
NORTH PENNINES HERITAGE TRUST

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**REPORT ON AN
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
EVALUATION AT
THE BUTTS, ALSTON,
CUMBRIA**

For Countryside Consultants

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1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- 1.1 An archaeological evaluation consisting of three small trenches was carried out on land at The Butts, Alston. Each trench was partially excavated to depths varying between 0.97m and 1.55m below the present ground surface.
- 1.2 Cobble surfaces, a flagstone floor, a culvert, and a wall were identified, and were associated with finds and deposits of a post-Medieval date.
- 1.3 Natural subsoil was not observed in any of the three trenches.

2 INTRODUCTION AND LOCATION

- 2.1 The North Pennines Heritage Trust was commissioned by Countryside Consultants to undertake a desktop assessment and archaeological evaluation on an area of proposed redevelopment at The Butts, Alston Cumbria.
- 2.2 The site lies just north of the centre of Alston at NY 71858 46574, and currently comprises wasteland containing derelict buildings.

3 DESKTOP ASSESSMENT

- 3.1 Alston is the highest market town in England, with the main thoroughfare rising from 886 ft at the Nent Bridge, to 1084 ft on the Nenthead road in the space of 800 yards (Robertson, 1999). The fortunes of the town throughout the ages are intrinsically linked to the lead and mineral extracting industries at Alston Moor.
- 3.2 Alston Moor has been continuously exploited for its mineral wealth from at least the Roman period onwards. The area is most well known for its rich lead deposits, from which silver has been extracted; though limestone, sandstone, whinstone, fluorspar, zinc, copper, amber, and coal have also been worked from the area (ibid).
- 3.3 Impressive prehistoric and Roman remain have been found a few miles to the north-west of Alston at Kirkhaugh and Whitley Castle. Remains at Kirkhaugh comprise two Bronze Age barrows found to contain a gold earring, broken pottery and flint tools. Whitley Castle, just two miles from Alston would appear to have been an early 2nd century army camp, which was succeeded by a fort in the mid 2nd century. The fort is surrounded by complex and well-preserved rampart defences, and was partly constructed by troops of the sixth and twentieth Legions (ibid). A 13th century bronze skillet decorated with scrollwork was unearthed close to Whitley Castle in 1906, and may have been used for assaying samples from the silver mine.
- 3.4 In the 10th century Alston Moor was part of Tynedale, one of the Scottish king's estates in England, and was affiliated to Northumbria. The status of the area was greatly enhanced by its mineral wealth, and for many centuries rights to Alston Moor incited conflict between England and Scotland, and the Church and the Crown.
- 3.5 The name 'Alston' is thought to have derived either from the old Scandinavian personal name of 'Halfdan' or the Saxon Aldwin's town. Other recorded names include Aldeneby, used between 1164-71, Aldenestown c.1208, Aldeneston, Haldeston, in 1279, Auston, used in 1589, and Aldston.
- 3.6 Much of the Sites and Monuments Record for Alston relates to industrial use, including various Post Medieval woollen mills and quarries of unknown date. However, a moated site (SMR 775) containing a possible hut circle where two medieval bronze vessels and a silver denari have been found, is located roughly 450m to the west of the present site. Additionally field systems and earthworks

belonging to a shrunken village of either Roman or Medieval date have been located close to Bankfoot, in the southern part of Alston (SMR 6188).

- 3.7 The area known as The Butts was already in existence during the 15th century, when two codes of civil law, the Paine Roll and the Drift Roll were introduced to Alston Moor. The Paine Roll refers specifically to The Butts at Alston, and states that: 'The Butts of Aldston and Garigill be yearly made before Snt. Hellen Day upon paine of 3 shillings 4 pence for every default' (Robertson, 1999, 21).
- 3.8 Areas known as 'The Butts' were commonplace in Medieval towns and were used for the practice of archery. As at Alston, many appear to be situated close to the church and presumably comprised fairly open wasteland. The date at which The Butts ceased to be used for this purpose is not known, houses in The Butts display datestones belonging to the 1740's, though these may relate to extensive alterations rather than entirely new builds.
- 3.9 The present site lies to the north-east of St Augustine's church. The current church dates to 1869, though records suggest that a church has existed on this spot since at least 1145. Nothing of the earlier church survives in the present build except for a few decorated stones in the porch.
- 3.10 No previous archaeological work is known to have taken place at the site, although the area is recognised to lie within an area of archaeological interest as identified by the Extensive Urban Survey for Cumbria (ref EUS 1). The thick line on fig 1 defines the boundaries of the area deemed to be of archaeological interest.

4 AIMS

- 4.1 The archaeological work was two-fold, consisting of an archaeological evaluation together with a desktop assessment of the existing resource, with the following as its objectives:

4.1.1 The Archaeological Evaluation

- to record archaeological deposits;
- to establish, wherever possible, the extent and depth of the archaeological remains;
- to establish, wherever possible, the condition of the remains for future management purposes;
- to recover artefactual material, especially that useful for dating purposes;
- to determine as fully as possible the quality and importance of the archaeological remains
- to prepare a report for Countryside Consultants setting out the salient conclusions;
- depending upon the results of the work, to prepare a report for publication;

4.1.2 The Desk Top Assessment

- to study primary and secondary maps, documents, and any aerial photographs relating to the site.

5 METHODOLOGY

- 5.1 The evaluation took place from 2nd-4th July 2002, under the direction of J Reeves, BA, who was assisted by J Trippier BA, PIFA.
- 5.2 The site can be identified by the code 'NPHT 02 ALS A' in the North Pennines Heritage Trust's sit archive.
- 5.3 In the week leading up to the evaluation three small trenches were opened under archaeological supervision by staff from the North Pennines Heritage Trust. The trenches were distributed throughout the site in locations agreed upon by Countryside Consultants and the County Archaeology Service.
- 5.4 All trenches were opened by hand, removing modern overburden to reveal the top of the archaeological deposits. Deposits were then hand cleaned and recorded in accordance to guidelines set out in the North Pennines Heritage Trust's excavation manual. With this completed, each trench was subject to partial stratigraphic excavation in order to achieve the objectives set out in the project design.

6 RESULTS

6.1 Trench 1 (Figs 3&4)

- 6.1.1 Trench 1 measured 1.06m by 0.82m and was positioned to the rear of the buildings, close to the western limits of the site.
- 6.1.2 The earliest deposit identified within the trench consisted of two large stone slabs (110) forming the roof of a culvert, the trajectory of which can be seen on the town map of Alston dating to 1775. The culvert contains the eastward continuation of the mill burn beck, which presumably supplied water to the mill at the top of The Butts.
- 6.1.3 The slabs, which were found at a depth of 0.97m below the present ground surface (288.41m AOD), were covered with a mid grey-brown silty clay (109), which became increasingly cobble filled with depth. This deposit measured roughly 0.3m in depth and was fairly mixed throughout, containing rubble, mortar, coal, pottery, bone and glass within its fill.
- 6.1.4 Deposit 109 was sealed by a fairly well-laid cobble surface located at a depth of 0.58m below ground surface (288.80m AOD). The cobbles (101) were bedded into a fine gravel-silt, and are thought to be part of a more extensive exterior cobble yard.
- 6.1.5 A steep sided feature (102), only part of which could be observed within the confines of the trench, cut through the cobble surface. The feature contained

fragments of broken ceramic drainpipe within its fill (103), and had a depth of roughly 0.6m.

- 6.1.6 Both the cobbles and the feature that cut through them were sealed by modern debris and topsoil (100).

6.2 Trench 2 (Figs 6&7)

- 6.2.1 Trench 2 measured roughly 4.1m by 0.9-1.1m, and was positioned inside the south building along the course of a proposed service trench.
- 6.2.2 Excavation of this trench was limited due to the lack of light within the building, though a sondage excavated along the north-west wall of the building was excavated to a depth of 1.1m below the present ground surface.
- 6.2.3 The earliest deposit identified within the trench consisted of a clean dark grey clay-silt (116) found in the base of the sondage. This deposit was directly overlain by a fairly substantial layer of dark brown-grey clay-silt (115) which contained frequent inclusions of cobbles and rubble.
- 6.2.4 Deposit 115 measured 0.55m in depth and appeared to continue beneath the building foundations. The deposit was also overlain by an intermittent and thin mortar spread (114), which was fine and crumbly in texture.
- 6.2.5 The mortar spread was sealed by a layer of mid-dark brownish grey clay-silt (113), which was overlain by deposit 112, a grey-brown clay-silt containing demolition debris.
- 6.2.6 A thin layer of mid brown clay-silt (111) overlay deposit 112, and was used as base on which to lay a cobble floor. The cobble surface found throughout much of the trench comprised rounded and squared cobbles (104) set into a fairly loose silt-gravel (117), similar to that observed in trench 1.
- 6.2.7 The cobble floor was found at 289.48m AOD, and used rectangular blocks of stone to depict pattern and form a shallow draining gully near the south end of the trench. In places the cobble floor uses fairly large cobbles and the overall surface is uneven, suggesting that the building was intended for stables or workshops rather than use as a dwelling.
- 6.2.8 Cobble surface 104 was cut by a shallow linear feature (107), the function of which remains uncertain. The feature measured 0.12m deep and was haphazardly backfilled with cobbles and a large stone slab in an attempt to reinstate the cobble surface.
- 6.2.9 The latest deposit within the trench comprised a mix of clay-silt, mortar and recent gravel deposits (100).

6.3 Trench 3 (Figs 7,8&9)

- 6.3.1 Trench 3 was positioned in the north-west part of the site, and measured up to 1.68m by up to 1.5m.

- 6.3.2 Th excavation of a small sondage in the central part of the trench revealed the earliest deposit to be a fairly clean mid brown sandy silt (126) at a height of 285.87 m AOD, approximately 1.55m below the present ground surface.
- 6.3.3 A wall comprising 12 rough courses of unfaced stone (125) directly overlay deposit 126. The wall was loosely bonded with patches of soil and mortar, and is thought to be part of a cellar wall, possibly belonging to buildings seen on the town map of 1775.
- 6.3.4 A series of deposits abutted the north-west face of wall 125, the earliest of which consisted of a mid grey sandy silt containing frequent cobbles (124). The deposit measured up to 0.47m in depth and was overlain by a layer of light brown silty material (123), which was in turn sealed by a brownish-grey sandy silt containing fragments of mortar (122).
- 6.3.5 A thick deposit of mortar (121) measuring up to 0.20m in depth was banked up against the wall, overlying deposit 122. The mortar deposit was covered with a mid brown sandy silt (120) noted to be similar to 122.
- 6.3.6 This sequence of deposits was sealed by an incomplete flagstone floor (119) located at a height of 286.83m AOD. The floor butts up to wall 125, but whether it is an internal or external surface is unclear.
- 6.3.7 Recent topsoil (100) containing a large chamfered stone (113) overlay the flagstone floor.

7 THE FINDS

- 7.1 All finds were recorded using the North Pennines Heritage Trust's standard methods, as set out in the excavation manual. The following table quantifies the finds (sherds/fragments) by trench and context:

Trench	Context	Iron	Pottery	Tobacco pipe	Bone	Burnt bone	Glass
1	109		5	1	2	2	1
2	105	2	1				
2	106		2				
2	113		1	1	2		
2	115		3	2	2		
2	116						1
3	120		6	1			
3	122		13		2		1
3	124	2	14		1		
TOTALS		4	45	5	9	2	3

- 7.2 The pottery has been examined by F Giecco, and would appear to be an 18th-19th century assemblage, with the exception of one residual fragment of possible late Medieval pot retrieved from context 122.
- 7.3 All finds of iron consisted of fairly heavily concreted machine made nails.

8 CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 Partial excavation of the three trenches revealed deposits exclusively of a post-Medieval date.
- 8.2 Natural subsoil was not observed in any of the trenches despite excavation to depths of up to 1.55m below the present ground surface, and it remains possible that archaeological deposits of Medieval or earlier date may lie beneath the post-Medieval deposits.

9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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