PREHISTORIC SOUTH TYNE

There's a small valley in southwest Northumberland, not far from the Durham, Cumbria and Northumberland borders. It has the best preserved drystone walls in the Pennines and is perhaps named after a Viking transport boat – the Knarr. Several veins of copper ore are named on Alston Moor but were mostly worked out before formal records began and have consequently been forgotten. The copper seams mostly contain chalcopyrite but azurite and malachite are also known.

My first find, in '84, was the old copper mine known as the Bold Venture (H.E.R. N13105) The portal has been walled shut but a gap through to the riverbank remains. It opens into a two metre high chisel-cut tunnel. The roof reduces gradually and, after a hundred metres or so, is little more than chest height. An unpleasant roof fall blocks the way, with a fork in the tunnel beyond. The mine was reported as abandoned in the early years of the 18C. An open stone cist remains 30m. from the mine entrance and this now has water running beneath it. There's many good examples of cairns large and small on the surrounding hillsides. A short walk upstream leads to the Butter Well Cairns. These three in a line jumbled stone cairns also seem to have been built over a stream (H.E.R. N13682). A riverine bed of glassy blue slag is presumably left from the medieval copper workings and has granted the village nearby the picturesque name of Slaggyford.

There are extensive peat deposits on the north-facing higher slopes of the Knar valley and these are vegetated by moorland sheep pasture and heather moorland. Between the layers of peat, about halfway down, are preserved the extensive remnants of prehistoric forestry work. There are good quantities of ancient bogoak bits, which wash out from the peat and collect beside the little streams. The pieces are usually roots or knotty pieces and often hold the sharp relief of the tool that cut them. A complete piece of roundwood emerged which had been trodden on and snapped in antiquity and presumably rejected and discarded. The bog oak roundwood has a very good record of the sharp axe that severed it and, opened out, it would be 48" long. Firewood in the United States is still sold by the cord foot, which is a measure four feet by four feet by a foot high. The unit of a cord of wood – probably named after the length of knotted twine that measured it - is believed to have been exported from G.B. and was also used in Australia and New Zealand. The inept P.A.S. Officer returned all the small finds, which included stone tools, both unrecorded and without comment.

A Victorian church minister at Croglin, a couple of kilometres away from the Bold Venture mine, was presented with some pieces of a Middle Bronze Age stone mould, that were found near a local quarry. The soapstone bivalve mould is held by Tullie House Museum in Carlisle and was intended to directly cast a basal-looped socketed spearhead; perhaps the steatite was quarried at Shetland. It's notable that the mould contains a space to shape the central plug – usually of baked coarse fireclay – and also that a corroded spearhead was found by a pioneer 1980s detectorist a few kilometres away. This Wolf Hills Farm spearhead is also held by Tullie House and it seems unlikely that a mis-cast object would travel far from its place of origin. The Alston Foundry cast fine bronze pieces, latterly golf club heads, until 2005.

Broad Mea Long Cairn (H.E.R. N27590) is a near hemispherical mound of rough stones, about twenty metres across and four or five high. Perhaps it had an entrance from the northeast to the middle that was later blocked and filled. A long tapering tail of stone, fifty metres long, runs out from the back of the cairn. In plan shape it's like the hour hand of a clock or a vertically bisected pear placed flat side down. It seems unique. The tail leads away from the northernmost rising point of the moon and will indicate the turning point of the eighteen and a half year 'Great Lunar Cycle'.

The letter from the Northumberland County Archaeologist with congratulations for the big cairn with a tail find is dated 1997 but nobody has yet visited this remote monument. It is unprepossessing on aerial images, distinguished mostly by the little modern era sheepfold beside it, and LiDAR images have yet to appear. Perhaps the long stone tail was added with the intention of capturing the shadow cast by the cairn at the time of a northernmost moonrise. Half a dozen giant rocks were added on top perhaps to raise the profile of the cairn so the actual shadow cast would fit the tail better. These are known as the Fineagle Stones and must weigh five or six tonnes apiece. A couple of hundred metres up the fell is a derelict drystone shelter that looks down on the cairn. It is marked by a single large boulder and the shape suggests that it was a short curved wall, presumably to shelter the watchers from the weather. There's enough space there for two or three officials. Professor Thom used the term observatory to describe a monument's lookout spot although 'managers dugout' might be more appropriate here. It *is* possible that the extreme northern rising of the moon would be bright enough to cast a shadow, when weather conditions were perfect, three or four days after a Full Moon. As an ephemeral spectacle it would certainly be extremely rare and might be tested in the autumn of 2024 when the moon rises again in the far north.

There's another long cairn nearby, at Colouring Crags (H.E.R. N27591), which is an enormous ungainly pile of stones. It has never been visited by an archaeologist and has a little satellite cairn. The Colouring Crags grouse drive is one of the most productive in the country and the drystone shooters' butts are close by the long cairn. A substantial new gravel road reaches the butts now and will take visitors to the long cairn. The amount of time and organisation that has gone into such a large collection of rocks is phenomenal. Another long cairn nearby was crushed for roadstone and none of the new shooters' roads in three adjacent parishes were granted Planning Permission.

The Kirkhaugh Barrow is in a prominent position in a field on the outskirts of a hamlet named Ayle. There are long views from the site, which include several hill summit cairns, and LiDAR shows it to be the central member of a group of three in a line. An embanked circular enclosure is 575m to the east and another circular mound is 575m. to the west. This circular banked enclosure is much eroded and is interpreted as a Romano-British roundhouse settlement (H.E.R. N24058). It is similar in scale to the two recently described circular embanked Neolithic enclosures at The Raise (H.E.R. C45298) and at Bridge End Farm (H.E.R. C43917), in Alston, three kilometres away. Deep under Kirkhaugh Barrow is an extensive cave system in the limestone. These are now known as the Ayleburn Caves and are 1.7km long with an underground pool large enough for a boat. The caves were modestly worked in Victorian times for zinc ore, when they were called the Ayleburn Mine.

Seven hundred metres away from the Kirkhaugh Barrow, in the valley below, is the ruined Kirkhaugh Stone Circle (H.E.R. N13679), a large double circle of small stones, now mostly recumbent and hidden by rushes. The stone circle is partly buried beneath the railway embankment and is below a field of jumbled rocks, presumably from a larger stone monument cleared during construction of the turnpike. The Whitley Castle Roman fort – *Epiacum* - overlooks the whole pitch, which has the placename Holymire.

Partially preserved inside the stone circle is a rectangular banked enclosure, with a faint external ditch. The bank, which has a well defined entrance at the northeast corner, is studded by small upright stones and perhaps a third to a half of the well preserved long mortuary enclosure remains (H.E.R. N13680) . It shows up well on aerial images and is broadly oriented north-south, with a resemblance to the cove or sanctuary at Castle Rigg. The Kirkhaugh Stone Circle has also never been surveyed and possibly has a formal portal to the southsoutheast, toward Gilderdale Burn. The burn runs over limestone beside the circle and, during dry spells, disappears into a sinkhole in the bedrock, only to emerge again 300 metres downstream.

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