

II.

THE EXCAVATION OF A PREHISTORIC AND MEDIÆVAL SITE
NEAR BLACKSIDE, MUIRKIRK, AYRSHIRE. BY ARCHIBALD
FAIRBAIRN, F.S.A.Scot.

The site under review, situated within the parish of Muirkirk, at Whitefield, a short distance north-east of Blackside and north of the road leading to Priesthill, had in times past been called by local people "The Roman Camp." It is not uncommon in pastoral districts to ascribe to Roman times mysterious mediæval remains, probably formed in greater part by the dexterous use of the flauchter-spade in the early days of ewe bughts, ewe milking, and the building of fail dykes. The

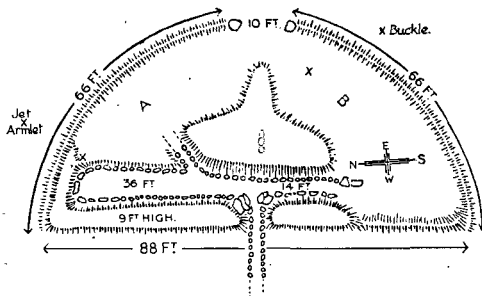


Fig. 1. Plan of an Earthwork in the Parish of Muirkirk, Ayrshire.

structure, prominently situated on rising ground, is easily noticeable on the skyline, and this, along with the finding of part of a flint implement or weapon in the vicinity many years ago, may have given rise to the local tradition. The excavation of the site was commenced in the autumn of 1913 by the late Col. J. G. A. Baird, F.S.A.Scot., proprietor of the Muirkirk estate, and the writer. The structure seemed curiously planned (fig. 1),¹ and it presented at first an enigma as to its probable age and use. Two quadrant-shaped areas adjacent to each other are enclosed by fail dykes or turf walling, and are separated in the centre by a large mound of earth. Across one side of both enclosures, facing west, there is a massive grass-grown earth embankment in a line running north and south, and divided in the centre by an opening through it, opposite to the mound. This embankment is 44 feet in length each way, right and left of the opening, giving a total length of 88 feet, and it rises to an average height of 9 feet, with a corresponding thickness. The opening through the embankment runs outwards (west) in a straight channel for 32 feet. It has sloping banks 8 feet wide at middle distance, narrowing to 2 feet at ground level and to 1 foot 6 inches below ground level, as it passes between a setting of stones into the interior at the base of the mound. This opening at its upper

¹ I am indebted to Miss A. L. Shaw Smith for kindly planning the site.

end is cut into the clay-band rock underlying the surface soil, for the purpose evidently of draining the whole interior. Leading from the upper end of the opening there is a continuous setting of stones, going right and left along the inner base of the embankment. On the right, the stones run parallel to a similar setting along the base of the mound, indicating the foundations of a narrow turf-walled passage, 2 feet wide and 14 feet in length, leading to, and ending within, the circular enclosure on the south side of the mound. On the left, the stone setting is continuous along the interior base of the embankment, returning in a circular curve at the far end, and continuing in a parallel line along the base of an inner bank of earth, thus forming a bught or pen 36 feet in length and 6 feet in width.

There were indications of a double setting of stones leading from this bught into the circular enclosure on the north side of the mound—the foundations, no doubt, of a connecting passage. There is ample evidence that the soil had been cleared from the bught, and that, when in use, the floor was the native clay-band rock. The enclosing fail dykes, continuing from the ends of the 88-foot embankment, are each 66 feet in length; both swing round towards the east, ending against large boulder stones, and leaving an opening 10 feet wide, convenient for use as an entrance into either enclosure.

Should the arrangement of the structure be referable to ewe-milking practices, a glance at the accompanying plan will show that the ewes could be driven in through a shedding gate in the 10-foot opening to one enclosure, pass through the milking bught, and out into the other enclosure. Doubtless this was the use the structure was put to as we see the ruins of it to-day; all with the exception of the mound of earth which, though it conveniently forms a division between the two enclosures, seems to be out of place within the precincts of a sheep-fold.

The fact that 60 yards north-west from the structure a never-failing spring runs clearly from under the visible roots of a prehistoric oak in a now treeless district, suggested a more human element, and that the whole site was worthy of exploration. A strip of ground was trenched over within the enclosure facing north (marked A on plan) and the excavation carried into the central mound. Part of the upper soil had fallen from the decayed turf wall, but underneath this many chips of flint, chert, and water-worn stone were found mixed with the lower soil. The upper soil of the central mound contained numerous fragments of clay-band rock, suggesting that the repeated cleanings and scrapings of the bught and passages had been thrown over it. Under the turf, near the top of the mound, a small glazed vessel of light red ware and curved rim was discovered, while lower down several fragments of thick, glazed,

mediæval pottery were recovered from the soil. At about 3 feet above ground level the greater part of a saddle quern was discovered set on end, and face inwards, within the mound. It measures 16 inches in length and 27 inches in breadth, the hollow part being 18 inches in diameter and $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. Here the soil was fine, rich, and dark coloured, and under the closest scrutiny almost every spadeful was found to contain minute chips of flint and chert. Slightly under this level a row of ten stones was brought to light, all set on edge and in line over the lower base of the mound. These were carefully removed and laid aside in the formation in which they were found. The soil underneath continued dark in colour, and it was quite strewn with chips of flint; one or two worked but imperfect flints were recovered.

Immediately underneath the row of stones, and below the original ground level, in the centre of the mound, three small heaps of a whitish clay-like substance were laid bare. The heaps lay close together in a line running east and west, and the middle one, the largest, was marked with a square-shaped stone set on the top. This deposit was carefully examined, and the light-coloured substance composing it, which had an adhesive feeling, was found to be plentifully mixed with wood charcoal. The deposit was contained within a circular cavity, 18 inches in diameter and 6 inches deep, which had been picked out of the soft clay-band rock. On the bottom of the cavity lay a finely worked flint scraper and several flakes of dark-coloured flint. The lesser heaps contained a similar substance intermixed with charcoal, both deposits being also within circular cavities excavated in the rock, and both containing flint chips. A small water-worn stone, showing a ring of abrasions round its edge, possibly from use in fabricating flints, was discovered near the deposits, as well as a rubbing stone, associated no doubt with the saddle quern.

From the numerous fragments of hard water-worn stone found throughout the mound, as well as from larger pieces with portions flaked off them, it was obvious that the early inhabitants of the site had made liberal use of this material so easily obtained in the neighbourhood. That the site had been occupied in early times by a race who had chipped out their weapons and implements of stone on the spot, was clearly evident, but the later mediæval reconstruction had, unfortunately, removed all trace above ground of the early form of dwelling.

Nothing further was done until some time ago, when the writer made an effort to examine the remaining portions of both enclosures, particularly that marked A on plan, where the extra depth of soil, it was hoped, might have preserved any relics underneath. Here, under

the deep accumulation of soil from the ruins of the inner wall, and on a layer of clay spread on the rock, and still presenting a particularly smooth surface, were found several large fragments of hand-made undecorated pottery of the Bronze Age. In close association with the potsherds were several small water-worn pebbles, which had evidently been subjected to intense heat and had become split in consequence. The pottery fragments were, no doubt, part of a Bronze Age cooking-pot, which accounts for the presence of the heat-cracked pot-boilers on the floor. The clay-covered floor was liberally strewn and stained with wood charcoal on a space about 5 feet square, which was carefully yet quite easily followed. Unfortunately, all trace of this floor was lost inwards, on the ground disturbed by the last users of the site. Underneath a portion of the inner wall of the ewe bught, and among the lower soil, was discovered a large segment of what had been a magnificent jet armband, probably dating to the first few centuries of this era. Although only a length of $2\frac{7}{8}$ inches survives, it had measured about 5 inches in external and $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches in internal diameter when complete. The ring, which is of triangular section with slightly convex sides, measures $\frac{1\frac{5}{8}}$ inch in breadth and $\frac{1\frac{3}{8}}$ inch in thickness.

In this section also, but nearer the surface, were found a small silver button, ornamented with concentric circles, and a small portion of a whetstone.

In the enclosure marked B on plan, where the soil is very shallow, a brass shoe-buckle, probably of eighteenth-century origin, was recovered.

It will be gathered that the relics, though few in number, are sufficiently characteristic to indicate various periods for the occupation of this site. The fragments of Bronze Age pottery, pot-stones, hammerstone, and flints are referable to the earliest occupation; while in succession we have the jet armband and saddle quern probably indicating an Early Iron Age occupation, glazed potsherds pointing to a mediæval occupation, and, finally, the brass shoe-buckle and silver button suggesting an eighteenth-century occupation.

The unsolved enigma, and therein lies one of the charms of archaeology, are the deposits within the excavated circular cavities underneath the mound. They do not quite compare with the cooking-holes recently discovered within Bronze Age hut-circles in the district, although it must be admitted that the hard strata in which they were formed may account for their want of depth. They were clean in comparison, and almost free from black residue, and, while they contained charcoal, there was no visible evidence of burnt bone. The smooth (comparatively speaking) clay-covered floor, however, is analogous with two such floors in local hut-circles, on both of which fragments of decorated and

undecorated Bronze Age pottery have recently been discovered. One noticeable feature of this site is the absence of stony debris. The original construction may have been for the greater part formed of turf, otherwise the stones forming a hut-circle, with its accompanying embankment, must have been very completely removed.