



**Herefordshire  
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# **An Archaeological Evaluation of a crop-mark at Holywell, Blakemere, Herefordshire**

Report prepared by

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**Herefordshire Archaeology**  
Conservation and Environmental Planning  
Planning Services

Places & Communities Directorate

Herefordshire Council



# **An Archaeological Evaluation of a crop-mark at Holywell, Blakemere, Herefordshire**

**NGR: SO 373 411  
EHE 1971**

**HAR 259**

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**Herefordshire Archaeology** is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, supports the maintenance of the county Sites and Monuments (Historic Environment) Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects. The County Archaeologist is Dr. Keith Ray.

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## **Summary**

*This report describes an evaluation excavation of part of a crop-mark site discovered through aerial photography. The crop-mark comprised a length of ditch aligned roughly east / west, with an entrance-way in its centre. The location, nature and size of the ditch suggested a possible prehistoric date.*

*A 10 metre by 10 metre square trench was excavated over the entrance way to include the ditch terminals. The ditch terminals were angled so that the entrance opens diagonally through them, pointing due north. The ditches were “V” cut in profile and contained two distinct fills. The primary fill contained large quantities of animal bone, often deposited at the base of the ditch in discrete groups, suggesting careful / purposeful placement. A small assemblage of pottery was recovered from both fills dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.*

*A second trench was excavated in an attempt to intercept the ditch further to the east. The ditch was not found, indicating that it had turned to the south before reaching the location of the second trench. Two pits were recorded within the second trench. One contained a large quantity of charcoal with occasional, small fragments of burned bone. The other contained a humic/ loam rich fill with small quantities of charcoal.*

*It would appear that this site represents a small enclosure, approximately 35 to 45m square of early to mid Romano-British date. The faunal and ceramic assemblages would suggest that this was not a domestic enclosure (i.e. a farmstead) but an enclosure used for ritual feasting involving the deposition of selected food waste within the enclosure ditch. The two pits within trench two, may be associated with this, however, no dating evidence was forthcoming to link the features within the second trench to the enclosure.*

**Disclaimer:** It should not be assumed that land referred to in this document is accessible to the public. Location plans are indicative only. NGR's are accurate to approximately 10m. Measured dimensions are accurate to within 1m at a scale of 1:500, 0.1m at 1:50, and 0.02m at 1:20.

Figures contained within this report contain material from the Ordnance Survey. The grid in this material is the National Grid taken from the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office (OS Licence 100024168). This material has been reproduced in order to locate the site in its environs.

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## **1. Introduction**

This report (EHE 1971) provides an account of an archaeological evaluation of a crop-mark site at Holywell, in Tyberton parish. The evaluation took place over a two week period between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2008. The purpose of the fieldwork was to establish the date and nature of a crop-mark recorded as a series of aerial photographs taken in 1996. The photographs show two lengths of an interrupted ditch the size, location and nature of which suggested a possible prehistoric date.

## **2. Aims, objectives and methods for the study, including reporting**

As part of an ongoing programme of small-scale investigations, following up the discovery of enclosures as crop-marks in different parts of the county a small scale evaluation was undertaken over a crop-mark at Holywell, Blakemere. The evaluation excavation was intended to sample the crop-mark in order to provide a date / period for the site and to recover information concerning its use. Its location and form suggested a prehistoric date.

The trench was located by measurement from known points on the ground in order for it to intercept the terminals of the ditches. In order to sample the fills of both ditch lengths a 10m by 10m square trench was opened. This was stripped to the base of topsoil / plough-soil by machine, under close archaeological supervision. Excavation then continued by hand. Sections and plans were produced as the excavation progressed and a full photographic record was made. Features and deposits were recorded using the single context recording system. Finds were recorded according to context, samples were taken where necessary.

The excavation was carried out by Herefordshire Archaeology staff with the assistance of two experienced volunteers. A full report was not produced immediately after the fieldwork but a note was entered into The Woolhope Naturalists Field Club, Sectional Recorder's Report (archaeology) publication for 2008 and the Council for British Archaeology, West Midlands Journal for 2008. This was done in order to disseminate the initial findings from the site whilst opportunities for specialist analysis of the ceramics and animal bone were sought.

The analysis of the pottery was of particular importance as the assemblage, (although small), was unusual and therefore had the potential of providing a relatively narrow date range.

### 3. Location

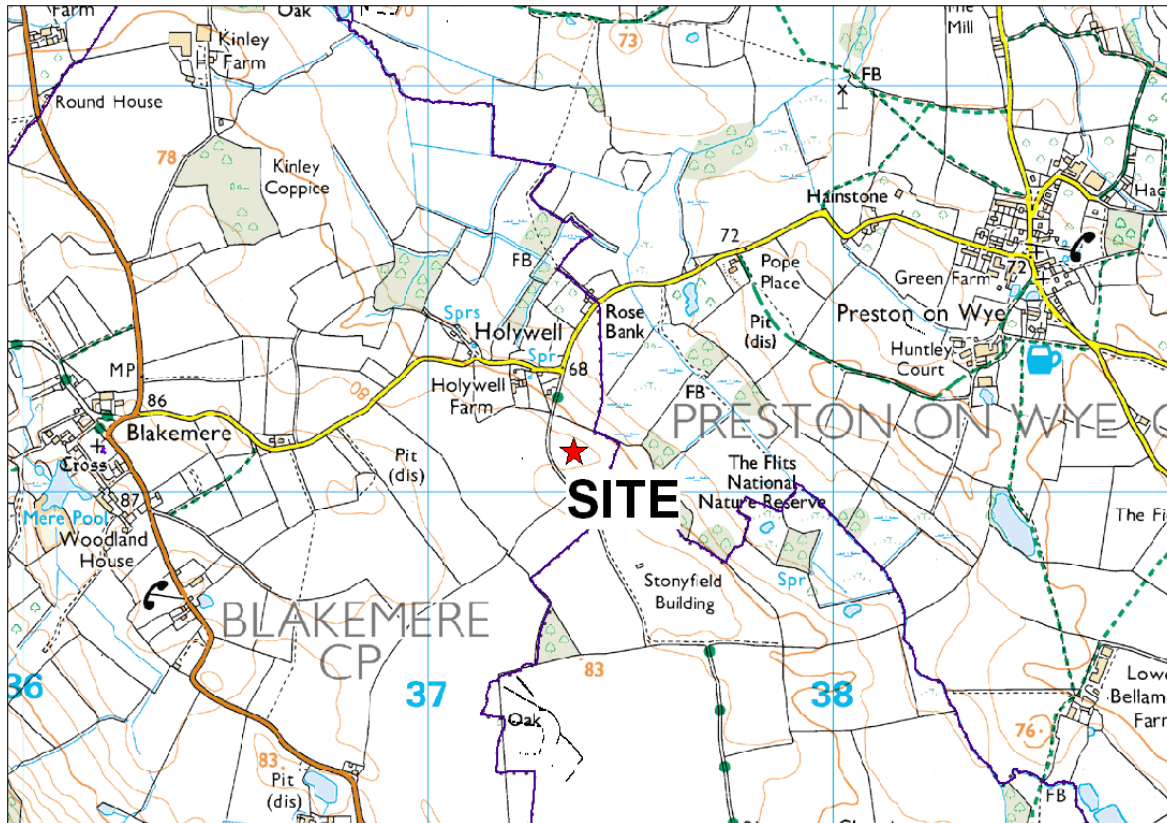
The hamlet of Holywell lies in Tyberton Parish approximately 1km to the west of Preston-on-Wye and 1km to the east of the village of Blakemere. The site lies on the crest of a low hill over-looking The Flits, National Nature Reserve; an area of wetland formed from an oxbow lake originating from the post-glacial course of the River Wye.

The underlying soils and geology of the area comprise Old Red Sandstone of the Raglan Mudstone series. Overlying this is a variety of fluvio-glacial deposits (gravels), associated with the late Devensian glaciation. Soils are typically slightly acidic reddish loams.



**Figure 1: location of site within the county of Herefordshire.**

The site lies just above the 80m OD contour line on the northern end of a flat topped ridge. This overlooks the remains of a fossilised oxbow lake (The Flits National Nature Reserve), which contains post-glacial peat deposits. The site therefore sits on the top of what was the first river terrace.



**Figure 2: Site location Plan.**

It is understood that the site has been under arable cultivation since the 1940's. Much of the top of the ridge has been subjected to small scale gravel extraction throughout the post-medieval period.

#### **4. Background history of**

The site was first recorded in July 1996 by aerial photography (HSM 49266), (see Plates 1 & 2). No surface finds have been recorded from the site. A perforated stone axe has been recovered from approximately 1km to the south-east of the site (HSM 1079). The site appears to comprise two slightly curved / angled, ditch lengths aligned roughly north-east – south-west, each approximately 25m in length. Between the ditches is an entranceway facing north-west. The crop-mark is only visible as it crosses the highest point of the field, where it crosses an area of gravel. The aerial photographs therefore, do not indicate the extent of the ditches and fail to show any returns or corners of the presumed enclosure. However it is likely that the western ditch turns prior to reaching the field on the western side of the green lane, indeed the return may correspond to the curve of the green lane at this location (Plates 1 & 2).





Plate 1: Aerial Photograph SHE13685: Musson, C R. 11/07/1996. 96-MB-0057.

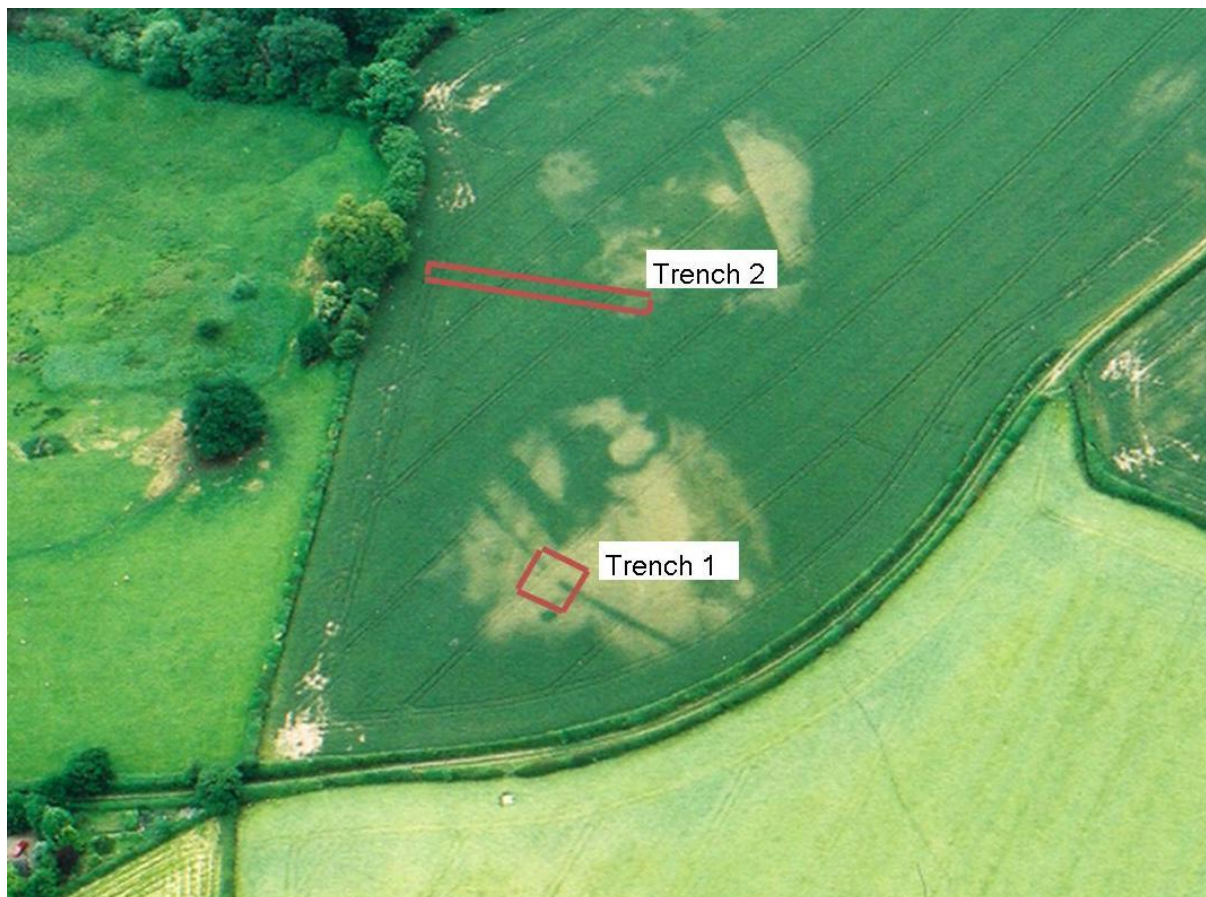


Plate 2: Aerial Photograph SHE13685: Musson, C R. 11/07/1996. 96-MB-0056.



## 5. Fieldwork in 2008

Excavations were undertaken between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> August 2008. Two trenches were excavated. Trench 1 was located close to the top of a low knoll with the intention of revealing the ditch terminals and entranceway. Trench 2 was excavated approximately 40m to the east of trench 1 with the aim of intercepting the return of the enclosure. After an initial machine strip to the base of plough-soil, the sides and base of the trenches were cleaned by hand.



**Figure 3: Aerial photograph showing trench locations.**

### **Trench 1:**

This comprised a 10m by 10m square trench which contained the two ditch terminals together with a linear feature (1006) which ran diagonally through the site on a north-east / south-west axis, almost cutting the western ditch terminal and running through the entranceway. This feature (Plate 2 and Figure 4) comprised a vertically cut trench 0.3m wide and 0.8m deep (from the top of plough-soil) and contained a late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century ceramic field-drain pipe.

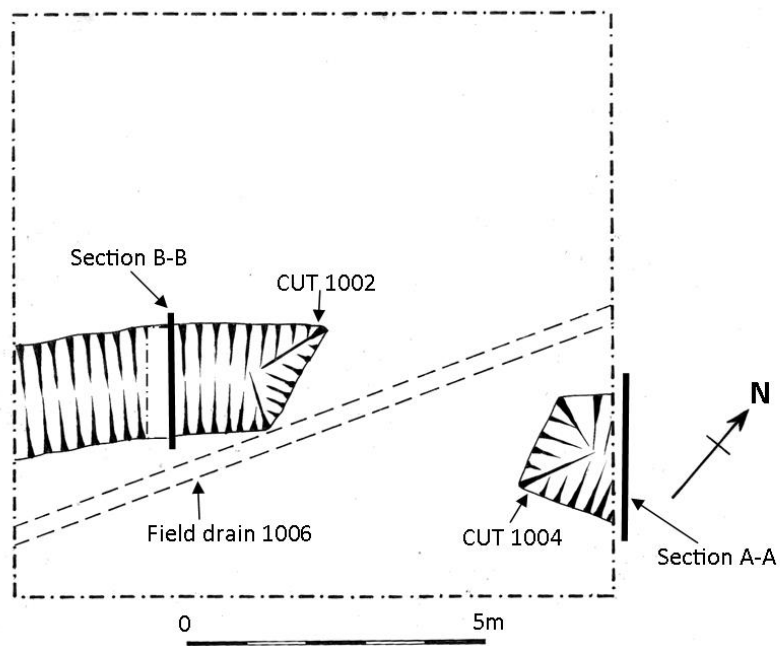


Figure 4: Plan of Trench 1 showing excavated features.

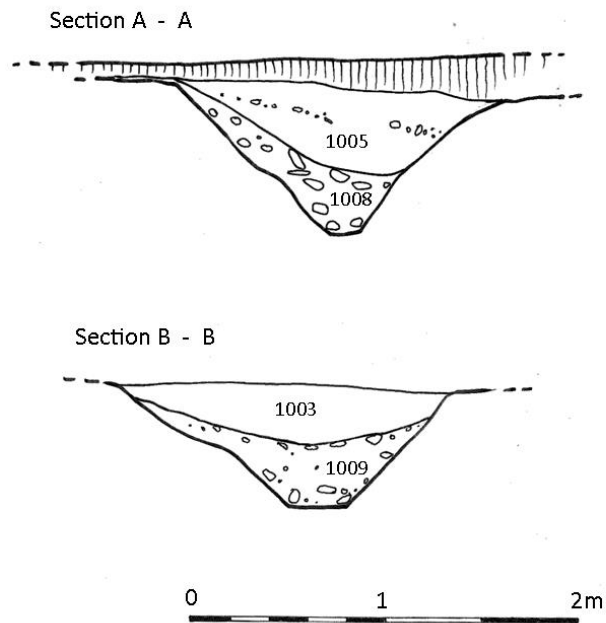


Figure 5: Sections of Ditch cuts 1004 (Section A-A) and 1002 (Section B-B).





Plate 3:  
Trench 1  
looking to the  
south-west  
along the line  
of the field  
drain.



Plate 4: The trench looking to the  
north-east, showing the western  
ditch.

The trench exposed a 4.5m length of the western ditch (1002). This comprised a 1.9m wide ditch with an angled terminal, filled with a loose, clayey loam (1003), (Figure 5). The entrance way was 4m wide and bordered on its eastern side by a second angled ditch terminal (1004). Both ditch terminals are angled in such a way as to align the entrance due north. The fill of the eastern ditch (1005) was similar to that observed within the western ditch. Both fills contained occasional Romano-British pottery sherds. Beneath fill (1005) within the eastern trench was a loose gravel deposit, (1008). This appears to have rolled or have been pushed into the ditch from its northern (outside of the enclosure) side. The nature and location of this deposit may suggest that deposit (1008) represents the upcast from the original excavation of the ditch, possibly having formed an external bank. This material contained three small sherds of Samian ware together with a single sherd of Severn Valley ware. Both ditch profiles were "V" shaped and survived to a depth of 0.95m below the top of the present ground surface.



Plate 5: Group of cattle rib bones within primary deposit (1009) at the base of ditch (1002).

A similar deposit (1009) was present within the base of the western ditch containing large fragments of Severn Valley Ware and a single fragment of vessel glass. The tip lines of this deposit may also suggest infilling of bank material from the northern (external) side. At the very base of this deposit were a series of discrete piles / groups of animal bone (plates 5 & 6). These comprised either numbers of ribs, numbers of ribs with a single vertebrae or a complete pelvis on its own. The bones appear to represent the remains of meals or feasts which have been gathered together and purposefully placed within the bottom of the ditch immediately prior to the infilling of the lower part of the ditch by possible bank deposit (1009) and (1008). No internal features were visible within the presumed enclosure, to the south of the ditches.





Plate 6: Cow pelvis  
within primary deposit  
(1009) at the base of  
ditch (1002).



Plate 7: Trench 1 looking south through the entrance, into the enclosure.



## Trench 2

This excavation was located approximately 40m to the east of Trench 1 and comprised a 30m long by 1.6m wide machine cut trench. The trench was located with the intention of intercepting the eastern ditch return of the enclosure within Trench 1. The trench was extended to run northwards to the edge of the field in order to ascertain the extent of plough soil and hill wash away from the top of slope. No return for the ditch within Trench 1 was located within Trench 2.



Plate 8: Trench 2 looking north. Pit 2004 is in the foreground to the left of the ranging pole.

The trench was excavated by machine to the top of undisturbed sub-soil. This resulted in a change in depth from 0.35m at the southern, (upslope) end of the trench to 0.7m at the northern, (downslope) end. Two features were recorded within the trench. These comprised two similar shaped and sized pits, (2002) and (2004), approximately 0.15m apart.

Pit (2002) comprised an oval pit approximately 0.5m long and 0.35m wide with a maximum depth of 0.25m. It was filled with a loamy dark earth (2003), containing occasional charcoal fragments. No finds were forthcoming from this feature. Approximately 0.15m to the south was the cut (2004) for a second pit. This too was 0.4m in length, 0.35m wide and had a maximum depth of 0.25m. It contained a fill of dark loam mixed with a considerable quantity of charcoal together with small fragments of burned bone, (1005), (see Plates 8 & 9).

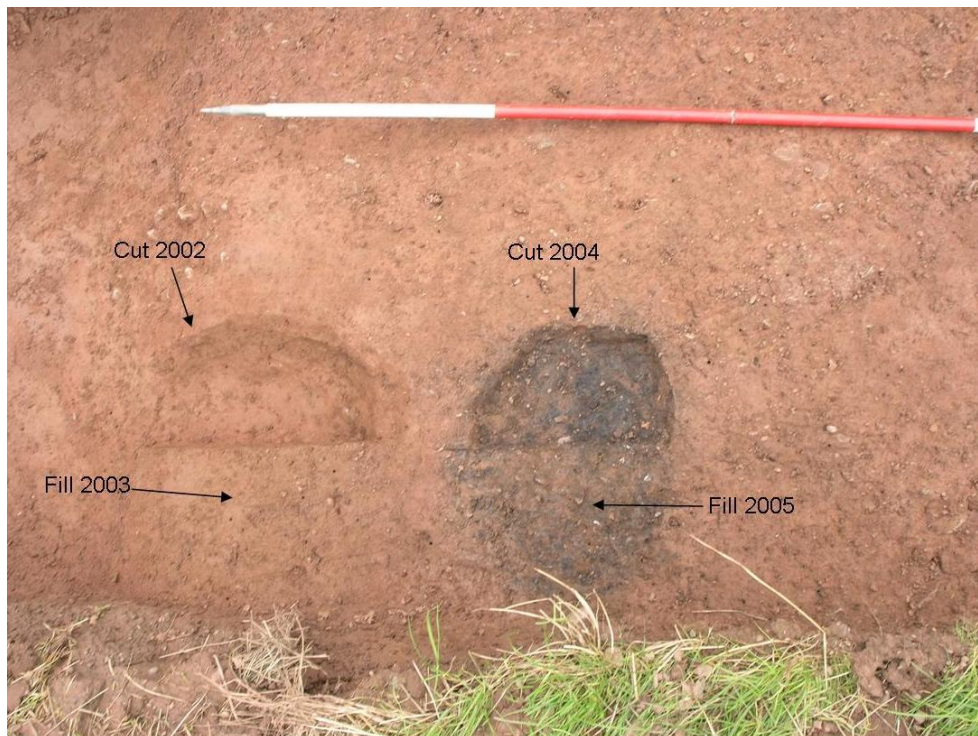


Plate 9: Detail of the two pits / features observed within Trench 2.

No artefacts were recovered from within the fill deposit (2005), however the entire context was removed as a sample for future analysis. The trench, immediately to the east and west of the two pits was widened to a width of 8m in order to locate any further features but none were forthcoming. It is clear that both features have been heavily truncated suggesting that they are of some antiquity. The purpose and date of these features and any possible association to the features apparent within Trench 1 are at present pure conjecture. The similar shapes and depths of the two pits, together with their proximity to each other suggest that the two pits were associated with one-another. Based on their size, shape and particularly the fill (2005) of pit (2004), it is possible that fill (2005) represents a cremation burial, (although analysis on the burned will need to be completed to confirm this). Pit (2002), due to its proximity to the pit containing charcoal and burned bone may therefore have been dug to contain a timber or stone marker for the cremation.

## 6. Conclusions

The excavations at Holywell indicate that the archaeological features present on the 1996 aerial photographs are of Roman or Romano-British origin. It is clear that the site has been heavily truncated by medieval and later ploughing, resulting in the complete removal of the bank which, it is assumed, complimented the ditch within Trench 1. The features recorded within Trench 2 also appear to have been heavily truncated. The excavation of Trench 1 recovered a small pottery assemblage dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. No evidence for earlier, (or later), activity within the enclosure was forthcoming. The nature of the pottery assemblage, (predominantly large and / or high status vessels), may suggest a specific, ceremonial or ritual use rather than a domestic, farmstead enclosure. The angled ditch terminals together with the quantity of bones (400 fragments) and apparent deliberate placing of bone groups within the base of the ditch together with the evidence for an external bank also point to a non-domestic function. The two pits recorded within Trench 2 are undated and their relationship to the ditched enclosure remains uncertain.

If the results from this small scale excavation are a true reflection of the nature of the site; it seems likely that the enclosure was used for some form of “ritual” purpose over a relatively short period of time. The angled entrance-way and the apparent deliberate placing of bone groups may suggest regular feasting at certain times of the year. These activities may be burial / cremation practices.



## **Appendix 1: A report on the pottery recovered from Holywell, Blakemere, (HW08) by Jane C. Evans and Tim Hoverd.**

A total of 23 sherds of pottery were recovered from two ditch lengths excavated as an evaluation of a crop-mark site at Holywell near Blakemere, Herefordshire. The material was recovered from the upper and lower fills of each ditch length believed to represent some form of sub-angular enclosure. The pottery was generally well preserved with relatively little abrasion suggesting little disturbance post-deposition.

Upper ditch fill deposits (1003) and (1005) contained exclusively Severn Valley Ware fabrics, some sherds showing signs of reduction. Deposit (1003) produced a complete jar base which has been deliberately rounded to make a large counter or stopper. The remaining sherds from these deposits comprised the rim fragments of medium and large storage jars. (1005) contained a Severn Valley Ware body sherd with a handle scar from a handled jar or flagon.

The lower ditch fill of the eastern ditch terminal, (1008), produced an fragment of organic tempered, Severn Valley Ware jar rim and 3 very small fragments of undecorated Samian Ware.

The lower ditch fill of the western ditch terminal produced 8 sherds of Severn Valley Ware and 1 sherd of reduced Severn Valley Ware. These all appear to be rim and body sherds from jars.

The occurrence of both Organic Tempered Severn Valley wares together with Reduced Severn Valley wares strongly suggest a late 1<sup>st</sup> to mid 2<sup>nd</sup> Century date for the assemblage.

### **Fabric descriptions:**

#### **Severn Valley Ware**

This fabric description applies to locally produced Severn Valley ware. Soft to hard fired, fine fabric containing common mica, occasional quartz grains (<0.5mm), clay pellets (1.5mm), fragments of black or brown fine-grained rock (<1.0mm), iron ore and unidentified soft, white inclusions, possibly decayed feldspar (<0.5mm).

Usually reddish orange but may be brown and sometimes with a reduced core.

The manufacture of this ware in Malvern is only part of a widespread regional tradition of similar vessels, with production known to have taken place at various sites covering a wide area along the Severn Valley from Shepton Mallet in the south and as far as Wroxeter in the north (Bryant 2001, 24). Severn Valley ware vessels in Fabric 12 are found in great quantities on all Romano-British sites in Worcestershire and are the products of a number of kilns. The neutron activation analysis of selected sherds from Deansway (Bryant and Evans 2001) and Sidbury (Evans 1991) in Worcester, confirmed the assumption that a large number of sherds from Worcestershire were produced in the Malvern area. Known kiln sites in this area include Great Buckmans Farm/Newland Common and Hygienic

Laundry, Malvern Link and Newland Hopfields, Great Malvern.

Manufactured from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

**Reduced Severn Valley ware:** This fabric description applies to locally produced Severn Valley ware. Soft to hard fired, fine fabric containing common mica, occasional quartz grains (0.5mm), clay pellets (<1.5mm), black or brown fine-grained rock (<1.0mm), iron ore and unidentified soft, white inclusions, possibly decayed feldspar (<0.5mm).

Reduced to a grey finish - this was intentional. Generally grey throughout but sometimes with a brown core.

Most commonly identified within assemblages of mid 1st to 2nd century date.

**Organic tempered Severn Valley Ware:** This fabric description applies to locally produced Severn Valley ware. As seen in Fabric 12 but with common organic temper, usually seen as elongated voids, appearing as black or grey streaks in the matrix (<3.0mm).

Usually reddish-orange but may be brown and sometimes with a reduced grey core.

Most commonly identified within assemblages of mid 1st to 2nd century date.

## Appendix 2: Finds Archive

CONTEXT	POTTERY	BONE	FE	GLASS	SNAIL	SLAG	CHARCOAL
1009	9	335	1	1	8+		
1005	3	6			5+		
1008	4	19	1		18+		
1003	7	40			4+	3	3
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>35+</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>

### Site Archive:

57 digital images

2 sheets of field drawings

1 entry in a site note book

1 box of finds

10 litres of environmental sample (2005)

This document

## Acknowledgements

Herefordshire Archaeology would like to acknowledge the help and co-operation of Phillip Gorringe, David Curtis and the Duchy of Cornwall Estate.

The author would also like to thank Tom Elliot and Barbara Joss for their assistance and hard work during the excavation.

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Plate 9: Detail of the two pits / features observed within Trench 2.

## Bibliography

Soils of England and Wales 1983 Soils of England and Wales, Sheet 3, Midland and Western England