Chapter 1: Introduction

by Anne Marie Cromarty with Alistair Barclay

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s the construction of a bypass to the south and west of Wallingford (Figs 1.1–2) was proposed by the Oxfordshire County Council, to run from the A4074 Crowmarsh–Reading road across the River Thames, the old Great Western Railway route and Bradford's Brook before joining the A4130 Wantage Road at Slade End. This prompted a series of archaeological excavations and watching briefs.

GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENTAL BACKGROUND

This route cut across an area of Lower Chalk of Cretaceous age overlain by a drift deposit of what is called Valley Gravel on the Geological Survey map of 1948. This is a mixed and variable deposit of orange and white patchy sandy loam with decayed chalk fragments and a high proportion of gravel, which may be described as a chalky head deposit and would have formed at the base of slopes here beyond the Pleistocene ice limits. This is overlain by a narrow strip of alluvium at either side of the River Thames and around the tributary stream known as Bradford's Brook that joins the river from the west, a little to the north of where the proposed bypass was to cross it (see Fig. 1.2).

The soils derived from this geology tend to be fairly sandy or silty loams with some decaying chalk and flint gravel, having higher proportions of clay in the alluvial areas nearer to the river, and have largely been cultivated throughout history, though to the east of the river the bypass crosses the grounds of Mongewell house which were landscaped in the 18th century and planted with avenues and clumps of trees.

The area is fairly low-lying with gently undulating topography, largely smoothed by centuries of ploughing and the landscaping in Mongewell Park. The ground level at the river lies at about 43.5 m OD. To the east it rises to a slight scarp around 45 m, about 30 m back from the riverbank, before rising again, fairly steadily, to just over 63 m OD, where the proposed bypass was to meet the existing Reading–Crowmarsh road. To the west of the river, the ground is flatter between the river and where the road was to cross Bradford's Brook at SU 594 889, lying at around 46 m OD, except for a small ridge rising to 51 m to the west of the line of the Great Western Railway. This is part of the lower slopes of Cholsey Hill and though very small is quite pronounced in the open countryside here. To the north of Bradford's Brook the ground slopes only very gently up to around 54 m OD near Slade End Farm.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

This area, within the river corridor of the alluvial floodplain and the gravel terrace, was known to be of some archaeological interest, as is much of the Thames Valley with many sites preserved within the alluvium and gravel terraces. In the immediate area activity was known from the Neolithic and late Bronze Age through to the medieval and post-medieval periods, including the Grim's Ditch monument of unknown, but possibly Iron Age, date. Many finds have been dredged from this stretch of the River Thames from the 19th century onwards.

The Neolithic material includes three Mortlake Ware bowls dredged from the river at Mongewell adjacent to the end of Grim's Ditch (SU 608 882). These have been interpreted as votive deposits (Holgate 1988a, 283). A stone axe was recovered from the river slightly to the south (*c* SU 607 878; ibid., 304). In 1959 a middle Neolithic double ring ditch with central burial was excavated by the Oxford University Archaeological Society at Newnham Murren (SU 603 888; Moorey 1982). This feature, together with several similar circular cropmarks preserved in the valley gravel, had been known from aerial photographs of the area (Benson and Miles 1974). Three circular cropmarks (at approximately SU 602 883, SU 602 881 and SU 601 881) lie in a field through which the proposed bypass was to cut (field 0001). The latter two are particularly close to the route. These cropmarks have been tentatively identified as barrows of Bronze Age date, but may be of similar date to that excavated by Moorey (1982) a little to the north; they have not been investigated.

In the wider area several monuments of similar date have been investigated. These include the middle Neolithic long mortuary enclosure and bank barrow *c* 2 km down the river south of North Stoke (at SU 611 856), described by Case (1982a), and the possibly Neolithic cursus monument further upstream at Benson to the north of Wallingford (SU 629 919–SU 624 910, first published in Leeds 1934; Benson and Miles 1974, map 41).

A riverside settlement, sealed under alluvium near Whitecross Farm, on the west bank of the Thames (at approximately SU 607 882; see Fig. 1.2), was also known. An occupation layer was visible where the bank of the river was actively eroding. Several successive investigations had been carried out on this settlement between 1948 and 1980, the results of which are synthesised in Thomas *et al.* (1986). These excavations were small and did not reveal the extent or full nature of this settlement.

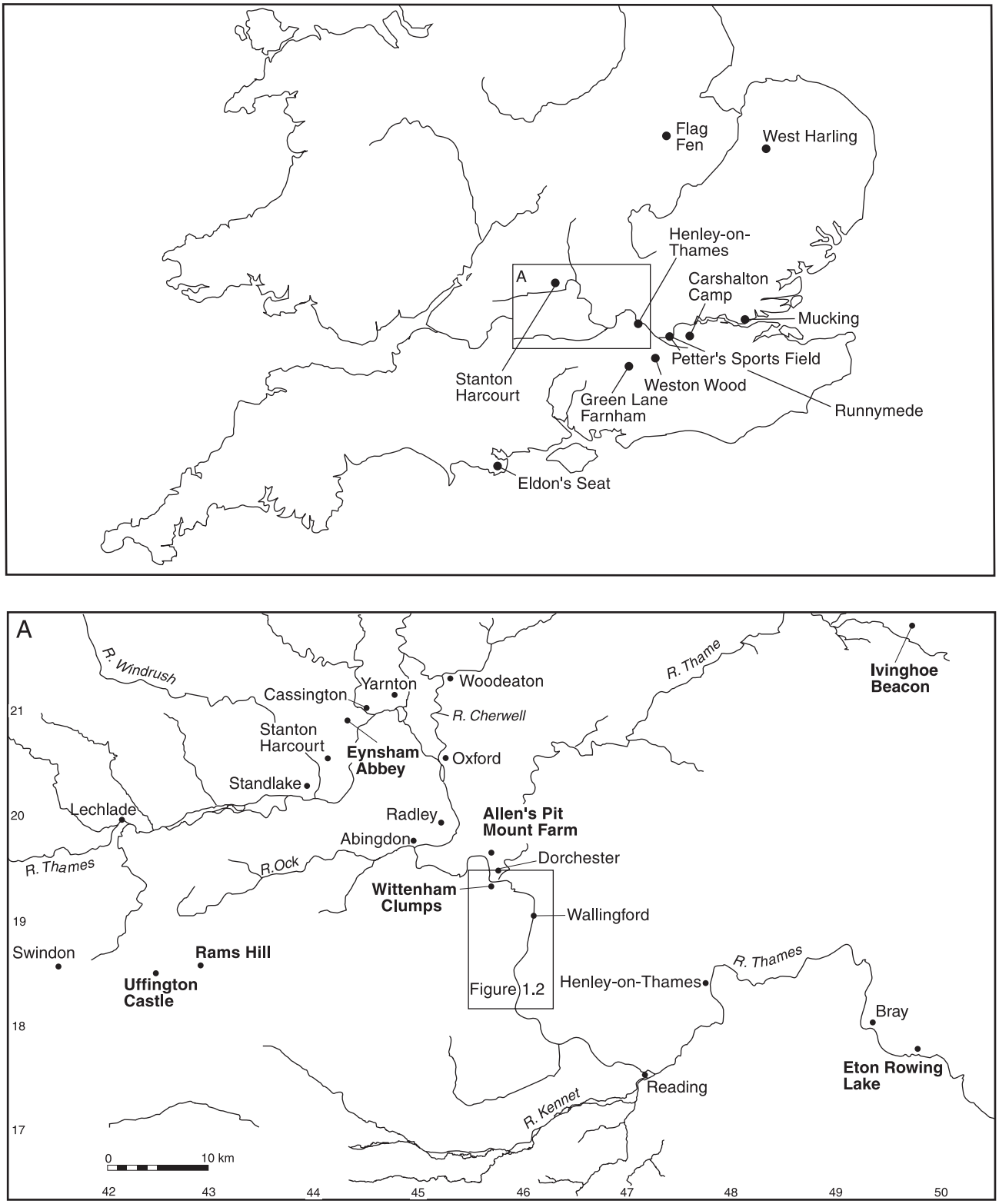
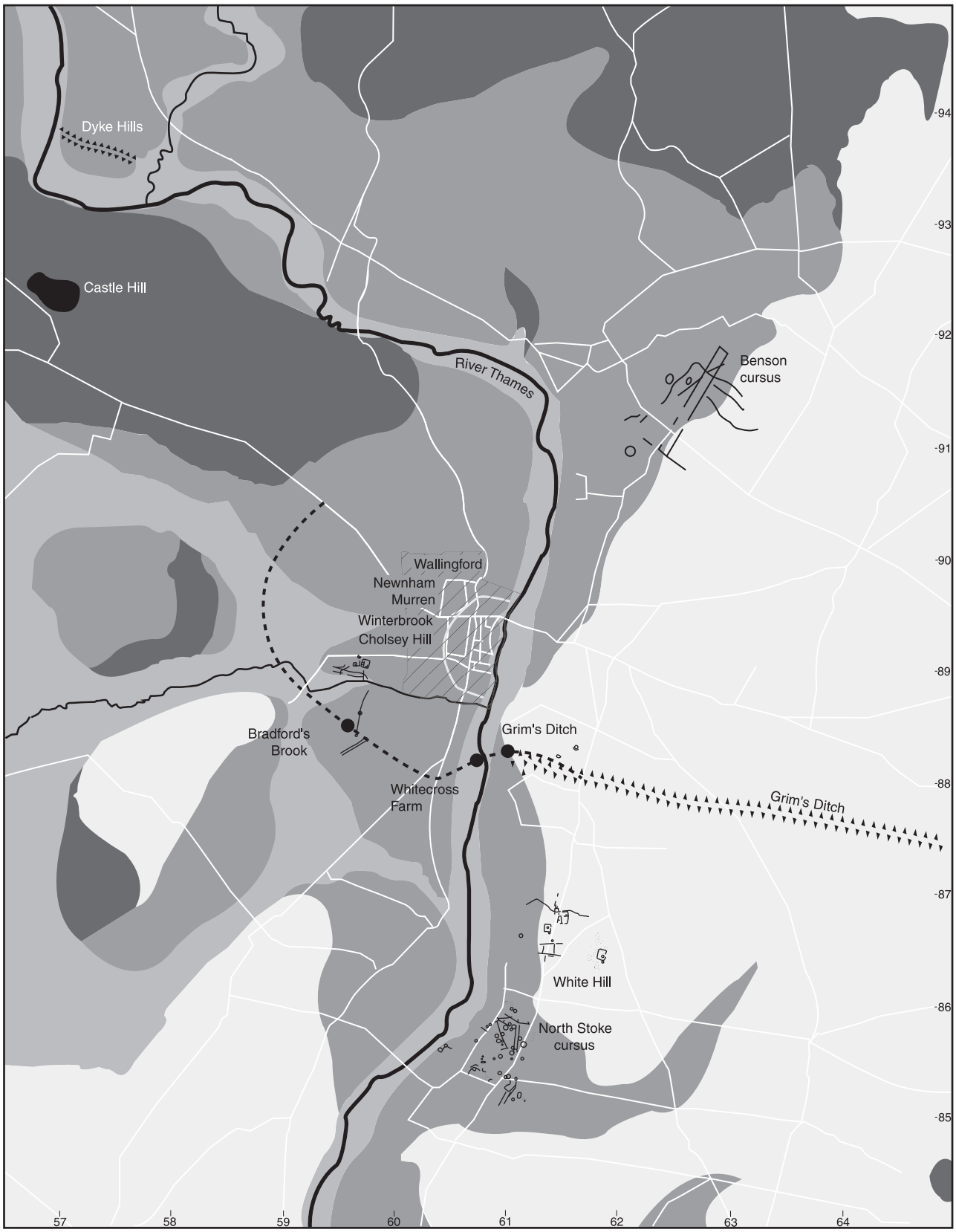


Figure 1.1 Location map showing Wallingford and other relevant sites

Figure 1.2 (facing page) Site location plan also showing geology and other surrounding cropmark and earthwork sites mentioned in the text


Dyke Hills
Castle Hill
River Thames
Benson
cursus
Wallingford
Newnham
Murren
Winterbrook
Cholsey Hill
Bradford's
Brook
Grim's Ditch
Whitecross
Farm
Grim's Ditch
White Hill
North Stoke
cursus
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Alluvium
Gravel terraces
Chalk
Greensand and clay
Archaeological sites
Cropmarks
Wallingford Bypass

The pottery was originally identified by Collins as Iron Age, but it was subsequently re-examined and found to be of late Bronze Age date (see Barclay, Chapter 3). The environmental evidence taken from the eroding section of bank in 1980 showed the progressive clearance of a partially wooded landscape at the time of occupation; the rich artefact assemblage recovered includes metalwork, pottery and evidence for textile production, metalworking and leatherworking, though no structures or features were found in the limited areas excavated.

In addition to the metalwork derived from these excavations, a number of pieces dating from the middle Bronze Age to the end of the late Bronze Age had been dredged from this stretch of the river between 1850 and 1964, the majority of which survives and is readily identifiable as to type and date. This metalwork may be derived from or associated with the activity at this site, suggesting the site may be of high status. This metalwork is summarised by Thomas (1984), and is also discussed by Peter Northover (see Chapter 3).

The other main site known on the line of the proposed bypass is Grim's Ditch (see Fig. 1.2). This is a linear earthwork running approximately east–west, with a ditch to the south, from the crest of the Chiltern escarpment to the Thames at Mongewell on the east side of the river to the south of Wallingford. Part of this is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM no. 32), though the less well-preserved western part where the bypass was to cross it is not and has been modified by the 18th-century landscaping within Mongewell Park. The field evidence for this monument was reviewed by Bradley (1968), who inferred an Iron Age date for the earthwork. A section was dug across this monument to the east of the Reading–Crowmarsh road (A4074) at SU 620 878 by the Southern Gas Board in 1959. This showed the bank to spread over *c* 9 m sealing a cultivation soil, while the ditch to the south was *c* 7.2 m wide but was not fully excavated. No revetment or other structure was observed and no dating material was recovered (Case and Sturdy 1959). Another small section of the monument was later excavated by Hinchliffe (1975) in advance of the widening of this road at SU 617 879, some 600 m to the east of the bypass route. Some pottery was recovered from the underlying old land surface and from the bank core. This was thought to be of middle Iron Age date, and further pottery of Iron Age date was recovered from a pit, though a stratigraphic relationship between this pit and the bank could not be defined. It remained unclear whether the Iron Age pottery was contemporary with the construction of the earthwork or was derived from the earlier occupation, represented by the pit; as a result the dating of the monument was still uncertain.

Some other Iron Age activity was also known from the vicinity of the bypass route. Near the excavated ring ditch was a cropmark rectilinear enclosure, also investigated by Moorey (1982). This produced pottery of early Iron Age date and was thought to belong with other more or less rectilinear ditched enclosures of this date in the region. Iron Age pottery and an early Iron Age occupation site were found during the construction of a new gas main at SU 6008 8865 in 1948. This site consisted of Iron Age pottery associated with cattle and sheep bones and concentrations of burnt quartzite pebbles interpreted as hearths (Collins 1948–9). A little further from the bypass route there is a hillfort on Blewburton Hill at Aston Upthorpe (SU 548 861). Work on this monument was undertaken by Collins over several seasons between 1947–67 and it was concluded to have been in use during the 5th–6th centuries BC and reused and partially rebuilt in the 1st century BC (Harding 1972). Traces of such a structure have also been suggested, though not confirmed, on Cholsey Hill at SU 573 879 overlooking the western part of the bypass route. Some 5 km to the north-west is the Iron Age hillfort known as Castle Hill (see Fig. 1.2). The hillfort is known to be early Iron Age in date and limited fieldwork has indicated that it was preceded by an adjacent late Bronze Age midden (Hingley 1979–80). Across the river from this site is the major Iron Age enclosed settlement of Dyke Hills (see Fig. 1.2), which is thought to be late Iron Age in date and is generally interpreted as an oppidum.

Roman activity in the area is largely known though stray finds, the exact provenance of which is uncertain. However, an extended inhumation burial accompanied by an unglazed red bowl of 4th-century date was found during construction of a new gas mains at SU 6008 8870, a little to the north of the bypass route (PRN 2992).

The fragmentary remains of three unaccompanied inhumations were found in the bank of Grim's Ditch during Hinchliffe's excavations, and a fourth a little to the south on the lip of the ditch (Hinchliffe 1975, 125–8). These could not be dated, but inhumations accompanied by iron spearheads are reported to have been found during ploughing in the general area of Grim's Ditch at approximately SU 615 880 (information from the Wallingford Archaeological and Historical Society). It is possible that these are of Saxon date. The town of Wallingford was a Saxon burh, mentioned in the Burghal Hidage compiled *c* 919, and a Saxon cemetery was discovered immediately south-west of the later town defences in the 20th century (Airs *et al*. 1975). The deserted medieval village of Mongewell is thought to lie somewhere on or close to the proposed route of the bypass where it approaches the east bank of the River Thames, though the precise location is not known.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

On the basis of this known archaeology the proposal to construct the bypass prompted a series of archaeological investigations undertaken between 1985–92 with the object of establishing the

nature of the archaeological remains that would be affected by its construction and of carrying out work to mitigate its impact. The specific research objectives of this work were mostly related to the two main sites on the route – the important late Bronze Age occupation site at Whitecross Farm and the Grim's Ditch earthwork – though to record any other archaeological remains found during the construction of the bypass was also an objective. At Whitecross Farm the objectives were to investigate and define the extent of the site and to recover artefactual and environmental remains. The latter, it was hoped, would confirm and refine the dating of the site and characterise its nature, as the earlier very limited investigations had never achieved this adequately. It was suggested from environmental samples taken in 1980 that the site was underlain by filled-in river-channel deposits though the occupation layer indicated dried ground, so the objective to investigate the relationship between the channel silts and the late Bronze Age occupation horizon was included in the Research Design for post-excavation analysis in 1987–8 (Lambrick 1988). At the Grim's Ditch site the objectives were to determine the structural history and date of the earthwork, identify and investigate the deserted medieval village of Mongewell and define the extent of post-medieval landscaping on Grim's Ditch. As fieldwork progressed it became clear that the Grim's Ditch earthwork was underlain by earlier cultivation horizons and traces of settlement, and the research aims were expanded to include the examination and dating of these features. The fieldwalking also suggested a previously unknown Iron Age site to the south of Bradford's Brook; the objective here was merely to examine the site to determine the nature and confirm the date of the archaeology in the area to be affected by the bypass.

After the fieldwork had been completed there was an assessment on how well these objectives had been met and on the evidence collected (Barclay *et al*. 1995). The results from the various episodes of fieldwork were judged to have met the above objectives to varying extents. Virtually all the initial questions were answered for the two main sites – Whitecross Farm and Grim's Ditch. The possible Iron Age site near Bradford's Brook was found to be multi-period with late Bronze Age, Roman and Saxon activity. The watching brief demonstrated these were the only significant sites on the route of the bypass.

A great deal of information about land use and settlement patterns across two different landscape zones – floodplain and gravel terrace – from the early prehistoric to the post-medieval period had been gathered from this work and several research aims were defined for the post-excavation analysis stage. Some were site-specific while others were more general, relating to how this study could enhance the knowledge of activity during these periods, understanding of the process of social change and transformation of the landscapes and the evidence for patterns of craftsmanship and industry.

The specific aims relating to Grim's Ditch were to establish the significance of the Neolithic activity at the riverside site, the date and character of the pre-earthwork settlement, the character and significance of the cultivation episodes, the date and function of the earthwork, and the evidence for Roman and medieval reuse of the earthwork, and how this relates to the known settlement evidence. At Whitecross Farm the specific aims were to establish the function, date and status of the island settlement, what the evidence from this site can contribute to the understanding of the formation of midden deposits, refuse management and changes in function/activity on the site, and what the artefactual evidence contributes to the understanding of regional and national material culture studies. At the smaller and more ephemeral Bradford's Brook site the objectives were merely to establish the character and significance of the late Bronze Age settlement and that of the Iron Age, Roman and Saxon activity on the site.

EXCAVATION OBJECTIVES, 1991–2

The programme of fieldwalking along the route as well as the evaluation excavations at the specific sites in 1985–7 provided the basis for the mitigation plan developed by the Oxford County Council Engineers in consultation with the Oxford Archaeological Unit. Proposals for archaeological work in 1991–2 were integrated with this. The objectives for this work were modified in light of what was now known of the archaeology along the route.

A wide swathe across the Grim's Ditch earthwork was to be fully excavated, not only to date the earthwork but also to date and examine the traces of cultivation preserved beneath it. This was to be considered in relation to other traces of prehistoric fields. The basal sediments in the earthwork ditch were to be dated and a sequence through them established. Biological and sedimentary samples were to be obtained to elucidate the character of the environment of this sequence, and especially of the environment of Grim's Ditch. The sociopolitical context of the monument was also to be considered in relation to the wider settlement pattern. The nature of the medieval settlement traces recorded during the evaluation were to be clarified and considered in relation to the documentary evidence for the existence and abandonment of Mongewell deserted medieval village.

The Whitecross Farm site was found to lie on a former gravel island with a silted-up palaeochannel to its landward side. For this site, together with the Mongewell riverside site, the main objective of the mitigation work was to preserve *in situ* the important prehistoric deposits on either side of the river through careful design of the bridge and approach, so the aim of the further archaeological work to be carried out here was merely to record prior to

disturbance the very limited area of the western waterfront late Bronze Age settlement which would be affected by bridge building.

The possible Iron Age site near Bradford's Brook identified by fieldwalking was to be evaluated and watching briefs were to be carried out to record any other sites uncovered during construction of the road.

FIELD SURVEY: METHODS AND RESULTS

by Anne Marie Cromarty with Cathy Capel-Davies

During 1985–6, fieldwalking was undertaken by the Wallingford Archaeological and Historical Society along the proposed route of the bypass. A 90 m wide corridor was walked which followed the centre-line of the proposed road through the fields under cultivation. Transects were laid out at 15 m intervals covering this corridor. Each line was walked twice, by different walkers each time. Walking was undertaken during the autumn of each year after ploughing. Conditions were variable but often poor. David Miles of the Oxford Archaeological Unit initially identified the finds, but subsequently some material was re-examined during the post-excavation analysis. Further details of the survey and a full catalogue of the finds can be found in the archive.

Little of significance was found during the fieldwalking, though a small quantity of Iron Age pottery (nine coarse black sherds) and early Roman pottery (two rim sherds of greyware) were found to the south of Bradford's Brook around SU 595 886 (field 5255) (see Fig. 1.2). On the basis of this pottery the site was singled out for further investigation as part of the bypass project. Scatters of flint and pottery were found at various points along the route walked. The most notable flint was a finely made leaf-shaped arrowhead of earlier Neolithic date. A probable Anglo-Saxon glass bead was recovered from chainage 440/10 (see Chapter 6).

A more recent field survey around Winterbrook (see Fig. 1.2) produced only a few pieces of prehistoric and Roman pottery, a quantity of flint flakes and some post-medieval material (Dingwall and Hancocks 1998).

WATCHING BRIEF: METHODS AND RESULTS

Mark R Roberts undertook the watching brief for the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1992 during the construction of the road. The stripped areas were 'fieldwalked' in addition to the monitoring of drainage and other works. A section through the estate bank to the south of Grim's Ditch was recorded. On the west bank of the river, the cutting of a field drain enabled a section of the palaeochannel, first identified in 1985, to be recorded. Dispersed features and finds were located throughout the watching brief. Another watching brief was carried out at the nearby CAB International carpark during 1993, where a single undated feature was found. Flintwork from the topsoil was largely undiagnostic but may be contemporary with material from Whitecross Farm (see Brown and Bradley, Chapter 3). Further details of the watching-brief methodology and results together with a full catalogue of the finds can be found in the archive.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report has been broken down into a description and discussion of the investigation, stratigraphy, artefactual and environmental evidence of the two major sites, Whitecross Farm (Chapters 2–4) and Grim's Ditch (Chapter 5), followed by a similar description of the smaller site at Bradford's Brook (Chapter 6). This is followed by an overview and discussion of the archaeology of the area, together with a wider discussion of the pertinent aspects raised by the excavation and analysis of these important sites (Chapter 7). The radiocarbon determinations obtained from each of these three sites are discussed in full in Appendix 1.

Radiocarbon determinations

The radiocarbon results have been calculated using datasets published by Stuiver and Pearson (1986) and the computer program OxCal (v2.18 and v3beta2) (Bronk Ramsey 1994; 1995). The calibrated date ranges cited in the text are those for 95% confidence. They have been calculated according to the maximum intercept method (Stuiver and Reimer 1986) and are quoted with the end points rounded outwards to ten years as recommended by Mook (1986). Probability distributions have been calculated in the usual probability method (Stuiver and Reimer 1993).

These dates are quoted in the text in the form: calibrated date range in calendar years BC or AD followed in brackets by the confidence percentage, the laboratory number and the uncalibrated date ± the appropriate margin of error in years BP (for example 2340–2040 cal BC (OxA-7175; 3765±40 BP)) to enable readers to perform their own analysis of the results easily.

Bronze Age dates

The dates used in this volume for the conventional divisions of the Bronze Age are as follows:

Early Bronze Age 2100/2200–1600 BC
Middle Bronze Age 1600–1150 BC
Late Bronze Age 1150–700/750 BC

LOCATION OF THE ARCHIVES

All the original site records, together with the finds and material generated during the post-excavation analysis, have been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service. A master copy of the paper archive on microfilm has also been lodged with the National Archaeological Record, RCHM(E), Swindon.

Accession numbers

Because the fieldwork for this project was funded and completed in several stages, the various parts of the archive were received by the museum at different times and accession numbers were issued individually. The Whitecross Farm archive was issued the numbers 1986.6 and 1995.182 for the 1985–6 and 1991 seasons respectively. The Grim's Ditch archive is held under the numbers 1988.59 for the 1987 evaluation and 1988 trial trenches, and 1995.183 for the main area excavation and the other trenches excavated in 1992. Accession number 1995.181 was issued for the evaluation stage of the excavations at Bradford's Brook in 1991, while the number 1995.184 was used for the archive generated by the watching brief carried out during construction of the road. This includes the further work at the Bradford's Brook site. The archive for the watching brief in the CAB International carpark undertaken in 1993 is held under the accession number 1993.88.