

Salisbury Plain Training Area National Mapping Programme project



The landscape of Salisbury Plain has been actively managed by the army for about 100 years, during which time most of the surrounding chalk upland has been subject to major agricultural activity that has levelled most archaeological remains. In contrast, sites from earliest prehistory survive on Salisbury Plain as well-preserved earthworks. The NMP project was aimed at recording not only the well-known isolated features, but the landscapes in between.



Central Impact Area of the Plain photographed on 22-JUN-1994. Clearly visible are the 'Celtic' field systems stretching transversely across the hillside and into the valley. In the distance (top right) is the settlement on Upavon Down. Here on the Plain it is possible to walk through Romano-British streets in one settlement, through its fields and on, into the next settlement. The small white spots are tank hulks, painted and used as artillery targets (NMR 15042/02). © Crown copyright.HE

The project

The Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA) Mapping Project was an internal project forming part of English Heritage's National Mapping Programme (NMP). It grew out of earlier work by the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England, who had been active on the Plain since the creation of Archaeological Site Groups (ASGs) under the auspices of the Salisbury Plain Working Party in 1986.

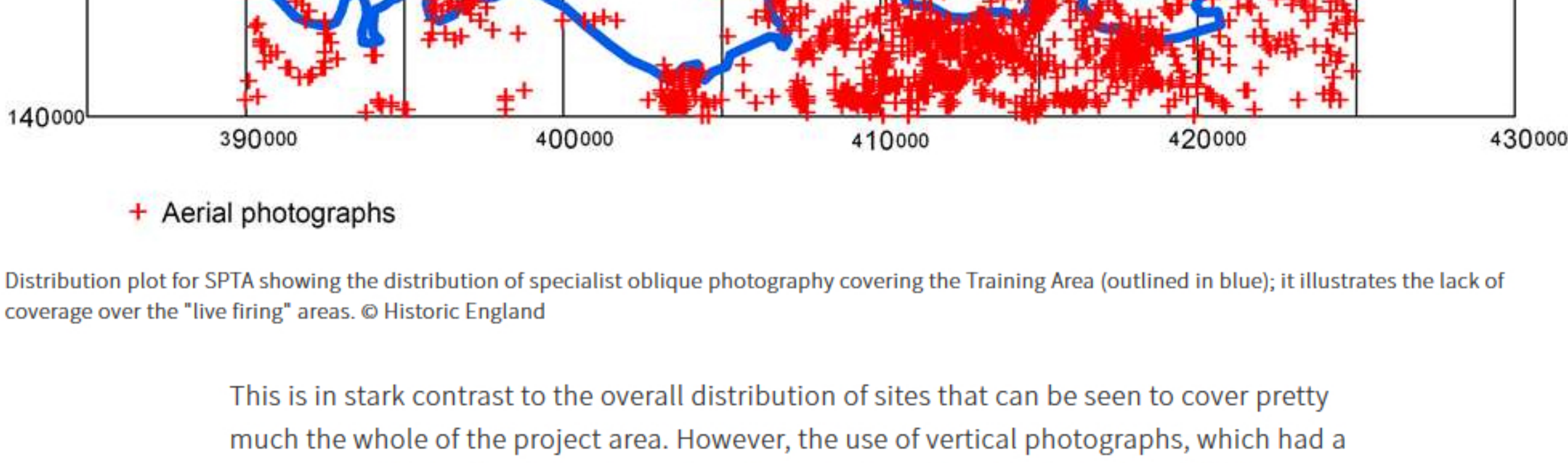
Previously work had been very largely field-based and covered small areas at a large scale. For the NMP project all archaeological features surviving as either upstanding earthworks or visible only as cropmarks were recorded. The 1:10,000 transcriptions are available from the Historic England Archive (formerly the National Monuments Record Centre).

By using aerial photography dating back to the 1920s the survey mapped, interpreted and classified not only extant sites, but also those which have long since been destroyed by military activity or the steady encroachment of ploughing around the edges of the Plain. In spite of the long history of interest in the Plain over 1,800 entirely new sites, 43.7% of the records for the project, were added to the record.

Photographic bias

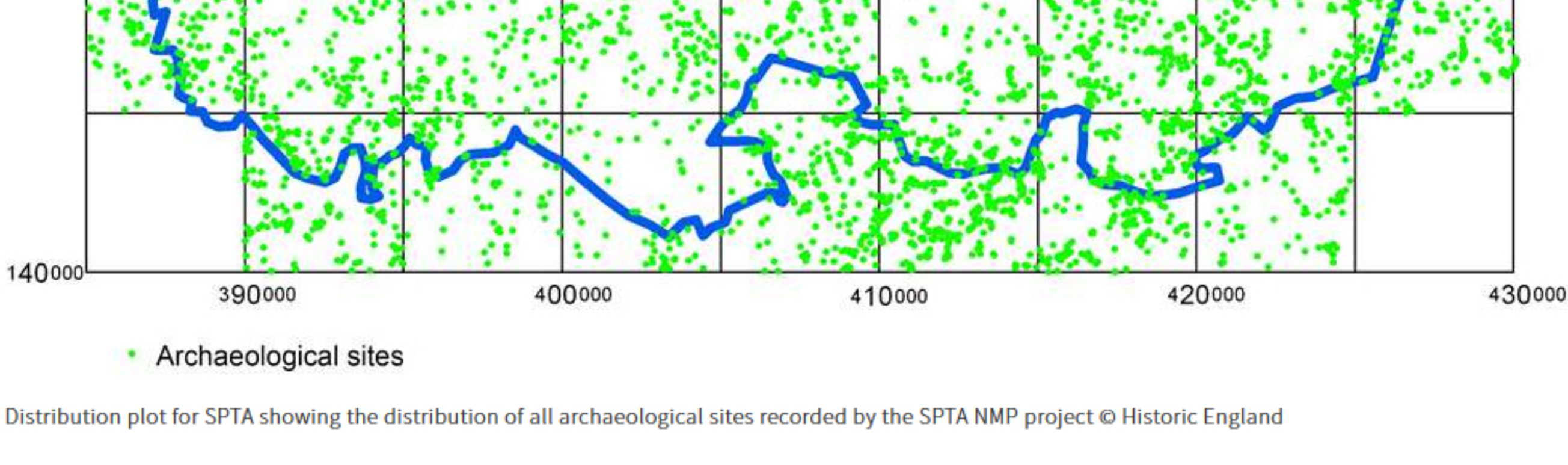
Salisbury Plain Training Area is an operational training area still used by the army today. As a result access for low-level specialist oblique photography is heavily restricted and therefore, unlike other areas previously covered by NMP such as the Thames Valley, the majority of photographs covering the area are non-specialist vertical photographs (especially RAF and USAAF).

The uneven distribution of specialist cover, with a heavy bias towards the eastern zone, which is used largely for vehicle activity rather than live firing, is clearly visible in the distribution map of oblique photographs.



Distribution plot for SPTA showing the distribution of specialist oblique photography covering the Training Area (outlined in blue); it illustrates the lack of coverage over the 'live firing' areas. © Historic England

This is in stark contrast to the overall distribution of sites that can be seen to cover pretty much the whole of the project area. However, the use of vertical photographs, which had a more even distribution, helped to redress the imbalance from the lack of specialist reconnaissance.



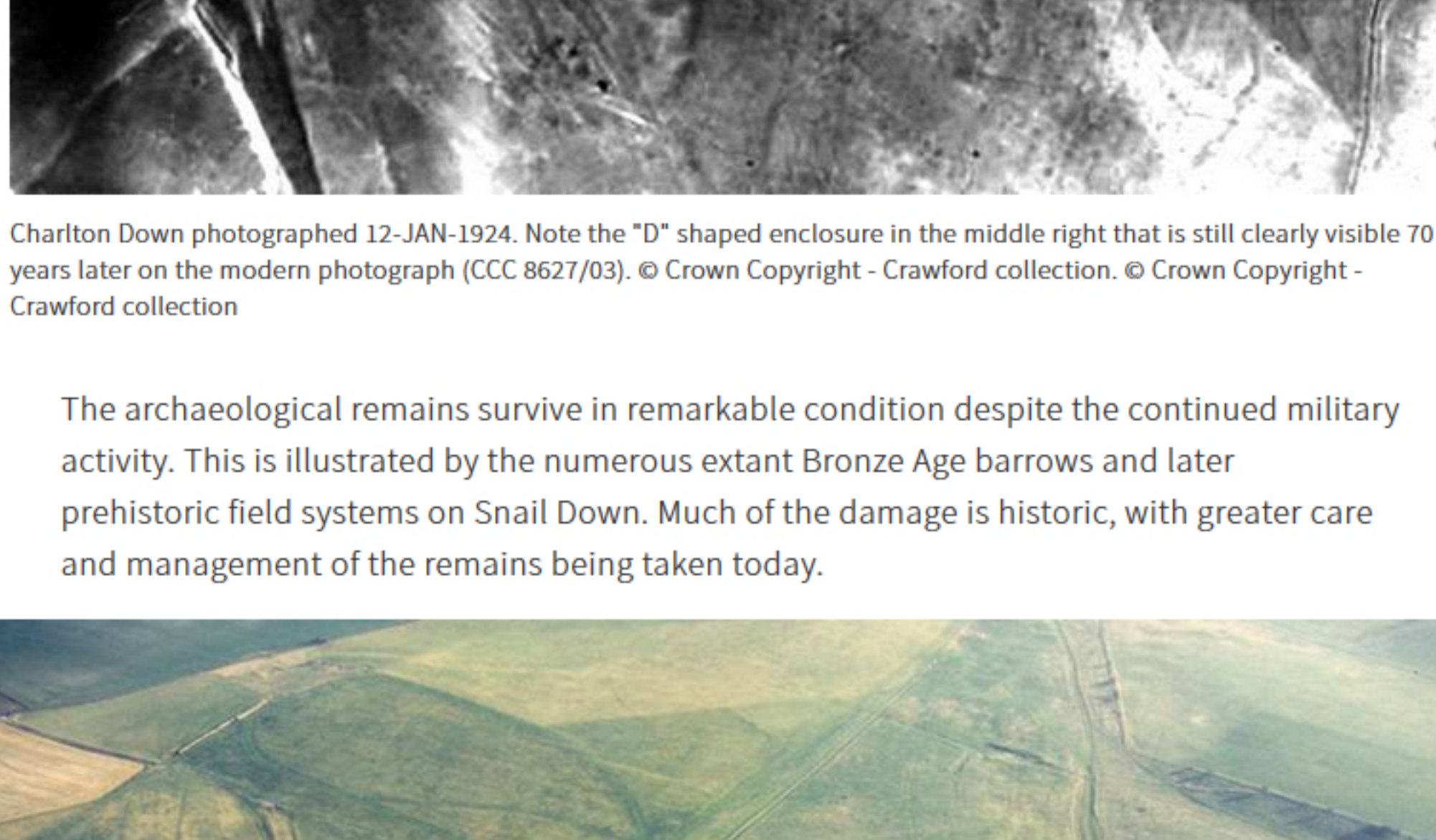
Distribution plot for SPTA showing the distribution of all archaeological sites recorded by the SPTA NMP project © Historic England

Salisbury Plain in the twentieth century

In the 1930s OGS Crawford, the founding father of aerial archaeology, noted that Salisbury Plain had been so damaged by military activity that archaeological interest should be concentrated on the Marlborough Downs, with a view to designation as a National Park. Unfortunately his advice was ignored and the archaeology of the Marlborough Downs was systematically destroyed by ploughing, something clearly demonstrated by the results of other NMP projects in the region.

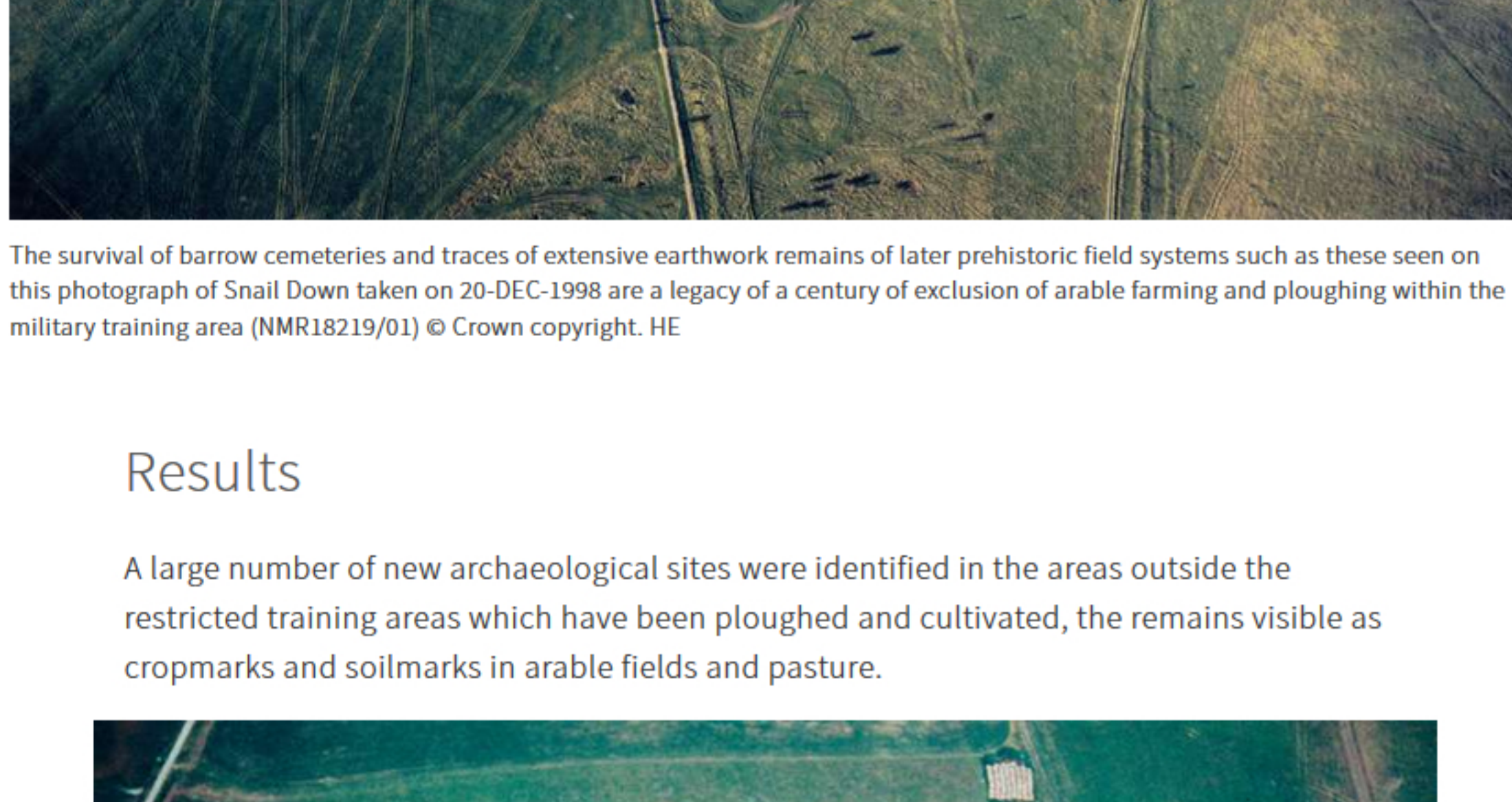
The presence of the military, destructive though it has been in specific areas, has helped to protect the Plain from plough damage. As a result it is now probably the best preserved area of upland in southern Britain, with earthwork remains of field systems, settlements and funerary monuments of various periods. On the Plain it is possible to walk along Romano-British streets in one settlement, through its fields and on, into the next settlement.

The image above taken 70 years before that above shows how little has changed on the Plain in that time compared with much of the rest of southern England.



Charlton Down photographed 12-JAN-1924. Note the 'D' shaped enclosure in the middle right that is still clearly visible 70 years later on the modern photograph (CCC 8627/03). © Crown Copyright - Crawford collection. © Crown Copyright - Crawford collection

The archaeological remains survive in remarkable condition despite the continued military activity. This is illustrated by the numerous extant Bronze Age barrows and later prehistoric field systems on Snail Down. Much of the damage is historic, with greater care and management of the remains being taken today.



The survival of barrow cemeteries and traces of extensive earthwork remains of later prehistoric field systems such as these seen on this photograph of Snail Down taken on 20-DEC-1998 are a legacy of a century of exclusion of arable farming and ploughing within the military training area (NMR18219/01) © Crown copyright. HE

Results

A large number of new archaeological sites were identified in the areas outside the restricted training areas which have been planted and cultivated, the remains visible as cropmarks and soilmarks in arable fields and pasture.



Cropmark remains of barrows on Figheldean Down photographed on 09-MAY-1995 (NMR 15407/09). © Crown copyright. HE

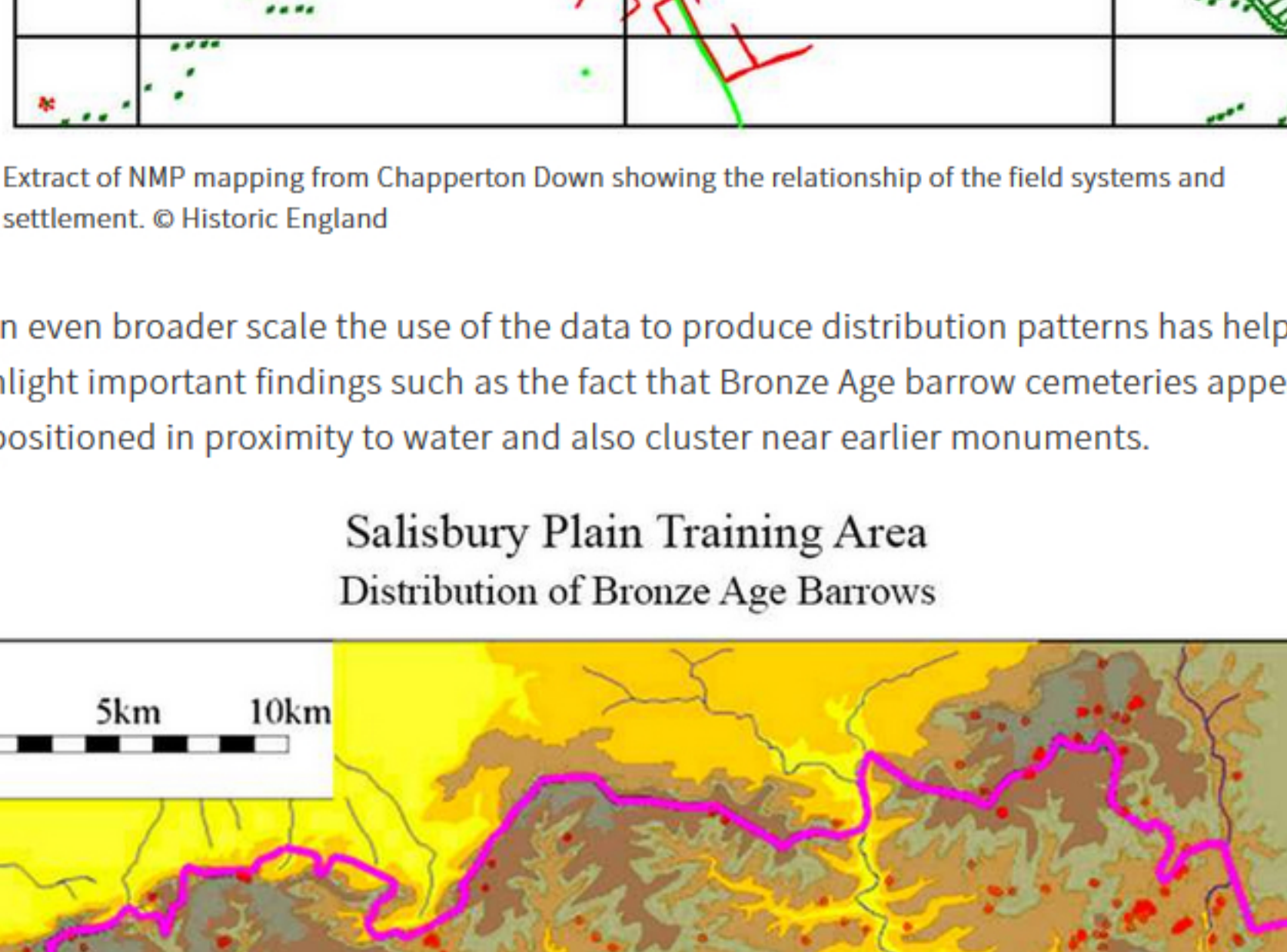
A large number of these new sites were enclosed settlements of presumed prehistoric date. This was an important finding as the Plain had previously been thought to hold very little in the way of enclosed prehistoric settlement.



A probable settlement enclosure of prehistoric date near Yarnbury Castle, Wilts photographed on 20-JUL-1994 (NMR 15149/09). © Crown copyright. HE

Providing context

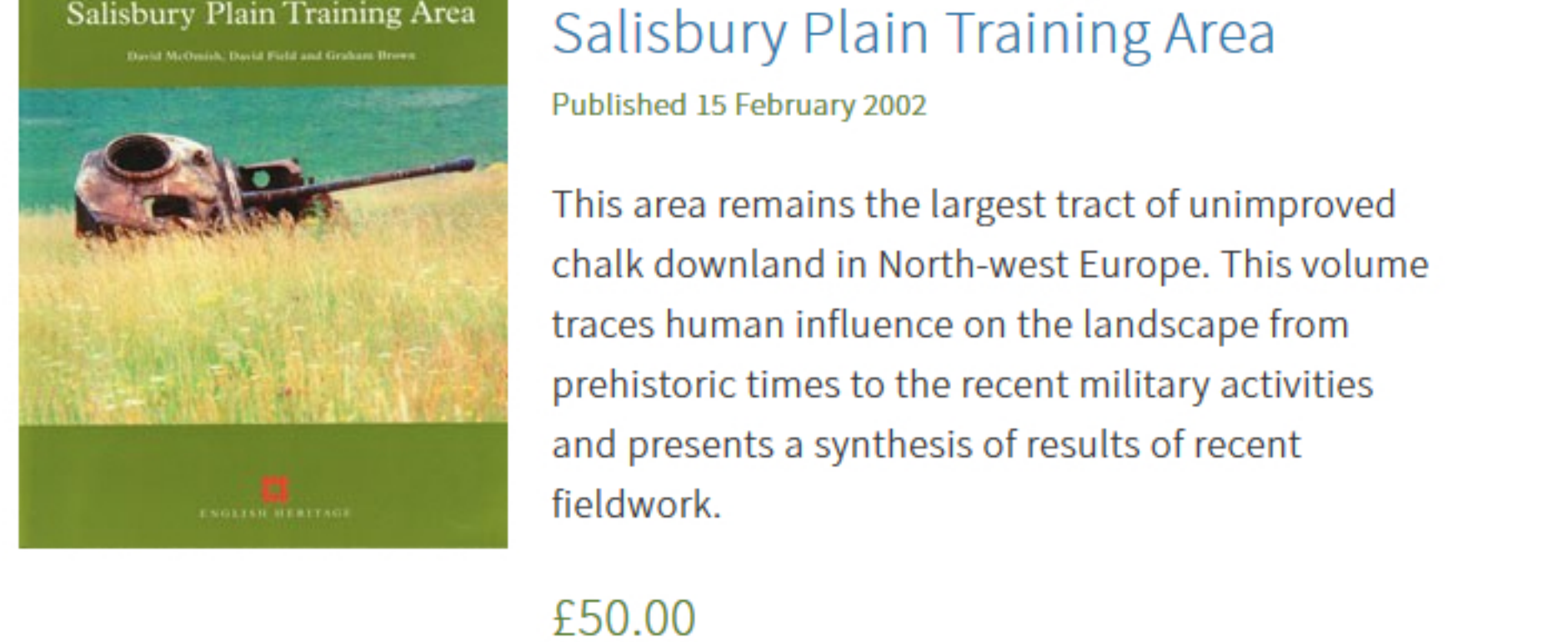
As well as the individual sites, the production of transcriptions showing how all the various features related to one another in the landscape was highly valuable. This information helps to provide a context for future management strategies for all the archaeological landscapes on the Plain. In addition, it provides new possibilities for research into settlement patterns and land use from prehistory to the 20th century.



Extract of NMP mapping from Chapperton Down showing the relationship of the field systems and settlement. © Historic England

At an even broader scale the use of the data to produce distribution patterns has helped to highlight important findings such as the fact that Bronze Age barrow cemeteries appear to be positioned in proximity to water and also cluster near earlier monuments.

Salisbury Plain Training Area Distribution of Bronze Age Barrows



Distribution plot of sites recorded as Bronze Age barrows from the Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA) NMP project. Note how there are distinct concentrations around the confluences of the various river systems on the Plain. © Historic England.

The Field Archaeology of the Salisbury Plain Training Area
Published 15 February 2002

This area remains the largest tract of unimproved chalk downland in North-west Europe. This volume traces human influence on the landscape from prehistoric times to the recent military activities and presents a synthesis of results of recent fieldwork.

£50.00