



Planning, Transport
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Northern Archaeological Associates

A69 HALTWHISTLE BYPASS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

DRAFT REPORT FOR THE DEPARTMENT'S AGENT

ON BEHALF OF A69 HALTWHISTLE CONSTRUCTION JV

NAA 96/41

October 1996

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The construction of the A69 Haltwhistle Bypass did not impact upon any known archaeological remains, however, due to the presence of alluvial deposits and numerous palaeochannels in the section of the road corridor south of the River South Tyne it was deemed necessary to undertake a watching brief during the site excavations in this area. An archaeological watching brief commissioned by the Construction Joint Venture (CJV) in accordance with Annex 14 to Schedule 4, Part 2 of the Agreement has recently been completed. The watching brief was undertaken by Northern Archaeological Associates on behalf of the CJV.

This draft report presents the preliminary results of that watching brief and the investigation of a group of archaeological features identified in O.S. Field 6035 at chainage 2030. Further analysis of environmental samples and of artefactual material has yet to be undertaken.

2.0 BACKGROUND

The route of the A69 Haltwhistle Bypass runs between NY 690638 and NY 720640, passing to the south of Haltwhistle and to the north of Bellister Castle (Fig. 1). An archaeological inspection was required during site works between chainages 1300 - 2600 to record the archaeological resource during development. To this end a watching brief was conducted over a 0.9km section of the route between NY 700631 and NY 709633, from near Bellister Castle westwards towards the embankment of the disused Haltwhistle - Alston Railway line between 19 - 26 June 1996. All of the fields crossed by this section of the bypass corridor were under pasture at the time the watching brief was undertaken.

South of the river the bypass route traverses the edge of a late Pleistocene alluvial terrace and areas of Holocene age alluvium (deposited in the last 10,000 years) to the north. Although it was considered that the Holocene alluvium might conceal waterlogged archaeological sites and features of some significance, the late Pleistocene terrace was thought not to have been significantly alluviated during the Holocene and that sites of archaeological interest were likely to be confined to the surface in that area. It was on the northern edge of the late Pleistocene terrace that the remains of a previously unsuspected round-house of the Romano-British period were discovered.

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The watching brief aimed to establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within an area of the proposed road corridor and to determine the extent, condition, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

Topsoil, areas of possible buried plough-horizon, and colluvial deposits were removed from the area of the watching brief under archaeological supervision using a tracked excavator with a toothless ditching bucket. With the exception of a c.2m strip at each side, the whole width of the corridor was stripped from the top of the slight escarpment near the centre of O.S. Field 8135 (from chainage 2250) westwards across O.S. Fields 6035 and 4228 (Fig. 2). To the west of this the road rises up on an embankment, and only a c.2m wide trench was stripped across O.S. Fields 2323 and 0010, again under archaeological supervision, in order to observe the subsoils for engineering purposes. An additional c.2m wide trench was also monitored crossing part of O.S. Field 0029 adjacent to the River South Tyne.

The resulting surface was then investigated to evaluate the presence/absence of potential archaeological features and a full written, illustrative and photographic record was made of any features subsequently identified in accordance with the NAA standard method (Tavener, N. ed. 1994). Archaeological features observed during the stripping were hand-cleaned and appropriate sections hand-excavated. The work was carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists' Code of Conduct and Code of Practice.

5.0 PALAEOCHANNEL TRENCH RESULTS

A trench was excavated by machine running westwards for c.20m eastwards from the base of the escarpment within OS Field 8135. As a result of the unstable nature of the deposits encountered, the presence of several large and active field drains, and extremely wet weather, very little standing section could be accurately recorded within this trench, although a record was made of the sequence of deposits within the palaeochannel to a depth of 2.5m, and samples recovered from peat deposits encountered.

A turf horizon 0.08m thick overlay a loose, dark brown mixed peat and clay topsoil extending to a depth of 0.20m. Below this, to a depth of 0.33m, was a firm blueish grey silty clay, above a band of fairly loose coarse grey sand. Between 0.46m and 0.75m below ground level was a complex sequence of layers of firm clays and sands. Below this, from 0.75m to 0.90m, was a mixed soft clay and peat. A thick deposit of running sand below this extended to a depth of 2.00m, above a second layer of peat. Below 2.5m further running sand was encountered and the trench could not be excavated further. Soil samples were recovered from deposits at depths of c.0.4m, 0.75m, 0.9m and 2.5m. Fragments of waterlogged wood were also recovered from the peat deposits.

No archaeological artefacts or deposits were identified within this trench.

6.0 WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

The results of the watching brief are presented below under the Ordnance Survey (OS) Field numbers across which the road corridor ran, in order from west to east.

6.1 OS Field 0029

Topsoil was removed from a strip c.2m wide running along the corridor near its northern side across this field. Most of the length of this strip was occupied by a palaeochannel of the River South Tyne filled with silts and clays. No peat deposits or archaeological features were identified.

6.2 OS Field 0010

A c.2m wide trench was stripped across this field near the centre of the road corridor. A palaeochannel of the River South Tyne, infilled with clays and silts, extended from the western side of the field for c.60m. The east of this the field rose up onto a slight gravel terrace. A test pit excavated by machine into the palaeochannel to a depth of c.2m did not uncover any peat deposits. However, after drainage had been inserted along the northern side of the new road corridor, peat was observed on the resulting spoil heap at chainage 1520.

No archaeological deposits were identified in this field.

6.3 OS Field 2323

A trench c.2m wide was stripped of topsoil and colluvium across this field, along the centre of the road corridor. The subsoil consisted of mixed light and mid brown sands and light grey clayey sand [28], c.0.5m thick above river-laid gravels. The subsoil was below a c.0.2m thick layer of a fairly compact, mid to dark brown slightly silty sand [27] interpreted as an old plough horizon. Above this was a friable, dark brown silty sand topsoil and turf [26] which was generally c.0.15m thick.

Four archaeological features were observed within this field. A subrectangular pit [1] was located 3.5m from, and parallel to, the western field boundary. It measured 1.6m by 0.6m and survived to a depth of 0.55m (1.15m from ground surface). It was filled with a dark brown silty sand [2] with moderate medium sized stones towards the top and occasional smaller pebbles towards the base. A sherd of post-medieval pottery was recovered from this feature, which, from its form and location, was interpreted as a possible sheep burial. The absence of bone within the pit can be explained by the general acidity of the soils in this locality.

Three parallel features were observed crossing the trench from northeast to southwest. A stone-lined field drain [3] was located 25.5m from the western field boundary. It had roughly coursed side walls constructed of unshaped cobbles and was capped with a single line of unshaped slabs measuring up to

0.5m long and 0.13m thick. Overall the drain was up to 0.5m wide and 0.3m high, and was observed for a length of 2.8m. The interior of the drain, 0.18m wide, was filled with a compact, dark brown sandy clay [5] up to 0.15m thick. It was constructed within a linear construction trench [4] which cut plough horizon [27] and measured c.0.7m wide and 0.6m deep with a flat-based 'u'-profile. The backfill [6] of the construction trench consisted of cobbles around and over the drain, within a matrix of compact, friable, dark brown silty sand, which also filled the upper part of the cut and was sealed by topsoil [26]. No dating evidence was recovered for this feature.

A second stone-built field drain [7] was located 3m to the east of drain [3]. It had roughly coursed side walls constructed of unshaped subangular cobbles measuring up to 0.4m, and was capped with a single line of re-used stone roofing slates of a variety of sizes and forms. Three examples of these were retained. Overall the drain measured 0.6m wide and 0.25m high, and was observed for a length of 3.3m. It had internal dimensions of 0.23m wide by 0.22m thick, and was filled with a compact, dark brown sandy clay [9] which was oxidised red towards the base. The drain was within a linear construction trench [8] which was only observed where it cut into the top of natural subsoil [28]. The trench, which had 'v'-shaped profile, had a width of 1.1m and a depth of 0.5m. It was backfilled with rounded cobbles in a matrix of fairly compact dark brown silty sand [10]. Again, no dating evidence for this feature was recovered, although the presence of the stone roofing slates suggested a late medieval or post-medieval date.

A third parallel linear cut [11] was located 3m to the east of drain [7]. It was 0.8m wide and 0.35m deep with a flat-based 'u'-shaped profile, and was observed for a length of 3m. It was cut from the top of subsoil [28]. Its fill [12] consisted of two distinct deposits. Around the base and sides of the cut was a mixed dark greyish brown silty sand and dark brown clayey sand, whilst towards the centre and top of the deposit was a friable mixed black silt and orange-brown sand. No dating evidence was recovered from this feature, which possibly represented a third, robbed-out, field-drain.

6.4 OS Field 4228

The full width of the corridor was stripped of topsoil in this field under archaeological supervision. A similar sequence of ploughsoil, a buried plough horizon and alluvial subsoil to that seen in OS Field 2323 was recorded.

No archaeological features were observed within this field.

6.5 OS Field 6035

The full width of the corridor was stripped of topsoil under archaeological supervision within this field. The soil and subsoil sequence was similar to that observed within OS Fields 2323 and 4228.

A group of features noted during topsoil stripping and subsequently subjected to further excavation are described below in section 7.0.

An additional curvilinear feature [15] was observed c.30m from the eastern side of the field, running eastwards and then southeastwards from a rounded western terminal. It was c.3.2m wide, cut 0.3m into subsoil, and extended for more than 9m. The eastern end was obscured beneath a spoil heap. It had a shallow, flat-based 'u'-shaped profile, and had a fill [16] of a dark reddish brown silt above a dark grey humic sandy silt containing recognisable straw fragments. This feature was considered by the excavator to be recent in origin, although no dateable finds were recovered.

6.6 OS Field 8135

The corridor within the western half of this field ran along the top of the gravel terrace, then ran down a short escarpment to a palaeochannel of the River South Tyne occupying the eastern half of the field. A trench was excavated into the palaeochannel and the sequence of deposits recorded as described in section 5.0 above. On top of the gravel terrace the topsoil was a very dark brown silty sand, up to 0.15m thick, generally directly overlying undifferentiated rounded gravels in a matrix of very slightly silty dark yellowish brown sand of mixed grain size.

The western field boundary consisted of a very slight hedgebank surmounted by a modern fence. Several trees surviving from the former hedge were noted to the north of the road corridor. An infilled ditch [22] was observed at the western side of this boundary, of which it was probably a part. It was not excavated. It was c.2m wide and was filled with a dark greyish brown sandy silt [23] containing frequent gravel. A shotgun cartridge observed within this deposit suggested that it had been infilled fairly recently.

A second, parallel, ditch [24] was located 4.5m to the east of the western field boundary. It was 1.75m wide, c.0.35m deep and had a flat-based 'u'-profile. It was observed for a length of 5m at the southern side of the corridor, being obscured to the north by a spoil heap. It was filled with a friable, dark brown silty sand [25] containing moderate small and medium sized rounded gravel. No dating evidence was recovered from this feature, which, from its location, alignment and the more leached state of its fill, probably represented an earlier phase of the western field boundary.

7.0 EXCAVATION RESULTS

Near the centre of the corridor within O.S. Field 6035 at chainage 2030, machine stripping revealed an arc of stones forming the south-eastern half of a sub-circle 8.8m in diameter (Fig. 3). Hand cleaning of the feature revealed a small concentration of charcoal and burnt bone at its centre and a north to south aligned subrectangular pit cutting the northern edge of the arc of the stones. The find was initially thought likely to represent the truncated remains

of a barrow with a central cremation, however, subsequent investigation suggests that they relate to a round house with a central hearth.

The primary feature identified within feature group [21] was a narrow trench [20] which formed the southeastern half of a circle measuring 8.8m in diameter. The trench could be traced for c.14m and was packed with stones measuring between 0.2m to 0.7m in diameter, in a friable dark brown silty sand matrix [19]. In places the flatter stones were set on edge against the sides of the cut, while elsewhere it was completely filled with rounded cobbles. The feature measured c.0.4m wide and c.0.3m deep with a 'u'-shaped profile and was interpreted as the construction trench for the wall of a timber house. In some areas it was very difficult to define the edge of the wall-trench, particularly within transect [33] (see below) where the stones within fill [19] were visible, but the sides of the cut containing them could not clearly be identified in either plan or section. On the northeastern side the line of the trench was only identifiable due to differential drying, the fill of the trench remaining damp longer than the surrounding subsoil after rain. No finds were recovered from this feature. A bulk soil sample was taken for palaeoenvironmental analysis.

An area of cobbles representing a possible internal surface [36] extended c.1m southwards from the southern side of wall-trench [20] and joined a second area of cobbles which appeared to represent an external surface running from east to west for a distance of c.5m. The layers of cobbles were c.0.1m thick and consisted of rounded stones measuring up to 150mm in a matrix of fairly loose dark brown silty sand. At the junction of this layer with trench [20] a number of large flat stones were removed during topsoil stripping, and may have represented a threshold or further area of paving. At the western side of the cobbling, immediately adjacent to the external side of trench [20], was an oval posthole [34]. It measured 0.70m from north to south by 0.45m east to west, and survived to a depth of 0.18m with a flat-based 'u'-shaped profile. It was filled with a fairly compact, dark brown silty sand [35] containing c.30% rounded stones forming a post-packing suggesting a post-pipe against the eastern side of the posthole. Cobbled surface [36] may have butted to these packing stones, although the relationship had been rather disturbed during stripping. This posthole could have been part of a porch structure associated with the entrance implied by cobbled surface [36], although no corresponding posthole could be identified to the north of the cobbles.

In the centre of the area defined by trench [20] was a large, shallow, subcircular hollow [18] measuring c.2.8m by 2.6m. It survived to a depth of 0.15m and had a rather irregular profile and base. It was surrounded by a band of reddened, heat-affected, sandy subsoil c.0.5m wide and was interpreted as a probable hearth. It was filled with a friable, dark yellowish brown sandy silt [17/29], with moderate lenses of olive grey sandy silt, probably ash, concentrated around the edges and base, and moderate small rounded stones. Iron panning was noted in patches at the margins. There was a concentration of charcoal and burnt bone towards the centre of the deposit. No burnt stones were noted. Pottery and burnt bone were recovered, the charcoal was sampled for species identification and possible radiocarbon assay, and a bulk soil sample

was taken for palaeoenvironmental analysis. The feature was interpreted as a hearth hollow.

Between hearth [18] and trench [20] to the south was another curved trench [40]. It ran for a length of 4.1m and was generally 0.4m wide, increasing to 0.6m at each end to form rounded pit-like terminals. It was 0.15m deep with a 'u'-shaped profile, and was filled with a fairly compact, dark brown silty sand [39] containing moderate large rounded stones measuring up to 0.25m. No stratigraphic relationship survived between this feature and any other part of group [21], and it could have been associated with an earlier structure. I

Traces of a subrectangular pit [13], orientated from north to south were identified north of trench [20]. It measured c.1.5m long, 0.6m wide, and survived to a depth of 0.25m, with a 'u'-shaped profile. Its margins were very indistinct. It was filled with a very clean dark brown silty sand [14]. No finds were recovered from this feature, and its date and function were not determined.

An isolated posthole [37] was located c.2m to the southeast of trench [20]. The posthole was subcircular in plan, measuring 0.7m by 0.6m, and survived to a depth of 0.4m. Its fill [38] consisted of c.60% large packing stones in a matrix of dark yellowish brown silty sand. A probable postpipe c.0.10m was located against the northeastern side of the cut.

Two transects were excavated outwards from near the centre of the trench towards the north and east. Transect [30] extended northwards from the northern edge of the burnt sand surrounding hollow [18] for a distance of 3.8m. It was excavated to a width of 1m. No archaeological features were identified. It revealed the the upper northwestern side of a palaeochannel [31] running from southwest to northeast beneath feature group [21]. This was gently sloping and was observed to a depth of 0.6m. The palaeochannel could be seen to have an overall width of c.10m. In the area of transect [30] it had a fill [32] consisting of compact dark brown silty clay above friable dark brown sandy silt. Both layers contained small coal fragments. The second transect excavated ([33]), extending from the eastern edge of the burnt sand around hearth [18] eastwards for 3.4m, revealed a similar sequence of palaeochannel fills above coarse sands. It was excavated to a depth of 0.9m and the base of the palaeochannel was not reached.

8.0 DISCUSSION

The features which comprise group [21] probably represented the remains of an Iron Age or Romano-British period roundhouse located on a gravel terrace above the River South Tyne. The ring-gully [20] is interpreted as the wall-trench for a timber-built house with the post-hole and cobbling marking the likely position of a doorway on the south side.

The potential significance of the site lies in the fact that it would appear to be evidence for an unenclosed settlement. The majority of Iron-Age/Romano-British settlement sites which have been identified are enclosed by a ditch, making them particularly recognisable features on aerial photographs. Evidence of unenclosed 'hut-cluster' type sites has been found in the surrounding upland areas, however, the excavated examples have produced a broad range of dating evidence from the 2nd millenium B.C. (Houseledge, Northumberland) to the later pre-Roman Iron Age (Percy Rigg, Kildale). The exact status of these sites in the overall settlement pattern remains therefore a matter of conjecture.

The size and form of the timber-built round house at Haltwhistle is directly comparable to those excavated by Jobey (1988) at Gowanburn River Camp in North Tynedale. The trenches of the houses there also survived only as vestigial arcs. House 3 in particular exhibited evidence of internal paving, postholes associated with a doorway and a burnt central area marking the position of former hearth. No evidence for either a palisade or a ditched enclosure could be identified at Haltwhistle and greater credence will need to be given in future for the potential existence of this type of site.

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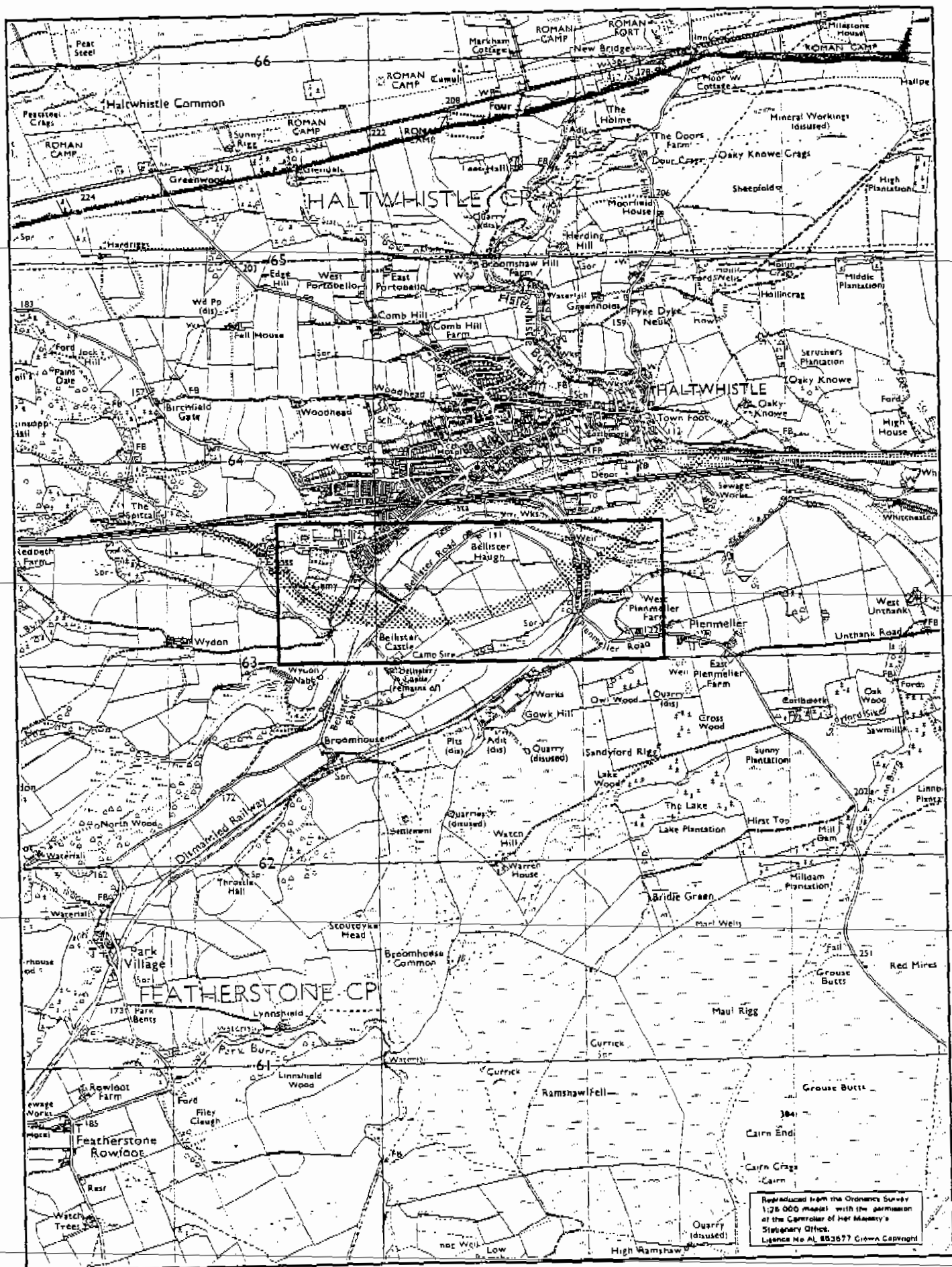


Fig. 1 Road corridor location (tone).

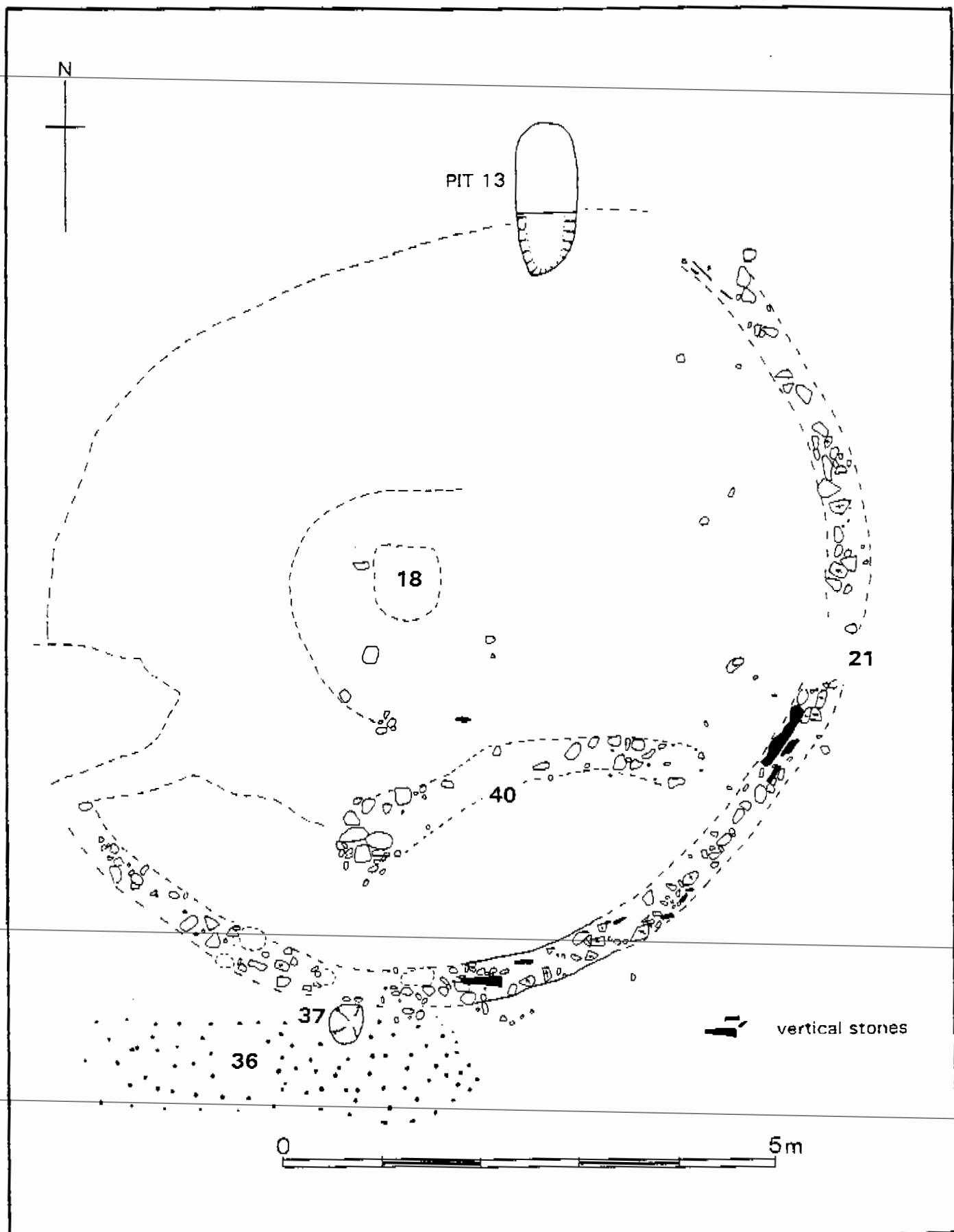


Fig.3

Feature group 21