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Archaeology in Northamptonshire

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COUNTY ARCHAEOLOGY

It has often been observed that the boundaries of an English county are peculiarly inappropriate to serve as the basis of an archaeological study and in this, Northamptonshire is no exception. The modern county is a modified medieval administrative unit that would previously have occupied a space on the periphery of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia. In the late Iron Age and Roman periods, it would have fallen somewhere between the tribal boundaries of the Catuvalauni, the Dobunni and the Coreiltauvi, prior to which, the evidence for landscape division is fragmentary.

The county occupies part of the Jurassic deposits of the Midlands, which have been uplifted in the north west, where a landscape of undulating clay predominates. In contrast, to the south and east, erosion by the river Nene and its various tributaries has exposed a range of clays, sands limestones and marls. In addition there are flat limestone plateaux in the south west and north east. Although the county is not a distinct geographical entity, the variety of soils and topography found in Northamptonshire represents a reasonable sample of the physical geography that makes up the East Midlands (Taylor & Fowler 1980, v-vi)

THE MYTH OF THE MIDLANDS JUNGLE

One of the most influential and misleading orthodoxies of British archaeology in the early twentieth century, was that throughout prehistory, central England was covered in a dense, impenetrable forest. This implied that, with a few notable exceptions, almost the entire centre of the country contained no archaeological remains that pre-dated the Roman period and that widespread clearance of the landscape was the work of Anglo-Saxon settlers. It was an accepted truth for almost a century and even today makes occasional appearances within otherwise well informed texts.

The idea of a densely forested interior for Britain appears to derive from a single reference in Tacitus that states *'Most of the Island is flat and thickly wooded'*, (Ireland 1986,19-20). With no other evidence at their disposal, this was adopted by antiquarian writers of the seventeenth century who at the same time saw a parallel between the likely appearance of prehistoric Britain and contemporary accounts of the newly discovered lands of America.

In 1659, John Aubrey characterised the prehistoric landscape of north Wiltshire as *'a shady dismal wood'* whose inhabitants were *'two or three degrees, I suppose, less savage than the Americans'* (Piggott, 1989, 62). In 1712 John Morton affirmed in his Natural History of Northamptonshire that...

'Before the Romans came amongst us, tis probable that a Great part of the Island, especially the Midland and Northern parts, were overrun with Woods, as we find the countries inhabited by savages usually are, in other parts of the world' (Morton 1712, 549)

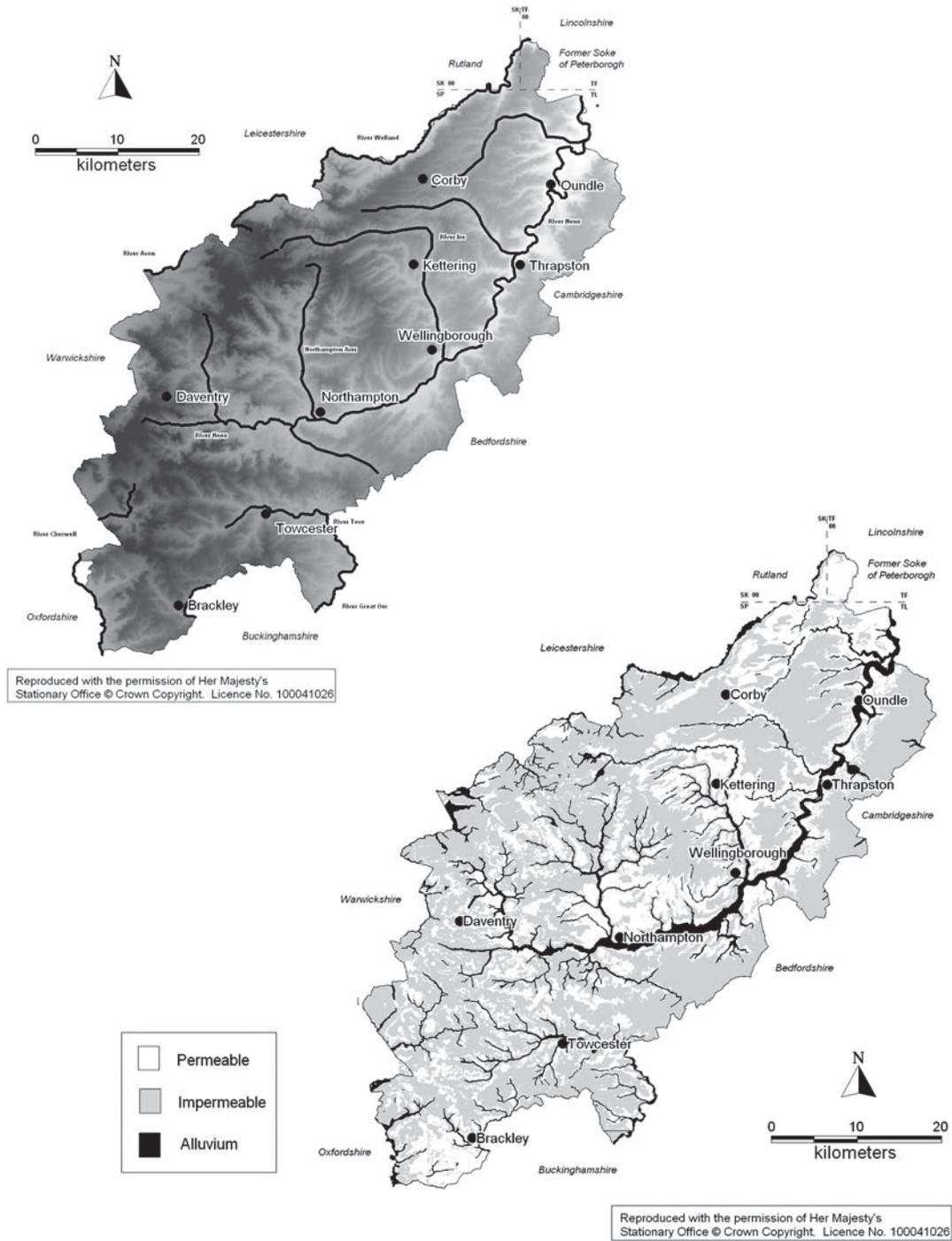
Such speculation continued into the second half of the nineteenth century but by then, the model for prehistoric Britain was no longer the woods of New England but the jungles of equatorial Africa, which by then had become the focus of both exploration and territorial division by the European powers.

In 1914, J.P. Williams wrote a guide to field archaeology in which he characterised the landscape of prehistoric lowland Britain thus...

'Two points must be thoroughly grasped. The impenetrable character of natural forest and the swampy impassable state of the river valleys. There were bare downs with patches of beech wood but nowhere could one escape altogether from the proximity of the forest.... This jungle was so thick that only along tracks made by wild beasts could it be pierced by man. It was the haunt of bear and wolf and savages who hunted one another in its gloomy depths when pastoral man first began to feed his herds on the downs.' (Williams 1914, 5)

The more extreme character of this imagined

MARTIN TINGLE



1.1 Northamptonshire: Topography and simplified geology



1.2 A model for the prehistoric landscape of the Midlands from 'In Darkest Africa' by H. M Stanley

landscape probably derived from the impact of Darwinian theory upon some of the more influential figures in late nineteenth century archaeology. Augustus Pitt Rivers was not alone in believing there to be an almost universal application for the notions of evolution and natural selection (Bowden 1991, 54). Not only animals, but also people, their behaviour, their artefacts and the landscapes that they inhabited, were all seen as being subject to evolutionary development. Written accounts of the interior of Africa seemed to confirm that 'primitive' people with rudimentary technology would inhabit wild and undeveloped places. That Prehistoric Britain had once resembled modern Africa could also have seemed evident from finds of lion, rhino and hyena bones in excavations such as those of Kent's Cavern in the 1860s (Todd 1987, 44).

In 1933, Cyril Fox's description of Early Iron Age Britain retained the impenetrable character of the forests although their physical description

had become more measured. Rioting jungle was replaced by a forest of damp oakwood through which a squirrel could cross the country from end to end without once having to emerge from the canopy. There remains however, an emphasis on the hostility of the woodlands, the dangerous wild animals that lived within them, and the reluctance of early Man to encroach upon them (Fox 1933, 82). In 1943, Jacquetta and Christopher Hawkes described prehistoric East Anglia and the Vale of York as '*Swampy and hard to traverse*' while the Midlands was '*impossible for human settlement and all but impenetrable*'. (Hawkes & Hawkes 1943, 12). The apparent concentration of monuments in the south of England was seen as a genuine reflection of prehistoric population distribution as late as 1949 when it was stated that...

'The British Midlands are, over a large area a virtual blank in the archaeological record, not from imperfect archaeological investigation, but because no effective

penetration of their heavy forest was made until the early historic period (Piggott 1949, 64).

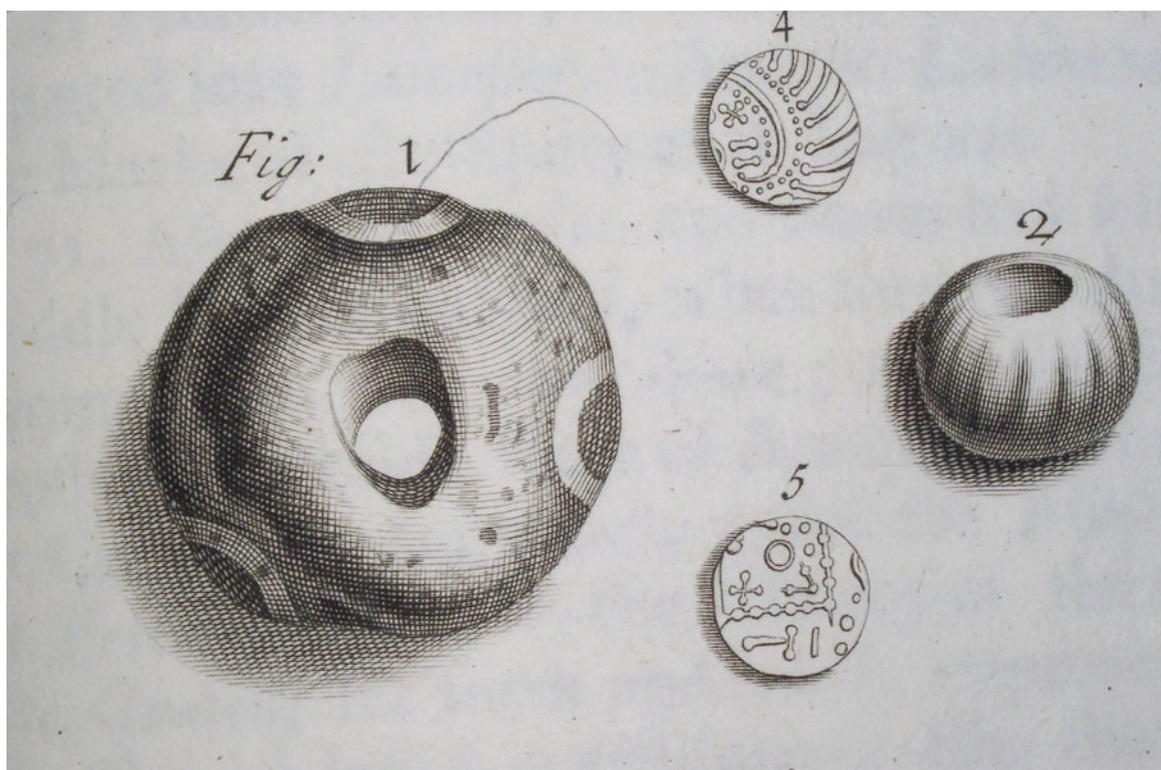
This view of the Midlands continued to appear in the works of influential landscape historians such as W.G. Hoskins but was increasingly at odds with a growing body of evidence derived from aerial survey, which revealed cropmarks in areas that had previously been thought uninhabitable. This was further confirmed as evidence from fieldwalking became systematised and the excavation of pre-historic sites began to include the reconstruction of past landscapes based on empirical data from preserved flora and molluscan remains.

The Midlands could well have been extensively forested throughout prehistory, however it was never credible to view all such woodland as either unproductive, impenetrable or uninhabitable. The prolonged acceptance of the jungles of prehistoric Britain were a significant factor in underestimating the archaeological potential of central England, a trend that has only recently been reversed

THE ANTIQUARIANS OF NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

The earliest record of an archaeological find from the county of Northamptonshire is thought to be the Roman coins from Towcester and Borough Hill which William Camden mentioned in his record of the antiquities of Britain, published in 1586. In a fashion that was to typify Romano-British studies thereafter, he devoted most attention to discovering the modern location of sites that appeared in the texts of classical writers. He concluded erroneously that two settlements mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary, Bannaventa and Tripontium were located at Weedon and Towcester and that hill forts at Borough Hill and Guilsborough were likely to be Roman fortresses constructed in 47 AD by governor Ostorius Scapula (Moore 1998). It was not until the eighteenth century that studies of the county alone were published by John Morton and John Bridges.

In 1712, Morton, the rector of Oxendon, wrote



1.3 Finds illustrated in *The Natural History of Northamptonshire* by John Morton. Reproduced by permission of Northampton Libraries and Museum Service

The Natural History of Northamptonshire, in which a single chapter was given over to the consideration of pre-Norman antiquities. Morton includes a single page of illustrations depicting two beads and a single coin together with the plan of a mosaic. Of the beads, the larger is from 'near Rowel in an old woad ground that has been ploughed' while the smaller (Fig 1.3) was from the woad ground at Dingley. The coin is unprovenanced although Morton compared it to one that appears in William Camden's *Britannia*. It is in fact an Anglo-Saxon *sceat*; a rare find in Northamptonshire (M Cuteis pers comm). He also illustrates a mosaic that had been found in 1699 during the earliest known excavation in the county; that of a Roman villa at Nether Heyford which was uncovered by a local clergyman, the Reverent and Worthy Mr H Gray. Unlike later authors, his explanation of the apparent paucity of prehistoric remains in the county did not attest to the excessive afforestation, but rather the character of the prehistoric peoples themselves:

'Tis scarce to be expected that at this Distance of Time we should meet with any Remains.. of the Older Britains, and particularly of those that inhabited our Inland Parts; the Inland Britains, as we learn from J. Caesar's Account of them, being in a particular manner Rude and Artless' (Morton 1712, 529).

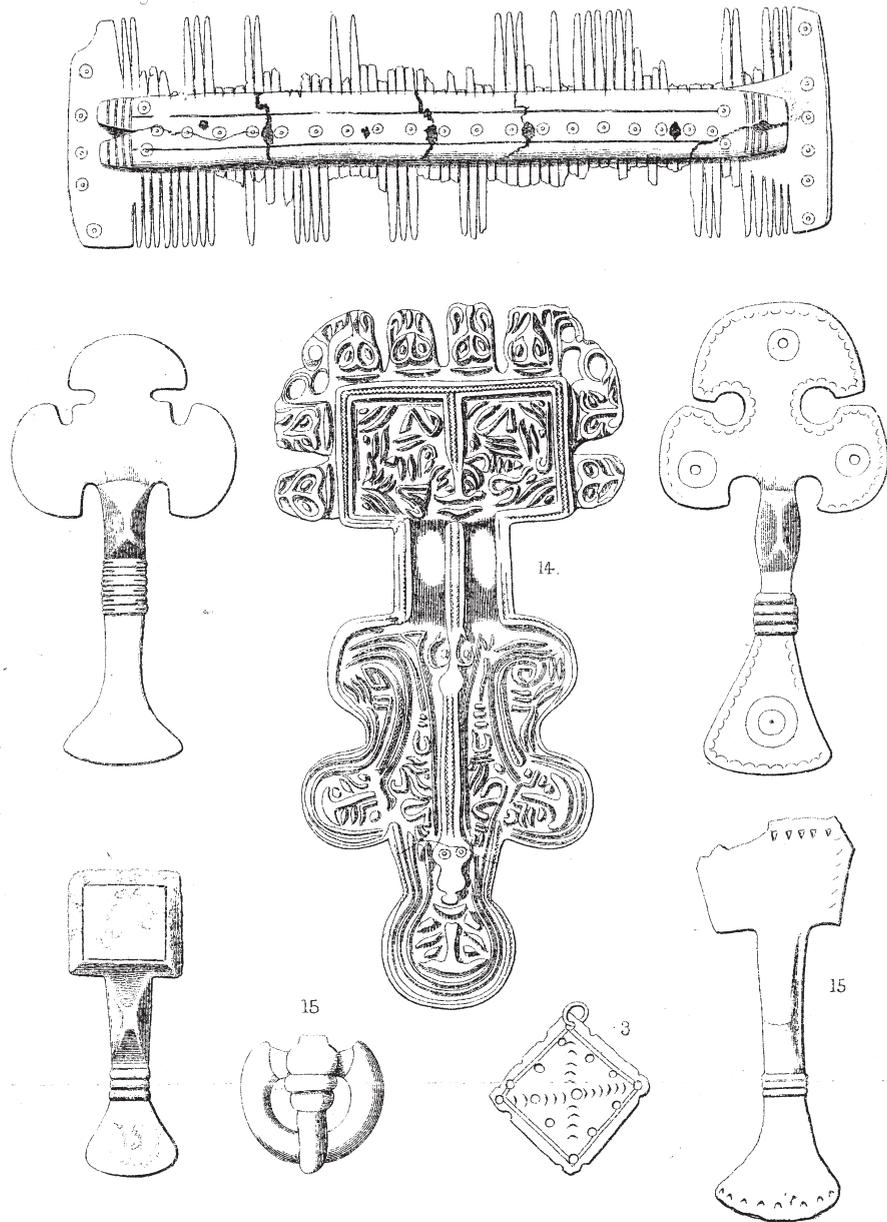
John Bridges remains today a seminal figure in local studies because of his *History and Antiquities of the County of Northamptonshire*, a remarkable achievement considering he neither wrote nor illustrated the work (Brown & Foard 1994, 170). What distinguished Bridges from other county historians was the way in which he set about collecting material for his study, employing an archivist, a team of copyists, a map maker, an engraver and several artists (Brown & Foard 1994, 171). Following his death in 1724, thirty volumes of manuscripts passed to his brother William who appointed editors to produce a parish by parish account of the county, that finally appeared in 1791. Although there are some archaeological observations particularly in relation to the earthworks of deserted medieval villages and a series of maps showing archaeological features that have subsequently disappeared, most of the published text is concerned with architectural descriptions of churches and the lineage of various landed families. This may result from the particular interests of Bridges editors since in his original notebooks there are sometimes more detailed

records of archaeological remains than appears in the text of the *History*. At Borough Hill, the Roman barrow group is mentioned in the *History*, while in the relevant notebook, there is a sketch plan with measurements of their dimensions and spacing (Brown & Foard 1994, 178).

In 1815, George Baker proposed a series of volumes with the same title as Bridges work, to rectify, as he claimed, some of the latter's deficiencies regarding family pedigrees and the description of country houses (Brown & Foard 1994, 173). Only five volumes were published covering the western half of the county when ill health and financial problems forced the abandonment of further work and in 1842 his collection of books, prints and antiquities was sold to a fellow antiquarian, Sir Henry Dryden of Cannons Ashby. Dryden spent much of his life in antiquarian studies including the excavation of a pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Marston St Lawrence (Fig 1.4). A contemporary of Dryden, but living at the opposite end of the county was Edmund Artis, the house steward of Earl Fitzwilliam at Milton. Between 1821 and 1827 he conducted extensive excavations of the Roman town at Castor which he published in a volume of plates entitled *The Durobrivae of Antoninus*.

Sir Henry Dryden helped to found the Architectural Society of the Archdeaconry of Northampton in 1844 and was active on the committee, which on 6 August 1866 brought about the opening of Northampton Museum (Moore 1998). The Museum's first honorary curators of antiquities were Dryden and Samuel Sharp, an antiquarian and collector who is perhaps best remembered for his reports on Northampton Castle and of the Roman finds from Duston (Sharp 1871, 1882). They assembled a large and varied display, mostly of objects on loan from their own collections or from those of gentlemen sympathetic to their cause. However within a few years, lacking an adequate budget or full time staff, the museum began to lose its loaned display items which were replaced by assorted curiosities such as an unusually shaped carrot, a double coconut, a piece of the Rock of Gibraltar and a hot cross bun (Moore 1998).

By 1884 the Museum had moved into larger premises on Guildhall Road and for the first time a Keeper was appointed in the person of Thomas George who held the post until his death in 1920. By this time an impressive display of Iron Age material from Hunsbury, Romano-British finds from



Comb, Fibulae, etc. found at Marston, S^t Lawrence, Northamptonshire.

Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London, 1894.

J. Burrow.

1.4 Finds from Dryden's excavation of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Marston St Lawrence reproduced from Archaeologia

Irchester and Duston and grave goods from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries formed the nucleus of the modern archaeological collection (Moore 1998).

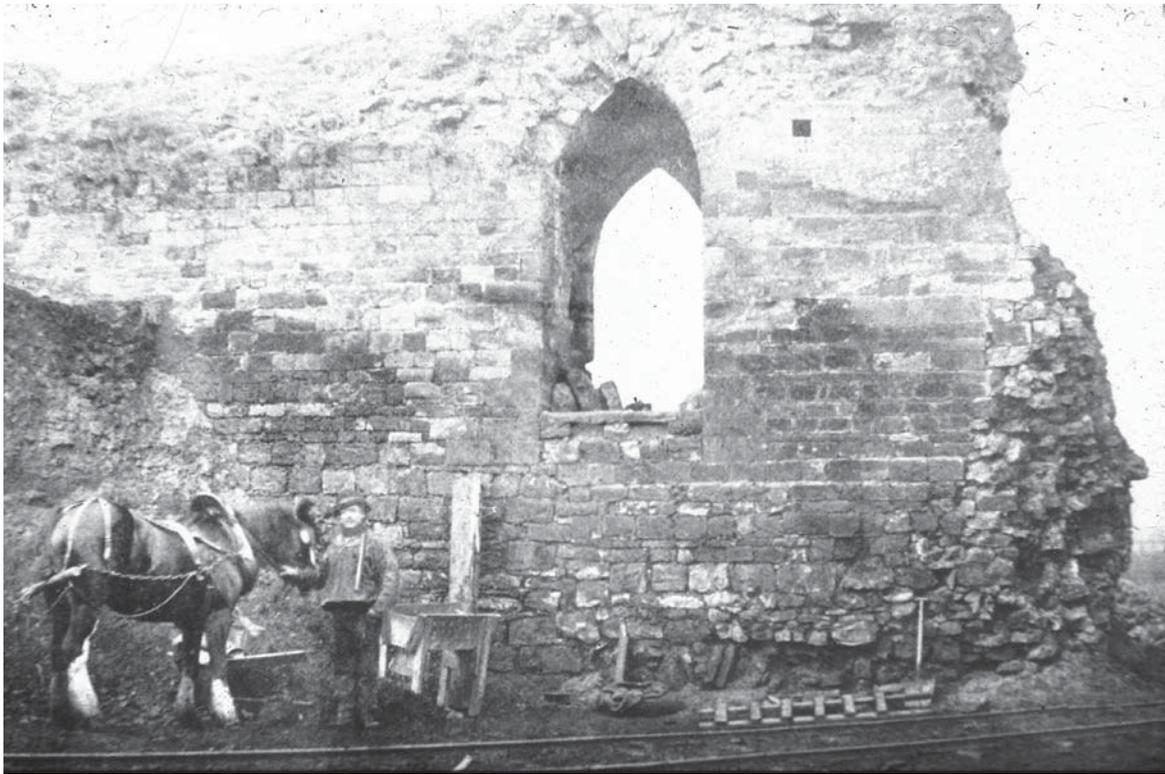
THE GROWTH OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The formation of the archaeological record can be seen as a process in which accumulations of artefacts are at first preserved from the natural processes of decay and then, after an indeterminate passage of time, released either by natural erosion or the effects of human agency, whereupon some of these are recognised and reported to the wider archaeological community. For much of the country, including Northamptonshire, the period following the industrial revolution saw an unprecedented exposure of archaeological remains. Intensification of arable agriculture together with the limited introduction of mechanised ploughing revealed some new sites but more important factors were the

expansion of towns, the construction of roads and railways, and the increased extraction of minerals for industry and construction. In the latter case the commercial exploitation of ironstone and latterly gravel has produced some of the most spectacular finds from within the county and probably destroyed many more.

One of the earliest attempts to record the threatened archaeology of Northamptonshire came about in 1879 when work began to enlarge Northampton's railway station, thus removing most of the remains of Northampton Castle. This prompted the Diocesan Architectural Society to plan and photograph the site as well as produce section drawing of areas with preserved stratigraphy (Law 1880). In addition there was a study made of the artefacts that were revealed, illustrating any complete vessels and listing finds of metalwork, coins, bone and even the masons marks on architectural fragments (Sharp 1882).

It has been estimated that during 50 years of



1.5 Part of Northampton Castle before its demolition. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Environment Team
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ironstone quarrying in the county, approximately 10 Early Bronze Age burials, 15 Roman villas or farms, 20 pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, as well as major multi-period sites at Duston, Desborough and Kings Sutton, and a Roman settlement at Kettering were exposed, although virtually no record of them survives (Moore 1998). The number and types of sites that may have been destroyed without any recognition can only be guessed at. Occasionally a particularly striking object such as the Desborough Mirror (see Colour Plate 1) would be brought to public attention but there was rarely any attempt to record the context of such finds. One partial exception to this occurred during the period between 1880 and 1886 when ironstone quarrying began within the hill fort at Hunsbury. An attempt was made to have the hillfort protected under the new Ancient Monuments Act of 1882, but this failed because of the likely cost of compensating the landowner and therefore quarrying proceeded (Ryland, Adkins & Serjeantson 1902). Removal of the topsoil revealed as many as 300 pits measuring between 5 and 10 feet (1.5-3 metres) in diameter and up 7 feet (1.8 metres) in depth (Dryden 1885, 55). As Thomas George observed:

'They were full of black mould and in them were found the numerous artefacts that now comprise one of the finest collections, I believe, of Pre-historic antiquities in England' (George 1887, 339).

An attempt was made by the chairman of the quarry company to recover as much of the material as possible and an illustrated catalogue of the finds was published (Dryden, 1885). This included a vast array of bronze brooches, pottery, glass, iron weapons and tools as well as approximately 150 querns, all of which were deposited in Northampton Museum (Fig 1.6).

Sadly, the belated attempts to record the finds from Hunsbury proved to be an exception rather than the rule. In the mid 1920s, Ironstone quarrying between Brixworth and Scaldwell revealed large numbers of Roman pottery kilns together with quantities of allegedly medieval jewellery and coins. These were apparently bought up by a private collector from London and thus no record of them survives beyond a story in the local newspaper (Moore 1998).

DEVELOPING ARCHAEOLOGY

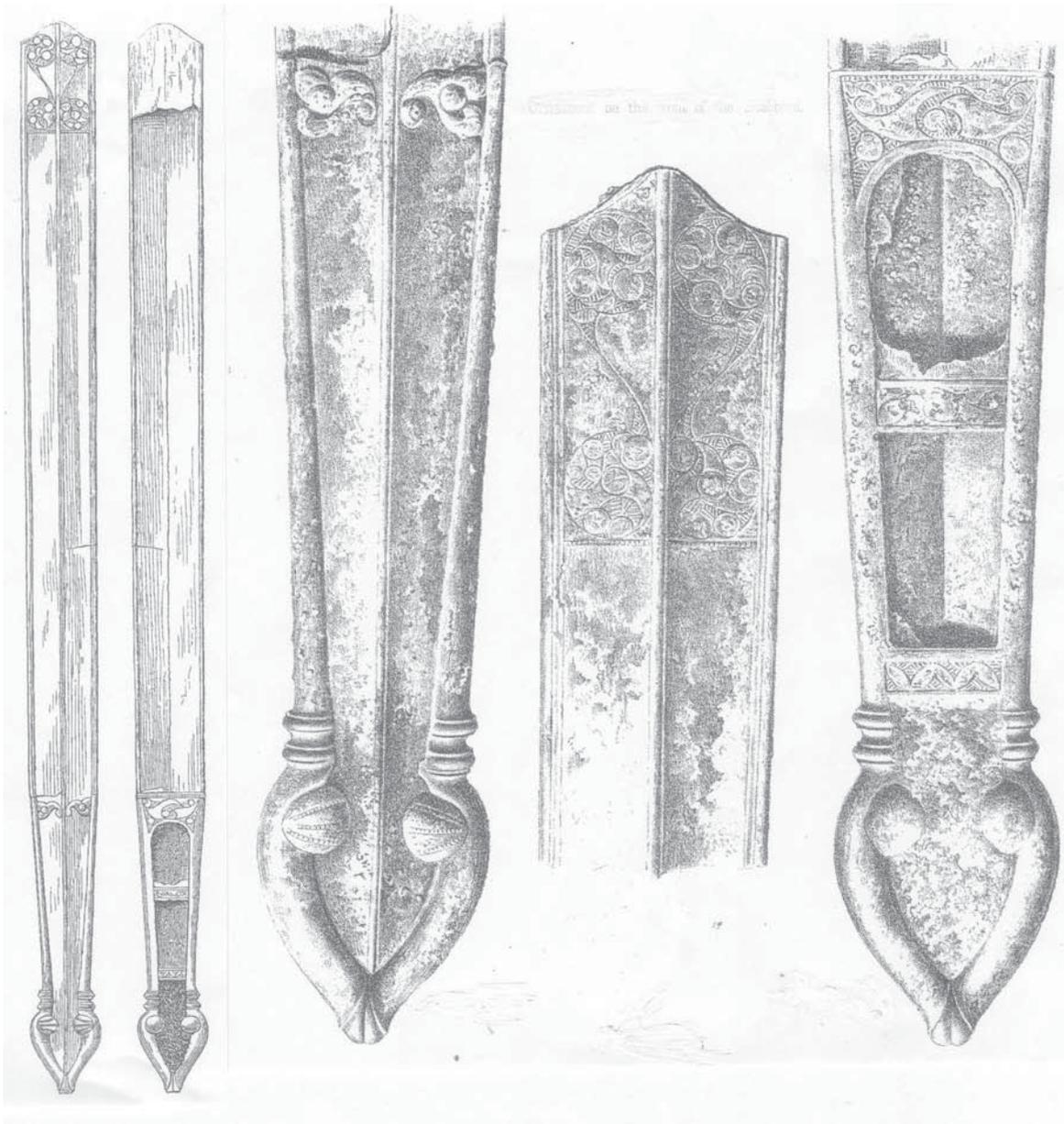
In 1942, professional archaeology came to Northamptonshire in the form of W.F. Grimes, excavating

a small Iron Age site at Draughton for the Ministry of Works and R. J. C. Atkinson conducting the rescue excavation of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery in Nassington (Moore 1998). Other large scale excavations included John Alexander's work at Northampton Castle between 1961 and 1964 and D.J. Smith's investigation of a villa, threatened by ironstone quarrying at Great Weldon, which took place over 26 weeks between 1953 and 1956 (Smith, Hird & Dix 1988-9). Atkinson returned in 1952 to cut a section through the rampart of the Hunsbury hill fort which he characteristically failed to publish, although the drawings from this excavation eventually appeared in print over forty year later through the work of Dennis Jackson (Jackson 1993/4, 11).

Increasing urban development and mineral extraction during the late 1960s and early 1970s led to the appointment of professional archaeologists by the Ministry of Works, the Northampton Development Corporation and the County Council. In the case of the former, this led to the remarkable career of Dennis Jackson, who in 1967 gave up his job as a brickwork contractor and spent the next thirty years excavating and publishing some of the most important sites in the county (Jackson 1998/9). The posts within the Development Corporation and the County Council formed the nucleus around which permanent teams of archaeologists were established. One major excavation from this period was that of the causewayed enclosure at Briar Hill. In 1972, air photography revealed a substantial segmented enclosure, made up of two concentric circuits covering approximately three hectares, in an area that had been designated for housing development (Bamford 1985, 2). The subsequent excavation took four years to complete during which period 150 weeks were spent on site. At the time, Briar Hill was the first causewayed enclosure north of the Thames valley to be fully excavated (Bamford 1985, 2).

Although the Soke of Peterborough was formally detached from Northamptonshire by the 1974 re-organisation of county boundaries, the archaeological links between the two continued. The Nene Valley Research Committee conducted excavations in both areas, notably at Ashton near Oundle, and distributed the first report of the nationally important excavation at Fengate near Peterborough (Pryor 1974).

The 1960s and 1970s were also a period of growth for amateur archaeology within the county. Throughout the nineteenth century, archaeology had been discussed and published within groups such



1.6 An Iron Age Scabbard recovered during Ironstone quarrying at the Hunsbury Hillfort reproduced from Archaeologia

as The Architectural Society of the Archdeaconry of Northampton and the Northamptonshire Natural History Society, however even within these, it was clearly a minority interest. In 1962 however, Richard

Hollowell, an amateur field archaeologist and aerial photographer, set up the Upper Nene Archaeological Society (Brown 1998/9). UNAS continues today as a thriving organisation based around the long-term



1.7 The Piddington Proto-Villa Excavation. Photo by Roy Friendship-Taylor

excavation of a Roman villa at Piddington (Friendship-Taylor & Friendship-Taylor 1997).

Other local archaeological societies appeared at Wellingborough (1964), Oundle (1970) and Towcester (1972) together with, in 1965, the Northamptonshire Federation of Archaeological Societies (Moore 1998). The Federation published seven editions of its Bulletin containing notes of recent archaeological discoveries and a cumulative bibliography for the county. The Bulletin for 1971 was given over entirely to a summary of the fieldwork and air photographs of Richard Hollowell, while in 1973 it changed its title to Northamptonshire Archaeology and published a full excavation report by Dennis Jackson. In 1974 the Federation became known as the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society and its journal Northamptonshire Archaeology adopted the format that it retains to the present day.

LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY

From the 1960s onwards, aerial surveying revolutionised perceptions of the archaeological record of Britain, particularly in the Midlands. A combination of RAF cartographical surveys, the work of archaeological surveys based in Cambridge and the remarkable contribution of individuals such as Jim Pickering and Dick Hollowell revealed a profusion of cropmarks in areas thought previously to be archaeological voids. This work has continued to the present day, expanding the database of the County Sites and Monuments Record.

Although some earthwork sites were discovered in this way and many known sites were better understood from an elevated perspective, aerial survey was predominantly directed at arable landscapes. The specific soil conditions that interact

with archaeological remains to produce cropmarks, parchmarks or soilmarks are not evenly distributed throughout the county. By their very nature cropmarks and soilmarks are only seen in arable land, which it has been estimated, makes up only about 30% of the total area of the county (Taylor & Fowler 1980, v). Even if the amount of arable land has increased since this estimate was made, the potential for aerial survey may actually have declined. Lately there has been an increasing trend away from the cultivation of cereals to oil seed plants whose growth characteristics do not so readily facilitate the production of cropmarks.

The gravel terraces and the adjacent limestone soils of the Nene valley and its associated tributaries are both suitably for arable agriculture and tend, by virtue of their free draining character to produce most of the known crop mark sites in the county. Heavier clay soils, have in the past been predominantly pasture, and even when ploughed, do not allow the free passage of soil moisture that encourages cropmark formation. It is possible for archaeological sites appear in grassland either as very slight earthworks or as parchmarks. The former can be obliterated when medieval cultivation resulted in the creation of extensive (if now declining) areas of ridge and furrow while the latter is dependant on the complex localised interaction of soil, vegetation and weather conditions.

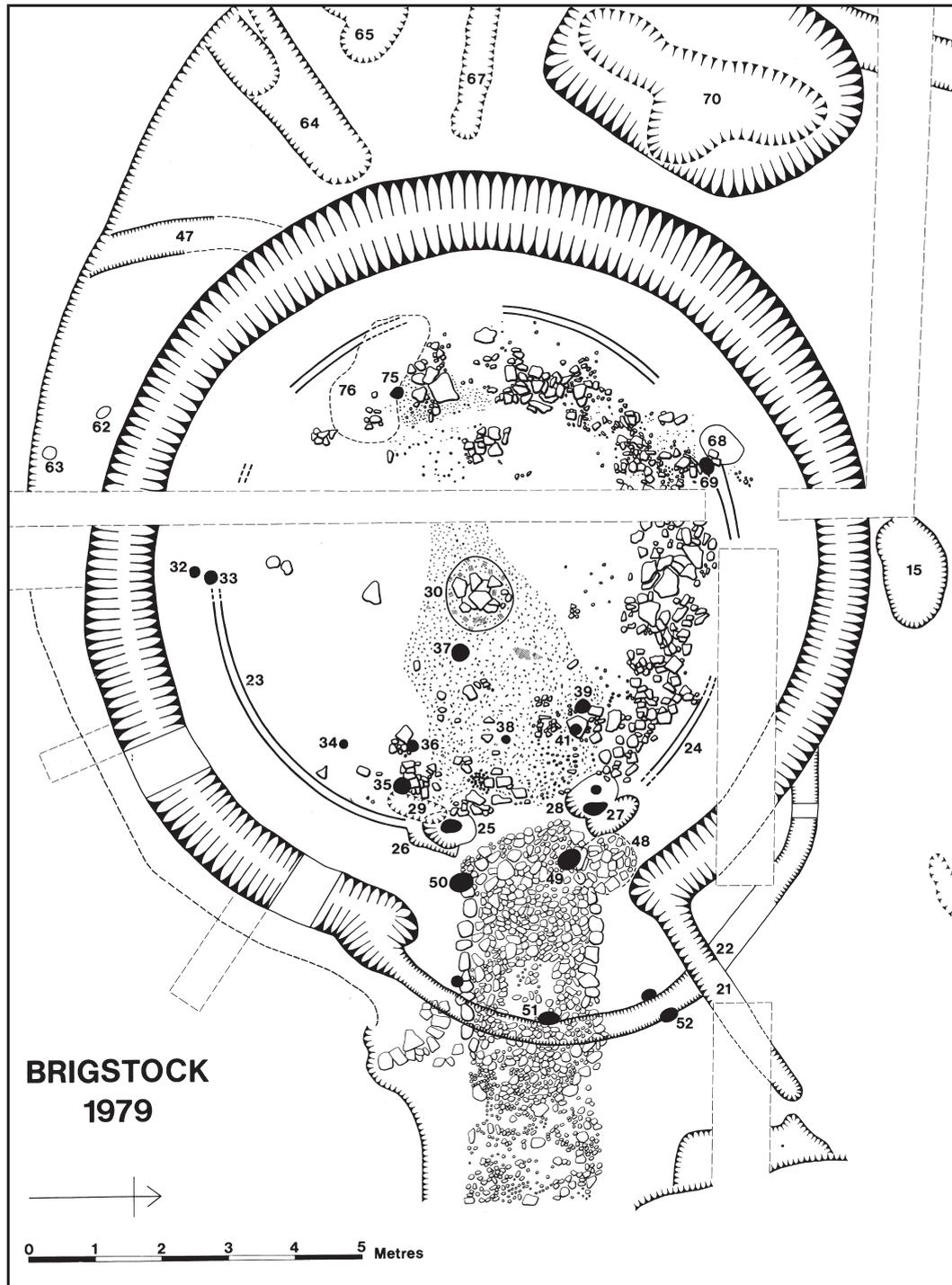
Areas of surviving medieval formal woodland are also obviously devoid of cropmarks but sometimes, by virtue of never having been ploughed, they have preserved prehistoric sites in a remarkable condition. One of the most striking examples of this was at Brigstock, where the creation of a medieval deer park excluded arable agriculture and even after disparking, the area became permanent pasture with only limited ploughing in recent times (Foster 1998-9, 133). As a result, when a circular earthwork within the park was excavated, it revealed an exceptionally well preserved late Iron Age round house (see Fig 1.8) with numerous internal features which were approached through an upstanding bank and ditch by a stone-surfaced causeway (Jackson 1983, 12).

Between 1985 and 1993 the most ambitious and far reaching multi-period landscape surveys undertaken to date was initiated in Northamptonshire, attempting to link systematic field survey over large areas with extensive excavations, documentary research and environmental studies. The Raunds Area Survey covered an area of 40 square kilometres made up

of the parishes of Raunds (including the medieval parish of Stanwick), Ringstead, Hargrave with parts of Irthlingborough, Denford and Shelton. It examined a transect of the Nene Valley from the flood plain, through the gravel terraces and onto the boulder clay plateau, in an area that was both of great archaeological potential and under considerable threat from gravel extraction, road building and the construction of houses.

Initially the main focus for prehistoric investigation was to be at Irthlingborough where the river Nene divides into two channels to form a 70 hectare 'island'. Here there was both the potential for waterlogged environmental deposits and a group of cropmark ring ditches as well as upstanding round barrows protruding through the alluvium. All but one of these barrows were excavated together with a group of hitherto unknown monuments that were revealed during the excavation of a deserted Saxon and medieval hamlet at West Cotton. A range of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments were located including a Long Mound and a Long Enclosure, both over 100 metres in length and orientated on a single point. Excavations of later sites within the survey area also revealed unexpected prehistoric features such as the Neolithic causewayed ring ditch, that was found during the excavation of the Redlands Farm villa.

The late Iron Age and Roman periods were to be investigated through the excavation of an entire nucleated rural settlement at Stanwick. The settlement at Stanwick covered approximately 10 hectares and included not only a villa but also a group of substantial and separate stone buildings laid out in a regular fashion along a series of radiating trackways. In its final phase (constructed unusually late in the fourth century) the Stanwick villa had a symmetrical frontage of corridor and wing rooms, a new bath suite, mosaic floors and a room with under floor heating. The hypocaust channels were constructed of re-used stone which included funerary monuments featuring scenes from classical mythology. Two kilometres south west of Stanwick, the Redlands Farm villa was found to have originated from a second century mill. The building developed with wing rooms, mosaic floors and under floor heating, however by the later fourth century it was partially demolished. This led to the remarkable discovery that an entire rear gable wall of one of the wings had collapsed outwards and was almost completely intact (Crosby pers comm).



1.8 A remarkably well preserved Iron Age roundhouse surviving within a medieval deer park at Brigstock. Plan by Dennis Jackson



1.9 The late Saxon timber ranges at West Cotton, Raunds, with the mill leat channel in the foreground.
Reproduced by permission of the Northamptonshire Archaeology © Northamptonshire County Council

The excavations at Stanwick produced a vast amount of material, most of which is Romano-British in date. There are 2.8 tonnes of pottery and over 200 boxes of animal bone as well as 1600 soil samples for environmental analysis. The 11,000 individually recorded finds included over 3500 Roman coins and 1000 pieces of personal adornment (e.g. brooches, bracelets and hairpins). The excavation records include over 2000 A1 size sheets of site plans and more than 2700 photographs (V. Crosby pers comm).

The core of the project was an examination of the transition of settlement in the late Roman period into the Anglo-Saxon and then medieval period. At North Raunds, three separate excavations at Furnells Manor, Langham Road and Burystead examined the growth of the manor and its immediate hinterland, while at West Cotton a late Saxon Manor and medieval tenements were investigated. In addition to large scale area excavation, a 6 year programme of fieldwalking was planned that would eventually be the largest and most intensive systematic fieldwalking survey in Britain. It is a

matter of some regret that although the fieldwork for the Raunds project is finished and some of the final reports, notably that of the fieldwalking, were completed several years ago, to date (spring 2004) only the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon church and churchyard at Raunds Furnells has actually been published, although other volumes are expected shortly (Boddington 1996).

In recent years there has been an expansion both in the number of excavations within the county and the number of organisations that have been carrying them out. The Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit has continued to conduct major excavations of medieval Northampton, which they have published in an exemplary manner. Amongst many notable discoveries, it has recently located the most complete sequence of the town's defences that include a revetted bank and substantial ditch dating from the early 10th century (Chapman 1998-9, 25). The unit has also acquired an international reputation for Garden Archaeology following its restoration of part of the Gardens at Hampton Court. In addition, they have made notable discoveries such as that

MARTIN TINGLE

of the first Roman vineyard in England, closely followed by an Anglo-Saxon royal burial in which there were a range of fine grave goods including, only the fourth helmet to have been found in this country (Meadows 1996/7). Today, there is without

doubt more archaeological work being carried out, as a result of recent planning legislation, than at any time previously. This has begun to produce a far more balanced picture of Northamptonshire's past, and illustrates its rich potential for future research.