A Community Archaeology Project at

Newton, Ellesmere, Shropshire, 2014

by
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Archaeology Service

Shropshire Council

A COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT AT NEWTON, ELLESMERE, SHROPSHIRE, 2014

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A Report for

The Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Scheme

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SUMMARY

In June 2014 the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council carried out a community archaeology project at Newton, near Ellesmere, Shropshire. The project involved the excavation of trial trenches across a cropmark enclosure of probable prehistoric date. The excavations located the enclosure ditch, and a possible internal feature. No artefactual evidence was recovered to date the enclosure. A radiocarbon date of 2,101 +/-37 BP (188BC – 114BC) was obtained for a charcoal sample from the lower fill of the enclosure ditch.

The writer would like to thank Mr Ian Mainwaring and Oteley Estates for permission to carry out the fieldwork at the site at Newton. The writer was ably assisted by Charlotte Orchard, Senior Archaeological Advisor in supervising the excavations, and Luke Neal of the Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership who provided organisational and logistical support. The site accommodation was provided by Countyloos Ltd of Whitchurch. And finally thanks to all the volunteers who took part in the excavations:

Paul Riley, Jen & Martin Spenser, Ryan Arrowsmith, Karen Good, Janet Hankey, Onno and Rosemary, Graham Davis, Rosie Wood, Alan Osborne, Irene Milhench, Liz Lever, and Tim Ashton

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 In June 2014 the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council carried out a community archaeology project at Newton, near Ellesmere, Shropshire. The project involved the excavation of trial trenches on a cropmark enclosure of probable prehistoric date (Shropshire Historic Environment Record [HER] No. 02447, "Cropmark enclosure c500m WNW of Little Mill, Cole Mere") at NGR SJ 423 336.

1.2 The project was funded by the Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Scheme (MMLPS), a Heritage Lottery Fund initiative. The MMLPS focuses on the distinct geographical area comprising a swathe of land around 200km^2 in north Shropshire and south Cheshire, from Ellesmere in the southwest through Whitchurch to the Cholmondeley estate in the northeast. It encompasses a number of key sites: The Mere at Ellesmere, Whitemere, Wood Lane, Colemere, Whixall Mosses, Prees Heath and Bickley Hall Farm. The MMLPS aims to undertake conservation of the natural and historic environment and engage local people in understanding and caring for the landscape.

1.3 A community archaeology project was proposed to address several of these themes, focusing on settlement in the later prehistoric period. A proposal for such a project was made during the consultations as part of the development phase of the MMLPS project.

1.4 The community archaeology project was intended to complement a Peat Coring Project to be run by Manchester Metropolitan University. The peat coring project was also proposed as part of the Landscape Conservation Action Plan, and aimed to investigate the depth, structure, composition and date of various deposits in the overall MMLPS area.

1.5 The community archaeology project would focus on settlement in the later prehistoric period and investigate a cropmark enclosure site of probable Iron Age date in the vicinity of Colemere or Whattal Moss. The archaeological investigation would take the form of the trial excavation of a section across the silted up ditch enclosing the selected cropmark enclosure, and investigate an area within the enclosure ditch.

1.6 Shropshire Council Archaeology Service (SCAS) was commissioned by the MMLPS to undertake the community archaeology project in accordance with a research design, submitted in January 2013. The project was directed by Shropshire Council Archaeology Service, employing volunteers recruited by SCAS and the MMLPS. The excavations took place over 10 working days in the first half of June 2014.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Man has been active in the area we know today as Shropshire since at least the latter stages of the last Ice Age some eleven thousand years ago. The earliest traces of human occupation belong to the hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic period (or Middle Stone Age) of c. 10,000 BC to 4,500 BC. Until relatively recently Mesolithic people were not thought to have penetrated into any but the southeastern parts of Shropshire. However recent discoveries of a flint-knapping and probable camping site at Grinshill 7km to the south of the MMLPS area, a findspot of 32 mesolithic flints from a site at Wykey Weir 5.5km to the southwest of the M&M area (Leah et al, 1998, p39, site SH70), and a findspot just outside Newport (Telford & Wrekin) have established the presence of Mesolithic activity in the county. No Mesolithic finds have yet been recovered from the Colemere/Whattal Moss area.

2.2 People probably first began to settle and farm in the Colemere/Whattal Moss area in the Neolithic period (or New Stone Age), though as yet no traces of their presence have been discovered here. However, communities living in the study area in the succeeding Bronze Age have left traces of their presence in the form their tools and weapons, recovered in recent years as a result of agricultural activity or metal detecting. Such finds from the study area include stone tools – such as a perforated axe hammer (HER 02920) from Rookery Field, Wolverley or metalwork such as bronze axe heads or palstaves from Rookery Meadow (HER 02660) and Long Length, Wolverley (HER 03422), and a bronze sword from Lyneal Wood Farm (HER 00889). These Bronze Age communities also left physical traces of their presence in the landscape in the form of the burial mounds or 'barrows' of the early Bronze Age (c. 2300- 1400 BC). These monuments are perhaps the earliest remains of man still to be found in the Shropshire landscape. Barrows are artificial mounds of earth or stone built up over one or more human burials. One such barrow survives at Welshampton (HER 01008); another nearby barrow was levelled in 1873 (HER 00883) to make way for a house. Ploughed-out remains of barrows may be seen as cropmarks, sometimes known as ring-ditches, formed by the silted up circular quarry ditches around a former barrow.

2.3 There are some 60 or so hillforts in Shropshire and these are today the county's most readily visible Iron Age settlement sites. However, most of the Iron Age population probably lived in small villages or farmsteads. Many of these farmsteads were enclosed by defensive ditches, banks, and palisades or hedges. Although few of these survive as earthworks today, aerial photography has revealed the remains of the silted up enclosure ditches of many of these farmsteads. Excavations carried out on such enclosures in Shropshire and elsewhere in the Welsh borders have shown that they were occupied mainly during the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Iron Age and/or Romano-British occupation of the Colemere / Whattal Moss area is indicated by the presence of a number of these cropmark enclosures, with some good examples being found near to Little Mill, Colemere (HER 02447), Lyneal Hall (HER 01007), Lyneal Wharf (HER 02487), and Colemere House (HER 02390 and HER 04033). A dugout canoe with a paddle and bowl (HER 00888) were found in peat cuttings at Whattal Moss in 1864 or 1866. The canoe has been radiocarbon dated to 465 - 200 BC cal (Leah et al p25; Switsur, 1989, 1014). The canoe is now held in the collections of the Shropshire Museum Service.

2.4 There are no known higher status Roman settlements in this part of the MMLPS area – though at the northern end there is the Roman fort and town and cemeteries at Whitchurch (Mediolanum), and roadside settlement at Heath Road. However, there

have been finds of Roman coins at Ellesmere and at Welshampton, which indicates that there was occupation of the area in the Roman period.

2.5 Iron Age/Romano-British cropmark enclosures form the commonest type of prehistoric monument in the Ellesmere region (Leah et al p26). An analysis of the distribution and form of these cropmark sites in the Welsh Marches was carried out in the early 1990s (Whimster, 1991). However, only a few of these sites in the central Welsh Marches have been sampled archaeologically, and none of those in the MMLPS study area have been archaeologically investigated. Data collected by the NWWS also indicates that there was substantial clearance of woodland in the area in the middle Iron Age (Leah p27-8). This suggests that this period probably saw significant changes in the landscape, with an increase in semi-permanent agricultural settlement. There was therefore an opportunity as part of the MMLPS to archaeologically sample one of these cropmark enclosure sites in the Ellesmere region, with the aim of attempting to locate and sample the enclosing ditch around one of these sites.

2.6 A cropmark enclosure at Newton (HER 02447, “Cropmark enclosure c500m WNW of Little Mill, Cole Mere”) was selected as the first choice for excavation. This site was selected on the basis of the quality of the aerial photographic evidence, the accessibility of the site, and because of its proximity to peat deposits around a small mere 100 metres to the southeast of the enclosure.

3 THE EXCAVATIONS

3.1 The cropmark enclosure (HER 02447) lies on the southern end of a spur of high ground, with Norton Merre to the north, Blakemere and Kettlemere to the northwest and Colemere to the southeast. At the immediate base of the spur is a small mere and area of peat, occupying a former palaeochannel that may have linked Blakemere and Colemere. The study area comprised the southern part of the area enclosed by the cropmark ditches. Two trenches were excavated in the study area; the trenches were initially cut with a tracked mechanical mini-digger, which removed approximately 0.1m of topsoil. The trenches were then cleaned and further excavated by hand.

3.2 Trench A (Fig. 2) was cut 20 m long by 3m wide and oriented west to east alongside the northern site boundary, and was intended to intersect the enclosure ditch and examine an area of the interior of the enclosure. The ground surface was level at the western end of the trench, which lay on the spur on which the cropmark enclosure stood. The ground surface dropped steeply down to the east and south. The trench followed the slope down to the east. The topsoil and subsoil were removed by machine to a depth of 100mm. At this point the trench was cleaned and excavated by hand.

3.3 At the top (western) end of the trench, the natural sand and gravel subsoil was exposed at a depth of 0.15m below the ground surface. A single linear feature (Fig. 3a; 9) was seen cut into the surface of the natural. On excavation, the feature proved to be a shallow gulley 0.8m wide by 0.15m deep. A 5m length of this gulley was exposed in the trench and three sections 1m wide were cut across it. Its fill (Fig. 4a; 7) produced no finds other than a few pieces of poor quality flint or chert, none of which showed any signs of having been worked. The fill of the gulley was sealed by the topsoil (2).

3.4 At the lower (eastern) end of the trench, the topsoil (2) lay over a deposit of buried topsoil (Fig. 4b; 5) representing hill-wash on the side of the slope. This deposit produced a single worked flint waste flake (small find 101) of probable prehistoric date, and a small number of sherds of post-medieval slipware pottery. Removal of this deposit revealed a linear feature (Fig. 3b; 10) aligned northeast-southwest running along the contour of the hillside. This feature was 2.5m wide and a 6m length was exposed in the eastern end of the trench. Three 1m wide sections were excavated across the feature, which proved to be a shallow ditch, up to 0.8m deep. The lower fill (8) comprised a brown silty sand. It produced no finds, but a single small fragment of charcoal was recovered and submitted to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre AMS Facility (SUERC) for radiocarbon dating. The sample provided a date of 2,101 +/- 37 BP at the one sigma level of confidence (SUERC-54998). Three pieces of chert were recovered, but these showed no signs of having been worked. This deposit lay below an upper fill (6) of dark brown sandy loam, which produced no finds (a small fragment of possible pottery proved on cleaning to be a coarsely gritted hard sandstone).

3.5 The second trench (Fig. 2; B) was excavated north to south at the top of the spur at right angles to the first. Again the topsoil (3) was removed by machine to a depth of 0.1m. Further cleaning and excavation by hand of the topsoil (4) revealed the surface of the natural subsoil at a depth of between 0.15 and 0.2m below the ground surface. No archaeological features or deposits were revealed in this trench.

3.6 The radiocarbon date obtained from the lower fill of the enclosure ditch places the enclosure in the Late Iron Age. Although cropmark enclosures are a not uncommon form of monument (some 550 are known from Shropshire) only a handful have been

subject to any degree of archaeological excavation, and of these not all have provided any dating evidence. Most of the excavated enclosures have been rectilinear in form, and these have given dates ranging from the Middle Iron Age through to the Roman periods. A D-shaped enclosure at Llynclys also produced ceramic finds of Middle Iron Age through to early Roman date. The enclosure at Norton is the first enclosure of oval form that has been excavated, and so the radiocarbon date is a very useful addition to the limited range of dates available from these monuments. As discussed in the introduction, the enclosures are generally thought to represent farmsteads, occupied by perhaps one or two extended family groups (depending on their size). When finds have been recovered from these sites, they tend to support this interpretation, although small scale industrial activity in the form of iron smithying is sometimes found and at one site at Duncote, near Wroxeter, pottery production was associated with one of the later phases of occupation of a Roman enclosure. Finds from Iron Age sites in the region are few, and the lack of finds from the excavations at Norton, though not unexpected, unfortunately does not help with understanding the status or nature of the enclosure, although again it is likely to represent an agricultural settlement.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AOD	Above Ordnance Datum
BGS	British Geological Survey
CMHTS	Central Marches Historic Towns Survey
HER	County Historic Environment Record, Shirehall, Shrewsbury
MMLPS	Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Scheme
OS	Ordnance Survey
RCHME	Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England
SA	Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
SCAS	Shropshire Council Archaeology Service
SNS	Shropshire News Sheet, Shropshire Archaeological Society
SUERC	Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre AMS Facility
SWT	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
TSAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society
WHAG	Whitchurch History & Archaeology Group

Appendix 1: RADIOCARBON DATING CERTIFICATE SUERC-54998

Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre

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RADIOCARBON DATING CERTIFICATE

12 September 2014

Laboratory Code	SUERC-54998 (GU34902)
Submitter	Hugh Hannaford Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council Shirehall Abbey Foregate Shrewsbury, SY2 6ND
Site Reference	Norton, nr Ellesmere, Shropshire
Sample Reference	NN14-1008-Sample 5
Material	Charcoal
$\delta^{13}C$ relative to VPDB	-28.9 ‰
Radiocarbon Age BP	2101 ± 37

N.B. The above ^{14}C age is quoted in conventional years BP (before 1950 AD). The error, which is expressed at the one sigma level of confidence, includes components from the counting statistics on the sample, modern reference standard and blank and the random machine error.

The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration program (OxCal4).

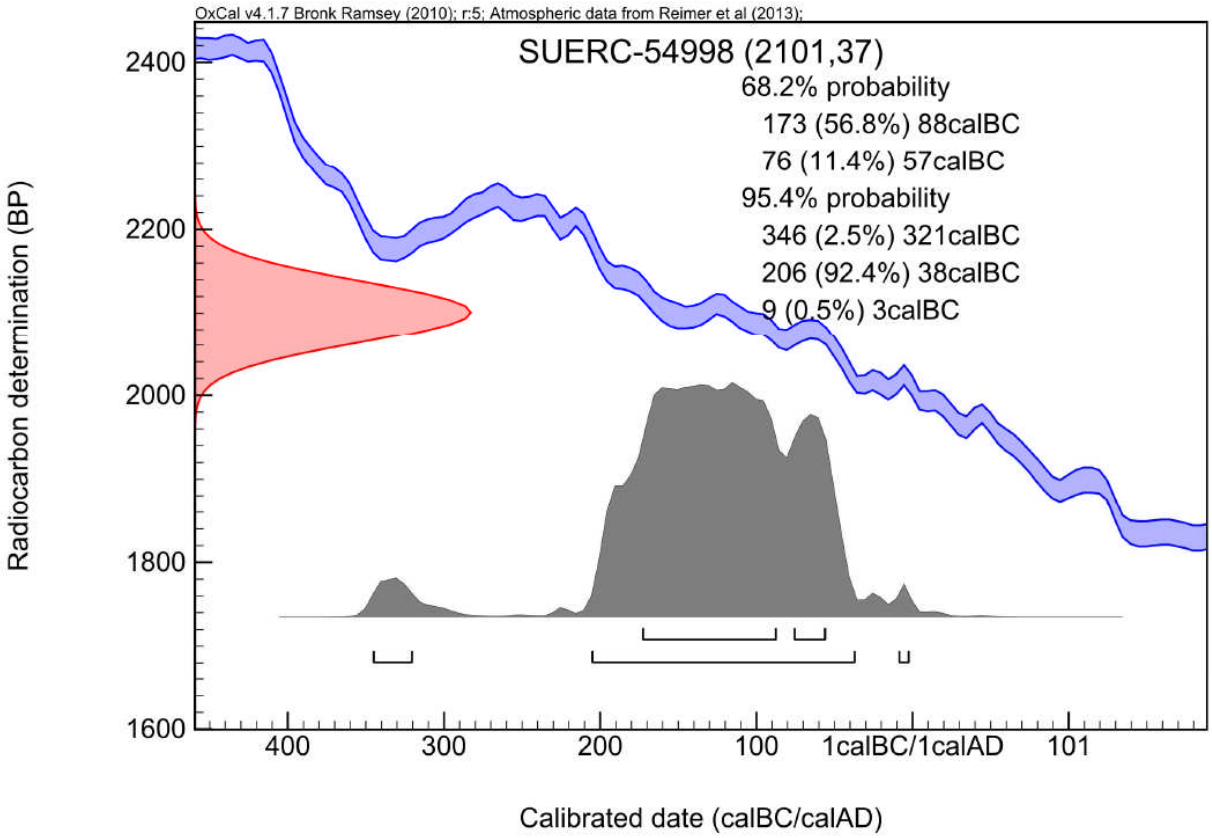
Samples with a SUERC coding are measured at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre AMS Facility and should be quoted as such in any reports within the scientific literature. Any questions directed to the Radiocarbon Laboratory should also quote the GU coding given in parentheses after the SUERC code. The contact details for the laboratory are email g.cook@suerc.gla.ac.uk or telephone 01355 270136 direct line.

Conventional age and calibration age ranges calculated by :- N. Rutt Date :- 12/09/2014

Checked and signed off by :- P. Naysmith Date :- 12/09/2014

University of Glasgow

Calibration Plot



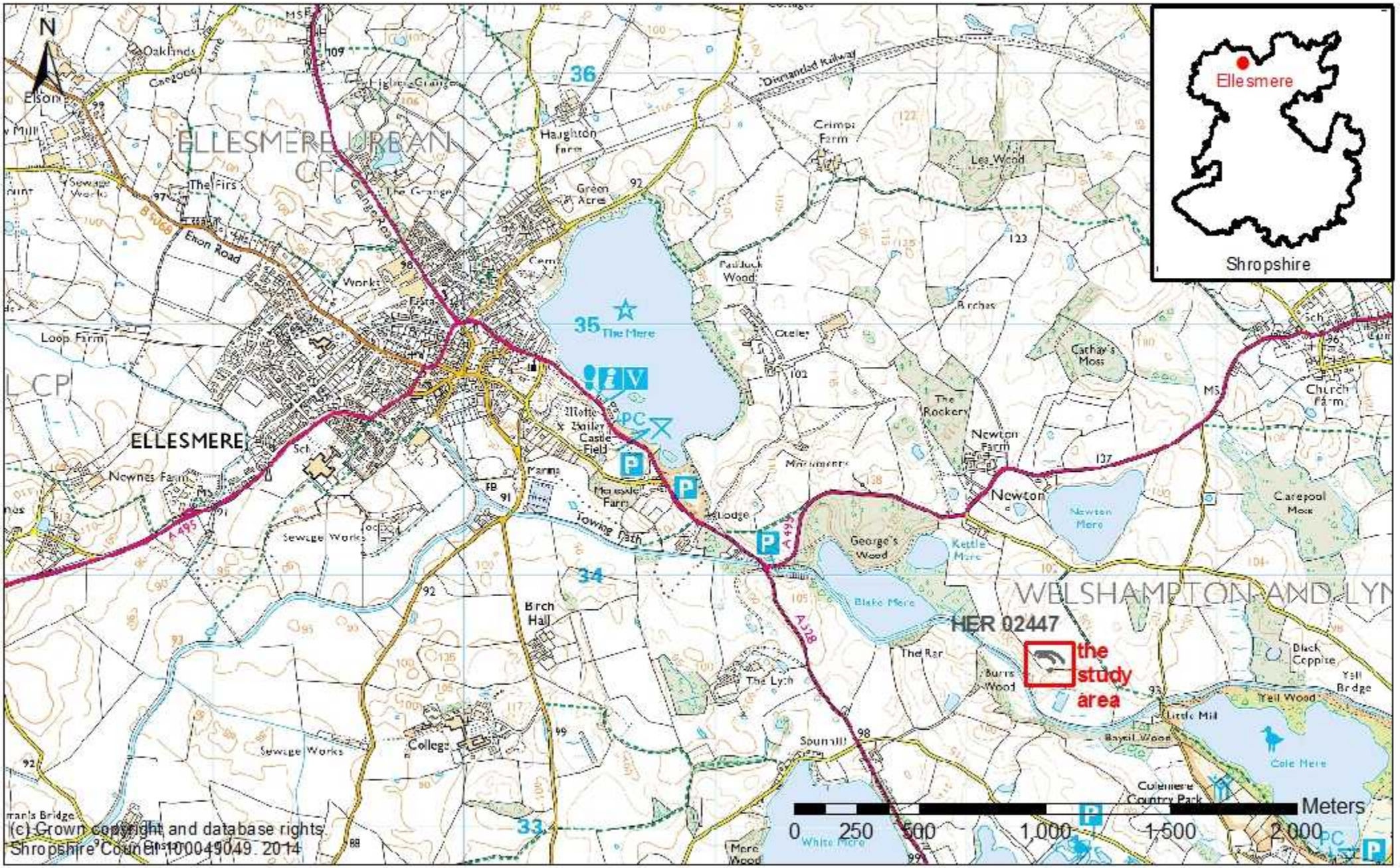


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Figure 1: The location of the study area

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1:20,000

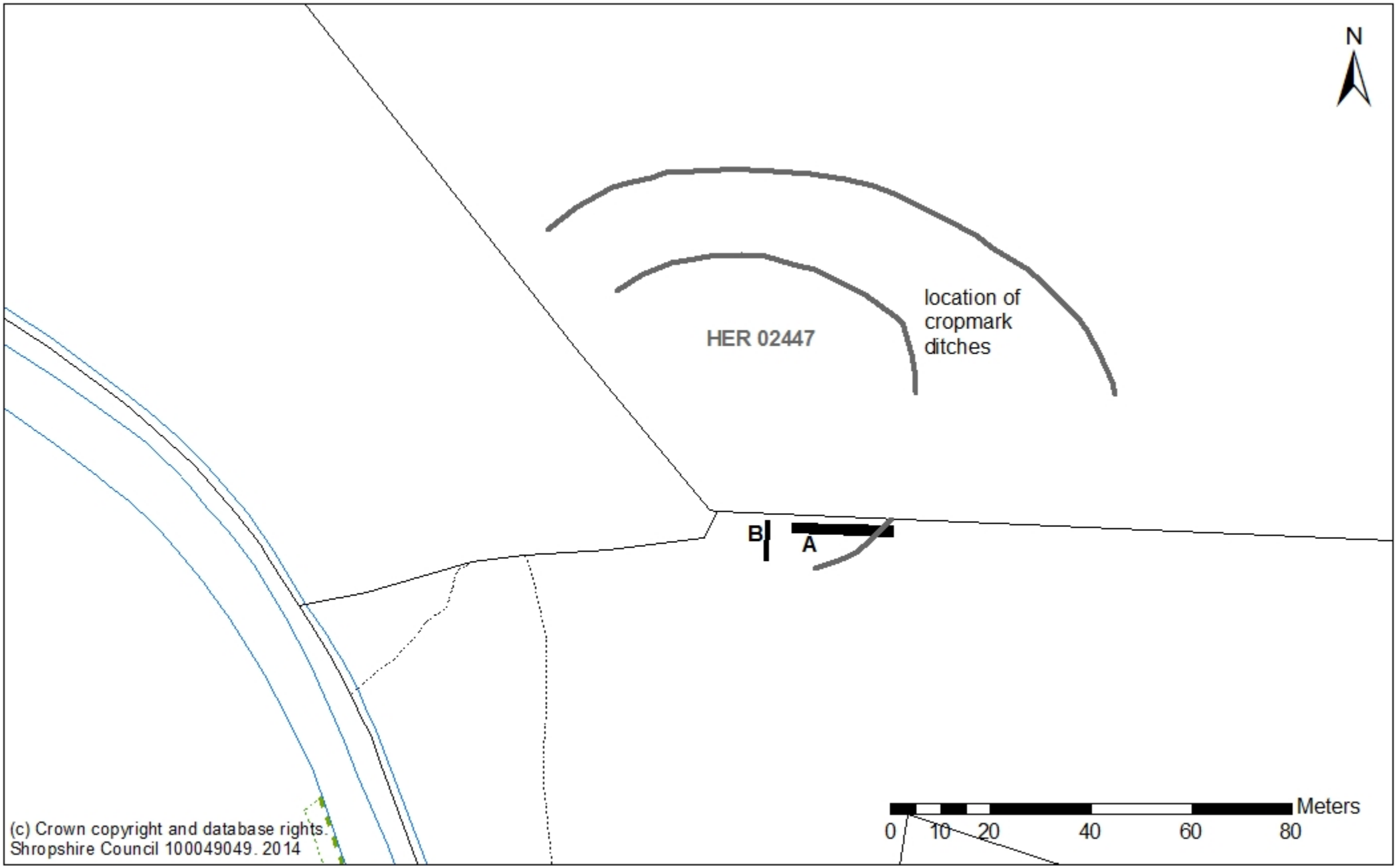

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Figure 2: The location of the cropmark enclosure and the excavation trenches (A & B)

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1:1,000

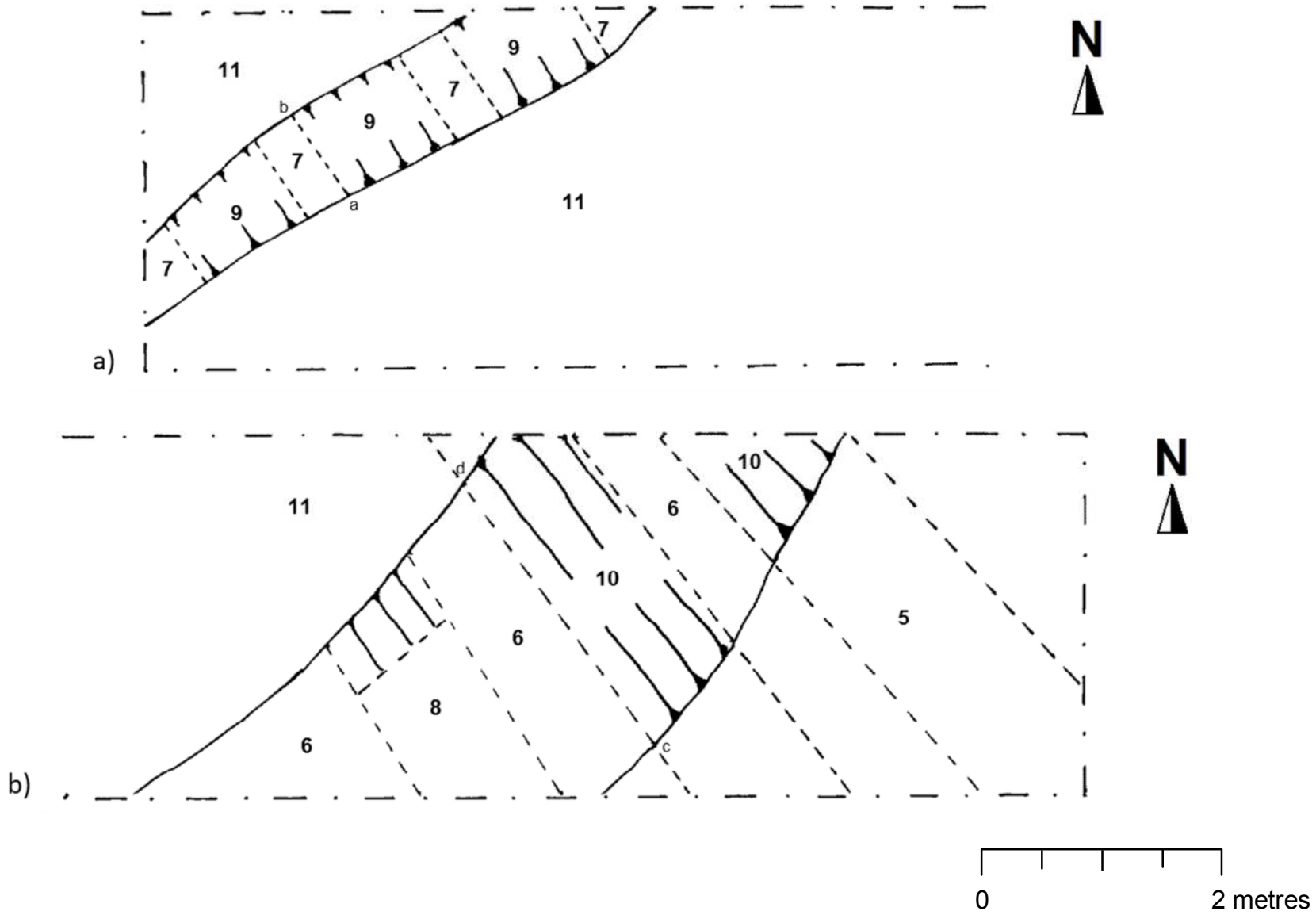

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Figure 3: Trench A, a) plan of gulley (9) at the W end of the trench; b) plan of ditch (10) at the E end; 1:50 scale

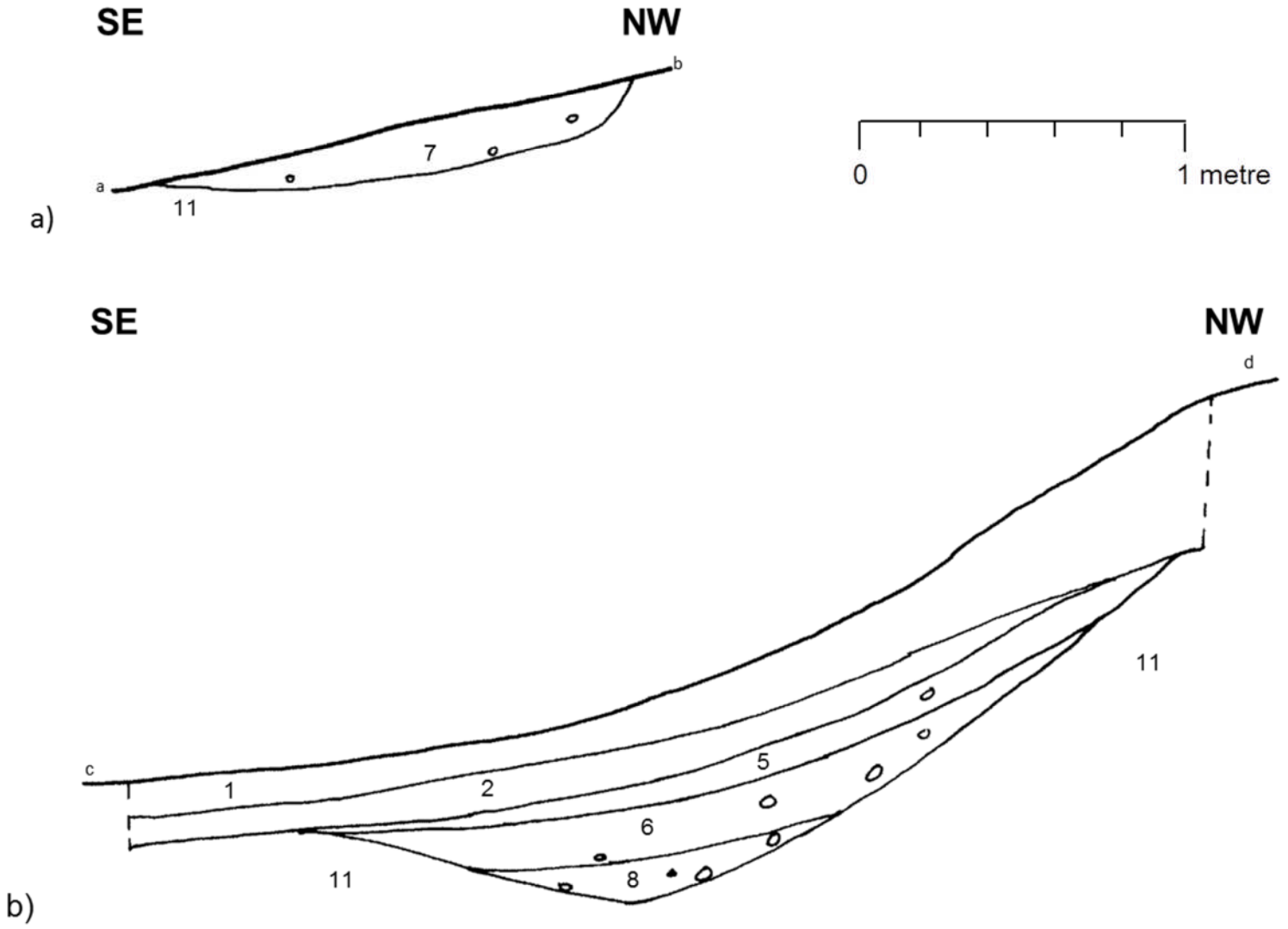

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Figure 4: a) Section across gulley (9); b) section across ditch (10); for locations see Figure 3, a-b & c-d; 1:20 scale

Photo 1: Gulley 9 in trench A, looking E, scale bars 2m & 1m

Photo 2: Ditch 10 in trench A, looking W, scale bars 2m, 1m & 0.5m

Photo 3: Section across ditch 10, scale bars 2m & 0.5m

Photo 4: Graham, Rosemary, Onno (volunteers) & Charlotte (SCAS)

Photo 5: Charlotte, Paul & Rosie

Photo 6: Tim, Irene, & Liz (foreground), Charlotte & Alan (background)

Photo 7 Irene, Charlotte, Graham & Ryan

Some of the project participants

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