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Neolithic pits at the former Cattle Market, Brackmills Point, Liliput Road, Northampton

by

JASON CLARKE

with contributions by Dana Challinor, Andy Chapman, Pat Chapman, Val Fryer and Yvonne Wolframm-Murray

Summary

A trial trench evaluation and subsequent excavation in 2014, by Northamptonshire Archaeology (now MOLA Northampton) on behalf of CgMs Consulting, on land at the former Cattle Market site, Brackmills Point, Northampton, identified a pair of pits and an isolated pit. One of the pair of pits contained a number of worked flints and debitage, dating to the early Neolithic, while charred hazelnut shell has been radiocarbon dated to the end of the early Neolithic. The site was traversed by remnant furrows of medieval ridge and furrow cultivation.

Introduction

In February 2013, an archaeological trial trench evaluation was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology (now MOLA Northampton) on land at the former Cattle Market, Brackmills Point, Liliput Road, Northampton (NGR: SP 793 593, Fig 1). A single undated pit in one of the trenches was the only archaeological feature identified in the 13 trenches excavated. Mitigation through a programme of archaeological works that comprised the investigation of a 0.4ha area around the undated pit was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology in May 2013.

Acknowledgements

The work was commissioned by CgMs Consulting ahead of the proposed development of the land. It was managed by Mark Holmes for Northamptonshire Archaeology and Steve Weaver of CgMs Consulting. The fieldwork was undertaken by Jason Clarke assisted by David Haynes and Anne Foard, illustrations and flint drawing are by Amir Bassir and photographs are by Jason Clarke.

Location and Geology

The development area comprised a roughly triangular piece of land, approximately 10ha in extent, lying in between the A428 Bedford Road and Liliput Road on the eastern outskirts of Northampton (Fig 1). It was split into three main areas; an area of rough grassland in the north-west, bunds to the north-east, and the former site of the Cattle Market to the south.

The excavation area was located at the west of the development area, to the north of the former Cattle Market buildings (Fig 2).

The development area stands to the south of the River Nene, between the 55m and 60m contours. Its geology is mapped as Whitby Mudstone (Lias group), overlain by 1st terrace gravels (BGS 2012). In the easternmost part of the site, the natural geology is overlain by made ground which was deposited by the farmer in the early 1990s (Soden and Holmes 1995, 3–4).

Historic background

The development area and its environs have been the subject of several previous archaeological evaluations, comprising two partial geophysical surveys and multiple phases of desk-based assessment.

The first geophysical survey was carried out in 1995, in advance of the construction of the cattle market. Magnetic scanning of 20m transects was followed up by the detailed survey of three sample blocks. No archaeological remains were detected (Soden and Holmes 1995, 3–4). The second survey was carried out in 1996, and again comprised magnetic scanning followed by the detailed survey of a sample area. This survey identified several '*broad, curvilinear anomalies that have some archaeological potential, although they may be natural*' (Wessex Archaeology 1996).

Both of the above surveys were carried out as part of wider evaluations, which also included desk-based assessments. A further desk-based assessment was carried out in 2006 (Mason 2006). All of these assessments noted the presence of nearby Roman remains, and of ridge and furrow earthworks to the south-east of the proposed development area.

Further geophysical survey was undertaken specifically for this development by Northamptonshire Archaeology in 2012 (Walford 2012). This survey detected several weak and disjointed linear anomalies which probably represent ditches, possibly contiguous with the Roman ditches previously discovered to the north and west of the proposed development area, and may represent parts of an early field system. More recent cultivation of the area was represented by extensive traces of medieval or later ridge and furrow.

The site lies within a wider area of known prehistoric, Roman and later activity. Fieldwalking *c* 500m to the south

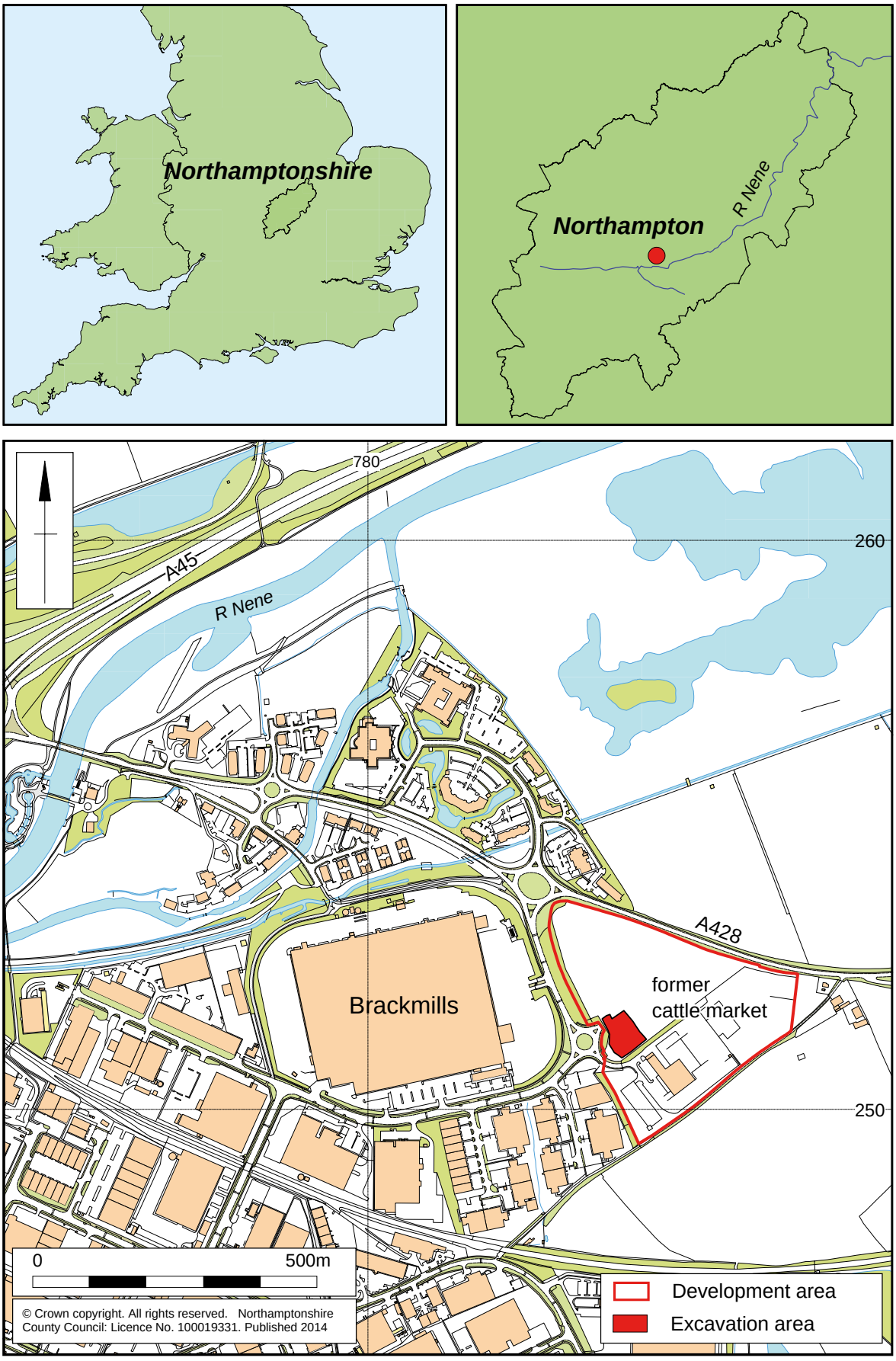
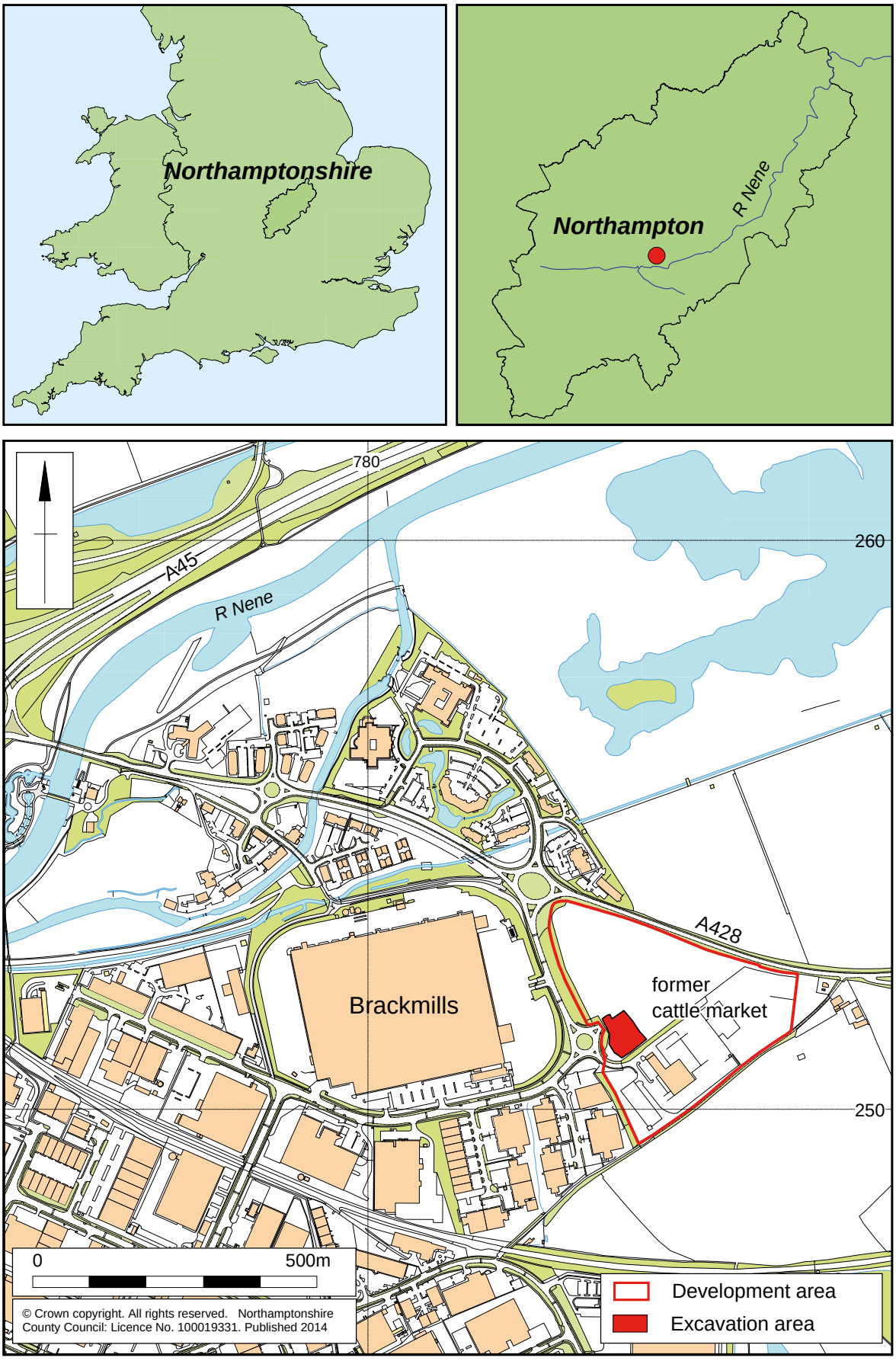


Fig 1 Site location



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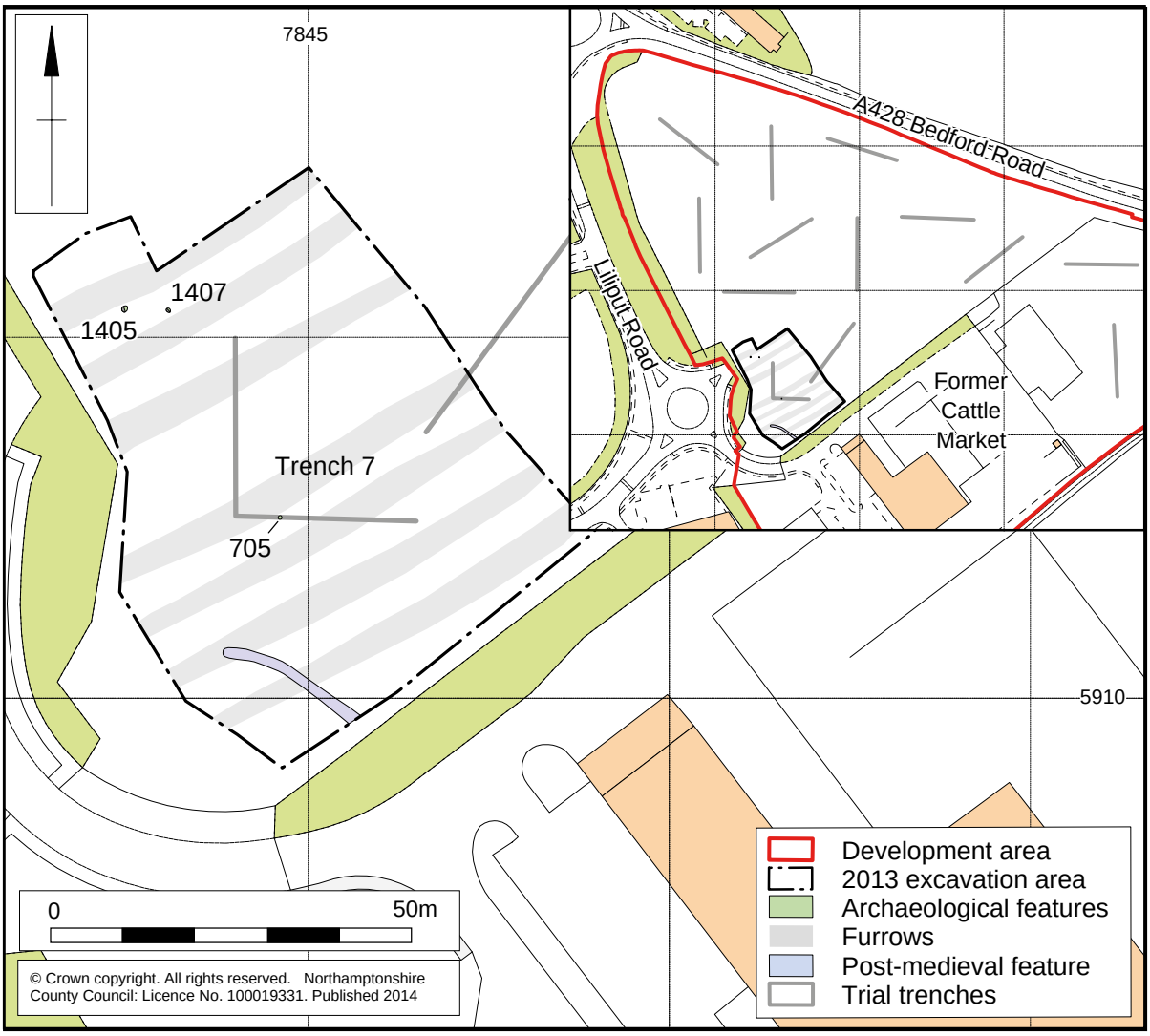

Fig 2 The excavated area and the Neolithic pits

of the site in 1990, prior to the extension of the Brackmills estate, produced prehistoric worked flint, Iron Age and Roman and medieval pottery but did not identify any specific settlement evidence (Shaw 1990). Approximately 1km to the south-west of the site, an extensive Iron Age settlement and part of a Saxon cemetery were excavated prior to the installation of a water pipeline between Great Houghton and Brackmills (Chapman 2001). An unstratified Neolithic polished stone axe was also recovered. A possible Roman ditch or pit was located during a watching brief undertaken immediately adjacent to the western boundary of the site (HER 5043/0/1).

The Neolithic pits

The underlying geology of mudstones and clay was encountered between 0.3–0.6m below the modern ground surface. This occurred as light-mid orange or brown-yellow sandy clay with occasional angular to sub-angular pebbles. The subsoil was light grey-brown sandy clay and the topsoil was mid grey-brown sandy clay, both soils contained occasional sandstone fragments and pebbles.

To the north there was a pair of pits, 1405 and 1407, 6m apart (Figs 2 and 3).

Pit 1405 was sub-circular, 0.58m in diameter and 0.10m deep with concave sides and a flat base. The fill was light brown-grey sandy clay with frequent charcoal inclusions from ash, oak and hawthorn, as well as hazelnut shell (Fig 4). Nine worked flints and 5g of debitage, dating to the early Neolithic were recovered. The assemblage included a serrated blade (Fig 5) and a utilised blade. A sample of hazelnut shell has given a radiocarbon date towards the end of the early Neolithic (Beta-354939, 3520–3330 cal BC, 4680 +/– 30 BP, 95% confidence).

Pit 1407, 6m to the east of pit 1405, was sub-circular with concave sides and a flattish base, 0.60m in diameter and 0.16m deep (Figs 2 and 6). The fill was mid grey-brown sandy clay with occasional charcoal fragments from oak and hawthorn/blackthorn. There were no other finds.

Pit 705 lay 33m to the south of pits 1405 and 1407. It was circular with an irregular U-shaped profile, 0.58m wide and 0.22m deep. The fill of mid to dark grey-brown sandy clay contained frequent heat affected

Fig 3 General view of site, looking south-east, with pits 1405 and 1407 marked by lamp irons

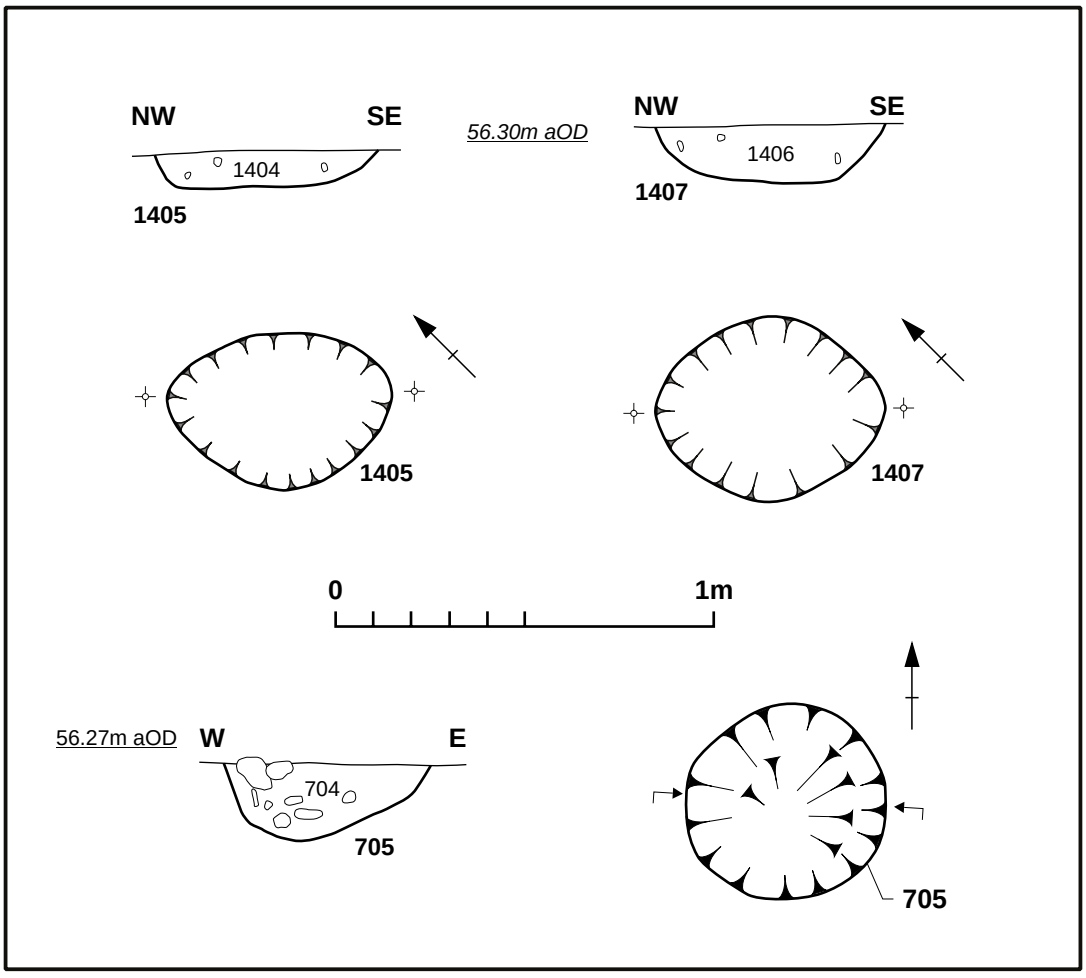

Fig 4 Plans and sections of excavated pits

stones, 50mm–150mm in diameter, charcoal fragments, fragments of fired clay, a flint core and burnt bone.

The one large and seven small fragments of fired clay from pit 705, weigh 34g. They are irregularly-shaped and made from hard fine silty sandy clay, orange and black in colour, having been subject to quite high temperatures. They are probably hearth debris (report by Pat Chapman).

A small quantity of calcined bone, weighing 4g, was recovered from a bulk soil sample from the fill of pit 705. The bone is white in colour, indicating a temperature in excess of 600^{0}C, as is typical of many cremation burials. The bone comprises small fragments from long bone shafts, but there is insufficient to identify it to species (report by Andy Chapman).

The worked flint
by Yvonne Wolframm-Murray and Andy Chapman

Nine pieces of worked flint were recovered from pit 1405 and a single flint from pit 705.

The assemblage from pit 1405 comprises six flakes, and an environmental sample yielded 5g of small debitage. The material includes a flake with cortical striking platforms, the medial section of a utilised blade and a single retouched tool: the proximal portion of a serrated blade, with regular removals along a lateral edge (Fig 5).

The condition of the assemblage was moderate, with the flint showing heavy post-depositional irregular edge damage.

The raw material comprises both opaque and vitreous flint, light to dark grey and brown in colour. The quality of the raw material is good. The cortex is typically light to mid brown in colour with a generally smooth, rolled and weathered surface. The raw material is likely to have been derived from local gravel deposits.

A core fragment, with one remaining striking platform, is of a poor quality raw material with flaws and was, consequently, shattered in antiquity.

The technological characteristics of the assemblage suggest a broad Neolithic date with an early element. The utilised blade is probably late Mesolithic/early Neolithic and the serrated blade is typical of the early Neolithic. The raw material from the flake, the blade, the debitage and the serrated blade are visually the same, and they possibly came from the same nodule.

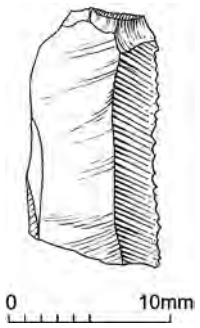

Fig 5 The serrated blade from pit 1405 (SF3)

The single flint from pit 705 is a small core in grey flint with a brown cortex, although the surface is almost entirely covered with light blue-grey patination. The core measures 40 by 40 by 20mm and has two platforms set almost at right angles, from which small blade-like flakes have been removed. A late Mesolithic or early Neolithic date is most likely.

Charred plant remains
by Val Fryer

Soil samples for the retrieval of the plant macrofossil assemblages from the fills of pits 1405, 1407 and 705 were bulk floated and the flots were collected in a 300 micron mesh sieve. The dried flots were scanned under a binocular microscope at magnifications up to x 16, and the plant macrofossils and other remains noted (Table 1). Nomenclature within the table follows Stace (1997). All plant remains were charred. Modern fibrous roots were extremely abundant within the assemblages along with seeds and arthropod remains.

The assemblages are small and very limited in composition. Charcoal/charred wood fragments are abundant, but other plant macrofossils are scarce, comprising a single, possible fragmentary cereal grain, pieces of hazel (*Corylus avellana*) nutshell and fragments of indeterminate root or stem. Although some charcoal is very well preserved, with clean, sharp breaks, other fragments are rounded and severely abraded, possibly suggesting that they were exposed to the elements for some considerable period prior to final deposition.

The small size and limited nature of these assemblages may indicate that the remains principally derive from scattered refuse and/or midden waste, and it seems likely that some of this material remained unburied for some considerable time. The un-weathered condition of other remains may suggest that deliberate deposition within the pit fills was occasionally undertaken, possibly as part of a seasonal 'ritual' of site clearance. Evidence for this latter practise has now been noted at several near contemporary sites within East Anglia and the east Midlands (cf. Harford Park and Ride site, Norwich, Fryer, forthcoming).

Table 1 Charred plant remains

Fill	**1404**	**1406**
Pit	**1405**	**1407**
Cereal indet. (grains)	–	xcffg
Corylus avellana L.	xx	–
Charred root/stem	–	x
Indeterminate seed	–	x
Sample volume (litres)	**40**	**40**
Volume of flot (litres)	**<0.1**	**<0.1**
% flot sorted	**100%**	**100%**

Key: Number of specimens x = 1 – 10; xx = 11 – 50; cf = compare; fg = fragment

Charcoal
by Dana Challinor

Two samples from pits of possible Neolithic date were submitted for the identification of charcoal and extraction of suitable material for radiocarbon dating. Standard identification procedures were followed and the charcoal was mounted in a sand-bath for examination.

The charcoal was very poorly preserved, with high levels of sediment infusion and extremely friable. This inhibited fracturing without destroying the piece, and not all identifications could be confirmed. Nonetheless, charcoal selected for dating was from diffuse porous species which are all relatively short-lived. No roundwood stems were noted.

Table 2: Charcoal remains

Context	Quantity	Identifications
Fill 1404 Pit 1405	>100 specimens	*Fraxinus excelsior* (ash), *Quercus* sp. (oak), Maloideae (hawthorn group) *Corylus avellana* (hazel) nutshell
Fill 1406 Pit 1407	c20 specimens	*Quercus* sp. heartwood, Maloideae/*Prunus* (hawthorn group or cherry/blackthorn type)

The radiocarbon determination

A sample of *Corylus avellana* (hazel) nutshell from pit 1405 was submitted for radiocarbon dating. The radiocarbon date places the pit towards the end of the early Neolithic, broadly contemporary with use of Peterborough ware, with the Middle Neolithic beginning *c* 3300BC. The possible early date, 3620–3600 Cal BC has only a 5.5% probability, so it is the later date range, 3530–3380 Cal BC, that is the more likely range, at 90% probability.

Discussion

The archaeological works identified a pair of pits and an isolated pit, with their homogeneous fills suggesting prompt backfilling. A small flint assemblage from pit 1405 comprises broken tools, flakes and flint debitage derived from the same nodule, suggesting that they were deposited into the pit at the same time. In addition, there was charcoal from a range of tree species and a hazelnut, identified from the charred plant remains, has been radiocarbon dated to the end of the early Neolithic, 3530–3380 Cal BC, broadly contemporary with the use of Peterborough ware.

Pit 1407 produced only some wood charcoal. The material within the pits suggests a deliberate selection of material to be deposited; including material that had been left un-buried for some time, this may indicate structured or possibly considered deposition and may have been part of a seasonal site clearance. However, there were no other material finds such as pottery or animal bone, as is more often the case in such small pit clusters of the middle to late Neolithic and the early Bronze Age,

The isolated occurrence of a small pit group of the early Neolithic at the Cattle Market site parallels other local pit groups such as the early Bronze Age pit at nearby Wootton (Chapman and Carlyle 2012) and a cluster of middle Neolithic cremation burials at Milton Ham, to the south of Northampton (Carlyle and Chapman 2012), as featured in the last volume of *Northamptonshire Archaeology*.

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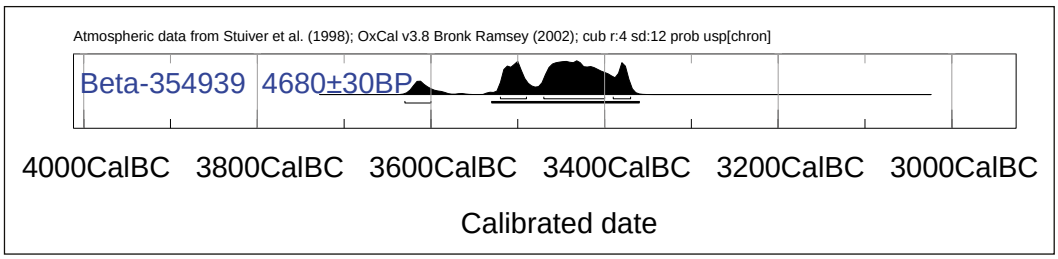
Laboratory & Sample No.	Context	Sample details	C13/C12	Conventional Radiocarbon Age BP	Cal BC intercept *68% confidence* **95% confidence**
Beta-354939 NBP13/1404	Fill 1404 Pit 1405	hazel nutshell	-22.8	4680+/-30	3500, 3430 & 3380 *3520–3490 & 3470–3370* **3620–3600 & 3520–3370**

Laboratory: Beta Analytic, Miami, Florida, USA
Calibration: INTCAL09 Radiocarbon Age Calibration



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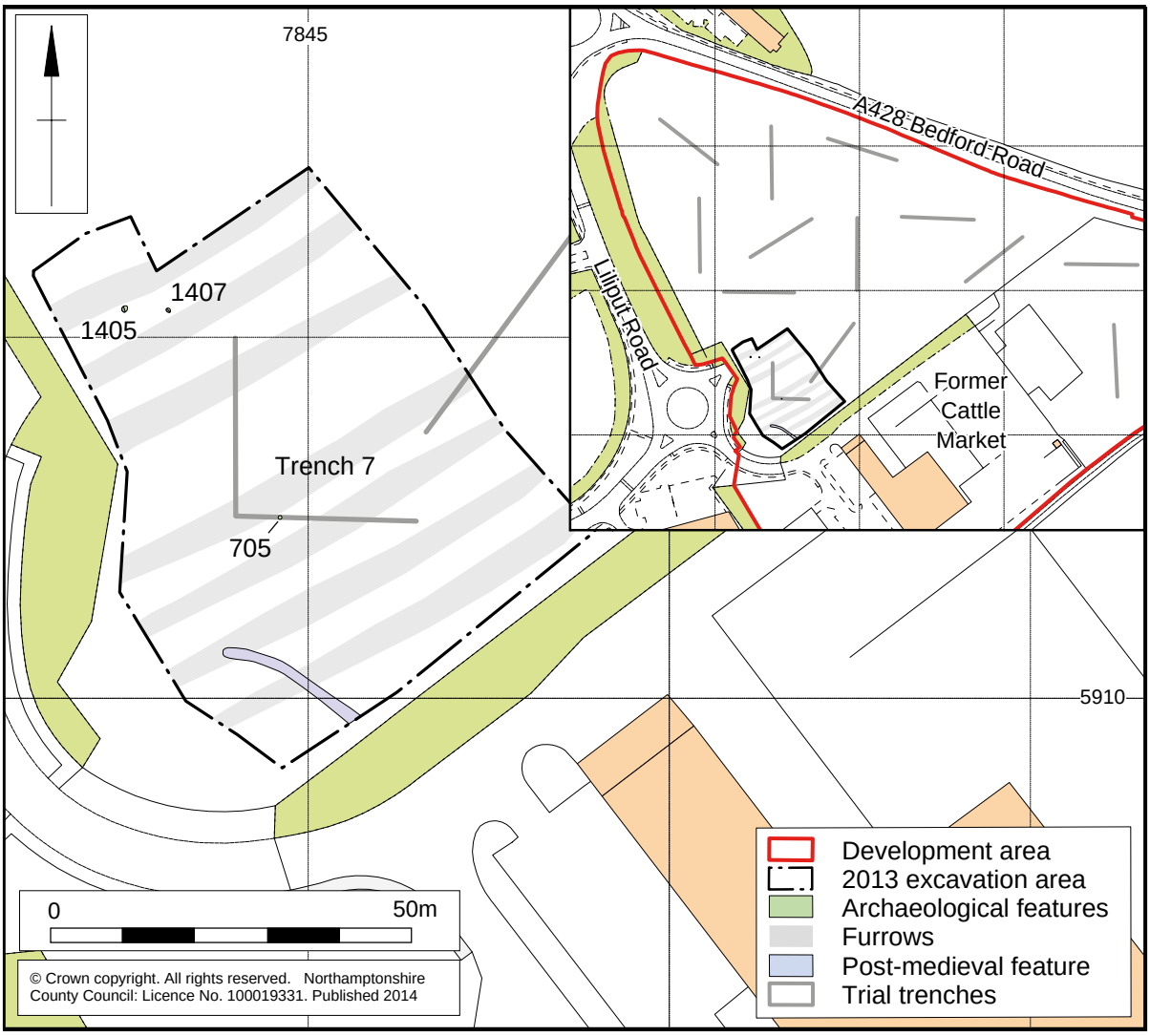

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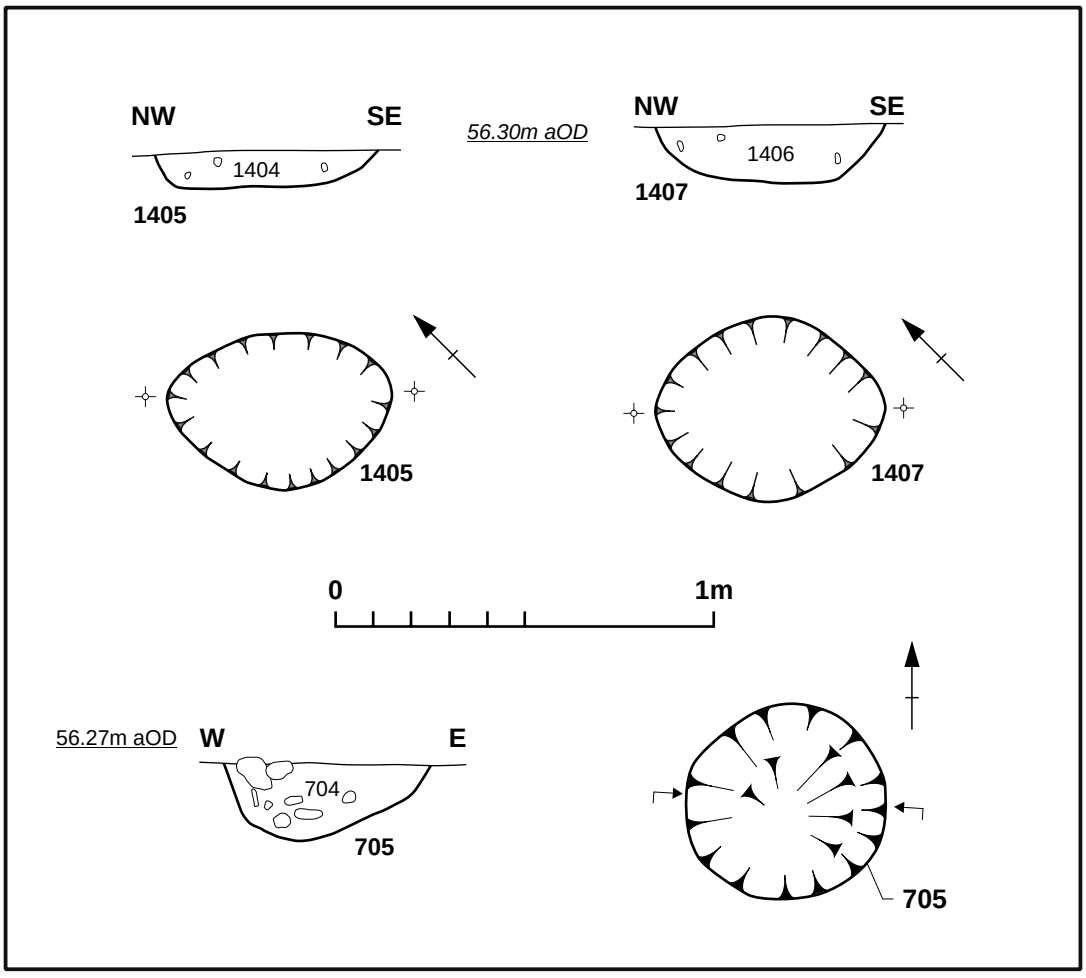

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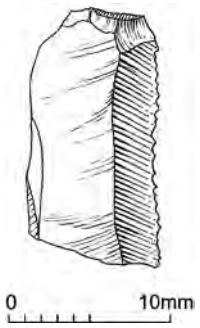

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