

# Chapter 1: Introduction

by Steve Lawrence and Alex Smith

The town of Higham Ferrers in Northamptonshire, and the Nene Valley within which it is located, are both rich in archaeological remains, with human activity well attested from the early prehistoric period onwards. This volume presents the results of excavations undertaken by Oxford Archaeology (OA) on the Roman settlement at Kings Meadow Lane on the north-western edge of Higham Ferrers from 2001 to 2003, in addition to

previous work by OA relating to prehistoric and Roman occupation of the immediate area. The development of the site is examined in relation to other excavated sites in the surrounding region, including those within the Raunds Area Project just to the north (Parry 2006). Excavations by OA of the important Saxon settlement at Higham Ferrers are the subject of a separate volume (Hardy *et al.* 2007).

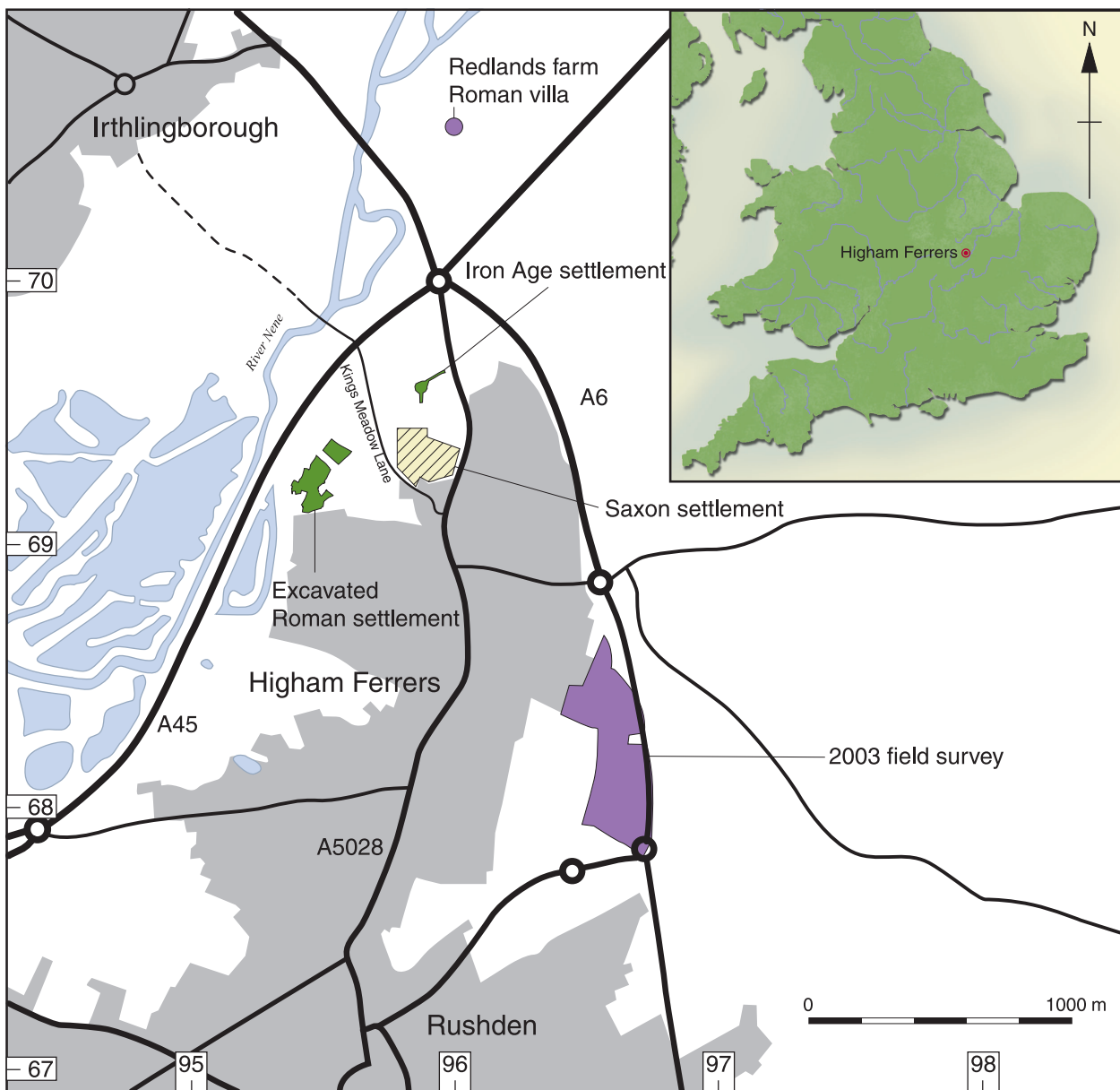


Fig. 1.1 Site location



Plate 1.1. Aerial photograph of Higham Ferrers site in the 1980s prior to any archaeological investigations (© Duchy of Lancaster)

### PROJECT BACKGROUND

In October 1988 the Duchy of Lancaster (DoL) was granted outline planning permission by East Northamptonshire District Council for a large-scale residential and recreational development on 41 hectares of land bisected by Kings Meadow Lane, at the northern edge of the existing town of Higham Ferrers (NGR SP 9544 6921; Fig. 1.1; Pl. 1.1).

The planning approval predated PPG16 and subsequent discussions between the DoL and English Heritage (EH) resulted in an agreement to fund a programme of archaeological works. This comprised a desk-based assessment, fieldwalking, geophysical survey and selective trial trenching by Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit (NAU 1991), in a three-phase evaluation of the entire development area. The combined results revealed a middle

to late Iron Age settlement to the north (known from cropmarks), a large Saxon settlement *c* 200 further south and an extensive Roman settlement in the south-western area (*ibid.*; Fig. 1.2). The Iron Age and Roman settlements form the subjects of the present volume, while the Saxon settlement is dealt with elsewhere (Hardy *et al.* 2007).

Further trenching was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1994 within the area of the Saxon settlement and this confirmed the national importance of the site (OAU 1994; Hardy *et al.* 2007, 3). Also in 1995 an excavation by OAU took place at the middle to late Iron Age settlement site, prior to construction of a roundabout and access roads (See Chapter 3). Further ephemeral parts of this Iron Age settlement were uncovered in a 1997 evaluation to the east of the 1995 excavations (OAU 1997; Fig. 1.2).



The Saxon settlement was subject to further excavation in 2000, when a Roman trackway and/or boundary ditches were also revealed. Concurrent with the 2000 excavations, a magnetometer survey (covering *c* 4.5 ha) was conducted by the Bartlett-Clark consultancy in an area to the south-west, focusing upon the suggested Roman settlement. This survey was later widened to reveal a substantial part of the settlement, including defined ditched areas, or land plots, adjacent to a road/trackway aligned NE to SW along the top of the valley slope (Fig. 1.3). There were no indications of structures within them. Targeted evaluation trenching of the features identified within the

geophysical survey, supplemented by a 1% percent sample of the 'blank' areas, demonstrated that good evidence for occupation survived within the area of the Roman settlement. *In situ* pitched limestone surfaces, representing structural or yard surfaces, were encountered within the ditched area defined in the northern portion of this settlement (Area G).

The geophysical survey also identified and located a previously-noted ring ditch (Fig. 1.3). A single targeted trench located across the northern side of the monument demonstrated this to be a two-phase feature. Flints from the excavated fills of the ditch were not closely dated, but unstratified material from this and adjacent trenches is mostly

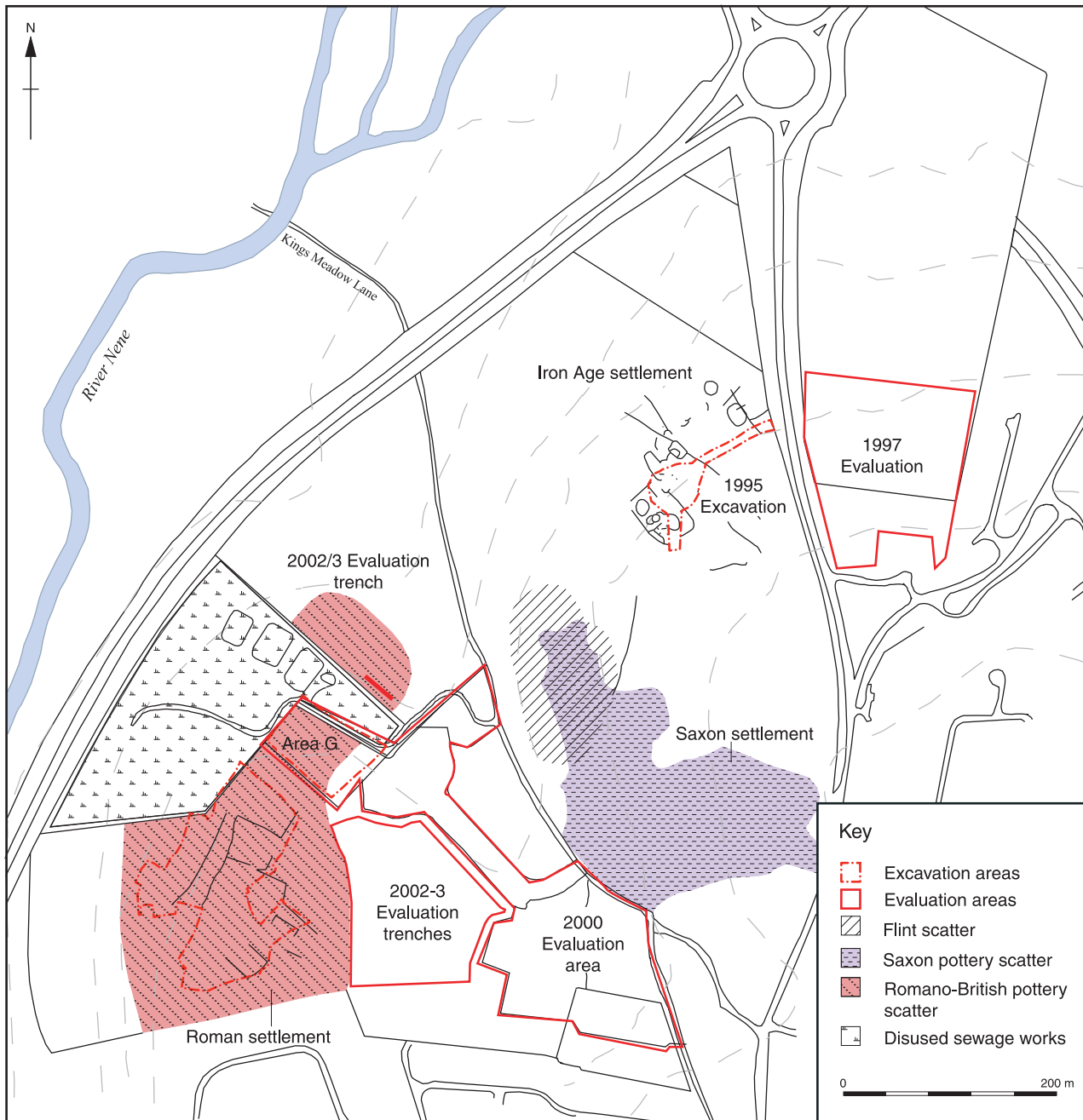


Fig. 1.2 Previous archaeological investigations in the area



Fig. 1.3 Geophysical survey of the Roman settlement



of late Neolithic – early Bronze Age character. The ring ditch was later fully excavated in 2000 (see Chapter 2).

Based on these results and further discussion between the interested parties, an agreed project design was approved which allowed for the investigation of targeted excavation areas, with funding provided by the client (DoL). EH provided specialist support and analysis during the initial excavation phase.

As a result of the continuing programme of development, OA completed the excavation of substantial parts of the Roman roadside settlement in two major phases. In 2001, an area (Area G) to the north was excavated, revealing an outlying and

presumably non-domestic part of the settlement, while in 2002-3, an area containing masonry domestic structures and a shrine precinct was excavated (see below). Overall, the areas revealed by OA in 2001-3 still represent only the northern extent of the settlement area, which continues further to the south under 1960s housing development (Pl. 1.2; see Chapter 7 for discussion on extent of settlement).

In 2003 a non-intrusive survey by OA identified the extensive remains of another settlement of likely late Iron Age and Roman date located to the immediate east of The Ferrers School, 1.5 km south-east of the excavated Roman settlement (OA 2004a; Fig. 1.1).



Plate 1.2 Aerial photograph of Higham Ferrers site during 2002/3 excavations on the Roman settlement (© Duchy of Lancaster)

**LOCATION AND GEOLOGY**

The Roman settlement is situated on what was arable land to the south-west of Kings Meadow Lane and north of modern Higham Ferrers town limits on the eastern side of the Nene Valley, just c

200 m from the river (SP 95446921; Figs 1.1 and 1.2; Pl. 1.2). The excavated site lay on one side of a small dry valley running up from the Nene (with the Saxon settlement on the other side), varying in height from 35 m to 65 m OD (most of the settlement

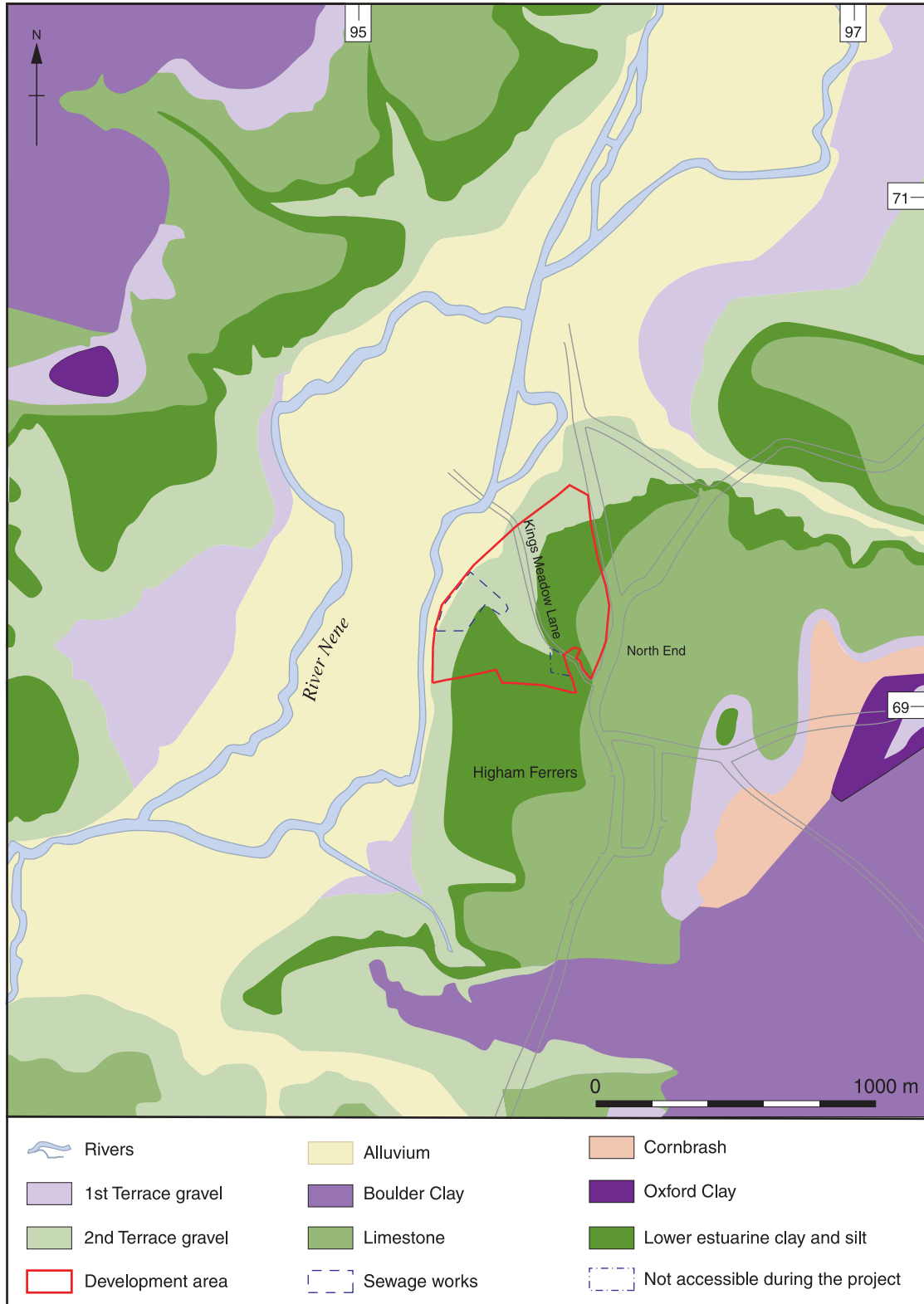


Fig. 1.4 Geology of the area



lay at *c* 50 m OD). The valley bottom has been used as a route (now known as Kings Meadow Lane) from the northern end of the town, down towards the river, and across to Irthlingborough. The geology of the Roman settlement is Northamptonshire Sands and Ironstone with the Upper Estuarine Series Silts and Clays in the extreme eastern part of the site (Fig. 1.4).

The Iron Age settlement lies *c* 0.5 km further north-east on a natural slope of Upper Lias Clay (*c* 55 m OD) overlooking the Nene Valley to the east (SP 95896958).

### EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

The excavations of the main part of the Roman settlement represented the final phases of archaeological works in advance of proposed development (Pl. 1.3). Evaluations were carried out to define the areas warranting full excavation, and initially a 'Strip-Map-Sample' approach was undertaken, which revealed a large part of the settlement.

This machine stripping began in August 2002 and it became obvious early in this exercise that the quality, quantity and extent of preservation surpassed expectations provided by the limited previous trenching and the geophysical survey results (see above). Early in the fieldwork programme it was realised that the existing budget would not be able to provide the means necessary to gain even a limited overview of the site. To mitigate this further discussions were held with the client,

EH and the County Planning Archaeologist to establish a 'best means' approach to the site excavation. The results of this led to the DoL making the post-excavation budget plus an additional sum available for the immediate fieldwork and thus completing their financial responsibilities to the project. EH also provided financial and specialist support and agreed to take the financial responsibility for the assessment and post-excavation analysis and publication.

Part of the agreement for the 'best means' approach included extending the excavated area to investigate areas identified as of interest not revealed by the initial stripping exercise. A significant individual discovery was that of a shrine complex associated with very large numbers of votive finds and a piece of religious statuary. OA received further financial assistance from EH on two occasions, in order to complete the detailed recording of the shrine area and of finds scatters. Funded excavation was completed in March 2003.

Figure 1.5 provides an indication of the extent of excavated soil-cut features across the site, though does not include sections across the road surfaces and other spreads of material.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The area of the Nene Valley around Higham Ferrers is known to be rich in archaeological remains dating from the early prehistoric to the post-medieval period. The volume dealing with the Saxon settle-



Plate 1.3 View of excavations looking northwards across the settlement with building 10850 in the immediate foreground and the road to the west.



Fig. 1.5 Extent of excavation of soil-cut features across the site



ment (Hardy *et al.* 2007) discusses the archaeological background for the Saxon and later periods, and so only a summary of the prehistoric and Roman background is presented below. More detailed discussion can be found in Chapters 2, 3 and 7.

Evidence for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers in the region, in the form of flint scatters, is generally clustered in riverine locations on well-drained soils and in areas of topographic prominence, possibly relating to the use of the valleys for navigating the wooded landscape and exploiting plant, fish and animal resources (Phillips 2006; Parry and Humble 2006, 38; see Chapter 2). This suggests that Mesolithic activity was generally confined to the lower slopes of the valley, and only infrequently reached the upper plateau.

Early Neolithic settlement sites are rare in Northamptonshire, usually just being represented by flint scatters (Humble 2006a, 45). However, monumental sites of this period are more readily identifiable, such as the West Cotton Long Mound and Turf Mound (*ibid.*, 43-4). A number of early Neolithic causewayed enclosures are known in the county (eg Briar Hill and Dallington), although henges remain quite rare. Other Neolithic mortuary monuments and enclosures have been excavated at Redlands Farm, less than 1.5 km to the north-east of Higham Ferrers, and at other sites distributed at roughly regular intervals along the Nene Valley, all of which show some use or re-use into the early Bronze Age (Chapman 2006, 6).

Round barrows and other late Neolithic/early Bronze Age monuments are found throughout Northamptonshire. The majority, like the example at Higham Ferrers, have suffered the effects of intensive arable farming since the Middle Ages and are detectable only as cropmarks on aerial photographs. Examples have been discovered nearby at Aldwinckle (Kinnes and Jackson 1971; Jackson 1976; 1977) and Grendon (Gibson 1988). A series of early prehistoric monuments, including more than one barrow cemetery, were excavated at Stanwick (Neal 1989) and Irthlingborough (Halpin 1987). As with earlier periods, there is little direct evidence of late Neolithic/early Bronze Age habitation, with most sites being represented only by flint distributions (Parry and Humble 2006, 38-42). The only later Neolithic habitation site excavated in Northamptonshire is at Ecton, Northampton (Moore and Williams 1975).

Elsewhere in Northamptonshire, late Bronze Age habitation sites are also rare, with examples at Stanwick and Thrapston. Three later Bronze Age cremation cemeteries (Kelmarsh, Chapel Brampton and Briar Hill) were all found within 25 km to the west of Higham Ferrers. The settlement pattern may have continued largely unchanged into the early Iron Age (Willis 2006, 97). Sites of late Bronze Age-early Iron Age date are sparse, but concentrate along the permeable geologies of the Nene Valley, largely confined to the valley sides such as at Crow Hill and Stanwick (Parry 2006, 65). Pottery of 8th- to

4th-century date has, however, been found on the boulder clay plateau, which may hint at occupation in these areas (*ibid.*).

Archaeologically recognisable settlements become far more ubiquitous from the middle Iron Age onwards in Northamptonshire, especially in and around the Nene Valley (Willis 2006, 99). In particular, a growing number of relatively small, heavily defended, rectangular middle to late Iron Age enclosures, similar to the Higham Ferrers site, have been excavated within Northamptonshire in the past few decades (Jackson 1975; Knight 1984, 191-2; Jackson and Dix 1986-87; Dix and Jackson 1989; Kidd 2004), including a possible example on the eastern fringes of Higham Ferrers (*c.* 1.5 km south-east of the present site; Mudd 2004; OA 2004a). Although similar types of enclosure have been recognised elsewhere (Jobey 1962; Marshall 1991), the apparent concentration in the Midlands appears to be genuine and could be used to argue for increasingly fragmented social conditions towards the later Iron Age. In addition to these small enclosed settlements, a number of open settlements of this date have been identified (Parry 2006, 61), while a few larger heavily defended hillfort enclosures occur across a wide area between the Rivers Welland and Great Ouse. The nearest to Higham Ferrers is at Crow Hill, just *c.* 2 km to the north, where an area of 3 ha was enclosed by a substantial ditch and bank during the early or possibly middle Iron Age (*ibid.*, 64).

A high proportion of middle Iron Age sites in Northamptonshire show some continuity into the late Iron Age, with additional settlements serving to 'fill in' the landscape (Willis 2006, 107). These newly founded settlements, such as Clay Lane, Ecton (Windell 1983), largely followed middle Iron Age traditions, and indeed the pottery of the two periods was quite indistinguishable, leading to problems with dating (Jackson and Denham 2006, 71). Nevertheless, it does appear that hillforts may largely have been abandoned by this time, with the exception of Crow Hill, which was apparently strengthened with a palisade around the fort in the first half of the 1st century AD, possibly indicating some unrest prior to the Roman conquest (Parry 2006, 65).

There is no convincing evidence for any site that may be classed as an 'oppidum' within Northamptonshire, although late Iron Age occupation has been found on the sites of several Roman towns, such as Irchester (Hall and Nickerson 1967) and Towcester (Walker 1992). There is also evidence for possible high-status sites of late Iron Age date beneath villas at Weekley (Jackson and Dix 1986-7), and Piddington (Friendship-Taylor 1999), while a substantial settlement at Stanwick containing a series of roundhouses may date to the middle and/or late Iron Age (Parry 2006, 170).

Coin distributions suggest that by the latter part of the late Iron Age central and southern Northamptonshire had come under the general influence of

the Catuvellauni (Curteis 1996), although the region still lay on the edge of this south-eastern zone of 'cultural transformation', marked by new pottery styles, cremation burials and other developments of material culture (Kidd 2004, 56-7; see Chapter 7).

The patterns of early Roman land use in the Nene Valley and surrounding regions changed little from the preceding Iron Age (Parry 2006, 72), and the lack of any real evidence for an early Roman military presence suggests that the transition to Roman administration was not contested too fiercely. More significant developments are observed in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, so that the late Roman settlement pattern bears little resemblance to that of two centuries earlier.

The wealth of evidence for settlement in the Nene Valley during the Roman period has been commented upon on numerous occasions (eg Condrón 1995; Taylor and Flitcroft 2004; Parry 2006), and yet there are still relatively few fully published sites, and even the nationally important Roman pottery industries of the Nene Valley have yet to be studied systematically.

Higham Ferrers lies between the walled town of Irchester (Hall and Nickerson 1967) *c.* 4.5 km to the south-west and the probable small town of Titchmarsh (Curteis *et al.* 1998-9) *c.* 12 km to the north-east. The villa at Redlands Farm (Biddulph *et al.* forthcoming) is only 1.5 km to the north and the major villa and associated rural settlement complex at Stanwick (Crosby and Neal forthcoming) a further 1-1.5 km away. There is also further evidence for many lower status rural settlements in the surrounding area, with the Raunds Area survey just to the north of Higham Ferrers showing an overall density of 1 site per km<sup>2</sup> in the early and middle Roman periods and 0.75 per km<sup>2</sup> in the late Roman period (Parry 2006, 76). The pattern here shows that larger settlements and villas like Stanwick and Redlands Farm occupied areas adjacent to the River Nene, while smaller more dispersed farms were generally found on the higher Boulder Clay plateau, although in some quantity (*ibid.*, fig. 4.10). Analysis of pottery scatters representing manuring suggests that all the settlements in the Valley and on the Boulder Clay Uplands were associated with a mixed regime of grain production and animal husbandry, with hay meadows along the banks of the river (*ibid.*, 81-2). Some aspects of the interrelationship of these sites have already been studied in part (eg Griffiths 1989; Condrón 1995; Taylor 2001; Parry 2006), although much remains uncertain (see Chapter 7).

The excavated site at Higham Ferrers, lying on the upper slopes of the Valley, clearly falls into the well-known, if not completely understood, category of 'roadside settlement', although classification of this as a 'small town' is more debatable. Comparable roadside settlements have not been extensively excavated and published, with an exception being Ashton (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 279-81), 23 km to the north-east, where important excavations were carried out in the early 1980s,

although these have not been published. However, the roadside setting and (for the most part) relatively simple building plans closely mirror the situation at Higham Ferrers. Elsewhere within the region settlement and structures of broadly comparable character have been examined at *Durobrivae* (Water Newton, Cambridgeshire), but the excavations were carried out in the 1950s and recent publication (Perrin 1999) has concentrated only on the ceramic aspects of that work.

Further afield it remains the case that relatively few undefended sites in the 'small town' category have seen extensive excavation and even fewer have produced evidence for the number and potential diversity of structures seen at Higham Ferrers, with domestic structures, manufacturing zones, religious areas/structures and burial areas. Taylor (2001, 57) maps ten such 'small town' sites in Northamptonshire, including the three defended sites of *Bannaventa* (near Norton), *Lactodorum* (Towcester) and Irchester. Inevitably the character of some of these sites is open to question, and morphologically Stanwick, for example, looks potentially more like an agricultural estate than a 'small town'. Overall, the total number of sites in this category within the county is relatively limited, compared with much higher numbers of villas and smaller rural settlements.

Studies of the development of settlement in the local region suggests that there was a marked decline in the numbers of settlements on the Boulder Clay plateau in the late Roman period, in contrast to those in the Nene Valley itself (Parry 2006, 80). This decline was probably due to gradual settlement nucleation, a process which may have begun in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, and was part of a wider regional trend (*ibid.*, 81). Villas and larger settlements in the valley seem to have either expanded or established themselves from the 2nd century onwards, possibly at around the same time as the decrease in the Boulder Clay sites.

The transition from late Roman to Saxon in this region is complicated by the difficulties of closely dating the Saxon ceramic assemblage, most of which covers a broad period of AD 450-850 (early-middle Saxon; Parry 2006, 91). Nevertheless, there are a growing number of late Roman sites where Saxon structures (sunken-featured buildings) and pottery have been found, including Redlands Farm, Stanwick and Wollaston (Brown and Foard 2004, 78). Early Saxon cemeteries have also been found near to the Roman small town of Duston (*c.* 38 km south-west of Higham Ferrers) and the nucleated settlement at North Kettering (*c.* 12 km north-west of Higham Ferrers), and have been used to suggest that the Anglo-Saxon takeover took place within a Roman framework (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, it still remains very difficult to determine any relationship between the native late/sub-Roman population and populations demonstrating a Germanic material culture (see Hardy *et al.* 2007 for a discussion of early Saxon evidence at Higham Ferrers).



## CHRONOLOGY AND PHASING

The following is a summary of the main phasing of the site.

### Phase 1: Early prehistoric activity

The discovery of an extensive redeposited flint assemblage attests to significant (probably early) Mesolithic occupation at the site. Sparse Neolithic occupation was indicated by two pits in the area of the Saxon settlement, along with Neolithic tools found scattered across that site.

A late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditch was found to the east of the Roman settlement on the south-western slope of the Kings Meadow Lane valley. The ditch surrounded a series of internal features including a probable cremation burial. A second cremation burial, this time contained within an inverted early Bronze Age Collared Urn, was found in the far western part of the site. Other potentially prehistoric features include two parallel ditches that lay in the north-east of the site; these may have been associated with a waterhole positioned at the putative entrance of the westernmost of the pair.

### Phase 2: Iron Age settlement

A middle to late Iron Age settlement was located *c* 200 m to the north of the Saxon settlement and *c* 370 m north-east of the Roman settlement on a natural slope overlooking the Nene Valley to the west. The settlement consisted of a series of enclo-

tures with associated ring gullies and other settlement features. The largest of the enclosures was recognised as belonging to a distinctive type of relatively small defended enclosure common to the Northamptonshire area (Dix and Jackson 1989). Further archaeological evaluation on land lying to the east of the main Iron Age settlement revealed mid to late Iron Age pits and ditches. Two ditches and a waterhole in the area of the Roman settlement may also be Iron Age in date. None of the pottery from any of the Iron Age features could be dated to the latest part of the late Iron Age (early-mid 1st century AD), although it is possible that earlier pottery styles continued in use.

### Phase 3: Establishment of the Roman settlement (2nd century)

The excavated part of the Roman settlement was established in the earlier 2nd century. There is evidence for three residential units, each represented by a circular building (Pl. 1.4), two of which were served by adjacent stone-lined wells. One of these units was located within the southern part of a rectangular enclosure, and a small cemetery area – comprising three adult cremation burials and an inhumation of a young child – was identified adjacent to the enclosure. Other features associated with the settlement included two large pits or waterholes. The settlement was bounded to the west by a ditch delimiting the eastern side of a NNE-SSW road.



Plate 1.4 View facing west over stone roundhouse 10920





Plate 1.5 View facing west over rectangular buildings 10860 and 11370 towards the Nene Valley

#### **Phase 4: Development of the Roman settlement (late 2nd to 3rd century)**

The layout of the settlement changed significantly during this phase, with a series of mostly rectangular buildings aligned upon the eastern side of the north-south road (Pl. 1.5). A gravel 'pavement' was constructed along the whole length of the roadside frontage of the settlement, representing a major collective or 'municipal' project. The northern end of the site remained largely empty, aside from field boundaries and two wells. On the western side of the road, a monumental shrine complex was constructed.

#### **Phase 5: Expansion and decline of the Roman settlement (late 3rd to 4th century)**

During this phase, the settlement continued to expand, extending further north, with discrete areas of stone paving laid down along the road frontage. The shrine to the west of the road probably fell into disuse after the late 3rd century, the religious focus possibly shifting to a small 'temple' at the northern periphery of the settlement. The coin and pottery evidence suggests that the settlement (or at least the excavated part of it) was abandoned during the second half of the 4th century, with the buildings being subjected to stone robbing, a process that probably continued into the post-Roman period. All the wells were abandoned during the 4th century.

At the time of the Saxon reoccupation of the site (mid 5th century onwards), many of the late Roman boundary ditches still existed as remnant earthwork hollows (see Hardy *et al.* 2007 for more details).

#### **PUBLICATION STRUCTURE**

This volume presents the results of archaeological investigations of prehistoric and Roman settlements on either side of Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers. It is based on a programme of work agreed subsequent to a post-excavation assessment of the excavation record (OA 2004b). Chapter 2 examines the evidence for early prehistoric activity (Mesolithic to late Bronze Age), while Chapter 3 looks at the middle to late Iron Age settlement excavated in 1995, along with other features possibly of this date. Both of these chapters also contain finds and environmental analysis and wider discussions of the periods in question.

Chapters 4 to 7 deal with the Roman roadside settlement and shrine. Chapter 4 provides a detailed narrative of the archaeological sequence from the 2nd to 4th centuries, while Chapters 5 and 6 examine the material culture and environment of the site. Finally, Chapter 7 presents a discussion of the development of the settlement and shrine, covering aspects such as spatial organisation, economy, social structure and ritual practice. The site is also discussed within the wider landscape of the Nene Valley and further afield.

#### **ARCHIVES**

The project archive is currently stored at OA until an adequate storage facility is provided for the county of Northamptonshire.