

## An Archaeological Watching Brief at Bridge St., Morpeth



A section of stone and brick lined drain running along the  
base of the trench on Bridge Street

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*In January 2012 Archaeological Research Services Ltd were commissioned by Northumbrian Water Ltd to undertake an archaeological watching brief at Bridge St., Morpeth in Northumberland. The watching brief involved the monitoring of groundworks associated with the renewal of water main infrastructure along Bridge Street and in the area of the marketplace.*

*A number of archaeological investigations have taken place in and around Morpeth including Oliver's Mill in 1995, Mains Terrace and Newgate Street in 1997, 1999 and 2000, Damside in 1998, St George's Hospital in 1999, Market Place and North Place in 2003 and Manchester Street in 2004. However, none of these excavations have revealed information that has given any real insight into the development of the town.*

*The 2012 Watching Brief revealed the presence of a brick and stone lined drain running along Bridge Street with an associated offshoot section and a small section of stone wall. It is thought that these remains date to the Post-Medieval period. The watching brief was also able to usefully characterise the nature of deposits along the length of Bridge Street, through the core of medieval Morpeth.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Location and Scope of Work

1.1.1 In January 2012 Archaeological Research Services Ltd were commissioned by Northumbrian Water to undertake an archaeological watching brief at Bridge St., Morpeth, Northumberland.

1.1.2. The watching brief involved the monitoring of groundworks during the renewal of the water main infrastructure along Bridge Street and in the area of the marketplace. Numerous archaeological investigations have been carried out in and around Morpeth in the past but none have managed to shed any light on Morpeth's development as a medieval town.

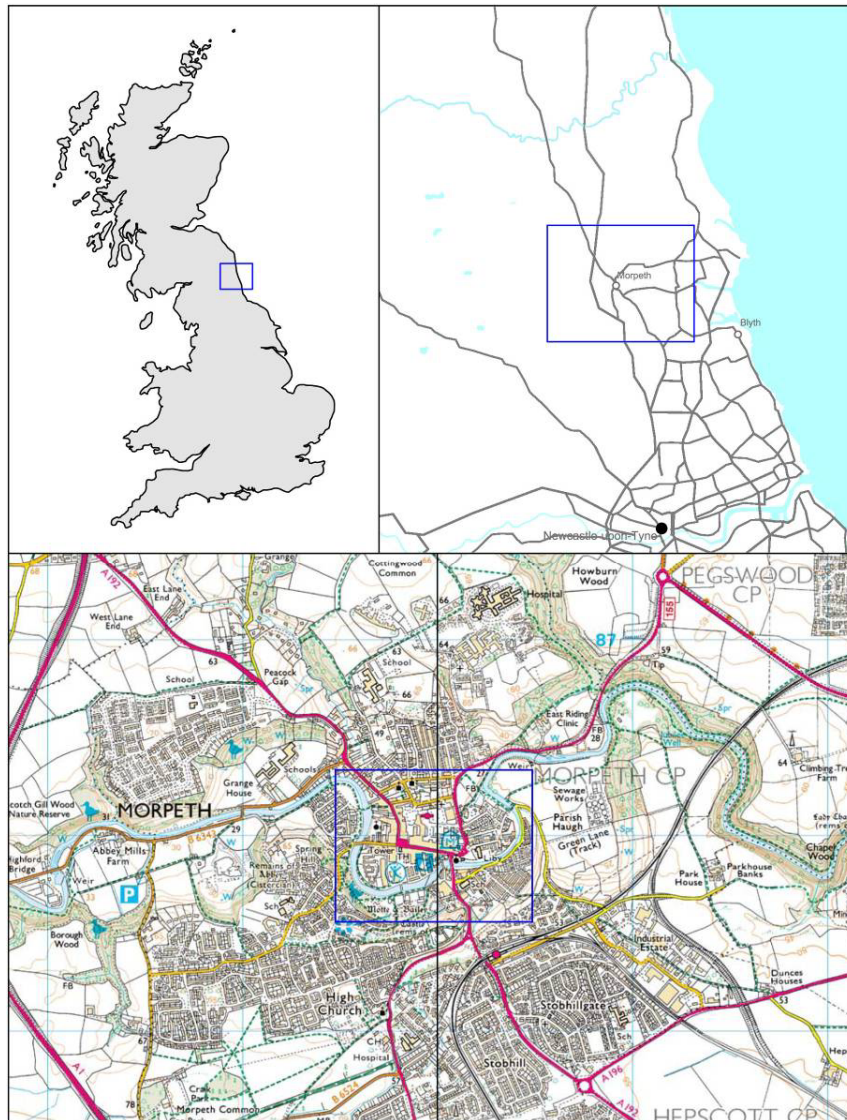


Fig. 1 Location of site.  
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## **1.2. Geology**

1.2.1. Bridge Street is centred at NGR NZ 19950 85929. The solid geology of the area is Pennine lower coal measures formation consisting of mudstone, siltstone and sandstone. This is overlain by river terrace deposits consisting of gravel, sand and silt (BGS, 2012).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

2.1. An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on Bridge Street during groundworks for the renewal of a water mains infrastructure. A narrow trench measuring approximately 333m in length, roughly 1.2m in depth and 0.5m wide was dug from the marketplace and along Bridge Street using a mini 360° machine. Other service trenches were dug at right angles to the main trench in order to provide businesses and houses with water from the new supply.

## **3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

### **3.1. Early Prehistoric**

3.1.1. In the 1820s, well-preserved waterlogged deposits were discovered in trenches that were cut for the construction of the gaol to the south of the Wansbeck (HER 11616; Hodgson 1832a, 60 cited in Northumberland County Council, 2009, 9). Included in the finds were deer horns, large trunks of oak, hazel branches and hazel nuts. There was no evidence that the deposits were created through human activity however this cannot be completely discounted.

3.1.2. Not much evidence for early prehistoric activity has been discovered in and around the area of Morpeth. A Neolithic Langdale stone axe was found south of the river (HER 11703), however the item may have simply been lost or discarded and its discovery does not prove that there was a settlement there. There is also a possible Bronze Age burial consisting of a cairn and a cist (HER 11122) on Haw Hill but again this does not indicate the presence of a settlement as the site may have purely been chosen for its prominence.

### **3.2. Later Prehistoric and Roman**

3.2.1. Aerial photographs have shown evidence for possible Romano-British enclosures in the area surrounding Morpeth, however this evidence becomes thin closer to the town (Event Nos 245 and 13426). Excavations carried out in 1830 at Haw Hill by Woodman (Hodgson 1832a, 25 cited in Northumberland County Council, 2009, 10) located an earthwork that is thought to represent the remains of a prehistoric enclosure, probably dating to the late Iron Age or Romano-British period. Material culture providing evidence for Iron Age/Roman occupation of Morpeth is scarce and only consists of a copper-alloy button and loop fastener, probably from a horse harness, that were discovered by metal detectorists at Coopies Lane (Northumberland County Council, 2009, 10; HER 11562).

### **3.3. Medieval**

3.3.1. There is no archaeological or documentary evidence for pre-Conquest occupation at Morpeth. The earliest evidence for a settlement at Morpeth is from 1080 when William I granted the barony of Morpeth to one of his followers, William de Merlay. The evidence is in the form of an earthwork castle on Haw Hill. It is believed that the castle was built by de Merlay after he acquired the barony. It is not certain when settlement began to the north of the River Wansbeck but it was probably before 1199 when a charter to hold a regular market was granted to the de Merlays.

3.3.2. Morpeth was burnt in 1216 when King John was marching against the rebellious northern barons. The Melrose Chronicle provides an account of the battles and the destruction that was inflicted on the town (Hodgson 1832a, 117 cited in Northumberland County Council, 2009, 8). Possibly soon after 1216, another castle was built on a site close to Haw Hill. While both the castle and the church were located on the south side of the river, almost all residential settlement on this side disappeared and reappeared on the north bank that was reached by a two arched stone bridge. The three main streets in Morpeth, Bridge Street, Oldgate and Newgate all radiated from the Market Place and remains the main streets of the town to this day. Although Morpeth has expanded, its historic core highlights its Medieval origins (Northumberland County Council, 2009, 8).

3.3.3. Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries there was little development of the town and the castle suffered extensive damage in 1644 from cannon fire during the Civil War siege. In 1689, fire destroyed a large number of properties and many were rebuilt in stone.

### **3.4. Post Medieval**

3.4.1. Morpeth developed an important role as a livestock market in the late Medieval/Post-Medieval period as it served the majority of the surrounding rural areas. Cattle and other livestock were droved to the town from Scotland and Northumberland where they were sold on. Morpeth's reputation as a livestock market was well known as Samuel Simpson, writing his *Compleat English Traveller* in 1746, described Morpeth's cattle market as 'the greatest for live cattle excepting Smithfield' (Northumberland County Council, 2009, 9). Its location on the Great North Road also meant that Morpeth became an important stop for coaches travelling along the route. Both the cattle market and its location along the busy coach route meant that there was a demand for more inns however Morpeth never became a successful industrial town as its tanning and cloth industries declined and practically disappeared throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Northumberland County Council, 2009, 9). Post-Medieval Morpeth would not have looked too different from the town during the late Medieval period as growth halted and the population froze at around 4000. The livestock market of Morpeth declined and Newcastle's railway allowed it to become the new regional market. Most recently, Morpeth has become an important administrative centre for the county but also a popular place to live.

## 4. RESULTS

4.1. The stratigraphy of the trench along Bridge Street varied from the eastern end to the western end. Towards the eastern end of Bridge Street, the track was dug through road tarmac (001) with a depth of 0.1m. Below this was the makeup of the modern road consisting of grey angular stone chippings (002) with a depth of 0.35m. A previous road surface consisting of a thin layer of tarmac (010) was observed below the modern road makeup. Orange/yellow clay made ground (003) existed with a depth of approximately 0.5m below the previous road surface and above brown/black natural alluvial clay (004) that continued beyond the limit of the excavation (fig.4). This series of deposits appeared to indicate that the western extent of Bridge Street has been successively raised in level.

4.2. Towards the western end of Bridge Street the majority of the track for the new water supply was dug through a layer of road tarmac (001) with a depth of 0.1m. Below this was the modern road makeup consisting of grey chippings (002) with a depth of 0.35m and then natural sand and cobbles (011) with a depth of 0.5m. Natural orange/yellow alluvial clay (004) existed below this and continued beyond the limits of the excavation (fig.5). In the area immediately adjacent to the marketplace the ground appeared to have been levelled or lowered meaning that the modern layer of road tarmac (001) and the modern road makeup consisting of grey chippings (002) sat immediately above the natural alluvial sand and cobbles (011).

4.3. During the watching brief a series of flat stones were discovered running along the base of the excavated track approximately 1.2m deep. Upon inspection these stones were found to be capping a brick lined drain that was running along Bridge Street. A typical section of drain was cleaned and recorded during the watching brief and was centred roughly at NZ 19987 85929. Flat capstones measuring on average 0.3m x 0.3m x 0.04m (005) were sitting on top of two rows of two courses of red hand-made bricks (012) that were lining the sides of the drain (figs.6 and 7). The bricks measured 0.23m x 0.12m x 0.06m and were laid with a stretcher bond and no mortar between them, just sand. These bricks themselves were sitting upon more flat stones that formed the base of the drain (013). A repair to the drain was also observed, whereby a section of drain approximately 1m in length had been exposed, partially deconstructed, and then replaced roughly re-using the original materials (009) (fig.8).

4.4. Also discovered during the watching brief was a small section of stone wall (fig.9). Previous groundworks had destroyed most of the wall, however, so that only 2 courses of the wall foundation remained. The wall was constructed using roughly squared sandstone blocks of various sizes that were resting upon a large flat sandstone slab (006). There was a possible sandy mortar between the stones that had degraded to a sandy material (007). A number of finds were recovered from the material both in and around the stones. These included lengths of clay pipe stem, sherds of pottery and pieces of glass.

4.5. In one of the many service trenches that were dug at right angles from the main track towards the building frontages was a small section of stone built drain. This consisted of a large flat sandstone slab sitting on top of another slab (014) that had been placed on its side. It is believed that this was an offshoot of the main drain (fig.10).



## **5. CONCLUSION**

5.1. The stone lined drain and associated offshoot discovered on Bridge Street are thought to date to the Post-Medieval period. The bricks used to line the sides of the drain were not produced any earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The small section of stone wall also discovered in the trench is believed to date to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The clay pipe, pottery and glass all discovered in and around the wall confirm this date.

5.2. The difference in stratigraphy between the western end of Bridge Street and the eastern end is likely due to successive levelling of the roadway at various points in the past. This has led to the apparent removal of deposits in the area surrounding the marketplace and the building-up of deposits at the eastern extent of Bridge Street. The nature of the deposits would therefore suggest that a greater potential for the survival of archaeological remains exists towards the eastern extent of Bridge Street, although any remains are likely to be significantly affected by successive service and drainage works.

## **6. PUBLICITY, CONFIDENTIALITY AND COPYRIGHT**

6.1. Any publicity will be handled by the client.

6.2. Archaeological Research Services Ltd will retain the copyright of all documentary and photographic material under the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act (1988).

## **7. STATEMENT OF INDEMNITY**

7.1 All statements and opinions contained within this report arising from the works undertaken are offered 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.

## **8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

8.1. Archaeological Research Services Ltd would like to thank all those involved in this project, in particular Ben Ralston of Northumbrian Water and Nick Best of Northumberland County Council.

## **9. REFERENCES**

Northumberland County Council, 2009. *Morpeth, Northumberland Extensive Urban Survey*

Websites

British Geological Survey

<http://www.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/index.htm>

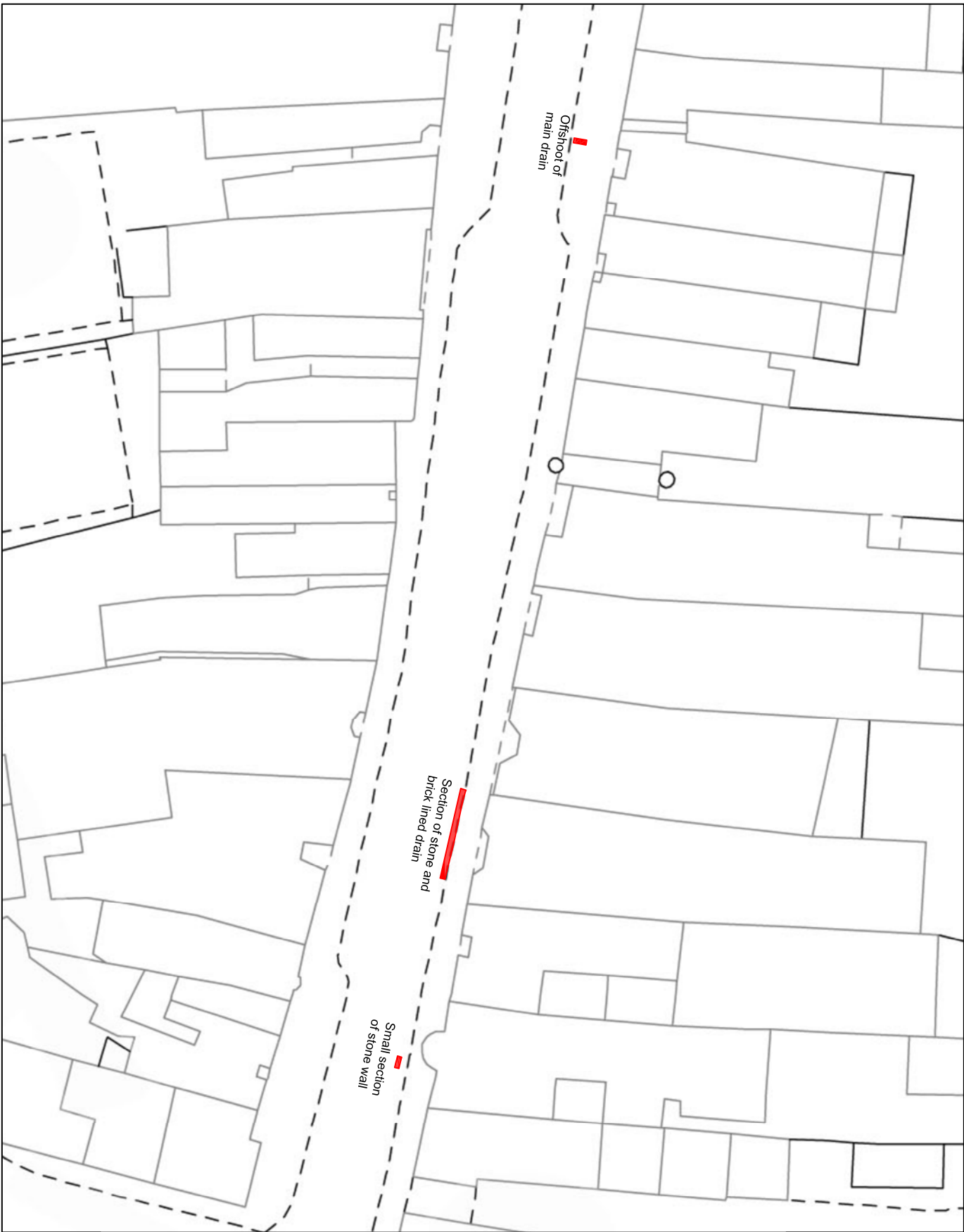


Figure 2:

A plan of Bridge Street in Morpeth showing the locations of recorded archaeological features

Scale = 1:500 at A4

Key:



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**Fig3**



Figure 4. Stratigraphy of the trench towards the eastern end of Bridge Street



Figure 5. Stratigraphy of the trench towards the western end of Bridge Street



Figure 6. Section of trench showing stone lined drain running along the base of the trench. Scale = 2m.



Figure 7. Bricks and stones lining sides and base of drain. Scale = 1m.



Figure 8. Photograph showing the repair to the drain using bricks. Scale = 1m.



Figure 9. The small section of sandstone wall foundation. Scale = 1m.



Figure 10. Small offshoot of drain. Scale = 1m.

## APPENDIX II: CONTEXT AND FINDS REGISTERS

### Context Registers

#### Bridge Street

Context No.	Context Description	Provisional date
001	Tarmac	Modern
002	Modern road makeup- grey chippings	Modern
003	Clayey made ground	Modern
004	Natural alluvial clay	-
005	Drain capstones	19 <sup>th</sup> century
006	Wall masonry	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century
007	Sandy material between stones	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century
008	Cut of drain	19 <sup>th</sup> century
009	Brick repair	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century
010	Previous road surface	Modern
011	Sand and cobbles	-
012	Bricks lining sides of drain	19 <sup>th</sup> century
013	Flat stones lining base of drain	19 <sup>th</sup> century
014	Stones of offshoot	19 <sup>th</sup> century

#### Finds Register

Find No.	Description	Context	Provisional date
1	5 small lengths of clay pipe stem	007	19 <sup>th</sup> century
2	Sherd of pottery?	007	19 <sup>th</sup> century
3	Sherd of pottery	007	19 <sup>th</sup> century
4	3 pieces of green glass	007	19 <sup>th</sup> century