

**ELSTOW-HARROWDEN HOUSING DEVELOPMENT
ELSTOW, BEDFORD
BCAS PROJECT EH458**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

November 1997

Report: 97/45

Elstow-Harroden Housing Development: Archaeological Evaluation

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Preface

Every effort has been made in the preparation of this document to provide an accurate summary of the works and all statements are offered in good faith. Bedfordshire County Archaeological Service (BCAS) cannot accept responsibility for errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by a third party, or for any loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in this document.

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Non technical summary

Limited archaeological evaluation by machine excavated trenches confirmed the survival of significant archaeological deposits already suspected from cropmarks and previous archaeological work. Five main Areas of archaeological importance are highlighted and these include evidence for late Neolithic/early Bronze Age burial mounds, late Iron Age unenclosed and enclosed settlement, Romano-British settlement and early Saxon to middle Saxon settlement. Despite being plough truncated evidence survives for enclosures, buildings and other structures including possible agricultural drying kilns. Burial within ring ditches has been confirmed and the site of a first century AD cremation cemetery has been discovered.

1. Introduction

This document summarises the results of archaeological evaluation on the site of the Elstow Harrowden Housing Development (BCAS project EH458).

The work has been carried out as a joint venture between Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (BCAS) and David Wilson Homes (the developer).

All work to date has been carried out as part of an access condition attached to the planning permission. This has not obligated the developer to fund any works and to date no brief or specification has been submitted for works, either by the County Archaeological Officer or any agent of the developer.

This stage of the project was not conceived as a formal evaluation. Work was undertaken in the full knowledge that this might be the only opportunity for investigating deposits, while at the same resources were extremely limited. Full evaluation of the site was impossible.

This report represents an interim statement of results only. It does not conform to standards normally applied to evaluation reports requested as part of a PPG16 condition.

The archive is currently held by BCAS at St. Mary's Church Archaeology Centre and will be deposited with Bedford Museum.

2. Site location and archaeological background

The site is located to the south of the suburban fringe of Bedford centred on TL055 475. Crop marks clearly identify the location of ritual, settlement and agricultural sites. Recent excavation immediately to the south, along the line of the Bedford Southern Bypass (BCAS 1995), has characterised these as representing multi-period activity from the early prehistoric, through Roman to medieval periods. Particularly important has been the identification of early prehistoric burial monuments, later prehistoric settlement, Roman settlement, and early to middle Saxon settlement. From this and other work it is clear that the sites within the development area are part of an extensive archaeological landscape preserving the remains of human activity stretching back over five thousand years.

Previous work adjacent to the site:

- Village Farm and Medbury Lane (BCAS projects 382/326)
(adjacent to Area 2)
Multi-period site comprising two late Neolithic/early Bronze Age burial mounds, Iron Age unenclosed settlement, Early Saxon settlement with post-built buildings, Middle Saxon settlement and later medieval settlement and enclosures.
- Bunyan's Farm (BCAS project 314) (adjacent to Areas 3 and 4)
Iron Age landscape boundaries and isolated Bronze Age settlement features
- Manor Farm (BCAS project 347) (adjacent to Area 5)
Iron Age/Romano-British enclosures with Middle Saxon settlement

3. Results and methodology of evaluation

Sites of archaeological interest have been identified and described in previous documents (Baker 190, BCAS 1993). For the purposes of this project they had been organised into five main areas and these are located on figure 1. Each area contained cropmarks or lay adjacent to already excavated sites.

The planned methodology involved the cutting of linear evaluation trenches on a 25m or 50m grid dependent on the complexity and concentration of cropmark features (the trenches were located to the OS grid). Where cropmarks were dense trenches were arranged at 25m intervals, where more open a 50m grid was used. In reality the pressures of time and constraints on resources lead to a less rigid approach. Topsoil was removed using a wheeled machine fitted with a back-acter and a toothless ditching blade. The upper part of subsoil deposits were also removed, to a point where cut features were easily visible (between 250mm and 350mm below modern ground surface). Trenches were approximately 1.5m wide and between 20m and 100m in length. In all 19 linear trenches were excavated. Where complex deposits were encountered or more clarity was required 10m by 10m boxes were opened up off the trench edges. Six of these boxes were excavated.

Features were excavated by segment and recorded using an abbreviated form of procedures outlined in the BCAS *Procedures Manual* (1997).

All finds were collected and contexts spot-dated.

Plans have been digitised, but no finds or structural database exists and plans have not been tagged with context numbers. In the report which follows context numbers are expressed within squared brackets [888] for cuts, and curved brackets (889) for fills.

3.1 Area 1 (fig.1)

Circular cropmarks HER 2421. Uninvestigated.
Outside of current development

3.2 Area 2: Trenches 22 - 26 (figs.1, 4)

Area adjacent to Village Farm excavations

3.2.1 Work to date

- Top soil strip of open area (trench 26) adjacent to road, approximately 378sq. m. Two features of Iron Age date recognised but not excavated. One, a pit [2002], 3m across with significant amounts of pottery collected from the surface, the other a smaller pit filled with burnt stone.
- Four trenches (22-25) totalling 106m. No archaeological remains located.

3.2.2 Interpretation

Features located within the open area are likely to represent the continuation of the unenclosed Iron Age settlement investigated to the south within the Village Farm excavations. This may be more extensive to the N and E despite the lack of evidence within the trenches. These would have located linear features but could have missed scattered pits and structural features.

3.3 Area 3: Trenches 1 - 9 (figs.1, 2, 5)

Adjacent to Bunyan's Farm Excavations. Cropmark enclosure HER1626 and ring-ditch.

Five trenches (1-5) totalling 340m in length were excavated across the site of cropmarks. At four points the trenches were opened up into 10m square boxes (trenches 6-9) to further define the layout of the site. A total of 44 archaeological features were recorded, comprising ditches, pits and post-holes.

3.3.1 The Late Iron Age/Early Romano-British settlement

A large enclosure 100m by 70m was defined by ditches. Pottery from within it suggested a date of use from the late pre-Belgic Iron Age into the Late Iron Age /early Romano-British period. Upper fills appear still to have been collecting into the early Saxon period. Internal enclosures were located to the NW and SE. Those in the NW are particularly complex and appear to indicate a number of separate phases of development, the earliest possibly pre-dating the construction of the main rectangular enclosure.

Within the central part of the enclosure undated pits and ditches were excavated.

The enclosure had as its W boundary a complex multiple ditch system that on the evidence of cropmarks and excavations at Bunyan's Farm extends to the N and S beyond the enclosure. Butt-ends within this suggest the entrance to the enclosure may once have been on this side.

3.3.2 Interpretation

The site of a small late Iron age to early Roman farmstead. It was located to the E of what may have been a major landscape boundary. Externally to the N cropmarks suggest a regular arrangement of paddocks or enclosures. Internally it was arranged into domestic/activity foci, (within their own possibly palisaded enclosures), to either side of what may have been a large open yard, (although this also contained ditch and pit features). Pottery and other finds indicating domestic settlement were recovered from ditches and pits in all areas. The internal enclosures to the SW contained burnt clay and fuel ash possibly originating from the destruction of a building.

3.3.3 Ring ditch

A ring ditch was exposed in a single trench to the SE. The ditch was located in two places but not excavated. No internal features were noted. The ditch was 20m in diameter and 1.5m wide.

3.4 Area 4: Trenches 10 - 11 (figs.1, 3, 6)

Adjacent to the E end of Bunyans's Farm excavations. Ring ditch HER1626. This was exposed within two trenches intersecting at its centre. The ditches were unexcavated but seen to be up to 1.5m wide, describing a ring 17m in diameter. Internal pit-type features were noted and a central unurned cremation burial [3201] was excavated.

3.5 Area 5: Trenches 13 - 21 (figs.1, 3, 6)

Adjacent to Manor Farm excavations. Cropmark enclosures HER1626. The western end of an extensive series of rectilinear enclosures was investigated with eight trenches totalling 324m in length, including a 10m square box (trench 21). Eighty-two features were recorded.

Many of the crop-mark ditches were identified within the trenches but the system was seen to extend much further W than suggested by aerial photographs alone. This may have been due to differences observed in the depth of topsoil and overburden contributing to the formation of cropmarks.

3.5.1 Late Iron Age to Middle Saxon settlement

Ditches within trench 17 and the S part of trench 13 indicate enclosures to the W of the known cropmarks. One of these, [3122], comprised large ditches up to 3m across and was followed N within trenches 19 and 20. All contained Iron Age pottery. Towards the E ditch [3171] was also invisible on aerial photographs and contained early Saxon pottery. Pits and postholes were recovered from within areas defined by [3122] and [3171] but were largely unexcavated. One large feature, [3165], nearly 5m across was part-emptied by machine. It was not bottomed, at over 1.5m, and contained middle Saxon Maxey-type pottery and a bone comb of similar date. Nearby post-holes cut ditches of Iron Age/Roman date and may be associated.

Further to the E within trenches 14, 15, 16, and 18, the cropmarks were confirmed as large ditches containing pottery dated variously from the Late Iron Age to the third/fourth centuries AD.

Within an enclosure marked by ditches [3104/7] and [3118] a concentration of settlement-type features was noted. These included a large number of posts holes and small pits but more significantly a curving gully, probably part of a drainage gully surrounding a circular building. Two corn-drying kilns were also recorded.

Although the eastern part of this enclosure system has not been investigated, due to the proximity of contractors works, observations have been made on a drainage run to the north of the road corridor that suggest the location of a cremation cemetery. Reported by local metal detectorists, but not observed by BCAS, up to fifteen separate urned cremations were seen in the side of the drainage run and in plan across the stripped road corridor. Amounts of first century pottery and a rosette brooch of similar date were offered as evidence. Subsequent investigation by Nick Shepherd, after the backfill of the pipe trench and construction of the road, showed there to be large amounts of

pottery within the remaining upcast, although there was no sign of burnt bone or any other burnt material indicative of burials or pyre sites.

3.5.2 Interpretation

The regular, rectilinear layout of ditches, covering an area of over 370m, suggests a single period of occupation, possibly from the Late Iron Age into the later Roman period. The disposition of pottery dates from within the ditches suggests that the enclosures to the W, invisible from aerial photographs, may be the earliest element of this complex (although the Saxon pottery also indicates later activity here), with the Roman activity concentrated to the E. A first Century AD cremation cemetery lies within the enclosures to the E. Superimposed over this is settlement of early and middle Saxon date.

The late Iron Age/early Romano-British settlement may be single or multiple occupancy farmstead or small nucleation. Its relationship to the late Iron Age enclosure within area 3 is unknown. Compared with the latter settlement, evidence survives well under the slightly deeper topsoil with *in-situ* evidence for structures and agricultural activities.

3.6 Other areas

3.6.1 Between Areas 2 and 3.

On aerial photographs the major part of this area is filled with a dark and wide N-S soil mark interpreted as a palaeochannel of the Elstow Brook. In other parts of the Ouse Valley, notably at Octagon Farm, these have been interpreted as late glacial or early Holocene in date and where excavated, channel deposits have been entirely minerogenic, with no organic preservation. The channel at Elstow may be of similar date, although it may be significant that both the enclosure systems and the ring ditches sit either side of the channel, possibly indicating it was still wet at the time. It has, therefore, potential to preserve within it deposits of prehistoric and/or later date. These may be waterlogged if the channel is of sufficient depth.

3.6.2 Areas to the north of the spine road

Cropmarks only extend to the N of the spine road within area 5, although they run up adjacent to its S edge within area 3. No investigation was undertaken in these areas other than observations along drainage runs, although archaeological remains certainly survive.

4. Summary and conclusions

- Area 1: Undated cropmark. Area earmarked for local authority school. Not within current development
- Area 2: No cropmarks visible. Unenclosed Iron Age settlement to the W, nothing revealed within trenches to the E although isolated features could survive
- Area 3: Prehistoric ring ditch and Late Iron Age/Early Romano-British enclosure
- Area 4: Prehistoric ring ditch with central burial.
- Area 5: Extensive late Iron Age/Romano-British enclosures, settlement and cremation cemetery with subsequent early and middle Saxon settlement

Area 1 can be discounted as part of this phase of development, although is clearly threatened by the planned construction of a school. Area 2, although it does not contain the spectacular remains seen in Area 3 to 5, does indicate the continuation of unenclosed Iron Age activity recorded during excavation at Village Farm immediately to the south.

Area 3 eastwards, including Area 4 and 5, could almost be considered a single settlement of late Iron Age to Romano-British date, bisected by a palaeochannel, and built close to two late Neolithic/Bronze Age burial mounds. To the west, within Area 5, and possibly within the earlier framework of enclosures, early and middle Saxon settlement was established. This extensive and complex site covers a total area of up to 10.5ha

In most cases the Elstow -Harrowden evidence has survived well despite plough truncation, and this is especially true towards the eastern end of the site within Area 5 where a greater depth of topsoil has protected the more fragile remnants of buildings and other structures. All five areas have great potential for informing our understanding of the development of landscapes and settlements at significant times in the past, and in particular the transitional phases of Briton into Roman and Roman into Saxon highlighted of particular importance by English Heritage (1991).

The case for excavation has already been made successfully within the context of the construction of the Bedford Southern Bypass (Baker 1990). A great deal of recent excavation has been undertaken in the Elstow area and the results of evaluation demonstrate that the current development poses a major threat to surviving remains. Adequate recording prior to destruction will significantly enhance work already undertaken. Archaeological excavation during as part of the Bypass works at Bunyan's Farm and Manor Farm in particular (and to a lesser extent at Village Farm) appear only to have clipped the margins of sites that are more fully contained within the current development. Without a thorough investigation of these sites much of the evidence already gathered will be rendered less useful and the opportunity to more fully understand the history of a landscape already largely destroyed by recent urban development to the north will be lost.

The most intensive groundworks are programmed to occur within those areas earmarked for housing development. Beyond this access and drainage services have already been put in with very limited archaeological supervision. It is important to

consider the impact on archaeological deposits of all future works beyond the core housing areas. Of particular importance are those areas directly adjacent to Areas 3 and 5, to the north of the already constructed spine road. Although much of this area has been set aside for public open space there has as yet been no opportunity to examine the design of this space in order to assess the potential disturbance of archaeological remains that are clearly continuous from the south.

References

- Baker, DB, 1990 *Archaeological implications of A428 Bedford Southern Bypass*
Submission to Public enquiry,
BCAS 1993 Report 93/11 *The Bedford Southern Bypass Archaeological evaluation*
BCAS 1995 Report 95/14 *The A428 Bedford Southern Bypass: Post excavation
assessment report, Vols 1-5*
English Heritage 1991 *Exploring our Past: Strategies for the Archaeology of England*

Appendix : Trench descriptions

Trench 1

Context	Description
3051	Ditch
3049	Ditch
3053	Post-hole
3025	Ditch
3030	Ditch
-	Ditch -unexc. (X3)

Trench 2

Context	Description
3068	Ditch
3077	Post-hole
3047	Ditch
3021	Ditch
3023	Pit
3036	Ditch
3032	Ditch
3034	Pit
3039	Tree throw
3065	Ditch
3061	?Pit
3063	?Pit
-	Tree throw unexc. (X2)

Trench 3

Context	Description
3216	Ditch
3007	Ditch
3017	Ditch
3014	Pit
3004	Ditch
3011	Ditch
3019	Pit
3041	Ditch
-	Ditch unexc.

Trench 4

Context	Description
3029	Ditch
-	Ditch unexc.

Trench 5

Context	Description
3199	Ring ditch segment
3197	Ring ditch segment

Trench 6

Context	Description
3055	Ditch
3057	Ditch
3059	Ditch

Trench 7

Context	Description
3214	Ditch
3045	Ditch
3079	Ditch
3203	Ditch

Trench 8

Misc. unexcavated ditches

Trench 9

Context	Description
3081	Ditch
-	Misc. unexc ditches

Trench 10

Context	Description
3212	Ring ditch segment
3208	Ring ditch segment

Trench 11

Context	Description
3206	Ring ditch segment
3210	Ring ditch segment

Trench 13

Context	Description
3170	Ditch
3122	Ditch
3093	Ditch
3110	Ditch
3091	?Pit
3089	Post-hole
3087	Post-hole
3085	Post-hole
-	Unexc post-holes (X6)

Trench 14

Context	Description
3095	Ditch
3097	Post-hole
3099	Post-hole
3104	Ditch
3107	Ditch
-	Unexc. ditches (X2)

Trench 15

Context	Description
3116	Ditch
3112	Ditch
-	Unexc. post-holes (X11)
-	Unexc. pit
-	Unexc. ditches (X2)
-	Unexc. ring gully

Trench 16

Context	Description
3118	Ditch
3120	Ditch
-	Unexc. post-holes (X6)
-	Unexc. pits (X2)
-	Tree throw

Trench 17

Context	Description
3165	?Well
3163	Pit
3158	Pit
3161	Post-hole
3172	Ditch
3173	Ditch
3175	Pit
3179	Ditch
3181	Ditch

Trench 18

Context	Description
-	Unexc. ditch
-	Unexc post-hole

Trench 19

Context	Description
3185	Ditch
3191	Ditch
3183	Ditch

Trench 20

Context	Description
3185	Ditch
3187	Ditch
3186	Ditch

Trench 21

Context	Description
3132	Post-hole
3134	Post-hole
3136	Post-hole
3138	Post-hole
3140	Post-hole
3142	Post-hole
3144	Post-hole
3146	Post-hole
3148	Post-hole
3150	Post-hole
3152	Post-hole
3154	Post-hole
3127	Stoke hole
3129	Drying kiln
3114	Drying kiln
3116	Ditch

Figures

ELSTON - HARROLDEN: Location of Archaeological Areas

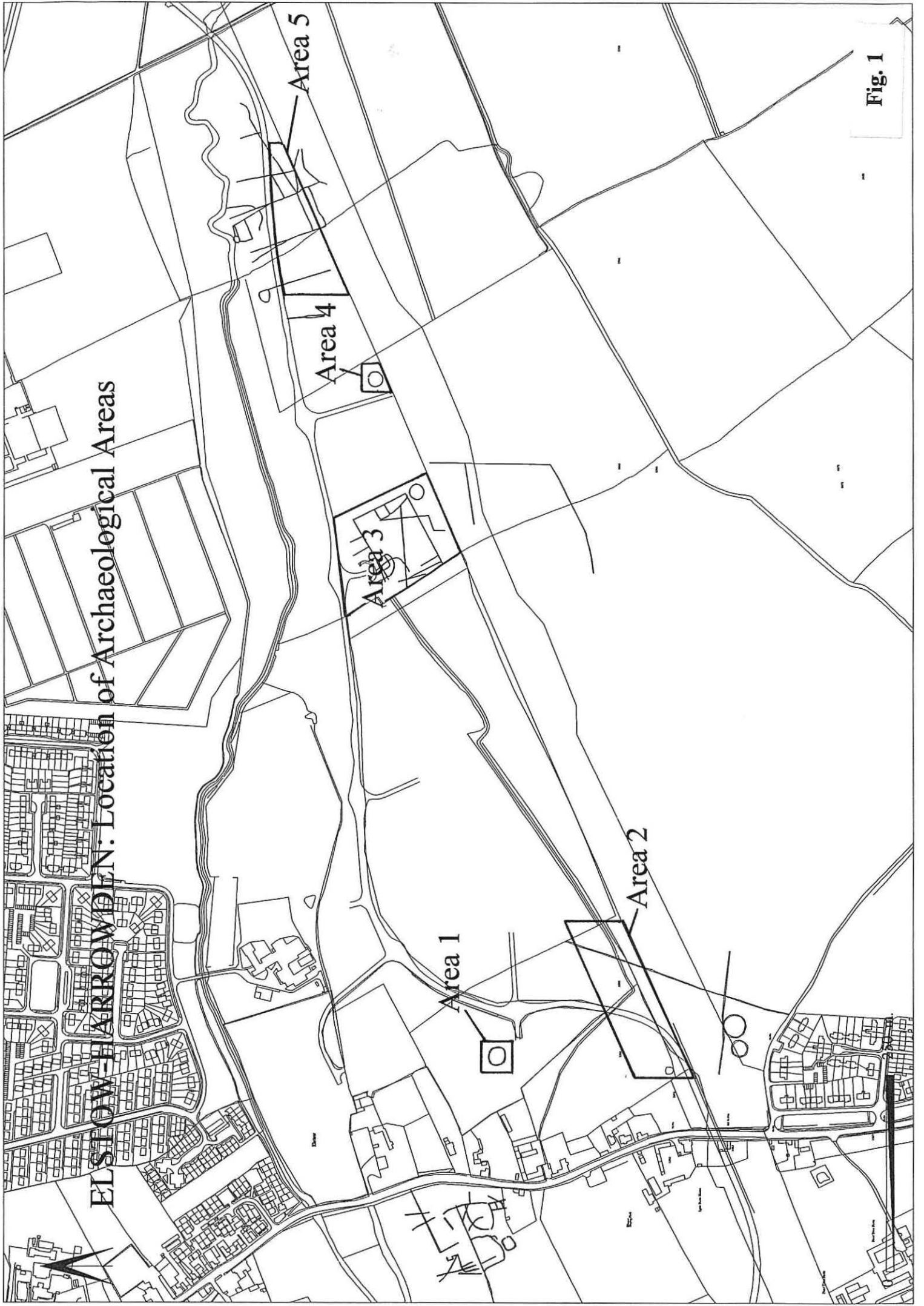


Fig. 1

ELSTOW-HARROWDEN: Trench 1-9 location

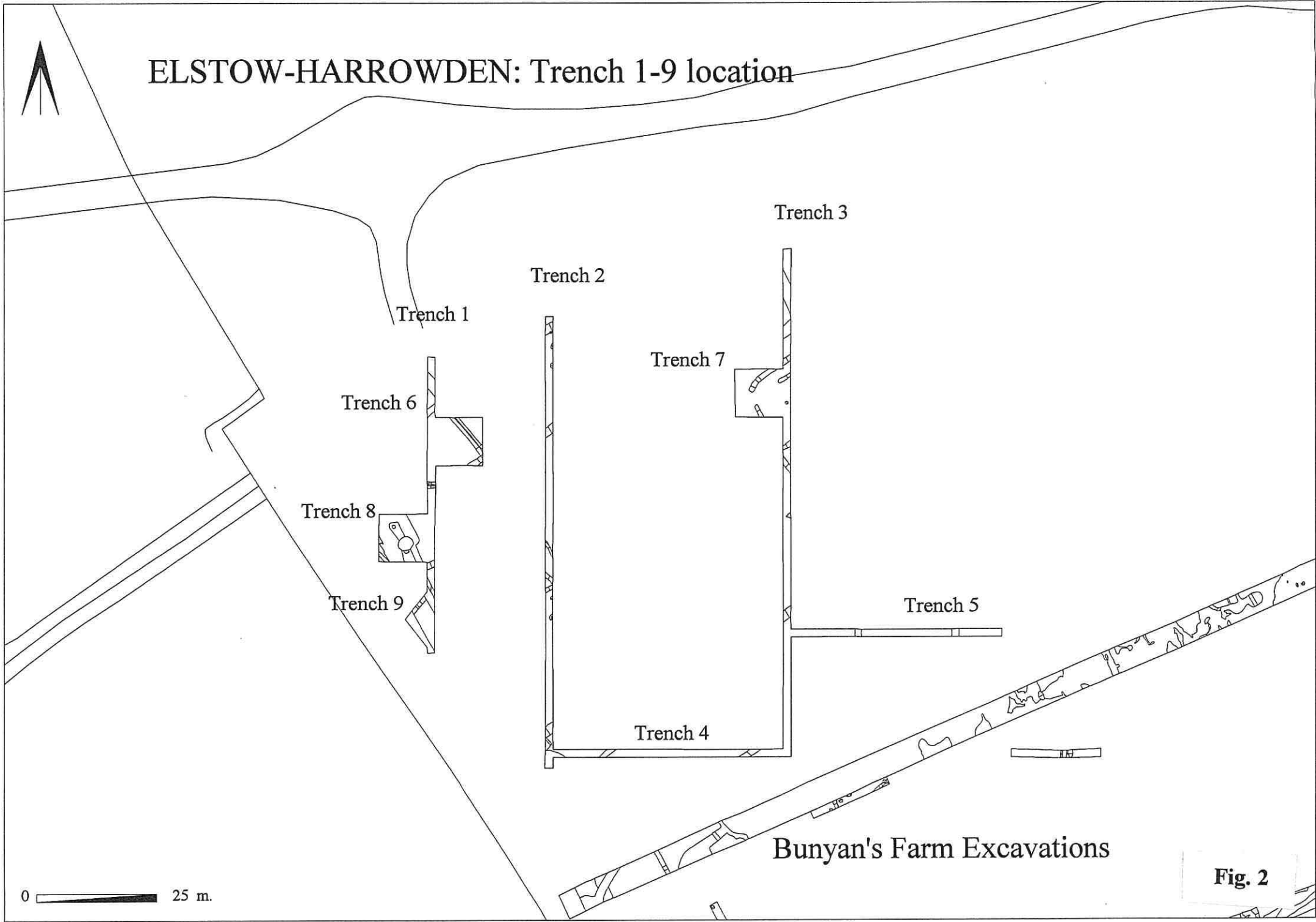


Fig. 2



ELSTOW-HARROWDEN: Trenches 10-21 location

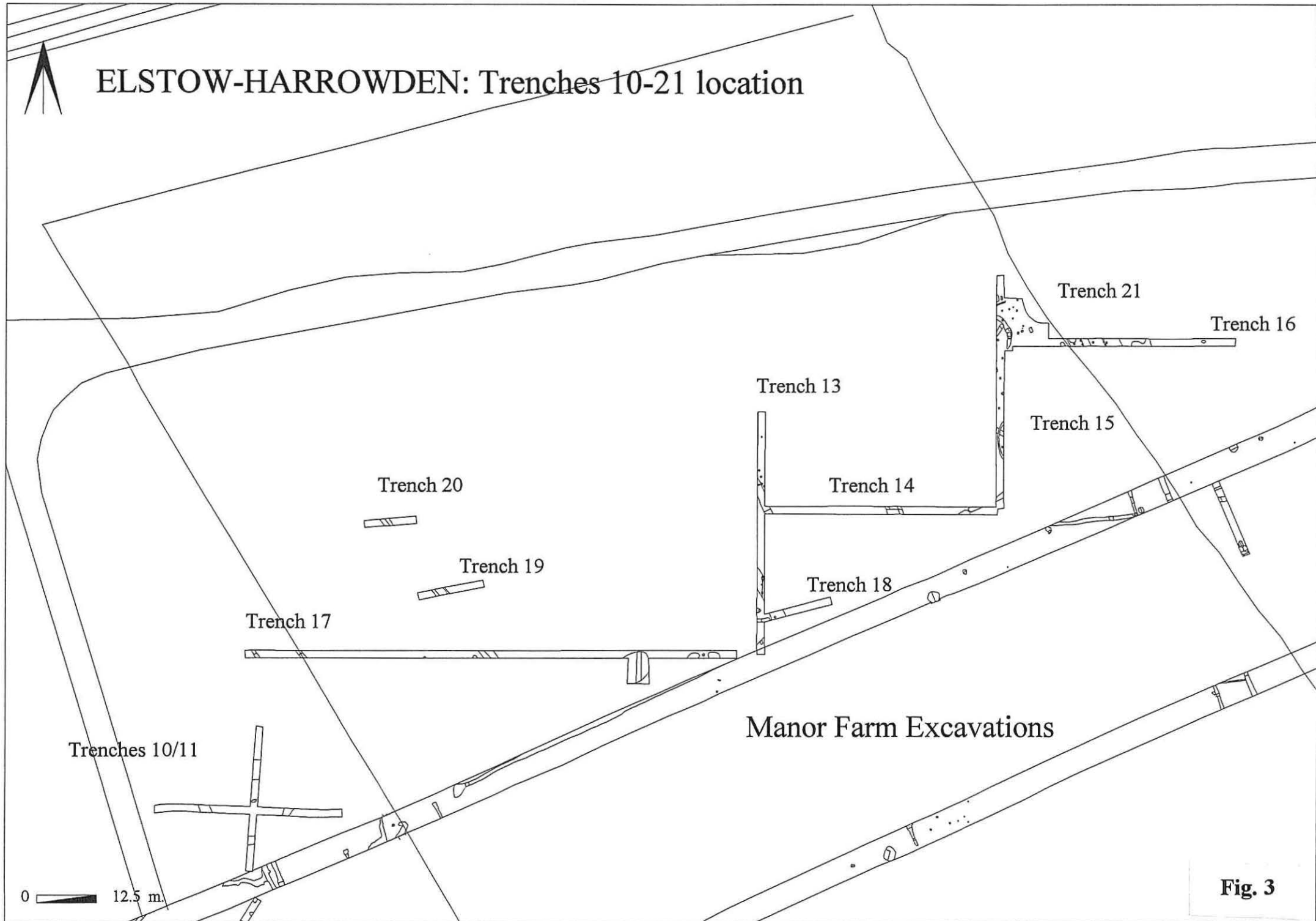


Fig. 3

ELSTOW-HARROWDEN: Trenches 22-26 location

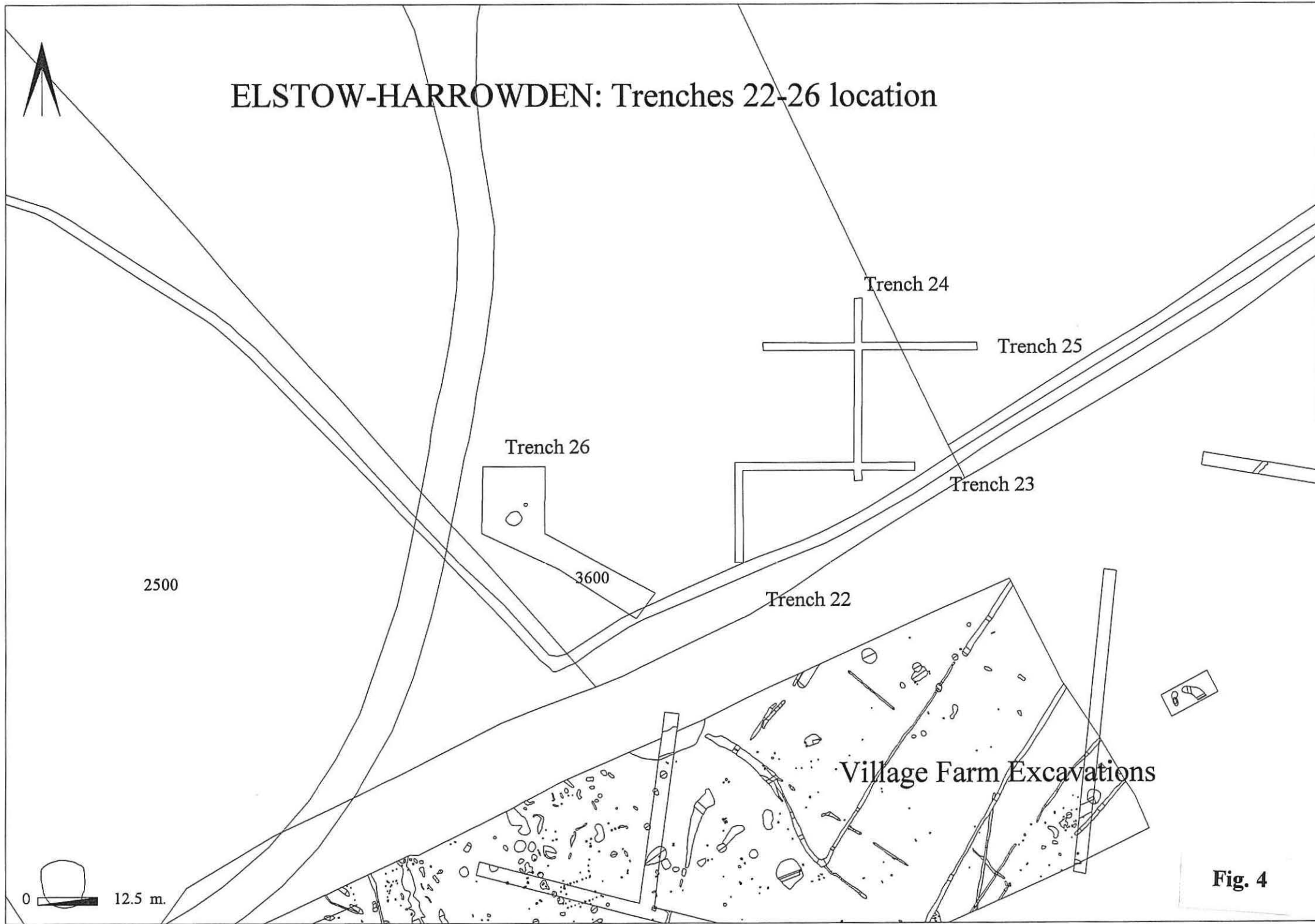
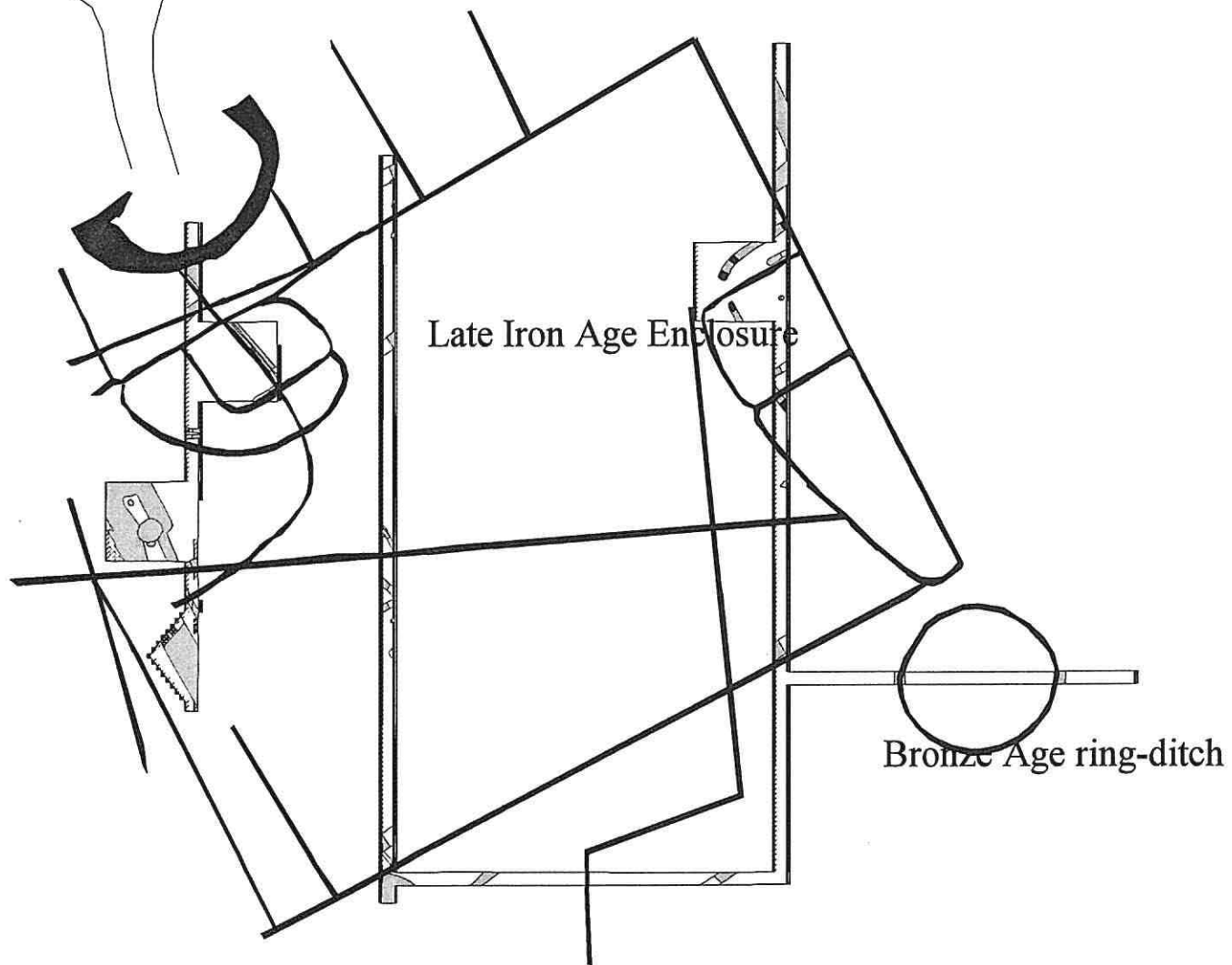


Fig. 4

ELSTOW-HARROWDEN: Area 3 cropmarks and trenches



0  25 m.

Fig. 5

ELSTOW-HARROWDEN: Areas 4 and 5 cropmarks and trenches

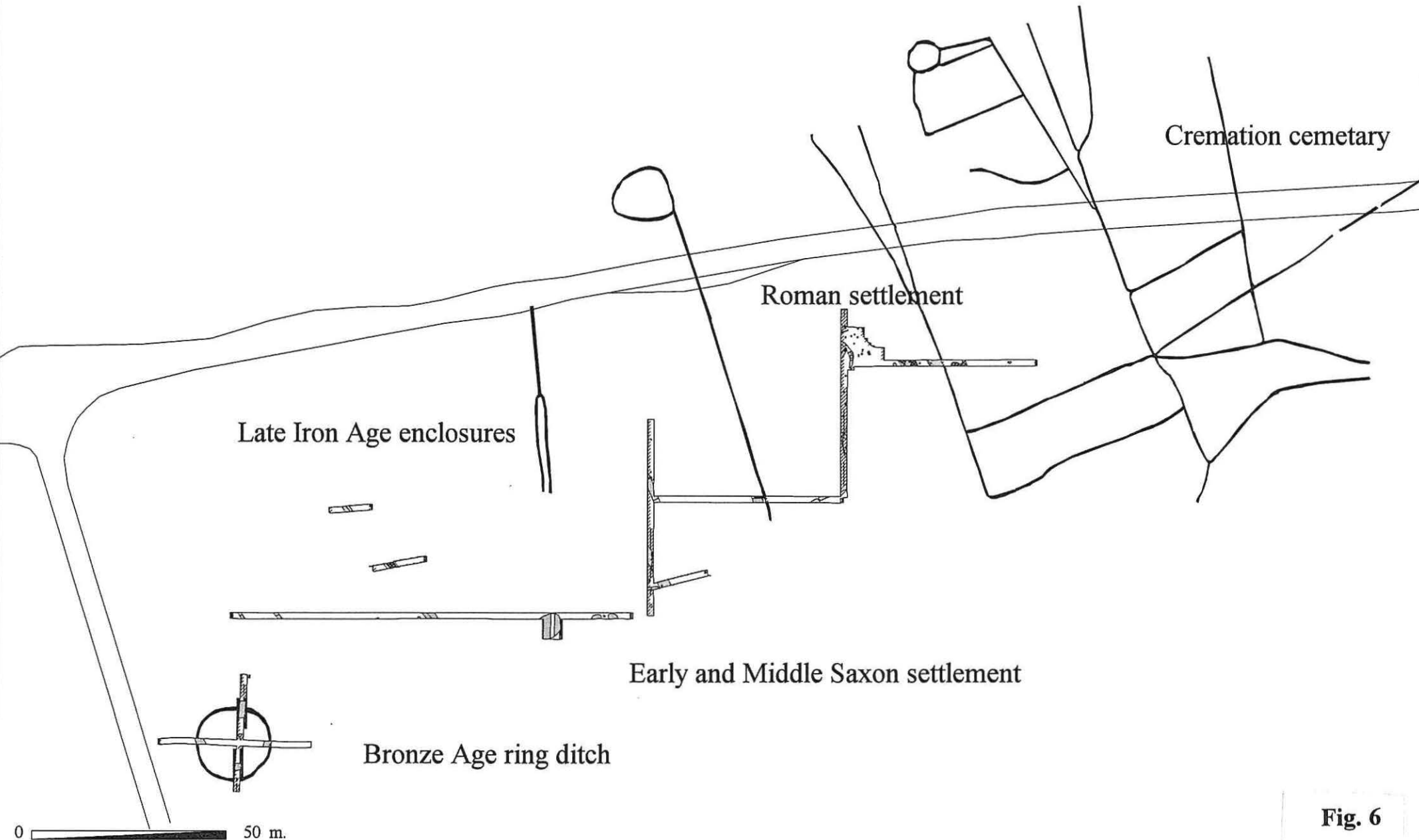


Fig. 6