Land 20m NE of Eversley Cottage, Gaza Back Street, Portmahomack, Highland

Archaeological Watching Brief Project
Planning Ref: 20/03626/FUL

Data Structure Report

For
Peter Austin

Andrew Young BA (Hons) MClfA
January 2024
(AAH Project PHK21)

Avon Archaeology (Highland) Limited
Professional Archaeological Services

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House development 20m NE of Eversley Cottage, Gaza Main Street, Portmahomack, Highland

Archaeological Watching Brief (Strip & Record) Project
Data Structure Report

Report No.	PHK21-002
Site Code	PHK21
Client	Mr Peter Austin
Planning Refs	20/03626/FUL
OS Grid Ref	NH 9153 8423
Date of Fieldwork	August 2021 and January 2024
Report Date	January 2024
Author	Andrew Young MCIfA

Executive Summary

An archaeological watching brief and recording project has been undertaken in accordance with the requirements of planning consent during preliminary groundworks for a new dwelling and associated services at a site located 20m NE of Eversley Cottage, Gaza Back Street, Portmahomack, Highland. The project was designed to identify, record and characterise all significant archaeological deposits, features and finds revealed during the course of preliminary ground works for the development build, in particular buried remains associated with medieval settlement-related activity, nationally important remains of which are recorded c 220 m to the southeast of the site in the area of Tarbet West Church.

The watching brief fieldwork recorded a relatively uniform sequence of deposits comprising a variable but generally shallow topsoil (501) containing a variety of modern debris, which in turn overlay a more extensive buried topsoil/subsoil (502) and a natural substrate of largely undisturbed windblown sand containing occasional gravels. The site was archaeologically sterile - no significant archaeological deposits, features or finds were revealed and no further archaeological mitigation is recommended.

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Legislation and Policy

The common principles underlying international conventions, national legislation and local authority planning policies are that cultural heritage assets should be identified in advance of development and safeguarded where practicable; if disturbance is unavoidable appropriate recording of features and recovery of portable artefacts should

take place. These have been set out in international and European Union agreements, and UK and Scottish legislation, as well as national and local planning policies[1]. Professional standards maintained throughout the present project adhered to the Codes of Conduct and Approved Practice and Standards of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists[2].

Acknowledgements

This document was written by Andrew Young MCIfA. The project was commissioned and funded by the landowner and developer, Peter Austin, who arranged the machine and operator for the site work.

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Copyright

[1] A summary of relevant international, EU, UK and Scottish legislation and policies is available from the AAH office on request.
[2] Chartered Institute for Archaeology (CIfA) Standards and Guidelines. https://www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa

Introduction & Background

Peter Austin has received planning permission from Highland Council (20/03626/FUL) for the construction of a new dwelling and associated access and services on a parcel of land located 20m south of Hillview, Back Street, Portmahomack (Figures 1 to 4 below). The planning consent for the development of the dwelling and associated infrastructure includes a Condition that requires all preliminary development works to be monitored archaeologically by means of a Watching Brief exercise, in order to identify, characterise and record all significant buried archaeological deposits, features and finds preserved within the footprint of the proposed development area.

The development area consists of an area of open and level ground at c 6m OD close to the centre of the village of Portmahomack in Highland. The site is located off Main Street and c 20m NE of Eversley Cottage (Figures 1 to 4 below). It is centred at Ordnance Survey grid reference NH 9153 8423 and has a footprint of approximately 450 square metres. The British Geological Survey indicates that the site is underlain by blown sands of Quaternary date, which in turn overlie solid geology of Devonian Raddery Sandstones[3].

The archaeological watching brief work was undertaken in accordance with an approved Written Scheme of Investigation (AAH 2021), which included a review of readily available documentary and other desk-based sources for the study area, the results of which are summarised below in this report.

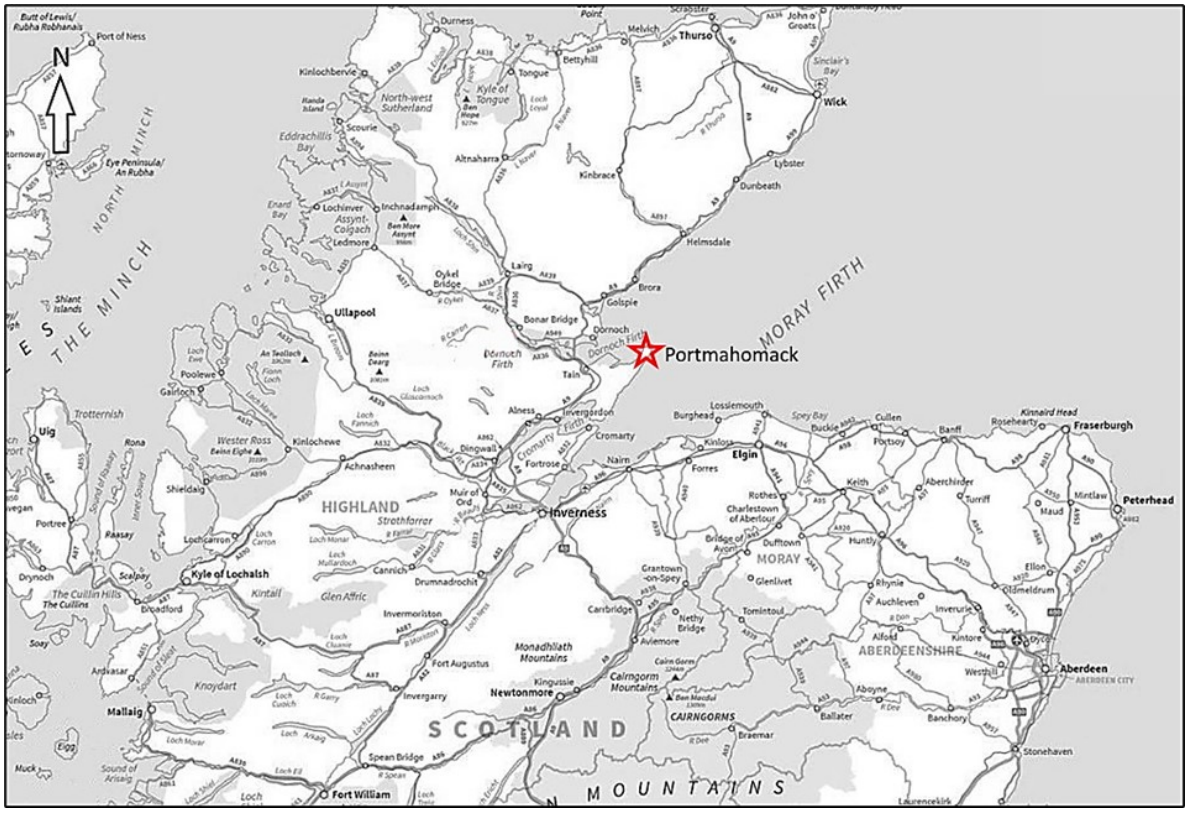

Figure 1 – General Site Location

[3] BGS online viewer

Figure 2 – Site Location. Grid squares in kms

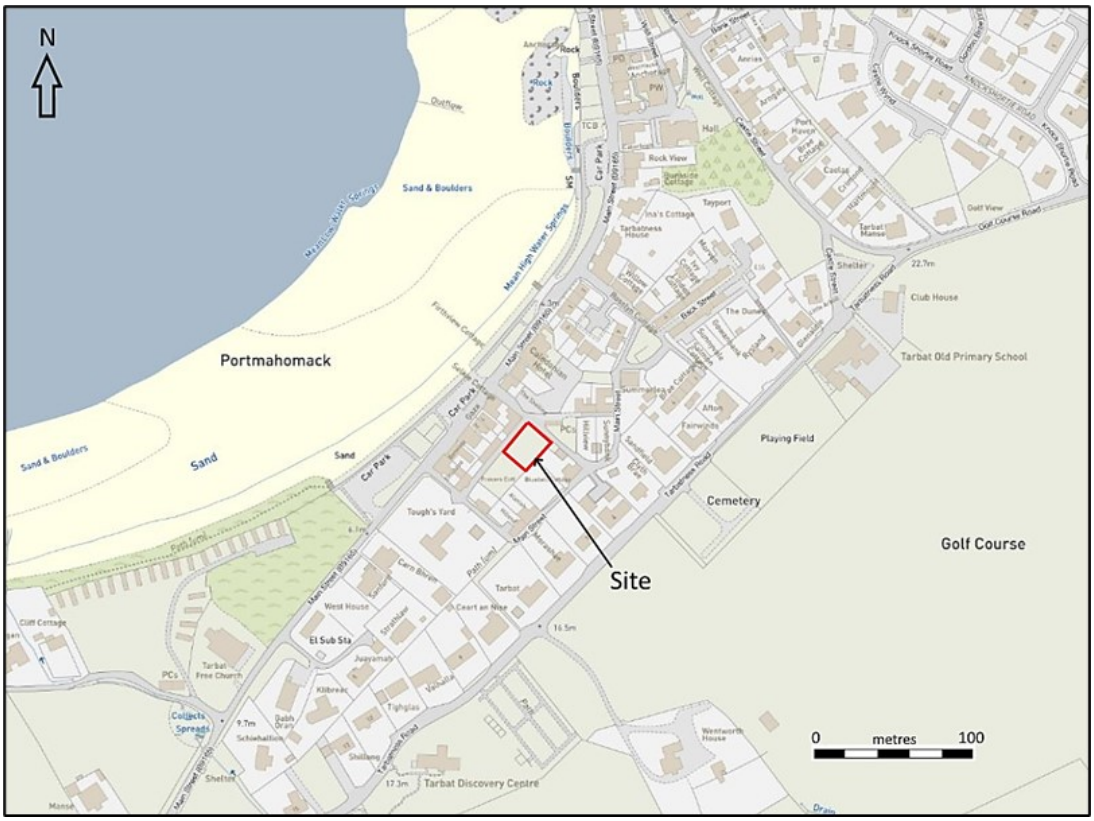

Figure 3 – Location of the development area. Scale shown

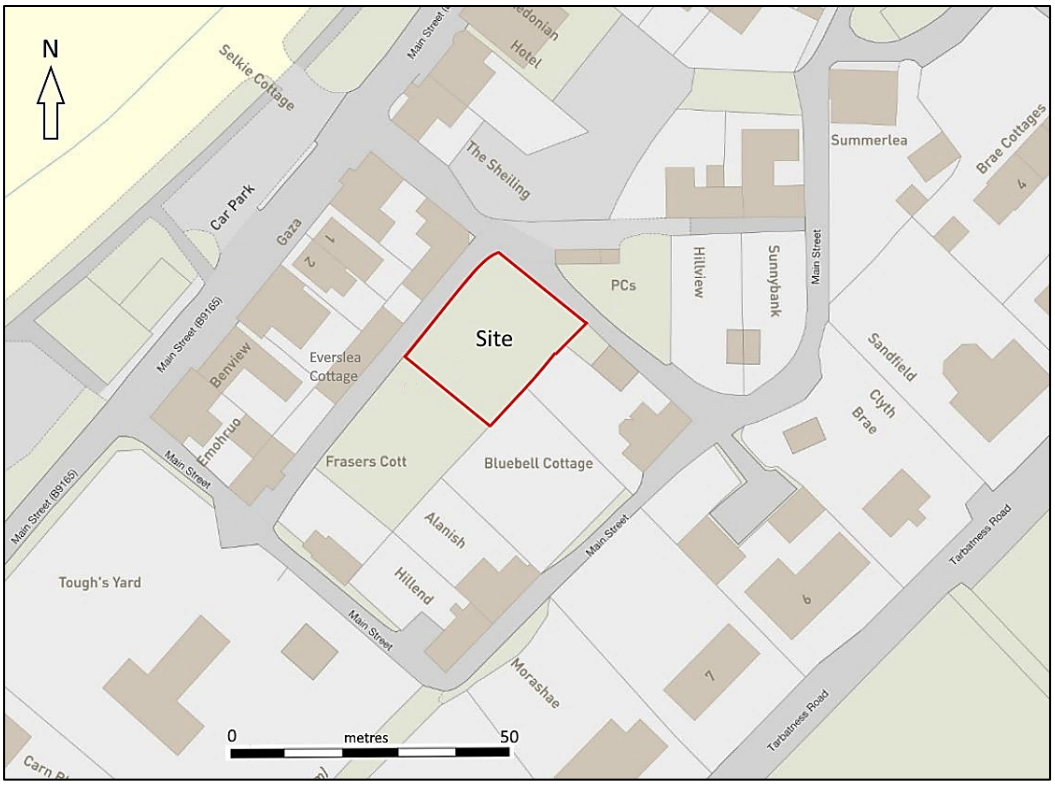

Figure 4 – Plan showing the footprint of the proposed development area. Scale shown

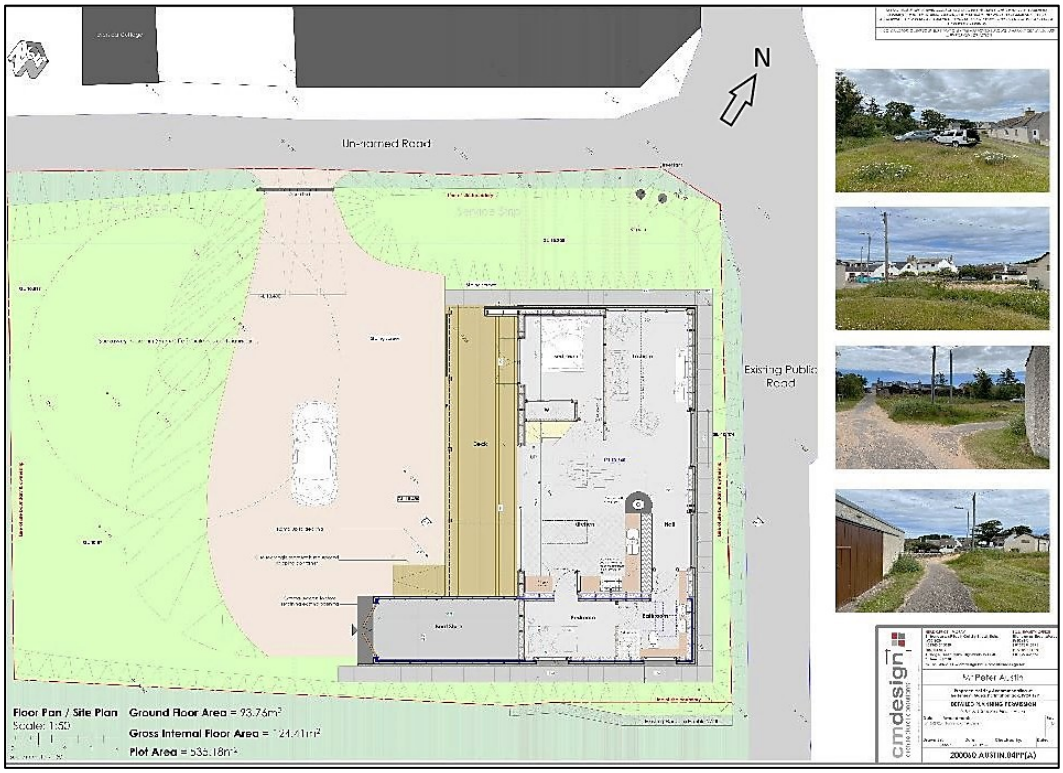

Figure 5 – Plan showing the layout of proposed site development. Not to scale. Reproduced courtesy of CM Design Ltd

Methodology

In order to satisfy the Condition for archaeology attached to planning consent the objectives of the Watching Brief exercise were to:

- Monitor archaeologically preliminary geotechnical investigations and subsequent earthmoving and reduced level excavation work for the development.
- Identify, characterise and record all significant heritage assets revealed in the area of the proposed new dwelling and associated development.
- Examine and establish the nature, extent and character of all features of potential archaeological significance affected by the proposed work, and to record these to professional standards, in line with current legislation and policy.
- Minimise any possible delay or cost to the development by anticipating archaeological requirements as far as possible, timetabling and integrating archaeological recording work with the project, and dealing with any issues arising quickly and efficiently.

Archaeological & Historical Background

Recorded heritage assets located in the vicinity of the study site were reviewed for the project WSI and the results of the research are detailed in the WSI document (Avon Archaeology (Highland) 2021) submitted to and approved by Highland Council in advance of the watching brief fieldwork. The sources consulted for the review included historic mapping held by the National Library of Scotland, the Highland Council HER and Canmore databases, the Old and New Statistical Accounts, Ordnance Survey Name Books, aerial photographs held by NCAP and LiDAR survey data.

The documentary research indicated that the development area had some moderate potential for the preservation of buried archaeological deposits and finds, in particular relating to past human activity during the medieval period. The results of the documentary research were summarised in the WSI document as follows:

The principal heritage assets recorded within 500m of the study area that are most relevant to the archaeological potential of the site relate firstly to the early medieval monastic activity and later medieval settlement activity at Portmahomack. In each case buried remains relating to each of those episodes of important medieval activity could be preserved within the study area and could be revealed during preliminary development ground works. This possibility is supported by the unforeseen discovery of domestic medieval midden deposits during a watching brief at the nearby Tough's Yard site in 2005 (MHG54023) and, more recently, evidence for medieval activity and midden deposits (EHG5636) on land adjacent to Sanford Bungalow, approximately 150m SW of the development site.

Figure 6 – The development area prior to development works. Facing west

Watching Brief

Geotechnical Investigations (August 2021)

A series of four geotechnical test pits (Figure 13, Test Pits 1 – 4) were excavated within the proposed area of development in August 2021 using a 5-ton tracked machine to determine ground conditions for the new building. The log and comment for each test pit follows:

Test Pit 1

The pit (Figure 7) was excavated to a maximum depth of 1m (c 5.4mOD) and revealed the following sequence of deposits:

101- up to 200mm of friable brown sandy silt topsoil

102- up to 300mm of dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing sparse small stones

103- up to 200mm of yellowish-brown silty sand

104- >300mm of medium fine windblown sand

None of the deposits revealed in the pit were archaeologically significant and none produced any significant archaeological finds.

Figure 7 – GI Test Pit 1 as excavated. Facing SE. Scale 1m

Test Pit 2

The pit (Figure 8) was excavated to a maximum depth of 680mm (c 5.7mOD) and revealed the following sequence of deposits:

201- up to 120mm of friable and mixed dark grey brown sandy silt topsoil

202- up to 380mm of dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing sparse small stones

203- > 180mm of light yellowish-brown sand with iron-staining

None of the deposits revealed in the pit were archaeologically significant and none produced any significant archaeological finds.

Figure 8 – GI Test Pit 2 as excavated. Facing NNW. Scale 1m

Test Pit 3

The pit (Figure 9) was excavated to a maximum depth of 800mm (c 5.3mOD) and revealed the following sequence of deposits:

301- up to 160mm of mixed friable dark greyish-brown sandy silt topsoil with lenses of clean sand

302- up to 280mm of dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing rare small stones and rare marine mollusc shells

303- up to 250mm of yellowish-brown silty sand

304- >120mm of medium fine windblown sand with iron-staining

None of the deposits revealed in the pit were archaeologically significant and none produced any significant archaeological finds.

Figure 9 – GI Test Pit 3 as excavated. Facing NW. Scale 1m

Test Pit 4

The pit (Figure 10) was excavated to a maximum depth of 850mm (c 5.65mOD) and revealed the following sequence of deposits:

401- up to 80mm of friable and mixed brown sandy silt topsoil

402- up to 100mm of orange sandy gravel

403- up to 580mm of highly mixed pale yellowish-brown sand containing lenses of topsoil-like sandy silt

404- >50mm of medium fine windblown sand

None of the deposits revealed in the pit were archaeologically significant and none produced any significant archaeological finds.

Figure 10 – GI Test Pit 4 as excavated. Facing W. Scale 1m

Watching Brief Observations (2024)

Topsoil stripping (Figures 11 and 14) and reduced level excavations were monitored by the writer to the level of the natural substrate or to the level required for construction, whichever was encountered first. Detailed survey was undertaken using a Topcon Hiper GPS unit capable of cm accuracy. The watching brief fieldwork was undertaken by the writer on the 12th January 2024.

The L-shaped footprint of the planned new building (Figure 5 above) will measure approximately 13.5m northwest to southeast and 12m from southwest to northeast. To achieve this an L-shaped area measuring approximately 15m by 14m (Figure 6 below) was stripped of topsoil to a depth of between c 200 mm and c 350 mm (to a maximum depth of c 6mOD). A series of foundation trenches, each c 600mm wide and between 400mm and 600mm deep were subsequently excavated by machine (Figure 15).

The topsoil consisted of mixed and occasionally disturbed very dark brown sandy silt loam (501) up to 400 mm deep containing occasional pieces of modern ironwork, plastic, glass and brick. The deposit overlay a variable underlying subsoil that mainly consisted of dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing rare small stones (502) but in places was replaced by an underlying relatively clean pale buff sand (503).

Figure 11 – Topsoil stripping in progress. Facing W

The foundation trenches (Figures 12, 13 and 15, Trenches 1-3) were opened by machine using a toothless bucket in a NW-SE and SW to NE alignment and to a depth of between 500mm and 700mm below the level of the topsoil stripping.

Each trench revealed mottled natural windblown sand (503) at a depth of between 500 – 600mm, which was in the main overlain by a dark greyish-brown sandy silt subsoil (502) that became shallower towards the northwest and in places contained mixed lenses of cinder and lime or clean pale sand (Figure 16).

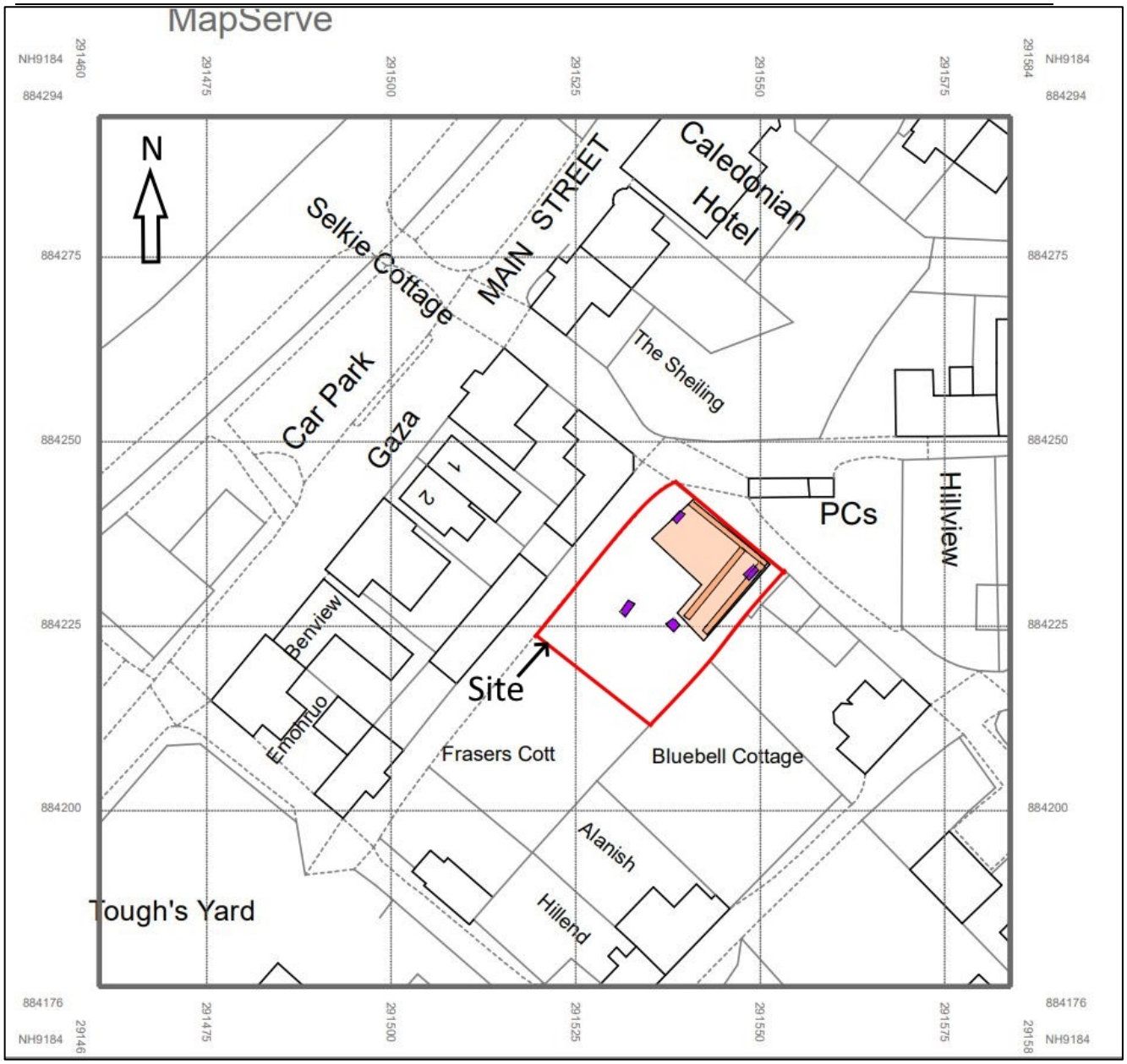

Figure 12 - Plan showing the development area and areas monitored by watching brief (see Figure 13 below for detail). Scale shown

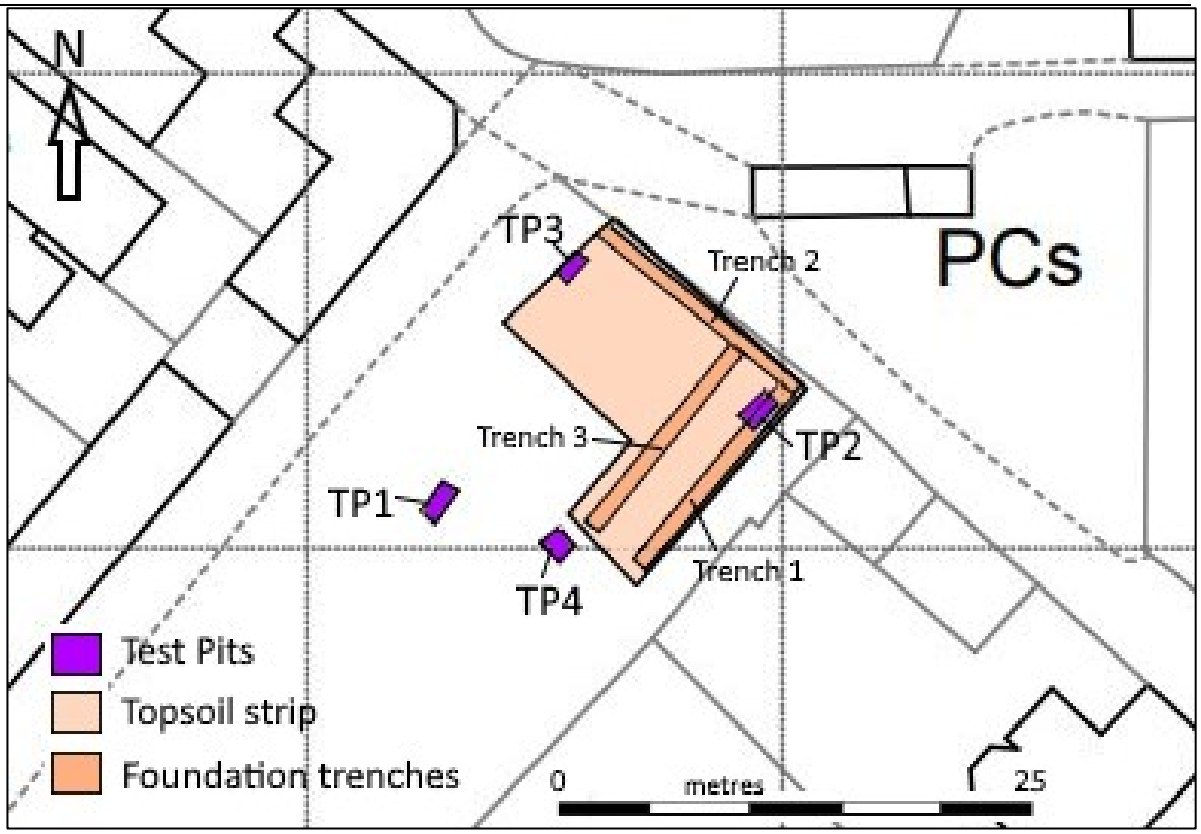

Figure 13 – Plan showing the location of GI pits, foundation trenches and the topsoil strip area. Scale shown.

Figure 14 – Topsoil stripping nearing completion. Facing SSE. Scales 1m

Figure 15 – Foundation Trenches 1-3 being excavated. Facing W. Scales 1m

Figure 16 – Foundation Trench 1 section at the NE corner of the development area showing typical trench profile. Facing SE. Scale 1m

Figure 17 – Foundation Trench 3 as excavated. Facing SW. Scales 1m

Finds

Finds from the topsoil and unstratified contexts were restricted to a handful of pottery sherds including modern White ware and Transfer Printed White ware, all of 20th century date. In addition, miscellaneous fragments of modern brick and redware were present in much of the topsoil along with fragments of rusted modern metalwork and plastic.

The only notable find recovered during the entire exercise was a complete 20th century W & J Cruickshank of Tain lemonade bottle (not retained). In summary, no significant finds of any kind were revealed during the watching brief monitoring.

Conclusions & Recommendations

A programme of archaeological monitoring and recording (Watching Brief) has been undertaken in accordance with the requirements of a Condition attached to planning consent 20/03626/FUL. The project was designed to identify and fully record all significant buried archaeological features, deposits and finds present within the footprint of a new dwelling and associated areas of development.

The watching brief fieldwork recorded a relatively uniform sequence of deposits comprising a variable but generally shallow topsoil (501) containing a variety of modern

debris, which in turn overlay a more extensive buried topsoil/subsoil (502) and a natural substrate of largely undisturbed windblown sand containing occasional gravels.

In conclusion, the development area was archaeologically sterile - no significant archaeological deposits, features or finds were revealed anywhere within the watching brief area and no further archaeological mitigation is recommended.

References

Avon Archaeology (Highland) Ltd 2021. House development20m NE of Eversley Cottage, Gaza Main Street, Portmahomack, Highland - Archaeological Watching Brief & Reporting: Desk-based Assessment, Project Design, Methods Statement & Risks Assessment. Unpublished client report.

Highland Council Historic Environment Record – passim

Managing Change in the Historic Environment (MCHE): Documents including guidance on the treatment and management of heritage assets including Scheduled Monuments

Scotland's Archaeology Strategy 2016
Document laying out the importance of archaeology in Scotland

The Historic Environment Policy for Scotland 2019 (HES 2019): Historic Environment Scotland's published revised principles and policies for the management of heritage in Scotland including managing change and sources of further information.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Photographic Register

Photograph	*Area*	*Facing*	*Description*	*Scales*
0451-0456	*TP1*	*NW*	*Test Pit 1*	*1m and 2m*
0460-0464	*TP2*	*NW*	*Test Pit 2*	*1m*
0465-0469	*TP3*	*NW*	*Test Pit 3*	*1m*
0470-0474	*TP4*	*W*	*Test Pit 4*	*1m*
4275-4279	*Site*	*W*	*The development area prior to topsoil stripping*	-
4280-4291	*Site*	*SW to W*	*Topsoil stripping in progress*	*1m*
4293-4300	*Site*	*W to NW*	*Foundation trench 1 as excavated*	*1m*
4301-4304	*Site*	*W to NW*	*Foundation trench 2 and 3 as excavated*	*1m*
4305-4308	*FT1*	*SE*	*Detail of trench section after cleaning*	*1m*
4309-4311	*FT1 and FT3*	*W*	*Foundation trenches 1 and 3 as excavated*	*1m*
4312-4314	*FT3*	*SW*	*Foundation trench 3 as excavated*	*1m*

Appendix 2 – Context Register

Context No.	Areas	Length (m)	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Type (Cut, Fill, Deposit, surface)	Description	Interpretation	Find No.	Plans (Drwg #)	Sections (Drwg #)	Photos (Y/N)	Samples
101	TP1	>2.5	>1	Up to 0.2	Layer	friable brown sandy silt	Topsoil		Y	N	Y	N
102	TP1	>2.5	>1	Up to 0.3	Layer	dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing sparse small stones	Buried topsoil or true subsoil		Y	N	Y	N
103	TP1	>2.5	>1	Up to 0.2	Layer	yellowish-brown silty sand	Modern dumped material		Y	N	Y	N
104	TP1	>2.5	>1	> 0.3	Layer	Clean medium-fine windblown sand	Natural windblown sand		Y	N	Y	N
201	TP2	>2.5	>1	0.12	Layer	friable and mixed dark grey brown sandy silt	Topsoil		Y	N	Y	N
202	TP2	>2.5	>1	0.38	Layer	dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing sparse small stones	Buried topsoil or true subsoil		Y	N	Y	N
203	TP2	>2.5	>1	>0.18	Layer	light yellowish-brown sand with iron-staining	Natural substrate		Y	N	Y	N
301	TP3	>2.5	>1	0.16	Layer	mixed friable dark greyish-brown sandy silt topsoil with lenses of clean sand	Topsoil		Y	N	Y	N
302	TP3	>2.5	>1	0.28	Layer	dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing rare small stones and rare marine mollusc shells	Buried topsoil or true subsoil		Y	N	Y	N
303	TP3	>2.5	>1	0.25	Layer	yellowish-brown silty sand	subsoil		Y	N	Y	N
304	TP3	>2.5	>1	>0.12	Layer	medium fine windblown sand with iron-staining	Natural substrate		Y	N	Y	N
401	TP4	>2.5	>1	0.08	Layer	friable and mixed brown sandy silt	Topsoil		Y	N	Y	N

Context No.	Areas	Length (m)	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Type (Cut, Fill, Deposit, surface)	Description	Interpretation	Find No.	Plans (Drwg #)	Sections (Drwg #)	Photos (Y/N)	Samples
402	TP4	>2.5	>1	0.1	Layer	orange sandy gravel	Modern deposit		Y	N	Y	N
403	TP4	>2.5	>1	Up to 0.58	Layer	highly mixed pale yellowish-brown sand containing lenses of topsoil-like sandy silt	Disturbed and mixed natural sand		Y	N	Y	N
404	TP4	>2.5	>1	>0.05	Layer	medium fine windblown sand	Natural substrate		Y	N	Y	N
501	Stripped area	>15	>13	0.2 – 0.35	Layer	friable brown sandy silt containing miscellaneous modern debris and rare small cobbles and occasional larger stones	Topsoil		Y	N	Y	N
502	Trenches 1-3	>15	>13		Layer	dark greyish-brown sandy silt containing rare small stones	Buried topsoil or true subsoil		Y	N	Y	N
503	Trenches 1-3	>15	>13		Layer	medium fine windblown sand with iron-staining	Natural substrate		Y	N	Y	N

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