

Fieldwork Survey of the Soke of Peterborough

by David Hall and Paul Martin

The present project began in 1974 when Adrian Challands invited us to record some ridge and furrow. We were engaged in a long term field-by-field survey of the whole of the historic county of Northamptonshire and were interested in that part of the county within the Nene Valley Research Committee's area. A three-year project was set up with grants from the Committee and Peterborough City Council to cover the whole of the Soke of Peterborough, except Borough Fen (45,000 acres).

The Soke of Peterborough lies on a ridge of Jurassic rocks and clays rising to just over 100 feet O.D., flanked by the gravels of the Welland on the north and the Nene on the south. The eastern part falls to the western edge of the Fen basin. The region is thus in a prime position for settlement of all periods. The rich loams of the river gravels attracted early agricultural communities; on either side the major rivers formed access routes inland, and to the east lay the extensive resources of the Fen for fowl, fish, fuel and fodder. The western boulder clay region offered woodland.

Much archaeological information was already known (RCHM (1960); (1969)). Aerial photography by the Committee has added to the picture. The present survey sought to put the whole region in context by trying to identify the complete settlement pattern, and to find the kinds of site not normally detected by aerial photography. Another aim was to record the ridge-and-furrow pattern with a view to identifying the mediaeval landscape using the surveys in the Peterborough Abbey manuscripts and in the muniments of the Cecil and Fitzwilliam families. Our fieldwork technique was to walk every field in 30 metre strips when in a ploughed, weathered state. Earthworks and concentration of flints, sherds etc. were recorded on a 1:10560 map. The results for the pre-mediaeval period are summarized on fig. 7.

Mesolithic material was limited to light, generally sandy soil, and as expected few sites were identified. Neolithic sites were represented by concentrations of worked flint, burnt stones and fragments of polished axes. Light soils were again preferred, particularly the heath regions of Barnack and Wittering. In spite of the large number of ring-ditches known few Bronze-Age settlement traces were found in the river gravels. At Orton Waterville an unploughed earthwork barrow partially buried by alluvium was identified.

Many new Iron-Age sites were recorded, some associated with previously undated crop-marks. At Deeping Gate an Iron-Age site yielded a piece of decorated Hunsbury ware — hitherto not found so far east. New Roman sites were identified on heavy ground and on the river gravels. At Marholm a site yielded a lead (repair) plug with *chi-rho* and *alpha-omega* graffiti. At Ufford the bowl of a silver spoon was discovered.

Perhaps the most exciting discoveries were the many Saxon sites. Most of them lie on the Welland gravels, but the largest (30 acres!) is at Castor — further evidence of the early importance of this village.

We were able to date by our fieldwork all the dense areas of crop-marks. Pre-Iron-Age sites were found on light soils only, especially sand, while Iron-Age and Roman sites occur on all types of soil. Saxon material is again limited to light soils, especially river gravels. No Saxon material was found on the boulder clay area in the west of the region. Here there are ramparted remnants of mediaeval woodland, and an abundance of iron-working sites that probably represent woodland clearance.

Bibliography

- RCHM (1960) Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *A Matter of Time*, 1960.
- RCHM (1969) Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *Peterborough New Town: A Survey of the Antiquities in the Areas of Development*, 1969.

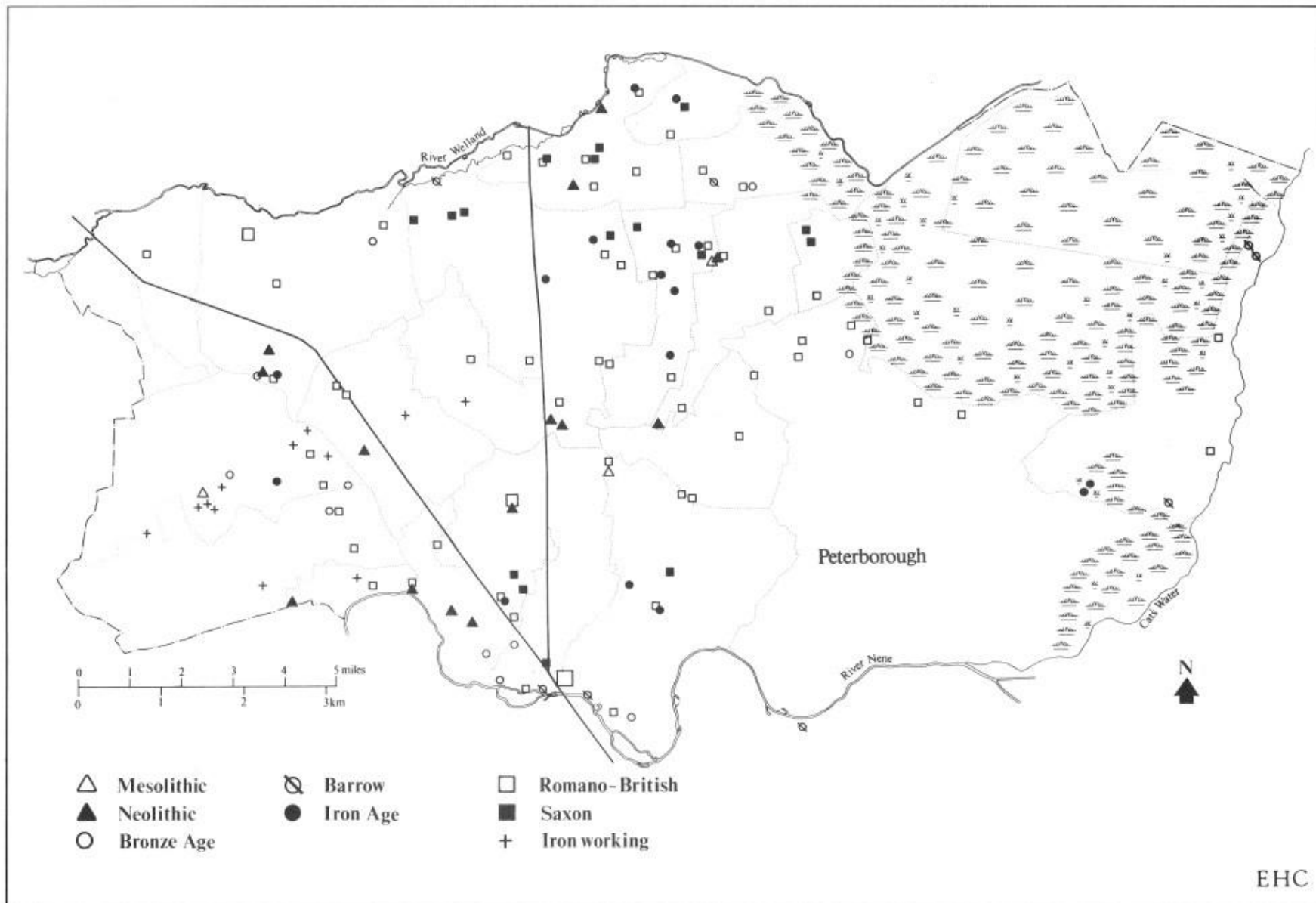


Fig 7 Pre-mediaeval finds from fieldwork in the Soke of Peterborough