

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Breiddin Hillfort, Powys
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT



CPAT Report No 464

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N W Jones
February 2002

Report for Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments


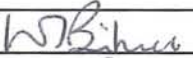
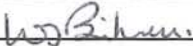
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CPAT Report Record

Report and status

CPAT Report Title	Breidden Hillfort, Powys: Archaeological Survey and Assessment		
CPAT Project Name	Breidden Hillfort		
CPAT Project No	980	CPAT Report No	464
Confidential (yes/no)	No	draft/final	Final

Internal control

	name	signature	date
prepared by	N W Jones		27/02/02
checked by	W J Britnell		27/02/02
approved by	W J Britnell		27/02/02

Revisions

no	date	made by	checked by	approved by

Internal memo

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In February 2002 the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust was invited by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments to undertake an archaeological survey and assessment of areas of recent groundworks within the area of the Breiddin hillfort, Powys. The groundworks in question, undertaken by Criggion Quarry, affected the south-eastern part of the hillfort (Fig. 1, pl 1-2) and comprised the removal of an existing boundary fence and the construction of an earthwork bund, the nature of which is described below (see 3.5).
- 1.2 The surviving area of the hillfort has been afforded statutory protection as a scheduled ancient monument (SAM Mg 21; Fig. 1) under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Under the terms of the Act any monument appearing on the Schedule will be protected by the control of works likely to affect the monument. Such works may only be undertaken if granted scheduled monument consent by the National Assembly for Wales. Furthermore, 'if any person executes or causes or permits to be executed any works to which this section applies he shall be guilty of an offence unless the works are authorised . . . This section applies to any of the following works: any works resulting in the demolition or destruction of or damage to a scheduled monument; any works for the purpose of removing or repairing a scheduled ancient monument or any part of it or of making any alterations or additions thereto; and any flooding or tipping operations on land in, on or under which there is a scheduled monument (Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, Part 1 Section 2).

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Breiddin Hillfort occupies the north-western of three parallel ridges overlooking the Severn valley between Welshpool and Shrewsbury (SJ 295143). The steep cliffs and scree slopes along the north-western flank made artificial defences superfluous, but along the south-eastern side the hillfort was defended by a double rampart, with an extra line of defence added close to the main entrance. In all, the hillfort defences would have enclosed an area of 28ha, although the local topography would have restricted the areas available for occupation.
- 2.2 Excavations were undertaken on the entrance and ramparts in 1933-35 (O'Neil 1937), and later in two phases between 1969 and 1976 (Musson *et al.* 1991), prior to the expansion of Criggion Quarry. The latter excavations demonstrated that the level areas towards the south-eastern end of the hillfort had been occupied during from the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British periods.
- 2.3 Part of the south-east end and north-west side of the hillfort have now been lost to quarrying, although the majority survives. The summit of the hill, surmounted by Rodney's Pillar, has always remained open, although much of the interior and defences was until recently covered by forestry plantation. The recent clearance of this tree cover greatly enhanced the visual setting appreciation of the hillfort.

3 SURVEY (Fig. 2)

- 3.1 The main objectives of the survey were: to accurately record the position and extent of the area of disturbance; undertake a photographic survey of the disturbance; assess the archaeological potential of the affected areas; and assess the potential impact of the disturbance on any buried archaeological deposits.
- 3.2 The survey was undertaken on 15 and 18 February 2002 and consisted of a total station survey of the area of disturbance, together with limited hand excavation to determine the likely depth of disturbance at five key locations. The total station survey recorded the top and bottom on either side of the new bund, together with the extent of disturbance along the western side of the bund, where material had been removed to form the bund. In addition, a limited topographical survey was undertaken to identify the extents of five natural terraces thought likely from the existing archaeological evidence to represent areas of high archaeological potential (see 4.5 below). The survey also recorded a number of fixed points which could be identified on modern Ordnance Survey mapping, such as the fence surrounding the Winch House, boundary fences and tracks. This information was later used to

georeference the survey against the Ordnance Survey Landline digital map data, although slight inaccuracies evident in the latter suggest a resulting tolerance of 2-3m accuracy.

- 3.3 The survey results were later augmented by the addition of data from other sources. The extent of the scheduled area was accurately transcribed from a 1:2,500 plan provided by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments. The location of the excavated areas was derived primarily from the published plan (Musson *et al.* 1991, Fig. 5), which was further refined by transcribing detail from large-scale vertical aerial photography taken in 1971, at the time of the excavations in Areas B3-4-5. This was achieved by rectifying the photograph using AutoCAD13, the results from which have enabled a fairly accurate location for the excavations in this key area. The main archaeological features recorded during the excavation of Areas B0, B1 and B3-4-5 was derived from the published plans (Musson *et al.* 1991, Figs 8 and 37).
- 3.4 Taking into account potential discrepancies between the survey and the Ordnance Survey digital data, the survey has demonstrated that with the exception of the extreme northern end of the affected area, the disturbance lies entirely within the area of statutory protection. Surviving lengths of the former boundary fence also demonstrate that the majority of the disturbance lies within land leased by Forest Enterprise rather than within the concession of Criggion Quarry.
- 3.5 The main element of the disturbance relates to the construction of a substantial earthwork bund (367m in length and averaging c. 0.8m high and between 4m and 6.5m wide), which follows the base of a steep slope (pl 3-4), running generally from north to south largely within an area which was carefully clear-felled by Forest Enterprise during 2001. For the majority of its length the bund has been constructed from material excavated from an area along its western side, between 3m and 8m in width. In general it would seem that mechanical scraping of this area has disturbed or removed at least 0.3m of material below the former ground surface. The bund itself appears to have been constructed by dumping the excavated material directly onto the existing ground surface. The southern 114m of the bund appears to have been constructed from material imported onto the site from outside the scheduled area. Additional disturbance has been caused by the construction of an access track to the east of the winch house.
- 3.6 In all, the bund occupies an area of 1,660m², while disturbance along its western side has affected an area of 2,070m². The total area affected by the recent groundworks is therefore 3,730m².
- 3.7 The area of disturbance was investigated at five locations (Fig. 2, A-E), consisting of limited hand cleaning of an area approximately 1m x 1m immediately against the western side of the bund, with the intention of determining the depth of disturbance. Material had been mechanically removed from this side of the bund, which in Areas A-D had left a disturbed surface up to 0.1m deep, which was removed by hand onto the top of the undisturbed subsoil. In each area the base of the bund was slightly cut back to provide a clean section and enable the depth of disturbance below, and deposition above the former ground surface to be determined. At each location a profile was also surveyed across the disturbed area (Fig. 3). No features of archaeological significance were identified within the limited areas investigated, although this should not be taken as an indication that significant deposits are absent from the surrounding areas.
- 3.8 Area A (pl 5-6) was located near the northern end of the disturbance. The bund at this point was 5.9m wide at the base and 0.7m high above the former ground surface. To the west of the bund an area 5.6m wide had been mechanically stripped, the western edge cutting up to 0.45m below the turf, while against the bund the disturbance was up to 0.2m deep.
- 3.9 Area B (pl 7-8) was located at the base of a steep natural slope. The bund at this point was 5.4m wide at the base and 0.65m high above the former ground surface. To the west of the bund an area 7.2m wide had been mechanically stripped, the western edge of which cut into the bedrock, while against the bund the disturbance was up to 0.2m below the ground surface.
- 3.10 Area C (pl 9-10) was located towards the western edge of a natural terrace. The bund at this point was 3.7m wide at the base and 0.85m high above the former ground surface. To the west of the bund an area 8.6m wide had been mechanically stripped, the western edge cutting into the bedrock, while against the bund the disturbance was up to 0.25m deep.
- 3.11 Area D (pl 11-12) was located along a natural terrace to the east of the excavated Area B3-4-5. The bund at this point was 4.6m wide at the base and 1.0m high above the former ground surface. To the west of the bund an area 5.0m wide had been mechanically stripped, the western edge cutting

gradually cutting below the ground surface to a maximum depth of 0.3m against the north-west side of the bund.

- 3.12 Area E (pl 13-14) was located towards the western edge of a natural terrace. The bund at this point had been constructed from imported material and was 5.8m wide at the base and 0.85m high above the former ground surface. To the west of the bund an area 6.5m wide had been mechanically stripped, the western edge cutting into a mound of quarry spoil at the base of which the turf had been scraped but not disturbed, suggesting that no significant ground disturbance had occurred at this point.

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT by C R Musson, MBE, BArch, MIFA, FSA.

Introduction

- 4.1 I have prepared this report for the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT), of which I was Director from 1974 to 1986. For the previous 6 years I had been a full-time field archaeologist with the Rescue Archaeology Group, carrying out year-round excavations on a variety of sites in Wales and England.
- 4.2 After leaving the Trust I worked as Investigator in Aerial Photography at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, until my retirement in 1998. I now undertake occasional consultancy work as director of Aber Photo Services Ltd, restricting myself to cases where my experience of archaeological excavation and aerial archaeology qualifies me to give an expert opinion.
- 4.3 My qualification in this case is that I directed and personally carried out much of the rescue excavation at the southern end of the Breiddin hillfort in 1969-72, and that I participated as a member of CPAT in a later phase of rescue excavations in 1975/76. The excavations were published in 1991 as CBA Research Report No 56, *The Breiddin Hillfort: A later prehistoric settlement in the Welsh Marches*, by C R Musson with W J Britnell and A G Smith (hereafter Musson *et al.* 1991).

Site Observations

- 4.4 I visited the site on the morning of 25 February in the company of Mr Nigel Jones of CPAT, who from earlier survey work provided a plan of the south-eastern part of the hillfort, showing the areas affected by recent operations in relation to excavated areas (Fig. 1). Although the local topography has been altered by quarrying operations since the excavations were undertaken it was possible, from the survey plan and from prominent rock outcrops, to visually locate the position of Area B3-4-5 of the earlier excavations to within 2-3m, and thus to relate the earlier investigations to the topography of the hillfort interior, as recently revealed by the removal of long-standing tree cover by Forest Enterprise.
- 4.5 From these observations it was clear that the works undertaken by the quarry had disturbed (in some places) and buried (in others) parts of five 'terraces' of relatively level or gently sloping land (Fig. 1 areas P, Q, R, S and T). These terraces are separated from one another by narrow east-west 'tongues' of more steeply sloping land. In its uninterrupted form, terrace R would have continued to the west to encompass Areas B3-4-5 of the 1969/76 excavations.
- 4.6 Each of the terraces is overlooked on the west by steeply rising rock outcrops, in places emphasised by the imposition over the years of quarry spoil, which also covers parts of Area B3-4-5 of the rescue excavations. All five terraces fall very gently to the east towards a hollow immediately behind the Iron Age rampart, created during the construction and subsequent occupation of the hillfort. These terraces, only recently revealed by the removal of tree cover, represent the largest areas of relatively flat, sheltered and 'readily-buildable' land within the hillfort. Much of the hillfort interior to the north is more steeply sloping and/or more exposed to the prevailing south-westerly wind.

The earlier excavation results

- 4.7 The earlier excavations showed that the hillfort was first constructed and occupied during the Late Bronze Age, in about the 8th century bc (radiocarbon years). The site is one of relatively few hillforts throughout Britain with proven origins at this early date. The hillfort rampart was strengthened during the pre-Roman Iron Age in about the 3rd century bc, occupation probably continuing until at least the 1st century BC. There are also important occupation deposits from the Romano-British period in the 2nd - 4th centuries AD.

- 4.8 The 1969/76 excavations, which were undertaken entirely by hand using small teams of highly skilled excavators, showed that ancient features such as the stone packing of ancient postholes were identifiable almost immediately below the modern topsoil (see, for instance, Plates 8, 9 and especially 10A in Musson *et al.* 1991). There was no indication of ploughing within the hillfort, and it seems likely that the modern surface, save for minimal natural erosion and accumulation, represents fairly closely the profile left by the last significant phase of occupation in antiquity. This being so, almost any disturbance below 20-25cm from the modern surface would risk damaging archaeological features were they present in the area concerned.
- 4.9 The rescue work in 1969/76 showed that every reasonably flat or gently sloping area subjected to excavation had evidence of Late Bronze Age, Iron Age or Romano-British structures, in the form of postholes, wall-gullies and stone-concentrations belonging to timber-walled roundhouses, four-posted buildings and perhaps constructions of other forms. In Area B3-4-5 stones belonging to a late and ill-defined structures were actually visible above the modern surface (Fig. 35, Plate 8B and pp 65-67 in Musson *et al.* 1991).
- 4.10 Excavations in Area B3-4-5 also showed that Iron Age roundhouses and four-posted structures continued to the very foot of steep rock outcrops (Musson *et al.* 1991, Fig. 34 and p61ff), presumably because the outcrops provided a degree of protection from the elements but also 'readily-buildable' land was at something of a premium during some stages of the pre-Roman occupation. Proximity to steep rock outcrops, therefore, does not suggest the absence of preserved archaeological features.

Assessment of likely damage by the recent quarry operations

- 4.11 My observations lead me to conclude that preserved archaeological deposits are unlikely to have been damaged (though they may well have been buried) along the western fringe of terrace P, where disturbance is limited to scraping down of the natural rock outcrops. There is unlikely to have been significant damage on terrace S, where the ground-surface has simply been buried beneath imported soil and stones.
- 4.12 I find it difficult to conceive, however, that damage has not been caused to sensitive areas in the 're-entrant' at the western end of terrace Q, where disturbance clearly breaches the modern surface of the most extensive single area of flat or gently sloping land within the prehistoric hillfort.
- 4.13 Likewise, there is clear disturbance and burial on terrace R, where the recent quarry operations (both disturbance and burial) lie immediately adjacent to an excavated area that produced rare evidence of Late Bronze Age metal-working as well as Iron Age roundhouses and four-posted structures (covering virtually the whole of Area B3-4-5). I find it inconceivable, in view of the contours of the site, that similar prehistoric occupation would not have continued to the east, onto parts of terrace R now disturbed by the quarry operations.

Damage to the contours and setting of the monument

- 4.14 The south-eastern part of the hillfort, visually separated by the central ridge from the heavily-quarried western flanks, appears more or less intact when viewed from the much-used vantage point of the New Pieces ridge to the east. Tree-cover has been recently removed from much of this area, taking great care not to damage the ground-surface and possibly-preserved archaeological deposits within the hillfort. It has thus become possible, for the first time in recent memory, to examine the contours and possible uses of the land within this part of the hillfort, and hence to speculate about the character and possible population of the hillfort during the pre-Roman Iron Age.
- 4.15 The bund now created at the foot of the slopes which form the natural skyline when viewed from the east has in my view significantly compromised the character and setting of the scheduled monument, as compared with the minimal impact that would have been caused by a protective fence along the top of the slopes, within the existing quarry concession.
- 4.16 I find it deeply regrettable that this kind of physical and visual disturbance, clearly outside the boundaries of the quarry concession but within the scheduled area, should have been undertaken without apparent consideration for the integrity of one of the most important scheduled ancient monuments of the Welsh Borderland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 5.1 I would like to thank the following for their co-operation and assistance: Chris Musson for his assessment of the archaeology; Glyn Owen and Wendy Owen, CPAT, for assistance with the survey; Wendy Joss, Forest Enterprise; Ian Brown, Criggion Quarry/Hansons plc.

7 REFERENCES

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O'Neil, T P, 1937. Excavations at Breiddin Hill Camp, Montgomeryshire. *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 92, 86-128.

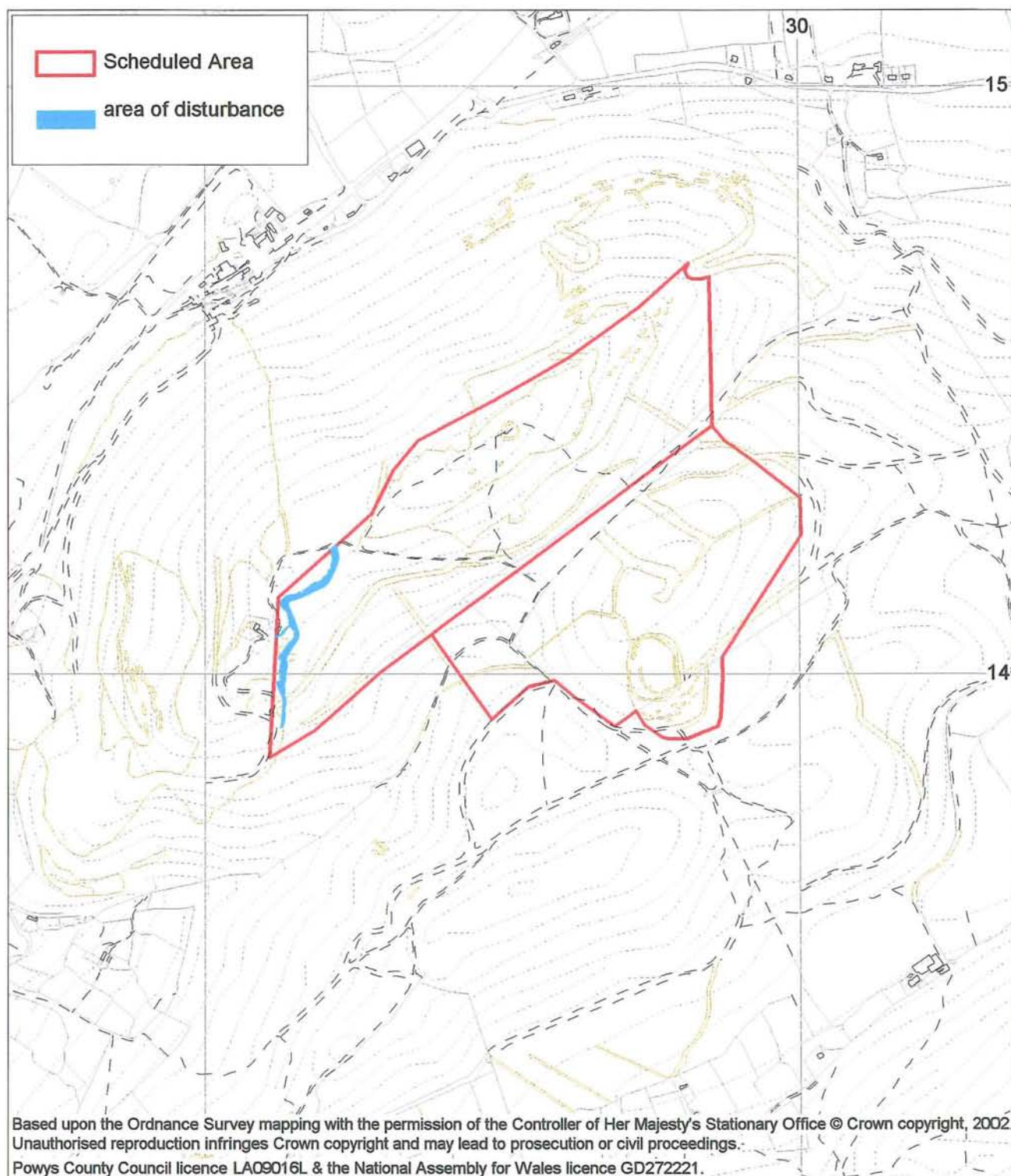


Fig. 1 Breiddin Hillfort: Scheduled Area and location of disturbance, scale 1:10,000

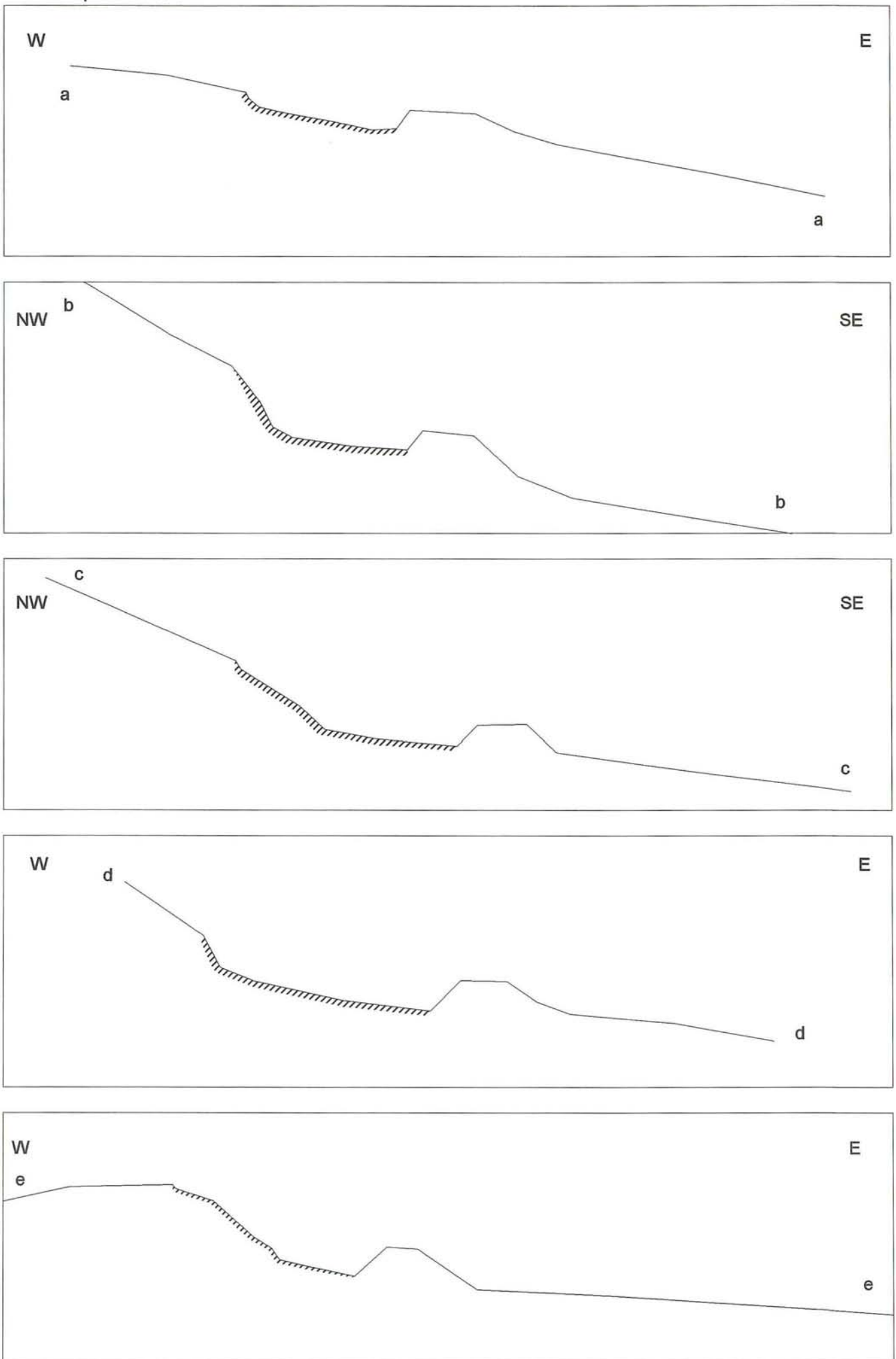
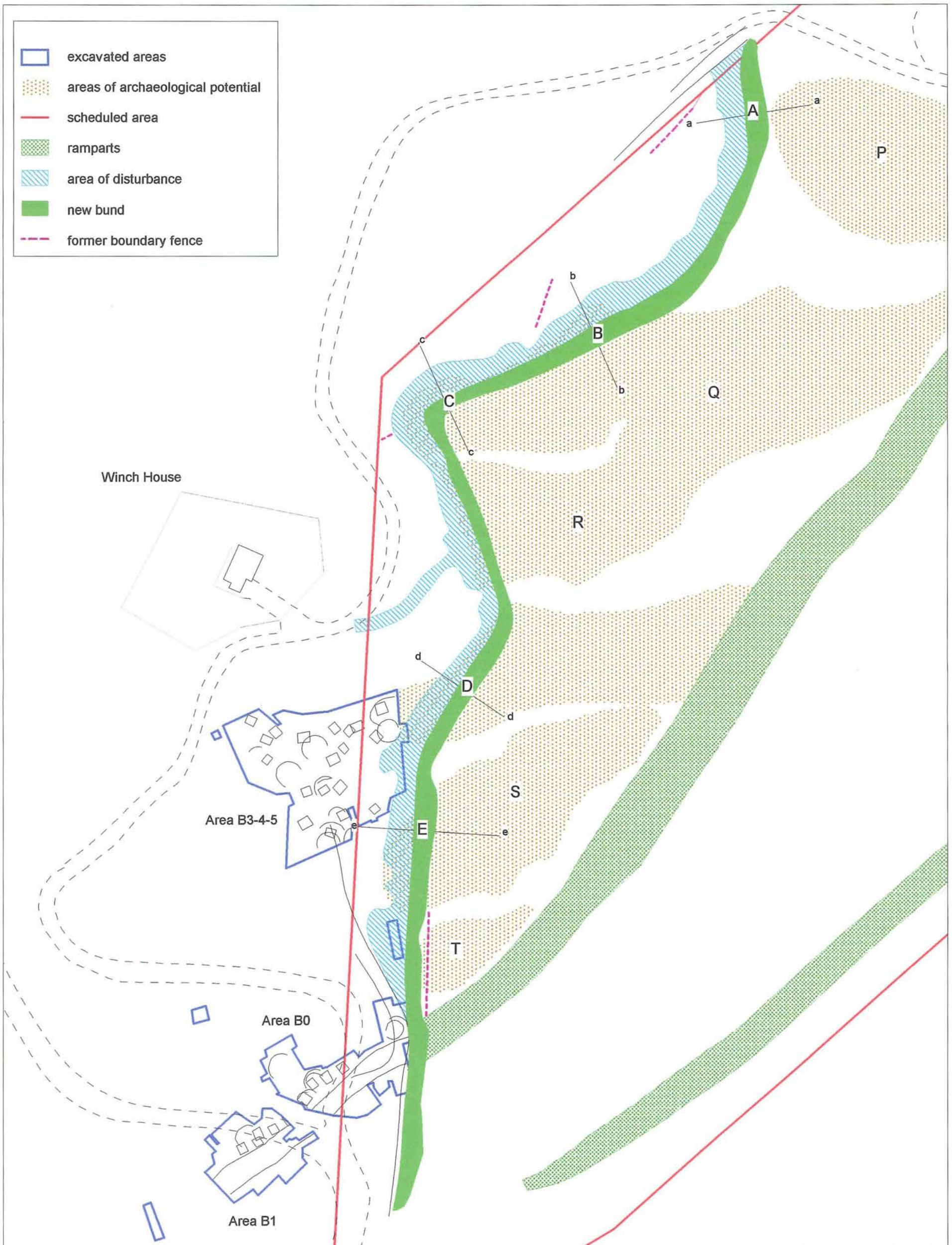


Fig. 3 Profiles across area of disturbance. Scale 1:200 (shading shows areas of ground disturbance)

Fig. 2 Survey of areas of disturbance, February 2002. Scale 1:1000



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Plate 1 Aerial view showing area of disturbance from north-east. © RCAHMW 2002-cs-0012



Plate 2 Aerial view showing area of disturbance from south-east. © RCAHMW 2002-cs-0016



Plate 3 View south-west from just south of Area A. Photo CPAT cs02/04/25



Plate 4 View north towards Area C. Photo CPAT cs02/04/31



Plate 5 Area A from west. Photo CPAT cs02/04/08



Plate 6 Area A from south. Photo CPAT cs02/04/11



Plate 7 Area B from north. Photo CPAT cs02/04/10



Plate 8 Area B from north-west. Photo CPAT cs02/04/14



Plate 9 Area C from north. Photo CPAT cs02/04/17



Plate 10 Area C from west. Photo CPAT cs02/04/29



Plate 11 Area D from north-west. Photo CPAT cs02/04/21



Plate 12 Area D from south-west. Photo CPAT cs02/04/33



Plate 13 Area E from west. Photo CPAT cs02/04/23



Plate 14 Area E from south. Photo CPAT cs02/04/34