

Chapter 1: Introduction

INTRODUCTION

by John Moore

In 1985 a planning application was submitted to local planning authorities with proposals for the redevelopment of about 80 ha. of land at Small Mead Farm, to the SW of Reading (Fig. 1). The area falls within the three districts of Newbury, Reading Borough and Wokingham. Because of the known archaeology in the region the area has been defined as one of high archaeological potential (Kennet Valley Local Plan 1985, Fig. 4). Policy EN26 of the Review of Berkshire Structure Plans (1985) and policy A1 of the Kennet Valley Local Plan state that areas of high archaeological potential should be evaluated before relevant planning applications are decided in order to enable full consideration of development proposals. Accordingly, the original applicants for this development, Bucknell Brothers

(Holdings) Ltd and Richworth Securities Ltd, commissioned and sponsored the Trust for Wessex Archaeology (TWA) to carry out an archaeological evaluation of the development area. The Trust for Wessex Archaeology investigation took place between April and July 1986.

Earlier fieldwalking in 1983 and 1984, as part of the Kennet Valley Survey funded by English Heritage, had produced finds from the fields W of Kybe's Lane (Area A; Fig. 2) and from the zone of what subsequently became Areas 3100 and 4000 of the excavations (part of Area C; Fig. 2). Other fields within the development area could not be examined. Aerial photographs of the site show a complex of archaeological features in Area A and the occasional archaeological feature in Areas 2000, 3100 and 4000 (the western parts of C and D). The TWA assessment was based on the excavation of 2.0 m square holes on a systematic grid

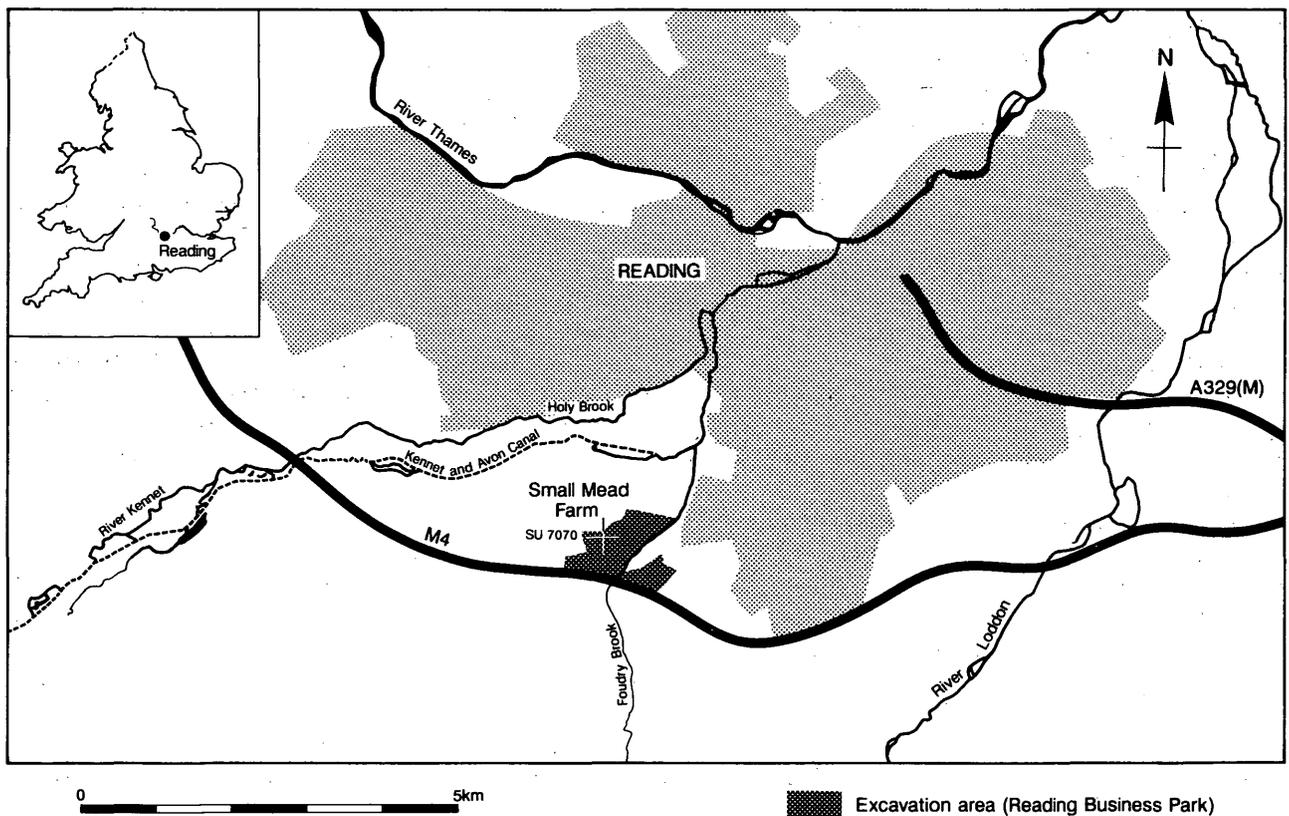


Figure 1 Location plan

placed at 100 m intervals over most of the site and at a closer interval of 50 m in Area A (Fig. 2). These were supplemented by mechanically excavated trenches (Fig. 2, numbered trenches) in zones where archaeological features and high levels of artefact densities were found. The results were presented in a report entitled *Reading Business Park: Axiom 4 – Archaeological Evaluation 1986*.

Further excavation and recording of the archaeological deposits were made a condition of development. The work went to tender and the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was invited to begin excavations of Area 5 in 1987 (Fig. 2). Events proceeded quickly and the additional work in Area 2000 became necessary the same year. The TWA assessment had left questions unanswered, principally the extent of areas of archaeological activity. The OAU carried out further assessment work using mechanically excavated trenches approximately 30 m long and 1.65 m wide. The excavation of Areas 5 (2855 m²) and 2000 (1795 m²) was completed in 1987. At the same time more trenches in Areas B and C were cut to define the areas of archaeological activity indicated by the TWA assessment.

In August 1987 the developers decided that the archaeology identified within the area of Phase I of the proposed development should be examined at the earliest opportunity. In September 1987 work was started on Area 3100 but stopped three weeks later when the site flooded. Work was then switched to Area 5000 where excavation of the two main areas (c 2100 m²) was completed in five weeks (a total of 153 man days). The small excavation areas in Area 6000 (740 m²) were also completed during this time.

The excavation of Area 4000 (c 1200 m²) was completed in two weeks using 77 man days. By this time Area 3100 had dried out sufficiently for excavation to proceed in this area and the excavation of its 7700 m² was completed in the first week of June, having taken c 500 man days. Excavation of the 8900 m² of Area 7000 took place immediately after work on Area 3100 ceased, taking 490 man days and finishing in mid-August.

The start of development was postponed and it was decided to publish the excavation which had been carried out without delay: this volume is the result of this decision. Additional excavation will precede Phases II and III of the development and the publication of the results of those investigations will incorporate and no doubt change some of the conclusions drawn from the excavations of 1986–1988 and presented in this report.

Excavation Methods

The assessment strategy has been briefly described in the preceding section. The TWA assessment used 2.0 m square hand-excavated trial holes to gauge artefact densities. The trial holes were laid out on a 100 m grid in Areas B–D and a 50 m grid in Area A and were supplemented by 4.0 m wide machine-excavated trenches. Features identified in this way were excavated by hand. The OAU assessment used machine-excavated trenches most of which were 30

m in length and c 1.65 m wide. Again, hand excavation of features was carried out.

Following the evaluation of the results of the various assessment stages, consultations took place with the County Archaeological Officer. Strategies for fuller excavation and recording were arrived at for the areas where archaeological activity had been detected. The programme of work and finance was then agreed with the developers, resulting in an agreed length of time and sum of money to be spent on each area. Any errors in the evaluation of the assessment results, notably underestimates of the extent of activity and density of features, had a bearing on the implementation of the strategies for each area.

Area 5, a late Bronze Age settlement occupying a gravel island, was to have been completely excavated. Initially a small area was stripped of topsoil and the bottom of the ploughsoil was examined and artefact distribution plotted. During this stage it was realised that the occupation here was more extensive than originally expected. All ploughsoil was then stripped down to the undisturbed horizon. The resulting surface was cleaned by trowelling and features were hand-excavated. Pits and postholes were half-sectioned and sections drawn. The second halves were then emptied. At the time of excavation it was believed that the limits of the settlement on the N, S and W sides had been reached. For reasons discussed later (see Chapter 3) pits on the slopes of the island may not have been located. Lack of time and finance prevented the examination of the continuation of the island to the E where more buildings probably existed.

The strategy for Area 2000 was a sample excavation. The evaluation of the results of the assessment indicated that field systems belonging to the Roman farmstead W of Kybe's Lane extended into Area 2000, and it was decided that two areas would be opened up in order to date the field systems. In Trenches 2004 and 2005 ploughsoils and alluvial deposits were stripped down to undisturbed deposits. All pits and postholes in Trench 2004 were fully excavated and 35% of the pit complex in Trench 2005 was sampled. The ditches and gullies were sectioned to reveal their character and filling sequence and to investigate stratigraphic relationships. Most of the bank (2027) was hand-excavated to reveal earlier features beneath.

The excavation of Trench 2008 was incomplete in that most of the late Roman ploughsoil occurring in the N part of the trench was not removed. It seems probable that the earlier field and enclosure ditches were located by the sample excavation of this layer but individual features may have remained undetected. It is to be hoped that the watching brief during the development will recover a more complete pattern of enclosures and field systems in this area.

The major excavation of Area 3100 is only Phase 1 of the examination of the late Bronze Age settlement there. The eastern edge of the excavation area is the edge of the Phase I development and further excavation to the E will take place prior to Phase II of the development.

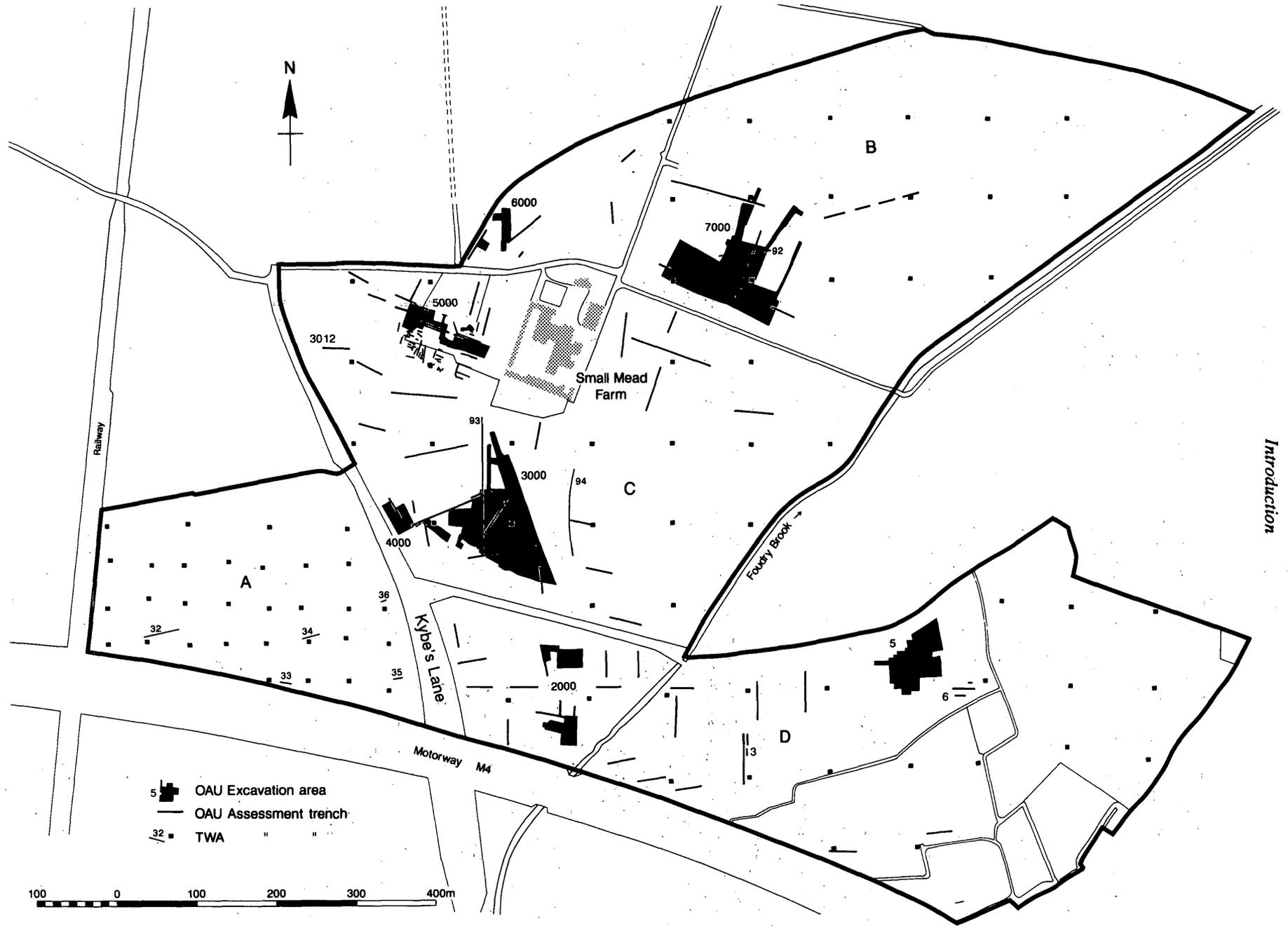


Figure 2 Plan of assessment trenches and excavated areas

The limits of the late Bronze Age settlement were reached on the western and northern sides, but the excavation of the southern part of the settlement was not possible. Assessment trenches did not reveal activity in this area and the spoil heap, some 3700 m³, was therefore placed here.

Within Area 3100 all overburden was mechanically removed down to the top of the gravel. The former use of Small Mead Farm for sewage works had resulted in the overburden being extensively disturbed. The resulting surface was shovel-scraped and features were then hand-excavated. The intention had been to excavate discrete features fully, but lack of resources prevented this policy from being carried out. All pits and scoops were examined by half-sectioning but only 83.2% were fully emptied. Of the post-holes, 10.8% (mostly in the SW part of the site) were not examined, but full excavation was undertaken on the remainder. The linear features were sectioned to reveal their character and filling sequence and to investigate the stratigraphic relationship between features.

Area 4000 was seen as a sample excavation of an area of low density activity, but all man-made features were completely excavated.

Within Area 5000 the overburden was mechanically removed and the subsoil cleaned by shovel-scraping and trowelling. All discrete features were completely excavated and a sample of the segmented ditches was excavated in an attempt to distinguish individual lengths and the development of the boundary. The other ditches were sectioned to determine their character. To the S, small machine-cut trenches were dug to define the extent of the field system.

A strategy of limited sampling was used to examine the activity to the NW of Small Mead Farm in Area 6000. The discrete features revealed were only half-sectioned and the ditches sampled. No attempt was made to follow the individual ditches in the complex in the northern part of the area.

The location of Area 7000 was chosen in order to investigate the prehistoric and Roman activity discovered in the assessment trenches. Again the excavations were seen as a sampling operation, concentrating on the slightly higher part of Area B adjacent to Small Mead Road. The prehistoric activity is known to continue further southwards in Area C, E of Small Mead Farm. The unusual prehistoric field was traced northwards up to the point where the eastern boundary petered out and the western boundary disappeared under the spoil heap.

Within Area 7000 all discrete features were completely excavated and the gullies and ditches were sectioned to determine their character and to establish stratigraphic relationships.

For the future, large scale excavations are planned to find the extent of Area 3100 to the E of the previous excavations and the excavation of Area 7000 will be extended S of Small Mead Road. A watching brief will be maintained during the course of development with the following aims: to recover plans of the prehistoric field systems associated with the settlements in Areas 5, 3100

and 7000; to recover the full extent of the Bronze Age field system in Area 5000; to establish the extent of the 1st-century AD enclosures in Area 2000; and to record the later Roman field system in the same area and locate the focal point of this activity. W of Kybe's Lane a large scale excavation is intended for Area A, where late Bronze Age, Roman and medieval features are known to exist.

Report structure

The report presented here has been structured in the traditional way. After the introductory chapter dealing with location, geology, alluviation and the history of the investigations, the structural archaeology of each area has been presented. Each area has been treated as an individual site, although references have been made to other areas where necessary. Within each area the earliest activity is described first.

As the earliest activity within Reading Business Park is the Neolithic pits and postholes in Area 7000 the section on this subsite (Chapter 2) precedes the main late Bronze Age settlement sites of Area 5 and 3100 (Chapters 3 and 4). These are then followed in Chapter 5 by the prehistoric field systems of Area 5000, the multi-period site sample excavation in Area 4000 and the small excavation in Area 6000. Lastly, the Roman occupation and field system of Area 2000 are described in Chapter 6.

The finds from the investigations are presented in Chapter 7 by period – prehistoric and Roman. Within these sections the finds are analysed by type. The flints of the Neolithic and Bronze Age are discussed within the same section, as the same type of analysis has been carried out and the conclusions drawn are more comprehensible if presented together. The environmental analysis forms Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 of this volume is taken up by the discussions of the three periods of archaeological activity occurring within the area of Phase 1 excavations of Reading Business Park: Neolithic, Bronze Age and Roman.

LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

by David Jennings

The site lies at 38 m OD approximately 3.5 km S of Reading city centre, immediately N of the M4 motorway NGR SU 701696. The river Kennet is approximately 1 km to the N and its tributary the Foudry Brook flows through the centre of the development area. It is located on valley gravel (Geological Survey Map, Sheet 268), which is capped in places by a red/brown fine grained loam. The gravel is overlain by soils of the Loddon series, up to 0.6 m deep, consisting of poorly drained gley soils developed in light grey, non-calcareous clayey alluvium principally derived from London clay (Jarvis 1968, 67–9). In the area of the Business Park the character of the soil has been greatly altered by Victorian sewage works. Today the site is fairly level, sloping gently from W to E; variations in the level of

the underlying gravel have been masked by blankets of alluvium and affected by the later sewage works and ploughing. However, the presence of discrete raised islands of gravel, on which activity in Areas 5, 3100 and 7000 was located, means that the prehistoric landscape would have been more undulating. In winter large areas of the site are under water for long periods, but in these clayey soils the flooding is caused not by rising ground water but by overflowing streams and ditches (Jarvis 1968).

SOILS, SEDIMENTS AND HYDROLOGY

by *Mark Robinson*

The area investigated extended from the first gravel terrace of the river Kennet, on which the main late Bronze Age settlement was situated (Area 5), westwards and southwards onto the floodplain, where Roman features were located (Trenches 2004/2008). The floodplain was terraced by the Foudry Brook, which flowed along a modern, canalised course, but the more sinuous channel of an earlier stream was evident as a hollow.

The original soil of the gravel terrace seems to have been a circumneutral yellow/brown sandy clay loam but ploughing had mixed stones from the terrace throughout most profiles. The lower areas of the site had grey to orange brown clay over the gravel but again some profiles contained stones as a result of ploughing. There was a gradual

transition between the sandy soil of the terrace and the clay of the floodplain.

Waterlogged organic remains were absent from the archaeological features on the gravel terrace where it stood to its full height but occurred in late Bronze Age features on the floodplain below 37.15 m OD, that is about 0.75 m below the Bronze Age ground surface. This is in agreement with the evidence from Knight's Farm, Burghfield, further upstream on the first terrace of the Kennet, for a high permanent water table from at least the late Bronze Age onwards (Bradley *et al.* 1980).

Modern ploughing had reworked any earlier ploughsoils on the terrace but a gravelly Roman ploughsoil containing pottery of the 2nd century AD was present on parts of the floodplain, filling the tops of late Bronze Age ditches. This in turn had been cut by Roman features, the deeper of which contained organic preservation at a similar depth to that in the late Bronze Age features.

Sealing the ploughsoil and the Roman features on the floodplain, the latest of which contained pottery of the 4th century AD, was a layer of grey to buff alluvial clay. In trench 1001 it partly filled a probable Roman ditch. The alluvium was not sufficiently calcareous for the survival of mollusc shells. Alluviation seems to have been complete by the post-medieval period. In the SE corner of the site the alluvium directly underlay the modern turf but elsewhere there was a recent ploughsoil above the alluvium.