HARBOTTLE
CHURCH OF ENGLAND FIRST SCHOOL, NORTHUMBERLAND

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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Prepared for:	By:
N.B.Building Design	*The Archaeological Practice Ltd.*

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Registered Office: *34G Clayton Street West, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 5DZ*
Telephone: 0191 2228130; FAX: 0191 2227809; E-mail: r.j.carlton@ncl.ac.uk
Registered Company no. 4549772

HARBOTTLE CHURCH OF ENGLAND FIRST SCHOOL
HARBOTTLE
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REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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Frontispiece: *South end of trench during excavation, showing partially-revealed shallow ditch feature and shallow pit interpreted as a root bowl*

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SUMMARY

This report describes a programme of archaeological evaluation trenching conducted to inform a proposal for the construction of an extension to Harbottle Church of England First School. An archaeological assessment carried out by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. in 2004 provided contextual information regarding the archaeological and historical development of the area, demonstrating the likelihood that it was the focus of intensive human activity in the medieval and early post-medieval periods. The trenching was devised to determine the precise impact of the proposed scheme on the area's cultural heritage remains.

In requesting archaeological evaluation of the site, the planning archaeologist for the Northumberland National Park Authority noted the possibility that structures or features of medieval or earlier date had existed upon the site and that their remains survived below the modern ground surface.

The investigation of the site by archaeological trenching revealed that the ground surface rising upwards from the modern trackway between the school and Harbottle castle appears formerly to have been much steeper, but the flat site occupied by the trackway appears to have extended further to the north by some 2 metres or more. It appears that a revetment built to protect the trackway has acted as a barrier against which soil has accumulated to a considerable depth, thereby flattening the slope above. Whether this has occurred as a result of natural soil creep/slumping, or deliberate terracing, is undetermined. The modern stone wall and hedge line is the latest of several phases of ad hoc revetment work. Between the original revetment remains and the road, at a depth of some 0.45 metres, is a hard core or cobbled surface, perhaps an earlier trackway. Upon this surface were fragments of modern pottery and glassware. Behind the original revetment were the slight traces of a shallow ditch, interpreted as a possible drain associated with the early trackway.

The nature of remains found upon the site does not support a recommendation for further archaeological evaluation. Certainly, it does not seem possible that substantial structures were ever present along the north side of the castle access road. However, since the site lies within the medieval village of Harbottle and demonstrably preserves features associated with the likely medieval and later castle access trackway, including a possible early surface, mitigation by archaeological watching brief is recommended as an appropriate strategy to record features of archaeological significance disturbed during the development works.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Evaluation

The following is a report on a programme of archaeological evaluation trenching carried out on the playground associated with and adjacent to Harbottle Church of England First School, by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. on behalf of the developer. The evaluation strategy was designed to further inform the planning process with regard to the proposed construction of a school extension upon the site. The trenching was designed to test for the existence and define the nature of any features of archaeological importance in order to inform the planning process.

1.2 Cultural Heritage Background

An archaeological assessment of the site and its surrounding area was carried out by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. in 2004 (Archaeological Practice 2004). The full assessment of both discrete and more extensive historical landscape components revealed that the development site lies on the route of the medieval and later eastern approach road to Harbottle Castle.

There is no known artefactual evidence for human activity within, or close to, the bounds of the assessment area in the prehistoric or Roman periods, although the castle site has long been suggested as a prehistoric settlement and stray finds from the vicinity attest to human activity in the bronze age and iron age.

2. EVALUATION PROGRAMME

2.1 Aims

The aims of the programme of evaluation trenching were to investigate the possibility that significant archaeological remains were present within the site, to determine the character of any such remains and determine, as far as possible, their date, function and state of preservation, as outlined in the evaluation project design (Northumberland National Park Authority 2004).

2.2 Methods

The trench was placed in a position, extending from the side of the trackway, considered most likely to intercept features of archaeological interest. A mechanical excavator, closely supervised by an archaeologist, was used to excavate the surface topsoil down to sub-soil level. All anomalies or features of potential interest were examined closely by hand to appraise their importance and, if necessary, for recording purposes. The surface of the sub-soil was also cleaned by hand to reveal any potential features cut into it. All trench sections were also hand-cleaned for recording purposes.

2.3 Trench Location and Extent

The location and extent of evaluation trenching is shown on Figure 1.

Trench	Location	Alignment
T1: 9.65m by 1.6m	West of the school, north side of castle access track	N-S

Trench 1.
The trench, measuring 9.65m x 1.6m, was positioned at right angles to the trackway, cutting through the hedged bank bordering the trackway. The aim of positioning it here was to reveal any settlement remains bordering the trackway and expose earlier road surfaces and/or associated features.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Trench 1

Several discrete features of interest, but not great significance, were noted during the evaluation work. Excavation of the higher slope area revealed a shallow topsoil [102] giving way almost immediately to natural boulder clay sub-soil [106]. The depth of topsoil increased downslope, until at the foot of the slope it was approximately 1.8 metres and showed signs of successive episodes of slumping or deliberate infilling, with lenses of sub-soil [104] appearing within it. In three places on the slope and at its foot were shallow depressions in the sub-soil which may be interpreted as tree root bowls [108-110], but are certainly of no archaeological significance. The foot of the slope appears once to have been flat, perhaps formed by terracing into the sub-soil, and there were slight remains of a ditch-like feature [107] running parallel with the course of the road on the flattened surface. The remains of a revetment, extending to two or three courses of rough sandstone blocks upon the sub-soil, lay another metre or so to the south and may be contemporary with [107] and a putative early road surface [111] which presumably underlies the modern road but was visible only in the narrow space between the revetment and modern road. A later revetment or field wall lies on top of the bank along the north side of the road.

Interpretation

The investigation of the site by archaeological trenching revealed that the ground surface rising upwards from the modern trackway between the school and Harbottle castle appears formerly to have been much steeper, but the flat site occupied by the trackway appears to have extended further to the north by some 2 metres or more. This wide road may have been cut out of the hillside, since the natural slope of sub-soil appears to be interrupted at this point. There are also signs that various attempts were made to maintain this trackway, both by scouring it (hence lenses of sub-soil up cast revealed in the section) and by building revetment walls. Unfortunately it has not been possible to date any of these events, although finds of abraided medieval pottery from the surface of the sub-soil attest to the use of pottery and its dispersal, possibly by manuring. Latterly, the revetments built to protect the trackway have acted as barriers against which soil has accumulated by soil creep to a considerable depth, thereby flattening the slope above. The modern stone wall and hedge line is the latest of several phases of *ad hoc* revetment work. Between the original revetment remains and the road, at a depth of some 0.45 metres, is a hard core or cobbled surface, perhaps an earlier trackway. Upon this surface were fragments of nineteenth century pottery and glassware. Behind the original revetment were the slight traces of a shallow ditch, interpreted as a possible drain associated with the early trackway.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation excavations have revealed the probable traces of an earlier road surface beneath the modern concrete road surface on the line of a suspected medieval road. A number of associated features, including revetment walls and a shallow ditch parallel with the road have also been recorded.

No features suggestive of substantial structures were identified, nor is there any real likelihood, given the topography revealed, that such structures could formerly have existed on the site.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the site lies within the medieval village of Harbottle and demonstrably preserves features associated with the likely medieval and later castle access trackway, including a possible early surface, mitigation by archaeological watching brief is recommended as an appropriate strategy to record features of archaeological significance disturbed during the proposed development works.

6. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1: Context descriptions

Trench 1

101 Modern concrete road surface

102 Topsoil - dark, organic loam with few stones

103 Stone wall of three courses in topsoil; probably originally constructed as a revetment, but since submerged by soil creep

104 Lenses of orange boulder clay, clearly redeposited, perhaps following work associated with the road.

105 Stone wall of two or three courses set upon sub-soil; probably originally constructed as a revetment, but since submerged by soil creep. Sits immediately adjacent to, or bordering, the north side of the castle access trackway.

106 Undisturbed boulder clay sub-soil.

107 Shallow ditch-like feature apparently cut into the sub-soil and containing top-soil fill – perhaps a drainage channel.

108 One of several shallow pits approximately 5-10cm deep, interpreted as natural features – probably root bowls, since they are in line with a surviving ancient tree further up the hillside, together with which they may once have formed a hedge line.

109 One of several shallow pits approximately 5-10cm deep, interpreted as natural features (as [108]).

110 One of several shallow pits approximately 5-10cm deep, interpreted as natural features (as [108] & [109]).

111 A hard, compact stony deposit, interpreted as a surface, perhaps cobbled, and running beneath the modern road surface [101] at a depth of some 40cm. It is overlain by a dark, organic silty loam, occupying the space between the revetment wall [105] and modern road [101].

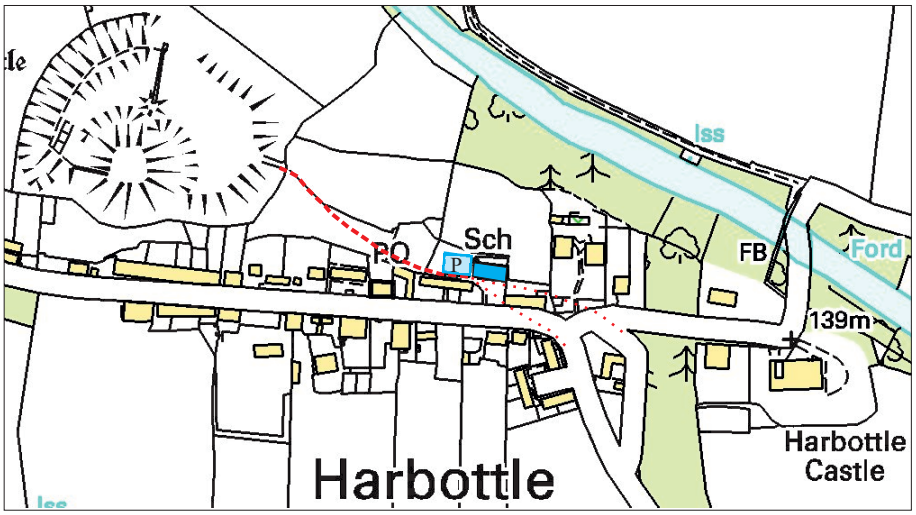

Figure 1: *Location of Harbottle School and playground [P] (highlighted blue) in Harbottle village*
(course of old road transposed from 1st edn. O.S. Map shown as red dashed line; suggested medieval courses east from the school are shown as red dotted lines)

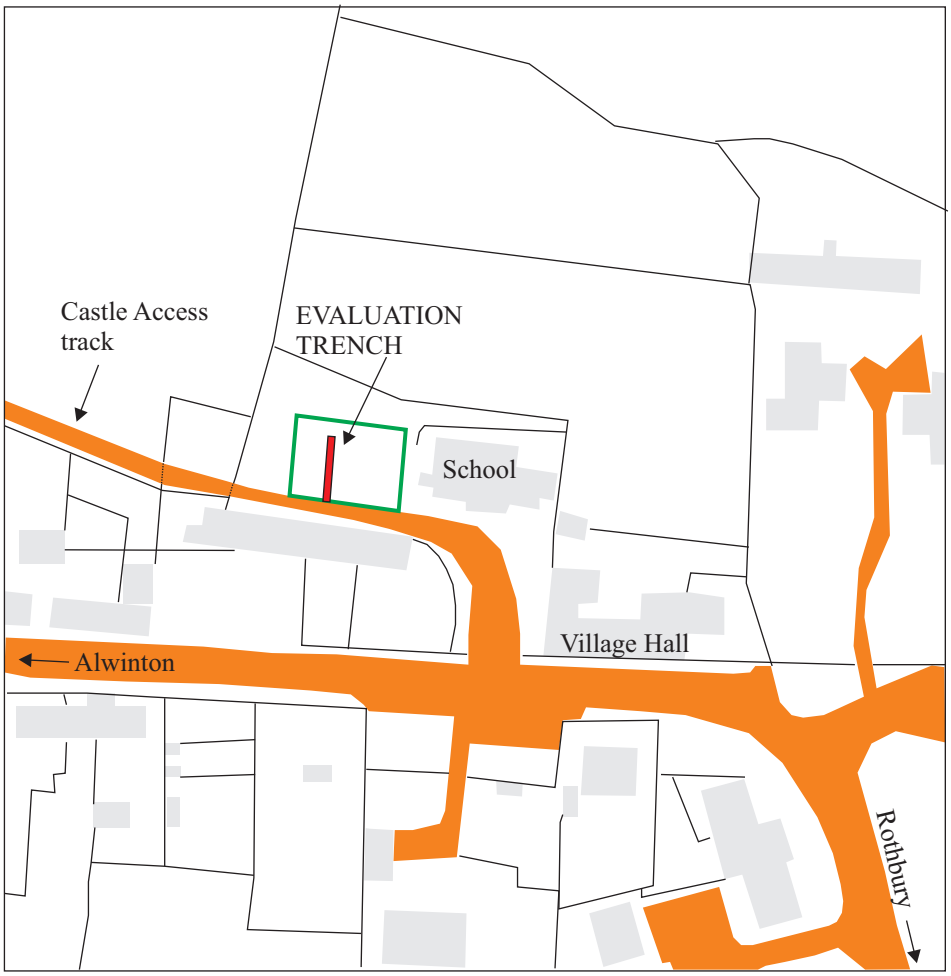

Figure 2: *Location of evaluation trench on playground attached to Harbottle School*

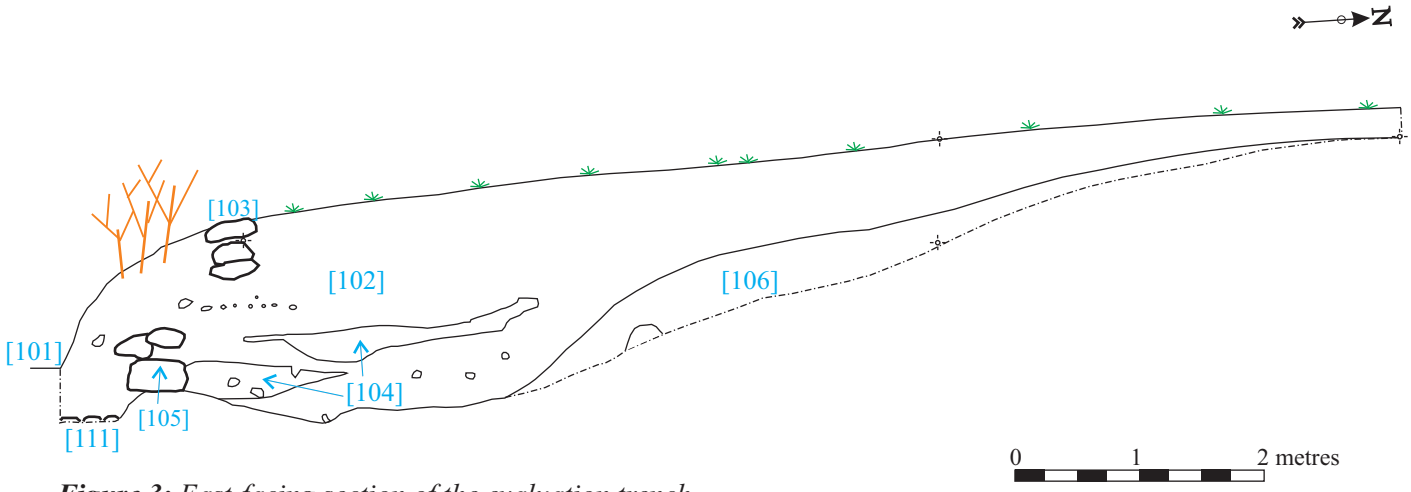

Figure 3: *East-facing section of the evaluation trench*

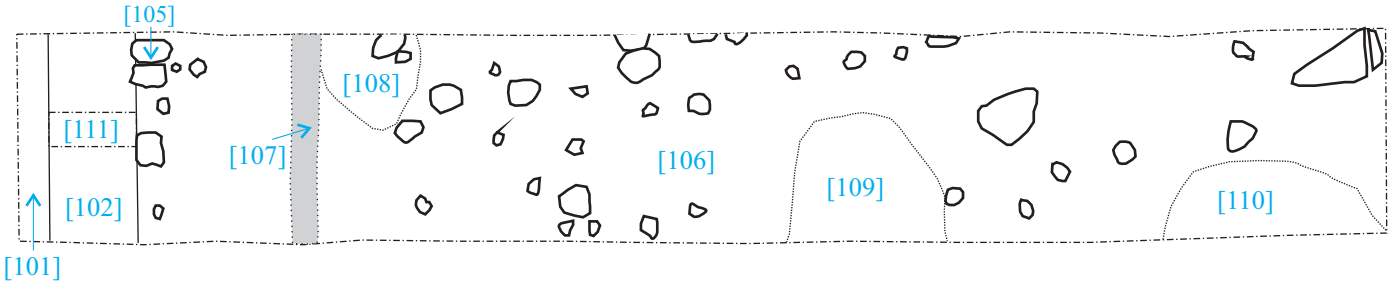

Figure 4: *Plan of the evaluation trench*

Plate 2: *View from the south, with upper course of lower revetment wall in foreground*

Plate 3: *East-facing section showing boulder clay lense in topsoil*