

# LAND AT BARTON FARM, BURLESCOMBE, DEVON

NGR ST 07769 17076

Results of an archaeological trench evaluation and  
assessment of the site's potential for further analysis

Planning ref. Mid Devon District Council 12/00412/MFUL

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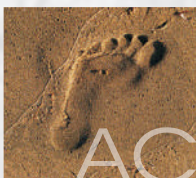
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On behalf of:  
Lightsource Renewable Energy Ltd

Report No: ACD477/1/0

Date: December 2012



AC archaeology

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## Summary

*An archaeological trench evaluation on land at Barton Farm, Burlescombe, Devon (NGR ST 07769 17076), was undertaken by AC archaeology during April 2012. The site occupies approximately 4.6 hectares of pasture land within a single field. A magnetometer survey carried out across the site identified a series of anomalies including the presence of magnetic debris within the southern and eastern parts of the site.*

*The evaluation comprised the excavation of five trenches totalling 101m in length. This identified generally negative results in the majority of trenches, although a small pit and dump of ironworking waste was identified in one area, while an undated ditch was recorded elsewhere.*

*The ironworking waste and pit are similar in character to a number of other deposits identified immediately adjacent to the site at Town Farm, where furnaces, debris and other industrial features have been previously identified dating to between the 8th and 10th centuries. A radiocarbon date obtained from charcoal within the pit from Barton Farm calibrates to 650-770 cal AD, and is significantly earlier than the adjacent Town Farm site. This indicates that ironworking in the immediate area is longer-lived than previously thought and is likely to have extended from early/middle Saxon times, through to the late Saxon and early medieval periods.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 An archaeological trench evaluation on land at Barton Farm, Burlescombe, Devon, was undertaken by AC archaeology during April 2012. The work was commissioned CgMS Consulting on behalf of Lightsource Renewable Energy Limited and was required by Mid Devon District Council in support of a planning application for the installation of a solar farm, as advised by Devon County Council Historic Environment Service (hereafter DCCHES).
- 1.2 The site (Fig. 1) occupies approximately 4.6 hectares of pasture land located immediately to the northeast of Burlescombe. It lies on land which slopes from south to north, between c. 125m aOD at the south falling to c. 110m aOD in the north. The underlying solid geology of the area consists of Triassic conglomerates, overlain by stony sandy loams of the Bromsgrove soil series (British Geological Survey online 2011).

## 2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 An initial desk-based assessment has been prepared by CgMs Consulting (Gidman 2012) and a subsequent magnetometer survey was undertaken by Archaeological Surveys Ltd (2012). Although there are no previous surveys, assessments or sites or findspots within the site, there are several within the close vicinity. Most notable of these are three late Saxon iron smelting furnaces recorded immediately to the south of the site with further evidence for metal working in the vicinity (Reed *et al* 2006).
- 2.2 The subsequent magnetometer survey carried out across the site identified a series of anomalies, including the presence magnetic debris within the southern and eastern parts of the site.

## 3. AIMS OF THE WORK

- 3.1 The aim of the trial trench evaluation was to establish the presence or absence, extent, depth, character and date of any archaeological features, deposits or finds within the site, with particular reference to the anomalies identified during the geophysical survey.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

- 4.1 The work comprised the machine-excavation of four trenches (Fig. 2) totalling 101m in length, with each linear trench 1.6m wide. Trench 1 was a hand-excavated 1m<sup>2</sup> pit located in an area where it was not possible to gain machine access. Trenches were positioned to target anomalies identified by the geophysical survey of the site.
- 4.2 All overburden removal was carried out using a JCB wheeled mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless grading bucket and working under constant archaeological supervision.
- 4.3 The site was recorded in accordance with the *AC archaeology pro forma* recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records, and with reference to AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2* (August 2012). All levels as shown on Fig. 3 and within the project archive relate to a temporary bench mark allocated a nominal value of 50m.

## 5. RESULTS

- 5.1 Trenches 1, 3 and 5 produced no evidence for archaeological activity and are described in tabulated form only in Appendix 1. The targeted geophysical anomalies are likely to relate to variations within the natural geology. The trenches with archaeological features or deposits are described in further detail below.

### 5.2 Trench 2 (Plan Fig. 3a, sections Fig 3b-c; Plates 1-3)

This trench was positioned across two linear anomalies and a discrete pit-like feature interpreted from the geophysical survey. It was excavated to a depth of 0.66m onto natural subsoil (context 204), comprising an orange to reddish-brown silty sand containing moderate amounts of gravels, with noticeably higher concentrations towards the eastern end of the trench. Cutting this deposit was a single undated small circular pit (F205), located towards the NW end of the trench.

F205 was 0.50m in diameter and with a maximum depth of 0.32m. The sides were steep, almost vertically sloping, the base rounded. Filling the pit were two distinct deposits (207 and 206). The primary fill (207) was a 0.07m thick greyish-black sandy silt containing abundant charcoal flecking. Sealing this was context 206, a 0.25m thick brownish-grey sandy silt, containing occasional charcoal and burnt clay flecks. No finds were recovered from either fills.

Partially sealing deposit 204 at the NW end of the trench was a layer of light grey silty sand (203) containing occasional gravels and comparable in composition to that of natural subsoil (204). Exposed at a depth of 0.44m and sealing layer 203 was a 0.14m thick layer of light to dark grey silty sand (202), which extended out from the NW end of the trench for 5.5m before petering out. Contained within the deposit were moderate amounts of charcoal flecking with associated occasional slag fragments and fired clay flecks. Directly above this was a 0.24m thick agricultural subsoil layer of mid brownish-red silty clay (201), which in turn was sealed by a 0.2m thick layer of mid to dark reddish-brown silty clay topsoil (200).



### **5.3 Trench 4 (Plan Fig. 3d, sections Fig. 3e-f; Plate 4)**

This trench was positioned across an area interpreted in the geophysical report as containing magnetic disturbance from ferrous material. It was excavated to a depth of 0.35m onto a natural subsoil comprising a reddish-yellow to grey sandy clay containing abundant gravels (402). Natural subsoil was cut by an approximately N-S aligned linear feature (F403).

F403 was 0.6m wide and 0.35m deep, with moderate to steep sloping sides and a narrow concave base. It contained two fills, with the lower primary fill (405) composed of a mid brown, yellow mottled silty sandy clay containing occasional small rounded stones. The upper fill (404) was a dark greyish brown silty clay containing occasional small rounded stones. No finds were recovered.

The upper fill of the linear feature and natural subsoil was sealed by an agricultural subsoil (401), composed of a 0.19m thick mid-brownish-red silty clay with occasional gravels, which in turn was sealed by a 0.16m thick layer of mid to dark reddish-brown silty clay topsoil (400).

## **6. THE FINDS**

by Naomi Payne

- 6.1** The evaluation produced 50 fragments (8750g) of iron slag, from the burnt deposit 202 within Trench 2. The slag is a mixture of furnace slag and furnace lining, indicating that iron ore was being smelted to extract the metallic iron in the close vicinity.

## **7. THE PALAEO-ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE**

by Mike Allen

- 7.1** A series of four bulk samples was taken from pit F205 and layer 202 in Trench 2. Samples of 15 and 30 litres were taken and processed by AC archaeology using standard washover flotation methods for the recovery of charred plant and charcoal remains. Flots and residues from three of these samples were provided for assessment. The results are set out in Table 1.
- 7.2** Many of the unsorted flots contained a considerable proportion of modern uncharred roots, which indicates the potential for biotic reworking and intrusion of material from higher strata. The sorted flots were sparse in charred remains. Charred cereal grains and possible charred weed seeds were only noted in one sample from the primary fill of pit F205 (context 207) and no definite chaff was recognised. This suggests that the focus of crop processing activities did not occur with the immediate vicinity. Charcoal was generally found in moderate quantities in all samples. The majority of the charcoal was branchwood fragments, with few short-lived roundwood or twiggy fragments present, and many of those were clearly worn. A few twiggy and roundwood elements were present in layer 202.
- 7.3** The overall low quantity of charred plant remains may indicate that many normal domestic activities occurred away from the excavated or sampled location. Nevertheless, the presence of relatively large quantities of charcoal indicates burning or firing practices occurred within the general vicinity, though the fact many charcoal pieces are relatively small and worn suggests that they many could have a history of residuality and taphonomy prior to deposition in the sampled features.

- 7.4** The sampled features were sparse in charred plant remains; little charred grain and weed seeds and no chaff were present. This suggests that the focus of crop processing activities did not occur with the immediate vicinity. The charred grain indicates the presence of cereal cultivation, but themselves provide little potential for determining the economy and activities performed on site which might relate to the sites' function and role.
- 7.5** Charcoal was present in moderate to large quantities from layer 202 and context 207 pit F205, and less so from context 206, pit F205 (Table 1). Where present the majority of the charcoal was worn fragments >5.6mm, and this was largely fragments branch, trunk with few or no roundwood and twiggy elements. This suggests localised burning of small fires and bonfires, as well as the weathering of the charcoal before its discard, or disposal in the sampled features.

Feature	Type	Context	Sample	Sample vol (litres)	Flot vol (ml) Charred/ roots	grain	Weed seeds/ chaff	charcoal> 5.6mm	notes
-	Layer	202	2	30	0 / 100	-	- / -	c. 60	Worn branch and heartwood fragments, one or two fine charcoal twigs
205	Pit	206	3	15	20 / 40	-	- / -	18	Worn branch and heartwood fragments
205	Pit	207	4	15	5 / 2	C	C / -	56	branch and heartwood, 1 branch c 10yrs

KEY: A\*\*= >20; A=10-20; B= 5-9; C= 1-5

Table 1. Assessment of charred plant and charcoal remains from the processed bulk samples (n / r = not recorded or given).

## 8. RADIOCARBON RESULTS

by Mike Allen

- 8.1** A radiocarbon determination was sought to date pit F205, which was thought to be contemporary with the late 8th to 10th century adjacent ironworking site at Town Farm (Reed *et al* 2006).
- 8.2** The potential for charcoal for radiocarbon dating relates largely on two main factors;-
- i) That the charcoal relates to a single deposition event or activity (rather than incidental charcoal blown into the feature and incorporated into the context). Here, the charcoal quantity and the archaeological interpretation of the context and the charcoal inclusion are important.
  - ii) The presence of short-lived woody elements (i.e. branchwood and roundwood), rather than heartwood fragments that could have an age offset of up to c. 350-400 years
- 8.3** The general lack of roundwood and twiggy elements precludes the acquisition of radiocarbon dates with confirmed short age-offsets. There was, however, the potential to provide suitable radiocarbon dates on identified roundwood and twiggy charcoal from basal context 207 of pit F205.

#### 8.4 Sample

A suitable sample was sought from the low sampled fill (context 207) which contained a lot of charcoal and charred matter, and considered to contain discarded dumps of probably single-event burnt waste. Although a few charred cereal grains were present, the high quantity of charcoal (c. 56 pieces >5.6mm), included branchwood material (see section 7 above).

The charcoal was examined by Dana Challinor who reported that 'no complete roundwood stems were noted'. Charcoal was mounted in a sand-bath for identification. Most was *Betulaceae* with some *Alnus glutinosa* (alder) and *Quercus* sp. (oak). A piece of *Alnus glutinosa* with a moderate to strong ring curvature, indicating it was likely to be derived from young branchwood, was selected for radiocarbon dating (Table 2).

Feature	Context no.	Sample no.	Identifications	Notes	C14 sample
Pit 205	207	4	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i> (alder) <i>Quercus</i> sp. (oak)	Most of the charcoal seems to be <i>Betulaceae</i>	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i> x 1

Table 2. Charcoal from context 207, pit 205

#### 8.5 Results

The identified branchwood charcoal sample was submitted for AMS radiocarbon dating and the results are given in Table 3 and are quoted in accordance with the international standard known as the Trodheim convention (Stuiver & Kra 1986). They are conventional radiocarbon ages (Stuiver & Polach 1977).

Calibration of the results has been performed using the data set published by Riemer *et al.* (2004) and performed using the programme OxCal v4.05 ([www.flaha.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.flaha.ox.ac.uk/)). Details of the algorithms employed by this program are available from the on-line manual or in Bronk Ramsey (1995; 1998; 2001). The calibrated date ranges in text are cited are those with 95% confidence and have been rounded out to the nearest 10 years (Mook 1986), and all posterior density estimates are presented in italics.

The result of 1317±17 BP which calibrates to 650-770 *cal* AD indicates burning activities relating to pit F205 in the mid 7th to late 8th century AD, i.e. early to mid Saxon period, which are clearly not contemporary with the ironworking of the late 8th to 10th century on the adjacent site. This also, therefore, suggests that the other charcoal and burning events at Barton Farm, including that from layer 202, are of similar date.

Feature	Context	Material	Lab no.	Result BP	δC <sup>13</sup>	Calibrated date
Pit 205	207	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i> branchwood charcoal	NZA-51738	1315±17	-24.5	cal AD 650-770

Table 2. Radiocarbon result

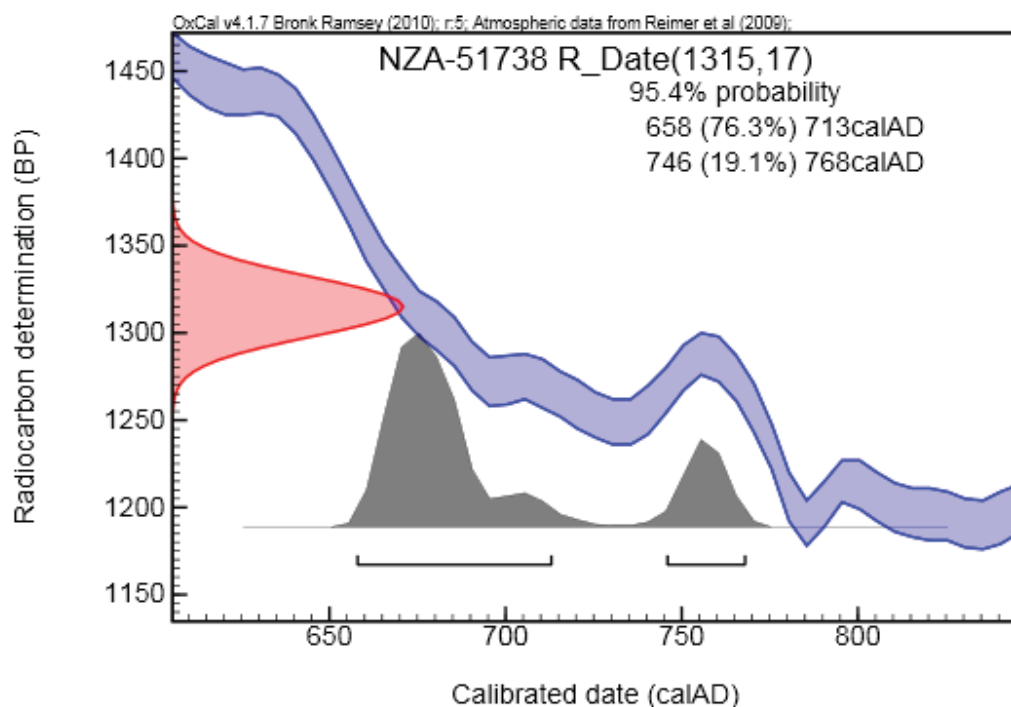


Fig. 4. Probability distribution from the radiocarbon determination from pit F205

## 9. DISCUSSION AND POTENTIAL

- 9.1** The evaluation has identified generally limited results, with the principal archaeological activity located in the vicinity of Trench 2, where a layer containing ironworking debris and a small pit were identified. Elsewhere across the site, the only feature identified was a probable N-S ditch in Trench 4, the position of which does not correspond with field boundaries depicted on historic maps (Gidman 2012, Figs 2-3) and is therefore likely to represent evidence for earlier land division or drainage.
- 9.2** The ironworking layer identified in Trench 2 (context 202) clearly continues beyond the confines of the trench and is similar in character to a number of other deposits identified within and in the vicinity of the Blackdown Hills (Reed *et al* 2006, Hughes 2009, AC archaeology *in prep.*). These layers appear to represent large dumps of waste from the iron smelting process, which based on evidence from other sites, does not travel far from source, and therefore indicates the presence of *in situ* working immediately adjacent to Trench 2. The features likely to be present are furnaces, gullies, post holes and pits, indicating a structural component to this activity; Pit F205 could have been a component of such a structure, with further evidence beyond the trench.
- 9.3** The radiocarbon date obtained from charcoal within pit F205 calibrates to 650-770 *cal AD*, and is significantly earlier than the adjacent Tow Farm site, where dates obtained ranged between the late 8th and 10th centuries. This indicates that ironworking in the immediate area is longer-lived than previously thought and is likely to have extended from the early/middle Saxon period (as per Barton Farm), through to the late Saxon and early medieval periods.
- 9.4** The early ironworking remains identified at Barton Farm are an important addition to current knowledge of this activity both in Burlescombe and the wider context of the Blackdown Hills. The



date obtained from pit F205 also indicates prolonged activity in the area during the Saxon period. However, the limited nature of the evaluation and the presence of very localised remains, means that further analysis beyond that presented here would not provide any additional new or useful information. The palaeo-environmental remains were sparse, although if more extensive ironworking features or deposits were exposed on the site, then it is considered that their quantities and therefore significance is likely to increase.

## 10. ARCHIVE

- 10.1** The paper and digital archive and finds are currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, Bradninch, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ, prior to their deposition at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter.
- 10.2** The OASIS (Online AccesS to the Index of Archaeological InvestigationS) number for this project is 138769.

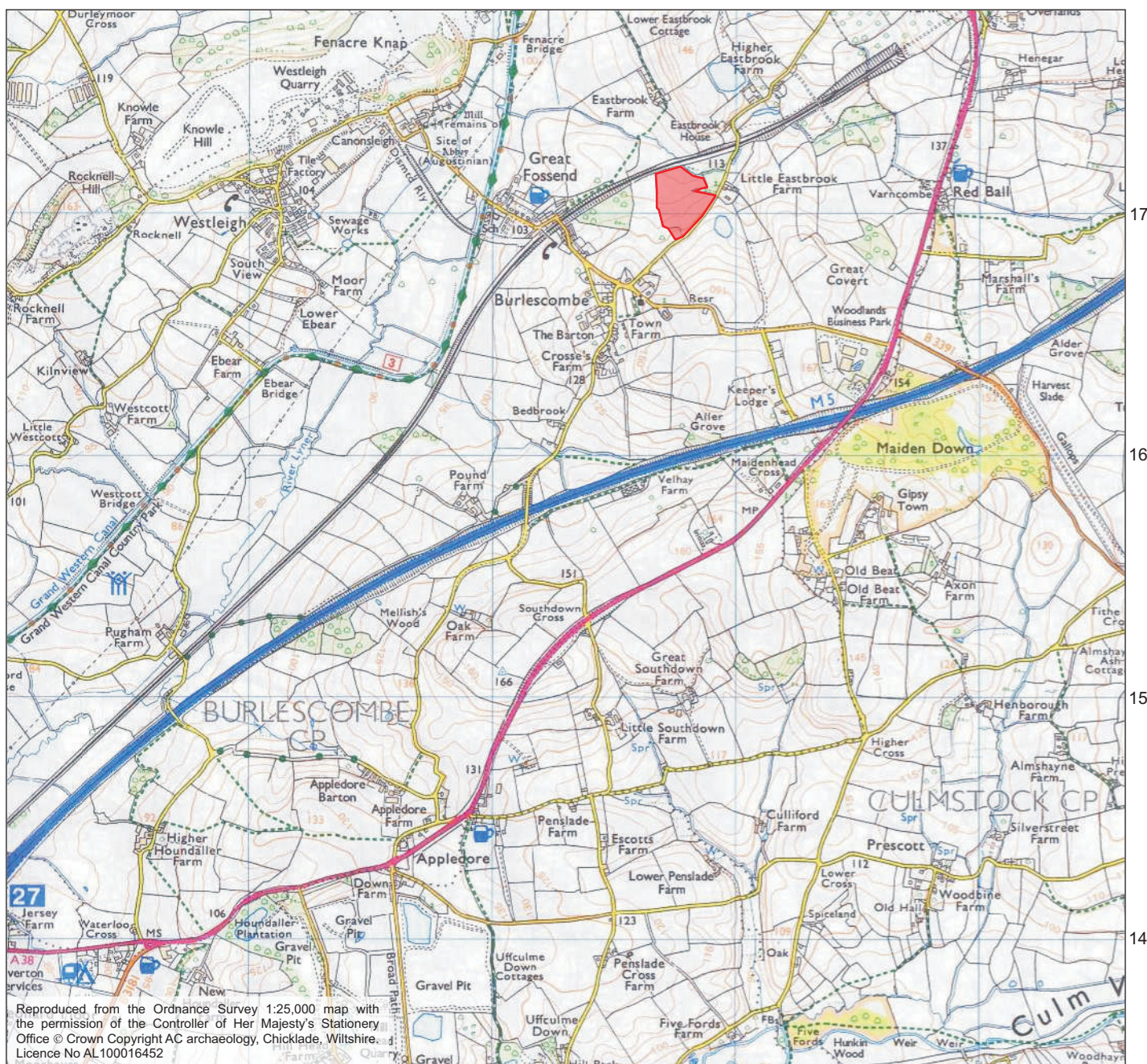
## 11. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The evaluation was commissioned on behalf of CgMs Consulting by William Bedford. The site trial trenching was carried out by Paul Jones, Simon Reames and Sarnia Blackmore, with the illustrations for this report prepared by Sarnia Blackmore. The advice of Stephen Reed, Devon County Council Archaeology Officer, is duly acknowledged.

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PROJECT

Barton Farm, Burlescombe, Devon

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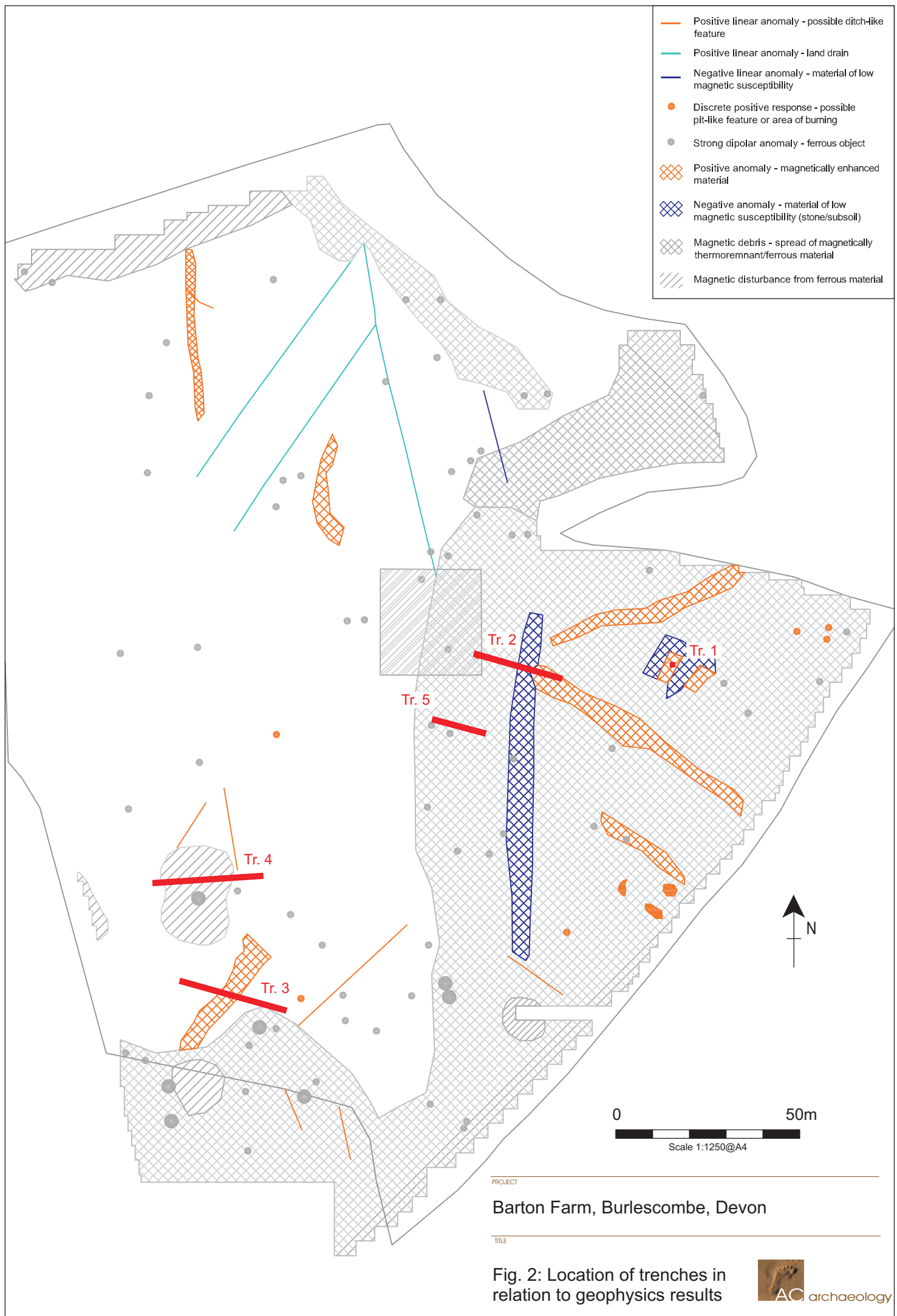
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Fig. 1: Location of site

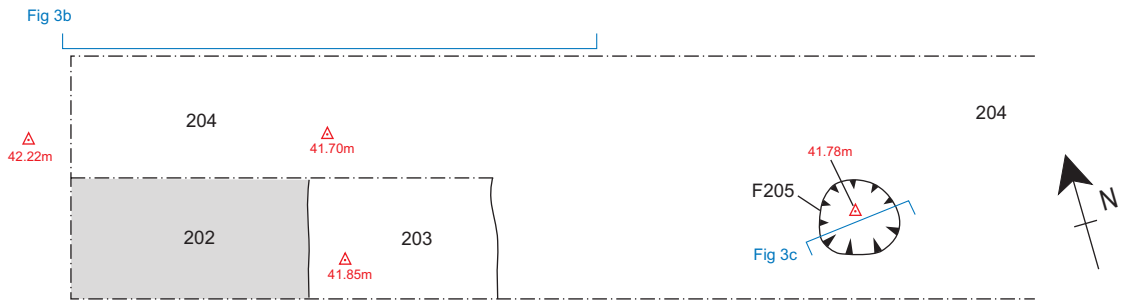


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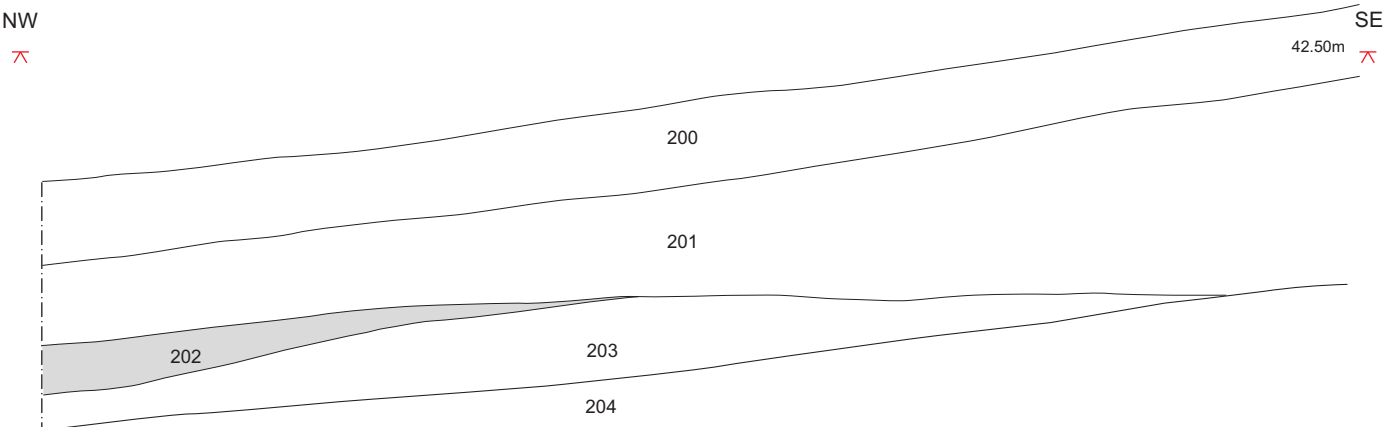





a) Plan of Trench 2



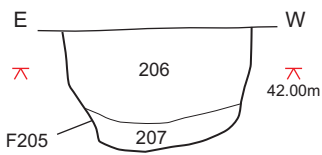
b) Southwest facing section, Trench 2



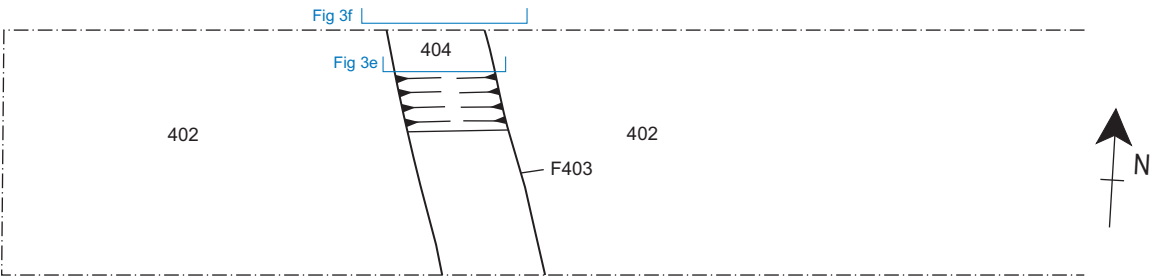
Key

 Burnt material and iron slag

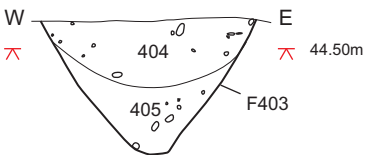
c) North facing section of pit F205



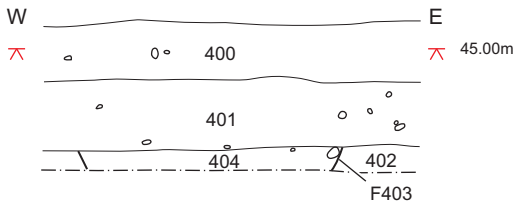
d) Plan of Trench 4



e) South facing section of linear feature F403



f) South facing representative section of Trench 4



datum based on arbitrary 50m

PROJECT

Barton Farm, Burlescombe, Devon

TITLE

Fig. 3: Plans and sections





Plate 1: Excavated section through ironworking debris layer 202. view to northwest (scale 1m)



Plate 2: Southwest facing section of Trench 2, showing layer 202. View to north (scale 1m)



Plate 3: Pit F205, Trench 2, view to south (scale 0.25m)



Plate 4: Linear feature F403, Trench 4, view to north (scale 1m)



# Appendix 1

Tabulated context descriptions by trench

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Appendix 1: Tabulated context descriptions by trench

Trench 1 (Test pit 1)			Length: 1.00m	Width: 1.00m	Alignment: N/A
<b>Reason for trench and outcome</b> Test area of negative 'rectilinear' anomalies from magnetometer survey. No archaeological features.					
Context	Depth below ground level (m)	Description	Interpretation		
100	0-0.13m	Mid/dark reddish-brown soft silty clay, with moderate small-medium rounded stones <0.05m	Topsoil		
101	0.13-0.31m	Mid brown to red silty clay with occasional gravels	Agricultural subsoil		
102	0.31-0.35m+	Reddish-brown silty clay with abundant gravels	Natural subsoil		

Trench 2			Length: 25m	Width: 1.60	Alignment: NW-SE
<b>Reason for trench and outcome</b> Targeting a number of linear anomalies. Small undated pit and heat-affected deposit.					
Context	Depth below ground level (m)	Description	Interpretation		
200	0-0.20m	Mid/dark reddish-brown soft silty clay with moderate small-medium sub-angular stones <0.05m	Topsoil		
201	0.20-0.44m	Mid brown to red silty clay with occasional gravels	Agricultural subsoil		
202	0.44-0.58m (max.)	Light to dark grey silty sand containing moderate charcoal flecking and occasional slag fragments with fired clay flecks	Burnt layer which may indirectly relate to a feature(s) located beyond the NW limits of the trench		
203	0.58-0.66m (max.)	Light grey silty sand containing occasional gravels	Heat affected natural subsoil relating to upper level of natural subsoil 204		
204	0.66m+	Orange to reddish-brown silty sand containing moderate to abundant gravels	Natural subsoil		
205	0.65m	Circular shaped feature measuring 0.50m and 0.33m deep. Straight to concave sides and rounded base. Cuts deposit 204	Cut of isolated pit. Incidence of a primary burnt fill 207 and fired clay deposit 207 within the pit appears similar to deposit 202.		
206	0.65-0.90m	Brownish-grey sandy silt containing occasional charcoal and burnt clay flecks	Upper fill of pit F205		
207	0.90-0.98m	Greyish-black sandy silt containing abundant charcoal flecking	Primary fill of pit F205		

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Appendix 1: Tabulated context descriptions by trench

Trench 3			Length: 30m	Width: 1.60m	Alignment: NW-SE
<b>Reason for trench and outcome</b> Targeting anomaly interpreted from geophysical survey. No archaeological features					
Context	Depth below ground level (m)	Description	Interpretation		
300	0-0.15m	Mid/dark reddish-brown soft silty clay with moderate small-medium sub-angular stones <0.05m	Topsoil		
301	0.15-0.35m	Mid brown to red silty clay with occasional gravels	Agricultural subsoil		
302	0.35m+	Reddish-yellow to grey silty sandy clay containing abundant gravels	Natural subsoil		

Trench 4			Length: 30m	Width: 1.60m	Alignment: E-W
<b>Reason for trench and outcome</b> Targeting magnetic disturbance interpreted from geophysical survey. Single undated ditch					
Context	Depth below ground level (m)	Description	Interpretation		
400	0-0.16	Mid/dark reddish-brown soft silty clay with moderate small-medium sub-angular stones <0.05m	Topsoil		
401	0.16-0.35m	Mid brown to red silty clay with occasional gravels	Agricultural subsoil		
402	0.35-0.42m+	Reddish yellow to grey silty/sand clay containing abundant gravels	Natural subsoil		
403	0.33m	N-S aligned linear measuring 0.65m wide and 0.35m deep with steep sloping sides and a flat base	Cut of ditch. Possible former field boundary		
404	0.33-0.47m	Dark greyish-brown silty clay containing occasional small rounded stones	Upper fill of ditch F403		
405	0.47-0.61m	Mid brownish-yellow mottled silty sandy clay containing occasional small rounded stones	Primary fill of ditch F403		

Trench 5			Length: 15m	Width: 1.60m	Alignment: NW-SE
<b>Reason for trench and outcome.</b> Contingency trench. No archaeological features					
Context	Depth below ground level (m)	Description	Interpretation		
500	0-0.10m	Mid/dark reddish-brown soft silty clay with moderate small-medium sub-angular stones	Topsoil		
501	0.10-0.23m	Mid brown to red silty clay with occasional gravels	Agricultural subsoil		
502	0.23-0.27m+	Reddish-brown silty clay with abundant gravels	Natural subsoil		

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