

Land off Alexandra Close, Plymstock, Plymouth

Archaeological Assessment

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1.1 Project Background

South West Archaeology Ltd. was commissioned by Peter Bowden (the client), to produce an archaeological assessment for scrub clearance work on land off Alexandra Close, Plymouth, Devon. This report has been produced in response to comments made in the press by 'archaeologist' Mr. Win Scutt concerning a possible barrow on the site and his concerns regarding the works being undertaken (Plymouth Herald 02.08.2014).

1.2 Site Location

The site is located at the northern end of Alexandra Close in Plymstock, approximately 5km to the south-east of Plymouth City Centre. The site is situated at a height of approximately 40m AOD. The Billacombe Brook and the large Moorcroft Quarry are located to the immediate north of the site and modern housing is located to the south and west.

The site is currently comprised of mixed deciduous woodland, consisting primarily of ash and overgrown shrubs. Many of the trees are in poor condition, and the woods have been unmanaged for at least 30 years. There are a number of fallen trees within the bounds of the site, including two large trees which have fallen (c. within 1-3 years) to the immediate west of the possible barrow. Some limited clearance work has been undertaken on the site, primarily of shrubs, undergrowth and of dumped rubbish and scrap. This work has included the replacement of a gateway onto Alexandra Close, and the re-instatement/clearance of scrub in the location of this former access track.

1.3 Historical Background

In the Domesday Survey Plymstock was described as being in the Hundred of Plympton. The origins of Plymstock can however be pushed further back, since the Manor of Plymstock is first mentioned in 959 when Prince Eadwig bequeathed it to Tavistock Abbey. Little documentary reference regarding the manor of Plymstock appears to be available from during its ownership by Tavistock Abbey. However, Pomphlett Barton is thought to represent the site of the demesne farm.

Upon its dissolution in 1539, Tavistock Abbey and most of its lands including Plymstock was granted to John, first Baron Russell (the Russells subsequently becoming the Dukes of Bedford). A 1755 plan of the Manor of Plymstock produced on behalf of the Duke of Bedford, does not however include the proposal site (see Figure 2), with the map suggesting that the proposal site probably fell within the manor of Plympton Holn. This is a reflection of the parishes of Plymstock and Plympton actually being comprised from a large number of sub-manors (five and fifteen respectively listed in the Domesday survey) (Gover *et al* 1931; Williams and Martin 2002). The proposal site probably therefore fell within the sub-manor of Elburton, but given its location on the north-west edge of the sub-manor (see Figure 3), it may well have changed ownership numerous times throughout its history. The parish boundary between Plymstock and Plympton St Mary runs along the Billacombe Brook to the north of the proposal site.

The Plymstock tithe map and apportionment of 1842 are the first (available) detailed sources to depict the site. These indicate that the site comprised a single large enclosure named Brake which had three subdivisions. As their subdivisions are not unbroken boundaries they may simply relate to different uses of these 'approximate areas' with the northern plot (now in different ownership, defined as *arable*, the central plot as *furze and coarse pasture* and the southern plot as *arable and furze*. The land was *occupied* at the time of the apportionment by William Pitts and seemingly part of the *Batton* landholding owned by Earl Morley of Saltram House.

Saltram House, c.2km to the north-north-east of the site originally appears to have developed as a farm during the medieval period, only becoming a 'great mansion house' in the late 16th or early 17th century. The house and estate was purchased by the Parkers of Boringdon in 1712, and by 1743, when the family relocated there, several major additions to the house and estate had been completed. Around the turn of the 19th century, Lord Boringdon (from 1815 known as Earl of Morley) had purchased the land which had formed Pomphlett Barton (subsequently a farm) and Wixenford from the Duke of Bedford. This dramatically expanded the southern extent of the 'formal' Saltram Park. This was finalised c.1807 after Lord Boringdon obtained an Act authorising him to enclose 175 acres of land south of the Saltram parkland to form Chelson Meadow, with a carriage road being constructed on an embankment adjacent to the river and granite gate piers originating from Boringdon House moved to form an entranceway.

The proposal site therefore forms part of the southern edge of the lands acquired by Lord Boringdon at this time. It would appear that the area south of the ridge, which runs broadly east-west through these additional farm lands, were never formally landscaped (Parks Agency 2007: 21). However, that is not to say that it was not picturesque, or that there were no changes to this landscape as a result of the change in ownership, especially given the dramatic landscaping and planting schemes embarked upon along the ridges themselves and within the formal parkland. In fact the scenery at Pomphlett was described (in part) as being 'highly romantic' and picturesque by Reverend Swete in 1793. This semi-industrial though picturesque landscape around Pomphlett may have been part of the reason why Lord Boringdon seemingly embarked on fewer changes within this area. It is possible however that the partially wooded nature of the proposal site is a reflection of the change of ownership, or that Lord Boringdon simply ran out of finance or inclination to further landscape areas to the south of the ridge.

1.4 Archaeological Background

On the north and east sides of the River Plym, fissures and caves within the limestone (discovered in the 19th century) have yielded archaeological deposits of Palaeolithic date, and caves at Breakwater Quarry, c.1.6km to the east of the site, and 'Pomphlett (Mills?) Quarry' (now Morrisons supermarket), produced various faunal remains from this date. The other notable 19th century discovery was of the Plymstock Hoard of bronze axes, 'found beneath a rock pile' at the base of a limestone ridge 'in a field near Pomphlett' (Pearce 1983; Worth 1888, 129).

Archaeological fieldwork in the general area has been sparse until the 1990s when significant evidence of activity spanning from the early Neolithic through to the post-Roman period has been discovered. Much of this evidence has been derived from findspots, unstratified material or isolated archaeological features, with little evidence of structures, except for field boundaries, as at the site of the former Widegate Nursery, Elburton (see Gent 1996; Dyer 2001; Watts 1995).

An Early Bronze Age cemetery was discovered and excavated in 1997–9 on land adjacent to the site, at the northern end of Alexandra Close (SX 5262 5364). The partly truncated remains consisted of five discrete pits; four containing pots and three cremated human remains. Sherds from three more vessels were also found from within the pits and topsoil. The authors suggested that it may have originally been a much larger cemetery, but noted that there was no subsoil surviving in the north-eastern part of the site (towards the site) and that the topsoil overlay the limestone bedrock directly. It was on the publication of these excavations that the mound within the site was first widely identified as a 'possible' barrow, located approximately 40m north-north-west of the main cluster of cremation deposits (Watts and Quinell 2001).

In addition evaluation trenches at Plymstock Quarry, approximately 400m east-north-east of the site, have provided further substantial evidence for settlement activity with a Romano-British enclosure and Middle Bronze Age features, including a buried soil set within a hollow and with

associated postholes set inside (see Passmore 2004). The Middle Bronze Age activity was seen as rather enigmatic, but I would suggest most likely represent the remains of a sunken featured round-house; a structural phenomena more commonly noted in Cornwall (for detailed discussion see Jones & Quinnell 2011, 217-9).

There is, therefore, extensive evidence for human activity within the immediate vicinity of the site from the Palaeolithic to the present day.

1.5 Walkover Survey

The site was visited on 5th August 2014 by Dr. Samuel Walls. Mr. Bowden (the owner) provided full unrestricted access to the site and explained the nature of the works undertaken to date and his knowledge of the history of the site, having purchased it earlier this year.

The only easily accessible part of the site was the south-west quarter of the site (see Figures 1-2), and the walkover study did not include a full inspection of the whole site, there may therefore be other unidentified features surviving within the woodland and scrub, although some clearance work would be necessary to assess if this was the case. It is, however, felt unlikely that any identifiable earthworks would survive, although slight un-diagnostic undulations may exist within the woodlands.

The walkover survey therefore comprised only the south-west corner of the site, this encompassed all of the area which has been impacted by the works to date, and included the area around the possible barrow.

The works undertaken prior to the visit had comprised the replacement of a gateway accessing the site from Alexandra Close to the south; this had necessitated the removal of some shrubs and scrub around the old gate. A c.3m wide track had then been scraped free of ivy and undergrowth leading directly north from the gate for c.47m before turning west towards the houses flanking Woodland Avenue. The track continued at this shallow c.0.03-0.05m depth for a further c.30m, before widening out into a larger clearing to abut the gardens of Woodland Avenue. The clearing had seen a greater degree of groundworks, with the machine stripping of the scrub excavating up to a depth of 0.1m, but still being within the topsoil. This portion of works is the most distant from the supposed barrow.

The topsoil comprised a yellow-brown clay-silt and had common sub-angular limestone fragments (up to 0.15m diameter). In the larger clearance area there were substantial fragments of modern building rubble, and rubbish.

1.6 The Possible Barrow

The groundworks which had been undertaken did not impact upon the possible barrow mound, although the reinstatement/cleaning up of the access track has occurred within approximately 10m to the north and east of the 'monument' (see Figure 9).

The mound survives to approximately 1.4m in height and 30m in diameter, it is very clearly defined to the south (Figure 6), but its northern limit is much less defined. The mound has a number of mature trees on and within its bounds, and there are several smaller trees, some of which have fallen. To the immediate west, on the edge of the mound there has been a substantial tree fall (probably c.1-3 years ago), with two adjacent mature trees uprooted (Figure 7). This has resulted in a substantial hollow in this side of the monument c.2m by 4m and up to 0.5m deep. The tree throw suggests that there is a very thin stony topsoil (c.0.1m deep) deposit overlying the weathered and fragmented limestone bedrock. The tree throw is in the location that one would expect to encounter

the edge of the mound structure and any ring-ditch, but no evidence for either was apparent. This may suggest that the mound is not a barrow, or that over time it has spread over a much wider area than the initial monument encompassed. It should be noted that there is no visible trace of a ditch on the other sides of the monument, nor that the mound had been terraced into the slope.

The mound, if it is indeed a barrow, would be an extremely unusual survival of a low-lying monument, with most surviving examples which are this well preserved located in considerably more prominent locations, and frequently on high ground. The chance survival of a mound of the Bronze Age can perhaps be accounted for by the tree coverage of the site dating back (throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and the probable poor quality of the topsoil meaning that cultivation had always been unfavourable in this location. The association of a burial mound with a nearby flat cemetery would arguably be even rarer than its lowland survival, with no confirmed examples in Devon (see discussion in Watts and Quinell 2001: 34). This can also perhaps be refuted to some extent in that it is rare for the areas around known barrows to have been excavated. The history of the site, and its association with Saltram could mean that the mound is a late 18th or early 19th century landscape feature established on the fringe of the grounds, perhaps as a viewing platform. There is also a good chance given the extensive limestone quarrying, limekilns and other industrial activity nearby (dating from at least the 18th century) that it represents the remains of a buried kiln or spoil heap. The mound certainly has a large number of limestone fragments lying on top of the surface, and there was the hint of a possible track (a slight hollow) running along the southern edge of the barrow near the site boundary, and turning to run north-east near to the western edge of the barrow; although the true nature of this slight hollow was disguised by the fallen trees.

1.7 Summary

The significance of the site is almost certainly nowhere near the level hypothesised by Mr. Scutt (Plymouth Herald 02.08.2014), and the author believes that is probably unlikely that the mound is a barrow; having only been hypothesised as such because of the nearby flat cemetery of Early Bronze Age Date. More importantly however, the 'mound' remains untouched by the recent clearance works, and these works have been to a limited extent, restricted to being within the topsoil.

The mound is currently in relatively good condition, although the recent tree falls have created some damage to the western edge, and caused a number of smaller saplings and trees to be damaged/fall on the mound itself. Some selective clearance, of primarily young trees would help preserve the mound in its current condition.

1.8 References

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2.0 Figures

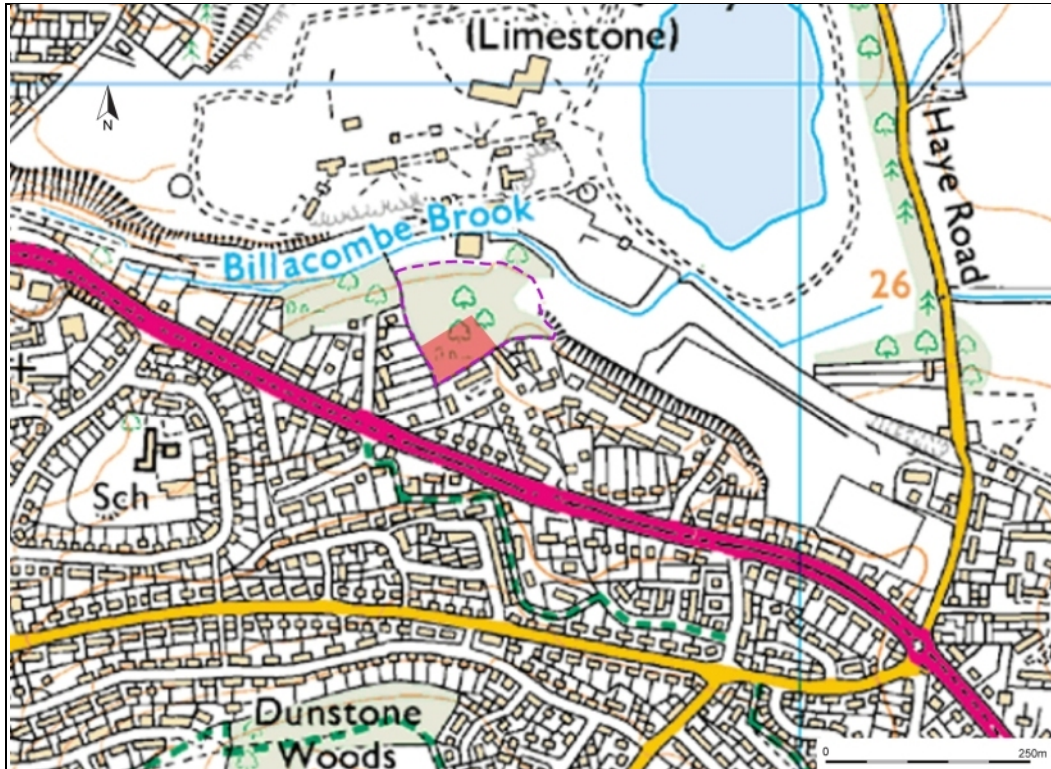


Figure 1: Location map. The area considered is highlighted, with the approximate site boundary demarcated by a dashed line.



Figure 2: Birds eye view showing the site (Bing maps). The approximate location of the clearance works is indicated, and the location of the possible barrow is indicated by the red arrow.

2.1 Historical Mapping

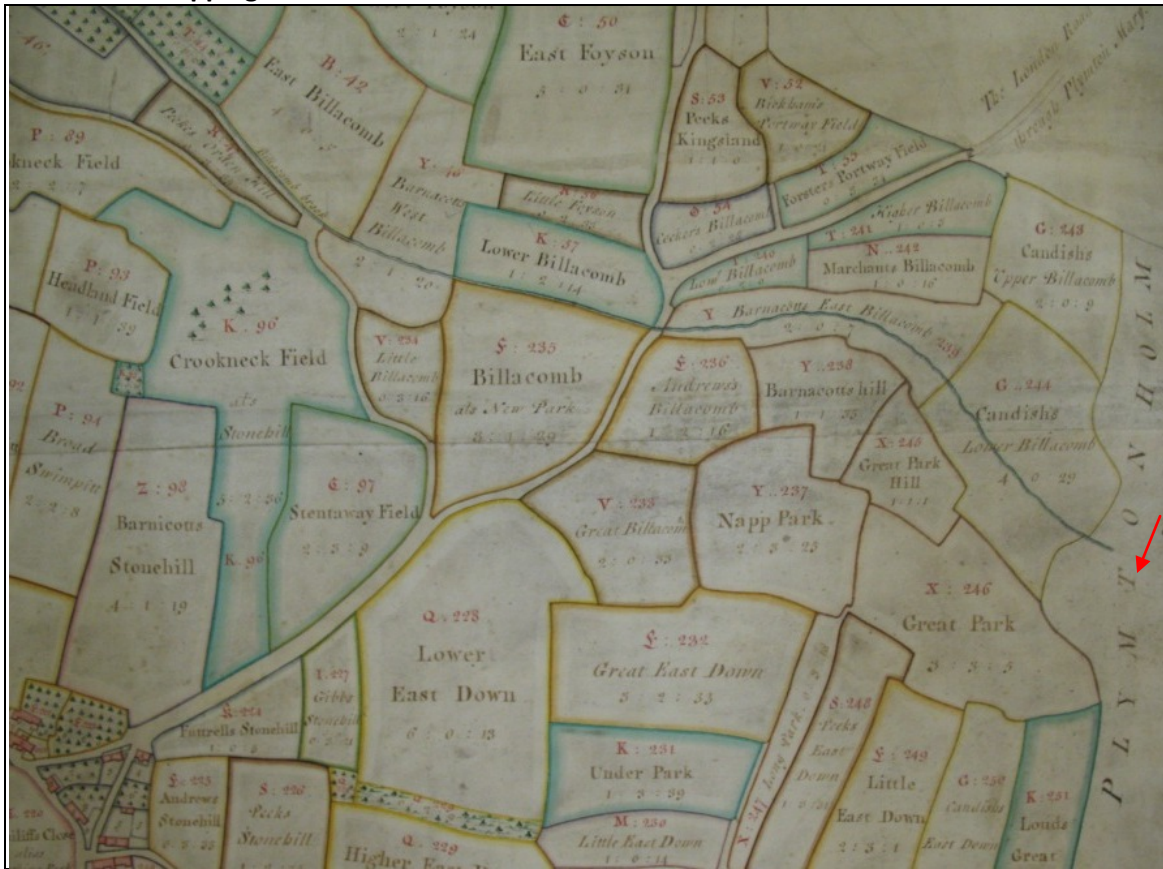


Figure 3: Extract from the 1755 Plan of the Manor of Plymstock (Devon Heritage Centre).

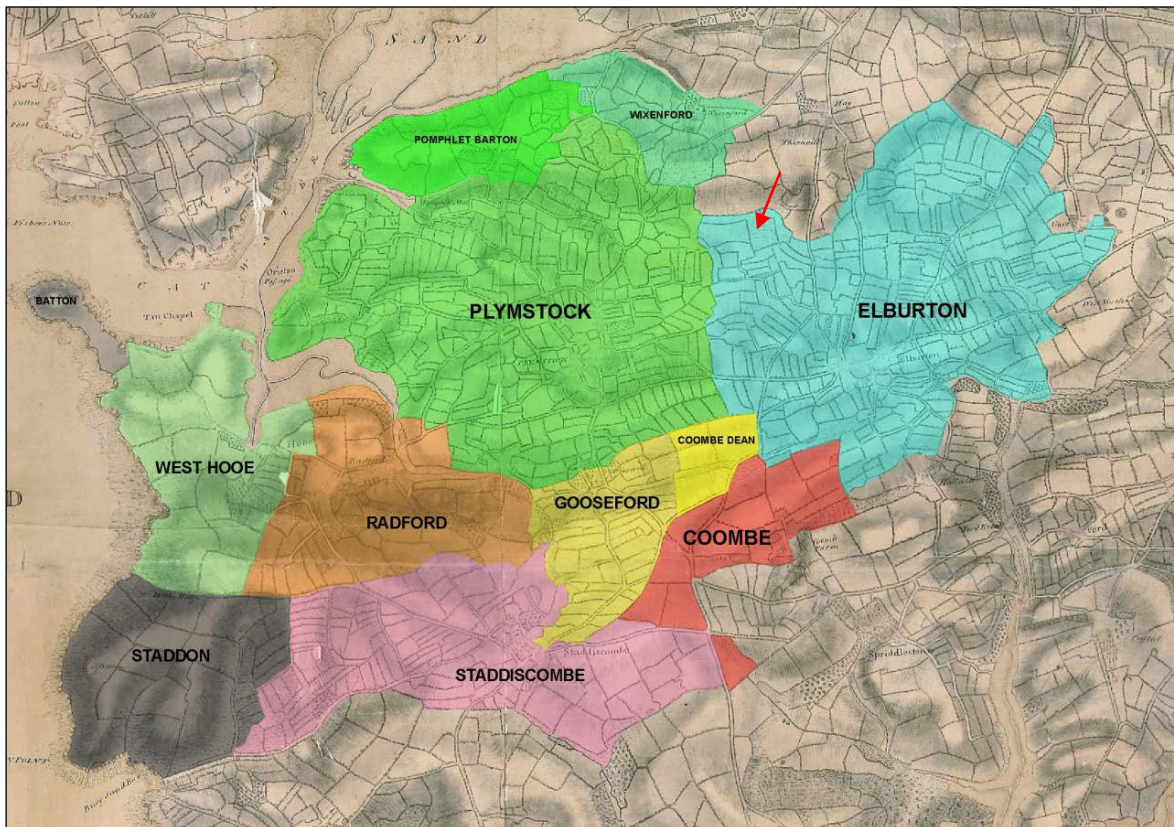


Figure 4: The sub-manors of Plymstock ancient parish. Based primarily on the tithe apportionment information and overlain on Ordnance Survey Drawing c.1805.

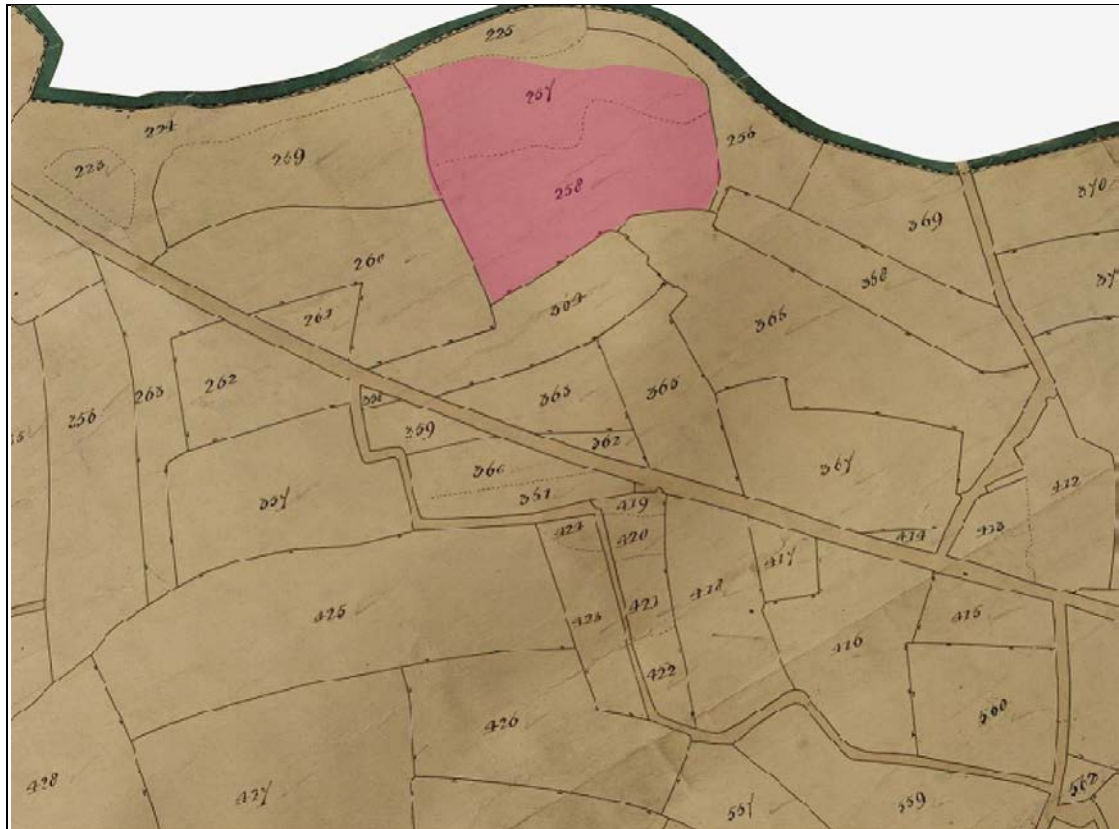


Figure 5: Extract from the 1842 Plymstock tithe map, the site is highlighted in pink (Devon Heritage Centre).

2.2 Walkover Jpegs



Figure 6: Possible barrow mound, untouched by any of the recent works, viewed from the south-west (2m scale).



Figure 7: Shot of one of the adjoining large tree throws to the west of the possible barrow, viewed from the west.



Figure 8: The possible barrow mound, viewed from the north (2m scale).



Figure 9: Shot of the cleaned track to the north and east of the possible barrow (to the far left of the shot), viewed from the south-east.



Figure 10: Shot of the cleaned track running east-west, showing the poorly maintained and dense woodland, viewed from the south (no scale).