

Archaeological watching brief at Old Oswestry Hillfort (SM 27556, HA 1014899), Oswestry, Shropshire



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Background information

<i>Client</i>	English Heritage
<i>National Grid reference</i>	SJ 29574 31019
<i>Authority</i>	English Heritage
<i>SAM Reference</i>	SM 27556, HA 1014899
<i>Scheduled Monument Consent</i>	Historic England 2016a
<i>Project design</i>	WA 2016
<i>Project parameters</i>	CIfA 2014

Introduction to site works

Worcestershire Archaeology was requested to carry out an archaeological watching brief at Old Oswestry Hillfort, Oswestry, Shropshire (SJ 29574 31019) by English Heritage. This was to fulfil a requirement for Scheduled Monument Consent (Historic England 2016a), for the installation of two new field gates on Old Oswestry Hillfort to improve grounds maintenance access to the monument's ramparts.

Geology background

The solid geology of the area is described as Etruria Formation comprised of mudstone, sandstone and conglomerate, with superficial glaciofluvial deposits of Devensian sand and gravel (BGS 2016).

Scheduled Monument Listing

Old Oswestry Hillfort and Wat's Dyke is listed as a Scheduled Monument (SM 27556, HA 1014899, HER ref SAM 351) and the background to the site is given in the *National Heritage List for England* which provides a definition of a hillfort which is summarised below:

Large multivallate hillforts are defined as fortified enclosures of between 5ha and 85ha in area, located on hills and defined by two or more lines of concentric earthworks set at intervals of up to 15m. They date to the Iron Age period, most having been constructed and used between the sixth century BC and the mid-first century AD. They are generally regarded as centres of permanent occupation, defended in response to increasing warfare, a reflection of the power struggle between competing elites. Earthworks usually consist of a rampart and ditch, although some only have ramparts. Access to the interior is generally provided by two entrances although examples with one and more than two have been noted. These may comprise a single gap in the rampart, inturned or offset ramparts, oblique approaches, guardrooms or outworks. Internal features generally include evidence for intensive occupation, often in the form of oval or circular houses. These display variations in size and are often clustered, for example, along streets. Four- and six-post structures, interpreted as raised granaries, also occur widely while a few sites appear to contain evidence for temples. Other features associated with settlement include platforms, paved areas, pits, gullies, fencelines, hearths and ovens. Additional evidence, in the form of artefacts, suggests that industrial activity such as bronze- and iron-working as well as pottery manufacture occurred on many sites. Large multivallate hillforts are rare with around 50 examples recorded nationally. These occur mostly in two concentrations, in Wessex and the Welsh Marches, although scattered examples occur elsewhere. In view of the rarity of large multivallate hillforts and their importance in understanding the nature of social organisation within the Iron Age period, all examples

with surviving archaeological potential are believed to be of national importance (Historic England 2016b).

More specifically, Old Oswestry hillfort (SM 27556, HA 1014899, HER ref SAM 351) is described below:

Old Oswestry hillfort is a fine example of this class of monument, which has two complex entrances and illustrates several phases of development and occupation. The interior of the hillfort will retain evidence for occupation including post holes, foundation trenches, and storage and refuse pits, as well as environmental and artefactual evidence for the domestic and industrial activities which took place there. The surrounding banks will retain details of their method of construction and subsequent modifications, and will have sealed beneath them environmental evidence for land use immediately prior to each phase of construction. The enigmatic sunken features on the west side of the hillfort will also preserve evidence for their construction and function, and their stratigraphic relationship with other elements of the site. The entrances will retain evidence for the sequence of their development, and for the revetments and palisades with which they will have been strengthened. The adjacent stretches of Wat's Dyke will similarly preserve evidence for their date and method of construction and the stretches of earthen bank will protect evidence for medieval land use prior to the dyke's construction. The reuse of the hillfort within the Wat's Dyke system illustrates the continuity of defensive structures in the vicinity from the prehistoric through to the medieval period. Old Oswestry is a prominent local landmark, is open all year to the public and is in the care of the Secretary of State. A public footpath follows the northern stretch of Wat's Dyke, allowing the relationship of the two earthworks to be appreciated. (Historic England 2016b)

Aims

The aim of the watching brief was to observe and record archaeological deposits, and to determine their extent, state of preservation, date and type, as far as reasonably possible.

The monument description indicated that significant deposits may be defined as those likely to be of Neolithic through to medieval date, relating particularly to the Iron Age Hillfort and medieval Wat's Dyke phases of activity.

Methods

General specification for fieldwork

WA 2015

Sources

National Heritage List for England (NHLE)

Scheduled Monument Consent

Date(s) of fieldwork

15 and 16 February 2016

Area of site

c 24 hectares total, with ramparts enclosing a central area of 8.4 hectares

Sampling

area sampled c 2m²; posthole locations indicated on Fig 2

Dimensions of excavated areas observed –

4 postholes max length 0.40m

max width 0.30m

max depth 0.79m

Access to or visibility of deposits

Archaeological observation of the excavated areas was undertaken during hand excavation. The exposed surfaces were sufficiently clean to observe well-differentiated archaeological deposits. The spoil excavated from the postholes was scanned for finds.

Statement of confidence

Access to, and visibility of, deposits allowed a high degree of confidence that the aims of the project have been achieved. The archaeological watching brief met the requirements of the Scheduled Monument Consent (Historic England 2016a).

Deposit description

The description of the deposits is given in Appendix 1.

Description and discussion

One gate (Trenches 1 and 2; Plates 1-6) was located on the western bank of the hillfort, between two ramparts, whilst the other was placed on the north-east edge of the hillfort close to ramparts (Trenches 3 and 4; Plates 7-10).

The postholes contained very similar stratigraphy; approximately 0.30m of turfed sandy silt topsoil, over 0.20-0.30m of stony sandy silt subsoil. The natural bedrock was encountered at 0.50-0.60m. No archaeological features, finds or deposits were uncovered. No deposits were recorded which were considered suitable for environmental sampling.

Conclusions

No significant archaeological finds features or deposits were uncovered during the works that may have related to the hillfort or activity in the area in the medieval period. The impact on deposits relating to the scheduled monument was therefore minimal.

Publication summary

Worcestershire Archaeology has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, Worcestershire Archaeology intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on behalf of English Heritage at Old Oswestry Hillfort, Oswestry, Shropshire (NGR SJ 29574 31019; SM 27556, HA 1014899), as a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent, for the installation of two new field gates in two locations. One gate was located on the western bank of the hillfort, between two ramparts, whilst another was placed on the north-east edge of the hillfort close to ramparts. Four small postholes were excavated, a maximum of 0.40m by 0.30m and 0.80m deep. Natural bedrock was recorded at 0.50-0.60m from the ground surface, below sandy silt topsoil and subsoil. No archaeological finds, features or deposits were revealed, relating to the hillfort or Wat's Dyke.

Acknowledgements

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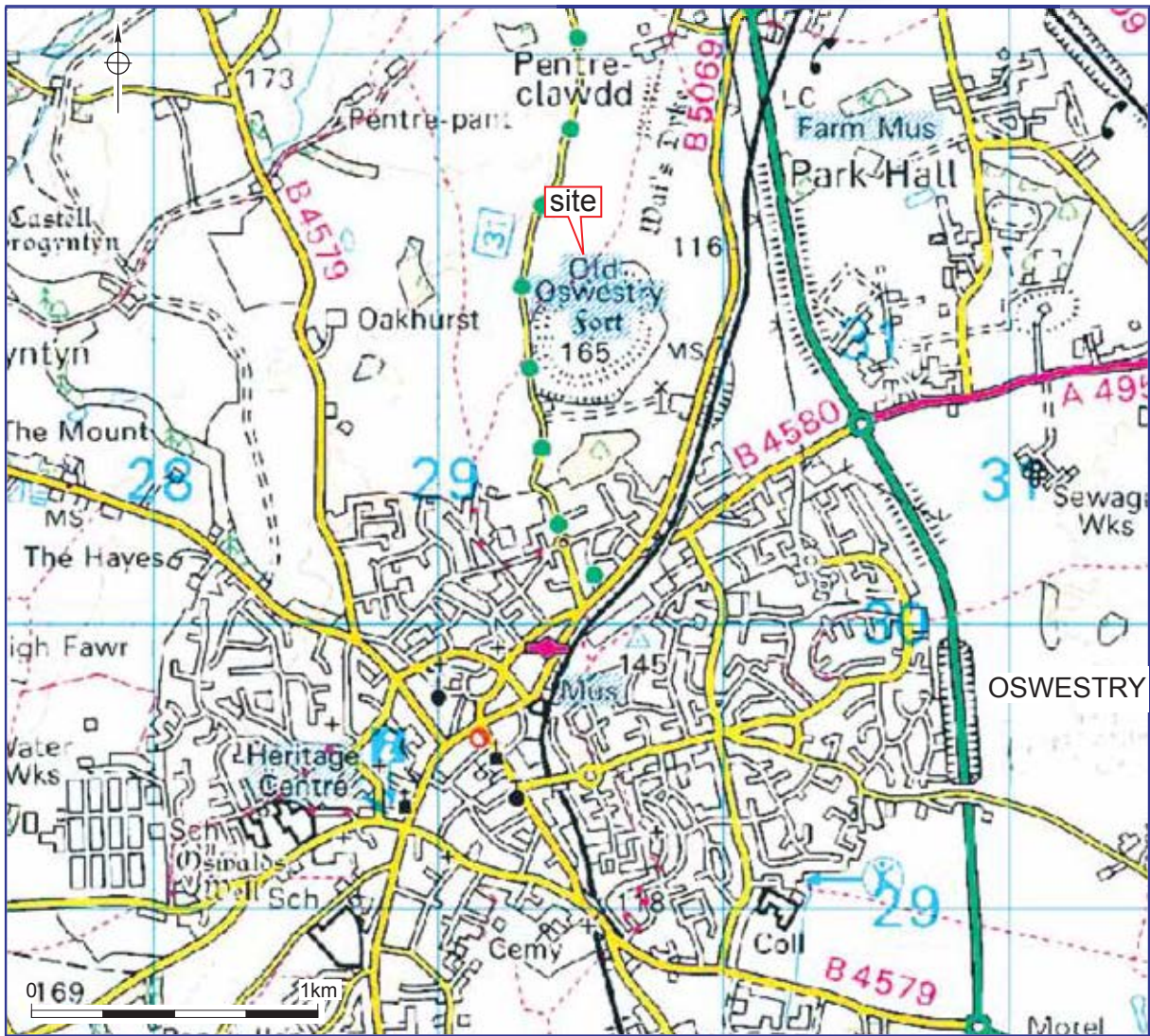
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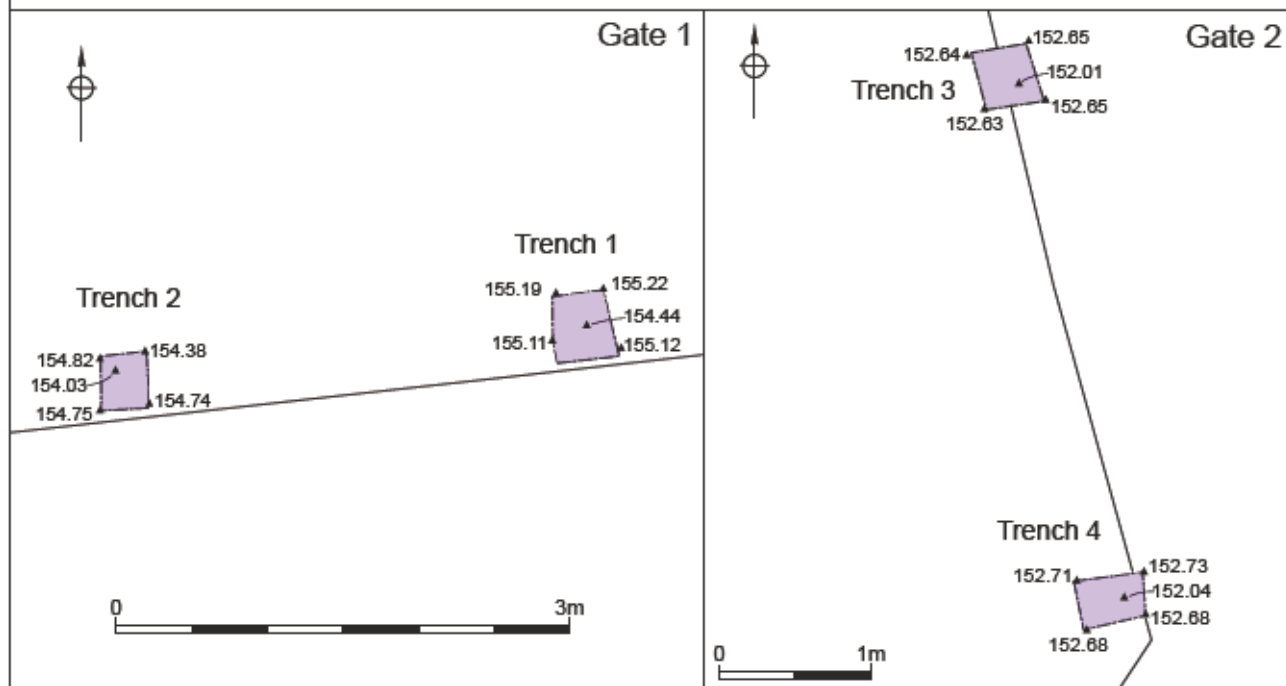
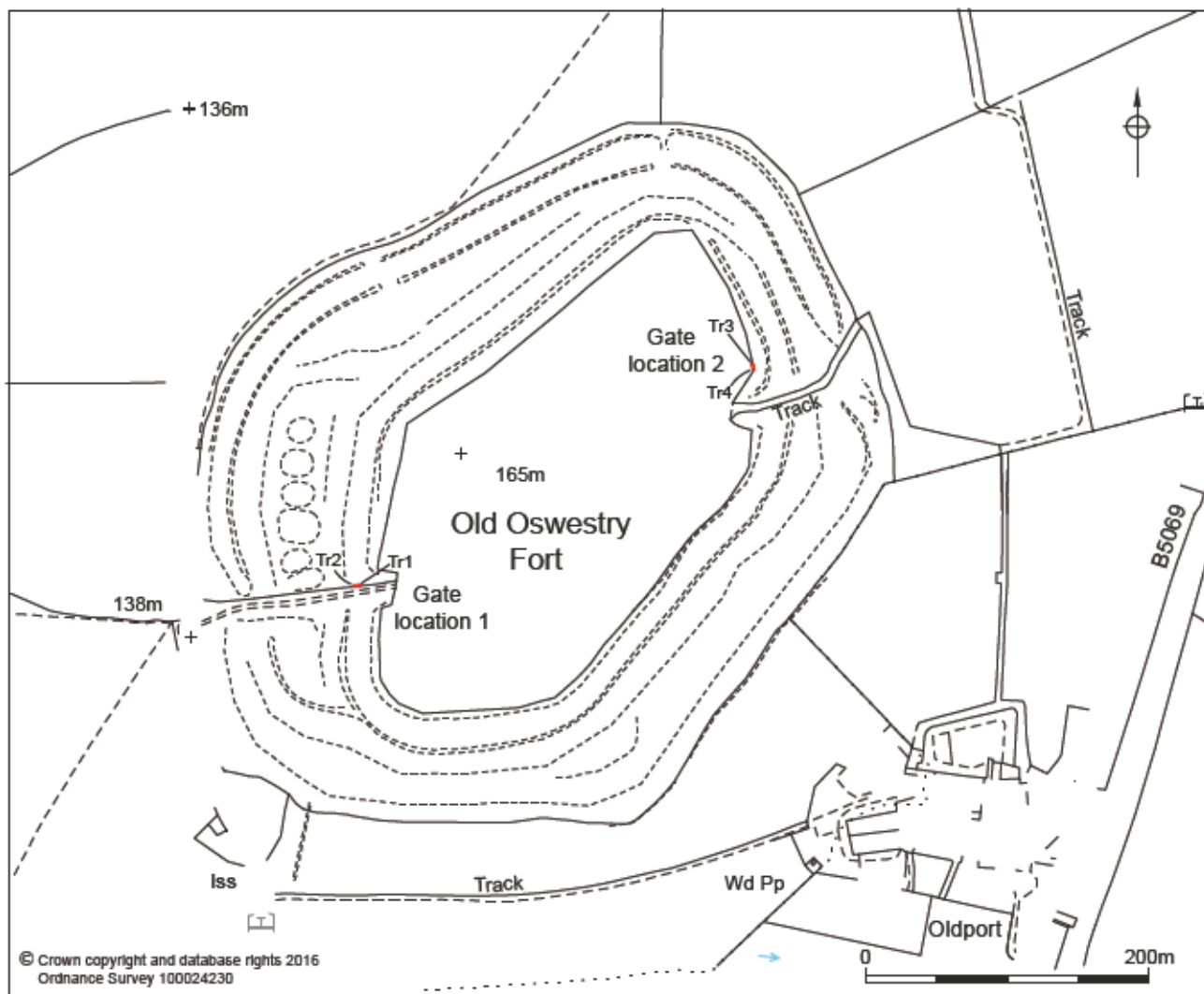
Figures



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Location of the site

Figure 1



Trench location plan

Figure 2

Plates



Plate 1: The west footpath up to the top of the hillfort, looking east



Plate 2: Location of gate on west side of the hillfort



Plate 3: Trench 1 and spoil



Plate 4: Large stone removed from Trench 1



Plate 5: Trench 2 at maximum depth to natural bedrock



Plate 6: Gate post installed and posthole excavated on west side of hillfort; facing north



Plate 7: The location of new gate on the north-east side of the hillfort; facing north-west



Plate 8: Trench 3 excavated to natural bedrock, 0.65m deep, and spoil from excavation



Plate 9: Trench 4 at full depth, 0.69m, onto natural bedrock



Plate 10: The gateposts installed on the north-east side of the hillfort, facing north-east

Appendix 1 Trench descriptions

Main deposit descriptions

Trench 1

Site area: Gate location 1

Maximum dimensions: Length: 0.30m Width: 0.30m Depth: 0.78m

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
100	Topsoil	Loose mid orangey brown sandy silt with occasional small rounded stones. No finds.	0.00-0.30m
101	Subsoil / weathered natural	Loose orangey brown silty sand with large rounded compact cobbles and gravels -Weathered mudstone	0.30-0.50m
102	Natural	Compact flat stoney bedrock with occasional yellow clay – mudstone	0.50 -0.75m

Trench 2

Site area: Gate location 1

Maximum dimensions: Length: 0.30m Width: 0.30m Depth: 0.79m

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
200	Topsoil	Loose mid orangey brown sandy silt with occasional small rounded stones. No finds.	0.00-0.30m
201	Subsoil / weathered natural	Loose orangey brown silty sand with large rounded compact cobbles and gravels -Weathered mudstone	0.30-0.50m
202	Natural	Compact flat stoney bedrock with occasional light yellow clay –mudstone	0.50 -0.75m

Trench 3

Site area: Gate location 2

Maximum dimensions: Length: 0.40m Width: 0.30m Depth: 0.65m

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
300	Topsoil	Friable dark brown sandy silt with occasional small rounded gravels. Topped with turf. No finds.	0.00 – 0.30m
301	Subsoil / weathered natural	Moderately compact mid brown sandy silt with moderate small gravels and occasional rounded cobbles.	0.30 – 0.60m
302	Natural	Compact light yellow clay mudstones, becoming gravelly when broken up.	0.60m+

Trench 4

Site area: Gate location 2

Maximum dimensions: Length: 0.40m Width: 0.30m Depth: 0.69m

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
400	Topsoil	Friable dark brown sandy silt with occasional small rounded gravels. Topped with turf. No finds.	0.00 – 0.30m
401	Subsoil / weathered natural	Moderately compact mid brown sandy silt with moderate small gravels and occasional rounded cobbles.	0.30- 0.60m
402	Natural	Compact light yellow clay mudstones, becoming gravels when broken up.	0.60 – 0.75m

Appendix 2 Technical information

The archive (SM 27556, HA 1014899)

The archive consists of:

- 1 Field progress reports AS2
- 1 Photographic records AS3
- 40 Digital photographs
- 4 Trench record sheets AS41
- 1 Copy of this report (bound hard copy)

The project archive is intended to be placed at:

Shropshire County Museum Service
Shropshire County Council
Wenlock Lodge
Acton Scott
Church Stretton
Shropshire, SY6 6QN

Tel. Church Stretton (01694) 781306