
ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS CHURCH,
ALWINTON
NORTHUMBERLAND

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING BY
WATCHING BRIEF

May 2004



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| Prepared for: <i>Diocese of Newcastle</i> | By: <i>The Archaeological Practice Ltd.</i> |
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

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Frontispiece: The vicarage garage doors, showing removal of built-up soil from the wall

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION
2. EVALUATION PROGRAMME
3. WATCHING BRIEF
4. CONCLUSIONS
5. RECOMMENDATIONS
6. REFERENCES

FIGURES & PLATES

Cover: View of St Michael and All Angels Church, Alwinton, and the vicarage garage (foreground), east view.

Frontispiece: View of the vicarage garage doors, south-east view.

Figure 1: Site Location Plan of the scheme of works.

Plate 2: Overview shot of groundworks, west view.

Plate 3: Overview shot of groundworks, south-east view.

Plate 4: Soil removal from vicarage garage wall, south-east view.

Plate 5: Shot in plan of posthole 'g', excavated under the current scheme of works.

Plate 6: Shot in plan of posthole 'j', excavated under the current scheme of works.

Plate 7: Shot in plan of posthole 'k', excavated under the current scheme of works.

SUMMARY

During May 2004, work was carried out on behalf of Alwinton and Holystone Parish Council to facilitate the construction of a new footpath from the Vicarage to the entrance of the churchyard of St Michael and All Angels, Alwinton. The route of this footpath follows a track that leads to the church and involved cutting into an embankment between the track and the church garage and hearse house. As a result of the new footpath's close proximity to the church (which is Medieval in origin), members of the Archaeological Practice Limited carried out a watching-brief while excavations (to allow a foundation/footing for the path and the insertion to postholes to hold a hand rail) took place along the length of the route. This report describes deposits and features encountered during works.

The observations made while excavations were carried out identified deposits of dark brown loam under a deposit of turf and top-soil. This dark soil continued to the maximum depth excavated (0.50m to allow for a posthole to hold a hand rail), and appeared to have been a deposit caused by soil creep. Finds were limited to small sherds of modern (Victorian) pottery.

The nature of remains found upon the site does not support a recommendation for further archaeological evaluation. However, it would be advisable to carry out archaeological watching briefs during any future work in the vicinity due to the areas rich medieval (and earlier) history.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Evaluation

The following is a report on an archaeological watching brief carried out at St. Michael's and All Angels church, Alwinton (*Figure 1*), by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. on behalf of Alwinton and Holystone PCC. A watching brief was required as part of a series of works to install a footpath and handrail due to the development area's close proximity to highly sensitive areas of archaeological and historical importance. Observations made were designed to identify and define the nature of any features of archaeological importance.

1.2 Historical Synthesis

The church of St Michael and All Angels is situated in Low Alwinton, about 600m south of the village of Alwinton (centred on NGR NY 9238 0578), at a point where the River Alwin joins the River Coquet.

The grade II* listed building dates back to the 12th Century, with fabric of this period surviving in the chancel, north aisle, east end of the nave and the lower section of the south transept. In the twelfth Century the choir was rebuilt and extended, and narrow north and south aisles were added to the nave (along with arcades of three arches in the side walls) in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century (Dixon 1903, 220). Numerous alterations have been made to the building, however, the most notable were those carried out by Pickering in 1851, when most of the church was rebuilt, leaving the structure now present.

The village of Alwinton was one of ten towns in Coquetdale that (after the Coquest) formed part of the Barony of Vasci, held from the Vescis by the Umfraville's. the Umfraville line held it until 1377/8 when Gilbert Umfraville settled the land on his half brother Thomas Umfraville (Hope Dodds 1940, 419).

The Muster Roll of 1580 is the first reference to Over and Nether Alwinton as separate settlements, however this separation is not mentioned in the 1604 survey of Royal Estates on the Border where five freeholders and five customary tenants are recorded (Dixon 1985, 36). This is also the case with the Hearth Tax return of 1665, which lists 11 household, yet the Rate Book of 1663 list 10 proprietors including Mr Widdrington of High Alwinton and Mt Thirwall of Low Alwinton (*ibid* 1985, 37).

It has been suggested that the medieval settlement of Alwinton was situated at High Alwinton, on the edge of the river terrace about half a mile north of Low Alwinton and the church of St. Michael and All Angels (*ibid* 1985, 37), and the present lay-out of the village supports this theory. However the occurrence of eathworks in the fields surrounding the church, (especially to the north west and south west) seems to suggest a settlement of some size around the church and present vicarage.

2. EVALUATION PROGRAMME

2.1 Aims

The aim of the archaeological watching brief was to observe and record archaeological deposits revealed during the excavation of land adjacent to Corchester Lane in advance of a footpath being laid. This involved opening a trench alongside the road between 1.0m and 1.5m wide to a depth of 0.15m below the road surface for the footpath, which included a cut (directly adjacent to the present road) 0.30m wide and 0.30m deep for the insertion of curbing.

Any deposits encountered were to be examined and recorded (through photography, with plans drawn where appropriate) to determine the character of any such remains and as far as possible, their date, function, and state of preservation. Excavation of features was to be limited to only those deposits at risk of destruction through the series of work.

2.2 Methods

The trench was opened using a mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.0m wide toothless bucket, with the cut for the curbing excavated with a 0.30m wide toothless trenching bucket. Where deposits were encountered, excavation was paused, and sensitive features were examined by hand.

3. WATCHING BRIEF

Excavation of a trench to create a foundation for a footpath (*plates 2-4*), and postholes to hold a handrail (*plates 3, 5-7*) took place in a single day, with the entire operation supervised by an archaeologist. Removal of turf and topsoil [101] revealed a deposit of dark brown soil [102] that occupied the length of the trench. This deposit seems to be a dump of plough soil and appears to be the result of natural soil creep building up against the building walls. This deposit contained very few finds, however what pottery did occur was of a Victorian (or later) date. This deposit continued down to the maximum excavated depth of 0.50m (postholes for handrail supports).

A larger concentration of roofing slate [103] (*plates 6-7*) was observed adjacent to the stone wall attached to the garage and may represent dump material from former “lean-to” structures attached to the vicarage side of this wall which have been demolished.

Interpretation

The deposits encountered throughout the trench seem to suggest little activity in this area at a shallow depth. The position of the site on a slope would account for the build up of plough/garden soil against the walls of surviving structure, and the modern material recovered from this deposit would seem to suggest the build up occurred in the last 150 years.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief carried out at Alwinton, Northumberland identified no features of archaeological significance, with deposits exposed during excavation being limited to natural dumps of plough/garden soil.

Material recovered during excavation was of a probable Victorian date and would suggest the embankment that was removed had formed over the last couple of centuries, with no evidence of material pre-dating this period.

The occurrence of quantities of roofing slate in one specific area might represent the dumping of material from the “lean-to buildings” that are evident against the vicarage boundary wall at an area where it joins the garage wall. These structures are in a poor state of repair, and it is possible that when the roof has been removed or has collapsed, material has simply been disposed of over the wall. It seems unlikely to have come from the garage or hearse house as both are roofed with stone tiles.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although no deposits of archaeological importance were observed during work on this occasion, it is recommended that any further be subject to archaeological watching brief due to the site's proximity to the medieval church and settlement of Alwinton.

6. REFERENCES

Dixon, P. J. (1985) *Deserted Medieval Villages of Northumberland: Vol 2*, unpublished Phd thesis.

Hope Dodds, (1940) *History of Northumberland: Vol XV*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Andrew Reid & Co., Ltd.

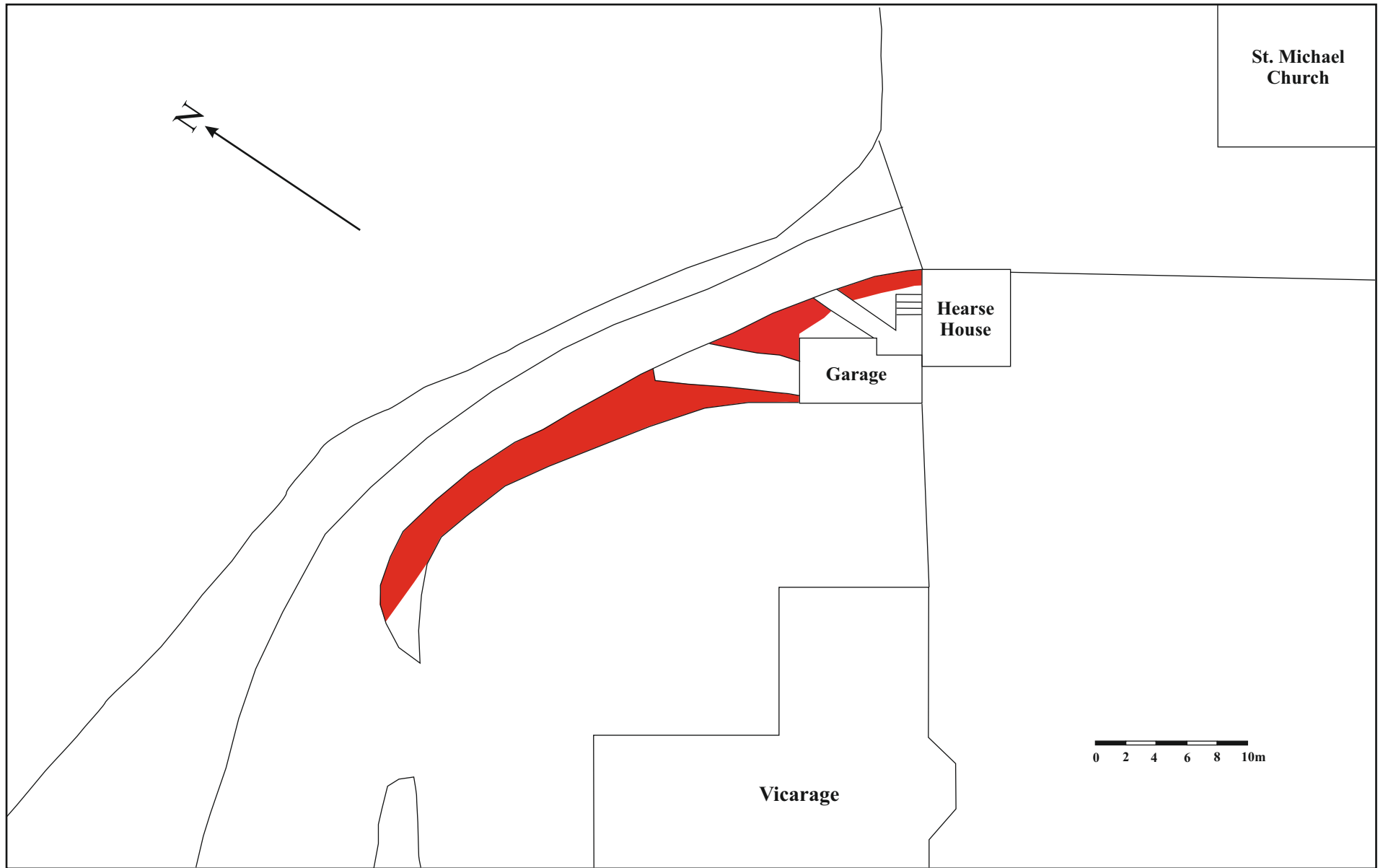


Figure 1.: Site Location Plan of scheme of works



Plate 2: Soil removal for the creation of a footpath.



Plate 3: The shallow trench excavated for the creation of a footpath, showing postholes excavated under the scheme of works.



Plate 4: Soil removal for the creation of a footpath, showing the build-up of soil removed from the vicarage garage wall.



Plate 5: Posthole 'g', excavated under the present scheme of works.



Plate 6: Posthole 'j', excavated under the present scheme of works.



Plate 7: Posthole 'k', excavated under the present scheme of works.