Uffington Village Project 2002

Archaeological Interim Report

Oxford Archaeology

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Figures:

Plates:

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SUMMARY

In October 2002 a partnership of Tom Browns School Museum and Oxford Archaeology undertook a research excavation on a site near the village of Uffington. The fieldwork revealed evidence of hut circles, ditches and pits forming part of a settlement dating to the Early/Middle Iron Age.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background

1.1.1 In June 2001, the Tom Brown's School Museum, Uffington, Oxfordshire submitted an application for a Local Heritage Initiative Grant for an archaeological research project in the environs of their historic village. The application was successful and funding was made available in November 2001.

1.1.2 The theme of the project was to investigate the relationship between the village of Uffington and the White Horse. This entailed a coordinated programme of documentary research and fieldwork. This report summarises the progress and results of the fieldwork.

1.1.3 The fieldwork was designed as a cooperative venture involving Friends of Tom Brown's School Museum, and Oxford Archaeology (OA), the latter providing professional guidance and training throughout the programme and managing the fieldwork. The investigation was centred on a newly discovered archaeological site situated approximately 0.5 km north of the modern village of Uffington (Fig.1).

1.2 Investigation methodology

1.2.1 The fieldwork programme was detailed in Written Scheme of Investigation, which was accepted by Hugh Coddington, Assistant County Archaeologist as a valid research design.

1.2.2 The project methodology was designed as a sequential programme of investigation, starting with non-invasive surveys, and culminating in a targeted excavation.

2. SITE IDENTIFICATION AND SURVEYS

2.1 Aerial Photography

2.1.1 The site was first identified as a group of cropmarks on an aerial photograph (Pl. 1). Further photographs, taken from a different angle and at a different time, were located at the National Monuments Record at Swindon. These confirmed the existence of the cropmarks, and appeared to show two distinct groups of features, characteristic of the hut circles, pits, and boundary or trackway ditches of a prehistoric settlement (Pl.2). These features appeared to be concentrated on a small plateau in the northwest corner of the field. The only other significant feature in the photographs was the line of the Uffington canal (backfilled in the 20th century) which curved around the northeast side of the plateau before heading southeast across the field.

2.2 Intervisibility survey

2.2.1 Recent research has highlighted the importance of the visibility of ancient monuments in the landscape, particularly when attempting to understand their original significance. This particularly applies to the White Horse itself, which was constructed as a visual symbol to be seen from afar. If the settlement under investigation was (as suspected) broadly contemporary with the Horse's construction, how well could one have seen the Horse from within the settlement?

2.2.2 In pursuance of this question, an intervisibility survey was undertaken, to see how well the horse could be seen from points in the landscape along the valley floor (Fig. 2). Such a study takes account of more modern landscape features that would not have been present in prehistoric times. The results indicated that the clearest view of the Horse would have been from a point approximately 1 km to the west of the site, at which point the view would be directly down into the Manger, with the Horse in full view above.

2.2.3 In contrast, the view of the White Horse from the settlement near Uffington is notably oblique, although also in view would have be the ramparts of the hillfort. However, it is possibly significant that this viewpoint puts the horse directly above the flat top of Dragon Hill (see Pl.3).

2.3 Geophysical survey

2.3.1 A geophysical survey was undertaken by Andrew Payne of English Heritage, to supplement the features already visible in the aerial photographs, and determine if the features were - as they appeared - confined to the plateau area (Figs 3 and 4).

2.3.2 The resultant survey greatly clarified the feature spread, confirming that the features were in two distinct groups, separated by an apparently open area, which itself was crossed by two ditches bordering a possible trackway. Many

of the features in both groups crossed each other, a clear sign of more than one phase of activity. The two groups of features appeared to be broadly contemporary, as there was evidence of a ditch encompassing both groups, and apparently roughly following the plateau edge.

2.4 Contour survey

2.4.1 A 5 m contour survey was undertaken of the plateau, to confirm the character of the local topography visible by eye (Fig. 3). The survey clearly shows the steep side of the plateau immediately east of the line of the modern canal. The revealed contours also showed slight evidence of a possible bank inside the ditched perimeter of the settlement.

3 THE EXCAVATION

Based upon the results of the various surveys a total of six trenches were targeted across the plateau, each designed to answer specific research questions. (Fig. 4). Areas that appeared to be archaeologically 'busy' were avoided, as these would needlessly complicate the interpretation, given the constraints of time.

3.1 Results

General

3.1.1 The natural subsoil across the plateau is a fairly fine greensand. This was overlaid by a pale brown sandy silt ploughsoil and a sandy loam topsoil. Across the top of the plateau (Trenches 3 to 6) the topsoil was up to 0.25 m deep, and the interface between the topsoil and the ploughsoil - and the ploughsoil and the natural - was indistinct, making the definition of revealed archaeological features very difficult. In contrast, the topsoil/subsoil interface on the northern slope of the plateau was relatively sharp, the topsoil never more than 0.20 m, and the ploughsoil layer almost non-existent. Two alternative scenarios may account for this localised clarity. Ploughing may have eroded the slope's topsoil layer, which would have washed downslope, leaving a thinner but more distinct topsoil layer. Alternatively, the modern infilling of the canal, and the subsequent landscaping of the area may have effectively removed a significant proportion of the topsoil ploughsoil accumulation, since when only a shallow topsoil has accumulated. Although there is some truncation of the features in this part of the site, it does not appear to be excessive, so it is considered most likely that this latter scenario is the most probable explanation for the general stratigraphy in this area.

3.2 Trench 1

3.2.1 The trench revealed part of an enclosure ditch at its southeast end, and a number of bowl-shaped pits down the slope (see Pl. 4). At the northwest end of the trench the south bank of the canal cut was revealed, showing that the canal basin was lined with blue clay. The pit fills produced a quantity of pottery and animal bone fragments.

3.3 Trench 2

3.3.1 The trench revealed two shallow ditches, the northwest one representing part of the perimeter ditch. The southeast ditch (from examination of the geophysics plot), may be part of an ?earlier ditch surrounding the western group of enclosures. Nether ditch produced any finds.

3.4 Trench 3

3.4.1 The L-shaped trench revealed a shallow gully and a number of shallow pits in the W-E arm, and a quantity of pottery and bone was recovered from the fills. In the N-S arm a gully packed with stone was revealed. Both gullies appear to be parts of the near-circular enclosure features seen on the geophysics plot.

3.5 Trench 4

3.5.1 The trench revealed two shallow ditches, one of which appears to be part of the settlement perimeter ditch. The other may be a continuation of one of the trackway ditches (see Trench 6 below).

3.6 Trench 5

3.6.1 The trench cut across a sequence of recut ditches belonging to at least one and possibly as many as three enclosures. Two small pits were also revealed. Quantities of pottery and animal bone were recovered.

3.7 Trench 6

3.7.1 The trench was sited across the apparently open central area in the settlement, bisecting one of the possible trackway ditches. In the event no clear evidence of the ditch was revealed, due partly to the indistinct stratigraphy in this part of the site, and partly the heavy rain preventing a proper cleaning of the trench floor. However, a slight darkening of the subsoil in the supposed area of the ditch, and a localised scatter of pottery, suggests that the feature exists, even if it was not satisfactorily clarified. No other features were identified on the trench, confirming the unoccupied nature of the area apparent in the geophysical plot.

4 THE FINDS

4.1 Pottery and Fired Clay *by Alistair Barclay*

Introduction

4.1.1 Some 563 sherds of pottery were recovered from the excavations. The pottery was recovered from features (ditches, gullies and pits) within five of the excavated trenches. Most of the pottery is of early Iron Age date, although small quantities of Bronze Age, middle Iron Age, Saxon, Roman and post-Roman pottery was also recovered.

4.1.2 The Iron Age pottery includes sherds from both fine and coarse ware vessels. Fine wares tend to be sand tempered and well-finished sometime by burnish and a few have red finish. A small number of sherds are highly decorated. Coarse wares can be shell tempered and where decorated carry finger-tip impressions, mostly on the shoulder and sometimes on the rim (see Pl. 5)

4.1.3 In addition to the Iron Age pottery, two Late Bronze Age sherds., and one Early Bronze Age sherd were recovered, along with a few Roman sherds and a single chaff-tempered Saxon sherd.

Discussion

4.1.4 A high proportion of the pottery is of Iron Age date. Some of the sherds are stylistically similar to All Cannings Cross style pottery and this could indicate that the origins of the site go back to the 8th century BC. While a few sherds of late Bronze Age pottery hint that the origins of the site could be even older. The recovery of a relatively smaller quantity of MIA pottery indicates continuation of the settlement - maybe on a smaller scale - perhaps with final abandonment by the Late Iron Age. The Roman pottery is almost certainly derived from manuring of this area - the nearest Roman settlement lies approximately 200 m to the south. The single Saxon sherd may have arrived on the site by a similar process; although it is conceivable that the plateau was resettled in the Saxon period, no other evidence of that date was recovered during the excavation.

4.1.5 The Early Iron Age pottery from the excavation is similar in character to material recovered from the excavated Castle Hill hillfort at Uffington and from the open settlement at Tower Hill, Ashbury, indicating that the valley settlement at Uffington and the enclosed hillfort settlement were broadly of the same date.

4.2 Worked flint *by Philippa Bradley*

Introduction

4.2.1 A total of 131 pieces of worked flint and four pieces of burnt unworked flint weighing 35 g were recovered from the excavations. The flint came from 25 contexts, mainly finds from later features, pits, gullies, and ditches. Flint was also recovered from the topsoil, ploughsoil and other unstratified contexts. Very little diagnostic material was recovered but there appears to be some Mesolithic or earlier Neolithic material together with some possible later flint.

Description

4.2.2 The flint was recorded using standard OA methods, further details of which may be found in the site archive. The flint is comparable to material found at excavations at White Horse Hill and Tower Hill (Bradley forthcoming). The assemblage is composed mainly of a range of flakes, blades, blade-like flakes, chips and cores also being recovered. A controlled approach to knapping seems to have been practiced, many of the flakes and some of the cores bear evidence for platform edge preparation and two core rejuvenation flakes were found. A variety of cores were recovered and included both flake and blade examples, although the latter are dominant.
The retouched forms recovered are limited and are not particularly diagnostic for dating purposes (a possible scraper, retouched flakes and an unfinished object). However, these pieces would not be out of place in a Mesolithic or Neolithic context.

Discussion

4.2.3 This small assemblage of worked flint shows that knapping was occurring on site and that some other domestic tasks were also probably taking place (possible scraper and retouched flakes). It is likely that the inhabitants would have utilised the local flint that they encountered during everyday activities (pit and ditch digging for example). It compares well with material from White Horse Hill and Tower Hill (Bradley forthcoming). The various blade cores, the evidence for platform edge preparation and the core rejuvenation flakes are indicators of a controlled approach to knapping, which is typical of the Mesolithic and earlier Neolithic. Although there are no diagnostic retouched forms it seems likely that the majority of the flint dates to this period. On technological grounds a little flint may be later in date but this is hard to prove.

4.3 Animal bone *by Bethan Charles*

4.3.1 Although the excavation yielded a modest quantity of animal bone, evidence from that recovered indicates that all the main domestic species were being kept at the site (cattle, sheep and pig). Beef, mutton and pork is likely to have been the staple meat diet of the inhabitants, probably supplemented by domestic fowl and goose, wild game and fish.

4.3.2 It is unlikely that cattle and sheep would have been kept primarily for meat with cattle providing the muscle for traction and possibly also kept for their milk whilst sheep would have been farmed for their wool and milk. From the evidence most of the pigs from the site were slaughtered before their 2nd year - it is unlikely the animals would have been kept much beyond that age since they did not provide much in the way of secondary products and would have been farmed for their meat alone.

4.3.3 Three horse teeth were recovered from the site providing evidence that horses were almost certainly kept in and around the site during the lifetime of the settlement.

4.4 Environmental evidence *by E.C.Stafford*

Methodology

4.4.1 Three soil samples, retrieved from early-Middle Iron Age features (listed in Table 1), were submitted for the assessment of environmental indicators. 10L of each sample were processed by flotation using a modified Siraf-type machine, with the flot collected on a 250μm mesh. After air-drying the flots were scanned for material under a binocular microscope at x10 and x20 magnification.

Table 1.

sample	context	feature type
1	319	Ditch
2	108	Pit
3	115	Pit

Results

4.4.2 The flots from all samples were moderate in size and contained substantial quantities of modern intrusive material in the form of roots and weed seeds.

4.4.3 Charred plant material was abundant in all three samples in the form of fragmented wood charcoal, some of the larger pieces of which may be identifiable. Both of the pit samples produced cereal grain albeit in very small quantities and poorly preserved. These included *Triticim diccocum/spelta.* (emmer/spelt wheat) and cf. *Avena* sp. (oat). Small quantities of chaff was also noted in sample <2> the form of glume bases.

4.4.4 Weed seeds were occasionally present in all of the samples, predominantly *Polygonum* sp. (Knotgrass etc) and occasional *Graminae* sp (Grasses). Other charred material included very occasional fragments of shell, probably hazelnut, n samples <1> and <2>.

Discussion.

4.4.5 Charred plant remains were preserved in all three samples. However this was largely confined to fragmentary wood charcoal with only a very small quantity of cereal (ie.<5 in each sample)grain/chaff or other plant remains. The flots are considered to offer little potential for further work other than perhaps identification of some of the larger pieces of charcoal to species level and confirmation of type of wheat present. Further work may also extend the list of weed species present.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The fieldwork was designed to be minimally intrusive, and to restrict its aspirations to a limited agenda of research questions. Therefore any conclusions drawn by the results of the six trenches must be seen as tentative and provisional.

5.2 Chronology

5.2.1 The characteristic outline of Bronze Age or Iron Age hut circles and animal pens were seen on both the crop mark photographs and the geophysics plot. The pottery sequence confirms that the major part of the occupation is spread across this period from as early as 500 BC to as late as 150 BC. However the presence of quantities of Mesolithic and Neolithic flints suggest that this small plateau may have been a favourable site at least as far back as 2000 BC. Whether the site was lived on in the Neolithic period is not certain - so far none of the features excavated appears to be of that date.

5.2.2 Another intriguing possibility is raised by the presence of a single sherd of early Anglo-Saxon pottery. Again, no features of that date were identified, but the possibility of 5th- or 6th-century occupation of the plateau cannot be dismissed.

5.3 The settlement form

5.3.1 The settlement appears to be quite clearly confined to the plateau, an aspect which probably results from the unfavourability of the lower lying - and perhaps seasonally flooded ground to the east and south. The presence of a perimeter ditch around the entire settlement was confirmed in the excavation, although the modest size of the ditch (even allowing for truncation by ploughing) suggests that it was not intended for defence.

5.3.2 The structures within the settlement consist of near circular enclosures that appear to represent the characteristic drainage and /or eaves drip ditch dug around the circular houses. Where excavation trenches were dug across these house features, the quantity of finds recovered was much greater, than - for instance - in the vicinity of the perimeter ditches. No clear evidence was found of postholes within the footprints of the houses, although such an absence is not necessarily significant. The structural postholes for houses at that time need not have been very deep, and may well have been completely destroyed by ploughing.

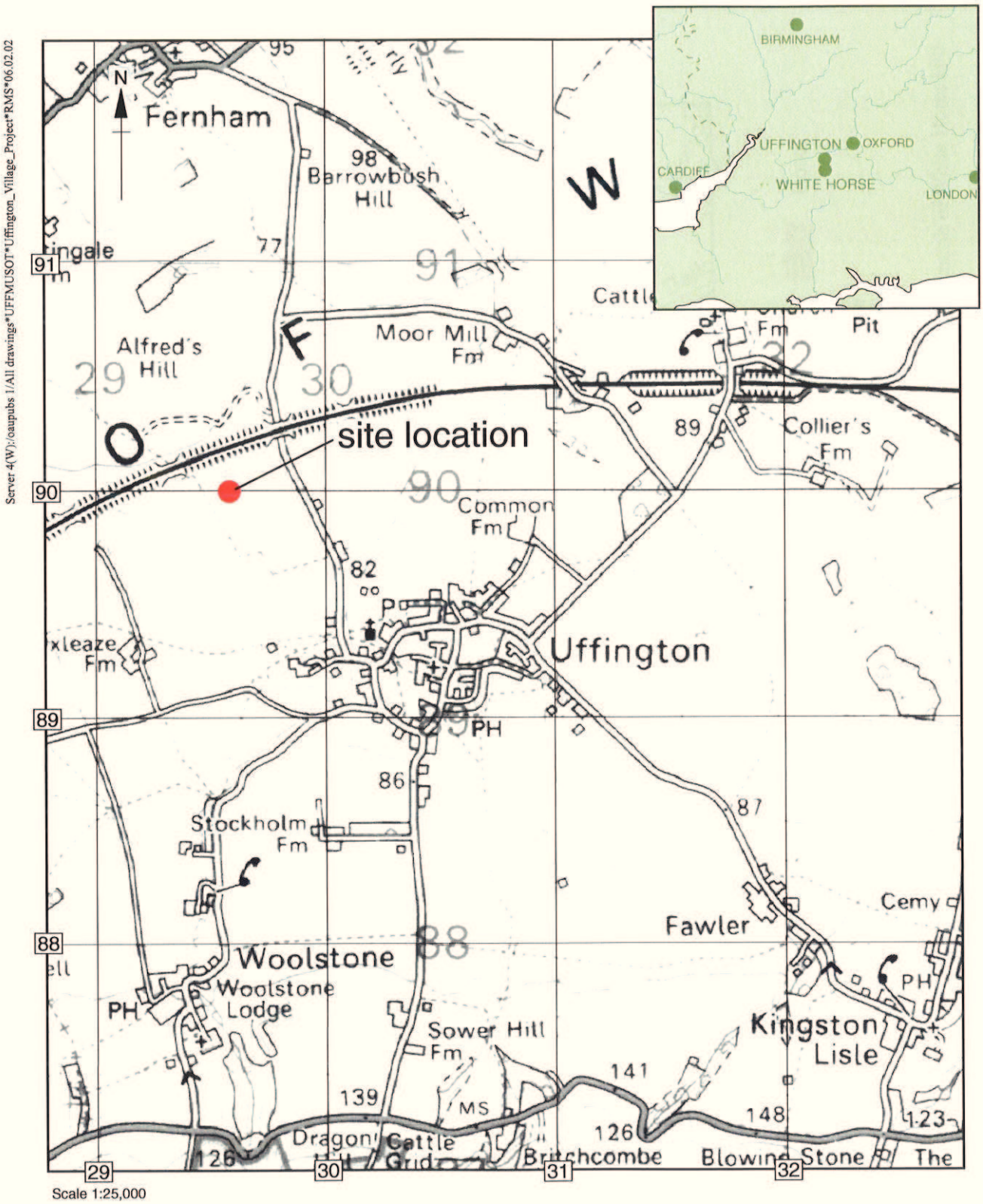
5.3.3 Many of these house circles have rectangular or irregular ditches running off them, which appear to be paddocks or corrals. Evidence of cattle and horse was identified in the animal bone assemblage. The latter would be most unlikely to have been kept as draft animals, and were clearly held in special regard among Iron Age peoples in general - and undoubtedly so in a settlement close to the White Horse itself.

5.3.4 The trenches also confirmed the presence of groups of pits (as in Trench 1). The modest quantity of pottery and bone recovered from the excavated pits suggests that they were probably not dug as rubbish pits initially. An alternative use may have been for storage of grain, and their position close to the hut circles supports this idea. However it has to be said that the environmental evidence is rather inconclusive, being based upon only a few samples.

5.4 Conclusion

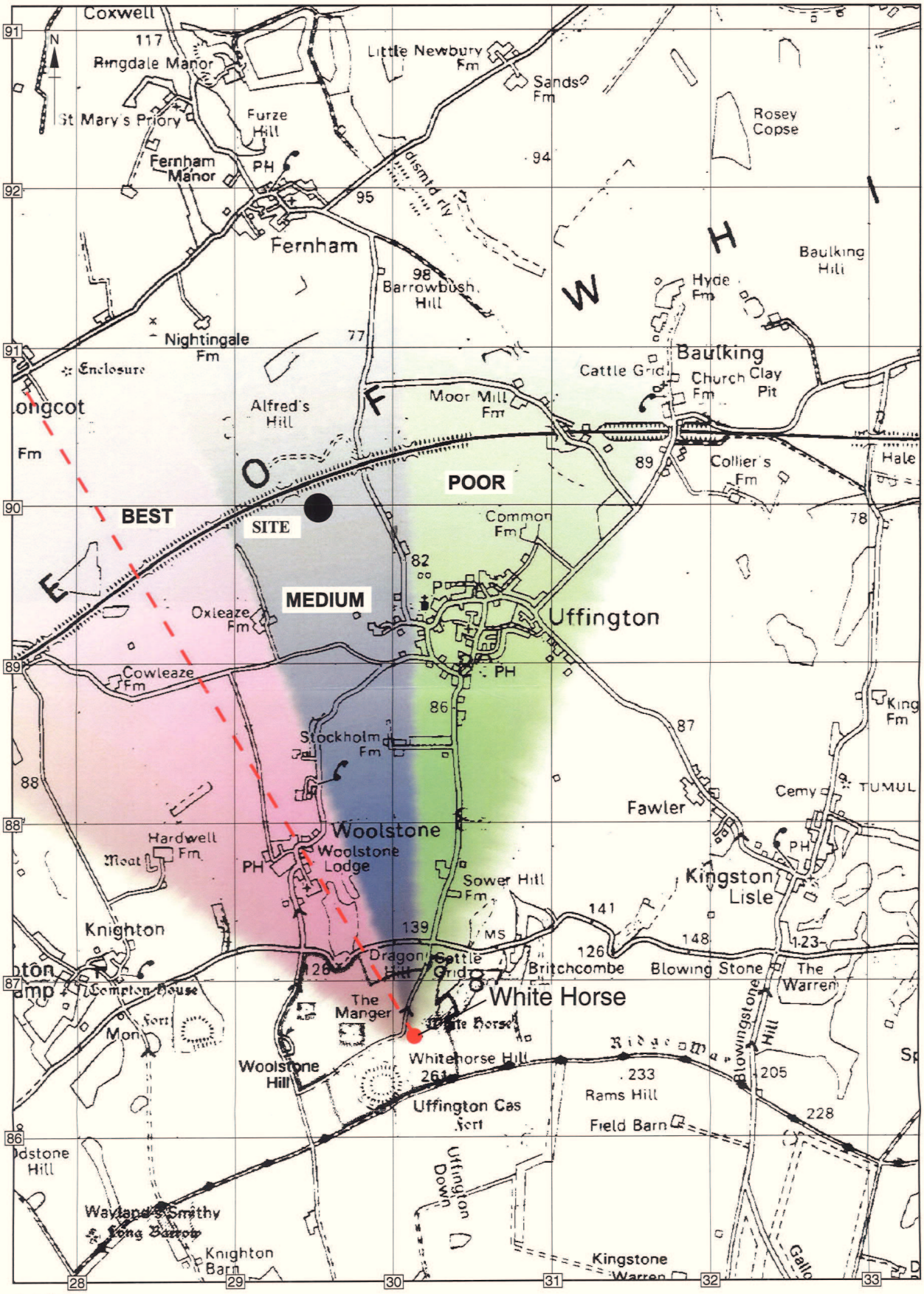
5.4.1 The fieldwork was very successful in consideration of the archaeological aims. Not only was the site confirmed as middle Iron Age, but the combination of survey and excavation have provided a great deal of detail about the settlement, while restricting excavation to a targeted minimum. Should further excavation be considered desirable, the evaluation has provided a good basis for more a sophisticated research agenda.

Alan Hardy
Project Manager
4.11.03



Scale 1:25,000

Figure 1: Site Location

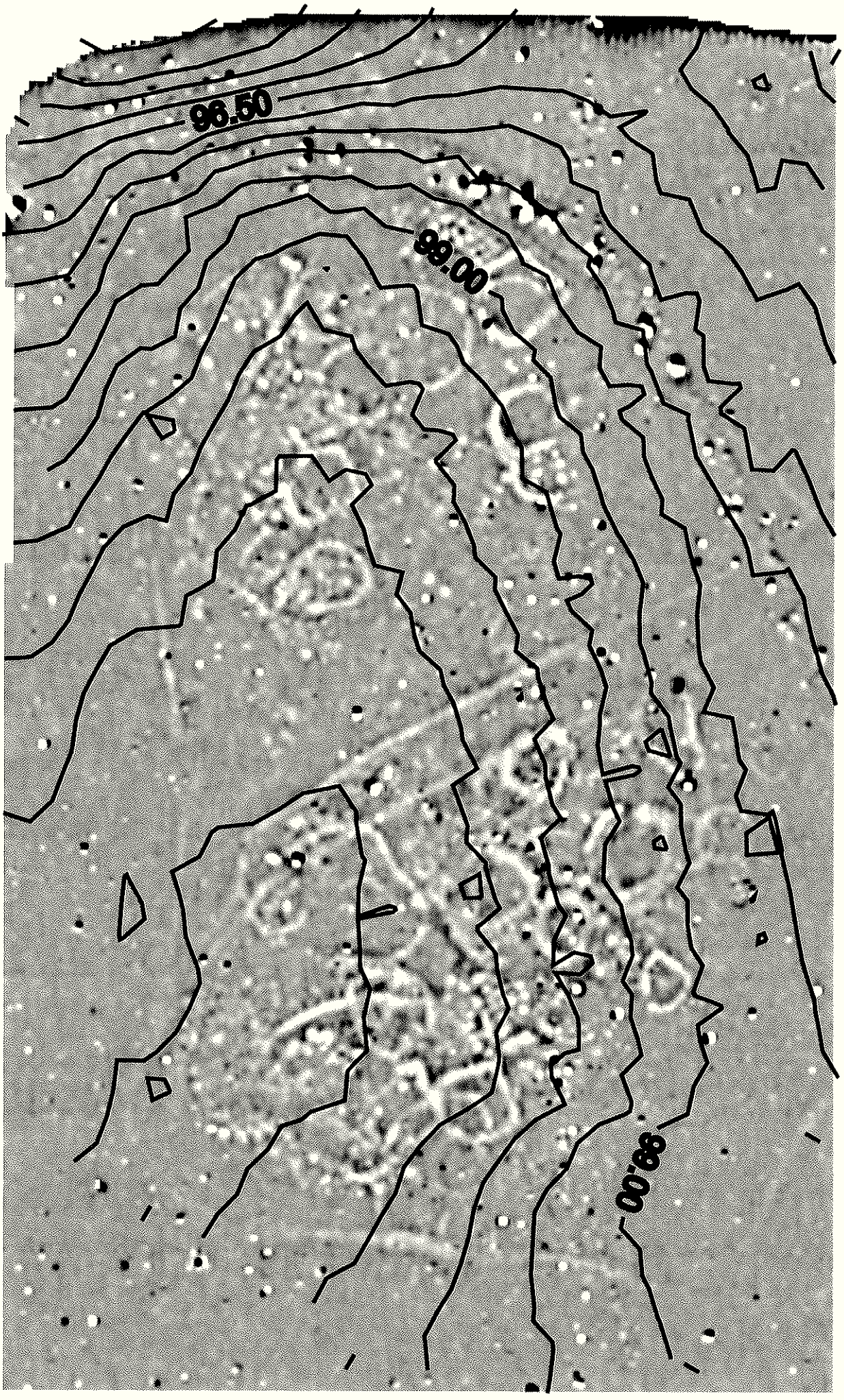


Scale 1:25,000

Poor Moderate Good

Conjectured line of optimum view

Figure 2: Intervisibility over the area north of White Horse Hill


96.50
99.00
00.66
0
50
100m

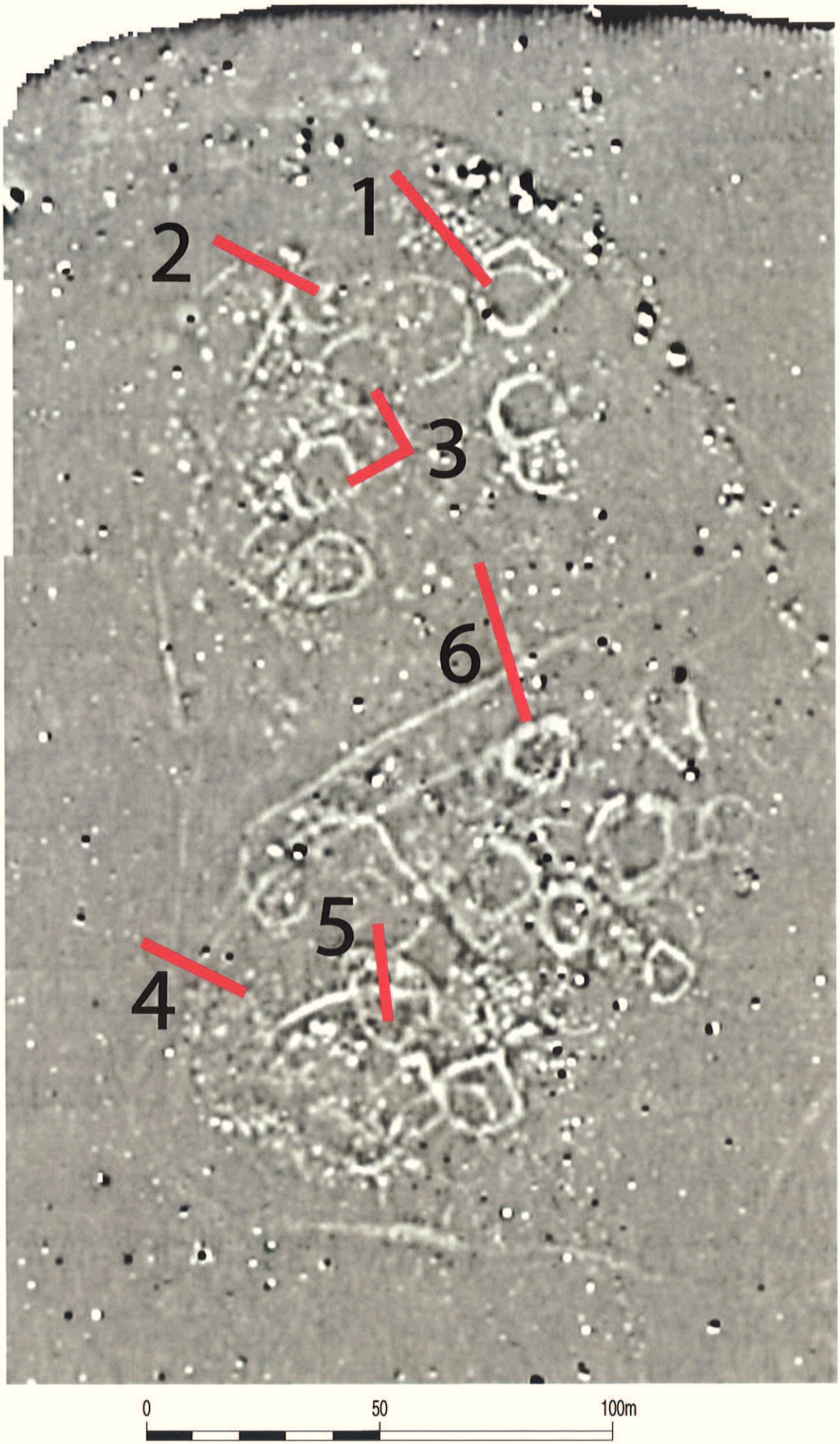

1
2
3
6
5
4
0
50
100m

Plate 1

Plate 2

Plate 3

Plate 4

Plate 5

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