

# DUNSTER CASTLE COMPOST AREA, DUNSTER, SOMERSET

(NGR SS 99293 43496)

Results of an archaeological watching brief

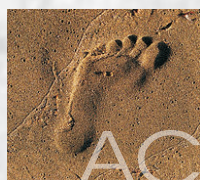
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Prepared by:  
Simon Hughes

On behalf of:  
The National Trust

Report No: ACD1563/1/0

Date: February 2017



archaeology

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## Acknowledgements

The archaeological investigations were commissioned by Christopher Turner of the National Trust. The site works were carried out by Paul Bracken, with the illustrations prepared by Leon Cauchois.

The views expressed in this report are those of AC archaeology and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

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## Summary

*An archaeological watching brief on land at Dunster Castle, Dunster, Somerset (SS 99293 43496) was undertaken by AC archaeology in February 2017 during the creation of a new compost area. The site was located on the east side of the castle grounds, close to the River Avill.*

*Groundworks comprised the bulk reduction of an area for new compost bays and an associated driveway.*

*A short section of a mortar-bonded stone wall was exposed during the work and this corresponded with the location of a former small enclosure dating to the 19th century. This was overlain by recent made ground. No pre-modern finds were recovered.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report sets out the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out during the construction of a new compost area on land at Dunster Castle, Dunster, Somerset (SS 99293 43496).
- 1.2 The archaeological works were commissioned by The National Trust and were carried out by AC archaeology on 13th February 2017.
- 1.3 The new compost area was located within the grounds on the east side of Dunster Castle (Fig. 1). It was positioned in a clearing within woodland to the northeast of the River Avill and close to the River Avill Bridge, which links the formal grounds with the deer park beyond (Plate 1). The area was located on ground that sloped gradually to the southeast towards the river at 36m aOD (above Ordnance Datum), with the underlying solid geology comprising sandstone of the Hangman Sandstone Formation, beneath an alluvial superficial deposit of clay, silt, sand and gravel (British Geological Survey).

### 2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 A castle at Dunster may have been present in the Saxon period, but it is first recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086. The main archaeological interest in this part of the grounds was its close proximity to the potential site of the medieval harbour on the River Avill (National Trust Sites and Monuments Record ref. 177217). First mentioned in 1183, the assumed location of the harbour is based on documentary evidence alone, with no known structural elements having been recorded. Silting of the river influenced its subsequent relocation to Minehead, which was established as the main harbour by the 15th century.
- 2.2 Nearby features related to the subsequent formation of the castle ground includes the River Avill Bridge. This is a Grade II-listed late 18th century structure built in the Palladian-style with three arches with voussoirs of undressed stone adding to its picturesque appearance, as does an artificial waterfall beneath (National Heritage List for England no. 1345591; Exmoor HER no. MSO12063).
- 2.3 The 1840 Dunster parish tithe map depicts the site of the new compost area as within the lower slopes of the castle hill. The River Avill Bridge is depicted with a curving trackway extending to the north. By 1887, the First-Edition Ordnance Survey Map shows a number of modifications to the castle grounds. These include the insertion of

a trackway linking to the River Avill Bridge, southwest of the track depicted on the parish tithe map, and corresponding with its current location. The extent of the former trackway is shown as forming a boundary between the wooded grounds and agricultural land to the northeast. On the northwest side of the bridge and likely to have extended into the current site, a sub-squared enclosure is shown. This is consistent on subsequent editions until 1972, when the north portion (within the current site) is shown as absent.

### **3. AIMS**

- 3.1** The principal aim of the watching brief was to monitor all groundworks in progress and to ensure the adequate investigation, recording and reporting of all significant archaeological features and deposits exposed.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1** Monitored groundworks comprised the bulk reduction of the area for the new compost bays and its associated entrance drive (Fig 2). This was carried out using a tracked machine fitted with a toothless grading bucket.
- 4.2** The work was undertaken with reference to the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' guidelines, *Standards and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (published 2014). All archaeological deposits exposed were 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* (revised August 2012). Sections were drawn at 1:10 and plans at 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate.

### **5. RESULTS (Plan Fig. 2; Plates 2-3)**

- 5.1** The natural subsoil (context 102), which consisted of a mid brownish-red silty sand, was exposed at the northern and southern extents of the monitored area at a depth that ranged between 0.4m to the south and exceeded 1.1m below existing levels towards the north. At the southern extent, the natural subsoil was overlain by a dark brownish-red silty-clay subsoil, while elsewhere, a dark brown silty clay was exposed on the base of the stripped area (103). This deposit measured at least 1.1m thick and consisted of a dumped or made ground layer that contained recent refuse. Overlying this was a dark brown silty-clay loam topsoil (100). No pre-modern finds were recovered from the overlying layer sequence.
- 5.2** Towards the southern extent of the monitored area, a short section of northwest to southeast aligned wall footing was exposed (S104) as protruding through modern layer 103. This measured 0.6m wide and was formed of un-faced stone rubble in a mixed red and white lime mortar. To the southeast, the wall continued beneath the overlying layer (103).

### **6. COMMENTS**

- 6.1** The watching brief exposed largely negative results, with much of the stripped area maintained within a modern made ground deposit.

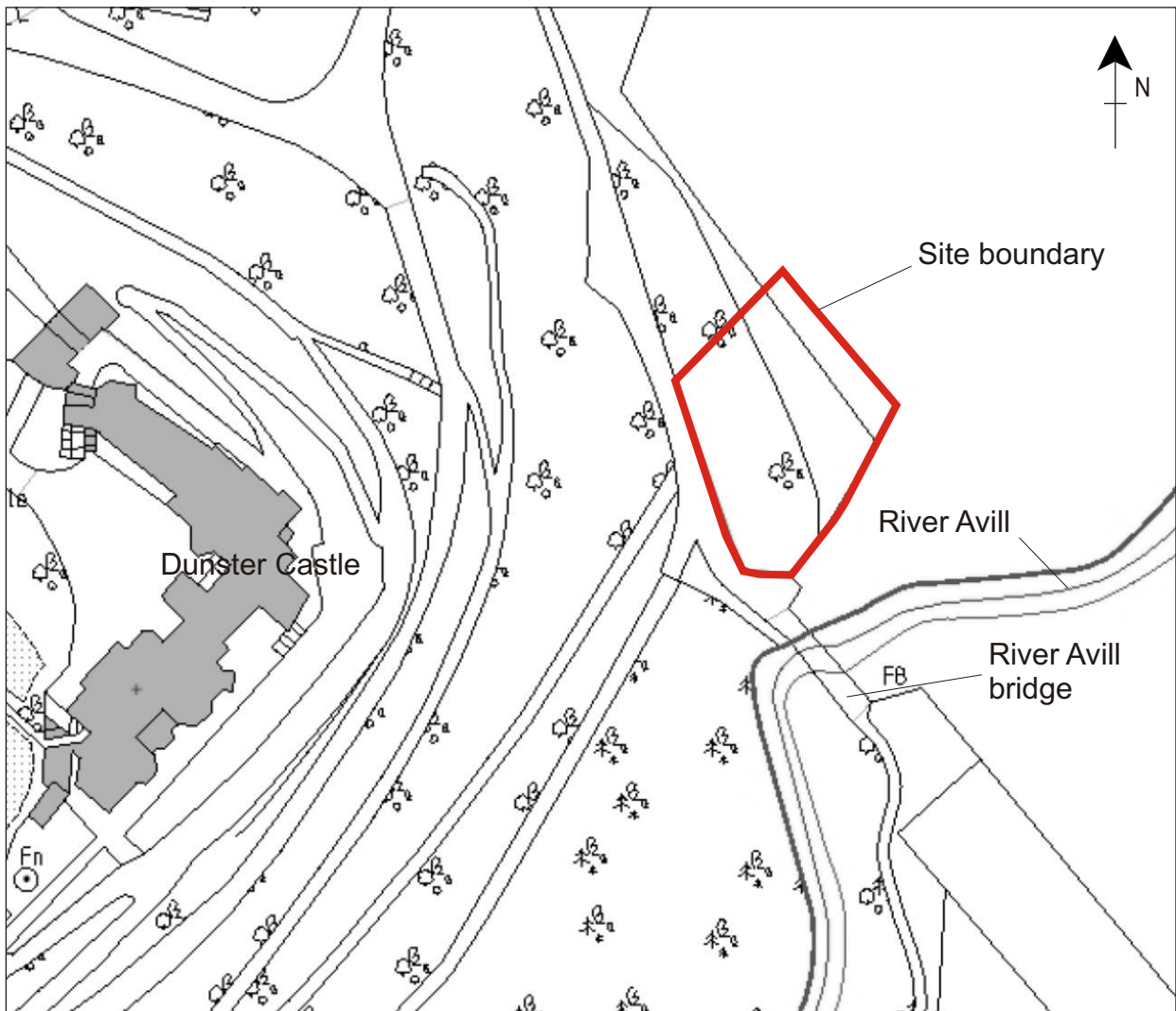
- 6.2** The exposed section of wall footing broadly corresponds with a former squared enclosure, which first appears in historic mapping after 1840 and before 1887. The historic mapping shows that this enclosure had been added to the north side of the late 18th century bridge over the Avill connecting the castle grounds with the Deer Park. The enclosure gives the appearance of having acted as a pound for containing stock being removed from the Deer Park. As such it was a functional addition to the picturesque bridge. The wall footing shows that some effort may have been made to replicate the rusticated style of some elements of the bridge, although the addition of this enclosure on the north side of the bridge in itself may be regarded as illustrating that by this time, approximately a century after the construction of the bridge, a concern with aesthetics had been largely replaced with a requirement for function.

## **7. ARCHIVE AND OASIS ENTRY**

- 7.1** The paper and digital archive is currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ. This will ultimately be deposited with the The National Trust.
- 7.2** An online OASIS entry has been completed, using the unique identifier **277493** which includes a digital copy of this report.



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0 50m  
Scale 1:1250@A4

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PROJECT  
Dunster Castle compost area, Dunster, Somerset

TITLE

Fig. 1: Site location











Plate 1: View of site looking north from River Avill Bridge



Plate 2: Showing wall S104, view to southeast (scale 1m)



Plate 3. Detailed view of wall S104. Looking northwest (scale 1m)

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