

# COTHELSTONE HILL HILLTOP FORTIFICATION EXCAVATIONS 2021



  
**Quantock Landscape  
Partnership Scheme**

*Reimagining the Manor*



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MUSEUM ACCESSION NUMBER TTNCM 56/2021

HER NUMBER 45156

BY

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2022



For

**Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme**

***Reimagining the Manor***

***The work was wholly funded by the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (QLPS), supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and hosted by the Quantock Hills AONB.***

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Bob Croft (SWHT) and Dan Broadbent (QLPS) for their supervisory work on site and help with developing the project. Thanks to Bill Jenman (QLPS) for his oversight of the project and the delicious confectionary. Thanks to all the AONB staff for facilitating the work and for bringing water during the heatwave. Jon Barrett (QLPS) recruited and organised the volunteers. Andy Stevens (SWHT) skilfully stripped and backfilled the trenches. Thanks to Antony Jones for his patient film recording of the fieldwork and for his unflagging ability to engage with the visiting public and present to them an ever changing interpretation of what it all means.

Thanks are due to all the volunteers who took part through some extreme weather including a heat wave in the first week: Dave Weston, Kathryn Davies, Anthony Haskins, Rod Liddle, Adrian Ruddle, Nicola Simmons, Kirsty Campbell, Lindsey Cooke, Dan Cooke, Jonny Davey, Nicolette Williams, Siobhan Elson, Jess Rogers, Jane Davies, Chantelle Lawrence, Jack Johnston, Sue Horrill, Jack Brunning, Phil Kirby, Peter Lees, Kit Houghton, Kate Houghton, Kim Russell, Lee Russell, Ben Redston, Louisa Rastrick, Claire Foster, Charlotte Foster, Linda Lowndes, Eloise Hopkins, Ruth Conley, Richard Gibbs, Antony Jones.

Especial thanks are needed for Damian Baker, the store manager of North Petherton Tesco Express, and his staff, for the life-saving ice creams and cold water delivered to the top of the hill in the middle of the heatwave. Much appreciated.



## Summary

Two trenches were excavated across the earthwork defences at the top of Cothelstone Hill at the southern end of the Quantock Hills as part of the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme. During the excavation newly obtained LIDAR data suggested that the earthwork was not part of a cross ridge dyke as previously suspected but was probably a complete enclosure on the western spur of the hill.

Both trenches showed very marked similarities in the construction and life history of the monument along its eastern side. The internal rampart appears to have had an external dry stone facing, with internal wooden framing evident on one of the trenches. Collapse of the rampart into the ditch appears to have occurred shortly after its creation in the late Bronze Age. Evidence of burning in the partially filled ditches were present in differing phases of the Iron Age in the two trenches, suggesting the possibility that the sheltered ditch location may have been chosen for domestic occupation at that time.

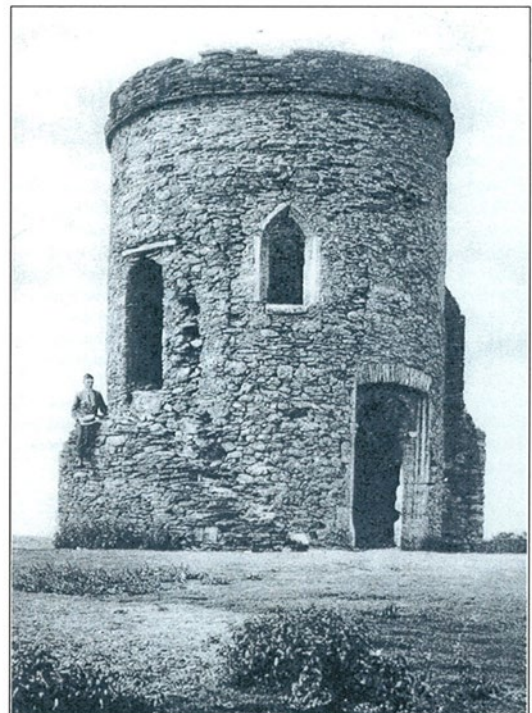
## Location, geology and archaeological background

The enclosure occupies the western end of Cothelstone Hill, a short east-west hill of Leightland Slate bed towards the southern end of the Quantock Hills, rising to a height of 331m at a point near the Prospect/beacon Tower.

Survey in 2003 (SHER 17907) identified an earthwork bank with an intermittent ditch (SHER 17910) 280m long crossing the western edge of Cothelstone Hill (Riley 2003). Both the northern and southern 'ends' turn to the west as the linear runs off the hilltop (figure 2). The bank was recorded as 2.5m wide, 1.4m high and the ditch 0.8m deep. The northern 'end' and centre have been damaged by ploughing and the centre slighted by trackways. The southern end is lost in scrubby woodland. The earthwork appeared symmetrical, with inturned ends just before the terminals at ST 1891 3252 and ST 1895 3275.

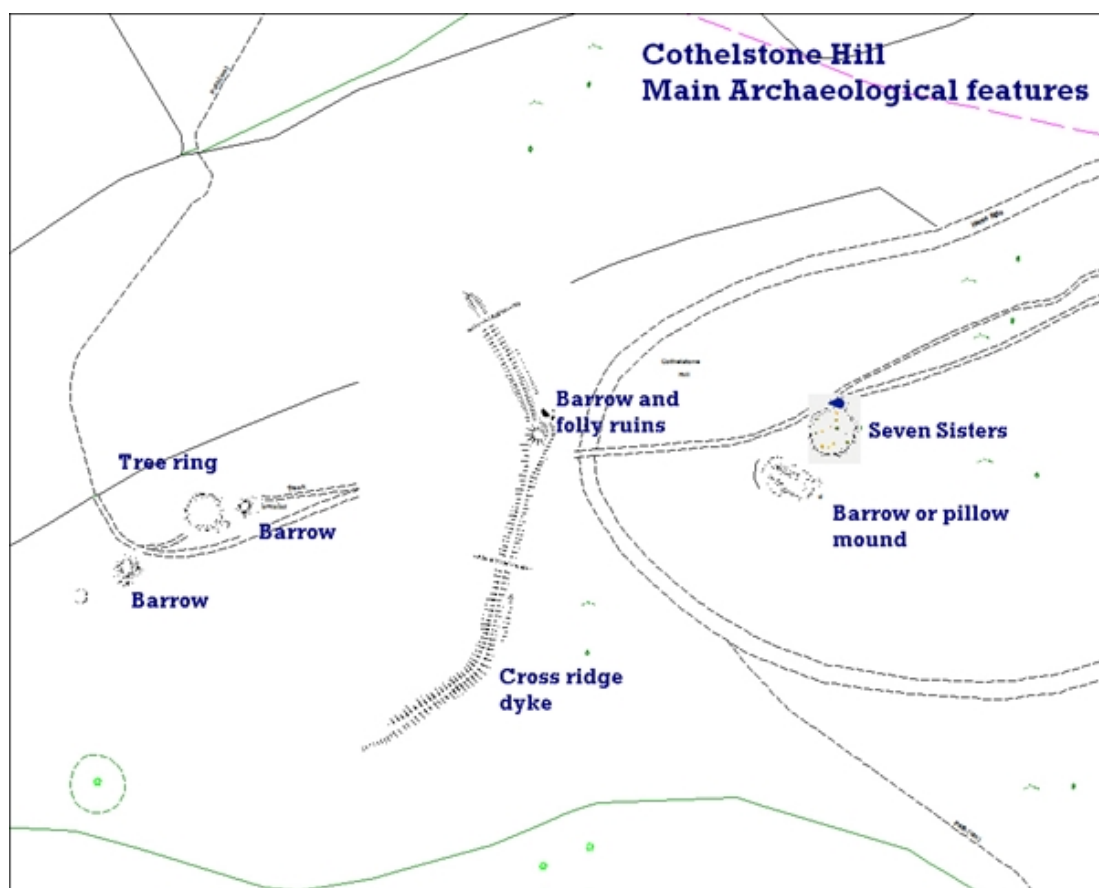
Later field boundaries (SHER PRNs 28111 and 17911) overly the earthwork and the beacon folly tower (SHER 43025) is built on its northern angle. The beacon tower itself may have been built on a previously existing Bronze Age Barrow. The Beacon Tower was erected on Cothelstone Hill between 1768 and 1780 by

Lady Hillsborough, the owner of the estate, for the purpose of viewing the surrounding country. It was a robust circular tower, built of randomly coursed stonework, about 10m high. It was built on top of a Bronze Age barrow and was destroyed a few years prior to 1919 after suffering storm damage.



*Figure 1 The Beacon Tower*





*Figure 2 English Heritage plan of the earthworks on the western end of Cothelstone Hill*

The Seven Sisters clump of beech trees comprises a partially embanked circular platform, 24m in diameter. The beech trees are very obviously part of an ornamental planting scheme, but the circular platform could represent the remains of a large prehistoric platform cairn.

To the southwest of the Seven Sisters is a rectangular mound which has been variously interpreted as two burial mounds, a pillow mound, or of recent origin. It was planted with beech trees in the latter years of the 20th century. The form of the



*Figure 3 View along the earthwork looking north, towards where trench 1 was opened*

earthwork and the presence of a ditch strongly indicates that this is a pillow mound, generally dated to the medieval or early post-medieval period and constructed as an artificial rabbit warren.

Two scheduled Bronze Age barrows lie at the west end of the hill, one of which is partially fenced to protect it from erosion.

### **LIDAR survey**

A LIDAR survey has recently been completed as part of the QLPS. One of its first surprising results was the identification of the continuation of the dyke earthwork along the southern and western sides of the western spur of Cothelstone Hill (figure 4). On the northern side of the medieval northeast-southwest field boundary its line is far less clear, probably because of the extremely dense vegetation in that area, but a faint line is just discernible (in yellow on figure 4). The new information suggests that the earthworks extend for 972m probably constitute a hilltop enclosure rather than a cross-ridge dyke. The enclosed area is 6.11ha in size.



*Figure 4 Hillshaded LIDAR image of the western spur of Cothelstone Hill showing the new extent of the earthwork and the presumed northern line (in yellow). The excavated trenches are shown in red*

### **Aims of the project**

The main aims of the project were as follows;

- Characterise the construction of the monument in two different locations
- Identify the purpose of the monument
- Obtain dating evidence for the monument's construction and its duration
- Provide an opportunity for local volunteers from the community to experience archaeological fieldwork and learn skills



### ***Community involvement***

The excavation was undertaken as a community archaeology project as part of the QLPS. Professional archaeologists from SWHT and QLPS worked alongside volunteers from the local community, some of whom had previously had some experience of archaeological fieldwork. In total six experienced and thirty novice volunteers contributed 18 days and 50 days respectively.



*Figure 5. volunteers beside Trench 1 looking to the NE*

Over the two weeks of the excavation, the weather conditions were not entirely favourable for excavating on top of a hill. In the first week there was Britain's first extreme heat warning, with temperatures that made any physical activity extremely tiring. The middle Saturday was lost because of the threat of lightning storms and occasional rain hampered work on the second week.

Despite this, the volunteers remained keen and cheerful throughout, and the excavation achieved its targets of investigating the form of the monument and obtaining dating information.



## Excavation methods and results

### Methodology

Two trenches were excavated across the earthwork, both located on what is now known to be the eastern side of the enclosure (figure 4). Trench 1 was situated north of the folly/barrow which lies beside the main path along the ridge. Trench 2 was located on the southern slope, where the line of the earthwork is more obscured by vegetation. One objective was to see if there was any significant difference in the monument in the two areas.

The trenches were located by hand held GPS (table 1). TBMs were established at each site with the same equipment. The height precision of the hand held GPS is not great so the heights have to be treated with a certain degree of caution.

Trench	size	SW Corner	SE Corner	TBM OD height
1	15m x3m	ST18973 32718	ST18987 32724	328m
		NE Corner	NW Corner	
2	18m x 2m	ST18985 32591	ST18966 32594	326m

Table 1. trench grid references

Both trenches were stripped by machine (figure 6), which removed the thin topsoil and helped to remove much of the root mass from the existing vegetation, which was especially dense in the trench 2 area. Subsequent excavation was all by hand. In both trenches the width of the trench was narrowed part way through the excavation to ensure that the base of the bank and ditch could be reached within the project time limits. A proportion of the bank material and ditch fills were sieved for finds retrieval as time permitted. Much of the lithic material and some of the larger charcoal fragments were found in the sieving.



At the beginning of the excavation there was a severe heatwave for several days which slowed down the work because of the harsh working conditions. Gazeboes were used to provide shade during work and break periods.

The excavations were given the HER number 45156 and the Somerset County Museum Service accession number is TTNCM 56/2021.

Figure 6. Trench 1 after machine topsoil strip



## **Trench 1**

Trench 1 was 15m long by 3m wide, running at right angles to the earthwork and positioned to encompass the entire bank and ditch (Plan 1).

The presence of a soil layer earlier than the monument was only noted in the western side of the trench where it was preserved under the bank. It consisted of a dark yellowish brown loam (12) that was uncovered but not excavated. The initial



*Figure 7. The ditch [34] in Trench 1 looking north (scale 2m and 1m)*

creation of the monument involved the excavation of a ditch [34] that was 4m wide and 1m deep, with a flat base c.2.8m wide (Plan 1). It was cut quite steeply on its western (interior) side, but at a gentler gradient on its eastern side. It had a flat base, just over 2m in extent.

The bank appeared to have been composed of three elements. A dry stone wall fronted the structure composed of the local stone probably dug out of the ditch. The local geology is the Leighland Slates Member. In this area of Cothelstone Hill that expresses itself in densely packed thin slates with clay in between. The flat and even size of the stone would have made them suitable for dry stone walling, although the absence of large stones may have made making a stable structure difficult.

The width of the drystone wall is suggested by what appears to be its foundation (11) lying on the previous land surface (12). This consisted of a 20cm deep layer of large stones, lying



*Figure 8. The lowest level of the drystone wall on the bank, looking SW with the timber slot immediately behind the 1m scale and the earth bank on the inside beyond (scales 1m and 30cm)*





*Figure 9. looking west along the ditch and bank on trench 1. Scales 1m and 2m.*

roughly horizontally, mixed with a small amount of olive brown loam. This layer survived to a width of 1.2m, which probably reflects the original width of the dry stone wall. Above this foundation layer, was a 10cm deep layer of dark yellowish brown loam with numerous small stones (13). The wall may have been built on this surface.

At the back of the wall foundation was a feature interpreted as a beam slot [36], 50cm wide and 35cm deep, running along the line of the bank (figures 8 and 10). This separated the stone wall at the front from the earth embankment on the back (context 15). It was filled with a brown loam with numerous small stones (32). This feature is thought to have held a wooden baseplate which, when it decayed, left a void allowing material from above to collapse into it.

Immediately above this slot in the centre of the trench was a roughly circular darker feature (figure 11) that may be the ghost of the bottom of an upright post which once slotted into the baseplate. Its edges were



*Figure 10. Beam slot [36] looking north. Scales 1m and 30cm*



*Figure 11. Possible post hole above cut 36. Scale 30cm.*



hard to follow downwards, possibly because there was little left of it before it merged with the fill of the possible beam slot.

The earth bank of the inside of the baseplate was a dark yellowish brown loam with occasional small stones (15). It survived to a depth of at least 30cm and maintained a level surface for c.1.6m before sloping down to the west. Pottery, lithics and charcoal were all recovered from this context.

Above the lowest elements of the bank detailed above was a layer of olive brown loam (10 and 14) immediately underneath the turf. This is thought to represent the eroded top of the bank.

The base of the ditch [34] was the hard geology. The primary fill was a layer of the local slate that had collapsed into the ditch from the bank side forming a layer (35) up to 40cm deep, extending roughly 2.5m across the ditch from the west.

On the eastern side of the ditch the primary fill was a c.30cm deep yellow brown silty loam (33) containing a few small fragments of the local stone. This apparent inwash from the eastern side of the ditch extended far enough to cover the tail of the stony layer (35).

Overlying these two primary deposits was a dark yellow brown clay loam (27) up to 40cm deep. Above this layer, a 5cm layer of dark olive brown loam containing numerous charcoal fragments (21) formed in a 40-60cm wide band along the lowest part of the partially silted up ditch.

Above these layers was a c.20cm thick dark yellow brown loam (6) containing small stones, charcoal, and some flint. Along the western side of the ditch this context was covered by a 1m wide layer of dark brown loam (9) containing lots of small pieces of slate (c.30%).

This final ditch fill below the turf which consisted of a 20-40cm deep brown loam (5) containing large blocks of lias rubble, slates and pink mortar with white flecks. The stone and mortar appeared to be the same as that used in the surviving base of the beacon tower folly. This suggests that demolition rubble from the tower was spread along the depression formed by the silted up ditch.

In the topsoil above the ditch numerous fragments of glass bottles were noted and several complete bottles were recovered. These included a complete Co-op milk bottle, a complete Arnold and Hancock Ltd beer bottle, and a mixer bottle with 'ODC Ld' and 'B/P L2' on it. These were probably lost or thrown into the ditch by people picnicking on the adjoining bank to enjoy the spectacular views across the Severn to Wales. A test tube and fragment of cork were recovered from the layer immediately under the topsoil suggesting that the location may also have been favoured by naturalists. Amongst the soil inside the tube were several beetles but it is unclear if they were the object of collection or had just died in the tube.

## **Trench 2**

Trench 2 was 20m long by 2m wide, running at right angles to the earthwork and positioned to encompass the entire bank and ditch. It was subsequently shortened once the extent of the ditch had become clear.



*Figure 12. Trench 2 ditch section looking north. Scales 2m and 1m.*

The natural geology of the hill was encountered as striated bedding planes on the west face of the ditch. A layer (26) overlying this was noted on the west side of the ditch representing either an old ground surface or the lowest level of bank material.

The ditch cut (17) was 3m wide at its flat base and 4m wide at the top, having a maximum depth of 1.15m. The inner face of the ditch was very steep, with a shallower concave slope on the outer face.

Initial silting/infill was noted from both sides, the inner face having a higher stone content (30) in comparison to the finer silty clay loam (19) on the outer.

The structure of the bank was suggested by an isolated arrangement of stones (37) 1.4m from the ditch edge, which lay over layer (26). These may represent the remains of revetting for the bank.

The main fill of the ditch (28) was a dense stony layer, in a matrix of light orange/brown clay loam, filling from the west, and distinct from the silting



*Figure 13. Trench 2 from the south, showing the remnant of stone revetment (37) with outcropping geology to the right cut by the top of the ditch. Scale 2m*



layers below. It would appear to have been a significant 'event' rather than a natural infilling process.

Within the lowest point of the now-in-filled ditch was a compact layer of stone (24) presenting as a surface some 1m wide, extending beyond the excavated area. This contained Iron Age pottery and lay immediately below a charcoal rich layer (22) which was dated to the late Iron age.



*Figure 14. Trench 2, stone layer (24) in the ditch, viewed from the south. Scale 1m.*

There was no further notable archaeological activity. Later fills showed evidence of bioturbation (roots & burrows).



## **Finds**

The small finds consisted of prehistoric flint and pottery and modern glass and pottery as listed in the table below. The modern pottery and glass objects and modern building remains were not retained as they did not conform to the Museum of Somerset accession policy.

Context	Trench	Lithics (no.)	Prehistoric Pottery (no./weight)	Glass	Other
1	1	--		bottle glass fragments, complete Co-op milk bottle, complete Arnold and Hancock Ltd beer bottle, mixer bottle with 'ODC Ld' and 'B/P L2' on it	Clay pipe stem and bowl frag (5 pieces 9g), pink mortar, 1933 ha'penny, iron fragments, dressed stone fragments, one with inscribed 'X', another with part of a possible name carved on it, 20 <sup>th</sup> C pottery (5 pieces 25g), marble bottle stopper, shotgun cartridge
2	2	-			58 pieces of 19 <sup>th</sup> C pottery (370g)
4	2	3			
5	1	-		Test tube and cork	
6	1	3			
7	2	4			
8	1	2			
15	1	8	5/3g		
19	2	1			
20	2	1			
22	2	1	3/10g		
25	2	1			
35	1	-	1/1g		
unstrat	1	1			

Table 2 Finds from differing contexts



*Figure 15 Test tube and cork from context 5*



*Figure 16 Roofing slate from context 1*



*Figure 17 Bottles from context 1*



*Figure 18 assorted finds from context 1*



*Figure 19 Stone with graffiti context 5*



*Figure 20 imitation Japanese pottery context 2*

## ***Prehistoric pottery report***

By Henrietta Quinnell

The prehistoric pottery was examined from three contexts.

**(22)** (Secondary ditch fill trench 2) Three sherds 10g fairly fresh with the same fabric, reduced with some exterior smoothing/burnish. Inclusions generally <2mm but occasional larger fragments, angular white (probably quartz) and pinkish (probably fine rock). The general character of the sherds is later Iron Age. The form of the simple rim with a possible slight external groove suggests the Late Iron Age and it is closely matched by P7.4 from Hinkley Point SPE 7. The case for identifying Late Iron Age ceramics is argued in the Hinkley Point report for Cotswold Archaeology, now paused. The sites at Hinkley did not have Middle Iron Age material, but simple plain forms with C14 dates from the later 2nd century BC onward. Activity then continued into the Roman period. The C14 charcoal date (SUERC-100876 see below) from this trench appears appropriate for the Late Iron Age.



*Figure 21 Pottery from context 15 trench 1*

**(15)** (Bank material trench 1) Five sherds 3g considerably abraded with poor representation of surfaces which appear to be oxidised. Inclusions up to 3mm. The fabric appears generally comparable to the Late Bronze Age assemblage from Hinkley Point SPE 6 but the quantity is too small for certainty. The two C14 dates (SUERC-100877 and SUERC-100870) which indicate broadly a ninth century BC date could well relate



*Figure 22 rim sherd from mid ditch fill, trench 2*



*Figure 23 microlith from context 7 trench 2*

to the same period.

**(35)** (Primary ditch fill trench 1) Scrap <1g but affiliation very uncertain.

### ***Lithic material***

A total of 25 lithics were recovered from the excavation, from 12 contexts (1 unstratified). The majority represent waste flakes from lithic tool production, but one small flake is a very carefully worked microlith (context 7 trench 2).



## **Charcoal**

Charcoal was recovered by hand excavation and by sieving. Bulk samples were also taken for charcoal retrieval from context 21, where concentrations of charcoal were noted. Charcoal was extracted from that sample by flotation.

Context	Trench	Weight (gm)	Notes
6		0.53	Mainly one large radial fragment
13		1.24	
15		2.63	Includes radial oak fragments
21		42.55	Numerous small fragments including some small twigs
22		0.17	Includes charred hazelnut fragments
23		8.56	Larger pieces, hand retrieved. Some small roundwood
25		4.13	Small fragments
26		7.22	
32		0.08	

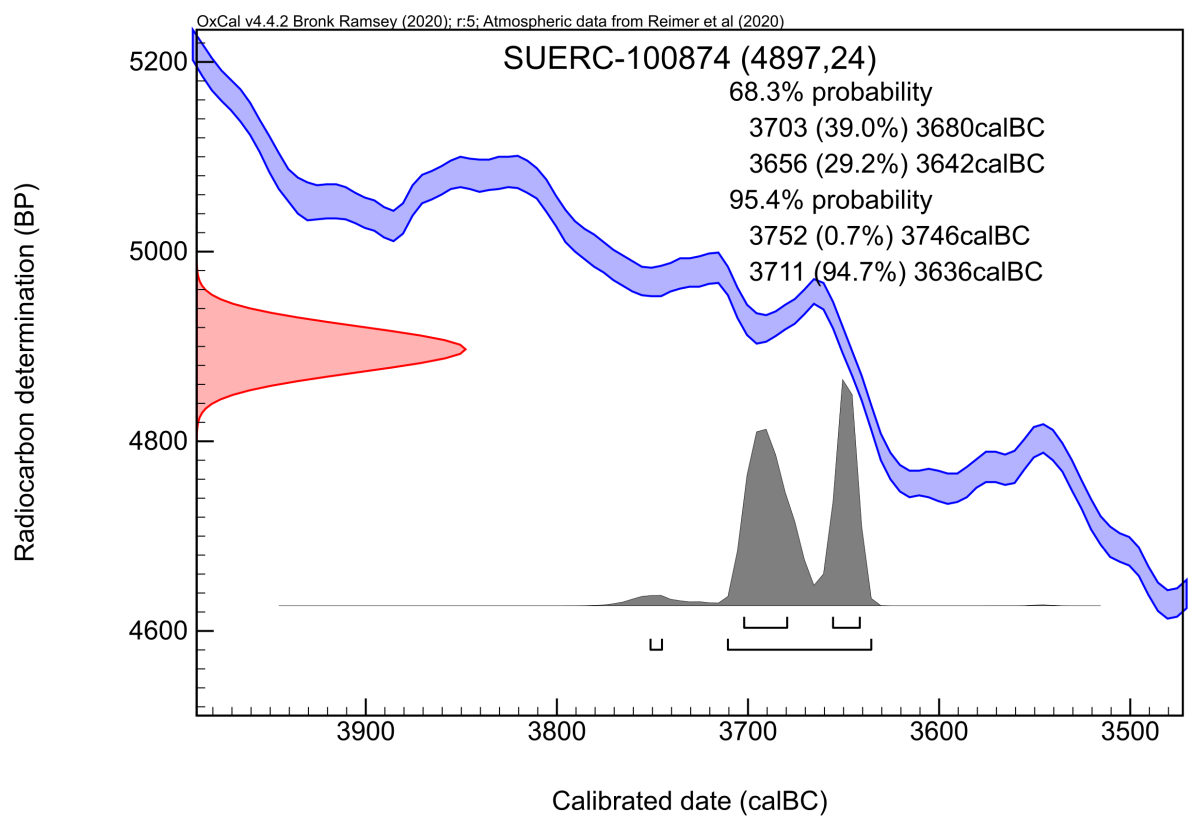
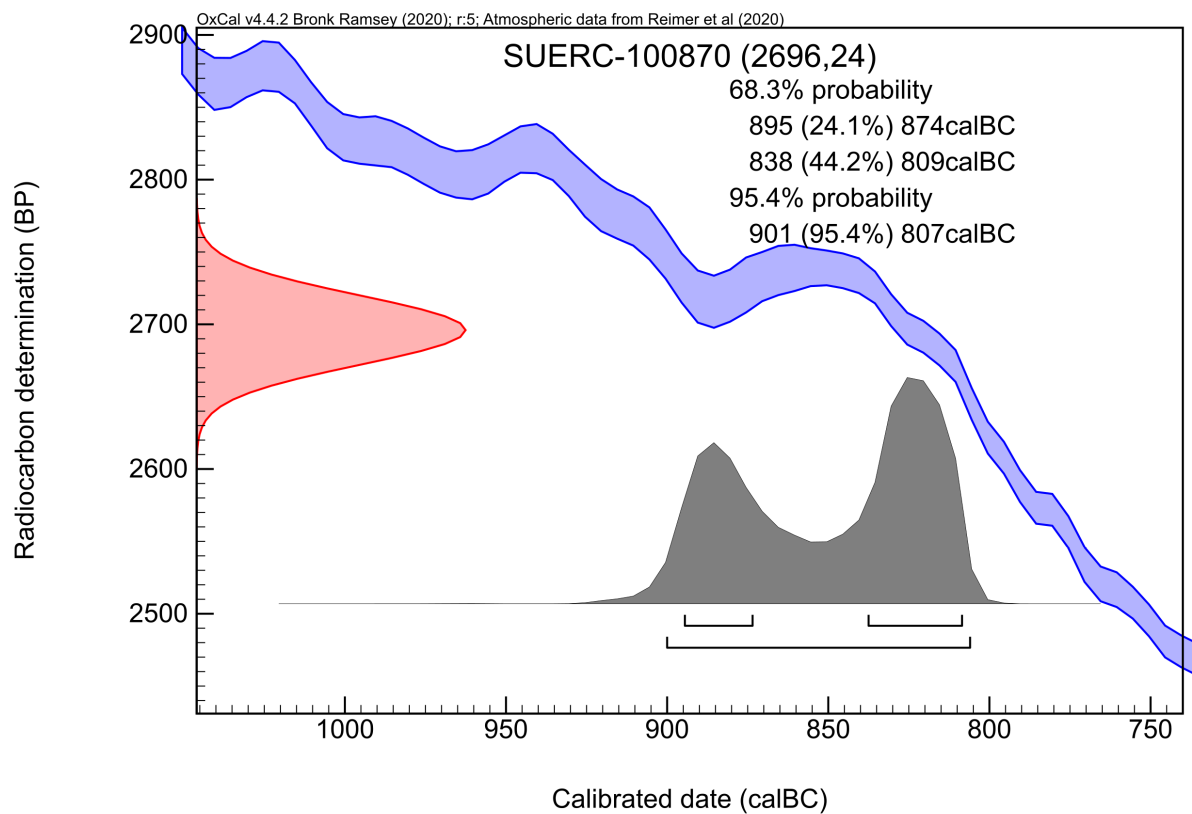
Table 3. Charcoal recovered from the excavations

## **Radiocarbon dating**

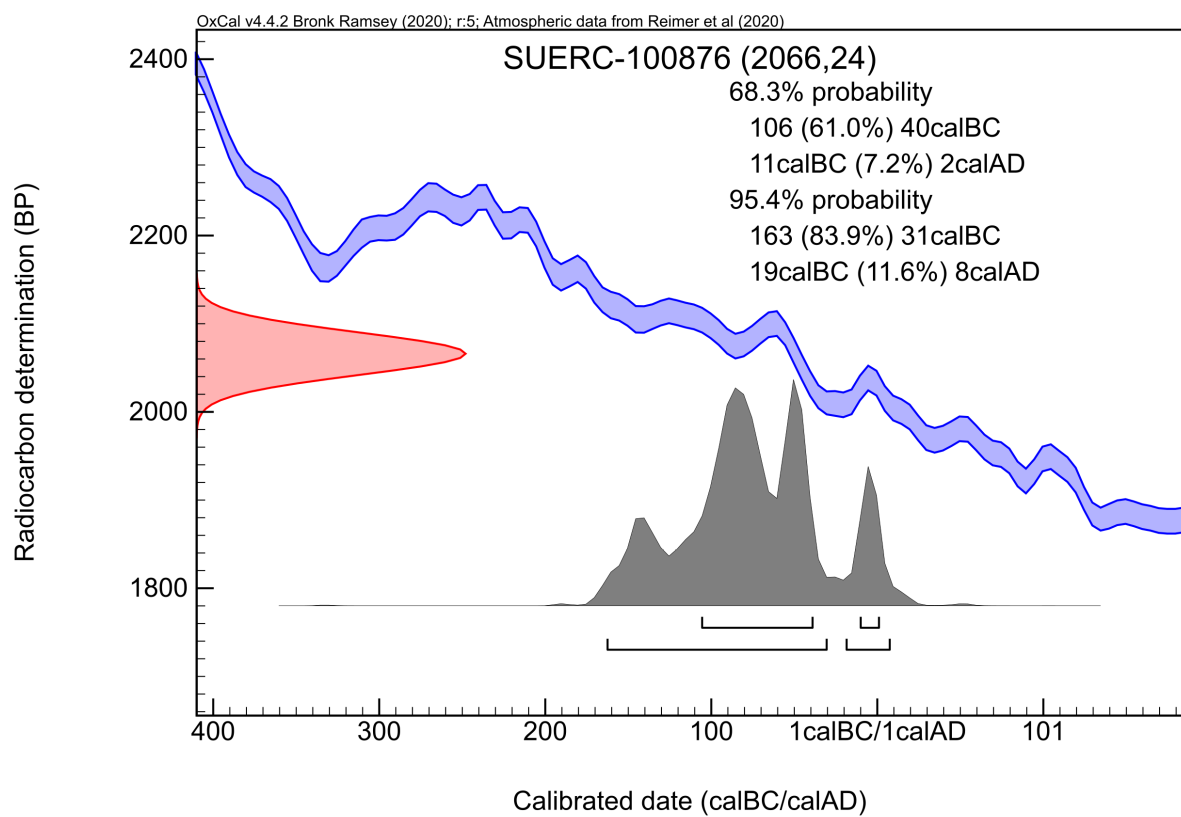
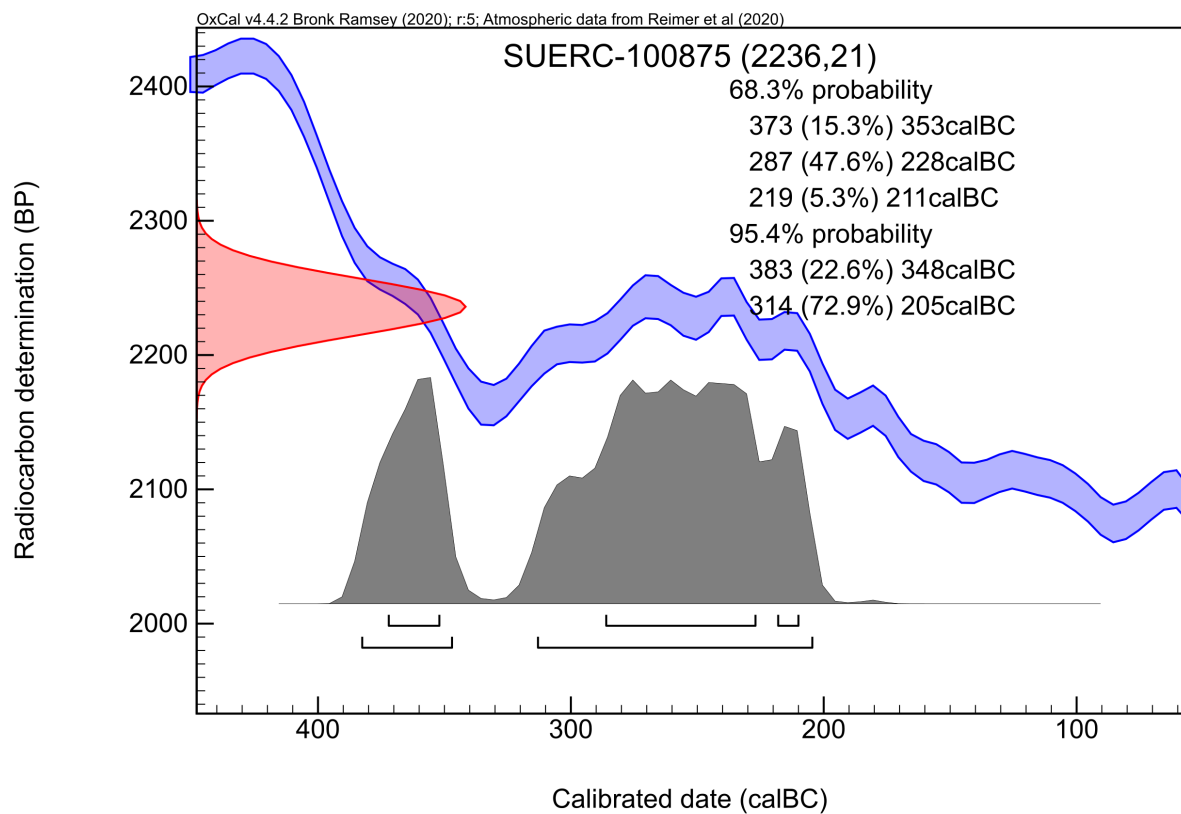
Five samples were submitted for radiocarbon dating, two from Trench 2 and three from Trench 1. The results are presented in the table and the individual calibration graphs below.

Context	Trench	Sample	Lab code	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ relative to VPDB	RC age BP	Calibrated date and probability %
13	1	Small oak charcoal	SUERC-100870 (GU58975)	-24.6 ‰	2696 ± 24	901-807 cal BC (95.4%)
15	1	Small oak charcoal	SUERC-100874 (GU58976)	-24.3 ‰	4897 ± 24	3752-3746 cal BC (0.7%) or 3711-3636 cal BC (94.7 %)
21	1	Small roundwood charcoal	SUERC-100875 (GU58977)	-25.2 ‰	2236 ± 21	383-348 cal BC (22.6%) or 314-205 cal BC (72.9%)
22	2	Small roundwood charcoal	SUERC-100876 (GU58978)	-24.8 ‰	2066 ± 24	163-31 cal BC (83.9%) or 19-8 cal BC (11.6%)
26	2	Small roundwood charcoal	SUERC-100877 (GU58979)	-22.9 ‰	2773 ± 21	990-891 cal BC (72.1%) or 883-836 (23.3%)

Table 4. Radiocarbon dating results from the excavations







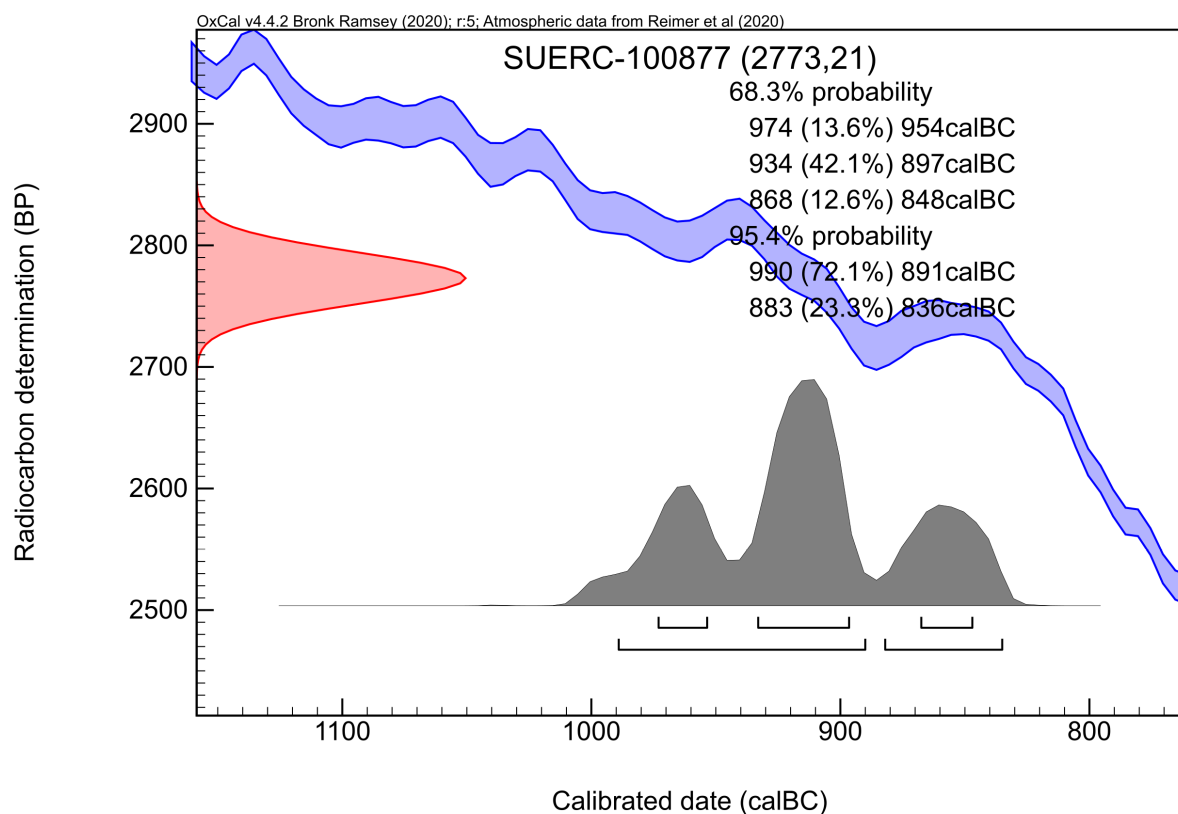


Figure 24 Radiocarbon calibration curves

## Conclusions

The lithic material from the excavations and the early charcoal radiocarbon date from the bank reflect wider Mesolithic and Neolithic activity on the hill. The exact time range represented by the lithic material from the hill is uncertain, but the greater quantities seem to relate to the Neolithic period (Norman and Norman 1974).

The LIDAR imagery suggest that initial theory that the earthwork represents a cross ridge dyke is incorrect and that it instead forms a complete enclosure on the top of the hill. The enclosed area would cover 6.11ha.

The radiocarbon dates and pottery from Trenches 1 and 2 suggest a contemporary build of the structure sometime in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century BC at the end of the Bronze Age. The similarity of the bank and ditch in both trenches support the probability that it was all one build. Trench 1 provides the most complete evidence for the construction of the bank. This appeared to have a dry stone frontage, with a large horizontal wooden base plate and probable vertical elements between that and the long tail of the embankment to the interior. This suggests that there may have been an element of timber framing in the structure.

The stony bank frontage in both trenches collapsed into the ditch, or was deliberately slighted, soon after its creation, before any significant silting up of the ditch occurred. This suggests that the enclosure may have had a limited active lifespan. By the



middle Iron Age, the ditch had considerably silted up, as shown by the radiocarbon date in the middle ditch fill in trench 1.

The late Iron Age charcoal and pottery in the mid fill Trench 2 is suggestive of a camp site or possible occupation within the shelter provided by the infilled ditch hollow. The scientific dating of a similar deposit in Trench 1 gave an earlier date of the middle Iron Age suggesting that activity continued over a period of at least several hundred years, although it is unknown if the activity was continuous or sporadic.

The demolition the beacon tower is reflected in the mortar and stone deposits seen in the upper ditch fills in trench 1. The finds from the topsoil in that area reflect the popularity of the bank as a viewpoint and possible picnic spot in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

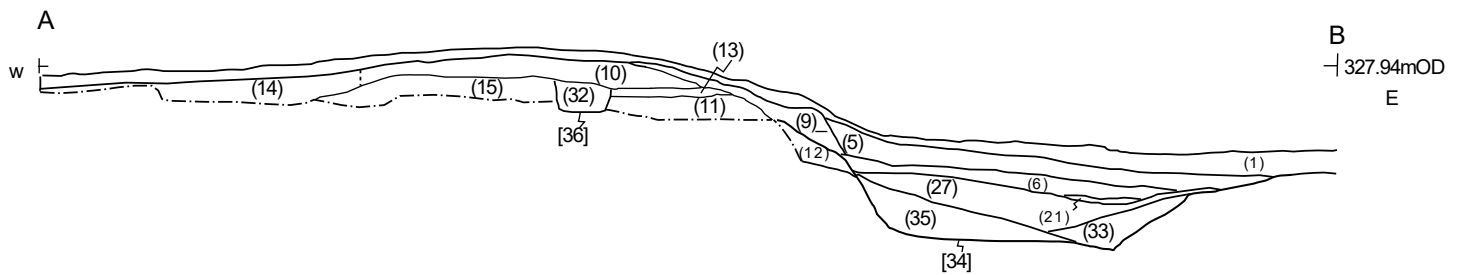
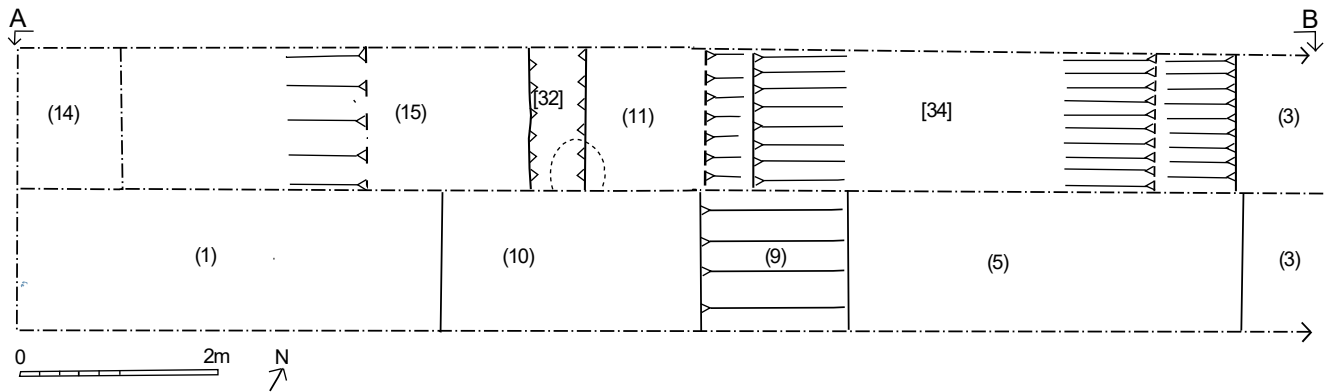
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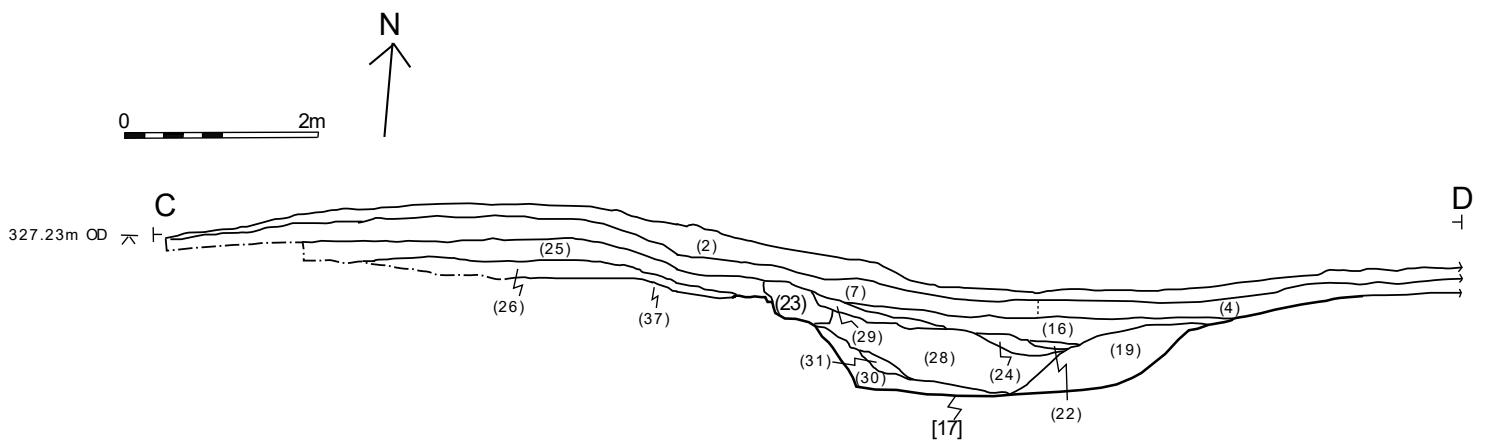
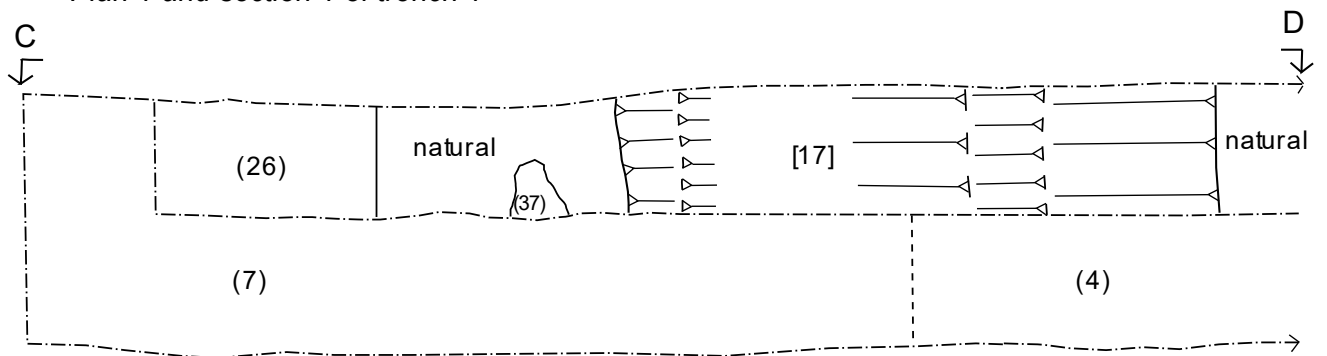
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# Plans and sections



Plan 1 and section 1 of trench 1



Plan 2 and section 2 Trench 2



## Appendix 1. Contexts

Context	Type	Interpretation	Description	Date
Trench 1				
1	layer	topsoil	Loam topsoil	modern
3	layer	natural	Well set slate and loam	geological
5	fill	Upper fill of ditch with demolition rubble from Prospect Tower	Brown loam with large stones and pink mortar	20 <sup>th</sup> C
6	fill	Ditch fill	Dk yellow brown loam with slatey stone	Post Iron Age
8	fill	Weathered natural at E end of ditch	Very stoney loam	geological
9	layer	Bank collapse	Dk brown loam with slatey stones	Post Iron Age
10	layer	Eroded top of bank	Dk brown loam with slatey stones	Post Iron Age
11	layer	Base of stone facing to bank	Olive brown loam with 80% flat stones	Late Bronze Age
12	layer	Original ground surface below bank	Dk yellow brown loam	Pre LBA
13	layer	Remains of bank frontage	Dk yellow brown loam	LBA
14	layer	Eroded top of bank	Dk brown loam with slatey stones	Post Iron Age
15	layer	Lower level of bank on W side	Dk yellow brown loam	LBA
21	layer	Occupation activity in silted up ditch	Dk olive brown loam with charcoal	MIA
27	fill	Very stoney ditch fill	Dk yellow brown clay loam	Pre MIA
32	fill	Fill of 36 after timber rotted away	Loose brown loam with 30% stones	LBA
33	layer	Silting up of ditch from E side	Dk yellow brown silty loam	LBA
34	cut	ditch	Flat bottomed ditch	LBA
35	layer	Collapse of stone face of bank into ditch 34	Orangey brown loam with 95% flat stones	LBA
36	cut	Linear feature behind stone front of bank where timber base plate ran	50-60cm wide and 19cm deep	LBA
Trench 2				
2	layer	topsoil	Loam topsoil	modern

4	layer	Layer immediately under topsoil W end of trench	Dk. Red brown silty loam	Post Iron Age
7	layer	Layer immediately under topsoil, E end of trench	Orange brown loam	Post Iron Age
16	layer	Upper fill of ditch 17	Dk brown silty loam	Post Iron Age
17	cut	Ditch cut	4-5m wide flat bottomed ditch	LBA
18	layer	Stoney slump of E face of bank	Orange brown loam	LBA
19	layer	First silting of ditch on E side	Orange brown silty loam	LBA
20	layer	Bank material disturbed by animal burrows	Dk brown humic loam	Post Iron Age
22	layer	Occupation activity in silted up ditch	Lgt grey brown silty loam with charcoal	LIA
23	layer	burrow	Dk grey brown silty loam	modern
24	layer	Linear concentration of stone at base of ditch	Very stoney orange brown loam	LBA
25	layer	Bank material similar to 18	Orangey brown silty loam	LBA
26	layer	Base of bank or old ground surface before bank	Orangey brown loam	LBA
28	layer	Dense stoney layer on west side of ditch cut	Light orange brown clay loam with 70% stones	LBA
29	fill	Upper fill of ditch 17	Orangey brown silty loam	Post IA
30	fill	Lowest fill of ditch 17 on W face	Orangey brown silty loam	LBA
31	layer	Ditch fill above 30	Orangey brown silty loam	LBA
37	layer	Stone structure of bank above 25	Grey brown silty loam with 3 deep layer of flat stones	LBA