March 2014 Appleby Archaeology

Appleby Archaeology welcomed Blaise Vyner, a consultant archaeologist to their March meeting. His talk concentrated on the prehistoric features on Fylingdale Moor, North Yorkshire a location familiar to many present.

Fylingdale moor is unusual in that the heather moorland extends to the coast as elsewhere on the North York Moors the coastal land is now in agricultural use. It was known that concealed under the heather there was a variety of archaeological features including rock art and burial mounds. Some of these features had been examined in the past but not recorded and many had proved impossible to relocate because of the vegetation.

The wildfire of autumn 2003 was to change that. 2.5 square kilometres of moorland was burnt. The intense heat destroyed the blanket of peat which had formed after the area was abandoned by farmers around 1000BC and exposed hundreds archaeological sites not previously recorded. It was vital to preserve these sites which were now susceptible to erosion and to restore the ecology of the moor. The immediate actions were to record the archaeology and regenerate the vegetation by reseeding the area with a mixture of heather and rye grass.

A walk over survey combined with aerial photography over the area was undertaken. GPS and digital photography were used and a computer data base was established and this was augmented by a detailed field survey of a sample area with laser scanning of some of the decorated stones. Cut heather brash was then spread over major monuments and other steps were taken to prevent damage from the weather. English Heritage produced a report in 2004. Many prehistoric features were identified including rock art, standing stones, rectangular cairns, enclosures, burial mounds as well as more recent evidence of alum works and military activity.

A few months after the fire the most important feature on the moor was discovered now referred to as the Stoup Brow Monument. It was first seen as a decorated stone protruding from the ground. Disturbance of the stone by a visitor who proceeded to excavate before alerting the National Park and English Heritage led to pressure to excavate and protect the stone. The stone was found to be part of a curved monument and had an entire side covered in geometric designs and it may have been broken and reset in this ring of stones. Only a segment of the 8 metre diameter monument was excavated and other stones decorated with cup marks were found. Cup marks and cup and ring marks predominate in the rock art on the moor. The vegetation has now regenerated and the monument, now recorded, is again protected.

Field work continued and from 2007 and 2013 certain features were examined in more detail. Blaise spoke in detail about the following.

A number of gullied features were identified comprising of a shallow gully, around 0.35 to 0.40 metres wide, enclosing a sub-rectangular area ranging in size from 2 metres square to 8 metres by 4metres. Some contained stones and a tiny piece of Iron Age pottery was found in one. Similar structures are found in north Wales and one was identified on Brackenber in

2011. Their interpretation is uncertain but it is probable that they were foundation trenches for structures.

Over a 100 little cairns 2-3 metres in diameter were found and a number were examined in detail. There was a great variety and many had been carefully constructed. Some had stone kerbs and a few contained worked flints of the Early Bronze Age (EBA). Several cairns were excavated and contained nothing and they were carbon dated to the Middle Bronze Age (MBA). The interpretation was that the EBA cairns were ritual and MBA ones were agricultural.

An attempt was made to establish a chronology of the rock art. Rock art was seen in the stones of cairns where it appeared that the pieces may have been smashed off larger monuments and dragged to the cairn suggesting that the decorated rocks were of significance to those who built the monuments and they were probably EBA. Earth-fast rock art with a wide variety of motifs may be Neolithic and portable rock art mainly of cup marks is probably EBA.

The follow up fieldwork also tried to establish the environmental history of the moor but there were gaps. Nothing is known of the Neolithic and EBA environment or the period from the Romans to the 18th century. In the MBA it was partly wooded and in the Iron Age there was heather bracken and scrub, by the 18th century there was extensive ash and alder woodland and by the 20th century there was extensive heather.

The fieldwork since the fire has enabled the principal periods of activity on the moor to be identified. There is some evidence of Neolithic activity in the rock art and possible cairns and enclosures and much more of the Early and Middle Bronze Age activity. Irom Age round houses and rectangular structures are seen but then there is a gap then until the 18th century alum works and water features and more recently game management, quarrying, military activity and rubbish dumping. From the iron age onwards animals were grazed , peat was dug and turf was cut on the moor.

Blaise concluded his beautifully illustrated talk by mentioning that pattern of prehistoric monuments appeared to lie on a south- north axis on both the east and west of the this region and that there was no evidence of monuments between North Yorkshire and Cumbria on an east and west axis.

The next meeting of the Appleby Archaeology Group is on Tuesaday April 8th when Dot Broughton (Lancs and Cumbria Portable Antiques Scheme) will talk about The Silverdale and Furness Viking Hoards.