

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
NOVEMBER 2002

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING ACTION
AND WATCHING BRIEF
BRACKMILLS LINK ROAD,
NORTHAMPTON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING ACTION AND WATCHING BRIEF

BRACKMILLS LINK ROAD, NORTHAMPTON

Abstract

Northamptonshire Archaeology undertook an open area excavation and subsequent watching brief between August and October 2002 on the route of the Brackmills Link Road. The excavation was carried out as the road corridor affected the environs of an early Bronze Age round barrow, previously identified in an archaeological evaluation. While the barrow itself lay beyond the road corridor, an unurned satellite cremation burial was located. A watching brief was carried out during the initial removal of topsoil and subsoil along the entire length of the road corridor. No further archaeological features were recorded.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Northamptonshire Archaeology were commissioned by Northamptonshire County Council Highways to undertake a pre-emptive open area excavation and a watching brief during soil stripping on the route of the Brackmills Link Road, Northampton (NGR SP 7723 5737; Fig 1). The road runs roughly south to north and will join the B526 Newport Pagnell Road to the Brackmills Business Park, which lies on the southern outskirts of Northampton. The road corridor is 850m long. It varies from 20m wide, where it is on a level with the present ground, to 46m wide at the edge of the northern scarp, where it is in a deep cutting.

1.2 Location and Topography

The site lies on the southern margin of Northampton and is situated on the summit of the Hunsbury ridge at 104.75m above OD. The road crosses an area of varied geology comprising Lower and Upper Estuarine Series, Great Oolite Limestone and Northampton Sand (British Geological Survey). As observed during the watching brief, the gentle slopes on the southern half of the road are on limestone, the summit is capped with shattered ironstone in an orange sand matrix, while tenacious clay was exposed on the steep slope to the north-east.

The round barrow lies on the summit of the ridge, on ironstone and sands, and has distant horizons in virtually all directions. The views are particularly extensive to the south, while to the north and north-east the site looks out across the Nene valley and to the other end of the

Hunsbury ridge at Great Houghton. To the east and west, along the line of the summit ridge, the views are still distant, as the ridge is fairly level, but slightly less extensive than the views off the ridge.

1.3 Archaeological Background

The Hunsbury Ridge, which runs from Hunsbury hillfort in the west to Great Houghton in the east has long been known to be a favoured location for prehistoric and Saxon settlement (Jackson 1993-94).

A cropmark complex in the fields to be crossed by the road had appeared to comprise ring ditches and rectilinear ditch systems. These were subject to an initial evaluation by Wessex Archaeology in 1996 (Wessex Archaeology 1996). The results were inconclusive, as many features could not be found, and those that were excavated were either undated or shown to be of probable geological origin.

Further trial trenching and geophysical survey by Northamptonshire Archaeology in 1999 examined the possible ring ditches (Atkins 1999). This work located a single ring ditch, with an internal diameter of 20m. A trench was cut across the ring ditch, but off-centre. The ditch was V-shaped and up to 2.5m wide. Only the upper and secondary fills were excavated, to a depth of 0.8m deep, but the ditch must originally have been *c* 1.2m deep. A mass of oak charocal was recovered from the interface of the secondary and final fills, and this has given a radiocarbon date of 1685-1525 cal BC (Beta-132789, 1 sigma). This places the silting of the ditch in the later part of the early Bronze Age and identifying the ring ditch as the remains of an early Bronze Age round barrow. No artefacts were recovered from any of the features.

There were two shallow pits within the area of the ring ditch, but both appeared to be no more than shallow hollows in the natural with fills were similar to the overlying subsoil. A linear feature, which appeared to be truncated by the ring ditch did not produce any finds, and appeared to be of geological origin.

2 THE EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

2.1 Methodology

An area measuring *c* 65m north to south and 35m east to west was to be excavated to take in the ring ditch itself along with a 20m allowance to the north and south in order to examine the wider environs of the barrow. However, due to the presence of overhead electricity cables it was necessary to reduce the width of the northern end of the trench to 10.0m, making the site trapezoidal in plan (Fig 2). The area was stripped of topsoil and subsoil under archaeological supervision using a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket. Following stripping and a site survey, it was shown that as the road corridor lay central to the broader zone investigated in the original evaluation, the barrow lay completely outside the stripped area.

The topsoil was a cultivation soil comprising mid grey brown silty fine sand, 0.35m to 0.40m thick, with moderate small ironstone and gravel inclusions, charcoal flecks and occasional sherds of post-medieval pottery and tile. The subsoil was mid orange brown fine silty sand with moderate small ironstone fragments, 0.10m to 0.30m deep. This layer was relatively sterile, with occasional flecks of charcoal, bone and post-medieval pottery. The natural comprised dense small ironstone fragments in a matrix of mid brown-orange fine silty sand. To the south patches of light grey-yellow sand and mid yellow-orange clay were also present.

2.2 Natural features

The area contained a number of curvilinear features similar to those found in the evaluation. The majority of these were shallow, generally less than 0.15m deep, with shallow edges and fairly flat bases. They differed widely in shape, some being regular and almost linear, while the majority were irregular and fairly small. The fills were very similar to the subsoil, comprising mid orange-brown fine silty sand with occasional small pieces of ironstone. These features seemed to consist of slight hollows and irregularities in the natural filled with largely stone-free soil.

A linear feature lay to the south, aligned east to west, with wavering, ill-defined edges. The upper edges were fairly steep but lower down they were irregular and covered with a compact layer of clay. Although it appeared that the base of the feature lay at a depth of 0.80m, at the centre the edges dived down again almost vertically. The feature was filled with loosely compacted grey-brown silty sands interspersed with compact yellow-orange sandy clay. This

feature appears to be geological in origin, probably an 'ice wedge'. It confirms that the linear feature seen in the evaluation of 1999 and the network of such features appearing on the aerial photographs are at least largely of geological origin.

2.3 The cremation deposit

The single archaeological feature was a shallow pit containing a possible cremation deposit. The pit was circular, 0.50m diameter by 0.11m deep, with shallow relatively uneven sides rounding imperceptibly into a slightly concave base. The ironstone at the base of the cut was slightly discoloured, either as a result of mineral staining or because the pyre debris was still hot when it was deposited. The fill was a dark brownish grey fine sandy silt containing small pieces of charocal, and occasional small pieces of burnt bone scattered throughout the fill. The pit had evidently been truncated and the presence of the larger pieces of bone at the exposed surface suggests that the bulk of cremated bone may have been lost to ploughing. A total of 44g of wood charcoal and 20g of burnt bone was recovered through wet sieving of the fill.

The cremation lay at a distance of *c* 27m from the barrow ditch, but would still appear to be a satellite burial, even if an extreme outlying example. It perhaps illustrates that the zone around a barrow that needs to be examined for the presence of related ritual activity should be of the order of 30m or more.

3 THE WATCHING BRIEF

A watching brief was maintained through the initial stages of groundworks in preparation for road construction. The topsoil and subsoil were removed by bulldozer, and regular visits were made during this process to examine the stripped surfaces. The method of stripping was clearly not conducive to the consistent identification of small archaeological features. Some areas would inevitably be subject to vehicle traffic and as the stripping was only to the top of the natural the exposure of the natural was patchy, with remnants of subsoil still obscuring the natural. However, along most of the road corridor sufficient areas of natural were exposed to indicate that there were unlikely to be any major features within the road corridor. Given a significant density of smaller features it is likely that at least some of such a group would have been evident, but small isolated features could have been missed.

The watching brief was continued into the initial stages of reducing the ground levels. However, the excavation of the deep cutting at the northern edge of the scarp was carried out using 360° excavators to cut back a vertical face. The method was therefore not conducive to the recognition of any archaeological features.

As a final check the exposed natural in the sides of the cuttings along the entire length of the road was examined, but no cut features were located.

4 PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS AND PUBLICATION

4.1 Further analysis

While only a single cremation deposit was recovered, its location in respect to a known and dated round barrow, as a satellite burial, makes it of some interest and worthy of further study. A substantial quantity of charcoal was recovered from the pit and this will be submitted for wood identification and radiocarbon dating. The cremated bone will not be submitted for study, as the small quantity recovered cannot provide any useful additional information.

4.2 Proposals for publication

A short supplementary report will be prepared once the wood identifications and radiocarbon date are available.

Even though so little has been excavated, the two radiocarbon dates for the filling of the barrow ditch and for the insertion of a satellite burial make the site worthy of publication. It is suggested that the results of both stages of work at Brackmills will be combined with two other sites that have produced similar evidence of Bronze Age burials. These were both excavated in the 1990s and comprise; a round barrow at Irchester quarry with a small Beaker pottery assemblage; and a cremation burial at Marsh Lane, Irthlingborough, radiocarbon dated to the middle Bronze Age. The combined report, *Three Bronze Age burial sites in Northamptonshire*, will be submitted for publication in *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, the journal of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atkins, R, 1999 *An Archaeological evaluation at Brackmills Link Road, Northampton*, Northamptonshire Archaeology Report

Chapman, A, 1999 *Archaeological evaluation at Brackmills Link Road, Northampton, 1999: Radiocarbon dating*, Northamptonshire Archaeology Report

Jackson, D, 1993-4 *Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon settlement and activity around the Hunsbury Hillfort, Northampton*, Northamptonshire Archaeol, **25**, 35-46

Wessex Archaeology 1996 *Brackmills Extension and Employment Sites, Northampton; Desktop Study and Archaeological Field Evaluation*, Wessex Archaeology for the Commission for the New Towns

SCHEDULE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig 1 Site location
Fig 2 The excavated area and the round barrow

Brackmills Link Road

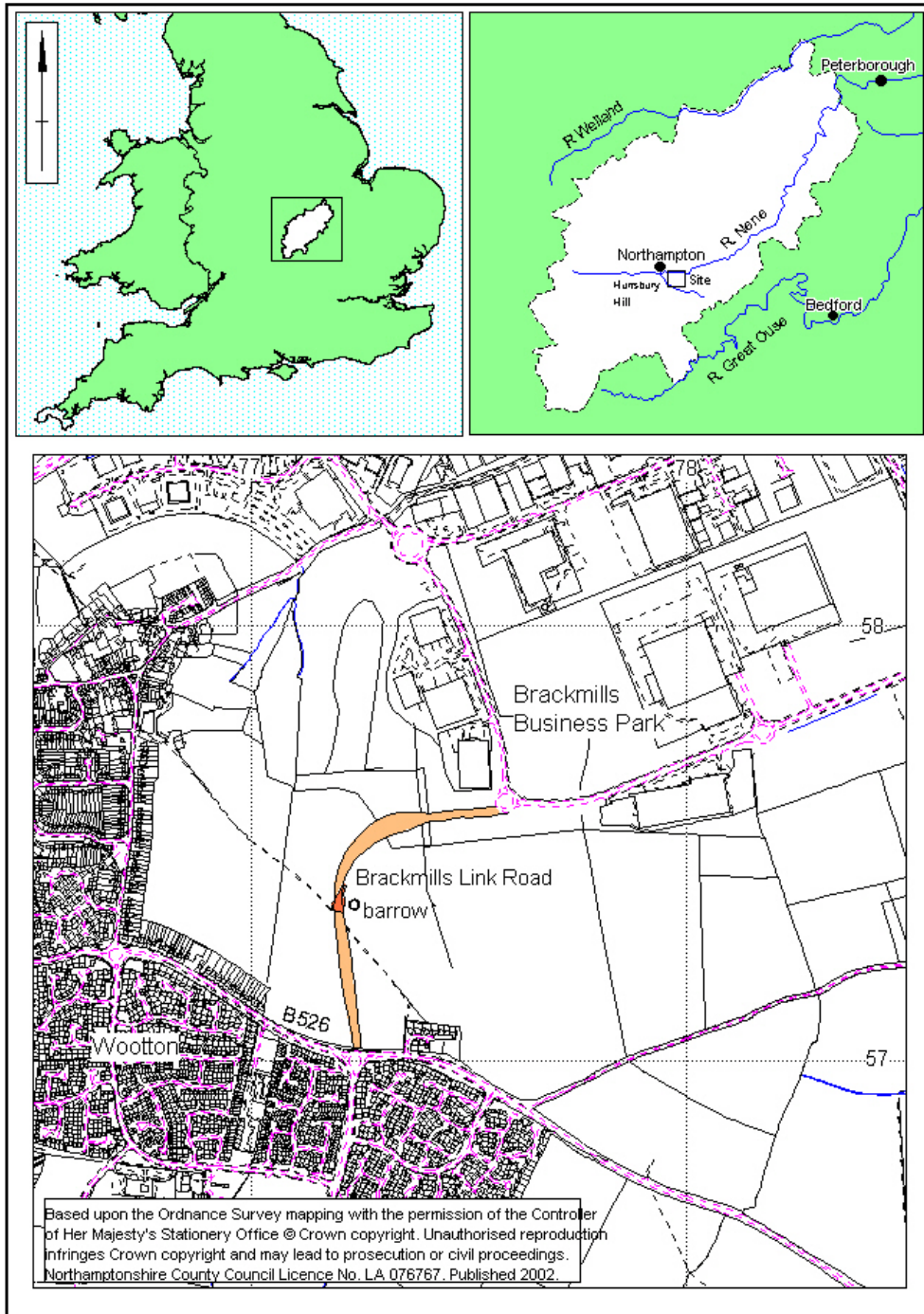


Fig 1

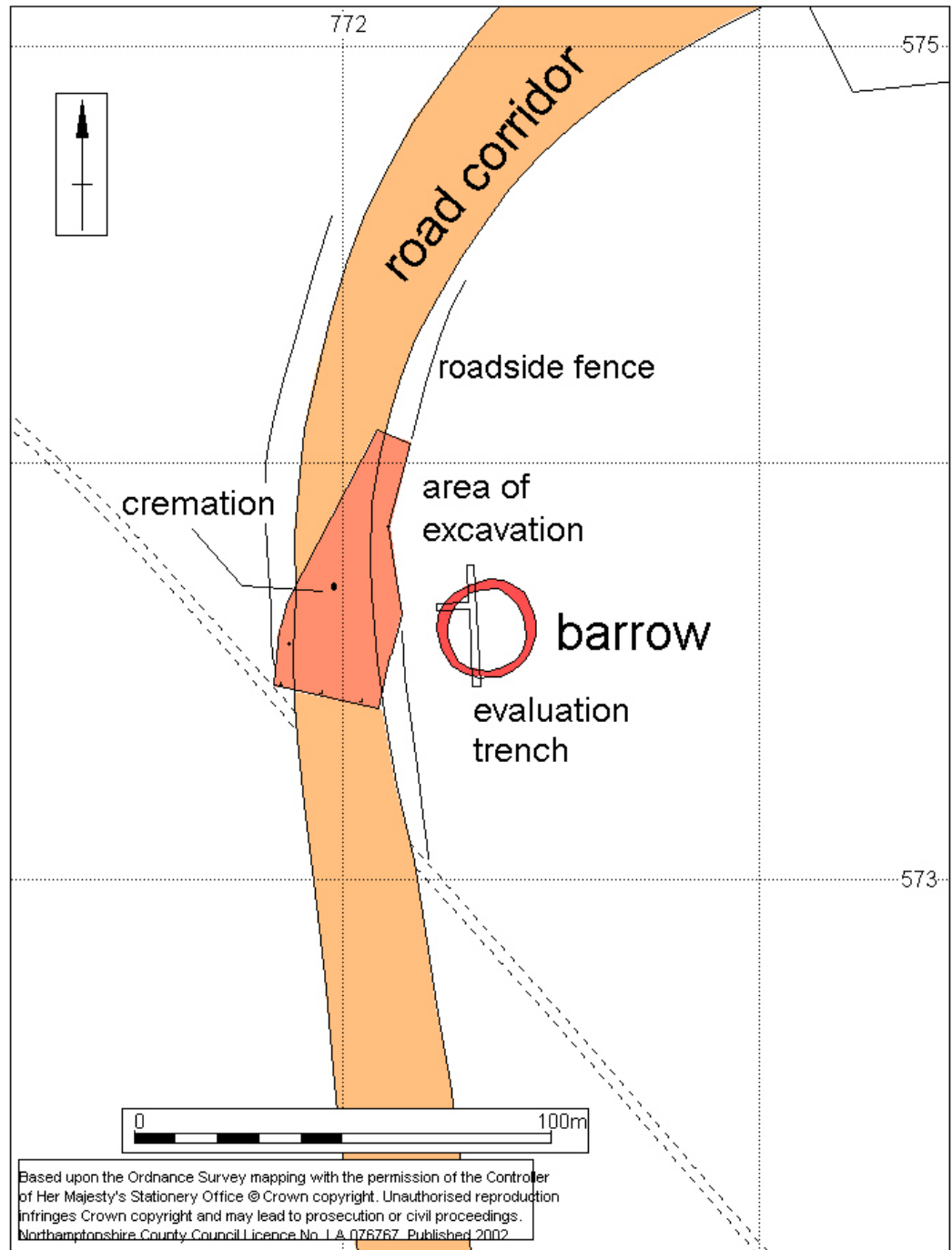


Fig 2

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING ACTION AND WATCHING BRIEF

BRACKMILLS LINK ROAD, NORTHAMPTON:

RADIOCARBON DATING

Abstract

Northamptonshire Archaeology undertook an open area excavation and subsequent watching brief between August and October 2002 on the route of the Brackmills Link Road. The excavation was carried out as the road corridor affected the environs of an early Bronze Age round barrow, previously identified in an archaeological evaluation. While the barrow itself lay beyond the road corridor, an unurned satellite cremation burial was located

Charcoal from the satellite cremation has been radiocarbon dated to the later part of the middle Bronze Age (1270-1020 cal BC) while charcoal from the barrow ditch had been previously dated to the early Bronze Age (1685-1525 cal BC). These dates result show that respect for the barrow and activity related to it continued well into the middle Bronze Age, some 400-500 hundred years after its construction.

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2 THE EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

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The road corridor ran to the west of the barrow, and an area excavation of the adjacent length of the corridor produced a single archaeological feature: a shallow pit containing a small cremation deposit (Stevens and Chapman 2002). The pit was circular, 0.50m diameter by 0.11m deep, with shallow relatively uneven sides rounding imperceptibly into a slightly concave base. The ironstone at the base of the cut was slightly discoloured, either as a result of mineral staining or because the pyre debris was still hot when it was deposited. The fill was a dark brownish grey fine sandy silt containing small pieces of charocal, and occasional small pieces of burnt bone scattered throughout the fill. The pit had evidently been truncated and the presence of the larger pieces of bone at the exposed surface suggests that the bulk of cremated bone may have been lost to ploughing. A total of 44g of wood charcoal and 20g of burnt bone was recovered through wet sieving of the fill. The charcoal has now been radiocarbon dated to 1270-1020 cal BC (Beta 175255, 1 sigma).

The cremation lay at a distance of *c* 27m from the barrow ditch, but would still appear to be a satellite burial, even if an extreme outlying example. It perhaps illustrates that the zone around a barrow that needs to be examined for the presence of related ritual activity should be of the order of 30m or more. It also illustrates how respect for early Bronze Age round barrows could be retained for several hundred years, in this instance for 400-500 years and well into the middle Bronze Age.

3 THE RADIOCARBON DATES

Lab. & Sample Number	Context details	Sample details	Conventional Radiocarbon age BP	Cal BC 1 sigma 2 sigma
Beta- 175255 BLR02/08	Pit 8 containing satellite cremation	Wood charcoal (to be identified)	2940 +/-70	1130 1270-1020 1380-930
Beta- 132789 BM99 /TR4/7	Trench 4 layer 7; mass of carbonised wood from fill of barrow ditch	Wood charcoal, <i>Quercus</i> sp. (oak) sapwood and heartwood	3330 +/-60	1620 1685-1525 1745-1485

Laboratory: Beta Analytic, Inc., Miami, Florida, USA

Method of analysis: radiometric-standard.
Calibration to calendar years: INTCAL98.

4 PUBLICATION

As previously indicated, the results of both stages of work at Brackmills will be combined with sites at Irchester quarry and Marsh Lane, Irthlingborough, that have produced similar evidence of Bronze Age burials. The combined report, *Three Bronze Age burial sites in Northamptonshire*, will be submitted for publication in *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, the journal of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atkins, R, 1999 *An Archaeological evaluation at Brackmills Link Road, Northampton*, Northamptonshire Archaeology Report

Chapman, A, 1999 *Archaeological evaluation at Brackmills Link Road, Northampton, 1999: Radiocarbon dating*, Northamptonshire Archaeology Report

Stevens, C, and Chapman, A, 2002 *Archaeological recording action and watching brief Brackmills Link Road, Northampton*, Northamptonshire Archaeology Report

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Brackmills Link Road

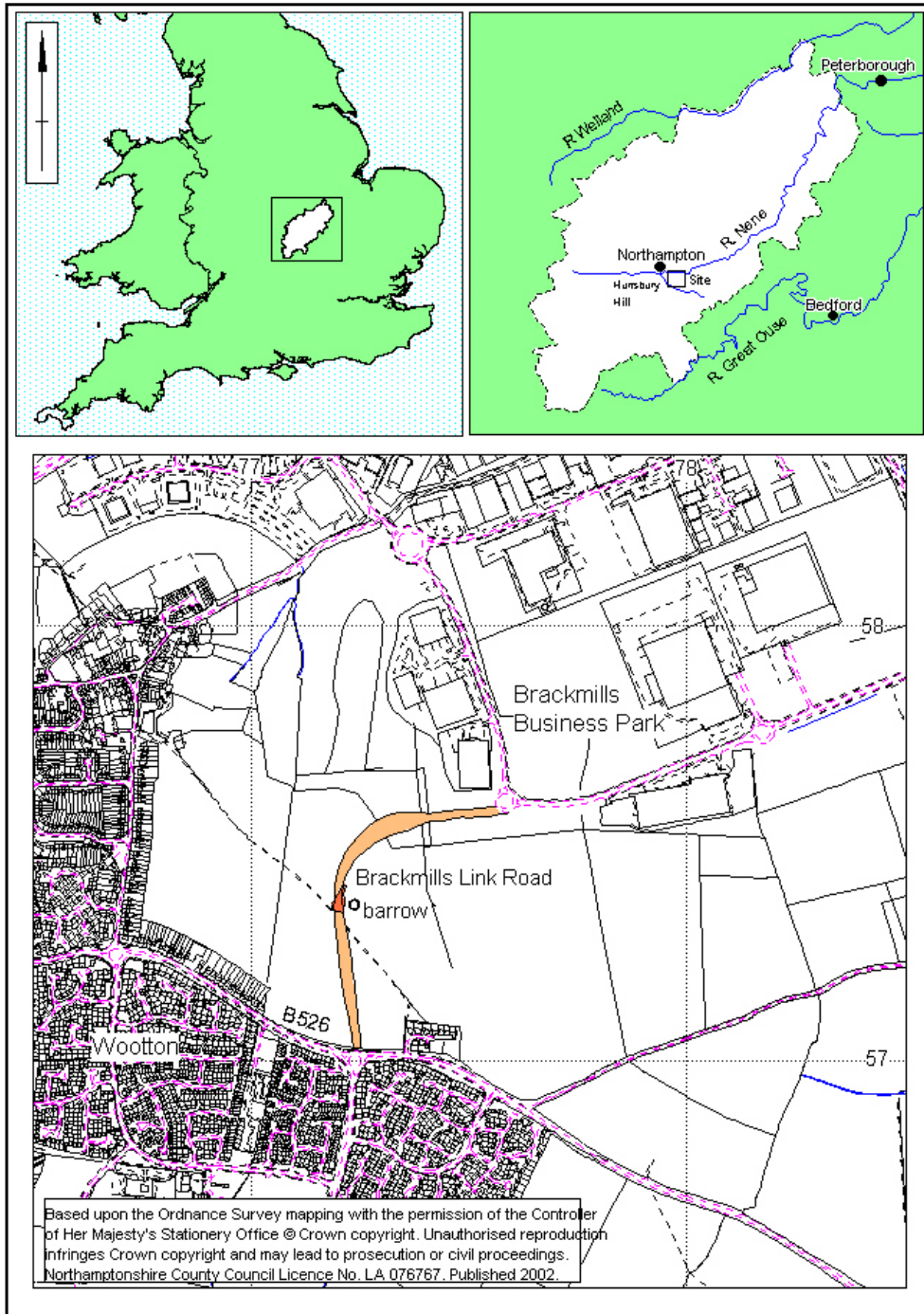


Fig 1

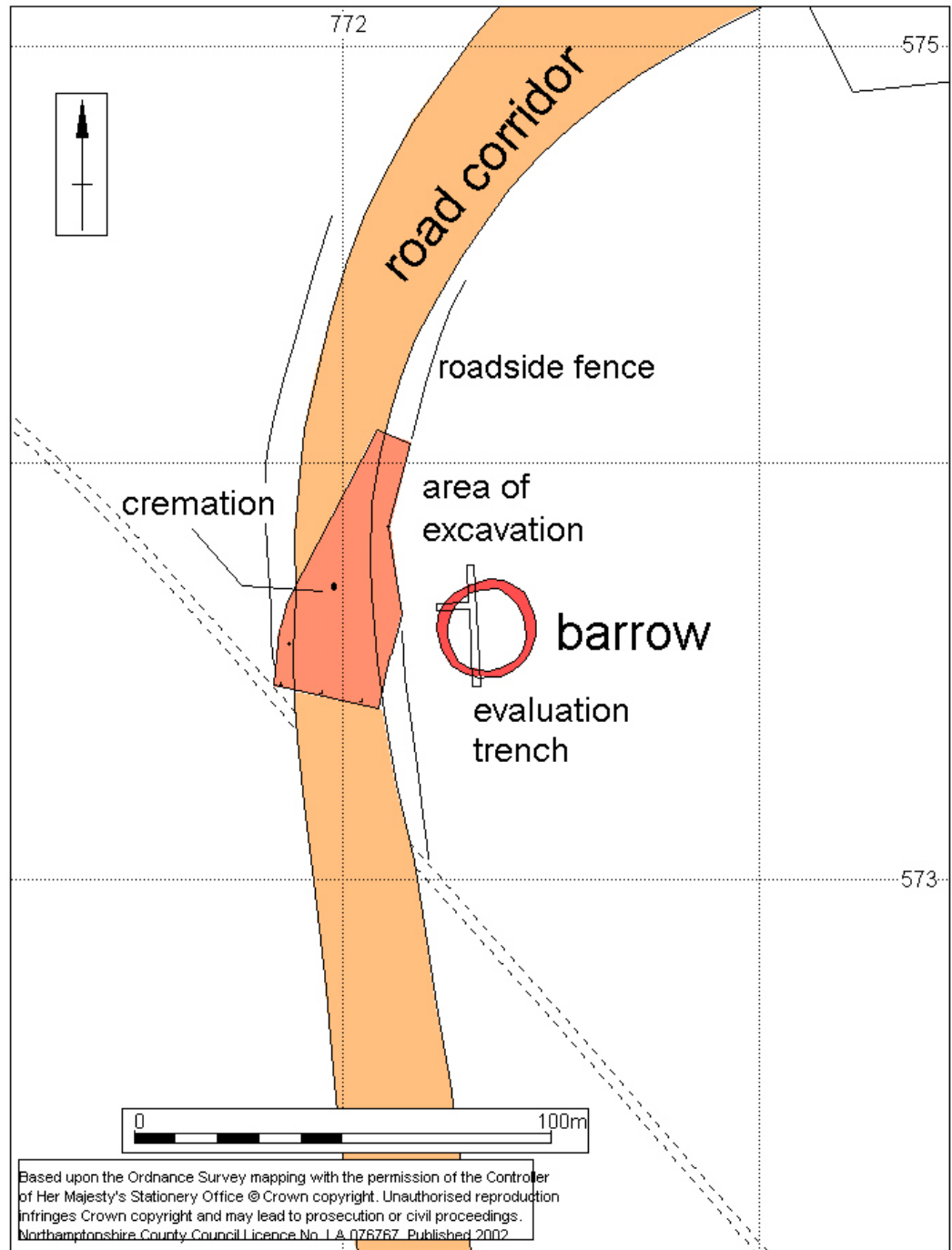


Fig 2