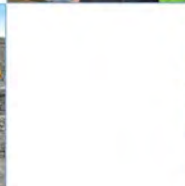
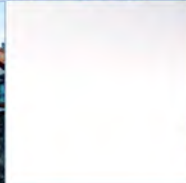


New Spittal Substation, Spittal, Caithness

Archaeological Watching Brief and Walkover Survey Data Structure Report

AOC Project 70767

September 2023



ARCHAEOLOGY

HERITAGE

CONSERVATION

New Spittal Substation, Spittal, Caithness

Archaeological Watching Brief and Walkover Survey

Data Structure Report

On Behalf of:	Environmental Resource Management LTD 6 TH Floor 102 West Port Edinburgh EH3 9DN
National Grid Reference (NGR):	ND 15875 56838 (centred)
AOC Project No:	70767
OASIS No:	aocarcha1-519505
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Date of Fieldwork:	2nd – 18th August 2023
Date of Report:	3rd October 2023

This document has been prepared in accordance with AOC standard operating procedures.

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Abstract

An archaeological watching brief and walkover survey was undertaken for Environmental Resource Management LTD (ERM) on behalf of their clients, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, in order to address the potential archaeological impact of the proposed development of a new substation and HVDC converter site, near Spittal, Caithness.

The site is located to the north of the hamlet of Spittal immediately east of the A9, with the hamlet of Achalone located immediately west of the proposed site centred at NGR: ND 15875 56838.

Archaeological monitoring work was carried out from 2nd August 2023 to 18th August 2023. During this time a total of 70 trial pits and 27 borehole locations were monitored. In addition, 20 test pits were excavated and monitored adjacent to the main trial pits to test bedrock stability, soil thermal conductivity, and percolation.

Two archaeological features were identified within Trial Pits 38 and 56 and comprised linear features of unknown date and function. Five upstanding structures were identified during the walkover of the development area in addition to those known in the historic record, including two buildings, a stone cairn, and a sheepfold. All features were recorded and left in situ and remained unexcavated. Trial Pit locations were moved to avoid disturbing all features identified.

Due to the presence of archaeological features, it is recommended that development avoid impacting upon the upstanding structures and that future grounding-breaking works within the development area are subject to archaeological monitoring. Final decisions on further mitigation works rests with the local planning authority.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Project Background

- 1.1.1 An archaeological watching brief was required by Environmental Resource Management LTD (ERM) on behalf of their clients, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, in order to address the potential archaeological impact of the proposed development of a new substation and HVDC converter site, near Spittal, Caithness. The proposed development site, hereinafter referred to as “the Site”, is located to the north of the hamlet of Spittal immediately east of the A9, with the hamlet of Achalone located to the west of the proposed site. The site is centred on the NGR ND 15961 56824. The works were carried out between the 2nd and 18th of August 2023.
- 1.1.2 The Site lies within the administrative area of the Highland Council, which is advised on archaeological matters by Kirsty Cameron, Archaeologist, Historic Environment Team, Highland Council. The archaeological watching brief was conducted in accordance with the principles set out in National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) (2023), PAN 2/2011 Planning and Archaeology (2011) and adhered to the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists’ (CIfA) *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (2020) and *Code of Conduct* (2022), and the Highland Council’s *Standards for Archaeological Work* (2012).
- 1.1.3 The objective of the archaeological works was to safeguard any buried or upstanding archaeological features by means of a programme of archaeological monitoring and excavation. Mitigation measures have been proposed ahead of development.

1.2 Site Location

- 1.2.1 The site is located to the north of the hamlet of Spittal immediately east of the A9, with the hamlet of Achalone located immediately west of the proposed site centred at NGR: ND 15875 56838 (**Figure 1**). The site has previously been in use as agricultural land and is composed of several improved fields that are enclosed by agricultural fields and woodland. The site is bordered by the A9 to the west and a gated farm track to the south. The Burn of Halkirk runs northwest/southeast at the north end of the site area. An existing substation is located c. 0.75km to the southwest of the proposed development.
- 1.2.2 The Site lies between c.75m and 90m above ordnance datum (AOD). The underlying bedrock is part of the Caithness Sandstone Group. This Sedimentary bedrock formed between 393.3 and 382.7 million years ago during the Devonian period. (BGS 2023). The superficial deposits at the Glaciofluvial Deposits comprising gravels, sands, and silts. These sedimentary superficial deposits formed between 2.58 million years ago and the present during the Quaternary period.

1.3 Development Proposal

- 1.3.1 The development proposal is for construction of a new outdoor 400kV substation, two new supergrid transformers, a new substation control building, and associated connections to the existing substation at Spittal along with new overhead Lines connecting Spittal – Loch Buidhe – Beauly. All areas of ground-breaking works were monitored by an archaeologist as a watching brief. During the excavation of 70 machine excavated trial pits, and 27 hand excavated trial pits dug in advance of borehole drilling on the same locations (**Figure 2**).

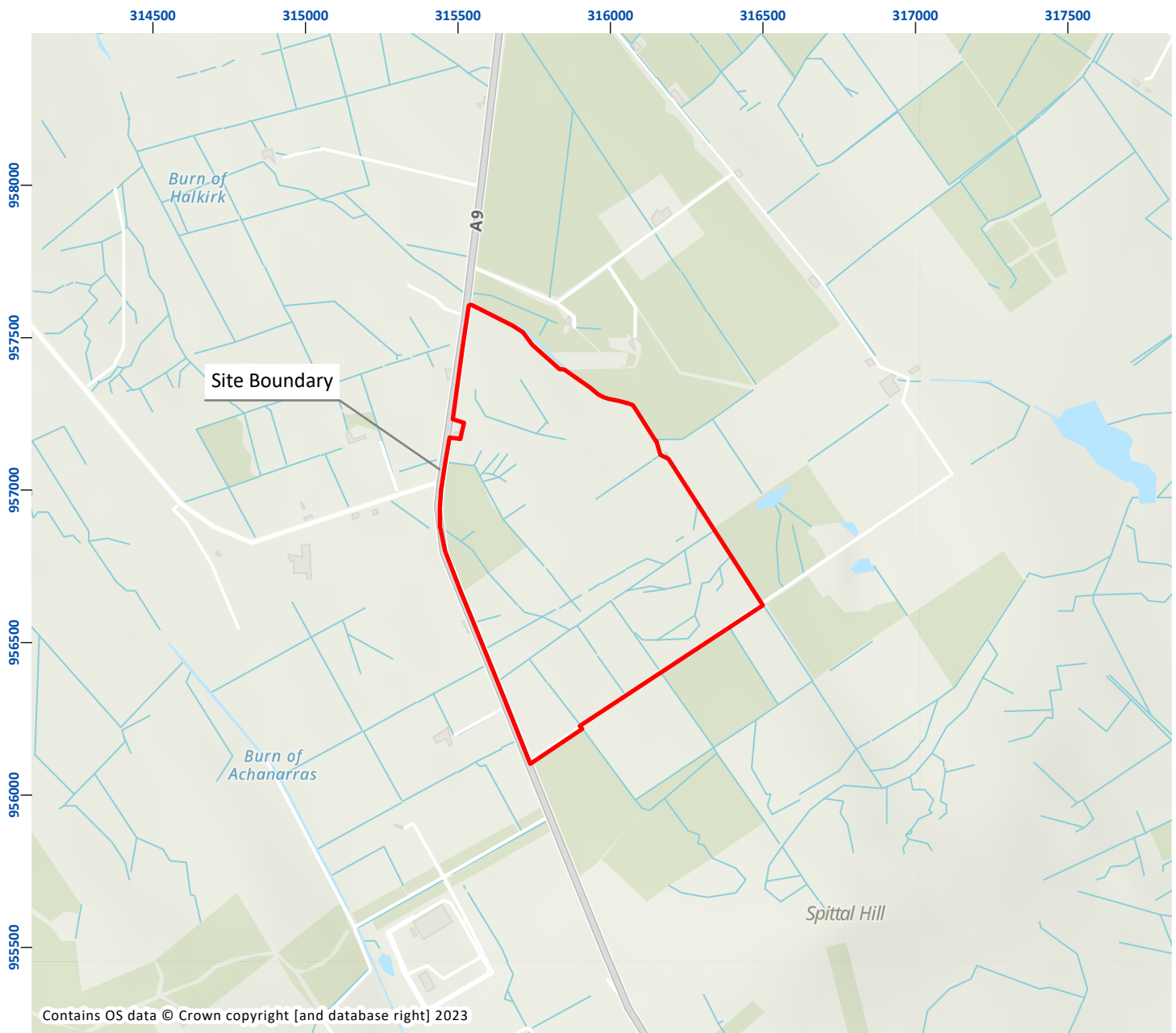
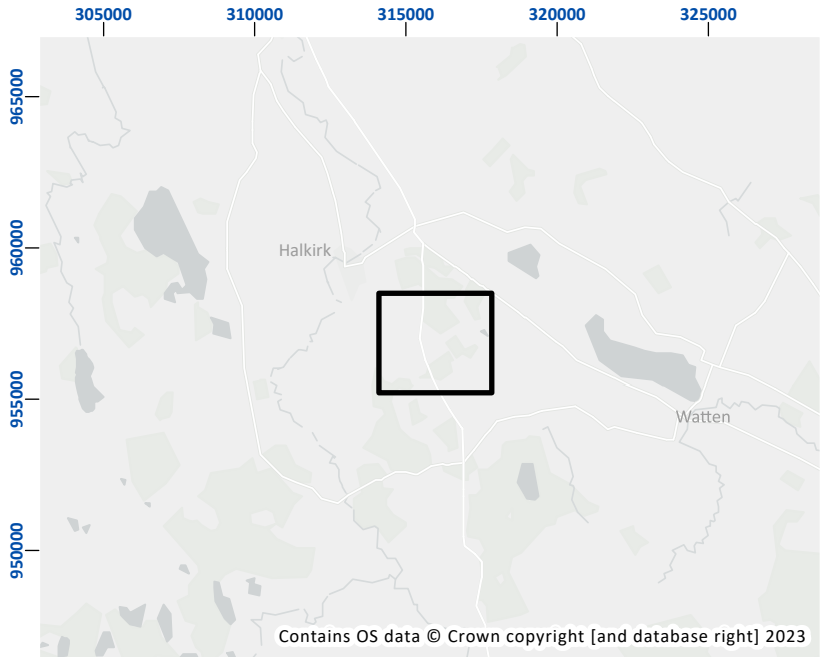
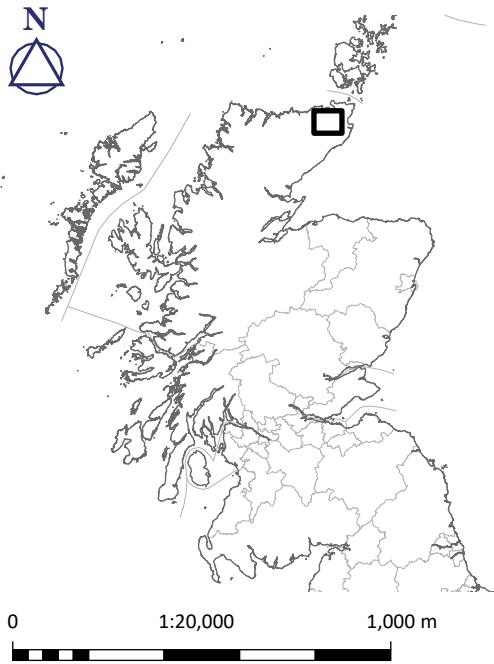


Figure 1: Site location plan

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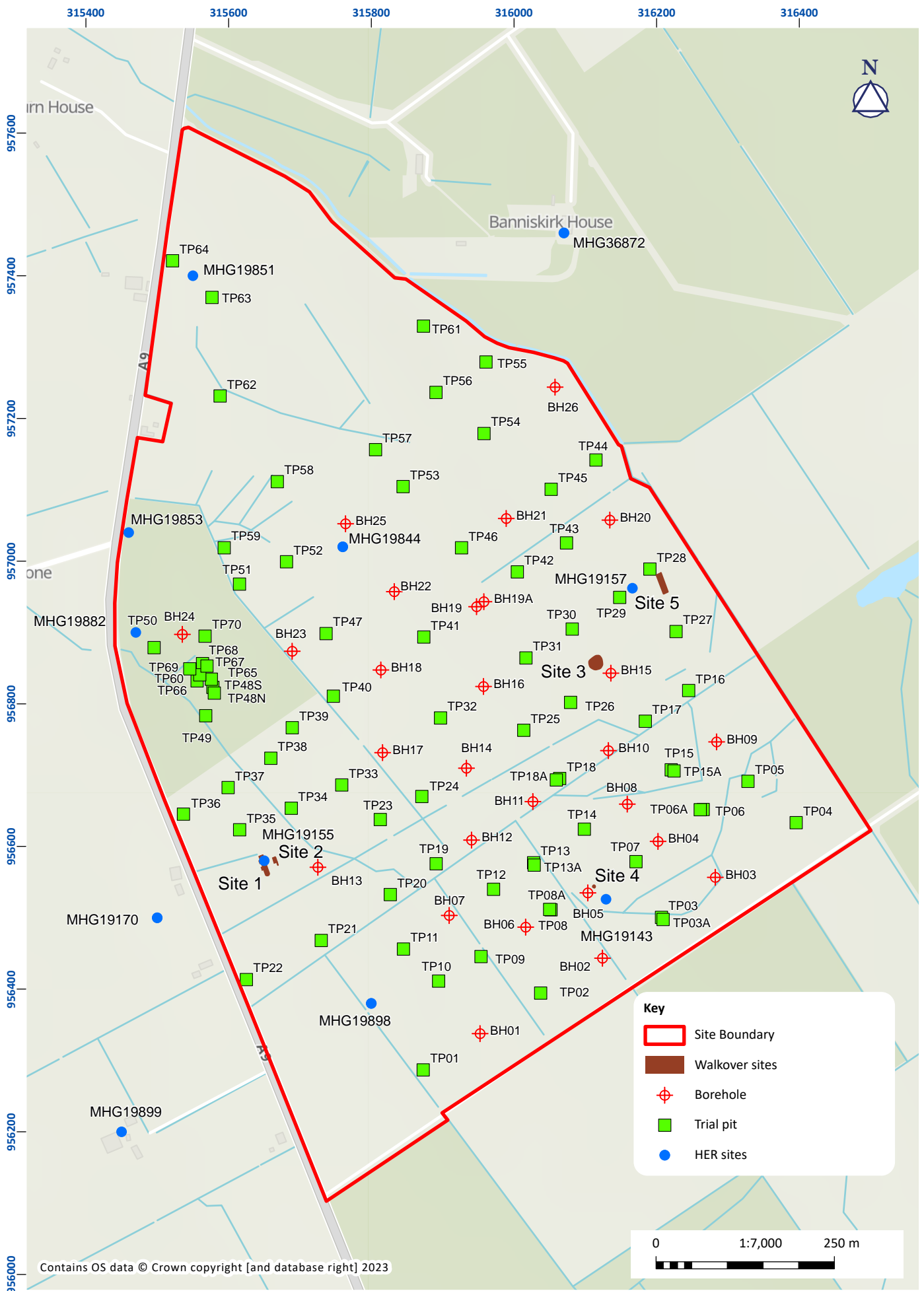


Figure 2: Trench location plan

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2.0 Archaeological Background

- 2.1 No previous archaeological investigations have been carried out within the area of the works.
- 2.2 There are a number of post-medieval farmsteads recorded in the area. Where they survive, most exist as upstanding structures, the remains of unroofed walls, and as turf banks. The majority of these structures that have significant upstanding remains are of the longhouse type. These are rectangular domestic dwellings constructed of drystone walls with lime mortar pointing and covered with a thatched roof. The location of *Achalone* farmstead was situated within the proposed development area (MHG19898). This farmstead was described as two longhouse style buildings: Building A aligned northwest-southeast and measuring 16m by 4.5m with three internally divided spaces and fireplaces in the southeast and central units of the building and a 3m by 3m annex joined to the south wall (Mercer 1995); Building B measuring 10m by 4.5m and aligned northeast-southwest with two internal divided spaces. These buildings are shown as unroofed structures on the 2nd Edition 6-inch OS map of the area (Figure 3).

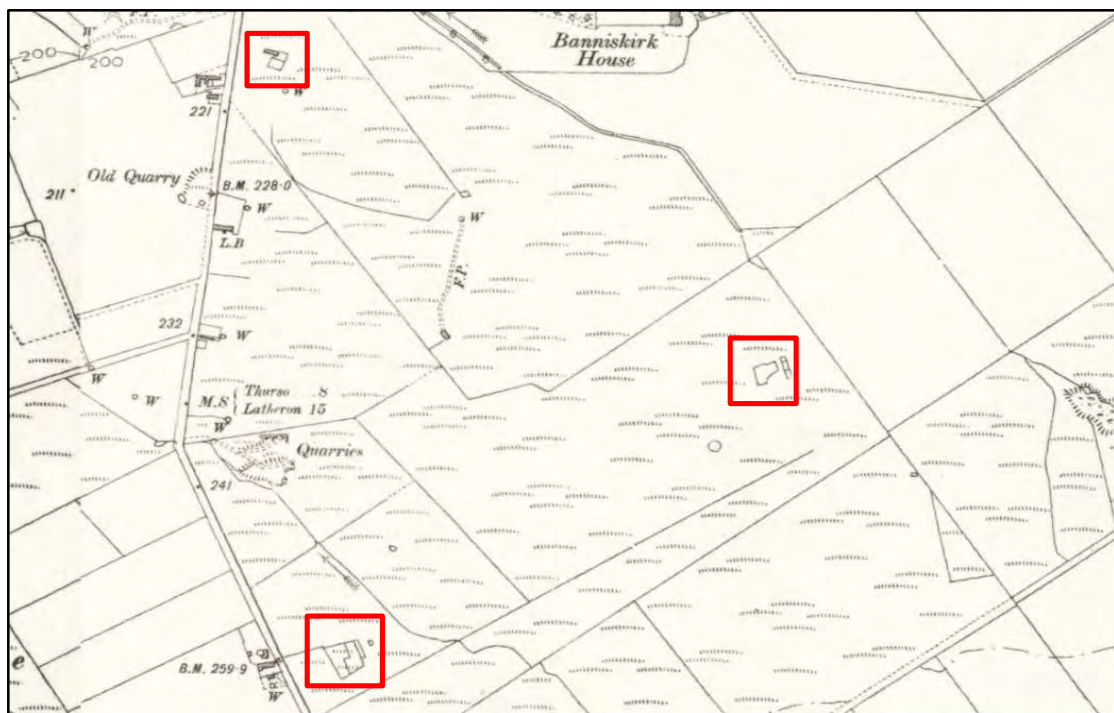


Figure 3: Extract from Ordnance Survey Map, 1907, showing several unroofed or partially roofed farmhouses in proposed development area

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- 2.3 This description is typical of the remains of post-medieval farmsteads, several of which had been recorded within the proposed development area, at sites referred to as *Achalone* (MHG19155, MHG19143, MHG19844, and MHG19157). There are a number of similar examples in the area surrounding the proposed development site, which serve as examples of the intensive farming activity within the landscape and likely remain today as part of the archaeological record.
- 2.4 Spittal Hill is located c. 0.9km to the south of the proposed development area (MHG39789). It is noted as the tallest point in Halkirk parish and is listed in 19th century sources as a traditional meeting place which fell out of use around 1827 (MHG39789). An annual market was said to be held there having either the name “Jamesmas” or “Georgemas Fair” (Ordnance Survey 1878). Another 19th century source identifies this as the gathering place for troops prior to the battle between Liotus, Earl of Orkney and his brother, Scilius, which took place south of Spittal Hill (Torfaeus 1866).

- 2.5 There is a low mound littered with stone which has been identified as a likely broch or cairn situated on the gentle west slope of Spittal Hill (MHG672) (MacKie, 2007). It measured 24m in diameter and was levelled to a height of 0.4m and rising to 0.9m at the southeast corner. There appeared to be a number of slabs dumped in the southeast corner of the structure. It was noted in 1872 that these mounds were referred to as “Tullochs” and many may have contained the remains of older brochs (Ordnance Survey 1878).
- 2.6 To the southwest of the development area there is a concentration of prehistoric remains around the area of Achanarras Hill (**Figure 4**). The first of these is a stone cairn, located c.1.1km to the southwest of the development area. It was noted as measuring 33ft north-south and 30ft east-west and surviving to a height of 2ft (MHG1335). RCAHMS noted in 1965 that a small stone shooting butt had likely been added to the cairn (Mercer 1995). The cairn currently appears as a grass and heather covered mound.
- 2.7 Immediately to the south of this cairn is the likely remains of a hut circle with the site name Achanarras Hill North (MHG1349). It was described as measuring 13m in diameter and 0.3m in height. At the centre of the structure is a small mound measuring 3m by 2m and surviving to a height of 0.3m (Mercer 1995).
- 2.8 Located c. 0.2km to the west of the Achanarras Hill North hut circle is the Benachie site (MHG1330). This comprised the remains of two cairns, one of which is surrounded by five prostrate stones forming a stone circle. The first cairn (designated structure A by observers) was described as a grassy mound c.10m in diameter and 0.5m in height, surrounded by five stones c. 1.8m by 1.4m and approximately 0.15m thick. The second cairn (structure B), located c. 35m to the west of structure A, was recorded as being 13m in diameter and surviving to a height of 1m (Mercer 1995).
- 2.9 Another set of structures, identified as possible hut circles, with the site name Achlure (MHG19896) is located c. 0.15km from the Benachie site. These were described as ill-defined structures appearing as low turf banks or shallow depressions c.6-13m in diameter (Mercer 1995). These are likely what is described as “Old Quarry” on the OS Six-inch 2nd edition map (**Figure 4**).

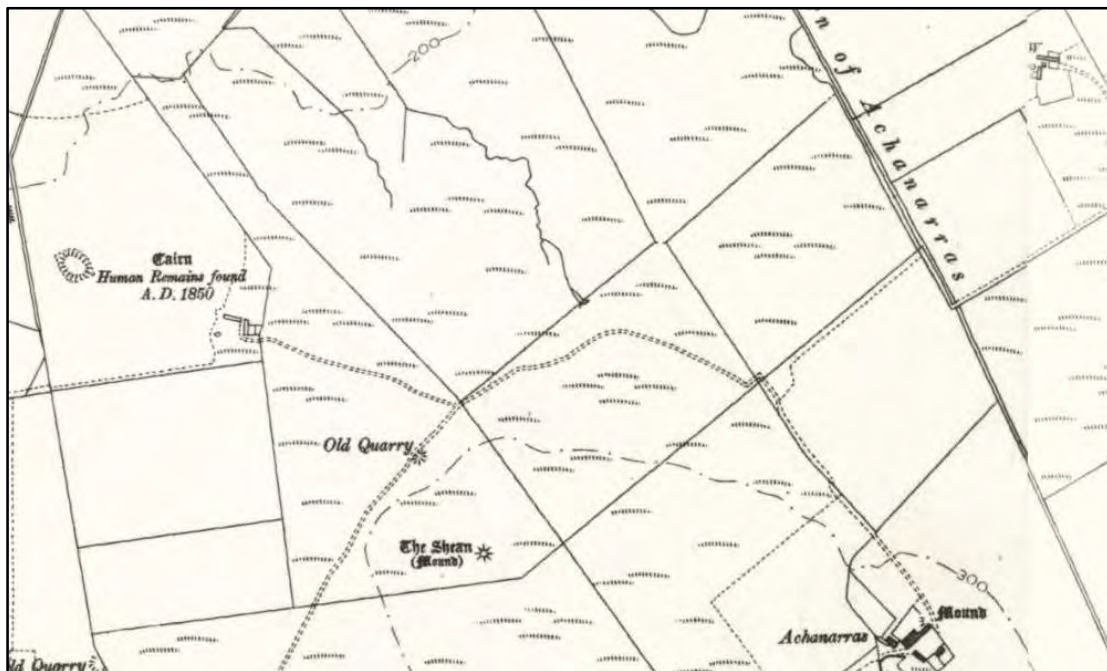


Figure 4: Extract from Ordnance Survey Map, 1907, showing prehistoric structures to the southwest of proposed development area

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- 2.10 The Achies East Broch (MHG1326) is the grass covered remains of a broch site located c. 0.25km to the east of Benachie Farm. It measured 44m in diameter with a c.10m diameter depression at the summit with no visible masonry apparent (MacKie 2007). The broch was partially excavated in 1850 and human remains were reported. This discovery was noted on OS Six-inch 2nd edition map.

3.0 Objectives

- 3.1 The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) defines an archaeological watching brief as *'a formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons. This will be within a specified area or site on land, in an inter-tidal zone or underwater, where there is a possibility that archaeological deposits may be disturbed or destroyed. The programme will result in the preparation of a report and ordered archive'* (2020).
- 3.2 The aims of the archaeological works were:
- i) To establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the proposed development area
 - ii) To remove by hand any overburden in order to expose the archaeological deposits
 - iii) To excavate, sample and record any features or to propose arrangements for their safeguarding, where possible
 - iv) To sample deposits for post-excavation work, including environmental analysis and dating
 - v) To identify the presence of any upstanding archaeological remains within the development area
 - vi) To make recommendations for further measures necessary to mitigate the impact of the development
 - vii) To make recommendations for post-excavation work that will require completion to fulfil the planning condition

4.0 Methodology

- 4.1 An archaeological watching brief was required during site clearance and excavation works to protect the archaeological and historical interest of the site. The development area is approximately 876.5km² in total (**Figure 1**). All ground breaking works were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist. Excavations of the trial pits were carried out using a mechanical excavator fitted with a c.2m wide straight-edged bucket. The borehole locations were excavated by hand to a diameter of c.0.3-0.4m to the natural subsoil, prior to the commencement of drilling. This monitoring occurred in order to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the site. All work was carried out in accordance with the Highland Council's *Standards for Archaeological Work* (2012) and the CIfA *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (2020) and *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation* (2020).
- 4.2 Where possible, trial pits were re-sited to avoid direct impacts to any archaeological features and deposits uncovered.
- 4.3 The location of the excavated Boreholes and Trial Pits were surveyed by Raeburn Drilling using DGPS. The archaeological monitoring was recorded using high resolution digital photography in order to record the process as well as any archaeological features or finds of interest. Written records were compiled utilising digital pro forma record sheets giving details of dimensions, soil compositions and any observations of note within the excavations.
- 4.4 A walkover survey of the development site was undertaken by an experienced archaeological surveyor. The development area was systematically walked, and sites were recorded using written descriptions and high-resolution digital photography, with site locations being recorded using ArcGIS Field Maps.



Figure 5: Extract from Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland*, 1747-52, showing structures possibly representing longhouse farms or their predecessors at Achalone

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- 4.5 Survey and recording methods recommended by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (2004) were employed.

5.0 Results

5.1 Ground Investigation

- 5.1.1 A total of 70 main trial pits and 27 boreholes were stripped of topsoil, exposing the natural subsoil (**Figure 2; Plates 1 - 101**). In addition to the main trial pits observed, additional test pits were excavated adjacent to trial pits 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 27, 28, 35, 44, 55, 56 and 61 to test bedrock stability, soil thermal conductivity, and percolation.
- 5.1.2 The topsoil (001) primarily comprised a loose/friable, brown, sandy silt with occasional angular and rounded pebbles and small cobbles up to 150 mm in size. The topsoil ranged from 0.10m to 0.58m in depth and averaged 0.40m deep across the site. Peaty topsoil was evident in the south and northwest areas of the site and ranged from 0.3m to 0.6m in depth.
- 5.1.3 The natural subsoil (002) comprised a primarily an orange-brown, gravely sand with occasional grey clay mottling. The exception to this was the old quarry along the A9. There the natural subsoil had been replaced with quarry backfill, including agricultural waste and coal tar, sitting directly on bedrock.
- 5.1.4 Two possible features were identified within trial pits 38 and 56 (**Figure 2; Plates 65, 85**). Once the feature locations were recorded, the trial pits were backfilled and extended to avoid disturbing the features. Trial Pit 38 contained a N-S aligned linear feature measuring 0.64m wide and 4.4m in length. The fill consisted of a mid-dark brown-grey silty sand with occasional angular stone inclusions. Trial Pit 56 contained an E-W aligned linear feature measuring 0.64m wide and crossing the extent of the trial pit. The fill consisted of dark grey-brown sandy clay and investigation of the southern extent revealed a steep edge. The function and date of these is unknown but it is likely that the linear feature in Trial Pit 38 represents a drainage channel.
- 5.1.5 Stone filled field drains were identified within Trial Pits 33 and 44, along with a drainage ditch within Trial Pit 62. Trial Pits 44 and 62 were extended to avoid disturbing the field drain/drainage ditch (**Figure 2; Plates 59, 73, 92**). The field drain identified in Trial Pit 33 ran along the north edge and as a result it was possible to continue excavating the trench with a smaller bucket to avoid disturbing the drain. E-W aligned plough scarring was evident within Trial Pits 9, 10 and 57 (**Figure 2; Plates 8, 9, 87**).
- 5.1.6 Trial Pits 28 and 53 were moved from their proposed locations. Trench 28 was moved 5m to the west to avoid archaeological remains associated with MHG19157. Trench 58 was moved due to an underground bee nest located on the north edge.
- 5.1.7 Modern activity was represented by the presence of race track debris in Borehole 14 (**Plate 14**), as well as in quarry backfilling throughout Borehole 24 and Trial Pits 48, 60, 65, 68, and 70 (**Plate 98**).
- 5.1.8 No further significant archaeological features or finds were identified during the watching brief.

5.2 Walkover Survey

- 5.2.1 A walkover survey was undertaken across the entirety of the proposed development site. This survey revealed and confirmed the presence of archaeological features within the site boundaries (**Figures 2, 6; Plates 102 - 109**). During the walkover survey the locations of HER sites MHG19155, MHG19143, MHG19157, MHG19844 and MHG19898 were examined to determine the presence/absence of remains.

- 5.2.2 The remains of a building (Site 1) formed by a double-faced stone wall was located under grass and turf towards the western edge of the development area. Site 1 comprised a rectangular structure aligned roughly NNW-SSE, measuring c. 28m by 5m. It contained multiple interior compartments and the walls measured 0.6m wide and up to 0.5m high (**Figure 6; Plates 102 – 106**). The south end wall curved around the remains of a grain drying kiln (**Plates 104 – 105**). This site likely coincides with *Achalone* structure A (MHG19155) identified within the Highland Environmental Record and depicted on Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland* (Roy 1747-52) (**Figure 5**).
- 5.2.3 Site 2 was located c. 12m to the east of Site 1 (**Figures 2, 6; Plate 107**). It comprised a rectangular double-faced stone wall structure aligned roughly NNW-SSE, measuring c. 5.5m by 3m with the remains of a c. 5m wall extending from the southeast corner. The walls measured 0.7m wide and up to 0.5m high. This likely coincides with *Achalone* structure B (MHG19155) identified within the Highland Historic Environment Record (HER) and depicted on Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland* (Roy, 1747-52) (**Figure 5**).
- 5.2.4 Site 3 comprised an upstanding sheepfold structure located towards the east of the development area c. 36m to the south of the location of the Highland HER record MHG19157 (**Figure 2; Plate 108**).
- 5.2.5 Site 4 comprised a stone cairn located under a layer of moss and grass located towards the south of the development area (**Figure 2; Plate 109**). It measured 4m by 3m and appears to have been in place for quite some time. It was not possible to identify the type of cairn or assign a date to the structure. The cairn was located c. 44m NNE of MHG19143.
- 5.2.6 Site 5 comprised a rectangular structure aligned roughly NNW-SSE, measuring c. 27.5m by 6.4m (**Figure 2**). The structure was in a ruinous condition located under a layer of moss and grass towards the east of the development area and c. 135m to the northeast of Site 3. The structure is in a ruinous state, overgrown vegetation in the area makes it difficult to identify any internal divisions. This site likely coincides with *Achalone* (MHG19143) identified within the Highland Environmental Record.
- 5.2.7 Evidence of previously recorded HER sites MHG19155 and MHG19157 was still visible within the development area. No evidence remains of sites MHG19143 and MHG19844. Whilst no upstanding remains of site MHG19898 were identified there was a slight rise in the ground and the presence of stone slabs may pertain to the remains of a dismantled building.

6.0 Conclusion And Recommendations

- 6.1 The archaeological watching brief at the Site revealed a small number of linear features and evidence for agricultural activity, including ploughmarks and field drains, within the trial pits. It is likely that there are further remains surviving within the Site.
- 6.2 The walkover survey of the site revealed and confirmed the presence of five upstanding sites. It is recommended that the sites are demarcated and safeguarded during development. If this is not possible, mitigation in the form of evaluation and recording is recommended in advance of development in order to record the remains ahead of their removal/loss.
- 6.3 Given the presence of multi-period archaeology within and surrounding the proposed site, a controlled strip archaeological watching brief is recommended during all groundworks.
- 6.4 The final decision on further mitigation works rest with the local planning authority.

7.0 References

7.1 Bibliographic References

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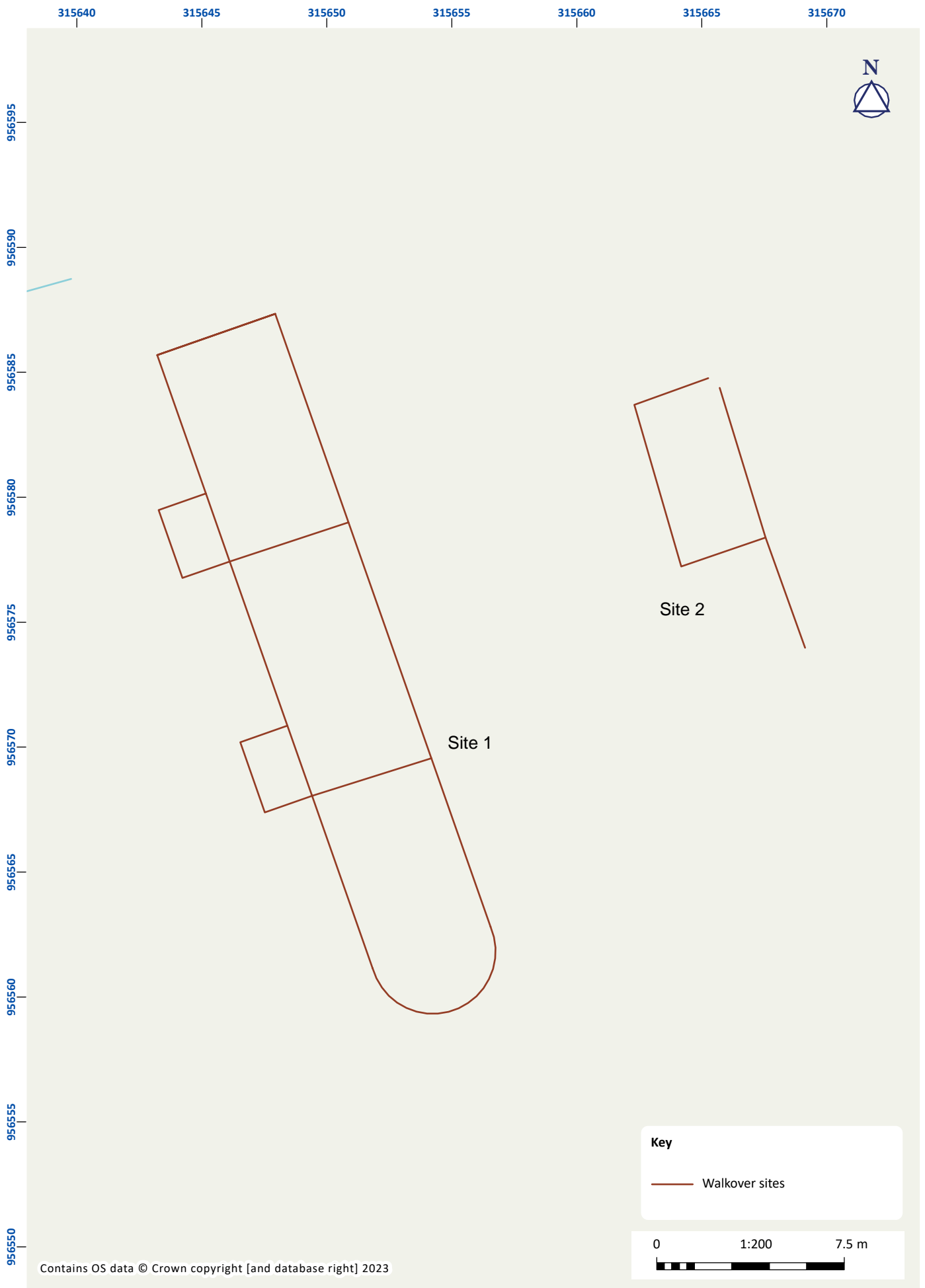


Figure 6: Detail plan of walkover Site 1 and Site 2

04/70767/DSR/06/01



Plate 1: General view of BH01 post-excitation, looking east



Plate 2: General view of BH02 post-excitation, looking south



Plate 3: General view of BH03 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 4: General view of BH04 post-excitation , looking west



Plate 5: General view of BH05 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 6: General view of BH06 post-excitation , looking west



Plate 7: General view of BH07 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 8: General view of BH08 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 9: General view of BH09 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 10: General view of BH10 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 11: General view of BH11 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 12: General view of BH12 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 13: General view of BH13 post-excitation, looking west



Plate 14: General view of BH14 post-excitation, looking west



Plate 15: General view of BH15 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 16: General view of BH16 post-excitation, looking east



Plate 17: General view of BH17 post-excitation , looking west



Plate 18: General view of BH18 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 19: General view of BH19 post-excitation - mislabelled as BH18 , looking east



Plate 20: General view of BH19a post-excitation , looking east



Plate 21: General view of BH20 post-excitation, looking east



Plate 22: General view of BH21 down to stoney natural, looking south



Plate 23: General view of BH22 post-excitation, looking east



Plate 24: General view of BH23 post-excitation - mislabelled as BH25, looking east



Plate 25: General view of BH23 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 26: General view of BH24 post-excitation. Excavated down to 1.1m, unable to reach natural subsoil, looking north



Plate 27: General view of BH26 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 28: General view of TP01 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 29: General view of TP02 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 30: General view of TP03 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 31: General view of TP04 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 32: General view of TP05 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 33: General view of TP06 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 34: General view of TP08 post-excitation , looking south



Plate 35: General view of TP09 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 36: General view of TP10 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 37: General view of TP11 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 38: General view of TP12 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 39: General view of TP13 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 40: General view of TP13 south facing section , looking south



Plate 41: General view of TP14 post-excitation - mislabelled BH14 , looking north



Plate 42: General view of TP15 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 43: General view of TP16 post-excitation , looking east



Plate 44: General view of TP17 post-excitation , looking west



Plate 45: General view of TP18 post-excitation , looking north



Plate 46: General view of TP19 post-excitation , looking north