

SWALEDALE ANCIENT LAND BOUNDARIES PROJECT

Second Interim Report (1985 season)

This season we have made good progress in our attempt to map the ancient walled field systems of the Reeth area, and to date them. The field systems in question have been briefly described by one of us (TL) in an article entitled 'Early land division and settlement in Swaledale and on the eastern approaches to the Stainmore pass over the North Pennines' (pp. 135-162 in D. Spratt and C. Burgess (eds.) Upland Settlement in Britain (British Archaeological Reports, British Series no. 143, 1985). Briefly, these are mainly large coaxial field systems (that is to say, their major boundaries follow one prevailing axis, so that they are parallel to one another) demarcated by low, broad, ruined walls. There are three main areas of interest; a) the Marrick system, to the NE of Reeth, which may have measured some 2.5-3 km each way; b) the Harkerside system, south of Reeth (perhaps 2 km broad by 1 km long); and c) Calverside, a general name for the hill-slopes and shoulders around Calver Hill to the west of Reeth. Here there are enclosures, cairnfields and small fragments of walling as well as coaxial fields, and this seems to be the most promising area in which to build up a general sequence for the region. The Reeth area itself forms a natural geographical unit, a zone where Swaledale is wider; its importance in late prehistoric/early historic times is emphasised by the large earthworks, the Grinton-Fremington Dykes, which occur here.

Our main season lasted just over two weeks, in the second half of July, when between four and seven people were involved in survey and limited excavation. This was a slightly smaller team than planned, but this turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as we needed to spend the balance of our grant on radiocarbon dates obtained from the plentiful charcoal which was recovered (see financial statement). We also did two weekends' work in the autumn of 1985.

1) The survey

Using the EDM theodolite owned by the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory at the University of Sheffield, we worked on two areas, mapping at a scale of 1:2000.

a) Marrick System (fig. 1). Here we have virtually completed the survey of a large area, approximately 1.5 km each way, on Copperthwaite Allotment, located around NZ 060000. Here, above the escarpment overlooking Reeth, at an altitude of some 430 m, the walls of a large coaxial system run roughly NE from Fremington Edge. On the edge itself are some smaller fields with curvilinear boundaries, including some which radiate from a large robbed Bronze Age cairn; these fields probably date from a different period from that of the Marrick system as a whole. The latter apparently runs almost as far north as Helwith, in the valley of the Marske Beck. There are two main zones of walling, on Copperthwaite Allotment and on Skelton Moor. Settlement sites are sparse here, but they do occur; there are a few enclosures, mostly small ones, very small stone-based huts, in ones and twos, and one or two larger stone-based houses or house-enclosures. There may, of course, have been houses of wood or turf which have left no trace, and other sites concealed in thick heather which we have yet to find. This very large system covers over 600 hectares.

b) Calverside. To the west of Reeth, we have continued mapping the area around Calver Hill (NZ 013003) and the work is nearing completion. The area involved covers Riddings Rigg, immediately to the west of the enclosed land west of Reeth, and the shoulder of moorland between Healaugh and Fore Gill Gate (on the Langthwaite-Low Road at NY 993010). We have also done a little mapping on the NW shoulder of Calver Hill. The sketch on figure 2 gives some indication of the complex structure sequence here. There are enclosures of roughly circular form, small cairns, a small number of hut-circles and possible house sites, short stretches of walling, and major field systems, with two systems

intersecting one another on Riddings Rigg, around NZ 020000. As soon as the plan is complete we will be able to analyse it in more detail; we hope that the material can be separated into phases in a dated sequence, a 'master sequence' which could be applied to a wider area of Swaledale and perhaps adjacent regions.

2) Excavation work

Three sites were excavated, and the section-face of an ancient wall was cleaned up and recorded at a point where it was already exposed, around SE 017996. The first site (A) proved unsuccessful and was soon abandoned. We made an attempt to pick up a wall in a boggy area, and although a promising line of stones projecting through the turf suggested that the wall was submerged, it turned out that they were part of a natural spread of stone. The nearby site B, however, was much more encouraging (see figure 2). Here a narrow trench across a major wall showed that the boundary was built of piled stones without any facing, at any rate at this point, and one stake-hole was found beneath. An attempt was made to see whether it was part of a fence, by extending the trench to the north, but no further stake-holes were found. It must be a matter for conjecture whether this hole, from which about 3 gm of charcoal were recovered, represents a single marking-out pole, part of a line of boundary-markers spaced at wide intervals, or a pole totally unconnected with the boundary system under investigation.

The most satisfying thing about this site was that it produced abundant charcoal, in quantities sufficient for radiocarbon dating. There was some charcoal beneath the wall, some to the west in a clearly defined horizon about 2 cm thick, near but not at the top of the A horizon (the soil horizon immediately below the surface peat) and some to the east of the wall, in the upper part of the A horizon where it sometimes occurred as general flecking, sometimes as a more clearly defined horizon. The charcoal beneath the wall may come from clearance carried out just before the wall was constructed, though it might be much earlier. The other charcoal, especially that to the west, appears to have been produced after the wall was built, during the life of the field systems, and at a time when there was enough worm action to bury it. Five charcoal samples, one from below and two each from the east and west sides of the wall, have been submitted to the Godwin Laboratory at the University of Cambridge for radiocarbon dating. It is expected that the results will be available sometime this winter. Identification of the tree/shrub species from which the charcoal has been derived will also be carried out, and should provide useful information about the nature of the landscape, especially since we have as yet no pollen stratigraphy to give us the general vegetational history of the area. It was hoped that the wall might have been built on a thin peat layer, but this proved not to be the case. Globules of peat of unknown date had formed in the voids between the stones. The wall and the area surrounding it was sealed by a peat of about 15 ± 5 cm.

Site C lay further east on Riddings Rigg (see figure 2). This was located at a critical intersection between a field system orientated roughly NW-SE with relatively broad walls and one orientated N-S with narrower walls. Before the excavation it looked from the position of an apparent facing stone, that the N-S wall overlay the NW-SE wall, and clearance of heather roots and a little peat showed that this was indeed the case. This was fortunate, since robbery at this intersection had destroyed all other evidence about the relationship between the two walls, and hence the two systems. As can be seen from the plan, the N-S walls, as well as post-dating the NW-SE walls, also post-date a circular enclosure. It should be noted that these walls, unlike the example further west at site B, are properly faced, although they are extremely low.

General comment on results

The situation is very satisfactory. We have two nearly completed plans,

from Calverside and Copperthwaite Allotment. On Calverside we have obtained material for absolute dating and have established the relative chronological position of two major walled field systems. It would be premature to say much about the Calverside sequence at the moment, but three points may be worth making:

1. We now have several roughly circular/ovoid enclosures, which must represent a distinct chronological horizon; it is noteworthy that two of them are in very exposed locations, perhaps by deliberate design. These enclosures are without obvious traces of hut-circles or house-platforms.
2. Most of the small cairns are found in small groups and are relatively small and irregular in shape. However, in one area to the west of the Cleasby enclosures the cairns are a good deal larger and more neatly built; possibly these cairns form a cemetery, as distinct from the 'clearance cairns' elsewhere.
3. Charcoal seems to be relatively abundant here, raising the possibility that substantial clearance including burning was necessary when the fields were laid out here. It also suggests that we may obtain all the dating evidence we need without having to get involved in digging a settlement site.

Objectives for 1986

1. To finish the plans of Calverside and Copperthwaite Allotment (about five days' work).
2. To map as much as possible of the Harkerside system.
3. To continue our investigation of the 'master sequence' on Calverside by further small-scale excavations at key points. At the moment the sites to be chosen are under discussion. Attention will be directed to the sequence of construction of field systems and settlement sites and to the recovery of environmental evidence and dating material. It is also hoped to solve one or two problems concerned with the layout of the field systems, for example the course of the 'terminal' or top wall of the NW-SE system on Riddings Rigg, and to see whether the use of a resistivity meter can help with these questions, picking up the course of walls buried in peat or thick heather.
4. To obtain the help of a palaeobotanist to work on environmental problems.

Thanks

We wish to record our thanks to the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority and to the Prehistoric Society for their financial support; to the Reeth Moor Committee and Mr. Mark Alderson (Calverside), Mr. Bainbridge (Copperthwaite Allotment) and Mr. David White (Stelling Bottom) for permission for survey and small-scale excavation work; and to Claire Adamson, Geraint Coles, Sarah Curtis, Chris Grimbley, Dave Hooley, Jenny Kestle, Jim McNeil and Rachel for their cheerful assistance, sometimes in rough climatic conditions.

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November 1985

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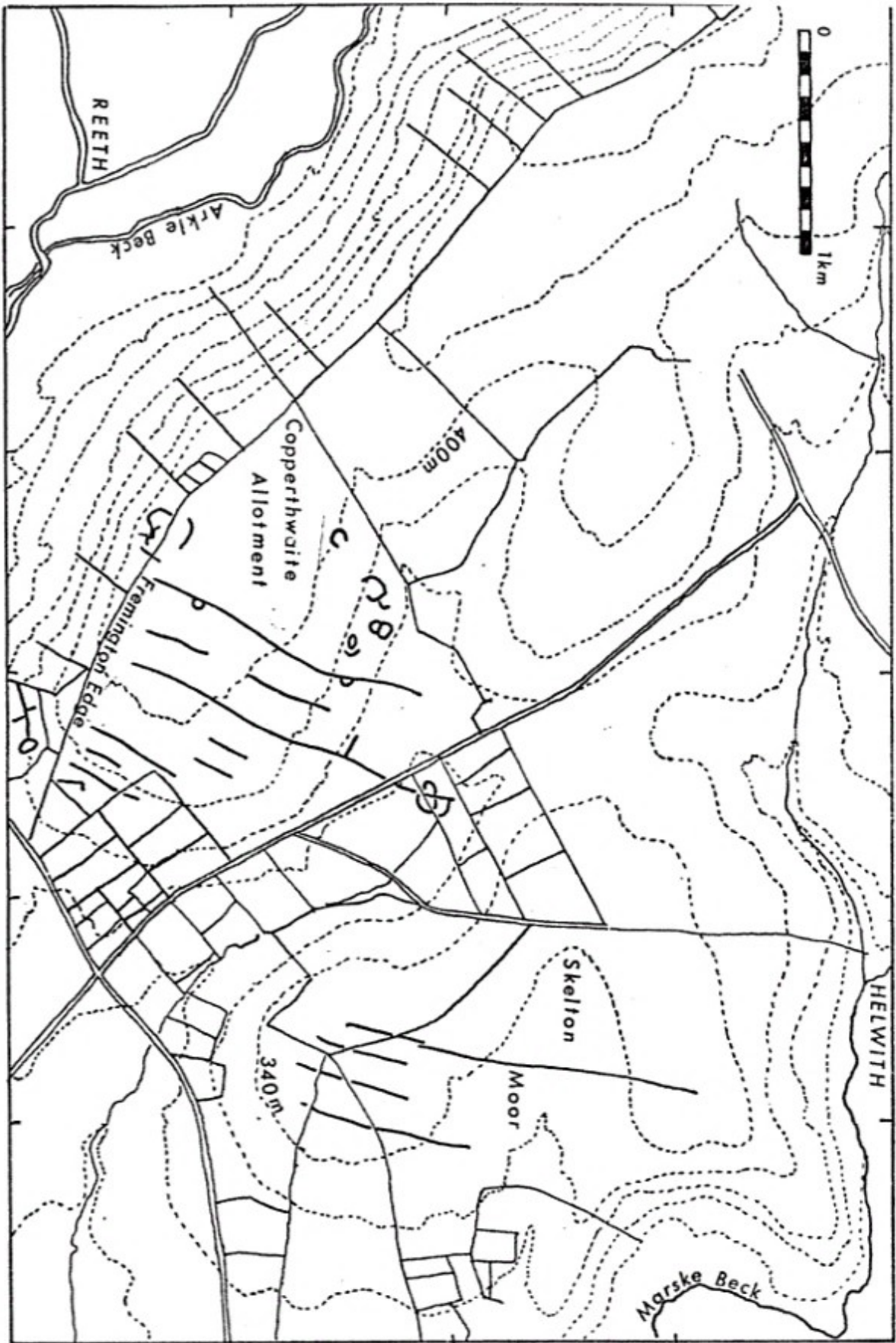


fig.1