

## **Archaeological Investigation of the Remains of a Medieval Vaccary at Gatesgarth Farm, Buttermere**

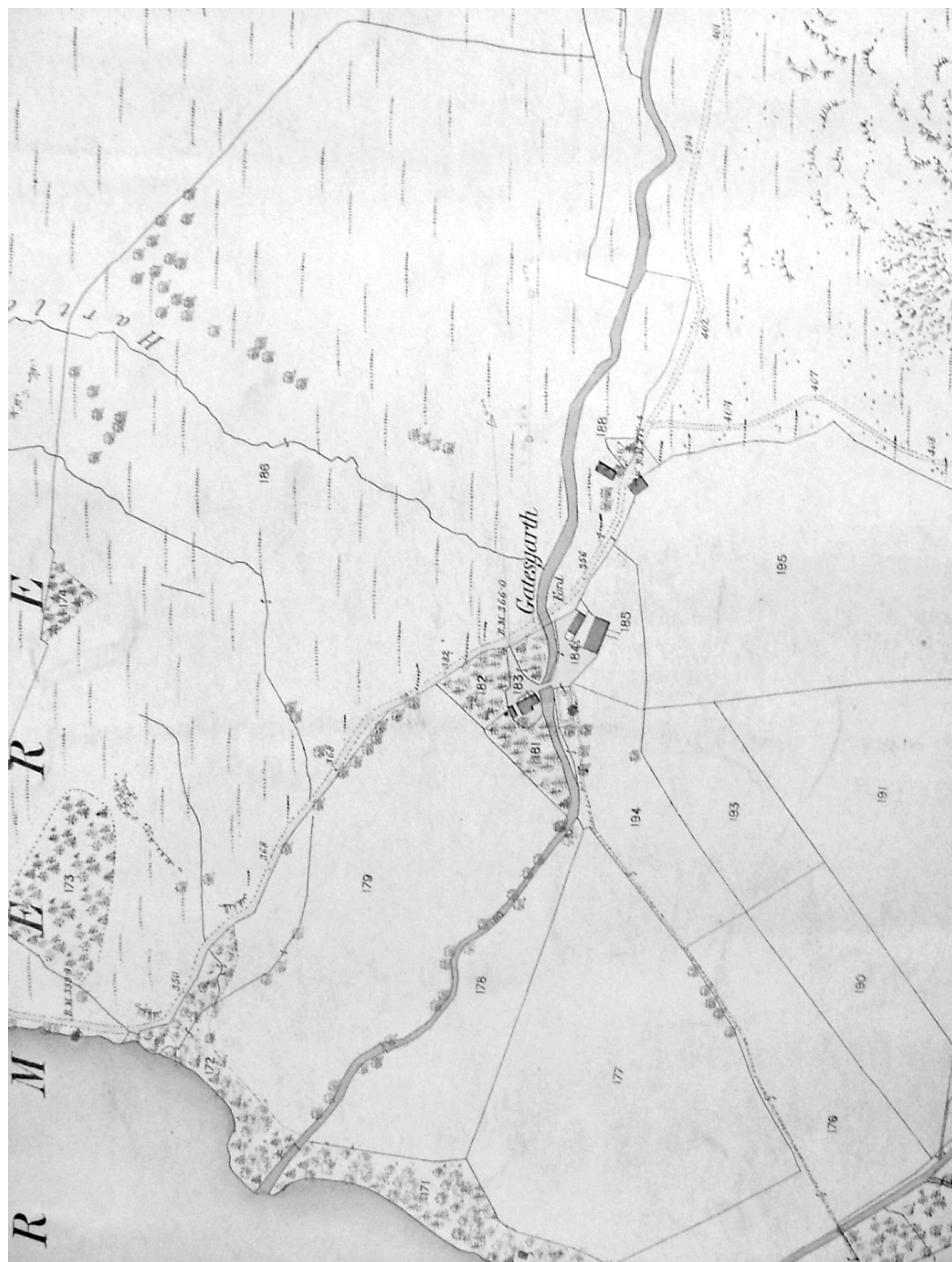
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### **Summary**

**R**ECENT archaeological investigations at Gatesgarth Farm, Buttermere in the Lake District National Park, have identified a number of features believed to be associated with a medieval *vaccary* (cattle farm). Excavation revealed a longhouse dwelling, an associated track way, timber structures, and an earthwork platform, as well as a small assemblage of medieval pottery dating to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. This work supports the documentary evidence for a *vaccary* at the site presented by Angus Winchester in a previous *Transactions* article, and has the potential to provide insight into the nature and scale of medieval farming practices in the Lake District.

Between December 2007 and January 2008, North Pennines Archaeology Ltd. undertook an archaeological evaluation of land at Gatesgarth Farm, Buttermere, in the Lake District National Park. The work was recommended by the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA), following an application by Mr. W. Richardson of Gatesgarth Farm to erect a new sheep-wintering building at the site. Earthworks had previously been identified in this area by the LDNPA, which were believed to be associated with a medieval vaccary (cattle farm). The initial evaluation confirmed the presence of a medieval longhouse dwelling and associated features on the northern part of the site. At the request of the LDNPA, the location of the new farm building was revised to minimise the impact of the proposed development on these sensitive archaeological remains. In May 2008 North Pennines Archaeology Ltd. returned to Gatesgarth Farm to monitor the excavation of the area for the new building. This work revealed further features, which may be associated with the medieval longhouse.

Gatesgarth Farm is situated in a steep-sided valley at the south end of Buttermere Lake, framed by Buttermere Fell to the north, Fleetwith Pike to the south-east, and High Crag to the south-west. The site is located 17km south of Cockermouth, and 10km south-west of Keswick (centred on NGR NY 1946 1494). The low-lying land is maintained as pasture for sheep farming, with rough grazing on the nearby fells. The land investigated during the archaeological evaluation was located in two fields of pasture to the south-east of Gatesgarth Farm, and west of Gatesgarth Cottage, on the south side of the road to Buttermere (B5284). This area occupies the north and west slopes of a rounded hill at the bottom of Fleetwith Pike, with elevations ranging between 108m and 121m OD.



## The Vaccary at Gatesgarth

Vaccaries were directly managed stock farms using private demesne pastures, and were established in the medieval period to provide an income from dairying and stock-breeding, often on land formerly used as hunting forest. The term *vaccaria* derives from the latin *vacca* meaning ‘cow’, and could refer either to an individual cowhouse, or a stock-rearing establishment and associated pastures.<sup>1</sup>

There is good documentary evidence for a vaccary at Gatesgarth Farm, which has been presented in a previous *Transactions* article by Angus Winchester.<sup>2</sup> The earliest documentary reference dates from 1260, and refers to a ‘pasture at Gatesgarth’. Gatesgarth was a demesne cattle farm in the thirteenth century, belonging to the lords of the honour of Cockermouth. Accounts from the period 1267-1269 mention repairs to a cowhouse (*vaccaria*), repairs to the enclosure around the meadow used in the production of hay (*haya*), and construction of a new house for hay and calves. In 1268 a man was paid to keep the wood and park of ‘*Gadscard*’, and to repair the palings. This is believed to be a large enclosure to the north of Gatesgarth Farm, now known as Gatesgarth Side. A 67ft (23m) long *vaccaria* was constructed in 1282-83, at which time the vaccary could sustain around forty cows and their calves. Other vaccaries are known to have existed in the Lake District at Wasdalehead and Gillerthwaite in Ennerdale, at Brotherilkeld in Eskdale, and Stonethwaite in Borrowdale, but are not as well documented.<sup>3</sup>

## Historical background

As outlined above, the earliest-known documentary reference to Gatesgarth Farm dates to 1260, when the area was a demesne forest pasture, indicating that a vaccary had existed somewhere near Gatesgarth Farm from the mid-thirteenth century. During this period the land was part of the honour of Cockermouth, and was closely linked to the fortunes of the estate, which was then in the hands of Isabella de Fortibus. The enterprise was relatively short-lived, and by 1310 the pasture at Gatesgarth had been let. By the sixteenth century the pasture had been subdivided into three separate holdings.

By the mid-eighteenth century, there were two holdings at Gatesgarth, by which time the modern focus on sheep was established. In 1750, the two farms ran about 1,600 sheep on the surrounding sheep heafs.<sup>4</sup> Cartographic evidence shows that farm buildings have been situated within the study area from at least 1770 onwards. Two possible barns are shown on Hodskinson and Donald’s map of 1774 (surveyed in 1770), but had been replaced by the present barns at Gatesgarth by the mid-nineteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century, Peter Crosthwaite, proprietor of the museum at Keswick, surveyed and planned several of the main lakes. His map entitled *An Accurate Map of Buttermere, Crummock and Lowes-water Lakes, Scale Force etc*, dated June 1793, shows a viewing station, which would have been located at the foot of Fleetwith Pike to the east of Gatesgarth Farm. The map also appears to show three buildings at Gatesgarth, one with the annotation *The Duke of Norfolk’s Great Sheep Farm*, which would appear to refer to Gatesgarth Farm, and the other two buildings marked *Thomas Benson’s Esq.*

The Tithe Map for Buttermere, dated 1845, provides useful information as to the owner, occupier and extent of the lands attached to Gatesgarth Farm, which is included with Croft Farm, located in Buttermere Village. The owner of both Gatesgarth Farm and Croft Farm at this date was William Marshall; the occupier of Gatesgarth Farm was Christopher Tyson. The total acreage for Gatesgarth Farm, along with Croft Farm and Buttermere Lake, was 938 acres, one rood and 17 perches. In 1860, sheep farming is described as being the chief employment of the inhabitants of Buttermere, with some employed in the slate quarries on Honister Crag.<sup>5</sup>

The 1st Edition 6-inch/mile Ordnance Survey map of 1863 shows Gatesgarth Farm much as it exists today, situated close to a ford across Gatesgarth Beck, with the large enclosure known as Gatesgarth Side to the north, and enclosed pasture to the south (Fig. 1). This area was used as meadow in the medieval period, and would have provided hay for feeding cattle in the winter. To the east the field boundaries form a ‘funnel’, used for bringing stock down to the farm from upland summer pastures.

Gatesgarth Farm was bought by Thomas Richardson in 1963 from the then owner, Sir Claude Elliot, the Provost of Eton. At present, it is the fourth largest farm in the Lake District.

### **The archaeological remains**

The first stage of the archaeological work comprised a visual inspection of the area of the proposed development, in order to identify features of potential archaeological interest. This was followed by a measured metric survey of visible features, and geophysical surveys to detect potential sub-surface anomalies, using both geomagnetic and earth resistance survey techniques. The results of the archaeological survey were used to inform the locations of 12 archaeological trial trenches, which were subsequently excavated across the site (Fig. 2). Both geophysical techniques proved ineffective on the north side of the study area, due to the shallow depth of the slate bedrock, and the large amount of stone present in the topsoil. The trenches were therefore positioned to target the earthwork remains recorded during the metric survey.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, further areas were investigated during the monitoring of the excavation for the new sheep-wintering building on the south side of the study area.<sup>7</sup>

Archaeological features were identified over a terrace on the north side of the site, situated immediately to the east of Gatesgarth Farm. These comprised a series of low stone banks made of earth-fast boulders and small stones, forming a rectangular area south of an existing drystone wall. These were interpreted as the footings of a rectangular building measuring approximately 20m long and at least 5m wide. The fourth side of this building was believed to be located beneath the drystone wall. Further low stone banks and areas of cobbles were identified to the south of this feature.

Two linear 6m-long trenches, and an 8m-long L-shaped trench were excavated to investigate this building. Within each trench there was a section of wall, made of large rounded boulders up to 0.45m wide and 0.55m deep, with a stone rubble core, confirming the presence of a longhouse (Fig. 3). The walls had no visible foundation,

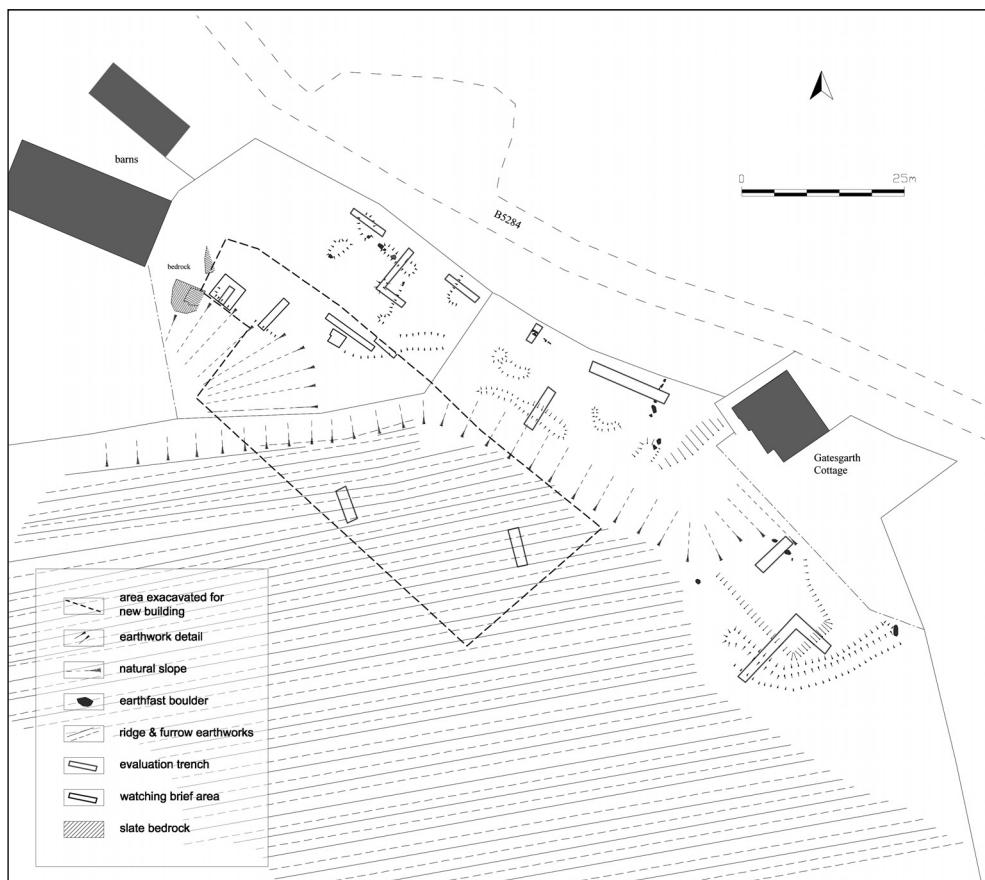


FIG. 2. Plan of the archaeological trenches in relation to topographic features.

but were set upon the natural subsoil, being 0.9m wide and 0.3m high on the north-west and south-west sides, and 1.1m wide and 0.4m high at the south-east end. These were overlain by large amounts of tumbled stone, forming a visible bank either side. The south-east trench contained the remains of a cobbled floor comprising tightly packed, small elongated cobbles and some small pieces of slate. The quality of this surface suggested that this was the interior floor of a former domestic building. A single corroded iron nail of possible medieval or post-medieval date was recovered from this floor surface. There was no evidence for an internal floor in the other two trenches, suggesting that the interior of the building was subdivided.

Another cobble surface was revealed to the south-east of this building, interpreted as a former external yard. Further evidence for this was revealed in the southern end of the L-shaped trench. Beneath this cobble surface and a layer of made ground, in the centre of this trench was a 0.5m-wide 0.2m-deep posthole and a 0.3m-wide linear feature, which were taken as evidence for an earlier timber structure. Since only a small portion of this feature was revealed by the excavation, this evidence proved difficult to interpret. It is possible, however, that this was a foundation slot for a timber building or fence.

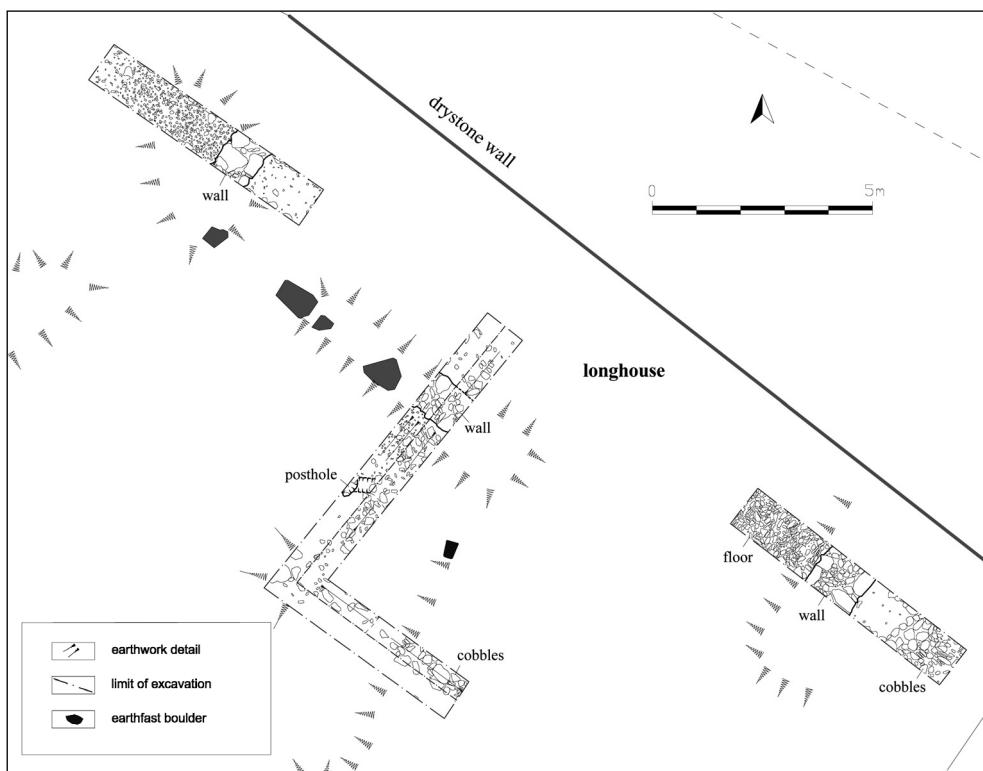


FIG. 3. Plan of the archaeological trenches and deposits associated with the longhouse.

Three fragments of medieval pottery were recovered from the L-shaped trench. The quantity of medieval pottery was small, however, medieval pottery from rural contexts is scarce, and so the assemblage was of relative significance. A fragment of an oxidised sandy ware vessel was recovered from the topsoil, dating to the mid-thirteenth or fourteenth century. Four freshly broken fragments from a single fragment of partially reduced ware were recovered from an organic-rich layer beneath the topsoil, dating from the thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries. The layer of made ground beneath this deposit produced two fragments from a glazed medium-coarse sandy ware jug, dated to the late thirteenth or fourteenth century. One fragment bore an eye decoration, forming part of a larger zoomorphic design (Fig. 4). In addition to the pottery fragments, a fragment of ceramic building material (CBM) was recovered from the layer of made ground. This was a fragment of cream coloured daub of possible medieval date.

Another cobbled surface was revealed in an evaluation trench on the west side of the site. This was revealed to a greater extent during the subsequent monitoring phase, and found to be part of a substantial cobbled trackway, which crossed the site, aligned approximately east-west (Fig. 5). This comprised a *c.*3m-wide, 0.3m-deep layer of medium-sized river cobbles, which had been set vertically in the ground to form a solid surface. This band of cobbles was edged on the north-east and south-west sides with medium rounded boulders, measuring on average 0.25m by 0.4m. A section was

excavated through this track, and another fragment medieval pottery was recovered from the bedding layer beneath the cobbles. This was a sherd of partially reduced ware, dating from the thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries. It is likely that the track originally ran eastwards towards the present Gatesgarth Cottage, as a similar feature was revealed in another of the evaluation trenches to the east. This track went out of use prior to the creation of the existing field boundaries in the eighteenth century.

Evidence for a possible gateway was revealed to the south of the longhouse. A number of large flat boulders had been set along the edge of the track and continued in the direction of the longhouse to form an area measuring at least 4.4m long and between 4.4m and 7.1m wide, aligned approximately north-south. A sample section was excavated through this feature, to reveal a crude surface of rounded river cobbles ranging in size between 0.23m and 0.4m in diameter, interpreted as a yard. Immediately to the north-west of the intersection of the cobbled yard and track, was a posthole, which measured 0.65m in diameter, and 0.25m deep, with the remains of a timber post in the bottom. This post was made of oak and measured 300mm long and 150mm wide at the base, tapering to a 15mm-wide point at the top end. The post was crudely shaped along its length, with a semi-circular cut flat base. The top of the post had rotted away, but several cut marks were observed on one side. No artefacts were recovered with which to date these features, and the timber was not suitable for dating using dendrochronology. A medieval or post-medieval date was likely, however.

Another 1.6m-wide and 12.5m-long trench was excavated on the north side of the proposed development area, immediately west of Gatesgarth Cottage, and close to the existing northern boundary wall, to encompass an alignment of earth-fast boulders recorded during the archaeological survey. This trench contained large amounts of stone rubble, cobbles and slate roofing tiles, interpreted as made ground resulting from the levelling of this area. Beneath this deposit were the foundations of a substantial stone

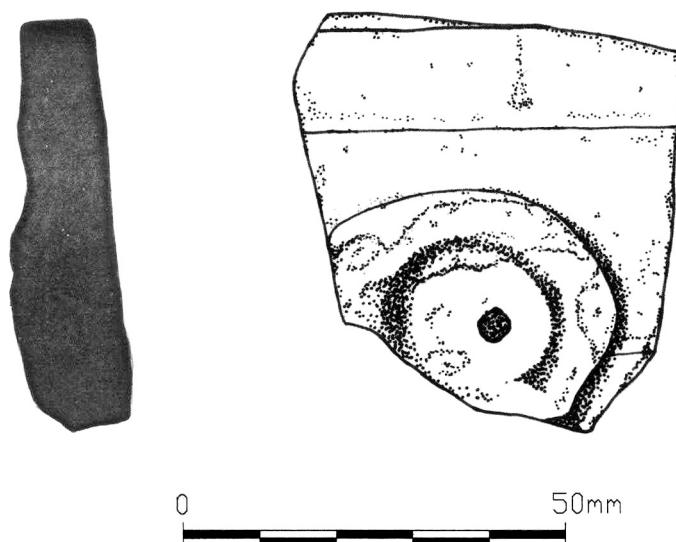


FIG. 4. Decorated sherd of a thirteenth or fourteenth century glazed medium coarse sandy ware jug.

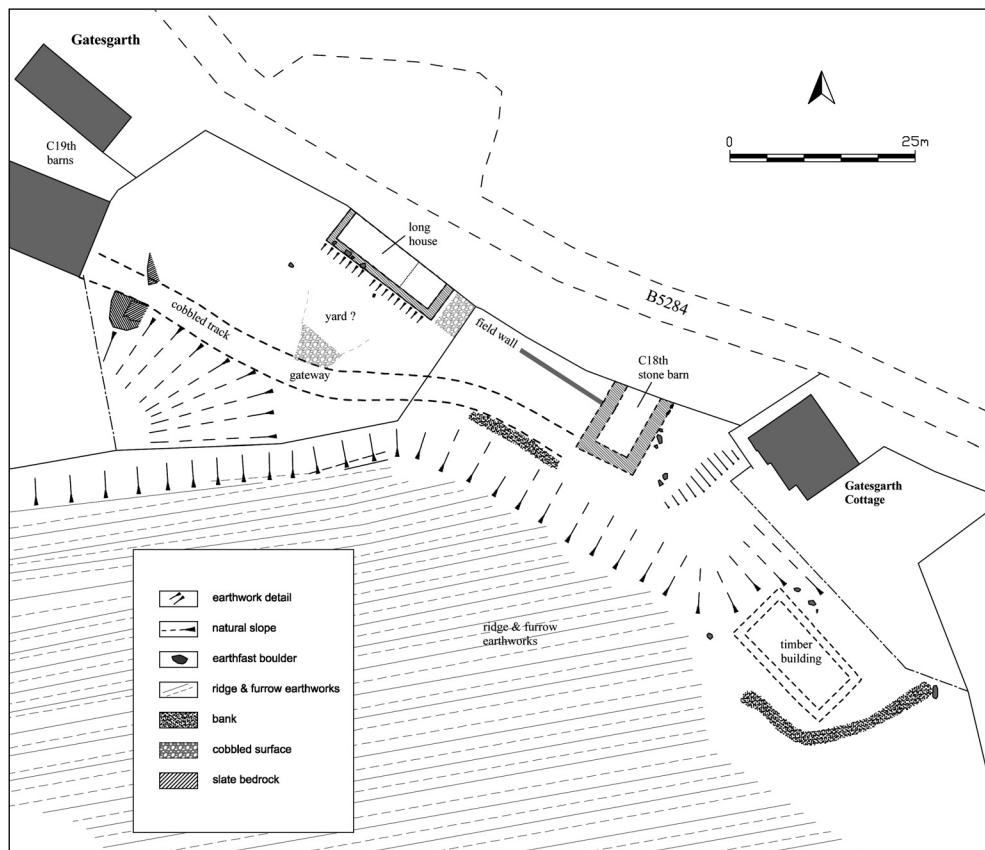


FIG. 5. Interpretation plan of archaeological features at Gatesgarth Farm.

building, comprising two 0.9m-wide, 0.2m-high walls aligned north-east to south-west, and spaced c.5m apart. These were made of sandstone boulders up to 0.6m in diameter, with some smaller rounded blue stones. Several fragments of post-medieval pottery were recovered from the top of the western wall. This wall was disturbed at the northern end, where it had been cut through by a stone-built, slate-lined drain. The drain was at least 3.4m long, 0.4m wide and 0.13m high, and crossed the trench with a north-west to south-east alignment. The base and top of the drain were constructed from re-used roofing slates, and the sides were made from rounded cobbles. Abutting the west side of this wall, and filling the south-west corner of the trench, was the base of a drystone wall, interpreted as a later boundary wall, which was also identified in another evaluation trench to the west. The two parallel walls were believed to be the remains of a post-medieval building, as all of the pottery recovered from this trench dated from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Also, the orientation of this building suggests that this may be one of two possible barns illustrated on Hodskinson and Donald's 1774 map, when Gatesgarth Farm was managed as a sheep farm.

On the east side of the site, south of Gatesgarth Cottage, was a prominent rectangular earthwork platform, comprising a 17m-long and 7m-wide area bounded on the north, east and south sides by a low earthen bank, with an open down-slope side to the north-west. Upon excavation a shallow linear feature was identified running along the inner edge of the rectangular platform. Two sections were excavated through this feature, which was interpreted as a foundation slot for a timber building. The cut for this feature was 1.2m wide and 0.2m deep with concave sides and a moderately flat base. A round flat stone, measuring 0.5m by 0.4m, had been placed in the bottom of this feature, which was interpreted as a pad for a timber post.

Cutting the natural subsoil to the south-east of the earthwork platform was a 0.8m-wide, 0.25m-deep ditch, which was packed with angular stones, measuring on average 0.15m in diameter. The ditch was clearly constructed as a drainage ditch, presumably to carry water around, and away from, the earthwork platform, to keep the area dry. Parallel with this feature was an earthwork bank, which was created from the up-cast from the drainage ditch. No finds were recovered with which to date these features.

Ridge and furrow earthworks were identified over the southern part of the study area. These were aligned north-east to south-west with 3m between furrows. This form of cultivation was commonly used for subsistence agriculture in the Lake District from the medieval period up to the early modern period. It is probable from the nature and scale of the earthworks that this ridge and furrow cultivation is post-medieval or later in date.

## Discussion

The most interesting, and potentially the earliest, building identified at the site is the longhouse of probable medieval date, with an internal cobbled floor at the south-east end of the building. Longhouses were by definition dual-purpose buildings, with living accommodation at one end, and a byre for animals at the other, entered by a common lateral door.<sup>8</sup> The excavated building certainly appears to have been subdivided, although no evidence was revealed for a door, or for the accommodation of livestock. This is not surprising given that only a small proportion of the structure was excavated. Tentative evidence for an adjacent timber structure of an early date was also revealed in this area. The pottery recovered suggests that these features date to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, indicating that the long house may be a dwelling associated with the documented medieval vaccary. The trackway and possible yard to the south of the longhouse may also be associated with the vaccary, or later holding.

Archaeological evidence has been revealed for the continued occupation of Gatesgarth in the post-medieval period, in the form of a substantial post-medieval stone building, believed to be an eighteenth century barn, as well as ridge and furrow earthworks and former field boundaries.

A possible timber building associated with a rectangular earthwork platform on the east side of the site is undated, but the possibility exists that this is associated with the medieval vaccary. The earthwork was not large enough to be the site of the documented 67ft (23m) long *vaccaria*. However, it could be one of a number of other structures indicated in the accounts of the honour of Cockermouth.

### Comparative sites

The only other known medieval longhouse to be excavated in the Lake District is at Stephenson Ground, Broughton West (NGR SD 2400 9450), which was investigated by students of University College, London, between 1986 and 1988. This comprised a double-walled rectangular building measuring 9m by 5m, with a semi-circular animal enclosure on one side.<sup>9</sup> The building had a paved area of flagstones at one end, forming a 3m-long, 1.5m-wide sleeping platform. The only dating evidence was a single sherd of pottery dating from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, some iron nails, and simple blades. The longhouse was one phase of a multi-period site, which included an early medieval oval farmhouse, and fifteenth to sixteenth century shieling.

### Conclusions

This project has provided a rare opportunity to combine documentary and archaeological evidence, which has the potential to provide insights into the nature and scale of medieval farming practices in the Lake District.

Overall only a small proportion of the site was subject to archaeological investigation, but nevertheless the archaeological remains support the documentary evidence for medieval occupation of the site, comprising a long house dwelling, associated trackway, and early timber structures. The work has not determined the location of the documented cowhouse (*vaccaria*), but the earthwork platform may be a feature associated with the vaccary. It is possible that other medieval structures are lost beneath the existing farm buildings and yards. Other evidence for the vaccary survives in the wider landscape, in the form of field boundaries.

The dating of rural sites is problematic, given the low level of artefactual evidence. However, comparison of the medieval pottery from Gatesgarth Farm with well-dated urban assemblages could provide a tighter date range for the excavated material. No faunal remains were recovered during the project, but recovery and analysis of these could provide information regarding medieval stock management, and should be highlighted as an area for future research.

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Wooler of North Pennines Archaeology Ltd. The pottery was assessed by Jo Dawson, Greenlane Archaeology, and illustrated by Juliet Reeves.

## Notes and References

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