



making sense of heritage

Balt Moor Wall, Banklands Reservoir and Athelney Spillway, Athelney, Somerset

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Museum of Somerset Accession number: TTNCM 27/2015
Sedgemoor District Council Planning Ref: 32/99/00005
WA Ref: 109040.01
November 2015



Balt Moor Wall, Banklands Reservoir and Athelney Spillway Athelney, Somerset

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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Quality Assurance

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Balt Moor Wall, Banklands Reservoir and Athelney Spillway Athelney, Somerset

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Summary

Wessex Archaeology were commissioned by VBA JV Ltd on behalf of the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological watching brief during flood prevention improvement works within Balt Moor Wall and Athelney Hill Scheduled Monuments (SM) near Athelney, Somerset (centred on NGR ST 3427 2925). The watching brief, which was undertaken intermittently between the 27th April and 15th October 2015, comprised monitoring all intrusive groundworks within the SM areas under a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent.

Archaeological features revealed during the watching brief were a pitched-stone road surface and a bank deposit uncovered below and to the south of Cuts Road respectively. Both features lay within the Balt Moor Wall SM, approximately 1 m below modern ground level (i.e. 6.6 m aOD).



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Acknowledgements

Wessex Archaeology (WA) wishes to thank VBA JV Ltd for commissioning the archaeological work and the Environment Agency for funding it. WA would particularly like to thank Andrew Holmes (VBA Principal Archaeologist) and Alastair Moon (Raymond Brown Construction Ltd) for their assistance throughout the project and Richard Brunning (Somerset County Archaeological advisor to Sedgemoor District Council) and Hugh Beamish (Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments at Historic England), for their advice.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Frances Ward, Lynn Hume, Michael Fleming, and Sam Fairhead. The report was compiled by Cai Mason, Michael Fleming and Lynn Hume. The illustrations were produced by Kitty Foster. Finds were assessed by Lorraine Mephram. The project was managed for Wessex Archaeology by Andy King and Andy Crockett.



Balt Moor Wall, Banklands Reservoir and Athelney Spillway Athelney, Somerset

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background

- 1.1.1 Wessex Archaeology (WA) were commissioned by VBA JV Ltd on behalf of the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological watching brief during flood prevention improvement works within Balt Moor Wall and Athelney Hill Scheduled Monuments (SM) near Athelney, Somerset (centred on NGR ST 3427 2925), referred to hereafter as 'the Site' (**Figure 1**).
- 1.1.2 Following the granting of Scheduled Monument Consent by Historic England, a condition for an archaeological watching brief was set to cover all improvement works within scheduled sites (Atkins 2014, 8).
- 1.1.3 The flood prevention improvement works comprised:
- *Inserting continuous sheet piles within a 0.6 m deep guide trench along Balt Moor wall (between Saxonburg Cottage and Moorside Cottage).*
 - *Laying erosion control geotextile matting (Enkamat) along the Balt Moor Wall between Moorside Cottage and Altheney Spillway.*
 - *Re-profiling and laying a geogrid bedding structure on the Athelney Spillway.*
- 1.1.4 The watching brief was undertaken intermittently between the 27th of April and the 15th of October 2015.

1.2 The Site

- 1.2.1 The Site comprised 1.3 ha of land, located within the Balt Moor Wall and Athelney Hill SMs, between the villages of Athelney and Lyng in the Somerset Levels. The Site follows the line of the Balt Moor Wall from Saxonburg Cottage in the west, to the Athelney Spillway in the east that lies between the twin peaks of Athelney Hill.
- 1.2.2 The solid geology comprised Triassic mudstone and halite-stone of the Mercia Mudstone Group, which were partially overlain by superficial deposits of alluvium (BGS 2015). Ground levels range between heights of 8.2 m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) along the crest of the Balt Moor Wall to east of the property known as Haggetts, 7.65 m aOD along Cuts Road and 4.5 m aOD where the Athelney Spillway meets a drain along the south side of New Road.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1.1 The archaeological and historical background is drawn from Atkins (2014) VBA JV Ltd (2014) and other primary and secondary sources. Athelney Hill would have once been a

prominent island within low-lying estuarine marshland, unsurprisingly this area has evidence for prehistoric and historically documented settlement.

2.2 Bronze Age

- 2.2.1 Worked oak timbers, radiocarbon dated to c 1370-1000 BC, were recovered from spoil that is believed to have been excavated from a trench to the north of the Balt Moor Wall (Watts and Scaife 2008, 21-70). The function of the timber remains unclear, but they are indicative of human activity in the area during this period.

2.3 Iron Age

- 2.3.1 A 2002 evaluation undertaken as part of the Time Team programme uncovered evidence of a substantial Iron Age ditch at the western end of Athelney Hill (GSB Prospection and Croft 2002, 151-2), which suggests that Athelney Hill was occupied in this period.

2.4 Late Saxon

- 2.4.1 The Athelney Hill SM area includes the remains of a late Saxon fort and settlement on the twin summits of Athelney Hill. The fort, which is generally considered to be situated on the western hill, was constructed by King Alfred in AD 878. Alfred subsequently established a monastery somewhere on the island (Keyes and Lapidge 1983).
- 2.4.2 Asser's AD 893 *Life of King Alfred* includes a description of the monastery and fort and mentions a causeway or bridge crossing the Lyng-Athelney gap, through which a branch of the Tone flowed. It is a matter of translation whether a bridge or causeway was described, but the causeway translation has generally been preferred due to the widely held view that such a causeway was a direct predecessor of, and followed the same line as the Balt Moor wall (Richardson 2003). Support for this suggestion may be provided by the discovery, during a 1996 evaluation to the east of Haggetts (Collings *et al.* 1996), of a layer of stone rubble, 3.2 m below ground level, which overlay a deposit of 5th-7th-century AD alluvium (HE 2015). A further evaluation slightly to the west, revealed a red clay bank along the line of Balt Moor Wall overlying 6th-century alluvium (EA 1999).

2.5 Medieval

- 2.5.1 Athelney Abbey, which may have been built on the site of the Saxon monastery, was situated on the eastern hill (Page 1911, 99-103). The 2002 Time Team investigations uncovered walls of the church and part of an early cemetery.
- 2.5.2 The earliest unambiguous documentary reference to the Athelney-Lyng causeway is a charter approximately dated to AD 1135-54, which refers to land reclamation and drainage works undertaken by the monks of Athelney Abbey. The presence of a late medieval causeway was confirmed during the 1996 investigations, which uncovered a 6 m wide by 1.7 m high clay bank within the Balt Moor Wall that contained 14th/15th-century pottery (Collings *et al.* 1996; HE 2015).

2.6 Post-medieval

- 2.6.1 In 1539 Athelney Abbey was suppressed and its property was surrendered to the Crown. Following the Dissolution, Athelney Abbey was acquired for use as a private mansion by Lord Audley, who had the church demolished. The mansion was never built and in 1544 he sold the site to Lord Clayton, who obtained a licence in 1545 to sell it to John Tynbere (Page 1911, 99-103). The remaining buildings subsequently fell into ruin or were demolished to salvage their stone and today there are no above-ground remains of the Abbey.

- 2.6.2 Balt Moor Wall was clad in stone in 1675 and again in 1880 at the direction of the Somerset Drainage Commissioners (HE 2015).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aims and Objectives

- 3.1.1 With due regard to the ClfA *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (ClfA 2014a), the principle aim of the archaeological watching brief was to monitor the improvement groundworks and record the archaeological resource which may have been impacted upon by the development, using appropriate methods and practices and in compliance with the *Code of conduct* and other relevant by-laws of ClfA.

- 3.1.2 In furtherance of the project aim, the following objectives were defined:

- *to allow, within the resources available, the preservation by record of any archaeological features or deposits to the highest possible standard;*
- *To confirm the approximate date of the remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence;*
- *To determine or confirm the approximate extent of any remains;*
- *To determine the condition and state of preservation of the remains; and*
- *To determine the degree of complexity of the horizontal and/or vertical stratigraphy present.*
- *to provide an opportunity, if needed, for the watching archaeologist to signal to all interested parties, before the destruction of the material in question, that an archaeological find has been made for which the resources allocated to the watching brief itself are not sufficient to support treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard; and*
- *To prepare a report on the results of the watching brief.*

3.2 Fieldwork Methodology

- 3.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken in accordance with the *Written Scheme of Investigation* (WA 2015). The fieldwork comprised the monitoring of all intrusive groundworks within the SM areas.
- 3.2.2 The watching brief was undertaken by an experienced WA archaeologist. The mechanical excavation was, where possible, undertaken using a toothless ditching bucket and under constant supervision by WA. Mechanical excavation proceeded to the required construction levels.
- 3.2.3 WA staff investigated archaeological deposits and features by excavation. All potential archaeological features and deposits were assigned a unique context number. Where practical, and towards meeting the aims of the watching brief, excavation included sampling of features and deposits in order to recover artefacts, ecofacts and dating evidence, and in order to determine stratigraphic relationships.
- 3.2.4 Historic England was kept informed of the progress of the archaeological fieldwork throughout the project.

3.3 Recording

- 3.3.1 Recording of exposed deposits and features was undertaken using WA's *pro forma* recording sheets, with all features and deposits being assigned a unique context number. Representative soil profile sections were drawn to appropriate scales and located on the site plan.
- 3.3.2 A full photographic record of the fieldwork was made using monochrome print film and a Pentax K50 digital camera with a 16 megapixel image sensor. The photographic record illustrated the general context of construction works, exposed features and deposits and general views of the Site as a whole. The digital images will be subject to managed quality control and curation processes which will embed appropriate metadata within the image and ensure long term accessibility of the image set.
- 3.3.3 Site survey was carried out using a Leica Viva series GNSS unit using the OS National GPS Network through an RTK network with a 3D accuracy of 30mm or below. All survey data was recorded using the OSGB36 British National Grid coordinate system.

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

- 4.1.1 The results of the watching brief are summarized below. Full context descriptions are provided in **Appendix 1**. Watching brief areas are shown in **Figure 1**. Contexts are highlighted in bold.

4.2 Balt Moor Wall

Saxonburg Cottage to Moorside Cottage

- 4.2.1 The excavation of four test pits (maximum depth 1.45 m) and the subsequent continuous piling guide trench along the south side of Cuts Road uncovered a brownish red silty clay bank deposit, the upper surface of which was recorded at 0.97-1.3 m below ground level (bgl), i.e. at 6.35-6.65 m aOD. A small quantity of mid-17th-century or later finds were recovered from this layer.
- 4.2.2 The bank layer was overlain by the modern concrete base for Cuts Road, which was in turn partially overlain and abutted by approximately 0.95 m of brownish grey sandy silt, which was sealed by 0.2-0.4 m of greyish brown topsoil.
- 4.2.3 **Plates 1-2** show a typical deposit sequence along the south side of Cuts Road; **Plate 3** shows the groundworks to the south of Willow Tree Cottage

Trench 13

- 4.2.4 Trench 13 (maximum depth 1.1 m) was situated within the roadway to the east of Willow Tree Cottage. An undated deposit of compact red clay, **1308**, was uncovered at a depth of 0.94 m bgl (6.54 m aOD). Layer **1308** was overlain by 0.1 m thick pitched-stone road surface **1305**, which was in turn sealed by modern road make-up layers (**Plate 4**).

Moorside Cottage to Athelney Spillway

- 4.2.5 Excavation along the Balt Moor Wall between Moorside Cottage and Athelney Spillway (maximum depth 0.7 m), revealed a simple sequence of modern made ground, overlain by 0.11-0.15 m of topsoil. These deposits are likely to have been deposited during flood defence works undertaken in 1994 and 2001 (VBA JV Ltd 2014, 1).

4.3 Athelney Spillway

- 4.3.1 The re-profiling works at Athelney Spillway (**Plate 5**) revealed a sequence of over 0.55 m of modern subsoil, overlain by 0.09-0.12 m of imported topsoil.

5 ARTEFACTUAL EVIDENCE

- 5.1.1 A very small quantity of ceramic finds was recovered from the Site. The finds were derived from three contexts in three trenches; all comprising made ground (see **Table 1**). All of the finds are all post-medieval.

Table 1: All finds by context (number / weight in grams)

Context	CBM	Pottery
102	2/77	5/248
302		1/13
603		1/15
Total	2/77	7/276

- 5.1.2 The pottery is the more closely datable material type. The seven sherds comprise two of North Devon gravel-tempered ware, including a bowl rim; two of slip-decorated redware; one of unglazed redware, probably from a modern flowerpot; one of transfer-printed pearlware (plate rim); and one of yellow ware. These wares have a potential date range of 16th to 20th century.
- 5.1.3 Two fragments of ceramic building material (CBM) were also recovered, comprising one of roof tile and one of brick. These cannot be more closely dated within the period.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1.1 The only archaeological features/deposits uncovered during the watching brief were a pitched-stone road surface, exposed below Cuts Road and a post-medieval bank deposit along the south side of the Cuts Road, both of which were situated along the Balt Moor Wall SM. Both features were uncovered approximately 1 m below modern ground level (i.e. 6.6 m aOD). Finds from the bank material date suggest a mid-17th-century or later deposition date; the road surface is likely to be of a similar date. This would correspond with the documentary evidence for improvement works having taken place in the 1670s.
- 6.1.2 The road surface overlay a deposit of red clay, which formed part of the Balt Moor Wall. A similar deposit was uncovered during an earlier evaluation along the Balt Moor Wall, to the east of Haggetts; in this location the red clay overlay a deposit alluvium that was radiocarbon dated to the 6th century AD (EA 1999).
- 6.1.3 The excavations on the Athelney Spillway and along the Balt Moor Wall to the east of Haggetts were too shallow to penetrate modern deposits.

7 STORAGE AND CURATION

7.1 Museum

- 7.1.1 With the full agreement of the landowner the project archive will be deposited for long-term storage with the Museum of Somerset under an accession code TTNCM 27/2015. Prior to deposition the archive will be temporarily stored at Wessex Archaeology's offices in Salisbury under Site Code 109040.

7.2 Preparation of Archive

- 7.2.1 The complete Site archive, which will include paper records, photographic records, graphics, artefacts, ecofacts and digital data, will be prepared following the standard conditions for the acceptance of excavated archaeological material by the Museum of Somerset, and in general following nationally recommended guidelines (SMA 1995; Brown 2011; ADS 2013; ClfA 2014c).

7.3 OASIS

- 7.3.1 An OASIS online record has been initiated for the work and key fields in regard of the watching brief have been entered under OASIS ID wessexar1-227958. All appropriate parts of the OASIS online form will be completed for submission to the Somerset Historic Environment Record. This will include an uploaded .pdf version of the entire report.

7.4 Discard Policy

- 7.4.1 Wessex Archaeology follows the guidelines set out in *Selection, Retention and Dispersal* (SMA 1993), which allows for the discard of selected artefact and ecofact categories which are not considered to warrant any future analysis. In this instance, the small quantity of finds, their nature (commonly occurring types of relatively recent date) and provenance (all from made ground), retention for long term curation is not warranted.

7.5 Security Copy

- 7.5.1 In line with current best practice (Brown 2011), on completion of the project a security copy of the written records will be prepared, in the form of a digital PDF/A file. PDF/A is an ISO-standardised version of the Portable Document Format (PDF) designed for the digital preservation of electronic documents through omission of features ill-suited to long-term archiving.

7.6 Copyright

- 7.6.1 The full copyright of the written / illustrative archive relating to the Site will be retained by Wessex Archaeology Ltd under the *Copyright, Designs and Patents Act* 1988 with all rights reserved. The County HER, however, will be granted an exclusive licence for the use of the archive for educational purposes, including academic research, providing that such use shall be non-profit making, and conforms to the *Copyright and Related Rights Regulations* 2003.

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APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix 1: Context summary

Test pit 1 Dimensions: 4 m x 0.9 m x 1.45 m deep			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
100	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.3
101	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.3-0.97
102	Made Ground.	Mid brownish red silty clay, with rare gravel inclusions.	0.97-1.45+
103	Concrete.	base for Cuts Road	1.1+

Test pit 2 Dimensions: 4 m x 0.9 m x 1.5 m deep			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
200	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.33
201	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.33-1.3
202	Made Ground.	Mid brownish red silty clay with rare gravel inclusions.	1.3-1.5+
203	Concrete.	Base for Cuts Road	1+

Test pit 3 Dimensions: 4 m x 0.9 m x 1.55 m deep			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
300	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.4
301	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.4-1.1
302	Made Ground.	Mid brownish red silty clay with rare gravel inclusions.	1.3-1.55+
303	Concrete.	Base for Cuts Road	1+

Test pit 4 Dimensions: 2 m x 0.9 m x 1.35 m deep			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
400	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.3
401	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.3-1.3
402	Made Ground.	Mid brownish red silty clay with rare gravel inclusions.	1.3-1.35+

Balt Moor Wall Sheet Pile Trench – South of Cuts Road to Moorside Cottage			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
501	Topsoil.	Mid brown silty clay, with moderate grass roots, frequent angular and sub-angular limestone inclusions.	0-0.2
502	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.2-0.65+
601	Topsoil.	Dark grey-brown sandy silt.	0-0.2
602	Fill of 604.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.2-1+
603	Fill of 604.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.2-1.85+
604	Service trench.		0.2+
701	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.35
702	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.35-0.95+
801	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.29
802	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.29+
901	Topsoil.	Dark greyish brown sandy silt.	0-0.22
902	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.22-0.57+
903	Made Ground.	Light brownish grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.57+
1001	Topsoil.	Dark grey-brown sandy silt.	0-0.15
1002	Made Ground.	Light brown-grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	0.15-0.78+
1101	Made Ground.	Greyish brown soil, mixed stone and aggregate overlying erosion control geotextile matting.	0-0.5
1102	Made Ground.	Brown clay with frequent sub-angular stone inclusions.	0.5-0.91



Balt Moor Wall Sheet Pile Trench – South of Cuts Road to Moorside Cottage			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
1103	Made Ground.	Light brown-grey silt with some darker mottling.	0.91-1.30+
1201	Modern sandbags.		0-0.65
1202	Made Ground.	Mid brown clay.	0.65-1.00
1203	Made Ground.	Light brown-grey sandy silt with some darker mottling.	1.00-1.10
1204	Made Ground.	Mid brown aggregate and stone.	1.10-1.45+

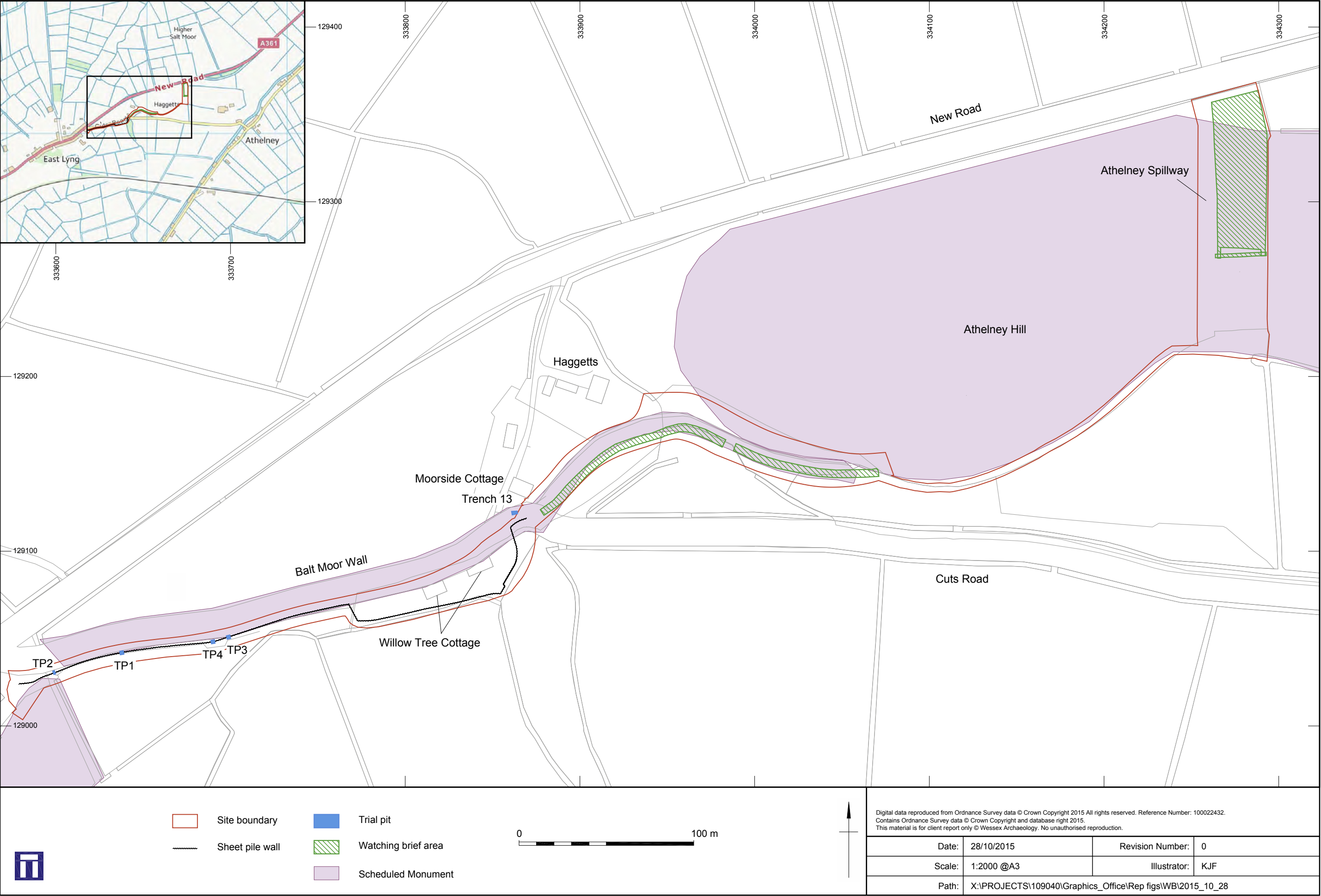
Trench 13 (within Cuts Road)			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
1301	Tarmac.		0.0-0.10
1302	Base for 1301.	Angular gravel.	0.10-0.67
1303	Tarmac.		0.67-0.74
1304	Base for 1303.	Clay, gravel and brick/stone rubble	0.74-1
1305	Road surface.	Constructed with pitched stones	0.83-0.94
1306	Fill of 1307.	Angular grey gravel.	0.1-1.1
1307	Service trench	North-east/south-west aligned 0.6 m wide trench containing steel/cast iron pipe.	0.1-1.1
1308	Bank	Compact red clay.	0.94-1.10+

Balt Moor Wall – Moorside Cottage to Athelney Spillway			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
1401	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks.	0-0.15
1402	Made Ground.	Mid reddish brown silty sand with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.15-0.7+
1601	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks.	0-0.16
1602	Made Ground.	Mid bluish grey clay with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.16-0.55+
1701	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks.	0-0.11
1702	Made Ground.	Mid reddish brown clayey silt with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.11-0.55+
1801	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks.	0-0.15
1802	Made Ground.	Mid bluish grey clay with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.15-0.48
1803	Made Ground.	Mid reddish brown silty sand with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.48+

Athelney Spillway			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
1501	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks.	0-0.11
1502	Subsoil.	Mid reddish brown clayey silt with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.11-0.5+
1701	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0-0.09
1702	Subsoil.	Mid reddish brown clayey silt with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.09-0.55+



Athelney Spillway			
Context	Description		Depth below surface (m)
1901	Subsoil.	Mid reddish brown clayey silt with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0-0.55+
2001	Topsoil.	Mid greyish brown silty sand with rare sub-angular stone inclusions and charcoal flecks.	0-0.12
2002	Subsoil.	Mid reddish brown clayey silt with sparse sub-angular stone inclusions. Modern finds noted but not collected.	0.12-0.5+



Site plan showing watching brief areas

Figure 1



Plate 1: Test pit 1, showing typical deposit sequence to the south of Cuts Road, looking north

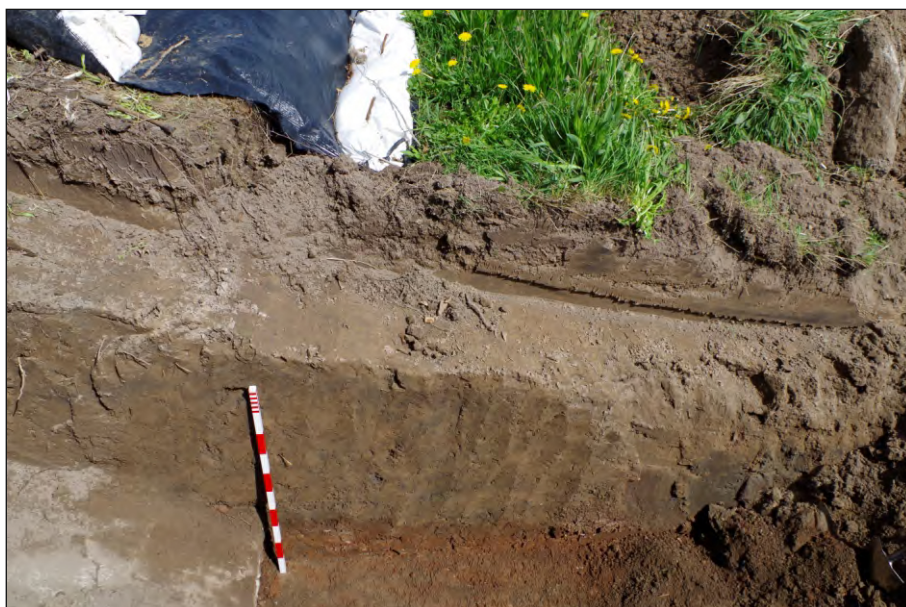


Plate 2: Test pit 1, showing typical deposit sequence to the south of Cuts Road, looking east


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Plate 3: Excavation of sheet pile guide trench to the west of Willow Tree Cottage, looking north-east



Plate 4: Trench 13, showing pitched-stone road surface 1305



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Plate 5: Re-profiling works on the Athelney Spillway, looking north-east

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