# CORCHESTER LANE, CORBRIDGE

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AND EVALUATION

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# SUMMARY

*During late March and early April 2004, Northumberland County Council Highways Department carried out work to install a new footpath running from the west of Corbridge to the English Heritage visitor centre on the site of Corbridge Roman Fort. The route of this footpath ran along the southern edge of Corchester Lane, the road running from Hexham to Corbridge, and adjacent to the Scheduled area of Corbridge Roman Fort. An archaeological assessment of the area of development had not been carried out as part of the planning/development process, but due to the footpaths close proximity to the Roman site of Coria, and ancient town of Corbridge, it was deemed necessary for a watching brief to be undertaken. Accordingly, the Archaeological Practice Ltd. was engaged to carry out a watching-brief while excavations to allow a foundation/footing for the path took place along the length of the route*

*This report describes deposits and features encountered during the above works.*

*The observations made while the trench for the footpath was excavated identified deposits of turf/topsoil and plough soil down to the maximum depth of the trench for the majority of the road's length. However, two features were recorded at opposite ends of the trench. The first (at the east end) appeared to be an area of field clearance/levelling, and was comprised of river-rounded cobbles. At the east end of the trench a section of wall was recorded surviving up to 4 courses in height, containing a worked Roman stone in the fabric. The lack of finds from either feature has made them impossible to date, however the wall in considered most likely to be late Roman or medieval, while the cobbled area is most probably post-medieval in origin.*

*The nature of remains found upon the site would suggest that any future work involving the removal of earth in this area should be the focus of an archaeological evaluation and watching brief, as the results from this latest work display deposits surviving, even in heavily disturbed areas.*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of Evaluation

The following is a report on an archaeological watching brief carried out on Corchester Lane, Corbridge, by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. on behalf of Northumberland County Council Highways Department. A watching brief was required as part of a series of works due to the close proximity of the development area to highly sensitive areas of archaeological importance. Observations made were designed to identify and define the nature of any features of archaeological importance.

## 1.2 Cultural Heritage Background

A review of cultural heritage issues for the site and surrounding area was carried out by the Archaeological Practice (Archaeological Practice 2001), in order to assess the existence or survival of archaeological deposits. The full assessment of both discrete and more extensive historical landscape components revealed that the area of the development and its immediate environs, east of the core of Corbridge, were apparently undeveloped in the early part of the nineteenth century and there is little to indicate that it had previously been the site of intensive post-Roman activity.

There is no known artefactual evidence for prehistoric human activity within, or close to, the bounds of the development area, although the topographical context of the site and limited evidence from the wider environs suggests that this relatively resource-rich area would have been exploited from the earliest times. Evidence in the wider vicinity for Bronze Age activity is provided by burials at Stagshaw Close House, Dilston Park and the banks of the Cor Burn, as well as by stray finds in the vicinity (Craster 1914, 4-6).

Corbridge, known as *Coria* in the Roman period occupied an important crossing of the River Tyne, at a point where major east-west and north-south routes intersected. A number of archaeological sites of Roman date are known. The area currently held in guardianship by English Heritage marks the centre of a town whose remains extend under the immediately adjacent fields and which developed out of a series of auxiliary forts the first of which was established c. 90 AD (see Bishop and Dore, 1989). Further to the west, close to the Red House Burn and partly under the line of the Corbridge by-pass, are the remains of what was probably the earliest Roman military structure in the area, the Red House Supply Base (see Hanson *et. al*., 1979). Next to this are the remains of a bath-house (see Daniels, 1959).

Dere Street Roman Road crosses the Tyne east of the fort, west of the village, and a Roman cemetery probably extends from *Coria* into the modern heart of Corbridge along Well Bank. In addition, a considerable quantity of Roman artefacts and other remains have been found in the town, but none attests with certainty to Roman occupation or settlement within the medieval and modern town.

The earliest sure reference to medieval Corbridge is a note on Anglian settlement in AD 786, but it is likely that the present form and layout of the town developed when the town became a *burgh* in the late tenth or early eleventh centuries and a *borough* in the late twelfth century, its status and extent defined by the completion of a town ditch in the same period. Corbridge reached the peak of its medieval prosperity in the thirteenth century, from which time several prominent monuments survive, including the modified church of St Andrew and the fortified Vicar's Pele, dating to around the year 1300 (Craster 1914, 209-15). Subsequently the fortunes of the town declined due to the onset of Scottish raids in the thirteenth century.


***Figure 1:*** *Location of Corbridge in Northumberland*

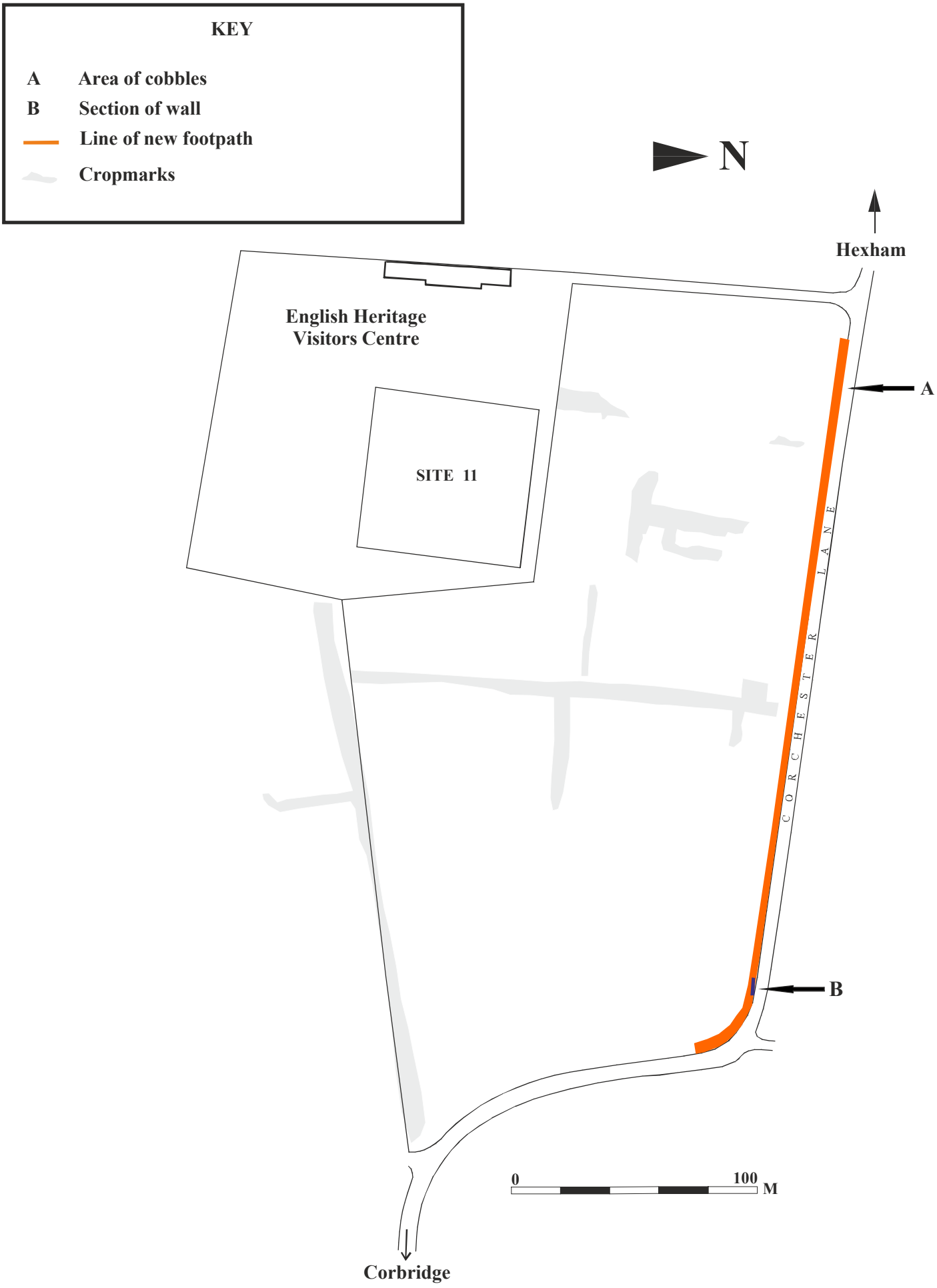


***Figure 2**: Location plan of new footpath showing location of cobbled area (A) and wall (B) exposed during works*

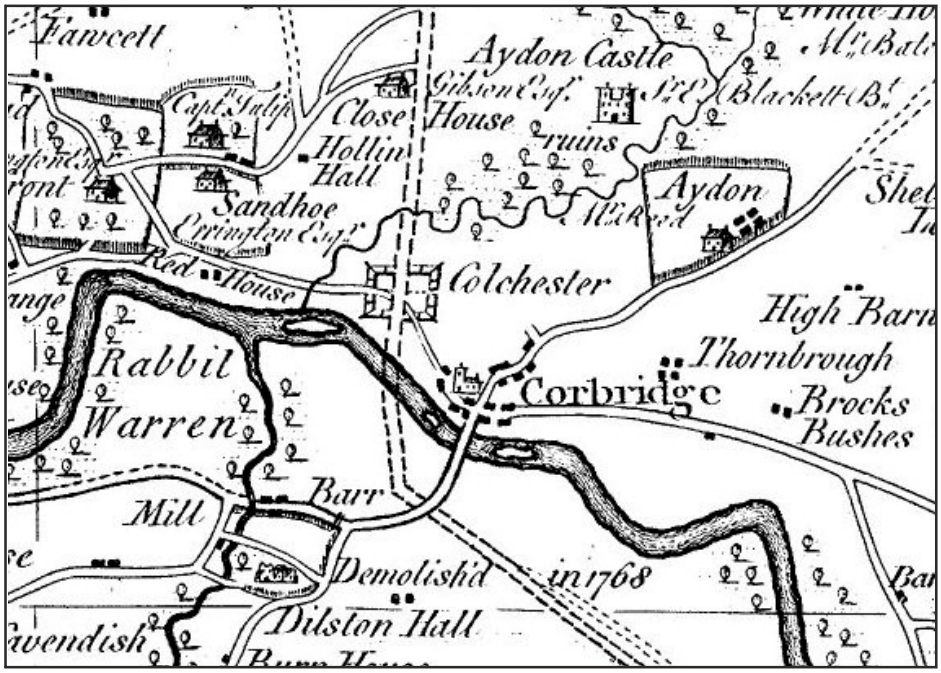


***Figure 3**: Corbridge town and Roman fort (shown as Corchester) on Armstrong's Map of Northumberland, 1769*

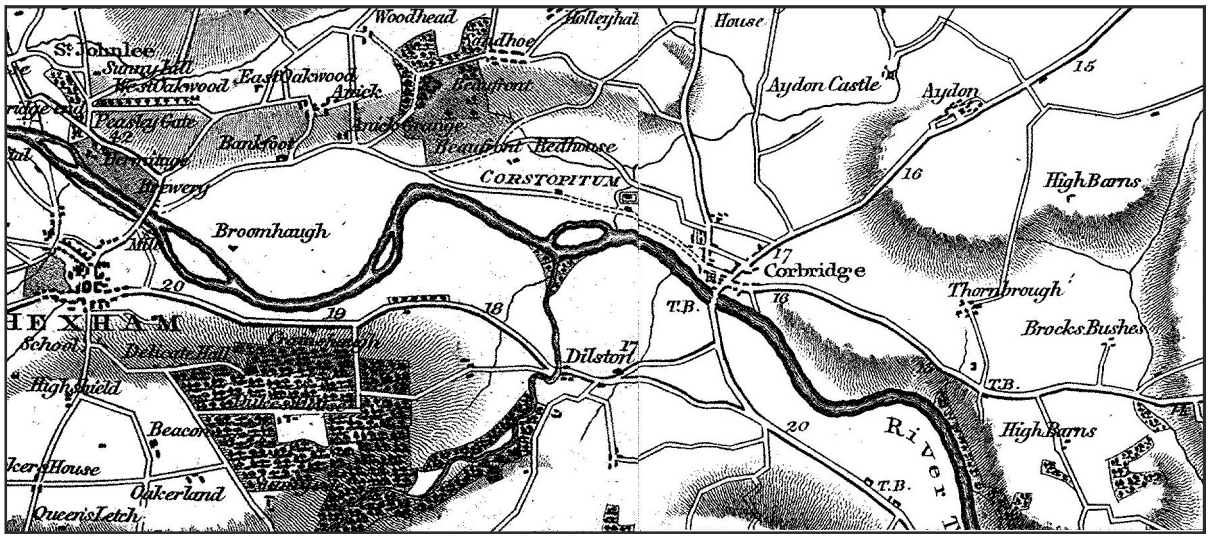


***Figure 4**: Corbridge town and Roman fort (shown as Corstopitum) shown on Fryer's Map of Northumberland, 1820*

# 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 (*Figure 2*). This involved opening a trench (along side 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 determine, 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 due to the roadworks.

## 2.2 Methods

The trench was opened used 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 halted, and sensitive features were examined, cleaned and recorded by hand. Close to the town end of the trench a length of apparent wall or curbing was encountered which was considered to merit further evaluation. Accordingly, following discussion with the Assistant County Archaeologist and the developer, a small evaluation slot was hand-excavated across the feature.

# 3. RESULTS

## 3.1 Trench 1

Along the entire length of the trench, a dark brown loam was encountered [101], that appeared to be a combination of turf, topsoil and plough soil. This very mixed deposit contained very little in the way of finds, however unstratified objects of material culture recovered ranged from fragments of Roman tile and pottery, to fragments of Belamine ware, and large quantities of modern pottery, glass and plastic. Beneath this band lay a deposit of brown plough soil [102], cut by a trench running parallel with the path for most of its length. This trench contained an orange brown clayey soil [104], and had been cut for a telecommunications cable.

At 33.1m from the western end of the footpath cut, an area of cobble stones [105] was encountered in the southern half of the trench (*Figure 5; Plates 3 & 4*). These river rounded cobbles were deposited about 0.10m below the present road surface, ran for about 2.50m, and held in a soil matrix [106] very similar to that encountered above (and either side of) the cobbles [102]. These stones were very loosely compacted, very uneven, and the clean matrix in which they were held suggests that they did not form a road or cobbled surface, and they may represent an episode of field clearance, or the filling of a depression in the land to create an even surface. The absence of finds of any kind made it impossible to date this feature.

The trench continued to be occupied by the plough soil deposit [102] to the maximum excavated depth east of the cobbled area for the majority of the trench. In a number of areas, a blue deposit of tarmac [107] was observed in the base of the cut for the curb-stones. These deposits marked the edge of a previous road surface, and a deposit of hardcore (on which the present road surface is placed) was observed in the north section, immediately under the road, however this was not apparent in the southern section.

Where Corchester Lane bends to enter the town of Corbridge, a length of stone wall [108] running for about 8.50m was uncovered (*Figures 6 & 7; Plates 5-8*). This wall consisted of roughly worked sandstone facing blocks (on the north side), with what appeared to be a rubble core surviving in places. The southern facing had been completely removed, possibly when a water pipe [110] was inserted. A cut was opened across the wall and revealed three or four courses of facing surviving to a depth of 0.40m below the present road surface. To the south of the wall, excavation revealed a guarded electricity cable [111] in between the water pipe and the surviving wall core,

There was no evidence of a mortar bonding, with the stone set in a dark brown compact soil. Due to the lack of finds (one small fragment of Roman pottery and a few fragments of post medieval/ modern material) it is impossible to date the wall, however the re-use of a Roman stone (one with a Lewis hole) in the wall [112] suggests a late/post Roman structure.

For the remaining distance of the trench, the plough soil that had occupied the trench contained a higher proportion of stone [113] which might represent stone previously used in the wall, but disturbed by the insertion of the water pipe and electricity cable.

*Interpretation*
The deposits encountered in the majority of the trench do not suggest significant activity in this area. The cobbled area [105] might represent an episode of field clearance, however their river-rounded appearance might also hint at their use as a method of levelling. Such methods can often be used when a field entrance has been used for a prolonged period, and the resultant erosion causes a depression that requires filling/levelling.

The appearance of a wall at the eastern end of the trench is a more significant discovery. Although disturbed by the insertion of services, the wall survived, and appears to have been quite substantial (at

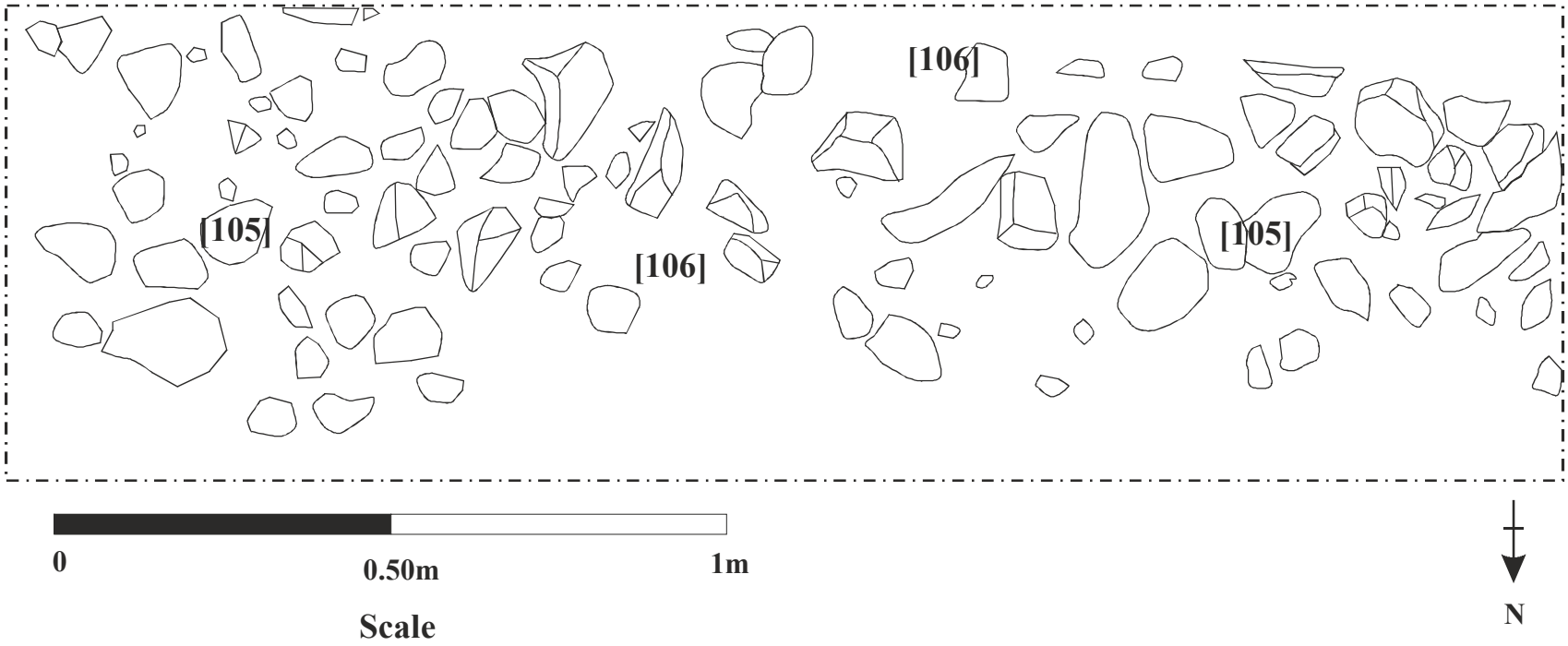


***Figure 5:*** *Plan of cobbled area uncovered in footpath foundation trench*

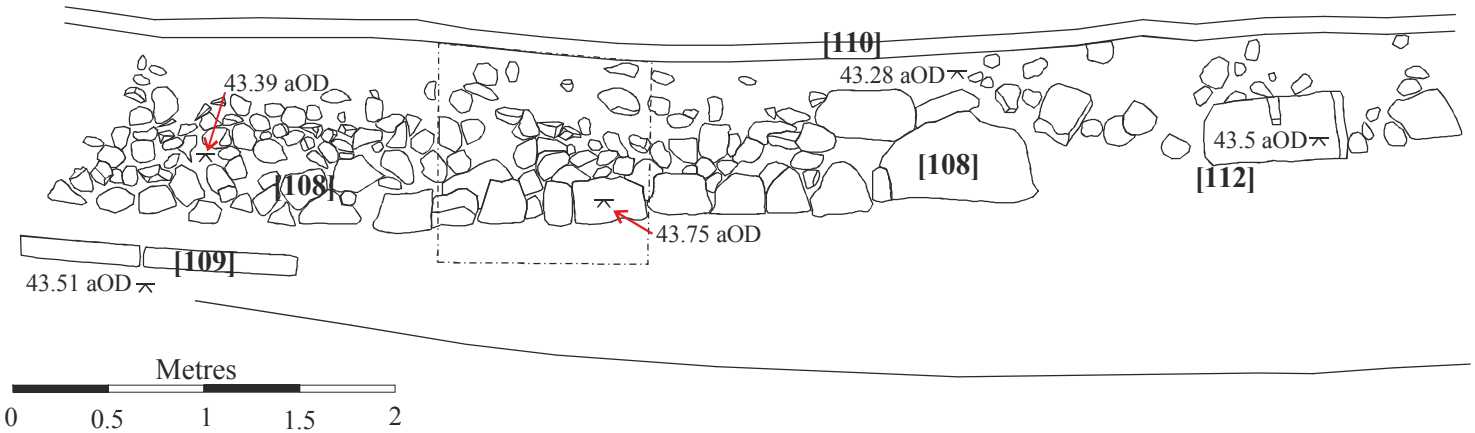


***Figure 6:*** *Plan of wall feature at East end of pathway, showing position of evaluation slot*

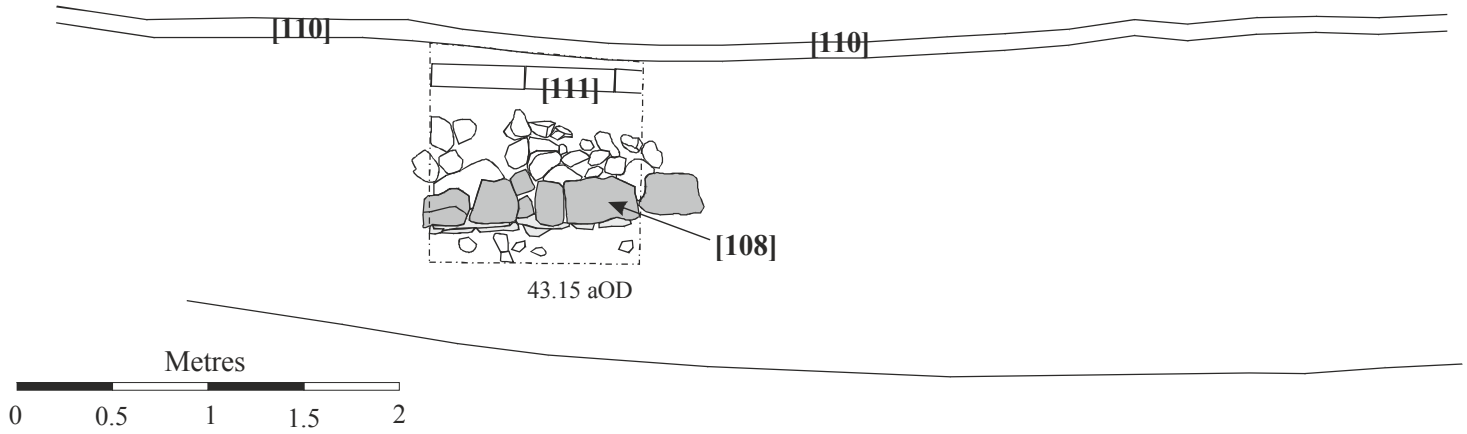


***Figure 7:*** *Plan of evaluation slot in wall feature at East end of pathway*

least *c.* 0.75m wide). Although no datable material was recovered from the wall deposits, the re-used Roman stone suggests a post- (or possibly late-) Roman structure. Although disturbed on the south side, enough survived to show that the wall had been a substantial structure, massive enough perhaps to have served as a boundary wall. It is interesting to note that the wall is not marked on any of the earlier plans of Corbridge, and there are no associated walls evident on plans compiled from crop mark and excavation results.

# 4. CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief carried out on Corchester Lane, Corbridge, identified archaeological evidence of significance in only two specific areas. The evidence recovered from the area of cobbles would suggest an episode of field clearance or the levelling of land, however the lack of finds means the feature cannot be dated. At the eastern end of the trench, the discovery of a wall was of more interest and importance. Surviving to four courses, the un-mortared wall was constructed of substantial masonry blocks on a cobble base. Although the south face of the wall had been removed (possibly during the insertion of the electric cables and water pipe that follow the line of the road), there is sufficient evidence to show that it had been a substantial structure, massive enough perhaps to have served as a boundary wall. Although no dateable artefacts were found in association with the feature, the form of its construction, location and orientation suggest likely Roman origins.

A number of sherds of Roman and later pottery, including one fragment of Samien ware, were recovered from the length of the trench. However as these were derived from the plough soil/top soil they must be regarded as unstratified in relation to the structural remains and, apart from providing a broad contextual chronology for the site, are of no use as dating evidence.

The location of the trench adjacent to agricultural land has resulted in deposits of mixed plough soil caused by soil creep eroding down the slight embankment between the field and the modern road. The road itself appears to have been resurfaced on a number of occasions.

# 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

*No recommendations are offered with respect to the present works, other than that the results published here are published in summary form in an appropriate journal (AA or Archaeology in Northumberland).*

*It is further recommended that archaeological monitoring should be undertaken during any future work along the line of Corchester Lane to determine whether significant deposits associated with Roman or later periods survive and provide a record of their character and extent in mitigation.*

# 6. REFERENCES

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***Plate 1**: General view of the strip of land excavated to make way for the new footpath (facing west towards the English Heritage Visitors Centre)*

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## APPENDIX 1:Context descriptions

**Trench 1**
101 Turf and topsoil
102 Plough soil
103 Cut in plough soil
104 Yellow/orange clay fill
105 Cobble stones
106 Matrix in which cobbles are held
107 Blue/black tarmac of previous road surface
108 Wall of dressed and undressed stones, at least one of which (below) is demonstrably re-used
109 Modern curb
110 Water pipe
111 Guarded electricity cable
112 Re-used Roman key stone
113 Stony plough soil

## APPENDIX 2: Finds List

1 lower body sherd of Roman Samian ware - - precise date unavailable
3 sherds of abraded Roman coarse pottery - precise dates unavailable
2 pieces of abraded Roman tile – precise date unavailable
3 sherds of Belamine ware – post-medieval
Various stoneware pottery - modern