

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report no. 859

**An Archaeological Strip and Record Excavation at
Longdell Hills, Easton,
Norfolk.**

Interim report

Michael Boyle

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Local Authority No. 100019340

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Location	Longdell Hills, Easton, Norfolk
Grid Ref.	TG 140 111
HER No.	36414 EAS
Date of fieldwork	2nd to 27th June 2003

Summary

An archaeological strip and record excavation was carried out between the 2nd and 27th of June 2003 in advance of mineral extraction operations at Longdell Hills, Easton, in central Norfolk. This work constituted Phase 4 of a six phase programme to be carried out over a five year period.

A significant number of archaeological features and deposits were recorded dating from the Earlier Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romano-British and medieval periods.

1.0 Introduction

(Fig.1)

An Archaeological strip and record excavation was carried out at Longdell Hills, Easton, in central Norfolk between the 2nd and 27th June 2003 in advance of mineral extraction. The work was carried out by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) and involved the monitoring of topsoil stripping prior to the extraction of aggregates. The area that was topsoil stripped measured 220m long (east to west) and between 95m wide (at the western end) and 130m wide (at the eastern end). A total of approximately 24,750 squared metres. The site occupied a position west of centre of the total area designated for mineral extraction (Fig. 1).

The work constituted Phase 4 of a six phase programme to be carried out over a five year period. This report forms an interim statement, it follows on from two previous interim reports which presented the results from the archaeological evaluation of the site (Trimble 2002a) and a watching brief which monitored the installation of the haul road (Trimble 2002b). Moreover, this report precedes a further watching brief which monitored the topsoil stripping of an area lying to the west of the total area designated for mineral extraction (Trimble 2004). A full and detailed report is to be produced on the completion of archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping at the end of Phase 6.

2.0 Results

(Figs 2 and 3)

A range of archaeological features were distributed across the site that included twenty pits, three gullies, one ditch and a structure comprising of post-holes and a gully.

Undated burnt pits

Fifteen of the pits ([577], [584], [587], [590], [601], [610], [615], [617], [661], [664], [669], [671], [678], [682] and [692]) recorded were very similar and thought to be of the same age and constructed for the same purpose. Although exhibiting some variation in size (longest diameter 2.10m ([678]), shortest diameter 1.10m ([615]), deepest 0.42m ([617]), shallowest 0.19m ([615])), all exhibited similar characteristics in terms of their morphology and fills. All were oval or sub-circular in plan, with gently sloping sides and moderately level bases. Significantly, all had charcoal rich primary fills measuring between 0.15m to 0.20m in depth with secondary fills of essentially grey silty sands. The majority of these pits also showed signs of scorching of their bases and sides in the form of orange red natural sands and gravels. This evidence strongly suggests that these pits contained *in situ* fires. These pits are in addition to the thirty-one similar features recorded in the three other phases of work.

Finds other than charcoal were scarce although worked flint (one retouched flake) and medieval (11th to 14th century) pottery was recovered from pit [669]. While more worked flint (one blade, one flake and one utilised fragment) was recovered from pit [671] and additional medieval pottery found in pit [617].

Other pits

Pits [613] and [676], were situated in the central southern portion of the site and were in close proximity. They displayed a similar size and morphology and contained similar fills (a rich brown sandy silt with charcoal flecking). These two small pits contained substantial amounts of earlier Iron Age (800-500 BC) pottery which was well preserved suggesting that it had not been exposed on the surface before being incorporated into the features.

Pit [593] was tentatively interpreted as being a large post-pit. Apparently unrelated to any other feature it produced four pieces of worked flint (one blade, one flake, one shatter and one utilised flake). The presence of the blade suggests a possible Earlier Neolithic date.

Pit [550] may have natural origins (tree throw) but produced two sherds of indeterminate Iron age pottery. Seven other pits were identified ([563], [565], [567], [571], [573], [599] and [667]) that did not contain charcoal fills and were barren of any other cultural material, it is possible they are also of natural origin – possibly tree throws.

The ditch

One ditch was recorded ([620]), it measured 1.1m wide and had a maximum depth of 0.3m. Situated towards the east of the site and aligned approximately north to south the feature extended beyond the limit of excavation to the north. The southern terminus of the ditch was undefined. No datable artefacts were recovered from the feature.

The gullies

Three gullies ([556], [579] and [582]) were recorded towards the western end of the site.

Gully [556] had an average depth of 0.23m and was approximately 0.75m wide. Aligned north to south the feature extended beyond both limits (north and south) of excavation. Three sherds of Iron age pottery and a flint flake of indeterminate date were recovered from the feature.

Gully [579] was located in close proximity to [556]. This feature emerged from the northern edge of excavation and ran parallel with [556] for a short distance before curving quite sharply to the east and terminating. Measuring 0.7m average width and 0.16m in depth this gully produced two flint flakes. The brown sandy silt fills of the two gullies were identical.

Gully [582] had a maximum depth of 0.1m and an average width of 0.60m. North-east to south-west aligned this feature terminated approximately 6m to the east of the western edge of excavation. Filled with a brown silt sand this shallow gully produced four sherds of Iron age and 100 sherds of Romano-British pottery, the latter all from the same vessel which was dated to the late 1st to early 2nd century AD.

The structure

The remains of a structure (M[630]) were located and recorded in the central northern portion of the site (Fig. 3). It consisted of a roughly circular arrangement of eleven post- and stake-holes ([634], [636], [638], [640], [642], [644], [646], [653], [655], [657] and [659]), with five internal post-hole or pits ([604], [622], [624], [631] and [648]). Two of the internal features contained pottery dating to the Iron Age, one sherd came from post-hole [648] and three from [604].

To the north of and immediately adjacent to this arrangement was a shallow slot or gully ([626]) with two contemporary post-holes ([607] and [628]). Owing to the close proximity and comparable fills of this feature to the structure it was thought to be associated with it and also of an Iron Age date.

This gully ([626]) cut post-hole [628] which contained a large relatively unabraded sherd of pottery dating to the Bronze age suggesting an earlier date for this particular feature.

3.0 The Finds

3.1 *The Pottery*

A total of 159 sherds of pottery, weighing 1.083kg, were retrieved during this excavation. Prehistoric pottery (77% by weight) was the most common, although Romano-British (21%) and medieval (2%) pottery was also found.

3.1.1 Earlier Iron Age pottery

Excavations at Longdell Hills produced an assemblage of fifty-two sherds weighing 0.837kg of prehistoric pottery. The majority of the sherds date to the Earlier Iron Age (800-500BC). One sherd may be of Bronze Age date and is distinguished by soft grog tempered fabric.

The Earlier Iron Age pottery was mostly recovered from a number of post-holes from structure (M[630]). The sherds feature distinctive fingertip-impressed decoration to the shoulder and to the rim and are made of coarse flint tempered fabric. The majority of the assemblage is well preserved suggesting that it had not been exposed on the surface before incorporation in the post-holes. Five sherds recovered from the fills of two ditches are highly abraded indicating that they are probably residual.

The discovery of a post-hole structure of earlier Iron Age date with associated pottery is of great interest and is comparable with structures discovered nearby in the early 1990s on the line of the Norwich Southern Bypass at Harford Farm (Ashwin and Bates 2000). Further work on the assemblage would examine the deposition of sherds around the structure to reveal any spatial patterning. Possible ritual elements to the pattern of artefact deposition have been observed in several contemporary structures (Fitzpatrick 1994) and the Longdell structure could provide further evidence of this custom.

3.1.2 Romano-British pottery

One hundred sherds of Romano-British pottery, weighing 0.225kg, were found in the fill of a shallow (probably truncated) gully [582]. The sherds date to between the 1st to early 2nd centuries AD and originate from a single sandy grey ware (unsourced but probably locally produced) medium mouthed storage jar.

3.1.3 Medieval pottery

Seven sherds of medieval pottery, weighing 0.021kg, were recovered from two contexts. The six pieces from burnt pit [617] are body sherds from a handmade vessel with a sandy fabric and dated to between the 11th and 14th centuries. The one sherd recovered from burnt pit [670] is a rim sherd with a similar fabric to that found in [617] and dates from between the 11th to 12th centuries. This sherd displayed four circular stamped impressions.

3.2 *Fired clay*

The site produced two small fragments of fired clay, weighing 0.003kg, from one context ([668]).

3.3 *Flint*

A total of twenty struck flints were recovered from the site consisting mainly of small unmodified flakes. Several flakes are squat in shape and were probably struck by hard hammer from small gravel pebbles and fragments. A shatter piece with some patinated surfaces and a small heavily patinated flake may be of thermal origin although they might have resulted from knapping. One quite large flake appears to be from a prepared core, it has some abrasion of its platform. A very small flake ([649]) which has a battered surface is probably a fragment from a hammerstone. Two small blades (one incomplete) are also present.

Type	Number
Blade	2
Blade-like flake	1
Flake	11
Hammerstone flake	1
Shatter	1
Retouched flake	1
Scraper	1
Non-struck fragment	0
Utilised flake	1
Utilised fragment	1
Total	20

Table 1: The flint

A few retouched or utilised pieces are also present. They include a scraper ([561]) formed by the neat retouch of a small squat flake fragment, a utilised blade-like flake ([594]) and a utilised thermal fragment ([673]). A heavily abraded and patinated flake ([670]) may also be retouched.

The assemblage is small and there are no pieces which can be closely dated. The small hard hammer struck flakes and presence of a utilised thermal fragment suggest that a later prehistoric date (Later Neolithic to Iron Age) is likely for some of the material but the small blades could be of an earlier date (Earlier Neolithic). The flint probably represents activity in the vicinity of the site at several periods.

4.0 Discussion

Evidence for Neolithic activity

Pit [593] (tentatively interpreted as a large post-pit), produced four struck flints including a blade and a utilised flake. If these flints are not residual they point to an Earlier Neolithic date for this feature.

Evidence for Bronze age activity

A single sherd of possible Bronze age pottery was recovered from the site. This quite large and unabraded sherd came from the fill a post-hole [628] which was associated with a shallow gully/slot situated immediately to the north of structure (M [630]). The function of this small complex of features is unknown although given the post-hole/slot association a structural origin is suspected. The large size and unabraded condition of the pottery sherd suggests that it was not residual.

Evidence for Iron age activity

Evidence for Iron age activity on the site was well represented, pottery of this period being recorded from pits, gullies and post-holes associated with a structure.

Pit/post-hole [613] contained twenty-nine unabraded sherds dating to the Earlier Iron age (800-500 BC), which belong to several different vessels. Three of these sherds are decorated.

Located in close proximity to [613] and very probably associated with it was pit/post-hole [676]. This feature produced eleven sherds of pottery also dating from the Earlier Iron age. This amount of pottery contained in these two relatively small features represents quite a high concentration so perhaps ritual deposition should be considered.

Pottery retrieved from features [604] and [648] associated with the small sub-circular suggest an Iron age date (possibly a little later than pits [613] and [676] judging by the pottery report). The small size and simplicity of the structure perhaps rules out permanent domestic occupation, more likely is that it was for some other use such as a base for hunting or some such activity.

Five sherds of Iron age pottery recovered from gullies [556] and [582] were highly abraded and thought to be probably residual.

Evidence for Romano-British activity

Gully [582] located at the western end of the site produced one hundred sherds of pottery which made up the greater part of a single vessel dating to the late 1st or early 2nd centuries. This vessel represents the only evidence for Romano-British activity on the site. The function of the gully is unknown but may be evidence for division of the landscape in this period.

Evidence for medieval activity

The charcoal rich pits

The charcoal rich pits were thinly, and it would appear randomly, distributed over the site. Although a single sherd of Bronze Age pottery was recorded from one of these pits ([261]) during the evaluation phase it was thought that due to its small size and abraded condition that it could well have been residual. The pottery recovered from pits [617] and [669] in this phase of excavation (Phase 4), has been dated to between the 11th to 14th centuries suggesting a medieval date for the pits. If this is the case the lack of any evidence for settlement of this period in the near vicinity indicates that whatever their function was it took place away from areas of occupation.

Possible interpretations as to the function of the pits include their use as ovens or for charcoal production. A medieval date for the pits would suggest that charcoal production is the most likely. Pit [682] provides possible supporting evidence for this theory as it displayed a different sequence of fills to the rest in that it had been re-cut. The primary fills displayed similar characteristics to those of the other pits (i.e. charcoal rich primary fills with grey sandy secondary deposits), the fill of the re-cut however consisted almost entirely of relatively large pieces of charcoal, many of which were still recognisable as tree branches or small logs and perhaps represent charcoal which was made but never retrieved.

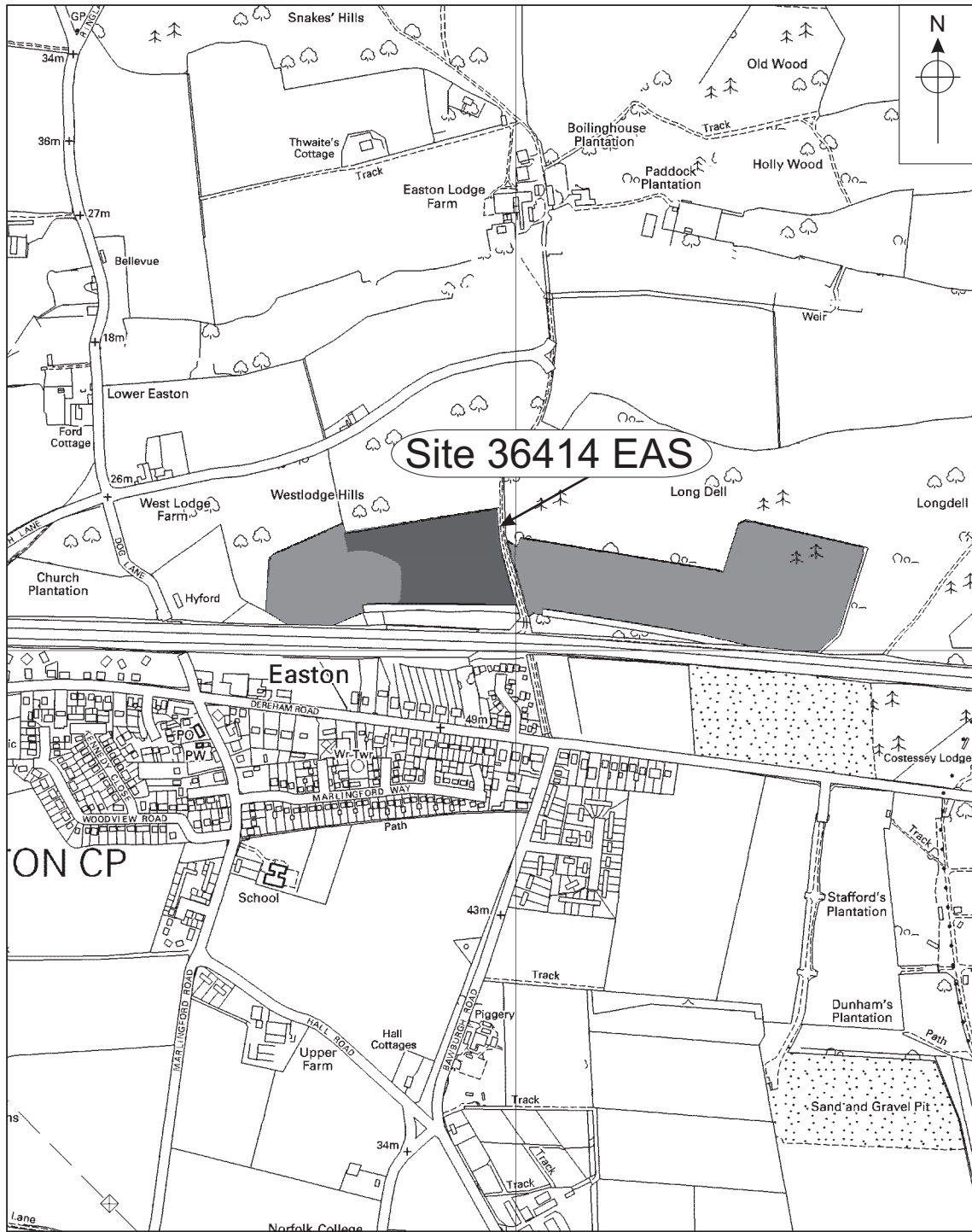
Environmental sampling of the pits gave little indication as to the original function of the features with the plant macrofossil assemblages having a surprising lack of anything other than charcoal. Of course charcoal was likely to be a by-product of any process involving the burning of wood in pits such as these as there would have been a restricted supply of oxygen to any smouldering debris not exposed on the surface so it is difficult to be certain as to whether charcoal was the intended end product or that it was a by-product of some other process. The high concentration of tree throws present on the site reveals that before conversion to open fields the site was a wooded environment which of course would have provided the raw materials necessary for this activity.

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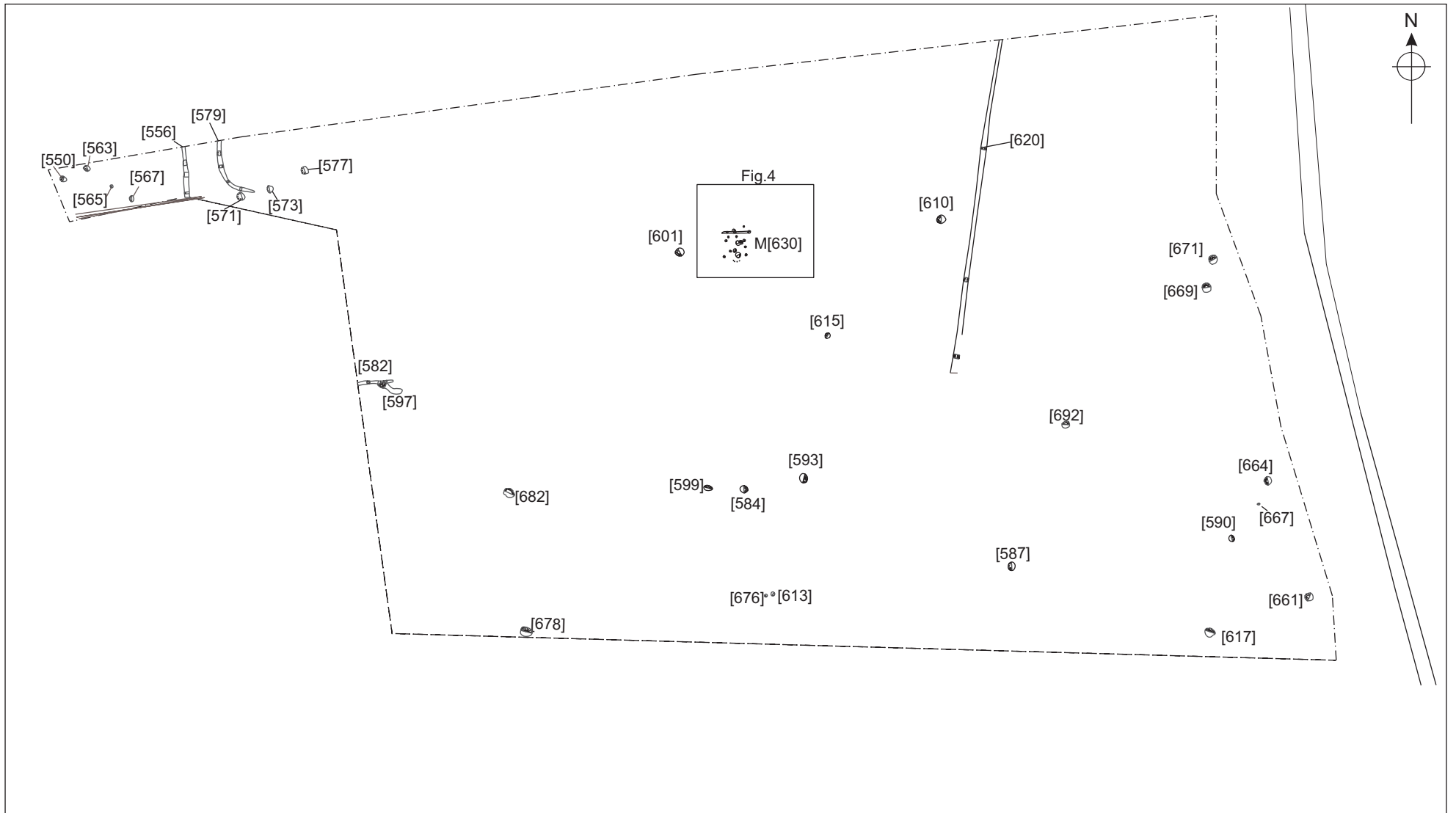


Key

- Total survey area
- Total survey area



Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000



0 100m

Figure 2. Location of features. Scale 1:1000

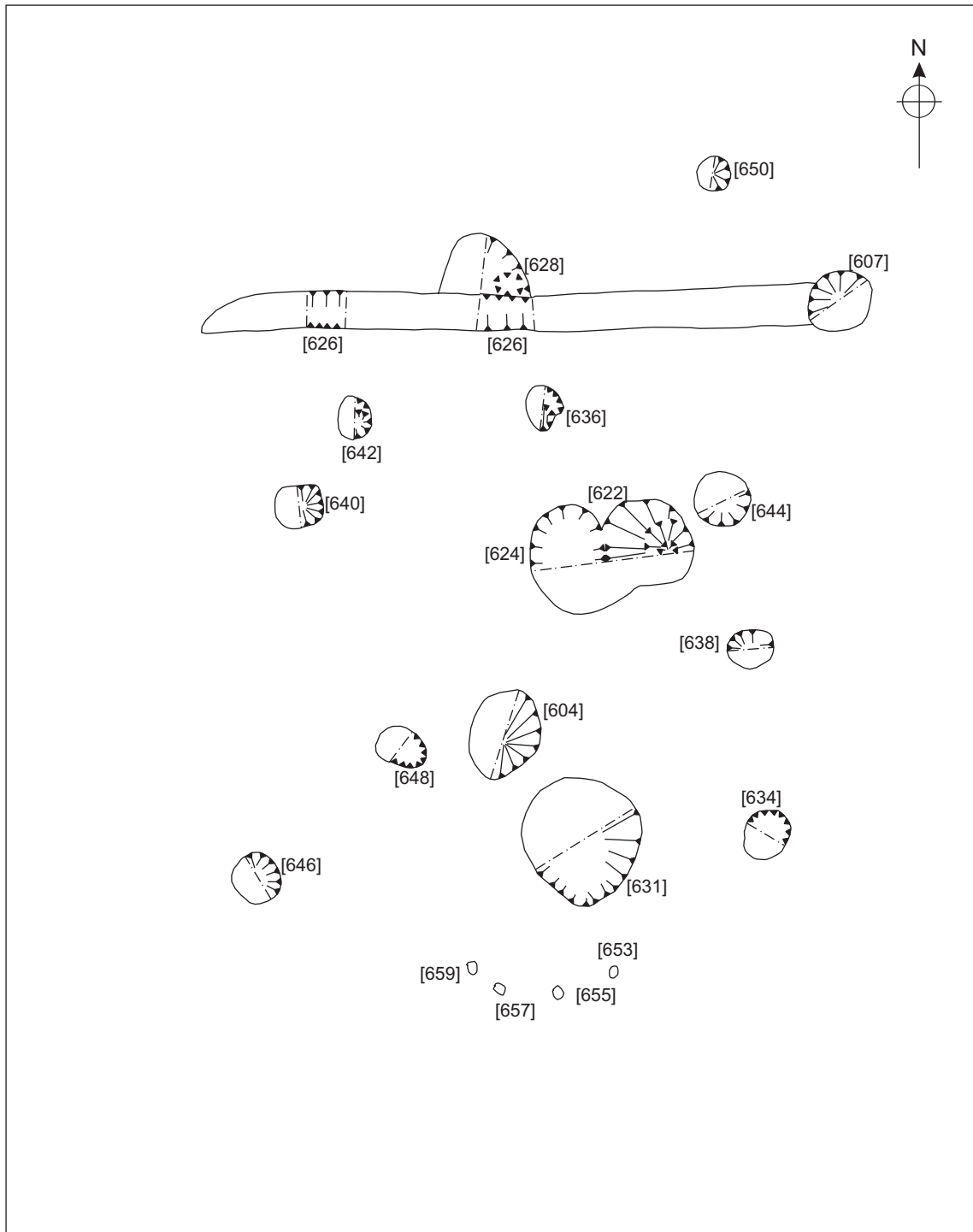


Figure 3. Plan of structure M[360]. Scale 1:50