

BRONZE AGE FIELD SYSTEM AT SOUTHAMPTON AIRPORT

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ABSTRACT

A recent excavation at Long Term Car Park, Southampton Airport uncovered a well preserved Bronze Age field system with an associated trackway. The sub-rectangular fields were aligned north-west to south-east and overlooked the River Itchen. A small amount of Middle–Late Bronze Age pottery was recovered.

INTRODUCTION

Framework Archaeology carried out an archaeological strip, map and sample prior to the construction of a Long Term Car Park, on a plot of land located towards the northern boundary of Southampton Airport (hereafter ‘the Site’), centred on NGR SU 452 175 (Fig. 1). The Site is bounded to the west by Mitchell Way and to the east by the operational area of the airport and occupies approximately 1.0 ha of land. The excavation was undertaken in two phases, Phase 1 in March and April 2007 and Phase 2 in October 2007.

SITE TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The Site is situated at approximately 12 m above Ordnance Datum (aOD), on flat ground slightly above the western floodplain of the River Itchen (Framework Archaeology 2007, 3). The geology of the area comprises River Terrace Deposits (loam and clay) resting on River Terrace Gravels (British Geological Survey 1987, sheet 315).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Prior to the Framework Archaeology excavations little was known about the archaeology in the Southampton Airport area. A rapid appraisal of the Sites and Monuments Record prepared by Framework Archaeology (2003) revealed that some works were carried out during the 19th and 20th centuries. Finds dating from the Mesolithic to the medieval periods were recorded in the 19th century expansion and development of the area. In the 1920s a Romano-British villa was excavated towards the south of the airport, but, given the antiquity of the works, the records, including the location of the site, are unclear.

In his study of Southern England, Yates (2007) identified the Solent Basin region, and more specifically Southampton Waters which includes the Southampton Airport area, as containing evidence of Bronze Age field systems. He highlighted the potential for this zone to produce further information on Bronze Age land divisions and agricultural practices as commercial developments in the area, resulting in development-led archaeological investigations, continue to flourish.

FIELD SYSTEM

The Bronze Age field system comprised eight ditches that formed a sub-rectangular series of NW–SE aligned fields, overlooking the Itchen valley (Framework Archaeology 2008, 2) (Fig. 1). The six ditches were 26–65 m apart and up to 42 m long (within the boundaries of the excavation area). Two ditches on a NE–SW

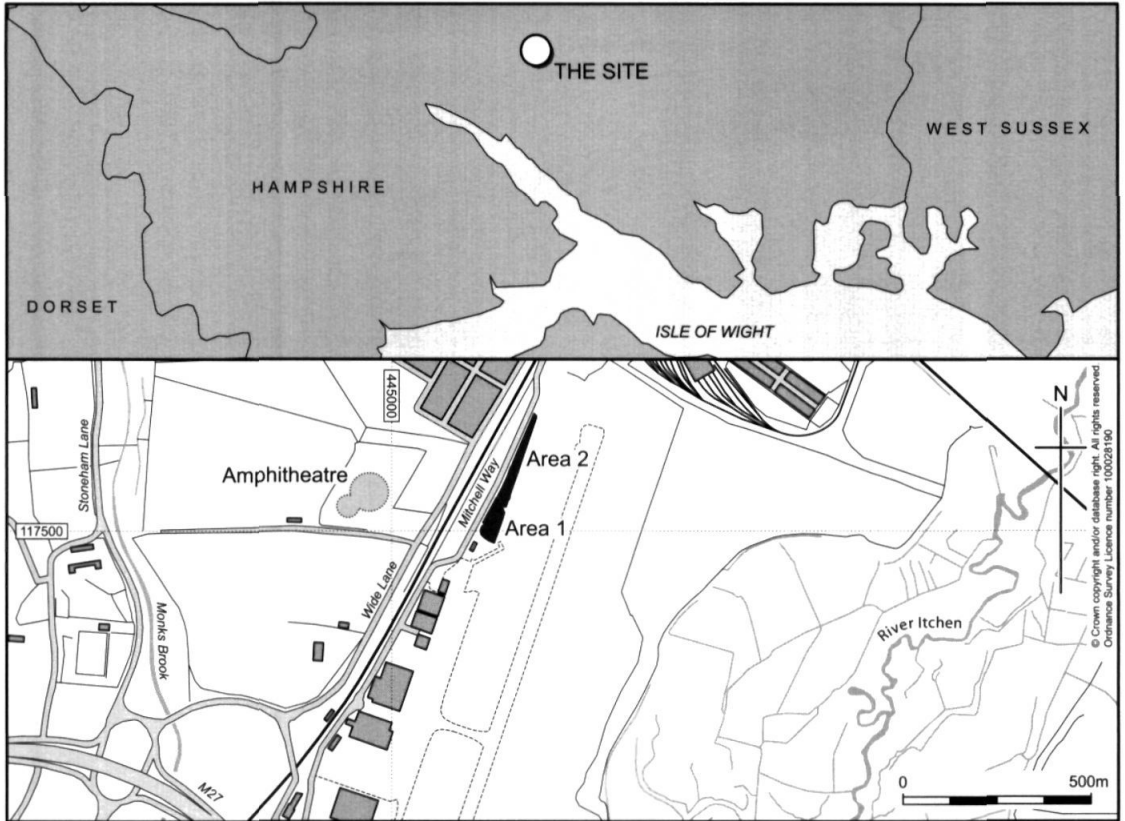


Fig. 1 Southampton Airport: site location plan

alignment were situated at right-angles to a double ditched trackway (Fig. 2), which was aligned with the fields towards the south of the Site. The trackway ditches were 2 m apart and up to 55 m long.

On average, the ditches were 1.21 m (106008) to 1.56 m (106015) wide and up to 0.64 m deep (ditch 106027; Fig. 3a), with either a U-shaped profile, or, more commonly, concave sides and a flat base. The deposits within the ditches were similar across the Site and were composed of mid-greyish brown silty clay with rare to moderate inclusions of small sub-angular flints. Although the number of ditch fills varied, most were secondary deposits deriving from the surrounding ground surface via a steady, low energy action. Primary dep-

osition was recorded only in a few of the excavated features. The scarcity of archaeological material (see below) indicated that the fields were not located in close proximity to an associated settlement. Therefore, it is highly likely, based on similar evidence of this date such as at Perry Oaks (Framework Archaeology 2006) where field systems and trackways were recorded in a comparable location overlooking the River Thames, that the field system extends over the brickearth plateau beneath the existing airport and that other elements of the Bronze Age landscape are likely to be present throughout the areas surrounding the River Itchen.

Some of the ditches showed signs of recutting and cleaning, which suggests that the field

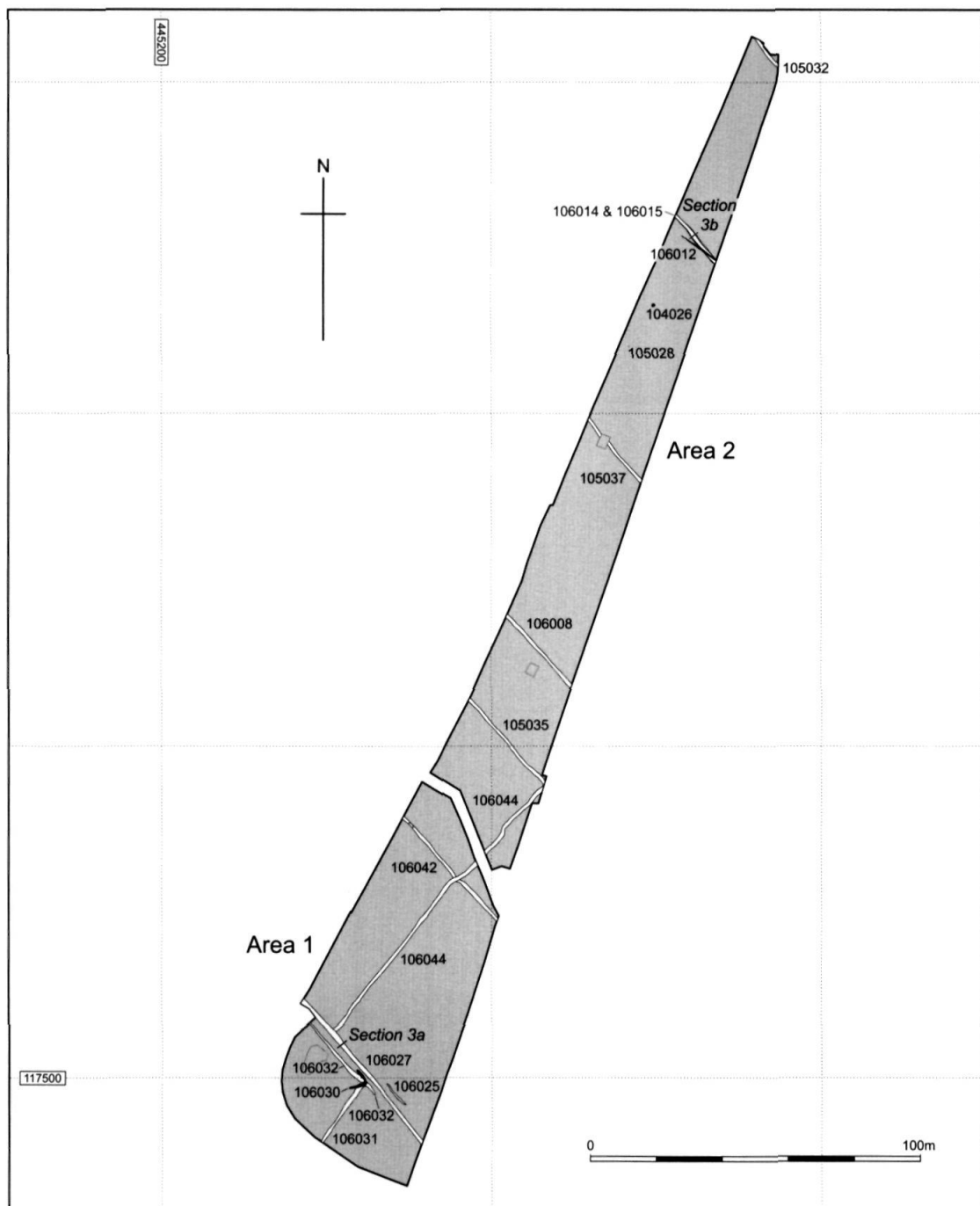


Fig. 2 Southampton Airport: detailed plan of the excavation area

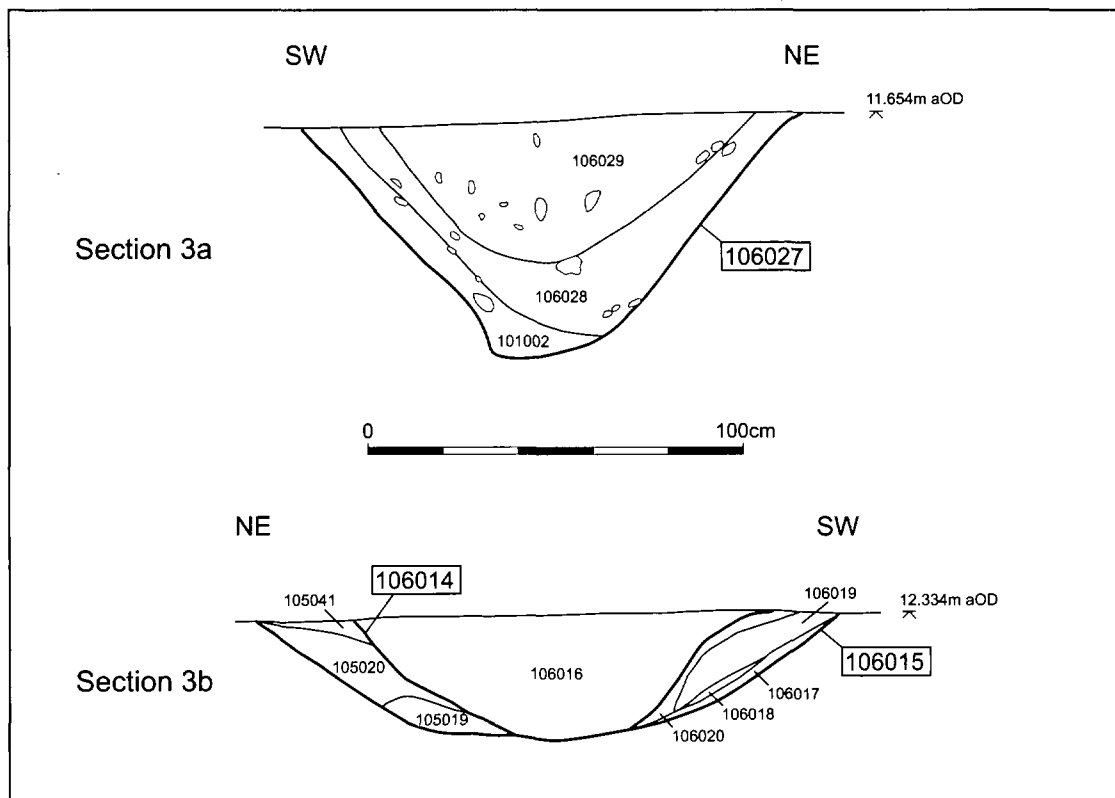


Fig. 3 Southampton Airport: sections of excavated ditches

boundaries and/or drainage ditches were in use for an extended period of time and were well maintained. Ditch 106014 recut earlier ditch 106015, indicating that once the latter was filled with soil, the feature was re-excavated to redefine the field boundary and allow drainage (Fig. 3b).

The NE-SW aligned ditches (106044 and 106031) were observed to cut SE-NW ditches (106042 and 106032) suggesting a progression and division of the field system through time. The long and thin SE-NW aligned fields appear to have been divided into smaller parcels. The only exception was the relationship between ditches 106027 and 106044, where the former cut the latter, indicating

that part of the trackway was created after this field division took place.

OTHER FEATURES

A small number of other features were recorded. These included two ditches, a pit, a stake-hole and a number of tree-throws. The tree-throws, although not securely dated, were cut by the field ditches and, consequently, are earlier than the field system. This suggests that woodland clearance took place in advance of the fields being laid out.

The small ditches/gullies did not contain any dating material but were cut into the fills

of the field ditches and therefore represent a later phase of activity. The isolated small pit and stake-hole were also undated.

FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE

A small amount of archaeological material was collected from the excavated features and a total of five environmental samples was taken for further assessment.

The finds included pottery, five burnt flints (109g) and two struck flints. Fourteen sherds of pottery were found in excavated features and no residual fragments were collected from topsoil. The pottery fragments were in coarse, flint-tempered fabrics and can be broadly dated as Middle to Late Bronze Age. Some fragments from ditches 101033 and 106008, however, are typical of the Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury ceramic tradition. Thinner-walled sherds (recovered from 106039, 106008 and 106014) are characteristic of the Late Bronze Age. The five pieces of worked flint comprise undiagnostic flakes and core fragments of a broadly prehistoric date.

The environmental samples contained very little material and no cereal remains were found. A single bramble seed (*Rubus sp.*) was recovered from ditch 106008 and a fragment of hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*) was preserved in ditch 106014. The results show little indication of cereals or settlement activity, which suggests the fields were pastoral rather than arable. It should, however, be noted that Middle to Late Bronze Age sites in the region have generally

produced very low densities of environmental material.

CONCLUSION

The archaeological excavation identified a well preserved Bronze Age system of field ditches, possibly extending over a wider area in the River Itchen valley. The Site illustrates the process of land use, from clearing the woodland, to the field preparation, its maintenance and to its later abandonment. Although no evidence for settlement was found, and a small amount of domestic material suggests it was located further away, a contemporary settlement is likely to be located in the vicinity.

This is a significant discovery for the region as it enables a better understanding of agricultural activity during the Middle to Late Bronze Age period and implies the possibility of further prehistoric remains on the River Itchen gravel terraces.

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