

The Wrekin Hillfort Telford Shropshire



Archaeological Excavation Report



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The Wrekin, Telford, Shropshire

NGR SJ 63000829

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

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SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a programme of archaeological excavations in the Wrekin hillfort on behalf of Castle Transmission International Ltd. In addition, two areas of heavy erosion on the ramparts were repaired. The excavations revealed a gravelled pathway, probably of 20th century date.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work (Fig. 1)

1.1.1 Between May 1999 and April 2000 OAU (now trading as Oxford Archaeology [OA]) carried out a programme of archaeological excavations in the Wrekin hillfort on behalf of Castle Transmission International Ltd (CTI) in respect of a planning application for the expansion of the existing radio transmission station and associated drainage works (Planning Application No. W98/0464). A mitigatory condition of the Scheduled Monument Consent (DCMS Ref. HSD 9/2/2609 PT 2) for the works also called for two areas of heavy erosion on the hillfort ramparts to be repaired and explanatory display boards to be erected. The WSI was prepared by OAU and agreed by English Heritage. The principal development site is centred on SJ 63000829 and is 275 sq m in area.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on the north-west facing shoulder of the hillfort at 386 m OD. The site is situated on the rhyolite rock of the hill.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the evaluation has been the subject of a detailed archaeological and historical survey prepared by OAU for the application for Scheduled Monument Consent (OAU 1998), and is summarised below.

1.3.2 The Wrekin is an isolated hill of rhyolite (rock originating from a lava flow) rising almost 300 m from the Shrewsbury Plain, and surmounted by the surviving earthworks of an extensive hillfort. It is one of a group of about 20 major hillforts scattered through North Powys and West Shropshire. The evidence so far collected from small excavations within the fort in 1939 and 1973 suggests that the site was first occupied in about 900 BC. Two lines of ramparts, designed to take advantage of the natural topography, were constructed around the crest of the hill, forming outer and inner defences. Originally at least the inner defensive rampart was faced with stone - a 'box' rampart.

1.3.3 There was one defended entrance on the steep south-western slope, and two entrances (now known as 'Hell Gate' and 'Heaven Gate') through the ramparts on the more accessible north-eastern slope.

- 1.3.4 Despite the modest amount of excavation that has taken place, it is believed that the interior of the fort was intensively occupied, and there would have been many timber-built houses, and other structures such as granary stores and workshops.

1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 The excavations, rampart restoration and report were entirely funded by CTI. OAU would like to express their appreciation for the cooperation and assistance of CTI throughout the project and in particular the individual contributions of James Brennan and Frank Smith.

2 EXCAVATION AIMS

- 2.1.1 The purpose of the mitigation works was to gather and record information from archaeological deposits in the areas where the proposed development would impact upon archaeological deposits.

3 EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The excavation programme consisted of an area of approximately 275 sq m immediately north-east of the existing CTI building, and a shallow drain trench and associated sump alongside the northern edge of the trackway between the inner and outer rampart gates.
- 3.1.2 The areas designated for repair were on the ramparts on both sides of both Hell Gate and Heaven Gate

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

The area excavation

- 3.2.1 The area was stripped of turf and topsoil by a mechanical excavator under close archaeological supervision. The resulting horizon was cleaned by hand and sample sections were hand excavated to natural bedrock. All deposits were recorded following standard OAU procedures (*OAU Fieldwork Manual* ed. Wilkinson, 1992).

The drain trench

- 3.2.2 The trench was machine excavated under close archaeological supervision. The soakaway at the north end of the drain trench was hand-excavated. All deposits were recorded following standard OAU procedures (*OAU Fieldwork Manual* ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

The earthwork repairs and display boards

- 3.2.3 Prior to the repairs, a detailed contour survey of the earthworks of Hell Gate and Heaven Gate was carried out by OAU to provide a record of the erosion (*see Fig.2*). The repairs to the earthworks were carried out by OAU after close consultation with the environmental consultants Penny Anderson Associates, and with English Heritage. The display boards were mounted on wooden posts and set up in three

places: beside Hell Gate, beside Heaven Gate, and at the beginning of the track leading up onto the hillfort from the road that skirts the northeastern edge of the hill.

4 EXCAVATION RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and ground conditions

4.1.1 The site is located on rhyolite bedrock. Natural soil cover is minimal. The ground is typically well-drained, particularly on the shoulders of the hill.

4.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

4.2.1 No archaeologically significant deposits were revealed, either in the area excavation or the drain trench and soakaway.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Description of deposits

The area excavation (Fig. 3)

- 5.1.1 The rhyolite bedrock (101) was revealed across the entire area, although it had been cut by the construction of the existing radio station against the southwest side of the trench.
- 5.1.2 Topsoil and a rudimentary turf (100), averaging 0.20m deep, sealed the bedrock (101).
- 5.1.3 A shallow linear feature (102 - also recorded as 108), oriented approximately NNE-SSW was identified across the area, apparently terraced into the slope of the hill, cutting the topsoil (100). It measured *c* 16 m in length x *c* 2.5 m in width, although as the northern edge of the feature blended into the downslope, the width of the feature was difficult to determine accurately.
- 5.1.4 The lower fill of feature 102/108 consisted of a layer of compacted gravel (107), up to 0.20 m deep, from which a fragment of modern brick was recovered.
- 5.1.5 Layer 107 was overlaid in places by lenses of eroded natural bedrock (104) and sealed by a layer of silty clay (106) up to 0.6 m deep against the eastern (upslope) edge of feature 102/108. This effectively restored the even contour of the slope. A few fragments of modern ceramics were noted in this deposit, but were not retained. A vestigial turf had accreted on the surface of deposit 106.

The drain trench (Fig. 2)

- 5.1.6 The excavated drain trench averaged 0.5 m deep x 0.4 m wide. At its northern end a small adjoining area (approximately 2 m x 1 m) was excavated (to a similar depth) to form a soakaway. The lowest deposit, exposed at various points along the trench, was a mix of sandy clay and stone pieces (5, 6 and 8) overlaid in places by a dark brown soil layer (4) probably a former topsoil. This in turn was overlaid by modern make

up layers 3 and 2, consisting of redeposited greyish clay and loose stone chippings. These deposits were finally sealed by the modern topsoil (1).

5.2 Finds

5.2.1 No finds of archaeological significance were recovered from any of the revealed deposits.

5.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

5.3.1 No deposits were exposed that were considered to have potential for the survival of significant environmental remains.

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1.1 The terraced pathway exposed in the area excavation is evidently of recent construction. The absence of artefactual material recovered from the drain trench is undoubtedly partly due to the small size of the trench, but also suggests that either any occupation or structural remains have been eroded away, or (possibly more likely) that they were situated in more sheltered parts of the hillfort, for example in the lee of the ramparts.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Area excavation

Context	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Comments
100	Layer		<0.20	topsoil
101	Surface		-	bedrock
102	Feature	<2.75	<0.66	pathway
103	fill			same as 107
104	fill		<0.05	eroded natural
105	fill			same as 106
106	fill		<0.65	levelling
107	fill		<0.35	gravel
108	Feature			same as 102

Drainage Trench

Context	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Comments
1	Layer		<0.15	topsoil
2	Layer		<0.30	modern make up
3	Layer		<0.15	modern make up
4	Layer		<0.13	old ground surface?
5	Layer		-	natural subsoil
6	Layer		-	natural subsoil
7	Layer		<0.12	modern make up
8	Layer		-	natural subsoil

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

OAU 1998 The Wrekin, Shropshire. Scheduled Monument Number SA 96. Application for Scheduled Monument Consent Supporting Statement, unpublished report prepared on behalf of Castle Transmission International

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: The Wrekin

Site code: WREK99/WREK00

Grid reference: NGR SJ 63000829

Type of work: Excavation and reconstitution

Date and duration of project: 1999-2002

Area of site: c275 sq m

Summary of results: no significant archaeology

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Shropshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following entry number: 4490/4491



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Figure 1 Site location.

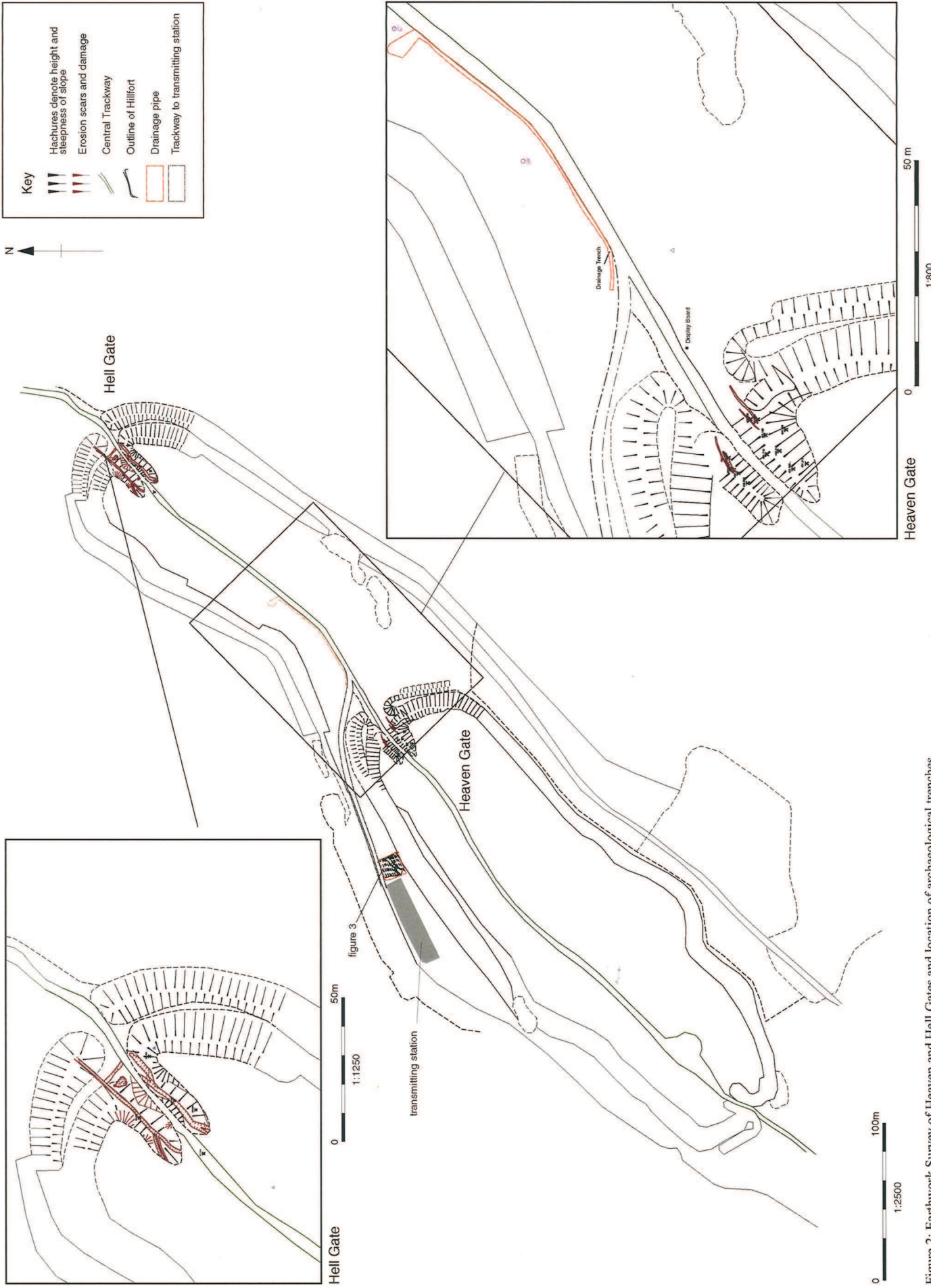


Figure 2: Earthwork Survey of Heaven and Hell Gates and location of archaeological trenches.

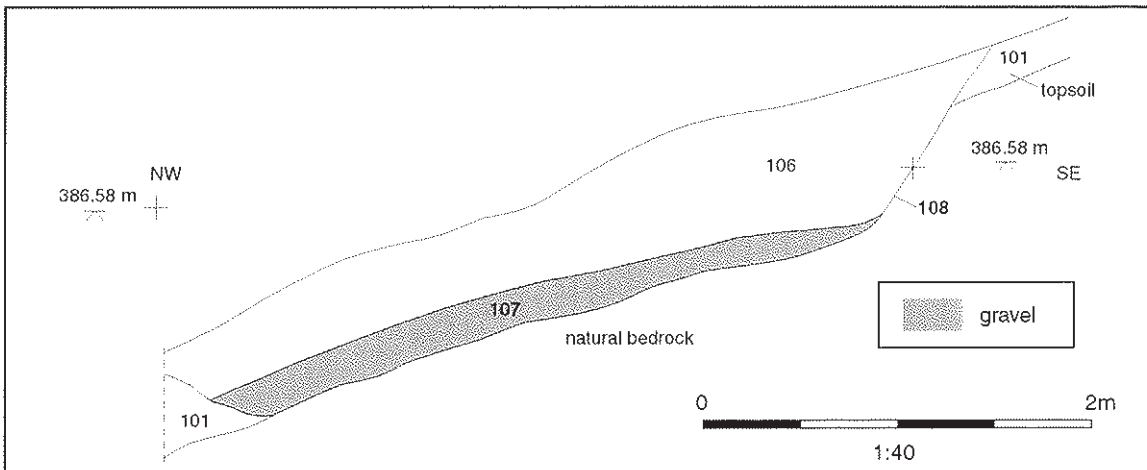
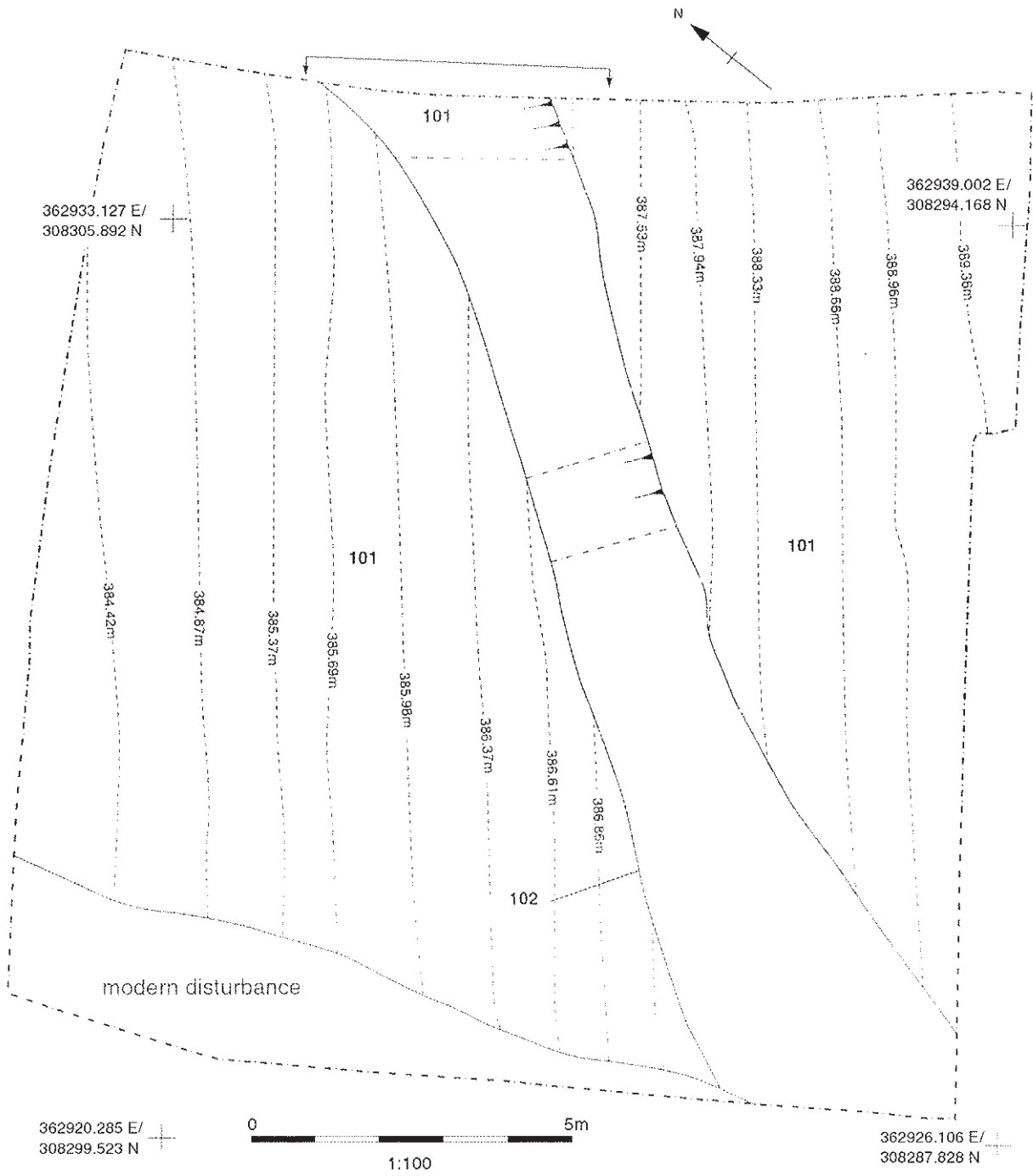


Figure 3: Plan and section of excavation area



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