

ART. II. – *Settlements and Groups of Small Cairns on Birkby and Birker Fells, Eskdale, Cumbria. Survey Undertaken in 1982.*

By R. H. LEECH, M.A., PH.D., F.S.A.

Introduction

THE potential for more detailed fieldwork on the south-western Fells of the Lake District has been emphasised by R. Bradley's correlation of the archaeological and ecological data for Neolithic and Bronze Age patterns of land use in north-west England.¹ From the archaeological records of the Ordnance Survey and from the extensive vegetational history research then recently synthesised by D. Walker in 1966 and W. Pennington in 1965 and 1970, it was possible to make a number of important observations regarding the patterns of land use in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages.² Most relevant to the survey to be described below are those relating to the Bronze Age use of the uplands of the south-western Fells. In 1970 Pennington had shown that there the secondary oak forest survived throughout the Neolithic, but was replaced by open grassland most probably in the Bronze Age.³ At Burnmoor Tarn, north of Eskdale, an interpolated date placed this event at *c.* 1500 b.c.; at the more remote and higher Seathwaite Tarn, above Dunnerdale, the replacement of trees by grassland was dated to 1080 b.c. \pm 140. It was concluded that 'this episode seems to record a pastoral land use in the uplands, in which much of the replacement of trees by grassland could have resulted from the grazing of many animals in the woodlands, with consequent failure of tree regeneration'.⁴ Correlating this with the archaeological data, Bradley was able to observe that 'perhaps unexpectedly, all four areas with strong evidence for open grassland suitable for pastoral farming are occupied by large groups of Bronze Age cairns'. At the same time, he noted that in 1971 A. Fleming had advanced arguments against the undertaking of such intensive forest clearance 'for purely pastoral use'. Yet, on the south-western Fells, if a phase of cultivation was to be identified, 'it must have been short lived and no cereal pollen has been identified'. Further difficulties of interpretation were related to 'the identification of the cairns as clearance features and the evidence of areas of walling amidst these cairns'. Concluding, it was thought that 'whether the specific observations which have emerged have any local or overall validity still remains to be seen'.⁵

Although archaeological fieldwork and excavation has been carried out on the Lake District Fells since the nineteenth century, the extent and remoteness of the monuments of archaeological interest, notably small cairns, has deterred fieldworkers from undertaking any detailed extensive survey.⁶ Yet, recent work in comparable upland areas such as Dartmoor and the North York Moors has emphasised the potential here for contributing to our understanding of Bronze Age society, territorial organisation and economy.⁷

The survey described here was undertaken by the Cumbria and Lancashire Archaeological Unit of the University of Lancaster in March-April 1982. The project was to assist an assessment of the sites and monuments records for Cumbria and Lancashire, on behalf of the Department of the Environment, and to provide instruction and experience in field survey for archaeology students in the Department of Classics and Archaeology. The assessment has now been completed and a copy has been made available to the

Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society. It is hoped to continue the project in future years, and the results presented here are therefore an interim report.

Methods

A 1 km wide east-west transect was selected for survey, to extend from the narrow coastal plain on the west to the highest fells on the east. The transect was to include Devoke Water, an important palaeobotanical record site.⁸ Fig. 1 shows the area which it was possible to survey in the available two weeks.

The organisation of the survey was based on that used in northern Scotland, outlined by R. J. Mercer in 1980.⁹ Preliminary survey of topographically defined areas was followed by detailed recording. Monuments were marked with bamboo canes, each bearing a number allocated from the Cumbria Sites and Monuments Record (hereafter SMR). Recording of location was by theodolite, Sopwith staff and tabulated notebook. Ordnance Survey XYZ coordinates of survey stations and monuments were calculated trigonometrically with the aid of a programmable calculator. Mapping was generally at 1:2500. The details of each monument were entered on a record form designed to facilitate transfer of the data to the SMR.

The Survey

520 monuments were recorded and mapped. These comprised nine groups of cairns, enclosures and other structures. The detailed records which form the basis of the following account will be incorporated in the Cumbria SMR.

Fig. 2. SMR 7532 centred SD 14349750. A group of 11 round cairns are either side of the beck descending towards Cropple How Plantation. The cairns to the east of the beck are uniformly smaller than those to the west. Further to the west is a rectangular stone structure (Fig. 2(a)).

SMR 7531 centred SD 14649758. A group of three round cairns are 220 m to the east of the easternmost cairn in 7532. It should be noted that the gradually sloping ground to the south was intensively examined and no sites were recorded.

Fig. 3. SMR 7530 centred SD 15129721. Five round cairns are to the east of Linbeck Gill.

SMR 7529 centred SD 15569724. On the south side of Water Crag are 24 small cairns and two lengths of walling, one of which (Fig. 3(a)) is possibly part of a former enclosure. If so, it is possibly an enclosure earlier in date than the cairns, for if of contemporary or later date more of it might be expected to have survived. In 1961 J. Cherry (site 2A) recorded 31 cairns.¹⁰

SMR 2696 centred SD 15689741. On the east side of Water Crag and extending towards Rough Crag is a group of 103 cairns and other features, morphologically distinct from 7529. The group includes round and long cairns and two lengths of walling, one of which (Fig. 3(b)) is probably part of a circular hut. Several relatively flat areas within the group are devoid of cairns, and detailed statistical analysis might reveal some patterning. Cherry (site 2) recorded 84 cairns.¹¹

Fig. 4. SMR 1424 centred SD 16459750. To the south-east of Rough Crag and 510 m to the east of the easternmost cairn of 2696 is a group of 45 small cairns. The cairns are

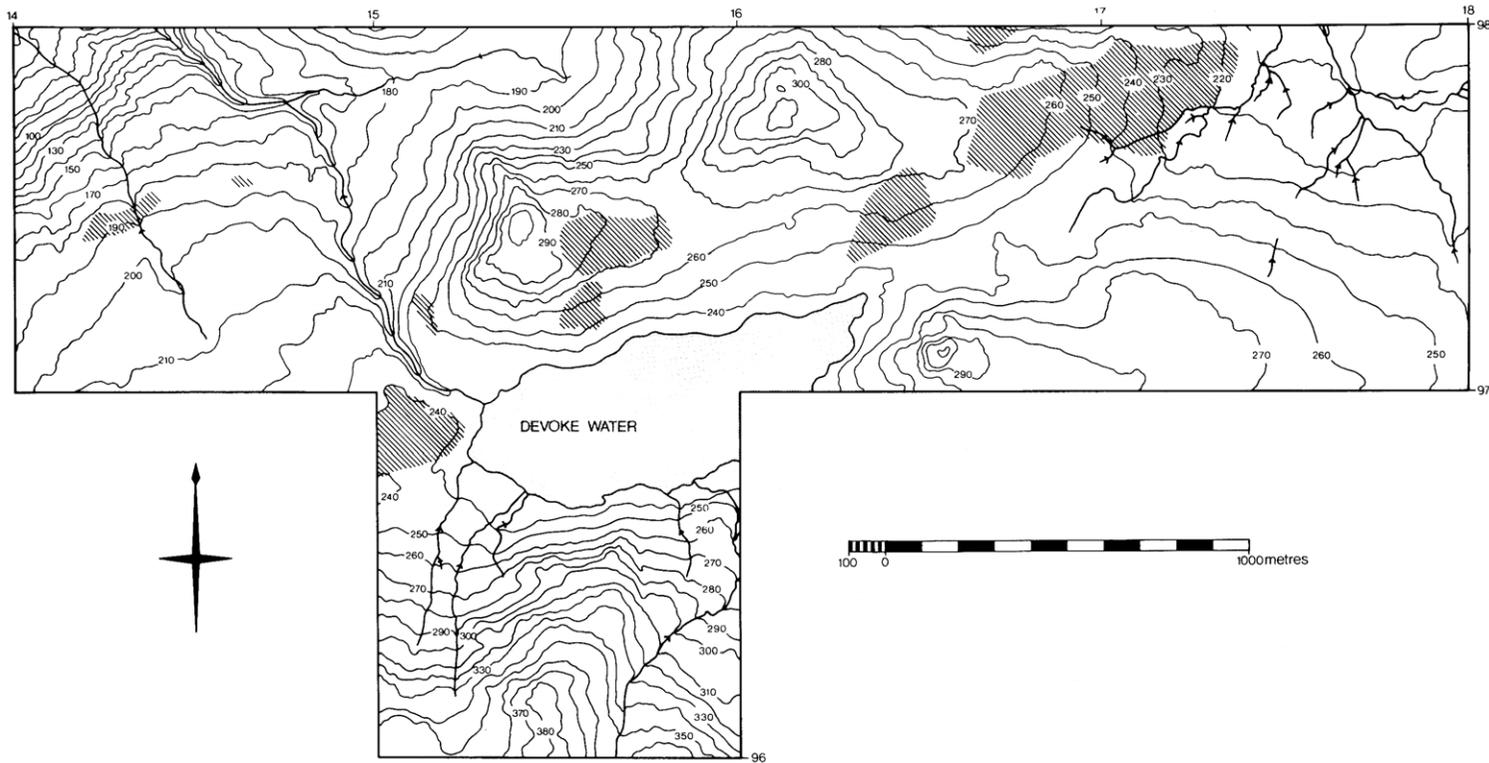


FIG. 1. – Location of the area surveyed. The shaded areas are groups of small cairns and/or settlements.

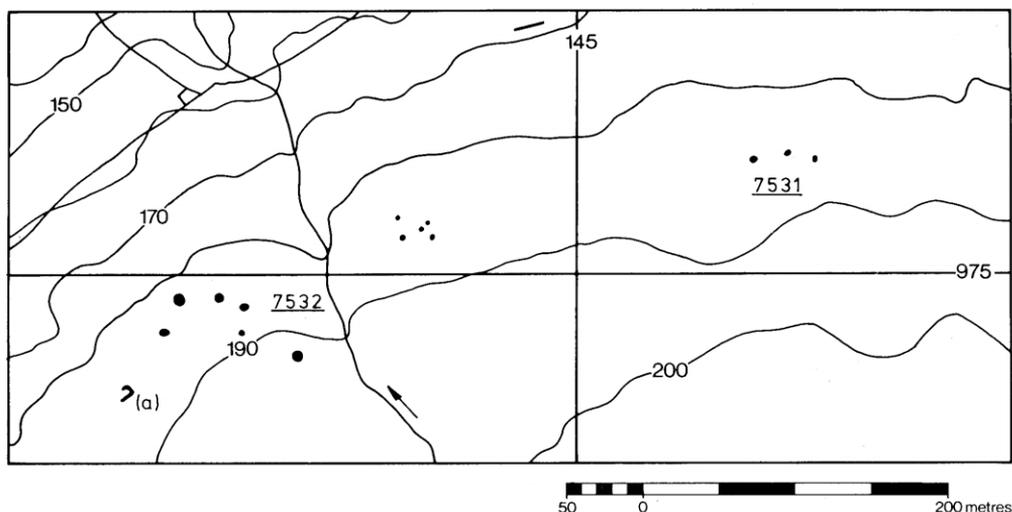


FIG. 2. – Survey south of Cropple How Plantation.

on sloping ground, and are in two distinct groups separated by a flatter area of ground *c.* 50 m wide by at least 140m in length (Fig. 4(a)).

Fig. 5. SMR 1425 centred SD 17009780. Extending along the south slope of Pike How either side of the road from Eskdale to Ulpha are an enclosure (Fig. 5(a)), three lengths of walling and 148 small cairns including both round and long cairns. The enclosure and other walls survive only to one course of boulders in height. The west side of the group is sharply defined by a concentration of small cairns (Fig. 5(b)), and on the north the watershed forms the approximate limit. Within the group as a whole are several void areas of ground similar to those occupied by cairns. Possibly, the construction of the road from Eskdale to Ulpha has resulted in the destruction of some cairns close to the roadside. Cherry (site 3) recorded 100 cairns in sites *1424* and *1425*, whilst detailed survey has recorded 199.¹²

SMR 7527 centred SD 16709800. On the north side of Pike How, a possible settlement consists of two enclosures, three cairns, larger than those in *1425*, and five lengths of walling. The largest of the enclosures (Fig. 5(c)) is roughly circular, *c.* 50m diameter, with the enclosure wall rarely surviving more than 1m in height. The interior of the enclosure is sharply defined by localised growth of bracken. The smaller enclosure (Fig. 5(d)) is roughly oval in plan, 20m by 30m, its interior also sharply defined by bracken growth. Close by are four lengths of walling running down or along the contours and with one possibly originally joined to enclose (b).

Fig. 6. SMR 4783 centred SD 15119688. On a prominent but low rise immediately to the west of Devoke Water are 138 small round or long cairns, two larger cairns, several lengths of walling and at least five structures. On the highest point of the low rise, and occupying a very prominent crest as seen from east or west, is a cairn (Fig. 6(a)) 14.6m diameter with a stone kerb and having only one small cairn situated within a 40m radius. To the east are more small cairns, three hut circles (Fig. 6(b)), two rectangular structures (Fig. 6(c)) and two roughly parallel walls (Fig. 6(d)), one of which marks the approximate

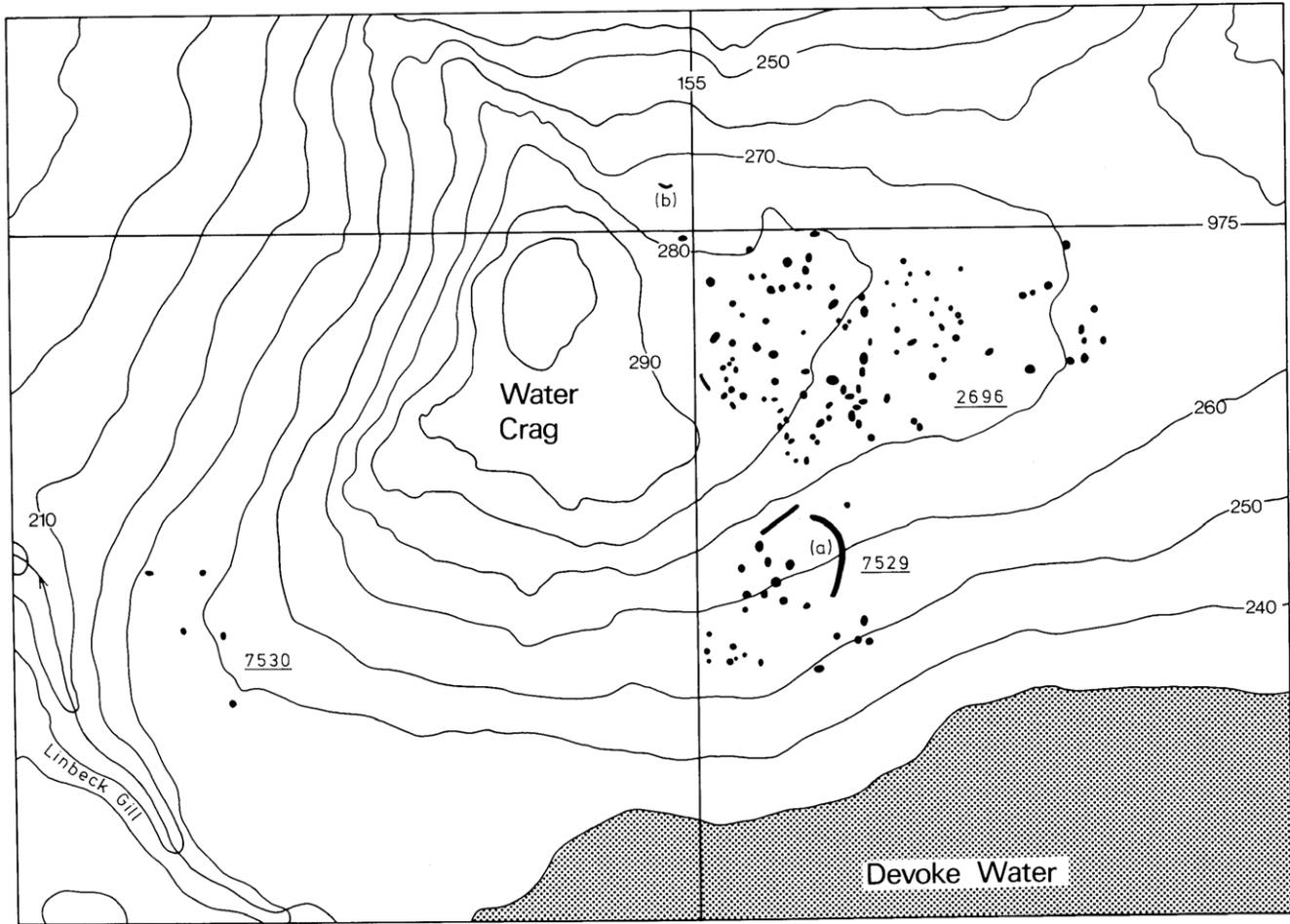


FIG. 3. - Survey on and south of Water Crag.

50 0 200metres

southern limit of the group of cairns. To the west of the large round cairn (a) are several straight alignments of groups of cairns, the more obvious indicated on the plan (Fig. 6(e)). A cairn 13m in length is partly a natural rock outcrop and partly man-made (Fig. 6(f)). The morphology of this settlement and group of small cairns is clearly capable of more detailed analysis than would be here appropriate.

Discussion

It would be wrong to draw any lengthy conclusions from the survey of this limited area. In particular, detailed spatial analysis of the groups of small cairns and the cairns themselves, including the relative sizes and quantities of different types, will be deferred to a later interim report. The following are the more obvious questions which can be discussed briefly at this stage.

Territorial boundaries. Some patterns are already apparent. The larger groups of small cairns 7529, 2696 (Fig. 3), 1425, 7527 (Fig. 5) and 4783 (Fig. 6) were associated with enclosures or hut circles and were thus probably settlement locations. The spacing between the groups of cairns 2696, 1424 plus 1425 and 4783 are such as might be predicted to exist between contemporary adjacent settlements. Further, the groups of cairns at 2696 (Fig. 3), 1424 plus 1425 and 7527 apparently respected watersheds as boundaries.

Land use. The location of some groups of cairns may indicate their former function or at least remove certain possibilities. The settlement/group of cairns 4783 were immediately to the west of Devoke Water, from the centre and margin of which have been taken sediment cores for pollen analysis. If of Bronze Age date, they are unlikely to be associated with arable cultivation, since no significant percentage of cereal pollen of that age has come from the Devoke Water samples.¹³ The cairns could be associated with the

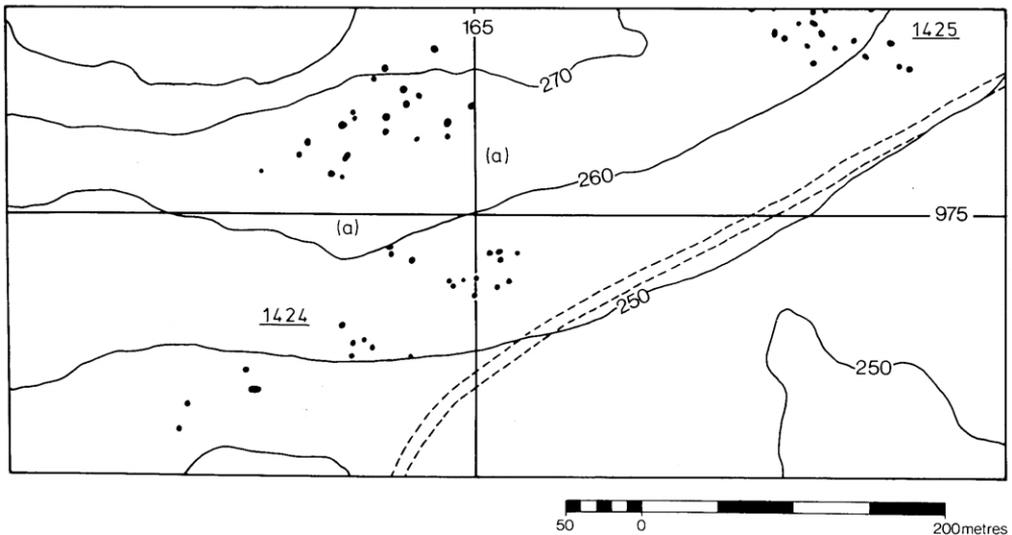


FIG. 4. - Survey south of Rough Crag.

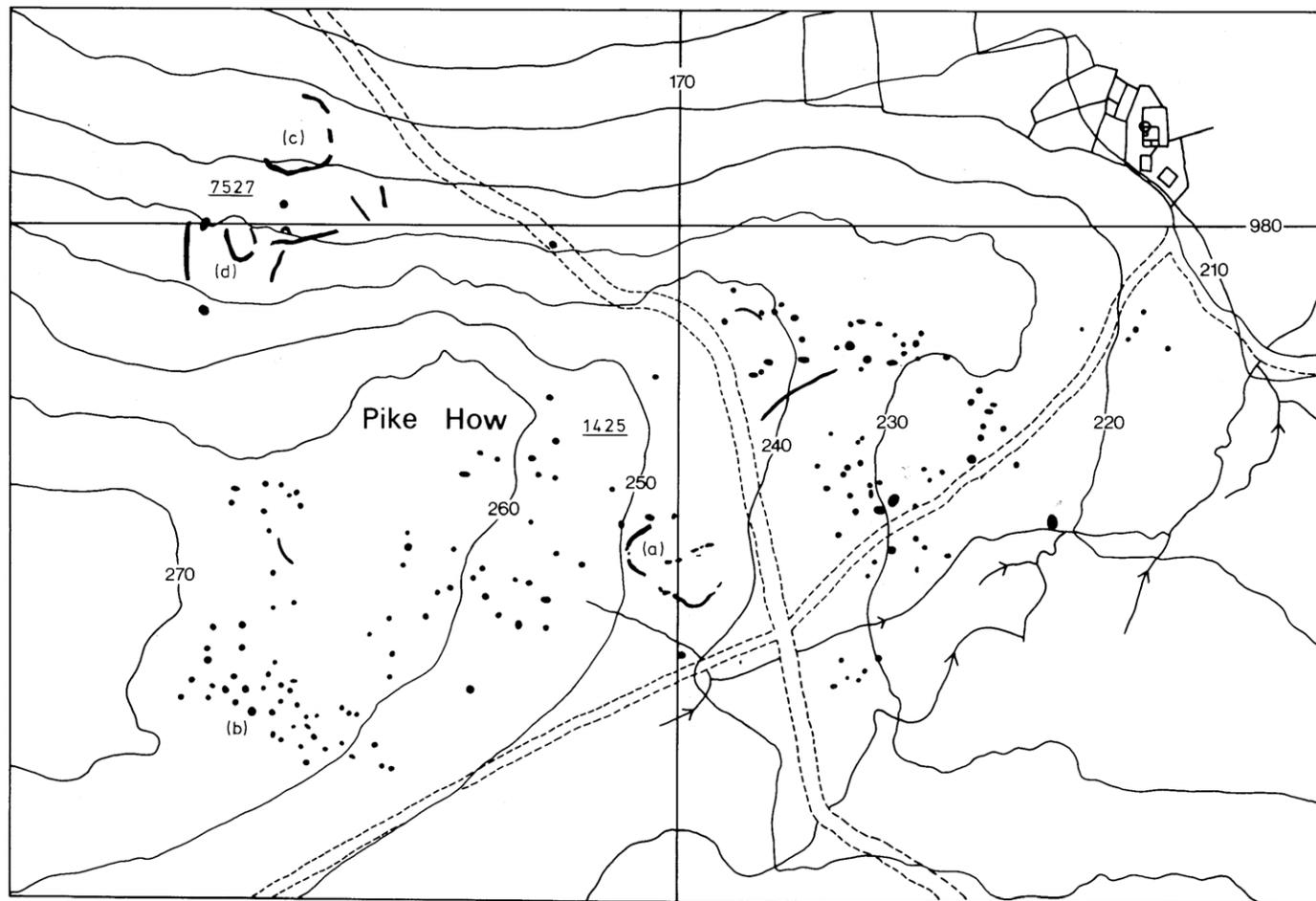


FIG. 5. - Survey of Pike How.



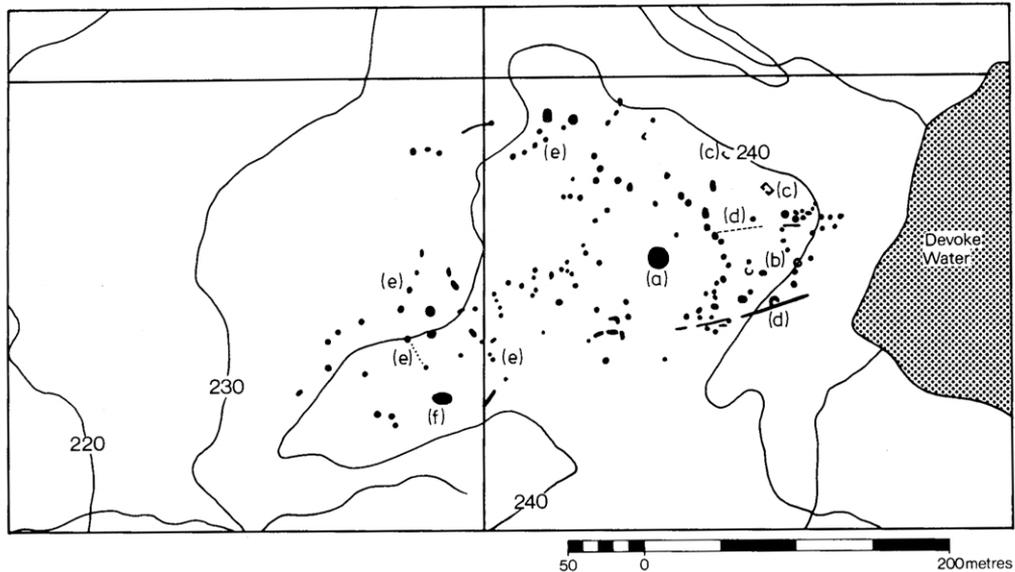


FIG. 6. - Survey west of Devoke Water.

later 'Brigantian' cereal phase recorded in the pollen analyses; but the location of the cairns on an unsheltered low rise, fully open to Atlantic gales, is also unlikely to have been seen suitable for arable cultivation. Furthermore, the small cairns were clearly spatially related to the large round cairn (Fig. 6(a)) which is certainly a characteristic Bronze Age burial monument. From more survey, it will clearly be profitable to test further possible land-use patterns particularly with regard to the groups of small cairns.

In 1983-4 it is hoped to complete the survey of the uplands between Eskdale and Dunnerdale, extending on the south to Black Coombe and incorporating sample areas of the lowland strip on the west coast.

Acknowledgements

For permission to undertake the survey I am indebted to the landowners, Sir William Pennington Ramsden and the Earl of Lonsdale. I am especially grateful to Kay Whitehead and Pamela Leech for much assistance in the organisation of the survey, to Phil Howard for preparing the drawings and to Dr P. J. Fowler for archaeological advice whilst the work was in progress. The field work was ably and enthusiastically carried out by Heather Hilton, Simon Pate, Elizabeth Roach and Russell Runacles.

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¹⁰ Cherry, *op. cit.*, site 2a.

¹¹ *ibid.*, site 2.

¹² *ibid.*, site 3.

¹³ Pennington, *op. cit.*, 1965, 1970.

