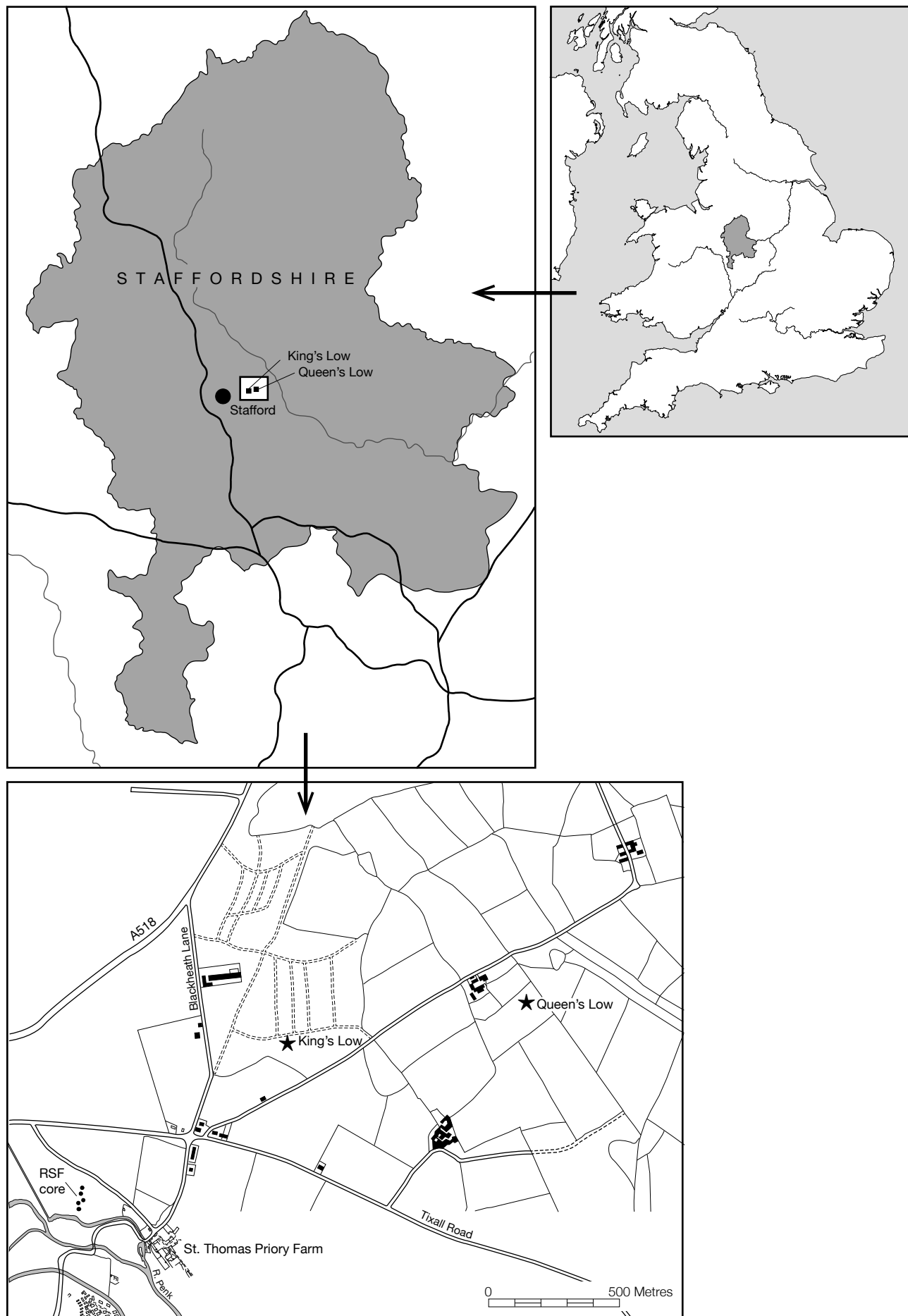


Figure 1.1 The location of King's Low and Queen's Low, Staffordshire, together with the general area of the environmental core in the valley of the River Sow (see Chapter 3.1).

(Accession number K38.1978) and have been confirmed as Early Bronze Age, undecorated.

### 1.3 The naming of King's Low and Queen's Low

Rose Longden

In order to try and establish the age of the names of the two barrows a selection of map and other documentary evidence was consulted.

#### Map evidence

All of the following maps were consulted in the Stafford Record Office.<sup>4</sup>

The early maps of Staffordshire are too small in scale to indicate any detailed landmarks. Robert Morden's map of 1722, as used in Camden's *Britannia*, does show a curious barrow-like hill at the location of King's Low although it is not annotated. The other maps which were checked are Staffordshire Estate and Tithe maps and awards as follows:

- Baswich (1778) ref: D/240/B/1/50
- Baswich (1809) ref: D615/M/6/10
- Baswich (late 17th century) ref: D603/H/3/9
- Ingestre (1802/1813) ref: D240/E(A) 2/134
- Tixall (1753) ref: D240/E(A) 2/253
- Tixall (1749) ref: D240/E(A) 2/252
- Tixall (early 19th century) Upper and Lower Hanyards ref: D240/E(A)2/272

None of the above indicate the existence of King's Low and Queen's Low.

The William Yates map of 1775<sup>5</sup> was the first systematic survey of the county at the scale of 1 inch to the mile. It does not indicate the barrows at all but it does show the general area which is now called Blackheath Covert named as St. Thomas' Heath. It also shows what appears to be a large pool less than one mile to the south towards the River Sow, named as Kingston Pool (discussed further below). This is also represented on John Speed's map of Stafford from 1611 where it is called the King's Pool.

The earliest map which locates the two barrows and names them as 'King's Low' and 'Queen Low' is the 1831/32 Henry Teesdale map.

The Ordnance Survey First Edition map of the area (ref: 37.12), dating to 1881 and 1901, is marked 'Tumulus' and 'Stone Cross Remains' at the position of King's Low although it is not named. The 1901 and 1923 map (ref: 38.9) indicates the position of a 'Tumulus' where Queen's Low is situated, but again it is not named.

The conclusion from the map evidence is that Teesdale's map of 1831/2 is the earliest to name the two barrows.

#### Documentary evidence

There is no mention of the barrows in Robert Plot's 1686 survey of the natural history and antiquities of Staffordshire, although he does mention a considerable number of other Lows in the county. As mentioned above, by the early 19th century Camden's second edition of *Britannia*,

probably using the evidence from Pennant's 1780 publication, is using the names King's Low and Queen's Low which then become established and used in subsequent texts and Teesdale's and future maps.

The map evidence, however, does not indicate why the two barrows are called King's and Queen's Low nor for how long before 1831/2 they are likely to have been known by these names. It has already been mentioned above that not far from King's Low was a pool known as King's Pool or Kingston Pool. What we can see from Teesdale's map is that close to the area of the mounds there is an area called King's Pool. Cockin (2000, 231) suggests that medieval pools in this area were owned by the Crown and in King John's reign tenants could hold the pools on condition that the King could keep all the pike and bream that he caught there. According to the Chartulary of St. Thomas (Parker 1887, 191) the site of King's Pool or the area near it was known in medieval times as 'Kinesbroc'. If we deconstruct this name, 'broc' means marsh, marshy ground, any watery area or pool (Ekwall 1960) and the first part of the word 'Kines' could be a derivation of the word King. On the outskirts of Stafford is the ancient parish of Kingston (or Kingstone) which means a royal manor or King's tun (*ibid.*), although the word can also be spelt 'Kyneston'. It is a possibility, therefore, that Kines in Kinesbroc, means King's and the medieval area known as Kinesbroc means King's marshy area or pool. There is a possibility, therefore, that the name King's Low does take its name from that of the area close to it (i.e. King's Pool or Kinesbroc in medieval times). The word 'Low' is Old English, usually translated as 'hill' but such 'features in the West Midlands were in fact tumuli, many of them associated with Anglo-Saxon pagan burial' (Hooke 1983, 45), indicating that King's Low could mean King's barrow or hill.

But as Clifford and Clifford point out (1817, 87) no one really knows why these barrows were given the names of King's Low and Queen's Low. The Reverend T. Loxdale, a 19th century antiquarian, calls them 'the kings' and queen's lows' but states that 'there is no room for a conjecture in what age it might be'.<sup>6</sup> Despite now knowing the approximate age of the mounds we are still no nearer to knowing the origins of their names.

Although Clifford and Clifford state that the origin of the name King's Low is 'now forgotten' they do make a guess at the origin of Queen's Low suggesting it takes its name from the adjoining fields called 'Quinsleys'. This, they propose, is assigned to the time of Elfreda, the daughter of Alfred, Queen of Mercia who may have fought a battle in the area (*ibid.* 87). Obviously local people, historians and antiquarians of the 19th century and before were unaware of the real age of the barrows and may not have realised that they belonged to a period long before Elfreda of the 10th century. But of course, it doesn't mean that Clifford and Clifford's reasoning as to why it was named so is wrong as people may have attributed the mound to this Queen, unaware of its antiquity. 'Quins' may be a derivative of Queen and 'ley' means a forest clearing or meadow

4 <http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/archives/homepage.aspx> (accessed 7th February 2012).

5 Collections for a History of Staffordshire, 4th Series, Volume 12.

6 Stafford Record Office, Microfilm 50.



(Paffard 1996, 7). So Queen's Low could have taken its name from Quinsleys, but equally it could have been the other way round and the fields could have been named after the barrow if that was named first.

Whatever the origins of the name 'Queen's Low', whether associated with Elfreda or not, it does not explain why the other barrow is called King's Low. But Clifford and Clifford include a footnote, a poem of Henry of Huntingdon an ancient historian, in which he styles Elfreda as 'both king and queen' so if the area was considered a battle place of Elfreda in the past, where she 'ordered heaps of earth ... to be raised over the bodies of the slain' (Clifford and Clifford 1817, 87) then both barrows could have been named after her. Alternatively, it could be argued that if there were two barrows quite close together and one is called Queen's Low after her, naming the other as King's Low would infer a pair of barrows of the same age and same origins.

#### 1.4 The environmental setting

*Helen Sugden and Alan Outram*

In Ch. 3.1, below, Helen Sugden and Alan Outram present a detailed report on the environmental development of the area based on molluscs and pollen from a core taken from the River Sow floodplain approximately one kilometre away from King's Low. The following summarises their conclusions:

A slow flowing fluvial environment depositing fine sediments and supporting reeds and sedges existed in the late-glacial/early Holocene. A relatively sparse landscape in terms of vegetation existed locally, including birch, grasses and herbs, characteristic of the early Holocene. Peat began to form *in situ* in parts of the floodplain, and subsequent drying allowed the colonization of these by pine, particularly at the floodplain edges and on higher ground. Pine persisted as the dominant tree type although fires, some possibly created by humans, allowed the expansion of oak and hazel within this woodland. Locally, areas of wet heath and reeds were colonized by alder *c.* 6000 BP and climatic warming and increased wetness reduced local pine populations and promoted the growth of lime on the floodplain margins. A series of small scale, temporary clearances occurred from *c.* 3000 BP onwards in the mid-late Bronze Age and thereafter the local woodland re-colonized. Further clearance may have occurred in the Iron Age and Romano-British periods for which there is evidence from the nearby King's Pool pollen core (Bartley and Morgan 1990). However, this is not readily substantiated in the River Sow pollen record. There is a strong possibility that a hiatus covering this period occurs in the pollen profile with a sharp decrease in arboreal pollen. From the early medieval period clearance is extensive, and evidence of cereal cultivation arises. Such clearance, as expected, continues into the present.

In terms of the extent of human impact on vegetation within the region, particularly that which is contemporaneous to King's Low and Queen's Low, there is a suggestion in the River Sow and King's Pool evidence that initial

human interference occurs in the Mesolithic. However, the first substantial clearance shows in the King's Pool analysis as reductions in arboreal pollen types and increases in anthropogenic indicators dating from 4170 BP (uncal) onwards. Pollen has also been extracted from the ground surface immediately under the King's Low barrow from which 'considerable human induced disturbance must be inferred (Chambers and Wilshaw, Ch. 3.2). However, the pollen profile from the River Sow floodplain shows nothing so significant as to be interpreted as human disturbance of the landscape until *c.* 3000 BP (uncal).

The later timing of the clearance in the River Sow diagram does not however contradict the above. The contrast between the three sites in the timing and extent of human impacts is explained by Limbrey's (1983) hypothesis that pollen relating to woodland clearances is often masked by surrounding forest, particularly at the floodplain edge. Hence clearance patterns may be indistinct or absent in pollen diagrams from floodplains as these areas tend to be latterly and inconsistently exploited.

Thus the accumulated evidence seems to suggest that human clearance of the landscape occurred in the region on drier ground from the Early Bronze Age. This clearance continued in a sporadic and intermittent fashion through to the Later Bronze Age. At this time, the pollen evidence from the floodplain suggests that human use of the environment temporarily encroached onto the wetter ground, perhaps indicating the expansion of human activity in the area leading to the use of more marginal land.

#### 1.5 The archaeological setting

*Gary Lock*

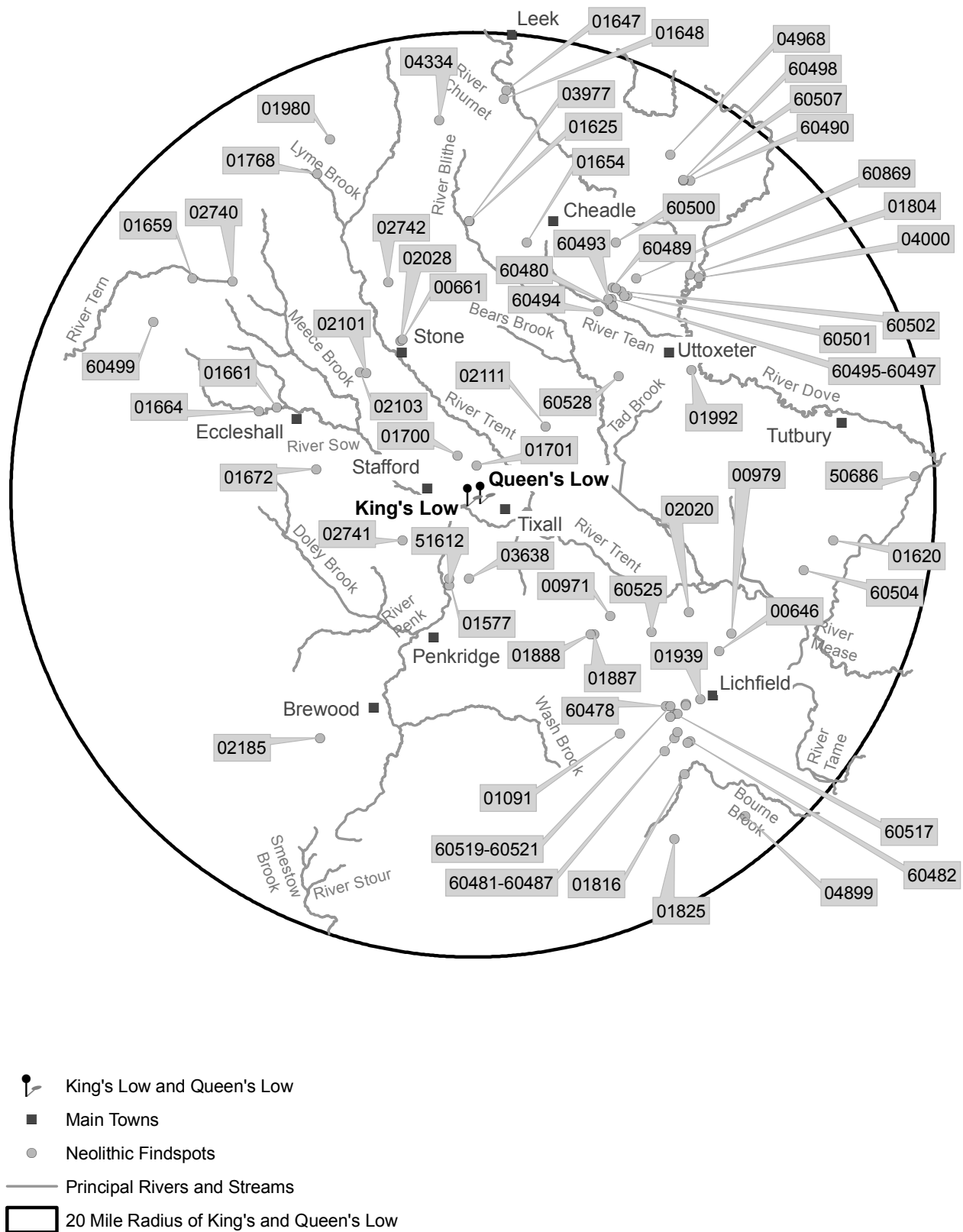
This section places King's Low and Queen's Low, Tixall, within the context of known archaeological sites and finds for the Neolithic to Iron Age periods as recorded in the Staffordshire Historic Environment Record.<sup>7</sup> It is meant to act as a pointer to the detailed information within the HER and only provides a visual snapshot of the density of finds and sites within a 20-mile radius of King's Low and Queen's Low together with HER PRNs (Primary Reference Numbers). Some of the sites shown are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 below with references, where a more extensive discussion of King's Low and Queen's Low is presented within the context of barrow studies from the antiquarian to modern periods.

There are no recorded Neolithic sites close to Tixall (Fig. 1.2), the nearest being the concentration of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age funerary and ritual sites further east in the valley of the River Trent and at its confluence with the River Tame. Here are three likely cursuses identified by aerial photography and varying amounts of excavation (a small one at Catholme (00204) and at Alrewas (00207)) although at Barton-under-Needwood (00208) the site is unlikely. Part of the same Catholme complex is a hengi-form monument (00203), together with a causewayed enclosure (00209), while a less likely henge is suggested by aerial photography at Shenstone in the valley of

<sup>7</sup> We would like to thank Suzy Blake of the Staffordshire HER for producing the figures presented here, Figures 1.2 to 1.9, together with

reports for all of the shown PRNs. Also thanks to Janet Cooper for liaising with the HER.

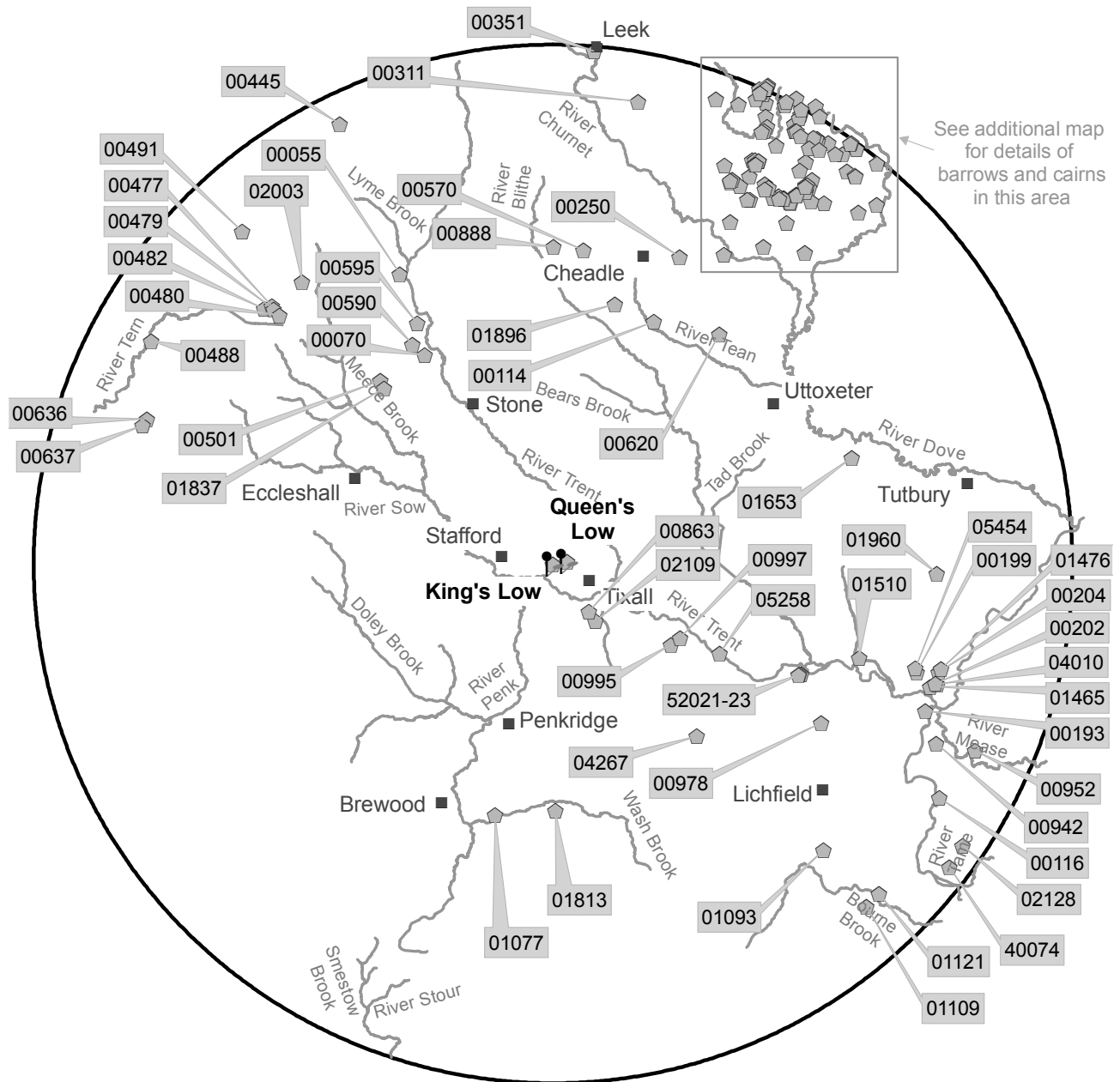









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Figure 1.3 Neolithic finds within a 20-mile radius of King's Low and Queen's Low (courtesy of Staffordshire HER, produced by Suzy Blake).



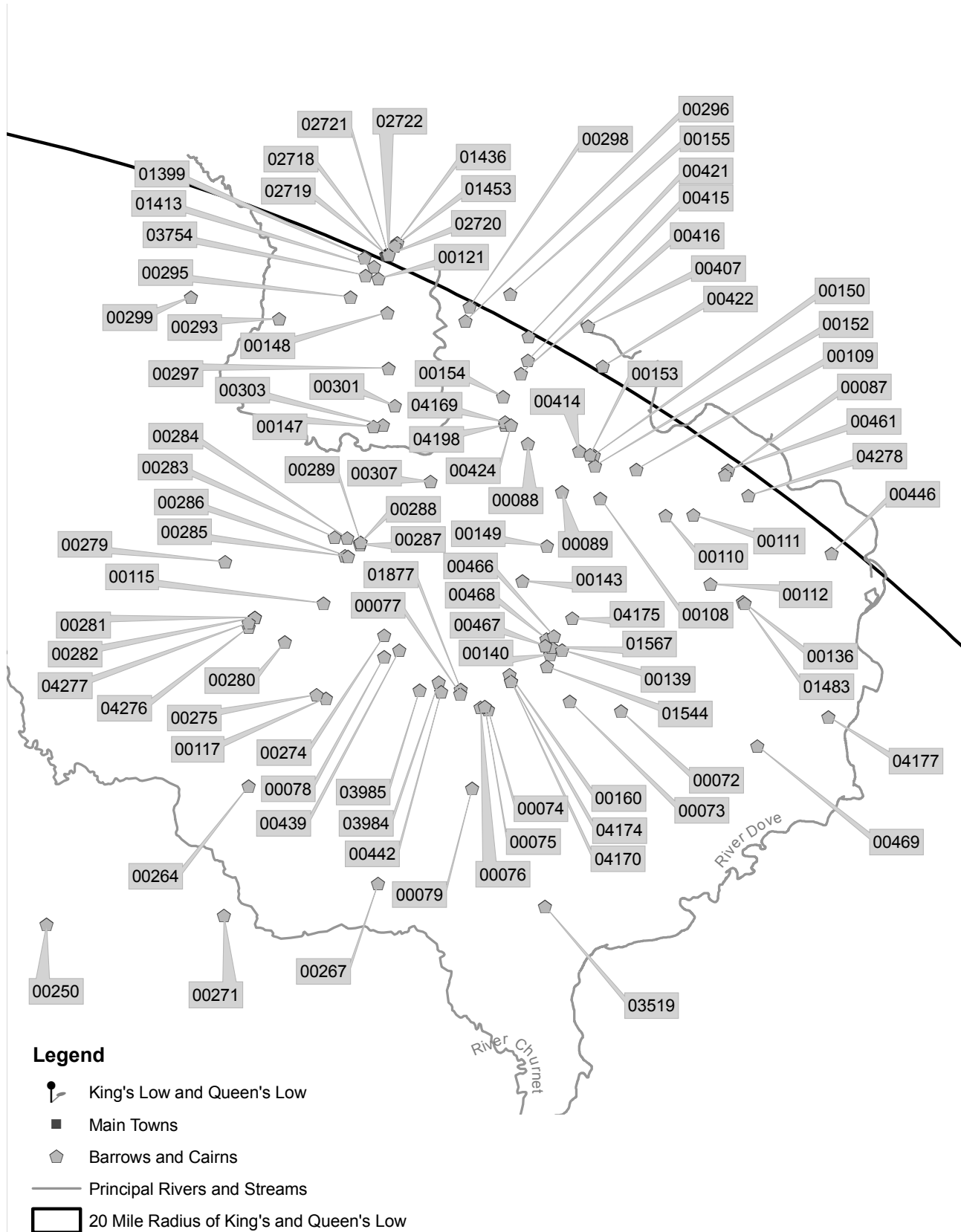


**Legend**

-  King's Low and Queen's Low
-  Main Towns
-  Barrows and Cairns
-  Principal Rivers and Streams
-  20 Mile Radius of King's and Queen's Low

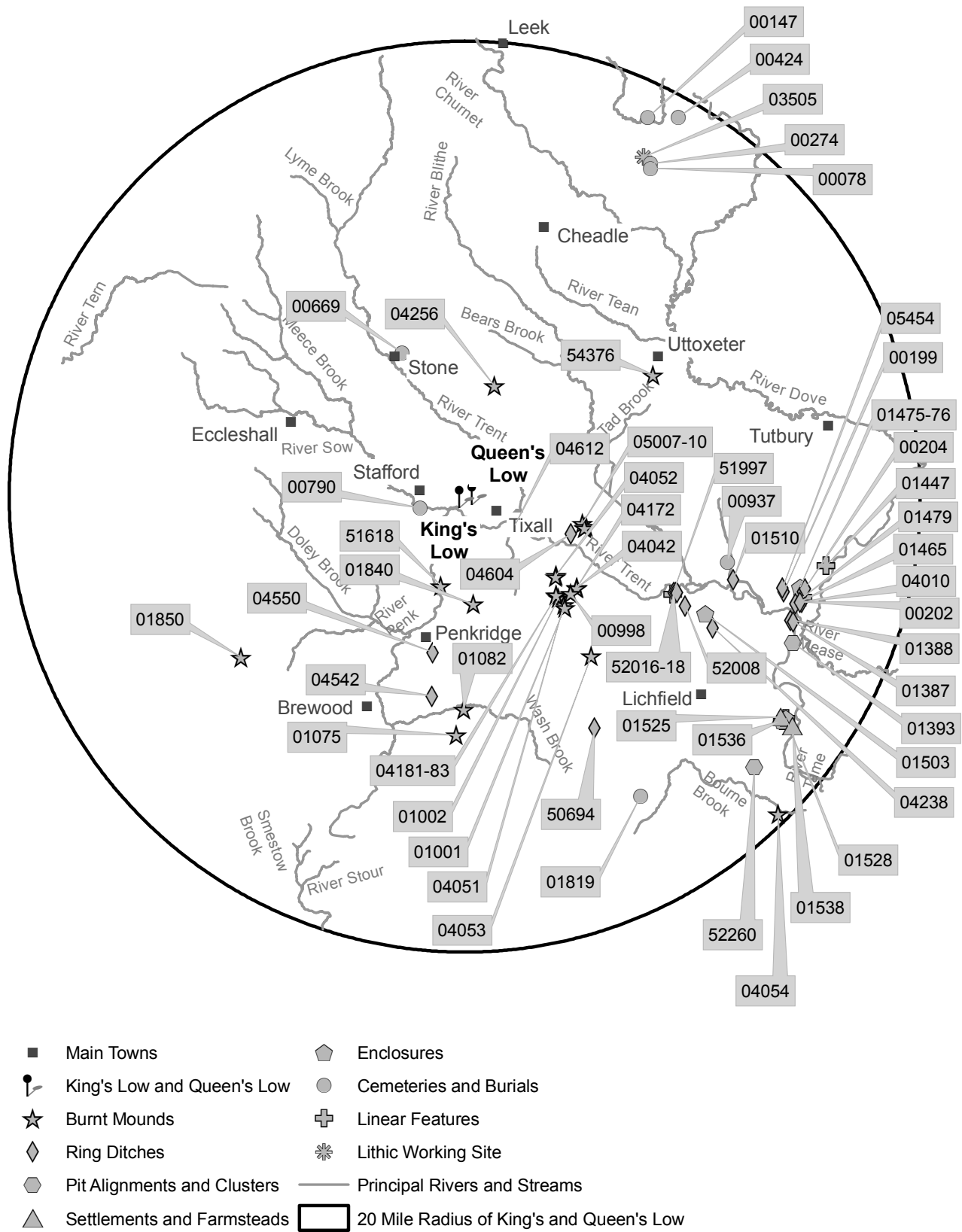
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Figure 1.4 Bronze Age barrows within a 20-mile radius of King's Low and Queen's Low (courtesy of Staffordshire HER, produced by Suzy Blake).



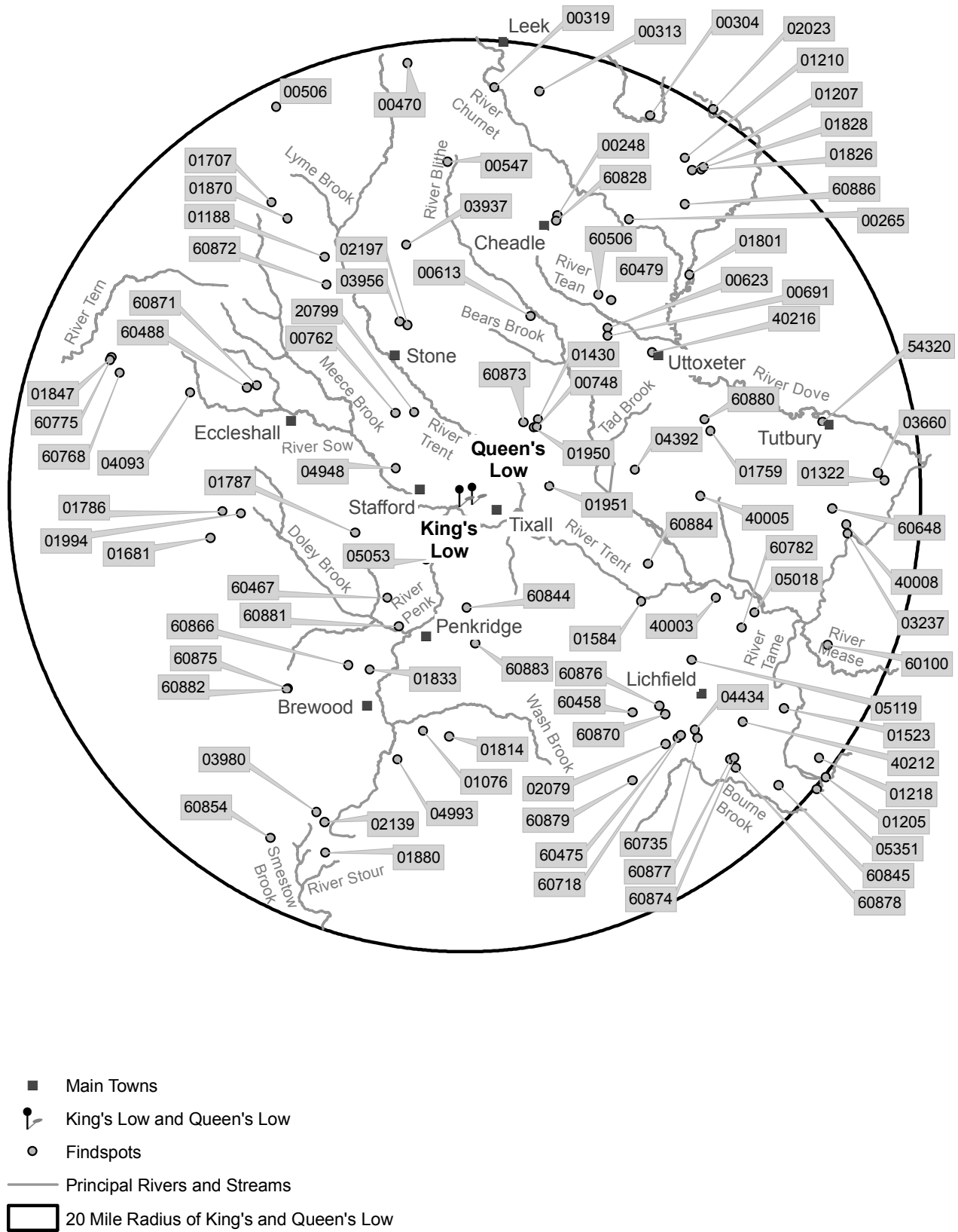
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Figure 1.5 Bronze Age barrows in the Staffordshire Peak District (courtesy of Staffordshire HER, produced by Suzy Blake).



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Figure 1.6 Bronze Age sites within a 20-mile radius of King's Low and Queen's Low (courtesy of Staffordshire HER, produced by Suzy Blake).



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Figure 1.7 Bronze Age finds within a 20-mile radius of King's Low and Queen's Low (courtesy of Staffordshire HER, produced by Suzy Blake).







Bourne Brook (04872). A cropmark complex at Mavesyn Ridware, also in the Trent valley, includes a possible cursus (01599) and causewayed enclosure (01562) while a possible enclosure is north of Fradley (01339). There are only two possible Neolithic settlements in the area, one comprising pits, pottery and lithics verified by excavation within Lichfield (02681), the other suggested by field walking finds at Cotton in the Peak District (03768). Funerary evidence is limited to possible Neolithic barrows in the Peak District (00310 and 00464) and ring ditches within the Catholme complex (00209). The distribution of Neolithic finds in many ways reflects that of the sites, being concentrated within valleys together with the upland areas of the Peak District (Fig. 1.3). The finds are mainly surface finds with very few from excavations, individual artefacts which are usually lithic tools and flint scatters. The two closest to King's Low and Queen's Low are two miles away at Hopton, a stone axe-hammer (01700) and a flint scatter (01701).

The distribution of Bronze Age sites is dominated by barrows and ring ditches, again showing concentrations along valleys, especially the River Trent and its tributaries, and within the upland Peak District (Figs 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6). Other than barrows and ring ditches, the concentration of burnt mounds to the south-east of King's Low and Queen's Low is striking although these are likely to be Middle to Late Bronze Age rather than Early. Of the eight 'cemeteries and burials' shown (Fig. 1.6), seven are likely to have been associated with barrows and one has been re-designated as Romano-British (00937). Settlement evidence is also likely to be Middle and Late Bronze Age such as the crop-mark enclosures at Fisherwick (01525, 01538, 01536 and 01528), King's Bromley (01503) and Barton-under-Needwood (01475) and the linear features and possible pit alignments associated with the continuing complex of cropmark and excavated evidence at the Trent Tame confluence (01447, 01393). Bronze Age finds in the area are 98 in total (Fig. 1.7), mainly an assortment of copper-alloy artefacts found as stray finds or reported as metal detecting finds via the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Of the ten Iron Age hillforts shown on Figure 1.8, seven are relatively well preserved while Tutbury Park (00219), Marchington (00727) and the excavated length of late Iron Age gully-built stockade at Acton Trussell Roman villa (51623) are doubtful as hillforts. The closest to King's Low and Queen's Low is Berry Hill (00024), a univallate enclosure approximately five miles away to the south-west of Stafford. Possible Iron Age farmstead enclosures are known from aerial photography (04601 and 04015) as well as part of the Alrewas complex which also includes possible pit alignments and field systems (05459), and associated with the Acton Trussell villa. As with earlier periods the Trent valley is particularly rich in cropmark evidence, not least a series of possible pit alignments at Catholme (0020, 01478 and 01479), and further to the west at Kings Bromley (52000, 52010 and 52019). Three of these cropmark complexes also include evidence that has been interpreted as possible Iron Age field systems (52019, 52026 and 05459) associated with enclosed farmsteads. As is usual for the Iron Age period burials are not common and only one record is in the HER, three disturbed inhumations at Tutbury (51519) inconclusively assigned to this period. Iron Age finds from the area, 20 in total (Fig. 1.9), are a mixture of stray finds and metal detected finds including eight silver and gold coins, a gold torc (00714) and an enamelled copper-alloy torc ring (01603). In waterlogged deposits in Stafford, only three miles from King's Low and Queen's Low, were found three worked timbers (52515) and nearby two antler picks (02108) all assigned to the Iron Age. Iron Age pottery (51622), associated with the pre-Roman occupation, was excavated at Acton Trussell five miles away from Tixall. As with the earlier periods, the importance of the river valleys in the Iron Age is shown by the distribution maps although it is unsure whether this is due to the success of aerial photography and the associated amount of archaeological work in these areas or whether it reflects prehistoric occupation density. The decrease in evidence from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the upland areas of the Peak District is clear.