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TOWNHEAD  
ELSDON  
NORTHUMBERLAND

~ ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF ~

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NOVEMBER 2017



Prepared for: <i>Dr John Wollaston</i>	By: <i>The Archaeological Practice Ltd.</i>
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TOWNHEAD  
ELSDON  
NORTHUMBERLAND

REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

Prepared by:

*The Archaeological Practice Ltd.*



**Frontispiece:** *General view of the rear of Townhead (looking E) in October 2017, showing the foundation trench location marked out on the surface. To the left (N) Elsdon Tower can be seen and to the right (S) the north end of Harbinger Cottage.*

**Grid Reference:** NY 93608 93387  
**Client:** Dr John Wollaston  
**Date of fieldwork:** September 2017  
**Project Code:** AP 17/31  
**Oasis Number:** thearcha2-385741

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## SUMMARY

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*This document reports on a process of archaeological monitoring conducted in October 2017, to mitigate the potential impact of groundworks associated with the excavation of foundation trenches for an extension to the rear of the cottage called Townhead (centred on grid reference NY 93608 93387), in the village of Elsdon, Northumberland.*

*The groundworks involved the excavation of a foundation trench, 0.60m wide and c. 0.75m deep, for the north, south and west walls of the new extension.*

*Townhead, a modest, stone-built, 19th-century house, stands at the north end of Elsdon village, immediately south of Elsdon Tower, on the west side of the village green at its very northern apex.*

*Given the archaeological potential of Elsdon village, which dates back to the Middle Ages, Northumberland County Council recommended that an archaeological watching brief should be undertaken during groundworks to ensure that any archaeological remains found to exist on the site are appropriately recorded and analysed.*

*Examination of detailed Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1860 onwards and other historic maps (the earliest dating back to 1731) reveals the present cottage was in existence by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (2nd edition Ordnance Survey 1898). The Ordnance Survey 1st edition (1860) shows a longer row of cottages, which extended further south, into the plot now occupied by Harbinger Cottage, and evidently preceded both Townhead and Harbinger Cottage. This row also figures on the 1839 tithe map. Earlier maps either omit this part of the village or are too schematic to inspire confidence, although various copies of the Enclosure map from 1731 show a building called 'The Flat', SW of the Tower, perhaps in the general area of the neighbouring Harbinger Cottage or the Old School and Schoolhouse.*

*During the watching brief a series of deposits were revealed over the natural subsoil, including a layer of hardcore, a mixed deposit of yellow sand and loam and a dark yellow brown sandy loam, none of which were of any evident archaeological significance. The natural pale yellow-brown sandy subsoil was encountered at the bottom of the foundation trenches at a depth of c. 0.75m.*

*It was concluded that no significant archaeological features or deposits were disturbed during the groundworks carried out at Townhead and monitored by archaeological watching brief.*

*No further archaeological monitoring is required during the works at this development site. However, given the high potential for significant archaeological deposits to exist in the wider area, it is recommended that any future work should be considered on its own merits with respect to the need for archaeological intervention.*

## 1. PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

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**1.1** This document reports on a process of archaeological monitoring conducted in October 2017, to mitigate the potential impact of groundworks associated with the excavation of foundation trenches for a rear (west) extension to the house known as Townhead, located at the northern end of Elsdon village (centred on grid reference NY 93608 93387), in the village of Elsdon, Northumberland (*see Illus. 01-03*).

**1.2** The groundworks involved the excavation of a foundation trench, some 0.60m wide and c. 0.75m deep, for the north, south and west walls of the new extension attached to the rear of the existing house.

**1.3** Townhead is a modest, stone-built, 19th-century house, situated at the north end of Elsdon village, immediately south of Elsdon Tower, on the west side of the village green's northern apex.

**1.4** Given the archaeological potential of the historic village of Elsdon, which dates back to the medieval period, and particularly those parts which immediately surround the village green, Northumberland County Council Conservation Team recommended that an archaeological watching brief should be undertaken during groundworks to ensure that any archaeological remains found to exist on the site are appropriately recorded and analysed.

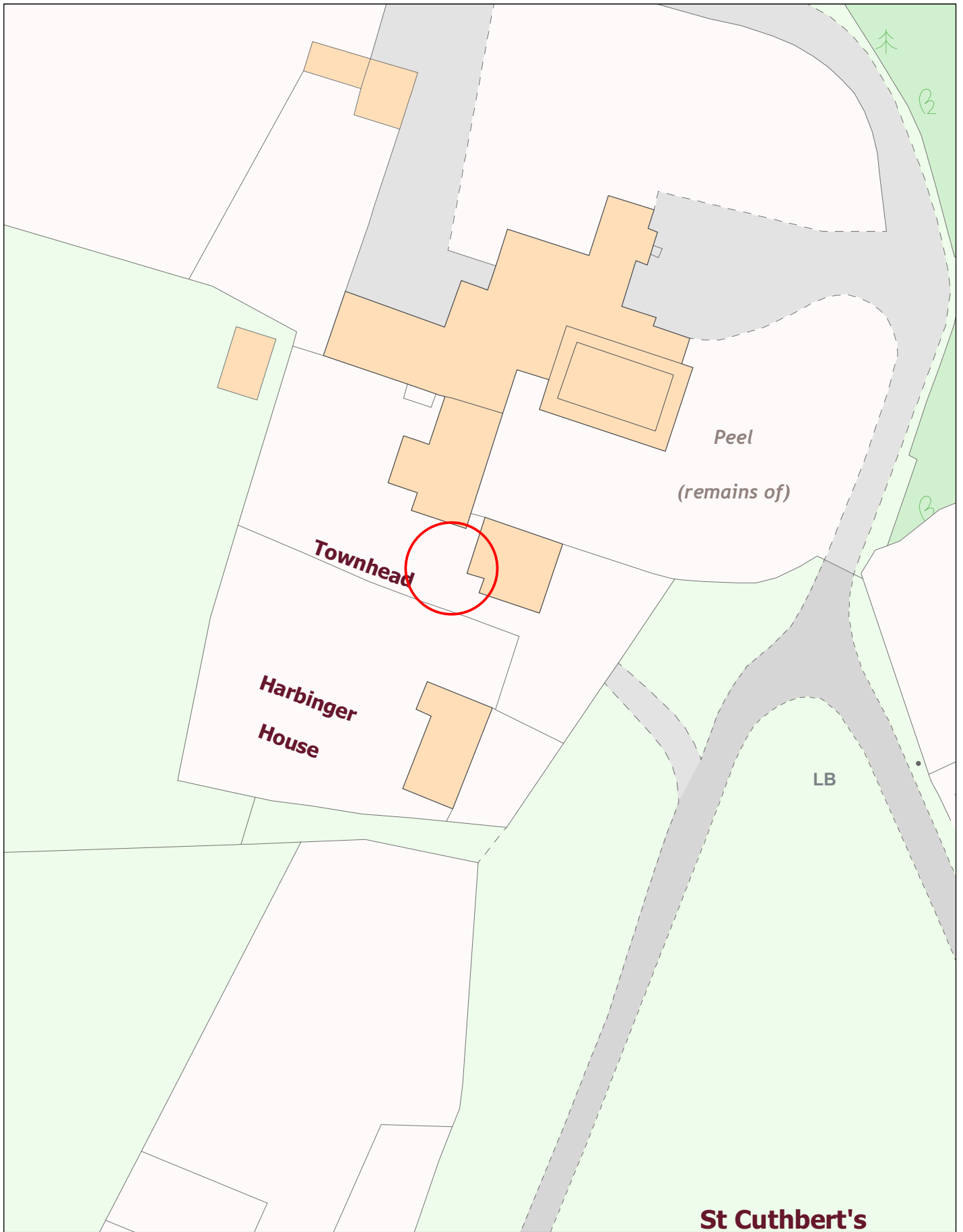


**Illus. 01:** The location of Elsdon (circled in red), near Otterburn in Northumberland.



**Illus. 02:** The location of the watching brief site (circled in red) in Elsdon, Northumberland.





Scale 1:500

0 4 8 12 16 20 24 28 32 36 40 m

**Illus. 03:** Location of monitored excavation (circled in red) at the watching brief site, Townhead, Elsdon.

## 2. CULTURAL HERITAGE BACKGROUND

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### 2.1 The historical and topographic context of Elsdon village

The village of Elsdon is situated in west-central Northumberland, near the eastern boundary of the Northumberland National Park, towards the eastern end of Redesdale (see Illus 1). Today the village is bypassed by the main A696 Newcastle to Jedburgh and Edinburgh road, from which it is accessed at Raylees, but is bisected by the B6341 road which links Rothbury and the Coquet Valley to Otterburn and Redesdale. It can also still be reached from the south east by the course of the original turnpike road from Newcastle, via Wallington, Harwood Gate and Steng Cross.

The village is set in a remarkable natural amphitheatre formed by ranges of hills to the north, south and east. Only to the west, towards Otterburn and upper Redesdale beyond, does this natural bowl open out. As a result, the main approaches from the south and south east provide panoramic views of the village, with the ridge-and-furrow earthworks of its ancient field systems spreading out around the settlement core. However, when viewed from the centre of the green, the village appears closed in. Only by ascending to the parapet of the stone towerhouse or climbing the ramparts of the Mote Hills can a liberating sense of wider vistas be gained and an impression of the vast sweep of open moorland to the north which forms the Otterburn Training Range.

The settlement surrounds a large central, leaf-shaped green which contains the church towards its north end. A towerhouse, formerly the rector's residence, and the impressive earthworks of a Norman castle (the Mote Hills) dominate the village to the north and north-east respectively. The two medieval fortifications are situated on spurs on either side of the Elsdon Burn, which has carved a steep-sided ravine along the eastern side of the village in its course down from the hills to the north to join the Whiskershiel Burn just to the south east of the settlement. From there the combined waters flow westward along the southern edge of the village, then south-westward to meet the Rede, draining the basin in which Elsdon sits.

Townhead is a small, stone-built, 19th-century house of two bays with dormer windows and a gabled projection to the rear. It is situated at the northern end of the village, on the west side of the leaf-shaped green's northern apex, and immediately to the south of the late medieval/16th-century tower. The house is positioned within a small plot, with a track along the south side giving access to the rear. This plot is bounded on the south side by the small wooden cottage, known as Harbinger Cottage (also called Green Cottage locally). There is now a small garden to the front, though originally the house fronted directly onto the green.

The site does not lie within any areas of protected status within the Northumberland National Park.

### 2.2 Previous Archaeological Assessment and Investigation

No previous archaeological investigation has occurred within the proposed development site. However, a watching brief was undertaken just to the south, in October 2016, during construction works at the rear (west side) of the neighbouring Harbinger Cottage, which exposed traces of a possible ditch at the bottom of the northernmost foundation trench. Another watching brief was undertaken a little further south again, earlier in 2017, in the

empty plot to the north of the Old Schoolhouse though this did not result in any significant archaeological findings (Archaeological Practice 2017). A heritage statement was also prepared in relation to that project (Archaeological Practice 2012). In addition, renovation works to Elsdon Tower, during the 1990s, were monitored by Peter Ryder, and revealed important evidence regarding the building's history, preserved in its fabric.

Investigations have also taken place on the adjacent parts of the green. A trench was dug alongside exterior face of the north wall of the churchyard, as part of a local community archaeology project in 2011, and geophysical surveys have been undertaken on the green, as part of a postgraduate MA study in 2004 (MacIntosh 2004; HER 9767, 20282-4; sites [67-68]), and later by Timescape Surveys, in 2012 (Timescape Surveys 2012). The earlier survey identified a variety of anomalies north and west of the churchyard, including traces of a possible rectangular structure to the north which was interpreted as a predecessor of St Cuthbert's Church and ovoid/sub-circular features to the west which might represent burnt pits or cremations. The 2012 survey showed there was much disturbance resulting from modern service pipes/cables etc., but revealed possible magnetic traces of burning, typical of cairns or hearths, and also slight traces of possible robbed out buildings in the area north of the church. The resistivity results included traces of rectilinear features with high resistance indicative of masonry foundations in the area north of the church. Magnetic anomalies possibly representative of part of a ditch and pits were also identified west of the church. All these features remain have yet to be tested by archaeological excavation, however. Multiple activities on the green over the centuries associated with markets or fairs or the establishment of various communal facilities are likely to have left traces identifiable as geophysical anomalies.

Furthermore, the area was examined as part of a detailed study undertaken by The Archaeological Practice Ltd. (Carlton & Rushworth 2005) during the compilation of an archaeological and historical atlas for the village, part of a series undertaken for NNPA in 2004-5.

### 2.3 Sites of interest within and in the vicinity of the proposed development area (see Illus 10)

Catalogue No.	SMR No.	Period	Site Name	Grid Ref.	Status
1		POST MEDIEVAL	Townhead		
2	9742	MEDIEVAL	Elsdon Tower	NY 393610 593400	Grade I
3		POST MEDIEVAL	Harbinger Cottage (original Elsdon Café)	NY 393610 593405	
4	14068	POST-MEDIEVAL	The Old School and Schoolhouse, Elsdon	NY 393585 593291	
5	9744	MEDIEVAL/IRON AGE?	Mote Hills motte and bailey castle (adapted IA hillfort?)	NY 393750 593510	SAM
6	9746	ROMAN	Roman Tombstone inside church	NY 393630 593280	
7	9752	POST-MEDIEVAL	The Bacchus, formerly Scotch Arms	NY 393700 593210	Grade II, II
8	9754	POST-MEDIEVAL	The Crown	NY 393700 593260	Grade II
9	9755	POST-MEDIEVAL	The Coach House attached to The Crown	NY 393700 593230	Grade II
10	9757	POST-MEDIEVAL	Townfoot, Elsdon, remains of bastle	NY 393500 593020	Grade II
11	9767	POST-MEDIEVAL	Elsdon village green cockpit	NY 393600 593200	
12	9768	MEDIEVAL	Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393640 593290	Grade I
13	9769	POST-MEDIEVAL	Bridge over Elsdon Burn c.150 yards south of The Mill	NY 393670 593530	Grade II
14	13641	POST-MEDIEVAL	Farmbuildings attached to left of the Crown	NY 393699 593270	Grade II
15	13642	POST-MEDIEVAL	The Bird in the Bush Inn	NY 393552 593175	Grade II
16	13643	POST-MEDIEVAL	The Pinfold	NY 393660 593100	Grade II
17	13644	POST-MEDIEVAL	Turnbull headstone c.2 yards south of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393650 593260	Grade II

18	13645	POST-MEDIEVAL	Headstone of Katharin .. c.10 yards south of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393650 593260	Grade II
19	13646	POST-MEDIEVAL	Three headstones c.20 yards south-west of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393620 593250	Grade II
20	13647	POST-MEDIEVAL	Pair of headstones c.20 yards south of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393660 593250	Grade II
21	13648	POST-MEDIEVAL	Alderson, Hall and Hall headstones c.10 yards south of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393650 593260	Grade II
22	13649	POST-MEDIEVAL	Dobson headstone c.15 yards south of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393650 593250	Grade II
23	13650	POST-MEDIEVAL	Snaith headstone c.25 yards south of Church of St Cuthbert	NY 393650 593240	Grade II
24	14051	POST-MEDIEVAL	Scott's House	NY.393695 593190	Grade II
25	14066	POST-MEDIEVAL	Elsdon Stone Craft	NY 393568 593097	
26	14069	POST-MEDIEVAL	Red House	NY 393595 593034	
27	14075	POST-MEDIEVAL	Council Houses on the village green, Elsdon	NY 393693 593106	
28	14067	POST-MEDIEVAL	Mote Hills Farm	NY 393717 593405	
29	14052	POST-MEDIEVAL	Blue House, Elsdon Village	NY 393570 593152	
30	14065	POST-MEDIEVAL	Burn Stones, Elsdon Village	NY 393675 593324	
31		POST-MEDIEVAL	Farmbuildings (including arched openings)	NY 393780 593324	
32		POST-MEDIEVAL	Wooden shepherds cottage	NY 393785 593290	
33		POST-MEDIEVAL	Site of twin bridge	NY 393723 593290	
34	20282	POST-MEDIEVAL	Building on the village green marked on the 1 <sup>st</sup> Edition OS map	NY 936500 931300	
35	20283	POST-MEDIEVAL	Geophysical survey to the west of the Church of St Cuthbert	NY 936000 932400	
36	20284	POST-MEDIEVAL	Geophysical survey to the north of the Church of St Cuthbert	NY 936300 933200	

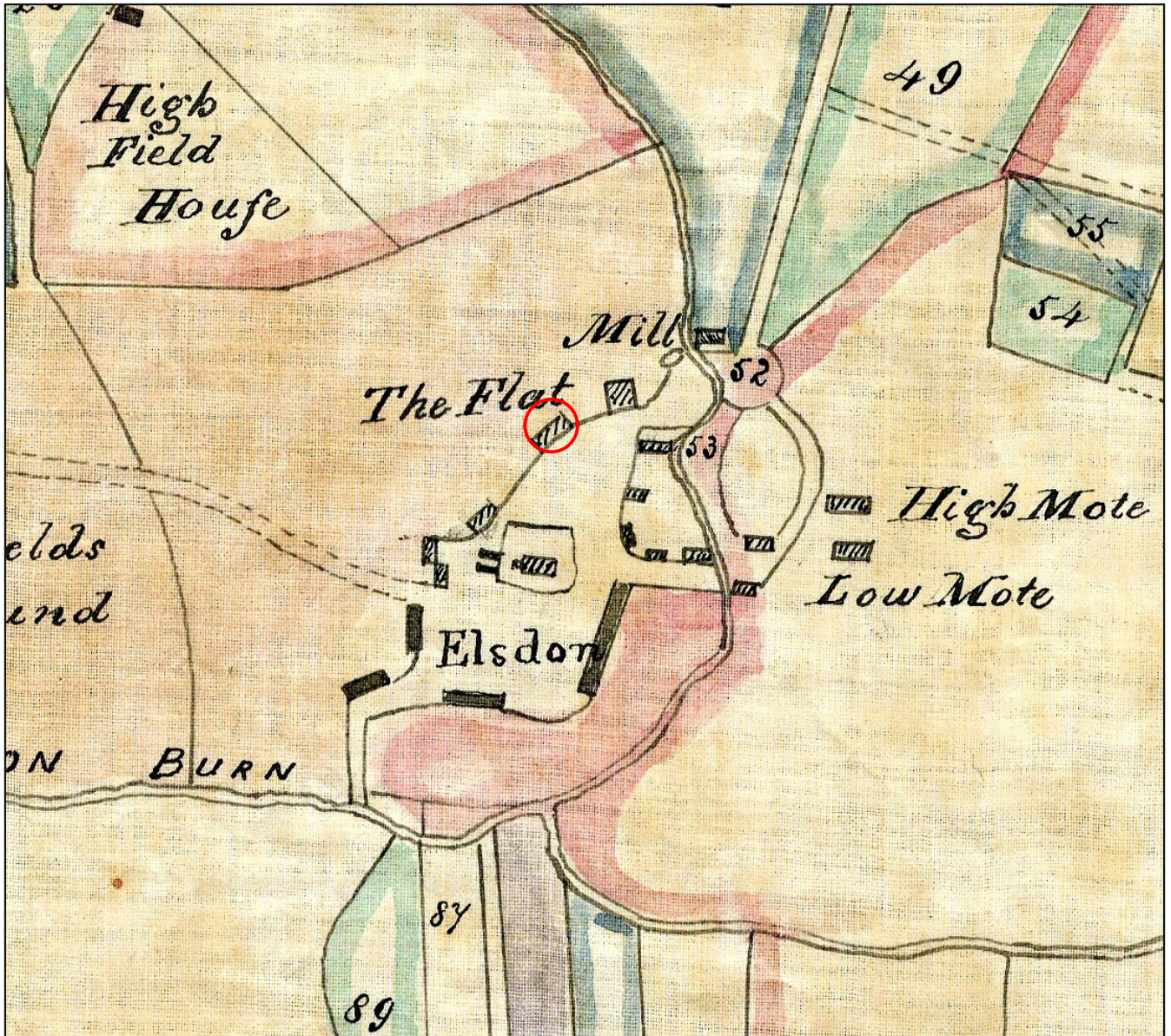
#### 2.4 Development of the development site and its environs as revealed by historic map analysis (*Illus 04-09*)

The earliest map to show the village in sufficient detail to make any judgement on the proposed development site is the 1731 Enclosure map (Aln. Cas. O XXV 1a; cf. later copy – *Illus 04* here). This shows a few buildings on the west side of the green north of the point where the Otterburn road exited the green. These clearly did not form a continuous row around that side of the green. A large square building at the northern end of the green probably represents Elsdon Tower. Another building, labelled 'The Flat', is depicted further south. It appears to be situated too far away from the tower to have intruded into the present Townhead plot and may have lain somewhere between Harbinger Cottage and the Old School and Schoolhouse. Subsequent county maps (Armstrong 1769, Fryer 1820 and Greenwood 1828) convey the same general impression as the enclosure map, as does the 1811 map of the road from Elsdon to the Coquet by Robert Tate (Aln. Cas. O XXIII 40.2), though the latter is rather schematic in its depiction.

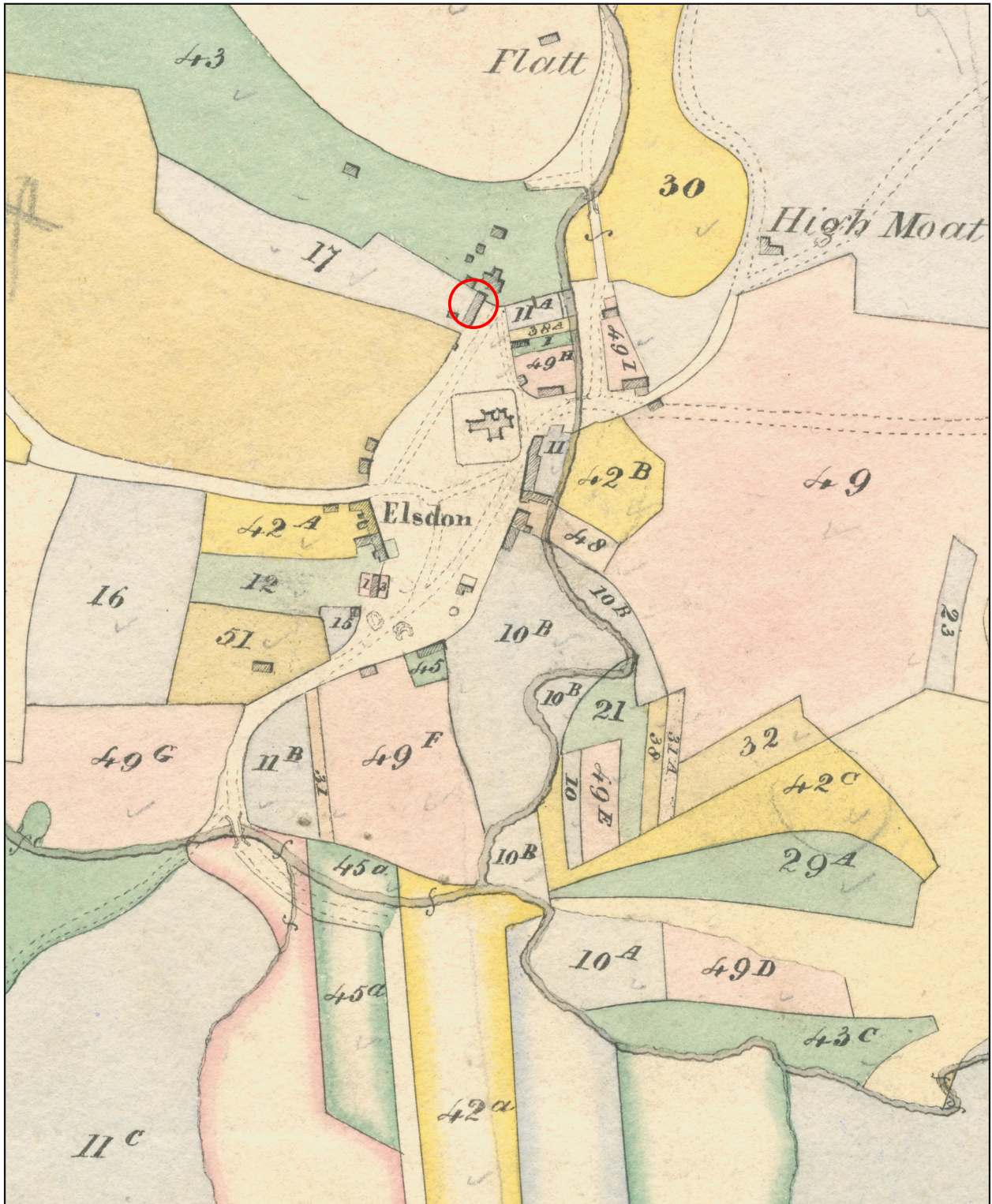
The first large scale map of the village, the 1839 tithe map (NRO DT 164 M; *Illus 05*), shows a narrow row of cottages, aligned NNE-SSW, just to the south of Elsdon Tower, and this still figures on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition (1860), where it is called Townhead (*Illus 07*). The row of cottages is too long and narrow to represent the present Townhead, however, and clearly extended further south, into the plot now occupied by Harbinger Cottage, as well as northwards closer to the tower. The row thus preceded both the present Townhead and Harbinger Cottage.

The present house was in existence by the end of the 19th century, as evinced by the 2nd edition Ordnance Survey (1898). At that stage it is shown forming the very edge of the green,

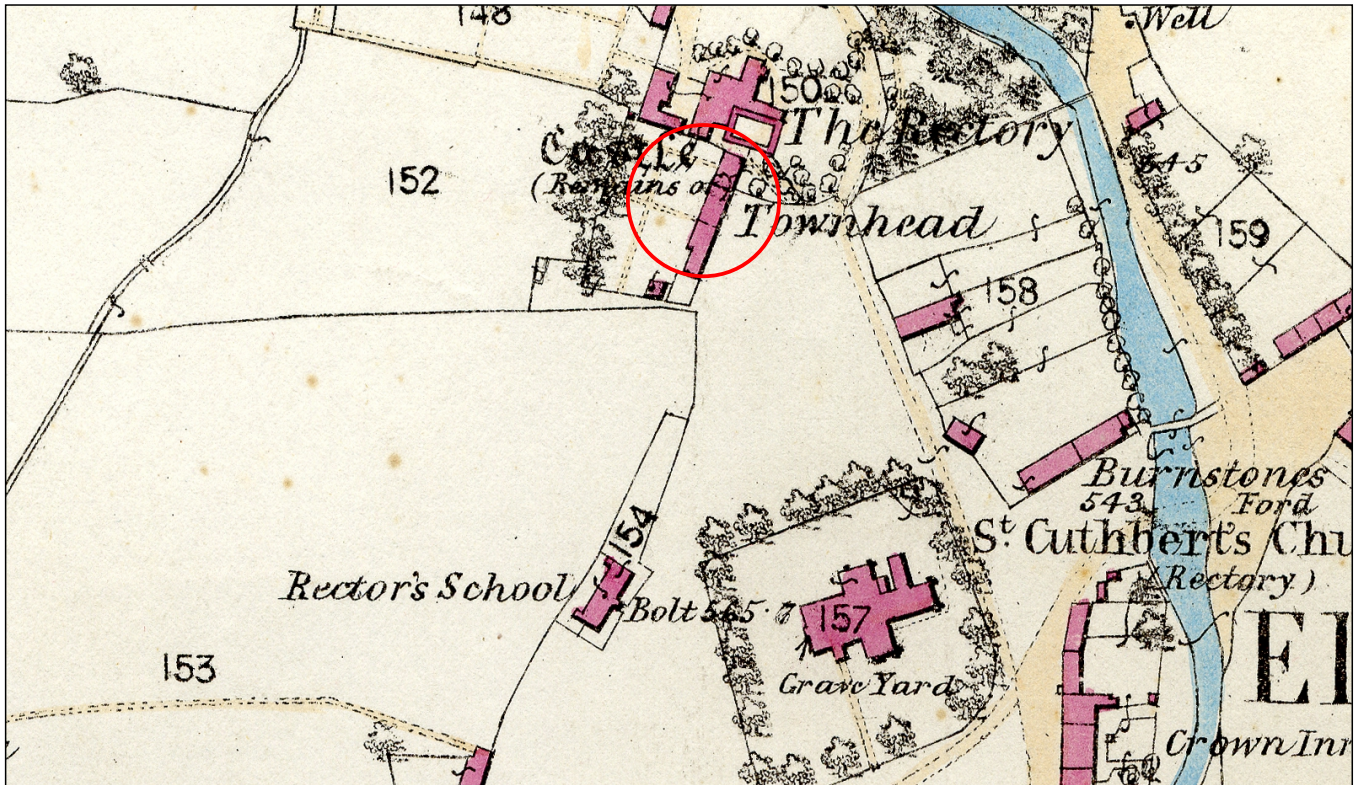
like the preceding row of cottages (*Illus 08*). It is now furnished with a small front garden which has slightly encroached onto the green (evident by the 1923 OS edition - *Illus 08*). The same edition shows a small structure to the SW of Townhead, but otherwise no buildings are shown anywhere to the rear of Townhead and none intrude into the area of the proposed construction works on these or later Ordnance Survey plans.



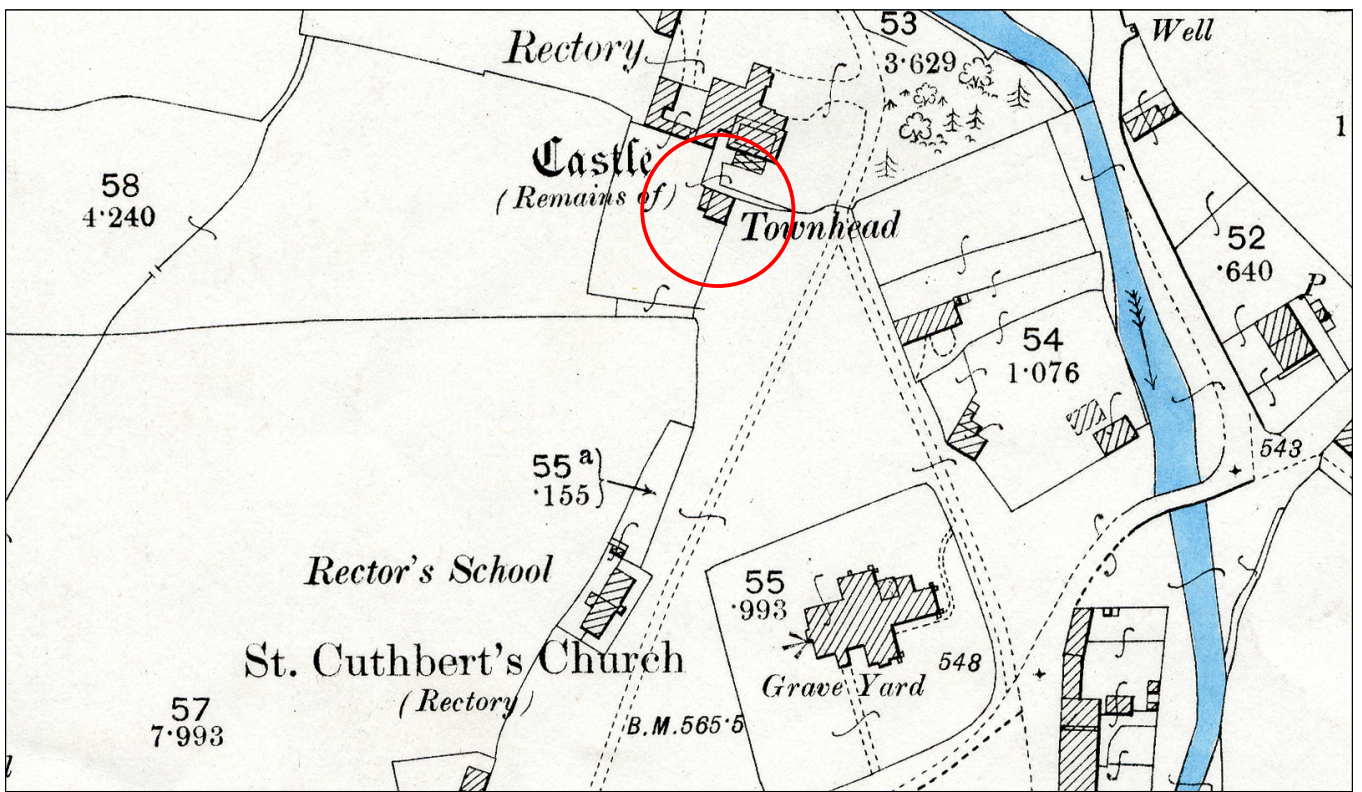
Illus. 04: Extract from the Elsdon Inclosure map c.1731, showing the watching brief area.



**Illus. 05:** Elsdon Tithe Plan c.1839, showing the location of the watching brief site (NRO DT 164 M)

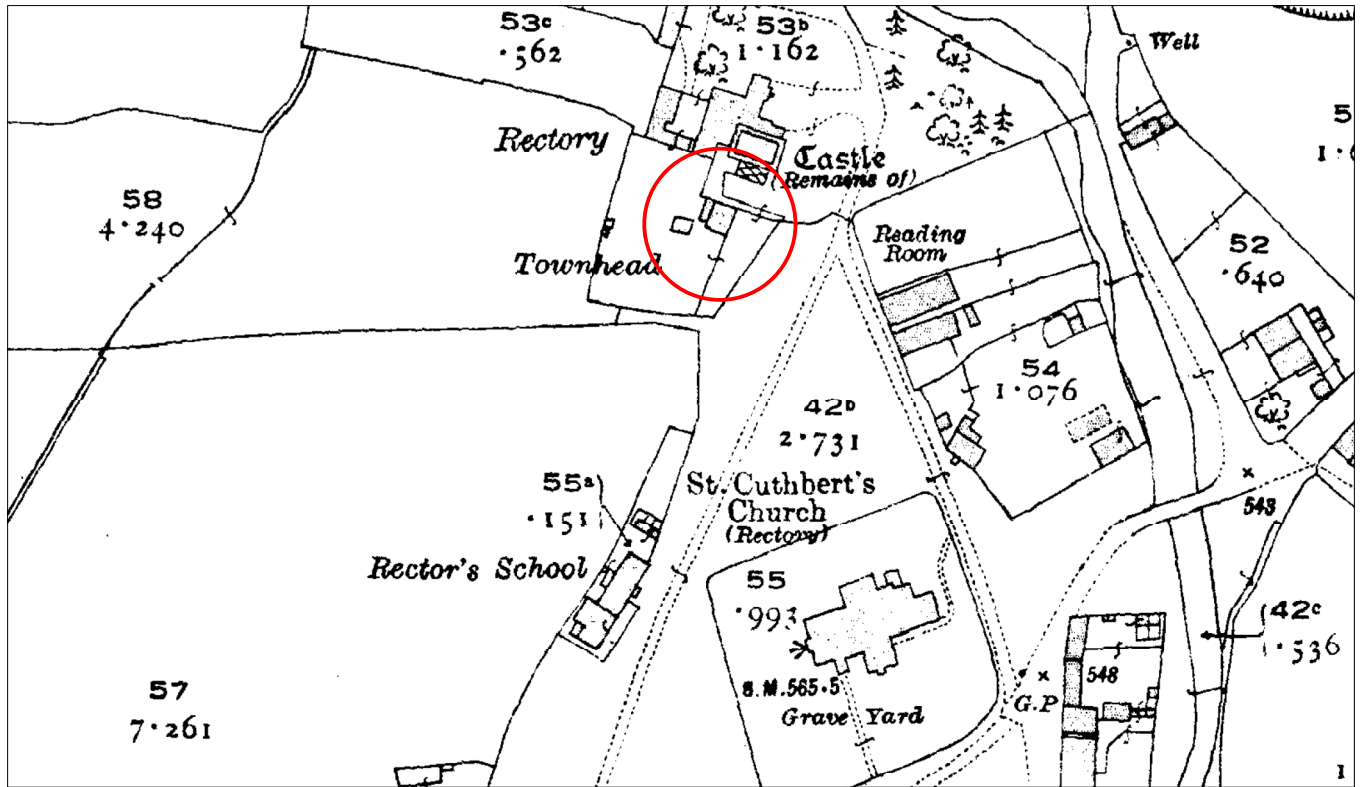


**Illus. 06:** Extract from the 1:2500 1st Edition Ordnance Survey Plan c.1863, showing the watching brief site in Elsdon, Northumberland.

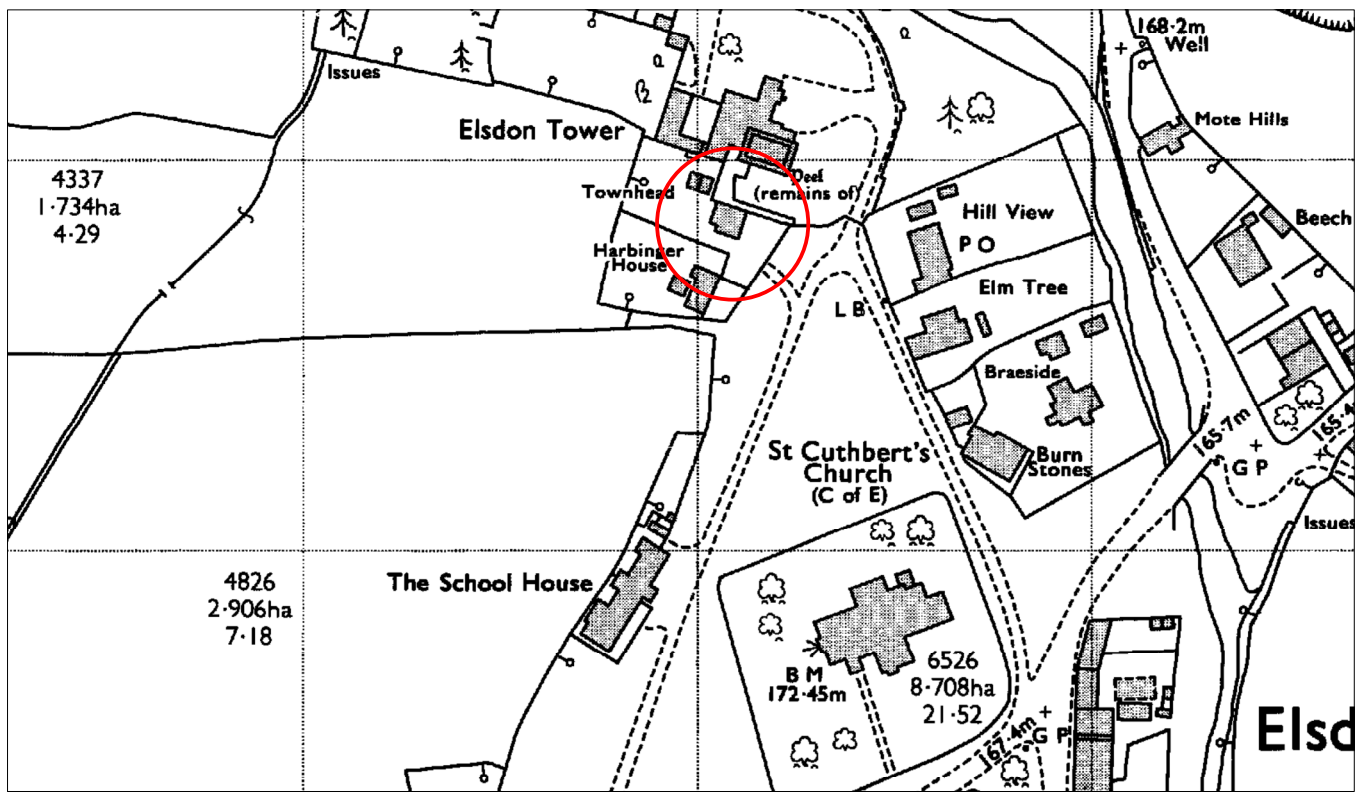


**Illus. 07:** Extract from the 1:2500 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Plan c.1897, showing the watching brief site in Elsdon, Northumberland.

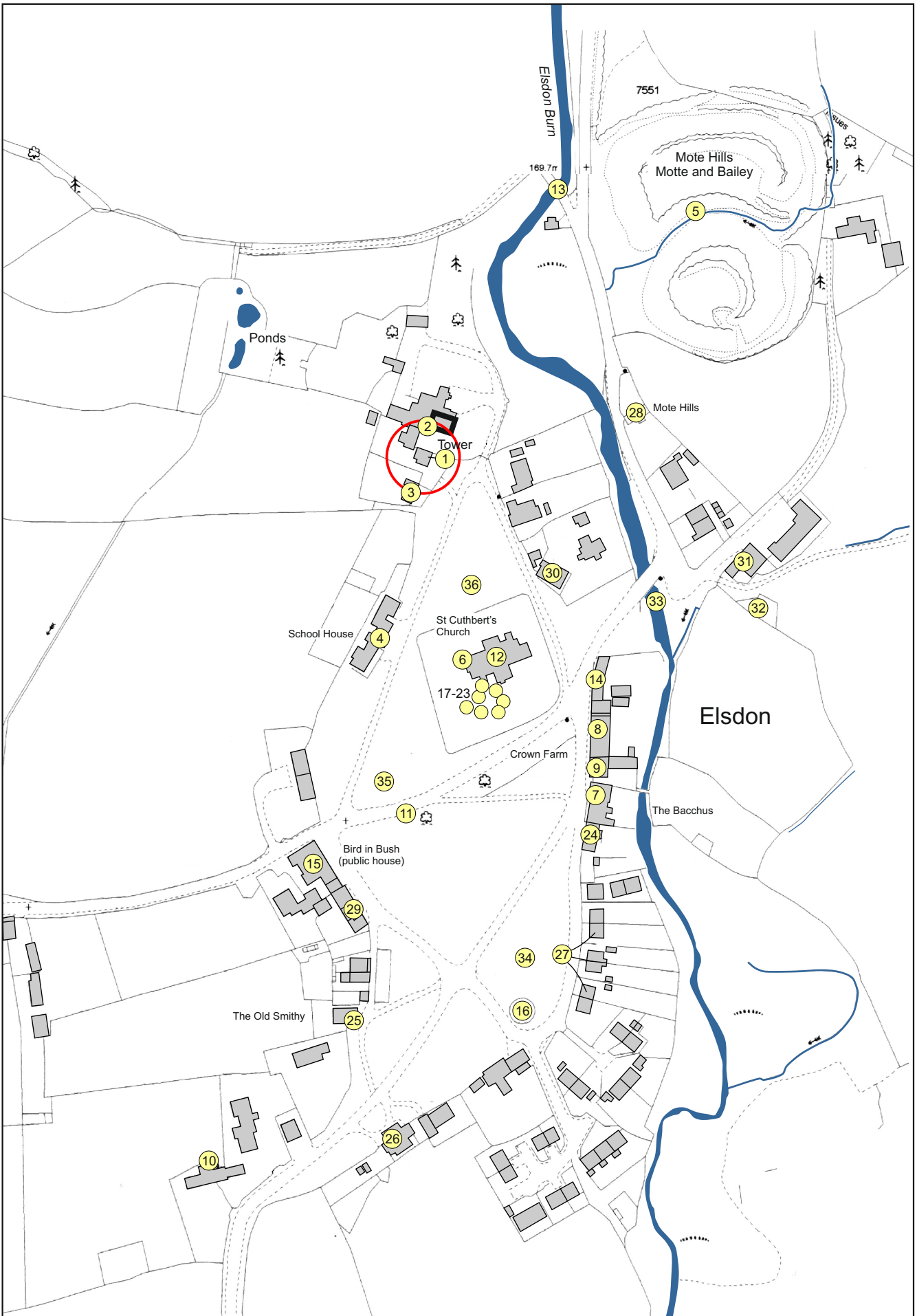




**Illus. 08:** Extract from the 1:2500 3rd Edition Ordnance Survey Plan c.1923, showing the watching brief site in Elsdon, Northumberland.



**Illus. 09:** Extract from the 1:2500 c.1976 Edition Ordnance Survey Plan, showing the watching brief site in Elsdon, Northumberland.



**Illus. 10:** Cultural Heritage Sites in Elsdon Village Core (Catalogue numbers keyed to Table 1). The watching brief site is circled in red.

### 3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

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The watching brief took place during all invasive groundworks carried out as part of the development to construct an extension, which takes the form of an oak-framed 'orangery', attached to the rear (west) of the extant house at Townhead, within the existing plot, specifically:

- The machine excavation of the three arms of a foundation trench, 0.60m wide and c. 0.75m-0.78m deep, for the north, south and west walls of the new extension.

The aims of the watching brief were to identify and determine the character of any remains uncovered during groundworks on the site, and to make an appropriate record of such finds by photographic and other means.

The trench was excavated by mini-mechanical excavator using a toothless ditching bucket. All excavations were closely monitored by a suitably trained and experienced archaeologist from The Archaeological Practice Ltd.



*Photo 1: View looking ESE across the watching brief site prior to the excavation of foundation trenches.*



*Photo 2: View looking east at foundation trenches abutting the west end of Townhead.*



*Photo 3: NNE facing section of north foundation trench.*



*Photo 4: SSW facing section of south foundation trench terminus.*



*Photo 5: View looking WNW along north foundation trench.*



*Photo 6: WNW facing section of south foundation trench.*



*Photo 7: View looking east along south foundation trench with clay patch [06] visible in the foreground.*



*Photo 8: Detail of variation in natural deposits with clay deposit [06] incorporated within sand [05] in the south foundation trench.*

## 4. RESULTS

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### 4.1 Foundation Trench *(see Photos 1-8)*

#### 4.1.1 Location and Dimensions

The foundation trench for the extension, attached to the rear (west side) of Townhead, was some 0.60m wide and varied between 0.75m to 0.78m in depth. It consisted of three conjoined arms – north, west and south – forming a C-shape in plan. The northern arm, which attached to a pre-existing projecting porch wall, was 3.75m in length (E-W), the western arm was 4.305m long (N-S) and the southern stretch was 5.00m long.

#### 4.1.2 Stratigraphy and Interpretation

A thin layer of garden topsoil [01] directly overlay a 0.09m thick layer of hard core [02] deposited by the previous resident to support an assemblage of temporary sheds and cabins (now removed). Beneath this a somewhat mixed deposit, some 0.27m in depth comprising a mixed yellow sand, loamy sand and soil [03]. A dark, yellow-brown sandy loam [04] lay beneath this extend down to the bottom of the trench, at 0.75m, where the subsoil, a pale yellow brown sand [05], was encountered. A patch of clean yellow clay and pebbles [06] was exposed at the bottom of the southern arm of the trench, on its north side, some 1.30m from the western end of the trench. There were no associated finds and no evident structural purpose could be ascribed to small clay spread, which was interpreted as a natural lens incorporated in the sand subsoil.

No archaeological remains, structural or artefactual, were observed in the three arms of the trench.

#### 4.1.3 Context List

- [01] Dark brown topsoil. Observed to a depth of 0.04m.
- [02] Dolomite hardcore beneath [01]. Observed from a depth of 0.04m to 0.13m.
- [03] Mixed deposit comprising a mixed yellow sand, loamy sand and soil beneath hardcore [02]. Observed from a depth of 0.13m to 0.40m.
- [04] A dark, yellow-brown sandy loam beneath mixed deposit [03]. Observed from a depth of 0.40m to 0.75m.
- [05] Pale yellow brown sand subsoil encountered at a depth of 0.75m.
- [06] A patch of clean yellow clay and pebbles observed at the bottom of the southern arm of the trench (depth 0.75m), located some 1.30m from the western end of the trench and 3.60m from the eastern end. The spread measured 0.43m E-W by 0.36cm N-S and extended into the north section. Interpreted as a natural deposit.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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**5.1** It is concluded that no significant archaeological features or deposits were disturbed during the groundworks carried out at Townhead and monitored by archaeological watching brief. The deposits revealed by the watching brief over the natural sand subsoil, encountered at a depth of 0.75m, most probably related to the recent occupation of the plot and its use as a garden area over the last two centuries.

**5.2** Examination of detailed historic ordnance survey maps (see *Illus. 04-09*) and other historic maps (the earliest dating back to 1731) reveals the present cottage was in existence by the end of the 19th century (2nd edition Ordnance Survey 1898). The Ordnance Survey 1st edition (1860) shows a longer row of cottages, which extended further south into the plot now occupied by Harbinger Cottage and evidently preceded both Townhead and Harbinger Cottage. This row also figures on the 1839 tithe map. Earlier maps either omit this part of the village or are too schematic to inspire confidence, though various copies of the Enclosure map from 1731 show a building called 'The Flat', SW of the Tower, in the general area of Townhead and the neighbouring Harbinger Cottage. However, any trace of these earlier buildings must lie beneath the present buildings and no trace was encountered during the watching brief.

**5.3** No further archaeological monitoring is required during the groundworks associated with this scheme. However, given the high potential for significant archaeological deposits to exist in the wider area, it is recommended that any future interventions should be considered on their own merits with respect to the need for archaeological intervention.

## 6. REFERENCES

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