

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRENCH EVALUATION
AT GIBBET MOOR CROSS,
STOODLEIGH, DEVON**

by

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SUMMARY

A trench evaluation was carried out for Pennymoor Timber in December 2008 at Gibbet Moor Cross, Stoodleigh, in advance of a planning application for the development of the site. A total of five features were exposed, all ditches. No dating evidence was recovered from the site. With the possible exception of one ditch, for which a tenuous association with an adjacent prehistoric burial ground has been made, all features are likely to be agricultural in function and post-medieval in date.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared for Mr Martin Freeman on behalf of Pennymoor Timber and presents the results of an archaeological trench evaluation undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) in December 2008 at Gibbet Moor Cross, Stoodleigh (NGR 288279 117062). The work was undertaken in order to provide supporting information for any future planning application to Mid Devon District Council (MDDC), for the redevelopment of the site.

2. PROJECT BRIEF

No specific brief for the project has been issued, the scope of the archaeological works having been determined following consultation with the Devon County Historic Environment Service.

3. THE SITE (Figs 1,2)

The site lies within an area of high archaeological potential. To the south of the proposed development lie three prehistoric funerary monuments, or burial mounds, subject to statutory protection as Scheduled Monuments. In view of the proximity of the site to the burial mounds and the probability that they are unlikely to exist in isolation, it was considered likely that any groundworks associated with the development would expose and destroy any surviving below-ground archaeological deposits within the development area.

The site comprised a broadly rectangular, level field, and was under pasture at the time of the evaluation.

A rapid map-based historic assessment of the site has confirmed that the current boundaries have remained unchanged from at least the early 19th century. The Stoodleigh parish tithe map of 1841 (fig. 5) shows the boundaries as they are today, and the tithe apportionment names the site as Gibbet Moor Little Plantation. The field is similarly named on the 1st edition OS map of 1887 and is shown as consisting of a mix of broad-leaved woodland and scrub. The current northern site boundary functions as a parish boundary.

4. AIMS

The principal aim of the trench evaluation was to establish the presence or absence, character, extent, depth and date of archaeological deposits within the site. The results are intended to inform the planning process should a planning application be submitted, and may be used to formulate a subsequent programme of archaeological works in mitigation of the impact of development, should any future planning application be successful.

5. METHOD

The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by EA and approved by DCHES (*EA 2008*).

Nine trenches measuring 1.8m wide and totalling 400m in length were opened, using a tracked excavator fitted with a toothless grading bucket. Topsoil and underlying modern deposits were removed to the level of either natural subsoil or the top of archaeological deposits (whichever was higher), at which point machine-excavation ceased and areas of archaeological survival were cleaned and investigated.

Archaeological features were excavated sufficient to establish their form, probable function and (where possible) date. The standard EA recording procedure was employed. Stratigraphic information was recorded on *pro-forma* single context record sheets, a drawn record was compiled at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate and a photographic record was made in black and white print and colour transparency.

6. RESULTS

As will be seen in the individual trench descriptions, natural subsoil lay very close to the surface (200-300mm below ground level). Extensive scarring of the subsoil, resulting from plough action was evident in all trenches.

6.1 Trench 1 (figs. 2,3. Plate.1)

This trench measured 50m long and was aligned broadly N-S. It was located within the NW corner of the site, parallel with the western site boundary.

Natural ground was exposed at a depth of 250mm. It consisted of yellow silty clay and was overlain throughout by a brown silty clay loam topsoil (100). The only feature exposed consisted of the western terminal of a shallow E-W aligned ditch (101). The ditch was exposed for a distance of 1m and continued beyond the trench to the east. It measured 490mm wide and 160mm deep, and contained a brown silty clay fill (102), virtually indistinguishable from the overlying topsoil. The alignment of the ditch was consistent with a number of adjacent ploughmarks.

6.2 Trench 2 (fig. 2)

This trench measured 40m long and was aligned broadly N-S. It was located within the SW corner of the site parallel with the western site boundary.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 230mm. It comprised silty yellow clay and was overlain throughout by brown clay loam topsoil (200). No archaeological features were present and no pottery or other artefacts were recovered.

6.3 Trench 3 (fig. 2)

This trench measured 50m long and was aligned E-W. It was located within the SW corner of the site parallel with the southern site boundary.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 200mm. It consisted of yellow silty clay with occasional mudstone fragments and was overlain throughout by dark grey to brown silty clay loam topsoil. No archaeological features were present and no pottery or other artefacts were recovered

6.4 Trench 4 (figs. 2,3. Plate .2)

This trench measured 50m long and was aligned E-W. It was located towards the SE corner of the site, parallel with the southern site boundary.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 300mm. It consisted of yellow sandy clay with occasional mudstone bands and was overlain throughout by a thin layer (50mm) of mottled grey clay subsoil (401), which was in turn overlain by dark brown silty clay loam topsoil (400), 250mm thick.

The trench contained a single cut feature; a linear ditch (403) exposed towards the east end of trench. It was orientated broadly NW-SE, oblique to the trench but parallel with the hedgebank that form the northern site boundary. It was seen for a distance of 6m, measured 1.5m wide but was very shallow (250mm deep), resulting in a gently rounded profile. A flatter "shelf" along its southern edge is suggestive of re-cutting, although no differentiation was evident in the homogenous silty clay loam fill (404). The fill was not very compact and did not display any evidence of weathering. No pottery or other datable evidence was recovered.

6.5 Trench 5 (figs. 2,3. Plate. 5)

This trench measured 50m long, and was aligned NE-SW close to the NE corner of the site.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 200mm. It consisted of yellow clay with mudstone bands and was overlain throughout by dark brown silty clay topsoil (500).

The trench contained a single feature; a linear ditch (503), which was aligned WNW-ESE, parallel with the northern site boundary. Measuring 450mm wide and 170mm deep it had a fairly steep-sided and open, flat-based profile, and contained a single greyish-brown silty clay loam fill, very similar to the overlying topsoil.

No pottery or other dating evidence was recovered.

6.6 Trench 6 (fig. 2)

This trench was 50m long and aligned NW-SE, parallel with the northern site boundary.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 280mm. It consisted of yellow clay with mudstone banding and was overlain throughout by brown silty clay loam topsoil (600). A number of modern ploughmarks or wheel ruts and a tree root hole were investigated. No other features were present, and no finds or other dating evidence recovered.

6.7 Trench 7 (figs.2, 4)

This trench measured 50m long and was aligned E-W within the centre of the site.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 300mm. It consisted of yellow clay with mudstone bands and was overlain throughout by dark brown silty clay topsoil (700).

The trench contained one potential feature; a possible ditch (702). Aligned N-S, it was unusually wide and shallow (2m x 60mm) and contained a single fill of brown friable loam (703) which was virtually indistinguishable from the overlying topsoil. Although its edges were clearly defined, its unusual proportions and the nature of its

fill leave some doubt as to whether it is an archaeological feature; it is possible that it represents infill of a variation in the level of natural subsoil.

6.8 Trench 8 (figs. 2,4)

This trench measured 50m long and was aligned NE-SW, towards the NW corner of the site.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 300mm. It consisted of yellow silty clay with mudstone bands and was overlain by brown silty clay loam topsoil.

Present in the extreme NE corner of the trench was a round-based ditch [802], 450mm wide and 110mm deep. Aligned NE-SW It contained a single fill (803), comprising greyish-brown clay loam similar to the topsoil.

6.9 Trench 9 (fig. 2)

This trench was 10m long and was aligned broadly N-S, within the NW corner of the site.

Natural subsoil was exposed at a depth of 200mm. It consisted of yellow silty clay and was overlain by brown silty clay loam topsoil.

No archaeological features or deposits were present and no pottery or other dating evidence was found.

7. DISCUSSION

The study site comprises a flat field with a heavy clay substrate and thin covering of topsoil (Plate 4). This has resulted in a wet site that has suffered as a result of modern agricultural practice. Both plough scarring and wheel ruts were numerous across the site, and present in all trenches.

The map evidence indicates that the field boundaries have remained fundamentally unchanged from at least the early 19th century, possibly much earlier. The parish tithe map of 1841 shows the site as comprising a mix of deciduous woodland and open scrub.

The general level of activity across the site is low with several trenches containing no features or significant deposits (trenches 2,3,6 and 9). Feature 101, (trench 1) is likely to have resulted from post-medieval ploughing, being consistent in character and alignment with a number of adjacent, shallower ploughmarks.

The evaluation has identified four potential archaeological features, all ditches; 403 (trench 4), 503 (trench 5), 702 (trench 7) and 802 (trench 8). None of these ditches have produced pottery or any other form of dating evidence and all were exposed in isolation, at least 60m from any other feature. This absence of dating evidence and the lack of inter-relationships severely restricts any meaningful interpretation of their function and significance, and places greater emphasis on the alignment of the ditches and the character of their fills.

Ditches 503 and 802 share the same alignment, profile and general dimensions, and are likely to represent exposures of the same feature. They lie parallel with the northern site boundary, which suggests that they post-date the formation of the field. In both cases, the ditch fill was very similar to the overlying topsoil which suggests that the ditch is not of very great age.

Ditches 403 and 702 are on markedly different alignments to both the frequent E-W aligned plough marks and the site boundaries. 'Ditch' 702 is unusually wide and shallow and is not particularly convincing as an archaeological feature. Ditch 403 was exposed close to the southern site boundary and may well pre-date it. The function of ditch 403 remains unclear. It was not present in trench 7 which would have been expected, based on its projected alignment. It is possible that it terminated a short distance beyond trench 4, that it had been completely ploughed out elsewhere (perhaps unlikely) or that it was more curvilinear than linear, returning to the southwest. If the latter were the case, the burial mounds within the adjacent field to the south would provide a possible context; the ditch perhaps functioning as a northern boundary to the burial ground, or forming part of an associated prehistoric field system. The nature of the ditch fill however argues against this, being fairly soft, and very similar to the overlying topsoil. Of particular note is the absence of mineral leaching and compaction that would be expected from a deposit of prehistoric date.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The trench evaluation has demonstrated a low level of archaeological activity within the site. The thin topsoil and heavy clay subsoil has resulted in a poor draining site, a characteristic that is compounded by the fact that the site is flat and relatively high. Historically, such land may not have been viewed as a preferred settlement site.

Those features that have been identified are few in number, and may all be relatively recent in date. The total absence of any pottery or other dating evidence is unusual and again reflects the low level of archaeological activity. Ditch 403 cannot readily be explained. It may have an association with the burial ground to the south, but such a relationship is tenuous and the nature of its fill argues against it.

9. SITE ARCHIVE

The site records have been compiled into a fully integrated site archive which is currently held at Exeter Archaeology's offices under project number 6672, pending deposition at RAM museum, Exeter. Details of the trench evaluation, including a pdf copy of this report have been submitted to the on-line archaeological database OASIS.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The report was commissioned by Martin Freeman for Pennymoor Timber and administered for Exeter Archaeology by Peter Stead. The fieldwork was directed by Paul Pearce.

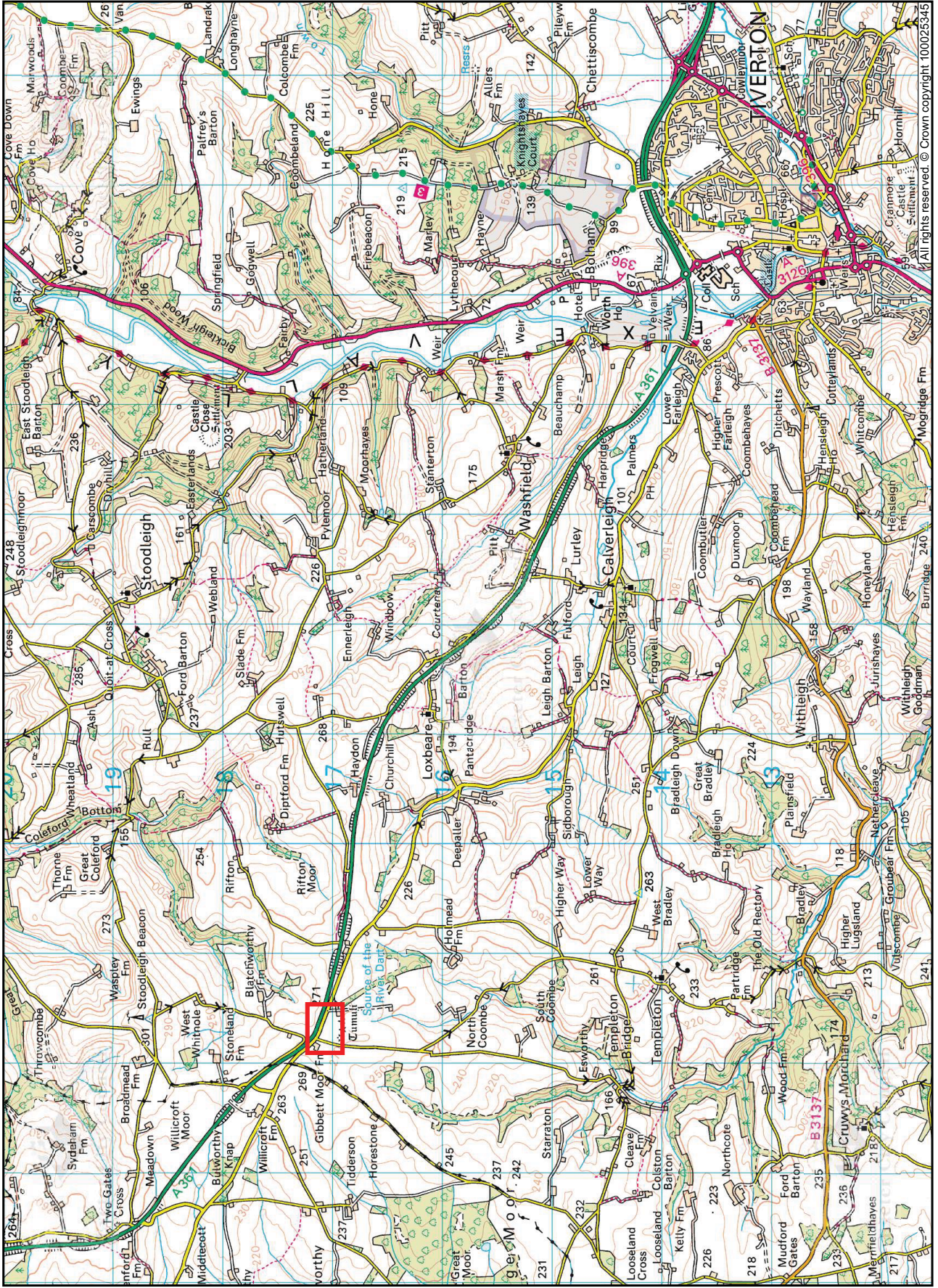


Fig. 1 Location of site. Reproduced 1:50,000 from Ordnance Survey digital data.

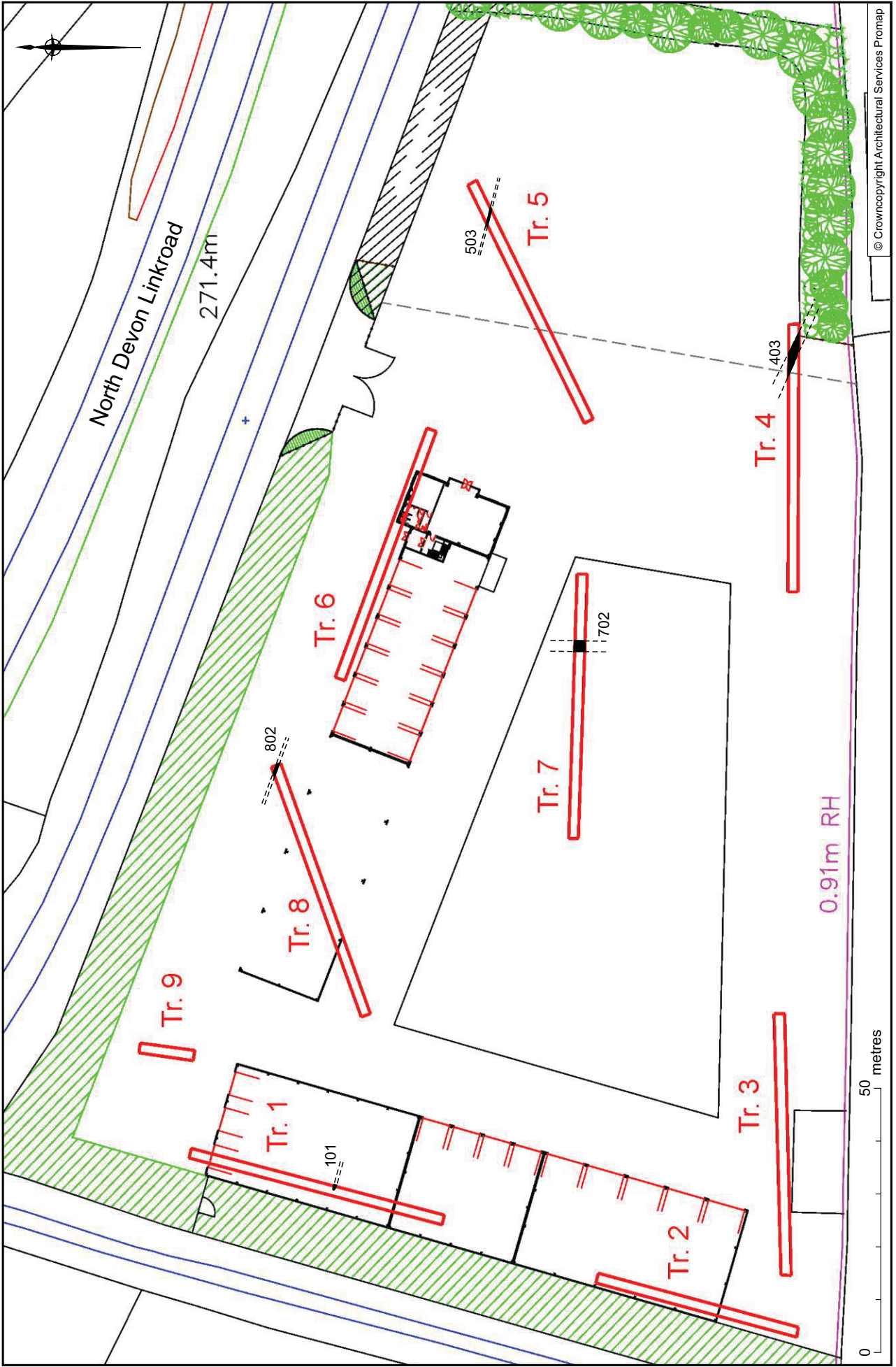


Fig. 2 Location of trenches and features. Scale 1:1000.

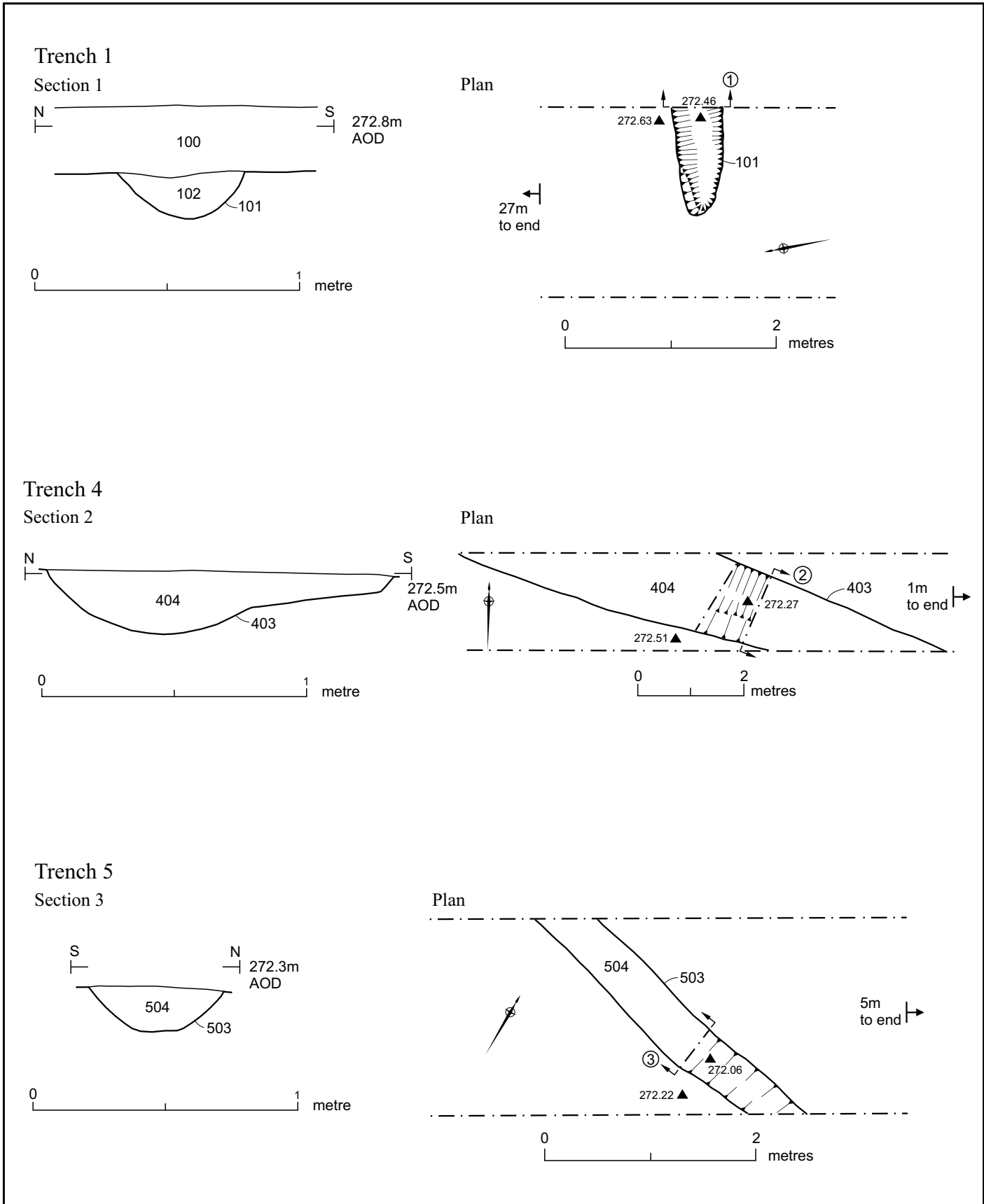
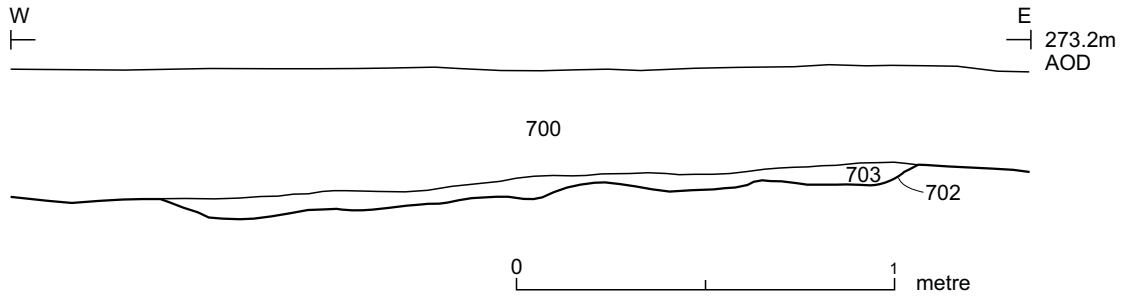


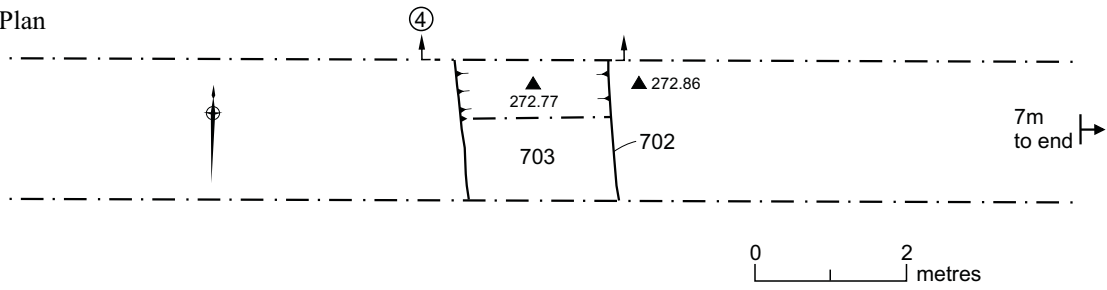
Fig. 3 Sections and plans of features in trenches 1, 4 and 5.

Trench 7

Section 4

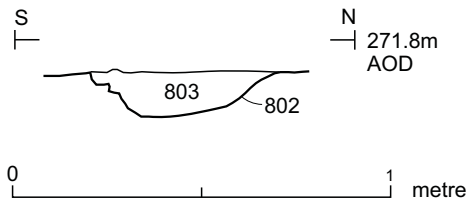


Plan



Trench 8

Section 5



Plan

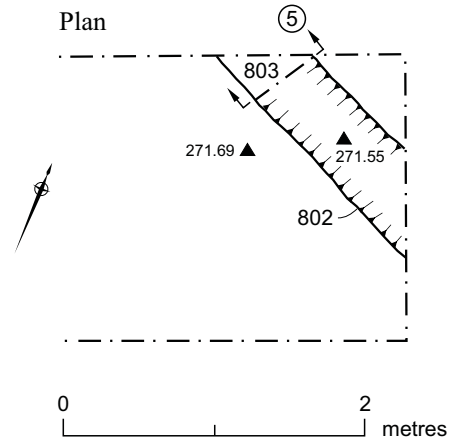


Fig. 4 Sections and plans of features in trenches 7 and 8.



Fig. 5 Extract from Stoodleigh Tithe Map of 1841.

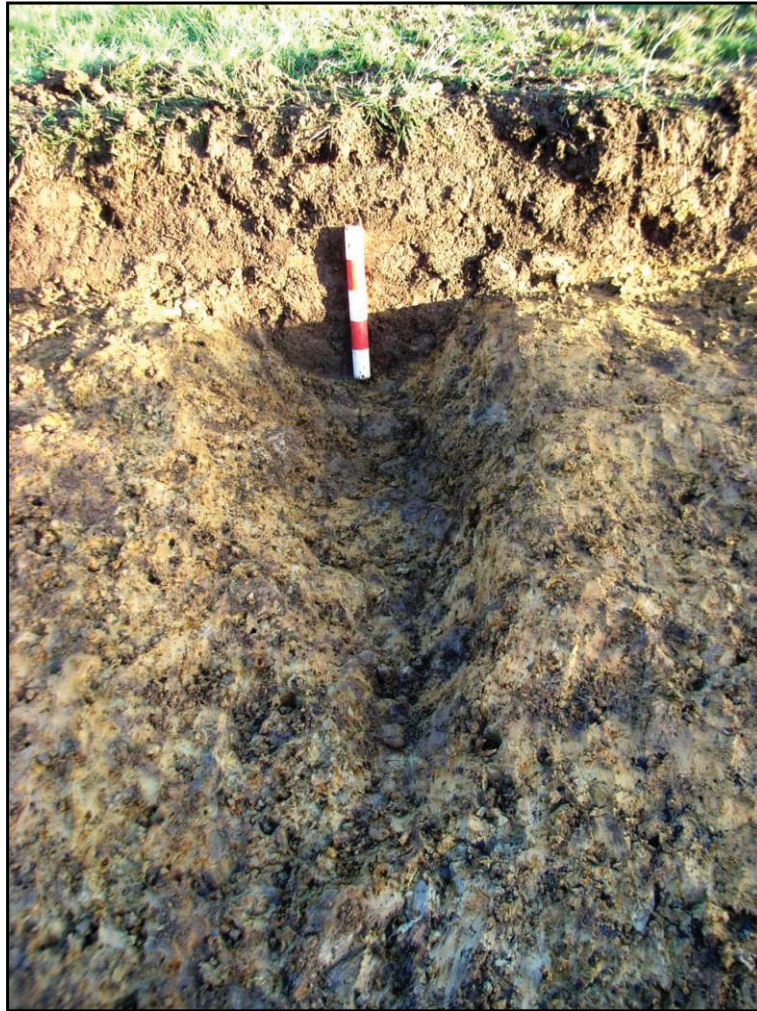


Plate 1 Trench 1, ditch 101. Looking east, scale 0.25m.



Plate 2 Trench 4, ditch 403. Looking south-east, scale 0.25m.



Plate 3 Trench 5, general view. Looking north-east, scale 2m.



Plate 4 General view of site showing trenches 9 (foreground) and 8 (centre). Looking east.