The Excavations at Hunting Hall in 2024

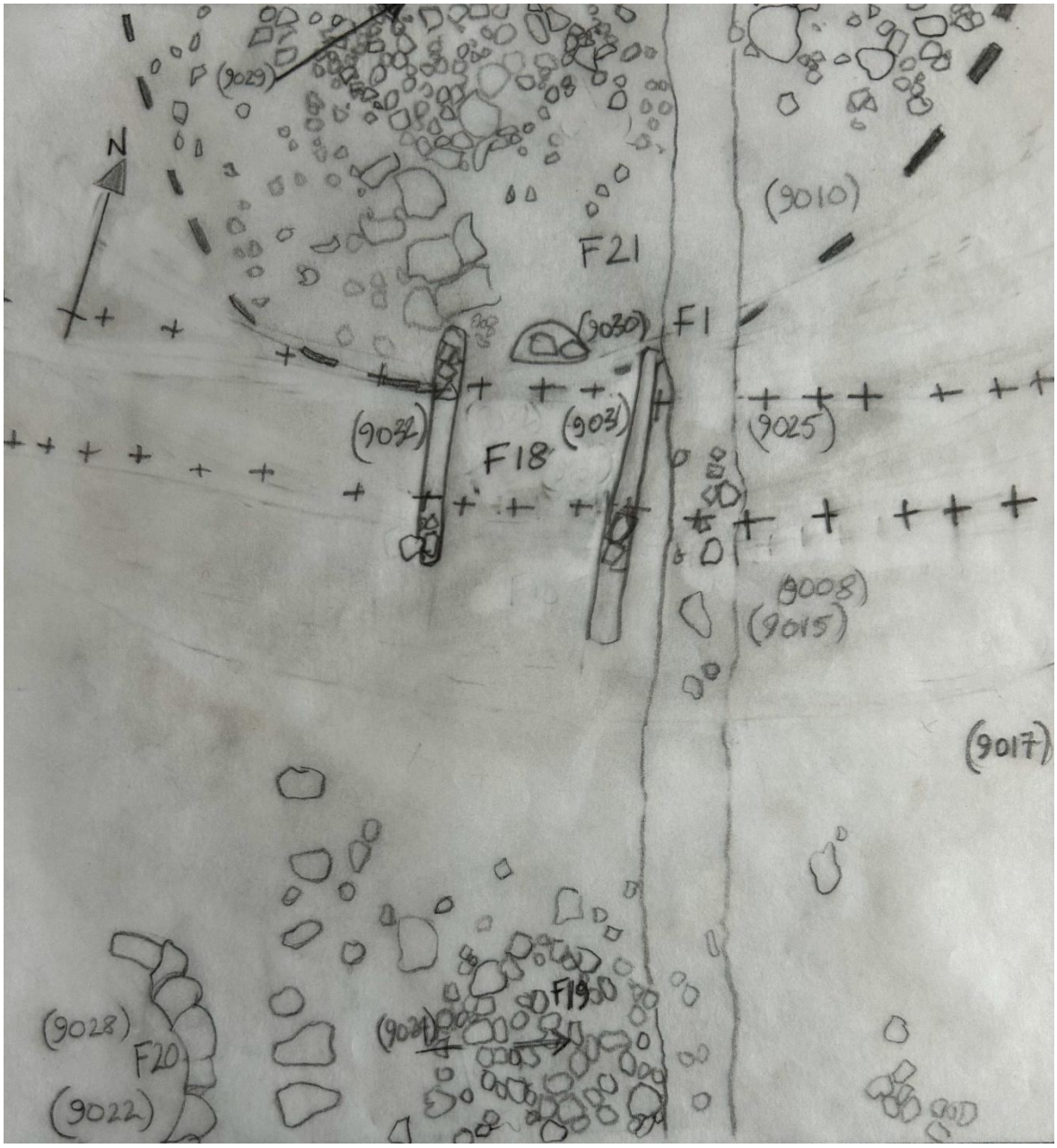
LHG Archaeology

REPORT OF THE EXCAVATIONS AT HUNTING HALL, LOWICK, NORTHUMBERLAND

Issue: May 2025

This document is a report on the 2024 dig and associated activities.
It is available on the Lowick Heritage Group website.
www.lowickheritagegroup.org

This excavation was funded by Barmoor Wind Farm Community Fund via Community Foundation and supported by Hunting Hall farm and Natural England



Composite of identified features and a selection of sampled contexts in Trench 9.

The drawing postulates a possible extent for the interior of F18, the palisade (+), and possible perimeter of F21, a roundhouse (-) as well as F19, a cairn and F20 unknown. F1is the Victorian drain previously encountered in 'Supertrench 7'.

Contents

Excavations at Hunting Hall in 2024

Introduction and Acknowledgements.

The archaeological dig at Hunting Hall, exploring the origins of Lowick Village, entered its fifth full season in 2024 with the Dig taking place from 03 June 2024 to 13 July 2024.

As in the previous 4 seasons the Lowick Heritage Group's archaeological sub-group was supported by the many volunteers who have committed themselves to the endeavour. This year a total of 33 volunteers contributed to the work of excavation under the direction of professional archaeologist, Kristian Pedersen.

We welcomed daily visitors all of whom were given a guided tour of the site prompting considerable interest and curiosity not only in the Hunting Hall dig but in the broader aims and methods of archaeological investigation. We are grateful to all those visitors and local people who have generously made donations towards our costs all of which have been noted in our records and used towards the many expenses of the work.

We were delighted that once again we had the support of staff from the Bailey Green School to provide a day of hands-on archaeology for their pupils. There is always great enthusiasm from the boys and girls who get the opportunity to leave the classroom and contribute to a real dig.

Our grateful thanks again to the Barmoor Wind Farm Community Fund and Community Foundation whose interest and financial support for our research has allowed us to continue our investigations both during the dig and during the post-excavation activities which continue throughout the year.

And lastly, our thanks as ever to our hosts, Karen and Tom Burns! Despite huge developments and hard work happening on the farm they always make time and resources available to support the success of the Dig.

Figure 1 Trench 8 dipping into the ditch ready for excavation.

Figure 2 Trowelling commences in trench 9

The Dig

Aims and Objectives

This year our research focus was in understanding the age and relationship between our earlier discoveries and the apparent palisade and demarcation ditches identified on the geophysical survey. To this end, two new trenches were to be opened.

The objectives were:

1) Trench 8.
   Measuring 16 m x 2.5 m and positioned west of 'Supertrench7', this long, linear trench cut through the innermost bank and ditch which demarcates the site. The objective was to excavate to the base of the ditch for the purpose of recording the stratigraphic layers and collecting dating material. This aim would allow an improved understanding of the chronology of the site and relatedness of the ditch to the site interior.

2) Trench 9.

   Measuring 10m x 10m, this trench to the south of 'Supertrench7' was chosen because the geophysical survey indicated intense activity including the possibility of identifying the palisade which was anticipated to run through this part of the site.

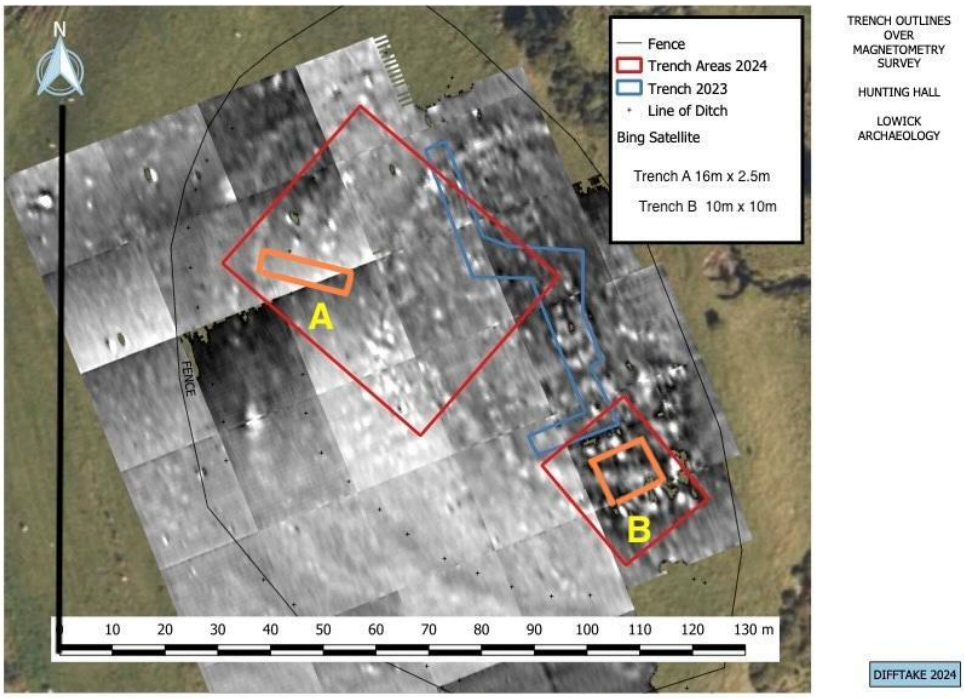


Figure 3 *A = Trench 8 B = Trench 9*

Progress: Trench 8

Trench 8 cut through the innermost bank and ditch surrounding the site. The intention was to excavate to the bottom in order to recover organic material to provide absolute dating. It was of great importance to ensure the stratigraphy was identified as precisely as possible in order to match with complete accuracy any dating samples in the discrete stratigraphic layers.
The environmental difficulties encountered in the trench (see Figure 11) were addressed by digging a sondage (a smaller, deep excavation sunk through the trench) against the trench wall. This provided an opportunity to go to the bottom of the ditch, albeit in a smaller area, whilst retaining the ability to define the edge of the ditch and the stratigraphy.

Figure 4 Photogrammetry image showing clear stratigraphy.

The first find to emerge was a flint blade, probably Mesolithic, which was found within the subsoil and possibly re-deposited there when a Victorian drain was set into the field (see Figure 4 circular feature to the right of the black base.).
Slightly deeper, we encountered medieval green glaze pottery adding evidence of later medieval activity on our site.

Figure 5 Prehistoric flint blade

Figure 6 Medieval green glaze pottery

Figure 7 The expanding sondage.

However, the most exciting finds came exactly where we had hoped to find our dating evidence: the vey bottom of the ditch.
Within this basal layer of thick, black organic material, discovered at a depth of approximately 140cm – 190cm, were blackened animal remains providing a rich selection of bone and tooth for Carbon14 dating. Many bones were sufficiently large and intact to be identifiable, and the team set to work labelling such pieces whilst awaiting expert opinion.

Figure 8 Jaw bones with teeth in situ.

Figure 9 A selection of bone retrieved and labelled from the base of the ditch

Figure 10 Digging to the base of the ditch.

Dating the bank and ditch surrounding the site was a research priority for this year's excavations so at the close of the dig we immediately sent samples to SUERC (Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre) for Carbon 14 dating. The results were exciting and indicate a probability of over 95% that these remains can be dated between the years 10AD to 133AD.

This accords perfectly with our previous Carbon 14 dates demonstrating significant activity over the whole site in the first century AD. Furthermore, it permits us to make a direct time connection between the demarcation ditch and the roundhouses, bloomery and pits already excavated. The results were reinforced by the analysis of charcoal taken from the hearth of the roundhouse excavated in 2022; this returned a date of 5AD to 125AD, remarkably identical to the demarcation ditch.

Figure 11 Solid Trench 8 surface promoting decision to dig a sondage

Having achieved our objective for Trench 8, it was closed with the intent of re-opening the deepest part of the ditch in season 2025 in order to fully assess the context of those animal bones which have been discovered. Of interest is the possibility of a greater volume of remains, of other types of remains and the possibility of determining whether these remains are of a domestic or potentially votive nature.

Figure12 Unusual metallic sheen on cattle tooth

Figure 13 Preparing the bones for archive.

Trench 9

The area of Trench 9 was selected on the basis of intriguing possibilities presented by the geophysical survey. Placed on the edge of the escarpment which holds the Low and slightly to the south of 'Supertrench 7', the objectives were to investigate the strong magnetromic signals given in the survey which suggested archaeological features including the possibility of a continuation of the palisade previously found in Trench 3. Metal detecting had suggested the possibility of metal finds or burning.

Figure 14Trowelling begins in Trench 9.

The turf was removed mechanically with an immediate exposure of large, embedded stones and thus trowelling back the topsoil was preferred to further mechanical removal as there was a risk of damage to potential archaeological features. Although a slower method, the choice was vindicated by the identification of at least 4 discrete features.

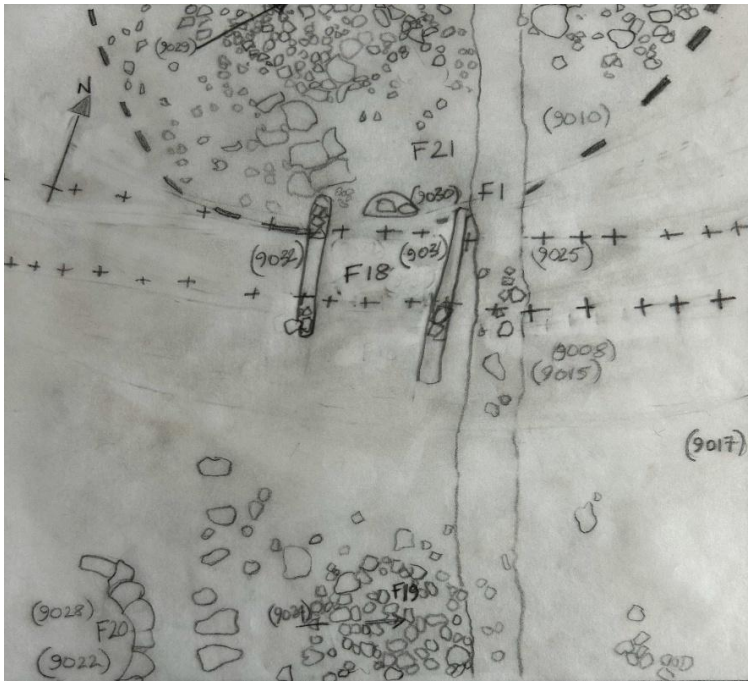


Figure 15 Composite drawing showing features as they emerged and indicating hypothesised lines for the demarcation of a roundhouse and the possible interior of the palisade.

Feature 18 The probable palisade, emerged as a dark stain in the eastern edge of the trench. With further trowelling, associated pits and post-holes began to appear, some with pieces of animal bone included. Once into the central area of the trench, slots were excavated (see Figure 15) revealing stone assemblages indicative of banking. Between these slots a further pit emerged containing bone and a stone in the manner of a large posthole. Intriguingly, the northern end of these slots abutted what had been hypothesised as the possible ring ditch of a roundhouse raising interesting questions about the relative chronologies and relationships of the two proposed features.

Feature 21 The proposed hearth and roundhouse, lay in the northern edge of the trench with the suspected hearth area tucked into the wall of the trench. This area was additionally furnished by flagstones reminiscent of the roundhouse excavated in 2022. Burnt bone and charcoal were noted in the putative hearth area along with several

Figure 16 Slot revealing the stone banking

Figure 17 The group inspect the slots through the palisade and possible adjoining ring ditch.

teeth, a piece of horn and a struck lithic.

The hypothesis that we have found our palisade as well as another roundhouse appears solid but will require further work to fully understand the correct interpretation of the features as we have found them and which further excavation can reveal. Each feature appears to have completely separate areas but there does appear to be a convergence where the northern bank of the palisade and the southern edge of the ring ditch 'collide'. There being organic remains, we have scope for dating the associated pits, but the conundrum will only be settled by further excavation. Thus, the area has been earmarked for future excavation.

Feature 19 This probable cairn appeared after de-turfing giving an immediate impression of a concentric build. Trowelling and the removal of loose stones confirmed the impression leaving embedded concentric stones and a noted area of burning around the perimeter. The upper fill contained small shards of bone and the lower, safe, contexts also produced small pieces of bone, some burned but without there being any evidence of human burial. However, the recovery of a small sherd of burnt ceramic pot whilst sectioning the interior of the feature provided more compelling evidence for the feature as a Bronze Age burial cairn.

Figure 18 The cairn as it first appeared.

Figure19 after removal of loose and upper fill.

Figure 20 section through lower fill where burnt ceramic and unusual sandstone was recovered.

Figure 21 Pot sherd

The interior of the cairn also produced a very unusual piece of bright sandstone to which small fragments of bone adhered. Again, time constraints dictated we err on the side of caution. Rather than risk destruction a decision to protect the feature and back-fill was made with the intent of re-opening in future.

Feature 20 appeared late on in proceedings and has everybody puzzled. These precisely laid, dressed stones were revealed in the south-western most corner of the trench and although there were cobbles and other stone above and around the feature there was no discernible relationship. These too have been protected and can be re-opened in future.

Figure 22 The mystery feature with precisely laid dressed stone.

In summary both trenches have produced more success. Trench 8 met its objective exactly and Trench 9 confirmed our suspicion of multiple areas of activity, including the discovery of the palisade, and the likelihood of a confirmed new roundhouse, a burial cairn and a mystery feature.

We have seen in previous years that the complexity of the site frequently makes it prudent to resist the urge to 'keep digging' and instead protect disturbed areas with a view to re-opening as the information from different areas of the site informs our research and associated hypotheses. With the knowledge gained over the past 3 years we will now return to those areas partially excavated in 2019 and 2021 knowing there is now a far greater likelihood of earlier prehistoric remains and thus designing the process of the dig with this in mind.

Figure 23 Trowelling back

Figure 24 The bosses!

Post Excavation

Floatation and microscopy

Our post excavation work continues throughout the year, much of it taking place in 'Garage Lab' where finds are checked and processed. Soil samples which have been put through a process of floatation and sieving are checked first with the naked eye and then using microscopy. Records, drawings and plans are checked and updated and liaison with organisations which support dating and conservation is undertaken.

This season a total of 375 litres of soil was sampled with resulting organic materials being retrieved such as bone and charcoal and many less obvious ecofacts (organic materials which have been used by humans) as well as the remains of other organics such as plants or insects present in the environment but not necessarily used by humans. Many litres of sieved soil produce tiny quantities of precious evidence to enhance our understanding of the environmental profile of our site.

Figure 25 Microscopy samples

Figure 26 Working in GarageLab

Finds

Finds this year were notable for two main reasons. Firstly, the range from Mesolithic to late medieval continues to testify to the longevity of the site; secondly, there was a distinct reduction in the volumes of faunal remains in Trench 9 which we have been accustomed to in previous trenches. Initially we considered 3 possible reasons for this.

1. Different preservation conditions prevail at this part of the site

2. We have reached the outer periphery of the site, so there was less activity and therefore less cultural material

3. The features here derive from a different period than those that we have encountered before, and perhaps there was a different tradition of waste disposal

By the end of the dig, we felt the third option was the most likely. We were able to conclude that more bone/tooth had been found in the area which was enclosed by the putative palisade (in and around Feature 18 and Feature 21) and significantly less in and around Features 19 and 20 which lay beyond the palisade. This may suggest that there

are at least two and possibly three distinct phases of occupation uncovered within Trench 9. We hope to discover more in future digs.

As always, finds in the disturbed plough soil proved interesting and none more so than an attractive sherd of pottery known as Samian Ware found in the northeast boundary of trench 9. This was a type of mass-produced Roman pottery commonly made in the first and second centuries AD and therefore fitting perfectly with the known dates for our site.

Figure 27 Samian Ware

Previously, Roman finds have been made around the site using metal detecting. As our range and volume of finds increases so does the implied possibility of interaction between our Iron Age community and the Roman Empire and this is a possibility which must be kept in mind as we pursue our research into the origins of Lowick.

A piece of copper slag was also found in the topsoil at the northeast corner of Trench 9. Being copper we can speculate on a date post-neolithic up to the medieval, but we have nothing which is truly diagnostic to attempt conjecture on possible copper-based manufacturing or a time period.


Figure 28Copper slag

Radiocarbon Dating

Often referred to as Carbon 14 dating, this is a method of determining the absolute date of recovered organic material. A sample with sufficient properties such as collagen is analysed and a radiocarbon date is provided. This radiocarbon date is then calibrated against tree-ring chronologies to provide calendar dates. These dates are presented as percentage possibilities and usually involve a range of dates.

It is an expensive process therefore it is used as part of our post excavation work only to confirm a solid hypothesis where other methods are insufficient.

This season cattle bone from Trench 8 was analysed using this method. Because of the promising result an archived sample from Trench 6 (2022) was retrieved as we sought to demonstrate the temporal relationship between the ditch and the site interior. This sample of charcoal was taken from a hearth within a roundhouse which until now had been identified as late Iron Age on the basis of plan, attributes and the presence of Iron Age pottery. The sample returned a date proving contemporaneity between the ditch and roundhouse allowing us to say with certainty that in the first century AD there was an enclosed community living atop the ridge of the Low at Hunting Hall.

School Visit

Once again, we were delighted to welcome the pupils and teachers from Bailey Green Primary School to enjoy a day out of the classroom!

The weather was warm and sunny for the most part which allowed us to offer lots of outdoor activities that included metal detecting, weaving, soil analysis and excavation all whilst dressed in mock Iron Age clothing. As our pictures show, there was keen interest and participation all round from our future archaeologists!

Figure 29 trowelling in the sun

Figure 30 Intense concentration

Archaeologists Report

The excavations at Hunting Hall in the summer of 2024 involved moving into heretofore unexplored locations on the site. This was undertaken because the magnetometric survey of the field previously carried out indicated many points of activity; there seemed to be a possibly involving burning or iron production.

In addition to this it was decided that dating material from the inner circuit of the bank and ditches demarcating the site was also necessary to understand the chronological sequence of the site's development.

In both instances valuable data was recovered and this has altered our perception of the site.

First let us consider the faunal material that was recovered from the inner circuit of the earthworks. A thick deposition of clay lay in the ditch and as excavations progressed there was encountered a modern field drain. This was suspected to run through the entire ditch as the area is prone to waterlogging. However, beneath the well-defined incision for the field drain, archaeological deposits were encountered. These were layers replete with organic material but at the basal level there was a large quantity of cattle bone exhibiting signs of butchery. It remains to be determined whether this represents the vestiges of some ritual meal at the establishment of the ditch-and-bank circuit or instead was merely the remains of some communal meal dumped into the ditch at a later point. An expansion of the excavation in this ditch is being considered to help resolve these questions.

Second, there is the trench which was opened to the south of the trenches that had previously occupied our attention. A large quantity of stonework was encountered here and a very salient trench structure that was lined with rock. This latter is likely the elusive palisade trench that was earlier encountered in Trench 3 . Although salient, it is also cut by other features and therefore affords a confused picture at the moment.

To the northern edge of the excavation trench, Roman pottery was found . This is consistent with ceramic production of the 1st/2nd century AD and thus accords with radiocarbon dates from the site.

A concentric stone setting was encountered and whilst a small shard of burnt ceramic pot was retrieved, the function remains unknown. It has been decided to re-open and investigate this feature more thoroughly rather than relying on a small and therefore unrepresentative sample to make inferences.

Lastly, the emergence on the final day of digging of a further stone setting also merits future investigation.