
NORTH PENNINES ARCHAEOLOGY LTD

Project Designs and Client Reports No. CP/367/06



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2006, North Pennines Archaeology Ltd was commissioned by Tynedale Council to undertake a programme of archaeological works on land beside Hexham Abbey, Hexham, Northumberland (NY 93510 64090). The site is located within an area of high archaeological potential, within the boundary of the designated Scheduled Ancient Monument of Hexham Abbey, which is also a Listed Grade I building. As a result, all works associated with the insertion of a new interpretation panel in the environs of the Abbey required a programme of archaeological work to be undertaken, in the form of a watching brief, undertaken on all groundworks associated with the development.

The works involved the excavation of two circular pits, measuring 0.3m diameter and excavated to a depth of 0.75m, to hold the supports for the interpretation panel, and the removal of a triangular area of topsoil to the south of the pits, measuring 1.7m by 1m by 1.5m to a depth of 0.11m. Fragmentary bone and associated material was recovered from both pits, although only two bones were encountered in Pit 2. No archaeological features were encountered during the removal of the topsoil.

The archaeological material encountered, which consisted of animal bones and an oyster shell, was consistent with that of food waste material from past habitation in the vicinity. The discovery of fragmentary human bones is unsurprising given the location of the site so close to the Abbey.

As this report comprises the recommendations for archaeological recording of the developments relating to works at Hexham Abbey, no further work is necessary. However, due to the continuing high archaeological potential of the area, and the status of the site as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, any further development in the area should be subjected to a programme of archaeological investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

North Pennines Archaeology Ltd would like to thank Tamsin Beevor of Tynedale Council for commissioning the project.

The archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Cat Peters. The report was written by Cat Peters, and Patricia Crompton, who undertook the analysis of the archaeological deposits. The drawings were produced by Cat Peters. The project was managed by Martin Railton, Senior Project Officer for NPA Ltd. The report was edited by Matt Town, Senior Project Officer for NPA Ltd.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PROJECT

- 1.1.1 The development site, centred on NY 93510 64090, is within the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Hexham Abbey, which is also a Grade I Listed Building. Deposits of archaeological significance may exist in the area of the works associated with the insertion of new interpretation panels. As a result, a condition of the planning permission was that, before the development commences, a programme of archaeological work be undertaken. This is in line with government advice as set out in the DoE Planning Policy Guidance on Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16). The development works also required Scheduled Monument Consent from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and English Heritage advised that such consent was conditional upon the implementation of a programme of archaeological work.
- 1.1.2 North Pennines Archaeology Ltd (NPAL) were invited by Tamsin Beevor of Tynedale Council, to undertake the required archaeological watching brief. The proposed groundworks involved the insertion of a new interpretation panel to the south-west of the Abbey, within the gardens to the west of the Abbey Shop and to the east of Hexham Court House. All of these groundworks had to be excavated under full archaeological supervision. The objective of this watching brief was to obtain an adequate record of any archaeological deposits or finds, which were disturbed or exposed by work associated with the development. All stages of the archaeological work were undertaken following approved statutory guidelines (IFA 1994a and 1994b).
- 1.1.3 This report comprises the results of the various stages of the archaeological work programme, namely: the archaeological recording of the groundworks associated with the development and post fieldwork analysis of the archaeological deposits recovered from the groundworks.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 WORK PROGRAMME

2.1.1 North Pennines Archaeology Ltd were requested to undertake a watching brief by Tynedale Council at Hexham Abbey, following a condition of planning permission which required the work to be undertaken. North Pennines Archaeology Ltd consulted Kate Wilson, English Heritage Inspector of Ancient Monuments (North-East), who issued a verbal brief. North Pennines Archaeology Ltd was commissioned by the client to undertake the work, which was consistent with the relevant standards and procedures of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA), and generally accepted best practice.

2.2 ARCHIVE

2.2.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with the project design, and with current UKIC (1990) and English Heritage guidelines (1991). The archive will be deposited within an appropriate repository and a copy of the report given to the County Historic Environment Record, where viewing will be available on request. The archive can be accessed under the unique project identifier NPA06, HAB-A.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 3.1.1 The development site lies within an urban context at the centre of the medieval market town of Hexham, Northumberland (Fig 1). It is located within the designated Scheduled Ancient Monument of Hexham Abbey, to the east of Hexham Magistrates Court and to the west of Hexham Abbey Shop, within a triangular flowerbed in the Abbey grounds (Fig 2).
- 3.1.2 In this part of Northumberland, rocks of the Carboniferous Series outcrop the surface and are composed of Carboniferous Limestone, Millstone Grit and Coal Measures. It is the Carboniferous Limestone, the oldest, that occurs most frequently, and it is composed of alternating beds of limestone, sandstone, shale and thin coal seams (Storey 1973, 9).

3.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.2.1 Hexham is a historic town, which has been settled since the early Medieval period at least, and possibly earlier. The earliest documentary reference to the settlement is dated to AD 674, when land was granted by Queen Ethelrid, (or Ethelreda), of Northumberland, to Wilfrid, to endow a new bishopric. The Church of St Andrew was founded at this time, later becoming a Cathedral in AD 681. Two further churches were founded during the 7th-8th century, around the Market Place at Hexham, the Church of St Peter, and the Church of St Mary, although the exact location of these has yet to be confirmed (Northumberland Archives Service 2001).
- 3.2.2 The crypt of Hexham Abbey was partially constructed from re-used Roman stones to display relics of St Andrew, which Wilfrid had brought from Rome, and the *Cathedra* (or bishop's throne) where he sat can still be seen. Five hundred years later the Norman Archbishop of York re-founded Hexham as an Augustinian Priory. Over the proceeding four centuries, the canons built the present church. After the 16th century Reformation with the dissolution of the monasteries, the building became the Parish Church of St Andrew, with a new nave, which was added in 1908 (Historic Hexham Trust 1996). The site is now a Grade I Listed Building, and has been designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument by English Heritage.

3.3 PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

- 3.3.1 The area surrounding the Abbey is known to contain human remains, most recently discovered in June 2006 at the bottom of Beaumont Street during an archaeological watching brief undertaken by North Pennines Archaeology Ltd for Northumbrian Water plc. (Peters forthcoming). Any development or groundworks in the area must therefore undergo archaeological mitigation due to the high archaeological sensitivity of the area.

4 WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

4.1 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

- 4.1.1 Due to the need for groundworks to occur in the vicinity of the Abbey as a result of plans to erect new Information Panels, a watching brief was carried out on Tuesday 24th October 2006. It was located to oversee works carried out beside the Magistrates Court Car Park off Beaumont Street, in a triangular flower bed to the south-west of the Abbey, close to a section of old wall by the Abbey Shop.
- 4.1.2 Two pits (Pit 1 and Pit 2) were excavated, to hold the two stands of the information panel in place, shown by red circles in Fig 3. These were excavated by hand, using spits and shovels, to a maximum depth of 0.77m, and with a diameter of 0.3m. The topsoil consisted of a dark, rich humic soil; at a depth of c. 0.55m a sandier, paler mixed backfill was encountered. Within this context, seventeen pieces of fragmentary bone, the first at a depth of 0.6m and the rest below that, and an oyster shell, were uncovered from Pit 1, and three pieces of bone were encountered in Pit 2. No natural drift geology or archaeological structures or features were encountered.
- 4.1.3 Once the Information Panel had been positioned, a small triangular section of the flower bed was dug to a depth of 0.11m to provide paved access to the Panel. This is marked by angled hatching in Fig 3. The triangular area measured 1.7m by 1m by 1.5m. As the bottom of topsoil was not reached, it is unsurprising that no archaeological features were encountered.

4.2 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSIT ANALYSIS

- 4.2.1 From the excavation of the two pits for the erection of the Information Panels at Hexham Abbey, several fragments of bone were recovered. From Pit 1, the left valve of an oyster was recovered and the fragmentary bones of both medium and large mammals. The fragments of large mammal comprised an almost complete thoracic vertebra of either horse or cattle. The neural spine was broken off close to the base and epiphyses were not present, indicating an immature animal, as fusion had not occurred. There were no signs of butchery present. Several rib fragments of large mammal were also recovered, all bearing butchery marks. Another two fragments of large mammal bone were unidentifiable but these also bore butchery marks.
- 4.2.2 The medium mammal bones recovered were very fragmentary and consisted of ribs, all with signs of butchery, and several fragments of vertebrae. The other pieces found were too small to indicate from which bone they had originated.
- 4.2.3 There was an unusual piece of possible large mammal bone that had been shaped into a rough point at one end. As the bone was a fairly flat piece it may be from a jaw fragment or scapula. It does not appear to have been a peg, sometimes used for fixing tiles to roofs, but could have been used as the handle of a knife, or other implement.
- 4.2.4 A piece of human bone was recovered from this pit, identified as part of a clavicle. Most of the mid section was present and it could be identified even though a third of

the material was missing. The breaks on the surfaces were not recent, indicating that it was probably from deeper strata that had been disturbed some time ago when the breaks would have occurred.

- 4.2.5 Only two fragments of bone were found in Pit 2. The first was the proximal end of a deer metacarpal. This was very well preserved but was again fractured about a third of the way down. This was not a new break and probably occurred after disturbance of the material some time ago. The other bone was a human femur. It was very degraded and only the mid section was present. Probably a third of the length was recovered. None of the fragmented ends was recently broken, again indicating reworking of the strata in the past.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1.1 The archaeological watching brief recorded all works associated with the insertion of a new interpretation panel at Hexham Abbey, undertaken on Tuesday 24th October 2006. Several archaeological finds were recovered from the two pits excavated during the groundworks.
- 5.1.2 Apart from the human bone, the material recovered from Pit 1 is mainly consistent with deposition of waste material, especially with the presence of the oyster shell. Oysters were a major food source, especially in the Victorian period and not the luxury item we know today. Bone recovered from Pit 2 again suggests it was redeposited some time ago when the fractures occurred. Little more can be said about any of the bone recovered without the presence of securely dated contexts. The presence of human bone on an area so close to the abbey is to be expected.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.2.1 As this report comprises the recommendations for archaeological recording of the developments relating to the insertion of a new interpretation panel, no further work is necessary. However, due to the continuing high archaeological potential of the area, and the status of the site as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, any further development in the area should be subjected to a programme of archaeological investigation.

6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX 1: FIGURES AND PLATES
