

Chapter 1: Introduction

By David Miles

In August 1974 a watching brief was maintained at the Wally Corner gravel pit, Berinsfield (Fig. 1) by members of the Oxford Archaeological Unit. At the same time a major excavation was taking place 7.5 km to the W at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon (Fig. 1). Wally Corner was known to contain a cropmark complex (Figs 4 and 5) dated to the Roman period, but it had been decided to keep archaeological investigation to a minimum in view of the potential of other threatened sites at that time. The aim of the watching brief was to assess the area and date of the Wally Corner ditch enclosures, and in particular to sample any waterlogged deposits as an aid to the interpretation of the past landscape.

On Friday afternoon, 8th August, Richard Chambers reported to the author that he had located a Roman well at Wally Corner, and also observed human bones on the spoil heaps of the gravel pit. Anxious to recover a Roman biological sample which might supplement those which had recently been recovered from Appleford (Hinchliffe and Thomas 1980), Ashville (Parrington 1978), Barton Court Farm (Miles 1986) and Farmoor (Lambrick and Robinson 1979), the author immediately went to Wally Corner, accompanied

by Richard Chambers and two assistants from the Barton Court excavation. At the Wally Corner gravel pit a stone-lined well was apparent in the area being worked by a drag-line and the exposed gravel surface around the drag-line was also pock-marked with dark, rectangular features, which were obviously graves. The author began to clear the loose surface of one of these marks and almost at once struck the top of a Saxon shield boss.

As soon as the potential of the site was realised arrangements were made to begin salvage excavation. Amey Roadstone Corporation, the owners and operators of the gravel pit, have always adopted an enlightened attitude towards archaeology and their extraction programme was reorganised to provide an opportunity for excavation. They also made site caravans and machinery available. The staff and many of the volunteers at Barton Court Farm moved over to the Berinsfield site where they were joined by many other volunteers, notably from the Dorchester Archaeological Society, the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Society and the Oxford University Archaeological Society.

Excavation began on the following morning, Saturday, 9th August 1974 and continued every day for three weeks. During that time a small group of



Figure 2 General view of the site looking northwards

excavators camped on the site in order to protect it from grave looters and treasure hunters who were a persistent nuisance — so much so that in spite of the guard a pot and a skull were stolen from two graves and one offender found himself in the magistrates' court (reported in the *Oxford Mail* 20th September 1974).

The unexpected discovery of the Saxon cemetery combined with the threat from looters and the necessity to avoid delays in the operations of the gravel pit meant that the main Wally Corner excavation was carried out very much in hurried, salvage conditions (Fig. 2). After the first frantic three weeks in which the main area of the cemetery was excavated, a further two weeks work was carried out in 1975 when a JCB IIC, equipped with a 5ft toothless ditching bucket, was used to cut a series of trial trenches to the W, N and NW of the 1974 excavation area. No further burials were located, nor any other Saxon features. The area immediately SW of the excavation was not explored as it was covered by the concrete base of a car park. South of the 1974 excavation area a narrow berm of land had been left by the gravel pit operators, between their pit and Burcot Lane, the Berinsfield-Drayton St Leonard road. Two narrow trenches were excavated in the restricted space available and three further graves located (Graves 152, 161 and 164: Fig. 6). Over the following two years the area was quarried without revealing any further graves. A single Saxon vessel was found in 1981 where it had fallen from the southern face of the quarry.

Following the excavation the enormous task of conservation was carried out most rapidly and efficiently by the staff of the Ashmolean Museum's Conservation department.

SITE GEOGRAPHY

The Wally Corner site (SU 5805 9565) lies 1.1 km N of Dorchester, 1.5 km E of the great loop of the River Thames around Long Wittenham and about 300 m NW of the river Thame (Figs 1 and 3). The cemetery was located at +50 m AOD on the second gravel terrace. Two hundred metres to the N the ground rises gently over a belt of Gault clay, where there are springs such as Cell Well, and onto a further area of gravel, where the site of the Mount Farm excavations was located (Myres 1937, Lambrick forthcoming).

The soils of the area have not been published in the detail of the neighbouring part of the Thames valley around Abingdon and Wantage (Jarvis 1973) but they are a combination of the same types found on the gravel terraces there.

These wide terraces are traditionally arable areas, growing principally barley, potatoes and sometimes vegetables, while during the Second World War an aerodrome was built on the site. This was dismantled, except for some of the concrete runways, and the land returned to agriculture, with

potatoes being cultivated in the period immediately prior to the excavation. The land was absorbed in the early 1970s into the large complex of gravel pits N of Dorchester, which now survive as lakes for sailing, fishing and birdwatching (Benson and Miles 1974, Fig. 17).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Dorchester area contains some of the most important archaeological complexes in the Thames valley (Fig. 3), perhaps even in southern Britain as a whole. Approximately 1 km SW of Wally Corner is the Dorchester group of Neolithic ceremonial sites including a large henge monument and a cursus (Atkinson *et al.* 1951; Benson and Miles 1974, 91–94, Fig. 17). In the Iron Age the hillfort of Castle Hill 3 km S, across the River Thames, and later the *oppidum* of Dyke Hills 2 km S, at the confluence of the Thame and the Thames, acted as the main foci of settlement. A Roman fort was succeeded by a small walled town of 5.2 ha at Dorchester, which has produced evidence of early Saxon occupation (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion; also Frere 1962 and 1984; Bradley 1978; and Rowley 1985). With the success of St Birinus' missionary activities in the 7th century, the town became the site of the first bishopric of Wessex.

The rural hinterland of Dorchester has produced evidence of dense settlement in Roman and Saxon times. Roman farmsteads have been excavated at Bishop's Court (May 1977) immediately W of the town and Mount Farm, 600 m N of Wally Corner (Myres 1937, Lambrick forthcoming). Early Saxon settlement evidence has also been found at Bishop's Court and Mount Farm as well as inside Dorchester itself.

Three major Roman cemeteries have been located, SE and NW of Dorchester (Harman *et al.* 1978), at least one of which, Queenford Farm (Chambers 1987), was probably in use until the end of the Roman period. The Queenford Farm cemetery lay 600 m S of Wally Corner, and was linked to Dorchester by a road, visible as a cropmark of parallel lines (Fig. 3). Dorchester is well known for its 5th-century so-called military burials which have been found at Dyke Hills (Hawkes and Dunning 1961) and N of the Roman town.

Early Saxon burials have been found in the Dorchester area at Bishop's Court (May 1977) and as secondary burials in the prehistoric mounds 1 km W of Wally Corner (Atkinson *et al.* 1951).

THE WALLY CORNER SITE

The Wally Corner cropmark complex was first observed and photographed by Major Allen on 9 June 1934, on the same flight that he took a famous series of photographs of the Mount Farm site 600 m to the N (Myres 1937). The site was independently rediscovered in 1960 when gravel extraction began

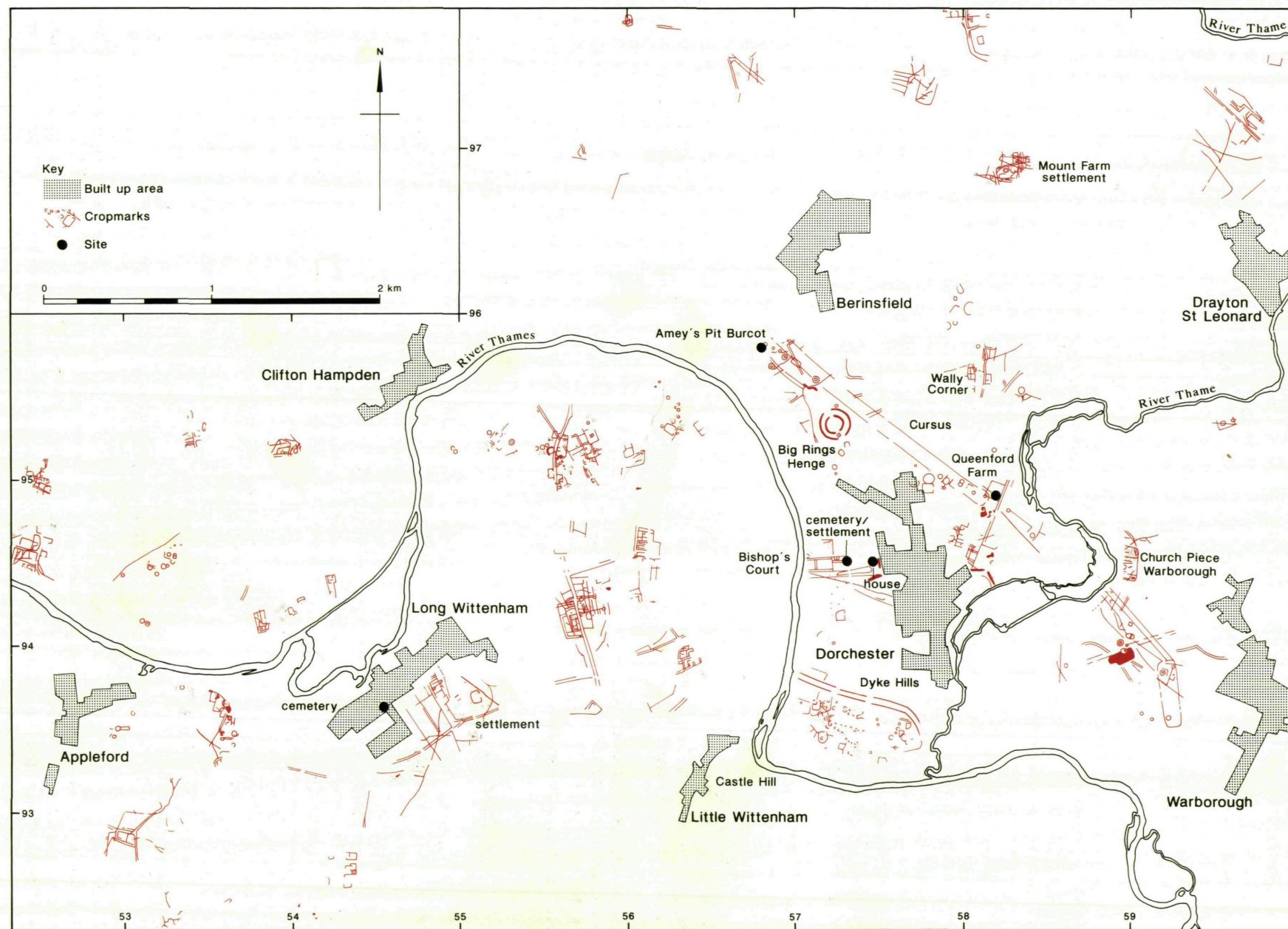


Figure 3 Cropmarks and archaeological sites in the Dorchester area

on the S side of Burcot Lane. Romano-British ditches were observed cutting the cleared gravel surface and members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society carried out an excavation (Sutton 1961/2). A series of rectangular Romano-British enclosure ditches was planned and sectioned. A number of pits were also excavated, which produced waterlogged material, wicker-lining and wood. Some of these 'pits' seem to have been wells. The excavation results were inconclusive; no structural evidence was produced and the ditches, of 1st- to 4th-century date, formed no coherent plan.

Allen's photographs, which do not seem to have been consulted in 1960, show the error of the excavators' conclusion 'that the larger part of the site was brought to light' (Sutton 1961/2, 12). Shortly after the excavation on 25th June 1962 further aerial photographs were taken of the cropmark complex by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography (Fig. 5): these revealed considerably more detail than had been available before.

The cropmark complex around the junction of Burcot Lane and the Drayton St Leonard road was first sketch-plotted in 1974 (Benson and Miles 1974, Map 36). The plan in this volume (Fig. 4) incorporates all the currently available cropmark evidence at a larger scale, which can be traced over an area of approximately 24 ha. There is no reason to believe that these are the actual limits of the archaeological features, as on the N side, for example, the marks are truncated where they run off the edge of the gravel terrace and heavier soils begin.

The main group of marks consists of trackways, sub-rectangular enclosures and paddocks of the Romano-British period. A trackway follows a slightly curving N-S line, running towards Dorchester and northwards in the direction of the Mount Farm settlement (Benson and Miles 1974, Map 38) where a trackway on the same line can be observed running into the nucleus of the site. Another trackway runs off in the direction of the main Roman Dorchester-Alcester road 500 m to the W.

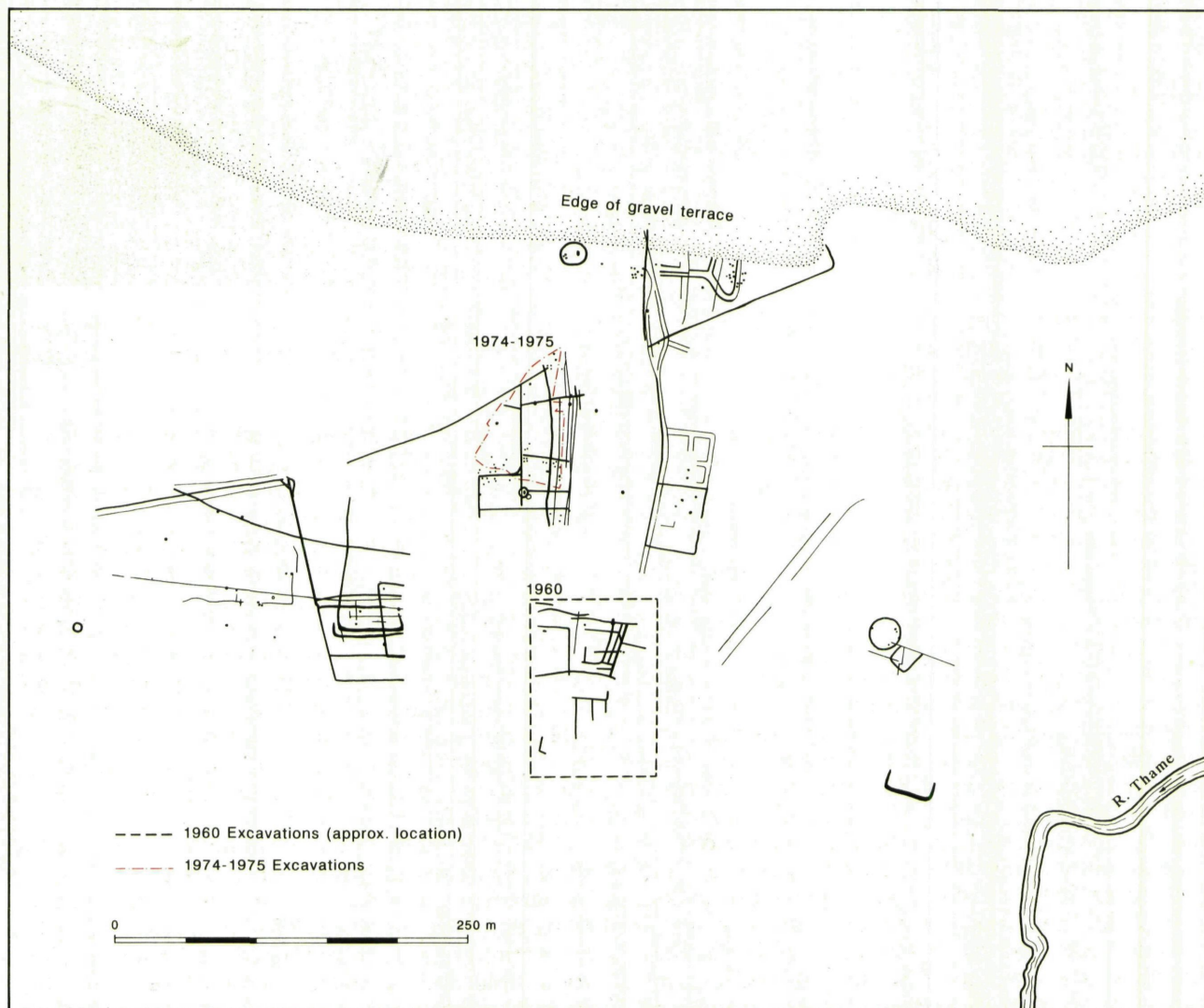


Figure 4 Plot of cropmarks at Wally Corner and the extent of the 1960 and 1974/5 excavations



Figure 5 Aerial Photograph of the Wally Corner cropmarks taken by Cambridge University (AFU 47) copyright reserved. The gravel quarry is on the site of the 1960s excavations, the 1974/5 excavation site is left centre, to the right of the barn (N is to the left of the photograph)

The cropmarks show considerable evidence for recutting and replacement of features as one would expect on a site with evidence of three to four centuries of Romano-British occupation.

Some features may predate the Romano-British enclosures, for example a circle measuring approximately 25 m in diameter, visible on Allen's photographs only 250 m SE of the Saxon cemetery site. This is possibly a ploughed-out late Neolithic/Bronze Age barrow or even an Iron Age enclosure; positive identification is impossible without excavation. This also applies to the oval enclosure at the N end of the cropmark complex. The most interesting circular feature as regards the present report, visible on the Cambridge photographs (AFU 47 [Fig. 5] and 48), is just S of the 1974 excavation. This circle is approximately 6-7 m in diameter with a rectangular mark close to its centre, the size and shape of a large grave, orientated N-S. The cropmark most resembles the ring-ditches known to have surrounded Saxon graves, particularly in Kent, and which provided the material for small grave mounds or enclosures (Hogarth 1973). Such a structure is exceptionally

rare in the Thames valley, with only one other example known from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Lechlade Butler's Field. Unfortunately the circle was destroyed prior to excavation.

Many of the excavated features are visible on the aerial photographs: the ditches can be correlated with the cropmarks and some can be traced which had been scoured away by the drag-line. The Romano-British well (F9) is visible as a relatively isolated spot in the Cambridge photographs and so is the large funnel-shaped pit (F116) which was a prehistoric feature, possibly part of a pond barrow (Barclay and Thomas, this volume) into which a later, Saxon female inhumation (grave 134) had been inserted.

The cropmarks provide some assistance in attempting to establish the size of the cemetery, and the largest concentration of graves visible on the aerial photographs is exactly in the area of the 1974 excavation. However, not all of the known graves are visible nor can all the visible cropmarks be equated with excavated features. One must be cautious, therefore, of counting the marks on the photographs to provide a total number of graves.

The most convincing group of unexcavated grave marks is that immediately S of the 1974 excavation (Fig. 4) where about a dozen rectangular marks can be seen orientated E-W, like the excavated examples (graves 51, 52, 54, 63 etc) immediately N of them, inside a Romano-British enclosure. Unfortunately, the strip of land alongside and N of Burcot Lane shows no marks owing to the deep soil of a headland formed by ploughing.

PLACE NAMES

The discovery of a Saxon cemetery at a place called Berinsfield caused some excitement, as it was conjectured that the name might derive from the Saxon word *byrgen* and refer to a 'burial field'. However it was rapidly discovered that the name was created only in recent times, named after St Birinus the first bishop of Dorchester (see Appendix 1; and Gelling 1978, 140-141), and the history of the naming of the new village provides a salutary lesson for those who use place name evidence.

Crutch Furlong

The Dorchester Tithe Award of 1846 (Oxfordshire Record Office Map 132) shows that the area of the Berinsfield cemetery lay among a parcel of strip fields — part of the great open field system of Dorchester then surviving in the N of the parish. The strips were jointly called Crutch Furlong. The name probably derives from the Old English word for a hill, slope or mound (Ekwall 1960, 134). The most likely explanation is that the land immediately N of Crutch Furlong slopes upwards to the similarly named Mount Farm and the third gravel terrace.

Wally Corner

The road junction adjacent to the cemetery site is known as Wally Corner, a name which can be traced as far back as a survey of 1551-2 (Gelling 1953, 152). The name is thought by Gelling to mean spring/stream land near a river.

METHOD OF EXCAVATION

When the Berinsfield cemetery was discovered most of the topsoil had already been removed by a drag-line. This left a rough, uneven surface and some shallow graves and Romano-British ditches were badly damaged by the machine's cumbersome bucket. A strip of gravel up to 16 m wide had also been dug out along the southern side of the site parallel to Burcot Lane (Fig. 2: foreground and Fig. 6). Undoubtedly a number of graves were destroyed in this initial phase of gravel extraction

and fragments of human bone and metal were found on the spoil heaps.

The most urgent problem in salvaging what remained of the cemetery was to excavate a corridor of land through the site up to the Burcot Lane entrance of the gravel pit. This was the only entrance and exit for the lorries, which were continuously carrying gravel from the pit, and therefore to prevent any delays in the operation of the pit a road-line was marked out and some seventeen graves examined over the first weekend of the excavation. Thus on the Monday morning the lorries could come and go through the cemetery area.

Excavation began by cleaning over the disturbed surface of the gravel with shovels. The top half of the triangular-shaped excavation area (Fig. 6) had some topsoil remaining on it so a JCB IIC was brought in and the topsoil was removed. Many graves showed up clearly as dark rectangular marks, but some areas were relatively featureless.

Before each grave was excavated the area around it was carefully cleaned in search of grave markers or traces of any other superstructure. Areas of apparently featureless gravel were carefully trowelled over a number of times and in several cases graves were eventually detected. These graves usually had clean gravelly fills, presumably material dug out by the grave diggers and then backfilled, which tended to show faintly only in damp conditions.

The security problems at Berinsfield meant that each grave had to be excavated, photographed, planned and emptied in a single day. This sometimes created difficulties especially with the more complex graves. By using most of the hours of daylight it was found that the work could be done without unduly compromising the standards of excavation. Nevertheless in such conditions some sins of omission were unfortunately committed. The recording of the most complicated graves was particularly helped by the ingenuity of John Cowan, RPS. His rapid production of life-size photographic prints on transparent film enabled three dimensional plans to be traced as the graves were excavated (Cowan 1974). All the graves were planned at a scale of 1:10 and the position of grave goods indicated in relation to the bodies. Such planning was not found to take an unduly large amount of time (see Barker 1977, 99) thanks to the presence of an extremely efficient draughtsman. All graves were photographed both on black and white and colour film.

Ideally a physical anthropologist should be present on site during the excavation of a cemetery. This was not possible at Berinsfield but the presence of Bob Wilson, who was then the Oxford Archaeological Unit's zoologist, was a great help. The presence of a conservator also aided the recovery of organic evidence: finds were lifted with material adhering to them and examined in laboratory conditions thus preserving textile and plant remains.

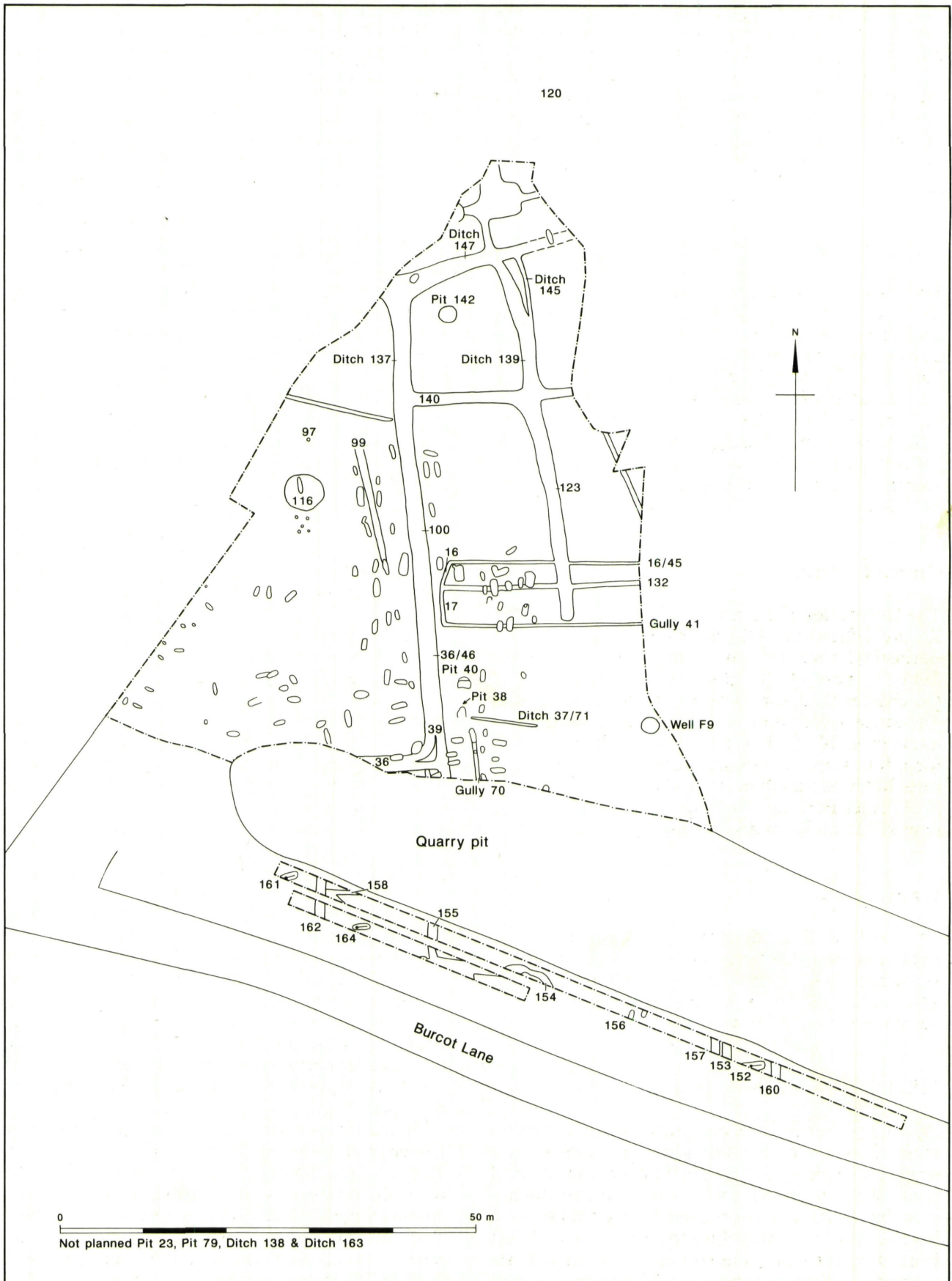


Figure 6 Site plan of prehistoric and Roman features

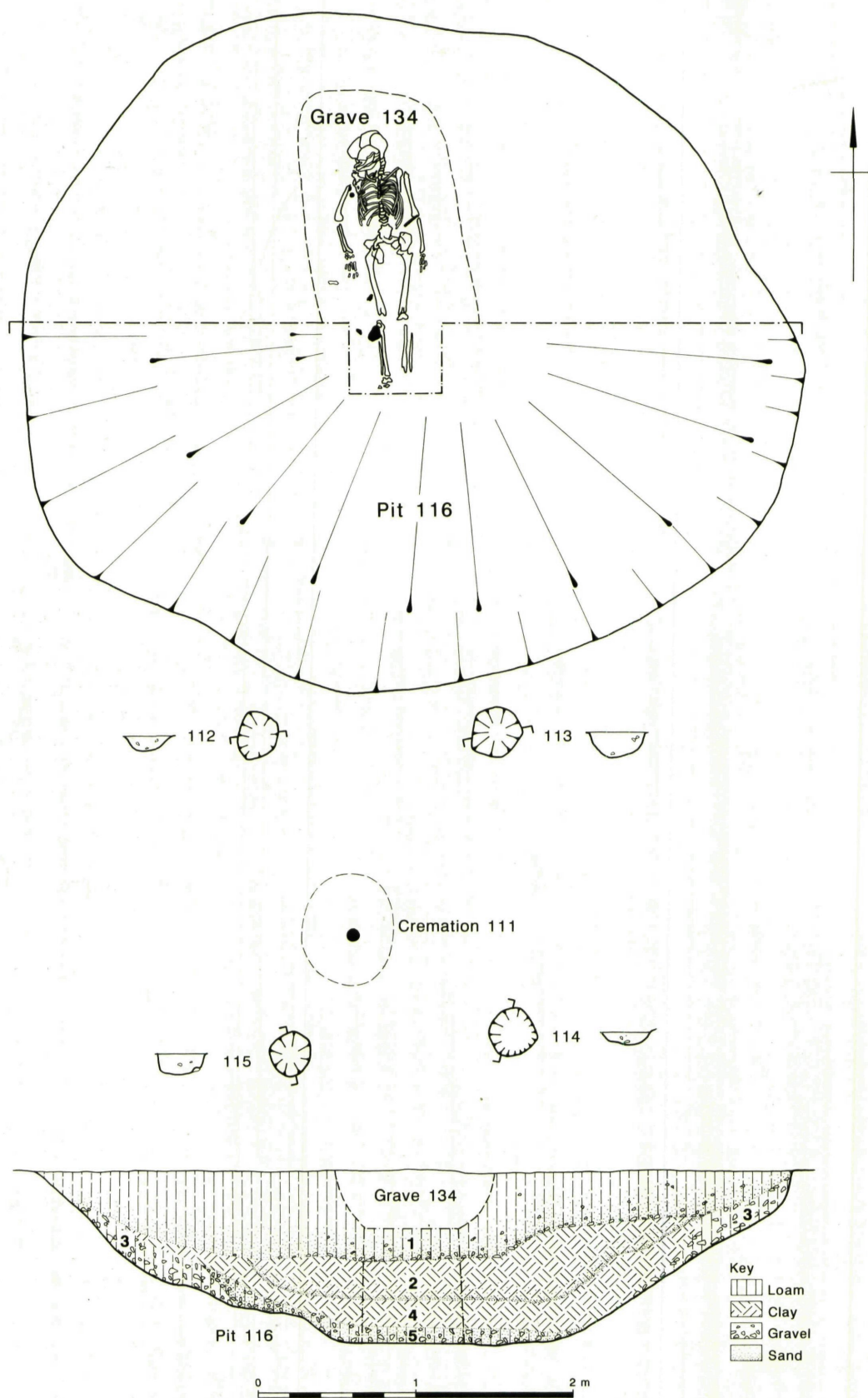


Figure 7 Plan and section of feature 116