

III.—A NOTE ON SCOOPED ENCLOSURES IN NORTHUMBERLAND

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Some account of the nature and distribution of rectangular shaped enclosed settlements of the Roman period in the southern parts of the county has been given in *A.A.*⁴ XXXVIII. Before proceeding with an analysis of the comparable stone-built enclosed homesteads and settlements of the Cheviot area, it will be as well to make some record of those settlement sites defined as scooped enclosures, whose distribution in Northumberland on present evidence appears to be confined to the northern hills (fig. 1). In general these enclosures bear some resemblance to the enclosed settlements of round stone houses, fronting onto a slightly scooped fore-court, to which a Romano-British context has been attributed.¹ Perhaps for this reason, coupled with their comparative remoteness, they have not received separate mention hitherto in Northumberland, though they have long been recognized north of the Border.

Briefly they have been described as walled enclosures, generally lying in non-defensive positions on sloping hillsides, "containing a number of oval or circular scooped floors, separated by walls or unexcavated ridges".² Some twenty years ago, examples in the Manor Valley in Peeblesshire were planned and investigated by Mr. R. B. K. Stevenson.³ Excavation on one site suggested that circular floors had been occupied in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Similar sites were noted in various parts of southern Scotland and

¹ See e.g. K. A. Steer in *Roman and Native in North Britain*, 103 and 104.

² *R.C.A.M. Roxburgh*, I, 48.

³ *P.S.A.S.*, LXXV, 92ff. Also Farms and Fortifications in King's Park, Edinburgh, *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXI, 158ff.

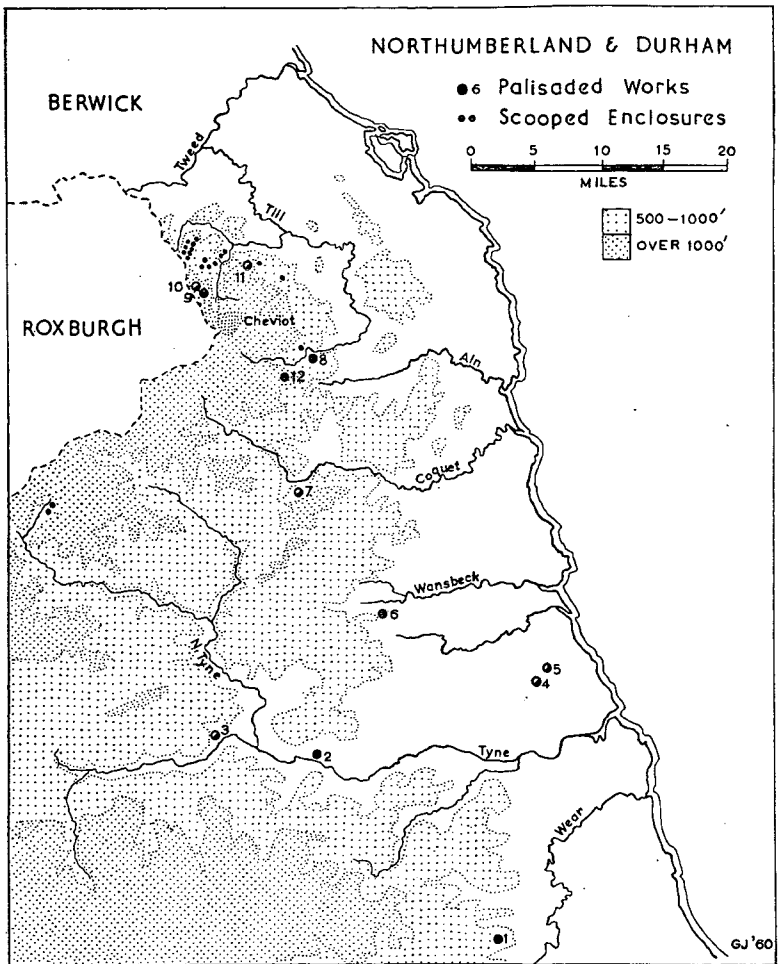


FIG. 1.

the perceptive suggestion made that scooped enclosures also might have had some genetic connection with the Romano-British stone-built settlements of Northumberland. Later, in *The County of Roxburgh*, vol. I, the probability of a late medieval date was retained for the scooped enclosures of the Kale and Bowmont Waters. This seemed to be supported by the fact that two sites were recorded as overlying cultivation terraces. On the other hand, it was also noted that on nine scooped sites in Roxburgh hut circles were indicated by shallow scoops or stone foundations.

The main purpose of this note is to record a selection of examples in Northumberland and, at the same time, to offer a possible re-interpretation of their chronological context.

In the first place there is a small number of single or conjoined enclosed scoops. These are cut back into the sloping hillsides, enclosed within rubble walls which are sometimes faced with large boulders but tend to fade out on the uphill sides. On occasions a single platform is present in the interior, somewhat similar to the platforms for timber houses in some hill-forts. In two instances rectangular stone buildings are present. From their condition these could well be intrusive and cannot be taken as a clear indication of a late date for the original sites.

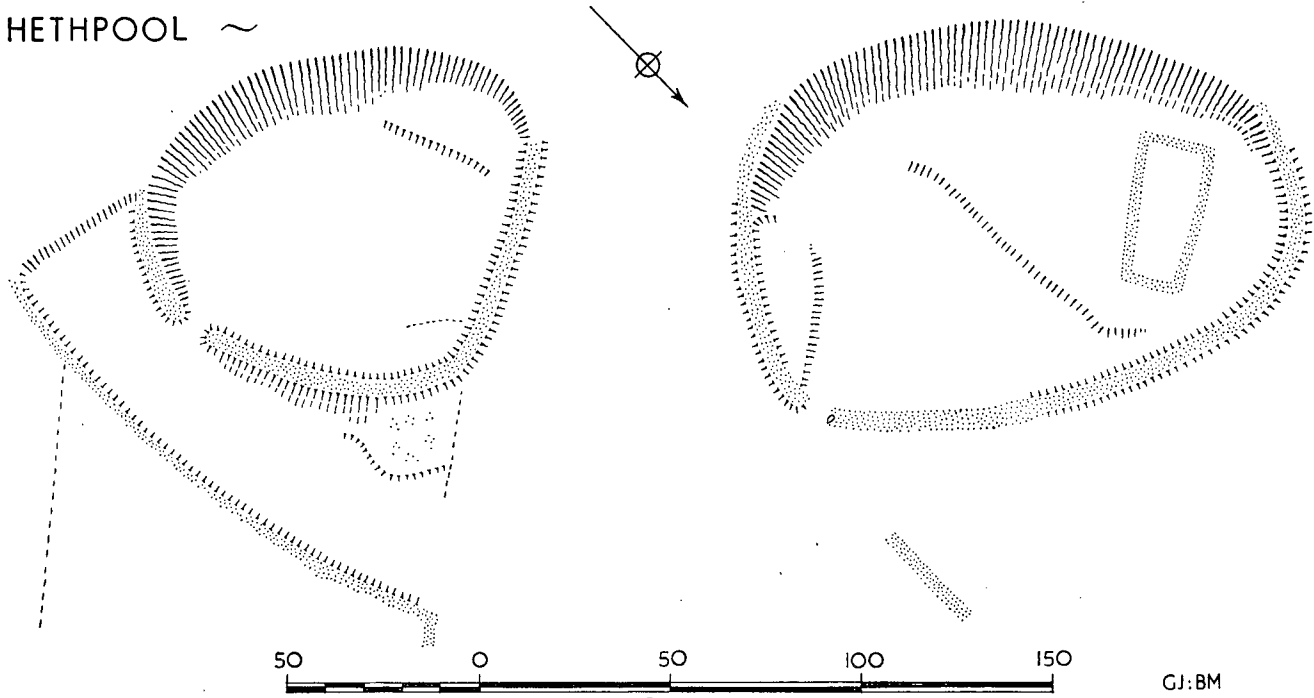
FIG. 2. HETHPOOL BELL (NT:903291)

Two deeply scooped enclosures lie on the slopes of the Bell about two hundred feet above the level of the College Burn. Both have slight platforms in the north corners. Nothing is visible on the platform within the southern enclosure but substantial foundations of a rectangular building lie on that in the northern enclosure. The stones are not overgrown after the manner of the enclosure wall and the building appears to be secondary. Traces of old boundary walls run down the hillside towards further indistinct remains now under a thick cover of bracken. Their context is not certain but they could be connected with the intrusive rectangular building.

FIG. 3. LOWER KNOCK HILL (NT:169995)

A pronounced scooped enclosure, with a three-roomed house

HETHPOOL BELL
HETHPOOL ~



FEET
FIG. 2.

GJ:BM

lying to one side, is to be seen on Knock Hill at about three hundred feet above the level of the River Breamish. Here the house is clearly secondary to the scooped enclosure and occupies the position where a circular stone house is to be found on a number of early homesteads in the area. These appear to be variants of the normal, walled homesteads to which, in general, a Roman and early post-Roman date has been given.⁴ There has been some attempt at levelling to the east of the rectangular house though there is no indication of further enclosure walls.

FIG. 4. COLDBERRY HILL (NT:971274)

Two conjoined walled enclosures, of which the southern is probably secondary, have been formed by cutting back into the foot of the slope of Coldberry Hill, near Wooler. The northern enclosure, measuring some one hundred and ten by eighty feet, has a small platform in the north-west corner, similar to that at Hethpool (south). This shows no traces of a timber dwelling but could have been intended for such. A slight scoop and traces of stone foundations for a circular house *c.* eighteen feet in diameter lie more or less on the floor of the enclosure. The position suggests a secondary context.

Other examples approach more closely to the type as defined in southern Scotland. In general these enclosures show scoops and platforms or terraces with occasional traces suggestive of circular floors for timber dwellings. There are some examples too where circular stone-built foundations occur in what is seemingly a secondary context. At this stage the form of the site approaches closely to that of the Romano-British walled settlement, to which reference has been made already.

FIG. 5. HETHA BURN 1 and 2 (NT:881275 and 878276)

Both sites are sub-rectangular in shape, with ruined stone and earth walls enclosing various scoops and platforms or terraces. The lower site (2) is situated just above the flood plain of the Hetha Burn and consists of a number of small hollowed courts having sharp

⁴ Cf. Crock Cleuch in *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXI, 138f. In some instances in Northumberland the circular house is not completely enclosed, but lies to one side with the enclosure walls coming up to and abutting onto the house walls. This appears to happen particularly on steep hillsides where a deep cutting back has been necessary to provide a flat forecourt. By placing the house to one side, the difference in level between house and forecourt is reduced.

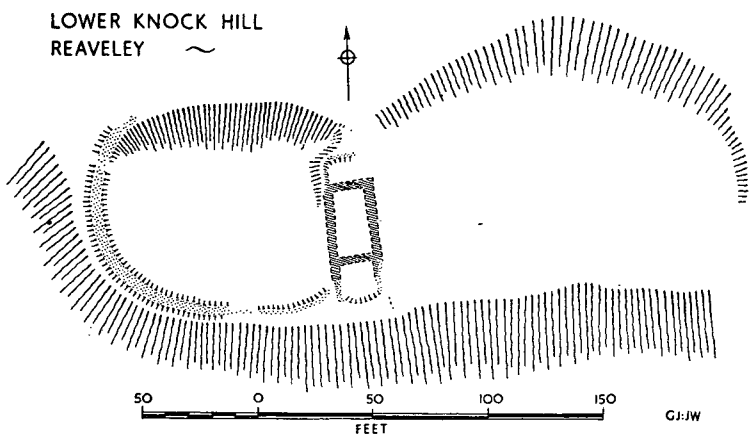


FIG. 3.

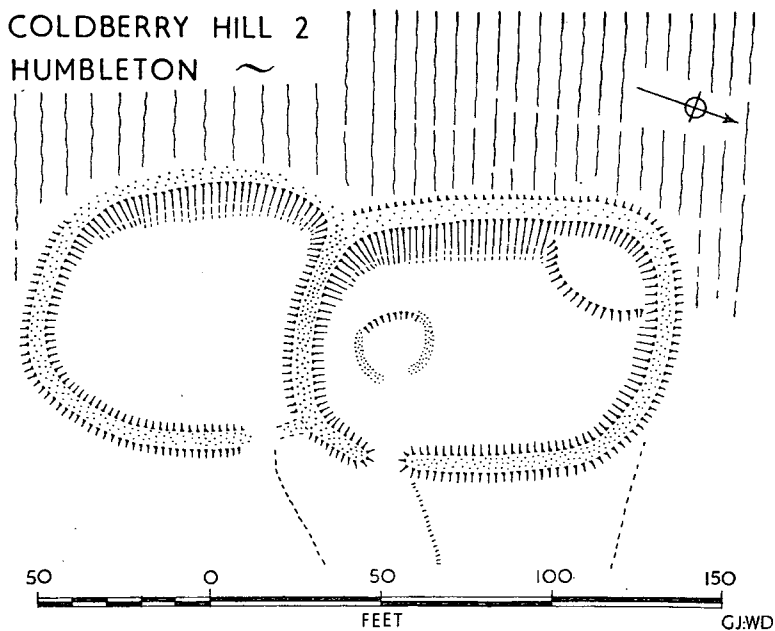


FIG. 4.

scarps on the uphill sides, but fairly flat interiors. Some of the ridges between the courts appear to be unexcavated mounds with some upcast present, rather than constructed walls. There is at least one platform with traces of a circular house floor but no stone foundations. Remains of a stone wall or bank running north-east from this position seems to be secondary. Other possible floors lie uphill in the south-east corner. A large circular enclosure not shown on this plan lies to the south of this site and could have some connection with it.

The other enclosure (1) is some one hundred and fifty feet higher above the stream and lies on the hillside to the south-east. It consists of a series of terraces formed on a fairly steep slope. There are no facing stones visible in the rubble and earth spread of the enclosure wall, which again fades out on the uphill side. Faint traces of possible floors, from sixteen to twenty feet in diameter, remain on some of the terraces and there is one small but marked scoop above a north-facing entrance.

FIG. 6. ELSDON BURN 1 (NT:869282)

A small site situated on the lower shoulder of a spur at just over one hundred feet above the level of the Elsdon Burn. It is irregular in shape, contains a rather elongated platform on the north, uphill side and a number of scoops, thirty to forty feet across, with unexcavated ridges between. There are traces of an enclosure wall on the south and east sides. No remains of dwellings can be seen but the site is overgrown with bracken.

Two hundred and twenty yards to the west, on the same hillside, is another enclosure containing a single platform and remains of a circular stone-walled house in the scooped court in a secondary position.

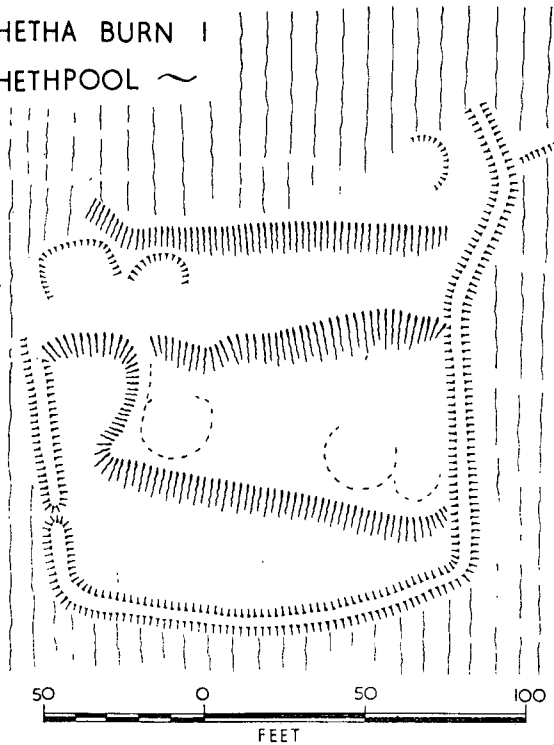
COLDSMOUTH HILL 1 (NT:857293)

This is one of ten unrecorded sites within a distance of seven hundred yards on the north-west slopes of Coldsmouth Hill, looking out over the Countrup Syke into Roxburgh.⁵ Two adjacent settlements are present. The lower is less well preserved and could be the earlier of the two. There is at least one possible circular scoop and platform, suitable for a timber-built house, lying to the east of the lowest court.

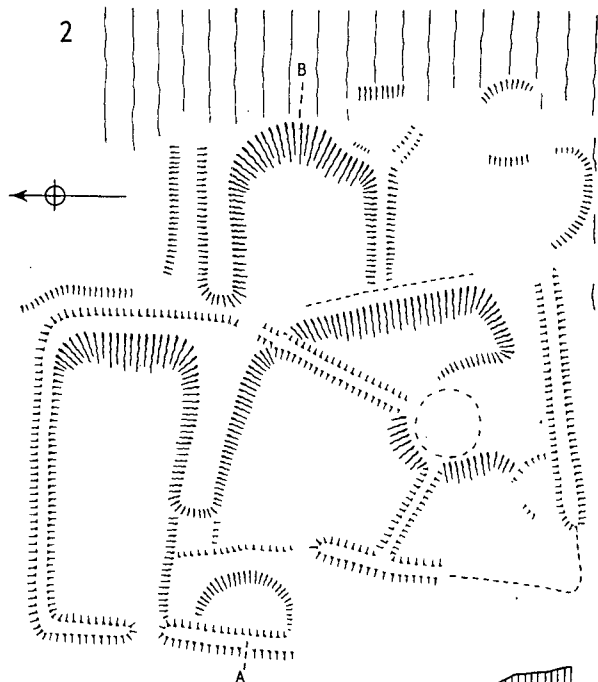
The upper, oval-shaped enclosure is surrounded by the remains of a substantial rubble wall faced with large boulders on the outside. An entrance lies on the east, where a slight hollow could be the

⁵ I am indebted to Mr. A. M. Bankier for bringing them to notice and assisting with the survey in this area.

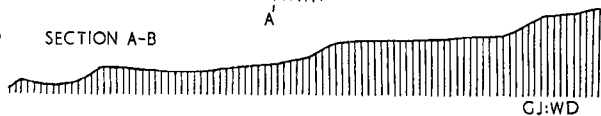
HETHA BURN I
HETHPOOL ~



2



SECTION A-B



GJ:WD

FIG. 5.

remains of a drainage ditch as recorded on occasions on Scottish sites.⁶ There is a deep artificial scarp on the uphill side, running down to a small rock face and some remains of comparatively recent walls. Two large platforms and intervening ridge occupy the western part of the enclosure. These platforms contain four or five possible circular house floors. However, the most interesting feature is the group of three stone-walled circular houses partly constructed from the north enclosure wall and clearly secondary in context.

What is conceivably a final transition, between the scooped enclosure with timber dwellings and the enclosed settlement of stone-walled houses fronting onto a forecourt, can be seen in the last example to be illustrated.

FIG. 7. STAW HILL (NT:885299)

These sites lie on the east-facing slope of Staw Hill, at an elevation of about one hundred and fifty feet above a burn which flows by West Newton into Bowmont Water. The northern enclosure is still scooped on the uphill side at the north corner, below which there is a further scoop providing a platform some forty-five feet across. An east-facing entrance leads into a scooped forecourt with house sites on the platform to the rear. Here there are present both small scooped floors, presumably for timber houses, and stone foundations. At least two of the stone-walled houses appear to be secondary. A similar situation prevails in the southern enclosure which now, more than ever, has the appearance of the Romano-British type of home-stead or settlement.

CONCLUSION

The distribution of scooped enclosures in Northumberland, on the present evidence of field remains, is confined mainly to the northern hills and links up with that of the sites noted in southern Scotland, particularly those in the Kale and Bowmont Waters. Of the few possible outliers in North Tynedale, that at Brans Walls near Kielder Burn Head, noted by the late Col. G. R. B. Spain as a prehistoric earthwork, bears a close resemblance and merits inclusion in the group,

⁶ R.C.A.M. *Roxburgh*, I, 48.

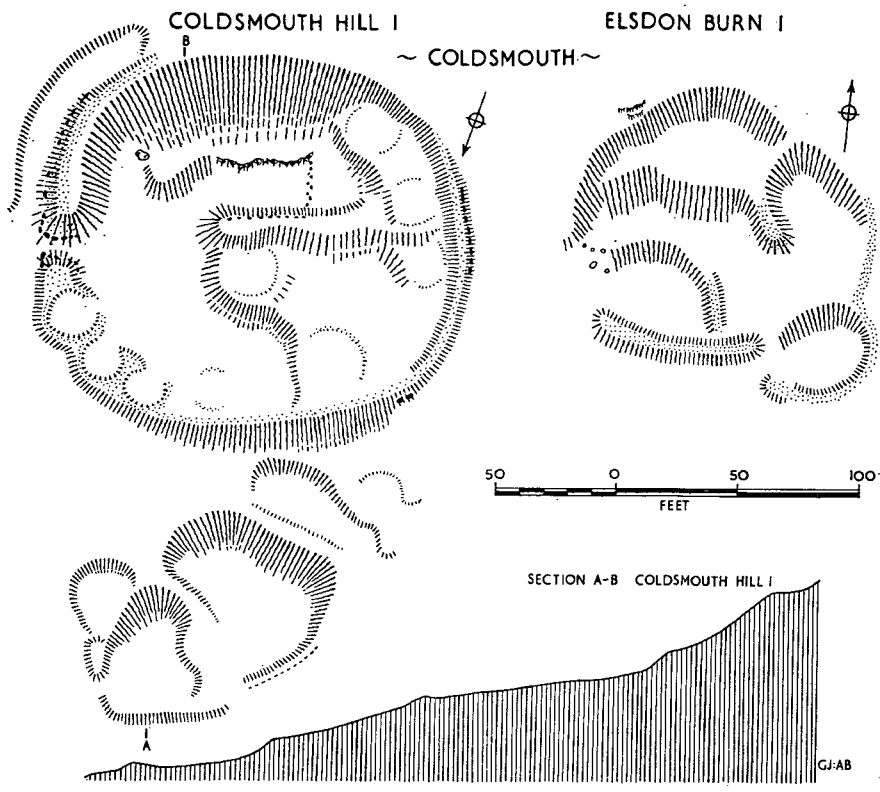


FIG. 6.

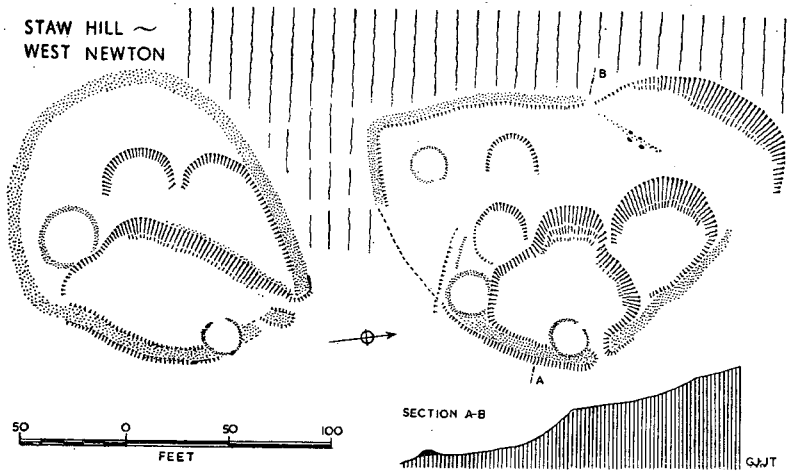


FIG. 7.

despite an association with later tradition.⁷ The full distribution of visible examples north of the Border no doubt will be revealed in future Inventories from the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments in Scotland. On the other hand, the general form of this type of site in these parts could be the result of an adaptation to a particular topography, where suitable habitation sites, in conditions then existing, were limited to rather steep hill slopes. Their possible equivalents in other, less difficult parts of the county will need to be considered.

In contrast with the large number of homesteads and settlements containing houses with circular stone foundations, which seem to arise during the Roman period, only a limited number of scooped enclosures have been noted in Northumberland. Some of these have a varying number of floors apparently intended for circular timber dwellings, on which basis they can be regarded conveniently as homesteads or settlements according to size. In physical appearance the larger settlements bear a close resemblance to some of the Late Bronze Age settlements of southern England with their house platforms and scooped and fenced enclosures.⁸ Others also contain circular stone foundations which appear to represent a later development or intrusion. In the circumstances, though no scooped enclosure has been excavated in Northumberland,⁹ it is difficult to maintain the medieval date as originally suggested. Re-occupation in later times is always a possibility in an area where level sites are at a premium. But this apart, the evidence from Northumberland would point to the scooped enclosure as a forerunner of the Romano-British type of homestead and settlement, such as is

⁷ *Proceedings*³, X, 82ff., including sketch plan. The traditional connection with Brandy Leish, brother of the Count of Kielder, perhaps could lie more happily with an unrecorded group of rectangular buildings on the same hillside a little to the north (noted by Mr. W. Dodds). The hills of South Tynedale have not been explored in detail, but the slightly scooped enclosure, part of a larger complex at Heavenly Hole, Plenneller, is unlikely to belong to this class of site.

⁸ E.g. Itford Hill, *P.P.S.*, XXIII, 167ff., esp. fig. 3, and list of other sites.

⁹ A rotary quern of Romano-British type at latest was retrieved from a questionable example at Earles Whin, near Wooler, during survey in 1959.

found on occasions overlying Iron Age hill-forts. To date, no unequivocal scooped enclosure has been found in contact with a hill-fort in Northumberland, but two published examples in Roxburgh overlie earlier earthworks. At Kirkton Hill¹⁰ a multivallate Iron Age hill-fort is overlaid by a settlement of circular stone houses with courtyards and also a scooped earthwork. There would seem to be no requirement to regard the latter as necessarily later than the settlement and it could well be earlier. Any more precise context for scooped enclosures will need to be worked out by excavation.

In some cases in Northumberland cultivation terraces appear in proximity to the scooped settlements, but in every instance other sites need to be taken into consideration in deciding upon their setting. This is best left to a future study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work of survey in Northumberland and Durham has progressed with financial assistance from King's College, Newcastle, and the Society, coupled with the willing exertions of our members Messrs. W. Dodds, J. Tait, A. Bankier and Miss B. Mole. The above observations, necessarily based on a limited area, owe much to the more recent of the Scottish Inventories of *Roxburgh* and *Selkirk*, and have been given some additional substance by a recent paper, as yet unpublished, from Mr. R. W. Feachem on *Timber Structures of the Iron Age in North Britain*.

¹⁰ R.C.A.M. *Roxburgh*, I, no. 148.