

Introduction

This report endeavours to outline the significance of the site located on the Lower Dene field at Hunting Hall, which abuts to the western bank of the River Low.¹ The site is extensive, the archaeological features occurring over an area of 9300 m², and comprising the vestiges of occupation that extend from the Neolithic to the Early Medieval period (*ca.* 4000 BC to AD 500). Little is known of characteristics of prehistoric settlements on the Northumberland Coastal Plain; the majority of the research in the region has been directed to the better preserved sites found in upland environments. This has furthermore proved to be an impediment to the understanding of the upland sites insofar that there does not exist a corpus of evidence sufficient to begin to develop arguments regarding the relationship of the upland and lowland settlements. The problem extends further: the upland settlements are presumed to have had an economy based on animal transhumance, whereas the lowlands are presumed to have furnished the majority of cereals and pulses in the economy. Although cereal and pulse cultivation are known through pollen analyses, impressions in ceramics, and so forth, the study of the lowland settlements and their internal organisation for storing and processing these crops has only rarely been undertaken. Investigations at Hunting Hall, therefore, are unusually promising for elucidating the changes in agriculture that unfolded on the Northumberland Coastal Plain from the introduction of an agrarian economy to the Medieval era. This, in turn, also permits a much more nuanced understanding of the development of the agricultural traditions, the soils, climatic impacts, and the cultural responses that attended these changes.

The research here began with the simple question of where the first settlement bearing the name ‘Lowick’ was located. An analysis of the placename suggests that the settlement was first situated on the River Low. The prefix ‘*Low*’ is a Brythonic word referring to pools of water left behind when the tide recedes, but it may equally have been applied to the pools of water lingering in the river valley through which this river flows after a spate episode. The suffix ‘*-wick*’ is Old English, ultimately being a paronym of the Latin ‘*-vicus*’ which referred to a farmstead. Thus, the name *Lowick* meant ‘the farmstead on the [River] Low’ for the speakers of Old English. It is clear that the present village does not lie on the River Low, and had therefore been displaced to its present location; the river could not have moved, for it is an underfit river constrained in its course by the deeply incised valley through which it flows. The church in Lowick has sculpture from the Anglo-Saxon era, so the movement of the settlement must have occurred early in its history insofar that the church was the cynosure of Early Medieval villages.

This movement of the settlement might be attributed to changing economic structures, and the Christian tradition—the former may have encouraged settlement to move towards the Devil’s Causeway to access markets in Berwick-upon-Tweed or to serve itinerant merchants travelling along this

¹ The site is centred on the Ordnance Survey grid reference of NU 02779 40834 (What3Words: importers.betrayal.impeached).

route, whereas the latter might have rendered the junction of the pilgrimage route to Holy Island on the Devil's Causeway particularly important for commerce and serving the pilgrims. Irrespective of the reasons for the main settlement moving to its present location, the original location was on the River Low and overlay occupation from the preceding Iron Age. The continuity of settlement here may have had much to do with the varied environmental niches afforded to the inhabitants: the river valley for fresh water and good browsing for some of the animals, as well as woodland for fuel and construction; the clay soils for cereal cultivation; the nearby hills for transhumance; the nearness of the coast.

This project took as its point of departure the identification of the site that first bore the name 'Lowick', but intends to pursue the question of the nature of settlement on this site from its earliest phases until the Early Medieval period. A long term perspective of changing land-use, manifested through economic changes in agriculture, shall be correlated with climatic and population changes. The first phases of investigation have confirmed that the site affords especially propitious conditions for the preservation of animal bone and floral remains, which renders it an ideal candidate for the aforementioned studies. The remainder of this contribution seeks to outline the investigations and their promise.

Investigations

The site was recognised through aerial photographic surveys, but was dismissed as an anthropogenically constructed feature by those interpreting the images through the 1960s:

*'Semi-circular earthwork visible on aerial photographs. Situated on a river terrace with rising ground to the south and west. It is approximately 100m in diameter, and consists of a ditch 10m wide and 1.5m deep with traces of an inner bank, and a counterscarp bank 15m wide and 0.5m high. The whole peters out about 30m at either end from a natural scarp, and is overlain by rig and furrow. Surveyed at 1/2500. No change, but very doubtful. There is no inner bank and the ditch and counterscarp bank are too strong for the non-defensive work which this implies. Further both ditch and bank should continue at either end to the natural scarp in the east, but do not. It is most likely that the apparent work is merely the result of land slip.'*²

A later entry to the *Northumberland Historic and Environmental Register* (HER), dated to 1994, however, did correctly identify the site as an 'enclosure' or possible 'fort': *'Semi-circular double-ditched enclosure, possibly fort. Visible on infra-red line scan imagery'*.³ The latter identification did not result in the site being scheduled, nor was it even sufficient to lead it to be included in the *Hillforts Atlas Project*.⁴ The site has thus been unremarked in scholarly discussions of the Iron Age in

² <https://www.archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record?titleId=958123>

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/>

Northumberland; there existed no research or management plans that explicitly seek to understand and preserve it until the work described herein this report was initiated.⁵

The archaeological investigation of the Lower Dene enclosure at Hunting Hall commenced in 2016. This initial season of excavation sought to characterise the banks and ditches that comprise the earthwork enclosure by digging a section through the extreme margins of these where they abut to the western bank of the River Low. Erosion of the bank over the river resulted in slumping of the sediment, so it was assumed that excavations here would cause the least disturbance to the features on the site whilst still affording an opportunity to characterise the features and to recover artefacts that might provide a provisional chronological framework for the occupation. Unfortunately, the slumping of the sediment resulted in the features losing their integrity and there was furthermore disturbance from land drains. No evidence of any archaeological significance was therefore encountered. This led to plans for excavation elsewhere to be developed, where the features would be better preserved and less distorted.

In recognition that excavation is a destructive process, it was decided that a politic approach would be to collect as much data suggesting the location and nature of the features and deposits through non-invasive survey methods. Two methods were employed: first, a metal detector survey, which plotted the distribution of sub-surface finds and deposits that returned a signal suggestive of metals; second, a comprehensive geophysical survey involving magnetometry. Both methods are complementary, but the latter permitted the production of imagery that revealed the structure of the features that was used for interpretation of the site. The geophysical survey was undertaken by the *Lowick Heritage Group*, under the specialist guidance of the *Bernician Studies Group* (Pennie 2018). This survey encompassed the entire Lower Dene field and extended well beyond the banks and ditches so that any structures lying outwith the earthworks would also be identified. A complex series of features were revealed to occur principally along the western bank of the River Low, including palisades and a series of large, circular structures. In addition, there were anomalous sub-rectangular structures and many inter-cutting and overlapping ditches. This survey suggests that the site was occupied over a protracted period, transgressing many formally recognised archaeological periods, and that the visible earthworks represent merely one of many episodes.

The majority of the features derive from the late Bronze Age and Iron Age, an assertion based on the morphological attributes of the features and the dating of these features elsewhere in the British Isles. Independent confirmation of Iron Age dates has been afforded by ceramic finds made during the course of the excavations. Distinguishing the features from one

⁵ The research hitherto undertaken by the *Lowick Heritage Group* has now been referred to by the Northumberland County Council in their *Historic Environment Register*, which is reproduced online at the web-site entitled *Keys to the Past* <http://www.keystothepast.info/article/10339/Site-Details?PRN=N4035>

another temporally, and establishing their contemporaneity, must nevertheless be deferred until a radiocarbon dating programme has been undertaken. Some provisional inferences can, however, be made on the basis of the aforementioned morphological characteristics. These inferences provided the working hypotheses guiding the first phase of the investigations.

The geophysical survey, by dint of it being incorporated into the Ordnance Survey grid system, permitted areas of especial interest to be spatially plotted for targeted excavation. In the 2019 season, two trenches were opened by a mechanical excavator, stripping away the topsoil to reveal cultural features cut into the sterile deposits below. The objective of this was to investigate features of especial promise, namely, an interior palisade and a concentric feature that was presumed to represent a Bronze Age mortuary feature. The second trench was situated so that it would permit excavation of a large, sub-rectangular feature that was postulated to be either an Early Medieval longhouse or a Neolithic timber hall. So many features became apparent in the first trench that there would have been no opportunity to undertake the excavations in the second, so this latter trench was closed for investigation another time. The first trench, however, was rich in features detected by the geophysical survey and more ephemeral features such as pits, postholes, and intercutting ditches that were not suggested by the survey.

A long, linear ditch afforded a brooch from the Early Medieval era—a time that formerly would have been referred to as ‘the Dark Ages’. This brooch is unusual, but more importantly is that it confirms that settlement occurred here precisely around the time that the name ‘*Lowick*’ was first coined. The ditch cut through other deposits, confirming that it was one of the latest features in this part of the site. The features in which it cut through must, therefore, be older. Confirmation of this was provided by the specimens of Iron Age pottery that were recovered in some of the deposits. The artefacts afford a good source for relative dating, but there was a copious quantity of animal bone and charcoal from fires that will be used for radiocarbon dating in the absence of material culture. All the material excavated was subject to flotation, to collect microscopic and semi-microscopic organic remains from cereals, spores, and so on. The material was put through sieves that were as small as 150 µm.

On most excavations in the British Isles, the work is undertaken by companies to discharge planning conditions enjoined by the councils. This rarely affords the archaeologists sufficient time to collect the evidence that has been retrieved at Hunting Hall because of budgetary constraints. A partnership between the *Lowick Heritage Group* and scholars from the University of Edinburgh allows a much more detailed and thorough approach to the excavations. The thoroughness of the flotation programme is particularly unique, for it will result in a statistically significant collection of floral evidence to discuss the changes occurring in the agricultural regime. When considered concurrently against the faunal remains, which currently seem to emphasise the importance of cattle husbandry, the nature of the

economy through time can be properly understood. This will stand as a significant control on the interpretation of settlement in these periods derived from upland sites, and should moreover suggest patterns in agricultural exploitation throughout the entire Northumberland Coastal Plain.

An emphasis, too, on correlating the agricultural changes with climatic discontinuity also has relevance for contemporary management. The clay soils of the region are particularly susceptible to being waterlogged, and this can only be ameliorated with extensive underfield drainage. Such approaches, however, lead to the sudden discharge of water into the rivers that leads to flash flooding and increasing siltation. Other approaches, suggested by the changes in agricultural practice in prehistoric and early historic times, might suggest alternative approaches. It is hoped that the scientific investigation of the soils at different horizons might help elucidate these changing patterns of agriculture.

References

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