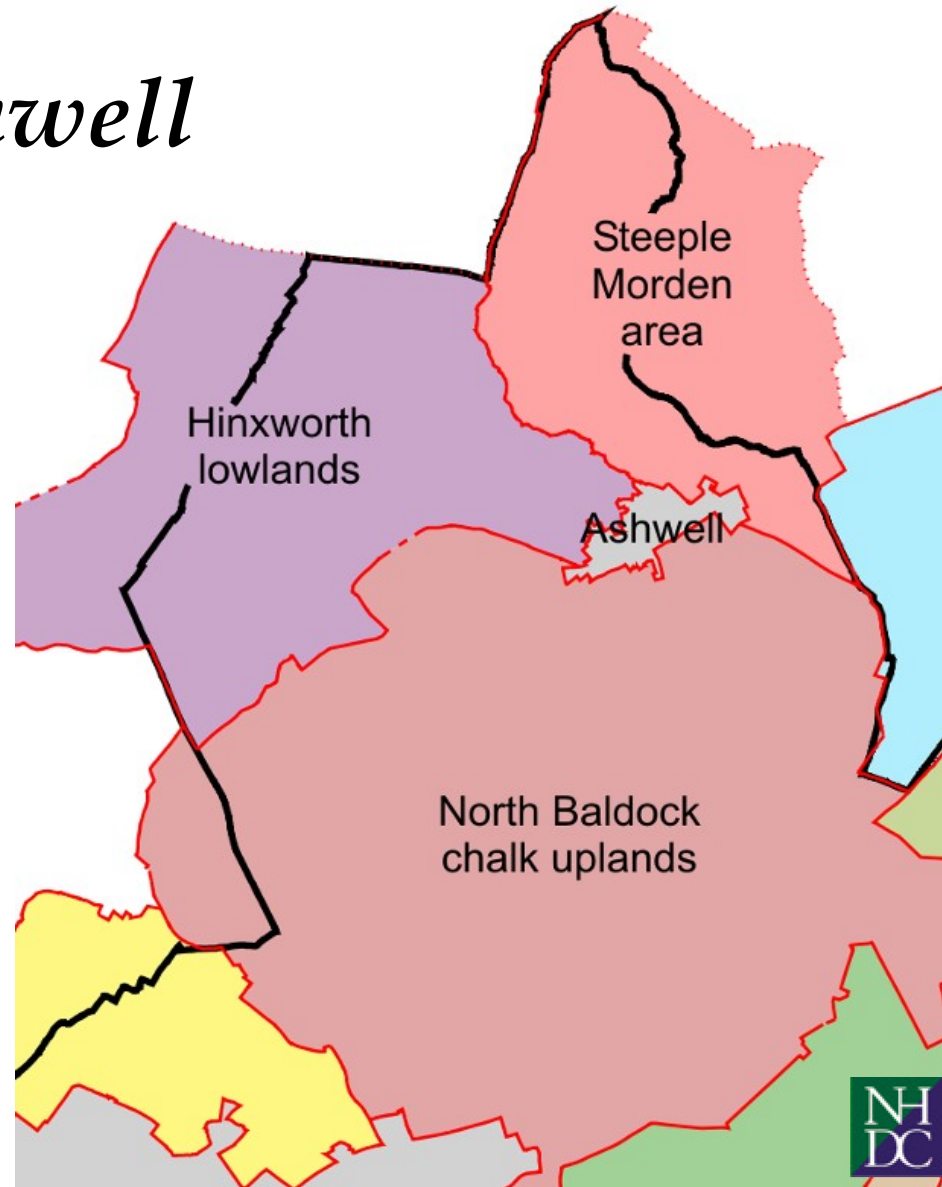# *From Springs to Senuna: the Archaeology of Ashwell*

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2013

Ashwell

- Occupies a northward 'projection' of Hertfordshire
  - Together with Bygrave, Hinxworth, Newnham, Caldecote and Radwell
- A distinctive character
  - The 'Hinxworth lowlands' west of the village
  - The 'Steeple Morden area' village centre and to the north
  - The 'North Baldock chalk uplands' south of Ashwell

Steeple Morden area

Hinxworth lowlands

Ashwell

North Baldock chalk uplands

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Early prehistory (before 4000 BC)

- No discoveries in Ashwell or neighbouring parishes
  - A handaxe found north-east of Stotfold is the nearest
- Many discoveries in the Hitchin area
  - Old river channel
  - Where a former land surface survives
    - Dates from the Hoxnian Interglacial, around 425,000 years ago
  - Dozens of handaxes
- The Mesolithic is even more obscure
  - Evidence from Baldock and the Weston Hills

The Neolithic (4000-3000 BC)

- Monuments
  - Long barrow east of Kingsland Way
  - Long barrow on Claybush Hill
  - Cursus at Nortonbury
- Finds
  - Three flint arrowheads from Westbury Farm
  - Greenstone axe and second axe west of Westbury Farm
  - Axe from Mobs Hole

The late Neolithic (3000-2000 BC)

- Numerous ring ditches
  - The remains of ploughed-out round barrows
    - The earliest examples belong to this period
- Henges
  - Two on the Weston Hills
  - Probable example in Norton
- Finds
  - Flints from close to the springs
  - Flint scatter west of Bygrave

The earlier Bronze Age (2000-1250 BC)

- Even more ring ditches
  - And some surviving barrows
    - Highley Hill
- Burials
  - Beaker burial at Caldecote
  - Newinn, Hinxworth
- Finds
  - Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead from Arbury Banks
  - Bronze finds from Ashwell End

The later Bronze Age (1250-850 BC)

- Much more obscure
  - No more burials under mounds
- Date of most of the Bronze Age metalwork from Ashwell End
  - Deposited in the second and third centuries AD
  - Why?

The Early Iron Age (850-400 BC)

- This is when things begin to happen in the landscape
  - Establishment of Arbury Banks
  - Enclosures at Blackhorse Road, Letchworth
  - Wilbury Hill given massive bank and ditch
    - But left incomplete
- We can begin to see settlements
  - Although burials are no longer commonplace

Arbury Banks

- Oval enclosure on a plateau
  - Investigated by Joseph Beldam in 1859
    - Who showed that it had two concentric ditches
  - Pottery was collected by Dan Pinnock in 1958/9
    - Mostly of Middle and Late Iron Age date (*c* 400 BC-AD 43)
  - Ditches recorded in 1991
    - Water pipe trench passing within 50 m of the defences
    - One of the ditches was Iron Age in date

- A prominent location
  - With good views to the north
  - But not really very defensible
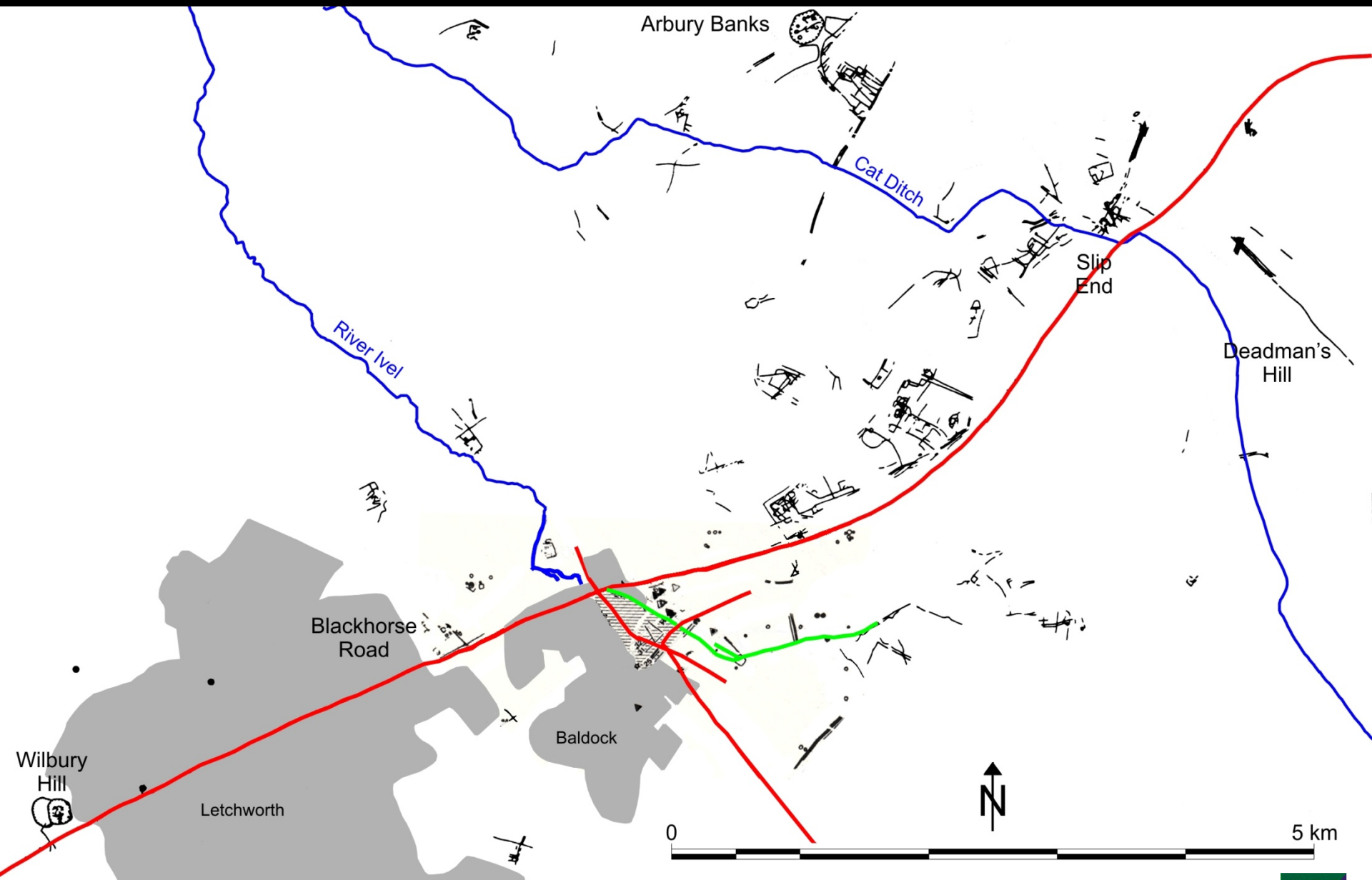   - Similar to Wilbury, on the edge of Letchworth
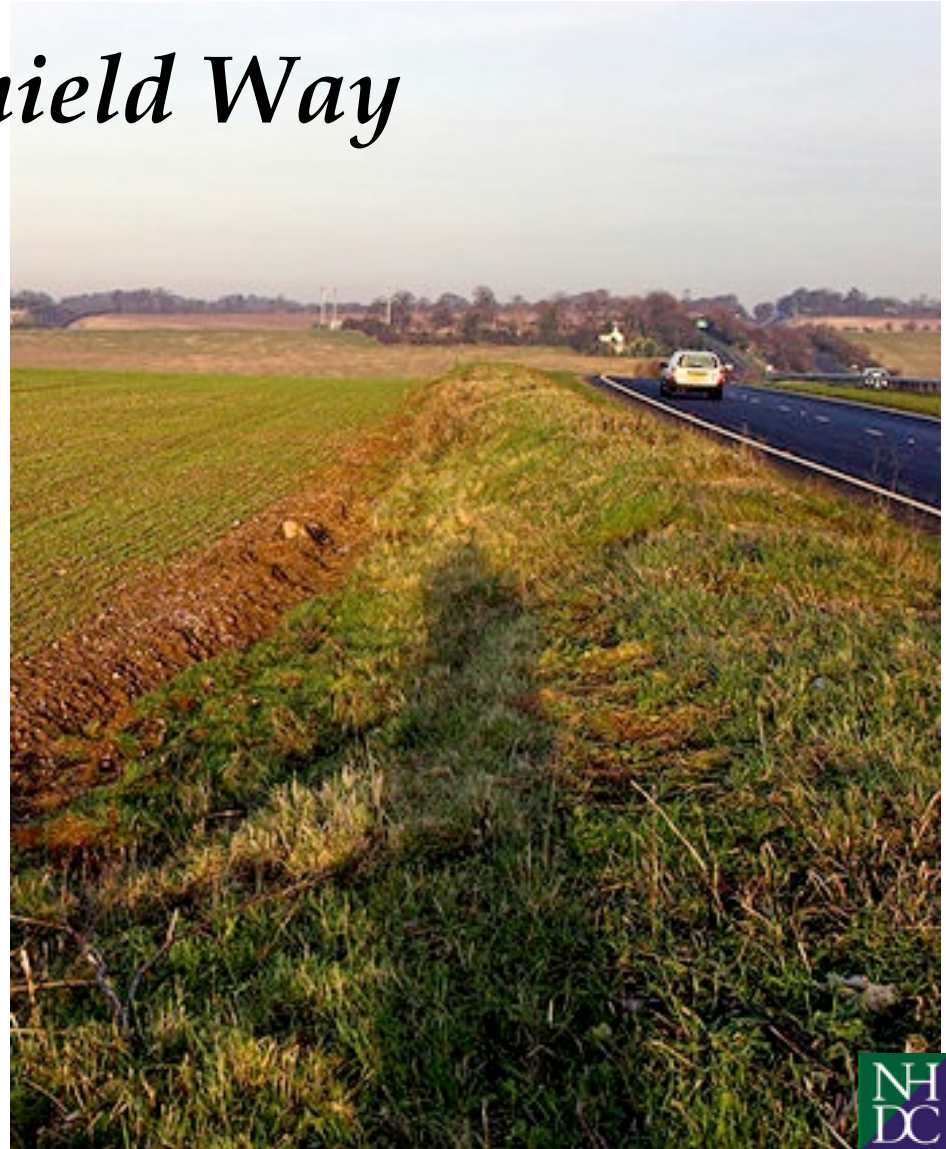
Lots of ditches

- Many long ditches dug in the Middle Iron Age (*c* 400-100 BC)
  - Some are at right angles to the Icknield Way
    - Series passing Deadman's Hill
  - Some are parallel with it
    - Around Slip End
  - Some radiate from the Arbury Banks area
- Part of a system surrounding Baldock
  - Which began to develop as a settlement around this time
  - A type known as an *oppidum*

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Arbury Banks

Cat Ditch

River Ivel

Slip End

Deadman's Hill

Blackhorse Road

Baldock

Wilbury Hill

Letchworth

N

0   5 km

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The Icknield Way

- Once claimed to be very ancient
  - A Neolithic track distributing flint from Grimes Graves
  - And perhaps even older
- Recently shown to be an eighteenth-century fantasy
  - Many stretches did not exist before then
  - Although some did
    - Including between Royston and Dunstable
- So parts are ancient
  - But not a long-distance trackway

Up to the Roman conquest

- The settlement at Baldock continued to grow
  - By the end of the first century BC, we can call it a "town"
- And it dominated its hinterland
  - Politically
    - The chieftains' burials
  - Economically
    - A port of trade for luxury goods
  - Socially
    - The town must have grown by attracting settlers
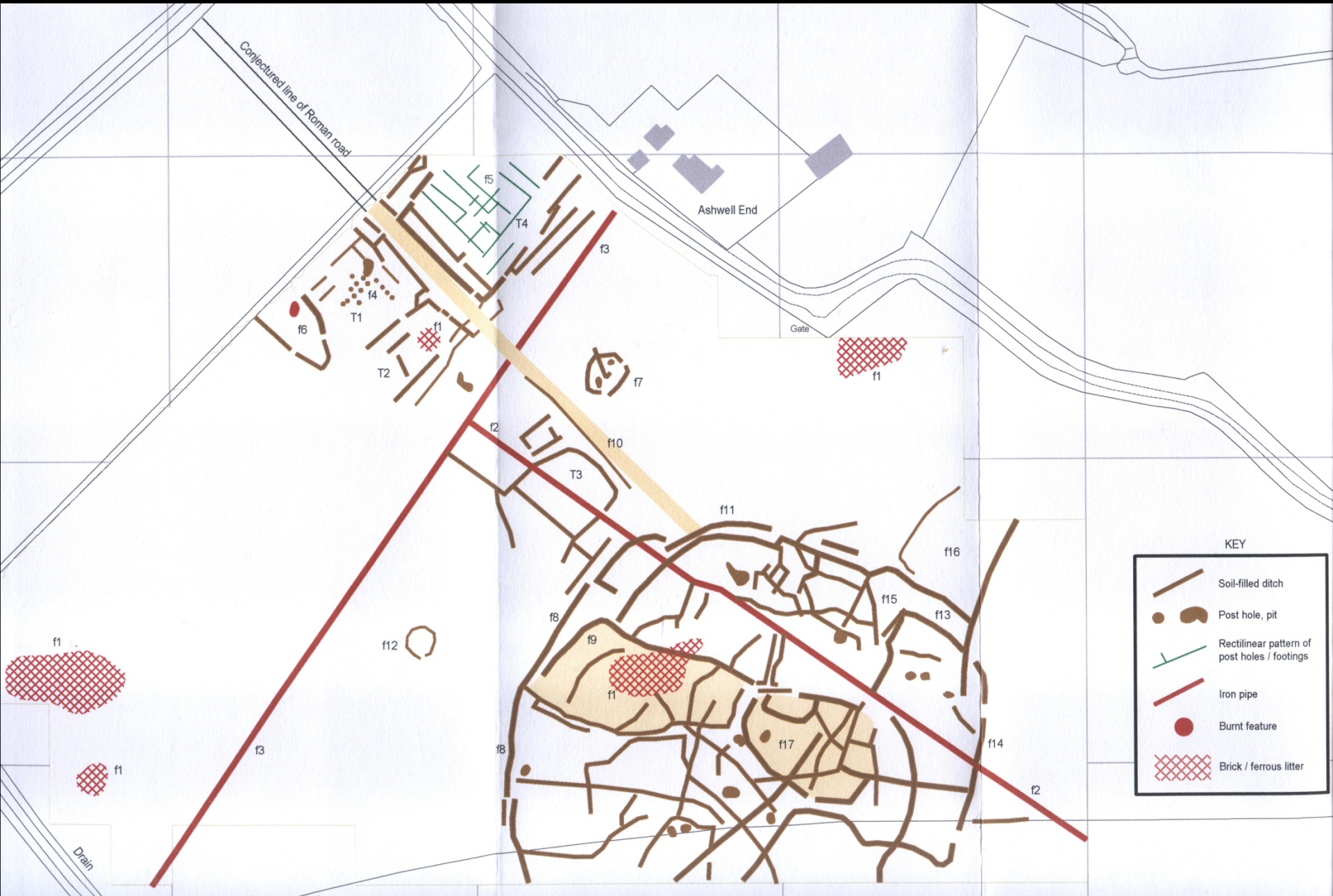   - But villages grew up nearby, too

Ashwell End

- A site has been known around Bluegates Farm since the nineteenth century
  - Little formal investigation
  - Some work in the early 1970s
    - When Pricem's Field was first ploughed
- Discovery of a treasure hoard in 2002
  - Much media excitement
  - The "Near Baldock" hoard
  - Now generally known as the Senuna treasure
- But it is part of a wider settlement area
  - Beginning with a large Iron Age enclosure
  - Later moving north-west towards Bluegates Farm
  - The treasure was found on edge of the two settlements

Conjectured line of Roman road

Ashwell End

Gate

Drain

f5
T4
f3
f4
T1
f6
f1
T2
f7
f1
f2
f10
T3
f11
f16
f8
f15
f13
f9
f12
f1
f17
f1
f14
f8
f3
f1
f2

KEY

Soil-filled ditch

Post hole, pit

Rectilinear pattern of
post holes / footings

Iron pipe

Burnt feature

Brick / ferrous litter

Senuna

- You've probably all heard a lot about her already
  - No new insights tonight!
- She seems to have been equated with Minerva
  - As a goddess of wisdom and learning
- And perhaps also with Fortuna
- But important as a previously unknown goddess
  - Her name is Brittonic
    - It contains the adjective *seno-*, meaning 'old'

Slip End

- ## A village developed at Slip End
  - ### Parts of two of its cemeteries have been found
    - One in 1968 and again in 1991
    - The other in 1975-6
      - When it was wrongly thought to be Anglo-Saxon
- ## The settlement is less well known
  - ### But evidently grew up alongside the Icknield Way
  - ### And seems to have been quite extensive
    - It appears to have flourished between the first and fourth centuries AD
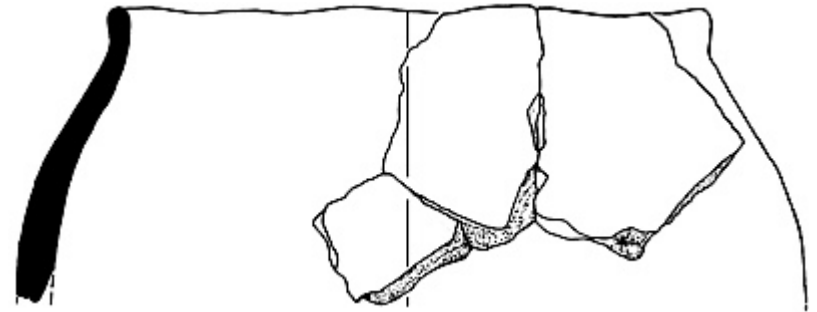
Huge villa site

- **Between Ashwell and the Icknield Way**
  - Large rectangular enclosures
  - Approached by a straight ditched road
  - Villa style building at the north-western end
- **Close to Arbury Banks**
  - Might it have been the residence of the former chieftain there?
  - Recently reinterpreted as a temple
    - Dedicated to the overthrow of Boudica
    - Whose last stand was at Arbury…
    - Probably slightly fanciful!

The fifth and sixth centuries

- A period for which there is little evidence
  - Although there is more over the county boundary
  - Does this mean the boundary is ancient?
- There is a late sixth-century jar from the spring area
  - Of Anglo-Saxon type
- And some metalwork has been found by detectorists
  - But we know nothing about its context

The origins of the settlement

- Ashwell is an Old English name
  - *Æscewelle* means 'Ash-tree spring'
  - It's an undatable type of placename
    - So we can't use it to suggest the origin of the village
- Ashwell is first mentioned *c* 1060
  - Before Domesday Book
    - When it has burgesses
    - Which means it was a town

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Why a town?

- Burgesses mean it was a *burh*
  - Which makes it a specific type of town
    - A market town
    - A defended town
    - An administrative centre
- And it's not the only one locally
  - Hitchin had a burghal ditch
- Why?
  - Probably part of Edward the Elder's reconquest of Mercia
    - Early tenth century
  - Accomplished by establishing defended towns
    - It was an era of town growth
    - And developing market economy

This is where I'll stop

- There is a great deal more to say
  - "Archaeology" doesn't end where "history" begins
    - It takes us right up to the present day
  - But there is much more evidence for the recent past
    - Surviving buildings
    - Possessions
    - Documents…

- So the medieval and later story is for another time
  - If you'll let me!