

MIDDLE SKELGILL ALSTON, CUMBRIA



WATCHING BRIEF REPORT
CP. No 10446
14/10/2013



WARDELL ARMSTRONG ARCHAEOLOGY
COCKLAKES YARD,
CUMWHINTON,
CARLISLE,
CUMBRIA,
CA4 0BQ
TEL: 01228 564820
FAX: 01228 560025
WWW.WA-ARCHAEOLOGY.COM

WARDELL ARMSTRONG ARCHAEOLOGY

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Quality Assurance

This report covers works as outlined in the brief for the above-named project as issued by the relevant authority, and as outlined in the agreed programme of works. Any deviation to the programme of works has been agreed by all parties. The works have been carried out according to the guidelines set out in the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) Standards, Policy Statements and Codes of Conduct. The report has been prepared in keeping with the guidance set out by WA Archaeology Ltd on the preparation of reports.

REVISION SCHEDULE			
	01	02	03
PREPARED BY:	Sue Thompson		
POSITION:	Archaeologist		
DATE:	08/10/2013		
EDITED BY:	Martin Railton		
POSITION:	Senior Project Manager		
DATE:	08/10/2013		
APPROVED BY:	Frank Giecco		
POSITION:	Technical Director		
DATE:	08/10/2013		

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SUMMARY

Wardell Armstrong Archaeology were commissioned by Alistair Robertson to undertake an archaeological watching brief at Middle Skelgill, Alston, Cumbria (NGR NY 7320 4645). This work follows a planning application (Planning Application No. 12/0272) for the construction of a new farmhouse on the site of the present ruinous house. Eden District Council granted planning consent for the development, on the condition an archaeological watching brief be undertaken during the excavation work within the area of the building. The work is required as the site contains a possible tower or bastle type building, National Monument Record 1389141, which has identified the site to be of archaeological interest.

The archaeological watching brief was undertaken over one day, the 4th October 2013. The watching brief monitored the excavation of the foundation trenches for the new farmhouse. No archaeological remains were noted during these groundworks.

As this archaeological watching brief was conducted as part of a recommendation to observe groundworks in association with the development of a new dwelling place, no further work is deemed necessary. However, given the archaeological potential of the area, it is recommended that any future work be subject to a programme of archaeological investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wardell Armstrong Archaeology (WAA) would like to thank Alistair Robertson of Ashleigh, Alston, for commissioning the project, and for all assistance throughout the work. Wardell Armstrong Archaeology would also like to thank Jeremy Parsons, Historic Environment Officer, Cumbria County Council Historic Environment Service (CCCHES), for his assistance throughout the project.

Wardell Armstrong Archaeology would also like to extend their thanks to James Boylan, the site owner, and all staff on site, for their help during this project.

The archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Sue Thompson. The report was written by Sue Thompson and the drawings were produced by Adrian Bailey. The project was managed by Martin Railton, Senior Project Manager for WAA. The report was edited by Frank Giocco, Technical Director for WAA.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PROJECT

- 1.1.1 Wardell Armstrong Archaeology were invited by Alistair Robertson on behalf of his client, James Boylan, to maintain an archaeological watching brief at Middle Skelgill, Alston, Cumbria (NGR NY 7320 4645; Figure 1), during groundworks associated with the demolition of an old ruinous farmhouse and the construction of a new farmhouse replicating the original. A previous historic building survey had also been produced by Alistair Robertson (Robertson 2013), which identified that the former farmhouse was a possible bastle-type building, which was extended in the 17th century. As a result, Jeremy Parsons, Historic Environment Officer, Cumbria County Council Historic Environment Service (CCCHES), requested that all ground reduction be subject to a programme of archaeological observation and investigation. This is in line with government advice as set out in Section 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2012).
- 1.1.2 All groundworks associated with the excavation of foundation trenches for the new farmhouse had to be excavated under full archaeological supervision and all stages of the archaeological work were undertaken following approved statutory guidelines (IfA 2008).
- 1.1.3 This report outlines the monitoring works undertaken on-site, the subsequent programme of post-fieldwork analysis, and the results of this scheme of archaeological works.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 PROJECT DESIGN

2.1.1 A project design was submitted by Wardell Armstrong Archaeology in response to a request by Alistair Robertson, for an archaeological watching brief of the study area (Railton 2013). Following acceptance of the project design by Jeremy Parsons, Historic Environment Officer, Cumbria County Council Historic Environment Service (CCCHES), Wardell Armstrong Archaeology was commissioned by the client to undertake the work. The project design was adhered to in full, and the work was consistent with the relevant standards and procedures of the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA), and generally accepted best practice.

2.2 THE WATCHING BRIEF

2.2.1 The works involved a structured watching brief to observe, record and excavate any archaeological deposits from the development site. A watching brief is a formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons, on a specified area or site on land, inter-tidal zone or underwater, where there is a possibility that archaeological deposits may be disturbed or destroyed (IfA 2008).

2.2.2 The aims and principal methodology of the watching brief can be summarised as follows:

- to establish the presence/absence, nature, extent and state of preservation of archaeological remains and to record them;
- to carry out further excavation and recording work in adequate time, if intact archaeological remains are uncovered during the project;
- to accurately tie the area watched by the archaeologist into the National Grid at an appropriate scale, with any archaeological deposits and features adequately levelled;
- to sample environmental deposits encountered as required, in line with English Heritage (2002) guidelines;
- to produce a photographic record of all contexts, each photograph including a graduated metric scale;
- to recover artefactual material, especially that useful of dating purposes;
- to produce a site archive in accordance with MAP2 (English Heritage 1991) standards.

2.2.3 An area of approximately 10m x 14m was cleared, involving the demolition of the old building to allow for foundation trenches to be excavated on the same footprint. All stone was stored on site for later restoration purposes. The trenches formed a 'T' shape approximated to 10m x 14m, with the foundation cuts measuring approximately 0.90m in width. The foundation trenches were stripped of demolition rubble and overburden to the required formation levels. Archaeological monitoring and supervision of groundworks associated with the stripping commenced on 4th October 2013. A summary of the findings of the watching brief is included within this report.

2.3 THE ARCHIVE

2.3.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with the specification, and according to the Archaeological Archives Forum recommendations (Brown 2011). The archive will be deposited within Carlisle Archive Centre, Carlisle, Cumbria, and a copy of the report will be deposited with Cumbria County Council Historic Environment Record at Kendal, where viewing will be made available upon request. The archive can be accessed under the unique project identifier MSA-A, CP 10446/13.

2.3.2 Wardell Armstrong Archaeology and Cumbria County Council Historic Environment Service support the **Online Access to the Index of Archaeological InvestigationS (OASIS)** project. This project aims to provide an on-line index and access to the extensive and expanding body of grey literature, created as a result of developer-funded archaeological work. As a result, details of the results of this project will be made available by Wardell Armstrong Archaeology as a part of this national project.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 LOCATION AND GEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

- 3.1.1 Middle Skelgill farm lies to the east of Alston, and is one of a number of long-established farms located on sloping ground between the A689 to the south and the River Nent to the North (Robertson 2013). The site lies at a height of approximately 350m AOD. The remains of a possible tower or bastle-type building and later post medieval farmhouse were originally located on the site but have now been demolished, prior to the rebuilding of a new farmhouse on the same site. The area is shown in Figure 2.
- 3.1.2 The Countryside Commission places the town of Alston in a character area known as the 'North Pennines', which is located at the northern end of the Pennine Chain and forms a separate and distinct area of upland moorland and dales. The area has a strong regional identity and is characterised by some of the highest and wildest moorland summits in England. Alston, which is reputed to be the highest market town in England, is the largest upland settlement in the North Pennines. (Countryside Commission 1998, 43-48).
- 3.1.3 The North Pennines coincide with the area known to geologists as the Alston Block. This is a structural unit consisting of a succession of Carboniferous sedimentary rocks which dip gently eastwards towards the Durham Coalfield and North Sea. The area is bounded on the north by the Stublick Fault System along the Tyne Gap, on the west by the Pennine fault System along the Pennine escarpment, and on the south by the Lunedale Fault System (*ibid*, 45).
- 3.1.4 The solid geology of the area around Alston consists of carboniferous mudstones and sandstones with thin limestones and thin coals of the Upper Border ground.

3.2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- 3.2.1 *Introduction:* this historical background is compiled mostly from secondary sources, and is intended only as a brief summary of historical developments specific to the study area.
- 3.2.2 *Prehistoric:* There is no known prehistoric activity known in the immediate vicinity of Middle Skelgill.
- 3.2.3 *Roman:* No roman archaeological remains have been found close to Middle Skelgill.

- 3.2.4 *Medieval:* There is potential for medieval remains at Middle Skelgill. It has been suggested that in its earliest form, Middle Skelgill farmhouse consisted of a tower or bastle-type building (Perriam and Robinson 1998: Robertson 2013: Monument 1389141).
- 3.2.5 *Post-medieval and Modern:* An extension of the earlier building to the east contains a lintel for the south facing doorway which is dated 1694. Further extensions to the east and north were added over time before being abandoned in the 1960s.
- 3.2.6 PastScape, the English Heritage website, lists a number of post medieval features within 500m of Middle Skelgill. These remains consist largely of field boundaries and trackways associated with local mining and quarrying, and are included in Appendix 2.

3.3 PREVIOUS WORK

- 3.3.1 As part of pre-planning application, a Level 3 Historic Building Survey was completed (Robertson 2013). This report confirmed the potential for archaeological interest but also highlighted the poor state of repair that farmhouse had fallen into. The study was begun in 2007 and completed in 2013, and it was noted that during the intervening years the building had deteriorated significantly.

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

4.1 INTRODUCTION

- 4.1.1 The watching brief was undertaken on a single day on 4th October 2013, and monitored the excavation of foundation trenches for the new farmhouse.
- 4.1.2 Prior to the date of the watching brief, the old ruinous Middle Skelgill farmhouse was demolished, and the rubble removed. All material resulting from this demolition was stored elsewhere on site for potential reuse within the new house.

4.2 FOUNDATION TRENCHES

- 4.2.1 The watching brief aimed to monitor all groundworks associated with the excavation of the foundation trenches (Figure 2).
- 4.2.2 A small portion of flagged stone floor (104) relating to the 1694 house was revealed during the demolition phase. These flags consisted of varying sizes of sandstone slabs, which were chamfered on the underside edges to allow for close fitting (*Plate 1*). The remnants of the flagged floor were removed prior to the excavation of the foundation trenches to allow them to be stored for reuse in the new building.



Plate 1: Sandstone floor in situ

4.2.3 The stratigraphic matrix observed within the excavated area remained constant throughout. The uppermost layer removed consisted of demolition/collapse rubble (100), which contained sandstone blocks, broken stone roof tile, modern pottery and glass and large amounts of plastic sheeting. The depth varied but was a maximum of 0.50m in depth. This overlay the natural drift geology (101), which consisted of a firm blue grey clay.



Plate 2: Foundation trenches

- 4.2.4 Only occasional foundation stones for the former buildings were observed within the foundation trenches, consisting of large rounded sandstone boulders. These were also removed and stored on site.
- 4.2.5 Within the northern portion of the site an area of concrete slab (102), 0.10m in depth was uncovered below the demolition layer (100). This surface was laid above the natural clay (101). It is thought to have related to a byre located to the rear of the farmhouse (James Boylan *pers comm.*)
- 4.2.6 A stone lined culvert (103) was observed running north south in the easternmost foundation trench. This was observed at a depth of 0.40m below current ground surface. The culvert was constructed using sandstone blocks and measured 0.30m in depth and was approximately 0.40m wide. The line of the culvert ran parallel to the former farmhouse and must therefore be contemporary or later than the latest phase of building.



Plate 3: West facing section, showing stone lined culvert

4.2.5 No archaeological remains were noted during the excavation of the foundation trenches.

4.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLING

4.3.1 No archaeological finds of note were recovered, and no environmental samples were retained during the groundworks.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

5.1.1 *Foundation Trenches*: the excavation of all foundation cuts were monitored during the watching brief. No notable archaeological remains were noted.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.2.1 As this watching brief was conducted as a condition of ground works relating to demolition of the old Middle Skelgill farmhouse and the excavation of foundation trenches for a new house on the same footprint, no further archaeological work is deemed necessary. However, given the potential medieval origins of the site, it is recommended that any work conducted in the future be subject to a similar programme of archaeological investigation.

6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX 1: CONTEXT TABLE

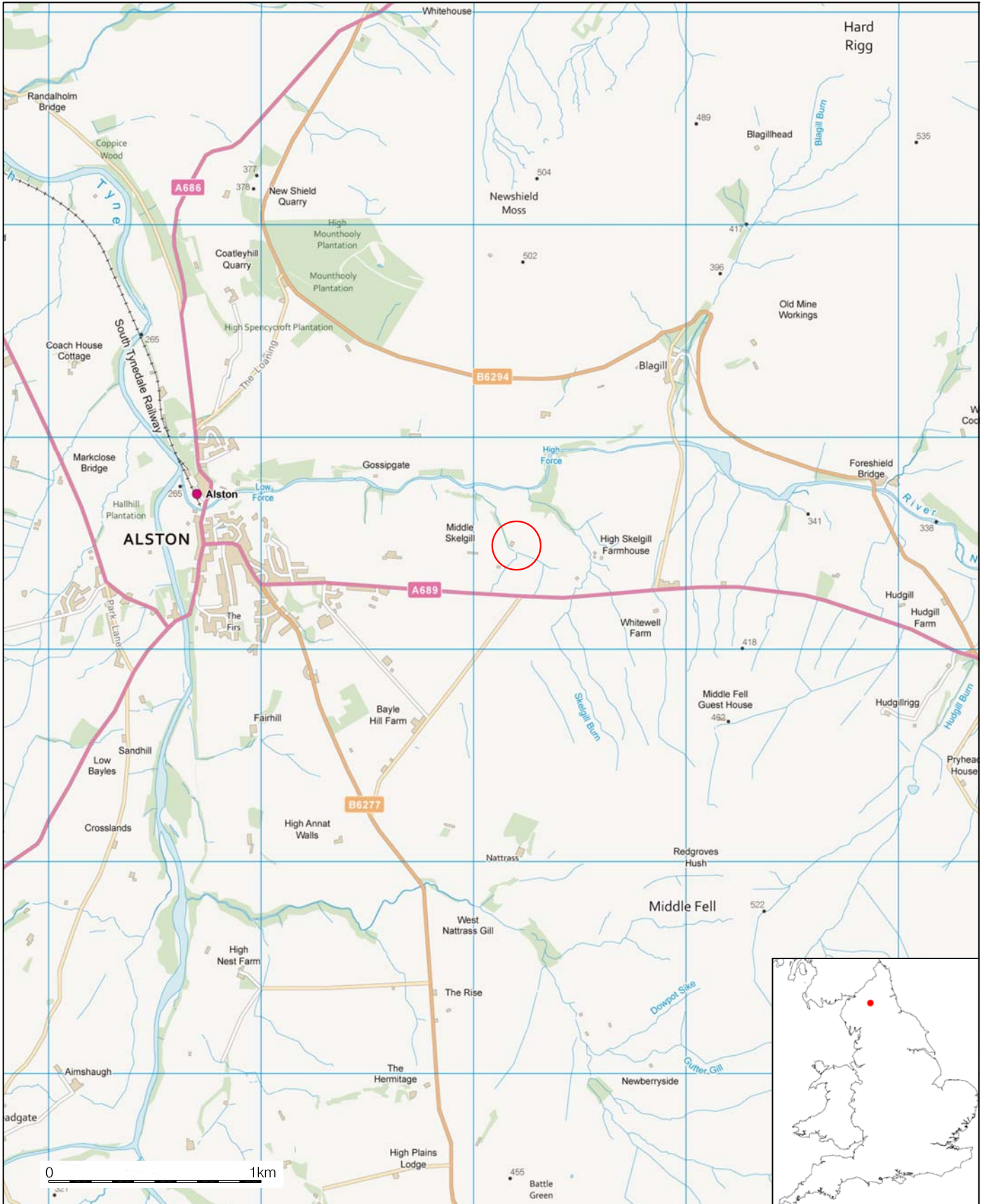
Context Number	Context Type	Description
100	Deposit	Demolition/ Collapse Rubble
101	Deposit	Natural blue grey clay
102	Deposit	Natural
103	Structure	Stone lined culvert
104	Deposit	Sandstone flagged floor

Table 4: List of Contexts issued during Watching Brief

APPENDIX 2: PASTSCAPES ENTERIES WITHIN 500M

Monument Name/No	Resources	Description
MONUMENT NO. 957976 ALSTON MOOR	Monument Pictures  Monument Maps  Monument Investigation  Monument Sources  EH Visitor Information 	A post medieval lead mine consisting of an adit and spoil heap is visible as an earthwork on lidar. It is extant on the latest 2009 lidar.
MONUMENT NO. 1536843 ALSTON MOOR	Monument Pictures  Monument Maps  Monument Investigation  Monument Sources  EH Visitor Information 	Field boundaries of probable post medieval date are visible as earthworks on lidar.
MONUMENT NO. 1536847 ALSTON MOOR	Monument Pictures  Monument Maps  Monument Investigation  Monument Sources  EH Visitor Information 	A possible post medieval field system and associated enclosures are visible as earthworks on lidar.
MONUMENT NO. 1537292 ALSTON MOOR	Monument Pictures  Monument Maps  Monument Investigation  Monument Sources  EH Visitor Information 	Two post medieval quarries and an associated trackway are visible as earthworks on lidar. They are extant on the latest 2009 lidar.
MONUMENT NO. 1537438 ALSTON MOOR	Monument Pictures  Monument Maps  Monument Investigation  Monument Sources  EH Visitor Information 	Medieval/ post medieval boundary banks, hollow ways and enclosures are visible on lidar. A broad sinuous boundary bank is intermittently visible.
MONUMENT NO. 1389141 ALSTON MOOR	Monument Pictures  Monument Maps  Monument Investigation  Monument Sources  EH Visitor Information 	At Skelgill is a stone house with a possible tower base. The tower predates the adjoining house which was added in 1694 according to a datestone over. ...

APPENDIX 3: FIGURES






 <p>Wardell Armstrong Archaeology 2013</p>	<p>PROJECT: Middle Skelgill, Alston, Cumbria</p> <p>SCALE: 1:25,000 at A4</p> <p>REPORT No: CP10446</p> <p>CLIENT: Alistair Robertson</p> <p>DRAWN BY: AB</p> <p>DATE: October 2013</p> <p>FIGURE: 1</p>	<p>KEY:</p> <p> Site location</p>	 <p>Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100019512</p>
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Figure 1: Site location.



Wardell Armstrong
Archaeology
2013


PROJECT:
Middle Skelgill, Alston,
Cumbria

CLIENT:
Alistair Robertson

SCALE: 1:500 at A4

DRAWN BY: AB

DATE: October 2013

KEY:
 Excavation monitored during watching brief



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FIGURE:
2

Figure 2: Location of watching brief.