An Archaeological Watching Brief for the Elsdon OHL Refurbishment, Elsdon, near Otterburn, District of Alnwick, Northumberland

Central National Grid Reference: NY 9375 9332

Site Code: ELS 07

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1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

1.1 An archaeological monitoring and recording exercise was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited in the village of Elsdon, near Otterburn, Northumberland, at National Grid Reference NY 9375 9332.

1.2 Northern Electric Distribution Limited commissioned the work which was undertaken in association with groundworks in a refurbishment scheme for an overhead electricity supply. The archaeological investigations were carried out by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited during December 2007 and January 2008.

1.3 The works were conducted on land within the village of Elsdon, which is of medieval origin and contains the site of Mote Hills motte and bailey castle, which has scheduled monument status. The scheme was considered to have most potential for disturbing archaeological remains where poles carrying overhead power lines were being replaced in close proximity to the scheduled area in the north-eastern part of the village.

1.4 The archaeological investigation was undertaken at the request of the Northumberland National Park Authority. Intrusive groundworks associated with the replacement of poles in the vicinity of the scheduled monument were to be monitored by an archaeologist and any remains of note recorded. Replacement of other poles in the scheme had to be monitored as appropriate. As it happened, the investigation comprised monitoring and recording six foundation pits (Pits 1-6) for new poles.

1.5 Natural geological material was recorded in each of the foundation pits. The deposits varied in composition, being sand, clay and gravel of glacial or alluvial origin. These were overlain by topsoil or made ground at all but one location. In Pit 2, located on ground directly east of Elsdon Burn, a spread of stones, possibly from a collapsed wall or surface of uncertain period of origin was recorded. No archaeological deposits or features of note were recorded in any other foundation pit.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 General Background

2.1.1 An archaeological monitoring and recording exercise ('watching brief') was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited (PCA) in December 2007 and January 2008 in the village of Elsdon, near Otterburn, Northumberland (Figure 1). The work was undertaken in association with a scheme by Northern Electric Distribution Limited (NEDL) to replace existing open wire electricity cables with aerial bunched conductors and to renew rotten poles carrying the overhead lines (OHL).

2.1.2 Elsdon is considered the most complete example of a medieval settlement in the Northumberland National Park. With a distinctive village green at its core, the village has an ancient parish church (St. Cuthbert's), an impressive tower house and extensive earthworks representing Mote Hills motte and bailey castle at the northern end of the settlement.

2.1.3 The Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) Archaeologist advised that the OHL refurbishment scheme had potential to disturb important sub-surface archaeological remains. It was recommended that an archaeological watching brief should be undertaken in association with intrusive groundworks in the scheme, with particular emphasis on an L-shaped portion of the OHL route close to Mote Hills, a site that has scheduled monument status. The NNPA Archaeologist produced a Brief for the archaeological investigation.[1]

2.1.4 On award of contract, a Project Design for the archaeological work was compiled by PCA, and this set out in detail the aims and methodologies to be applied to the investigation.[2] Archaeological monitoring would be carried out during machine-excavation foundation pits for new poles supporting the OHL in the aforementioned portion of the route close to Mote Hills, as well as monitoring of any other intrusive groundworks in the scheme considered to have potential to disturb archaeological remains. The broad aim of the investigation was to preserve by record archaeological remains uncovered during intrusive groundworks.

2.1.5 At the time of writing, the project archive is housed at the Northern Office of PCA, at Unit N19a, Tursdale Business Park, Durham. The completed project archive, comprising written, drawn, and photographic records will be ultimately deposited with the Museum of Antiquities, University of Newcastle, under the site code ELS 07. The **O**nline **A**cces**S** to the **I**ndex of Archaeological Investigation**S** (OASIS) reference number for the project is: preconst1-36251.

2.2 Site Location and Description

2.2.1 The village of Elsdon is located *c.* 5km to the east of Otterburn in the District of Alnwick, Northumberland. It lies within the Northumberland National Park at NGR NY 93 93 (Figure 1). The village straddles Elsdon Burn, a little to the north of its confluence with Whiskershiel Burn, and the whole settlement sits in a natural bowl surrounded by hills to the north, south and east. Only to the west are more extensive views possible, towards Otterburn and the River Rede.

[1] NNPA 2007.
[2] PCA 2007.

2.2.2 The OHL refurbishment scheme in Elsdon was part of an ongoing programme of works for the improvement of the electricity supply in the Otterburn area. Of particular concern to the NNPA Archaeologist were six poles along an L-shaped section of the OHL route immediately to the south of the scheduled site of Mote Hills in Elsdon (Figure 2). Approximately 0.2km in length, this portion of the route began off the B6341 at the entrance to the track leading to Hudspeth Farm, immediately to the east of Elsdon Burn. It then ran to the east, south of the Village Hall, before turning at right angles to run north, up the hillside towards a house, The Mote, located immediately to the east of the scheduled area. In the event it was only necessary to replace four poles in this stretch (Pits 1, 2, 3 and 4 on Figure 2). Pit 1 was located in a grass verge beside the track leading to Hudspeth Farm, Pit 2 was located in a small field north of the farm track, Pit 3 was located in the embankment east of an unclassified road running north up the hill to The Mote and Pit 4 was located in the garden of The Mote.

2.2.3 The NNPA Archaeologist also requested that renewal of any other poles at locations within the scheme with particular potential for archaeological remains should also be archaeologically monitored. In the event, machine-excavation of only two other foundation pits for new poles was monitored. The first (6 on Figure 2) was sited to the south-west of Mote Hills between the B6341 and a drystone wall forming the bank of the Elsdon Burn, the second (5 on Figure 2) was sited *c.* 300m to the south-west, in a grass verge near the village green.

2.3 Geology and Topography

2.3.1 The underlying solid geology of the area comprises sedimentary rocks of Carboniferous age, in a repetitive succession of limestones, sandstones and shales, locally with thin coals and a small number of mineral veins. The overlying drift geology is glacial boulder clay of Pleistocene origin, and the existing river channels are cut into these Pleistocene deposits, Holocene alluvium, or bedrock.

2.3.2 The village of Elson is situated within a low-lying basin with higher ground to the north, east and south. To the west, the natural bowl opens out towards Otterburn and Redesdale. The valley sides are mainly pasture on the lower slopes, giving way to open moorland higher up. Elsdon Burn flows through the village and has formed a steep-sided ravine along its eastern side. Just south of the settlement the watercourse joins Whiskershiel Burn and the combined river skirts the southern edge of the village, draining the Elsdon basin, and eventually merging with the River Rede.

2.4 Planning Background

2.4.1 The OHL refurbishment scheme at Elsdon involved replacement of existing overhead open wire electricity cables with aerial bunched conductors and renewal of rotten poles along the route. As the village lies within the Northumberland National Park, Full Planning permission was required for the undertaking of the work. Thus an application (NNPA Planning Application 07NP0056) was made by NEDL to the Secretary of State for the Department of Trade and industry for consent under Section 37 of the '*Electricity Act 1989*' to install or keep the electric line above ground and for a direction under Section 90(2) of the *'Town and Country Planning Act 1990'* for planning permission. Permission was duly granted, with a condition relating to archaeology imposed on the recommendation of the NNPA Archaeologist.

2.4.2 The NNPA Archaeologist has responsibility for archaeological development control within the National Park and was thus was consulted on the proposal. The *'Northumberland County and National Park Joint Structure Plan'*[3] contains a raft of policies relating to archaeology (Heritage and Conservation Policies HC1–HC7), the most relevant of which are reproduced below:

> ***Policy HC2:*** *There will be a presumption in favour of the preservation of Scheduled Ancient Monuments, other nationally important archaeological sites, and their settings. The Local Planning Authority will not permit development which would be detrimental to these sites or their settings.*
>
> ***Policy HC3:*** *The Local Planning Authority will not permit development which would be detrimental to any regionally or locally important archaeological site unless it can be demonstrated that the need for the development outweighs the importance of retaining the site unaltered and no alternative site is available.*
>
> ***Policy HC4:*** *Where the impact of a development proposal on an archaeological site, or an area of archaeological potential, or the relative importance of such an area, is unclear, the Local Planning Authority will require the developer to provide information in the form of an archaeological assessment and in some cases an archaeological evaluation before any consent is granted. Once a judgement on the archaeological impact of a proposal has been made, and where preservation in-situ is not appropriate, permissions granted may be subject to a condition and/or an agreement requiring the developer to make provision for appropriate further archaeological fieldwork, to allow the recording of the remains and publication of the findings.*

2.4.3 Elsdon village is generally an area of high archaeological sensitivity and part of the refurbishment scheme was located immediately to the south of the site of Mote Hills motte and bailey castle, a scheduled ancient monument (No. 21039). Six poles in this section were proposed for renewal**,** although in the event only four poles were replaced (Figure 2). Given the location of the works, there was considered some potential for important archaeological deposits to be disturbed during intrusive groundworks in the scheme. The aforementioned Brief (NNPA document reference 9.07.14/CJ/261107) for the archaeological work was compiled by the NNPA Archaeologist, outlining the justification for the investigation and its objectives.

[3] Northumberland County Council and National Park Authority 2007.

2.4.4 Part of the archaeological condition attached to planning permission was that a 'written scheme of investigation' (WSI) should be produced and submitted to the NNPA Archaeologist for approval prior to work commencing. On award of contract, PCA compiled a Project Design[4], setting out the background to and the aims of the project and describing the methodologies to be employed during the fieldwork and 'post-excavation' phases of the project. This constitutes the required WSI.

2.5 Archaeological and Historical Background

2.5.1 A thorough archaeological and historical study of the township has previously been undertaken.[5] This summary has been synthesized from that document, and using information contained within the Northumberland online Sites and Monuments Record.[6] The research and writing of those responsible is fully acknowledged.

2.5.2 Known archaeological remains in Elsdon parish date from prehistoric times to the 20th century A stone axe from Grasslees dates to the Neolithic period and numerous cup and ring marks are carved on a rock outcrop at Tod Crag. The oldest structures in the parish date to the Bronze Age and include cairns and ritual monuments. Most of the cairns are clearance cairns created to allow crops to be grown on the newly created fields, although some were built as burial places and overlie a stone cist.

2.5.3 The earliest settlement in the parish is probably a roundhouse of likely Bronze Age or Iron Age date at Hallshill Farm. Defended settlements in the area include those at Manside and Haining. The latter, lying to the south-west of the village, is double-ditched, with three ramparts. It was excavated in 1959 and revealed evidence of continued habitation into the Roman period.

2.5.4 The parish lies north of Hadrian's Wall and although there are Roman military sites in neighbouring parishes at Otterburn there are none in Elsdon. A Roman tombstone in St. Cuthbert's church is said to have come from High Rochester Roman fort and was found in Elsdon motte.

2.5.5 In the medieval period, Elsdon developed as an important village, lying on more than one significant routeway, such as the Elsdon to Gamelspath road. Elsdon village grew up around the motte and bailey castle, built after the Norman Conquest and probably by Robert de Umfraville. It has been suggested that the earthworks bounding the inner ward and the bailey of the Norman castle represent an adaptation of much earlier Iron Age hillfort defences.

2.5.6 The motte, roughly circular in plan with a flat top, stands to a maximum height of 15m and is 80m in diameter across the base and 46m across the top. It is surrounded on the north and east sides by a strong earthen rampart up to 3m high, while the western side has a steep natural defence. The bailey, roughly rectangular in shape and measuring 72m east-west by 48m north-south, is situated to the north of the motte and separated from it by a broad crescent shaped ditch 15m wide. It is strongly defended an all sides by a massive earthen rampart on average 20m across and 10m high.[7]

[4] PCA 2007.
[5] The Archaeological Practice Limited 2004.
[6] Available online at the *Keys to the Past* website: *www.keystothepast.*
[7] Detail taken from the English Heritage scheduled monument record entry for Monument No. 21039.

2.5.7 Unfortunately the castle was too remote and its role was taken by Harbottle Castle in the 12th century. The 12th century also saw the first church built in Elsdon. Elsdon Tower was originally built in the 15th century for the rector of the village. Rebuilt in the 16th century, it is considered one of the best tower houses in the county.

2.5.8 By the 18th century, the area saw a greater prominence given to farming. The parish registers record many farmsteads in the parish, including The Haining and Low Carrick and new farm buildings were built in Elsdon village at The Crown, one of several historic inns in the settlement. These would have provided accommodation and refreshments to travellers along the new Jedburgh to Newcastle turnpike, which opened in 1776. The cockpit at Elsdon provided sport to locals and travellers. The boundaries of landownership were formalised at this time and a series of boundary stones were erected between Ottercops and Kirkwhelpington. Alongside farming, other economic activities developed, including: millstone quarrying, corn milling and lime quarrying and burning.

2.5.9 There is a significant quantity of early documentation and map evidence relating to the village, including the earliest statutory enclosure award for any Northumbrian township (dated to 1729). There is however, a lack of any documentary record of the castle, while the tower house appears and disappears in sources. Ordnance Survey maps from 1866, 1895 and 1898 were examined as part of the rapid assessment of readily available documentary, cartographic and photographic material undertaken to compile the Project Design for the watching biref, as stiuptaed in the NNPA Brief. These maps show the village in essentially the same form as it is today, with the original medieval layout fossilized in the street plan.

2.6 Aims and Objectives

2.6.1 In broad terms, the archaeological investigation aimed to record any archaeological remains exposed as a result of groundworks associated with OHL refurbishment prior to their destruction. Such remains could encompass buried structures, deposits and features and any associated artefactual and ecofactual evidence.

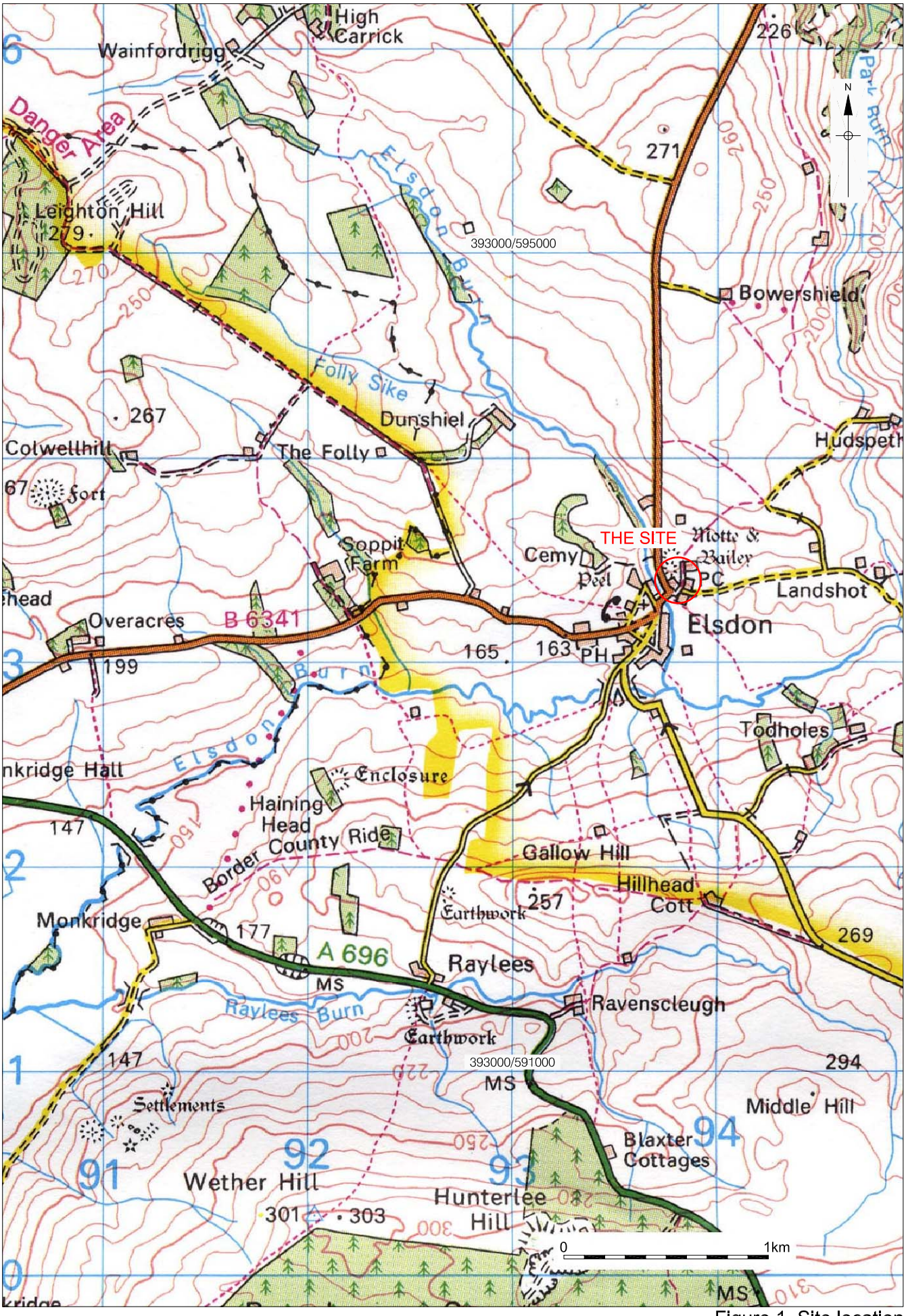

Figure 1. Site location
Scale 1:25,000

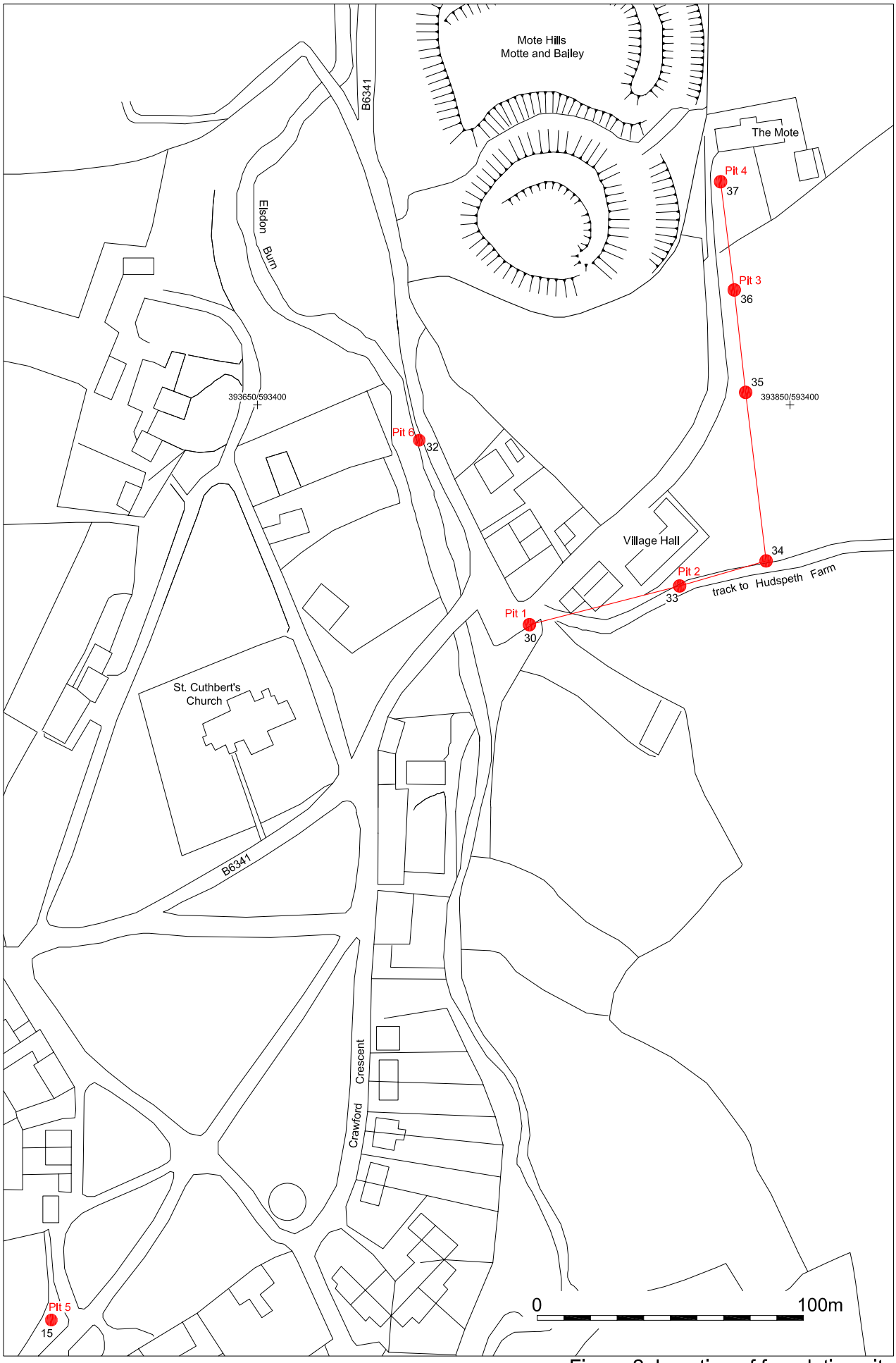

Figure 2. Location of foundation pits
Scale 1:2,000

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

3.1 Fieldwork

3.1.1 The work was undertaken according to the relevant standard and guidance document[8] of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA), with which PCA is a Registered Archaeological Organisation.

3.1.2 Site attendance was provided on three separate occasions: 14 December 2007; 4 and 16 January 2008.

3.1.3 A total of five new foundation pits (Pits 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6) were machine-excavated under archaeological supervision. Pit 4 was simply created by the removal of an existing pole, and this work was also monitored by the archaeologist. The pits were used to accommodate new timber poles carrying the refurbished OHL. The location of the monitored pits is shown on Figure 2. Five of the pits were 1.0m x 0.40m x 1.60m deep. Pit 4, which was not machine-excavated as described, measured 0.40m x 0.40m x 1.60m deep.

3.1.4 Each pit and a summary of the stratigraphic sequence therein exposed were recorded on a *pro forma* 'Test-Pit Recording Sheet'. Each deposit was recorded using a *pro forma* 'Context Recording Sheet'. A photographic record of the investigations was compiled using SLR cameras including black and white prints and colour transparencies (on 35mm film).

3.2 Post-excavation

3.2.1 The stratigraphic data for the project is represented by the written, drawn and photographic records. A total of 17 archaeological contexts were defined during the archaeological investigations. A written summary of the archaeological sequence was compiled, as described below.

3.2.2 Artefactual material was noted in, but not recovered from, two of the foundation pits (Pits 1 and 6). The palaeoenvironmental sampling strategy for the project was to recover bulk samples where appropriate, from well-dated (where possible), stratified deposits covering the main periods or phases of occupation and the range of feature types represented. To this end, no features or deposits were encountered to warrant the recovery of bulk samples.

3.2.3 The complete project archive, in this case comprising written, drawn, and photographic records (including all material generated electronically during post-excavation), and artefactual material will be packaged for long-term curation. The depositional requirements of the receiving body, in this case the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle University will be met in full.

[8] IFA 2001.

4. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE

4.1 Phase 1: Natural

4.1.1 The earliest deposits encountered in Pits 1 and 6, both located immediately east of the Elsdon Burn, were river gravels, [104] and [601], respectively. This material was encountered at depths of 1.5m and 1.1m, respectively.

4.1.2 In Pit 2, situated in a field north of the track to Hudspeth Farm, the earliest deposits encountered were layers of yellow sandy clay, [201], and brownish grey sandy clay, [202], both of which contained a significant amount of small stones. These deposits were interpreted as late glacial boulder clay.

4.1.3 Two similar deposits of clayey sand, [301] and [302], were encountered at depths of 0.40m and 1.40m, respectively, in Pit 3, located in the embankment of the road to The Mote. In Pit 5, located well to the south-west, near the village green, sandy clay material formed the basal deposit, [502], at a depth of 1.5m below the existing ground surface. Again, these deposits are interpreted as natural, glacially deposited, material.

4.2 Phase 2: Post-medieval?

4.2.1 Only two foundation pits contained deposits other than modern, or naturally occurring material. In Pit 5, a 1.10m thick layer, [501], of silty sandy clay with frequent stones throughout, was encountered overlying boulder clay [502], with a very diffuse interface between the two strata. It has been interpreted as a developed soil of uncertain period of origin, perhaps post-medieval or earlier.

4.2.2 In Pit 1, a layer, [103], of compacted sandstone rubble was recorded at a depth of 1.40m. This could potentially represent a collapsed wall or simply be a dump of masonry rubble. Overlying this was a thin layer, [102], of purplish brown clayey silt, encountered at a depth of 1.20m. It contained frequent small fragments of coal and shale, as well as lesser amounts of cinder. A sherd of late 19th century pottery and a fragment of clay pipe stem of similar date were noted within the deposit during excavation of the pit. The deposit has been interpreted as a dump of fire debris and general domestic refuse of late 19th century or later date.

4.2.3 Overlying layer [102] in Pit 1 was a layer, [101], of greyish brown clayey silt, 0.90m thick, which is interpreted as a ground raising and consolidation dump of 19th century or later date.

4.3 Phase 3: Modern

4.3.1 Topsoil, [100], [200] and [500], generally greyish brown sandy silt with an average thickness of 0.30m were the uppermost deposits in Pits 1, 2 and 5, respectively.

4.3.2 In Pit 3, the uppermost deposit, [300], was a layer of orange brown clayey silt, which was 0.40m thick and had a rather indistinct interface with layer [301] below. Owing to the location of this pit, on a steep slope adjacent to an unclassified road, this deposit is interpreted as modern dumped material for the creation of the road embankment.

4.3.3 In Pit 6, the uppermost deposit was a layer, [600], of friable sandy silt. This was a considerable deposits, up to 1.10m thick, and is interpreted as a dump deposit laid down during the construction of a wall to consolidate the bank of the Elsdon Burn and form a barrier and embankment for the B6341 road.

4.3.4 Pit 4 was unusual in that it was created by the removal of an existing pole, rather than being machine-excavated. As a consequence, only the uppermost deposit through which the pre-existing pit had been cut was visible in section, this comprising topsoil at least 0.40m thick.

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5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The natural geological sub-stratum was encountered in five of the six monitored foundation pits.

5.2 Archaeological deposits of low significance were recorded in Pit 1, where a dump of fire and/or domestic debris overlay a spread of sandstone rubble, both of probable late 19th century date.

5.3 No features or deposits of archaeological significance were recorded in any of the other foundation pits. Topsoil or road embankment materials were the uppermost deposits in all six foundation pits.

5.4 No artefactual material was recovered and no bulk samples for palaeoenvironmental evidence were collected.

5.5 Following the submission of this report to the Northumberland National Park Authority and the Northumberland County SMR, and the completion of the online OASIS record for the project, it is recommended that no further work be undertaken on the data recovered from the investigations at Elsdon.

6. REFERENCES

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'*Archaeology Data Service*' website: *www. ads.ahds.ac.uk*

'*Keys to the Past*' website, the online Sites and Monuments Record for Durham and Northumberland: *www.keystothepast.info*

'*Planning Portal*' website: *www.planningportal.gov.uk*

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

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The curatorial role of Chris Jones, the Northumberland National Park Authority Archaeologist, is acknowledged.

PCA Credits

Fieldwork and Report: Clare Henderson

Project Management: Robin Taylor-Wilson

CAD: Adrian Bailey

APPENDIX A

CONTEXT INDEX

ELS 07:CONTEXT INDEX

Context	*Foundation Pit*	*Phase*	*Type 1*	*Type 2*	*Interpretation*
100	1	3	Deposit	Layer	Topsoil
101	1	2	Deposit	Layer	Dump deposit/made ground
102	1	2	Deposit	Layer	Dump deposit
103	1	2	Deposit	Layer	Sandstone rubble
104	1	1	Deposit	Layer	River gravel
200	2	3	Deposit	Layer	Topsoil
201	2	1	Deposit	Layer	Natural boulder clay
202	2	1	Deposit	Layer	Natural boulder clay
300	3	3	Deposit	Layer	Dump deposit/made ground
301	3	1	Deposit	Layer	Natural boulder clay
302	3	1	Deposit	Layer	Natural boulder clay
400	4	3	Deposit	Layer	Topsoil
500	5	3	Deposit	Layer	Topsoil
501	5	1	Deposit	Layer	Developed soil
502	5	1	Deposit	Layer	Natural boulder clay
600	6	3	Deposit	Layer	Dump deposit/made ground
601	6	1	Deposit	Layer	River gravel