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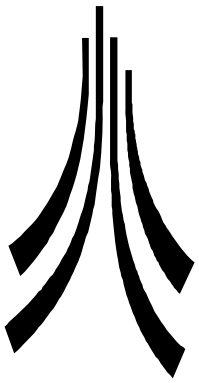

January 1999

STEWART SHIELS
NORTHUMBERLAND

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Commissioned by: Turner Facilities Management

Stewart Shiels Farm
Otterburn
Northumberland

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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The fieldwork was undertaken by Iain Hedley, who also compiled this report. The report was edited by Jamie Quartermaine and Richard Newman. The project was managed by Jamie Quartermaine.

SUMMARY

Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU) undertook a watching brief during the groundworks for the construction of cow house at Stewart Shiels Farm (NY 8673 9891) Otterburn, Northumberland. The work was commissioned by Turner Facilities Management, on behalf of the MOD.

The work was undertaken in accordance with a methodology prepared by LUAU (Letter 6th Jan. 1999), which was based on a verbal brief by the Northumberland National Park Archaeologist. The watching brief followed on from the evaluation of an enclosure at Stewart Shiels undertaken by LUAU (1998).

The watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of pits for the cow house stanchions, some of which extended across the area of the enclosure. At the west end of the site mixed deposits were identified which included large stones, a lens of mortar and contained early nineteenth century pottery. It was considered that these deposits may have related to a construction or alteration phase associated with the former Stewart Shiels farm house (now an out building).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTRACT BACKGROUND

1.1.1 A watching brief was undertaken by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU) during the groundworks for the construction of cow house at Stewart Shiels Farm (NY 8673 9891) Otterburn, Northumberland. The work was commissioned by Turner Facilities Management, on behalf of the MOD and was undertaken on the 14th of January 1999. This work was in accordance with mitigation measures recommended in a report on the results of an archaeological evaluation at Stewart Shiels Farm in December 1998 (LUAU 1998).

1.1.2 The watching brief was carried out according to a methodology prepared by LUAU (Letter 6th Jan. 1999), which was produced in accordance with a verbal brief by the Northumberland National Park Archaeologist. The methodology provided a suitable level of archaeological observation, and recording of all archaeological features or deposits encountered during the watching brief.

1.2 SITE DESCRIPTION

1.2.1 Stewart Shiels is located some 6km to the north of Otterburn, in the Redesdale district of Western Northumberland. It is at an approximate altitude of 230m AOD, in a general area of moderate relief and poor land quality principally used for sheep-farming, forestry, and military training. The underlying solid geological deposits are composed of Lower Carboniferous sandstones and shales of the Scremerston Coal and Lower Limestone Groups, although widespread and more acid quaternary drift deposits mantle the landscape. The soils are generally stagnogleys, or poorly drained stagnopodzols, and the general environment is noticeably boggy and wet.

1.2.2 The Stewart Shiels enclosure consists of a sub-circular ring-bank some 20m in diameter and directly to the south and south-west of it is a slightly lower lying, particularly marshy depression, that eventually forms a spring-head feeding Stewartshiels Burn to the north-east. The environs of the enclosure are covered by reeds and other marsh vegetation, and currently form part of the rough pasturage surrounding Stewart Shiels Farm.

1.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.3.1 The landscape of the Northumberland moors around Otterburn contains numerous sites and features relating to past agricultural land use, particularly those from late medieval times up to the nineteenth century. Owing to the poor quality of the land and the difficult winters, a form of transhumance was practised, characterised by the movement of people (and stock) from winter settlements to summer pastures. This shifting pattern of agriculture and settlement left characteristic remains, including those of temporary summer huts ('shielings'), sheep folds, stack stands, and high level farms (Ramm *et al* 1970).

1.3.2 Stewart Shiels is clearly to be regarded on linguistic grounds as being the site of a former shieling, a seasonally occupied site, although the existing farm structures are too large and well built to be considered as having directly related to the

original shieling structures. It is possible that climatic change coupled with expansion of agricultural settlement may have led to a change in function in the shieling evolving into a permanently occupied settlement.

1.3.3 Little is known of the early history of Redesdale, which in medieval times was under the control of the Umfreville family (Charlton 1996, 9). In the late sixteenth / early seventeenth centuries, a number of references to Stewart Shiels are documented, indicating that by this period some sort of permanent settlement was in existence on the site. The documentary evidence consists of complaints to the March Warden from 'Michaell Waules of Stewardsheilles' and 'William Hall of Gersomffeld' (Bain 1894-6, 350), and of references in the 1604 survey of the Debateable and Border Lands (Sanderson 1891). Interestingly, Stewart Shiels was regarded as being part of 'Ellsden Wintersteeds', indicating that, by this date at least, the settlement was associated with over-wintering, as well as summer pasturing.

1.3.4 During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Stewart Shiels was held by the Hedley and Hall families (NRO 542/20), although there is limited evidence to indicate the nature and extent of occupation. In the nineteenth century, Stewart Shiels was purchased by the Redesdale Estate, and by 1841 Lord Redesdale is listed as landowner in Elsdon Tithe Apportionment (NRO 486/4/1). The site of Stewart Shiels farm is shown on large scale county maps by Fryer (1820) and Greenwood (1828), and the Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6" map (1863) shows the area in more detail.

1.3.5 In this century, Stewart Shiels, although still a working farm, was sold to the MOD, and much of the surrounding land was (and still is) utilised for military training purposes.

1.4 PREVIOUS WORK

1.4.1 Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU) was commissioned by Turner Facilities Management to undertake an archaeological evaluation to investigate an enclosure to the north-east of Stewart Shiels Farm, Otterburn, Northumberland, in advance of a proposed cow house development. The evaluation was commissioned by TFM, on behalf of the Ministry of Defence (landowners). The work was requested by the Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA), and a project brief was prepared by The Archaeology Practice, University of Newcastle.

1.4.2 The evaluation consisted of an initial landscape survey to record the extant earthworks of a rectilinear enclosure identified by Tim Gates (Gates 1997) from aerial photographs to the north-east of Stewart Shiels Farm. This work was followed by the mechanical excavation of a trench into the enclosure in order to characterise the nature of the remains. The results suggested that the enclosure was eighteenth century in origin, and that it may have been a 'lazy bed' enclosure.

1.4.3 The evaluation report (LUAU 1998) established that the footprint of the cow house development would impinge on the western corner of the enclosure and also a putative building platform further to the west. It was therefore recommended that a watching brief be undertaken during ground works for the development.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 WATCHING BRIEF

2.1.1 The cow house was to be located to the north east of the modern farm, partly within the existing farmyard parallel with the exist outbuildings. Ground works comprised a series of 12 trenches arranged in two parallel rows of six with a single trench in the centre of the northern end. The trenches were to be excavated for concrete foundations which would be used to hold vertical steel stanchions, forming the frame of the cow house. Two further trenches were to be excavated at the southern end following the completion of the building works.

2.1.2 Of the thirteen trenches, ten had been excavated on the day before there was an archaeological presence on site. The remaining trenches were machine excavated using a tracked mechanical excavator with a 360º rotation and a 1m wide toothed bucket. The central area of the development, including the putative building platform, was obscured by a layer of hardcore.

2.1.3 The programme of field observation accurately recorded the location of these trenches and the extent and character of subsoil horizons exposed in section. The lower strata of many of the trenches was, however, obscured by standing water.

2.1.4 The stratigraphy and archaeological features were recorded using methods in accordance with those recommended by English Heritage's Central Archaeology Service (CAS). Recording was in the form of context sheets. Scale drawings (plans at 1:50) were made where appropriate, and photographs (black and white prints and colour transparencies) were taken as necessary. On-site assessment of the deposits suggested it was not necessary to take environmental samples. Any finds were handled and stored according to standard practice (following current Institute of Field Archaeologists guidelines) in order to minimise deterioration.

2.2 ARCHIVE

2.2.1 A full archive of the work has been produced to a professional standard in accordance with current English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The archive will be deposited with the County Record Office and a copy of the report will be given to the SMR. A copy of the archive will also be available for deposition with the National Monuments Record in Swindon.

3. WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

3.1 GENERAL STRATIGRAPHY

3.1.1 The sequence of deposition within each individual trench is recorded on the pro-forma sheets, which form the project archive, and are not discussed in detail within this report.

3.1.2 The trenches were numbered 1 to 13, with 1 to 6 running along the western side of the development from the south west to north-east; Trenches 7-12 were on the eastern side running north-west to south-east, Trench 13 situated in the mid point of the north-east end (Fig 2). The trenches were 1m wide by up to 1.75m north-east/south-west, and regularly spaced at 6.1m centres. The depth varied between 0.5m and 1.12m.

3.1.3 The general pattern of stratigraphy encountered comprised a basal deposit of buff coloured natural till, with occasional mottled blue patches. This tended to increase in depth progressively from the south-west to the north-east, varying between 0.1m in the south west to 0.8m in the north-east; it was not encountered in Trenches 9 and 13 which were excavated to a depth of 1.12m and 0.9m, respectively.

3.1.4 At the north-west end this till tended to be overlain by a grey-brown silty clay loam, with occasional flecks of ash, again varying in depth between trenches, and possibly representing a slightly leached buried soil horizon. In Trenches 4 to 6 this was overlain by a mixed deposit of dark brown silty loam with frequent large stones, which was overlain in trench 5 by a thin lens of creamy white mortar. In Trench 13, it was overlain by a 0.25m orange/brick coloured layer of fairly loose, coarse material which included brick and ash fragments. The upper layer of most trenches comprised turf with a dark brown friable topsoil. This was absent in Trenches 10-12, where a thin grass layer directly overlay light brown silty clay loam.

3.2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

3.2.1 Cut features were encountered in Trench 2, where a ceramic drain cut the natural till and was sealed by topsoil, and in Trench 13 where the grey brown loam was cut by a steep sided trench which was again sealed by topsoil. The fill of the latter feature comprised a fairly loose, purple ashy material and may have been originally dug to house a drainage pipe.

3.2.2 The sequence of deposition in Trench 9 differed considerably in character. At a depth of 1.02m a black, oily silt was encountered, the upper part of which contained root matter. This was overlain by a 0.64m deposit of redeposited clay. This was in turn overlain by a uniform grey brown clayey silt, sealed by topsoil.

3.2.3 Pottery and a small number of iron artefacts were recovered from the upper mixed layer of Trench 3, and the orange/brick coloured mixed layer in Trench 13. The pottery was dated on site to the nineteenth century and a sample was retained for analysis by LUAU's finds specialist. A rapid scan of this material has confirmed an early nineteenth century date.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The results of the watching brief suggest that within the footprint of the cow house development, natural till is overlain by a possible buried soil horizon. This is overlain in the west by mixed deposits which include large stones and a lens of mortar. This material is particularly prevalent opposite the building forming the north-east end of the range of outbuildings, which was an earlier farmhouse, perhaps dating to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It is considered that this material, which includes early nineteenth century pottery, may therefore relate to a construction or alteration phase associated with that building.

4.2 Trench 9 differed in character from all other trenches encountered during fieldwork. In the bottom of the trench, which was not excavated to a natural horizon, a thick black oily deposit was encountered which emanated water immediately on exposure. The upper part of this deposit included root matter which suggests that it was once exposed and vegetated. It is likely, therefore, that the trench was excavated wholly within a larger though localised, feature which had been filled with redeposited clay, possibly in order to level up the ground. However, it was not possible to determine the nature and extent of this feature, nor whether it was man-made or wholly natural.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1 : Stewart Shiels, Otterburn Location Map

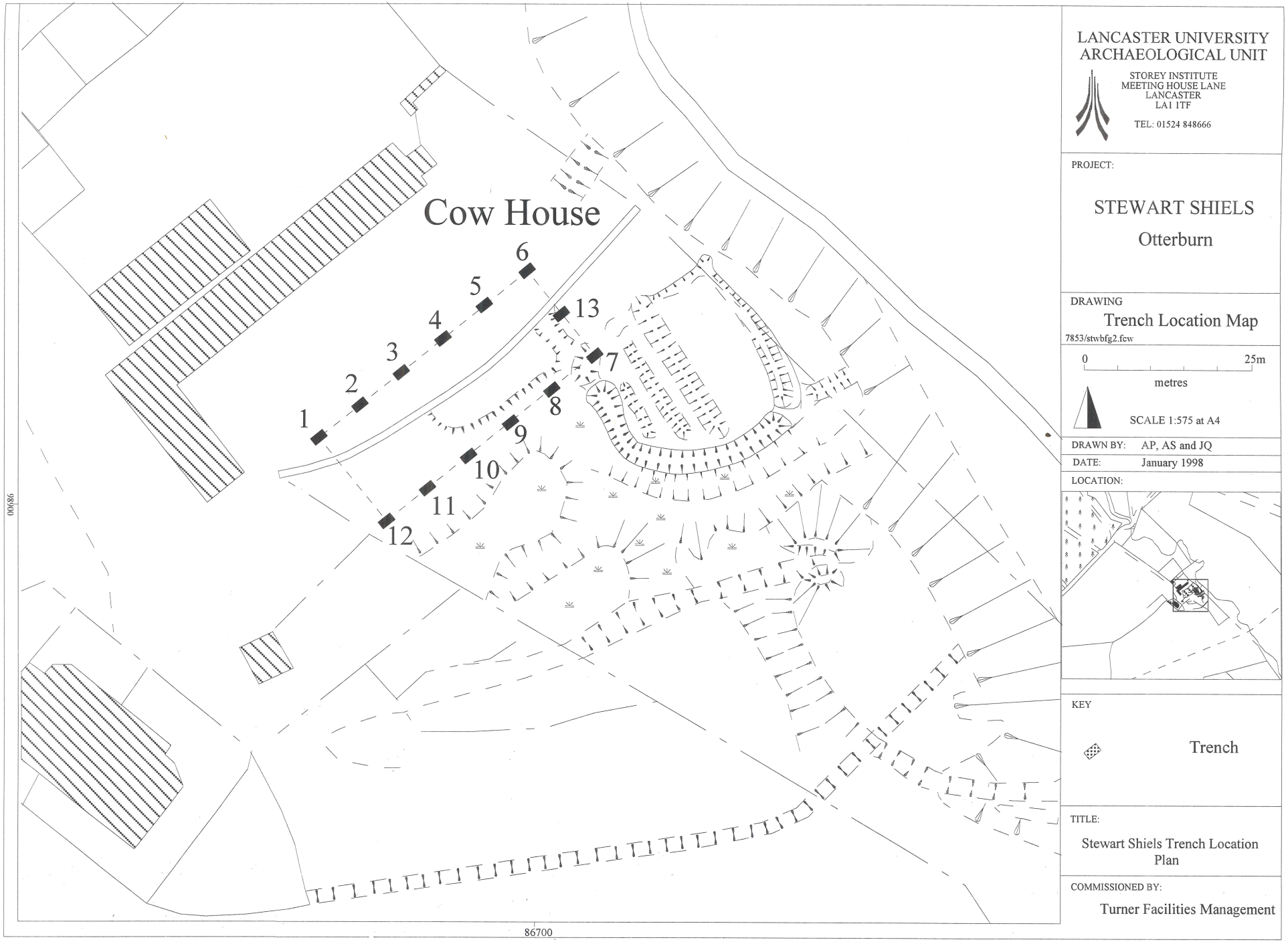

Fig 2 Stewart Shiels Trench Location Plan