

# Investigations within a Scheduled Romano-British Cropmark Complex at Moreton Lane, Northmoor

Oxford Archaeology undertook a series of investigations at Northmoor, within a scheduled monument comprising an extensive cropmark complex of Iron-Age and Roman settlement that extends around the south and west sides of the village (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The site was located 0.4 km south-west of Northmoor, in part of a field on the west side of Moreton Lane at NGR SP 41728 02493. The investigations comprised watching briefs in advance of construction of agricultural buildings in 1995 and 2007 and a small strip, map and sample excavation in advance of construction of a farmhouse in 2017. They encompassed a total area of 0.53 ha. The site lay near the southern limit of an area of gravel terrace between the River Windrush and a northward loop of the River Thames, close to the boundary with the broad alluviated floodplain of the Thames.

This note is a summary of separate client reports that were produced for each stage of the investigations and which contain the complete specialist reports.<sup>2</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The investigations provided a detailed insight into a small area of the extensive Roman landscape that had previously been recorded from cropmark evidence. The trackway uncovered in the 2007 watching brief formed part of a dense network of such routes that have been recorded as cropmarks, traversing the southern tip of the gravel terrace south and west of Northmoor. The features uncovered by the 1995 watching brief and the 2017 excavation lie within a broadly rectangular block of land that was defined to the north, east and south by further trackways (Fig. 1). A group of enclosures of varied size and shape adjoining the trackway on the eastern side of this block have the appearance of domestic occupation, although they have not been tested by excavation. The features at Moreton Lane may represent a similar area of occupation, although nothing is known of this area beyond the footprint of the investigations, since the cropmark evidence does not indicate features here. Indeed, only two of the ditches in the excavation area corresponded with cropmark features, most likely because the generally shallow character of the features does not promote the formation of cropmarks.

The dating evidence indicates that the establishment of the enclosures may represent a secondary phase of development that took place some time after the network of trackways

<sup>1</sup> The scheduled monument is designated as National Heritage List entry 1006343: Prehistoric and later settlements near Northmoor. The authors would like to thank PCA Architects for commissioning the 2017 fieldwork and post-excavation programme. Thanks are also extended to David Wilkinson, assistant inspector of ancient monuments, Historic England, and Hugh Coddington, archaeological advisor for Oxfordshire County Council, for their advice and guidance. The project was managed for OA by John Boothroyd, and the post-excavation analysis was managed by Andrew Simmonds. The fieldwork was directed by Diana Chard and Ashley Strutt, who were supported by George Gurney, Michael McLean, Meirion Pryor, and Andrew Smith. Survey and digitising were carried out by Ben Brown. Thanks also to OA staff who cleaned and packaged the finds under the management of Leigh Allen, processed the environmental remains under the management of Rebecca Nicholson, and prepared the archive under the management of Nicola Scott. The archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service under accession number 2017.158.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hiller, 'Moreton Lane, Northmoor, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Watching Brief' (1995), <https://library.oxfordarchaeology.com/3472/>; M. Sims, 'New Barns, Rectory Farm, Moreton Lane, Northmoor, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Watching Brief' (2008), <https://library.oxfordarchaeology.com/1642/>; A. Simmonds, 'Moreton Lane, Northmoor, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Excavation Report' (2018), <https://library.oxfordarchaeology.com/5772/>.



Fig. 1. Site location.

was established. This is consistent with the generally late emphasis of the remains recorded by evaluation of a large area of the scheduled monument complex to the west and south-west at Stonehenge Farm.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the period of occupation of the settlement excavated at Ireland's Land, 1.5 km to the north of Moreton Lane, appears to have ceased during the first half of the second century.<sup>4</sup> The abandonment of the settlement at Ireland's Land may have occurred as part of a widespread phenomenon of landscape re-organisation that has been noted in Oxfordshire and more widely in the upper Thames valley, often involving the abandonment or relocation of settlements and typically dated broadly to the second quarter of the second century.<sup>5</sup> These changes were often associated with the establishment of a network of trackways that facilitated transport through an increasingly regulated landscape.<sup>6</sup> The pottery from Moreton Lane indicates that the trackways and associated features were established rather later than this and may therefore represent a separate, and much more localised, development. Nevertheless, the re-organisation around Northmoor was clearly locally very significant, entailing the construction of a network of trackways that integrated this part of the landscape between the Rivers Windrush and Thames into a single coherent design. The relatively late date of the development in this area may indicate that traditional tenurial practices and rights of access, perhaps inherited from the late Iron Age, persisted longer here than elsewhere.

The end of occupation at Moreton Lane is difficult to date precisely, although activity certainly extended into the fourth century. Material that certainly dated from the second half of the fourth century, however, was very sparse.

## EXCAVATION RESULTS

The investigations uncovered part of a north–south aligned trackway and adjoining enclosures (Fig. 2). The trackway was defined by a pair of flanking drainage ditches and had an unusually funnel-shaped design, which varied in width within the area of the investigation from 15–20 m. Cropmark evidence indicated that at its northern end, where it formed a junction with a similar trackway aligned east–west, it was 45 m wide, and to the south it narrowed to 10 m. Most of the pottery from the trackway ditches came from the later phases and dated from the third and fourth centuries, but sufficient earlier material was recovered to indicate that the trackway may have been initially set out some time around or shortly after the middle of the second century. The flanking ditches were subsequently recut periodically throughout the third and fourth centuries, although the two sides appear to have been treated rather differently, the western ditch exhibiting at least five distinct phases but the eastern ditch only two. Strangely, a number of features were located within the carriageway of the trackway. They included four penannular gullies with diameters of 3.5–5.0 m, which were clearly too small to represent the remains of roundhouses and are best interpreted as the locations of stack rings, fodder stands for the provision of livestock. Similar features have been found at several rural sites in the upper Thames valley.<sup>7</sup> Four pits were also located within the trackway, including one that cut a stack ring. The presence of the pits and stack rings would surely have impeded the use of the trackway if they were contemporary, but unfortunately the dating evidence provided by the pottery is somewhat equivocal. Stack rings are typically a trait of the late Iron Age and early Roman period, but the pottery indicates that the rings at Moreton Lane date from no earlier

<sup>3</sup> 'Stonehenge Farm, Northmoor, Oxon: Archaeological Assessment', unpublished OAU report (1988), <https://library.oxfordarchaeology.com/4774/>.

<sup>4</sup> A. Norton, 'Excavations at Ireland's Land, Northmoor, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 71 (2006), p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> P. Booth et al., *The Thames Through Time. The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames: The Early Historic Period, AD 1–1000*, pp. 43–53; M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (2000), pp. 106–10.

<sup>6</sup> P. Booth, 'Romano-British Trackways in the Upper Thames Valley', *Oxoniensia*, 76 (2011), pp. 1–13.

<sup>7</sup> For example, D. Miles et al., *Iron Age and Roman Settlement in the Upper Thames Valley* (2007), p. 90.

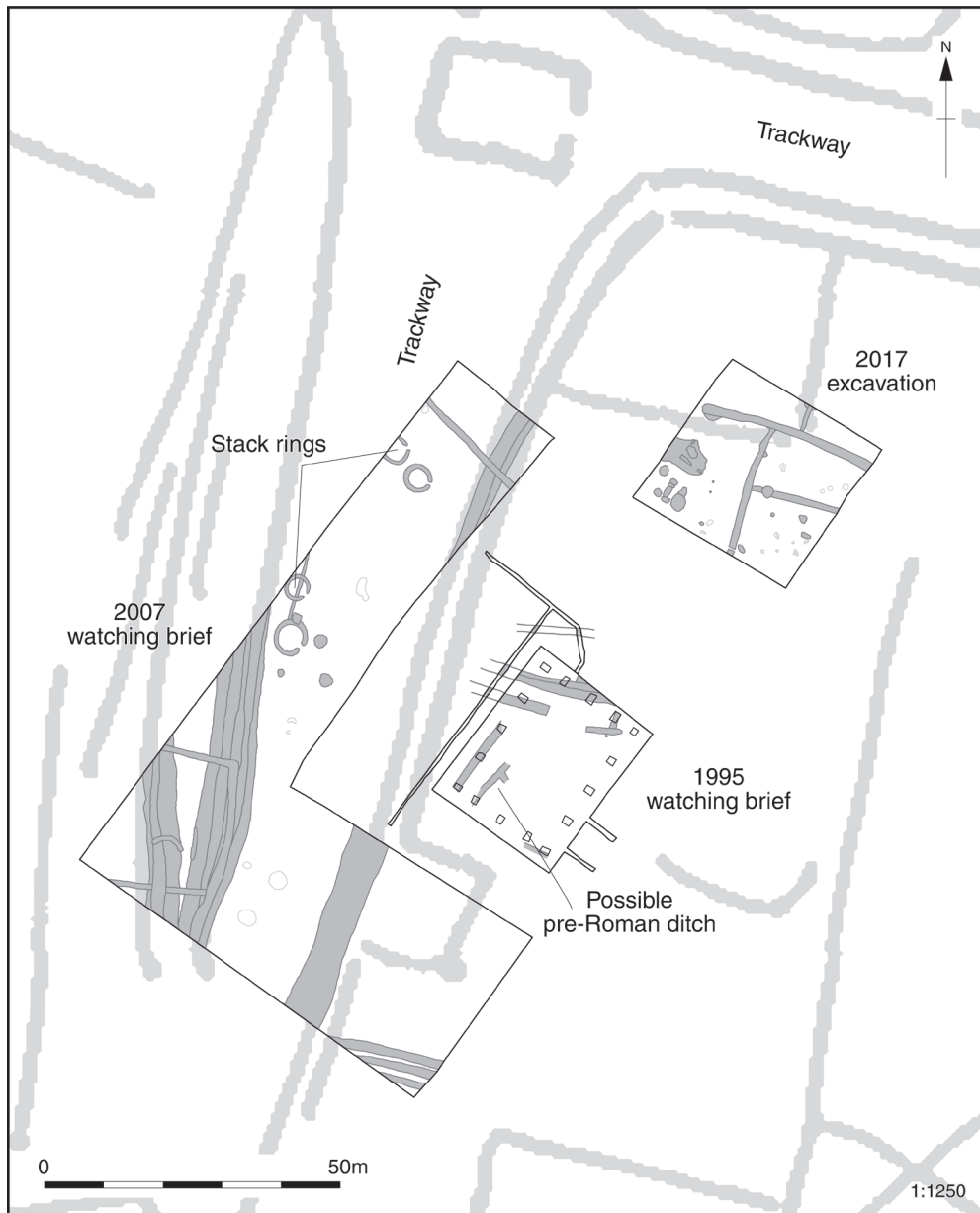


Fig. 2. Plan of the excavation areas, showing the NMP cropmarks.

than the second century and two yielded sherds of Oxford colour-coated ware and white ware mortarium indicative of a date after *c.*240. The quantities are very small, however, and it cannot be discounted that this material is intrusive.

The 1995 watching brief and the 2017 excavation uncovered the ditched boundaries of enclosures that adjoined the eastern side of the trackway. The 1995 watching brief uncovered a possible pre-Roman ditch and a single ditch dated to the second century, most of the features



*Fig. 3. Graffito consisting of the capital letters 'CA' on a sherd from a greyware jar.*

being of late Roman date. They comprised ditches aligned north–south and east–west, which were presumably enclosure boundaries, although no complete enclosures were defined, partly because definition of features was hampered by the nature of the topsoil strip, which was carried out using a machine equipped with a toothed bucket and a dozer blade and did not produce a properly clean surface.

The arrangement of boundaries in the 2017 excavation area was much clearer. A ditch that corresponded with a cropmark feature extended across the northern end of the area, with subsidiary boundaries branching off it to north and south. The area south of the main ditch was further subdivided to define the rear of a large rectangular enclosure that presumably fronted onto the adjacent trackway and parts of a pair of smaller enclosures to the rear of this. A large, irregularly shaped hollow at the western limit of the excavation area may have been a single feature or a complex of intercutting pits, and a handful of discrete pits were also excavated. In contrast to the areas investigated by the earlier watching briefs, the features in the excavated area appeared to be entirely late Roman in date. At both the earlier investigations, second and early third century activity was indicated by moderate quantities of Central Gaulish samian ware and products of the 'West Oxfordshire' industry, but in the 2017 area the almost complete absence of the former and very low representation of the latter suggest that activity in this area may not have begun much before the middle of the third century. It is interesting, therefore, that the only samian ware (except one tiny eroded fragment) comprised three sherds from a single Dragendorff type 30 bowl, which must have been considered an antique by the time it was deposited in a fourth century ditch fill. Also of note was a sherd from a reduced ware jar bearing a graffito of the capital letters 'CA' (Fig. 3).

There was no definite evidence regarding the function of the enclosures, but it is evident from the artefactual assemblage that domestic occupation lay somewhere nearby, although no structural remains were uncovered. Fired clay discs were found that are likely to have been used in an oven or hearth, which suggests that cooking activities took place here, and the animal bone assemblage, although small, provides evidence for the consumption of cattle, sheep and pig. The small size of the tile assemblage suggests that this material also probably derived from

ovens or similar structures, since the quantity was insufficient to indicate use in roofing. In addition to their contribution to the inhabitants' diet, two cattle and one horse also exhibited pathologies consistent with use as draft animals, whether for pulling carts or drawing a plough. Charred plant remains were not well preserved, but preserved chaff fragments indicated that crops grown included emmer or spelt wheat, with spelt the more likely candidate as the more common cultivar during the late Roman period.

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