



# MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT REMAINS AT NORHAM, NORTHUMBERLAND

James Brightman and Ben Johnson

*In April 2009, nine evaluation trenches were excavated as part of an application for planning permission in a cultivated field at the western extent of Norham Village, Northumberland. The evaluation revealed evidence of medieval activity in the southern section of the field, with pottery evidence dating the site to the mid to late medieval period. Prompted by these finds an open area excavation was undertaken, revealing a series of substantial sandstone walls, a hearth and a well, indicating the presence of a substantial medieval domestic dwelling.*

## INTRODUCTION

Norham is situated approximately eleven kilometres to the south-west of Berwick-upon-Tweed in north Northumberland, and the site is situated at the westernmost edge of Norham village (NT 897 472) between an open field to the west, and existing buildings to the east (Fig. 1). The river Tweed flows approximately 500 m to the north.

Norham is perhaps most famous for its substantial, and much illustrated castle. Constructed in 1121 at the order of Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, it was intended to protect the property of the bishopric in north Northumberland. The wider border area around Norham is renowned for its turbulent history, and the castle was repeatedly attacked and captured during the decades following its construction as the area played host to bitter hostilities between the English and Scottish crowns. Eventually the castle was rebuilt around 1171, and much of the older fabric still extant dates to this time (Blair and Honeyman 1966).

Norham's Church of St Cuthbert, constructed around 1165, has as rich a history as the neighbouring castle. In 1320 the church was seized and occupied by Robert the Bruce and it was held during the besiegement of Norham Castle as a symbolic feature of the town and the surrounding area. An internal pillar of the church is constructed from an Anglo-

Saxon cross fragment, suggesting that the medieval fabric may conceal the site of an earlier place of worship (Pevsner 1957; Cramp 1984).

## Previous Work

In 2003, as part of the Till-Tweed Project (Passmore and Waddington 2009; 2012), a series of aerial photograph and fieldwalking surveys took place along the Tweed Valley, including examining many of the fields in and around Norham Village. The aerial survey revealed distinct cropmarks of medieval settlement to the west of the area excavated, and the fieldwalking revealed scattered finds of Mesolithic flint tools on the river terraces flanking the Tweed in the Norham area.

Initial work on the site by Archaeological Research Services Ltd (ARS Ltd) began in April 2009 with a programme of evaluation trenching which began with seven trenches and was expanded to nine following the discovery of two sections of intact stonework, in addition to three pits and two linear cut features. The evaluation also yielded sherds of medieval green-glazed pottery although none of the pottery was retrieved from secure contexts.



Figure 1 Location of Norham and excavation trench.

## STRATIGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

The excavation took the form of a single trench encompassing 360 m<sup>2</sup> targeting the area around the stone walls uncovered during evaluation trenching.

The overall stratigraphy of the trench consisted of a relatively simple sequence of topsoil, subsoil and natural substratum. The topsoil consisted of silty clay which contained small and large stones, varying in depth between 0.2 and 0.5m. Directly beneath the topsoil there was a very thin layer of subsoil consisting of a lighter silt/clay with small stone inclusions. The subsoil directly overlay the natural sand and gravel substratum, which covered the entirety of the site and continued beyond the limit of the excavation.

### Building (004)

During the evaluation, a section of stone wall (004) was uncovered that ran from east to west. The excavation revealed that the wall measured 9.4 m from east to west and turned north at its western end to form an 'L' shape. The wall had an average width of 0.9 m and was constructed from large, roughly cut, rectangular sandstone blocks that measured between 0.7 by 0.4 m and 0.3 by 0.2 m. These dimensions, and its form, suggest that it would have been an external wall. The stones had been roughly coursed and packed using smaller stones, with coarse compacted clay used as a bonding agent. Towards the western end the wall survived to two courses but only to one course high along the rest of its length. The wall section had been built directly on to the sand and gravel substratum with no discernible construction trench, and continued into the trench edge at the eastern end. A number of sherds of green-glazed medieval pottery were discovered in the immediate area of the wall sections, and also within the construction of the wall providing a *terminus post quem* for the construction of this feature in the late medieval period (14th to 15th century).

Within the 'L'-shaped walls were the fragmentary remains of two probable internal walls (007) and (008). These narrow walls comprised a single course of stone blocks with no discernible bonding material.

### Wall (005)

In the western area of the trench a small section of stone wall (005) was uncovered surviving to one course on an alignment with the east-west section of (004). The wall ran from east to west for 3.9 m and continued into the western trench section. With

an average width of 0.3 m it was constructed from roughly cut sandstone blocks that measured approximately 0.2 by 0.4 m. The stones were laid in an inconsistent bond and no bonding material had been used. Gritty sherds of pottery recovered from within the construction of this wall were finer than those recovered from the rest of the site, suggesting an earlier *terminus post quem* for the construction of this section of wall, perhaps within the 12th century.

### Hearth

A very well preserved hearth (006) measuring 1m by 1.5 m was discovered in the south eastern corner of the trench (Fig. 4) within the footprint of the building defined by wall (004). The hearth was lined with four long sandstone blocks and was constructed of rectangular sandstone blocks with a flat hexagonal stone in the centre. The stones in the centre of the hearth showed evidence of in situ burning and a sample taken from this feature confirmed the presence of bread wheat and rye as well as tiny fragments of calcined bone, an assemblage that can be considered typical for domestic medieval occupation deposits.

### Potential Internal Features

Towards the centre of the trench were a number of small sections of sandstone wall running from north to south (009) (010) (011). Together, (009) and (011) measured 1.4 m in length and 0.6 m wide representing the largest single section of wall in this group. The features were of uniform construction and condition, being roughly dressed and varying in shape and size with no mortar or bonding. These walls only survived to one course and had been truncated by later agriculture meaning that their form was indistinct. Given the location and rough probable alignment, as shown in Figure 2, it is likely that these walls represent additional internal divisions within the structure defined by (004).

To the east of these wall sections was an isolated area of in situ burning on the surface of the sand and gravel substratum (022). A bulk environmental sample was taken from this deposit and the analysis confirmed that it contained barley and oats indicative of domestic activity.

### Well

A well (013) was uncovered in the north-eastern corner of the trench, constructed of sandstone blocks that had been dressed to form a circular shape. The blocks were relatively uniform in size and were



Figure 2 Plan of trench showing all features



Figure 3 General view of the trench looking north-east illustrating the robust main wall footings.

bonded with what appeared to be a loose clay bond. The blocks surrounding the well were approximately 0.3 m wide and 0.4 m in length, with the interior diameter of the well 0.85 m, and the exterior diameter including the construction cut approximately 1.45 m. The fill of the well, which was excavated to a depth of 0.9 m, consisted of mixed and relatively loose topsoil and stones. The sandstone construction was removed to a depth of 0.5 m. Attempts were made to take core samples from the well but the high quantity of stones within made it impossible to penetrate more than 0.30 m.

Adjacent to the well, on its southern side, were an arrangement of stones (012), which, although truncated and disturbed, may represent the footings of a wall on the same alignment as the other structural features described. The possibility remains that this may be the rear wall of the structure more clearly defined by wall (004) with the well immediately outside to the north.

### Linear Features

A linear feature was revealed within the trench, run-

ning north to south parallel with the main axis of wall (004). The linear features had a width of 1 m, and excavation found that it had an average depth of 0.45 m with relatively steep sides. An environmental sample revealed the presence of oats, barley and bread wheat, indicating domestic backfill and a similar signature to other environmental samples taken on site.

### Pit Features

In the south of the trench, and outside of the structure defined by wall (004), a circular pit was revealed (014), cut by a later less regular pit feature (016). Pit (014) measured c. 3m in diameter and was cut directly into the natural substratum to a maximum depth of 0.4m to a flat base. The fill of both the larger circular pit and the later smaller feature was reasonably clay-heavy, though no material culture was recovered, other than a large flat stone at the base of the circular pit, which may have been deliberately placed. The lack of material culture makes interpretation speculative at best, but the proximity of the feature to the walled structure would suggest

a potential association.

Within the footprint of the structure, a circular cut feature was tentatively identified (020) but upon excavation was demonstrated to be very shallow and devoid of artefactual material. It is unclear whether this feature was anthropogenic or merely represented compacted topsoil within a natural undulation in the sand and gravel substratum.



Figure 4 Hearth feature 006 illustrating its fine construction.

SPECIALIST ANALYSES

**Medieval Ceramics**

Jenny Vaughan

A small assemblage of 20 sherds of medieval pottery weighing 478 grams was recovered from the two phases of work. There were some possible 12th century shards but the majority were probably late medieval (14th/15th century).

Most numerous were sherds of dark grey reduced green glazed type. The fabric was quite fine and sandy. There were no very diagnostic sherds but two joining pieces were from the shoulder of a hollow vessel with horizontal incised lines. There were four light-firing gritty sherds, being rather finer than the others. These may be 12th century.

The dating of pottery assemblages, in the absence

of coins or other specific date indicators, depends to a great extent on the proportions of different types present. This is a very small group containing no particularly diagnostic material and the dating given above should therefore be treated with some caution. Reduced green glazed pottery persists into the early post-medieval period in Scotland and North Northumberland. Light-firing gritty wares are also found on later medieval sites in Scotland, so, although the sherds here have similarities with 12th century wares, they may also be later than suggested. It was noted that several sherds were large and most, with the exception of a grey gritty sherd from Norham, were relatively fresh, suggesting that they had not moved far from the original place of deposition.

Context No.	Context	Pottery Type	Sherds	Weight	Comments
002	Subsoil	reduced green glazed	2	44	Find nos. 1 and 3 - join. Fine sandy fabric
002	Subsoil	reduced green glazed	1	95	Base - similar fabric to 1 and 3.
002	Subsoil	grey gritty	1	5	Dark grey gritty fabric with pink surface
004	Main wall	reduced green glazed	4	122	Find nos. 1-4. 1 joins 3, 2 joins 4. Possibly same vessel - ?jug with incised lines round shoulder.
005	Extension wall	buff gritty (fine)	1	8	Sooted sherd in gritty fabric - medium to large (up to .75mm) quartz inclusions. Find no. 6
006	Hearth	reduced green glazed	5	58	Find nos. 7-11. Possibly same vessel.
006	Hearth	part oxidised iron rich	1	7	Dark grey with oxidised exterior margin/surface. Sandy/gritty fabric coarser than the green glazed sherds. Find no. 12
008	Internal wall	orange	1	9	Base sherd with patch of glaze. Fairly fine fabric. Find no. 13
008	Internal wall	reduced green glazed	1	6	Find no. 14
008	Internal wall	white gritty	1	21	Hard white fabric with moderately frequent inclusions, medium to large with some ferrous grits. Find no. 15
018	Linear feature	buff gritty	1	30	Sooted. Hard fabric with moderate ill-sorted fine to large inclusions. Find no. 16
Unstrat.	-	buff gritty	1	73	Similar to sherd from [18]. Find no. 18.

Table 1 Medieval ceramics assessment catalogue

## Palaeoenvironmental assessment

Lorne Elliott and Charlotte Henderson

Three bulk samples were taken for palaeoenvironmental assessment from (006) a hearth fill, (018) a linear fill, and (022) an area of in-situ burning. All three samples produced relatively small flots comprising varying amounts of charcoal, coal, fuel ash, uncharred seeds and modern roots.

A few charred rhizomes and heather twigs were also recorded in (006). The well-drained nature of the sediments and the presence of roots suggest the uncharred seeds are recent introductions.

Charred plant remains occurred in all three contexts, although generally they were in very poor condition with many having a degraded or pitted form. Grains and chaff of bread wheat and rye were recorded in (006), along with grains of oat and indeterminate cereals, and a weed seed each of heath-grass and cinquefoil. Contexts (018) and (022) contained grains of oat, barley, cf. bread wheat and indeterminate cereals, with larger amounts occurring in (022). A barley rachis fragment, a wild radish pod and a weed seed of the goosefoot family also occurred in (018), and a culm node of the grass family was recorded in (022).

The residues of (006) and (022) comprised burnt clay and stones, with tiny fragments of calcined bone also occurring in (006). A small sherd of pottery was recorded in (018).

A combination of oats, barley, bread wheat and rye were recorded at the site, although many grains in all three contexts were unidentifiable due to poor preservation. This charred plant macrofossil assemblage is typical of the medieval period. Bread wheat and rye were the more abundant species in (006), whilst barley and oats were greater in number in (018) and (022). These differing assemblages, though small, may reflect periods of cultivation, with wheat and rye representing winter crops and barley and oats representing spring crops.

The poor condition of the barley grains and rachis fragment prevent further identification for this species, and due to the absence of diagnostic chaff, it cannot be ruled out that the oat grains are from the wild variety. The occurrence of chaff in (006) and (018) and a charred pod of wild radish, which is an arable weed, in (018), suggests crop processing was taking place at or near the site. The presence of fuel ash, charcoal, charred plant remains, pottery and fragments of calcined bone, suggests that the fills accumulated from the disposal of domestic waste.

## DISCUSSION

The excavation has revealed evidence for the foundations of a substantial stone-built building with internal stone wall divisions and an internal stone-built hearth. It is possible that this building was associated with the medieval settlement known from aerial photographs to have been located to the west of this site, though given that the building is closely aligned with the course of the present road through Norham it is perhaps more likely that it is a medieval structure associated with an earlier phase of the current layout of Norham village. Ascribing a function to the building is difficult as the walls only survive to a height of two courses and there were no intact internal floor surfaces, but the artefactual and palaeoenvironmental evidence would suggest a domestic use for this building. There was also no evidence uncovered to suggest that there was any type of industrial activity on the site.

The well identified to the north of the building appears, from its location, to have been associated with the putative burgage plot of which the stone-built building is the main feature. The wall section to the west of the building may have been part of a boundary wall which would provide an explanation for its relatively flimsy construction compared to some of the better-coursed walling on site.

The dateable evidence recovered from the site provides a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the building in the mid-late medieval period, with sherds of a different fabric suggesting a possible earlier date for some of the activity on the site. Given the quantity of pottery recovered from a relatively focused area of truncated archaeological remains, it would seem most likely that the artefactual evidence does not just represent a *terminus post quem*, but is also an accurate indicator of the date of occupation and use of the site, placing the habitation of the site at a time of turmoil when Norham was a key stronghold during the Border struggles.

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