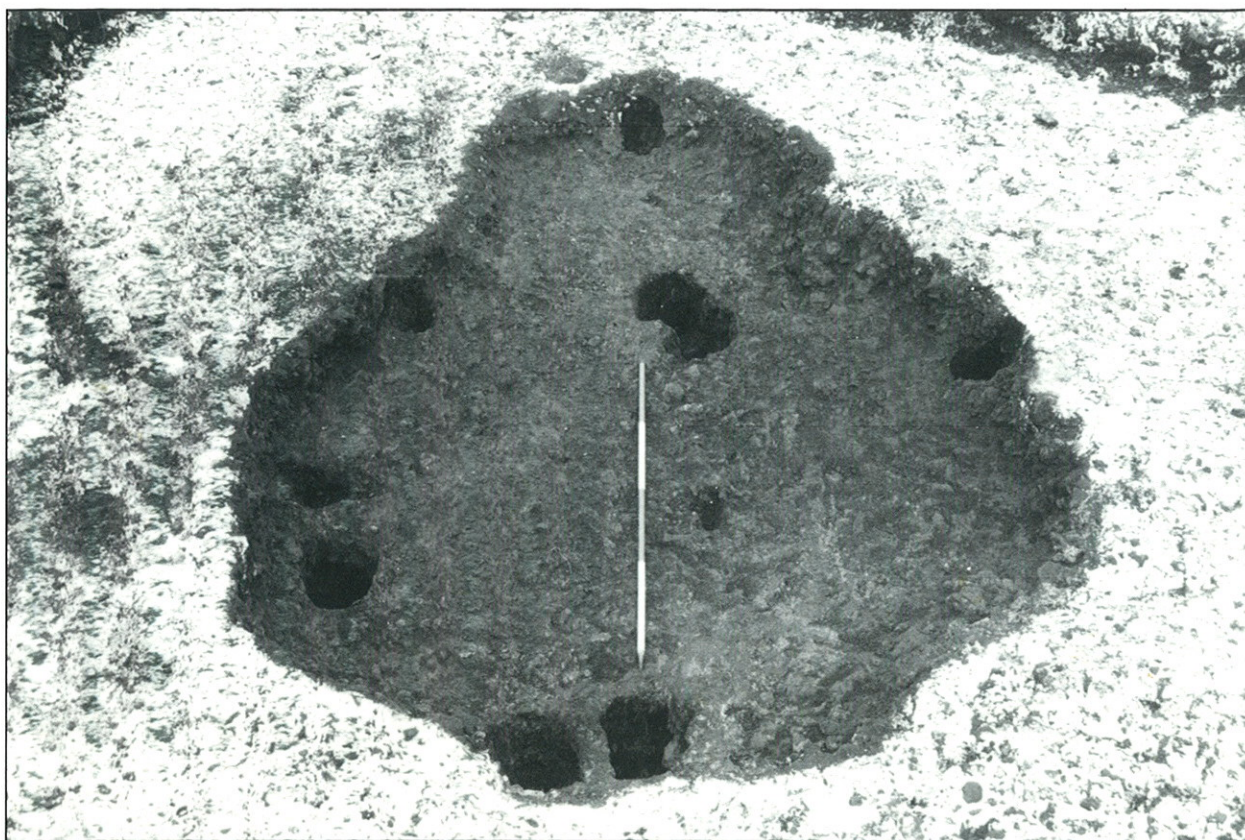


Iron Age and Saxon excavation at Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire



Early Saxon sunken featured building at Higham Ferrers

For the last two months the unit has been excavating an Iron Age ditched enclosure and Saxon settlement on the outskirts of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire. This excavation is the culmination of work by both the Oxford and Northamptonshire Archaeological Units, which comprised two evaluation phases, a surface collection survey and a magnetometer survey. The present excavation has been jointly funded by The Duchy of Lancaster as land owners and by English Heritage. It has been undertaken in advance of a massive development by Tarmac Homes covering over 100 acres. The site is considerable in extent and of importance in both regional and national terms.

Over 3500 m² of the Iron Age site was stripped and revealed a multi-phased rectangular ditched enclosure typical of middle Iron Age settlements in central southern England. A large number of pits and at least two circular structures were found. One of the buildings was trench built and surrounded by its own circular enclosure ditch. The latter was of much larger proportions than the usual penannular drainage ditch. Structures of this type are relatively rare and preliminary assessment suggests that it may have pre-dated the main enclosure.

The Saxon settlement is unusual for a rural site in that its occupation spans the entire Saxon period. It contains a large open-ended oval ditched enclosure over 100 m across, which was investigated by a series of 17 trenches measuring 3 m x 25 m. The ditch of the enclosure averaged 1.30 m deep and would have required a substantial labour input to construct. It appears to be of early to middle Saxon date. Few contemporary features were located inside the enclosure, and the probability is that it was used for stock. This now seems a more likely idea than the earlier suggestion that it enclosed a large high status building. If this supposition is correct, why other enclosures of this type are not more commonplace remains unresolved. The problem of the apparent wide open end has been partly solved by the discovery of a straight ditch closing off the 'entrance' although this appears to have been added at a later phase.

In addition to the 17 trenches, three open areas totalling about 5000 m² were also investigated. One area, to the north-west of the oval enclosure, revealed four sunken-featured buildings, of probable early Saxon date, a range of pits and possible post-built structures. Recognition of the latter has been severely hampered by the extremely difficult ironstone geology, which made the distinction of small features very difficult.

Another open area overlapping the south end of the oval enclosure was covered with post holes of probable middle to late Saxon date. Work was concentrated on one group and revealed what at present is interpreted as two large overlapping timber halls. These were of both posthole and trench-built construction. Overlying the timber halls was a sequence of shallow gullies, forming a

rectilinear pattern and these are thought to be the remains of the rear tenement boundaries of late Saxon and medieval houses. The houses may have faced onto a triangular green.

The most unexpected discovery has been a medieval stone-founded building overlying and masking the south-east part of the Saxon enclosure, no evidence of which had been found in either of the earlier evaluations. Fortunately this area did not form part of the original planning permission, and the OAU have been commissioned to fully evaluate the area as part of a separate contract.

Late Bronze Age Settlement at Reading Business Park

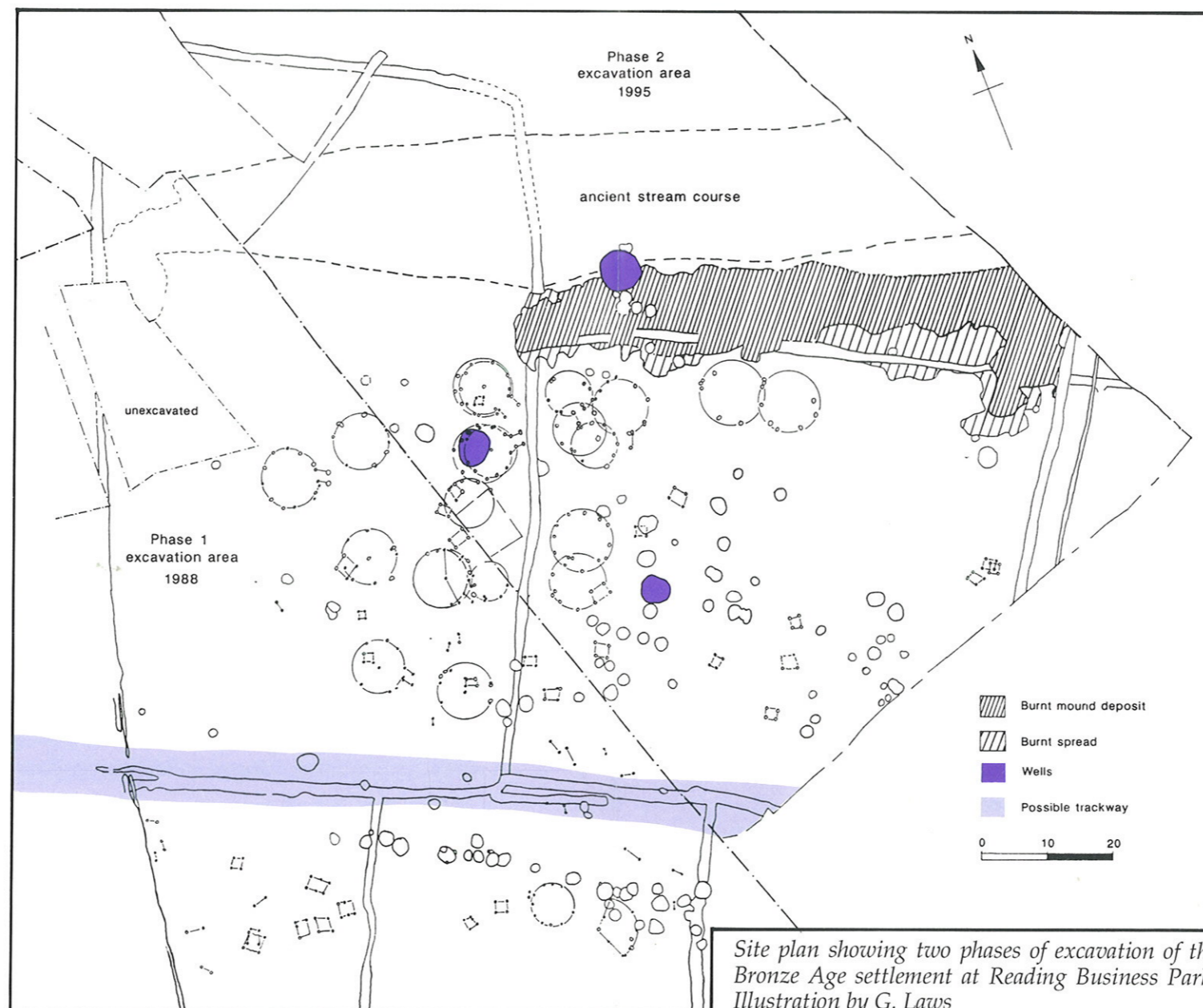
The second phase of investigations at Reading Business Park began in late August 1995 and comprised two areas of excavation within the course of a flood relief channel to be created in advance of the development scheme.

The first phase was carried out by the OAU as long ago as 1988, and involved worked in six areas over the 80 ha extent of the proposed development. The 1988 excavations produced evidence of Neolithic,

Bronze Age and Roman occupation and the results of this phase of work have been published in *Reading Business Park: a Bronze Age Landscape* by J Moore and D Jennings (1992). Excavations in Area 3100 in 1988, uncovered the northern and western portions of a late Bronze Age settlement. The second phase investigations opened an area adjacent to Area 3100 and have largely defined the full extent of the settlement. This is possibly the most complete and coherent late Bronze Age settlement plan excavated in the Thames valley.

The planned, and organised, nature of the site suggests a sustained period of permanent occupation during the late Bronze Age, which contrast with other sites excavated in the area. The settlement appears to have been bounded on its north side by a stream. Although the precise phasing of structures is not yet fully understood, the general layout would suggest that paired structures occupied an area close to the stream course, with domestic pits sited to the south-east. An alignment of large pits cut into the water table to the south of the principal concentration of hut circles, may be evidence for flax-retting, and four-poster structures to the south-east could have been for grain storage. Four waterholes were identified across the site, including one adjacent to the stream course, and these suggest that the stream was not providing sufficient water to the settlement.

A burnt mound adjacent to and on the south bank of the stream, was the surprise find of the second phase excavations. The mound consisted of burnt flint and contained late Bronze Age pottery. Burnt mound deposits have been more commonly found in the Midlands or on upland sites, but recent excavations within the Thames and Kennet valleys have begun to show their distribution to be more widespread. A definitive interpretation for these features remains elusive. Researchers favour two theories based on ethnographic parallels: they are thought to be middens created by the debris either from saunas or from feasting. The mound at Reading is at least 85 m long and 12 m wide, probably the largest example of a burnt mound uncovered to date. No new



Site plan showing two phases of excavation of the Bronze Age settlement at Reading Business Park. Illustration by G. Laws

evidence has been recovered to further our understanding of these features, but the unusual length of the mound may be the result of spacial shift over time along the edge of the stream course.

An east-west-aligned trackway south of the settlement may have provided a route to a smaller contemporary settlement site, 500 metres to the east (1988 excavations, Area 5), and to another possible late Bronze Age settlement, suggested from evaluation evidence, about 500 metres to the west. A third phase programme of work at Reading Business Park, to be carried out at some future date, will concentrate on the remains of this possible settlement to the west.

The OAU, Electronic publishing and E-mail

The OAU is now on the Internet. What does this mean? What use is this facility to archaeologists? In the first instance, the main advantage of the Net is that it allows the Unit and its staff to send and receive E-mail from colleagues in universities, museums and other units not just in Britain but abroad. It is possible to send not only text files, but drawings and photographic images via the Internet.

There is already an archaeology newsgroup on the net, although this is currently little used by professional archaeologists. Nonetheless, it is possible to post serious questions to the newsgroup. In addition, the World Wide Web can be used to search for information on a whole host of topics. The Net also gives access to the electronic Journal published by the Council for British Archaeology.

In the future it would be possible for the OAU to set up its own Web page to disseminate information about its activities and to provide information on more interesting projects as part of an educational service.

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Final Newsletter

As announced in the previous issue, this will be the last OAU Newsletter. The decision to discontinue publication has been taken reluctantly, but has been necessary because of increasing production costs. The unit will continue to produce its Annual Report. This will be in a slightly modified format with more information about individual projects undertaken by the unit. The subscription for the Annual Report will be £5.00 per annum.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank subscribers for their support of the newsletter and we hope that they will continue to support the OAU through subscription to the Annual Report.

STOP PRESS:

New OAU Publications hot off the press:

T G Allen,
Lithics and Landscape: archaeological investigations on the Thames Water pipeline at Gatehampton Farm, Goring, Oxfordshire 1985-92 (Oxford Archaeological Unit: Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph No 7) (Oxford University Committee for Archaeology) (140 pp, 64 figures, 22 tables) ISBN 0 947 816 85 2

Available from Oxbow Books price £18.00

A Boyle, A Dodd, D Miles and D Mudd,
Two Oxfordshire Saxon Cemeteries: Berinsfield and Didcot, (Oxford Archaeological Unit: Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph No 8) (Oxford University Committee for Archaeology) (274 pp, 97 figures, 44 tables) ISBN 0 947 816 86 0

Available from Oxbow Books price £28.00