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**The South Cadbury Environs Project  
Fieldwork Report 1994**

by

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# SOUTH CADBURY ENVIRONS PROJECT

1994

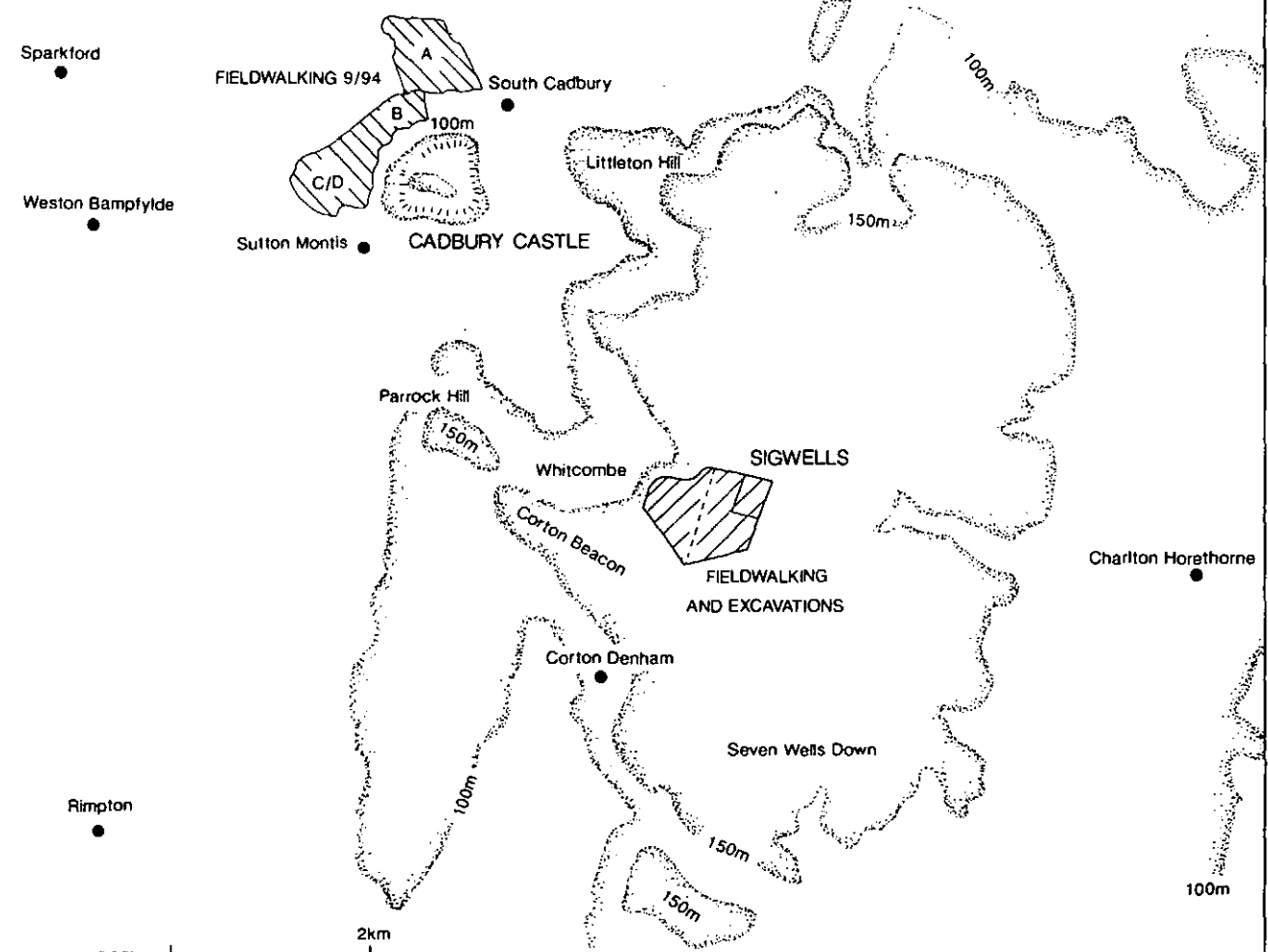
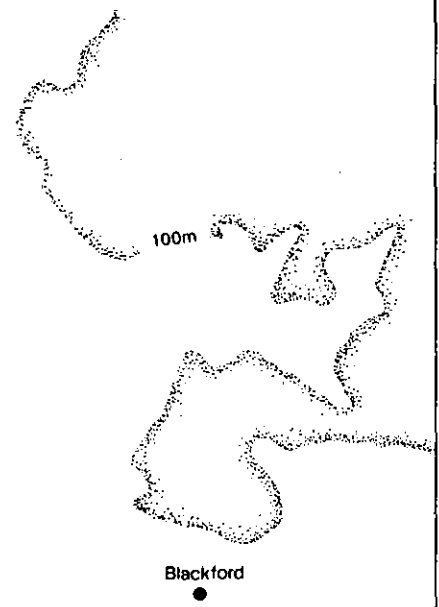
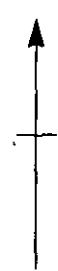
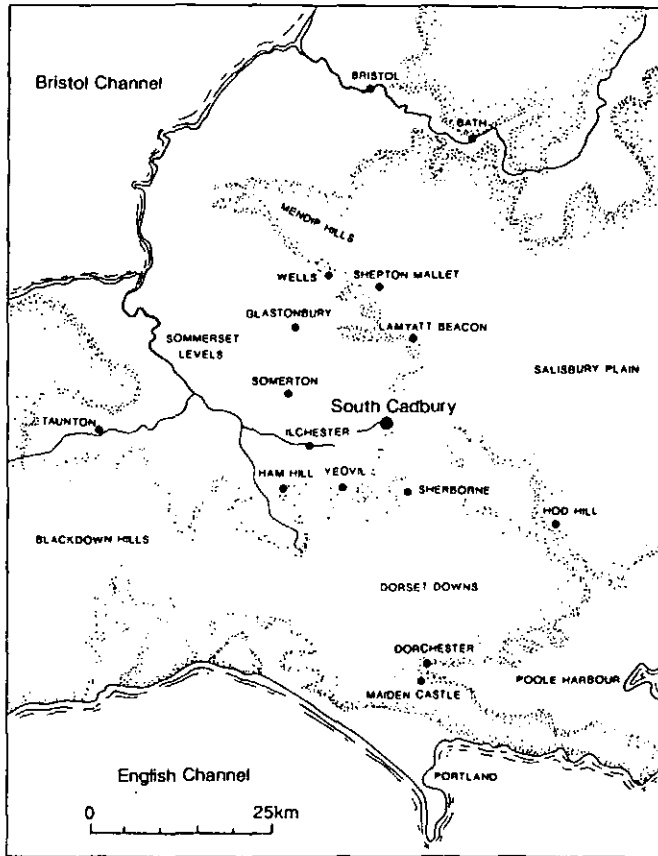


Figure 1

# The South Cadbury Environs Project

## Fieldwork Report 1994

### Introduction

Excavations at South Cadbury Castle in Somerset by Leslie Alcock between 1966 and 1973 revealed what must be one of the largest and most extensive material and chronological sequences for the Late Bronze Age/pre-Roman Iron Age in Britain (Alcock 1972). In addition, there is important evidence of Neolithic settlement, and outstanding remains of post-Roman/early Medieval occupation on the hill top. Preparation of the results for publication is now well advanced, through the corporate efforts of Professor Alcock and a range of specialist contributors co-ordinated through the Universities of Glasgow and Birmingham.

Following in part upon the heels of this project, and the input of a distinguished local amateur tradition, a series of archaeological surveys and excavations in the two decades since have focussed particularly upon the Romano-British and Medieval periods in south east Somerset. Motivated both by academic research and the opportunities provided by development and land use threats, project research has focussed upon such topics as Romano-British settlement in the region (Leech 1978), the Roman and medieval towns at Ilchester (Leach 1982 & 1994), Urban settlements (Aston & Leech 1977), medieval rural settlements (Ellison 1983), and most recently the Roman town and its hinterland at Shepton Mallet (Leach 1991 and forthcoming). In the same period have come the publications of excavations and research on several other major archaeological sites in the region, and of local historical and documentary research, including a Victoria County History volume. However, until recently very little attention has been paid to the immediate hinterland of South Cadbury itself.

### Objectives

Building upon this legacy, and in particular the imminent publication of the South Cadbury excavations, a new phase of research seeks to characterise in more detail the cultural identity of a region centred upon the hillfort in later prehistory and through into the Romano-British period. Specific objectives involve an investigation of the settlement and landscape history of the study area, with particular emphasis upon the Iron Age and Roman periods and the transition between the two, but with reference also to the Neolithic and Bronze Age foundations and to the emergence of early medieval society. Through the application of the latest information technology (Geographic Information Systems) hypotheses concerning social and economic relationships within successive local Iron Age and Romano-British societies, and the transition between the two, will be explored. A 'model' strategy can also be developed for the management of archaeological landscapes, combining academic research aims with monument protection/conservation or exploitation policies. Ultimately, the project should generate computer-based multi-media educational publications at different levels.

### The Study Region

Broadly, the region is defined by the Somerset Levels and Mendip Hills to the north, Bruton Forest and the Vale of Blackmore to the east, the Cretaceous outcrop of North Dorset to the south, and the upper valley of the River Parrett to the west. Within that region, areas for more detailed local study focus upon the interlocking

hinterlands of South Cadbury Castle and of Ilchester. These are defined approximately within a <10km radius of both centres, partly by means of modern parish boundaries.

As a supplement to data already published or available through current research, all other available sources, including County SMRs and aerial photographic coverage, will be scanned to provide a data base for the project and study region overall. More intensive local survey will concentrate initially on the South Cadbury study area to provide data from fieldwalking, geophysical survey, selective trial excavations, etc. Several more specific period, artifact or functional research themes will operate within the project, involving a variety of researchers at different levels of commitment, from undergraduates to local amateur workers, doctoral students and other academics. The fundamental tool for analysis and integration of data throughout will be a Geographical Information System (GIS), which can also be interactively used in the development of research and fieldwork strategies.

## Sigwells 1994

### The site

The Sigwells area, centred on Sigwells Farm in the parish of Charlton Horethorne, Somerset (NGR ST 64 23), lies at one of the highest points on the hills formed by the limestone of the Inferior Oolite, approximately 2km south east of South Cadbury Castle. Steep scarp slopes and combs, facing generally west, descend 100m and more in that direction; the Sigwells area occupying a gently undulating plateau on the dip slope at and just above 180m AOD, and flanked by several shallow dry valleys. Today, much of the area away from the steep western slopes is occupied by large arable or pasture fields. Earlier surface discoveries from a field south west of Slait Farm, Sigwells comprised three Bronze Age round barrows which were opened by General Pitt Rivers towards the end of the 19th century (Grinsell 1971), worked flint, and artifacts of Romano-British date, including a stone altar.

Recently, a more systematic programme of fieldwalking and geophysical prospection has concentrated upon this field, involving members of the South East Somerset Archaeological Society (SESAS), the Universities of Birmingham and Glasgow, and co-ordinated locally by Richard Tabor (currently a research student at the University of Birmingham). These surveys revealed concentrations of mainly Romano-British artefacts and prehistoric flint, and the outlines of a variety of potential structures. Material of Roman date is especially prominent, and concentrations of stone building remains, dark occupation soil and charcoal, slag, burnt clay, bone and pottery are very apparent following ploughing. Many of these concentrations correspond with low spread mounds, still visible as surface features on the field today. The geophysical prospection suggested the remains of some rectilinear structures and a number of other linear features, some of which could be natural. These results indicated an extensive Romano-British settlement, and the likelihood of evidence for earlier prehistoric activity.

### Strategy

The intensity of activity at Sigwells indicated the desirability of a more specific evaluation of the data recorded there so far. This involved a series of small-scale excavations on the site of a number of the surface mounds and artefact concentrations, during the summer of 1994. The excavation programme, under the direction of Peter Leach (University of Birmingham), operated primarily as a training programme, with graduate and undergraduate students from the University

based at a newly established field centre in the village of South Cadbury, and with members of SESAS. Excavation and recording, entirely by hand, aimed to assess the character, condition and chronology of surviving archaeological remains, from ploughsoil horizons down to the underlying natural formations. Subject to their scale and survival, total excavation of features and deposits within the sample areas was not necessarily the aim. Detailed pro-forma written, graphic and photographic records made in the field are now being supplemented by processing and further recording of portable finds and samples removed from the site. More detailed analysis of the finds and site record archive will be undertaken through the University of Birmingham and in consultation with the appropriate finds and environmental specialists, the majority of whom are based there. Provisional arrangements have been made for the eventual deposition of the excavation archive of finds and records with the Somerset County Museum.

### Excavation Results

Six trenches were excavated by hand in late June and July; five (I-V) to examine the Romano-British settlement remains and a sixth (VI) adjacent to one of the Bronze Age barrows (Sigwells III) on the edge of the hill (Fig 2). The first five were located at that time within a cultivated field of broad beans, and care was required to minimise disturbance to the crop.

**Trenches I and V** were positioned to the north east of a pair of ploughed round barrows (Sigwells I & II) and within 20m of each other. Trench I (c 8x3m) was designed to sample a surface concentration of stone rubble on a low rise, while Trench V (c.10x2m) sampled an area of notably darker surface soil where a concentration of Romano-British pottery sherds was apparent.

In **Trench I** the surface stone rubble proved to be a spread of recent origin occupying a shallow depression beneath the base of present plough disturbance. Artifacts associated with it suggested a 20th century date and the possibility that it derived from a small building which originally stood nearby within the field. Beneath this level up to 0.40m of sandy subsoil contained a sparse scatter of Romano-British pottery and other artifacts, but there was no clear evidence of structural remains. Although a disturbed horizon of the natural sand was reached in the south west corner of the trench, this was not exposed throughout, and thus, in the light of evidence recorded in other trenches, there remains the possibility that one or two archaeological features could have been present and detected at that level.

In **Trench V** removal of c.0.20m of ploughsoil exposed a dark grey-brown sandy subsoil which became progressively lighter in colour as the weathered surface of soft natural yellow sand was approached at c.0.50m below the present surface of the field. It was difficult to distinguish clear formation horizons within this subsoil, except to the south, where a spread of worn limestone blocks and smaller rubble - some burnt, and a small concentration of shattered Lias limestone roof tiles, were present in its upper levels. Associated with this stone spread and the upper subsoil horizons was a considerable quantity of 3rd and 4th-century Romano-British pottery, some animal bone, and more occasional artifacts of stone and metal. Pottery and other finds were more sparsely distributed in the lower deposits, where some earlier pottery types can be recognised. Only the western half of the trench (1x10m) was completely excavated to the natural sand, where several small features (a gully, postholes and a pit) were wholly or part excavated. Only the latter produced datable artifacts - prehistoric pottery sherds representing two vessels, one almost certainly part of an Early Bronze Age funerary vessel, both from the dark ash and charcoal soil of its fill.

**Trench II** (c.3x10m) was sited on another rise in the surface of the field where stone rubble was particularly apparent, and approximately 40m north of Trench I. Clearance of the ploughsoil very quickly revealed a tumbled surface of large weathered limestone blocks over most of the trench, in places no more than 0.10m below the surface. Within this horizon was visible two alignments of dressed and mortared stone blocks, two courses wide and set at a right angle. As excavation progressed it became clear that these were the bottom two or three courses of stone walls marking the south east corner of a building aligned SSE-NNW. The mortared and horizontally coursed wall blocks of local limestone were set upon three pitched courses of smaller and rougher unmortared stone. Within the building to the west was the remains of a mortared floor, a small hearth, and what may have been a slight partition wall. Finds included later 3rd and 4th-century pottery, animal bone, glass, stone and metal artifacts (including a small hoard of Constantinian bronze coins), many from the deposits of stone rubble and debris representing collapse or demolition of the building. Similar deposits and finds, including much Lias limestone roof tile, were spread around the building's exterior, where there were traces of rough cobbled surfaces. Part of a separate stone structure, possibly belonging to an oven, was found in the north east corner of the trench.

The walls and foundations of this building were not removed during the excavations, and neither the north nor west terminations of the two walls were seen. The lower subsoil levels, particularly outside the building, which predate its construction, were excavated down to the weathered horizon of natural sand beneath. At this level a ditch c.1m wide and c.0.40m deep ran almost parallel to and partly beneath the south wall foundations. Parallel and c.1m to the south of this ditch was a narrower ditch or gully. Neither ditch was clearly visible in the subsoil until the horizon of lighter natural sand was reached, but both contained Romano-British pottery of 2nd-century type and some animal bone.

**Trench III** (c.3x8m) coincided with another rise on the surface of the field over 70m north of Trench II, where stone and roof tile scatters were particularly marked. A second trench (IV) was also located here, immediately to the west and at right-angles to III. Both trenches were positioned to sample geophysical anomalies plotted by resistivity survey in this area, which suggested at least two separate rectilinear structural layouts.

Removal of no more than 0.20m of ploughsoil revealed several zones of stone debris, dominated by dense concentrations of Lias limestone roof tile fragments and some complete examples. Removal of these deposits eventually revealed the north east corner of a building represented by two alignments of pitched stone wall foundation set at a right angle. No mortared upper wall courses had survived but the foundations were identical in character to those in Trench II. Very little of the interior of this room or building lay within the trench and thus was not investigated. An indistinctly defined gravel and occupation soil horizon marked the contemporary building exterior to the north, and a shallow drainage gully followed the exterior edge of both wall foundations. The latter appeared to drain into a much larger ditch which ended close to the corner of the building but continued beyond the trench and downhill to the north. Finds associated with all these features and deposits included Romano-British pottery of late 3rd and 4th-century types, stone, glass, bone and metal artifacts, and animal bone.

Once again, wall foundations here were retained virtually intact, but substantial portions of the lower subsoil horizons surrounding and pre-dating this part of the building were excavated down to the weathered surface of natural sand. Two substantial earlier features could then be clearly discerned and excavated at that level. To the west, part of a broad but relatively shallow ditch was excavated, running approximately N - S and passing beneath the later Roman building remains. At the same level, but beyond the north east building corner was a large bowl-shaped pit full of ashy soil and charcoal, possibly an ash pit associated with a

nearby hearth (not seen). Both of these earlier features contained pottery of 2nd-century type.

**Trench IV** (c.3x10m) lay immediately to the east of III but at right-angles to it, sampling other geophysical anomalies and surface evidence for structures suggested here. Once again, removal of the thin ploughsoil horizon revealed a complex spread of large weathered stone blocks and smaller rubble (some burnt), with scatters of Lias roof tile fragments over much of the trench. Excavation eventually resolved this as the debris of stone building collapse or robbing above part of a large room aligned approximately ESE-WNW. As in Trench III, the two parallel outer wall alignments survived only as three courses of pitched stone rubble footings set into the subsoil, although a few stones of a bottom, horizontal, mortared course survived at the east end of the southern wall. Heavy wear on these stones and a cobbled surface approaching from the south suggested the site of an entrance into the room there. Within the room itself were the badly truncated remains of several small hearths or ovens, associated with baked soil and ash deposits, and an ash pit containing heavily burnt hearth stones. Close to the inside of the northern wall and aligned with it was a small pit containing the articulated burials of three sheep or goats. This pit was covered by several horizontally laid stone roof tiles, and appears to date from the period of building abandonment. Outside to the north was an indistinctly defined, stony occupation surface and a shallow drain defined roughly by pitched roof tile fragments.

Sections were cut through the wall foundations but most were left in situ. The removal of pre-building subsoil horizons from within or around its remains was less extensive than in other trenches, and a more limited exposure of the natural weathered sand horizon beneath was achieved. Only one certain pre-building feature was excavated, a small pit outside, and cut by, the southern wall foundations. Remarkably, this contained fragments of fired two-piece clay moulds for the casting of a Late Bronze Age socketed spear, a sword and a socketed axe. Most of the finds of pottery, coins, and other artifacts recovered from deposits and features associated with the Roman building were of later 3rd and 4th-century date.

**Trench VI** (12.5m x 2m) was situated immediately to the west of a ravine cut into the north-facing scarp overlooking Cadbury Castle and adjacent to a round barrow (Sigwells III). The trench was designed to assess the context, condition and potential of the barrow, to examine a broad east-west aligned cropmark which appears to separate a spur here from the rest of the plateau, and to gain some insight into flint scatters discovered during fieldwalking west of the barrow.

The excavation was undertaken primarily by members of SESAS under the direction of Richard Tabor. Its southern end formed a partial section across the north side of the cropmark (visible as a shallow depression extending west from the edge of the ravine). A narrower section (5.5m x 1m) was cut into the south side of the barrow. Turf and topsoil were removed by mattock, after which excavation was continued in spits until more coherent layers or features were encountered.

**Barrow:** The northern end of Trench VI, extending part way up the barrow mound, was cut through some 0.50m of mixed sandy soils disturbed by animal burrows, before encountering a thick lens or capping of soft stone rubble. Excavation was continued for another 0.60m beneath this through buried soils containing charcoal, flint flakes and occasional small sherds of pottery, to the natural sand beneath. The stone rubble cap was probably obtained from a ditch 4.6m to the south, which almost certainly encircles the barrow. This section revealed a steep-sided cut into the sand bedrock with a concave base, up to 0.90m deep and almost 2.0m wide. There was no evidence of recutting, and the only find from the lower fills (above the primary silts) was a sherd from a decorated Early Bronze Age Collared Urn. Later activity was, however, suggested by shallow depressions cut into a very late phase of ditch infill, depressions containing burnt



soil and charcoal, prehistoric pottery, flint flakes and two fired clay loomweights, possibly of Late Bronze Age type.

**Cropmark:** South of the ringditch an increasing depth of mixed sandy soils sealed a weathered surface of bedrock which sloped down to the south and was cut by several features. The first was a shallow gully which curved gently down the slope towards the ravine and contained a few flint flakes and Romano-British pottery sherds. This may have been a hollow-way curving around the earlier barrow and giving access to the ravine. Two shallow post-holes lay alongside it to the south west, and a third beside a much deeper cut to the south. This last feature was seen only as the north side of a deep, steep-sided cut into bedrock which corresponded on the surface with a depression on the east side of the ravine. This was excavated here to an inclined base at 2m below the modern topsoil, but its full width was not revealed. Within its upper sandy loam fills were a few flint flakes and some lightly abraded Romano-British pottery sherds. The lower sandy gleyed silts contained only a few flints.

### Interpretation

The excavation of five small trenches at Sigwells in 1994, in an area where surface survey had suggested the presence of Romano-British settlement remains, was essentially an evaluation exercise. Not only have such remains now been proven, but something of their character, chronology and context is now apparent. Prehistoric use of this area, already evidenced by the presence of at least three Bronze Age round barrows in the vicinity, is also revealed through substantial assemblages of flint flakes and occasional implements. This evidence comes both from fieldwalking and from excavations, albeit mainly from secondary Roman contexts. The material has yet to be subjected to detailed analysis but preliminary examination suggests that both Neolithic and Bronze Age types are present, and possibly some of Mesolithic character. The discovery of a small pit containing Early Bronze Age pottery in Trench V was the only well authenticated prehistoric context located in this area, possibly associated with the twin barrows to the south west. An outlying cremation cemetery relating to those barrows must be considered a possibility.

In Trench VI the third barrow was directly tested to determine its character and the preservation of Bronze Age contexts and artifacts in situ. Both were located, but once again the results and their significance must await future analysis. The 1877 excavation by Pitt Rivers and Rolleston (Grinsell 1971) recovered evidence of a cremation and funerary pyre, traces of which may have been found, although their trench was not found. Our understanding of the large ditch/natural gully to the south remains open, although the presence of relatively unabraded Roman pottery well down in its fill suggests that it was a far more prominent feature at that time. Also unclear is the evidence of a later prehistoric(?) occupation on or close to the barrow, although possibly contemporary with the late Bronze Age weapon casting moulds from Trench IV on the main Roman site to the south east. There is as yet, however, no other suggestion of pre-Roman Iron Age occupation from pottery or context evidence anywhere at Sigwells.

Pottery, and a handful of features and deposits found in almost all of the five trenches excavated in the main area, suggest that a settlement was established on the hill top during the 2nd century AD., if not a little earlier. The remains recorded are too disparate and sparse to gain any clear impression of the layout or character of this early phase of settlement, but were presumably a direct forerunner of what was to follow.

The main expansion of the Romano-British occupation here occurred during the 3rd and 4th centuries AD., as represented most dramatically by the erection of several

stone-founded buildings. Those encountered seem to share a common alignment and were evidently substantial structures with mortared stone walls and stone tiled roofs. The remains in Trenches II, III and IV suggest three separate buildings, and at least one more very close to Trench V. Stone debris, artifacts and soil colour variations on the ploughed surface of the field indicate that the settlement spread over at least 3 hectares at its maximum. There is as yet no sign of a particular focus for the site, as might be provided by a villa or temple (hinted at by the altar?), and no roads or tracks have yet been identified within or nearby. The suggested extent of the remains and likely number of major buildings implies something more than a basic farm unit, although agriculture will almost certainly have played a major role in its existence. An abundance of natural ironstone in the Inferior Oolite formations underlying the site could provide one explanation for its siting here, but little direct evidence of extensive iron working or smithing has yet come to light. So far the artifacts recovered in excavation and from surface collection appear to be typical of Romano-British rural settlements in the region. Dorset Black Burnished pottery is overwhelmingly predominant in the later settlement, though proportionally less common in the early phase. Coin evidence suggests occupation continuing late into the 4th century, if not beyond, but there is no suggestion of any post-Roman continuation or reoccupation thereafter.

### Field Walking

Sigwells has been subjected to several programmes of fieldwalking during 1994 (Fig.2). Two areas (A and B) based upon 20m grid squares were subject to collected in February, and followed on from a preliminary survey over part of the Romano-British settlement area by members of SESAS. during 1993, using their original grid. Weather and surface conditions were far from ideal at this time but in July Area A was re-walked, and a more extensive area to the west could also be covered. The enlarged Area A represents a small promontory above the steep scarp to the north, where concentrations of worked flint are notable. This assemblage has yet to be analysed although the proportion of artifacts appears to be low, while Roman pottery and other artifacts are very sparsely represented.

In October a third session involved post-graduate students and centred once again upon the known Romano-British settlement area in the eastern part of the field (Area C). On this occasion a 10m grid collection module was based upon the National Grid, which will form the basis for all field walking exercises undertaken as part of the project from now on. A large quantity of material was recovered, principally of Romano-British date and dominated by pottery. Analysis of this collection will help to define the focus and extent of occupation here and assist in devising a strategy for any further evaluation by geophysical prospection or sampling excavation. It is anticipated that fieldwalking can be extended to cover the whole field during 1995.

The 1994 fieldwalking programme was completed in September by the sampling of three areas in fields below and to the north and west of South Cadbury Castle (Fig.1). These areas (A, B & C/D) were also collected as 10m squares based upon the National Grid, and undertaken as part of undergraduate field training by students from the University of Birmingham. Analysis of these results is still underway but prehistoric material including flint and some pottery, Romano-British, medieval and post-medieval artifacts were all recovered in some quantity. The occurrence and distribution of certain material classes within these assemblages may suggest localities for further evaluation, and point the way for an extension of the project into the wider hinterland of South Cadbury.

# SIGWELLS 1994

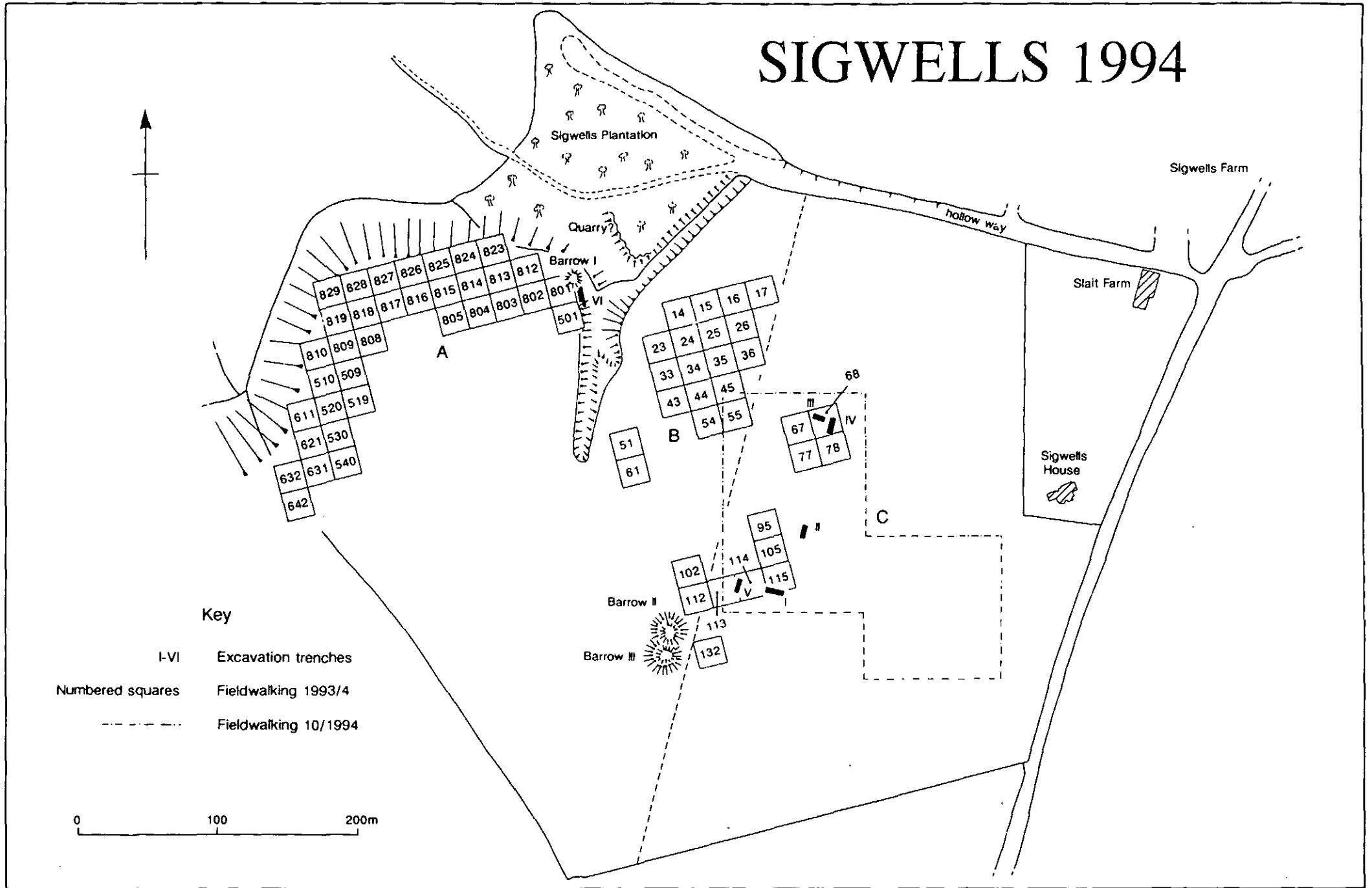


Figure 2

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