

Binchester Hall, Binchester, Co. Durham Archaeological Monitoring Report

For The Auckland Project

March 2023


Ecus Ltd


Report to: The Aukland Project

Report Title: Binchester Hall, Binchester, County Durham: Archaeological Monitoring Report

Version: 2.0
Issue Date: March 2023
Report Ref: 23-13

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Version	Author	Description	Date
0.1	TF	First draft	20/03/2023
0.2	SR	Edit/QA 1	22/03/2023
0.3	AC	Approval/QA 2	22/03/2023
1.0	TAP	Client for approval	22/03/2023
2.0	SR	Minor amendments as requested by client	13/04/2023

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Summary

Northern Archaeological Associates (NAA, now Ecus) was commissioned by The Auckland Project to undertake archaeological monitoring at Binchester Hall, Binchester, Co. Durham (NGR: 421000 531300). The monitoring was carried out during the structured demolition of the Hall and subsequent levelling and reinstatement of the site. All work conformed to a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI; NAA 2019), which was approved by all invested parties in advance of the work.

Binchester Hall is located in the western corner of Binchester Roman Fort (*Vinovia*), which is designated as a Scheduled Monument. The fort was founded around AD80 and was, for a time, one of the largest Roman military installations in northern Britain. The site was continually occupied beyond the end of Roman rule into the 5th and 6th centuries. Burial evidence from the area has suggested settlement in the vicinity of the site during the 11th century.

The core of the existing structure of Binchester Hall dated to the late 18th century, though most of the building represented 19th- and 20th-century extension. The Hall complex was extended to the south during the 19th century. Modification during the 20th century saw extension on all sides and included the construction of a cellar.

The demolition works had the potential to destroy unrecorded heritage elements associated with the Hall, therefore a watching brief was considered to be an appropriate archaeological response to identify and record any heritage elements present. The monitoring works would also ensure that the demolition, including the removal of foundations, would have no adverse impact on features associated with the Scheduled Monument. No heritage elements were present, and the works did not impact on sub-surface remains associated with Binchester Roman Fort and associated *vicus*.

1. Introduction

1.1 Project background

- 1.1.1 Northern Archaeological Associates (NAA, now Ecus) was commissioned by The Auckland Project to undertake archaeological monitoring at Binchester Hall, Binchester, Co. Durham (NGR: 421000 531300; Fig. 1; Plate 1). The monitoring was carried out during the structured demolition of the Hall, with removal of the building classed as Permitted Development under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (England) 2015, and was therefore exempt from planning permission. However, applications for Building Regulation Consent and Scheduled Monument Consent were necessary, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was produced by NAA (2019) on behalf of The Auckland Project to support the applications. This WSI was adhered to fully throughout the works.
- 1.1.2 Binchester Hall did not form part of the designation of the Scheduled Monument of Binchester Roman Fort (*Vinovia*), but lay within its boundary. As such, the sub-surface footprint of the Hall had a high potential for the presence of archaeological remains dating from the Roman period.
- 1.1.3 Archaeological monitoring was carried out between 18th September 2019 and 17th October 2019, during demolition of the above-ground structures. Monitoring of the removal of concrete foundation slabs, and the levelling and reinstatement of the site, was undertaken between 24th October and 4th November 2019.

1.2 Landscape and topography

- 1.2.1 The Roman fort of Binchester (*Vinovia*) is situated c.1.5km north of Bishop Auckland on a spur of higher ground overlooking and guarding the point where Dere Street, the main Roman road running from York to Corbridge, crossed the River Wear. The site lies on a glacial gravel plateau between the River Gaunless to the east and Bell Burn to the north. The plateau descends steeply to the south and west to the Wear. The fort covered a maximum area of 4–4.5ha.

2. Archaeological and historical background

Binchester Fort

- 2.1.1 Archaeological excavations within Binchester fort and *vicus* (a civil settlement associated with the fort) have revealed well-preserved deposits, which included important late Roman/sub-Roman stratigraphy. Geophysical survey has revealed that the *vicus* is extensive and covers a large area to the east of the fort as well as either side of Dere Street to the north-west and south-east. Excavations have shown that Roman military occupation of the site began in the early Flavian period and continued, with variable intensity, throughout the Roman period. Occupation continued into the 5th and 6th centuries and burials suggest settlement nearby into the 11th century.

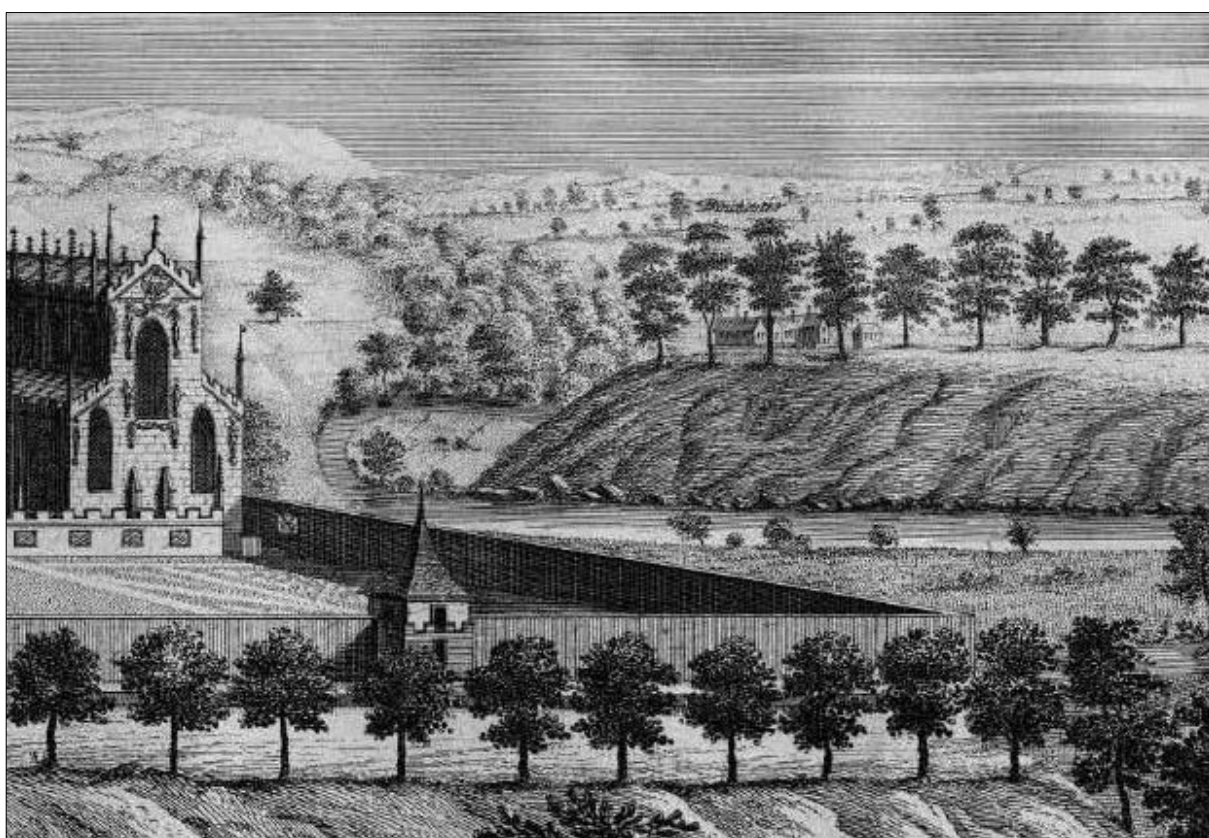


Plate 1: Extract from Buck's engraving, showing the Wren Hall at Binchester standing above the loop of the River Wear to the north of Auckland Castle (after Kirby 2007).

Binchester Hall

- 2.1.2 The interior of the fort is largely unencumbered by modern buildings other than Binchester Hall and Binchester Hall Farm. The Binchester estate was under the ownership of the Wren family from around 1570, and the associated Hall was said to have been redesigned in the 18th century by Sir Christopher Wren, the architect and designer of St Paul's Cathedral. The Wren Hall was short-lived and, following the marriage of Mary Wren to the honourable Thomas Lyon in 1774, was demolished and replaced with a "most beautiful and modern" Hall surrounded by "hanging plantations" (Purcell

2019). Their son, Charles, took an interest in coalmining and began to dig pits along the edge of the River Wear beneath Auckland Castle, causing a rift to develop between the family and their neighbour, the Bishop of Durham. In 1833, Bishop William van Mildert made the decision to buy the estate to prevent further industrial development and is said to have demolished the 1770s Lyon Hall (*ibid.*).

2.1.3 The current Binchester Hall was built in 1835 and incorporated parts of a late 18th-century structure that appeared to include components of the Lyon Hall, suggesting it was not fully removed. During the early 20th century, the Hall and Hall Farm were divided into two ownerships. The tenant of the Hall, John Watson Cook, focused on the coal mining industry rather than farming (*ibid.*).

2.1.4 In the 1970s, the Hall was converted into a hotel with a new west range built in brick to provide bedroom accommodation, over a large basement room for functions. By the 1990s, the Hall had again been converted and was used as a nursing home. This was closed in 2002 and remained disused until sold to The Auckland Project in 2014 (Purcell 2019).



Plate 2: Binchester Hall, looking south-west. The buildings to the right of the mobile elevating work platform represent the 1970s extension.

2.2 Building survey

2.2.1 A condition survey of Binchester Hall (Kirby Surveying 2017) included an assessment of the historical development and form by Harry Beamish (*ibid.*, 9–23). The assessment identified three phases of development:

- a late 18th-century range, comprising a rectangular two-storey block of coursed rubble sandstone, which represents an element of the Lyon Hall that was retained and adapted when the mansion was demolished in the 1830s;

-
- a 19th-century three-bay two-storey addition to the south side of the late 18th-century range, forming a modest villa, probably intended as the farmhouse for the adjacent farm complex. The stonework is squared, regularly coursed sandstone;
 - a later 20th-century brick-built addition to the west side of earlier fabric, added when the building was developed in the 1970s to create a hotel. This addition was later modified to include a flat-roofed link between the buildings, and lean-to ranges to the south and east sides of the ground floor.

3. Methodology

3.1 Standards

3.1.1 The monitoring was carried out in accordance with the Standards for *All Archaeological Work in County Durham and Darlington* (DCC 2017) and with reference to relevant standards and guidance published by Historic England (2015a) and the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA, 2014a; prior to the updated standards and guidance). The programme of works was executed according to a WSI (NAA 2019), which was approved by all parties and agreed in advance by Durham County Council (DCC) and Historic England (HE).

3.2 Scope of work

3.2.1 Archaeological monitoring of the removal of the structure, and associated sub-surface features, was scheduled to occur in two stages. Stage 1 comprised monitoring of the full structured demolition of Binchester Hall down to and including ground floor/slab level, leaving any basements to be addressed separately later (Stage 2). This report concerns monitoring of Stage 1 works only; Stage 2 works have not taken place at time of writing (March 2023)

3.3 Aims and objectives

3.3.1 The main aims of the archaeological monitoring were:

- to identify the presence or absence of heritage elements within the standing structures prior to and during demolition;
- to record any such elements in order to achieve their 'preservation by record'; and
- to restrict any impact to the Scheduled Monument from the demolition works, and to confirm this in subsequent reporting.

3.3.2 The objectives were:

- to establish the presence, nature, extent, preservation and significance of any heritage elements within the area of demolition;
- to provide a detailed record of any such heritage elements;
- to undertake a programme of investigation that meets with national and regional standards (Historic England 2015a; CIfA 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; Petts and Gerrard 2006; DCC 2017); and,
- to prepare an illustrated report on the results of the archaeological investigations to be deposited with the Durham Historic Environment Record and the Historic England Archive.

3.4 Archaeological monitoring

- 3.4.1 Demolition of Binchester Hall would result in the destruction of any surviving heritage elements associated with the structure, and therefore a watching brief was considered to be an appropriate archaeological response to limit any loss of unrecorded features. The monitoring works would also ensure that the demolition, including the removal of foundation slabs, would have no adverse impact on the Scheduled Monument.
- 3.4.2 The demolition was carried out under archaeological supervision. A record was made of all monitoring, using pro forma record sheets and text descriptions appropriate to the findings. Had heritage elements been identified, accurate scale plans and section drawings would have been drawn, though in the event none were identified.
- 3.4.3 A full photographic record was maintained, using a digital camera equipped with an image sensor of not less than 10 megapixels. Digital images will be subject to managed quality control and curation processes which will embed appropriate metadata within the image and ensure long term accessibility of the image set. Output will be in TIFF/JPEG format. Digital records created as part of the project comply with specific data standards (Historic England 2015b). A register of all photographs was kept.
- 3.4.4 No finds or environmental samples were recovered by the monitoring.

4. Monitoring results

Demolition of standing structures

4.1.1 Binchester Hall was demolished using a tracked excavator fitted alternatively with a grab and toothed bucket. Structural components were removed according to building material, which resulted in the Hall being demolished in reverse chronological order to its construction. The 20th-century extensions were removed, followed by the removal of the 19th-century structure located to the south of the 18th-century range (Fig. 2). All demolition debris was removed from site.



Plate 3: North-facing elevation of the 18th-century range after removal of later structures.

4.1.2 No heritage elements or previously unrecorded structural phases were identified during the demolition. The removal of later additions to the hall exposed the earliest iteration of the standing structure; however, the fabric of the building in these areas remained obscured by 20th-century plasterwork and internal decoration (Plate 3).

Removal of concrete foundation slabs

4.1.3 Archaeological monitoring of the removal of foundation slabs and the reduction of other upstanding foundation components was focused on three areas. These included the removal of concrete slabs to the south of the late 18th-century core of the building, the removal of a concrete slab and associated foundation to the north of the structure, and the lowering of the 1970s concrete cellar lining wall (Fig. 2).

- 4.1.4 A tracked excavator fitted with a toothed bucket removed structural elements at, or above-ground level. Some shallow sub-surface structural components were removed in order to create a level surface. The c.1970s cellar wall lining was reduced but left largely intact (Fig. 2).
- 4.1.5 The area to the south of the late 18th-century structure included the removal of a 0.1m-thick concrete slab that supported the 20th-century southern extension, and a smaller slab located to the east that supported a lean-to type structure. All foundation slabs were laid directly upon topsoil representing an earlier ground surface.
- 4.1.6 The 19th-century extension had been constructed upon a series of individual concrete slabs, which formed the floor of the structure. The slabs were c.0.15m thick and were bedded onto topsoil.



Plate 4: Infilling of the c.1970s cellar.

- 4.1.7 A substantial, reinforced concrete slab was located to the north, which supported the north end of the 20th-century extension. The slab was 0.45m thick and required use of a hydraulic breaker in its removal. It was situated upon topsoil but was associated with further support from a sub-surface foundation that had been constructed around its edges within a trench. The trench was 0.25m deep and the foundation was bedded onto an aggregate levelling layer. Excavations associated with

removal of this foundation did not penetrate the topsoil and no archaeological features or deposits were exposed.

- 4.1.8 During the work, the cellar lining wall was left in situ (Stage 2). However, upon removal of the northern foundation slab and the overlying structure, the wall stood proud of ground level. In order to level the site, the upstanding wall was reduced using a hydraulic breaker to c.0.15m below ground level. Associated ground disturbance did not penetrate previously disturbed levels or topsoil, and therefore no archaeological features or deposits were exposed. The cellar was filled and compacted with building rubble (Plate 4).
- 4.1.9 The 18th-century range was footed upon foundations that were equivalent to the building material used to construct the walls, being faced and coursed sandstone rubble. Upon demolition of the late 18th-century structure, the foundations were left in situ and the site was levelled with demolition rubble.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1.1 The Stage 1 archaeological monitoring of the demolition of Binchester Hall, and subsequent levelling and reinstatement of the site, did not identify any historic elements associated with the 18th-century Hall allegedly designed by Sir Christopher Wren. The earliest surviving structural components were the partial remains of the late-18th century Hall constructed by Thomas Lyon. The archaeological presence maintained during the works ensured no Roman or sub-Roman period remains associated with the Scheduled Monument of Binchester Roman Fort and *vicus* were exposed during groundwork. The programme of work achieved the aims and objectives set out in the WSI (NAA 2019).
- 5.1.2 The 20th-century cellar, which forms the focus of potential Stage 2 works, has been infilled with crushed rubble, and the lining walls remain in situ below ground level. It is not currently anticipated that the cellar walls will be removed; however, should this be required at future date, it is considered most likely that Roman period remains associated with the Fort would be exposed.

6. Archive and copyright

6.1 Site archive

- 6.1.1 An OASIS form has been compiled for the results of the works; northern1-514023 (Appendix 1). This will include submission of a PDF version of the report to the Archaeology Data Service via the OASIS form. The form will be submitted following approval of the report by the Client, Durham County Council (if appropriate) and Historic England.

6.2 Copyright

- 6.2.1 The copyright of any written, graphic or photographic records and reports will rest with Ecus. Ecus will grant licences in favour of the client, Durham County Council Historic Environment Record and Historic England to use such documentation for their statutory and related functions and to provide copies to third parties as an incidental to such functions.

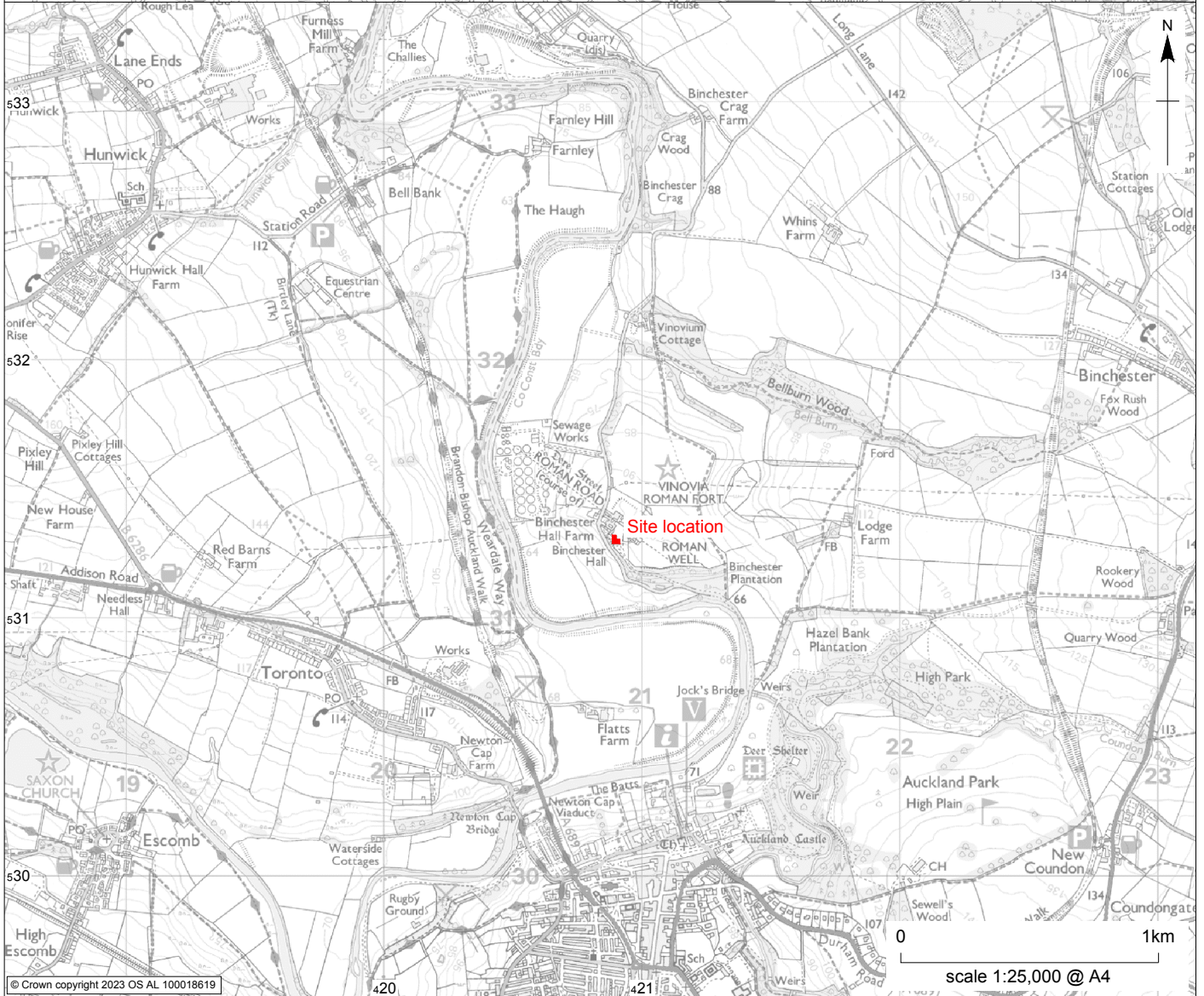
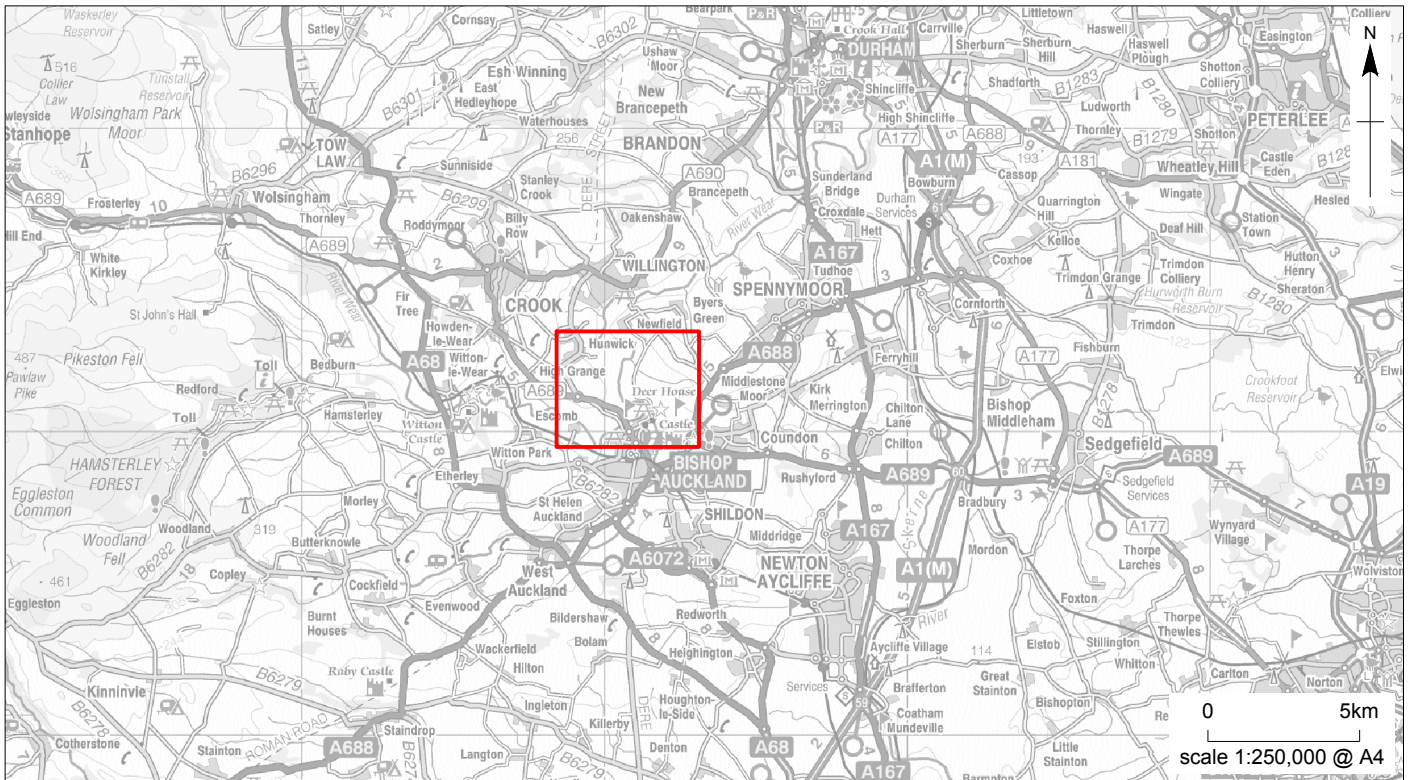
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Appendix 1: OASIS entry

Summary for northern1-514023

OASIS ID (UID)	northern1-514023
Project Name	Watching Brief at Binchester Hall
Sitename	Binchester Hall
Activity type	Watching Brief
Project Identifier(s)	Binchester Hall
Planning Id	
Reason For Investigation	Scheduled monument consent
Organisation Responsible for work	Northern Archaeological Associates, ECUS Ltd
Project Dates	18-Sep-2019 - 04-Nov-2019
Location	Binchester Hall NGR : NZ 21000 31300 LL : 54.6763304435014, -1.67585766869822 12 Fig : 421000,531300
Administrative Areas	Country : England County : Durham District : County Durham Parish : County Durham, unparished area
Project Methodology	Monitoring of demolition of 18th-20thC hall.
Project Results	No heritage features were observed during the demolition. No archaeological features were observed during the levelling of the ground.
Keywords	Country House - POST MEDIEVAL - FISH Thesaurus of Monument Types
Funder	
HER	Durham County Council HER - noRev - LITE Historic England review - unRev - STANDARD
Person Responsible for work	
HER Identifiers	HER Monument No - 1002362
Archives	Digital Archive - to be deposited with Archaeology Data Service Archive;



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Binchester Hall, County Durham: Site location

Figure 1

