

## **Medieval settlement remains at Norham, Northumberland.**

### **Abstract**

Excavation of trial trenches began at Norham in April 2009 as part of a mitigation strategy and survey, in order to obtain planning permission for construction in a cultivated field at the western extent of Norham Village. The excavations revealed evidence of medieval activity in the southern section of the field with pottery evidence dating the site to the mid to late medieval period (12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century). Prompted by these finds an open area excavation was undertaken, revealing some substantial sandstone walls, a hearth and a well, which indicate the presence of a substantial domestic dwelling on the boundary of Norham.

### **Introduction and Background (including previous work)**

Norham is situated approximately eleven kilometres to the south-west of Berwick-upon-Tweed, and the site is situated at the western most edge of Norham village (NT 897 472) between an open field to the west, and existing buildings to the east (Fig. 1). The river Tweed flows approximately 500 m to the north.

Norham is perhaps most famous for its castle. Constructed in 1121 at the order of Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, it was intended to protect the property of the bishopric in the north Northumberland. The area and the castle were repeatedly invaded and captured during the years following the construction, eventually being rebuilt some time around 1171 (Blair and Honeyman 1966).

The Church of St Cuthbert, constructed around 1165, it has as rich a history its neighbouring castle. In 1320 the Church was seized and occupied by Robert the Bruce. It was held during the besiegement of Norham Castle. An internal pillar of the

church is constructed of Anglo-Saxon cross fragment, which may mean the church is positioned on the site of an earlier Anglo-Saxon church (Pevsner 1957).

In 2003, as part of the Till-Tweed Geoarchaeology Project (Passmore and Waddington 2009), a series of aerial photograph and field walking surveys took place along the Tweed Valley, encapsulating the fields in and around Norham Village. The aerial survey revealed distinct cropmarks of a deserted medieval village adjacent to the study area, and the field walking revealed scattered finds of Mesolithic flint tools within the study area.

In April 2009 Archaeological Research Services carried out an evaluation on the site, adjacent to West Street, Norham, that included the opening of 7 trenches. Two sections of stone wall with a height of one course were discovered in Trench 1 and a total of three pits and two linear features were found across three other trenches. The discovery of the walls in Trench 1 prompted the opening of two more 5m x 2m trenches to establish the full extent of the structure. Some sherds of Medieval green-glazed pottery were found within trench 1 although no material culture was retrieved from *in situ* contexts.

### **The Excavation (Figs. 2 and 3)**

The objectives of the archaeological excavation were to establish the date and extent of the features that had been discovered during the evaluation, and to determine the chronological relationships between them and other features and deposits within the Norham area. The archaeological excavation took the form of a single open area trench measuring 360 m<sup>2</sup>. The positioning of the trench was decided upon in order to target the stone walls that had been uncovered during previous archaeological work.

The stratigraphy of the trench consisted of topsoil, subsoil and natural. The topsoil consisted of silty clay which contained small and large stones, varying in depth between 0.2 and 0.5 m. directly beneath the topsoil there was a very thin layer of subsoil consisting of a lighter silt/ clay with small stone inclusions. The subsoil directly overlay the natural sand and gravel, which covered the entirety of the site and continued beyond the limit of the excavation.

During the evaluation, a section of stone wall was uncovered that ran from east to west. The subsequent excavation revealed that the wall measured 9.4 m from east to west and continued at its western end to run from south to north to form an 'L' shape to a length of 4.4 m. The wall had an average width of 0.9 m and was constructed from large, roughly cut, rectangular sandstone blocks that measured between 0.7 by 0.4 m and 0.3 by 0.2 m. These dimensions suggest that it would have been an external wall. The stones had been laid using a mixture of header and stretcher bonds and had been packed using smaller stones. Coarse compacted clay had been used to bond the wall. Towards the western end the wall survived to two courses but only survived to one course elsewhere. The wall section had been built directly onto the natural and continued into the trench edge at the eastern end. Numerous fragments of pottery, with a dark green glaze, were discovered among these wall sections helping to date them to the late medieval period (fourteenth/ fifteenth-century).

Within the 'L' shaped walls were two internal walls. These narrow walls were a single course of stone high and contained no bonding material. In the western area of the trench a small solitary section of stone wall was uncovered surviving to one course. The wall ran from east to west to a length of 3.9 m and continued into the trench edge at the western end. With an average width of 0.3 m it was constructed from roughly cut sandstone blocks that measured approximately 0.2 by 0.4 m. The stones were mostly

laid using a stretcher bond but this was not consistent and no bonding material had been used. Gritty sherds of pottery recovered from this wall, were finer than those recovered from the majority of the site, suggesting a date of the twelfth-century.

A very well preserved hearth measuring 1 by 1.5 m was discovered in the south eastern corner of the trench (Fig. 4). The hearth was lined with four long sandstone blocks and was constructed of rectangular sandstone blocks with a flat hexagonal stone in the centre. The stones in the centre of the hearth showed evidence of *in situ* burning and a sample of this confirmed the presence of bread wheat and rye as well as tiny fragments of calcined bone which is an assemblage that can be typical of the medieval period.

Towards the centre of the trench was a small section of sandstone wall running from north to south that was not connected to any other part of the structure. The wall measured 1.4 m in length and was 0.6 m wide. The remaining stones were roughly cut and varied in shape and size, the larger stones being more rectangular in shape with no mortar or bonding between. This wall only survived to one course and had been built directly onto the natural. Beside this wall section, slightly to the east was an isolated area of *in situ* burning of the natural. A bulk environmental sample was taken from this deposit and the analysis confirmed that it contained barley and oats which suggests domestic activity on the site.

A well was uncovered in the north eastern corner of the trench. The well was constructed of sandstone blocks that had been cut to form a circular shape. The blocks were relatively uniform in size and were bonded with what appeared to be clay. The blocks surrounding the well were approximately 0.3 m wide and 0.4 m in length. The interior diameter of the well was 0.85 m and the exterior diameter including the construction cut was approximately 1.45 m. The fill of the well, which was excavated to a depth of 0.9 m, consisted of topsoil and stones. The sandstone construction was

removed to a depth of 0.5 m. attempts were made to take core samples from the well but the high quantity of stones within made it impossible to penetrate more than 0.30 m. Two linear features were discovered within the trench, one running east to west in the southern section, the second running north to south, parallel with the western edge of the trench. The two linear features had a width of 1 m, and excavation found that they had a depth of 0.45 m with relatively steep sides. An environmental bulk sample of the north – south linear revealed the presence of oats, barley and bread wheat, indicating domestic backfill.

## **Discussion**

Given the historical and archaeological background of the village of Norham and its surrounding area, it was likely that the study area would contain features of archaeological interest. The excavations performed have revealed evidence of the foundations of a substantial stone built structure with internal stone wall divisions and an internal stone built hearth. It is possible that this structure was associated with the deserted medieval village known from aerial photographs to have been located to the west of the development area. However, given that the building is closely aligned with the course of the present road through Norham it is thought more probable that it is a medieval structure associated with this street frontage. Ascribing a function to the building is difficult as the walls only survive to a height of two courses, and there were no intact internal floor surfaces, but the information gained from the specialists both in the pottery and soil samples, would suggest a domestic use of this site. There was also no evidence uncovered to suggest that there was any type of industrial activity on the site.

The well identified to the north of the structure appears, from its location, to have been associated with this burgage plot although no material culture was recovered from within the feature. The wall section in the west of the trench may have been part of a garden wall. If this was the case it would explain why it was not connected to the main structure and why it seemed to be isolated from the other walls.

The dateable evidence recovered from the site indicates a range between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. These dates would tie the medieval foundations uncovered during the excavation with the most notable events in Norham's history, most notably the construction of Norham Castle and The Church of St Cuthbert as well as the subsequent invasions and sieges which followed. It would have been very unlikely that this domestic settlement went untouched during these episodes but no evidence to suggest militaristic occupation was uncovered.

### **Specialist reports.**

#### **Pottery**

Jenny Vaughan (NCAS)

A small assemblage of 20 shards of medieval pottery weighing 478 grams was recovered from the two phases of work. There were some possible 12<sup>th</sup> century shards but the majority were probably late medieval (14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century).

Most numerous were shards of dark grey reduced green glazed type. The fabric was quite fine and sandy. There were no very diagnostics shards but two joining pieces were from the shoulder of a hollow vessel with horizontal incised lines. There were four light firing gritty shards, being rather finer than the others. These may be 12<sup>th</sup> century. See catalogue for other fragments.

The dating of pottery assemblages, in the absence of coins or other specific date indicators, depends to a great extent on the proportions of different types present. This is a very small group containing no very diagnostic material and the dating given above should therefore be treated with some caution. Reduced green glazed pottery persists into the early post medieval period in Scotland and North Northumberland. Light firing gritty wares are also found on later medieval sites in Scotland, so, although the shards here have similarities with 12<sup>th</sup> century wares, they may also be later than suggested. It was noted that several shards were large and most, with the exception of a grey gritty shard from Norham, were relatively fresh, suggesting that they had not moved far from the original place of deposition.

### **Palaeoenvironmental assessment**

Mr Lorne Elliott and Dr Charlotte Henderson (Archaeological Service University of Durham).

Three bulk samples were taken for palaeoenvironmental assessment from context (6) a hearth fill, context (18) a linear and context (22) an area of burning. This report presents the results of the assessment.

All three bulk samples produced relatively small flots comprising varying amounts of charcoal, coal, fuel ash, uncharred seeds and modern roots. A few charred rhizomes and heather twigs were also recorded in context (6). The well-drained nature of the sediments and the presence of roots, suggest the uncharred seeds are recent introductions.

Charred plant remains occurred in all three contexts, though generally they were in very poor condition with many having a degraded or pitted form. Grains and chaff of bread wheat and rye were recorded in context (6), along with grains of oat and

indeterminate cereals, and a weed seed each of heath-grass and cinquefoil. Contexts (18) and (22) contained grains of oat, barley, cf. bread wheat and indeterminate cereals, with larger amounts occurring in context (22). A barley rachis fragment, a wild radish pod and a weed seed of the goosefoot family also occurred in context (18), and a culm node of the grass family was recorded in context (22).

The residues of contexts (6) and (22) comprised burnt clay and stones, with tiny fragments of calcined bone also occurring in context (6). A small sherd of pottery was recorded in context (18).

A combination of oats, barley, bread wheat and rye were recorded at the site, although many grains in all three contexts were unidentifiable, due to poor preservation. This charred plant macrofossil assemblage is typical of the medieval period. Bread wheat and rye were the more abundant species in context (6), whilst barley and oats were greater in number in contexts (18) and (22). These differing assemblages, though small, may reflect periods of cultivation, with wheat and rye representing winter crops and barley and oats representing spring crops.

The poor condition of the barley grains and rachis fragment prevent further identification for this species, and due to the absence of diagnostic chaff, it cannot be ruled out that the oat grains are from the wild variety. The occurrence of chaff in contexts (6) and (18) and a charred pod of wild radish, which is an arable weed, in context (18), suggests crop processing was taking place at or near the site. The presence of fuel ash, charcoal, charred plant remains, pottery and fragments of calcined bone, suggests that the fills accumulated as a result of the disposal of domestic waste.

## **Bibliography**



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