

Land at Oaklands, Cowick Lane, Exeter, Devon

NGR SX9125190616

Results of an archaeological trench evaluation
Planning reference: Exeter City Council 10/0487/03

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archaeology

LAND AT OAKLANDS, COWICK LANE, EXETER, DEVON (SX9125190616)

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SUMMARY

An archaeological trench evaluation, on the site of a proposed residential development on land at Oaklands, Cowick Lane, Exeter, Devon (NGR SX9125190616), was undertaken by AC archaeology during May 2010. An earlier geophysical survey of the site identified part of a ring ditch anomaly in the southern part, as well as other possible linear anomalies to the north of this.

The evaluation comprised the machine-excavation of two trenches totalling 37m in length, with each trench 1.6m wide. Both trenches were positioned to target anomalies identified during the geophysical survey. The ring ditch was identified in two locations, with excavation confirming that it is likely to represent the quarry ditch from a former ploughed-down barrow, positioned on the crest of a ridge overlooking the Alphinbrook Valley. The ditch was 1m deep, a maximum of 2.4m wide and with a full external diameter of around 22m, making it one of the larger and better-preserved examples in the area. No associated features were present, but any central burial pit would be located outside the confines of the trench, close to the southern site boundary. Three pieces of prehistoric worked flint were recovered from the fill of the ditch.

The trench positioned across linear anomalies to the north established that these were variations in the natural geology.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 An archaeological trench evaluation, undertaken in support of a planning application for the construction of 13 houses and associated works on land at Oaklands, Cowick Lane, Exeter, Devon, was carried out by AC archaeology on 22 May 2010. The work was commissioned by David Wilson Homes South West, and was undertaken following consultation with the Archaeology Officer, Exeter City Council. The location of the site is shown on Fig. 1.
- 1.2 The site covers an area of 0.49 hectares and is located on generally level ground, occupying a low ridge just above the Alphinbrook Valley. It lies at around 18m OD and the current land use consists of mainly a grass horse paddock, with a menage located towards the northwest corner. The underlying solid geology of the area is Breccia of the Dawlish Sandstone Formation (BGS 1995).
- 1.3 An earlier geophysical survey of the site (Sitescan Archaeological Ltd 2010) identified the presence of a curvilinear part ring ditch anomaly, which continued beyond the site boundaries to the south. Other, more ephemeral, linear anomalies were identified elsewhere. Prior to this survey there were no known archaeological sites or monuments within the site itself or in its immediate vicinity.

2. METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 The evaluation was undertaken with reference to a method statement prepared by AC archaeology (Valentin 2010) and subsequent trench location plan, submitted to and approved by the Archaeology Officer, Exeter City Council. It comprised the machine-excavation of two trenches totalling 37m in length, with each trench 1.6m wide. Trench positions (Fig. 1) were designed to target some of the anomalies identified during the geophysical survey, in particular the ring ditch anomaly.
- 2.2 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 1*. All plans were drawn at a scale of 1:50 and sections at 1:10 or 1:20. All levels have been related to Ordnance Datum.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Trench 1 (Sections Fig. 2a-b)

This trench was 12m long, northwest to southeast aligned and positioned to target two linear anomalies identified during the geophysical survey, which upon excavation were established as variations (gravel banding) within the natural subsoil. No other archaeological features or finds were present and the recorded layer sequence is described in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The layer sequence, Trench 1

Context	Depth below ground level	Description	Interpretation
100	0-300mm	Dark greyish-brown sandy clay silt, with occasional fine root disturbance and rare small rounded gravels	Turf and topsoil
101	330-810mm	Dark reddish-brown clayey silty sand, with rare rounded gravels and small pebbles	Agricultural subsoil
102	810 -1005mm	Light reddish-brown silty sandy clay with occasional rounded gravels and pebbles	Weathered subsoil horizon
103	1005mm +	Coarse brownish-red clayey sand, with occasional pockets of pebbles and yellow clay	Natural subsoil

3.2 Trench 2 (Plan and sections Fig. 2c-f; Plates 1 and 2)

This trench was 25m long, northwest to southeast aligned and positioned in the southern part of the site to target the part ring ditch anomaly identified during the geophysical survey. The recorded layer sequence is set out in Table 2, with archaeological features described below.

Table 2. The layer sequence, Trench 2

Context	Depth below ground level	Description	Interpretation
200	0-300mm	Dark greyish-brown sandy clay silt, with occasional fine root disturbance and rare small rounded gravels	Turf and topsoil
201	300-550/800mm	Dark reddish-brown clayey silty sand, with rare rounded gravels and small pebbles	Agricultural subsoil
202	550/800 – 800/900mm	Light reddish-brown silty sandy clay with occasional rounded gravels and pebbles	Weathered subsoil horizon
203	800/900mm +	Coarse brownish-red clayey sand, with occasional pockets of pebbles and yellow lay	Natural subsoil

The ring ditch anomaly was present at opposing ends of the trench as a wide curving ditch. Part of the northwest end the trench was widened to allow a section to be excavated across the feature at right angles. This established that the ditch (F207) cut lower subsoil layer 202, but this could only be discerned in section (Figs. 2d & e). The ditch was a maximum of 2.4m wide and 1m deep, with initially moderately sloping sides, then becoming steeper onto a slightly undulating, but generally level base. At the upper levels there was evidence for root or animal disturbance along the edges.

The ring ditch contained two fills, with the basal fill (206) composed of a light brownish-yellow friable sandy clay, containing occasional small rounded pebbles. The main upper fill (205) was a mid yellowish-brown friable sandy clay with occasional small rounded pebbles and rare charcoal flecks. Two pieces of prehistoric worked flint were recovered from 205.

The unexcavated portion of the ring ditch at the southeast end of the trench (204), had an exposed fill composed of a dark yellowish-brown soft to friable clayey sandy silt, with rare fine root disturbance and the fill noticeably stonier in its central part. A single piece of prehistoric worked flint was recovered. No other associated cut features were present.

4. THE FINDS

4.1 Only four pieces of prehistoric worked flint weighing 17 grams were recovered. Three pieces were collected from the upper fill of the ring ditch (contexts 204 and 205), with a single piece recovered from subsoil layer 201. The waste flakes are characteristic of a later prehistoric, probably Bronze Age, industry, while the broke blade fits in with a later Mesolithic or early Neolithic date. The flint can be described as follows:

201 (subsoil)	1 x broken waste flake with hinge fracture
204 (upper ditch fill)	1 x waste flake with white patina
205 (upper ditch fill)	1 x broad waste flake, 1 x broken blade flake

4.2 Small quantities of 19th century and later pottery were recorded in layers 200 and 201, but these were not retained. The pottery comprised glazed red earthenwares, industrial whitewares and blue and white transfer-printed wares.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The evaluation has established that the curving anomaly identified during the geophysical survey is part of a ring ditch, probably a quarry ditch from a ploughed-down former barrow of Bronze Age date. What was present in the trench was well preserved and it appears to be a large feature compared to other ring ditches in the area. It has a projected diameter of around 22m, maximum width of ditch of 2.4m and total depth of 1m. The thick soil layers formed above the ring ditch will have aided its good survival and it is likely that the remainder of the feature outside the site will survive beneath Balls Farm Road.

5.2 The ring ditch is located on level ground at the crest of a moderate to steep slope down to the south and the Alphinbrook Valley. During the prehistoric period this would have been a prominent location, and one which is typical for siting burial mounds.

5.3 Within the inner part of the ring ditch, the overlying lower subsoil layer (203) was 0.2m thick, but on the outside was only 0.1m (see Fig. 2e). There was no difference in composition of this layer either outside or inside, but the greater thickness inside might suggest that it could represent part of a surviving buried soil horizon.

5.4 While no associated features, such as burials or cremations, were identified during this work, any central burial pit present would be within the site and adjacent to the southern boundary. Similarly, there is still the possibility for associated features, such as cremation pits, to be present outside the perimeter of the ring ditch.

6. IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT

6.1 The results from the geophysical survey and trial trenching indicate that the northern three quarters of the site is unlikely to contain any evidence for archaeological activity. The anomalies recorded were shown to be variations in the natural subsoil, while the trial trenching established a deep sequence of overlying soils, largely devoid of any artefacts. In the southern part, where the ring ditch is present at 0.55m below ground level, there is clearly good survival of archaeological remains and the potential for associated features and deposits to be present.

6.2 Based on the proposed site layout, this area of the site will contain five houses and part of the new road, as well as some new drainage trenches. Construction for the new houses will be by traditional strip footings, with these excavated to depths in excess of 1m into the natural subsoil. On this basis, there will clearly be an impact on the ring ditch itself, as well as any associated features.

7. ARCHIVE AND OASIS

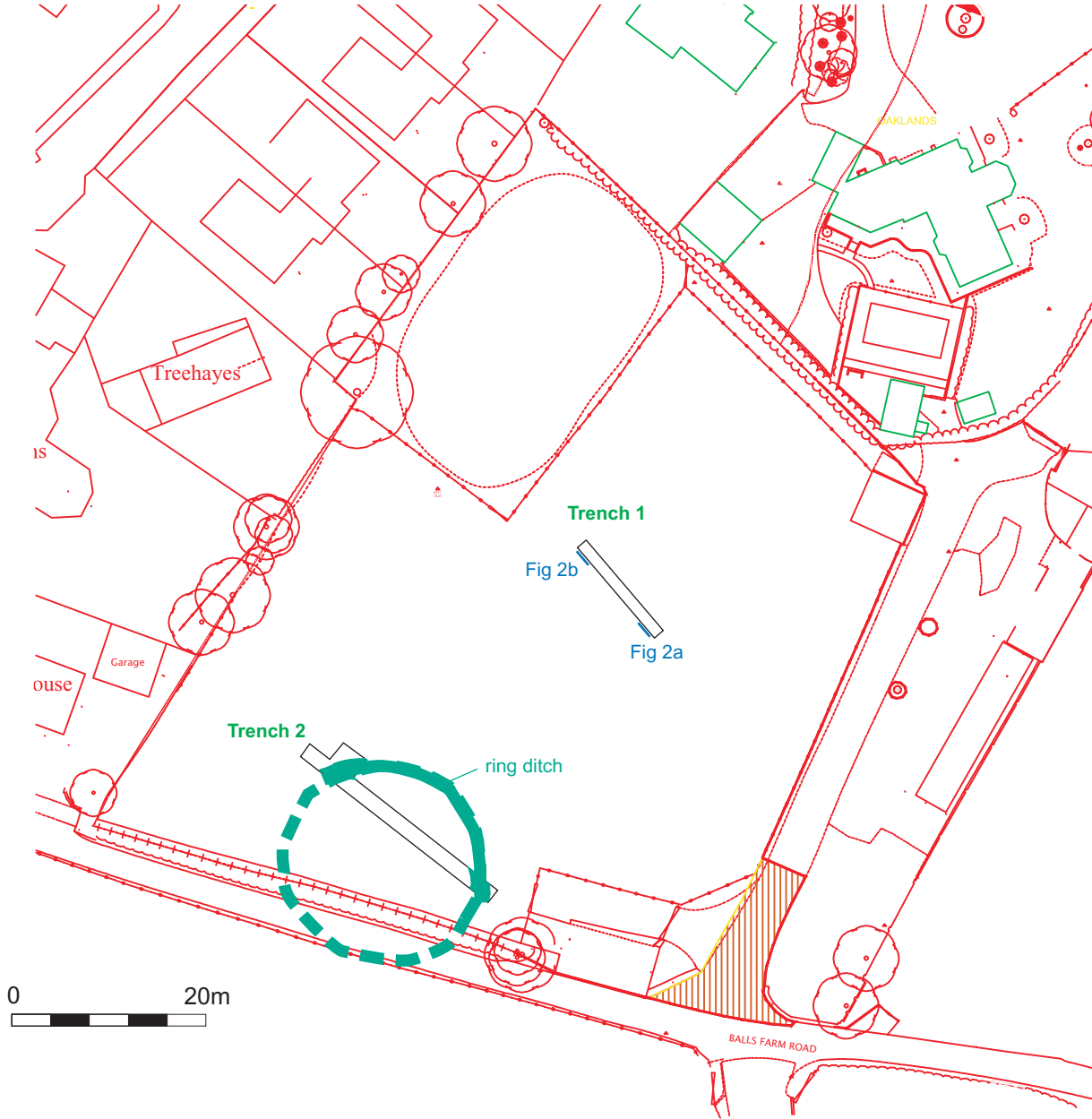
- 7.1** The paper and digital archive and finds are currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, Bradninch, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ. They will be deposited at Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter under the accession code 50/2010 along with any archive generated by subsequent work on the site. The OASIS (Online AccesS to the Index of Archaeological InvestigationS) number for this project is 77914.

8. REFERENCES

BGS (British Geological Survey), 1995, *Geological Survey of Great Britain (England and Wales) 1:50000 Series Solid and Drift Geology Sheet 325 (Exeter)*

Sitescan Archaeological Ltd, 2010, *Geophysical Survey carried out at Balls Farm Road, Exeter, Devon*. Unpublished report for client

Valentin, J., 2010, *Land at Oaklands, Cowick Lane, Exeter, Devon: Method statement for geophysical survey followed by either an archaeological strip, map and sample excavation or watching brief*. Unpublished AC archaeology document, ref. ACD148/1/2



b) Trench location

a) Site location



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PROJECT

Cowick Lane, Exeter

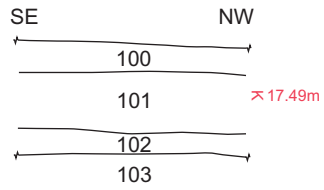
TITLE

Fig. 1:
Site and trench locations, showing
projected extent or ring ditch

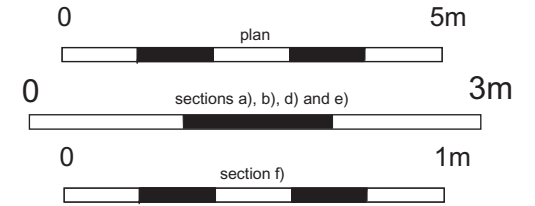
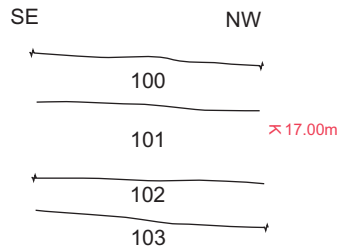


Trench 1

a) Representative section, SE end of trench

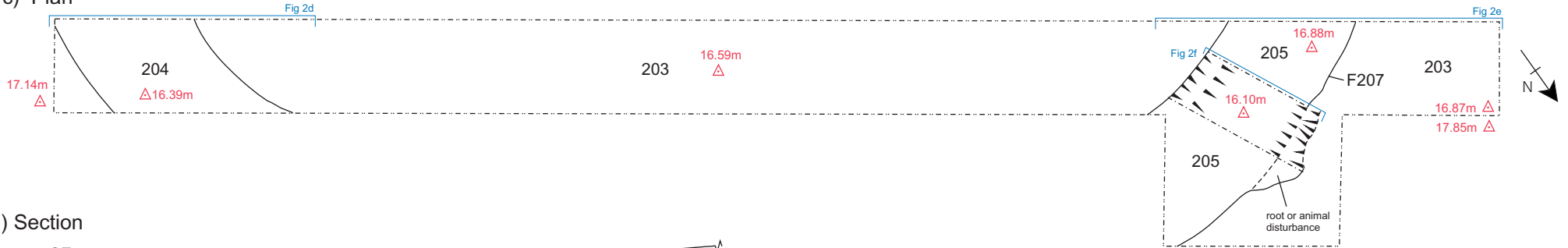


b) Representative section, NW end of trench

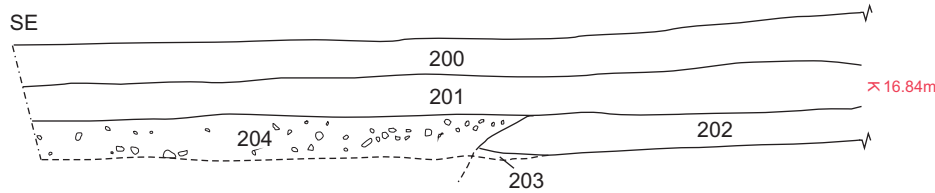


Trench 2

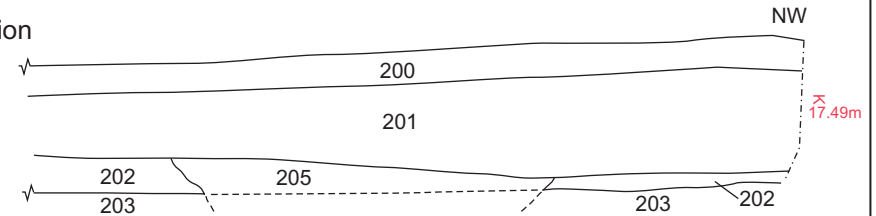
c) Plan



d) Section



e) Section



f) Section, F207



- Key**
- Pebbles/gravel
 - Charcoal

PROJECT
Cowick Lane, Exeter

TITLE
Fig. 2:
Plan and sections, Trenches 1 and 2





Plate 1: Excavation of ring ditch in Trench 2. View to east



Plate 2: Ring ditch section F207, Trench 2. View to southwest. (Scales 1m and 0.5m)

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