



ACCESS TRACKS AT LANGLEEFORD AND COMMONBURN

Northumberland

Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeology North

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SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) was commissioned by the Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership to undertake an archaeological watching brief during July and August 2002. The Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership has proposed that two new access tracks should be built on land near Langleeford in the Harthope Valley (centred on NT 965 224), and Commonburn, Northumberland (centred on NT 928 277) (Fig 1). The tracks are in an area of high archaeological potential in which several important sites are known.

The project was undertaken in two phases: the first being at Commonburn during 16th – 18th July 2002; the second at Langlee Crag on 31st July and 8th - 9th August 2002. The groundworks comprised the mechanical excavation of two 3m wide trays, 300m and 750m long respectively, to allow a gravel stone trackway to be instated. The reduction of the present ground surface averaged 200-300mm with a maximum depth of 450mm in places along the Langlee Crag (Track 1).

The area of the first track to the north of Langlee Crag (Fig 2) had previously been examined as part of an archaeological desk-based assessment of four proposed access tracks in the Harthope Valley area undertaken on behalf of the client by Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) in its former guise as the Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU 1998). The assessment highlighted the proximity of several important prehistoric remains, centred on NT 9636 2236, to the north of the proposed track, including a relict Bronze Age field system with lynchets and banks, and the earthworks of unenclosed round houses with associated land plots, together with a round cairn, ring cairn and around 60 field clearance cairns; they are protected as a Scheduled Monument (SM 29331). Despite the high archaeological profile of surrounding areas, no features or finds were encountered by the recent programme of works.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Ian Hall and Ronnie Hush of the Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership for commissioning and funding the project. In particular, Paul Frodsham and Rob Young of the Northumberland National Park Authority are both thanked for their advice and support during the course of the fieldwork.

The watching brief element of the project was undertaken by Andrew Bates, Dan Elsworth, and Neil Wearing. The report was compiled by Neil Wearing, with the illustrations by Emma Carter. Overall project management and editing of the report was undertaken by Alan Lupton.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PROJECT

- 1.1.1 The Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership (hereafter the ‘client’) proposed that two new access tracks should be built on land near Langleeford in the Harthope Valley (centred on NT 965 224), and Commonburn, Northumberland (centred on NT 928 277) (Fig 1). The tracks are in an area of high archaeological potential in which several important sites are known. Discussions with the Northumberland National Park Archaeologist highlighted the need for an archaeological watching brief of the groundworks associated with the tracks, and a project design was produced outlining the methodology for this work (*Appendix 1*). The following document details the results of the watching brief, which was undertaken in July and August 2002.
- 1.1.2 The area of the first track to the north of Langlee Crag (Fig 2) was examined as part of an archaeological desk-based assessment of four proposed access tracks in the Harthope Valley area undertaken on behalf of the client by Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) in its former guise as the Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU 1998). The assessment highlighted the proximity of several important prehistoric remains, centred on NT 9636 2236, to the north of the proposed track, including a relict Bronze Age field system with lynchets and banks, and the earthworks of unenclosed round houses with associated land plots. These features lie in an extensive cairnfield, including a round cairn, ring cairn and around 60 field clearance cairns, with at least one burial cairn. The remains are considered to be typical of northern upland settlements of the Bronze Age and Iron Age, but are exceptionally well preserved; they have been designated a Scheduled Monument (SM 29331), and thus have statutory protection.
- 1.1.3 In July 1998 the proposed tracks in the Harthope Valley area were constructed. Track laying in the Langlee Crag area on the proposed route designated Track 1 in the 1998 assessment report included a long section in which only the turf was removed, the subsoil being sufficiently hard at the time to support a track. The soil exposed was dark brown, peaty and included occasional fragments of stone up to 0.2m. At *c* NT 964 223 the track skimmed immediately north of three cairns without damaging them, and did not expose archaeological deposits. From this point eastward, remaining parts of the track were created by simply dragging the digger bucket across the turf to compact it, and no further cutting was done. It was thought that no surfacing would be necessary in this area, but after a season’s use it was decided that the track would need to be strengthened.
- 1.1.4 The area of the second track at Commonburn was not examined as part of the 1998 assessment. It lies to the north of Commonburn House and to the south of Yeavering Bell hillfort, and passes close to a large cairn known as Wackerage Cairn (Fig 2).

1.2 SITE LOCATION AND GEOMORPHOLOGY

- 1.2.1 Both sites lie within the Cheviot Hills, which in turn form part of the upland plateaux of the Northumberland Moors. The Cheviots themselves are both geologically and topographically distinct from other Northumberland hills. They are composed of a suite of igneous rocks of the Devonian (Old Red Sandstone) age. They form a cluster of rounded hills with extensive rolling plateaux of semi-natural grass moor and heather moorland. The summits are characterised by mixed areas of blanket bog and heather and by granitic ‘tors’ (Countryside Commission 1998, 31).
- 1.2.2 The drift geology of the study area is mainly thin slightly acidic soils on the lower slopes and in combination with wet acidic peaty areas and blanket bogs. These overlie an extremely compact stoney subsoil variant, known locally as Moorband (R Hush, pers comm).
- 1.2.3 Track 1 lies to the south of the Harthop Watercourse in an area roughly central to the Cheviot Hills, close to Cheviot Hill itself, in an area known as Langlee Ford. Track 2 lies further to the north. The stretch of trackway runs between Commonburn House and towards Yeavinger Bell, closely passing Wackerage Cairn.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 WATCHING BRIEF

- 2.1.1 The work undertaken followed the method statement detailed in the project design (*Appendix 1*) and complied with current legislation and accepted best practice, including the Code of Conduct and the relevant professional standards of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA). Close liaison between OA North staff and the site contractors, and a permanent presence during the excavations, was maintained at all times.
- 2.1.2 The programme of field observation recorded accurately the location, extent, and character of any surviving archaeological features. This work comprised observation during the groundworks, the examination of any horizons exposed, and the accurate recording of all archaeological features, horizons and any artefacts found during the excavations.
- 2.1.3 The recording comprised a full description and preliminary classification of features or structures revealed, on OA North *pro-forma* sheets, and their accurate location in plan. In addition, a photographic record in colour slide and monochrome formats was compiled.

2.2 ARCHIVE

- 2.2.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with the project design (*Appendix 1*), and in accordance with current IFA and English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The archive will be deposited with the Northumberland Record Office, and a copy of the report will be sent to the Northumberland Sites and Monuments Record.

3. RESULTS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The groundworks comprised the excavation of two trays, 3m wide and 300m and 750m long respectively, to an average depth of 200-300mm. These were to be filled with gravel stone to form new stretches of trackway. The work was undertaken in two phases during late July and early August 2002. The majority of the work only removed the topsoil, but in some areas of Track 1 a depth of 450mm was required which revealed subsoil which was sterile of finds and /or features.

3.2 TRACK 1 - LANGLEE CRAGS

3.3.1 A stretch of trackway approximately 750m long north of Langlee Craggs to the south-east of the Harthop Burn watercourse was scheduled to be repaired. This involved the reduction of the current ground level by between 200mm and 300mm to instate a gravel stone trackway, which would also facilitate the drainage of surface water. The groundworks were carried out using a JCB mechanical excavator using a 2m toothless ditching bucket to excavate a 3.00m wide tray for the trackway.

3.3.2 A very dark grey clay-silt / peaty topsoil varied from 150-300mm in thickness. This overlay a dark grey silty clay subsoil averaging 200mm in thickness. In places this subsoil gave way to the Moorband stoney subsoil variant. All along the length of the trackway the deposits varied between Moorband, peat and subsoil. In places, evidence of wheel rutting could be seen which was evidenced by a 1.0m x 0.6m wide disturbed area of mixed stone and topsoil.

3.3.3 Approximately 250m west of the current trackway a plastic drainpipe was encountered. This was evidenced by an area of redeposited natural sandy clay 3.20m wide and spanning the width of the trackway. This actually overlay the topsoil and was therefore a very recent attempt at a drainage solution.

3.3.4 No other archaeological features or horizons of any kind were exposed during the course of the watching brief.

3.3 TRACK 2 - COMMONBURN

3.3.5 A stretch of trackway approximately 300m long at the northern end of the field to the north of Commonburn House was scheduled to be repaired. This involved to the reduction of the current ground level by between 200mm and 300mm to instate a gravel stone trackway that would also facilitate the drainage of surface water. The groundworks were carried out using a JCB mechanical excavator using a 2m toothless ditching bucket to excavate a 3m wide tray for

the trackway. Wackerage cairn was located and lies at least 100m to the west of the track and was in no way threatened by the groundworks.

- 3.3.6 A very strong fibred coarse turf overlay a very dark brownish grey clay-silt topsoil containing frequent lenses of peat. The thickness of topsoil varied between 150mm and 300mm. This gave way to a very compact stoney subsoil variant known as Moorband. This layer consisted of an equal mix of very compacted gravels and shale in a matrix of very firm sandy clay. There were intermittent areas where the stone component was visibly reduced and the deposit became more plastic in consistency and extruded under mild finger-pressure.
- 3.3.7 The southern 100m of the track revealed the remains of wheel ruts (Plate 1). These were evidenced by several dark irregular linear features running intermittently for a distance of approximately 100m. These features varied in length from 200mm and 600mm and were on average 300mm wide x 80-100mm deep. They were filled with material from the surrounding topsoil. No finds were contained within the fills.
- 3.3.8 The only other features encountered were modern land drains. These were plastic pipes in wide cuts backfilled with rubble stone. These were left *in situ*, with the rubble levelled out, to be covered in terram before the gravel stone track is instated. The stripping continued to the northern field boundary and into the field beyond for 9m. No other archaeological features or finds were revealed during these groundworks.

4. DISCUSSION

- 4.1 All sources consulted for the archaeological assessment (LUAU 1998) indicate clearly that the area contains well-preserved prehistoric enclosures, cairns and field systems suggesting the area was populated in the Bronze Age by small communities, who cleared and cultivated the land and kept stock. Iron Age and Romano-British occupation was also identified during the assessment work. The high standard of preservation of this prehistoric landscape, coupled with the lack of evidence for dense settlement during the historic period (it appears to have been unenclosed grazing land), would suggest that any buried features would be well preserved.
- 4.2 Despite the surrounding landscape being rich in extant archaeological and historical remains, no sub-surface finds and/or features were encountered during this programme of works. It is thought that the immediate area has seen extensive drainage and other groundworks associated with the maintenance of the trackway during the recent historic period. The wheel ruts show relatively recent vehicle activity has cut both through the subsoil and into the Moorband below. It is likely that the use of the trackway would also have truncated any surviving deposits underlying the topsoil.

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APPENDIX 1: PROJECT DESIGN

May 2002

**Oxford
Archaeology
North**

ACCESS TRACKS AT LANGLEEFORD AND COMMONBURN NORTHUMBERLAND

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

PROPOSALS

The following project design is submitted in response to a request from Mr Ian Hall of Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership, following discussions with the Northumberland National Park Archaeologist, for an archaeological watching brief during the construction of new access tracks.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership (hereafter the ‘client’) has proposed to build two new access tracks on land near Langleeford in the Harthope Valley, and Commonburn, Northumberland. The tracks are in an area of high archaeological potential in which several important sites are known. Discussions with the Northumberland National Park Archaeologist highlighted a need for an archaeological watching brief of the groundworks associated with the tracks. The following represents a project design to undertake this watching brief.
- 1.2 Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) has considerable experience of excavation of sites of all periods, having undertaken a great number of small and large scale projects throughout Northern England during the past 20 years, including work in Carlisle, Appleby, Kendal, Penrith, and other towns in Cumbria. Evaluations, assessments, watching briefs and excavations have taken place within the planning process, to fulfil the requirements of clients and planning authorities, to very rigorous timetables. OA North is an Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) registered organisation, registration number 17, and all its members of staff operate subject to the IFA Code of Conduct.
- 1.3 OA North, in its former guise as the Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, has particular experience of the archaeology of the Langleeford and Commonburn areas having undertaken previous desk-based assessments, watching briefs and survey work in the area.

2. OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 The following programme has been designed to provide for accurate recording of any archaeological deposits that are disturbed by the groundworks associated with the new tracks.
- 2.2 A written client report will assess the significance of the data generated by the watching brief, within a local and regional context, and will make recommendations for further publication of any discoveries that are made should they warrant a wider dissemination.

3. METHOD STATEMENT

3.1 WATCHING BRIEF

- 3.1.1 **Methodology:** A programme of field observation will accurately record the location, extent, and character of any surviving archaeological features and/or deposits within the excavations in the course of the proposed development works. This work will comprise observation during the excavation for these works, the systematic examination of any subsoil horizons exposed during the

course of the groundworks, and the accurate recording of all archaeological features and horizons, and any artefacts, identified during observation.

- 3.1.2 During this phase of work, recording will comprise a full description and preliminary classification of features or materials revealed, and their accurate location (either on plan and/or section, and as grid co-ordinates where appropriate). Features will be planned accurately at appropriate scales and annotated on to a large scale plan provided by the Client. A photographic record will be undertaken simultaneously.
- 3.1.3 A plan will be produced of the areas of groundworks showing the location and extent of the ground disturbance and one or more dimensioned sketch sections will be produced per cut or test pit.
- 3.1.4 A watching brief will be conducted of all topsoil stripping and all below ground works. Putative archaeological features and/or deposits identified by the machining process, together with the immediate vicinity of any such features, will be cleaned by hand, using either hoes, shovel scraping, and/or trowels depending on the subsoil conditions, and where appropriate sections will be studied and drawn. Any such features will be sample excavated (ie. selected pits and postholes will normally only be half-sectioned, linear features will be subject to no more than a 10% sample, and extensive layers will, where possible, be sampled by partial rather than complete removal).
- 3.1.5 It is assumed that OA North will have the authority to stop the works for a sufficient time period to enable the recording of important deposits. It may also be necessary to call in additional archaeological support if a find of particular importance is identified or a high density of archaeology is discovered. Also, should evidence of burials be identified, the 1857 Burial Act would apply and a Home Office Licence would be sought. This would involve all work ceasing until the proper authorities were happy for burials to be removed. In normal circumstances, field recording will also include a continual process of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of the data, in order to establish the necessity for any further more detailed recording that may prove essential.
- 3.1.6 Environmental samples (bulk samples of 30 litres volume, to be sub-sampled at a later stage) will be collected from suitable deposits (i.e. the deposits are reasonably well dated and are from contexts the derivation of which can be understood with a degree of confidence). Where such deposits are encountered, an appropriate sampling strategy will be agreed with the National Park Archaeologist.
- 3.1.7 Samples will also be collected for technological, pedological and chronological analysis as appropriate. If necessary, access to conservation advice and facilities can be made available. OA North maintains close relationships with Ancient Monuments Laboratory staff at the Universities of Durham and York and, in addition, employs artefact and palaeoecology specialists with considerable expertise in the investigation, excavation and

finds management of sites of all periods and types, who are readily available for consultation.

- 3.1.8 Full regard will, of course, be given to all constraints (services etc.), as well as to all Health and Safety regulations. OA North provides a Health and Safety Statement for all projects and maintains a Unit Safety policy. All site procedures are in accordance with the guidance set out in the Health and Safety Manual compiled by the Standing Conference of Unit Managers.

3.2 ARCHIVE/REPORT

- 3.2.1 **Archive:** The results of all archaeological work carried out will form the basis for a full archive to professional standards, in accordance with current English Heritage guidelines (Management of Archaeological Projects, 2nd edition, 1991). The project archive represents the collation and indexing of all the data and material gathered during the course of the project. The deposition of a properly ordered and indexed project archive in an appropriate repository is considered an essential and integral element of all archaeological projects by the IFA in that organisation's code of conduct. OA North conforms to best practice in the preparation of project archives for long-term storage. This archive will be provided in the English Heritage Centre for Archaeology format and a synthesis will be submitted to the Northumberland Sites and Monuments Record (the index to the archive and a copy of the report). OA North practice is to deposit the original record archive of projects (paper, magnetic and plastic media) with the appropriate County Record Office, and a full copy of the record archive (microform or microfiche) together with the material archive (artefacts, ecofacts, and samples) with an appropriate museum. Wherever possible, OA North recommends the deposition of such material in a local museum approved by the Museums and Galleries Commission, and would make appropriate arrangements with the designated museum at the outset of the project for the proper labelling, packaging, and accessioning of all material recovered.
- 3.2.2 **Report:** One bound copy of a written synthetic report will be submitted to the Client, and a further two copies submitted to the Northumberland National Park archaeologist within six months of completion of fieldwork. The report will include a copy of this project design, and indications of any agreed departure from that design. It will present, summarise, and interpret the results of the programme detailed above and will include a full index of archaeological features identified in the course of the project, with an assessment of the overall stratigraphy, together with appropriate illustrations, including detailed plans and sections indicating the locations of archaeological features. Any finds recovered will be assessed with reference to other local material and any particular or unusual features of the assemblage will be highlighted and the potential of the site for palaeoenvironmental analysis will be considered. The report will also include a complete bibliography of sources from which data has been derived.

3.2.3 This report will identify areas of defined archaeology. An assessment and statement of the actual and potential archaeological significance of the identified archaeology within the broader context of regional and national archaeological priorities will be made. Illustrative material will include a location map, section drawings, and plans. This report will be in the same basic format as this project design; a copy of the report can be provided on 3.5" disk (IBM compatible format), if required.

3.2.4 **Confidentiality:** All internal reports to the client are designed as documents for the specific use of the Client, for the particular purpose as defined in the project brief and project design, and should be treated as such. They are not suitable for publication as academic documents or otherwise without amendment or revision.

4 PROJECT MONITORING

4.1 Monitoring of this project will be undertaken by the Northumberland National Park Archaeologist, or his representative, who will be informed of the start and end dates of the work.

5 WORK TIMETABLE

5.1 OA North could commence the watching brief within two weeks of receipt of written notification from the client.

5.2 The client report will be completed within six months following completion of the fieldwork.

6 STAFFING

6.1 The project will be under the direct management of **Alan Lupton PhD MIFA** (Project Manager) to whom all correspondence should be addressed.

6.2 Present timetabling constraints preclude detailing at this stage exactly who will be undertaking the desk-based assessment and watching brief elements of the project.

6.3 Assessment of the finds from the evaluation will be undertaken by OA North's in-house finds specialist **Christine Howard-Davis BA MIFA** (OA North project officer). Christine acts as OA North's in-house finds specialist and has extensive knowledge of all finds of all periods from archaeological sites in northern England. However, she has specialist knowledge regarding Roman glass, metalwork, and leather, the recording and management of waterlogged wood, and most aspects of wetland and environmental archaeology.

- 6.4 Assessment of any palaeoenvironmental samples which may be taken will be undertaken by **Elizabeth Huckerby MSc** (OA North project officer). Elizabeth has extensive knowledge of the palaeoecology of the North West through her work on the English Heritage-funded North West Wetlands Survey.

7 INSURANCE

- 7.1 OA North has a professional indemnity cover to a value of £2,000,000; proof of which can be supplied as required.

Bibliography

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ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Location Map

Figure 2: Track Location Plan

LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1: Wheel Ruts, Looking North

Plate 2: General View of Commonburn Track, Looking South



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