Survey and Excavation of an enclosure near Raincliffe Farm, Low Road, Newby and Scalby 2025

Martin Bland, Chris Hall and Trevor Pearson

Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society
Report 66: 2026

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National Grid Reference (approx centre) TA 00240 89007
National Grid Co-ordinates (approx centre) 500240 489007
North York Moors National Park Heritage Environment Record No: 24337

SAHS Site code: OXP25

Summary

In 2025 the Society investigated a newly-discovered square-shaped earthwork in a pasture field below the wooded slope of Raincliffe Woods involving earthwork and geophysical surveys followed by an evaluation excavation. The enclosure has been partly levelled by ploughing, probably before the middle of the 19th century and survives as a low bank with a broad external ditch that encompasses the summit of a low glacial ridge. Traces of a possible stone surface predating the construction of the bank exist in the interior while the bank itself is formed of upcast natural clay. The section of ditch excavated appears to reuse a natural channel probably linked to a nearby spring. No evidence of occupation was discovered leading to the conclusion that the site was probably a livestock enclosure connected with the use of the valley as pasture. The site probably dates to the Iron Age or Romano-British periods, one of many examples of such sites in the local area.

Report 66

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Cover image: View of the excavation looking west.

1. Introduction

Between May and October 2025, the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society (SAHS) investigated a square-shaped earthwork in a pasture field to the west of Scarborough near Raincliffe Woods (NGR (centre) TA 00240 89007). Situated within the North York Moors National Park, the site is on the south edge of the valley below the steep wooded slope of Raincliffe Woods which rises to Seamer and East Ayton Moors. The high ground of Suffield Moor forms the north side of the valley (Figure 1). The earthwork occupies a slight ridge of glacial deposits in the valley floor at a height of 69m OD some 40m to the north of Low Road and the edge of Raincliffe Woods. The ridge is bordered by shallow natural gullies to the east and west that probably represent former stream courses, and to the north the ground falls gently towards a small wood called Carr Wood, a name which reflects the boggy and woody character of the area.

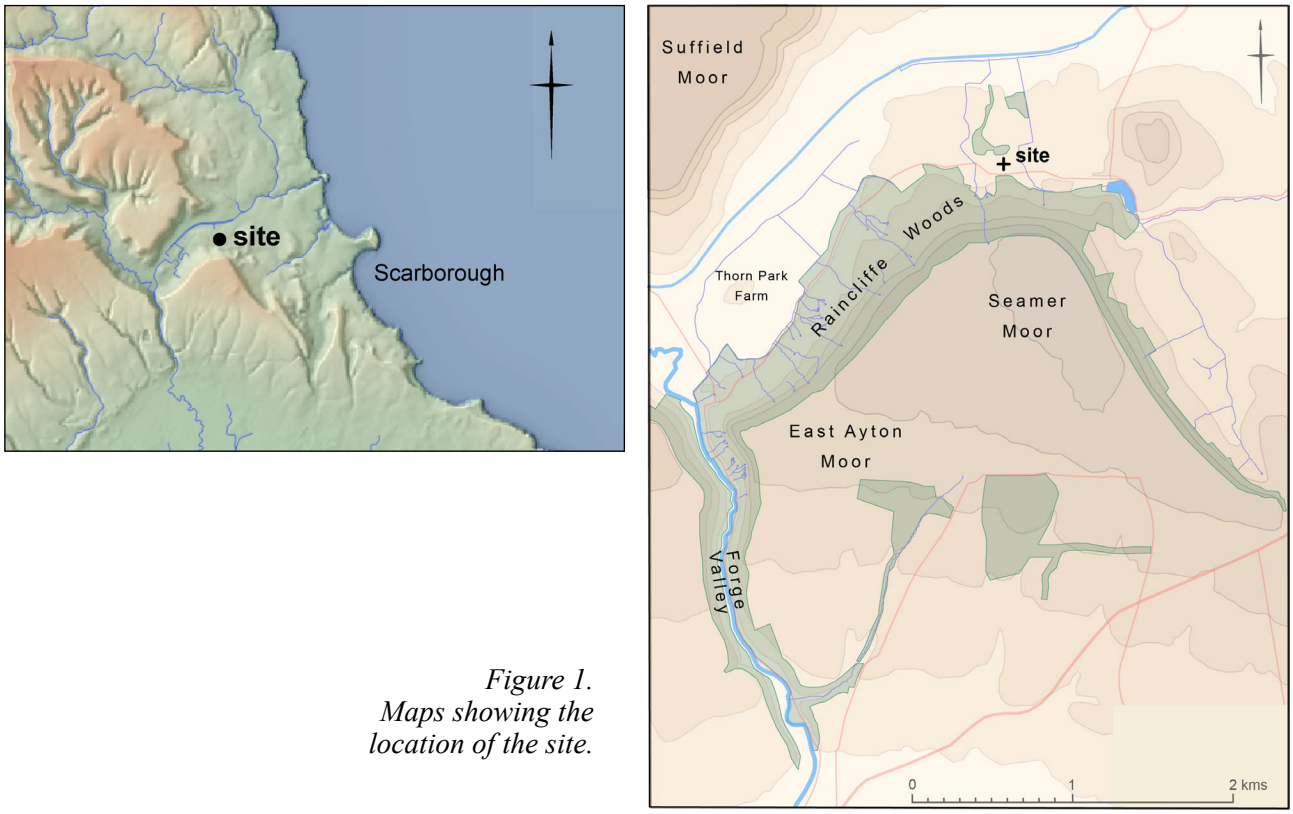

Figure 1. Maps showing the location of the site.

The earthwork was only recently recognised after the encircling ditch appeared as a cropmark on a Google Earth satellite image dated September 2018 and as a slight earthwork on 0.5m resolution lidar data published by the Environment Agency in 2023. The latter image clearly resolves the basic square outline of the monument (Figure 2) and the site is now included on the North York Moors National Park Historic Environment Record as an Iron Age embanked enclosure (Entry No. 24337). The lidar also shows a sub-oval earthwork in the southeast corner of the field that was surveyed as part of the project. Prior to that the only feature recorded on Ordnance Survey mapping within the field was an east-west track that passed close to the south of the enclosure. The track is shown on the first edition 1:10560 scale map surveyed in 1849-50 (Ordnance Survey Yorkshire Sheet 77 published 1854) but had gone by the 1895 edition of the same map (Ordnance Survey Yorkshire Sheet LXXVII.SE surveyed 1890-91). The enclosure earthwork is not depicted on either Ordnance Survey map which suggests it was no more visible than it is today. The on-line Historic England Aerial Mapping Explorer records narrow north-south ridge and furrow of post-medieval date across the entire field plotted from

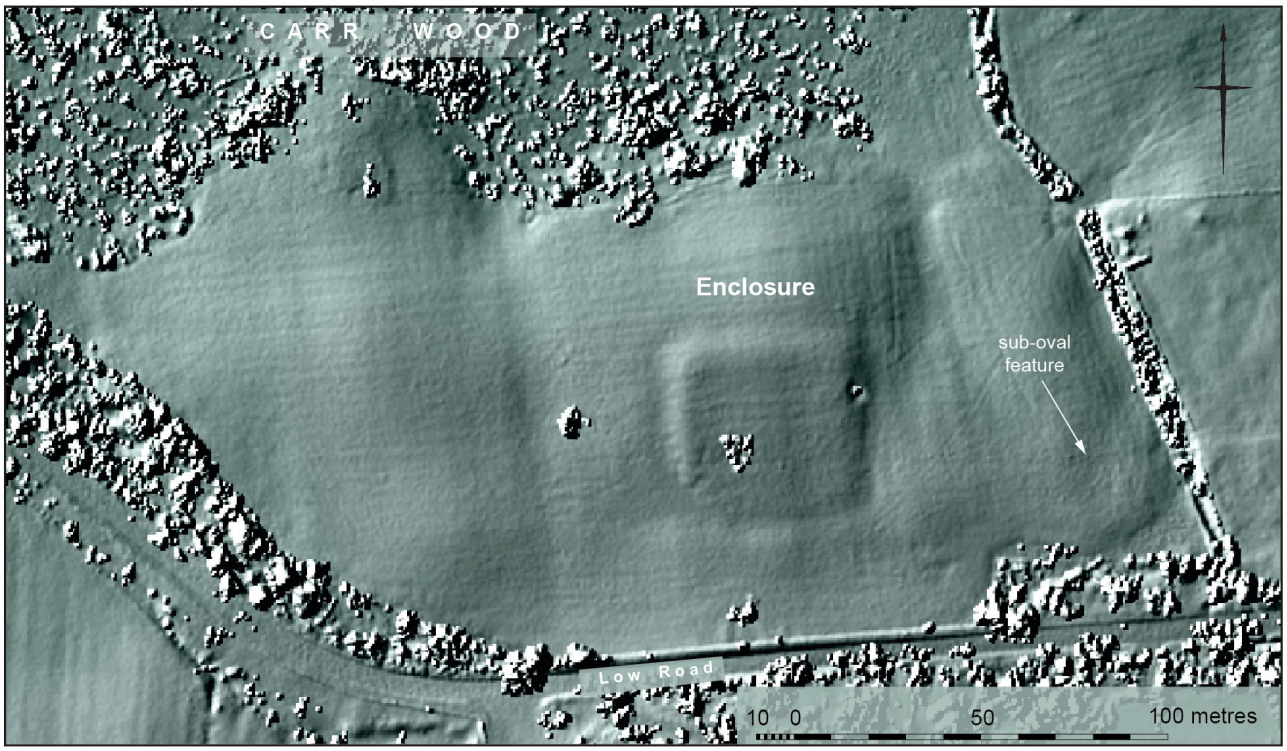

Figure 2. Lidar image of field. Image contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

an aerial photograph dated 17 June 1945 (Historic England Monument no. 1537573; NMR RAF/106G/UK/394 4030 17-JUN-1945).

The Society's interest in learning more about the site stems from the extensive survey and excavation work it has undertaken in the area during the past decade. This involved the discovery and mapping of archaeological and historic features in Raincliffe Woods and small-scale excavations and geophysical survey towards the west end of the valley at Thorn Park Farm (Pearson 2018 & 2022). A picture is starting to emerge from this work of how the landscape has evolved over several thousand years with the present site being another element of that story.

Both the owner of the field and the farmer gave permission for the SAHS to undertake earthwork and geophysical surveys of the monument in the summer of 2025. The project began with an earthwork survey of the enclosure in May followed in August by a resistivity survey of the site. Permission was then granted for the excavation which took place over six consecutive days in October. The opportunity was also taken in October to survey the sub-oval earthwork in the southeast corner of the field seen on the lidar image. The Fridaythorpe Fimber Wetwang Archaeological Project (FFWAP) kindly undertook a magnetometer survey of the enclosure along with an adjacent area of high ground to the west and the earthwork in the southeast corner of the field.

The earthwork survey was undertaken using a Topcon GTS-720 electronic theodolite and a Trimble R12i differential GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System) which was also used to locate the excavation trench and survey results on to Ordnance Survey National Grid. A single sensor Geoscan Research FM36 Fluxgate gradiometer was used for the magnetometry survey and a Tar-3 resistance meter for the resistivity survey logging at 0.5m intervals.

2. The Enclosure

2.1 Earthwork survey

The enclosure sits in a gently undulating landscape of glacial ridges, hummocks and channels that characterises this part of the valley floor (Figure 3). The undulating landform forms a 'shoulder' between the steeply rising land to the south and the lower, less undulating land to the north which before 19th century drainage works were carried out must have been wet and boggy carr lands as reflected in the name 'The Carr' on the first edition OS map surveyed in 1849-50. The enclosure occupies a favourable well-drained position, a locational advantage reflected in the later siting of

Figure 3. View of the north side of the enclosure with the earthwork visible as a slight rise immediately beyond the two figures.

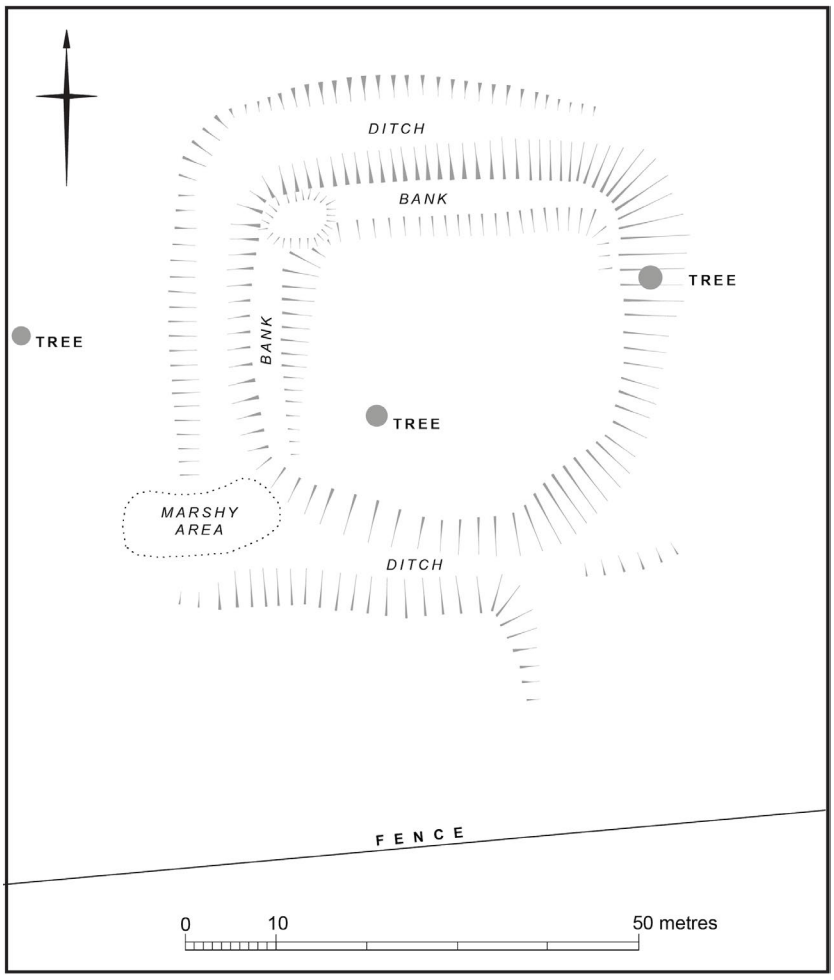

Figure 4. Earthwork survey of the enclosure.

Raincliffe Farm nearby. The site is now under pasture but previous ploughing accounts for the rounded and smoothed appearance of the earthworks. At the time of the survey there were two small hawthorn trees growing on the enclosure, one on the side of the eastern ditch and the second in the interior, with a third tree some distance to the west.

The enclosure comprises the partial remains of a bank and the more extensive remains of an external ditch which together define a roughly square-shaped area. The enclosure has three straight sides, on the north, west and east, while the south side bows out slightly (Figure 4). The external ditch is clearly visible on the north, east and south sides where it is around 8-10m wide and up to 0.4m deep. On the east side only the inner face of the ditch is clearly visible on the ground though the full width is apparent on the lidar image. The height of the inner face of the ditch on the north and west is accentuated by the presence of a slight internal bank on these two sides, up to 7m wide and 0.4m high but there is no visible trace of the bank on the other two sides, probably because of plough damage. Were the bank complete, the area enclosed would be approximately 27m across east-west and 30m north-south. There are no earthworks evident within the interior although slight undulations in the ground surface along the top of the trench were noted during the course of the excavation and are probably plough furrows. At the northwest corner of the enclosure a slight mound overlying the bank is the remains of a fairly recent dump identified by the farmer. There is no obvious entrance into the enclosure though the survey noted a slight oval depression at the southwest corner possibly caused by erosion, suggesting a point of access. A marked vegetation change indicates this depression is wetter than its surroundings suggesting a spring in the vicinity.

2.2 Resistivity survey

The survey covered an area of 90m x 60m to encompass the enclosure and exterior areas to the east, west and south (Figure 5). The results clearly show the ditch visible as a band of low resistance around all four sides of the enclosure though indistinct on the east side where it is also less obvious as an earthwork. Two areas of high resistance are close to the hawthorn trees and may be caused by their respective root systems. A third roughly U-shaped area of high resistance close to the northeast corner of the enclosure bank may be a recent dump of stony material, or it may conceivably be a small structure using the pre-existing earthwork

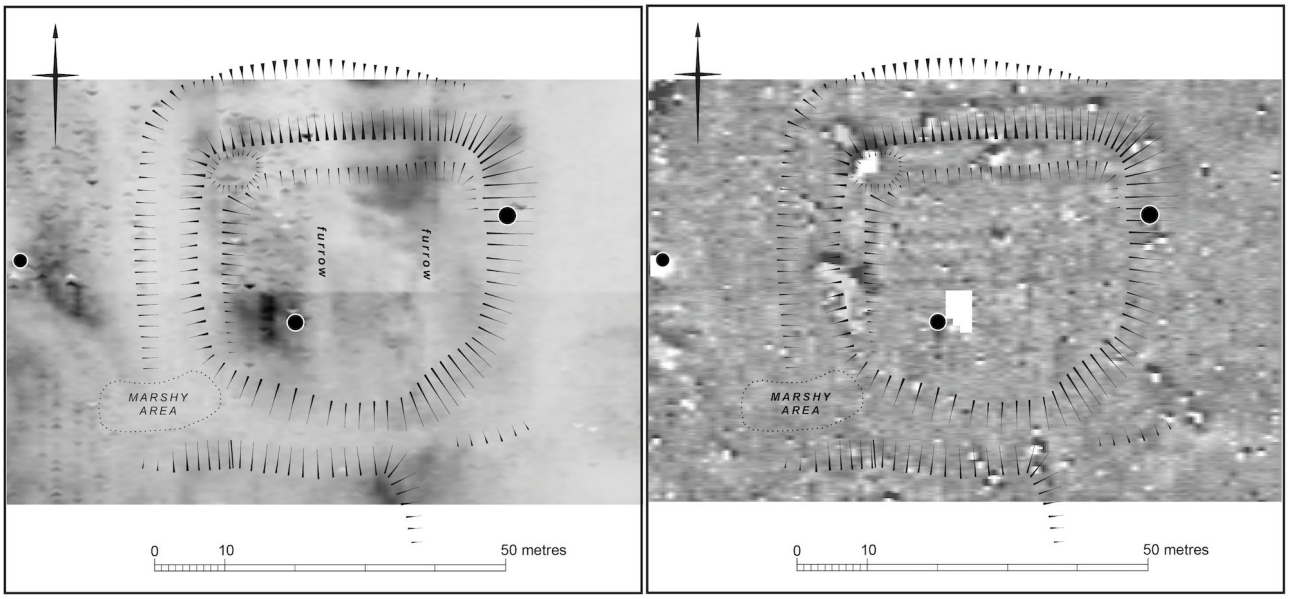

Figure 5. (left) Resistivity plot of the enclosure and Figure 6 (right) Magnetometer plot of the enclosure.

as a secure foundation. Two north-south indistinct linear anomalies around 14m apart within the enclosure and across the north ditch may be the remains of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing. The furrow on the east may account for the slight north-south earthwork scarp beyond the south edge of the enclosure ditch.

2.3 Magnetometer survey

The survey covered an area of 90m x 60m to encompass the enclosure and exterior areas to the east, west and south (Figure 6). Two high response features in the results are presumably caused by the root system of the trees at these locations while a third response at the northwest corner of the enclosure bank corresponds to the recent dump identified by the farmer as described above. Parallel linear anomalies aligned north-south and east-west in the interior of the enclosure are probably narrowly-spaced plough furrows. The bank and ditch of the enclosure gave no clear response.

2.4 Excavation

The excavation aimed to investigate the construction and date of the enclosure and the character of archaeological deposits preserved on the site. A single trench measuring 20m long and 1m wide was opened by the farmer using a mechanical excavator. It was positioned across the western ditch and bank and part way into the interior of the enclosure (Figure 7). The ditch, bank and deposits in the interior were excavated stratigraphically by hand providing a section across the earthwork and underlying natural deposits (Figures 8 and 9). The stratigraphic sequence is described below in chronological order.

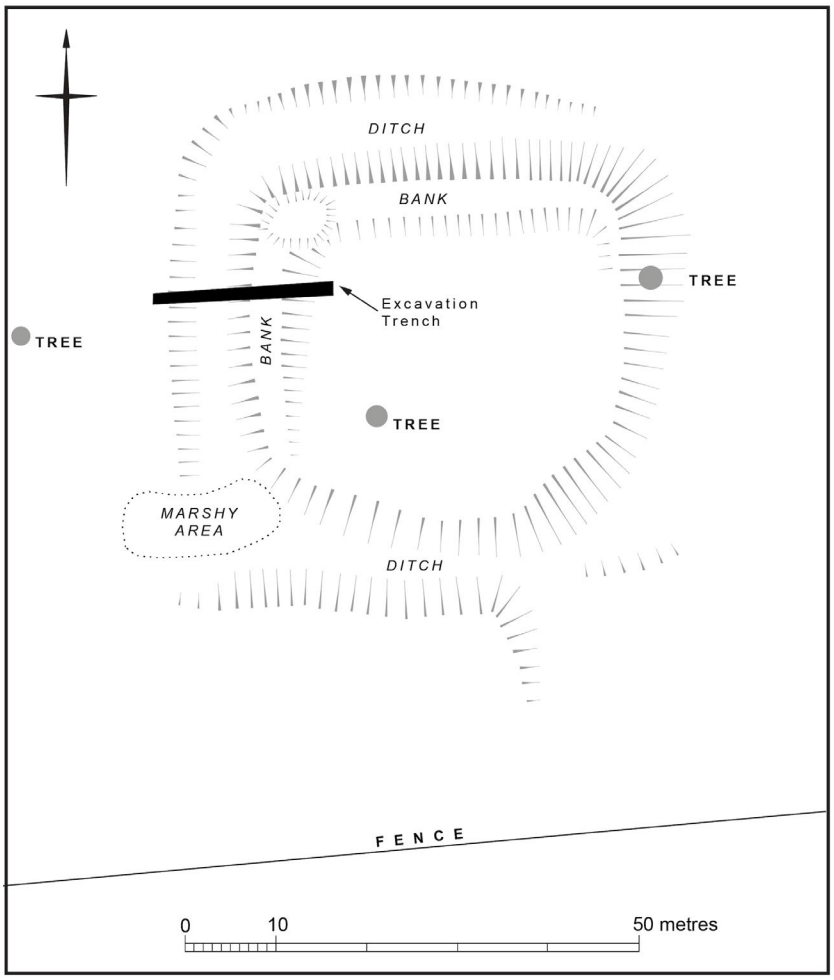

Figure 7. Location of the excavation trench.

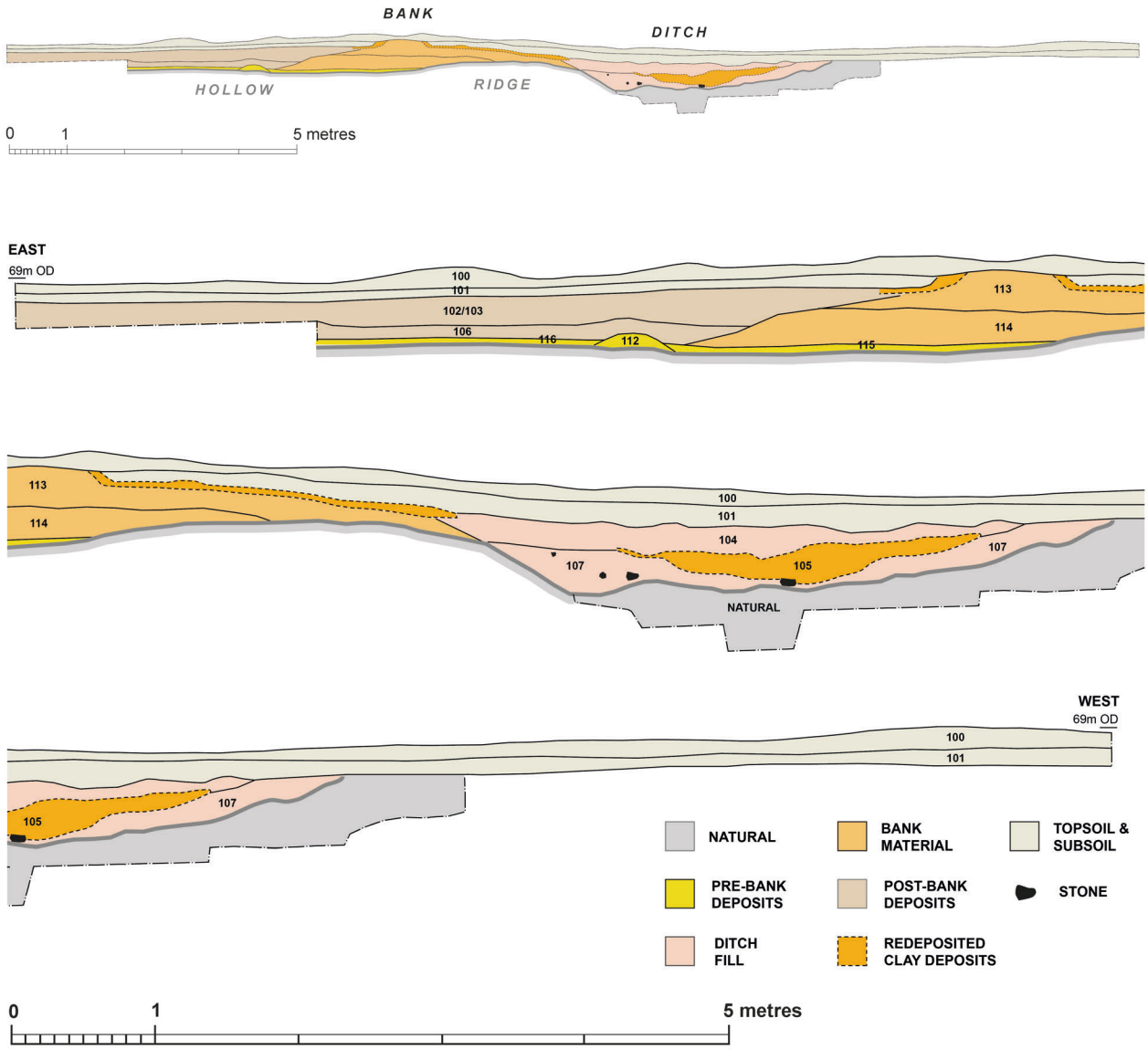

Figure 8. Complete south section of the trench (above) and in three larger-scale segments (below).

Natural topography

The natural deposits changed along the length of the trench reflecting the existence of higher ground on the east compared to the west. The higher ground underlying the enclosure was formed from a hard orange/brown clay containing small rocks and pebbles. Where the higher ground falls away to the west the natural deposit changed to a damp and soft silty stone-free clay. It contained reddish iron pan inclusions and turned from grey to orange/brown after exposure to the air. The initial grey colour of the sediments suggests they exist in wet, anaerobic conditions which probably extend several metres south to cause the marshy area on the southwest corner of the enclosure.

The first phase enclosure

There is archaeological evidence that the area of the enclosure attracted some use before the bank was constructed. This rests on the existence of a distinct fall from west to east in the level of the natural surface within the enclosure which points to erosion of the ground before the construction of the earthwork, perhaps due to the corralling of livestock in this area. The edge of the erosion hollow

Figure 9. Aerial view of the trench looking east. The ranging rod is in a sondage below the base of the ditch. An east-west plough furrow is visible in the foreground (context 117).

Figure 10. Photograph of contexts 112 and 116 looking west.

extends to beneath the middle of the earthwork bank from where the natural ground surface rises by 0.2m to form a ridge underlying the west half of the bank. This is clearly visible in the south section of the trench. The ridge is where erosion of the ground stopped and may indicate there was a hedge or fence at this point as a precursor to an upcast bank. The ditch around the summit may not have existed in this phase as it was probably dug to supply material for the later bank. A 0.1m thick deposit of stone and clay deposited within the hollow (contexts 115 and 116) may be the damaged remains of an artificial surface laid to consolidate the hollowed-out area. Within this deposit was a very solid band of clay and stone (context 112) aligned north-south which on investigation proved to be natural rather than part of a structure (Figure 10).

The enclosure bank and ditch (Figure 11)

The bank (context 110) survives to a maximum height of 0.5m and width of the 5.2m with its western outer edge coincident with the natural fall from the dry ground to the more-marshy area to the west. The bank was excavated in two successive spits (contexts 113 and 114). It was composed of an orange/brown loamy clay containing pebbles and some charcoal inclusions. The material to form the bank probably came from the enclosure ditch, but not on the west side where the ditch cuts into the marshy area. Here the natural is a soft silty clay as noted above and so very different in composition to the make-up of the bank. This indicates a degree of planning in the construction of the enclosure with material presumably brought from the ditches on the other three sides to construct the west bank.

The ditch (context 109) was around 5.8m wide and 0.4m deep and was much harder to define in plan than in section. The inner face of the ditch was quite steep and clearly defined as it was formed by cutting into the natural slope. The ditch was broad with a flat bottom and shallow outside edge. It was filled by two deposits of grey silty clay (context 104 overlying 107), very similar in colour and texture to the natural into which the feature was cut and which was excavated in several sondages below the base of the ditch. The fill was probably mainly redeposited natural that had washed into the ditch over time. Sandwiched between the two contexts 104 and 107 was a thick lens of much stiffer and brighter yellow/brown sandy clay (context 107) which contrasted with the rest of the ditch fill. The deposit was probably introduced into the ditch by ploughing when it was slightly deeper than it is today.

Figure 11. Photograph looking east of the inner face of the ditch (context 109) and partly excavated ditch fill.

No evidence of any features or occupation levels were present within the enclosure. The interior was covered by a 0.3m thick horizontal deposit of reddish/brown loam excavated in several spits (context 106 overlain by contexts 102 and 103) which on the west overlay the inside face of the bank. This deposit represents the gradual accumulation of material inside the enclosure including through ploughing as evidenced by the furrows on both the magnetometry and resistivity plots and the two distinct lenses of probable natural clay visible in section overlying the top of the bank. An east-west plough furrow cutting natural (context 117) crossed the west end of the trench (Figure 9).

3. The artefacts

Context	Interpretation	Summary of finds
100	topsoil	4 sherds post-medieval pottery; 1 .303 blank bullet cartridge; 1 flint flake; 1 flint thumb scraper with retouch on edge; 4 small brick/tile fragments
101	subsoil	4 tile fragments; 14 sherds post-medieval pottery; 1 iron blade fragment; 1 length of iron rod; 1 small fragment of thin clear glass; 4 bone fragments; 3 broken clay pipe stems; 1 smooth rounded stone - possible sling stone
102	build-up inside enclosure bank	1 small fragment of thin clear glass; 1 broken clay pipe stem; 1 brick fragment; 3 small sherds post-medieval pottery
104	upper fill of ditch	1 iron nail head; 1 fragment of thick iron collar; 2 sherds post-medieval pottery; 4 flint flakes
105	clay deposit in ditch	1 sherd post-medieval pottery
114	base of upcast bank	2 fragments of struck flint
115	stony surface within phase one hollow	1 fragment of struck flint
117	recent plough furrow	1 fragment of thin glass tube

Table 1. Finds catalogue.

The struck flint flakes found in several contexts and one small scraper from topsoil context 100 are representative of the general spread of worked flint in the local landscape and therefore are of no direct relevance to either the interpretation or dating of the enclosure. The .303 calibre cartridge blank was probably dropped during one of the many field camps and military training exercises based on Seamer Moor that took place before the First World War, and which also included Home Guard units during the Second World War (MacDonald 2021, 80).

4. Other survey work

4.1 The oval feature

During the course of the excavation a search was made for any other earthworks in the field which resulted in the discovery of a slight oval feature at the southeast corner measuring a maximum of 40m north-south and 30m across. It is not apparent on Google Earth imagery but can be seen as a slight hollow on the 2023 0.5m resolution lidar from the Environment Agency (Figure 2).

An earthwork survey determined that the feature is primarily formed from a slight outward facing scarp which is strongest on the south where it falls into a natural channel representing a former

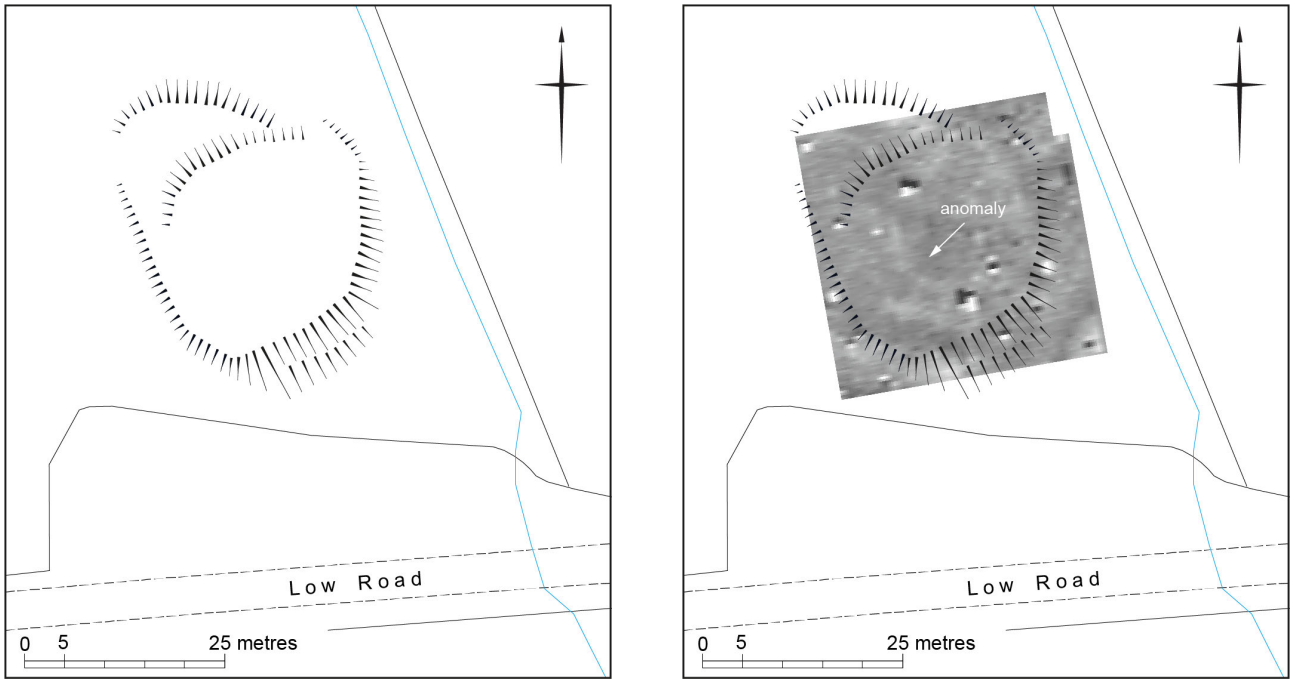

Figure 12. (left) earthwork survey and Figure 13 (right) magnetometer survey of oval feature.

stream course visible on the lidar image (Figure 12). A curving scarp cuts across the north end of the oval and may indicate there are two phases to the outline of the feature on this side. A magnetometer survey of the feature revealed a curving linear anomaly around the southwest quadrant of the hollow (Figure 13). The purpose of the feature could not be determined but it is probably recent and may be where the ground has been shaped by livestock at a feeding station or water trough.

4.2 Magnetometer survey west of the enclosure

An area measuring 60m x 60m was surveyed across most of the summit of the adjacent natural ridge to the west. No significant anomalies were detected.

5. Discussion

The 2025 survey and excavation project has added evidence to the landscape history of the area and builds on the results of fieldwork undertaken by the SAHS over the past ten years in Raincliffe Woods and latterly towards the west end of the valley at Thorn Park Farm. The enclosure was not identified until recently as the earthwork lacks prominence due to having been heavily ploughed in the past, with north-south furrows evident on aerial photography from 1945 (Historic England Monument no. 1537573; NMR RAF/106G/UK/394 4030 17-JUN-1945). Neither the ditch nor bank is readily visible from the nearest road and only as a slight rise viewed from the north from within the field itself.

Before natural drainage was brought under control the valley floor consisted of a series of low ridges separated by extensive areas of marshy ground fed by ground water draining off the valley sides. The remains of several relic stream channels are evident in the field and on the lidar plot as broad, shallow-sided gullies to the east and west of the enclosure. Dry ground was restricted to the ridge tops and the earthwork encloses the entire summit of one particular ridge with the bank

positioned around the highest part of the ridge on the north, west and east sides. The excavation determined that a slight erosion hollow that extends part way below the bank may indicate use of the ridge top to corral livestock before the present enclosure was constructed, with a perimeter initially defined by a timber fence or hedge.

The excavation demonstrated the survival of archaeological deposits forming the bank, infilling the shallow ditch and within the enclosure. The natural slope was probably cut back slightly to create the steep inner edge of the ditch which from that point on has a very broad, shallow profile. This length of ditch may be a part-natural channel formed by water draining from the spring and area of marshy ground immediately to the south. It is likely the ditch on the north, south and east sides is cut into the solid natural clay of the ridge and therefore may be much deeper than on the west. There is no clear evidence of an entrance into the enclosure but this is not surprising because the site has been heavily ploughed, rounding and spreading the earthwork. It is possible that the marshy area on the southwest of the enclosure developed in an erosion hollow associated with an entrance at the junction of the west and south sides.

The few artefacts recovered, mainly pieces of worked prehistoric flint, are residual and therefore cannot be used to give a secure date for the construction of the monument and no charcoal or other organic material was found that was suitable for scientific dating. The resistivity survey indicates that the enclosure may be overlain by medieval ridge and furrow which establishes that it must be earlier in date and therefore probably belongs to the Iron Age or Romano-British periods. Square and rectilinear enclosures from these periods are found throughout the north of England with 36 examples in north-east Yorkshire listed in a gazetteer compiled by Raymond Hayes (Hayes 1988).

Three enclosures near the present site have been investigated recently - on Seamer Moor in 2008-10 (Hall and Hinchliffe 2013), at Thorn Park Farm in 2022 (Pearson 2022) (Figure 15) and a third slightly further away to the west at Coomb Hill, north of Wykeham centered on National Grid Reference SE 95375 89350 (LS Archaeology 2025; Jamieson 2025). Limited excavation at each of these sites has established they date to the Iron Age. Carbon-14 dates obtained from the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre for the Thorn Park Farm and Seamer Moor enclosures centre upon 110BC and 292BC respectively (Certificates SUERC-19405 (GU-16882) and SUERC-125088 (GU66646)). In addition, sherds of Iron Age pottery were found in both the ditch and the interior of the Seamer Moor enclosure. Two sherds of ‘moderately abraded’ pottery recovered from the fill of the encircling ditch at Coomb Hill indicate activity at that site in the Iron Age. However, as the report cautions, the pottery does not conclusively date the enclosure as it was found in a backfill deposit and could be residual (LS Archaeology 2025, 32).

There is a clear divide between the character of the present site with its near neighbour in the valley bottom at Thorn Park Farm compared to the Coomb Hill and Seamer Moor enclosures which occupy hill top locations at elevations respectively of 195m and 150m above Ordnance Datum. Before the planting of Wykeham Forest, the Coomb Hill site had open views across the moors to the north and the Derwent valley to the east (Jamieson 2025, 2) while the Seamer Moor enclosure looks

south over the Vale of Pickering to the wolds beyond. These enclosures are also larger in size compared to the two in the valley. The Coomb Hill enclosure is around 55m across internally and the Seamer Moor site is larger at 70m whereas the two valley bottom sites are both around 30m across. The two upland enclosures are also more substantially constructed. The Coomb Hill enclosure was provided with a stone-revetted bank fronted by a timber palisade (LS Archaeology 2025, 31) and while the bank did not survive at the Seamer Moor site, it was fronted by an impressive rock-cut ditch 4.7m wide and up to 2.3m deep. In contrast the perimeter of the Thorn Park enclosure appears from excavation to have been a timber palisade set in a shallow trench (Pearson 2022, 9), while at the present site the excavation demonstrated that the enclosure was defined by a simple upcast clay bank fronted by a broad, shallow ditch. At none of the four sites is there any firm evidence of occupation but it is perhaps more likely at the two upland enclosures on account of their greater size, more substantial construction and their wide field of view, as well as the archaeological evidence provided by the discovery of pottery at both locations.

The sparsity of finds from the excavations at the two valley bottom enclosures suggest neither site was permanently occupied and it is therefore more likely they were primarily involved in stock management. The large number of hollow ways on the south side of the valley in Raincliffe Woods is compelling evidence for the use of the valley to pasture livestock. The hollow ways, sometimes several metres deep, reveal the habitual routes used to move livestock up and down the valley side, possibly over several thousand years (Figures 14 and 15). They link the valley with other areas of grazing on the higher ground above the slope on Seamer and East Ayton Moors in a repeated cycle

Figure 14. Example of a hollow way in Raincliffe Woods.

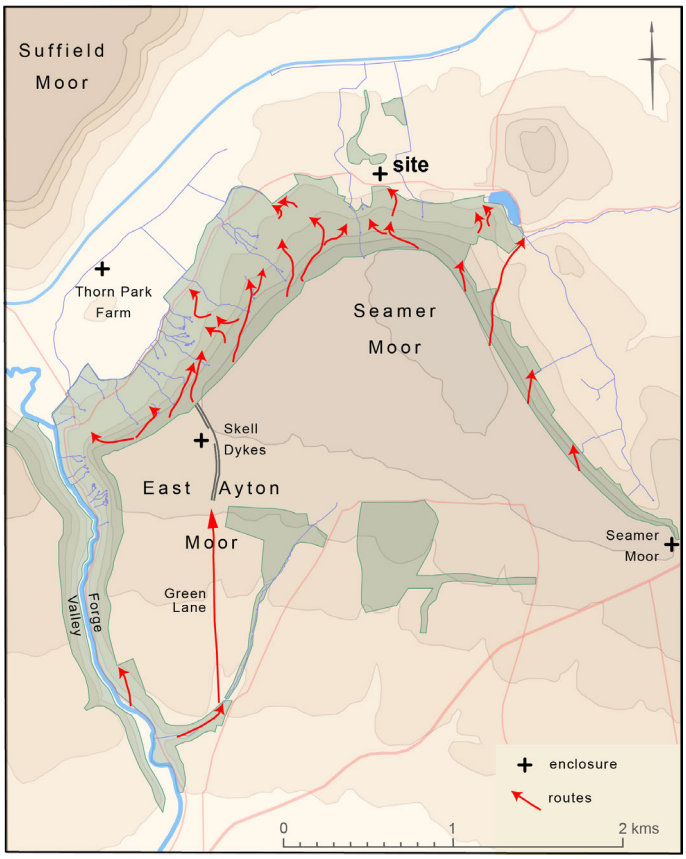

Figure 15. Map showing the location of enclosures and routes.

of seasonal migration. This probably also encompassed more distant pastures in the Vale of Pickering and along the river Derwent in Forge Valley. The present enclosure and the one at Thorn Park Farm were probably part of the same pastoral landscape providing locations where grazing stock could be held securely and closely managed. The association between the enclosures and the management of livestock is demonstrated convincingly by the close relationship between a cropmark enclosure on East Ayton Moor and a north-south droveway. On the south the droveway survives as a green lane which then ascends to the moor top by following the west ditch of a late Bronze Age linear earthwork called Skell Dikes which is where the enclosure is situated (Figures 15 and 16). Skell Dikes terminates at the crest of the slope above the valley from where the route descends to the valley floor along a deep hollow way in Raincliffe Woods. The enclosure next to Skell Dikes was mapped from a 2006 aerial photograph by Historic England (NMR SE 9987/23 NMR 20584/42 25-JUL-2006). It is roughly square about 80m across and is purposely sited for access next to the west ditch of Skell Dikes (Historic England Monument No. 1532804; North York Moors National Park Monument No.18875). It is evident from the plot that a length of the original bank of Skell Dikes exterior to the ditch was levelled to accommodate the enclosure, thereby making it easier to move livestock from the droveway into the interior.

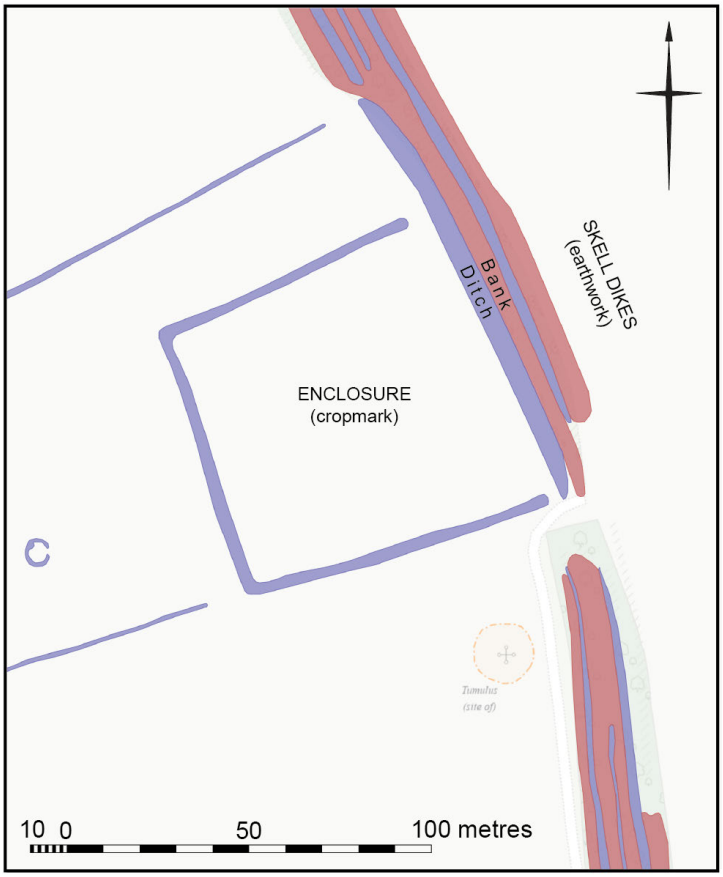

Figure 16.
Skell Dikes enclosure as depicted on Historic England Aerial Mapping Explorer. © Crown Copyright and database right 2025. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number AC0000815036 © Historic England 2023.

The eventual drainage of the valley floor encouraged the introduction of arable cultivation leaving archaeological traces on the ridge top. Possible medieval ridge and furrow was identified on the resistivity plot while later, more narrowly spaced plough furrows are evident both on the magnetometer plot and across the entire field on the 1945 aerial photograph (Historic England Monument no. 1537573; NMR RAF/106G/UK/394 4030 17-JUN-1945).

6. Acknowledgements

The landowner, Mr Jack Howarth, is thanked for giving permission for the survey as are the farmers Chris, Peter and Sam Wilson who gave practical help to the excavation by moving the tools and by opening and backfilling the trench. Gareth Davies of the SAHS is thanked for first drawing attention to the enclosure revealed on Google Earth imagery. The initial earthwork and resistivity surveys were undertaken by the following members of the SAHS field team - Martin Bland, Chris Hall, Elaine Jamieson and Trevor Pearson. These members additionally worked on the excavation along with Rebecca Abberstein, Ruth Blamires, Margaret Carey, Gareth Davies, Stephen Gandolfi, Dawn Haida, Mike Lawson, Jessika Odenthal, Mick Panton, Alison Spencer and Andy Volans. Chris Hall undertook the record photography during the excavation and Simon Temlett the drone photography. Gareth Davies created a 3D scan of the completed excavation trench. Alison Spencer of the SAHS and FFWAP was responsible for the magnetometer survey assisted by members of the excavation team. Frances McIntosh of the English Heritage curatorial team kindly commented on one of the finds.

7. References

Note: The SAHS Fieldwork Reports listed below are available to download from the SAHS website (https://www.sahs.org.uk/fieldwork-summaries) or from the Archaeology Data Service: https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/organisationDetails.xhtml?organisationId=60

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