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The Godwin Ridge, Over, Cambridgeshire
A (Wet-) Landscape Corridor

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Summary

This contribution outlines the results of the archaeological investigations conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit upon the Godwin Ridge (Needingworth, East Anglia, UK). The Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bell Beaker settlement phases are outlined. Methodological issues regarding the importance of assessing the archaeological potential of buried soils are also addressed.

Keywords: Over, East Anglia (UK), Mesolithic, Grooved Ware, Bell Beaker, developer-funded archaeology.

This contribution outlines the results of the archaeological investigations conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU), University of Cambridge, upon the Godwin Ridge in Hanson Aggregate's Needingworth quarry, approximately 15 km northwest of Cambridge (East Anglia, UK; fig. 1). There the lower fen-edge reaches of the River Great Ouse have been the subject to nearly three decades of intensive archaeological scrutiny, first under the auspices of the University's Haddenham Project (Evans & Hodder, 2006a-b) and then through a series of developer-funded fieldwork programmes undertaken by the CAU (Evans & Knight, 2000, 2001; Evans forthcoming a). In addition to the recent large-scale excavations at Colne Fen, Earith (Evans *et al*., forthcoming), thus far within the immediate Needingworth environs some 800 ha have been investigated, and where the work spans both banks of the river just upstream from where it debouches into the Fenland marshes.

The latest phase of evaluation led to the definition of several zones of archaeological potential (fig. 2; Vander Linden & Evans, 2008), including a cluster of Bronze Age barrows. Of particular interest was the *Godwin Ridge*. Already recognised during the Fenland Survey (Hall, 1996), this impressively upstanding feature runs on a southwest-northeast axis for *c*. 1400 m. Ranging between 60 and 150 m across, it rises to *c*. 1.5-3 m OD and well above the river's floodplain. As a palaeochannel bisects the ridge into roughly equal parts, it is actually better described as two elongated *islands*. The westernmost stretches for *c*. 600 m and was almost completely exposed during successive phases of excavation in 2007 and 2008 (*c*. 5.4 ha; fig. 3 and fig. 4). Surprisingly enough, this represents one of the few instances when the totality of a bounded natural landmass has been so intensively investigated in its near-entirety.

As a topographic feature the ridge is the product of Late Glacial stream courses traversing the surface of the gravel braid-plain. It presents a complex and composite internal stratigraphy, comprising a basal silt (occasionally associated with gravely clay) overlain by sand and sandy clay. Buried sandy clay soils, which yielded the greater part of the archaeological material, lay across the higher parts of the ridge, with sandier deposits having been washed off its crown into the surrounding sediment. The ridge is bordered on each side by palaeochannels: to the west and north, the main palaeochannel of the Ouse; and, to the south, a smaller channel separating it from another parallel ridge to the south, the *O'Connell Ridge* (Excavations are currently on-going across the latter area; to date, though, both distinct Grooved Ware- and Bell Beaker-attributed occupation clusters have there been recovered). What we have, therefore, with the Godwin Ridge is a great linear landscape feature: simultaneously a routeway corridor through the delta wetlands of the Ouse Fen and, in its own right, a critical focus of prehistoric occupation.

1. Methodological Concerns

Throughout, the abiding directive of the Needingworth Quarry's fieldwork has been to explore the changing status of a river in prehistory: territorial divide and/or communication corridor? To this end, from the outset it has been held that strict methodological consistency across both of its banks is an absolute necessity. Aside from many tens of

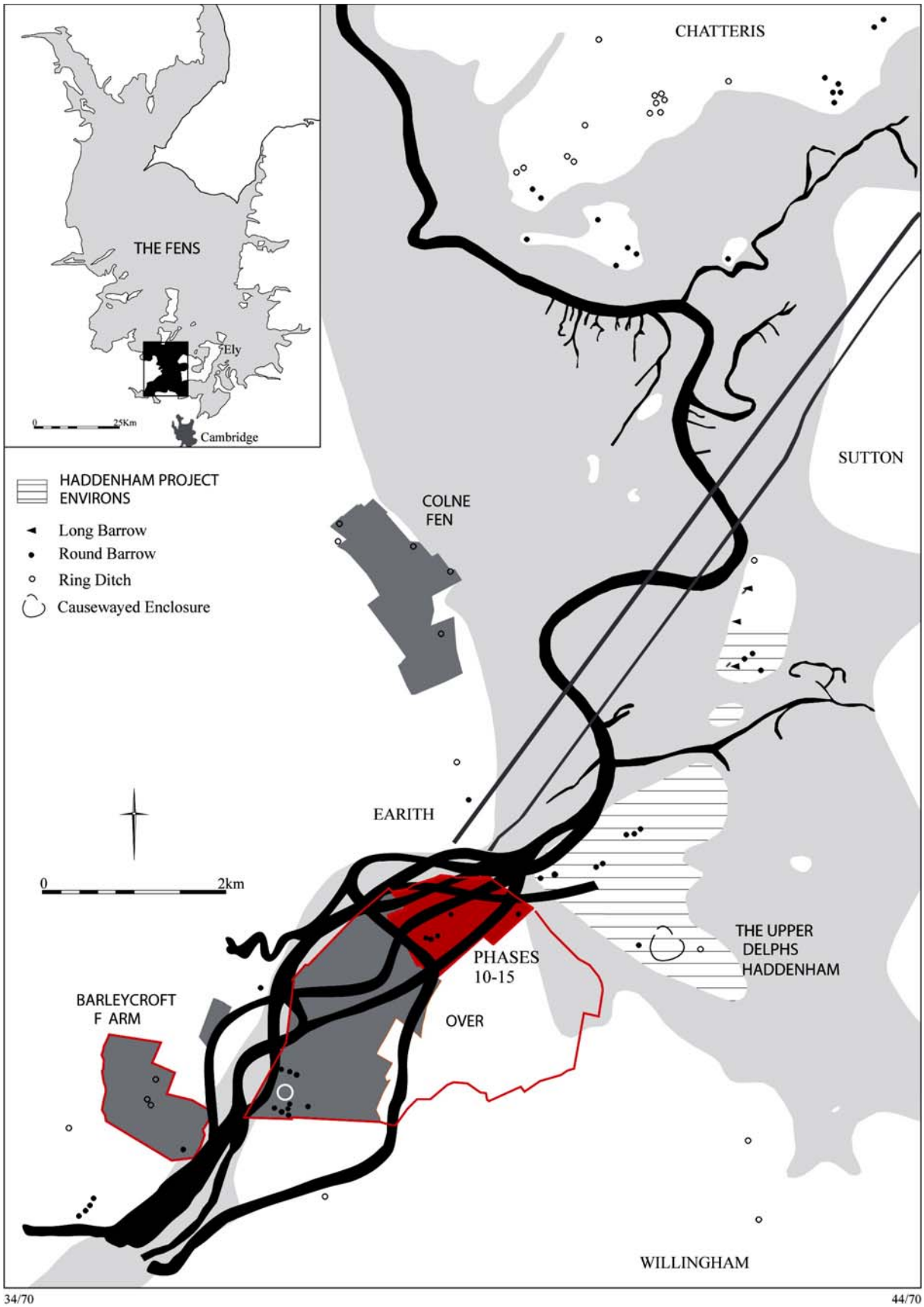

Fig. 1 — The Over landscape (Cambridgeshire, UK) and its environs.

kilometres of evaluation trenching, this has involved hundreds of test pit-derived standard samples from its buried soil layers to appraise finds densities, and which now together contribute to an unparalleled mapping of its palaeo-topography, overlain by plotting of differential artefact distributions on a truly grand scale.

Amid the many monuments that dot the alluvium- and peat-submerged landscape, these techniques have proven successful in the discovery in a wide range of *open* Neolithic occupation clusters (see Evans *et al*., 1999; Garrow, 2006 for overview) and, also, widespread Bronze Age fieldsystems and settlements (Evans & Knight, 2000, 2001; Bradley 2007: fig. 4.14; Yates, 2007: 91-2, fig. 10.4). Vast area-stripping is usually not an option as its deeply buried terraces often have up to 1-3.00 m overburden cover and site-exposure normally requires two stages: first down to the buried soil horizons (which are duly sample-tested) and then, again, down to the gravel terrace levels where features are generally visible. The trick, therefore, is how to tease-out and distinguish just what constitutes 'sites' of different periods; it is understood that 'off-site' landscape-usage and settlements *per se* constitute a gradient of activity (i.e. no site is an 'island') and, accordingly, methodologies must be employed that allow for an 'enfolding' or intermeshing of site-excavation and landscape-evaluation fieldwork stages (see also Gdaniec *et al*., 2008 for a comparable application of these methodologies across another Fenland prehistoric landscape).

Following the established procedures, the thrust of the Godwin Ridge's excavation was, therefore, primarily directed towards the systematic sampling of the alluvium-sealed buried soil. This was achieved by the hand-digging of some 500 x 1 m^2 test pits; organised in successive phases, the results of each conditioning the next. The first phase saw the digging of test pits every 20 m, with all deposits being sieved through a 5 mm mesh. On the basis of the density of finds (flint and ceramics), further sampling tiers of every 10 m and, then, every 5 m were locally imple-mented to delineate

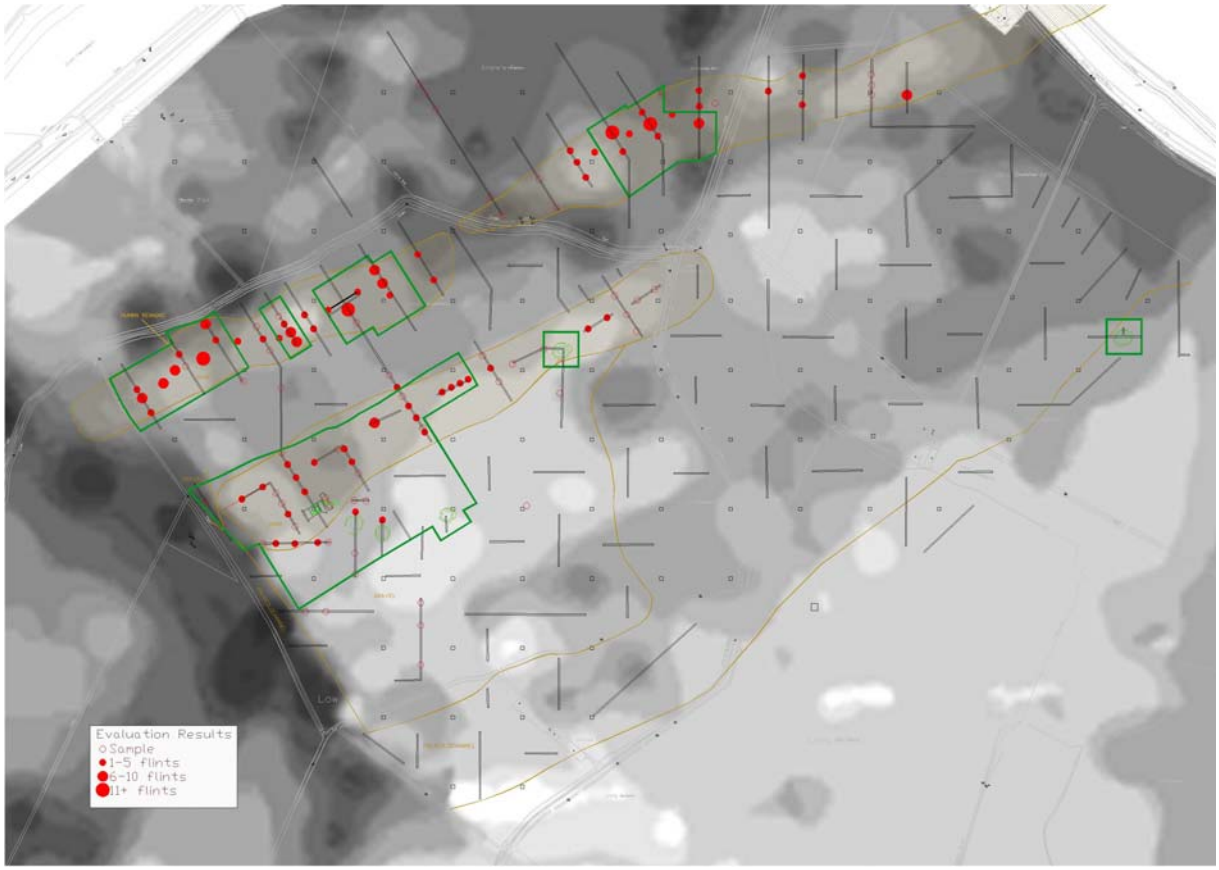

Fig. 2 — *Godwin Ridge* complex, Over (Cambridgeshire, UK) : results of the 2007 archaeological evaluations in the Needingworth/Over quarry, with indications of the samples of buried soil and of the zones proposed for further archaeological investigation. The grey shades correspond to the depth of the underlying Devensian gravels.

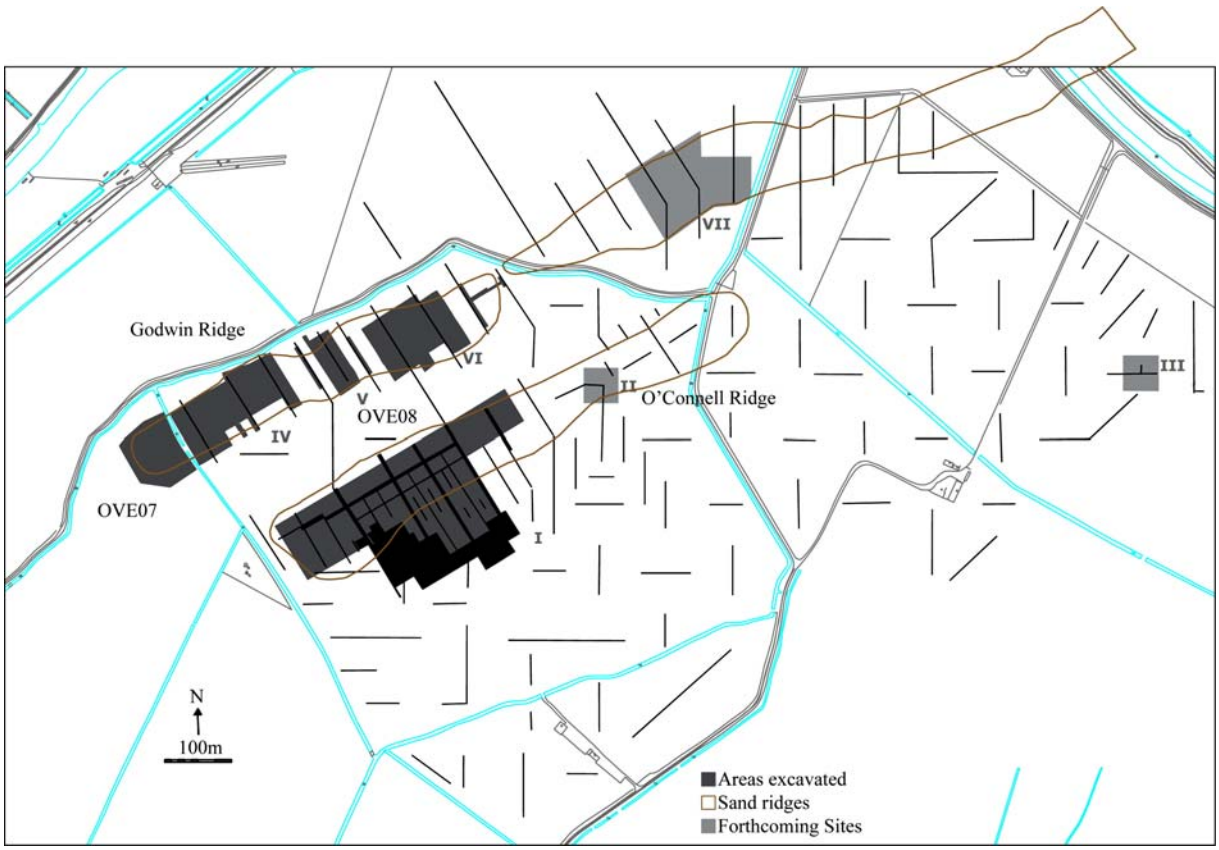

Fig. 3 — 2007 and 2008 archaeological investigations in the Needingworth/Over quarry.

higher density artefact scatters. Five such areas were thus defined and then excavated by chequerboard-like test pit arrangements (fig. 5):

1. The first corresponded to the top of the ridge at its south-western end, where high magnetic susceptibility survey showed an intense signal; a total of 40 test pits were there excavated.
2. The second and third areas were located on the southern slope of the ridge, also at its south-western edge, where the sampling had demonstrated finds densities exceeding 100 and 200 flints per metre respectively. A total of 112 test pits were deployed across both areas and, together with the next swathe, these yielded a major Mesolithic flint assemblage (see below).
3. A fourth concentration lay immediately east of the latter two and was just separated from them by a modern drainage ditch; there, a total of 53 test pits were dug.
4. Finally, 16 tests pits were excavated towards the centre of the ridge, where a high quantity of pottery had been recovered.

For logistical reasons no sieving was undertaken at these later stages. However, in order to maximise finds retrieval it was decided to completely excavate three further 'blocks' of buried soil where the sampling had demonstrated substantial buried soil finds densities; these covered, in total, 195 m^2. In addition, a series of transects were dug across washed sand deposits bordering the ridge's northern and southern sides in order to clarify the relationship between the sand ridge and the surrounding palaeochannels.

Only after these extensive phases of sampling was the rest of the buried soil stripped using a mechanical digger to expose the surface of the non-altered sand and to identify cut features; the latter were then entirely excavated and sampled for environmental analyses.

The outcome of this ambitious excavation policy is that the ridge-area yielded some 60,000 finds. However, only approximately a quarter of these derived from its cut features, with the bulk otherwise all coming from the buried soil and the water-washed deposits; factoring for the site's sample-ratio, it is estimated that the ridge's sub-soils would have held, in total, of some 1.4 million finds.

Fig. 4 — Aerial photograph of the archaeological investigations in the Needingworth/Over quarry (June 2008).

2. *A Ridgeway Palimpsest*

The exceptional preservation of the ridge's buried soil provided a palimpsest of its numerous 'use-horizons' from the Mesolithic onwards and, of which, there is only scope here to briefly list those findings attributable to the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bell Beaker periods (which belongs to the Early Bronze Age in the British terminology).

2.1. Mesolithic

An important flint scatter belonging to the Late Mesolithic has been excavated on the south-western edge of the ridge. This yielded no less than 12,000 flint artefacts. Nearly all the finds derived from the buried soil, with a very minor subset from within the underlying sand that most probably had percolated downward. Because of the nature of the buried soil (and the effects of later agriculture), no clear spatial patterning can be unravelled from this scatter as, for instance, Mesolithic microliths were found in association with Iron Age potsherds.

Lithic analysis suggests that, despite some mixing with later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age elements, the vast majority of this ridge-end assemblage can be assigned to the Late Mesolithic, although an earlier Mesolithic contribution cannot be discounted. The variety of tools (obliquely blunted points, scrapers) and the presence of elements belonging to all phases of the *chaîne opératoire* (preparation flakes, cores, blades, retouched or not) suggests that this assemblage corresponds to episodic usage, reflective of numerous discreet events of varying duration and character.

The remainder of the ridge was otherwise marked by a paucity of Mesolithic elements.

2.2. Early Neolithic

Indications of the Early Neolithic period were sparse. One of the problems rests in the difficulty to disentangle the Early Neolithic industries from the Late Mesolithic material. It is thus possible, if not probable, that a fraction of the Mesolithic scatter incorporates Early Neolithic artefacts. This is reinforced by the discovery of few definitely Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowheads and a handful of diagnostic potsherds. The restricted Early Neolithic presence is further confirmed by the fact that only a single pit can be attributed to this period, and that only tentatively.

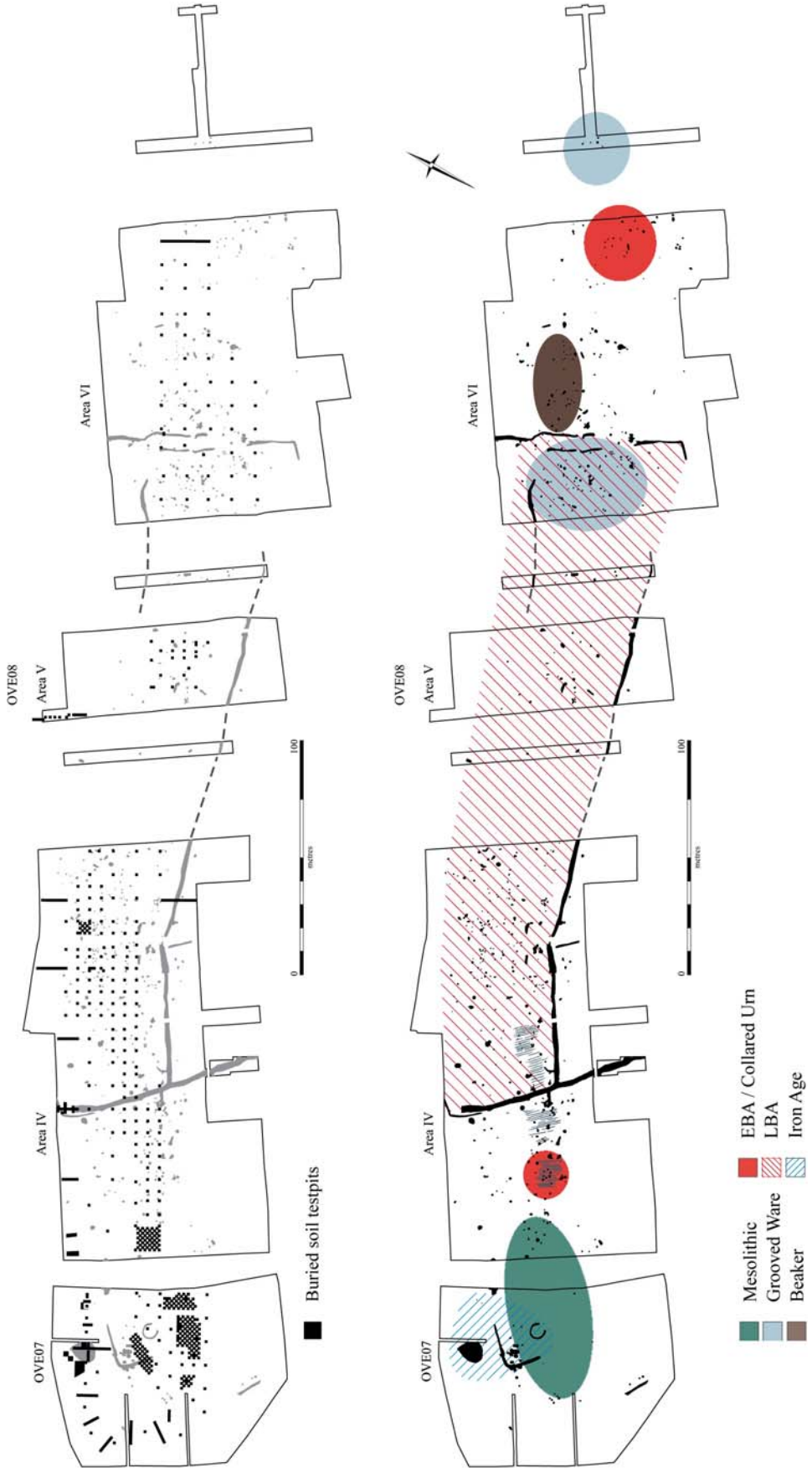

Fig. 5 — The Godwin Ridge complex. Above: plan of the buried soil sampling. Below: distribution of the main archaeological phases.

2.3. *Later Neolithic*

Later Neolithic remains are more substantive, with both transverse and oblique arrowheads recovered. There were, in addition, occurrences of Peterborough Ware, mostly scattered on the south-western end of the ridge, and Grooved Ware, distributed along its length.

This apparent differential distribution between both Later Neolithic ceramic productions is reproduced by the associated features. While the Peterborough Ware within features was consistently residual, several cut features were themselves attributed to the Grooved Ware phase. Of the latter, a cluster of pits located in the eastern half of the ridge is of particular interest, as it recalls similar clusters previously observed in other areas of the Needingworth Quarry (Sites 3, Area B & Site 4, Area D; see Garrow, 2006).

2.4. Bell Beaker Phase

Evidence for the Bell Beaker phenomenon was relatively extensive on the Godwin Ridge, with an assemblage of 16 barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, finds of pottery in the buried soil, as well as from several cut features.

Of these, the most important cluster lies in the eastern half of the ridge where it is at its lowest point. This consisted of three pits, which yielded the remains of several Beakers, including a late Rusticated one. Although no material has been found in them, it is possible that these pits are associated with a series of six postholes 5 m southwards. The latter features defined a small apsidal structure, which bears close comparison with one at the Bell Beaker site on Beacon Hill (Gibson, 1987).

3. Conclusions

Given its immediate landscape situation, the ridge would have provided an ideal locale for the exploitation of its surrounding wetlands. Interestingly enough, though, it also clearly saw arable activity and, as shown on figure 5, the parallel lines of spade-cultivation plots were present along its southern flanks. Themselves truncated by Early Bronze Age occupation features, this evidence of agricultural production is probably attributable to either the ridge's Grooved Ware or Bell Beaker usage (radiocarbon dates and pollen analysis results are still forthcoming).

The archaeological investigations on the Godwin Ridge fully confirmed the archaeological potential of this great geological feature. The intensity of the occupation/usage along its length is extraordinary and attests to the long-term draw and appeal of this feature within the local landscape. Of its many *period-horizons*, the discovery of an extensive Mesolithic scatter is most remarkable given the general paucity of sites of this time in the region. While the Grooved Ware features fit well with previous evidence, the evidence of Bell Beaker occupation, including a roundhouse, is also particularly noteworthy.

The fieldwork further confirmed the known potential of this environmental niche: at the interface between relatively dryland terraces and the fen marshlands. From a methodological point of view, it also demonstrated the importance of taking into consideration buried soils in the appraisal of sites; this component is too often overlooked in developer-funded archaeology, where the extensive stripping of sites – usually with little or no accompanying top-/buried soil investigation – has become far too commonplace (see Evans, forthcoming b).

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