



PRIORY CRESCENT SOUTHEND-ON-SEA

Condition Survey

06 November 2009



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Priory Crescent, Southend-On-Sea:

Site condition report following the dismantling of Camp Bling

1.1 Introduction

The following summary is intended to inform the reader as to the current condition of the Priory Crescent site as left following the dismantling of Camp Bling in July 2009, with especial reference to areas thought to have been disturbed during the life of the protest camp. It should be stressed, that this report does not take into account any damage that may have occurred to the trees during the occupancy of the site. Following the clearance and vacation of the site, a preliminary meeting and walkabout was undertaken on 3rd August 2009 with representatives of MOLA, Southend-On-Sea Borough Council and Atkins Heritage to discuss the options for further work on the site and it was agreed that:

1. a survey and condition report should be undertaken to assess the 'possible' impact of the Camp on archaeologically sensitive areas
2. a new geophysical survey (to include Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR)) be commissioned in order to pinpoint possible areas of archaeological interest

Although a geophysical survey (magnetometer and resistivity) was carried out as part of the original site investigation in 2003, the results were relatively poor and inconclusive due to a combination of factors including the arid nature of the soil and electrical interference from a variety of surrounding features: such as the Herris fencing around the site perimeter, buried cable ducts, and overhead electrified wires for the adjoining railway line.

Following on from the site meeting and in advance of the condition survey being undertaken, contact was made with a spokesperson and former resident of Camp Bling to better understand the nature of the buildings erected on site and their possible impact on the archaeology. The responses to a number of general and specific questions are given below:

In terms of the general upkeep and care of the site, it was stated that:
'People were always aware of the sensitive nature of the location and treated it accordingly during the time that Camp Bling was in existence'.

In relation to a question as to whether a series of visible surface scars were the remains of features such as latrine pits dug beneath toilets, possible rubbish pits, garden or allotment areas, disturbance from house platforms etc the response was:
'The infamous compost toilet was built to sit above ground, as opposed to being a dug out pit. No food was grown directly in the ground, however there was a raised bed built by the visitor centre, and some window boxes scattered around to grow herbs and vegetables. Many of the current bare patches of earth are due to the temporary living structures which were built to the best of my knowledge to be as non-destructive as possible. Some were secured with wooden posts sunk about a foot or so into the ground to minimise impact. The wooden tower may have had slightly deeper footings, other than that I am not aware of anything that should have affected the archaeology directly'.

Although a question about the reported '*non-invasive tunnel system*' remained unanswered, my view was that a picture of a deep shaft purporting to be an entry point into the tunnels was part of a pre-existing lined shaft and part of an existing drainage system on site. There is a substantial raised manhole over a deep drop-shaft in the centre of the site which it is assumed to have been opened and photographed. This theory is borne out by the fact that one of the Camp Bling structures had been erected around and completely enclosed the manhole (Fig 4 and Fig 5). In relation to tunnels, it may be prudent to inspect the side of the railway embankment along the east side of the site (which lies outside of the footprint of the survey area) to ascertain if any headings had been tunnelled beneath the site from this point, but this is thought to be unlikely.

1.2 The site survey

The site condition survey was undertaken on 21st October 2009 and was concurrent with the programme of geophysical work, with a GPR survey being underway at the time of the visit (Fig 8 and Fig 9). The principal aims of the survey were to define and accurately locate areas of:

- surface disturbance where the ground had clearly been broken – possibly indicating cut features
- areas of parch-marks or absence of vegetation – likely to be the vestigial remains of house platforms from Camp Bling

A total of ten areas which met with the above criteria were defined and these targets located using a combination of handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) and EDM total station (see Fig 1 and cover) likely to reflect the positions of the more robust structures and buildings of Camp Bling (see Fig 2 and Fig 3).

Although four of these areas appeared to have been dug over, it is thought likely that this surface disturbance is relatively superficial and was part of the dismantling process or levelling over of soil from the raised bed in front of the visitor centre. This interpretation is supported by a report in the local Echo newspaper dated Wednesday 24th June 2009 in which Shaun Qureshi, one of the founding members of Camp Bling, said:

'We are doing it (the dismantling of the camp) as sympathetically as possible to minimise the impact. All that can be seen from the huts we have taken down is a patch of soil, which we dig over. Grass is already growing back' (see Fig 6 and Fig 7).

The Ordnance Datum (OD) surface levels of the disturbed areas are consistent with the level data shown on the developer drawings which were compiled in advance of the archaeological evaluation in 2003.

1.3 Summary and conclusions

Based on the written and verbal accounts above, together with a review of the photographic evidence, it seems likely that the comparatively small visible areas of disturbed ground are relatively superficial and contained within the topsoil horizon. Although a number of the larger Camp Bling structures were built on earth-fast posts set in post pits, the majority of these are reported to have been no deeper than 1ft (0.30m),

and consequently these will not have had any major impact on the underlying archaeological levels.

In conclusion, it is considered that the presence of Camp Bling on site between 2005–2009 is likely to have had a negligible effect on the buried archaeological resource, although it will be necessary to compare the results of this survey with those of the geophysical investigation to see if this interpretation is confirmed or contradicted in any way.

1.4 Recommendations for further work

There are 2 areas which it is suggested merit further investigation as detailed in Sections 1.1 & 1.3 above, these are:

- *The reported tunnel system beneath Camp Bling:* inspect the side of the railway embankment cutting along the east side of the site to ascertain if any tunnelled headings have been made beneath the site from this point.
- *The condition and geophysical surveys:* compare and integrate the results of the condition survey with those of the forthcoming geophysical investigation to see if there is any evidence of deeper ground disturbance allied to Camp Bling.

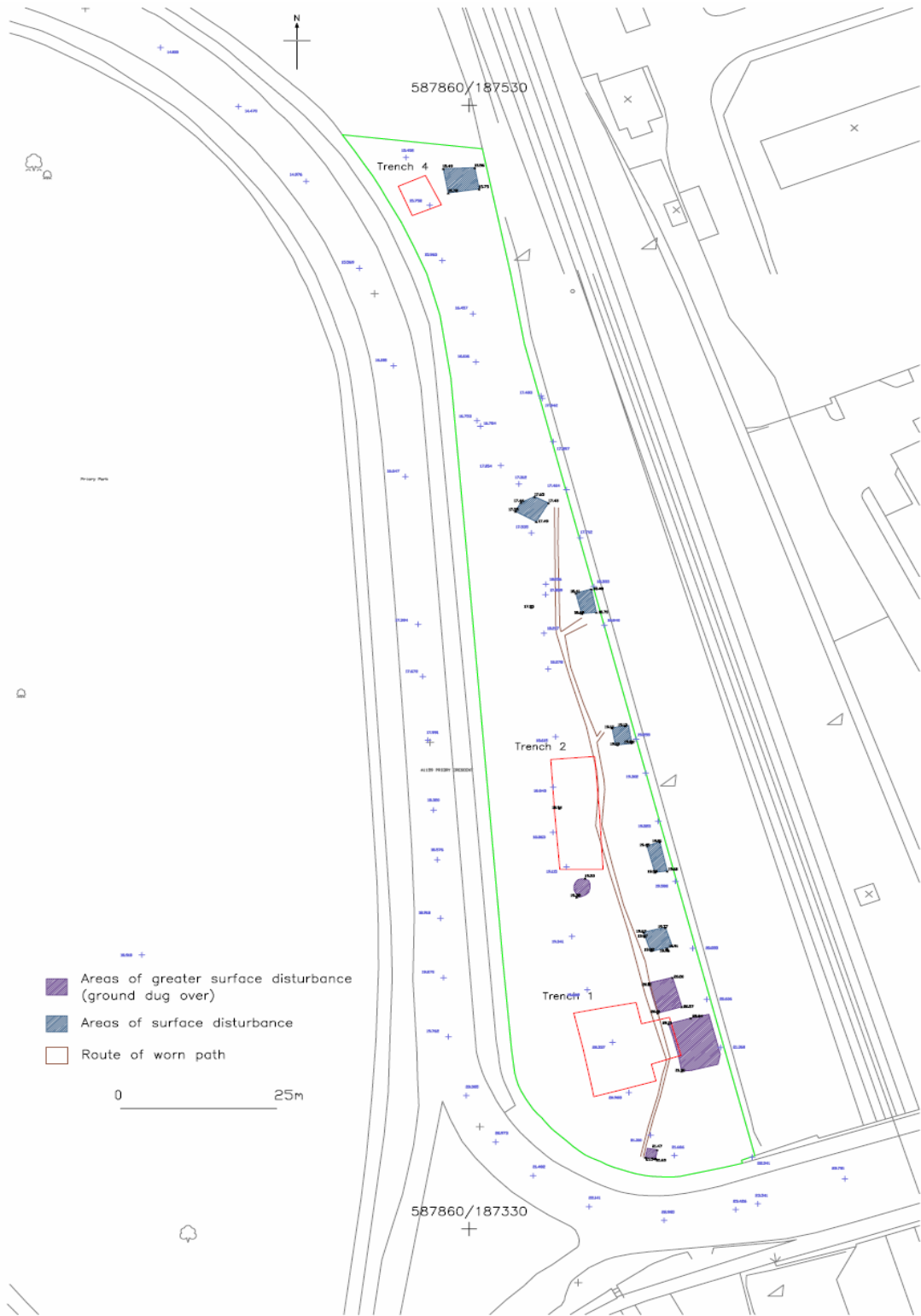


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Fig 2 Entrance to Camp Bling looking N/E towards the visitor centre and wind turbine tower



Fig 3 The wind turbine tower and adjoining Camp Bling house (looking N/E)



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