PONTOP SMITHY
DIPTON, COUNTY DURHAM
~ ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION ~

OCTOBER 2016
PONTOP SMITHY
DIPTON, COUNTY DURHAM

REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

Prepared by:

The Archaeological Practice Ltd.

**Frontispiece:** View looking north along sandstone foundations of a possible smithy building, revealed during excavations in October 2016.

**Grid Reference:** NZ 14944 53778
**Date of fieldwork:** 6th – 12th October 2016
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SUMMARY

An archaeological excavation was carried out by The Archaeological Practice Ltd. for The Land of Oak and Iron Project in October 2016 to the north-west of Dipton, County Durham (centred on Grid ref. NZ 14944 53778). The purpose of the work was to investigate the site of a building associated with the early 18th century Pontop waggonway, marked on contemporary maps of the area and suggested on the ground by slight earthworks adjacent to the known course of the former waggonway. The work was based on background historical work carried out by David Marrs and others, including, more recently, Les Turnbull.

The excavations carried out in October 2016 comprised the excavation of a single large trench, focussed on slight remains of buildings visible on the surface and extended appropriately once the course of the buildings had been ascertained. In addition to the main area of excavation, limited excavation and recording was carried out on three other adjacent sites, namely a revetment wall some 20 m east of the main site, a culvert below the current stream bed below the footbridge and the remains of a water channel draining into the Pikewell burn, on the south side of the present footbridge.

The main excavation uncovered the substantial remains of a building – identified as a potential ‘Smithy’ – with its east and south walls surviving up to three courses of roughly-faced masonry and the remains of a hearth set into the south wall. The north and west sides fronting on to the old waggonway junction were less well-defined, but a number of post-holes on the projected line of the west wall suggested the presence of an open-fronted workshop-type arrangement associated with maintenance of waggonway traffic. The finished excavation area extended 10 metres (aligned NNW-SSE) x 6 metres (aligned WSW-ENE) from end to end, but invasive excavation varied intermittently within this.

Investigations of the wider site expanded to include other features noticed during excavation of Site ‘A’, including a curvilinear revetment wall of quarried sandstone drystone construction, located approximately 7 metres to the north-east of building remains ‘A’ and built into the front of the bank, which it supported. Cleaning of its north face revealed a length of wall measuring 2.65 metres (minimum length) x 0.52m (depth) and standing a maximum of seven courses high. The wall has been interpreted as a revetment, constructed along the lower-front of a declining bank to prevent slumpage by retaining the raised flat area of land immediately to the south that housed building remains ‘A’ and other potential structures in the early 19th century and possibly earlier.

The remains of a culvert wall located approximately 22 metres to the north-east of building remains ‘A’ were partially exposed and recorded. It is surmised that this feature drained water from the pond area on the higher ground to the north-east. The previous interpretation of the pond as a wash pond associated with the waggonway is now rejected, since it is doubtful that it could have been used for this purpose and appears to be a feature created as an unintended consequence of the construction of the waggonway embankment. A well-constructed arched sandstone culvert opening through the former waggonway embankment over the Pikewell Burn dene, located some 4 metres or so to the north-west of culvert wall ‘C’, was also investigated.

It is concluded that the remains exposed and recorded are associated with early 18th century mining and associated transportation systems and, as such, are of high local significance and some considerable regional historic importance.
1. INTRODUCTION - PURPOSE OF EXCAVATION

1.1 Location and Background (Illus. 01 - 03).

This document, prepared by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. reports on an archaeological excavation carried out in October, 2016 for the Land of Oak and Iron project at Dipton, County Durham (centred on Grid NZ 14944 53778).

The location of works was determined by following discussion with local historian, David Marrs who identified the position of three buildings of interest, associated with the early 18th century Potop waggonway, marked on contemporary maps of the area. It was considered worthwhile to attempt to identify the position of at least one of these buildings, the position of which was suggested on the ground by slight earthworks adjacent to the known course of the former waggonway.

The site is approximately 0.5 km to the north-west of Dipton (see Illus. 01-02), accessed via a pathway running north through fields from the Pontop Hall road, accessed next to St. John’s Vicarage (see Illus. 03). Specifically, the site was located within woodland on the west bank of the Pikewell Burn, south-west of a boundary adjacent to linear pond marked on the ordnance survey map. A footpath runs from south to north along the route, turning in a north-easterly direction following the contour beyond the woods and past the pond. This path follows the route of the former Pontop waggonway, with earthworks clearly visible on historic ordnance survey maps from c. 1842 onwards (Illus. 04-07) – marked as ‘Old Wagonway’.

1.2 Previous Archaeological Assessment and Investigation

There have been no previous archaeological interventions within or in the immediate vicinity of the proposed development site, although it sits in an area known for its high archaeological potential. David Marrs and others, including, more recently, Les Turnbull have carried out intensive studies of the area to elucidate the history of the Pontop and wider Derwent Valley waggonways through the study of historic sources.
Illus. 01: Regional view, showing the location of Dipton (circled in red) in the north-east of England.

Illus. 02: Town view, showing the location of the study area (circled in red), on the north-west side of Dipton.
Illus. 03: Site view, showing the study area (circled in red and with features highlighted) along the Pikewell Burn, a little to the north-east of Pontop Hall, Dipton.
Illus. 04: Extract from the 6 inch 1st Edition Ordnance Survey c.1842, showing the study area (circled in red).

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Illus. 08: Survey view, showing the location of archaeological features identified during the Pontop Smithy excavations in October 2016.
2. CULTURAL HERITAGE BACKGROUND

2.1 Cultural Heritage Background (by David Marrs)

2.1.1 Background
In 1710 Clavering and Brumel extended the existing Hollinside Way up the southern slopes of the Derwent valley and westward to Bucksnook which is situated one field to the NW of the modern Mountsett Crematorium. This was ‘Western 1’ waggonway and was feted at the time as being a wonder of modern engineering. Chancery lawsuits, 13 in total, plagued Bucksnook Colliery, a collection of 5 drift mines, and it was abandoned soon afterwards. In 1720 Jane Clavering and Elizabeth Bowes, in a partnership called the ‘Western Alliance’, rerouted ‘Western 1’ to miss the Manorial lands of Whickham which had been bought by William Cotesworth purely to frustrate the Alliance; so ‘Western 2’ came into being and Bucksnook was re-opened. In 1724 ‘Western 2’ was extended from Bucksnook across Ewehurst by means of a lease from Elizabeth Emerson; through Weed Park which Jane Clavering had purchased some 10 years earlier in her brother’s name so as not to arouse her rivals’ suspicions and across the sunken lane to Collierley farm via a wooden bridge into the Collierley estate of the Bowes Family (gifted to them by Elizabeth 1 in 1598).

‘Western 2’ was later further extended across land leased to a Newcastle Hostman called Leybourne, across the Pikewell Burn via a battery and into the Pontop estate of the Swinburne Family. By this time the Pontop lands had been producing coal on an industrial Scale for over 150 years transporting the coal via wains. The waggonway reached its terminus, at the Spring Pit before 1738.

2.1.2 COLLIERLEY LANDS: THE PONTOP COLLIERY
In terms of visible archaeology, a lot of waggonway related features remain. The drift mine entrances of Bucksnoo Colliery can still be seen in the fields, in Wintertime. The Western Way is mostly a PROW and various raised earthworks and cuttings still exist as the waggonway hugged the 700 ft contour. Some pit sites are visible and others can be identified using OS 1st and 2nd edition, and various deed maps lodged in the County record offices. One very visible branch line can still be seen in Collierley. Some details of the annual production, particularly of the Pontop pits, can be found in the Coal Vend records and it seems that the peak of production in this area was in the 1750-1760’s when Pontop topped the Vend and the now Western 3 was further extended across Billingside to Pont Head. Western 3 was extensively branched to the South of Pontop Pike from the late 1740’s to the 1770’s also. Fighting Trade by Clavering notes that the Pontop shafts were deepened (probably to reach deeper seams when the surface seams were exhausted), but nothing is written about the Collierley pits,. even though the majority of existing waggonway features are in this area,. There is an accurate drawing of the Pontop Colliery, drawn in 1750 by the Colliery Viewer, Watson, showing and naming all the pits. It also shows three buildings of which A Fighting Trade considers one a blacksmith’s and one a waggonway wheelwright, a recognised trade in those days, but there are no known details of the use of the third building. In respect of enhancing our knowledge and recording these rare industrial archaeological Features it was proposed, therefore, to excavate one of these sites in order to confirm its date and assess its function.
3. EXCAVATION PROGRAMME

3.1 Aims

Given the potential archaeological sensitivity of the site, specifically the possibility of discovering preserved sub-surface features, a programme of archaeological trenching was agreed in order to determine the character, nature, date, depth, and degree of survival of archaeological deposits there.

3.2 Methods

The excavations carried out in October 2016 comprised the excavation of a single large trench, focussed on slight remains of buildings visible on the surface and extended appropriately once the course of the buildings had been ascertained. Excavation, recording and sampling procedures were undertaken using agreed strategies, namely:

The setting out of the trenches was undertaken by archaeological staff and the excavations were carried out manually by archaeologically competent staff and volunteers. Topsoil and unstratified modern material was removed under continuous archaeological supervision in successive level spits down to the first significant archaeological horizon. Spoil was kept close-by and rapidly backfilled into the trenches at the conclusion of the work.

In addition to the main area of excavation, limited excavation and recording was carried out on three other adjacent sites, namely a revetment wall some 20 m east of the main site, a culvert below the current stream bed below the footbridge and another site, probably the remains of a water channel draining into the Pontop burn, on the south side of the footbridge.
4. RESULTS

4.1 Location Summary

The archaeological excavation area was located approximately 0.5 km to the north-west of Dipton (see Illus. 01-02), accessed via a pathway running north through fields from the Pontop Hall road around 15 metres along from St. John’s Vicarage (see Illus. 03). Specifically, the site was located within woodland along the Pikewell Burn and to the south-west of a boundary adjacent to a large pond marked on the ordnance survey map. A footpath runs from south to north along the route, turning in a north-easterly direction following the contour beyond the woods and past the pond. This path follows the route of the former Pontop waggonway, with earthworks clearly visible on historic ordnance survey maps from c.1842 onwards (Illus. 04-07) – marked as ‘Old Wagonway’.

4.2 Feature Summary

Four areas of potential archaeological interest labelled A-D were identified and investigated during the fieldwork at the Pontop site in October 2016 (see Illus. 08):

A. Explored an area towards the south-west corner of the site where a potential ‘Smithy’ building was observed on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map c.1842.
B. Exposed and recorded a revetment wall, approximately 7 metres to the north-east of building remains ‘A’.
C. A culvert wall located approximately 22 metres to the north-east of building remains ‘A’.
D. An arched culvert opening located some 4 metres or so to the north-west of culvert wall ‘C’.

Whilst features ‘B-D’ were recorded as part of the fieldwork, only area ‘A’ - which contained significant building remains - was subject to invasive archaeological excavation.

4.3 Archaeological Excavation of Building Remains ‘A’

4.3.1 Location and Dimensions:

Area ‘A’ was located towards the south-west corner of the site (see Illus. 08) where a large building – identified as a potential ‘Smithy’ - can be observed on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map c.1842 (see Illus. 04). This building had linear and perpendicular east and south walls, but curiously with inwardly-curving north and west sides fronting on to the old waggonway junction, perhaps indicative of an open-fronted design for a workshed-type arrangement associated with maintenance of waggonway traffic.

An area of topsoil was stripped by hand in this location over slight remains of stone wall-lines barely visible on the surface and extended appropriately once the course of the buildings had been ascertained. The finished excavation area extended 10 metres (aligned NNW-SSE) x 6 metres (aligned WSW-ENE) from end to end, but invasive excavation varied intermittently within this.

Post-hole & beam slot on same alignment as possible primary terminus of east wall.

Kink in east wall indicates possible rebuild or extension.

Possible primary terminus of east wall

Hearth

Threshold

Blocking material
Illus. 10: East facing elevation of Building ‘A’ east wall, Dipton 2016.

Illus. 11: North facing elevation and profile of Building ‘A’ south wall at intersection with east wall, Dipton 2016.
4.3.2 Archaeological Stratigraphy and Interpretation: (See Illus. 09-12)

Beneath the topsoil [01] were foundation remains of intersecting east and south sandstone walls [02] belonging to a building interpreted as the probable Pontop Smithy.

The east wall was aligned roughly north-south and measured 8.40 m (length) x 0.68 m (width) x 0.80 m (depth). This faced sandstone foundation survived to at least four courses in height. A kink towards the north end of the east wall indicated a northward extension to the building of 3.40 m or of secondary rebuild/alteration for unknown reasons.

A threshold opening [03] was observed through this northern extension/rebuild, measuring 1.04 m in length. It is unclear whether this opening functioned as a doorway or as some kind of service chute – perhaps for carrying water via a launder or similar. A planned blocking up [04] of the opening/threshold using sandstone rubble was observed and attributed to a later phase in the building’s lifespan.

The south wall perpendicularly intersected with the southern end of the east wall and extended to the west for a distance of 5.58 metres in length. Its structural form was of equivalent design to the east wall, with the addition of an offset chimney breast foundation [05] projecting 0.60 metres to the south, located roughly half way along its length. An area of contained but irregularly laid hand-made red-bricks forming a surface [06] within the chimney breast cavity, exhibited evidence of burning, suggesting its use as a probable hearth.

It was observed that the primary terminus of the east wall was on the same alignment as a post-hole and beam slot [08] observed 3.88 metres to the west, perhaps indicating the building incorporated a contemporary timber façade fronting on to the Pontop waggonway. The absence of north and west walls from the building, along with the evidence for a post-hole and beam slot located towards its projected north-west corner, reinforces evidence from historic mapping (see Illus. 04) that suggests an open-fronted design for a workshed-type arrangement associated with maintenance of waggonway traffic.

A possible yard surface [09] abutting the external face of the south wall in the south-west corner, was observed extending southwards, but due to the limits of excavation its extent was undetermined.

4.3.3 Context List:

[01] Topsoil, comprising of mid grey-brown silty-loam, with penetrations of tree-root action throughout.

[02] Linear sandstone walls of Building Remains ‘A’, comprising an ‘east’ wall and intersecting perpendicular ‘south’ wall.

The east wall was aligned NNW-SSE, measuring 8.40 metres (length) x 0.68 metres (average width) x 0.80 metres (max. depth excavated), constructed with roughly quarried but square faced sandstone slabs and blocks, doubled skinned and of at least four surviving courses high, with irregular sandstone rubble core. The full depth of the east wall was not reached during this phase of excavation. A kink towards the north end of the east wall, observed from 5 metres along from the south-east corner and offset to the east by approximately 0.15 metres, indicates a northward extension to the building of 3.40 metres or of secondary rebuild/alteration for unknown reasons. A threshold opening [03] was observed through this northern extension/rebuild, located at approximately 0.80m south of the northern edge of the wall. The primary terminus of the east wall is on the same alignment as a post-hole.
and beam slot [08] observed 3.88 metres to the west, and indicates a contemporary timber façade of the building fronting on to the Pontop waggonway.

The south wall perpendicularly intersected with the southern end of the east wall and extended to the WSW for a distance of 5.58 metres in length. Its structural form was of equivalent design to the east wall, with the addition of an offset chimney breast foundation [05] projecting 0.60 metres to the south, located roughly half way along its length.

[03] Opening/threshold through east wall of building remains ‘A’ [02], measuring approximately 1.04 metres in length and located approximately 0.80m south of the northern edge of the wall. It is unclear whether this opening functioned as a doorway or as some kind of service chute – perhaps for carrying water via a launder or similar. A planned blocking up [04] of the opening/threshold using sandstone rubble was observed and attributed to a later phase in the building’s lifespan.

[04] Sandstone rubble material purposely blocking the opening [03] through the east wall of building remains ‘A’ [02].

[05] Probable chimney breast, comprising of sandstone foundations observed half way along the south wall of building remains ‘A’ and projecting 0.60 metres to the south and measuring 1.70 metres in width. Contains a probable hearth surface [06] observed within cavity.

[06] An area of contained but irregularly laid hand-made red-brick surface within the chimney breast cavity [05]. Exhibits evidence of burning, suggesting a probable hearth. The brick surface measured approximately 0.96 m x 0.70 m.

[07] Rubble demolition observed beneath topsoil and evident at depth within interior of east and south wall of building remains ‘A’. Unknown extent.

[08] Possible beam slot and post hole observed on west side of building remains ‘A’, indicating possible timber open-front of building. Observed to be 3.88m to the west of and on same alignment as possible primary terminus of east wall of building remains ‘A’, suggesting a contemporary association.

Dimensions: 0.50 m (width) x 0.40 m (depth).

[09] Possible yard surface abutting the external face of the south wall of building remains ‘A’ [02], observed in the south-west corner of the building, between the western limit of the south wall and the chimney breast foundation [05]. Extending southwards for unknown distance. Comprises a level surface of flat sandstone pieces observed at floor level and associated with building remains ‘A’.

4.4 Revetment Wall ‘B’ (see Illus. 08 & 13)

A curvilinear revetment wall of quarried sandstone drystone construction, was exposed and recorded towards the centre of the site, located approximately 7 metres to the north-east of building remains ‘A’ and built into the front of the bank, which it supported. Cleaning of its north face revealed a length of wall measuring 2.65 metres (minimum length) x 0.52m (depth) and standing a maximum of seven courses high.

The wall has been interpreted as a revetment, constructed along the lower-front of a declining bank to prevent slumpage by retaining the raised flat area of land immediately to the south that housed building remains ‘A’ and other potential structures in the early 19th century and possibly earlier.

4.5 Culvert Wall ‘C’ (see Illus. 08)
Stone
Topsoil
Post hole?
Possible
beam slot
Compact a/s ruble,
tumble, no bond

3.15m to external face of Building ‘A’ south wall


The remains of a culvert wall located approximately 22 metres to the north-east of building remains ‘A’ were partially exposed and recorded. The culvert wall was aligned ENE-WSW and evidently carries water from the pond area on the higher ground to the north-east, and drains it into the Pikewell Burn below. The wall comprises rough quarried, undressed sandstone drystone fragments.

4.6 Culvert Opening ‘D’ (see Illus. 08)
An arched sandstone culvert opening, located some 4 metres or so to the north-west of culvert wall ‘C’. It comprises dressed sandstone blocks forming an arched culvert to allow passage of the Pikewell Burn through the former waggonway embankment which infilled the Pikewell Burn dene at this point in order to permit passage of the waggonway without cause to build a bridge. Its dimensions are: 2 metres (height) x 2.5 metres (width).
APPENDIX 1:
Photographic Archive for Archaeological Excavation, Pontop Smithy, Dipton, County Durham, October 2016.

- **Photo 1:** Pre-excavation shot of the Pontop Smithy site, view looking south-west.
- **Photo 2.** View looking south-west during excavation of Building remains ‘A’ east wall.
- **Photo 3.** View looking north-east at hearth area of Building remains ‘A’ south wall and a school group uncovering foundations of the east wall.
- **Photo 4.** The south-east corner of Building remains ‘A’, view looking north-west.
- **Photo 5.** A probable hearth visible along the south wall of Building remains ‘A’, view looking south-west.
- **Photo 6.** A probable hearth visible along the south wall of Building remains ‘A’, view looking north-east.
- **Photo 7.** Detail of probable hearth, revealed along the south wall of Building remains ‘A’, view looking south-east.
- **Photo 8.** North facing section of south wall of Building remains ‘A’, exposed in sondage excavated in south-east interior corner.
- **Photo 9.** View looking west at blocking of an entrance through the east wall (north end) of Building remains ‘A’.
- **Photo 10.** North facing elevation of Revetment wall ‘B’.
- **Photo 11.** View looking east along Revetment wall ‘B’.
- **Photo 12.** View looking north-east at bridge over the Pikewell Burn, with Culvert wall ‘C’ just visible towards the lower centre of shot.
- **Photo 13.** View looking north-west at remains of Culvert wall ‘C’.
- **Photo 14.** View looking WSW along remains of Culvert wall ‘C’.
- **Photo 15.** View looking south-west at Culvert opening ‘D’.
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- **Photo 17.** Local historian David Marrs leading a guided walk around the site; view looking north-east towards the footbridge over the Burn.
- **Photo 18.** Local historian David Marrs leading a school party around the site; view looking north-east.
- **Photo 19.** Broad view looking south-east showing possible beam slot and posthole on the west side of Building Remains ‘A’.
• **Photo 20.** West facing section of possible beam slot and posthole on the west side of Building Remains ‘A’.

• **Photo 21.** Vertical view (east to top of photo) showing possible beam slot and posthole on the west side of Building Remains ‘A’.
Photo 1. Pre-excavation shot of the Pontop Smithy site, view looking south-west.

Photo 2. View looking south-west during excavation of Building remains 'A' east wall.

Photo 3. View looking north-east at hearth area of Building remains 'A' south wall and a school group uncovering foundations of the east wall.
Photo 4. The south-east corner of Building remains ‘A’, view looking north-west.

Photo 5. A probable hearth visible along the south wall of Building remains ‘A’, view looking south-west.

Photo 6. A probable hearth visible along the south wall of Building remains ‘A’, view looking north-east.
Photo 7. Detail of probable hearth, revealed along the south wall of Building remains 'A', view looking south-east.

Photo 8. North facing section of south wall of Building remains 'A', exposed in sondage excavated in south-east interior corner.

Photo 9. View looking west at blocking of an entrance through the east wall (north end) of Building remains 'A'.

Photo 10. North facing elevation of Revetment wall ‘B’.

Photo 11. View looking east along Revetment wall ‘B’.

Photo 12. View looking north-east at bridge over the Pikewell Burn, with Culvert wall ‘C’ just visible towards the lower centre of shot.
Photo 13. View looking north-west at remains of Culvert wall ‘C’.

Photo 14. View looking WSW along remains of Culvert wall ‘C’.

Photo 15. View looking south-west at Culvert opening ‘D’.
Photo 16. Interior view looking south-west down Culvert opening ‘D’.

Photo 17. Local historian David Marrs leading a guided walk around the site; view looking north-east towards the footbridge over the Burn.

Photo 18. Local historian David Marrs leading a school party around the site; view looking north-east.
Photo 19. Broad view looking south-east showing possible beam slot and posthole on the west side of Building Remains ‘A’.

Photo 20. West facing section of possible beam slot and posthole on the west side of Building Remains ‘A’.

Photo 21. Vertical view (east to top of photo) showing possible beam slot and posthole on the west side of Building Remains ‘A’.