

A later prehistoric landscape at Sandy Lane, Northampton

by

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Summary

A programme of archaeological investigation was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology in 2010 at Sandy Lane Improvement North, north-west of Northampton. A total area of 3.6ha was excavated across seven areas. Archaeological remains were confined to the northern and central parts of the site, with settlement mostly concentrated on an area of the Northampton sands either side of the Dallington Brook, which bisected the site. The excavated archaeology comprised a small oval enclosure of possible domestic or funerary character with associated pits and postholes, both radiocarbon dated to the Early/Middle Bronze Age. A Middle Bronze Age cremation burial was associated with a small group of pits at the northern end of the route. A Late Bronze Age settlement comprised two probable roundhouses, associated with two groups of pits, which produced evidence for craft production, including fired-clay loomweights and a perforated stone disc. In addition, a short length of a later prehistoric pit alignment was cut by a trackway of Middle to Late Iron Age date, which was associated with enclosure boundary ditches and pits. There were also Middle Iron Age four-post structures. A later prehistoric boundary ditch towards the southern end of the route may have been contemporary with the Middle to Late Iron Age activity. Medieval and post-medieval features included ridge and furrow, boundary ditches and pits.

Introduction

Between February and April 2010 Cotswold Archaeology (CA) carried out an archaeological excavation at Sandy Lane Improvement North, north-west of Northampton (centred on NGR: SP7051 6187 to SP7127 63460; Fig 1). The work was undertaken at the request of WSP Environmental, on behalf of MGWSP, in order to fulfil a condition attached to planning permission granted by Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) for the construction of a new road. The site, which was defined by the footprint of the new road, New Sandy Lane, is located on the north-western edge of Northampton, within the suburb of New Duston. It lies at approximately 111m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) to the south, gently dropping away to a height of 97m aOD to the north. At the

northern and southern ends of the route, the underlying bedrock geology is mapped as interbedded Stamford Member (BGS 2017). A band of Northampton Sand Formation is present across the central area of the route. Alluvial deposits comprising clay, silt, sand and gravel were also recorded along each side of Dallington Brook (Fig 1). Fieldwork followed the methodology set out in a project design prepared by WSP (2010).

This report presents a summary of the excavation results: a detailed report is available to download via the Cotswold Archaeology website: <http://reports.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk> (Cotswold Archaeology 2017). It is intended that the archive will be deposited with Northampton Museum and Art Gallery.

Acknowledgements

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The later prehistoric landscape

Aside from a single Mesolithic or Early Neolithic core rejuvenation flake, the earliest evidence for occupation is a small number of features radiocarbon dated to the Early/Middle Bronze Age, with evidence for settlement continuing, perhaps sporadically, through the Middle to Late Bronze Age and the Middle to Late Iron Age.

Area 3: Early/Middle Bronze Age enclosure and pits

Enclosure 432, in Area 3 immediately north of Dallington Brook, comprised two curvilinear ditches 127 and 129, averaging 0.4m wide by 0.2–0.3m deep, enclosing a space 8.5m in diameter (Figs 1, 2 and 3). The enclosure ditches produced two sherds of pottery, broadly dated as late prehistoric, alongside a few charred plant remains including barley grain fragments and seeds of ivy-leaved speedwell, representative of wind-blown hearth material. A western entrance, *c.* 1.9m wide, was defined by rounded terminals. A possible second entrance lay on the southern side of the enclosure, although two oval intercutting pits 102 and 155, 1.5 and 1.7m long respectively, in the same location made it difficult to determine whether this gap had ever functioned as an entrance. A single sherd of late prehistoric pottery was recovered from the fill of pit 102. Pit 155 produced six sherds of late prehistoric pottery, two fragments of fired clay and two pieces of burnt animal bone. Small assemblages of charred plant material and moderate assemblages of charcoal were recovered from the fills of both pits. Charcoal from the fill (128) of ditch 129 was radiocarbon dated to 1680–1530 cal BC (SUERC-74054, 95.4% probability, Table 1). The enclosure may represent a small domestic enclosure or the ditch surrounding a ploughed-out oval barrow or a funerary ring ditch enclosure.

While there were no internal features to Enclosure 432, six small pits 100, 104, 107, 135, 145 and 172, lay within 15m. Pit 107 was sub-circular, 0.9m in diameter by 0.25m deep, and the fill (108) produced 4.49kg of burnt reddened sandstone and an abundance of charcoal. A charred hazelnut shell from the fill returned a radiocarbon date of 1730–1530 cal BC (SUERC-74055, 95.4% probability, Table 1). The five other pits were either oval or circular in plan, 0.80–1.59m in diameter by 0.15–0.40m deep. A clay lining to pit 104 suggests that it may have been used to hold water and/or for cooking.

Area 1: Middle Bronze Age pits and a cremation burial

Two pits, 517 and 521, a possible hearth 522 and a cremation burial 515 were recorded in Area 1 at the northernmost end of the road corridor (Figs 1 and 4). No finds were recovered from the fills of any of these features; however, they have been assigned to the Middle Bronze Age on the basis of a radiocarbon determination of 1380–1130 cal BC (SUERC-74056, 95.4%, Table 1) on bone from the burial. The cremated bone could not be identified to sex and the small quantity recovered suggests that only a token amount of the cremated individual had been deposited in the burial pit.

Area 2: Late Bronze Age settlement

Late Bronze Age activity was focused on the northern part of Area 2 and comprised a small unenclosed settlement of two possible roundhouses and a number of associ-

ated pits and postholes (Figs 1 and 5). Roundhouse 436, adjacent to the western edge of excavation, was defined by postholes forming a ring 8.5m in diameter, with eight postholes set around the circumference at irregular intervals. This was possibly an internal ring of support posts, which could suggest that the roundhouse would have been a little larger than this. A large sub-rectangular pit, 379, 0.81m long by 0.24m deep, near the centre of the structure, contained hearth debris. A worked stone disc 64mm in diameter (a loomweight or flywheel?), along with a worked bone awl or point, most likely for leatherworking, were recovered from two of the postholes.

Another roundhouse, 437, was located 1.5m east of roundhouse 436. This structure consisted of a ring 6.8m in diameter, defined by eight postholes that suggest a spacing of *c.* 2m post-to-post, with perhaps 11 posts having formed the ring originally. A ninth posthole to the south-east was perhaps part of a south-east facing porch. Three small pits or postholes, 325, 333 and 335 may represent internal structural features. A pit 259, 0.66m diameter by 0.27m deep, containing burnt reddened sandstones overlain by charcoal-rich fills was either a sunken hearth or a pit containing hearth debris. A radiocarbon determination on charcoal returned a date of 1190–1000 cal BC (SUERC-74053, 95.4% probability).

Area 3: Later prehistoric pit alignment

Later prehistoric activity included a line of six pits, aligned north-east to south-west and extending beyond the limits of excavation in Area 3 (Fig 2). This pit alignment could have originated in the Early Iron Age, but it seems that the final fills accumulated during the Middle Iron Age. The excavated pits, 177, 181, 292, 293, 354 and 402, were sub-square or circular in plan.

Areas 2–4: Middle to Late Iron Age activity

Middle Iron Age activity in Areas 2 and 3 included several postholes, possibly representing a number of four-post structures, eg Structure 411, and a fence line (Fig 5). Middle to Late Iron Age activity recorded within Areas 3 and 4 consisted primarily of a track or driveway defined by flanking ditches (Fig 2), with the southern ditch overlying and cutting the pit alignment. The ditch did not produce any finds later than the later prehistoric period. In addition, there were several field boundary ditches that appeared to take their alignment from the route of the trackway.

Medieval to post-medieval activity

Several features of probable medieval or post-medieval date, comprising boundary ditches, ridge and furrow and a waterhole were recorded within Areas 1, 4 and 6. Although no pottery or other finds of medieval or post-medieval date were recovered from these features, they have been assigned to this period based on their spatial relationships with extant modern field boundaries and, in some cases, stratigraphic relationships to earlier features.

A LATER PREHISTORIC LANDSCAPE AT SANDY LANE, NORTHAMPTON

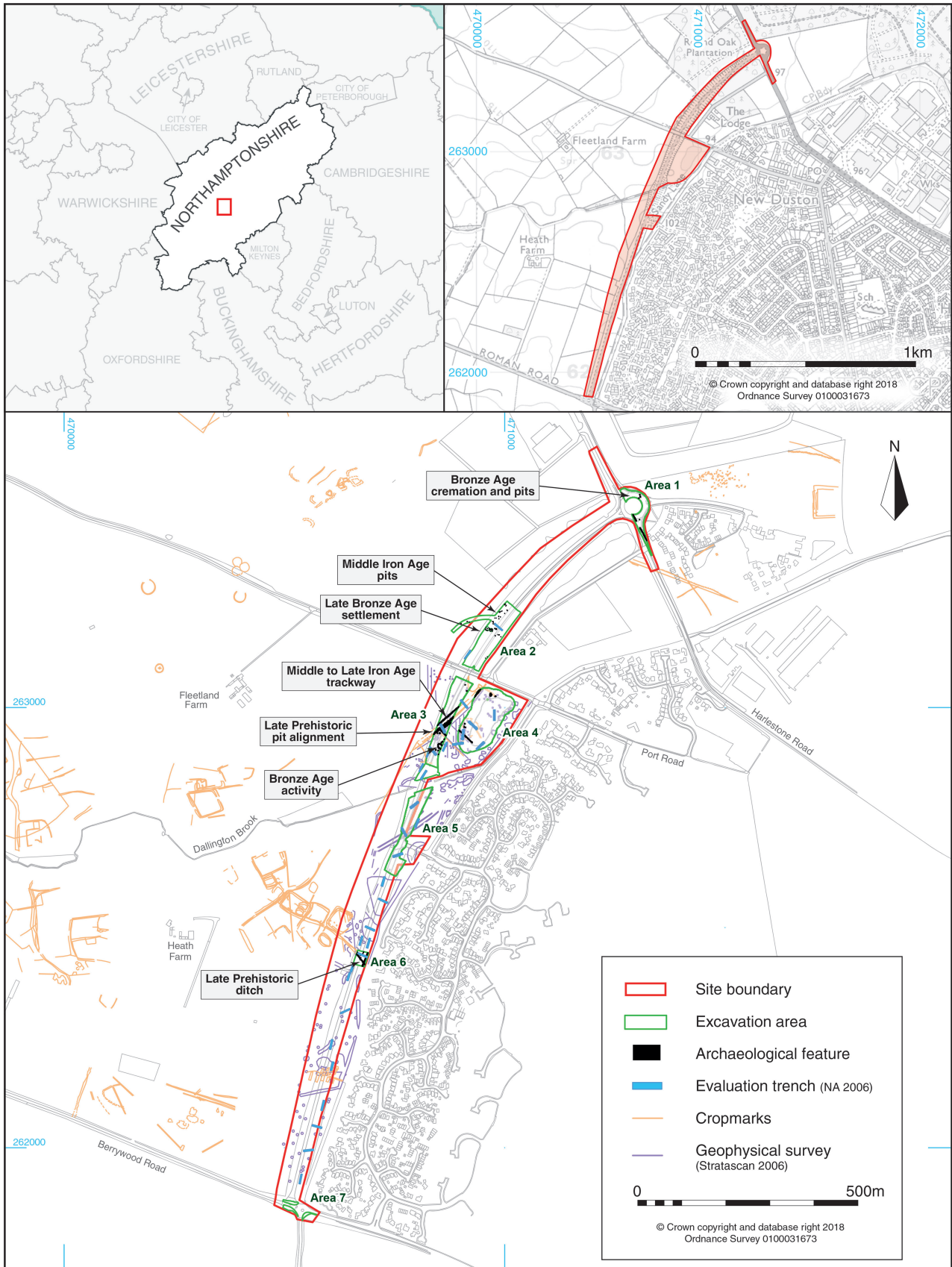


Fig 1: Site location

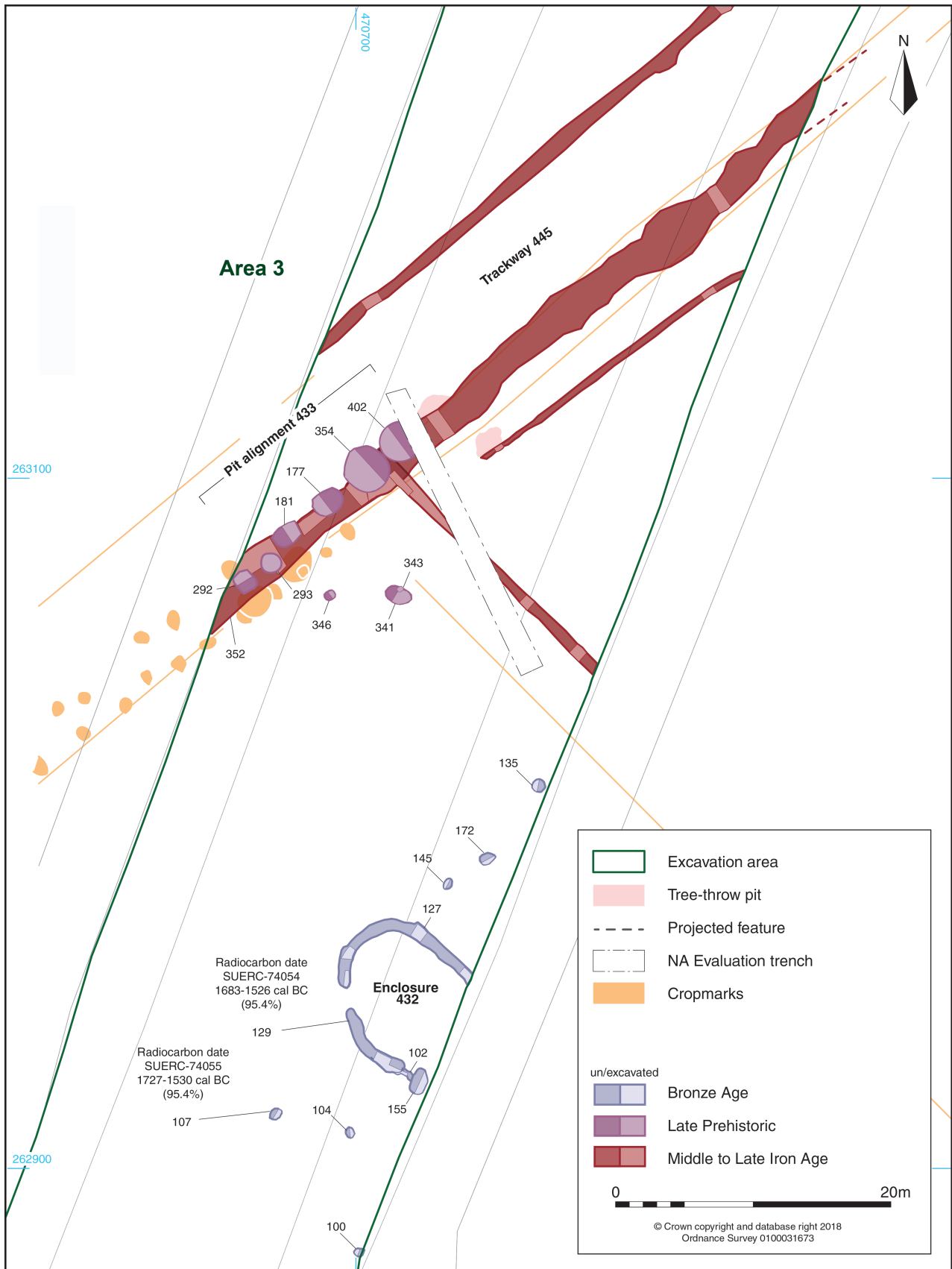


Fig 2: Early/Middle Bronze Age enclosure 432 and later prehistoric pit alignment



Fig 3: Bronze Age Enclosure 432, looking north (Scales: 1m and 2m)

Finds

The finds assemblage is consistent with small-scale settlement and agricultural/industrial activity during the main periods represented. The assemblage comprises flint, pottery, fired clay, worked stone and worked bone.

The flint assemblage consists of 18 worked flints, mostly comprising flakes along with 22 burnt unworked flints. The only chronologically diagnostic piece is a core rejuvenation flake dating to the Mesolithic or Early Neolithic recovered from a Late Bronze Age pit.

There is a small amount of Bronze Age pottery entirely comprising unfeathered body sherds in shell, limestone and quartz-tempered fabrics. Otherwise, the pottery assemblage mostly consists of later prehistoric, Late Bronze Age/ Iron Age, material and is dominated by shell and limestone-tempered fabrics, with vessels (where identifiable) probably comprising globular jars. A substantial proportion of this later prehistoric material derives from the Late Bronze Age roundhouses and the pit alignment.

The fired-clay assemblage comprises 28 fragments, 27 of which belong to two pyramidal or triangular loomweights from a Late Bronze Age pit. The worked stone assemblage includes 60 pieces of burnt stone and a stone disc, 64mm in diameter, which is possibly a flywheel or loomweight, recovered from a posthole of Late Bronze Age roundhouse 436. The worked bone object is a bone awl or point recovered from another posthole belonging to the same structure.

Biological evidence

The biological assemblage consisted of human bone, animal bone, charred plant macrofossils and charcoal, consistent with human occupation and agricultural use of the landscape, including both pastoralism and agrarian production during later prehistory.

The human bone assemblage comprised 88g of cremated material recovered from Middle Bronze Age cremation 515, probably representing a ‘token’ human burial consisting entirely of skull and long-bone fragments and perhaps reflecting the status of the individual.

The animal bone assemblage was small, comprising 54 fragments of highly fragmented burnt bone, none of which could be identified to species.

Charred plant remains were recovered from three bulk soil samples from Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age contexts. The moderate to large Bronze Age assemblage was dominated by fragments of hazelnut shell (*Corylus avellana*) and sloe stones (*Prunus spinosa*), along with a single indeterminate grain fragment. The Late Bronze Age assemblage was dominated by cereal remains including barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), hulled wheat, emmer or spelt (*Triticum dicoccum/spelta*) and free-threshing wheat (*Triticum turgidum/aestivum* type). In addition, there were weed seeds of goosefoot (*Chenopodium* sp.), stitch-worts (*Stellaria* sp.) andampions (*Silene* sp.).

The well-preserved charcoal assemblage recovered from the Bronze Age cremation burial and other Late

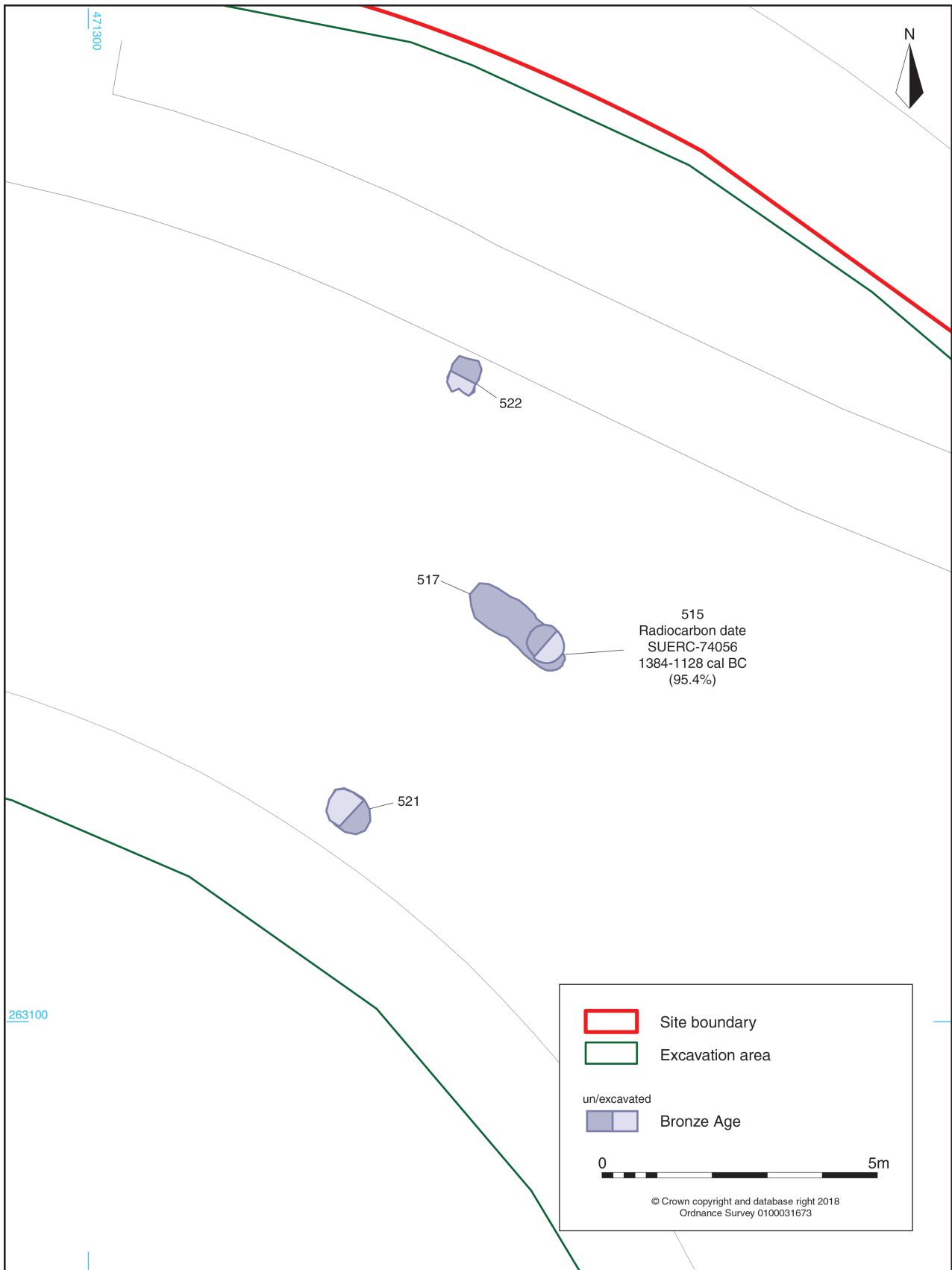


Fig 4: Early to Middle Bronze Age features from Area 1

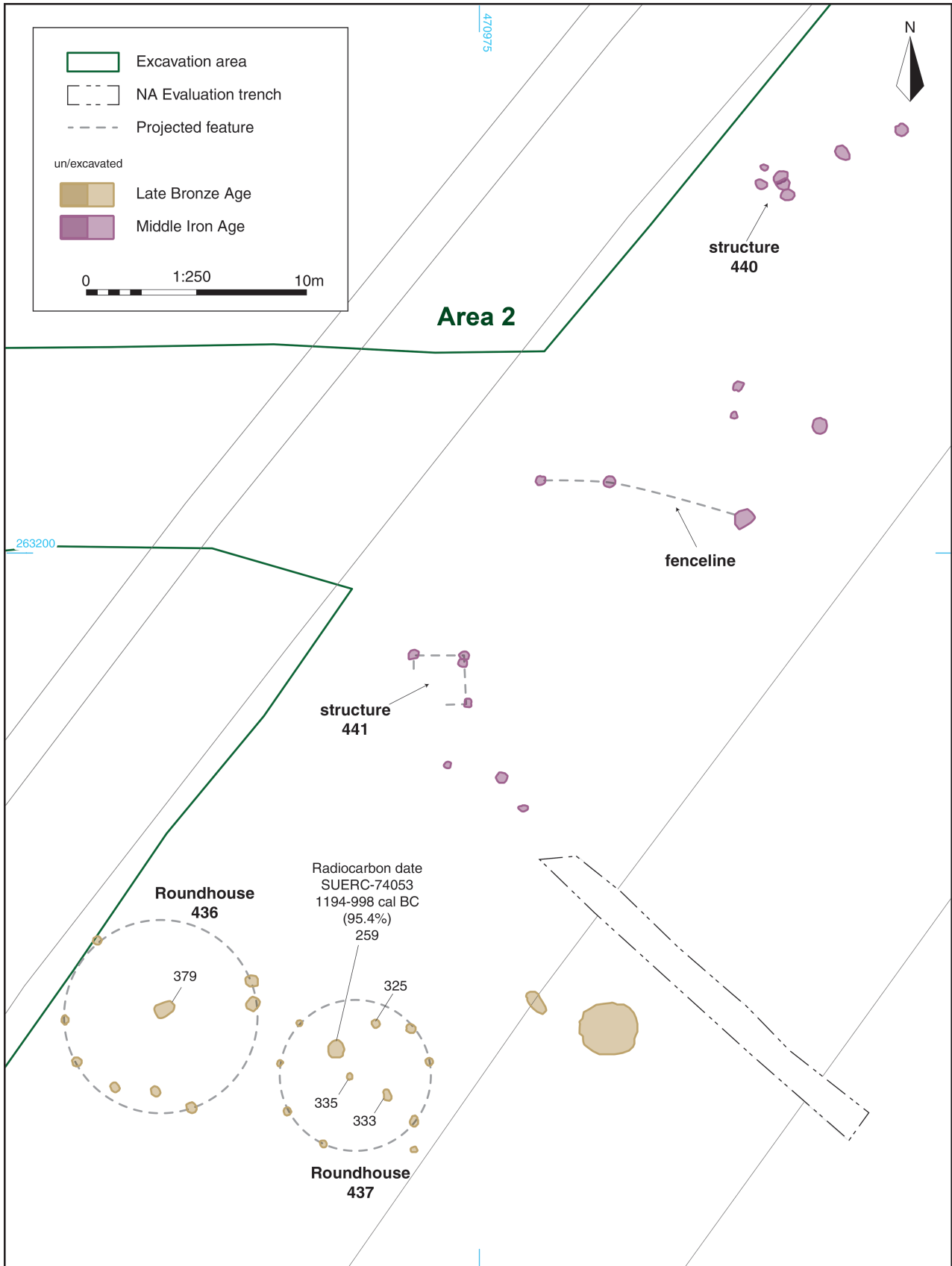


Fig 5: Late Bronze Age roundhouses and Middle Iron Age four-post structures

Bronze Age and Middle Iron Age contexts comprised fragments from elm (*Ulmus* sp.), oak (*quercus* sp.), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), poplar or willow (*Populus/Salix*), Maloideae including apple (*Malus*)/ service/whitebeam/rowan (*Sorbus*), hawthorn (*Crataegus*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), field maple (*Acer campestre*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The fuel wood used for the cremation burial was dominated by oak.

The radiocarbon dates

Full details of the samples and the radiocarbon dating results are available in the client report (Cotswold Archaeology 2017, 66–67), which is summarised below (Table 1).

Discussion

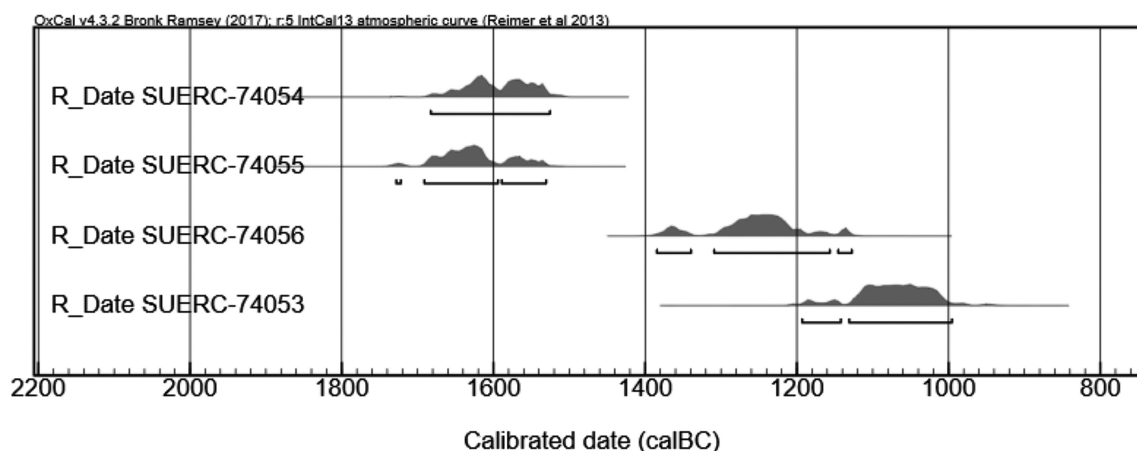
The New Sandy Lane road scheme transects the slope of a spur of the Northamptonshire uplands that flanks the northern side of the Upper Nene valley and is bisected towards its northern end by the Dallington Brook, which

flows into the River Nene to the south. The underlying geology comprises interbedded sand stone and siltstone at both the northern and southern ends of the route, with areas of more permeable Northamptonshire sands, overlain by alluvial silts, sands and gravels either side of the brook (BGS 2017). The underlying soils therefore would have provided a mixed prospect for settlement and agriculture, with the most suitable locations lying on the gentle slopes to the north and south of the brook, exactly where the excavations revealed the most intensive activity, including the Bronze Age settlement or funerary activity from Area 3, the Late Bronze Age settlement and Middle Iron Age four-post structures from Area 2, and the later prehistoric pit alignment from Area 3 and the Middle to Late Iron Age boundary ditches and trackway.

The environmental evidence in the form of charcoal and charred plant remains indicates that the Bronze Age environment was largely lacking in domesticated crops, with evidence for cereal cultivation thereafter. Charcoal from the feature fills suggests that the population had easy access to mixed deciduous woodland, comprising a diversity of species from the Late Bronze Age until at least the Middle to Late Iron Age, suggesting that hillslopes away from settlement foci may have been heavily wooded in places.

Table 1: The radiocarbon determinations

Laboratory No.	Context	Material	Radiocarbon Age BP	Calibrated dates cal BC 68.2% confidence 95.4% confidence
SUERC-74054	Ditch 129 Enclosure 432	Charcoal (hazel)	3320±30	1640–1600 (30.6%) 1590–1540 (37.6%) 1680–1530 (95.4%)
SUERC-74055	Pit 107 near enclosure 129	Carbonised Hazelnut	3340±30	1680–1610 (58.6%) 1580–1560 (9.6%) 1690–1530 (95.0%)
SUERC-74056	Cremation burial 515	Cremated bone	3010±30	1290–1210 (66.0%) 1380–1340 (10.4%) 1310–1160 (80.4%)
SUERC-74053	Pit 259 Roundhouse 437	Charcoal (Hawthorn/rowan etc)	2890±30	1110–1030 (68.2%) 1190–1140 (8.8%) 1130–1000 (86.6%)



Laboratory: (SUERC) Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre; Plot: OxCal v4.3.2
 Calibrated dates at less than 8% confidence omitted from table
 All dates rounded to nearest 10 years

The Bronze Age remains include an oval enclosure that produced no material finds to indicate its function. The radiocarbon date of 1680–1530 cal BC (SUERC-74054, 95.4% probability) places the enclosure within the Early/Middle Bronze Age transition (using the chronological framework for the Bronze Age used by Cotswold Archaeology). The enclosure could be interpreted as either a funerary enclosure/oval barrow within an Early Bronze Age tradition or perhaps a domestic enclosure of the emerging Middle Bronze Age. The surrounding pits are contemporary, and contained dumps of hearth debris, including hazelnut shells, with the range of cereals present suggestive of an agricultural regime that included both small-scale cereal cultivation and animal husbandry. The topographical location on the sandy soils overlooking Dallington Brook to the south, would have been suited to this kind of agricultural activity, however, an abundance of wild species among the charred plant remains suggests a greater reliance on wild foods, more typical of a mobile hunter-gatherer subsistence strategy in a less open environment, than of a well-established agricultural regime.

The Middle Bronze Age cremation burial was located on the lower slopes of a low hill at the far northern end of the route, also overlooking Dallington Brook, but situated on silty clay soils derived from the underlying sandstone and siltstone geology and comprised a unurned ‘token’ deposit of adult human remains.

By the Late Bronze Age the focus of settlement/activity had shifted to the north, although still on the free-draining Northampton sands. The unenclosed Late Bronze Age settlement was represented by two post-built roundhouses comprising partial rings of posts and both containing pits with hearth debris, and with some evidence for craft production, including textile and leather production in one of the buildings. Willis (2006, 94–5) states that very few sites in Northamptonshire can be firmly attributed to the Late Bronze Age, with settlement sites of this type in the region more commonly dated to the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, although finds and sites of this date are also infrequent (*ibid.*, 97–8). However, the settlement from New Sandy Lane seems likely to have been contemporary with a probable Late Bronze Age enclosure and a scatter of Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age pits at Harlestone Quarry, nearby to the north-west (Chapman *et al* 2017), which also produced an assemblage of Late Bronze Age loomweights.

Iron Age activity consisted of a pit alignment, with the final filling dating to the Middle Iron Age, and a Middle Iron Age scatter of pits and postholes to the north-east of the Late Bronze Age settlement. These represent two different if potentially overlapping uses of the landscape.

The short stretch of pit alignment seems to have followed the contour of the gentle slope above Dallington Brook (Fig 1) and appeared from the cropmark plots to continue beyond the limit of excavation to the south-west and into Area 4 to the north-east; although no corresponding features were found during excavation. The Sandy Lane pit alignment forms part of an extensive local landscape containing multiple pit alignments, many of which have been at least partially investigated. To the north, in the landscape around the Dallington Causewayed

enclosure there are three known but unexcavated pit alignments, and a little to the west an excavated pit alignment at Dallington Gateway (Chapman this volume) and another further to the north-west at Harlestone Quarry (Chapman *et al.* 2017). There was another pit alignment to the south-east, and south of Berrywood Road (Speed 2015). Further to the south-east of Sandy Lane, along the northern margins of the Nene valley, there was a pit alignment at Upton and Quinton House (Walker and Maull 2010; Foard-Colby and Walker 2010) and 1km to the west either a continuation of the same alignment or a different but perhaps related pit alignment (Carlyle 2010). These may all perhaps have functioned to divide areas of settlement and agricultural activity during the Early Iron Age, with some apparently retained or at least only becoming redundant into the Middle Iron Age.

The pits and postholes to the north of the Late Bronze Age settlement seem to represent up to three four-post structures, which are most often interpreted as the foundations for grain stores, although a range of other functions have been suggested (Willis 2006, 99). If the New Sandy Lane four-post structures were granaries then they may well represent zoned activity on the periphery of a settlement situated to the east or west of the road corridor.

The Middle to Late Iron Age trackway which replaced the pit alignment in Area 3 and continued into Area 4, and the associated enclosure boundary ditches to its south-east, seem likely to have formed part of a much larger landscape of settlement and agricultural occupation hinted at by cropmarks recorded to the west of the new road (shown on Fig 2), which the large undated boundary ditch from Area 6 also seems likely to have been part of. Such occupation was clearly very common in the environs of New Sandy Lane, as shown by the cropmarks and also the extensive excavated evidence for Middle Iron Age settlement (Shaw *et al* 1990, Speed 2015, Walker and Maull 2010, Foard-Colby and Walker 2010, Holmes and Chapman 2006).

After the end of the Middle to Late Iron Age there was no clear evidence of any activity along the course of the road scheme until the medieval to post-medieval period. Medieval and post-medieval evidence consisting largely of ridge and furrow probably related to open-field cultivation associated with the nearby settlements of Harpole 1.5km to the south-west and Harlestone c.1km to the north. The waterhole, which is in a typical position close to a field boundary, perhaps dated to the post-medieval period and would therefore indicate that the field in question had been turned over to pasture by this point.

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Online resources

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