Introducing the Holocene archaeology of the Brecks Fen edge and river valleys

David Robertson

Edward Martin

NORFOLK GEODIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

The Brecks

Archaeology East Anglia

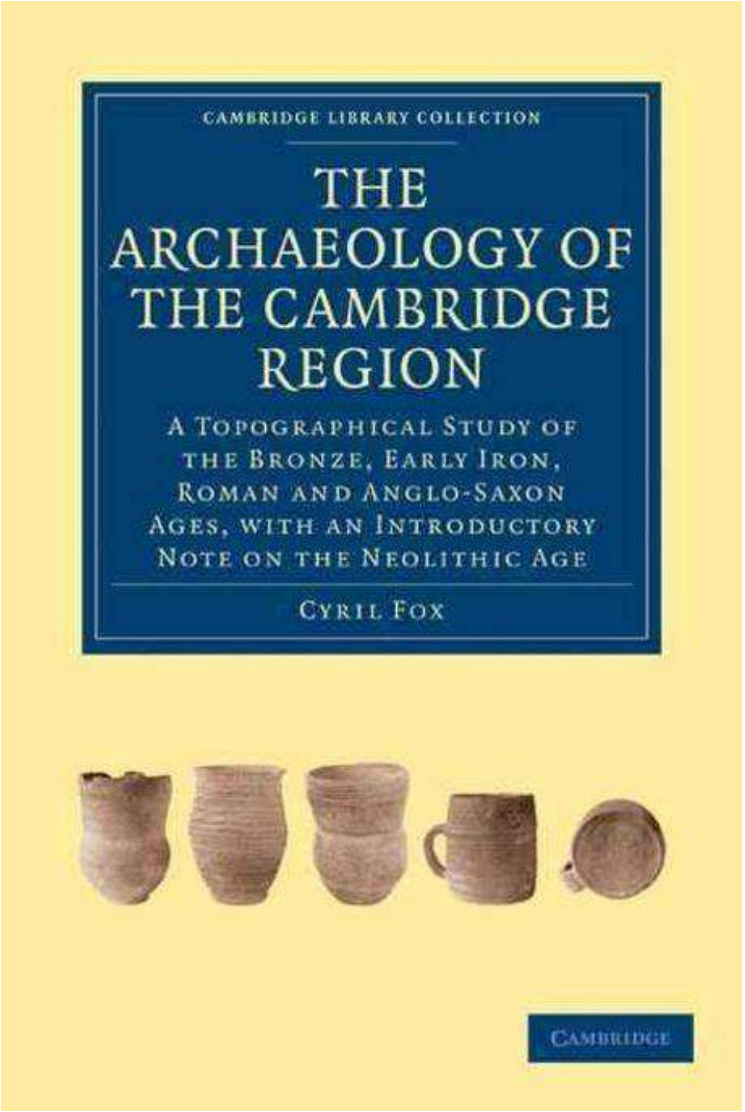
David Robertson: introduction and Norfolk sites

Edward Martin: Suffolk sites

Image: Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership

Previous archaeological research

- Antiquarian interest, 17th to early 20th centuries
- Fenland Research Committee, from 1932
- Rescue archaeology, from 1960s
- Local collectors and excavators, from 1960s
- Work by archaeologists 1970s and 1980s
- Fenland Project 1981-1995
  - Field survey
  - Fenland Evaluation Project
  - Fenland Management Project



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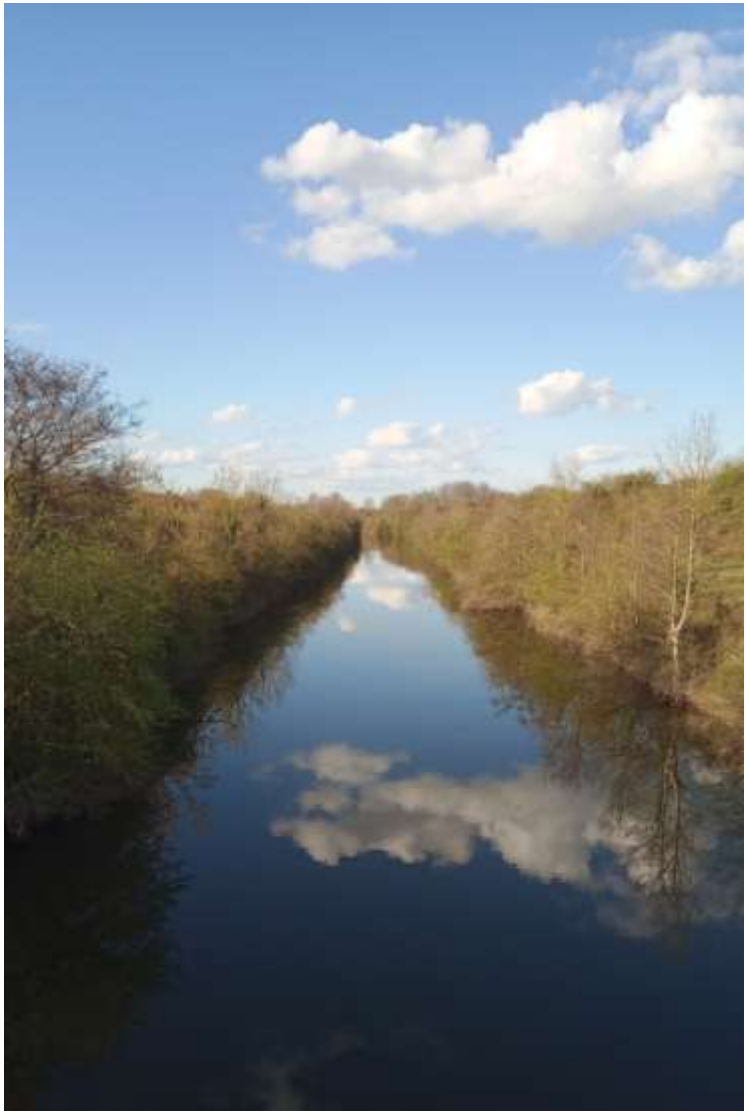

Image: Archaeology East Anglia

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Images: East Anglian Archaeology 78/Archaeology East Anglia

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Image: East Anglian Archaeology 79

Timeline

Palaeolithic: c.1 million – 10,000 BP

Mesolithic: c.10,000 – 6,000 BP

Neolithic: c.4000 – 2500

Bronze Age: 2500-700 BC

Iron Age: 700 BC to AD 43/60

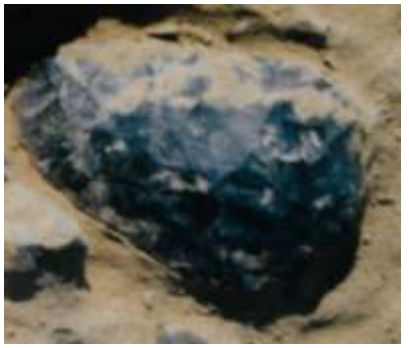
Roman: AD 43/60 – c.410

Early medieval: AD c.410 – 1066

Medieval: 1066 - 1540

Post medieval: 1540 - 1900

Modern: 1900 to present day



Images : Archaeology East Anglia (2), Davies *The Land of Boudica* (1); internet (2)

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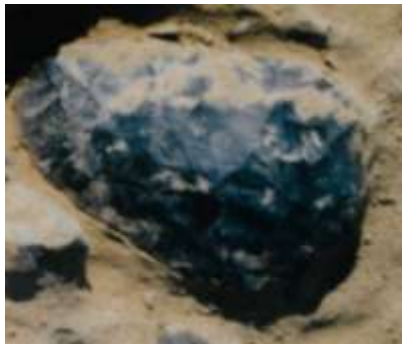

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Mesolithic c.10,000-6,000 BP

Woodland

Hunter gathers using flint tools: microliths and axes

Activity focused on sand hills and rivers

Activity buried under later deposits?

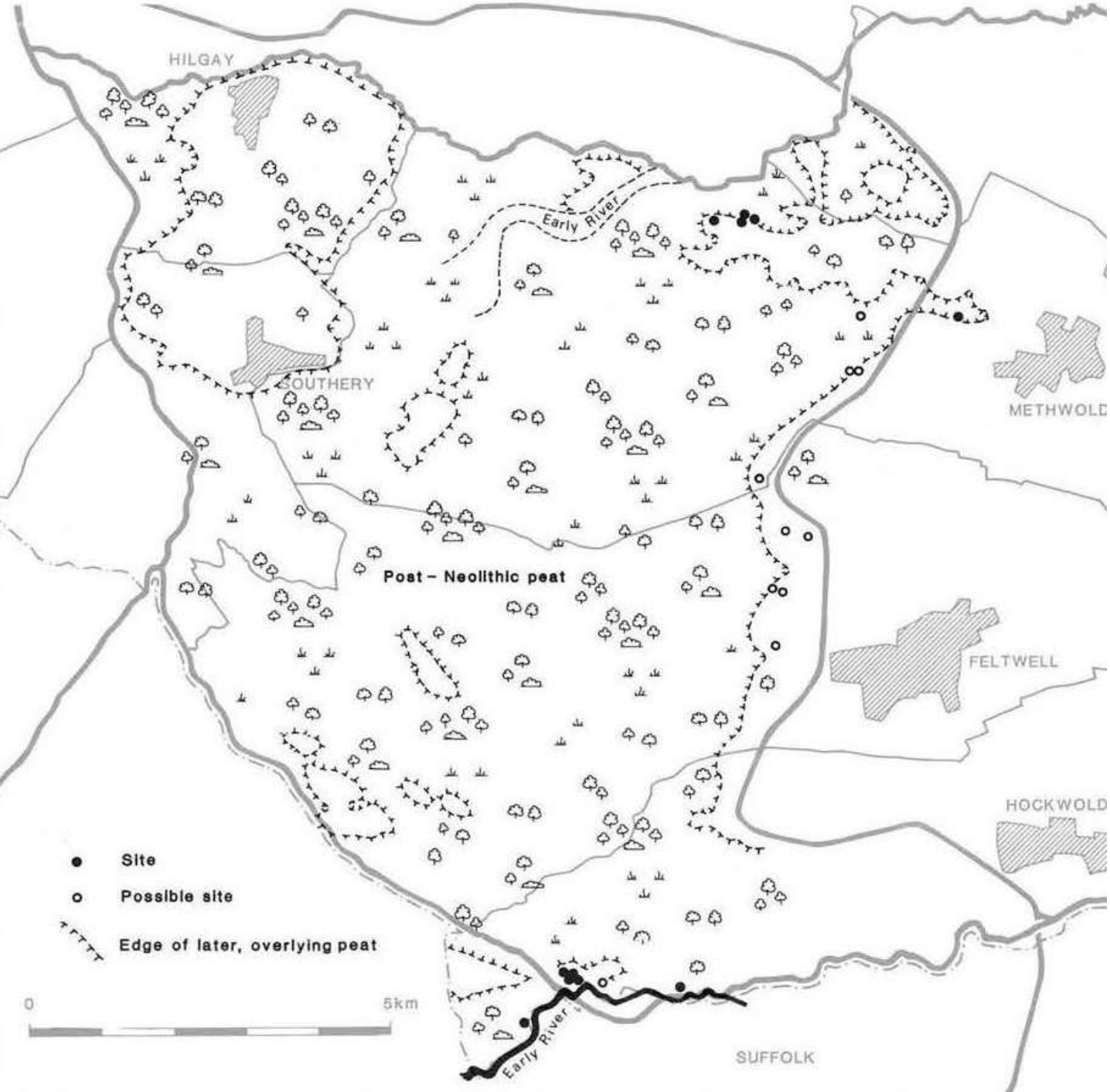


Image: East Anglian Archaeology 52, Figure 45

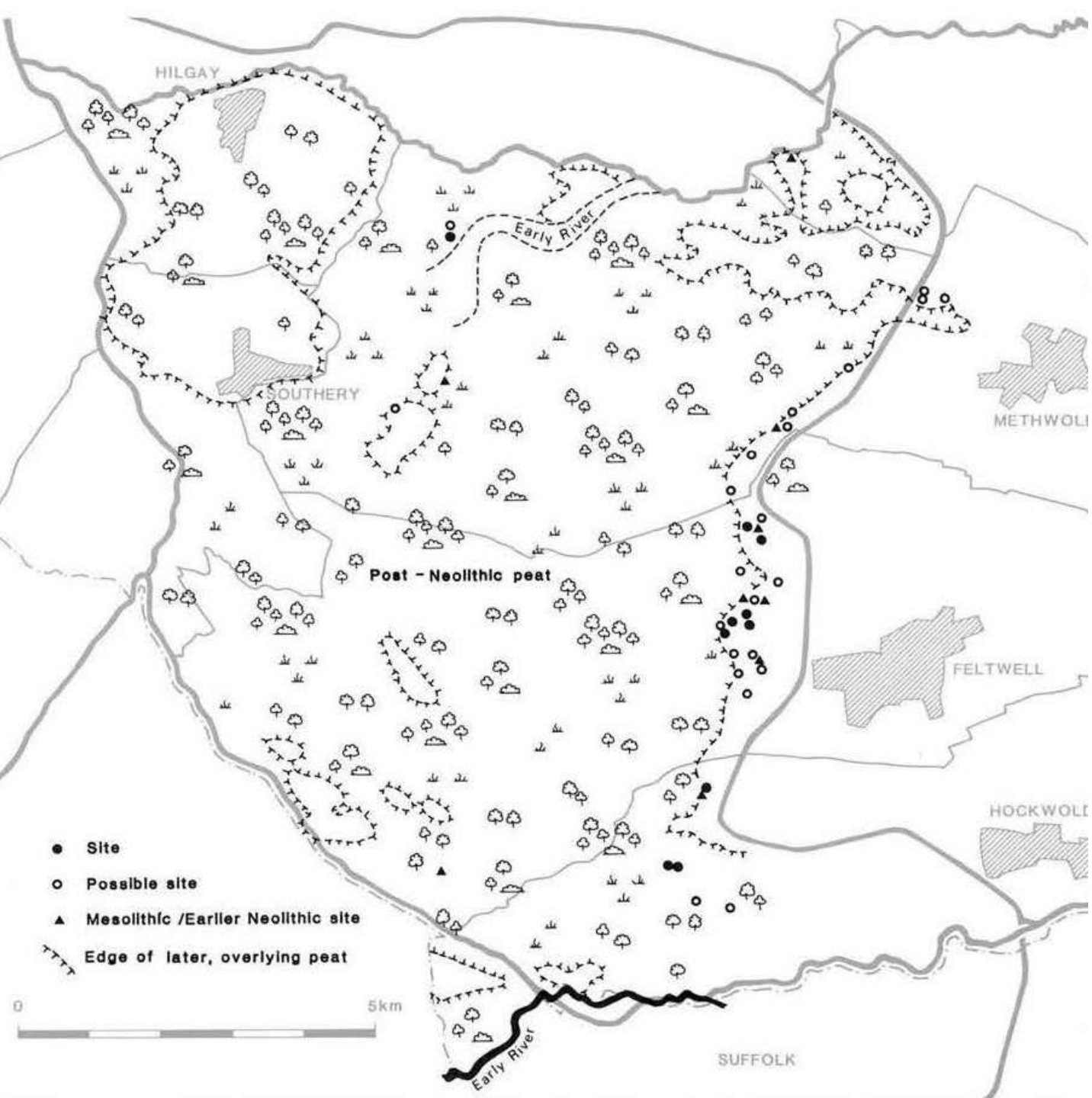
Mesolithic c.10,000-6,000 BP

Image: Catsholme, Clive Jonathon Bond

Mesolithic c.10,000-6,000 BP

Images: Catsholme, Clive Jonathon Bond

Earlier Neolithic c.4000-3000 BC



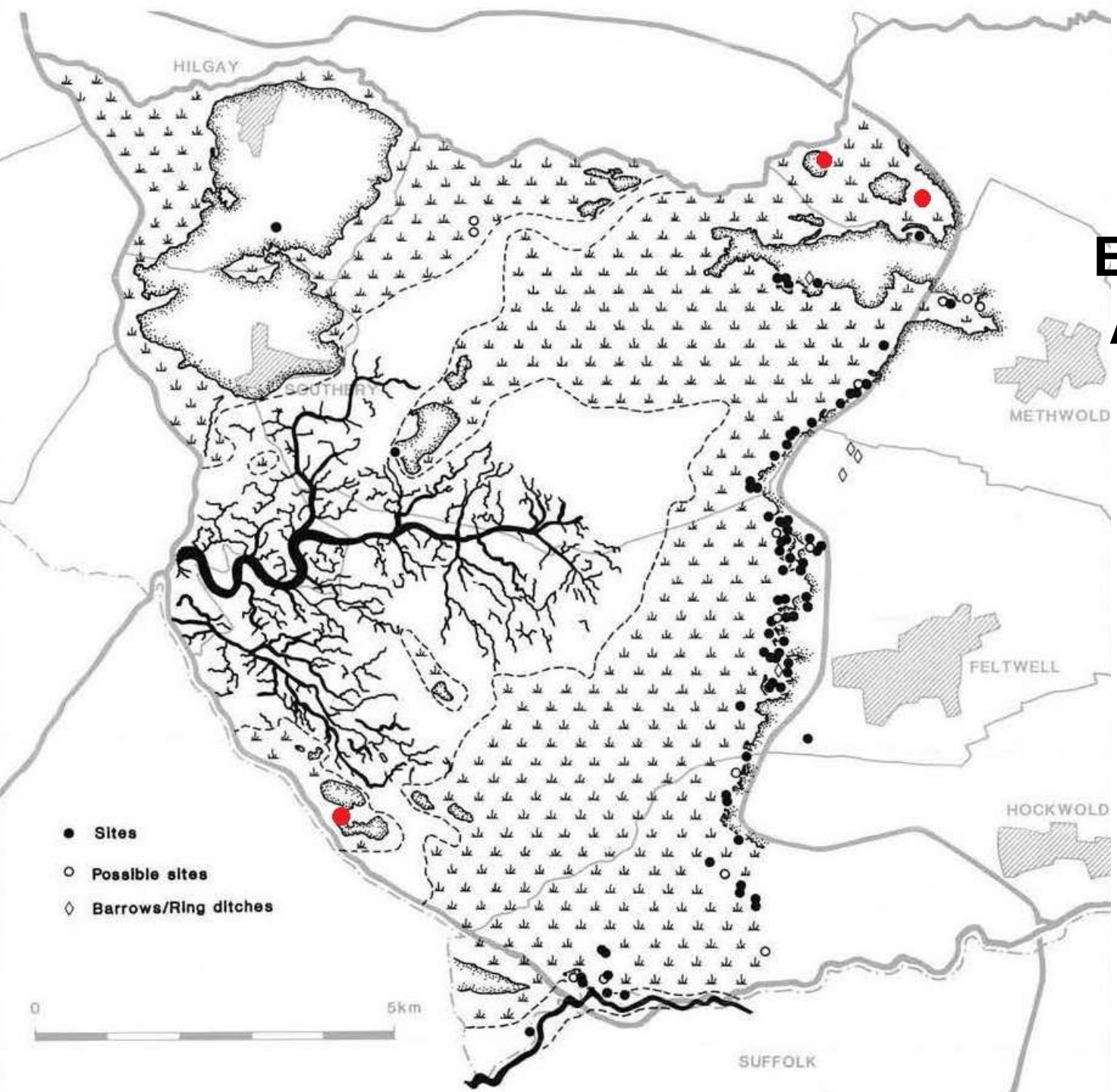
Freshwater environments developing in Fenland basin

First farmers: crops, domestic animals, flint tools, pottery

Activity moved to Fen edge

Image: East Anglian Archaeology 52, Figure 46

Later Neolithic & Early Bronze Age c.3000-700 BC



Coastal environments in Fenland basin

Farming : Beaker pottery, metal objects from c.2500BC, 'pot boilers', burials

Image: East Anglian Archaeology 52, Figure 47

‘Pot boilers’

Heat affected flint

Heated in fire

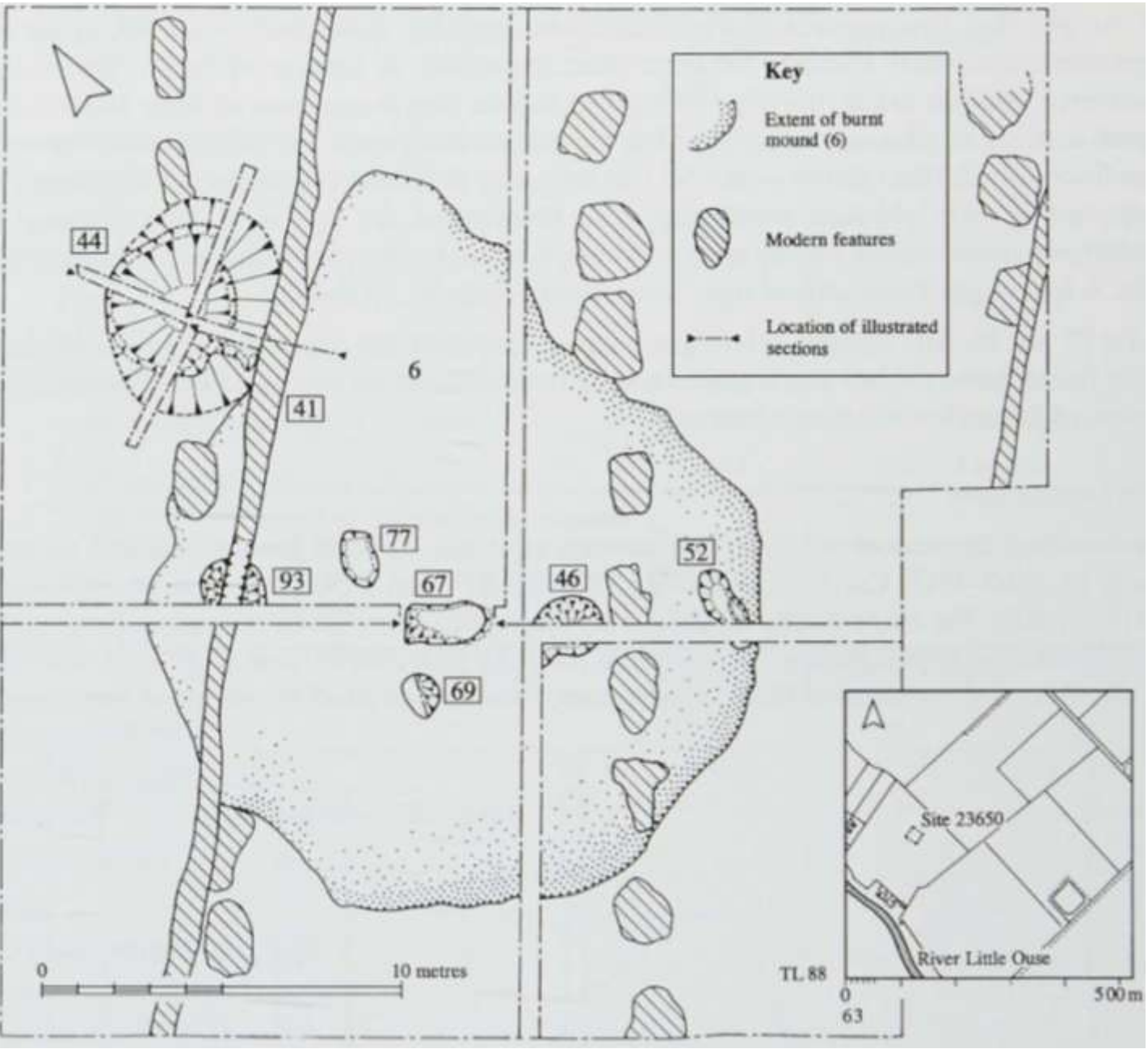
Placed in water while hot

Resulted in cracking, crazing, discolouration (white, grey, pink)

Cooking?
Bathing?
Sauna?
Industry?

More than 300 sites on Norfolk fen edge

Image: heat affected flint from Norfolk Wildlife Trust Watering Farm, Archaeology East Anglia



Burnt mounds

Feltwell Anchor, excavated 1992 by Mark Leah

Mound of black organic sand, charcoal and HA flint

Radiocarbon dating: 2460-1900 cal BC

Image: Bates, Norfolk Archaeology 1992, Figure 3

Burnt mounds

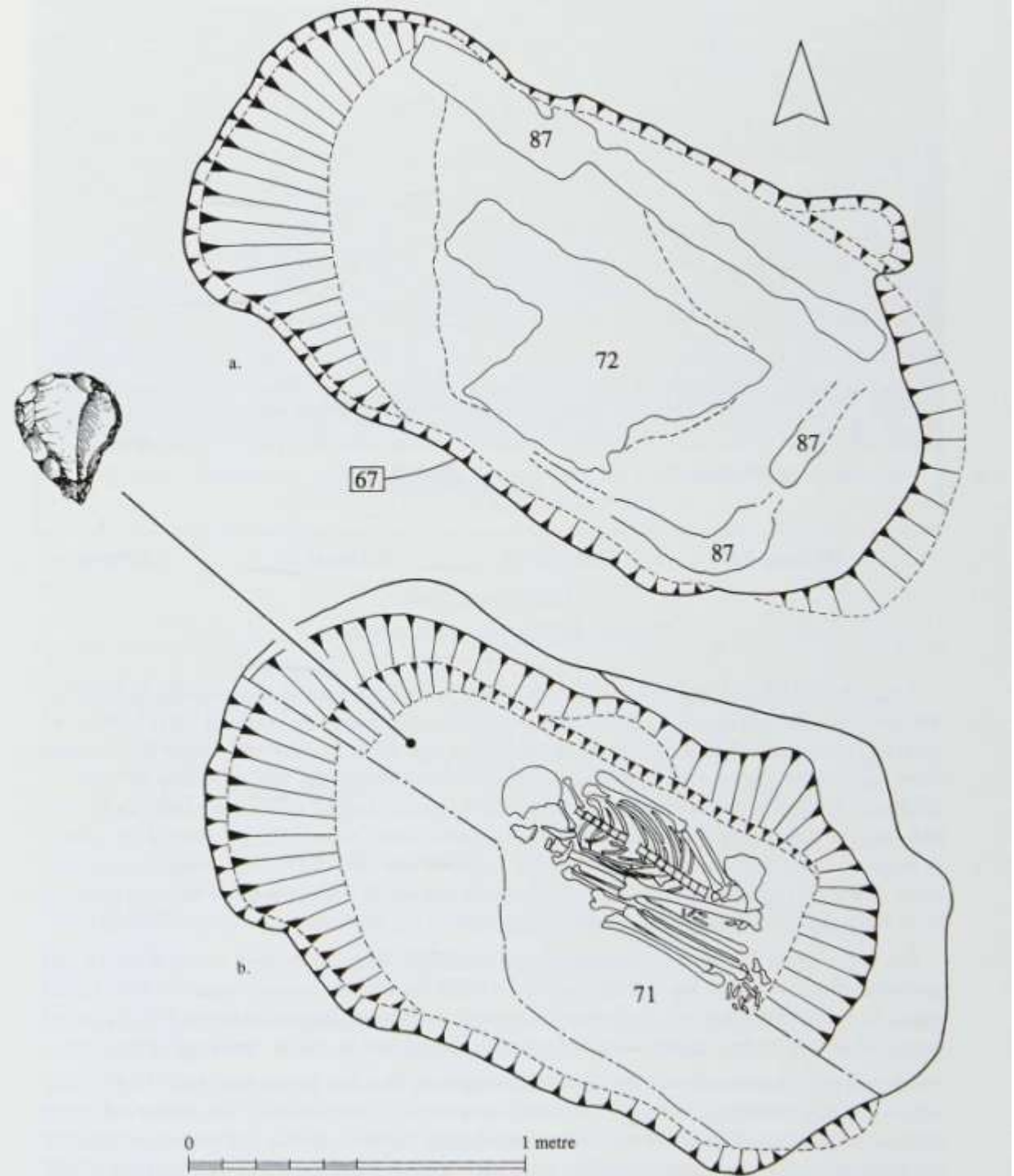
Feltwell Anchor

Waterlogged pit *44* to northwest

Over 1m deep

Timber trough: Hollowed alder trunk, 0.75m long, metal axe marks inside

Image: Bates, Norfolk Archaeology 1992, Plate 1



Burnt mounds

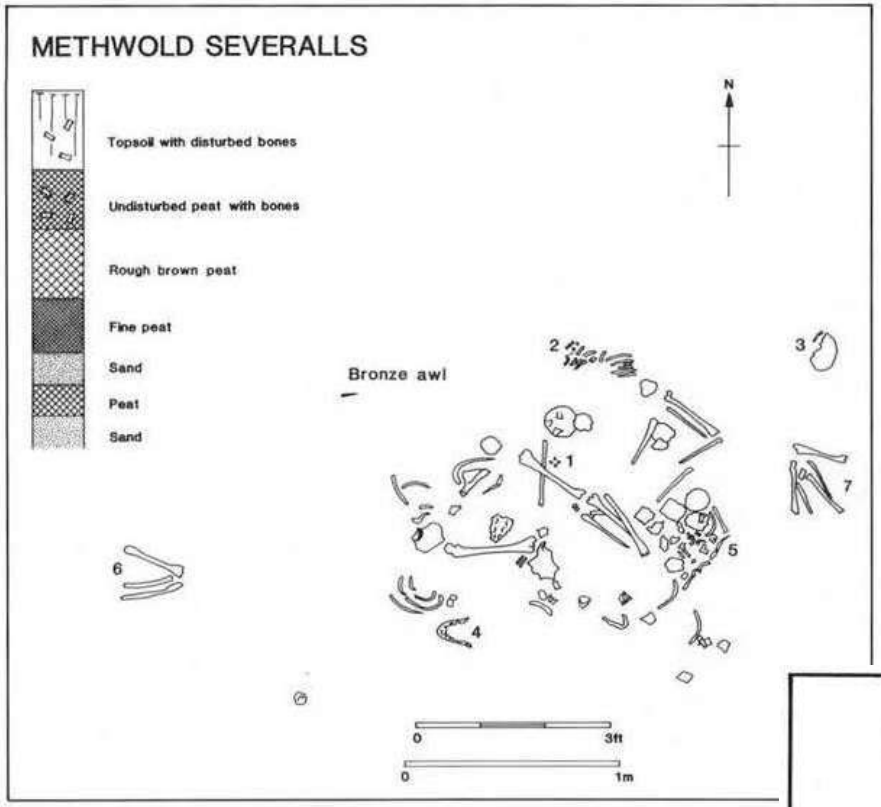
Feltwell Anchor

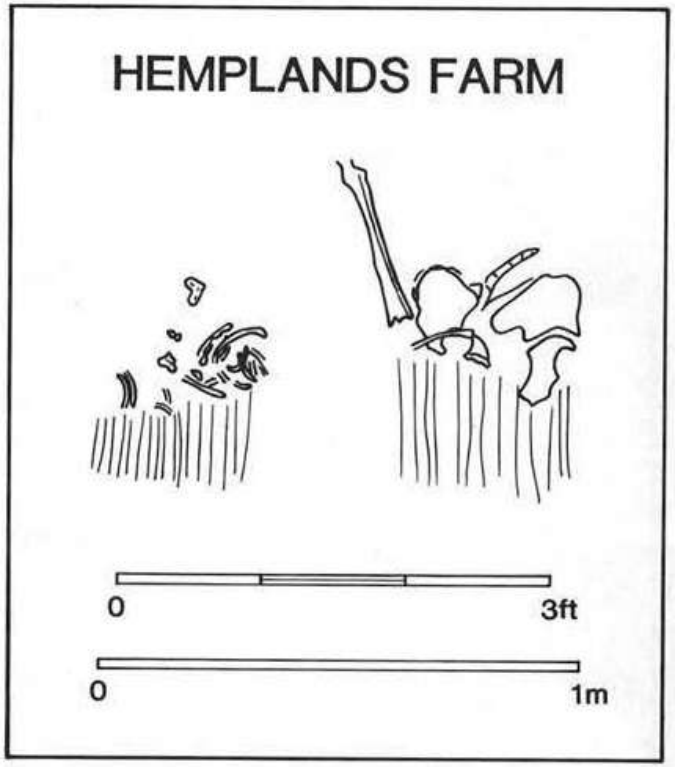
Grave *67* dug into centre of mound

Crouched inhumation in coffin, with flint scraper

Radiocarbon dating: 2140-1880 cal BC

Image: Bates, Norfolk Archaeology 1992, Figure 9





Burials

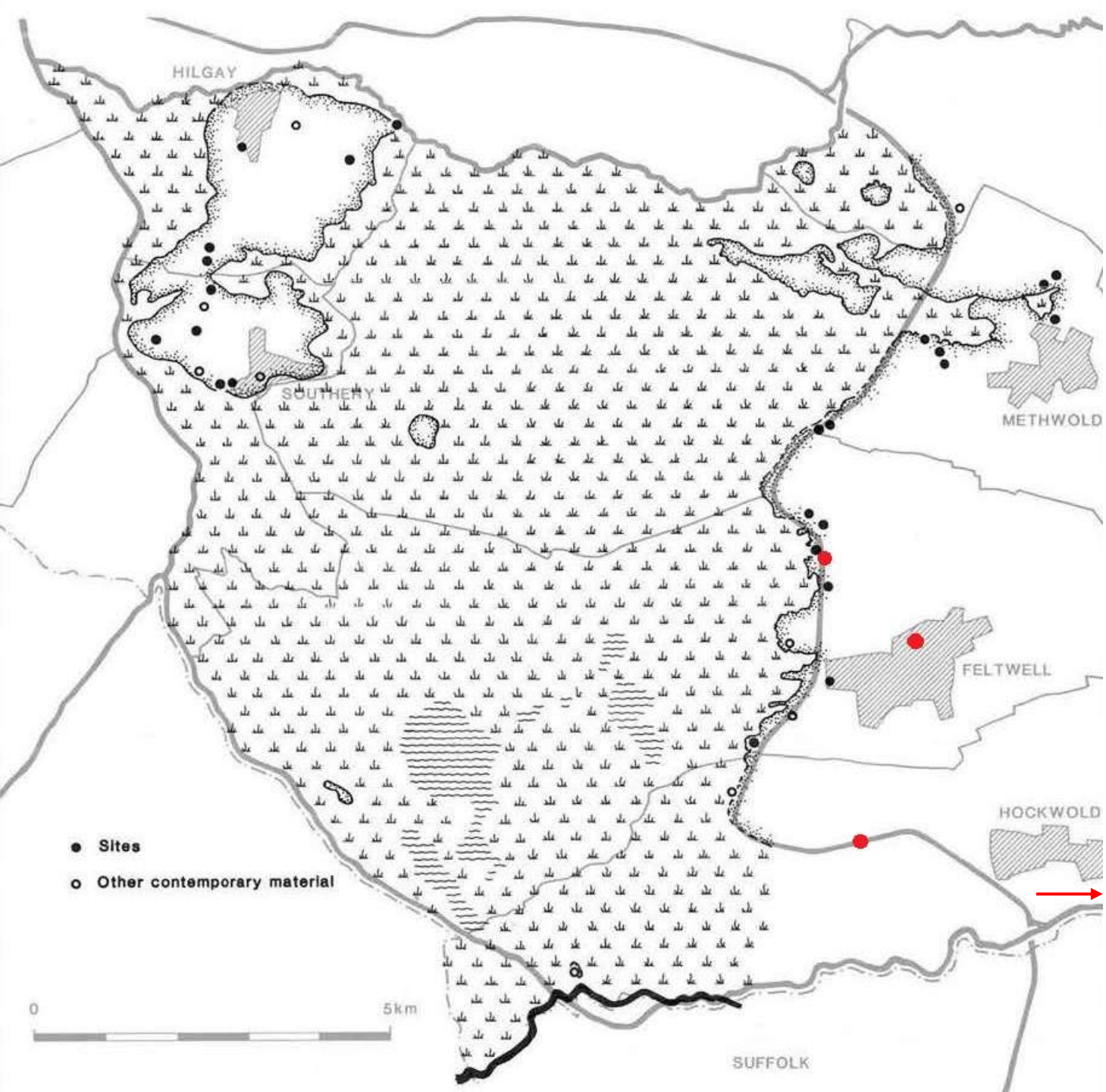
Hill Close, Feltwell:
30 individuals buried in natural hillock, excavated 1965

Hemplands Farm, Methwold:
adult woman, in peat, 1967

Methwold Severalls: 6 individuals, in peat, 1968

Where did the people live?

Images: East Anglian Archaeology 78, Figures 20 & 21



Roman AD 43/60-c.410

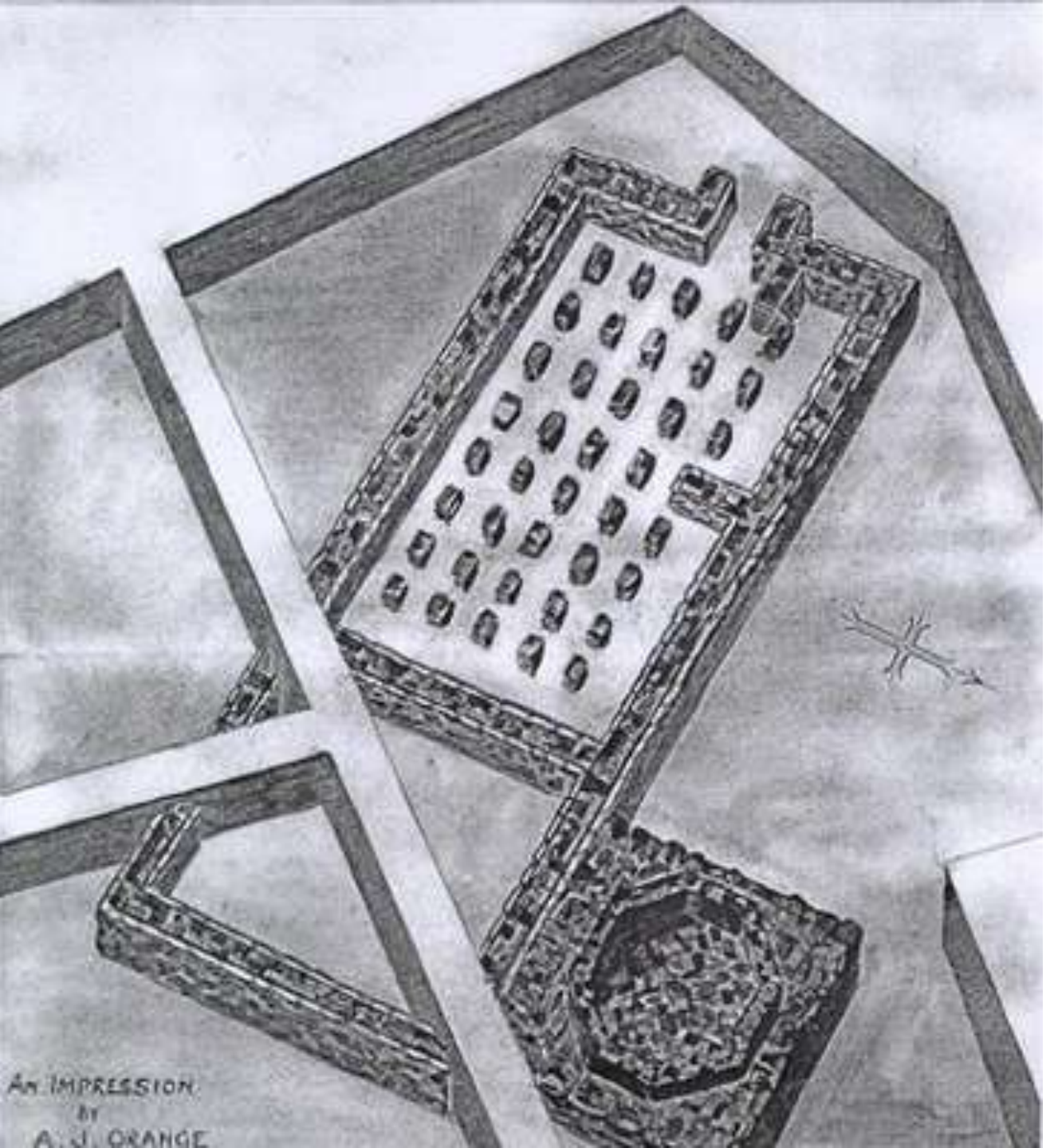
Freshwater environments in Fenland basin

Settlement hierarchy

- capital towns
- small towns
- rural settlements
- villas
- farmsteads

Ditched field systems

Image: East Anglian Archaeology 52, Figure 51



Roman AD 43/60-c.410

Glebe Farm, Feltwell

Bath-house excavated by Frank Curtis in 1964

3-4th century

Image: Norfolk Heritage Explorer (record NHER 4921)

Roman AD 43/60-c.410

Hockwold and Weeting

Known from cropmarks, chance discoveries and excavations

Image: Archaeology East Anglia, using Historic England aerial investigation mapping data and World Topographic Map in ArcGIS Pro

Images: Archaeology East Anglia (1); British Museum website © Trustees of the British Museum (2)

Roman AD 43/60-c.410

Hockwold and Weeting

Legally protected as a Scheduled Monument

and finally, the Fossditch

Image: Archaeology East Anglia, using Historic England aerial investigation mapping data and World Topographic Map in ArcGIS Pro