

**Avebury A4 cable trenches investigation:
preliminary report
(CfA project 654)**

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Background

Following enquiries to the Inspector from local residents, EH Centre for Archaeology agreed to examine a series of trenches that were being cut as part of a cable installation scheme along the A4 in Wiltshire. Upon arrival on the afternoon of Friday 3 March 2000 six trenches were identified for examination due to their proximity to the Avebury World heritage Site, while other cable trenches were noticed along the route of the A4 as far east as Hungerford. The trenches are approximately 2-300 metres apart, and are locations for access points or “manholes” along the cable trench. In the stretch of A4 between Marlborough and Avebury all of the trenches are on the south side of the road, in the grass verge, no more than 1.5 metres from the edge of the tarmac carriageway. The trenches were located, photographed, measured, and in two cases sections were drawn. However, the locations are measured along the road from nearby landmarks in the first instance and then plotted on a large scale map, so exact location coordinates may vary by several metres. A map showing the location of the trenches and the Schedule area is appended, but the exact location of the Schedule area and World Heritage Site boundaries would need to be confirmed through the use of appropriate survey equipment.

The trenches

All of the trenches are set with their long axis parallel with the carriageway, roughly east-west. All were protected by plastic movable barriers, and were easy to identify from the road. Numbering for this record began at the trench opposite the Avenue junction, and ran east to the Bell Inn, prior to the discovery of number six while driving to the Beckhampton roundabout to check for the extents of the cabling scheme.

Trench 1 is located at the junction with the road that runs up the Avenue to Avebury, and is just outside the Scheduled area for SM 28131 at approx SU 11172/68351. The trench is filled by a steel box “man hole” structure set in concrete, so no exposed archaeology was visible in section. The steel box had removable shutters at either end, and the evidence indicated that the entire construction was very recent. The extreme dimensions of the intervention measured 1.8m long by 1m wide, and 0.8m deep.

Trench 2 is approximately 30m east of the junction to East Kennett (marked by the signs for Sarsen Pet Hotel), and appears to be within the Scheduled area of SM 28131/01 at approx SU 11570/68132. The hole has not been fitted with any structure yet, so all four profiles could be examined. The trench was clearly excavated by machine, and measures 2m long by 1.1m wide by 0.75m deep. The base of the trench was made up of broken chalk in a light yellowish brown silty sand matrix, which started at a uniform depth of 0.65m across the trench. Above this was a thick deposit of dark brown sandy silt with a few flecks of chalk. This silt layer was sealed by a layer of the same dark brown silt matrix, but with chalk fragments of varied sizes and charcoal flecks. This upper layer formed the ground surface, and its base sloped down towards the roadway. It appears as though the layer with the varied chalk fragments is a recent build-up, possibly associated with the construction of the A4.

Trench 3 is approximately 180m east of the layby for the Sanctuary and Ridgeway, and

approximately 800m west of the Bell Inn and junction for West Overton at approx SU 12060/68085. It is 1.7m long by 1.6m wide by 0.8m deep, and contains two steel box structures side by side set in concrete.

Trench 4 is approximately 300m west of the Bell Inn and junction to West Overton at approx SU 12550/68194. It is 1.8m long by 0.95m wide by 0.8m deep, and contains a steel box set in concrete.

Trench 5 is approximately 80m east of the Bell Inn and junction for West Overton at approx SU 12915/68318. It is 1.6m long by 0.9m wide by 0.7m deep, and is lined with a concrete box structure, poured *in-situ* using some form of temporary timber shuttering.

Trench 6 was discovered last, and is at the southern tip of Waden Hill in the small area of woodland marked on the OS 1:25,000 map at approx SU 10700/68345. It is 1.8m long by 0.9m wide by 0.9m deep, and has not yet been filled by any structure. In section the top 0.15m is dark brown silty topsoil, with a 0.10m thick layer of broken chalk below it. Beneath this is a thick layer of light yellowish brown silt with fragments of broken chalk and large (0.20m) mottles of dark brown silt, extending to 0.80m below ground surface. The base of this layer is level, and below is a homogenous deposit of light yellowish brown silt that forms the base of the trench. The mottled layer suggests make-up material to grade for the road, and visual examination of the landform either side of the A4 at this point suggests that the southern tip of Waden Hill was truncated, with waste material dumped on the south side of the road to form an embankment. Trench 6 is the western-most trench seen on the A4 between Marlborough and the Beckhampton roundabout.

Conclusions:

The trenches that were not filled by concrete demonstrate a mix of potentially archaeological material and probable road make-up, similar to the results of cable trenches examined last year along the Avenue (see Nick Burton's 1999 CAS report on the investigations along the Avenue). The limited sections did not show any identifiable features, but these might be better examined in plan. Unlike the earlier intervention, this appears to be the construction of a completely new cable route through ground that was last disturbed by the creation of the A4. Neither of the two empty trenches showed any signs of cable ducting at the ends, confirming the new route hypothesis and indicating that there is further disturbance to come. (The other trenches show no sign of being connected, but the shuttering might conceal adjacent disturbance.) Given the length of the runs between trenches it is unlikely that the connections will be made by soil boring alone, and on the road near Marlborough work crews were observed using a mini-excavator with what appeared to be a 300mm bucket to dig connecting trenches to a depth of about 0.6m to receive plastic sleeves through which the cables will run. The connecting trenches will effectively sever any directly observable stratigraphic links between the archaeology on each side of the road.

Trench 2 is almost certainly in the Scheduled area given that the text of the Schedule specifically excludes the road surfaces but includes the ground below, and most of the other trenches are likely to be within the World Heritage Site and the Conservation Area. The

connecting trenches between the access points will definitely cross these boundaries. Regardless of the circumstances that have led to the current situation, this cable installation scheme calls out for a watching brief of all the works, including examination of a long section across the Avenue as provided by the trenching. This brief should involve a constant site presence over the whole stretch between West Overton and Beckhampton, including sufficient time to examine and record the trenches as they are exposed, and should involve sieving of spoil for finds. Given that the cables are likely to be laid to a depth of around 0.6m any attempt at soil boring as a trenching technique should be resisted. Soil boring could affect the site at a depth below the intervention of road building, and would not allow any useful investigation of archaeological deposits that may be disturbed. The terms of the watching brief should allow the archaeologists at least a full day in each 2-300m section of trench (access point to access point) for recording and interpretation, with the right to request more time if needed. The proposed day access should be without any contractor's works taking place, and should occur prior to any laying of cable ducts. Please note that this will have a significant impact on the cable contractor's work programme.

Archive:

The archive consists of 20 digital photographs (at least two per trench - one showing it in its setting, one showing the intervention in detail), matching colour slide and monochrome print photos, two section drawings on permatrace, and a page of notes.



