

Berwickshire Naturalists' Club

Field Trip to Cranshaws Church, White Castle and Stenton

Thursday 15 August 2024

CRANSHAWS CHURCH



Thirty-five club members and guests gathered at Cranshaws church on an overcast, damp morning on Thursday 15th August led by Past President Richard Blake. The arrangements had been made to gain an insight into how two sites in the Lammermuir Hills and one hillfoot village formed important parts of community life in and around the hills over not only centuries, but, in one case, millennia. The route between the first two sites followed the ancient, and very important, Whiteadder route from the Lothian plains to the Merse and crossed the Herring Road, which linked Dunbar with Lauder and along which the womenfolk from Dunbar would walk with their creels of herring.

After coffee and cakes provided by Alison Landale, a welcome from the President and an introduction to the day's activities from the Past President the party was given a presentation by the Reverend Bill Landale about the history of the church and the local community. The parish extends to 26 sq.km. and, in the 19th century, it was divided in two as it was intersected by that of Longformacus. The oldest church ruins, with a graveyard, was situated near Cranshaws House. It is believed to have been built at least 800 years ago, there being an entry in Bagimond's Roll of 1275, while, in 1296, the Vicar of Cranshaws swore fealty to Edward I at Berwick upon Tweed. There is also reference to a dedication to St Ninian, which could take the story back to the 7th century.

A church was erected on the present site in 1739 and, at that time, the Royal Coat of Arms was moved from the earlier church to its position opposite the pulpit. It has been verified by the Lord Lyon to date from before 1473, thus being of James IV. Within one hundred years the church had fallen into such disrepair that it was rebuilt in 1898 by Andrew Smith of Whitchester and Cranshaws in the Romanesque revival style. He engaged the architect George Fortune from Duns. The old walls were retained while whinstone was used for the external walls, pink freestone on the interior and Westmoreland flags for the roof. Ridges and corbels were of cast aggregate faced with cement and the barrel-vaulted roof and pews are of Siberian pine. Under the roof pediments are pairs of faces representing classes of people and the laird's loft, with an external access, gives a clear sightline to the pulpit.

With the benefit of a grant from the Church of Scotland, a Wee Forest has been planted beside the graveyard to the north of the church and regular outdoor Forest Church services are held there. Wee

Forests are densely packed native forests in small spaces using a method created by Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki in the 1970s. They bring the benefits of a forest—reconnecting people with nature and raising awareness as well as providing nature-rich habitat to support wildlife—to a community.

After the presentation, the Past President thanked Bill and Alison Landale for their welcome to the church. Those present then had an opportunity to view the interior and exterior of the church, the graveyard and the Wee Forest.

WHITE CASTLE



View from White Castle over the Lothian plain

Because of the weather conditions the Past President gave the following introduction to White Castle before the party left Cranshaws. It had mostly been taken from the written report following detailed excavations between 2010 and 2013 (WHITE CASTLE: The evaluation of an upstanding prehistoric enclosure in East Lothian by David Connolly, Murray Cook and Hana Kdolska, Archaeopress Publishing Ltd. ISBN 978-1-78969-931-9 which can be accessed at <https://www.archaeopress.com/Archaeopress/Products/9781789699302>).

Introduction

There are believed to be over 4000 hill forts in Britain and Ireland. Canmore (2017) records around 400 enclosed sites (from forts to palisaded enclosures and settlements) in East Lothian. Of these, there are possibly around 80 “hillforts”, of which around 50% have been subject to “modern” excavation. In the 2010-2013 research (above) 30 known enclosures, including White Castle, were within a 5km square study area.

White Castle, Black Castle and Green Castle are hillforts situated within a few kilometres of each other on the northern slopes of the Lammermuir Hills. These names are relatively recent and “castle” would have started to have been used much later as a generic name for a type of fortified structure. The colours are believed to refer to the surrounding vegetation at a later stage: White=bleached

grass; Black=heather; Green=pasture. The earliest record of White Castle can be found in the Statistical Account 1791-99 . It is shown on Roy's Military Map 1747-55 and Forrest's Map of 1799.

Situation

White Castle is situated on a natural spur above the Thorter Water which runs north from its source (close to the source (White Well) of the River Whiteadder which runs south). The minor road from Garvald to the Whiteadder Reservoir is adjacent to the site and, especially during the winter when vegetation has died back, it is possible to see the line of the old track to the east of the modern road. That track has a gentler incline and would have been more suitable for horse- and oxen-driven carts.

Drove roads and footpaths are in close proximity. The Herring Road between Dunbar and Lauder is to the south of the site. It is believed that the site lies on what, for very many centuries would have been one of the principal tracks (the Whiteadder route) between the Lothian plains and the Merse.

The recent research concluded that there were at least three phases of tracks on the Whiteadder route which were no earlier than Post Medieval but the route could be of prehistoric origins and certainly would have been used during the Iron Age. This route is associated with medieval campaigns. As James IV marched his army from Haddington and camped at Johnsleugh in 1496 before proceeding to inflict damage between the Rivers Tweed and Till, the route must have been suitable for hauling heavy guns (possibly including Mons Meg, which would have taken a day to cover 3 miles on reasonable tracks in good weather). A reference in a Charter from the 13th century might evidence use of the track during the reign of Alexander II.

It is surrounded on three sides by water courses and has a natural causeway approach. The vegetation is principally grass, heather, blaeberrries and bracken. The location and design of the fort suggests that it might have been connected to the control of access to the grazing resources of the Lammermuirs as well as the possible management of arable land in the area. There is evidence of more recent cultivation on its west slopes. It is possible that the site might have been used pre-construction of the enclosures and also post their abandonment and maintenance.

Over the last 150 years there has been a certain amount of linear erosion caused by visitors and grazing stock, thus creating what might appear to be additional openings in the enclosures. This is evidenced from the detail of OS maps from the 19th century.

Timeline

The conclusions of the 2010-2013 excavations include:

- There were a number of periods of development, enlargement and redesign
- The initial complete development of banked enclosures and redesign are estimated between c.750 BC – 100 BC.
- The initial univallate banked enclosure would have taken place c. 750 BC, followed by alterations and enlargement (including banks, ditches, terraces and entrances) c. 400 BC, and between c. 366 BC and c. 100 BC . These correspond to the development from the initial univallate banked enclosure through to bivallate or even trivallate (the 3rd rampart has not been dated).
- The final two phases were post-enclosure presence, namely High Medieval (AD 974-1150) and Post Medieval/Early Modern (AD 1471-1640).
- The date of abandonment is not clear. Many East Lothian enclosures were abandoned in favour of open settlement in closing centuries BC. This coincided with the re-emergence of

Traprain Law as the major centre with the increasingly densely populated lowland plain around it.

General

The enclosed site was probably built to underline and define community rights to local resources. Possibly there were times of violent competition but the act of construction, maintenance and reworking of the enclosures is likely to have sustained community cohesion.

With so many entrances it is doubtful that the site was primarily defensive. During all stages the works were designed to be impressive from close proximity and from a distance. Specific entrances were located, and added to, in order to take account of the surrounding landscape and to maximise the visual impact on visitors and occupants in regards to landmarks: Traprain Law from 3 entrances on the north side; and the old Whiteadder route from 3 entrances on the south side. So, perhaps display and status were more important than defensive considerations.

The 2010-2013 excavations identified 19 visible platforms and 7 possible platforms. These were cut platforms with a timber building above. The 3 largest are situated closest to the entrances, possibly showing a hierarchy of structures. Post-enclosure activity included a platform c 10th century and a late medieval/early modern turf-built building, which was likely a shepherd's hut. Excavations uncovered a large horseshoe scraper (late Neolithic /early Bronze Age) and an arrowhead (early Bronze Age).

Other source: Canmore Reference 57479

The party then left Cranshaws and made their way north across the Lammermuirs to White Castle, where they were able to walk around the site and benefit from the excellent views across the Lothian plain from the Pentland Hills to the Bass Rock. The line of three northern entrances with a direct view of Traprain Law was clearly visible, as was the route of the old track along the Whiteadder Route.

Leaving White Castle members and their guests drove towards the old village of Garvald and passed Sancta Maria Abbey, a Category A listed Cistercian abbey constructed in the mid-20th century.

Stenton village



The Rood Well, Stenton (Previous image)

After lunch the party gathered at Stenton Parish church, where the Past President introduced David Wyllie, a resident in the village who had kindly offered to lead the visit to the attractive village with its pantile roofed houses, mostly dating from the late 17th and 18th centuries, lining the main street. "Stane Toun" takes its name from the surrounding terrain and the village may have been the first in East Lothian to have its houses built with stone, instead of wood. The village is described in the new edition of *Pevsner's The Buildings of Scotland: Lothian* (Yale University Press, 2024, p 818) as "One of the most picturesque and complete villages in East Lothian".

Mr Wyllie explained that the 1342 foundation charter of Dunbar collegiate church mentions a chapel at Stenton as part of its possessions. It had replaced the nearby chapel at Pitcox as the parish church before 1587. The ruined church, situated within the churchyard, is medieval in shape and had a tower, probably a later addition to the parish church, at the west end which is now a doocot. He pointed out the pre-reformation font, which had been located upside down as part of the floor in the old church, the Sydserff of Ruchlaw family aisle, the Biel mausoleum and the Ionian cross dedicated to R.A. Dundas Nisbet Hamilton of Biel designed by W. Steel, sculptor.

The present church was designed by William Burn and is neo-Gothic. It was built to the requirements of the laird of Biel and incorporates a substantial tower and elongated finials. Originally the pulpit was in the centre but this was moved in 1892 to the west end of the church and the pews were turned accordingly. The Biel family loft is of Neo-Jacobean style and now houses the organ by Pulham, which was originally in Southsea church and then rebuilt by Richerby of Oldhamstocks and installed in 2009. Attractive stained-glass windows are by Kempe, Ballantine & Gardiner, A. Ballantine, and James Ballantine II. The Parish war memorial was designed by Robert S. Lorimer.

The tour continued through the Tron green to view the tron scales and Tron House with its external stairs, the 17th century old bake house, the joiner's house, the octagonal horse mill, and the late 18th century school house with a later rear extension to house boarders. This school was replaced by the Board School in 1878 which sits at the west end of the village. At the east end of the village is the important Rood Well with rich foliage finial on a rope fitting, which may have come from the old village church. The Rood Well was formerly linked to the church by a flagged stone path.

The party was then taken to the handsome village hall where tea and cake was a most welcome end to a most interesting day. The Past President expressed his thanks on behalf of the club to Mr Wyllie for his most informative tour.