

A walkover archaeological survey of
South Bishops Den

TR 084 580

in the parish of Dunkirk, Kent

July 2009

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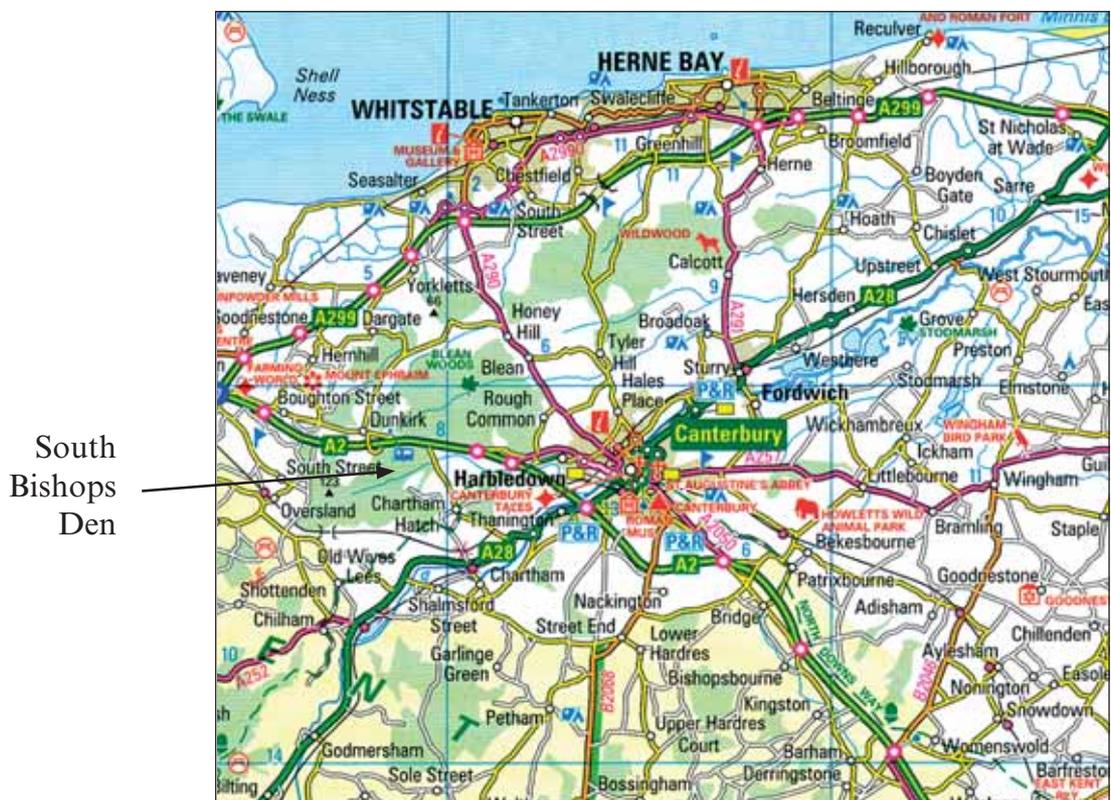
INTRODUCTION

Commissioning of Report

South Bishops Den had recently been purchased by Ownwood Ltd and the owners wished to have some information about the archaeological features found within the wood. The owners suggested it was not necessary to undertake a detailed survey.

Location

South Bishops Den forms part of the considerable wooded area to the north and east of Canterbury. It is south of the A2 trunk road and is surrounded almost entirely by woodland (see Fig.1). The A2 at this point was formerly a Roman road.



SITE DESCRIPTION

South Bishops Den as marked on Fig 3 is 172 acres. A large proportion is sweet chestnut coppiced; some sweet chestnut is of considerable age. There are a large number of oaks, mostly less than 100 years old scattered throughout the area. The wood contains a number of important historic features and two public rights of way exist through the wood.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The north-west side of the wood rises to 115m and the ground slopes off gradually to the south east. Drainage is generally very good, much of the wood lying on an approximately 1m bed of highly porous River Terrace Gravel deposit (not all shown on Fig 2). Most streams and drainage channels only appear to run when the rainfall is heavy.

The underlying deposit is of London Clay.. There is evidence of quarrying of deposits of River Terrace Gravels close to the main ride through the wood and in the Oldhaven Beds in the south of the wood. The River Terrace Gravels appear to have been used mainly as a source of building materials. Head Brickearth was used throughout the Canterbury area for brickmaking.¹

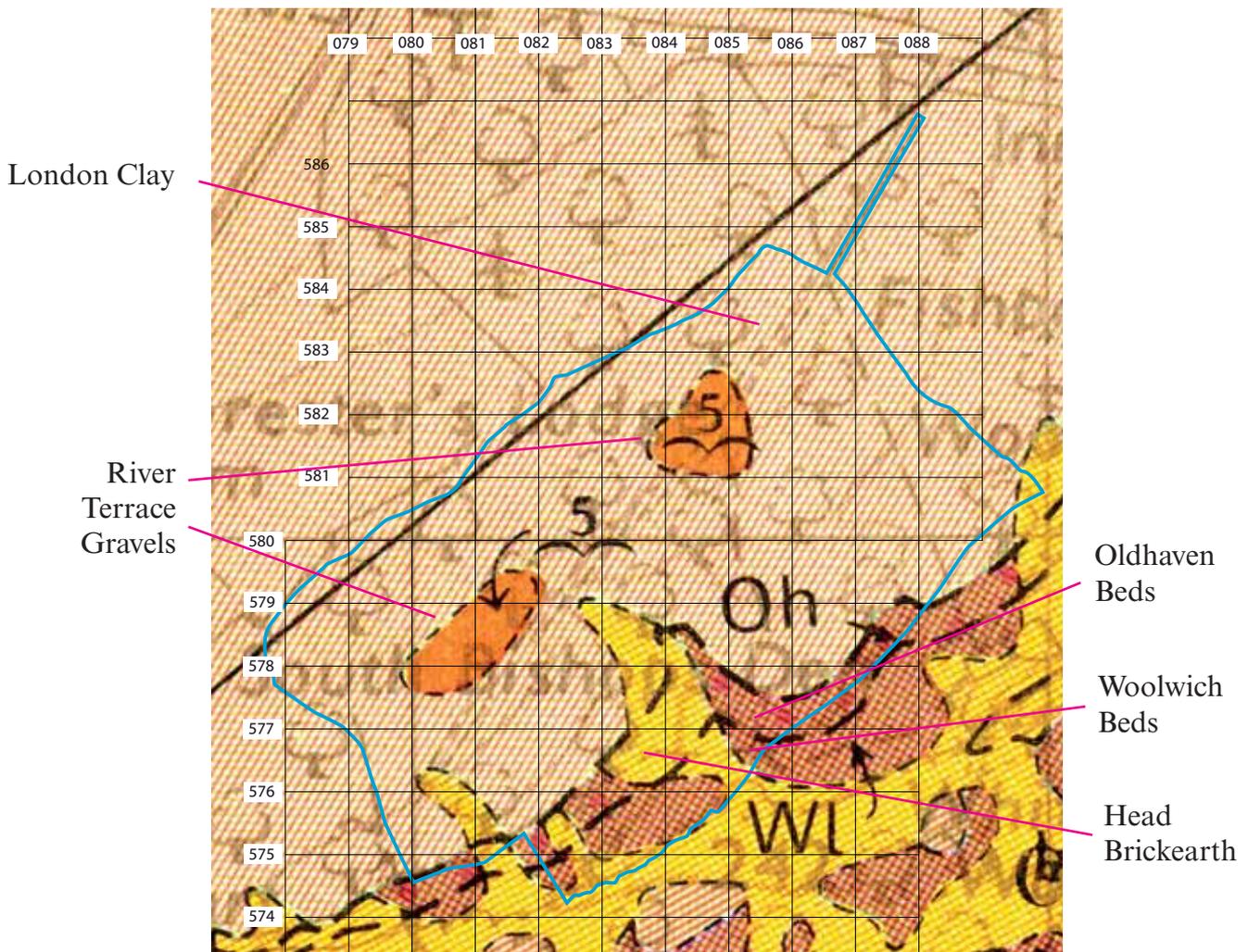


Fig. 2: Geology of the area around South Bishops Den

METHODOLOGY

Two visits were made to the wood, one on 27th May 2009 and the second on 14th June 2009. The undergrowth on both occasions precluded a thorough search for more subtle features, but where anything of importance was located its position was recorded with a hand-held GPS. A compass provided orientation for linear features. Mapping then took place using Adobe Illustrator.

SURVEY RESULTS

At the time of both visits a central trackway was being surfaced, with culverts beneath for drainage. A boundary woodbank with external (to this wood) ditch was found on the north and north west as shown on Fig 3, although some of this bank falls outside the area purchased.

A sunken trackway, now being shared with the bed of an intermittent stream was found along the south-eastern edge of the wood. Some minor trackways indicate frequent foot passage between key points.

One charcoal burners' platform was found and two cant markers.

The access road to the wood was bounded on both sides by banks with a ditch on the outside.

DISCUSSION

Charcoal burners' platform

CB1 (TR 0853 5769) was the only charcoal hearth located, but it is unlikely that there was ever only one. The expectation is that there were probably two or three in fairly close proximity (20-30m apart) and of about the same size (7m diameter). They are likely to be at approximately the same elevation as the one already located.

Woodbank

Boundary woodbanks extended either side of the main access path and continued on the western edge of the wood, following the boundary line shown in Fig 3. This had a ditch on the outer side indicating that South Bishops Den may have been the first wood in this area. The bank and ditch end somewhat abruptly at V1 where there is a significant ancient pollarded oak on the bank. In places this bank has a second bank running parallel with it, and it is also breached by the public right of way entering at the south western corner. No other woodbanks were detected within the wood.

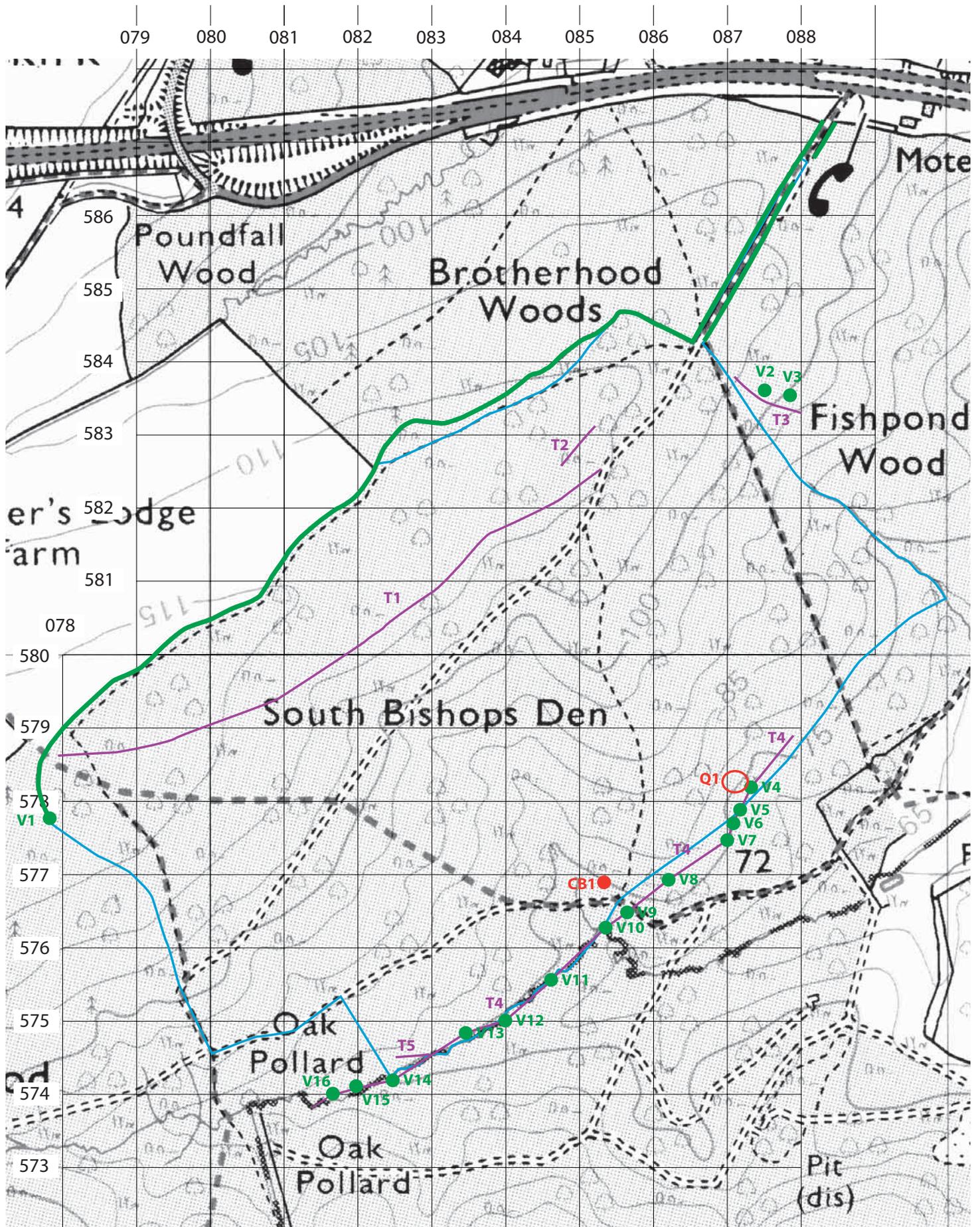


Fig.3: Features found in South Bishops Den. Boundary banks are marked in green.

Trackways

Trackway T1 runs intermittently from where the public right of way in the south-western corner enters the wood and joins the central trackway where it changes direction. T1 is about 0.2m deep and 0.75m wide, suggesting it was used mainly by people on foot as a short cut.

Trackway T2 was only located for a short distance, but may have served the same purpose as T1.

Trackway T3 runs outside the boundary of the purchased area, it was up to 3m wide and 0.75m deep making it a fairly important route, probably used by pack animals.

Trackway T4 is a significant routeway marked along its length by 'marker trees' (V4 to V16). It runs north-east/south-west. At its northern end it rises up a slope and then peters out at TR0879 5789, and at its southern extremity a rather confusing picture emerges. It could be that it divided at TR 0813 5738, with one leg going east and the other west: the westerly leg, however, looks more like the bed of a stream than a path.

Trackway T4 was a well-used route, but when in use was probably not as deep or as wide as it is now. Rainwater run-off from the slope above the path has turned the trackway into an intermittent stream with consequent erosion. It was evident that in heavy downpours the entire width of the trackway (up to 20m across) becomes a torrent of water.

It is difficult to reconcile the apparent importance of this trackway (taking into account the marker trees) with its somewhat inconclusive end points. Both ends seem to peter out to nothing, and yet there are sections where the track is substantial and it is not acting as a water channel (see V10 running north east, Fig 3).

Trackway T5 is to be a smaller pathway joining the main track T4. It is only sunken for the 20m which takes it to the top of the bank above T4.

Trees

V1 clearly denotes the end of the ditch and bank. It is odd that the ditch and bank ends so abruptly, and at a point which appears to have no significance topographically or in relation to the tree species. The fact that there is an oak pollard on the bank should help in identifying why the bank and ditch was removed. What the reason was, is a matter for conjecture at this point.

V2 is outside the boundary of the purchased area, but appears to be a cant marker. It is a beech tree pollarded at a low level and is typical of cant markers found elsewhere.

V3 is also outside the boundary, and is now dead. This is close to V2 and has been subjected to the same management. The fact that there are two cant markers in the wood is suggestive that there were once more. As most of the wood is sweet chestnut, this is the most likely species to be used to mark cants, and not the beech of these two.

Trees V4 to V16 mark the trackway T4. Some of them appear to be intended as marker trees because of the way they have been managed. A few may just happen to be in the right place and be very mature, and so were judged to be possible markers. All but one of the trees were on the uphill side of the track (north west).

V4 (TR 0874 5781) beech, on the edge of a quarried area

V5 (TR 0873 5779) beech

V6 (TR 0872 5777) beech

V7 (TR 0870 5775) sweet chestnut

V8 (TR 0863 5769) oak

pathway crosses at TR 0858 5765

V9 (TR 0857 5765) beech

V10 (TR 0854 5764) sweet chestnut

V11 (TR 0846 5756) beech

V12 (TR 0840 5750) sweet chestnut

V13 (TR 0835 5749) sweet chestnut

V14 (TR 0825 5742) sweet chestnut

V15 (TR 0820 5741) oak

V16 (TR 0818 5740) beech

Quarries

There were a number of small areas where the surface gravels had been excavated to a depth of about 1 metre. Most of these appeared to be close to the central track, and the majority were on the south-eastern side.

Q1 was a quarry which was slightly larger than those mentioned above and occurred in the path of trackway T4. It is located in the Oldhaven Beds, which consist of smooth round pebbles (flint) and ironstone.

CONCLUSIONS

The position of the wood in relation to the settlements to the south and the road (now the A2) probably gave it added importance as a point of access to the road. The approach to the A2 north of the wood is between banks on which would have been planted a hedge which would have been laid. This allowed herders to collect and contain their livestock prior to taking them along the road. A significant proportion of the trackways within the wood converge on this access point, emphasising the probable importance of the wood's location.

The lack of internal boundaries suggests the wood was in one ownership for its lifetime.

It is possible that not much of the wood was converted to charcoal. Sweet chestnut is second only to oak in its durability in contact with the ground, and has been used for many years for fencing and hop poles.

The use of the wood as a route for herding livestock is not unusual, particularly in relation to the early dens where transhumance took place between the Downs and the Weald.

The absence of mature oak trees is likely to be due to the demand for oak during both World Wars and the wood's proximity to the road.

No tithe map exists for the parish of Dunkirk, within which South Bishops Den has always existed. This is a somewhat unusual situation, and a historian has commented: "Given that the point of the Tithe Award was to regularise a haphazard system which had grown up over centuries and varied from parish to parish and had often resulted in disputes, it is possible that for some reason there had been some earlier agreement regarding tithes in Dunkirk which rendered a further revision unnecessary. After all it must have been a fairly expensive procedure to survey the whole parish. The Local Historian's Encyclopaedia states "under the Act tithes could be commuted to a rent-charge" suggesting the latter, so perhaps the church and tithe-payers were perfectly happy with the system they already had in Dunkirk."

REFERENCE

Smart J G O, Bisson G & Worssam B C (1966). *Geology of the Country around Canterbury and Folkestone*, HMSO, London