AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION OF A PROPOSED NEW LAGOON SYSTEM NEAR WEST CREECH FARM, STEEPLE PARISH, DORSET (SY 895 823)

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1. SUMMARY

An archaeological field evaluation of a proposed new lagoon on land adjacent to West Creech Farm, Steeple parish, Dorset (SY 895 823), was carried out by AC archaeology during April 1999. The site is located on a slight ridge which slopes moderately to the north within the development area. The main archaeological interest for the site comprises a prominent curvilinear bank and shallow ditch extending from the west end of the field in an easterly direction and curving round to the south. It does not appear to continue into the adjacent fields to the west or south.

The evaluation comprised the machine-excavation of six trenches totalling 169m in length, one of which was located across the earthwork bank. Limited evidence for archaeological activity was identified in the central area of the site, comprising a series of ditches, all of which were sampled by hand-excavation and some producing pottery of Romano-British date. This area does not appear to contain evidence for settlement on the site, the ditches likely to represent sub-surface evidence for former boundaries.

The trench excavated across the earthwork bank has confirmed that the bank was man-made, but cannot provide conclusive evidence for the date of its construction. There does not appear to be an associated ditch, but the bank does seal a buried soil horizon - probably a former land surface - from which fragments of late Iron Age pottery were recovered. The bank was therefore constructed during or after the later Iron Age and may be Romano-British or Medieval in construction. A medieval date for construction is considered most likely. Subsoil layer (601) in Trench 6 is comparable to subsoil horizons throughout the remainder of the site, more particularly layer 101 in Trench 1, which was cut by F108. This feature contained a large proportion of the Romano-British pottery recovered from the site.

Although the earthwork bank is of some antiquity, it does not appear to represent the boundary to a former settlement, and is more likely to have been constructed in order to provide an effective barrier between the low-lying, waterlogged land on one side and the more usable farmland to the south and west.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 This report presents the results from an archaeological field evaluation of land adjacent to West Creech Farm, Steeple parish, Dorset (SY 895 823). The work was commissioned by ECC Ball Clays and carried out by AC *archaeology* during April 1999.

2.2 ECC Ball Clays wish to consider the site's suitability for inclusion in a planning application to be submitted to Dorset County Council Mineral Planning Department for the construction of a new lagoon system. Consultation with the Dorset County Council Archaeological Officer confirmed the need for an archaeological field evaluation.

2.3 The site is located within Steeple Parish in the Isle of Purbeck . The area of the proposed new lagoon system covers approximately 2 hectares within the northern portion of a field

currently used for cattle grazing. The topography of the whole field comprises generally level, but slightly undulating ridge in the southern portion, the land then sloping moderately to the north within the development area, and gradually to the east and west of the field, within the development area. During the evaluation, the lower-lying ground in the northern portion of the field was saturated and therefore trenches were not excavated in this zone. The site lies on heathland soils at around 50mOD.

2.4 The aim of the investigation was to identify the presence or absence of archaeological features or deposits on the site by the least destructive means and to determine their date, nature, function and degree of survival, thus determining whether the site contains overriding archaeological constraints to development.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 The main archaeological interest for the site comprises a prominent earthwork bank (SMR ref. Steeple, 37), which was plotted from an aerial photograph taken in 1946. The earthwork comprises a curvilinear bank and shallow ditch extending from the west end of the field in an easterly direction and curving round to the south, and does not appear to continue into the adjacent fields to the west or south. The bank has never been investigated, but it has been suggested that the bank represents the line of a former tramway associated with quarrying during the earlier part of this century.

3.2 Approximately 600m NE of the site is a partly excavated Iron Age settlement (Cox and Hearne 1991, pp. 59-61). Occupation on the site was identified as having extended over a period of some 400 years, during the middle to the late Iron Age periods. Activity on the site comprised evidence for trench and post-built hut circles, as well as pits, ditches and other features. Artefacts recovered comprised significant quantities of native coarseware pottery. It is clear that this site extends over a much wider area, but unlikely as far Southwest as the present site.

3.3 A well-preserved Bronze Age barrow lies approximately 200m to the SE of the current site (Dorset SMR ref. Steeple, 19; SAM Dorset 21945). This monument has a diameter of approximately 13m and survives to a height of over 1.20m.

3.4 An archaeological evaluation was carried out by AC *archaeology* approximately 500m NE of the site, on North Hills Plantation (Valentin and Robinson, 1999). This identified extensive archaeological settlement remains of late Iron Age and Romano-British date.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a specification provided by AC *archaeology* (Doc. e99022/1/0), which was submitted to and approved prior to commencement by the County Archaeological Officer, Dorset County Council.

4.2 The work initially comprised the machine-excavation of three trenches, a c. 1% sample of the proposed lagoon area. Following the discovery of only moderate quantities of archaeological deposits and finds at this stage, and consultation with the County Archaeological Officer's representative, it was agreed to shorten Trench 5 and to excavate further trenches to clarify the extent, distribution and nature of archaeological activity in the lower, northern portion of the site. This additional work also included a trench to obtain a

profile through the bank recorded within Dorset SMR. The position of all trenches, as excavated, is shown on Fig. 1. A total length of trench of 219m was excavated.

4.3 Topsoil was removed by mechanical excavator under constant archaeological supervision, onto the top of the natural subsoil, thus exposing the upper surfaces of archaeological deposits. Clarity of features, where present, was generally good, although the poor weather conditions prevalent during site works necessitated localised hand-cleaning in all trenches. All features and deposits considered to be of archaeological interest were sampled by hand-excavation.

4.4 The site was recorded in accordance with AC *archaeology's* standard recording system. Trench plans were produced at 1:50, with sections of features and trenches drawn at 1:10 or 1:20 dependant on the level of detail required. A colour transparency and monochrome photographic record was also taken. All levels relate to a temporary bench mark (TBM) located on a gate post on the southern field boundary, which has been allocated the nominal value of 100m.

4.5 The archive has been prepared using the site code AC 534.

5. RESULTS

The location of all trenches is shown on Fig. 1 and relevant detailed plans and sections included on Fig. 2 and 3.

5.1 Trench 1 (Fig.2a)
This trench was orientated on an approximate N-S axis and had plan dimensions of 50 x 1.50m. It was positioned in the western portion of the site partly on a level ridge and break of a moderate to steep north-facing slope. Machine-excavation removed up to 500mm of topsoil and 200mm of subsoil varying in depth throughout the trench. These were composed of a soft, dark greyish-brown sandy silt (100) and a light greyish-brown sandy silt (101), both layers with coarse components of sparse unworked angular flint fragments and charcoal flecks. These soil horizons represent topsoil overlying either a natural soil accumulation or an earlier ploughsoil. Due to the similarity of the fills of archaeological features to the natural subsoil, it was unclear in some cases whether features were cutting layer (101) or lay below it. Natural subsoil (102) comprised mainly light coloured sands becoming more weathered sands and gravels to the north. Three cut subsoil features were identified within Trench 1.

F103 (Fig. 2b); a linear feature on an approximate NW to SE alignment. Its visible dimensions were 1.70m exposed length and 1.60m width and was situated at the far southern end of the trench, continuing beyond both the E and W trench edges. This feature had steep sloping edges to a depth of 400mm and a rounded base. It contained a single fill (104), composed of a light greyish-brown sandy silt with sparse small unworked flint fragments up to 40mm in size. No artefacts were recovered from this feature. It is likely that F103 represents a former field boundary and probably continues into Trench 3 as F303 but did not appear in Trench 2.

F105 (Fig. 2c); a linear feature on an approximate NW to SE alignment. Its visible dimensions were 1.50m exposed length and 700mm width and was situated towards the southern end of the trench and continuing beyond both the E and W trench edges. This feature had gentle sloping edges to a depth of 200mm and a flattish base. It contained a single fill (106) a mixed light-mid brown silty sand with sparse unworked flint fragments up to 50mm in size and occasional charcoal flecks. Three sherds of pottery were recovered from this feature, all of Romano-British date.

F107 (Fig. 2d); a discrete feature or linear terminal was aligned E-W and situated towards the central area of the trench, visible in plan for 1.35m length x 900mm width. This feature had gentle sloping edges to a depth of 250mm and a concave base. It contained a single fill (108) of mixed light greyish-brown silty sand with occasional small flint fragments and heathstone pieces up to 150mm in size. Several sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered from this feature.

5.2 Trench 2 (Fig. 2f)
This trench had plan dimensions of 50 x 1.50m and was orientated on an approximate N-S axis and positioned in the central area of the site on level ground which then slopes moderately to steeply to the north. Machine-excavation removed a maximum of 400mm topsoil and 300mm of subsoil, varying in depth throughout the trench. These comprised a soft, dark greyish-brown sandy silt (200) and a dark brown silty-clay sand (201) with sparse coarse components of flint fragments and charcoal flecks. These soil horizons represent a topsoil and underlying probable early ploughsoil or buried soil similar in composition to subsoil horizons visible in other trenches. Natural subsoil (202) comprised sands, clays and gravels. Layer (200) sealed one archaeological feature.

F203 (Fig. 2h); a probable ditch on an approximate NW to SE alignment situated at the southern end of the trench and continuing beyond both the E and W trench edges. The feature was visible in plan as 1.50m long and 1.20m wide. This feature had steep sloping edges to a depth of 300mm and a flattish base. It contained a single fill (204) of dark greyish-black sandy silt with sparse small flint fragments and charcoal flecks. No artefacts were recovered from this feature.

5.3 Trench 3 (Fig. 2e)
This trench had plan dimensions of 50 x 1.50m, orientated on an approximate NW-SE axis, and was positioned between Trenches 1 and 2 in the central portion of the site on moderately sloping ground to the north. Machine-excavation removed up to 300mm of ploughsoil and 450mm of subsoil, varying in depth throughout the trench. These comprised a soft, dark greyish-brown sandy silt (300) and a mid-brown silty sand (301) with sparse coarse components of flint fragments up to 50mm in size. These soil horizons represent a topsoil and underlying probable early ploughsoil or buried soil similar in composition to subsoil horizons visible in other trenches. Natural subsoil (302) comprised light greyish-white sand with dark patches of mineral staining. One archaeological feature was present towards the SE end of the trench.

F303 (Fig. 2g); a linear feature situated at the SE end of the trench and continuing beyond both the NE and SW edges of the trench with visible dimensions of 2.20m length x 1.00m width. This feature had moderately sloping edges to a depth of 300mm and a rounded base. It contained a single fill (304) of mid-brown sandy silt with occasional small flint fragments, heathstone pieces and sparse charcoal flecks. No artefacts were recovered from this feature. This feature is possibly a continuation of ditch 103 in Trench 1 (see above).

5.4 Trench 4
This trench had plan dimensions of 25m x 1.50m and was orientated on an approximate NW-SE axis positioned towards the eastern side of the site on moderately sloping north-facing ground. Machine-excavation removed up to 400mm of ploughsoil and 200mm of subsoil. These comprised a soft, dark brown sandy silt (400) and a dark yellowish brown silty sand (401) with sparse coarse components of small flint fragments and charcoal flecks. Natural subsoil (402) comprised tertiary gravels, sands and clays. No archaeological features or finds were present.

5.5 Trench 5
This trench had plan dimensions of 32m x 1.50m and was orientated on an approximate N-S axis positioned towards the eastern side of the site on the crest and break of moderately sloping ground to the north. Machine-excavation removed up to 400mm of topsoil and 150mm of subsoil. These comprised a soft, dark brown sandy silt (500) and a dark yellowish-brown silty sand (501) with sparse coarse components of small flint fragments and charcoal flecks. Natural subsoil (502) comprised mixed tertiary gravels, sands and clays. No archaeological features or finds were present.

5.6 Trench 6 (Fig.3)
This trench had plan dimensions of 12 x 2.40m and was orientated on an approximate NE-SW axis positioned towards the eastern side of the site across an existing linear earthwork (shown on Fig. 1) in order to determine its date and function. The earthwork comprises a curvilinear bank and shallow ditch, extending from the west side of the field in an easterly direction for approximately 200m before curving round to the south. The trench was located in an area where the bank had been damaged by modern agricultural usage.

Machine-excavation removed up to 250mm of ploughsoil and 600mm of subsoil. These respectively comprised a soft, dark brown sandy silt (600) and a light grey-orange mottled silty sand (601) with sparse coarse components of small flint fragments and charcoal flecks. This layer appeared to have

accumulated over a deposit considered to have formed the bank (F603), which in turn was overlying a buried soil horizon (604). The bank material comprised pale greyish-orange mottled silty sand with sparse coarse components of small flint fragments, with dimensions of 600mm depth and 2.00m width and cut through by a modern land drain. The buried soil horizon (604) had a maximum depth of 200mm and was only present within the central area of the trench, composed of a dark greyish-black sandy clay silt with occasional charcoal flecks and sparse small flint fragments. Two sherds of late Iron Age pottery and one piece of worked flint were recovered from this deposit. Natural subsoil (602) comprised iron and manganese stained light greyish-white sand.

There was no evidence within the trench for the presence of a 20th century tramline thought to have been associated with the bank.

6. THE FINDS

A quantification of all finds is included in Table 1 below.

6.1 Ceramics

Pottery was recovered in only small quantities, but has been quantified (see Table 1) and scanned to assess its composition and diagnostic elements. The majority of the pottery is of the local black-burnished ware (BB1) tradition. Other sherds of later (*ie* post-medieval) date, although few in number, were collected from trench spoil heaps.

The pottery evidence from sealed contexts indicates that activity on the site is likely to date to between the 1st-century BC to AD 1st-century, the collection comprising only very coarse native fabrics, showing few refinements. The pottery assigned to the earlier part of this timespan was recovered from the buried soil horizon, sealed by the earthwork recorded in Trench 6, represented by a thick-walled storage vessels of indeterminate form. All pottery recovered from cut features, although diagnostic by fabric, contained no recognisable forms. None of the sherds were decorated, and very few exhibited signs of burnished surfaces.

The post-Medieval pottery from spoilheaps, although not assessed in any detail, appear to derive from the Verwood kilns and are likely to be of 18th century or later date. A similar date range would apply to the clay pipe fragments recovered.

6.2 Worked Flint

The single piece of worked flint comprises a small, undiagnostic broken flake recovered from the buried soil horizon in Trench 6.

Trench	Context	Context Type	Late Iron-Age Pottery		Romano-British Pottery		Post-Medieval Pottery		Clay pipe		Worked Flint	
			No.	Wt. (g.)	No.	Wt. (g.)	No.	Wt. (g.)	No.	Wt. (g.)	No.	Wt. (g.)
1	106	Ditch fill	0	0	3	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
	108	Feature	0	0	10	220	0	0	0	0	0	0
	110	Spoilheap	0	0	1	6	1	8	0	0	0	0
3	306	Spoilheap	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	0	0
6	604	Buried soil	2	54	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
TOTALS:			2	54	14	236	2	10	2	8	1	2

Table 1 : Finds Quantification by no. and weight in grams

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 This evaluation has identified limited archaeological activity within the central area of the site, comprising a series of linear features likely to represent former field boundaries, the pottery recovered from some indicating a Romano-British date. There is no evidence, in the form of discrete cut features and significant quantities of artefacts, for permanent settlement on the site.

7.2 The results from Trench 6 provide a cross-section through the earthwork bank. There does not appear to be an associated ditch, but the bank does appear to seal a buried soil horizon - probably a former land surface - from which pottery of late Iron Age date was recovered. This layer was not present within any of the other trenches, as extensive ploughing appears to have occurred on the higher ground throughout the remainder of the field. The survival of this layer is therefore likely as a result of its proximity to the lower-lying waterlogged area, seemingly demarcated by the prominent earthwork.

7.3 The presence of late Iron Age pottery provides a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the bank, ie. that the feature is late Iron Age or later date. No positive determination is possible from present evidence, but it is considered more likely that the feature is of medieval, rather than Romano-British date. Subsoil layer (601) in Trench 6 is comparable to subsoil horizons throughout the remainder of the site, more particularly layer 101 in Trench 1, which was cut by F108. This feature contained a large proportion of the Romano-British pottery recovered from the site.

7.4 Although the earthwork bank is likely to be of some antiquity on the basis of the density of pottery recovered, it does not appear to represent the boundary to a former settlement, and is more likely to have been constructed in order to provide an effective barrier between the low-lying, waterlogged land on one side and the more usable farmland to the south and west.

8. REFERENCES

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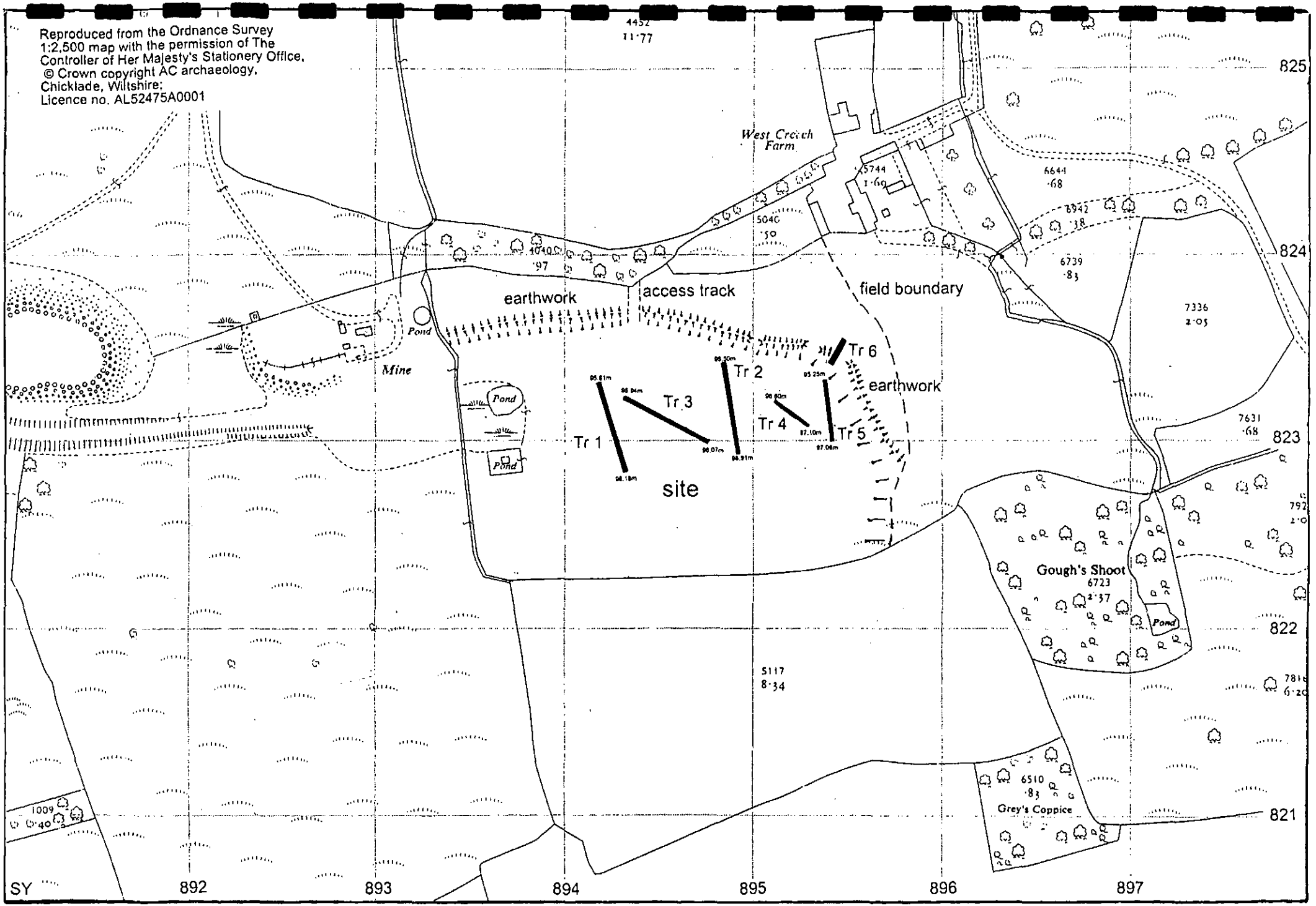

Fig.1: Trench location and earthwork plan

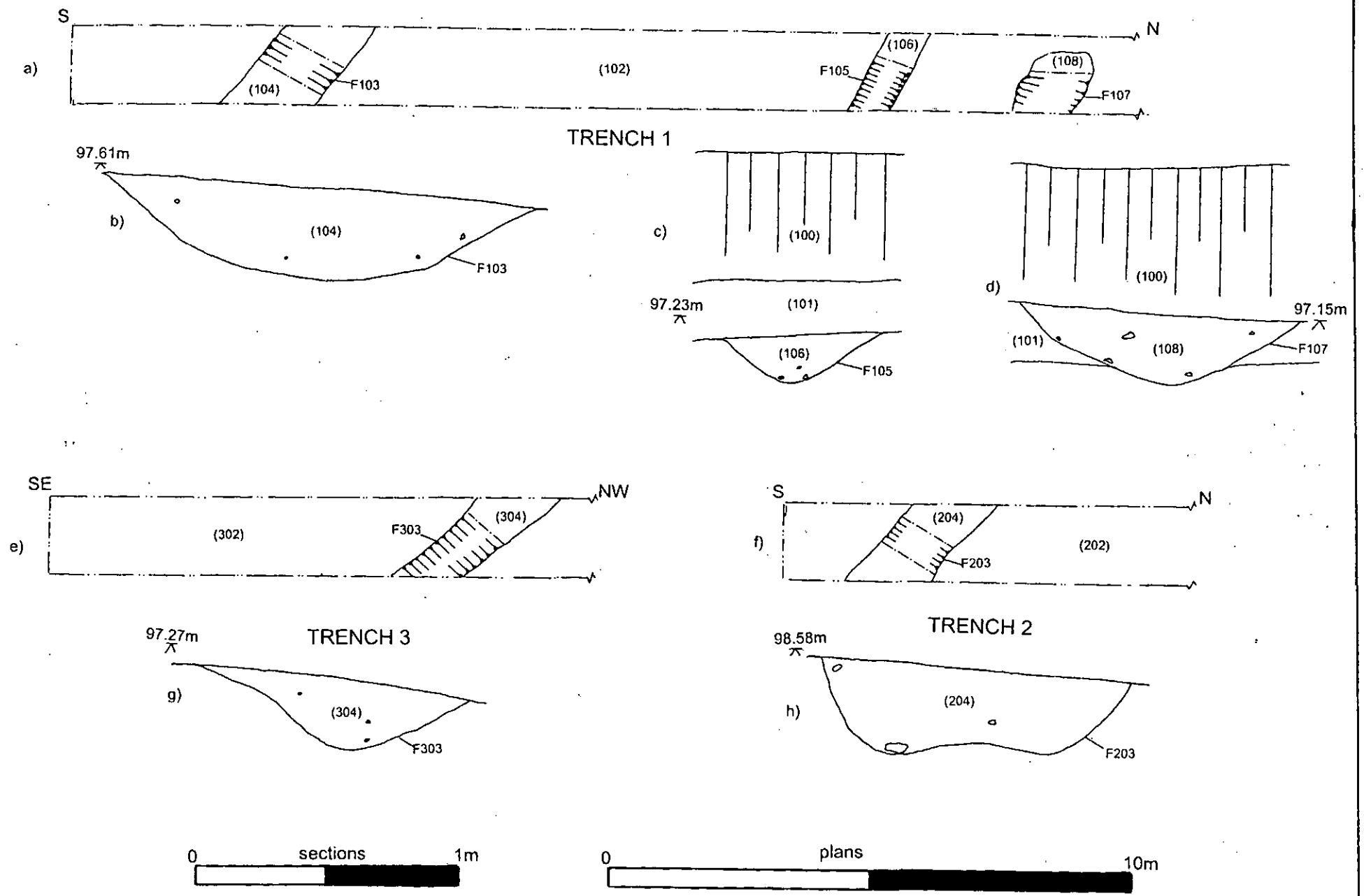

Fig.2: Detailed plans and sections

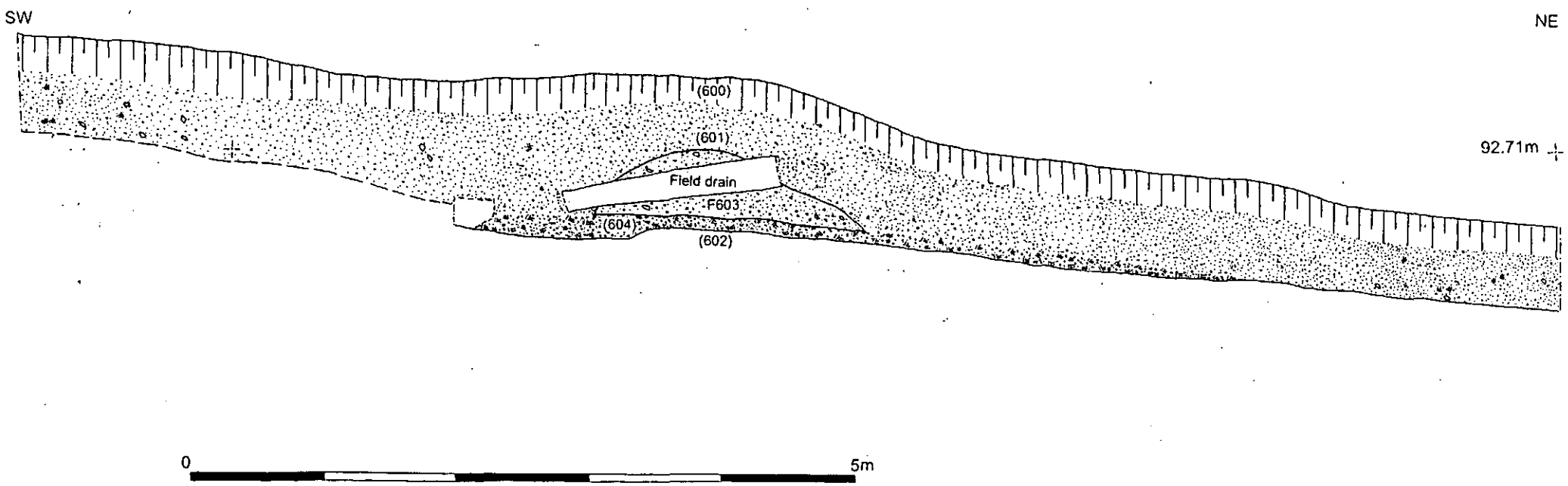

Fig.3: Section through earthwork bank. Trench 6