Archaeology South-East

ASE

A Further Archaeological Watching Brief at Bexhill High School, Bexhill, East Sussex

NGR 573155 109163

Planning Refs: RR/2709/CC and RR/2008/2010/C

Project No. 3634
Site Code: BGL 08

ASE Report No. 2009016
OASIS ID: archaeol6-57733

By
Simon Stevens BA MIFA

With a contribution by
Lucy Allott

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Abstract

A watching brief was maintained during ground reduction in a former playing field on visits to the site in January 2009. Mechanical removal of the topsoil and subsoil revealed a total of 15 archaeological features cut into the underlying silty clay of the Hastings Beds.

Most of the features were small and shallow, and the majority contained charcoal-rich fills, possibly derived from hearths. No datable artefacts were recovered from any of the features and examination of the available charcoal shows it to solely comprise slow grown oak that is not considered suitable for radiocarbon dating. At present, therefore, these features remain undated, though, given the occurrence of Mesolithic and later prehistoric features in the vicinity of the site, it is considered possible that these features are also or prehistoric date.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Background

1.1.1 Archaeology South-East (ASE), a division of University College London Centre for Applied Archaeology (UCLCAA) was commissioned by Longley to undertake a programme of archaeological works at Bexhill High School, Bexhill, East Sussex in advance of the construction of new school buildings. The site is centred at NGR 573155 109163 and its location is shown on Figure 1.

1.2 Geology and Topography

1.2.1 The site of the development comprised a level, grassed playing field and was bounded on three sides by further playing fields, with housing to the south. According to the British Geological Survey Sheet 320/321 Solid and Drift Edition (*Hastings & Dungeness*), the underlying geology at the site consists of Hastings Beds, comprising interbedded sands, sandstones and clays.

1.3 Planning Background

1.3.1 Planning permission was granted for the development of the site, to include the construction of a new school complex with associated landscaping and car parking (Planning Refs: RR/2709/CC and RR/2008/2010/C). Owing to the archaeological potential of the site, a condition (No. 3) was attached to the planning consent requiring a programme of archaeological works at the site. The condition stated that:

> *'No development shall take place on the site until a written scheme of investigation and programme of implementation of archaeological work has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Director of Transport and Environment. The development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved scheme, which shall be implemented in full.*
>
> *Reason: The development may disturb items of archaeological interest and an investigation provides a reasonable opportunity to record the history of the site in accordance with Policy S1 (j) of the East Sussex and Brighton and Hove Structure Plan 1991 – 2011 and Policy GD1(viii) of the Rother District Local Plan 2006.'*

1.3.2 Previous phases of archaeological work at the site consisted of a watching brief maintained during unexploded ordnance mitigation works, followed by an archaeological geophysical survey (ASE 2009b). A *Written Scheme of Investigation* (WSI) for the current phase of work was subsequently prepared by Archaeology South-East with reference to this document and was submitted and duly approved by the County Planning Authority, following advice from the County Council Archaeological Officer, prior to the archaeological works taking place (ASE 2009a).

1.4 Aims and Objectives

1.4.1 The principle objectives of the archaeological work laid out in the *Written Scheme of Investigation* (2009a, 2) were:

> *'In general, the aim of the watching brief is to record any archaeological remains exposed during the groundworks. In addition, all artefacts or ecofacts of archaeological and palaeoenvironmental interest exposed and affected by the excavations, are recorded and interpreted to appropriate standards.*
>
> *The watching brief will also evaluate the past impacts on the site and pay particular attention to the character, height/depth below ground level, condition, date and significance of the deposits.'*

1.5 Scope of Report

1.5.1 The current report provides results of the archaeological monitoring of groundworks at the site carried out during January 2009. The work was undertaken by a team comprising Clive Meaton and Paul Riccoboni (Senior Archaeologists), Nick Garland (Archaeologist), and Chris Kileen and Caroline Russell (Assistant Archaeologists). Surveying was undertaken by Rob Cole and Lesley Davison (Archaeological Surveyors). The project was managed by Giles Dawkes (Project Manager) and by Jim Stevenson (Post-Excavation Manager).

2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 An Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment of the site was prepared by L-P Archaeology Ltd (L-P Archaeology 2008). The results of this work are summarised below, with due acknowledgement.

2.2 In essence, no designated archaeological sites or listed buildings are known to exist on the site and that there are few records of archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity of the site, though this may well be the result of a lack of investigation rather than a genuine absence of archaeological evidence. However, the occurrence of finds of Mesolithic and later prehistoric date in the wider vicinity suggests at least some potential for archaeological remains of this date to exist on the site.

2.3 The available cartographic evidence shows that the site has comprised agricultural land since the late medieval period, with no obvious evidence of buildings.

2.4 The watching brief maintained during the survey of buried ordnance at the site did not result in the recovery of any archaeological evidence. No archaeological features or deposits were encountered and no significant artefacts were recovered. The geophysical survey revealed a number of anomalies, some of which may be of archaeological origin (ASE 2009b).

3.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

3.1 The archaeological watching brief was maintained during ground reduction by bulldozer and 360° tracked excavator on visits to the site during January 2009 (Figs 2 and 3). Personnel from Archaeology South-East monitored the stripping of topsoil and subsoil, in order to identify, excavate and record archaeological features and/or deposits.

3.2 Machine excavation was undertaken using a tracked mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. The spoil from the machine excavations was scanned for the presence of any artefacts, both visually and using a metal detector.

3.3 All encountered archaeological deposits, features and finds were excavated and recorded in accordance with accepted professional standards (IFA 2000 & 2001, EH 1991), the Recommended Standard Conditions for Archaeological Fieldwork, Recording, and Post-Excavation Work (Development Control) in East Sussex (2008) and the approved ASE Written Scheme of Investigation (ASE 2007), using pro-forma context record sheets. Archaeological features and deposits were planned at a scale of 1:50, with selected detail drawn at a scale of 1:20 or 1:10. Deposit colours were verified by visual inspection and not by reference to a Munsell Colour chart.

3.4 A photographic record of the work was kept and will form part of the site archive. The archive is presently held at the Archaeology South-East offices at Portslade, and will in due course be offered to a suitable local museum.

3.5 The archive consists of the following material:

Number of Contexts	46
No. of files/paper record	1
Plan and sections sheets	1
Bulk Samples	4
Photographs	*c.*25 black & white *c.*25 colour slides *c.*30 digital
Bulk finds	-
Registered finds	-
Environmental flots/residue	discarded

Table 1: Quantification of Site Archive

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 The overburden consisted of two separate layers. The uppermost was Context [100] a *c.*0.50m thick deposit of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil. This overlay Context [101], a light brownish orange silty clay subsoil, which was a maximum of 0.20m in thickness. The underlying natural geology, Context [102] comprised light yellowish orange clayey silt.

4.1.2 A number of archaeological features were encountered cut into the surface of the natural geology. All were shallow, suggesting a high level of truncation by ploughing or landscaping, and none contained any datable artefacts. All were sub-circular in plan unless otherwise stated, and all depths are the maximum observed. No correlation with the results of the geophysical survey was apparent (ASE 2009b).

4.2 The Features (Fig. 3)

4.2.1 Three features were encountered at the northern end of the stripped area. Cut [103] had a diameter of 700mm and a depth of 100mm (Fig. 4, Section 1). The single fill was Context [104], a charcoal-rich dark blackish brown clayey silt. Nearby, two further features were located. Cut [105] was 1.13m in diameter and 100mm deep (Fig. 4, Section 2). The single fill was Context [106], a charcoal-rich dark brown clayey silt. Cut [107] was 910mm in diameter and 60mm deep (Fig. 4, Section 3). The single fill was Context [108], a charcoal-rich, dark brown silty clay.

4.2.2 Further to the south-east, Cut [109] was an oval feature with a length of 1.17m, a width of 860mm, but a depth of only 15mm (hence no section was drawn). The single fill was Context [110], a charcoal-rich grey clay. Cut [111] had a diameter of 700mm and a depth of 150mm (Fig. 4, Section 4). The single fill, Context [112] was a charcoal-rich blackish grey silty clay. Cut [113] had a diameter of 760mm and a depth of 150mm (Fig 4, Section 5). The single fill was Context [114], a charcoal-rich greyish black silty clay. Pits [111] and [113] both exhibited signs of scorching of the underlying natural clay, suggestive either of *in situ* burning or that the charcoal rich fills were deposited while still hot.

4.2.3 There was a group of three features close to the centre of the stripped area. Cut [115] had a diameter of 710mm and a depth of 120mm (Fig. 4, Section 6). The primary fill was Context [123], a 20mm thick deposit of charcoal-rich, dark grey silty clay. The upper fill was Context [116], a light grey silty clay. Cut [121] had a diameter of 770mm and a depth of 80mm (Fig. 4, Section 7). The single fill was Context [122], a charcoal-rich, mid-grey silty clay.

4.2.4 The other feature in the group had three separate fills. Cut [117] was 1.02m in diameter and 160mm in depth (Fig 4, Section 8). The primary fill was Context [120], a 50mm thick deposit of light orange silty clay, probably the result of silting at the bottom of the open feature. This was overlain by Context [119], a 60mm thick layer of charcoal-rich dark grey silty clay. The uppermost fill was Context [118], an 80mm thick deposit of light grey silty clay. Heat discolouration of the surrounding natural of these three pits indicates *in situ* burning or the deposition of hot material within the features.

4.2.5 Cut [124] was located to the south-west of this group. It was 690mm in diameter and survived to a depth of only 40mm (Fig 4, Section 9). The single fill, Context [125] was a charcoal-rich dark brownish grey silty clay. Cut [126] was located to the north-west of the group. It was the largest feature recorded at the site, with a diameter of 1.6m and a depth of 250mm (Fig. 4, Section 10).

4.2.6 The arrangement of the fills possibly suggests that the feature had been recut. The earliest fill was Context [130], a 230mm thick deposit of orangey yellow silty clay. It was partially overlain by Context [128], a 200mm thick charcoal-rich, dark greyish black silty clay. The upper fills were Context [127], a 60mm thick orangey yellow clayey silt, and Context [129], a mid-greyish brown silty clay of similar thickness.

4.2.7 The other group of features lay close to the western edge of the stripped area. Cut [131] was 500mm in diameter and 110mm in depth (Fig. 4, Section 11). The primary fill was Context [132], a 40mm thick deposit of charcoal-rich mid-blackish grey silty clay. It was overlain by Context [144], a 70mm thick, mid-grey clayey silt. Cut [133] was 600mm in diameter and 100mm in depth (Fig. 4, Section 12). The single fill was Context [134], a charcoal-rich blackish grey silty clay.

4.2.8 Cut [135] was 550mm in diameter and 210mm in depth (Fig. 4, Section 13). The primary fill was Context [136], a 60mm thick, charcoal-rich, blackish grey silty clay. The upper fill was Context [137], a 170mm thick, mid-bluish grey clayey silt. Cut [138] was 1.19m in diameter and 250mm in depth (Fig. 4, Section 14). The primary fill was Context [139], a 110mm thick deposit of charcoal-rich, blackish grey silty clay. The upper fill was Context [145], a 240mm thick, bluish grey clayey silt. Pits [131], [133], [135] and [138] all showed signs of heat discolouration to the surrounding natural clay, indicative either of *in situ* burning or the deposition of hot material within the features.

4.2.9 The remaining features in this group was Cut [140], which had a diameter of 790mm and a depth of 120mm (Fig. 4, Section 15). The single fill was Context [141], a bluish grey clayey silt.

5.0 THE ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES by Lucy Allott

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Four bulk samples were taken during the archaeological monitoring at Bexhill High School from charcoal rich pit features to recover environmental remains and dating evidence. The samples were processed in a flotation tank and the flots and residues captured on 250µm and 500µm meshes respectively. The residues were sorted for environmental remains and artefacts (Table 2). Flots were viewed under a stereozoom microscope at x7-45 magnification and their contents recorded (Table 3).

5.1.2 The samples are rich in well preserved wood charcoal fragments the majority of which were recovered from the residues. Charcoal fragments are prominent in samples <1000>, <1002> and <1003>. The flot from sample <1001> is dominated by uncharred vegetation. Occasional fragments of burnt clay are also present in sample <1002>, (128) although these are not numerous and are non-diagnostic. No other environmental remains or artefacts are present and therefore charcoal provides the only potential for dating these pit features.

Sample Number	Context	Context / deposit type	Sample Volume litres	Sub-Sample Volume litres	Charcoal >4mm	Weight (g)	Charcoal <4mm	Weight (g)	Other (eg ind, pot, cbm)	Notes
1000	112	Fill of pit	12	12	****	858	****	324		Residue 99% charcoal
1001	139	Base of pit fill	20	20	**	20	**	8		
1002	128	Fill of pit	20	20	****	108	****	16	Burnt Clay */ 1g	
1003	125	Pit fill	20	20	****	238	****	84		Residue 98% charcoal

Table 2: Residue Quantification (* = 0-10, ** = 11-50, *** = 51-250, **** = >250)

Sample Number	Context	Weight g	Flot volume ml	Uncharred %	Sediment %	Charcoal >4mm	Charcoal <4mm	Charcoal <2mm
1000	112	12	20	40		*	**	****
1001	139	4	10	99				*
1002	128	2	5	80	5			***
1003	125	24	40	25	5	**	***	****

Table 3: Flot Quantification (* = 0-10, ** = 11-50, *** = 51-250, **** = >250).

5.2 The Charcoal

5.2.1 Charcoal fragments were fractured along three planes (TS, TLS, RLS) following standardised procedure (Gale & Cutler 2000) and viewed under a transmitted light microscope at x50, 100 and 200 magnifications. Identifications have been made through comparison with modern reference material and wood anatomical atlases (Hather 2000, Schweingruber 1990). The maturity of the wood, presence of sapwood and bark and the presence of roundwood are noted where apparent. Bulk samples were rich in wood charcoal fragments and therefore a sub sample of 80 fragments from each was included in the assessment. Sub-samples were obtained using a riffle box to ensure a cross section of all fragments sizes was included and to limit bias.

5.2.2 Anatomical features are well preserved in the majority of fragments viewed. Only one taxon, deciduous oak (*Quercus robur* or *Quercus petraea*) was recorded in each of the four samples. All of the specimens viewed appear to derive from mature oak trees although the rate of growth within these is variable. No roundwood fragments or specimens retaining bark are present and sapwood could not be distinguished from the heartwood.

5.2.3 The exclusive presence of oak wood provides clear evidence for selection. It is likely that these charcoal fragments originate from fuel using activities however the lack of other environmental remains and artefacts, although interesting, does not assist our interpretation of these features. The assemblages hold no evidence for coppiced wood (in which round wood specimens would be common) and it is not possible to determine whether the wood was burnt as wood charcoal or as fresh, dried wood. The oak wood may have originated from managed woodland, however without other woodland species identifications and other environmental evidence it is not possible to determine the nature of this woodland.

5.2.4 It was hoped that the assessment of these samples would produce material suitable for dating. Short-lived tree species are usually targeted to ensure that the date obtained is indicative of the point at which the wood was used and therefore dates the archaeology. Charcoal from oak trees is usually excluded from dating due to their potential longevity unless young wood, such as roundwood, twigs or sapwood, can be isolated from the sample.

5.2.5 As this assemblage contains slow grown oak wood (most likely from mature wood) and no roundwood specimens have been noted, the charcoal is not considered ideal for radiocarbon dating. In the absence of any other datable material however it is possible that dating the wood would assist in broadly dating the oak, however, it should be noted that any date obtained may not be directly indicative of the use of these features. For this reason no further work is recommended for these samples.

6.0 DISCUSSION

6.1 This investigation has succeeded in identifying archaeological features on the site, comprising a total of 16 discrete pits distributed across much of the stripped area with no apparent pattern.

6.2 These features are of some interest given that all but one contained comparable charcoal rich fills, suggestive of a similarity of function. This premise is given further credence by the fact that the charcoal present within the features exclusively comprised oak, suggesting selection of a specific species, probably for fuel burning activities. It is perhaps also worth noting that some nine features displayed evidence of *in situ* burning or the deposition of hot material. That none of these features was in use over a prolonged period of time is suggested by the fact that none of the respective charcoal fills was of any appreciable depth and that many were sealed by fairly clean deposits of redeposited natural clay. On balance, therefore, it is considered here that these pits represented short-lived - perhaps even single use - fire-pits or hearths.

6.3 Regrettably, none of the excavated features contained any datable artefacts and the charcoal recovered from them has proved unsuitable for radiocarbon dating. Consequently it is difficult to place the features within a meaningful wider context. Given the evidence for Mesolithic and later prehistoric features elsewhere in the wider vicinity of the site (LP: Archaeology 2008), it is possible that the features are prehistoric in date. Similar pits, dated to the Saxon period by C14 AMS radiocarbon dating, were found at Brisley Farm, Ashford, Kent, and it is conceivable that these are of a similar date (Johnson *pers. comm.*). However the complete absence of any cultural material in any of the features is problematic and suggests that it would be prudent not to assign a date to the features with any degree of certainty.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

7.1 The implementation of an archaeological watching brief at the site was prudent given the presence of known archaeological remains in the vicinity, and resulted in the excavation and recording of a small number of undated archaeological features.

7.2 It is important that any future archaeological investigation in the vicinity recognises the important of any similar ‘burnt’ pit type features identified. The dating of any such features should perhaps be considered a priority, either by the presence of artefacts in their fills of by scientific methods. To this end, it is suggested that this is a specific research aim for any such work on nearby sites that such features are fully sampled to provide the maximum resource for dating techniques.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The input of Casper Johnson and Greg Chuter, East Sussex County Council is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to the on-site contractors for their co-operation.

SMR Summary Form

Site Code	BGL 08					
Identification Name and Address	Bexhill High School					
County, District &/or Borough	Rother, East Sussex					
OS Grid Refs.	573155 109163					
Geology	Hastings Beds					
Arch. South-East Project Number	3634					
Type of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	Watching Brief ✓	Standing Structure	Survey	Other
Type of Site	Green Field ✓	Shallow Urban	Deep Urban	Other		
Dates of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	WB. Jan. 2009	Other		
Sponsor/Client	Longley					
Project Manager	Giles Dawkes					
Project Supervisor	Paul Riccoboni					
Period Summary	Palaeo.	Meso. ?	Neo.	BA	IA	RB
	AS	MED	PM	Other		

100 Word Summary.

A watching brief was maintained during ground reduction in a former playing field on visits to the site in January 2009. Mechanical removal of the topsoil and subsoil revealed a total of 15 archaeological features cut into the underlying silty clay of the Hastings Beds.

Most of the features were small and shallow, and the majority contained charcoal-rich fills, possibly derived from hearths. No datable artefacts were recovered from any of the features and examination of the available charcoal shows it to solely comprise slow grown oak that is not considered suitable for radiocarbon dating. At present, therefore, these features remain undated.

OASIS Form

OASIS ID: archaeol6-57733

Project details

Project name	A Further Archaeological Watching Brief at Bexhill High School, Bexhill, East Sussex
Short description of the project	A watching brief was maintained during ground reduction in a former playing field on visits to the site in January 2009. Mechanical removal of the topsoil and subsoil revealed a total of 15 archaeological features cut into the underlying silty clay of the Hastings Beds. Most of the features were small and shallow, and the majority contained charcoal-rich fills, interpreted as hearths by the excavators. No datable artefacts were recovered from any of the features. Following discussions with Casper Johnson of East Sussex County Council, it was decided that C14 dating was not appropriate in this case, and hence the features encountered during the watching brief remain undated.
Project dates	Start: 05-01-2009 End: 20-01-2009
Previous/future work	Yes / Yes
Any associated project reference codes	3634 - Contracting Unit No.
Any associated project reference codes	BGL 08 - Sitecode
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	None
Current Land use	Other 14 - Recreational usage
Monument type	NONE None
Significant Finds	NONE None
Investigation type	'Watching Brief'
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16

Project location

Country	England
Site location	EAST SUSSEX ROTHER BEXHILL Bexhill High School
Postcode	BN39 4ED
Study area	1.00 Kilometres
Site coordinates	TQ 573155 109163 50.8757182315 0.236296208234 50 52 32 N 000 14 10 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 32.00m Max: 36.00m

Project creators

Name of Organisation	Archaeology South-East
Project brief originator	East Sussex County Council
Project design originator	Archaeology South-East
Project director/manager	Jon Sygrave
Project supervisor	Paul Riccoboni
Type of sponsor/funding body	Client
Name of sponsor/funding body	Longley Kier

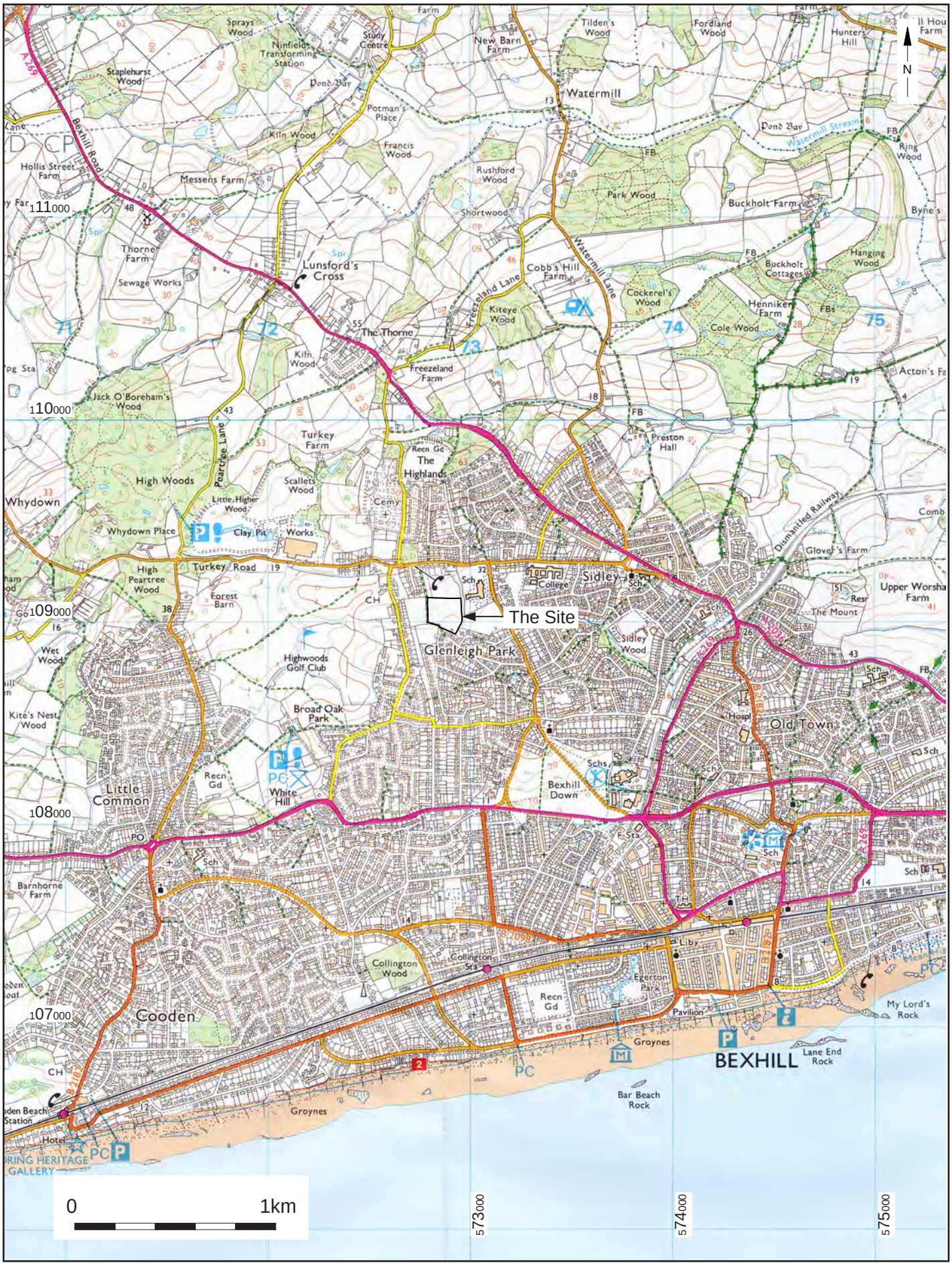
Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No

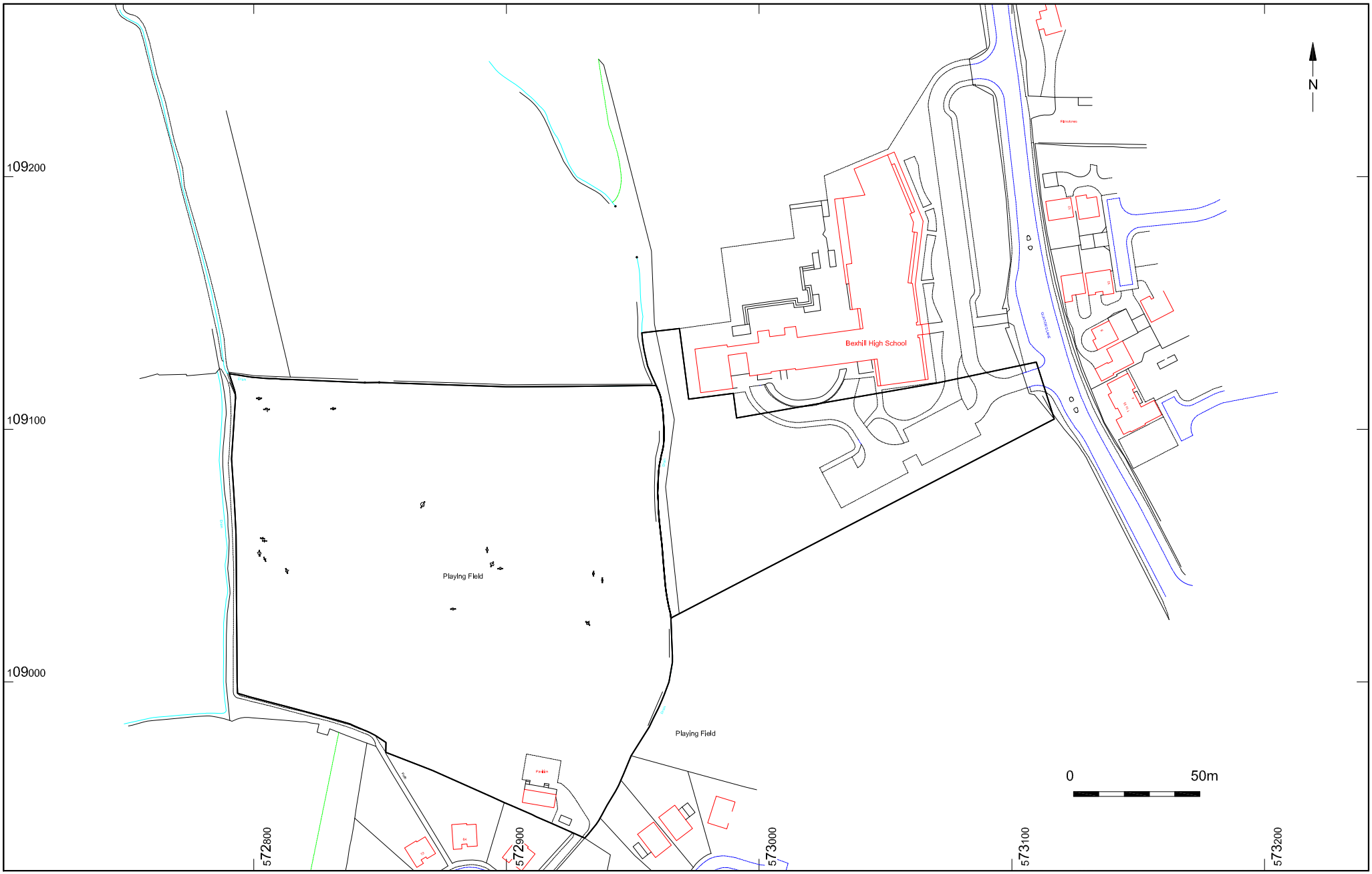
Digital Archive recipient	local museum
Digital Contents	'other'
Digital Media available	'Images raster / digital photography'
Paper Archive recipient	local museum
Paper Contents	'other'
Paper Media available	'Context sheet', 'Correspondence', 'Diary', 'Miscellaneous Material', 'Photograph', 'Plan', 'Report', 'Section', 'Unpublished Text'

Project bibliography 1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	A Further Archaeological Watching Brief at Bexhill High School, Bexhill, East Sussex
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Stevens, S.
Other bibliographic details	ASE Report No. 2009016
Date	2009
Issuer or publisher	Archaeology South-East
Place of issue or publication	Portslade
Description	Standard ASE Client Report : A4-sized with Cover Logos



© **Archaeology South-East**		Bexhill High School	Fig. 1
Project Ref: 3634	March 2009	Site Location Plan	
Report Ref: 2009016	Drawn by: JLR		



© Archaeology South-East		Bexhill High School	Fig. 2
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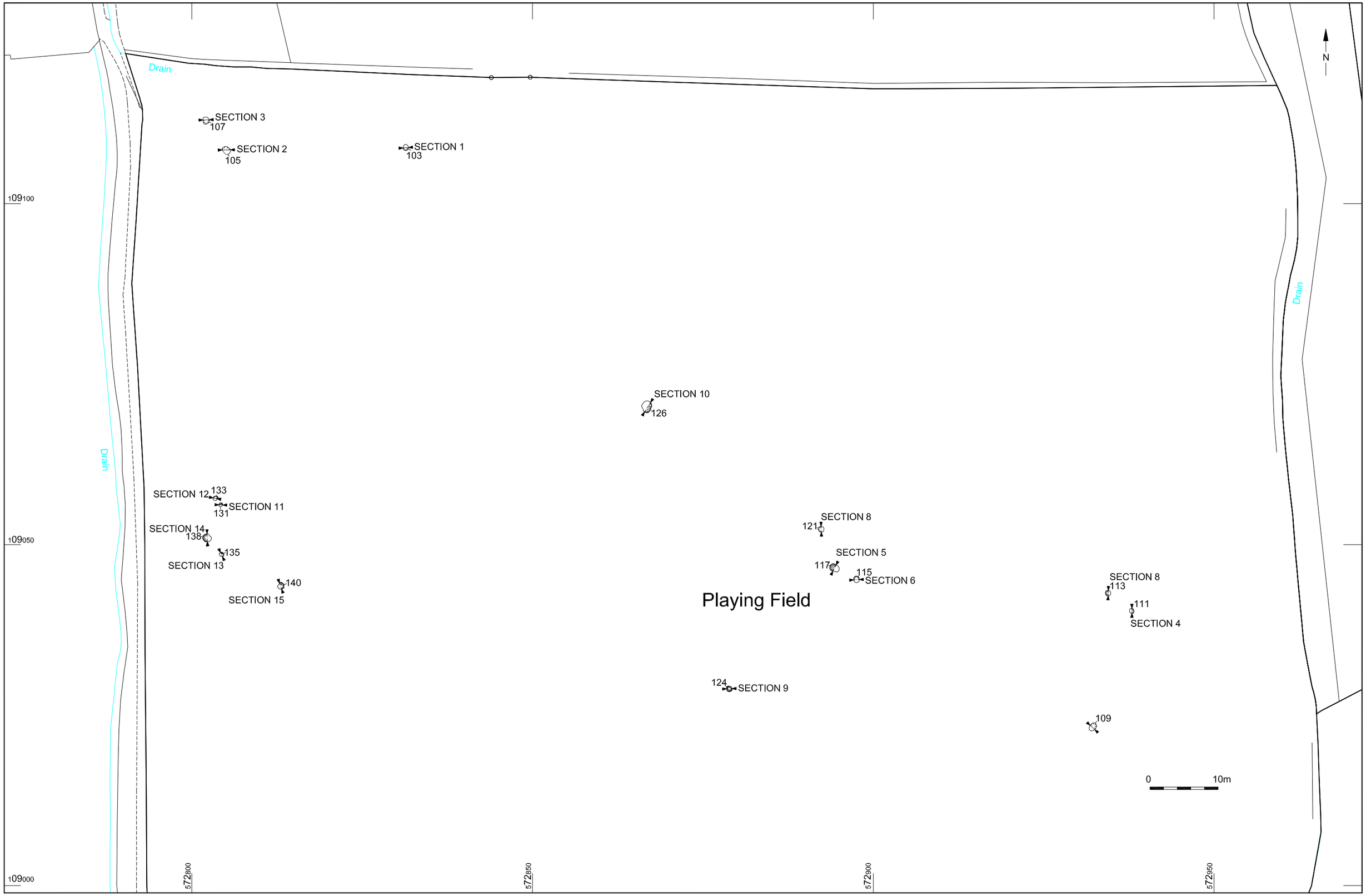
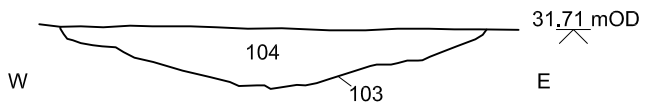


© **Archaeology South-East**		Bexhill High School	Fig. 3
Project Ref: 3634	Jan 2009	Site Plan	
Report Ref:2008016	Drawn by: JLR		

Section 1



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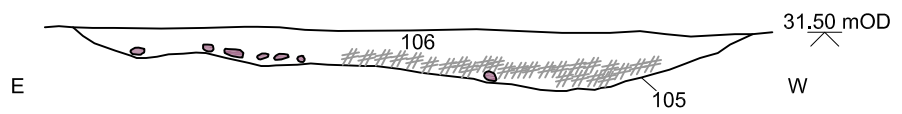

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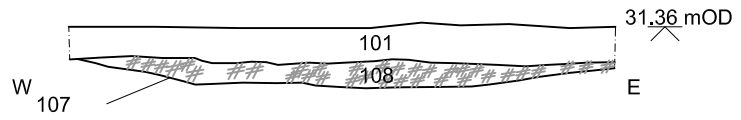

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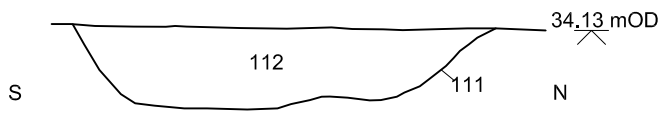

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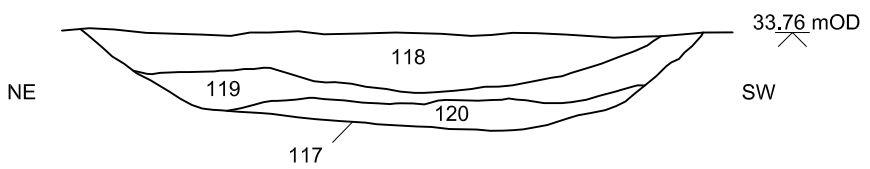

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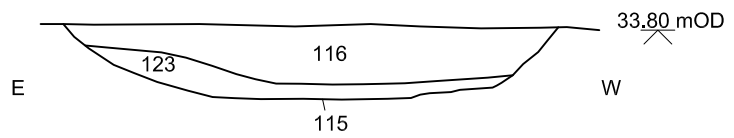

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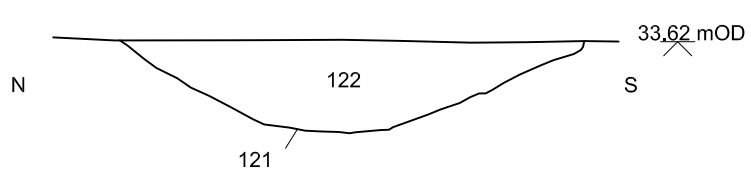

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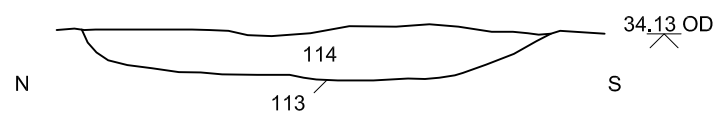

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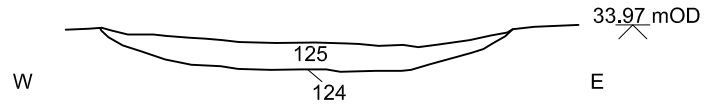

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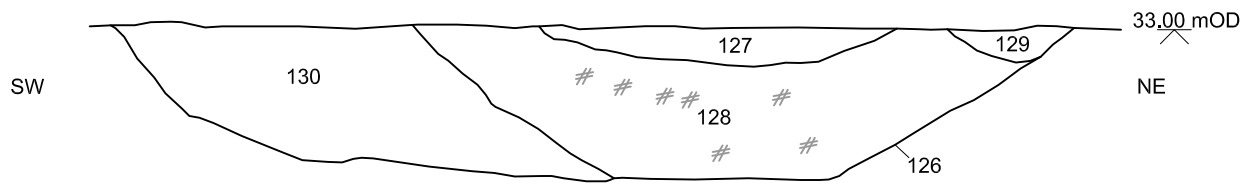

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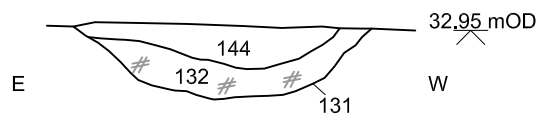

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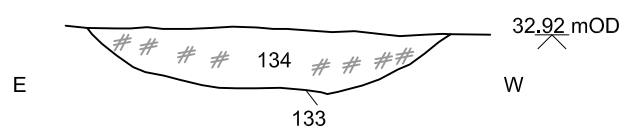

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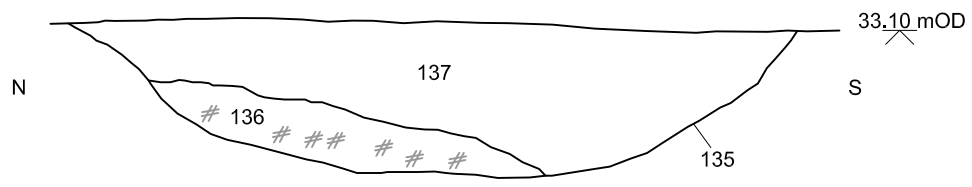

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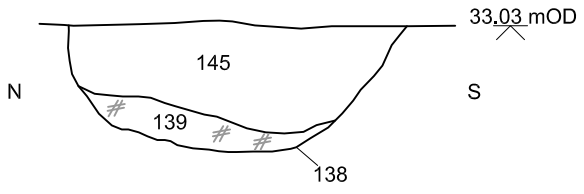

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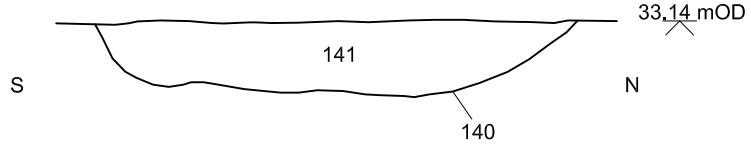

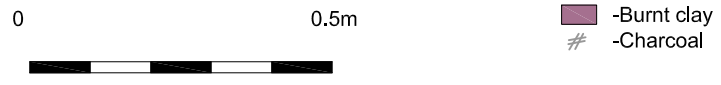

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