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1.0 Introduction

Location: Shute Lane
Parish: Winkleigh
District: Torridge
County: Devon
NGR: SS6340 0783 (site centre)
Planning Application Nos. 1/0641/2005/OUT and 1/1183/2005/FUL

1.1 Background

South West Archaeology (SWARCH) was commissioned by the clients, Redrow Homes, to undertake a watching brief of groundworks undertaken as a condition of planning consent for the development. A desktop assessment of the site by SWARCH (Report no. 050720) suggested that the area of the development was formerly a medieval open or common field system.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Martin Gillard, Chris Preece and Jon Freeman for SWARCH between 21st June and 1st September 2006.

Prior to the start of groundworks, site visits revealed that the line of a north to south boundary on the tithe map at the east side of the development, survived as a weed filled ditch, and that there were slight traces of wide, shallow ridges running north to south suggesting the presence of other archaeological features.

1.2 Summary of Results

The north to south access road and the east access road were stripped of subsoil to weathered shale. A number of pairs of linear features were revealed, all but one running north-south (see Fig. 2). These presumed boundary ditches indicate, as the desktop assessment, that the site was a medieval field system. The easternmost pair of linear features corresponds to a boundary still extant on the 1843 tithe map. The linear ditches were likely to have been the source of material for banks constructed between them. Evidence for such banks included north-south ridges observed prior to the commencement of groundworks and a residual portion of bank forming a garden boundary north of the site. In the fill of almost all of these ditches medieval pottery was found. A pair of east-west linear features appear to be a continuation of an east-west boundary seen bisecting fields 2069 and 2083 to the east on the 1843 tithe map. This would have subdivided the four (or possibly five) north-south orientated fields into eight (or ten) within the development site.

Two other features were recorded, the first a hearth of medieval date. The second was an ovoid pit the fill of which contained six sherds of Middle Bronze Age pottery.

1.3 Methodology

This was conducted to the specification agreed with DCHES (appendix 1).

A swing shovel with a 2m wide grading bucket was used for the topsoil stripping and reduction of the subsoil to weathered shale (shillet) for the access roads. Deep footings were excavated with a 0.6m wide grading bucket. These deeper excavations were prone to collapse.

Along the line of access roads the subsoil was stripped to the surface of weathered shale (210) and a number of features were revealed. The features within these roads were excavated and recorded from south to north (T2) and from west to east (T3) in advance of the groundwork. These trenches varied between 1.5m to 4.0m wide.

2.0 Results of the Watching Brief

2.1 Stripping of Topsoil

Stripping commenced from the NE corner of the site, with 0.3m - 0.4m of topsoil being removed. This revealed a paler, clay-rich subsoil (201). In places, the grey to yellow surface of natural shale was revealed.

The topsoil contained sherds of pottery ranging in date from Bronze Age (see below 3.0 The Finds) to modern, and frequent charcoal flecks. Some features were observed at this stage. These included: a soak-away in the western part of the development. This did not provide any suitable material for environmental sampling. Two postholes (100) and (102), 1.4m apart, just to the west of the weed-filled ditch (204) were excavated and recorded (Fig. 3). The posthole to the south-west (100), was circular, had a diameter of 0.24m, was steep-sided and had a flat base. The fill (101) was a grey-brown clay loam with sub-angular shillet grit and charcoal flecks. No finds were recovered. The posthole to the north-east (102) was also circular, had a diameter of 0.11m, with tapering sides and a bowled base. It was filled by a grey-brown silty clay with sub-angular shillet grit and some charcoal but no finds (103).

The topsoil strip was in most areas, of insufficient depth to reveal archaeological features. Therefore, following consultation with DCHES it was decided that subsequent deeper intrusive groundworks should also be monitored.

2.2 Trench 1

To investigate the N-S linear which had survived as a weed-filled ditch, a 4.65m x 1.5m area was excavated by machine down to clean shillet. The ditch (204), although much damaged by machinery, was recorded (Fig. 4). The cut of the ditch had a break of slope less sharp than other linears subsequently recorded, probably indicating constant use and re-cutting. The fill (203) was dark and humic and the only finds made were C19/20 earthenware. Between 1.5m and 2m to the west another linear on similar alignment was revealed. In contrast to (204), this ditch had a more vertical west edge to its cut (206) and a more compact, less disturbed fill of mid-brown silty clay (205). Two abraded sherds of North Devon medieval coarseware were found in this fill.

2.3 Trench 2

The first features to be uncovered were a pair of parallel linear features 2.3m apart, cut into natural, running N-S (Figs. 2 & 5). That to the west (212) was 'U' shaped in section, with fairly steep sides and a width of 0.4m. It was filled with a dark to mid-brown, friable, compact clay (211) containing North Devon medieval coarseware sherds. That to the east (214) was 'V' shaped in section, 0.5m wide to the north and as much as 0.6m wide to the south, with a stony, compact fill of mid-brown clay with flecks of charcoal (213). One abraded sherd of North Devon medieval coarseware was found at the base of the fill. To the immediate west of (214) but not associated with it, was an ovoid pit (216) approximately 0.8m wide and 0.47m deep, with sloping sides and a flattish base (Figs. 5 & 6). The fill (215) was a beige to mid-brown silty clay. Within this fill were two ceramic sherds of Middle Bronze Age date (see below: 3.0 Finds).

Approximately 20m north of the recorded sections of linear features (212) and (214) (see Fig. 2) was another ovoid feature (218), with a long axis of 1.1m and 0.8m wide but with a depth of only 0.1m. It had been cut into the shillet (210) and then lined with a band of clay (209) of variable thickness (Fig. 7). Cut into the base of (218) were two stakeholes, one to the west (222) and one to the east (224) (Fig. 7). (222) was ovoid in shape and had a maximum diameter of 120mm but its average diameter mirrored that of (224) which was sub-circular and had a diameter of approximately 80mm, (222) was 50mm deep whilst (224) was 60mm in depth. The fills (221/223) of both were similar, being red pliable clay with small stone inclusions and no finds. The fill (217) of (218) was mid- to dark brown clay with shale inclusions, flecks of charcoal and fragments of burnt reddish clay.

Also within the fill were several large slabs of shale laid horizontally. One sherd of abraded, fragile, medieval coarseware was recovered.

To the south-west of feature 218 was another posthole (220) similar to those within (218). It was 60mm in diameter and 160mm deep, and was filled with mid-brown friable clay with no finds. No other posthole could be located in the vicinity suggesting that if (220) was integral to the feature, it may have formed part of a tripod arrangement. Otherwise (222) and (224) may have supported a ridge pole either for cooking or to provide some sort of canopy. The charcoal and burnt clay fragments indicate nearby fire-related activity, but there was no *in situ* basal scorching that might confirm that (218) was a hearth.

Approximately 13m north was the first of another pair of linear features (Fig. 8) both approximately 0.65m wide. In contrast to the others these ran east-west. The southernmost (226) had a flat, angled base with fairly steep, straight sides. Its fill (225) was a compact, mid-brown, stony clay with no finds. Some 3.5m to the north another linear ditch (229) was 'U' shaped in section with a flattish base. Its primary fill (228) was composed of a mid-brown clay with shale fragments and contained several North Devon medieval coarseware sherds. Its upper fill (227) was also a mid-brown clay containing medieval sherds, but in contrast, had a high percentage of stones (c. 40%).

At the north end of T2, where it turned west, another pair of linear features running N-S were recorded (235) & (233). The alignment of these suggested that these were the northern extensions of linears (212) and (214) and so they were recorded photographically and in plan (Fig.9) only. That to the west (235) had a 'U' shaped profile as (212), and was filled with a compact, grey-brown silty clay with frequent small angular stones (234). There were no finds. To the east, (233) was 'V' shaped in section as (214). It was filled with grey-brown silty clay containing medieval ceramic sherds including a granite-derived fabric coarseware jug handle with slashed decoration (232).

2.4 Trench 3

This trench was a stripping of subsoil eastwards of similar width to T2 (see Fig. 2). This revealed linear features (204) and (206) at the east end of the trench. Apart from this pair of features the only other recorded was a single N-S linear feature to the west, 1m in width (305). When half-sectioned, the cut (305) of this ditch showed a rounded base with a gentle slope to the west. It was filled by dark to mid-brown silty clay (304) with flecks of charcoal, a tiny fragment of North Devon medieval coarseware and stones (Fig. 10). This had been re-cut (303) to a width of 0.4m, possibly by a hoe or similar tool to form a channel, presumably for drainage. The fill of the re-cut was of similar clay to (304) but less compact and with less stone, and contained a number of medieval sherds.

2.5 Trench 4

This trench was excavated to weathered subsoil but no continuation of linear feature (299) or other archaeological features were observed or recorded.

2.6 Trench 5

This trench was positioned to evaluate the proposed play area/car park in the north-west corner of the development. At the east end it replicated the evidence of the north-west end of T2 and revealed further evidence of linear features, probably (235) and (233). Both had been cut by modern drainage from dwellings to the north.

2.7 Trench 6

This trench completed the east/west assessment of the site. It revealed a change in the geology, with natural there consisting of yellow clay and stone (601) at a depth of 1m in the west end of the trench. Further east ground level had been graded down to natural (601). No features were revealed. Contrary to expectations no evidence of any boundary on the projected alignment of the residual bank to the north of the site (the north/south boundary between 'Vinhays' and 'Krow House') was seen (Fig 2).

3.0 Finds

A considerable number of medieval coarseware sherds were recovered during the site work. These included typical sherds of North Devon type fabric vessels of late 13th to 14th century date, including cooking pots, jug body sherds, and a pinch-footed jug base. Also recovered were numerous sherds from vessels with typical 13th-14th century form but of a previously unknown granite-derived fabric. These may have originated from an unknown local production site (J. Allan Pers Com.).

There were two finds of Middle Bronze Age ceramics. The first find was of two thick-walled body sherds from the same vessel, one with a lug, found in the fill of a small pit (216). They appeared to be from a slightly curved-sided undecorated domestic vessel. The reddish-brown fabric contained sizeable (up to 5mm) inclusions of shale. These sherds were comparable with finds from Shaugh Moor on Dartmoor (H. Quinnell Pers Com.).

The second was four badly damaged sherds from the same vessel found during topsoil stripping (200). It was of a different fabric to the sherds found in pit (216), containing more granite inclusions.

Both of these fabrics showed evidence either of having been being cracked during firing, or of having been re-fired after breakage (H. Quinnell, Pers Com.).

4.0 Conclusions

All but two of the linear features were oriented N-S, running downslope. With the exception of the single linear (305), all the other N-S linear features appeared to be in pairs with an interval ranging from 1.6m to 2.7m between them. Although the fill and dimensions of features (214) and (212), and (235) and (233) have significant differences, if (214)/(212) and (235)/(233) are accepted, on the basis of alignment and similar ditch profiles, to have been the same linears, then variation in spacing can be seen even within the same pair of features, with the interval reducing from 2.7 to 2.3m to the south.

The N-S and E-W linear features may be interpreted as the ditches originally lying either side of earth bank boundaries. This accords with the desktop assessment of the site suggesting a fossilized medieval strip field system. The ridges observed prior to the stripping of topsoil may well have been the remains of banks lying between the pairs of ditches revealed by excavation. It is likely that these ditches provided the material for the boundary banks and served to improve drainage. The ceramic evidence points to all of these field divisions being of medieval date with exclusively medieval sherds being found in almost all of the ditches.

The easternmost N-S linear features (206)/(204) correspond with the boundary in evidence on the 1843 tithe map. Some 18m west is the single linear (305), and then some 25m to the west again are the linear features (214)/(212) and their assumed northern ends (235)/(233). Their alignment paralleled that of (206)/(204). Thus within the development site between Shute Lane and the Exeter road to the east, the evidence suggests at least four strip fields. The presence of a fifth may be indicated by the residual portion of hedgebank running N-S, forming the boundary between the back gardens of 'Vinhays' and 'Krow House' to the immediate north.

The evidence of east/west parallel linear features (226)/(229) recorded in T2 indicates that these N-S strips were subdivided in the medieval period by an east-west division across the site, making eight (or ten) fields. The E-W boundary corresponds with that seen in the fields to the east of the development on the tithe map i.e. the east-west division between fields 2069 and 2083 (see coverplate or refer to SWARCH Report No.050720 Fig. 3b.).

Williamson has noted that there is a degree of uncertainty regarding common as opposed to personal usage of fields in medieval times (2002, 27). The archaeological evidence at Winkleigh suggests the presence of fairly substantial banks. These would preclude some forms of common usage. Thus the boundaries discovered in the present fieldwork provide evidence that if an open field had existed on the present site, it was replaced by a system of enclosed strips or selions during the medieval period.

The presence of pottery of previously unknown medieval coarseware fabric, suggesting a local production site, is a find of some significance.

The discovery on the site of pottery dated to the Middle Bronze Age is of particular interest, as such finds are virtually unknown in mid Devon. Although one sherd was discovered in the topsoil, the other of these finds was within the discrete context of the ovoid pit (216). This indicates that the site may have been subject to occupation or use by prehistoric man.

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