

ART. III. – *Interim results of survey work on Stockdale Moor and Town Bank, West Cumbria*

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CAIRNFIELDS, such as those on Stockdale Moor and Town Bank, are ubiquitous features of the south-western and western fells of Cumbria and especially so on the marginal lands rising from the coastal plain. They probably indicate an agricultural exploitation of the fells and are usually ascribed to the Bronze Age on the basis of a limited number of C14 dates¹ and their spatial association with datable types of funerary monument.² This is consistent with the palaeobotanical evidence so far available. For example, the pollen diagram from Burnmoor Tarn,³ on the western fells, suggests a decrease in the mixed oak forest with a corresponding expansion of grasslands in the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. This vegetation change probably reflects clearance and farming undertaken at the large Burnmoor cairnfield, which is less than a kilometre away, towards the source of the prevailing winds. There was no cereal or weed pollen found, which led Pennington to suggest a 'pastoral land use in the uplands'. This evidence from the uplands contrasts with the palaeobotanic evidence from the coastal plain, as demonstrated by the Barfield Tarn diagram,⁴ where there was a much earlier deforestation at the beginning of the 3rd millennium with a corresponding appearance of cereal pollen, indicative of cultivation. Hence these cairnfields appear to reflect an expansion out from the farming lands of the coastal plain on to the adjacent uplands during the Bronze Age. The relatively warm and dry climatic conditions of the Neolithic and the Bronze Age (the sub-boreal period) were sufficient to make the marginal lands agriculturally viable⁵ during this period of expansion. However, throughout the Bronze Age, these conditions were in a gradual, albeit uneven decline, finally culminating in a very rapid deterioration at the start of the 1st millennium B.C.

Although the cairnfields represent an important survival of the prehistoric agricultural landscape, they have only been minimally recorded. They are under persistent threat from changing agricultural use; forestry expansion, in particular, has already destroyed many of them. The Lake District National Park Survey was therefore set up by the Cumbria and Lancashire Archaeological Unit at Lancaster University, on behalf of English Heritage, to record the surviving prehistoric landscape for inclusion within the Cumbria Sites and Monuments Record. As a part of the overall programme, the Stockdale Moor/Town Bank survey was undertaken in May 1985 and April 1986, on 8.5 sq. km of moorland owned by the National Trust (Fig 1.).

Methods

The field monuments were located by systematic field walking. They were surveyed with respect to a primary control which was triangulated in from the Seatallen and Lank Rigg OS triangulation points. The archaeological, and some topographic detail was surveyed by EDM tacheometry. The survey plans were drawn at 1:1000 with additional topographic detail enlarged from OS 1:10,000 maps.

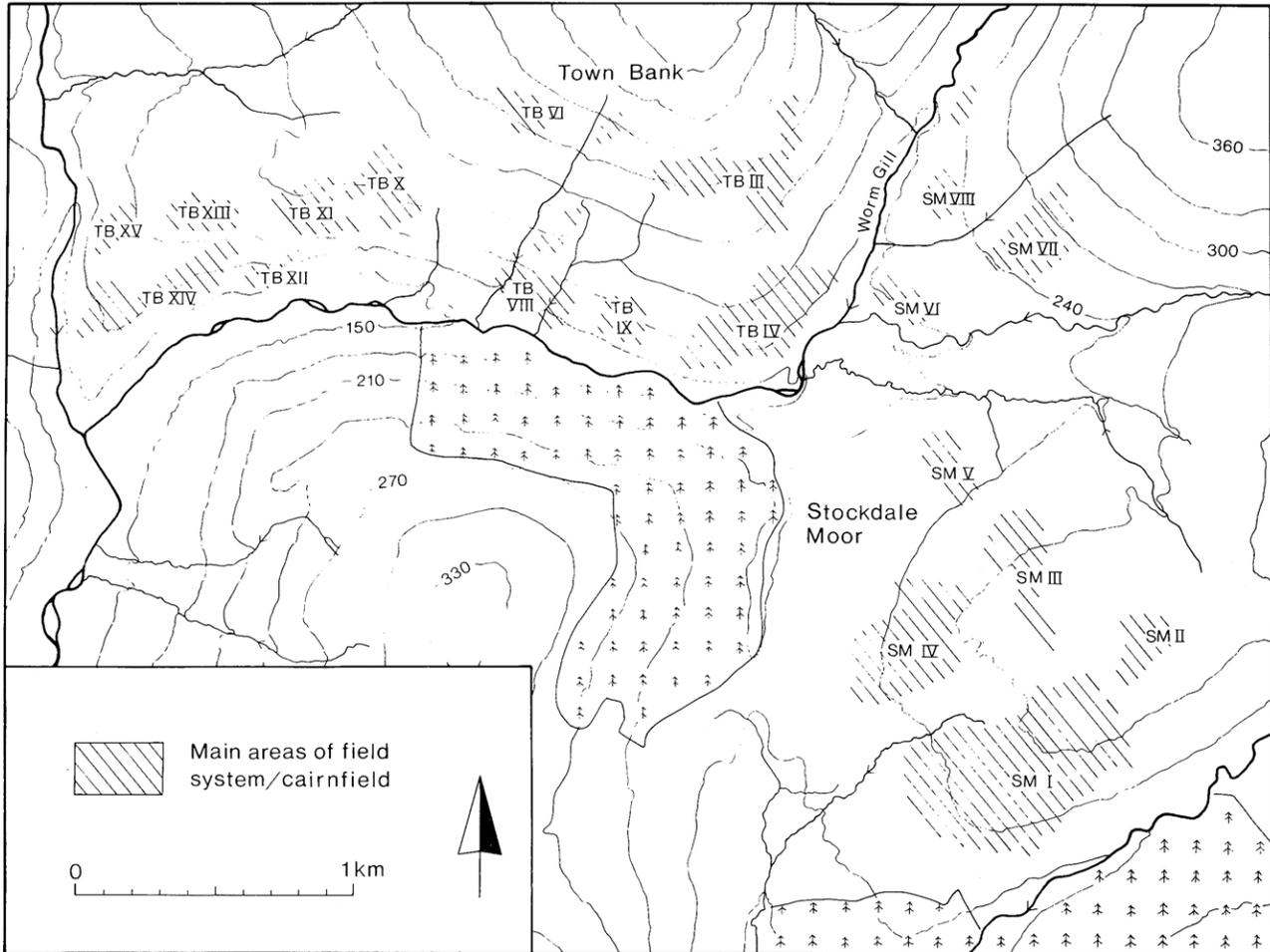


FIG. 1. Field systems on Stockdale Moor and Town Bank, near Calder Bridge.

The Survey

The 1730 surveyed monuments of Stockdale and Town Bank within 23 cairnfields/field systems which exhibit substantial variation in size, range of monument, types and complexity. The largest, Stockdale I (Fig 2.), has a wide variety of monument types and is broadly representative of the Stockdale cairnfields. It is located on a well drained, moderately sloping area of moorland and comprises 325 monuments. Of these, 90% are small, ill-defined cairns, which, as has been discussed on many occasions,⁶ are probably the result of field clearance. The cairns have an approximately random distribution, however there are concentrations which are dictated by natural topography. Hence there is a band of cairns at the southern end of the cairnfield which is in part defined by the edges of a natural terrace. Similarly the concentration at (C) is partly determined by a well drained, low-gradient terrain with patchy outcropping.

In the centre of the Stockdale cairnfield there is a small number of stone-banks which are low, ill defined, discontinuous and have irregular quantities of stone material, to the extent that, on occasions, they are defined only by an insubstantial alignment of field stones. These stone-banks define two possible fields (A and B). Field A is comparatively well edged, on undulating, rocky ground, with a small gully in the centre, and contains only a few cairns. Field B has ill-defined boundaries on three sides, is on well drained, uniformly sloping land and has a much greater concentration of cairns. The differences between the two fields might suggest that they represent differing agricultural activities.

Around the periphery of the cairnfield there is a small number of cairns, which in terms of their height, size, shape and definition are almost certainly funerary monuments. The most famous of these is Sampsons Bratful (435)⁷ which measures 25 m × 13.5 m and has a regular, well-defined pear shape. Monument 732, on the opposite side of the cairnfield, has a similar pear shape, but has been disturbed by the recent superimposition of a bield on top of the cairn. There are also four short stone banks protruding from the body of the cairn, which are not recent because the stones have a thick, uniform lichen cover, but they are not necessarily a part of the original cairn structure.

The cairnfield includes two ring features. Monument 496 is situated on top of a small natural hillock and is isolated from all the field systems. Its ring bank comprises mainly small stones (*c.* 100 mm across) which, by themselves, are inappropriate for dry stone construction; there is a well defined, north-east facing entrance with rough orthostats to each side. It is similar to the ring cairn, Moel Goedog I⁸ and there is a case for suggesting that it is also a ring cairn. Site 591, by contrast, is associated with a field system and comprises a narrow, low, regular, outer bank, and though it is on a slight gradient, there is no sign of any internal levelling. Although it is possibly a hut structure, an excavation would be necessary to reliably determine its function.

On Town Bank the field systems are of a much greater complexity than those on Stockdale Moor and this is best exemplified by the Town Bank IV field system (Fig 3.). This complex is divided into four basic fields (A, B, C & D) by a series of stone-banks which run down-slope. The fields appear to belong to an unified system and despite the discontinuities of the stone banks, some of them seem to relate to each other (e.g. bank 255 relates to bank 247 and bank 210 relates to bank 247 via the discontinuous banks of 235 and 237). Hence it can be suggested that the fields were in contemporary use.

Field A is on land with good natural drainage and contains a large group of clearance

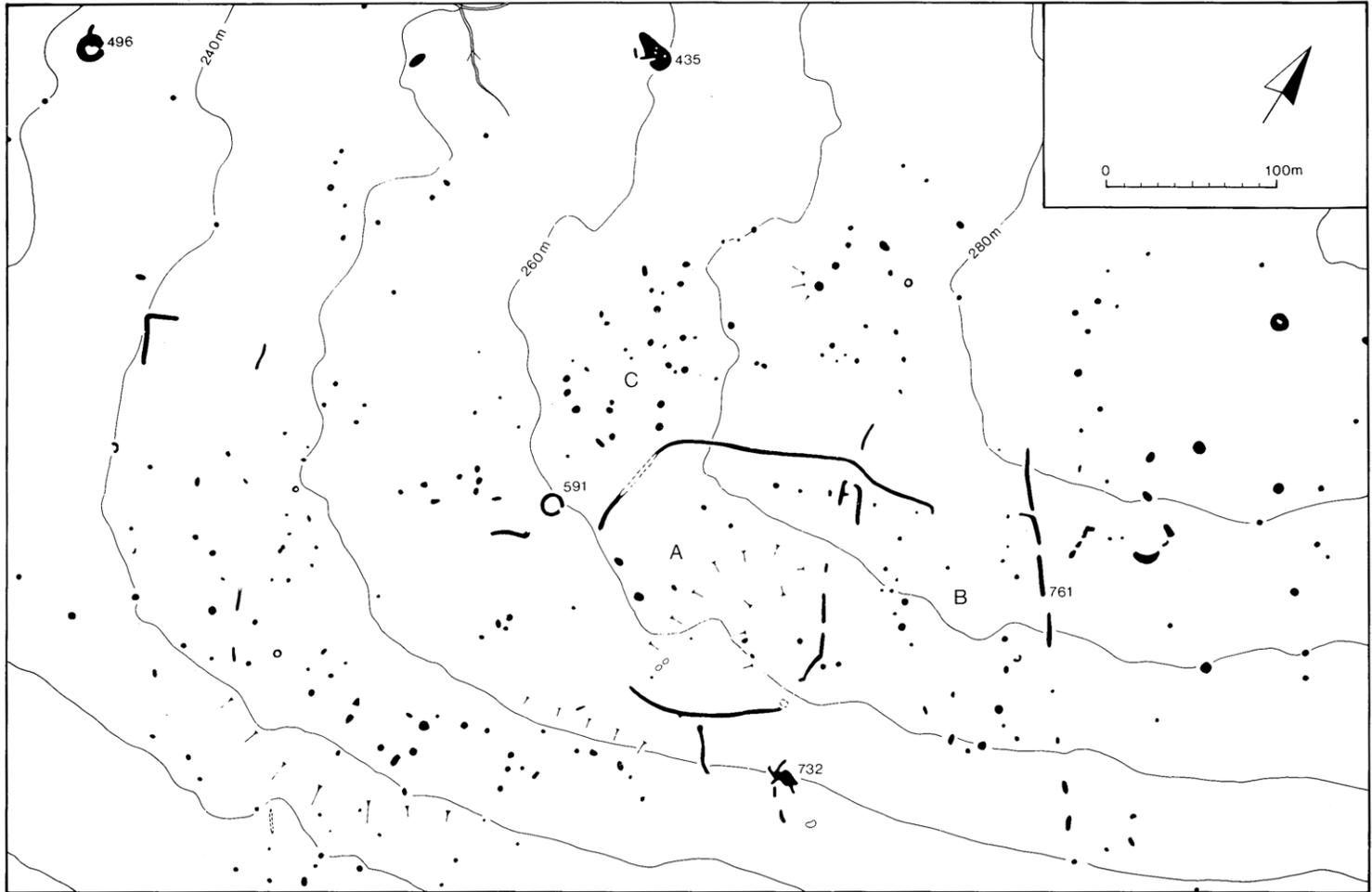


FIG. 2. Stockdale Moor I.

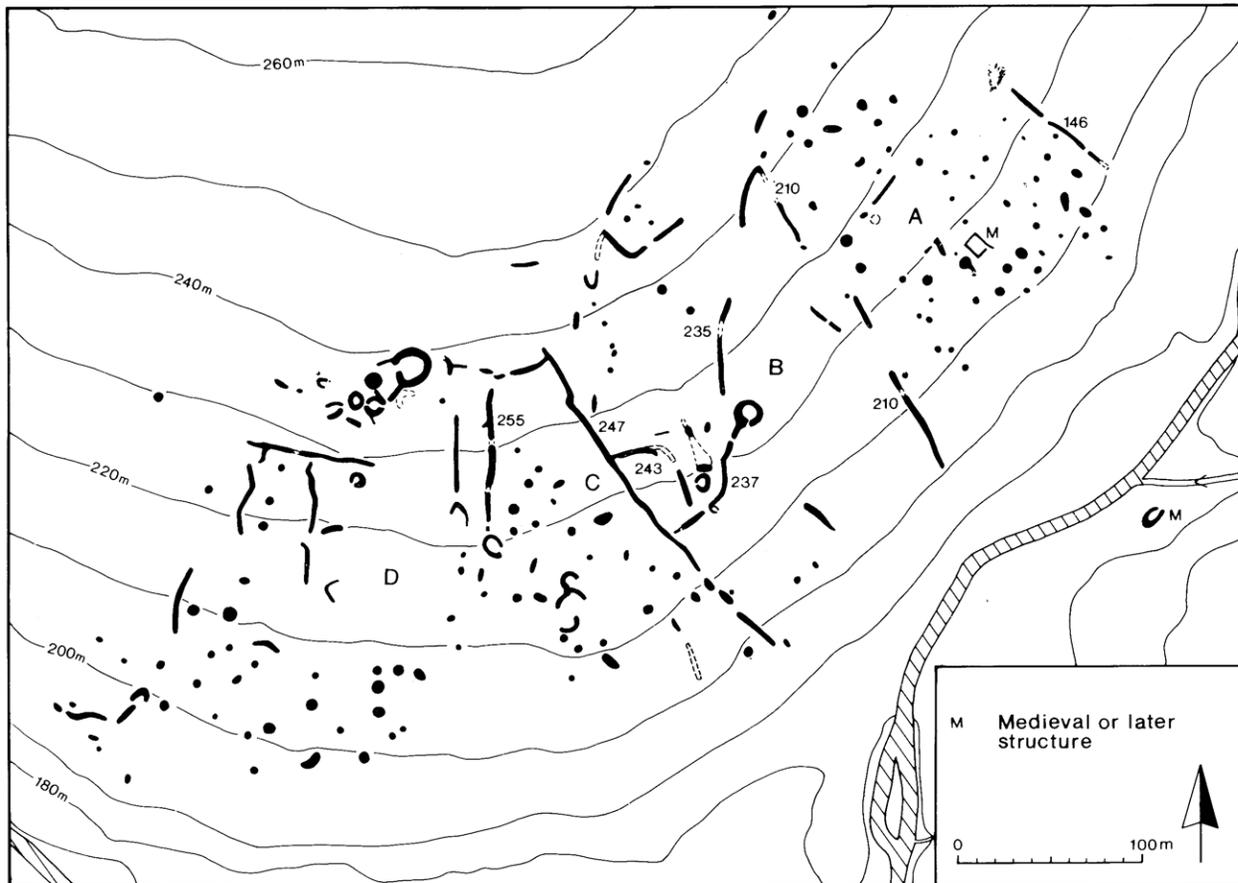


FIG. 3. Town Bank IV.

type cairns. They are delimited to the south-east by a sharp break of slope, to the north-east by stone-bank 146 and to the south-west by stone-bank 210. Because the spread of cairns was contained by the stone-banks there is a possibility that the cairns and the field boundaries were in contemporary use.

Field B, in contrast, has very few cairns suggesting a function distinct from that of the adjacent field. Within it there are two well-defined hut circles that are associated with a small rectilinear enclosure (243), attached to stone bank 247. The enclosure covers 974 sq. m of well drained, uniformly sloping land, which may have been ploughed: at the upslope end of the enclosure it is bordered by a 0.8 m deep lynchet, and there is a smaller corresponding lynchet at the lower end. There is a possibility that this cultivated enclosure was in contemporary use with the cairnfield A, and the obvious differences between them suggest that the agricultural activity undertaken within the cairnfield was distinct from full cultivation. Field C has a large concentration of cairns, whereas part of the poorly defined field D has a noticeable absence of cairns. Hence the Town Bank IV system exhibits a pattern of alternating fields either with or without cairnfields.

Discussion

Stone banks are a common feature of cairnfields. They are almost certainly not decayed drystone walls as they usually have insufficient stone, are very irregular and occasionally comprise predominantly small stones which are unsuitable for dry stone construction. They do, however, appear to represent boundaries, as they enclose 'fields' which have a contrasting pattern of land-usage to that outside. The most probable explanation is that the stone-banks represent sporadic, linear stone clearance along the line of a poorly marked field boundary. Thus the continuation of stone-bank 761, in Stockdale I, is represented by an alignment of five clearance-type cairns. It is probable that some of the boundaries had markers which have not survived as surface evidence. At the Stockdale IV cairn group there is a 260 m long probable boundary defined by six small cairns which are too widely spaced to be effective as boundary markers themselves and there is the implication of supplementary markers. Excavation of a stone bank at Hallshill, Northumberland,⁹ produced no evidence for postholes or ditches, but a hedge, for example, would not necessarily leave recognizable traces.

The cairnfields of Stockdale Moor and Town Bank are very different from each other, as evidenced by the Stockdale I and Town Bank IV systems. Though the two areas are close, they are divided by Worm Gill, which proved, during the survey, to be an effective obstacle to free movement between the moors, and it was likely to have formed a natural boundary in the prehistoric period. The Stockdale cairnfields have large numbers of randomly distributed, unenclosed cairns but only occasional fields and no hut circles (excepting, possibly the problematic ring feature 591). This simple type of cairnfield is found in profusion throughout the south-western fells.¹⁰ In contrast, the Town Bank field systems display a complex arrangement of well-defined fields with associated hut structures and small enclosures. This gives an impression of well established occupation. It is tempting to relate the Stockdale/Town Bank cairnfields to the Highland Zone field typology of Fowler (parts A and B),¹¹ which suggests that the more complex field system is a development from the simple cairnfield. Thus it is possible to suggest that the Town Bank systems represent a later period of exploitation on the fells, which is absent at

most of the West Cumbrian cairnfields. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of supportive dating evidence, which severely limits this argument, although there is an iron age type of enclosed settlement¹² at the west end of Town Bank (Town Bank XIII), which may indicate that occupation continued on the moor into the sharp climatic deterioration of the 1st millennium.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

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