Between Peak and Plain

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Excavations on a Multiperiod Site at Mellor, Stockport, 1998–2009

Edited by
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Cover: The west entrance to the Iron Age inner enclosure on the Mellor hilltop, excavated within the garden of the Old Vicarage; a Romano-British bow brooch found in an upper fill of the inner ditch; and a medieval arrow-head found in a post pit of the aisled hall.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Peter Arrowsmith

This volume presents the results of annual excavations conducted between 1998 and 2009 centred on the Old Vicarage at Mellor, Stockport, in north-west England (Figure 1.1). The work revealed a multiperiod site with evidence of human activity extending over several millennia, from the Mesolithic to the post-medieval period. The site lies on the western flank of the Peak District, on a hill commanding distant views to the west over the Cheshire Plain.

The principal datable remains were of the Iron Age and the medieval period. The Iron Age evidence included rock-cut ditches defining an inner enclosure and an extensive outer enclosure, ring-gullies, and stone-packed linear gullies. The main medieval remains were the post pits of an aisled hall which from historical evidence probably belonged to a hereditary forester of the royal hunting preserve of Peak Forest. Both periods were also represented by evidence of material culture, which included a regionally significant assemblage of late prehistoric pottery. The site also produced lithics of the Earlier and Later Mesolithic, a small number of Late Neolithic–Early Bronze Age flint objects including two items of rarity, and an assemblage of pottery and other artefacts demonstrating Romano-British occupation. Radiocarbon dating points to activity in the early medieval period. Post-medieval finds were mostly recovered from the topsoil and subsoil, and include an important assemblage of clay tobacco pipes. In terms of chronological range, the site has no parallel in Greater Manchester and few within the wider region.

The location is also out of the ordinary in that the core of the excavations lay within the curtilage of the Old Vicarage. This is a private house which at the time was the home of Professor John W.S. Hearle, an expert in fibre technology, and his wife Ann Hearle, a local historian. Trenches were dug in the outer garden and

Figure 1.1. Mellor hilltop, the location of the excavations, looking across the Goyt valley from the ridge at Marple. St. Thomas's Church (centre) sits adjacent to the Old Vicarage garden, directly to the left. In the background (left) is Cown Edge/Coombs.

in an adjacent triangular plot. Others were excavated in adjoining fields by courtesy of the landowners.

The first investigations of the site in 1998 were at the Hearles' invitation and in the following year resulted in the formation of the Mellor Archaeological Trust to carry the work forward. The excavations were directed from the outset by archaeologists from the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit (UMAU). Initially a small group of University of Manchester students was recruited for the fieldwork. As the work developed this became a major community project and attracted a much larger body of volunteers, ranging from A-level students to retirees. Both excavation and recording were carried out by the volunteers. Professional supervision and training were provided throughout the project by members of UMAU.

Location

The site of the excavations is located above the valley of the River Goyt *c.* 8 km to the east of the town of Stockport, Greater Manchester (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). The Old Vicarage and the adjacent parish church of St. Thomas occupy a slight spur, at NGR SJ 982 889, at the west end of a hilltop with a total area of *c.* 23 ha. Sometimes called the 'Mellor hilltop', this extends *c.* 0.9 km from west to east and 0.4 km from north to south, and is roughly triangular in plan with the apex at Mellor Hall on the north (Figures 1.1, 1.4 and 1.5). The spur lies at a height of *c.* 220 m AOD (Above Ordnance Datum), and to the east the hilltop gradually rises to a peak at 278 m AOD. Immediately to the west of the Old Vicarage and the church, the ground slopes down to a lower shelf at *c.* 190 m AOD, and then falls again to the Goyt where it flows through the village of Marple Bridge.

The Mellor hilltop is flanked by the valleys of two streams which descend to the Goyt. That on the north is often known as the Mill Brook, while that on the south has been termed the Mellor Brook (Hearle 2011: 4). Beyond the streams are two higher hills. The southern, bordered on two sides by the Goyt, rises to 327 m AOD on Mellor Moor. The northern hill reaches 292 m AOD at Ludworth Intakes above Ludworth Moor. It is flanked on the north and west by the River Etherow which flows into the Goyt downstream of Marple Bridge. These two hills are linked, to the east of the Mellor hilltop, by a broad ridge at a height of *c.* 265 m AOD. The whole arrangement of high ground thus roughly follows a reversed E shape with the Mellor hilltop forming the centre.

On the opposite side of the Goyt valley to the Mellor hilltop is the ridge at Marple, while to the north-west Werneth Low rises above the far side of the Etherow valley. The Goyt flows westward between those hills, beyond which ground levels fall towards the Cheshire Plain. At the town of Stockport, the confluence of the Goyt and the Tame marks the start of the River Mersey.

To the north-east, overlooking the Mellor hilltop and the adjacent high ground, is the ridge of Cown Edge/ Coombs at *c.* 415 m AOD. Further to the east lies the Kinder Scout massif, rising above *c.* 600 m AOD. It is the highest part of the gritstone and shale uplands of the Dark Peak, which form the southern end of the Pennine range. To the south-west and south-east of the massif, those uplands continue in a horseshoe arrangement around the White Peak, a central lower plateau of Carboniferous limestone. In the Dark Peak to the north-east of Mellor lies Longdendale, the upper valley of the Etherow, which leads up to the watershed and provides an important trans-Pennine route.

While the Mellor hilltop is a conspicuous feature when viewed from the neighbouring hills, to the west the site itself provides a vista over a much wider area (Figure 1.6), looking out onto the Mersey Basin and in particular the Cheshire Plain, to the mid-Cheshire sandstone ridge and beyond to the Welsh hills.

Mellor is crossed by minor routeways, the principal being Longhurst Lane/Moor End Road which follows the valley of the Mellor Brook, and from which Church Road climbs the south side of the Mellor hilltop to St. Thomas's Church. A historic routeway descends the north side of the hilltop to Mill Brow on the Mill Brook and is known as the 'alehouse trackway', after the earliest known use of the house which is now the Old Vicarage (see Appendix 2). Below the Mellor hilltop, the village of Marple Bridge takes its name from a bridge over the River Goyt documented since the early 17th century, although the present structure is later. At an earlier date the river could be forded here (Jones 2004), providing a direct routeway westward towards the Mersey valley and the Cheshire Plain. To the east of Mellor, access into the Peak District south of the Kinder Scout massif can be gained via Rowarth and Hayfield.

Geology

The foothills of which Mellor is a part have a complex geology of Carboniferous sandstones and gritstones, siltstones and mudstones, which form a band between the gritstones of the Dark Peak to the east, and the Permo-Triassic sandstones and mudstones of the Cheshire Plain to the west. The top and upper slopes of the Mellor hill itself comprise an outcrop of hard coarse grained sandstones of Woodhead Hill Rock. They overlie, and are surrounded by, mudstones and siltstones of the Pennine Lower Coal Measures Formation, fine grained rocks less resistant to erosion. These various strata were laid down *c.* 318 million

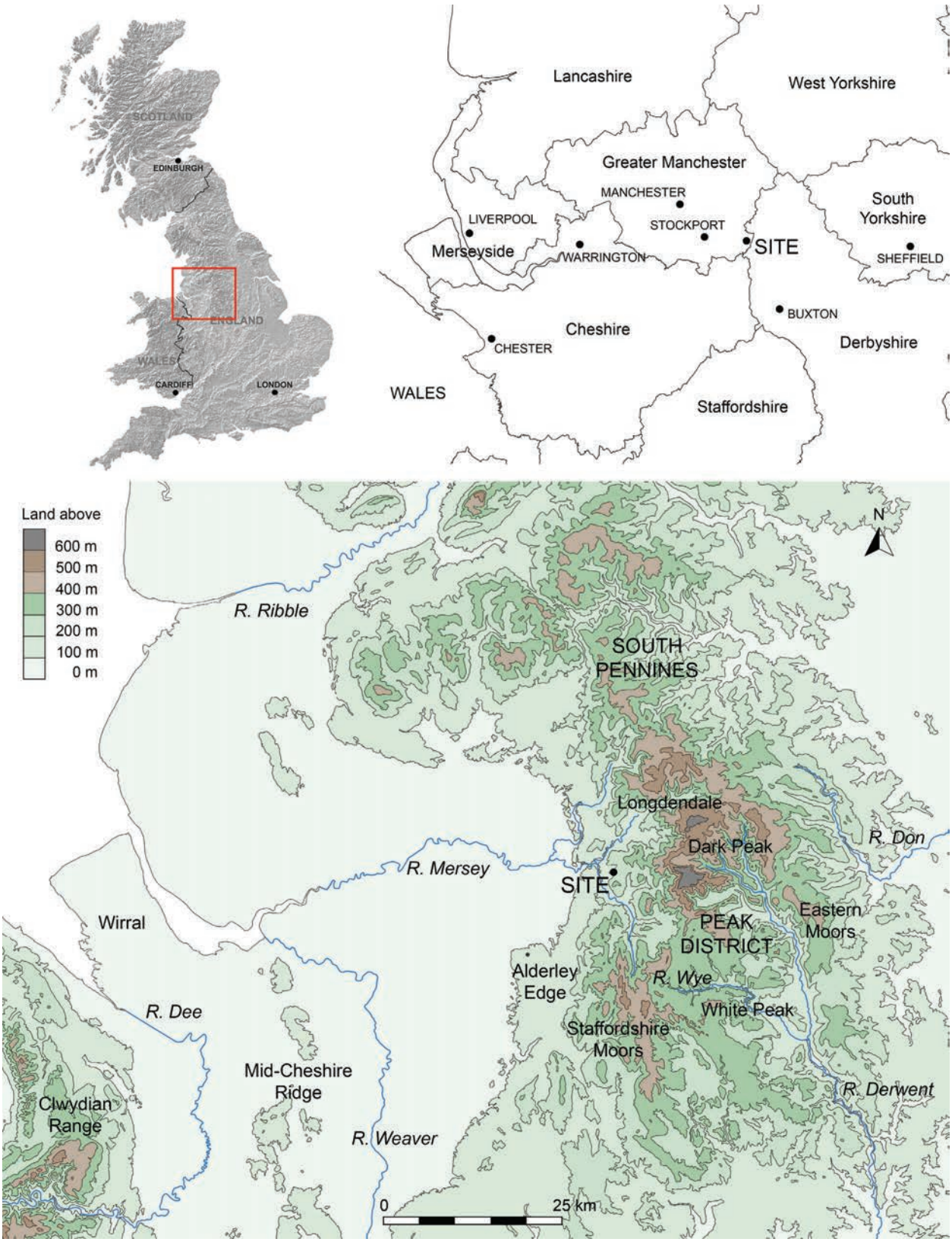

Figure 1.2. Regional setting of the site. Contains Public Sector Information licensed under the Open Government Licence V3.0.

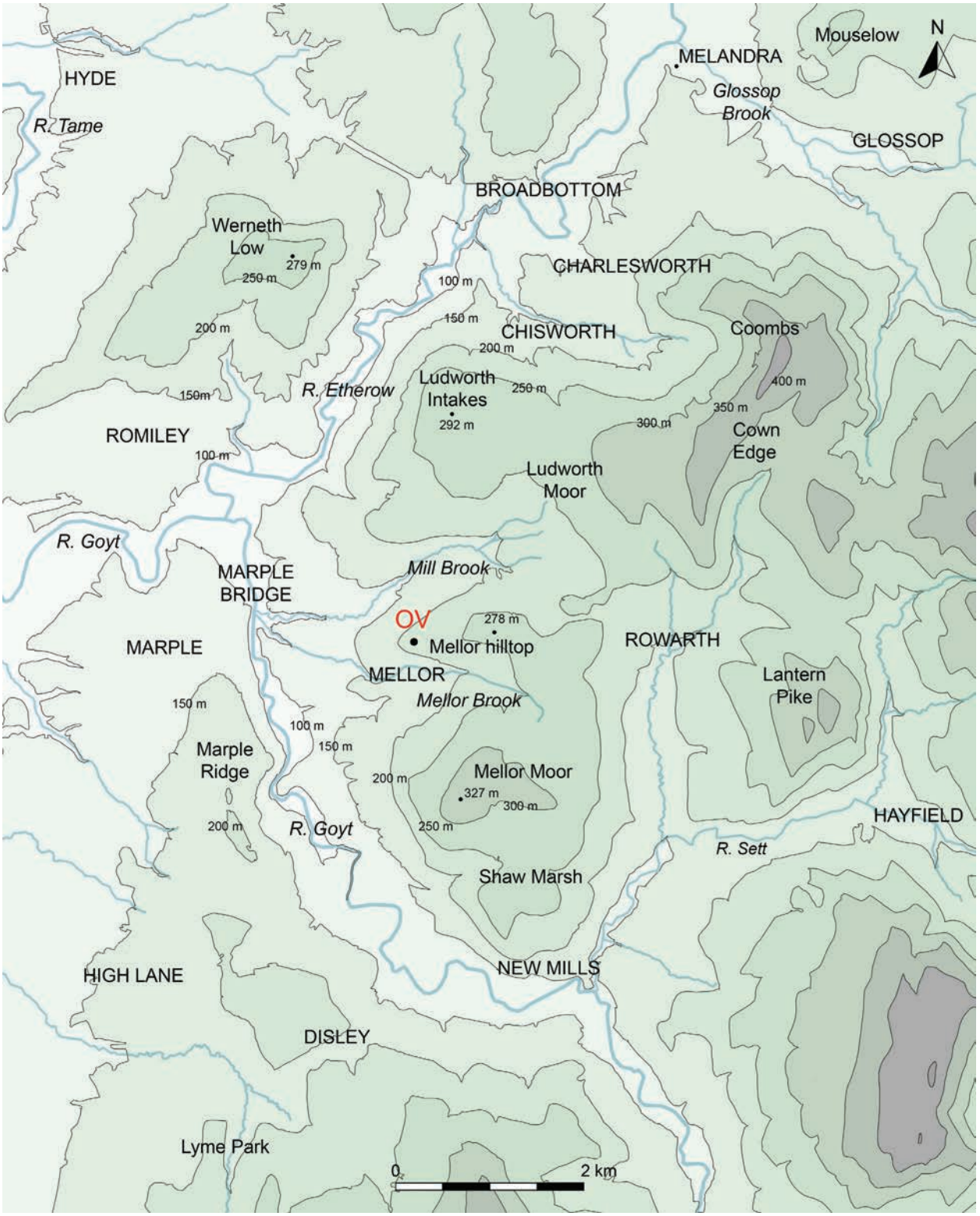

Figure 1.3. Local setting of the site. OV = Old Vicarage. Contains Public Sector Information licensed under the Open Government Licence V3.0.

years ago in the late Carboniferous as part of a vast river delta. The Woodhead Hill Rock sandstones have bedding planes which mark the original sand layers within that environment. They also have joints at right angles to these planes, resulting from later expansion when a thick rock overburden was removed by erosion (Broadhurst 2001). As a consequence, the stone is relatively easy to prise apart in large flat fragments. This characteristic facilitated the digging of the Iron

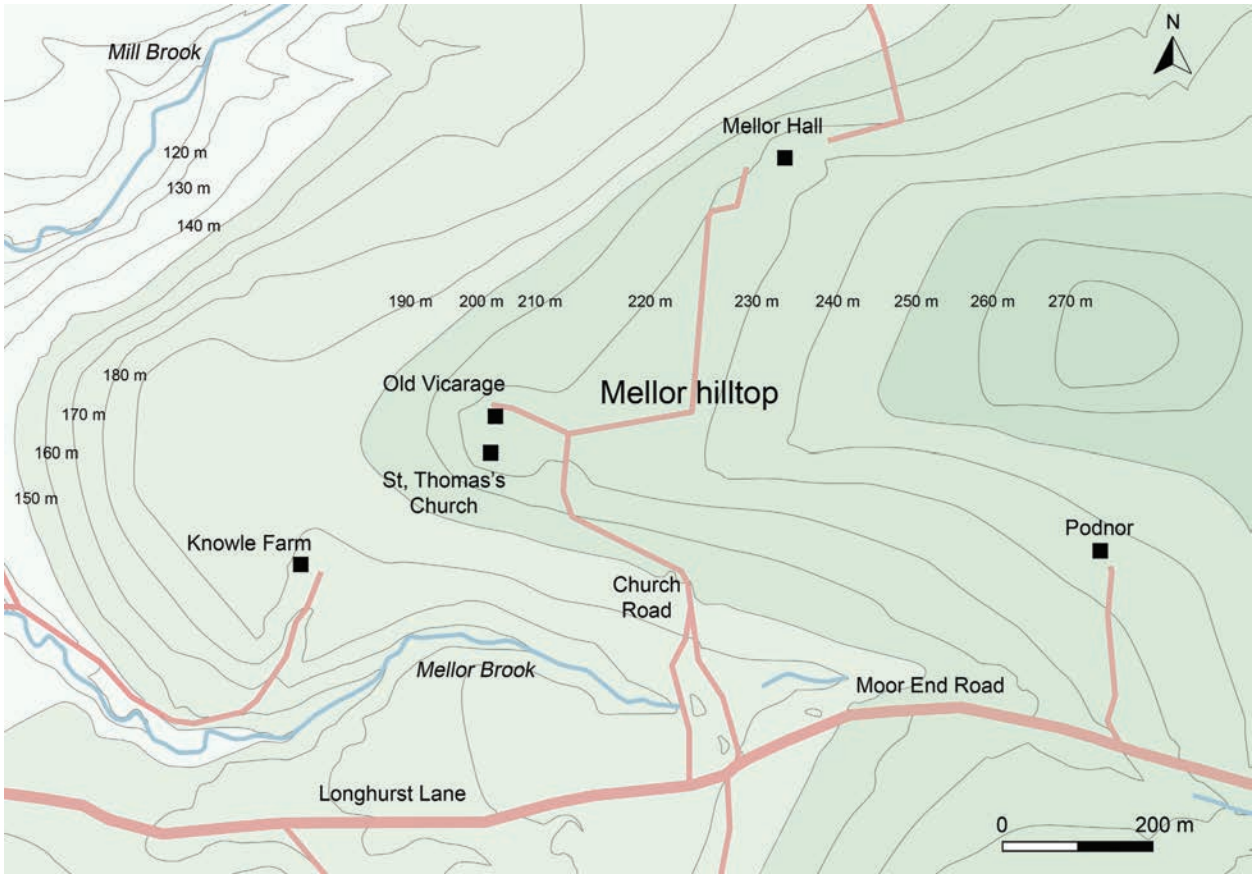

Figure 1.4. Map of the Mellor hilltop. Contains Public Sector Information licensed under the Open Government Licence V3.0.

Figure 1.5. Looking east to St. Thomas's Church from Knowle Farm. Photograph by Graham Eyre-Morgan.

Figure 1.6. St. Thomas's Church, looking west, with Marple Ridge in the middle distance (left) and the Cheshire Plain beyond. Photograph by Graham Eyre-Morgan.

Age rock-cut ditches on the hilltop and provided packing material for postholes and gullies.

In some parts of the site, the Woodhead Hill Rock was found directly below the topsoil and subsoil. In others, boulder clay (Devensian till) was encountered, seemingly in a band running down the north side of the hill and suggestive of the fill of a glacial channel. Boulder clay also covers much of the Pennine Lower Coal Measures Formation surrounding the hill but the Woodhead Hill Rock itself has given rise to relatively light, well-drained soils. In comparison with the Mellor hilltop, the soils on the sandstones on the neighbouring higher hills have suffered from excessive leaching of nutrients (Weston 2005: 10). The soils of the hilltop are slightly acidic.

The permeability of the Woodhead Hill Rock means that water is available below the surface of the hilltop, and has created a spring line where this rock meets the underlying strata (Weston 2005: 6, 25). Wells provided the water supply to the hilltop until as late as 1926. One of uncertain age is still extant on the north-east side of the Old Vicarage (Hearle 2011: 71–72).

Mellor

The townships and civil parishes of Mellor and neighbouring Ludworth, to the north, lay in Derbyshire until 1936. In that year they were amalgamated within the urban district of Marple in Cheshire, the boundary between the two counties until that date having followed the Goyt and the Etherow. As part of the changes to local government in 1974, Marple urban district became part of the new metropolitan borough of Stockport in the county of Greater Manchester.

ln the late 18th and early 19th centuries Mellor, an area formerly characterized by its scattered farms and hamlets, became a focus of the Industrial Revolution. In the Goyt valley Samuel Oldknow built one of the country's largest early cotton mills. Other smaller factories were erected on the fast-flowing Mellor Brook and Mill Brook. Transport links were improved by the construction of the Peak Forest Canal through Marple, and in the 1860s by the arrival of the railway with a station close to Marple Bridge (Ashmore 1989). By the end of the 19th century most of Mellor's mills had closed (Oldknow's mill was destroyed by fire in 1892), but the area was revitalized as an affluent commuter settlement on the fringe of the Manchester conurbation.

Discovery of the site

Sections of infilled rock-cut ditch were first uncovered on the site over two centuries ago, both at the Old Vicarage and in the adjacent churchyard. In 1810 the

Figure 1.7. Cropmark on the line of the outer enclosure ditch, photographed by Ann Hearle in 1995, looking north-east from the Old Vicarage.

Reverend William Marriott, curate of Disley, recorded in his book *The Antiquities of Lyme and its Vicinity*, 'Some years ago, in sinking deep into the soil of the church-yard for the construction of a vault, the progress of a cavern was discovered. It no longer, indeed, remained hollow; but the line of it was as distinct as ever from the vein of factitious soil, which had been introduced, in opposition to the native stratum at that depth, for the reparation of the cavity. The same vein was also brought to light, many years before, in sinking the foundation of an adjacent dwelling-house, now occupied as the residence of the clergyman of the place. Unless this could be really a concealed cavern for the ingress or egress of the troops of the post here maintained, which the view of the place hardly authorizes, no other solution but the following remains for the work. A deep fosse was constructed originally for the inclosure of the position. In subsequent ages it had the fate to be filled up, and the name and place of it passed into oblivion; until the labours of the mason and the grave-digger were accidentally directed into the bed' (Marriott 1810: 369).

Other discoveries at Mellor were reported by Thomas Bateman, the noted Derbyshire antiquarian and barrow digger, in his *Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire* in 1848: 'When, some years ago, the north wall of the church was taken down, several holes hewn in the rock were discovered, which had evidently been foundations for the pillars of a more ancient building' (Bateman 1848: 216). His source seems to have been the Reverend Matthew Freeman who was the incumbent when the north wall was rebuilt in the late 1820s (Bateman 1848: vi; Cox 1877: 221). Based on the findings of the modern excavations in the Old Vicarage garden, the features described by Bateman were probably postholes or pits associated not with the church but with the site's earlier history of occupation.

No further evidence of archaeological remains in or around the Old Vicarage is known to have come to light until the 1990s. In the dry summer of 1995 Ann Hearle photographed a curving linear cropmark in the grass of a field to the north-east of the house (Figure 1.7). The later excavations would reveal that it marked the line of an outer enclosure ditch. In 1997 the present writer, then a member of UMAU, was conducting research for a new history of Stockport and visited Ann Hearle in her capacity as a local historian. The timing was fortunate, for he was shown the photographs and was able to view the setting of the Old Vicarage at first hand. When the history was published later in 1997, it raised the possibility that this was the site of a late prehistoric or Romano-British settlement (Arrowsmith 1997: 20).

In 1998 John and Ann Hearle invited UMAU to carry out exploratory investigations on the site and provided the funding for the work. This initial fieldwork, involving

geophysical survey and trial trenching, located the linear feature previously apparent as a cropmark and revealed it to be a rock-cut ditch. On the western side of the Old Vicarage garden, a geophysical anomaly proved to be a second, wider and deeper, section of rock-cut ditch with Romano-British pottery in its upper fills and potentially prehistoric material below. The excavations in later years would show this ditch to belong to the site's inner enclosure and to be the 'deep fosse' described by Marriott.

Funding

The privately sponsored fieldwork conducted at and around the Old Vicarage in 1998 confirmed the presence of archaeological remains on the site and laid the foundations for further investigations. A second season of work, in 1999, was funded by the local authority Stockport MBC, which also contributed to the excavations in subsequent years. In 1999 the Mellor Archaeological Trust was established to steer the project and raise further funds. In the same year the results of the excavation were shown to the public in the first open day held on the site. This became an annual event and from 2000 onwards was extended to two days. As well as informing the local community and other visitors of the findings of the excavations, the open days generated income towards their cost. Significant additional support came from the Heritage Lottery Fund, increasing both the scale of the excavations and the extent of community involvement. In 2001 HLF funding was provided by the Local Heritage Initiative and in 2003–2005 by a Your Heritage grant. In their final years, from 2007 to 2009, the excavations formed part of the larger HLF-funded Mellor Heritage Project, covering the history of the whole of Mellor parish. The Project included an education and outreach programme with a full-time officer, which in 2008 was recognized with a Sandford Award by the Heritage Education Trust (Hearle 2011: 7–8, 20; Hearle and Hearle 2005, 2015).

Publication

The results of the excavations for each year were described in grey-literature reports produced by UMAU (Eyre-Morgan 1999, 2000; Holden 2001; Noble 2009; Noble and Thompson 2007; Noble *et al.* 2004, 2008; Thompson *et al.* 2005; UMAU 2003). At the close of the Mellor Heritage Project, these were followed by a report providing a general overview (Roberts 2011a). Copies of the grey-literature reports have been deposited with the Greater Manchester Historic Environment Record, currently maintained by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service based at the University of Salford. The annual reports have also been made available on line, through the website of the Mellor Archaeological Trust.

An interim monograph on the site was published in 2005 and drew together contributions originally presented at a study day held at Mellor's Parish Centre two years previously (Nevell and Redhead 2005). The interim volume described the results of the excavations carried out up to 2004 (Noble and Thompson 2005), and considered the site in its wider context during the late prehistoric and Romano-British periods. Later a summary of the completed excavations was included within a new history of Mellor, published as part of the Mellor Heritage Project (Roberts 2011b). There has also been an interim statement on the prehistoric and Romano-British activity at the site in a monograph on hillforts published by the Council for British Archaeology North West (Hearle *et al.* 2014).

The present volume draws together the results of the 12 seasons' work in a single publication. This synthesis has allowed a more detailed understanding of the development of the site, and in a number of instances has revised the interpretation and conclusions presented in the grey-literature reports and other interim accounts. The volume is principally concerned with the evidence from the Mesolithic period to the medieval, but also extends beyond that last period to include a report on the clay tobacco pipes.

The following chapter outlines the methodology of the excavations. In Chapter 3 the excavation results from each of the main periods from the Mesolithic to the medieval are presented and discussed. Finds and palaeoenvironmental evidence are then described in specialist chapters. These are largely based on reports originally written either during the course of the excavations or as part of the post-excavation process in the year or so following the completion of the fieldwork in 2009. Where considered appropriate, the information or interpretation presented has been updated by their respective authors in 2023. As a conclusion, Chapter 19 draws together and further explores aspects of the site against the background of its local and regional context. Appendices 1 and 2 briefly outline the historical context of the site in the medieval period and later. Appendix 3 is the report on the clay tobacco pipes.

Regional context

Mellor's position on the border of two geographically distinct areas, the uplands of the Peak District and southern Pennines to the east, and the lowlands of Cheshire and neighbouring counties to the west, raises the question of the regional context within which the site should be studied. Historically the basic building block for the regional discussion of archaeology in England has often been the county, a trend reinforced by the modern system of county archaeological curators whose responsibilities include the maintenance of a

county Historic Environment Record. The published overview by Redhead of the regional background of the Mellor site in the late prehistoric and Romano-British periods follows this pattern by placing the excavations primarily in the context of Greater Manchester and the North-West (Redhead 2005). However, at times the site has been considered from other perspectives. Bevan has included Mellor within discussions of the Peak District in the Iron Age and Romano-British period (Bevan 2005a, 2005b, 2007). Others stress Mellor's central position between the uplands and the Cheshire Plain, and the potential advantage which this gave in the exploitation of trans-Pennine communications and trade (Connelly 2005; Roberts 2011a: 1–2).

The present volume has sought to adopt a flexible approach, drawing on comparative evidence from east and west, in order both to assist the interpretation of the archaeology and to explore the site's appropriate local and regional context. A brief explanation needs to be added with regard to regional definitions. The term North-West is used in this volume principally for the area encompassed by the modern counties of Greater Manchester, Cheshire and Merseyside and the southern part of Lancashire, geographically extending from the western lowlands to the Pennine fringe (Figure 1.2). References to the Peak District are to both the Dark and the White Peak.