

**BARR BEACON,
WALSALL:
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
EVALUATION 2007**

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Project No. 1716

**Barr Beacon, Walsall:
An Archaeological Evaluation 2007**

By Mark Charles

**For
WALSALL COUNCIL**

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CONTENTS

1.0	INTRODUCTION.....	3
1.1	BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT	3
1.2	LOCATION AND GEOLOGY	3
2.0	ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND.....	3
3.0	GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY	5
4.0	AIMS AND OBJECTIVES	5
5.0	METHODOLGY.....	5
6.0	RESULTS.....	6
6.1	INTRODUCTION	6
6.2	NATURAL GEOLOGY.....	6
6.3	SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES AND DEPOSITS.	6
7.0	DISCUSSION	7
8.0	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	8
9.0	REFERENCES	8

Figures

- 1 - Site location
- 2 - Test Pit location plan
- 3 - Section drawings of Test Pits 1, 6 & 8

Plates

- 1 - Removing the turf, looking E
- 2 - Test Pit 1, gully 1003, looking SE
- 3 - Test Pit 6, stratigraphy showing ditch (6003), bank 6001 and path 6000, looking NW
- 4 - Test Pit 8, evidence of ridge and furrow ploughing, looking W

Appendices

- 1 - Geophysical Survey
- 2 - WSI

SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation of land at Barr Beacon, Walsall (centred on NGR SP 4061 2973) was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology in November 2008. The evaluation, in the form of a series of test pits, took place to investigate anomalies highlighted by the results of a geophysical survey and in response to a desk-based assessment of the site.

The evaluation found no evidence of prehistoric or Roman activity on site. Evidence of medieval agricultural activity, in the form of ridge and furrow ploughing was identified. A ditch and bank forming a land division and a narrow gully was also identified. It is likely that many of the anomalies highlighted in the geophysical survey results were created by natural underlying geology. However, it is clear from conclusions drawn from an earlier desk-based assessment, and an informal visual inspection of the site, that potential for locating evidence of early archaeological activity remains high.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project

Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by Walsall Council to undertake the excavation of a series of test pits at Barr Beacon, Walsall (hereinafter referred to as the site).

This report outlines the results of a field evaluation carried out in November 2007, and has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations (IFA 2001).

An archaeological desk-based assessment (Ramsey 2007) and subsequent geophysical survey (Breeze 2007) on the site has identified a number of anomalies that may represent buried, *in situ*, archaeological deposits. The aim of this evaluation is to establish the character and nature of any archaeological remains across the site and to test the suitability of such deposits for detailed excavation.

A Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2007) was approved by Walsall Council prior to implementation (Appendix 2), in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

1.2 Location and geology

The site is situated on the summit of Barr Beacon, Walsall, and is centred on NGR SP 4061 2973 (Fig. 1). The present character of the site is open parkland, with areas of car park, tree plantation, gorse plantation, reinstated heather, and pathways. The site is surrounded predominantly by farmland, with housing encroaching to the east and south.

The Barr Beacon summit is a crescent-shaped ridge that curves around the farmland to the west, while the landscape to the east slopes gently away towards Sutton Park.

The underlying geology consists of interlinked beds of conglomerate and sandstone, known as the Bunter Pebble Beds. These form part of the larger Kidderminster Conglomerate Formation, and are present at depths of as little as 3 inches across the surveyed areas.

2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The following summary is taken from a desk-based assessment by Ramsey (2007).

With its summit at 227m AOD, Barr Beacon is reportedly the highest point following its latitude eastwards until the Ural Mountains in Russia. It is one of the highest points in the local area, and it is reputed that no less than 15 counties are

visible from it. Barr Beacon has undoubtedly served as a focal point for human activity and settlement in the region for millennia. However, much has been speculated concerning its use in ancient times, and these claims should be treated with a certain amount of caution as early writers were anxious to prove an early importance for the hill as a Roman, Saxon or Danish camp (Shaw pers. comm., BCSMR 2661). The name Barr is likely to derive from ancient British, meaning 'top' or 'summit', similar to Welsh 'Bar', Irish 'Barr' and old Celtic 'Barro' (Poulton-Smith 1995, 55).

18th and 19th century historians have suggested that there had been Roman activity at Barr Beacon but there is no positive evidence for this. Willmore (1887, 13) quotes Salmon (1726, Vol 2, 136) who describes 'lines drawn around the hill on one side enclosing a large camp in the form of a half moon'. Stebbing Shaw (1798, 18) states that 'several sub-divisions have been made, which works may have been altered by the Danes or Saxons'. However by Willmore's time, the end of the 19th century, there were no earthworks visible, and he suggests they had possibly been removed by ploughing (Willmore 1887, 23).

Willmore further states, somewhat theatrically, that during the Anglo-Saxon period, the area was the scene of almost constant conflict and tradition relates that the neighbourhood of Barr Beacon was witness to a great struggle between Saxons and Danes (Willmore 1887, 29). The high hills of Barr Beacon were thought a proper place to alarm this part of the kingdom by firing a beacon placed there on approach of piratical Danes (*ibid.*, 17). A beacon is recorded here in a 10th century Anglo-Saxon charter (Hooke 2006, 41, 56).

He goes on to further suggest that the struggle between the rival houses of York and Lancaster also raged fiercely in this part of the country, and that there are records of a group of Yorkists occupying Barr Beacon for a time during this period (Willmore 1887, 266).

It is suggested by Woodall (1951) that Barr Beacon was probably illuminated to announce the arrival of the Spanish in 1588, and that Samuel Lloyd in his 'Lloyds of Birmingham 1907' recalls that during the Napoleonic Wars Barr Beacon was equipped with poles, iron, basket and chains ready to announce the landing of Napoleon's troops (Woodall 1951, 7).

In 1800 Barr Beacon was occupied for a month by a detachment of engineers, taking bearings of different stations as seen from the Beacon summit for the government Ordnance Survey (Woodall 1951, 8), and in 1887 Barr Beacon was illuminated to commemorate the Jubilee of Queen Victoria. This occasion was reported on in the Birmingham Gazette of June 22nd 1887, which described the fire as 24 feet square at the base, rising to a cone 30 ft high, and including cordwood, brushwood, sleepers, tarred boat wood and 40 empty oil and tar casks, all saturated with 216 gallons of oil, tar and creosote ventilated by a cross tunnel and chimney. (Woodall 1951, 7).

The South Staffordshire Waterworks Company was allowed to construct a storage reservoir on the hill in 1897, and in 1918 the land was purchased by Colonel Wilkinson who presented it to the public as a memorial to the Staffordshire and Warwickshire men who fell in World War I (*ibid.*, 8). A memorial to these men, and to Colonel Wilkinson, was erected on the summit in 1933, and was intended to be illuminated every night. However, during the Second World War this was removed for safety to a building in Cannon Hill Park, a building which unfortunately was subsequently bombed (*ibid.*, 9). The monument structure itself still stands within the site.

3.0 GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

The following summary is taken from a geophysical survey report by Breeze (2007).

Geophysical investigation, in the form of resistance survey, was undertaken within Walsall Council land on the southern summit of Barr Beacon, Walsall (Appendix 1). Work was commissioned by Walsall Council and undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology. Three areas were surveyed, two upon the summit itself, and one on the western slope of the beacon. Despite constraints imposed by the local geomorphology, survey revealed a series of potential features across the area.

Primarily, substantial possible structural remains were identified on the south-eastern summit, in the form of a large (15m²) regular high resistance square, potentially indicative of a structural footprint, foundations or floor. A further potentially structural area of high resistance was identified to the south, with evidence of later truncation by a series of negative features.

A series of responses correlating to visible earthworks were identified as the remains of medieval ridge and furrow and several potential field boundaries.

An unusual series of three high resistance regular arcs was identified within the area, of unknown origin, and of interest for future investigation.

Survey has indicated the potential for the preservation of archaeological features at shallow depths upon the southern summit. The geophysical survey of the western slope failed to identify any features of possible archaeological origin.

Recommendations based upon the results of this investigation were proposed, primarily that identified features may benefit from targeted trial excavation. The topography and geology of the area suggests the site would form the basis for a successful community-based project.

4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the evaluation is to determine the character, extent, date, state of preservation and the potential significance of any buried remains.

More specific aims were to:

- Test the results of the geophysical survey
- Assess the suitability of the site for further excavation which may include student and community participation.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

Each test pit measured 1.5m². The depth of stratigraphy encountered meant only 8 out of a planned 12 test pits were excavated.

The turf was lifted and stored on plastic sheeting. All topsoil and modern overburden was removed by hand down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon or the subsoil. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was then undertaken. Archaeological features and deposits were manually sample

excavated sufficiently to define their character and to obtain suitable dating evidence. Any test pits left open overnight were fenced off with barrier tape.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50, and sections were drawn of all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:10. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using a combination of monochrome, digital, and colour slide photography.

The full site archive includes all artefactual and/or ecofactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (Walker 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with an appropriate repository, subject to permission from the landowner.

6.0 RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

What follows is a summary of the deposits and features identified in the test pits. Full details of individual trenches are available in the project archive.

6.2 Natural geology

The natural subsoil was reached at a depth of between 0.12m and 0.47m beneath the current ground level across the site. It consisted of sand or stoney sand that had a range of colourisation, from orange-brown to light mid orange.

6.3 Summary of archaeological features and deposits.

Test Pit 1 (Fig. 3)

Natural subsoil (1004) was identified at a depth of 0.27m. A gully (1003: Plate 2) was revealed cutting the natural on a NW-SE alignment and measured 0.25m wide x 0.04m deep. The fill (1002) consisted of a range of coloured orange sands from dark to light tan. The gully was overlain by a layer of light grey silty sand (1001) 0.22m deep which, in turn, was sealed by a 0.05m depth of dark grey-brown sandy-silt topsoil (1000). A small fragment of probable oyster shell and a sherd of post-medieval pottery were recovered from 1002.

Test Pit 2

Natural subsoil (2002) was identified at a depth 0.4m. This was sealed by 0.29m of grey-brown sandy silt (2001) that, in turn, was overlain by 0.11m of topsoil (2000). No archaeological features or deposits were located.

Test Pit 3

Natural subsoil (3004) was identified at a depth 0.35m. This was overlain by 0.20m of mid-grey-brown silty clay subsoil (3001) deep. A N-S aligned v-shaped gully (3003), with an organic dark brown-grey silt fill (3002) and measuring 0.18

in width and 0.16m in depth, was cut through the subsoil. This feature was sealed by 0.25m of dark brown-grey silty clay topsoil (3000).

Test Pit 4

Natural subsoil (4004) was identified at a depth of 0.47m. Overlying the natural was a dark brown pebbly sand subsoil layer (4002) that lay beneath an angled layer (4003) of orange-brown pebbly sand. Overlying both 4002 and 4003 was a layer of orange-brown sand subsoil, 0.15 deep that was sealed by dark brown sandy silt topsoil, 0.10m in depth. A small fragment of slag was located in context 4003.

Test Pit 5

Natural subsoil (5002) was identified at a depth of 0.12m. This was sealed by 0.06m of dark brown silty stoney sand subsoil (5001), which, in turn, was overlain by 0.15m of brown organic sandy silt topsoil (5000). No archaeological features or deposits were located.

Test Pit 6 (Fig. 3)

Natural subsoil (6005) was encountered at a depth of between 0.30m and 0.45m, sloping to the south. The E-W stratigraphic profile at the northern end of the test pit revealed a subsoil layer (6002) consisting of light grey-brown sand containing cobbles overlying the natural to a depth of 0.15m. This layer was overlain by a layer (6001) of mid-greyish brown silty sand 0.10 deep that was interpreted as probable upcast for a bank to the north. This context was sealed by 0.05m deep mid-dark brown organic sandy topsoil (6000).

The N-S stratigraphic profile (Plate 3) at the western end of the test pit revealed not only the natural, overlain by 6002, but also a possible ditch feature (6003) that had a fill (6004) consisting of dark brown sandy silt, 0.40 wide x 0.15 deep. Subsoil 6002 was overlain by 6001 and by a depression of 6000 that was interpreted as the course of a footpath visible on the surface. Topsoil 6000 sealed both 6001 and 6003.

Test Pit 7

Natural subsoil (7002) was identified at a depth of 0.35m. This was sealed by mid-brown-grey silty sand subsoil (7001) and overlain by 0.15m of grey-brown silty sand topsoil (7000). No archaeological features or deposits were located.

Test Pit 8 (Fig. 3)

Natural subsoil (8003) was identified at a depth of 0.39m and was overlain by compact grey-brown stoney sandy silt subsoil (8002). This layer was cut by a 0.25m deep bowl-shape furrow (8004: Plate 4)) that had a fill of grey silty sand (8001) and was sealed by dark brown organic sandy silt topsoil, 0.09m in depth. No archaeological features or deposits were located.

7.0 DISCUSSION

The evaluation found no evidence of prehistoric or Roman activity on site. A gully in Test Pit 1 contained a single sherd of post-medieval pottery and in Test Pit 8 evidence of ridge and furrow ploughing was revealed directly under the topsoil. This agricultural activity is most likely medieval in date. The ridge and furrow

identified is on a different E-W alignment to the N-S aligned ridge and furrow suggested by the results of the geophysical survey (Appendix 1).

The E-W linear highlighted in the geophysical survey results and investigated by Test Pit 6 produced evidence of a ditch and bank but no datable artefacts. It is likely that this feature formed a land division, possibly dating to the enclosures period of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Evidence of archaeological activity suggested by other geophysical anomalies remained elusive. It is likely that underlying geology produced anomalies within the survey results.

Although the evaluation results could find little evidence to support early occupation of Barr Beacon it is clear from the desk-based assessment, and an informal visual inspection of the area around the site, that the potential for locating archaeology remains high.

8.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Walsall Council – Thanks go to Mike Shaw, Black Country Archaeologist, who monitored the project on behalf of Walsall Council and also to Jeff McBride of Walsall Countryside Services for allowing site staff to use their facilities. Work on site was undertaken by Paul Breeze, Kimberley Costello, Helen Foster, Jon Hennah, and was supervised by Mark Charles. Mark Charles produced the written report which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds, and edited by Kevin Colls who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

9.0 REFERENCES

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APPENDICES

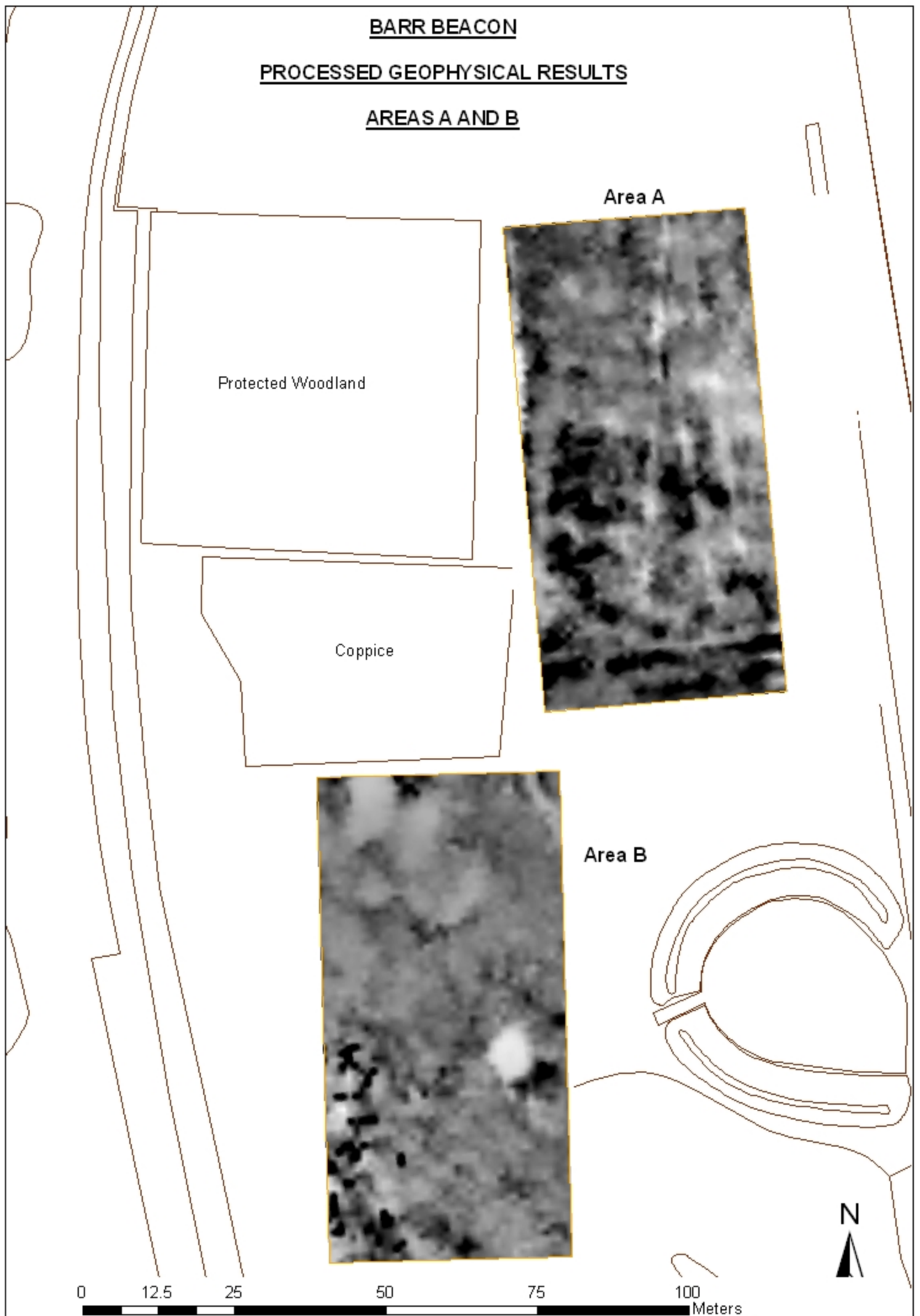
**APPENDIX 1- GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY
(PROCESSED RESULTS & INTERPRETATION)**

APPENDIX 2 - WSI

BARR BEACON

PROCESSED GEOPHYSICAL RESULTS

AREAS A AND B



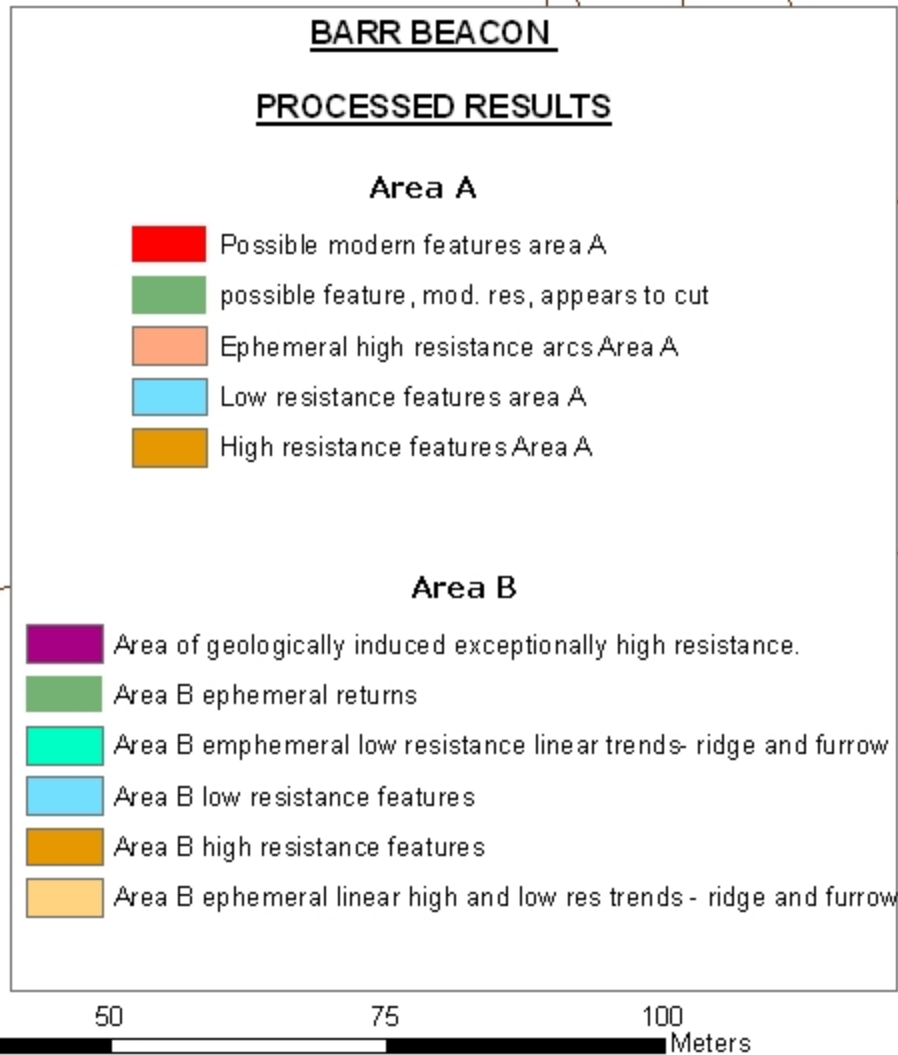
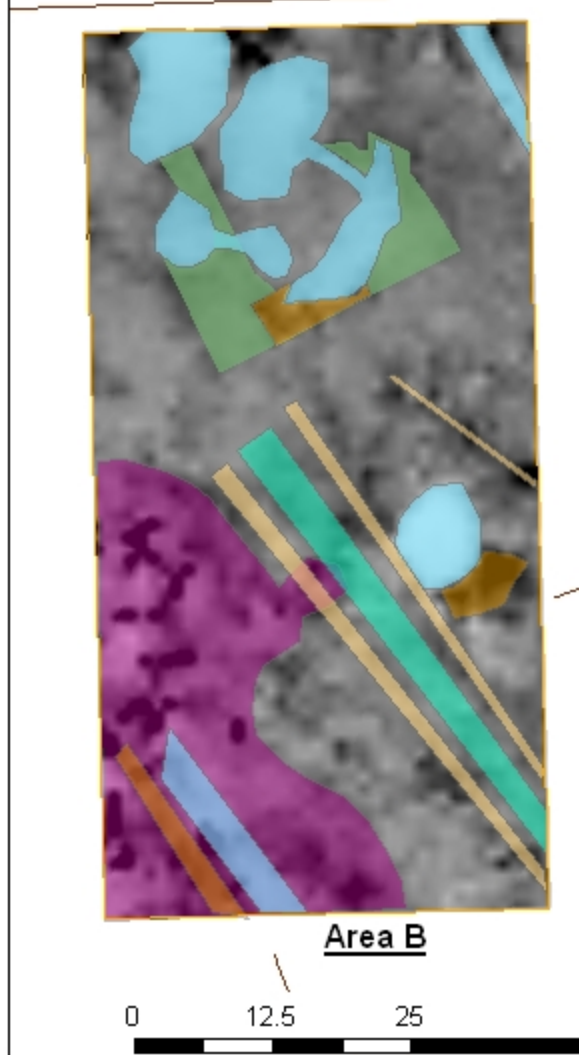
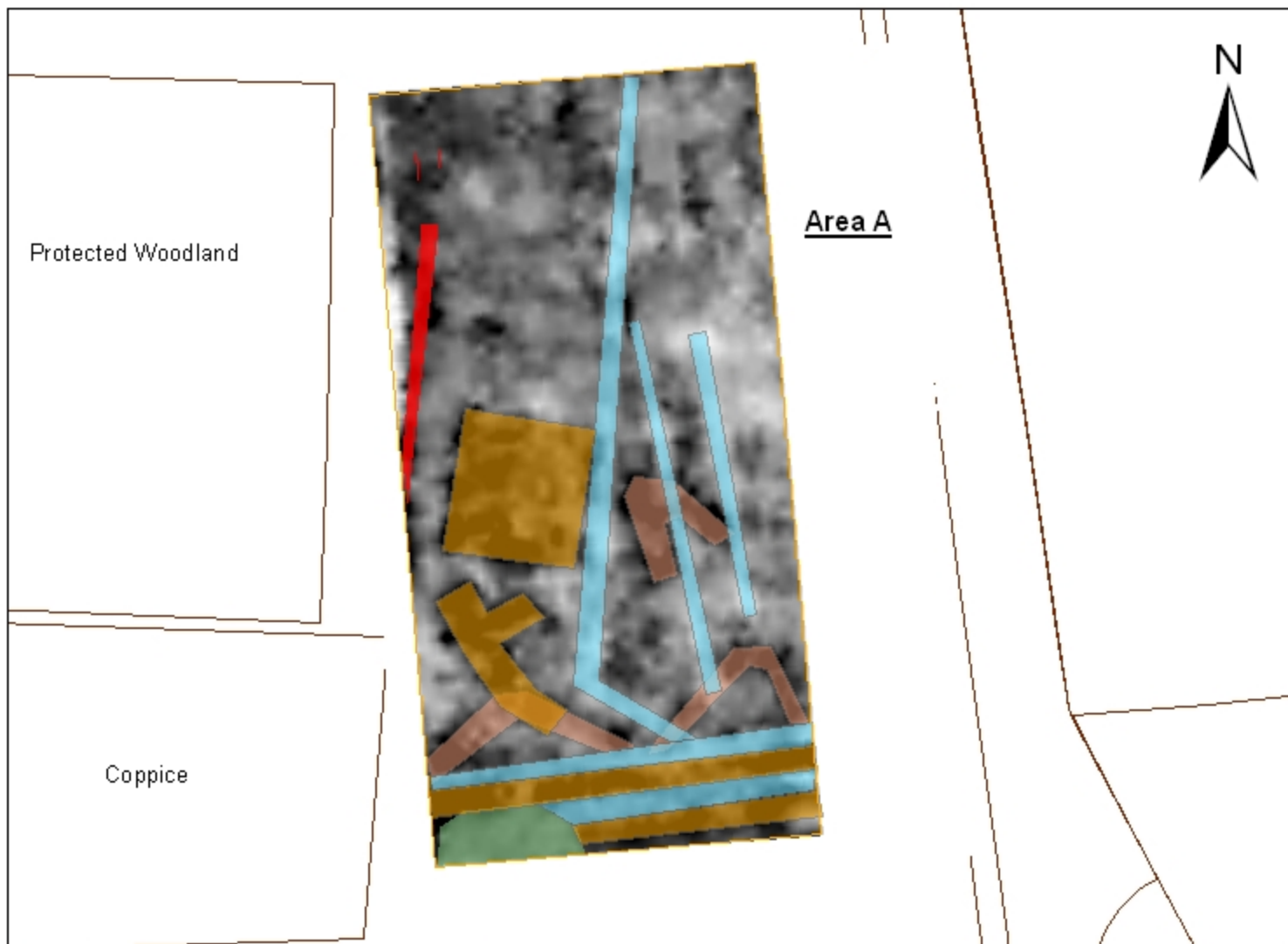




Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4

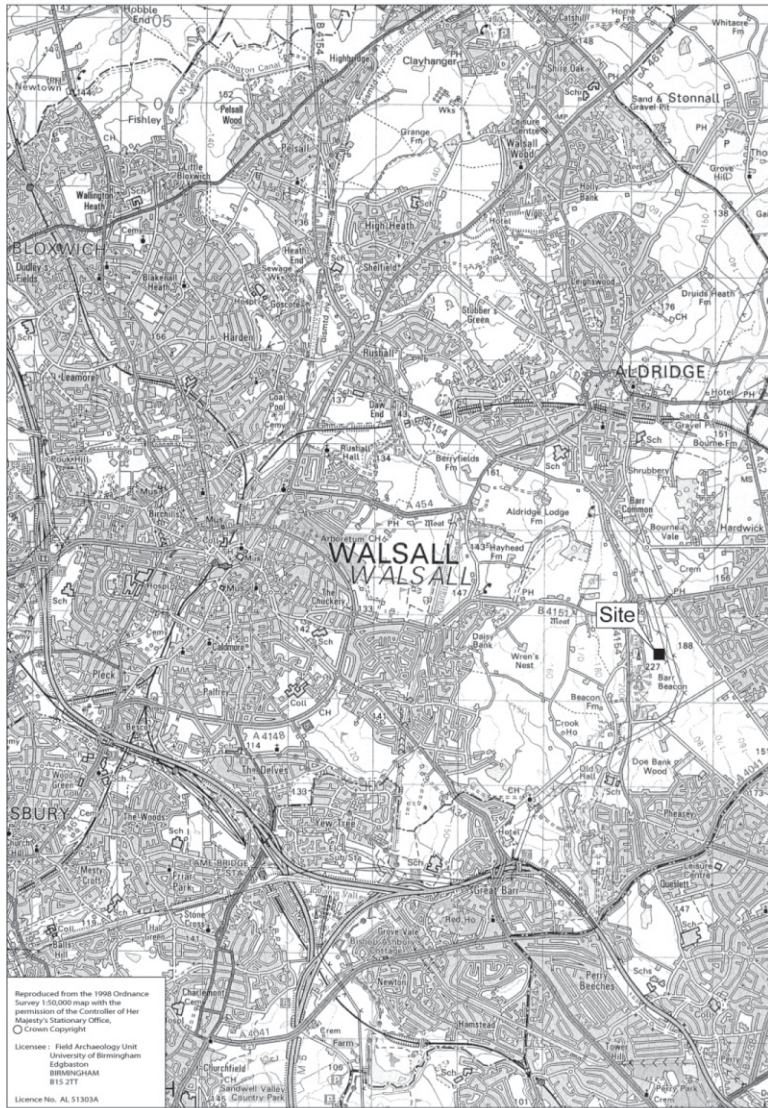


Fig.1

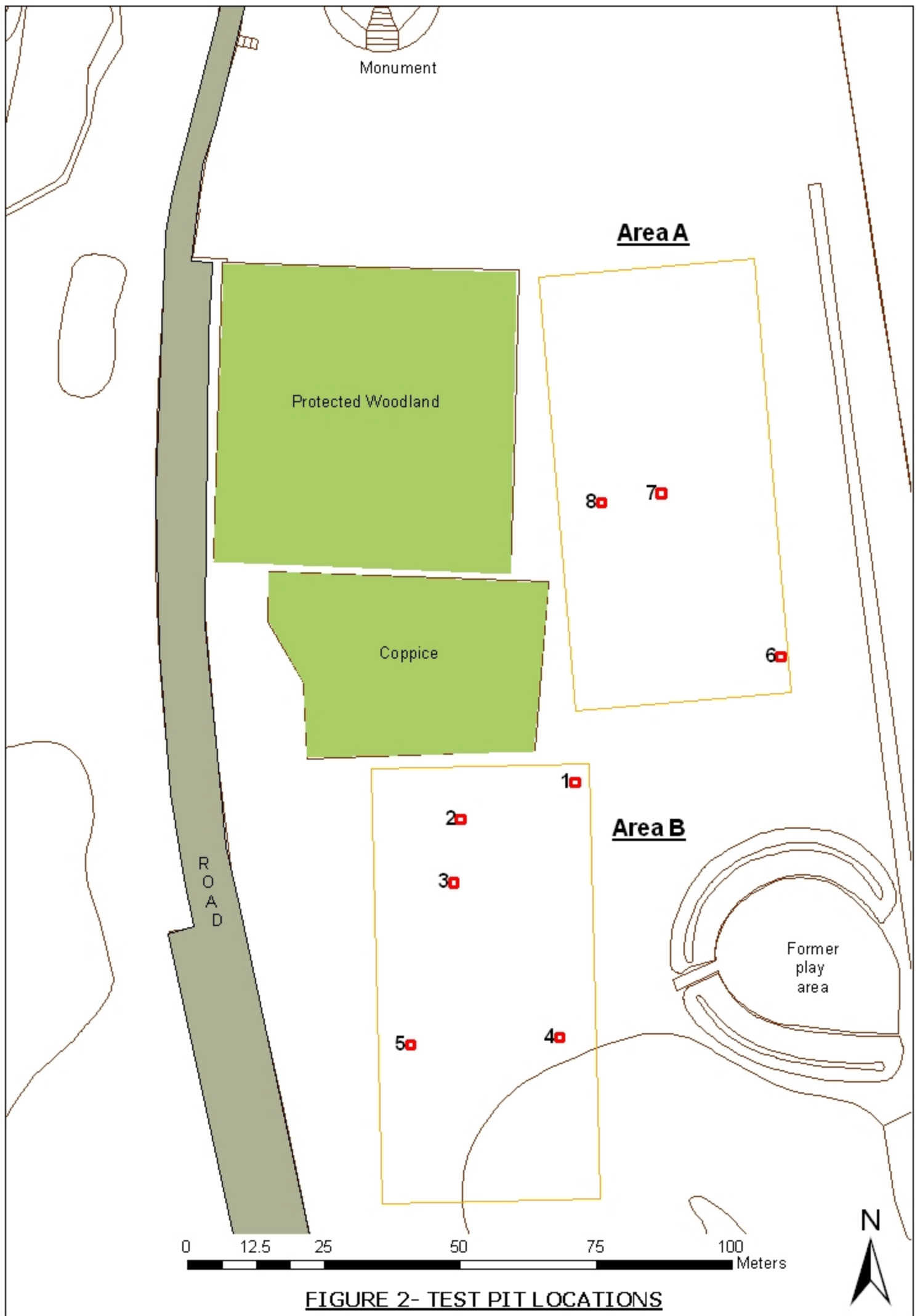
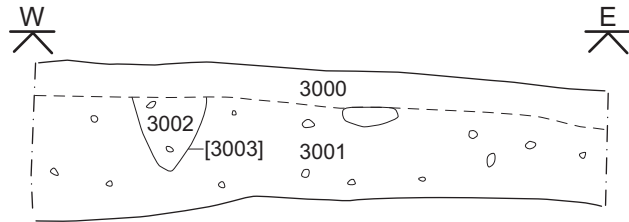
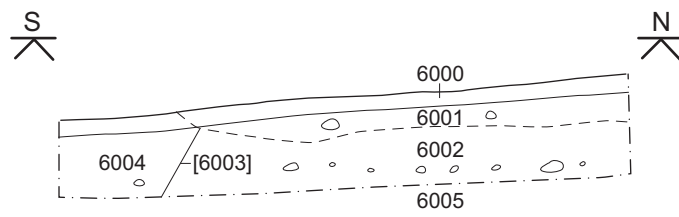


FIGURE 2- TEST PIT LOCATIONS

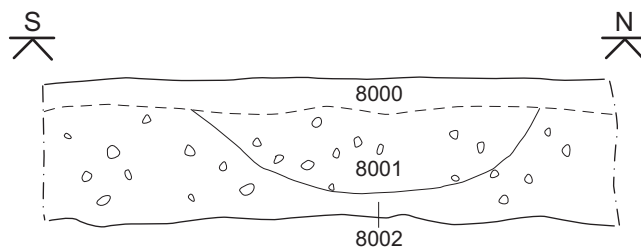
Test pit 3



Test pit 6



Test pit 8



0 1m

Fig.3