

**BOOK OF DEER PROJECT  
EXCAVATIONS 2013  
ADEN PARK, MINTLAW  
ABERDEENSHIRE**



**- Archaeological Excavation**  
Carried out 2<sup>nd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013  
by  
**Murray Archaeological Services Ltd**



**Report No: MAS 2013-27**  
by  
H K Murray and J C Murray

H K Murray BA, PhD, MIFA, FSA Scot  
J C Murray BA, MIFA, FSA Scot, FMA  
Hill of Belnagoak, Methlick, Ellon, Aberdeenshire AB41 7JN  
Telephone: (01651) 806394 e-mail: cmurray@btinternet.com

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**Archaeological Excavation**

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**1. Background**

1.1 As part of the Book of Deer Project there have been a series of archaeological interventions to assess and identify any evidence that may indicate the original site and characteristics of the early medieval Monastery of Deer. In 2009 a desk-based assessment and field evaluation of the lower ground to the E of the Old Kirk was undertaken by Olivia Lelong on behalf of GUARD (Lelong 2011).

In 2011 (Murray & Murray 2011) and 2012 (Murray & Murray 2012), the Book of Deer Project contracted Murray Archaeological Services Ltd to undertake a further field evaluation of other areas of the village of Old Deer, developing upon the results of the earlier interventions.

At present there are no readily available areas within Old Deer for further excavation.

The Book of Deer Project have widened their remit to look at sites that might give some insight into the pattern of late prehistoric settlement into which Christianity

was introduced.

1.2 In 2013, Murray Archaeological Services Ltd was commissioned by the Book of Deer Project to assess the nature of a series of circular enclosures in woodland within Aden Park.

1.3 The excavation in woodland at Aden Country Park took place between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2013 with the assistance of local volunteers and members of the Book of Deer Project. We are grateful to Aberdeenshire Council for permission to excavate.

## 2. Documentary sources

2.1 The site was part of a group recorded for RCAHMS by Iain Fraser in 1996 as:  
*'A group of 27 circular enclosures or possible huts lie in a plantation 40m N of the former stables of Aden House, now the North East of Scotland Agricultural Heritage Centre, between NJ 9805 4798 and NJ 9811 4819.'*

RCAHMS Number **NJ94NE 88**

**NGR** NJ 9808 4804.

### 2.2

*1870 25" Ordnance survey. Aberdeen sheet xxi.4 (Old Deer) 1870, published 1873.*  
Area of site shown as mixed woodland.

*1899 Ordnance Survey Aberdeenshire 021.04. 1899, published 1902.*  
Area of site shown as woodland. Mineral well marked.

*1957 Ordnance Survey 1:25000 NJ94.*  
Area of site shown as woodland. Well marked (W).

## 3. The Excavation

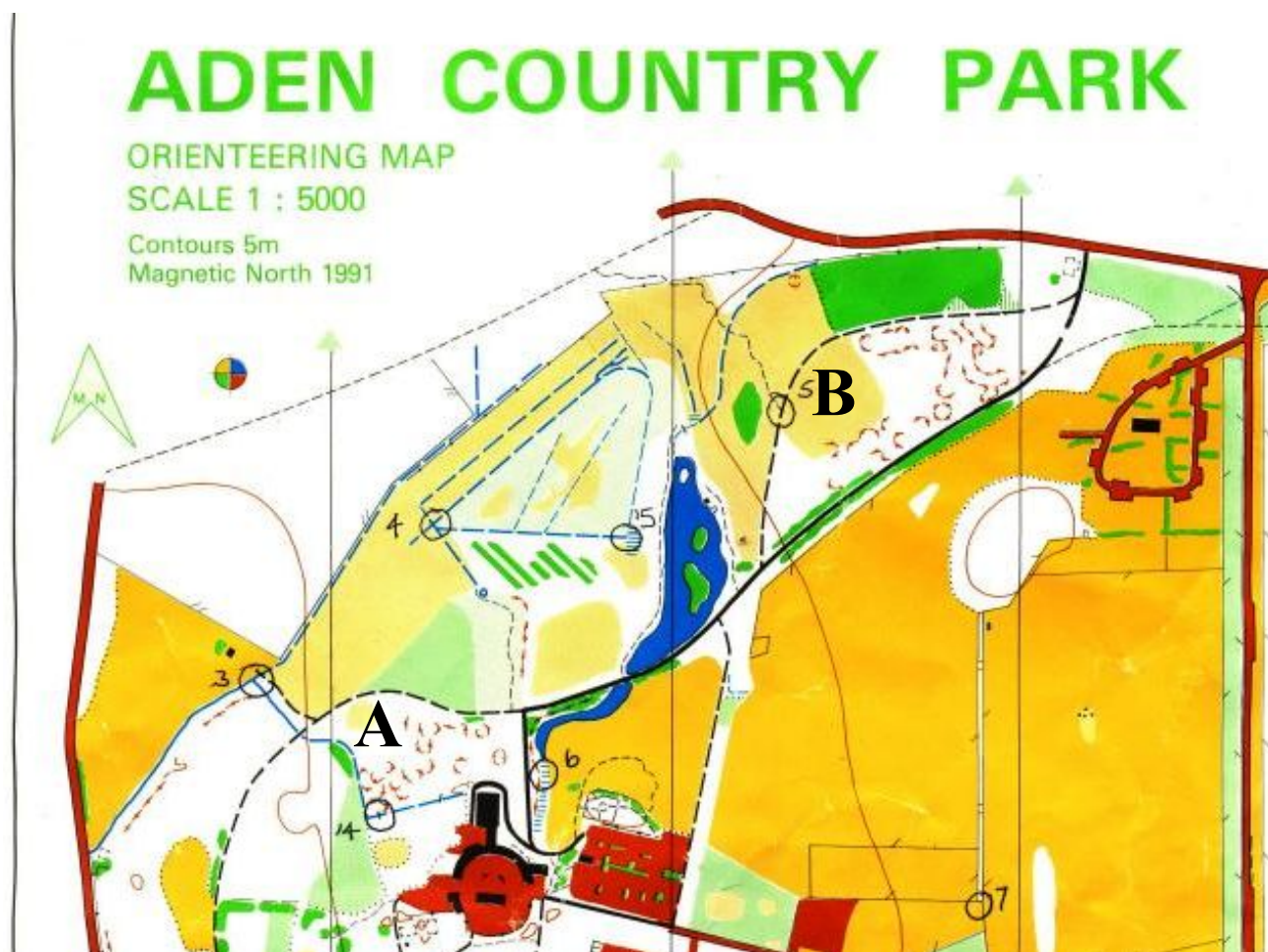
### 3.1 The Site

Parish: Old Deer

GPS: 398062, 848083 (Centred on circle A- see Illus 12)

Part of the area noted by Fraser was within a conifer wood which lies between c 100m and 180m N and NW of the Aden stables block. This was the focus of the work in 2013.

However Fraser's recorded features extended S of this, into the area that has been cleared of trees and landscaped as a new arboretum in the last 5 years. Any features in this area would have been destroyed. The former existence of circular features within the landscaped area was corroborated by a number of visitors to the site and is shown on an orienteering map dated 1991 (Illus 1: A).



**Illus 1** Scan of orienteering map surveyed and drawn by Neil McLean for Banff and Buchan District Council. Letters A and B have been added to indicate A: the position of the 2013 site and the S extension of this complex, since removed by landscaping and B: Area not surveyed in 2013, near caravan park.

A further area of earthworks, also noted on the orienteering map (Illus 1: B), lies to the E centered on 398400,848300 near to the caravan park. This was not surveyed in 2013 but a quick walkover showed that there are at least some very similar, although larger, circular features in this area. It is within mature but fairly open woodland.

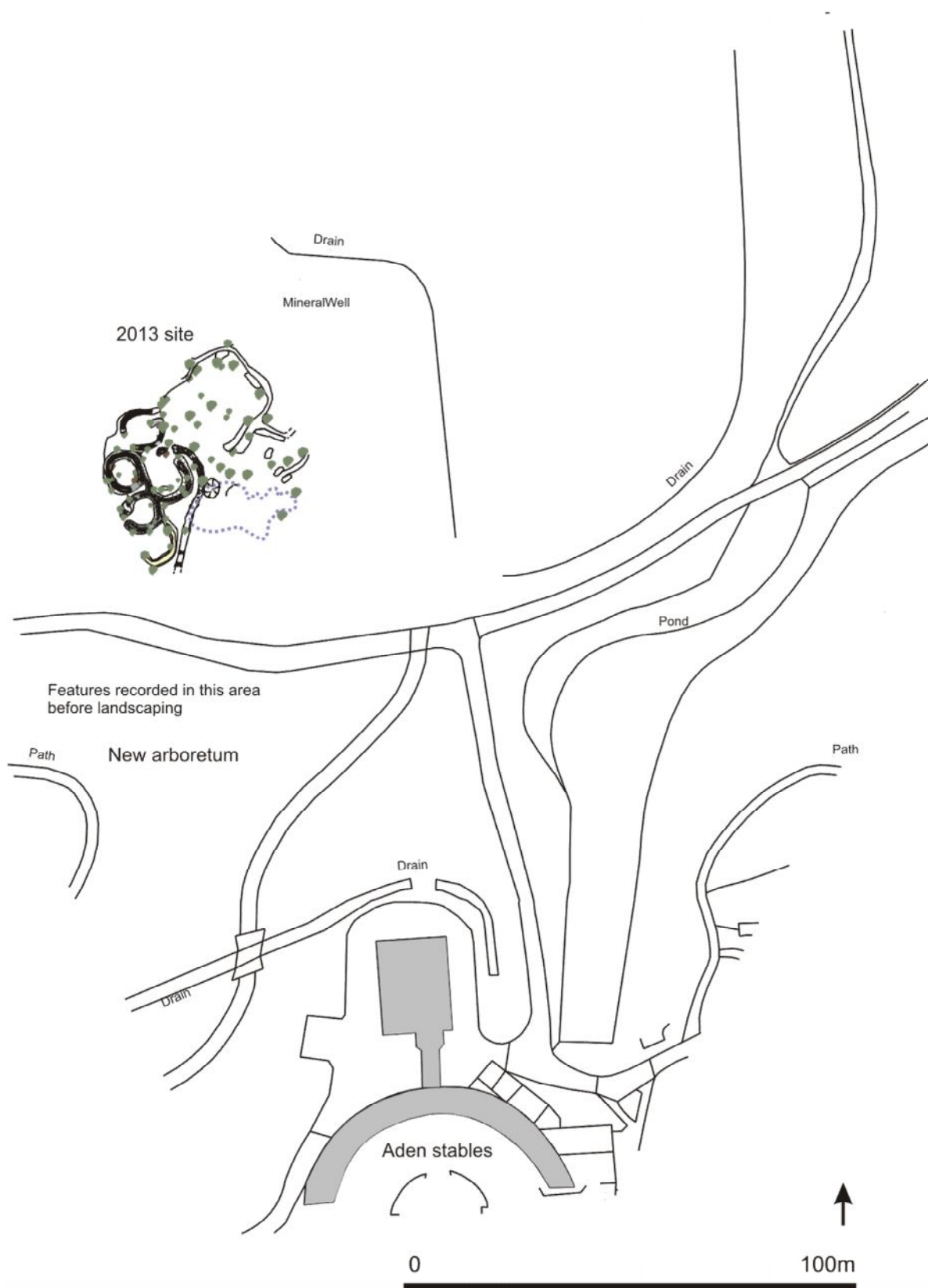


**Illus 2 One of the features near caravan park (Bright green moss shows line of bank)**

### **3.2 Methodology**

The project had two objectives:

- To plan the features in the selected area of woodland and to determine their nature as far as possible.
- To excavate sections across those features which appeared to be of possible archaeological importance.



**Illus 3** Location of 2013 site

## Survey

The area of woodland N of the path on the N side of the arboretum and E as far as the path to the mineral well was walked and surveyed in detail.

Due to the dense tree cover GPS signals were variable so a base line was set up extending outwith the woodland and the survey was conducted with offsets from the base line. Both ends of the base line were tied in by both GPS and traditional survey methods.

Spot GPS locations were recorded on each of the main features with between 7 and 8 satellites in view. All GPS mapping was done with a Magellan Mobile Mapper CX.

The survey identified and plotted four categories of features:

- Drainage channels and earth banks cast up from the dug channels (Illus 4). These drained down to the wet ground to the N. In some instances they had cut across earlier features. These were considered to be relatively recent features and no further action was taken.



**Illus 4 Drainage gullies and upcast earth banks**

- An area of dumping of rubbish (centred on 398088,848081)

which is believed to have come from Aden House (pers comm park staff and walkers). This is roughly outlined on Illus 12 but is not described in detail and no further action was undertaken in this area. Eroded areas yielded bottles and china of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century date. In one place it appeared that there had been an unofficial 'excavation' for bottles etc (Illus 12, 23). Some of the rubbish overlapped the path (Feature F).

- A stone path (Illus 12: F). The surface of the path was predominantly covered by tree debris and pine needles/ leaf compost. This was partially cleared as part of the excavation and a narrow section cut through it to establish that it was a path rather than the remains of a wall. The section was rebuilt after recording. Some of the clearing of the path was undertaken by local schoolchildren as part of a series of school visits on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> October.
- Circular or curvilinear features with constructed banks (Illus 12: Features A-E). Limited excavation was undertaken to attempt to establish the nature of these features (see below).

### Excavation

- Two full sections were excavated across the enclosing bank of Feature B (Illus 12) and partial sections across the bank of Feature A. A 1metre wide section was excavated across the interior of Feature A and a small sondage 1 metre square cut in the interior of Feature B.
- Topsoil was removed in narrow sections across the enclosing banks of three other features (Illus 12: Features C, D, E) to determine the material of their construction
- A stone path (Illus 12: Feature F), which respected the line of Features C and D, was partially exposed and a narrow section excavated and then re-instated.

The sections were excavated by hand and backfilled after excavation.



All features were planned (Illus 12), photographed (Appendix 1) and recorded (Appendix 2).



**Illus 5 Photography in action- showing the difficulties of recording in the dense woodland (Photograph courtesy of Andrew Kellock)**

As a result of the very poor light levels below the trees it was decided to sieve all excavated earth to retrieve any additional finds. All artefacts were retained on site, labelled and bagged. They have been examined, sorted and catalogued during post-excavation work. 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century artefacts have not been retained.

### 3.3 Results

#### Feature A

*GPS:* 398062,848083

*Dimensions:* 5.5-6.5m internally (to base of bank slippage) 7.5-8.0m to crown of bank.

*Summary of results:* Circular feature enclosed by banks with SW entry,

1.30m wide. The topsoil (1) was excavated off sections of the bank in three places, revealing that it was formed of a very compact, stiff grey clay containing some small stones (5). The bank was 1.5-1.7m in width but this included wash down of the clay (7) on both sides.

A section 1m wide was cut across the interior of Feature A. The stratigraphy consisted of 40mm topsoil (1) over c100mm light brown sandy clay soil (3). This generally merged into a similar layer (8), 60-100mm thick with a few stones on the top of it. Clay wash from the bank (7) interleaved between 3 and 8 beside the bank. There was considerable root and mouse/vole disturbance of all layers.

A single flint flake (SF1) was found in the top of the clay (5) of the bank in section A1. All other finds were of late 19th- 20<sup>th</sup> century date and were from the interface between the topsoil (1) and the underlying layer (3). In general they comprised a fairly typical topsoil collection of fragments of glass, china and rusted nails or staples. Perhaps more intriguing was the finding of no less than three copper trouser fly buttons, possibly military and maybe associated with the use of Aden Park by soldiers during WW2.

*Condition:* The bank at the W was badly cut by rabbit burrows. Six trees and a rotten tree stump are on the bank and a small self-seeded ash in the interior. A deer/people track has eroded the bank in places.



**Illus 6 Feature A looking SW**



**Illus 7 Feature A. Bank part-section A2, showing central core and slippage/wash down on both sides.**

### Feature B

*GPS:* 398064,848092

*Dimensions:* 6.0-7.9m internally (to base of bank slippage), 9.0m to crown of bank.

*Summary of results:* Roughly circular feature enclosed by bank with SW entrance, c.1m wide, partially obscured by a tree. The bank survives to 600-700mm above the centre.

The bank was fully sectioned in two places, revealing that it was formed of a very compact, stiff grey clay containing some small stones (6). In the sections it appeared that some of the stones might have been a small revetment on the base of the bank (Illus 11).

The bank was 1.5-1.7m in width but this included wash down of the clay on both sides (11), the core width being nearer to c.800mm. In section B2 there was a thin (c. 10mm) grey/black, slightly greasy clay between the base of the clay of the bank and the top of natural. This was bulk sampled in the hope that it contained charcoal but further examination showed there was no charcoal present. It is interpreted as a buried turf line.

A 1m square sondage was cut in the interior of Feature B. This showed a thin topsoil (1) over light grey, sandy/clay soil (13) which was very similar to layers 3 and 8 in Feature A. There were no finds.



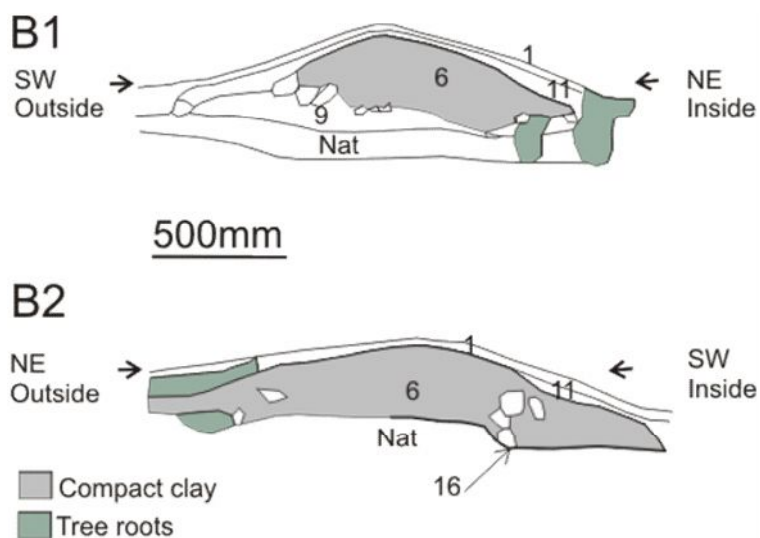
**Illus 8 Feature B (on LHS) looking NW**



**Illus 9 Feature B. Bank section B1**

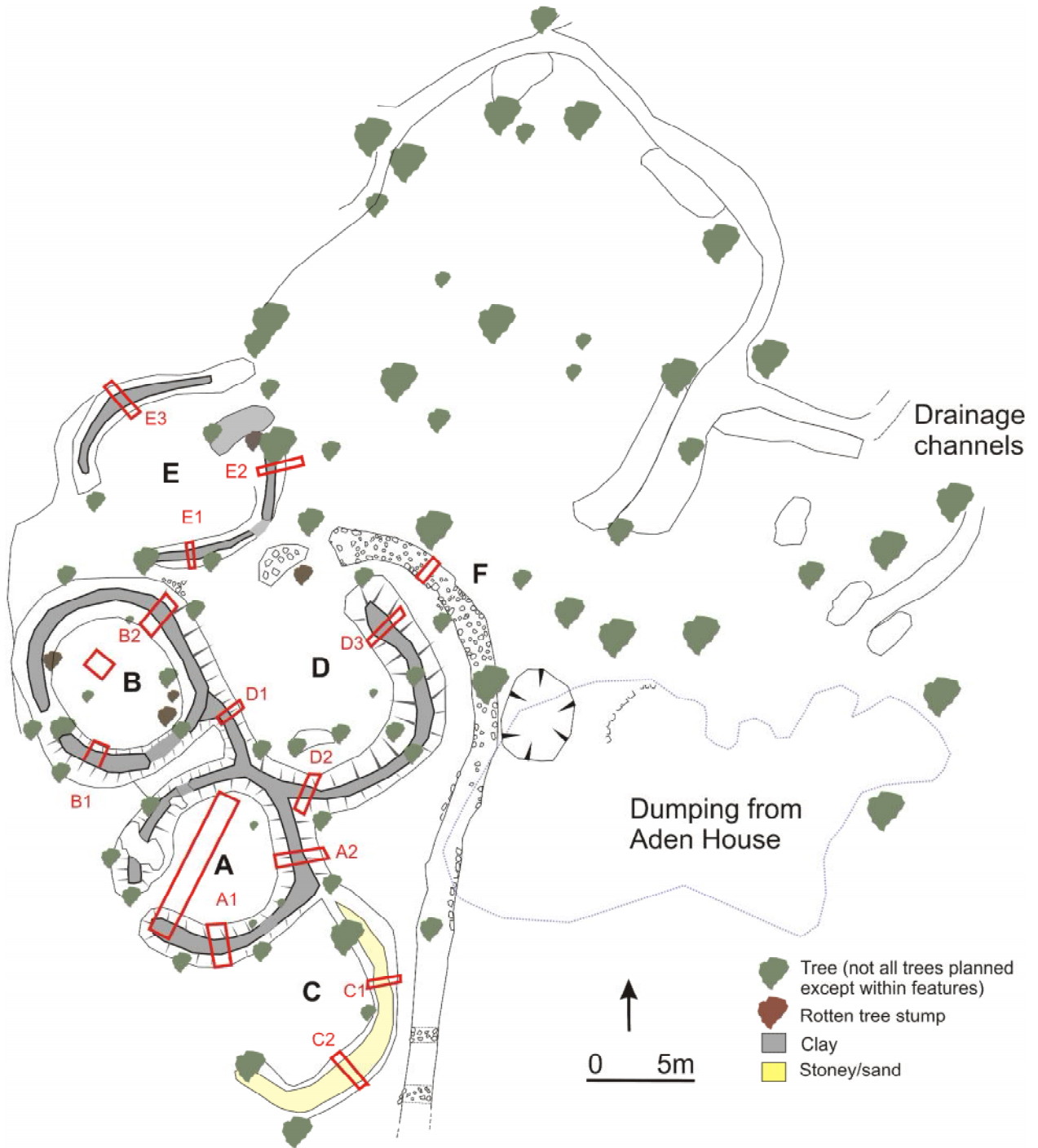


Illus 10 Feature B. Bank section B2



Illus 11 Sections through bank of B

*Condition:* There are five trees and two rotten tree stumps on the bank and two trees in the interior. A raised area in the SE sector appears to be debris accumulation around tree and stumps. There is slight rabbit damage inside the bank on the S. A deer/people track has eroded the bank in places.



**Illus 12 Plan of surveyed features. Red lines indicate sections or partial sections of features.**

Feature C

GPS: 398073,848074

Dimensions: Internally c 6.2 x 6.5m. Externally c.7.8 x 9.7m.

Summary of results: This was an arc of bank abutting the SE side of Feature A and open to the SW with a gap of 4m.

The bank was partially sectioned in two places to reveal its composition. This proved to be the only bank that was not formed of clay. In section C1 c.150mm of the top of the bank was sectioned showing that below c.170mm of topsoil, there was a bank c.700mm wide formed of small stones in a hard gritty, sandy matrix. In section C2 the bank was up to 1.5m wide and 300mm high of the same make-up as shown in section C1.



**Illus 13 Feature C. Bank section C2**

#### Feature D

*GPS:* 398066,848098

*Dimensions:* 6.9 x 11m internally, 10 x 13.3m externally.

*Summary of results:* This was an arc of bank abutting both A and B and extending towards Feature E at the N. There was an opening to the NE which appeared to coincide with the end of path F. It was not clear if this was an original gap or if the bank had been cut through to facilitate drainage of the woodland, as there was a pile of stones and clay which may have derived from the bank of D or from path F.

The bank was partially sectioned in three places to reveal its composition. In section D1 the bank survived to c.300mm height and was 1.20m wide, formed of compact grey clay, with wash-down at the sides. Section D2 was similar, 1.2m wide and 400mm high. The top width of the core of the bank was c.700mm. Section D3 was 1.50m wide on the

surface but the partial section showed that the actual clay core was c.850mm wide and 400mm high, with the extra width on the outside formed by earth upcast from a cut gully between D and the path F.



**Illus 14 Feature D. Bank section D1**

*Condition:* There are eight trees on the bank and three trees and two rotten stumps in the interior.

Feature E

*GPS:* 398071,848102

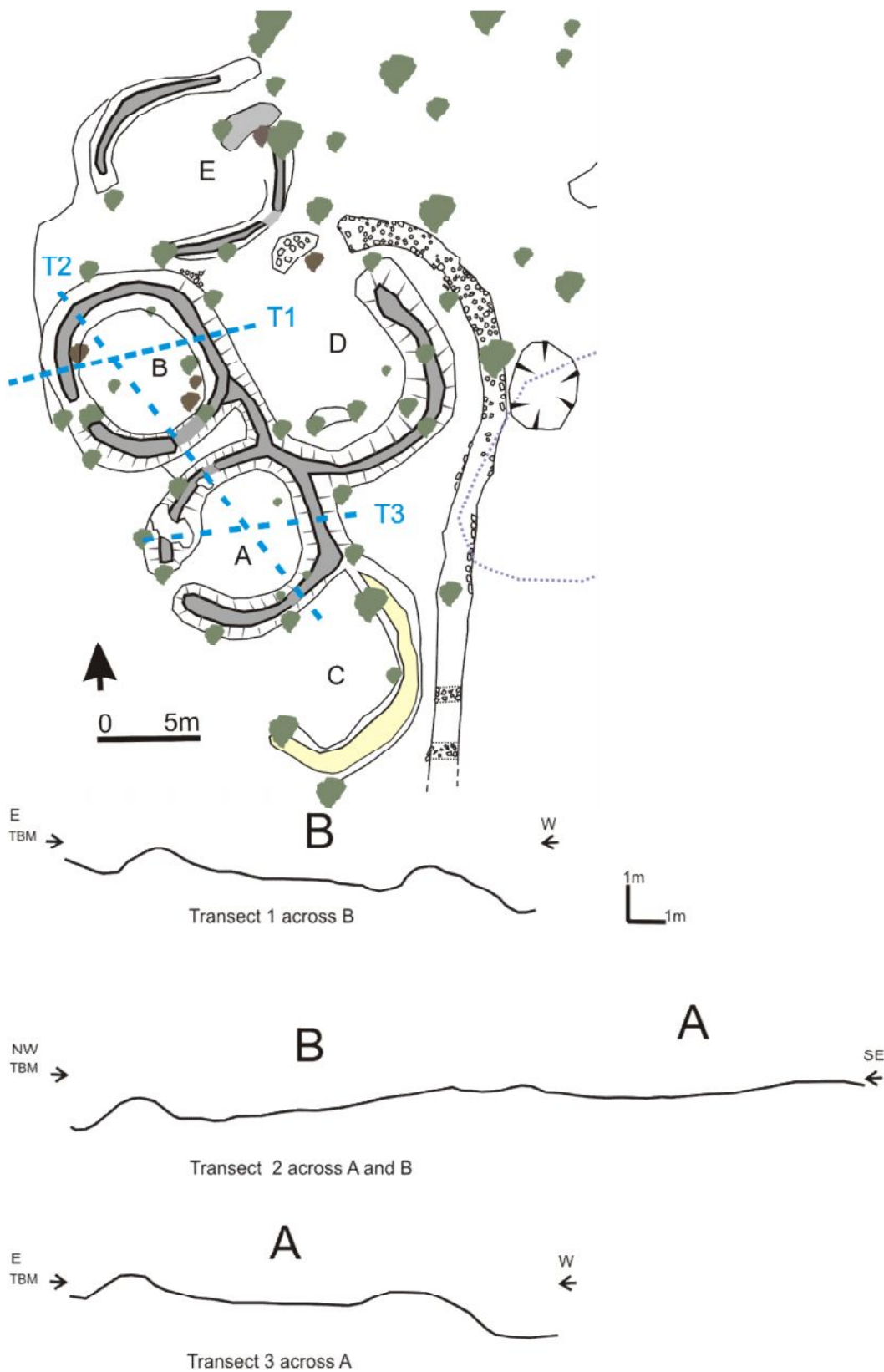
*Dimensions:* 5.6 x 7m internally, 8.6 x 9.4m externally.

*Summary of results:* The bank appears to form a circular feature open to the SW. However the NE side had been cut away, possibly to aid drainage for the trees and avoid ponding within the feature, clay from the dug-away section of bank is piled beside the gap. The bank was partially sectioned in three places to reveal its composition. In section E1 it was 1.15m wide and c.300mm high and formed of compact grey clay with some stones. In section E2 the total width was 1.4m but the sides were clay/soil mix typical of wash-down. The core appeared nearer to 1.1m in width. In section E3 the bank was 1.2m wide and 300-400mm above the interior. On the outside there was a big drop down to the boggy ground and burn to the W.





**Illus 15 Feature E. Bank section E3**



**Illus 16** Plan showing lines of level transects. Transects were plotted using levels at 200mm intervals related to a temporary bench mark (TBM).

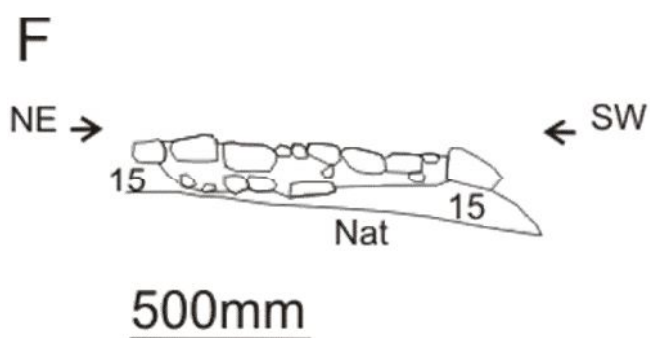
### Feature F

GPS: S end: 398078,848080 N end: 398079,848108

*Dimensions:* Average width 1.25 – 1.5m, varying slightly where stones have become dislodged.

*Summary of results:* This was a well laid, level stone path with some indication of edging stones in places. The stones averaged 200-250mm in size and were set in a stony clay matrix with a total depth of c.150mm. It was almost fully covered by topsoil and many tree roots cross over it. It is clearly later than the features A-E as it curves around the E side of both C and D and appears to terminate at the opening to D but it was very disturbed at this point.

Dumping from Aden House overlay part of the path. It is not shown on any available maps.



**Illus 17 Section through path F**



**Illus 18 Path F curving around E side of feature D.**



**Illus 19 Path F. Section through path (14).**

## 4 The Finds

With the exception of a single flint flake on the top of the clay bank of Feature A, there were no finds of prehistoric date. The flake is undiagnostic and could be derived from the clay source rather than be relevant to date Feature A.

All the other finds were of late 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century date. The three buttons may relate to military use of the park in WW2 but were at the base of topsoil/top of the underlying layer 3 and can not be used to date the features.

Dumped material from Aden House in the area to the E of the circular features was not collected.

SF no	Description	Context	Approx date
1	Flint flake	Top of bank 5 in feature A, section A1	Possibly prehistoric
2	Iron staple	3 (1/3 interface)	20 <sup>th</sup> C
3	Copper fly button, possibly military	3 (1/3 interface)	1 <sup>st</sup> half 20 <sup>th</sup> C
4	Glass sherd	3 (1/3 interface)	Modern
5	Sherd stoneware jar	3 (1/3 interface)	L 19 <sup>th</sup> /E 20 <sup>th</sup> C
6	Iron nail frags	3 (1/3 interface)	20 <sup>th</sup> C
7	Glass sherd	1 over bank in Feature A	Modern
8	Iron nail frags	3 (1/3 interface)	Modern
9	Copper fly button, possibly military	3 (1/3 interface)	1 <sup>st</sup> half 20 <sup>th</sup> C
10	Sherd white china	3 (1/3 interface)	20 <sup>th</sup> C
11	Copper fly button, possibly military	3 (1/3 interface)	1 <sup>st</sup> half 20 <sup>th</sup> C

## 5 Schools

On Monday 7<sup>th</sup> October a number of local primary school groups visited the site and, as part of their visit, enthusiastically helped to excavate the surface of the stone path (Illus 20).



**Illus 20 School children excavating Path F**

## 6 Discussion

The survey of this area of woodland has highlighted that there is a range of different earthworks, some relating to former estate management such as the drainage gullies and others such as Features A-E of archaeological potential. It is clear that lack of detailed survey may have hindered the protection of some other, possibly early, features, for example during the landscaping for the new arboretum. The presence of further circular earthworks at the E side of the Park, near the caravan site suggests that further survey in that area would be desirable, possibly as part of a more systematic historic landscape survey.

The circular and curvilinear features A-E can not be dated by the finds. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century finds are at the base of the loose leaf debris and topsoil and the single undiagnostic flint flake could derive from the clay source rather than the structures. No charcoal was found in a secure context and there was no charcoal in samples taken from the base of the bank sections in Feature B.

It had been suggested that these earthworks might represent structures built by the 3rd (or Buchan) Administrative Battalion of the Rifle Volunteers who trained at Aden and camped pitched camp in the Park near the South Lodge, in a field sloping down to the South Ugie in 1871 and 1873 (Buchan, 1997, 117). However, the location of these camps would appear to have been in one of the open fields shown on the 1870 Ordnance Survey map, well to the W of the present site which was woodland at that time (*25" Ordnance survey. Aberdeen sheet xxi.4 (Old Deer) 1870, published 1873*). The park was used on later occasions for military purposes, including at some point during WW2. A lady from Longside who lived on the Aden estate for 25 years up to the 1960's recalled that soldiers used the site during WW2 and she remembers a 'huge mound of soldiers boots buried next to Aden house (pers. comm. to Derek Buchan). It is possible that the brass trouser buttons date from this period of use but it seems unlikely that the curvilinear structures were constructed at this time.

It was also considered that they might have been some form of estate feature related to tree planting but as they are not consistent throughout the areas of woodland shown in the post-Improvement plantings in the park shown on the 1870 Ordnance Survey map, this also seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the drainage gullies are a useful reminder that there may be earthworks from a number of periods, including relatively modern land management features.

However, the position of the circular features near a burn and their morphology suggest they are likely to be of late prehistoric date. The grouping of features A-E is very similar to the grouping of stone walled circular and semi-circular house sites, animal corrals etc at both New Kinnord and Old Kinnord, Dinnet (Shepherd, 1986, 131-2), dated to the late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. Although the average diameter of the structures in this area of Aden is smaller, at 6-8m internally (features A,B,E), than those at Kinnord, it is similar to the Late Bronze Age houses and enclosures recently planned and part excavated at Greenlands, Balbithan Wood, near Kintore (NMRS No: NJ81NW 4) which were 7-10m internally with entrances to the S/SE. They fall well within the range for Donside discussed by the Royal Commission (RCAHMS, 2007, 79-87), which also provides a useful discussion of the vagaries of survival. The survival of the Aden examples is almost certainly due to the successive woodland plantings on the site since the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The most probable interpretation on the present evidence is that features A and B, and possibly feature E, were small circular buildings, for dwelling or other domestic use. The clay banks may be interpreted as the remnants of low solid clay walls or of clay daub from timber walls; the width suggests that solid clay walls are perhaps the more likely. The nearest source of the clay appears to have been the wet area to the N towards the burn. The more open structures, C and D, are more easily interpreted as un-roofed animal enclosures, or possibly even small 'garden' enclosures. The difference in the bank of C may perhaps indicate that this may have been enclosed by a timber fence or stockade, rather than a clay wall.

The path (F) while clearly respecting the circular features may be considerably later.

## 7 Future management of the site

The excavation and survey has highlighted several issues regarding the vulnerability of these sites which may have an impact on the planning of future management for them.

- They lie in woodland with the present trees some 50 years of age. Some trees are growing on banks or in the interior of features A-F. Future felling of the area over Features A-F would need to be done without vehicle access. Wind blow of trees on the banks may also present problems in future.



**Illus 21** Feature A showing large trees growing on banks and self sown ash in interior.



- Clearing the area also presents problems as the banks are easily eroded and a number of tracks, probably made by deer, are evident across the banks (Illus 22).



**Illus 22 View from feature B through A and C. Ranging rods mark where deer/people track has eroded banks**

- There is some evidence of unofficial ‘excavation’ in the area of dumping thought to derive from Aden House; this is of minor archaeological importance but is exposing potentially dangerous chunks of glass.



**Illus 23 Dumping from Aden House and unofficial ‘excavation’ for bottles etc**

## 8 References

Buchan, J 1997 *A Peterhead Portrait*. The Buchan Field Club.

Lelong O 2010 *The monastery of Deer archaeological project : Desk-based assessment & field evaluation*. GUARD Project 2712. Glasgow University: Glasgow

Murray, H K & Murray, J C 2011 *Book of Deer Project Excavations 2011, Old Deer, Aberdeenshire*. MAS 2011-25. Archive report: Aberdeenshire.

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## Acknowledgements

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Without the volunteers it would not have been possible- many thanks to: Joyce Brown, Mike Horn, Heather Jennings, Derek Jennings, Andrew Kellock , Jim Leel, Carolynne Milne, Tirkana Stanhope, Jackie Taylor, Nicola Watson and Malcolm Watson for their hard work on the excavation.

## Appendices

### **Appendix 1: Catalogue of digital photographic record (supplied to SMR and NMRS)**

<b>Digital frame number</b>	<b>Content</b>
Aden Park, Aberdeenshire	
001-002	General views of Features A/B after clearing branch debris
003	A looking NW towards B
004	A looking N along survey base line
005	A from entrance looking NE
006	A looking N along survey base line
007-008	Detail of bank before partial excavation of section
009-010	General view
011	A. Section A1 of bank
012	B Section B1 of bank
013	B Section B2 of bank
014-017	A Section A2 of bank
018-019	A Section A1 of bank
020	Leveling transects
021	Excavation interior A
022	Sieving soil

023-024	Interior A
025-026	Dumping from Aden House and detail
027	General view looking S
028-033	Drainage gullies and upcast
034-036	Dumping from Aden House and detail
037-042	Interior A
043-047	B Bank section B1
048-050	C Bank section C1
051-053	C Bank section C2
054-055	Aden house dump
056	B bank section B2 from the S (outside)
057	B general
058-061	A bank section A1
062-063	A looking SE to C
064	Wear path/deer track from B to A and C
065-067	Steep bank along W side of site
068-073	B bank section B1
074-075	D bank section D1
076-077	D bank section D2
078-079	D bank section D3
080-084	B bank section B2 partially excavated
085	B/E stone scatter between B and E
086-087	E bank section E1
088-091	E bank section E2
092-094	E bank section E3
095-100	School children excavating etc
101-105	B section B2
106-111	A looking SW
112-123	Views of features A-E from above
124-135	Path F and feature D from above
136-137	Photo tower
138-141	B section B2

142	Photo tower
143-146	Path F
147-148	Section of path F
149-152	Path F
153-154	Circular earthworks in woods to N near caravan park
155-156	Photographic tower. Photos by A Kellock

## Appendix 2: Context data

Context No	Feature	Description	Finds	Interpretation
1	A, B,C,D,E	Topsoil with wood debris/pine needles c. 20mm on banks. < 40mm in centre of feature	7	
2	D, E	Clay with some stones. Bank	None	Bank/wall
3	A	Light brown, sandy/clay soil across interior of feature A. < 100mm. Much root and mouse/vole disturbance.	SF 2-6. SF 8-11 all at interface 1/3	
4	A	Disturbed area 150 x 130		Animal burrow
5	A	Compact grey clay with some small stones. Bank	1	Bank/wall
6	B	Compact grey clay with some small stones. Bank. C250mm depth in section and 700-800mm wide		Bank/wall
7	A	Patchy clay < 40mm deep around inner edge of bank in interior of feature A		Clay wash from bank 5
8		Light brown, sandy/clay		

		soil across interior of feature A. 60-100mm deep. Very similar to 3 but partially separated by 7 at edges of feature A. On top of natural.		
9	B Section B1	Small stones < 50mm in sandier clay matrix		
10	C	Small stones 40-100mm in hard gritty sandy matrix below 50-150mm topsoil. Forms bank of C		
11	B Sections B1 and B2	Clay/soil mix on either side of clay bank in sections through bank of feature B		Clay wash from bank 6
12	B Sections B1 and B2	Gritty yellow/gray natural		Natural
13	B	Light grey, sandy/clay soil across interior of feature B		
14	F	Angular stones of path F. Average size 200-250mm.		Path
15	F section	Light brown sandy		Original topsoil below path
16	B Sections B1 and B2	Grey/black slightly greasy clay below clay 6 of bank of feature B		Buried turf line. No charcoal.