

An Archaeological Evaluation at Bromfield, Shropshire

by H. R. Hannaford

The Archaeology Unit of



and



The Field Archaeology Unit,
University of Birmingham

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT
BROMFIELD, SHROPSHIRE

by

H R HANNAFORD

THE ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT, LEISURE SERVICES DEPARTMENT,
SHROPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

AND

THE FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location

The sand and gravel terraces at Bromfield, Shropshire, are situated around the confluence of the Rivers Teme and Onny from the west and the River Corve from the north. These rivers occupy a broad, lowland basin 2km to the northwest of Ludlow within the mainly upland landscape of South Shropshire (Fig. 1).

The gravels are of fluvio-glacial origin, and have been subject to mineral extraction in recent years.

The modern road and rail communications between Shrewsbury and Hereford traverse this area.

1.2 Previous Archaeological Work

The Bromfield area includes what has been described as the foremost archaeological site in the Welsh Borders. The main feature of the site, which covers an area 1500m long by 750m wide, is an extended Bronze Age barrow cemetery comprising some twenty barrows, five of which are still upstanding. Other features include an Iron Age enclosure or farmstead, reused as an Anglo-Saxon cemetery, and a Roman marching camp some 8.4ha (20.5 acres) in size.

A number of the barrows were examined in the early 1880s (Fortey, 1885). In 1965 the Bromfield Sand and Gravel Quarry opened, and its subsequent operations on the east bank of the Onny have been accompanied by archaeological rescue excavations and a programme of monitoring and salvage recording. This work has revealed the presence of neolithic occupation on the site, and has involved the excavation of further Bronze Age barrows

and cemeteries (Stanford, 1982 and 1985, and Leach, 1989), the Iron Age enclosure and Saxon cemetery (Stanford, 1985), and sections of the Roman marching camp (Stanford, 1970). This work has served to confirm and amplify the archaeological importance of this area.

1.3 The Study Area

The area which is the subject of this evaluation lies on the sand and gravel terrace on the west bank of River Onny 1km north of village of Bromfield. It comprises of a largely arable area some 34ha (84 acres) in extent (Fig. 1).

This area is currently the subject of a proposal for sand and gravel extraction. To date all such mineral extraction has been confined to the east bank of the River Onny. Located within the study area at SO474775 is a linear cropmark feature of uncertain date and function (Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record number SA2029). It consists of two parallel ditches c.10m apart and running approximately west to east for a distance of 250m.

The proposed mineral extraction would totally destroy this linear cropmark feature and any other as yet unrecorded archaeological remains on the site. It was therefore deemed necessary to conduct an archaeological evaluation of the site to determine an appropriate response for the archaeological provision of the affected area.

A brief for this evaluation was drawn up by M.D. Watson, Senior Archaeologist at the Leisure Services Department of Shropshire County Council. The evaluation was undertaken as a joint venture between the Field Archaeology Unit of the University of Birmingham and the Archaeology Unit of the Leisure Services Department of Shropshire County Council. The work was carried

BROMFIELD Evaluation 1991

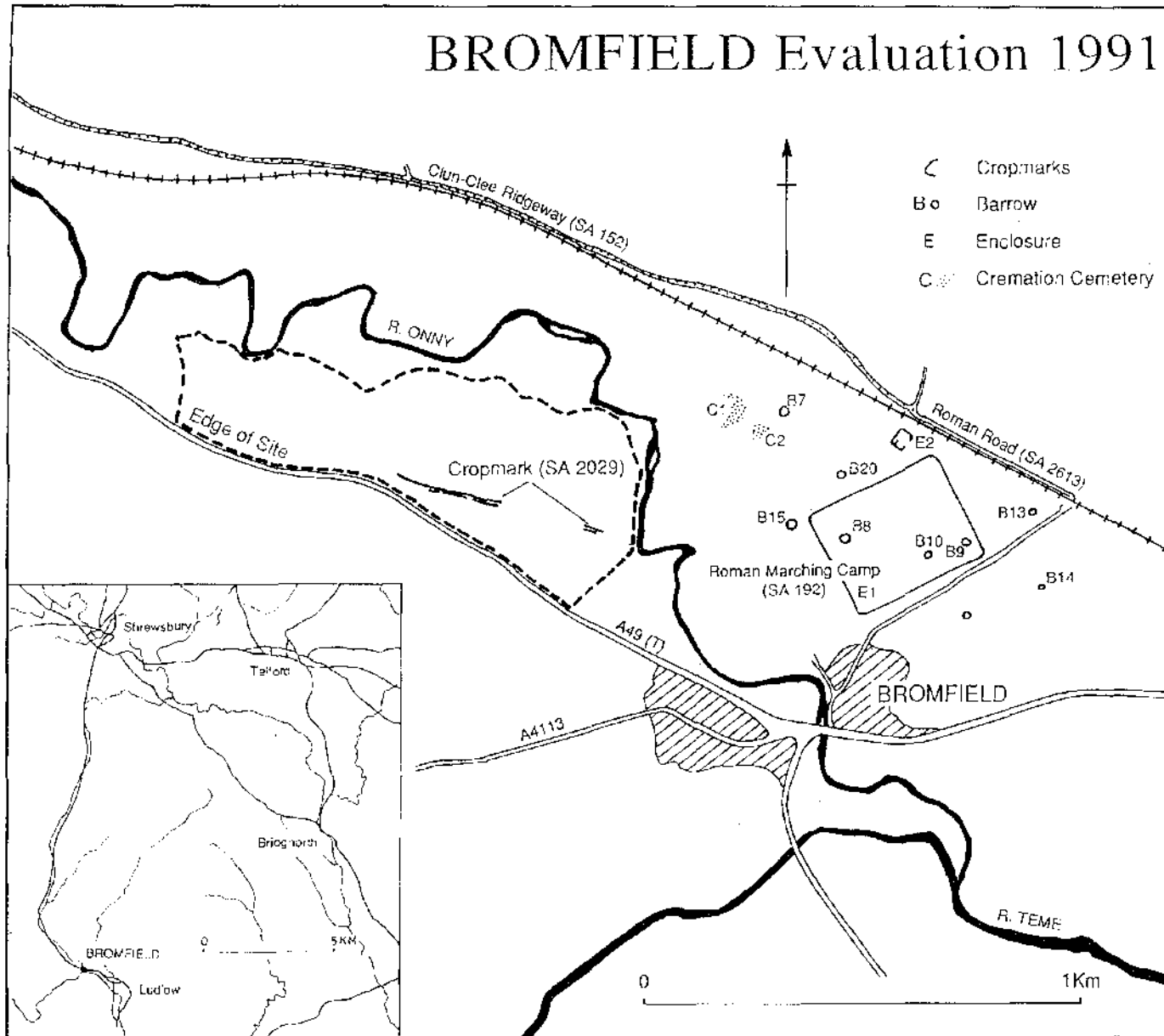


Fig. 1

out in December 1991 by a team from Birmingham University assisted by local volunteers under the direction of the writer.

1.4 Aims of the Evaluation and Methodology

The aims of the evaluation of the site were to locate and make contact with any archaeological deposits likely to be affected by the proposed mineral extraction, and to assess the survival, quality, condition, and significance of any such archaeological deposits. On the basis of this, recommendations would be made for any further archaeological provision for the site.

In order to achieve these objectives, the evaluation comprised a mixed strategy of documentary research, fieldwalking, and sample excavation.

2 THE EVALUATION

2.1 The Documentary Survey

Documentary research was undertaken by S. Litherland of the Field Archaeology Unit of the University of Birmingham on documents held at the Shropshire Record Office and the Local Studies Library, Shrewsbury.

This research revealed that the study area had been wholly given over to agricultural usage since the early 18th century at least. A map of 1733 (SRO: 3424) shows that the present field was at that time divided up into smaller arable strips, possibly relicts of a medieval open field system (presumably attached to the village of Bromfield). By 1770 the arable strips had been incorporated into regular large enclosed fields (SRO: D.P. 587). The layout of these fields then remained relatively unchanged from the 1840s until the recent removal of field boundaries to produce the present 32 hectare (78 acre) field.

The documentary survey also showed that the road north from Bromfield (the present A49) had been improved in the early 19th century (SRO: 1141/Box 90.13) although the line of the road does not appear to have been significantly changed.

However, the documentary survey did not reveal the presence in historic times of any activity within the study area which might have accounted for the presence of the cropmark feature SA2029.

2.2 Survey of the Aerial Photographic Documentation

A survey of the available aerial photographic evidence revealed a possible eastern extension to the linear cropmark feature

SA2029. This extension was located some 200m to the east, centered on S0476774 and was approximately 50m in length, also consisting of two parallel ditches spaced at a distance of 10m apart (Fig. 2). The cropmark ditches were then mapped at a scale of 1:2500 using the paper strip method. A margin of error of +/- 10m was predicted, with a greater accuracy expected at the eastern end of the plot (due to the greater number of control points available).

A number of other linear features were noted but all these appeared to be removed field boundaries of relatively recent date and consequently were not plotted. No other features of significance were noted.

2.3 Fieldwalking

The first phase of the on-site evaluation consisted of a systematic fieldwalking exercise over the site. Only the extreme western end of the proposed quarry site was excluded from this survey, as this area of about 2.5ha (6 acres) lay in part of a separate field which remained unploughed and under stubble at the time of the evaluation.

The large 32ha (78 acre) field which comprised the main part of the site had been recently ploughed, however, and conditions were favourable for fieldwalking. The site was marked out in a grid of 50m x 50m squares corresponding to the Ordnance Survey Grid. Each square was then fieldwalked once by a line of eight fieldwalkers spaced at 6m intervals.

A substantial quantity of post-medieval to 19th century pottery, tile, brick, and glass was noted but not kept. A smaller quantity of medieval pottery and glass was recovered from all over the site. This material was kept for future reference. Likewise, a total of nine sherds of Romano-British

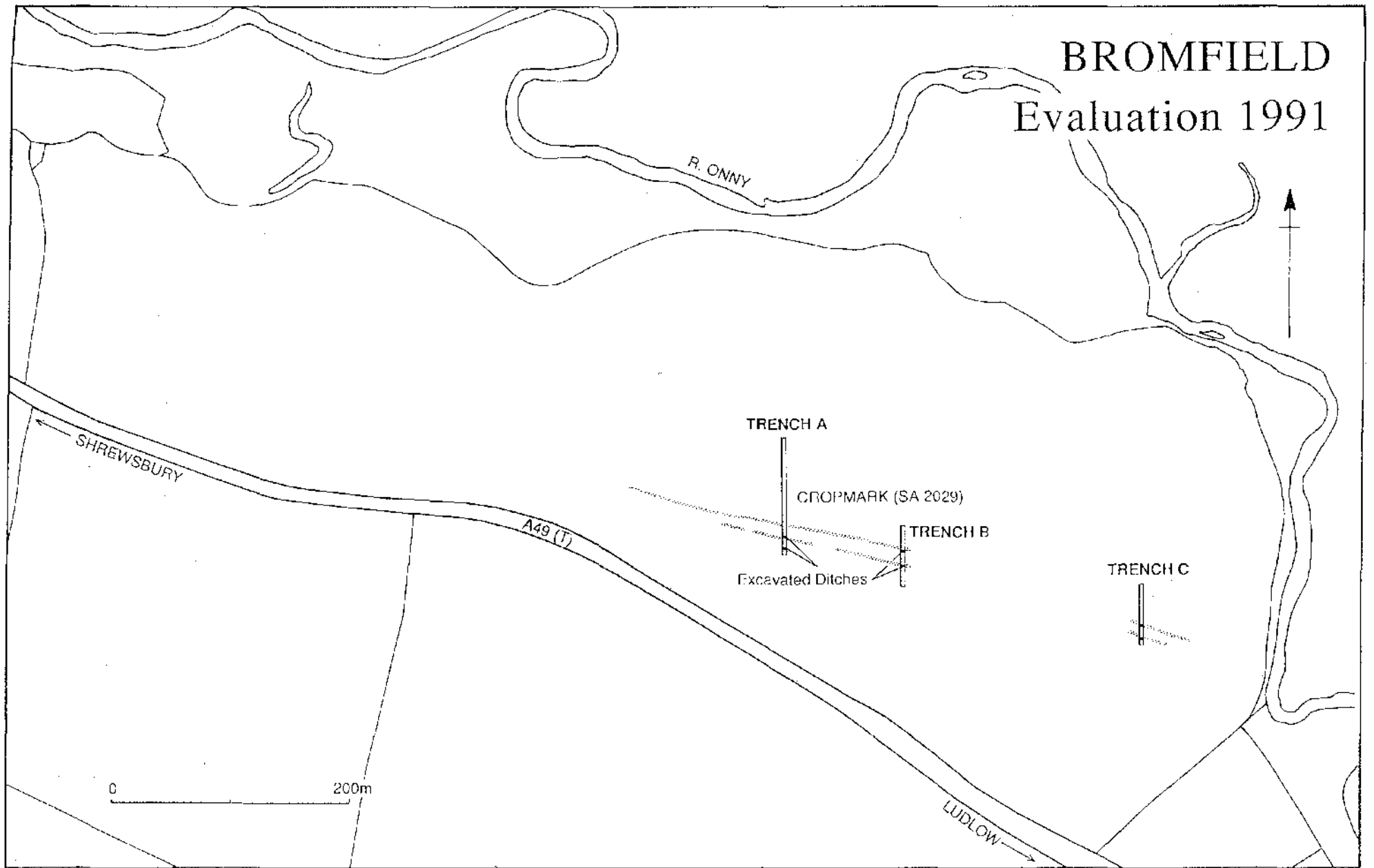


Fig. 2

coarseware pottery was generally distributed over the study area (Fig. 3).

There was also a light scatter of worked flint flakes over the site. The majority of these consisted of probable artifacts, mainly blades and scrapers, but included in the assemblage were a couple of cores and a small number of waste flakes. There was a marked, though by no means dense, concentration of flints recovered from the northeastern corner of the site, centered on SO47687760, which produced nine flakes from an area of about 3.25ha out of a total of 27 recovered from the 32ha site as a whole (Fig. 3). This northeastern corner was then fieldwalked a second time, with the specific aim of attempting to refine the sources of the flint flakes in this area. On this occasion, the area was walked in squares of 25m x 25m, each being walked twice, again with a line of eight walkers, this time spaced at 3m intervals. Only a further four flint flakes were recovered, however, and these were from separate locations within the area.

2.4 The Trial Excavations

It was intended that the cropmark ditches be examined by means of trial trenching to determine their form, assess the quality of their survival, and perhaps recover some dating evidence from their fills. On the basis of the largely negative results of the Documentary and Aerial Photographic research and fieldwalking, no further excavations were proposed.

Three trial trenches were laid out at right angles across the line of the cropmark ditches (Fig. 2). Two, Trenches A and B, were located over the main section of the cropmark feature, and a third, Trench C, was sited some 200m further to the east over the possible extension to the feature revealed by the survey of the aerial photographic evidence.

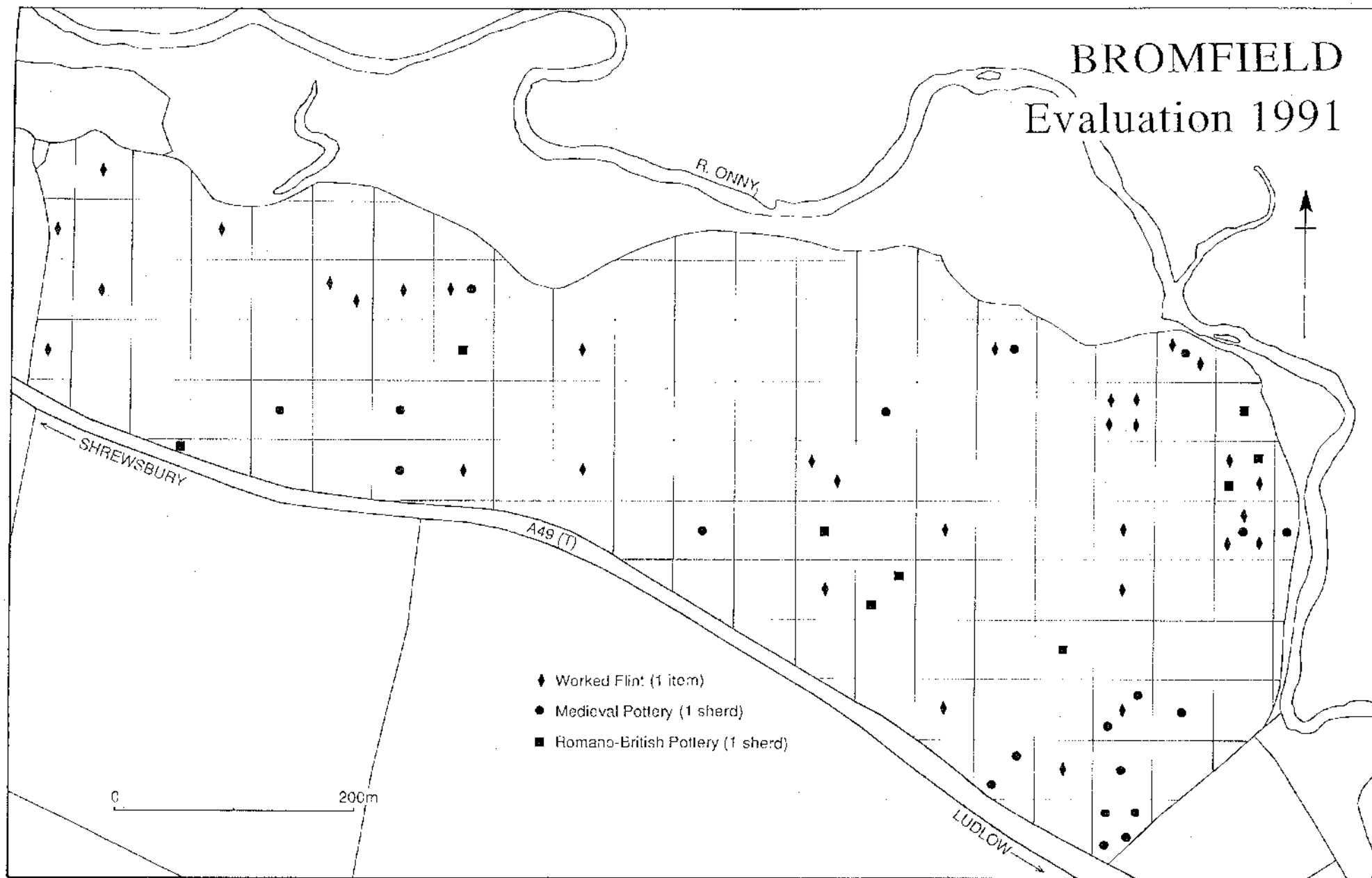


Fig. 3

The topsoil was removed from the trenches by means of a mechanical excavator, and the trenches were then cleaned by hand to reveal any archaeological features.

In each of the three trenches, linear features on the same alignment as the cropmark ditches were found in the approximate locations predicted by the 1:2500 plot from the aerial photographs. No other archaeological features were revealed.

Trench A:

Beneath about 0.3m of modern ploughsoil (2400) was a layer of slightly browner topsoil 0.2m deep (2401). These two layers were virtually indistinguishable and were both removed by machine, onto the surface of the natural gravel subsoil.

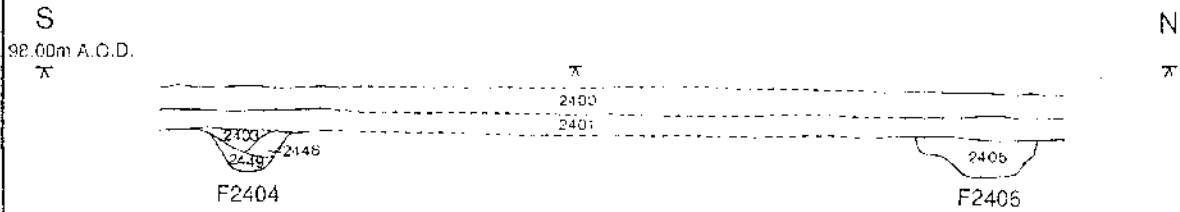
After cleaning by hand, two linear features 7m apart and aligned west to east were revealed cut into the gravel about 10m to the south of the predicted position of the cropmark ditches.

These features were both excavated by hand, and proved to be ditches (Fig. 4). The southern of the two ditches (2404) had a flattened v-shaped profile, and was 1.1m wide by 0.5m deep. The northern ditch (2406) was u-shaped in profile, 1.5m wide by 0.45m deep.

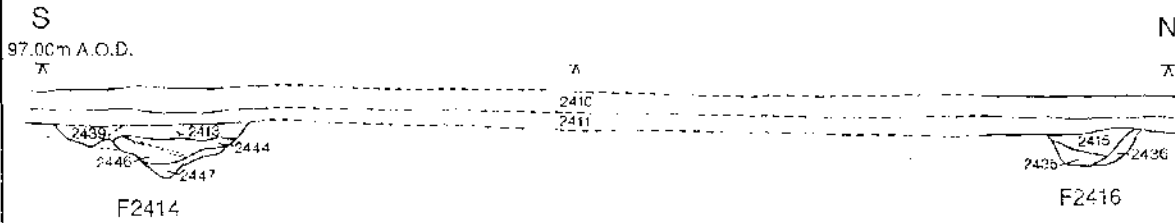
The lowest fills of both ditches had high concentrations of gravel and pebbles, probably representing a fairly rapid initial erosion of the ditch sides. The upper fills were, however, much siltier in content, indicating that once the ditch sides had stabilised, the silting of the ditches was much more gradual. (This same sequence was true for all six ditch segments examined.) A small quantity of coal fragments were recovered from the upper fill (2405) of ditch segment 2046.

BROMFIELD Evaluation 1991

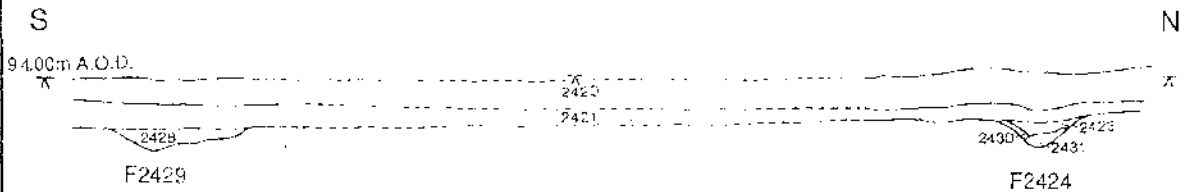
TRENCH A



TRENCH B



TRENCH C



0 5m

Fig. 4

Trench B:

As in Trench A, 0.3m of modern ploughsoil (2410) and a layer of less recently disturbed topsoil (2411) 0.15m deep were removed by machine. The distinction between the two layers was again only seen in section; the presence of a thin lense of gritty soil (2437) probably represents the natural sorting of this soil as a result of worm action.

This buried ploughsoil in turn sealed two linear features, 9m apart and 5m south of the plot of the cropmark ditches.

Again, these two features proved on excavation to be ditches, almost certainly continuations of the features seen in Trench A. As in Trench A, the northern of the two ditches in Trench B (2416) was also u-shaped in profile, and was of a similar size, being 1.25m wide by 0.4m deep (Fig. 4).

The southern of the two ditches in Trench B, 2414, was somewhat wider and deeper, at 2m wide by 0.6m deep, and was a shallow v-shape in profile.

Again the lower fills of both ditch segments consisted of gravelly, pebbly silt, whilst the upper fills were relatively stone free.

The upper fill of the southern ditch was cut by a smaller v-shaped ditch (2440) along its western edge. This may represent a recutting of 2414; however, as this later cut was not apparent in any of the other excavated ditch segments, it is more likely to be a coincidental though otherwise unrelated feature, perhaps a small field boundary ditch.

Trench C:

In Trench C, as elsewhere, beneath the modern ploughsoil (2420) and a less recently disturbed topsoil (2421) two linear features, 2429 and 2424, were revealed, cut into the natural subsoil, and 2.5m to the south of the predicted location of the cropmark ditches. The subsoil here was less gravelly, with a much higher clay content than was the case in Trenches A and B, making initial identification of these features more difficult.

Both the ditch segments in this trench proved on excavation to be shallow; the southern of the two, 2429, was 1.8m wide but only 0.3m deep. The northern ditch, 2424, at this point had a slightly steeper profile, being 1.5m wide but again surviving to a depth of only 0.3m below the surface of the natural subsoil (Fig. 4). The upper fill (2423) of ditch segment 2424 produced a single, abraded sherd of pottery, tentatively identified as a piece of Romano-British coarse ware. Again, as in the ditch segments excavated in the other two trenches, the lower ditch fills had a higher gravel content than the upper fills, though in the case of 2429 the distinction was less marked.

Both the ditches appeared to have been truncated here, probably through ploughing. The greater truncation of the ditch segments here compared with that further west may in part at least be explained by Trench C having been located just below the break of slope of the terrace down to the River Onny, an area where greater erosion - both natural and man-made - might be expected to occur.

A further feature, 2426, 15m to the north of ditch 2424 proved to be a natural feature, perhaps a tree hollow or large animal burrow.

2.5 Discussion

The assemblage of worked flint recovered during the fieldwalking is of Neolithic/Bronze Age character, and is indicative of human activity, if not actual settlement, within the study area during this period. The distribution of flints recovered was, however, nowhere dense enough to indicate the location of a specific occupation site.

The excavation element of the evaluation exercise confirmed that the cropmark feature SA2029 does represent surviving archaeological features in the form of two parallel linear ditches. Both ditches survive reasonably well at a depth of about 0.45m beneath the present day ground surface, buried under the modern ploughsoil. The correlation between the excavated features and the 1:2500 plot of the cropmark ditches from the aerial photographs was well within the predicted margin of error.

The most likely interpretation of these ditches is that they are the side ditches of a trackway heading east towards a fording point of the River Onny which would have been situated at approximately S047767739.

Dating this feature is less certain. The documentary research (above) suggests that the feature predates the medieval period, and the finding of a fragment of Romano-British pottery in the upper fill of one of the ditch segments examined hints at a possible Roman or earlier date for the trackway.

The quantities and general distribution of medieval and post medieval pottery and other artefacts recovered from fieldwalking is suggestive of it having arrived on site largely through the process of manuring. This interpretation would be entirely consistent with the findings of the Documentary Research which indicated that the study area, for the most

part, has been under cultivation since the medieval period. The surface finds are unlikely to be representative of any other form of human activity in the area during these periods.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the evaluation exercise has confirmed the existence of archaeological features and finds within the study area, it is not considered that these are of sufficient archaeological merit as to preclude mineral extraction on the site.

The only specific archaeological site is the cropmark linear trackway SA 2029. The nature of this feature and its apparent relatively low archaeological potential does not justify its preservation in situ. In the event of its partial or total destruction, it does however merit some further archaeological provision. An appropriate option would be to ensure that the initial stripping of topsoil along the line of the cropmark prior to mineral extraction is carried out under close archaeological supervision. Adequate provision should then be made for the cleaning, recording, and sampling of any exposed traces of the cropmark.

Despite no additional archaeological sites being located within the study area by the evaluation exercise, it should not be assumed that these do not exist. The finding of prehistoric flint artifacts during the fieldwalking may hint at some form of prehistoric activity. Moreover, long term archaeological monitoring of the nearby existing Bromfield sand and gravel quarry has resulted in the locating of important archaeological remains that were completely unknown until revealed during topsoil stripping prior to mineral extraction. In view of this it is recommended that within the whole of the study area provision be made for the archaeological inspection of areas immediately after the initial removal of topsoil in order to identify any archaeological features revealed. Allowance should also be made for the adequate archaeological recording of any such features.

H R Hannaford

February 1992

REFERENCES

Fortey, C, (1885), Explorations upon the Old Field near Ludlow, December 1884, TSAS VIII, 445-9

Leach, P J, (1989), Bromfield: The Excavation of Ring Ditch B8, 1989. An Interim Report. BUFAU

Stanford, S C, (1980), The Archaeology of the Welsh Marches, Collins

Stanford, S C, (1982), Excavations at Bromfield, Shropshire, PPS XLVIII

Stanford, S C, (1985), Bromfield Excavations - From Neolithic to Saxon Times, TSAS LXIV 1-7

Sources Consulted:

Local Studies Library, Shrewsbury:

Tithe Map, Bromfield, c.1840

Ordnance Survey 6" and 25" 1st editions

Shropshire County Sites and Monuments Record:

Aerial Photograph Nos.:

SMR-SO4777-B.....NMR-SO4777-4.....UCCAP AHT 13

SMR-SO4777-A.....NMR-SO4777-1.....Baker A

SMR-SO4777-G&H...NMR-SO4777-11&12...CPAT 82/C/24&25

SMR-SO4777-J&K...NMR-SO4777-13&14...CPAT 82/C/30&31

SMR-SO4777-D&E&F.....CPAT 82/1/7&8&9

Shropshire Records Office:

Document Nos.:

SRO 3424 (Map, 1733)

SRO D.P.587 (Map, c.1770)

SRO 1141/Box 90.13 (Sketch Plan, 1820)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer would like to thank the following for their contributions to the work on site: Ed Newton, Sally Sinter, Mark Hughson, and Bob Burroughs of the Field Archaeology Unit of the University of Birmingham, William Fletcher, Allister Heggart, Robin Gough, and Chris Gwyther, volunteers. Also Steve Litherland for undertaking the documentary research.