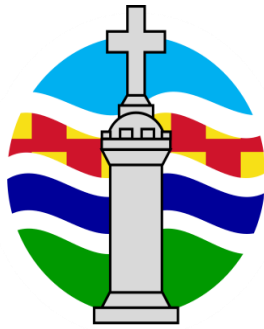


Excavations at Hunting Hall in 2023



LHG
Archaeology

REPORT OF THE EXCAVATIONS AT HUNTING HALL, LOWICK, NORTHUMBERLAND

Issue: November 2024

*This document is a report of the 2023 dig and associated activities.
It is available on the Lowick Heritage Group website.
www.lowickheritagegroup.org*

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Introduction and Acknowledgements.

The archaeological dig of 2023 was the fourth full season of excavations exploring the origins of Lowick Village. It is undertaken by the Lowick Heritage Group's Archaeological sub-group supported by volunteers from across Northumberland and the Scottish Borders with professional direction provided by archaeologist Kristian Pedersen.

Excavations ran from 15 May 2023 to 23 June 2023 with an extension period from 27 September 2023 to 02 October 2023.

The dig welcomed forty volunteers and fifty-two visitors. Additionally, there were planned visits from local community organisations such as the eighteen children from Bailey Green School, Newcastle, who along with their teachers provided an inspiring experience for all involved.

Once again, we received generous financial support from the Barmoor Wind Farm Community Foundation whose interest in our Project has been an instrumental part of our success and we were delighted that a team from the Foundation was able to visit the site this year to witness our efforts and even write about them in their own Community Foundation newsletter.

Developments in land management at Hunting Hall afforded an opportunity to meet with representatives of Natural England. This informed and supported our efforts to underpin our activities in ways which support the integrity of the land and farm, and we are grateful for their input which has allowed us to prepare a further 5-year plan for the site.

Once again in 2023, we were grateful for the support of AOC Archaeology, Edinburgh for their assistance and participation in a range of activities notably the provision of educational workshops and the advice provided regarding the conservation of finds.

We welcomed interest from other professionals including archaeologists and geologists and extend a special acknowledgement to Mrs Claire Smith, BDS for her examination and opinion on the dental remains uncovered during excavations.

Finally, our hosts, Karen and Tom Burns who own and farm Hunting Hall. They have been endlessly encouraging and provide unstinting practical help without which excavations would be impossible: thank you!



Karen and Tom inspecting progress.

The Dig

Aims and Objectives

Our aims and objectives this year were:

- 1) To establish the phases and the relationships between Features with a view to understanding continuity through chronology and economic activities. We approached this by excavating unopened areas adjacent to the roundhouses, seeking evidence of associated ring ditches and exploring the deposits which have revealed metalwork and ceramics.
- 2) To excavate and record the area exposed in Trench 6 in 2022 suggestive of an East/West aligned burial within the footprint of Feature 8, a roundhouse.
- 3) To resolve the relationship between linear stone Feature 9 (revealed in Trench 6 in 2022) and linear stone Feature 12 (revealed in Trench 4 in 2021)

To facilitate these objectives, the previous Trenches numbered 3,4 and 5 were to be reopened and joined to Trench 6 creating one large trench which for this season would be Trench 7



'Super-trench 7' - the site ready for the season



Ready...



Steady...



Go!!!!

Progress:

The Roundhouses

Once reopened, the condition of the trenches and exposed features were noted to be in particularly good condition allowing the team to quickly clean back the surfaces and begin the work of exploring the areas adjacent to the roundhouses. Excavation in the immediate vicinity of the roundhouse containing the postulated bloomery (Feature 11, a type of iron making furnace) and Feature 6 (the flagstones) revealed further pits and postholes suggesting associated structures at this part of the site.

Finds included various faunal remains and a fragment of a coarse ceramic bowl, probably early medieval.

This area – organic and charcoal rich - became increasingly complex

as intercutting ditches, pits and postholes were revealed with mixed deposits of animal bone and more ceramics. There was a strong impression of use *and* re-use, and such was the complexity that a decision was made to return to this area of the site later in the year for a week to excavate and record it more accurately.

This work, conducted in late September, clearly defined the ditch and associated postholes named Feature 17. It allowed us to postulate that the ditch represents a demarcation of the roundhouse structure which contains the bloomery and flagstones. The presence of the ceramic sherd and animal remains can provide evidence for dating which will be compared to the finds of 2022 which gave dates for the late Iron Age within both Feature 6 and Feature 11.

Trowelling the surface in the newly exposed area north of the bloomery and flagstones, a large area of embedded stones and cobbles emerged. Within was a deposit of dark organic material containing pieces of charcoal, This was named Feature 13. There were further pits containing animal bone and a large sherd of pottery which is most likely Iron Age. A stone alignment turning westward appeared to encircle both the embedded stones and the pits raising the possibility that this represents part of the same structure identified as Feature 17. The presence of the pottery provides a good indication for tentatively dating this area of the site to the Iron Age, whilst the presence of animal remains provides an option for Carbon 14 dating to achieve an absolute date.



The emergence of postholes within Feature 17

During 2022, in the south end of the trench, excavation revealed Features 3 and 5. These appeared as substantial stone concentrations. Close by is Feature 8, the Roundhouse, with Feature 10, a hearth, at its centre. However, there was no immediate or obvious relationship between Features 3, 5 and 8.



The team at work

This year's excavations confused the picture further when we exposed yet another stone assemblage, Feature 16, lying close to Features 3, 5 and 8. This alignment was baffling as it appears to both overlie *and* interrupt Feature 8 and gives the appearance of yet another roundhouse perimeter. With limited time we were unable to assess whether it was a discreet feature, whether it is part of Feature 3 or 5 or what the relationship to Feature 8 might be. Therefore, this is an area which we will have to return to in the future to clarify relationships and chronology.

The Grave

The discovery and excavation of a human inhumation represents a sensitive activity within archaeology and one which has its own legal and procedural protocols. Additionally, the location and setting of this burial marked it out as uncommon and therefore of increased archaeological value.

In 2022 two days before the dig ended, a metal-detecting signal led to the recovery of a copper-alloy brooch just beneath the trench surface. This lay within the perimeter of the roundhouse, Feature 8, (see above). With insufficient time to excavate, the surface was trowelled to permit visual examination for potential features. The shape and dimensions of what was revealed by this light trowelling was sufficient for us to proceed on the supposition that this could represent a burial and therefore the area was left untouched with the objective of excavating in 2023. The

feature lay on an east-west axis and tantalisingly within the boundary of the roundhouse perimeter.



Excavation was undertaken in quadrants to support the definition of stratigraphy. It was planned to extract all the soil (fill) for floatation analysis and, if possible, to remove small amounts of organic material (potentially bone or tooth) for the purposes of radiocarbon dating.

All remains were to be returned to the grave as soon as the removal of the underlying fill had been collected. Any remains removed for radiocarbon dating would be returned to the grave once that process was completed.

Grave outline after light trowelling.

Almost immediately, the emergence of a human tooth and small pieces of bone confirmed this was a human inhumation.



The emerging teeth.

Ultimately, the remains which emerged comprised twenty-eight teeth, several small bone flakes and six substantial bone fragments of which four were identifiable parts of the leg bones, the other two being most likely part of an arm bone and part of a rib. The positioning of the leg bones and teeth demonstrated that the individual had been buried in a crouched position lying on the left-hand side on a west/east axis (the head being in the west).

The team was grateful to Mrs Claire Smith, BDS who examined the teeth and was able to confidently state they were those of a young adult which showed few signs of wear, disease or trauma. That said, four teeth were absent: the Upper Left 1 and Upper Left 3 and the Lower Left 1 and the Lower Left 3. The symmetry of those missing teeth can only be speculated upon. However, the intact set emerged in clenched position, prompting some speculation as to whether the head

had been bound as part of a mortuary practice.



Emerging leg bones

Within the fill of the grave the soil varied in colour, texture and composition including one particularly dark and 'oily' area where a small find was retrieved.



The unidentified organic find.

This was an unidentified piece of probable organic material with vestiges of copper, iron and plant fibre attached. It was excavated at the find spot of the copper-alloy brooch retrieved in 2022. The 'oily' area was possibly indicative of an organic remnant. Additional finds within the grave included a small crinoid columnal (St Cuthbert's bead), a piece of fibre (possibly cloth or plant) and a small but visible area of Verdigris.

A sample of tooth was sent to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) for carbon dating. This provided a date for the burial being sometime around

709AD to 775AD at 95.4% probability.

We thus have a medieval burial placed unknowingly in the footprint of an Iron Age house. The person was laid to rest in a crouched position aligned east to west with the head facing east.

The body was presumed to be clothed or wrapped as it had the vestiges of decoration evidenced by the brooch, Verdigris, plant fibre and probable bead. The person's mouth was most likely deliberately held shut and despite the good condition of teeth at time of death, four were missing in a curiously symmetrical pattern.

Now the remains have been returned to the earth, the burial site is to be marked with a stone and can be a place for interest and reflection for all associated with Hunting Hall and their many visitors.

The Linear Stone Feature



The area between the black lines was excavated revealing continuity between the area to the left, excavated in 2021 and the area to the right excavated in 2022.

The linear concentration of stones shaded purple, was originally revealed in 2021 and had one large stone lined posthole containing animal bone at its base. It was named Feature 12. In 2022, shaded green, a further linear stone alignment was identified and named Feature 9. Our objective in 2023 was to ascertain whether the two Features would 'run into' each other therefore resulting in them being one single Feature or whether there was a 'break' in their course thereby forming two separate alignments. Understanding this, we could then begin to determine whether or not the feature/s were contemporaneous to the nearby roundhouses.

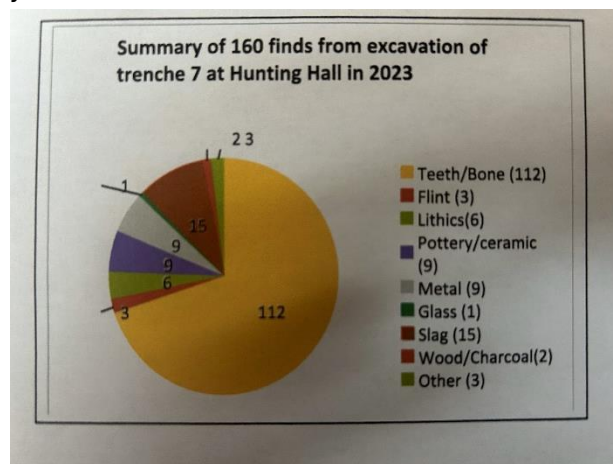
Further stone emerged in the newly opened portion of the trench. This new area was of a similar stone type to Features 9 and 12, providing compelling evidence of continuity and singularity.

The emergence of a further posthole cut into Feature 9 had a dark filling representing a straight-sided post that had decomposed in situ. Gradually, as excavation proceeded, the two Features resolved into one revealing an impressive and substantial structure running along the escarpment edge. We were happy to conclude this was one Feature, thereafter numbered Feature 9.

Post Excavation

Finds

In common with previous years, the team have a wealth of finds to preserve for archiving. This year we have a total of 160 finds.



Bone/Tooth – mostly small broken pieces but many larger pieces. Some can be identified by type or animal whilst others are just too small. Teeth are easier to identify with cattle tooth being the most commonly found. Regardless of size, presence helps us understand volumes and numbers and their conservation in an archive may prove to be of excellent value to future research.

In post-excavation work, the bones will be examined for any unusual attributes for example cut marks which may be evidence

of butchering. Being organic, bone and tooth can provide Carbon 14 dating.

Pottery/Ceramic- In an undisturbed context, pottery and ceramics can provide good dating



evidence as styles are markedly different throughout the prehistoric and medieval periods. Additionally, these artefacts can be associated to a range of different activities such as domestic, agricultural or manufacturing. This year, our finds of nine pieces included part of a pot-rim and part of a pot-base. Overall, the inferred sizes and shapes suggest domestic use.

Pot recovered from F17

Metal- This year produced nine metal finds. Most are distorted by the effects of corrosion and degradation within the ground and whilst six remained unspecified, two were identified as nails



and one as part of a pin. During the dig, **metal-detecting** is also undertaken in the area around the site and produced this fine specimen of Romano-British culture.

Romano-British find

Slag- fifteen large pieces of slag were excavated providing further evidence of manufacturing on the site.

Glass- Notoriously difficult for non-specialists to identify we have kept all glass artefacts for archiving except those which are modern and lie in the topsoil. This year has produced only one piece which may represent glass slag.

Lithic (stone) -This year 3 pieces of worked flint and a piece of worked agate provided further evidence of the longevity of the Hunting Hall Site. Each piece could potentially represent something from as long ago as the Mesolithic Period or the more recent Bronze Age.

Charcoal –the pieces collected this year provide evidence of manufacture and use in domestic or ‘industrial’ settings. In analysis, charcoal can be identified by wood type. Previous pieces which have been examined demonstrate that the charcoal was made from Oak allowing us to build this into an environmental picture of the site.

Post-excavation work allows us to gather more charcoal using the floatation process and we anticipate collecting more through this process, as has been the case in previous years.



Conservation

As part of the archiving and conservation process, our two brooches were taken to the



The penannular brooch after conservation.

Conservators based at AOC, Edinburgh where a process of assessment, cleaning and stabilising confirmed our objects to be a copper-alloy penannular brooch with bead and spool cast decoration and a copper-alloy annular brooch with ribbed design and elliptical section. Additional information from the process demonstrated that the annular brooch (from the grave) had iron residue most likely from an iron object which had corroded in the grave beside the brooch.



The annular brooch found in the grave.

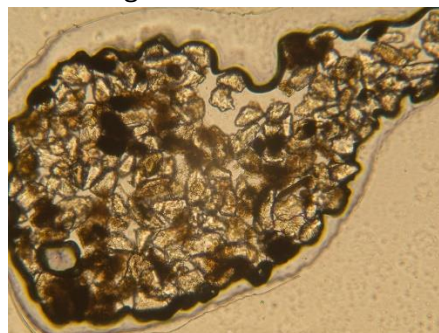
Flotation and Microscopy

This year we collected a total of 671.8 litres of soil for flotation and microscopy analysis. This included the entire fill of the grave and samples from thirty-seven separate contexts.



Fibre recovered through microscopy

The complete sample collection has now been through the flotation process, labelled, dried and stored whilst the examination by microscopy of the organic material retrieved from the flotation process has begun and is already yielding interesting finds.



Microscopic cell

School Visit

Eighteen pupils from Bailey Green Primary School, Newcastle who have a keen interest in history visited the site for a day of archaeology. Amongst the activities on offer, each participant had the opportunity to excavate in the trench, learn how stone tools were made, use a metal detector and look through microscopes for evidence of the past.



Despite being active the whole day and as well as learning about these skills, the children worked together

to recreate the framework of an Iron Age Roundhouse whilst wearing Iron Age costume (very strenuous!) With no signs of fatigue, all agreed they would have liked to have stayed longer and do more!



Intense concentration!

AOC Workshops

These workshops held in January were very instructive and were designed to support the group with the management of finds ‘from field to archive.’

The first workshop focused on ecofacts, which are natural materials which have been used by humans, or natural material recovered from the archaeological site such as plant remains, seeds, insects etc. The focus was on the microscopy finds and charcoal recovered from the trenches along with an introduction to the identification of animal bones.

Interestingly, our charcoal finds were identified as slow growing Oak adding another layer of certainty to our knowledge of the Iron Age environment of Lowick.



The group learn animal-bone identification

The second workshop focused on both ecofacts and artefacts, exploring the journey from field to archive through a process of identification, handling, retrieval, recording, analysis and conservation.

We are thankful to Jackie, Dawn, Gen and Sarah from AOC, Edinburgh for sharing all this knowledge.

Archaeologist's Report

The archaeological investigations at Hunting Hall in the field season of 2023 sought to link the excavation trenches from previous field seasons. This was intended to prove, with as little equivocality as possible, the relationship of some features to one another—namely, to establish whether the features identified in previous seasons were related, formed larger discrete features, or whether they were formed at different episodes. Most important, though, was the thorough investigation of the grave which was encountered in the final days of the 2022 season but left until the 2023 season so it could be excavated with as much circumspection as possible.

Before addressing the burial, it is pertinent to note that the roundhouse structure and its associated hearths found in Trench 4 were suspected of being part of the roundhouse platform that was accorded the name ‘Feature 6’ and is associated with the presumed bloomery. This ultimately proved to be erroneous, but it did underscore that there were numerous phases of

occupation that were difficult to tease out become of complex, overlapping features. All the presumed roundhouse platforms, though, afforded a remarkable trait: it appears that there was a scatter of occupation debris over all of them. This has been noted on Iron Age sites elsewhere in the British Isles, in particular those that have been excavated in northern Scotland. This has been interpreted as a custom involving the abandonment of structures by filling them with refuse. Such an interpretation is consistent with that at Hunting Hall: the uppermost layers, immediately below the plough-soil horizon, largely afford butchered animal bone, ash, and scattered rocks.

Another roundhouse platform, albeit far less well built and affording few internal features, contained the burial within its perimeter. Insofar as the roundhouse tradition is typically prehistoric, and the burial was dated by the radiocarbon method and by the accompanying brooch to the eighth century AD, it is assumed that the burial was intrusive. This is the most likely explanation, but the deposits comprising the roundhouse platform shall be subject to sampling for radiocarbon date to prove this supposition. Nevertheless, the burial's isolated situation requires explanation. In the eighth century, cemeteries were commonplace; some were buried on prehistoric monuments, possibly in an attempt to create a real or spurious connection between those occupying the landscape and those that occupied it earlier. The orientation of the burial, being East-West, and the crouched position, easily conforms with the Christian tradition. It is therefore possible that the isolated burial represents two things of particular relevance to the research programme at Hunting Hall: first, that the site was still occupied in some capacity in the eighth century; second, that there may not have been a church yet raised in Lowick.

Additional interest was taken in two long, well-built stone walls which were named F 9 and F12. These both extended roughly North-South but F9 seemed to be devoid of postholes. Was this potentially a single wall that demarcated a settlement plot? Such features are relatively well known from the Romano-British Iron Age elsewhere in the region, and this corresponds nicely with the radiocarbon dates that we have hitherto obtained. It may be that some of the roundhouse platforms were associated with these stone walls that represented something akin to a courtyard. The excavations of 2023 established there was continuity and singularity of the two structures. Whether this is associated with the first period of occupation or represents a different phase of occupation of the courtyard of another structure, remains unresolved but with samples submitted for Carbon 14 dating, a further step to resolving this relationship is at hand.

Another matter that is unresolved is the nature of the ceramic material. This is indistinguishable from Iron Age ceramics, but if a Brittonic population persisted on this site, there may have been no reason to change their ceramic customs. It was suggested by Roger Miket that, in the absence of direct dates from the ceramic material, or dates that are unequivocally in association with it, that it is prudent to refrain from assigning a temporally deterministic term such as 'prehistoric' or 'Iron Age' to the collection, and instead refer to it as 'Native'. The analysis and dating of this ceramic material shall form an objective for the post-excavation process in the winter months. A final word is necessary regarding the copious quantity of faunal remains: this overwhelmingly comprises cattle bone, almost all butchered or burnt. It underscores the importance of cattle to the subsistence economy, and presumably also for trade in hides. The relationship between livestock and cereal agriculture must be resolved, though, and this is hoped to be elucidated in part through the comprehensive flotation assays,

