Chapter 1: Introduction

by Alistair Barclay, Philippa Bradley, Claire Halpin and Frances Healy

LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT

The Barrow Hills monument complex is centred at SU 5160 9830, 2 km NE of Abingdon, on the second (Summertown/Radley) gravel terrace, 1.5 km N of the river Thames (Figs 1.1–3). At its W end was the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, formed by an interrupted inner ditch and a probably continuous outer ditch cutting off a spur of the terrace between two converging streams. The more easterly of these streams, now running in a culvert, separated the cemetery from the enclosure. The barrows were built across a spur of slightly higher ground (60 m OD) and appear to run parallel with the edge of the gravel terrace (Fig. 1.3).

The monument complex extends for approximately 1 km, with a linear cemetery of at least 25 barrows of Neolithic and Bronze Age date aligned WSW–ENE on the E side of the Abingdon causewayed enclosure (Fig. 1.2). It is unlikely to have continued to the SW of the enclosure, since excavations at Barton Court Farm revealed only isolated Neolithic pits in this direction (Fig 1.11; Miles 1986, 4). Little is known about the area NW of the enclosure which since the 1950s has been covered by housing, although at least one and possibly more early Bronze Age burials have been found there.

From the SSE edge of the barrow cemetery the land dips gently by approximately 5 m over a distance of 300 m towards the first gravel terrace and the edge of the Thames floodplain (Fig. 1.3). The immediate environment has been drastically altered in later prehistoric and historic times by a rising water table and alluviation of the floodplain (Lambrick 1992a; Robinson 1992a). To the S of the causewayed enclosure the two converging streams were dammed in the medieval period to create fish ponds. More recent transformations have resulted from gravel extraction and suburban development. An aerial photograph taken by Crawford in the 1920s shows a rural landscape in which small fields and ridge and furrow were still visible. It also shows small-scale quarrying in the interior of the causewayed enclosure and around barrow 16. This landscape has been radically altered by urban development and gravel extraction, and what appear to have been open fields on the first gravel terrace have been systematically quarried away. The Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society (AAAHS) and the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) have undertaken a number of small-scale excavations on the first gravel terrace.

HISTORY OF DISCOVERY AND INVESTIGATION

The field name 'Barrow Hilles' is known from Land Revenues recorded in 1547 (Gelling 1974, 456) and is probably of Saxon derivation. Despite the field name, the site was discovered only in the 1920s by O G S Crawford (AP RCHME SU 5198/1). It is not known when the barrows were completely levelled, but the cemetery appears to have escaped antiquarian interest, since only barrows 4A and 15 showed signs of possible disturbance. Ridge and furrow running NW–SE across the site suggests that the earthworks were flattened by the end of the medieval period.

The causewayed enclosure was also discovered in the 1920s, the inner ditch observed on the ground during gravel quarrying (Leeds 1927, 438), the outer recorded in an air photograph (AP RAF 3151) but identified only by Case in the 1950s (Case 1956a, 11). Case recalls that E T Leeds always believed that an outer ditch existed. The enclosure was excavated on four separate occasions (Leeds 1927; Leeds 1928; Case 1956a; Avery 1982), but only after both the inner and outer ditches had already been damaged by quarrying. The outer ditch may have been continuous: at least one of the breaks in it was made by a 1920s gravel pit (Avery 1982, fig. 3). There is slight cropmark evidence for a third, middle ditch (Avery 1982, fig. 3; AP RCHME SU 5198/1). The site is now covered by housing (Fig. 1.4), and it is unlikely that its layout will ever be fully understood. Although the excavations were on a small scale they produced a significant quantity of material and the site remains the most extensively excavated causewayed enclosure in the Upper Thames. The results of the excavations have been reinterpreted by Richard Bradley (1986a).

In addition to fragmentary human remains from the ditches, three discrete articulated inhumations have been found within the area of the enclosure. Two burials were found during gravel quarrying in 1905, perhaps in a ditch of the enclosure, in the form of an extended male inhumation and the skeleton of a young female 'in a small square hole, doubled up with the head on the legs' (Leeds 1928, 476; 1929, 37). Avery suggests that the extended inhumation may have been of historical date, the contracted one Neolithic or Beaker (Avery and Brown 1972, 69). A prehistoric date seems even more likely for a tightly contracted male burial found between the two ditches in 1963, perhaps associated with three pieces of struck flint (Avery 1982, 12).

Crawford's initial air photography was followed by Major Allen's more detailed record, on which Leeds based the first survey of the Barrow Hills cemetery (1936, fig. 1). He subsequently numbered the known barrows from 1 to 17 (1938a, fig. 7). A large oval cropmark at SU 5144 9845 near the causewayed enclosure, with a single break at the E end, was identified on the ground by Crawford and was described by him in a note to E T Leeds as a possible

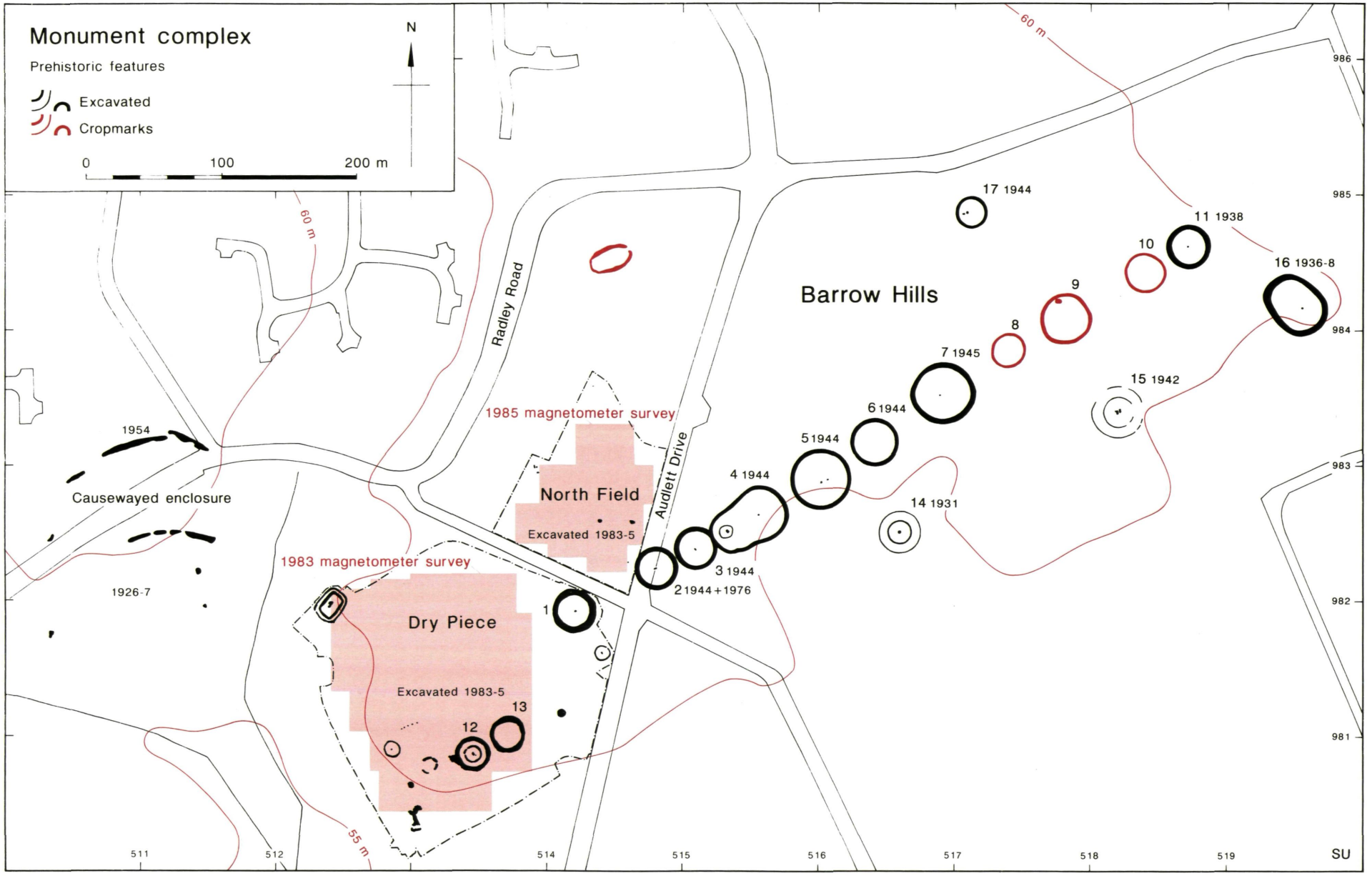


Figure 1.2 Barrow Hills, showing Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, dates of excavation, and areas of magnetometer survey

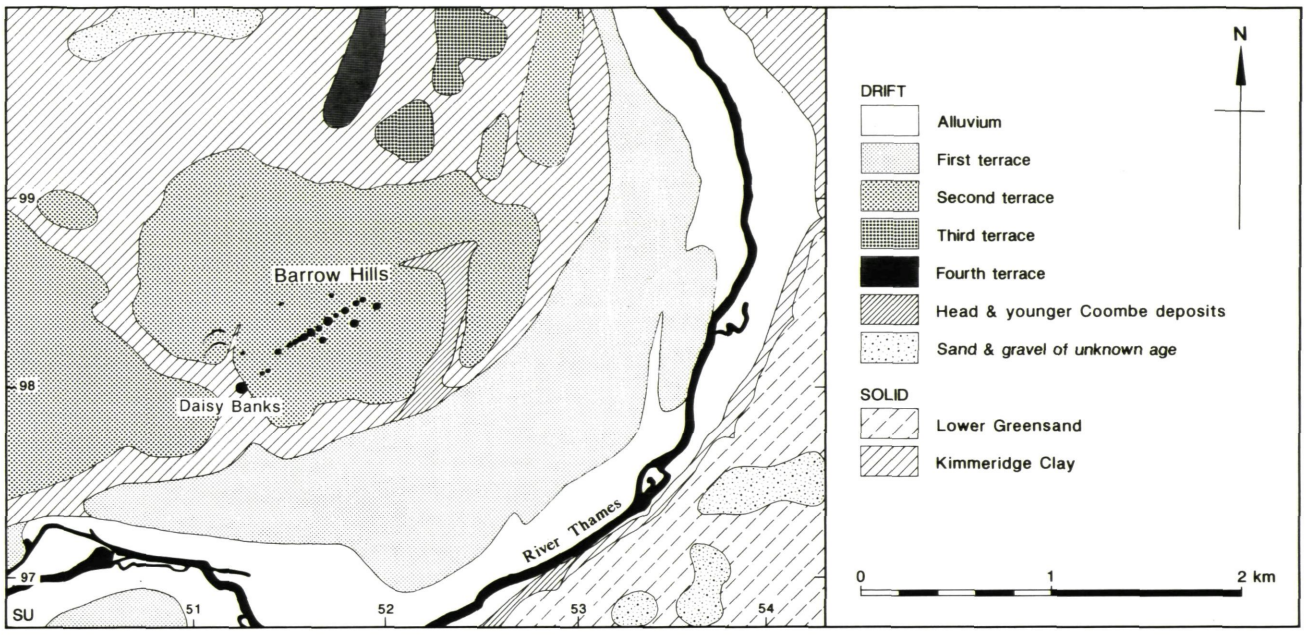


Figure 1.3 Geology

long barrow (Fig. 1.5). It shows clearly in a 1935 photograph by Major Allen (Fig. 1.6), but appears as two contiguous ring ditches in subsequent photographs (eg RCHME SU 5198/3), and is plotted as such by Benson and Miles (1974, map 31 and fig. 15). The clarity with which it can be distinguished in Fig. 1.6, however, and the fact that Crawford was able to locate it on the ground as an oval cropmark with 'no resemblance to the ditch of a twin barrow' (Crawford 1930, 357), suggests that his interpretation was correct. This site was never numbered by Leeds and did not appear in any of the early publications. The same is true of a subrectangular enclosure, later known as the oval barrow, at SU 5128 9824 (R Bradley 1992a). The precise position of barrow 17 was also never recorded, although it was N of barrow 8 (Williams 1948, 13), and since its destruction in 1944 its number has been incorrectly attributed to Crawford's possible long barrow (Benson and Miles 1974, 88; Parrington 1977, 31).

In 1930 Leeds was able to locate the cropmarks of three ring-ditches on the ground and in 1931 the Oxford University Archaeological Society (OUAS) excavated barrow 14 as a research excavation (Leeds 1936, 9–13). This provided the first indication that small subsoil features were present among the ring ditches, here in the form of a pit without finds and numerous possible post- or stakeholes, equally undated (Leeds 1936, 9). Further excavations took place in advance of gravel extraction: barrow 16 by OUAS in 1936–8 and barrow 11 in 1938 (Leeds 1938a), barrow 15 by OUAS in 1942 (Riley 1982), barrows 4A, 4, 5, 6 and 17 by Audrey Williams in 1944 (Williams 1948), and barrows 2, 3 and 7 by Atkinson in 1944–5 (Atkinson 1952–3). In 1945 too a Romano-British inhumation cemetery was exposed by topsoil stripping (Atkinson 1952–3, 32–4). By the 1960s it was clear from air photographs and limited salvage excavation that a Saxon settlement with sunken-featured buildings occupied the SW end of the prehistoric monument complex (Avery and Brown 1972). The full extent of the Saxon settlement was defined when the SW end of the site was photographed, revealing a number of smaller ring ditches, pits, what appeared to be a post-ring henge, and natural features (Fig. 1.8).

In 1974 Benson and Miles published a survey of cropmarks recorded on river gravels in the Upper Thames Valley in which the cropmark complex of Barton Court Farm/Barrow Hills was used as a case study to illustrate the then current threats to and destruction of cropmark sites on the Thames gravels from urban development and ploughing. They also defined and drew attention to the extent of the Saxon settlement (1974, 57, 87–90, figs 15, 16). Since 1974 housing has been built over the SW end of the barrow cemetery and ploughing of the NE end, which contains the unexcavated barrows 8–10, has continued. Figure 1.4 summarises the aerial photographic record.

In 1976 the OAU undertook further excavation of barrow 2 in advance of the construction of Audlett Drive, which now runs across the complex (Fig. 1.4; Parrington 1977).

THE 1983–5 EXCAVATIONS

The 1983–5 excavations were conducted in advance of housing development by the OAU 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 AAAHS and the OUAS. While previous excavations had all taken place in the centre and NE of the cemetery, these were sited over its SW end, W of the present line of Audlett Drive, in a field known as Dry Piece and in another field to the N of it, referred to as 'the north field', now divided from

Figure 1.4 Interpretative plot of Neolithic and Bronze Age cropmarks within the monument complex, showing the extent of destruction and survival

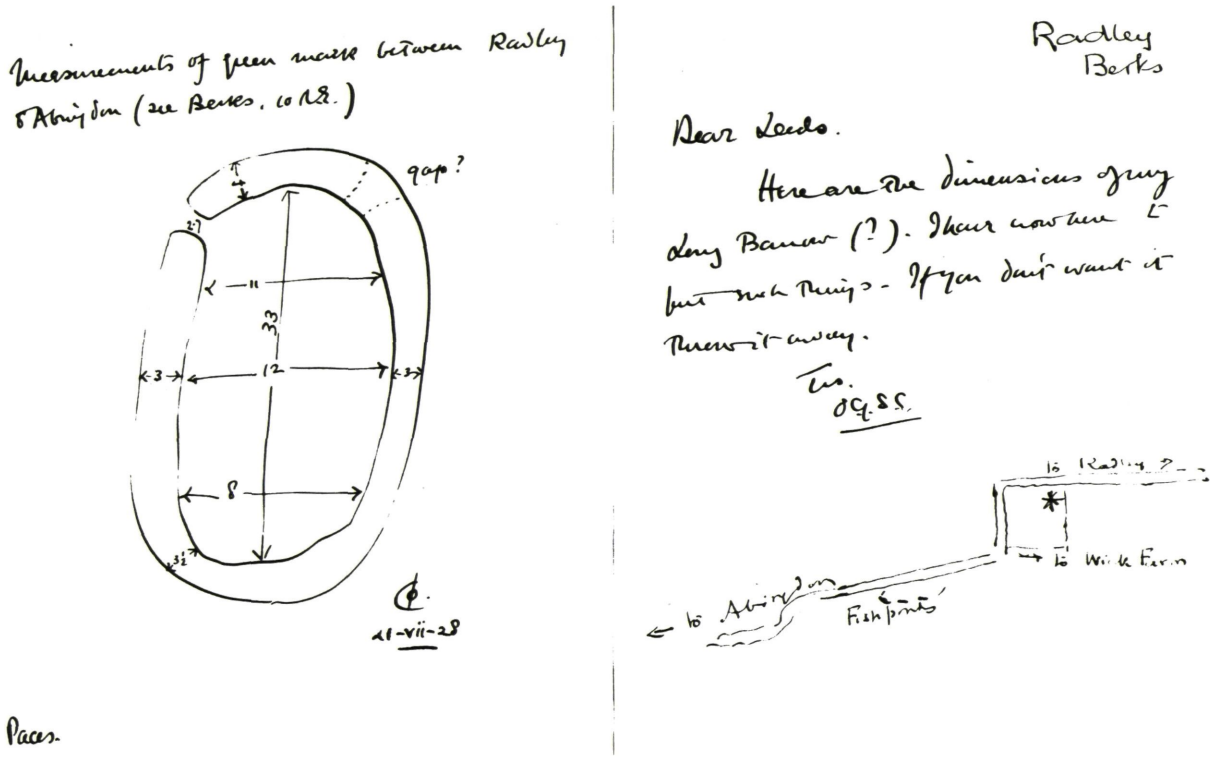


Figure 1.5 A note from OGS Crawford to ET Leeds, describing the oval cropmark at SU 5144 9845, 1928. © Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Dry Piece by Wick Hall Drive (Fig. 1.10). This was the first time that the site was the subject of planned rescue excavation on an extensive scale, and the programme included preliminary fieldwalking, geophysical and contour surveys (Ch. 2).

The initial foci of investigation were (i) apparently Neolithic features in the form of the oval barrow and the probable post-ring henge, in the hope of relating both monuments to the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, (ii) the remaining unexcavated ring ditches, with a view to elucidating and expanding the sequence of development of the barrow cemetery, (iii) later prehistoric and Romano-British land use and (iv) the Roman cemetery and the Saxon settlement, especially in relation to the already excavated Roman villa and Saxon settlement at Barton Court Farm 500 m to the SW and to subsequent developments in local settle-ment and land use, such as the rise of Abingdon Abbey. Extensive topsoil stripping was employed in order to recover flat graves and Saxon buildings. Excavation both extended and diminished the prehistory of the site: unsuspected 'flat' Neolithic and early Bronze Age burials and other features were revealed by extensive topsoil stripping, while the 'henge' proved to be a 19th-century tree plantation.

Richard Chambers of the OAU directed the topsoil stripping of the main field, after which his excavating team cleaned the stripped surface and planned all features, including natural ones. Responsibility was then divided by period. The excavation of the Neolithic features was directed by Richard Bradley of Reading University, whose brief it was to dig the oval barrow, the 'henge' and a segmented ring ditch W of barrow 12. Bronze Age features were excavated by Claire Halpin of the OAU, largely with members of the AAAHS and the OUAS, working at weekends; her initial brief was to excavate barrows 1, 12 and 13 and a ring ditch (201) S of barrow 1. Prehistoric features outside and beyond the monuments were pro-visionally distinguished by their fills, planned and numbered by Richard Chambers' team, and assigned to her for excavation. Richard Chambers was res-ponsible for excavating later features; towards the end of the last season his team also assisted in the excavation of prehistoric features.

EXCAVATION METHODS

Pre-1983 excavations

The ring ditch excavations of the 1930s, 40s and 50s all employed more-or-less the same strategy, with variations recorded in the plans reproduced in Chapter 5. In general a trench was cut across the diameter of the monument, recovering central burials and providing two ditch sections. The original trench was expanded and/or additional cuttings made according to circumstances and resources. Parrington's 1976 excavation of barrow 2 began with the excavation of a trial trench 40 m long and 1 m wide along each edge of the 9 m wide road corridor. Once the ring ditch was located it was sectioned in each trench and the area within the ring ditch was excavated over the whole 9 m width.

1983–5 excavations

Topsoil Stripping

The relatively shallow topsoil of Dry Piece was stripped over the entire excavation area, except where it overlay barrows 1, 12 and 13 and ring ditch 201. The topsoil overlying barrow 1 and ring ditch 201 was removed by hand in order to recover finds derived from the eroded mounds. Few finds were recovered and this exercise was deemed to have given a low return. The topsoil overlying barrows 12 and 13 was therefore mechanically excavated with baulks left intact. All the topsoil overlying ring ditch 801 and pond barrow 4866 was removed mechanically.

The deeper topsoil of the north field was also removed wholesale, proceeding N from Wick Hall Drive until features gave out.

Recording

The national grid served as the site grid. Most features were recorded according the system developed by OAU in the 1970s: each feature was given a number in a continuous sequence; each excavated segment of a feature (for example half of a half-sectioned pit) was given a letter, starting from A in each feature; each layer within a segment was numbered in a continuous sequence starting from 1. The three elements of the notation were separated by oblique strokes; the complete context reference for layer 4 in segment G of ring ditch 801 (Fig. 4.9) is thus 801/G/4. Where features were excavated in plan segment letters were dispensed with; layer 1 of pit 2181 (Fig. 4.25) is thus 2181/1. The only exceptions to this were the segmented ring ditch and a few smaller features in the same area, among them pit 2124, for which single context recording was employed.

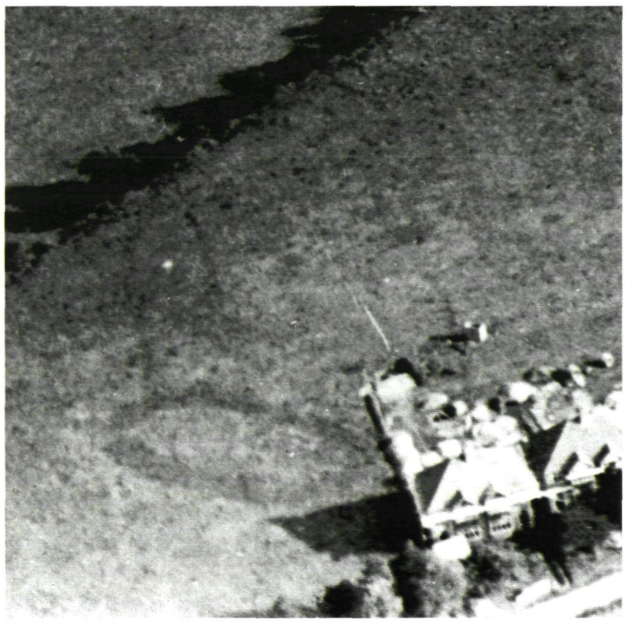


Figure 1.6 Detail from a photograph by Major Allen showing the oval cropmark described by Crawford, from the NW, 1935. © Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, ref. 971

Figure 1.7 The barrow cemetery from the SW, 1949. Photo University of Cambridge Committee for Aerial Photography, ref DX-17. © British Crown copyright/MOD Reproduced with the permission of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office

Barrows and Ring Ditches

Baulks were established across barrow 1 and ring ditch 201 and barrows 12 and 13 in order to obtain cross-sections through the monuments. A 2-metre wide segment was excavated against each of the four baulks and drawn, these served as representative samples of the barrow ditch sections. Rather more was excavated of the ditches of barrows 12 and 13, partly to reconstruct their mounds for an open day. Barrow ditches were always dug by hand. Smaller ring ditches and pond barrow-like features were fully excavated.

In the case of the oval barrow, the segmented ring ditch and what still appeared to be a post-ring henge, 80 litre samples of ploughsoil taken along 1 m wide central transects were sieved through 6 mm mesh and the proportion of gravel retained in the sieves was recorded. Increasing density of gravel from the edge to the centre of the oval barrow reinforced the argument that it once had a mound (R Bradley 1984a; 1992a, 134).

Graves

Graves were cleaned and planned before excavation. A section line through the long axis of the feature was established and half of the grave fill was removed. As soon as a burial or grave good was located

the section was drawn, the second half of the grave fill was removed, and half-sectioning gave way to area excavation. Urned cremations and all vessels were lifted intact and sent to the Ashmolean Museum's conservation laboratory for excavation and conservation. The soil from them was returned to the OAU where it was sieved to extract cremated remains and small objects. The bead from cremation 802 (Fig. 4.9, B1), for example, was found during sieving. All grave goods were assigned small find numbers and planned.

Intrinsically interesting finds such as arrowheads and flint or stone axe fragments from other contexts were also assigned small find numbers, perhaps more readily by Richard Chambers' team than by the others.

Sampling

Samples for molluscs and plant macrofossils were taken when charcoal was observed during the excavation of a feature. A 100% sample was taken, unless the deposit was exceptionally large, like treethrow hole 5353 (Fig. 3.1) or pit 3196 (Fig. 4.32). These deposits were amply sampled (Table 7.33). The soil returned from the excavation of urned cremations and complete vessels was not processed for carbonized remains. This omission was realised soon afterwards. It was felt, however, that if carbonized remains had been present in significant quantities the need for processing would have been apparent. Samples were dry-sieved through a 10 mm mesh and water-floated over a 0.5 mm mesh, with the residue wet-sieved through a 2 mm mesh.

NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE BACKGROUND
by Philippa Bradley

To set the site in its local context, an area of 12 km^2 around the barrow cemetery was taken as the base for a gazetteer (Fig. 1.11). Cropmarks, stray finds and the results of excavations were assessed. Information was collated from the Sites and Monuments Record, Oxford City and County Museum and published sources. Jeff Wallis of the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society kindly provided information about Society work in the Radley area. The gazetteer forms part of the site archive.

Almost all of the excavations in the area have been a response to gravel extraction, redevelopment or other

Figure 1.8 The area excavated in 1983–5, together with barrows 2 and 3, from the SW, 1959. Photo University of Cambridge Committee for Aerial Photography, ref. YC7. © British Crown Copyright/MOD. Reproduced with the permission of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office.

destructive processes such as ploughing. A large-scale field survey carried out by Robin Holgate has recovered a considerable quantity of mostly Neolithic and Bronze Age flint in the immediate area of Barrow Hills. Archaeological field survey carried out by the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society has recorded a number of sites in this same area. The available information is thus uneven, with excavation confined to areas of recent quarrying, construction and other earthmoving, and fieldwalking and air photography extending beyond these areas into surviving farmland, as far as landuse and soils permit.

Within these limitations, it appears that settlement is most clearly represented in periods contemporary with the earlier and later stages of the Barrow Hills monument complex, the Neolithic and the later Bronze Age. Later Neolithic occupation is conspicuous at Thrupp House Farm (SU 525 972: Jones *et al.* 1980a; Wallis 1981b; Thomas and Wallis 1982)) and Barton Court Farm (SU 510 978: Miles 1986) and both earlier and later Neolithic material is widespread in scatters and later contexts. Late Bronze and early Iron Age settlement is best-represented in the enclosures, fields and domestic features of Eight Acre Field (SU 525 980: Mudd 1993; 1995). In the intervening period, in which the monument complex reached its fullest and most impressive development, living sites are less visible. Beaker and/or early Bronze Age settlement is perhaps represented by stray and redeposited sherds and flint at several sites and some of the less distinctive scatters. Finds along the edge of the alluvium may point to the preservation of living sites beneath it. Extensive Neolithic and Bronze Age activity sealed by alluvium has recently been excavated at Yarnton, Oxfordshire (Hey 1993a; 1993b).

Funerary and ceremonial activity, on the other hand, seem to span the life of the complex more evenly, from a penannular ditch with Abingdon Ware and a possibly Neolithic burial on different sites at Thrupp House Farm (SU 5228 9714 and 523 973: Jones *et al.* 1979; Case 1986, 23) through a hengiform cropmark (SU 5334 9952) to Beaker and early Bronze Age burials. Several Beaker burials have been recovered from the area. However, many were salvaged in advance of gravel extraction and precise details are often scarce. A Wessex/Middle Rhine Beaker was found, without evidence for a skeleton, in a central pit within a small ring ditch at Tuckwell's pit, Radley (SU 5318 9854: Jones *et al.* 1980b; Thomas *et al.* 1980; Wallis 1981c). A Beaker burial was found during gravel extraction NE of Thrupp House Farm (SU 524 977: Benson and Miles 1974, 60), and workmen discovered another in Lower Radley in the 1930s (SU 5215 9888: Leeds 1935, 38–9; Clarke 1970, No. 32, fig. 152); finds from a ring ditch at 82–4 Lower Radley (SU 5345 9879: Ainslie 1987) would be compatible with a Bronze Age date, and an inhumation with a miniature Collared Urn was found in the Cowley Concrete Co. gravel pit at Northcourt, Abingdon, as was a complete Beaker (SU 5075 9824: Anon. 1938, 163; Anon. 1939, 195; Clarke 1970, No. 14; Davies 1861–4; Leeds 1938b, 26; Longworth 1984, No. 1353, pl. 246g). The date of five apparently unaccompanied inhumations from the same gravel pit is uncertain. Beaker and early Bronze burials seem to be scattered without focus over the gravel terrace, like an earthwork round barrow and uninvestigated cropmark ring ditches, which are perhaps most likely to date from the same period. This contrast with the closely-spaced, linear organisation of the barrow cemetery provides a more complete picture of contemporary practice. The location of the burials at the Cowley Concrete Co. pit is interesting, perhaps implying that the limits of funerary activity may have extended W of the causewayed enclosure.

Metalwork has been dredged from the river Thames between Abingdon and Radley and includes a middle Bronze Age rapier (PRN 12,630) and palstave (PRN 12,631) (Thomas 1978, 246). A middle Bronze Age dagger was dredged from the Thames between Abingdon and Sutton Courtenay in 1976 (ibid.). A socketed axe, a sword (PRN 7825) and a further palstave (PRN 1874) were also recovered from the Thames in this area but the precise findspots are not known.

THIS VOLUME

Aims

The main aims of post-excavation analysis of the prehistoric elements of the site, detailed by Barclay and McAdam (1992) have been (i) to determine the structure, spatial organisation, use and chronological sequence of the Barrow Hills complex, incorporating evidence from the 1983–5 and earlier excavations, (ii) to investigate the different aspects of funerary, ceremonial and domestic activity across the site, (iii) to place the archaeological features within a developing physical and cultural landscape, in which the earliest major monument is the Abingdon cause-wayed enclosure, (iv) to investigate patterns of artefact deposition and to examine in detail the more unusual artefacts and artefact assemblages and (v) to compare Barrow Hills with other related sites.

Structure

This report describes the 1983–5 excavations, summarising the already published oval barrow excavation (R Bradley 1992a), and reappraises the previous barrow excavations. It is broadly organised by period. For the more complex later Neolithic/early Bronze Age phase (Chs 4 and 5) the narrative moves across the site from SW to NE, following the overall direction of chronological development and reflecting both the spatial and temporal relations of the archaeological features.

Each subsite, in the sense of a monument or, for example, a group of pits, is described separately, the accounts concluding where appropriate with a summary of the sequence for the subsite. Descriptions of the human remains and finds from each subsite are integrated into the narrative, with overall specialist discussions collected together in Chapter 7.

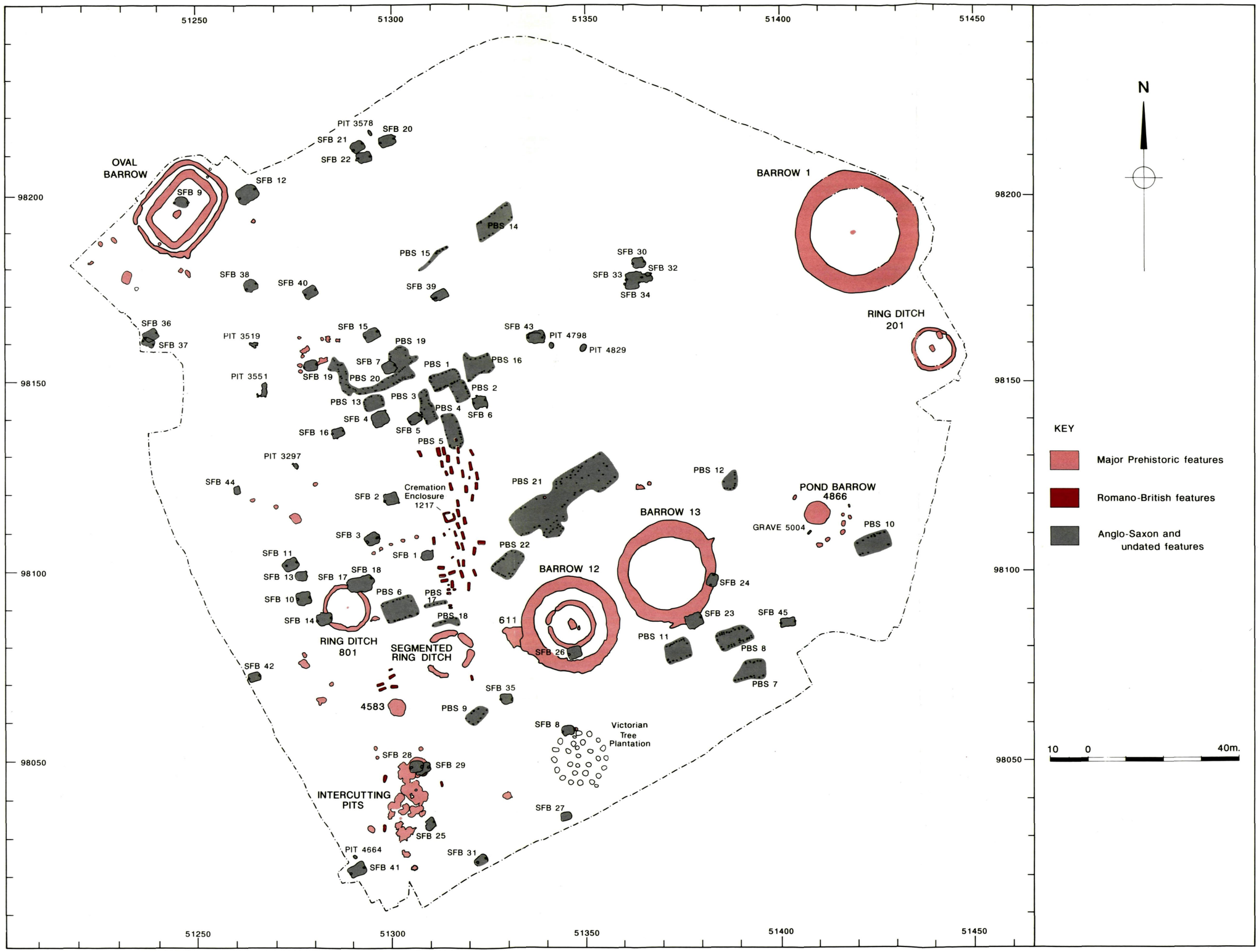
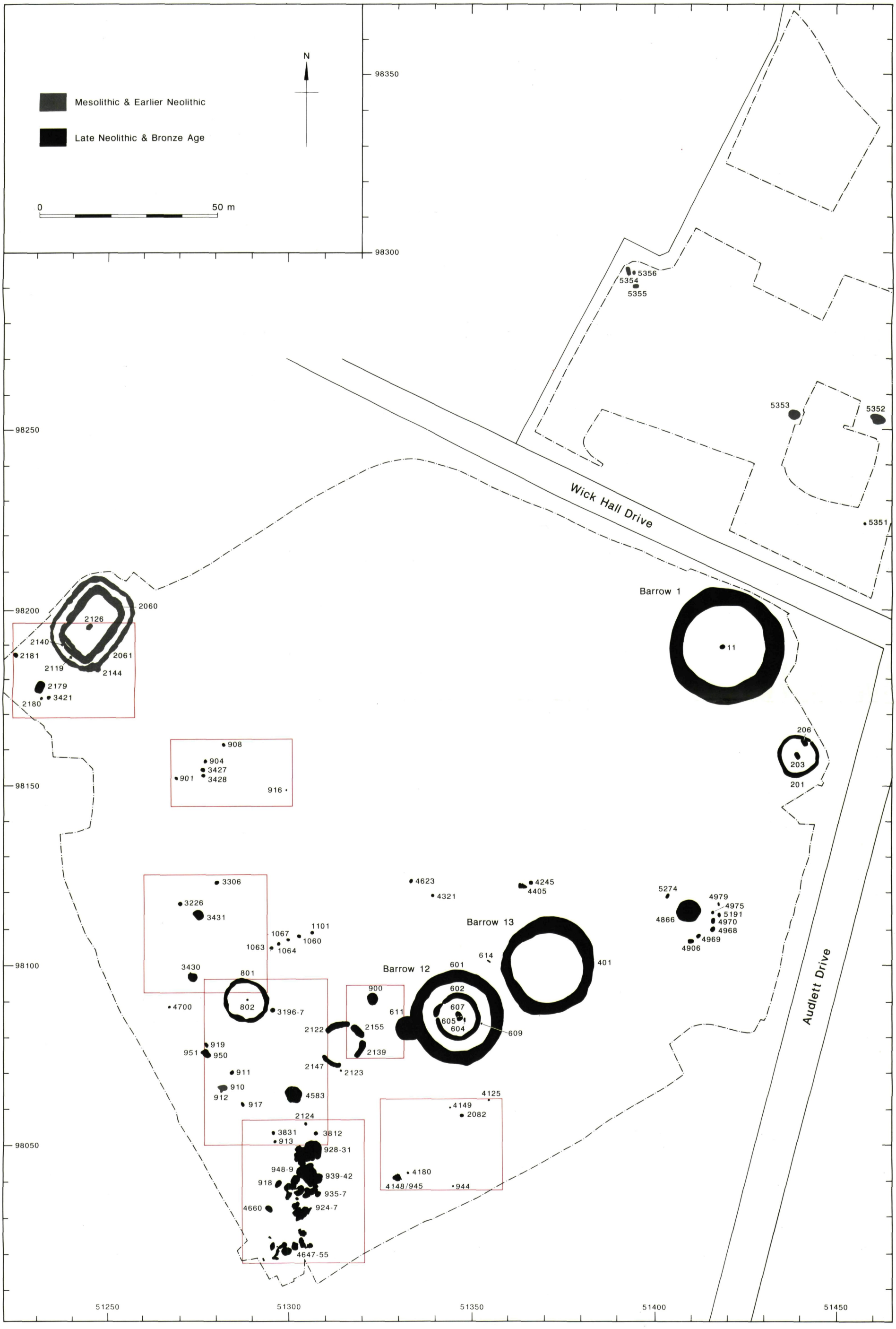


Figure 1.9 Features of all periods excavated 1983–5

Figure 1.10 Prehistoric features excavated 1983–5



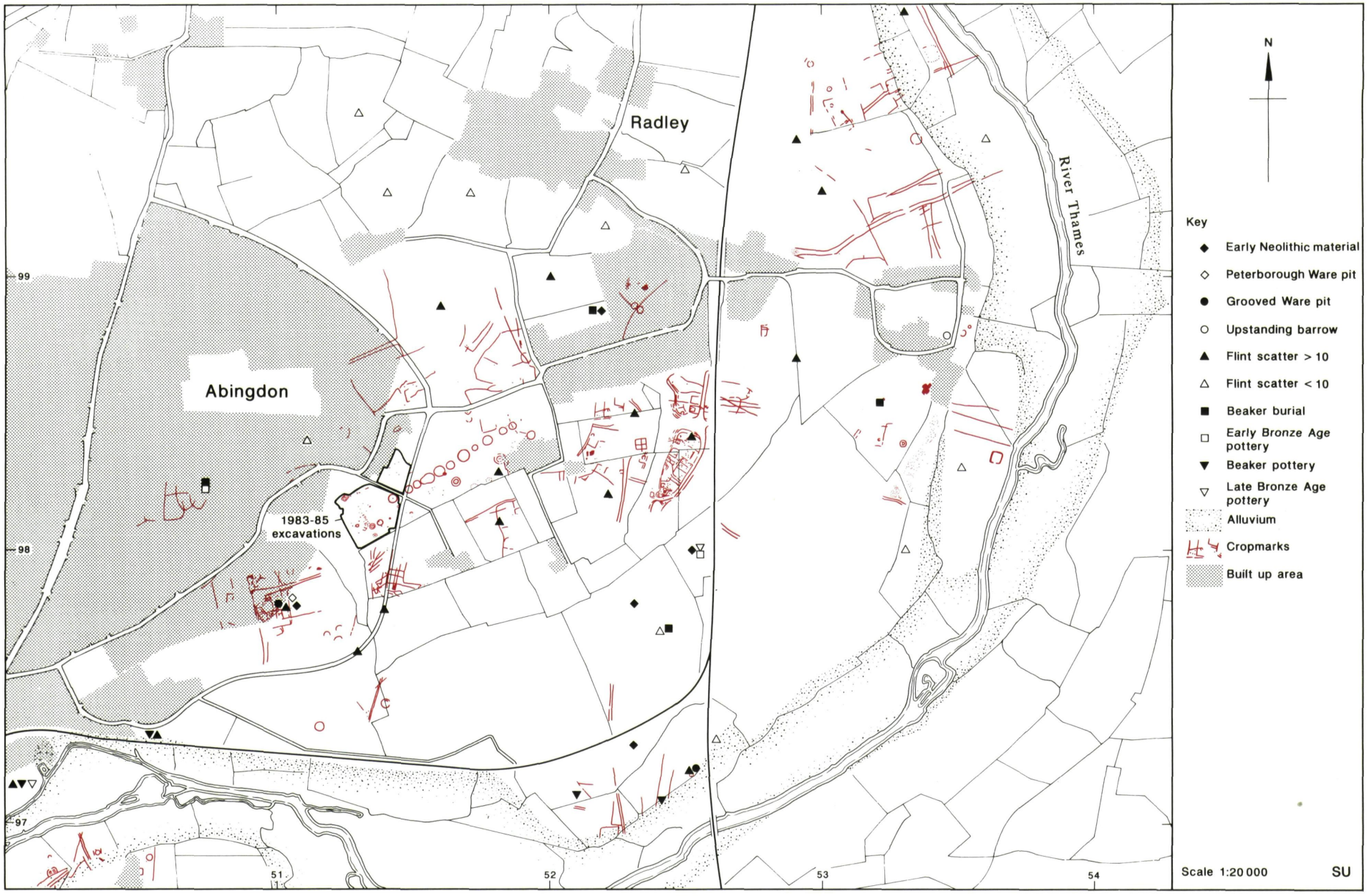


Figure 1.11 Map of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites and finds in the vicinity

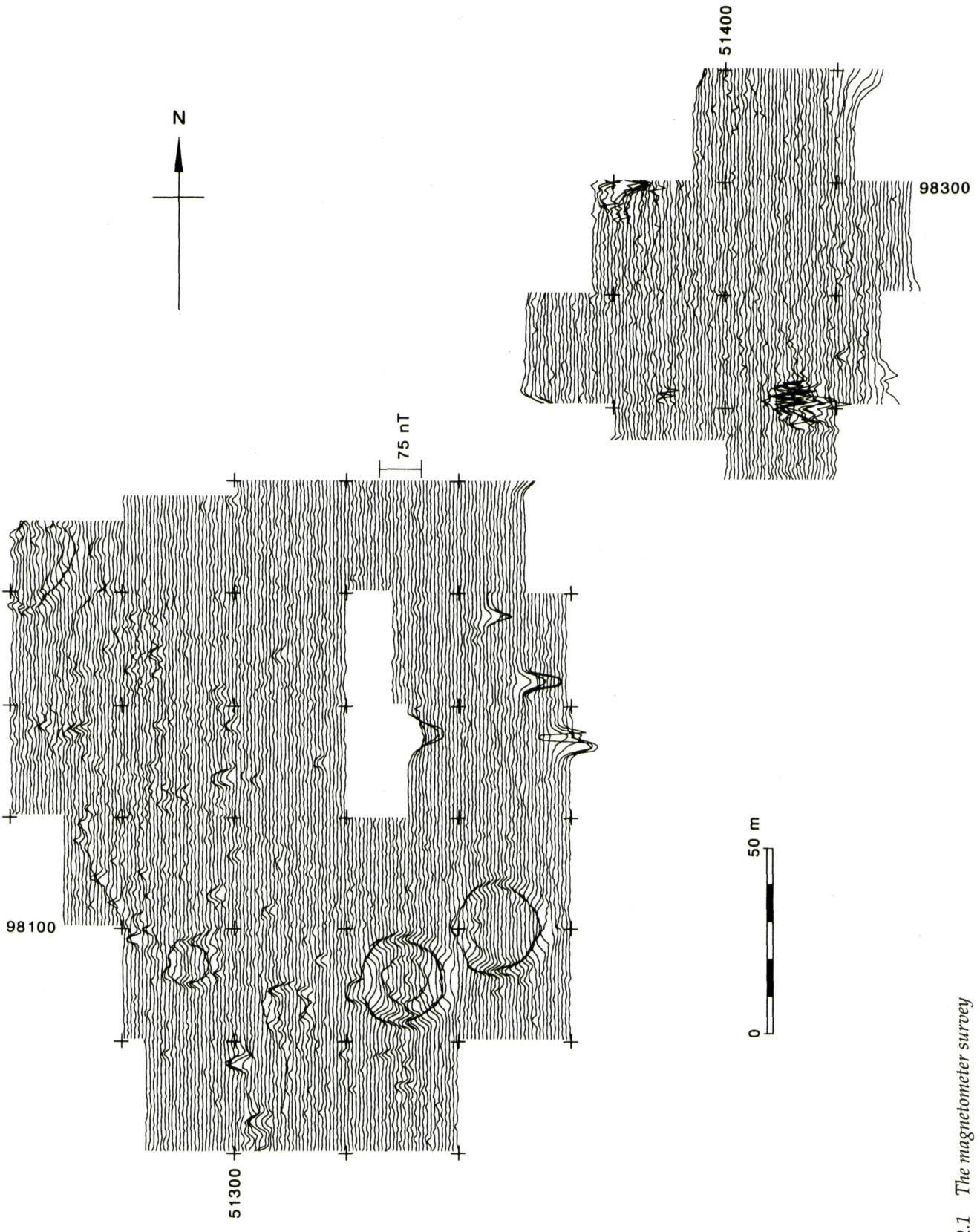


Figure 2.1 The magnetometer survey