

A SUMMARY REPORT ON SECOND WORLD WAR ACTIVITY AT WATERY LANE, CHURCH CROOKHAM, HAMPSHIRE

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ABSTRACT

An archaeological excavation of four areas approximately 0.39ha in total, of land at Watery Lane, Church Crookham, Hampshire, was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology in November and December 2016. It followed the recording of two Pill Boxes and a trial trench evaluation of a wider development area. In all four areas archaeological features were identified. The artefactual evidence indicated five phases of archaeological activity, with features dating from the late prehistoric, medieval, medieval/post-medieval, and post-medieval to modern wartime period. Several heavily truncated isolated prehistoric features were identified, as were field boundary ditches of medieval to the post-medieval date. Many undated, but presumed modern, postholes were found across the site. The postholes may have been the result of an extensive network of Second World War temporary timber structures known as tactical obstacles (including barbed wire entanglements and tank proof obstacles) erected during anti-invasion defence works. These structures were likely to have been part of the important Stop Line Defence network, Line A of the GHQ (General Headquarters) line of defences, which were planned to slow down a ground invasion.

INTRODUCTION

Cotswold Archaeology (CA) carried out an archaeological excavation at the request of Martin Grant Homes on land at Watery Lane, Church Crookham, Hampshire (centred on NGR: 480005 151083, Fig. 1). The works were agreed following consultation by the Local Planning Authority with their archaeological advisor, Neil Adam, Senior Archaeologist for Hampshire County Council. A Historic Building Record (HBR) of two Pill Boxes (CA

2016a) in their historical setting and a trial trench evaluation (CA 2016b) of the wider development area were undertaken at the site. Excavation of four areas continued the phased programme of work (CA 2017).

The development area was approximately 33ha in size, and at the time of excavation comprised a number of fields and paddocks with established hedgerows and wooded areas. It is bounded by agricultural land and woodland to the south and west, by residential development to the northeast, by Redfields Road to the east and by the Basingstoke Canal to the north. The site is located on a slight incline sloping down towards a stream (within the site) feeding into the Basingstoke Canal to the north-west at an elevation of approximately 75–90m above Ordnance Datum (aOD). The underlying geology is mapped as clay, silt and sand of the London Clay Formation, overlain by alluvium (BGS 2017).

Archaeological features were identified during the excavation in Areas A, B, D (Fig. 1) and C (CA 2017). The artefactual evidence indicated five broad phases of archaeological activity and the shallow nature of all the features found indicated later truncation. Late prehistoric (Phase I) features comprising several isolated pits and postholes indicative of temporary settlement activity were found in Areas A and C. Medieval (Phase II) to post-medieval (Phase IV) features, comprising a series of furrows were found in Areas A and C with intercutting ditches that formed a field boundary system. A multi-phased enclosure indicative of agricultural activity was found in Area D. A full assessment of the archaeology identified can be found in the trial trench evaluation (CA 2016b) and excavation reports (CA 2017). Extensive

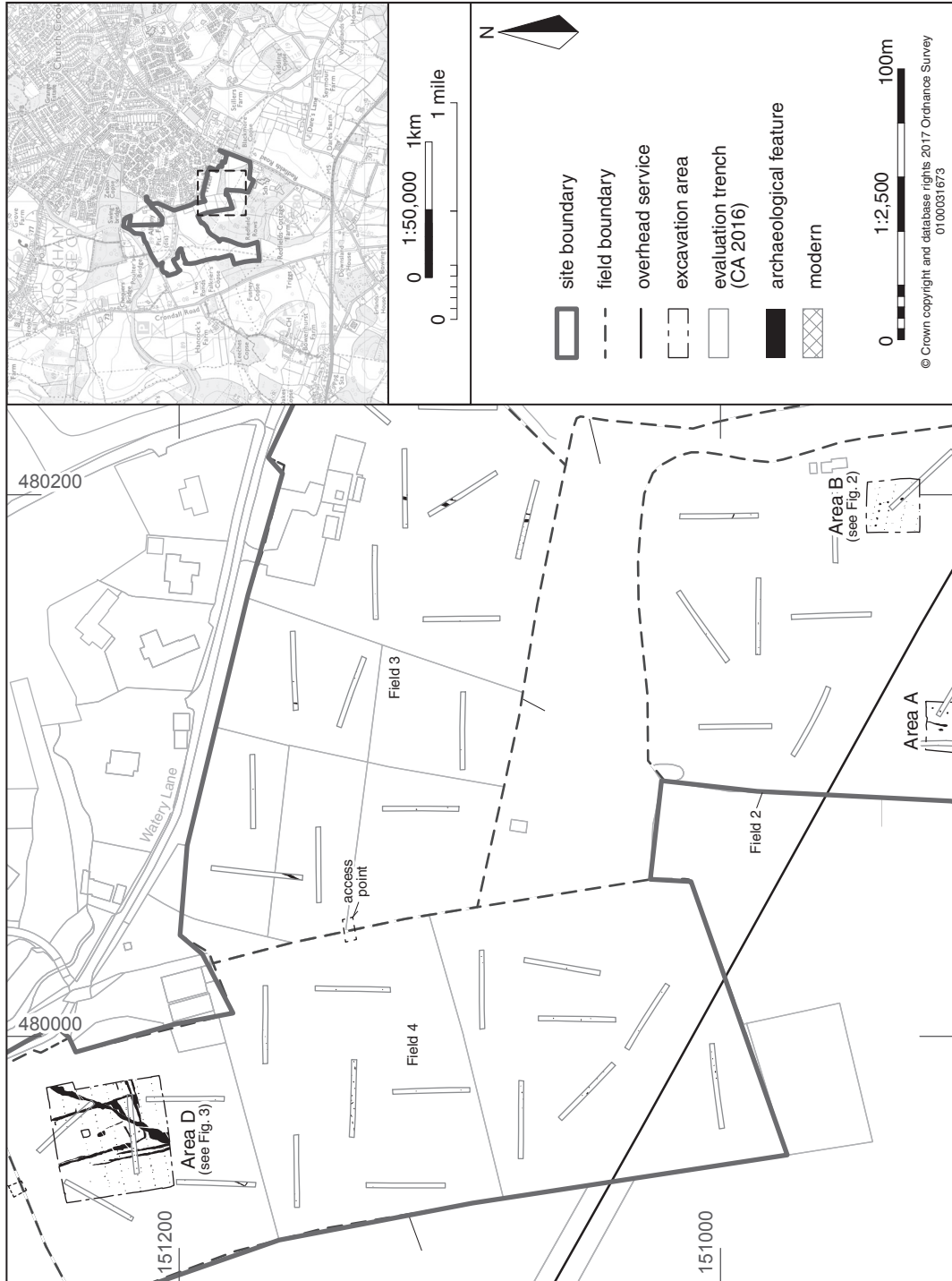


Fig. 1 Site location and site plan showing all trial trenches, excavation areas and wartime features

modern (Phase V – c. 1940) features were found in Areas A, B, C and D comprising posthole and small pit alignments, which likely formed part of an extensive network of Second World War temporary timber structures known as tactical obstacles. This summary focuses on the Second World War (Phase V) features.

Full documentary sources for the project, including specialist reports and data, photographs and additional illustrations, can be found on the Cotswold Archaeology website: <http://www.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/>. The archive has been deposited with the Hampshire Cultural Trust. (Accession. No A2017.122)

SUMMARY RESULTS (Figs 1–3)

The excavation (CA 2017) generally demonstrated a correlation with the features found during the trial trench evaluation (CA 2016b) (Fig. 1). In all four areas, topsoil was 0.2–0.4m thick and overlay a subsoil horizon, c. 0.2–0.5m thick. Located beneath these layers was the geological horizon, the composition of which was variable. In Areas A, B and C, in the south of the site within Field 2, the geological horizon comprised clay deposits of the London Clay Formation. The geology encountered in Area D, further north within Field 4, comprised silty sand and silty clay alluvial deposits.

Defences known prior to groundworks

Church Crookham was on Line A of the GHQ line of defences constructed from 1940 as a response to the threat of a German invasion in World War II. GHQ Line A was divided into sectors falling within South Aldershot Sub-Area, numbers 3 and 4, which led to Warren Corner in Crondall, to the southeast of the site. One of these sectors runs to the north of the A287, crossing the route of the road at Dares Farm in the area of proposed roundabout junction improvements and where Pillbox HER 24237 and Pillbox HER 24208 were recorded. The principal defensive obstacle was an anti-tank ditch or tank trap. The anti-tank obstacle was in part at least hand-dug by troops from Aldershot Garrison,

and in front of that forward part of the Line a demolition belt was planned. The area has been assessed to have been potentially the most heavily defended location in the country during the Second World War. There is a high density of military defence features in the area. The defences follow the course of Line A running between Ewshot and Crondall and are densely clustered on the heavily defended ridge at Ridding's Copse to the south of the Queen Elizabeth Barracks (Foot 2006, 541–2; Foot 2009).

2016 trial trench evaluation

One hundred and sixty-one postholes were identified during the trial trench evaluation in June 2016 within Fields 1 to 5 (CA 2016b) (Fig. 1). Post-medieval potsherds and fragments of CBM (ceramic building material) were recovered from several examples and are likely to have been residual. In one area the postholes appear to have formed a chequered board effect in plan suggesting that the features are likely to represent evidence for a series of supporting posts to form barbed wire entanglements. In a second area the posthole alignments appeared to form a series of east/west orientated defensive lines. The latter was confirmed during the excavation of Area D.

2016 excavation – Phase V (Second World War c. 1940)

One hundred and eighty shallow postholes and small pits were identified during the excavation in November and December 2016 within Fields 2 and 4 (Fig. 1), though very few finds were found in the postholes and pits located within Areas A, B, C and D. Based on their intermittent positioning and projected alignments, morphology and fill characteristics, the postholes may have formed part of the extensive network of Second World War temporary timber structures erected as anti-invasion defence works (Foot 2006, 541–7; HMSO 1936). An alignment of postholes (1.1) was located across the east side of Area A and appears to have been orientated on alignment 3.1 found further south in Area C (neither

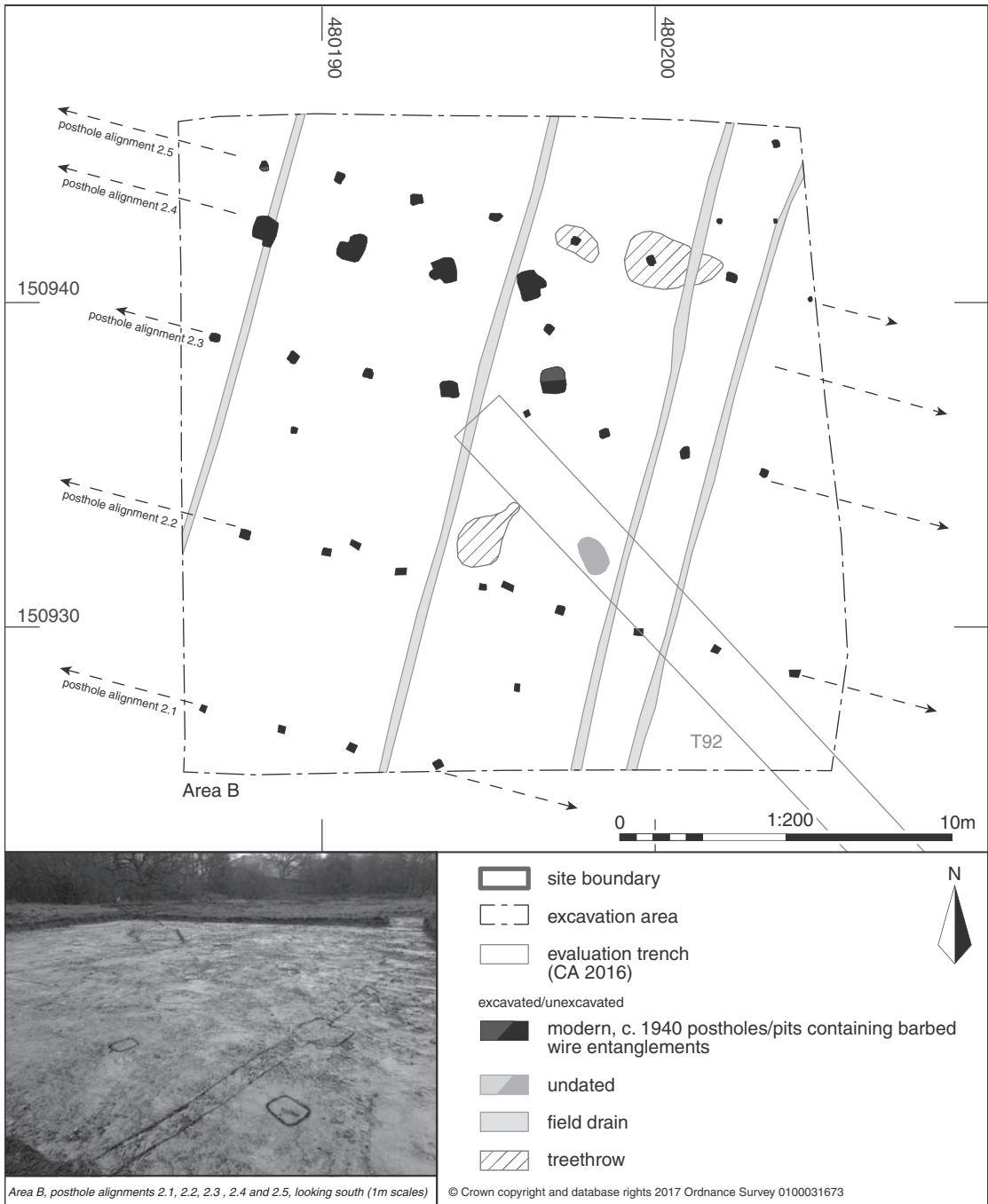


Fig. 2 Area B: archaeology and wartime postholes/pits

illustrated). Three posthole alignments were found in Area C consisting of 22 postholes. Five posthole alignments (2.1–2.5) consisting of 42 postholes were found in Area B (Fig. 2) and several of the postholes appear to have been isolated. Their somewhat sporadic positioning may represent modification and perhaps extra timber supports for post alignments during their functional use as barbed wire entanglements. Seven east–west orientated posthole alignments (4.1–7) were found in Area D consisting of 109 postholes (Fig. 3). The posthole alignments were positioned approximately 5.2m to 5.3m apart on their north/south axis. Several of these postholes were found to be isolated examples similar to those recorded in Area B.

CONCLUSION

Deep ploughing undertaken in the autumn of 1940 was considered a sufficient obstacle against enemy aircraft landing (Foot 2006, 10–11). Such ploughing may also explain the shallow, truncated nature of the late prehistoric features and medieval/post-medieval features found within Fields 2 and 4. If we can assume the postholes are associated with an extensive network of Second World War obstacles within a prepared battlefield it is unlikely that these were constructed to prevent aircraft landing, such as glider traps. This type of defence was utilised in open areas with a straight line length comprising of 500 yards (*c.* 457m) or more. The fields at the site are much smaller in size measuring approximately 250m in length and 100m in width, *i.e.* much smaller than the specified aircraft landing requirement (Foot 2006, 10). The postholes found are more likely to represent a structure forming temporary defensive works such as barbed wire entanglements. A substantial existing drainage ditch measuring approximately 3m wide and with a depth of approximately 1.5m was identified during the trial trench evaluation (CA 2016b), and was located in Field 3 following the northern boundary of an extant wooded copse. Although undated, the ditch may have been utilised as an existing

defence in conjunction with the wooded environment located mostly to the west and south-west of the site. The combination of barbed wire entanglements and a ditch would have served to disrupt enemy troop advances and also funnel them towards preselected strong points.

The defences identified, both man made or natural, were situated within one of the most heavily defended areas in the country during the Second World War, located between the southern end of the important Stop Line Defence at Chequers Bridge and to the north of the Area Defence associated with a heavily defended army camp north of Ewshot. The threat of German Invasion during 1940 was very real and a programme of homeland defence to counter or slow down this threat was taken very seriously. Documentary evidence in the National Archive, the British Library and Historic England NMR demonstrates how the War Office proposed to manage the threat of German invasion. It was thought likely that a German invasion would employ one of, or a combination of, the following: high explosive bombs, incendiary bombs, gas bombs or spray, machine gun attack by low flying aircraft or parachutists (TNA, W0166/1185). With the threat of a ground invasion the construction of a homeland defence was considered of upmost importance. GHQ Command stated: “It is unlikely that attack by parachute or by carrier borne troops will be made directly upon aerodromes or other localities, such as Aldershot itself, known to be prepared and garrisoned for defence. It is, however, probable that attack may be made by troops landed from the air at localities which are beyond the scope or immediate counter-attack by our troops but which are at the same time within, let us say, a five mile radius of the selected objective” (TNA, W0166/1185). GHQ Command’s specified policy for “Home Defence” in 1940 was to “To defeat the enemy when landing or when landed in the British Isles” (TNA, W0199/55), “to kill in the shortest possible time” every invader that “is misguided enough to set foot in Farnborough Sub-Area” (TNA, W0166/6739). The site at Church Crookham falls within the Farnborough Sub-Area.

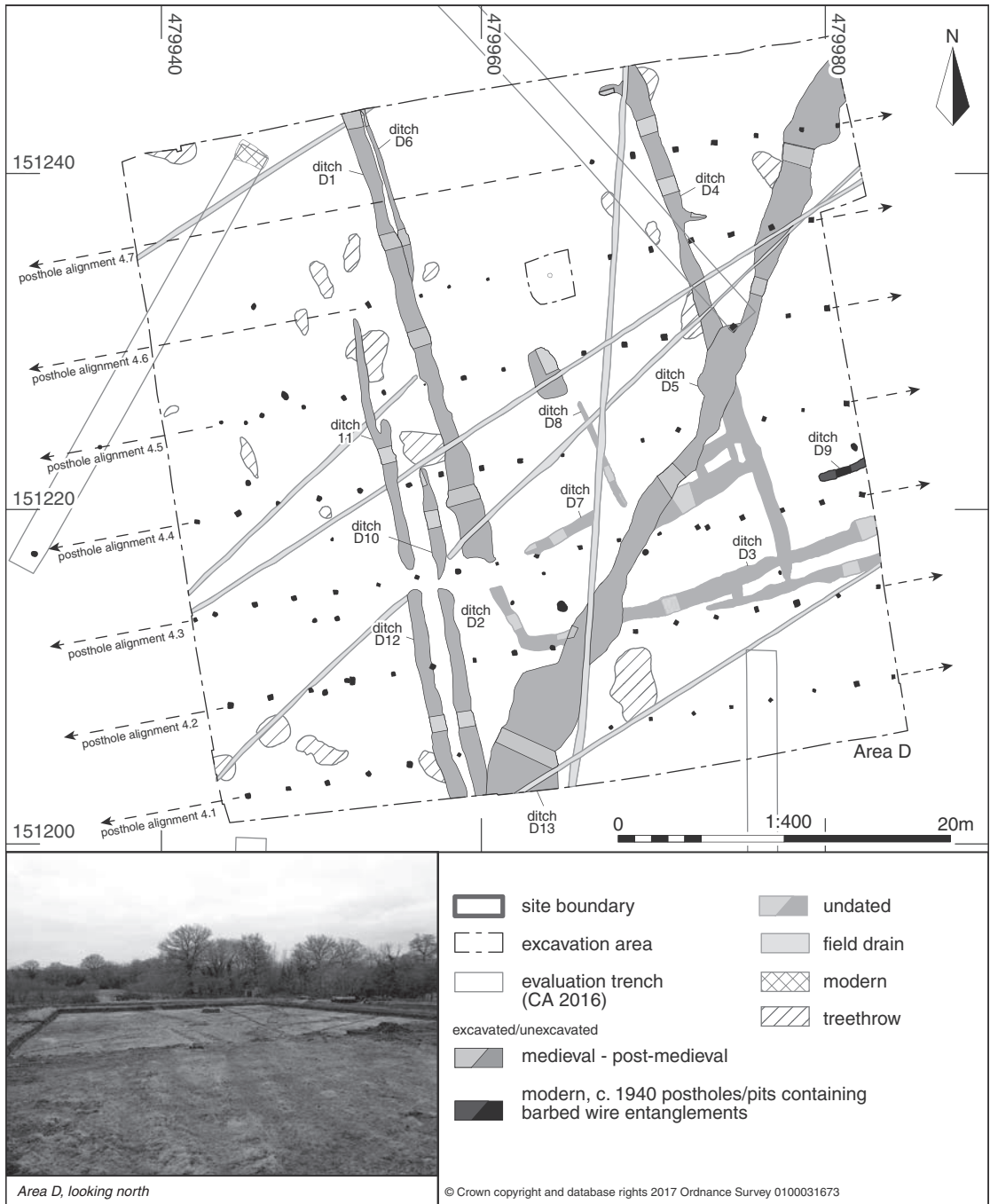


Fig. 3 Area D: archaeology and wartime postholes

The invasion never came, and many defences constructed from June 1940, such as the barbed wire entanglements, were removed before the cessation of hostilities. The temporary field defences of the Army were not normally owned by the War Office and much of the defended land was re-instated to help feed the nation (Foot 2006, 2–3). The evidence for the short-lived defences and the building record of the two pillboxes are of historical interest and complement our understanding of homeland defence during the early years of the Second World War.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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