

A Square Earthwork at Hangingshaw, Yarrow, Selkirkshire

by Dorothy N. Marshall

Hangingshaw earthwork¹ lies in the Yarrow valley, just above Yarrow Ford. It was built on an old river terrace where this fades into the flatter land. A meadow, 400 yds. wide, lies between the site and the present course of the river.

The site consists of a square flat-topped mound or platform 30 ft. across, with a surrounding ditch and external bank. This bank is well defined except on the W. side where it has been ploughed out. The S. side follows the line of the river terrace and so seems to have a greater height. The bank is lower opposite the corners of the mound, more distinctly so at the NE. and SE. corners than at the western ones. The entrance is to the north.

THE EXCAVATION

Two trenches, 6 ft. wide, were cut from the centre of the interior at right angles to each other. One ran N. through the entrance, the other E. through the bank at one of its best defined sections. Another cut was made through the shallow dip in the bank opposite the NE. corner of the internal platform. The eastern half of the top of the earthwork was stripped to the occupation level.

A tree stump with its accompanying roots prevented excavation of the western half. A pit had been dug 3 ft. into the centre of the interior, probably in medieval times. Two recent disturbances are marked by hatching in the plan.

The Bank

The present crest of the bank is 2 ft. above the present ground-level and, to judge from the small amount of fill in the ditch, can never have been much higher. No post-holes were found on the top of it in any of the sections cleared. The three cuts through the bank showed that it was built of earth and stones without foundations, with no kerb or stone core. Each cut showed slightly different disposition of the stones. At the entrance the stones were towards the foot of the bank and were few in number. At the eastern cut there were more stones and they appeared slightly higher in the bank. The largest stones were found in the cut at the dip in the bank at the NE. corner. The trench in the ditch was dug to a depth of 2 ft. 6 in. Apart from a recent sheep burial there was no occupation debris in the fill. The stones which had fallen, and there were not many of them, had come from the interior rather than from the bank. At the eastern cut the outer face of the ditch was cut from soft rock of compacted gravel, with a massive stone set in it to even up the line of the bank. The original depth of the ditch is now difficult to determine but it probably averaged about 4 ft. below the crest of the bank.

¹ RCAMS, *Inventory of Selkirkshire*, No. 145.

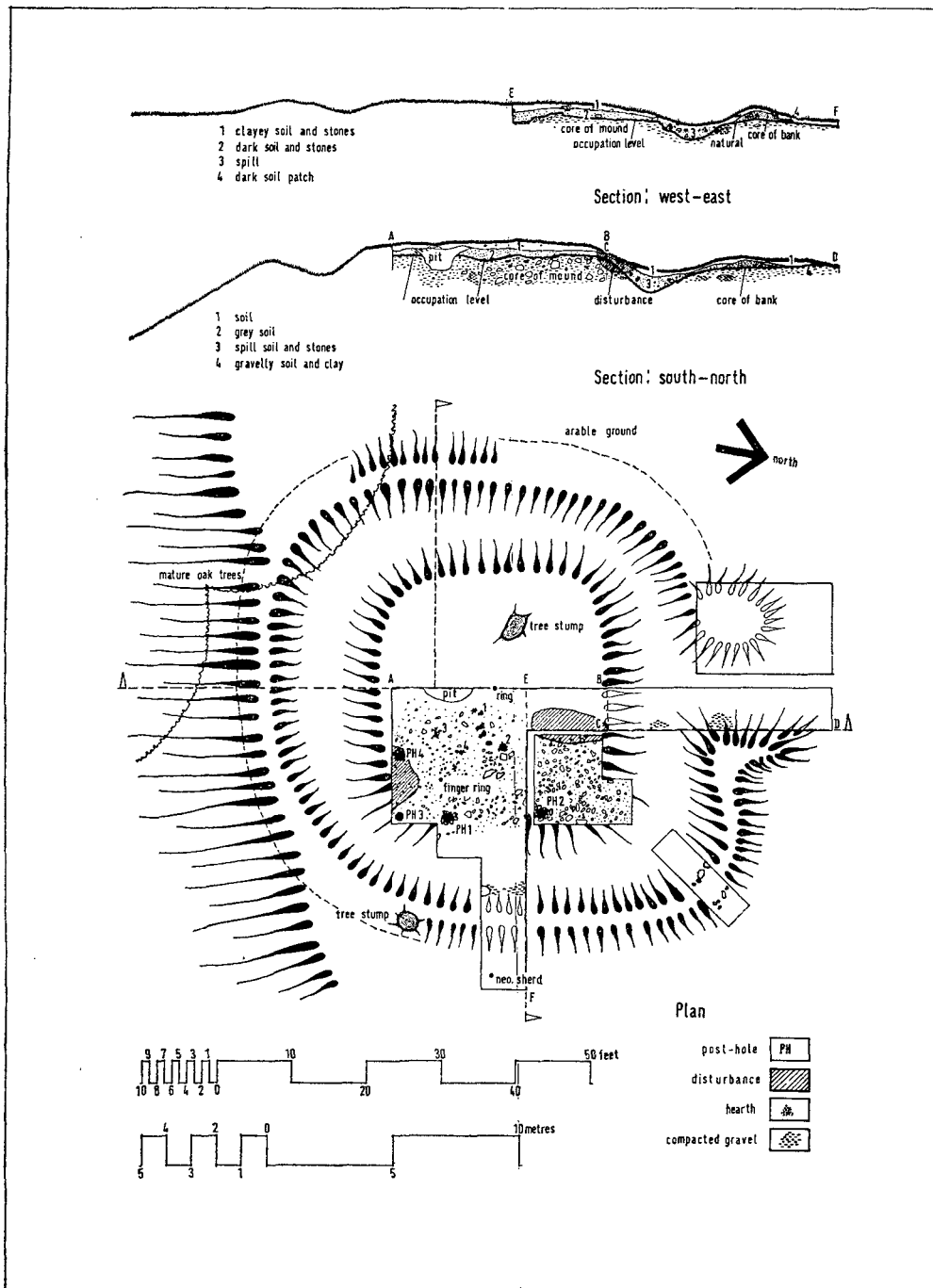


FIG. 1. Plan of site

The Entrance

The entrance is to the north. Here the eastern bank turns outward in a narrowing tail. The western bank seemed to end in a round mound, but excavation showed that this had been disturbed and its original plan and purpose is uncertain. In the entrance way a ridge of soft rock of compacted gravel, a natural feature of the site, had been levelled up with cobbles packed with clay. This pathway led up to the edge of the ditch, and across the ditch the scarp of the internal platform was faced with stones. No trace of steps or a foothold on this face was found. The occupation level of the interior is 2 ft. below the present turf-line so the crest of the bank and the top of the platform would originally have been about the same height.

The Interior

The eastern half of the platform was cleared down to an occupation level. A cobbling of stones covered the surface for a distance of 8 ft. to 10 ft. from the eastern edge, fading out towards the centre. Four post-holes were found, one at the southern edge of the platform, one at the south-eastern corner and the other two at the eastern edge. No trace of wood was found in them. The central area had no made-up floor other than clay and earth tramped firm. The cobbled area does not make a pattern with the post-holes. There were several areas of burning, but only one of these could be described as a hearth with a base of packed and blackened stones (marked '2' on the plan).

Post-holes (fig. 2)

- 1 Set in the cobbled area, made of water-rolled stones with three stones 8 in. long set upright. The fill was soil and loose stones, some of which may have been filler stones.
- 2 Made of smaller stones than No. 1. There were stones at the foot of it.

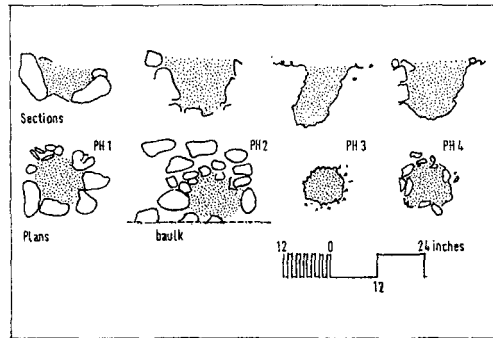


FIG. 2. Sections of post-holes

3 Cut in the soft rock of compacted gravel. The bag-like shape is not typical of a post-hole and may have held a supporting stake. It was filled with soft loose soil and is in line with the other post-holes at the edge of the platform.

4 Cut in the same soft rock as No. 3, but better cut with upright stones at one side. It was filled with loose soil. As it lay within the recent disturbance, some of its upper stones may have been removed.

A trench was dug through the core of the platform to a depth of 6 ft. The section showed no lower occupation level. The core of the mound is composed of earth and stones lying on clayey

gravel and compacted pebbly rock, the natural features of the river terrace which the occupiers had adapted to their needs.

At some later time, when the soil had accumulated to a depth of 1 ft. 1 in. above the floor level of the interior, a pit was dug, 7 ft. wide and 3 ft. deep. This went through the floor level into the core of the mound. It was re-filled with a homogeneous mass of grey sticky soil. There is no sign of the pit having been used or having remained open for any length of time. Since this pit was filled in, 9 in. of soil have accumulated on the top of the mound.

The Finds

1 One rim-sherd of Neolithic ware (fig. 3, 1; N.M.A. HD 1904) was found 1 ft. 3 in. below the turf, outside the bank; a stray, unstratified find. It is typical Neolithic dark grey, hand-made ware, with large angular grits and a smoothly finished surface. This smoothing however, does not go right under the rim. Neolithic pottery is very rare in this region. The angle of the rim is uncertain.

2 Half a bronze ring (N.M.A. HD 1904) found on the occupation level in the centre of the interior. The estimated diameter is 1.4 in. It is D-shaped in section, 0.18 in. thick, in three pieces and much corroded.

3 Bronze ring (fig. 3, 2; N.M.A. HD 1906) was found above the cobbling, 4 ft. from the S. side of the platform, 1 ft. 2½ in. below the turf. It has a diameter of 0.8 in. is 0.5 in. thick, D-shaped in section and much corroded but seemingly with a wide, half round moulding in the centre of the outer face, edged by a hollow with a raised zig-zag line and two smaller rounded mouldings near the edge. Despite the small diameter and the awkwardly thick section it is probably a



FIG. 3. Neolithic sherd (1) and bronze ring (2)

finger-ring. Mr R. B. K. Stevenson of the National Museum of Antiquities examined the ring and dated it to the Iron Age, possibly first century A.D. It is badly corroded but the incised design can be clearly seen on one side. The design was made by leaving a ridge standing and then punching from alternate sides. He pointed out that this method of working can be seen on an Iron Age bowl from North Devon¹ and on the torc or girdle from Newstead.² There is also similar decoration on the spiral bronze armlets found in Scotland, as on the spiral bracelet from Culbin sands.³ Zig-zag decoration also appears on the spiral armlet from New Mains Whitekirk, East Lothian, part of an unpublished hoard of the first or second century A.D. The design itself seems to indicate an import from the south, though it was used in a modified form by native craftsmen in Scotland. The bowl can be seen in the British Museum and the other examples in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.

¹ *Ant. J.*, xli (1961), 195.

² *ibid.*

³ *Iron Age in North Britain* (A. L. F. Rivet, ed.), 32.

CONCLUSIONS

Hangingshaw earthwork was probably an Iron Age homestead, the bronze finger-ring dating it to about the first century A.D. Not enough was found on the top to give the plan of a hut. Dr Steer, when examining the plan, pointed out that, if one discards post-hole 3 – not a very convincing one – the others lie in an arc, possibly part of a hut-circle. If the arc were completed the resulting hut-circle would have a diameter of about 27 ft. The presumed line would cut through the cobbled area on the NE. corner of the platform and would be within 2 ft. of the edge opposite the entrance, but would allow about 6 ft. or 8 ft. of a courtyard area to the west. One objection to this is that the post-holes lie so near to the edge of the platform. While the edge must have eroded in the course of time, very little debris has silted into the ditch and the extra space cannot have been large. Alternatively, the post-holes may give the line of a palisade round the edge, which would have enclosed an area with flimsy huts, all traces of which have disappeared. There was only one period of occupation and that one does not seem to have been of long duration. The earthwork, while adapted from the river terrace to a symmetrical plan, does not seem to have been constructed with method or great skill. As no steps were seen, the platform may have been reached by a ladder or a tree trunk; it is, however, low enough to have needed neither. It seems probable that the bank was built from the earth thrown up from the ditch which can hardly have had any great defensive value and was probably designed for drainage.¹ The bank may, of course, have had thorn and brushwood along the crest which would have made it more useful than it now appears. Nevertheless the curious but definite dips at the corners are difficult to explain, unless we assume that the bank was never more than mere upcast and so was not intended to have a protective role.

Permission to carry out this investigation was kindly given by the landowner, Mr R. S. S. Meade, Lower Farm, Compton, Abdale, near Cheltenham. The excavation was carried out in 1962 by the Selkirkshire Antiquarian Society (Field Section) under the direction of the author with the assistance of Miss Charlotte Lythe. The members are grateful to Mr Stevenson, Dr Steer and Miss Henshall for their help and advice freely given at the time of the excavation and with the preparation of the report. The full excavation report, photographs and plans have been deposited with the Selkirkshire Antiquarian Society.

¹ cf. the bank and internal ditch at West Plean, Stirlingshire (*PSAS*, LXXXIX (1955–6), 227 ff.).