Cunsey Forge
Archaeological Survey 2016
Report Summary

Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) and the University of Salford were invited by the Lake District National Park Authority to provide supervision and support to facilitate and enable a community archaeology project examining the Cunsey Bloomery Forge, close to Near Sawrey in South Lakeland; the project was financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Cunsey Bloomery Forge is a site of considerable archaeological and historical importance, not least as it provides a very rare surviving example of an early seventeenth century bloomery forge that retains significant physical evidence for its development and subsequent conversion for use as a refining forge in the early eighteenth century. The importance of the site was highlighted in 2003, when the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) commissioned a geophysical survey and excavation of an ancillary building on the site by OA North. Some of the site was covered with modern detritus, and since then the site had continued to be used as a rubbish dump and had also become heavily overgrown with trees, raising concerns that the condition of this significant heritage resource was deteriorating.

In view of the importance of the site, the LDNPA proposed that Cunsey Bloomery Forge be subject to further archaeological investigation as part of the 'Rusland Horizons: Working a Lakeland Landscape' project. Designed by the LDNPA, and financed by Heritage Lottery Fund, the Cunsey Bloomery Forge study is one of four community projects that are to be undertaken as

part of the 'Rusland Horizons – The Lives in the Landscape', which is a core element of the overarching project. A principal aim of the project was to involve people from the local community with an interest in archaeology and in their own local historic environment and to provide training in archaeological excavation and survey that would also provide new information on the wealth of archaeological remains at the site.

The programme of archaeological investigation at Cunsey Forge has provided a unique and invaluable opportunity to investigate the principal elements of a Cumbrian forge complex. Coupled with the data recovered from the previous investigation of the site in 2003, the excavation has yielded significant evidence for the evolution of the site, potentially from a medieval bloomery, through intensive use as a bloomsmithy forge, to its reconstruction during the early eighteenth century as a finery forge used in conjunction with the region's blast furnaces. Physical evidence for bloomeries and seventeenth/eighteenth-century iron forges in the region is very rare, and they represent a monument type that is comparatively poorly understood due to lack of research.

It has been suggested previously that Cunsey represents one of the best surviving examples of a bloomsmithy forge/refining forge in the region (OA North 2004), and this has been reaffirmed during the course of the present project. The results of the excavation mostly relate to the use of the site as a refining forge in the early eighteenth century, with considerable potential for elements of the seventeenth-century forge to survive beneath the excavated surface.

The excavation has furnished significant evidence for the internal layout and infrastructure of the main processing area, associated with the finery and chafery forge known from documentary evidence to be operating in the eighteenth century. Situated in the low-lying area at the foot of the retaining bank for the dam across the Cunsey Beck, the eighteenth century forge was undoubtedly water-powered, with the remains of one waterwheel pit being clearly identified on the north-eastern side of the building.

The excavation has also yielded tantalising evidence for a second waterwheel, situated at the foot of the rock-cut headrace from the mill pond, with the tailrace being adapted subsequently as a drain. Compelling evidence for a trip hammer at the site was provided by the remarkable remains of an anvil base and evidence for prolonged use of a hammer in this part of the site was provided by the extensive deposit of smithing pan. The linear edges of the smithing pan were noted during the excavation, and may represent internal partitions or the walls of the forge. However, the

absence of any clear foundations for this building, other than a few stone blocks that may have been used as pads for vertical timber posts, suggests that it may have been an open-fronted structure, which could be closed off with leather sheeting or similar.