

The Archaeology of the M.40

By TREVOR ROWLEY

THE M.40 Archaeological Research Group was founded in November 1970, in anticipation of the construction of the nine mile extension of the M.40 from Stokenchurch (Bucks.) to Waterstock Crossroads in Great Milton (Oxon.). The Group, jointly sponsored by the University of Oxford Department for External Studies and the Oxford City and County Museum, was made up of professional and part-time archaeologists, and a number of volunteers who, initially at least, had little or no archaeological experience. A description of the way the Group functioned, together with a preliminary record of their work, has already been published.¹ Here I should like briefly to assess the overall archaeological value of the M.40 work, although inevitably a final assessment must await the test of time.

Firstly, however, I must put on permanent record thanks to all members of the Steering Committee, of which I was Chairman, Mr. M. Davies (Hon. Secretary), Mr. D. Hinton (Hon. Treasurer), Mr. M. Aston, Mr. W. Fowler, Mr. R. Parker, Mr. J. Brooks, Mr. C. Miles and Mr. J. Halliburton; and most of all to members of the Group. This was essentially a working group, and both Committee and Group members played an active part in all the archaeological activity, from the initial intelligence and fieldwork through to the examination and sorting of artefacts. Grateful thanks must also be extended to Mr. R. A. Chambers who joined the Group as a full-time director of excavations from May 1972 until the end of the operation.

Archaeologically speaking a motorway is a random line (FIG. 1). In this case the motorway presented an ideal geological transect—from the top of the Chiltern chalk escarpment (*c.* 250 metres) where it has a capping of clay with flints, down onto the Upper Greensand in the neighbourhood of Postcombe and across a wide undulating belt of Gault clay around Tetsworth, finally rising again up to *c.* 100 metres on the Plateau gravel which makes up Milton Common (FIG. 2). In all there were 15 excavations along the route, all except one of which were archaeologically positive. Since little fieldwork had been carried out in the area before, this virtually meant that 14 new sites were discovered, quite apart from surface pottery found along the length of the road and the sites found off its line.² There is no reason to believe that the picture would have been any different if the road had been built on a different alignment—the details naturally would have differed, but we would have expected the density of sites to be roughly the same.

The first significant discovery is therefore simply about the density of sites. Figure 3 clearly shows how the line of the motorway stands out as a concentration of archaeological sites. This confirms the pattern that is emerging from other

¹ R. T. Rowley and M. E. Davies (eds.), *Archaeology and the M.40 Motorway* (1973).

² Surface finds are recorded in Rowley and Davies, *op. cit.*, 9–11.

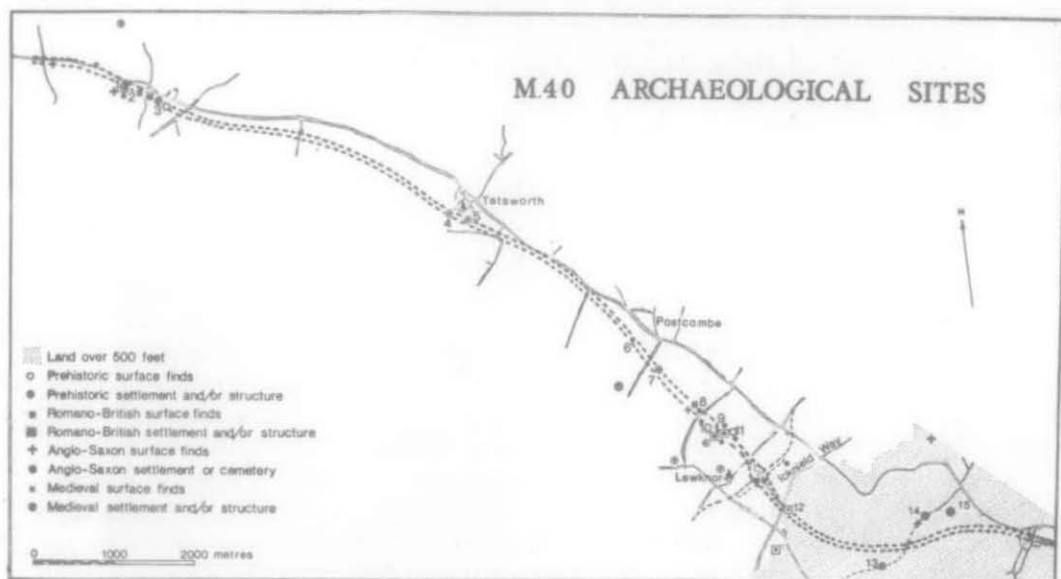


FIG. 1

intensive surveys, that far more remains of the pre-Roman Iron Age, the Romano-British and Medieval periods than had been realized, which calls in question estimates of population and land utilization based upon what must now be regarded as an incomplete knowledge of the distribution of archaeological evidence.

The M.40 work was deliberately intensive and the Group tried to salvage all the available information. This intensive work drew attention to the information relating to past landscapes in, for example, the form of boundaries and roads, and emphasized that archaeological sites should be seen within their total landscape context if possible. One other general point to emerge from the work was a purely practical one. About half the sites were discovered through research and fieldwork before construction on the motorway began. The remainder, which tendered no surface indication as they were mostly lying under permanent pasture, came to light during the early stages of construction work. Therefore, although ideally all archaeological work should take place in comparatively leisured conditions before motorway construction starts, realistically there will always be a need for salvage excavation on sites discovered during earthmoving. In the case of the M.40 these happened to be some of the most significant sites.

The earliest prehistoric structures found during the motorway work date only from the pre-Roman Iron Age. Nevertheless, residual finds at Heath Farm (Site 3) and Lewknor (Site 9) indicate the presence of earlier settlement in the region. The discovery of a village consisting of circular buildings at Heath Farm adds to our knowledge both of the form and extent of Iron Age occupation in the area between the Thames Valley and Chiltern escarpment. It also draws

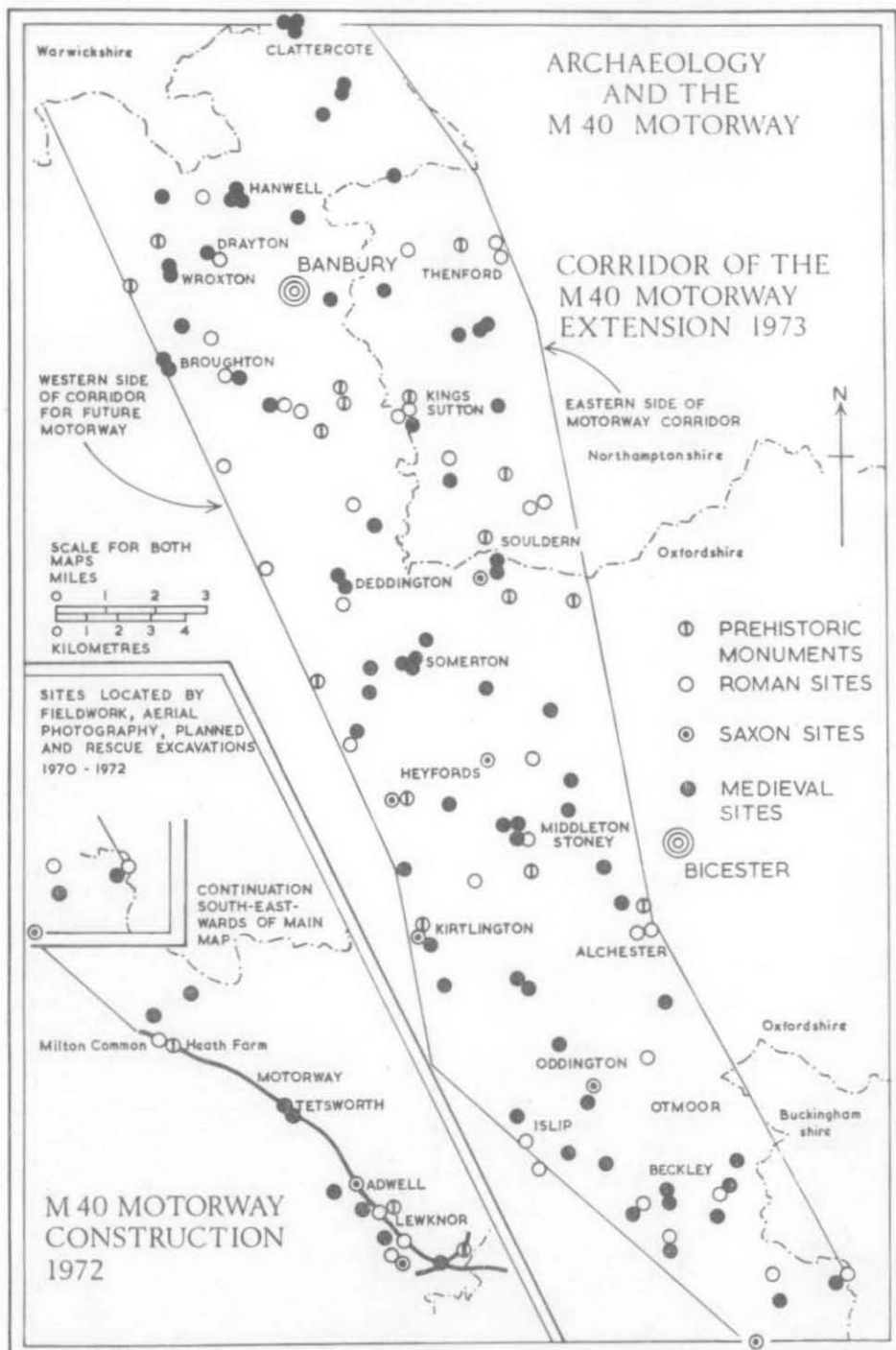


FIG. 2

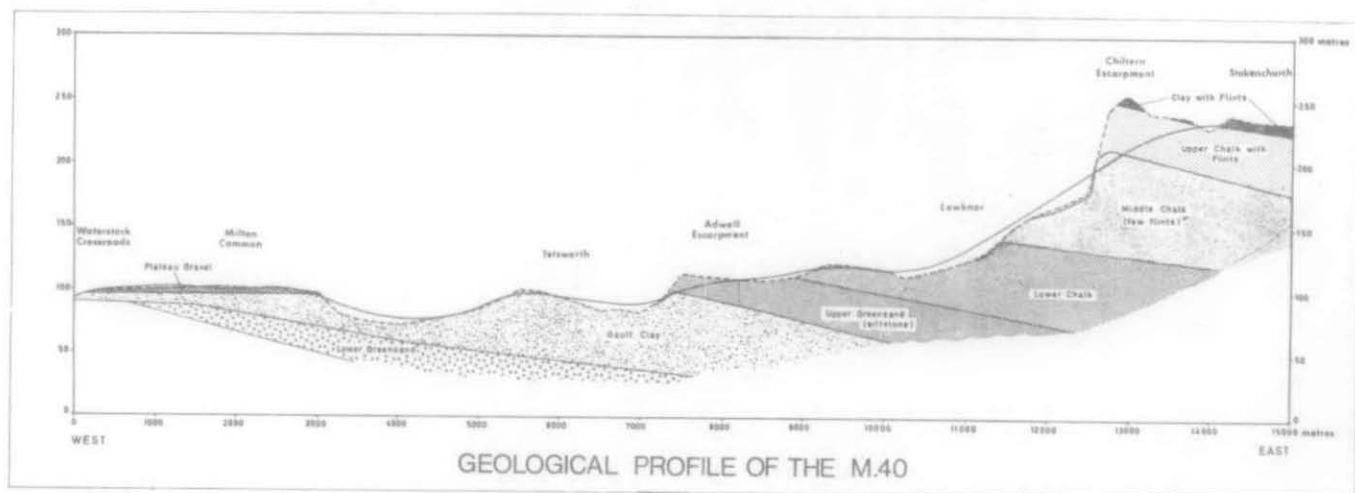


FIG. 3

attention to the archaeological potential of the Milton Common plateau gravels which are covered with crop-markings (Heath Farm, Site 3 ; Fig. 1, p. 25).

The main contribution to our knowledge of the Romano-British period was the discovery by fieldwork of an extensive villa-type site near Lewknor (Site 11). Fortunately, the motorway destroyed only part of the outlying boundaries. Close by along the line of the Upper Icknield Way a previously unknown Romano-British cemetery was excavated immediately before it was destroyed (Site 12). These discoveries emphasize the archaeological importance of the area lying at the foot of the Chilterns, as well as pointing to the Lewknor area as a likely candidate for continuous occupation from prehistoric times to the present day.

A small cemetery near Postcombe (Site 7) was the only definite Anglo-Saxon site from the motorway. It marks the most westerly of a group of such burials along the Chiltern scarp and in the adjacent valley.

Two important Medieval sites were excavated at Tetsworth (Sites 4-5) and Sadler's Wood (Site 13). At Tetsworth the identification of the earthworks of a shifted village has led to the discovery of a number of similar sites in the vicinity, most notably at Lewknor. Furthermore, the excavations, together with parallel documentary research, provided detailed information concerning the development and decline of one particular holding within the Medieval village.

At Sadler's Wood the excavation of part of an extensive Medieval farmstead complex suggests the presence of a possible monastic grange or satellite farmstead, and has led to the discovery of several other such sites on the Chilterns.

The Group, now under the aegis of the newly formed Oxfordshire Archaeological Committee, has turned its attention to the northern section of the M.40 from Oxford to Birmingham. This section, which in all covers 60 miles, promises to be as archaeologically promising and demanding as the section already dealt with.

The publication of these reports has been made possible by a grant from the Department of the Environment, and by a generous donation from Gleeson Ltd.

Grants and donations for the fieldwork have been acknowledged with gratitude in R. T. Rowley and M. E. Davies (eds.), 'Archaeology and the M.40 Motorway' (1973).