IRON AGE AND ROMAN FARMSTEAD AT NORSE ROAD, BEDFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING ACTION

INTERIM REPORT

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Persimmon Homes

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Preface

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This report was prepared by Matt Edgeworth (Project Supervisor) and Martin Wilson (Project Officer). The Project was managed by Martin Wilson and fieldwork was directed by Matt Edgeworth. Excavation and recording was carried out by Matt Edgeworth, Ian Beswick, Jerry Stone and Julian Watters. The finds were examined by Jackie Wells (Artefact Supervisor), and the figures were produced by Joan Lightning. BCAS would like to thank Mr Graham Sloan, Site Manager, and the team of groundworkers at Persimmon Homes for their cooperation, which enabled a large amount of information to be obtained from a short period of observation and recording.

Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service
St Mary's Church Archaeology Centre
Bedford, MK42 OAS
☎: 01234 270002/6/9
Fax: 01234 359287
e-mail: bcas@dial.pipex.com

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Key terms

Throughout this report the following terms or abbreviations are used:

CAO	County Archaeological Officer
BCAS	Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service
BCC	Bedfordshire County Council
Client	Persimmon Homes The Old Brewery, Towcester Road, Milton Malsor Northants NN7 3AP
Brief	Document: Brief for archaeological work at Norse Road, Cambridge Archaeological Unit (22. 8.96), passed by CAO of BCC
Project Specification	Document: Norse Road, Bedfordshire MAP2 Specification for Contingency Linked Sample Excavation, BCAS 1996/22 (03.09.96)
Method Statement	Method Statement for Archaeological Recording (Watching Brief) At Norse Road, Bedford *BCAS* 06.12.99

Summary

This is an interim statement of the results of a programme of archaeological investigations conducted by BCAS, from 17th to 26th January 2000, at Norse Road, Bedford. This stage of the investigations was initiated by landscaping works for Public Open Space, in an area where a high concentration of archaeological features was already known from geophysical survey and aerial photography.

The investigations took the form of an archaeological rapid recording action immediately prior to, and during, ground reduction. The work focused on gaining as much information as possible from all exposed features, with regard to their date, morphology and function.

A sequence of super-imposed farmsteads was identified, which dated from the Early Iron Age through to the Late Roman period. The investigated features comprised enclosure ditches and the remains of three Early Iron Age round buildings and one Late Roman building.

The knowledge of this site is to be further enhanced when construction of play areas takes place in close proximity to those areas already investigated and a footpath bisects the site.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Planning Background

An application for development at land off Norse Road, Bedford, was granted on appeal in 1991 subject to an archaeological condition (No.7) which required the implementation of a programme of archaeological works approved by the local planning authority[1]. The work would be carried out in two stages, the first of these, a field evaluation, would both clarify the nature of archaeological interest and provide information for the design of the second stage. Following the evaluation a comprehensive recording programme was to be designed, taking into account the degree of ground disturbance to be caused by the detailed development proposals.

1.2 Archaeological Background

A *Project Brief*[2] was subsequently prepared and approved by the *CAO* and between 1993 and 1996, a programme of geophysical survey, field artefact collection, evaluation and excavation was carried out[3]. The geophysical survey revealed a dense cluster of enclosures on top of the small hill or spur of land near the centre of the Study Area. Figure 1 shows the cluster of enclosures revealed by the geophysical survey together with the position of evaluation excavation trenches. Excavations focused on the large eastern enclosure, which was shown to be Late Iron Age in date[4].

The *Brief* furthermore specificed (section 3) that a monitoring brief would be undertaken of groundworks during the course of construction. In the event that 'significant archaeological remains were encountered (e.g. a building, midden or pit / ditch cluster), subject to full consultation with appropriate parties, there would be provision for limited test excavation (i.e. rapid excavation to establish date and feature type/ form); further negotiation would be necessary should a 'major' discovery be made (e.g. a cemetery, barrow or waterlogged remains)'.

The area of the greatest density of archaeological features was set aside as an area of Public Open Space. The creation of associated features ('kickabout' area, play areas and paths) in this area, however, necessarily involved a certain degree of topsoil removal and ground reduction, exposing and disturbing archaeological deposits and features.

Between 1997 and 1999 a large proportion of the archaeological site was either removed or had suffered from deep rutting caused by contractors' plant during development works. Site inspections in 1999 revealed no trace of either the north-western and westernmost features, whilst the investigations in 2000, which revealed considerable disturbance in the main focus of archaeology, seems to imply that only the lowermost of archaeological deposits are likely to survive in the southern and eastern reaches of the Study Area.

[1] *Norse Road, Bedford, Archaeological brief (Stage 1)*, November 1991, Conservation and Archaeology Section, County Planning Department, Bedford

[2] Bedfordshire County Council, 1991, *Norse Road, Bedford: Archaeological Brief (Stage 1) November 1991*

[3] *BCAS*, 1993, 'Norse Road Archaeological Assessment', Report 1993/3; *BCAS*, 1997, 'Post Fieldwork Assessment of Potential for Analysis and UpdatedProject Design: Norse Road, Bedford, Report 1997/41; Dawson, M and Gaffney, CF, 1995, 'The Application of Geophysical Techniques within a Planning Application at Norse Road, Bedford (England)', *Archaeological Prospection*, 2, 103-115.

[4] Edgeworth,M, Iron Age and Romano-British Farmstead at Norse Road, Bedford (*Beds Arch Journ.* forthcoming)

A monitoring brief was implemented immediately prior to, and during the works in 2000 in order to record the surviving archaeology. An updated Method Statement[5] was prepared and approved by both the client and the CAO.

[5] Method Statement For Archaeological Recording (Watching Brief) At Norse Road, Bedford, *BCAS* 06.12.99

2. OBJECTIVES

The aims of the rapid recording action are:-

- to survey and record all surviving archaeological deposits and features exposed by the construction works;
- to carry out an adequate sample investigation of all archaeological deposits and features exposed by the works, sufficient to enable a meaningful interpretation of the remains to be made.
- to recover evidence that will determine chronology, morphology and function;
- to make a lasting record of the investigations and dissemminate the results as appropriate

3. METHODOLOGY

Throughout the works, the standards[6] of the Institute of Field Archaeologists were adhered to, and all excavated features and deposits were surveyed and recorded according to the standards set out in the *BCAS Procedures Manual*[7]. All artefacts were recovered and treated in accordance with the *Manual's* guidlines. All topsoil stripping and below ground works was closely monitored by an archaeologist.

There was little intervening time period between ground being reduced to the level of the subsoil, and the same ground being made-up to a height of 1-2m from the subsoil. Maximum information needed to be recovered with minimum time available.

Archaeological features were planned as they were uncovered, using a rolling grid. A mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket was used to excavate selected sample segments through ditches in order to provide chronological and morphological indicators. Each section was then hand cleaned, a written and graphic record made, and rapidly sampled for dating evidence, paying particular attention to primary fills. In general each segment was backfilled and the ground made up within about 15 minutes of excavation. Spoil was scanned for artefacts as the works proceeded.

[6] *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (1994)*
[7] *BCAS Procedures Manual Vol 1: Fieldwork* (1997)

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

4.1 Areas of excavation

Four areas, amounting to 2,760 sq m in total, were affected by the development and were the subject of the recording action. Figure 1 shows the areas so far covered by the recording action. Figure 2 shows the archaeological features uncovered and segments excavated.

4.1.1 Enclosure and Boundary Ditches

A large number of linear features were observed and recorded. Some of these proved to be medieval furrows or modern disturbance, but most were ditches of enclosures already known from geophysical survey or aerial photos. Since the correspondence between ditches revealed by excavation and those already mapped by other methods was fairly exact, these features are not described in detail in this report. A total of 14 segments were excavated by machine through the ditches in order to obtain dating evidence (Fig 2, 3). Results of analysis of this material are described below.

4.1.2 Early Iron Age Round Huts

Three partially circular features, thought to be drip-gullies of round houses, were found (Fig 2, 3). With full circles projected, these would have measured about 8m, 4.5m and 4m in diameter. At least one of the houses was enclosed by an oval gully, measuring 14m x 10m. Segments were excavated by hand. In all cases the gullies were 0.35 - 0.50m wide and 0.10 - 0.20m deep, with fills of mid grey silty clay and inclusions of occasional small stones and flecks of charcoal. Early Iron Age pottery was recovered from one of the segments.

The similar dimensions and fills, together with the proximity of the round houses to each other, indicates that the structures are more or less contemporary. However, the fact that the projected line of the small oval enclosure crosses that of at least one of the houses suggests that there was more than one phase of occupation. It is possible that the houses represent a number of episodes of seasonal occupation of the site.

Analysis of finds from enclosure ditches indicates that the round houses were probably situated on the interior of a large enclosure, also of Early Iron Age date (see Fig. 4 and discussion of phasing below).

4.1.3 Late Roman Building

The existence of a building on the highest point of the hill and overlying earlier . Roman features was demonstrated by six short lengths of wall foundation (Fig 2, 3). The longest of these was about 4m long and 0.7m wide, consisting of a single course of large river cobbles up to 0.25 x 0.20 x 0.20m in size. This material does not occur naturally on the site and must have been brought in from elsewhere. Within the stones and in the vicinity of the wall were a number of roof tiles, as well as several nails, a metal hinge, and a spoon. No foundation trench or post settings were visible.

Other shorter but similar lengths of wall indicate that the building or group of buildings probably had a north-south or east-west axis, though not enough of the walls remained to make out a ground plan. It seems likely that the building was a small farmstead, possibly with small outbuildings. Its walls were probably timber, set on stone foundations. These foundations may have been more substantial where they

crossed the old in-filled ditches, serving to consolidate soft ground and prevent sinkage of walls.

4.2 Provisional Phasing of Enclosures

A considerable amount of dateable pottery was found in excavated segments of enclosure ditches and other features. Spot dates thus obtained, enabled a provisional phasing to be made. Fig 3 shows the dating of features on the basis of pottery evidence.

Fig 4 shows the dating information obtained from the recording action combined with that from previous excavations to give a provisional phasing for the site as a whole - a basic five-fold sequence of the development of the farmstead, from Early Iron Age to Late Roman times. Landscape numbers (e.g. L1, **L14**) denote features which have already been dated and phased prior to the recording action.

4.2.1 Early Iron Age

Perhaps the most significant finding to emerge from the dating analysis, is that the round huts are situated within the interior of a large enclosure that is also of Early Iron Age date. This enclosure is of the same order of size - 120m x 60m - as the Late Iron Age enclosure L1 to the E (Fig. 4). With a likely entrance on the west side, it represents the first major work of construction on the site. Prior to the recording action, the only features of this period known were a few small pits to the east of the study area.

4.2.2 Middle Iron Age

A post-built structure **L10** was built just outside the Early Iron Age enclosure on its east side. A curving 70m long ditch **L14** was dug across the south part of the enclosure.

4.2.3 Late Iron Age

In the Late Iron Age the focus of activity shifted over from the west to the east, with the construction of the new enclosure L1, which was of similar size to its Early Iron Age precursor. Some of the ditches and banks of the first enclosure were retained and re-used. The north-east ditch/bank L8, for example, was re-used as one side of a droveway leading into the new enclosure, with a parallel ditch/bank L9 constructed on the other side.

4.2.4 Early Roman

As the Late Iron Age enclosure L1 fell into disuse, activity shifted again back to the west. The oval enclosure L15 and the circular enclosure L13 have both been dated from previous excavations to this phase. To these can now be added a rectangular grid of ditches. One of these, oriented roughly east-west and running across the middle of the oval enclosure, was 4m wide. The relation of this ditch to L15, however, is unknown. In the absence of stratigraphic evidence, all that can be said is that more than one phase of activity is evident within this period. Again there is evidence of ditches/banks from previous periods being re-used and incorporated into new landscape features. The Late Iron Age droveway ditch L9, for example, may have formed part of the rectangular grid system of ditches. Certainly the general orientation of the earlier enclosure L1 is retained and reflected in these features.

4.2.5 Late Roman

The last phase of occupation of the site is represented by the building(s) located over the silted up ditches of the previous phase on the very highest point of the hill. Pottery and other finds date from the 2nd-4th centuries. There is no evidence to suggest that its period of use extended beyond the end of the Roman period, and it seems likely that most of the stone and roof tile was robbed for use elsewhere. The site was ploughed in the Early medieval period.

5. DISCUSSION

The ongoing recording action has been successful in producing dating information from enclosure ditches and other features, and in locating habitation structures. This can be used to supplement evidence from previous excavations, and to add to the growing understanding of the development of the site. The picture that emerges is of a spur of land in use from the Early Iron Age to the Late Roman period. The system of enclosures and boundaries was in an almost continuous state of evolution as activity shifted from one part of the site to another. New enclosures replaced old ones yet incorporated parts of the old ditches and banks into the new layouts. The main purpose of the site was probably the overwintering of cattle in enclosures on high ground, with the community of herders moving onto the floodplain in the summer to exploit the rich grassland resources. The occupation of the site may therefore have been seasonal for much of the Iron Age. A shift to more permanent occupation and a more settled mode of farming occured in the Roman period, culminating in the construction of a stone building. The farmstead was abandoned in Anglo-Saxon times and the low hilltop turned over to ploughing.

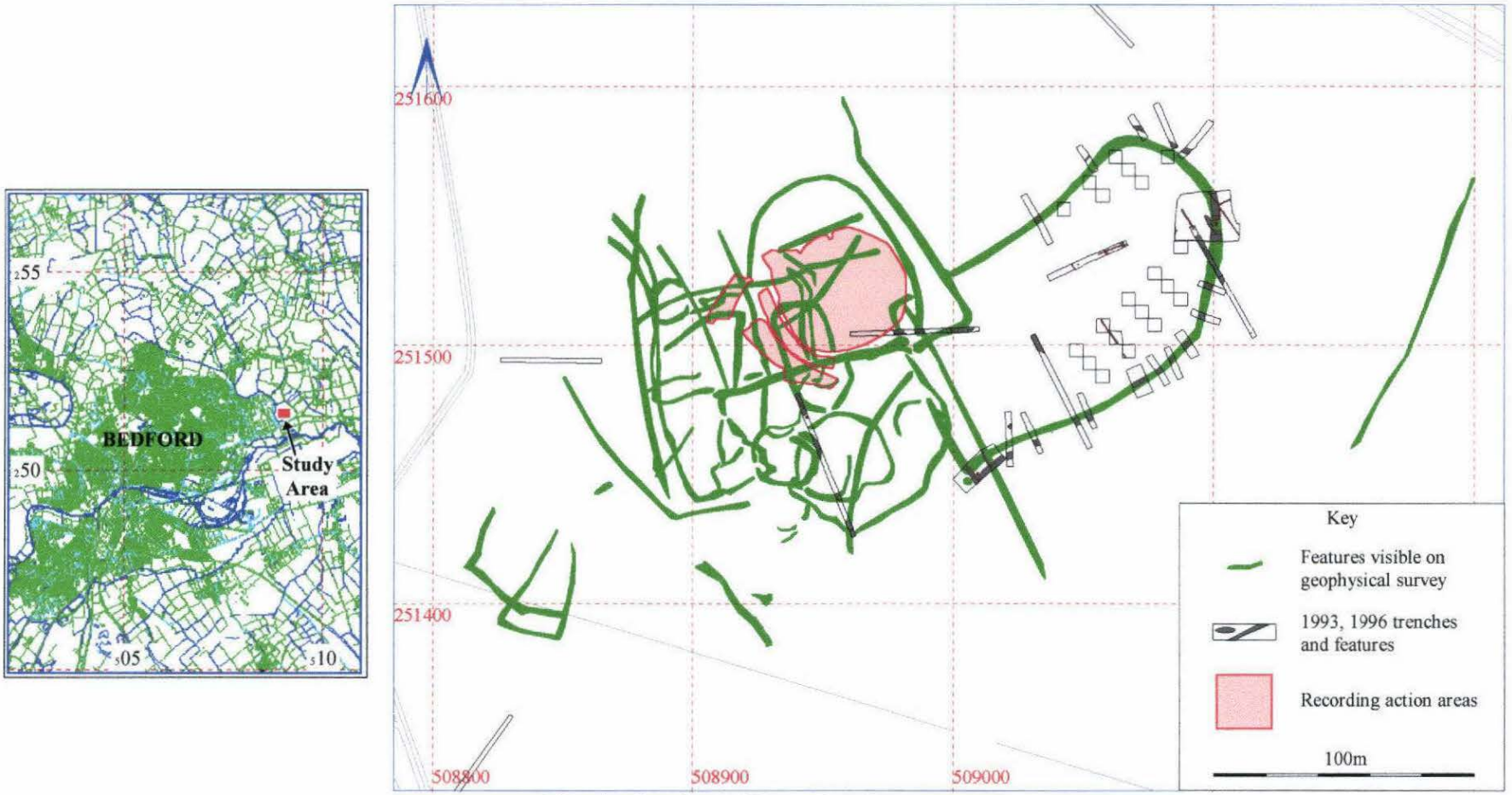

Fig. 1: The site at Norse Road.

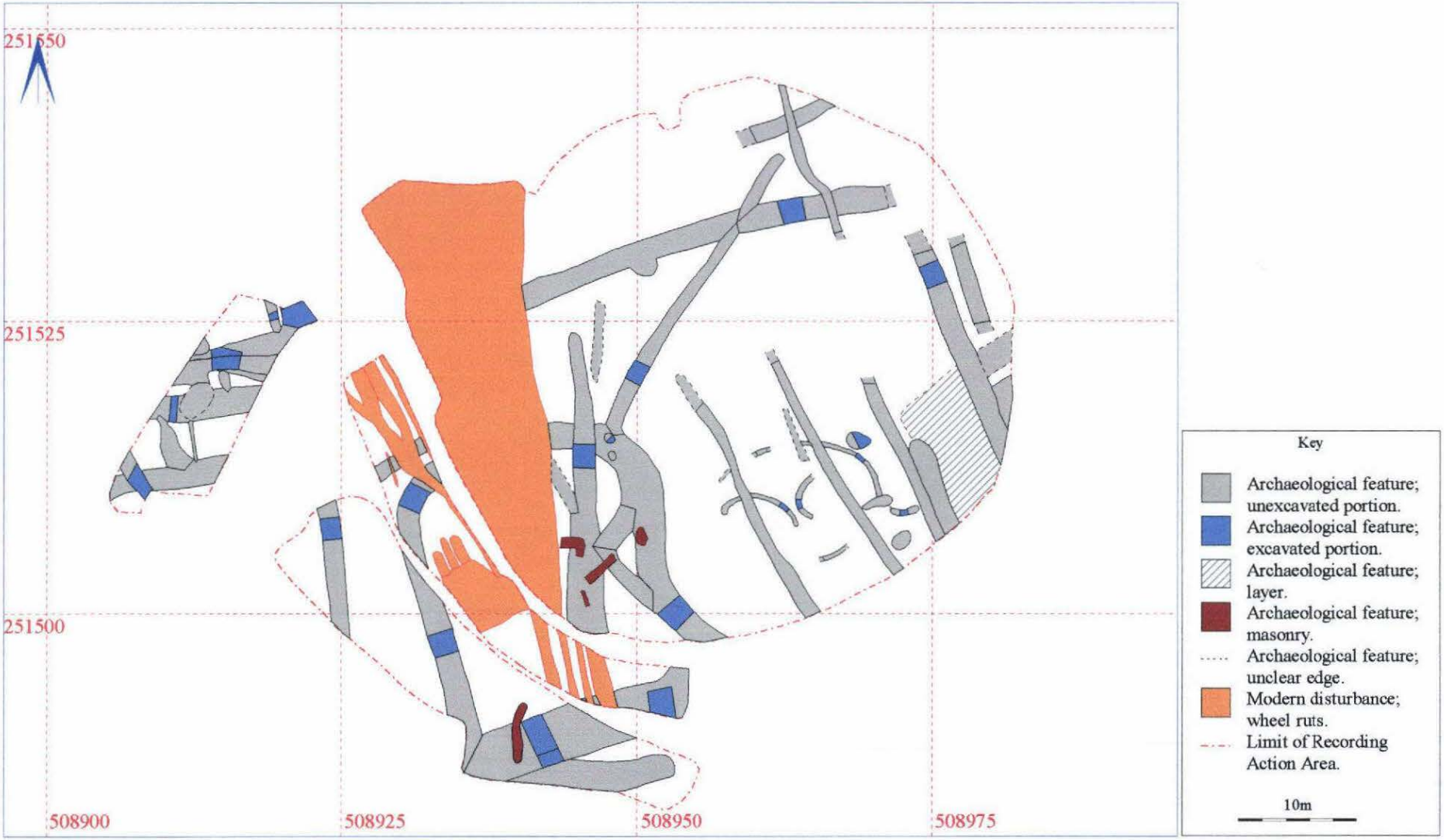

Fig. 2: Areas of investigation and archaeological features.

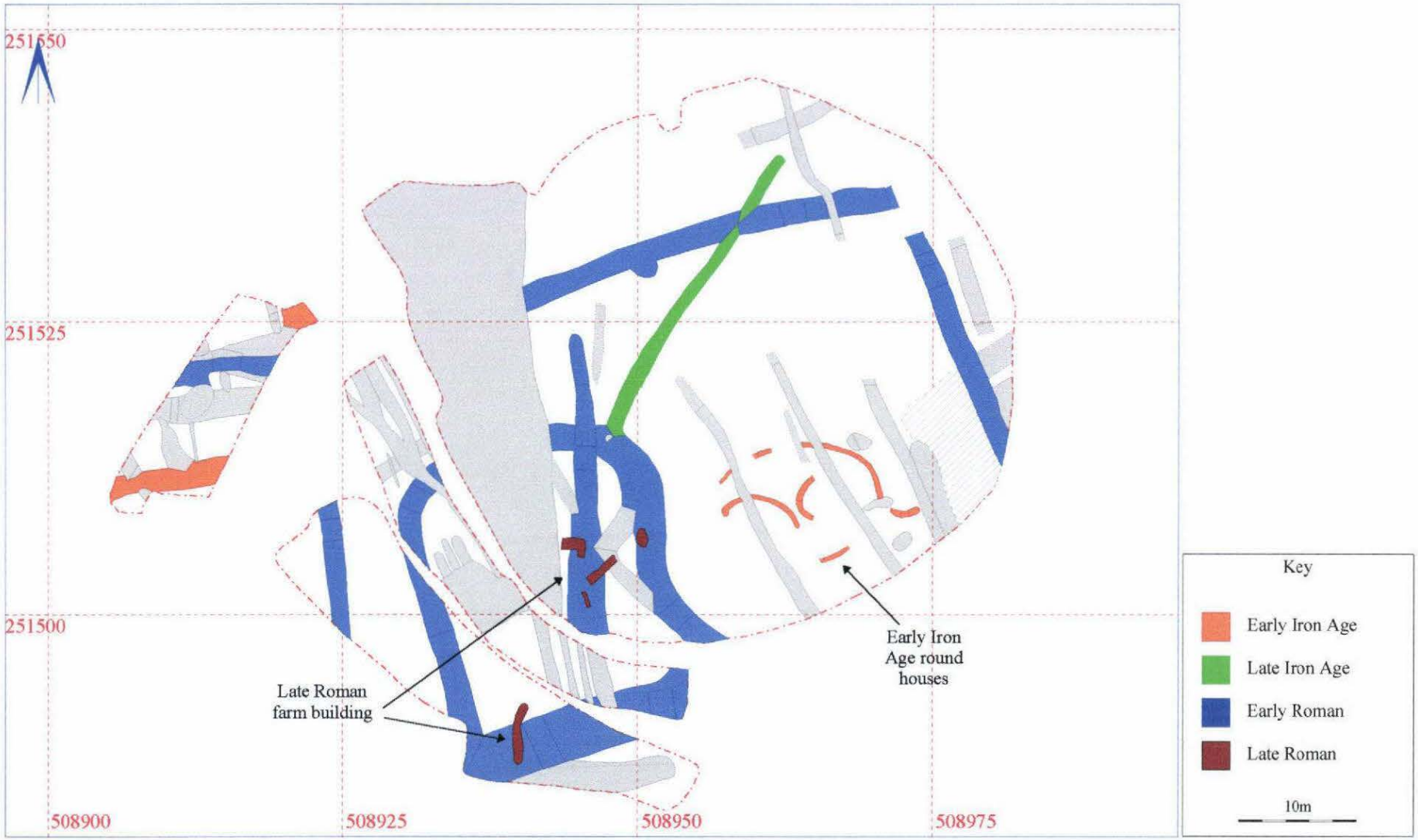

Fig. 3: Provisional dating of features.

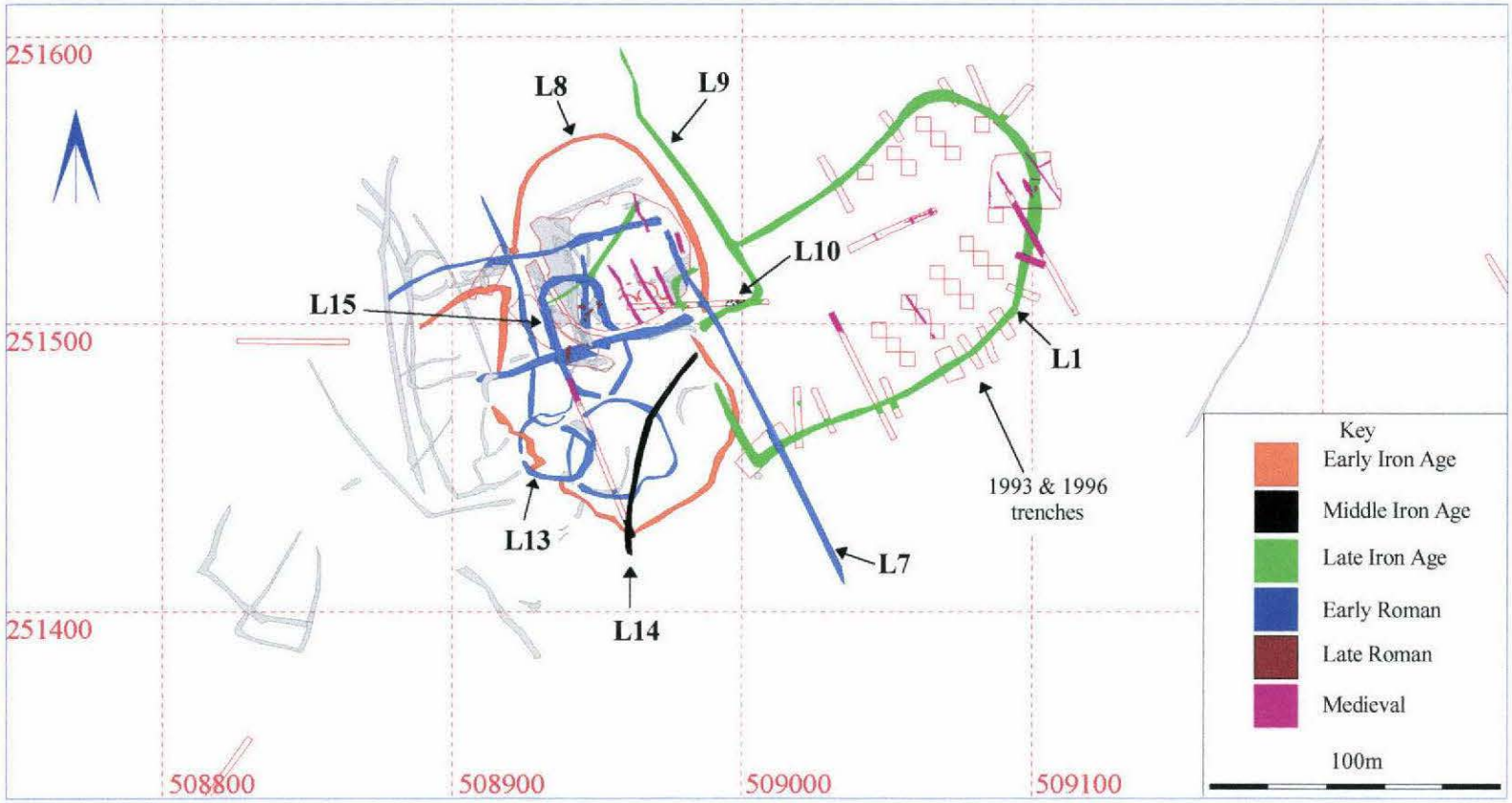

Fig. 4: Provisional phasing of site.