

Clay Lane 1980: Interim Report

An Iron Age and Roman Rural Settlement at Clay Lane, Earls Barton

by D WINDELL

SUMMARY

Approximately two-thirds of a complex of cropmarks of an Iron Age and Roman rural settlement, covering 18 ha, at Clay Lane, Earls Barton was recorded between 1978 and 1980, in advance of road construction and gravel extraction. The results obtained from excavation and salvage recording in 1980 are outlined in advance of final publication, providing evidence for a large late Iron Age enclosure and surrounding occupation together with a small Romano-British farmstead and field system. The area was occupied from the beginning of the late pre-Belgic Iron Age, if not earlier, until the 3rd century AD and possibly beyond. During this time the settlement drifted southwards with changes in its layout being determined, at least in part, by previous occupation and existing boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

An extensive cropmark site at Clay Lane, Earls Barton (NGR SP 845625) had been recognised for some years and the RCHM selected it as one of the sites in Northamptonshire most worthy of preservation (RCHM 1979). In 1978 it was decided to construct the A45 Northampton-Wellingborough New Road along a route which transected the site. Consequently, a rescue excavation was carried out, in 1978-9, under the direction of Mr A Johnson when effort was concentrated on the fullest recording of the area threatened by the road in the belief that the cropmarks to either side would be left undisturbed. However, in October 1979, permission was granted for the extraction of gravel from the adjacent fields which included the majority of the remainder of the site. A rescue excavation was conducted over seven months of 1980 to sample the 12 ha under threat.

The problems of achieving a complete synthesis of all the material from this large and diverse site

excavated in two seasons under different direction and using different post-excitation methods have inevitably led to delays in the production of the final report. To make the excavated information from 1980 available as quickly as possible it has been decided to publish this interim report as a guide to the detailed structural evidence and finds reports (Level III) which are available upon application either in printed form from Northampton County Council Archaeology Unit, County Hall, Northampton or as microfiche copy from NMR, Fortress House, Savile Row, London. It is hoped that the Level III publication will serve to fill the period until final publication of the entire site area is possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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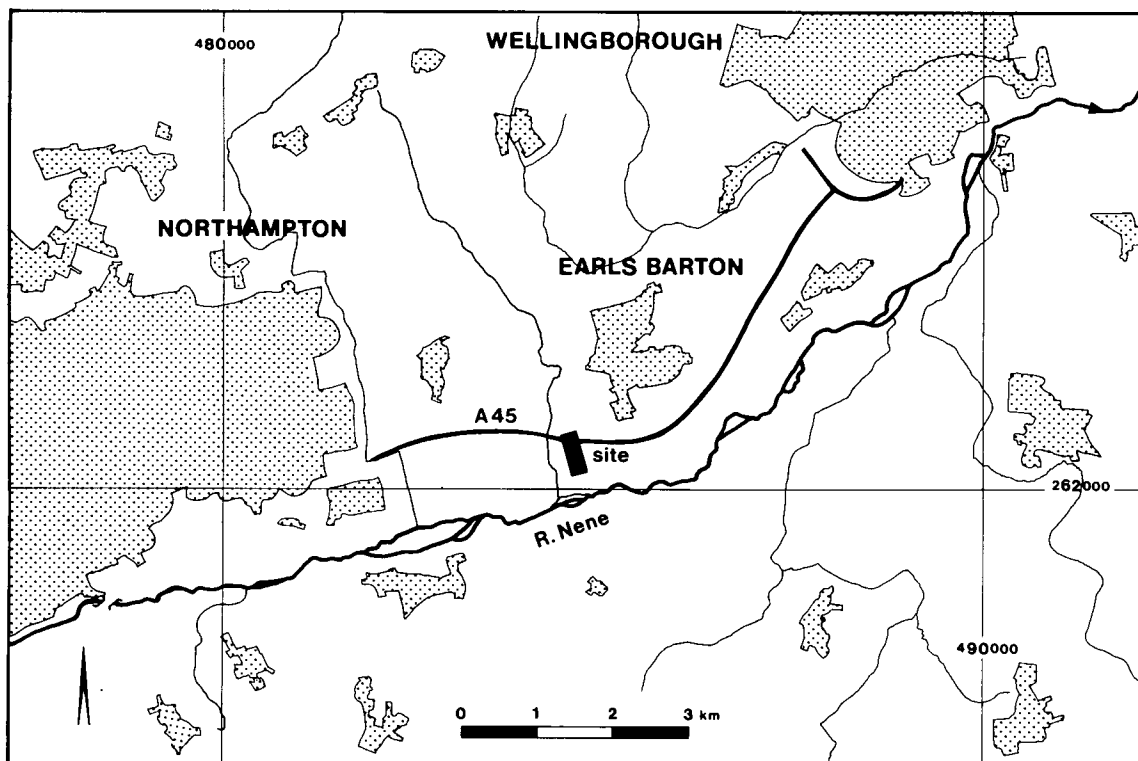


Fig 1: Clay Lane, Earls Barton: site location

POSITION OF THE SITE AND ITS CONTEXT

The site was situated *c* 2km south-west of the village of Earls Barton and *c* 0.5 km north of the present canalised course of the River Nene (FIG 1). It lay between 50m and 52m OD on the gravel terrace of the river. Over the majority of the area the gravel formed the 'natural' but in certain areas it was capped by buff alluvial clays of post-glacial date (*cf* Castleden 1976).

The site was recognised from aerial photographs (in NMR and CUAP AFX 6-9, 2E 24-8) and fieldwalking had yielded a range of Iron Age and Romano-British material and flint scatters. In 1966, a gas-pipeline was cut through the eastern portion of the site revealing Iron Age ditches and pits (BNFAS 2, 9; 6, 8-9), but no major excavation had taken place prior to 1978-79.

Cropmarks extended over an area of 18 ha (44 acres) and provided a pattern of overlapping systems, comprising a number of sub-rectangular

and irregular enclosures which occupied the northern part of the site with a more regular arrangement of rectilinear ditches to the south (FIG 2). A driveway passed between some of the enclosures and followed the line of a pit alignment which extended into a separate series of cropmarks to the east. Additional cropmarks have been noted to the west where fieldwalking has produced material of Roman date. The excavated areas may therefore be viewed as part of a larger pattern reflecting extensive and continuous use of the gravel terrace through the Iron Age and Roman periods.

STRATEGY AND METHODS

- The objectives of the 1980 excavations were
- i) to obtain a picture of the site's development, with particular regard to settlement drift
 - ii) to establish how patterns of boundaries eg pit alignments and driveways had affected the planning and lay-out of later phases

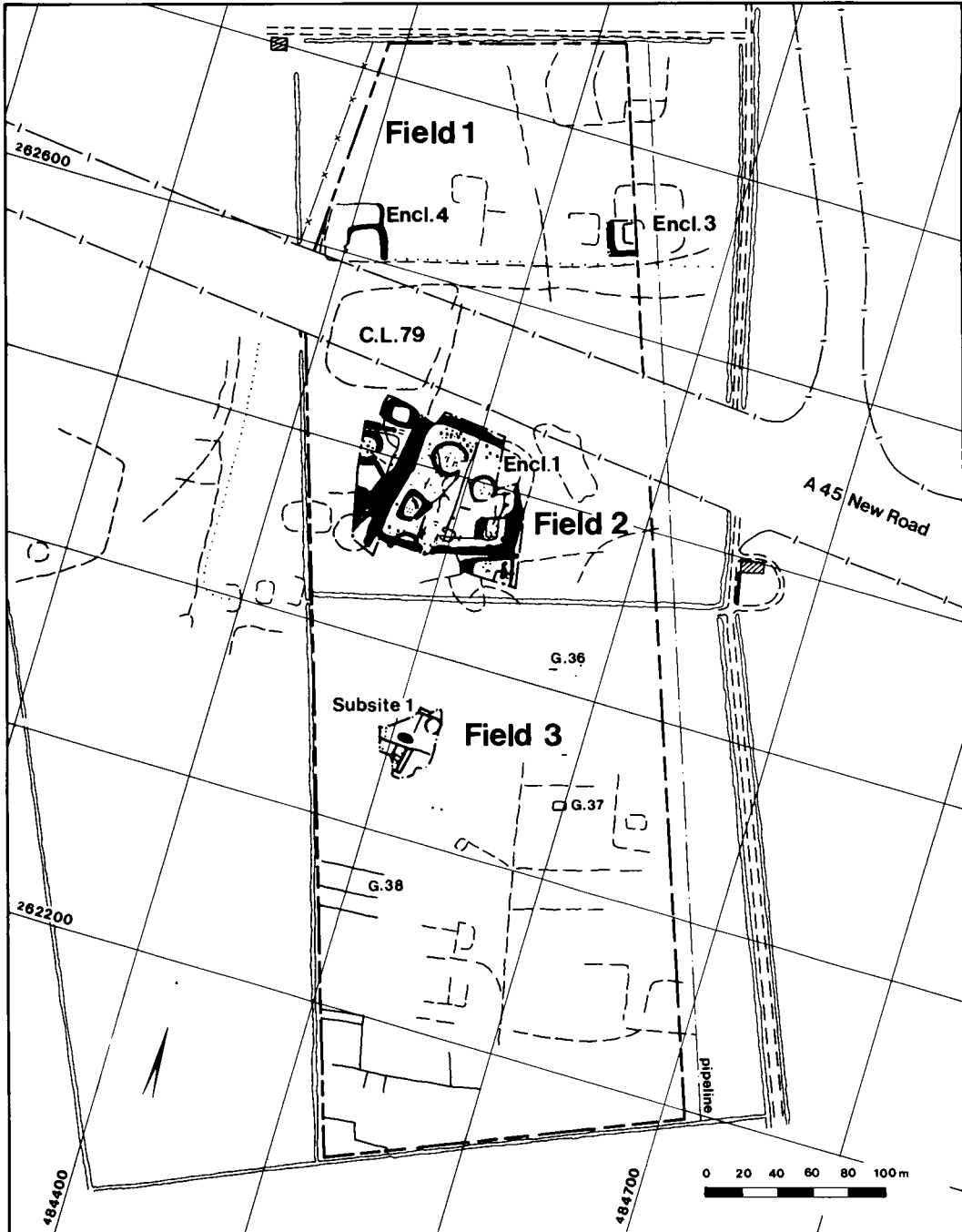


Fig 2: Clay Lane: excavated areas and cropmarks

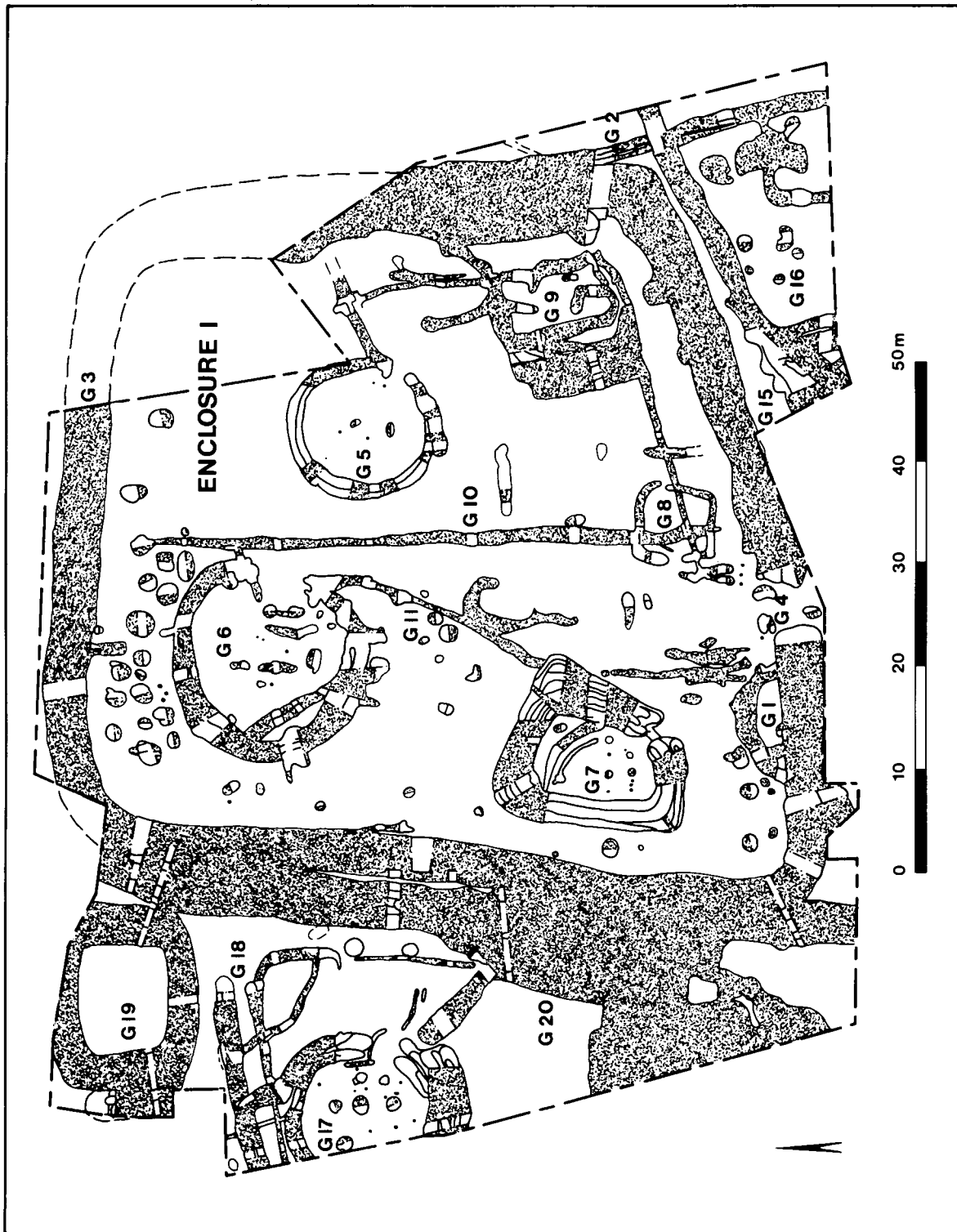


Fig 3: Clay Lane: Field 2, Iron Age features

- iii) to identify the type and form of occupation at different periods
- iv) to form an archival record of the site for future research.

The strategy adopted was to sample certain occupied areas identified from the cropmarks (Enclosures 1, 3 and 4 and Sub-site 1) and to follow up with watching brief and salvage to fill the gaps. A hierarchy of samples was envisaged, from the exhaustive and complete excavation of a single enclosure in 1979, through sample excavation of large areas to watching brief encompassing the whole threatened area in 1980. A major problem proved to be the difficulty of obtaining information from the watching brief during the gravel extraction. In a number of cases features apparent from cropmarks could not be located on the ground. Thus the gaps were often filled incompletely.

ORGANISATION OF THE MATERIAL

On site all recording was carried out in terms of stratigraphic units or contexts, though some of these were defined, perforce, somewhat arbitrarily. The complete record of individual contexts has been deposited as microfiche with NMR and NCC Archaeology Unit (reference: *RCHM Northamptonshire CC Archaeology Unit. Clay Lane 1980. Level II. 65 cards*).

Within the Level III report the excavated evidence has been divided into two areas, Fields 1 and 2, and Field 3, as this was a convenient split reflecting the division between Iron Age and Romano-British occupation and the subsoil geologies of the site. The individual contexts have been grouped for discussion and the groups defined as far as possible in terms of structures. Groups 1 to 21 were found within Field 2 and with Groups 22 to 24 from Field 1 are discussed under the Iron Age occupation. Groups 25 to 38 within Field 3 are discussed under the Romano-British occupation. In Fields 1 and 2 separate enclosed areas have been designated Enclosures 1-4 to aid discussion.

This interim report follows the Level III usage and organisation. Reference from the groups discussed to the original contexts recorded on site may be made through the detailed discussion and tabulations in the Level III record (*Clay Lane 1980, Level III: the structural evidence*,

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IRON AGE OCCUPATION

Aerial photography revealed cropmarks over much of Fields 1 and 2. One main area of c 0.75 ha (1.85 acres) was excavated which included the majority of cropmarks in Field 2. This centred on Enclosure 1 and surrounding areas to the south and west. In Field 1 a smaller area including parts of Enclosures 3 and 4 was excavated and the rest was left to watching-brief. Throughout the area c0.3m of topsoil and subsoil was removed by box-scraper to reveal the gravel surface. This inevitably led to some loss but it was believed that more information bearing on the objectives could be gathered by excavation of a larger area from that level. On the gravel surface the Iron Age occupation, in common with many other gravel terrace sites, was represented as a palimpsest of features with no true vertical stratigraphy joining them.

The major element revealed was Enclosure 1, attributed to the late pre-Belgic and Belgic Iron Age. Other elements could only be assigned to pre- or post-Enclosure 1. Considerable effort was applied to the definition of chronologically meaningful groups within the mass of late pre-Belgic pottery but only the divisions middle, late pre-Belgic and Belgic Iron Age were apparent. It was unclear to what extent the 'pre-Belgic' material was in fact earlier in date than the Belgic material rather than non-Belgic in style, as it seems probable that pre-Belgic traditions continued alongside the innovative Belgic styles.

EARLY FEATURES, PRE-ENCLOSURE 1

Within both Fields 1 and 2 some middle Iron Age types of pottery were recovered but always as residual material in later features. This may indicate some level of middle Iron Age occupation but presumably outside the closely excavated areas. The pre-Enclosure 1 features all appear to be of late pre-Belgic Iron Age date.

In Field 2 two series of boundary ditches and gullies (Groups 2 and 20) were found, aligned north-south and delimiting an area c 75m wide. Both had been open gullies and had been considerably recut. Group 20 had a prolonged period of use and had formed a major north-south division

of the whole site, traceable in cropmark for c150m. Group 2 consisted of minor gullies forming a division traceable for c30m but possibly associated with cropmarks extending over 200m. Enclosure 1 had been laid out later within these boundaries and following their alignments. Also predating Enclosure 1 in Field 2 was a single round-house (Group 1). This was represented by an arc of penannular gully and a single pit or posthole, the remainder having been cut away by the enclosure.

The material excavated in Field 1 was also of late pre-Belgic date and thought to have predated Enclosure 1. It may be suggested that Enclosure 3 provided the earliest features. A single large ditch (Group 22) enclosed an area of c40m x 40m, part of which was excavated. Within the enclosure a gully delimiting an area of c10m x 10m (Group 23) may have represented a stock pen or a structure of which no other evidence survived. The cropmarks suggested that Enclosure 3 lay north of a parallel-ditched feature and a pit alignment which, it was thought, would provide evidence of the early layout of the site. Unfortunately, after considerable and repeated effort, these features could not be located on the ground. The reason for this remains in doubt though a combination of factors such as the gravel extraction method, shallowness of the features, and the indeterminate nature of their fills seems probable.

In the west of Field 1 a further area, Enclosure 4, was sampled and yielded only late pre-Belgic material from the enclosing ditches (Group 24). No evidence of internal structures was apparent though the enclosure had been subdivided or made smaller at one stage. The cropmark evidence suggested that this enclosure related to the 'drove-way' and pit alignment but no evidence of these could be found on site. To the immediate south of the 'drove-way' lay the area excavated in 1978-9. The enclosure there was also of late pre-Belgic date and considerable evidence of its internal structures was revealed. This enclosure had been subsumed into a larger one, comparable in size to Enclosure 1, probably during the early Belgic period, so both major enclosures would have been approximately contemporary.

ENCLOSURE 1

Enclosure 1 encompassed an area of 60m x 65m

(internal) defined by a large, recut ditch (Group 3) (FIG 3). The enclosure remained organised on broadly similar lines throughout its occupation which can be dated by ceramic evidence to the late pre-Belgic and Belgic periods. In the north were two round houses (Groups 5 and 6) represented by recut penannular drainage gullies but internally neither showed much evidence of the actual structure. Group 6 yielded two entrance or porch posts with a few other small and scattered posts and Group 5 only three shallow posts. In the south-east was a complex of intersecting gullies (Group 9) forming a sub-enclosure of three phases, presumably for stock, which had been cut later by a single gully probably draining the back of an upcast bank. In the south-west of the enclosure was a further structure (Group 7). The first phase of this structure had been much cut away by the second. The arc of a penannular gully was found with a wall slot with stakeholes and further postholes concentric to it. This was interpreted as either a semicircular structure comparable with Hut 8 at Wakerley (Jackson and Ambrose 1978) and one at Farmoor, Oxon (Lambrick *et al* 1979) or possibly the remnant of a circular structure of more typical form. The second phase consisted of a series of deep gullies which defined a sub-rectangular area of c 12m x 7.5m with a narrow entrance at the south-east corner. The gullies had been recut many times. Postholes in the interior possibly formed a small four-post structure, which could have been used for dry storage.

All these structures showed evidence of use throughout the occupation of Enclosure 1 and only minor modifications to the lay-out were noted. At the single south-facing entrance (Group 4) evidence was found suggestive of a gateway which had initially a four-post system comparable with that of Enclosure 1 at Wakerley (Jackson and Ambrose 1978), later reduced to a simpler pair of double posts. Also nearer the entrance other modifications had taken place. The single gully (of Group 9) draining the base of the bank was cut by a north-south gully (Group 10) which divided the enclosure into two. This was cut, in turn, by a pair of gullies which defined a sub-rectangular area (Group 8) perhaps providing drainage for stacked material such as a haystack, as postulated at Fengate (Pryor and Cranstone 1978, Structures 24 and 40).

To the west, an area of further occupation, adjacent to and largely contemporary with Enclosure 1 was excavated. It consisted of a further round house (Group 17) represented by recut penannular drainage gullies and postholes and pits. The penannular gullies were related to a series of linear gullies (Group 18) which possibly served as boundaries to the round house. North of this a large ditch defined a small enclosure of c 9m x 11m (Group 19) which may have been for stock.

South of Enclosure 1 further features were investigated including a series of pits and gullies (Group 16) and a ditch system (Group 15). Initially, these were thought to have formed part of another enclosed area, 'Enclosure 2', but it was subsequently shown that they had not. The ditch system was of Romano-British date and marked the northern limit of Romano-British features.

ROMANO-BRITISH OCCUPATION

Evidence of Romano-British occupation was limited to Field 3, except for the ditches (Group 15) mentioned above. The cropmarks revealed an extensive rectilinear pattern of field boundaries and trial trenching was carried out in several areas to locate any surviving structures. One group of buildings was found, designated Sub-site 1, and rapidly sampled in advance of gravel extraction. In this area the 'natural' was a buff coloured alluvial clay and some vertical stratification was present.

The earliest occupation, Period I, consisted of a ditch (Group 37) aligned east-west which formed part of the pattern extending over Field 3. Associated with this was slight evidence of two timber buildings (FIG 4.I). A post-built structure was represented by two or three postholes (Group 33); a small circular structure was represented by a shallow slot and two postholes (Group 34). The dating evidence for this period was poor but they can be assigned to the mid to late 1st century AD. They were followed, in Period II, by an accumulation of silt and subsoil (Group 32), possibly indicating a temporary and brief abandonment of Sub-site 1.

The next period was characterised by more substantial buildings with stone foundations (Groups 27 and 28). Group 27 was a rectangular structure of pitched limestone foundations with internal clay floors and evidence of a ceramic and stone tiled roof, it had developed from a small two-roomed

structure with a timber verandah to a slightly larger building with a northward extension and stone founded corridor or verandah. Even in its final form it was a modest 14.5m x 9m, but comparable to other 'farmhouses' such as Building 1 at Wymbush, Milton Keynes (Zeepvat 1980) and Gayhurst (Fleming 1972).

A number of developments were associated with the evolution of the farmhouse. A pitched limestone wall foundation (Group 29) aligned east-west, which is thought to have been a boundary wall, had originally stood alone (FIG 4.IIIa), but later a circular structure (Group 28) was built against it. The new building occupied one side of a yard defined by the addition of a wall which ran at right angles to the original boundary but did not actually join with it (FIG 4.IIIb). This circular building was c 8m in diameter and built of pitched and flat laid limestone courses with an entrance to the south where two postholes suggested the presence of a lightly built porch. Internally there was a gravel floor and hearth. The building was directly comparable with several other examples excavated in Northamptonshire (*cf* Williams 1976).

The finds from this modest farmstead show that the buildings were occupied from the very late 1st or early 2nd centuries AD and had continued to the end of the 2nd or early 3rd centuries AD.

Further minor features were revealed outside the buildings but the absence of clear dating evidence or stratification makes it impossible to assign them to a particular phase. One very large pit of uncertain function (Group 30) was sampled and shown to have been cut in the late 2nd century AD and backfilled during the 3rd century AD, with considerable amounts of residual material presumed to have originated from the earlier occupation.

Around the farmstead there was a rectilinear pattern of field boundary or drainage ditches and small areas of limestone rubble. No evidence of further buildings was found and the sampled ditches yielded date ranges coincident with the occupation of Sub-site 1. Among the associated cropmarks were rectangles defined by ditches which may have represented the sites of further buildings. However, where one of these features was sampled (Group 38) it was found to have been formed by a number of ditches which coincidentally formed a rectangle without evidence of an

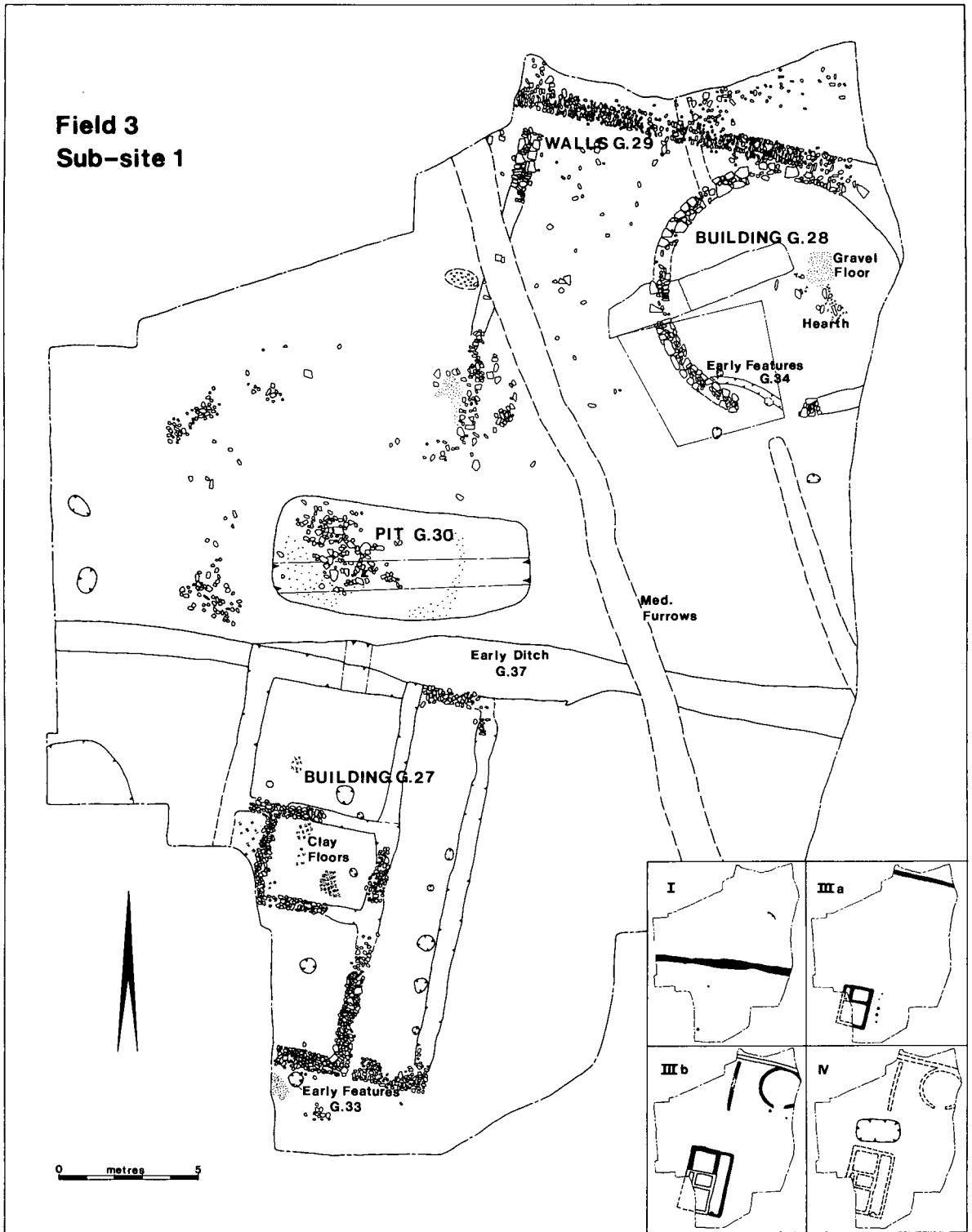


Fig 4: Clay Lane: Sub-site 1, Roman buildings, with phase development

internal structure. One small area of activity later than that of Sub-site 1 was revealed in the north-east of Field 3 where finds of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD were associated with a wall, two gullies and an area of limestone rubble but there was no clear evidence of buildings.

Though considerable effort was made during the watching brief, conditions of work made the recognition of postholes or timber slots extremely difficult and whilst no stone structures would have been missed some isolated timber buildings may have existed in Field 3.

SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT

At present it is not possible to advance definitive statements on the development of the settlement as a whole. However, a number of general points may be noted. The cropmark took the form of a parallel-ditched feature and pit alignment with appended enclosures. The extent of the cropmarks suggests a settlement of considerable size, but the excavated evidence has indicated that only relatively small areas, possibly only two enclosures, were occupied at any one time. The spread of the cropmark was due to settlement drift throughout the period of occupation. The site was occupied possibly from the middle Iron Age but certainly from the beginning of the late pre-Belgic period to the 3rd century and possibly into the 4th century AD. Enclosure 1 was laid out with respect to earlier boundaries and this appears to have influenced the drift of the settlement. The Roman occupation continued the southward drift towards the river which was already apparent in the Iron Age but the focus of occupation was more clearly divorced from earlier occupation than had previously been the case. Indeed, the introduction of a Romanised style of building and the rectilinear pattern of field boundaries seems to have marked the greatest change in layout of the settlement.

FINDS

Not all the finds have been completely analysed yet. However the following Level III reports are available:

THE COARSE POTTERY, by MISS P AIRD

The whole assemblage of both Iron Age and

Roman coarse pottery from the work in 1980 has been examined and quantified by fabric and form. A sample of the Iron Age material was analysed by detailed criteria of fabric to review the possibility of extracting significant groupings from the broad spectrum of late pre-Belgic pottery. Unfortunately no such divisions of value were apparent within the constraints of the assemblage, the methods adopted and the time available for analysis. Therefore a relatively simple division of the fabrics, based on the most abundant inclusion, was used and the whole assemblage was also divided into form types. It was decided that the Roman assemblage was too small with too few securely stratified groups to warrant exhaustive analysis and again a simple division by form and fabric was employed.

THE SAMIAN, by MR H PENGELLY

A small assemblage of 26 sherds was recovered, mainly from Sub-site 1, ranging in date from the third quarter of the 1st century to the mid or late Antonine period. Unfortunately, the majority was found as residual material in later contexts.

THE GLASS, by MRS L MONK

A group of 14 fragments of Roman glass was found comprising 11 pieces from vessels and 3 of window glass. Only two colourless fragments could have been from fine table ware, the remainder being of 'natural' blue-green or green glass, seven of which were from either prismatic or cylindrical bottles and one was from an unguent bottle or flask.

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