

2.4 The Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age

by I Meadows

Introduction

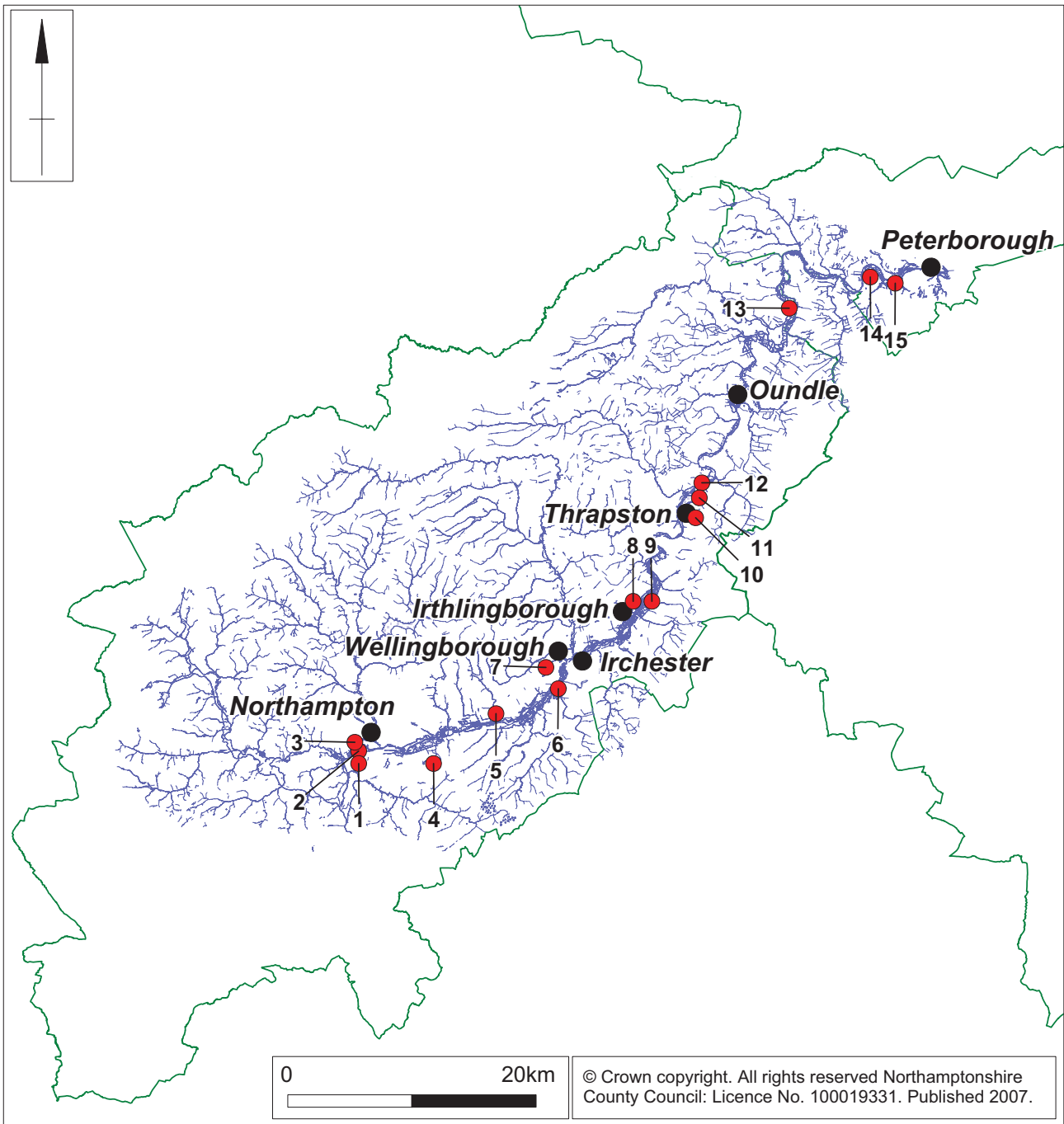
This period in Northamptonshire's archaeological record sees the quantity of evidence increase dramatically. Whilst it is possible this represents an increase in population and human activity (Kidd 2004) some aspects of it may simply be a reflection of increased visibility of the created archaeological monuments, artefacts and activity. The monuments include the beginning of extensive land divisions and field systems, and there are few large monuments other than the hillforts at Hunsbury (Jackson 1994) and Crow Hill (Parry 2006, 139-46). The climate at the start of this period is generally believed to have got colder and wetter, becoming warmer and drier around 500 cal BC. The evidence in this period for the valley is of an increasingly cleared and open grassland environment with permanent settlement and agriculture of increasing scale. The landscape is subdivided by a series of extensive linear monuments such as pit alignments, these have in some instances been traced by excavation and observation of cropmarks for several kilometres suggesting large-scale planning and organisation.

The Archaeological resource assessment (Kidd nd), prepared as part of the East Midlands Archaeological Research Assessment and Research Agenda (Cooper 2006), states that 518 entries for the Iron Age comprise 7.3% of the entries in the county Historic Environment Record (HER), a large proportion of these are from the Nene Valley (Fig 2.4.1). Our understanding of the character of the valley in the first millennium cal BC is based to a large extent on the extensive cropmark evidence with a few substantial areas of excavated landscape, such as Wollaston. The difficulty with this period is the generally unenclosed nature of settlement in the earlier part does not generally lend itself to form cropmark remains and they are therefore often found as part of other work. Essentially the Middle and Later Iron Age are disproportionately visible because many of their farmsteads are enclosed. This is a pattern that is not uncommon in the midlands and in the Trent valley (Knight and Howard 2004, 95) the homogeneity of these enclosed farmsteads was commented upon.

Fields

The Later Bronze Age is not a period that produces monumental remains that dominate the landscape and that ephemeral nature means that often the remains are detected only incidentally as part of larger projects. This is well illustrated by the remains of a co-axial field system recognised during the excavations at Stanwick. Two distinct blocks of shallow ditches defining rectangular parcels of land were found, one block showed evidence of at least two phases of recutting suggesting extended use. Although no dateable artefacts were recovered one block was associated with a fence line and hut circle with a radiocarbon date of 1390-1040 cal BC (2990±50 BP; GU-5320). The individual fields had entrances generally in the corners and their size and associated droveways would suggest they were used for livestock. This represents the only demonstrable field system of this date in not only the study area but also in the whole of Northamptonshire, which reflects how scarce evidence of this period is for even the most extensive of activities.

The extensive systems of fields that survive in marginal locations such as Dartmoor (Fleming 1988) or the Fen edge (Pryor 1980) were most probably quite widespread but their fragility would seem to have precluded their survival through later cultivation. This difficulty is further increased by the fact that the contemporary ceramics survive poorly in the ploughsoil, preventing the identification of any idea of the extent of activity (Parry 2006, 60).



Scale 1:500,000

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 Northampton, Hunsbury | 12 Aldwincle |
| 2 Northampton, Briar Hill | 13 Fotheringhay |
| 3 Northampton, Duston | 14 Peterborough, Lynch Farm |
| 4 Great Houghton | 15 Peterborough, Orton Meadows |
| 5 Earls Barton, Clay Lane | |
| 6 Wollaston Excavations | |
| 7 Wellingborough, Wilby Way | |
| 8 Irthlingborough, Crow Hill | |
| 9 Stanwick | |
| 10 Thrapston, Ringwork | |
| 11 Titchmarsh | |

Distribution map of Iron Age sites mentioned in the text Fig 2.4.1

In the valley, by the Early Iron Age, a new and distinctive boundary element, which forms generally good cropmarks, appears. These new boundaries were defined by alignments of pits, each separated by a causeway of unexcavated ground (Plate 2.4.1). As a monument category the distribution is across the middle of England into the Welsh borders, none occur in southern England and the examples north of the Humber in Yorkshire and Northumberland are characteristically different to these examples (Fig 2.4.2). Pit alignments appear to define or delimit extended boundary lines sometimes running for several kilometres and, where conditions for detection allow their recognition, often there are secondary alignments subdividing the land. The distribution based upon the Cambridge University Collection of aerial photographs (Wilson 1978) is still largely true, work by the author examined the pit alignments recorded by HERs across the country in the mid 1990s confirmed that the main area was still the core of the distribution and many of the outliers are anomalous cropmarks.

The largest area of pit alignments (Fig 2.4.3), believed to be Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age in date, examined in the county is at Wollaston, where one alignment was traced for over 3km (Plate 2.4.2). Along that length numerous pits were excavated and bulk soil samples wet sieved to try to recover both environmental material as well as any dating evidence. Despite processing nearly 50 such samples not even a single piece of charcoal was recovered, probably reflecting the absence of contemporary habitation sites in the vicinity. In addition to the main single alignment elements of other parallel single alignments were also examined, the alignment furthest west and closest to the river followed a course in places that would have mirrored the line of the river. The presence of single and double pit alignments running perpendicular to the main lines had the effect of subdividing the landscape into parcels of ground defined by lines of pits. Similar co-axial pit alignment systems have been identified at other locations, for example at Four Crosses in Powys (Owen *et al* 1989).

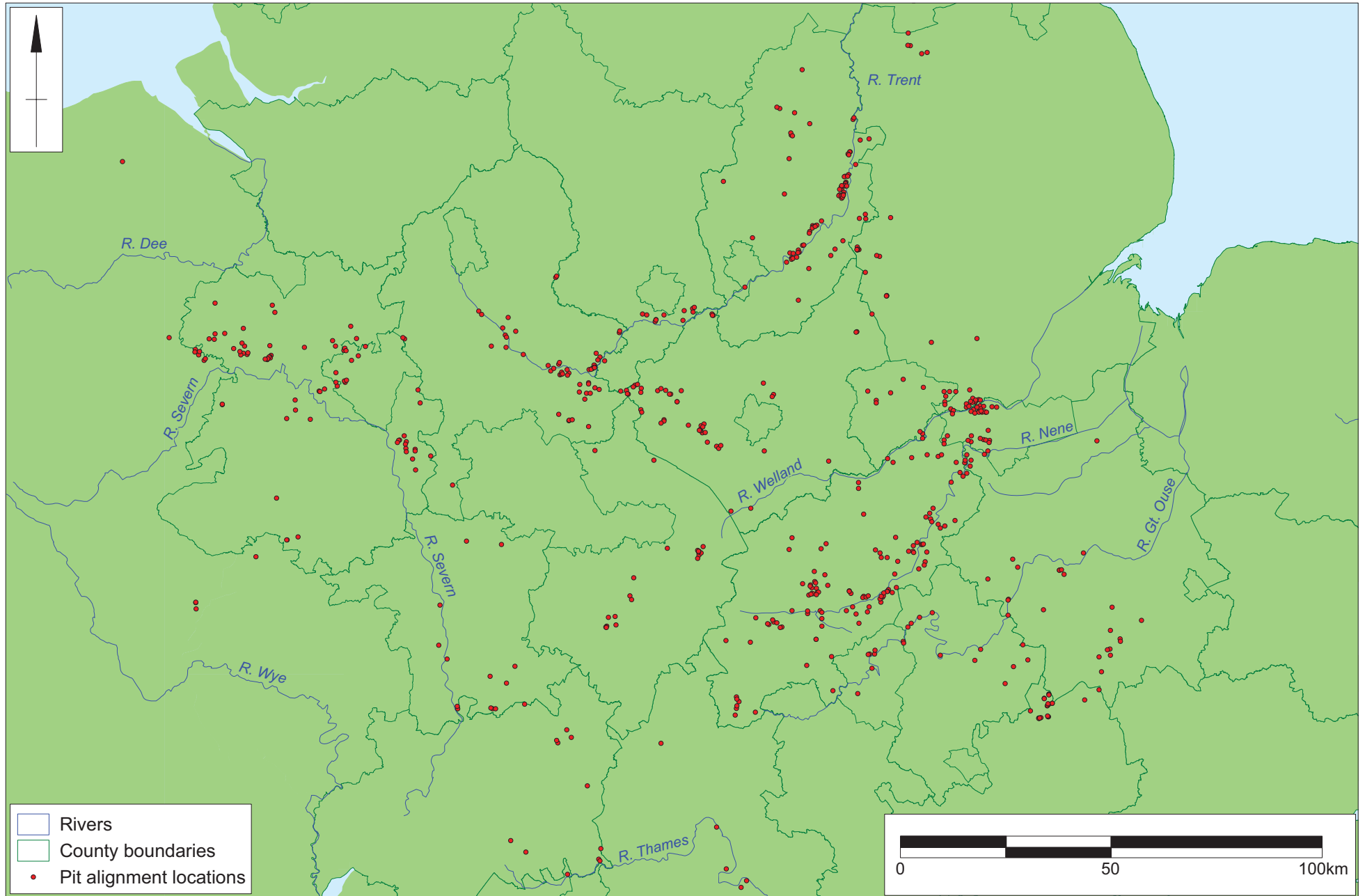
The individual pits were generally irregular, sub-rectangular in plan at the scraped surface with a marked 'cone of weathering' in their upper profile and they all had flat bases. The size of the pits varied but on average they were of an order of 1.8m long and 1.2m wide and up to 1m deep, in many examples the lower parts of the profile retained a near vertical form. It was noted during excavation that the material that would have been derived from the weathering process of the open pit was not present in sufficient amounts within many of the pits, this suggests maintenance of these pits over a prolonged period. This process of scouring, as with recutting ditches, would remove weathered material leaving an increasingly stable profile. One consequence of repeated scouring could also be the progressive deepening of the pits.

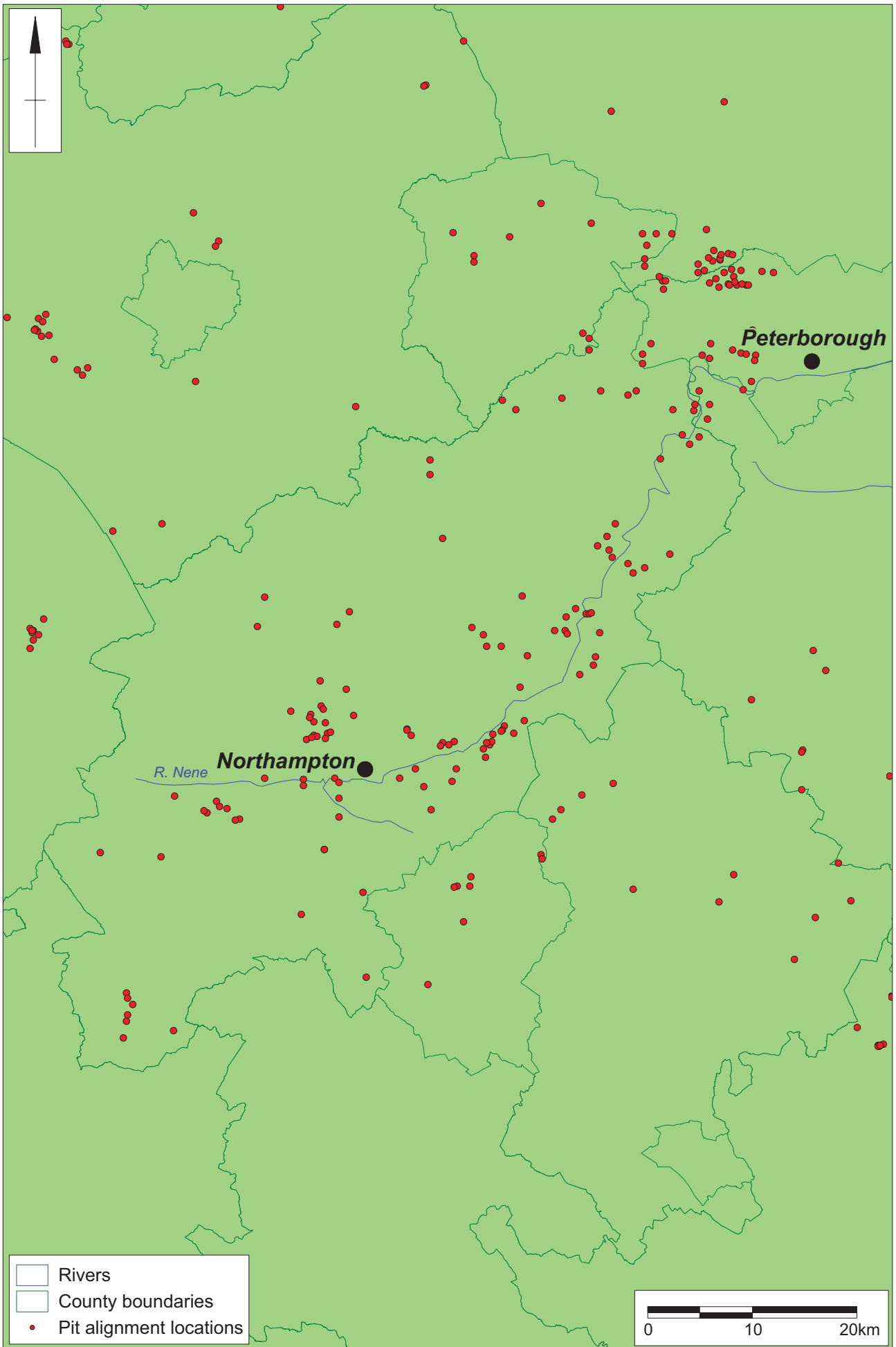
Experimental pits excavated in 1997 were monitored for a year and confirmed there should there be substantial recognisable deposits of weathered material in the base of the pits (Plates 2.4.3, 2.4.4). A second aspect of the experimental pits was to demonstrate how many small animals fell into and died within the pits. The reason these carcasses are not then reflected in the archaeological record is that scavengers such as crows remove the carcasses.

The deepening of pits through scouring is perhaps implied by the different form of some groups of pits in individual alignments. Generally, at the junction of two alignments some of the pits were significantly shallower than the rest, this shallowness may reflect a shorter duration to any maintenance, perhaps because they were in locations which were to become, or had already become recognised as, entrances. No evidence has survived generally for how the upcast material was disposed of, although on some sites potential upcast banks are claimed. In the experimental alignment two different approaches were tried, one was the formation of a bank the other was to use the upcast to blanket the area thereby suppressing the vegetation. The use or function of this monument type is likely to have determined the disposition of the upcast, a bank would create a continuous barrier which would be in contrast to the permeable nature of the pits themselves.

The environmental information recovered from the alignments at Wollaston, and many other sites, suggest pits existing in a largely grass landscape, this coupled with the absence of human material,

Pit alignments in the Midlands
Fig 2.4.2





Pit alignments in Northamptonshire Fig 2.4.3

even charcoal from fires, would perhaps indicate land used for extensive pastoral agriculture. If the pits were used in a pastoral landscape then the question is, why were pits employed as elements of the boundaries? Two reasons might be suggested; firstly a permeable boundary may have been desired so that herds or flocks could be driven freely across the grass floodplain. By defining lines but not closing them would enable a shepherd/herdsman to manage his stock within areas but would also allow their free movement to utilise the best ground. A rigid barrier would have prevented such easy stock movement but would only really be necessary if there were issues of ownership or conflicting demands of different land uses, cereal/stock, which the environmental indications suggest was not the case. The second reason for having a boundary of pits may be that the boundary was created with an individual responsible for a section, a number of pits is instantly more quantifiable than a length. Some authors have suggested that some of the irregularities in line might reflect work gangs (eg Jackson 1977, 46) but it is equally possible that each section represents an individual's effort, the creation and maintenance of the alignments being a community act might suggest a defined obligation falling on each individual.

At Wollaston the alignments of pits were maintained for an unspecified period of time before being abandoned. However, the alignments they defined appear to be respected and were presumably marked in some form, as the first farmsteads of Middle/Late Iron Age date were sited at the corners of the units previously defined by lines of pits. In the Roman period the boundaries previously denoted by the pits were clearly recut by ditches suggesting the line had been marked and or respected throughout the period, even after the pits had become infilled. This pattern of static and respected boundaries runs through from the pit alignments to the Iron Age on a number of site in Northamptonshire and reflects a high level of rural conservatism. It would almost appear as if the significant expansion of population and the expansion of fields that occurs in this period was maintained with little modification for many generations. It has been noted that some of the boundary lines defined initially by pit alignments at Wollaston were still defined and respected into the post Roman period. The axial Roman road followed a course defined originally by a pit alignment and subsequently by an Iron Age drove, and it was adjacent to this line that the seventh-century princely burial was recovered (Meadows 2004).

The establishment of lines of pits in the landscape would require an enormous organisation in terms of manpower and surveying and it is notable how many instances there are of the alignments incorporating upstanding earlier prehistoric monuments, suggesting they were still visible in the landscape as 'targets'. At Briar Hill (Bamford 1985, 49) the alignments' relationship to the causewayed enclosure, at Aldwinckle the relationship with the mortuary structure (Jackson 1977) and on other sites suggests that Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments were visible in the landscape. It suggests that the alignments were laid out in a landscape that was as well understood in terms of its features as the landscapes described in Saxon boundary charters.

The significance of the pit alignment boundaries is not just the existence of the boundary as pits but also the land division and the process of land division they denote. The massive undertaking of excavating alignments comprising hundreds of pits across long distances, subdivided by other alignments whose relationships to the initial line was subsequently to be recognised and respected and later occupied, suggests a huge social undertaking. As the next activity was the laying out of farming units it at times almost seems as if the pit alignments were stamping a social mark and defining land into which settlement was to expand. That the flood plain, which is where most pit alignments are seen, was identified as an area into which to expand might suggest that in the Later Bronze Age and Early Iron Age it formed less desirable land in which to settle. Perhaps to extend this logic the evidence for Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age settlement should be sought in areas where there are no pit alignments.

In the Iron Age it is easy to see the hillforts as major social monuments reflecting social need, control and an ability to plan but these large-scale boundaries that become the backbone of the subsequent rural settlement are perhaps an even greater reflection of that social control and cohesion. The

creation of pit alignments required a social consensus to create and maintain them; they needed under-occupied or unoccupied land in which to be constructed and most importantly they needed a part of society to have the vision to require them to be created. As a monument they appear to have been maintained in a generally unoccupied landscape (as reflected by the lack of artefacts and charcoal), which would suggest they were seen as something done for the long term good of the population. It is reasonable to imagine that they eventually would have become overtaken by shrub growth, even if they were not deliberately planted and subsequently these would form the basis of hedge lines, which would need less maintenance and would have defined lines into which the Middle Iron Age farmsteads could have been inserted.

If these alignments were the product of a locally centralised decision-making process then the identification of irregularities, whilst possibly reflecting work gangs, could reflect the work of an individual. In historic times the idea of labour dues are accepted because documentation confirms its existence, however, in the prehistoric period similar practices may have also operated.

The pit alignments are not the only large-scale land division that is seen in the Iron Age in the Nene Valley there are also examples of the enigmatic multiple ditch boundaries. Examples are known at a number of locations above the floodplain, for example Pitsford (HER Mon No 1285/0/1) and on the floodplain at Lynch Farm (RCHM(E) 1969, 19 fig 7) where a triple ditch line could be traced for over 1km. Excavation in the 1970s (Challands 1974, 85) showed the ditches varied from U-shaped to V-shaped in profile and were between 2.5 and 3m wide and 1m deep spaced about 11m apart. There was little to date the ditches other than a little Late Iron Age pottery within the infills mixed with a small amount of first and second century Roman.

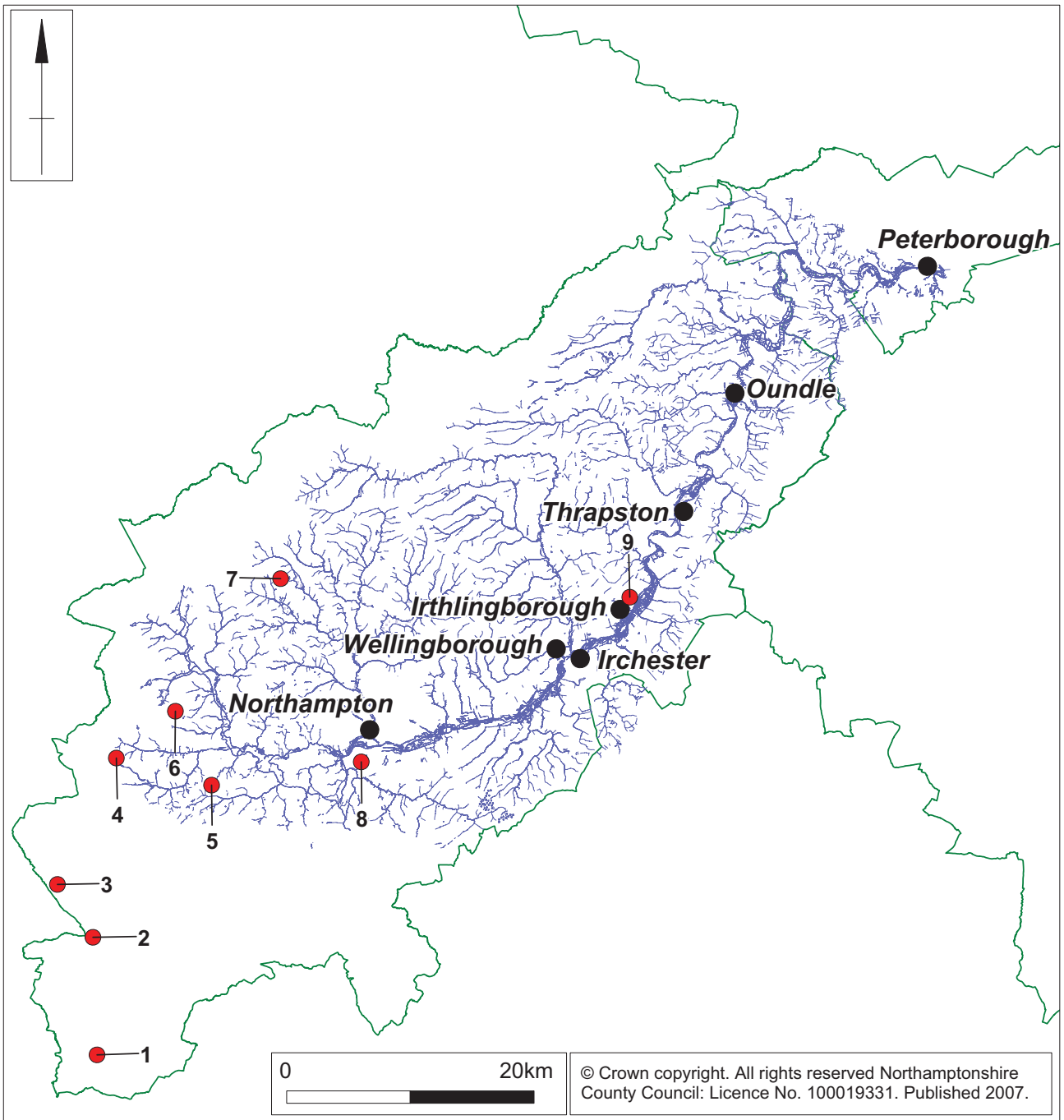
The construction of long distance boundaries in the Iron Age reflects a large scale planning and subdivision of the countryside which is something that is new in the archaeological record of this part of the country. Large-scale divisions extending over many kilometres can be seen on Dartmoor (Fleming 1988), but until the appearance of the pit alignments nothing comparable occurs in the Nene Valley. That large-scale boundaries can be conceived suggests a highly organised and self-aware population with the ability to plan and construct large monuments, and in the case of the pit alignments these monuments might lie in areas that were at the time not occupied by permanent settlement.

Hillforts

The Early Iron Age, in addition to the construction of these large boundaries, sees the advent of the largest of all monuments of this period, the hillforts (Fig 2.4.4). The valley contains two such sites; Crow Hill, Irthlingborough and Hunsbury Hill, Northampton, both in dominant locations overlooking the river valley and presumably visible themselves from within the valley.

Excavations at Crow Hill (Parry 2006, 138-46) produced evidence for occupation beginning in the Early to Middle Iron Age comprising a ditch and rampart (Plate 2.4.5). This ditch had numerous recuts on slightly different lines with the individual cuts getting shallower through time, the initial two ditch cuts were at least 3.3m deep and of the order of 5m wide. The total enclosed area was about 3ha and there were at least seven ring ditches identified by excavation or geophysical survey, probably indicating houses of Middle or Later Iron Age date when the excavation of ring ditches around houses became widespread in the midlands (Allen *et al* 1984, 100).

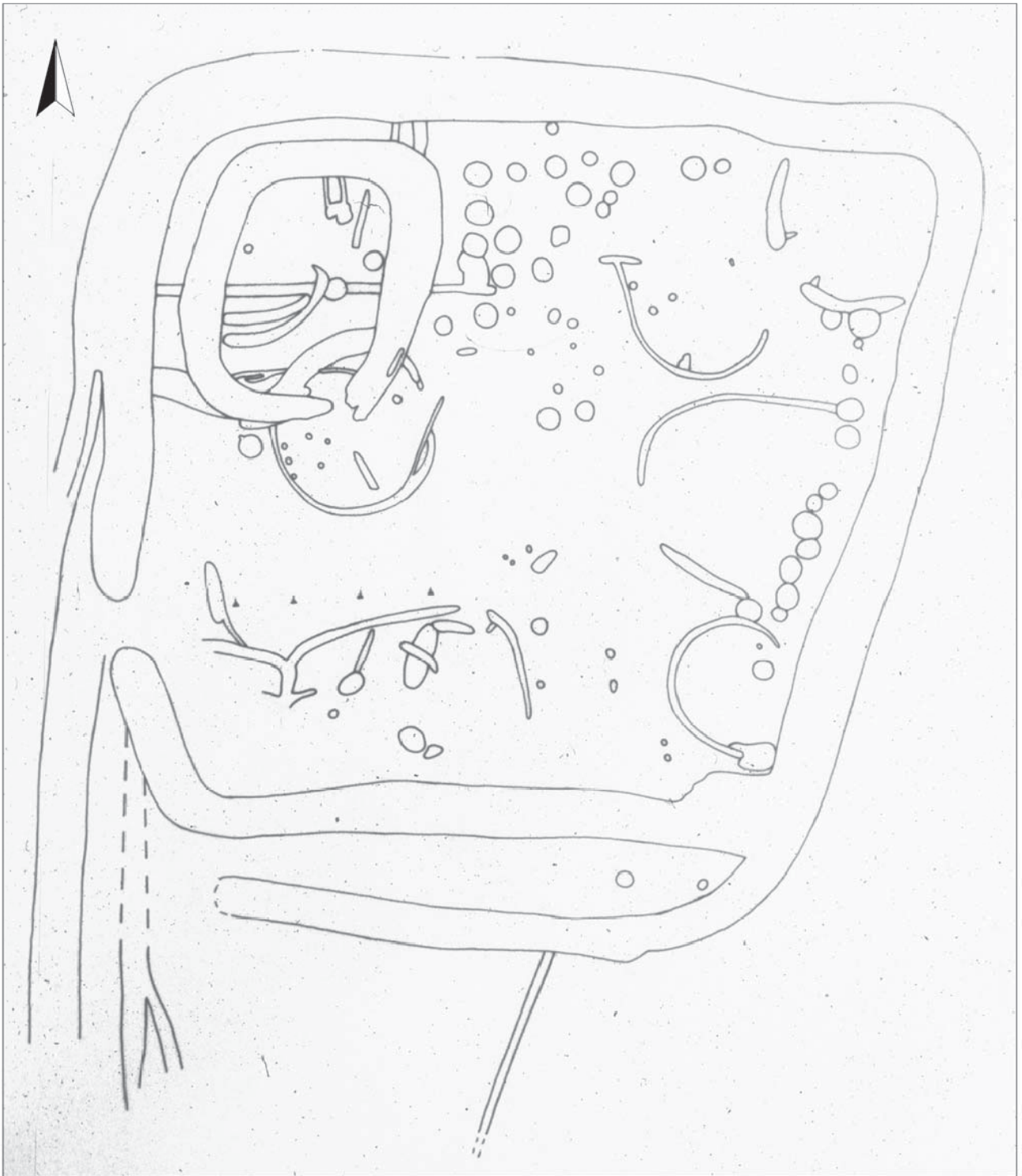
The other hillfort, at Hunsbury, to the south-west of Northampton has been poorly recorded with much damage occurring during ironstone quarrying. Recent work has, however, shown that areas of the interior survive (Butler pers comm). This hillfort comprised initially a ditch and rampart circuit enclosing about 1.6ha, the initial box rampart was subsequently replaced by a glacis type rampart and ditch (Jackson 1994, 18). The initial recording in the nineteenth century only recovered later Iron Age pottery, perhaps reflecting a period after the fort's construction when it was not occupied.



Scale 1:500,000

- 1 Rainsborough
- 2 Thenford
- 3 Arbury Camp
- 4 Arbury Hill
- 5 Castle Dykes
- 6 Borough Hill
- 7 Guilsborough
- 8 Northampton, Hunsbury Hill
- 9 Irthlingborough, Crow Hill

Hillforts in Northamptonshire (after Jackson 1993-4) Fig 2.4.4



Radiocarbon dates for the timbers of the box rampart suggest the box rampart was erected between the eighth and fourth centuries cal BC (2390± 70 BP; HAR-10568). In addition to hillforts the county has another category of potentially defensible sites, the defended enclosures (Dix and Jackson 1989) but these are generally Late Iron Age in date (see below).

Other Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age settlement

The paucity of Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age settlement sites in the archaeological record is almost certainly a reflection that their remains were extremely ephemeral, not that they did not exist. In a recent survey less than twenty examples of settlement of this date were recognised in the whole of Northamptonshire (Parry 2006, 60), two of these were the initial phases of the hillforts discussed above.

At Thrapston a ringwork was excavated (Hull 2001) overlooking the river valley, this site comprised a circular ditched enclosure between 110-120m diameter with a depth of the order of about 1.8m. This type of site is variously described as a mini-hillfort, aristocratic residence or ringwork (Hull 2001, 89) and it belongs to a regional monument type of the Late Bronze Age. Samples submitted for radiocarbon dating from this site place the site in the ninth or tenth centuries cal BC (910-760 cal BC; BM-3113 and 810-750 or 700-540 cal BC; BM-3129). It was unfortunate that very little of the interior of the monument was available for excavation, however, a number of postholes and pits explored both inside and outside the ditch also contained Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age pottery, making the largest assemblage of this period from the whole county. Whilst no structures were found indicating occupation the quantities of pottery and animal bone, predominantly cattle, would suggest domestic activity, and there were also special placed deposits within the ditch comprising a pair of shed antlers perhaps suggesting the site could also have had a ceremonial/ritual role.

Middle-Late Iron Age settlement

Along the Nene Valley, as with other parts of the midlands, the number of recognisable sites increases dramatically; this is to some extent because of the appearance of numerous enclosed farmsteads. It is unclear what the motivation for the creation of innumerable small enclosed farmsteads was, whether perceived threat, imitation of larger scale defensive sites or as a social statement, but they become the dominant settlement site of this period.

There are also a few unenclosed nucleated sites of this date in Northamptonshire, the best example being at Crick, well away from the Nene Valley. In the valley at Wilby Way near Wellingborough (Thomas *et al* 2003) occupation covering about 4ha was partially excavated to reveal a settlement that had its origins in the Early-Middle Iron Age. The earliest occupation comprised enclosures and structural remains, which became more extensive in the Middle and Later Iron Age. In total at least ten circular buildings were present, defined by eaves drip gullies, along with a small number of pits and fourteen enclosures of varying size. The excavator suggests that the presence of large storage jar sherds indicates the sites role as a central place or communal centre (op cit 61). The presence of three four-post structures perhaps indicates some level of above-ground storage of grain (Gent 1983).

Another pair of unenclosed nucleated settlements was identified during the excavations at Stanwick (Crosby and Neal forthcoming). One comprised a small group of ring ditches on an area of higher ground adjacent to the river, the other was a complex covering about 3ha and including at least forty-nine ring ditches, although these were not all contemporary. At this site there was evidence to suggest that individual structures may have been paired. The larger settlement may have superseded the smaller one near the river and it appears to have continued to be occupied until after the conquest. Interestingly it displayed a low take-up of new ceramics, samian was absent and native wares predominated.

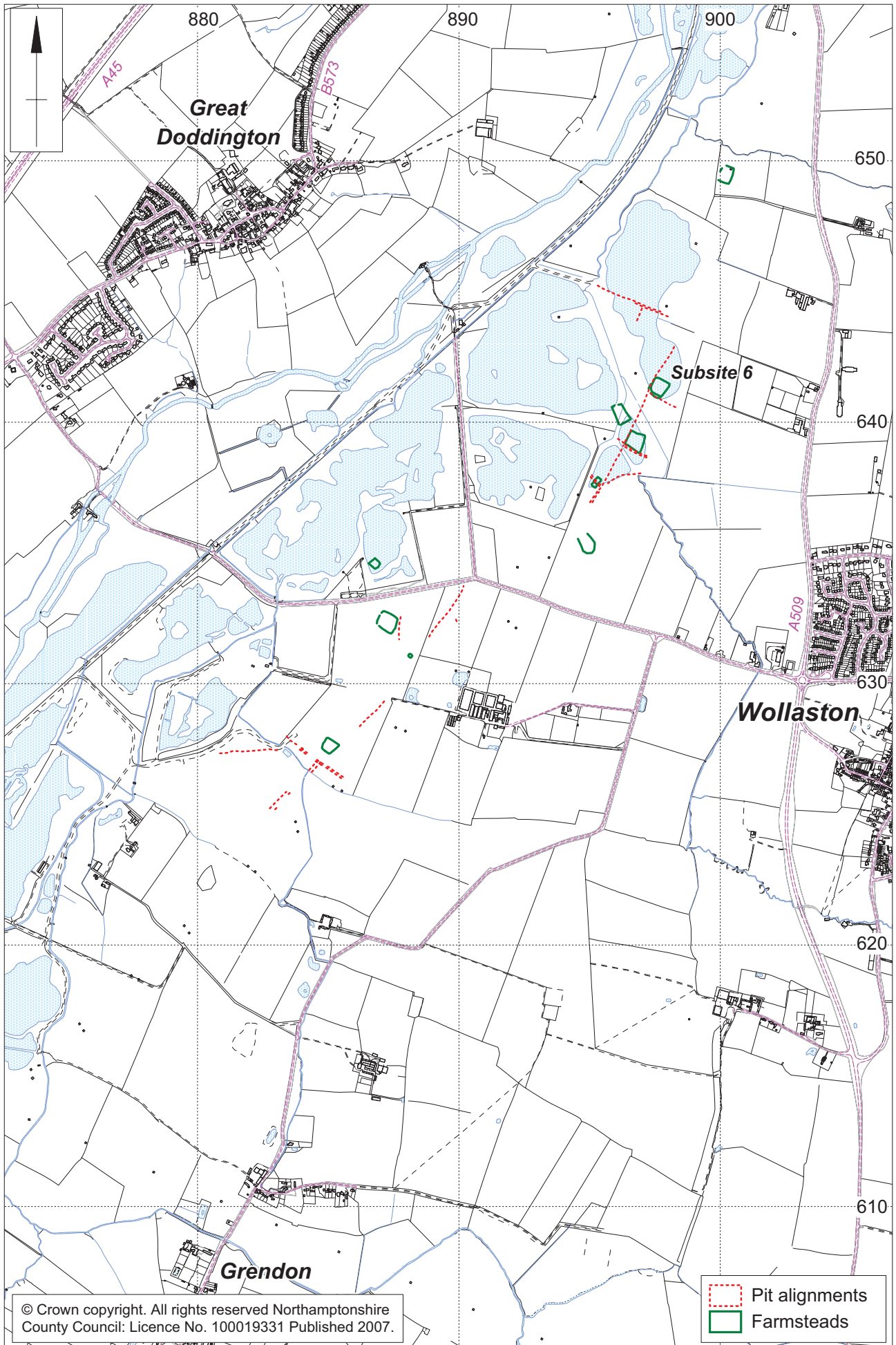
and the recovery of dung beetles of a type indicative of close penned animals (sub site 6) might suggest the deep-ditched enclosure held stock that were close penned and fed. It is a feature of the enclosures that often this inner small ditched pen had deep ditches, sometimes deeper than those of the main enclosure ditch.

The evidence for the agricultural practices of the occupants of these farms shows a high level of diversity and landscape exploitation. It is clear that land well beyond the flood plain was being used and its resources being taken to the farms, suggesting that the farmsteads' location was specifically chosen. These resources are not just agricultural but may include wood and definitely included bracken, of which substantial amounts were recovered from one ditch, which may have been used as cattle bedding. All but one of the farmsteads lay at the intersection of pit alignments, the other example lay in an area severely affected by quarrying and much of its environs could not be examined. That the Early Iron Age boundaries were still significant when siting the Middle Iron Age farms perhaps suggests that although those earlier lines of pits had become in filled with weathering and other material the line they defined was still marked, perhaps by a hedge. The coincidence of so many farms with intersections shows, if nothing else, how static the land divisions must have been within the area. In one of the farms a waterlogged context produced thorns and fragments of twigs from sloe or hawthorn, perhaps indicating the proximity of a hedge in the vicinity.

The evidence for agriculture from the environmental data at Wollaston shows that in addition to cattle, pigs and sheep a range of other resources were exploited. In one farmstead the remains of honeybees within an enclosing ditch suggest that bee keeping was practised to provide honey. The beehive, in the warm parts of the year, would be placed out in the fields but in the winter, in order to protect it, it would be brought back into the farm. On warm winter days solitary bees would venture out a short distance to collect water to take back and dilute the stored nectar to feed the hive. The enclosing ditch around one farm contained standing water and at least three bees became trapped and drowned (Plate 2.4.6). The occurrence of cereal grains and the seeds of cereal weeds suggest a degree of arable cultivation and cereal processing and the overall impression from the environmental indicators was that at least one farm (sub site 6) was a relatively dry site not prone to either general or seasonal wetness.

The average size of the farm enclosure was about 70 metres square but some examples are larger and in the Wollaston section of the Nene Valley at least one of these larger enclosures occurs adjacent to the site of a Roman Villa (RCHM(E) 1979, 176). This enclosure measured *c* 90m square, similar in size to the example in the excavated area that had been severely damaged by nineteenth-century gravel extraction. The damaged enclosure was different to the other farmsteads that were examined in that it had an internal dividing ditch and had additional occupation elements around the outside including a ring ditch that enclosed a house, the portal postholes survived. It is possible therefore that the size of the enclosure can be taken as an indicator of status and it is for that reason unfortunate that the interior of the large enclosure that was excavated had been lost through quarrying, preventing the identification of potentially different activities that may have been carried out within it and any comparison with the standard type farmsteads.

In the flood plain there is little other evidence for Iron Age farms. Although Iron Age farming can be shown, most of the occupation seems to have been concentrated on the slope or at the top of the slope still, however, allowing the exploitation of the rich valley floor. Perhaps typical of this type of site is Top Lodge, near Ringstead (Shaw *et al* 1992), which was first detected by aerial photography and then fieldwalking. The site lies on the side of the valley on the cornbrash and extends over about 2ha. The area was surveyed using a magnetometer, which identified an unenclosed site composed of a number of ring ditches, enclosures and linear ditches. The site was only examined by limited trial trenches, which did not allow the identification of internal relationships between the various elements of occupation that could only be dated broadly to the Iron Age. This site may be typical of many of the Iron Age sites around the valley and from which the valley was exploited. Upstream at Ecton a similar range of ditches and enclosure were examined, about 2km from the river (Meadows 1993).



Wollaston, plan of Iron Age features Fig 2.4.6

Whilst other nucleated settlements must exist they often formed part of some of the complex cropmark remains, for example those around Fotheringhay. The lack of excavation, however, prevents certain identification. The poor representation of Iron Age pottery generally within the plough soil renders non-intrusive techniques such as fieldwalking unlikely to identify sites (Parry 2006, 70).

Enclosed farmsteads are very visible from the aerial photographic record as generally their enclosing ditch will form a cropmark, even if no other element is visible. It is unclear why they were enclosed with ditches, which in some instances are quite substantial, and in only very few instances can an internal bank be suggested as the internal features often extend to close to the edge of the innermost ditch. To define the farmstead within a ditched enclosure must, however, denote a degree of perceived threat or a permanence of occupation. It is unclear whether the ditches were to keep people or animals in or out but few are of enormously defensible form, perhaps suggesting they are to a degree a marker of social aspiration. Enclosed farmsteads have also been examined at a number of sites along the valley and they display a remarkable uniformity of form and plan. This perhaps is a reflection of common function and perhaps also a common range of agricultural practises as well as similar social aspects in terms of the relationship between the farm and the accommodation for the 'family' that it comprised.

At Clay Lane (Windell 1982) an area of Iron Age occupation on a gravel terrace was examined in several excavation areas, the largest of which measured 100m x 75m. This main excavation area exposed a sub-square enclosure within which a number of features were present, at least two ring ditches, several pits, subdivisions and enclosures defined by shallow gullies and a sub-rectangular ditched enclosure. The ring ditches were penannular in form and would have served as eaves drip gullies around circular structures of which little other evidence survived. The pits were mostly shallow and would have been limited borrow pits for the underlying gravelly material. The sub-rectangular enclosure lay in one corner of the main enclosure and it was noted how much deeper its ditch cuts were than those of the ring ditches, individual cuts reaching as much as 1.2m below the scraped surface. Around the main enclosure, whose individual cuts extended to up to 2.1m deep, further activity was found comprising further enclosures and possible roundhouse sites defined by penannular ditches. One hundred metres to the south of this enclosure lay a Roman farm that was certainly active by the later first century and perhaps represented continuity of the Iron Age farming community.

About 4km further downstream the excavation of a large landscape (Fig 2.4.5), covering over 200ha, in a series of adjoining gravel quarries (Meadows forthcoming) has allowed the exploration of several enclosed farmsteads, four of which were fully excavated and a further example that was to be preserved was explored by geophysics. Each of the excavated examples was found to comprise common elements as has been commented upon in the Trent Valley (Knight *et al* 2004) and none of them appeared to have an earlier unenclosed phase. The individual farmstead comprised generally three penannular ring ditches arranged along one side of the interior, a deep ditch sub-rectangular pen, shallower pens defined by gullies and varying numbers of shallow pits (Fig 2.4.6).

The repetition of form is notable and must reflect a number of repeated aspects to the rural life. That each farm is largely the same size is potentially a reflection of similar sized family units, this is perhaps also further reinforced as the number of roundhouses, indicated by eaves drip gullies, is regularly three. The common form of the farmstead possibly reflects the similarity in size of each agricultural holding and the repeating of the internal presence of shallow pens and a deep-ditched enclosure would suggest the agricultural practices are also the same. The shallow gullies may have been small stock pens and the deeper ditched enclosure could perhaps have been to enclose a plough team. This suggestion is based upon the size of the enclosure and that the plough team comprising two cows would have been of particular value to the farmer. As cattle were subject to rustling there would be good reason for taking particular care of such a specialised pair within the protection of the farmyard. Examination of a possible trample deposit associated with one of the enclosures (sub site 5)

This apparent preference for locations away from the floodplain might suggest either the environment was too unstable with regards seasonal flooding or that the agriculture was more seasonally focussed, perhaps even with an element of transhumance of both people and stock. Certainly along the valley there are few farmsteads or other settlements that have been identified on the floodplain. In the Thames valley around Oxford such a practice has been suggested for Farmoor and other sites (Lambrick *et al* 1979, 134) as a means of exploiting the resources of the floodplain but avoiding winter inundations.

In the area of the valley from Thrapston downstream to Wansford there are several groups of cropmarks whose precise nature can only be elucidated by excavation. Some of these complexes are described as Iron Age/Roman for want of better period characterisation and in some instances there may be elements of continuity. Unfortunately the lower Nene Valley has had very few Iron Age settlements explored archaeologically even the extensive observations at Lynch Farm near Peterborough failed to identify any structures. Although Late Iron Age pits containing pottery and bone fragments, perhaps reflecting occupation, were recorded, residual Iron Age material, including triangular loomweights, was also recovered from early Roman features.

A number of sites are suggested along the valley as having significant Iron Age occupation, but in the case of Duston and Titchmarsh the evidence is limited. Duston has been suggested as the site of an oppidum, but was largely destroyed by nineteenth-century quarrying preventing the recovery of any proof. The site at Titchmarsh may have had a very specialised function as a religious centre (see below).

In addition to the above evidence for settlement types in the valley there are a particular type of small enclosure that have disproportionately substantial, almost defensive ditches, and may have had palisades and gate arrangements, which were absent in the other farmsteads. These 'Wootton hill style enclosure' have previously been discussed (Dix and Jackson 1989) where they were dated to the first century BC although perhaps in light of the associated finds of early La Tène pottery a broader Middle to Late Iron Age range may be more appropriate (Kidd 2004, 54). Only one of this monument type lies on the edge of the floodplain, Aldwinckle (Jackson 1977), the remainder are all on high ground often in commanding locations with good views. The site at Aldwinckle comprised a rectangular enclosure 64m x 42m formed of a ditch between 1.6-2.4m deep, with a narrow entrance causeway 3-4m wide reinforced by a substantial gate arrangement. Within the enclosure at least four roundhouses were identified, although only three could have been contemporary, along with pits and the gullies that defined small pens.

Other enclosures

One of the characteristic aspects of the Iron Age is the occurrence of small enclosures which display no evidence for buildings, but whose form is such that they could have served in stock management. Many of these small enclosures hang from longer boundaries and are associated with other occupation. The presence of several such enclosures on the floodplain directly opposite each of the enclosed farms, at Wollaston lead to their being regarded as stock enclosures. None have produced any environmental support for this theory but there were no contemporary internal features. The individual enclosures were small, too small to be regarded as fields; they could only have effectively served in stock control or management, not its containment.

One enclosure measured 20m x 17m with an adjoining annex, another measured 40m square. This size of enclosure is seen across the excavations at Wollaston and similar enclosures are known from both excavation and cropmarks along the valley. Their presence, probably indicating stock management, should perhaps be used as an indicator of the extensive herds/flocks of this period

utilising the floodplain for grazing. As with modern hill farming enclosures might only be needed during times of either severe weather or when the herd/flock was being sorted for market/slaughter.

Communications

Although little can be said about long distance communications in this period most of the sites excavated produced evidence for tracks or droves. The longest pit alignment at Wollaston had enclosures along both sides, but although on the east side the enclosures overlay the pits, on the western side they were set off the line by a consistent few metres. This space was subsequently to form a Roman road and it is probable therefore it was an Iron Age drove. Most of the nucleated sites show localised droves as do many of the cropmark complexes. It is likely therefore that the countryside had a network of tracks and paths threading between farms and fields linking them all together.

The only evidence for the use of the river for any sort of communication is the single dugout canoe recovered during the construction of the power station in Peterborough in 1950 (Fell 1951). It had a surviving length of nearly 10m and a beam of 0.76m. Such a craft is larger than would be needed by an individual and it would have been able to use the river as a major artery of communications.

Religion and burial

The nature of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in this area are such that evidence of any activity is difficult to detect. Generally the dead of the Iron Age are under-represented in the archaeological record, probably because the nature of body disposal was such that it left little detectable trace. Religious or ritual contexts are sometimes obvious but are occasionally just deposits that appear out of the ordinary, this was the case of a pole-axed cattle skull in one terminal of an entrance to a farm at Wollaston (Plate 2.4.7). Similar skulls were recorded adjacent to the entrances of several of the other farmsteads and as parts of the skeleton they occurred nowhere else in any of the ditch circuits. The reason or rationale for this placing is therefore uncertain but clearly had significance to the inhabitants. It is suggested that either they were excarnated or cremated and the residue disposed without any container, either spread or buried in an unurned fashion. Urned burials are known for the Middle and Late Iron Age in the valley, for example the small Late Iron Age group at Irchester (Hall *et al* 1967, 84) but even these under-represent the likely population. Isolated inhumations are also known, for example at Wollaston (Meadows forthcoming). The excavations at Wollaston identified several unurned cremations buried in no apparent order across the landscape. At present, however, work on the material has not been able to identify whether they are human and whether they are Late Bronze Age/Iron Age or even Roman.

The single inhumation identified at Wollaston helps to underscore the unusual character of inhumation in the period. The body appeared to have been exposed for a period prior to being tightly bound in a flexed/crouched position (Plate 2.4.8). It was then placed in a shallow grave in the corner of one of the farmsteads (sub site 5). It is assumed that the burial occurred during the occupation of the farmstead as a ditch was cut to isolate the corner, dividing it from the rest of the farmyard. No other inhumations of this date were identified at Wollaston but a single large fragment of human cranium was recovered adjacent to a four-post structure. This type of structure, with suggested functions ranging from lookout towers to granaries, has also been suggested as possible exposure platforms similar to those employed by the Mandan Indians of North Dakota and recorded by the painter George Caitlin in 1833. That a skull fragment was found associated might be chance, but equally no other human skeletal remains were recognised across the site during excavation.

At the Wilby Way site (Thomas *et al* 2003, 64) there were three scattered inhumations and a number of pieces of redeposited human bone. The bone was in such a condition that it was possible to suggest a period of exposure prior to burial and in one instance there was even suggested evidence for defleshing. The occurrence of 'stray' human bones on sites of this period has been noted previously on Thames valley sites such as Ashville (Parrington 1978, 92). This regular occurrence of isolated bones suggests that exhumation was widespread.

No extensive cemeteries of this date are known for the valley, although a poorly recorded possible cremation cemetery was identified at Duston, which comprised a number of urns and brooches (Whimster 1981, 386). It seems possible that the individuals singled out for burial, whether urned cremations or inhumations, are recognised as being in some undefined way as different. This sort of difference is reinforced by the excavation just off the floodplain at Great Houghton where the burial of a thirty to forty year-old woman was found flexed, possibly trussed, in a 1.5m diameter pit with a lead alloy torc around the neck (Chapman 2001). There does not, however, appear to be any selection of valley location and it would suggest that whatever burials are encountered are derived from the immediate vicinity.

That so few burials are known should not, however, suggest they were poor or provincial. During the nineteenth century a probable grave was disturbed in Northampton containing a copper alloy bucket formed from two pieces of Etruscan bronze, a bucket and an *oenochoi* (Plate 2.4.9). It appears that the *oenochoi*, a jug, had become worn out and the lower part of the body roughly shorn to leave a squat open container. The handles and mounts were taken from a bronze bucket, which presumably had also ceased to be functional, for the Iron Age craftsmen to create a new bucket uniting the two elements. These items with their visible exotic origin were associated with wine consumption and are generally only encountered in this country in funerary contexts.

In terms of religious sites in the valley there are very few that can be identified with enormous certainty, however, there are several sites and locations where unusual practises have been observed. The absence of recognisable structures is perhaps as much as anything a reflection of the nature of Iron Age religious observances, that even a cursory reading of Tacitus *Germania* makes clear, seldom required permanent structures.

At the lower part of the study area there was a substantial deposit of metalwork deposited into one course of the River Nene at Orton Meadows. The metalwork included swords, spearheads and currency bars that had been bent, perhaps 'ritually killed' (Stead 1984). These objects were found during gravel extraction in a channel near to a pair of Bronze Age round barrows, perhaps reflecting some continuity of respect for the general location (Plate 2.4.10). As a practice the deposition of metalwork in water is also more a Bronze Age trait than Iron Age although significant deposits of both periods are known. The recovered objects comprised two La Tène I swords, a La Tène III sword in a copper alloy scabbard, a spearhead with engraved decoration, seven complete currency bars (additional fragments were also found), a rare ladle perhaps used in wine consumption and a latch lifter of La Tène III style. Whilst the objects span a 400-year period, and although some could have arrived in the water accidentally, the currency bars were deposited in a single event. That many of the pieces showed damage that was probably deliberate would also suggest the conscious separating of them from this world. No other deposits of metalwork have come from the Nene.

The evidence for the Iron Age settlement at Titchmarsh is dominated by a collection of artefacts, in particular coins. At twenty-seven it is the second largest assemblage of coins from any site in Northamptonshire (Curteis *et al* 1999, 168). It is argued that such a number of coins suggests the establishment of a settlement at least by the later pre Roman Iron Age and that their occurrence is an indicator of a high status site perhaps a shrine. Sadly the site has been partially quarried away and little excavation has taken place across the remainder.

At Wollaston a truly unusual enclosure was excavated, it comprised a double circuit of ditches with an entrance causeway in the north-west corner. The enclosure produced Middle to Late Iron Age pottery, but also a number of unusual aspects became apparent. The interior of the enclosure did not contain any evidence for a structure and other than a clay-lined scoop none of the small pits had to be domestic in origin. Most of the pits contained clean infills devoid of finds and might have been tree or shrub root boles but three pits contained La Tène curvilinear pottery sherds, including pieces of the same vessel in two of them, more curvilinear pottery was also recovered from the enclosure ditches. This type of pottery has been discussed elsewhere (Jackson and Dix 1987 77-9) but its occurrence here was particularly surprising as the excavation of the Iron Age landscape around recovered no sherds of this type of pottery. That such a specific artefact type was absent from all the adjacent farmstead perhaps suggests a specialised function for it. In addition a Hunsbury-type quern was recovered along with an assemblage of animal bone from one of the pits.

The enclosure ditch was waterlogged and the examination of the environmental remains suggested that neither people nor animals had occupied the enclosure and that it lay in a largely open grass landscape. The function and form of this enclosure contrasts with the adjacent enclosures and the occurrence of a quantity of a specialised type of pottery that is elsewhere absent might reflect a specific non-agrarian function. Whilst there are no explicitly 'ritual' deposits the deposition of a quern and also the pottery might imply a specialised use.

Iron Age-Roman transition in the valley

It is accepted that well defining historic events might be almost invisible within the archaeological record. The Roman conquest of England in AD 43 followed nearly a century of contact between England and the Romanised world. This contact manifested itself in the archaeological record in the form of imported artefacts that occur mixed with native types. The possession of these 'foreign' artefacts acted to symbolise connections and demonstrate status of their owners in the same way that the possession of Etruscan metalwork had. It is notable within the Nene Valley how few sites in the years prior to the Claudian conquest have produced assemblages with more than a few imported products. As has been said above at Stanwick there was an absence of imported samian pottery in the Iron Age settlement and at Wollaston a similar conservatism appears to have been displayed. In fact it is almost possible to suggest a two-speed Iron Age with one part adopting and acquiring Roman wares and the other developing slowly with only native wares.

Similar conservatism appears to apply to the farms with many Iron Age farms apparently continuing to function in the post-conquest period, slowly becoming increasingly Romanised and moving only slightly. Many Iron Age farms are very close to Roman farms and it is as if the occupants continued farming but when a new farm was required the new build was erected adjacent to the old site, probably allowing uninterrupted cultivation. This conservatism was carried through in the infrastructure with many Roman routes having Iron Age antecedents.

That so little evidence for Roman military activity occurs in the Nene Valley may be a further reflection of the acceptance of the new order without need for dramatic change. As the new rule was accepted there was no imposed change and therefore the gentle transition recognised at Stanwick and suggested at Wollaston may be a true reflection of this period in the valley.

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Plate 2.4.1: Pit alignment at Warmington.
(Northamptonshire Archaeology)

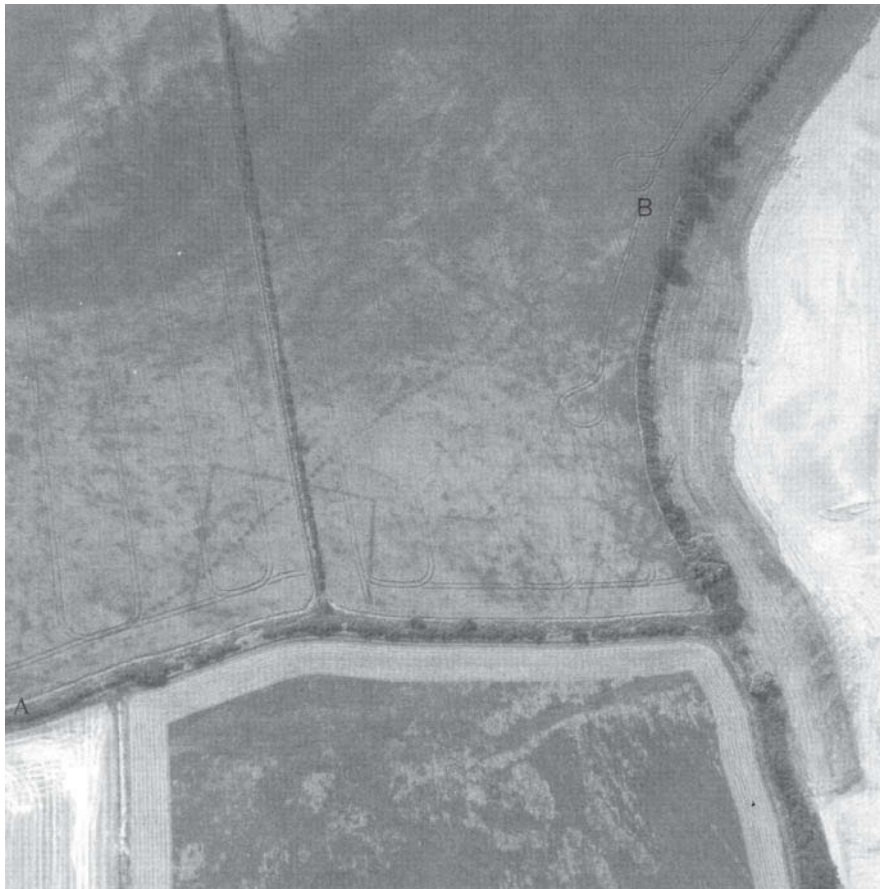


Plate 2.4.2: Pit alignment at Wollaston.
(Northamptonshire County Council)



Plate 2.4.3: Experimental pit alignment at Wollaston.
(Northamptonshire Archaeology)



Plate 2.4.4: Experimental pit alignment at Wollaston.
(Northamptonshire Archaeology)



Plate 2.4.5: Crow Hill cropmark.
(Northamptonshire County Council)



Plate 2.4.6: Wollaston, Sub site 6, waterlogged ditch.
(Northamptonshire Archaeology)



Plate 2.4.7: Pole-axed cattle skull from a ditch terminal by the entrance to a farmstead, Sub site 6, Wollaston.



Plate 2.4.8: Tightly flexed body from Wollaston.



Plate 2.4.9: Etruscan bucket from Northampton.
(Northamptonshire Archaeology)



Plate 2.4.10: Artists impression of a sword being cast into the River Nene at Orton Longueville.
(Drawn by R. McKenna)