

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*By Richard Chambers and Anne Dodd*

## BACKGROUND TO THE EXCAVATION (FIG. 1.1)

This volume forms the second part of the report on the excavations at Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire, conducted by the Oxford Archaeological Unit with Reading University from 1983 to 1985 in advance of housing development, and deals with the Romano-British cemetery and Anglo-Saxon settlement. The pre-historic monument complex forms the subject of Volume 1 (Barclay and Halpin 1999). The site, centred at SU 51359815, lay 1.5 km north of the river Thames and 2 km north-east of the centre of Abingdon, within the Vale of White Horse (Fig. 1.1). The area is now in Oxfordshire, but until the reorganisation of local government boundaries in 1974 was part of Berkshire.

The site lay within a major concentration of archaeological features on the Second (Summertown/Radley) Gravel Terrace which was discovered by aerial photography in the 1920s by O G S Crawford. This was followed by more detailed work by Major Allen in the 1930s. The history of the aerial photography and investigation of the site is discussed exhaustively in Chapter 1 of Volume 1 (Barclay and Halpin 1999). Further aerial photography in 1959 and 1965 by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography revealed in more detail the probable existence of a Roman cemetery and a large Anglo-Saxon settlement at the south-west end of the prehistoric monument complex at Barrow Hills. Saxon pottery was collected by Leeds from gravel pits to the north of the present excavations (Leeds and Harden 1936, fig. 1), and in 1963 limited salvage excavation confirmed the presence of early Saxon occupation to the west, south of the causewayed enclosure (Avery and Brown 1972). In 1974, Benson and Miles drew attention to the archaeological importance of the area (1974, 87–90) and called for a programme of rescue and research excavation to counter the threat which economic and social pressures were posing to what they described as 'one of the finest sequences of continuous land use in the Upper Thames'. Figures 1.3–4 and Plate 1.1 summarise the aerial photographic evidence for the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon features.

From the early 1970s onwards the area has been rapidly and extensively developed, with the creation of suburban housing and a peripheral road. A number of excavations, beginning with Barton Court Farm (Miles 1986) and including Barrow Hills, Radley, have been undertaken in response to this growth, and continue to the time of writing with the phased redevelopment of Abingdon's former cattle market (the Vineyard site) and its disused railway.

## RELIEF AND GEOLOGY (FIG. 1.2)

The site lay on level ground some 60 m above sea level and about 8 m above the level of the river Thames, 1.5 km from the right or Wessex bank. The character and topography of the area are chiefly governed by the location of Late Pleistocene sand and gravel deposits, and the site lay towards the south end of the Second (Summertown/Radley) Gravel Terrace, which is the most extensive of the four gravel terraces flanking the Upper Thames. The gravel overlies impermeable Kimmeridge clay and the site had free-draining, thin soil (generally 0.15–0.30 m thick), prone to leaching and drought. To the west of the site springs rise from the base of the gravel, along the edge of a broad stream channel known as Daisy Banks, and to the south and south-east a line of springs occurs along the belt of heavy land between the Second and First Gravel Terraces.

The Second Terrace is approximately 1 km wide at this point, and to its north clay soils gradually give way to the sands and limestones of the Corallian Ridge, rising to a height of 165 m at Bagley Wood, a little to the south-west of Oxford. To the south of Barrow Hills, the opposite or left bank of the Thames is marked by low partly-wooded hills beyond which lie the Chiltern plain and the prominent scarp of the chalk downs. To the south and east the site is bordered by a fairly steep drop of about 2 m, after which the ground slopes down by about 5 m over a distance of 300 m towards the First Gravel Terrace and the edge of the Thames floodplain.

The environment around Barrow Hills has changed drastically since later prehistoric and historic times (Lambrick 1992; Robinson 1992), and since the last war the pace of change has been particularly rapid. From at least the 14th century, the gravel terraces had been used primarily for cereal production. Until the early 1970s, the land between Abingdon, Radley and the river Thames remained farmland, penetrated only by ribbon development along the Radley Road and the construction of the Didcot to Oxford railway line in 1844, with a branch line to Abingdon added in 1856. Along the edge of the floodplain, the First Gravel Terrace has been extensively quarried; although some pits have been backfilled for agricultural or building use many have been left as areas of open water, creating a wetter environment than for several thousand years. The clay belt along the south edge of the Second Terrace has largely been drained and the ancient permanent pasture has been ploughed up, as has much of the floodplain beside the river. The ground immediately to the south and east of the housing development that now occupies the site, which is clear in the photographs taken during the 1983–5

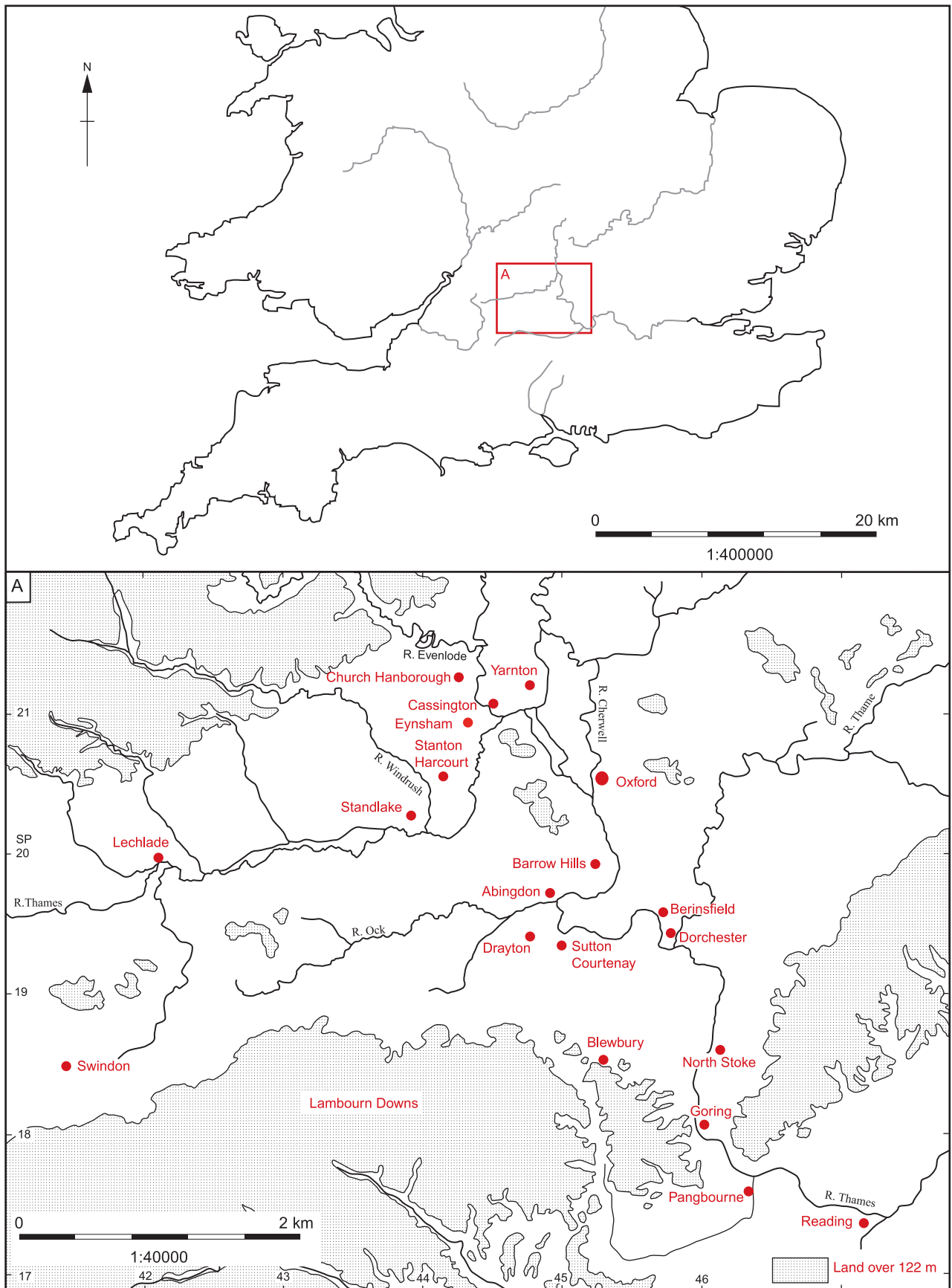


Figure 1.1 Site location plan.

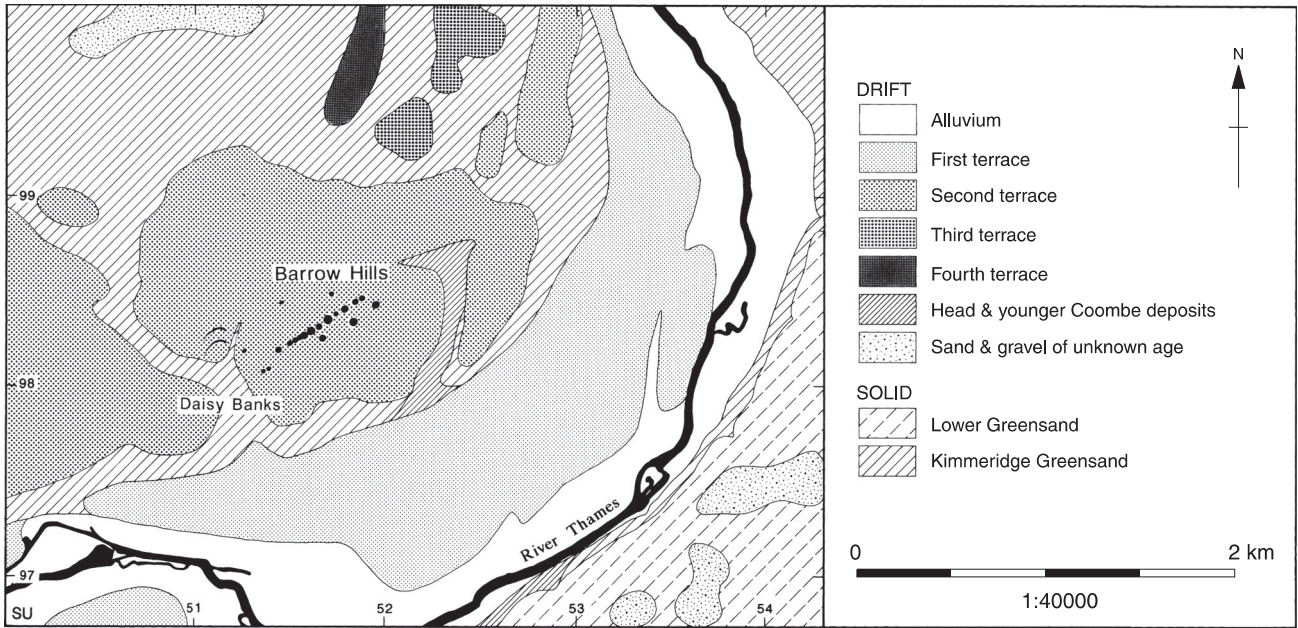


Figure 1.2 Solid and drift geology of the Radley area.

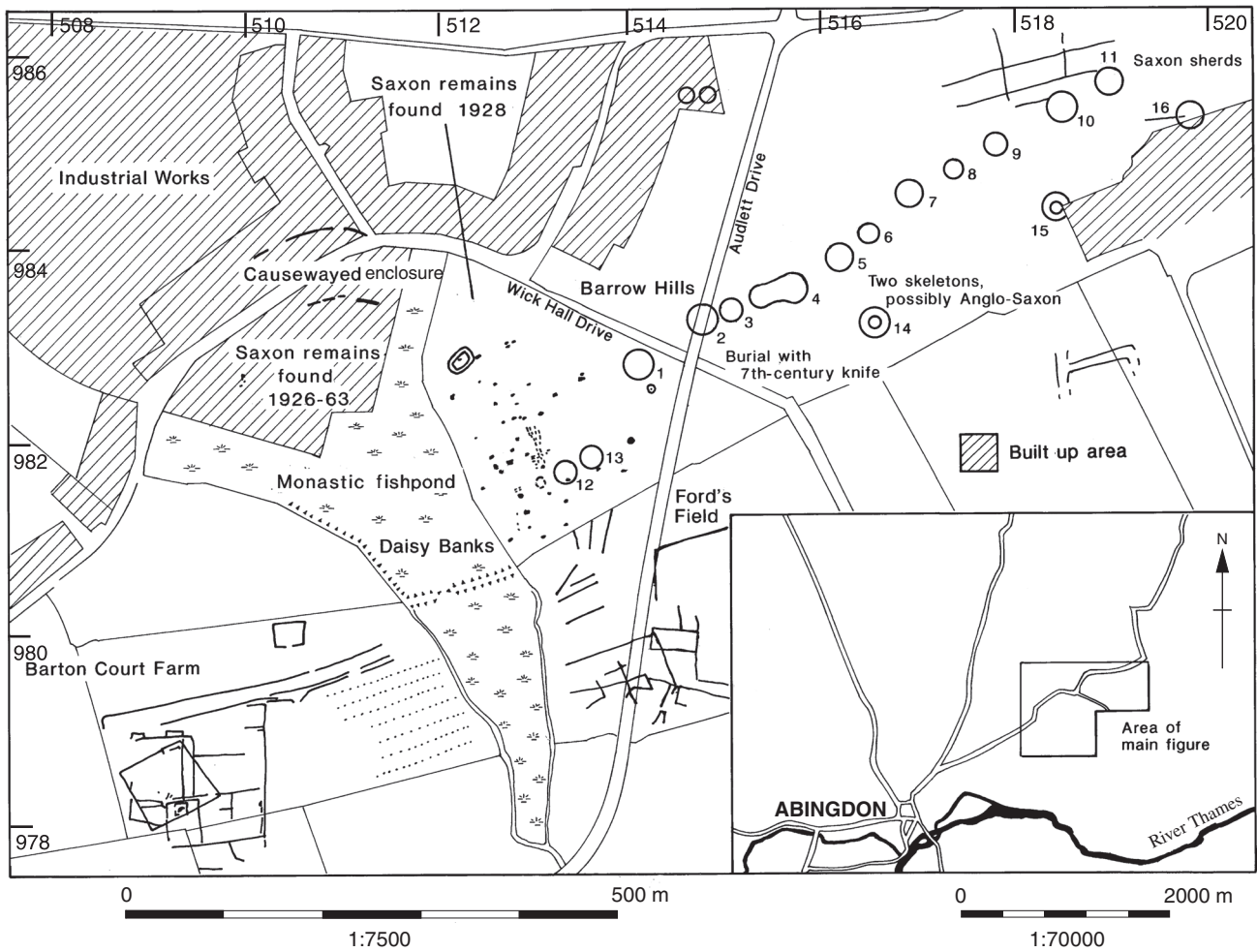


Figure 1.3 The cropmarks between Radley and Barton Court Farm (after Benson and Miles 1974).

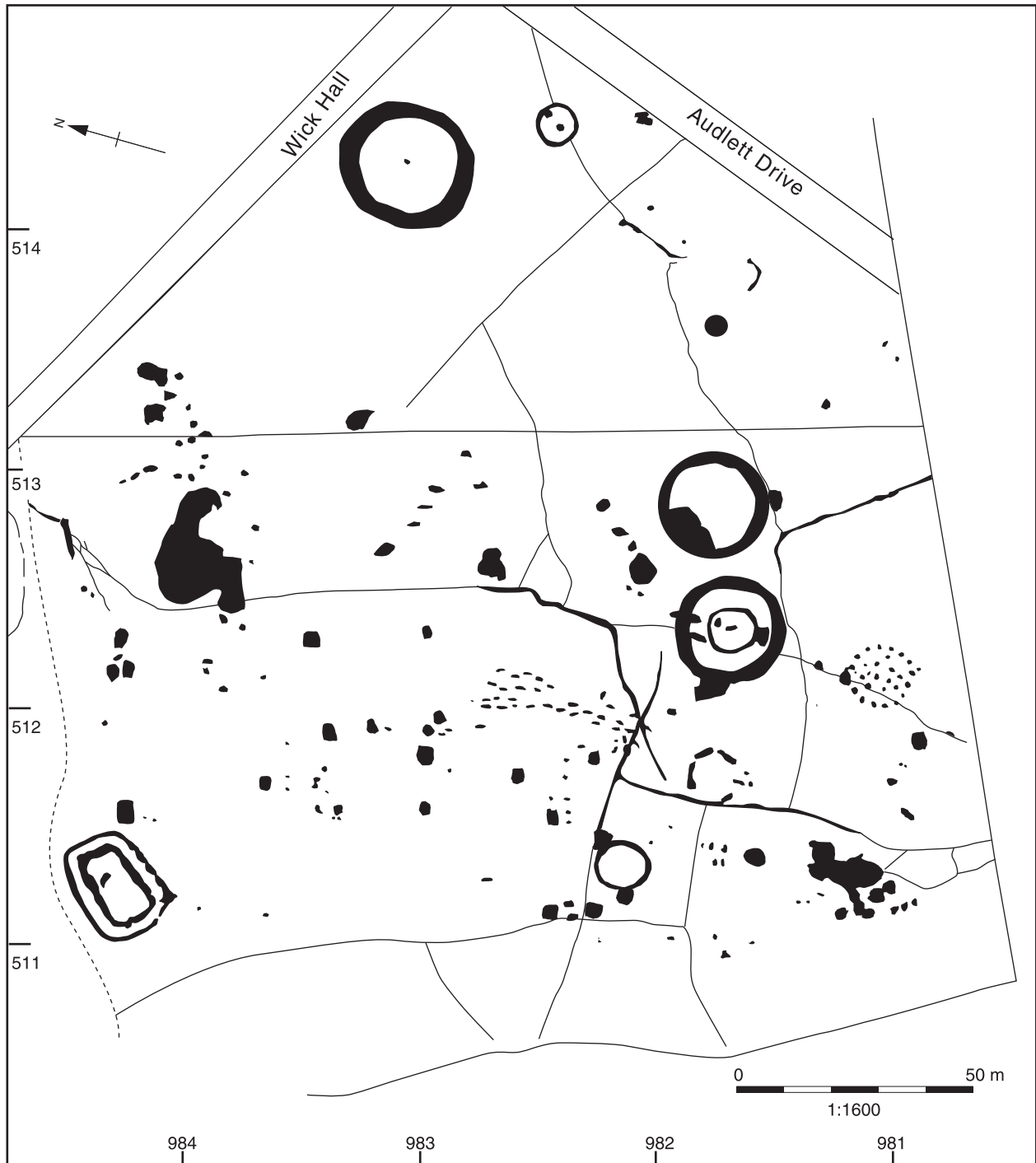


Figure 1.4 The site: a plan of the cropmarks plotted from aerial photographs (see Figure 1.3). The irregular lines represent natural periglacial features.

excavations, was thickly overgrown with hawthorn, elder and brambles by 1998.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The confluences of the Thames and its tributaries, combined with broad gravel terraces, have attracted notable foci of settlement (Miles 1986, 1) and survey and archaeological investigation have demonstrated

a complex network of settlement in this part of the Upper Thames Valley. The confluence of the Ock and the Thames at Abingdon had a Neolithic focus at the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, adjacent to the Barrow Hills site. The area continued to be a focus for burial and other purposes throughout the Bronze Age and the evidence for prehistoric activity in the area is considered in detail in Volume 1 of this report (Barclay and Halpin 1999).

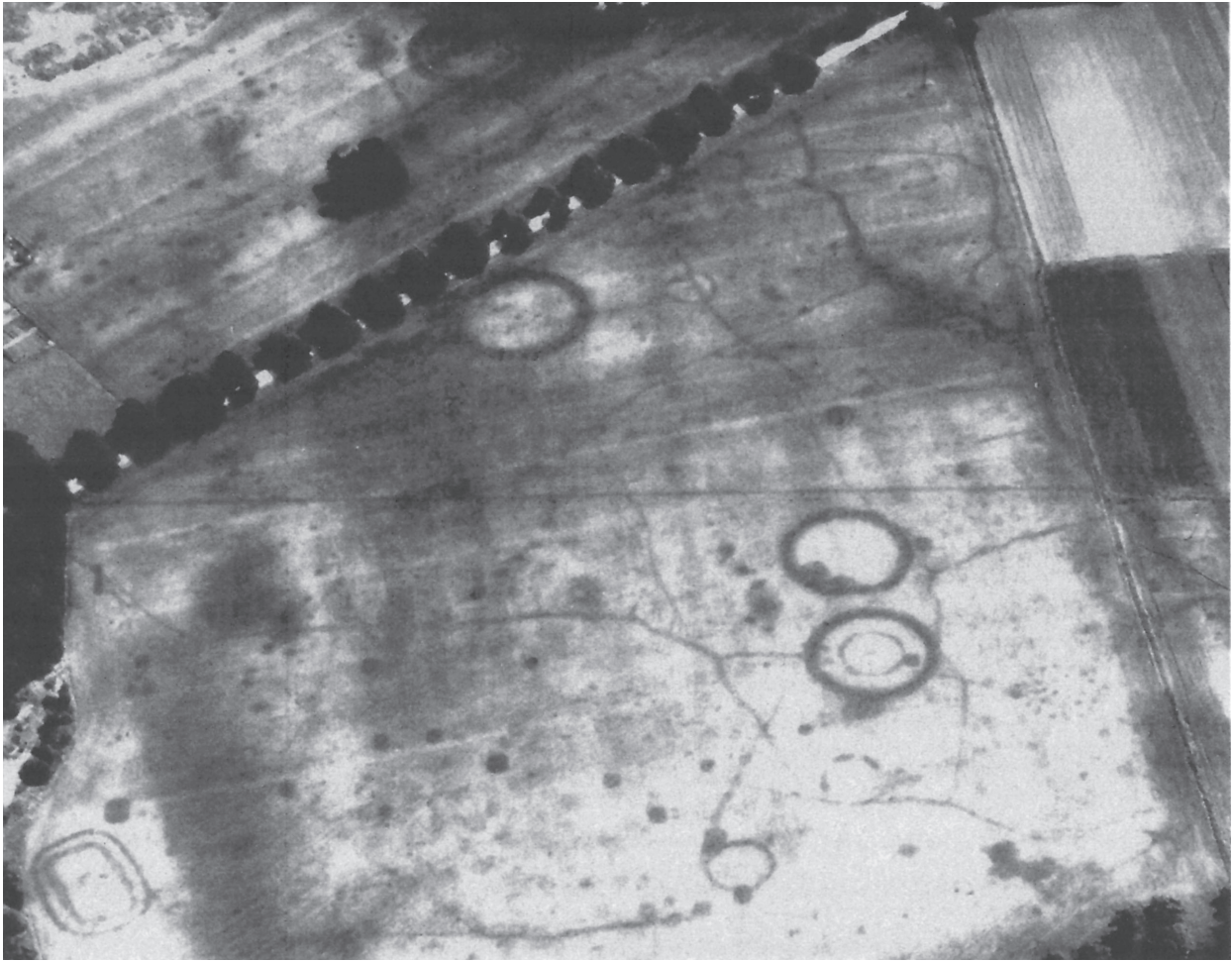


Plate 1.1 Aerial photograph of the cropmarks at Barrow Hills taken on 9 June 1959. The marshy area of Daisy Banks is off the bottom of the photograph, to the left is the Neolithic oval barrow and to the right the circular ditches representing the west end of the Bronze Age barrow cemetery. The sunken-featured buildings of the early Anglo-Saxon settlement appear as dark rectangles. Cambridge University collection.

### The Romano-British landscape (Fig. 1.5)

By the end of the Iron Age, if not earlier, the landscape was well populated and very fully exploited. Late Roman coins and pottery were found during the 1928 excavations of Abingdon Abbey, south of the Vineyard site, and intensive occupation continued well into the 4th century. Recent excavations at the Vineyard site in the centre of Abingdon, SU 499972 (Allen 1990a; 1990b; 1991), have revealed extensive evidence of occupation from the middle and late Iron Age and early Roman period. The site was enclosed by a defensive ditch and bank and may have functioned as a local market centre. Intensive occupation ended in the early to mid 2nd-century AD, and was succeeded by a single masonry building with a well, which continued in use into the 4th century. Another masonry building, in East St Helen Street, was investigated by Akerman in the 19th century. He recorded the presence of massive foundations and a herringbone tiled floor, in association with pottery, coins and a great quantity of animal

bones (1865, 145, 202–3); the nature of the remains inclined him to believe that there had been a temple on the site. Walls of a building constructed in the late 1st or early 2nd century have been found in recent work on a site some 40 m to the south-west (Wilson and Wallis 1991). A third masonry building, apparently including a hypocaust, was reportedly found when the Stratton Way Inner Ring Road was constructed. Similar evidence of occupation in the Roman period has frequently been noted from small-scale work elsewhere in the centre of Abingdon (eg Wilson 1991 and Miles 1973, where the excavators noted a concentration of occupation in the 1st-2nd centuries AD which diminished thereafter, as at the Vineyard).

To the north-west of the town centre, Chambers (1980) noted settlement features and domestic refuse at the site of Abingdon School (SU 49459532), and deposits from the later Roman period were recorded at Bath Street, SU 49529728 (Ainslie 1991). To the north-east, at Boxhill (SU 499979), seven burials were cut through late Romano-British settlement features (Wilson 1980). To the south of Abingdon, part of a

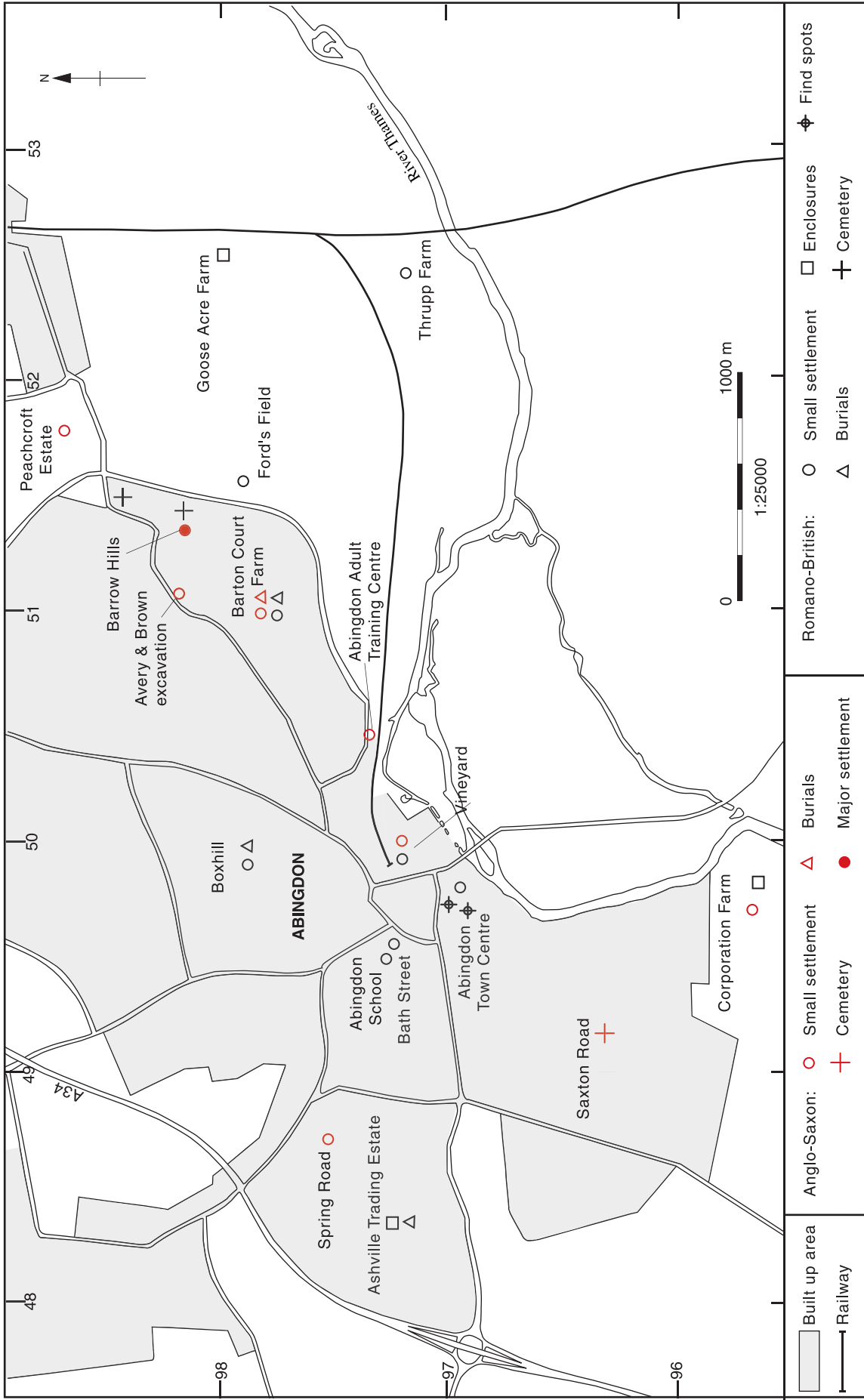


Figure 1.5 Romano-British and early Anglo-Saxon sites in Abingdon.

mid 2nd-century Romano-British enclosure ditch was excavated at the Corporation Farm site, SU 497957-SU 497970 (Abingdon and District Archaeological Society 1973).

Excavations in the west of the town at the Ashville Trading Estate (SU 483973) revealed part of an Iron Age settlement succeeded in the Romano-British period by a field system, pits and wells representing a system of small paddocks, in use from the 1st to the 3rd centuries (Parrington 1978, 36). Part of a small Romano-British cemetery was found *c* 200 m south of the site, adding weight to the suggestion that a significant Romano-British settlement site lay in the vicinity (Parrington 1978, 36). Subsequent work at the adjacent MG car factory site (Halpin 1982) revealed further Romano-British field ditches, one of which contained large quantities of Roman pottery, and further excavation on the site in 1995 recovered Saxon pottery (M Roberts pers. comm.).

To the east and north-east of Abingdon, the area around Barrow Hills has also revealed evidence of widespread occupation and use in the Romano-British period. At Barton Court Farm, approximately 300 m south-west of Barrow Hills, at SU 510978 (Miles 1986), the first enclosed farmstead dated to the late Iron Age was succeeded by a second farmstead which was in use from the later 1st century to the mid 2nd century AD. Following a gap in the settlement sequence, a modest villa farmhouse was built on the site in the latter part of the 3rd century, and at its peak in the late 4th century it was surrounded by a ditched enclosure and a regular grid of ditched paddocks and yards extending to 1.4 ha. In the extreme south-east of the paddock system was an area devoted to the burial of newborn and very young infants. The main villa farmhouse was systematically demolished towards the end of the 4th century, although Romano-British occupation probably continued on the site in a secondary cottage building well into the 5th century.

Approximately 200 m south of Barrow Hills, at Ford's Field (SU 514979), a Romano-British date was established for two ditches by trenching and field-walking. Finds from the site included a coin of Gratian, AD 375–378, and a Roman bronze knee brooch (Wallis 1981a). Approximately 500 m north-east of Barrow Hills, at SU 518987, a 'humble' Romano-British farm was excavated, apparently occupied from the 1st century BC to the mid 2nd century AD and again from the late 3rd into the 4th century AD (Spickett 1975). Between this farm and Barrow Hills lay a Romano-British cemetery, at SU 515984, recorded by Atkinson in a partial salvage excavation in 1945 (Atkinson 1952–3) and consisting of 35 adult inhumations arranged in regular rows.

At Thrupp Farm, approximately 1 km south of Barrow Hills at SU 525972, a small settlement dating from the 2nd century BC into the early Roman period was found (Jones *et al.* 1980; Wallis 1981b). Goose Acre Farm, approximately 1 km east of Barrow Hills, has revealed extensive networks of features in aerial photographs, and several sites have been

investigated. Evidence of ubiquitous Romano-British field enclosures has been noted in recent excavations of Iron Age sites at Eight Acre Field, SU 525980, and the field immediately to the south-west (Mudd 1995). The Barrow Hills cemeteries may have occupied marginal land between the Barton Court estate and the Gooseacre Farm settlement.

### Saxon settlement (Figs 1.5–6)

The importance of the Abingdon area as a focus of early Anglo-Saxon settlement has been recognised since the excavation there in 1934–5 of a major pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Saxton Road, SU 490963 (Leeds and Harden 1936). Including more recent finds of burials in the area, the cemetery is known to have contained 128 inhumations and 99 cremations and is considered by Dickinson to date from the early 5th to the early 7th centuries (1976, Vol. 2, 3). The cemetery is remarkable in the Upper Thames region for the large number of 5th-century burials it contained (Dickinson 1976, Vol. 1, 403). At Corporation Farm, SU 497957-SU 497970, approximately 1 km south-east of the Saxton Road cemetery, three sunken-featured buildings and two pits containing pottery considered to be of 5th-century date were found (Abingdon and District Archaeological Society 1973). Dickinson (1976, Vol. 2, 3) has noted the proximity of the two sites and it seems likely from their dating that they should be associated.

Further early Anglo-Saxon remains have been recovered approximately 1 km to the north of Saxton Road, at the modern town cemetery at Spring Road, SU 488975, where an evaluation carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1990 revealed traces of a sunken-featured building and two lines of post-holes. Remains of a further sunken-featured building, and concentrations of early Anglo-Saxon pottery, some decorated, have also been recorded during grave-digging at the site (Allen and Kamash in prep.).

On the east of the town centre, early Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence was recovered at the Vineyard site (see above) in the form of two 6th-century sunken-featured buildings, both containing weaving equipment, domestic pottery and animal bones. They may represent settlement peripheral to a main early Saxon focus further west (Allen 1990a; 1990b).

In the area around Barrow Hills, substantial early Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence has been recovered at three other sites. Excavation at the site of Abingdon Adult Training Centre, SU 505973, revealed three sunken-featured buildings which contained large quantities of pottery and animal bone, and individual finds of spinning and weaving equipment, worked bone, jewellery, quern fragments and whetstones (Keavill 1992). The site was in use from the 6th to the 7th century.

At Barton Court Farm, early Anglo-Saxon occupation of the Romano-British villa farmstead appeared to have followed rapidly after the demolition of the main villa building. The Saxon settlement consisted of seven sunken-featured buildings, several

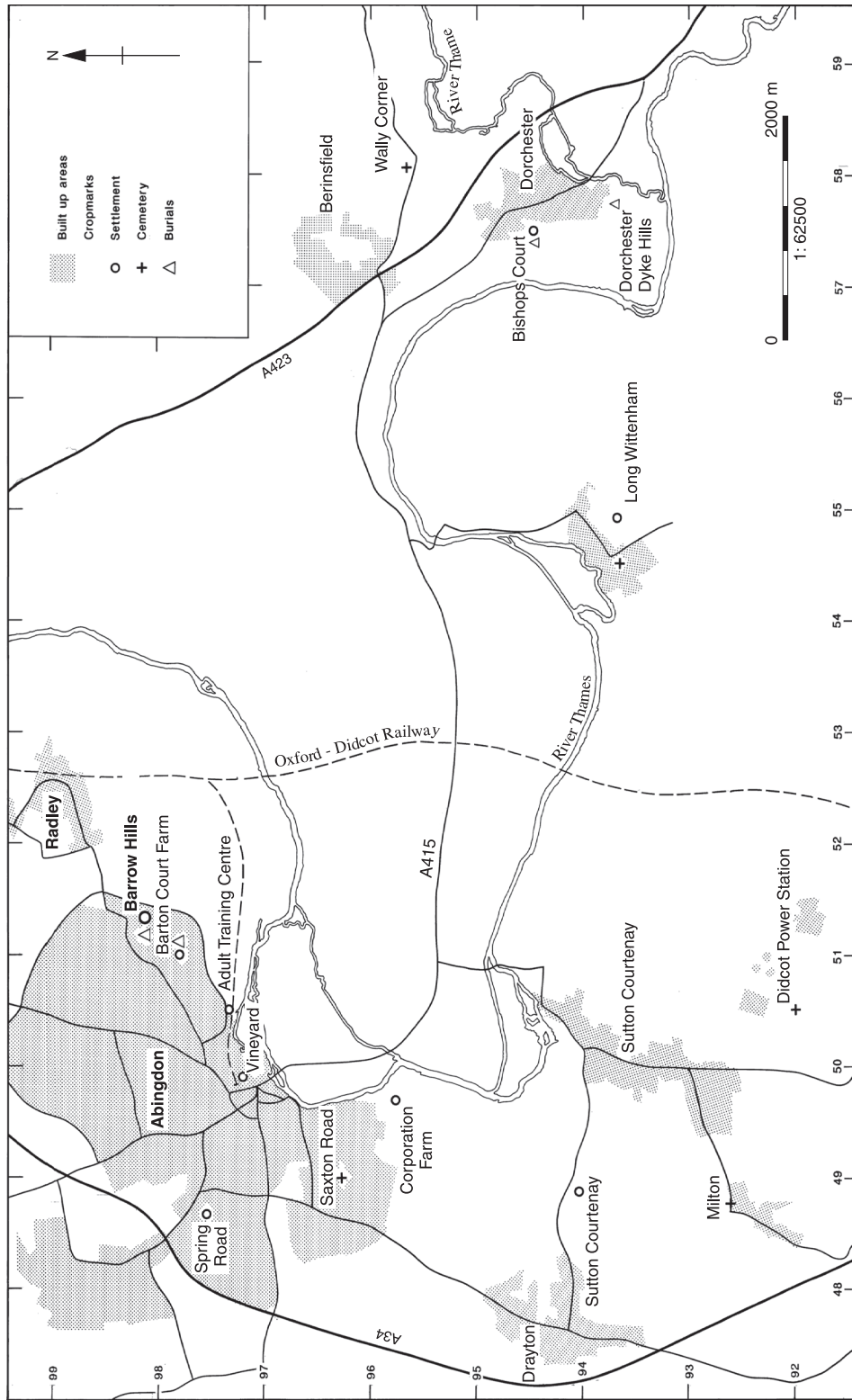


Figure 1.6 Major Anglo-Saxon sites between Dorchester and Radley.



post-built structures, fence lines, a pit, a wicker-lined well within a Romano-British ditch, four (possibly five) human burials and debris deposited in ditches (Miles 1986, 35; Fig. 7.5). Details of the features hitherto published only in fiche are given in Chapter 3. The settlement was in use from the mid 5th century to the mid 6th century (1986, 19), and thus overlapped with Barrow Hills. Its relationship to Barrow Hills is discussed at greater length in Chapter 7.

Salvage excavation in 1963 at the Abingdon Neolithic causewayed enclosure, immediately to the north-west of the Barrow Hills site at SU 511983, revealed two pits of Saxon date which are almost certainly associated with the main settlement to the south-east (Avery and Brown 1972). The excavator was unable to offer any definite interpretation of either feature, but noted that pit 1 contained two postholes of probable Saxon date, and that both pits were used for the dumping of contemporary refuse moved from elsewhere. These and other Anglo-Saxon features in the area of Barrow Hills are listed in Chapter 3.

In sharp contrast to the Romano-British and early Saxon periods, there is very little evidence for the use of the land around Barrow Hills from the mid Saxon period onwards. The early Saxon settlements all appear to have gone out of use in the 7th century, and this may be associated with the foundation of Abingdon Abbey. Barton Court, Thrupp, Northcourt Grange, Wick and Radley were all estates of Abingdon Abbey in the later medieval period (Bond 1979, fig. 2), but the place name Barrow Hills is first recorded in Land Revenues of 1547 (Gelling 1974, 437, 456–7).

### GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

Prior to excavation, selected areas of the field south of Wick Hall Drive were subjected to a magnetometer survey in 1983 to ensure the precise location of the cropmarks on the ground (Ancient Monuments Laboratory 1983). The results were particularly clear, even locating inhumation graves within the Roman period cemetery, but no new features were added to the cropmark survey. The smaller area to the north of Wick Hall Drive was surveyed in January 1985. The survey has been discussed by David (1994, 6–7 and figs 1–2) and full details are given in Volume 1 (Bartlett 1999, 11–14).

### THE EXCAVATIONS

The excavations took place from 1983–5 in advance of housing development and were conducted by the Oxford Archaeological Unit, now Oxford Archaeology, with funding from English Heritage. Labour was provided by the Manpower Services Commission, students from the Department of Archaeology of the University of Reading and members of the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society. Richard Chambers of the Oxford Archaeological Unit directed the topsoil stripping of the main field, after which his team cleaned the stripped surface and planned all features, including natural ones. Responsibility was

then divided by period. Excavation of the Neolithic features was directed by Professor Richard Bradley of the University of Reading and excavation of the Bronze Age features was directed by Claire Halpin of the Oxford Archaeological Unit. The Romano-British cemetery and Anglo-Saxon settlement were excavated under the direction of Richard Chambers. The programme included preliminary fieldwalking, geophysical and contour surveys (see Barclay and Halpin 1999, chapter 2).

### The site and excavation strategy

The aims of the excavation which are relevant to this volume were the investigation of later prehistoric and Romano-British land use and of the Romano-British cemetery and Anglo-Saxon settlement, especially in relation to the site at Barton Court Farm and to subsequent developments in local settlement and land use.

The site at Barrow Hills was characterised by an unusually thin layer of topsoil (0.15–0.30 m thick) which generally lay directly on the surface of the gravel terrace. Faint surface traces of ridge and furrow still survived over much of the site, and extensive topsoil stripping before excavation revealed clear traces in the surface of the underlying gravel terrace. The ridge and furrow could not be directly dated by archaeological means, but was presumed to date from the medieval period when the land belonged to Abingdon Abbey. The field had been heavily cultivated for cereals in recent years, and share marks from modern ploughing were also revealed in many parts of the site, running at an angle to the ridge and furrow.

The Anglo-Saxon ground surface did not survive. Generally the features were discrete and shallow, cut into fine sandy gravel. The thin topsoil had caused even small stakeholes to penetrate the gravel, although often only to a depth of a few centimetres, and it was not always easy to differentiate between postholes and burrows left by widespread animal activity on the site. During the early months of the excavation, soil samples were taken from both natural and man-made features in an attempt to detect any general distinguishing attributes such as a difference in texture or colour caused by leaching over different periods of time. However, no such differences were detected.

Richard Chambers directed the topsoil stripping, after which his team cleaned the stripped surface and planned all features, including natural ones, at 1:50 (the 'B' plans). Responsibility was then divided by period (see above). The 'henge' observed on aerial photographs proved to be a 19th-century tree plantation. The area north of Wick Hall drive was stripped and investigated in 1985, but the dark shapes visible on the aerial photographs (Fig. 1.4) proved to be tree-throw holes, and no Anglo-Saxon features or artefacts were recorded in this area.

Over the first *c.* 1.5 ha of the site, all features were sectioned. Following a reduction in funding and manpower from April 1984, it became necessary to adopt a more selective excavation strategy towards

the remaining 2 ha, although owing to the difficulty of distinguishing animal burrows and man-made features, every pit- or posthole-like structure with the exception of several small areas of soft sand in which there was intense animal activity was excavated.

### Recording system

The national grid served as the site grid. Features were recorded according to the then standard Oxford Archaeological Unit system; each feature was given a number in a continuous sequence, and each excavated segment of a feature (for example a quadrant of a sunken-featured building) was given a letter, starting from A in each feature; each layer within a segment was numbered in a continuous sequence starting from 1. For the sunken-featured buildings, the south-west quadrant was A, the south-east B, the north-east C and the north-west D (Fig. 1.7). The three elements of the notation were separated by oblique strokes; the complete context reference for layer 3 of quadrant C of SFB 1055 would be 1055/C/3.

The Romano-British graves were excavated in plan and planned on graph paper at 1:10. sunken-featured buildings were excavated and recorded in quadrants; postholes were half-sectioned and were usually recorded separately. During the excavation, plans and sections of individual sunken-featured buildings were drawn during or immediately after excavation on graph paper or drawing film at 1:20, and the sections of most postholes were also drawn on graph paper at 1:20. Excavated areas were planned on A4 sheets of tracing film at 1:50, and these plans (the 'C' plans) were amalgamated and traced on A1 sheets of film to produce 1:50 area plans. It is from these area plans that the site mosaic has been drawn. Information is

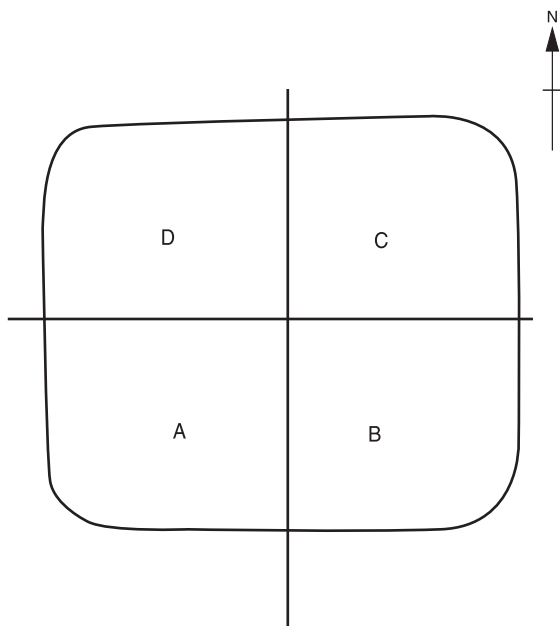


Figure 1.7 Diagram showing the position of the quadrants in a sunken-featured building.

missing for the grid square to the north-east of SFB 2. There are no original A4 'C' plans for this area in the archive and the existence of one or two postholes is known only from overlaps with other plans. Over the rest of the site the 'C' plans form a complete and reliable record.

During excavation, each small find was allocated a number in a running sequence. In the course of the first phase of post-excavation analysis, however, the finds were renumbered and a new finds catalogue was prepared by John Hedges. In this catalogue, a copy of which has been lodged with the archive, the finds from the Romano-British cemetery appear first as numbers 1 to 135, followed by the objects from the Anglo-Saxon settlement, including Romano-British and post-medieval finds, as numbers 136 to 625. Within these divisions the finds are grouped firstly by material and secondly by a ranking system which runs from personal items to manufacturing debris. Both numbering systems have been retained in this report: the original small find numbers are preceded by the letters SF.

### Post-excavation analysis by Ellen McAdam

The post-excavation analysis was funded by English Heritage and took place in three stages. Richard Chambers prepared the first draft of this report between 1985–91. The reports on the faunal and plant remains, human remains, slags and knives and razors were completed in their present forms by 1987, as were many of the illustrations. On the retirement of Mr Chambers from archaeology in 1991 responsibility for managing the publication of the completed report was assumed by Ellen McAdam. The following tasks were undertaken and a draft for refereeing was prepared by May 1996:

- 1 All illustrations were checked against the archive and corrected, redrawn or supplemented as necessary.
- 2 The text for all Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon features was checked against the archive and corrected, reformatted or supplemented as necessary.
- 3 The Anglo-Saxon small finds (with the exception of burnt clay and querns) were recatalogued and analysed.
- 4 The Romano-British pottery was reanalysed and a selected group of the Anglo-Saxon pottery was reanalysed.
- 5 The introduction was revised in the light of recent work.
- 6 Discussions of the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon settlements were written.
- 7 The site archive was security copied.

During pre-refereeing consultation in 1997 the partial analysis of the Anglo-Saxon pottery assemblage was considered to represent an omission, and English Heritage agreed to fund a full reanalysis. This was completed in 2001 and the results incorporated into the present report in 2002–3.

This report describes the 1983–5 excavations and appraises them in the light of other discoveries in the area. Features are described in a series of gazetteers. The Romano-British cemetery is described and discussed in Chapter 2 and the Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured buildings, post-built structures and

other features in Chapter 3. Details of the Anglo-Saxon features at Barton Court Farm, hitherto published only in fiche (Miles 1986), are included by kind permission of David Miles. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the Anglo-Saxon pottery, other finds and environmental evidence, and Chapter 7 summarises the evidence for the site and seeks to place it in context.

The difficulties attending backlog post-excavation projects are well known. It is a tribute to the consistent and thorough recording of the original excavator and his team that it has been possible to publish this site. A report prepared over such a timespan by different hands inevitably contains errors of omission and commission, and with limited resources it has not been feasible to rectify all these. Much of the preparation of this draft has taken place in the

co-author's spare time. The reader is asked to remember the age and history of this report, and to regard its imperfections with tolerance. The primary concern throughout has been to publish an accurate account of this important site without further unnecessary delay.

#### *Location of archive*

The archive has been deposited with the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, accession number 1995.113, and a copy of the archive is held by the National Archaeological Record. The finds have also been deposited with the Ashmolean Museum, with the exception of the human remains, which are held by the Natural History Museum, London.

