LAND OFF NORTH ROAD, SOUTH MOLTON, DEVON

(Centred on NGR SS 709 264)

Results of archaeological excavations

North Devon Council outline planning consent reference: 61953 (condition 9)

Prepared by: Paul Rainbird

With a contribution from: Naomi Payne

> On behalf of: Baker Estates Ltd

> > Report No: ACD1517/3/0

Date: October 2021



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| Client | Baker Estates Ltd |
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The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of AC archaeology and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

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CONTENTS

Summary

| 1. | Introduction | 1 |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|
| 2. | Archaeological background | 1 |
| 3. | Aims | 2 |
| 4. | Methodology | 2 |
| 5. | Results – Excavation Area 1 | 3 |
| 6. | Results – Excavation Area 2 | 3 |
| 7. | The finds | 5 |
| 8. | Discussion | 6 |
| 9. | Conclusions | 7 |
| 10. | Archive and OASIS | 7 |
| 11. | Sources consulted | 8 |

List of figures

- Fig. 1: Location of site and excavation areas
- Fig. 2: Plan of Excavation Area 1
- Fig. 3: Excavation Area 1, sections
- Fig. 4: Plan of Excavation Area 2
- Fig. 5: Excavation Area 2, sections

List of plates

- Plate 1: Excavation Area 1, general view, looking north
- Plate 2: Excavation Area 1, general view, looking, looking east
- Plate 3: Excavation Area 1, excavation of ring gully F9029 in progress, looking northwest
- Plate 4: Excavation Area 1, posthole F9036, looking southwest
- Plate 5: Excavation Area 2, general view, looking west
- Plate 6: Excavation Area 2, ditch F10019 segment [10015], looking north
- Plate 7: Excavation Area 2, ditch F10044, looking east
- Plate 8: Excavation Area 2, ring gully F10050 segment [10048], looking north

Appendix 1: Summary of finds by context

Summary

Archaeological excavations of two areas on land off North Road, South Molton, Devon (NGR SS 709 264), were undertaken by AC archaeology prior to residential development in February and March 2019 and then January 2021.

The excavations confirmed and expanded on the findings of a previous trench evaluation, in that an Iron Age ring gully was present on the west side of the site (Area 1), while another undated example was partially exposed in Excavation Area 2 to the east, albeit this was undated.

Ditches in Excavation Area 2 probably largely define areas of field enclosure established during the medieval period, with finds indicating that at least some of the field boundaries continued into the post-medieval period. Two undated pits cannot be assigned to a period, but a third post-dated the field boundaries and is probably late post-medieval in date.

Artefacts recovered comprise two sherds of prehistoric pottery, 16 sherds of medieval pottery, 24 sherds of post-medieval pottery, one prehistoric worked flint, one piece of fired clay, a single piece of clay tobacco pipe and one piece of glass.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Archaeological excavations on land off North Road, South Molton, Devon (NGR SS 709 264; Fig. 1), were undertaken by AC archaeology during February to March 2019 and then January 2021. The works were commissioned by Baker Estates Ltd and were required as a condition of planning consent granted by North Devon Council, following consultation with the Devon County Council Historic Environment Team Senior Historic Environment Officer. The development comprises the construction of circa 250 dwellings (use class C3), allotments, public open space and other associated infrastructure.
- **1.2** The overall site is situated immediately to the northwest of South Molton and occupies an area of approximately 13 hectares of formerly agricultural land. It is bounded to the south by Gunswell Lane, to the east by North Road and by arable fields to the north and west. It occupies a small hilltop on land lying at around 164m aOD (above Ordnance Datum), sloping down gently to the west, south and east to approximately 145m aOD along the south boundary. The underlying solid geology comprises shale and sandstone, with patches of mudstone and siltstone of the Crackington Formation (British Geological Survey Online Viewer 2021).

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The site has been subject to a previous desk-based assessment (Wessex Archaeology 2011), geophysical survey (Carey 2012) and trial trench evaluation (Sims 2013). The assessment established that the site lies in an area of limited known prehistoric remains, although the presence of a possible prehistoric enclosure has been identified within the site, towards the top of the hill by the northern boundary (Devon County Historic Environment Record ref. 16910). This is recorded as kite-shaped and measures approximately 40m by 45m, with a 0.25m high bank. The geophysical survey identified several anomalies across the site. These included a possible prehistoric circular double-ditched feature, a possible smaller ring ditch, two possible enclosures and a number of linear features suggestive of former field boundaries.
- **2.2** The results of the trial trenching established that archaeological features were present across most of the site and largely confirmed the results of the geophysical survey. A prehistoric circular double ditched ring ditch with internal features and containing Middle to Late Iron Age pottery,

was recorded within the western part of site. There was no conclusive evidence for the existence of the possible prehistoric kite-shaped enclosure identified in the northern part of the site, or of the two possible enclosure ditches identified from the geophysical survey. A pattern of small infields recorded in the eastern part of the site suggests that they are medieval in origin and likely to represent a different form of land use and ownership within the area.

2.3 Between the evaluation in 2012 and the start of excavation in 2019, Area 1 had been tracked over by machines resulting in some truncation of the buried archaeological features previously identified, partly as a result of shallow soil cover and wet ground. An interim report was prepared for Area 1 (Rainbird 2019) and this is superseded by the current report.

3. AIMS

- **3.1** The main aim of the archaeological excavations was to excavate and record any archaeological features present within the agreed areas to be investigated, which will be damaged or destroyed by the development. More site-specific aims were:
 - To establish the full extent of prehistoric ring ditch, as well as potential adjacent settlement remains;
 - To confirm the full extent of the medieval in-field in the eastern part of the site and whether there is any associated settlement;
 - To establish the nature of the activity of any hitherto previously unrecorded archaeological remains;
 - To recover any environmental evidence from archaeological features;
 - To identify any artefacts relating to the occupation or use of any hitherto previously unrecorded archaeological remains;
 - To provide further information on the archaeology of Devon from any archaeological remains encountered; and,
 - To analyse and report the most significant results and finds from the site.

4. METHODOLOGY

- **4.1** The archaeological excavations were undertaken in accordance with a project design prepared by AC archaeology (Valentin 2017) and the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation* (2014, revised 2020). The archaeological mitigation comprised two strip, map and sample open area excavation areas as shown on Fig. 1.
- **4.2** The removal of overlying deposits within the excavation area was undertaken by machine in 20cm spits (maximum) under the control and direction of a site archaeologist. Stripping by mechanical excavator ceased at the level at which archaeological deposits or natural geology was exposed.
- **4.3** All features and deposits revealed were recorded using the standard AC archaeology *pro forma* recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2* (revised August 2012). Detailed sections and plans were produced at a scale of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate. All site levels relate to Ordnance Datum. Spoilheaps were scanned for displaced artefacts.

5. **RESULTS – EXCAVATION AREA 1** (Plan Fig. 2; Plates 1-4)

5.1 Introduction

This excavation area targeted a pair of concentric ring gullies and internal features, with associated Middle to Late Iron Age pottery.

5.2 The archaeological features cut the natural subsoil (context 9002), which comprised a light brown – mid yellow silty clay. Above this, the topsoil had been previously removed and a heavily mixed subsoil was present which contained one sherd of medieval pottery and other finds of post-medieval and modern date (see section 7 below).

5.3 Outer ring gully F9029 (Sections Figs 3a-I; Plate 3)

The outer ring gully had a diameter of 18m. Evidence from the excavation and evaluation phases indicating that it was probably open to the southeast, with detached segments [9023]/[9025] and [9027] likely to be originally part of a continuous penannular gully. The gully had maximum dimensions of 0.5m wide by 0.2m deep, with a variable profile along its length. The ring gully segments had fills largely composed of pale to mid reddish brown silty clay which contained three finds of prehistoric date, comprising two sherds of pottery and one piece of worked flint.

5.4 Inner ring gully (Sections Figs 3m-p)

This was slighter than the outer ring gully and only survived in three parts (F9038, F9040 and F9046). It had maximum dimensions of 0.25m wide by 0.08m deep, with a variable profile. The gully was concentric with the outer ring gully sitting 2.5m within it and had a projected diameter of 13m. The inner ring gully segments had fills of mid grey or mid greyish brown silty clay which contained no finds.

5.5 Discrete features (Sections Figs 3q-t; Plate 4)

Four postholes were present. Three of these (F9030, F9032 and F9034) were located outside of the outer ring gully (F9029) to the southeast. Posthole F9032 had a diameter of 0.45m and was 0.25m deep. It cut F9030 which was much shallower. Posthole F9034 had a diameter of 0.5m and was 0.13m deep.

Posthole F9036 was close to the centre of the ring gullies and had a diameter of 0.4m but had been almost completely lost to truncation. All of the postholes had fills of mid grey or mid greyish brown silty clay which contained no finds.

Small gully F9044 which was exposed over a length of 1m, petering out at both ends, was located within the inner ring gully segment F9046. It measured 0.2m wide by 0.05m deep, with a rounded profile. It had a single fill (9045) composed of mid grey silty clay which contained no finds.

6. **RESULTS – EXCAVATION AREA 2** (Plan Fig. 4)

6.1 Introduction

Excavation Area 2 was positioned to target a possible medieval in-field and was irregular in plan with maximum dimensions of approximately 100m east-west by 60m north-south (Plate 5). The features exposed comprised six ditches or gullies (F10019, F10020, F10030, F10032, F10041 and F10044), part of a possible ring gully (F10050) and three pits (F10003, F10006 and F10010). These features are described in detail below.

6.2 The natural subsoil (context 10002) consisting of mid yellow clay was encountered at a depth of between 0.49m below the current ground surface. Overlaying the natural substrate was a subsoil and topsoil. One sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from subsoil (10001).

6.3 Ditches F10019, F10020 and F10044 (Sections Figs 5a-h and 5j; Plates 6-7)

Ditch F10019 was not fully exposed in the trench but possibly defined a rectilinear enclosure in plan, measuring 30m across, with at least parts of three sides exposed; only a postulated north side fell completely outside of the excavation area. It was excavated in five segments – [10012], [10015], [10025], [10028] and [10042] – and had greatest proportions in [10015], measuring 1.79m wide by 0.54m deep, with moderately steep sides and U-shaped base. It was substantially more truncated in all of the other segments being only 0.12m deep in [10042]. Only segment [10015] had more than a single fill, with the upper fill (10016), of two main fills in this segment, containing 14 sherds of medieval pottery dating from c. 1150-1450.

Within the southeast corner of F10019 and running parallel with the south side of it for a length of 11m was very shallow ditch F10020. This was excavated in two segments – [10021] and [10023] – with maximum dimensions of 0.68m wide by 0.1m deep, with shallowly sloping sides and rounded base. There were no finds. A sterile subsoil deposit (10027) filled a natural hollow between F10020 and F10019 at the west end of F10020.

Running as an apparent westward extension to the south side of F10019 was ditch F10044 which continued for a distance of 30m before going beyond the limit of excavation at the west end. It did not have a stratigraphic relationship with F10019, but the alignment indicates that they were in contemporary use. F10044 measured 0.95m wide by 0.28m deep, with steep concave sides and rounded base. It had a single fill (10045) which contained one sherd of post-medieval pottery dating from the late 18th or 19th century.

6.4 Gully F10030 (Section Fig. 5i)

This was within the centre of F10019 and was a north-south aligned short length of shallow gully measuring 4m long by 0.42m wide and 0.12m deep, with moderately steep concave sides and rounded base. There were no finds.

6.5 Ditches F10032 and gully F10041 (Sections Figs 5k-m)

Ditch F10032 was north-south aligned and 9m long, located 6m within the west side of F10019 and running parallel with it. The ditch continued beyond the limit of excavation in the north, close to where it crossed and cut gully F10041 and terminated in the south some 2m short of the south side of F10019. It was excavated in two segments – [10035] and [10037] – illustrating a variable profile and measuring a maximum of 0.8m wide by 0.22m deep. It had a single fill (10036/10038) which contained one sherd of post-medieval pottery dating from the 16th to 17th century.

Ditch F10032 cut slightly curving approximately east-west aligned gully F10041. This was exposed over a length of 10m terminating at each end and had maximum dimensions of 0.6m wide by 0.1m deep, with moderately steep concave sides and rounded base. It was excavated in two segments – [10033] and [10039] – and had a single fill (10034/10040) which contained one piece of fired clay.

6.6 Ring gully F10050 (Sections Figs 5n-o; Plate 8)

This was partially exposed in the southeast corner of the excavation area. It appears to be a ring gully with an extrapolated diameter of approximately 10m. It was excavated in two segments - [10046] and [10048] – with a consistent V-shaped profile and maximum dimensions of 0.78m wide by 0.22m deep. It had a single fill which contained no finds.

6.7 Pits F10003, F10006 and F10010 (Sections Figs 5c, 5p-q)

Three pits were exposed across the excavation area, with two of these – F10003 and F10010 – exposed in the southeast part of the area. Pit F10003 was located in the space between enclosure F10019 and ring gully F10050. It was sub-oval in plan and measured 3.12m long by 1.38m wide and 0.21m deep. It had two fills which contained no finds.

Within the southeast corner of F10019 was pit F10010 which cut both the enclosure ditch and parallel ditch F10020. It measured 1.4m in diameter by 0.14m deep, with steep concave sides and a rounded base. It had a single fill (10011) which contained no finds.

The remaining pit (F10006) was located in an isolated position to the south of enclosure F10019. It was sub-circular in plan measuring 0.51m long by 0.49m wide and 0.09m deep, with a bowl-shaped profile. It had a single fill (10007) which contained no finds.

7. THE FINDS by Naomi Payne

7.1 All finds recovered on site from the two areas of excavation have been retained, cleaned and marked where appropriate. They have been quantified according to material type within each context and the assemblage examined to extract information regarding the range, nature and date of artefacts represented. The collection of finds is summarised in Appendix 1.

7.2 **Prehistoric pottery**

Two body sherds (29g) of prehistoric pottery were recovered from ring gully F9029 in Area 1. The larger sherd (from context 9006) is in a similar fabric to the three sherds recovered during the evaluation (Sims 2013). The sherd from context 9020, is fully reduced with sub-angular white quartz temper. There are few diagnostic features but the pottery is probably of Iron Age date.

7.3 Medieval pottery

A single sherd (8g) of medieval pottery was recovered from subsoil in Area 1. This is a sherd from close to the everted rim of a North Devon Medieval coarseware jar dating from *c*. 1150-1450. 15 further sherds (111g) of North Devon Medieval coarseware were recovered from Area 2, one from subsoil 10001, and 14 from context 10016, upper fill of ditch F10015. All of these sherds derive from jars. They are mainly body sherds, but there is a single base angle and a rim with a convex profile, similar in form to P12 from Launceston Castle (Saunders 2006, 286, fig. 9.4). The presence of rounded slate and probable mudstone fragments suggests that at least some of these sherds are a variety of North Devon coarseware known as North Devon Slate-Tempered wares. Waste material in this fabric, which dates from the later 12th or 13th century, has been found at Green Lane, Barnstaple (Saunders 2006, 272-3).

7.4 Post-medieval pottery

A total of 22 sherds (221g) of post-medieval pottery was recovered from the subsoil in Area 1. These comprise four sherds of North Devon Gravel-tempered ware, four sherds of North Devon Gravel-free ware, a sherd of Bristol/Staffordshire yellow slip ware, two sherds of flower pot and 11 sherds of industrially-produced wares. Two further post-medieval sherds (18g) were recovered in Area 2: a body sherd of 16th to 17th century North Devon Gravel-tempered ware from context 10036, fill of ditch F10032, and a body sherd of late 18th or 19th century blue-on-white transfer-printed Staffordshire-type white ware, from context 10045, fill of ditch F10044.

7.5 Lithic

A single worked flint (1g) was recovered from context 9022, ring gully F9029, in Area 1. This is a broken tertiary flake (or possibly a blade) with some irregular retouch along the lateral edges.

7.6 Glass

A single fragment (3g) of modern green bottle glass was recovered from the subsoil in Area 1.

7.7 Clay tobacco pipe

A single fragment (5g) of clay tobacco pipe was recovered from the subsoil in Area 1. This is a stem fragment and cannot be closely dated.

7.8 Fired clay

A single piece (14g) of fired clay was recovered from context 10034, fill of gully F10041, in Area 2. This is amorphous and featureless and cannot be closely dated.

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 Area 1

The excavation confirmed the presence of a pair of concentric ring gullies as identified in the evaluation phase. These, and the few associated features, represent the poorly preserved remains of a roundhouse, much of which has been lost to plough and later truncation. The roundhouse is represented by the fragmentary remains of the inner ring gully, which may have been a foundations trench, with an outer drip gully or enclosure. The pottery from the evaluation and excavation phases indicates that the roundhouse dates to the Iron Age and would have had a diameter of 13m within the outer gully which had a diameter of 18m. A similar arrangement of concentric gullies was found at Twin Yeo, Chudleigh Knighton, where Iron Age roundhouse structure 2, had an inner foundation gully 10m in diameter within an outer drip gully with a diameter of 13.5m (Farnell 2015, 197-9). Iron Age roundhouse ring gullies up to 18m diameter have been recorded in Cornwall (Jones and Taylor 2015, 80-1), which means that the current site is at the top end for the size of Iron Age houses in Devon and Cornwall.

- **8.2** Internal features are limited to a small length of gully (F9044), within the northern arc of the inner gully and a posthole (F9036), located a little to the east of the centre. Such limited remains are difficult to interpret. The entrance was probably in the southeast, a typical location for Iron Age roundhouses (Oswald 1997; also Sharples 2010, chapter 4), and the outer ring gully segment [9003] may represent a true terminal rather than the petering out of a truncated feature. Three possible postholes outside of the probable entrance are not well positioned to represent an entrance structure and, if related to the occupation of the roundhouse, probably represent activities taking place out of doors.
- **8.3** The broader context, considering the presence of the possible ring gully in Excavation Area 2 (see below), is that this may not have been a building in isolation, However, no dating evidence to show contemporaneity was forthcoming from the features in Area 2.

8.4 Area 2

This area was chosen for excavation following a small number of medieval pottery finds from two features during the evaluation phase. The conclusion of the evaluation was that the area was the location of former medieval in-fields and this has been confirmed, despite evidence for heavy plough truncation of features, with continuation of use in the post-medieval period. Previously unsuspected evidence was uncovered in the excavation area to show that the later prehistoric settlement found in Excavation Area 1 was also present in this area. The two main periods are discussed below.

8.5 Later prehistoric

Although no artefacts of definite prehistoric date came from this area during either the evaluation or excavation phases, two of the features exposed may indicate use of this part of the site in the latter part of this period in addition to that known from Excavation Area 1. The first feature is probable ring gully F10050 which was partially exposed in the southeast corner of the excavation area. Although heavily truncated, the gully had a distinctive V-shaped profile and may have been a wall trench for a roundhouse, as suggested for similar steep-sided ring gullies at Pinn Court Farm, Exeter (Wells and Newton 2020, 121). F10050 had an extrapolated diameter of 10m which is well within the parameters for sizes of later prehistoric roundhouses.

The other feature is gully F10041 which was cut by medieval/post-medieval ditch F10032. Once again this feature was probably heavily truncated and had an inconsistent profile. A later prehistoric date for the ditch is suggested by it being cut by F10032, as well as the sole find of a piece of fired clay which is a typical find from sites of this date.

8.6 Medieval

The Devon Historic Landscape Characterisation Project has mapped the area as 'Medieval enclosures based on strip fields' which means 'This area was probably first enclosed with hedgebanks during the later middle ages. The curving form of the hedge-banks suggests that earlier it may have been farmed as open strip-fields' (DCC 2021). Enclosure F10019 and associated linear features are former field boundary ditches which appear to have been established in the medieval period but with a small number of finds indicating that they continued in use into the post-medieval period. Two of the three pits uncovered are undated, but one of them (F10010) post-dated the enclosure ditches, indicating a probable late post-medieval date for this example.

Historic mapping shows that the field boundaries had already been removed by the mid-19th century. It is of note, however, that the alignment of the south side of enclosure F10019 and ditch F10044 was continued to the west by an extant field boundary (see Fig. 1).

The small number of medieval finds from Excavation Area 2 indicates that the fields were probably at some distance from contemporary settlement, which was presumably in the historic core of South Molton, approximately 500m to the southeast.

9. CONCLUSIONS

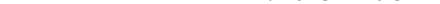
- **9.1** The excavations confirmed and expanded on the findings of the trench evaluation. There was however a general paucity of finds and environmental deposits and the dating of features is generally quite broad. The truncation of features meant that in the majority of cases the cut features were shallow and poorly preserved. Two key phases were identified across the site.
- **9.2** A ring gully in Excavation Area 1 is of probable Iron Age date and another partially exposed in Excavation Area 2 is probably of later prehistoric date and, although it could also be Iron Age, there was no dating evidence associated with it.
- **9.3** Ditches in Excavation Area 2 probably largely define areas of field enclosure established during the medieval period with finds indicating that at least some of the field boundaries continued into the post-medieval period. Two undated pits cannot be assigned to a period, but a third post-dated the field boundaries and was probably late post-medieval in date.

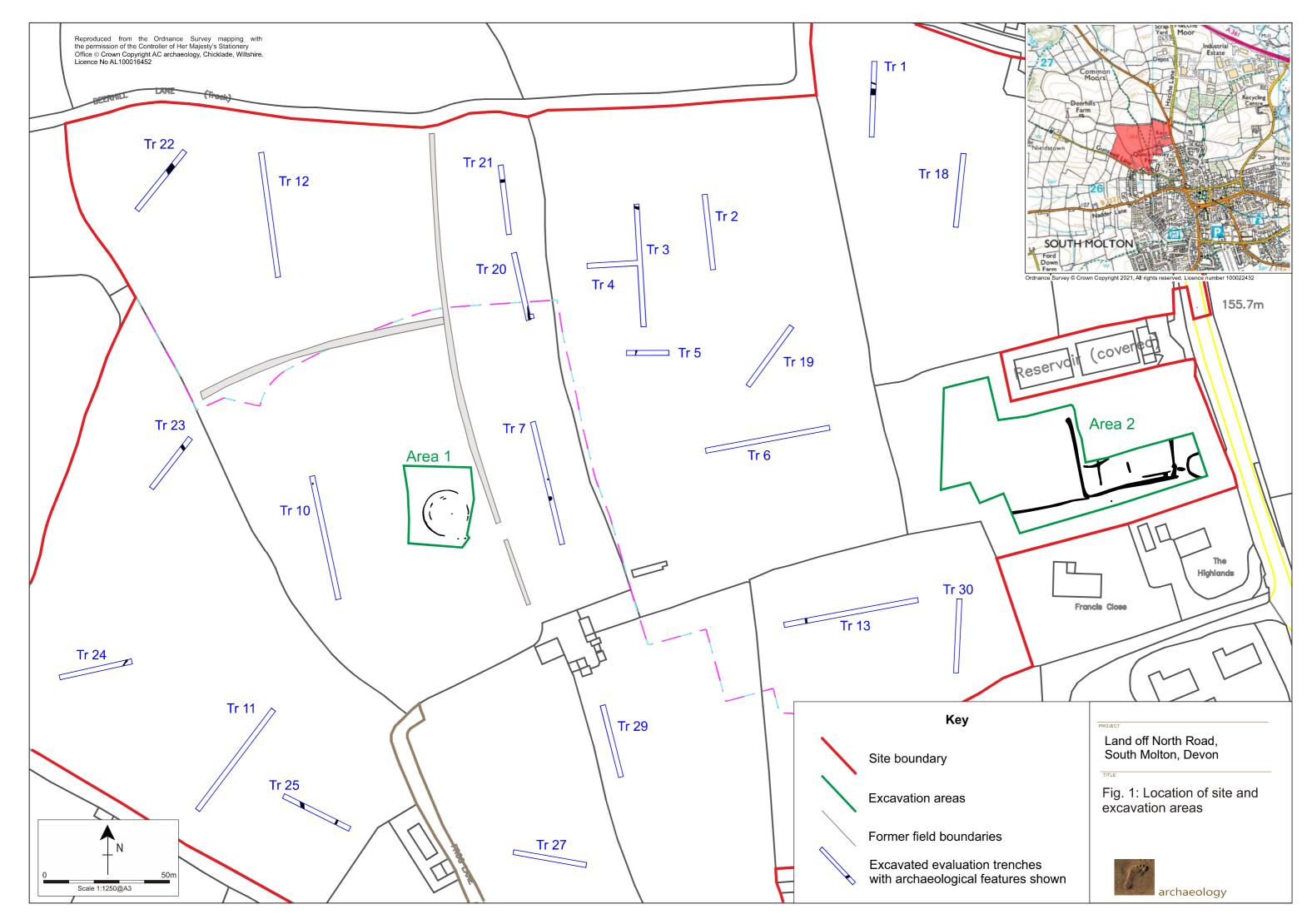
10. ARCHIVE AND OASIS ENTRY

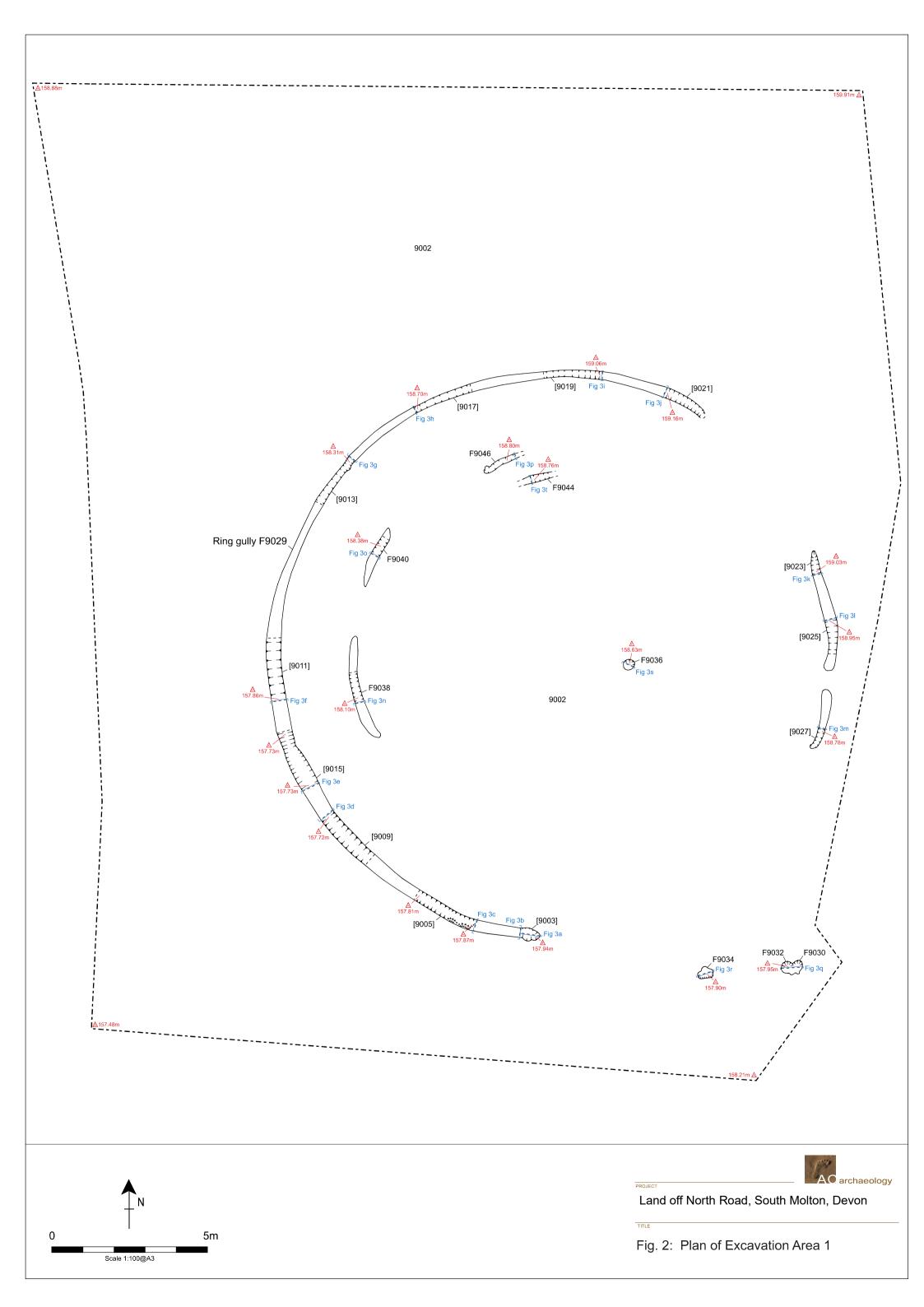
- **10.1** The finds, paper and digital archive will initially be stored at AC archaeology's Devon office under the unique project code **ACD1517**. Agreement will be reached with the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon concerning deposition and long term storage of the project archive and finds, which has been allocated the accession number **14.2016a**.
- **10.2** An online OASIS entry has been completed using the unique number **355371**, which includes a digital version of this report.

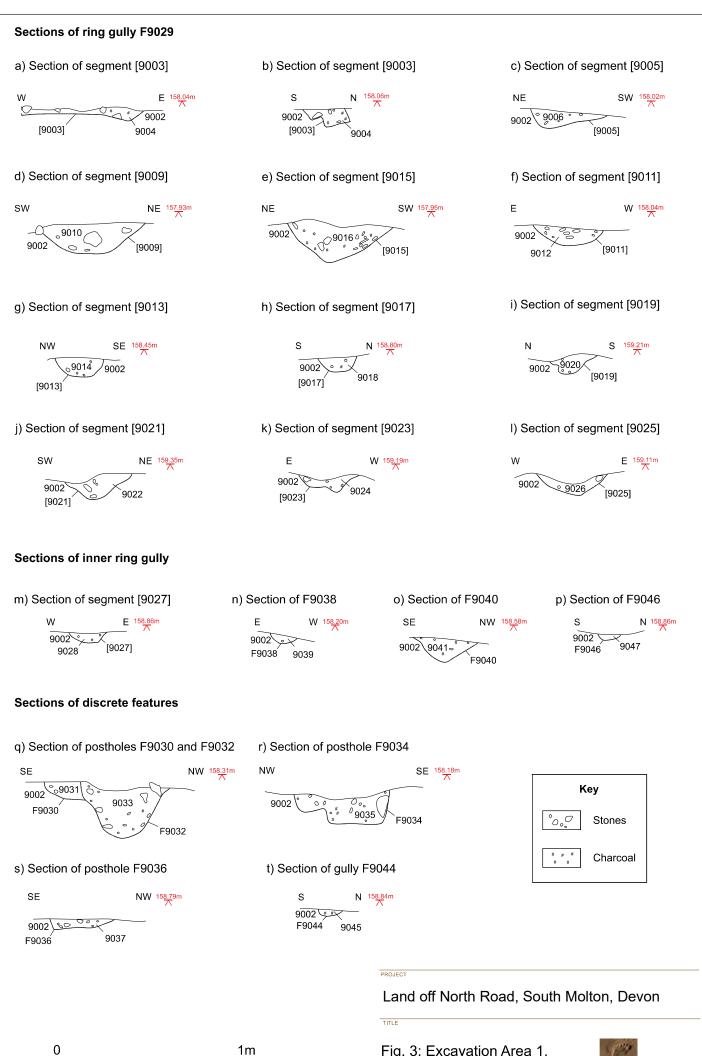
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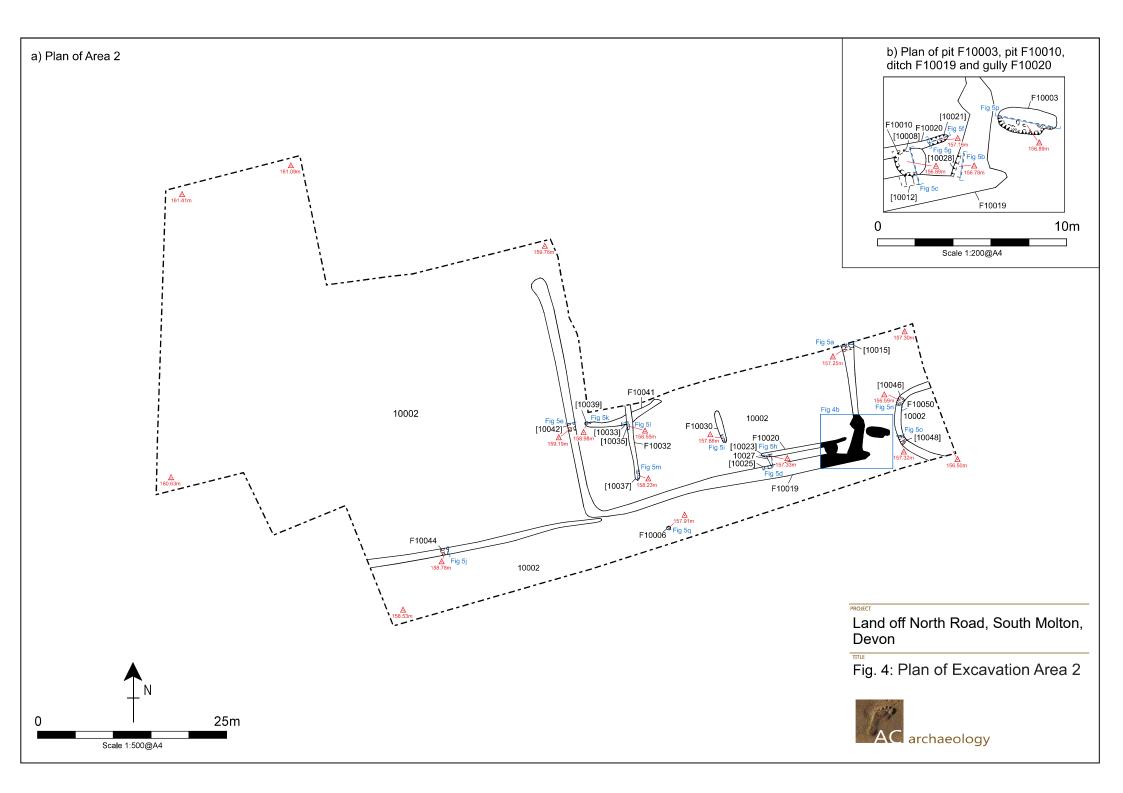




Scale 1:20@A4

Fig. 3: Excavation Area 1, sections





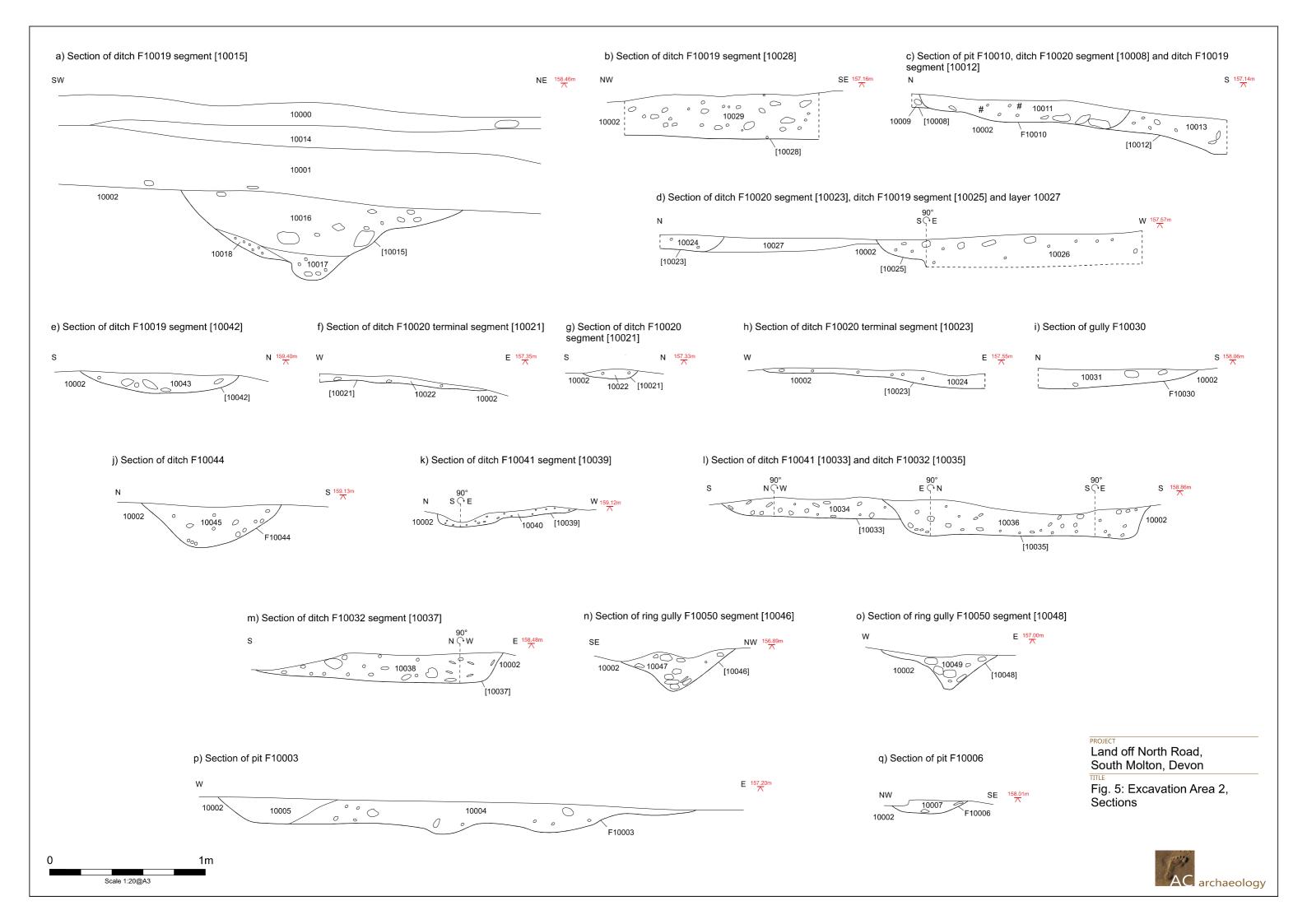




Plate 1: Excavation Area 1, general view, looking north



Plate 2: Excavation Area 1, general view, looking, looking east





Plate 3: Excavation Area 1, excavation of ring gully F9029 in progress, looking northwest



Plate 4: Excavation Area 1, posthole F9036, looking southwest (0.3m scale)





Plate 5: Excavation Area 2, general view, looking west



Plate 6: Excavation Area 2, ditch F10019 segment [10015], looking north (1m scale)





Plate 7: Excavation Area 2, ditch F10044, looking east (1m scale)



Plate 8: Excavation Area 2, ring gully F10050 segment [10048], looking north (0.4m scale)



Appendix 1 Summary of Finds by Context



APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF FINDS BY CONTEXT

| Context | Context Description | Lithics | | Prehistoric pottery | | Medieval pottery | | Post-medieval pottery | | Glass | | Clay tobacco- pipe | | Fired clay | |
|---------|---|---------|----|---------------------|----|------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|-------|----|-----------------------|----|------------|----|
| | | No. | Wt | No. | Wt | No. | Wt | No. | Wt | No. | Wt | No. | Wt | No. | Wt |
| 9001 | Area 1 subsoil | | | | | 1 | 8 | 22 | 221 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 5 | | |
| 9006 | Fill of ring gully F9029 segment [9005] | | | 1 | 24 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9020 | Fill of ring gully F9029 segment [9019] | | | 1 | 5 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9022 | Fill of ring gully F9029 segment [9021] | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10001 | Area 2 subsoil | | | | | 1 | 9 | | | | | | | | |
| 10016 | Upper fill of ditch F10019 segment [10015] | | | | | 14 | 102 | | | | | | | | |
| 10034 | Fill of gully F1004 segment [10033] | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 14 |
| 10036 | Fill of ditch F10032 segment [10035] | | | | | | | 1 | 17 | | | | | | |
| 10045 | Fill of ditch F10044 | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Totals | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 29 | 16 | 119 | 24 | 239 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 14 |

Weights in grams

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