

From Senuna to *Æscewelle*:  
the Archaeology of Ashwell  
part 2

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# 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

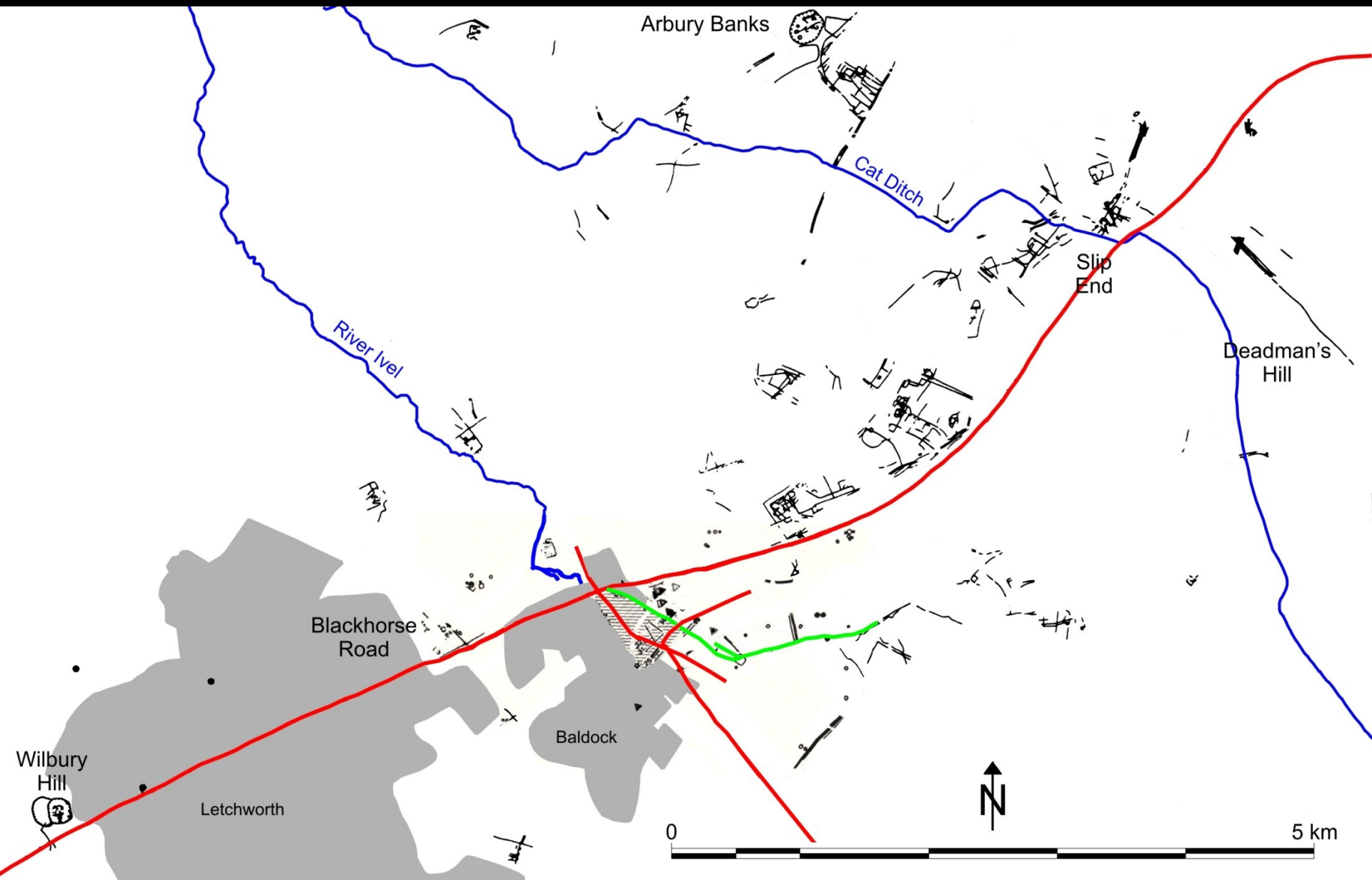


# Prehistory

- ◆ Ashwell lay in the territory of Arbury Banks
  - Oval enclosure on a plateau
    - Investigated by Joseph Beldam in 1859
    - Pottery was collected by Dan Pinnock in 1958/9
  - Middle and Late Iron Age date (c 400 BC-AD 43)
- ◆ A prominent location
  - With good views to the north
  - But not really very defensible
    - Similar to Wilbury, on the edge of Letchworth



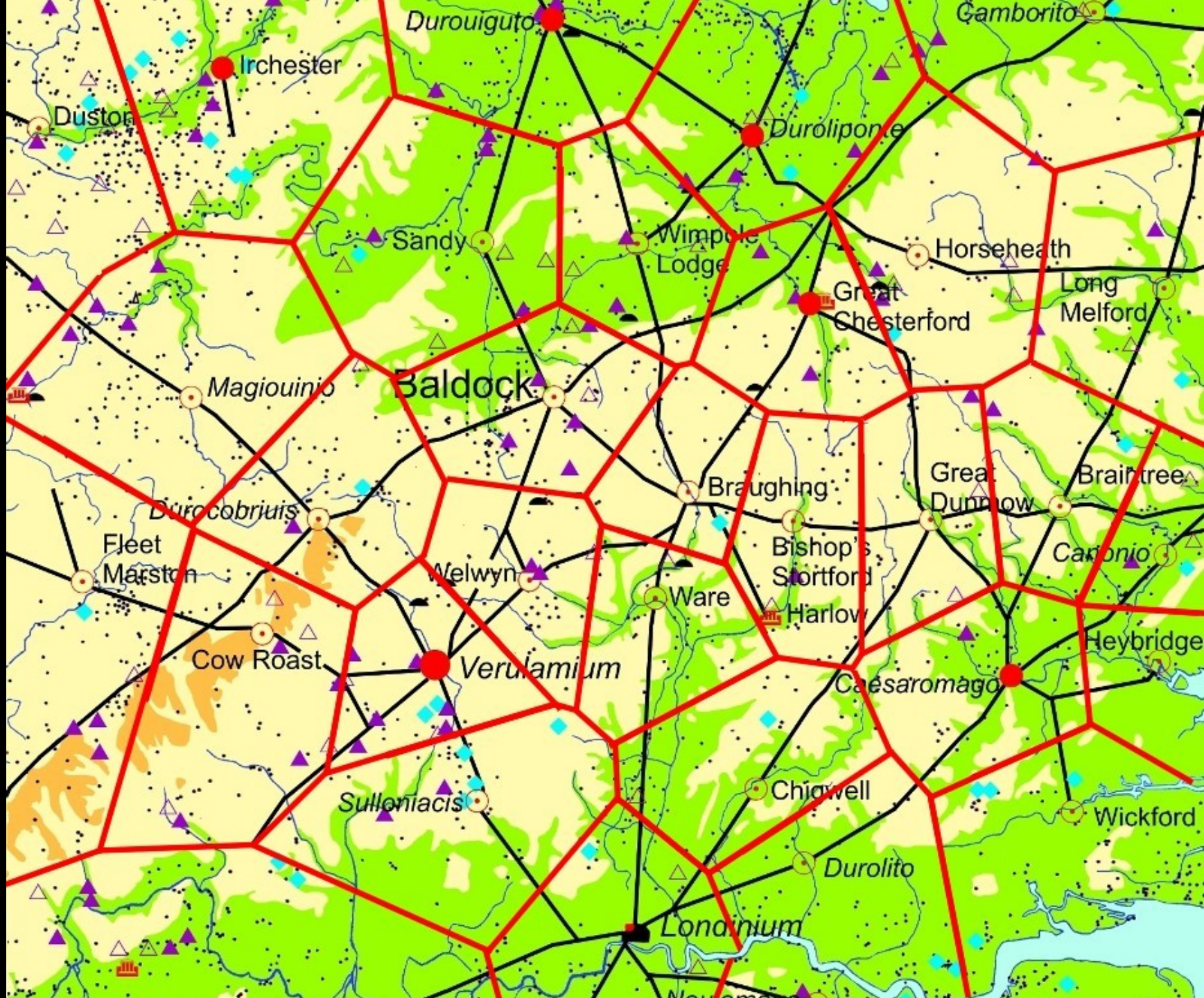


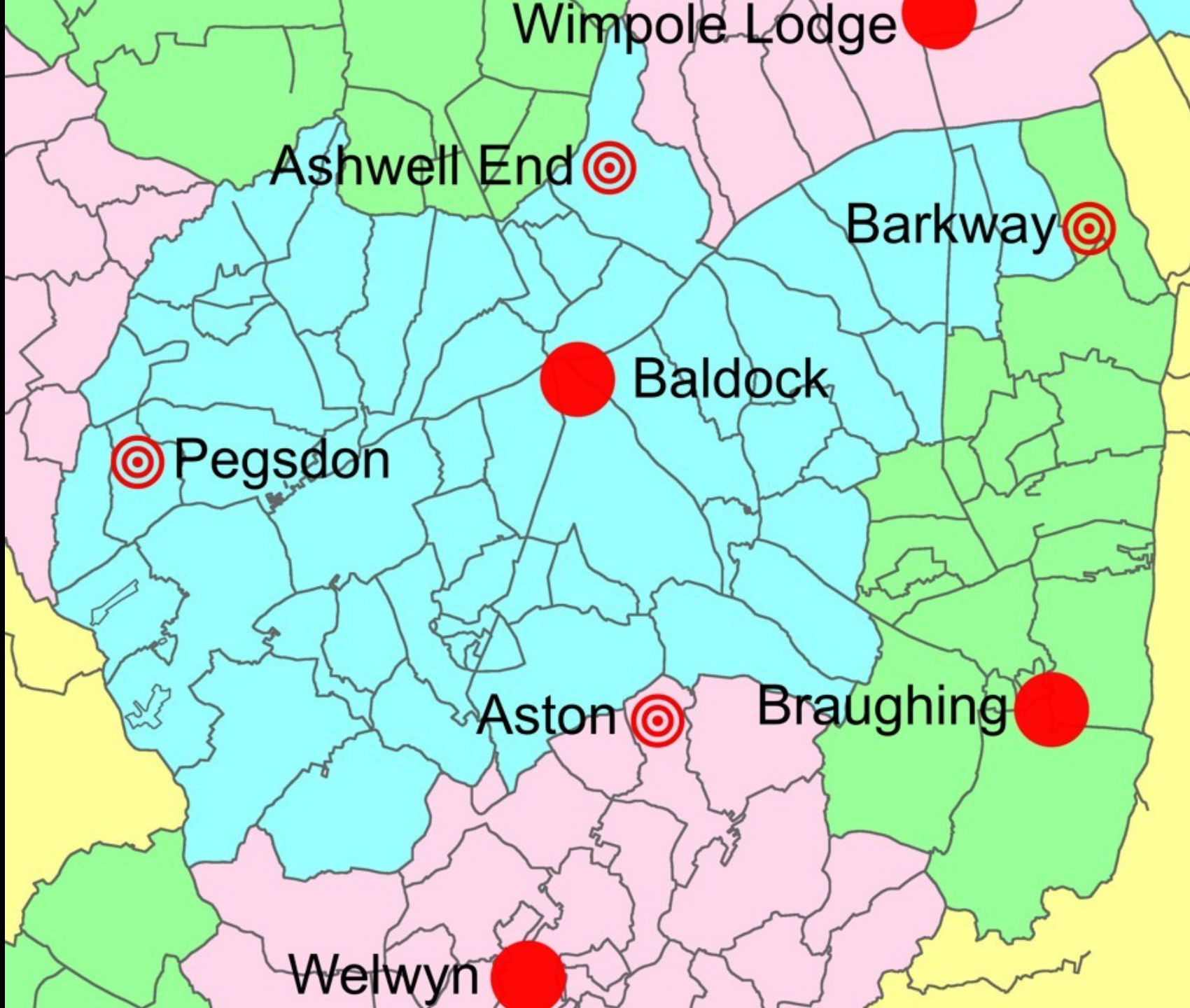


# The Roman period

- ◆ Baldock was the dominant settlement locally
  - A 'small town' with its own council
  - And a prosperous hinterland
    - Numerous large villas
- ◆ Gil Burleigh has suggested that its boundaries are marked by religious sites
  - The shrine of Senuna at Ashwell End
  - The shrine of Mars Alator at Barkway
  - A complex at Pegsdon
  - A temple at Aston
  - This is curiously like modern North Hertfordshire!





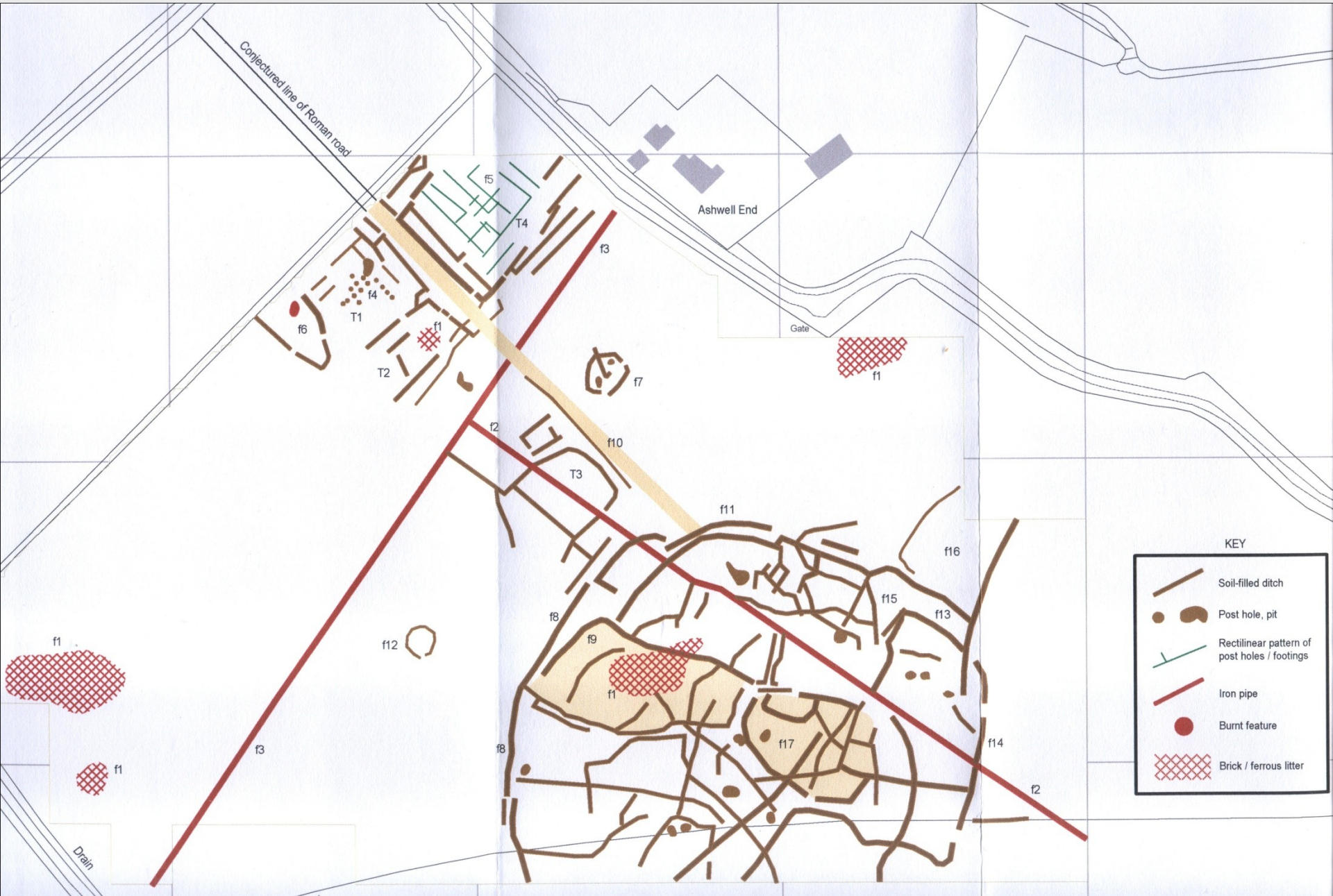










# Ashwell End

- ◆ 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





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'











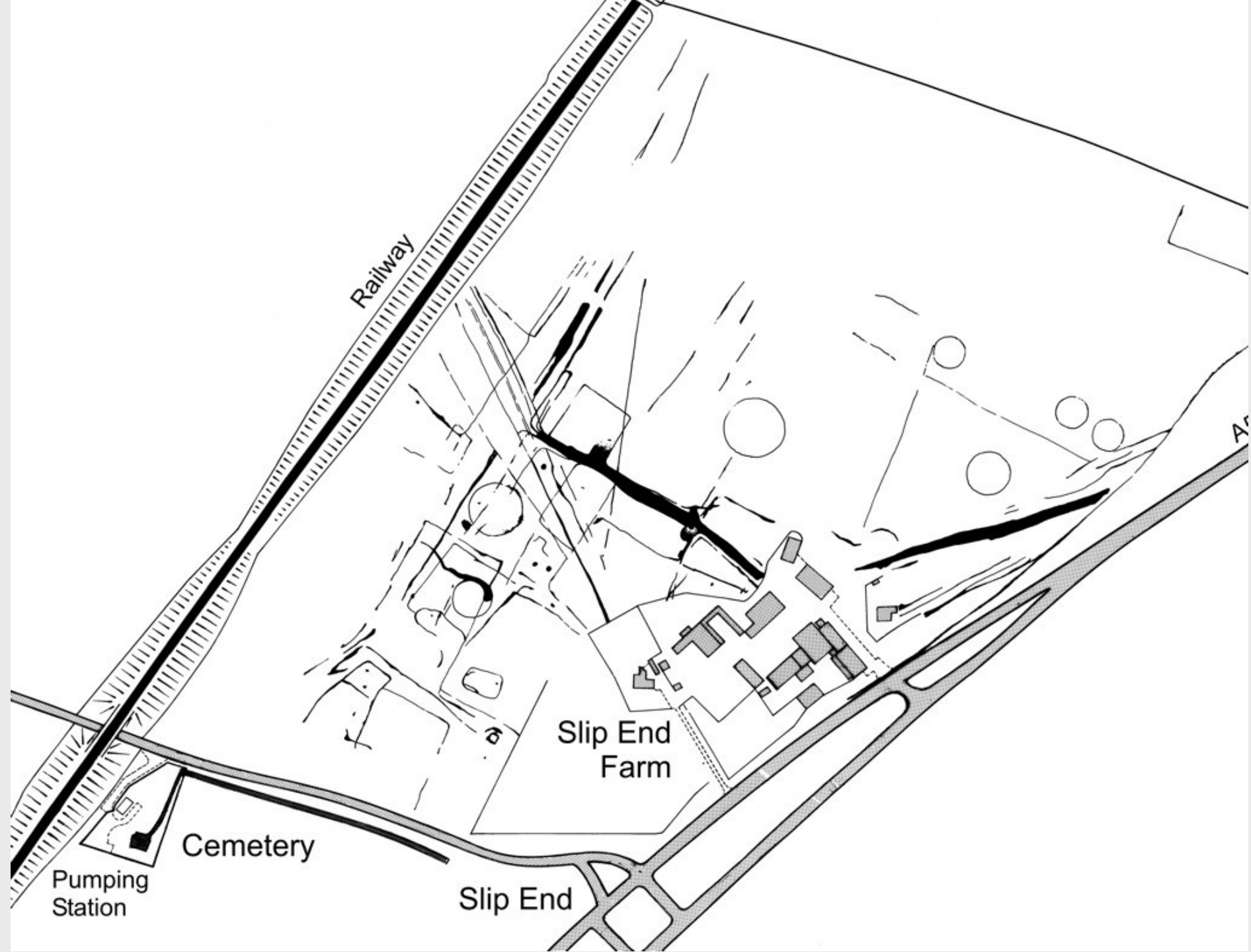




# Slip End

- ◆ 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





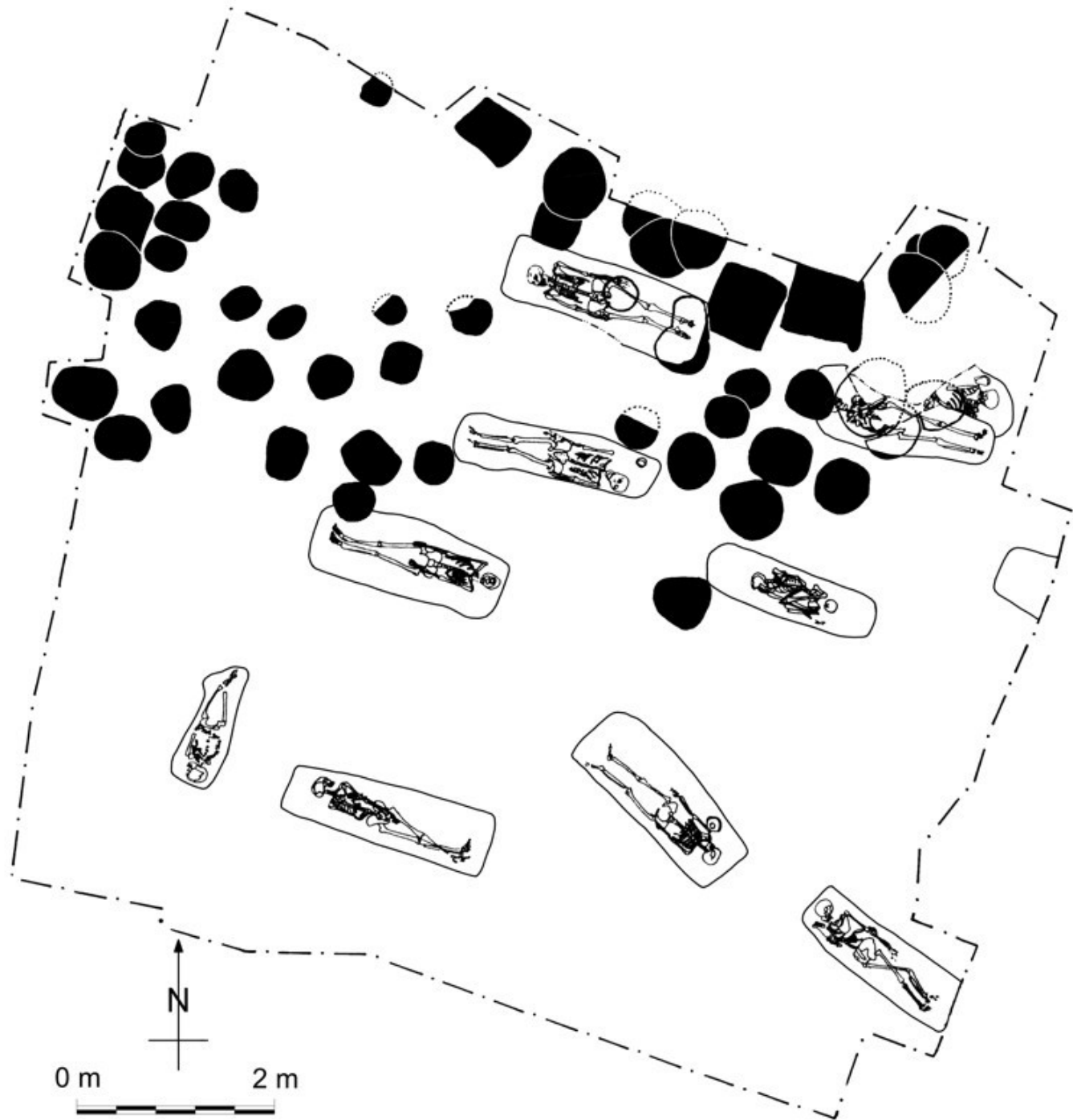
Railway

Slip End Farm

Cemetery

Pumping Station

Slip End



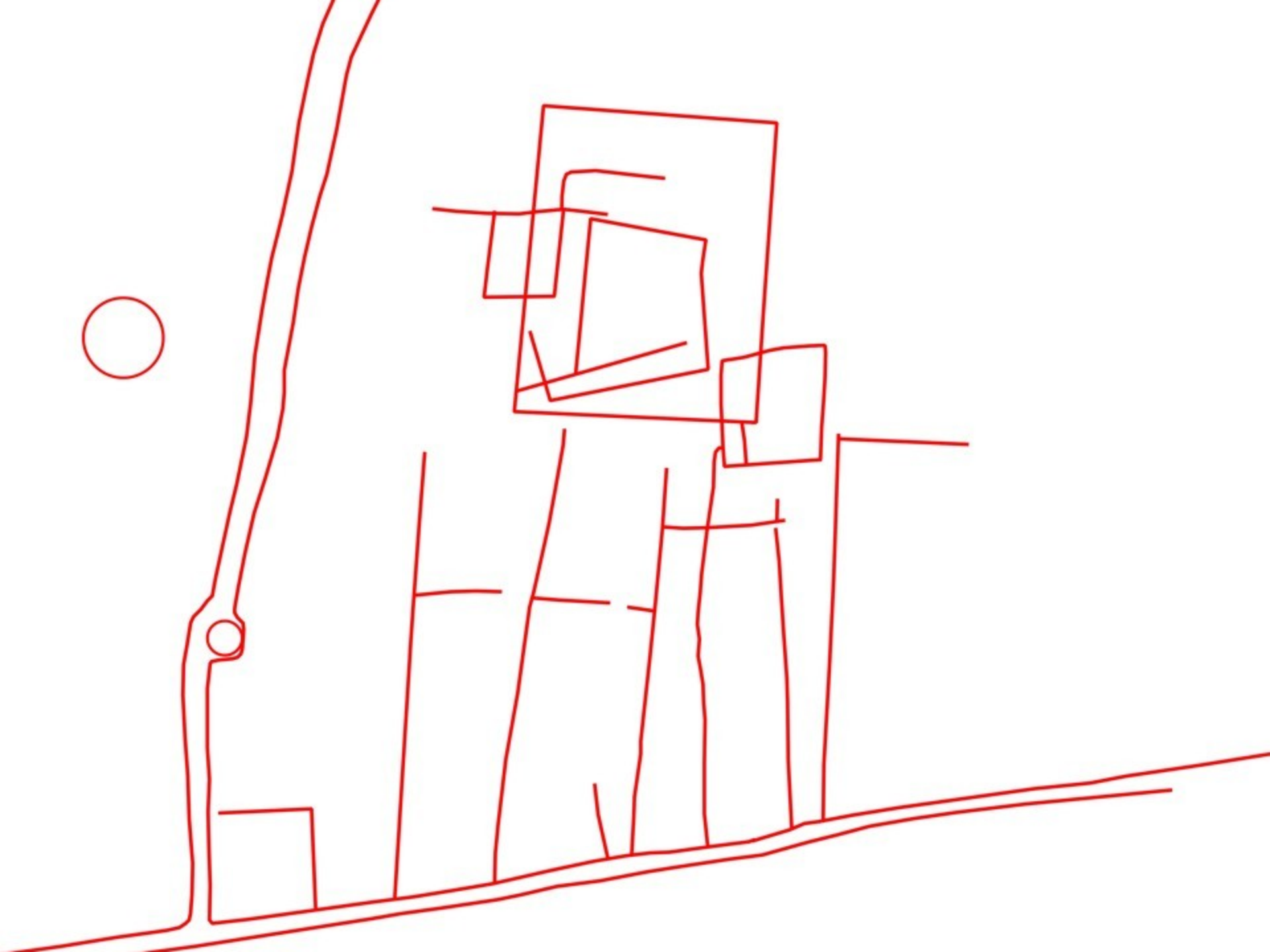
# Huge site at Claybush Hill

- ◆ 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...









# What is the evidence for Boudica?

- ◆ Not very good!
  - Grahame Appleby has tried to reconstruct troop movements
    - Working out how quickly Roman armies could respond
- ◆ Roman defeat between day 4 and day 9
  - Destruction of *Londinium* follows
  - *Verulamium* sacked day 13
- ◆ Boudica then returns home
  - Via the Icknield Way
  - Roman army in place on day 15
  - Final battle on day 16

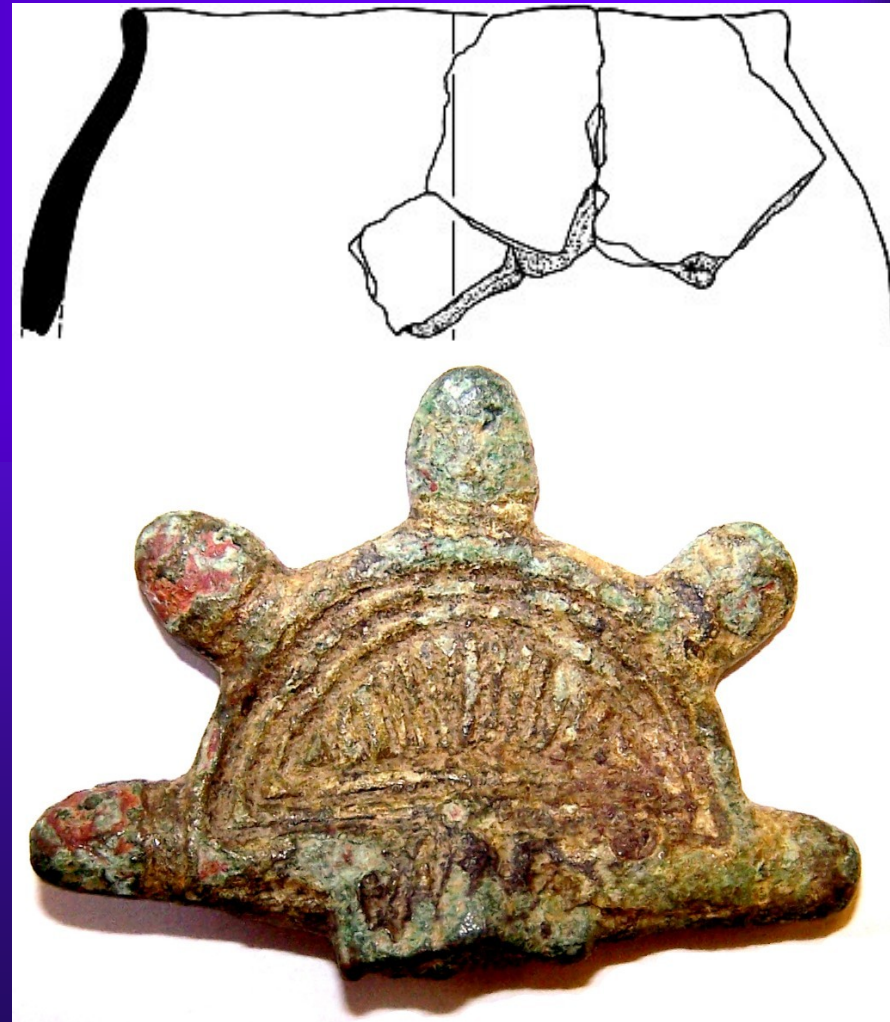






# After the Romans

- ◆ 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



# Political developments

- ◆ Before the creation of Hertfordshire in the tenth century
  - Ashwell lay in south-eastern Mercia
    - Barley, Barkway, Nuthampstead and Reed were in Essex
- ◆ And there were tribal divisions
  - The Hicce gave their name to Hitchin
  - Ashwell may have been in the territory of the West Wille





Elmet

Lindisse

Wreocensæte

Pecsæte

Mierce

Norþfolc

East  
Engle

Magonsæte

Hwicce

Herefinna

West  
Wille

Supfolc

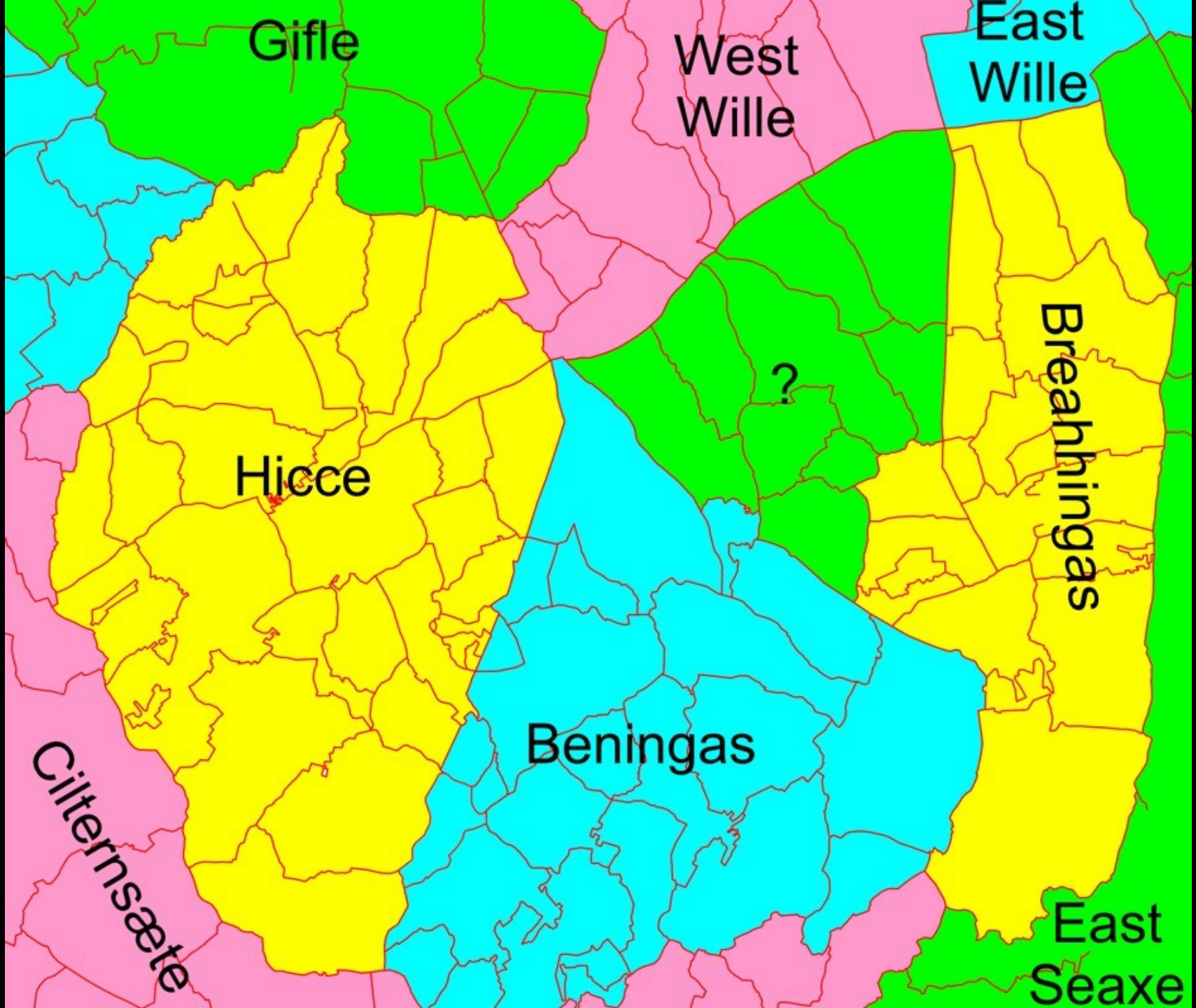
Gifle  
Hicce

East  
Seaxe

Cilternsæte

West Seaxe

Cent



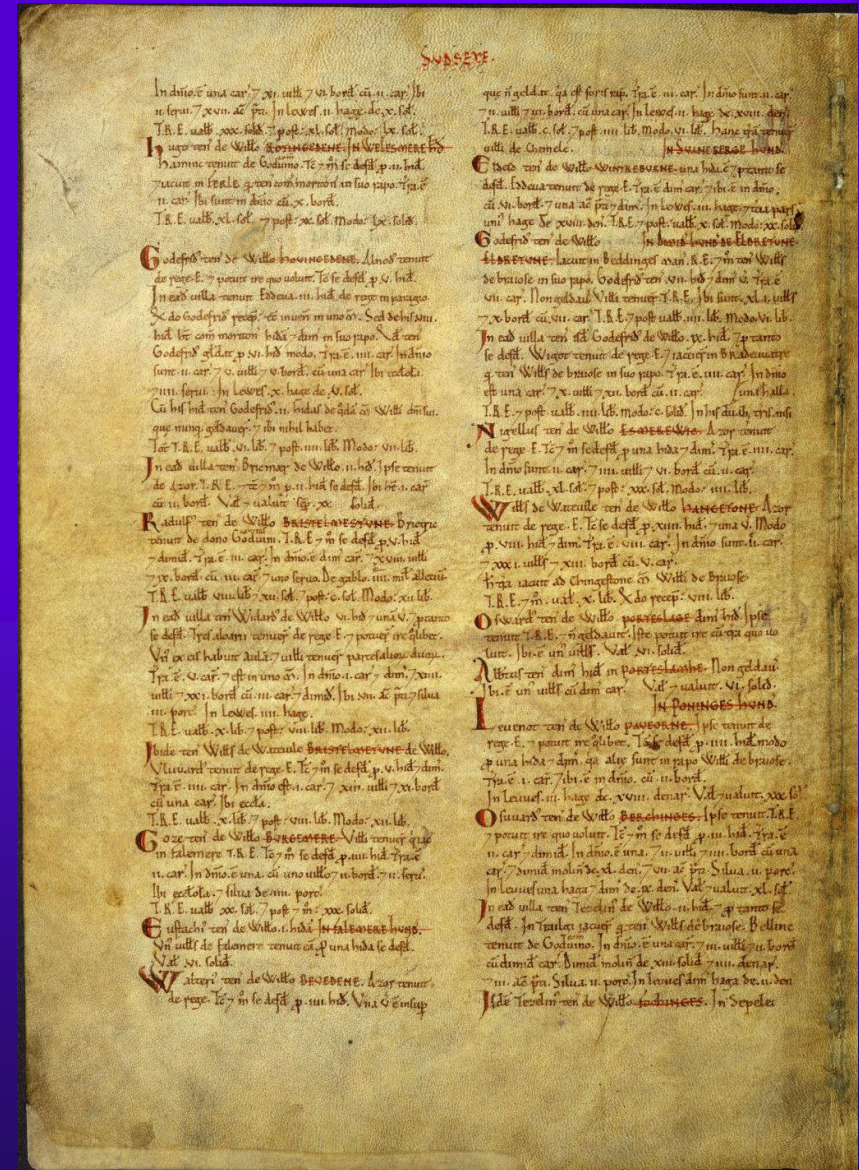
# The origins of the settlement

- ◆ 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



# Domesday Book

- ◆ A list of places
  - Organised by feudal overlords
  - With details of population etc.
- ◆ It's actually a tax list
  - So the king can work out how much Danegeld he can raise
  - So it only mentions taxable people
- ◆ People get over-excited if their village is named
  - And, despite what some people believe, nobody's house is mentioned in it!







# 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



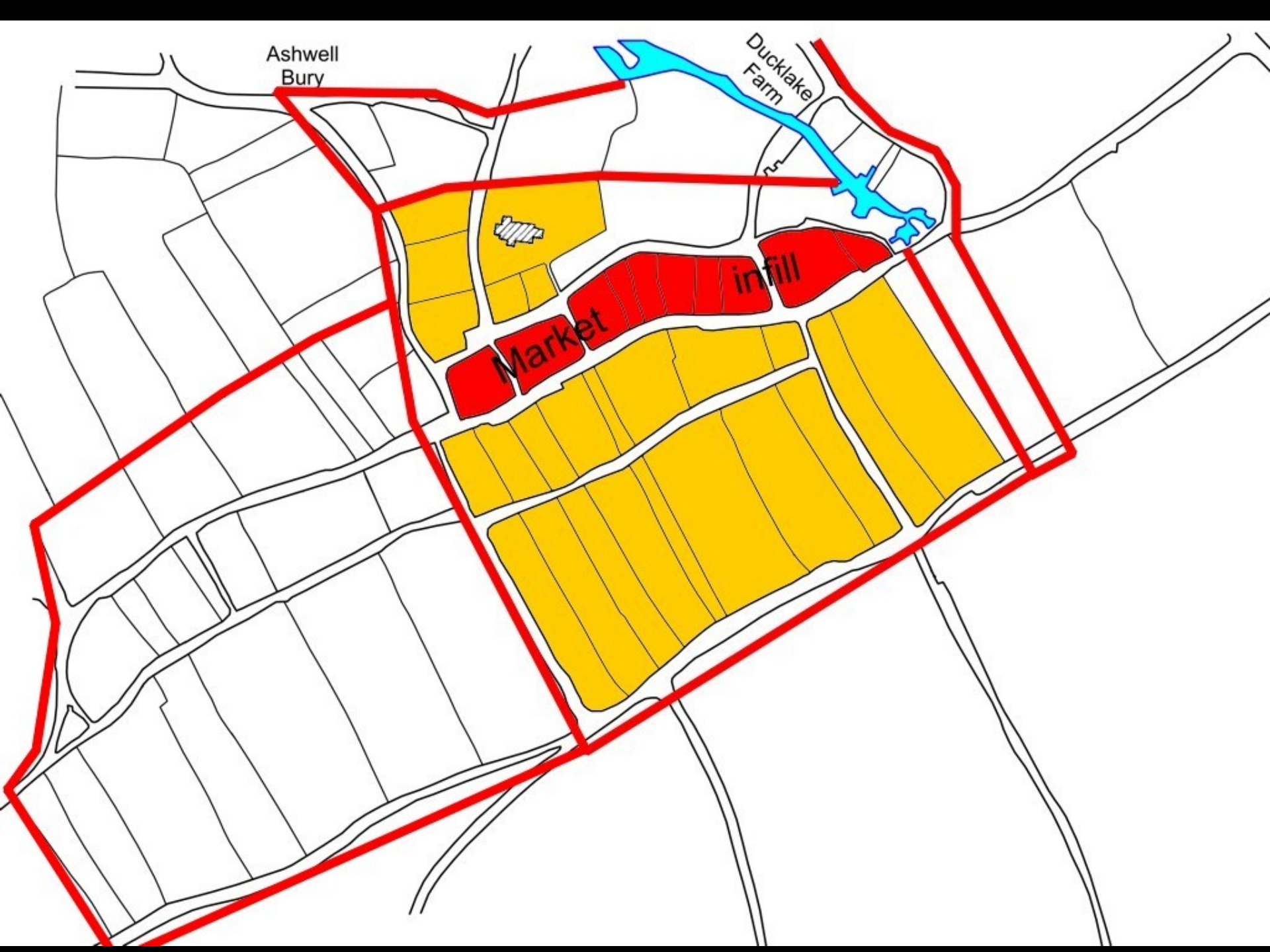


# Ashwell's *burh*

- ◆ Where were the defences?
  - Like Hitchin, nothing remains
    - It's the same at Hertford
- ◆ But we may be able to work out where they were
  - Town plan analysis
    - Looking at the layout of roads and boundaries
  - We know that the market and church must be inside
- ◆ Two basic options
  - Minimal and larger







Ashwell  
Bury

Ducklake  
Farm

Market

infill

# What about the big changes?

- ◆ “History” tells us about many discontinuities
  - The Roman conquest
  - The *adventus Saxonum*
  - The Danelaw
  - The Norman Conquest
  - The Dissolution
  - The Agrarian Revolution
- ◆ Archaeology can barely see them
  - We are looking at political events
  - Little impact on the landscape
    - Including its organisation
  - New rulers tend to re-use existing administrations
    - So territories are taken over *en bloc*
  - And long-term continuities survive political and economic upheavals



# The big picture

- ◆ This is probably what archaeology is best at doing
  - We don't get bogged down in personalities, battles and the chance survival of documents
- ◆ Baldock is the early focus for population
  - Territory formed by the merging of two or three hillfort territories
    - Arbury Banks, Wilbury and Ravensburgh Castle
  - Splits after the Roman period
    - Into two or three territories
- ◆ During the fifth and sixth centuries, Ashwell becomes the dominant settlement
  - And the centre of a small kingdom
- ◆ We cannot understand the growth of Ashwell without understanding its hinterland
  - It would be nothing without its rural component



# 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!

