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BIRKBY NAB,

RIPON,

NORTH YORKSHIRE

BY BRYAN ANTONI



REPORT NUMBER: 2003/23
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

**BIRKBY NAB,
RIPON,
NORTH YORKSHIRE**

**REPORT ON AN
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

BY BRYAN ANTONI

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to Page 7
and section 5 to
Page 6.*



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Figure 1 Location of Test pits

1. INTRODUCTION

Between the 13th and 19th May 2003, York Archaeological Trust carried out an archaeological watching brief during the excavation of a series of test pits within the area of a proposed 'borrow pit' located on farm land to the south of Birkby Nab, Ripon, North Yorkshire (NGR SE 283 721). A total of 23 pits ^{was} excavated (Fig. 1) to test both the suitability and depth of the natural subsoils to be used in the construction of a barrier across the River Laver. The construction of the proposed barrier will eventually form part of a flood alleviation scheme whereby flood water will be stored within an artificial lagoon, created by the dam and the steep sides of the valley, to the north-west of Birkby Nab. When the adverse weather conditions improve, and / or the flood waters subside, the stored water will then be released in a controlled manner to prevent flooding within the market town of Ripon, which is located approximately 3km to the south-east. The historical and archaeological back-ground of the area are not included within this report as they were extensively covered in a recent historical and archaeological desk top survey commissioned for the proposed flood alleviation scheme (Finlayson 2002). The 2002 survey did not however specifically cover the location of the proposed 'borrow pit' ^{as it} was not known when the Desk Top Study was carried out.

The main contractors for the ground works were ~~the~~ Halcrow Group Limited who were acting on behalf of the Environment Agency.

2. TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The topography and geology of the general area was also covered in the Desk Top Survey (Finlayson 2002). The topography of the immediate area consisted of relatively flat, uneven river terraces, adjacent to the river Laver, before the ground level rises towards the south-west, in a series of steep to gentle inclines, to culminate in a series of irregular rounded hillocks. The most prominent of these, Dick Hill, is situated some 500m due south of Birkby Nab and affords extensive uninterrupted views of the surrounding countryside for many kilometres. Beyond Dick Hill the ground tends to flatten out towards the south-west where there are several widely spaced, uneven steep-sided troughs, formed by relict stream beds or palaeochannels, which are generally aligned east / west and tend to fall towards the lower lying land of the Vale of York to the south-east.

3. METHODOLOGY

The test pits were excavated by a wheeled mechanical excavator with a back-acting hoe and were primarily used for engineering purposes to test the depth and quality of the natural boulder clays. These pits were approximately 3.5 – 4m in length, approximately 0.6m wide and up to 4.5m deep and, with the exception of Test Pit 6 (Fig. 1), all proved to be free of archaeological features. Test Pits 7, 8, 10, 11, 16, 19 and 21 reached a limestone bed rock at 2.30, 2.40, 1.95, 1.60, 2.65 and 2.60m BGL (metres Below Ground Level) respectively; the remainder failed to penetrate a covering deposit of cobble rich boulder clay. Test Pit 9, however, reached a depth of 4.10m BGL where a coarse sand and pebble gravel was encountered beneath the overlying boulder clay.

The archaeological deposits within Test Pit 6 were recorded as a drawn section at a scale of 1:20 as well as being described on pro-forma context recording sheets.

The artefacts and site records are currently stored with York Archaeological Trust under the Harrogate Museum accession code HARGM: 11986.

Three fragments of worked millstone grit (Plates 1-3) were recovered as stray finds; their locations were recorded by Ordnance Survey grid reference as well as being described and digitally photographed before being returned to the current land owner, Mr T Ramsden of Brekamore, Ripon, North Yorkshire.

4. RESULTS

Test Pit 6

Test Pit 6 was orientated north-east / south-west (Fig. 1) and was the only trench in which archaeological deposits were encountered. The earliest deposit observed was a natural, compact, stiff pebble rich boulder clay (606, Fig. 2) which was encountered at 0.60m BGL and machine excavated to a depth of c. 4m.

This had been truncated by a deep ditch (605) which was aligned north-west / south-east and was 2.2m wide and 1m deep. It was located in the north-eastern half of the test pit and extended across its full 0.60m width. The south-west and north-east edges of Cut 605 broke sharply from the surface to fall steeply, less so on the south-western side, before falling vertically to a rounded bottom edge, leading to a gently rounded, almost flat base, 0.64m wide.

Directly above this was a 0.06m thick, plastic pale to mid-bluish grey clay silt (604), which was, in turn, sealed by a 0.92m thick back-fill deposit (603) of a friable to plastic dark brown, mottled pale to mid grey brown, slightly sandy clay with frequent small to large cobbles, occasional 'pot-boilers' (heat shattered cobbles - a by-product of cooking), and flecks and small fragments of charcoal. Context 603 also produced several fragments of animal bone (one burnt), and a small piece of ferrous slag.

The north-eastern half of fill 603 was sealed by a deposit of small to medium cobbles (602), in a matrix of a plastic, mid-ginger brown, slightly sandy silt clay, which increased to a thickness of 0.23m towards the north-eastern limit of excavation. Context 602 is most likely the remnant of a bank that was either deliberately slighted or spread by weathering and / or ploughing after ditch cut 605 was back-filled. This bank would have been contemporary with ditch 605 and would have originally run along its north-eastern edge and suggests that, if a defensive and / or boundary ditch, the enclosed area was towards the north-east.

This ditch was sealed by a up to 0.36m thick build up of subsoil consisting of a plastic, mid ginger brown, slightly sandy silt clay (601), with occasional small to medium pebbles and large cobbles, which was in turn sealed by a 0.30m thick plough soil (600), a friable, sticky, mid-orange brown silt sand clay with frequent small pebbles, moderate medium pebbles and occasional twelve-bore cartridge cases. At the time the watching brief was undertaken it was supporting a healthy cereal crop.

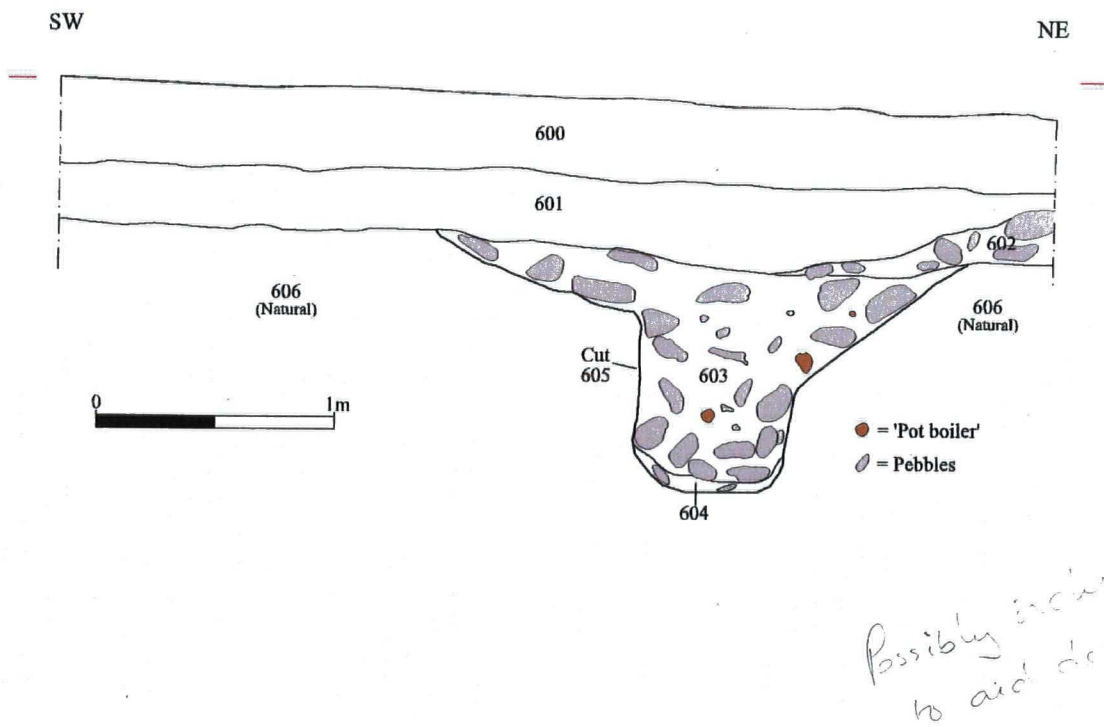


Figure 2 Test pit 6 south east facing section



Plate 1. Beehive Quern top stone

5. UNSTRATIFIED FINDS

The unstratified finds were recovered from the surface of the plough soil and consisted of a fragmentary top stone from a millstone grit 'bee hive' quern (NGR SE 2828 7178; Plate 1) and, from close by, the fragmentary base stone (NGR SE 2830 7178; Plate 2) from a second. Bee hive querns were used to produce flour by grinding corn between the top and bottom stones. This type of quern is generally thought to have originated in the pre-Roman Iron Age and continued to be used well into Romano-British times.

A substantial rectilinear fragment of mill stone grit (NGR SE 2825 7179; Plate 3) was also recovered from a modern clearance cairn of large cobbles located in the angle of the field due south of Dick Hill. This fragment was obviously worked and bore several tooling marks to its sides, as well as several modern plough scars on its upper surface, and had a very roughly worked base. The smooth upper surface was relatively flat with the exception of a very slight barely noticeable ramp formed at one end. The smoothness of the surface and the slight ramp suggested that this stone had been subjected to a use whereby a reciprocal back and forth movement was necessary. This may relate to the processing of grain or some other agricultural usage, such as grinding and / or sharpening implements, but, as this particular fragment was found out of context, its purpose and date of manufacture are uncertain.

A worked flint of uncertain date was recovered from the surface of a field lying immediately to the north-west of Birkby Nab (NGR SE 2820 7255).



Plate 2. Beehive Quern base stone



Plate 3. Worked Millstone grit slab

6. AREAS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST

6.1 AREA 1

Area 1 (Fig. 3) is centred on grid reference NGR SE 2825 7179 and relates to the find spot of the beehive querns and the rectilinear slab of millstone grit recovered from the clearance cairn (Plates 1-3). These objects are difficult to transport and tend to be found in the close proximity to, and are therefore indicative of, settlements of the Iron Age to Romano British period. These rural settlements generally range in size from a single farmstead or a cluster of buildings; any groundworks in this area would need to be monitored as there is a possibility of their disturbing or destroying archaeological deposits and features relating to such a settlement.

6.2 AREA 2

Area 2 (Fig. 3) is centred on grid reference NGR SE 2824 7192 and is noticeable as the apex of a slight prominence known as 'Dick Hill'. This feature is only slightly elevated, although its north-eastern side falls steeply towards the valley of the River Laver. Its position at the top of the south-western flank of the valley provides panoramic views of the surrounding countryside for many kilometres. When viewed from afar 'Dick Hill' stands out on the sky line and is itself visible over a great distance; topographical features of this type are often the preferred places for the siting of prehistoric funerary structures, such as burial mounds in the form of round barrows, and are chosen so that the monument can be observed as a prominent feature from a distance. There is a possibility that evidence for such structures and / or burials will be encountered in this area.

6.3 AREA 3

Area 3 (Fig. 3) is centred on grid reference NGR SE 2835 7198 and is in the form of a relatively flat rectilinear area at the base of the steep north-eastern flank of Dick Hill. This 'platform' covers an area of c. 110m north-west / south-east x 100m north-east / south-west. It is not noticeable when viewed from the north-west, from the farm access road, where it appears that the south-west flank of the valley falls as a continuous slope down towards the river. Occupation within this area is attested to by the location of ditch cut 605 (Test Pit 6), unfortunately not closely dateable, which was observed in the southernmost corner of the platform and appeared to be aligned north-west / south-east to run along the south-west edge of the area. Ditches of this type are seldom found in isolation and suggests that, although not encountered during the excavation of any other test pits, similar cut features are likely to be located in the vicinity. Ditch cut 605 may have functioned as a defensive ditch, a drainage ditch to carry away rain water 'run-off' from Dick Hill which lies immediately to the west, or a property boundary. The sterile silt within the base of the ditch (604) was indicative of the presence of standing water and had formed when the ditch was in use and open to the elements.

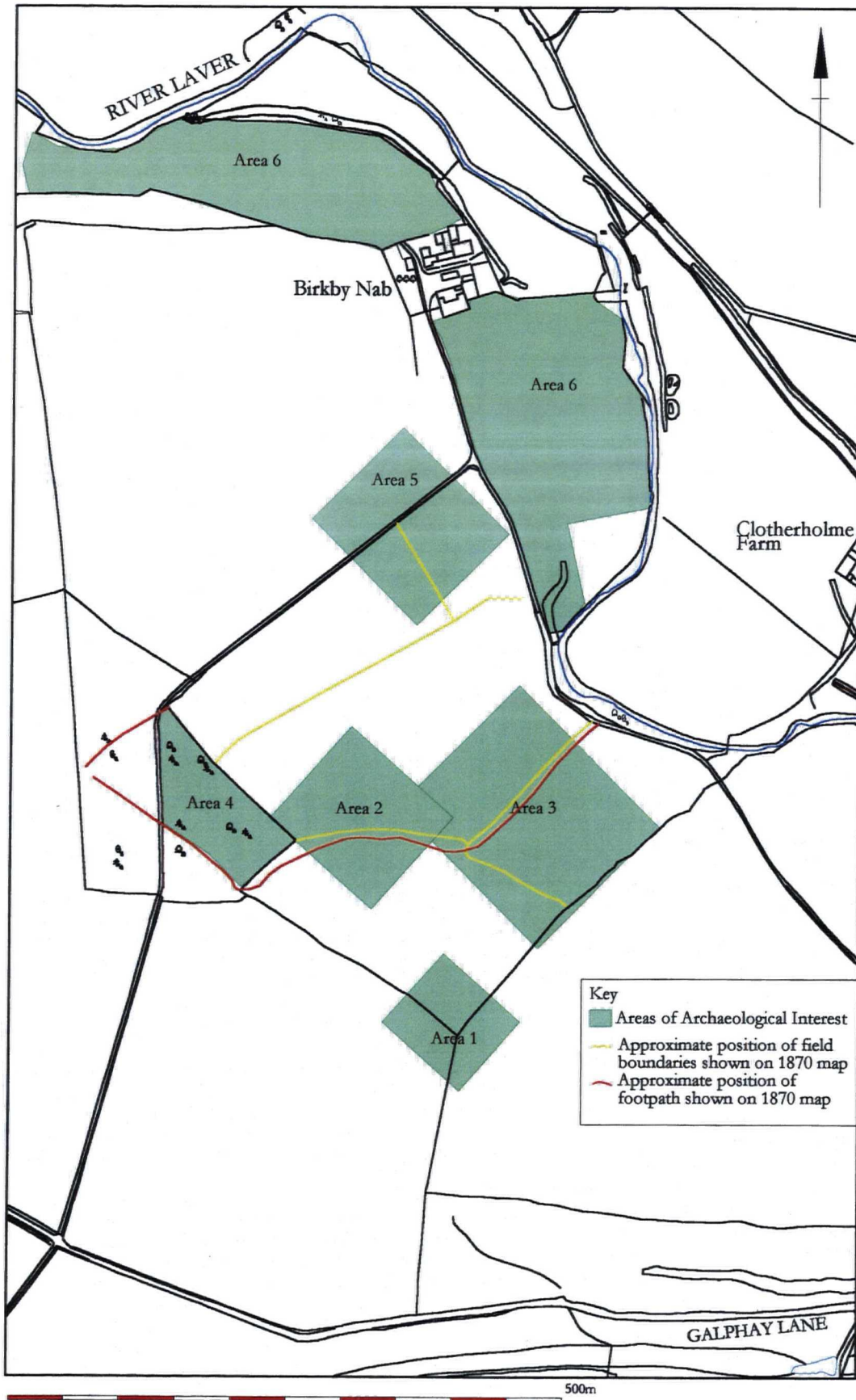


Fig. 3. Areas of Archaeological Interest

The back fill of cut 605 (603) also contained 'pot boilers' and animal bone (including one burnt fragment), and charcoal, materials which tend not to become dispersed over a great distance and are often found in close association with occupation sites. The 'pot-boilers' suggest a prehistoric or Roman date, although this is not entirely certain. The presence of a single small fragment of ferrous slag hinted that metalworking may have been carried out close by. The infrastructure needed to carry out metal working is complex and involves trading in both raw materials and fuel as well as the dispersal and trade of the finished items; any settlement with a tradition of metalworking, especially in the prehistoric period, would have to be sufficiently well established and stable to maintain such an infrastructure. To conclude, there is a likelihood that cut features and deposits of archaeological interest, relating to human occupation, will be encountered on and around this 'platform'.

6.4 AREA 4

Area 4 (Fig. 3) is centred on grid reference NGR SE 2802 7204 and is located just within the north-east edge of Dick Hill Wood. This consists of a linear bank of cobbles (Plate 4), which is approximately 2.5 to 3m high and extends almost the full length of north-eastern edge of the wood, tailing off at both ends, with the exception of a cutting for a track-way or entrance at approximately 20m from the south-eastern corner of the wood.



Plate 4. Cobble bank looking south-east.

Although the dating of this feature is uncertain, it is of some antiquity as all the cobbles were supporting a healthy growth of moss and there are several large trees growing through its crest and sides. These trees suggest that the bank at least pre-dates 1870 when it is shown in the 'plantation' now known as Dick Hill Wood on an estate map of the same date (see below). Without further investigation the purpose of such a bank is uncertain; it does not appear to have been a spoil tip as there is no evidence for clay pits or other such quarrying in the locality. It would also seem unlikely to be a clearance cairn of cobbles removed from the surrounding fields, due to its great size and the presence of an apparent entrance. This feature warrants further investigation and any ground works within this area should be monitored as there is a strong possibility that features and deposits relating to its construction, date and use may be found in the field immediately to the north-east and south-east of the wood.

The modern boundary of the field which contains Dick Hill appears on an estate map of the area dated 1870 (NYRO, MIC 2707/127/2-21). At this time the field is subdivided into three, following topographic divisions, with the elevated area to the south (6.2) forming one field, the platform (6.3) between the river and the elevated area another and the third field comprising the remainder of the modern field. This map also shows a footpath leading through an area marked 'plantation' (6.4) following the base of the elevated area, along the edge of the platform down to join a path from Birkby Nab along the river.

Included
area
division
on map

6.5 AREA 5

Area 5 is centred on grid reference NGR SE 2820 7230 and is thought to be the location of a Deserted Medieval Village (DMV) known as Studley Parva, or North Studley, which was referred to in a documentary reference of 1285. It would, however seem more likely that the centre of the village was further towards the south-west where the topography is markedly flatter than the shallow bowl-shaped depression in the area currently shown as the site of the DMV. The farm track from Dick Hill Wood to Birkby Nab is very straight at this point and, although shown to the south-east of the DMV, may reflect the position of the access road and / or possibly the main street of the medieval settlement. In 1962 when the field was used for pasture, there were visible earthworks; these have since been lost due to the field being ploughed and put to arable usage. This, however, does not negate the strong possibility that archaeological cut features and deposits survive beneath the present day top-soil, therefore, any groundworks in this area in general should be monitored.

6.6 AREA 6

Area 6 is centred on grid reference NGR SE 2824 7250 or the central point of the gravel river terrace on which Birkby Nab Farm is located. There are pronounced gravel terraces to both the west-north-west and south-south-east of Birkby Nab which, despite the imposition of the farm house, form a continuous area of elevated level ground adjacent to the River Laver. These 'terraces' are often favoured as the site of temporary camps for the hunter - gatherer societies of the Mesolithic period (10,000 - 4,000 BC). These areas were exploited due to their locality to drinking water as well as for fishing, game and wildfowl which were attracted to watering places

along the length of the river. The rivers themselves were also used as 'highways' to gain access to areas which were otherwise difficult to reach by travelling over land due to dense forestation. With the onset of farming (and hence a settled existence), in the Neolithic period (4,000 – 2,200 BC), gravel river terraces were also favoured for the free draining, fertile and easily worked nature of the covering silt soils as well as providing easy access to a dependable supply of water, for livestock and crops, from the river. Although this area was not covered by the watching brief a worked flint was recovered from the surface of the field close by the access road to the south-west of Birkby Nab (see above, 5. Unstratified Finds). This area should be monitored if affected by the proposed barrier and the associated ground works.

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the results of the watching brief that archaeological deposits and cut features survive beneath the plough soil in the vicinity of Test Pit 6. In addition, the Desk Top Survey (Finlayson 2002) showed that numerous isolated finds from the Neolithic period onwards are reported from the surrounding countryside. This suggests that there is a likelihood that archaeological features and deposits relating to these periods will be exposed during the excavation of the borrow pit. A mitigation strategy should be employed to preserve the integrity of the archaeological resource by fully recording such areas before they are completely removed. This should initially entail a 'watching brief' during the stripping of the top-soils; any areas found to be archaeologically sensitive may then, with consultation with the Environment Agency and / or their agents, require further archaeological investigation.

8. LIST OF SOURCES

Finlayson. R., 2002. *Ripon Flood Alleviation Scheme, North Yorkshire Report on an Archaeological Desk Top Study*, YAT, 2002, Field Report 60

Lindrick with Studley Royal Fountains, 1870 Estate Map (scale 6" to 1 chain), NYRO MIC 2707/127/2-21



YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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