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WELL HEAD DESERTED MEDIEVAL HAMLET, TEESDALE: SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS IN 2017 AND 2018

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Introduction

This report summarises the first two years of a project by the community group Altogether Archaeology (AA) to investigate Well Head, a deserted medieval hamlet in Teesdale. AA has its origins in a project based at the North Pennines AONB from 2010 to improve the rather sparse knowledge about the archaeology of the area, through surveys and excavations by volunteers; in 2015 AA was re-formed as an independent group.

Well Head (NY 9081 2671, elevation 280m) is one of a line of deserted medieval hamlets which lie in Holwick, Upper Teesdale, along the southern edge of the valley floor. This part of County Durham was in the North Riding of Yorkshire before 1974. An archaeological survey of Holwick had been previously carried out by AA members, supervised by Oxford Archaeology North (Schofield and Quartermaine 2011). This work included the detailed planning of several of the deserted hamlets (but not Well Head itself), and showed that most of the valley floor is covered by evidence of medieval arable agriculture: lynchets across drumlins and large areas of ridge and furrow.

Well Head lies next to a vigorous spring in a field of rough pasture. Footpaths run from the hamlet, across the head-dyke, and diagonally up the steep valley side to the ruinous foundations of a group of small rectangular stone buildings (NY 9087 2655) on the rim of the upland pastures and moorland (Eastmead 2018b). These are scheduled as shielings, but the first edition Ordnance Survey map marks a 'Peat House' at this location and it seems probable that they were peat scales for storage and drying of peat, as described in the Lake District (Winchester 1984, 2000). Beyond the spring, in the same field and about 140m from the centre of the hamlet, is a short arc of stony bank. Excavation as part of the Well Head project suggested this to be the damaged remnants of a Bronze Age ring cairn; charcoal from it gave a radiocarbon age of 3504±29 BP: 1883–1867 (12%), 1848-1773 (56%) cal BC.

Holwick does not appear in the Domesday Book. The Bowes of Streatlam (now the Strathmore Estate) acquired Holwick in 1561; later they went on to purchase other parts of the parish in which it lies, Romaldkirk, as described in the Victoria County History (Page 1914). However, in 1607 they let much of the land on thousand-year leases via intermediaries to tenant farmers (Durham County Record Office: D/HH/4/3/52), giving the tenants increased security of tenure. Manorial records note that many of the same families farmed dispersed holdings of roughly equal size from the fifteenth century through to the late sixteenth century, but in the decades after the thousand-year lease, several tenants began to increase their holdings in Holwick, concentrating the land in fewer families (DCRO: D/St/D3/11/8). The in-fields of the valley floor were subject to piecemeal enclosure from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries and the enclosure was completed and mapped in 1826. John Jordan of Well Head was one of the tenants named in the thousand-year lease. In 1627 he was a juror for Holwick at the Mickleton Court (Winchester 2000, figure 2.6) and in 1699 a Robert Jordan sold 'part of a tenement at Well Head' (DCRO: D/St/D3/4/1).

Well Head first appears on maps in *c*. AD 1800, 1820 and 1826, shown in Schofield and Quartermaine (2011), at which time only a single building was present by the spring. A byre was marked on one map to the north of the settlement. Currently all that survives on the site are foundations in the form of low walls and banks. Overlying them are several very irregular tumbled stone walls; these are shown on the early nineteenth century maps and may be related to livestock control around the watering place.

Survey and Excavations in 2017

In May 2017 the field was surveyed by volunteers using a theodolite and navigation-grade hand-held GPS, with further information from lidar processed to 2D and 3D models. The methods used were those of Eastmead (2012; 2018a), who describes techniques to maximise the accuracy of surveying using hand-held GPS receivers, and to integrate the GPS data with lidar and Ordnance Survey data using free open-source software (QGIS). This enables high-quality plans of sites to be produced quickly, with minimal expenditure. The core of the hamlet was also surveyed at greater detail using a theodolite with a Leica Disto for laser measurement of distances.

The survey showed that the site is complex. There are foundations of ten probable rectangular structures; eight are grouped in an irregular way on and around a small hillock next to the stream. One of these structures, with an associated small enclosure, is overlain by the wall enclosing the field. The other two structures are 80m to the north, across a stream. One of these may be the byre marked on the 1820 plan. As well as rectangular structures, there are also yards, tracks, field-walls and a cairn.

Excavations were carried out by AA members over two fortnights in September 2017 and May 2018 supervised by Paul Frodsham, professional archaeological advisor to AA. In 2017 one of the rectangular structures, F8, was

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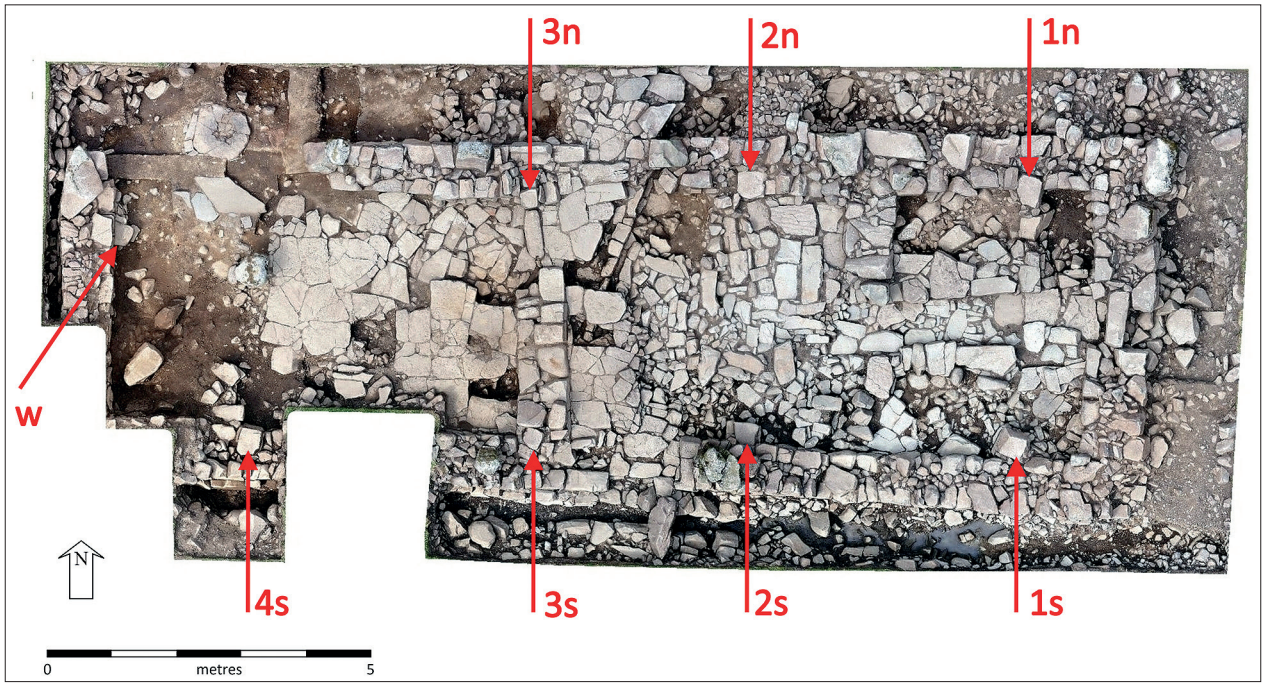

Figure 1 Photogrammetric plan of longhouse F9 (by Stephen Eastmead). Padstones are shown in red.

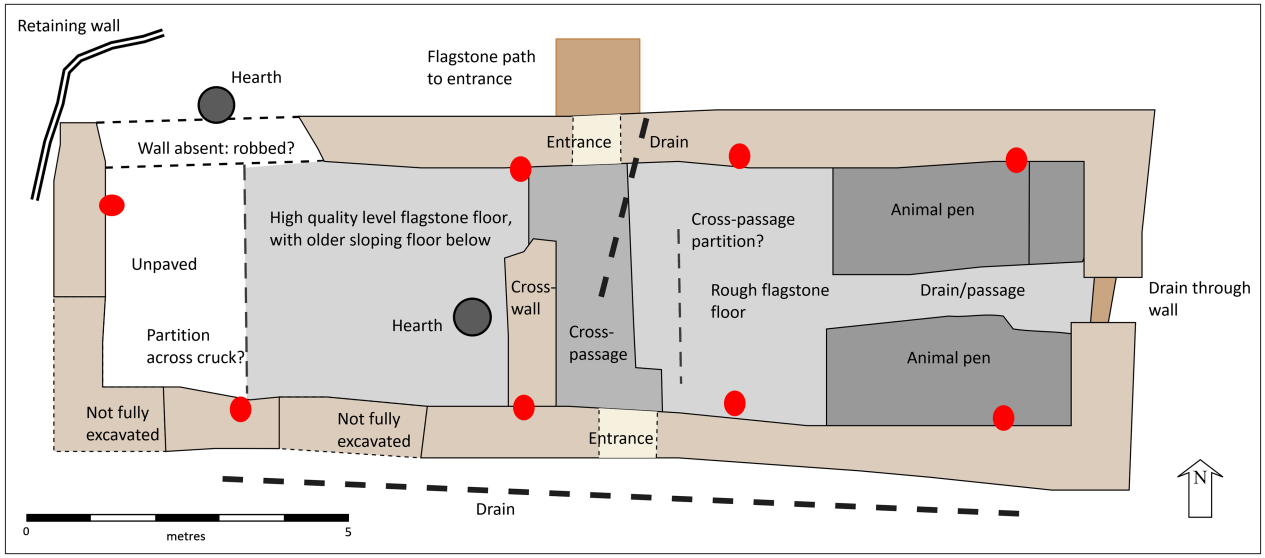

Figure 2 Interpretative plan of longhouse F9. Padstones are shown in red.

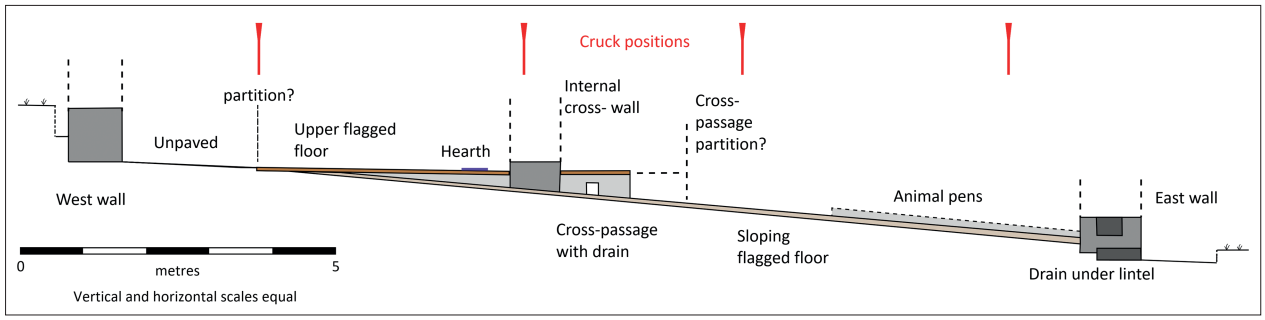

Figure 3 Schematic section on long axis of longhouse F9.

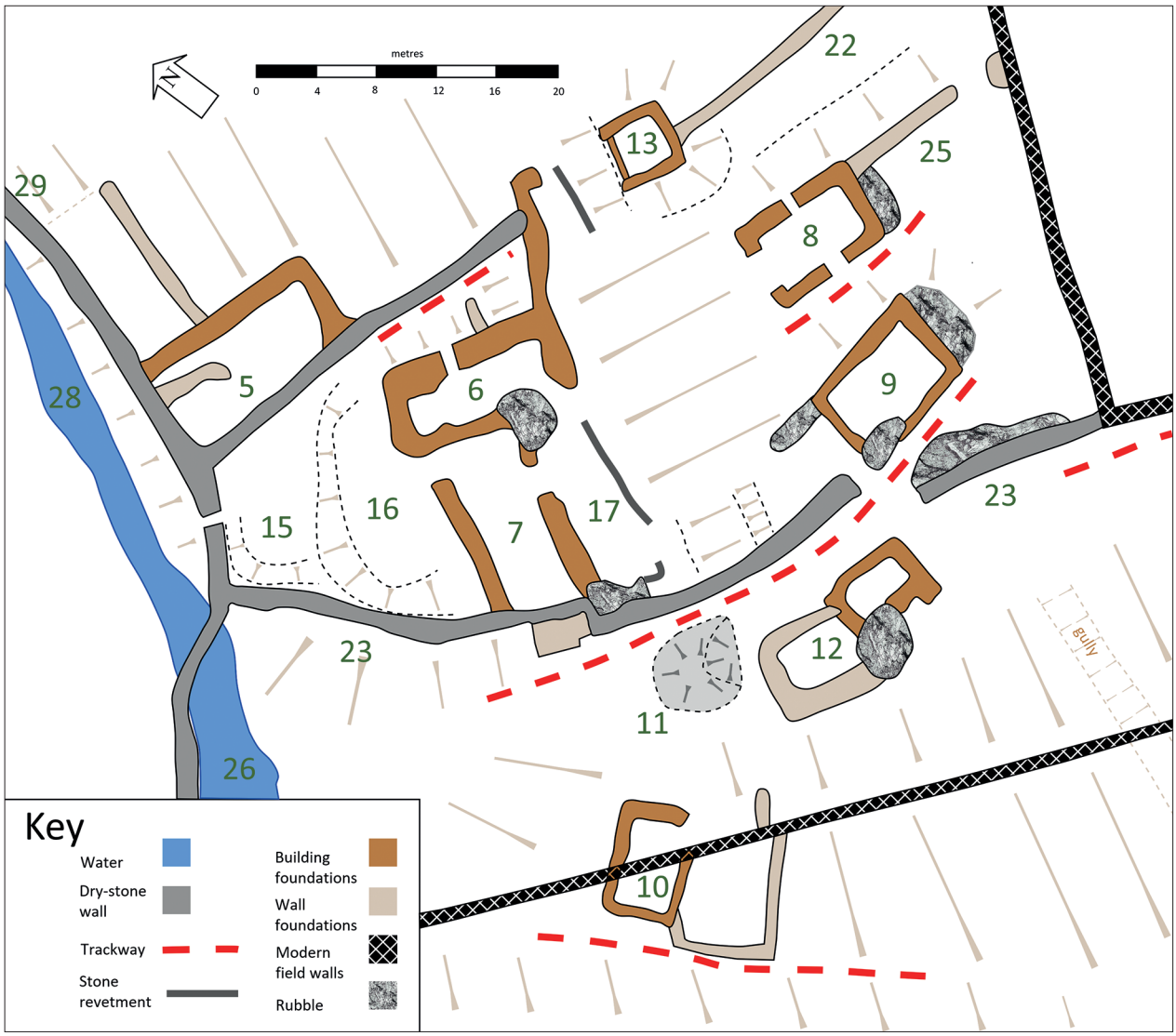

Figure 4 Plan of core area of Well Head settlement, showing feature (F) numbers.

fully excavated and two platforms close to the spring on the side of the hillock were examined. These platforms were found to be artificial, with stone revetment walls. There was a paved path across the lower one, but no evidence of buildings. F8 proved to be a longhouse, about 6m × 10m (external). Its low walls were faced by up to three rough courses of unbonded stones, with a rubble core. Well Head is beside a rocky scar of hard igneous whinstone; although used in the buildings of the hamlet, it is difficult to dress, so unsuitable for high-quality masonry.

The longhouse F8 had opposite entrances on the long sides. In the downhill (east) end the floor was of large cobbles, but no internal structures were identified. The uphill end had a compacted clay floor. There had probably been a flagged floor over this as a few remnant flagstones were found at the edges. The building had been constructed using a pre-existing stone field-wall as part of the north wall, with a kink where the end-wall connected to it. The end-walls were of better quality than the side-walls. Outside the building to the south was an area of rough cobbling with a drainage gully through it. To the north was a higher quality surface of small cobbles; this surface's western end was overlain by a later area of cobbling edged by larger stones.

Excavations in 2018

In 2018 three trenches were excavated. One was to examine the nearby Bronze Age cairn mentioned above. A second looked at F12, a scooped-floor structure on the south side of the hamlet. Excavation showed it to be two unequal adjoining rectangles, defined by crude stone walls. The larger (west) rectangle was scooped into the hillside with no clear floor level. In its north-east corner was an irregular clay surface with a heat-damaged area in one part, extending under one of the walls. Charcoal from the surface gave a radiocarbon age of 296±23 BP: 1523–59 (43%), 1563–70 (5%), 1631–47 (20%) cal AD. The smaller rectangle was floored with rubble, containing some charcoal and peat-like material. The sparse finds in both parts were

medieval or later, and provisional analysis of a sample from the surface around the heat-damaged area showed abundant hammer scale. Hence F12 is unlikely to have been a dwelling and there is evidence of being used as a workshop and for storage.

The third trench was over F9, a longhouse to the south of F8 and, like F8, aligned east-west. It was larger: 17m long externally and 6m wide at the east end, narrowing to 5m at the west end. Walls were similar to those of F8: roughly-coursed unbonded masonry with a rubble core, about 0.85m thick and up to 0.8m high (though most about 0.5m). There were entrances on the long sides, opposite each other. The north entrance had a well-worn threshold stone with pivot hole and a slot containing a flat stone, possibly a locking mechanism. Leading to this entrance was a flagstone path, approaching F9 diagonally down the side of the hillock. Along the outside face of the south wall was a stone-built drain. Internally F9 had an irregular sloping flagstone floor, well-worn and patched. At the downhill (east) end two rectangular areas, probably animal pens, were defined by lines of stones. These had disturbed floors of earth and stones and were separated by a walkway/drain which emptied under a stone lintel through the east wall. The lintel was chipped on its underside, probably when being cleared of slurry.

Under the floor of F9, in both ends of the building, there was a deposit in which all pottery was of early date, *c*. AD 1200, some possibly earlier in the twelfth century. Over the floor a narrow (0.75m) stone cross-wall divided the building just to the west of the entrances, with a threshold stone (with pivot hole) for a door at its north end. Subsequently a new level flagstone floor had been inserted over the sloping lower floor in the cross-passage and most of the western cell of the building. This happened after *c*. AD 1620 as there were clay pipe-stems beneath it; the growing popularity of tobacco smoking during the seventeenth century in North-East England is described by Graves and Heslop (2013). On this new floor there was a hearth against the stone cross-wall. There was a stone drain under this new floor in the cross-passage, emptying through the north wall. A line in the stones of the lower (original) floor marked the probable site of a timber partition forming the east side of the cross-passage.

Padstones, forming a rectangular pattern, show that F9 had a timber cruck-type frame. There were four pairs, with the first and last pairs set in from the end-walls (implying a hipped roof). One pair lay on the cross-wall. The northern padstone of the westernmost pair, and the adjacent external wall, were absent, possibly robbed. There was an extra padstone on the west wall, possibly for a gavelfork (Alcock 1977). Under the line of this absent section of external wall was a hearth; charcoal in it gave a radiocarbon age of 373±26 BP: 1455-1514 (52%), 1600-1617 (16%) cal AD. Clearly this hearth was associated with building F9, but had gone out of use before the higher flagstone floor was inserted in the seventeenth century. This floor did not extend beyond the westernmost cruck; this suggests a major rearrangement of the building at that time, with the western end of the building being partitioned across the cruck and the kiln or other structures around the hearth being removed.

Finds

Examination of the pottery finds is ongoing with the help of Durham University. The extreme paucity of excavated medieval sites in the North Pennines hampers this analysis. Well Head has already produced a large assemblage of pottery, dating from the twelfth century to about 1700, with some glass from the seventeenth century. Metal finds have been few, with no identifiable coins. Two lead spindle whorls were found, one from F8 and one from F9: these have similar decoration patterns and appear to be from the same mould. A stone spindle whorl was also found. A broken octagonal creeing trough lay in rubble banked against one wall of F9; this would have been used as a mortar to prepare food, particularly grain. Another example of this style of trough, from Yorkshire, is shown at www.finds.org.uk (Record ID: SWYOR-CE309F).

Beside the south door of F9, face-down over the external drain, was a stone with faint incised lines covering an area of 0.3m × 0.4m; gouge marks crossed the pattern's central section. Part of the design resembled a Twelve Men's Morris board. Given its position, the stone may have had an apotropaic function; it is similar to an incised stone found at Nevern Castle (Caple 2012).

Discussion and further work

With a relatively remote and high (although sheltered) location, Well Head has similarities in layout to Hound Tor 1 settlement on Dartmoor (Beresford 1979). F9 is clearly a well-constructed longhouse with a long period of occupation, five centuries at least. The structure shows evidence of adaption and improvement through its life, as discussed by Wrathmall (2012), with evidence of a timber frame, protected by low non-weight-bearing walls (Wrathmall 2001, Gardiner 2014). Thus, it fits well into the picture seen elsewhere of medieval houses, extant in 1200, surviving through the robustness of their frame construction into the post-medieval era, though adapted during their long life.

Excavations are planned to continue in May 2019, including further examination of F9. Analysis of finds and samples is ongoing. The reports page of our website has a more detailed interim report on the project (Green 2018) as well as a survey of the nearby peat houses (Eastmead 2018b).

Acknowledgements

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Radiocarbon dates

Radiocarbon ages BP are given with one sigma error ranges. Calibration is by the IntCal13 curve. Calibrated dates, calBC and calAD, are given as date ranges with percentage likelihoods totalling one sigma (68% approximately).

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