

# A Beaker Burial and Iron Age droveway on the Elton Estate, Warmington

by

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## Summary

*In 2007 Archaeological Solutions conducted a programme of archaeological excavations at the site of a proposed processing plant on the Elton Estate, Warmington. The majority of datable material was prehistoric. A crouched burial of a juvenile, aged 15 years, was accompanied by fragments of a comb-decorated Beaker, placed near the feet. Fragments from another Beaker were found in a pit. An Iron Age droveway, ditch system and pits were also present.*

## Background

Between October and December 2007, Archaeological Solutions conducted a programme of archaeological excavations at the site of a proposed processing plant on the Elton Estate, Warmington, Northamptonshire. The site occupies c 3ha of land within the Nene Valley, on the north-eastern edge of the county (TL 0820 9220, Fig 1). It lies on the floodplain and southern edge of the River Nene. The local drift geology comprises floodplain and terrace sand and gravels overlain by alluvium. The underlying solid geology is limestone. The site is at an average height of 26m aOD.

## Archaeological Context

The earliest archaeological evidence in the immediate area comprises a Neolithic settlement and a pit containing the disarticulated remains of five individuals (French 1994). Such evidence suggests that this area, overlooking the River Nene, may have held some manner of 'ritual' significance during the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age (Barlow 2008). Cropmarks, in and around the area of the site attest to widespread prehistoric activity including a series of former boundaries and trackways, and two possible Bronze Age barrows (Barlow 2008). A trial trench evaluation carried out on the site in 2007 (Pole 2007), revealed a series of Iron Age ditches, a field system and a ring ditch, most likely representing the remains of a ploughed out barrow.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Excavations encountered evidence dating between the Neolithic and post-medieval periods. The majority of datable material is prehistoric and it is this evidence that will be considered herein. A full account of the excavated features and finds, including specialist analyses, is presented in the *Research Archive Report* (Stone 2008).

## The Beaker Burial

Grave 2107 contained a severely plough damaged burial, SK2108 (Fig 2). Post-depositional processes had resulted in the loss of parts of the skull, spine, pelvis and feet. Nonetheless, tooth-wear data show that the individual was aged c 15 years at time of death. The body was found in a crouched position, on its left side, accompanied by the remains of a Beaker vessel (Fig 3) which had originally been placed by the feet. The presence of this vessel dates the grave to between 2500 and 1700BC, and associates the burial with others of the Beaker tradition (Cunliffe 2005). The vessel, containing sand and grog temper, comprises a fragment of rim, a flat base sherd and numerous body sherds, most of which display comb decoration (Thompson in Stone 2008).

Fragments of a second Beaker vessel were recovered from a pit 2003. The vessel is in a coarse shell tempered fabric and displays comb decoration, forming a zig-zag pattern, with one sherd containing apparently random 'stab' impressions (Fig 4). It was initially thought that the vessel contained cremated human remains, although subsequent analysis recorded only unburnt animal bone. Pit 2003 was severely truncated and the original cultural context surrounding the deposition of the Beaker remains uncertain.

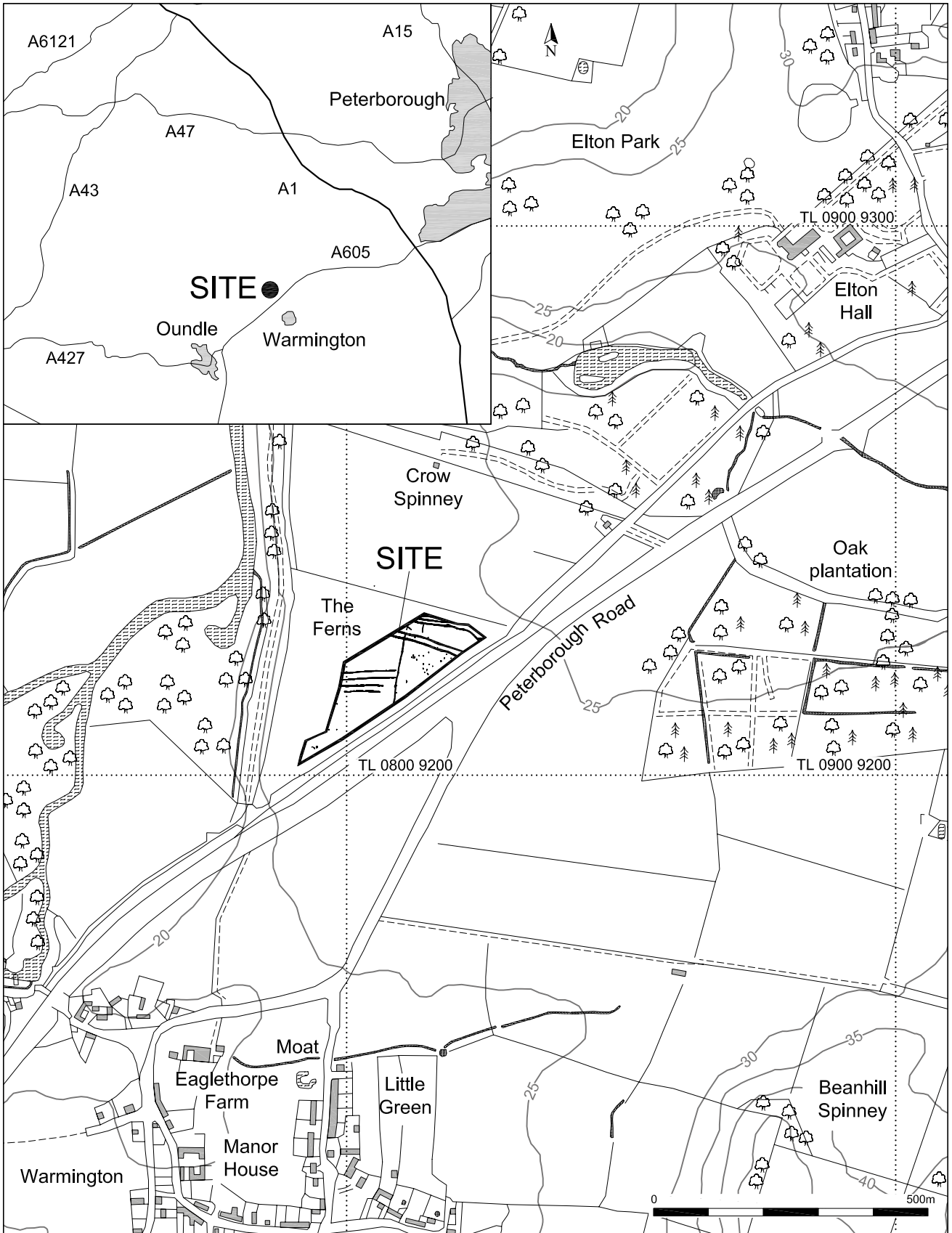


Fig 1 Site location

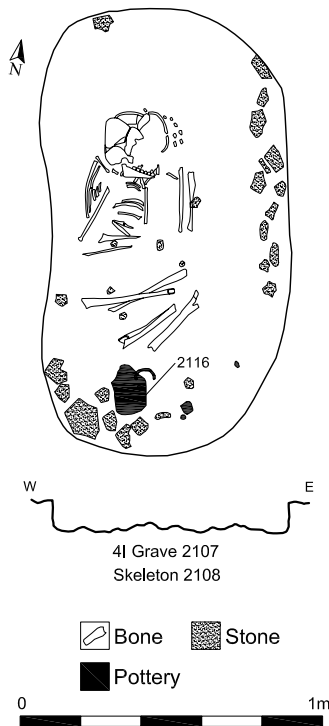


Fig 2 Beaker grave 2107

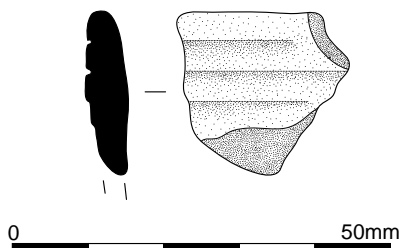


Fig 3 Rim sherd of Beaker vessel from grave 2107

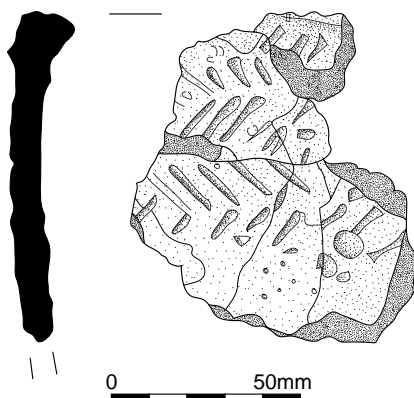


Fig 4 Beaker vessel from pit 2003

‘Beaker Folk’ is a general term once used to define Early Bronze Age communities who interred their dead with a specific package of objects. The spread of this cultural package, characterised by the distinctive Beaker vessels, can be traced across much of Europe. Traditionally, this spread was linked to the migration of a ‘Beaker People’

– a wealthy warrior class with divergent, individualistic values (Cunliffe 2005). However, the spread of the Beaker ‘package’ is now better understood in terms of cultural overlap and exchange between indigenous, ‘static’ populations.

Beaker burials are well documented across Northamptonshire (Chapman 1999), having been excavated as chance finds at Cowthick-near-Weldon (Jackson 1974), and at Warmington and Ashton (Parry *et al* 2012). Two rich Beaker burials, containing pottery vessels, flint daggers, V-perforated jet buttons and other objects, were excavated at Irthlingborough and West Cotton, Raunds in the 1980s as part of the Raunds Area Project, which investigated a number of Neolithic/Bronze Age sites forming parts of a single, large monument complex (Harding and Healy 2007). A small Beaker cemetery was also excavated at Aldwinckle, c13.7km south-west of the current site (Jackson 1976).

### Probable prehistoric postholes

A large number of postholes in the southern part of the site were probably of prehistoric date. These comprised one isolated feature (2057), and two distinct ‘clusters’ containing five and ten postholes, respectively (Fig 5). The first cluster comprised a west to south aligned arc of postholes of roughly equal size (2059, 2061, 2063, 2065 and 2067). It is thought that they represent a post-built fenceline associated with the second posthole cluster, c3m to the north-east. The second cluster was formed from ten postholes in a roughly circular arrangement, eight of which were similar in size and plan. The two most north-easterly features in this cluster (2078 and 2096) were markedly larger than their contemporaries. It is possible that this sub-circular arrangement formed a post-built structure, with an entrance to the north-east marked by the two larger postholes. Both feature clusters were devoid of datable material, and their relationship to other features on the site is unknown.

### The Iron Age droveway and ditch system

Ditch 2024 was the only Iron Age ditch on a north to south alignment (Fig 6). It was cut at its northern end by droveway ditches 2022 and 2026.

Slots excavated through 2024 yielded very small amounts of Iron Age pottery, animal bone and residual flint. The profile of this ditch was highly variable, indicating that it was possibly dug in a piecemeal manner (Barlow 2008). The fill of 2024 was indicative of a single backfilling event and, although speculative, this may have occurred contemporaneously with the construction of droveway ditches 2022 and 2026. A small linear ditch 2168 may have been part of the same feature, though it had since been subject to much heavier truncation by ploughing. Ditch 2168 ran parallel to ditch 2114 (not illustrated), which lay 30m to the east. The stratigraphy of these two features was very similar and it can be postulated that ditch 2114 was the remnant of a contemporary boundary feature. Cropmarks indicate a continuation of ditch 2024 to just south of the A605 on the same align-

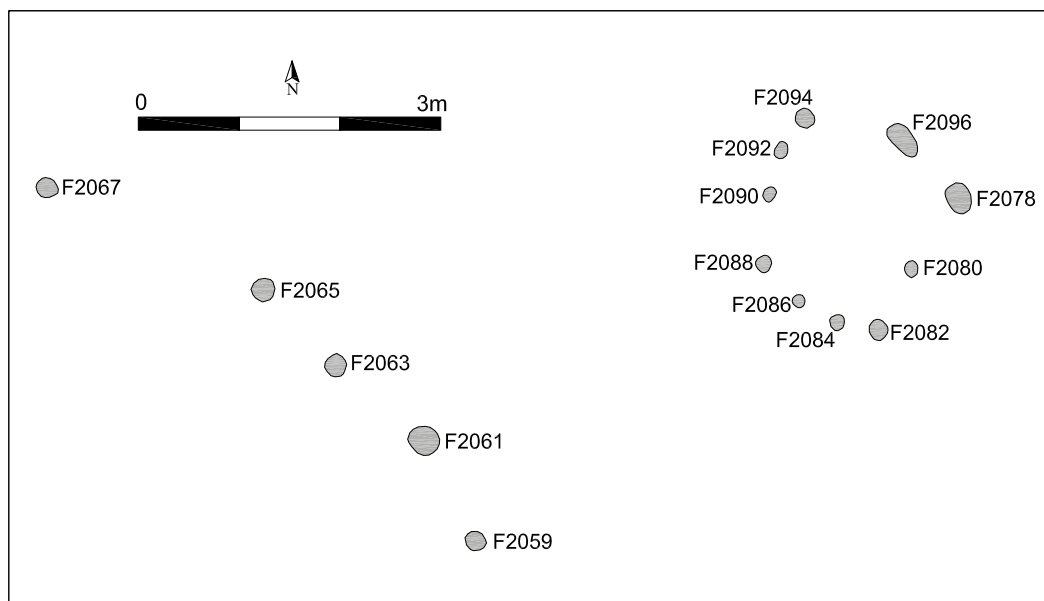


Fig 5 Prehistoric posthole structures

ment, before turning 90° and continuing in an easterly direction towards an area of possible enclosures (Barlow 2008).

A possible Iron Age droveway ran north-west to south-east across the site (Fig 6). The parallel ditches forming the droveway (2022 and 2026) were consistently spaced 4m apart. Cropmarks indicate a continuation of these features on the same alignment to the south-east of the modern A605, towards an area of possible enclosures (Barlow 2008). The fill of ditch 2022 yielded a single sherd of mid- to late Iron Age pottery, while ditch 2026 contained a single sherd of 1st-century AD pottery.

Sections of three further parallel ditches (2068, 2070, and 2110; Fig 6) on a similar alignment were exposed to the north-east of the possible droveway. All three ditches showed evidence of having been re-cut to a narrower profile, although the dates of these recuts are unknown. However, each recut was so central to the original feature that they must have been visible in the ground at the time of recutting. The re-cuts extended throughout each section of ditch indicating that they originally ran for the same distance, and probably served the same function.

Multiple parallel ditched boundaries, often running for considerable distances, are commonplace on late Bronze and Iron Ages sites in the East Midlands; with double, triple and quadruple ditches well attested. Like those at the current site, the majority of these boundaries are aligned north-west to south-east. However, the function of these boundary features remains unknown, and it is unlikely that any single interpretation can be applied. The boundaries possibly represent land divisions between small local communities. Such arrangements of ditches could also have functioned as track or droveways. Ditches 2022 and 2026 at Elton Estate could easily have functioned in this way, channelling people or livestock between the River Nene and the nearby (possible) enclosures. The river would have constituted an important transport link, whilst the adjacent floodplain could have provided

water and grazing for animals. The northernmost group of parallel ditches encountered at the site (2068, 2070 and 2110) proved more difficult to interpret; they were more irregular and appeared to diverge (as cropmarks) around the cropmark of a ring ditch, which possibly represents a ploughed out barrow (Barlow 2008).

### Other Iron Age activity

Further Iron Age activity was evidenced by three pits located in the central and eastern areas of the site. Pit 2018 was elongated and sub-oval in plan, with its long axis aligned east to west. It yielded the largest finds assemblage of any feature encountered, including 31 sherds (529g) of late Iron Age pottery, and a quantity of pale to mid grey fuel ash slag (see Gilmour below). Although originally thought industrial in nature, pit 2018 can only be unequivocally linked to the disposal of refuse, including animal bone, ceramic building material, a single struck flint and the fuel ash slag residues.

### Residues from apparent Industrial Activity *by Brian Gilmour*

Material found in Iron Age pit 2018 was originally thought to be associated with some kind of industrial activity, possibly metalworking. However, further analysis has suggested this to be much less likely than was thought to be the case. The main residue was a series of small to medium-sized lumps (approximately 60mm across or less) of a very light weight greyish-green, slag-like material, full of small gas bubble holes, weighing 1700g. This material is quite clearly some kind of fuel ash slag probably formed by the reaction, at quite high temperatures, of clayey material with fuel ash acting as a flux, resulting in the formation of the slaggy material, with the gas holes also being a result of this reaction. It would

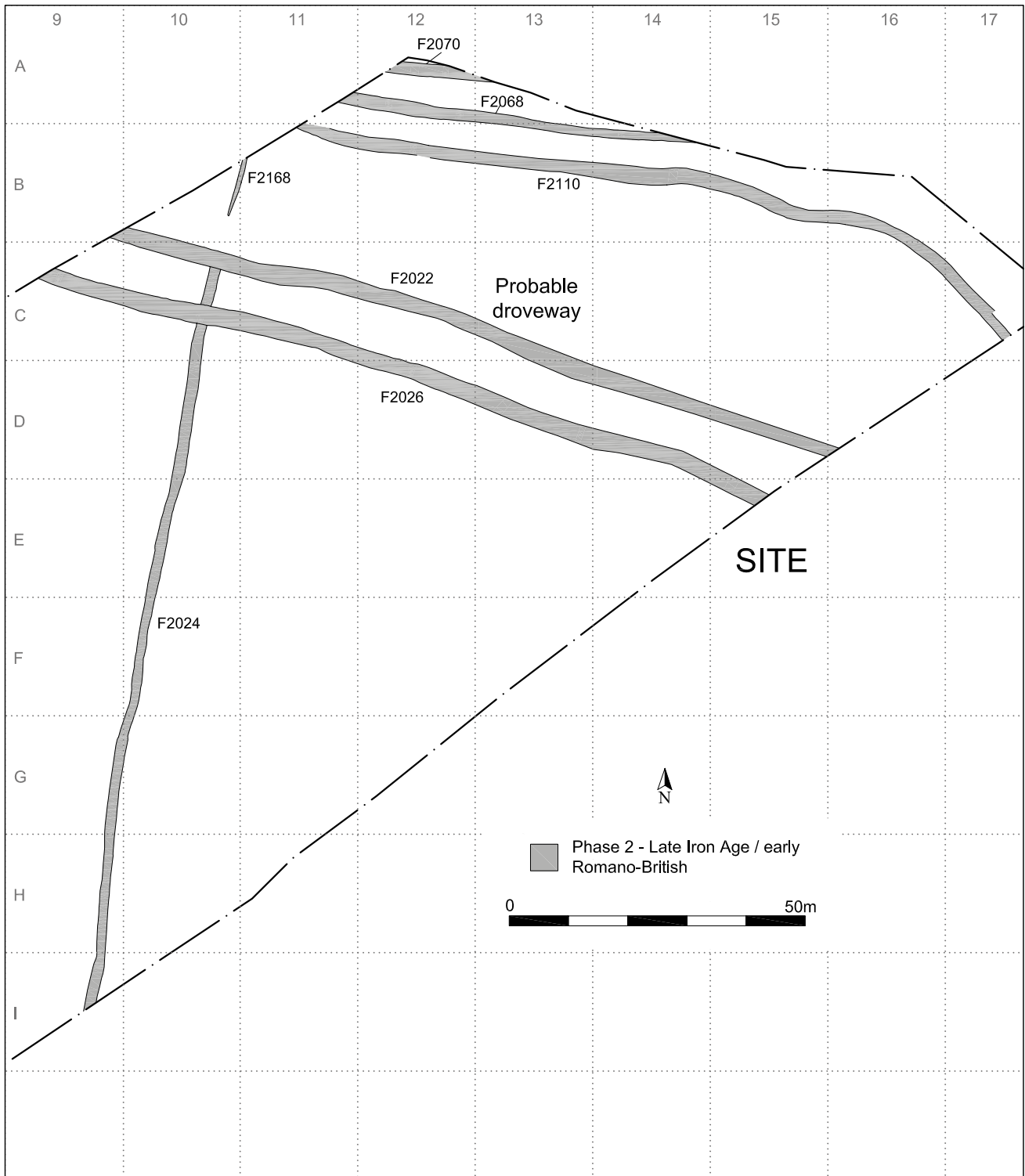


Fig 6 The Iron Age droveway and other ditches

appear unlikely that these remains were associated with iron smelting as no trace of tap slag – the inevitable by-product of the bloomery iron smelting operation – was found here, nor does the fuel ash slag appear to have been associated with the kind of cindery material that might be expected for iron smelting, nor was any trace of any smelting furnace found in the vicinity.

### Conclusion

The presence of the Beaker burial indicates a commencement of activity at the site from at least 2500 to 1700BC. It remains uncertain whether the burial was an isolated occurrence, or part of a wider funerary landscape, as tentatively suggested by the Beaker present in the truncated

pit. The truncated nature of both might indicate that other burials, if present, had been subsequently destroyed by ploughing. Other burials of a similar date have been recorded in the vicinity. A Neolithic burial site containing the disarticulated remains of five individuals in a pit was found just to the north-east of the site during excavations linked to the construction of the modern A605 (French 1994). Also, cropmarks to the south-west and north-east of the site suggest the presence of ploughed out barrows. It is possible that this area of high ground, overlooking the River Nene and its floodplain, was an important focus of Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial activity.

Droeways and large linear ditches are features indicative of prehistoric activity across Britain (eg Nicholson 2012). It is clear that the ditches encountered at the current site were used and maintained over a long period. Ditches 2068, 2070 and 2110 had been subject to recutting at some point in the Iron Age, and it appears that their function remained consistent throughout their use. The exact function of these features is unknown, however. The southern pair of ditches (2022 and 2026) could have functioned as a trackway or droeway, channelling people or animals between the River Nene floodplain and the nearby (cropmark) enclosures, possibly a settlement. The river would have provided an important prehistoric transport link, whilst its floodplain may have constituted valuable grazing land, at least on a seasonal basis.

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