

# SWALEDALE ANCIENT LAND BOUNDARIES PROJECT

Fifth Interim Report (1988 season)

## INTRODUCTION

This year we have made considerable progress in our study of Swaledale's ancient land boundaries, which is aimed at determining their date and the sequence in which they were established and used. In various places, but especially in the Reeth area, archaeological sites are visible on the surface on both the heather moorlands and the enclosed land below, on the daleside. On the moors there are small cairns, and ruined walls, which once demarcated enclosures and field systems. Most of the field systems seem to have been quite large, with their major boundaries conforming to a prevailing layout axis. Among the present-day walled fields there are substantial traces of an older pattern of smaller fields, many of them roughly rectilinear, and numerous settlement sites. Most of these are roughly oval or circular platforms cut back into the hillside, on which may be seen one or more smaller 'house-platforms', presumed to have been the sites of buildings; there are also house-platforms outside the enclosures. Our work has mainly concentrated on the moors to the south and west of Calver Hill, a zone which we call Calverside, and on the daleside between Reeth and Healaugh.

## THE 1987-88 SEASON

The main field season took place from July 8th-31st, with a team of volunteers - 5 in the first week, around 15 in the two subsequent weeks. In the first week we were mainly occupied in pre-excavation work, EDM survey on Calverside, and beginning an inventory of pollarded elms. During the next two weeks we completed the excavation of Calverside E, a moorland site on Black Hill; excavated a house platform on an enclosed settlement site ENE of Healaugh; and did further prospection and survey on the Calverside moors. Also, a small amount of prospection and photography occurred at selected weekends.

This was a difficult season from a financial point of view, and the accounts should be read with the following factors in mind: the Project was very fortunate to have free use of a minibus from the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory in the University of Sheffield, to have the subsidised services of several third year field course students from that department, and the services of several volunteers who were willing to attend for no more than the payment of their camp site fees.

## Calverside E

Readers of last year's report may remember that we had provisionally interpreted the site as that of a cairn which had been robbed, with a boundary wall then transgressing its southern edge. Further work this year, in difficult conditions, tended to confirm this interpretation. Disappointingly, it proved impossible to locate any deposit which might have been associated with the cairn, although we were naturally able to study the character of the wall, which was broad and low and apparently roughly faced.

## Calverside field systems

Field checks of the accuracy and completeness of our previous survey were carried out. Increased confidence in our ability to recognise ancient walls and robber trenches allowed us to pick up several new boundaries, with a beneficial effect on our interpretation of the Calverside sequence. Unfortunately time pressures which built up during the preparation period of this interim report have prevented its illustration by a detailed interim plan. However, the main findings were as follows:

a) Four roughly circular enclosures were thought to be relatively 'early' in the sequence, and it has been known from the start that one of them was slighted by a boundary wall of the Healaugh system. It is now clear that another enclosure was respected by field walls which run up to but not through it, and that the eastern part of a third enclosure was robbed out, to make the later field wall which runs beside it. The case for regarding these four carefully-spaced enclosures as roughly contemporary and early, dating perhaps to a phase (of common grazing?) when there were no walled boundaries on Calverside now seems a good one.

b) The Reeth system, located mainly on Riddings Rigg and known to pre-date the Healaugh system, now looks a good deal more complete, after the finding of a new wall and the discovery that a wall already known could be traced all the way to the terminal. Our work on the north-eastern side of the Reeth system, around Black Hill, had already indicated that the walls of the system ended on two different terminal boundaries, suggesting at least two distinct phases of land division here. Further fieldwork in this area in 1988 has strongly confirmed this, showing how a boundary from one phase cuts across the terminal of an earlier episode of boundary-making. We have also discovered a new small walled enclosure in this area, and also, thanks to the sharp eyes of a visitor, Mike Atwell, the first case of a rock carving to be recognised from this zone.

c) The situation near Cleasby, on the western side of our study area, is now more complex, with evidence for two distinct axes of alignment for the upper fields near the Cleasby enclosures, and an irregular but in places rather impressive 'top wall' to the N and NW of them. In several places here it can be seen that some boundaries have been laid out with total lack of reference to others, allowing us to work much more positively towards the establishment of a sequence.

d) On the map generally it is becoming clear that the gaps which may occur where one wall meets another are more significant than we would have previously believed. These gaps are unlikely, in most cases, to represent robbery by the builders of recent walls; they are simply too small, and the

recent walls are much too far away. The gaps probably represent robbery in antiquity, by the builders of other, later ancient walls. Where we have two walls which do not actually cross one another, the more complete one is likely to be the later of the two. This is a very useful finding, which will give us considerable help in building up a sequence.

e) Now that the evidence from the Cleasby area has been added to that from Riddings Rigg, it is becoming very clear that the building of boundaries on Calverside was episodic. When new walls were laid out, their predecessors tended to be over-ridden or robbed, which suggests that there were periods when walls went out of use, being neither respected as boundaries nor maintained physically as barriers. This episodic boundary-making may have several interesting implications which will be considered below.

#### Healough site A

Here (SE 021992 approx, some 300m ENE of Healough and on land enclosed at the present day) is a group of six or seven house-platforms enclosed within a bank or wall to form a settlement enclosure with an entrance on the southern or downhill side approached by a hollow-way. There are ancient field-banks in the area, and two other enclosures not very far away to the east, one of which has house-platforms; arrangements in the other are unclear, owing to probable damage in relatively recent times. A little further to the WNW are at least three unenclosed ancient house-platforms.

Careful excavation of one platform within the enclosure revealed a good deal of tumbled stone rubble. This was eventually cleared to reveal, on the last scheduled day of the excavation, an elliptical building with a floor of rough flag-stones, with a well-built wall-face at the back of the platform and the basal course of an equally neat wall surviving on the platform's front edge. The main axis of the building measured 9.3m and lay along the contour, with an entrance on the eastern side; it was 5.1m wide. There were considerable numbers of cracked and split pebbles on the site, presumably pot-boilers; some of them must have come down from the buildings higher up the slope. Two sherds of early Roman pottery were associated with the building, which contained stones with well-defined 'dished' areas, presumably seats for wooden uprights (door-posts?) and a saddle-quern re-used as a flagstone.

As can be easily imagined, there was little time to record this building properly, especially given the poor weather conditions which prevailed, and it was resolved to return to the site in 1989. It seems likely from the character of the area immediately behind the elliptical house that there was an earlier platform here, probably more circular or squareish in plan, which could well have been for a pre-Roman building (from which which might have come the saddle-quern referred to above). With the vision given by this discovery, inspection of the grassy surface of the platform just below the one under discussion suggests that there may be two building phases here too. Surface inspection also suggests that the hollow-way which leads into the enclosure from the south was not necessarily a primary feature in its present form.

## Elm pollards

Attempting to find out more about the ancient pollarded elms of the Reeth area, which we were apparently the first to recognise, has been a 'spin-off' of the Ancient Boundary Project's work. With signs of the ravages of Dutch elm disease all around it has seemed important to promote their study. This year we did some recording, mainly of girths and disease percentages, of elms around Reeth and Marrick, and we discovered a fine series of pollards on top of the eastern Grinton/Fremington earthwork, between Swale Hall and Grinton.

At the end of October we were able to arrange a visit by Dr Oliver Rackham, the country's foremost expert on the history of woodland, and he was able to:

a) confirm the identification of the pollards, and suggest, as we thought, that most of them are between about 300 and 600 years old, so that the tradition goes back to at least the late Middle Ages.

b) suggest that pollarding ceased during a period stretching between the late eighteenth century and the early twentieth, with most cessations (as we thought) about 130-150 years ago.

c) identify some 300 year old hawthorn pollards, which we had not noticed, in the area just NE of Reeth - on the hillside and on some of the boundaries.

d) confirm our suspicions that this part of Swaledale once contained more hedges than is apparent now.

e) suggest that with regard to Dutch elm disease, all is not lost. Apparently Wych Elm survives the disease better than the Common Elm, and the trees which have young green shoots springing from the knobbly pollarded part of the tree are quite likely to recover. It is to be hoped that some preservation policy can be developed which takes account of the antiquity of these fine old trees and their capacity for survival into the 21st century.

## OUTLOOK FOR THE PROJECT

It is worth discussing briefly the main implications of this year's campaign, since after this season's successes, it looks as if we can move towards some general conclusions and ideas for future work.

The finding of a well-constructed Romano-British house, probably dating from early in the Roman period, in a small enclosed settlement near Healaugh, is of major interest; at present its closest parallel seems to lie at Roystone Grange, on the limestone of Derbyshire. Here a rather similar building, associated apparently with a little pottery of the second century A. D. was discovered only a week or two before the Healaugh excavation. That the Healaugh house had a (?late Iron Age) predecessor is an exciting possibility which we hope to investigate in 1989. It may be that this will turn out to be a settlement which witnessed the Iron Age/Romano-British transition, and that this site can be compared with other North Yorkshire sites, such as Stanwick, which relate to the process of 'Romanisation' in this area. It may turn out that 'house-platform' sites like the one excavated at Healaugh will turn out to be late prehistoric/early Romano-British, as opposed to settlement sites with small rectilinear enclosures, in

Swaledale and elsewhere, which may relate to a time later in the Roman period.

The evidence that land division on Calverside was both episodic and large-scale suggests that these upper slopes were probably common land, subjected sometimes to phases of tighter control which may not have lasted very long, judging by the unelaborated character of the boundary systems. The patterns of 'ownership' represented by the boundaries evidently did not endure long enough to be recognised in later boundary-making phases - old boundaries tended to be ignored or partially robbed. It may be that the episodes of boundary-making on Calverside reflect significant phases in Swaledale's history - phases of population growth, perhaps, or times when social and economic conditions made it necessary to make more intensive use of the upper slopes. It is now vital to try to find a location which would produce a 'master' pollen sequence for Swaledale, so that these boundary-making episodes can be correlated with changes in vegetation cover - episodes of clearance and regeneration of woodland, perhaps the spread of moorland vegetation, and so on. We are grateful to Dr David Gilbertson of the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory at the University of Sheffield for advising us on locations which might be suitable for such work, for which we will have to try to find resources.

#### FUTURE PLANS

In 1989, subject to financial considerations and permission, we hope mostly to build on advances made this year, as follows:

Calverside. There is still work to be done on the completeness of the plan, reconstruction of the boundary sequence, and dating. We hope to add further detail to the existing plan - further boundaries discovered during recent fieldwork, including those exposed by recent moorland burning. Attempts to clarify our view of the sequence of the boundaries will be made by a number of very small, shallow trenches at critical boundary junctions. We will carry out a small programme of probing and work with a resistivity meter, in places where the course of a boundary needs to be established. We also propose to do some soil auguring to find out which critical junctions may be associated with charcoal spreads dense enough to be usable for radiocarbon dating purposes.

Healaugh site A. We hope to re-open the site of the Romano-British building to check the probability that there is an earlier house beneath it, and to locate further associated material. We hope also to do a small investigation of the nature of the boundary of the enclosure which surrounds the settlement site.

Elm pollards. We believe that we should continue to do some basic recording of the location and character of the elms, which are under assault from disease and chain saws. If we can secure resources for a proper study of these trees, the basic work which we have carried out will be of considerable use.

We propose a three-week season, from July 5th (arrival day) to July 28th (departure day). As in 1988, the first week would be spent mainly on survey work on Calverside, deturfing the Healaugh site, and on recording elm pollards. Weeks two and three would be spent continuing the excavation at Healaugh, and doing some small-scale trenches on Calverside (see above).

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Tim Laurie,  
Flat 3,  
15 Pierremont Crescent,  
Darlington.

Andrew Fleming,  
Department of Archaeology  
and Prehistory,  
The University,  
Sheffield S10 2TN.