OVERFLOW CAR PARK FOR
THE CHILTERNS GATEWAY CENTRE
DUNSTABLE DOWNS
BEDFORDSHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION,
INVESTIGATION, RECORDING,
ANALYSIS AND PUBLICATION

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Introduction

In June 2008, Albion Archaeology was instructed by Bedfordshire County Council to undertake a programme of archaeological monitoring during the construction of an overflow car park on land to the south of the new Chilterns Gateway visitor centre on Dunstable Downs. Planning permission for the visitor centre and associated facilities had been granted in 2004 (planning ref: BC/CC/2004/43), following an archaeological assessment of the development's impact on the cultural heritage of the area (Albion Archaeology 2004a and b). The assessment, which included geophysical survey (Archaeological Services WYAS 2004) and trial trenching (Albion Archaeology 2004c), demonstrated that the development had the potential to disturb archaeological deposits. As a result the CAO (Bedfordshire's County Archaeological Officer) issued a brief for a programme of archaeological observation, investigation, recording, analysis and publication (BCC 2005). Albion Archaeology was commissioned by Bedfordshire County Council (acting through Hannah Reed and Associates Ltd) to undertake the work in accordance with a project design (Albion Archaeology 2005) approved by the CAO. The programme of archaeological work associated with the construction of the Chilterns Gateway Centre and main car park area was completed in 2006 (Albion Archaeology 2007), but the construction of the overflow car park was postponed.

When the overflow car park proposal was revived in 2008, the CAO agreed that the archaeological mitigation could be undertaken in accordance with the existing Brief and Project Design.

Groundworks associated with the overflow car park comprised ground reduction necessary for the construction of the car park surface and an associated footpath, as well as a series of drainage trenches.

The archaeological observation and investigation was carried out by Kathy Pilkinton (Assistant Archaeological Supervisor). The preparation of this report was undertaken by Kathy Pilkinton and Wesley Keir (Project Officer). The project was managed by Wesley Keir and Jeremy Oetgen. Drew Shotliff (Operations Manager) was responsible for quality control.

Site Description and Location

The overflow car park is located on unenclosed land adjacent to the access road to Chute Farm to the south of the Chilterns Gateway Centre at the top of Dunstable Downs (centred on TL 00870 19300) (Fig. 1).

The area affected by the construction works was essentially triangular in shape, following the outline of a series of lateral drainage trenches that fed into a long central trench. The car park was located within the northern half of this area. The land is owned and farmed by the National Trust and slopes down from the north-west to the south-east at a height of between 235m and 243m OD.

The underlying geology consists of clay-with-flints (British Geological Survey 2001).

Archaeological Background

Existing archaeological and historical knowledge of the area of the Chilterns Gateway Centre was examined as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment (Albion

Archaeology 2004b), which was produced in support of the original planning application. This found that, although the Downs are rich in archaeology dating from the Palaeolithic period to the 20th century, the only record relating to the site of the visitor centre is that of an early 19th-century Admiralty telegraph signalling station (HER 11211; NMR 359480; Lutt 1997, p19). This station was built in the Napoleonic War period and was part of the Yarmouth line; it was abandoned in 1814. The OS 2 inch to 1 mile map of 1804-15 shows it as being located in the vicinity of where the visitor centre now resides, but its exact location is unknown. In addition, the ancient route of the track-way known as the Icknield Way (HER 353) has been identified as running close to the site (*c*. 100m to the west), just off the chalk scarp.

A programme of archaeological work was undertaken in advance of and during the construction of the visitor centre. This comprised a combination of geophysical survey (Archaeological Services WYAS 2004), trial trenching (Albion Archaeology 2004c) and a watching brief (Albion Archaeology 2007). However, the majority of the overflow car park lay to the south of this study area, with the exception of the linking footpath and a small strip of land at the north-west end of the car park (Fig. 2).

A small number of archaeological features were revealed during the previous investigations, including four pits containing modern waste material, a post-medieval/modern chalk quarry and several other undated possible pits and post-holes. However, none of these features were within the area of the overflow car park.

Project Methodology

The programme of archaeological observation and investigation adhered to the field methods set out in the Brief (BCC 2005) and Section 3 of the Project Design (Albion Archaeology 2005). Excavation of the drainage trenches was continuously monitored. Soil stripping for the car park surface and footpath did not penetrate deep enough to reach the natural geology. As a result, it was agreed with the CAO that this could be monitored intermittently. Spoil heaps were checked with a metal detector.

Throughout the project the standards set out in the following documents were also adhered to:

- Institute of Field Archaeologists' (IFA) *Code of Conduct* (Revised edition 2006);
- IFA's *Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (Revised edition 2001);
- IFA's *Standard and Guidance for the Collection, Documentation, Conservation and Research of Archaeological Materials* (2001);
- English Heritage's *Management of Archaeological Projects* (1991);
- Albion Archaeology's *Procedures Manual: Volume 1 Fieldwork*, (2nd edn, 2001);
- Bedford Museum's *Preparing Archaeological Archives for Deposition with Registered Museums in Bedfordshire* (2007), and the Society of Museum Archaeologists' *Preparation of Archaeological Archives: Selection Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections* (1993).

Description of Groundworks and Results

The total area affected by the groundworks was approximately 1.76ha. The majority of work within this area consisted of the excavation of 14 drainage trenches that connected to a central drainage trench. These trenches were 0.35m to 0.45m wide and *c*. 0.5m deep. The area stripped for the car park surface was *c*. 4,250m^2 in extent, within which the ground level was reduced by *c*. 0.1m. A similar depth of material was removed during the construction of a 2m-wide footpath which linked the overflow car park with the main visitor centre car park. The archaeological observation and investigation was undertaken during August and September 2008, during which all groundworks that required monitoring were completed.

Within the drainage trenches, topsoil consisting of a mid-brown clay silt, between 0.2m and 0.3m thick, was observed directly overlying the undisturbed natural geology. This consisted of compact, plastic red clay, which contained numerous chalk and flint inclusions ('clay-with-flints'). By contrast, soil stripping for the car park area and footpath only penetrated *c*. 0.1m into the topsoil. The footpath crossed the location of one of the previously recorded geophysical anomalies (see Fig. 2), but no feature or source of the anomaly was visible at this depth. A refuse pit, probably related to other similar anomalies, was revealed nearby during the previous watching brief (Albion Archaeology 2007), but this was sealed by 0.2m of topsoil.

No archaeological features, deposits or finds were revealed during the course of the groundworks.

Conclusion

No archaeological remains or artefacts were revealed during the development. However, the majority of the groundworks were very shallow; the undisturbed geology beneath the topsoil only being exposed within the drainage trenches. Given that previously revealed archaeological features in the vicinity were sealed by the topsoil, there remains a strong possibility that buried features and finds, including the potential remnants of the signal station, may still survive within the development area. Any such remains are unlikely to have been adversely affected by the construction works.

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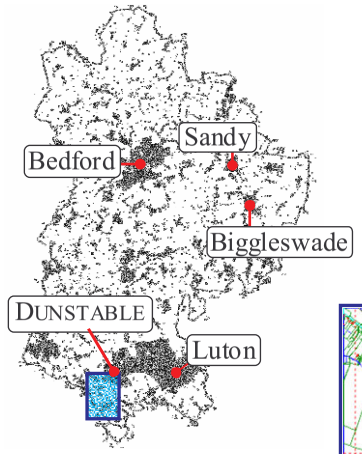

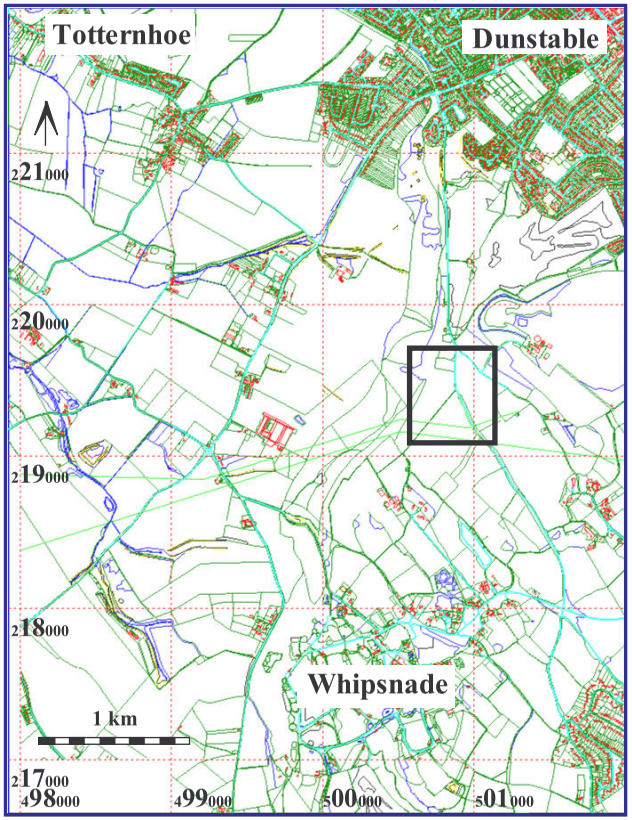

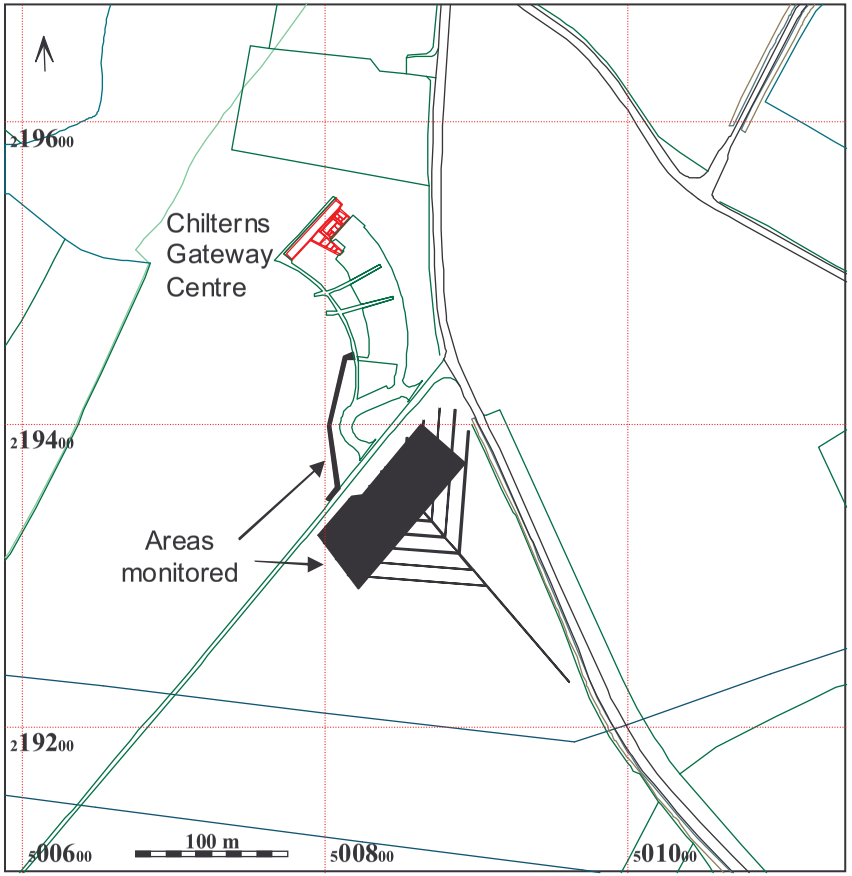

Figure 1: Site location plan

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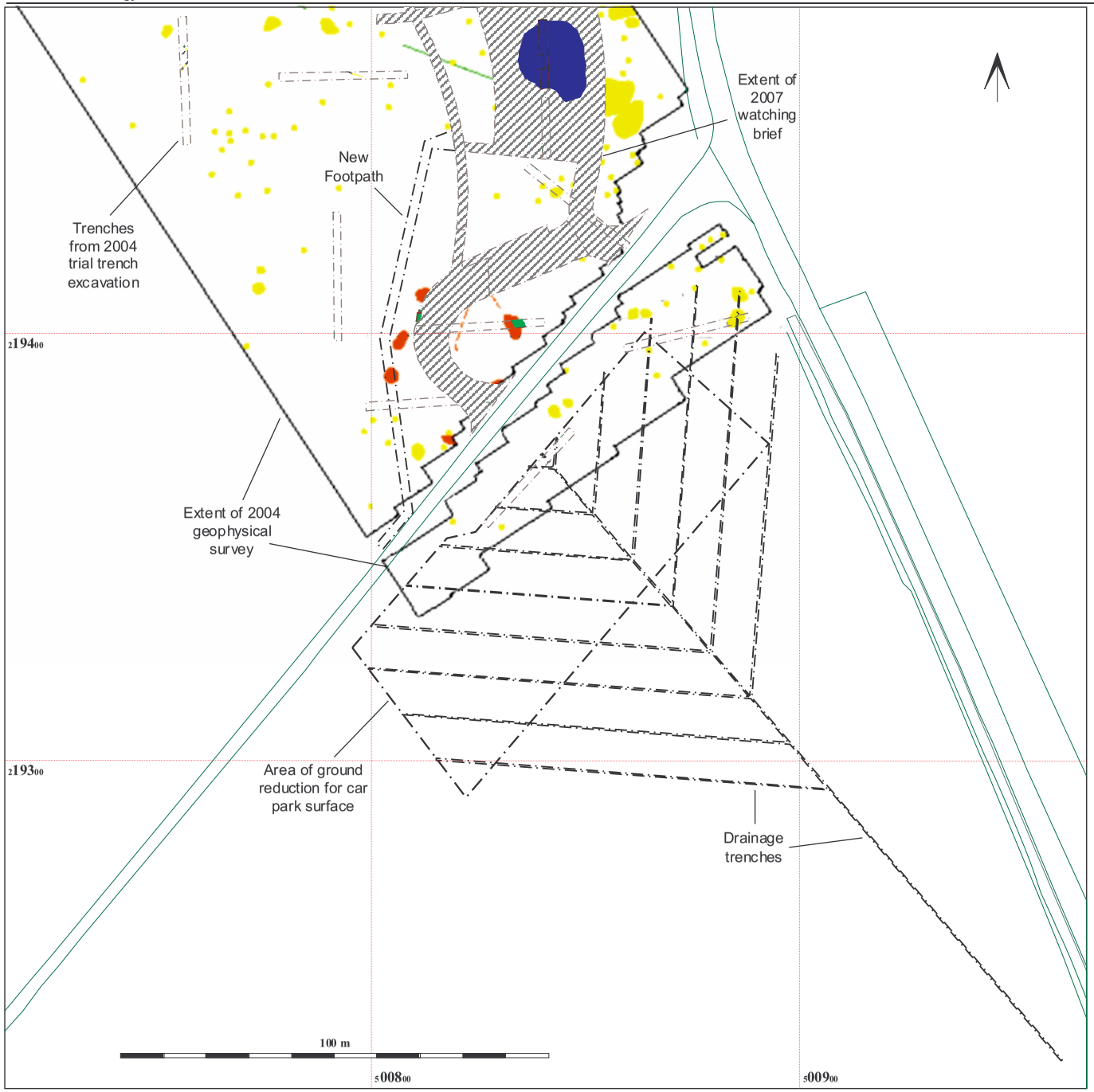

ANOMALIES IDENITIFIED DURING THE 2004 GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY	
TYPE OF ANOMALY	INTERPRETATION
DIPOLAR, ISOLATED	FERROUS MATERIAL
AREA OF MAGNETIC DISTURBANCE	FERROUS MATERIAL
LINEAR TREND	MODERN/AGRICULTURAL
AREA OF MAGNETIC ENHANCEMENT	POSSIBLE PITS
LINEAR TREND	LAND DRAIN?

FEATURES REVEALED DURING THE 2004 EVALUATION AND 2007 WATCHING BRIEF
REFUSE PIT
QUARRY PIT

Figure 2: Monitored area overlain with 2004 evaluation and geophysical survey, and 2007 watching brief