Highland Archaeology Services Ltd
Bringing the Past and Future Together

Littleferry

Cable Undergrounding

Archaeological Watching Brief

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Authors	John Wombell and John Wood

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was maintained on excavations for underground cables at Littleferry, Golspie, Sutherland. One feature was identified: two parallel lines of stones appeared to indicate the presence of a former building. However this could not be investigated in any detail within the confines of the cable trench.

Contents

Illustrations

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork was carried out by John Wombell and John Wood. Steve Birch kindly examined and commented on the lithics. The sections showing Feature 1 were drawn in the field by John Wombell, who also took many of the photographs. Background mapping has been reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey under Licence 100043217. Historic maps are courtesy of the National Library of Scotland. Site plans showing the proposed cabling areas were kindly supplied by SSE.

Location

The hamlet of Littleferry lies on the north shore of Loch Fleet at NH 805 956, between about 6 and 10m above sea level.

Figure 1 Site location.
(Not reproduced to scale)

Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by John Wombell and John Wood of Highland Archaeology Services Ltd to identify and record any archaeological features revealed by excavations for underground cables at Littleferry, Golspie, Sutherland.

Background

Policy

The Electricity Act 1989[1], as amended by the Utilities Act 2000[2], requires Electricity companies to preserve 'amenity' including the cultural heritage, and to minimise impacts of new infrastructure works. The wider planning and policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*[3], and the Scottish Government's *Scottish Planning Policy* (SPP), issued in February 2010, which consolidates and supersedes the previous SPP and NPPG series[4].

The fundamental principles underpinning UK and Scottish policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2002)[5] and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999).[6]

Archaeology

According to the Highland Historic Environment Record

> Littleferry is reportedly the site of a skirmish in 1746. Caithness men on the way south to join Bonnie Prince Charlie prior to Culloden, became lost and were trapped on the point and killed by troops of the Sutherlands. They were reputedly buried on site and the discovery of human remains in the 1930s and again in 2003 have been linked by locals to this activity[7]

No source is given and the information appears derived from local tradition. However in 2003 human bones were found during excavations for drains. Hilary White of Highland Council Archaeology Unit attended but there is no indication of the nature of the bones found or what happened to them. She reported

[1] http://www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts1989/ukpga_19890029_en_1

[2] http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/en/ukpgaen_20000027_en_1

[3] http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/structureplan/thehighlandstructureplan.htm

[4] http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/02/03132605/8

[5] www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf

[6] The Burra Charter is accessible online at http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html

[7] HHER MHG32682

> Following [a] site visit to record identify bones from trenches, local people reported that human remains had previously been found in the village when telephone put in in the 1930s. These may have been reported in the Northern Times. Allegedly the bones were kept on a local mantelpiece for many years (house now empty and bones presumably gone). GR [Grid Reference] given to site pointed out as area of discovery (ie on the west of the road)[8]

In 2004, AOC Archaeology were requested to attend and record more human remains at Littleferry, following the reporting of their discovery in trenches for new household waste pipes. On arrival they found that thigh bones of an adult over 5'6", with modern breaks had already been removed from the trench. There were few other distinctive other human bones visible in the trench, which was less than 1m wide.

AOC investigated and defined one single inhumation in a distinct grave pit, cut through (and backfilled with) midden material, Laid on back with hands over pelvis, possibly in an E-W position. There were no datable finds. AOC noted that

> The trench cuts through very complex stratigraphy of old ground surfaces, beach levels and midden dumping, in the deepest point at a depth of over 1m were a series of more bones in situ that are probably human phalanges - these were left in place pending excavation. Another bone disturbed further to the S in the trench is possibly also human but not necessarily adult[9].

Midden material was found at Littleferry in 2003 at the top of the slope in the garden area of Ferry Cottage during excavations for drains:

> Examination of trenches to the south of this downhill for the sewage trenches that turned out human remains reveal complex stratigraphy over 1m deep in places with layers of midden interspersed with darker soil, but also clean beach surfaces. The middens are largely marked by shell of a variety of types (the variation from midden layer to midden layer can be marked). Some areas also appear to contain bone. At the beach area are the only dateable finds i.e. 19th century pottery and an 18thC wine bottle base. But these come from a badly disturbed area and should not be used as indicative for dating the whole midden area, which potentially could be as early as prehistoric in places[10]

A Bronze Age burial urn was recorded as found at Littleferry was presented to Elgin Museum in the mid 19th c. Unfortunately its exact provenance is not known[11]. Undated pottery from Littleferry is also recorded as held by Dunrobin Castle Museum:

> Two sherds of hard, fine ware, with grey core and pink- brown surface, 0.4ins thick; and a sherd of fine, hard, sandy ware, dark grey with a pink-buff surface, 0.2ins thick, all from Kiell, Little Ferry (NH 805 956), are in Dunrobin Museum (Acc. No's X 78 + X 79)[12].

Also, 'possibly from Little Ferry'

> Sherds of a cordoned urn of hard dark ware with a fine slip and an estimated diameter of 12ins[13]

[8] HHER MHG32681

[9] HHER MHG32680

[10] HHER MHG32679

[11] HHER MHG11649

[12] HHER MHG11672

Littleferry was probably the site of a ferry from early times. This was largely superseded by the Mound to the west, built by Thomas Telford in 1814-16, which carries the modern road across, although a ferry is still shown on the 1879 Ordnance Survey 6 inch map (Figure 3). It continued to serve as a small local port, with storehouses and a customs house, into the 20th c. but by 2003 several properties were empty or derelict. Since then it has undergone a transformation and several new houses have been built.

Figure 2 William Roy's map 1747-55
Courtesy of National Museum of Scotland

[13] HHER MHG11671

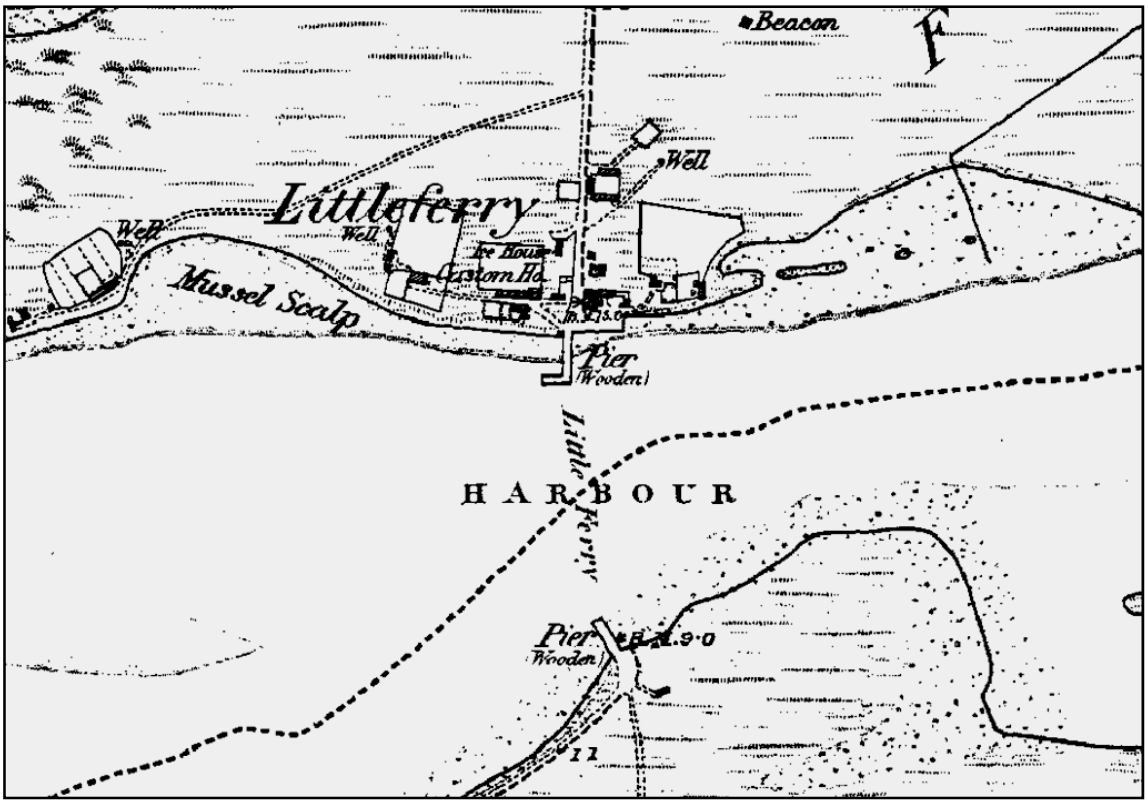

Figure 3 1st Edition OS 1:10560 map 1879 (not to scale)
Derived from digital mapping courtesy of Landmark Information Group Ltd.

Programme

Following a check of all relevant archaeological and historical records accessible locally or online, a watching brief was maintained on excavations for undergrounding cables. This took place from 21 March to 1 April 2011, in accordance with Institute for Archaeologists standards and the Highland Council Archaeology Unit's (HCAU) Development Guidance. The area covered is shown in Figure 5 below. The weather was fine and dry with sunny intervals.

Results

The cable trenches were cut using two back-acting mini-diggers fitted with 300mm (1 foot) wide digging buckets (toothed). The trench depth was approximately 750mm throughout and apart from the sections noted below, revealed about 300mm of topsoil above clean sand.

Work started from the position shown as CP4 on Figure 6 below, working WSW along the road edge. The first 14m of the cable trench was into yellow / orange sand and cut through a spread just below the surface of re-deposited slate rubble and burnt coal / soot / and cinders. No archaeology was noted.

At c 21m from the start point a gravel seam appeared below the sand and within the next few m the trench passed into one of the Littleferry parallel gravel banks. Nearing the bend south (see photos 6-9), lime

mortar spreads c50mm thick were cut at between 300mm and 400mm below the metalled road surface. The spreads appeared to continue into the pine plantation to the S. No solid archaeology was noted in connection with these spreads. The lime and coal waste spreads could have several possible interpretations, including association with the construction of the nearby Icehouse, and commercial activity associated with the 19th c. ferry business.

The cable trench then turned south, just east of CP10 (see Figure 6) across a disturbed area. It twice crossed the same unmarked water supply pipe which was burst by the excavator near to the bend in the trench.

On entering the back garden of the 2nd house west of the pier, and opposite to the Icehouse, the ground changed from gravel back into sand and in line with the derelict post and wire fence (approx CP34 on Figure 6), cut through an area of large re-deposited stones and boulders from a destroyed part of the old stone wall separating the first and second properties west of the pier. In the middle of this area of stones a 50mm external diameter galvanised pipe was encountered (see photos 10 and 11), surmised to be a possible water supply of some kind to the decommissioned Littleferry 20th c. command bunker situated c250m to the west[14]. Another 'dry' water supply pipe was also encountered here.

South of these two pipes the garden ground quickly became undisturbed, with c 300mm of light brown topsoil overlying natural yellow sand. There were very few top soil finds within the garden – just the occasional piece of 20th / 19th domestic pottery.

At a point about 17m due north of the back wall of the second house west of the pier, the top soil began to dip and a thin deposit of black sand appeared between the top soil and yellow sand below (see Figure 4). At c 14m from the back wall of the house, the footings of a wall became evident, encased in the same black sand material. These comprised no more than 2 courses of natural flattish stones. The black sand deposit continued south for a further 2m where the trench cut through a deeper bowl shaped trough of the same black material. From this point the top soil / subsoil interface rose rapidly back up to a top soil depth of c400mm. When the base of the trench was cleaned up for recording it was noted that a thin spread of the same black sand dipped away S from the bowl shaped trough and this was chased out for the width of a draw hoe to the point where it ended (0m on the section drawing) and in doing so 2 small possible packing stones c100mm max were noted beneath the bowl shaped trough.

One stone of the back (N) wall of this structure was disturbed and lifted out by the machine, leaving two flat stones visible after cleaning down for recording. To facilitate the laying of the 2 electricity cables neatly on the bottom of the trench one of the 2 exposed stones was removed and the west facing section re-cleaned at this point to reveal 3 smaller flat stones, which also gave an accurate width measurement of this wall at 0.5m.

This feature was located at approximately at NH 80553 95666.

No other features were recorded. Elsewhere the cable trenches ran alongside or across the modern roads, but there appeared to have been very little disturbance of the natural underlying sand.

[14] HHER MHG32048

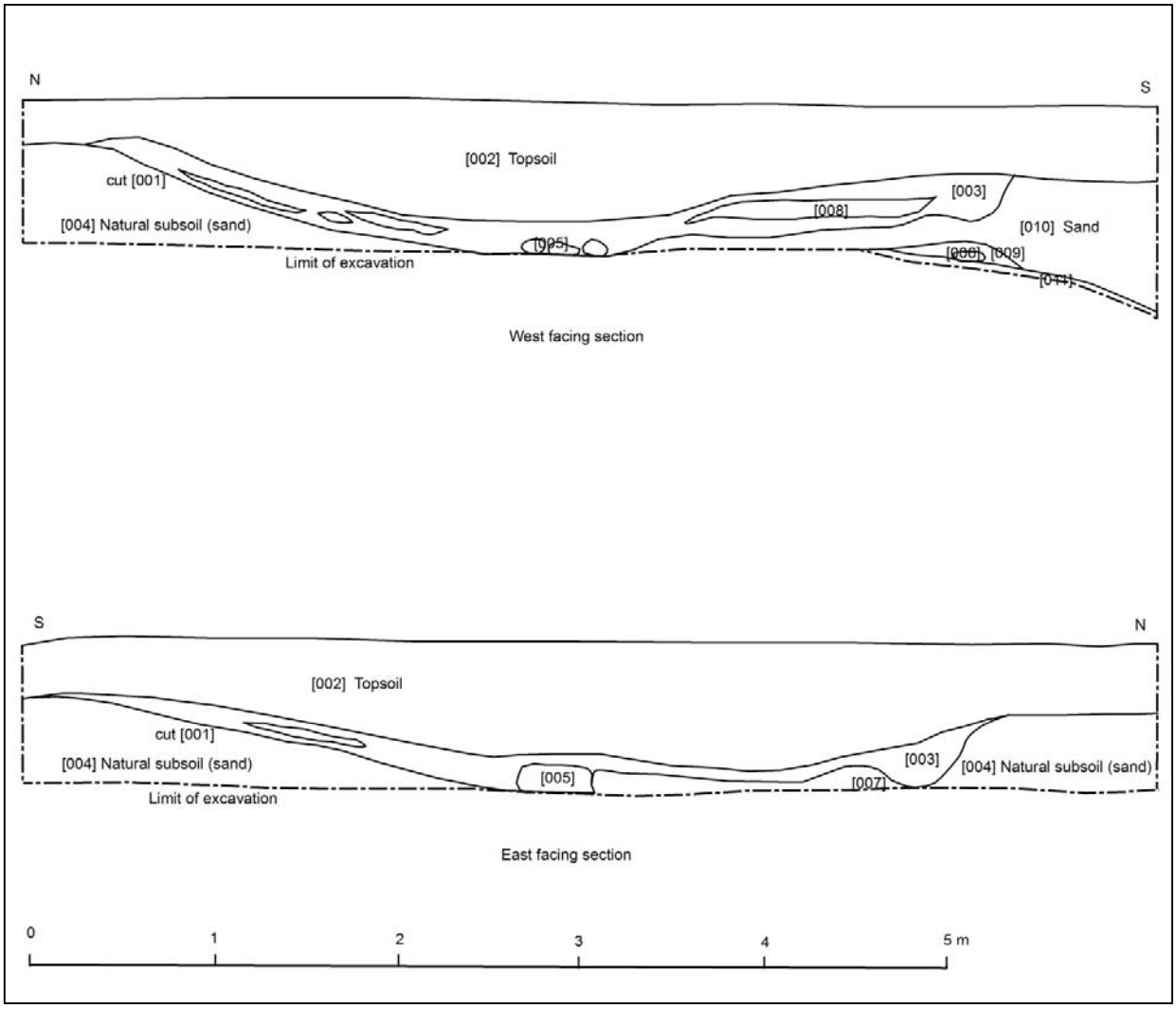

Figure 4 West and East facing opposite sections

Discussion

Working within the confines of a trench just 300mm wide proved difficult. The trench appears to have cut through a building constructed on a level platform, which had been cut into the face of a sloping sand-dune. This had an internal width of c2m, with a back (N) wall c0.5m wide which was constructed on slight stone footings. There was a notable absence of any demolition stone on either side of the observed footings. The back wall might have been of turf which collapsed and became levelled during the formation of a back garden. The top soil over the structure, though up to 3 times the average depth of top soil in the back garden, was indistinguishable in structure, texture and colour from the back garden top soil as a whole.

The bowl shaped trough of black sand and two small possible packing stones suggests a possible groove for a front (S) timber wall made of planks or posts. A possible occupation surface within the building was suggested by a fine black sandy deposit - which was aceramic as far as could be determined within

the cable trench. No charcoal particles were noted in the black deposit. The only finds from the topsoil over the structure were two pieces of apparently butchered bone, which could have come from anywhere, and a piece of vein quartz measuring 70mm x 35mm x a max of 13mm thick (see Photo 2 below) recovered from the base of the trench.

The black deposit extended in a spread up to 200mm thick sloping upwards behind the back wall for 2.5m, and at the front a thinner spread c50mm thick of the same deposit extended downwards for c1m. A number of lenses of yellow sand within the black deposit are interpreted as being the result of animal burrowing.

From this feature working south, the ground became increasingly mixed and disturbed throughout its full depth.

The section of trench running alongside the public road to the pier showed no signs of any archaeological remains.

Over lunchtime on 23rd and 24th March the recently landscaped but unsown gardens of the first and second houses west of the pier were walked by John Wombell out of interest. A large quantity (c 80 pieces) of flint and possibly chert were collected from a gravel bed exposed beside the newly constructed parking area in front of the second house. Several entire cobbles were collected plus many broken pieces. Two or three of these pieces looked as if they might have been worked before being polished by water action. See Littleferry finds photo 020 (scale has 1cm divisions). The probability remains that the broken pieces have all come about naturally by storm wave action, but this bed, known to extend from an earlier brief at least 100m further west would have been a valuable local resource in the prehistoric period.

The lithics were examined by Steve Birch whose comments are included as Appendix 1 below. He concluded that this material is likely to be of natural origin.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It would seem from this and previous work at Littleferry that the settlement is built on a beach or low dune system which has no doubt been subject to considerable changes over the centuries. In some areas it seems that a thin soil has started to develop, only to be inundated in due course by more sand. This could be an interpretation of contexts [006], [010], [011]. However, context [003] is interpreted as an occupation layer, although there was no evidence to assist dating or characterisation. The stones [005] appear to represent the base of a wall, but within the narrow confines of a 300mm wide cable trench this could not be confirmed for certain.

Beach flint and quartz was recovered, as on several previous occasions at Littleferry. However there has as yet been no evidence of any working of this material on site and all seems to be sea-worn (See Appendix 1).

No bones, human or otherwise, or midden deposits were found on this occasion.

Photo 1 West-facing section
50 cm scale

Photo 2 Finds from recorded area: butchered farm animals; angular quartz
Scale in 1cm divisions

Appendix 1: Note on Lithics by Steve Birch

1. Most of the material comprises what appears to be good quality pebble flint, much of which still retains cortex.

2. Again, much of the material is heavily rolled and patinated, suggesting that it has been subject to movement and potential natural breakage in a highly mobile environment; most likely within a beach or river deposit.

3. There are a few fragments that appear to have been broken / modified more recently and having looked at these with a magnifying glass there is edge damage.....some of which at first looks like retouch.

4. The single piece of quartz appears to have derived from a vein, and is a natural piece without any signs of modification.

Without knowing the full context of discovery and having no knowledge of sea-level change and the occurrence of natural deposits of flint in the area, I am more limited in what I can say. However, I have seen very similar deposits within two contexts that spring to mind.

The first is a natural deposit of chalcedonic silica or chert tha occurs as a 'lag' deposit in the Staffin area of north Skye. This material has been exploited during the Mesolithic through to the Early Iron Age (more so in the Meolithic though) and I have mapped the source. I have found complete nodules and broken fragments, much like the Littleferry material, from stream courses in the Kilmartin River catchment area, some of which eventually finds its way to the estuary of the river in Staffin Bay. One of Steve Mithen's students studying flint resources on beaches in western Scotland also came across this material and thought that it had been worked. However, working in conjunction with Caroline Wickham-Jones, Karen Hardy and Bill Finlayson on the Scotland's First Settlers Project, we all thought that most of the material had been rolled in the rivers and reduced to the fragments that we eventually recover.

Some of this material can looked worked (cores etc.) until it is looked at in some detail under the glass. Of course, there are many lithic scatter sites around the bay at Staffin and it is possible that due to fluctuations in sea-level and the timing of the maximum transgression, that some humanly-worked material can find its way onto the lower foreshore, where some of it is rolled and reworked through natural agencies.

The other types of deposit I would like to mention is ship’s ballast. In areas where boats have docked and have had their cargoes unloaded.
Flint ballast was often carried on outward journeys, to be replaced by other goods. The flint is usually dumped on the foreshore where the boats have been docked. Depending on the exposure of the location to tides and storms, this can sometimes give quite distinctive and discrete scatters of material. Of course, if the location is exposed, then the material can be spread through the local gravel and beach deposits.

Having looked at the material closely I have noticed what appeared to be retouch on a few edges on some of the pieces. However, this type of damage can also occur naturally. I have failed to find any distinctive bulbs of percussion or bulbar scars on any of the material, or edge preparation work that is normally used prior to making a flake or blade removal. Therefore, I personally feel that the material has been naturally modified, although there is always the chance that some of the pieces had initially been worked humanly and had then been subject to modification and rolling by natural forces.

Appendix 2: Tables

Table 1 Photographs

Photo No.	Location	Direction	Subject	Taken By	Date
LFY11 1	CP13	E	Trench for Pole Stay	J Wood	25/03/2011
LFY11 2	CP4	SW	Start of excavation	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 3	CP11	ENE	View back to CP4	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 4	CP12	SE	View to icehouse	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 5	CP9	NW	Trench by track: section	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 6	CP9	NW	Trench by track: section	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 7	CP9	NW	Trench by track: section	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 8	CP10	E	Trench	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 9	CP10	E	Trench	J Wombell	23/03/2011
LFY11 10	CP34	SE	Pipes in trench	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 11	CP34	SE	Pipes in trench	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 12	CP18	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 13	CP19	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 14	CP20	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 15	CP21	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 16	CP22	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 17	CP23	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 18	CP24	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 19	CP25	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 20	CP26	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 21	CP27	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 22	CP28	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 23	CP29	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 24	CP30	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011

Photo No.	Location	Direction	Subject	Taken By	Date
LFY11 25	CP31	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 26	CP18	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 27	CP19	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 28	CP25	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 29	CP25	W	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 30	CP36	E	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 31	CP32	N	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 32	CP33	S	Trench Section with scale+tape	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 33	CP35	SE	Trench from new pole	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 34	CP37	N	Trench line	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 35	CP4	S	Trench line	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 36	CP6	N	Trench line	J Wombell	24/03/2011
LFY11 37	CP2	N	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 38	CP1	S	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 39	CP5	SW	Trench line + Ice House	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 40	CP6	N	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 41	CP6	E	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 42	CP14	E	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 43	CP15	E	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 44	CP8	W	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 45	CP16	W	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 46	CP7	S	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 47	CP17	N	Trench line	J Wood	29/03/2011
LFY11 48	CP6	E	Cut through road	J Wood	31/03/2011
LFY11 49	CP15	S	Cut through road	J Wood	31/03/2011
LFY11 50	CP14	W	Cut through road	J Wood	31/03/2011

Photo No.	Location	Direction	Subject	Taken By	Date
LFY11 51	CP17	E	Trench	J Wood	31/03/2011
LFY11 52	CP17	N	Trench	J Wood	31/03/2011
LFY11 53	CP6	N	Trench line	J Wood	31/03/2011
LFY11 54	CP4	S	Trench line	J Wood	25/03/2011
LFY11 55	CP6	N	Trench line	J Wood	25/03/2011
LFY11 56	-	-	Finds - bone, quartz	J Wombell	01/04/2011
LFY11 57	-	-	Finds	J Wombell	01/04/2011
LFY11 58	-	-	Finds - quartz	J Wombell	01/04/2011
LFY11 59	-	-	Finds - quartz	J Wombell	01/04/2011

Table 2 Drawings

No	Subject	Drawn scale	
1	Annotated copy of SSE drawing	1:1000	J Wombell
2	Measured Cable trench Location Plan showing position of sections	1:200	J Wombell
3	East and West sections of trench centred at NH 80553 95666	1:25	J Wombell
4	Annotated copy of SSE drawing	1:1000	J Wood

Table 3 Features

Feature no.	Description	Location	Dimensions
F1	Possible parallel walls of building?	NH 80553 95666	Single lines of stones, 2.2m apart

Table 4 Contexts

Ctxt No.	Type	Length (m)	Breadth (m)	Depth (m)	Later than	Earlier than	Equal to	Uncertain	Description	Interpretation
1	Cut	?	c. 5	max 0.9	4	3	-	7	Dipping cut for 2.5m N-S then approx level, rising sharply to S at c 5m	Cut to form level platform on leading edge of a sand dune
2	Deposit	Over all	Over all	0.3 - 0.4	3	(top)	-	-	Topsoil	Light sandy garden soil - probably former kitchen garden; now rough grass.
3	Deposit	?	c.6	max 0.4	1,4	2	-	-	Fine black sandy deposit lightly compacted	Occupation deposit
4	Deposit	?	?	?	(limit of exc)	1	-	-	Clean yellow sand	Natural subsoil
5	Structure	?	c.0.5	c.0.15	4	3	-	7	Flattish, water-worn stones: undressed but arranged in a line	Footings of former turf wall
6	Structure	?	?	?	11	9	-	-	2 stones, c. 0.1m dia	Possible packing stones for timbers
7	Cut	?	c.0.5	c.0.15	4	3	1?	1, 5	Secondary cut to S side of structure	Secondary cut forming groove for possible timber wall
8	Deposit	max 1.2	?	max 0.1	3		-	-	Yellow sand lenses within ctxt 3	Lenses of yellow sand introduced into ctxt 3 by rabbits
9	Deposit	?	0.8	0.1	6, 11	10	-	-	Mixed sandy deposit, darker than topsoil, but lighter than ctxt 3, forming a dome cap over packing stones 6	? Remains of turf footing
10	Deposit	?	?	?	9	3	-	-	Clean yellow sand	Redeposited natural
11	Deposit	?	?	?	4	6, 10	-	-	Fine black sandy deposit lightly compacted	Occupation deposit or natural lens within subsoil

Figure 5 Area covered by watching brief: observed cable trenches

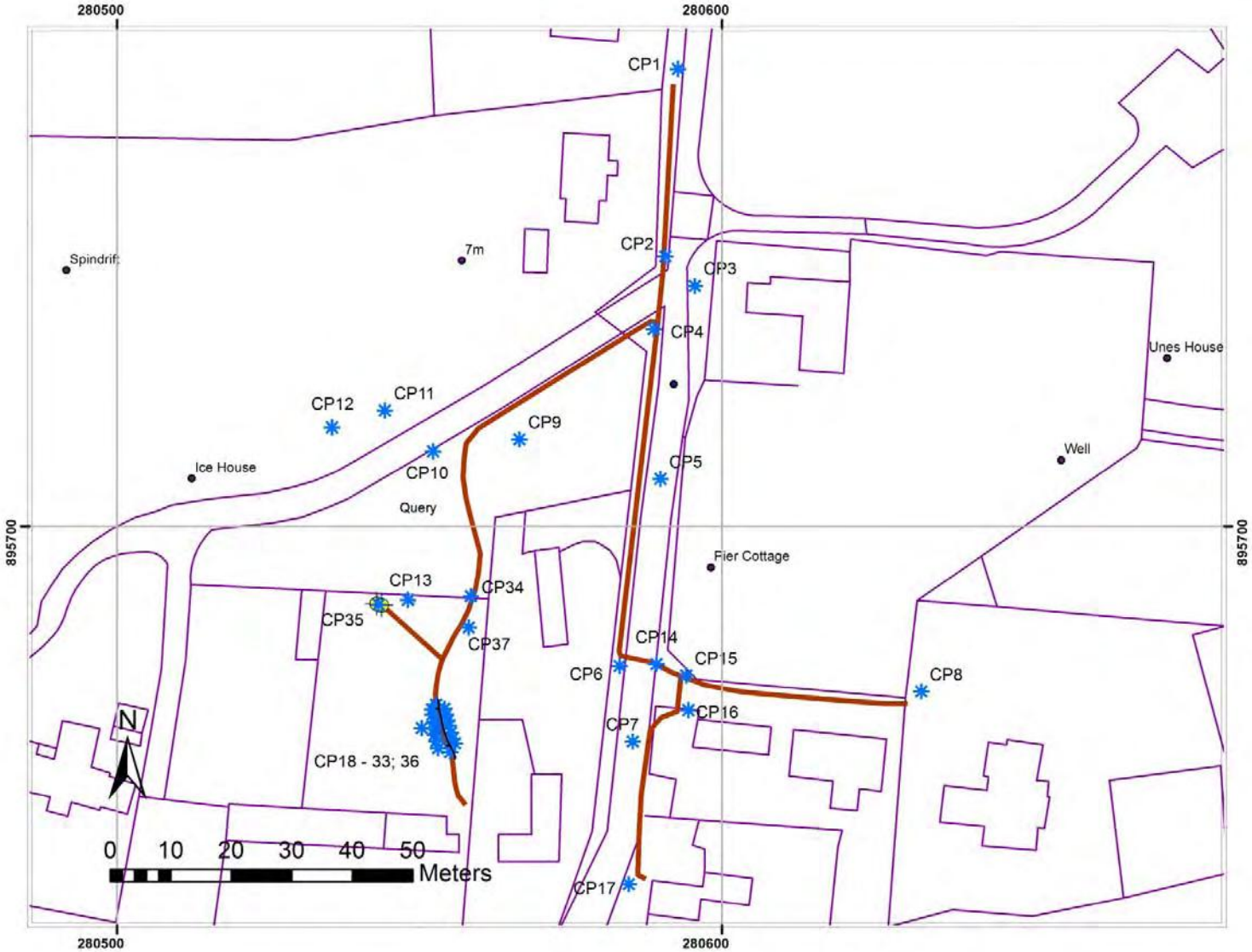

Figure 6 Photograph locations (camera points)

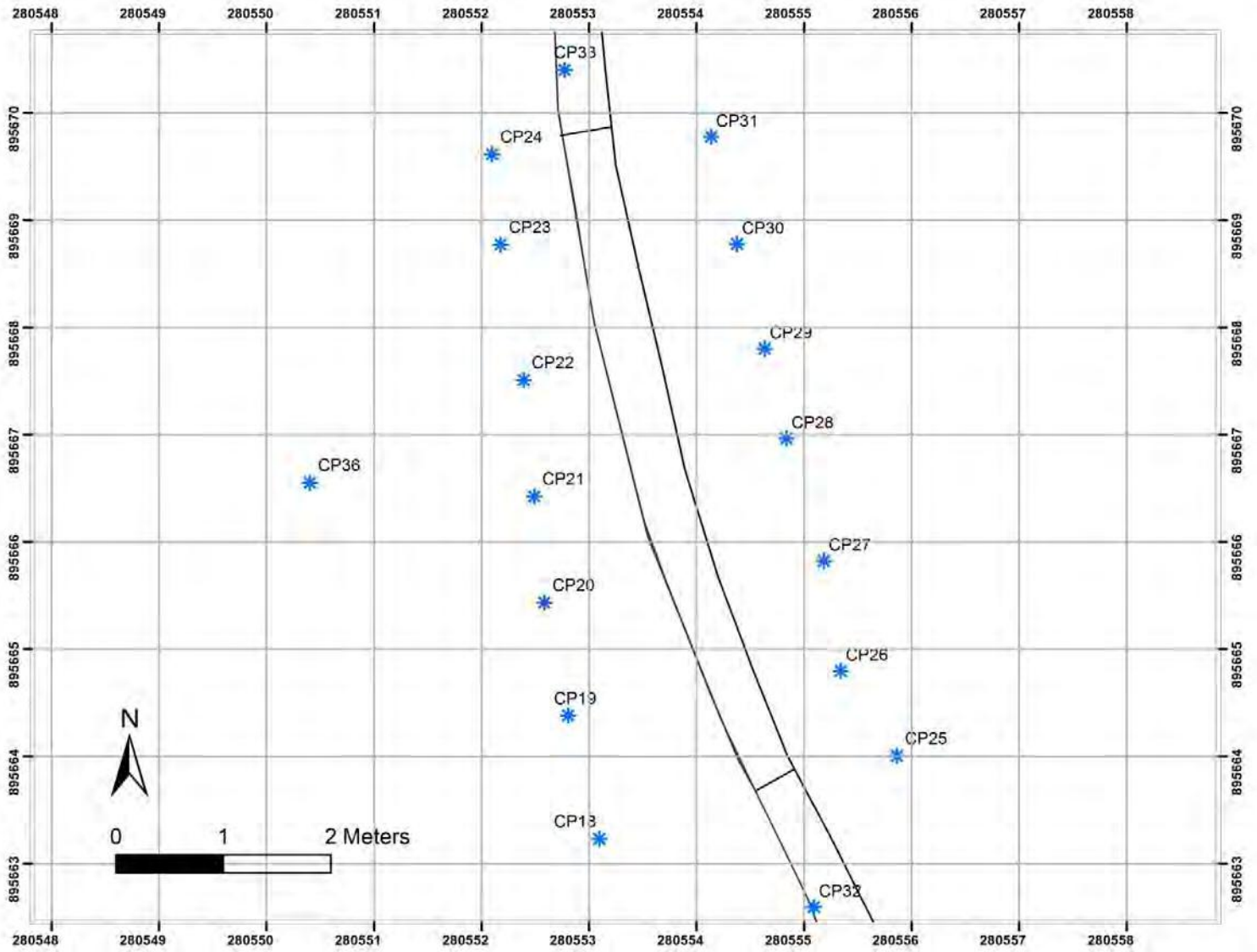

Figure 7 Photograph locations (camera points): recorded sections