



Northamptonshire County Council

# Northamptonshire Archaeology

Archaeological strip, map and sample  
excavation at Potton Road  
Biggleswade, Bedfordshire  
September 2009



Christopher Jones

October 2009

Report 09/146

## Northamptonshire Archaeology

2 Bolton House  
Wootton Hall Park  
Northampton NN4 8BE  
t. 01604 700493 f. 01604 702822  
e. [sparry@northamptonshire.gov.uk](mailto:sparry@northamptonshire.gov.uk)  
w. [www.northantsarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.northantsarchaeology.co.uk)



Northamptonshire  
County Council

## STAFF

Project Manager	Adam Yates BA AlFA
Text	Christopher Jones
Fieldwork	Christopher Jones, David Haynes, Peter Haynes
Neolithic pottery and discussion	Andy Chapman BSc MlFA
Environmental evidence	Karen Deighton MSc
Illustrations	Pat Walsh BA

## QUALITY CONTROL

	Print name	Signed	Date
Checked by	Pat Chapman		
Verified by	Adam Yates		
Approved by	Andy Chapman		

## OASIS REPORT FORM

<b>PROJECT DETAILS</b>		
Project name	Archaeological strip, map and sample excavation at Potton Road, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire	
Short description (250 words maximum)	In October 2009, an archaeological strip, map and sample excavation was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology on land at Potton Road, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire. Areas measuring 20m by 10m and 10m by 10m were excavated in the vicinity of two trenches from an earlier evaluation. One area was targeted on three known Neolithic pits and another was targeted on a late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pit. Both areas were extended but no archaeological features beyond those previously identified were present. The previously unexcavated Neolithic pit produced multiple sherds that make up about a quarter of a Peterborough ware Mortlake bowl.	
Project type (eg DBA, evaluation etc)	Archaeological strip, map and sample excavation	
Site status (none, NT, SAM etc)	None	
Previous work (SMR numbers etc)	Desk-based assessment, geophysical survey and trial trenching	
Current Land use	Agricultural	
Future work (yes, no, unknown)	No	
Monument type/ period	Neolithic pits	
Significant finds (artefact type and period)	Neolithic and late Iron Age pottery	
<b>PROJECT LOCATION</b>		
County	Bedfordshire	
Site address (including postcode)	Biggleswade, Potton Road.	
Study area (sq.m or ha)	4.5ha	
OS Easting & Northing (use grid sq. letter code)	TL 2070 4580	
Height OD	34m above Ordnance Datum	
<b>PROJECT CREATORS</b>		
Organisation	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project brief originator	Central Bedfordshire Council Archaeologist	
Project Design originator	CgMs Consulting	
Director/Supervisor	Christopher Jones	
Project Manager	Adam Yates (NA) Simon Mortimer (CgMs)	
Sponsor or funding body	David Wilson Homes	
<b>PROJECT DATE</b>		
Start date	29 9 2009	
End date	02 10 2009	
<b>ARCHIVES</b>	<b>Location (Accession no.)</b>	<b>Content (eg pottery, animal bone etc)</b>
Physical		Neolithic pottery
Paper		Site records. B+W photos, Colour slides, client report copy
Digital		Photographs, client report PDF
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		
Journal/monograph, published or forthcoming, or unpublished client report (NA report)		
Title	Archaeological strip, map and sample excavation at Potton Road, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire	
Serial title & volume	Northamptonshire Archaeology Report 09/146	
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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL STRIP, MAP AND SAMPLE EXCAVATION  
AT POTTON ROAD, BIGGLESWADE  
BEDFORDSHIRE  
OCTOBER 2009**

**Abstract**

*In October 2009, an archaeological strip, map and sample excavation was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology on land at Potton Road, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire. Areas measuring 20m by 10m and 10m by 10m were excavated in the vicinity of two trenches from an earlier evaluation. One area was targeted on three known Neolithic pits and another was targeted on a late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pit. Both areas were extended but no archaeological features beyond those previously identified were present. The previously unexcavated Neolithic pit produced multiple sherds that make up about a quarter of a Peterborough ware Mortlake bowl.*

**1 INTRODUCTION**

David Wilson Homes has been granted planning permission for residential development on 4.5ha of land south of Potton Road, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire (NGR: TL 2070 4580; Fig 1). Previous work on the site (desk-based assessment, geophysical survey and trial trenching) has identified archaeological remains comprising Neolithic and late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pits (Albion 2008). A condition requiring archaeological works was attached to the planning consent. Following discussion between CgMs Consulting and Martin Oake (Central Bedfordshire Council Archaeologist) it was agreed that the impact of the proposed development would be mitigated by a limited strip, map and sample excavation. The scope of these works was set out in a specification prepared by CgMs Consulting (2009).

Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned to undertake those works by CgMs Consulting, acting on behalf of David Wilson Homes.

**2 BACKGROUND**

**2.1 Location and topography**

The proposed development site is largely flat, lying 1.4km east of the River Ivel and lies on the northern edge of Biggleswade at approximately 34m above Ordnance Datum. The site is located to the south-east of Potton Road on agricultural land, and covers an area of approximately 4.5ha. The site is situated on river terrace gravels overlain by well-drained, locally calcareous soils of the Sutton 1 association (SSEW 1983).

**2.2 Archaeological background**

The desk-based assessment identified a range of interest in the vicinity of the site, but none within the development area itself (CgMs 2007). Nearby sites included a Bronze Age ring ditch and Iron Age/Roman activity 600m to the south-east of the site. The assessment concluded that the site had a medium potential for remains dating to the prehistoric and Roman periods.

The geophysical survey (GSB 2007) identified a range of anomalies of potential archaeological origin, including pits and a possible enclosure. Trial trenching by Albion Archaeology (2008) identified some localised archaeological remains, but these had little or no correlation to the geophysical anomalies. In Trench 6 four pits were present, three of which formed a linear group with an isolated pit to the north. Two of the group were excavated and both produced Neolithic pottery, flint and bone. No finds were recovered from the outlying pit. Trench 3 contained a single pit which produced pottery of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age date.

### **3 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

The general objectives of the overall excavation were set out in the specification as follows:

- To establish the spatial extent of the prehistoric activity in the vicinity of Trenches 3 and 6
- To recover information relating to the nature and function of past human activity represented by the surviving archaeological remains
- To interpret the nature of human activity at the site and to place the site within its local, regional and national context as appropriate
- To produce a site archive for deposition with an appropriate museum and to provide information for the local HER to ensure the long-term survival of the excavated data.

#### **3.2 Methodology**

All works were conducted in accordance with the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Excavation* (IFA 1994, revised 2008) and the *Code of Conduct of the Institute for Archaeologists* (IFA 1985, revised 2008). In addition, all works complied with the guidelines detailed in *Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England* (Gurney 2003).

The excavation areas (A and B) were set out by the contractors on site in the locations required by the specification (Fig 2). Both areas were machine-excavated using a 2m-wide toothless ditching bucket.

Area A was centred on Trench 3 and Area B on Trench 6. The topsoil and subsoil was removed under continuous archaeological supervision to reveal archaeological features or, where these were absent, the natural substrata. The trenches were cleaned sufficiently to assist in the identification of any features.

All deposits encountered during the course of the excavation were given a separate context number and fully recorded. Recording followed standard Northamptonshire Archaeology procedures. Deposits were described on pro-forma context sheets to include details of the context, its relationships, interpretation and a checklist of associated finds.

The areas were planned at a scale of 1:100. Sections of the sequence of deposits in each area were drawn at a scale of 1:10 and related to Ordnance Datum. The excavated area and spoil heaps were scanned visually and with a metal detector to ensure maximum finds retrieval.

A full photographic record comprising both 35mm black and white negatives and colour transparencies was maintained, supplemented with digital images. On completion of archaeological recording the areas were left open as there was no requirement for specialist re-instatement.

The field data has been compiled into a site archive with appropriate cross-referencing.

## **4 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE**

### **4.1 Area A**

Area A initially measured 10m by 10m and was excavated to expose the single late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pit found in Trench 3 of the evaluation. The area was extended to the south-west and north-west to check for further remains forming an L-shaped trench extending 19m north-west to south-east by 22m north-east to south-west, but no further features were present.

The area was excavated to a depth of 0.40m on to the natural orange sandy gravel. Above the natural was brown sandy subsoil 0.10m deep, overlaid by dark brown sandy topsoil 0.30m deep.

The Iron Age pit from the earlier trenching was identified and the surrounding area hand cleaned to expose any possible features. One feature was excavated but proved to be of natural origin.

### **4.2 Area B**

Area B initially measured 20m by 10m and was excavated to encompass the three Neolithic pits in Trench 6. This area was then extended to the west to give a total area measuring 19m by 16m, to check if any more archaeological features were present. The area was excavated to a depth of 0.40m onto the natural orange sandy gravel. Above the natural was brown sandy subsoil, 0.10m deep, overlain by a dark brown sandy topsoil 0.30m deep.

The three Neolithic pits from the earlier trenching were identified and the surrounding area hand cleaned to expose any possible features (Figs 3-5). Six other possible features were exposed, excavated and recorded, but all turned out to be either modern features or natural anomalies.

The three Neolithic pits lay in a line. To the south a pair of pits [605] and [16] lay only 0.3m apart while the third pit [05] lay 1.1m to the north.

One of the three previously exposed Neolithic pits had been fully excavated (Albion 2008; [205]) so was not further investigated. Of the two remaining pits, [16] had been quarter-segmented during the evaluation and the other [05] had remained undisturbed. Both these two pits were fully excavated.

Pit [05] was 0.50m in diameter by 0.24m deep, with steep sides and a concave base (Fig 5). It had a fill (04) of brown-grey sand, and sherds of Neolithic pottery were scattered through the fill.

The other pit [16], the middle pit of the three, was 0.60m in diameter and 0.33m deep, with steep sides and a concave base. The fill was brown-grey sand, and contained no further artefacts. The pit excavated previously was 0.7m in diameter by 0.4m deep (Albion 2008, 20: pit 605).

## THE FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE

### 5.1 Neolithic pottery by Andy Chapman

There are six large sherds, weighing 278g, including three joining rim sherds, from the fill (04) of a small pit [05]. These are all from a single vessel, a Peterborough ware bowl in the Mortlake style (Cover and Figs 6-9) (Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series: Late Neolithic, Peterborough ware, Fabric Type X05). This vessel is within the broad group of Later Neolithic impressed wares, and Mortlake-style vessels are dated to the third millennium BC (3000-2000 BC).

The fabric contains sparse angular mineral inclusions. The core, the internal surface and the inner part of the rim are black, while the external surface and outer edge of the rim are oxidised red-brown.

The bowl is c 220mm diameter. The rim is not very thick but slopes outwards and downwards above the concave neck, with a sharp shoulder between the neck and the body. The rim sherds comprise 32% of the full circumference, and the surviving sherds represent around 20-25% of the full vessel.

The body and neck are decorated with rows of vertical whipped cord maggot impressions. Those on the lower body are deeply impressed, typically 14-16mm long by 3.5mm wide, typically spaced 4-5mm apart but sometimes more (Cover, Fig 6 and 7). The impressions on the neck are of similar size. The two rows on the upper body comprise shallower and shorter impressions. These are less clear, but the lines appear to run obliquely, indicating they were made with a twisted cord, in contrast to the near horizontal lines of the whipped cord. On the interior there is a single row of vertical whipped cord impressions immediately below the rim, spaced 5-8mm apart (Fig 8). The top of the rim is also decorated with whipped cord impressions, with some radial and others oblique in a rather haphazard pattern (Fig 9).

In addition to the cord impressions, there are multiple fine horizontal lines around the neck, which appear to have been made with a fingernail whilst shaping the concave neck. In addition there are a few random fingernail impressions on the body.

Two nearby pits excavated during the evaluation produced eight sherds of Peterborough ware in the Mortlake style from “two carinated bowls...each with fingernail impressed decoration in a herringbone design on the rim, interior and exterior surfaces” (Albion 2008, 12). There were seven sherds from pit [605] and a single sherd from pit [603], fully excavated as pit [16]. Pit [605] also contained a further eleven abraded sherds with fingernail impressed decoration.



## 5.2 Plant macrofossils by Karen Deighton

A single five litre soil sample was collected by hand during the course of excavation from the fill of a Neolithic pit [05]. This material was analysed to determine the presence, preservation and nature of any ecofacts. The light shed by the findings on the function of the pit was also considered.

The sample was processed by manual flotation using a 250 micron flot sieve, to collect the light fraction. The retent was washed thorough a series of stacked sieves (sizes 3.4mm, 1mm, 500microns). The resulting flot was examined with the aid of a microscope (10x magnifications) and any ecofacts were identified. The author's small reference collection and Cappers *et al* (2006) were consulted for seed identifications. The residues were also scanned for ecofacts.

Finds from the flot were restricted to 22 well-preserved fat hen (*Chenopodium album*) seeds and approximately 50 fragments of comminuted, abraded charcoal of indeterminate taxa. No ecofacts were observed in the residues.

Fat hen is a ubiquitous weed of disturbed ground; therefore its presence provides little information on the environment of the pit. The low number of ecofacts suggests that they represent "background" (ie material washed or blown into a feature from activities taking place elsewhere). Consequently they provide no clues to the function of the pit.

## 6 DISCUSSION by Andy Chapman

The excavation of Areas A and B has shown that no prehistoric activity, beyond the features previously identified, was present in the vicinity of Trenches 3 and 6.

The excavation of the third, previously unexcavated, pit in Area B produced six large sherds of late Neolithic pottery from a single Mortlake bowl, but no bone or worked flint. The full excavation of the partially excavated Neolithic pit did not add to the single sherd previously recovered. The Mortlake bowl is contemporary with the material previously recovered (Albion 2008), although the new vessel has twisted and whipped cord decoration while the other vessels have impressed fingernail decoration.

This line of three Neolithic pits appears to be an isolated group. The appearance of similarly small clusters of pits dated to the Neolithic or early Bronze Age pits has been noted at several other sites in the county. There are examples on the chalk uplands in the south and also on the gravels of both the Great Ouse and the Ivel (Luke 2007, 39). Like the pits at Biggleswade, excavated examples have also produced small assemblages of Neolithic and early Bronze Age pottery, struck flints and sometimes animal bone and charred plant remains (often hazel nut shells), although the latter is absent at Biggleswade. The appearance of pit groups has also been studied in the broader East Anglian region (Garrow 2006).

At its simplest, such small clusters of pits containing a range of domestic debris have been regarded as equating directly with minor and temporary habitation sites (Garrow 2008, 10), but Garrow argues that we need to more fully understand many aspects of their occurrence, including their location within the landscape, and the scale, density and duration of occupation represented at these pit sites. In East Anglia, Garrow has noted the tendency for Peterborough ware sites to produce either single pits or pits 'grouped closely together, almost without exception in pairs', and he also notes that this pattern has been seen elsewhere in Britain (Garrow 2006, 61). Biggleswade can be interpreted as conforming to this pattern. The three pits are a small group, tightly clustered, and two

of them do form a pair, with similar pottery assemblages, while the third pit is a single pit a little further away, and containing a distinctly different assemblage, as discussed below.

Connections with acts of structured deposition are a further consideration, and in the example of pit [05] at Biggleswade the presence of sherds representing around a quarter of a single Mortlake bowl and the absence of any other domestic debris, might be interpreted as relating to structured deposition rather than the casual discard of domestic waste. To assess this at Biggleswade more fully it would have been useful to have had a more detailed description of the larger assemblage from pit [605], excavated in the evaluation, including an assessment of the proportions present of the two identified carinated bowls, and an assessment of whether the abraded sherds are likely to have come from a small number or several vessels. However, the previously excavated material was all fingertip-decorated, with no cord impressed sherds noted, while the material from pit [05] is all from a cord impressed vessel. The absence of further sherds from the cord-decorated vessel within the other pits could suggest that each pit had only received a selected group of material, with no general scattering of material, but a mundane interpretation might argue that the three pits were merely successively utilised during a short period of domestic occupation.

Whatever its interpretation, the Neolithic pit group at Biggleswade does provide a further example to add to the county and regional corpus of a phenomena of considerable interest in Neolithic and Bronze Age studies, but almost impossible to pursue systematically when examples are only likely to appear fortuitously during the evaluation or excavation of sites of later periods.

It is proposed that a short note or article incorporating the results of the Albion Archaeology and Northamptonshire Archaeology excavations be published in Bedfordshire Archaeology.

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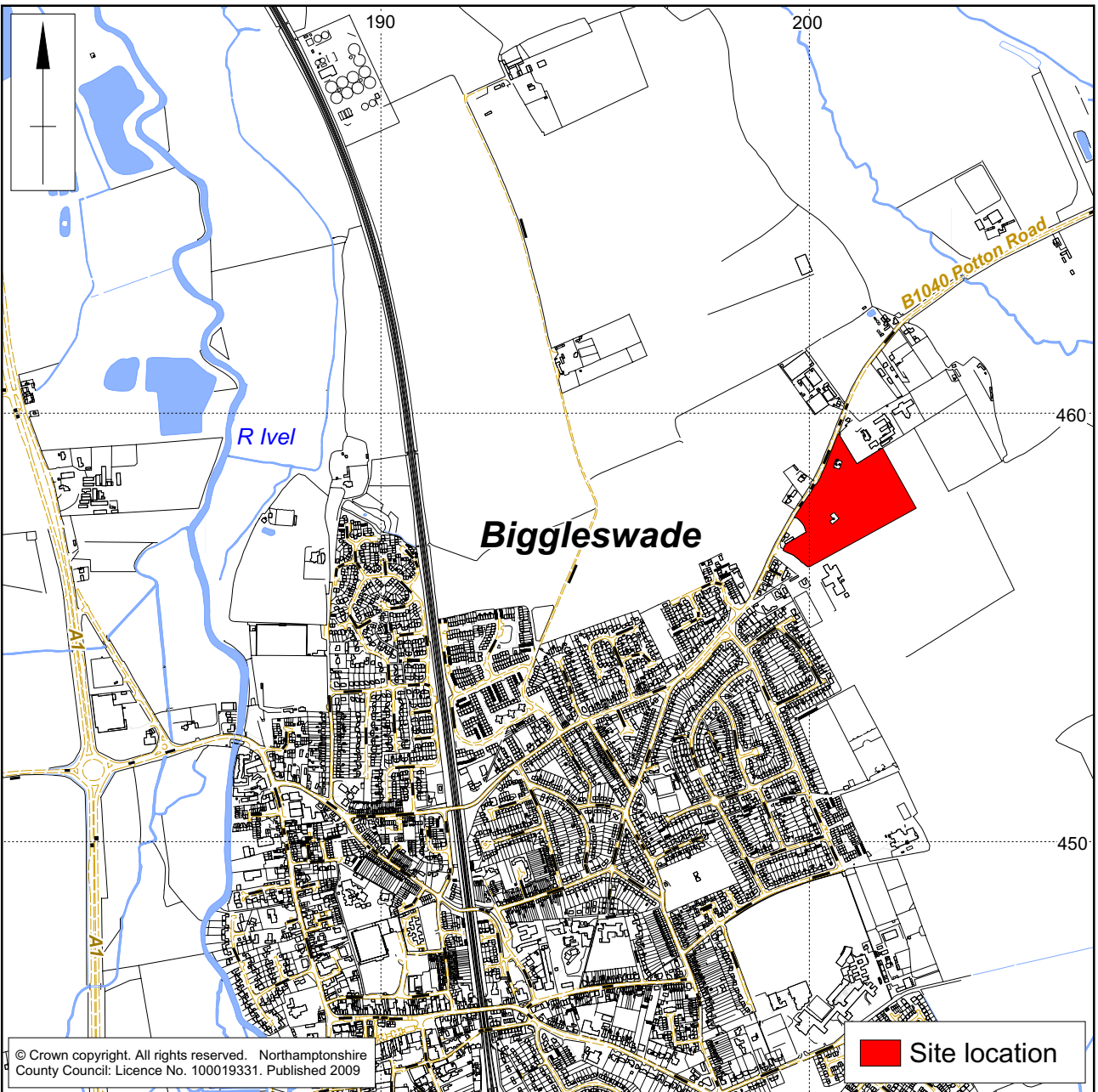
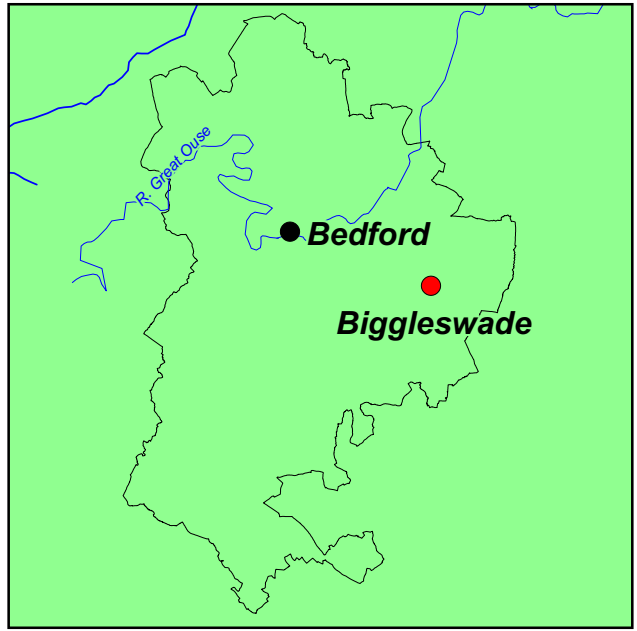
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Scale 1:15,000

Site Location Fig 1



Scale 1:1000

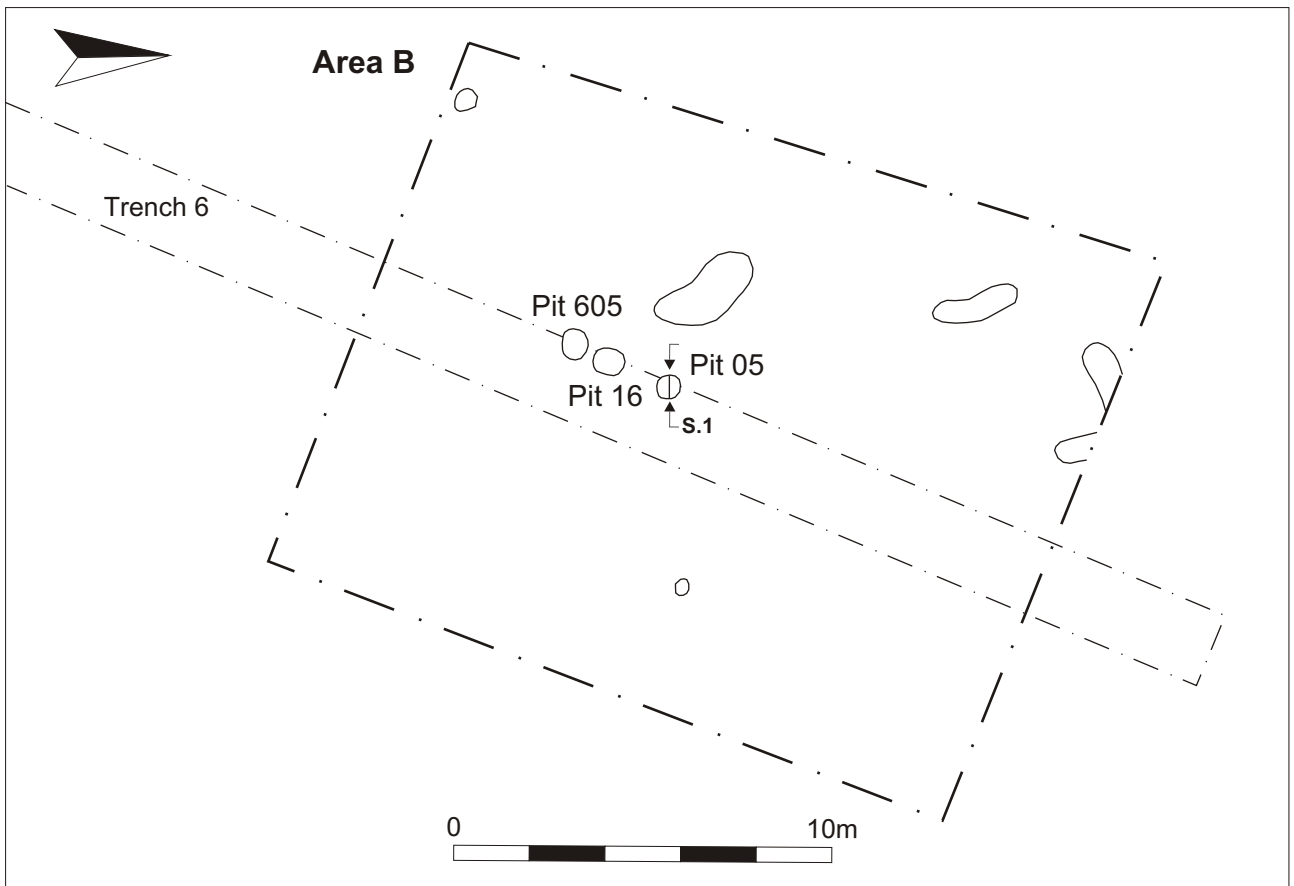
Excavated areas Fig 2



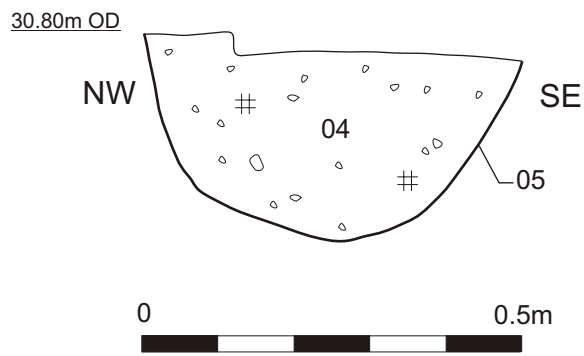
General view of Area B, looking south-west Fig 3



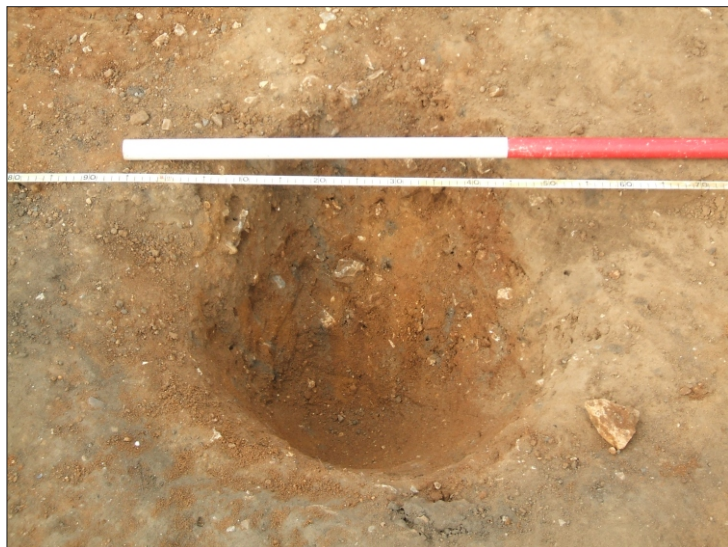
Area B, the Neolithic pits, pit 05 in foreground Fig 4



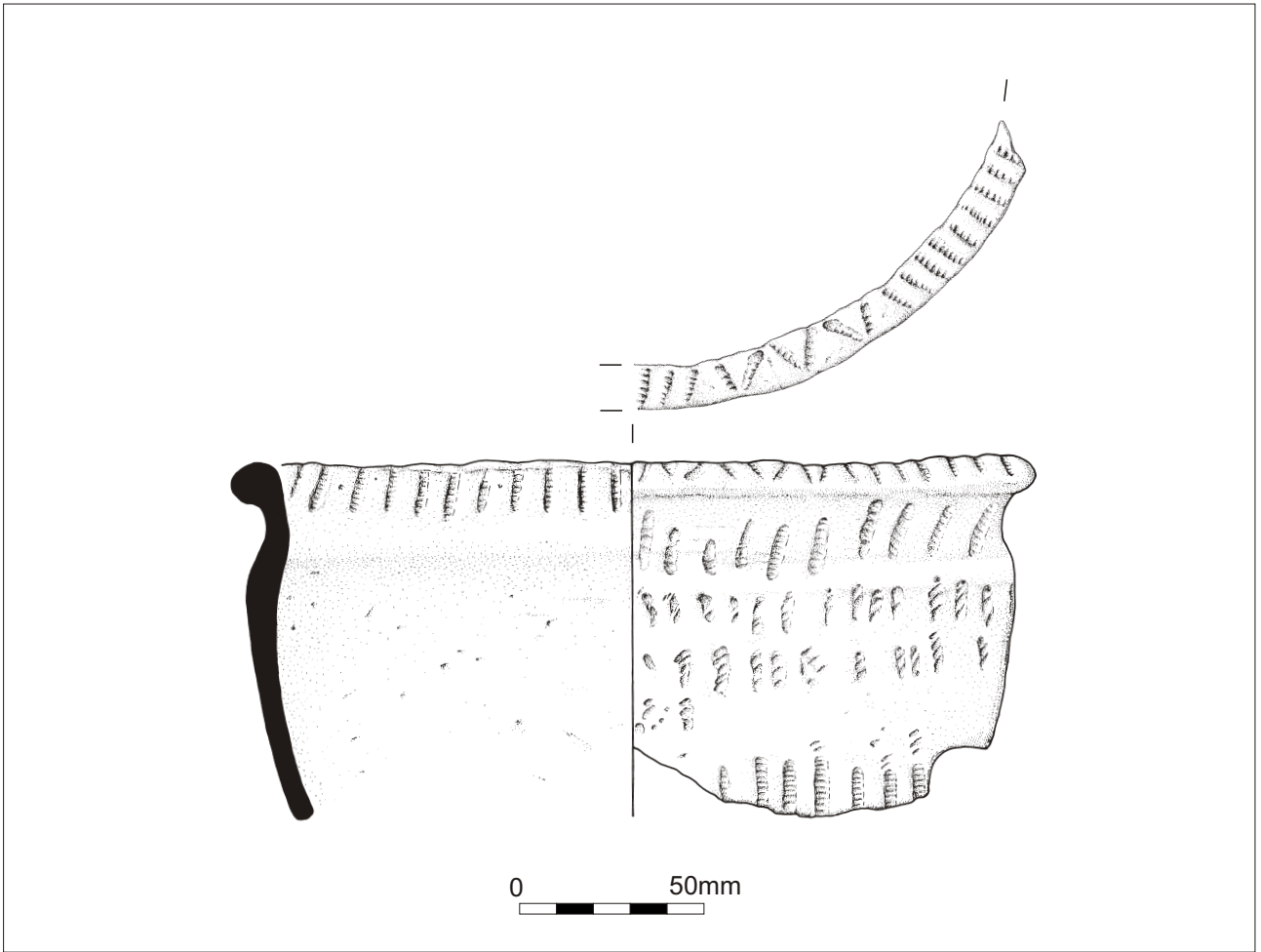
**Section 1**



**Pit 05**



Plan of Area B and section of pit [05] Fig 5



The Mortlake bowl Fig 6





Close-up of well-preserved whipped cord maggot impressions Fig 7



Row of whipped cord impressions on the interior below the rim

Fig 8



Whipped cord impression on the rim

Fig 9



Northamptonshire County Council

# Northamptonshire Archaeology

## Northamptonshire Archaeology

2 Bolton House  
Wootton Hall Park

Northampton NN4 8BE

t. 01604 700493 f. 01604 702822

e. [sparry@northamptonshire.gov.uk](mailto:sparry@northamptonshire.gov.uk)

w. [www.northantsarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.northantsarchaeology.co.uk)



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