

## V.

A FORT AT SKITTEN, WICK, CAITHNESS, WITH NOTES ON  
FLINT IMPLEMENTS FROM THE SAME COUNTY. By  
MRS L. DUFF-DUNBAR, F.S.A.Scot.

The hill-fort or earth-walled ring at Skitten, Kilminster, in the parish of Wick, Caithness, is described in the Ancient Monuments Commission's *Inventory of Caithness Monuments*, p. 165. It is situated on slightly raised

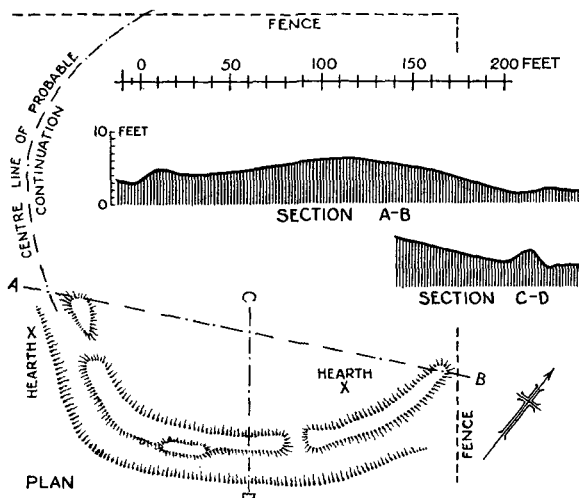


Fig. 1. Fort at Skitten, Caithness : Plan.

ground on the edge of a moor about 2 miles from the sea, and takes the form of an oval fortified enclosure about 230 feet in greatest diameter from north-west to south-east, surrounded by a ditch, still distinct on the uncultivated segment, and by a low rampart of yellow clay mixed with small stones which is now almost effaced by the plough except on the uncultivated part (fig. 1).

When the last Ordnance Survey was made it was under heather except for a grassy space in the centre and was not noticeable enough to be indicated on the survey sheet. Before the ground was cultivated there was a ring of fine green turf round part of the enclosure and a portion of this still exists at the south-west side. No large stones were

turned up when the land was taken in and there was no trace of a cairn. At the south-east side there is a segment measuring roughly about 170 feet by 55 feet still under grass and short heather. The earth-wall of this segment varies in width from about 15 feet 8 inches across one point to about 23 feet 4 inches at another. A break through the circumvallation towards the south-east has probably been the entrance. It measures about 8 feet 3 inches across. The ditch is roughly 3 feet below the top of the rampart. The arable soil within the latter is from 6 inches to 12 inches in depth. The sub-soil is a yellow clay and the rock is said to lie 10 feet to 12 feet below the surface.

There are at least three fire sites, two within the rampart and one to the south side 10 feet away from it. This outer hearth is intact and will I hope remain so. One of the inner hearths now disturbed by the plough lies 50 yards north-west of the rampart, and the third and smallest, also disturbed by deeper ploughing in 1933, is at the south-east corner of the enclosure, 28 feet 6 inches from the enclosing ring. A trial opening at the largest hearth, before it was so much disturbed by agricultural operations, showed first 5 inches of soil, then a thin orange-coloured stratum with a layer of small flat, thin, laid clay-stones, fire-marked, and some with a sooty substance on them underneath. The latter were bedded in a stratum of from 3 inches to 4 inches of fine white siliceous clay with one or two small bits of what appears to be charcoal embedded in it.

Sir John Flett, F.R.S., who has kindly examined the clay, says that it is not marly or calcareous, but contains many subangular grains of quartz, fine scaley particles of white clay, weathered mica, and no vegetable matter or diatoms. He says that there is no such deposit of clay known in Caithness, and that he is not free from a suspicion that it may be the ashes of fires, but "if so, the peat was very sandy and dirty, and the clay is exceptionally white in colour if derived from such a source." When burned in a hot fire it remains pure white.

In the Knowe of Unstan, Orkney, the floor of the chamber was covered, except in one small space, with white clay (*Proceedings*, vol. xix. p. 34), and I am informed that similar material came from the neolithic chambered cairn Taiverso Tuick, at Trumland, in Orkney. In 1931 the Rev. P. Clayton dug down to a prehistoric layer under a late tower built of dry walling, also in Orkney, and there found a white layer, which it has been suggested had been a hearth.

In 1931, while marking the smallest fire-site (since ploughed up) so that it might not be entirely lost trace of in the processes of agriculture, I had a top spit carefully removed and under the first spadeful, a pasture

sod, was a piece of a Bronze Age cinerary urn measuring about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $4\frac{1}{4}$  inches lying on the fire-marked clay surface. The colour of the pottery is pale reddish-yellow and it shows the usual mixture of broken stone. It is about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick. The rim is short but overhanging and there are two bands of decoration, one above and one below the lip bulge, consisting of impressed vertical lines perpendicular to the rim. Three fragments of flint were with the piece of urn and one tiny bit of burnt bone.

No interments have been found, nor any entire vessel. Besides the piece of urn just described I picked up, in 1929, a fragment of pottery of rough clay mixed with white particles, apparently of shell, bright red outside and blackish at the core, resembling pieces found on a small, seemingly Bronze Age site at Findhorn (*Proceedings*, vol. lxiii. p. 353). Other pieces, said to be also small, were got inside the Skitten ring about 1905, but the finder, Mr John Nicolson, Nybster, gave them to Sir Francis Barry of Keiss, and they cannot now be traced.

I have not found any bones except one or two burnt scraps, nor any of the limpet and periwinkle shells that abound in the seaside kitchen-middens.

When defining the area of the hearth outside the ring, so that it might not be lost or dug over, I had cuttings made spoke-wise towards it, and while this was being done we came on a place 4 feet 8 inches from the outer edge of the white clay where at 1 foot 8 inches from the surface there was a further 9 to 11 inches of loose black and grey clayey soil containing a few small bits of red and white stone. Following this, outwards from the hearth, we found a small pit 2 feet 8 inches deep. It was paved with two flat flag-stones, measuring respectively 1 foot 3 inches by 1 foot 11 inches and 1 foot 5 inches by 1 foot 4 inches laid lengthwise with one or two smaller stones. The flags were carefully raised and then replaced and the pit was filled in. The expert ditcher and drainer who was doing the spade work said that the earth under the paving was undisturbed grey sand. There was no layer of white clay on the flooring, nor did the riddle reveal any shards of pottery or any bones, burnt or unburnt. The loose blackish earth has been analysed by Dr J. F. Tocher, County Analyst, Aberdeen, and he reports that it is composed mainly of silica and alumina without any evidence whatever of the action of fire. The pit was not puddled with clay like an, apparent, food-pit at a Bronze Age village of hut-circles in the Auld Yeach, Auchterless, Aberdeenshire (*Proceedings*, vol. ix. p. 157).

A trial excavation of a small bit of the ditch yielded first heather and turf, no peat, then looser greyish soil which passed to clay at a depth of 4 inches. Nothing was found by the riddle.

I have from Skitten a piece of granulated quartz veined with red chalcedony and three small bits of rock crystal. Quartz flakes occur in the circle.

Mr M'Ghee, the tenant of the Skitten site, has told me that when the ground was first ploughed he found a number of round or oval stones of a grey granite-like rock, measuring 6 inches to 8 inches in circumference. These were thrown away, but others have been found from time to time since observation of the site was begun. Such rounded pebbles of white biotite granite occur on the sea beach. They may have been hammer-stones and there is on one or two a suggestion of such use.

One ball of sandy rock about 8 inches in circumference has been used as a hammer. There are also a roughly rounded disc of sandy stone about 5 inches in diameter and over 1 inch in thickness, and one or two unworked pieces of flint, not flaked but chipped and battered, resembling flints in the British Museum and elsewhere, noted as hammer-stones. A piece of greyish flint measuring  $8\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches, which shows on its upper surface incipient cones, might just possibly have been used as an anvil-stone.

Another artifact found in the site is a section of a claystone polisher,  $1\frac{7}{10}$  inch by  $\frac{9}{10}$  inch by  $\frac{4}{10}$  inch, semi-cylindrical above and flat below. No rubbing-stones or pounding-stones of the well-known broch types have occurred, and, although whorls are fairly common in the district, none has been found on the site.

Flint working was carried on extensively within the enclosure. Unfortunately the site was not under observation when the ground was taken in from the moor about forty years ago, but all over the now tilled land, and out of soil from trial excavations examined by the riddle there is an apparently inexhaustible supply of flints, worked and unworked. Many of the broken flints are calcined. There are numerous broken and unbroken water-rolled pebbles of no great size, but none of the large, fresh, chalk-coated nodules that occur in the south and east of England have been got in the ring. One black flint nodule has occurred.

Small round scrapers are the most usual artifacts. They are mostly of poor workmanship, though one or two thumb-scrapers are carefully chipped. The round scrapers seem to have been made by striking a cap-like slice off the rounded end of a pebble and then chipping the edge more or less, usually less, at one end. The large number of these caps suggests that some may have been used as scrapers without further dressing.

Cores are small and not as numerous as one would expect.

There are side-scrapers, nosed (or tailed) scrapers, knives or side-scrapers, ridged flakes, flakes with parallel edges and square ends, and very

numerous flakes of no special form. So far no notched flints have been found here. Flakes with and without notches have occurred at Mid-Freswick and Kinloch, and there is an *encoche*, in the National Museum, from the former place, found by Mr Simon Bremner, of Mid-Freswick.

Only two arrow-heads have been found so far as I know on the site. One is leaf-shaped of white cherty flint. The other is a beautiful thing, very thin and diamond-shaped, of a greyish-yellow colour, with beautiful long flaking. It is said that a barbed and tanged arrow-head of yellow

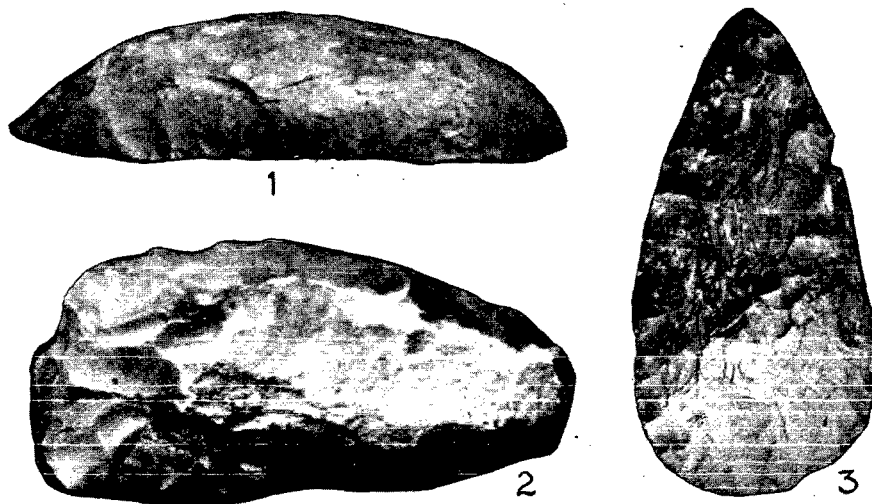


Fig. 2. Flint Knife, Axe, and Spear-head from Caithness. (†.)

flint was picked up on the site, about thirty-five years ago, but, if so, all trace of it is lost.

Some of the Skitten flints show patches of the surface polish called "gloss."

Worked flints and pieces of flint have been got on the small farms adjoining the hill-fort, and I have a beautiful light-grey curved knife, measuring  $3\frac{3}{16}$  inches by  $1\frac{1}{16}$  inch from one of them (fig. 2, No. 1).

On the farm of Kinloch above Hempriggs Loch, about 7 miles away, there is another site of flint working. At Kinloch the Misses Bremner have found at one spot on the arable land a large number of smooth, oval flint beach pebbles, all except five being black in colour, and varying in size from under 1 inch up to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch and even more, but mainly

of a fairly even size between. Only four of them had been broken. Two like pebbles with their surfaces polished have been got just across the road from the Skitten hill-fort on a croft that also yields many flints. Sling-stones of much the same size and shape, made of clay, are in the Glastonbury Lake-Dwelling collection. Is it not probable that these pebbles are sling-stones? It seems difficult to account otherwise for the Kinloch collection. Since these flints were found I have seen Dr Curwen's *Prehistoric Sussex* (1930), and at page 45 he mentions the finding in the Caburn Camp of several hundred selected flint beach pebbles which he supposes were collected as sling-stones. "The flint sling-bullets found at the Caburn," he was kind enough to write under date 11th February 1932, "are a definite feature of the Early Iron Age, having been found at the Trundle and at Cissbury in equally large quantities, but we have not found them with remains of the neolithic period in this country." The Caburn remains extend, Dr Curwen says, from neolithic to Roman times. One baked-clay bullet such as Cæsar assigns to the Gauls was found there.

Careful observation over years at this Skitten site has failed to detect so far other than the artifacts described, but should a deeper or more extended examination of the enclosure be possible, other types may yet be found.

That a flint worker's site, while abounding in material, mostly decidedly poor, should not be productive of fine finished implements is perhaps to be expected, unless in the case of the precipitate flight of the worker. The neighbourhood of a settlement such as at Foulden Moorpark, described in the *Proceedings*, vol. lviii. p. 112, is a much more hopeful situation for such finds. There are many hut-circles in Sutherlandshire and some in the less exposed southern parts of Caithness, and it seems possible that prior to the Broch period the north-eastern and more exposed districts may have been occupied mainly in the summer for hunting and grazing, and that the Skitten site may have been an enclosed summer camp.

There is not as has been said, nor has there been a stone wall round this defensive construction. The only stones found in the site are more or less worn and rolled "land-stones."

Along the south coast of the Moray Firth throughout the counties of Aberdeen, Banff and Moray worked flints abound, but when one crosses some 60 miles of sea to the northern side of the firth to beyond the Ord of Caithness the conditions alter. It must be borne in mind that much possibly once inhabited land in the pleasant sheltered straths of the burns is unexplored and untilled and permanently under natural turf.

Caithness from the border hills is a wide expanse of moor and, except for the absence of birch, scrub and pine, is the land as Neolithic and Bronze Age man viewed it—a fascinating thought. There is a fertile and highly cultivated belt along the coast and inland up the Wick and Thurso rivers to Halkirk. In this cultivated part worked flints occur, but less commonly than on the other side of the firth.

No deposit of flint occurs like the Aberdeenshire flint belt which runs for about 10 miles diagonally across central Buchan from Whitestone Hill to Buchan Ness with outliers near Turriff and Fyvie, affording an inexhaustible store, but in Caithness we have the advantage of knowing that every flint found on the land has been carried by man at some date or other.

The only native Caithness flints are beach pebbles brought up by the sea or the ice from the floor of the Moray Firth. Dark and light grey, blackish and yellowish rolled flint pebbles occur in the shingle of the sea beach, and these seem to have been diligently collected and used. So far as I have examined the 5-foot raised beach I have not found on it any flints, a circumstance which suggests prehistoric gleanings. As regards the present beach, the supply is renewed by the tides. These small tidal flints are rarely coated with a soft chalk cortex, but I have got coated nodules of a larger size. One of these, dug up in another part of the district, looks as if it had been recently separated from the matrix of the Sussex chalk. It weighs 1 lb. 11 oz. On the farm of East Harland, not far off, a fine black triangular scraper,  $2\frac{4}{10}$  inches by  $1\frac{7}{10}$  inch, was found in 1933. Though black flint occurs it does not seem to have been a popular material. A yellow flint is found, not apparently derived from beach pebbles, and an interesting fact is the fairly frequent occurrence among the worked flints of a fine red. This colour seems to be characteristic of Aberdeenshire, though of course it is found in other places, and its marked occurrence in Caithness may perhaps be safely put down to commerce, direct or indirect, between these counties in prehistoric times. I have looked for red flint among the artifacts in the British Museum, and so far, I write subject to correction, I have not noted any arrow-heads of that colour from the British Isles that are not of northern Scottish provenance, except, I think, three from Antrim in the Sturge Collection. These may be exceptional, for Mr Deane, Curator of the Belfast Museum, writes that, though in Antrim red flints do occur in pockets between the chalk and the basalt out-poured in Eocene times, he knows of no artifacts made from them. They are, he adds, porous and would be most unsuitable material for striking. On the farm of Kinloch, where by far the larger number of flints found are rolled beach pebbles, the one arrow-head so

far found is part of a thin reddish leaf-shaped point, finely flaked. One small spatulate-shaped flake or scraper from a farm adjacent to that on which the Skitten enclosure is situated is of red-brown flint, spotted with cream colour, and might have come off the same core as a scraper from Glen Urquhart in the Sturge Collection. Mr Bathgate of Gersa has noted the occurrence of red flint at Gersa.

Till last year no flint axe had been reported from Caithness, nor any artifact larger than the fine yellow flint spear-head measuring  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $1\frac{7}{10}$  inch found in the parish of Bower many years ago and preserved in Stemster House (fig. 2, No. 3). But in the summer of 1933 Major Sutherland, M.C., of Wick, secured from shingle got from the north side of Wick Harbour a small grey-blue flint axe formed from a natural flake by rather rough chipping almost all on one face; it is probably unfinished (fig. 2, No. 2). It measures about  $2\frac{4}{16}$  inches by  $1\frac{3}{16}$  inch and is about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch in greatest thickness. A good deal of the cortex remains. In the *Geology of Caithness*, 1914, p. 157, it is stated that the asserted presence of marl, if verified, would point to a loch along that part of the river course "at the harbour mouth now submerged . . . and from certain data it seems clear that the Wick River at some time since the Glacial Epoch has eroded its channel to a depth at least 60 feet below present low water" and "the land has undergone depression in post-glacial times."

Caithness has yielded fine axes and hammers of other kinds of stone, only two of which seem to have been associated with burials—the beautiful hammer of polished grey granite from the Ormiegill short, horned, chambered cairn, and the axe of micaceous sandstone found in 1926 in a round chambered cairn in the parish of Reay.

The usual type of flint arrow-head found in Caithness is the leaf or the diamond shape, the form found in the megalithic cairns. The lop-sided arrow-head of dark flint found in the Ormiegill chambered cairn, though common in Ulster and occurring in Aberdeenshire and other parts of Scotland, is, so far, unique in Caithness. Out of fifty-five arrow-heads from Caithness in the National Museum, there are only nine with barbs and stems. Not one of the nine is of Mr Reginald Smith's Beaker type with the ends of barb and stem in one line forming a triangle, although what seem to be the only two existing Caithness Bronze Age pottery vessels are two beakers of Abercromby's "C" type. One of these was found in a short cist at Glengolly near Thurso, accompanied, the finder states, by a smaller earthenware pot, in existence seven years ago but now lost. The beaker (fig. 3) is preserved in Thurso Museum. The other beaker was found in a short cist at Acharole in 1904. It is now in the National Museum, and the find is described and figured in the



*Proceedings*, vol. xxxix. p. 448. Fragments of urns have been discovered from time to time.

Mr Nicolson, Nybster, has, I understand; found only one barbed or stemmed arrow-head; it is of yellow flint and has serrated edges. He picked it up in the parish of Mey, near Dunnet Head. There is in Thurso Museum a barbed and tanged arrow-head with the stem rather longer than the barbs.

In the *Proceedings*, vol. lvii. p. 18, there is noted the gift by Mr

Murray (Stemster, Bower) of three barbed and forty-two leaf-shaped arrow-heads of flint and chert from the southerly face of Stemster and Sordale Hill, where neolithic cairns are noted in the *Ancient Monuments Inventory*. Up till now this has been far the most productive site in the county. Leaf-shaped arrow-heads have been found on the sunny side of Tannach Hill and above the Loch of Hempriggs, and the late Mr Scott, the artist, collected a number round the site of M'Cole's Castle, a chambered cairn near the Loch of Yarrows. Mr Bremner, Mid-Freswick, found two barbed and tanged arrow-heads about twenty



Fig. 3. Beaker from Glengolly, Caithness.

years ago, and leaf-shaped arrows as well on a ridge with a southerly aspect above the Burn of Freswick. The late Sir F. Barry, while questing for brochs, found I think six arrow-heads, one stemmed, along with charcoal, ashes and fragments of thin black pottery in a cairn near Ackergill Tower; but no record of the excavation seems to have been kept. All these sites are dry and sunny. Prehistoric folk had no more desire to live in bogs than we have.

None of the four-horned long cairns recorded in the *Ancient Monuments Inventory* as having been examined has yielded any implement. Three were excavated by Dr Joseph Anderson in 1865-6, two at Yarrows (Nos. 543 and 544 Report), and one at Camster (563), and a probable fourth at Heathercrow in Bower, by Sir Francis Barry; of the last no record seems to have been made. About a dozen chips of flint, mere

fragments, were found in the larger long horned cairn at Yarrows (543). The surface of the floor was a compacted mass of earthy clay, ashes and charcoal, about 5 inches thick, containing minute fragments of calcined human bone. Two fragments of pottery, well made, hard baked, and of thin black paste unornamented, were found. The smaller long horned cairn at Yarrows was similar, with burnt fragments of human bone in the floor and unburnt on it. There was in the outer compartment a cist with fragments of an urn ornamented with parallel twisted cord impressions and small discoidal lignite beads. A secondary interment?

In Camster long horned cairn the same conditions were found, and splintered bones of horse, ox, deer and swine, but no fragments of pottery, nor chips, nor implements of flint were found.

Large quantities of flint chips and flakes have been found in some of the short horned and chambered cairns as also numerous pottery fragments which seemed to be of thin, hard-baked round-bottomed vessels, mostly unornamented. The three leaf arrow-heads from the round horned chambered Cairn of Get and the triangular or lopsided arrow-head from Ormiegill cairn are the only instances known to me of the occurrence in Caithness of flint arrow-heads associated with burials, unless the finds at Ackergill were such. In the Cairn of Get there were at least four unburnt skeletons, and one skull was of great size and weight and showed a cephalic index of 76. In Cairn Hannach a round chambered cairn, not horned, great quantities of pottery-fragments of seven varieties were discovered, and flint chips, but no flint implements. In the round unhorned cairn at Camster which the *Inventory* calls "the finest example of an excavated chambered cairn in the county, if not in Scotland," a small, finely formed flint knife was found by Dr Anderson.