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Tormented Alderney: archaeological investigations of the Nazi labour and concentration camp of Sylt

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Abstract

Following the evacuation of Alderney, a network of labour and SS concentration camps were built on British soil to house foreign labourers. Despite government-led investigations in 1945, knowledge concerning the history and architecture of these camps remained limited. This article reports on the findings of forensic archaeological investigations which sought to accurately map Sylt labour and concentration camp for the first time using non-invasive methods and 3D reconstructive techniques. It also demonstrates how these findings have provided the opportunity – alongside historical sources – to examine the relationships between architecture, the landscape and the experiences of those housed there.

Introduction

The Nazis constructed a network of over 44,000 (concentration, extermination, labour, Prisoner of War (PoW) and transit) camps across Europe, imprisoning and murdering individuals opposed to Nazi ideologies, and those considered racially inferior (Megargee & White 2018). Information about these sites varies in part due to Nazi endeavours to destroy the evidence of their crimes (Arad 1987: 26; Gilead *et al.* 2010: 14; Sturdy Colls 2015: 3). Public knowledge regarding the camps that were built on British soil in the Channel Islands is particularly limited, not least of all because they were partially demolished and remain “taboo” (Carr & Sturdy Colls 2016: 1). Sylt was one of several camps built on the island of Alderney (Figures 1 & 2). The camp first operated as a labour camp, before becoming an SS concentration camp in March 1943.

Literature describing Sylt often claims that the camp was “completely” “destroyed”, “dismantled” or “burnt”, and that only gateposts, a few bunkers and an underground tunnel remain (Packe & Dreyfus 1971: 59; Pantcheff 1981: 36; Steckoll 1982: 182; Bonnard 1993: 72; Sanders 2005: 205) (Figure 3). Aside from the few visible traces, the only other marker in

the landscape acknowledging the site's former function is a memorial plaque, erected in 2008 at the request of former prisoners (Carr 2012: 102; Figure 3A). A disused building constructed to house airport direction-finding equipment (in the 1960s) and dense vegetation now characterise the site (Pinnegar 2010: 3). The former camp area is privately owned by various landowners, some of whom wish to protect it, others who do not share this enthusiasm for its wartime history. Only in December 2017 was the site designated a conservation area but, as of 2019, its physical condition remains unchanged (States of Alderney 2017).

Since 2010, the Centre of Archaeology (Staffordshire University) has regularly undertaken historical and archaeological investigations at Sylt labour and concentration camp as part of the "Alderney Archaeology and Heritage Project" (Centre of Archaeology 2018). Through comprehensive historical research and the development and application of non-invasive archaeological methodologies, the aim of the work was to accurately map and characterise the extent and nature of Sylt in order to: (1) preserve the site by way of record, (2) determine what physical traces of the camp survive today and (3) provide new insights into the relationships between architecture and the experiences of those housed there. Research questions included: How did the camp evolve over time and how did this impact upon inmate experiences? In what ways did the architecture of the camp allow the SS to maintain control over the inmates? To what extent has the camp been destroyed and how might this impact upon future protection requirements? Given the current condition of the site and attitudes towards it, how might archaeological methods contribute to heritage management and education? This paper addresses these issues and seeks to demonstrate the contribution that an interdisciplinary approach can have when researching sites of atrocity.



Figure 1. Plan of the Channel Islands archipelago, showing Alderney's position approximately 15-20km off the northern coast of France (figure by Centre of Archaeology)

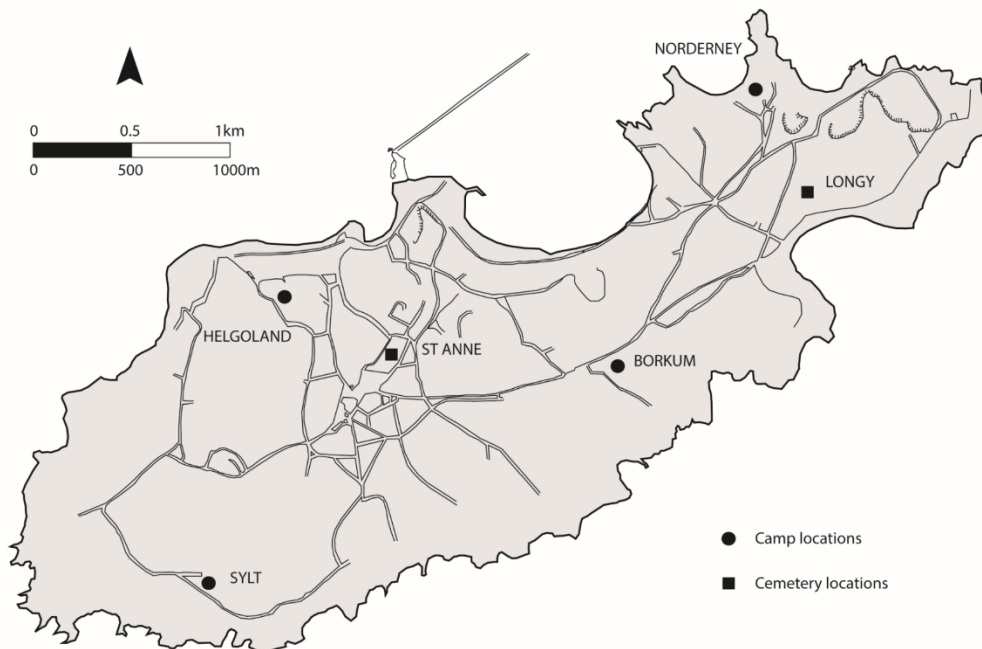


Figure 2. The island of Alderney and the location of: Helgoland, Norderney, Borkum and Sylt camps (figure by Centre of Archaeology)



Figure 3. UAV photogrammetry of the site of the former labour and concentration camp Sylt in 2017 and the memorial plaque installed by a survivor on the surviving camp gateposts in 2008 (marked A) (figure by Centre of Archaeology)

Historical Background

Alderney, measuring 4.8km by 2.4km, is the most northerly of the Channel Islands, an archipelago of five islands between England and France (Clarke 2008: 19; Figure 1). Following the “Battle of France”, and the decision that the Channel Islands were too difficult to defend against Nazi invasion, the British government evacuated 1,432 islanders from Alderney on 23rd June 1940 (Archive 1; Bonnard 1993: 5). On 2nd July 1940, the Luftwaffe landed on Alderney, encountering no resistance. Hence, the island’s “occupation” was a propaganda coup of tactical value to the Nazis; Alderney was supposedly the “last stepping stone before the conquest of mainland Britain” (Bonnard 1991: 21). As part of Hitler’s “Directive on the Fortifications and Defence of the Channel Islands” (1941), Alderney became one of the most heavily fortified landscapes in Western Europe and was incorporated into the Atlantic Wall (Pantcheff 1981: 3).

By 1942, Alderney’s population comprised mostly of paid and unpaid foreign workers under the governance of *Organisation Todt* (OT), a civil and military engineering group responsible

for supplying labour to the Third Reich. These workers came from more than 30 countries, but most were Eastern Europeans (described as “Russians” in Nazi documentation but coming from Ukraine, Poland, Russia and other Soviet territories) (Sturdy Colls and Colls, in press). The majority were forced or slave labourers, or they had “volunteered” under duress. Most were considered political enemies of the Third Reich but there was also a large contingent of French Jews (Luc 2010). OT accommodated the workers in camps constructed around the island: Helgoland, Norderney, Borkum, Sylt and Citadella (Pantcheff 1981: 6); alongside several smaller unnamed camps (Sturdy Colls & Colls in press) (Figure 2). Initially, Helgoland housed around 1,500 forced Eastern European labourers; Norderney around 1,500 forced Eastern European, French (mostly Jewish), Czech, Dutch and Spanish workers alongside German volunteers; Borkum between 500-1000, mostly German volunteers; and Sylt between 100-200 forced Eastern European labourers (Pantcheff 1981: 6). Each camp regularly exceeded capacity.

Sylt Forced Labour & Concentration Camp: An Overview

Located south of Alderney's airfield, adjacent to a cliff road, Sylt was initially constructed to house 100-200 Eastern European political prisoners who arrived in August 1942 (Archive 2). Under the command of the OT, these prisoners were responsible for fortifying Alderney's defences and, ultimately, the development of the Atlantic Wall (Pantcheff 1981: 31; Bonnard 1991: 63).

The limited testimonies describing life in Sylt labour camp highlight the severity of atrocities even in this early period. Former Helgoland camp prisoner Georgi Kondikov described Sylt as, “the most terrible camp [which] everybody was afraid of” (Bonnard 1991: 50). This was attributed to the camp's architecture e.g. barracks exposed to the windy weather conditions, and the treatment of prisoners by OT staff. Former prisoner Cyprian Lipinski explained how, during forced labour duties, “we were beaten with everything they could lay their hands on...most of these beaten people died of wounds they had received” (Archive 3). Each prisoner was assigned to a labour company and forced to undertake heavy construction work for 12 hours per day (Archive 3). Prisoners were inadequately dressed and undernourished. Daily rations comprised: black coffee for breakfast; thin soup and a loaf of bread between five prisoners for lunch; and a relatively thicker soup with butter for dinner (Archive 3). The OT did not administer medical treatment at Sylt. Sick prisoners able to walk were sometimes permitted to visit the hospital at Norderney (Archive 4). One fifth of the camp's inmates

reportedly died between August 1942 and January 1943 (Sanders 2005: 200; Sturdy Colls and Colls, in press).

In March 1943, Sylt was transformed from a labour to a concentration camp through an exchange in command between the OT and SS *Totenkopfverbände* (Death's Head Unit). The SS *Totenkopfverbände* was a Nazi paramilitary organisation in charge of concentration-camp operations, specialising in acts of dominance and brutality (Sanders 2005: 197). The OT prisoners in Sylt were transferred to the Helgoland and Norderney camps to make way for incoming SS prisoners (Archive 4).

In September (1942), the SS formed a series of *Baubrigade* (building brigades) in Germany and, on the 3rd and 5th March 1943, SS *Baubrigade I* was transported to Alderney (the only *Baubrigade* to be sent; Archive 5). The prisoners – just over 1,000 – came via the German concentration camps Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme, and Sylt was then designated a sub-camp of Neuengamme concentration camp (Megargee 2009: 1361). Treated as slave labourers, they reportedly comprised c.500 Russians and Ukrainians, 180 Germans, 130 Polish, 60 Dutch, 20-30 Czechs and 20 French nationals, most of whom were classed as political prisoners (Archive 4). As Fings states “the SS-*Baubrigaden* consisted as a rule of male non-Jewish prisoners”, although some sources suggest a small number of Jews were present in the camp (Fings 2009: 135; Sturdy Colls and Colls in press). Later, Sylt also became a punishment camp for c. 135 OT prisoners who had committed perceived crimes (Archive 2). SS prisoners were distinguishable from other labourers as they wore distinctive SS concentration camp blue and white striped pyjama uniforms (Pantcheff 1981: 32; Freeman-Keel 1995: 62). Prisoners were identified by a number and different coloured triangular symbols worn on their uniforms to show their offence/group (Archive 2). They were subjected to hard labour, poor rations and harsh punishments from their overseers. If a prisoner died, the SS issued the Sylt doctor with pre-printed death certificates, which often labelled the cause of death as “faulty circulation” or “heart failure” (Archive 4). In many instances, island doctors were not permitted to view dead bodies but instead instructed by the SS to sign the death certificates (Archive 4). The official number of deceased SS inmates on Alderney was 103 individuals. However, this represents a minimum number of individuals that died, not least of all because a number of shootings reportedly occurred that do not appear in the camp death registries (Sturdy Colls & Colls in press).

Between 70 and 80 SS guards ultimately oversaw Sylt, resulting in tight control and harsh conditions for the prisoners (Fings 2009). The first Camp Commandant and head of the *Baubrigade* was SS-*Untersturmführer* Maximilian List and he was succeeded by SS-*Obersturmführer* Georg Braun in March 1944. Both men were long-serving members of the Nazi party; List “ordered the security to treat the prisoners harshly” and Braun was “brutal to excess” (Archive 6 and 7). The SS assigned certain prisoners the role of Kapo, which required supervision of, and disciplinary action against, other inmates (Archive 4; Bonnard 1991: 33). The Kapos ensured work was conducted to standard and, if it was considered unsatisfactory, they would inflict punishment. This approach created hierarchies and mistrust within the camp.

Previous Investigations

Declassified intelligence documentation concerning Sylt shows that multiple investigations occurred in 1945, after the liberation of Alderney by the British. The first two-day investigation by Brigadier Snow, Major Haddock and Major Cotton revealed that Sylt was initially constructed to house Eastern European prisoners, and in 1943 was “controlled by the S.S. for political, homosexual, conscientious objectors etc, prisoners of all nationalities” (Archive 2). Eyewitness testimonies detail the atrocities at Sylt, specifically beatings, dog attacks and shootings (Archive 8). The investigation also discovered a false-bottom coffin at the site of the OT and SS worker cemetery on Longy Common and documented rumours of mass graves (Archive 3; Sturdy Colls & Colls, in press). Sylt’s dismantlement was also described including how materials were re-used by the Germans for “defence works” (Archive 9).

In June 1945, at the request of the British War Office, Major Pantcheff assumed control of the investigations. Alderney was also visited by a Russian investigative team, led by a Major Gruzdev. These various investigations culminated in approximately 3,000 interviews with survivors, bystanders, and members of the German forces. Pantcheff’s investigation also documented brutality and murder, terrible working conditions, the details of the SS staff, the operational deployment and departure of *Baubrigade I*, illnesses, medical treatment and the deceased (Pantcheff 1981: 29). That said, Pantcheff stated that, “German records in Alderney were so confusing [contradicting] traditionally renowned...meticulous and efficient administration” (Pantcheff 1981: 70). Importantly, the only plan of Sylt was produced and verified by members of the German forces on Alderney, and photographs were taken of the camp (Figure 4). However, by focusing primarily on the SS operations, not OT, significant information was missed regarding Sylt pre-1943.



Figure 4. A photograph of Sylt concentration camp taken in 1945 (figure by © Trustees of the Royal Air Force Museum)

Post-WWII, the existence of Sylt became public knowledge through media reports, resulting in rumours circulating about a death camp on Alderney (Megargee & White 2018: 1362). Quashing these claims, the findings from Pantcheff's 1945 investigation were publicised in 1981, presenting a less atrocious version of events by comparison to the initial investigation. Although initial investigations highlighted the extent of atrocities at Sylt and those individuals responsible, no prosecutions occurred, the findings regarding prisoner nationalities were simplified (reducing most victims to "Russian") and eventually claims regarding the brutality were watered down (see Pantcheff 1981 compared to Archive 6). This, in part, was guided by the British government's wish to hand over the investigations to the Russian government and to forget about the crimes perpetrated on the island, a view shared by many in the local government and population (Sturdy Colls 2012; Sturdy Colls & Colls, in press).

Methodology

In response to current conditions and disparities between source material, historical research and archaeological fieldwork were undertaken at Sylt (2010-2017). This study used material

from numerous archives around the world in order to document the history of the site, identify fieldwork survey areas and interpret findings. Although historical sources provide a valuable resource, Nazi documentation can be misleading, due to purposeful deceit, biased writing or absent documents (Pantcheff 1981: 70; Myers 2008: 234). Therefore, archaeological research is vital as it can complement and supplement historical records through the identification of surviving physical evidence.

Non-invasive methods were employed during the archaeological fieldwork, including: fieldwalking, vegetation clearance, remote sensing and geophysical survey. Systematic fieldwalking and vegetation clearance confirmed areas of significance by locating vegetation indicators, man-made depressions and surface finds. These discoveries confirmed the need to record surviving features because of the risk of erosion. To accurately record the position of vegetation indicators, depressions and structural remnants, a combination of Differential Kinematic Global Positioning Systems (DGPS), total station recording, Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), resistance survey, photogrammetry and Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) were used. These non-invasive methods allowed vast areas to be scanned and visualised, even through high-density foliage (Sturdy Colls 2015: 172; Abate & Sturdy Colls 2018: 130). By acquiring diverse datasets from DBA and fieldwork, evidence-based 3D models were developed showing Sylt's evolution between 1942-1945 and providing a useful resource for heritage management (see below).

Mapping the Evolution of Sylt's Architecture

From archive documentation, aerial reconnaissance, maps and plans, Sylt's gradual development can be documented (NCAP Archive 1,2, and 3; Figures 5 & 6). By August 1942, Sylt comprised five barracks which were reportedly constructed by political prisoners and French "volunteer" labourers under the supervision of OT. The camp security consisted of guarded gateposts and "its perimeter [was] surrounded by coiled concertina barbed wire" (NCAP Archive 1; Pantcheff 1981: 6) (Figure 6A). By January 1943, aerial photographs show that the camp tripled in size ahead of the arrival of the SS (NCAP Archive 2) (Figure 6B).

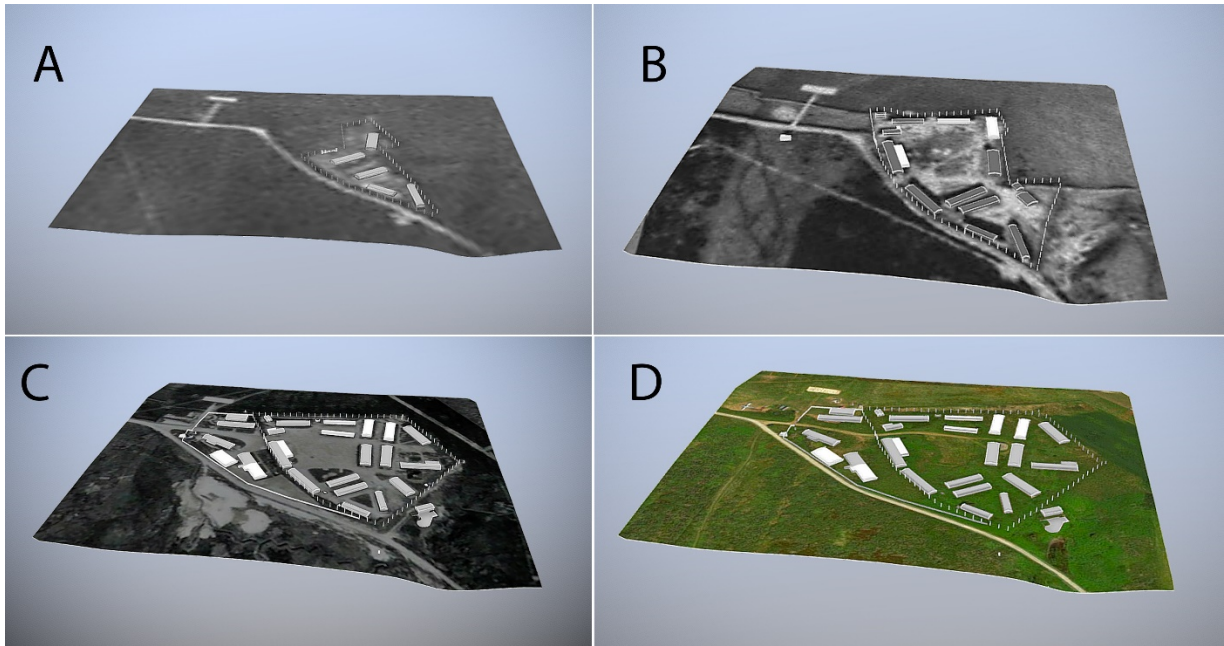


Figure 5. Evidence-based 3D reconstructions of Sylt from: 1942 (A); 1943 (B); 1944 (C) and 2017 (D) (figure by J. Kerti)

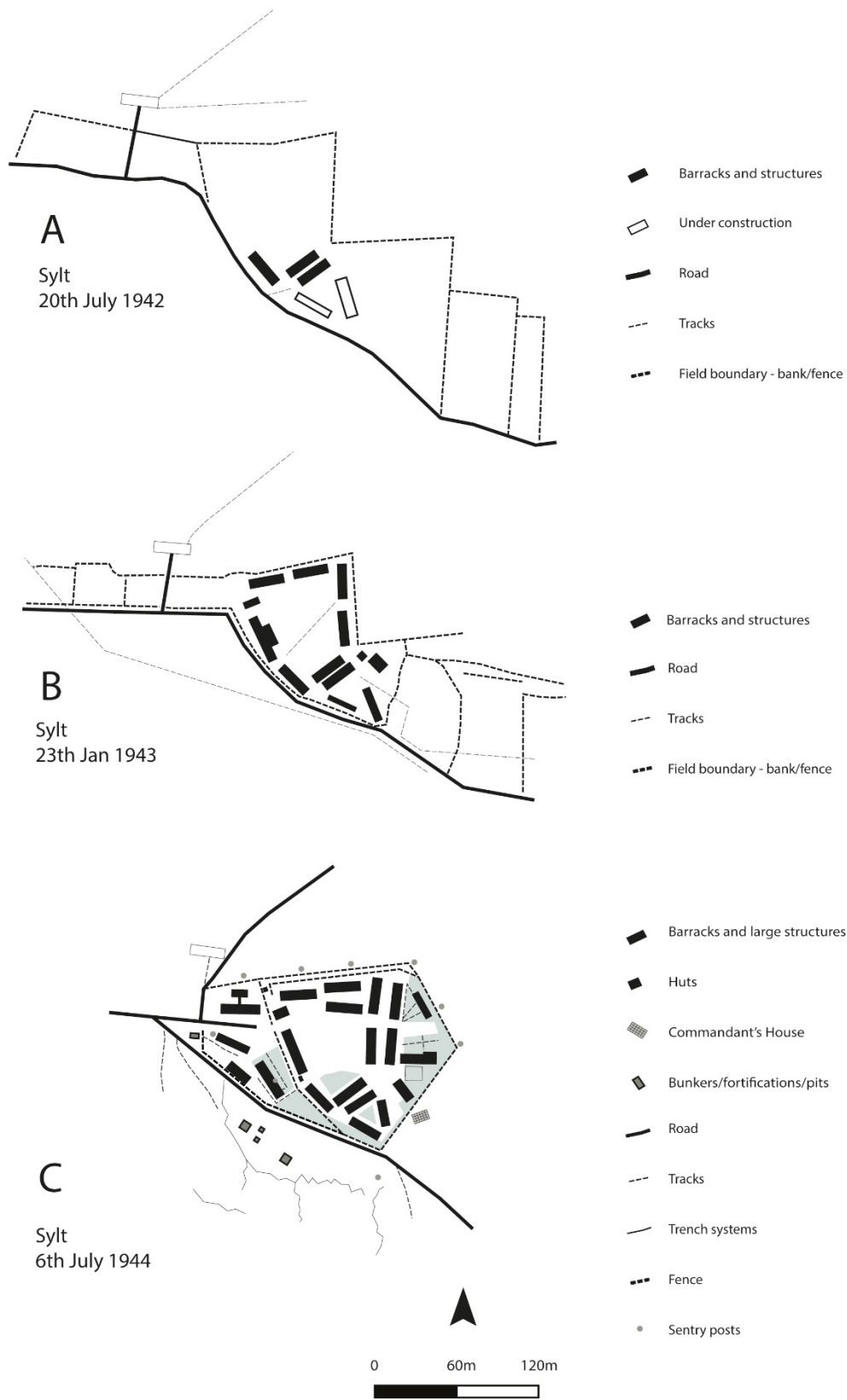


Figure 6. 2D plans showing the development of Sylt (A) from 1942, (B) 1943 and (C) 1944 based on aerial photographs (figure by Centre of Archaeology)

Yet in March 1943, when the *Baubrigade I* prisoners arrived they described the camp as unfinished; they report that only four barracks were usable, even though aerial images show that many more buildings were present (Kukuła 1999: 21; Archive 10). Some prisoners had to sleep outside for two months whilst construction continued (Bonnard 1993: 175).

By August 1943, the camp was extended to 25 structures, which included SS buildings and the Commandant's Tyrolean style accommodation (NCAP Archive 3; Figure 6C). Aerial photographs confirm the presence of a newly constructed "barbed wire fence [with] watchtowers at the corners" and a main gate, which witnesses report displayed the words "SS-Lager Sylt" (Kukuła 1999: 20). The camp was divided into two separate compounds - a prisoner and SS section – via a stone-covered wall and gateposts, both of which were recorded during the archaeological survey, and featured a central roll call square (Pantcheff 1981: 29; Bonnard 1991: 75). DBA and fieldwork demonstrated that in early 1943, the eastern boundary wall of the prisoners' compound ran parallel to the cliff road that initially surrounded the camp and reinforced stone walls surrounded the SS orderly room and quarters. Exposing and mapping of the positions of steps, gateposts and surviving sentry posts illustrated the various routes in and out of the camp (Figure 7).

Consistent with other European concentration camps, these heightened security measures assisted in controlling the prisoners (Jaskot 2002). The security measures also had a psychological effect, reminding prisoners that they were confined to designated spaces, with consequences for attempted escapes. This mental torment was likely exacerbated by the fact that, due to the island's terrain and remoteness, there were limited opportunities to escape should prisoners breach the camp boundaries. Several accounts describe how escaped prisoners often returned to Sylt when they realised the difficulties in acquiring food and transport outside the camp (Archive 7). For sport, the SS guards sometimes used dogs to force prisoners through security fences and then they shot them for attempting to "escape" (Archive 2; Bonnard 1993: 68). The SS documented many such deaths as "suicide", but really, they were executions (Bonnard 1993: 175).

Accounts describing the camp's boundaries and the gateposts also frequently outline that these spaces were used to inflict punishment on prisoners. The surviving raised stone wall supporting the barbed wire fence around the prisoners' compound is described in several accounts as a place where brutality occurred. For example, German soldier Otto Tauber recalled how four men were bound to the barbed wire fence and whipped for killing and eating a lamb (Archive

4). The gateposts were also a favoured place for the SS to conduct and display brutality. A former Norderney prisoner explained, “at Lager Sylt we saw a Russian, he was just hanging, strung up from the main gate” on his chest was a sign indicating that he had stolen bread (Archive 11). Others were strung up for days and whipped or had cold water poured over them all night until they died (Archive 9 and 10). Bodies remained hung up as a warning to others not to commit crimes (Archive 11). Even the German garrison on Alderney were aware that Sylt was a brutal camp, to which access was restricted. German corporal Otto Taubert explained, whilst visiting Sylt in 1943, that “no one [in the Wehrmacht] was allowed to enter the inner [prisoner] compound”, whilst German Lieutenant D.R Schwalm stated that “access to the camp was only allowed with the permission of the camp-leader and then only in his presence” (Archive 4).

Surviving Traces of Camp Buildings

Within the camp boundaries, the archaeological fieldwork revealed that an abundance of traces at Sylt still exist within the landscape and these too played a role in the oppression of the camp inmates (Figure 7B). Since 1945, the locations of the SS quarters and ablutions have been incorporated into Alderney’s airport, whilst the remaining structures reside on privately-owned land. 30 surface features were recorded including boundaries ($n= 4$) and structures within the: SS ($n=5$), prisoner ($n=21$), and Commandant’s ($n=2$) sections. Above-ground, notable structures hidden under vegetation include the toilet block and bathhouse, stables and kitchen (with accompanying subterranean cellar) in the prisoner area, accompanied by the remains of the SS canteen, workshops and guardroom in the SS area (Figure 8D). Sentry posts, gateposts and remnants of the camp fences also survive intact. The LiDAR and geophysical survey data reveal that much information still resides beneath the surface, including the foundations of prisoner and SS barracks, the sickbay and construction office (Figure 9).



Figure 7. 2D plans showing (A) the function of each structure and (B) surviving remnants recording during archaeological investigations (figure by Centre of Archaeology)

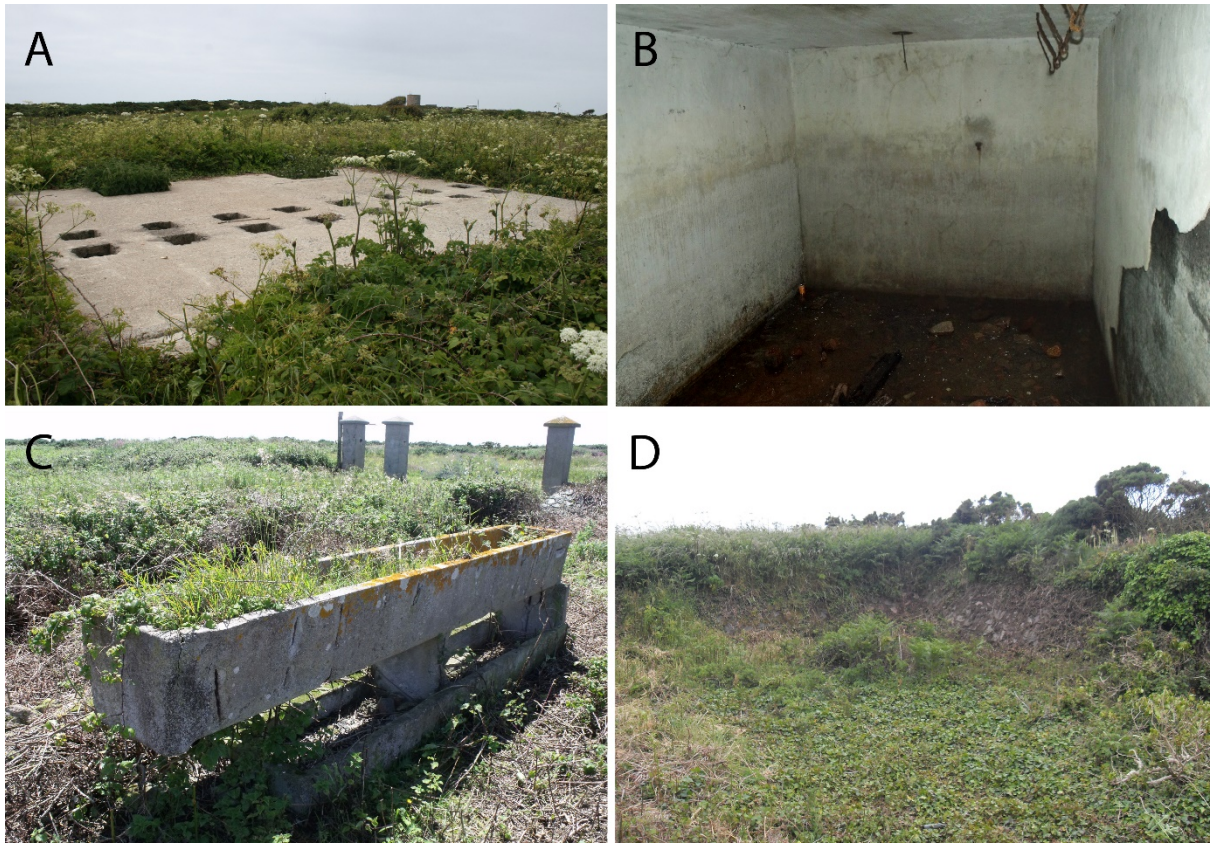


Figure 8. (A) The toilet block, (B) prisoner kitchen cellar, (C) stable block and (D) the SS Orderly Room (figure by Centre of Archaeology)

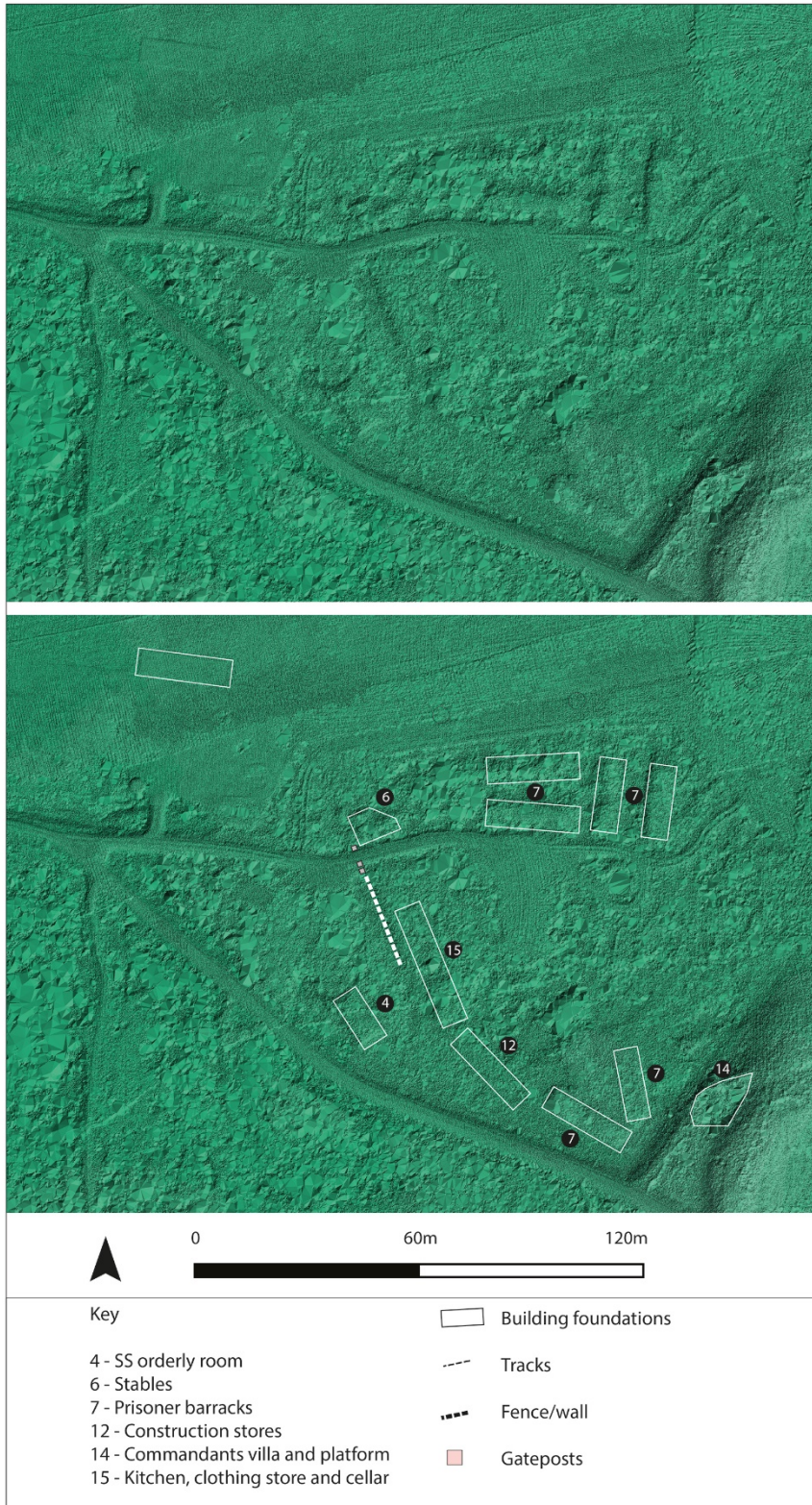


Figure 9: LiDAR survey data showing the surviving traces of Sylt camp in 2017 (figure by FlyThru and Centre of Archaeology)

The surviving traces of prisoner barracks comprise of shallow depressions with buried concrete foundations and associated stairs leading down to them from ground level. The wooden barracks have long since been removed. These structures measured 28m by 8m and approximately 150 prisoners were housed in each barrack. This would have resulted in extreme overcrowding and would have allowed for a maximum of only 1.49m² of space per person; maximum because a large, private room reportedly existed for a Kapo who resided in each building (Archive 9; Bonnard 1993: 175; Figure 7). Witness testimonies demonstrate that the conditions in the barracks – coupled with the inadequate sleeping materials provided - were a breeding ground for lice (Steckoll 1982: 75). During the SS's command of Sylt, an outbreak of typhus (spread by lice and poor sanitary conditions) reportedly killed between 30-200 prisoners (Archive 2, Archive 4). The toilet block – uncovered in 2013 - was equally undersized and basic (Figure 8A), although the presence of soap dishes and other objects that survive on the surface in this area do suggest that the prisoners could perhaps engage in basic personal hygiene. The sickbay (located at the rear of the camp) comprised a simple wooden building and was operated by the prisoners; thus, it functioned with inadequate medical equipment and knowledge (Pantcheff 1981: 33; Figure 7A). By contrast, stables for the SS-mens' horses – which curiously appear in the prisoner area - are well-built and the foundations and concrete trough survive in good condition (Figure 8C).

Sylt had two eating areas, one for prisoners and one for guards, and the foundations of both were recorded during archaeological survey (Figure 7). In terms of size, the SS canteen was larger than the prisoner kitchen, measuring 22.48m by 12.19m, even though far fewer individuals ate within this space. The prisoner kitchen foundations were recorded over three separate platforms measuring 19.5m by 6.03m overall, with several drain/water access points positioned around the foundations. Within this space, a clothing store was also established and located south-east, adjacent to the foundations, was a subterranean food store, which survives with in situ fixtures for food storage (Pancheff 1981: 28; Kukuła 1999: 20; Figure 8B).

Historical sources confirm that the SS used food to enforce dominance and control. Prisoner rations were stolen by SS guards, who either ate, sold, traded or kept the supplies; island soldiers could acquire cheap meals at Sylt's SS canteen as a result (Archive 9; Bonnard 1993: 175). Sylt's Commandant, Maximilian List, was investigated by German military police, who discovered "chests full of sugar, lard, dripping, bacon" (Bonnard 1993: 175). German seaman, Franz Dokter, explained "almost every day a wangle took place to pass on the prisoners rations from the KZ [concentration camp] cookhouse to the SS canteen" (Archive 9). SS entertainment

events held at Sylt often served food stolen from prisoners, something which was never questioned by the German officers (Archive 8). One of the kitchens also became a killing site when, as former Sylt prisoner Wilhelm Wernegau recalled, the prisoner's cook was strangled and killed by the SS because they did not like his cooking (Bunting 1995: 188; Steckoll 1993: 75).

In general, and in contrast to the prisoner area, the archaeological survey revealed that the SS enhanced their areas of the camp to enable them to live in comfort and socialise. Many SS structures were constructed from reinforced concrete and their foundations were excavated below ground level with surrounding stone walling to afford the SS men protection from the weather and air raids (Figure 8D). Located outside the south-east perimeter of Sylt is the terrace that formerly housed the Commandant's villa. In 1944 after the abandonment of Sylt, the villa itself was moved to Longy Common for use as a private dwelling (Bonnard 1993: 73). Due to its position on lower terrain, facing away from Sylt, the villa had picturesque views of a spring towards the English Channel. Behind the villa was a tunnel which ran underneath the eastern boundary wall into a building - most likely a bathhouse - in the prisoners' compound (Figure 10). Before reaching this building, the tunnel joined a subterranean room. The existence of these features is well-documented. However, their purpose is less clear. Many theories have previously been suggested ranging from: an air raid shelter for Sylt's Commandant, a quick access point in and around Sylt, or a space through which women could be taken into a brothel within the villa (Sturdy Colls and Colls, in press). As the tunnel was located beneath the surface, the date of its construction remains unclear, although aerial reconnaissance suggests that it was likely built sometime between February and August 1943 (Sturdy Colls and Colls, in press).

The application of photogrammetry and visualisation of the room and tunnel through Virtual Reality (VR) facilitated the documentation of a furnace, traces of pipework, ventilation fixtures, light fittings, marks (such as a handprint and tool marks) and a chute leading from the foundation above - all of which were otherwise difficult to analyse in the field due to poor lighting and (in the case of the ventilation fixtures) the height of the subterranean room (Figure 10). These findings suggest that the subterranean room housed a heating system, undoubtedly serving the Commandant's villa and nearby kitchen but it is unclear whether it also serviced the prisoner bathhouse and the guards' washrooms, or whether it provided hot water, heat or both. Although it was sealed by substantial doors at either end, the existence of the tunnel is curious not least of all because it seemingly compromised the camp's tight security by

providing an entrance/exit point connecting the inside prisoner compound to the outside perimeter of the camp. Although the archaeological survey could not confirm what the tunnel was used for, it did highlight the existence of regularly-spaced light fittings along it, thus suggesting that – whatever its purpose - it was in frequent use.



Figure 10: Photogrammetry of the tunnel and subterranean room which connected the Commandant's house to the camp (figure by Centre of Archaeology)

Conclusion

The investigation described in this paper is the first to have taken place at Sylt labour and concentration camp since government-led inspections in 1945 - and the first to examine its landscape using archaeological methods. Walkover survey, vegetation clearance photogrammetry and LiDAR allowed surviving evidence to be located, accurately mapped and preserved by way of record, whilst the combination of this data with historical sources enhanced the narrative of events by demonstrating how the architecture, aesthetics, and the guards of the camp influenced the lives of the inmates and their overseers. Evidence-based reconstructions offered the opportunity to explore how Nazi dominance and control evolved over time between 1942 and 1945. This work differed from the 1945 investigations – and many other studies of Nazi camps – in that it did not only focus on a singular epoch in the camp's history. The result was that the work allowed consistencies and changes in the way the camp functioned between the OT and SS periods to be recorded, and it challenged the “official”

narrative by demonstrating that Sylt's inmates consistently faced terrible living and working conditions. The research highlighted that, although in many ways it looked different (since its form was influenced by the landscape it was in), by mid-1943 Sylt possessed many of the physical characteristics – and operational traits – of other SS camps in Europe, consistent with it forming part of the wider Nazi concentration camp network (Sturdy Colls & Colls, in press).

The historical and archaeological research also responded to the fact that the camp landscape has fallen into and remains in ambiguity. The apparent lack of surviving remains and the perception that Sylt was destroyed was central to discussions in 2015 about its inclusion in the Register of Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments. For example, during a meeting in March (2015) a committee member stated, “if there were buildings or something there worth conserving, I might have a different opinion; but there is nothing, apart from a broken old wash trough...and a load of brambles” (Kelly 2015: 41). However, archaeological survey has clearly demonstrated that considerable traces of the camp survive intact, both above and below the ground. Thus, it has rewritten the narrative around the destruction of the camp and challenges the notion that there is nothing “worth” conserving.

In December 2017, Sylt was formally listed as a conservation area and, therefore, it is hoped that the research and resulting 3D models will provide useful tools for decision-makers engaged in heritage management and any future memorialisation plans at the site. Currently Sylt remains uncertain and, whilst some members of the local government and community are enthusiastic about developing it into a memorial, fear this focus on slave labour will bring the island into disrepute (Alderney Press 2017: 15). Therefore, the application of an interdisciplinary suite of non-invasive methods – and the visualisations and new knowledge generated - have facilitated access to a site which otherwise remains difficult to approach, both physically (e.g. due to the presence of obstructive vegetation) and politically. Whilst this situation prevails, it is hoped that the historical and archaeological findings outlined in this paper will provide temporary surrogates for as yet absent, more extensive, on-site information and commemorative elements, and will raise awareness of this internationally important site that forms part of our collective history.

Acknowledgements

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