

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION REPORT:
HOOK VALLEY FARM, WINCANTON, SOMERSET, BA9 8AD

NGR: ST 685 285
Planning Ref.: APP/R3325/A/13/2193993
Acc. no.: TTNCM 134/2013
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Site code: HVFE 13
PCAS job no.: 1178

Report prepared for
British Solar Renewables

by

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Summary

Planning Permission has been granted for the construction of a photovoltaic park with associated PV equipment on land at Hook Valley Farm, Wincanton, Somerset, centred on NGR: ST 685 285. In accordance with the NPPF, a planning condition was attached to the permission to safeguard any archaeological interests. Pre-Construct Archaeological Services Ltd., were commissioned by British Solar Renewables to undertake archaeological investigations at the site to fulfil the requirements of the planning condition.

A preceding assessment, geophysical survey, and trial trench evaluation identified an archaeological potential; sufficient to expand two areas into a strip, map and recording phase of investigation (mitigation works).

Area 1 revealed a total of 51 cut features and produced artefactual remains, which included Mesolithic worked flint, as well as fragments of Iron Age and Medieval pottery. Area 2 contained a medieval enclosure, as well as one related structure and a possible hearth. The results indicate a long history of occupation at the site.

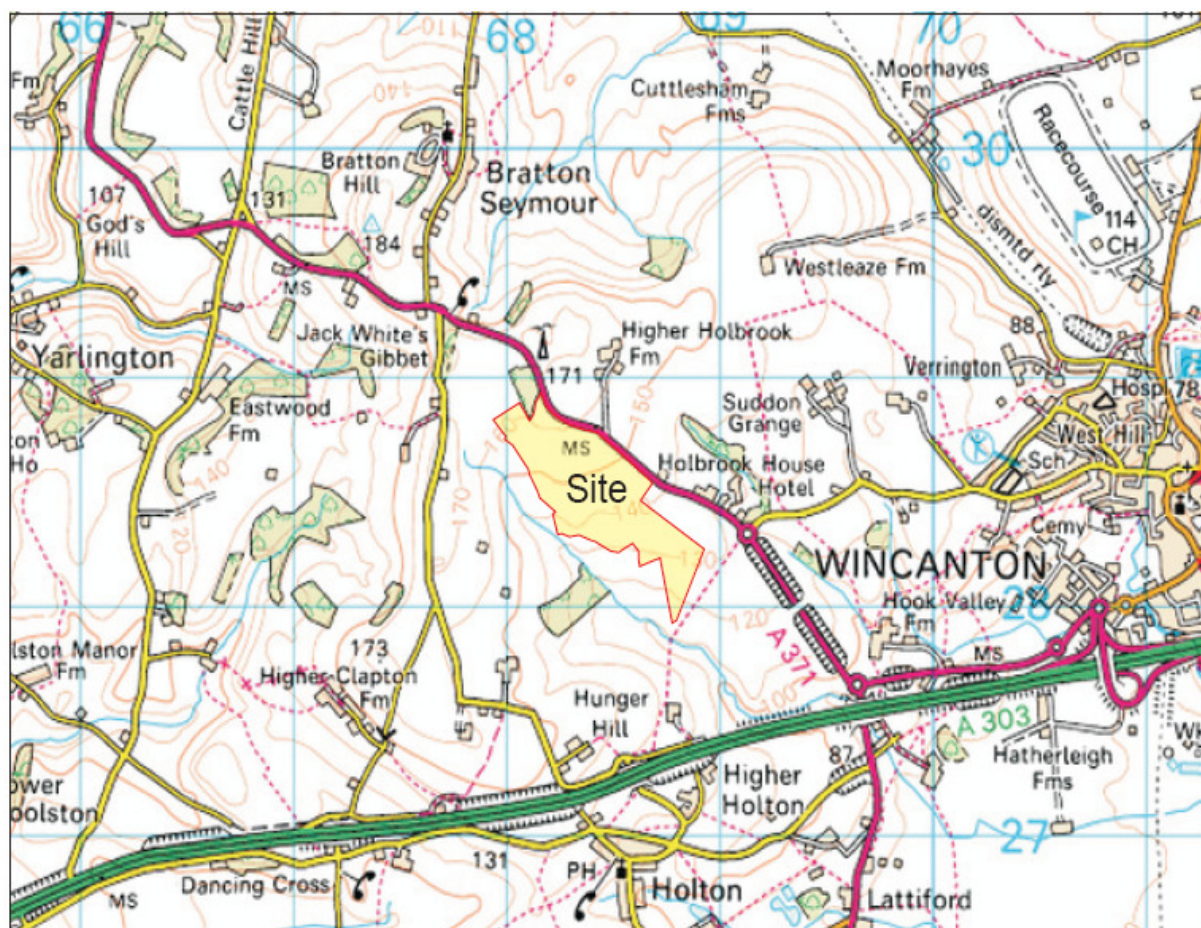


Fig. 1: Site location, with development area outlined in red. Scale 1:25 000

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1.0 Introduction

Pre-Construct Archaeological Services Ltd (PCAS) was commissioned by British Solar Renewables to undertake archaeological excavations at Hook Valley Farm, Wincanton, Somerset. This work followed a scheme of evaluation trenching that identified potentially significant archaeological remains in two areas of the proposed development zone. Further excavation was agreed with the Senior Historic Environment Record Officer for Somerset County Council to fulfil the required archaeological mitigation for the site.

2.0 Site location and description (Figs. 1 & 2)

The development site lies approximately 2km to the west of Wincanton and to the immediate south of the A371, part of Hook Valley Farm. The site is bounded to the north by Dean's Bush; to the north-east by the A371 and Holbrook Farm. A drain and Elliscombe Wood lie to the southwest.

The overall development site comprises of three arable fields, the central one of which (12ha) was identified as having archaeological potential and was targeted for geophysical survey and evaluation trenching. The site was formerly arable farmland, and at the time of the excavation had a young grass crop in place.

The site is centred on NGR ST 685 285.

3.0 Geology and Topography

The underlying solid (bedrock) geology of the area is the Forest Marble Formation, comprising limestone and mudstone - sedimentary Bedrock formed approximately 164 to 169 million years ago during the Jurassic Period. No drift geology is recorded for the area (<http://maps.bgs.ac.uk/>; BGS, 1995).

The site slopes steeply down from the north, giving a south-facing aspect. The ground level falls towards the south-east. The level of archaeology in Area 1 of the excavation ground levels are recorded at c. 143m OD; around Area 2, ground levels range from 130.6m OD at the top of the slope to 129.2m OD at the base.

4.0 Planning Background

The National Planning Policy Framework of 2012 places the responsibility for dealing with heritage assets affected by development proposals with the developer. Local planning authorities now need to be assured by those applying for planning permission that any such remains are not under threat. As a result developers are required to produce a definitive method of mitigating the effect of development on the historic environment within the planning process.

An initial planning application (**12/04445/FUL**), for the construction of a 15MW photovoltaic park with associated PV equipment on land at Hook Valley Farm was submitted to, and refused by, South Somerset District Council in 2012/13.

In September 2013 an appeal to this judgement was made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (**APP/R3325/A/13/2193993**). Planning permission (subject to conditions) was granted at appeal. The revised scheme

reduced the area of the solar panels from c. 31.6ha to c. 23.7ha and the installed capacity from 17MW to 15MW, although the boundary of the planning application remained unchanged.

The Senior Archaeologist for Somerset County Council, acting as advisor to South Somerset District Council, advised that the proposed development zone had the potential to contain heritage assets with archaeological interest. Therefore, the development was granted planning permission subject to the following condition (Condition (17)):

No development shall take place until the appellant or their agents or successors in title has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation including a timetable which has been previously submitted to and agreed in writing by the local planning authority.

In accordance with the NPPF (2012, para. 128), an archaeological evaluation was completed to provide further information on the archaeological potential of the site and the likely impact of the proposals on those remains. The scheme included a contingency that allowed for a larger area to be examined and fully excavated, if significant remains were identified during the evaluation.

The evaluation was duly completed, and two areas of significant interest were identified. In consultation with the Senior HER Officer for Somerset County Council, the contingency was realised and two areas were stripped for wider excavation. This document reports on the results of the contingency excavations. The results of the initial evaluation are reported separately, and are referred to within this document.

5.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

The baseline archaeological evidence for the site was recently compiled in an Archaeological Assessment prepared by Archaeadia (Gent & Manning, 2012). This can be summarised as follows:

The assessment has identified five heritage assets within the proposal Site. These are a prehistoric flint scatter, a parish boundary, other field boundaries, the site of a quarry, and the site of a building.

The flint scatter close to the A371 indicates prehistoric activity within this field. The scatter is relatively widespread, the artefacts numerous, and contains tools and burnt flints, both features suggestive of some form of settlement. Features and deposits associated with this activity may survive below the ploughsoil.

A geophysical survey of the site was carried out by Pre-Construct Geophysics Ltd. (PCG) in February 2013. This recorded ditches that appeared to define the northern, eastern and western elements of a regular ditched enclosure in the south eastern corner of the field. Other linear anomalies in this area were also indicative of ditches, some of which suggested the existence of a small enclosure abutting the western edge of the larger example. A number of pit-like anomalies were identified in proximity to this enclosure. Dispersed potential archaeological and natural anomalies were identified across the remainder of the site, including an area close to the A371 where a scatter of flints had been recovered from the surface, but where no further archaeological investigation had been completed. The survey also recorded widespread traces of cultivation and a scatter of modern ferrous-rich objects within the plough soil (PCG February 2013).

A subsequent trial trench evaluation involved the investigation of 10 trenches, positioned to examine anomalies identified by geophysical survey. This exposed the natural features causing magnetic responses on the west side of the site, and confirmed the presence of a number of former field boundaries seen both on the geophysics and on historic mapping. A ditch in the south-western corner of the site contained 11th – 12th century pottery, as did ditches in the south-eastern corner relating to the potential enclosure. On the northern edge of the site in Trench 8, a potential ring ditch was revealed to be of natural origin; however a pit, which had not been identified by geophysics, was exposed (Lane, 2014).

The pit in Trench 8 and the enclosure in the south-eastern corner of the field (Trenches 3 and 4) were considered to be of potential significance. These areas were discussed and the excavations extended to investigate the wider area surrounding these features as per the contingency.

6.0 Methodology

The adopted methodology followed the scheme set out within the Specification as agreed with the Senior HER Officer for Somerset County Council. Excavations in Area 1 centred on the pit identified in Trench 8, whilst Area 2 was opened up in order to expose the suspected enclosure in the south-eastern corner of the site that had been identified in Trenches 3 and 4.

Initial stripping excavations were completed using a 24 tonne tracked machine fitted with a smooth bladed bucket. All machining was carried out under constant supervision.

The excavation areas were hand cleaned and all features and deposits were investigated and recorded. Context sheets were completed for each feature/deposit, and multi-context drawings were produced in both plan (located by GPS) and section (1:20). Colour slide and digital photographs were taken to complement these accounts, a selection of which is reproduced in Appendix 1. This work was undertaken between the 28/1/14 and 14/2/14 in variable conditions which included waterlogging of parts of the site. The site team included Simon Savage, Leigh Brocklehurst, Mathew Wells and Ian Kintcher.

Following completion of the fieldwork, all artefacts and records were returned to PCAS offices for processing. Pottery was sent to David Dawson for identification, while animal bone was submitted to Jennifer Wood; worked flint was identified by Mr T. Lane of Archaeological Project Services, and bulk environmental samples were submitted to University of Leicester Archaeology Service (ULAS) for processing and assessment (see appendices for full reports).

7.0 Results

The excavated areas were separated by c.100m, and were thus recorded separately:

Area 1 (Figs. 2 and 3)

Area 1 was excavated around the pit identified in Trench 8 of the evaluation phase. The archaeology encountered was exposed beneath stripped modern topsoil (3000) and subsoil (3001); the combined depth of which was recorded as c. 0.70m. The natural substrate (3002) was the earliest horizon encountered. The majority of the archaeological remains were discrete features, cut directly into the natural clay.

The archaeological remains identified consisted of 51 cut features, recorded as 106 contexts, excluding overlying modern soils and the natural geology. The cut features were concentrated towards the centre of Area 1, with dispersed remains identified around the periphery. A ditch extended beyond the north-eastern Limit of Excavation (hereafter L.O.E).

The majority of features were postholes, configured in such a way that suggested they possibly formed the ground plan of a roundhouse. Their irregular pattern suggests an extended period of occupation, with multiple phases of construction and/or repair and replacement. The postholes themselves did not vary greatly in size and shape; with diameters ranging from c. 0.2m to c. 0.35m, whilst their depths ranged from c. 0.05m to c. 0.3m.

Several pits and one linear were identified close to the postholes; however due to a lack of artefactual evidence any direct associations cannot be confirmed. The pits, [3003], [3007], [3041], [3045], [3047], [3061], [3067], [3097], [3099], [3102] and [3105], have been recorded as possible internal/external storage and waste features. They varied in shape from irregular circle to oval in plan, and usually had steep edges and concave bases. Size differed considerably, ranging from 0.3m wide to 1.8m, and 0.12m deep to 0.3m. Of all of these pits, five were located within the confines of the postholes, whilst the other six lay outside of the posthole zone, but on the inside of the purported enclosure ditch (below).

A linear feature, [3011] / [3107], was identified as a possible enclosure ditch; partly due to the postholes and pits that appear to respect it, and also because the ditch itself appears to be curving, from a SW-NE orientation to a more E-W orientation, thereby giving the impression that it was effectively 'enclosing'. The ditch was 0.64m wide and 0.16m deep. Only part of this feature was exposed during the excavation. One of the slots cut through it produced a flint core of Mesolithic date, used for blade removal. This single artefact may well have been intrusive.

A large 'spread' of material, (3101), was identified in the SE corner of Area 1. This was initially thought to be a circular feature, however upon excavation it was demonstrated to be very shallow and have an undulating base. It may have been a truncated occupation horizon.

Pottery from Area 1 has been dated from the Iron Age through to the medieval period. Seven pieces of flint were firmly dated to the Mesolithic, with two being late Mesolithic/early Neolithic.

The two fragments of Iron Age pottery were recovered from one of the pits within the potential roundhouse, [3039]. Medieval pottery dated between the 11th and 12th century was recovered from pits [3099] and [3105], both of which were located just outside the suggested roundhouse.

Of the flint artefacts recovered, two fragments were unstratified, whilst the other five came from five individual features. One of these features was the fill of the enclosure ditch, (3108); one was from an occupation spread, (3101), in the SE corner of the excavated area; two were recovered from the fills of two pits, (3008) and (3006); and one from the fill of a posthole, (3050). Although difficult to prove either way, it is possible that these flint artefacts were residual, deriving from earlier activity at the site. This notion is further corroborated when considering the date of the pottery - from both the roundhouse and the features beyond.

Area 2 (Figs. 2, 4, 5 and 6)

Area 2 was centred on a three-sided enclosure ditch that had been identified by geophysical survey and sampled by evaluation trenching (Trenches 3 and 4). It was excavated in order to fully expose the enclosure ditch and any possible associated features. To achieve this, an inverted L-shaped area was opened to the south of the existing trenches (see figs. 2 and 4).

The archaeology encountered was exposed beneath the stripped modern topsoil (2000) and subsoil (2001), the combined depth of which was recorded as c. 0.35m. The natural substrate (2002) was the earliest horizon encountered. The majority of the archaeological remains were discrete features, cut directly into natural clay.

The archaeological remains identified consisted of 17 cut features, including the enclosure ditch, recorded as 40 contexts (excluding overlying modern soils and natural geology).

The principal feature in this area was the three-sided enclosure ditch. Four slots were excavated through this (in addition to two excavated during the evaluation), which included a slot at each terminus [2003] and [2035], one on the NW corner [2005] and one on the NE-SW side of the ditch [2033]. The ditch maintained a fairly regular profile across its full length, its width ranging from 1.26m to 1.6m, its depth 0.24m to 0.3m.

The other features identified in Area 2 were generally within the confines of the enclosure. Two sets of features may indicate occupation at the site: a group of four postholes (see fig. 5), towards the centre of the excavation, and a group of three pits and a possible hearth (see fig. 6).

The four postholes, [2009], [2011], [2013] and [2015], presented a rectangular plan, and were all of a similar shape and size, with steep, but shallow sides, and a flat base. Their diameters ranged from 0.22m to 0.44m, whilst their depths ranged from 0.02m to 0.1m. No finds were found in any of the fills of these features.

The potential hearth complex was made up of three pits, [2041], [2027] and [2029], in a linear trend orientated approximately NE-SW, with a small circular hearth area of burnt stone [2025], located almost immediately to the west. Although the three cut features were recorded as pits, they may well have been postholes indicating a potential structure such as a screen to one side of the hearth.

Several other features were exposed, including linear features, [2037], [2039] and [2019]; recorded as potential agricultural features such as plough scars or furrows. An isolated pit, [2021] and a posthole [2031] were located away from the other features in the area to the NW; but still within the confines of the enclosure. The pit contained moderate amounts of whole and fragmented oyster shell, which may indicate that it functioned as a waste pit.

The pottery assemblage from Area 2 consists of 20 sherds, whose characteristic fabric types reflect the period from the 11th to the 12th century, representing a minimum of 18 vessels. The group is typical detritus from domestic occupation in this part of Somerset. The majority of sherds derived from the fills of the enclosure ditch. One other feature produced medieval pottery - one of the features surrounding the hearth near the southern edge of the area. This suggests that the hearth and its associated features were contemporary with the enclosure.

In addition to the medieval finds, three sherds of potentially Bronze Age pottery were recovered from the topsoil, indicating some form of much earlier presence at the site.

A small amount of animal bone was found within the enclosure ditch. This was all attributed to cattle. Due to the relatively small quantity, no real conclusions can be drawn from this other than the confirmation of the presence/use of cattle.

8.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The excavations produced artefactual indications of occupation and settlement associated with potentially four major cultural periods: Mesolithic (worked flint); Bronze Age (pottery); Iron Age (pottery, almost certainly associated with the occupation of one structure); medieval (enclosure and related features). Some chronological clarity is lacking with regard to some of the features due to an absence of stratified artefacts, but the enclosure and its seemingly related features in Area 2 are fairly securely dated to the medieval period.

The pottery assemblage recovered from Area 2, characterised principally by the three-sided enclosure, is comparatively large and mostly presents the same date range: 11th to the 12th century. Such pottery was retrieved from multiple sections cut through the enclosure, allowing a high confidence with regard to its date spectrum. The enclosure bracketed two potential structures: one was located in the northern half of the area, made up of four postholes arranged in a rectangular pattern. The second 'structure' comprised of three post holes that appeared to be associated with a hearth. The postholes may represent a shelter or screen of some sort, surrounding the hearth to the south. In terms of dating, the four-post structure produced no finds, whilst one of the post holes associated with the hearth, [2029], contained medieval pottery suggesting that it was in use at the same time as the enclosure ditch.

The features in Area 2 do not appear to reflect large scale occupation; more likely elements of a field system perhaps associated with a medieval farmstead. This is further corroborated by the presence of what appear to be furrows to the south-west of the enclosure, indicating agricultural activity in the direct vicinity.

A definitive date for the roundhouse and its associated features in Area 1 is more difficult to establish due to the comparative lack of stratified finds. A pit from within the roundhouse did yield two fragments of Iron Age pottery, and such a date would not be at odds with the wider chronology that is attached to such structures (round houses were common throughout much of the Iron Age and early Romano-British periods). This is complicated by the presence of what is most likely residual Mesolithic worked flint, and some surrounding features contained medieval pottery. Unstratified Mesolithic finds are not uncommon on archaeological sites and most likely reflect temporary or seasonal occupation by transient communities. Slightly later prehistoric occupation in the surrounding area is known (with a potential Neolithic settlement recorded in the Somerset HER (HER ref.: 54203)), but the Mesolithic period is not represented - within a 5km radius of the site, no Mesolithic sites or find spots are recorded in the Somerset or Dorset HER's. Therefore the artefactual finds recovered from the current site are significant.

In considering the suggested roundhouse in Area 1, there may have been several phases of construction/repair; indicated by clusters of postholes forming a broadly circular plan. This structure would have been c. 7m in diameter, with a possible entrance (indicated by a gap in the sequence of postholes) on its east side; the latter being fairly typical. There were slight indicators of internal structures (postholes);

including a large central feature that most likely represents a central support for the (presumably thatched or turf covered) roof, and some waste/storage pits.

In the NW part of Area 1 was a potential enclosure ditch, that appeared to spatially respect (or was respected by) the northern arc of the roundhouse.

9.0 Effectiveness of Methodology

The strip, map and record excavation was an appropriate and effective form of archaeological mitigation works. It provided an opportunity to record a series of previously unknown important archaeological remains that might have otherwise have been disturbed or destroyed.

10.0 Site Archive

The documentary and physical archive for this scheme is currently in the possession of Pre-Construct Archaeological Services Ltd. Following the acceptance of the report, the archive will be prepared and deposited with a printed copy of this report at Somerset museums. It may be consulted there by citing the global accession number TTNCM 134/2013.

11.0 Bibliography

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