

# The Sandstone Ridge Trust



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## Interim Report : URCHINS KITCHEN

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Carried out on behalf of :  
The Sandstone Ridge Trust:  
The Ridge, Rocks and Springs Project.



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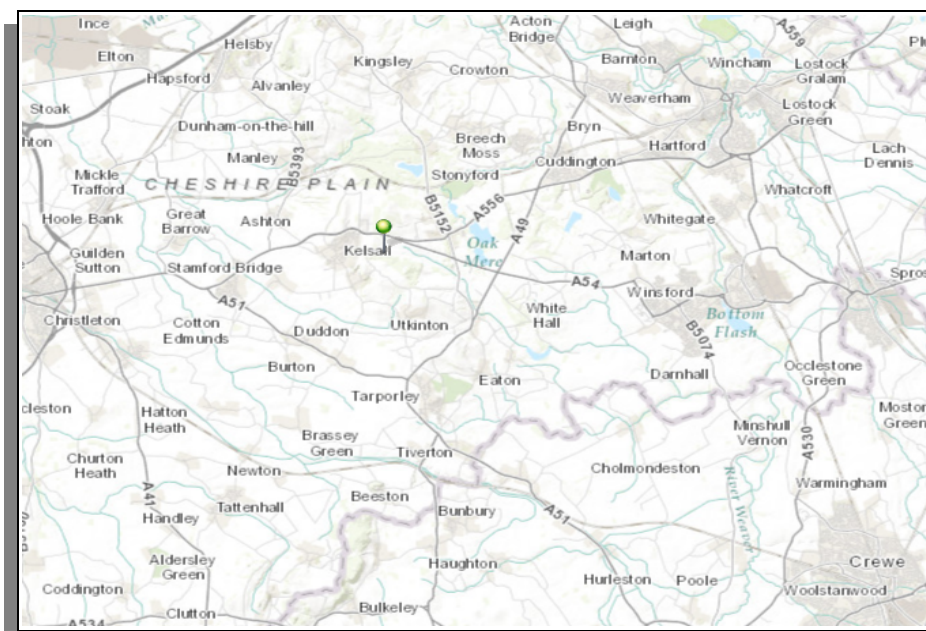
## 1.0 Summary

- 1.1 An archaeological trial excavation was carried out to identify potential from the Stage One reporting of sites for the Ridge ,Rocks and Springs project at Urchins Kitchen, Delamere Forest, Cheshire. The site is located in managed woodland within Delamere Forest. The work consisted of trial excavation trenches to investigate the extent of the rock shelters and geology. An examination was also undertaken of a suspected 'Celtic head' within the rock face and detailed planning and recording of a graffiti panel was also completed. These works were commissioned by The Sandstone Ridge Trust as part of the Second Stage of the HLF funded Ridge, Rocks and Springs project . The work was undertaken in March 2016, and was restricted to a target area and what was considered achievable for volunteers within the 2 day time frame.
- 1.2 The work will enable the Trust to evaluate the Urchins Kitchen location as to its potential for archaeology , develop an understanding of its history and geology and also assess the Trusts ability and resources to carry out similar work.
- 1.3 Further work may produce more evidence of activity in the area and there is a possibility of more material being recovered from excavation on the site. However it is a large area, some 30% of the original feature has previously been buried and a complete assessment is outside the current resources of the project. It is recommended that the landscape feature itself is protected from any future change of use (or back filling) and highlights the rapid loss of such landscape features if not managed by the landowners.

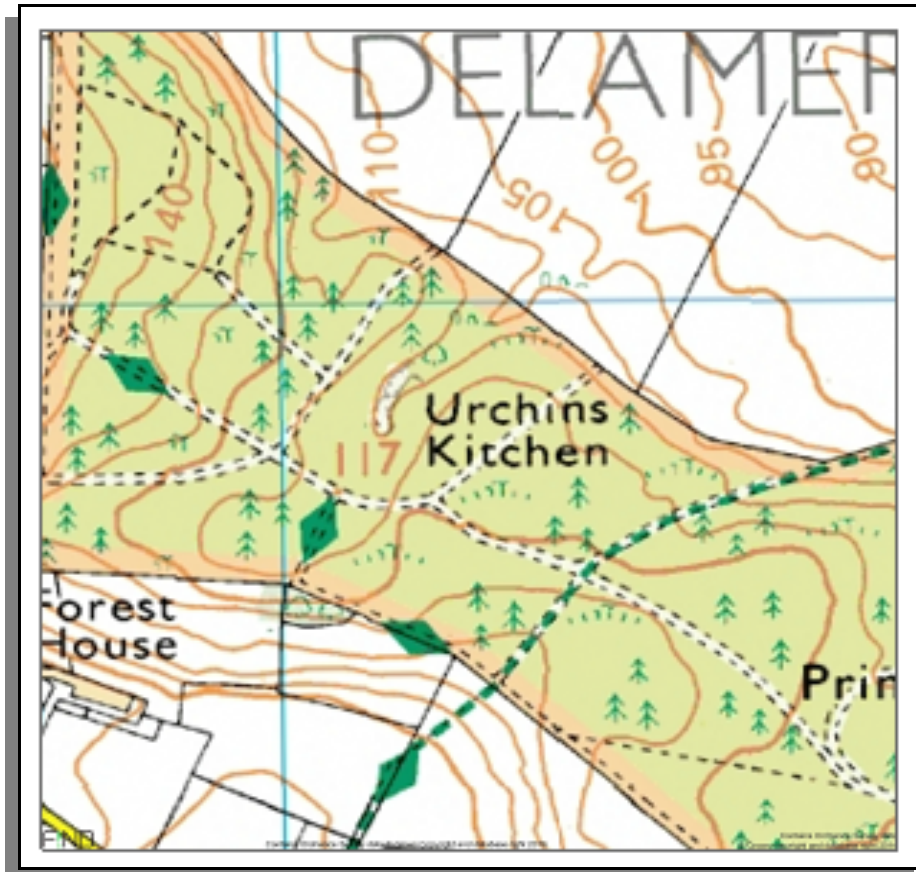
## 2.0 Introduction

### 2.1 Site Location

The site is located 12.8 km's west of Northwich, 1.6 km's east of Kelsall within Delamere Forest near Primrose Hill and is centred at and currently stretches for 190.4 meters covering some 4131square meters.



*General site location map*



*General site location map (2)*

## **2.2 Site History**

No historical references to the site were discovered as part of the stage one RRS archives and records research. Therefore we have considered its geological origins and associations with Cheshire folk law.

## **2.3 The Formation of a Landscape**

Kelsall lies in a nook on the south-west facing escarpment of the Mid Cheshire Ridge. Indeed the name Kelsall may well be derived from Middle English (1100-1500 AD); Kells Halh meaning 'Nook of land of a man called Kell'. The Mid Cheshire Ridge is a range of low sandstone hills which stretch north to south through Cheshire in North West England.

The ridge acted as something of a barrier to the passage of Irish Sea ice during the last ice age and its hills are etched with numerous glacial melt water channels, many of which formed sub glacially. Particularly spectacular examples are those at Urchin's Kitchen in Primrose hill Woods.

Kelsall gap lies at 125m, with Pale Heights (176m) and the Yeld (157m) to the north and Primrose Hill (158m) to the south. The broad landscape is shaped by Permo-Triassic sandstones and a series of parallel faults running NE/SW. During the Permian, some 250 - 286 millions years ago, this part of the earth's crust was stretched causing faulting and subsidence.

The strong red colouring in the local rock is due to iron oxide, coating round the sediment grains, and indicates an origin in desert conditions. The Helsby sandstone formation is thought to be

braided stream deposits from the Variscan mountains which, in the Triassic (250-213 million years ago), rose between present day Dorset and Brittany. At the time this part of the continental land mass is believed to have been much nearer the equator. The Triassic period ended in this locality with the incursion of the sea and the deposition of Cheshire's salt beds to the east of the central ridge.

Today natural rock exposures occur notably at Urchin's Kitchen in Primrose Hill Wood .

The erosion would be exaggerated along the existing geological faults leading to the nook formations we see today. The force of laden melt waters has carved out features like the Urchin's Kitchen and overlain the bedrock with drifts of sands and gravels together with occasional large boulders. Here it seems that sands and gravels were deposited around stranded blocks of ice giving rise to the undulating landscape of Delamere with its peaty hollows.

A sub glacial melt water channel is a channel beneath an ice mass, like ice sheets and valley glaciers, roughly parallel to the main ice direction. These melt water channels can have different sizes, ranging from very small channels of a metre deep and wide to big valleys which can be up to a kilometres wide. The dimensions of these channels are regulated by several factors, like: temperature, melt water volume, debris content in the water, ice wall closure rates and squeezing of fluidized sediment (Menzies, 2002).

## **2.4 Folk History**

Cheshire's folk tales recount that the Devil, when cast out from heaven fell to earth near Delamere forest. Being hungry and having spotted an earthworm the devil dug and dug into the ground, unearthing more and more insects, bugs and worms for his supper. Discovering an old cooking pot he lit a fire and started cooking up his earthy feast. The people of Kelsall, seeing the smoke came to look and were convinced that the noises came from a giant hedgehog (urchin). When the smoke cleared they realised that it was the devil himself, they took hold of the many stones and boulders that had been thrown up and cast them down onto the 'urchin'. In reply the devil flew up into the air, carrying a huge boulder which he flung at the gathering of Kelsall folk, only to miss. The boulder came to rest in the Cheshire gap and is known today as Beeston crag. Hence the name 'Urchins kitchen' (Cheshire Folk Tales)

## **2.5 Acknowledgements**

The excavation was carried out by 8 volunteers from the Sandstone Ridge Trusts '*Ridge ,Rocks and Springs Project 2013-2017*'. The community excavation was supported by Heritage Lottery Fund and was assisted by the kind permission of the Forestry Commission and its staff at Delemere who granted access.

## **3.0 Objectives**

The Ridge, Rocks and Springs project has accumulated a data set of over 700 sites across the Ridge, most have been identified from historic maps. Much of the project concentrated on the desk based assessment of wells, springs, quarries and graffiti. As a volunteer driven and volunteer focused project there was a desire to carry out some field work, especially as many had previously volunteered on the excavations from the Habitats and Hillforts landscape partnership. Therefore it was agreed that 3 sites would be identified for investigation of the archaeological potential, one from each of the North, Central and Southern project areas.

The suspected presence of a 'Celtic head' at Urchins Kitchen, plus its un-designated status was good opportunity to start the field work and access the potential for the Trust to undertake further work at a later date.

The objectives were thus:

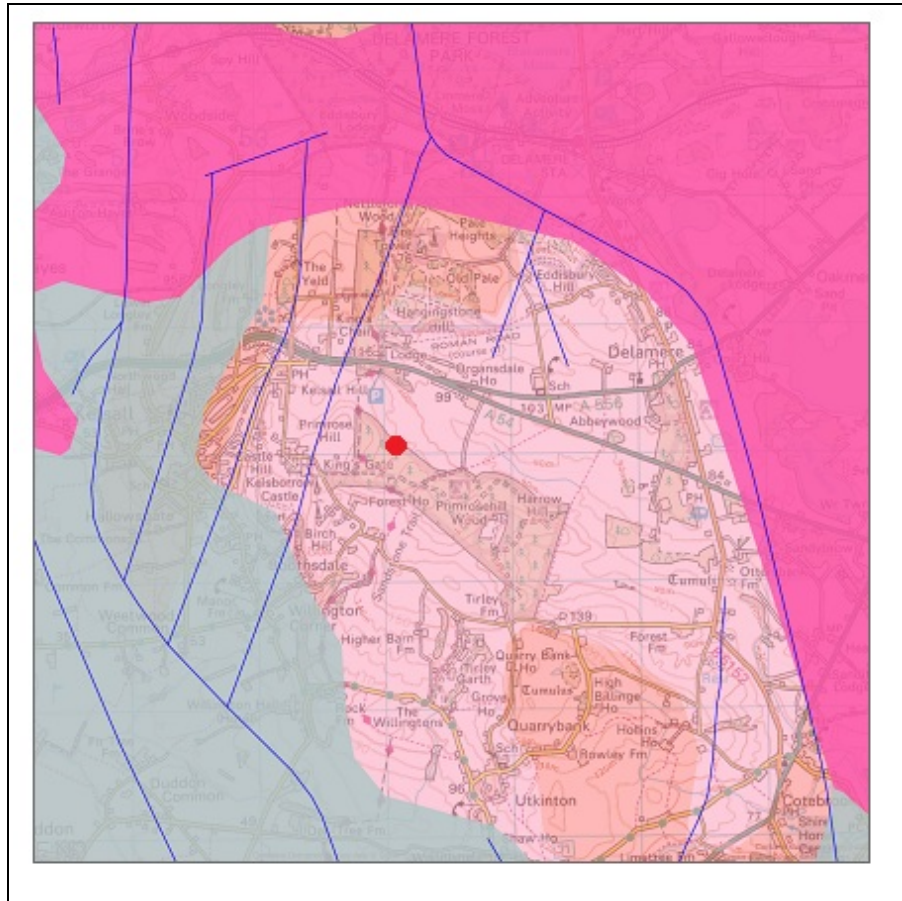
1. Record and identify the nature of the 'Celtic head' at the entrance to the Urchins Kitchen.
2. Excavate a trial trench within the two nearby rock shelter's, to search for graffiti below modern ground levels.
3. Excavate a survey trench to determine the geology of the site.
4. Assess the site for archaeological potential for further work by the Trust.
5. Evaluate the current resources held by the Trust and its volunteers to carry out further archaeological excavation at this and other sites.



*'Celtic head' in niche at North West entrance to Urchins Kitchen , above Trench two*

#### **4.0 Methodology**

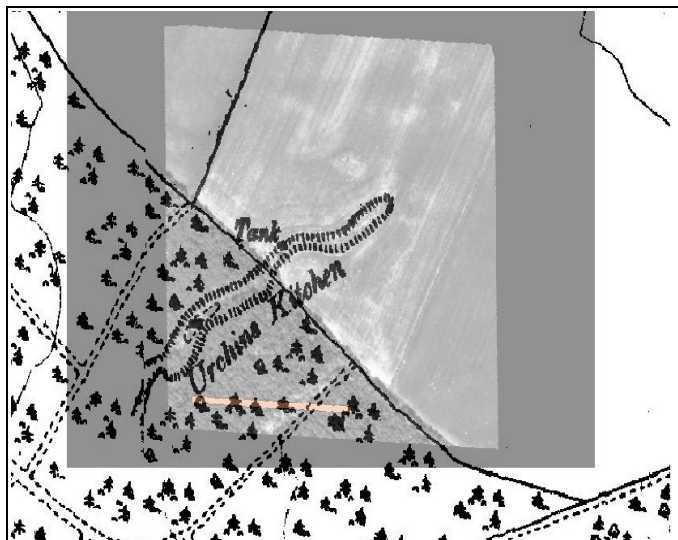
The area had been recorded as part of the Stage 1 field work when a group of volunteers had visited the area as part of the graffiti survey, a panel of graffiti located here was identified for detailed scale recording. Desk based assessment looked at maps of the local geology and the sites relation to known fault lines.



*Geological map of area with fault lines*

Historic maps retrieved from the Cheshire Archives and Records office showed the feature known as Urchins Kitchen on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ordnance Survey ( 1848) . It has added relevance to the project as it has marked the location of a 'tank' which must relate to a water supply being drawn from here and stored for use elsewhere.

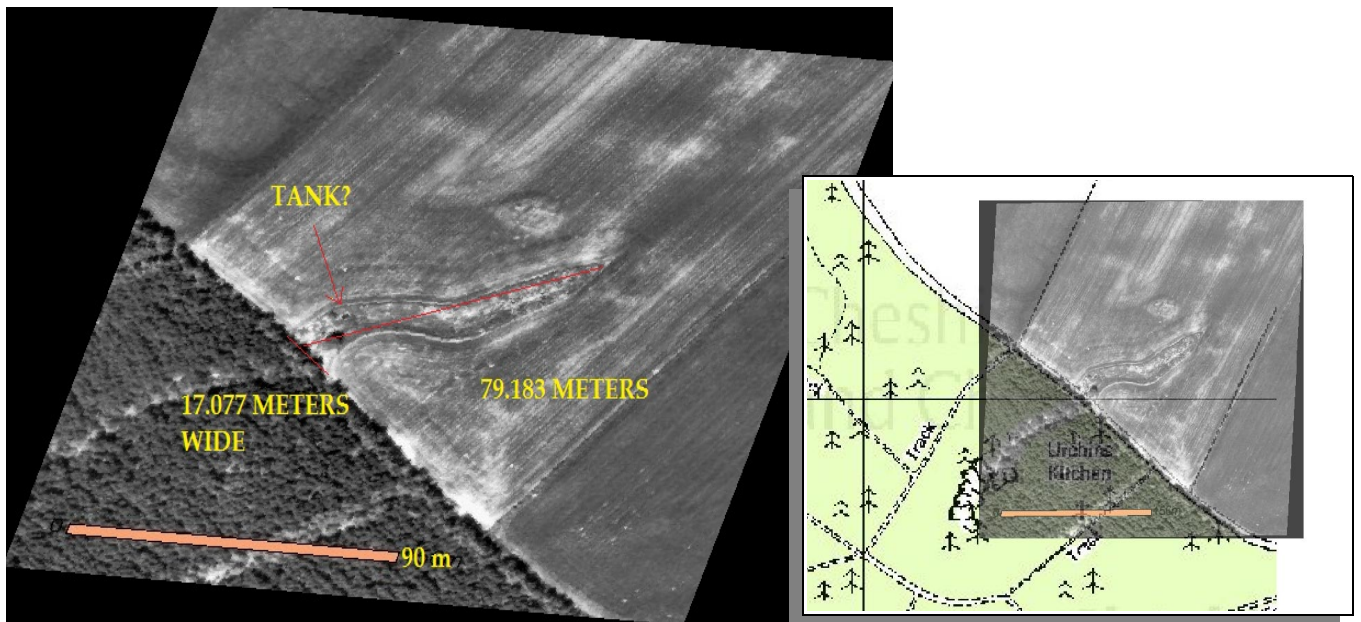
The historic maps combined with Aerial photographs (below) showed a significant reduction in the feature in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century when it was evidently filled in along approximately 50% of its length, where it crossed into the field system beyond the forestry to the north east.

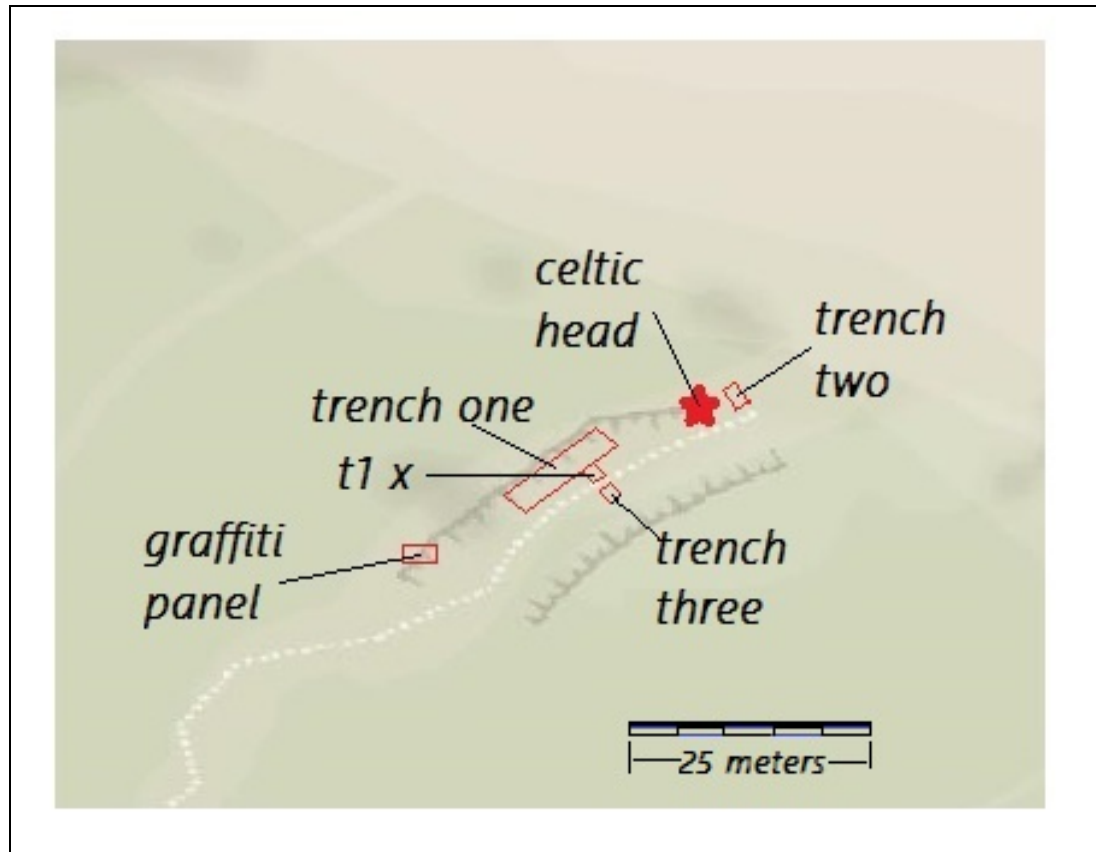




*Site location (above) and scaled Ariel photo of ploughed and backfilled landscape (below)*

*Early 20<sup>th</sup> C aerial photograph shows the feature still exposed to the North East*





*Location plan of trenches and features (above) and photograph of area (below)*





Three trenches were excavated.

- Trench One running along the rock face to the North of the gorge.
- Trench One X being a 1 meter square extension to the South east to determine the extent of the previous roof of the rock shelter.
- Trench Two 1 meter square below the 'Celtic head' feature
- Trench Three the other side of the foot path in line with the extension from Trench One.

The 'Celtic head' feature was cleaned and recorded

The panel of graffiti was planned on per-ma trace with a 1 meter grid square.

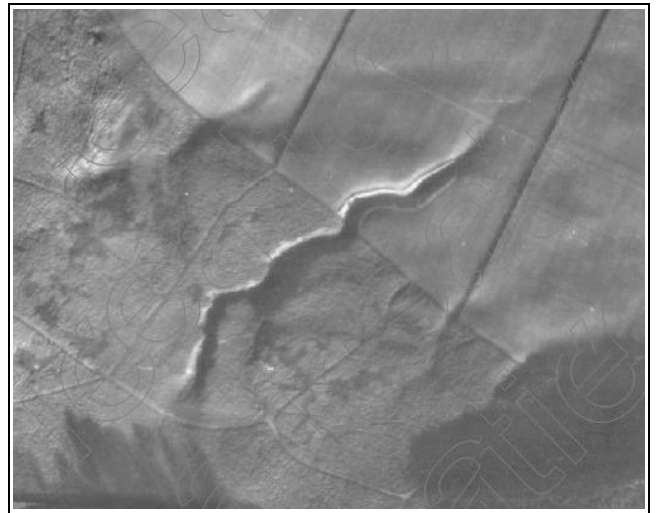


## 5.0 Results

The results recorded are prior to any post excavation work being completed on the site, due to the nature of the project and its objective of assessing the archaeological potential of such locations on the Ridge.

### 5.1 Desk Based Work

The desk based assessment replaced any field work on the site, again due to time and resource constraints the buried earthworks of this feature were not surveyed. However use of the photographs and satellite images for this location revealed the previous extent of this geological feature in the landscape. Correspondence with the present land owner informed us that the area of the Kitchen had been filled in circa 2003 as it had previously been used as a farm dump and new legislation required it to be sealed up. They supplied this image of the area as they later attempted to add new land drains as it had always remained wet with water issuing from the ground.



The historic maps showed a 'tank' marked in the south west corner of the now buried feature, another important link to water features relating to historic supply and water management on the Ridge.

## 5.2 Trench One





*East and North sections of Trench One*



### 5.3 Results Summary Trench One :

The trench was excavated down to the natural bedrock , to look for earlier levels of graffiti that may have survived below the modern ground levels.

As this trench was within the overhang of the rock face there was only an average of 20 cm of soil depth in 2 and 3 defined layers, with a maximum depth of 35 cm

A succession of fire-pits had been dug in the northern end of the trench and created a layer of charcoal and burnt material to about 20 cm in depth.

Although the uppermost layers of burnt material contained an amount of post modern rubbish, the lower layers contained a number of clay pipe fragments, showing considerable reuse of this 'spot' for at least a couple of centuries.

### 5.4 Trench One extension



*Trench one extension*

### 5.5 Results summary Trench One extension:

This trench was to investigate the extent of the roof of the rock shelter by looking for roof fallen sandstone fragments. The edge of a large piece of sandstone roof fall can be seen above.

There was also evidence of a firepit, which may have been used at the edge of the rock shelter when it extended further than its modern form.

## 5.6 Trench Two



*Trench Two was excavated with its North west corner at the surveying staff, below the suspected 'Celtic head'*

## 5.7 Results Summery Trench Two:

A 1 meter square trench was excavated to the depth of the natural and showed no archaeological features or finds other than some post modern rubbish.



*Trench Two showed the bed rock exposed on its eastern edge*

## 5.8 Trench Three



*Trench Three was excavated to investigate the geology beyond the edge of the (excavated) rock shelter roof*

## 5.9 Results Summery Trench Three

The aim of this trench was to investigate the geology of the site beyond the edge of the rock shelter roof. The 1 meter square trench showed numerous layers of sediment washed along Urchins Kitchen and a 10 to 13 cm wide band of clean, white sand , associated with the Triassic deserts at 80cm depth.

This trench also returned some unexpected small finds , including a number of ceramic vessel sherds of late 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> Century date, in context to the washed silt layers.



*Ceramics from just below top soil in washed silt layers*

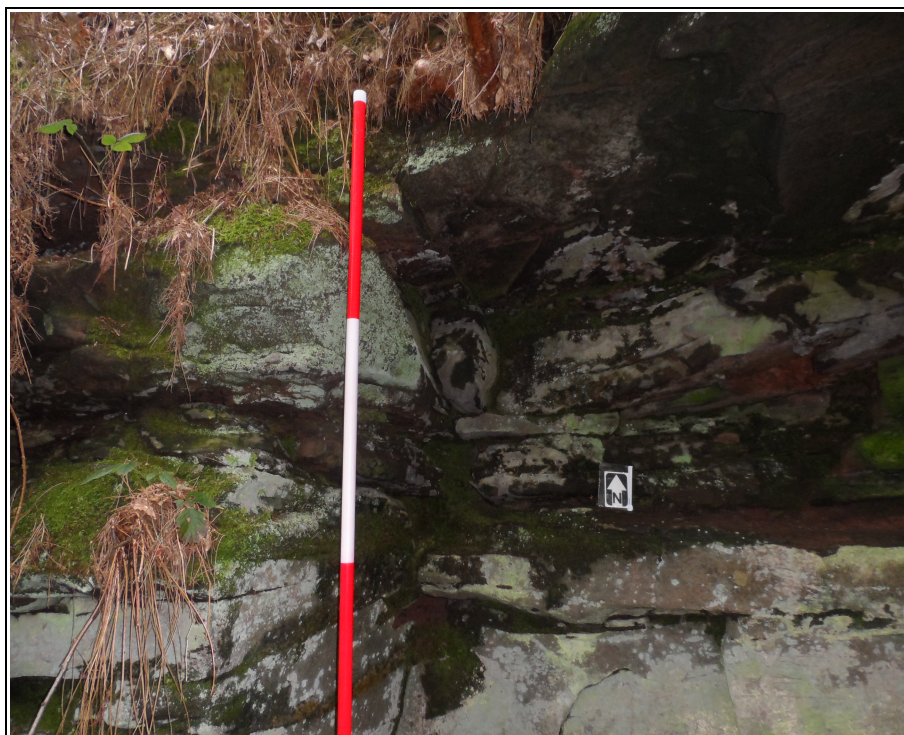


*General elevated overview of site with Trench One to the right of image*

#### **6. 'Celtic head'**

The suspected 'Celtic head' had been photographed as part of a previous graffiti hunt along Urchins Kitchen by the project team as part of the Stage One survey.

Its location at the entrance to the cliff edged part of the Kitchen has suggested it had some sort of significant location as a 'guardian' or 'watcher' by one of the volunteers.



*Location of 'Celtic head' (centre)*



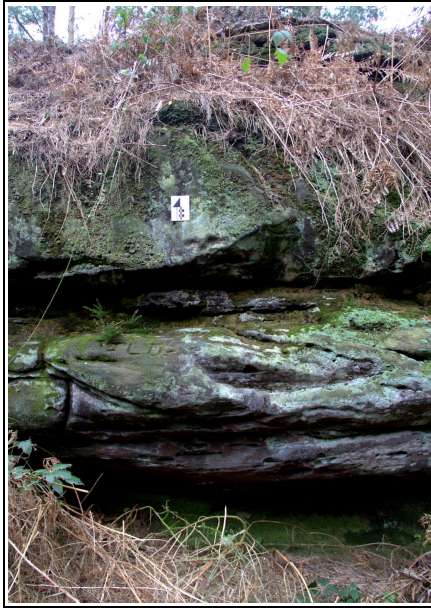
**6.1 Results Summary : Celtic head**

After cleaning away the moss and silts from around the rock face it was decided that the feature corresponded to the fault lines and bedding planes of the surrounding sandstone and was not carved. There were no tool marks evident. Weathering in the form of wind and water probably account for its formation. Pareidolia seems to have more influence here than human hands!



*Another rock face at Urchins Kitchen?*

*This example displays similar features to others found on the Sandstone Ridge.*



## 6.2 Graffiti panel

In conjunction with the excavation at Urchins Kitchen , the field work presented an opportunity to record a graffiti 'panel' with a scaled grid square on per-ma trace , in contrast to the previous photo recording method used in the Stage One surveys. The problems of exposure and lighting makes many parts of graffiti difficult to record by camera and the recording by drawing was an attempt to capture some of the less obvious and fainter marks that make up the graffiti.



*Isolated graffiti is easier to record via photography*

## 6.3 Results Summery Graffiti panel:

the results are shown with a comparison photograph of the location.

*Plan and front elevation of a graffiti panel surveyed for comparison with photographic records*



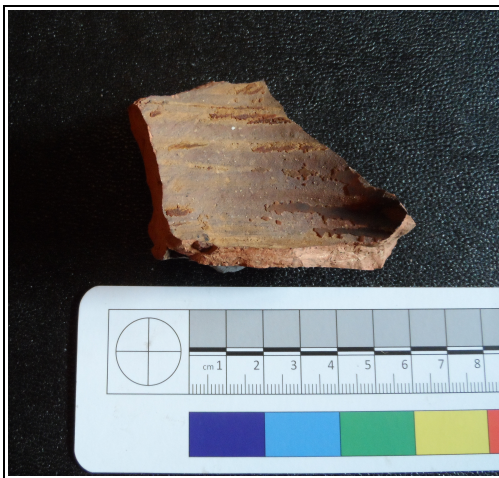
## 7. Artefacts

Trench One and Three both contained artefacts as small finds, ceramic sherds and clay pipe fragments, all good sources of chronology although the ceramics where not associated with any features ,but rather represent 'chance finds' as their context suggests that they where deposited by water action previously. The use of this area as a dump historically could be attributed to their presence..



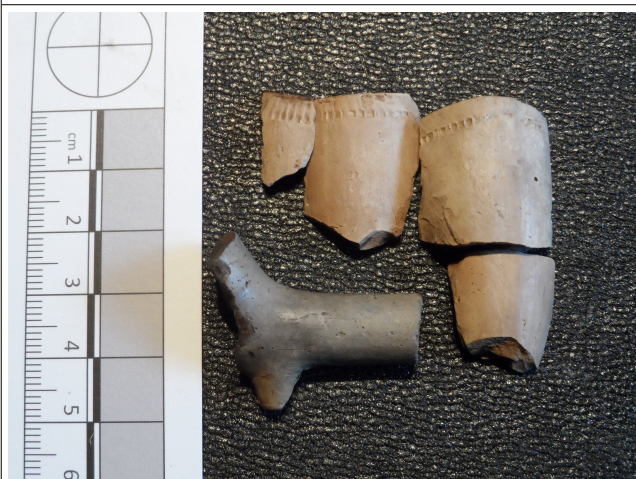
*Reference photograph of ceramics type*

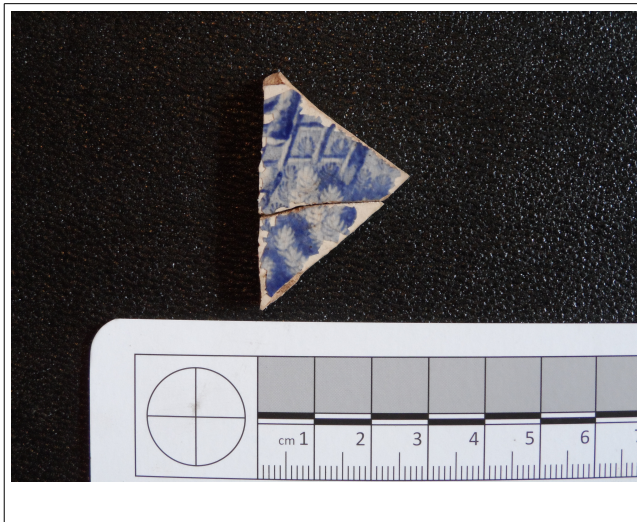
Midlands purple and Cistercian-type wares from Trench Three.





Fragments of clay pipes found within the lower layers of the fire-pit in Trench One.





Two sherds of blue and white ceramics from Trench Three. Context : deposited in washed silt layer just below top soil.

## 8.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The objective of this field work was to assess the archaeological potential of such locations on the Sandstone Ridge as identified by the Stage One survey. Its aim was not to conclude the research but to generate potential and possible further work for future projects to be implemented by the Sandstone Ridge Trust.

The presence of ceramic small finds leads to questions relating to the extent of trade routes and transport links in the later Middle ages, as the nearby presence of Vale Royal Abbey and the use of Urchins Kitchen to travel to and from such a site may be relevant with the Cistercian ware found.

The clay pipe fragments, particularly 2 of the smaller bowls may be late 17<sup>th</sup> c or 18<sup>th</sup> c, again attesting to the use of this landscape feature as a navigation route, or somewhere to hunker down whilst travelling 'abroad' and caught in a storm, taking shelter around a camp fire within the Sandstone cliff's of Urchins Kitchen and recounting the night the devil fell to earth!

The massive landscape changes observed with the recent backfilling of the Northern end of Urchins Kitchen illustrates how features may be lost or obscured in the modern landscape. Its previous form and length must be examined in the context of trade or travel links across the historic landscape, does it lead to the Iron Age hillforts, for example?

## 9.0 References

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[http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/mpcist\\_eh\\_2011/index.cfm](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/mpcist_eh_2011/index.cfm)  
**The Journey Man** ,Cheshire Folk tales, History Press 2011  
**The Sandstone Ridge Trust** <http://www.thesandstoneridgetrust.co.uk/>