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ARCHAEOLOGY

**Archaeological evaluation on Spooner's Moor,
Exmoor, Somerset**



on behalf of
Exmoor National Park Authority

Report No. 17-01

Project No. 1210

January 2017



OAKFORD ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeological Groundworks and Historic Buildings

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Oakford Archaeology on Spooner's Moor, Exmoor, Somerset (SS 7792 3740), during October 2014. The work comprised the excavation of a single trench across the remains of a suspected Bronze Age burnt mound previously identified through walk-over and geophysical survey.

Excavation revealed a dense, black spread of heat affected stone and charcoal, which appears to represent in situ burnt mound material. This has been radiocarbon dated to the early to mid Bronze Age.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared for Exmoor National Park Authority and sets out the results of an archaeological evaluation undertaken by Oakford Archaeology (OA) in October 2014 on Spooner's Moor, Exmoor, Somerset (SS 7792 3740). The work is part of the Exmoor Mires Project and was commissioned by the Historic Environment Officer (HEO) for the Exmoor Mires Project (EMP).

An earthwork, measuring *c.* 14.5m long, 10m wide and 0.3-0.6m high and situated adjacent to an incised stream near its confluence with the Great Woolcombe, had been identified by walk-over survey in advance of mire restoration work in 2013. A subsequent geophysical survey (Chris Carey 2014) revealed a major magnetic anomaly suggesting the extant earthwork was composed of heated material. This, combined with an apparent 'horse-shoe' morphology and its location next to a stream, suggested that it was a prehistoric burnt mound.

1.1 The site

The site (Fig. 1) lies on the southern part of Exmoor, to the south of Simonsbath, and is situated adjacent to a small stream near its confluence with the Great Woolcombe. The area consists of open moorland and lies at *c.* 300m AOD. The underlying geology belongs to the Morte Slate Formation, smooth grey or purple slates formed approximately 375-365 million years ago in the Devonian period, and gives rise to deposits of clay, silt, sand and gravel overlain by peat (BGS).

1.2 Archaeological and historical background

The mound lies in an area where evidence for prehistoric activity has been previously identified, in particular to the west and south of the site. This includes the remains of Bronze Age barrows on the ridge to the south, while surface artefact collection to the west, along the side of a track has recorded a small concentration of prehistoric worked flint (Bray *pers. comm.*).

1.3 Burnt mounds

The evidence, distribution and interpretation of burnt mounds have been fully discussed in Wilson-North¹ and only a brief summary will be given here.

Burnt mounds have been identified in lowland and highland locations across the British Isles,² and although some burnt mounds have been radiocarbon dated to the late Neolithic most

¹ Wilson-North 2011.

² Williams 1987.

date to the Bronze Age. While excavations have revealed the principal features of burnt mounds, the mound itself which consists of burnt stones interspersed with charcoal and ash, a hearth for heating stones, and a water-tight trough or pit within close proximity to a source of water, no conclusive evidence regarding their purpose has so far been identified.

Although some of the burnt mounds discovered in the Northern Isles are associated with settlements, in England they are mostly solitary sites which has led to the suggestion that they were used for special activities undertaken at a distance from contemporary settlements, or visited by mobile groups as part of a seasonal round where different areas and resources were exploited at various times of the year.³ Evidence from excavations would suggest differing or even multiple functions for individual 'burnt mound' sites: sweat lodges, cooking places, breweries, tanneries, dying places.

No other burnt mounds have been identified in the vicinity, and there are no known Bronze Age settlements sites in the area. The only other burnt mound, identified in 2009 on Brendan Common, lies *c.* 6.5km to the north.

2. AIMS

The general aim of the archaeological evaluation was to establish the presence or absence, character, extent, depth and date of a suspected prehistoric burnt mound.

More specific aims of the project were to acquire bulk samples suitable for palaeo-environmental analysis and scientific dating, as well as to identify palaeosoils and other sediments sealed by the mound which are suitable for sampling and analysis as part of a different Exmoor Mires Project case study focussed on geo-archaeological questions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The work was undertaken in accordance with a brief provided by the HEO EMP in an e-mail (dated 14-08-2014) and a subsequent project design prepared by Oakford Archaeology (2014), submitted to and approved by the HEO EMP prior to commencement on site. This document is included as Appendix 1.

The work comprised the excavation of a single trench totalling 6.2m in length and 1m wide. This was positioned to provide a sample of a suspected prehistoric burnt mound. The trench position was agreed with the HEO EMP prior to commencement on site. The position of trench as excavated is shown on Fig.2.

Hand excavation was undertaken and topsoil and underlying deposits were removed to the level of either natural subsoil, or the top of archaeological deposits (whichever was higher). Areas of archaeological survival were then cleaned, investigated and recorded.

The standard OA recording system was employed. Stratigraphic information was recorded on *pro-forma* context record sheets and individual trench recording forms, plans and sections for each trench were drawn at a scale of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate and a detailed digital photographic record was made. Registers were maintained for photographs, drawings and context sheets on *pro forma* sheets.

³ Topping 2011.

4. RESULTS

Relevant detailed plans and sections are included as Fig 3 and context descriptions for the trench are set out in Appendix 2.

4.1 Trench 1 (Detailed plan and section Fig. 3, Plates 1-4)

The burnt mound consists of a well preserved horseshoe or ‘u’-shaped earthwork, some 14.5m across from west to east and 10m wide from north to south. It is on average c.0.3m high but at its highest reaches some 0.6m. The mound is covered by turf and long grass and apparently undisturbed. Geophysical survey has indicated that the earthwork is composed of burnt, ex situ material spread around a ‘trough’ (Carey 2014).

The trench was located on the eastern edge of the mound, measuring 6.2m x 1m. It was orientated approximately NW-SW and was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.85m.

A layer of light yellowish white clay (104), identified underneath the burnt mound, was interpreted as a buried soil horizon. This was 0.14m thick and in turn overlain by a 0.02m thick mid brown clay (110), interpreted as a scorched turf line. It was clear from the excavation that the burnt mound material overlay the pre-existing ground surface. Deposit (103) represents the body of the burnt mound, and consisted of a single layer, up to c. 0.35m thick, of charcoal rich, black clayey silts with about 45% small burnt shale and quartz. The deposit appeared homogeneous and no individual dumping episodes were identified. This produced radiocarbon date in the early to mid Bronze Age of 2138-2386 cal BC (SUERC-56652, 3804±32 BP at 95.4% probability). The overlying deposit (102), c. 0.14m thick, comprised a heavily root disturbed black clayey silt with frequent charcoal flecks and about 20% small burnt shale and quartz. This was in turn overlain along the southern edge by 0.02-0.04m thick mid grey silty clay deposit (101) with rare burnt stone fragments. This interface may represent a trample zone caused by the action of disposing of the used burnt stones. The site was sealed by dark greyish black peat topsoil (100), 0.07-0.27m thick, with about 5% burnt quartz and shale.

To the south of the mound a small stream had incised into the shale bedrock (105) and the deposits (106-9) filling it are likely to relate to a later period, when the mound had been abandoned and its constituent parts were being eroded and redeposited in the stream channel.

5. PALAEOENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

by Ellen Simmons

5.1 Introduction

Flotation samples were taken from the burnt mound which was revealed during archaeological excavations carried out at Spooner’s Moor, Exmoor, Somerset. The flotation samples were assessed in order to determine the concentration, diversity, state of preservation and suitability for use in radiocarbon dating, of any archaeobotanical material present. A further aim of this assessment was to evaluate the potential of this material to provide evidence for the function of the contexts, the economy of the site or for the nature of the local environment.

Recovery, processing and laboratory methods

The flotation samples were processed for charred plant remains and wood charcoal by GeoFlo Southwest Geophysical and Flotation Services using a water separation machine.

Floating material was collected in a 250µm mesh, and the remaining heavy residue retained in a 1mm mesh. The flots and heavy residues were air dried and the residue from burnt mound context 103 was re-floated in order to maximise the recovery of charred material from this deposit.

The samples were assessed in accordance with Historic England guidelines for environmental archaeology assessments (Jones, 2011). A preliminary assessment of the samples was made by scanning under a stereo-binocular microscope (x10 - x65) and recording the abundance of the main classes of material present. Identification of plant material was carried out by comparison with material in the author's own reference collection and various reference works (e.g. Cappers *et al*, 2006). Plant nomenclature follows Stace (2010). The composition of the samples is recorded below in table 1.

Preservation

High proportions of intrusive roots were present in the sample. This indicates an increased likelihood that some charred material present in these samples may be intrusive.

No charred plant remains were present in the samples. Wood charcoal fragments were present in exceptionally high density in burnt mound deposit 103. Preservation of wood charcoal fragments overall was good, with little indication of mineralisation or vitrification.

5.2 Charcoal

The sample from burnt mound context 103 contained an exceptionally high density of thousands of wood charcoal fragments greater than 2mm in size. Predominantly ring porous taxa were represented, although a small proportion of the fragments were of diffuse porous taxa. Preliminary examination of the charcoal assemblage indicates that a majority of the fragments appeared to be of oak (*Quercus* sp.), although further analysis of the wood charcoal assemblage using high power microscopy would be necessary in order to confirm the full range of taxa represented. No roundwood or wood charcoal with strong ring curvatures was noted during preliminary scanning indicating the use of predominantly mature wood rather than twigs and smaller branches. Many of the probable oak charcoal fragments had very closely spaced growth rings indicating slow growing timber such as that present in mature woodland where light levels are restricted. Narrow growth rings may also result from pollarding, where leaves are cut for use as fodder. Detailed examination of the growth ring pattern present in the charcoal fragments would be necessary in order to investigate these possibilities.

5.3 Discussion and recommendations for further work

Excavated burnt mounds are relatively uncommon in Somerset (Best *et al* 2007, 71). Where analysis has been carried out on charcoal assemblages from burnt mounds, such as for a number of the numerous burnt mounds that have been excavated in the Midlands and Eastern England (Murphy 2001, 13), this generally indicates the utilisation of local woodland resources for fuel. As burnt mounds are frequently located in the vicinity of water sources, these assemblages often include significant proportions of alder. Wood charcoal from contexts associated with a burnt mound excavated at Burlescombe in Devon included alder, oak, hazel, birch and Pomoideae, with oak and alder likely representing the most important fuels (Best *et al* 2007, 22 & 27). The probable predominance of slow grown oak in the wood charcoal assemblage from the burnt mound excavated at Spooner's Moor, therefore suggests the proximity of mature oak woodland. Palynological evidence from Exmoor indicates the presence of oak-hazel and alder woodland during the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age,

with increasing clearance from the Middle Bronze Age onwards (Wilkinson and Straker 2007, 69; Straker 2007, 114). Further analysis of the wood charcoal assemblage from Spooner's Moor would be likely to provide additional information concerning local woodland that would complement that available from palynological studies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The discovery and investigation of a second burnt mound is a significant find for Exmoor. The initial interpretation as a burnt mound has been confirmed by the evaluation, although due to the location and limited nature of the works little can be said about the wider function of the burnt mound.

The burnt mound lies away from known contemporary prehistoric settlement although a number of barrows lie within 1km. It is unclear if the topography was relevant to the siting of the mound. The mound is located at the bottom of a remote valley at the intersection between the Great Woolcombe and a small stream. The views are obstructed to the north, south, east and west by the valley sides, although some views southeast to the distant hills are possible. The immediate area surrounding the mound has been part of an earlier walk-over survey and has not revealed other archaeological features (Bray *pers. comm.*).

The small size of the burnt shale and quartz fragments suggests that the material is derived from refuse disposal activity rather than *in situ* burning. Moreover, the deposits underneath the burnt mound do not show any sign of burning. The area in which the stone heating activity took place has not been identified but is likely to have been close to the burnt mound. Although no separate dumping or burning events have been identified, the large dimensions of the mound suggest that activity at the site continued over a considerable period.

The lack of finds seems to be typical of this kind of feature, although the preservation of organic materials may be affected by soil conditions.

7. PROJECT ARCHIVE

The site records have been compiled into a fully integrated site archive which is currently held at Oakford Archaeology's offices under project number 1210, pending deposition with the ADS. Details of the evaluation, including a pdf copy of the final report will be submitted to the on-line archaeological database OASIS (oakforda1-197176).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was commissioned by Exmoor National Park Authority and was administered and monitored on their behalf by Lee Bray (ENPA) and Chris Carey (University of Brighton). The fieldwork was carried out by Marc Steinmetzer and Richard Stevenson and the illustrations for the report were prepared by Marc Steinmetzer and Richard Stevenson. The environmental samples were collected by Chris Carey.

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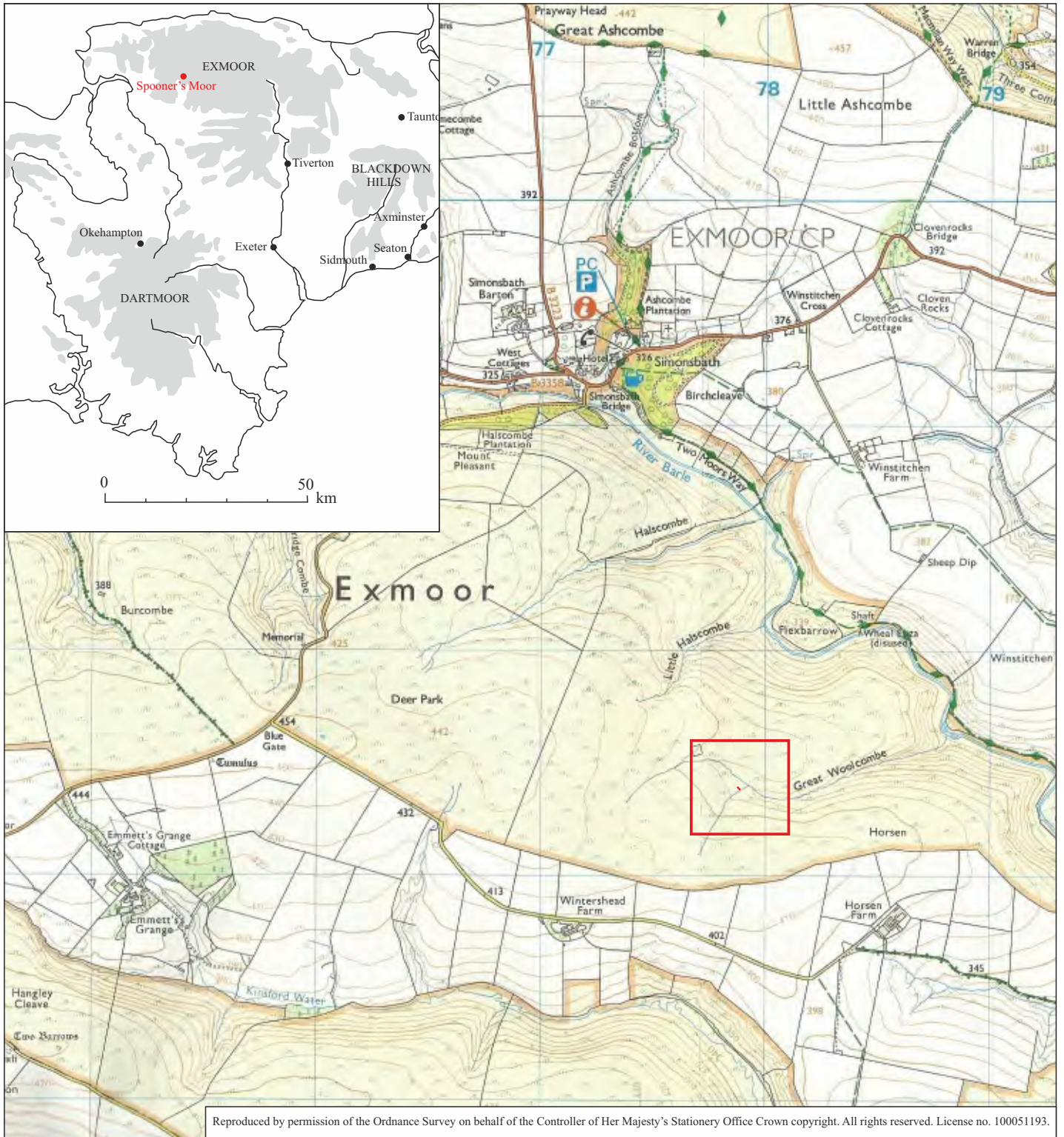


Fig. 1 Location of site.

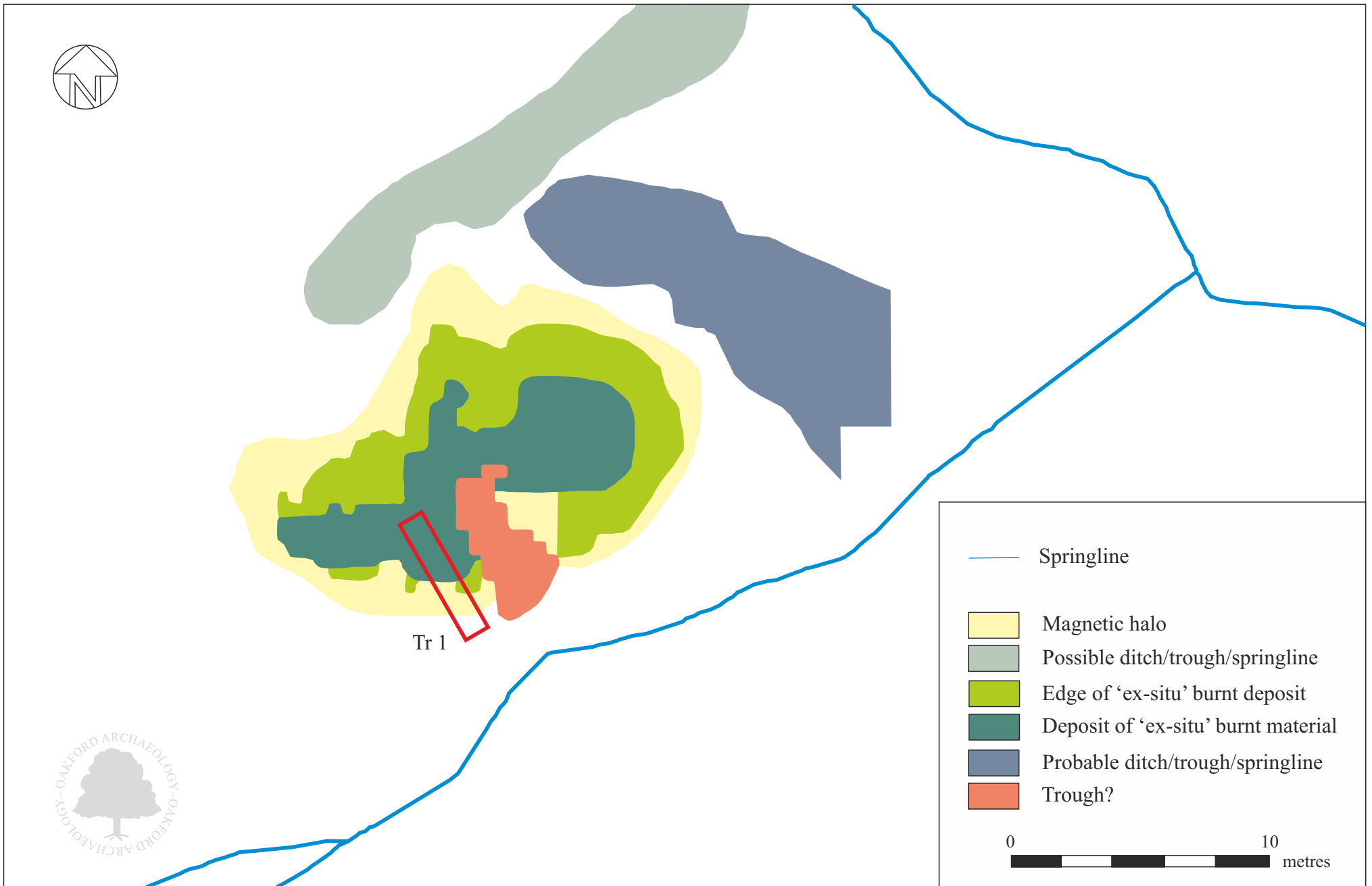


Fig. 2 Plan showing summary results of geophysical survey and location of trench (© Carey Consulting).

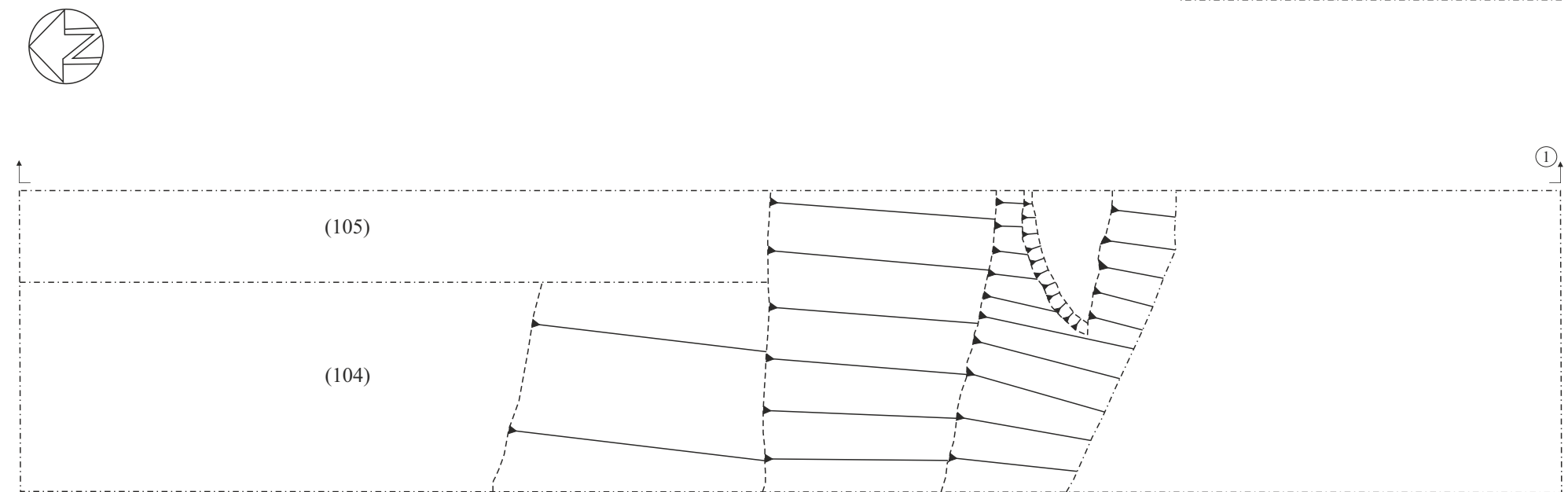
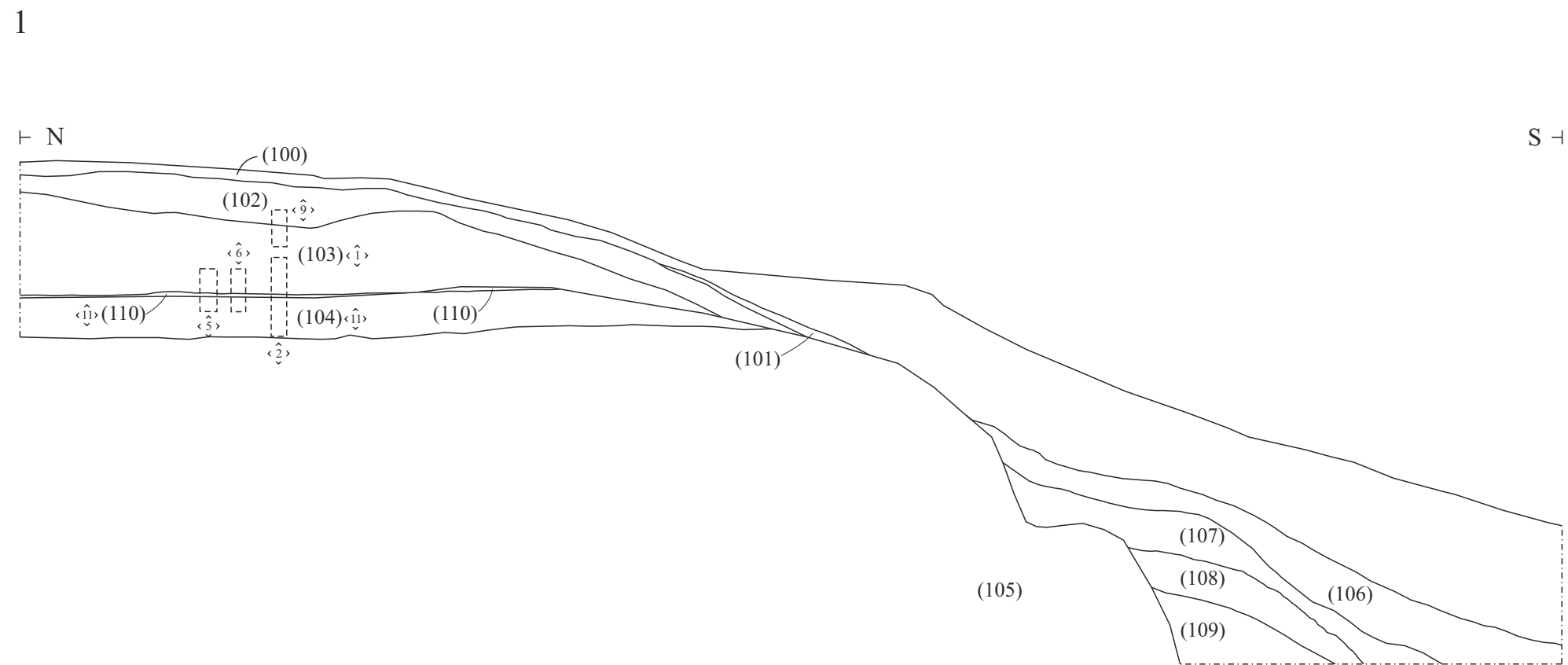


Fig. 3 Section and plan of burnt mound showing location of samples..



Pl. 1 General view of trench showing extant earthwork in foreground. Looking northwest.



Pl. 2 General view of trench looking towards Great Woolcombe stream. Looking northeast.



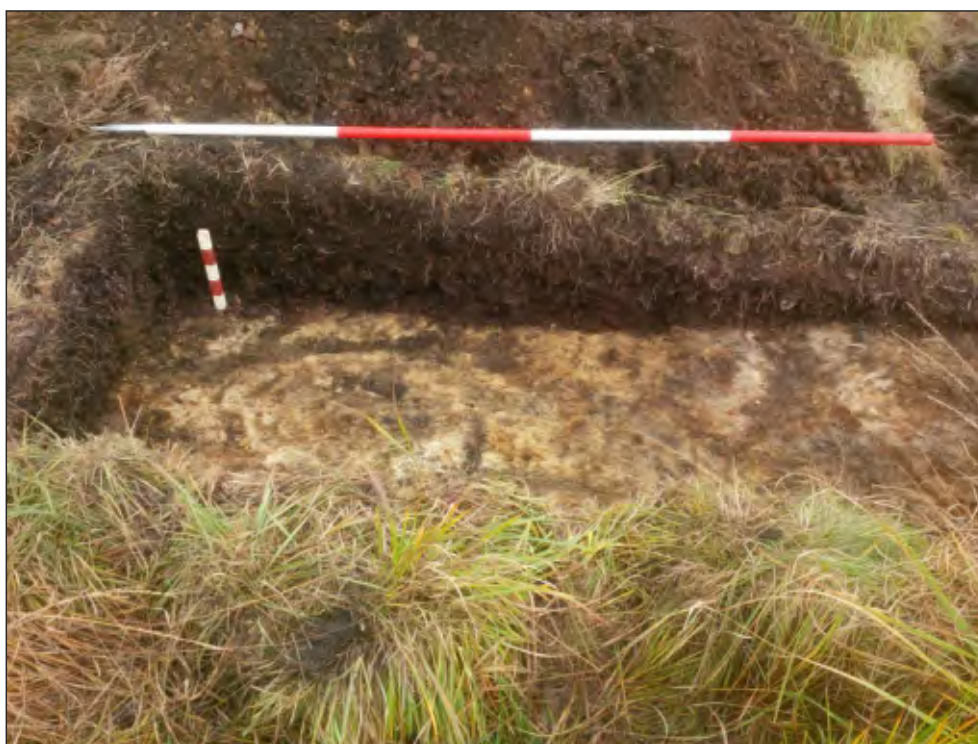
Pl. 3 General view of burnt mound material (103) following removal of root disturbed deposit (102). 0.25m and 1m scales. Looking northwest.



Pl. 4 Close-up of burnt mound material (103). 0.25m and 1m scales. Looking west.



Pl. 5 General view of trench after removal of burnt mound material (103) showing top of buried landsurface (104). 0.25m and 2m scales. Looking northwest.



Pl. 6 Section through burnt mound showing top of buried landsurface (104). 0.25m and 2m scales. Looking east.



Pl. 7 Section through burnt mound showing buried landsurface (104). 0.5 and 2m scales. Looking east.



Pl. 8 Close-up of burnt mound showing mound material (103), parched grass (110) and buried landsurface (104). 0.5m scale. Looking east.



Pl. 9 Dr Chris Carey sampling the burnt mound and underlying deposits. Looking southeast.

Appendix 1:

Written Scheme of Investigation for
Archaeological works

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This document has been prepared by Oakford Archaeology (OA) for Exmoor National Park Authority and sets out the methodology to be employed during an archaeological evaluation at Lanacombe, Exmoor (SS 7792 3740). This document represents the 'Written Scheme of Investigation' for archaeological work undertaken as part of the Exmoor Mires Project. The work is required by the Historic Environment Officer (HEO) for the Exmoor Mires Project (EMP) on behalf of Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA).
- 1.2 Since 2013, the Exmoor Mires Project has been undertaking a major case study on Lanacombe aimed at the investigation of the Prehistoric landscapes of the area. A walk-over survey in advance of mire restoration work on Spooners has identified an elongated mound of material, measuring *c.* 16m x 5m x 1m, and situated adjacent to an incised stream near its confluence with the Great Woolcombe watercourse. Subsequent geophysical investigation has revealed a major geophysical anomaly coincident with the mound, suggesting it is composed of heated material. This, combined with an apparent 'horseshoe-shaped' morphology and its location adjacent to a stream, suggested an interpretation as a burnt mound of probably prehistoric date.

2. AIMS

- 2.1 The aim of the evaluation is to ground truth the geophysical results and characterise the make-up of the mound; to acquire bulk samples suitable for palaeo-environmental analysis and scientific dating; and to identify palaeosoils and other sediments which may be sealed by the mound and which are suitable for sampling and analysis as part of a different Exmoor Mires project case study focussed on geo-archaeological questions.

3. METHOD

- 3.1 The evaluation will comprise the hand-excavation of a single trench, *c.* 4m x 1m. The location of the trench will be surveyed and marked by the HEO prior to the start of excavation. During excavation, turf and spoil will be kept separately on a tarpaulin to facilitate backfilling and reinstatement of the site on completion of the work. All archaeological deposits will be stratigraphically excavated by hand down to natural subsoil.
- 3.2 Health and Safety requirements will be observed at all times by archaeological staff working on site. A risk assessment will be prepared prior to excavation, and when excavating personnel are not present, the trench will be surrounded by a clearly visible hazard tape barrier.
- 3.3 Initial cleaning, conservation, packaging and any stabilisation or longer term conservation measures will be undertaken in accordance with relevant professional guidance (including *Conservation guidelines No 1* (UKIC, 2001); *First Aid for Finds* (UKIC & RESCUE, 1997) and on advice provided by A Hopper-Bishop, Specialist Services Officer, RAM Museum, Exeter.

- 3.4 Should any human remains be exposed, these will initially be left *in situ*. If removal at either this or a later stage is deemed necessary, these will then be fully excavated and removed from the site in accordance with Ministry of Justice guidelines. If required, the necessary license will be obtained by OA on behalf of the client. Any remains will be excavated in accordance with Institute of Field Archaeologist Technical Paper No. 13 (McKinley and Roberts 1993). Where appropriate bulk samples will be collected.
- 3.5 Should items be exposed that fall within the scope of the Treasure Act 1996, then these will be removed to a safe place and reported to the local coroner. Where removal cannot be effected on the same working day as the discovery, suitable security measures will be taken to protect the finds from theft.
- 3.6 The HEO will be informed of the start of the project, and will monitor progress throughout on behalf of the planning authority and will wish to inspect the works in progress. A date of completion of all archaeological site work will be confirmed with the HEO and the timescale of the completion of items under section 5 will run from that date.

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING

- 4.1 Standard OA recording and sampling procedures will be employed, consisting of:
- (i) standardised single context record sheets; survey drawings, plans and sections at scales 1:10, 1:20, 1:50 as appropriate;
 - (ii) colour digital photography;
 - (iii) survey and location of finds, deposits or archaeological features, using EDM surveying equipment and software where appropriate;
 - (iv) labelling and bagging of finds on site from all excavated levels. The retention and discard strategy will be agreed with the RAMM once all the finds have been cleaned. Post-1800 unstratified pottery may be discarded on site with a small sample retained for dating evidence as required.

5. REPORTING AND ARCHIVING

- 5.1 The reporting requirements will be agreed with the HEO on completion of fieldwork, and a draft digital copy, will be provided by 19th December 2014, although any scientific dating and other specialist reports may not be complete by this time. The summary report will contain the following elements as appropriate:
- location plan and overall site plans showing the positions of the trenches and the distribution of archaeological features within them, as well as copies of any relevant historic maps;
 - a written description of the exposed features and deposits and a discussion and interpretation of their character and significance in the context of the known history of the site;

- plans and sections at appropriate scales showing the exact location and character of significant archaeological deposits and features, including in relation to the plot of the geophysical survey, and of the layout (if available) of the remains found in the adjoining field to the north;
 - a selection of photographs illustrating the principal features and deposits found;
 - specialist assessments and reports as appropriate.
- 5.2 Two bound and illustrated hard colour copies, an unbound hard copy, as well as a digital copy in MS Word format and a .pdf version of the summary report will be produced and distributed to the HEO on completion of sitework within the timescale above. A copy of the report and .pdf version will also be deposited with the site archive.
- 5.3 An ordered and integrated site archive will be prepared with reference to *The Management of Archaeological Projects* (English Heritage, 1991 2nd edition) upon completion of the project.

The archive will consist of two elements, the artefactual and digital - the latter comprising all born-digital (data images, survey data, digital correspondence, site data collected digitally etc.) and digital copies of the primary site records and images.

The digital archive will be deposited with the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) within 12 months of the completion of site work, while the artefactual element will be deposited with the Museum of Somerset. The hardcopy of the archive will be offered to the Museum of Somerset and if not required will be disposed of by OA.

OA will notify the HEO upon the deposition of the digital archive with the ADS, and the deposition of the material (finds) archive with the Museum of Somerset.

- 5.4 A .pdf copy of the updated summary report will be submitted, together with the site details, to the national OASIS (Online Access to the Index of Archaeological investigationS) database within six months of the completion of site work.
- 5.5 A short report summarising the results of the project will be prepared for inclusion within the “round up” section of an appropriate national journal, if merited, within 12 months of the completion of site work.
- 5.6 Should particularly significant remains, finds and/or deposits be encountered, then these, because of their importance, are likely to merit wider publication in line with government planning guidance. If such remains are encountered, the publication requirements – including any further analysis that may be necessary – will be confirmed with the HEO. OA will then implement publication in accordance with a timescale agreed with the HEO. This will be within 12 months of the completion of site work unless otherwise agreed in writing.

5.7 Any amendments to the method or timescale set out above will be agreed in writing with the HEO before implementation.

6. COPYRIGHT

6.1 OA shall retain full copyright of any commissioned reports, tender documents or other project documents, under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 with all rights reserved, excepting that it hereby provides an exclusive licence to the client for the use of such documents by the client in all matters directly relating to the project as described in this document.

7. PROJECT ORGANISATION

7.1 The project will be undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced archaeologists, in accordance with the Code of Conduct and relevant standards and guidance of the Institute for Archaeologists (*Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluation*, 1994, revised 2008, and *Standards and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief*, 1994, revised 2008), plus *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation* 1994, revised 2008). The project will be managed by Marc Steinmetzer MifA.

7.2 Any variations to this document shall be agreed with the HEO before they are carried out.

Health & Safety

7.3 All monitoring works within this scheme will be carried out in accordance with current *Safe Working Practices (The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974)*.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Specialists contributors and advisors

The expertise of the following specialists can be called upon if required:

Historic and archaeological research: Lucy Browne;

Bone artefact analysis: Ian Riddler;

Dating techniques: University of Waikato Radiocarbon Laboratory, NZ;

Charcoal identification: Dana Challinor;

Diatom analysis: Nigel Cameron (UCL);

Environmental data: AEA;

Faunal remains: Lorraine Higbee (Wessex);

Finds conservation: Alison Hopper-Bishop (Exeter Museums);

Human remains: Louise Loe (Oxford Archaeology), Charlotte Coles;

Lithic analysis: Dr. Linda Hurcombe (Exeter University);

Medieval and post-medieval finds: John Allan;

Metallurgy: Gill Juleff (Exeter University);

Numismatics: Norman Shiel (Exeter);

Petrology/geology: Roger Taylor (RAM Museum);

Plant remains: Julie Jones (Bristol);

Prehistoric pottery: Henrietta Quinnell (Exeter);

Roman finds: Paul Bidwell;
Others: Wessex Archaeology Specialist Services Team

MFR Steinmetzer
23 September 2014
WSI/OA1210/01

Appendix 2:

Context description by Trench

Table 1: Trench 1

Context No.	Depth (b.g.s.)	Description	Interpretation
100	0-0.27m	dark greyish black peat	Topsoil
101	0.1-0.14m	mid grey silty clay	Trample
102	0.07-0.22m	black clayey silt	Burnt mound material
103	0.18-0.42m	black clayey silt	Burnt mound material
104	0.44-0.56m	light yellowish white clay	Buried land surface
105	0.56m+	Shale bedrock	Natural subsoil
106	0.27-0.34m	Mid to dark greyish black peat	Stream infill
107	0.34-0.48m	Mid grey silty clay	Stream infill
108	0.48-0.63m	Dark brown clayey peat	Stream infill
109	0.63m+	Dark brown silty clay	Stream infill
110	0.42-0.44m	mid brown clay	Scorched turf line

Appendix 3:

Radiocarbon date

Calibration Plot

