

Perran Round, Perranzabuloe, Cornwall

Excavation to investigate root damage from gorse



Historic Environment Service (Projects)

Cornwall County Council

A Report for the St. Piran Trust

**Perran Round, Perranzabuloe,
Cornwall**

**Excavation to investigate root
damage from gorse**

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The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the Historic Environment Service projects team and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

Cover illustration

Perran Round in 1813 (from OS Map)

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Abbreviations

- CRO Cornwall County Record Office
- EH English Heritage
- HER Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Record
- HES Historic Environment Service, Cornwall County Council
- NGR National Grid Reference
- OS Ordnance Survey
- PRN Primary Record Number in Cornwall HER
- RIC Royal Institution of Cornwall

1 Summary

Perran Round is the best preserved plen an gwary (medieval playing place) in Cornwall. It is leased to the St. Piran Trust, which is a charitable group whose primary objective is to protect and enhance archaeological sites in the Perranzabuloe area, associated with the name of St. Piran, the national saint of Cornwall.

The Trust took over the management of the site in 2002. Ongoing scrub clearance and maintenance by the Trust raised serious questions about how best to remove gorse from the monument. This report details the small excavation carried out to investigate whether scrub growth had damaged the banks of the round and to advise on the most appropriate way to control the scrub without damaging the monument.

This excavation shows that efforts to physically remove gorse roots from the bank would cause considerable internal disturbance and damage to the monument.

It is the view of the Historic Environment Service (Projects) that where gorse is to be cleared, the vegetation should be trimmed back as close as possible to the bank and the roots treated to prevent regrowth.

2 Introduction

2.1 Project background

The St. Piran Trust is a charitable group whose primary objective is to protect and enhance archaeological sites in the Perranzabuloe area, associated with the name of St. Piran, the national saint of Cornwall.

In 2002, the Trust took over the management of the site of Perran Round¹, the best preserved plen an gwary (medieval playing place) in Cornwall (Scheduled Monument Cornwall 29628; HER SMR 19554; NGR SW 7721 5646) (Fig. 1).

Located just outside Perranporth, the Round had become overgrown and rather neglected. Ongoing scrub clearance and maintenance by the Trust led to this proposal for a small excavation to investigate the extent to which scrub growth has damaged the banks of the round and to advise how best the scrub could be removed without damaging the monument.

3 Background

3.1 Plenys an Gwary

The monument class known as plen an gwary or plenys an gwary (plural) is unique to Cornwall. Rod Lyon describes them as “constructed to function as an open air theatre for the performance of Cornish miracle plays – religious dramas which lasted over a period of two or three days, describing biblical events or possibly the life of a saint” (Lyon 2003, 2). There is also an implicit link with the Cornish language, the medium through which the plays would have been performed. It is widely believed that the plenys an gwary ceased to be used as theatres as the language declined (see Spriggs 2004).

Rod Lyon notes that there are nine sites which survive with extant remains, 19 further sites that have no above-ground remains and 20 possible sites which he considers worthy of further investigation (2003, 2, 7). Matthew Spriggs meanwhile lists a total of 51 sites, ranging from those with physical remains to those based on place-name evidence (2004, 160-61).

Spriggs has also produced a distribution map of plenys an gwary and notes that most lie to the west of a line extending roughly between St Teath and Fowey, which linguistic evidence suggests was the easternmost point that Cornish was spoken between 1300-1500. Referring to the various lists of potential plenys an gwary, he notes:-

“Not all of the features indicated ... are called plenys an gwary in the sources they quote. Some are called ‘playing place’ or some similar term in English. ‘Playing place’ does not always indicate an arena theatre. It could for instance refer to a sports ground. But then, does plen an gwary always refer to an amphitheatre for the performance of plays? Again one has to admit ‘not necessarily.’ All the term means in Cornish is ‘playing place’ after all!

“ ... when we look at only those cases where the plen an gwary/playing place and an amphitheatre structure or memory of an amphitheatre location combine, then all of the examples east of our 1300-1500 Cornish speaking line drop out. Although plays were performed in eastern Cornwall in this period,

¹ This monument is known variously as Perran Round, Piran Round or St Piran’s Round. We have chosen to use the name Perran Round, which is the preferred local name for the site.

they did not necessitate the construction of a classic plen an gwary structure but either took place in open spaces, churchyards or large halls and would have been performed in English (Joyce and Newlyn 1999). Similarly, in neighbouring Devon there is no reference to the use of plen an gwary-like structures (Wasson 1986). There are none in Somerset either (Stokes 1996).

“This style of ‘theatre in the round’ structure can thus be seen to be associated specifically with Cornish language plays. Stage directions and stage plans of surviving Cornish plays make it clear that they indeed took place in circular enclosures (Joyce and Newlyn 1999, 551-3, 555-6)” (Spriggs 2004, 152).

3.2 Perran Round

Perran Round is a circular enclosure, with bank and outer ditch enclosing an arena approximately 45 metres in diameter. The bank is approximately 2.6 metres high internally, sloping up to a flat top.

It has been widely argued that Perran Round was a Iron Age/Romano-British enclosure or round, which had been adapted for use as an open air theatre in medieval times. This possibility is even acknowledged within the paperwork associated with the scheduling (revised in 1981) and Cornwall County Council’s Historic Environment Record. The scheduling notes, originally compiled by Henry Jenner, do however state that it is “more probable” that it was “constructed for a plain-an-gwary or amphitheatre in which, no doubt, the Cornish scriptural and miracle dramas were acted in the 14th and 15th centuries and possibly later.”

The earliest plan was produced by William Borlase in his Natural History of Cornwall, whose depiction of the Round is very similar to the present condition of the monument (Fig. 2) (Borlase 1758), showing the two opposed entrances and the ‘Devil’s Spoon’ (a hollow with trench running to it on the eastern side of the arena). The map does however also record a series of stepped terraces, assumed to have been seats, on the inner face of the bank which are not apparent on the present monument. His description of the monument was as follows, with the capital letters referring to areas marked on the plan:

“A, the area of the amphitheatre, perfectly level, about one hundred and thirty feet diameter; B, the benches, seven in number of turf, rising eight feet from the area; C, the top of the rampart, seven feet wide; D, the outer slope of the rampart; E, the foss; F, the slope of the foss; G, the level of the hill on which the work is formed; H, a circular pit, in diameter thirteen feet, deep three feet, the sides sloping, and half-way down a bench of turf, so formed as to reduce the area of the bottom to an ellipsis; I, a shallow trench, running from the pit H nearly east, four feet six inches wide, and one foot deep, till it reaches the uppermost bench of the amphitheatre A, where it is terminated by a semi-oval cavity K, eleven feet from north to south, and nine feet from east to west, which makes a breach in the benches ...

“This is a curious and regular work, and is formed with the exactness of a fortification, but the visible benches within, the pit, the trench, and cavity, and the foss having no esplanade beyond it, determine it in its present figure to the uses of an amphitheatre.”

On the 1813 OS Map (Fig. 3), a roadway is shown as still extending through Perran Round, as well as a nearby route which is now the present road (B3285), leading from Goonhavern to Perranporth. To the east, there was enclosed land associated with the settlement of Rose

whereas to the immediate north-west and south of the monument the land was shown as unenclosed.

The 1840 Tithe Map for Perranzabuloe shows that use of the road through the Round has been discontinued, and the open land to the north-east enclosed. A new roadway had been constructed within the newly enclosed land, roughly parallel with the B3285.

The 1880 OS map demonstrates that more of the open land to the south had been taken in by that point, broadly creating the landscape that presently exists (Figs. 4 and 5).

3.3 Modern use of the Round

As noted above, the principal use of Perran Round would have been for the performance of Cornish language miracle plays during the medieval period, although in later times the use had been more varied and Roger Glanville has written that “before the First World War, Perran Round was the location for political rallies held by the Tory Party and Liberal Party” (n.d., 13).

There has been considerable debate about the westwards retreat of the Cornish language (see George 1986, Dunbar and George 1997, Holmes 2003, Spriggs 2003 and Spriggs 2004) and when such events were likely to have ceased. Ian Arthurson has noted that “at Perranzabuloe, St Piran’s relics were paraded in Mary Tudor’s reign. Perranzabuloe also drew about 2000 spectators from the surrounding countryside to religious dramas in its plain-an-gwary” (2000, 77) and Carew speaks of playing places being in active use in about 1600 (Halliday 1953, 144-5).

Because plens an gwary are unique to Cornwall and because of their association with Cornish language and culture, they have attracted considerable interest in recent years. An extensive bibliography is included at the back of this report. As the best preserved plen an gwary, the Cornish Revivalist movement has properly seen Perran Round as an iconic site for Cornwall, its identity and language, and has staged a large number of events at the site. The Cornish Gorseth, for example, has held its annual ceremony within the Round on no less than five separate occasions, namely 1946, 1958, 1970, 1985 and 1993 (Ann Trevennen Jenkin *pers. comm.*). It is certainly interesting to note that the first Gorseth following the Second World War, during which time the organisation had held a small ‘closed’ ceremony in the Royal Institution of Cornwall, was held at the site.

The miracle play Bewnans Meryasek was performed in the Round during July 1951 by Gwaroryon Gernewek, a group affiliated to Mebyon Kernow, as part of the festivities to mark the Festival of Britain (Deacon, Cole and Tregidga 2003, 33), with other events including Cornish wrestling and a concert by Skinners Bottom Male Voice Choir (Glanville n.d., 13). Later performances of similar plays included the 1969 Cornish Ordinalia by the Bristol University Players (Carter 2001, 80), Gwyrans an Bys (Creation of the World) in 1973, while an extract from the Ordinalia was staged in July 1996. Perran Round has also been the venue for a large number of musical events throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.

3.4 Condition of the monument

The management of Perran Round has fluctuated between periods of neglect, phases of restoration and other times when it has been carefully looked after, with the vegetation cover of the monument varying from close-cut grass to rampant gorse.

Roger Glanville recorded that “between the wars the Round became neglected and in the early 1930s the Perranzabuloe branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England reported that it had been used as a dumping ground for tins, rubbish and caravans and

undertook, with the help of the people of Rose to keep it clean. Their work proved to be of value as during the Second World War the Round became the training ground for the Rose Platoon of the Home Guard whose headquarters was in the tearooms across the lane” (n.d., 13).

The situation up to 1997 was summarised in a CAU report by Ann Preston-Jones (1997), which described some recent minor management work (Preston Jones 1997). She noted that in the 1960s, the Round was again neglected and covered in scrub, while the entrance on the southern side was waterlogged. She noted:

“Work organised by Cornwall County Council in 1967 involved selective scrub clearance, fencing of the forecourt, raising the level of the forecourt to improve drainage, reseeding and laying paving across the forecourt to the entrance ... after this, the site was leased to Perranzabuloe Parish Council, but maintenance appears to have been limited ...

“In 1984-85, the exercise was repeated. Most of the fencing was replaced, the position of the access altered and further scrub clearance carried out. On this occasion, all of the interior of the bank and the exterior to either side of the main entrance on the south-south-east ... following this, the care of the monument was handed over to the Rose Community Association (later taken over by Rose Men’s Institute) who regularly mowed the interior and forecourt and generally managed to maintain the improvements made in 1984-85.”

Finding the work too expensive and onerous, Rose Men’s Institute gave up the management of the Round in 1995. In 1996, the Cornwall Wildlife Trust undertook an ecological assessment in advance of the monument being handed onto the Cornwall Heritage Trust.

At this time, gorse and scrub were cleared from three areas: the bottom of the ditch, the outer face of bank and ditch to either side of the entrance and the top of the bank on the west. The work was carried out by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

The Cornwall Heritage Trust did not maintain the site as well as had been anticipated, with the result that gorse on the banks grew back and flourished. In 2002, the lease was taken over by the St Piran Trust who, with the help of an English Heritage Management Agreement, have started to tackle the Round’s management needs energetically and have carried out further scrub clearance and other works.

At the present time, the top of the bank and its inner slope are clear of large scrubby vegetation, although the outer slope of the bank is still masked by a very heavy coverage of vegetation. This includes gorse, thorn and some elder. Where the gorse has been cleared from the inner slopes of the monument, the roots remain in place and a large amount of the gorse has started to regrow.

3.5 Background to the present project

One of the aims of the St Piran Trust is for the plen an gwary to once again be used as an arena for the performance of plays. As with the events held in the Round during the 20th century, it is envisaged that the audience would sit on the banks, in the manner that Borlase’s plan suggests, even though there are now no remains of turf seating.

It was noted however, that the remains of gorse stumps on the banks could make this a potentially uncomfortable experience and representatives of St Piran Trust asked English Heritage whether the stumps could be pulled or dug out of the banks. Normally, such an intrusion would not be tolerated on a Scheduled Monument, particularly one like Perran Round, which is so well preserved.

In this case, it was considered possible that the various phases of gorse intrusion may have so adversely affected the Round that any stratigraphic evidence will have been comprehensively destroyed.

It was therefore decided that a small excavation be carried out to:-

- Establish the depth of gorse-root penetration.
- Establish the lateral extent of gorse-root penetration.
- Investigate whether any deposits which can be confidently considered to be undisturbed medieval layers survive within the areas of the bank which are currently infested with gorse.
- Produce a recommendation for the future management of the gorse on the banks.

4 Methodology

A single trench measuring 5.75m by 1.0m was excavated across the inner face of the eastern bank of Perran Round, where the infestation of gorse has been among the most severe in recent years (Fig. 6).

The trench was excavated carefully in such a way that the gorse roots were not progressively removed as excavation progressed, but were left in situ for as long as possible, so that the depth and lateral extent of the roots could be assessed. The intention of the excavation was to identify and record any features surviving in the area of most severe root penetration, giving careful consideration to the extent that the roots have damaged and disturbed archaeological layers.

The archaeological remains were recorded as follows:-

- Drawings (plan and section) were made in pencil (4H) on drafting film; with standard information such as site details, personnel, date, scale, etc.
- All archaeological contexts were described to a standard format.
- All features and finds were accurately located at an appropriate scale
- Scaled monochrome photography was used as the main record medium. Photos were taken before work commenced, while work is in progress and on completion of the work.

The work took place between 17th and 23rd November 2004.

5 Results

5.1 The bank

The excavation trench was positioned on the eastern side of Perran Round, where the bank is 2.6m in height (Fig. 6). Its inner face extends approximately 4.3m into the centre of the monument, while the flat top of the bank is 2.0m wide.

Interestingly, comparison of the modern dimensions of Perran Round with those recorded by William Borlase in 1758 (Fig. 2) shows them to be quite similar. Borlase's dimensions suggest that the bank stood 3.0m above the level of the interior at that time, just slightly higher than the modern dimensions. His depiction of the inner slope extends 4.2m and the top of the bank was just over 2.0m in width.

The excavation trench itself extended the full height of the inner bank and a further 0.5m over its flat top (Fig. 7).

The upper deposit was a top soil [1], 0.05m-0.1m in depth, which at the top of the bank came down straight onto its stony core, made up of a large amount of small slatestone pieces. Encountered beneath the top soil, but only in the lower half of the trench, was a silty clay deposit [2], largely free of stones. It has a maximum depth of 0.3m.

The trench showed that the upper part of the bank comprised a considerable amount of dumped slatestone, which may have been excavated from the ditch which surrounds the bank itself. This appears to overlie a series of more soily deposits and it was decided to excavate a small sondage trench into the bank, in order to fully understand its make-up.

A further eight deposits were recorded, [3] – [10], each with varying degrees of slatestone. The evidence clearly pointed to a series of different ‘dumps’ of material used to construct the bank, which could quite feasibly relate to a single construction phase.

It is interesting to note that the various contexts encountered within the sondage trench appeared slightly stepped, though presently masked by context [2]. While it might be argued that context [2] has slumped down the bank over the last 250 years, covering ‘turf seats’ as recorded by William Borlase, it seems much more likely that the stepped nature of the various fills, actually relates to the individual dumps of soil making up the bank. The irregularities encountered in the profile of the bank, below [1] and [2], were considered too irregular and too small to represent the remains of turf seats. There was no evidence of any such irregularities in the top half of the bank.

There was also no evidence of a buried top soil layer at the base of the bank and it appeared that the various dumped layers were placed directly onto the subsoil.

One modern feature was noted and a single artefact recovered. A perfectly circular post-hole with vertical edges, measuring 0.05m in diameter, was noted at the top of the bank. This feature is almost certainly a residual mark of staging for one of the performances within Perran Round during the twentieth century. For example, a photograph of the 1969 performance of the Ordinalia shows a considerable amount of staging erected around the Round (Carter 2001, 80). Within the top soil, a penny was recovered, dating to 1966.

More detailed descriptions of the various contexts are listed below.

Context no.	Description
1	Top soil / turf layer, with an average depth of 0.05-0.1m. This layer contains numerous patches of gorse roots.
2	Mid orangy brown silty clay. This deposit comprised soft soil towards the base of the bank, where it had a maximum depth of 0.3m, but was less substantial further up the bank.
3	This deposit comprised a mid orangy brown silty clay, similar to [2], associated with a markedly large amount of slatestone fragments. The slatestone in this context is clearly linked to the stony core of the main bank.
4	Mottled light brownish grey clayey silt. This compact layer contained the occasional small (quartz) stone and slatestone fragment.
5	Light greyish brown silty clay. This layer contained the occasional small (quartz) stone and charcoal flecks.
6	Mottled light brownish grey silty clay. This compact layer contained the

	occasional small (quartz) stone.
7	Light greyish brown silty clay. This compact layer contained numerous small slatestone pieces, occasional charcoal flecks and odd slatestone fragment.
8	Light brownish grey clayey silt. This compact layer contained numerous small slatestone pieces
9	Brownish grey clayey silt. This compact layer contained numerous small slatestone pieces, especially to the rear of the sondage trench.
10	Gritty, brownish grey silty clay. This deposit contained a large number of quartz stones (fist sized and smaller).
11	Undisturbed natural layer. This comprises quartz stones within a gritty, brownish grey silty clay. Not excavated.

5.2 The gorse

Figure 7 clearly shows the position of the two concentrations of gorse roots. These included a tight root cluster just below the brow of the bank. The larger complex of roots was positioned a little lower down the inner face of the bank but above the position of the sondage trench.

The higher of the two concentrations of root had a series of five ‘suckler’ roots extending away from it. These were not substantial and mostly measured 0.02m in diameter. Positioned directly on top of the largely slatestone core of the bank, these roots had not penetrated into the bank, but had grown through the top soil, running along and overlying the top of the stone core.

Further down the bank, the overall impact of the roots of the gorse was more varied. The roots themselves were more mixed in size, from 0.01-0.05m in diameter, and some of the root damage was more extensive. A large number of the roots, particularly those at the top of this grouping also ‘bounced’ over the slatestone core, but some of those lower down had entered into softer areas, extending horizontally into the bank itself. Pressure was applied to some of these roots (ie. to replicate the act of their forcible removal) and it was clear that such an activity would cause parts of the largely slatestone bank to become loose and break up.

The southernmost root recorded in the excavation trench extended for over a metre. Growing away from the stone core of the bank, it grew into the softer soil, context [2], further down the inner face of the bank.

6 Recommendations

The results of the single excavation trench have proved to be very useful in making management recommendations as to how to deal with the infestation of gorse within Perran Round.

While it is clearly the case that a large number of roots were contained within the top soil, preferring to expand within a loose humic soil rather than into a very stony bank, it must also be noted that a number of roots also extended into the bank itself. This excavation shows that efforts to physically remove these roots from the bank would cause considerable internal disturbance and damage to the document.

It is the view of the Historic Environment Service (Projects) that where gorse is to be cleared, the vegetation should be trimmed back as close as possible to the bank and the roots treated to prevent regrowth. This should be done repeatedly if necessary.

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8 Further research

There is a considerable literature concerning playing places, Cornish miracle plays, etc, which could be used by St Piran Trust to undertake further research into Perran Round and the traditions surrounding the monument.

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9 Project archive

The HES project number is **2004006**

The project's documentary, photographic and drawn archive is housed at the offices of the Historic Environment Service, Cornwall County Council, Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, TR1 3AY. The contents of this archive are as listed below:

1. A project file containing site records and notes, project correspondence and administration.
2. Field plans and copies of historic maps stored in an A2-size plastic envelope (GRE 208/17).
3. Electronic drawings stored in the directory `..ACAD ARCHIVE\SITESP-Q/PERRAN ROUND`

4. Black and white photographs archived under the following index numbers: GBP 1724.
5. This report held in digital form as: G:\CAU\HE PROJECTS\SITES\SITES P\PERRAN ROUND EXCAVATION PR4006 07\PERRAN ROUND GORSE INVESTIGATION REPORT.DOC

Artefacts and environmental material retrieved during the project are stored at the Royal Cornwall Museum, River Street, Truro.

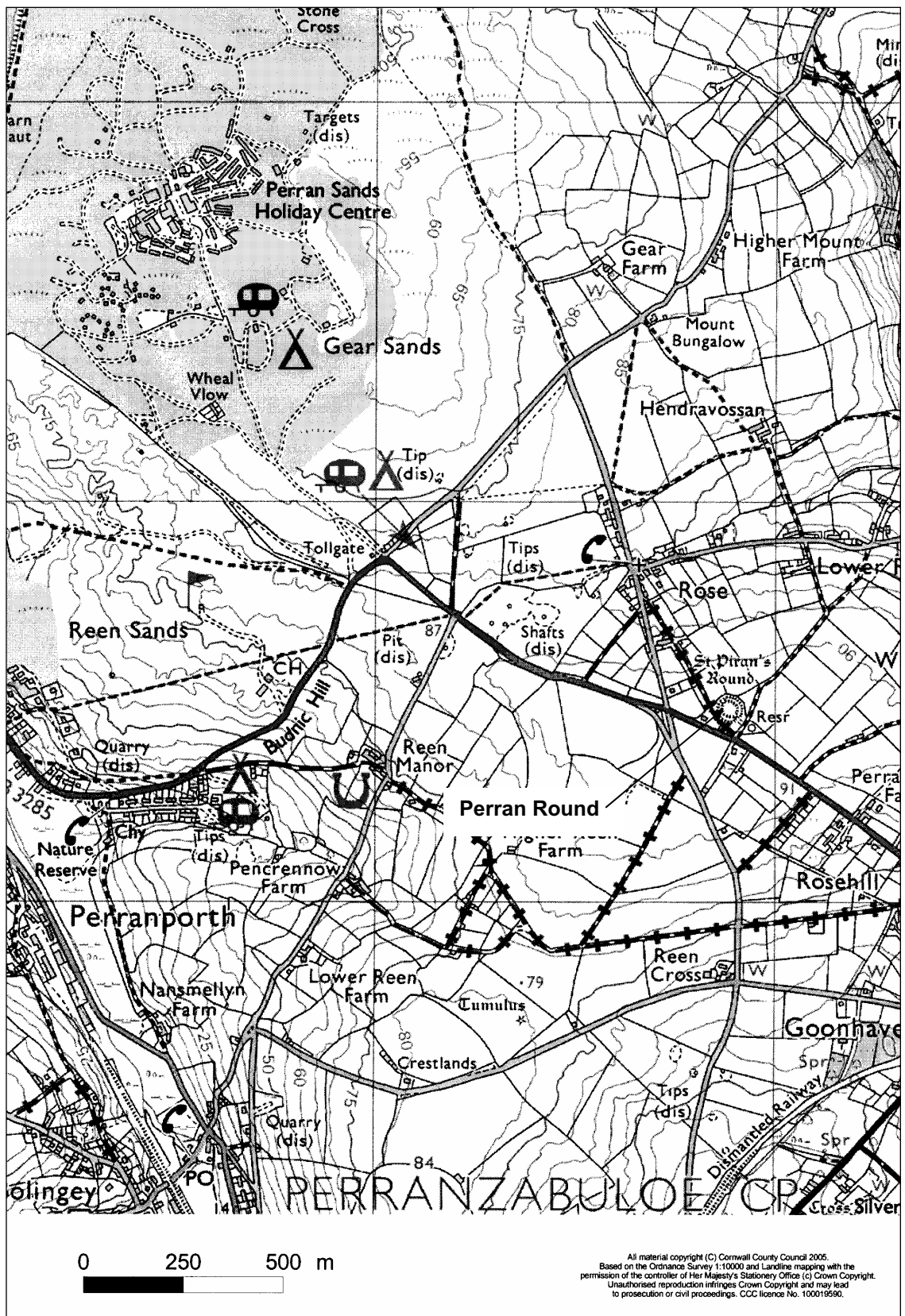


Fig 1 Location map.

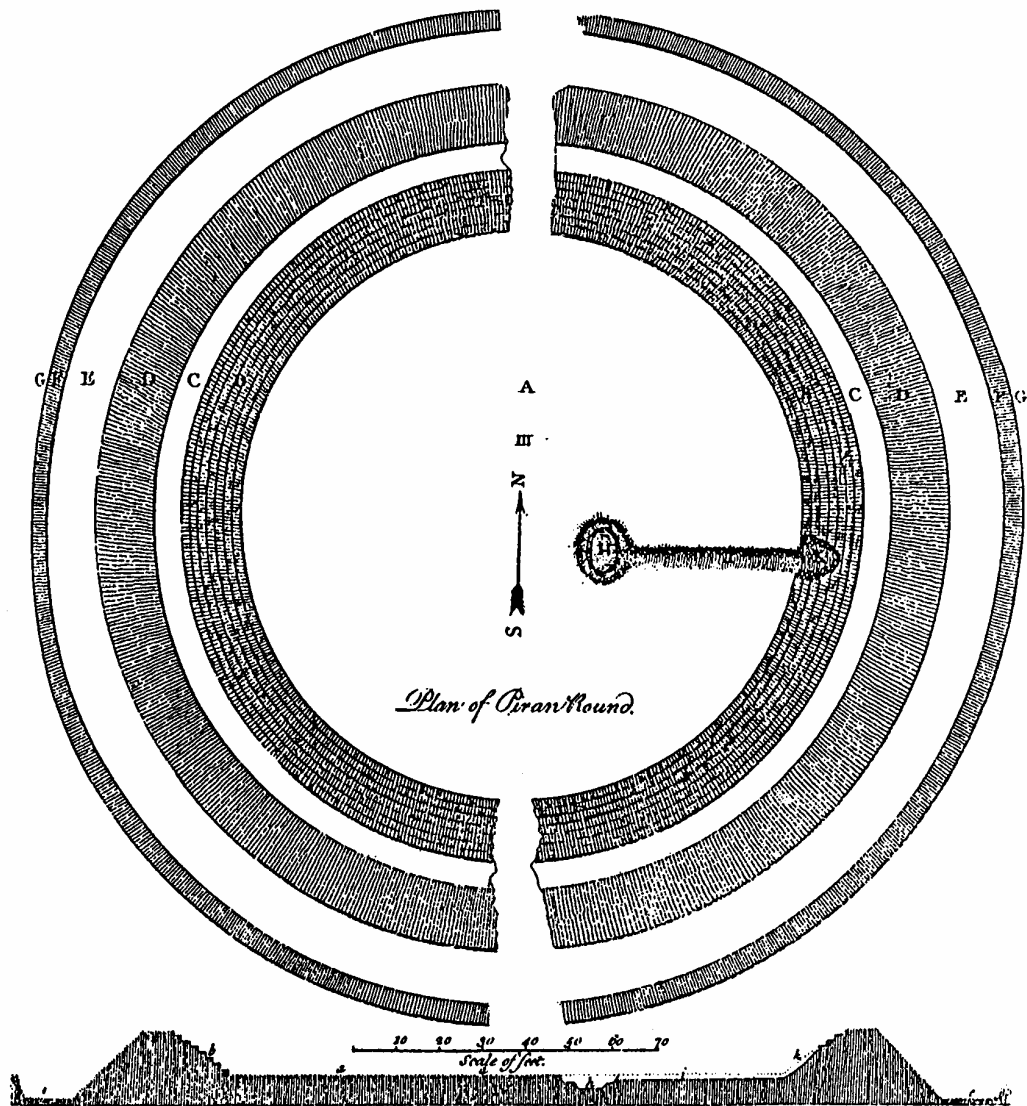


Fig 2 Eighteenth century drawing of Perran Round from Borlase.



Fig 3 Perran Round in 1813 (from OS Map).

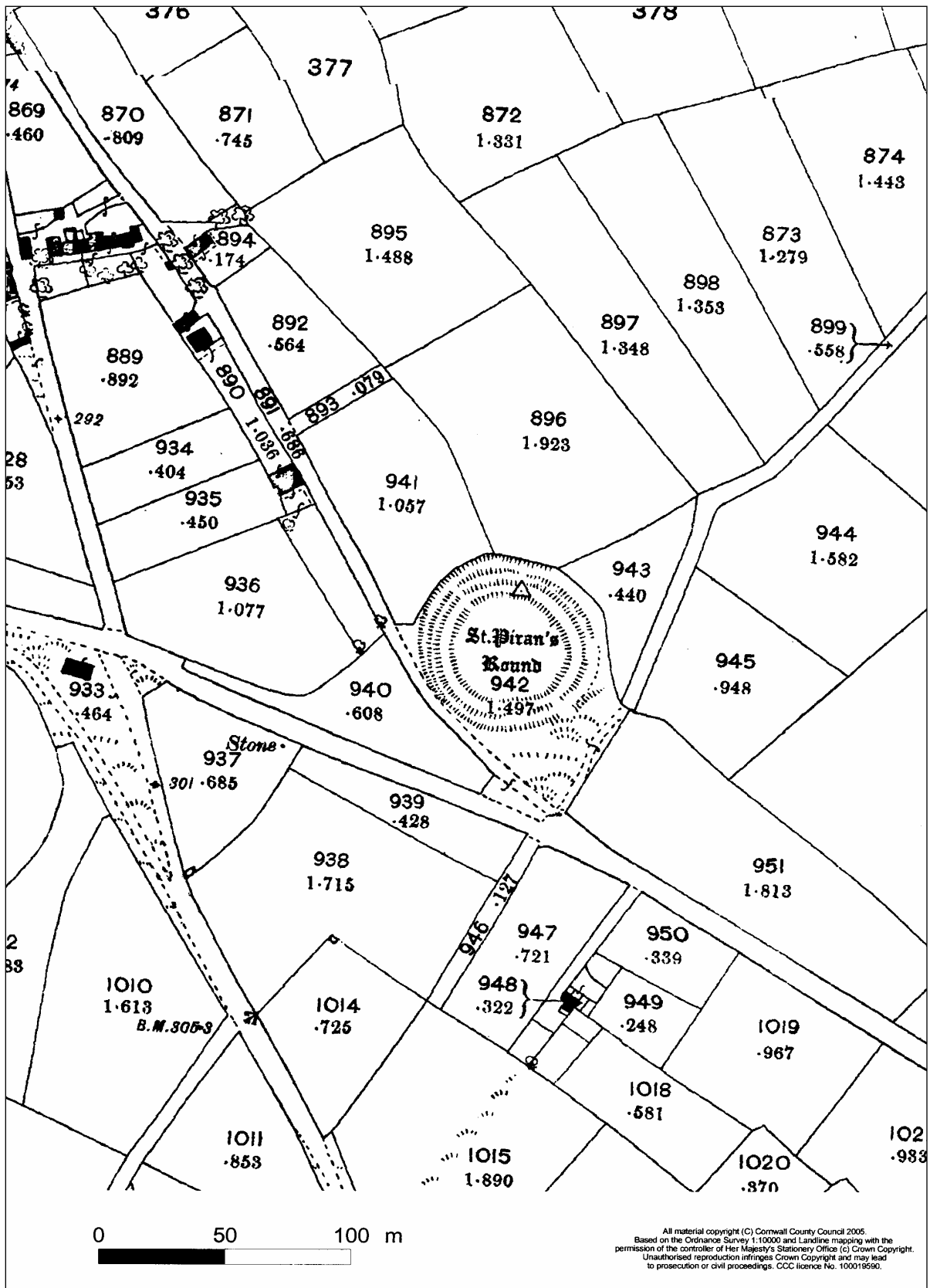


Fig 4 Perran Round in 1880 (from OS Map).

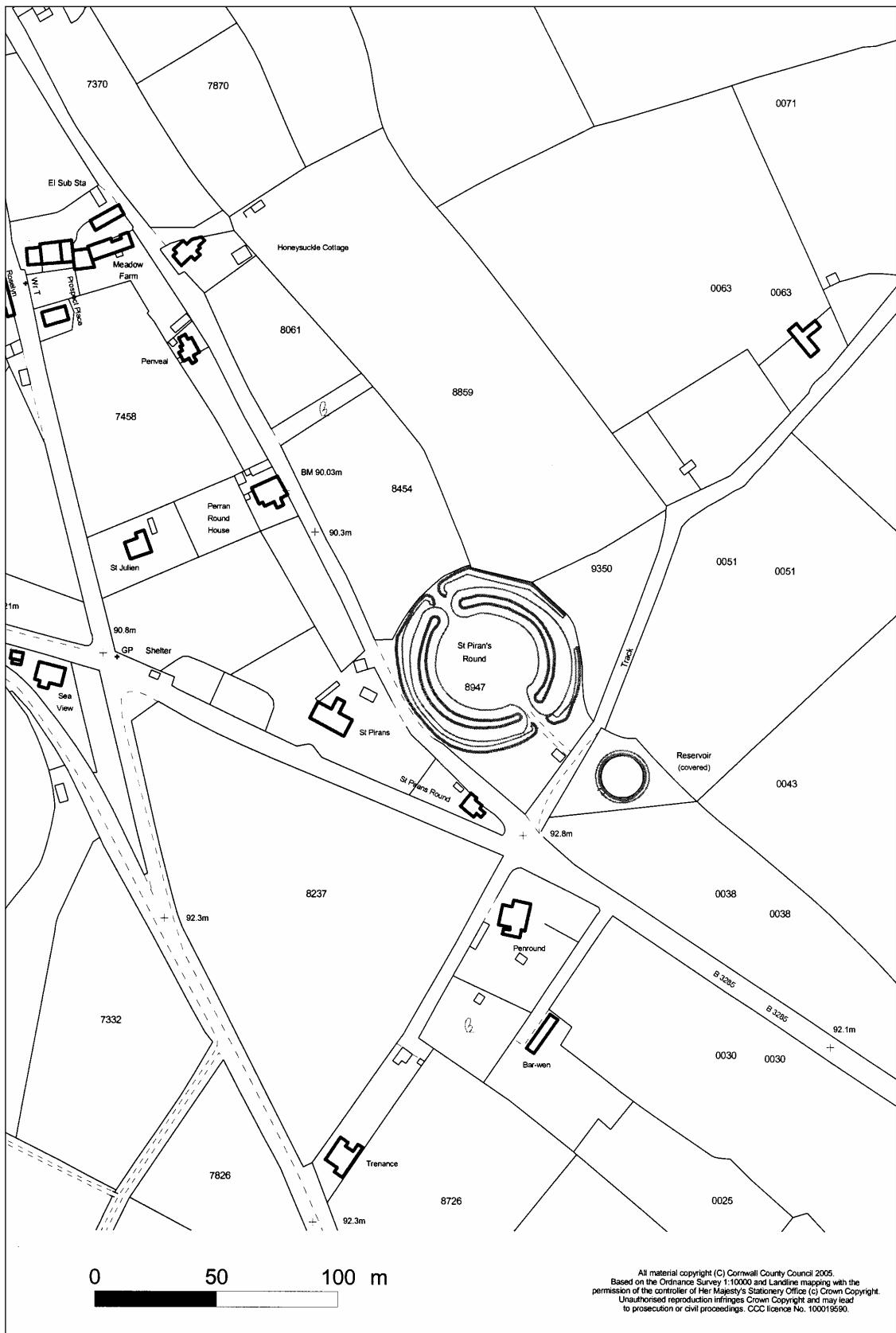


Fig 5 Perran Round in 2005 (from OS Map).

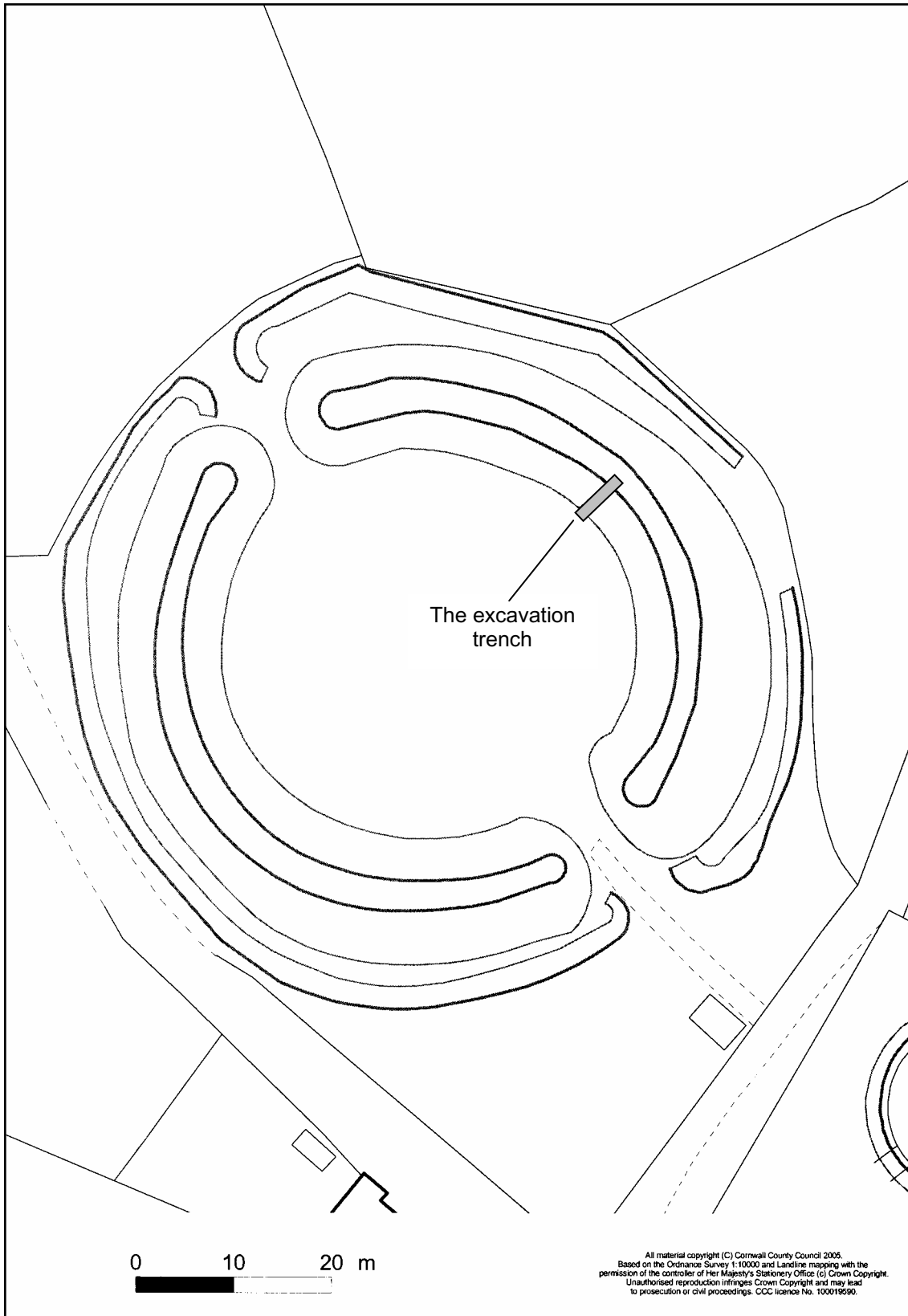
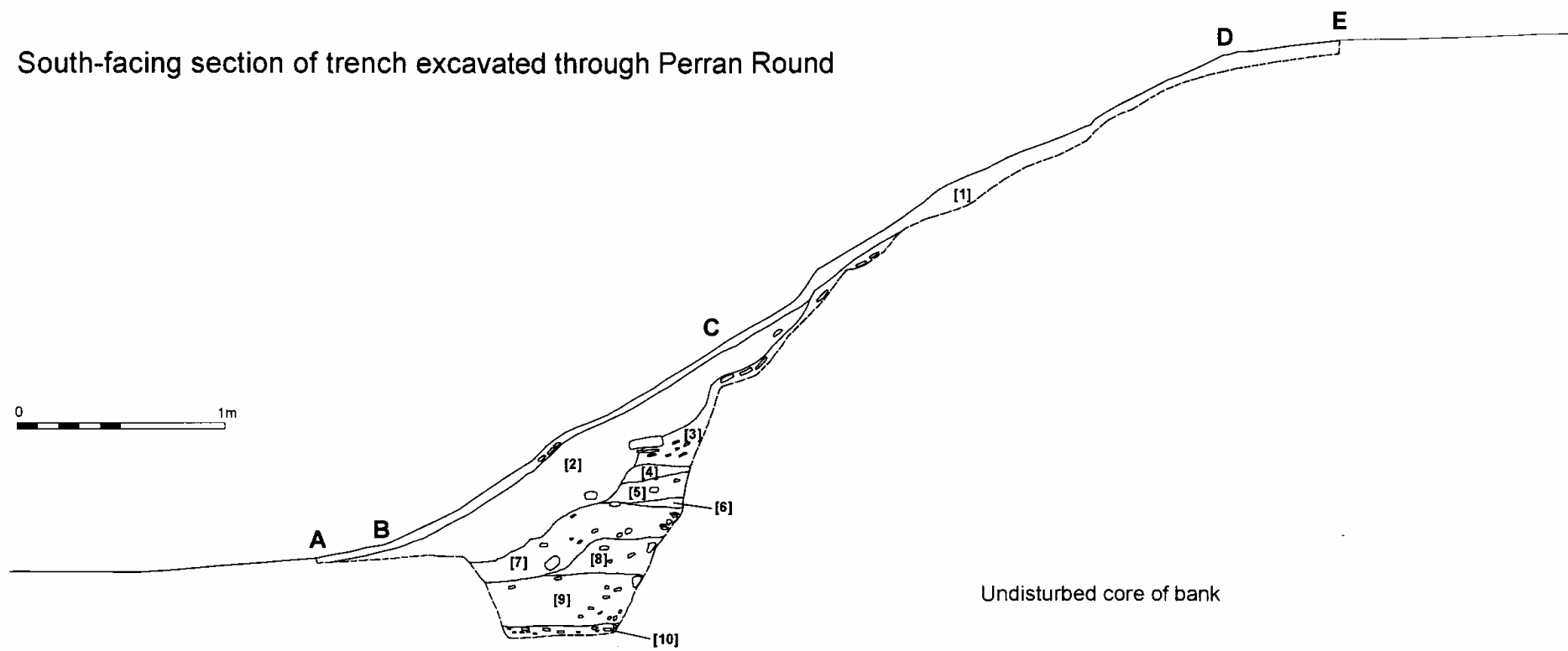


Fig 6 Location of the excavation trench.



Plan of trench excavated through Perran Round

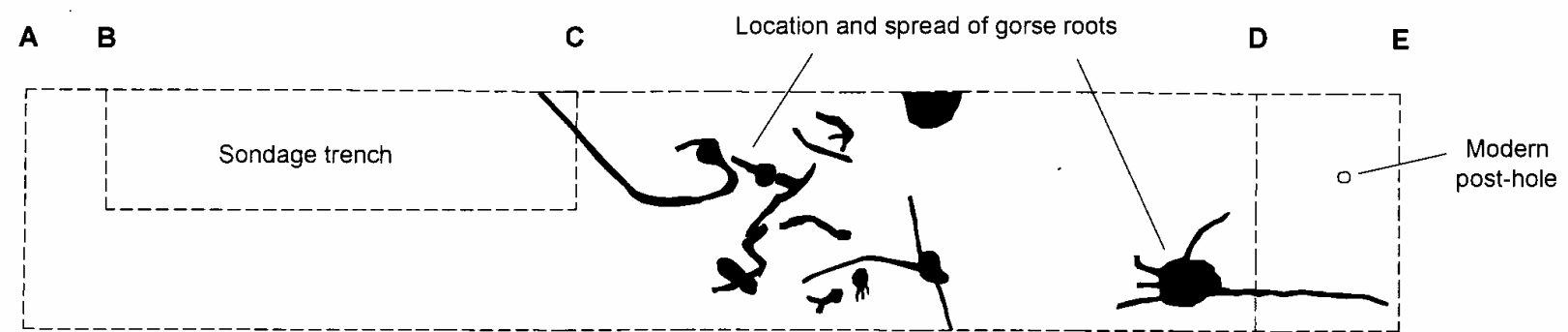


Fig. 7 Section and plan of excavation trench.

