AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRENCH EVALUATION ON LAND AT THE HATCHERIES, BATHPOOL, TAUNTON, SOMERSET

prepared for Strongvox Homes

by Alex Farnell and John P. Salvatore

Exeter Archaeology

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Summary

An archaeological trench evaluation of land at The Hatcheries, Bathpool, Taunton was undertaken by Exeter Archaeology during July 2010. The evaluation comprised the machine-excavation of eleven trenches totalling approximately 200m in length, with each trench 1.6m wide. One trench (Trench 8) produced evidence of what appear to be four related and contemporary features tentatively dated to the Romano-British period although C^{14} (Radiocarbon) dating has provided a Middle Bronze Age date from charcoal deposits in one of the features.

The remaining ten trenches were devoid of archaeological features.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared for Strongvox Homes and presents the results of an archaeological trench evaluation undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) in June 2010, on land at The Hatcheries, Bathpool, Taunton. It represents archaeological work required as a pre-determination condition prior to any grant of planning permission for the residential development of the site. The work is required by Somerset County Council, as advised by the SCC Historic Environment Service (HES).

1.1 **The site** (ST 25682620, Fig. 1)

The site lies within the village of Bathpool which lies on the north side of the River Tone about 1.7km northeast of the centre of Taunton. The proposed development area is level and encompasses former modern farm buildings. Evaluation trenches were positioned where development is proposed with the exception of the areas occupied by standing occupied buildings.

2. PROJECT SPECIFICATION

Specifications for archaeological evaluation were set out in a written scheme of investigation put forward by EA in October 2009 in accordance with guidelines set out by Somerset County Council (*Heritage Service Archaeological Handbook*). The principal requirements were:

- evaluative trenching sufficient to investigate targeted areas within the footprint of the proposed development site, these target areas determined by the proposed location of new build.
- reporting and archiving as appropriate and sufficient for the purposes of fulfilling the planning requirements of Taunton Deane District Council.

3. AIMS

The principal aim of the project was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological deposits within the site. If present, the aim was to establish the date, character and function of the archaeological levels or deposits exposed with the further aim of informing the planning process response and the need or otherwise for a subsequent programme of archaeological investigation or mitigation within the site either prior to, and/or during construction.

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

No known sites of archaeological interest were previously recorded as lying within the development area. However, Romano-British pottery has been recovered to the south west of Bathpool, south of the River Tone and an area of Iron Age occupation has been attested at Alvins Orchard also on the south side of the River Tone where the junction of the A358 and A38 now stands (Somerset HER 43079). The region is characterised by ditched enclosures revealed by aerial photography. Many of these are undated but may be the sites of Iron-Age and Romano-British farms (Leach, 2001, 94). For example the rectangular ditched enclosure at Maidenbrook Farm, less than 1km due west of The Hatcheries, was found to be an Iron Age settlement which

continued into the Romano-British period at least into the later 3rd and early 4th centuries (Ferris and Bevan, 1993, 38).

5. METHOD

Eleven trenches were excavated totalling approximately 200m in length using a wheeled excavator with a 1.6m wide toothless grading bucket. Trenches were positioned to investigate areas where below ground disturbance by development was expected to occur. Trench 3 was repositioned to the south from the original trench plan in order to avoid tree roots; the repositioning necessitated a shortening of this trench. Machining continued until either undisturbed natural or archaeological deposits were reached. Where archaeological deposits were exposed, trenches were cleaned back by hand, and the deposits investigated and recorded – this occurred only in Trench 8 (see below).

Standard EA recording procedures were employed. Stratigraphic information was recorded on pro-forma single context record sheets; a drawn record was compiled in plan and section at scales of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate and a photographic record was prepared in black and white film and digital (colour) format.

6. RESULTS (Figs.1-2)

Overview
The typical deposit sequence encountered in all trenches comprised approximately 200-300mm of topsoil lying above a subsoil layer (up to 400mm thick) which appeared to have been disturbed by post-medieval activity with occasional fragments of 'coke' present throughout. This in turn lay above natural alluvial deposits; an upper layer of highly compacted silty clay approx 180-200mm thick, and a lower layer of undisturbed natural moist silty clay at about 700mm below present ground surface. The latter, once exposed, continued below the level required for the purposes of the evaluation.

6.1 Trenches 1-7

Trench 1 (Fig 1. Plate 1)
Trench 1 was 11.7m in length on an approximate east-west alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 2 (Fig 1. Plate 8)
Trench 2 was 13m in length on an approximate east-west alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 3 (Fig 1.)
Trench 3 was 12m in length on an approximate east-west alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 4 (Fig 1. Plate 6)
Trench 4 was 21m in length on an approximate NE-SW alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 5 (Fig 1.)
Trench 5 was 15m in length on an approximate NW-SE alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 6 (Fig 1.)
Trench 6 was 15m in length on an approximate NE-SW alignment.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 7 (Fig 1.)
Trench 1 was 18.6m in length on an approximate NW-SE alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

6.2 Trench 8

Trench 8 (Figs. 1-2. Plates 2-5)
This trench was aligned NE-SW, measured 47m long and was excavated to a maximum depth of 800mm. Natural subsoil was encountered at a depth of approximately 700mm, below a layer of material, interpreted as a very poor soil or weathered/ root affected natural subsoil (802), up to 200mm thick. This layer was sealed by a layer of subsoil (801), 220mm thick, of clear post-medieval origin containing fragments and lumps of 'coke' and slate fragments. Subsoil 801 was in turn sealed by up to 300mm of topsoil.

During the course of the trench reduction for evaluative purposes four features were exposed approximately 18m from the NE end of Trench 8 at a depth of approximately 500mm below ground surface. Three of these were evenly spaced features (807, 809 and 813) of which 813 was seen in section only. Each extended beyond the limits of the evaluation trench to the south east and these deposits remain in-situ. Each feature was similar in profile with a very gentle almost flat-bottomed U-shape and each contained two similar fills: a primary fill consisting principally of charcoal; and a secondary fill of compact silty clay (Fig. 2: section 1). The base fills of these features where they extended into the body of Trench 8 were excavated but with little return.
A fourth feature (805), of very similar description to the other three and with a flat-bottomed profile where sectioned (Fig. 2: section 2) was located almost completely within trench 8. It was sub-oval in plan (see Fig.2) and similarly contained a charcoal rich primary fill and a silty clay secondary fill. This feature was half-sectioned and then fully excavated in order to obtain a reasonable charcoal sample for analysis and possible C^{14} (Radio-Carbon) dating.

Feature 805 was a sub-oval pit measuring 1.35m long, up to 900mm wide and 300mm deep. In section it possessed near vertical sides and a flat base. It contained two fills (804 and 814). Primary fill 814 was located in the NW half of the feature only. It extended along the base and up the western side of the cut and consisted of reddish brown clay and black charcoal rich silty clay. Sample <1> was taken from this fill. Secondary fill 804 consisted of dark greyish brown silty clay with frequent charcoal

flecks throughout. A number of corroded iron nail fragments, including one with mineralised wood attached, were recovered from fill 804 at its southwestern end whilst two hobnails later identified as Roman, were recovered from the body of the fill in the location shown on plan in Fig. 2.

Feature 807 measured approximately 650mm wide, 340mm deep and was exposed to a length of 850mm within the trench. It continued beyond the limit of excavation to the SE. It contained two fills (806 & 816). Primary fill 816 was black and charcoal rich. Secondary fill 806 consisted of dark brown silty clay with occasional charcoal flecks. The appearance of fill 806 was very similar to that of the surrounding layer 802 being only slightly darker in colour with poorly defined edges.

Feature 809 measured approximately 600mm wide and 400mm deep and was exposed to a length of 350mm within the trench. It continued beyond the limit of excavation to the SE. It contained two fills (808 & 815). Primary fill 815 was black and charcoal rich. Secondary fill 808 was dark brown silty clay with occasional charcoal flecks. The appearance of fill 808 was very similar to that of the surrounding layer 802 being only slightly darker in colour with poorly defined edges.

Feature 813 measured approximately 450mm wide, 300mm deep and was observed in section only; it is unlikely to have extended into the trench much beyond the SE section face. It continued beyond the limit of excavation to the SE. It contained two fills (812 & 817). Primary fill 817 was black and charcoal rich. Secondary fill 812 consisted of dark brown silty clay with occasional charcoal flecks. The appearance of fill 812 was very similar to that of the surrounding layer 802 being only slightly darker in colour with poorly defined edges.

6.3 Trenches 9-11

Trench 9 (Fig 1. Plate 7)
Trench 9 was 16m in length on an approximate NE-SW alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 10 (Fig 1.)
Trench 10 was 15m in length on an approximate NE-SW alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

Trench 11 (Fig 1.)
Trench 11 was 16m in length on an approximate NE-SW alignment.
The deposit sequence is that as described above in the overview.
No archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

7. THE FINDS

The evaluation produced finds of iron objects only from the fill (804) of feature 805. These included two hobnails found close together and identified as Roman by John Allan (EA), a further possible hobnail, two nails badly corroded, one of which appeared to have a piece of fossilised wood adhering to it, and three nail fragments. Total weight for the eight pieces is 30g.

8. RADIOCARBON DATING

A sample of charcoal from feature 805 was submitted for identification and subsequent dating by C^{14} testing. An initial date of Middle Bronze Age was subsequently confirmed by re-testing. The certified results are presented in Appendix 1.

9. DISCUSSION

The evaluation has demonstrated the presence of as yet undated but clearly related archaeological features in the western part of the development site within evaluation Trench 8 with the high likelihood that the features are Roman (Romano-British) given the presence of hobnails.

Whilst interpretation of the features must at this stage be tentative it is possible to suggest that all four may be related to funerary activity of the Roman period. The fully excavated feature (805) has no human bone identified, nor is the plan of the 'grave' cut or its size conducive with human adult coffin burial. However, in this instance it should be noted that crouched inhumation persists in rural communities as late as the 3rd century (Philpott, 1991, 222) and crouched burial is recorded in this period in Dorset where the principal characteristic, other than the crouched posture, is grave furniture selected from a restricted range of items. (Whimster, 1981, 107-8).

It is perhaps premature, in this report, to go beyond the limits imposed by the nature of the evaluation exercise and the following discussion is therefore offered in the knowledge that further investigation could provide refined or, alternatively, conflicting information. However, at least one clear indication of a Roman burial tradition in feature 805 is provided by the presence of hobnails. Philpott, in his survey of grave treatment and furnishing of the Roman period, has stated that:

'*In areas where unfurnished inhumation appears to have been the usual Roman rite (in Wiltshire and Somerset for example) there is an upsurge in the 3rd century in the provision of pottery vessels, hobnails and occasionally coins in inhumations……'* (1991, 224).

No human or animal bone material was recovered from feature 805 nor was any cremated bone recovered from an examination of the charcoal-rich layer (814), which appeared to be localised to the northwest corner of the pit, but its presence and the presence of charcoal-rich layers in the other three features identified suggests a common purpose. With no evidence for in-situ burning it appears that the charcoal was introduced deliberately and it occupies a similar position in the deposit sequence in each feature, i.e. near the base of the primary fill, where it has the appearance in section of a 'bed' of charcoal (Fig, 2, section 1). The reason for this must await further investigation but the absorptive properties of charcoal could arguably be seen as a rural precursor of the use of gypsum and/or plaster in the burial process, usually interpreted in 4th century urban Roman burial as an attempt to preserve the body. This might be significant if the soils at the Hatcheries site were known in antiquity to be particularly destructive of body parts. In addition, the arrangement of the three features seen in section, clearly on the same alignment, placed in a row and not intersecting is highly suggestive of late Roman cemetery practice evidenced in urban cemeteries of the 4th century.

There is a wide disparity between the date of the artefacts recovered from feature 805 (believed to be Roman) and the date derived from charcoal recovered from the same feature (Middle Bronze Age). It is possible that waterlogged wood of Bronze Age date from the Somerset Levels had been utilised and subsequently burnt to provide the

deposit in 805 but only further investigation of the other similar known features on the site, all with significant charcoal deposits, will provide any possible solution.

10. PROJECT ARCHIVE AND 'OASIS' REPORT

A fully integrated project archive has been compiled and will be deposited at the Somerset County Museum, Taunton under museum accession number 229/2009

A report of the evaluation (including a pdf version of this document) will be submitted to the on-line database OASIS (On-line AccesS to the Index of archaeological investigationS), under OASIS ID: exeterar1-79313.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was commissioned and funded by Strongvox Homes and managed by Scott Gill (Strongvox Homes) and Peter Stead (EA). Site work was supervised by Alex Farnell with assistance from Fiona Pink. The report was written by John P. Salvatore with input from Alex Farnell and with illustrations prepared by Sarnia Blackmore. The finds were identified by J. Allan.

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Philpott, R. 1991 Burial Practices in Roman Britain. *British Archaeological Reports* British Series **219**.

Whimster, R. 1981 Burial Practices in Iron Age Britain. *British Archaeological Reports* British Series **90**.

Other

Somerset Historic Environment Record, Somerset County Council

APPENDIX 1
RESULT OF RADIOCARBON DATING

RADIOCARBON DATING CERTIFICATE

26 July 2010

Laboratory Code	SUERC-30335 (GU-22098)
Submitter	Andrew Passmore Exeter Archaeology Custom House The Quay Exeter, Devon EX2 4AN
Site Reference	The Hatcheries, Taunton
Sample Reference	EA 6996 sample 1
Material	Charcoal : Fraxinus excelsior
$d^{13}C$ relative to VPDB	-27.2 ‰
Radiocarbon Age BP	3115 ± 35

N.B.

1. The above ^{14}C age is quoted in conventional years BP (before 1950 AD). The error, which is expressed at the one sigma level of confidence, includes components from the counting statistics on the sample, modern reference standard and blank and the random machine error.

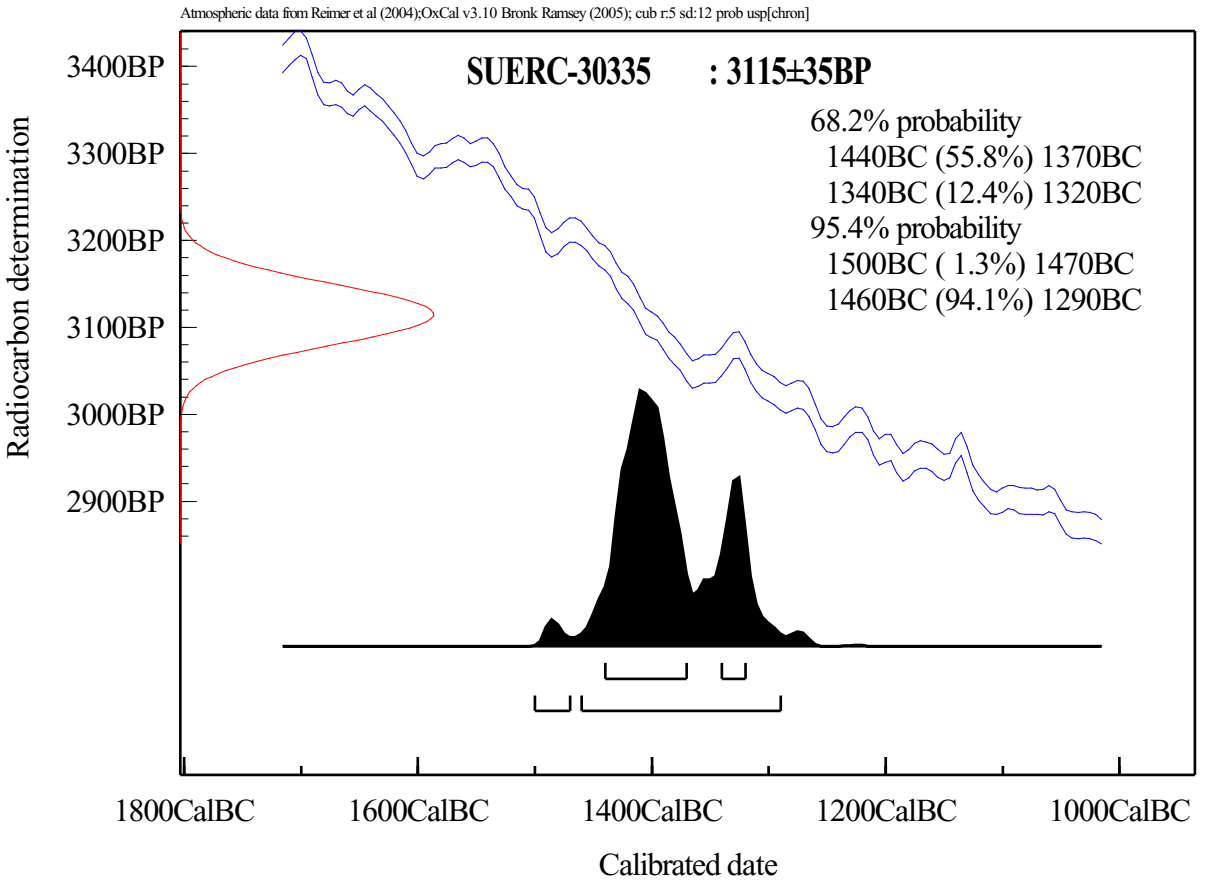
2. The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration program (OxCal3).

3. Samples with a SUERC coding are measured at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre AMS Facility and should be quoted as such in any reports within the scientific literature. Any questions directed to the Radiocarbon Laboratory should also quote the GU coding given in parentheses after the SUERC code. The contact details for the laboratory are email g.cook@suerc.gla.ac.uk or Telephone 01355 270136 direct line.

Conventional age and calibration age ranges calculated by :- Date :-

Checked and signed off by :- Date :-

Calibration Plot



RADIOCARBON DATING CERTIFICATE

13 August 2010

Laboratory Code	SUERC-30616 (GU-22098)
Submitter	Andrew Passmore Exeter Archaeology Custom House The Quay Exeter, Devon EX2 4AN
Site Reference	The Hatcheries, Taunton
Sample Reference	EA 6996 sample 1
Material	Charcoal : Fraxinus excelsior
$d^{13}C$ relative to VPDB	-25.3 ‰
Radiocarbon Age BP	3110 ± 35

N.B.

1. The above ^{14}C age is quoted in conventional years BP (before 1950 AD). The error, which is expressed at the one sigma level of confidence, includes components from the counting statistics on the sample, modern reference standard and blank and the random machine error.

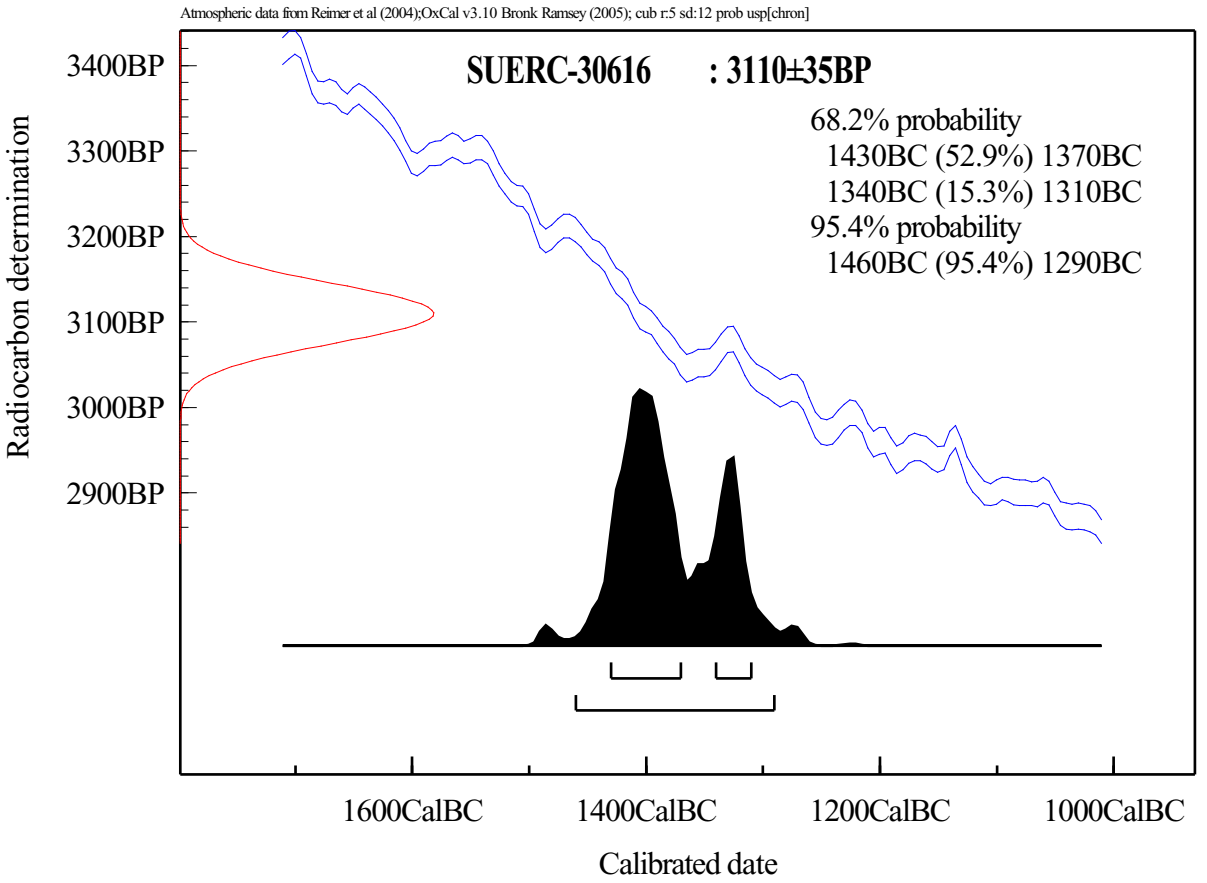
2. The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration program (OxCal3).

3. Samples with a SUERC coding are measured at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre AMS Facility and should be quoted as such in any reports within the scientific literature. Any questions directed to the Radiocarbon Laboratory should also quote the GU coding given in parentheses after the SUERC code. The contact details for the laboratory are email g.cook@suerc.gla.ac.uk or Telephone 01355 270136 direct line.

Conventional age and calibration age ranges calculated by :- Date :-

Checked and signed off by :- Date :-

Calibration Plot



Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre
Director: Professor A B MacKenzie Director of Research: Professor R M Ellam
Rankine Avenue, Scottish Enterprise Technology Park,
East Kilbride, Glasgow G75 0QF, Scotland, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1355 223332 Fax: +44 (0)1355 229898 www.glasgow.ac.uk/suerc

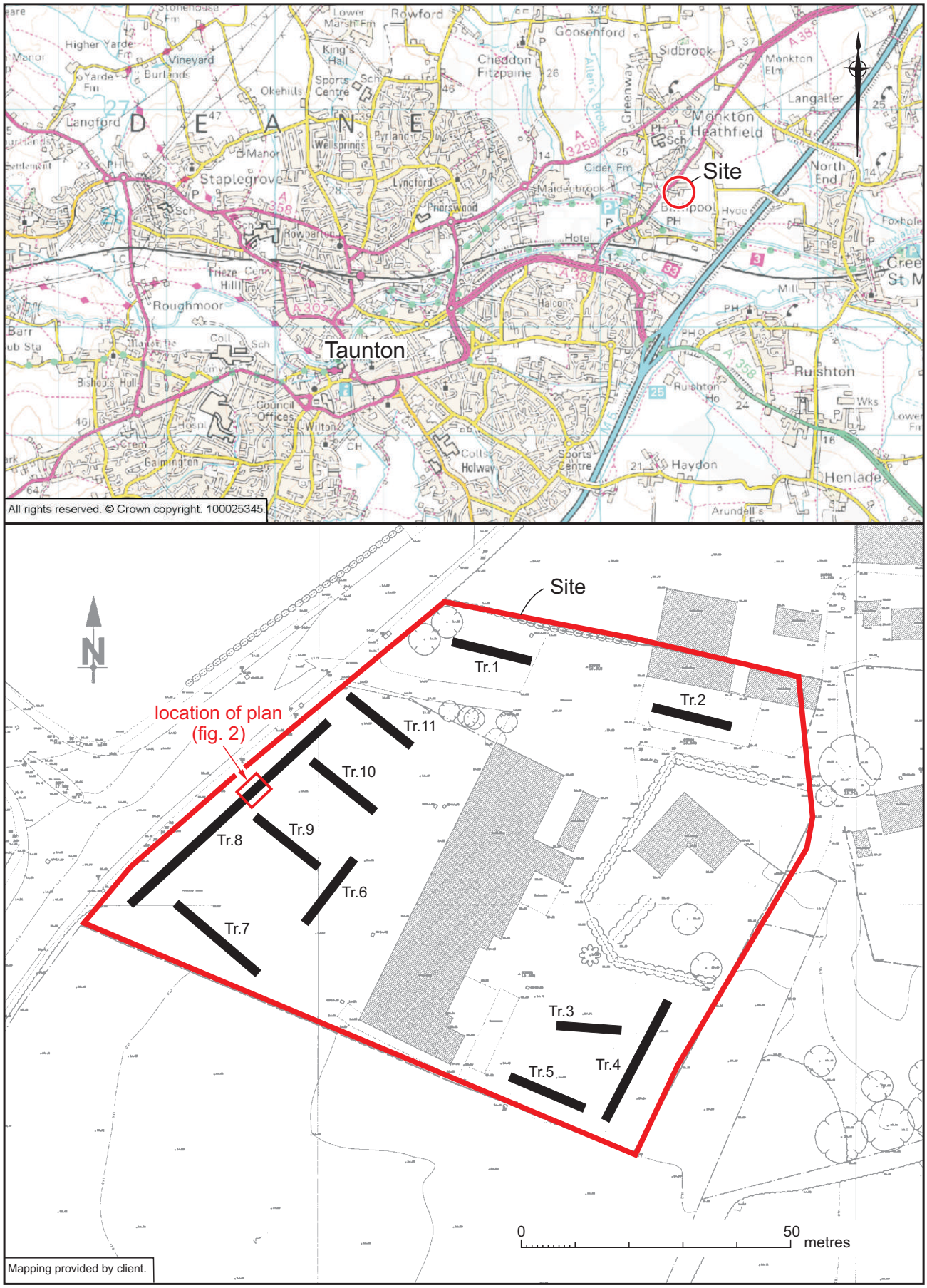


Fig. 1 Trench location plan (1:1000).

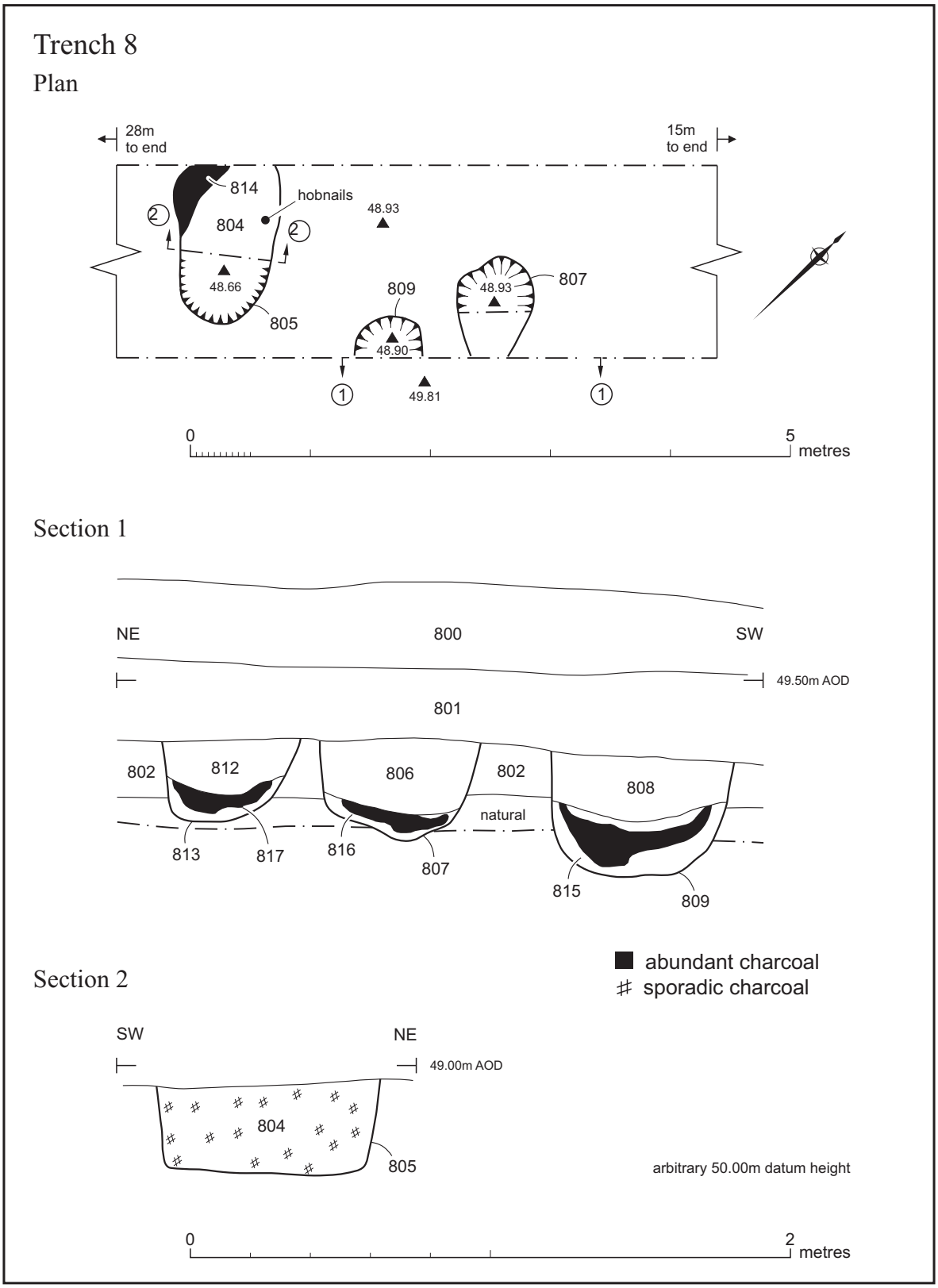


Fig. 2 Trench 8: plans and sections.

Pl. 1 Trench 1 general view, looking west. 1m scale.

Pl. 2 Trench 8 feature 805 (half section) looking northwest. 0.25m scale.

Pl. 3 Trench 8 feature 805 (fully excavated) looking northwest. 0.25m scale.

Pl. 4 Trench 8 features 813 (in section only)807, 809 and 805 looking northeast. 1m scale.

Pl. 5 Trench 8 feature 805 in foreground, looking southeast. 1m scale.

Pl. 6 Trench 4 general view, looking northeast. 1m scale.

Pl. 7 Trench 9 general view, looking northwest. 1m scale.

Pl. 8 Trench 2 working shot, looking east.