# Bellister Castle, Haltwhistle, Northumberland

## Archaeological Watching Brief

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# Bellister Castle, Haltwhistle, Northumberland

## Archaeological Watching Brief

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## Acknowledgements

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## *Executive Summary*

*An archaeological watching brief was undertaken in July 2017, monitoring excavation of pits to send and receive lengths of new water pipework installed by directional drilling, as well as a section of open-cut trench where such drilling proved impracticable. The works were carried out to the immediate north and north-west of Bellister Castle, between the castle and Bellister Bank, near Haltwhistle, Northumberland. The watching brief was undertaken to fulfil with The National Trust's own conservation management requirements.*

*The archaeological monitoring has provided little definitive archaeological evidence; however, it has served to provide a detailed understanding of the character of subsurface deposits across the area surrounding the castle, which has possible implications for the understanding of the monument itself.*

*The excavations undertaken within the field to the north-west of the castle have shown riverine deposits of silt and cobble banks running approximately in line with the current course of the River South Tyne, to the west, and possibly illustrating its shifting course in this area. These were shown to overly earlier deposits of glaciofluvial sand and gravel, which is the mapped superficial geology for this area (BGS 2017).*

*The series of pits excavated along the course of the modern driveway cut into the castle mound have been particularly interesting in terms of understanding the archaeology of the site; particularly in light of the question surrounding the origin of the mound as either a modified natural feature, or a more wholly-constructed motte of Norman date (Gatehouse 2017).*

*The watching brief demonstrated that the base of the mound includes natural clay deposits close to the surface, whilst, at the upper part of the mound, this clay gives way to degraded bedrock just below the modern driveway surface. This series of deposits strongly suggests the mound is a partly-modified natural feature and might suggest that the castle does not have a late 11$^{th}$ or 12$^{th}$ century origin, but a later foundation date altogether. This is, however, speculation based on limited excavated evidence and should be tested further. No artefactual evidence was uncovered with which to ascertain the date of any modifications to the mound.*

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Project Background

This report has been commissioned by The National Trust to outline the findings of a programme of archaeological monitoring (watching brief) on excavation works for the installation of new water supply pipework to the Grade I listed Bellister Castle, Haltwhistle (NHLE 1045292), part of which is also a scheduled monument (NHLE 1002910). The water supply was also renewed to the Grade II listed farm buildings north-east of Bellister Castle (NHLE 1370286). The monitoring was undertaken to fulfil with The National Trust's own conservation management requirements.

## 1.2 Site Locations and Description

The works were situated to the immediate north and north-west of Bellister Castle, between the castle and Bellister Bank, near Haltwhistle, Northumberland, centred at grid reference NY 70018 63016 (Figure 1). The groundworks monitored involved the excavation of pits to send and receive lengths of pipework installed by directional drilling, as well as sections of open-cut trench where such drilling proved impracticable (Figure 2).

## 1.3 Potential Significance

The potential archaeological significance of the site, and hence the reason for the monitoring works, lies in the potential for archaeological deposits to survive associated with the castle, as well as other built or garden features associated with its development.

## 1.4 Aims and Objectives

### 1.4.1 Watching Brief

An archaeological watching brief is defined as:

> "A formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons. This will be within a specified area or site on land, intertidal zone or underwater, where there is a possibility that archaeological deposits may be disturbed or destroyed. The programme will result in the preparation of a report and ordered archive" (CIfA 2014b, 2).

The overarching aim of the watching brief is:

> To ensure that significant archaeological remains are not destroyed, and are ideally retained in-situ. Where encountered, such remains will be adequately recorded.

The objectives of the watching brief are:

- To record and seek to preserve in-situ any archaeological deposits of significance observed during the groundworks
- To attempt to establish the date, character and significance of any archaeological and palaeoenvironmental deposits, including in relation to other similar features within the area
- To ensure there is a permanent record of the work undertaken deposited with the local Historic Environment Record (HER) and made available online
- To ensure all work was undertaken in compliance with the *Code of Conduct* of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) (2014a) and, the CIfA *Standard and Guidance for Watching Briefs* (2014b).
- To ensure compliance with the required Scheduled Monument Consent and WSI.

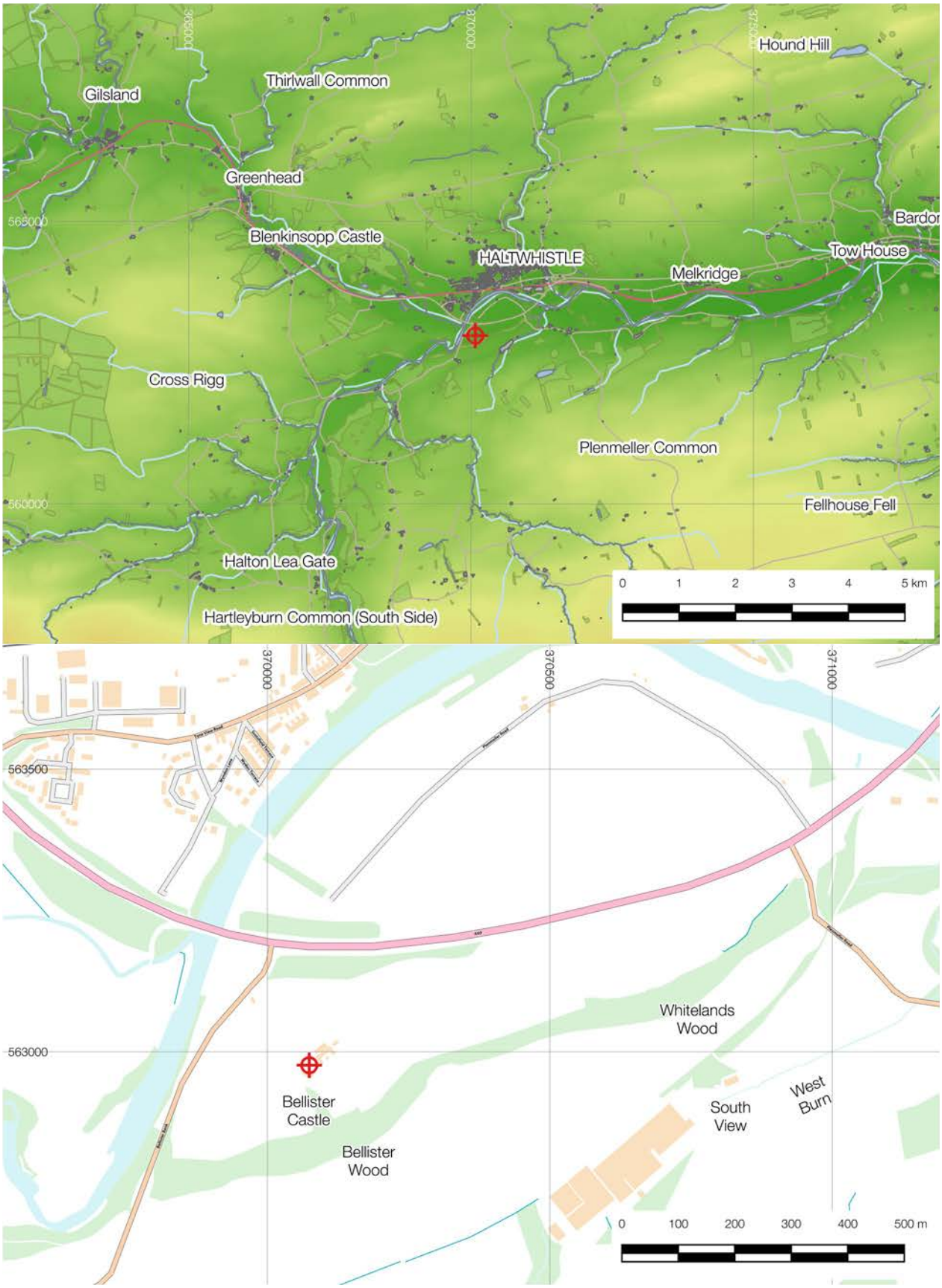



Figure 1 Site Location

# 2. Results

## 2.1 Areas Monitored

The monitored excavations at the site comprised nine send and receive pits for the directional drilling and insertion of pipework, as well as a *c.* 43 m length of open-cut trench where directional drilling was impracticable. These excavations occurred within the field to the north-west of the castle, within the immediate driveway approach to the castle building and at the immediate south-west side of the farm buildings to the north-east of the castle (Figure 10).

## 2.2 Open-Cut Trenching

A *c.* 43 m length of open-cut trench was monitored within the field to the north-west of the castle (Figure 2). The trench was *c.* 43 m in length, 0.4 m wide and an average of 0.8 m deep. The trench was cut in line with the main driveway leading to the castle, *c.* 7 m into the field from the driveway boundary and extending north-west from a point *c.* 41 m north-west from the fence surrounding the castle mound. The trench was cut through a well-developed, dark brown, fine loam topsoil (001), which had a thickness of 0.4 m. This overlay a fine, light brown, silty subsoil (002), with a thickness of 0.4 m. In patches, the glaciofluvial coarse, orange sand and gravel substrate (003) was noted within the base of the trench. Occurring in distinct NE-SW aligned bands within the subsoil (002), the sand and gravel substrate (003) was overlain with thickly compacted deposits of large sub-angular and rounded river cobbles (004), suggesting that this area has played host to former river channels (Figure 3). These cobble bands were interspersed with areas where very few stones were present within the subsurface deposits, suggesting the location of these former channels. There was no evidence that these varying deposits were archaeological in origin. No archaeological finds, features or deposits were noted during excavation of the open-cut trench.

Figure 2 Open-cut trench, looking south-east towards Bellister Castle. Note cobbles in spoil to left. No scale

Figure 3 Representative shot of cobbles within subsoil. No scale

## 2.3 Send and Receive Pits

Aside from the open-cut trenching, a total of nine send and receive pits were monitored during the watching brief. These consisted of:

- Four pits within the field to the north-west of the castle
- Four pits on the driveway leading to the castle doorway
- A pit adjacent to the farm buildings to the north east of the castle

### 2.3.1 Pits within the field to the north-west of the Castle

The send and receive pits monitored within the field to the north-west of the castle consisted of four 1.5 m x 1 m x 0.70 m excavations (Pits 1-4), carried out by machine, along the length of the intended route of the new water service. All of the pits were cut through a well-developed, dark brown, fine loam topsoil (001), which had a thickness of 0.4 m (Figure 4). This overlay a fine, light brown, silty subsoil (002), which was generally excavated to a depth of *c.* 0.3 m, but not excavated to its full thickness. None of the pits was dug into an area containing significant deposits of cobbles, as noted during the excavation of the open-cut trench. No archaeological finds, features or deposits were noted during excavation of the pits.

Figure 4 Representative example of pits excavated within field. Scale 1x2 m

### 2.3.2 Pits within the Castle Driveway

The send and receive pits monitored within the castle driveway consisted of four 1.5 m x 0.5 m x 0.60 m (approx.) excavations (Pits 5-8), carried out by machine, along the length of the intended route of the new water service. Pit 8 was located closest to the main castle doorway, with Pit 5 furthest away to the north-west.

Pit 5 was cut through a disturbed, dark brown, fine loam topsoil (001) with inclusions of medium sized rounded cobbles, which had a thickness of 0.4 m (Figure 5). This overlay a fine, grey-brown, clay (006), which was excavated to a depth of *c.* 0.15 m, but not excavated to its full thickness. As this pit was excavated on the approximate line of the earthwork 'moat' surrounding the castle mound it is considered that these deposits may represent silting and natural infilling of this feature, however, the limited scale of the excavation and its uneven sides, as well as the lack of a clear earthwork continuing up to this point, did not allow for clear, or certain, interpretation of these deposits.

Pit 6 was cut through a disturbed, dark brown, fine loam topsoil (007) with inclusions of small stones, which had a thickness of 0.3 m (Figure 6). This overlay a fine, naturally-deposited mid-brown clay (005), which was excavated to a depth of *c.* 0.3 m, but not excavated to its full thickness. As this pit was excavated on the slope of the castle mound it is considered that these deposits represent a reworked modern topsoil overlying a natural clay till. The incised nature of the modern driveway is most likely to be the reason for the shallow nature of the natural clay deposit at this point.

Pit 7 was cut through a modern pebble and disturbed, silty soil driveway deposit (008) with a thickness of 0.2 m (Figure 7). This overlay a fine, naturally-deposited, mid-brown clay (005), which was excavated to a depth of *c.* 0.45 m, but not excavated to its full thickness. As this pit was excavated on the slope of the castle mound it is considered that these deposits represent a modern driveway surface overlying a natural clay till. The incised nature of the modern driveway is most likely to be the reason for the shallow nature of the natural clay deposit at this point.

Pit 8 was cut through a modern pebble and disturbed, silty soil driveway deposit (008) with a thickness of 0.2 m (Figure 8). This overlay a degraded in-situ bedrock (mudstone?) (009), which was excavated to a depth of *c.* 0.5 m, but not excavated to its full thickness. As this pit was excavated at the top of the slope of the castle mound it is considered that these deposits represent a modern driveway surface overlying a natural, degraded bedrock. The incised nature of the modern driveway is most likely to be the reason for the shallow nature of the natural bedrock at this point, with no intervening deposits present. This trench was extended by a distance of 2 m to reach the castle forecourt at its south-west extent. This extension was excavated through modern backfill deposits on the line of existing services.

Figure 5 Pit 5, looking south-west. Scale 2x1 m

Figure 6 Pit 6, looking north-west. Scale 2x1 m

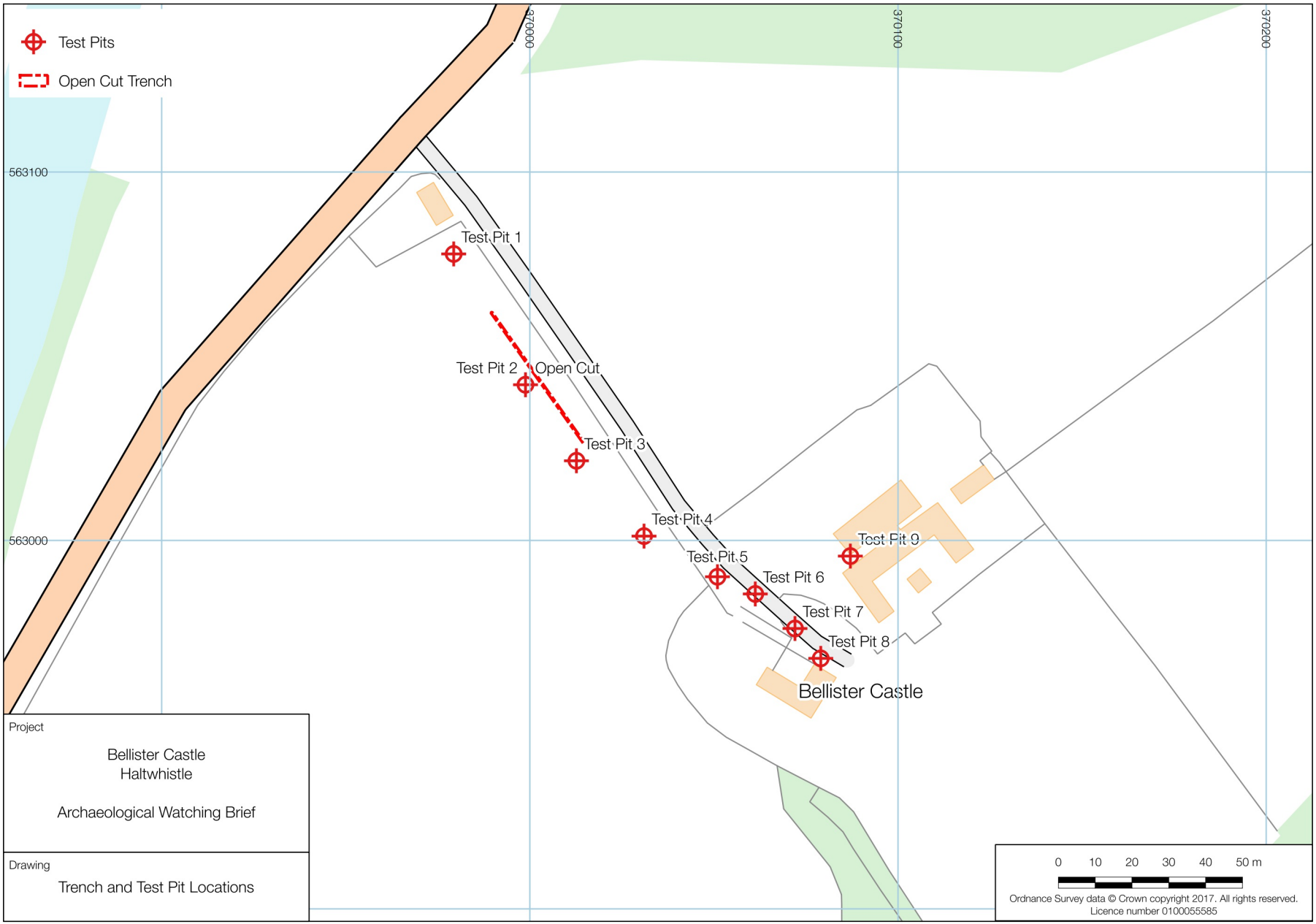
Figure 7 Pit 7, looking north-west. Scale 2x1 m

Figure 8 Pit 8, looking south-west. Scale 2x1 m

### 2.3.3 Pit adjacent to the Farm Buildings

The send and receive pit (Pit 9) monitored at the south-west corner of the crowstepped gable end of the coach house extension to the listed farm buildings consisted of one 1.5 m x 0.5 m x 0.70 m excavation, carried out by machine (Figure 9). This pit partially exposed the modern concrete underpinning of the gable end, within which it was possible to note previous structural movement. This concrete underpinning had been laid within a trench cut into a fine, naturally-deposited mid-brown clay (005), which was excavated to a depth of *c*. 0.5 m, but not excavated to its full thickness. Overlying the natural clay (005) was the modern gravel yard surface (010), with no intervening deposits. No archaeological finds, features or deposits were noted during excavation of the pits.

Figure 9 Pit 9, adjacent to coach house, looking north-east. No scale




Project

Bellister Castle
Haltwhistle

Archaeological Watching Brief

Drawing

Trench and Test Pit Locations

# 3. Discussion

The archaeological monitoring undertaken has provided little definitive archaeological evidence; however, it has served to provide a detailed understanding of the character of subsurface deposits across the area surrounding the castle, which has possible implications for the understanding of the monument itself.

The excavations undertaken within the field to the north-west of the castle have shown riverine deposits of silt and cobble banks running approximately in line with the current course of the River South Tyne, to the west, and possibly illustrating its shifting course in this area. These were shown to overly earlier deposits of glaciofluvial sand and gravel, which is the mapped superficial geology for this area (BGS 2017).

The series of pits excavated along the course of the modern driveway cut into the castle mound have been particularly interesting in terms of understanding the archaeology of the site; particularly in light of the question surrounding the origin of the mound as either a modified natural feature, or a more wholly-constructed motte of Norman date (Gatehouse 2017).

The watching brief demonstrated that the base of the mound includes natural clay deposits close to the surface, whilst, at the upper part of the mound, this clay gives way to degraded bedrock just below the modern driveway surface. This series of deposits strongly suggests the mound is a partly-modified natural feature and might suggest that the castle does not have a late 11$^{th}$ or 12$^{th}$ century origin, but a later foundation date altogether. It is known that several later medieval castles included the creation of a mottle-like feature to lend an air of antiquity and lineage to a newly-established site, such as at Warkworth Castle, Northumberland, and Lydford Castle in Devon (Creighton 2002, 71-72). This is, however, speculation based on limited excavated evidence and should be tested further. No artefactual evidence was uncovered with which to ascertain the date of any modifications to the mound.

# 4. Sources

## 4.1 Bibliography

Chartered Institute for Archaeologists. 2014a. *Code of Conduct*. Reading, Chartered Institute for Archaeologists.

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Creighton, O. 2002. *Castles and Landscapes; Power, Community and Fortification in Medieval England*. London: Equinox Publishing.

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# Appendix 1 - Context Register

| Context Number | Type | Description | Probable Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| 001 | Deposit | Topsoil | Modern |
| 002 | Deposit | Subsoil | Modern |
| 003 | Deposit | Glaciofluvial sand and gravel | Glacial |
| 004 | Deposit | Riverine cobbles | Post-glacial |
| 005 | Deposit | Natural Clay till substrate | Glacial |
| 006 | Deposit | Silty clay | Medieval? |
| 007 | Deposit | Disturbed topsoil | Modern |
| 008 | Deposit | Modern pebble driveway | Modern |
| 009 | Deposit | Bedrock | Carboniferous |
| 010 | Deposit | Gravel yard surface | Modern |

# Appendix 2 - Methodology

## Fieldwork

The monitored works were carried out between 13th July 2017 and 20th July 2017. All groundworks were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist, and a toothless bucket was used for all excavations.

Where archaeological features and deposits were encountered, these were recorded to the standards outlined in the relevant CIfA Standard and Guidance (2014b). All features and deposits were recorded on *pro forma* record sheets, drawn in plan and section at a suitable scale and photographed. No deposits with palaeoenvironmental potential were noted. In addition to any specific features or deposits, a general record of the trench stratigraphy was made on a *pro forma* record sheet.

## Post-Fieldwork

The primary site archive was compiled, comprising site records and digital photography. This has been used to compile this report.

## Chronology

Where chronological and archaeological periods are referred to in the report, the relevant date ranges are broadly defined as follows:

- Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age): 1 million – 12,000 BP (Before present)
- Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age): 10000 – 4000 BC
- Neolithic (New Stone Age): 4000 – 2400 BC
- Chalcolithic/Beaker Period: 2400 – 2000 BC
- Bronze Age: 2400 – 700 BC
- Iron Age: 700 BC – AD 70
- Roman/Romano-British: AD 70 – 410
- Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-Scandinavian: AD 410 – 1066
- Medieval: AD 1066 – 1540
- Post-medieval: AD 1540 – 1750
- Industrial: AD 1750 – 1900
- Modern: AD 1900 – Present

## Assumptions and Limitations

Data and information obtained and consulted in the compilation of this report has been derived from a number of secondary sources. Where it has not been practicable to verify the accuracy of secondary information, its accuracy has been assumed in good faith. All statements and opinions arising from the works undertaken are provided in good faith and compiled according to professional standards. No responsibility can be accepted by the author/s of the report for any errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by any third party, or for loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in any such report(s), howsoever such facts and opinions may have been derived.

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