

# Excavation of an Early Neolithic Settlement and Adjacent Cairn at Sandyford Quarry Field: An Interim Report.

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## INTRODUCTION

During September 1997 an excavation took place at Sandyford Quarry Field (NZ075817) west of Bolam Lake on the watershed of the Blyth-Wansbeck catchments (Fig. 1; Plate 1). The site is situated on the very tail-end of the sandstone ridge which runs eastwards from Shaftoe Crags 2km away. The excavation took place as a response to the results of the fieldwalking programme in the area which has been undertaken by Mr. John Davies over the past 12 years (cf. Davies 1990; 1995). The excavation work comprised the cutting of two trenches; one located over the area of a pottery and flint scatter, and a small second one over a ridge at the top of the field. The intention of the second trench was to allow the examination of this ridge to determine whether it was of natural or anthropogenic origin. The small trench proved on excavation to be completely sterile of archaeology and so was interpreted as a natural feature. However, the large trench located over the pottery and flint scatter contained; 1) a buried truncated land-surface, 2) an Early Neolithic settlement and 3) a burial cairn covering three cremation pits.

## FIELDWALKING

Fieldwalking over the last two years on this field has produced a wealth of lithic and ceramic material. The field was visited three times during the winter-spring of 1995-6 and walked at 5m intervals (40% coverage) producing 238 lithics and 26 pottery sherds. The field was returned to once during winter-spring 1996-7 and walked at 2m intervals (100% coverage) and produced a further 144 lithics and 42 pottery sherds. The total volume of finds from this surficial survey over these repeated visits totals 382 lithics and 68 sherds of pottery. The pottery distribution was clustered in the north-east corner of the field just off the lip of the sandstone ridge. The pottery was identified as being of the Early Neolithic Grimston Ware series. Diagnostic lithics included predominantly Early Neolithic forms, though a quantity of Late Mesolithic material has also been identified.

## THE EXCAVATION

Given the occurrence of early prehistoric pottery in the ploughzone, which does not last long in such an environment, it was thought likely that recent ploughing was cutting the top of sub-surface archaeological features surviving in this field. Given that much of the surficial archaeological material was of Early Neolithic date it was suspected that the truncated remains of an Early Neolithic settlement might exist below the ploughzone in this field. As the ploughing cycle is to continue for a further 3 years it was deemed important to investigate this potential site, especially given the rarity of Early Neolithic settlements and, especially those, spatially associated with Late Mesolithic activity.

Funds were raised from the Joseph Cowen Bar of the Adult Education Department, University of Newcastle upon Tyne and also from the Morpeth Antiquarian Society. The excavation was directed by C.W. and the excavation team included members of the Northumberland Archaeological Group (N.A.G.) and students from the Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Equipment was provided by N.A.G. and the Archaeological Practice of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. All work was undertaken voluntarily and the funds were used to pay for a machine, materials and petrol costs.

### Trench 1

This trench was located on the basis of the distribution of the surficial pottery finds, though its precise positioning was laid out by the use of dowsing rods. The ploughsoil was removed by machine using a 5' ditching bucket. The stratigraphy comprised a ploughzone averaging 30cms deep overlying a truncated earlier land-surface which varied in thickness from 3-8cm thick. This relict land-surface was located directly upon a veneer of sandstone drift which comprised sand and shattered bedrock. This drift cover was relatively shallow, averaging 15cm deep, and overlaid the solid geology of the sandstone bedrock.

The relict land-surface was found to contain an

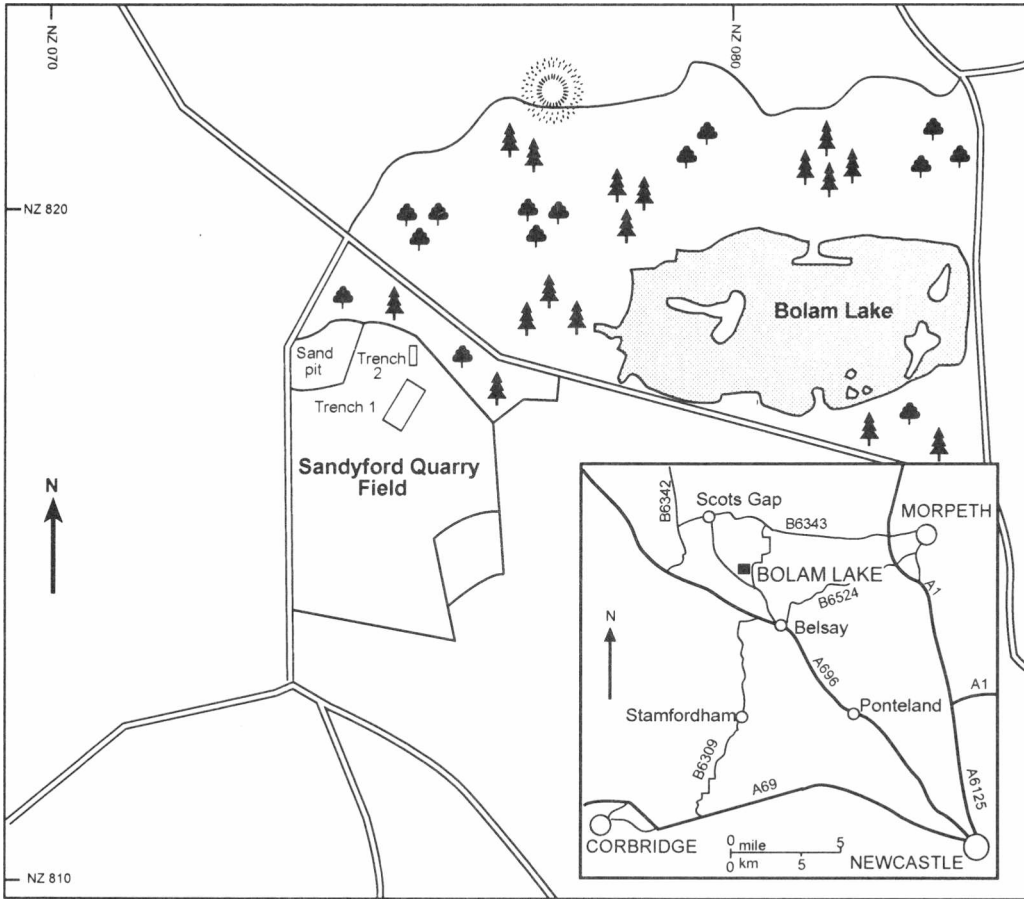


Fig. 1. Site location.



Plate 1. General view over Trench 1 from the NE.

abundance of flints and broken pottery sherds, all of comparable form and fabric to the material recovered from the surface by fieldwalking. The lithics included a leaf-shaped arrowhead and a steeply retouched scraper, together with many narrow parallel-sided blade forms. The pottery was of a black gritty fabric with thick walls. This surface was sampled for its potential as a palaeoenvironmental resource, and hopefully can be used to reconstruct the local prehistoric environment.

Cut into the drift deposits, and sometimes into the solid sandstone below, were a series of archaeological features which included stone-packed post-holes, rubbish pits, and a fence-line with stake and post-holes along its length (Fig.2).

The post-holes include a straight line of three holes which had a much larger post at the east end of the alignment. It was not possible to form a coherent rectangular, trapezoidal or sub-circular feature out of the post-holes but the line of posts suggests a ridged structure had existed - part of a frame for a tent perhaps. These remains are interpreted as part of a structure, probably a dwelling given that domestic refuse was recovered from the pits outside.

The rubbish pits were located in a tight cluster further to the east of the post structure. The prevailing winds in this valley come from the west and so the positioning of the rubbish repositories outside and downwind from the structure are in keeping with such a function. These rubbish pits all contained heat affected stones, charcoal, charred hazelnut shells, flints (some of which were broken) and broken pottery; one pit also contained a used and broken polished stone-axe of Group VI type (Langdale tuff) while another yielded some seeds. Samples were taken from all these pits which will be floated in due course. These rubbish pits contained many burnt stones, which were often fire reddened and heat-cracked, together with charred material including hazelnut shells, testifying to the location of hearths (probably for cooking) above ground close to these pits and the settlement structure. The pit containing the stone axe was rock cut and appeared to have been originally lined as the area directly next to the sides and base of the pit were stained very dark while the rest of the fill was of a much lighter colour. It is thought this could be the shadow of a lining, possibly of wicker or basketwork. Such a lining suggests this pit may have originally served as a storage pit being backfilled with domestic refuse once it had come to the end of its use. The location of a stone axe back in the ground, in the rock cut part of the pit, may carry some symbolic significance (it was originally won from the bedrock and now at the end of its life it must go back into bedrock - or some such belief), though as the axe was broken through use it seems appropriate to interpret these pits as being of a predominantly domestic nature, with the possibility of some symbolic connotations embedded in the practice of waste disposal.

The fence-line consisted of a straight section of a truncated shallow ditch with a central socket cut along its course. Along this central socket stake-holes had been driven into the compact drift material and the socket had been backfilled and packed with the redeposited natural drift that had been cut out to make the socket. Occasional

more substantial post-holes were located along the line of the stake-holes indicating that the fence had extra support to make it more robust. However, the fence was far too ephemeral to envisage a defensive function. At the same time it appears robust enough to have been adequate for controlling stock. Two flints were recovered from the fill of the upper ditch, one of which was near to the surface while the other was from lower down. Some charcoal was also recovered.

The pottery and flints from the rubbish pits were all of Early Neolithic character and so it is expected that when radiocarbon dates are returned this will date this settlement firmly to the Early Neolithic. Charcoal was also recovered from several of the post-hole and stake-hole pits which will allow the dating of the structural remains.

A cairn was discovered in the section on the south side of the trench after its northern half had been removed after the first machine cut. This left the smaller half of a low stone sub-circular cairn to be excavated. It appears that this cairn had always been very low and had, therefore, largely escaped plough disturbance. The cairn material had been placed on the redeposited relict land surface indicating that the land surface existed at that level at the time the cairn was constructed. The area occupied by the cairn had been cut through the land surface and three small pits were cut into the sandy drift deposits. A cremation had been deposited in each of these pits and then the earth thrown on top and cairn material piled over it. As the cairn was cut into this land surface it is evidently a later feature, though by how far has not been determined. Although flints were found in the land surface around the cairn these do not provide dating evidence for the cairn itself. No artefacts were recovered from the cairn structure. However, the wealth of cremated human bone and the large quantity of charcoal fragments accompanying them will allow this relatively unobtrusive burial monument to be radiocarbon dated. Potential also exists for DNA analysis of the cremated remains which will allow the determination of age, sex and the extent to which the people buried in the cairn are related - could it be a family burial? This monument could well be an Early Bronze Age burial, but, as Jobey's (1968) excavation of a small low sub-circular cairn at Chatton Sandyford showed, it could yet prove to be Early Neolithic.

## Trench 2

The second trench was cut over a slight rise observable along the spine of the ridge. The trench was one bucket width broad (1.5m) and 25m long. The trench was cleaned back but revealed nothing that could be confidently ascribed as anthropogenic in origin. The relict land-surface was extremely thin in this trench, averaging just over 1cm in thickness, and no finds were recovered. The sandstone drift was again evident below the relict land-surface though a band of clay deposits were observed cutting across the trench from east to west. This was interpreted as a localised pocket of clay-till situated on the tail end of the sandstone till just above where it merges into the boulder clay of the lower valley sides.

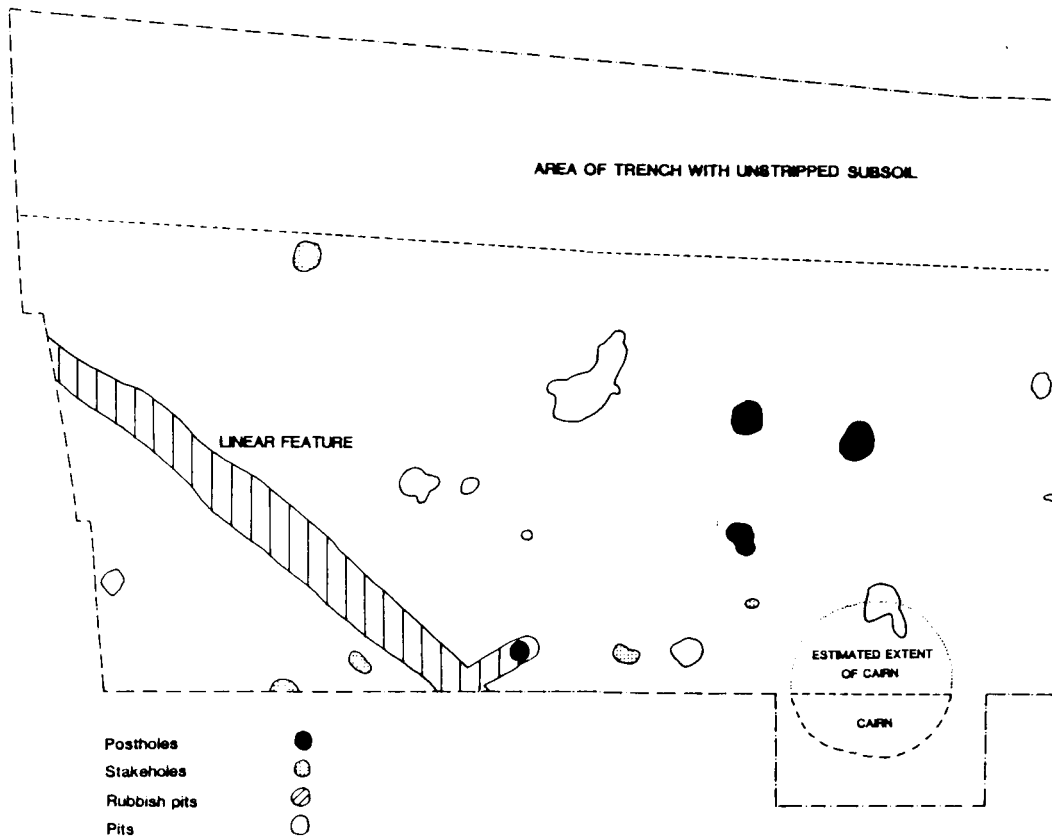
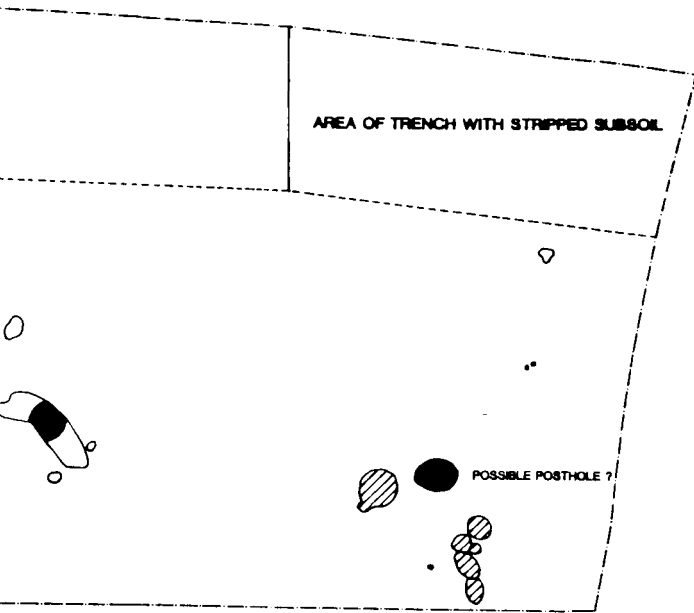


Fig. 2. Plan of Trench 1.



SCALE



## DISCUSSION

This site has proved extremely useful on several accounts. First, it helps add to the otherwise scant picture of Neolithic settlement in the south of the county. Second, from a methodological viewpoint, it underlines the value of fieldwalking as a method for establishing patterns and areas of settlement in this part of Britain. In addition, it also demonstrates that in geomorphologically stable hill top locations such as this, the surficial distribution of material can be a valid indicator of sub-surface remains. Third, the excavation of an exciting site such as this should give us greater confidence in opening up fairly sizeable trenches on the basis of fieldwalking data. Finally, this excavation has provided a rare insight into the kind of use the sandstone escarpments of Northumberland were put during the Early Neolithic.

With structural remains of what is almost certainly an Early Neolithic settlement this site compares well with sites such as Thirlings (Miket 1987). However, the lack of any greater pattern than a single line for the post-holes, together with the large number of stakehole features around it, suggest that this structure is more likely to have been the frame for a substantial tent rather than timber house. The construction of a fence around at least part of the site suggests that stock were being kept by the occupants. Furthermore the relatively small number of domestic pits and the volume of waste would suggest that this settlement was not occupied for prolonged periods. Although further pits and structures would almost certainly be found if a larger area was opened up it is unlikely that the pattern of these remains would be changed much. Indeed the presence of charred hazelnut shells suggests that occupation at this site may well have been seasonal, perhaps extending into late summer and autumn. If this is the case, then it is suggested that this may represent a seasonal encampment for a herding group engaged in grazing stock on the higher parts of the valley sides and the interfluves, probably during the summer months before movement down to the lower ground for the winter. This pattern of exploitation on the sandstone fells would conform to the system of land-use suggested for the Milfield Basin (Waddington 1996; 1996a) which is enclosed to the east by a sandstone ridge. Further consistencies with the Milfield evidence are apparent when it is observed that Davies' recent surveys around the Sandyford Quarry site have revealed a number of previously unrecorded cup and ring marked outcrop rocks and 'portables' on the sandstone ridge (Davies forthcoming). It is worth mentioning, however, that it is not unfeasible that certain elements of this site, including the areas which have not yet been uncovered, may date to the Late Mesolithic.

The site is located just below the crest at the tail-end of the sandstone ridge which affords some protection against the prevailing winds. In addition the site is also located above the break in slope from where the land drops away on a medium slope to an old wetland 200m away. Although this wetland is now boggy land supporting a dense tree-dominated vegetation, coring in this boggy area revealed at least 1.5m depth of peat in some places interleaved with layers of course-grained non-organic sediments,

suggestive of inundations of hillwash material into this wetland environment. It is highly likely, therefore, that during the early-mid Holocene this boggy area was a small lake or wetland. This is to be confirmed by more detailed palaeoenvironmental work. The position of a settlement on the free-draining sandstone till on a flat ledge below the crest proper, but near to a fresh water lake, would provide ecological and topographical conditions conducive to an early herding seasonal settlement.

The burial cairn may represent a later phase of activity on this ridge line or it may yet prove to be closer in time to the settlement. Either way, it adds another layer of information to past human behaviour in this appealing part of the landscape. The possibility of DNA analysis on the three cremations provides an opportunity to address the question of whether status (as witnessed by a cairn burial) was bestowed on the basis of merit (possibly unrelated burials) or on hereditary rites (directly related burials).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our gratitude to the farmer, Mr. David Robson, who allowed the excavation to take place on his farmland and for his interest and support throughout. Thanks are also due to the Northumberland Archaeological Group for the provision of tools and willing labour, to the Joseph Cowen Bar of the Adult Education Centre, University of Newcastle upon Tyne for their financial assistance and also to the Morpeth Antiquarian Society for their contribution of funds. Finally, the efforts of all the diggers, and in particular Gordon Moir, who worked very diligently over the two week period and who gave freely of their labour is fully acknowledged. The good humour and enjoyment with which the work was carried out also deserves a special mention.

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