

Bromfield

The Excavation of Ring Ditch B8, 1989

An Interim Report

by Peter Leach

Bromfield
The Excavation of Ring Ditch B8, 1989
An Interim Report
by Peter Leach

Summary

The imminent destruction of a ring ditch at Bromfield Sand and Gravel Quarry, Shropshire, originally identified as a crop-mark feature among a more extensive group of archaeological sites, prompted its excavation in the summer of 1989. The project was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit and commissioned by English Heritage, with additional funded support from Bromfield Sand and Gravel Co. Ltd. and Shropshire County Council. The results here summarised arise from a two week field project and a preliminary archiving and interpretation of the results achieved.

Introduction and Acknowledgements

The long-term monitoring of the Bromfield gravel workings by members of Shropshire County Council's archaeological staff led to the identification of this ring ditch early in 1989, following topsoil stripping. The archaeological importance of this area has already been emphasised by cropmark evidence (Fig. 1) and through the efforts and discoveries of previous excavators, notably by S.C. Stanford in a series of excavations from 1966 to 1979 (Stanford 1982 and 1985). Since that campaign the maintenance of a watching brief has led to further discoveries, including portions of a Roman marching camp (Scheduled Monument SAM.202), through a series of salvage recording exercises.

At the present time, sand and gravel extraction is continuing eastwards, progressively removing the remainder of the marching camp and threatening a scatter of crop-marks indicative of further archaeological features. One of these, a ring ditch identified as B.8 (Stanford 1982, Fig.2) and as SA 2576 (Shropshire SMR), was exposed through the removal of topsoil preparatory to

gravel extraction. Its removal and destruction (now largely accomplished) necessitated archaeological excavation and recording by B.U.F.A.U., employing a small field team for a two week period in August 1989. Commissioned by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, England; the project was funded jointly by them and by Bromfield Sand and Gravel Company and Shropshire County Council.

For support and assistance throughout we are grateful to Lord Plymouth and employees of Bromfield Sand and Gravel Company, and to Mike Watson, archaeologist with Shropshire County Council. Excavations were directed by the author of this report with the assistance of Jon Sterenberg (supervisor), Rob Atkins, Lucy Dingwall, Laurence Jones, Iain McCraith, Ed Newton, Andrew Rutherford and Karen Walford. The report was produced by Liz Hooper and illustrated by Caroline Gait.

The Site

The sand and gravel terraces at Bromfield, Shropshire (centring on SO 485775), lying at around 91m AOD, are located near the confluence of three major streams - the Rivers Teme and Onny flowing from the west and the River Corve from the north. Together, these rivers occupy a broad lowland basin to the north west of Ludlow within the broken but predominantly upland country of the Welsh highland fringes of south Shropshire. The gravels, with bands of sand and clay, are of fluvio-glacial origin and occupy a tongue of land between the rivers Teme and Corve, extending south east towards Ludlow. The most prominent archaeological feature of this terrace is an extended Bronze Age barrow cemetery. Other crop marks suggest further evidence of human occupation or activity on this terrace in the past, some of which has been revealed in more detail through archaeological excavation as a forerunner to the advancing gravel quarry south of the railway (Figs. 1 and 2). Later phases of use include the remains of a late prehistoric/Romano British enclosed settlement, the 1st-century AD, Roman military marching camp, and remains of a post-Roman (c.7th-century) cemetery.

A series of excavations by Stanford (op.cit. and 1980) demonstrate both Neolithic and Beaker occupation here prior to its development as a funerary site in the Bronze Age. At least 20 round barrows are identified by Stanford (op.cit. and Fig. 1), a few still upstanding, while his excavations in the quarry further to the west recorded two 'flat' cremation cemeteries, some with urns. Three ring ditches were examined - B7, B15 and B20 - the former associated with Cremation Cemetery 2 and probably its focus as a small round barrow. These examples and the most recently excavated ring ditch (B8) almost certainly represent former round barrows (burial mounds) of the Bronze Age. As a group, these barrows and the cremation cemeteries represent one of the most important and prolific concentrations of prehistoric funerary remains in the Welsh Marches, spanning a period from c.1900 to 900 BC.

The current zone of gravel extraction is defined as a roughly triangular portion of the terrace

defined north by the railway, south by the River Onny floodplain, and east by Station Lane, linking Bromfield with Ludlow Racecourse (Fig.2). East from the present quarry face much of this area is occupied by a single, large arable field. No archaeological features are currently visible here, although crop marks representing the Roman marching camp and two further suspected ring ditches (B9 and B10) appear under favourable conditions (as in the early summer of 1989). All of this remaining area is scheduled to disappear in the course of sand and gravel quarrying.

The Excavation

The extraction process at Bromfield involves the deep excavation of sand and gravel in c.20m wide sectors along a face aligned approximately NE-SW. This is preceded by topsoil stripping of the sector to be extracted and the positioning of a conveyor belt parallel to the working face. It was following these preliminaries, towards the end of 1988, that the fills of a circular ditch first became apparent towards the western end of the strip (early in 1989). Although not fully exposed, and transected by the conveyor belt, the position of this feature corresponded closely with a crop-mark circle plotted from aerial photographic coverage and identified as the ring ditch B8 (Stanford, op. cit.). It was upon this assumption that a research design was prepared by M.W. Watson (Shropshire County Council) and funding sought from the three sponsors to carry out the archaeological investigation and recording of these remains prior to their destruction. This was accomplished by B.U.F.A.U. in August 1989, and that part of the site which lay north of the conveyor belt has now been destroyed.

To achieve the maximum exposure of the ring ditch remains and its immediate environs it was necessary in the first instance to clear the machined surface of loose debris and recently compacted material. It was soon apparent that the process of mechanical topsoil excavation and subsequent vehicular traffic across the area of the ring ditch had truncated some of its original surviving depth, particularly to the west. Two narrow segments of the exposed ditch fills also remained inaccessible beneath the conveyor belt. In addition to the remains of the circular ditch

and its fills, a large sub-circular feature was revealed towards the centre point of the encircling ditch. This appeared to correspond with a central crop-mark noted on previous air photographs of the site.

Following the definition of archaeological feature fills, their removal and recording from within the ring ditch itself was accomplished in the first instance by excavation of a series of 21 radial transects averaging 2m wide, with baulks of similar dimensions left between them (Fig.3). The process of definition and removal was, for the most part, straightforward, hampered though it was by extremely dry conditions at the time of excavation and the very coarse nature of both feature fills and the natural gravels. Samples were taken from each of the principal layers identified within the ditch fills in several of the excavated segments and at least one latitudinal cross section was drawn and photographed in each sector. Some of the sectors were excavated longitudinally to examine sections along the axis of fills.

The surviving ring ditch was revealed as a somewhat irregular circle, approximately 23m in diameter and slightly elongated on a NW-SE axis. Where best preserved around the eastern circumference, a c.1m wide flat-bottomed ditch was exposed with sloping sides, steepest around the outer edge of the cut. A maximum upper width of c.1.5m was recorded, where the ditch was up to 0.60m deep, but even at this point had probably suffered some truncation. To the west a progressive truncation had reduced the surviving depth of the ditch to less than 0.10m and at one point removed it entirely. The ditch fills, again surviving most fully towards the east, revealed a sequence of sand and gravel tips (1005), entering and infilling the ditch from both sides but with the emphasis upon material from the interior of the circle. In virtually every profile a central core of very coarse gravel and cobbles, some with air spaces, was clearly visible as an almost vertically-defined deposit (1004) concentric with the ditch. In several sections a lower fill of finer sandy gravel and clay soil was also detected, penetrating to the level of the bottom cut or resting upon a thin primary gravel silting (1006) (Fig.3, sections 1 and 2). All these fills were sealed by an upper

layer of more clayey material (1003), which only survived truncation in the best preserved ditch sectors to the east. With the exception of a single sherd of coarse pottery in this upper layer, no artefacts were recovered from any of the ditch fills. Charcoal flecks were visible in places and two small concentrations were recorded and sampled within the loose rubble fill - 1004.

The central feature (F2) was first revealed as a sub-circular area of clay soil and rubble fill c.2.0 x 3.0m in extent. Its excavation revealed a steep-sided, 1.7m deep cut into natural gravel which tapered to a narrow shelf or ledge, below which, a more steeply-cut, sub-rectangular lower portion terminated in an area c.1.3 x 2.0m with a flat gravel base. The central core of backfill comprised tips of loose stones and cobbles derived originally from the natural gravels and having frequent air spaces. A few fragments of animal bone and two sherds of late 17th/18th-century brown-glazed earthenware (the only finds) were recovered from the upper fills of this pit.

Some examination of the natural gravel surface horizon outside the confines of the ring ditch was attempted, despite the hindrances posed by the current gravel extraction process and the scale of recent disturbance and degradation to that surface, particularly to the west. No other features or deposits of archaeological significance were thereby detected.

Archaeological Interpretation

There seems little reason to doubt that the ring ditch B8 represents a quarry ditch around a former, conical, central barrow mound (Fig. 3). The latter has now been totally erased as an upstanding feature, a process which may only have been completed by agriculture in recent times. Excavation of the ditch revealed several features of interest. In the first instance its original construction suggests a chordal plan involving the layout and excavation of the ditch in a series of 13, 4-5m length straight segments. This is most apparent around the almost unweathered base; the upper sides, having been subjected to more intensive weathering, obscure this layout and suggest at first sight a more circular shape. Whether or not this method of laying out the ring ditch was responsible for its slightly oval shape, three other barrow-ditches excavated here previously by Stanford (1982) appeared to have been cut in a similar chordate fashion (B7, B15 and B20) with no significant distortion of true circles. By implication, the ditch of B8 can hardly have been set out from a common centre point, although the changes in alignment will presumably have been marked by stakes around the intended circumference.

Within the surviving ditch fills the most prominent feature was the vertical core of loose rubble, gravel and clay soil (1004) which separated the tips of naturally accumulating infill introduced by weathering from each side (Fig. 3, sections 1 and 2). There was no clear emphasis or distinction within these infills to suggest that weathering of the barrow mound was a major contributor to this process, although it may reasonably be assumed. The character of the central core material indicates the former presence of an upstanding feature set concentrically within the ditch. This was almost certainly a palisade of wooden stakes or posts inserted into the partly silted ditch and held firm with larger packing stones. Despite careful examination, both longitudinally and latitudinally in excavation, no clear post-pipes were seen and thus their spacing could not be determined, although such palisade posts could have had a maximum diameter of 0.35-0.40m. Post settings of this character, either within or beyond the circumference of

round barrow ditches, are recorded relatively frequently elsewhere in the British Isles, although this appears to be the first example at Bromfield. Two small concentrations of wood charcoal within the palisade-post trench fills suggest some deposition episode during its life. The only other find was a small fragment of Bronze Age-type pottery from the upper fills in Sector I. It was unclear whether the palisade posts had been removed at a later date or had rotted in situ, although the latter is suspected.

Conclusions

All in all, the excavation of these remains tend to confirm their identity as another representative of the 2nd-millennium BC barrow and cremation cemetery at Bromfield; a site previously categorised as the ring ditch B8 from air photographic evidence. Despite relatively recent truncation of the ditch, levelling of the mound and the robbing through re-excavation of a central feature, the original monument can confidently be reconstructed as a round barrow covering a primary central grave, and surrounded by a quarry ditch into which a concentric, vertical setting or palisade of wooden posts had subsequently been set.

Despite the paucity of directly associated dating evidence, a monument of this type will most probably have been erected in the early part of the 2nd millennium BC. This supposition is reinforced by the proximity of morphologically similar monuments and other funerary remains of this period at Bromfield. There was no evidence to suggest that a cremation cemetery was focussed upon this barrow, as was demonstrated for B7 (Stanford 1982), although secondary interments may have been inserted into the mound. A Carbon 14 determination of its approximate date could probably be obtained from the small quantities of wood charcoal recovered. No other significant palaeo-environmental evidence appeared to survive in the well-drained and mildly acid environment of the natural gravels and fills of archaeological features. No molluscan or other faunal or plant remains (beyond carbonised wood) were seen in excavation or among wet-sieved samples, and no buried soil horizons survived.

Gravel extraction at Bromfield is now proceeding apace and it is evident, will remove the remainder of the field to the east and the monuments within it in only the next few years (Fig.1). Up to the present time the archaeological response to this circumstance has involved monitoring of the horizons exposed following topsoil removal and the mounting of salvage excavation and recording exercises from time to time as appropriate. This approach has taken account of the foreknowledge available through aerial photographic coverage but has also revealed hitherto unsuspected remains. Furthermore, discovery and recording exercises have invariably followed this non-archaeological soil stripping process when, as demonstrated in particular by this latest response, conditions for optimum preservation and thus recovery of surviving remains will often be inhibited.

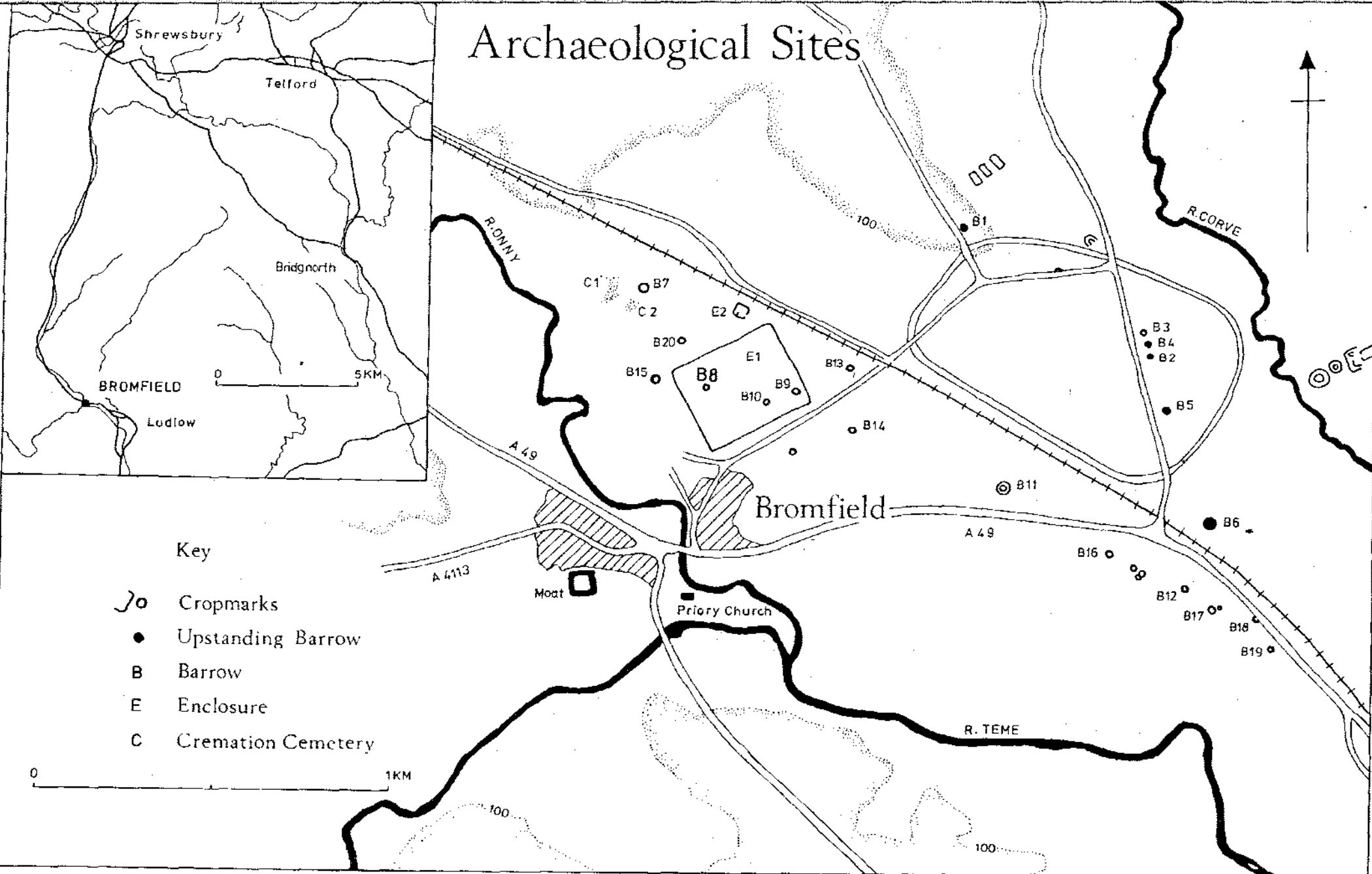
As some counter to this situation the first priority now must be a geophysical survey of the remaining threatened area as far as Station Lane, to confirm known crop-marks and to determine whether any other significant archaeological features survive here, as yet undetected. This matter is now in hand and it is anticipated that such a survey will be carried out in the near future. With this information it should then be possible to formulate a response involving some further selective archaeological excavation of surviving remains, under conditions which permit a more controlled removal of overburden well in advance of quarrying requirements. Only then will it be possible to prepare a more detailed account of the balance remaining of unpublished archaeological discoveries at Bromfield and of their full significance.

References

- Stanford, S.C., 1980
The Archaeology of the Welsh Marches
- Stanford, S.C., 1982
Bromfield, Shropshire - Neolithic, Beaker and Bronze Age Sites, 1966-79' *P.P.S.* 48, 1982, 279-320
- Stanford, S.C., 1985
'Bromfield - Neolithic to Saxon Times'
Transactions Shropshire Archaeological Society LXIV, 1985, 1-7.

P.J. Leach,
B.U.F.A.U.
October 1989

Archaeological Sites



Key

- Jo Cropmarks
- Upstanding Barrow
- B Barrow
- E Enclosure
- C Cremation Cemetery

FIG.1

RING DITCH B8

Location

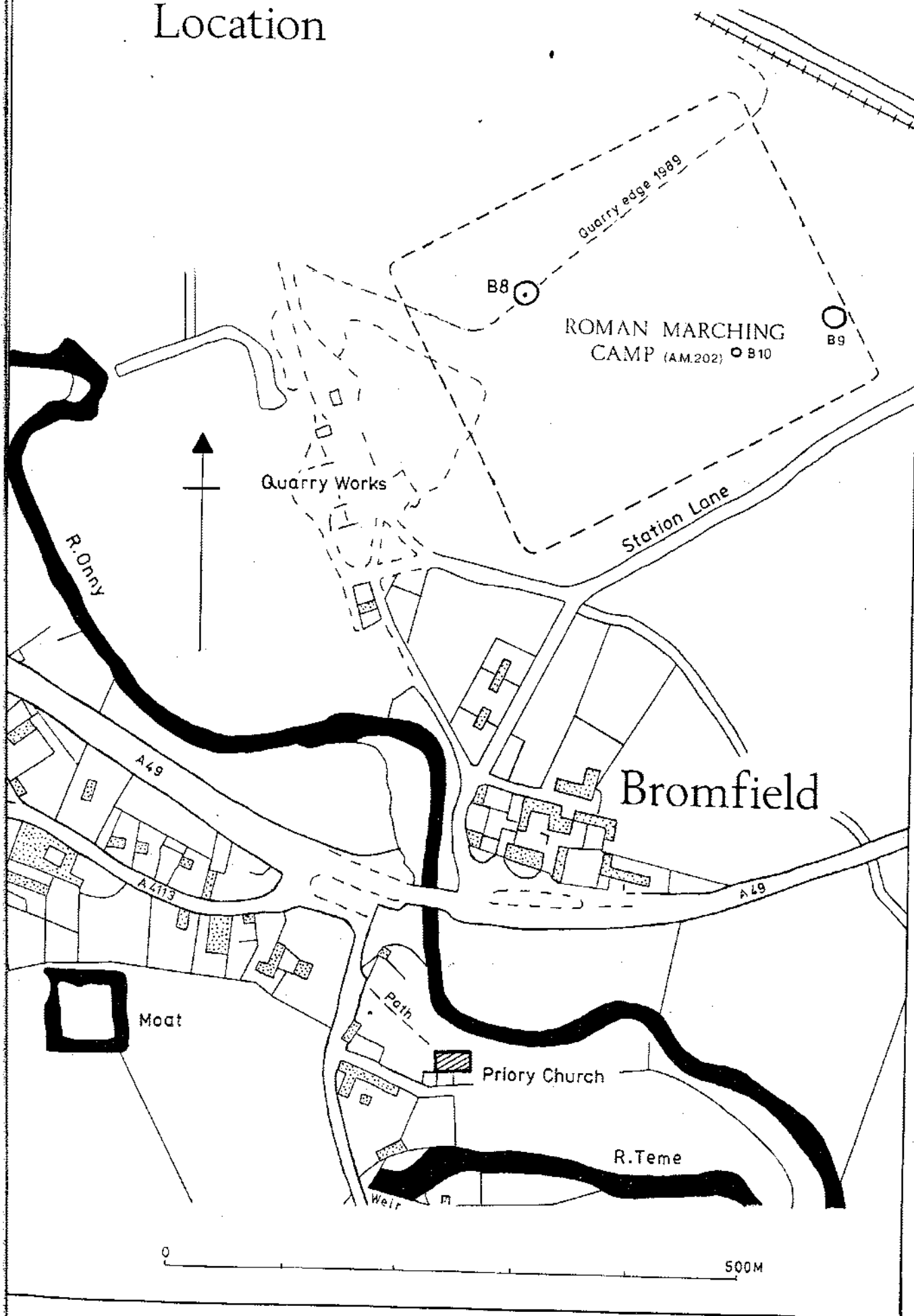


FIG. 2

BROMFIELD 1989

Ring Ditch B8

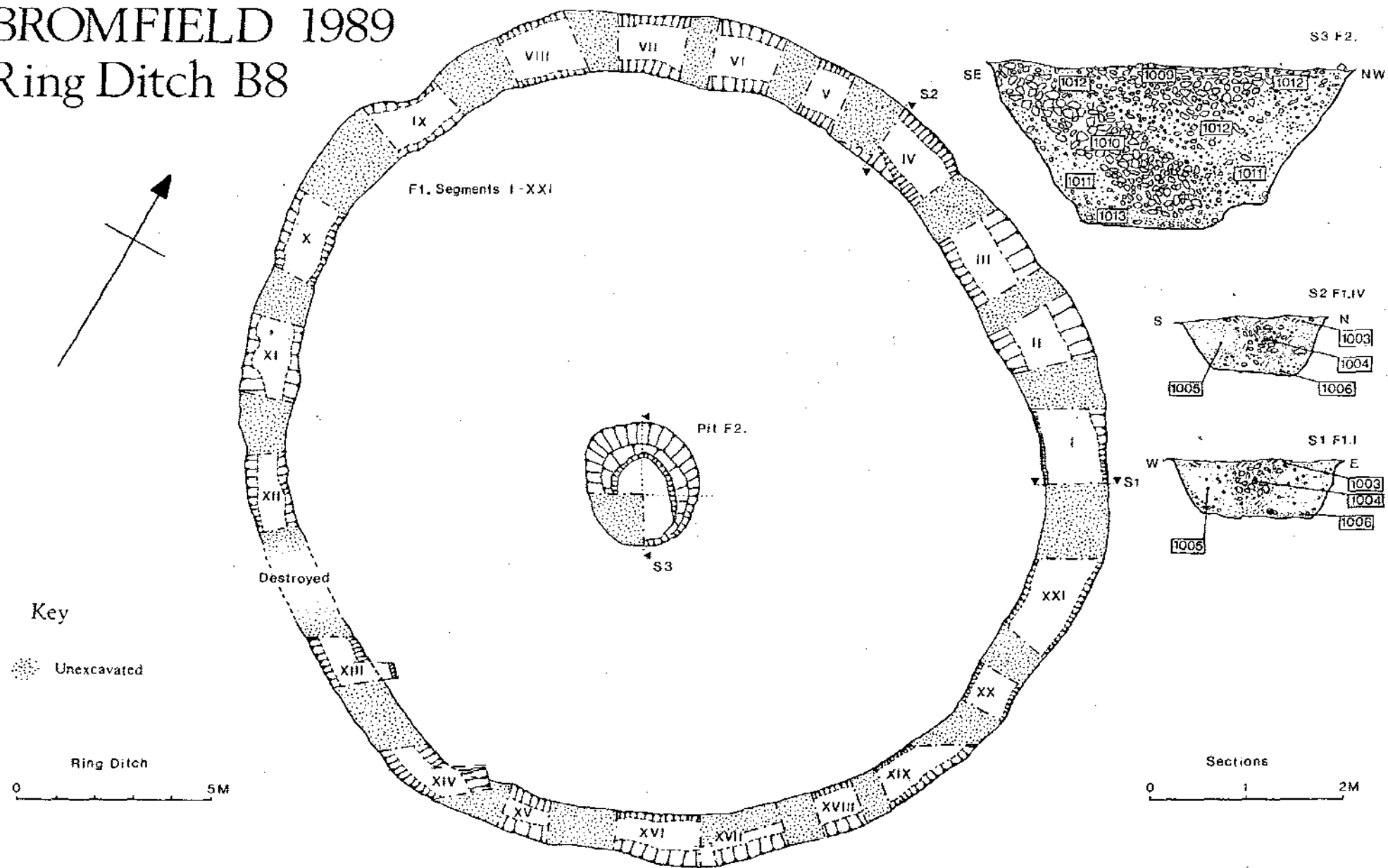


FIG. 3