



HOTBANK FARM, Northumberland

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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SUMMARY

The present heavily used path across Milecastle 38 of Hadrian's Wall, Northumberland (NY 7726 6812), forms part of the Pennine Way and the Hadrian's Wall Path National Trail, and crosses both the east and west walls of the Milecastle. This structure is part of the Scheduled Monument of *Hadrian's Wall and associated features between the field boundary west of Turret 37a and the road to Steel Rigg car park, in Wall Miles 37, 38 and 39* (SM 26060), which forms part of the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site. Visitor pressure has resulted in wear lines forming over both walls of the milecastle and, to some extent, through the interior. Neil Rimmington, then Project Officer for Proactive Earthwork Management at English Heritage, proposed to divert the Path from its current route to allow the worn path time to recover. This work involved the insertion of two new wicket gates into current field boundaries, laying three areas of flags, and the insertion of a pipe within a drainage ditch, all within close proximity of the milecastle. The drainage ditch and one of the sections of flags lie across the Military Way, the agger of which is visible as an earthwork in this section of the Scheduled Monument. English Heritage therefore commissioned a watching brief during ground works, which was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology North in September 2003.

None of the work carried out disturbed any archaeologically significant deposits or produced any finds. The excavation of the pipe trench within the drainage ditch did reach glacial till at its base, but did not extend outside the area of existing disturbance caused by the original excavations for drainage. The insertion the flags was in an area where the Military Way had either already been eroded away, or been excavated to aid drainage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oxford Archaeology North would like to thank Julian Acton of Bradley Farm, upon whose land the ground works took place. Thanks are also due to Neil Rimmington, then of English Heritage, for commissioning the project, and to Mike Collins, Hadrian's Wall Archaeologist, for subsequent help with the project.

The field work was completed by Andy Bates and David Tonks. All CAD drawings were produced by Emma Carter. This report was compiled by Andy Bates and edited by Rachel Newman, who also managed the project.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PROJECT

- 1.1.1 Hadrian's Wall is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SM26060) of international importance, and has been designated a World Heritage Site. The present heavily used path around Milecastle 38, in Northumberland (NY 7726 6812), forms part of the Pennine Way and the Hadrian's Wall Path National Trail, and the most commonly walked route crosses the east and west walls of the milecastle. Whilst the legal route of both of these National Trails follows around the south side of the milecastle, this area is subject to seasonal wetness, and it is likely that walkers will continue to take the shortest route across the monument. Visitor pressure has resulted in wear lines forming over both walls of the milecastle and, to some extent, through the interior. Neil Rimmington, then Project Officer for Proactive Earthwork Management at English Heritage, proposed to divert the path temporarily from its current route to allow the worn path time to recover. This work involved the insertion of two new wicket gates into current field boundaries, the laying of all three areas of flags, and the insertion of a pipe within a current drainage ditch, all within close proximity of Milecastle 38.
- 1.1.2 In the first instance, a topographical survey of the milecastle was undertaken (OA North 2002). A brief was then issued by English Heritage for an archaeological watching brief to be conducted on the programme of works. Julian Acton of Bradley Farm and Dave Tasseel were contracted to undertake the groundworks and Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) was commissioned to undertake the watching brief. English Heritage also applied for Scheduled Monument Consent for the programme of works, which was granted by the Department for Culture Media and Sport, and the fieldwork was undertaken in September 2003.

1.2 SITE LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

- 1.2.1 Milecastle 38 at Hotbank Farm lies within the Scheduled Monument of *Hadrian's Wall and associated features between the field boundary west of Turret 37a and the road to Steel Rigg car park, in Wall miles 37, 38 and 39* (SM26060), and as such forms part of the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site. It is situated on the east side of Milking Gap (Fig 1), overlooking one of the most obvious north/south routes in the area, formed by a glacial overflow channel (Daniels 1978, 168).
- 1.2.2 The underlying geology of the area is of Carboniferous (345 to 280 million years ago) sedimentary rocks, comprising alternate layers of limestones, sandstones, and shales. Hadrian's Wall, to the north, exploits the dramatic north-facing escarpment formed by the Whin Sill dyke, an igneous intrusion of dolomite, intruded late in Carboniferous times at around 295 ± 6 million years ago (Taylor *et al* 1978, 68).

- 1.2.3 The surrounding landscape is one of open, windswept, valley slopes with predominantly pasture, but with some arable, land. Sizable areas of conifers or mixed woodland and isolated farmsteads are notable features within the landscape. Hedgerows, drystone walls and blocks of woodland enclose a pattern of large regular fields and pastures (Countryside Commission 1998, 50).

1.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 1.3.1 Hadrian's Wall is well documented and, whilst a full historical account would be inappropriate in the context of this report, a summary of the salient points may be of relevance.
- 1.3.2 The Roman legions entered the land to the north of Stainmore, possibly sometime after AD 71, when Petillius Cerealis crushed the Brigantes. Jones (1991) suggested that, by the early AD 90s, a series of large forts had been established in a line running from Corbridge westwards as far as the Solway: this fortified line has become known as the Stanegate Frontier.
- 1.3.3 The beginning of the second century saw much unrest in the north of England, and the Roman Army struggled to consolidate its territorial gains of the late first century. About AD 105, the unrest culminated in the destruction of many of the forts north of the Tyne-Solway line, probably at the hands of hostile tribesmen (Daniels 1978, 5). During a visit to Britain by the Emperor Hadrian in AD 122, the decision was made to create a continuous and permanent frontier barrier from Tyne to Solway. Aulus Platorius Nepos, governor of Britain from AD 122, began construction of the Wall, which was largely completed in its initial format during the AD 120s.
- 1.3.4 As originally designed, the Wall to the east of the River Irthing was to be 10 Roman feet wide, based on a foundation of stone and puddled clay, or else large flagstones. The Wall to the west of the Irthing was initially constructed of turf and timber. The foundations were laid in advance of the main body of the Wall, and this continued from Newcastle to the North Tyne and thereafter intermittently as far as Willowford, before a decision to complete the work to a narrower gauge was taken. Hence, between the North Tyne and Willowford, the Wall is Narrow Gauge but in places it stands on foundations prepared for the Broad Gauge. Variations also occur in the construction of the Wall's lowest courses. These may take the form of a single course of large stones above the foundation, and then a single offset course, or consist of three or four courses of small stones above the foundation, then the offset (*op cit*, 18).
- 1.3.5 The Vallum lies to the south of Hadrian's Wall and, although is not considered part of the original design of the Wall, it appears to have been conceived not long after work began on the frontier. The two structures, the Wall and the Vallum, would seem to have formed a military zone within which a civilian presence may have required explanation (Frere 1974, 134). Within this zone, military stores, buildings, and camps had some protection (Salway 1981, 180), the completed frontier separating possibly rebellious British to the south from like-minded tribes to the north (Frere 1974, 134). Another purpose for the

Vallum may have been a concealed route of communication (Shotter 1997, 48).

- 1.3.6 In AD 139 the Roman Army made a new advance into Scotland, which seemingly resulted in the virtual abandonment of Hadrian's Wall. Gains in Scotland could not be consolidated however, and Hadrian's Wall was re-occupied during the later AD 150s. At some point between the late second century and the early third century, the Wall was breached by the northern tribes, who inflicted much damage and destruction to the fortifications. This uprising was rapidly suppressed, but the Wall required some restoration. The late second and early third centuries saw a period of continued rebuilding and modification along the Wall and, nearly a century later, a further programme of Wall restoration and modification occurred under Constantius (Daniels 1978), although nothing is known of the condition of the Vallum throughout this long period. Indeed, it is likely that it rapidly became disused, as the Military Way, the road connecting the Wall forts, frequently makes use of the Vallum. This road had been constructed by AD 213, and possibly before the end of the second century (*op cit*, 38-9).
- 1.3.7 The year AD 367 is recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus (Syme 1968) as the date when Roman rule was overrun in Britain, and although the invaders were subsequently quelled by Count Theodosius, and the Wall was again restored, the end of Roman occupation had been signalled. Occupation of the Wall continued after this date, as evidenced by the various discoveries of late fourth century pottery and coins, but little is known of its history through the early medieval period. There is, however, increasing evidence that elements, particularly some forts and even milecastles, remained in occupation beyond the formal end of Roman administration (Wilmott 1997).
- 1.3.8 In the post-Roman period the single most destructive event inflicted on the Wall was the construction of the Newcastle to Carlisle Military Road between 1751 and 1759. Whilst in eastern Northumberland it was the Wall that suffered: 'Stones that may easily be got out of the ruin of the Old Roman Wall must be reserved to make a Stone Wall on each side of the Road...' (Lawson 1973, 181), and for some of its course the Military Road is built directly on top of Hadrian's Wall, in the central section, the Military Road follows the lower-lying land to the south of the Wall.

1.4 MILECASTLE 38

- 1.4.1 Milecastle 38 is one of the 80 original formal crossing points of the curtain wall, and was part of the original design of the frontier (Breeze and Dobson 2000). Each milecastle had wide gates through their north and south sides, suitable for wheeled traffic, the north wall being formed by Hadrian's Wall itself. These gates were later frequently either narrowed or blocked completely. Internal structures lined a cobbled road through the milecastle, presumably housing a small detachment of troops, although the size of these structures varied between milecastles (Daniels 1978, 24).

- 1.4.2 Milecastle 38 was excavated in 1935 (Simpson *et al* 1936), and proved to be of short-axis type, with the gates reduced to posterns, presumably in the early third century. It seems to have continued in occupation until the end of the Roman period (*op cit*, 263-66). No attempt was made to excavate internal structures, although part of a building was recognised in the north-west corner of the milecastle. This had been constructed into a layer containing amphora, and was clearly not primary in the constructional phase (*op cit*, 266).
- 1.4.3 Its main claim to fame, however, is that an inscription recording building work by the *Legio II Augusta* during the Governorship of Aulus Platorius Nepos was found at the nearby farm of Bradley. Uniquely, a second and more perfectly preserved inscription, still retaining traces of red paint, was found in the area, in a 'station' on the Wall, according to an antiquarian source in 1757 (Daniels 1978, 167-8), suggesting that both north and south gates of milecastles were surmounted by matching foundation inscriptions. It is perhaps of significance that Milecastle 38 is very similar in dimensions and style of construction to Milecastles 37 and 42, which have also both produced Hadrianic inscriptions of the Second Legion (Simpson *et al* 1936, 267).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 THE WATCHING BRIEF

- 2.1.1 The work undertaken followed standard practice 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).
- 2.1.2 The groundworks were undertaken by Julian Acton of Bradley Farm and Dave Tasseel. The excavation of the postholes for the gates was undertaken using spades, whilst the re-excavation of the drainage ditch, and the deturfing for the paving slabs, was completed using spades and a hydraulic arm fitted to a tractor. Both operations were undertaken under archaeological supervision. The programme of field observation accurately recorded the location, extent, and character of any surviving archaeological features. All horizons exposed and examined, and the excavated areas, with all archaeological features, horizons and any artefacts found during the excavation, were recorded as appropriate.
- 2.1.3 The recording comprised a full description and preliminary classification of features or horizons revealed, on OA North *pro-forma* sheets, and their accurate location in plan (Fig 2), tied into the Ordnance Survey National Grid. A photographic record in both colour slide and monochrome formats was also compiled.

2.2 THE ARCHIVE

- 2.2.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with current IFA and English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The archive will be deposited in the Northumberland Record Office, with copies of this report being submitted to the Northumberland Sites and Monuments Record, the Northumberland National Park Authority and the National Monuments Record.

3. WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The results of the watching briefs undertaken during the course of the project are detailed below. The position of each area of excavation is given in Figure 2.

3.2 RESULTS

3.2.1 **Gate 1:** the insertion of the easternmost gate into the current dry stone wall involved the excavation of four postholes, each measuring 0.35m square and 0.85m deep (Plate 1), in pairs approximately 2m apart. This involved the removal of a mid-brown loose sandy clay, with less than 2% angular stone inclusions. No finds or deposits of archaeological significance were noted during the excavations.

3.2.2 **Gate 2:** the insertion of the westernmost gate into a modern wire fence involved the excavation of four postholes, each measuring 0.40m by 0.35m and 0.85m deep, some 1.20m apart. The turf was removed to a depth of 0.10m, followed by a further 0.75m of a firm bluish grey sandy clay with occasional stone inclusions. No finds or deposits of archaeological significance were noted during the watching brief.

3.2.3 **Flags 1:** the easternmost flags were placed in a wet area to the west of Gate 1. An area 1.7m in length and 0.7m wide was deturfed to allow the placement of four flags in a boggy area dominated by rushes (*Juncus sp*). A maximum depth of 0.30m of very dark grey fine sand silty clay was removed, the soil horizon continuing to a greater depth than the excavation. No finds or features of archaeological significance were noted during the excavation.

3.2.4 **Flags 2:** the second section of flags was placed on the Military Way, in an area which has evidently been either previously affected by water erosion, or deliberately excavated for drainage, creating a U-shaped profile in this section of the road. Very little disturbance of the soil horizon was required to lay the four flags, which effectively bridged the ditch, forming a small clapper bridge, allowing water free drainage beneath them. The flags covered an area 1.4m by 1.04m on an east/west alignment, the western end of which was deturfed to a depth of 0.10m across the width of the paving slabs for 0.3m along their length. The eastern end was built up with stone and turf to allow the paving slabs to form a level surface. One stone was removed at the eastern end, measuring 0.7m by 0.4m by 0.3m, creating a hole 0.5m by 0.4m by 0.3m, from the south-eastern corner of the area to be covered by flags. This was a fragment of dolomite, originating from the Whin Sill, and was not considered to have formed any element of the Military Way.

3.2.5 **Flag 3:** the westernmost flag was placed to the south of Gate 2. A single flag, measuring 1.10m square, was laid to bridge the drainage ditch to the south of the field boundary. At each end a small amount of turf was removed across the

width of the flag, 0.10m deep, and 0.3m along the length of the flag. The drainage ditch, therefore, remained undisturbed below the flag.

- 3.2.6 ***Insertion of the pipe into a drainage ditch:*** some 80m west of Gate 1, a pipe was inserted into a drainage ditch to prevent pinchpoint erosion on the line of the Military Way. This required the removal of the fill of the drainage ditch to a depth of 0.50m, 0.45m wide (east/west), for a length of 5.7m (north/south). The uppermost deposits comprised a dark grey medium sandy clay soil, 0.40m thick, with 30-40% angular and sub-angular stone inclusions of a maximum size of 0.50m by 0.36m by 0.25m. Below this was a mid-orangy grey clay, a glacial till, excavated for a further 0.10m depth. The very stony soil within the ditch was considered possibly a deliberate backfill in this section of the ditch. The drainage ditch in this location crosses the Military Way, visible as an earthwork, and this stone backfill may have allowed the Military Way subsequently to be used as a farm track. Nothing of the original fabric of the Military Way was visible in section, as the area excavated did not extend beyond the limits of the original drainage ditch.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The ground works carried out at the site were of a very limited nature, and despite the presence of Hadrian's Wall and its associated structures, Milecastle 38 and the Military Way, in this vicinity, nothing of an archaeologically significant nature was located during the watching brief. The excavation of the postholes only disturbed topsoil and subsoil deposits, and the insertion of the flags disturbed the turf layer only, except for a single stone removed to allow the insertion of Flags 2. The area re-excavated in the drainage ditch to insert the new pipe was very narrow, 0.45m wide, and although it reached glacial till at a depth of 0.4m it did not extend beyond the width of the previous excavation for this ditch. Therefore, all that was seen in the sections were the fills of the drainage ditch and nothing of the fabric of the Military Way was identified. Similarly, the insertion of Flags 2 involved very limited excavation in an area previously excavated for drainage or simply eroded by water. Nothing, therefore, was visible in the way of deposits associated with the Military Way in this location.

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Plate 1: Posthole for Wicket Gate 1



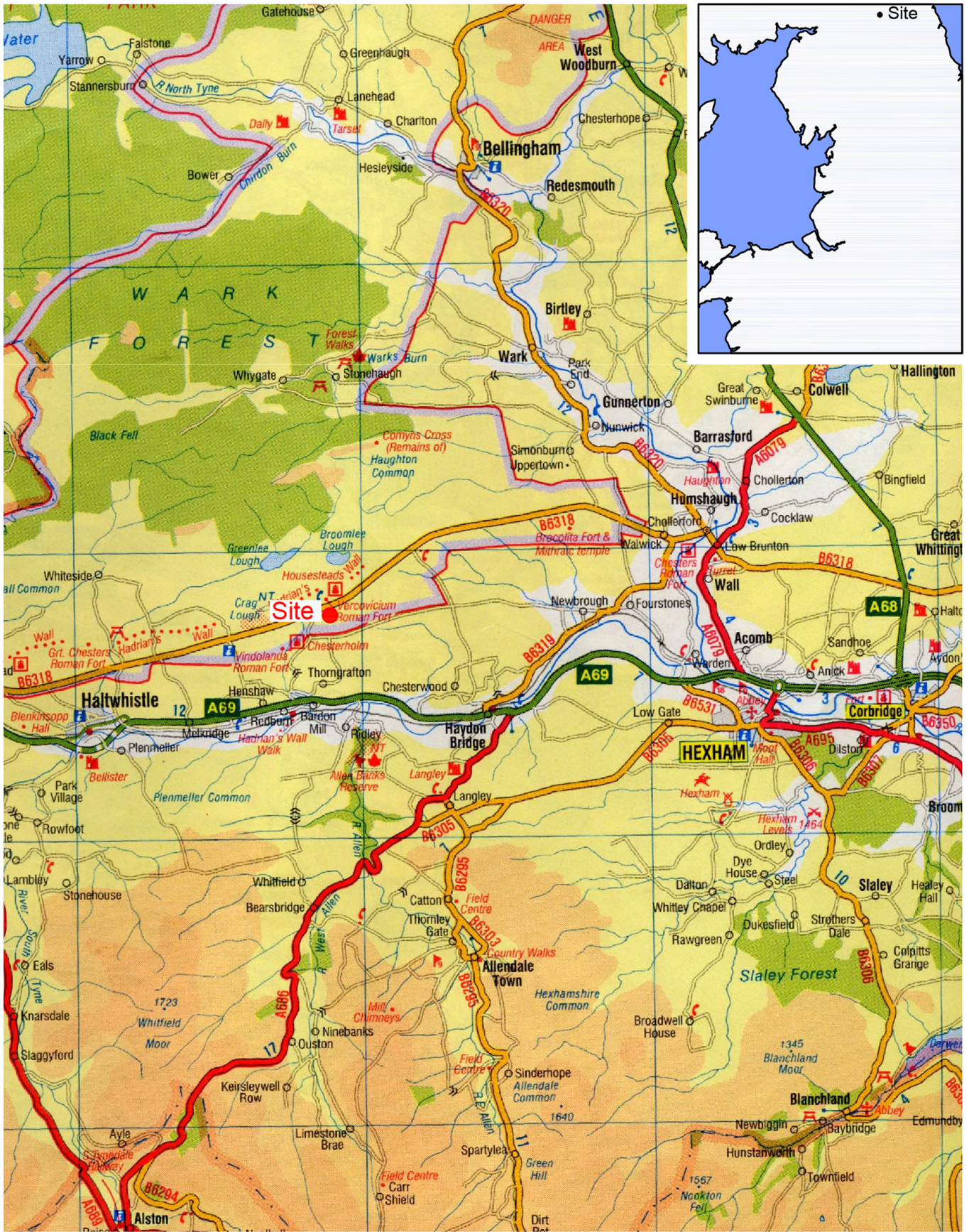
Plate 2: Flag 2, across the line of the Military Way, looking west



Plate 3: Flag 3, and Wicket Gate 2, looking north



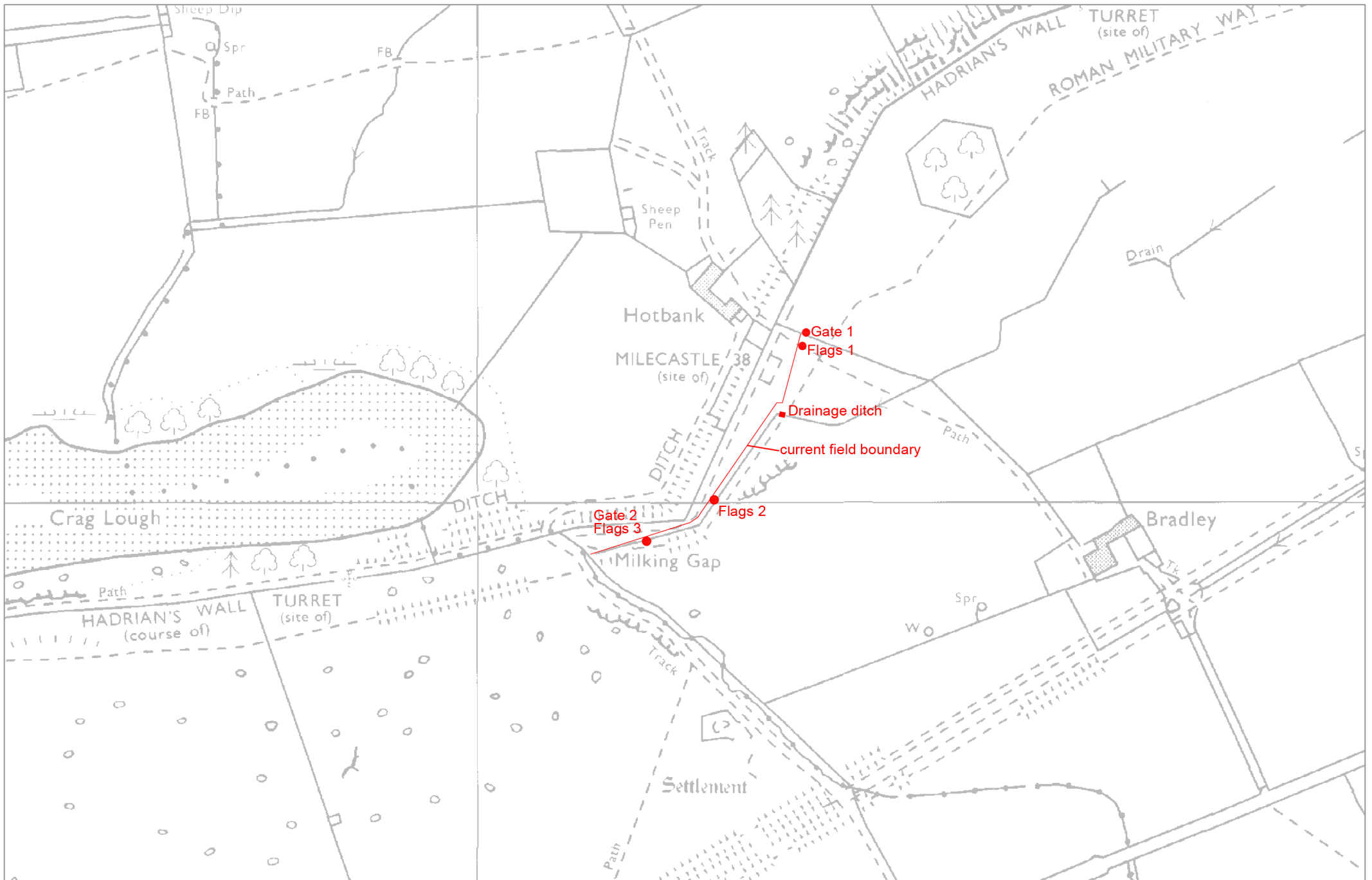
Plate 4: Excavation for insertion of pipe into drainage ditch, looking south



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Figure 1: Location Map



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Scale 1:5000



Figure 2 : Watching brief locations



Plate 1: Posthole for Wicket Gate 1



Plate 2: Flag 2, across the line of the Military Way, looking west



Plate 3: Flag 3, and Wicket Gate 2, looking north



Plate 4: Excavation for insertion of pipe into drainage ditch, looking south



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