Field Surveys in Bedfordshire

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SUMMARY

Four parishes in the south of Bedfordshire were surveyed field-by-field for archaeological "sites" and for the remains of medieval fields. Many prehistoric and Roman sites were discovered, forming a density similar to that found previously in the north of the county. The medieval field-patterns were reconstructed from the linear banks that represent furlong boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

During 1977-8 several Bedfordshire parishes were surveyed in the southern part of the county. This was undertaken to compliment the fieldwork undertaken in North Bedfordshire between 1966-72 where many new sites were discovered (Hall and Nickerson 1966; Hall and Hutchings 1972). It was of interest to discover whether the remainder of the county was similarly dense in remains of pre-medieval activity. The surveys were more detailed than those previously made in that the medieval field-boundaries were recorded from which the complete open-field pattern was reconstructed.

The parishes studied in the first instance were Higham Gobion, Sundon and Barton le Clay, with Edworth added in 1983.

METHOD

The fieldwork technique used was to walk over each field in the parish in strips of 100 metres width, when land was suitably weathered in winter. Early sites were identified by the discovery of concentrations of artifacts, domestic bone fragments, burnt stone and other occupational debris. Iron Age and Roman sites were often indicated by a dark stain on the field surface, particularly at the Iron Age remains of Barton le Clay. When a "site" was discovered walking lines were reduced to five metres to collect artifact samples.

Medieval field boundaries were identified by the occurrence of long linear banks of soil that had accumulated at the edges of groups of strips (furlongs). These were plotted on 1:10560 scale Ordnance Survey maps, of which copies were used in the field. The orientations of individual lands were sometimes visible as soilmarks or could be worked out satisfactorily from the field pattern itself. The methods follow those previously used (Hall 1972 and 1981).

RESULTS

The results of the studies are presented here in the form of parish maps. The site locations are indicated by letters and numbers marked where there are spreads of artifacts; the earthwork boundaries of the medieval fields are drawn as thin lines. The strips are schematic only, but the orientations are believed to be correct. Grid references (NGR) are given to the nearest kilometre only; full details may be found in the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

Barton le Clay

SITES

No	NGR	SMR No	Description
1	TL 09 33	7998	Dark area with Iron Age sherds, pebbles, 1 piece of 2nd century Roman pottery. Clay and flint.
2	TL 08 32	9352	Dark area with Iron Age sherds at the SW, and also Belgic and Roman sherds at the NE. A large site; a loomweight. Clay.
3	TL 08 32	9353	Iron Age sherds and a saddle quern fragment. Clay.
4	TL 09 28	14739	Two neolithic flint scatters and a few sherds.
5	TL 09 30	9354	Dark sandy pottery of Iron Age, Roman and Saxon date. Clay.
6	TL 09 31	9355	Dark area with Iron Age sherds. Clay.
7	TL 07 31	3447	Saxon and medieval sherds. Clay.

The medieval fields of Barton are split into two parts by the steep scarp of chalk. This was not ploughable and presumably served as the common pasture for grazing the village animals. Some earthworks of hollow ways and ditches occur to the west at Brook End Green (SMR 3447).

Edworth

No new sites were discovered in this parish because when surveyed the ground was frozen, and only the

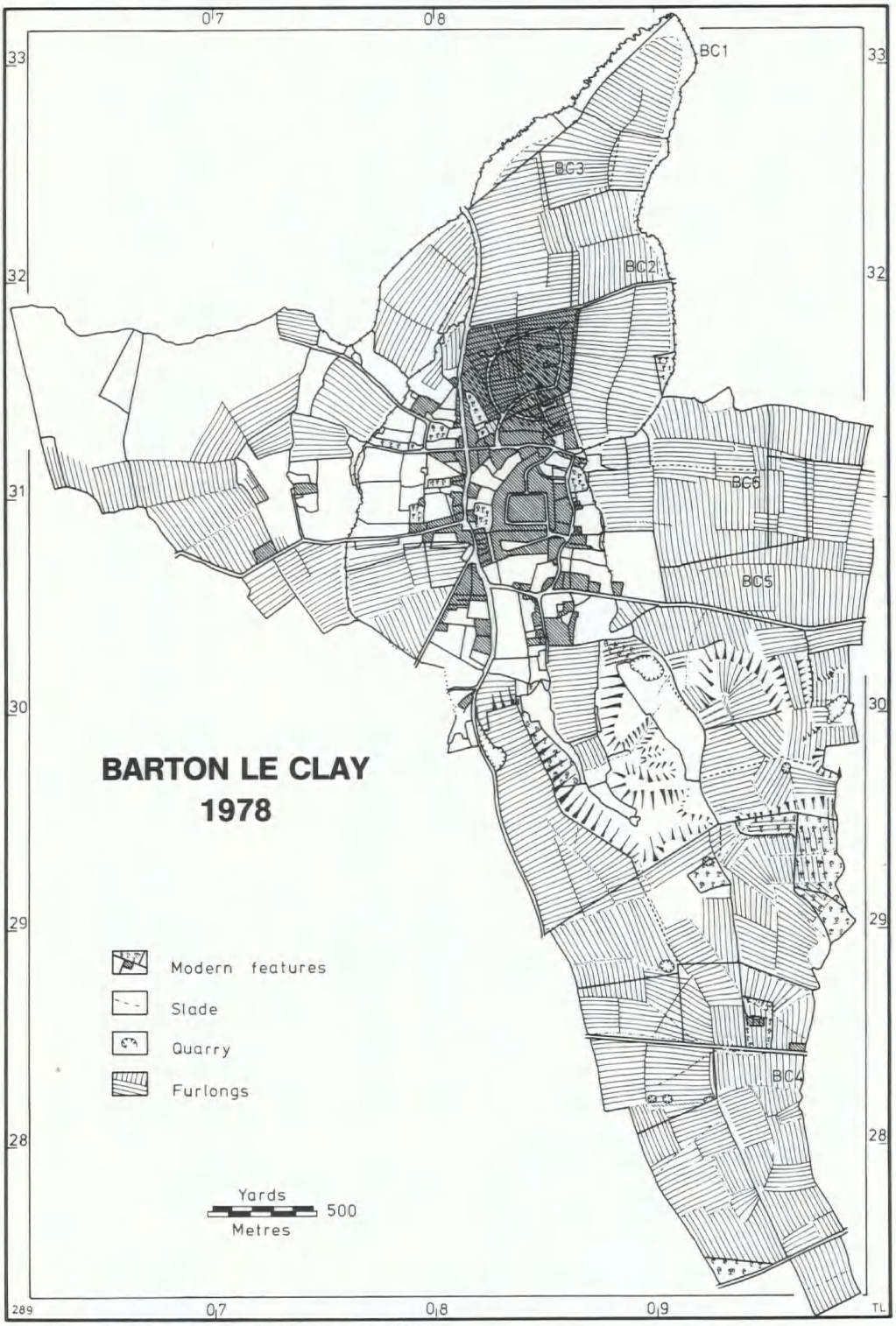

Fig 1 Barton le Clay archaeological survey 1978

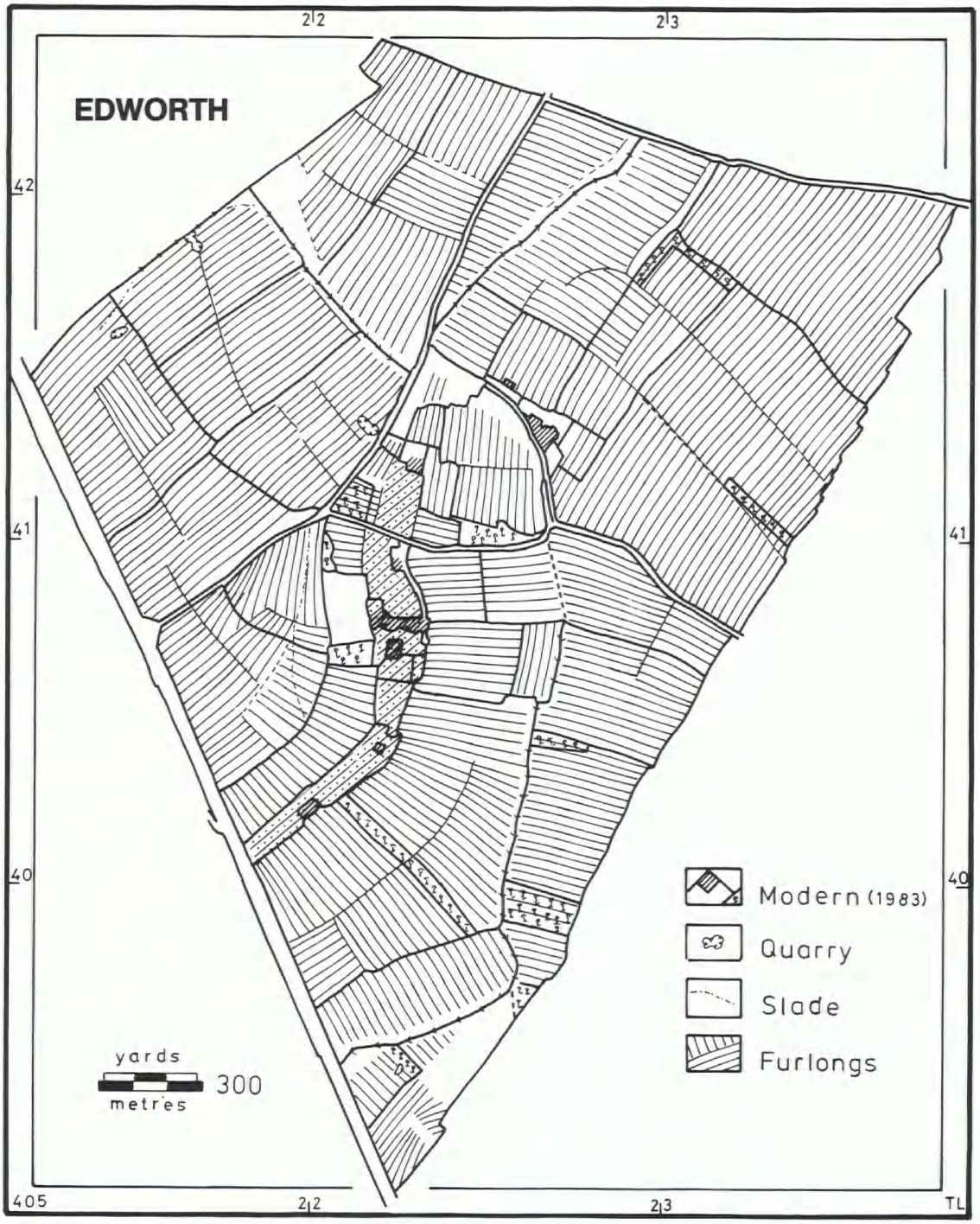

Fig 2 Edworth archaeological survey 1983; the village earthworks are marked by the stippled band

medieval boundaries could be seen. From the information already available in the County Sites and Monuments record it is clear that most of the cropmark sites occur only on clayey Till. This highlights the local relativity of what is a "good" soil; in most areas boulder clay is the worst and unpreferred geology for settlement, but at Edworth it is the best, being preferable to the impermeable Jurassic clay.

Geology also dominates the medieval vill, which lies along the boundary between the two clay types at the spring line. The vill plan has an unusually linear "drove" form, superficially like a fen drove settlement. A large scale plan of these earthworks was made in 1983 (by John Wood, in the SMR).

Higham Gobion

SITES

No	NGR	SMR No	Description
1	TL 10 32	1804	Cropmarks; no finds.
2	TL 10 25	9348	A few worked flints. Glacial gravel.
3	TL 09 33	9349	Iron Age sherds and occupational debris. Gault Clay.
4	TL 09 31	9350	Iron Age sherds on Gault Clay.

The village is shrunken with a few house plots visible (SMR 773). There are the earthworks of a large fishpond to the north of them (TL 10 33; SMR 404).

Sundon

SITES

No	NGR	SMR No	Description
1	TL 04 26	8903	Worked flints, boulder clay.
2	TL 05 26	9308	Iron Age sherds, burnt pebbles etc. Chalky clay.
3	TL 04 27	9309	Dark area with much burnt stone; Roman sherds. Clayey chalk.
4	TL 05 27	9310	Large Iron Age site with some Belgic sherds and a possible house site. A complex of soilmarks of enclosures visible, that probably extend beyond the sherd area. Boulder clay.
5	TL 06 26	9332	Gritty hand-made sherds of Iron Age date. Dark area with many burnt pebbles.
6	TL 06 27	9333	Dark area with many Roman sherds, fragments of querns made of puddingstone and sandstone.
7	TL 06 28	9334	Slightly dark area with Neolithic flints, flint-gritted pottery and Roman sherds.
8	TL 05 27	9341	A few Roman sherds and burnt pebbles from a dark area; clay.
9	TL 06 28	9343	Belgic sherds from a dark area; gravelly clay.
10	TL 04 27	9342	Saxon sherds and a glass bead; glacial gravel.
	TL 05 27	9338	Burnt pebble area of probable prehistoric cooking site.
	TL 05 28	9337	Two small tile kiln sites, 17/18th
	TL 05 27	9337	century.

There are the two vills of Upper and Lower Sundon (SMR 5469, 3558), both very shrunken, of which more detailed plans of the earthwork hollow ways and property boundaries have been made by R. Fowler and the Manshead Archaeological Society. Sundon Wood (TL 05 26; SMR 9340) and Holt Wood (TL 06 28; SMR 9339) are likely to be medieval since they are surrounded by ramparts. The area to the west is quarried and destroyed; land west of the M1 was not investigated.

CONCLUSIONS

The occurrence of pre-medieval sites is seen to be similar to the north of the county. There were several new sites discovered, mainly dating from the Iron Age and Roman periods and lying on heavy soils that are unresponsive to conditions that give rise to cropmarks. The number of Iron Age sites is considerable, they presumably relate to the hill forts in the region.

Most of the soils in the chosen parishes were not as different from the north as might have been expected because the chalk of Sundon and Barton is largely covered by Till (boulder clay). The Jurassic clay (Gault) on the lower ground of Barton was more densely occupied than expected. Studies elsewhere show that these clays are generally avoided (eg north of Cambridge where a 5,000 hectare sample was found barren; Hall forthcoming). The recorded archaeology of Edworth supports this finding also, where most of the cropmark sites occur on the Till clays and not on Jurassic clay.

The locations of the sites discovered follow the distribution pattern first reported in 1966 and subsequently; early prehistoric and Saxon sites normally occur only on light soils, but those of the Iron Age, Roman and medieval periods spread on to heavier clays. This settlement pattern has been observed throughout the south-east Midlands and on the Yorkshire Wolds; it is probably the same throughout the country and Europe.

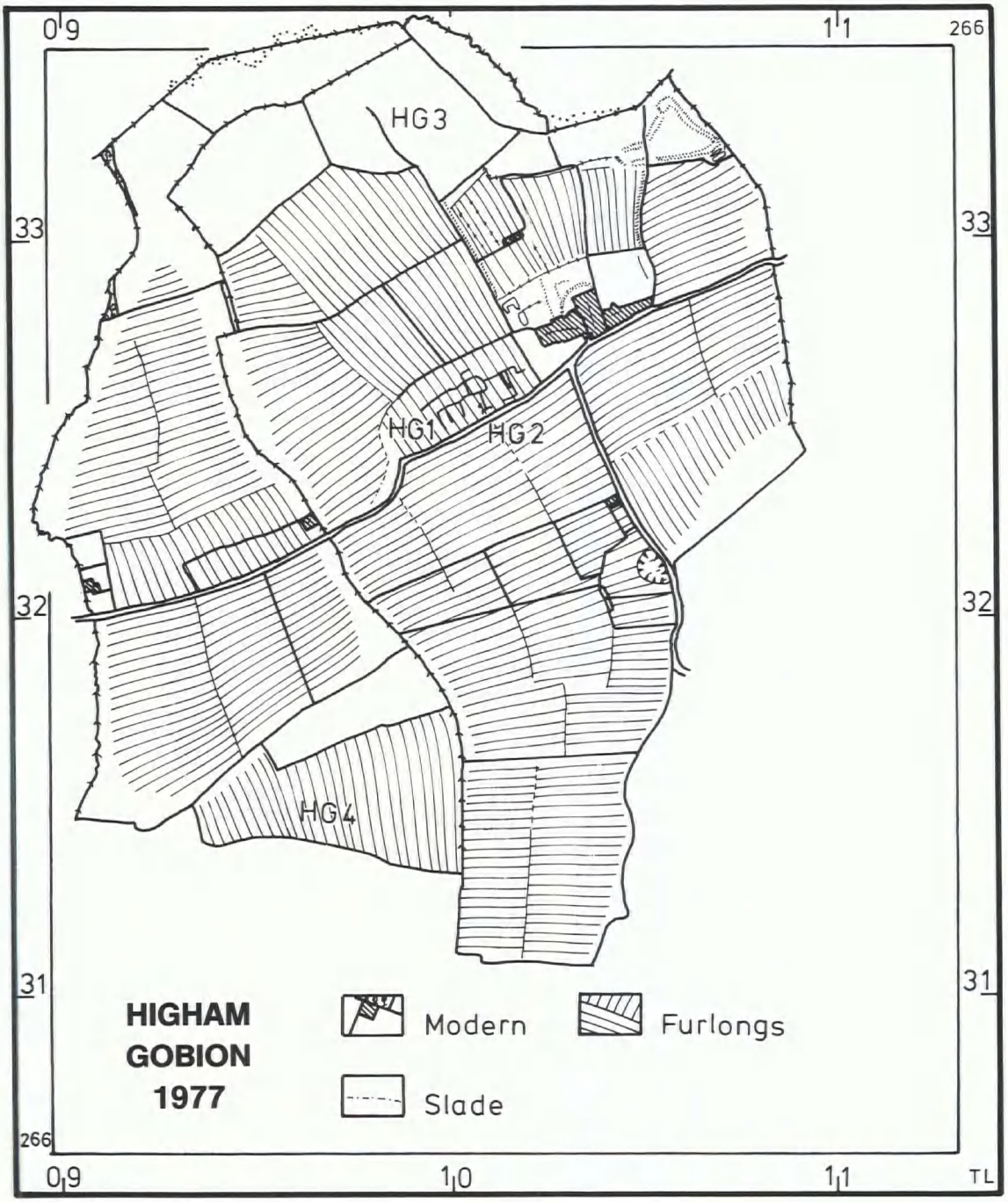

Fig 3 Higham Gobion archaeological survey 1977

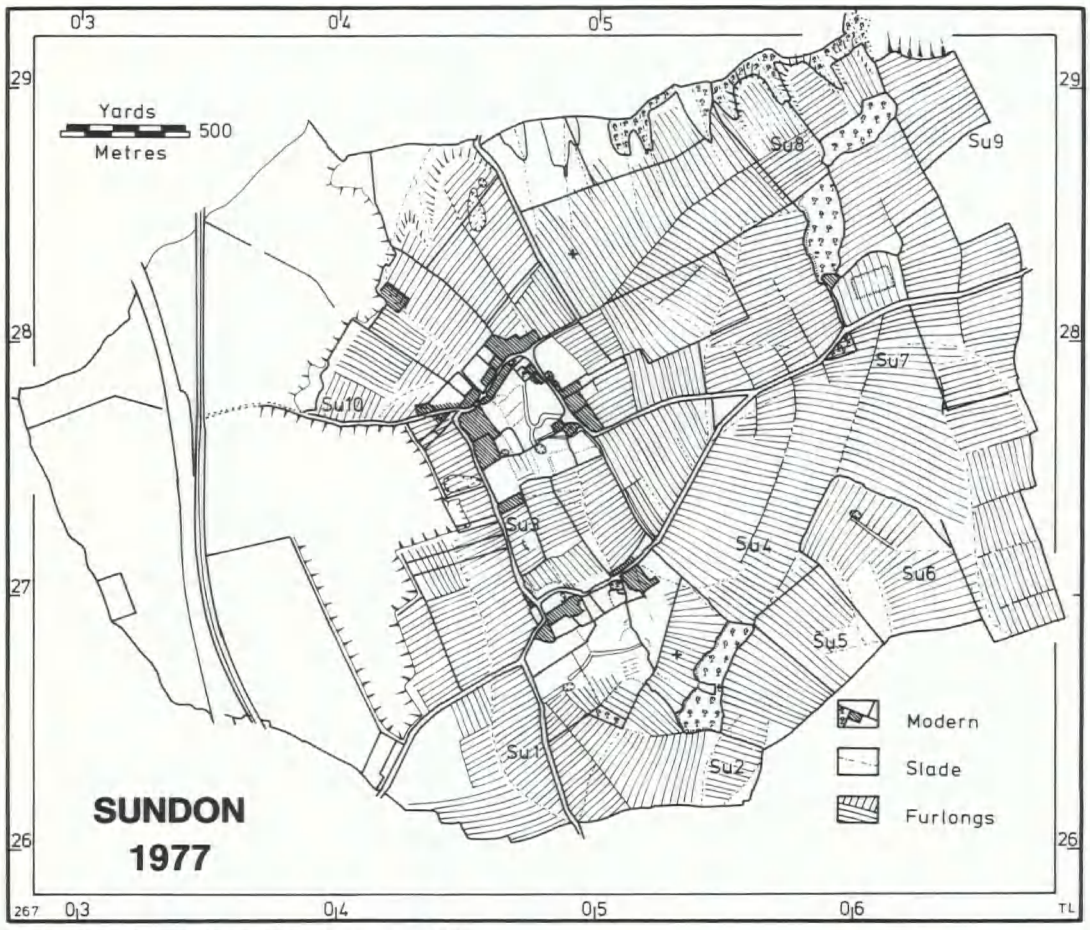

Fig 4 Sundon archaeological survey 1977

MEDIEVAL FIELDS

The field patterns all show a normal checkerboard arrangement found in most of the English lowlands that have an undulating terrain. The fields (furlongs) are a response to the contours, given that the furrows need to drain down the steepest gradient.

It should be possible to work out the furlong names and field structure from the available historical sources, especially for Barton which has detailed medieval records originating from the muniments of Ramsey abbey, to which it belonged.

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