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**Archaeology and the M5 Motorway. Gloucestershire 1969-75: A  
Summary and Assessment**

by P. J. Fowler  
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# Archaeology and the M5 Motorway Gloucestershire 1969–75: a summary and assessment

By P. J. FOWLER, M.A., Ph.D., F.S.A.

BETWEEN the early months of 1969 and the end of 1970 the field archaeology of lowland Gloucestershire was more or less created. Before then, with the exception of some mainly Roman sites around Gloucester and a few villas found in the 19th century between Bristol and the Stroud valley, in the lowlands south from Tewkesbury and through the vale of Berkeley few sites of any date were known. Knowledge of the area assumed that the present pastoral use, the generally clayey soils and the former afforestation made it archaeologically nugatory. Some 18 months of combined fieldwork, intensive surveillance and generally small-scale, more or less continuous excavation, prompted entirely by the construction of the M5 motorway and executed very largely by archaeological volunteers, produced a completely different picture. This result was not without its implications.

The Gloucestershire result, detailed in four Reports (Fowler and Waltham, 1971, henceforth *M5 First*; Fowler and Bennett, 1973: *M5 Second*; Fowler and Bennett, 1974: *M5 Third*; Fowler, Bennett and Hill, 1976: *M5 Fourth*) is tabulated in Appendix 1 (p. 46 below). 54 sites were recorded along 67 kms (c. 41 miles) of motorway route, i.e. 54 sites were given numbers in the published Reports. Several of those each covered two or more separate sites and in addition 30 unnumbered 'sites' were itemized (*see* Appendix 2, p. 46). Not all the 'sites' were subsequently affected by motorway construction, but all were recorded during the archaeological M5 exercise. Depending on whether one uses the minimal 54 numbered sites or c. 90 recorded 'sites' altogether, the incidence of record averages 0.8 sites per km (1.3 per mile) or 1.3 'sites' per km (2.2 per mile). This final figure is remarkably close to an early assessment of the average (Fowler, 1971: '150 sites in 75 miles'; cf. Fowler, 1972, FIG 4), an average closely maintained on the Somerset M5 and also on the M40 in Oxfordshire (Hinton and Rowley, 1974, cf. Fowler, 1976).

Publishing the Gloucestershire M5 has involved some 50 contributors filling 185 pages with c. 90,000 words in five volumes of the *Transactions*. The 74 figures have included 22 of pottery (mostly full-page) illustrating 375 Romano-British, 159 medieval and 28 post medieval sherds. 97 Romano-British and 7 medieval pottery type fabrics have been defined. The 18 'small finds' figures illustrate 79 metal and 17 stone objects, 43 flints and various other material. The 17 site plans are supplemented by 7 maps. Behind the end product were the efforts of perhaps 150 volunteers in the field, some £2,000 in central government grants for the rescue work, DOE grants for editorial assistance and to the Society towards publication costs, and many £000s of hidden subsidy from institutions—the University of Bristol and Gloucester and Bristol museums principally—and a small number of committed volunteers. If the whole exercise could be properly costed, even at the minimal level at which it was executed, expenditure would have been well over £20,000 at 1972 prices. As it was, the cash expenditure from beginning to end, including payments to 5 consecutive full-time field and editorial assistants, was c. £7,000. The difficulties of mounting and sustaining such a largely voluntary, corporate effort, particularly after the 'action' and during the much longer time required to reach the publication stage, are unquantifiable. In this respect, annoying and in many ways incredible now was our total unawareness in 1969 of German and American experience on 'motorways', though in this we merely shared in the insularity characterizing rescue archaeology in Britain in the 1960s (Rahtz, 1974).

Inevitably, Gloucestershire suffered because its motorway was archaeologically the pioneer. In

particular, although we were consciously aiming at as complete a record as possible, we were still thinking primarily of sites and structures; it was only later in Somerset, with somewhat more time, that the work developed a landscape as distinct from a site orientation. On the other hand, it is unlikely that any major sites recognizable by normal archaeological phenomena were missed. Although we had the advantage of working mainly on a stone-free route, so that stone of any sort was relatively easily observed, we suffered from a major drawback. The present pastoral land-use largely obviated the use of air photography for sub-surface features. Further, the clay subsoil quickly produced archaeologically unhelpful conditions as machines churned it up when wet or pounded it down when dry. Many of the M5 sites, particularly occupation areas, therefore lack a context.

The M5 prehistoric material is entirely non-structural and aceramic but it is useful to see the incidence of utilized flint and stone, all non-local, off the Cotswolds. It must, however, be recognized that, in part at least, the flint record in particular contains a known but unquantifiable subjective element. The specific distribution of 'flint sites' is probably not very meaningful; they do not proliferate until the Cotswold foothills are reached south of the river Frome, however, and the general incidence seems a clear indication of lowland activity, even settlement, in the 3rd-early 2nd millennia B.C. The ard-marks at Lodge Farm (Site 47) are potentially of considerable significance in this context. The evidence overall, supplementing that from Cam (Smith, 1968), is suggestive of lowland clearance broadly in the 3rd millennium, followed by forest regeneration during the 2nd and 1st millennia (cf. *passim*, Evans *et al* 1975). Whatever its interpretation, it provides a useful counterbalance to the funerary monumental record from the contemporary Cotswolds (O'Neill and Grinsell, 1960). Iron (and bronze?) age settlers do not appear to have been on the lias and clay lowlands of Gloucestershire along the line of the M5.

The main positive impact of the M5 appears to be in settlement studies of the Roman period. For much of the M5 route, Roman levels were *c.* 30 cms below the present ground surface, itself usually corrugated or showing other evidence of ridge-and-furrow cultivation. This arable land-use had fairly effectively flattened the surface features of the Roman period but, on the other hand, had protected the Roman landscape by burying it under a soil cover, eventually grassed over to become the present-day pasture. The suspicion persists that the M5 density (24 sites) reflects in some measure the importance of the adjacent Sea Mills-Gloucester Roman road, though no such explanation is available for a comparable M5 density around Taunton (M5 Research Committee *forthcoming*). That at least 6 settlements began in the later 1st century is probably significant, particularly in view of the absence of pre-Roman Iron Age evidence. Seven more began in the 2nd century. The possibility that some form of plantation is involved could receive support from the common characteristics of most of these sites: spreads of stone for the bases of structures, cobbled areas and paths, plentiful provision for drainage, and a variety of evidence for small-scale industrial activity. No new sites appeared in the 3rd century, but two (Sites 1 and 31) produced only late pottery in small surface collections. Conversely, while no settlements produced only 1st-century material, three (28, 39, 41) produced nothing later than the 2nd century and possibly five (12, 13, 15, 36, 49) nothing later than the 3rd century. Though the basis is shaky, there might just be a hint here on the lowland clay that it was the 2nd rather than the 4th century which saw the maximum settlement density. In this context it is very tempting to see the (2nd century?) ditch at Alveston (Site 49) as a hint of maintained field-boundaries following land-clearance.

The M5 of course avoided existing settlements. Here its evidence is biased in a way which is not obviously so for earlier periods. The absence of sub-Roman/early medieval material (with the exception of surface finds, Sites 6 and 20) is almost as striking as that from the pre-Roman Iron Age in view of the now known Roman occupation of the vale. As it is, the M5 results imply either that the area was unsettled, that the settlements are under existing farms and villages or that communities, as in the Iron Age, were established elsewhere. The occurrence of Roman and medieval pottery on eight M5 sites (24, 27, 28, 31, 35, 39, 43, 47) might support the idea of continuity but evidence from the 6th-10th centuries is lacking. Even the occasional hints of possible pre-Norman

occupation are of the 11th century rather than earlier, e.g. Sites 17, 31, 47. The 'dead' sites encountered by definition on M5 are, however, probably in secondary or inferior locations anyway, and therefore less likely to have been occupied continuously. The vale of Berkeley could well have been fairly heavily wooded (with its second regeneration after neolithic and early Roman clearance?) and yet supported many small settlements in clearings where the successful old settlements persist today. Obliquely, but firmly, the M5 results point to the need for research in existing, not deserted, medieval settlements to understand the origins and development of historic settlement patterns in lowland Gloucestershire.

The survey of Gloucestershire place-names is relevant to these considerations. Of the (unfortunately unnumbered) maps in the folder of *Part IV* (Smith, 1965), that showing the incidence of nine separate elements (*teah*, *graf*, etc.) indicates virtually no settlement at all in the clay/lia lowlands before Domesday. The marked filling up of the landscape between then and 1500 accords with the M5 archaeological results. Documentation of the few surviving Romano-British and Welsh names and elements occurs, with very few exceptions and notably round Gloucester, only after 1086. On the other hand, the elements *tun*, *ingtun* and *wic*, particular the last, are scattered down the vale in pre-1086 sources. Fortuitously or not, clusters of these elements occur in the same areas as the two marked concentrations of M5 sites, i.e. around the Little Avon and south-east of Thornbury (FIGS 1 and 2, Sites 26-41 and 42-50).

M5 evidence for the Norman and later landscape is 'new' only in the sense that very little medieval fieldwork had been done. The results are typical of other areas (Appendix 1, FIG 2). The real lesson is that much more could be discovered through systematic fieldwork and documentary search. Although we located sites from field, field-name or documentary evidence (Fowler, 1972), we merely touched on and did not pursue the wider field of medieval settlement studies, particularly in relation to territorial units (parishes, manors, estates, etc.; but *cf* Sites 3 and 17). The results displayed on FIG 2 reflect our prime and urgent concern at the time to identify archaeological *sites* but, for example, the vertical air cover from which the M5 route was designed contains a wealth of evidence for the morphology of adjacent villages and their surrounding fields. Nor have we included ridge-and-furrow in our 'sites' although the M5 cut through a more or less continuous blanket of it as far south as Site 36 (*M5 Second*, 58). Recording of post-medieval sites and material was partial yet field-names and habitation evidence again indicated the potential, though perhaps first by compiling a topographical index from maps and documentary evidence.

The house at Wick (Site 35) gave a pointer to another research topic, vernacular architecture, so far scarcely touched in the vale. Similarly the material from Site 40 provided the basis for opening up a new subject of study in the area, namely post-medieval ceramics. Indeed, the Gloucestershire M5 material generally has provided the opportunity for exploring largely unexamined aspects of local material culture. Nothing from the M5 has been individually outstanding—indeed the 'finds' are aesthetically of a consistent unremarkableness—but, more importantly, there is now a corpus of prehistoric, Roman, medieval and post-medieval material from an area previously without such a background (above, p. 40 for quantities). The two samples of kiln material (Sites 36 and 40), and the apparently localized distribution of some fabrics, strongly suggest that many more pottery-producing sites await discovery. Already we know that the pottery from Sites 25, 27 and 31 is of a particularly distinctive type which may well prove to be the norm for south Gloucestershire medieval ceramics (information from A. Vince and J. Bennett).

Archaeologically, then, observation of the M5 in Gloucestershire produced academic results and indicated a potential both locally and nationally. In the event, emergency proved to be not the antithesis but a stimulant of research. Nor were its results only academic. Indeed, its impact was more immediate in organizational and political fields. The M5 was a factor leading to the formation of Rescue, the Trust for British Archaeology, and to the establishment of rescue archaeology as a concept in political and popular terms. The M5 saw the first full-time archaeological field team in Gloucestershire's countryside and the co-operation between local archaeological interests foreshadowed a regional Committee for Rescue Archaeology employing a desperately-needed full-time

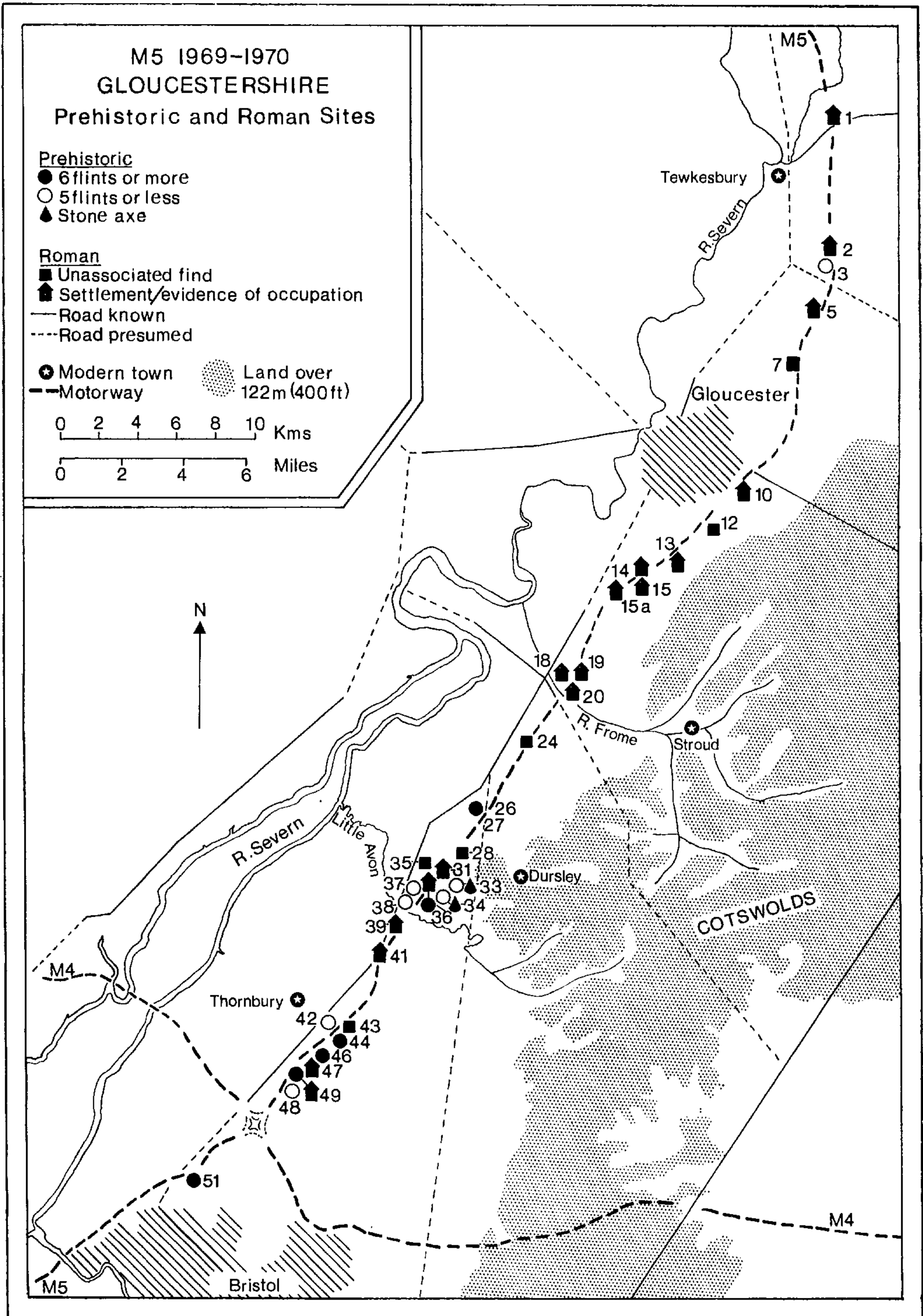


FIG. 1

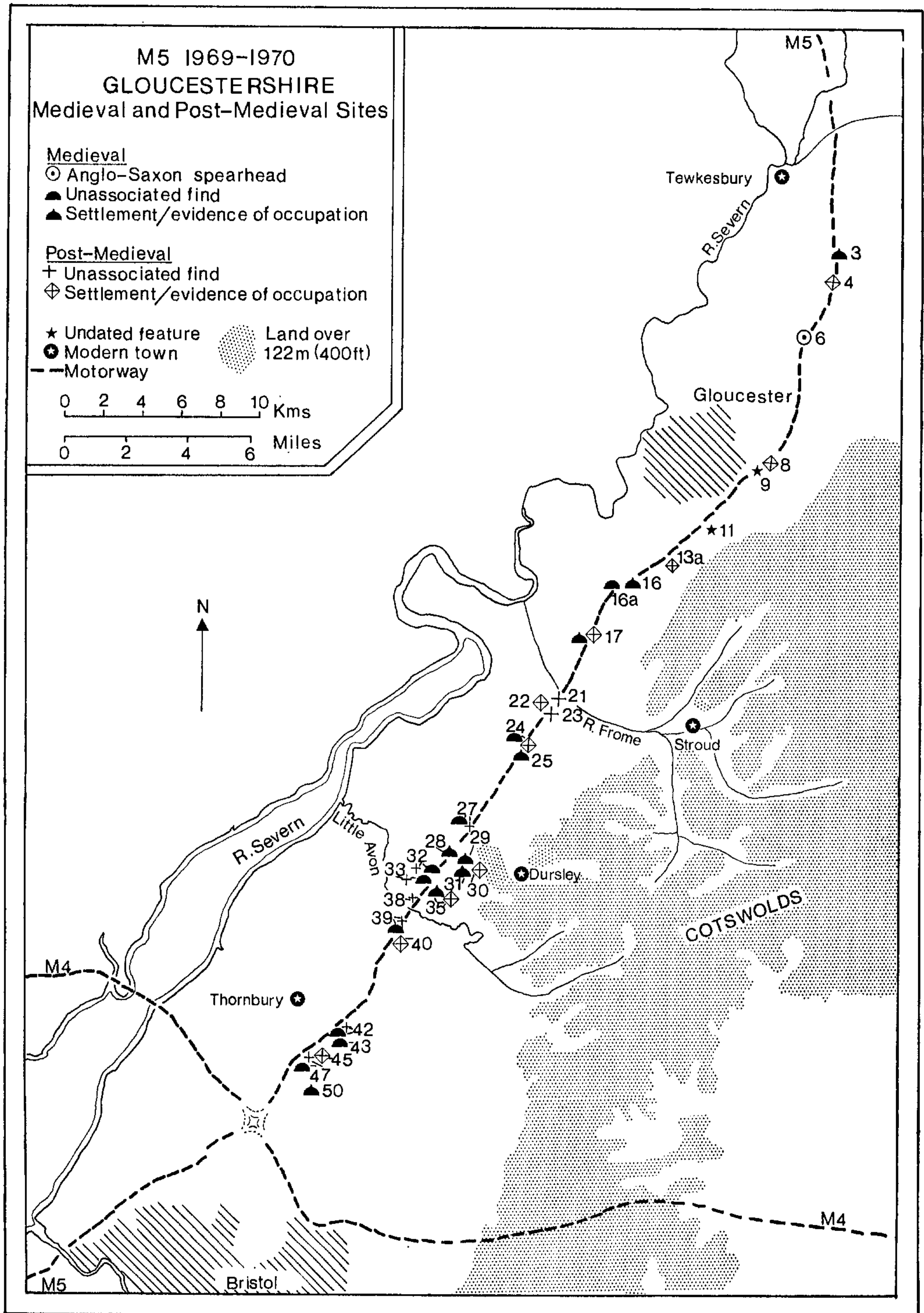


FIG. 2

staff. As a pioneer effort, it was quickly followed by similar responses to motorway construction elsewhere, notably on the M40, M11 and M3, and it helped in archaeology being officially recognized as an element in the planning and consultative processes of road construction. The M5 can fairly claim to have been one of the factors contributing to major changes in several aspects of British archaeology and its status in the early 1970s.

In the last resort, however, the archaeological significance of M5 rests on an academic assessment of its results and implications. The present writer has been too much involved to be altogether dispassionate: FIGS 1 and 2 are both gratifying and disappointing. A difficulty now is to recall the state of knowledge, the impoverished archaeological resources and, above all, the archaeological frame of mind early in 1969. Obviously, the operation could have been better executed, the recording could have been more thorough, objective and consistent judged by the standards and resources available 5 years later, e.g. £28,000 from DoE in 1975–76 alone for only 13 miles of M3 (Fasham, 1975); equally it could be argued that a success of M5 is precisely that such matters are different now. None of the Gloucestershire M5 sites is of great significance in itself other than locally, but *en masse* they seemingly justify a tiny expenditure of public money and a considerably larger amount of voluntary effort. They pose questions, of course, about the archaeological validity of the M5 route itself—an haphazard strip dictated by road planners maybe, but not an arbitrary linear unit (*contra* Gregory, 1975); and about such a concentration of effort, to the exclusion of other work, particularly when it produced incomplete results from every site individually. They raise basic questions about whether it is better to have such results or none at all; and, having obtained them, about their quality and significance. As archaeological standards and provision improve, the whole M5 exercise is appearing increasingly crude and unsatisfactory, an opportunity lost rather than its original conception of an opportunity accepted. Yet one fact was not foreseen in 1969, and its existence now gives point to the effort then: the great age of motorway construction is already over. Whatever our result, there is at least something to show from an opportunity which, in its temporal brevity and linear scale, had not been attempted before in Britain and is unlikely ever to be repeated. It is curious to sense that, having seen the archaeology of the Gloucestershire M5 through from start to finish in less than 6 years, we have seen it already become a part of history (e.g. Daniel, 1975, 381).

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## APPENDIX 1

## THE M5 IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE—CATALOGUE OF THE SITES

## APPENDIX 2

## PARISHES CONTAINING UN-NUMBERED M5 'SITES' (arranged alphabetically)

Barnwood	Frocester	Thornbury
Cam (2 'sites')	Haresfield (2)	Tortworth (3)
Coaley (2)	Slimbridge (2)	Tytherington (9)
Eastington	Stinchcombe	Walton Cardiff
Falfield (3)	Stoke Orchard	