

An Archaeological Watching Brief at Cresswell Tower House, Northumberland



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Contents

	List of Illustrations.....	
	Executive Summary.....	2
1.	Introduction.....	3
2.	Location and Geology.....	4
3.	Historical and Archaeological Background.....	4
4.	Aims and Objectives.....	6
5.	Methodology.....	6
6.	Results.....	6
7.	Summary and Recommendations.....	13
8.	Publicity, Confidentiality and Copyright.....	13
9.	Statement of Indemnity.....	13
10.	Acknowledgments.....	13
11.	References.....	14

List of Illustrations

1	Site location.....	3
2	Detailed Site Location.....	4
3	The appearance of the first-floor level of the tower prior to clearance works, looking west.....	8
4	The first-floor during clearance of deposit (001), looking north-west.....	8
5	Pre-excavation photograph of a collection of faunal remains within deposit (001).....	9
6	The first-floor level following clearance, showing the flag-stone surface (002), looking south-east (scale = 2m + 1m).....	9
7	The first-floor level following clearance (scale = 2m + 1m).....	10
8	The brick and stone repair (004) adjacent to the slop hole in the south wall (scale = 1m).....	11
9	Extent of the surviving stone floor (002) in relation to the evidence in the south wall of a timber partition (scale = 1m).....	11
10	Extent of the surviving stone floor (002) in relation to the evidence in the north wall of a timber partition (scale = 1m).....	11
11	Rough rubble base to the west and south walls of the western chamber, marking the height of the previous floor level which must have been above the rubble section. Note also the height of the entrance to the latrine chamber. This floor level would have been higher than the level of the flag-stone floor in the eastern chamber (scale = 1m).....	12
12	Set-back section (005) in the centre of the westernmost extent of the flag- stone floor (002) marking the location of a possible entrance into the western chamber which most likely original had a stone step at this point.....	12

Executive Summary

In May 2014 Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) was commissioned by Napper Architects to carry out an archaeological watching brief at Cresswell Tower House, Northumberland, as part of a conservation programme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The tower is a Scheduled Monument and Grade II Listed Building. The work was undertaken through Scheduled Monument Consent (Ref: S00087146).*

The watching brief monitored the removal of a build-up of debris, soil and vegetation at first-floor level above the ground floor vault. This revealed the partial remains of a flag-stone surface across a large proportion of the first-floor level. This had been robbed out in the south-east corner and across the western end of the chamber. The western end of the chamber appears to have been originally partitioned off as a separate room and evidence of such a partition is contained within the walls of the structure and within the surviving flag-stone floor. The floor level in the western chamber appears to have been higher than that of the flag-stone floor, but no evidence of the original flooring material remains.

The flag-stone floor and the evidence of a partition were photographically recorded as part of the watching brief. It is recommended that a drawn record is made of the floor surface and the packing material around the vault should there be any proposed impacts upon these features as part of ongoing works. The packing material was not fully exposed during the watching brief, and the small exposed area has been re-covered for protection. It is recommended that any further clearance works down onto the packing material should be conducted using detailed archaeological methods. This will allow for a full understanding of the profile and character of the packing material and its stratigraphic relationship with the flag-stone surface. Any lifting of the flag-stone surface should also be carried out under archaeological supervision, with the specific aim of recovering dating evidence for the floor surface.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In June 2014 Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) was commissioned by Napper Architects to carry out an archaeological watching brief at Cresswell Tower House, Northumberland during the removal of an accumulation of debris, soil and vegetation on top of the tower's ground floor vault at first-floor level. Cresswell Tower House is a Scheduled Monument (NHLE: 1014509) and a Grade II* Listed Building (NHLE: 1042148). The works took place as part of an initial programme of conservation works, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The build-up of debris and soil was removed to allow for inspection of the condition of the vault. The work was undertaken with Scheduled Monument Consent (Ref: S00087146).

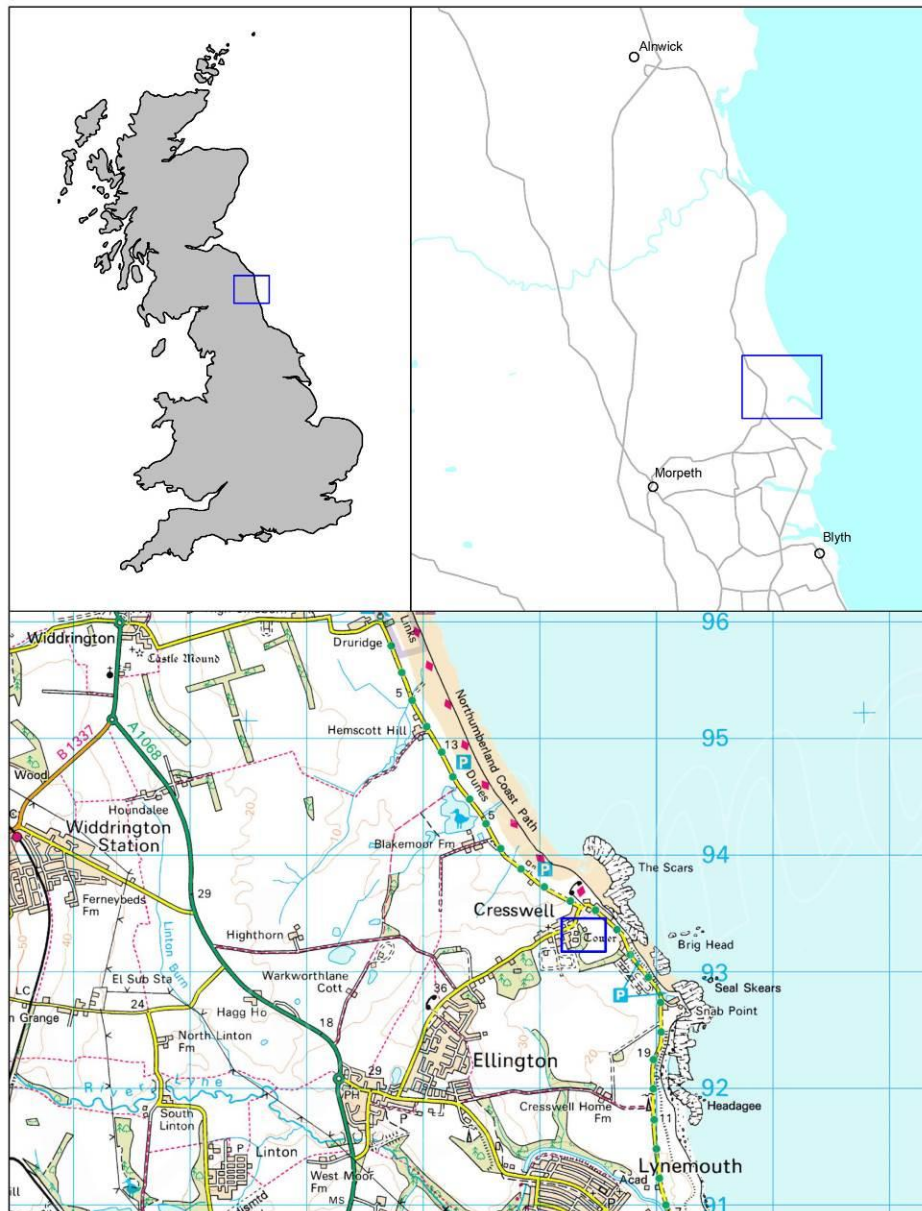


Figure 1. Site location (Ordnance Survey data copyright OS, reproduced by permission, Licence no. 100045420)

2. LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

2.1 The site is located in Cresswell, Northumberland, centred at NZ 29364 93356, at the south end of Druridge Bay. The solid geology of the area is Pennine Middle Coal Measures-Mudstone. The overlying drift geology comprises Devensian Till (British Geological Survey 2014).

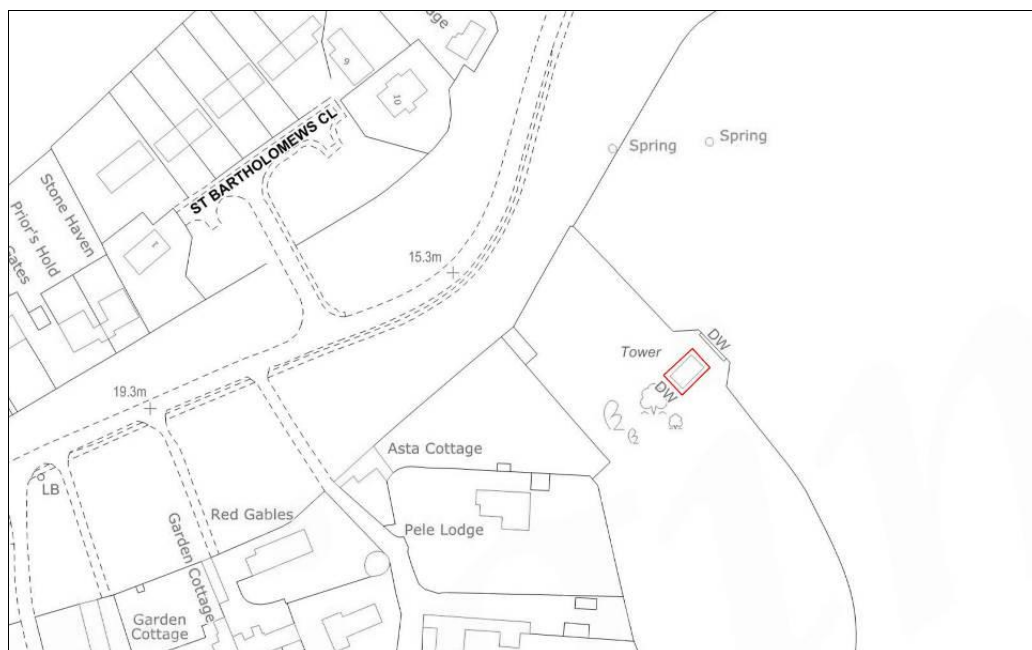


Figure 2: Detailed site location (Ordnance Survey data copyright OS, reproduced by permission, Licence no. 100045420)

3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Cresswell Tower House is a Scheduled Monument (NHLE: 1014509) and Grade II* Listed Building (NHLE: 1042148). It was surveyed by Peter Ryder as part of a conservation programme undertaken in 2000 (Ryder 2003), but has not otherwise been the subject of an archaeological investigation.

3.2 The Scheduled Monument Description for the site reads:

Cresswell tower house is an unusually complete example of a tower house which is in good condition.

The monument includes a medieval tower house situated within the grounds of Cresswell Towers Caravan Park on the Northumberland coast. It was formerly the seat of the Cresswell family. A large 18th century house was once built on to the north end of the tower and was demolished in the mid 19th century. This house was replaced by Cresswell Hall built in 1821-5, lying some distance further west. This was in turn demolished in 1937. The tower, which is Listed Grade II, is now an isolated structure set within woodland. The only trace of the former mansion is its roof groove on the north wall of the tower. The medieval tower is 15th century in date, with an 18th century parapet and turret, and is a rectangular structure measuring 12.5m by 8.5m externally, its long axis running north east to south west. The structure is built of coursed and squared stone and the parapet and battlements are of high quality close jointed stone work. The north elevation of the tower, formerly adjoined by the 18th century house, is the most complex elevation. Set east of the centre at basement level is a doorway with a segmental pointed arch, with a double chamfered surround. The arched doorway is of medieval*

character, but its relationship with the surrounding stonework suggests that it may be a later insertion. At first floor level is a similar, but wider doorway that looks to be an original feature; west of it are the remains of a window. At the west end of the wall, and set a little lower, is another blocked doorway which had a quadrant-shaped head and a chamfered surround. Above the principal blocked first-floor doorway are a series of sockets marking the position of the attic floor of the 18th century house, and then a series of infilled vertical slots indicating the positions of former corbels carrying a machicolated projection protecting the doorways below. East of these is a single light square headed window with a chamfered surround and a second similar window just above the roof line of the removed house, further west. At the north east corner of the parapet is a taller turret, carried on shallow corbels, with a groove marking the roof line of the former house cut across its north face. The east end of the tower has a central chamfered loop, and, further to the north, a vesica shaped opening cut through a single slab, lighting the newel stair. There are larger chamfered square headed windows at first and second floor levels and another corbelled out turret at the south east corner, although this one does not rise above the general height of the embattled parapet. The south wall has no openings at basement level. At first floor level is a sizeable square headed window with a chamfered surround, formerly with a mullion and transom, a projecting stone spout and a tiny loop. At second floor level there are smaller chamfered windows towards each end of the wall, as on the north. A corbelled out projection at parapet level appears to be the base of a chimney. The only opening on the west side is a chamfered loop to the basement, set centrally. At parapet level are two corbelled out projections, the northern probably a chimney.

The interior is currently inaccessible, however previous sources have depicted the basement with a pointed tunnel vault, with a square projection at the north east corner housing the newel stair, and a wall cupboard at the west end. At first floor level there is a fireplace with segmental pointed arches in both south and west walls, an L-plan mural garderobe at the west end of the south wall and a wall cupboard in the west wall. At second floor level there are fewer features. In the west wall is a cupboard or aumbry with an arched head. Sources from earlier this century claim that an inscription on the internal lintel and jambs of a window in the north east turret read 'William Cresswell, brave hero'.

(NHLE: 1014509)

3.3 The Listed Building Description for the site reads:

Towerhouse, probably C14; embattled parapet early C18. Squared stone with dressings. Rectangular plan, 3 storeys. Segmental pointed doorways to ground and 1st floors on north, the upper being the original entrance (traces of machicolated projection above). Windows mostly rectangular chamfered loops, except for ground floor vesica on east and larger C17 window, formerly with mullion and transom, on 1st floor south. All openings to lower floors blocked at time of survey. Corbelled-out turrets at eastern angles, smaller corbelled projections at parapet level on south and west.

Interior: Ground floor has barrel vault. Newel stair at north-east corner. Contemporary fireplaces, mural recesses and garderobe.

The medieval tower of the Cresswells; an adjacent 'mansion house' on the north was built in the early C18 and demolished in the C19.

(NHLE: 1042148)

3.4 Peter Ryder's survey of the tower followed the opening up of blocked access on the ground floor allowing for inspection of the tower's interior. The survey includes drawn plans, cross sections and elevations of all walls and it provides a detailed description of the fabric and historical development of the building (Ryder 2003). Ryder argues that the first-floor level was divided into rooms based on the presence of two fireplaces at this level and

the presence of two small ‘cut-outs’ at the heads of the west jambs of the large windows in the north and south walls, which would carry the top rail of a timber partition (Ryder 2003, 76-77). Ryder describes the floor surface of the first-floor as consisting of ‘stone slabs (robbed in places), with some repair and brick patching which are presumably of the same period’ (Ryder 2003, 76). Ryder did not provide a drawing of the floor surface and it is unclear how much of the surface he was able to survey.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

4.1 The purpose of the watching brief was to ensure that important archaeological remains were not destroyed during the clearance works and to provide a record of the works undertaken.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 The build-up of debris, soil and vegetation was removed by hand under the direct supervision of a qualified archaeologist from ARS Ltd. This involved clearing down onto the existing flagged-stone floor surface using shovels and spades. The material removed was inspected by the on-site archaeologist and the resultant floor surface was cleaned and photographed.

5.2 A photographic record was maintained. All images were taken in black and white print, and digital format, and contained a graduated photographic scale. The main photographic archive will comprise 35mm b/w SLR print film, supplemented by digital SLR (minimum 12 megapixels).

5.3 All archaeological fieldwork, recording of archaeological features and deposits and post-excavation analysis was carried out to acceptable standards as set out in the Institute for Archaeologists’ *Code of Practice* (2010) and *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (2008).

6. RESULTS

6.1 The first floor chamber was covered with dense vegetation (Figure 3) which was cut down and removed by hand. A dark brown silty clay deposit (001), containing frequent slate roof tiles and ceramic chimney pot fragments, was removed by hand (Figures 4). This deposit (001) varied in depth from c.0.04m at the eastern entrance into the chamber, to c.0.28m at the west end of the chamber. Artefactual remains within this deposit (001) were largely limited to modern objects such as plastic bottle-tops, a spanner and glass bottles. Towards the south-west corner of the chamber, the greater depth of deposit (001) contained a collection of animal bones from horse, cow and sheep/goat (Figure 5), which were removed up to the limit of excavation. A fragment of post-medieval-modern pottery was recovered amongst the bones, indicating that they were deposited after the floor was removed in this area.

6.2 Deposit (001) overlay a flag-stone surface (002) over much of the area of the first-floor level. The surface (002) consisted of square and rectangular flag stones of sizes varying from 0.25m x 0.25m to 0.7m x 0.8m (Figure 6 and 7). The flag-stone floor (002) only

survived in part, with significant robbed-out areas noted in the south-east corner of the chamber and across the western end of the chamber. In the areas of stone robbing a nominal limit of excavation was set at the level of the flag-stones meaning that a shallow depth of deposit (001) was retained *in-situ* in these areas. Against the west wall of the tower a small area of (001) was removed in order to characterise the deposits beneath. This revealed an area of compacted sandstone blocks and chips set within a sandy matrix (003) which is likely to be the material packed in around the top of the vault to level the area and form a bedding layer for the floor. This area was immediately re-covered with a thin layer of deposit (001) for protection. The flag-stone surface (002) formed the limit of excavation elsewhere and was retained *in-situ*.

6.3 The surviving area of flag-stone surfacing (002) contains a brick and stone repair (004) adjacent to the slop hole in the south wall. This consists of six hand-made bricks laid flat and two new or re-laid stone slabs (Figure 8). The flag-stone floor (002) and the walls of the tower also contain evidence that corroborates Ryder's argument for a partition of this level into two rooms. Ryder suggested that the westernmost 3.5m of the first floor were partitioned off using a timber screen to form a separate chamber (Ryder 2003, 77). This area corresponds almost exactly with the extent of the robbed-out area at the western end of the first-floor level (Figures 9 and 10), suggesting that the floor surfacing of the entire western chamber was removed, whilst the floor of the eastern chamber was retained. Further to this, it appears that the floor level of the western chamber was higher than the floor level of the eastern chamber (represented by the flag-stone surface 002). This is evidenced by the height of the entrance into the latrine chamber at the west end of the south wall and by the rough rubble base to the walls on the north, west and south sides of the tower (Figure 11), which must have been hidden beneath the floor level originally. There is no such rough stonework visible at this level in the eastern chamber, where the walls' facing stones continue down to the flag-stone floor (002). The final piece of evidence relating to the partition is found at the centre of the westernmost extent of the surviving flag-stone floor (002), where there is a set-back section (005) of the flag-stone floor (Figure 12), potentially marking the location of the doorway into the western chamber. This set-back section (005) would be exactly central in the partition and the recess formed by the set-back section most likely marks the location of a robbed-out stone step, which would have given access up into the higher floor level of the western chamber. No evidence survives of the form of the floor of the westernmost chamber, however, the fact that it was removed in preference to the flag-stone floor (002) of the eastern chamber suggests that it may have been of higher quality, or of more useful materials, than the flag-stone in the eastern room, possibly ceramic tiles or timber.

6.4 The flag-stone surface (002) was not excavated so it has not been possible to ascertain its date. However the presence of the set-back section of flooring (005) marking the possible entrance into the westernmost chamber, indicates that the flooring (002) was in place whilst the timber partition was still in operation. It appears likely, therefore, that the flag-stone surface (002) is an original 15th century floor, however further excavation would be required to confirm this.



Figure 3: The appearance of the first-floor level of the tower prior to clearance works, looking west (Photograph Barry Mead).



Figure 4: The first-floor during clearance of deposit (001), looking north-west.



Figure 5: Pre-excavation photograph of a collection of faunal remains within deposit (001) (scale = 0.25m).



Figure 6: The first-floor level following clearance, showing the flag-stone surface (002), looking south-east (scale = 2m + 1m).



Figure 7: The first-floor level following clearance (scale = 2m + 1m).



Figure 8: The brick and stone repair (004) adjacent to the slop hole in the south wall (scale = 1m).



Figure 9: Extent of the surviving stone floor (002) in relation to the evidence in the south wall of a timber partition (scale = 1m).



Figure 10: Extent of the surviving stone floor (002) in relation to the evidence in the north wall of a timber partition (scale = 1m).



Figure 11: Rough rubble base to the west and south walls of the western chamber, marking the height of the previous floor level which must have been above the rubble section. Note also the height of the entrance to the latrine chamber. This floor level would have been higher than the level of the flag-stone floor in the eastern chamber (scale = 1m).



Figure 12: Set-back section (005) in the centre of the westernmost extent of the flag-stone floor (002) marking the location of a possible entrance into the western chamber which most likely original had a stone step at this point (scale = 1m).

7. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 The watching brief exposed the partial remains of a flag-stone surface (002) across a large proportion of the first-floor level. This had been robbed out in the south-east corner and across the western end of the chamber. The western end of the chamber appears to have been originally partitioned off as a separate room and evidence of such a partition is contained within the walls of the structure and within the surviving flag-stone floor (002). The floor level in the western chamber appears to have been higher than that of the flag-stone floor (002), but no evidence of the original flooring material remains

7.2 The flag-stone floor (002) and the evidence of a partition were photographically recorded as part of the watching brief. It is recommended that a drawn record is made of the floor surface (002) and the packing material around the vault (003) should there be any proposed impacts upon these features as part of ongoing works. Deposit (003) was not fully exposed during the watching brief, and the small exposed area has been re-covered for protection. It is recommended that any further removal of deposit (001) down onto deposit (003) should be conducted using detailed archaeological methods. This will allow for a full understanding of the profile and character of (003) and its stratigraphic relationship with the flag-stone surface (002). Any lifting of the flag-stone surface should also be carried out under archaeological supervision, with the specific aim of recovering dating evidence for the floor surface.

8. PUBLICITY, CONFIDENTIALITY AND COPYRIGHT

8.1 Any publicity will be handled by the client.

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

9. STATEMENT OF INDEMNITY

9.1 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.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

10.1 Archaeological Research Services Ltd would like to thank all those involved with this work in particular John Curtis of Napper Architects for commissioning the work, Michael Wright from MKW Engineering, and Barry Mead for assistance on site. Thanks are also due to Rob Young and Tom Gledhill of English Heritage for approving Scheduled Monument Consent and providing necessary guidance.

11. REFERENCES

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