

The brigantia archaeological practice



***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF at the
FORMER COUNCIL DEPOT, BIRCH ROAD,
BARNARD CASTLE***

A report to Browne, Smith and Baker



14th September 2006

THE BRIGANTIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

BRITANNIA CHAMBERS
18a HORSEMARKET
BARNARD CASTLE
Co DURHAM DL12 8LZ



Tel./fax: 01833 630125 Email: enquiries@brigantiaarchaeology.co.uk

***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF at the
FORMER COUNCIL DEPOT, BIRCH ROAD,
BARNARD CASTLE
(TEESDALE DISTRICT)
Co DURHAM***

In connection with planning consent no 6/2005/0384/DM

A report to Browne, Smith and Baker

Percival Turnbull

14th September 2006

***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF at the
FORMER COUNCIL DEPOT, BIRCH ROAD,
BARNARD CASTLE***

INTRODUCTION

1. On instructions from Messrs Browne, Smith & Baker, acting on behalf of Three Rivers Housing Association, a programme of archaeological works was implemented in respect of the redevelopment of the former Teesdale District Council depot, Birch Road, Barnard Castle. This was required by a condition attached to the planning consent (6/2005/0384/DM). Discussion with the office of the County Archaeologist subsequently established that a 'watching brief' would be the appropriate level of response: this had, in fact, been communicated by the C.A. to the Planning Authority before determination of the application..
2. Fieldwork was carried out by Percival Turnbull, of this Practice, over a number of visits during July and August 2006.

BACKGROUND

3. The site (Fig. 1) lies on the southern side of Birch Road, which is a post-mediaeval development possibly following the line of an earlier 'back lane'. The area is part of the burgage system of the mediaeval suburb of Newgate, and the development site appears to occupy the rearward part of a plot fronting on Newgate.
4. The site may be seen on the large-scale Town Plan of 1852, where it is shown as a tanning yard; features are shown which appear to be parts of the plant of the tannery. On the First Edition 25" map, the Birch Road frontage is shown as built up (some of the buildings, of course, remaining yet), though no detail is visible, and no function ascribed to the site. The southern part of the plot appears at that time to have been yard or open space.
5. The site is bounded to the east by a series of old walls, mostly of sandstone occasionally patched with brick and other materials. Generally, these walls seem to be 19th century boundaries or the backs of buildings of the same period but, in view of the long continuity of the boundaries from the time at which Newgate was formally laid out, an earlier date for some parts of the boundary must remain a possibility.
6. Previous archaeological monitoring of groundworks immediately to the west of the site (now Endeavour Housing Association properties) and to the east (the former Victoria Hall site) have been consistently devoid of significant archaeology (The Brigantia Archaeological Practice, *passim*), presenting a sequence of modern building directly over a cultivated soil, itself directly overlying natural deposits: the pattern indicated prolonged horticultural use before the slow and piecemeal development of Birch Road in the 19th century.

THE WATCHING BRIEF

7. A broad strip along the full length of the eastern side of the site was stripped to a depth below ambient surface of between 80 and 100 cms, to expose the surface of the natural sandy clay which in this area directly overlies Carboniferous sandstone (Fig. 2). In places, traces were left of the bottom of the black cultivated soil which seems to be ubiquitous in this part of the town, and which must have its origins in the cultivation of the rear parts of the Newgate burgage plots.

8. The deposits removed along this eastern strip consisted entirely (apart from some tarmac and concrete hard-standings) of a dirty, loose black soil containing abundant stone and brick rubble, and pottery and other rubbish of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Fig. 3). This is probably best seen as a highly disturbed form of the cultivated soil discussed above, perhaps churned up during demolition activity immediately before the establishment of the Council depot.

9. On the western side of the site, extensive excavation was involved in exposing an existing main sewer (Fig. 4), running from the southern boundary of the site to a point 50 metres to the north. Again, upper deposits were highly disturbed, and contained much stone and brick rubble. Close to the south-west corner of the site were the floors of two buildings recently demolished, and including the base of a furnace or industrial hearth.

10. At the north-east corner of the site, removal of a concrete slab revealed, immediately below the surface, part of a sunken timber-lined tank or pit. It was immediately evident that this was a tanpit, a survival from the leather works attested at the site in the 19th century. As more of the feature became exposed, it became clear that it was part of an array or bank of at least six tanpits: an isolated corner found further west during excavation for a manhole indicates that the total number was probably eight (Fig. 5). It is interesting, however, that these pits are not those shown in the 1852 Town Plan: those are further north (in an area not affected by the present operations), and the space occupied by the pits which are here recorded is shown on the Plan as open yard. The obvious inference is that they date from shortly after 1852, and represent a change or expansion of an existing tanning business. The site is still locally known as 'Tanners' Yard'.

11. The first tanpit to be exposed (Fig. 6) was the north-easternmost of those identified: it appeared that it represented the northern limit of the array, but since excavation ceased at this point the matter was not placed wholly beyond doubt. It lay directly against the eastern boundary wall of the site and, indeed, once the tanpits had been identified it became a matter of priority that they be filled with stone to ensure the safety of the wall from collapse.

12. The tanpits survived to a maximum depth of 1.5 metres (Fig. 6): it is most probable that this represents fairly well the full original depth, because ground levels seem to be much the same as in the early 19th century. In plan, the eastern pair were almost exactly 2 metres wide by 3 metres long (measurements varied slightly because of the bulging of timbers); the pair to the west were circa 3.4 metres long; and the length of the pair further again to the west could not be determined (there is a

possibility that the isolated corner found in the manhole might represent the end of this last pair, which would make them about 6 metres long).

13. The tanks were fully lined and floored with timber (Figs. 6 & 7): this proved, rather surprisingly, to be oak, and in a surprisingly good state of preservation. Why expensive oak rather than, say, deal should be chosen for such a mundane task as lining pits is not clear. It is possible that the natural qualities of oak enhanced the tanning process: equally, it might be that the timber was obtained from an existing supplier who delivered the constant supplies of oak bark which the traditional tanning process required.

14. The timbers were thick boards, 30 centimetres (or twelve inches) broad and 3.5 centimetres (an inch and a half) thick. They were arranged horizontally (Fig. 7) without joints or nails. However, the timbers of the sections aligned north-south which divided each pair of pits were bored through their thickness at the centre line of the pit, so that the boards could be threaded onto an iron rod (Fig. 8). This looks like some sort of sluice arrangement, by which the contents of one pit could be let into the next (perhaps merely for cleaning them out).

15. Each corner of each piece was covered by a triangular piece of timber (Fig. 9).

16. The pits were filled with large quantities of sodden, shredded oak bark (Fig. 11), with a small quantity of rubble and clay on top. A large amount of the shredded bark was examined closely, and proved to contain no leather scraps at all: if whole hides were being tanned, this is unsurprising, since they would easily be removed entirely. A few pieces of hemp rope, and a sack made of hemp or jute were also found, though it was not practical to recover them.

DISCUSSION

17. Tanning was an important industry in southern County Durham in the 18th and early 19th centuries: Darlington had an abundance of tanneries, and Barnard Castle had several, and had indeed enjoyed a good reputation for its leather goods since the early 17th century (A. Wilkinson, 1998, *Barnard Castle, Historic Market Town*). In 1707, the Borough Court decreed that '*whereas the town of Barnard Castle has been anciently reputed for tanning of good leather, and for preservation of the same; ordered, that no tanner sell, stall, or expose hides not sufficiently tanned and dressed*'. In 1823, the poet G. Layton wrote, in a verse called 'Castle Barnard':

*'With hasty step, I skim the pest-rife street,
Anxious to 'scape the noxious gales I meet
From Tanpits, puddles, filthy refuse, worse-
The whole night might rival Egypt's curse'*

18. The habits of some of Barnard Castle's tanners were held partly to blame for the town's ghastly cholera epidemics in the mid-19th century. It is interesting that the industry was tolerated in the town centres, when the stench associated with the traditional tanning industry (which used such ingredients as urine and dog *faeces* as well as bark) had led to its exclusion from some mediaeval towns: on the other hand, Barnard Castle in 1852 also boasted a guano warehouse. The early 19th century

registers of St Mary's parish church record the occupations of a large number of people as 'cordwainer', or worker in fine leather, as well as tanners, shoemakers and saddlers.

19. The introduction in the second half of the 19th century of chemical processes, and the production of chrome leather, led to the centralisation and greater capitalisation of leather production and the decline of small tanneries such as ours, which we seem to be seeing at the very end of its life (though heavy leather for making gloves for foundry workers and for the M.o.D. was still made in a mill at the bottom of Thorngate in living memory).



Produced 18 Aug 2006 from Ordnance Survey digital data and incorporating surveyed revision available at this date. © Crown Copyright 2006.

Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited without the prior permission of Ordnance Survey.

Ordnance Survey and the OS symbol are registered trade marks and Siteplan a trade mark of Ordnance Survey, the national mapping agency of Great Britain.



Centre Coordinates: 405190 516375

National Grid sheet reference at centre of this Siteplan: NZ0516SW

Supplied by: NFS Distribution
Serial Number: 00223500

Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 1
Site location



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 2

**Excavation down eastern side of site,
looking south**



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 3

**Excavation down eastern side of site,
showing rubble backfill in section**



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 4

Sewer trench along western side of site



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice

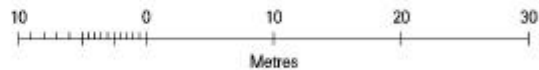


Produced 14 Sep 2006 from Ordnance Survey digital data and incorporating surveyed revision available at this date. © Crown Copyright 2006.

Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited without the prior permission of Ordnance Survey.

Ordnance Survey and the OS symbol are registered trade marks and Siteplan a trade mark of Ordnance Survey, the national mapping agency of Great Britain.

Part or all of this Siteplan is enlarged from mapping produced at one or more of the following scales 1:1250, 1:2500, 1:10000.



Centre Coordinates: 405193 516372

National Grid sheet reference at centre of this Siteplan: N20516SW

Supplied by: NFS Distribution
Serial Number: 00226700

Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 5

Location of tanpits



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 6

The north-easternmost tanpit



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



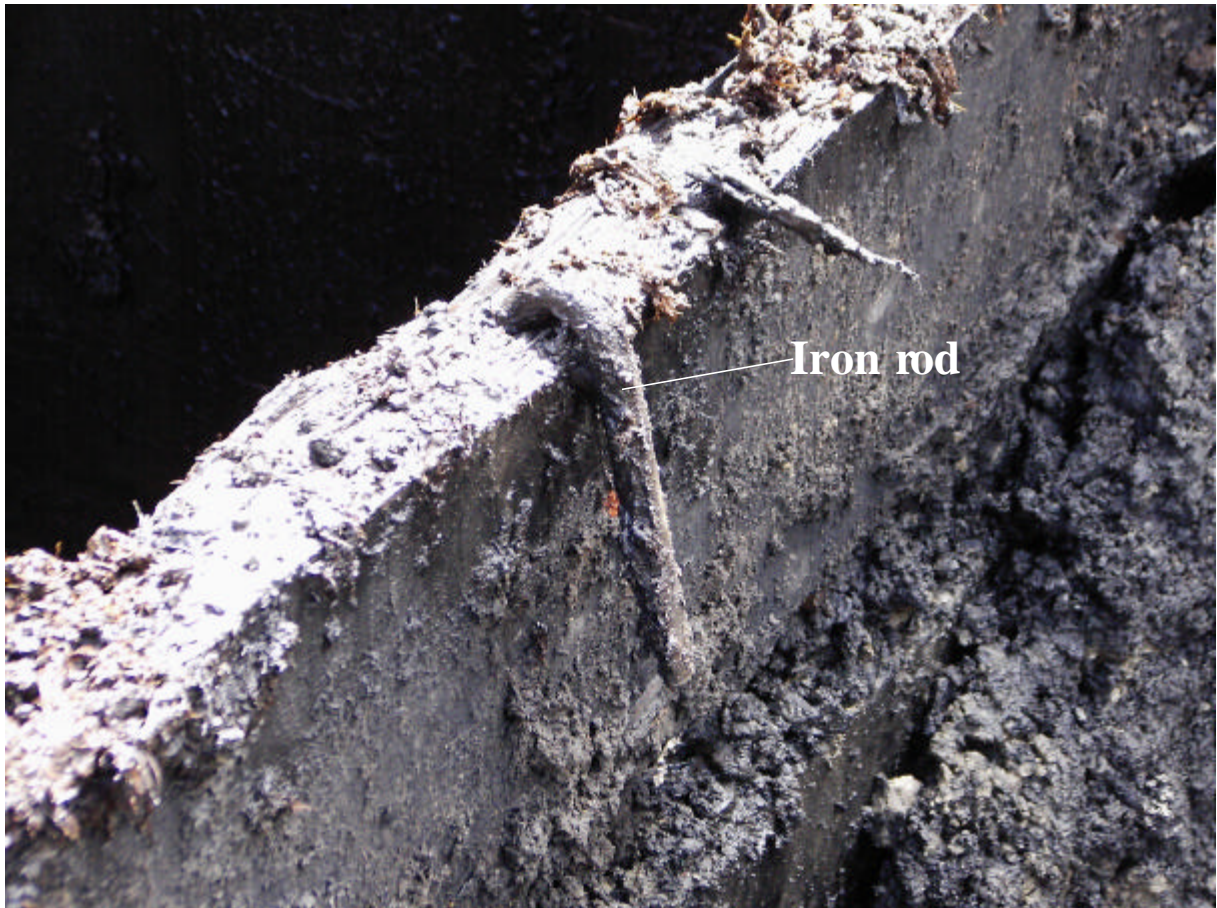
Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 7

Construction of north-easternmost tanpit



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 8

Construction of tanpits, showing vertical iron rod



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 9

Construction of tanpits, showing corner piece



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 10

View of tanpits.



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice



Birch Road, Barnard Castle

Fig. 11

Bark from tanpit.



The brigantia
Archaeological
practice