

Archaeological Excavations at Little Paxton Quarry
Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire



Archaeological Excavations at Little Paxton Quarry Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire

2017 to 2021

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Project background

MOLA was commissioned by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology, on behalf of Aggregate Industries Ltd, to carry out archaeological mitigation works at Little Paxton on two different excavations at Areas B, C, D and L. This present work has combined the results of the two excavations into a single publication. Both MOLA excavations took place after earlier phases of quarry works had been previously investigated from the 1960's onwards (Fig 1.1; including Greenfield 1969; Colls 2004; Jones 2001; Jones 2011, Coates and Richmond 2012; Francis and Richmond 2018). The latter two reports were from excavations by Phoenix Consulting in 2016 directly to the south of MOLA's excavations at Area B, whereas the other sites were further away (Fig 1.1).

The archaeological work found a moderate to large density of archaeological features at Areas B, C, D and L (Fig 1.2).

The MOLA work took place in accordance with the *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF; upgraded MHCLG 2019), and a programme of archaeological mitigation was undertaken to mitigate the effects of quarrying on the archaeological resource.

The first series of MOLA excavations was the carrying out of archaeological mitigation works on land at the Area B extension of Little Paxton Quarry, St Neots (NGR TL 1946 6492; Fig 1.1). Planning permission had been received for the extension of the quarry works as part of Phase 2 (Planning reference H/5007/03/CM). The area MOLA was commissioned to excavate measured approximately 40ha and aimed to further investigate enclosure systems and surrounding features identified by earlier works (Colls 2004; Francis and Richmond 2018). Due to the requirements of the quarry works, and the requirement of areas for topsoil and subsoil storage, Area B was excavated in three phases over 2017 and 2018 (Figs 1.1 and 1.2). After these excavations, an assessment report on Area B was carried out (Fairclough 2020a) and then further analysis took place with a full grey literature report (Fairclough 2023).

The second stage of excavations occurred over 2019 and 2020 at Areas C and D (NGR TL 1959 6399). A third area (Area L) was then also opened which linked Areas C and D (Fig 1.3). In total, approximately 28 hectares was excavated.

Location, topography and geology

Little Paxton Quarry is situated to the north of the town of St Neots in Cambridgeshire, with Areas B, C, L and D being located c1.5km north of Little Paxton village, equidistant between the A1 to the west and the River Great Ouse to the east. The areas were previously occupied by flat arable fields at approximately 13 to 15m above Ordnance Datum (aOD). Previously, excavations in the BUFAU area to the north were at c13m aOD, while flooding was recorded annually at c12m level (Roseff 2000, 28).

The underlying geology predominantly comprised Oxford Clay Formation mudstone, a sedimentary bedrock formed approximately 157 to 166 million years ago during the Jurassic Period (BGS 2024). Superficial deposits comprised River Terrace deposits of sand and gravel formed up to 2 million years ago during the Quaternary Period (BGS 2020). Overlying soils of the site were of the Newport 4 Association, characterised as well-drained and sandy (LAT 1983).

Historical and archaeological background

The archaeological background to the site has been detailed in various earlier documents, including the issued Council Brief (Thomas 2017), the site evaluation report (Colls 2004), the reporting for the investigations neighbouring Area C in 2009 (Coates and Richmond 2012), Area B reports (Francis and Richmond 2018, Fairclough 2023) and the British Archaeological Report publication for Area A (Jones 2011). The following is a summary of the archaeology of these areas (Fig 1.1).

Neolithic and Bronze Age

The terraces of the River Great Ouse were favoured places to settle from the Neolithic period (3500 – 2000 BC). A Neolithic settlement is known to the north-east of Area B, situated on a slightly elevated terrace above the floodplain. Within Area B itself, several isolated Neolithic features were also recorded along with residual worked flint in later features. In the Bronze Age (2000 – 700 BC), land to the north of Little Paxton became a focus for funerary activities, and within the quarry itself 12 middle to late Bronze Age cremations deposits were recovered in Area B. In the wider landscape a number of sites have been recorded and these noted former earth mounds had been constructed over cremated human remains.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT LITTLE PAXTON QUARRY HUNTINGDONSHIRE



Figure 1.1. Site location and excavation areas within Little Paxton (Scale 1:25,000)

INTRODUCTION

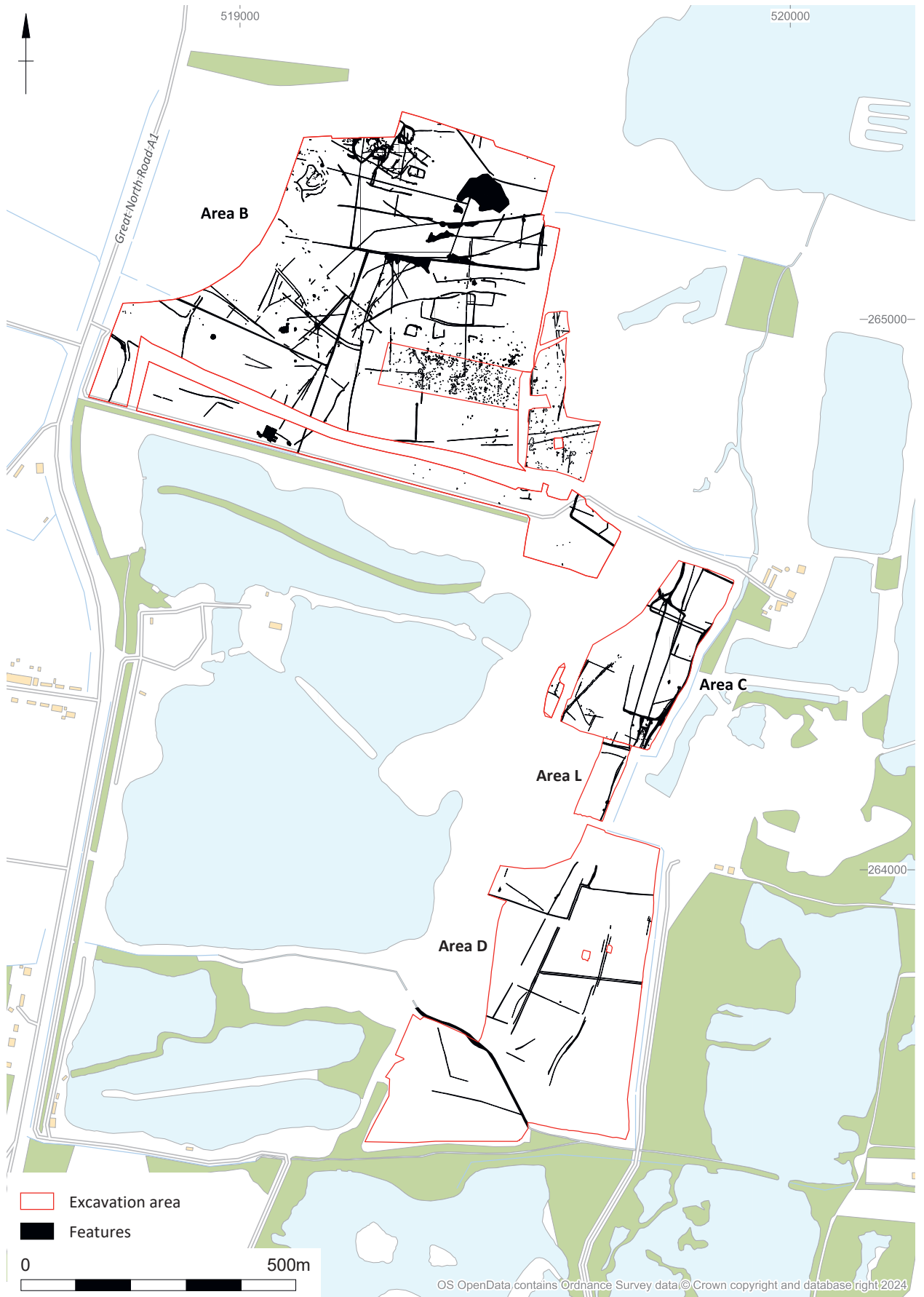


Figure 1.2. All features plan of MOLA and Phoenix excavations at Areas B, C, D and L (Scale 1:10,000)



Figure 1.3. Aerial photograph of Area B, looking north



Figure 1.4. Aerial photograph of Area C, looking north

Flint artefacts, including arrowheads, scrapers, and knives, have also been found within the gravel deposits, indicating past activity areas. The identification of circular eaves-drip gullies of this date suggests occupation sites on the dryer slopes, with ditched enclosures on the lower floodplain for the management of cattle.

Iron Age and Roman

During the Iron Age, (700 BC – AD 43), the area was increasingly settled and farmed with farmsteads and agricultural features being recorded throughout the landscape. In proximity to Areas C and D, are the pastoral enclosures and field systems to the north-west in Area B (Fairclough 2023), a linear settlement west of Brampton (Reid and Atkins 2019), and farmsteads to the north (Jones 2011). Further afield, Iron Age farmsteads were recorded to the north during works on the A14 road scheme (MHI 2018a-c) and to the south during A428 road scheme (MOLA forthcoming).

During the Iron Age, some low-lying areas were abandoned with settlement moving toward drier, more elevated slopes. Those low-lying local sites which continued contained features with alluvial silting fills and waterlogged deposits, suggesting frequent flooding took place on the site.

Areas along the A1 route continued to be occupied during the Roman period (AD 43 – 410). Farmsteads with internal features such as rubbish pits, wells and hearths, as well as associated fields and tracks have been found at Little Paxton and the surrounding area. In Area B there were two middle Iron Age settlements established c0.5km apart, one continued into the Roman period whilst the other reverted to pastoral farming in this time period (Fairclough 2023). By the early 2nd century, settlement continued to shift further to the north and west, away from the flood plains. In one new settlement area, ladder-shaped enclosures have been recorded, with traces of timber-framed buildings (Jones 2011). The finds, which included pottery, coins and roof tile fragments, suggested that this area continued to be occupied until the end of the Roman period, around AD 400. During the A14 mitigation works to the north of Little Paxton, several substantial ladder enclosure systems, a drove way and field systems were investigated (MHI 2018a and b). In most places these post-dated earlier Iron Age activity.

Saxon

IN 2016, excavations by Phoenix examined most of a pagan Saxon cemetery at Area B: Phase 1 (TL 1946

6492; Francis and Richmond 2018). This cemetery was directly to the west of earthworks of the deserted medieval village (DMV) site of Boughton, with the settlement recorded in 11th century documents including the Domesday Book (see Chapter 5, Discussion). Earlier, a separate pagan Saxon cemetery was partly excavated at Little Paxton Quarry, 2km to the south of the present excavations, also near to the River Great Ouse (TL 196 629; Tebbutt and Lethbridge 1962).

Medieval

Area C lies immediately south of the earthworks, ditches, and banks of the deserted medieval village (DMV) of Boughton (Scheduled Monument NHLE UID: 1006848). The hamlet of Boughton lies partly in eastern Southoe parish and partly in Diddington parish. These parishes are located directly to the north of Little Paxton parish. All these parishes are within the Toseland Hundred of Huntingdonshire.

Boughton in old English is translated from *Bugantūn* ('Buga's farm') (Mawer and Stenton 1969, 266). The Victoria County History (VCH) records that the Boughton hamlet was returned in the Domesday Survey among the lands of Eustace the Sheriff in Toseland hundred. It states it as having been held by Godric the priest, who was tenant there of Earl Waltheof before the Conquest (Page *et al* 1932). The Domesday Book also records that Boughton had one hide taxable and land for two ploughs in 1066, but in 1086 there was one plough. Five villagers were recorded having half a plough, and there were seven acres of meadow. The value before 1066 was 20s and in 1086 it was 10s (Morris 1975, 206).

The VCH noted that the disintegration of Eustace's property was followed by the recovery of this hide by Waltheof's heirs, by whom it continued to be held as of the honour of Huntingdon (*ibid*). The VCH continued with the history of the hamlet:

'A William Quarrel was dealing with land in Boughton in 1224–5, and in 1242–3 Ivo Quarrel held half a knight's fee there of Isabella de Brus as of the honour of Huntingdon. Ivo was owing money to Isaac the Jew of Cambridge in 1245, and he and his wife Joan gave half a mark for an assize in Bedfordshire in 1262. The Quarrel half-fee in Boughton seems to have passed to the Stokes family. In 1279 John de Stokes held of Robert de Brus half a fee in Boughton in which Isabel his mother had her dower. John de Stokes was holding in Southoe in 1302, but before 1315 Boughton had become divided between two sisters and coheirs, possibly his daughters'.

The small size of the Boughton hamlet can be seen when in 1279 it had six villeins and 13 cottars according to the Hundred Rolls. In 1316 it was linked with records for Diddington, but why not to Southhoe is uncertain. The main village of Diddington lies further to the north, which likely had medieval origins, with evidence of a larger village and associated field systems in the wider landscape.

In the 14th century, Boughton manor was owned by the Parkers. In this period the ownership split until in 1363 John Billing and Mary, his wife, and Hugh Archer and Joan, his wife, conveyed two parts of the manor to Walter Walshe. By 1439 the manor of Boughton had passed to Hugh Boville, who in that year granted it to Thomas Rous. It was kept in the Rous family for more than 200 years but by 1718 the manors of Boughton and Southhoe were in the possession of Richard Banner and in 1751 Richard Banner conveyed them to William Finch.

Recent archaeological work within Little Paxton Quarry

An Environmental Impact Assessment of the Cultural Heritage was undertaken in 2007 (Entec 2007). Archaeological work at the site was divided into lettered areas and sub-divided into phases. Mitigation works undertaken in Little Paxton Quarry include Phase 1 works in Area B in 2016 by Phoenix Archaeology (Coates and Richmond 2017), and Phase 2 works in Area B in 2017 and 2018 by MOLA (Fairclough 2023). Previous archaeological work in the quarry has been summarised within various interim reports (Colls 2004, Coates and Richmond 2012, Francis and Richmond 2018) and a BAR monograph publication, prepared by Birmingham Archaeology (Jones 2011).

Air photographs have recorded cropmarks across the landscape. These cropmarks are recorded in Fig 1.5 over a 5km area north to south by more than 3km area east to west. These are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Previous works specifically in Areas C and D included aerial photographic analysis, geophysical survey, and trial trench evaluation. However, a trial trench evaluation was not carried out in Area D due to waterlogged ground conditions. In Area C one area of activity was recorded, with six possible ditches identified in the north-eastern corner of the area (Entec 2007, Trench D2). These ditches were aligned north-west to south-east and believed to be associated with cropmarks. Two ditches produced sherds of late Iron Age pottery. No archaeology was recorded in the other trenches (Entec 2007, D1, D3 to D5) within Area C.

The Area B Phase 1 archaeological excavations were carried out in 2016 and were focused in two parts: the subsoil storage area and an area to the west of the Scheduled Monument of Boughton DMV (NHLE UID: 1006848). Archaeology dated from the early prehistoric through to the Saxon period. There were in excess of 150 burial cuts, from which only eight poorly preserved, partial skeletal remains were recovered (Francis and Richmond 2018). Associated votive artefacts were largely the remains of iron blades as well as a single highly decorated brooch of Saxon origin. Due to the finds, the cemetery was provisionally dated to the Saxon period although there may well have been earlier unpreserved Roman burials. Earlier features related to the agricultural landscape included the remains of a driveway, associated field system, refuse pits and watering holes. It is possible that the cemetery related to the Saxon settlement at Boughton (Mawer and Stenton 1969, 266).

Area B Phase 2 investigations encountered archaeological deposits primarily dating from the Iron Age to the Roman. Earlier prehistoric features and post-medieval field systems were also recorded. The Iron Age and Roman activity was primarily focused at the north-west corner of the area and comprised an enclosure system aligned north-west to south-east. Within a middle Iron Age enclosure, a four-post structure was found with a large vessel at its centre that had been inverted and buried. Field systems contemporary with the various phases of the enclosure system were recorded in the southern half of the area.

Several sub-square and rectangular enclosures, middle Iron Age in date, were located to the north of the Saxon cemetery excavated during the 2016 Area B Phase 1 investigations. A continuation of this cemetery was discovered during Area B Phase 2 but no preserved remains were found, only a few iron objects. A number of ditches, representing a field system with a contemporary waterhole, were discovered to the west.

Archive and Oasis

The MOLA Little Paxton physical archive will be deposited together at the Cambridgeshire County Council County Archaeological Stores. The Area B excavation has the following accession number ECB5179, whereas for Areas C, D and L it is ECB5107. The digital archive will be deposited with the Archaeological Data Service (ADS).

The Oasis number for the Area B report is molanort1-518046. The Oasis number for Areas C, D and L is molanort1-523501.

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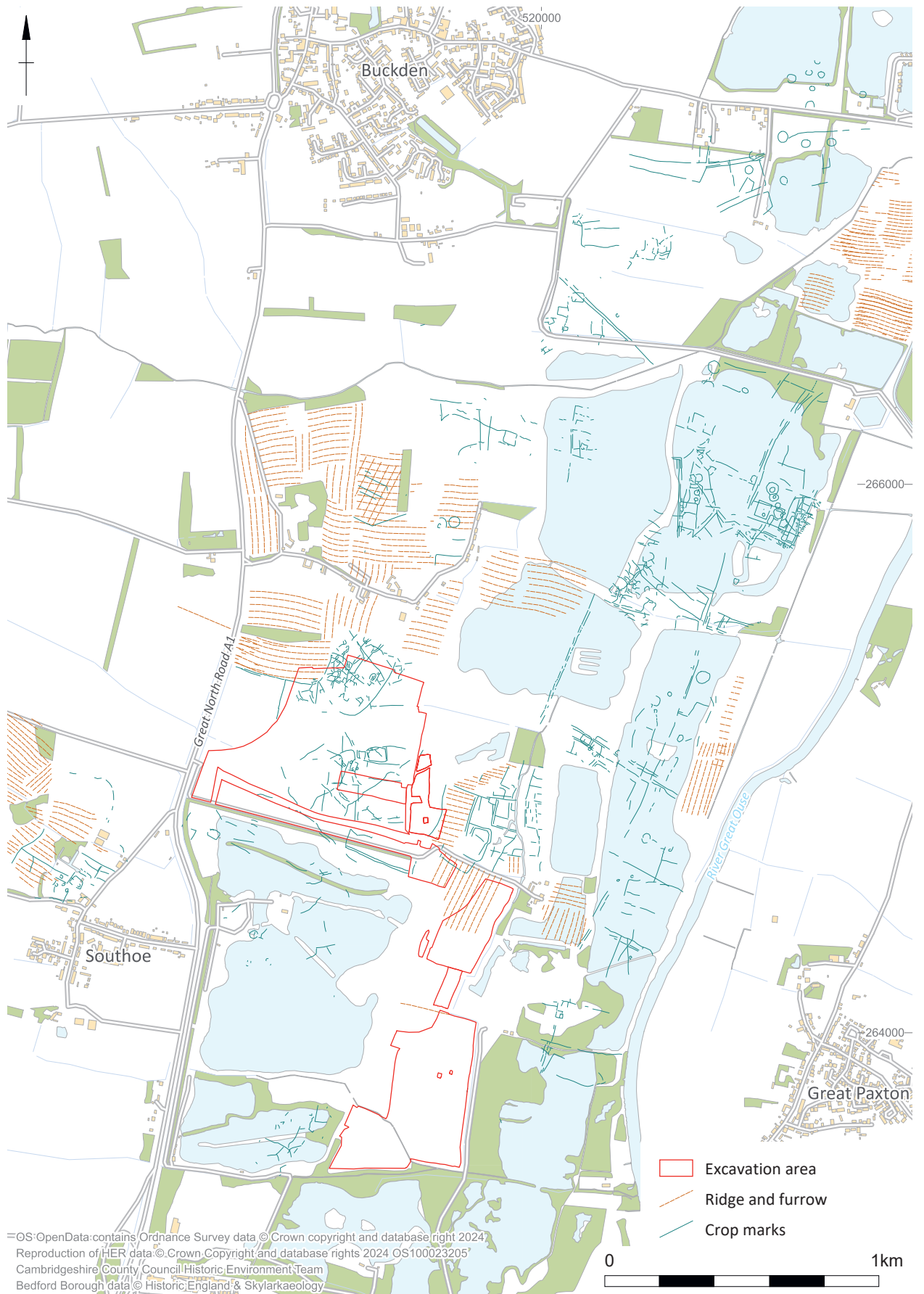


Figure 1.5. Excavation areas overlying cropmarks including ridge and furrow (Scale 1:20,000)

Site phasing

Site phasing is as follows:

Period 1: Neolithic to early Iron Age
(c4000 – 400 BC)

Period 2: Middle Iron Age to Roman
(c3rd or 2nd century BC– late 4th century AD)

Period 3: Saxon to modern

Results

The two different excavations produced largely different results. In Area B there were a handful of Neolithic features and layers followed by a moderate sized middle Bronze Age cemetery and then a middle Iron Age to Roman area of occupation and activity (Fig 1.6). In contrast, within Areas C, D and L there was an early Bronze Age cremation deposit, followed by late Bronze Age to early Iron Age pit alignments, a background scatter of Iron Age and Roman features and the remains of part of the medieval settlement of Boughton (Fig 1.7).



Figure 1.6. General site plan of Area B (Scale 1:7500)

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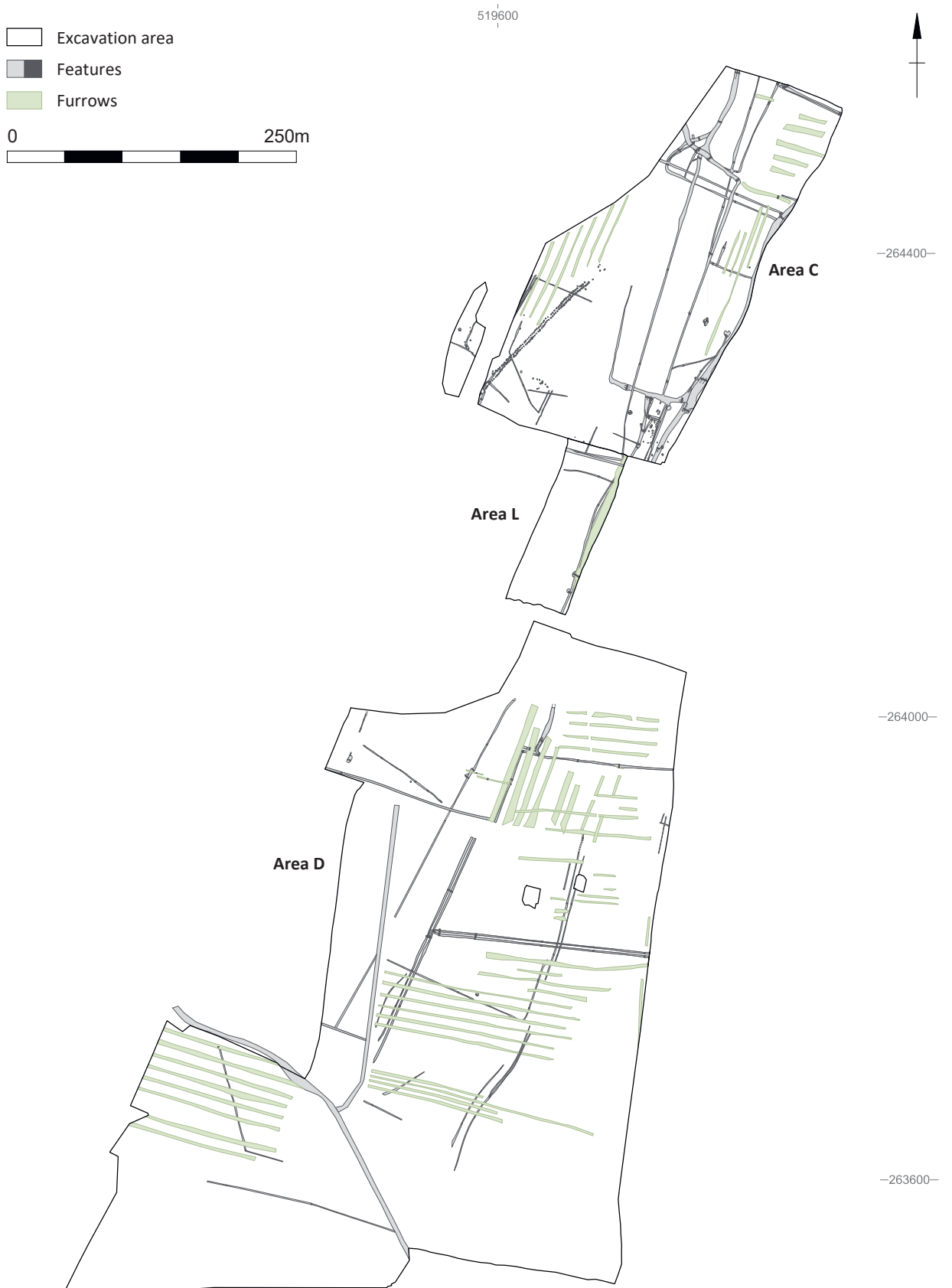


Figure 1.7. General site plan of Areas C, D and L (Scale 1:5000)