



NEWS

Spring 1995

IRON AGE AND ROMAN ABINGDON

The OAU celebrated its 21st birthday in 1994 but the Unit's origins can be traced back even further, and in 1972 our Director, David Miles, was appointed as Abingdon's first professional archaeologist. The town has been investigated as thoroughly as any in England since then. One of the Unit's first large-scale excavations was at the Ashville Trading Estate on the west edge of Abingdon, and there have been more big projects around the town since then at sites such as Barrow Hills (Radley), Barton Court Farm and the Vineyard. We have revealed a wealth of evidence for the town's history, especially during the Iron Age and Roman periods. Recently our research has come full circle with a major excavation at Wyndyke Furlong on the Abingdon Business Park, immediately to the north of the Ashville Trading Estate site.

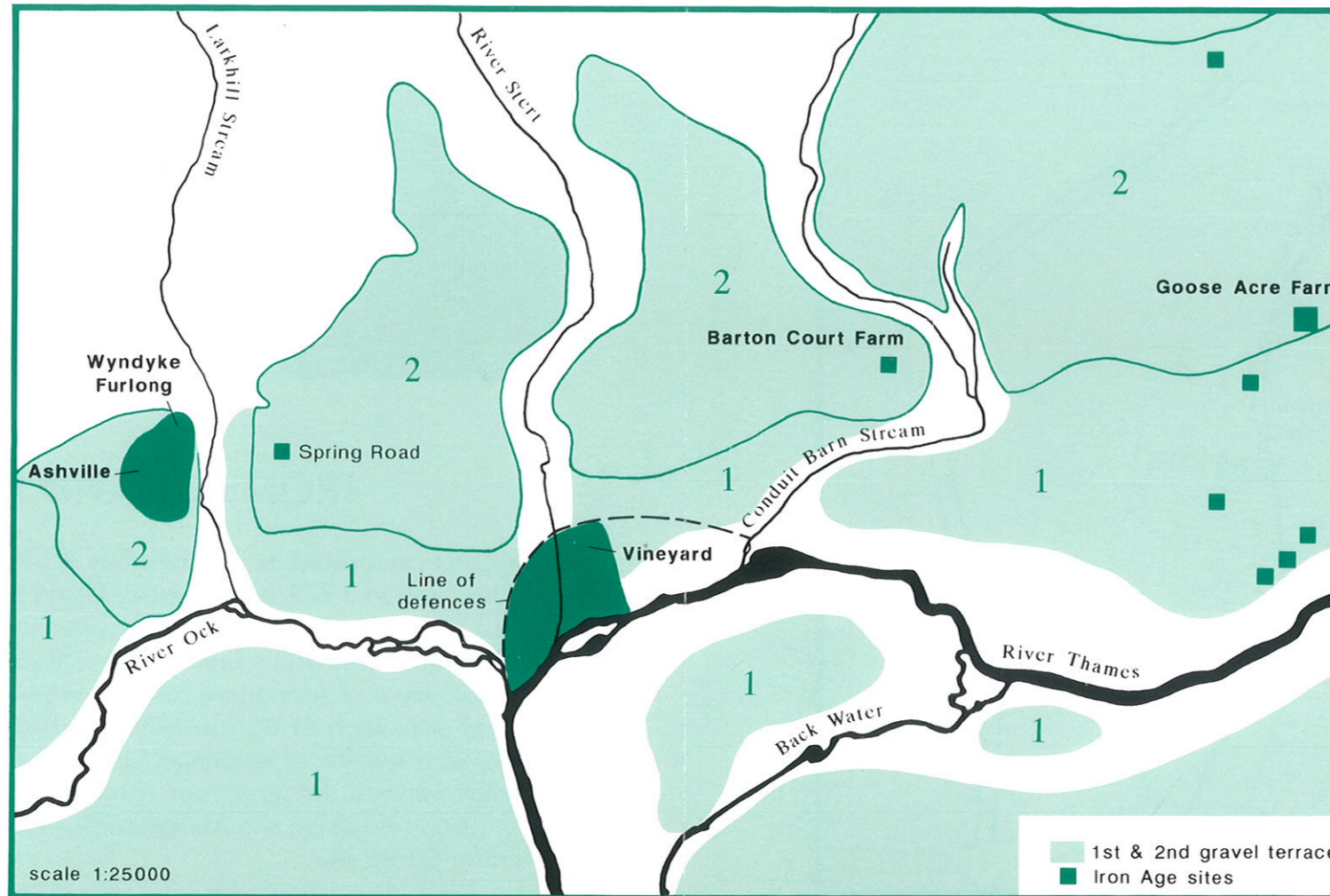


Wyndyke excavations with the business park in the background

FROM HAMLETS TO OPPIDUM

by Tim Allen

The early prehistory of Abingdon is dominated by the great ritual monuments to the east of the town, and especially the complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age burial sites at Barrow Hills (see OAU News, May 1994). We have more evidence for settlements in the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age, however, and we know of three mixed farming hamlets which developed then close to streams and spaced between 1 and 2 km apart: at Ashville/Wyndyke Furlong, under the town centre at the Vineyard and at Gooseacre Farm and Thrupp near Radley. The Ashville site developed into a more substantial village during the Iron Age with a strong emphasis on arable agriculture, and at Thrupp a string of small enclosures along the Thames show the development of specialised pastoral farming. Rings of postholes and circular ditches typify the villagers' roundhouses during the period. Decorated pottery and distinctive traded finds such as quernstones suggest that the town centre settlement was growing in importance and status: it would soon come to dominate the area.



Iron Age settlements in and around Abingdon

Contact with the Roman world brought increasing cross-Channel trade during the late Iron Age (50 BC-AD 45), and rivers like the Thames and their major tributaries became arteries of communication. The settlement under the town centre lay at the junction of the Thames and the Ock and was ideally placed to control river trade. The site was now defended by three concentric ditches and a bank enclosing 33 hectares, much larger than the preceding villages. Julius Caesar called such defended native centres 'oppida', and they are the nearest prehistoric equivalent to a modern town.

After the Roman conquest the oppidum flourished, acquiring a local fineware pottery industry and a range of imported goods. Painted plaster on wall daub suggests that timber buildings similar to those appearing in the commercial quarter at large Roman towns such as Verulamium (St Albans) were present.

At Verulamium early Roman villas were established within late Iron Age enclosures overlooking the oppidum there, and they have been seen as the residences of local aristocrats. At Barton Court Farm a late Iron Age farmstead contemporary with the Abingdon oppidum was transformed by the construction of a timber villa during the late 1st century AD. This was one of the earliest villas in Oxfordshire. Perhaps Abingdon too had its local aristocrat.

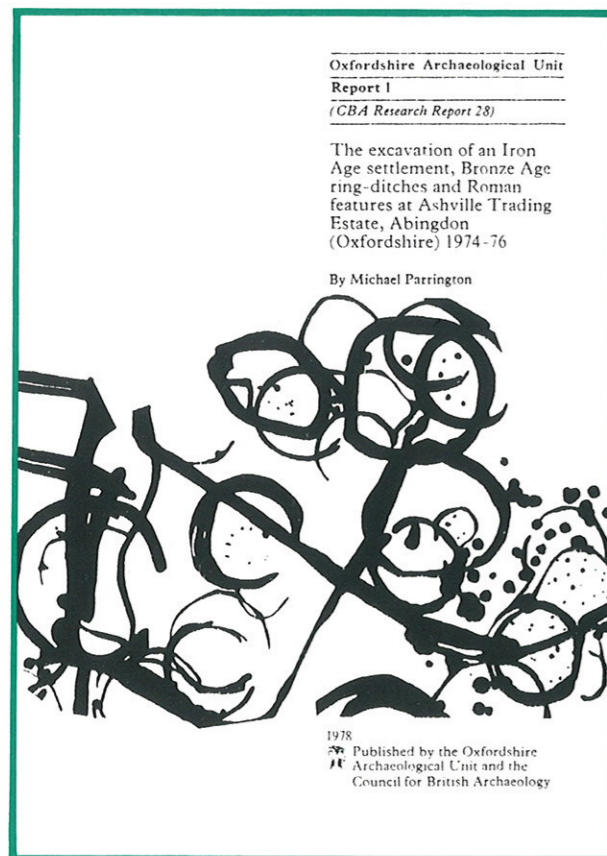
The oppidum defences survived intact into the early 2nd century AD, but then part of the bank was thrown back into the inner ditch so that the settlement could spread. Stone buildings were constructed within the former defended area, part of a trend throughout Britain for the wealthy to move into towns at this time. The local aristocracies had accepted an urban lifestyle, and Abingdon had been born.

BACK TO OUR ROOTS: ASHVILLE AND WYNDYKE

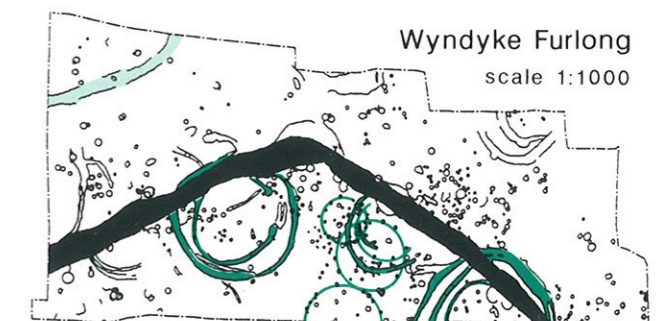
by Mark Roberts

Wyndyke Furlong is the latest in our series of investigations into the Iron Age landscape on the west side of Abingdon. The Ashville excavation and watching brief in 1974-6 was followed in the 1980s by various excavations and watching briefs on the former MG Works site to the south of Ashville. The Wyndyke excavations from December 1994 to February 1995 covered an area of 1.3 hectares, or one quarter of the latest development area on the business park.

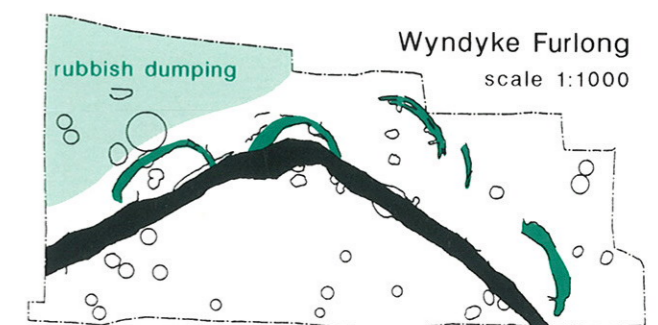
The Ashville and MG Works excavations had revealed the central and southern parts of a long-lived Iron Age settlement which developed within an area of Bronze Age activity. The Iron Age site was apparently unenclosed and the central area was covered by timber roundhouses and pits, but the site seemed to peter out to the south and west: would it continue to the north?



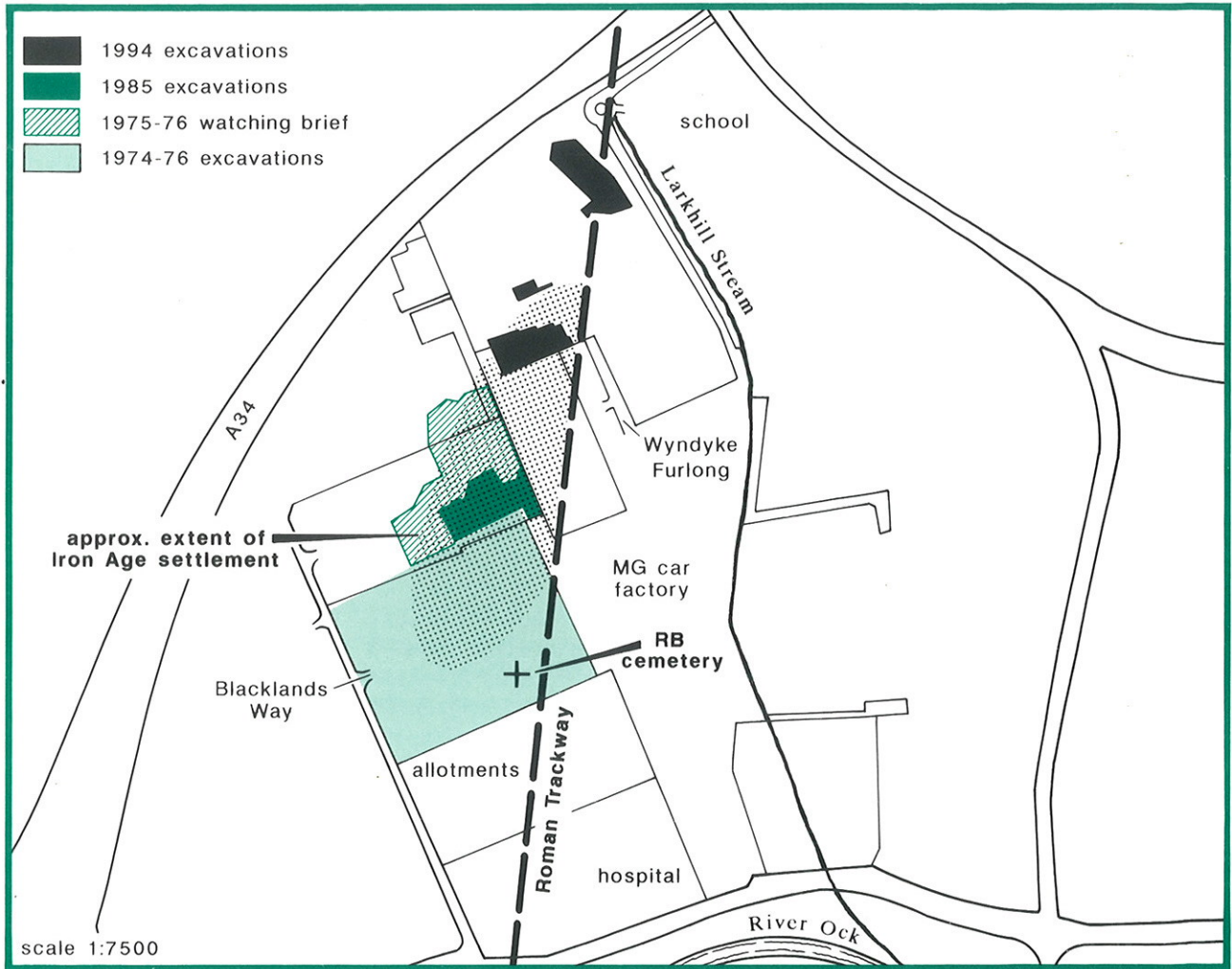
Cover of the OAU's first major excavation report



Iron Age boundary with houses cut by Roman ditch



Iron Age workshops and pits cut by Roman ditch



Location of the Ashville, MG works and Wyndyke excavations

The Wyndyke excavations quickly answered this question when many Iron Age roundhouses, pits and workshops were found in the south-west corner of the site only 30 m north of Ashville. The area had been divided functionally: the houses and their enclosures to the south were separated from two lines of workshops to the north, and rubbish dumping was carefully located north-west of the houses. A ditch seems to mark the north-west boundary of the village, as few features other than field ditches were found beyond it despite extensive trial trenching.

Soon after the Roman conquest the Ashville/Wyndyke Furlong village changed character; Roman activity is much less intense, comprising field boundaries and a north-south trackway. A Roman cemetery found in the southern part of the MG Works site shows that some people were living in the area at the time. Does this indicate a movement of population into the newly defended oppidum?

We have now embarked on further study of the site and all the finds from it. The successive campaigns of archaeological fieldwork in the area over 21 years give us an unprecedented opportunity to analyse the development of a whole landscape, and to relate the study to wider regional issues.

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