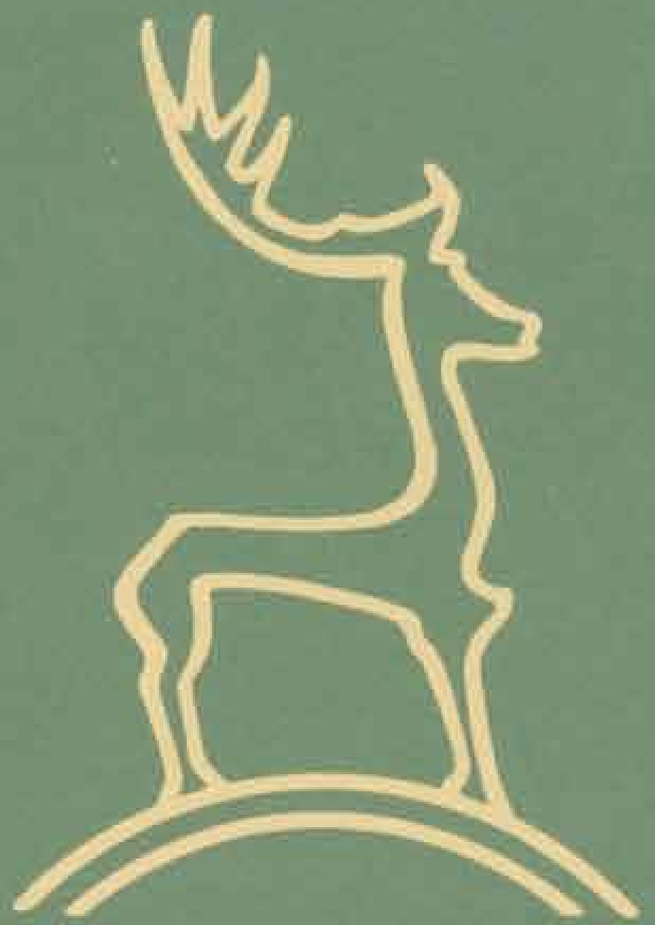
Society of Antiquaries of London
Suffolk County Council
British Broadcasting Corporation

British Museum
National Maritime Museum
The University of Birmingham

BULLETIN OF THE SUTTON HOO RESEARCH COMMITTEE



No. 4 July, 1986

PREFACE

This edition of the Bulletin contains the text and figures of the PROJECT DESIGN prepared in support of further research work at Sutton Hoo. After nearly three years of fieldwork and study, I, as research director, am convinced that a carefully controlled archaeological excavation there, performed to the appropriate scale, will add substantially to our knowledge of the British Isles, and its people. I am also convinced that such a project is viable and will bring considerable interest and pleasure into the lives of modern Europeans, including those for whom archaeology and the tangible heritage are of no particular concern.

Nevertheless, as a professional archaeologist, my job is to allow others to judge the value of this proposal on the basis of what is now known to lie under the ground, its expected yield and our present competance to extract and elucidate it. The remaining pages are therefore, as far as possible, free of rhetoric. They attempt to isolate the assets of the site on their own terms (PART 1, the evaluation), propose a research strategy for understanding them, (PART 2) and offer a solution to the long-term protection and presentation of the monument (PART 3).

It is my contention that these three aspects form an indivisible whole. The fugitive archaeological evidence, the visible monument and the understanding to be drawn from each class of the surviving strata cannot be treated separately, but should participate in the same plan for the future of the site. That future must be of general concern: whatever the balance between excavation, conservation and presentation is to be, the monument has hitherto scarcely enjoyed, at its site, the status it holds in the hearts of the people of East Anglia and Britain. The most reprehensible decision at Sutton Hoo would be to do nothing.

The PROJECT DESIGN includes the results of fieldwork up to October 1985, and has benefitted from the criticism and comments of a number of colleagues who were kind enough to read it. In that respect we would particularly like to thank the members of the Sutton Hoo Research Committee, the Scole Committee and the Suffolk Archaeological Unit.

Requests for additional information or clarification of any matter, together with any comments, will be welcomed.

Martin Carver
31st March 1986

Note: The expression EARLY MEDIEVAL is used throughout this report to mean the period of 5th–11th century AD, as on the continent. The term is used to avoid the ethnic connotations of 'Anglo-Saxon', 'Swedish', 'Barbaric' etc.

THE SUTTON HOO PROJECT is sponsored by the SUTTON HOO RESEARCH TRUST who acknowledge with gratitude the support given by:
the **SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON**, the **BRITISH MUSEUM**, the **NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM**, the **BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION**, the **SCARFE TRUST**, the **AURELIUS TRUST, GONVILLE AND CAIUS COLLEGE, Cambridge, TRINITY COLLEGE, Cambridge, ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, Cambridge**, the **ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY**, the **BRITISH ACADEMY**, the **NORWICH UNION ASSURANCE COMPANY** and the **EAST ANGLIAN DAILY TIMES**.

The project is administered through the University of Birmingham and carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit who gratefully acknowledge the support and help in kind given by:
the **LEVERHULME TRUST**, the **SUTTON HOO SOCIETY, RANSOME, SIMS and JEFFERIES Ltd., OSRAM-GEC Ltd., ANDREWS INDUSTRIAL EQUIPMENT, GOBLIN Ltd., VINYL PRODUCTS Ltd., NOTTCUTTS Ltd., INGRAM SMITH Ltd.**, and **K & C MOULDINGS Ltd.**
We also acknowledge with pleasure the participation of:
the **CITY UNIVERSITY**, the **UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**, the **DEPARTMENT OF QUATERNARY RESEARCH, Stockholm**, the **SCOTT POLAR INSTITUTE, Cambridge, SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL, SUFFOLK COASTAL DISTRICT COUNCIL**, the **SCOLE COMMITTEE for EAST ANGLIAN ARCHAEOLOGY, WOODBRIDGE MUSEUM, GEOSCAN RESEARCH Ltd.**, the **UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD**, and **CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE FOR AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY**.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART 3 – PROPOSALS FOR SITE MANAGEMENT AND PRESENTATION

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

SUMMARY

Sutton Hoo (Grid Ref. TM 288 487) is an archaeological site lying on the E bank of the River Deben in SE Suffolk. A *Site Evaluation* was undertaken there from 1983-85 in order to establish the extent, date and present condition of the evidence that remains. An additional purpose was the trial and development of new techniques required for remote mapping and excavation.

The evaluation of the site has provoked a fresh assessment of its character. It was found to comprise a large prehistoric complex occupying a low whale-back, limited approximately by the 30m ring contour. All periods from the early Neolithic to the Iron Age were represented, and the activity was both domestic and ritual, including the construction of barrows. It was within and around the earthworks left by the prehistoric site that a prestigious Anglo-Saxon cemetery developed, dating from the 6th or 7th century AD. The cemetery is characterized by a wide variety of burial rites, including cremations with and without urns, inhumations oriented E–W, W–E, NW–SE, with and without coffins, cremations with horses in barrows, an inhumation in a boat in a barrow, and a very rich burial deposit in an oak clinker-built vessel 90ft long beneath a barrow – the ship-burial which made the Sutton Hoo site famous. Grave-goods in the flat-graves are rare, but techniques for excavating decayed organic deposits were developed in 1985, which allowed, in addition to human bodies, the remains of two objects to be detected: a joint of meat and a wooden ard.

The site therefore comprises a prehistoric site of a size and longevity unusual in Britain, and an Early Medieval cemetery with a wide range of burial rite, and it is likely that a connection will be found between the two. The use of the Early Medieval cemetery spans the period of the conversion to Christianity and has documented links with Scandinavia and Central Europe. It offers a rare opportunity to monitor human behaviour at a time of radical change, both social and religious. In its wider context, Sutton Hoo is a tangible source of evidence for the origins of the English nation.

The *survival of the archaeological evidence* varies according to the present exploitation of the land and its vegetation. In the central scheduled area beneath the turf, the acidity is high, encouraging decay, and considerable damage has been done by bracken roots. In the surrounding fields, the acidity is lower and the agricultural regime has resulted, so far, in less attrition of the archaeological features. It is thought however that chemical farming presents a continuing danger to the archaeological deposits.

The understanding of Sutton Hoo and its context can be achieved, in our time, through a *programme of excavation, remote mapping, regional survey and comparative research.* It is taken as axiomatic that the area to be excavated will be the smallest capable of yielding coherent results, and that the remainder of the monument will be conserved for interrogation at a later date. The proposed excavation sample (1.38 ha) is a cruciform transect placed towards the northern end of the area. It is extracted from a more extensive 'large sample', and is itself broken into four 'sectors'.

The excavation sample is designed:

- to take advantage of the deepest prehistoric stratification,
- to investigate the growth of the Early Medieval cemetery along the N–S and E–W axes,
- to investigate one barrow of each size-group, of each status of survival, along the hypothetical axes of growth (a total of 6 barrows out of 19),
- to cross each type of terrain on which the site lies,
- to connect the trenches of 9 of the excavations made previously, into a coherent area.

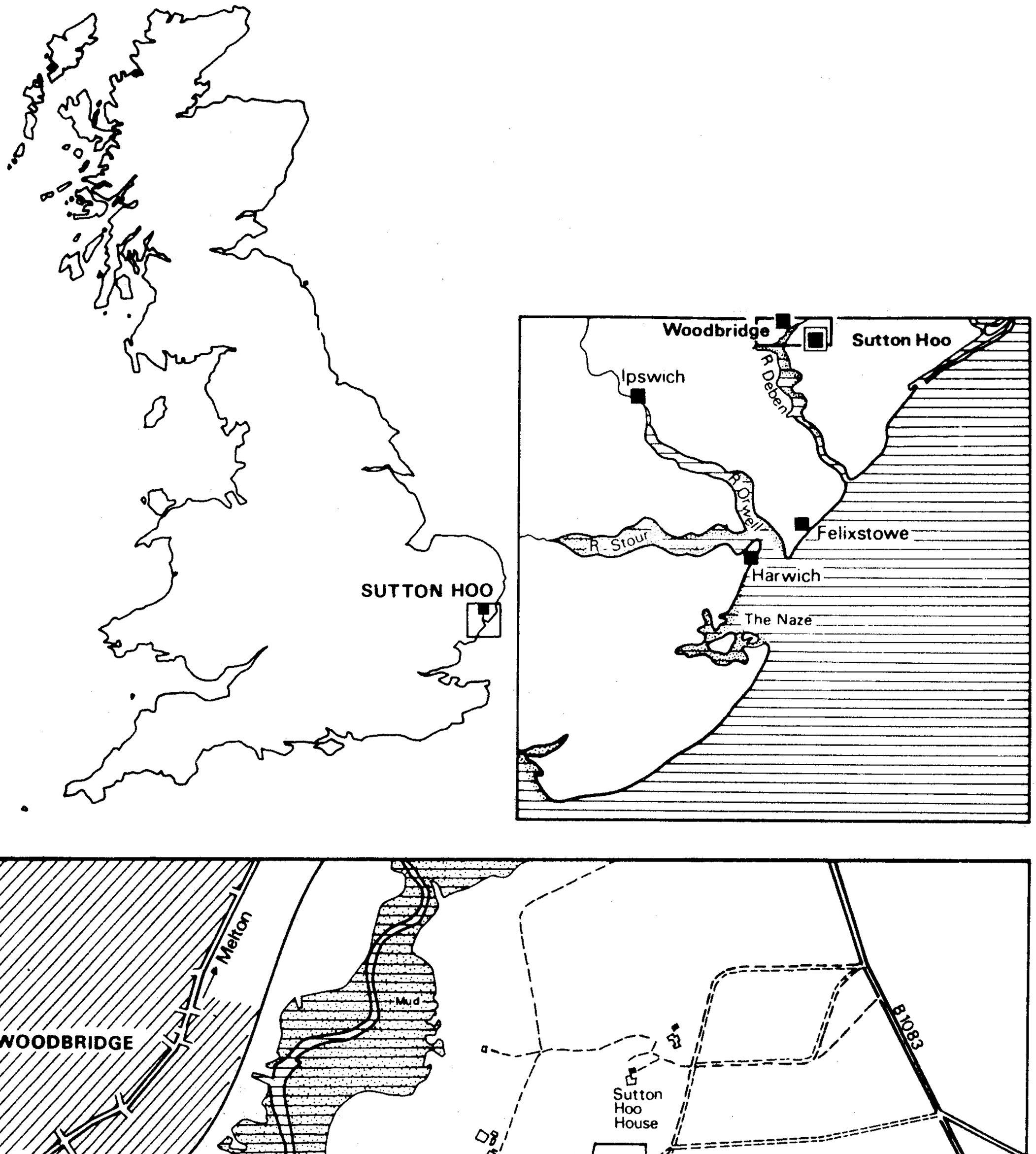


Fig. 1: Location of the Sutton Hoo site (Birkeland)

The excavation is to extend over 6 years and is intended to produce, firstly, a statement of the range of domestic activity and monumentality of the prehistoric site, together with a continuous sequence of assemblages (early, middle, and late Neolithic, Beaker, early and middle Bronze Age and Iron Age); and secondly the evolution of Early Medieval burial rite together with its chronological, religious and social implications. The *remote mapping programme* is designed to put clear limits on the site, and reveal the coarser elements of its underground geography (major earthworks ditches and quarries). The *regional survey* is designed to provide a sequence of settlement and the exploitation of land for all periods within the Deben valley. For the Early Medieval period alone a comparison will be made between the occupation in the Sandlings and that of NW Suffolk, parts of Norfolk, and other zones believed to have lain in the early kingdom of East Anglia.

It is anticipated that this work will allow supported statements to be made about the history of Sutton Hoo, its status, its role and its meaning, which will be vital for a coherent policy of *management and presentation*. The current arrangements for access to the site and its future protection are uncertain, and it is strongly recommended that measures for its security are taken urgently. The case is put forward for state ownership of the site and its access, as a concomitant of its presentation, its further exploration and indeed its survival. The monument at Sutton Hoo, and its meaning, have an appeal for a wide public, as has been demonstrated both by visitors and television viewers. It has been estimated that more people watched the television programme about the new campaign than have seen 'The Mousetrap', and of these only 4% did so out of a declared interest in archaeology. Proposals are made for the development of the site so as to accommodate visitors, while respecting its character. Sutton Hoo has a particular beauty and serenity which only those who have been there in the solitude of a summer evening can know. They will understand why this precious source of evidence should be both studied and conserved for the generations to come.

Fig. 2: Topography of SE Suffolk, showing accessibility (Birkeland)

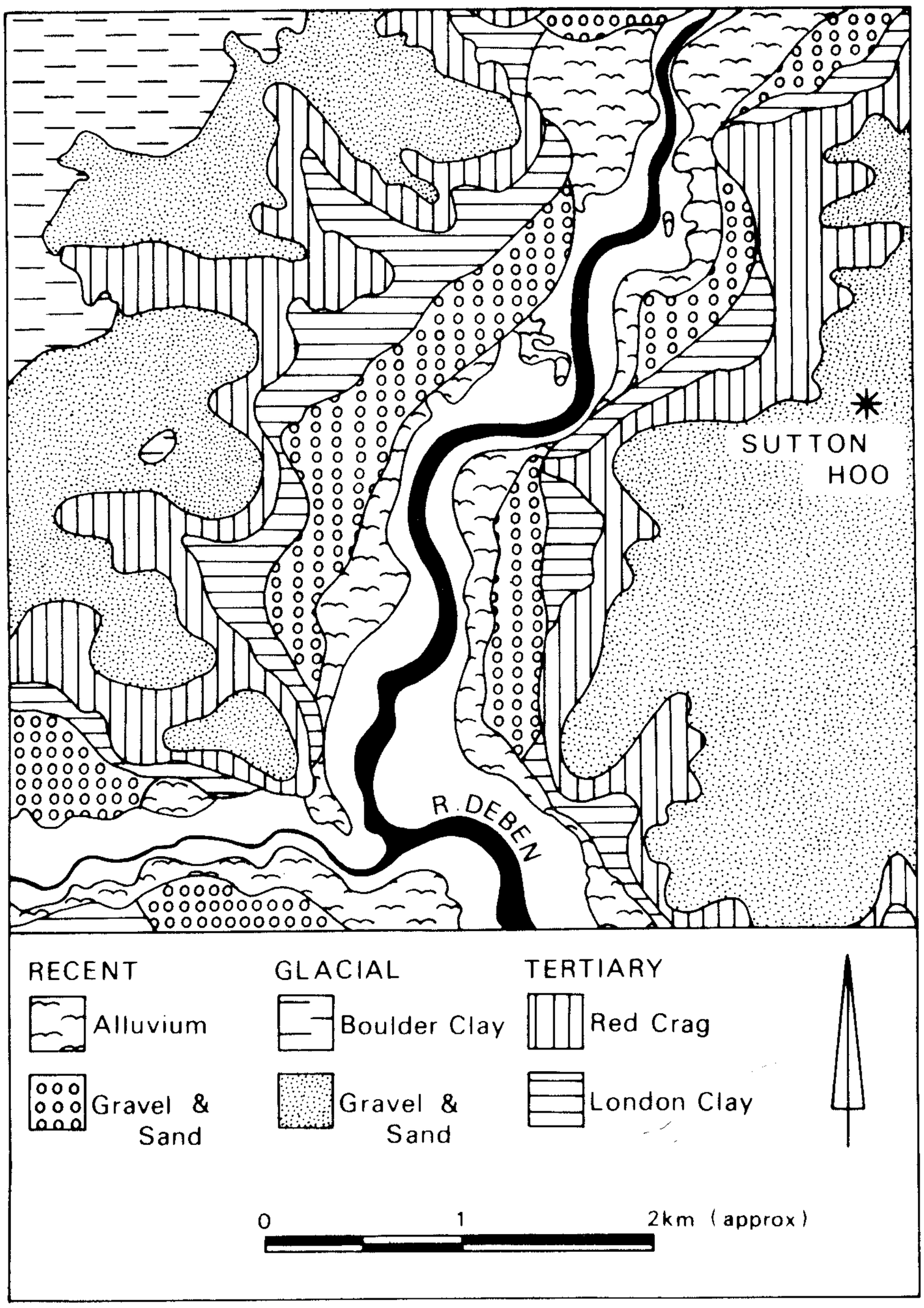


Fig. 3: Surface Geology (Royle after Bruce-Mitford, 1975)

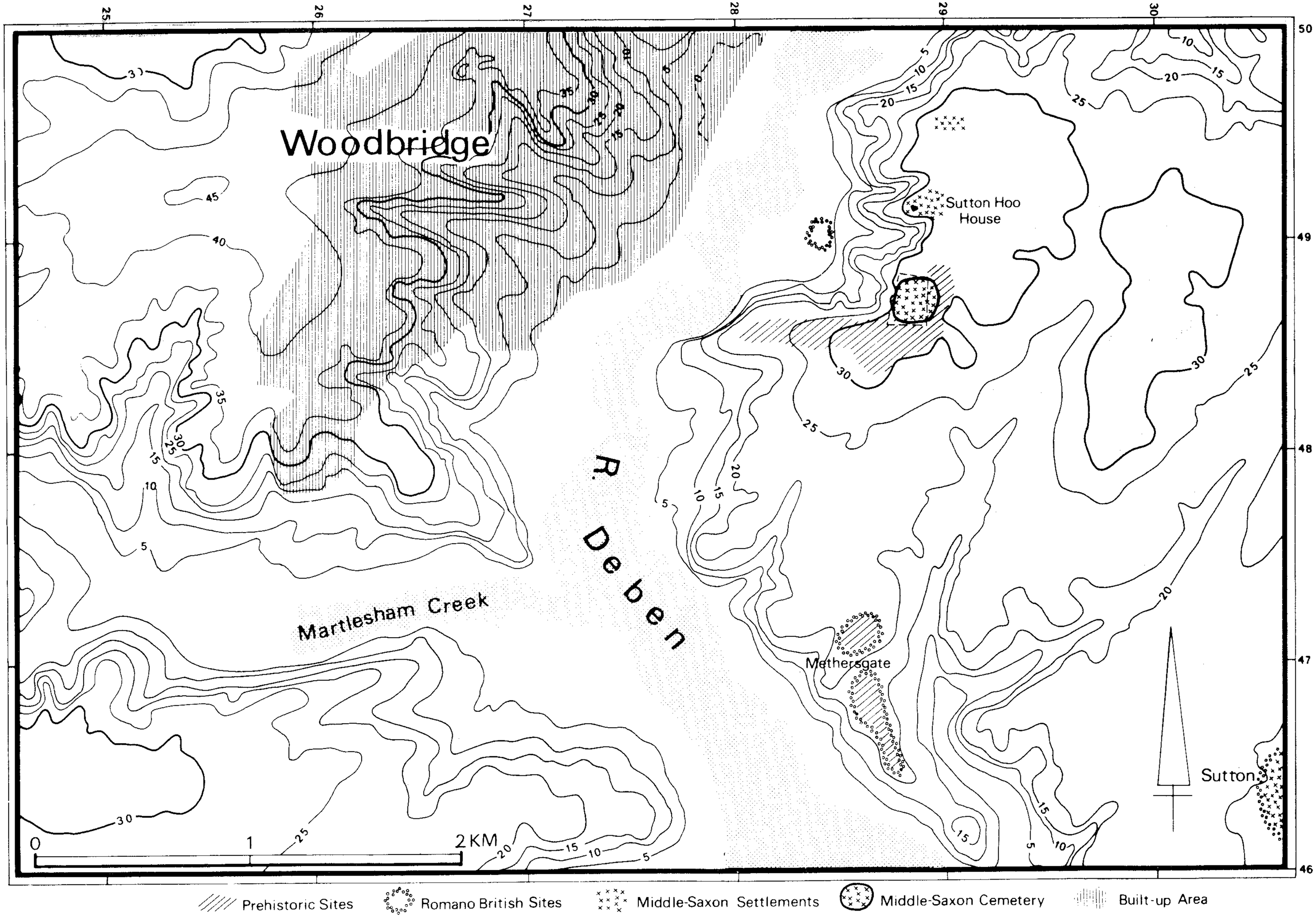


Fig. 4: Topography of the archaeological area at Sutton Hoo (Birkeland/Hooper)

PART 1: EVALUATION

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE (Figs. 1-7)

This report is largely concerned with an area of SE Suffolk known as the Sandlings, bounded to the SE by the North Sea, and to the NW by a ridge of elevated clayland. The site at Sutton Hoo emerges within the Sandlings as an isolated whaleback of higher ground, contained by a 30m ring contour beside the River Deben (Figs. 1, 4). This whaleback was theoretically visible, before the implantation of conifers, from positions along much of the Suffolk seaboard.

On the centre of the whaleback, but towards its western edge, stands a small group of burial mounds first noticed and examined, according to the records, in the mid-19th century (*Ipswich Journal* 1860). It was one of these mounds which was opened in 1939 to reveal the Anglo-Saxon ship-burial which has made the name of Sutton Hoo famous throughout the world.

The present condition of the site reflects the use to which the various parts of it are being put. The central area, containing the barrows (Zone A) was, until 1983, a thicket of bracken and brambles, and represented one of the last segments of unhusbanded heathland in the country. To the W, the ground falls away in a number of combes and promontories towards the alluvial strip of the River Deben. The western slopes are now covered by a wood (Top Hat Wood, Zones B and C) which consists mainly of conifers planted about 1881. Over the past century, some of the older trees have outgrown their purchase on the soft sandy slopes and are collapsing or subsiding, while the younger trees have colonised earthworks on the flatter gound containing the barrow cemetery. To the N a new plantation has been established (Zone E) although the trees are still scarcely more than saplings. The area to the E (Zone F) and S (Zone D) has been under the plough since the war, and has gradually encroached onto the barrow site itself. The crops currently grown are barley, sugar–beet, carrots or potatoes.

The geological character of the site is more uniform (Fig. 3). Some 2-3m of glacial sands and gravels overlie the Red Crag plateau which itself lies on London Clay. The surface deposits are well-drained and the site is notoriously dry: continual irrigation is necessary for the support of most crops. Springs emerge between the Red Crag and the London Clay on the slopes of the river valley; strata beneath the burial site are consequently wet at about 2m below ground level, the depth to which some burial deposits descend. The sand in the uncultivated central area is highly acid (pH 3/4), but this has been counteracted by chemical farming in the fields (pH 6). As a preliminary to the study, the area was divided into zones reflecting the different surface vegetation and topography (Fig. 7).

2. PREVIOUS WORK ON THE SITE (Fig. 8; Table 1)

There have been four campaigns of excavation at Sutton Hoo (Table 1, Fig. 8). The first, in 1860, resulted in the examination of a mound which has not since been located or identified (INT. 1) but which must have contained a ship, as indicated by the two bushels of 'iron screwbolts' which were recovered. The second took place in two seasons, in 1938 and 1939, and was sponsored by the then owner Mrs. E. Pretty. It was carried out under the auspices of Ipswich Museum, and directed initially by Basil Brown (died 1977). Brown trenched Mounds 2, 3 and 4 in 1938 (INT. 2–4), and in 1939 began the excavation of Mound 1 (INT. 5). After the definition of the ship and burial chamber, the latter was excavated under the direction of Charles Phillips (died 1985). He and his small team (Stuart Piggott, Peggy Guido, W. F. Grimes and Graham Clarke being the principal participants) recovered 263 object of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, cloth, pottery, wax, feathers and fur from the burial chamber, inluding a number of weapons, items of regalia and objects symbolic in intention. The wealth and character of the artefacts has led to the identification of the burial as the tomb of

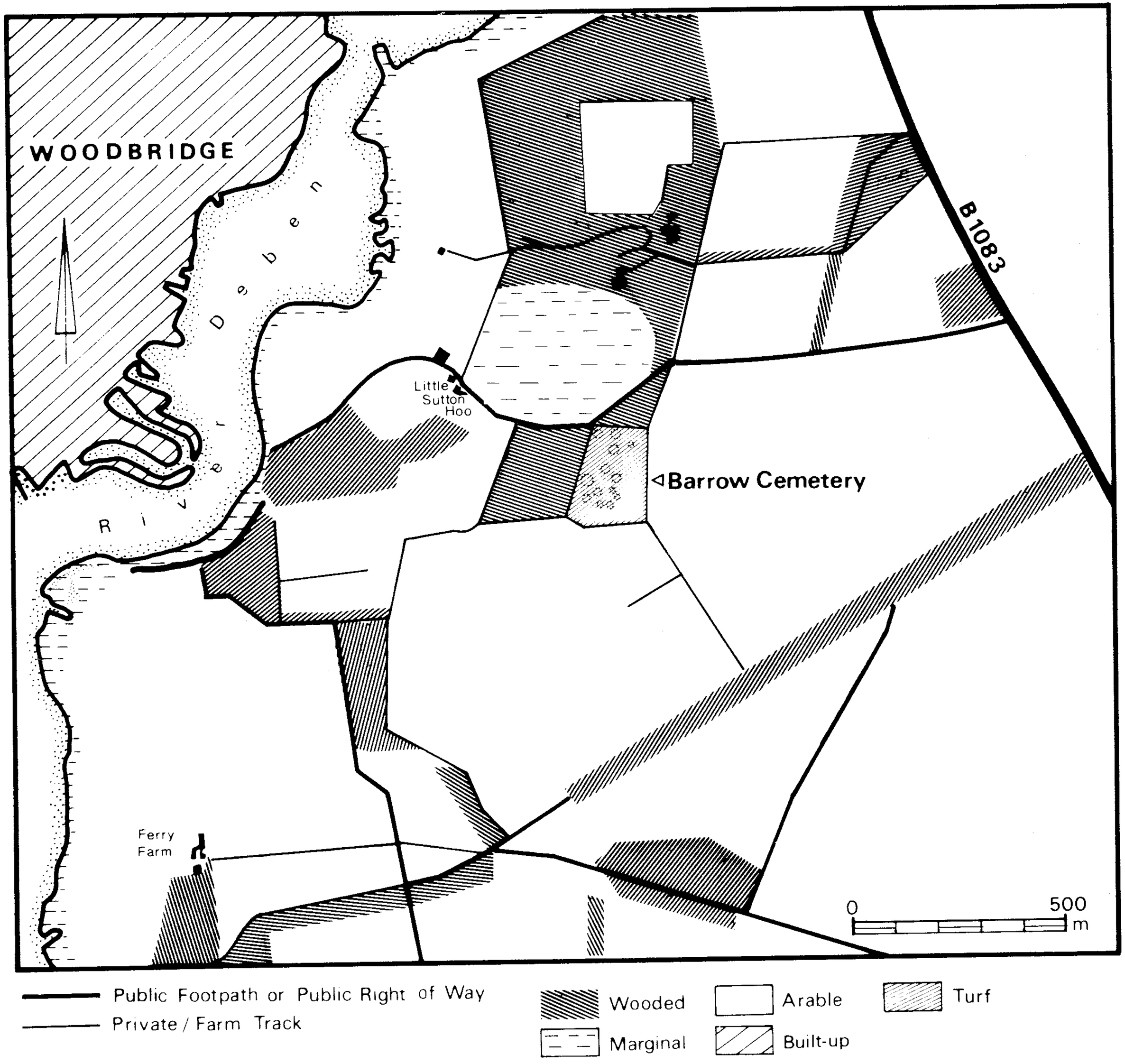


Fig. 5: Land usage at Sutton Hoo in 1985 (Birkeland)

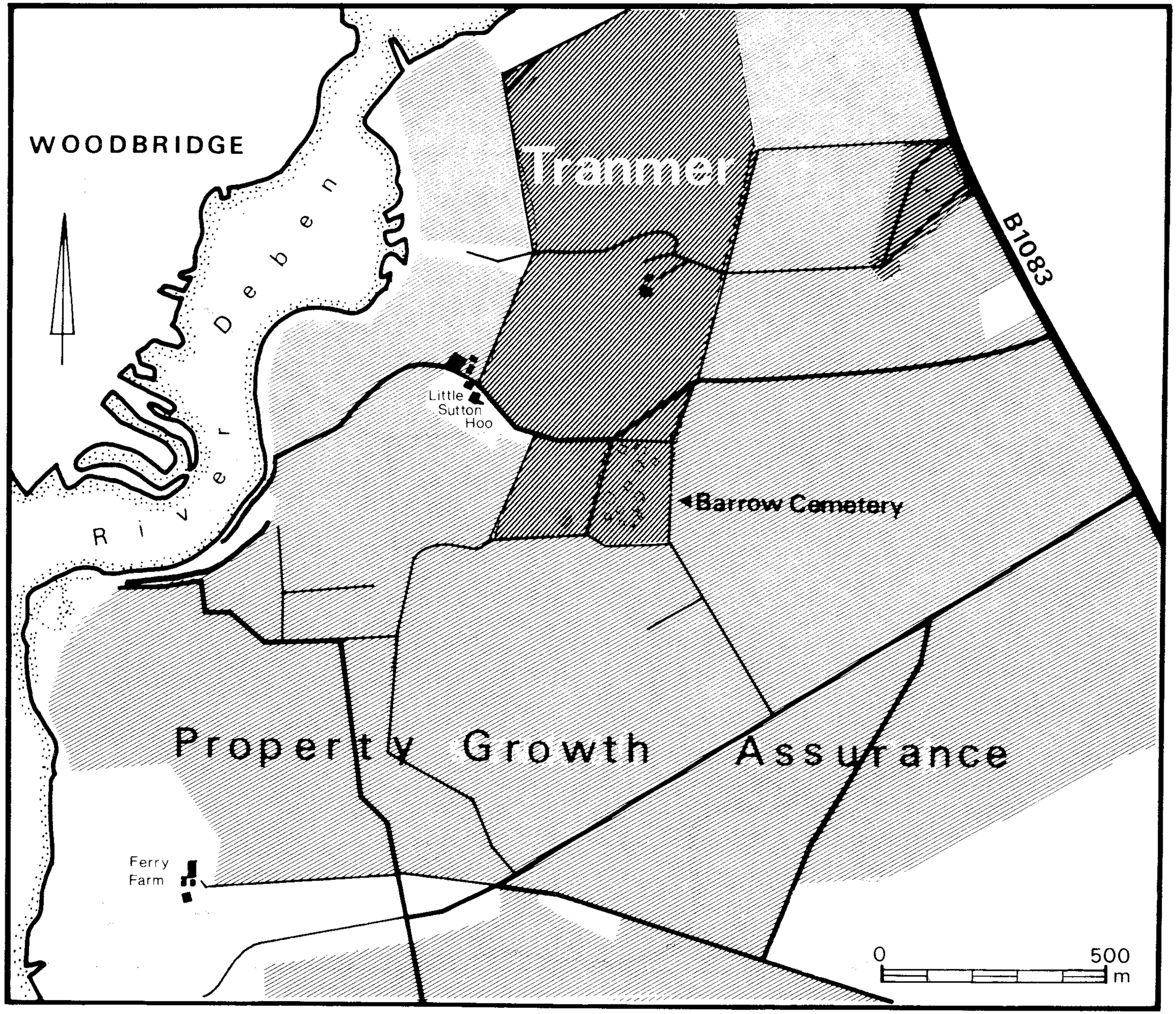


Fig. 6: Land ownership at Sutton Hoo in 1985 (Birkeland)

Zonation 1985

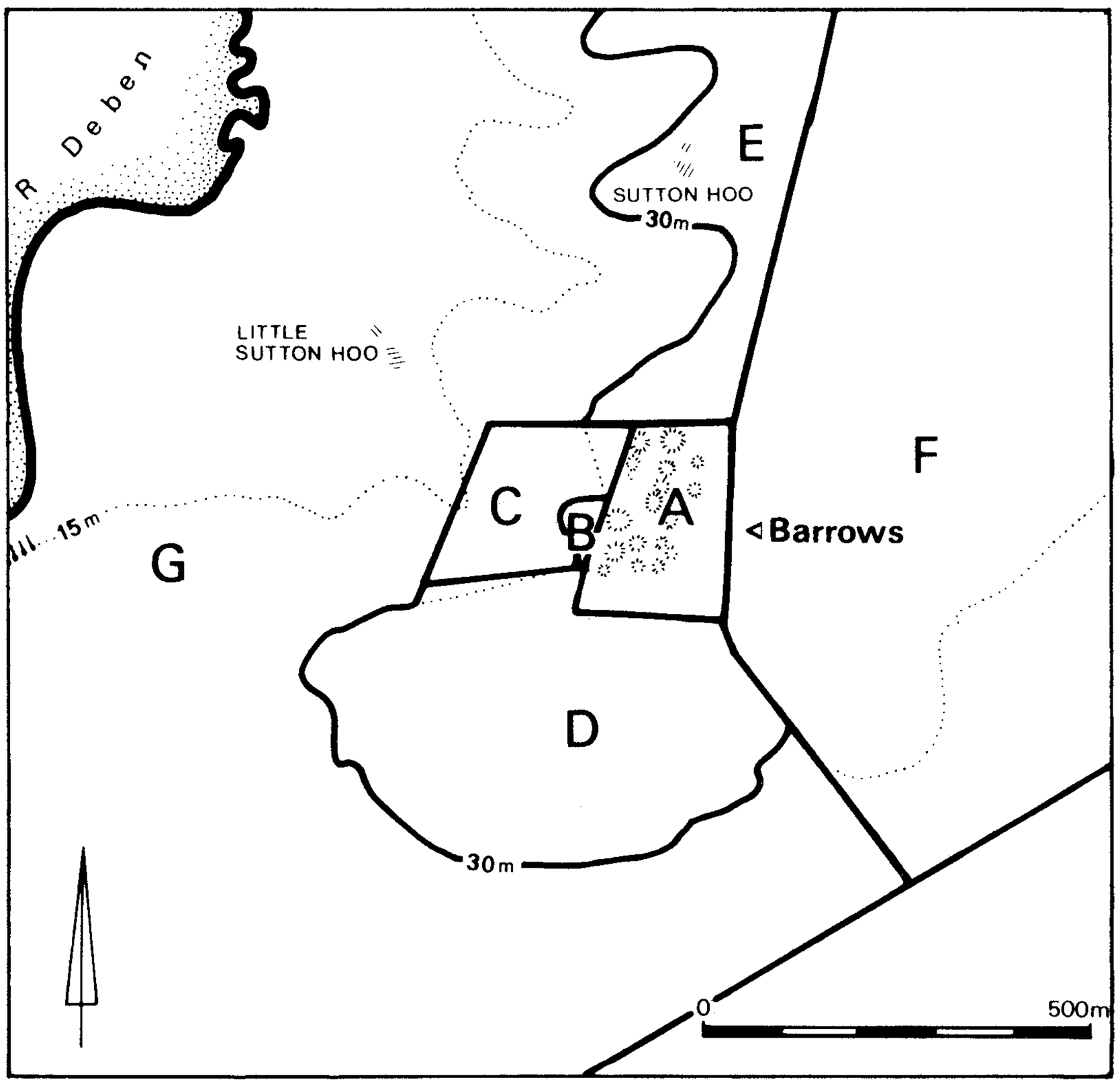


Fig. 7: Zones for archaeological study (Birkeland)

Raedwald, King of East Anglia, who died about 625 AD. The excavators, however, found no trace of a body (Phillips 1940; *Antiquity* 1940; Bruce-Mitford 1974, 1975, 1978, 1983).

After the war Rupert Bruce-Mitford was appointed by the British Museum to publish this find, and over the next forty years he was primarily responsible for the successful study, conservation, restoration, dating and interpretation of most of the objects. He mounted a third field campaign in 1966-71, primarily in order to complete the excavation of Mound 1 (INT. 6 and 7). A new plan and a plaster-cast of the remains of the ship were made, and the remaining lobes of Mound 1 were excavated, together with the surrounding spoil-heaps. Bruce Mitford's definitive publication of the ship burial appeared in 1975, 1978 and 1983. The prehistoric features beneath Mound 1, excavated by Paul Ashbee remain unpublished (although they are now incorporated into the Sutton Hoo archive). The fourth campaign, which took place in 1966 and from 1968–70, was also conducted by staff of the British Museum (Ian Longworth and Ian Kinnes). Its purpose was to investigate the flat ground north of Mound 1 (apparently devoid of barrows), to confirm the presence of Mound 5 and to investigate the prehistoric site. Their work confirmed the existence of Mound 5, showed the presence of prehistoric postholes and linear features of Neolithic to Iron Age dates, and revealed three early medieval inhumations without grave-goods in an advanced state of decay (Longworth and Kinnes, 1980).

The present project was initiated by a steering committee, which included members representing the Society of Antiquaries and the British Museum. This committee was succeeded by the Sutton Hoo Executive Committee, and then the Sutton Hoo Research Trust. Their common objectives were to research the Sutton Hoo site by excavation and other means so as to establish the context of the ship burial. In 1983 the present author was appointed as research director on the basis of his research design (Carver 1983). This proposed a two-phase programme which began with a site evaluation phase lasting three years.

The SUTTON HOO PROJECT DESIGN, presented here is the result of that site evaluation, although it is not intended as its full publication. It is a summary of proposals for the management, presentation and further understanding of the site, which together constitute a plan for the second phase.

3. METHODS OF EVALUATION

The object of the Site Evaluation was to establish the extent of the archaeological site, its state of survival and its potential for further research. To this end a wide range of individual investigations was put in train, and for the most part completed, by a large number of collaborators, many of whom gave their services free of charge (for a full list of contributors to the site evaluation phase, see Appendix 1).

The elements may be briefly summarised:-

- all existing information about the site was collected and *earlier interventions* located (Table 1 and Fig. 8).

- the *extent of the site* on the ground was sought by remote sensing, including aerial photography, fieldwalking, magnetometry, resistivity and radar (Carver 1985; Table 2, Figs. 9–20 and see below).

- the *state of survival* of the site was determined by vegetation mapping, metal detection and exploratory cuttings in Zones A, B, D and F. Cuttings within the scheduled area used the holes previously made by earlier excavators: Mound 2 (1938) and the central anti-glider ditch (1940).

- methods for *stabilisation of sand* and for the *enhancement of badly decayed organic materials* were tested on site during trial excavations, and are being developed within a special research project being funded by the Leverhulme Trust (see below).

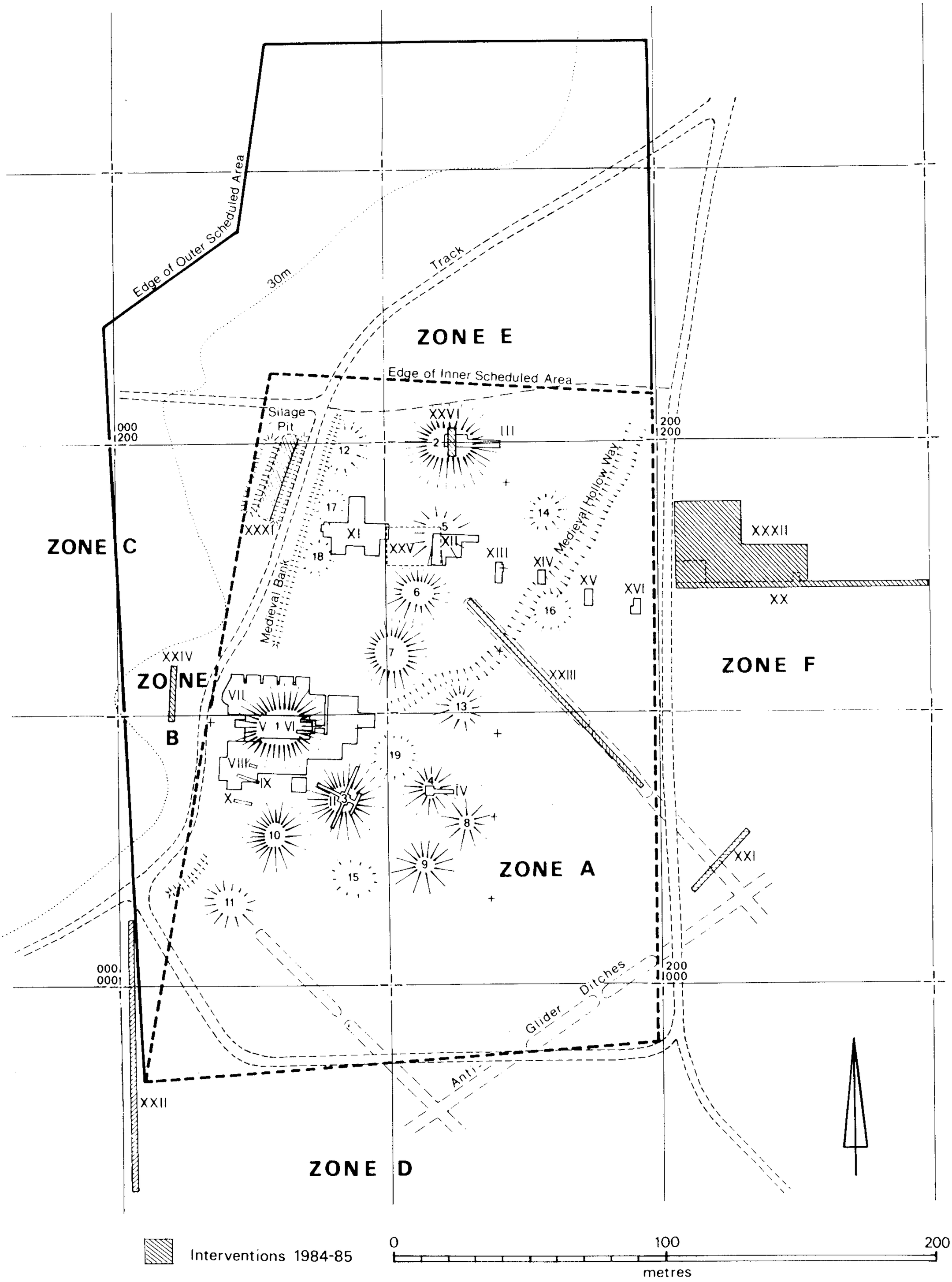
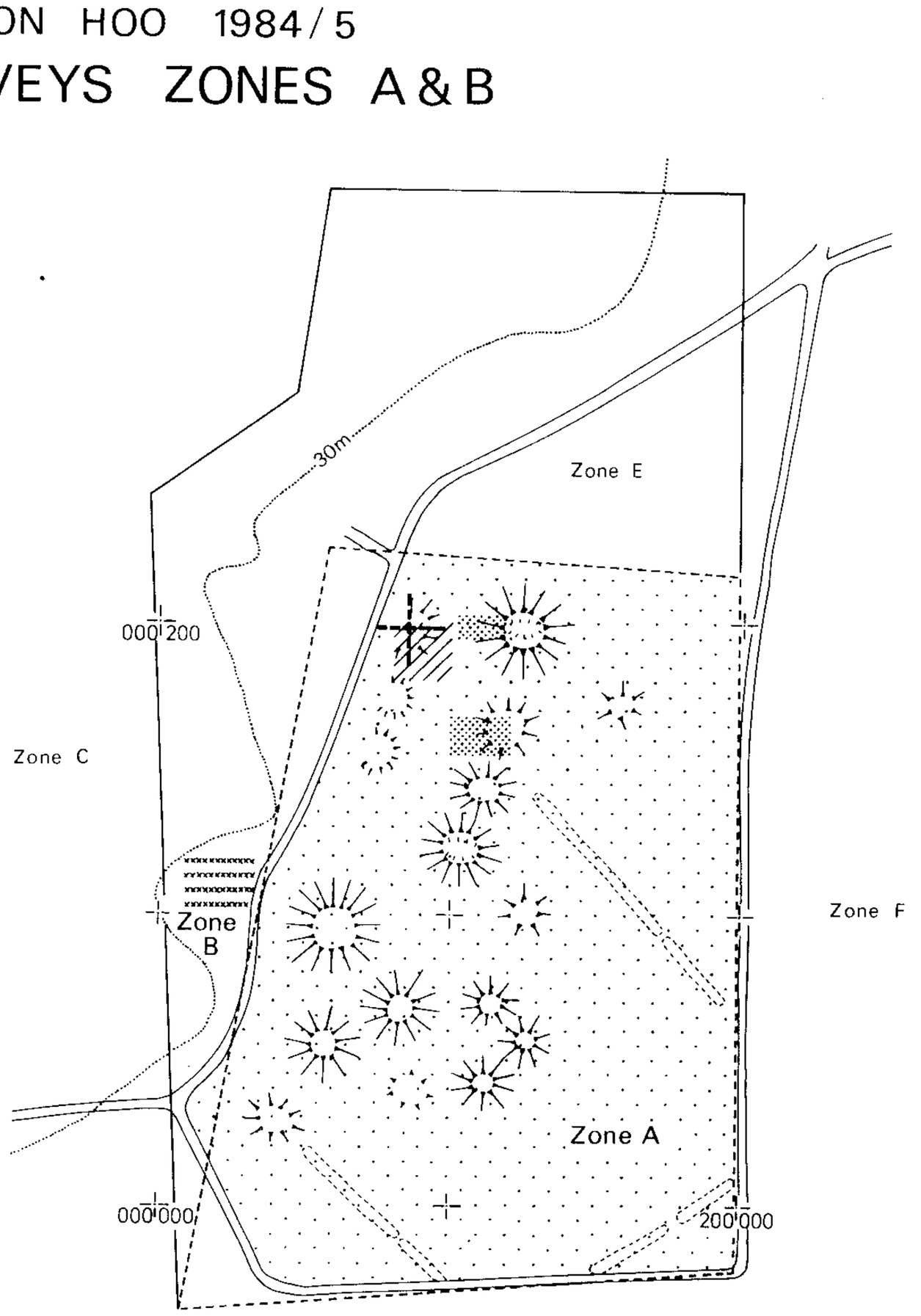


Fig. 8: Archaeological interventions at Sutton Hoo 1938-1985 (Hooper)

SUTTON HOO 1984/5

SURVEYS ZONES A & B



—— Outer scheduled area

----- Inner scheduled area

Tracks

Anti-glider ditches

Proton magnetometer transect (Int. 28)

Radar transect (Int. 29)

Surface mapping (Int. 18), Metal detection (Int. 27), and Contour survey (Int. 30)

Magnetometry and Radar

Resistivity (Int. 36)

0 100m

Fig. 9: Remote Sensing in Zones A and B (Royle)

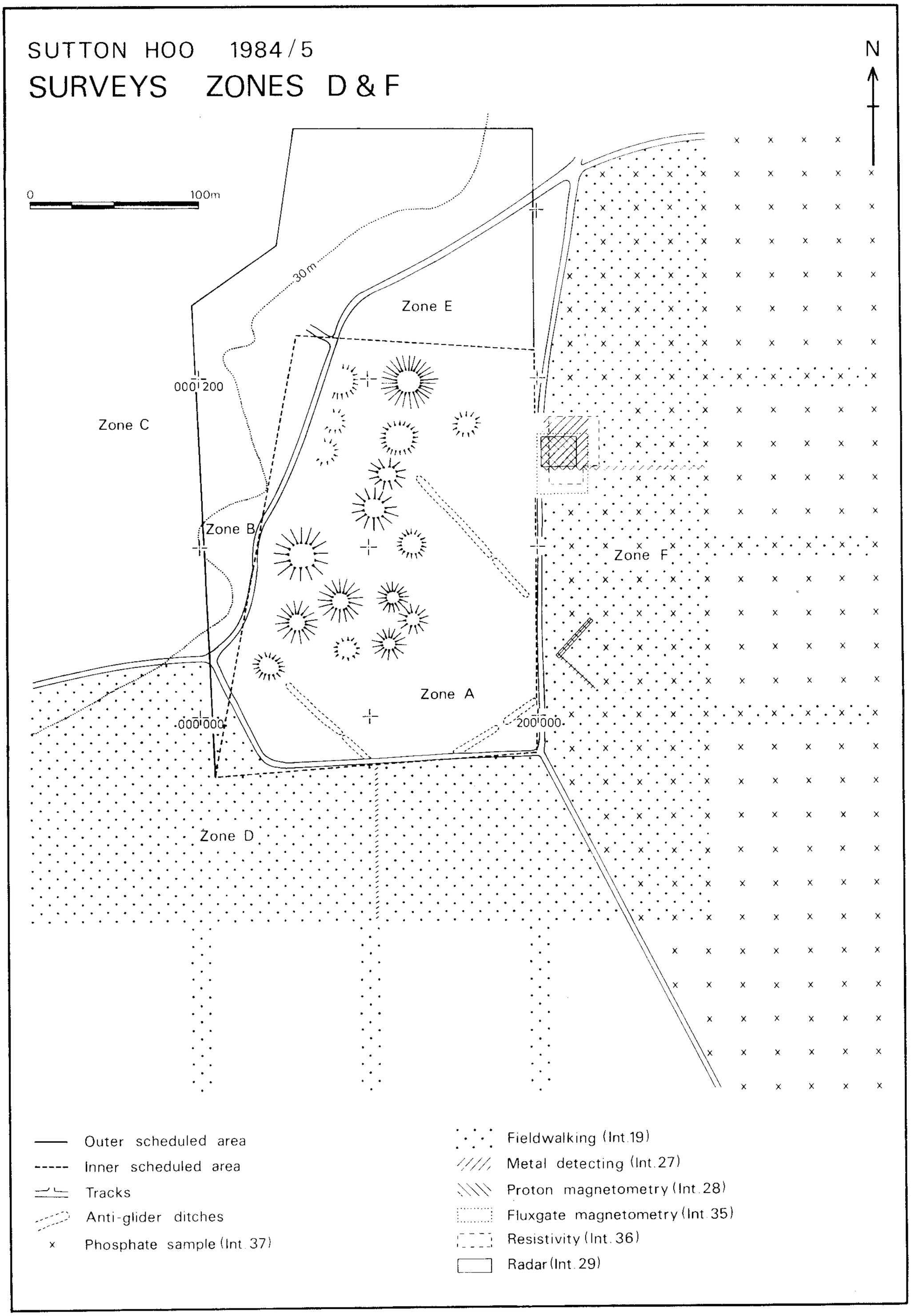


Fig. 10: Remote Sensing in Zones D and F (Royle)