

OSPREY QUAY, PORTLAND, DORSET
Archaeological Observations and Recording



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Osprey Quay, Portland, Dorset Archaeological Observations and Recording, October 2002

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SUMMARY

Terrain Archaeology carried out a watching brief during new drainage construction associated with the Osprey Quay development on Portland (NGR SY683743) in October 2002. Observations were limited to the area adjacent to Portland Castle, within the area of the former outworks of the castle. Modern reclamation fill was encountered to a depth of about two metres in all areas. Within this fill were a number of very large dressed Portland stone blocks, some of which may have been derived from the castle outworks. No in situ evidence for the castle outworks was observed.

INTRODUCTION

This project, comprising an archaeological watching brief during the construction of new drains, was commissioned by South West of England Regional Development Agency following advice from Steven Wallis, Senior Archaeologist, Dorset County Council.

An initial desk-based assessment for the site was prepared by CPM in January 1999. Following this, Steven Wallis, Senior Archaeologist, Dorset County Council requested further information on the potential archaeological deposits on the site, in order to be able to have sufficient information to be able to offer advice to the Local Planning Authority. Terrain Archaeology was commissioned in October 2001 to undertake an archaeological impact assessment on the development proposals (Terrain Archaeology 2001). On the basis of this assessment, it was determined that only the drainage works in the area of the former outworks to Portland Castle were likely to impinge on potential archaeological deposits and that a watching brief during groundworks was the most appropriate archaeological mitigation.

The site is the former RNAS Osprey at the northern end of Portland, centred on NGR SY682742 (Figure 1). It is situated largely on reclaimed land, formerly the low-lying mudflats of the Mere between Chesil Beach and Portland Harbour beach. The south and east margins of the site lie on the edge of Portland itself and Portland Castle is adjacent to the southeast corner of the site (Figure 2). The area of the observations was on flat reclaimed land about three metres above Ordnance Datum, with a tarmac surface and formed part of an access road and helicopter landing area.

The groundworks comprised the excavation of two separate areas (Trenches 1 and 2) for the construction of new manholes and connecting pipes to the existing drains (Figure 2). These were excavated by machine with a toothed bucket down to a depth of between about 1.9–3.4 m.

The fieldwork was carried out between 11th– 29th October 2002 by Peter Bellamy.

Terrain Archaeology would like to acknowledge John Ray at Osprey Quay and the drainage contractors for their help and cooperation during this project.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The archaeological background of the site has been previously presented in CPM 1999 and Terrain Archaeology 2001 and only a summary will be provided in this report.

The area of the site was formerly 'The Mere', an area of low-lying tidal mudflats between Portland Harbour Beach to the east and Chesil Bank to the west. The land was reclaimed in the late 1950s for RNAS Osprey.

The only archaeological site recorded within the development area was part of the early 16th century outworks to Portland Castle. These outer defences comprised a rectangular enclosure with angle bastions and external ditch (Woodward and Tyler 1995). They were dismantled in the mid 17th century. The castle itself, constructed between 1539 and 1541 (RCHME 1970, 250–2), lies immediately outside of the development area (Figure 2).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of the archaeological observations was to establish and make available information about the archaeological resource existing on the site.

The archaeological works aimed to observe and record all the in situ archaeological deposits and features revealed during the groundworks to an appropriate professional standard.

METHODS

The work was carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Code of Conduct and *Standard and guidance for archaeological watching briefs*, although there was no written brief produced for the archaeological works.

The groundworks comprised two trenches (numbered Trenches 1 and 2 for the purposes of the watching brief) excavated using a mechanical excavator. The size and depth of the trenches was determined by the contractors. The location of the footings trenches was taken from a plan provided by the client. All depths recorded were below existing ground surface.

The observations of the drainage works was intermittent, as defined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists, with a suitably qualified archaeologist viewing all footings trenches either during or immediately after machining. All deposits exposed in the trenches were recorded using elements of Terrain Archaeology's recording system of complementary written, drawn and photographic records.

The records have been compiled in a stable, cross-referenced and fully indexed archive in accordance with current UKIC guidelines and the requirements of the receiving museum. The archive will be deposited with the Dorset County Museum.

RESULTS

Trench 1

Trench 1 was the northernmost trench, oriented roughly NW–SE, and measuring about 12 m by 1.5–3.0 m across, dug to a depth of about 1.9 m. It crossed the projected line of the castle outworks (Figure 2). At the time of the observations, the new pipes had been laid and the trench partly backfilled to a depth of about 1.1 m in the southeast part (Plate 2). The area of the new manhole in the northwest end of the trench was still open to its full depth but was partly filled with water (Plate 3).

A similar stratigraphic sequence was seen along the whole length of the trench. This comprised a series of loose layers and lenses of rounded limestone cobbles and limestone gravel with frequent Kimmeridge clay and with large quantities of shale and mudstone pieces and some flint gravel

also, in varying proportions (Plate 4). The cobbles and stones are poorly sorted and range between 5–25 cm across. Finds visible in this deposit included some iron debris and shell, neither of which was collected. Also within this deposit, on the east side of the trench, were two large ashlar limestone blocks (Plate 5). The largest block was found at a depth of 1.2 m below present ground level and measured 1.37 m long by 0.24 m high. The other block was broken and had fallen out of the base of the section. It measured 0.55 m long by 0.3 m wide and 0.26 m high. Neither block was *in situ*. Above these rubble layers were a series of clayey layers about 0.1–0.2 m thick directly below the tarmac sub-base.

A number of other large ashlar blocks were excavated from this trench and were examined on the spoil tip (Plate 6). Six blocks were visible and were of varying large sizes. The most interesting piece was a section of column shaft, 1.08 m long and 0.41 m in diameter (Plate 7). The whole piece was roughly finished and a large letter 'E' was found chiselled into one end (Plate 8).

Trench 2

This was a complex L-shaped trench about 14 m to the south of Trench 1 (Figure 2). It measured about 25 m by 7.5 m in maximum dimensions and was up to 3.4 m deep. The new pipes were laid as the trench was dug, so there was only a small area available for observation at any one time (Plate 9). There were serious problems with the ingress of water in this trench making the recording of the lowest deposits very difficult. Similar deposits were noted along most of its length.

At the base of the southern part of the trench, at a depth of about 2.6 m below present ground surface, the top of a dark grey fine silty sand with marine shells was exposed. This is thought to be the top of the mudflats of The Mere. It was only really visible during initial excavation of the trench, prior to groundwater inundation.

Overlying this natural deposit was a thin layer of broken brick and pebbles, intermittently visible along the length of the trench below the water (Plate 10). Overlying this was a deposit of black clinker and tarmac scrapings up to 2.4 m deep, containing a lot of rubbish including leather boot fragments, cloth, iron, pottery and some brick fragments. The upper part of the trench comprised more recent disturbance, services, etc down to a depth of about 1 m, sealed beneath the present tarmac surface.

At the northern end of the trench, the layer of clinker and tarmac scrapings was about 1.7 m thick, and overlay a series of sand and gravel layers below (Plate 11).

CONCLUSIONS

No trace of the 16th century outworks to Portland Castle were found in the excavated areas. In Trench 2, modern reclamation deposits continued right down on to the top of the earlier mudflats. Trench 1 was not dug to such a great depth, so no natural deposits were exposed, but a similar stratigraphic sequence is likely.

A number of large ashlar blocks were found in Trench 1. These may have been derived from the Castle outworks. Certainly, some very large blocks still survive in the stonework to the north and west of the castle, including the area of a possible surviving bastion of the castle outworks, which are thought to have come from the castle (Woodward and Tyler 1995, pl. 2–3). The column shaft is unfinished and still bears a quarry mark so is probably quarry waste or surplus, rather than an architectural fragment from the castle. The possibility exists that some of the other stone blocks may have a similar origin, rather than being derived from the castle.

PROJECT ARCHIVE

The archive (Terrain Archaeology Project No. 53101) will be deposited with Dorset County Museum, which has agreed in principle to accept the archive, subject to fulfilment of the Museum's requirements of the preparation of archaeological archives. A copy of the microfilmed archive will be deposited with the National Monuments Record.

REFERENCES

- CPM 1999 'Royal Naval Air Station, Portland, Dorset: An Archaeological Assessment.' (CPM1612H.1)
- RCHME 1970 Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England 1970 *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the county of Dorset* **2**, South East.
- Terrain Archaeology 2001 'Osprey Quay, Portland, Dorset: Archaeological Impact Assessment' Report No. 5085.1, October 2001. Unpublished report for SWERDA.
- Woodward, A. and Tyler, D., 1995 'Proposed new Barrackmaster's workshop, R.N.A.S. Portland' *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeology Society* **117**, 137–40.



Figure 1: Location map

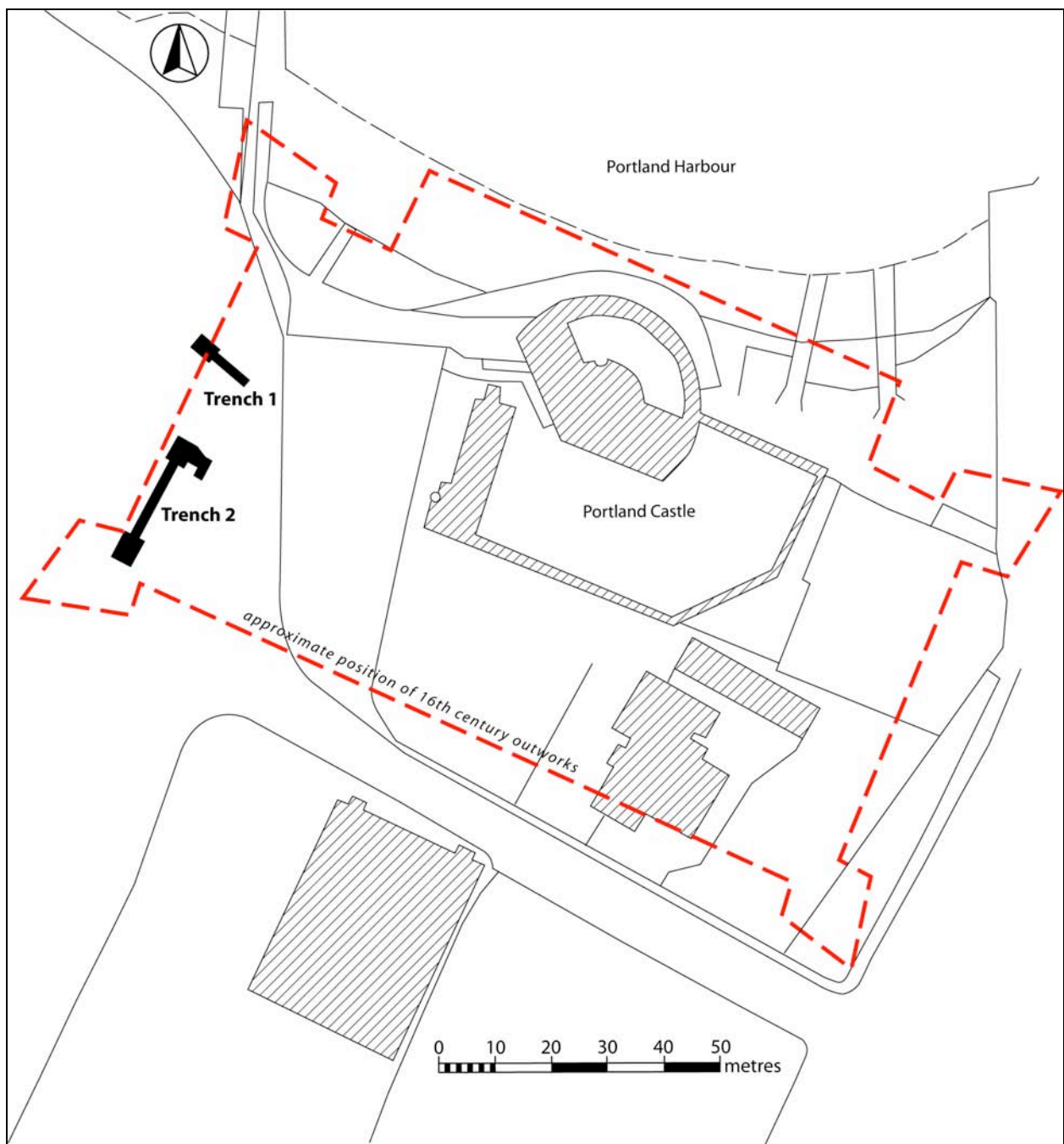


Figure 2: Location of the drainage works in relation Portland Castle, with the approximate position of the 16th century outworks shown.



Plate 1: General view looking northeast, with Trench 2 in foreground and Trench 1 in background. Portland Castle on right.



Plate 2: View looking east along Trench 1. Portland Castle in background. Large ashlar blocks visible just behind the shoring.



Plate 3: View northwest along Trench 1.



Plate 4: Detail of deposits in south baulk of Trench 1.



Plate 5: Large ashlar blocks in north baulk of Trench 1.



Plate 6: Large ashlar blocks from Trench 1 on spoil heap.



Plate 7: Column shaft from Trench 1.



Plate 8: Mark on end of column shaft from Trench 1.



Plate 9: View looking southwest along Trench 2 during excavation.



Plate 10: Detail of deposits in south part of Trench 2.



Plate 11: Detail of deposits in north part of Trench 2.