

ART. IV. – *Stone-based huts and other structures at Smithy Beck, Ennerdale.*

By the late W. FLETCHER AND CLARE I. FELL

Foreword by Clare Fell

IN March 1986 Mr W. Fletcher sent me his notes, photographs and plans of work he had done in 1962/63 on hut sites and cairns up Smithy Beck in Ennerdale and asked me to prepare a report. My draft, printed below, was sent to him in July. Our planned discussion never took place for, sadly, he died 3 August 1986. It has therefore not been possible to clear up certain obscure points including the position and significance of three fragments of thin (6 mm) slate, identified by E. H. Shackleton as from Fleetwith, found in two of the structures, or in which structures they were found. Nor is it possible to state with certainty the measurements of the cairns east of Starling Gill as no plan has been traced; nor do his notes give the depth of the cist exposed as the central feature of the partially excavated cairn. A few photographs of the work on the cairn survive.

The numbers he gave the various huts, or houses, are not consistent – in fact two different sets of numbers occur in two sketch maps of the site contained in the notebooks which his widow handed me in October 1986. I have therefore given the equivalent numbers and letters printed by H. G. Ramm in *Shielings and Bastles*. H.M.S.O. (1970) and by G. Crawford and C. George in *An Archaeological Survey of Copeland* (1983), both of which include individual map references.

The position of the postholes found between the hut wall and the outer enclosure at Ramm 157 suggests that roofing probably also extended over that area. J. Cherry possesses a coloured slide of one of the postholes.

Mr Fletcher's large plan of the area at a scale of 100 yds to 1 in. shows further structures north of Smithy Beck at the western end of the site using the same symbol he employed for the twelve huts described below. These are assigned numbers in the sketch plans in his notebooks and may be of the same type. The plan, notes and photographs will be deposited at Carlisle Museum, together with his sketch plans of some of the huts.

The discovery of a vein of ribbon jasper 6 ft (1.83 m) wide running across Clews Gill at 1250 ft (420 m) above OD is of geological interest. Samples were sent to the Geological Institute, London and to Carlisle Museum. The jasper has been partially extracted.

Stone based huts and other structures at Smithy Beck, Ennerdale.

By the late W. FLETCHER.

An interesting group of twelve or more rectangular stone-based huts, set within small stone walled enclosures and situated on either side of Smithy Beck in Ennerdale, were first shown to me in 1959 by the late R. F. Dickinson of Lamplugh and H. Williamson of Routon Farm, Ennerdale. They chiefly lie between the 183 and 213 m contours in a sheltered valley below Great Borne and Starling Dodd with Latterbarrow to the south. The underlying rock is the Ennerdale Granophyre. The site was noted as a settlement by Dr E. D. Hyam in his report to the South-West Regional Group of this Society,

giving a central map reference of 35(NY) 129150.¹ Some of the structures had been shown as sheepfolds on the first edition of the 6 in. OS map, surveyed in 1863 and published in 1867,² and on subsequent editions. They were also known to R. H. Quine who considered them later than hut circles and possibly belonging to early explorers for iron.³

A bloomery, scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Acts, lies on Smithy Beck close to the point where it enters Ennerdale Water (Cumbria SMR 3714) and from this a track climbs along the beck and past the huts to the iron ore (haematite) levels in Clews Gill to the north. These workings are mentioned by J. Postlethwaite who stated that they are at the junction of the Ennerdale and Buttermere granophyre with the Skiddaw slates, but he did not give the period of their activity.⁴ A tenement called Sinderhill, held by the occupier of Mireside farm, existed in 1560, so presumably a bloomery had been established by that date. Mining rights were leased by Queen Catherine to Richard Patrickson of Calder Abbey and others in 1685⁵ and in 1765 Ennerdale manor, forest, mines etc. were leased by the Crown to Sir James Lowther.⁶

In addition to the huts a group of four cairns were found near the head of Smithy Beck, east of Starling Gill, on the southern slopes of Starling Dodd. Other structures such as open hearths, potash pits, sheepfolds and sheep washing enclosures were also noted in this area and near the Gillflinter Beck and at Gillerthwaite. A description of a curious structure known as a "goose-bield" for catching foxes, situated on the south slope of Great Borne, has been published by Thomas Hay.⁷

Following a trip to Denmark I was struck by the possible similarity in outline of some of the huts to house types there dating from the Viking period. This decided me to carry out a detailed survey and undertake some excavation in order to determine their age and purpose. Permission to excavate was obtained from Mr W. Rawling and the work was carried out under my direction by the boys of Pelham House School, Calderbridge and members of the South-West Regional Group in 1962 and 1963. A few notes about the work have appeared over the intervening years, but this account records more fully what was done.⁸ The huts are scheduled (Cumbria SMR 3605, 3712, 3715-6). Late medieval pottery found in the largest hut was shown at this Society's Spring Meeting at Kendal in 1964.⁹ All measurements taken at the time were in English standard measure.

Preliminary enquiry

After visiting the site in June 1962 when one hut had been exposed Clare Fell consulted the late Dr Peter Gelling who, after seeing a photograph and sketchplan of this hut, suggested that it was a shieling house, on account of its position by a stream and said that H. G. Ramm of R.C.H.M. (England) based at York was then working on shielings in the Bewcastle area. Subsequently Mr Ramm twice visited the Smithy Beck site, taking measurements and photographs of the twelve huts of this type and included a short description and illustration in his published work.¹⁰ I also showed him two huts on Ben Gill on the south side of Ennerdale Water which have no outer enclosing wall. The Smithy Beck huts with their surrounding enclosures are unusual in his study of shielings. He considered the enclosures too small for folding, or cultivation, and in some cases appeared to constitute a doubling of the house wall. The proximity of the mining activity

in Clews Gill suggested to him that the Smithy Beck structures may have been miners' huts rather than normal shielings connected with transhumance.

Miss Fell also consulted the late R. J. C. Hamilton who considered that comparative studies in Iceland had shown that buildings with stone faced turf-core walls were later in date than the Viking period there.¹¹

The site and the excavation

Bracken and turf were removed from the dry stone walls and the interiors of the huts and enclosures to enable plans to be made. The huts are rectangular in form with a single entrance on one of the long sides. The stone walled enclosures are more curved in outline, sometimes giving the appearance of a double wall, leaving a gap usually from 0.6 m to 1.8 m, sometimes more, between its inner face and the outer wall of the rectangular hut. If this gap was at one time turf filled for greater insulation no trace now remains of such material and some other purpose may have been intended. In many cases the gap is far too large to suggest stone facing of a turf core wall and the thickness of the walls too great to indicate this type of construction. The huts are concentrated in three main groups, two on the left bank and one on the right of Smithy Beck.

- (1) The most westerly group of four huts is on the left bank, standing on a terrace above the stream. At this point there seems to have been an artificial water cut 0.9 m wide diverted from the beck and running close below the huts. This made me wonder whether a horizontal water wheel could once have been positioned there. A little to the south is a fifth hut, now overlayed by a sheepfold. All five huts are oriented east/west and have a single entrance on the long north side (Ramm 153-7; Crawford and George A-E).

The most easterly hut of this group (Ramm 157; Crawford and George E) was excavated in 1962. It measured 10.4 by 4.1 m and had a single entrance near the west end of the long north wall. The walls of granophyre blocks stand to two or three courses to an average height of 0.5 m and are 0.9 m thick. There appeared to be a single room in this hut and the floor was of compacted clay. The neck of a green glass globular wine bottle was found 152 mm below the turf and was the only find. This was identified by Dr Donald Harden as a type dating in this country between the 1650s and the 1730s, or 1740s. The gap between the enclosing wall and the hut averaged 0.5 m on the east, north and west sides but bowed out to the south giving a maximum of 2 m and standing up to four courses high. The overall measurements of the enclosure are 13.5 by 8 m (Plate 1). Four post holes 152 mm in diameter were found between the hut wall and the outer enclosure.

Another hut in this group (Ramm 156; Crawford and George D) was also partly examined. The hut itself measured 8.2 by 4.3 m with an entrance on the north side. The walls were standing for a single course in most places and it is set in a surrounding enclosure. A circular structure, rising to three or four courses, is situated in the north-west corner of the hut and a smaller circular structure exists in a similar position in the enclosure wall. Some investigation of the larger circular structure was carried out which showed that the base stones were vertically placed, making a rectangular setting containing ash and charcoal. This suggested that it could have



PLATE I. – One of the “Shielings” after excavation. Ramm 157; Crawford and George E, looking west.

been some kind of kiln, or oven, but it was uncertain whether it was contemporary, or later than the hut. There was no opening from this structure into the interior of the hut (Plate 2). An oval corn-drying kiln was found in the corner of a barn building at the 14/15th century farmstead at Jarlshof, Shetland,¹² which made me wonder whether this building has had other uses than a dwelling.

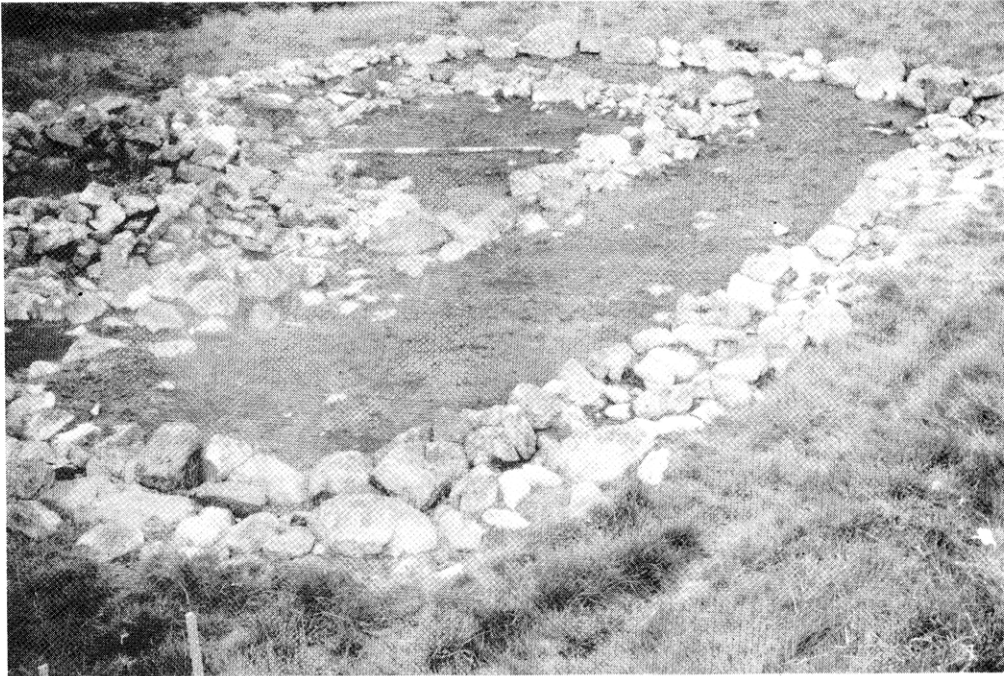


PLATE 2. – Ramm 156; Crawford and George D, from the southwest.

- (2) The second group of two huts of this type, also on the left bank, lies further east up Smithy Beck and were in close proximity (Ramm 158 and 158a; Crawford and George F and G). One was oriented east/west with a single entrance on the north side. The hut measured 9 by 5 m. The other, oriented north/south with a possible entrance on the west side was not well preserved and measured 6·1 by 4·6 m. This area has been ploughed and planted since 1963 and the latter hut was not traced by Crawford and George.
- (3) The third group of five huts is on the right bank of Smithy Beck all except one of which lie east of Clews Gill (Ramm 159-163; Crawford and George H-L). The hut on the west side of Clews Gill (Ramm 159; Crawford and George H) is oriented north/south and surrounded by an enclosing wall, with a short length of wall projecting eastward from the southern end of the east wall near which the single entrance is placed. This hut is divided into two equal rooms, with indications of a bed platform at the south end. It measured 7·9 by 4 m.

The largest hut (Ramm 161 (see reference 10 below); Crawford and George J) stands on dry ground 3·6 m above the beck and with a streamlet to its east. It is oriented north/south and surrounded by an enclosing wall which follows more closely

the outline of the hut, giving the impression, in some parts, of a double wall. This hut was excavated more fully. The single entrance is on the west wall and protected from the prevailing wind by a flagged passage, or porch. There is a small semi-circular annexe on the west side near the porch and a larger semi-circular annexe at the south end. The hut itself was divided into two rooms. The larger northern room had a raised platform at the north end, possibly a bed space, and there was a hearth on the east wall opposite the entrance. The southern room was roughly paved with granophyre slabs approximately 0.46 m square. The hut itself measured 10.5 by 6 m and the outer enclosure 15.5 by 11 m beyond which was the semi-circular annexe measuring 8 m east/west. This annexe has an entrance on the west side and its walls still stand to three or four courses. It is sub-divided and could have been used as a stall for animals though there was some indication of a hearth on the south side.

A length of the foundation of a wall 0.6 m wide, possibly a field boundary, abuts the southern wall of the large annexe and runs in a south-westerly direction. Mr Ramm took this to be part of another hut of this type the northern end of which underlay the hut just described (Ramm 160; Crawford and George I).

When excavating around the hearth in the main building a considerable amount of wheel-made green glazed pottery was found and further sherds were discovered between, and under, the paving immediately adjacent to the south. The bulk of this proved to be late medieval with a few post-medieval sherds. A report by the late Eric Parsons with a fresh assessment by Jeff Taylor of the Carlisle Archaeological Unit is given as an Appendix. The post-medieval sherds have unfortunately not been traced at the time of writing. It is possible that this hut was occupied at more than one period and that the stone flagging belongs to a later phase of use.

Further north up the streamlet on which the last described hut is situated is another structure of the same type, oriented north/south with a single entrance near the south end on the east side (Ramm 163; Crawford and George L). There were possible traces of paving at the south end and a considerable amount of fallen stone which suggested a gable end. A hearth was noted in the middle of the east wall. Near this hearth a rusted iron blade was found which I took to be the remains of a sickle. The hut is surrounded by a badly preserved enclosure, more easily traced on the south and west sides. The hut itself measured 8.5 by 3.5 m.

Nearby is the last hut of this group and type. It is oriented north/south with a single entrance near the south end of the east wall (Ramm 162; Crawford and George K). It is set within an enclosure which closely follows the outline of the hut and almost forms part of its south wall. The hut measured 7.6 by 4 m.

Conclusions and comparisons

Insufficient evidence was obtained to reconstruct with certainty the original height of the stone walls, or the method of roofing the huts. Turf or heather thatch supported on wooden spars was probably used as cover. The earliest artefacts found were the late medieval sherds from the largest building and they will be deposited at Carlisle Museum. The late 17/18th century wine bottle from another hut may represent casual occupation rather than regular habitation.

The small enclosures, in some cases giving the appearance of a double wall, are

unusual in shieling house construction. The apparent similarity in plan noted at a medieval farmhouse at the Clints, near Blacklyne House in the Bewcastle Fells, was the result of successive buildings of different size on the same site rather than an actual doubling of the walls.¹³ My attention was also drawn to medieval farmsteads with apparent double walls at Homestead Moat, Muirhouselaw, and at Crom Rigg, Roxburghshire.¹⁴ However, the Smithy Beck group are different from houses constructed with stone-faced turf-core walls.

The size of the largest house and the possibility of a field boundary abutting its southern side made me wonder if it could have been a farmstead rather than a shieling house, or miner's hut. Certainly vaccaries are known to have existed in Ennerdale in the 14th century.¹⁵ In Cumbria, medieval farmsteads at Millhouse, Middleton in the Lune valley¹⁶ and deserted farmsteads at Mitredalehead, Eskdale,¹⁷ are no larger in size but have definite field systems in association. Other examples of early farmsteads in the Askerton and Bewcastle areas of northern Cumbria have been described by H. G. Ramm and chiefly tend to be wider in proportion than the shieling huts.¹⁸

Fresh investigation will be necessary to elucidate further the age and purpose of the Smithy Beck structures described above.

The cairns

Four stone heaps, or cairns, were noted east of Starling Gill between the 244 and 274 m contours on the southern slopes of Starling Dodd at approximately NY 135150. The largest of these was about 9 m in diameter, rising to a height of 1.2 m in the centre above the present turf line. Two smaller cairns lie at a short distance to the north-east and a fourth to the south-west of the largest cairn.

Some work was carried out in 1963 on the south-eastern quadrant of the largest cairn. The upper part of the cairn was composed of a mixture of large and small boulders gathered locally from the mountainside. When the stones were removed a central feature was revealed consisting of a cist formed by six granophyre rocks, set on edge and defining an area measuring 1.37 m east/west and 1.2 m north/south covered by a wedge shaped block of granophyre varying in thickness from 178 mm to 76 mm. There was an airspace immediately below the capstone. The cist contained some grey ash and charcoal, together with reddish sand and gravel of the local drift. No bones or any artefacts were found in it. Some superficial work on the northern side of the cairn uncovered burnt material and large pieces of charcoal 203 mm below the present surface.

From the evidence this structure appears to have been a burial cairn. Work at this site was not completed.

Appendix

INTRODUCTION

By J. TAYLOR

In 1963 the pottery recovered from the excavations at Smithy Beck was reported on by the late Eric Parsons of the Department of Archaeology, The University of Durham. I was asked to look again at this material in the light of more recent research. Some, unfortunately, has been lost and

for this reason I have presented the original report in full with my own 'additional notes' on the remaining pottery as a supplement to it.

POTTERY REPORT

By E. PARSONS

Medieval

- (1) Base and wall fragments of a large heavy vessel (storage jar ?). Smooth grey fabric, fired to a buff (1 mm) inside. Medium green glaze has originally covered the exterior face of the vessel, which is fired to off-white (2 mm). The sherds appear to have been subject to acid conditions which have softened the fabric and destroyed the glaze. Basal diam. 10 in. Late 14th-15th century.
- (2) Body fragments of large heavy vessel as (1) in smooth dark grey fabric. The exterior is fired to light grey where it bears traces of olive green glaze. Slight rilling is visible on one of the neck sherds. The fabric has been subject to similar conditions as (1). Basal diam. 8 in.
- (3) Wall sherds and upper joint of strap handle in smooth grey fabric with evidence of overall medium green glaze. No base or rim fragments are present but the size of the vessel appears similar to (1) and (2) while the fabric is less affected by acidity. Late 14th-15th century.

Post-Medieval

- (4) Wall sherd in smooth hard buff fabric (7 mm). The exterior bears a trace of bright green glaze produced by the effect of copper oxide. 15th-16th century.
- (5) Wall sherd in smooth hard brick-red fabric. The exterior has been knife-smoothed vertically. The type of fabric suggests a 15th-16th century date.
- (6) Well-potted base fragment in smooth hard buff fabric (6 mm) covered overall with a thin glaze, apparently chemically changed to a blue-black colour. The base angle bears evidence of knife trimming such as appears not infrequently on some types of 15th-16th century vessels.

Summary

The bulk of the pottery falls within the period of the 14th and 15th centuries and constitutes a small group of large vessels, probably, though not necessarily, storage jars. A somewhat similar group of material is recorded from Carlisle^[1] and can also be paralleled in material from E. J. W. Hilyard's excavations in W. Durham.^[2]

ADDITIONAL NOTES

By J. TAYLOR

Medieval

I have identified four sherds from vessel 1, two from vessel 2, and two sherds from vessel 3. There are obviously sherds missing from vessel 3 where I could only find one wall sherd to go with the strap handle. A jug recovered from recent excavations in Carlisle^[3] has an almost identical handle and has been used for the reconstruction presented here (see Fig. 1).

The three vessels are all of the same fine sandy fabric type although the surface colours and glaze vary.^[4] It is the latest fabric within the long tradition of Northern Reduced Wares^[5] which began to be used as early as the 13th century in Carlisle^[6] and Newcastle upon Tyne.^[7] A more recently excavated parallel for the date range of this ware is the Type 5 reduced Greenware recovered from the Castle Ditch, Newcastle upon Tyne. It is the dominant local ware from phase 5 onwards (late 14th/early 15th century-late 16th century).^[8] The fabric of these Smithy Beck vessels can also be paralleled with the latest 'reduced ware' being used and possibly manufactured

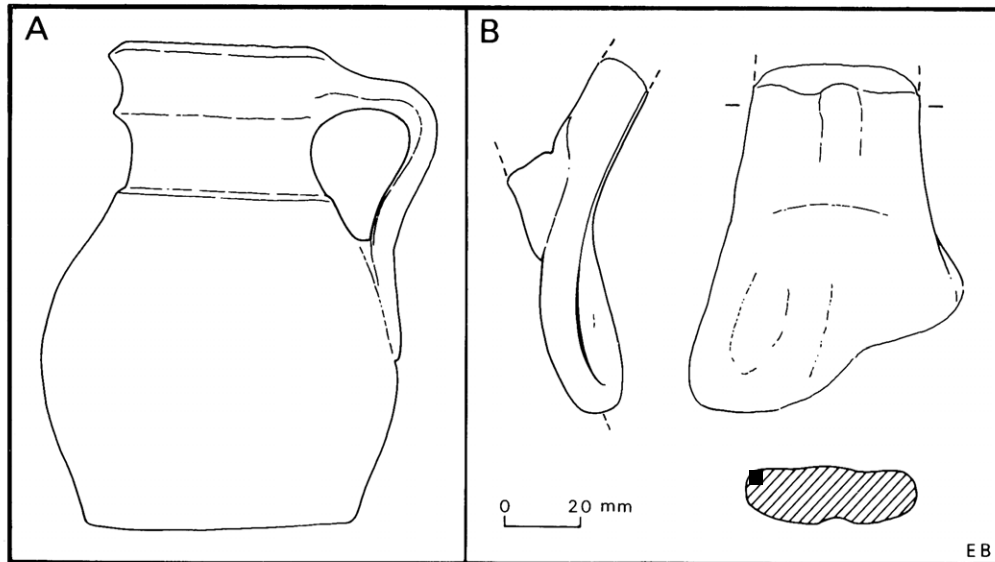


FIG 1. (A) Reconstruction of vessel 3 based on an excavated example from Keays Lane, Carlisle. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$. (B) Fragment of strap handle from vessel 3. Scale $\frac{1}{2}$.

in Carlisle^[9] in the later medieval period, although soil conditions have, as Eric Parsons noted, obviously softened the usually hard fabric.

Post Medieval

Unfortunately all of the post-medieval sherds noted in the original report are presently lost.

Appendix, Notes and References

[1] CW2, lv, 79-107.

[2] AA4, xxvii, 177-206.

[3] The jug was recovered in 1981 from excavations in Keays Lane, Carlisle (Excavation Reference Number KLA B357.6; Find No. P10) by Carlisle Archaeological Unit. I wish to thank Mr M. R. McCarthy for permission to use the vessel in this way prior to its publication. I would also like to thank Mr Edgar Bolton for producing the drawing at short notice.

[4] See Fabric A in J. Taylor "The Pottery" in G. Fairclough "Clifton Hall Cumbria: Excavations 1977-9", CW2, lxxx, 45-68. The suggestion in this report, based on much earlier evidence, that this fine reduced ware was being used in Carlisle as early as c. 1250 has not been substantiated by recent excavations in Carlisle. See n. 6 below.

[5] Peter Brears. *The English Country Pottery*, 17-18.

[6] A much coarser reduced fabric has been recovered in Carlisle from a sequence of pits dating to the 12th/early 13th century. See J. Taylor, "The Medieval Pottery", in M. R. McCarthy, "Excavations on Blackfriars St, Carlisle; 1977-79". (Forthcoming).

[7] See the earliest reduced Greenware Types 1 and 2 in B. Harbottle and M. Ellison, "An Excavation in the Castle Ditch, Newcastle upon Tyne 1974-76", AA5, ix, 105.

[8] *Ibid.*, 108.

[9] E. M. Jope identified pottery kiln activity on a site at Castle St, Carlisle associated with this reduced fabric. See E. M. Jope, "The Medieval Pottery from Castle St", in R. Hogg, "Excavations in Carlisle", CW2, lv, 101.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are due to the writers of specialist reports. In addition to those already mentioned in the text P. L. Winchester of the Forestry Commission was very helpful and E. H. Shackleton provided me with a note on the geology of the area and suggested the source of the fragments of thin slate found in two of the huts. Thanks, too, to all who worked at the site.

Notes and References

- ¹ E. D. Hyam – A report on Archaeological Sites in S.W. Cumberland, 1958, 5 under Cumberland 68 SE.
- ² Cumberland Sheet 69.
- ³ R. H. Quine, *The mystery of the Early British* (Douglas), (1953).
- ⁴ J. Postlethwaite, *Mines and Mining in the Lake District*, (1877), 138.
- ⁵ CW2, xxxi, 189.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.
- ⁷ CW2, xliii, 28-30 and Pl.
- ⁸ *Archaeological News Bulletin for Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland*. No. 4, Jan. 1969, 10; W. Fletcher, "The Shielings of Ennerdale" in *Cumbria*, Jan. 1982, 566-8; G. Crawford and C. George, *An Archaeological Survey of Copeland*, Feb. 1983, 18-20 (Cumbria C.C. Planning Dept.).
- ⁹ CW2, lxiv, 411.
- ¹⁰ H. G. Ramm, R. W. McDowell and E. Mercer, *Shielings and Bastles* (1970), HMSO 10 and 36, Fig. 9, 161, Pl. 7.
- ¹¹ Letter to Miss C. Fell, dated 20 July 1962 written from Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings, Ministry of Works.
- ¹² J. R. C. Hamilton, *Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland* (1956), HMSO, 190-3, Fig. 86.
- ¹³ *Shielings and Bastles* (1970), 44, Fig. 10, 196; *Monuments Threatened and Destroyed* (1963), R.C.H.M. (England), HMSO, 12-13 and plan.
- ¹⁴ R.C.A.H.M (Scotland), Roxburghshire, Vol. II, monuments 559 and 983.
- ¹⁵ CW2, xxxi, 165.
- ¹⁶ CW2, lxvii, 35-50.
- ¹⁷ CW2, lxxix, 150-5.
- ¹⁸ *Shielings and Bastles* (1970), 44-51.