

Appleby Archaeology April 2010

Many visitors were welcomed to the last meeting of the winter season of Appleby Archaeology when Paul Frodsham, Historic Environment Officer, North Pennines Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) Partnership, spoke on *The Prehistory of the North Pennines*. Paul also introduced the group to an exciting community archaeology project called *Altogether Archaeology* which will start this summer and run initially for 18 months. The project aims to encourage local people to undertake research work such as topographic and geophysical studies of multi period archaeological landscapes. Some more detailed investigations will be undertaken for example of rock art sites and small scale excavation of prehistoric settlements within the AONB.

The North Pennines AONB encompasses a wide area extending from near Kirby Stephen in the south west to south of Corbridge in the north east and Brampton in the north west. It includes part of the Eden valley, the South Tyne valley, Weardale and Teasedale.

Ice covered the area until around 10,000 years ago and this ice destroyed any evidence, that there might have been, of human activity. Evidence of the first hunters dates to the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) and comes from finds of tiny flint blades (microliths) which are between six and eight thousand years old. These along with later arrowheads dating to the Neolithic 3500-2000 BC (New Stone Age) and Bronze Age 2300-700BC have been found in lowland areas in Northumberland. These locations are very like present day wooded river valleys, and suggest that people moved to areas where there was food and water.

Mesolithic camp sites have been located in the Cheviots and it is probable that there are similar sites in the North Pennines. Flints are occasionally found in upland areas of the North Pennines. Mesolithic flints were found near Alston, when peat was washed away, and in molehills in Allendale. Further similar finds could lead to the mapping of the movement of the people who made and used the tools. Neolithic axes from Langdale are found in the North East and elsewhere, enabling archaeologists to trace the likely trade routes for these axes.

There is more evidence of the treatment of the dead in prehistory as many late Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds (barrows) have been located. Round cairns are common, but without excavating, it is difficult to tell whether these cover burials or are just heaps of stone cleared from fields. Such sites have been found for example on Stainmore where cairns and field boundaries have been identified.

A rare discovery was made at Kirkhaugh near Alston when two Bronze Age barrows and a cairn were excavated in the 1930s to reveal a Beaker pot, flints, and a gold earring or hair decoration which are now in the Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle. These finds are similar to more recent ones from Stonehenge and pose the question of why they were buried in a small cairn in the North Pennines.

Another spectacular find was made in the 19th century when a Bronze Age hoard, dated to around 1000 BC was found, apparently in the middle of nowhere, in Heathery Burn Cave, Co Durham. The hoard, which contained tools, weapons, pins and rings is now hidden away in a store room at the British Museum. Other prestigious objects such as jet beads and pots have been found and again raise the question as to what was going on in the area three to four thousand years ago.

Paul reminded the group that the dates given to the different ages was a guide and that the changes for example from hunter gatherer to early farmer or from the use of bronze to that of iron were gradual and evolved over a long period of time.

He then drew the group's attention to some other sites and their potential for further investigation. Aerial photographs of Garrogill show circular features with two concentric ditches which have not yet been surveyed. Long Meg, which is aligned to the winter solstice and is one of the best known sites in the area, merits further study including further investigation of the landscape and the relationship of the circle to other monuments. It is possible, that the carvings on Long Meg, which are examples of prehistoric rock art, were carved when the stone was part of the riverside cliff and a sacred site .

Recent survey work at a Bronze Age site at Scordale has revealed a complex of house platforms, cairn fields and field walls extending over 20 hectares. These finds indicate that it would be worthwhile to survey a wider area. Burnt Mounds are another feature of this period that need more investigation. In 1999 none had been recorded in the North Pennines but now several have been noted. These mounds are found near water and contain a hearth, are typically kidney shaped and made up of fired cracked pebbles and charcoal. They are associated with a sort of wooden trough which suggests that they may have been used for heating water. No one is sure of their purpose but one suggestion, which Paul favoured, is that they were sweat lodges or prehistoric saunas.

There is little evidence of Iron Age activity in the North Pennines in contrast to Northumberland where there is abundant evidence of forts. An enclosed farmstead has been recorded at Castle Hill, Dufton and it is possible that this dates to the Iron Age. Recent excavations by Apple Archaeology and North

Pennines Archaeology at the Druidical Judgemnt Seat, Appleby have indicated an Iron Age or earlier enclosure. In Upper Teasdale several potential Iron Age sites have been located but all need further investigation.

The lack of knowledge of the prehistory of the North Pennines may in some way be due to the attention given to Roman archaeology and of the impact of lead mining on the landscape. A five year research programme being undertaken by English Heritage at Whitley Castle may lead to a better understanding of the historic landscape. This involves a detailed study of the fort and its adjacent civilian settlement, and is part of a wider research project in which English Heritage, in conjunction with North Pennines AONB Partnership, are investigating the evolution of the landscape around Alston. Lidar surveys, which use pulsed laser beams to scan the ground from the air to produce images of far greater detail than aerial photography, are being used and have to date revealed evidence of the landscape from prehistory to the advent of lead mining.

Paul concluded by emphasising the need to find out more about the prehistory of this beautiful area, the questions that require answers and the potential for the community to be involved in the community project *Altogether Archaeology*.

A number of questions were taken before Paul was thanked for a stimulating and informative talk.

3/5/2010