Chapter 1: Introduction

by Tim Allen and Philippa Bradley

Introduction

The excavations by Oxford Archaeology (formerly Oxford Archaeological Unit) on the sites of the Environment Agency's Maidenhead, Windsor and Eton Flood Alleviation Scheme (referred to below as the Jubilee River) and the Eton College Rowing Course, adjacent to the river Thames in Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, have provided an unprecedented opportunity to examine a landscape within the middle Thames Valley (Fig. 1.1). The later evidence from this area is considered in two companion volumes: Volume 2, *Bridging the river, dividing the land*, covers the later Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman periods, and Volume 3, *Gathering the people, settling the land*, the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods.

The projects *by Jonathan Hiller and Tim Allen*

The two projects were contained within a 12km stretch of the middle Thames Valley (Fig. 1.1). The difference in the designs of the projects – one a linear scheme approximately 12km long, and the other contained within a defined project area measuring 3km by 1km – provide two contrasting windows onto the landscape.

When Eton College took the decision in 1985 to provide a rowing course for their pupils on land at Dorney Reach, the then Thames Water Authority (TWA , subsequently the National Rivers Authority (NRA), and now the Environment Agency) were already considering a flood relief channel, and for some time both they and Eton College investigated the possibility of a joint Rowing Course and Flood Alleviation Channel. Thames Water commissioned a cropmark and fieldwalking survey of the Dorney area (Pl. 1.1), which was carried out by Buckinghamshire County Museum. This was completed in March 1986 and a summary was published (Carstairs 1986). By 1989 the different needs of the Rowing Course and the Flood Alleviation Channel had led to the separation of the two projects, and the proposed Rowing Course was no longer linked to the Thames.

The Maidenhead, Windsor and Eton Flood Alleviation Scheme (Fig. 1.2) *by Jonathan Hiller*

In March 1989, Thames Water published its proposals for the new flood alleviation channel. The agreed archaeological mitigation strategy involved three stages of work. Stage 1 comprised a preliminary study of the archaeological implications of the Flood Alleviation Scheme which was undertaken by Buckinghamshire County Museum (Hunn *et al.* 1990). Stage 2 consisted of a fieldwalking programme supplemented by limited geophysical survey along the proposed channel route. Cropmarks were also identified which were interpreted as possible monuments and enclosures. Stage 3 consisted of an archaeological field evaluation along the proposed channel route which was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) in 1991. The fieldwork consisted of 993 evaluation trenches which were excavated between January and March of that year (Ford 1991). The trenching was supplemented by augering and test pits.

As a result of this work, both Buckinghamshire and Berkshire County Councils attached an archaeological condition to the proposed channel scheme. In response, the then National Rivers Authority (NRA) commissioned Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) to undertake a programme of fieldwork to preserve by record the archaeology along the route.

Two seasons of excavation were undertaken in 1996 and 1997 under the overall direction initially of George Lambrick and then Mark Roberts. The 1996 excavations at Lake End Road East were supervised by Jonathan Hunn; in the same year Mark Roberts managed the excavations at Lot's Hole, Marsh Lane East (Sites 1 and 2), Taplow Mill (Sites 1 and 2), Amerden Lane West and Roundmoor Ditch (Sites 1 and 2). In 1997 Stuart Foreman undertook the extensive excavations at Lake End Road West and Marsh Lane and acted as project manager.

From 1996 to 1998, the excavations were augmented by a watching brief on the remainder of the topsoil stripping along the scheme which was conducted by Philip Catherall of the Environment Agency. In 1999, a watching brief was conducted by OAU on behalf of Summerleaze Ltd during the construction of a gravel storage area immediately east of Lot's Hole.

The Eton College Rowing Course project (Fig. 1.3; Plates 1.1-6) *by Tim Allen*

Eton College appointed David Miles, then director of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, to act as archaeological consultant to the Eton Rowing Course project, and between 1987 and 1993, a 0.5% sample of the 75 hectares under threat was evaluated by OA. Following a public enquiry, a further 200

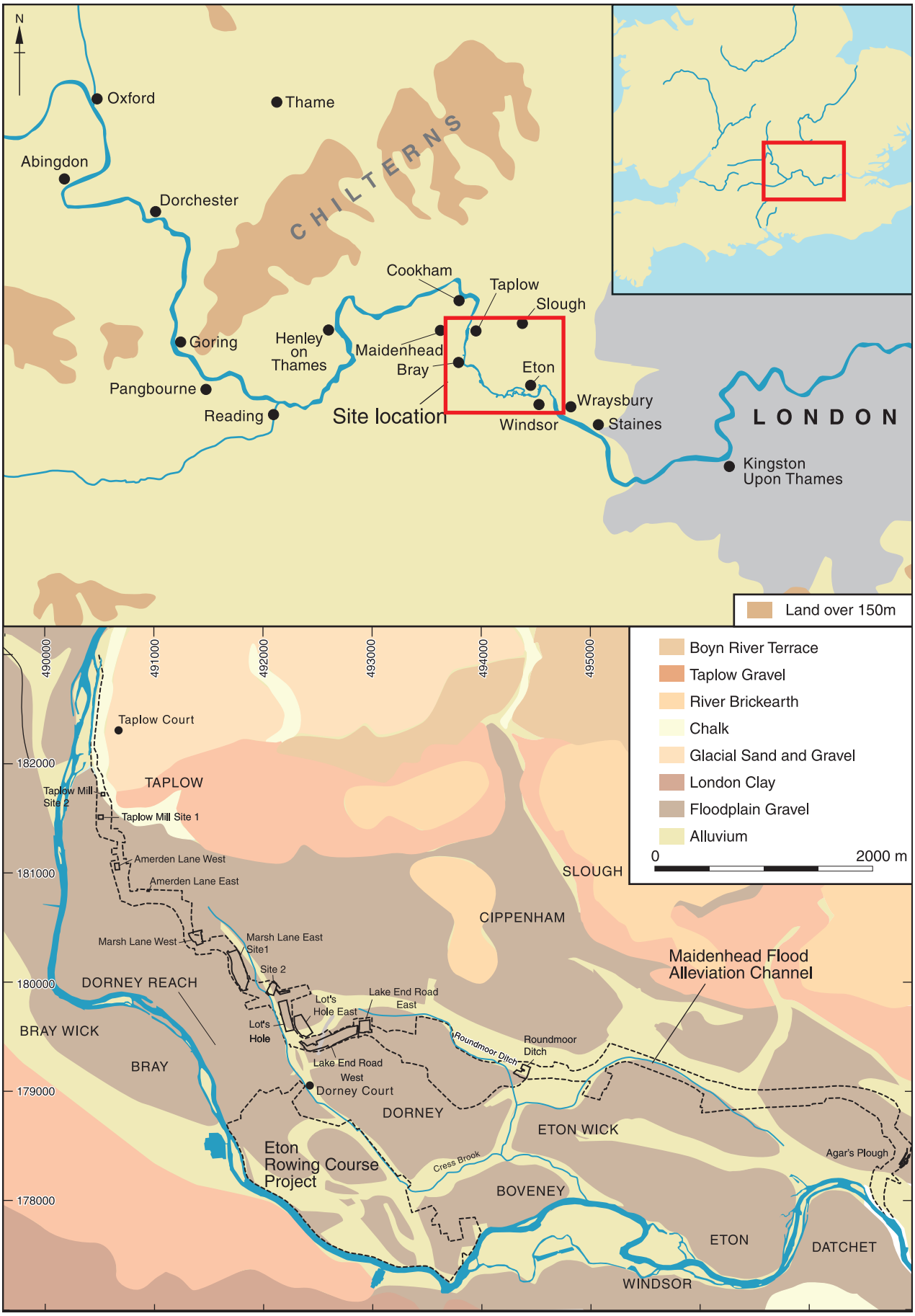

Fig. 1.1 Project location plan and geological map (Crown copyright 2013 Ordnance Survey 100005569; CP13/073 British Geological Survey © NERC)

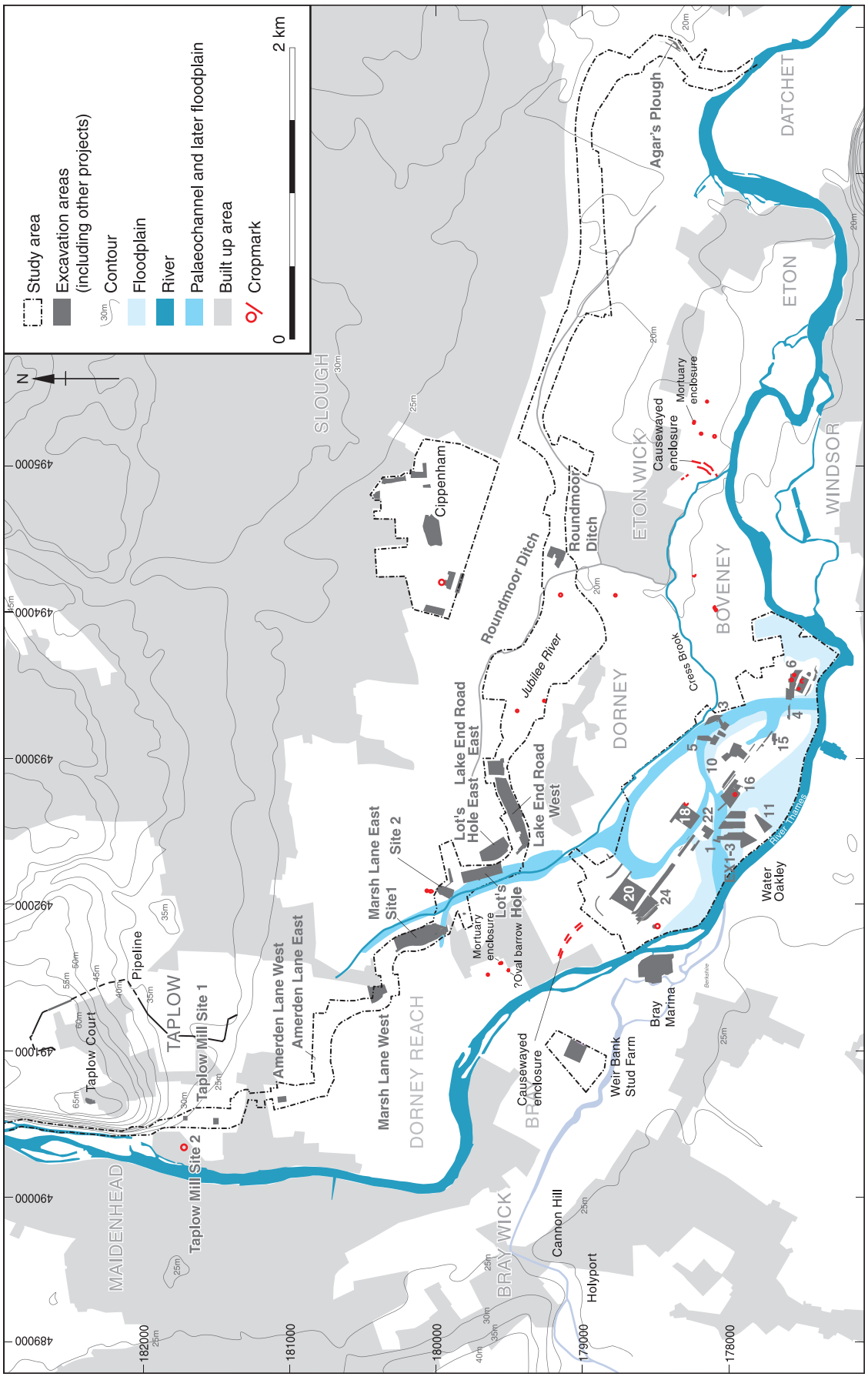

Fig. 1.2 General site location plan (Crown copyright 2013 Ordnance Survey 100005569)

Plate 1.1 Aerial photograph of the site, showing showing palaeochannels and gravel islands

trenches, averaging 30m in length, were excavated in 1994 and 1995, comprising a 2% sample of the threatened part of the site.

In 1995 Eton College appointed an Archaeological Liaison Committee chaired by Professor James Graham-Campbell of UCL, and including Professor Richard Bradley of Reading University, to advise on the appropriate research objectives and excavation strategy, and OA was asked to design and carry out the archaeological mitigation.

The archaeological mitigation strategy was agreed between Buckinghamshire County Council and Eton College in June 1996, and was approved by the Buckinghamshire County Archaeologist, Mike Farley. The aim of the strategy was to understand the development of the landscape and human involvement within it. Three aspects of the archaeology were targeted for specific investigation: the former Thames channel, the alluvial floodplain and the cropmark gravel terrace sites.

Area excavations in the following three years were staffed by a professional team from OAU, supported by a larger number of volunteers drawn from British and overseas universities, local societies and other interested amateurs. Further excavations in 2000 and 2003 were staffed solely by professionals.

Methodology *by Tim Allen and Philippa Bradley*

Excavation methodology

Since the sites excavated along the two schemes were of very varied characters, the excavation methodologies adopted for particular sites also varied. The evaluation results for each site were reassessed once stripping was completed, and the revealed archaeology was selectively excavated in the light of the defined research priorities.

The location of all sites is shown on Figure 1.2 in relation to palaeochannels and the modern landscape. In all excavation areas the overburden, consisting of topsoil and sporadic relict ploughsoil, was stripped by a mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. Depending on the underlying drift geology, this action exposed either fairly clean flinty gravel (into which were cut negative features – principally pits, postholes and ditches) or alluvial or fluvial deposits of varying dates. In the latter cases further supervised machine excavation was undertaken in order to examine palaeochannels or floodplain alluvial sequences, some of which included preserved occupation horizons.

Details of methods particular to specific sites are described in Chapter 3 and, where relevant, in the

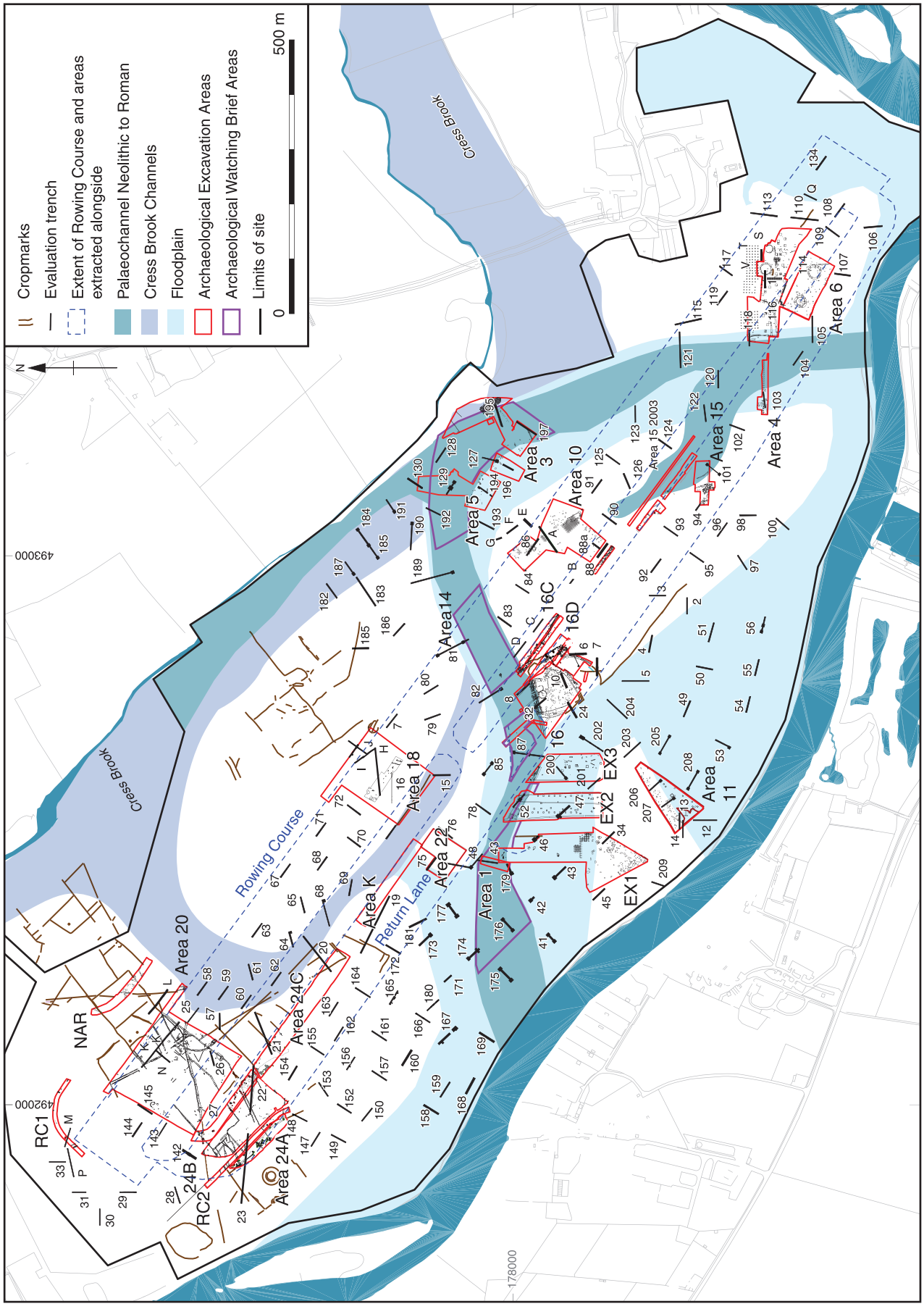

Fig. 1.3 Detailed site location plan of the Eton Rowing Course (Crown copyright 2013 Ordnance Survey 100005569)

Plate 1.2 Aerial photograph of SE end of site from the south, showing the former Thames palaeochannel, with Inlet Z to the west and the hollow containing the Neolithic midden in Area 6 (© Crown copyright. EH)

descriptions by phase below. All features were recorded in plan, but the degree to which they were investigated by excavation varied according to their relevance to the research priorities. The recording procedure adopted on all of the OAU excavations followed standard practice (Wilkinson 1992). Initial spot dating of features allowed a provisional separation of features into groups, allowing differential treatment according to the priorities laid out. Features were defined and half sectioned; many subsequently had their second halves removed in order to recover finds and environmental material. Layers were defined, planned and excavated as appropriate. Where artefact scatters were identified, they were defined, gridded into squares and excavated, or were recorded in 3-D. Linear features were excavated and sampled both to understand their character and to recover artefactual and environmental material. Cremation and inhumation deposits were excavated using standard methods (Wilkinson 1992). Sufficient artefacts were sought to enable the dating and characterisation of the sites, although for some sites with scattered earlier prehistoric remains many features remain undated. The environmental sampling policies, which were guided by Dr Mark Robinson of Oxford University, were designed to enable the past environments to be reconstructed as well as to provide information on the economy of the sites. A radiocarbon dating programme was undertaken.

Plate 1.3 Aerial colour photograph of Area 6 from the north, showing the hollow containing the Neolithic midden, the cropmarks of the adjacent ring ditches and the modern Thames (© C Stanley)

Post-excavation

In 1998, it was suggested that the results of the two projects should be published together as a series of monographs. The linking of the two projects involved the identification of a loosely defined study area that extended from just below Cookham, immediately upriver from Maidenhead, to Windsor, which encompasses a 2-3km wide corridor of the river plain (Fig. 1.1). The sites within the main area targeted for archaeological fieldwork and considered in this volume were bounded to the north by the M4 and to the south by the River Thames. Work at Widbrook Common, to the north of the study area and to the south of the Thames, undertaken in conjunction with the Flood Alleviation Scheme, also produced evidence for very limited Neolithic and Bronze Age activity.

Archaeological background

The middle Thames has, until relatively recently, been the subject of comparatively little archaeological research. In 1975, a cropmark survey of the river gravels of the middle Thames Valley was published (Gates 1975). The survey was based on a review of aerial photographs. Little excavation or fieldwalking evidence was available to supplement the study. Since the mid 1970s further aerial photographs have become available, but in general the photographic coverage of the region has been poor, owing to local flying restrictions imposed by the proximity of Heathrow Airport. In the 1990s, cropmarks within the general study area were plotted by the Aerial Reconnaissance section of the RCHME (now English Heritage) as part of their Survey of the Thames River Gravels. Figure 1.2 includes a compilation and interpretation of the cropmark evidence. Several archaeological sites recognised by aerial photography had already been destroyed by the late 1970s by urban expansion and the construction of the M4 Motorway. Gravel extraction sites had also affected the archaeology of the region, a situation only partly mitigated by rescue excavations. Finds collected during gravel extraction south of the river Thames in the Bray area suggested the presence of Mesolithic, Neolithic, Iron Age and Roman archaeological activity in the vicinity (Stanley 1972; Stanley pers. comm.).

In 1985, Buckinghamshire County Museum was commissioned by Thames Water to review the archaeological resources of the area between Maidenhead and Windsor and investigate the

Plate 1.4 Aerial photograph of the central part of the site from the south-east, showing the former Thames channel between Site F East and Area 16, including the ring ditch in the latter (© Crown copyright. EH)

potential impact of any flood relief work. Photographs taken by the RCHME were reassessed, and a limited programme of archaeological fieldwalking was implemented. Attention was paid in particular to the area south and west of Dorney, which on the basis of the aerial photographic evidence was felt to be particularly vulnerable. The results revealed that the area was covered with a broad range of landscape features, gravel islands, relict watercourses and cropmarks. Finds from the fieldwalking suggested that archaeology of all periods could be expected on this part of the river plain (Carstairs 1986).

Neolithic and Bronze Age evidence from the area is dominated by burial and ceremonial monuments (Fig. 1.2). These include a probable Neolithic mortuary enclosure just north of Dorney Reach, a possible causewayed enclosure just to the south, and a second causewayed enclosure and mortuary enclosure, 3km downriver, to the south of Eton Wick (Ford 1987b; 1991-3). Further downstream at Staines there is another causewayed enclosure (Robertson-Mackay 1987). In addition, a shaft at Cannon Hill contained early Neolithic pottery and flintwork (Bradley *et al.* 1975-76), and excavations at Weir Bank Stud Farm on the south side of the Thames had also produced early Neolithic pottery (Cleal 1995).

The pattern of Bronze Age burial in the Middle Thames Valley appears to have been one of either isolated barrows or of small barrow groups, spaced at frequent intervals (often no more than

Plate 1.5 Aerial photograph of Site F East looking south-east, showing the variable gravel and sand/silt geology, and the probable ring ditch at the junction of the two (© Crown copyright. EH)

1km apart) across the landscape. A cropmark just north of Dorney Reach, thought to be a ring ditch, was destroyed during the construction of the M4, while two others were identified as cropmarks at Marsh Lane, and were subsequently excavated in advance of the construction of the Flood Alleviation Channel. The ring ditches of a further six or seven barrows lay within the Eton College Rowing Course Project: these comprise a double or triple ring ditch adjacent to Queen's Eyot, a probable ring ditch on the adjacent gravel island, a single ring ditch in the centre of the site (in Area 16), and a further group of four immediately south-west of Boveney (in Area 6). Other cropmark ring ditches are known to the north-west of Eton Wick and between Eton Wick and Eton itself (Fig. 1.2).

Topography, geology and environment

The topography of the area is generally level – although the relict channels are up to 2m lower than the adjacent gravel terraces – and forms part of the Thames Valley gravels and floodplain. The land has been used recently principally as open fields devoted to market gardening and cereal agriculture, although the area of the Eton College Rowing Course previously comprised open fields and hay meadows adjacent to the river Thames.

The geology of the study area comprises First Terrace river gravels of the Pleistocene (Sherlock 1947, 54). The gravel consists 'mainly of flint with subsidiary quartzite sandstone and chert' (Jarvis *et al.* 1984, 14). Overlying the gravel are areas of alluvial silt, formed during periods of flood activity.

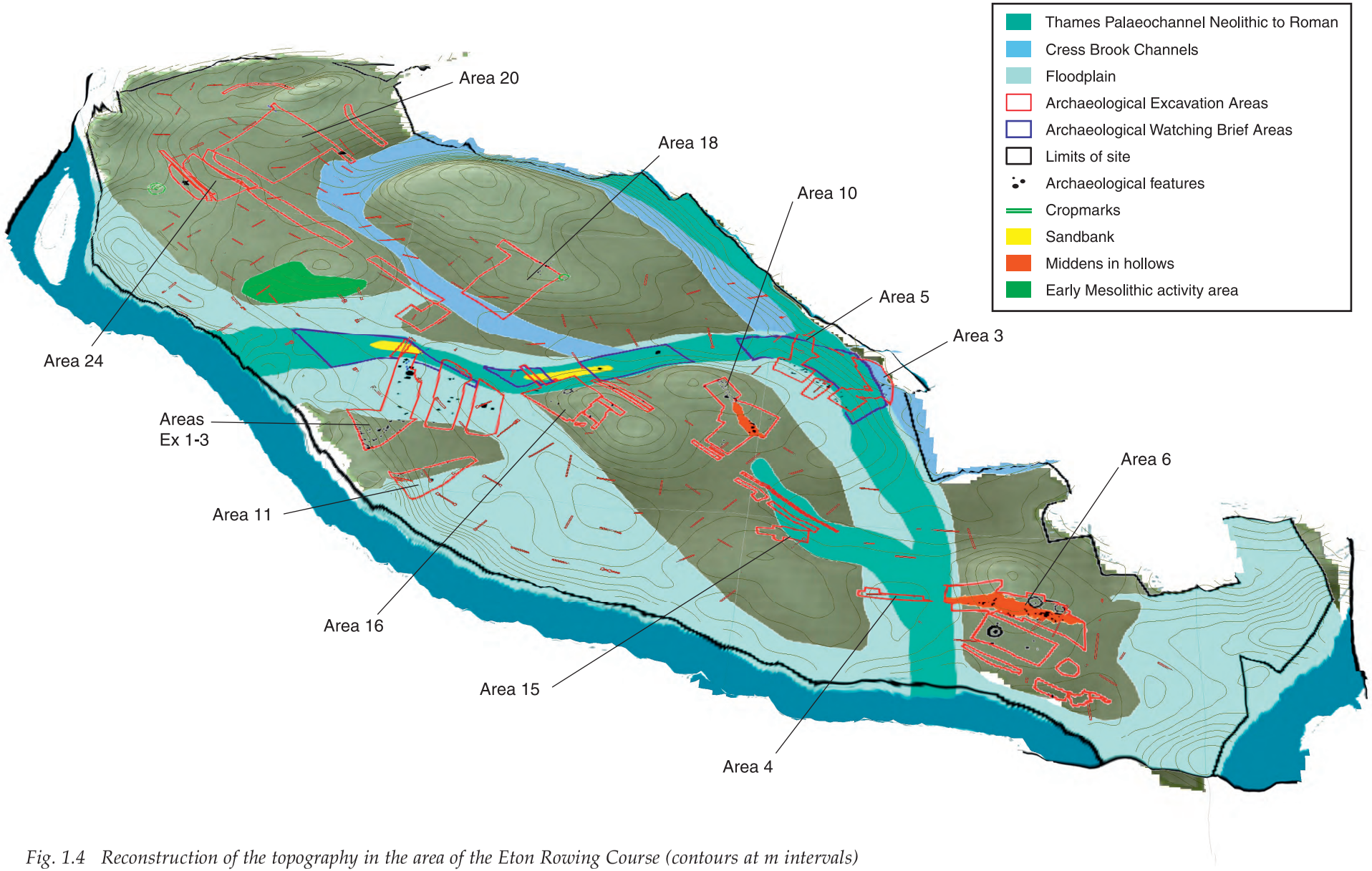

Fig. 1.4 Reconstruction of the topography in the area of the Eton Rowing Course (contours at m intervals)

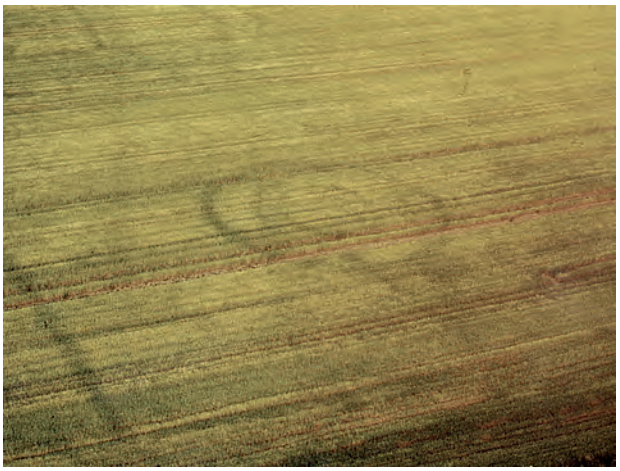

Plate 1.6 Aerial photograph of double or triple ring ditch at the NW end of the site, from the south west

Relict watercourses cross the study area, and have done so until comparatively recently: two water channels or ditches are depicted on John Rocque's map of Berkshire published in 1761, and these survive today as managed drainage channels. The map shows the channels cutting across the meadows and fields surrounding Lake End Green and the village of Dorney, before converging as one, to join the river Thames to the east of Boveney.

The Eton Rowing Course lies within, and the Flood Alleviation Channel extends through, part of an area that in the prehistoric period was interlaced by ancient stream and river courses, crossing low-lying ground, creating gravel islands or eyots along the line of the Thames Valley (Figs 1.2 and 1.4). These islands were fertile and were favoured locations for prehistoric activity and settlement (eg Yarnton, Oxfordshire: Hey 2011; Southwark: Yule 1988; and Runnymede: Needham 2000).

The soil types in the area of Bray, Dorney and Eton Wick, all close to the present line of the Thames, tend to be shallow and imperfectly drained sandy clay loams, reflecting the influence of the floodplain evolution. The depth of topsoil and ploughsoil over the gravel is typically between 0.3 and 0.4 m; seasonal flooding is frequent. These areas are not suited to horticultural crops, though cereals and grasses are grown. Much of the land is exploited as pasture. Upstream, at Boveney Lock and between Maidenhead and Dorney the soil types become sandier and the soils tend to be deeper (up to 0.76m over gravel). Such land is suitable for arable crops and intensive market gardening, although it is also exploited as pasture.