# 2 Archaeology

## 2.1 Introduction
by I Meadows

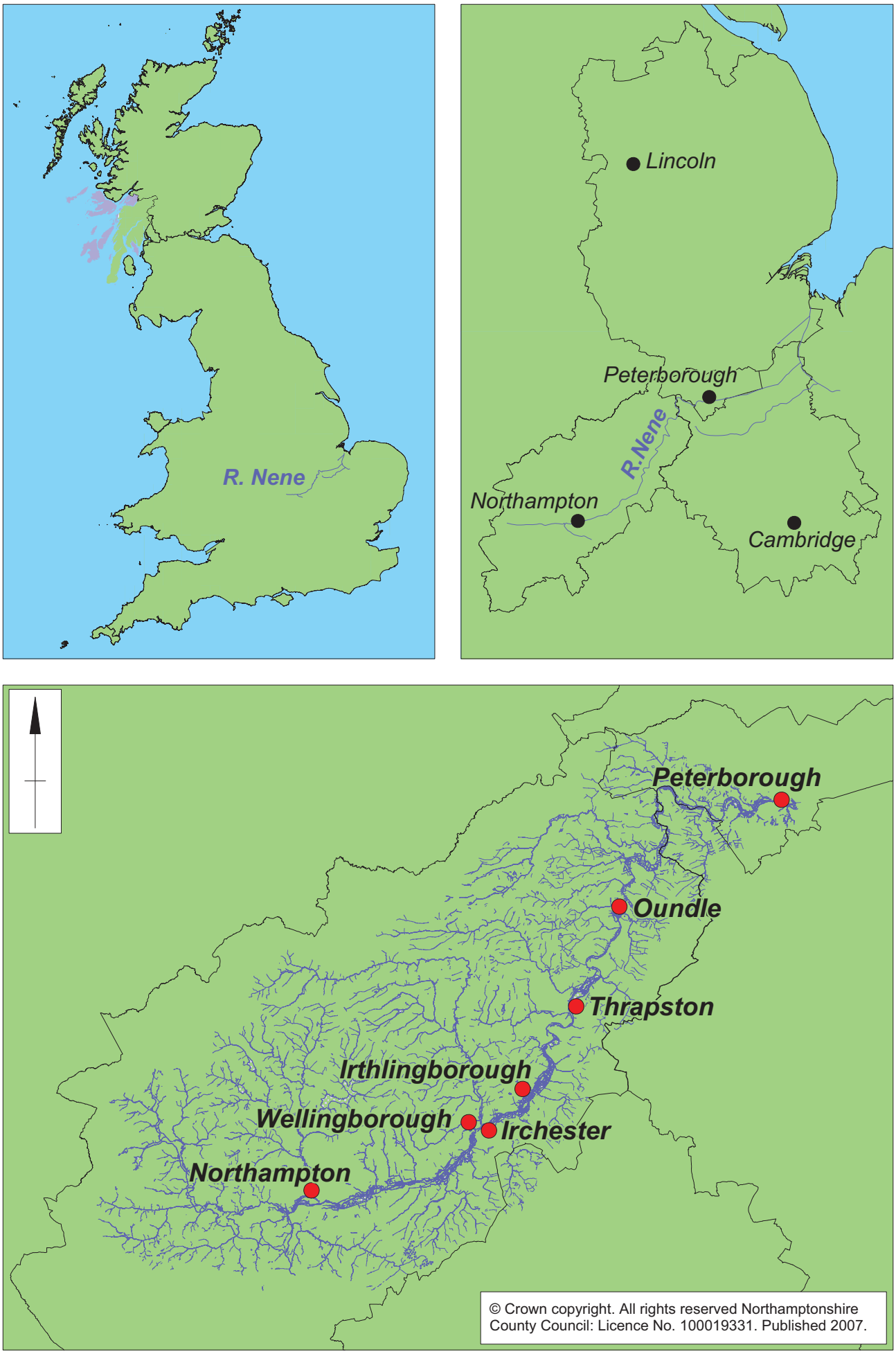
The Nene Valley was selected for this project because of the level and quality of archaeological and environmental data that exists for it. As a river valley it is reaching the later stages of its extractive cycle so it is important to assess the present level of knowledge and identify any gaps that remain. As an area it includes some of the larger landscape-based archaeological projects of the last twenty-five years either immediately adjacent to the river or in the land adjoining it.

The River Nene is one of the longer rivers of England, flowing from a large rural catchment on the western border of Northamptonshire eastwards through the East Anglian fens to the sea near Wisbech (Fig 2.1.1). As a geographical entity it should reflect a slice of typical riparian activity in the Midlands of England through the archaeological and environmental record contained within the valley. The river does not cross any geomorphologically extreme areas and for most of its length the river has only a very slight gradient. The present study does not extend beyond the Town Bridge in Peterborough as that point is effectively where the 'Midland' river changes morphologically into a much altered 'Fenland' river and also a point at which it is believed brackish conditions prevailed in the archaeological past. As a landscape entity the river valley should represent a transect of data in which common themes and constraints are displayed as each archaeological and environmental phase deal with common conditions.

The River Nene rises on the hills to the south of Daventry at approximately 160m OD, a second course is sometimes also cited which rises at Long Buckby (Fig 2.1.2). The river flows with a slight gradient for about 160 miles across various Jurassic strata (see Hydrology section below) comprising predominantly impermeable rocks such as the Whitby Mudstone and Oxford Clay which are poor aquifers, so most of the water it receives is directly from permeable superficial deposits or tributary streams such as the River Ise and Harpers Brook (Fig 2.1.3). It has a total catchment of 1630km$^2$ (Environment Agency figures) which the Agency has divided into eleven areas. The eleventh is, however, the Peterborough and fenland area which is not part of this study. The drainage of each of these catchment areas is characterised by a dendritic pattern of streams and other surface drainage channels that feed into the main sinuous river channel. They range in size from less than 80km$^2$ up to nearly 250km$^2$ with a single large catchment of 460km$^2$ along the southern side of the river, on the northern side of the watershed with the River Great Ouse.

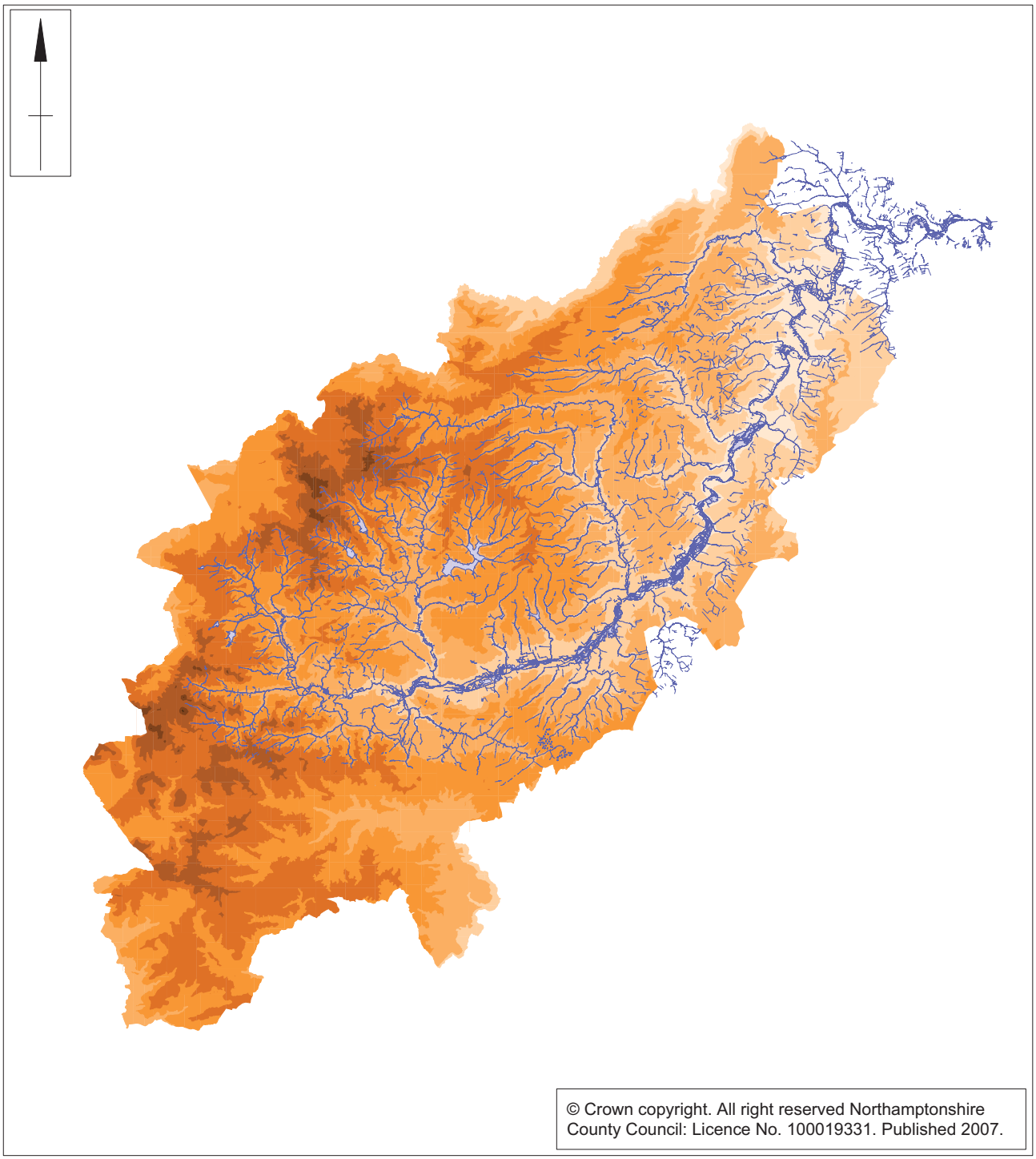
The river flows in a valley of pre Devensian origin (Brown 2004) and lies between the maximum extent of the Pleistocene ice sheet and the Devensian ice sheet that is believed in places to have lain about 80km to the north. There are localised surviving elements of two terraces with a possible third, which is though by some authors to represent part of an alluvial fan (Langford 2004). None of the terrace fragments survive to any great height above the present flood plain.

This project represents a culmination of fieldwork over two hundred years by many dozen archaeologists and environmental scientists in this valley. The early archaeologists and antiquarians recorded several sites in limited locations, for example the work around Peterborough (Artis 1828), but as fieldwork increased the density of occupation along the length of the valley became increasingly clear. This increase was highlighted in the work by Taylor (1975) showing Roman settlement in the wider valley; his study area extended approximately 6km to either side of the river line. The series of chronological distribution maps he produced shows increasing levels of knowledge through time as fieldwork increased. The first plan for 1931 shows sites clustered around the Peterborough area denoting the pioneering work of Artis and the Peterborough Museum Society, the




Scale 1:500,000

Location of River Nene and its tributaries Fig 2.1.1




10-39m
40-69m
70-99m
100-129m
130-159m
160-189m
190-219m
220>m

Scale 1:500,000

River Nene related to schematised relief Fig 2.1.2

second for 1956 still shows a concentration around Peterborough but with smaller groups of known sites around Northampton and Wellingborough. The final plan is for 1972 and it reflects the upsurge in both fieldwork and aerial photography by showing sites across the whole length of the valley with a slight paucity in the length between Oundle and Wansford and again in the upper reach upstream of Northampton which may reflect geological susceptibility to show sites rather than a true absence. The increase in sites of one period that these plans show is mirrored in all the other archaeological periods; however, as the number of sites increased the opportunity to synthesise the data became harder.

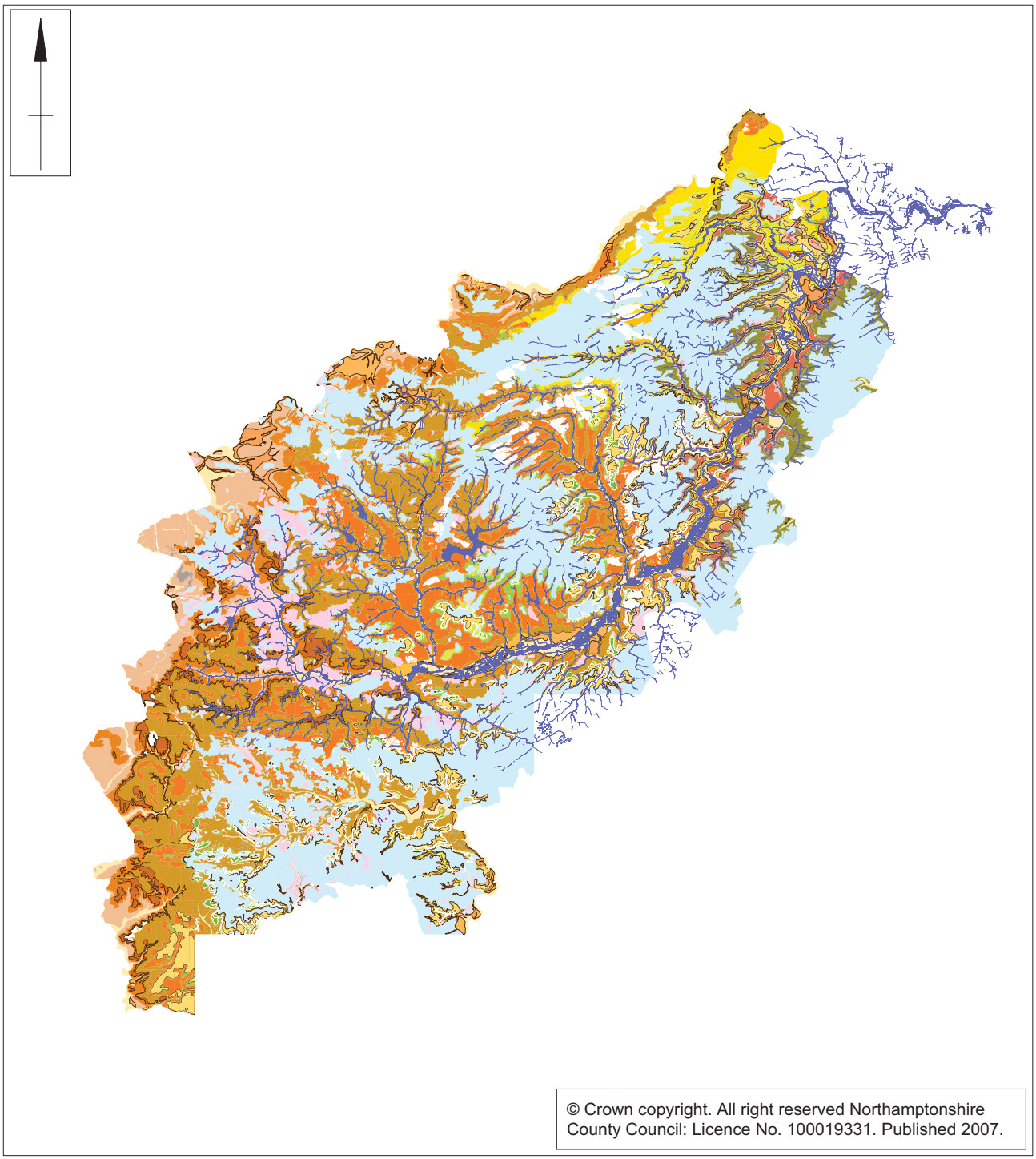
The work of fieldworkers finding and in some instances excavating sites has provided a huge collection of data but until this project the chance had not arisen for a synthesis for the river as a whole. Earlier synthetic work such as Taylor were either period-based or was heavily based around a small part of the valley (Robinson 1992). The need to synthesise the data for the valley as a whole is highlighted by the number of large research projects that have occurred along its line. These individual projects have produced a depth of knowledge for short lengths of the valley, for example at Raunds and Wollaston.

This project has been financed through the Aggregate Levy Sustainability Fund administered by English Heritage. It is hoped the results of this project will provide a benchmark level of knowledge, firstly for the future management of the archaeological resource in the Nene Valley, secondly that its results will enable the better targeting of the mineral industries financial support through Planning Policy Guidance 16 (PPG 16) funded projects by identifying gaps in the present level of knowledge and common trends, and thirdly that it will serve as a model for other river valleys in which the impact of mineral extraction or the level of archaeological fieldwork has not been so great. It will also provide a synthetic body of data against which new data can be assessed.

The Nene Valley has been extensively affected by mineral extraction since the nineteenth century; the Aggregate Industry has in particular affected the valley floor where it has removed large areas of gravel. This process is reaching the stage where the majority of commercially viable areas for mineral working on the flood plain have now been worked leaving islands of uncommercial reserves or areas protected by their legal status (Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Scheduled Ancient Monument). It was felt that examining this valley at this time towards the end of its extractive cycle would provide an opportunity to synthesise archaeological data that has been derived from over fifty years of very intense archaeological work, along with the resulting environmental data set that has been recovered for each of the sites.

Attention in this study has concentrated only on the main course of the river within which the areas that have been most affected by mineral extraction lie and as a result for which the data set is almost as complete as it will ever be. Environmental study has increasingly become a standard aspect of archaeological analysis with samples being taken in order to study a wide variety of indicators. This study has produced many individual collections of site-based data and with the implementation of PPG 16 the amount of environmental and other data has risen almost exponentially. This large collection of data, much of which has not been viewed other than in its site-based context, has needed digestion and, in the case of pollen, some samples have offered the potential for greater environmental definition by sub-sampling and also extending the counting.

All the readily available material housed either in the Northamptonshire County Council or the Peterborough City Council Historic Environment Records have been consulted. Additionally unpublished information has been sought from several excavators on recent projects. The size of the data available was greater than anticipated and all the authors are aware there are omissions and gaps but it is hoped that this study will provide a basis for continuing archaeological and environmental research within the region.




- Boulder clay
- Kellaways clay
- Oxford clay
- Upper estuarine limestone
- Lower estuarine limestone
- Upper estuarine clay
- Lower lincolnshire limestone
- Great oolite limestone
- Alluvium
- Glacial lake
- 1st river gravel terrace
- Middle lias silts and clays
- Northampton sand and ironstone
- Cornbrash
- Marlstone rock bed
- Upper lias clay
- Lower lias clay
- Glacial sand and gravel

Scale 1:500,000

River Nene related to schematised solid geology Fig 2.1.3

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