PA

PROSPECT ARCHAEOLOGY

Dowsborough Hillfort, Holford, Somerset

The Results of an Archaeological Excavation

Ref: CDH 21

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Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme

Reimagining the Manor

Made possible with Heritage Fund

Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

PA

PROSPECT ARCHAEOLOGY

DOWSBOROUGH HILLFORT
Holford, Somerset

Excavation Report

Prepared for
South West Heritage Trust

by
Prospect Archaeology
'Xavier'
Nethermoor Road
Middlezoy
Somerset TA7 0PG

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DOWSBOROUGH HILL FORT, HOLFORD, SOMERSET. THE RESULTS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

James L. Brigers, BA on behalf of South West Heritage Trust

NGR: ST 1596 3920 **LAT: 51.145933; LONG: -3.2028625**

Soms museums acc. no. 87/2021 **Soms HER PRN: 45287**

SUMMARY

Two trenches were excavated through the upper rampart at the north side of Dowsborough Hillfort in advance of the installation of drainage during September 2021. The rampart was found to have been most likely formed in a single phase although was composed of numerous dumps of stone rubble of varying component size, including some large material forming parts of the northern face of the bank. No features of significance indicative of the existence of a palisade or retaining walls were encountered and the bank sealed what appeared to be the pre-existing ground surface of weathered natural substrate. No dating evidence of any form was present.

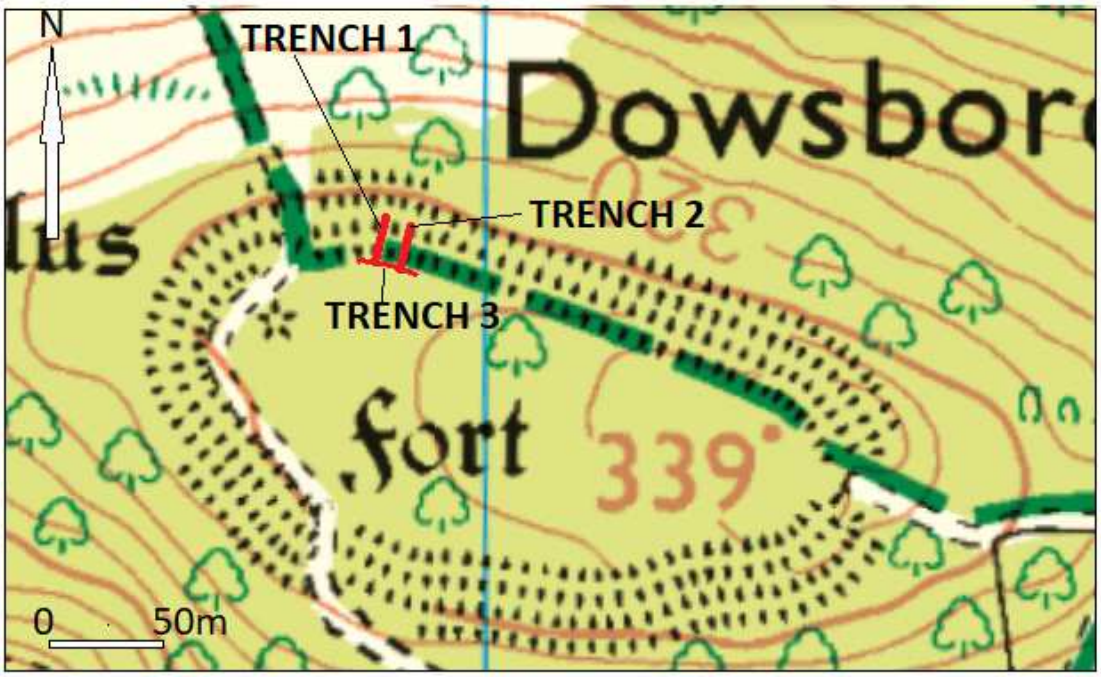
1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location & Geology (fig. 1)

1.1.1 Dowsborough Hillfort lies at an elevation of approximately 330m above Ordnance Datum at the highest point of a densely wooded ridge of Little Hangmans Sandstone[1] providing a commanding position overlooking the elevated landscape of the Quantock Hills onwards to the Bristol Channel and, locally, the steep sided valleys of Holford Combe to the north west, Lady Combe to the west and south and Bin Combe to the south east. The village of Holford lies 2.4km to the north north west, Dodington 1.7km to the north east and Nether Stowey 2.7km east north east. The investigation was centred at ST 15956 39207 on the upper rampart at the north western perimeter of the hill fort and immediately to the north of a bridleway that runs along the ridge as part of a southerly loop from the footpath known as the *Coleridge Way* between Nether Stowey and Holford.

[1] British Geological Survey digital mapping

Fig. 1: Dowsborough Hillfort 2021. Location of the Site



1.2 Description & Context

1.2.1 The hillfort[2], most likely Iron Age in origin, is univallate and oval in form and defined by a rampart following the natural contour of the hill, up to 1.5m in height above a substantial ditch with counterscarp bank beyond, surviving only to the south and east. A possible complex entrance has been postulated for a break in the defences at the eastern apex and here earthworks have been interpreted as the remains of guard chambers, although this is disputed. A second original entrance is suggested at a break in the defences to the north west where a causeway leads to the plateau below. The interior is densely wooded as a deliberate plantation of oak trees to serve the tanning industry in nearby Nether Stowey and few internal features are visible with the exception of a Bronze Age burial mound to the west[3] and scoops and hollows thought to be evidence for mining trial pits.

1.2.2 Recent formal archaeological investigation is has been limited to the excavation of two trenches through the rampart, also for drainage purposes, to the south east of the site[4] in 2017. This suggested the rampart had been formed as single dump but produced no dating evidence.

1.2.3 The hillfort enjoys statutory protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (no. 1010494).

1.3 Project Background & Acknowledgements

1.3.1 Following the success of the procedure to the south east (HER 42896), the decision was made to attempt similarly alleviate the water logging of the bridleway inside the north rampart which required the installation of drainage along the path and through the rampart at this location. Scheduled monument consent was granted under the condition that the trenching was excavated by hand and under full archaeological controls.

1.3.2 The resulting excavation was conducted by Jan Groves of South West Heritage Trust, Dan Broadbent of the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme and James Brigers and Peter Axtell of Prospect Archaeology under the direction of Richard Brunning (SWHT) during mid September 2021. The work was wholly funded by a grant from the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme and thanks are due to that body and to Bob Croft (SWHT) for logistical and emotional support during the fieldwork process.

1.3.3 The project was developed for, and funded by, the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme 'Reimagining the Manor', with the financial support of the Heritage Fund.

[2] Soms HER PRN 33306
[3] Soms HER PRN 33307
[4] Soms HER PRN 42896

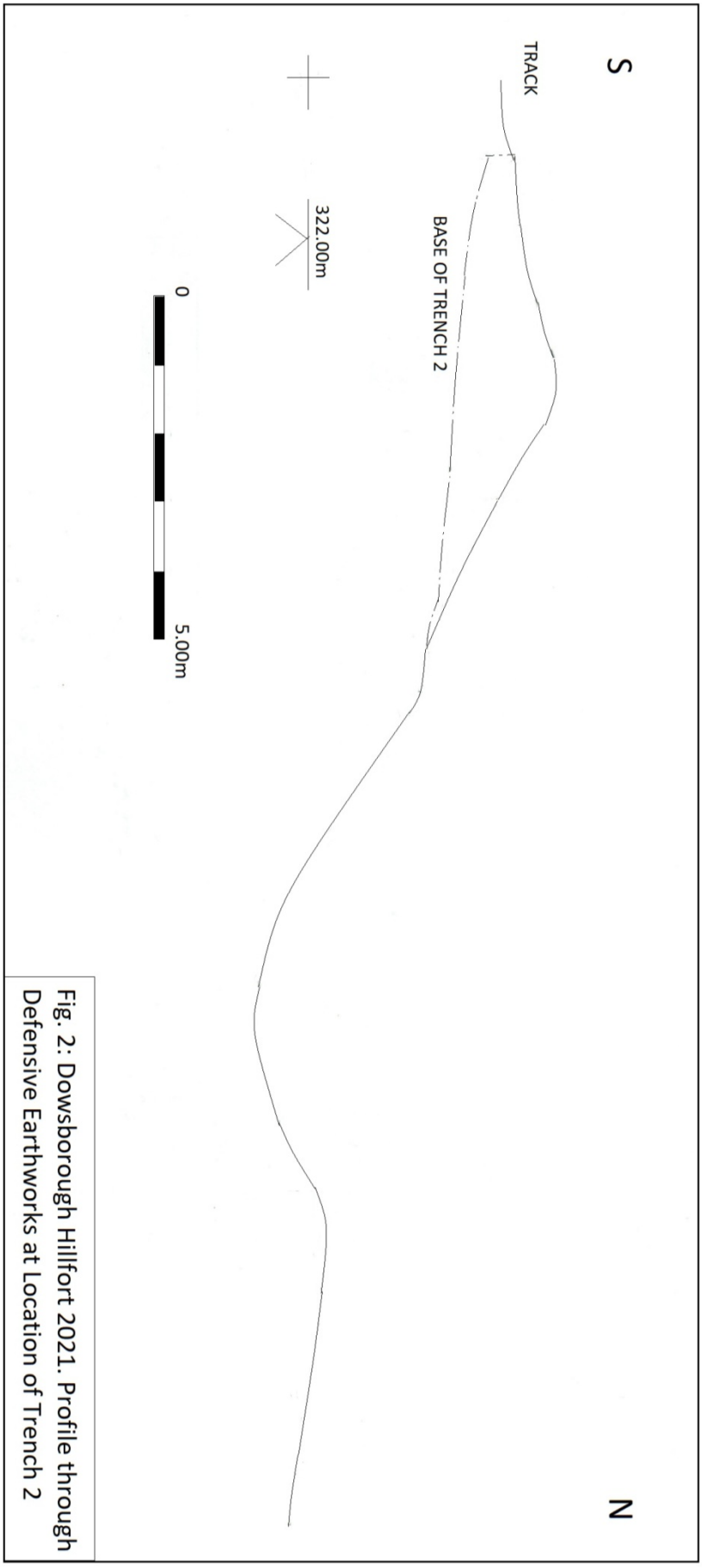


Fig. 2: Dowsborough Hillfort 2021. Profile through Defensive Earthworks at Location of Trench 2

2.0 THE ARCHAEOLOGY

2.1 Aims & Objectives

2.1.1 The principal aim of the investigation was to satisfy a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent to perform a controlled excavation of elements of the monument of Dowsborough Hillfort to be directly impacted by the proposed drainage works. This was to understand and allow a full preservation by record of the archaeological deposits within the scope of the project and use the derived information to inform on the origins, function and chronological development of the hillfort and its environs.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Two trenches (Trenches 1 & 2) were opened running north-south through the rampart, each 6.50m in length and 1.00m in width. These were excavated employing only manual labour to the level deemed suitable to efficiently accommodate the proposed new drainage. A third trench (Trench 3) was excavated east-west within the path to the south to a total length of 17.40m and width of 0.30m to contain the linking drainage. This was opened by a machine fitted with a toothless bucket under constant archaeological supervision.

2.2.2 A photographic record was maintained throughout the excavation process including shots of process and culminating in general and detail shots of the completed trenches and their long sections. The characteristics of each archaeological contexts were recorded on pro-forma record sheets and added as annotations on detailed scale drawings (1:20) of one long section of each trench. The location of the excavation was plotted on a site plan at a scale of 1:1250 and the position of each trench identified through the use of a hand held GPS device. Levels were recorded for each trench datum through reference to the concrete base inside the east entrance to the fort, allocated a notional height above sea level of 330.00m. A 20m long north-south profile through bank and ditch at the position of Trench 2 was drawn based on a surveyed transect (fig. 3).

2.2.3 The work was carried out in accordance with accepted best practice for archaeological work in Somerset[5], guidance provided by the Institute for Field Archaeology[6] and a specification produced by SWHT and approved by Historic England. The project archive, to include all photographs, drawings and field notes will be suitably indexed and deposited with a copy of this report at the Somerset Heritage Centre (under accession no. 87/2021). A Further copy of this report will be sent to South West Heritage Trust for inclusion on the County Historic Environment Record. A summary of the results of the investigation was

[5] South West Heritage Trust 2017 'Heritage Service Archaeological Handbook'
[6]. Institute of Field Archaeologists 'Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation', 1994; revised 2008; updated 2011

published in the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society in 2022.

Pl. 1: General view of Trenches 1 & 2 during excavation (view from SE)

2.3 Results & Description (appendix i; fig. 3; pl. 2-7)

Trench 1

2.3.1 At the limit of excavation, with its upper surface at 322.28m, a deposit of clean pale yellow-brown sandy-silt (107) was exposed. This possibly represents the land surface predating the formation of the rampart and was found to slope gently towards the north, falling below the excavated level. This was found to be entirely devoid of cultural material. Context (107) was initially overlain by dump (106), consisting of compact red-brown gravelly clay-silt and then by a substantial dump of small angular sandstone rubble (105) which extended beyond the northern limit of excavation. The northern side of dump (105) was sealed by a dump of medium to large angular sandstone rubble (102) with a very sparse matrix and numerous voids. These dumps combined to form the body of the prehistoric rampart.

Pl. 2: Detail of sandstone rubble dump (102) as exposed (view from N; scale=0.60m)

2.3.2 To the south the earlier dumps were immediately sealed by further dumps of small sandstone rubble with pale red or pink matrices (104) and (103), which extended to the north to merge with the rubble surface of the modern trackway investigated in Trench 3 as (300). These deposits were finally overlain to the level of the modern ground surface at a highest level of 323.40m by thin humic topsoil (101) and (100).

Pl. 3: West facing section of Trench 1 (view from NW; scales=1m)

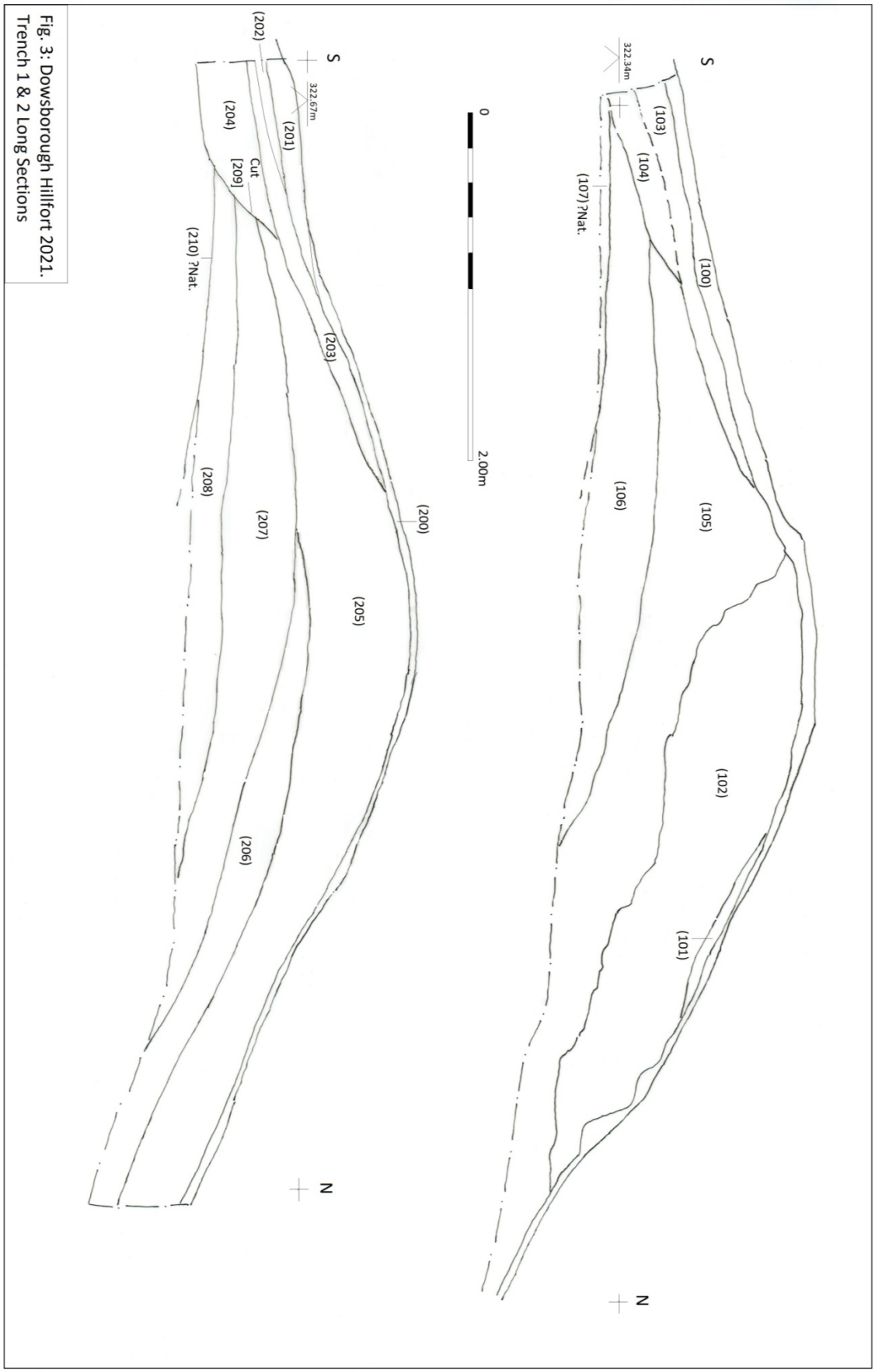


Fig. 3: Dowsborough Hillfort 2021. Trench 1 & 2 Long Sections

Trench 2

2.3.3 A deposit representing the probable prehistoric land surface (210) was exposed at a level of 322.22m at the limit of the excavation and found to consist of compact mid red-brown to pinkish gravelly silty-clay. This was immediately sealed by a dump of compacted coarse sandstone gravel (207); overlain to the north by a further dump of coarse, clean gravel (206). The upper portion of the bank was formed by the deposition of dump (205) consisting of densely-packed small and medium angular sandstone rubble in a matrix of red-brown silty-clay. The above deposits, with the exception of (210), combine to form the prehistoric rampart at this location and none were found to contain cultural material of any form.

2.3.4 At their southern edge the dumps of the bank were cut by the steep edge of terrace [109] which contained a dump of small sandstone rubble in a pinkish silty-clay matrix (204) and a subsequent dump of similar character, (203). Context (204) appears to form the northern extent of the existing track surface (300). These deposits were finally sealed humic-rich top soil deposits (200) & (201) to the level of the modern ground surface at up 323.33m.

Pl. 4: Centre of west facing section through rampart in Trench 2 (view from WSW; scale=1m)

Pl. 5: General view of west facing section of Trench 2 (view from SSW; scales=1m)

Trench 3

2.3.5 Probable natural geological substrate consisting of clean red-brown gravelly silty-clay (301) was exposed at a depth of 0.30m. This was overlain throughout the entire length of the trench by a single dump of compacted small to medium angular sandstone rubble in a pale grey of pale red-brown silty-clay matrix (300) which formed the surface of the existing trackway.

Pl. 6: General view of Trench 3 at completion (view from E; scale=1m)

Pl. 7: Detail of part of south facing section of Trench 3 (view from S; scale=1m)

3.0 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

3.1 At both trench locations deposits were encountered at the lowest levels that most probably represent the land surface immediately pre-dating the construction of the rampart. These deposits appeared to be entirely of mineral composition with no obvious organic content and yield no evidence for contemporary occupation. From this it would appear the site selected for the defences was open land with a very thin accumulation of top soil immediately prior to the construction of the monument.

3.2 The defences themselves were found to be entirely composed of dumps of re-deposited natural material containing no obvious evidence for phasing. The composition, component size and matrix characteristics was found to be variable but this is almost certainly due to the equivalent variations in the natural geology encountered at different locations by the excavators of the ditch to the north. Further evidence that the area of the site was a 'clean' area at the commencement of their construction lies in the total absence of anthroprogenic material within the excavated deposits. No indication of other features contemporary with the rampart was detected and there appears to have been no significant retaining wall, internal walkway or palisade, at least at the surviving level of the earthwork. The only feature recognised, aside from the bank itself, was cut [209] to the south which partially truncated the prehistoric deposits here and probably resulted from the construction and use of the track to the north, the surfaces and repairs to which were evident as the highly compacted rubble deposits against the bank and throughout the extent of Trench 3.

3.3 In conclusion, the defences at this location were constructed on the natural ground surface and probably during a single phase of activity. The bank was simple and appears to have possessed no additional defensive attributes, although it is possible that the evidence

for these may have been eroded and lost in the past along with the upper parts of the bank. The investigation yielded no diagnostic, sadly allowing no light to be shed on the date of the origins of the defences or the hillfort.

Context No.	Type	Interp. Type	Description	Phase/Period	Strat. Above	Strat. Below
TRENCH	**1**					
100	Layer	Build-up	Very dark grey brown humic silty-loam. Occ: small weathered Little Hangmans Sandstone	3	101; 103	-
101	Layer	Slump/Weathering	Friable mid-dark red-brown silty-loam. Moderate: small LHS	3	102	100
102	Layer	Dump/Bank	Medium-large angular LHS rubble (max. 0.58m) in sparse matrix of friable dark red-brown clay-silt	2	105	101
103	Layer	Dump/Levelling	Small angular LHS rubble/gravel in matrix of friable pale red-brown/pink clay-silt	3	104	100
104	Layer	Dump/Track	Compacted small-medium angular LHS rubble; matrix of pink clay-silt	3	105	103
105	Layer	Dump/Bank	Small-medium angular LHS rubble in matrix of friable mid-dark red-brown gravelly clay-silt	2	106	102
106	Layer	Dump/Bank	Compact mid-dark red-brown gravelly clay-silt. Frequent: small angular LHS	2	107	105
107	Layer	Build-up/?Natural	Friable pale yellow-brown sandy-silt or silty-loam. Moderate: small LHS	?1	???	106
TRENCH	**2**					
200	Layer	Build-up	Friable-loose very dark red-brown humus. Occ: small weathered LHS	3	201	-
201	Layer	Build-up	Compact dark grey-brown sandy-silt. Occ: small weathered LHS	3	202	200
202	Layer	Dump/Levelling	Compacted small LHS rubble & gravel in pink silty-matrix	3	203	201
203	Layer	Dump/Levelling	Small LHS rubble in friable matrix of pink gravelly-silt	3	204	202
204	Layer/Fill	Levelling Dump	Small-medium angular LHS rubble in matrix of loose mid red-brown clay-silt	3	209	203
205	Layer	Dump/Bank	Very densely packed small-medium angular LHS rubble (max. 0.20m); matrix of friable mid red-brown silty-clay and sand	2	206	209
206	Layer	Dump/Bank	Loose coarse LHS gravel (30-40mm). Occ: small angular LHS	2	207	205
207	Layer	Dump/Bank	Compact coarse LHS gravel (10-20mm) in matrix of compact mid red-brown clay-silt. Occ: small LHS	2	208	206
208	Layer	Dump/Bank	Small angular LHS rubble (max. 0.15m) in matrix of friable mid red-brown clay-silt. Occ: medium angular LHS	2	210	207
209	Cut	Path Construction/Wear	Visible in profile only, full extent and plan form uncertain; probable terrace; visible side steep and slightly concave falling to moderate break at flat base with slight slope to S	3	205	204
210	Layer	Build-up/Natural	Compact mid red-brown to purplish pink silty-clay. Moderate LHS gravel. Occ: small abraded LHS	1	???	208

Context No.	Type	Interp. Type	Description	Phase/Period	Strat. Above	Strat. Below
TRENCH	**3**					
300	Layer	Track/Path	Dense small-medium angular LHS rubble in compacted matrix of pale red-brown/pink and mid grey clay-silt; ?same as (204)	3	301	-
301	Layer	?Natural	Compact mid red-brown gravelly silty-clay	1	-	300