



## **Monitoring Report No. 221**

**45m north-east of 21 Bond's Road,  
Dorsey.  
Silverbridge,  
Co. Armagh**

**AE/11/18E**

Ronan McHugh

## Site Specific Information

*Site Address:* 45m north-east of 21 Bond's Road, Dorsy, Silverbridge, Co. Armagh.

*Townland:* Dorsy

*SMR No:* Proximity to ARM 028:008

*State Care:* No *Schedule:* No *Other:* Development site is within Dorsey ASAI

*Grid Ref:* H 9541218963

*County:* Armagh

*Excavation License No:* AE/11/18E

*Planning Ref / No.:* P/2010/0175/F

*Date of Evaluation:* 21<sup>st</sup> February 2011

*Archaeologist Present:* Ronan McHugh.

*Brief Summary:* An archaeological evaluation was carried out at a site in the townland of Dorsy, Silverbridge, Co. Armagh as part of the planning application for a replacement dwelling. The application site lies approximately 200m to the south of the Dorsey Entrenchment, which is a scheduled Iron Age earthwork. It also lies within the designated Dorsey ASAI. A total of five trenches were mechanically excavated to investigate the presence of remains or material of archaeological significance. The trenches showed some evidence of recent agricultural activity on the site in the form of drainage features, particularly in Trenches 3 and 4, but yielded nothing of archaeological significance. It is recommended that no further archaeological fieldwork is carried out at this site.

*Methodology:* Excavation of five test trenches by mechanical excavator equipped with toothless 'sheugh' bucket, under the supervision of the licenced archaeologist (Ronan McHugh)

*Size of area opened:* Approximately 196m<sup>2</sup>.

*Current Land Use:* Rough grazing.

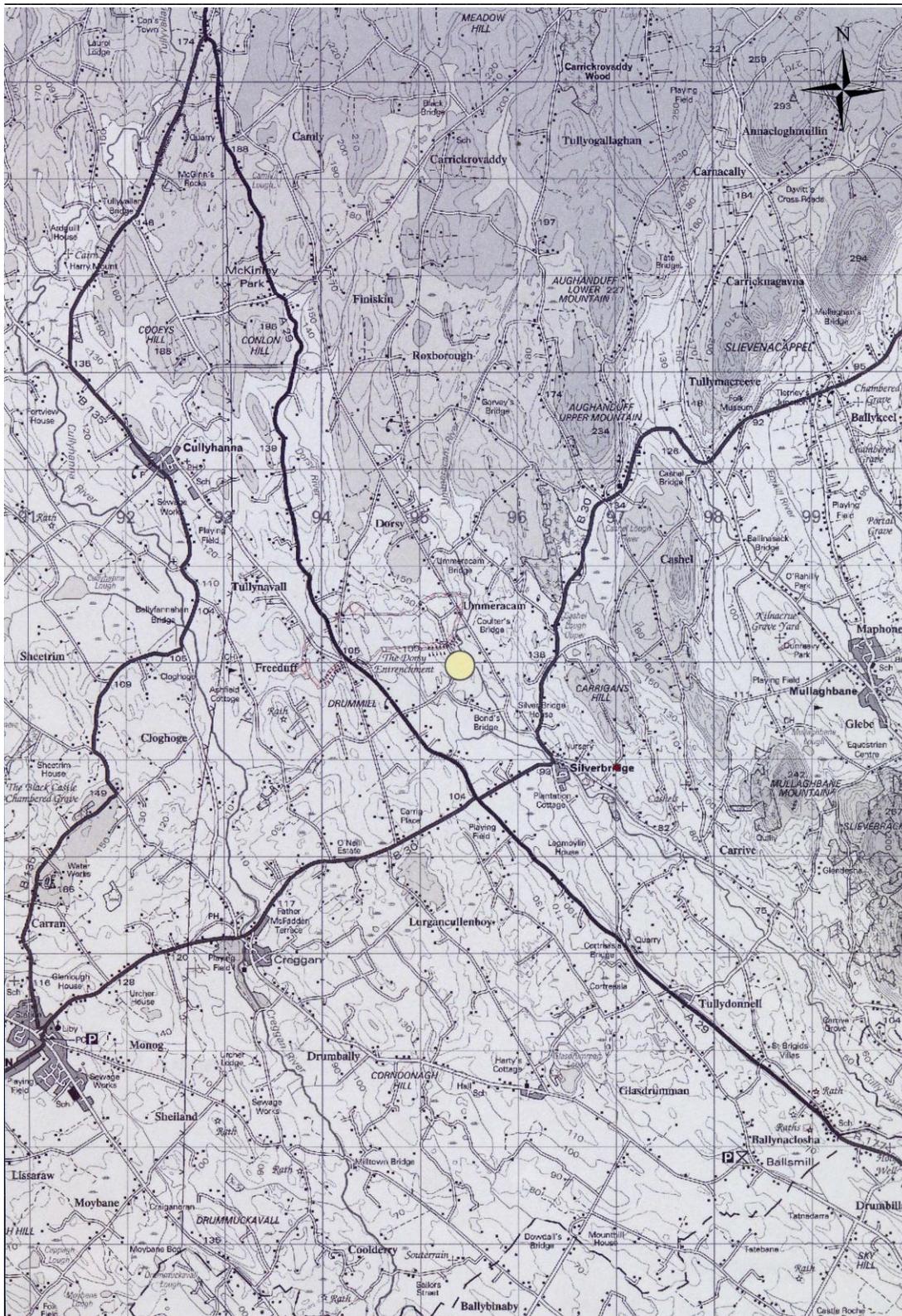
*Intended Land Use:* Development of replacement dwelling.

## **Introduction**

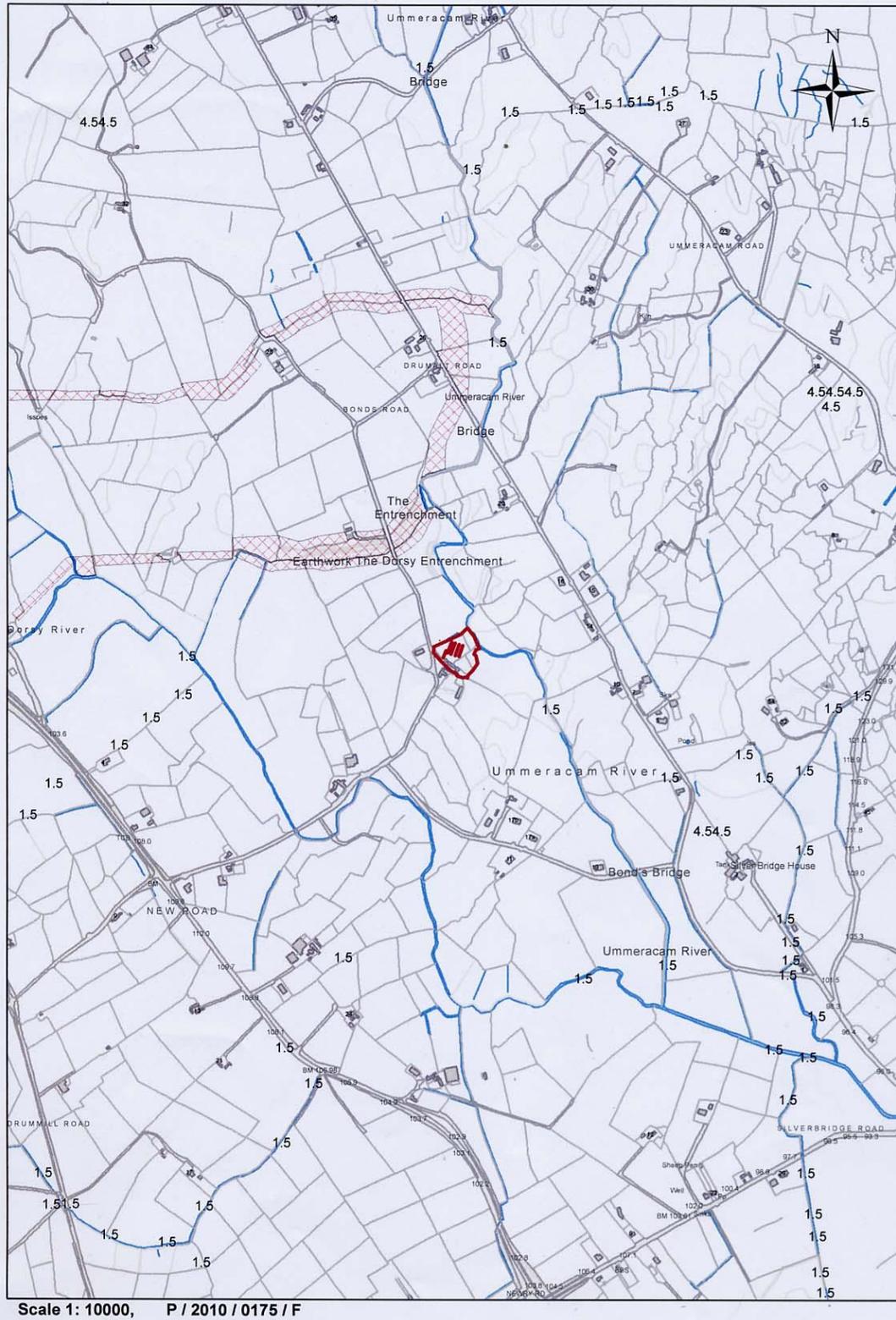
It is proposed to erect a replacement dwellinghouse and garage in a field behind an existing dwellinghouse in Dorsey townland, Co. Armagh (Fig.1). The suggested site of this replacement dwellinghouse and garage is located approximately 200m to the south of the south-eastern edge of the Iron Age earthwork known as the Dorsey, within the designated Dorsey ASAI, and is referred to in this document as 'the development site' (Fig.2)

NIEA (Historic Monuments Unit) requested that an archaeological evaluation of the development site was carried out before work can commence there (see planning ref. P/2010/0175/F). The purpose of the evaluation was to determine whether there were previously unrecorded archaeological remains or material at the development site

The development site is located in a low lying, sub-rectangular field immediately to the east of Bond's Road, some 45m north-east of No.21 Bond's Road. The topography slopes eastwards down from the road's edge to a waterlogged, boggy hollow in the centre of the field, and then rises again in the north-east to an elevated shelf of bedrock. The site is today used as rough grazing for livestock. The boundaries of the site are formed by collapsed dry stone walling which is interrupted intermittently by mature trees. Ruined farm buildings define the southern corner of the field. At the base of the wall forming the north-western edge of the field is a drain or conduit, which appears to have been defined by a stone wall on both sides. It is possible that this feature is related to a Mill Race that was depicted on the first and second editions of the OS 6-inch map, although these depictions show the Mill Race to the south of the development site. The course of the Mill Race depicted on the maps is now marked by a field boundary and it is not shown running through the development site on any of the maps.



**Figure 1.** Approximate location of the development site in Dorsy townland, Co. Armagh.



**Figure 2.** The development site (outlined in red) is 200m south of the Dorsey earthwork (crosshatched).

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## Archaeological Background

The Dorsey is amongst the most significant and visible of a series of earthwork monuments in the northern half of Ireland which are thought to date to the Iron Age. The monument comprises at least six separate stretches of extant earthwork which, when viewed in plan, form the remains of what appears to have been a massive, trapezoidal enclosure with maximum dimensions of approximately 0.5km north/south by 1.8km east/west (Fig.3). It is not certain to what extent the enclosure was ever complete, but earlier accounts attest to the presence of more extensive remains than are visible today while, in the 1930s, Tempest suggested that gaps in the earthwork corresponding with boggy or wetland areas may have been filled by piling. Today, the extant stretches of the earthwork survive in various forms; in the north-west corner, where the perimeter of the site is marked by a small hedge, it survives as a 7m-wide ditch which is 1.5m deep. It is much more substantial at both the south-east and south-west, where it survives as a massive bank flanked by two ditches; the northern ditch is 6m wide and 1.2m deep, the bank rises 3.2m high and is 11.5m wide while the outer ditch is 7.5m wide and 1.0m deep.

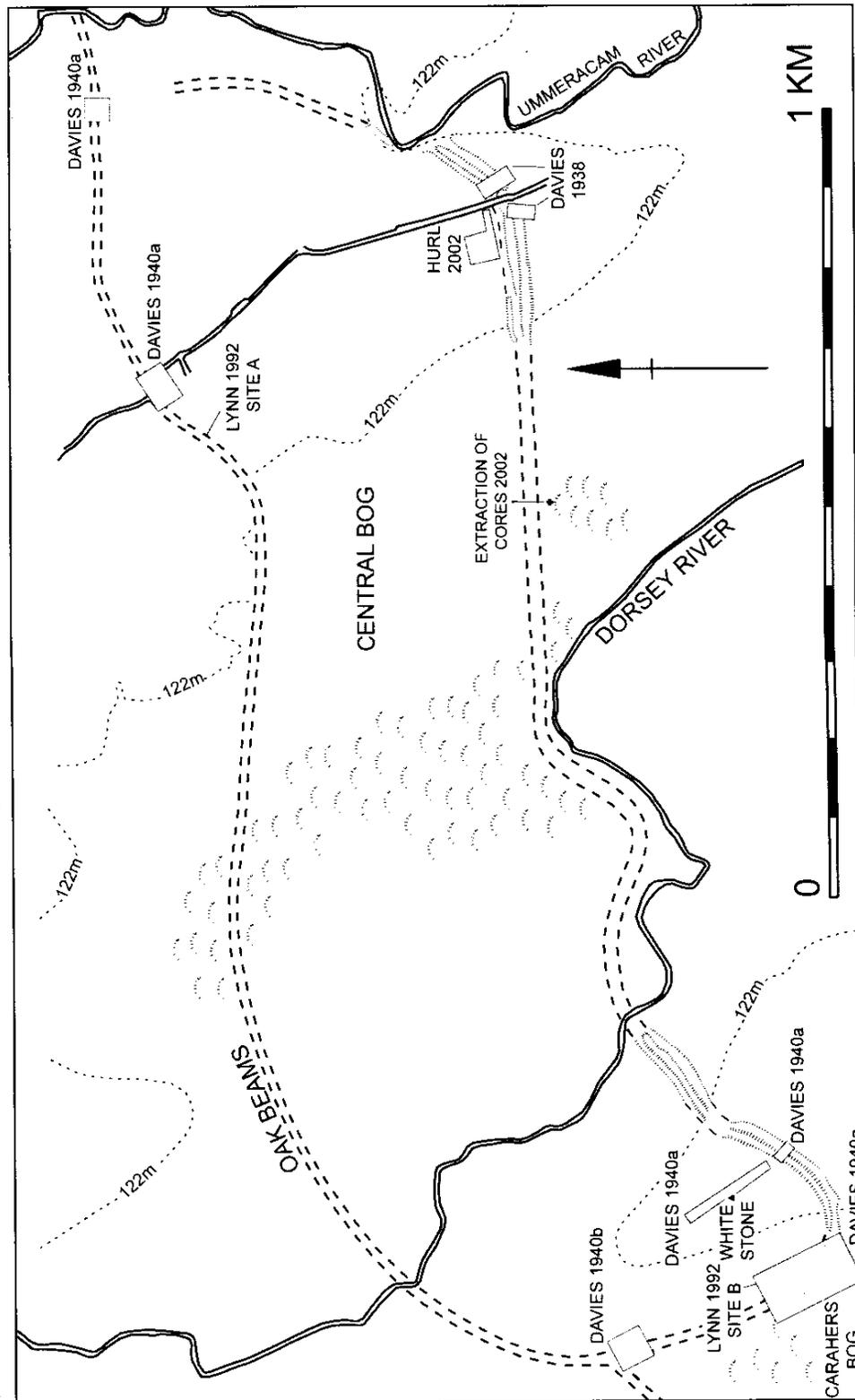
The Dorsey has been the subject of a considerable amount of research since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and has been the site of a number of excavations in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Davies carried out a number of excavations at the site in the late 1930's. In 1938, he excavated in the 'South Gate' area, close to the south-east corner, where the modern Bond's Road runs through the site. He discovered that the causeway through the earthwork, through which the modern road runs, was an original feature. This suggested that the modern road, in this position at least, may have followed the course of the ancient *Bealach Mor na Feadha*, the original road from *Emhain Mhaca*. He also found arrangements of post holes to the east of the road that suggested both that a palisade had flanked the old road on the east side, and that a circular post-built structure was located just to the north-east of the gap. He interpreted this latter feature as a guard house. In 1939, he excavated in the north-west corner of the Dorsey, again where the modern road runs through the monument. Here, there was no evidence of an original causeway through the earthwork, suggesting that the *Bealach* either traversed the earthworks with a bridge at this point, or else its path deviates from the modern road. Davies' programme of excavations also included work at the south-west of the monument. He showed that, in that location at least, the earthwork consisted of two earthen banks without an intervening artificial ditch, with a natural bog lying between the two banks. He also demonstrated that a related linear earthwork, known as the Black Pig's Dyke, adjoined the Dorsey on its western side, and suggested that the two were contemporary.

In 1977, Lynn excavated a section of the bank at the north of the earthwork and retrieved charcoal from beneath it that confirmed an Iron Age date for the Dorsey. In the same year, at the south-west of the monument, he also noted a line of recently exposed wooden posts, just outside the bank. A dendrochronological date from these timbers showed that the wooden structure

they represented dated to the early years BC, and may have been part of another phase of fortification of the site.

The most recent excavation at the Dorsey, by Hurl and MacSparron in 2002, was located close to Davies' 1938 excavation, but to the north-west of the South Gate, on the western side of Bond's Road. As in Davies' excavation, a number of features were unearthed that ran parallel to the line of the modern road. Two palisade trenches were located at a distance of approximately 30m to the west of the road, while a third palisade was associated with a trench immediately to the west of the road, also on a parallel alignment. Radiocarbon dates from these features ranged between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and seemingly confirmed that the line of the modern road in this location fossilised a routeway of ancient significance. A possible hut site was also recorded during this excavation.

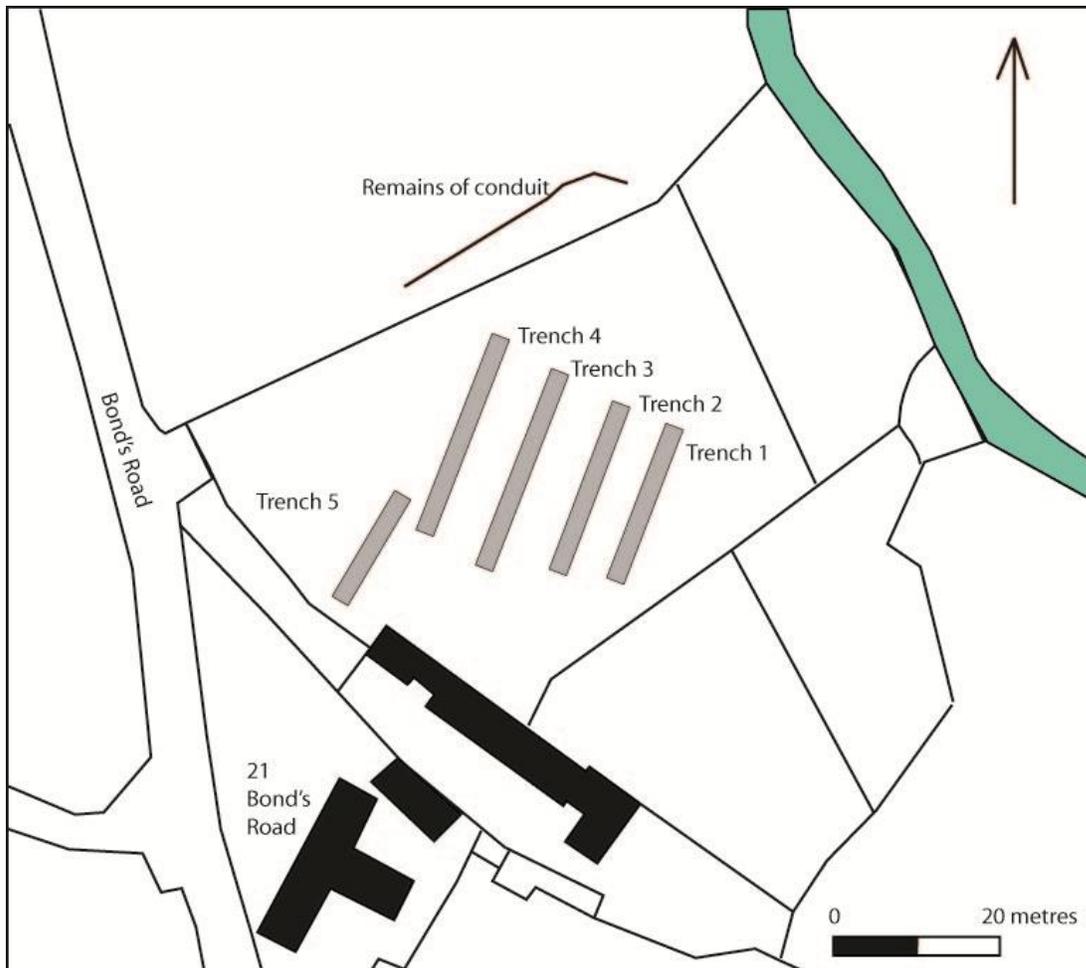
While the Dorsey is recognised as an important survival of the Irish Iron Age, its function is not certain, and many theories have been suggested. Early commentators suggested it was a true enclosure, perhaps a refuge where a chieftain placed his cattle and property when under attack. Aitchison, writing in 1993, also saw it as an enclosure, but suggested its function was ritual, perhaps to enclose sacred landscape features. More recently, both Davies and Lynn have emphasised the Dorsey's role as a frontier fortification, with the different elements of its construction perhaps representing the reinforcement of the monument's defences in response to different episodes of strife. Hurl and MacSparron stressed the importance of the putative ancient roadway in any potential interpretation of the Dorsey's function.



**Figure 3.** Plan of the Dorsey, showing relevant features and location of previous excavations (after Hurl and MacSparron 2004, 41).

## The Excavation

The evaluation consisted of the archaeological supervision of five mechanically excavated trenches. Trenches 1 to 4 were positioned within the footprint of the proposed replacement dwelling and its garage. All trenches measured between 19m and 25m in length and were 2m wide. Trench 5 was located along the proposed access laneway and measured 15m long and 2m wide. The evaluation trenches were laid out as shown in Fig. 4



**Figure 4.** Layout of trenches at the development site.

### *Trench 1.*

Trench 1 was the easternmost of the trenches and its northern end coincided with the base of the outcrop at the east of the development site. For the first 3m from its northern edge, the trench was extremely shallow. A shallow sod (C.101) overlay a thin layer of mid-brown silty clay-loam topsoil with small pebble inclusions (C.102) with an overall depth of 0.05m to 0.1m, and this deposit, in turn overlay the subsoil (C.103), which was a stony orange-brown

boulder clay with protruding areas of bedrock. As the trench extended southwards into the heart of the field, the sod and topsoil deposits became deeper, but the basic stratigraphy remained constant. The trench reached a maximum depth of 0.31m approximately 7.2m from the northern edge (Plate 1). In this position, the sod (C.101) was 0.08m thick and the underlying topsoil (C.102) was 0.23m deep. Decaying stone and damp areas caused some grey mottling and discolouration of the subsoil at the base of the trench immediately to the south of the outcrop.

Trench 1 was excavated to the surface of the subsoil and was discontinued after 19m (Plate 2), as the mechanical excavator was encroaching on the south-eastern boundary of the field.



**Plate 1.** Trench 1 (western section) at 7.2m from northern edge of the trench.



**Plate 2.** Trench 1 on completion of excavation (Facing south-west).

*Trench 2.*

Trench 2 was positioned approximately 5.5m to the west of Trench 1, on a parallel alignment. It was located to the west of the bedrock shelf, in slightly marshier soil. Excavation of a shallow sod (C.201) exposed a topsoil deposit of mid brown silty clay-loam which again had small pebble inclusions (C. 202). The depth of these two deposits was relatively consistent throughout the trench; the sod varied in depth between 0.03 and 0.07m, while the topsoil varied between 0.21m and 0.26m. Removal of the topsoil exposed the natural subsoil (C.203). In Trench 2, this consisted of a stony grey-brown boulder clay, although there were significant areas of grey and orange mottling, particularly in the more low-lying northern half of the trench. At approximately 8.3m from the northern edge of the trench, the remains of a now disused field drain (C.204) were observed running east-west across the trench.

Trench 2 was excavated to the level of the surface of the subsoil and had a maximum depth of 0.33m at approximately 13m from its northern edge (Plate 3). It measured 22m in length (Plate 4).



**Plate 3.** Trench 2 (western section) at 13m from the northern edge of the trench.



**Plate 4.** Trench 2 after completion of excavation (Facing south-west)

*Trench 3.*

Trench 3 was located 7m to the west of Trench 2 and was set out parallel to it. Its northern end coincided with the most low-lying area of the field, close to

the waterlogged hollow in the centre of the development site, while the second half of the trench extended upslope towards Bond's Road. A sod, which varied in depth between 0.04m and 0.10m (C.301), was removed to expose dark brown silty clay-loam topsoil (C.302) which was between 0.21m and 0.28m deep. Some large angular stones (average size approximately 0.3m x 0.4m x 0.3m) were recorded in the topsoil at the northern end of the trench, but were not observed after approximately 9m from the north edge. The topsoil directly overlay the subsoil (C.303) throughout the trench, although some variation was noted in the natural deposit. For the first 8.5m of the trench, the subsoil was a grey boulder clay with frequent stone inclusions and was waterlogged. After this point, as the trench moved upslope, the boulder clay became drier and orange-brown in colour, and was less stony. The remains of two old field drains extended across the trench. At 3.4m from the northern edge of the trench, fragments of a disused drain (C.304) were observed running east-west through the trench. A second drain (C.305), in similar condition, extended from the eastern edge of the trench at 5.3m from the northern edge and extended approximately north-south across it, disappearing into the western side of the trench approximately 5m from the northern edge. Both drains were, on average, 0.1m to 0.2m wide and survived only as shallow depressions, approximately 0.05cm deep, containing both angular and rounded pebbles.

Trench 3 was excavated to the level of the subsoil and had a maximum depth of 0.41m at approximately 5.3m from the northern edge of the trench. It measured 25m in length when completed (Plate 5).



**Plate 5.** Trench 3 after completion of excavation (Facing south-west)

*Trench 4.*

Trench 4 was located 7.5m from the edge of Trench 3 and was set out parallel to Trenches 1-3. It was positioned in the middle of the waterlogged hollow at the centre of the development site and, like Trench 3, extended upslope towards Bond's Road. At the low-lying northern edge of the trench, removal of the sod layer (C.401) exposed a topsoil that consisted of a waterlogged dark

brown silty clay-loam (C.402). Large stones and boulders (average size 0.5m x 0.4m x 0.3m) had been mixed through the topsoil probably in an effort to improve drainage. For the first 10.5m of the trench, coinciding with an area of standing water in the field, the topsoil contained these stones, but in the drier second half of the trench there were fewer stones in the topsoil as the terrain sloped upwards towards the road. The topsoil was markedly drier and lighter brown in hue in the drier portion of the trench.

Removal of the topsoil exposed the natural subsoil, which again varied in character owing to the waterlogging of the northern side of the trench. For the first 10m from the northern edge of the trench, the excavation was problematic as the base of the trench continuously filled with water. However, the subsoil was observed to be a grey-brown boulder clay with decayed stone boulders throughout (C.403). The gradient of Trench 4 was the steepest of all of the trenches, and the subsoil became drier towards the southern edge of the trench, where it was visible as a stony orange-brown boulder clay. The sod (C.401) varied between 0.07m and 0.11m in depth, while the topsoil layer varied between 0.12m and 0.31m.

Trench 4 was excavated to the surface of the subsoil, and was 25m in length (Plate 6). It was deepest at 8.7m from the northern edge of the trench, where it was 0.42m deep. The area of the development site where the northern edge of the trench had been located was the most low-lying within the field. This factor, combined with the standing surface water and presence of significant numbers of stones in the soil suggested that this particular area had been used as a drainage sump or run-off for agricultural field drains in the past. Features such as this are commonplace on poorly draining agricultural land.



**Plate 6.** Trench 4 after completion of excavation (Facing south-west).

### *Trench 5.*

Trench 5 was located upslope from, and to the south-west of, the other four trenches. It coincided with the rising terrain immediately to the east of Bond's road, and was positioned to coincide with the proposed access laneway for the replacement dwellinghouse. The uppermost layer across the trench was a sod (C.501) which varied between 0.05m to 0.1m thick. This overlay a light brown sandy loam topsoil (C.502) which varied between 0.1m and 0.3m in depth. Excavation of these two deposits revealed a light orange brown boulder clay (C.503), that was more consistent in colour than the subsoil elsewhere on the development site, doubtless due to it being drier. Approximately 2.5m from the northern edge of the trench, a field drain (C.504) traversed the trench, running south-east/north-west across it. This drain consisted of angular stones (average size 0.1m x 0.12m x 0.05m), was approximately 0.5m wide and 0.4m deep. It was not completely excavated as it was found to be functional, the only such functional drain encountered during the excavation.

Trench 5 was excavated to the surface of the subsoil and measured 15m in length (Plate 7). It had a maximum depth of 0.45m approximately 5.7m from the northern edge of the trench (Plate 8).



**Plate 7.** Trench 5 at completion of excavation (Facing south-west). The functional field drain (C.504) is clearly visible in the foreground.



**Plate 8.** Trench 5 (west section) at 5.7m from northern edge of the trench.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Five test trenches were excavated at the development site, all down to the surface of the natural subsoil. Although some evidence of agricultural activity was noted in the presence of drainage features, particularly in Trenches 3 and 4, no features or material of archaeological significance were recorded at the site. It is therefore thought that the proposed development will not impact on any previously unrecorded archaeological remains and it is recommended that no further archaeological fieldwork is carried out. No publication of the results of this evaluation is required beyond a short summary in the annual *'Excavations'* bulletin.

**Articles referred to in this report.**

Aitchison, N.B. 1993. 'The Dorsey: a reinterpretation of an Iron Age Enclosure in South Armagh', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 59, 285-301.

Davies, O., 1938. 'Excavations at the South Gate of the Dorsey', *Journal of the County Lough Archaeological Society*, 9.2, 131-134.

Davies, O., 1940. 'Excavations at the Dorsey', *Journal of the County Lough Archaeological Society*, 9.4, 280-289.

Davies, O., 1940. 'Excavations at the Dorsey and Black Pigs Dyke', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 2, 31-37.

Hurl, D.P. and MacSparron, C. 2004. 'Excavations at the Dorsey Co. Armagh', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 63, 41-51.

Lynn, C.J., 1989. 'An Interpretation of the Dorsey', *Emania*, 6, 5-14.

Lynn, C.J., 1992. 'Excavation at the Dorsey, Co. Armagh, 1977', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 54-55, 61-77.

Tempest, H.G., 1930. 'The Dorsey: Some notes on the large entrenchment in the townland of Dorsy in the south of the county of Armagh', *Journal of the County Lough Archaeological Society*, 7.2, 187-240.

## **Archive**

Finds: N/a

Photographs.

The digital images (24) taken during the evaluation are archived within the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queens University Belfast.

Plans/drawings: N/a

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Dated \_\_\_\_\_