

THE OLD SCHOOL, MAIN STREET, DISTINGTON, CUMBRIA

Archaeological Watching Brief



Client: John Swift Homes Ltd

NGR: 300582 523424

Planning Application Refs:
4/13/2030 and 4/13/2185

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Non-Technical Summary

Following the submission of a planning application to demolish a former school and construct new houses on a site at Main Street, Distington, a condition was placed for an archaeological watching brief be carried out during the associated ground works. Greenlane Archaeology was commissioned to carry out the watching brief, which was undertaken on the 12th December 2013.

The watching brief monitored excavation of the footings of two houses (relating to Plots 13 and 14) at the far west end of a new development south of Chapel Street. This revealed a straightforward sequence of deposits below the hardcore surface which had been placed following the removal of vegetation from the site. A small amount of topsoil remained below the current ground surface. This sat above a layer of subsoil and the underlying natural was encountered throughout the area of trenching below that.

Distington is known to have been occupied in the medieval period and the site is within what is presumed to be the remnants of a medieval burgrave plot which fronted onto Main Street to the east, however, no archaeological features were encountered and only a very small number of post-medieval finds were recovered, dating from the late 17th to early 20th century. These few finds likely relate to the growth of Distington as a mining village in the 18th and 19th century. The east end of the new development was perhaps more likely to have been the focus of medieval activity at the site and this end might have revealed evidence for earlier occupation had it been appropriately evaluated for its archaeological potential.

Acknowledgements

Greenlane Archaeology would like to thank John Swift Homes Ltd for commissioning the project. Additional thanks are due to Jeremy Parsons, Historic Environment Officer at Cumbria County Council, for approving the project design and the staff of the Cumbria Archive Centre in Carlisle (CAC(C)) for assistance accessing the relevant archive information. Special thanks are also due Dave Bell, Craig Richards, and Gordon Miller for their help on site.

The watching brief was carried out by Tom Mace, who also wrote the report and produced the illustrations. Jo Dawson assessed the finds. The project was managed by Dan Elsworth and the report was edited by Jo Dawson.

1. Introduction

1.1 Circumstances of the Project

1.1.1 Following the submission of a planning application (Planning ref. 4/13/2030 and 4/13/2185) by John Swift Homes Ltd (hereafter 'the client') for the demolition of a former school and construction of new houses (and a later amendment) on a site at Main Street, Distington, Cumbria (NGR 300582 523424), a condition was placed by Copeland Borough Council, following advice from the Cumbria County Council (CCC) Historic Environment Service, requiring an archaeological watching brief be carried out during the associated groundworks. Greenlane Archaeology was commissioned by to carry out the watching brief, which was undertaken on the 12th December 2013.

1.1.2 The proposed development site is situated within a burgage plot in the centre of the village of Distington, which is at least medieval, although its place-name indicates a likely early medieval Anglian origin.

1.2 Location, Geology, and Topography

1.2.1 The watching brief area occupies the western end of a housing development on the west side of Main Street, Distington, at approximately 73m above sea level. The trenching follows the footprint of the proposed houses to be built at this end of the site relating to Plots 13 and 14.

1.2.2 Distington is a small linear village approximately midway between Whitehaven and Workington on the West Cumbrian Coastal Plain and likely grew as a mining village in the 18th and 19th century (Countryside Commission 1998, 29). The disused railway to the west of the village is a reminder of the once thriving coal and iron ore industries associated with these nearby ports (*ibid*) and today the area has a decidedly residential character.

1.2.3 The solid geology comprises Coal Measures with patches of Millstone Grit of Carboniferous age (Moseley 1978, plate 1), with overlying deposits of boulder clay and, in places, sand and gravels (Countryside Commission 1998, 27).

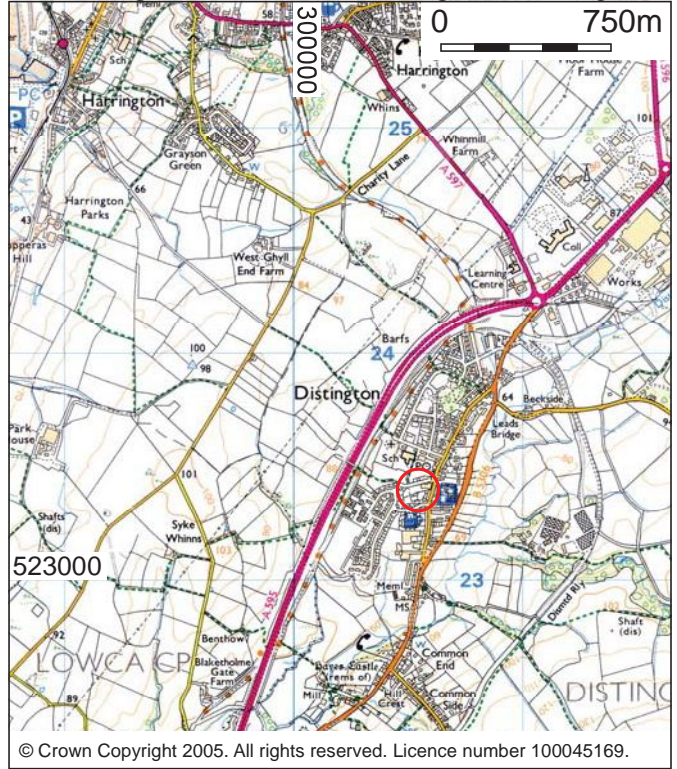
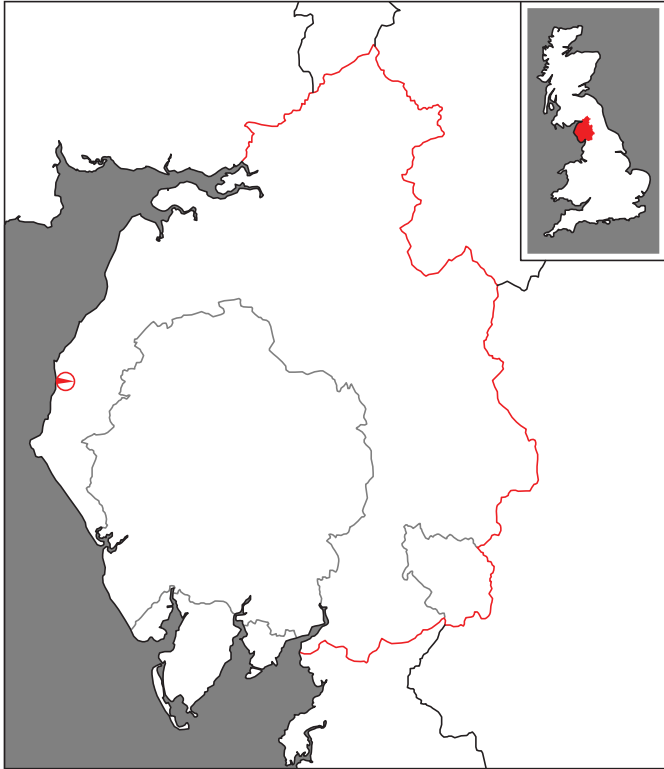


Figure 1: Site location

Client: John Swift Homes Ltd

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2. Methodology

2.1 Desk-Based Assessment

2.1.1 A desk-based assessment did not form part of the original project design, however, it was considered potentially useful to examine the tithe maps for the area as well as the early Ordnance Survey maps to better understand the development of the site. These are held in the Cumbria Archive Centre in Carlisle (CAC(C)).

2.2 Watching Brief

2.2.1 The excavation for the footings, which was carried out using a tracked mechanical excavator with a toothed bucket c1.0m wide, was monitored by an archaeologist on site. All aspects of the archaeological recording were carried out according to the standards and guidance of the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA 2008) and Greenlane Archaeology's own excavation manual (2007). The location of the trench was recorded on a site plan provided by the client and amounted to an area of approximately 90m². Finds were collected from the deposits encountered as far as was practical. No archaeological features were observed but all deposits encountered were recorded in the following manner:

- **Written record:** descriptive records were made using Greenlane Archaeology *pro forma* record sheets;
- **Photographs:** general photographs in both 35mm colour print and colour digital format were taken of excavation area and the deposits encountered, as well as general views of the site, and working shots. A selection of the colour digital photographs is included in this report. A written record of all of the photographs was also made using Greenlane Archaeology *pro forma* record sheets;
- **Drawings:** a trench location plan was produced at a scale of 1:200.

2.3 Environmental Samples

2.3.1 No environmental samples were taken as no appropriate deposits were encountered.

2.4 Finds

2.4.1 **Processing:** the finds were washed then naturally air-dried and packaged appropriately in self-seal bags with white write-on panels.

2.4.2 **Assessment and recording:** the finds were assessed, identified, and catalogued by Jo Dawson (*Appendix 3*).

2.5 Archive

2.5.1 A comprehensive archive of the project has been produced in accordance with the project design and current IfA and English Heritage guidelines (Brown 2007; English Heritage 1991). The paper and digital archive and a copy of this report will be deposited in the Cumbria Archive Centre in Whitehaven on completion of the project. A paper copy and digital copy of this report will be provided for CCC Historic Environment Service for placement in the Historic Environment Record to enable the discharge of the planning condition. In addition, a paper copy will be provided to the client and one will be retained by Greenlane Archaeology. A digital record of the project will also be made on the *Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations* (OASIS) scheme.

3. Desk-Based Assessment

3.1 Background History

3.1.1 Distington has at least medieval origins, although fragments of stone cross from the church (Bailey and Cramp 1988) and the circular shape of the original churchyard (O'Sullivan 1985, 32-33) indicate that the settlement is more ancient. The place-name is early medieval, although the meaning of it is uncertain: the final element means 'the town belong to' but the first apparently means 'dusty' (Armstrong *et al* 1950, 375). The present village retains the form of its original medieval burgage plots, extending east and west from Main Street, the main north/south thoroughfare; although these are even more evident on early maps (see Section 3.2 below), and is recorded several times from the 13th century onwards (*ibid*). It continued to grow in the 18th and 19th century with the coming of the railway and the burgeoning coal and iron ore industries of the nearby towns of Whitehaven, Workington, and Maryport (Countryside Commission 1998, 29).

3.2 Map Regression

3.2.1 The area does not appear to have a tithe map and nothing relevant is shown is on the tithe map for nearby Harrington parish (CAC(C) DRC/8/84/1-2 1844) or an earlier enclosure map for Distington (CAC(C) Q/RE/1/85 1768). The earliest map depicting the village at Distington in any detail held at the Cumbria Archive Centre in Carlisle is the Ordnance Survey map c1863 and the only other edition held there is from 1899.

3.2.2 **Ordnance Survey, c1863:** the watching brief area is at the west end of a large field to the south side of what is now Chapel Street. The field presumably originated as a medieval burgage plot, aligned east/west fronting onto Main Street which runs north/south through the centre of Distington. The east end of the plot has some structures shown in an area now occupied by the new development.

3.2.3 **Ordnance Survey, 1899:** by this time the plot has been subdivided; the east end is occupied by the school buildings and grounds, the west end is open field.

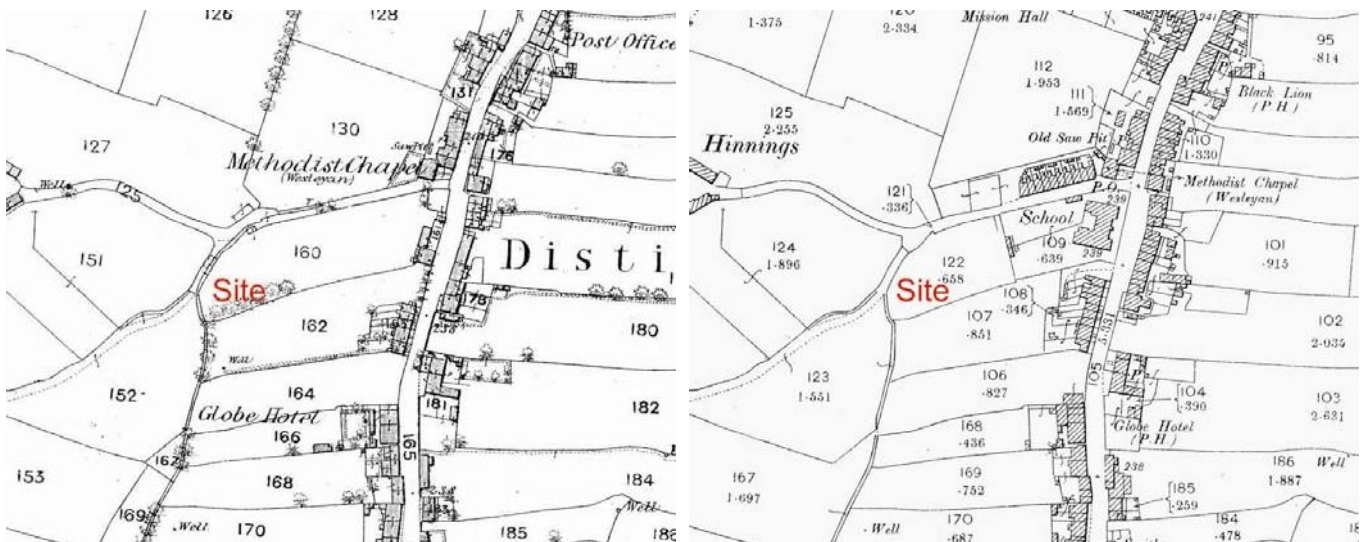


Plate 1 (left): Extract from the Ordnance Survey map of c1863

Plate 2 (right): Extract from the Ordnance Survey map of 1899

4. Results

4.1 Watching Brief

4.1.1 The area had been stripped of vegetation and some of the topsoil removed prior to the arrival of an archaeologist on site and a layer of hardcore had been placed on top. The stripped topsoil had been shifted to the southern edge of the site and was checked for finds but there were none.

4.1.2 The trenches were centred on the wall footings relating to Plots 13 and 14 (Figure 2). Each section of the trench was between 1.0m and 1.1m wide and had a maximum depth of c1.6m below the current ground surface. The hardcore layer formed by grey gravel and brick fragments was c0.1-0.15m thick at the west end below which a thin layer of topsoil (**100**) remained. Below that was a mid-to-dark brown sandy-silt subsoil layer (**101**), between 1.2m and 1.4m thick at the western end, which gently sloped upwards and was thinner to the east. This deposit had perhaps been truncated at the eastern end, where it thinned to c0.3m thick below the hardcore (which was closer to 0.6m thick at this point) and where there was no discernible topsoil. A ceramic drainpipe cut the subsoil on a north/south alignment across the eastern edge of Plot 13 as shown on Figure 2 but no significant archaeological features were found. The underlying natural (**102**) was encountered throughout the area excavated and varied from a light yellowish sand to a coarser and more firmly compacted orange sand from west to east (see Plate 3 to Plate 6).



Plate 3 (left): Trench section at the west end of Plot 14



Plate 4 (right): Dividing section between Plot 13 and 14



Plate 5 (left): Trench section along the south side of Plot 13 and 14



Plate 6 (right): View of the south end of site looking towards the east end of Plot 13

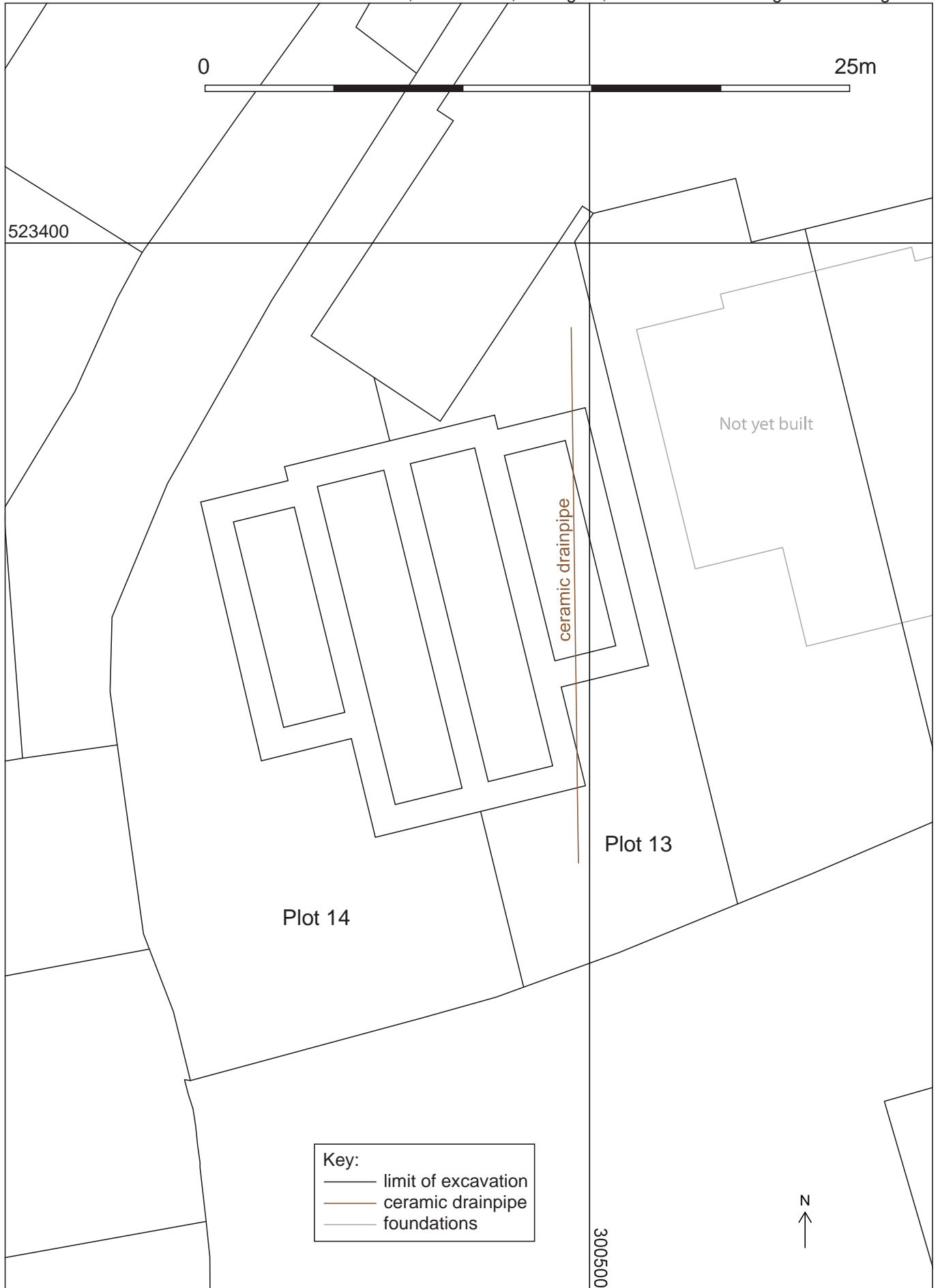


Figure 2: Trench plan

4.2 Finds

4.2.1 Three pieces of post-medieval pottery were recovered from the topsoil. However, these are not good as dating evidence, being persistent and common domestic forms used over a long period with a potentially range in date from the late 17th to early 20th century. A complete catalogue of the finds is presented in *Appendix 3*.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 The watching brief did not reveal any archaeological features and the number of finds for all periods was very low. The finds were all post-medieval in date, probably relating to the growth of Distington as a mining village in the 18th and 19th century. The absence of any earlier finds is perhaps a little surprising given the presumed medieval origins of this part of Distington and the depth of deposits encountered. This might indicate the site has seen very limited use, although some later disturbance had clearly occurred. Within the same plot of land, the east end, facing onto Main Street, would have been likely to have had higher archaeological potential, this typically being the focus of activity and settlement. However, this inevitably also means such areas have also seen later use and therefore more disturbance, which would probably have been the case on this site.

6. Bibliography

6.1 Primary and Cartographic Sources

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Ordnance Survey, c1863 *Cumberland Sheet, LXI.7*, 1:25,000. Surveyed in 1861 and 63.

Ordnance Survey, 1899 *Cumberland Sheet, LXI.7*, 1:25,000. Surveyed in 1861; revised in 1898.

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6.2 Secondary Sources

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Appendix 1: Project Design

THE OLD SCHOOL, MAIN STREET, DISTINGTON, CUMBRIA

Archaeological Watching Brief Project Design



Client: John Swift Homes Ltd

Planning Application Ref.: 4/13/2030 and 4/13/2185

NGR: 300582 523424

December 2013

Client: John Swift Homes Ltd

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1. Introduction

1.1 Project Background

1.1.1 Following the submission of a planning application (Planning ref. 4/13/2030 and 4/13/2185) by John Swift Homes Ltd (hereafter 'the client') for the demolition of a former school and construction of new houses (and a later amendment) on a site at Main Street, Distington, Cumbria (NGR 300582 523424), a condition was placed by Cumbria County Councils (CCC) Historic Environment Service for a programme of archaeological work. This was to comprise a project design on groundworks associated with the construction of the new houses, in response to which Greenlane Archaeology produced this project design.

1.1.2 The proposed development site is situated within a burgage plot in centre of the village of Distington, which is at least medieval, although its place-name indicates a likely early medieval Anglian origin.

1.2 Greenlane Archaeology

1.2.1 Greenlane Archaeology is a private limited company based in Ulverston, Cumbria, and was established in 2005 (Company No. 05580819). Its directors, Jo Dawson and Daniel Elsworth, have a combined total of over 18 years continuous professional experience working in commercial archaeology, principally in the north of England and Scotland. Greenlane Archaeology is committed to a high standard of work, and abides by the Institute for Archaeologists' (IfA) Code of Conduct. The watching brief will be carried out according to the Standards and Guidance of the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA 2008).

1.3 Project Staffing

1.3.1 The project will be managed by **Dan Elsworth (MA (Hons), IfA)**. Daniel graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1998 with an honours degree in Archaeology, and began working for the Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, which became Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) in 2001. Daniel ultimately became a project officer, and for over six and a half years worked on excavations and surveys, building investigations, desk-based assessments, and conservation and management plans. These have principally taken place in the North West, and Daniel has a particular interest in the archaeology of the area. He has recently managed a wide variety of projects including building recordings of various sizes, watching briefs, and excavations, including an excavation and evaluation in the centre of medieval Kendal (Greenlane Archaeology 2009b; 2010a), evaluation in the Roman vicus at Stanwix (Greenlane Archaeology 2010b), evaluation of a Scheduled post-medieval gunpowder works (Greenlane Archaeology 2010c), and watching briefs in Preston (Greenlane Archaeology 2009c; 2010d).

1.3.2 The watching brief will be carried out by **Dan Elsworth** or **Tom Mace (BA (Hons), MA, MifA)**, depending on scheduling constraints. Tom has extensive experience of working on a variety of archaeological projects, especially watching briefs, but also excavations, evaluations, and building recordings, as well as report writing and illustration production. He joined Greenlane Archaeology in 2008 having worked for several previous companies including Archaeological Solutions and Oxford Archaeology North.

1.3.3 All artefacts will be processed by Greenlane Archaeology, and it is envisaged that they will initially be assessed by Jo Dawson, who will fully assess any of post-medieval date. Medieval pottery will be assessed by Tom Mace, and other finds will be assessed by specialist sub-contractors as appropriate. The client will be notified of any other specialists, other than those named, whom Greenlane Archaeology wishes to engage.

1.3.4 Environmental samples and faunal remains, should significant deposits of these be recovered, will be processed by Greenlane Archaeology. It is envisaged that charred plant remains will be assessed by staff at Headland Archaeology Ltd, and faunal remains by Jane Richardson at ASWYAS. Should any human remains be recovered for assessment it is envisaged that these will be examined by Malin Horst at York Osteoarchaeology, following appropriate advice on initial processing.

2. Objectives

2.1 Watching Brief

2.1.1 To identify any surviving archaeological remains and to investigate and record any revealed archaeological remains or deposits.

2.2 Report

2.2.1 To produce a report detailing the results of the watching brief, which will outline the nature, form, extent, and date of any archaeological remains discovered.

2.3 Archive

2.3.1 Produce a full archive of the results of the watching brief.

3. Methodology

3.1 Watching Brief

3.1.1 Groundworks associated with the construction of houses at the site with the potential to affect below ground deposits are to be monitored, with one archaeologist on site. If there are multiple machines operating on site it may be considered necessary to have more than one archaeologist on site.

3.1.2 The watching brief methodology will be as follows:

- The removal of foundations, trenches excavated for the placement or removal of services, the removal of floor surfaces, and any areas of ground reduction will be excavated by machine under supervision by staff from Greenlane Archaeology;
- All deposits of archaeological significance will be examined by hand if possible in a stratigraphic manner, using shovels, mattocks, or trowels as appropriate for the scale;
- The position of any features, such as ditches, pits, or walls, will be recorded and where necessary these will be investigated in order to establish their full extent, date, and relationship to any other features. If possible, negative features such as ditches or pits will be examined by sample excavation, typically half of a pit or similar feature and approximately 10% of a linear feature;
- All recording of features will include detailed plans and sections at a scale of 1:20 or 1:10 where practicable or sketches where it is not, and photographs in both colour print and colour digital format;
- All deposits, drawings and photographs will be recorded on Greenlane Archaeology *pro forma* record sheets;
- All finds will be recovered during the watching brief for further assessment as far as is practically and safely possible. Should significant amounts of finds be encountered an appropriate sampling strategy will be devised;
- All faunal remains will also be recovered by hand during the watching brief as far as is practically and safely possible, but where it is considered likely that there is potential for the bones of fish or small mammals to be present appropriate volumes of samples will be taken for sieving;
- Deposits that are considered likely to have, for example, preserved environmental remains, industrial residues, and/or material suitable for scientific dating will be sampled. Bulk samples of between 20 and 60 litres in volume (or 100% of smaller features), depending on the size and potential of the deposit, will be collected from stratified undisturbed deposits and will particularly target negative features (e.g. gullies, pits and ditches) and occupation deposits such as hearths and floors. An assessment of the environmental potential of the site will be undertaken through the examination of samples of suitable deposits by specialist sub-contractors (see *Section 1.3.4* above), who will examine the potential for further analysis. All samples will be processed using methods appropriate to the preservation conditions and the remains present;
- Any articulated human remains discovered during the watching brief will be left *in situ*, and, if possible, covered. The client will be immediately informed as will the local coroner. Should it be considered necessary to remove the remains this will require a Home Office licence, under Section 25 of the Burial Act of 1857, which will be applied for should the need arise;
- Any objects defined as 'treasure' by the Treasure Act of 1996 (HMSO 1996) will be immediately reported to the local coroner and securely stored off-site, or covered and protected on site if immediate removal is not possible;
- Where practicable spoil removed using the machine will be visually checked for finds and scanned with a metal detector in order to recover metal finds;
- Should any significant archaeological deposits be encountered during the watching brief these will immediately be brought to the attention of CCC and ground works in that area halted so that the need for further work can be determined. Any additional work and ensuing costs will be agreed with the client, and subject to a variation to this project design.

3.2 Report

3.2.1 The results of the watching brief will be compiled into a summary report, which will contain the following sections as necessary:

- A front cover including the appropriate national grid reference (NGR);
- A concise non-technical summary of results, including the date the project was undertaken and by whom;
- Acknowledgements;
- Project Background;
- Methodology, including a description of the work undertaken;
- Results of the watching brief including descriptions of any deposits identified, their extent, form and potential date, and an assessment of any finds or environmental remains recovered during the watching brief;
- Discussion of the results, with specific reference to their relationship with previous discoveries at the site;
- Illustrations at appropriate scales including:
 - a plan showing the location of the ground works;
 - plans and sections of the watching brief ground works, as appropriate, showing any features of archaeological interest;
 - photographs of the watching brief, including both detailed and general shots of features of archaeological interest and the trenches;
 - photographs of individual artefacts as appropriate.

3.3 Archive

3.3.1 The archive, comprising the drawn, written, and photographic record of the watching brief, formed during the project, will be stored by Greenlane Archaeology until it is completed. Upon completion it will be deposited with the Cumbria Archive Centre in Whitehaven. The archive will be compiled according to the standards and guidelines of the IFA (Brown 2007), and in accordance with English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). In addition details of the project will be submitted to the Online AccesS to the Index of archaeological investigationS (OASIS) scheme. This is an internet-based project intended to improve the flow of information between contractors, local authority heritage managers and the general public.

3.3.2 A copy of the report will be deposited with the archive at the Cumbria Archive Centre in Whitehaven, three copies will be supplied to the client, and within two months of the completion of fieldwork, one copy will be provided for the CCC Historic Environment Record (HER). In addition, Greenlane Archaeology will retain one copy, and a digital copy will be deposited with the OASIS scheme as required.

3.3.3 The client will be encouraged to transfer ownership of the finds to a suitable museum. Any finds recovered during the watching brief will be offered to an appropriate museum. If no suitable repository can be found the finds may have to be discarded, and in this case as full a record as possible and necessary would be made of them beforehand.

4. Work timetable

4.1 Greenlane Archaeology will be available to commence the project on **12th December 2013**, or at another date convenient to the client. It is envisaged that the project will involve tasks in the following order:

- **Task 1:** watching brief;
- **Task 2:** post-excavation work on archaeological watching brief, including processing of finds and production of draft report and illustrations;
- **Task 3:** feedback, editing and production of final report, completion of archive.

5. Other matters

5.1 Access

5.1.1 Access to the site will be organised through co-ordination with the client and/or their agent(s).

5.2 Health and Safety

5.2.1 Greenlane Archaeology carries out risk assessments for all of its projects and abides by its internal health and safety policy and relevant legislation. Health and safety is always the foremost consideration in any decision-making process.

5.3 Insurance

5.3.1 Greenlane Archaeology has professional indemnity insurance to the value of **£500,000**. Details of this can be supplied if requested.

5.4 Environmental and Ethical Policy

5.4.1 Greenlane Archaeology has a strong commitment to environmentally- and ethically-sound working practices. Its office is supplied with 100% renewable energy by Good Energy, uses ethical telephone and internet services supplied by the Phone Co-op, is even decorated with organic paint, and has floors finished with recycled vinyl tiles. In addition, the company uses the services of The Co-operative Bank for ethical banking, Naturesave for environmentally-conscious insurance, and utilises public transport wherever possible. Greenlane Archaeology is also committed to using local businesses for services and materials, thus benefiting the local economy, reducing unnecessary transportation, and improving the sustainability of small and rural businesses.

6. Bibliography

Brown, DH, 2007 *Archaeological Archives: A Guide to Best Practice in Creation, Compilation, Transfer, and Curation*, Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA), Reading

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Appendix 2: Summary Context List

Context	Type	Description	Interpretation
100	Deposit	Friable, very dark blackish-brown silt with few inclusions, c0.1m thick	Topsoil
101	Deposit	Mid to dark brown silty-sand, 1.2 to 1.4m thick at the west end and rising on a gentle slope and thinning to the east. Heavily rooted.	Subsoil
102	Deposit	Varying slightly from a light yellowish sand to a coarser and firmer orange sand from west to east with some sub-rounded stone and pebble inclusions	Natural

Appendix 3: Summary Finds List

Context	Type	Qty	Description	Date range
100	Pottery	3	1 x black-glazed red earthenware crock base, 2 x brown-glazed red earthenware: strap handle fragment and dish rim	Late 17 th to early 20 th century