

# MERCHISTON CAMPUS MAINTENANCE, EDINBURGH

*Results of an Archaeological Watching Brief  
for Edinburgh Napier University*

*June 2017*

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*March 2017*

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Project Manager: Kirsty Dingwall  
Author: Matthew Ginnever, Magnar Dalland  
Fieldwork: Matthew Ginnever, Magnar Dalland  
Graphics: Rafael Maya-Torcelly  
Approved by: Kirsty Dignwall – Project Manager

## CONTENTS

1.....	INTRODUCTION .....	3
2.....	SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION .....	3
3.....	AIMS & OBJECTIVES .....	3
4.....	METHODOLOGY .....	3
4.1	Site works .....	3
4.2	Recording .....	3
4.3	Reporting and Archives .....	4
5.....	RESULTS .....	4
5.1	Discussion .....	4
6.....	REFERENCES .....	4
6.1	Bibliographic sources .....	4
7.....	APPENDICES .....	5
7.1	Appendix 1 .....	5
7.2	Appendix 2 – Discovery and Excavation in Scotland entry .....	6

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Site location plan .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
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# MERCHISTON CAMPUS MAINTENANCE, EDINBURGH

## RESULTS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

*Headland Archaeology Ltd were commissioned by Edinburgh Napier University to monitor excavation works associated with the maintenance of steps that passed close to the east side of Merchiston Tower. The monitoring took place over two periods.*

*The first phase took place in February 2017 and involved the removal of deposits on the east side of the tower. This monitoring was undertaken at the invitation of the client who wished to conduct best practice as the nature of the maintenance work did not require planning permission.*

*The existing steps were removed and the ground beneath reduced by 1m. Modern made ground deposits were observed throughout the excavation.*

*The second phase was carried out in accordance with a WSI created to fulfil the planning condition for this work. It involved the excavation of a planter box at the south-east corner of the tower and the replacement of steps and paving to the east of the area affected by the work during the previous phase.*

*No archaeological or geological deposits were observed during the excavation of the planter box. The replacement of the steps and paving would not affect any archaeological deposits as this work would only cut into recently made ground.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Headland Archaeology Ltd was commissioned by Edinburgh Napier University to undertake a programme of archaeological works in connection with maintenance work of steps at Merchiston Campus.

Planning permission for the first phase of the development was not needed as the nature of the work was maintenance rather than development. Edinburgh Napier University were keen to follow best practice however due to the presence of Merchiston Tower, a 15<sup>th</sup> century tower house, in close proximity to the maintenance work.

A Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was prepared by Headland Archaeology (2017) on behalf of the client; setting out the proposed strategy for archaeological monitoring. This included for the presence of an archaeologist to monitor the removal of the current steps to the formation level of approximately 1m below the current ground level.

The second phase of work was subjected to planning conditions and was carried out in accordance to as second WSI prepared by Headland Archaeology (2017) on behalf of the client.

Both WSIs were submitted to and agreed with the City of Edinburgh Council Archaeological Service ('the curator') who advise the Local Planning Authority on archaeological matters.

### 2 SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

The site is located at NGR: NT 24245 71822 (Illus 1). It is occupied by Edinburgh Napier University Merchiston Campus buildings, including the 15<sup>th</sup> century Merchiston Tower. The site is bounded by Colinton Road to the south and Mardale Crescent to the north. It lies around 52m OD and is underlain by glacial till deposits, which are Devensian in origin (<http://www.bgs.ac.uk>).

The archaeological background is dominated by the presence of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Merchiston Tower. The tower is a category A Listed building (HB 26828) which was incorporated into the design of the campus in the 1960s. The Tower is an interesting and elaborate example of the medieval tower house, being built on the familiar 'L' plan with a wing projecting to the north. It was originally vaulted at the

second floor and the roof. Among several remarkable features is the unusual elaboration of the main entrance, which is at second floor level in the south front. The tall shallow recess in which the doorway is set undoubtedly housed a drawbridge which must have rested upon an outwork some 14 feet above ground level and 10 feet from the Tower (MacGibbon and Ross 1887; Historic Scotland listing descriptions).

The lands surrounding the tower were acquired in 1438 by Alexander Napier, the first Laird of Merchiston, and remained in the Napier family for most of the following five centuries (Armet & Harris 1962).

Merchiston Castle was probably built as a country house, but its strategic position and the turbulent political situation required it to be heavily fortified - with some walls as much as six feet thick - and it was frequently under siege. During restoration in the 1960s a twenty-six pound cannon-ball was found embedded in the Tower, this is thought to date from the struggle in 1572 between Mary, Queen of Scots, and supporters of her son, James VI. In 1659, the tower was sold to Ninian Lewis, in whose family it remained until 1729, when it was sold to the governors of George Watson's Hospital. The tower was reacquired by the Napier of Merchiston family when Francis Napier bought it in 1752 (Ibid).

In 1772, a year before the sixth Lord's death, the tower was sold to a relative, Charles Hope-Weir. He sold it in 1775 to Robert Turner, a lawyer, who in turn sold it in 1785 to Robert Blair, a professor of astronomy at Edinburgh University. The Napier family again came into possession of Merchiston Tower in 1818, when it was purchased by William Napier, 9th Lord Napier. By 1833, Lord Napier let the

Tower to Charles Chalmers, who founded the Merchiston Castle School. It was sold outright to the school in 1914 by The Honourable John Scott Napier, fourteenth Laird of Merchiston. The school vacated the building in 1930, moving to a site some three miles away.

The property passed first to The Merchant Company in 1930, and then to the Edinburgh City Council in 1935, and remained unoccupied (except for war service) until 1956 when it was suggested as the centrepiece of a new technical college. Restoration work began in 1958, highlights of which were the discovery of the entrance drawbridge and the preservation of an original seventeenth century plaster ceiling. During the course of the construction of the campus buildings large sections of wall on the northern extension were removed to accommodate a corridor which runs through the Castle to other campus buildings.

During March-August 2012 Headland Archaeology undertook a trial trenching evaluation at this site, finding no remains of archaeological significance, with the results of the work suggesting that any remains relating to the original castle would have

been removed or entirely truncated when the university buildings were constructed in the 1960s (Wilson & Van Wessel 2012). Despite this there remains a potential for buried archaeology in areas outwith the evaluation trenches.

### 3 AIMS & OBJECTIVES

In line with the WSI the main objectives of archaeological works were:

- To establish the location, extent, nature and date of archaeological features or deposits that may be present within the accessible areas targeted for maintenance
- To establish the integrity and state of preservation of archaeological features or deposits that may be present within the accessible areas

### 4 METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1 Site works

The work was undertaken as specified in the WSIs.

Phase 1 comprised excavation work relating to the replacement of the surface of concrete steps and slabs between the upper and lower quadrangles of the campus.

These works involved the removal of the slabs and the excavation of the ground beneath them to a depth of 1m prior to the ground being built back up and sandstone slabs being placed. In addition to the new slabs a low wall was to be constructed along the western edge of the steps, the foundations of which were to the same level as the rest of the excavations.

All monitoring of excavations of soft deposits were carried out with a mechanical excavator working with a toothless blade. A toothed blade was used for the removal of hard modern deposits. Monitoring was concluded when the maximum required depth was reached.

Phase 2 comprised the excavation of a planter box outside the south-east corner of the tower at the top of the steps. It was excavated by hand down to a depth of 0.4m below current ground level.

#### 4.2 Recording

All recording followed ClfA Standards and Guidance for conducting archaeological watching briefs (2014). All contexts, small finds and environmental samples were given unique numbers. All recording was undertaken on pro forma record cards.

Digital photographs were taken with a graduated metric scale clearly visible. All photographs were recorded by individual print number and include

information of the context and direction taken. A full list of photographs taken is included in Appendix 1.

### 4.3 Reporting and Archives

The results of the works are presented below. A summary report has been prepared for submission to *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* (Appendix 2) and the OASIS database (headland1-280937).

The complete project archive will be deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS) within six months of the completion of the project. The records (paper and digital) will be archived according to best practice guidelines set out by the Archaeological Archiving Forum.

## 5 RESULTS

Monitoring of the Phase 1 excavation was undertaken over two days between the 23rd and 24th of February 2017.

Upon removal of the concrete slabs that formed the existing steps a layer of light grey sands and concrete powder up to 0.2m thick was observed across the area (Illus 2). This deposit had been used form a level platform for the concrete steps.

Beneath this a 0.3m thick layer of modern red blaes (inert waste deposits of colliery spoils that have been burnt or oxidised) was observed across the area (Illus 3).

Beneath this and comprising the remaining 0.40m of removed deposits across the area was a made ground deposit consisting of bricks, broken sand stone, concrete and other modern debris in a mid-brown-grey sandy silt matrix (Illus 4). This deposit extended beneath the required depth of excavation across the area.

No archaeological deposits or features were observed during the course of monitoring.

Monitoring of Phase 2 took place on the 21th June 2017. The planter box was 2m wide by 2.6m long. It was bounded to the east and north by a stone wall built during the previous construction phase. There was a plinth of concrete at the south end of the box which was removed by a handheld concrete breaker. The rest of the box was filled with Type 1 gravel down to and beyond the formation depth of 0.4m (Illus 5).

### 5.1 Discussion

The results of the archaeological watching brief concur with previous archaeological work at Merchiston Campus (Wilson and van Wessel 2017), namely that the construction of the university buildings in the 1960s led to extensive truncation across the area.

The most intrusive work took place during Phase 1. Still the depth of excavation for the maintenance works on the steps appears to be within the original impact levels from when the steps were originally constructed. It is likely then that the construction of the steps removed any archaeological remains that may have been present.

The remaining work within Phase 2 involved the replacement of slabs along a narrow corridor along the east side of the steps and a wide shelf in the middle of the steps (Illus 6). This work involved a minimum disturbance of the underlying ground and given the results from the adjacent work to the west during Phase 1 it would not disturb any significant archaeological deposits. It was therefore decided that no further archaeological monitoring was required.

## 6 REFERENCES

### 6.1 Bibliographic sources

- Archaeological Archives Forum Archaeological Archives: a guide to best practice in creation, compilation, transfer and curation (published by the ClfA 2014).
- Armet, H and Harris, S 1962 The Tower of Merchiston, The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, Vol. 31
- ClfA 2014 Standards and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief (revised December 2014).
- Headland Archaeology 2017 Merchiston Campus Maintenance, Edinburgh Written Scheme of Investigation
- MacGibbon, D and Ross, T 1887 Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland, vol III, pp263-8
- Wilson, D & Van Wessel, J 2012 Edinburgh Napier University, Merchiston Campus: Results of an Archaeological Evaluation and Watching Brief. Unpublished Client Report.

## 7 APPENDICES

### 7.1 Appendix 1

#### *Photographic register*

Photo Number	Digital file name	Facing	Description
01	MCME-01-01.JPG	N	Ph1. Working shot of ground reduction beneath concrete slabs
02	MCME-01-02.JPG	NE	Ph1. Red blaes in SW facing section lying over made ground
03	MCME-01-03.JPG	NE	Ph1. Working shot showing sand levelling layer beneath slabs
04	MCME-01-04.JPG	SW	Ph1. Red blaes beneath Merchiston Tower wall supporting stones
05	MCME-01-05.JPG	-	Ph1. View of Merchiston Tower from site
06	MCME-01-06.JPG	NW	Ph1. Working shot showing made ground in relation of Merchiston Tower
07	MCME-01-07.JPG	N	Ph1. Working shot showing red blaes across whole area
08	MCME-01-08.JPG	SE	Ph1. Working shot excavations into made ground
09	MCME-01-09.JPG	SE	Ph1. Working shot excavations into made ground
10	MCME-01-10.JPG	NE	Ph1. SW facing section showing made ground to bottom of excavation
11	MCME-01-11.JPG	NE	Ph1. SW facing section showing made ground to bottom of excavation
12	MCME-01-12.JPG	N	Ph1. Working shot of trench reaching full depth
13	MCME-01-13.JPG	SE	Ph1. Working shot of trench reaching full depth
14	MCME-01-14.JPG	N	Ph2. Planter box at SE corner of tower.
15	MCME-01-15.JPG	W	Ph2. Planter box at SE corner of tower.
16	MCME-01-16.JPG	SSW	Ph2. Planter box within new stone walls.
17	MCME-01-17.JPG	SE	Ph2. Stairs and shelf to be re-surfaced. New wall built during Phase 1 to the right. Phase 2 area between heras fence and outer wall to the left.
18	MCME-01-18.JPG	S	Ph2. East wall of tower built on bedrock. Area excavated and filled with Type 1 gravel during Phase 1.
19	MCME-01-19.JPG	NW	Ph2. Interior of planter box excavated down to formation level.

## 7.2 Appendix 2 – Discovery and Excavation in Scotland entry

<b>LOCAL AUTHORITY:</b>	City of Edinburgh Council
<b>PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:</b>	Merchiston Campus Maintenance, Edinburgh
<b>PROJECT CODE:</b>	MCME17/001
<b>PARISH:</b>	Edinburgh
<b>NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR:</b>	Ginnever, M
<b>NAME OF ORGANISATION:</b>	Headland Archaeology Ltd
<b>TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:</b>	Watching Brief
<b>NMRS NO(S):</b>	
<b>SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):</b>	N/A
<b>SIGNIFICANT FINDS:</b>	N/A
<b>NGR (2 letters, 8 or 10 figures)</b>	NT 24245 71822
<b>START DATE (this season)</b>	23.03.17
<b>END DATE (this season)</b>	21.06.17
<b>PREVIOUS WORK (incl. DES ref.)</b>	N/A
<b>MAIN (NARRATIVE) DESCRIPTION: (May include information from other fields)</b>	<p>Archaeological monitoring took place during excavation works associated with the maintenance of steps that passed close to the east side of Merchiston Tower.</p> <p>Phase 1 of the work comprised the removal of the existing steps and the reduction of the ground beneath by 1m all the way up to the foundations of the tower. Modern made ground deposits were observed throughout this excavation.</p> <p>Phase 2 took place three months later. It comprised the excavation of a planter box at the south-east corner of the tower. This area was excavated down to 0.4m below ground surface all within made ground.</p> <p>No archaeological or geological deposits were observed.</p>
<b>PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:</b>	None
<b>CAPTION(S) FOR ILLUSTRS:</b>	N/A
<b>SPONSOR OR FUNDING BODY:</b>	Edinburgh Napier University
<b>ADDRESS OF MAIN CONTRIBUTOR:</b>	13 Jane Street, Edinburgh. EH6 5HE
<b>EMAIL ADDRESS:</b>	office@headlandarchaeology.com
<b>ARCHIVE LOCATION (intended/deposited)</b>	NMRS

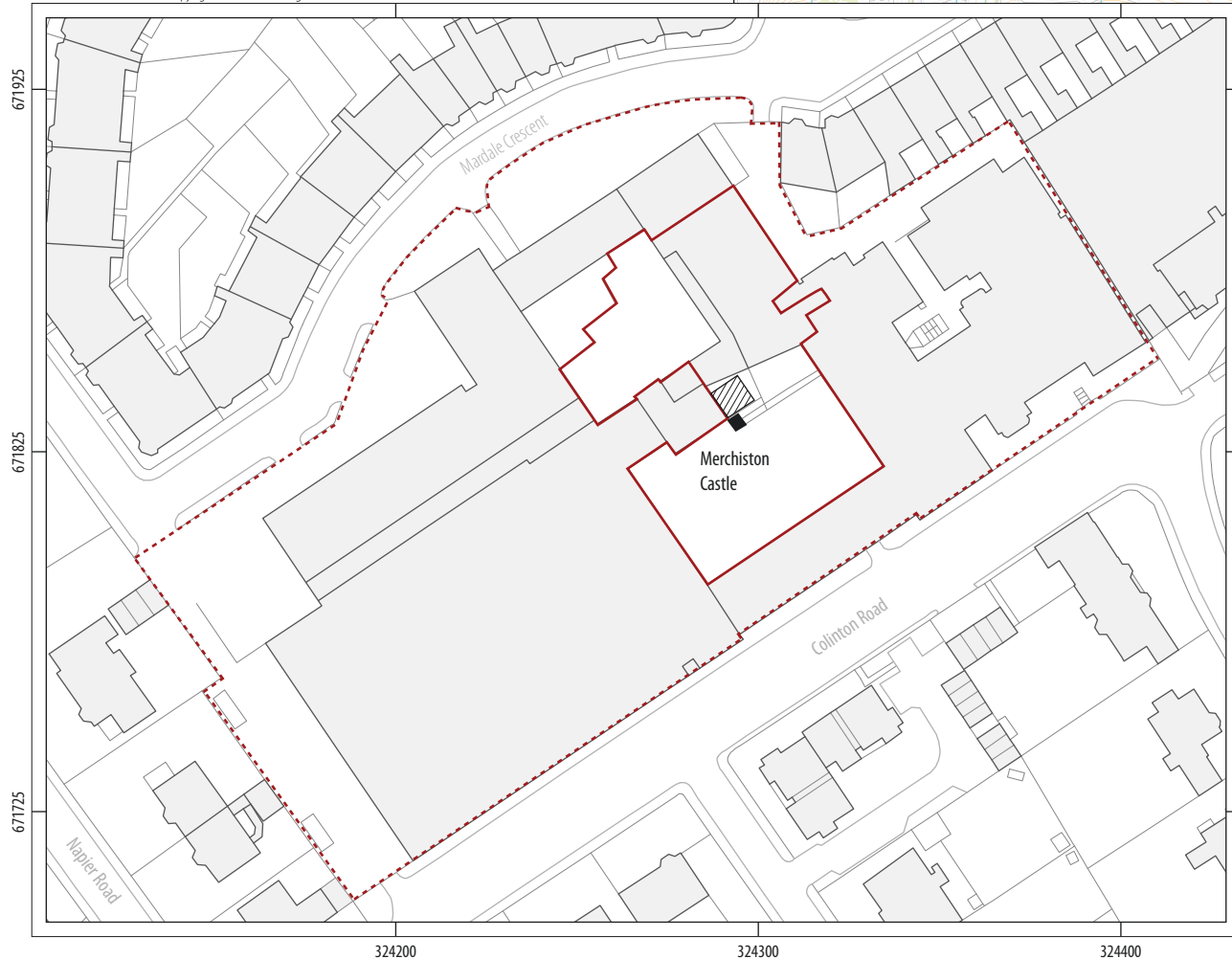
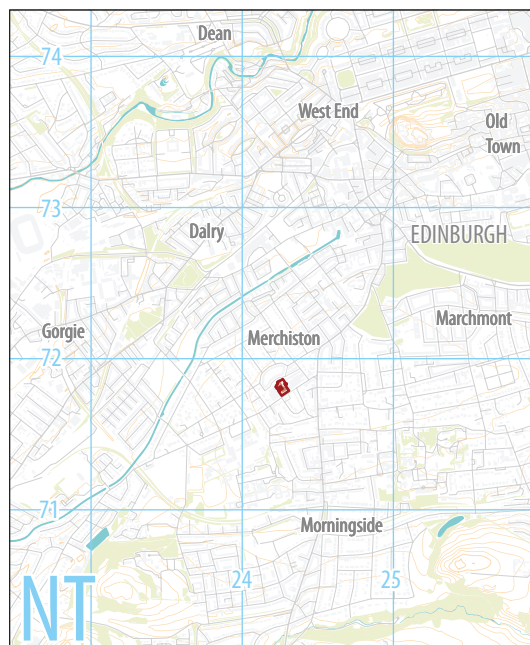


MCME/01

Merchiston Campus  
Colinton Road  
Edinburgh  
Midlothian

0 200km  
1:10,000,000 @ A4

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0 40m  
1:2,000 @ A4

- ownership boundary
- site boundary
- watching brief phase 1
- watching brief phase 2



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13 Jane Street  
Edinburgh EH6 5HE  
0131 467 7705  
[www.headlandarchaeology.com](http://www.headlandarchaeology.com)

ILLUS 1 Site location

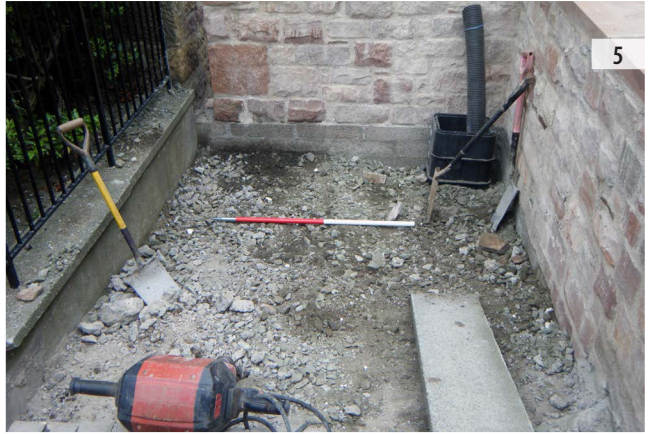


**ILLUS 2** Working shot showing sand levelling layer beneath slabs



**ILLUS 3** Working shot showing red blaes across whole area





**ILLUS 4** SW facing section showing made ground to bottom of excavation    **ILLUS 5** N facing shot of interior of planter box excavated down to formation level    **ILLUS 6** SE facing shot of stairs and shelf to be re-surfaced. New wall built during Phase 1 to the right. Phase 2 area between heras fence and outer wall to the left