An Archaeological Evaluation at
Acton Scott Historic Working Farm, Shropshire

by
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Archaeology Service

Shropshire
COUNTY COUNCIL

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT ACTON SCOTT HISTORIC WORKING FARM, SHROPSHIRE

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A Report for

MUSEUM SERVICE
SHROPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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SUMMARY

There is currently a proposal to construct a new visitor facility and associated car parking at Acton Scott Farm Museum, near Church Stretton, Shropshire. The study area abuts on to the scheduled monument area of Acton Scott Roman Villa. Within the scheduled area also lies a cropmark enclosure of probable Iron Age/Roman date whose western arm extends into the study area. In view of the potential archaeological significance of the proposed development site it was deemed necessary to undertake an archaeological field evaluation of it. A geophysical survey of the study area was carried out by Stratascan and 3 trial trenches were excavated by the Archaeology Service, SCC. The evaluation located the western arm of the enclosure ditch running along the eastern edge of the study area, but did not find any other significant archaeological features. It is recommended that the area of the enclosure be excluded from development, and that a watching brief accompany any groundworks on the remainder of the proposed development site.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Acton Scott is a small village situated about 23km south of Shrewsbury in Shropshire. There is currently a proposal to construct a new visitor facility and associated car parking at Acton Scott Farm Museum, near Church Stretton, Shropshire (NGR SO 4572 8988). It has been deemed necessary to carry out an archaeological evaluation of the proposed development.

1.2 The proposed development site (the study area) is presently an area of pasture paddock adjacent to the entrance to the museum site and is largely in use as an area of car parking. The study area abuts on to the scheduled monument area of Acton Scott Roman Villa (Mon No 168). Within the scheduled area also lies a cropmark enclosure of probable Iron Age/Roman date and whose northwest angle extends into the study area. There is a strong possibility therefore that other archaeological remains associated with the enclosure site and Roman villa may exist within the study area.

1.3 In view of the potential archaeological significance of the proposed development site it was deemed necessary to undertake an archaeological field evaluation of it in accordance with the guidelines laid down in the DoE Planning Policy Guideline No.16

1.4 A brief for this archaeological evaluation was been prepared by the Historic Environment Officer, Sustainability Group, Shropshire County Council. This brief formed the basis for the archaeological evaluation.

1.5 The Archaeology Service of Shropshire County Council was commissioned by the County Museum Service to carry out the evaluation, which was undertaken in March 2004.

2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Aims and Objectives of the Evaluation

The aim of the evaluation is to provide information that will enable an informed and reasonable planning decision to be taken regarding the archaeological provision for the areas affected by the proposed development.

The objectives were:

(a) To locate any archaeological features and deposits within the study area.
(b) To assess the survival, quality, condition and relative significance of any archaeological features, deposits and structures within the study area.
(c) To identify and recommend options for the management of the archaeological resource, including any further archaeological provision where necessary.

2.2 Methodology of the Evaluation

In order to achieve these objectives, the evaluation was required to comprise a geophysical survey of the study area and a programme of trial excavation, supported where appropriate by documentary research. A full methods statement was included in a written scheme of investigation for the evaluation

A Geophysical Survey was carried out by Stratascan Ltd on behalf of the Museum Service, Shropshire County Council in accordance with the specifications laid down in the brief (Donaldson & Sabin, 2004)

The sample excavation comprised the excavation of three trenches; one 20m by 1.5m located to intercept the likely position of the northwestern corner of the enclosure ditch and any associated internal features, one 5m x 2m to investigate the northern part of the pasture paddock, and one up to 10m x 1.5m and to investigate deposits in the area of the proposed new visitor facility. It was required that all excavation should be limited to the top of significant archaeological deposits, with further excavation undertaken only where essential for achieving the objectives of the evaluation.

Documentary research was undertaken as appropriate to assist with the objectives of the evaluation exercise and to elucidate any features recorded during the on-site investigations.

3 THE EVALUATION

3.1 The Documentary Research

3.1.1 Late Prehistoric and Romano-British Occupation

Iron Age and/or Romano-British occupation of the study area is indicated by a cropmark enclosure (SMR no: SA4419) in the northern part of the field immediately to the east of the study area (see Figure 3). The enclosure is about 0.7ha in extent and is categorised by Whimster as a regular quadrilateral single-ditched enclosure (Whimster, 1989). The cropmark enclosure is shown on an oblique AP in the SMR files (SMR SO4589), and there is also a Whimster plot at 1:2500 scale of the cropmark (SMR file SA4419). The cropmark is also shown on the digital aerial photographic coverage of the county held by Shropshire County Council. The cropmark probably marks the site of a ditch around a farmstead of Iron Age and/or Roman date. Gaps in the eastern and western sides of the cropmark coincide with the line of a road which formerly ran across the study area. The northwestern corner of this enclosure lies within the eastern part of the study area, although the precise location and form of this corner was not apparent from the aerial photographic record.

In 1817, a Roman villa was discovered during the realignment of a road. The villa was located immediately to the south of a bend in the former road line, approximately in the centre of the modern field to the east of the study area. The villa was re-excavated in 1844 by Mrs Frances Stackhouse Acton. The excavated villa buildings formed a rectangular block 31m long by 12.5m wide (Stackhouse Acton, 1846.). It is not known how much of the villa survives.

The plotting of all these features onto a modern 1:2500 OS plan gives the approximate location of villa in relation to the cropmark enclosure and modern features (Figure 3). The villa appears to be on a slightly different alignment to the southeastern side of the cropmark enclosure, and possibly partially overlies the enclosure ditch. However, the location plan in the mid 19th-century published account of the excavations is not to an accurate or consistent scale, and so the precise orientation and location of the villa is uncertain. It is possible that the cropmark enclosure is directly associated with the villa building.

The site of the known villa buildings is not affected by the proposed development.

3.1.2 The medieval manor

Acton Scott is first mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086; at that time it lay in Leintwardine Hundred, later it fell within Munslow Hundred. Before the conquest, Acton Scott had been held by Edric, probably Edric the Wild, and was valued at 10 shillings. At the time of the survey, the manor had land for 4 ploughs, with a hedged enclosure, and was valued at 15 shillings. Edric the Wild probably forfeited the manor in c.1070 following his rebellion, and by 1086 the manor was held by Aldred, brother of the rich thegn Siward and a second cousin of Edric; Aldred in turn held the manor from Roger of Montgomery, Earl of Shrewsbury. Later in the 12th century the FitzAlans became the overlords of Acton Scott, and remained so until 1574. (Stamper, 1998; Thorn, 1986, 4,27,33 and notes).

3.1.3 The study area in the post-medieval to modern periods

In 1553, a property which consisted of at least one share of the medieval manor was sold to Richard Acton. In 1773, Susanne Acton, the heiress to the estate, married John Stackhouse, the botanist; his daughter-in-law, Frances Stackhouse Acton, was responsible for the identification and excavation of the Roman villa in the mid 19th century. The estate is still held by the Acton family. (Stamper, 1998)

3.1.4 In 1997, the Archaeology Service carried out an evaluation of a new trackway running alongside the eastern edge of the hedge marking the eastern side of the present study area (Hannaford, 1997). The evaluation confirmed the existence of significant archaeological features and deposits along the northern section of this track. The archaeological remains located were associated with the known cropmark enclosure and villa site. Where encountered, the archaeological deposits commenced at a depth of 0.45m below the ground surface.

3.2 The Geophysical Survey

3.2.1 A geophysical survey was carried out in accordance with the evaluation brief by Stratascan on behalf of the County Museum Service (Donaldson and Sabin, 2004).

3.2.2 The geophysical survey was hampered by farm machinery across the site and magnetic disturbance in the overflow car park.

3.2.3 A positive linear or curvilinear anomaly was located in the overflow car park (Area 1) by the magnetometer survey. This cut feature could form part of an enclosure and may be related to the Roman Villa site or the enclosure evident from crop marks. This anomaly should therefore be considered of possible archaeological origin. Further investigation through targeted archaeological excavation would be required to ascertain if this anomaly relates to an archaeological feature.

Resistivity survey in Area 1 located a series of high and low resistance linear anomalies possibly relating to former ridge and furrow. Several area and linear anomalies of low resistance may relate to cut features across the site but it is not possible to be certain of their origin.

3.2.4 Due to the proximity of farm machinery Area 2 was unsuitable for magnetometry survey. Therefore detailed resistivity only was carried out in Area 2. Even so, only partial survey of this area was possible due to the physical l9mitations caused by the farm machinery and surface materials. Variations in resistance across the area did not form defined anomalies although a short length of a possible high resistance linear anomaly was abstracted.

3.3 The Trial Excavations

3.3.1 Three trenches were located and laid out around the study area on the basis of the results of the geophysical survey and after consultation with the Historic Environment Officer, Shropshire County Council. The topsoil and overburden were removed from all three trenches by hand. The underlying deposits were then cleaned before being sampled and recorded as appropriate.

3.3.2 Trench A: Trench A was located in the eastern part of the study area in the paddock currently used as car parking (Figure 3). The trench was 20m long by 1.5m wide and was laid out to intercept both the western arm of the enclosure ditch and a number of the linear anomalies identified by the geophysical survey.

The natural subsoil (Figure 4; 13) comprised a yellowish brown sandy silt containing gravel and pebbles. The subsoil had been cut at the eastern end of the trench by a linear feature 3.7m wide. The feature ran at right angles to the line of the trench and its sides tapered down. The upper fill (7) of the feature was sampled to a depth of 0.5m and comprised a brown, sandy, silty loam. This fill produced 1.4kg of Roman brick and tile, including identifiable pieces of *tegula* and hypocaust brick, and a number of small sherds of abraded Romano-British pottery. This feature was identified as the western arm of the enclosure ditch.

The only other features identified in this trench were two small and shallow scoops (10 & 12) cut into the surface of the natural subsoil at the western end of the trench. One (10) was 0.85m long by 0.28m wide by 0.05m deep, the other (12) was about 0.5m in diameter by 0.2m deep. The fills of neither feature produced any finds, although both were flecked with small fragments of charcoal.

All these features were sealed by a layer of brown sandy silty loam topsoil 0.4m deep (5 & 6). This soil layer produced further finds of abraded fragments of Romano-British pottery and tile, as well as a quantity of medieval and post-medieval pottery, glass and tile. The lower 0.15m (6) became progressively stonier with depth.

A telephone cable had been laid along the centre of the ditch (8) on the top of the upper fill. The cut for this cable was only discernable through the slightly looser nature of its fill compared with the topsoil it was cut through. A layer of geotextile membrane (2) lay over the top of the topsoil layer; the membrane comprised strips of orange fibre mesh fixed with lines of iron pegs. The membrane lay beneath the turf (1) of the ground surface.

3.3.3 Trench B: Trench B was placed in the western part of the study area in the location of the site of the proposed new visitor facility (Figure 3). This trench was 6m long by 1m wide and was designed to investigate a raised area of ground along the northern edge of the former roadway through the site.

The natural subsoil here (Figure 5a; 26) again comprised a yellowish brown sandy silt containing gravel and pebbles. The subsoil sloped up slightly from north to south, although less steeply than the present ground surface. It lay at a greater depth than in trench A, being found at a depth of 0.65m at the northern end of the trench and 0.85m at the southern end. The natural subsoil was sealed by a layer up to 0.65m thick of dark yellowish brown topsoil (18) which produced a small number of small

abraded fragments of Roman and post-medieval brick and pottery. This was covered by a further layer of brown sandy silty loam topsoil (16) 0.2m deep which produced further small fragments of post-medieval pottery and brick and a single small flint waste flake. This layer was sealed by more geotextile membrane (15) at its northern end and a thin layer of charcoal (17) at its southern end, and the turf (14) of the ground surface.

No significant archaeological features or deposits were encountered in this trench.

3.3.4 Trench C: Trench C was located in the northern part of the paddock (Figure 3). The trench was 5m long by 0.6m wide and was laid out to intercept a possible linear anomaly identified by the geophysical survey.

The natural subsoil (Figure 5b & 5c; 25) was seen at a depth of 0.45m below the ground surface. A feature (24) was seen running through the subsoil in the location of the geophysical anomaly. The feature was about 1m wide and filled with a very hard clean yellowish brown clay (23), and was almost certainly a natural feature of peri-glacial origin. The subsoil lay beneath c. 0.2m of brown loam (22) and 0.2m of dark brown loam topsoil (21). These were covered by geotextile membrane (20) and turf (19).

No significant archaeological features or deposits were encountered in this trench.

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Possible prehistoric activity on the site in the Neolithic or Bronze Age periods was indicated by the flint flake recovered from trench B.

3.4.2 The cut encountered in trench A almost certainly represents the western arm of the ditch around the cropmark enclosure SA4419. The fills of this feature were sampled to a depth of 0.5m. The ditch was not excavated to its full depth. The sampled upper fills, representing the final silting of a dis-used feature, contained Romano-British pottery and building material of probable 2nd-3rd century date. The top of these fills were encountered at a depth of 0.45m below the existing ground level. The location and alignment of this feature makes it possible finally to reconstruct the outline of the enclosure, and together with the information available from SCC's digital aerial photography, suggests that the entrance to the enclosure lay in the middle of this western arm.

The geophysical survey did locate a linear feature running along the eastern edge of the study area. This feature was not however, the enclosure ditch, but was identified during the trial trenching as a telephone cable, which partially overlay the upper fills of the enclosure ditch in the area of trench A but extended beyond the enclosure to the north.

The geophysical survey also located a number of linear features tentatively identified as possibly being produced by medieval ridge and furrow ploughing. No physical remains of such ploughing were seen in trench A, and it is suggested that these anomalies may have been produced by the rows of iron pegs holding down the geotextile membrane.

3.4.3 No significant archaeological deposits were encountered in trench B. The natural subsoil was encountered here at a depth of between 0.65m and 0.85m below the existing ground level.

3.4.4 No significant archaeological deposits were encountered in trench C. The natural subsoil was encountered here at a depth of 0.45m below the existing ground level. A feature identified by the geophysical survey as being of possible archaeological origin was seen to be a natural peri-glacial feature.

3.4.5 The archaeological remains encountered were sealed by a significant depth (0.45m) of ploughsoil in the eastern part of the study area and here may have suffered some degree of truncation by agricultural activity, (some abraded Romano-British pottery and brick/tile was recovered from the topsoil in trenches A and C). However, the evidence from trench A would seem to suggest any such truncation would appear to have only affected the uppermost levels of the original enclosure ditch in this part of the site. The ditch survived here to a depth of over 0.5m, with no sign of its bottom. The sampled fill contained further quantities of Romano-British pottery, brick and tile.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The field evaluation has confirmed the existence of significant archaeological features and deposits in the eastern part of the study area. The archaeological remains located are associated with the known cropmark enclosure and villa site and date back to at least the Roman period.

4.2 Where encountered, the archaeological deposits commence at a depth of 0.45m below the existing ground surface. Consequently, if all ground disturbance associated with the development in the study area were limited to a maximum depth of 0.40m below the existing ground surface, then there would be no impact on the archaeological remains. However, development in the eastern part of the study area would affect the availability of the (unscheduled) corner of the cropmark enclosure for future research.

4.3 It is therefore recommended that a strip at least 8m wide along the southeastern edge of the study area be excluded from development.

4.4 If all ground disturbance associated with the proposed development in the remainder of the study area were limited to a maximum depth of 0.40m below the existing ground surface, then no further archaeological provision need be made for the development.

4.5 If however groundworks were to exceed 0.40m in depth below the present ground surface, then they should be accompanied by a programme of archaeological work. Such a programme might include an archaeological watching brief. Provision of time and resources should be made for the recording of any archaeological features revealed during the course of the groundworks.

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Abbreviations:

APs	Aerial Photographs
EP-NS	English Place-Name Society
NGR	National Grid Reference
OS	Ordnance Survey
RCHME	Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England
SMR	Sites and Monuments Record, Shire Hall, Shrewsbury
SRRC	Shropshire Records and Research Centre, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society
TSAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
VCHS	Victoria County History of Shropshire

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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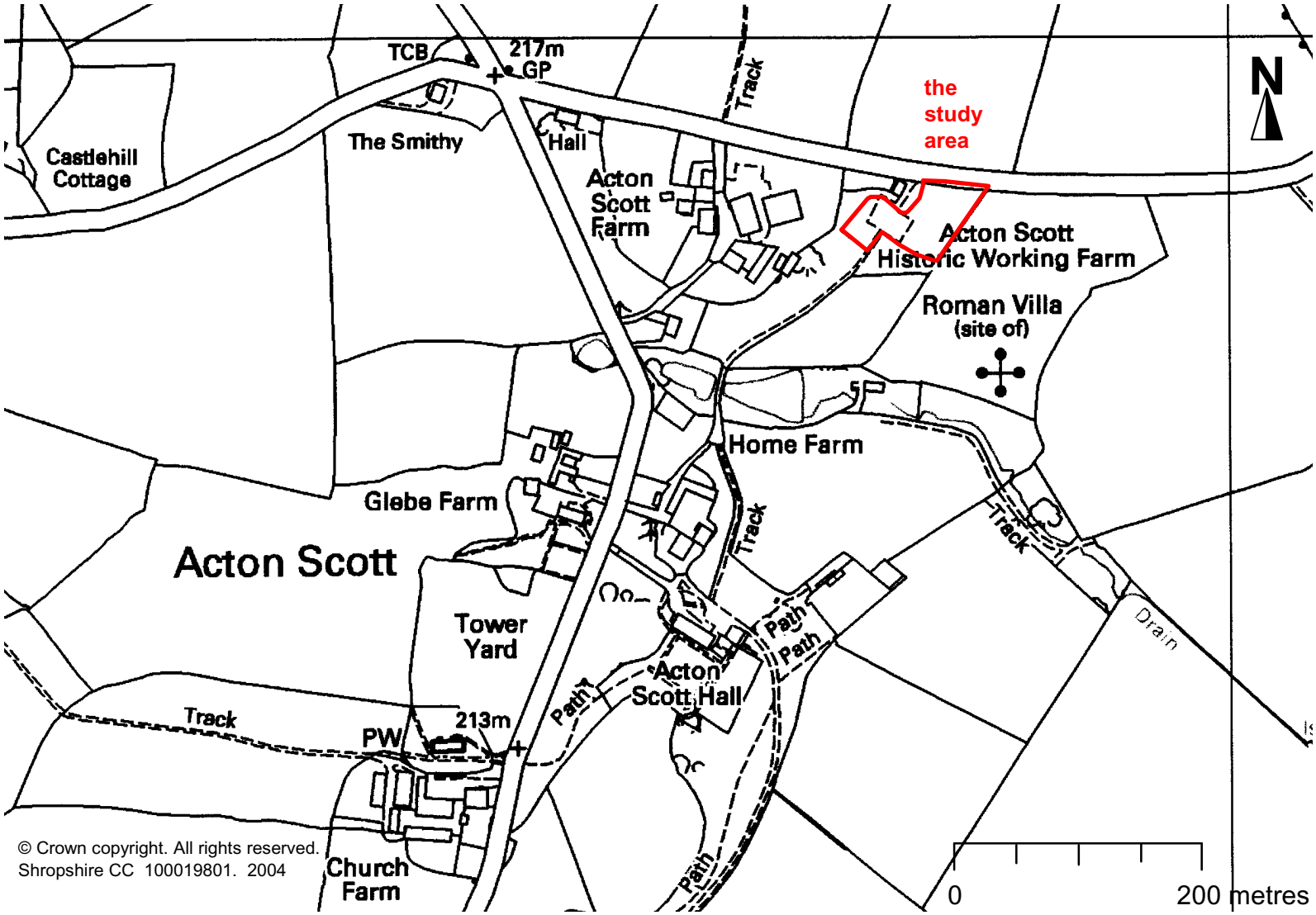

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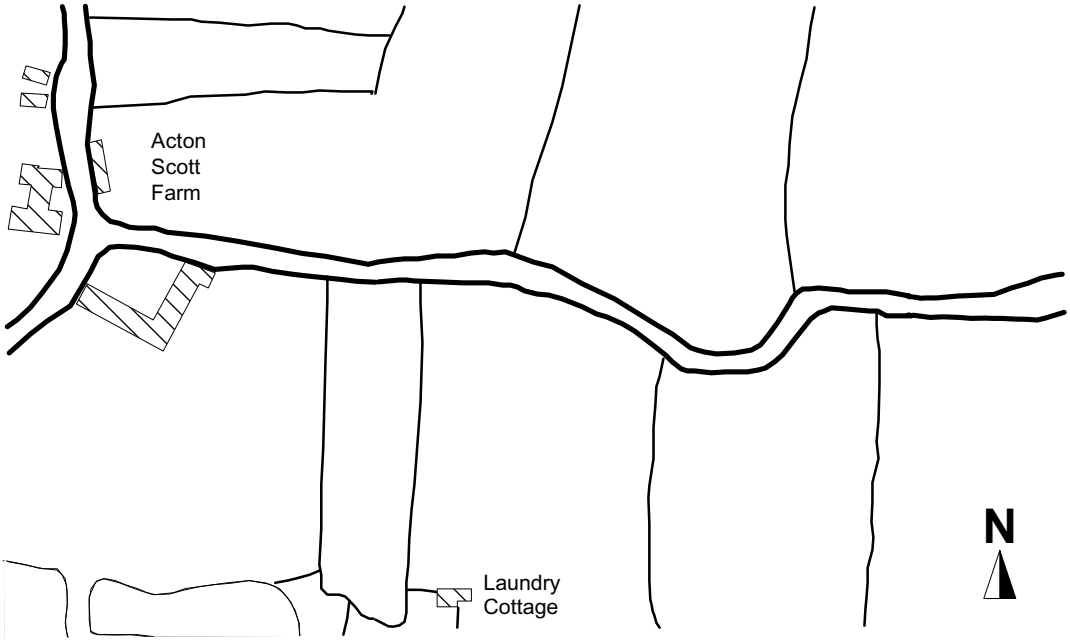
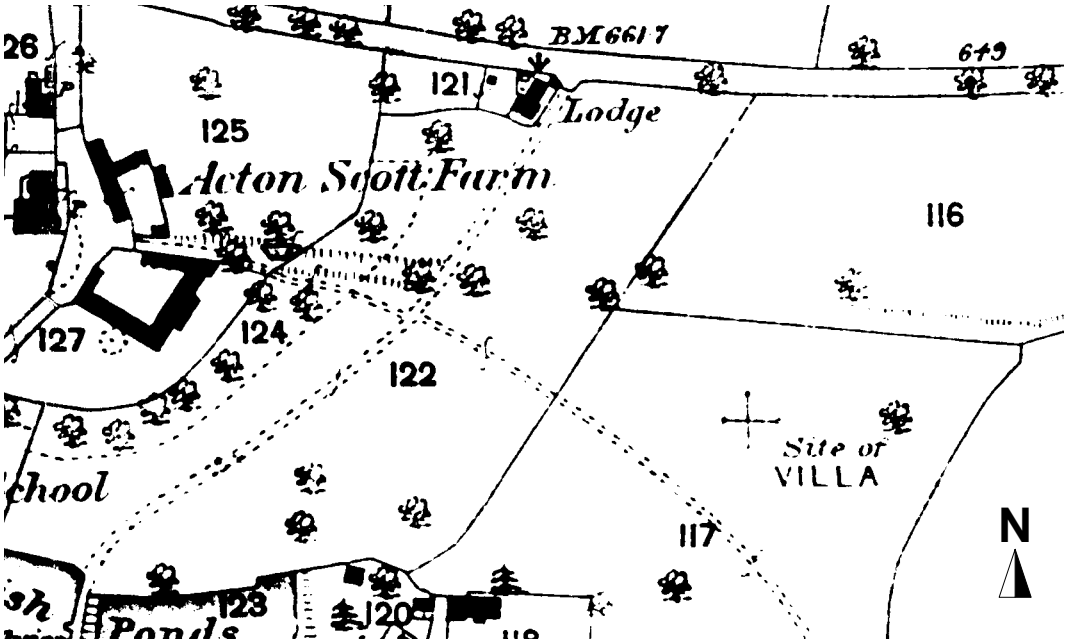
Figure 1: The location of the study area; 1:5000 scale



a)



b)

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Figure 2: The study area; a) from 1776 estate plan (SA 3925/115.2); b) from Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st edition, 1884; both at c. 1:2500 scale

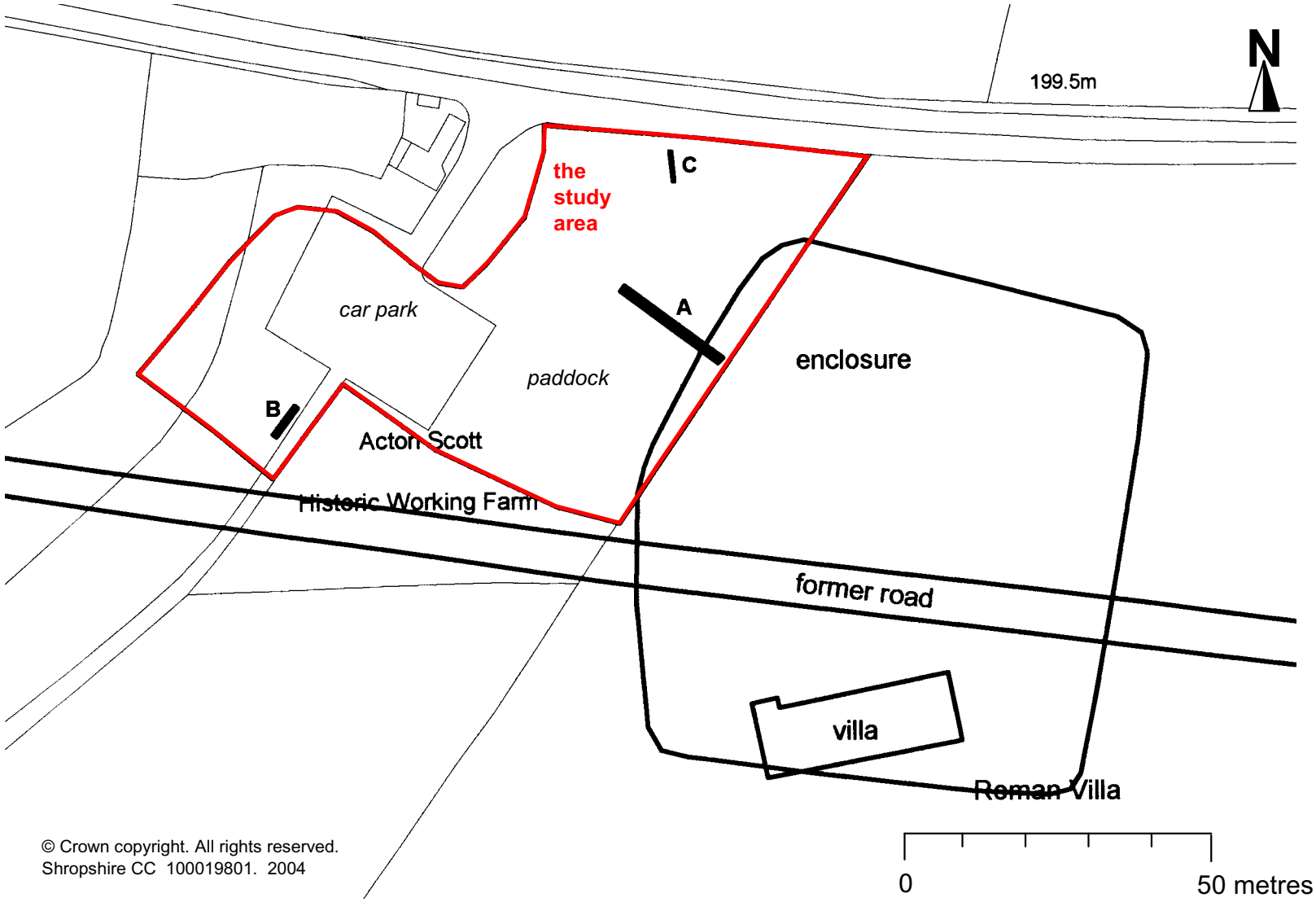

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Figure 3: The study area showing the location of the evaluation trenches; 1:1000 scale

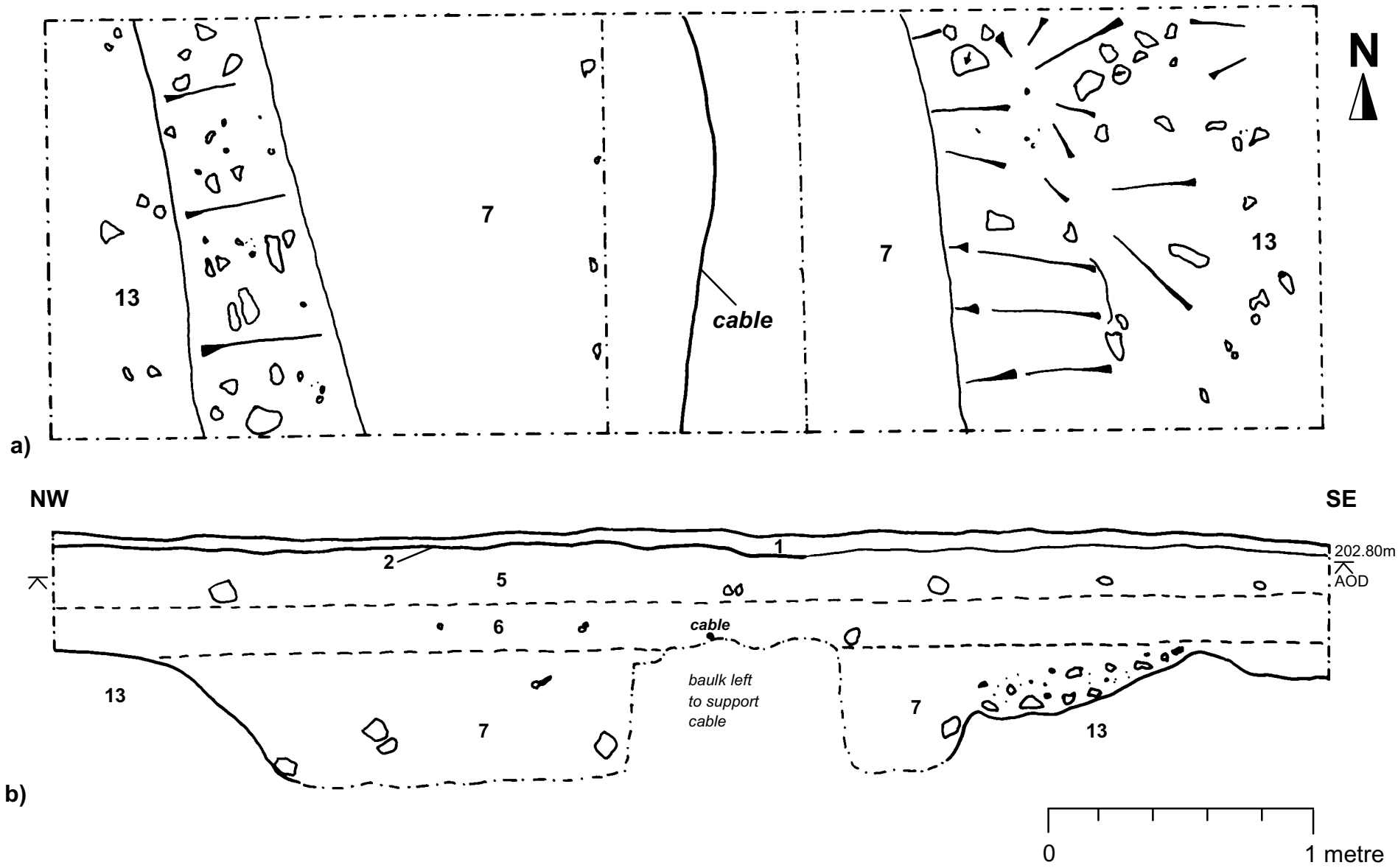

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Figure 4: Trench A, southeastern end showing enclosure ditch; a) plan view; b) southwest-facing section; 1:20 scale

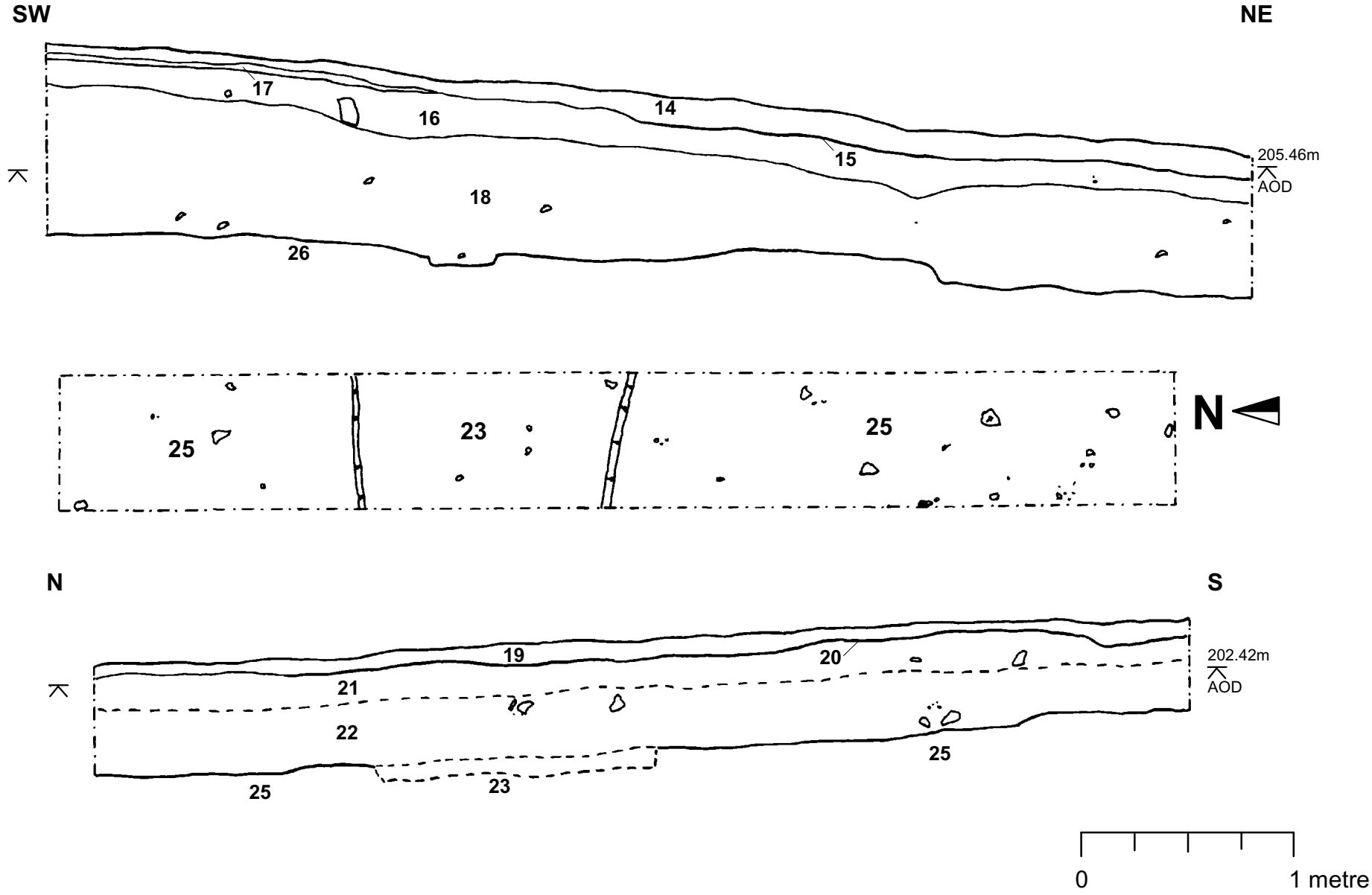

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Figure 5: a) Trench B, southeast-facing section; b) trench C, plan view; c) trench C, east-facing section; 1:25 scale