An Archaeological Watching Brief at Corstopitum, Corbridge

General shot of trench, looking west

Archaeological Research Services Ltd Report 2008/40
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2007 Archaeological Research Services Ltd were commissioned by British Telecom to undertake phase one of an archaeological watching brief near the site of Corstopitum Roman Station in Corbridge, Northumberland. The monitoring was carried out during ground works for the installation of underground ducting to carry a telecommunications cable on land within public roads close to the Roman Station. A shallow, modern dry-stone wall and a modern plough blade were the only finds recovered from the narrow installation trench.

In May 2008 Archaeological Research Services returned to the site at Corbridge to monitor the second phase of the work. The ground works were monitored but no archaeological remains of national importance, survived in the study area.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Location and scope of work

1.1.1. In September 2007 Archaeological Research Services Ltd were commissioned by British Telecom to undertake an archaeological watching brief on land close to Corstopitum Roman Station in Corbridge, Northumberland (Fig. 1). The second phase of this watching brief took place in May 2008. The following report discusses the work carried out in 2007 and the continuation of this work in 2008.

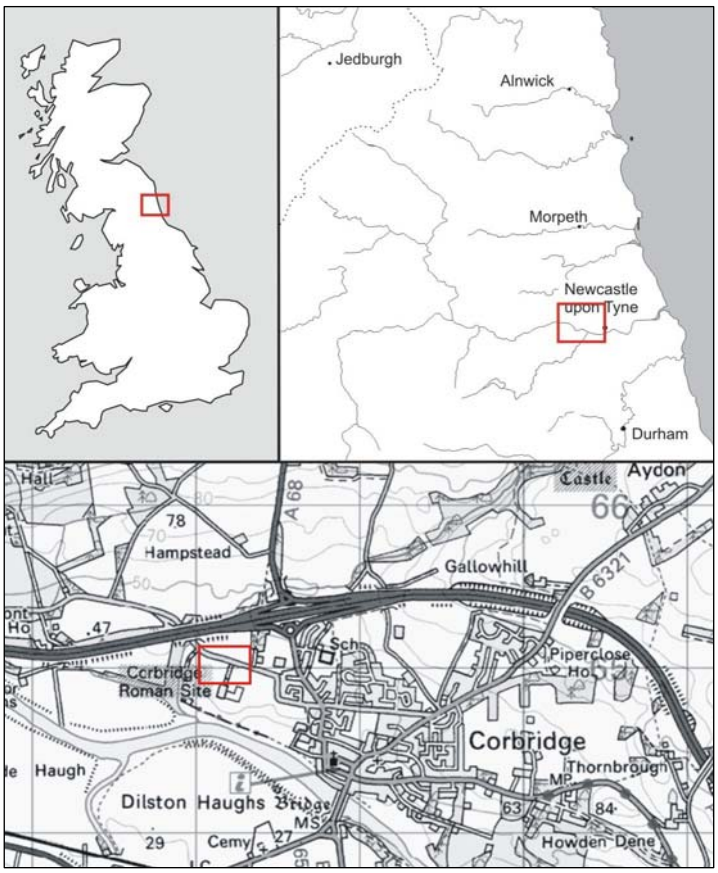

Fig. 1 Site location Ordnance Survey data copyright OS, reproduced by permission, Licence no. 100045420

1.1.2. The site is centred at NY982650 on the second river terrace of the north bank of the Tyne at approximately 45m aOD. The site lies to the west of modern day Corbridge on a slight promontory to the east and south of the Cor Burn. It is strategically situated at the junction of Dere Street and the Stanegate, approximately 4km south of Hadrian's Wall.

1.1.3. The overall aims of the watching brief were to establish the presence or absence of archaeological features along with their nature, depth and character, and to determine if the development would impact on such remains.

1.2. Geology

1.2.1. The solid geology of the site consists of Carboniferous, Namurian Millstone Grit Series and the drift geology consists of undifferentiated river terrace deposits and till (British Geological Survey 2007).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The first trench measured 20m long, 0.2m wide and 0.35m in depth, with a single 1m square junction box on the east side of the trench. The trench was excavated with a mini mechanical digger utilising a 0.2m wide bucket. The second phase of the work involved the digging of a 2.5m long trench (from the original junction box), which was 0.2m wide and 0.34m deep and ended with the construction of another 1m square junction box.

2.2. The ground works were monitored by an archaeologist from Archaeological Research Services Ltd in order to identify any features of archaeological importance that may have been revealed during the process.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Prehistoric

3.1.1. The archaeology of Corbridge parish is dominated by two settlements, the Roman garrison town of Corstopitum and the later Medieval town of Corbridge, which is located slightly further east. However, the earliest remains found in Corbridge date as far back as the Mesolithic Period. Flint tools dating from this period have been discovered in the vicinity of Shorden Brae (Davies 1983), Cairstron Field (Miket and Burgess 1984), Red House (*ibid.*), and Gallowhill (Weyman 1975). At Gallowhill over 40 flint tools were found and it is thought that this may have been a tool production site (*ibid.*). The number of prehistoric sites and finds around Corbridge suggests that the valley of the River Tyne may have been an important route along which communication and movement occurred during this period, as well as being an attractive place to settle.

3.2. Romano-British

3.2.1. The extensive remains of a major Roman town and supply base for Hadrian's Wall stand just west of the present village of Corbridge. It is thought that the earliest structure was a timber supply base located 1km to the west of the study area at Beayfront Red House and was probably built by Agricola in the first century AD before Hadrian's Wall was built (Richmond and Gillam 1955). By the mid 80's AD occupation shifted slightly eastwards and the primary turf and timber fort at the site of Corstopitum was built, protecting Dere Street, the main road from York to Scotland, where it crossed the River Tyne. This was subsequently reduced in size before being abandoned around AD 103. The fort was rebuilt several times and in AD 139 stone was employed for the first time,

for at least some of the central range buildings. After Hadrian's Wall was built to the north of the Stanegate in the second century AD, forts behind the wall became redundant. However, Corbridge lay on Dere Street and guarded the main supply route north to Scotland. When Antoninus Pius re-advanced into Scotland in AD 142, he constructed a turf-wall known as the Antonine Wall on the Forth-Clyde line. Corbridge became a significant point on the supply lines of the new frontier and new fort buildings were constructed there. At the same time other forts on Dere Street were re-commissioned and the road was fitted with milestones. Corbridge remained strategically important due to its location at a crossing point on the Tyne and also at the junction of the Stanegate and Dere Street, two principal Roman roads. The remains of the Roman Bridge which carried Dere Street over the River Tyne can still be seen in the riverbed immediately to the south of the Roman town.

3.2.2. At least five forts were laid out on the site over the years, largely keeping within the existing ramparts and ditches (Richmond and Gillam 1955). The developments continued until about AD163 and when the Antonine frontier in Scotland was abandoned the fort saw a drastic change in appearance. The ramparts were levelled and most of the buildings were demolished, the granaries were rebuilt, and a large courtyard building and an elaborate aqueduct and fountain were built. However, excavations have shown that these ambitious plans proceeded little further than foundation stages before being abandoned (*ibid.*). Other developments took place to the south with small properties including a pottery shop or warehouse, possible workshops, administrative block and substantial houses. The military vicus was enclosed within defences and a large civilian settlement grew up around the military site. By the mid-second century the fort was a defended market town and by the third century two separate enclosed compounds were built in the centre of Corbridge for the manufacture of arms and equipment for the army.

3.2.3. In addition to the Roman remains in the area, round the town of Corbridge, a number of small farmsteads or settlements existed in more rural locations. At Thornbrough Scar a settlement of six round houses was excavated. The settlement is thought to have been used by native Briton's until the second century AD (McCord and Jobey 1968). Nearby at High Barns, another settlement, now partially destroyed by the main road, is also thought to be Roman in date (Jobey 1960).

Fig 2. site plan

4. RESULTS

4.1 The first phase trench was orientated northwest - southeast parallel to the road for 10m, then continued west to the junction box for a further 10m (Fig. 2). The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.35m and 0.2m in width. A 1m square extension to the trench was situated at the eastern end (Fig. 3).

4.2 The overburden consisted of asphalt to a maximum depth of 0.12m, with a thin inconsistent layer of hardcore visible in the section below the asphalt. The layer below consisted of brown silty-sand (7.5YR 4/3) with large (less then 0.12m) sandstone rocks. The layer below this was the natural, a brown silty-sand (7.5YR 4/2), slightly greyer and more silty than the layer above.

4.3 In the western end of the trench a shallow dry-stone wall, approximately 0.5m in width, with faced stones lay directly under the asphalt, cutting across the trench from east to west, parallel to the road. This was interpreted as the remnants of a modern field boundary (Fig. 4). The alignment with the modern road, the clean edges still on the sandstone and the shallow nature of the wall made it apparent that it was a modern feature. There were no remains of *opus caementicum* (pink concrete) or archaeological deposits associated with the modern wall and at the same level a late 19th or early 20th century plough-head was recovered (Fig. 4, 5 and 6), presumably discarded at the edge of the field.

4.4 The second phase trench ran northwest south east parallel with the road for 2.5m, starting at the first phase junction box, until reaching the area for the second phase junction box (fig. 7). The trench (figs. 8 & 9) was 0.2m wide with a depth of 0.35m. The area of the junction box was 1m squared with a depth of 0.45m. The over burden consisted of grassed topsoil down to a depth of 0.45m**.**

Fig. 3 Eastern end of trench, facing west, showing one meter square extension, scale = 1m

Fig. 4 Section of slit trench, facing east, blocks of stone from wall had been removed and piled next to where they were extracted. Plough-head shown in relation to dry-stone wall, scale = 1m.

Fig. 5 Plough head, scale = 0.25m by 0.15m

Fig. 6 Plough head reverse, scale = 0.25m by 0.15m

Fig. 7 Second phase junction box with pre-existing cables

Fig. 8 Second phase trench showing pre-existing cable

Fig. 9 Second phase trench showing link up with first phase junction box.

5. Discussion

5.1. Neither phase of the work carried out at Corstopitum turned up any finds of archaeological importance. The lack of archaeology may be due to both the shallowness of the excavation and former groundwork within the study area which could potentially have destroyed any remaining evidence.

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 Sean Heslop of British Telecom.

9. REFERENCES

Davies, J. 1983. *Northern Archaeology* Vol 4 Part 2

Jobey, G., 1960. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th Series 38:18,35.

McCord, N. and Jobey, G., 1968. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th Series 46: 61

Miket, R. and Burgess, C. (eds.) 1984. *Beyond and Between the Walls*. Edinburgh

Richmond, I. A. and Gillam, J. P. 1955. Some excavations at Corbridge 1952-1954. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th Series 33:218-52.

Weyman, J., 1975. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th Series 3: 219-21

Websites

British Geological Survey www.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/index.htm

APPENDIX I: CONTEXT REGISTER

Context No.	Description
001	Asphalt and hardcore
002	Subsoil – brown silty-sand (7.5YR 4/3) with sandstone inclusions
003	Natural – brown silty-sand (7.5YR 4/2) with sandstone inclusions

APPENDIX II: PHOTOGRAPHIC REGISTER

Film One: Black and white print

Shot No.	Description
1	Eastern end of trench, looking west, scale = 1m
2	Eastern end of trench, looking west, scale = 1m
3	Section of dry-stone wall and plough head
4	Section of dry-stone wall and plough head
5	General working shot

Film Two: Colour transparency

Shot No.	Description
1	Eastern end of trench, looking west, scale = 1m
2	Eastern end of trench, looking west, scale = 1m
3	Section of dry-stone wall and plough head
4	Section of dry-stone wall and plough head
5	General working shot

APPENDIX III: SPECIFICATION

Watching Brief at Corstopitum Roman Station, Northumberland

1. Introduction

1.1. An application has been made by British Telecom for scheduled monument consent for the installation of underground ducting, to carry a telecommunications cable, on land within public roads close to Corstopitum Roman Station, Northumberland. This project design details the works to be undertaken during an archaeological watching brief at the site in accordance with discussion with Kate Wilson of English Heritage.

1.2. The route of the proposed development is centred at NY982650, to the north of Corstopitum. There have been no previously recorded archaeological works on this site.

1.3. The works lie within the legally protected scheduled monument area of Corstopitum. British Telecom have secured permission from the Secretary of State to carry out the work with the proviso that an archaeologist is present at all stages of the ground work.

2. Site Specific Requirements

2.1. The client for this work is British Telecom who are proposing to install telecommunications ducting. The client has provided a plan of the layout of the ducting.

2.2 The work to be undertaken is an archaeological watching brief which aims to ascertain whether there are any archaeological constraints which may affect the proposed development. This will be done by establishing the presence or absence of archaeological remains, their quality, depth and preservation. The overall aim of the watching brief will be:

- to establish the presence/absence, nature, depth and character of any possible archaeological features
- to make suggestions, where possible, about further mitigation which may be necessary to preserve archaeological features *in situ*, or
- to make suggestions to preserve archaeological features by record, where necessary
- to determine if further archaeological interventions are required

2.2. Should archaeology be discovered a course of action will be discussed with Kate Wilson of English Heritage and approved prior to further work being undertaken on the site.

3. Project Management and Standards

3.1. The project will be carried out in compliance with the codes of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) (2000) and will follow the IFA Standard and Guidance for Excavations (1995).

3.2. All staff employed on the project will be suitably qualified and experienced for their respective project roles and have practical experience of archaeological excavation and recording. All staff will be made aware of the archaeological importance of the area surrounding the site and will be fully briefed on the work required by this specification. Each member of staff will be fully conversant with the aims and methodologies and will be given a copy of this written scheme of investigation to read. All members of staff employed by Archaeological Research Services Ltd are fully qualified and experienced archaeologists, this will ensure that appropriate decisions regarding environmental and dating sampling will be made in the field.

4. Methods

4.1. All those involved in the works must be informed of the scheduled status of the monument, its extent, and the legal obligations which apply.

4.2. Equipment and machinery shall not be used or operated in the scheduled area in conditions or in a manner likely to result in ground disturbance other than that which is expressly laid out in this document.

4.3 Topsoil and unstratified modern material will be removed by a machine using a 1m wide, toothless ditching bucket, under continuous archaeological supervision. The topsoil or recent overburden will be removed down to the first significant archaeological horizon in successive level spits. No machinery will track over areas that have been stripped.

4.4. The trenches will be cleaned using appropriate hand tools in order to expose surviving archaeological features and deposits.

4.5. All archaeological features and deposits will be recorded on a pre-excavation plan before excavation, sampling and recording.

4.6. All features exposed will be excavated by hand. Sampling will typically comprise 50% of every discrete feature; 25% of linear/curvilinear features with non-uniform fill and 10% of linear features with a uniform fill.

4.7. In the event of human burials being discovered, they will be left *in-situ,* covered and protected and the coroners' office informed. If removal is essential, work will comply with relevant Home Office regulations.

4.8. Appropriate procedures under the relevant legislation will be followed in the event of the discovery of artefacts covered by the provisions of the Treasures Act 1996.

4.9. Deposits that have the potential for providing environmental or dating evidence will be assessed while the work is in progress. An environmental sampling strategy has been agreed with the English Heritage Scientific advisor for North-East England, Jacqui Huntley. The sampling strategy comprises the following:

- All intact archaeological contexts will be sampled. Small pit features will be 100% sampled while bulk samples of 40 litres will be taken from larger feature contexts, such as linear ditch fills.
- Any samples recovered will be floated on site in graduated sieves with the smallest being 500µm and the flots and residues collected. Samples will be analysed by B Johnson of Archaeological Research Services Ltd and an assessment report prepared in accordance with Management of Archaeological Projects 2 (HBMC 1991).

4.10. During and after the excavation, all recovered artefacts and environmental samples will be stored in appropriate materials and storage conditions to ensure minimal deterioration and loss of information (this will include controlled storage, correct packaging, regular monitoring of conditions and immediate selection for conservation of valuable material).

5. Recording

5.1. The site will be accurately tied into the National Grid and located on a 1:2500 or 1:1250 map of the area.

5.2. A full and proper record (written, graphic and photographic as appropriate) will be made for all work, using pro-forma record sheets and text descriptions appropriate to the work. Accurate scale plans and section drawings will be drawn at 1:50, 1:20 and 1:10 scales as appropriate.

5.3. The stratigraphy of the trenches will be recorded even where no archaeological deposits have been identified.

5.4. All archaeological deposits and features will be recorded with above ordnance datum (AOD) levels.

5.5. A photographic record of all contexts will be taken in colour transparency and black and white print and will include a clearly visible, graduated metric scale. A register of all photographs will be kept.

5.6. Where stratified deposits are encountered, a 'Harris' matrix will be compiled.

6. Access

6.1. Archaeological Research Services Ltd will give the Kate Wilson of English Heritage 10 working days (or less if so agreed) notice of the commencement of fieldwork.

6.2. Archaeological Research Services Ltd will afford access to Kate Wilson or her representative at all times, for the purposes of monitoring the archaeological evaluation.

6.3. Archaeological Research Services Ltd will maintain regular communication with Kate Wilson to ensure that the project aims and objectives are met.

7. Finds Processing and Storage

7.1. All finds processing, conservation work and storage of finds will be carried out in compliance with the IFA guidelines for Finds Work (2001) and those set out by UKIC (1990).

7.2. Artefact collection and discard policies will be appropriate for the defined purpose.

7.3. Bulk finds which are not discarded will be washed and, with the exception of animal bone, marked. Marking and labelling will be indelible and irremovable by abrasion. Bulk finds will be appropriately bagged, boxed and recorded. This process will be carried out no later than two months after the end of the excavation.

7.4. All small finds will be recorded as individual items and appropriately packaged (e.g. lithics in self-sealing plastic bags and ceramic in acid-free tissue paper). Vulnerable objects will be specially packaged and textile, painted glass and coins stored in appropriate specialist systems. This process will be carried out within two days of the small find being excavated. Prehistoric pottery will not be cleaned or be subject to any abrasion or loss of adhering residues.

7.5. During and after the excavation all objects will be stored in appropriate materials and storage conditions to ensure minimal deterioration and loss of information (including controlled storage, correct packaging, and regular monitoring, immediate selection for conservation of vulnerable material). All storage will have appropriate security provision.

7.6. The deposition and disposal of artefacts will be agreed with the legal owner and the Museum of Antiquities prior to the work taking place. All finds except treasure trove are the property of the landowner.

7.7. All retained artefacts and ecofacts will be cleaned and packaged in accordance with the requirements of the recipient museum.

8. Site archive

8.1. The archive will be compiled in an orderly fashion to the standards and format set out in Management of Archaeological Projects 2 (HBMC 1991) and in accordance with the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long Term Storage (UKIC 1990). The archive will be deposited with the Museum of Antiquities within 6 months of the fieldwork once all post-excavation work is completed and the final report produced.

9. Report

9.1. One copy of the report will be submitted to the client, and two hard copies (one bound and one unbound) and one digital copy will be submitted to the Northumberland SMR within fourteen working days of the completion of the fieldwork. One bound copy of the report will be submitted to English Heritage. Each report will be bound with each page and paragraph numbered and will include as a minimum the following:

- executive summary
- a site location plan to at least 1:10,000 scale with 10 figure central grid reference
- contractor's details including date work carried out
- nature and extent of the proposed development, including developer/client details
- description of the site location and geology
- trench plans to a suitable scale and tied into the national grid so that features can be correctly orientated
- discussion of the results of field work
- context & feature descriptions
- features, number and class of artefacts, spot dating & scientific dating of significant finds presented in tabular format
- plans and section drawings of the features drawn at a suitable scale
- additional plans/map extracts to display noted and recorded archaeological features as appropriate
- bibliography

11. OASIS

11.1 ARS Ltd will complete an on-line OASIS form for this evaluation. ARS Ltd is a registered contractor on the OASIS system and has uploaded archaeological reports before.

12. Dissemination/Publication

12.1 A summary will be prepared for 'Archaeology in Northumberland' and submitted to Northumberland County Council by the beginning of December of the year in which the work is completed.

12.2 A short article will be prepared for a local journal if appropriate.

13. References

Institute of Field Archaeologists. 1995. *Standard and Guidance for archaeological excavation.*

Institute of Field Archaeologists, 2000. *Code of Conduct.*

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UKIC (United Kingdom Institute for Conservation). 1990. *Guidelines for the Preparation of Archives for Long-Term Storage.*

