

UNENCLOSED PLATFORM SETTLEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

THE unenclosed platform settlements of upper Tweeddale, which were first noticed ten years ago by our fellow Mr J. Halkett Hendrie, have been investigated during the preparation of the Inventory of Peeblesshire by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The existence of two such settlements in the valley of the Meldon Burn was noted as long ago as 1941,¹ and other examples have been recorded in Roxburghshire,² Midlothian³ and upper Clydesdale.⁴ Now that the nature and wide distribution of these monuments have been appreciated, it seems probable that other examples will eventually be found over a wider area. At the time of writing 40 settlements have been recorded in Peeblesshire alone.

An unenclosed platform settlement consists simply of several platforms cut into a hillside. The number of platforms in the settlements so far recorded varies from 2 to 12, the number occurring most frequently being 9. The platforms vary in width from 25 ft. to 80 ft., but rather more than half the total fall between 40 ft. and 50 ft. The platforms are most frequently found disposed in a line along the contour, although in a minority of cases they form tiered groups. It is not unusual to find small cairns on the slopes immediately below the settlements.

The land in upper Tweeddale, as indeed that in the neighbouring parts of the Lowlands, has long been used exclusively as pasture, chiefly for sheep, and much of it has never been ploughed. Under such conditions the platforms are generally well preserved, but an unknown number may have been obliterated in districts into which cultivation has spread.

The proportions of the platforms vary according to the degree of slope of the hillside into which they were cut. In some cases the scarp at the rear of the platform rises to a height of as much as 12 ft. above the floor, while in others it is barely perceptible. In a very few examples platforms have been formed entirely by cutting into a very gentle slope, but the almost universal practice was to make the rear half of the platform by quarrying into the hillside and the front half by extending the semicircular floor thus made with the spoil so produced. The typical platform therefore appears as a level circular or oval floor backed by the crescentic rear scarp formed by cutting into the slope and fronted by the crescentic forward scarp which falls to the natural surface of the ground below.

As nothing at all was known about these newly-recognised and numerous monuments, the excavation of a suitable example was decided upon by the Commissioners, to whom I am indebted for permission to use unpublished material in this report.

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, LXXV (1940-1), 108.

³ I am indebted to Mr R. B. K. Stevenson for this information.

² *Inventory*, p. 64.

⁴ Unpublished, R.C.A.M.S.

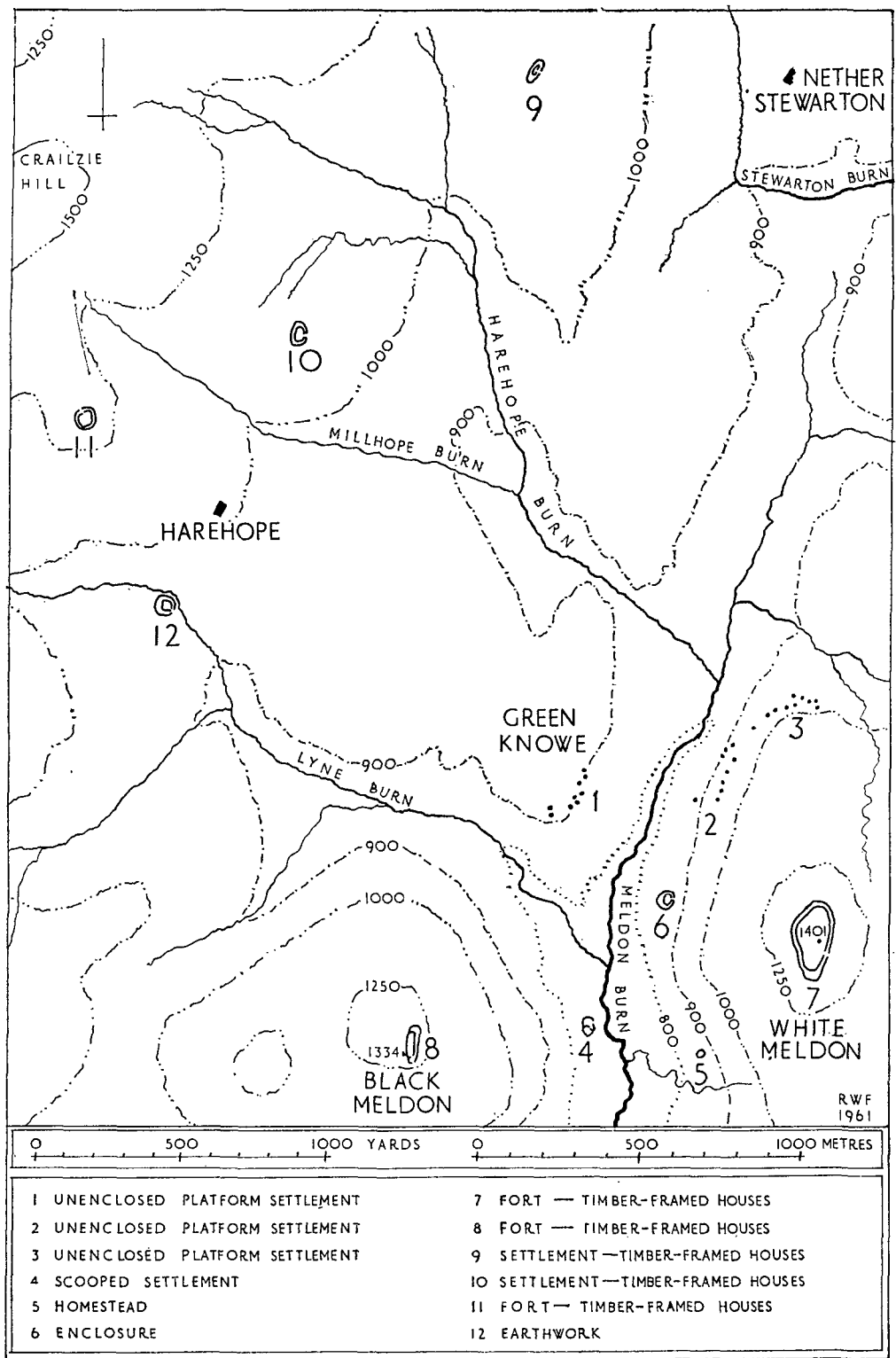


FIG. 1

The platform selected was chosen as being of the size most commonly found and as forming part of a settlement of 9 platforms, the number which, as mentioned above, occurs most frequently. It is situated (fig. 1) $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles W. of Peebles on the E. flank of Green Knowe, on the farm of Harehope, the proprietors of which, Mr and Mrs A. Boyd, kindly allowed the excavation to take place. Equipment was loaned, and financial assistance towards the cost of the operation was generously granted, by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. The work was carried out in May 1961, with the assistance of Mrs R. W. Feachem, Mr Alastair MacLaren and Mr Ian G. Scott, together with two labourers.

EXCAVATION

The platform selected for excavation was the fourth from the N. end of the settlement (fig. 2). It measured 50 ft. in width, and the rear scarp rose to a height of 5 ft. above the floor. The surface of the latter, which was covered with fine pasture-grass, was divided into four segments, the baulks eventually being entirely

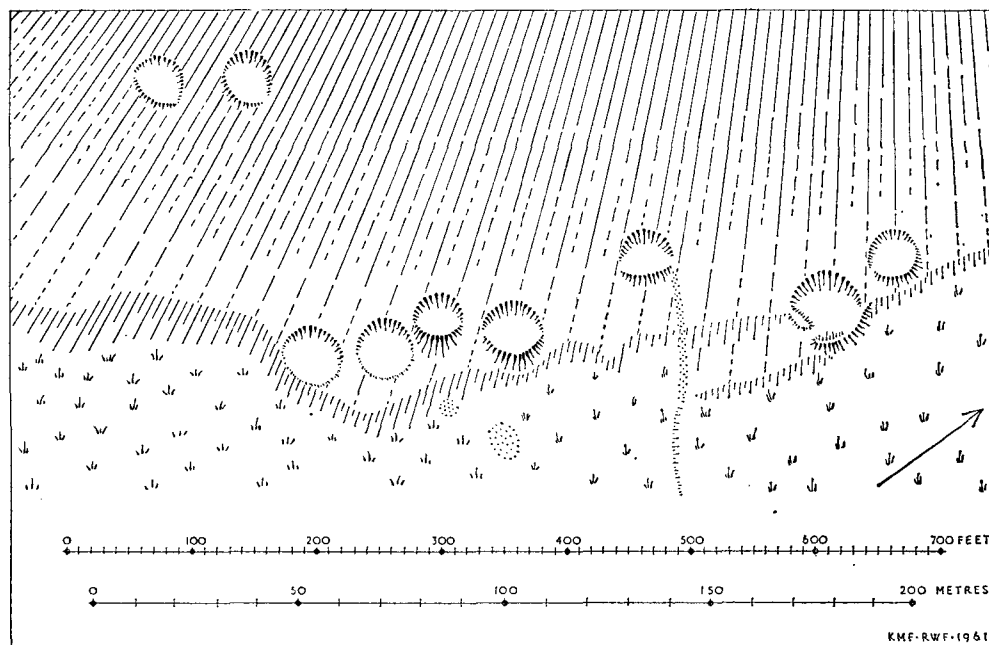


FIG. 2

removed. The turf was found to be 6 in. deep, and while as much as 4 in. of humus lay beneath it near the back of the platform, there was none at all at the front, where several of the quarried blocks forming the bottoming protruded through the turf. In addition to exposing the whole of the floor of the platform, a strip 5 ft. wide was cleared down the front scarp to the point where this merged with the natural hillside below (fig. 3).

The platform had been formed in the manner most frequently encountered, the spoil from a crescentic quarry cut into the face of the hill being used to extend the semicircular floor thus formed into a full circle. The forward half of the level stance thus formed consisted of packed rubble and the rear half of the natural substances exposed by quarrying. It so happened that the N. part of the latter consisted of

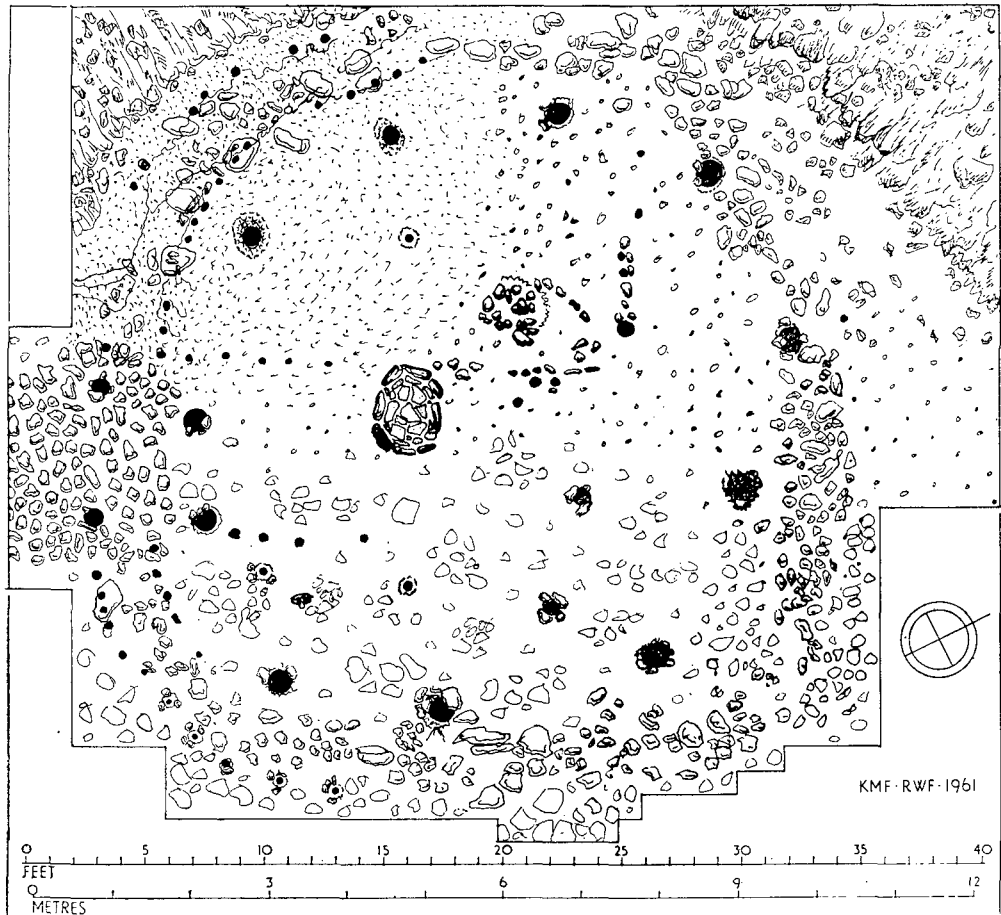


FIG. 3

coarse yellow gravel and the S. part of a thin exposure of comparatively soft sandstone lying upon an agglomeration of pebbles set firmly in a sandy matrix. The sandstone had the property, so rarely encountered during excavations in the district, of preserving small post-holes and other such depressions, albeit in a somewhat blurred condition.

After the removal of the grass-roots a roughly circular scatter of boulders appeared, and as these were cleared of loose earth and small rubble it became evident that while they might have formed the lowest feature of a wall, they were not

laid with the precision essential in the basal courses of a conventional dry-stone structure. When the clearance of earth and rubble reached the sector of the platform floor formed by the sandstone, it was seen that the scatter of boulders was flanked on either side by a row of small depressions which measured about 4 in. in width and about 2 in. in depth and occurred at intervals of about 9 in. It was assumed that the rows, which lay about 2 ft. 6 in. apart, were the holes made by, or for, a series of small stakes comprising the upright members of screens, probably woven and daubed, which had formed the inner and outer covers of a wall, the filling of which rested on and among the boulders. The stake-holes were hard to trace in the areas beyond the extent of the sandstone, although a few were located in the made-up part of the floor. A reconstruction of their probable lay-out indicates that they must have enclosed an almost circular space measuring about 28 ft. in diameter.

A ring of 11 post-holes was found at a distance of about 1 ft. 6 in. within the inner ring of stake-holes. Two of these, spaced 4 ft. apart, were situated one on either side of the entrance, while the rest were placed at intervals of within a few inches of 8 ft. from each other. Two more post-holes, found in the patch of cobbles 8 ft. in width which formed a paving at the entrance, apparently served as terminals for the outer line of stake-holes. An oval hearth 4 ft. long and 3 ft. wide lay 8 ft. in from the entrance. Other features included 6 subsidiary post-holes, somewhat smaller in size than the rest, which presumably held uprights providing support for the rafters; and lines of stake-holes which indicate the positions of some of the internal partitions. The floor of the house was covered with stony earth.

THE FINDS

Pottery. 1. The broken fragment of part of the wall of a vessel was reconstructed from 20 coarse sherds of a group found all in one place (fig. 4, 1). It forms part of a

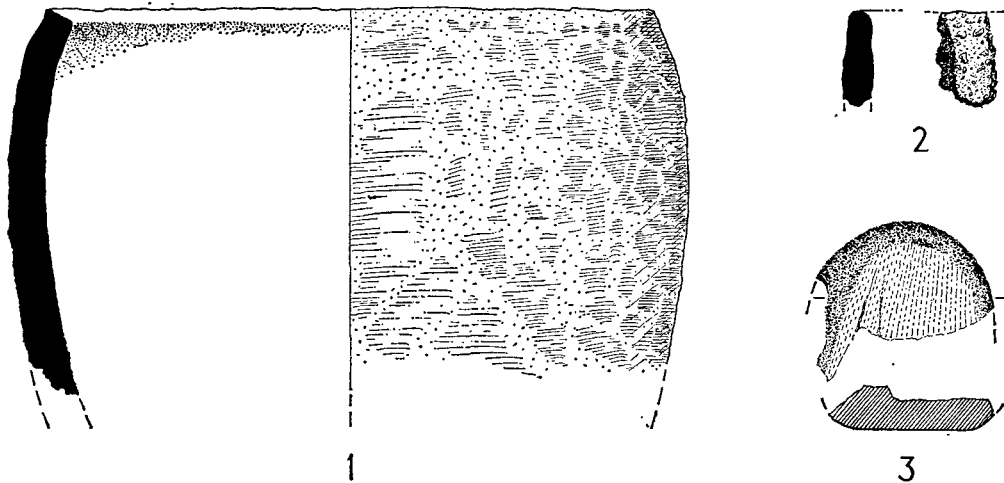


FIG. 4. 1. Restored drawing of upper part of pot; 2. Rim sherd; 3. Stone rubber (all 1/3)

barrel-shaped or situlate pot the internal diameter of the flattened rim of which is $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. The flattening appears to have been achieved by pinching the outer edge. The thickness of the wall varies from $\frac{1}{2}$ in. near the rim to as much as $\frac{5}{8}$ in. at the lowest part of the fragment, which is 6 in. high. The base is not reached, but some of the thicker unplaceable sherds may have belonged to it.

2. Eight other sherds were found, all coarse and ill-fired and all possibly from different vessels. All were featureless except one, which includes the rim (fig. 4, 2).

Stone. 1. A fragment split off what was probably originally an oval stone which had been used for rubbing or grinding (fig. 4, 3). The broad, flattened face is very smooth.¹

2 and 3. Oval pebbles, the surfaces of which appear to have been finely abraded² The larger measures $2\frac{3}{4}$ in. in length by 2 in. and $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. along the transverse axes, the smaller similarly $2\frac{1}{2}$ in., $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. and $1\frac{1}{2}$ in.

DISCUSSION

The technique of screening both the faces of a house wall with wattle has been found in a Beaker context at Gwithian, Cornwall,³ while at Huckhoe, Northumberland, traces of a screen round the inner face only, and of internal partitions, were found in a circular stone-walled house the occupation of which was attributed to the first or second century A.D.⁴ In each of these cases the stake-holes were preserved in virtually ideal conditions, the former in sand and the latter in the solid rock into which they had been bored. It may well be that the practice was in more general use than has heretofore been appreciated, and that the difficulty of recognising such insignificant depressions in the familiar fragmented rock and coarse gravel which underlie so many prehistoric timber-framed houses has militated against their recognition. In the case of a turf wall, such screening must have been virtually essential, while the problem of stopping draughts through a dry-stone wall would also be solved by its use. The filled-cavity wall at Knockadoon⁵ may be compared.

I am indebted to Dr John Coles for a verbal opinion that all the pottery appeared to be appropriate to a horizon located in Period I of the North British Iron Age. The distinction between this and material from Late Bronze Age 4 is slight, but the sherds were adjudged to belong among the later rather than the earlier flat-rimmed wares.

Until excavations are carried out on other platforms in unenclosed platform settlements, the Green Knowe house and its pottery must provide the only evidence for dating the class. From these it would appear that the occupants lived in a manner which differed from what went before and to some extent presaged what was to follow. At the present time almost nothing is known about the way of life of any inhabitants there may have been in the vicinity in the first half of the first millennium B.C., and no positive comparison is therefore possible. It has been suggested that certain types of small timber-framed houses may at least reflect, if not indeed belong

¹ cf. *P.P.S.*, xxiii (1957), 217.

² cf. *ibid.*, 204, fig. 28, 4.

³ I am indebted to Mr A. C. Thomas for this information.

⁴ *Arch. Ael.*, 4th series, xxxvii (1959), 236 and fig. 7.

⁵ *P.R.I.A.*, lvi, section C (1954), 301.

among, Late Bronze Age traditions,¹ but at the moment the question remains open. There is however a considerable body of evidence which can be interpreted as suggesting that during the second half of the first millennium B.C. the countryside was increasingly opened up by the builders of homesteads and small settlements characterised by timber-framed houses within timber enclosures. It may be thought more likely that the unenclosed platform settlements represent an immigration of people with a somewhat more rigorous and systematic method at their command than any which had existed before, than that they were developed by an existing native population. If so, the incomers might be equated with a possibly late stage of the movement which is recognised as having been directed from the Continent to the eastern seaboard of Britain in the middle of the first millennium B.C.²

The Society is indebted to H.M. Treasury for meeting the cost of the illustrations for this paper.

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, xcii (1958-9), 22-24.

² cf. J. R. C. Hamilton, *Jarlshof* (1956), 4.