

# EXCAVATIONS AT MAGIOVINIUM, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, 1978-80

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Section 1 of 11:

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, INTRODUCTION, PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS AND DISCOVERIES

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### EASY ON-LINE ACCESS TO FIGURES AND PLATES:

This report runs to a total of 137 printed pages, which makes it too large for publication on-line as a single digital file. The report has therefore been split into eleven separate sections. Each can be downloaded separately and saved locally.

The report contains 56 drawings ('figures') and 12 photographs ('plates'). For ease of access these have all been saved into a single file titled 'Magiovinium – figures and plates'. The reader should open (or download) this file when reading any of the report's 11 sections. Individual illustrations referenced in the text can then be found by searching for 'Figure XX' or 'Plate XX', where 'XX' is the number of the figure or plate you wish to view.

The full details for academic source references given in the text can be found in the 11<sup>th</sup> and last section of the report: 'A bibliography of Magiovinium'.

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*A fort and vicus were the forerunners of Magiovinium, a small defended town straddling Watling Street, Outside the town, occupation consists of buildings fronting Watling Street and field systems aligned with the fort; the structures are industrial— smithies servicing road traffic. Barns and many horse bones in the enclosure ditches indicate the proximity of stabling and knacker's yards. The clearance of these structures possibly represents a period of urban reorganization perhaps associated with the construction of the town's defences. In the fourth century part of the area was taken up by a cemetery.*

## **Acknowledgements**

If it had not been for the remarkable fortitude shown by numerous volunteers, frequently working in the most adverse conditions, the excavation would not have been possible and therefore the writer, on behalf of the Department of the Environment, would like to record a debt of gratitude to them. He would also like to acknowledge his gratitude to The team of supervisors who bore the same conditions: these included N. Appleton, D. Bartlett, B. Bell, the late Miss D. Edwards, F. McAvoy, Miss M. A. Nation and A. Wallers.

The processing of the finds was ably organized by Mrs J, Keen: the processing of the pottery was begun on site by Mrs B. Easter\* brook, Mrs B, Hurman and Mrs Y, Parminter. Mrs Parminter undertook the reporting of the pottery for publication—an arduous task involving the processing of 874 kg of sherds! A special debt of thanks must also go to Mr and Mrs P, Woodfield not only for maintaining a watching brief during road works but for liaising with the numerous metal-detector enthusiasts and obtaining their coins and finds for identification, Mr Woodfield's list of coin identifications appears in the text.

Reports and identifications of the finds have been made by a number of specialists.

These include the late Dr F. W. Anderson (stone). Miss J. Bayley (slag and copper alloys), Miss S, A. Butcher (brooches), Miss E. Crowfoot (textiles), P. Curnow (coins), G. Dannell (samian), Miss B. Dickinson (samian stamps), Miss J, Henderson (human bones), Dr M. Henig (intaglios), Mrs A. Locker (animal bones), Miss F. Macalister (slag), Dr R. F. Tylecote (hammer adze) and Dr A, Wardle (small finds). The writer is also grateful for the considerable help of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory. N. Balaam co-ordinated specialist contributors and Miss G. Edwards supervised a team of conservation staff including Miss A. Bennett, Miss J. Douglas, Miss K. Mercer, I. Panter, Miss M. Robson, Miss K, Starling and Miss K. Walker. The geophysical survey was carried out by A. Bartlett and A. David, and the writer has also benefited from a bibliography on Magiovinium prepared by Andrew Pike of Buckinghamshire County Museum (sec Appendix).

The illustrations of the small finds have been made by J, C. Thorne and D. Honour Of the Ancient Monuments Illustrator Section; the plans and pottery drawings are by the writer. The landowners, Mrs Unwin of Dropshort Farm and the Bedford Estate, are thanked for allowing the excavations to proceed before land transfer.



Finally, the writer would like to acknowledge the considerable help by Miss M. A. Nation and Dr A. Wardle towards the completion of this report and its archive,

The finds from Site 17 are preserved in Buckinghamshire County Museum, Aylesbury and the finds for Site 18 in the British Museum. Copies of the site archive are available for inspection at Aylesbury Museum, the National Monuments Record, Fortress House, London and the Central Excavation Unit, Fort Cumberland, Portsmouth, Hants.

### ***General Introduction***

From London, Watling Street, the modern A5, passes through *Sulloniaca*, the Roman industrial settlement at Brockley Hill, and then proceeds towards Verulamium (Fig. 1, insert). It passes through *Durocibrivae*, modern Dunstable, runs over the chalk scarp and across rolling countryside towards Little Brickhill, a small village on the north-facing edge of the Lower Greensand hill commanding a view of much of the South Midlands. Close by, at an elevation of 170 m, is the Iron Age hillfort of Danesborough, a sub-rectangular enclosure aligned south-west-north-east. From Little Brickhill the road drops towards Magiovinium, a small defended settlement situated at the end of a narrow spur projecting into the flood plain of the River Ouzel. Leaving Magiovinium, Watling Street crosses the river and heads towards *Lactodorum*, modern Towcester, 24 km north-east.

The settlement of Magiovinium (SP 890 335), now only identified by a shallow earthwork encompassing about 8 hectares (19.76 acres), is partly under cultivation and apart from the A5 and Dropshort Farm is unencumbered by development. West of the river and the Grand Union Canal, however, lie Fenny Stratford and Bletchley, both incorporated into the newly designated city of Milton Keynes,

Dropshort Farm lies on the edge of the clay close to the alluvium covering the flood plain—which even with modern drainage is still very damp and liable to flood. The precise limits of Magiovinium are uncertain.

Part of its bank can be seen south-east of Dropshort Farm curving round towards and at right angles to the A5 (Fig. 1). From this point it can be traced north-west towards the farm where it appears to underlie a barn. In this area, however, the bank merges with pronounced ridge and furrow and certainty of its alignment is not possible. On the opposite side of the A5 the oval plan of the defences shows as a shallow rise and, when ploughed, a ditch is represented by darker soil. The north-west limits of the settlement are dictated by the course of the river, but this may have changed since Roman times and conceivably the banks have been eroded. However, there is no evidence for the bank emerging in an orchard to the north-west and adjacent to the farm, and it is probable therefore that it turned and that the actual farmhouse lies just outside or upon the defences. Indirect support for this view was given by the discovery in 1975 of a deep ditch opposite the farm and also of a Roman road leading towards it. It is likely to have met Watling Street just outside the entrance into the settlement rather than to have communicated with the settlement through a separate gate.

The settlement lies on a thin spread of sand and stones, being fragments of the lower Greensand hills further south; some of the fragments are boulders as large as 1 m. Beneath this lies Oxford clay. There is a springline between the Lower Greensand and the clay, making the site very wet.

### ***Previous Excavations and Discoveries***

Dropshort farmhouse, formerly the White Hart Inn, and the area adjacent to it has long been recognized as the site of Roman Magiovinium or Magiovinium recorded in the Antonine Itinerary (itineraries 471, 476, 479; Rivet 1970, 42 ff.). As early as 1732 Roman coins were reported from Fenny Stratford while in 1806 Lysons records 'coins and foundations of buildings have been dug up in abundance' (1806, 485).

In 1848 Roach Smith reported the discovery of a figure of an eagle on a piece of land adjoining the inn (1849, 246) and Sheahan records that in 1857 'a great number of human bones and skulls' were found (1862, 532). Finds continued to be reported and in 1912 Haverfield contributed

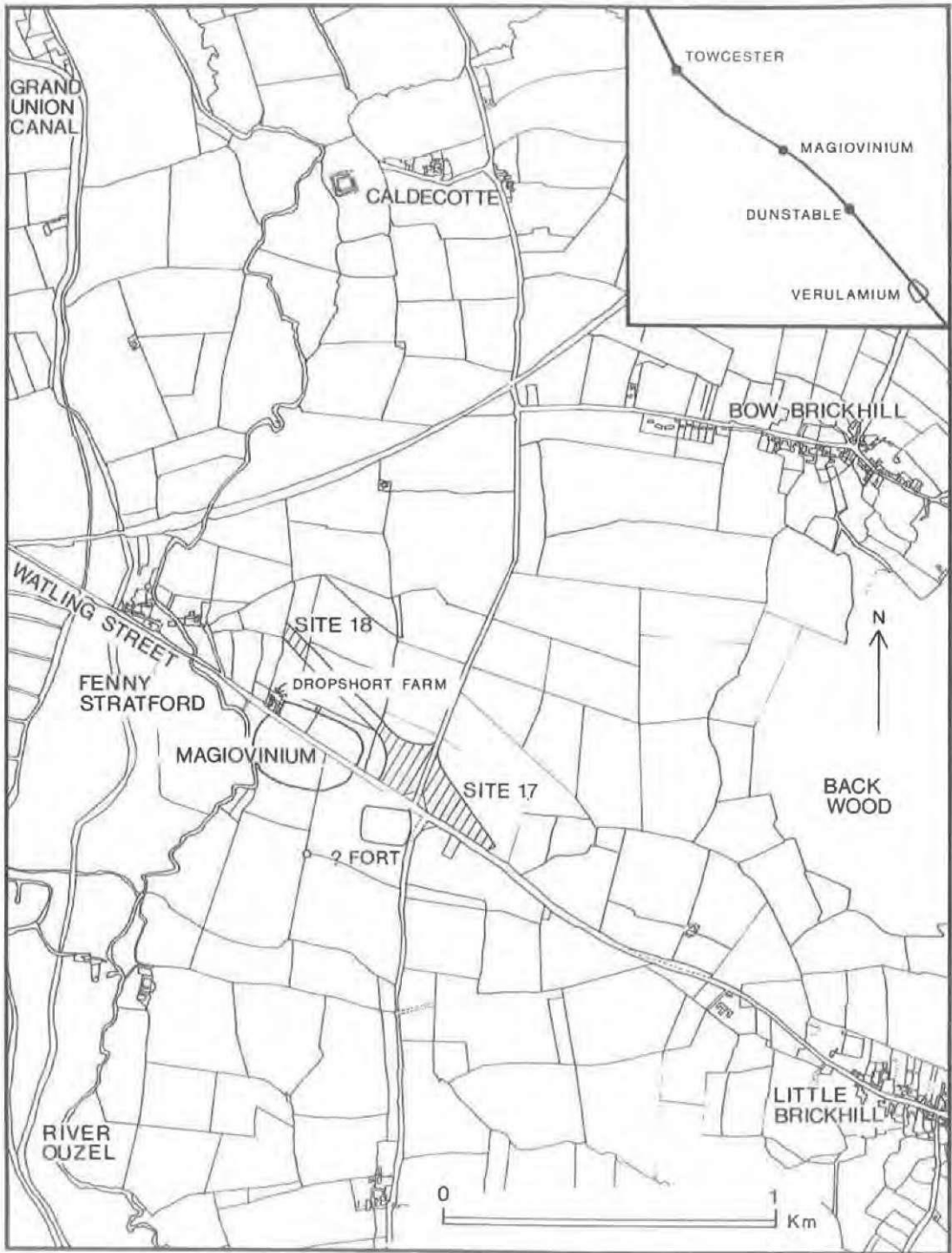


Fig. 1. Plan showing location of site and relationship of Magiovinium to other small Roman towns along Watling Street.

a note on a fragment of samian (1912, 35-6). More recently, numerous finds have been made as a result of road works and the installation of services. At the Bathing Station site, from 1955, graves have been found cut into the floors of Roman buildings of masonry and timber; the finds included 40 third to fourth-century coins (Tapper 1955). The laying of a North Sea gas pipe-line in 1967, running north—south, east of Galley Lane crossroads, resulted in the discovery of a hoard of 296 denarii. More coins from this hoard were found in 1987. Nearby was a hoard of ironwork comprising two lugged axes, a chisel and a large spoon bit (Wilson 1968, 192),

Further structures were revealed in 1970 by Hedley Pengelly at the north angle of the Galley Lane crossroads. He found five phases of occupation including post-holes, clay floors, ditches and pits. The remains or a third to fourth-century masonry building were also found. In 1975 Mrs Unwin of Dropshort Farm invited Miss D. M. Hudson to investigate an area of land to the north of her farm on the line of the proposed A5 diversion. Features discovered were interpreted by Miss Hudson and N. Farrant as sleeper beams, which led them to speculate that 'the building of early timber-framed structures at a considerable distance from Watling Street could well indicate that they form part of a larger plan. A very real possibility is that they are connected with a fort for all or part of the XIV Legion'; and 'Another possibility is that a garrison was maintained after the advance and that the destruction may be dated to the Boudiccan revolt' (Hudson and Farrant 1977, 10),

The presence of a fort at Magiovinium was suspected as early as 1971 when aerial photographs revealed a double ditched enclosure of 2.25 hectares lying in a field south of the defended settlement. The results of the cutting of a water-pipe trench across the suspected ditch in 1976 and a watching brief by Mrs C. Wood field were more cautiously appraised. She concluded; The profile and construction of the ditches indicates, though not conclusively, that it is military work, and finds suggest a construction in the Neronian period, probably

related to military consolidation after the Boudiccan rebellion' (Woodfield 1977,385).

### *Development Proposals*

The proposal to build the A5 diversion bypassing Fenny Stratford and Bletchley to form part of the transport infrastructure for Milton Keynes was put forward in 1967 and formulated in 1970. The straight north-west to southeast route of Roman Watling Street was to be superseded by a dual carriageway leading from a new roundabout at the Galley Lane crossroads (Fig. 2) which would cross part of Dropshort Farm. In addition to the roundabout, a large portion of land to the north of the Pullman Cafe was threatened by the construction of access roads.

The occurrence of finds over such a large area affected by the proposals caused concern in many quarters that important archaeological features would be destroyed. It was argued that the town extended well beyond the scheduled area (the defended settlement) and that the road should be re-routed to minimize destruction. Understandably, it was also argued that the environs of an undisturbed settlement should be protected. Contrary to local opinion, however, the proposed route was, on the evidence available, considered by both the Ancient Monuments inspectorate and the Road Construction Unit to be less damaging both archaeologically and environmentally. However, in order to understand the nature of the archaeological remains large-scale excavations were arranged. These were carried out by the Inspectorate's Central Excavation Unit under the direction of the present writer and involved trial trenching virtually the whole length of the proposed new road, from where it was to merge with the A5 close to the Pullman Cafe, across to the north-west boundary of Dropshort Farm—a distance of 1000 m. North of the A5, at the Galley Lane crossroads, adjacent to Mr Pengelly's excavation of 1970, overall clearance was undertaken.

For convenience of recording, the overall area was divided into two sites, Sites 17 and 18. Site 17 was situated on either side of the crossroads on land previously owned by



MAGIOVINIUM

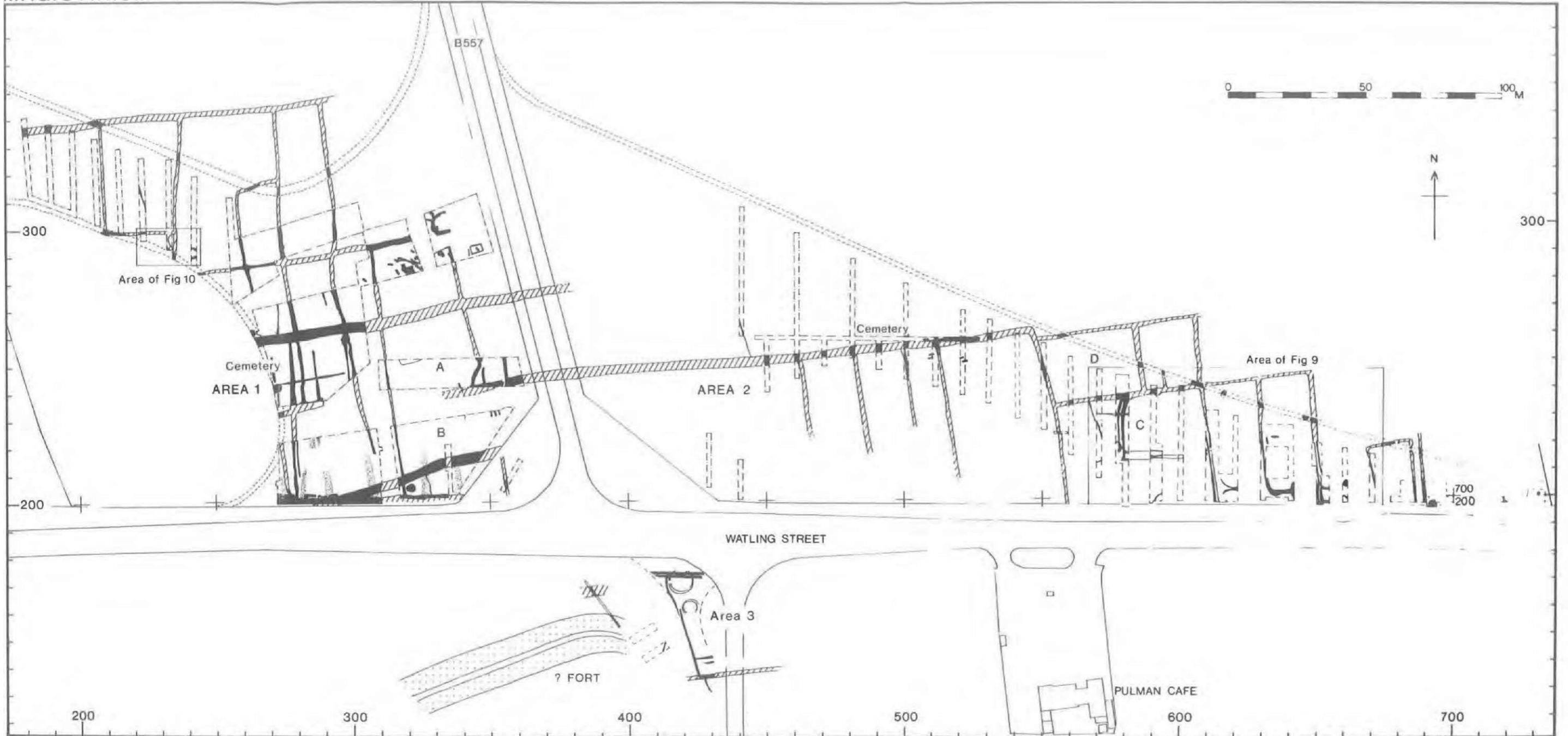


Fig. 3. General plan showing field system in relation to Watling Street; Site 17 Areas 1-3.



MAGIOVINIUM

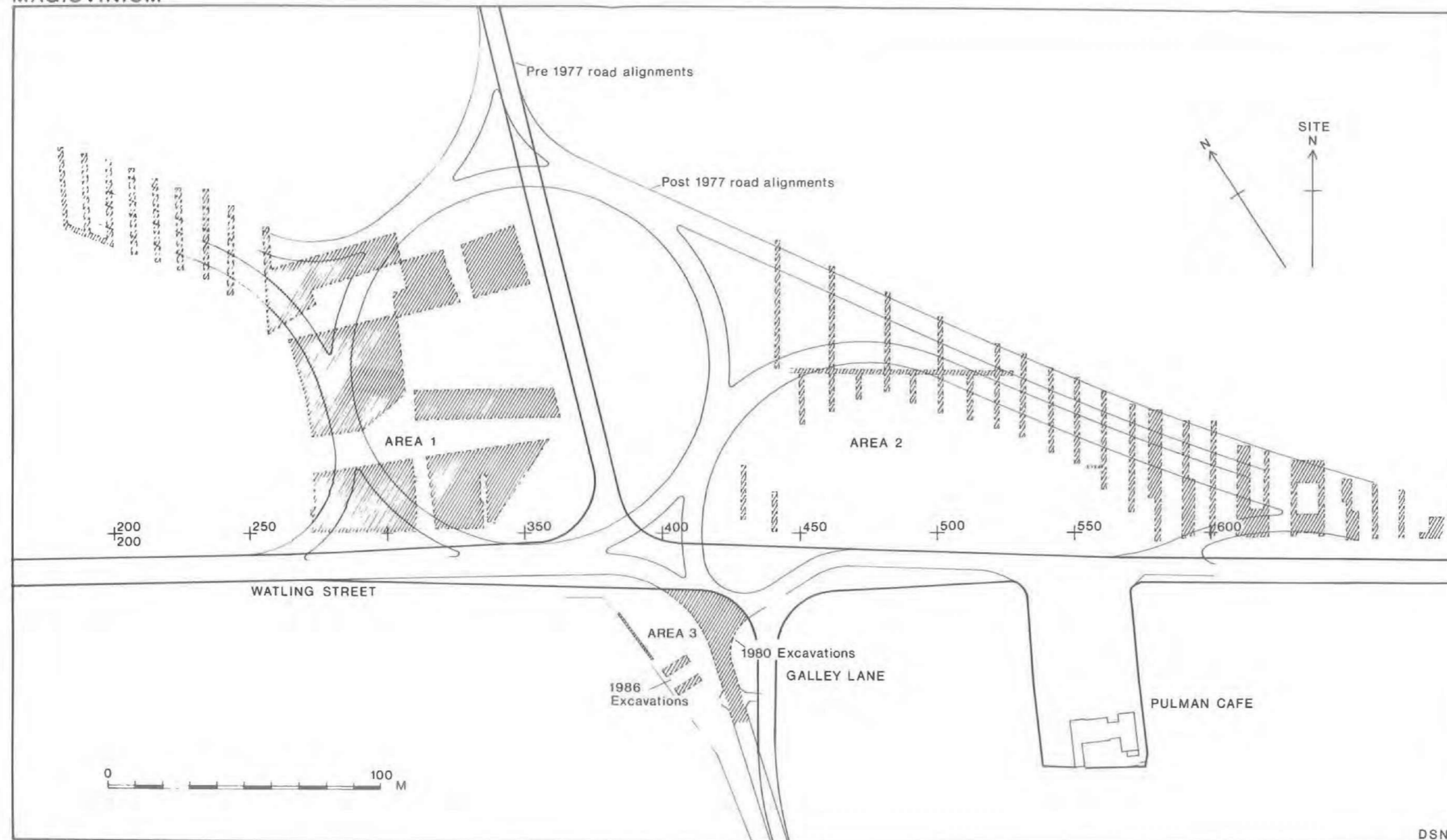


Fig 2. Plan of trenches, Site 17.

crossroads on land previously owned by Bedford Estates and farmed by Mr Gurney of Cross Roads Farm; it was subdivided into three areas (Areas 1-3, [Fig. 2](#)), separated by Galley Lane and the A5, Site 18 was on Dropshort Farm, (Site numbers follow the sequence of excavations carried out by the Central Excavation Unit.) For convenience of reporting the two sites will be described separately, and conclusions drawn from them will be combined in the discussion (p. 29).

Work began in October 1977 and continued until May 1978. The period coincided with the wettest winter for many years and for much of the time the site was totally waterlogged—for six weeks the work had to be abandoned. Once road construction began it was possible to carry out a watching brief inspecting drainage ditches cut along the route of the easement. They provided useful evidence for the extent of the site ([Fig. 3](#)). Other opportunities for excavation were presented in May 1980, when improvements were made to the junction of Galley Lane where it meets the south side of the new roundabout, and in March 1985, in advance of the proposed A4146 Fenny Stratford southern bypass. The recording of the finds was well in hand when these works were undertaken and although the pottery is recorded it has not been included in the detailed analysis (pp. 58-102).

**This article continues in [Section 2: Excavations on Site 17.](#)**