

**Grimesthorpe Road, Burngreave, Sheffield.  
An Archaeological Watching Brief  
on the 'Roman Ridge'.**



View of Grimesthorpe Road looking west

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## ***Executive Summary***

*An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) on behalf of Sheffield City Council during the month of March, 2007. The watching brief comprised observing all ground works undertaken by Sheffield City Council to improve the safety of the bank on Grimesthorpe Road, Burngreave, Sheffield.*

*The 'Roman Ridge', a collective name for a series of dykes running across south west Yorkshire, is an important defensive earthwork that is part of a wider series of archaeological features including the Iron Age camp at Wincobank. According to previous excavations undertaken in 1948 the ridge ran along the natural bank on Grimesthorpe Road, eventually turning east towards Wilkinson's Spring Wood.*

*The watching brief did not reveal any archaeological remains or evidence that earlier works on the site had truncated or destroyed archaeological features or deposits.*

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) was commissioned by Sheffield City Council to undertake a watching brief during works to improve the safety of the bank that runs along the north-west side of Grimesthorpe Road, Burngreave (Fig. 1). The bank had been supported by a revetment wall that had recently started to collapse onto the pavement in places. The works included the demolition of the existing wall and its replacement with gabions, in this case one metre square wire baskets filled with coal waste and stone from the demolished wall. The topsoil on the upper part of the bank above the gabions was scraped off by machine so the gabions could be fitted before the soil was reinstated. The bank at the west end of the road was to be excavated to a gradual slope to avoid any future slippage and therefore, no gabions were necessary here.



Figure. 1 Location of Grimesthorpe Road, Burngreave, Sheffield.

## 2. Location and Geology

- 2.1 Burngreave ward, which includes the districts of Burngreave, Fir Vale, Grimesthorpe, Pitsmoor, and Shirecliffe, is one of the 28 electoral wards in Sheffield. It is located in the northern part of the city (SK 363884) and covers an area of 7.3 km<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.2 The solid geology of Burngreave consists of the interbedded sandstones of the Carboniferous Westphalian Coal Measures (B.G.S. 2002). Grimesthorpe Road runs along the foot of a natural sandstone ridge overlooking the Don Valley to the south-east.

## 3. Background

- 3.1 A series of dykes run across south west Yorkshire between Sheffield and Mexborough. These dykes, essentially banks with a ditch running alongside, are collectively known as 'The Roman Ridge'. Despite this misleading name the ridge is now widely considered not to be of Roman construction. Sidney Addy, in his book published 1893, was impressed by the similarities between the ramparts of the Iron Age fort at Wincobank and the construction of the dyke at Wilkinson's Spring Wood, near Grimesthorpe Road. He stated that he was in no doubt that they were constructed by the same people and that they were uniform parts of one plan (Cronk 2004, 65). Unfortunately, an exact date for the ridge has not been established, although some broad limits can be set (Cronk 2004, 1). The ridge would probably not have been built much before 1000BC, when similar long dykes first appeared. Similarly, it would not have appeared much later than 1000AD when the first parish boundaries were established (Cronk 2004, 2). The ridge closely follows some of these boundaries, suggesting the prominent earthwork may have been used when deciding these borders (Cronk 2004, 2). This indicates that the ridge was probably constructed at an earlier date than the boundaries, but for what purpose remains equivocal.
- 3.2 The ridge has been described as a possible road or prehistoric trackway, a theory that has since been abandoned due to a lack of evidence (Cronk 2004, 8). Another argument, that the dykes were enclosures built to confine livestock belonging to a number of farming communities, essentially focuses on the enclosed land rather than the dykes themselves (Cronk 2004, 9). However, there are problems with this interpretation too. The ditch not only lies on the wrong side of the bank for controlling livestock, but it is also a discontinuous feature, with plenty of breaks for animals to escape through (Cronk 2004, 11). The third argument, that the dykes were constructed as a political frontier, is more credible. Whether the builders were Iron Age Brigantes or kings from the British kingdom of Elmet, the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria, or the Viking kingdom of York, all may have sought to demarcate and defend this frontier (Cronk 2004, 13). The ridge is situated on the high ground along the river Don suggesting it was used as a defensive bank or strategic boundary. It was probably constructed by those living north of the boundary as it, and its ditch, are positioned to face southwards. The area between Burngreave and Grimesthorpe was described by Samuel Mitchell in 1840 as having a military advantage with its wide ranging view of the whole valley of the Don between Sheffield and Rotherham (Cronk 2004, 13).



- 3.3 Grimesthorpe Road, which runs through Burngreave, is a very old road that follows the course of the 'Roman Ridge'. Excavations by Leslie Butcher in 1948 revealed the remains of the ridge lay just below the crest of the natural bank on Grimesthorpe Road (Fig. 2). Where the road bends in a more easterly direction the ridge turns north towards what used to be Wilkinson's Spring Wood, now a housing estate (Cronk 2004, 23). It was during work to widen the road in 1948 that excavations revealed the internal structure of the bank, with the variation in material suggesting that the ditch material had been used to create the bank (Butcher 1957, 96). There appears to have been no attempt to make a uniform structure when creating the ridge (Cronk 2004, 25). One commentator (Cronk 2004, 25) has suggested that rather than being a status symbol the dyke was thrown up in haste as a defence against immediate danger. Unfortunately, it seems all traces of the dyke were destroyed during the road widening.



Figure. 2 View of Grimesthorpe Road looking east.

#### 4. Aims of the Project

- 4.1 The project is an archaeological watching brief as stipulated by South Yorkshire Archaeology Service (SYAS). The aims were as follows:

- To observe all groundwork for the presence of archaeology.
- To alert all interested parties to the possible destruction of archaeological features.
- To fully record and excavate any archaeological features encountered.

#### 5. Methodology

- 5.1 All machine excavation on the site was observed by an archaeologist to ensure that no archaeological remains were disturbed. All features or structures were to be fully cleaned and recorded in accordance with the standards stipulated by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) and the guidance provided in 'Archaeological Science at PPG16 Interventions' (English Heritage 2003).

- 5.2 Any features or structures were to be sectioned, photographed, recorded and, where possible, fully-excavated. Feature plans were to be made at 1:20 scale and sections at 1:10 scale. All the contexts were recorded on pro-forma sheets, and a context register, along with a finds, levels and photographic register, were all produced for inclusion in the archive.
- 5.3 Photographs were taken using a 35mm SLR camera with black and white print film, and colour transparency, as well as with a digital camera (5 megapixel resolution). All finds were to be given an individual number and stored appropriately.
- 5.4 All work was carried out wearing appropriate safety equipment. A system of hand signals was agreed before work commenced to allow for easy communication and a safe environment for examining the potential archaeological remains while supervising machine excavation.

## 6. Summary of Results

- 6.1 The sandstone revetment wall (Fig. 3) that ran the length of the north side of Grimesthorpe Road was demolished for a length of 270m and the stones reused in the gabions (Fig. 8 and 9). The gabions were not used at the north-west end of the road. In this area the bank was battered to a gentle slope (Fig. 9). The exposed area behind the wall revealed that the majority of the bank was comprised of natural deposits with a layer of topsoil (Fig. 5). The topsoil (001) had a maximum depth of 0.6m and was dark brown (7.5YR 3/4) in colour. The topsoil (001) had a significant amount of modern debris included within it, probably from the allotment gardens situated at the top of the bank. Below the topsoil (001) was a natural clay substrate (002) which had a maximum thickness of 0.45m and was yellow brown (10YR 3/4) in colour. The substrate (002) had no modern inclusions and overlay the natural yellow sandstone substratum (003) which was excavated to a maximum thickness of 1.3m (Fig. 6). No archaeological deposits or artefacts were uncovered during any of these works.



Fig. 3 View of the sandstone revetment wall looking west.



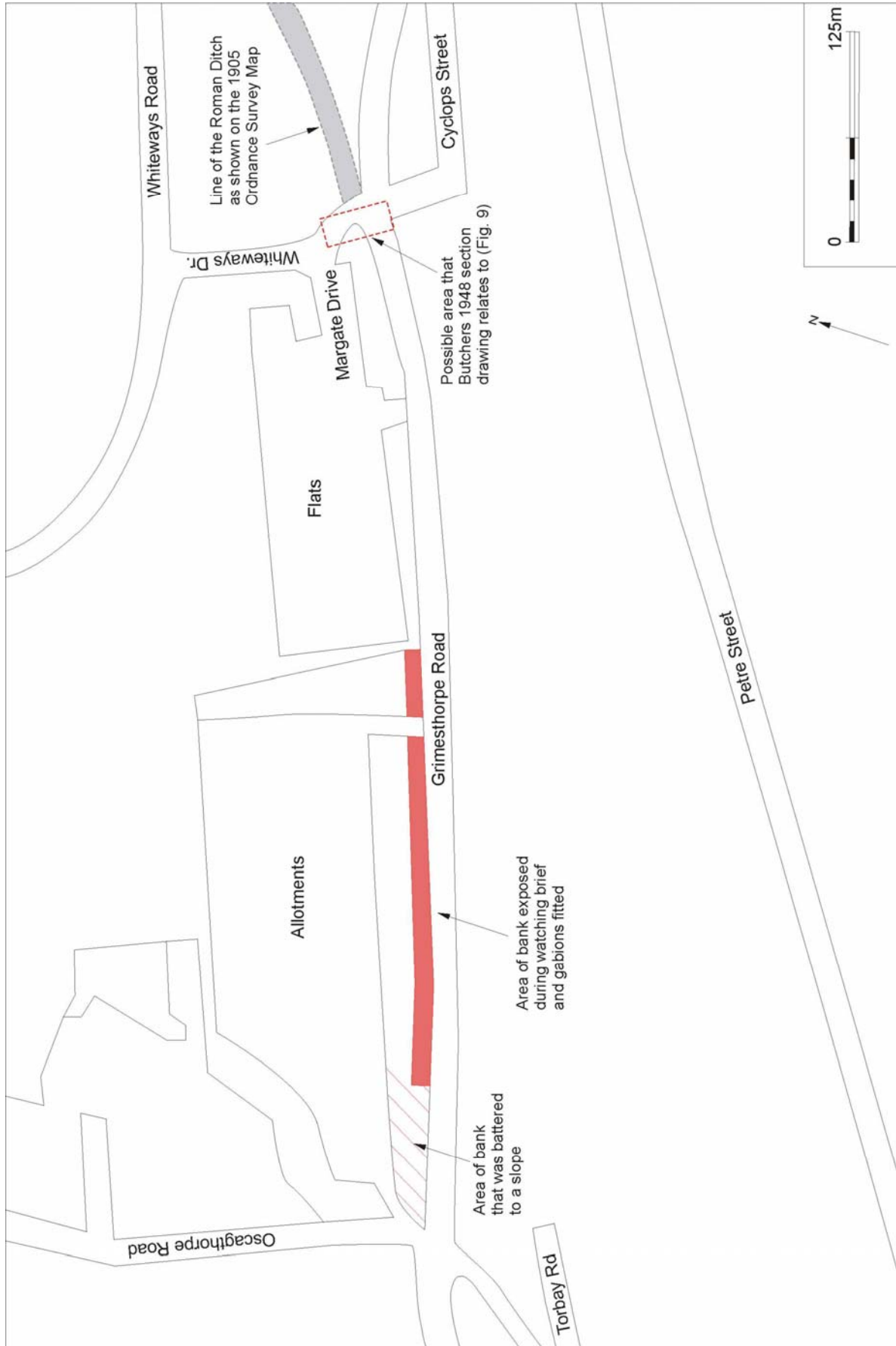


Figure. 4 Plan of Grimsthorpe Road showing areas excavated as part of the watching brief. The possible location of Butchers section is shown where Margate Drive cuts through the ridge. The position of the ridge as shown on the 1905 OS Map is also shown.



Fig. 5 View of the wall after demolition, looking north-west.

- 6.2 The results of the watching brief suggest that rather than being an artificial bank, the 'Roman Ridge' in this area may have predominately been a natural sandstone scarp (Fig. 6). It is possible that the ridge builders deposited some of the ditch material on top of the scarp, as well as taking advantage of its natural height, but no evidence for this was found during this intervention. It is likely that the road widening in 1948 destroyed any remaining traces of an artificial ridge. However, it is possible that some of this ridge still survives on the very top of the bank but the watching brief did not require the ground to be stripped at this level.
- 6.3 The archaeological work undertaken by Butcher during the road widening is informative, as the section drawing reveals the internal structure of the bank (Fig. 7). The drawing shows that the construction of the bank involved layers of heavy sandstone blocks that Butcher described as 'flagstones', together with smaller stones, sand and clay (Butcher 1957, 96). It is unlikely that he meant flagstones as cut sandstone blocks, but rather broken slabs of the natural sandstone from the rock-cut ditch that can be won by prizing off along the bedding planes. However, there are inconsistencies with Butcher's work that need to be explained. It appears that the scale bar used on Butcher's section is the same as the scale bar used on his corresponding plan of Grimesthorpe Road. This is clearly inaccurate, as it would make the section over several thousand feet long. The mistake means that a precise length for this section cannot be obtained. A further inconsistency is that the section, according to Butcher, was aligned along a length of Grimesthorpe Road, rather than being perpendicular to it. The drawing is clearly a cross-section view of the bank and the only cross-section of the bank made during these works was when a new road, Margate Drive, was constructed (Fig. 4). It can be concluded then, that the location of the section is incorrectly located on Butcher's plan. The most likely position of this section is shown on Fig. 4. It is along this part of the natural ridge that the scarp is less steep and therefore more likely to have been artificially banked up, a detail that is consistent with Butcher's drawing.

6.4 An alternative, however, is that if Butcher's location of the section is correct, then it must have cut across the bank at a very oblique angle and Butcher has used this stretched profile as the basis for his drawing that appears to show a section cut to the line of the monument. Despite this latter possibility it is still thought most likely that Butcher's section was taken from the monument in the Margate Drive area.



Fig. 6 View of the excavated bank showing the sandstone substratum, looking north.

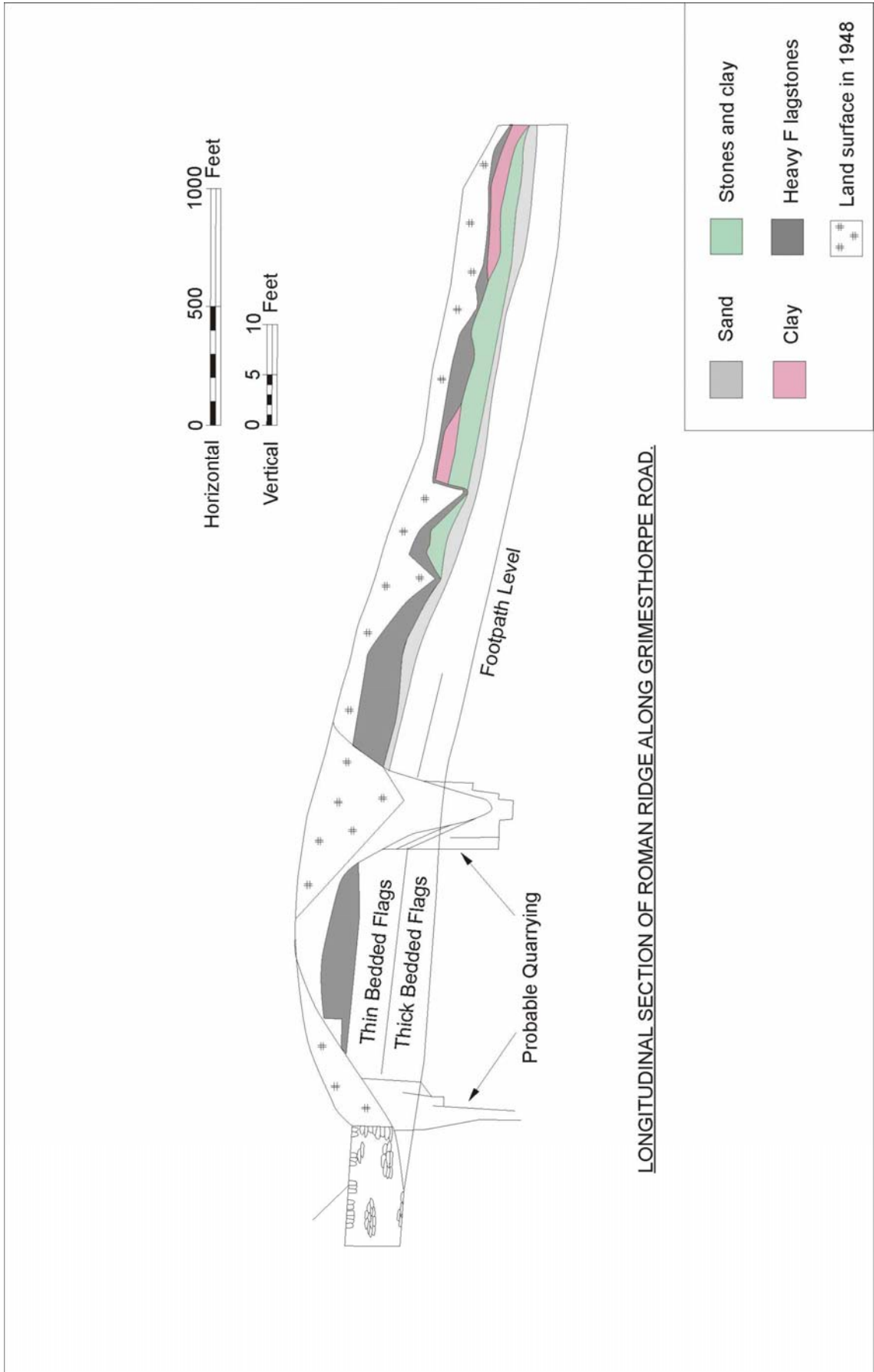


Figure. 7 Section of the 'Roman Ridge' along Grimesthorpe Road redrawn from Butcher (1957).





Fig. 8 View of work in progress.  
(The streetlights show the original width of the bank before it was excavated to accommodate the gabions).



Fig. 9 View of the bank showing the end of the gabions and the start of the battered slope.



## **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 According to Samuel Mitchell writing in 1854, the line of the 'Roman Ridge', for part of its length, ran along the north side of Grimesthorpe Road. He described the earthwork as an 'immense vallum' whose ditch was over 3.5m deep (Cronk 2004, 23). The results from this intervention show that a natural sandstone scarp, following the same route as the 'Roman Ridge', may have been the reason the ridge seemed so impressive in 1854. It seems that the earthwork in this area took advantage of the already extant natural scarp which would have required only minor modification to incorporate into the line of the boundary. This means that the ridge is likely to have lay on top of the natural scarp, respected by, and incorporated into, the built line of the 'Roman Ridge'. The road widening in 1948 could have destroyed remains of an artificial ridge if the latter lay below the crest of the bank and the present road appears to lie over the line of the ditch. No remains of the artificial ridge were uncovered during this intervention and although it is possible that remains of the ditch are still present below the road surface, no tarmac was disturbed during the works, and so this was not able to be confirmed.

## **8. Publicity, Confidentiality and Copyright**

- 8.1 Any publicity will be handled by the client.
- 8.2 Archaeological Research Services Ltd will retain the copyright of all documentary and photographic material under the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act (1988).

## **9. Statement of Indemnity**

- 9.1 All statements and opinions contained within this report arising from the works undertaken are offered in good faith and compiled according to professional standards. No responsibility can be accepted by the author/s of the report for any errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by any third party, or for loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in any such report(s), howsoever such facts and opinions may have been derived.

## **10. Acknowledgements**

- 10.1 ARS Ltd would like to thank all those involved in the running of the project, in particularly Alan Marsh of the Sheffield City Council, Jim McNeil of South Yorkshire Archaeology Services, Kathleen Cronk, author of 'Journey along the Roman Ridge' and Pete Parsons from Street Force.

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