

# High Hunsley Deserted Medieval Village (DMV) Community Excavations Summer 2022

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*High Hunsley has been known as a deserted medieval village for sometime. The recent survey carried out by Ed Dennison is described in a separate article in this edition of Forum. This article reports on the results of the archaeological excavation carried out as a community project by ETHOS Heritage CIC during 2022.*

## Introduction and Background

Ethos Heritage CIC are an assets locked social enterprise company this means in the event that we cease to exist then all of our assets will become the property of the CBA. Our project was advertised via social media and on our Facebook pages and website. The open area excavations were carried out over three weeks from 16th July through to 7th August. Over the course of the excavations we had a total of 153 people with an average age of 36. This calculation does not include children and is c.20years younger than the normal age demographic for participants in archaeology. In addition 81% of our participants had never before taken part in heritage projects.

Every day we provided a free lunch for everyone who was taking part on the project and 59% of our participants had either a free or supported place on the dig. Armed forces veterans and blue light workers and their families were also supported.

The site of the Ethos Heritage CIC community excavations at High Hunsley lies at a prominent point at the southern end of the East Yorkshire Wolds (Fig.1). The area has both a known prehistoric and Romano-British archaeological presence (Dennison & Richardson 2022, 4; Stoertz 1997; Map 4). Supporting evidence for activity in the area has also been provided by finds from the local fields and area by metal detectorists.

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### **About the authors**

*Richard together with his co-directors of [ETHOS Heritage CIC](#), Emma Samuel and Diarmaid Walshe, undertook to excavate High Hunsley as their first community project.*

At its highest point the site is c.154m above sea level sitting on soils of the Swaffam Prior association. “The soils are mostly freely drained and contain chalk and flint stones.” and are extensive in Humberside “... there is considerable variation in depth to chalk or chalk rubble.” (Jarvis et. al. 1984; 284).

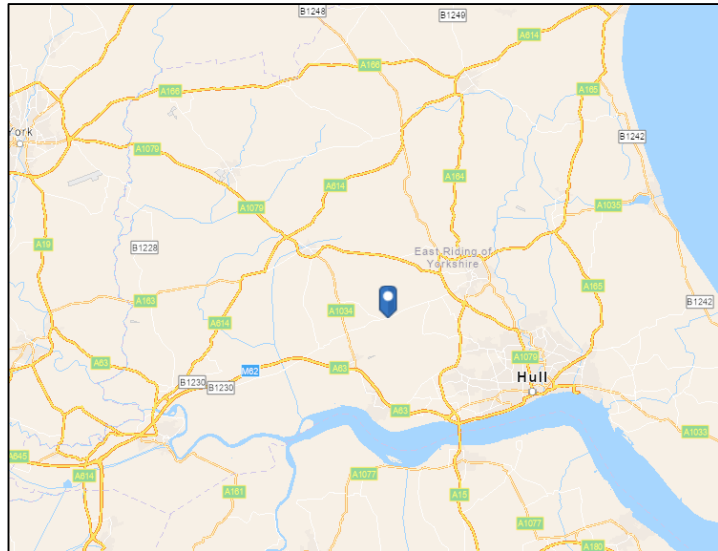


Fig. 1: East Yorkshire map with Site location



Fig. 2: Environment Agency LIDAR composite DTM 2020 1m data Hillshade imagery  
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The LiDAR Composite 1m DTM hillshade imagery (Environment Agency 2020) (Fig.2) indicates that both the village and hollow way actually continue westwards for c.150m and lies beneath and beyond the complex of farm buildings to the west. Only a relatively short distance from the western extent of the village is the highest area, at c.161-162m AOD of the southern end of the East Yorkshire Wolds (Stoertz 1997; Map 4).

The site location SE952 351 (Loughlin & Miller 1979, 33) commands views in all directions and would have been an ideal location for a signal station. The original location of the Hunsley Beacon, a muster point for the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace (Cox 1903; 89; Allison 1979, 142), may have been at the crossroads only a few hundred metres to the west of the village. The beacon "...was maintained until c.1820" (Allison 1979, 142). Excavations in the 1960s, by Bartlett and Mackey at the Ling Howe long barrow, c.1300m to the north-east provides evidence of early prehistoric and Roman activity (Bartlett & Mackey 1973). To the south-west of this site, further excavations by them of Bronze age barrows revealed inhumation burials some of which were decapitated (Bartlett & Mackey 1973; 24). However more recent radio-carbon dating analysis indicates that they relate to "...an Anglo-Saxon execution cemetery..." (Buckberry & Hadley 2007; 309)

A settlement may have been on the site from as early as 6th or 7th century which is supported by its name. An interpretation for the name 'Hunsley' relating to the Anglo Saxon "hund" or dog and "leg" a district is suggested (Nicholson 1926; 63). Other derivatives are also noted by Nicholson from Domesday Book; King John's Charter; Chronica de Melsa; Nomina Villarum; 1609 Government paper (Nicholson 1926; 63).

The significance of this area of England in the medieval period is also of note. Estimates based on the poll tax returns of 1377 (Hoskins 1984; 10) the town of York is noted as being the 2nd largest city with an estimated population of c.12,100 of which 7,248 were taxpayers. Beverley is listed as the 11th largest city with a population of c.4,400 and 2,663 taxpayers and Kingston upon Hull as the 25th largest with a population estimated at c.2,600 and 1,557 taxpayers (Mortimer 2009; 10; Hoskins 1984; 227-8).

There is documentary evidence of a settlement from the 11th century in the Domesday book (Dennison & Richardson 2022; 4) through to the 16th century, which is supported by tax rolls and the archive at Durham priory who owned the land (Allison 1979; 140-54). Later records show that in 1743 there were only two families living at Hunsley (Allison 1979; 143).

Documentary evidence for the village is patchy, which we believe may be due, at least in part, to the lack of research of the site. The site of the deserted village and remaining earthworks is recorded on the 1855 six-inch ordnance survey map and there is a brief summary of the village in Vol. 4 Victoria County History of York (Allison 1979; 140-54).



Fig. 3: Sensys MXPDA magnetometer survey James Lyall / Roman Roads Research Association 2022.

## Previous work

From 2019 to 2022, a variety of surveys were undertaken by the East Riding Archaeology Society (ERAS; Coates 2022), the Fridaythorpe, Fimber, Wetwang Archaeology Project (FFWAP) and Ethos Heritage CIC in association with the Roman Roads Research Association (RRRA) and led by James Lyall (Fig.3) and drone surveys by both Historic England and Tony Hunt. These surveys included; magnetometry, resistivity, aerial photography and LiDAR, also Environment agency LiDAR images have been analysed. In addition historical background research was undertaken (Lamb 2019) and a detailed earthwork survey was carried out by Ed Dennison (Dennison & Richardson, 2022) which shows that the site is a lot larger than was originally believed.

All of the surveys have provided an outline of the layout of the Deserted Medieval Village (DMV) however none are able to provide accurate or specific information relating to the village, which is why excavations were required. However, the survey results do indicate around 19 building platforms and associated yards aligned along either side of the central east-west hollow way.

It is believed that the site of the DMV has never been deep ploughed and was only subject to light farming during WW2 (Landowner Pers Com).

The aims of this year's excavations were to gather sufficient information to enable an assessment to be made of the potential preservation of the archaeology, the significance of the site and for the retrieval of dating evidence.

At Easter 2022 Ethos Heritage CIC and volunteers from Humber Timelines carried out the excavation of three 1m x 1m test pits. Test pit 1 (TP1) was located in the southern area opposite the copse of trees. The other two test pits 2 and 3 (TP2; TP3) were in the north-western area of the site. Based on the results obtained from these test pits it was decided to focus the 2022 open area excavations in the area of TP1.

### The Excavations

Although the area of the potential building platform was relatively flat the areas to the east, west and south sloped away significantly. Due to the undulating ground, the very dry conditions and thickness of the turf the use of mechanical equipment was impractical and the turf was removed by hand.

### Area One

Based on the survey results the excavations targeted one of the building platforms along the southern side of the east-west hollow way which runs through the centre of the village. Over three weeks from 16th July through to 7th August 2022 and led by experienced archaeologist c.150 community volunteers plus local Special Needs Schools, Children in care and Youth Groups, excavated two adjacent open areas (Area: 1) and (Area: 2).



Fig. 4: Area 1 after turf removal (north at top of image).

Area 1 measured 10m x 10m; the ground surface in this area slopes down east to west from 153.02m OD at the north-east to 152.85m OD at the south-west corner. The turf and topsoil removal revealed at c.152.96 - 152.91m OD an artificially raised platform of compacted irregular shaped pieces of local chalk and flint in a clay matrix. (Fig.4)

Near the northern edge a deposit of compacted light brown clay, possibly a beam slot levelling deposit, extended eastward beyond the excavation. However it has also been suggested that this linear feature may be a division between the building and a chalk path running parallel along the southern side of the east-west hollow way.

A few metres to the south and roughly parallel was a second similar feature of compacted light brown clay. This may represent the bedding deposit of a



Fig. 5: Section 1



Fig. 6: Section 2

southern beam slot, this feature also had less chalk than the areas to both the north and south.

Between these deposits and along both the northern and southern edges was a compacted silty light brown clay deposit with abundant irregular shaped pieces of local chalk and flint.



Fig. 7: Section 4

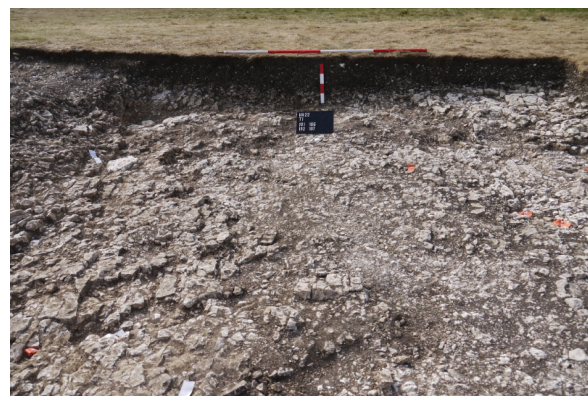


Fig. 8: Section 3

Four features were investigated, two of which appear to be geological anomalies. The other two, (Fig. 5; Section 1 and Fig. 6; Section 2), may be postholes however no post packing was evident. Due to time constraints and extreme heat which baked the ground, it was not possible to reduce any of these surface deposits.

In order to gain more information a narrow sondage was excavated along the north-eastern edge of Area 1. The excavation revealed three features, possibly pits or east-west ditches, cut into a natural layer of chalk and flint (Fig. 7; Section 4). Due to the absence of post packing these have been ruled out as post holes.

To the south-west, where the ground falls away, three deposits were excavated. These deposits were less compact than those to the east and north and the excavations reduced the surface in this area down to 152.38m OD at the lowest point. All three of these deposits were of friable grey-brown silty clay with abundant small pieces of stone, not local to the area, flint and chalk (Fig. 8; Section 3).

Many of the finds from the site were recovered from the two upper deposits. These finds consisted of abundant animal bones, predominantly cattle, some with cut marks relating to butchery. There was also a very large assemblage of pottery mainly dating to the medieval period. In addition a significant number of both ferrous and copper alloy objects were recovered. These included parts of horseshoes, dress accessories and a large quantity of nails. This large assemblage provides an insight to both the diet of the people and the occupation of the site. Due to the abundance and types of finds we can conclude that the site was occupied between the late 12th to early 16th Century.



*Fig. 9. Area 2 after turf removal (north at top of image)*

## Area Two

This 'L' shaped area was 10m east-west x 6m north-south (Fig. 9). The ground surface in this area sloped away quite steeply from 153.07m OD at the north-west corner to 152.43m OD at the south and at the east to 152.32m OD

Below the turf and extending over the whole area was a loose to firm deposit of irregular shaped pieces of local chalk and flint. This may have been bedding material for the structure on the building platform. This deposit was similar to the upper surface in Area 1 but far less compacted.



*Fig. 10. West facing Section 5 along eastern edge of Area 2.*

At the north-eastern edge of this area, extending beyond the limit of excavation to the north and south, the remains of a possible chalk and cobble wall or revetment were exposed (Fig. 10). The construction of this 'wall' was poor, having no bonding material and we believe that it is unlikely to be part of a building. A sherd of possible late 15th to early 16th Century pottery was found in the section adjacent to the 'structure', this dating would be comparable with the dating evidence from Area 1. The function of the possible chalk 'wall' is currently unknown and work in 2023 will target this area in an attempt to establish both its purpose and extent.

## **The Finds**

### **Area 1**

A very large assemblage of predominantly medieval type pottery and animal bone, some with butchery cut marks was recovered. The majority of these finds were from the topsoil and the underlying two grey brown deposits at the southwest area of the excavation.

Additional finds from these contexts included an assemblage of snail shells and a small assemblage of oyster shells, a few pieces of brick, daub and a small quantity of charcoal. A number of ferrous and copper alloy objects were also recovered.

### **Area 2**

The finds from this area were all recovered from the topsoil deposit and included medieval type pottery, animal bone, snail shells and a small number of both ferrous and copper alloy objects. A single unfinished Neolithic flint arrowhead was recovered along the north-eastern edge of this excavation.

### **Recorded Finds.**

The total assemblage of small finds from both areas comprised 82 items which, apart from a couple of items, were medieval in date. A total of 40 ferrous objects were recovered including a number of pieces of horseshoes and items associated with a structure or domestic occupation also there is evidence of glazed windows, in the form of lead beading. Among the assemblage were 6 ferrous knives/blades (Fig. 11) and interestingly 2 ferrous stone working chisels. (Fig. 12) In addition, 22 copper alloy objects were recovered, the majority connected with personal clothing. These included 3 pins, 3 strap ends, clothing clasps and other personal objects. A very interesting object was a small cube/ piece of decorated bone, the function of which is currently unknown.

### ***Bone***

The total amount of bone found during the excavations amounted to c.7Kg with the majority 6.5Kg being found in Area 1. Area 2 accounted for 0.5Kg which may be explained in that the mound was not fully excavated nor extended into the area sloping down to the south where any finds may have accumulated.

An interesting observation was that the quantity of teeth recovered which came to 2.2Kg comprising of 1.9Kg from Area 1; and 0.25Kg from Area 2. Among these bones were the lower jawbones of cattle and a large quantity of toe and knuckle bones which again may be indicative of butchery at the site.

### **Pottery**

In total and from all contexts c.15.8kg of pottery was recovered (13.7Kg Area 1; 2.1Kg Area 2), The majority, over 11.7kg, being from the upper two deposits in Area 1 and just over 2kg from the upper deposit in Area 2. The majority of the pottery was medieval in date, probably mainly from local pottery kilns. However there was also some post medieval pottery that could be dated to the early part of the 16th Century

Area 1: (T.1) The majority (c.95%) of the total c.12.7Kg identified pottery falls into six types by order these are:-

1. Medieval Green glaze (2.559Kg)
2. Medieval Glazed (2.508Kg)
3. Coarse ware (1.697Kg)
4. Grey slip ware (1.486Kg)
5. Shell tempered (1.118Kg)
6. Humber ware (0.855Kg)



*Fig. 13: Glazed Pottery*

Area 2: (T.2) The majority (c.96.9%) of the total c.1.9Kg of the identified pottery falls into six types by order these are:-

1. Grey slip ware (0.416Kg)
2. Coarse ware (0.389Kg)
3. Oxidised ware (0.336Kg)
4. Medieval Green glaze (0.287Kg)
5. Shell tempered (0.214Kg)
6. Medieval Glazed (0.175Kg)



*Fig. 14: Coarse Ware*

## Summary and conclusions

The excavations confirmed the presence of a large artificially raised chalk building platform. The source of the chalk to raise the platform may have originated from the areas of lower ground to the east, west and south of the platform. This would explain the removal of chalk in the western part of Area 1. Alternatively the chalk may have been brought in from a nearby quarry site of which many are evident in the surrounding area.

Dating evidence from the pottery recovered indicates that the platform is associated with the medieval occupation of the site. The finds from the southwest quadrant of Area 1 may be related to the occupation of the building. Alternatively, if the chalk from this area had been excavated and used to raise the building platform then these deposits could relate to the back filling or levelling of the area.

The village and buildings would have gone through several phases of development and change over the centuries of occupation. These phases of both expansion and contraction would have involved remodelling, demolition and rebuilding until the final abandonment and decay of the village and buildings. Evidence from the various non invasive geophysical surveys appears to depict very clear rectangular patterns that have been interpreted as the 'footprint' of the foundations of buildings. It is likely that the medieval buildings at High Hunsley would have been of a cruck frame construction probably with a beam slot rather than a stone bedding trench. The chalk in the area is very close to the surface and all that would be required is a clay deposit to provide a solid level surface on to which the beam could rest. The excavations in Area 1 exposed an artificial > 6m east-west x c.0.8m wide flat shallow clay surface and a similar parallel deposit c.3.6m to the south which we believe to be the bedding layers for a cruck frame building. Both of these will be investigated in more detail as part of the 2023 excavations.

It is not possible, at this early stage, to fully understand the use of this building other than to say that due to its proximity to the central hollow way and the quantity of pottery and other artefacts that it was probably for domestic use. The lead beading associated with glazing and the copper alloy dress fittings may provide an insight as to both the status of the building and the prosperity of its occupants.

Our planned excavations for 2023 will give us a far greater understanding of the building platform and hopefully its use.

## **Summary of the aims and the results of 2022 excavations**

The main archaeological aims for 2022 were:-

1. To ascertain the state of preservation of any of the identified structures:

The building was probably of cruck frame construction with beam slots, and demolished in the late to early Post-Medieval period.

2. The type and purpose of these structures:

The finds are clearly indicating that this was a domestic structure.

3. Dating evidence relating to the date of occupation and abandonment of the DMV:

The medieval pottery evidence indicates a date of occupation between 14th to late 15th century, with reduced activity in the early 16th century. There is no evidence for later occupation.

4. The significance of the location of the DMV and its place in the wider landscape context:

The location alongside a hollow way that extended to both east and west could indicate a stopping place between Beverley and towns to the west.

5. The type of farming practised and the economy:

The animal bone assemblage, predominantly cattle indicate the diet was of a pasture type supplemented by tillage in the surrounding area.

## **Acknowledgements**

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**Appendix.**

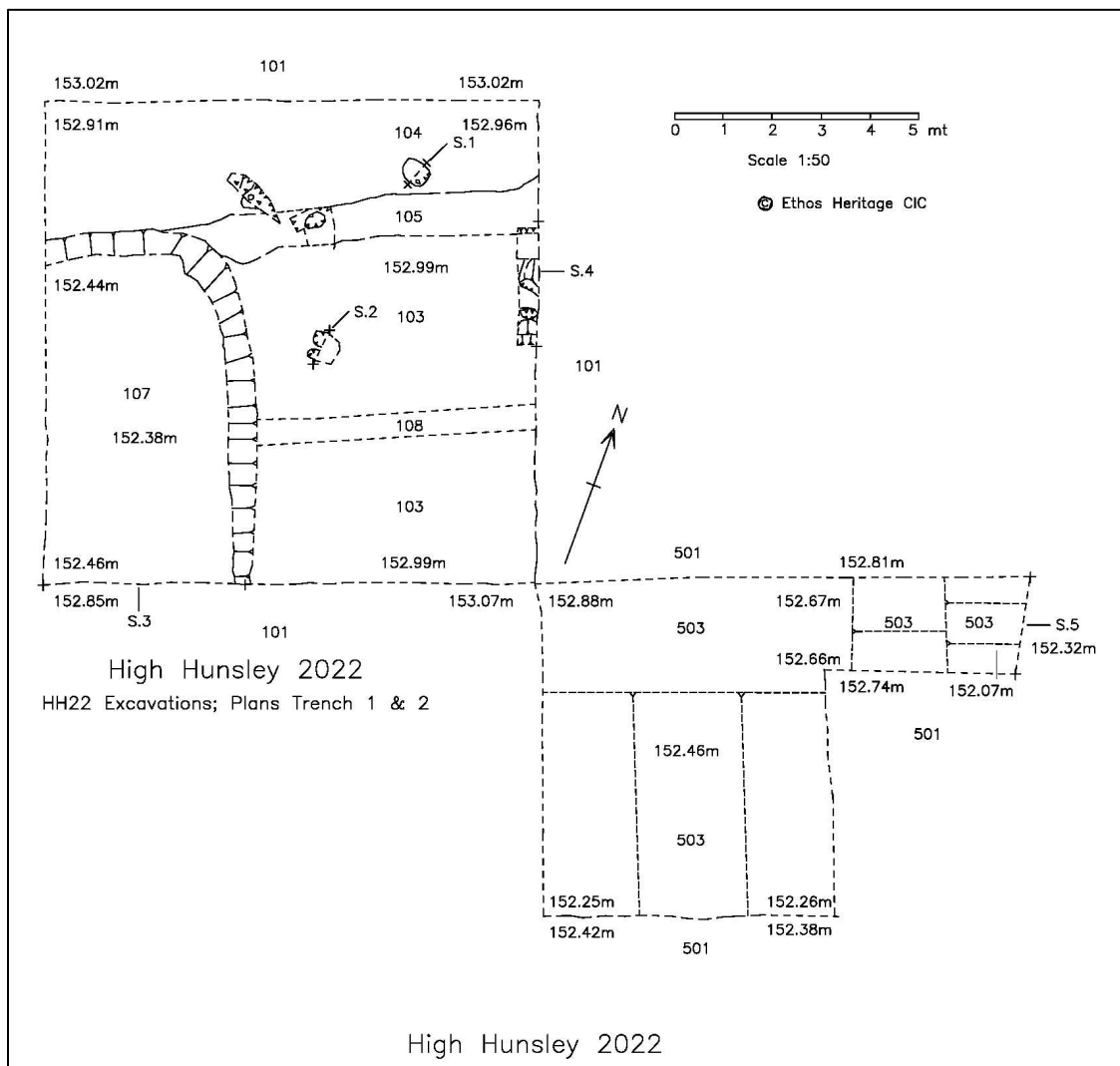


Fig. 15: Plan drawings of High Hunsley HH22 excavations.

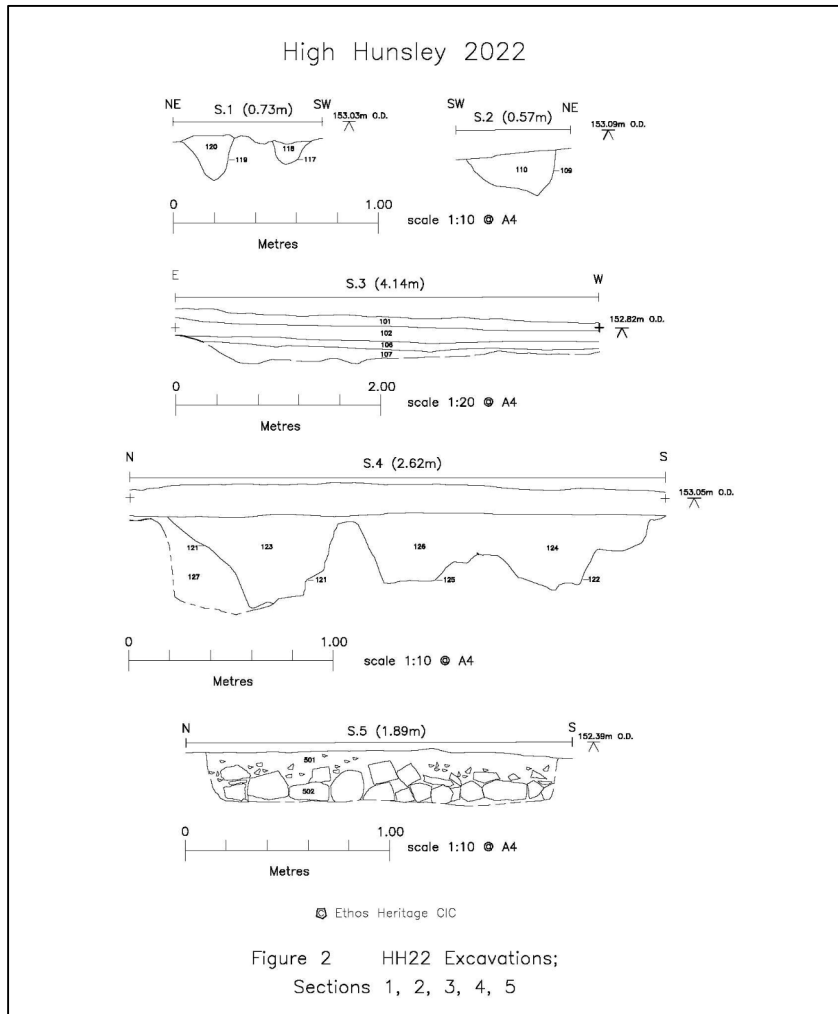


Fig. 16: Section drawings of High Hunsley HH22 excavations



Fig. 17: Aerial view during excavations



*Fig. 18: Area 1 looking south pre excavation*



*Fig. 19: Area 1 looking east post excavation*