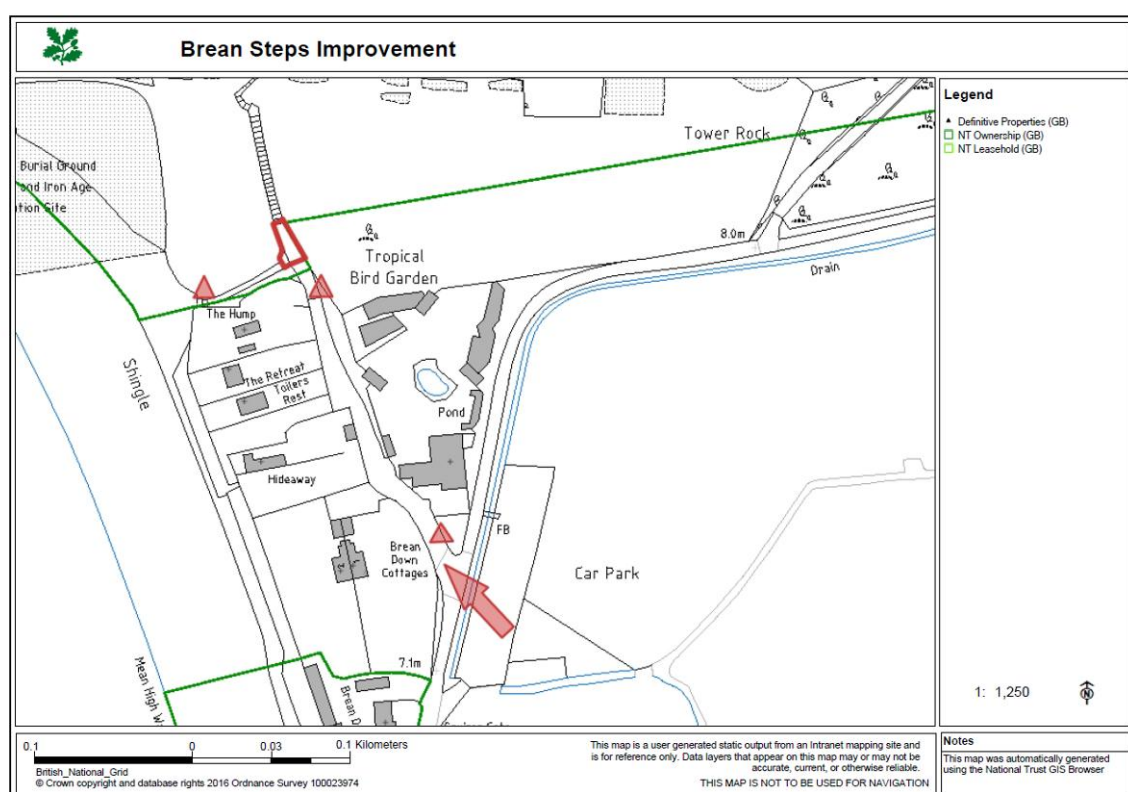


BREAN DOWN STEPS INSTALLATION ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 10-11 JANUARY 2017 – Nick Hanks MA ACifA

Non-technical summary

This watch brief records the observations made by Nick Hanks MA ACifA, during the installation of railway sleepers as additional steps at the lower end of a flight of concrete steps across the most archaeologically sensitive area of Brean Down. This area has suffered from erosion due to this being the main visitor access on to the down. Nick Hanks was acting for the National Trust in a voluntary capacity observing the limited excavation of material on the 10th January 2017 prior to installing the steps. All the material that was exposed or removed by the contractors (Guy Manning Countryside Services) was either sterile sand devoid of archaeological material, or material previously placed here by the National Trust to deal with the erosion.



Introductory statements

Brean Down is designated both as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) (National Heritage List for England number 1008211) and as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). As such Scheduled Monument consent was applied for and given by Historic England. One of the principal reasons for this statutory protection was the unusual Sand Cliff deposits that span the late Pleistocene to the present. These include a sequence of prehistoric settlements and a post-Roman cemetery. They are crossed by the main visitor route and the concrete steps. The soil of the Sand Cliff is mostly sand, or a sand mix, and not consequently not very stable.

The works carried out on 10-11 January 2017 involved the installation of railway sleepers to provide additional steps at the lower end of the main flight of concrete steps. Here the gradient lessens, but the footfall leads to erosion of the sandy soil. At times this erosion

below the lower step has been up to 0.5m. Previously, gravel and a few larger stones have been used to in fill the erosion here. Consequently, it was expected that most of the material to be removed to install the sleepers would be from previous repairs to the erosion. However, with some inroads in to upper most layer of the Sand Cliff deposits, which due to the action of rabbits, and other surface disturbance, could include archaeological material from other deeper layers.

As Nick Hanks has been studying Brean Down and monitoring the erosion issues there since 1997 he was considered best placed to monitor the works for the National Trust in his capacity as a volunteer.

Aims and Methodology

- To observe any exposed features and record by photography or drawing as appropriate.
- To collect and record any archaeological material disturbed or exposed during the works.

Results

The photographs 1 and 2, (taken by Rebekah West, National Trust Area Ranger) show the condition of the area of the works before and after installation of the railway sleepers.





Photograph 3 (taken by Nick Hanks) shows the middle stage of construction. This shows that the profile of the erosion was such that material was added to the centre of the path to raise it. Only at the ends of the sleepers, and then only for their thickness, was there any excavation of soil. The one exception was on the line of the highest sleeper where three rough c.30-40cm rocks were removed. The three rocks were on the same alignment as the sleeper forming a rough step. These were almost certainly from previous repairs to erosion as they protruded from the surface in the centre of the visitor route. Below these the soil was a mixture of natural top soil, the redder subsoil below and some hard rock from previous path repairs.



Photograph 4 (taken by Nick Hanks) shows the maximum depth excavated was 30cm, and then only at the ends of the railway sleepers. Here the difference between the top soil and the first red subsoil layer could be observed. However, the soil in all of the locations observed during the watching brief was sterile and without any artefacts, gravel or stones, as shown in this photograph.



Conclusions

The works carried out to create these steps had the minimum of disturbance to small areas of the top soil, and subsoil. No archaeological features or finds were damaged or revealed during this work. However, any similar works in this sensitive area should always have a watching brief as there is always the potential for exposure or damage to important archaeological features or finds from these rich deposits.

References and bibliography

Bell, M G 1990 *Brean Down Excavations 1983-1987*. English Heritage Archaeological Report No.15

Hanks, N 2016 *Erosion Monitoring Report 1997-2016. Brean Down, Somerset*. The National Trust.