

Summary and Introduction

Summary

This report provides a synthesis and overview of excavations and other fieldwork from 1934 to 2019 at Metchley Roman fort, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 045836, Figs 1.1 and 1.2). During that time more than 60 interventions have been completed at the Roman military complex, including excavations, trenching, and watching briefs. The fort is located to the southwest of the city centre, partly within the campus of the University of Birmingham, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital complex, and the University rail station.

An extensive programme of archaeological fieldwork has been undertaken at Metchley Roman fort, Birmingham, in advance of new hospital, university, and train station developments. The upstanding earthworks were first identified by antiquarians in the 18th and 19th centuries, but their Roman date was only confirmed in the 1930s. Large-scale excavations have been undertaken since that date, which have transformed our understanding of the complex. The earliest, under the direction of Dr Graham Webster in 1950–51, examined part of the northern annexe defences. Large areas of the fort interior were examined in 1967–9 under the direction of Trevor Rowley. The overall phasing used in this report is that devised from the 1930s and 1960s excavations. These excavations suggested that the fort was a Claudian foundation. A more recent review of the dating evidence from all excavations suggests that the first fort was a mid-Neronian foundation, which could place its first layout around the time of the Roman ‘recovery’ of the west midlands after the Boudiccan rebellion. Further excavations were undertaken from 1999 to 2010 in advance of major hospital and university developments. More small-scale fieldwork was undertaken from 2013 to 2019. In total, an area of approximately 2.7ha was excavated from 1963 to 2010, amounting to approximately 25% of the total area of the Roman military complex, making the site one of the most extensively investigated Roman military complexes in the midlands.

An important feature of the work has been the opportunities for public interpretation of the Roman military complex. This has taken the form of a number of interpretation panels, and the selective partial reconstruction of the fort ramparts, to provide an indication of the scale and extent of the forts.

A construction camp (Phase 1A, possibly mid-Neronian, Figs 1.3 and 1.4, Table 1.1) was probably the earliest

Roman activity at Metchley. This was succeeded by a double-ditched fort (Phase 1B, mid-Neronian) measuring 240m square, enclosing 4.4ha. It contained an excavated facing pair of barrack-blocks, granaries, the *praetorium*, and a workshop. Two structural phases were distinguished by buildings laid out on very slightly differing alignments. A small settlement, including open-fronted shops and possible dwellings was laid out along a road to the west of the fort. Annexes (Phase 2A) were laid out on the northern, eastern, and southern sides of the fort during its later use. Following abandonment and systematic dismantling of the first fort, a military stores depot was laid out within the fort defences, which were modified but largely retained. Five periods of activity were recorded within the military stores depot (Phase 2B, later Neronian), comprising the clearance of the Phase 1B fort buildings, the layout of new timber-framed buildings, industrial activity, and the use of the fort interior and external areas to the west of the fort for livestock pens, followed by backfilling of the fort defences, in that order. After a period of abandonment, a smaller, second fort (Phase 3A, early Flavian), enclosing 2.6ha, was located within the interior of the first fort, whose inner ditches were re-cut to provide additional defence. The primary rampart of this second fort was of turf construction, later reinforced with timber bracing. Few buildings are recorded within the second fort interior – most comprising granaries which may have survived later disturbance because they were more deeply cut than other building types. Once again, the plateau to the west of the smaller fort was occupied, primarily by livestock pens, although evidence of industrial activity and a single timber-framed building was also recorded. Traces of small-scale Roman, presumably civilian activity have also been recorded to the east of the forts. Following the final military abandonment of the site in the later 1st century, the fort and annexe ditches were re-cut, to form pens for livestock herding. This activity may have come to an end by the late 2nd century.

During the early post-medieval period the site lay within a hunting park, and a hunting lodge was built within the fort interior. Later, the area was farmed. The Worcester and Birmingham Canal was cut through the southeastern angle of the fort in the late 18th century, followed by the adjoining railway in the mid-19th century. The earliest modern development at the complex took place in the 1930s for the University Medical School.

This report has been completed and updated with funding from Historic England.

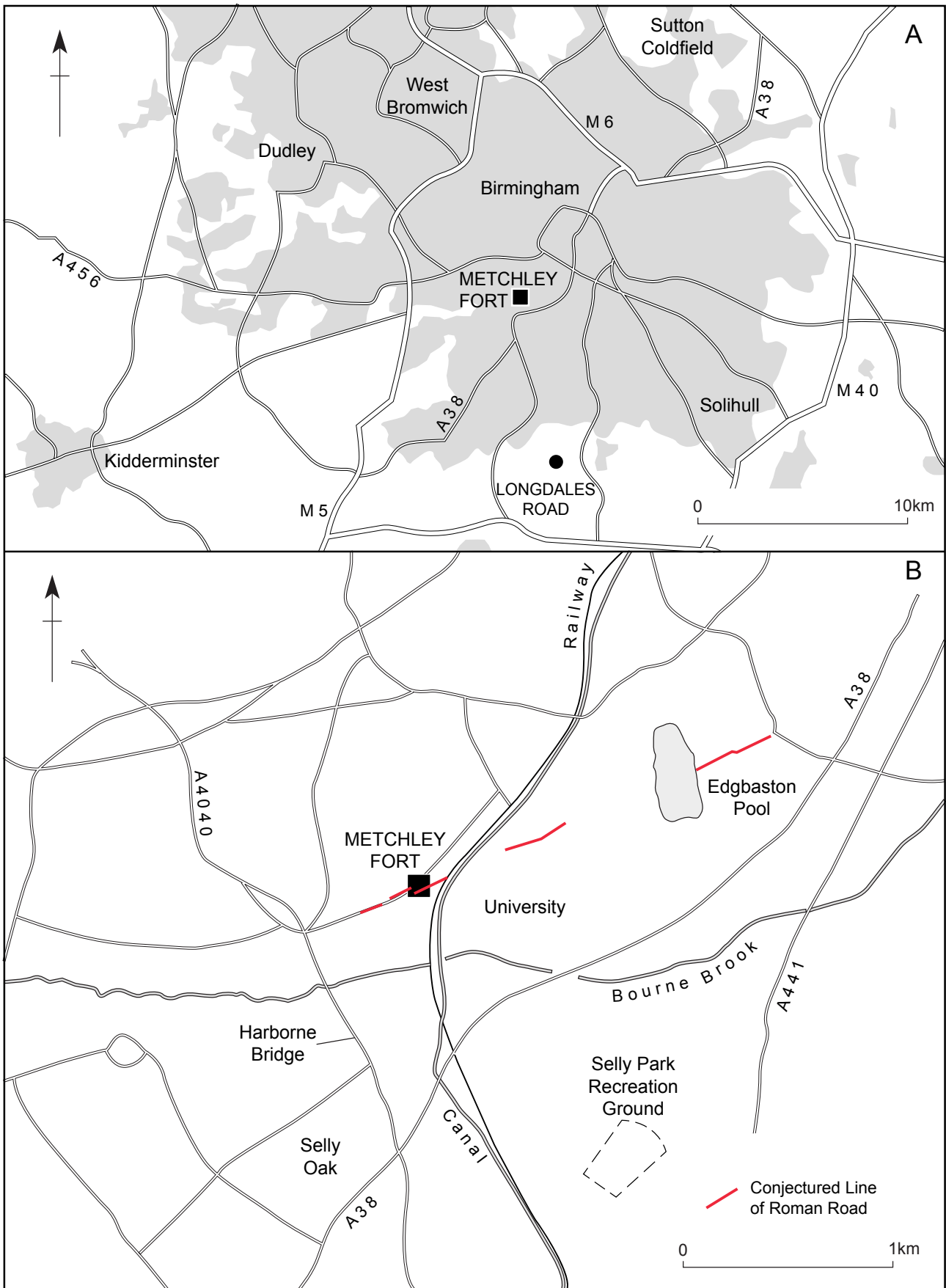


Figure 1.1. General location (A); detailed location of Metchley fort (B).

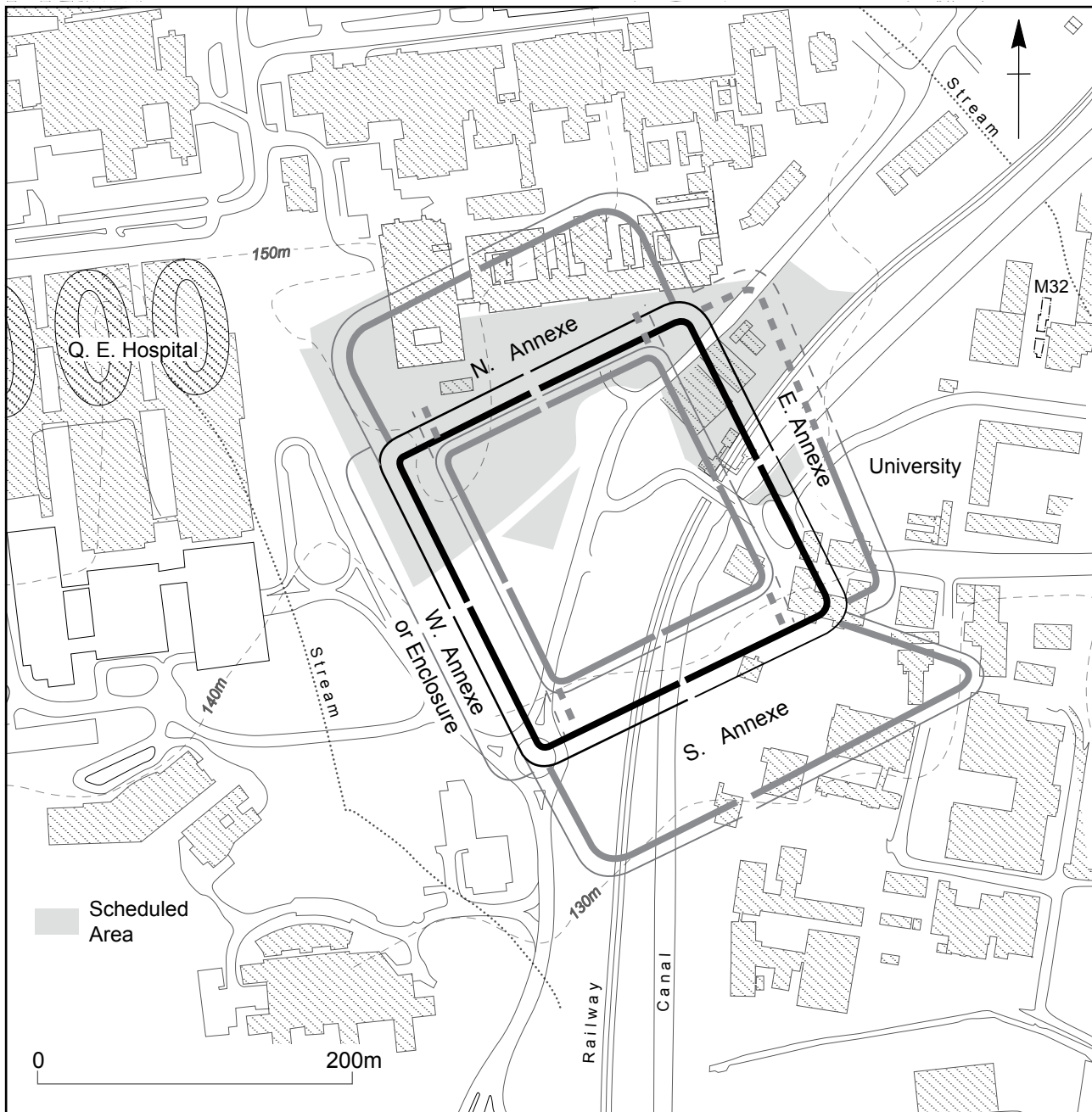


Figure 1.2. Metchley fort and its local setting.

Introduction

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The detailed excavations have been reported in five volumes (Jones 2001, 2005, 2011, 2012 and 2025).

The sequence of Roman military activity at Metchley

The Roman fort complex at Metchley (Fig. 1.2), which comprises the earliest occupation of the site, was first identified from cartographic sources and antiquarian descriptions, and more recently by extensive trial-trenching and excavation. The fort defences, still surviving as above-ground earthworks in the 18th century, were mapped and described in detail at that time (Jones 2001, 10–12). The Roman date of the earthworks was only confirmed in the 1930s when limited slit-trenches were cut in advance of an earlier development (St Joseph and Shotton 1937).

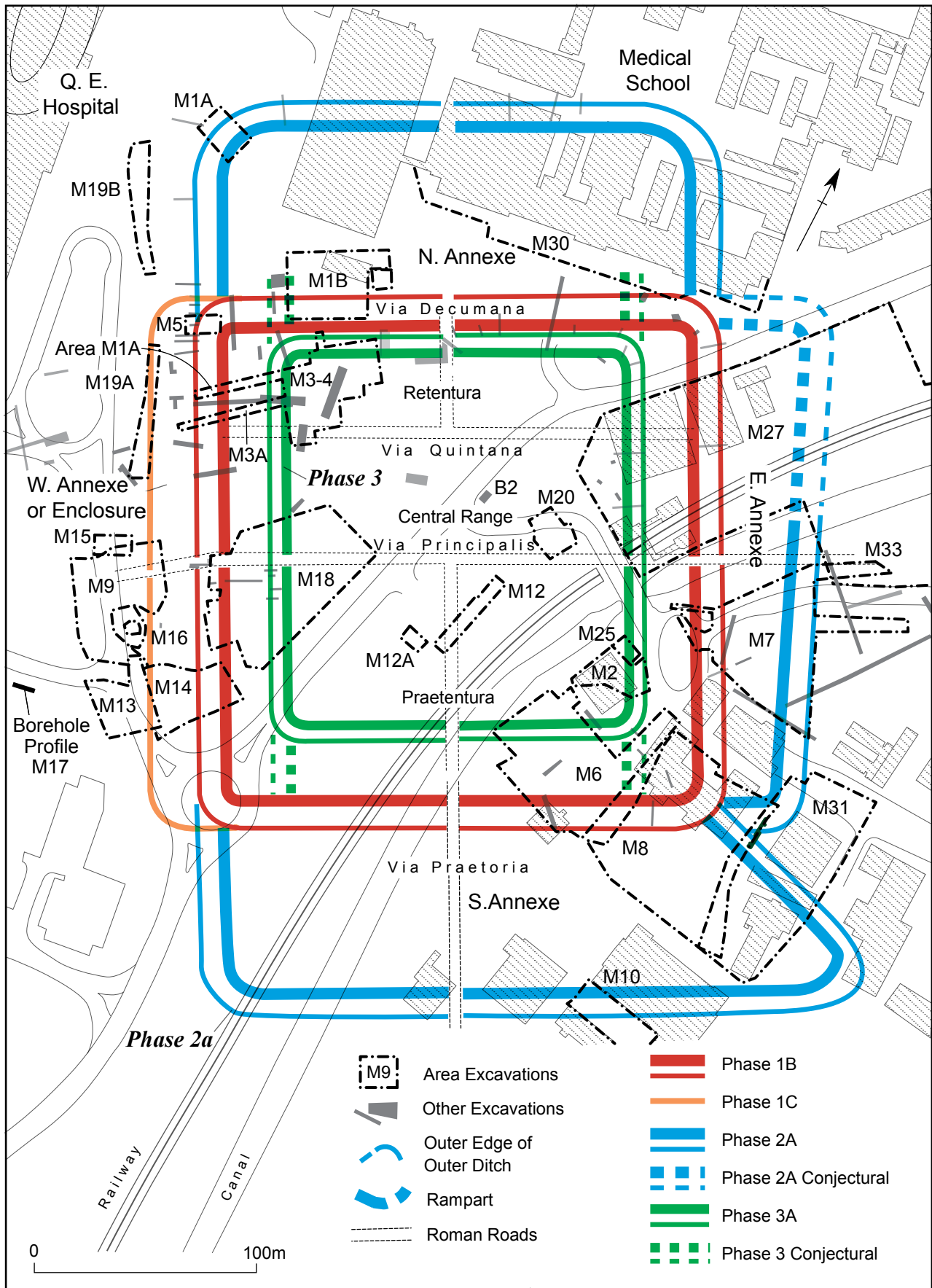


Figure 1.3. Matchley fort, simplified extent, phasing, and main areas investigated to 2010.

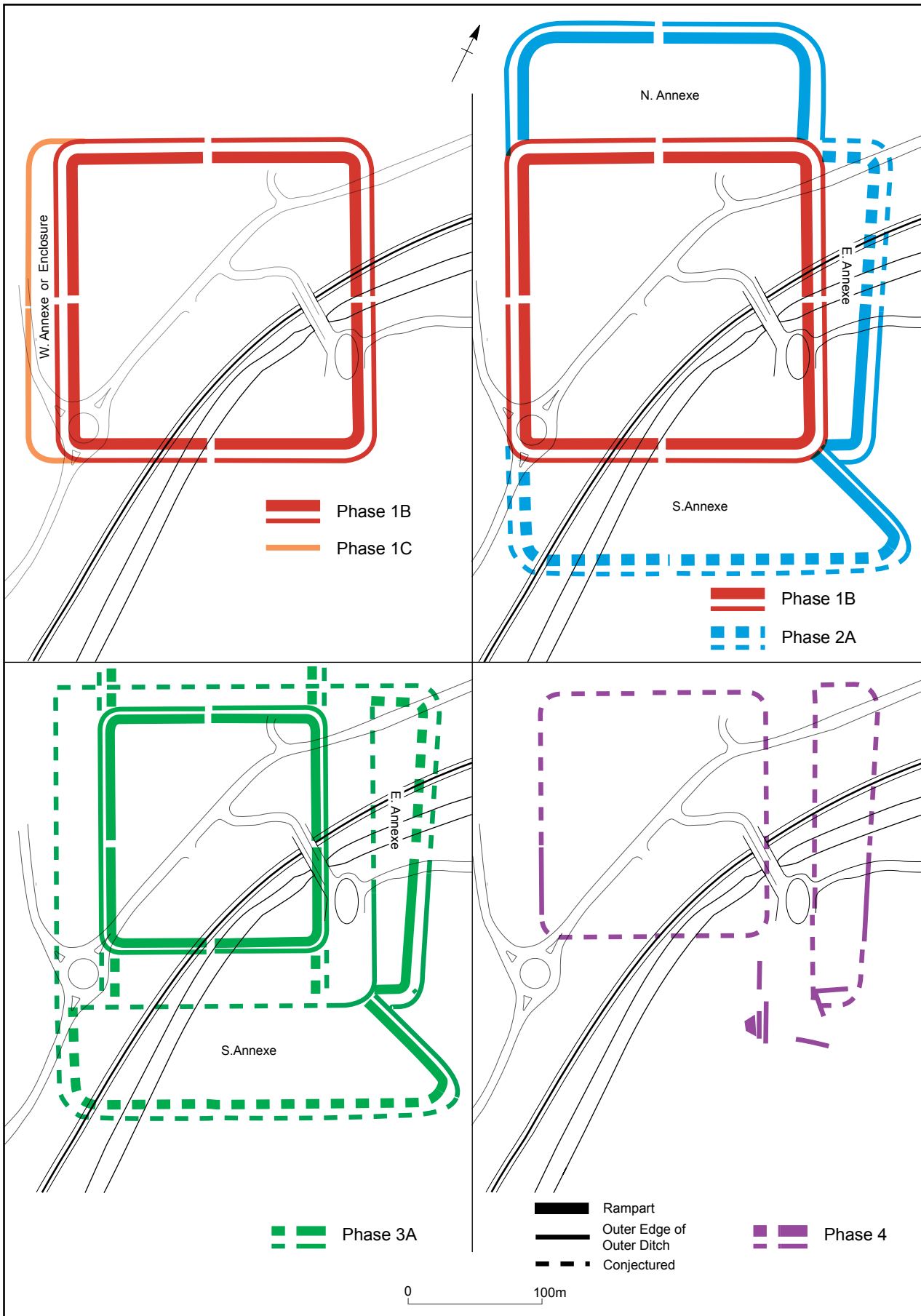


Figure 1.4. Metchley fort, simplified outline of phasing.

Table 1.1. Metchley Roman fort, summary of phasing.

Phase	Interior		Defences/external features	
1A Possible construction camp	–		Western <i>clavicula</i> ?	
1 First fort 4.4 ha Mid-Neronian	1D Early building alignment	1D/1E Features which could belong to Phase 1D or Phase 1E, or to both	1B Double-ditched fort defences, rampart, square in plan; excavated <i>porta principalis dextra</i> , external <i>clavicula</i>	Western external settlement
	1E Later building alignment		1C Western annexe or enclosure	
2A Annexes Later Neronian	Possible rearrangement of internal buildings		Northern, eastern, and southern annexes	
2B Military stores depot Later Neronian	Periods: 1 Demolition Phase 1 buildings 2 New timber-framed buildings 3 Industrial activity 4 Livestock pens		New entrance arrangement for livestock sorting. Backfilling of Phase 1B ditches at end of Phase 2B (Period 5)	
3A Second fort 2.6 ha Early Flavian	Granaries in <i>retentura</i> and central range; granary and cookhouse in <i>praetentura</i>		New rectangular circuit of defences, including excavated <i>porta principalis dextra</i> . Re-cutting of Phase 1B defences to provide additional protection	
3A–4B Activity to west of Phase 3A fort ? Flavian+	-		Redefinition of Phase 3A gatehouse, later arrangement associated with external palisade trenches forming livestock enclosures, industrial features, and timber-framed building west of fort	
4A Re-cutting of Phase 3A fort ditches Later Flavian to late 2nd century	-		Re-cutting of Phase 3A defences	
4C Post-military abandonment	Three-sided ditched enclosure (Areas M3–M4). Palisade trench along eastern and southern sides of Phase 3A fort		Irregular partial blocking of Phase 3A fort entrance, cultivation soil and stone surfaces to the west of Phase 3A fort	
5 Post-Roman	Use of fort interior for livestock, ‘entrance’ inserted into Phase 3A <i>porta principalis dextra</i> . Re-use of fort roads, and cutting of ditches along their margins		Pollen evidence for ?Saxon/?medieval cultivation from Area M8	

Note: The main events are divided into phases, some of which are subdivided. Additionally, Phase 2B is subdivided into 5 periods.

The updated fort phasing is summarized in Table 1.1. The main events are defined as phases, some of which are subdivided. Additionally, Phase 2B is sub-divided into five periods.

The earliest Roman military occupation may have taken the form of a construction camp (Phase 1A). The earliest fort, of mid-Neronian date (Phase 1B, Figs 1.3 and 1.4), was defended by double ditches and a rampart. Large-scale investigations directed by Trevor Rowley within the Phase 1B fort interior during 1967–9 (Jones 2001; Fig. 1.3, Areas M2, M3 and M4, M5) identified the well-preserved foundation trenches of timber-framed buildings, including barrack-blocks, a granary, a store building, and a workshop. This fort was contemporary with a small western settlement first identified in 2001 (Jones 2011). A narrow western annexe or enclosure, defined by a palisade trench (Phase 1C), probably contained a zone of pottery production (Jones 2011, 18–20).

Excavations in the 1960s, and latterly in 1998–9 and 2004, identified later Neronian (Phase 2A, Figs 1.3

and 1.4) annexes added to the northern, eastern, and southern sides of the Phase 1B fort (Jones 2005). Deliberate clearance of the Phase 1 fort buildings was followed as a single operation by the construction of temporary structures and fenced compounds associated with a military stores depot (Phase 2B, later Neronian; Jones 2001, 43–54), primarily concerned with livestock herding. Subsequently, after a period of abandonment, the site was reoccupied, and a smaller fort of early Flavian date (Phase 3A, Figs 1.3 and 1.4) was laid out within the interior of the Phase 1 fort. This second fort may have functioned as a supply depot, in particular for grain. To the west of the fort defences was a contemporary ditched livestock complex (Phase 3B–4B).

After the abandonment of the Phase 3A fort later in the 1st century, small-scale civilian occupation continued at Metchley through the 2nd century, and possibly beyond. This civilian occupation included the insertion of a livestock ‘funnel’ into the western Phase 3A–4A fort entrance, to facilitate the movement of livestock into the fort interior (Phase 4C). The surviving fort

defences were utilized as a livestock enclosure in the post-Roman military or post-Roman periods (Phase 5), until piecemeal enclosure in the later 18th century. Lengths of the fort defences continued to be visible and mapped as upstanding earthworks into the 20th century.

Parts of the northern and eastern fort interior and adjoining defences have been designated a Scheduled Monument (NHLE 1020977 (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1020977?section=official-list-entry>)).

Background

Iron Age

While the later Iron Age political geography of the region is difficult to reconstruct in detail (Booth 1996, 26; Hodder 2011, 48), Metchley was probably located at or adjoining the boundaries between three tribes; the Cornovii to the northwest, the Dobunni to the south and southwest, and the Corieltauvi to the northeast (Millett 1990, fig. 12). White (2007, fig. 12) and Jones and Mattingley (1990, fig. 4.24) place the tribal boundary between the Dobunni and Cornovii close to Metchley (Fig. 1.5), with the boundary of the Corieltauvi further to the east. Magilton (2006, 101) places the *civitas* boundaries at Coleshill, by analogy with other temple complexes located at *civitas* boundaries. Booth (2018, 36) identifies a division between Corieltauvian coinage in the north of Warwickshire and Dobunnian issues in the south of the county which may reflect tribal boundaries. Similarly, a distinction is drawn by Dalwood et al. (2018, 48) between the material culture within the north and west of Worcestershire and that within the south of the county.

Hillforts are a particularly notable aspect of the Iron Age landscape in the west midlands (Hurst 2011, 106, fig. 3.4; Hodder 2011, 45). They may have acted as ceremonial *foci* of the surrounding populations (Hingley 1996, 18; Bradley 2007, 252), or have been used as bases to farm nearby land (Darvill 2000, 139). Hillforts were built at different scales, the smaller sites being no larger than some ditched enclosures (Bradley 2007). Indeed, Wigley (2007, 178) has described smaller enclosures as constituting one end of a continuum which includes hillforts at its upper end. Unlike Droitwich, which was a centre of the salt trade in the later Iron Age (Hurst 2011, 117), and Alcester, assigned a local government function associated with the northern sept of the Dobunni (Booth 1996, 32), there is no evidence of Iron Age occupation at or near Metchley. This apparent lack of evidence could reflect disturbance by recent urban development and the lack of investigation. Recent excavations along the line of the M6 Toll have transformed our understanding of the Iron Age settlement pattern in the west midlands (Fitzpatrick 2008, 508) – suggesting a greater settlement density than is currently recorded (Hodder 2018, 158).

Roman military campaigns (Fig. 1.5)

Traditionally (e.g. Webster 1993), archaeological sequences within individual excavated forts have been assimilated within the historical accounts provided by Tacitus and other writers. The limitations of archaeological dating evidence and the imprecise and patchy information provided by the literary sources make the conflation of archaeological and literary evidence impossible (Esmonde Cleary 2011, 132; Mattingley 2006; White 2018, 23). Individual sites are not often mentioned, so that placing them within the overall pattern is a matter for interpretation (Burnham and Davies 2010, 33).

For the Roman army the West Midlands was ‘an area of transition, to be moved through relatively swiftly in their push to crush the resistance led by Caratacus . . . and to occupy Britain up to the Mersey’ (White 2018, 19), ‘in part because of the apparent acquiescence of the tribes after being disarmed by Scapula’. During AD 45–47 the XIV and IX legions incorporated the territory of the Dobunni and Corieltauvi into the Roman Empire (Mattingley 2006, 98), a process completed by the end of the governorship of Aulus Plautius. In AD 47, during the early governorship of Ostorius Scapula, hostile tribes attacked allied forces within the Marches (Todd 2004, 50). Scapula drove off the raiders from Dobunnian territory, garrisoned from that date, if not earlier, along with Corieltauvian territory (Mattingley 2006, 101). The establishment of Metchley has been traditionally attributed to the Scapulan advance (Webster 1993, 71; Pengelly et al. 2001, 101), although recent reassessment of the small finds dating (Cool, Chapter 3 below) has suggested a mid-Neronian date for the earliest military occupation of Metchley. This dating could suggest that the first fort at Metchley was established around the time of, and in response to, the Boudiccan revolt.

Watling Street (Fig. 1.1) formed a key line of westwards advance (Mattingley 2006, 143), possibly by the XIV legion (Todd 2004, 53). Vexillation fortresses were provided at Mancetter, Kinvaston, Leighton, and also possibly Wall (Mattingley 2006, 143). These sites may be related to campaigns against the Ordovices in the late 50s. According to Todd (2004, 53), the gap between the Trent and Severn may have been ‘closed’ by means of forward control positions, including Wall and Kinvaston. This advance was continued to Leighton, near Wroxeter, and further westwards to Rhyn Park, which may be related, despite limited dating evidence, to the ‘encirclement’ of the Ordovices in the late AD 50s (Todd 2004, 53), together with further forts which extended from the lower Severn valley into the Usk and Wye valleys. On the west bank of the Severn a number of bases were also established in Cornovian territory, including Leintwardine (Mattingley 2006, 143). A legionary fortress was established at Wroxeter in the mid-AD 50s (Webster 2002), which continued to be garrisoned by the same legion until AD 66. A westward advance may have formed the military context for the earliest fort at The Lunt, which was located away from the strategic road network (Booth 1996, 28).

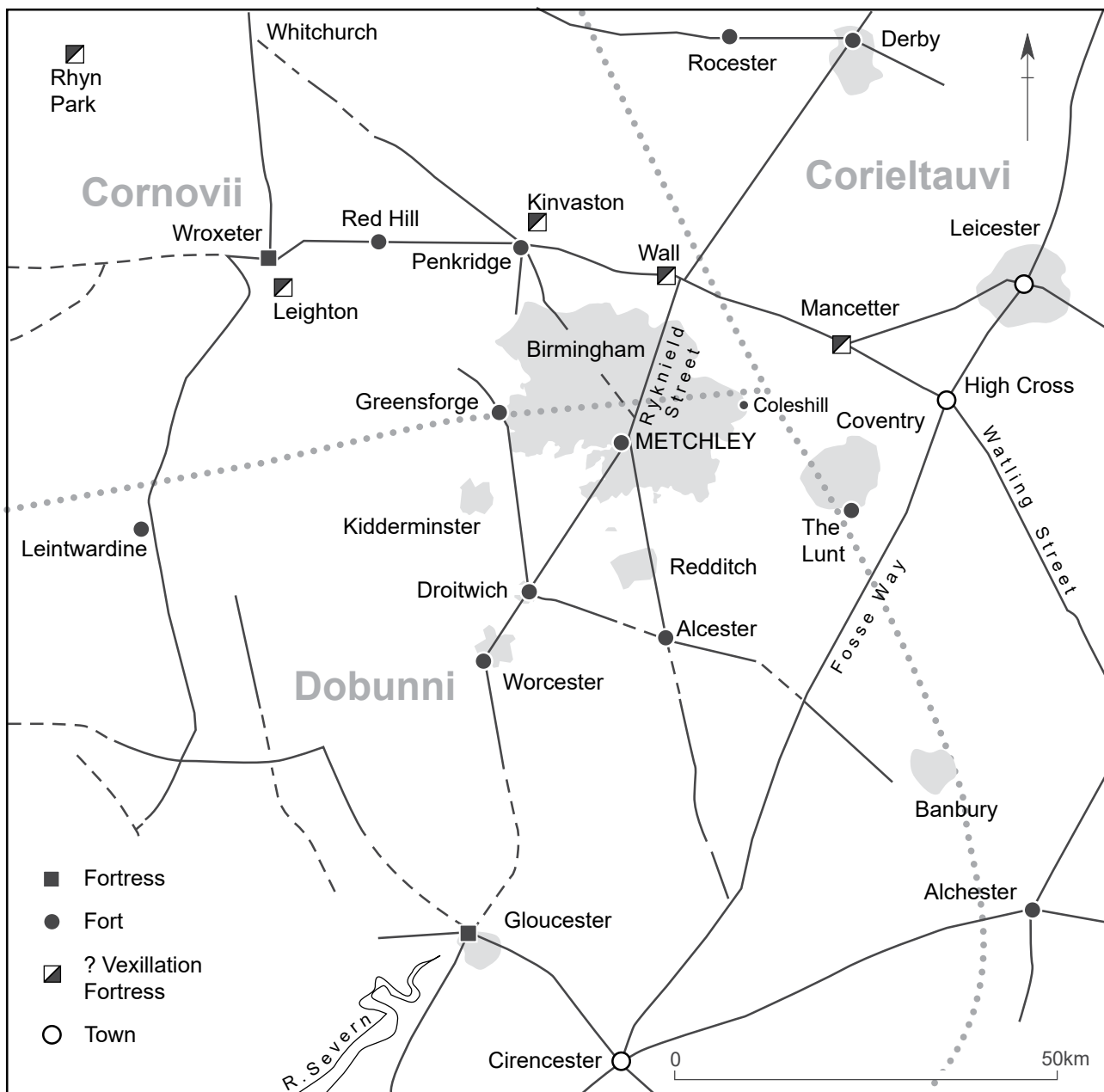


Figure 1.5. Metchley and the Roman road network, forts, and fortresses.

Between the invasion corridors later defined by Watling Street and Ermine Street/Akeman Street, an intermediate route has been recognized running northwest from Alcester, including Alcester and Droitwich (Mattingley 2006, 143), suggesting a further line of advance. This advance could have passed near to Metchley.

Following the fall of Colchester, London, and Verulamium to Boudicca, the governor, Suetonius Paulinus, defeated the rebels in a battle located variously near Mancetter, Warwickshire, or northwest of Towcester, Northamptonshire (Frere 1987a, 73) in AD 61. Such a revolt against Roman authority in the early empire was rare (Todd 2004, 55), although Todd suggests it was of Rome’s own making. Following the recovery of the

province, Paulinus was stern in his response towards the rebels (Frere 1987a, 73). Reinforcements, including 2,000 legionaries, eight auxiliary infantry, and two auxiliary cavalry units were sent from the Rhine. Frere describes how the territory of the rebel tribes was thoroughly laid waste. New forts were built within the territory of the Iceni, and also elsewhere including The Lunt (Coventry) and probably Metchley also, with the primary aims of repression and punishment – including military government (Frere 1987a, 74).

Millett (1990, 55) observes that few sites can be dated to the post-Boudiccan phase of campaigning, and most forts of this date may be better interpreted as serving the supply network. This group may have included Metchley, particularly in Phase 2B (and possibly Phase 3A also). The

focus of campaigning in the later AD 60s by Vettius Bolanus lay within the territory of the Parisi as a base for operations to the north, in Brigantian territory (Todd 2004, 57). The withdrawal of *legio* XIV from Britain around AD 67 and a number of auxiliary units reduced the military manpower available, resulting in redeployment of the remaining units (Burnham and Davies 2010, 42). Vexillations from all three legions were sent to the continent to support rival imperial candidates during the civil war of AD 68–70 (Todd 2004, 57). Following the resumption of military campaigning in AD 71 there were significant changes in garrison, notably Gloucester, in the early AD 70s, as well as at Chester and Lincoln (Todd 2004, 57). Garrisons in the midlands were given up in the AD 70s, as the area was given over to civilian occupation (Booth 1996, 28). Mancetter and The Lunt were abandoned in the mid-70s (Booth 1996, 30). Exceptionally, at Wall and Alcester (Bleachfield Street), military occupation continued into the early 2nd century (Booth 1996, 32).

From the Flavian period onwards there was a policy of spreading garrisons thinly in occupied territory (Mattingley 2006, 135), to confront the pattern of dispersed resistance, leading to the establishment of more numerous but smaller bases (Hopewell and Hodgson 2012, 43), which may explain the location of the later Alcester fort, and also the Phase 3A fort at Metchley. Iulius Frontinus, who became governor in AD 73/74, undertook the final conquest of Wales, including the territories of the Silures, Ordovices, and Demetae (Mattingley 2006, 116). This campaigning could provide a broader context for the removal of the Phase 3A fort garrison from Metchley, dated by the limited pottery evidence to the early Flavian period (see Chapter 3 below).

Aims

The aims of the excavations were to:

- 1) provide details of the fort defences, including environmental evidence;

- 2) contribute towards an appreciation of the layouts of internal buildings and other structures, and of subsequent changes to these layouts;
- 3) contribute towards an understanding of the overall chronology of the complex;
- 4) contribute towards an understanding of the pattern of military supply;
- 5) locate and map external features, including annexes, roads and settlements;
- 6) contribute towards an understanding of the overall pattern of military deployment in the west midlands.

Methodology

Excavation was undertaken on a piecemeal basis, as individual areas became available in advance of development (Fig. 1.3). Large areas were excavated in the 1960s, 1998–2001, and 2004–5. The areas excavated from 1997 were stripped of topsoil and overburden by a 360° excavator working under continuous archaeological supervision. The machined subsoil surface was hand-cleaned as necessary to define features, or possible features, of archaeological interest. Additional machining was selectively undertaken with a mini-digger to remove post-medieval features and deposits, following their testing by hand-excavation. Roman features were tested by hand-excavation only.

The first draft of this report was prepared at Birmingham Archaeology. The report was completed by the original author with funding from Historic England, which enabled updating of the stratigraphic and discussion sections. The finds and environmental contributions prepared in 2003–10 have not been updated.

Throughout this report it is assumed for simplicity that the fort was aligned north–south, although the drawings are labelled with compass north.

