

Whiteadder



Historic Heart of the Lammermuirs

## A Medieval Sheepcote on the Botwell Water

By Jessica Lowther

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# Introduction and Background

An unusual structure is located on the Bothwell Water, one of the tributary streams of the Whiteadder, which has few local parallels. The building is clearly visible in the LiDAR imagery, located on a low river terrace in the Bothwell Water Valley at NT 68004 65605 (centred), just north west of where an unnamed road crosses the Bothwell Water (Figure 2).

The site sits within a previously recorded area of rig and furrow, recorded as cultivation remains (Canmore ID 57464). This cultivation runs on the same alignment as the structure and presumably masked its identification on aerial photographs. The wider valley is rich in archaeological remains mostly consisting of agricultural features and small pre-improvement settlement remains.

The nearest archaeological site lies c. 400m to the south west. 'Birk Cleuch' is a pre-improvement farmstead visible on Roy's Military Survey 1747-55 and recorded by the Scotland's Rural Past Project. The agricultural remains primarily consist of walls and structures pertaining to the management of sheep, particularly sheepfolds and sheephouses visible on several historical OS maps. The sheephouses of the Bothwell Water Valley are interesting as they are depicted on the OS maps as roofed rectilinear buildings, often with an associated enclosure. None of the OS maps show evidence for the long building.

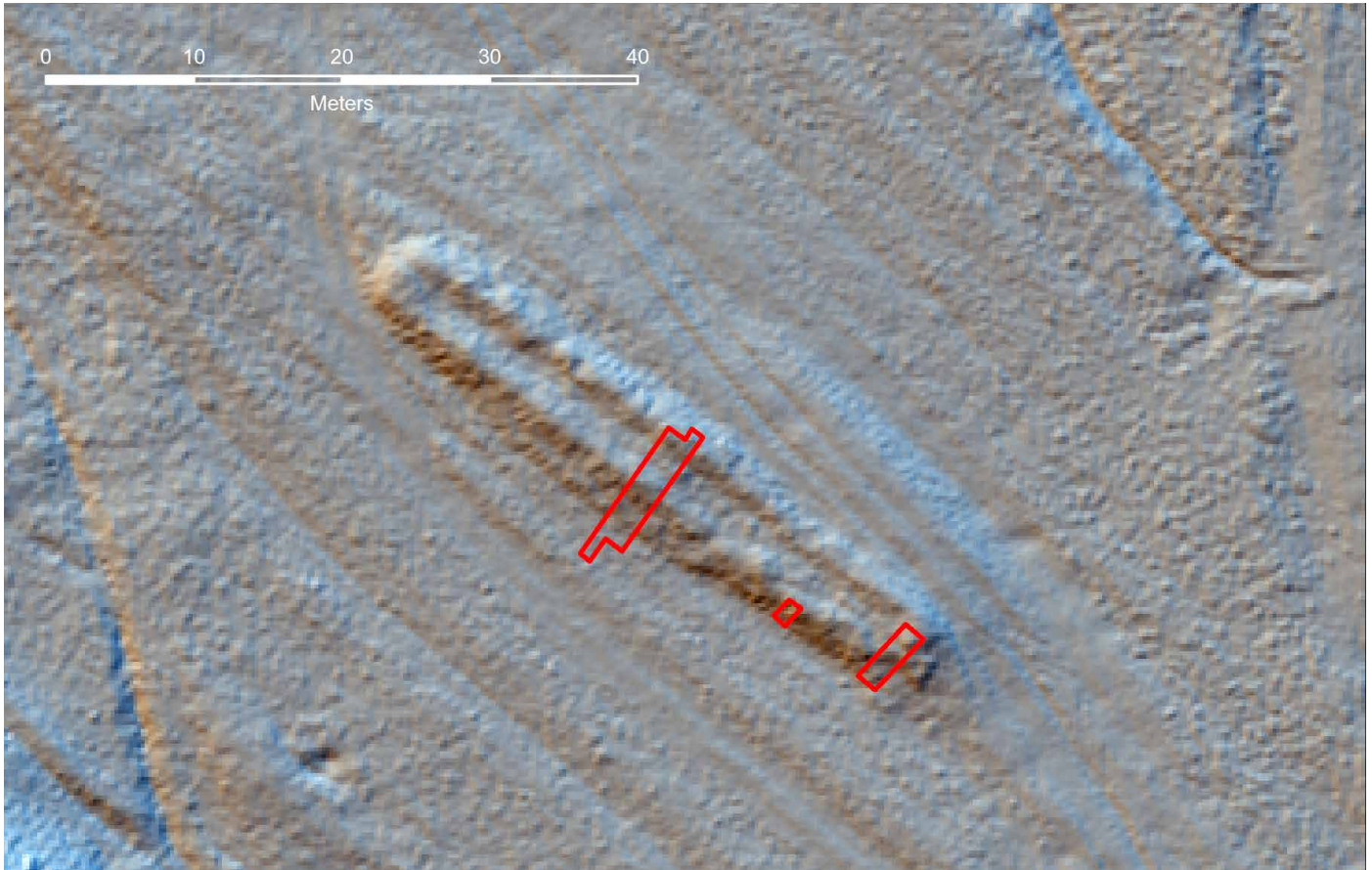


Figure 1: LiDAR scan of the site showing excavation areas

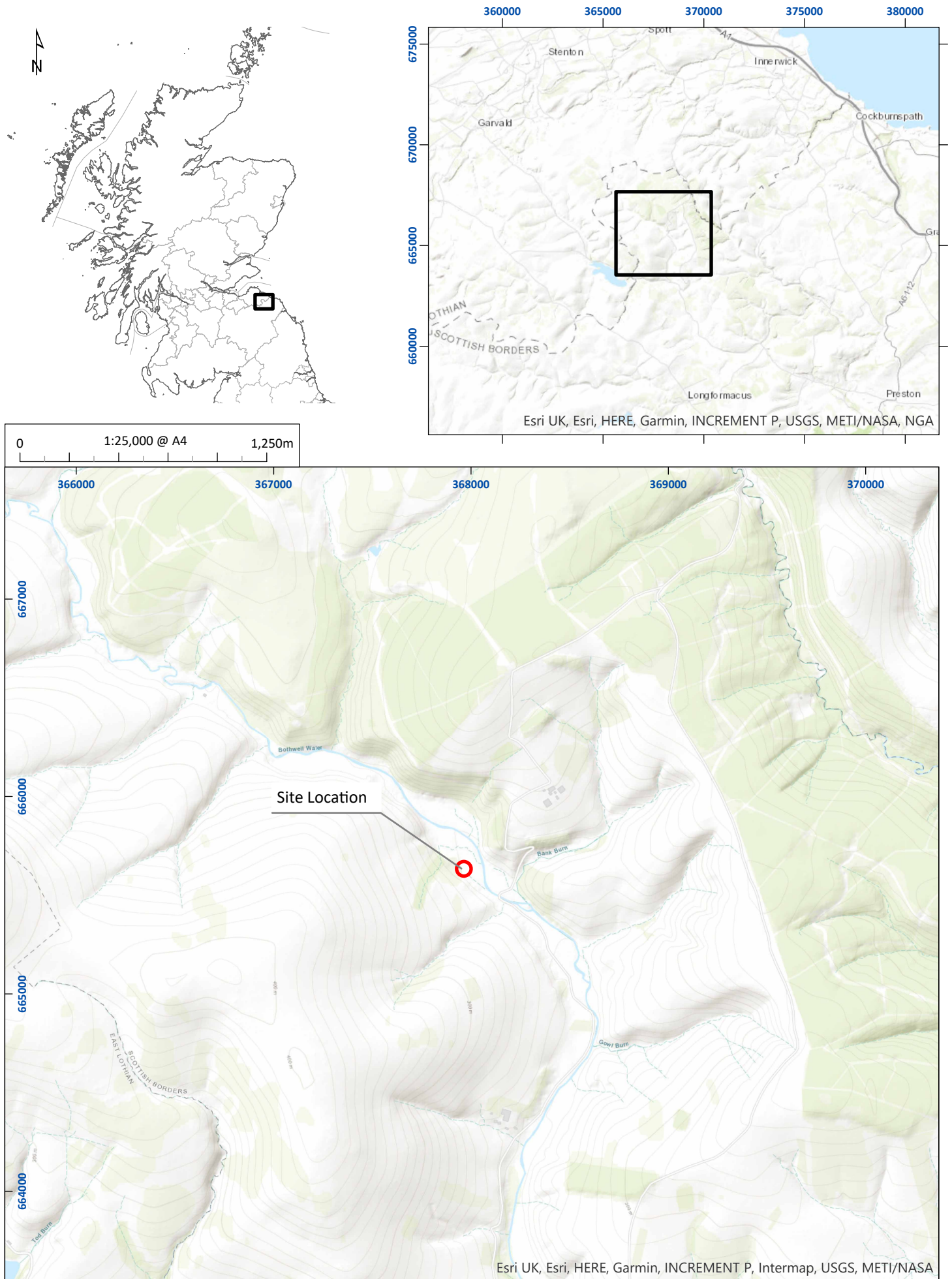


Figure 2: Site location plan



The OS map of 1859 shows a circular sheepfold to the north west of the location of the long building (Figure 3). The OS map from 1895 shows the circular sheepfold and new 'sheephouses' across the river and further up the valley (Figure 4) and the OS map from five years later in 1900 shows the circular sheepfold unnamed, but the sheephouses still visible and named (Figure 5).



Figure 3: Excerpt from 1859 OS map showing sheepfold

Figure 4: Excerpt from 1895 OS map showing sheepfold and new 'sheephouses' across the river and further up the valley



Figure 5: Excerpt from 1900 OS map showing sheephouses

# Results

The archaeological evaluation was undertaken on the 4th-8th February 2020. Two trenches were hand excavated across portions of the building. The building survives as an upstanding earthwork consisting of a continuous rectangular low bank with rounded ends. No entrances are immediately identifiable. The earthwork measures roughly 47m long by 7.5m wide and is oriented northwest to southeast.



Figure 6: Aerial view of the excavation areas

## Trench 1

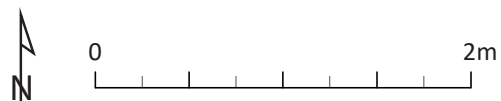
Trench 1 measured approximately 9m x 2.8m and was aligned northeast to southwest (Figure 7). The trench was situated across the western bank of the building.

The western wall of the building [112] (Plate 1) was covered with a collapse/decay deposit (103) consisting of mid-brown orange compact silty sand with patches of clayey silt and large stones throughout. The underlying wall [112] survived up to three courses high and two courses wide. It was constructed with a base course of large flat faced boulders up to 0.85m x 0.45m with the second course constructed of smaller boulders up to 0.4m x 0.32m x 0.22m. The uppermost surviving course consisted of medium stones measuring 0.25m x 0.18m x 0.15m.





Figure 7: Trench 1 Post-ex plan





Wall [112] was well constructed, with the stones packed tightly together with a compact mid to light orange silty sand matrix (114). The basal boulders were set on a mid-brown orange silty sand with inclusions of gravel and frequent small angular stones in its upper extent. This deposit existed under the entire building including the eastern wall [113] and the western wall [112], and continued outside the building to the west and terminated abutting wall [109]. This deposit was interpreted as the old ground surface prior to the construction of the building, forming a rise in the natural topography on the river terrace.

Wall [113] (see plate 3) was not fully exposed, but the overlying material (104) was visibly similar to the deposits forming the decay/collapse deposit (103) of wall [112] and a few in situ wall stones [113] were visible protruding from (104) roughly in a similar alignment and position within the bank as in wall [112].

To the southwest of the main building in Trench 1 a further wall [109] was encountered. It measured up to 1m wide and consisted of sub-rounded and angular stones roughly measuring up to 0.4m x 0.3m x 0.1m. Up to three courses of the wall survived. No bonding material was evident and the wall was poorly built, in contrast to the main walls of the building and appeared to be constructed of a drystone walling technique. The wall ran parallel with the building within the trench and by tracing the unexcavated banks beneath the turf from the wall in either direction, it appeared to meet the building at either end, forming a linear annexe feature.



Plate 1: Southwest facing elevation of wall [112]

Plate 2: Wall [112] in plan



Section AA

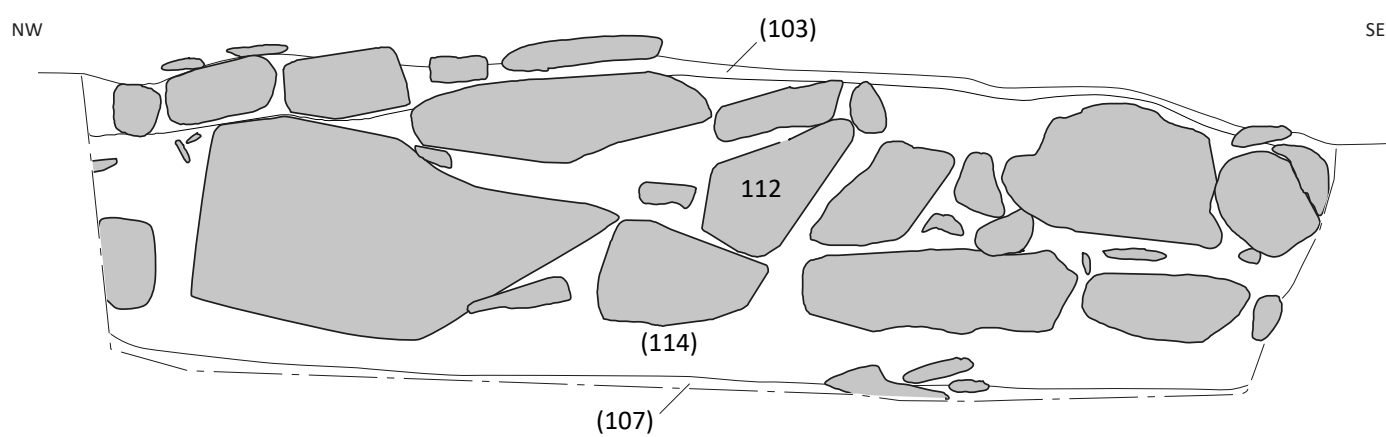


Figure 8: Elevation of wall [112]

0 0.5m



Two large deposits of sub-rounded and sub-angular boulders mixed with smaller stones were evident both in the interior of the building between walls [112] and [113] and the annexe area between walls [109] and [112]. The deposit in the interior of the building (105) was comprised of mid to light brown/orange silty sand with large boulders up to 0.65m x 0.4m x 0.32m and patches of degraded turf throughout. The deposit in the annexe area was similar in composition but included a higher percentage of smaller stones. These deposits were interpreted as tumble from the decay and collapse of walls [112] and [113].

The collapse/decay deposit between walls [112] and [113] on the interior of the building lay directly on top of the original ground surface deposit (107), which ran underneath both of the walls. No internal features or surfaces were encountered. A radiocarbon date obtained from this deposit returned a date of 1249-1299 cal. AD (SUERC-93853, 1 $\sigma$ , 94.7% probability).

Below the building between walls [112] and [113], cut into the original ground surface (107), was a curving linear feature (Figure 7). The cut [116] was 0.4m wide x 0.15m deep with steep sides and a rounded base, filled by (117); a light orange brown silty sand with charcoal flecks and frequent pebbles. The feature may relate to the construction of the building, as it runs below wall [113]. A radiocarbon date obtained for the fill of the feature returned a date of 1223-1284 cal. AD (SUERC-93854, 1 $\sigma$ , 95.4% probability).

Plate 3: Building from the south east showing wall [112] on the left and wall [113] far right



Plate 4: Wall [109] in foreground with building to rear, showing annexe area between

## Trench 2

Trench 2 measured approximately 4.4m x 1.8m and was also oriented northeast to southwest. The trench was opened to investigate whether there had been disturbance to the south east end of the building or whether the visible difference in the bank was caused by an underlying feature. However, a concentration of resources in trench 1 prevented the full excavation of this trench and after the turf was removed and the trench cleaned, the trench was recorded.

The difference in the bank appeared to be due to a difference in construction method of the bank in the southwest end of the trench, compared to the bank at the southeast and northeast. It is possible this southwest portion of the bank was a later addition to the structure, although this was not fully investigated during the evaluation.

Figure 9: Plan of Trench 2

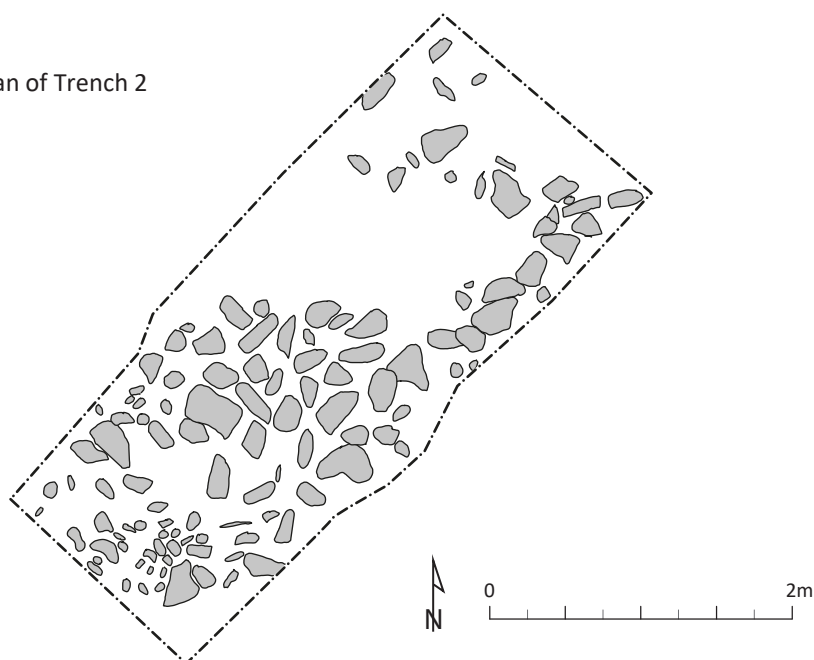
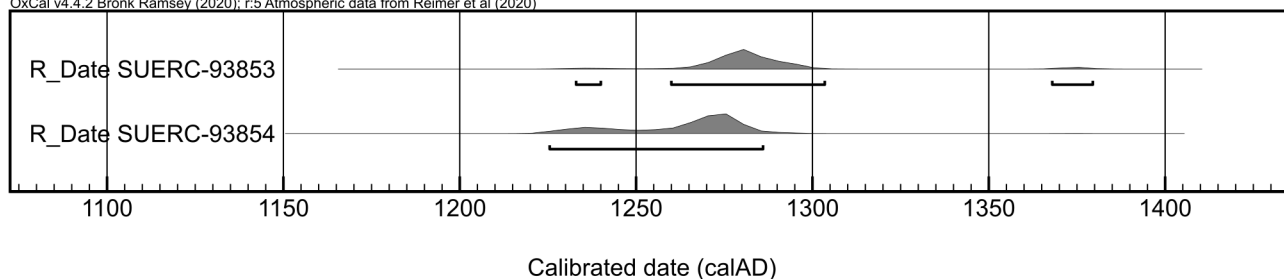


Figure 10: Radiocarbon dates

OxCal v4.4.2 Bronk Ramsey (2020); r:5 Atmospheric data from Reimer et al (2020)





# Discussion and Conclusions

The excavations revealed that the long building identified by LiDAR in the Bothwell Water Valley was constructed to a relatively high standard but contained no internal features in the areas investigated. The collapse/decay deposits contained patches of material consistent with decayed turf as well as a wealth of medium to large stones and boulders, presumably indicating that the walls originally stood to a substantial height with turf elements, perhaps toward the upper parts of the building.

The outer wall [109] was of a different construction which could either indicate that it was a later addition to the structure, or that wall [109] did not need to be as well built as walls [112] and [113] due to a difference of purpose. No internal floor surfaces or features were evident inside the building. It is possible that the limited trenching missed any evidence for these, but it is also possible that the building was not constructed with any.

The building's overall dimensions (47m x 7m) indicate that it is unlikely to be a residential building. With the wealth of agricultural structures in the valley it is likely that the Bothwell long building represents an earlier form of similar agricultural structure such as the linear sheephouses, predating the OS mapping in the area.

The lands where the Bothwell long building is situated were held by the monks of Kelso in the 12th century, after being gifted by Earl Cospatric 1139 x 1153 (Smith 2011) on which they reserved the right to build shielings and sheepfolds to develop their sheep farming (Gilbert 2012). Wool had become so profitable in the early medieval period that 'every available acre in the Borders... was grazed by sheep' (Walling 2014) and in particular the monastic sheep flocks were substantial, with 20 percent of Scottish wool being produced by just the Cistercian houses. The rent rolls for Kelso Abbey in 1290-1300 show they held between seven and eight thousand sheep in one valley alone (Walling 2014). This practice declined over the subsequent centuries particularly owing to the disruption of the countryside by the Wars of Independence in the fourteenth century (Dixon 2002), but saw an increase in the 18th century as a result of changes in agricultural practices and increased demand (Dodgshon 1976).

Medieval sheepfolds are markedly different from the temporary open structures of the 19th and 20th centuries (such as the circular one visible on the OS mapping in figures 2-5) as they were used to house sheep for long periods of time. A well-known 13th-century writer on agricultural affairs, Walter of Henley recommended that sheep were 'housed' in sheepcotes between Martinmas (11 November) and Easter (Dyer 1995).

Dyer (1995) has identified earthworks representing the remains of several medieval sheepcotes across the county of Gloucestershire. The structures range in dimensions from 23-65m long and 6-10m wide and survive as earthworks of the foundations of long buildings, often with surrounding field systems and features. It is estimated that between 1250 and 1550 at any one time there may have been as many as 300 similar sheepcotes in use in Gloucestershire alone, and evidence for them also survives in other counties throughout England (Dyer 1995). They were well constructed, weatherproof buildings and used to house entire flocks of sheep through the winter nights, sometimes costing as much as half the yearly revenue earned from the profits of sheep farming. Manorial records from the 13th and 14th centuries provide an insight into their construction; recording stone built, cruck framed tall buildings, with one recorded at a height of 3.7m. They typically served more than one use, often being used for lambing in the spring and were also sometimes to store materials. Sheepcotes were often located near fresh water, for use as sheep washing, and were used to collect manure for spreading on fields – indicating that the deep deposits would have been dug out after use (Dyer 1995).

The Bothwell Long Building is situated on a low rise in the river terrace surrounded by rig and furrow and a metaled track – which could have removed evidence for any surrounding field systems and features. It conforms to the dimensions and records of the medieval sheepcotes identified by Dyer (1995) in Gloucestershire and other parts of England. The lack of internal features is perhaps not surprising as a sheepcote would not have needed any. The lack of floor surface, formal or informal can be attributed to the practice of manure accumulation; whereby at the end of the life of the structure it would have been thoroughly cleaned out of all valuable accumulations for use on the fields.

The excavations at the Bothwell long building have revealed a well-built structure with evidence for an external annexe. Its form and construction is consistent with similar structures in England identified as the remains of medieval sheepcotes. Documentary evidence confirms that medieval sheep farming was being undertaken in the area as early as the mid-12th century by the monks of Kelso Abbey. Although this structure is not confirmed to date from as early as the 12th century, the structure does pre-date the OS mapping evidence and the other sheep husbandry structures in the valley.

Relatively little evidence remains of rural life in medieval Scotland. There are few surviving remnants of deserted medieval villages and farms in comparison with England (Dixon 2002). If this structure is in fact the remains of a medieval sheepcote, it serves to demonstrate the long-lived sheep farming heritage of the Bothwell Water Valley and also provide a keen insight into the importance of the medieval sheep farming industry.

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