

# LAND OFF DARK LANE, THORVERTON, DEVON

(Centred on NGR SS 9235 0216)

## Results of an Archaeological Trench Evaluation

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Prepared by:  
Simon Hughes

With contributions from:  
Charlotte Coles, Henrietta Quinnell  
and  
Cressida Whitton

On behalf of:  
Thorverton Parish Council

Report No: ACD1634/1/0

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AC archaeology

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Report Author	Simon Hughes
Contributions	Charlotte Coles, Henrietta Quinnell and Cressida Whitton
Checked by	John Valentin
Approved by	John Valentin

### Acknowledgements

The evaluation was commissioned by Alison Marshall on behalf of Thorverton Parish Council. The site works were carried out by Simon Hughes, Laszlo Lichtenstein and Tom Etheridge, with the illustrations for this report prepared by Leon Cauchois. Thanks to Stephen Reed, Devon County Council Historic Environment Team who provided useful advice prior to and during the course of the site works.

The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of AC archaeology and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

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## Summary

*An archaeological trench evaluation was undertaken by AC archaeology during June 2017 on land off Dark Lane, Thorverton, Devon (SS 9235 0216). The evaluation comprised the machine-excavation of three trenches totaling 60m in length, with each trench 1.5m wide. These were positioned to provide a sample coverage of the site.*

*Evidence for archaeological activity was recorded in each of the trenches, with this dated to the Middle Neolithic, more tentatively to the Early Bronze Age and perhaps also the Iron Age. The presence of Neolithic and potentially Early Bronze Age activity on the site corresponds with what had been suggested from an extensive record of contemporary flint scatters from the area, including the field containing the site.*

*Despite having sustained some degree of plough truncation, the Middle Neolithic activity (c. 3300 - 2900 BC) comprises a series of ditches and pits likely to represent evidence for settlement of this date. Associated finds recovered from the features consist of Peterborough style pottery, worked flints and deposits of charred material, which include hazelnut shells and cereal grains.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Archaeological work, comprising a trench evaluation, was undertaken by AC archaeology during June 2017 in order to provide accompanying information for a proposed application for the extension to the cemetery of St Thomas a Becket's Church on land off Dark Lane, Thorverton, Devon (NGR SS 9235 0216). The work was required following consultation with the Archaeology Officer, Devon County Council Historic Environment Team (hereafter DCCHET).
- 1.2 The site lies on the northwest side of Thorverton on land to the east of St Thomas a Beckett's Church and Dark Lane (Fig. 1, Plate 1). It comprises part of a wider pasture field bounded to the southwest by a row of residential properties on Eastern End and the Thorverton Village Car Park to the southeast. The site is situated at the end of an elevated ridge at around 60m aOD (above Ordnance Datum), close to the break of slope down to the Exe valley to the southeast and a tributary stream valley to the northeast. The underlying solid geology consists of sandstone of the Thorverton Sandstone Formation ([www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk)).

## 2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The lower Exe valley incorporates extensive evidence for prehistoric activity. Numerous artefact scatters and finds spots dating from the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods have been identified within the area. These are principally positioned on the base of the lower Exe valley and along the western ridge above. One of these finds spots, which comprises a Palaeolithic hand axe, is located within the proposed application area (Devon County Council Historic Environment Record reference MDV37281). A further two artefact scatters are positioned within the wider pasture field to the north (Bayer 2011, 74), while some 350m to the northeast, at the base of the valley containing the tributary stream, a collection of 31 Neolithic to Early Bronze Age worked flints was recovered (MDV1240).
- 2.2 In the wider area, the lower Exe Valley contains a number of prehistoric sites, many of which were first identified from aerial photographs and suggest the presence of a complex Neolithic and Bronze Age landscape. Among the identified sites are the scheduled cursus monument 2.5km to the southeast at Nether Exe (National Heritage List for England reference 1014144), the barrow cemetery at Upton Pyne extending

from some 2km to the south west, while further afield but in view of the site, the Neolithic causewayed enclosure on Raddon Hill (1016259) lies 4km to the northeast (Plate 2).

- 2.3** The Thorverton parish tithe map of 1841 shows little change in the site or its vicinity since that date. To the southeast, the current village car park is located within a former post-medieval stone quarry excavated into the break of slope (MDV1259). Dating from around the 15th century, but with extensive restoration during the 19th century, the Grade-I listed parish church of Thomas a Becket (Heritage List for England 1240595) sits to the east on lower ground, with its associated grave yard extending up to Dark Lane.

### **3. AIMS**

- 3.1** The aim of the trial trench evaluation was to establish the presence or absence, extent, depth, character and date of any archaeological features, deposits or finds within the site. The results of the work, as set out in this report, will be reviewed and used to inform any subsequent mitigation.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1** The trial trench evaluation was undertaken in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' document, Standards and Guidance for Field Evaluation (revised December 2014). It comprised the machine-excavation of three trenches totaling 60m in length and with each trench 1.5m wide. These were positioned to provide a sample coverage of available areas of the site (Fig. 2).
- 4.2** All trenches were located with a Leica Net rover GPS accurate to 1cm. The removal of soils within the trenches was undertaken in 20cm spits (maximum) under the control and direction of a site archaeologist. Stripping by mechanical excavator ceased at the level at which archaeological deposits or natural subsoil was exposed.
- 4.3** All features and deposits revealed were recorded using the standard AC archaeology pro-forma recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2* (revised August 2012). Detailed sections and plans were produced at a scale of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate. All site levels relate to Ordnance Datum.

### **5. RESULTS**

#### **5.1 Introduction** (Trench location Fig. 2; Plates 1-2)

Archaeological features were present in all three of the trenches and are described below. Natural subsoil exposed within each of the trenches consisted of a light yellowish-brown to reddish-brown loamy sand to clay with abundant gravels. It was overlain by a light yellowish-brown clayey-loam agricultural subsoil, then a thin dark brown silty-loam turf and topsoil.

#### **5.2 Trench 1** (Detailed plan Fig.3a and sections Figs.3b-d; Plates 3-4)

Trench 1 was excavated through topsoil (context 100) and subsoil (101) onto natural subsoil (102), which was exposed at a depth of between 0.1m and 0.55m below the existing ground level. The trench contained three probable ditches (F103, F105 and F109) and two possible pits (F107 and F112). These were all sealed by the subsoil. One sherd of prehistoric pottery of probable Middle Neolithic date and four pieces of worked flint including an end scraper were recovered from the subsoil.

Ditch F103 was approximately northeast to southwest aligned and extended across the middle of the trench. It measured 1.34m wide and 0.14m deep, with a gradually-sloping concave profile. The ditch contained a mid reddish-brown sandy-loam fill (104) from which a piece of prehistoric worked flint was recovered.

Ditches F105, F109 and pit F107 were intercutting, with ditch F106 the latest in the group. Ditch F109 extended north to south and measured 1.16m wide and 0.5m deep, with steeply sloping sides and a concave base. It contained a small tip-line of dark greyish-brown silty-loam that had common charcoal fleck, small gravel and occasional crushed quartz inclusions (110). A small quantity of charred hazelnut shells and charcoal pieces were recovered from a sample taken from the deposit. It was overlain by dump of mid reddish-brown loamy-sand (111) with abundant gravel and cobble inclusions. Six pieces of worked flint were recovered from fill 111.

Possible pit F107 was partially exposed. It measured 1.25m across and 0.26m deep, with moderately-steep sloping sides and a flat base. It was filled with a dumped mid reddish-brown loamy-sand deposit (108) that had abundant cobble and gravel inclusions. No finds were recovered.

Ditch F105, which cut ditch F109 and possible pit F107, was northeast to southwest aligned. It measured 1.06m wide and 0.2m deep, with a gradually-sloping concave profile. The ditch contained a mid brown loamy-sand fill (106) in which a small dump of charcoal-rich material was identified. A total of 10 sherds of Neolithic pottery and two worked flints were recovered from the dump. A soil sample from this deposit produced a quantity of charred hazelnut shells and a small number of cereal grains.

Possible pit F112 was located at the northwest end of the trench. It was irregularly-shaped and was diffuse with the natural subsoil. The possible pit measured 1.9m across and 0.09m deep with a gradual-sided and flattish-based profile. It contained a mid brown sandy-clay fill (113), from which one piece of prehistoric worked flint was recovered.

### **5.3 Trench 2 (Detailed plan Fig.4a and section Figs.4b; Plate 5)**

Trench 2 was excavated onto natural subsoil (202), which was exposed at a depth of 0.44m below the existing ground level. It contained two intercutting possible ditches (F205 and F208) and a possible pit (F207). A total of two pieces of worked flint, six sherds of post-medieval pottery and a piece of iron slag was recovered from the overlying subsoil (201).

Possible ditch F205 was the earliest in the sequence of intercutting features. It measured 1.6m wide and 0.28m deep, with a gradual-sided concave profile. The fill comprised a mid yellowish-brown loamy-sand (206), from which one piece of worked flint was recovered.

Possible ditch F208 was north to south aligned and cut across the top of ditch F205. It measured 1.9m wide and 0.16m deep, with gradual-sloping sides and a flat base. The fill comprised a mid greyish-brown sandy-loam (207). A small piece of iron slag was recovered from fill 207 as well as a sherd of prehistoric pottery and three pieces of worked flint.

Possible pit F203 was cut into the west side of ditch F203. It measured 0.86m across and 0.09m deep with a shallow concave profile. The fill comprised a mid reddish-brown sandy-clay (204). One piece of prehistoric worked flint was recovered.

#### 5.4 Trench 3 (Detailed plan Fig.5a and section Fig.5b; Plate 6)

Natural subsoil (302) in Trench 3 was exposed at a depth of 0.43m below the existing ground level. The trench contained a single approximately east to west aligned possible ditch (F303) located towards the southern end. Six pieces of prehistoric worked flint and three sherds of post-medieval pottery were recovered from the overlying subsoil (301).

Possible ditch F303 measured 0.42m wide and 0.02m deep, with a very shallow concave profile. It contained a mid brown loamy-sand fill (304) with common gravel inclusions. Three pieces of prehistoric worked flint were recovered, including a thumbnail scraper of Early Bronze Age form.

### 6. THE FINDS *by Charlotte Coles and Henrietta Quinnell*

#### 6.1 Introduction

All finds recovered during the evaluation have been retained, cleaned and marked where appropriate. They have been quantified according to material type within each context and the assemblage examined to extract information regarding the range, nature and date of artefacts represented. The collection of finds are summarised in Table 1 below and consist of worked flint, prehistoric pottery, post-medieval pottery and iron slag.

Table 1. Summary of finds by context (weights are in grams)

Context	Context Description	Worked Flint		Prehistoric Pottery		Post Medieval Pottery		Slag	
		No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt
101	Trench 1 subsoil	4	56	1	1				
104	Fill of ditch F103	1	1						
106	Fill of ditch F105	2	9	10	67				
111	Fill of ditch F110	6	26						
113	Fill of pit F112	1	2						
201	Trench 2 subsoil	2	13			6	30	1	52
204	Fill of pit F203	1	3						
206	Fill of ditch F205	1	29						
207	Fill of ditch F208	3	22	1	1			1	3
301	Trench 3 subsoil	6	4			3	68		
304	Fill of ditch F303	3	26						
Total		30	191	12	69	9	98	2	55

#### 6.2 Prehistoric pottery *by Henrietta Quinnell* (Plate 7)

There were ten sherds (76g) recovered from fill 106 of ditch F105. These are in a smooth fabric with sparse large inclusions of vein quartz and probably come from the same vessel. The slight indications of form suggest a vessel in the Fengate sub-style of Middle Neolithic Peterborough ware: some sherds have close set finger nail decoration which is appropriate for this style. The single sherd (1g) from Trench 1 subsoil 101 is abraded but of a similar fabric. The final sherd (1g) from fill 207 of ditch F205 is also abraded but of a different fabric with more frequent small inclusions. This probably dates to the 1st millennium BC.

Middle Neolithic pottery is still rarely found in Devon and usually comes in small quantities from pits or tree throws (Quinnell 2014; Quinnell and Taylor 2012). The largest Devon assemblage, still small in national terms, is that from Castle Hill, Honiton (Laidlaw and Mephram 1999), which contains both Mortlake and Fengate substyles.

### 6.3 **Lithics** by *Henrietta Quinnell* (Plate 8)

The assemblage, which consists of 29 pieces of flint and one piece of Greensand chert is all in fairly or very fresh condition. There are three tools represented: an extended end scraper from subsoil 101; a scraper from 207 with abrupt retouch on one lateral side and the distal end; and, a small scraper, possibly of the broadly Beaker/Early Bronze Age thumbnail class, from 304. With this possible exception, the assemblage could be all of Middle Neolithic date.

### 6.4 **Post-medieval pottery**

Nine pieces of post-medieval pottery (98g) were recovered from the agricultural subsoil (201 and 301). These are all South Somerset wares and are body and base sherds.

### 6.5 **Slag**

Two pieces of iron working slag (55g) were recovered from contexts 201 and 207. These are undiagnostic and not closely datable.

## 7. **PALAEO-ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT** by *Cressida Whitton*

### 7.1 **Introduction**

Three environmental bulk samples were recovered from deposits within ditch features F202, F105 and F109 (Samples 1, 2 and 3 respectively). The samples were processed by standard AC archaeology methodology comprising flotation/sieving in a siraf-type tank. The 250 micron flot and finer residues (2mm and 500 micron) were assessed for environmental potential using a stereo-binocular microscope (10-30 x magnification) and the coarser residue (5.6mm/) was sorted using an illuminated hand lens for artefacts and ecofacts. The results are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Results of the palaeoenvironmental assessment

Sample no.	Context no. & feature	Sample volume (litres) & % of sample flot sorted	Ecofacts - Charcoal - type of fragment eg trunk/branchwood (t/b) & size (mm) & - Charcoal amount Occasional x (0 - 25) fragments moderate xx (25+) - Charred Plant Macrofossil (CPM) eg Grain (wheat/barley type)	Potential for Radio-carbon dating? Y/N (type)	Presence/Absence of environmental ecofacts Y/N (type)
1	207, fill of ditch F208	7.5 Litres (100% of flot)	x - Charcoal, small trunk/branchwood fragments (5 – 10 mm size)  No CPM	N	N
2	106, fill of ditch F105	2.5 lts (100% of flot)	xx - Charcoal trunk/branchwood fragments (< 3 - 5 mm)  CPM – Hazelnut (HNS) – 25 + fragments  CPM Grain (wheat/barley type) x 2.5 (poorly preserved)	Y (HNS)	Y – CPM (HNS & ?Grain) & wood Charcoal
3	110, fill of ditch F109	7.5 lts (100% of Flot)	X – charcoal (T/b) fragments (<5mm)  HNS < 5	Y (HNS)	Y CPM (HNS & wood Charcoal

## 7.2 Comments

### *Sample 1*

Sample 1, taken from fill 207 of ditch F208, contained very little charcoal and no ecofacts. It therefore presented limited environmental potential.

### *Samples 2 and 3*

Sample 2 was taken from the dumped deposit within fill 106 of ditch F105. Despite its small volume, the sample contained a relatively large concentration of hazelnut fragments (25+) as well as 2 to 3 possible charred cereal grains and a possible legume or nut as well as charcoal. Sample 3 presented similar results to Sample 2, with charcoal and hazelnut shells present, but no grain.

Both Samples 2 and 3 demonstrate good environmental potential. The results from these suggest the presence of domestic/settlement related ecofacts, which if of Middle Neolithic date as the finds suggest, would relate to an early period of farming.

## 8. DISCUSSION *with a contribution from Henrietta Quinnell*

- 8.1 The results from the evaluation have established the presence of prehistoric activity on the site, with this likely to have been represented in each of the trenches. The features exposed were consistently sealed beneath an agricultural subsoil at a depth of around 0.4m to 0.5m below existing levels. The limited depth of the majority of the features suggests that they had sustained some degree of plough truncation.
- 8.2 The intercutting nature of the features exposed in Trenches 1 and 2 indicate the potential for phasing on the site. While finds recovered from the features in Trench 1 all suggest a Middle Neolithic date, the presence of the thumbnail scraper recovered from ditch F303, which has been identified as of probable Early Bronze Age Beaker date demonstrates that activity across different periods is likely. Furthermore, the presence of slag and 1st millennium BC pottery from ditch F208 provides additional evidence for multi-period activity. The limited quantity and abraded nature of the pottery recovered from ditch F208 makes it difficult to date this feature with any certainty, therefore only an Iron Age or later date can be suggested.
- 8.3 The presence of Middle Neolithic archaeological features is generally a rare occurrence in Devon. However, given the extensive quantity of finds recovered from the lower Exe valley and including the immediate vicinity, occupation during this period has perhaps been expected somewhere in the area. From the results, it is not clear what the ditches and pits recorded in Trench 1 and perhaps also ditch F205 in Trench 2 represented. Nevertheless, given the deposition of pottery sherds with charred hazelnut shells, cereal grains amongst other plant remains within the ditches, these are likely to reflect occupation of a type that has associations with the processing of food stuffs. There are few local parallels, however, at the broadly contemporary site at Castle Hill, Honiton (the only other site in Devon where pottery of this date was found in ditches) the finds were associated with two oblong ditched enclosures; features that are linked to mortuary practice (Fitzpatrick et al 1999).

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1 The evaluation has identified evidence for prehistoric activity on the site, with this dated to the Middle Neolithic and more tentatively to the Early Bronze Age and perhaps also the Iron Age. The recording of Neolithic and potentially Early Bronze Age activity on the site has corresponded with what had been suggested by extensive records of contemporary flint scatters from the area and including the field containing the site.
- 9.2 Despite having sustained some degree of plough truncation, the Middle Neolithic archaeology comprised a series of ditches and pits representing evidence for probable *in situ* occupation. Associated finds recovered from the features consist of pottery, worked flints and deposits of charred material, which includes hazelnut shells and cereal grains. From the portions of the site investigated, conclusions on what the nature of the occupation represented are problematic. Nevertheless, the addition of this site, which sits on a relatively prominent position above the River Exe and a tributary stream that flows through Thorverton, as well as overlooking important sites such as Raddon Hill, adds further information on the prehistoric occupation of the lower Exe valley.

## 10. ARCHIVE AND OASIS

- 10.1 The finds, paper and digital archive is currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, Bradninch, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ under the unique project code of **ACD1634**. It will be held until the need for any further archaeological work on the site is established and ultimately will be offered to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter under a pending temporary reference number, but if they are unable to accept this, then it will be dealt with under their current accession policy.
- 10.2 An online OASIS entry has been completed, using the unique identifier **289384**, which includes a digital copy of this report.

## 11. REFERENCES

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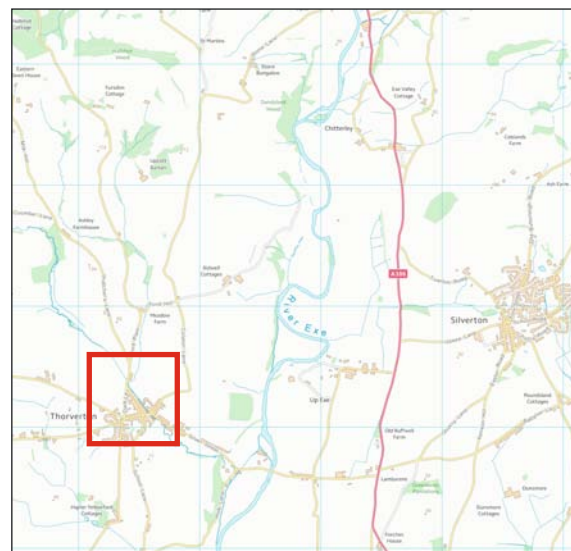
British Geological Survey Online Viewer, [www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk).

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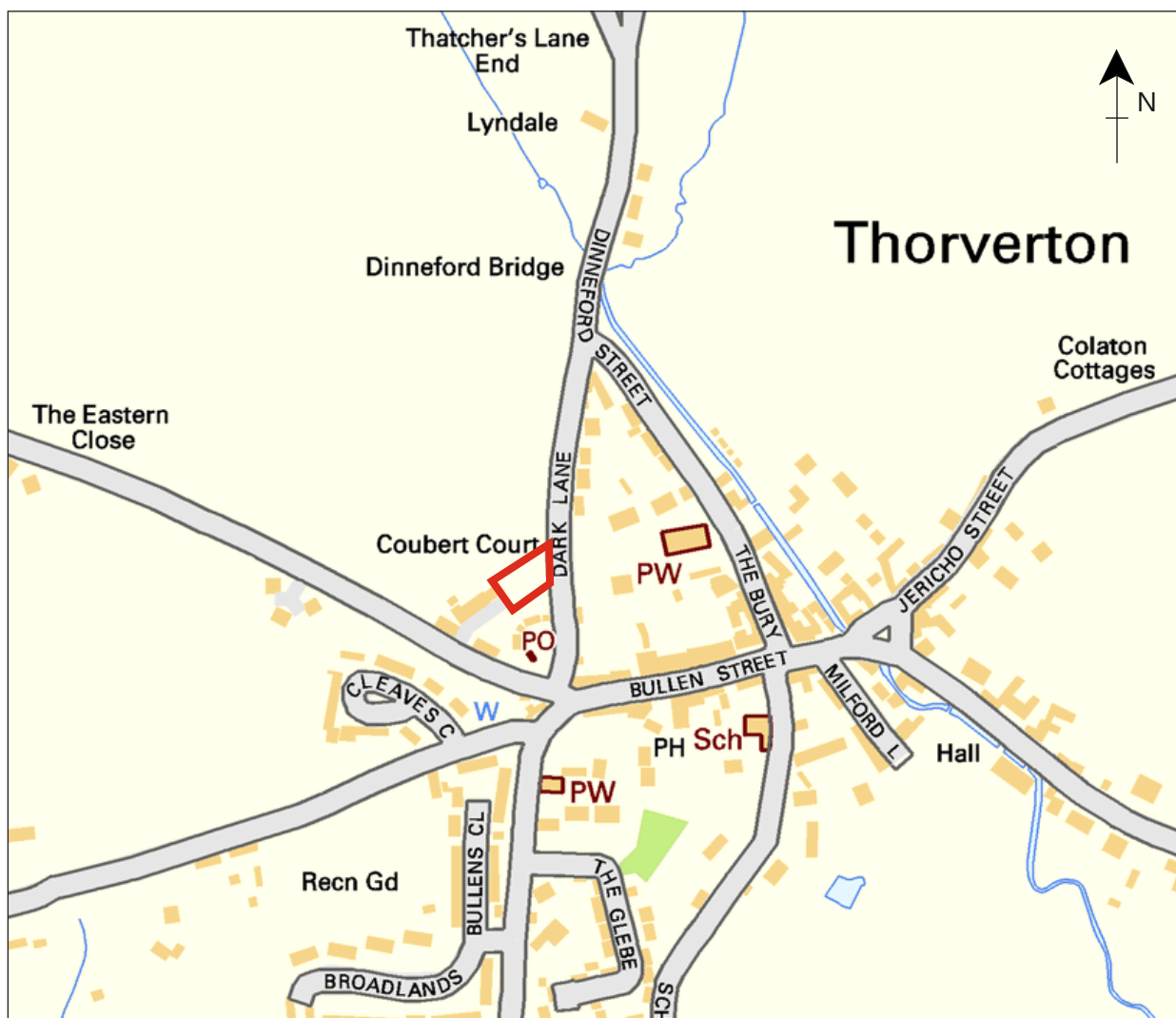
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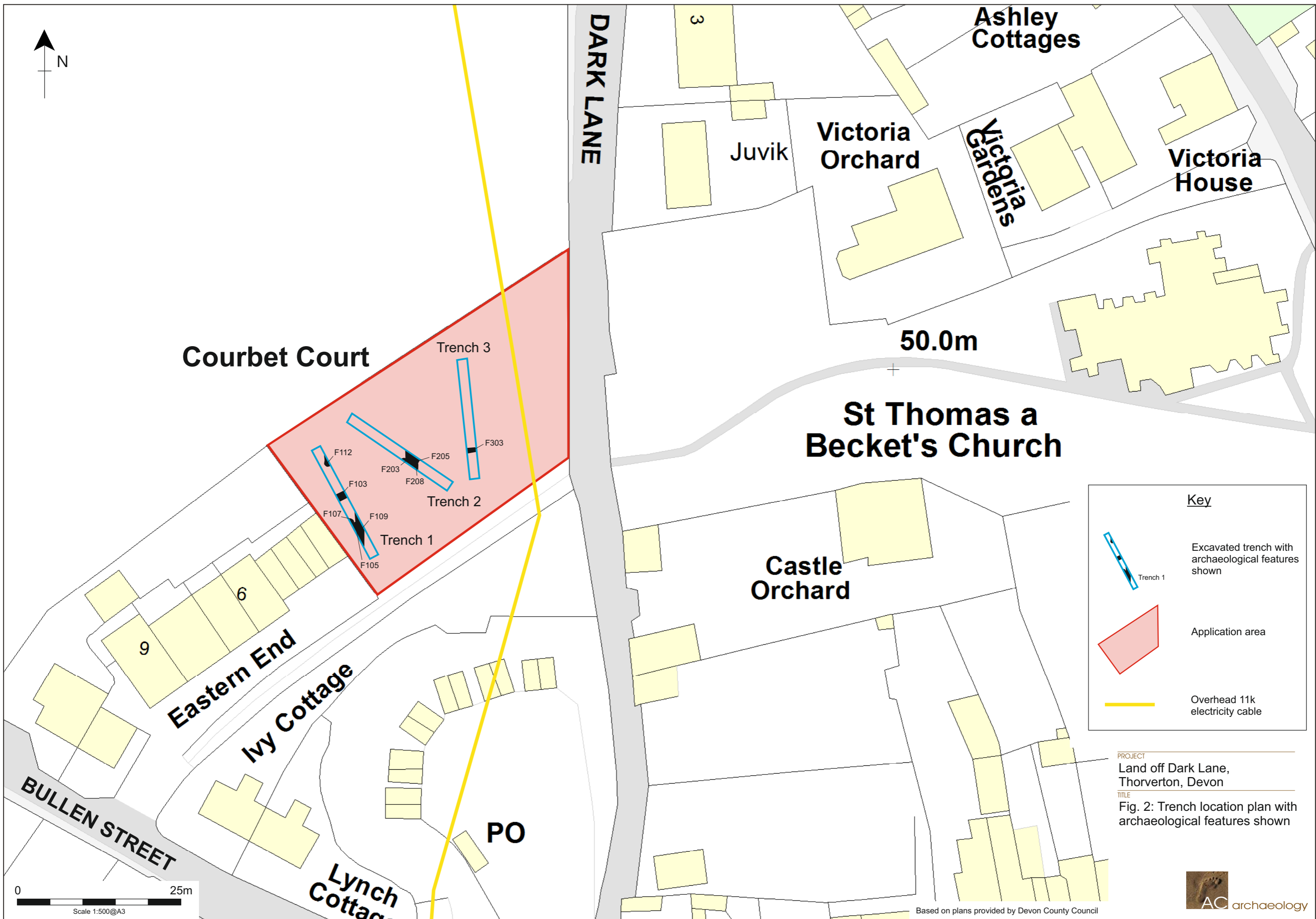
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TITLE

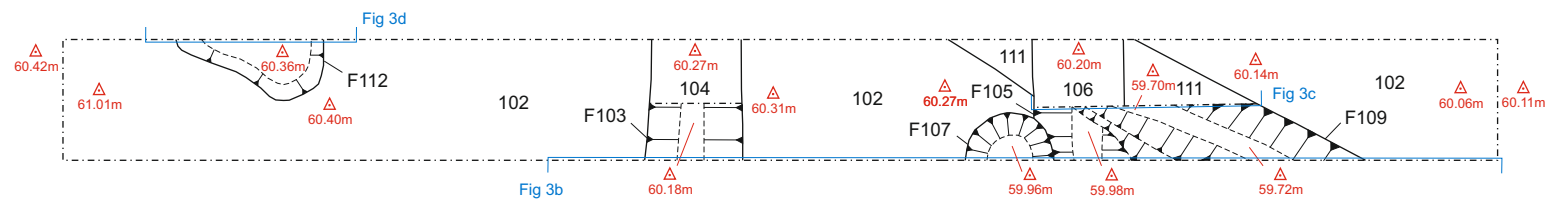
Fig. 1: Site location



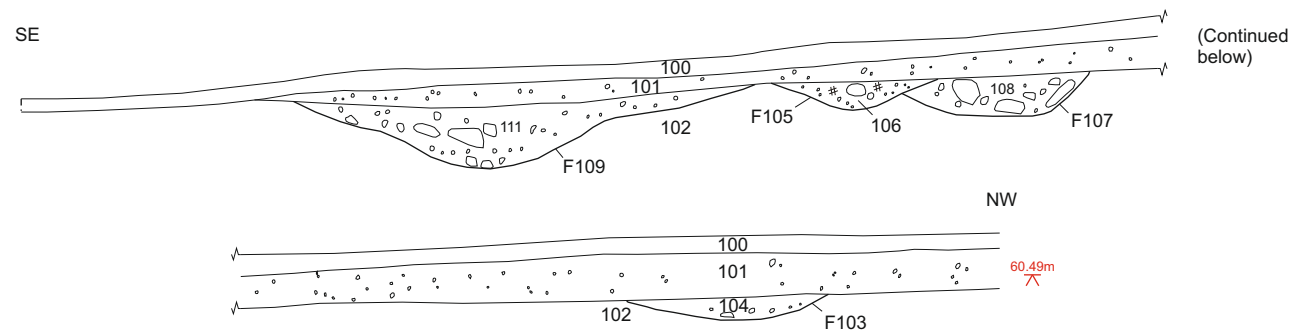
AC archaeology



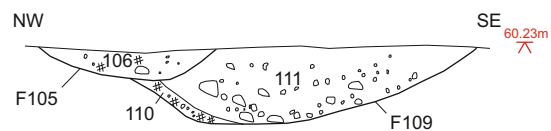
a) Plan of Trench 1



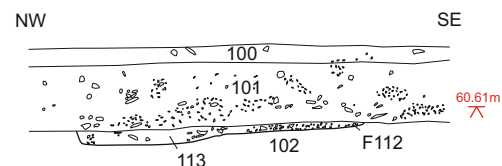
b) Section of ditches F103, F105, F109 and pit F107



c) Section of ditches F105 and F109



d) Section of pit F112



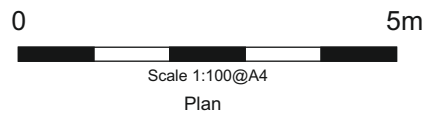
Key to all sections



Stones



Charcoal



PROJECT

Land off Dark Lane,  
Thorverton, Devon

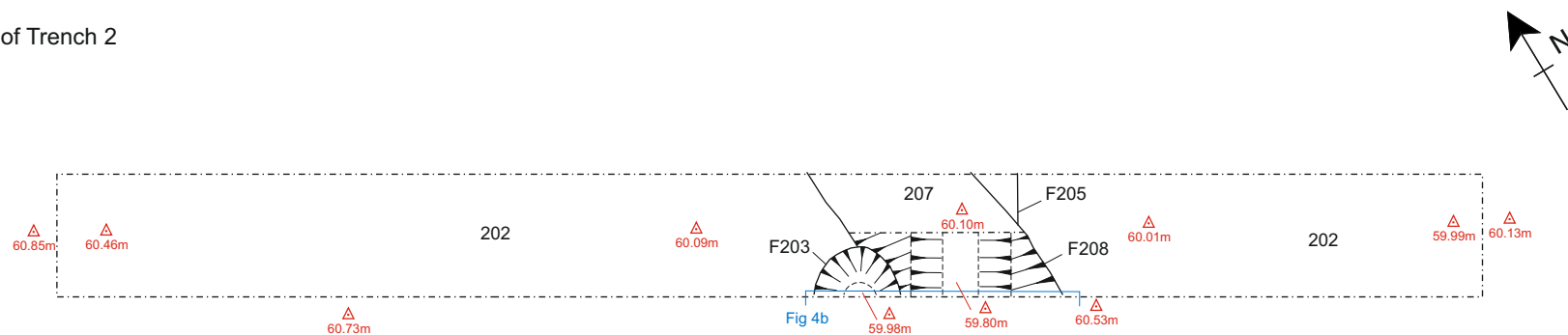
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Fig. 3: Trench 1, plan and sections

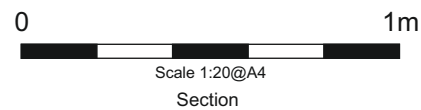
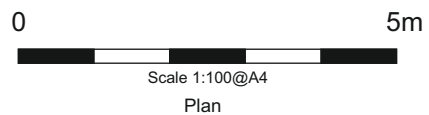
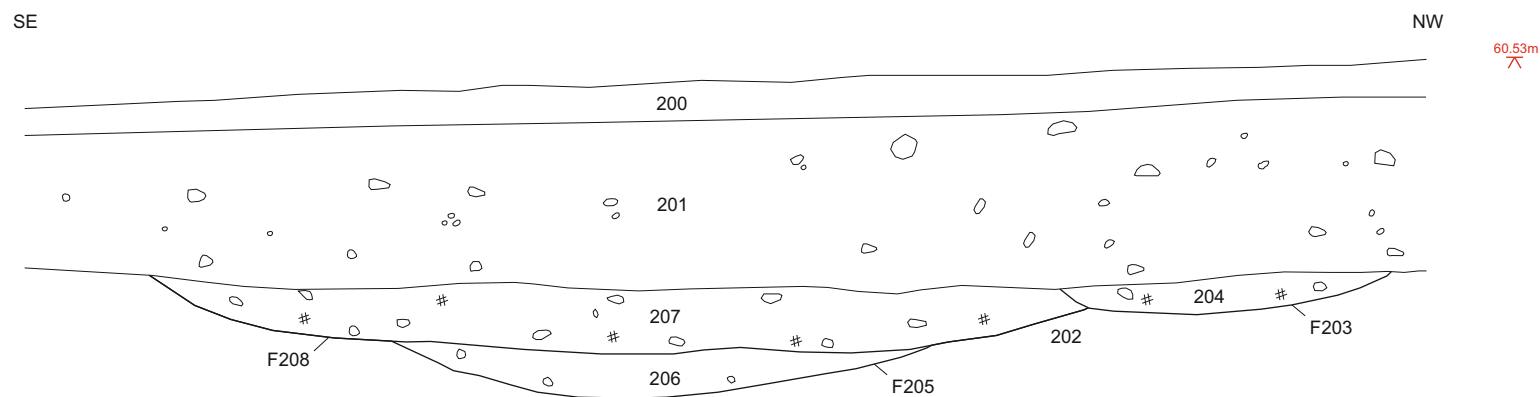


archaeology

a) Plan of Trench 2



b) Section of pit F203 and ditch F205



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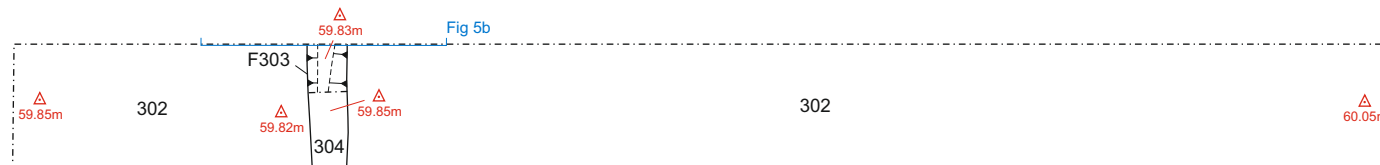
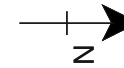
Land off Dark Lane,  
Thorverton, Devon

TITLE

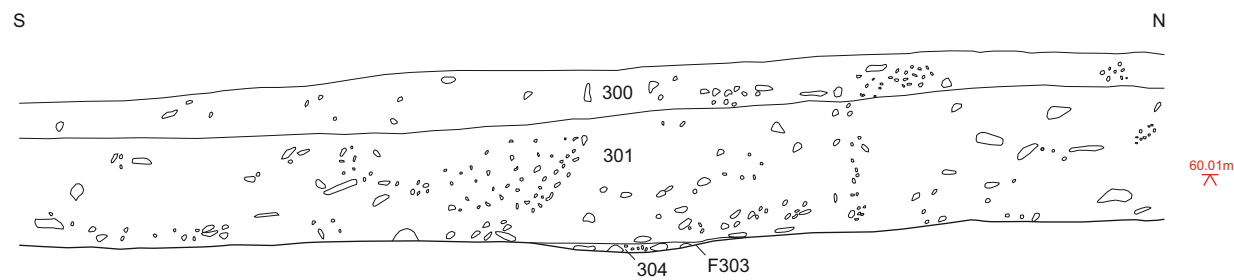
Fig. 4: Trench 2, plan and section



a) Plan of Trench 3



b) Section of ditch F303



PROJECT

Land off Dark Lane,  
Thorverton, Devon

TITLE

Fig. 5: Trench 3, plan and section



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Plate 1: View of site looking east towards St Thomas a Becket's church



Plate 2: View of site looking northwest towards Raddon Hill



Plate 3: Trench 1, view to the NNW (scale 1m)



Plate 4: Trench 1, showing ditches F105, F109 and pit F107. View to southwest (scale 1m)



Plate 5: Trench 2, showing ditches F205, F207 and possible pit F203. View to southwest (scale 1m)



Plate 6: Trench 3, showing possible ditch F303. View to west (scale 1m)



Plate 7: Middle Neolithic Peterborough ware pottery (scale 5cm)



Plate 8: Worked flint, including end scraper and thumbnail scraper to left and centre respectively (scale 5cm)

### Devon Office

AC archaeology Ltd  
Unit 4, Halthaies Workshops  
Bradninch  
Nr Exeter  
Devon  
EX5 4LQ

Telephone/Fax: 01392 882410

### Wiltshire Office

AC archaeology Ltd  
Manor Farm Stables  
Chicklade  
Hindon  
Nr Salisbury  
Wiltshire  
SP3 5SU

Telephone: 01747 820581  
Fax: 01747 820440

[www.acarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.acarchaeology.co.uk)