Watching Brief Report

Tilstock Airfield, Higher Heath, Whitchurch, Shropshire

27/06/2014

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Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Neo Environmental was commissioned by Farm Energy Partnership to undertake an archaeological watching brief at Tilstock Airfield, Higher Heath, Whitchurch, Shropshire (NGR SJ 56481 37288) in the course of ground investigations for unexploded ordnance (UXO). The watching brief was requested by Shropshire County Council's Historic Environment Manager following pre-development consultation for a proposed solar farm at the site (Planning ref: 14/03957/FUL). Both Bronze Age and Roman finds have been discovered in the vicinity of the site and, more recently, it was utilised by the RAF.

1.2 Tilstock Airfield is located southwest of Whitchurch to the east side of the A41. The ground investigations were concentrated on a large (29.96ha), flattish field of roughly triangular shape, located to the immediate west of a northwest/southeast aligned tarmac runway/private road (Appendix A - Fig. 1, Appendix B - Plate 1). The field consisted of mowed grassland, being used by a local parachute club at the time of the work, with a strip alongside the eastern boundary serving as a grass runway.

2 SCOPE & AIMS OF THE PROJECT

2.1 A watching brief is defined by the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) Standards and guidance: Archaeological watching brief (December 2014) as a formal programme of observation and investigation that will define as far as reasonably possible the nature, depth and preservation of archaeological materials encountered during any operation conducted for non-archaeological reasons.

2.2 The broad aims of the project as set out in the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) produced by Neo Environmental (McMorran 2015) were to:

- Monitor all invasive ground-works associated with the UXO survey
- Locate any archaeological features and deposits within the investigated areas
- Assess the survival, quality, condition and relative significance of any archaeological features, deposits and structures within the investigated areas
- Identify and recommend options for the management of the archaeological resource, including any further archaeological provision where necessary

3 METHODOLOGY

The watching brief was carried out between the 10th and 18th of June 2015 and was undertaken in accordance with the WSI (McMorran 2015). The project followed current best archaeological practice, embodied in the by-laws, codes of professional conduct, and standards and guidance (specifically that for archaeological watching brief) of the CIfA.

3.1 The project involved monitoring the excavation of test-pits undertaken by mechanical excavators using toothless ditching buckets, followed by the inspection of the exposed sub-soils for archaeological features. As part of the site's health and safety protocols, a 25m exclusion zone was in place during all excavation works, negating the possibility of direct monitoring. Instead,

3.2 each trench was reduced in at least two stages, with inspection taking place between each phase of excavation.

Written records in the form of site notes and annotated sketches were made and high resolution digital photographs taken to show specific stages of fieldwork and the layout and relationship of

3.3 archaeological features or deposits. Scales and a caption board were included within the photographs whenever possible, although access restrictions imposed by the UXO contractors precluded their use in all instances.

4 RESULTS

4.1 The watching brief monitored the excavation of 149 test-pits located to investigate 164 anomalies identified during survey of the site (Fig.1). The test-pits were typically 1.20m wide and varied in length from 1.20m to 2.60m, although those that targeted two anomalies were up to 4.00m in length. Depths varied from 0.30m to 1.00m. A number of anomalies situated on the grass runway were investigated by means of small hand-dug pits (c. 0.20m x 0.20m). These excavations were too small to properly discern the soil profile or any archaeological features

4.2 within them.

The anomalies occurred in four main clusters: one in the southeast corner of the site, one in the southwest corner, one towards the north end, and one approximately half way down the eastern

4.3 side of the field. Excavation started in the southwest corner and progressed in a clockwise direction around the site.

The same general soil profile was seen across most of the site (Plate 2) and comprised a 0.30-0.50m thick, dark brown, humic sandy/silty topsoil (100) with moderate inclusions of small rounded stones, beneath which was the natural subsoil, a pale grey/ yellow sand with moderate inclusions of small rounded stones, up to 0.70m thick.

4.4 Some variations in the natural subsoil were observed, in a number of the test-pits on the east side of the field. A 0.15-0.20m thick layer of grey/yellow gravelly sand (102) was seen between (100) and (101) in test-pits 112, 117, 120, 125, 126, 131-135, 140, 142, 145, 148 (Plate 3). In test-pits 6 and 127 the same gravelly layer was seen below sand (101). Elsewhere in the eastern side of the field, the natural sand observed in test-pits 39, 46, 47, 48, 137 -139 and 147 was somewhat redder in colour than elsewhere and was recorded as (106)/(107) (Plate 4).

4.5 A more marked difference in soil profile was recorded in the test-pits 63-75 at the north end of the field (Plate 5). Here made-ground layers (110), a dark brown sandy silt with moderate inclusions of small rounded stones and occasional brick and scrap metal fragments (barbed wire, metal re-bar etc.), and (111), a mid-brown silty sand, persisted beneath (100) to a maximum depth of c.1.00m below ground level, at which point the natural subsoil (101) was observed.

4.6 Silty made-ground (108)/(109), c.0.40m thick, appeared between (100) and (101) in test-pits 49, 50, 52 and 53 in the south-west corner of the field (Plate 6).

4.7 Between (100) and (101) in test-pits 21, 23 and 35, all of which were located in the south-eastern corner of the field, was a 0.10-0.29m thick made-ground layer of small angular sandstone fragments held in a red sandy matrix (103)/(105) (Plate 7).

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The archaeological watching brief undertaken at Tilstock Airfield during the excavation of test-pits searching for potential UXO revealed no features or deposits of archaeological interest. The soil profile seen across the site was generally uniform, consisting of topsoil above natural sand, although intervening silty made-ground/landscaping layers were seen at the north end of the airfield and also in a small area towards the southwest corner. The comparative frequency with which scrap metal fragments were encountered within the made-ground layers towards the northern end of the site suggests the deliberate dumping of such material in this area.

6.1

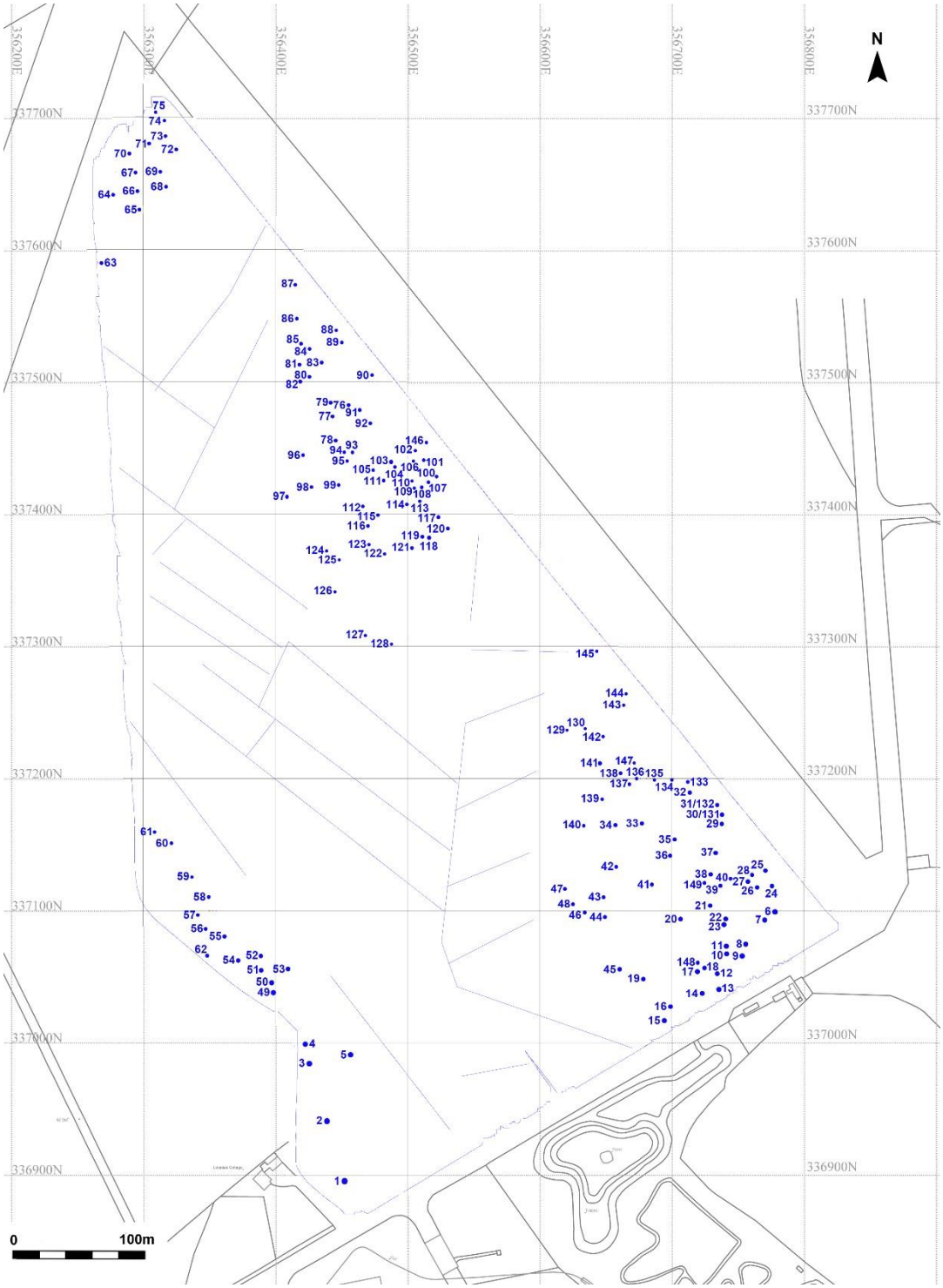
6 REFERENCES

McMorran, R. 2015. *Twemlows Solar Farm: Written Scheme of Investigation*. Neo Environmental.

7 APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – FIGURES

FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF TEST PITS



APPENDIX B – PLATES

PLATE 1: THE AIRFIELD LOOKING NORTHWEST, WITH THE TARMAC RUNWAY/ROAD EVIDENT TO THE RIGHT OF THE IMAGE

PLATE 2: TEST-PIT 11 LOOKING SOUTHEAST, SHOWING THE GENERAL SOIL PROFILE OBSERVED ACROSS THE SITE

PLATE 3: TEST-PIT 131 LOOKING WEST, SHOWING THIN LAYER OF GRAVELY SAND (102) BELOW THE TOPSOIL (100) AND ABOVE NATURAL SUBSOIL (101)

PLATE 4: TEST PIT 137 LOOKING WEST, SHOWING RED SAND (106)/(107) BELOW THE TOPSOIL

PLATE 5: TEST PIT 66 LOOKING WEST, SHOWING THE MADE-GROUND LAYERS EVIDENT AT THE NORTH END OF THE FIELD

PLATE 6: TEST PIT LOOKING EAST, WITH SILTY MADE-GROUND LAYER (108)/(109) EVIDENT BELOW THE TOPSOIL AND ABOVE THE NATURAL SAND

Plate 7: Test pit looking west, showing thin layer of sandstone fragments (103)/(105) below the topsoil and above the natural sand