

AN EXCAVATION AT PEASHOLM, NEAR SCARBOROUGH

By Trevor Pearson

INTRODUCTION

Between the 4th and 6th of May 1991 the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society undertook exploratory excavations on the site of the English Civil War earthwork known as Peasholm Fort (Grid Ref TA 036898). The fort occupied a vantage point overlooking the North Bay on the boulder clay cliff north of Peasholm Gap, above what is now the Corner Cafe and the Water Scene swimming pool (Fig 2a). It was levelled before the war to make way for tennis courts and today the northern half of the site is within an amusement complex called Mr Marvel's Fun Park and the rest is covered by lawns and shrubbery in the ownership of Scarborough Council.

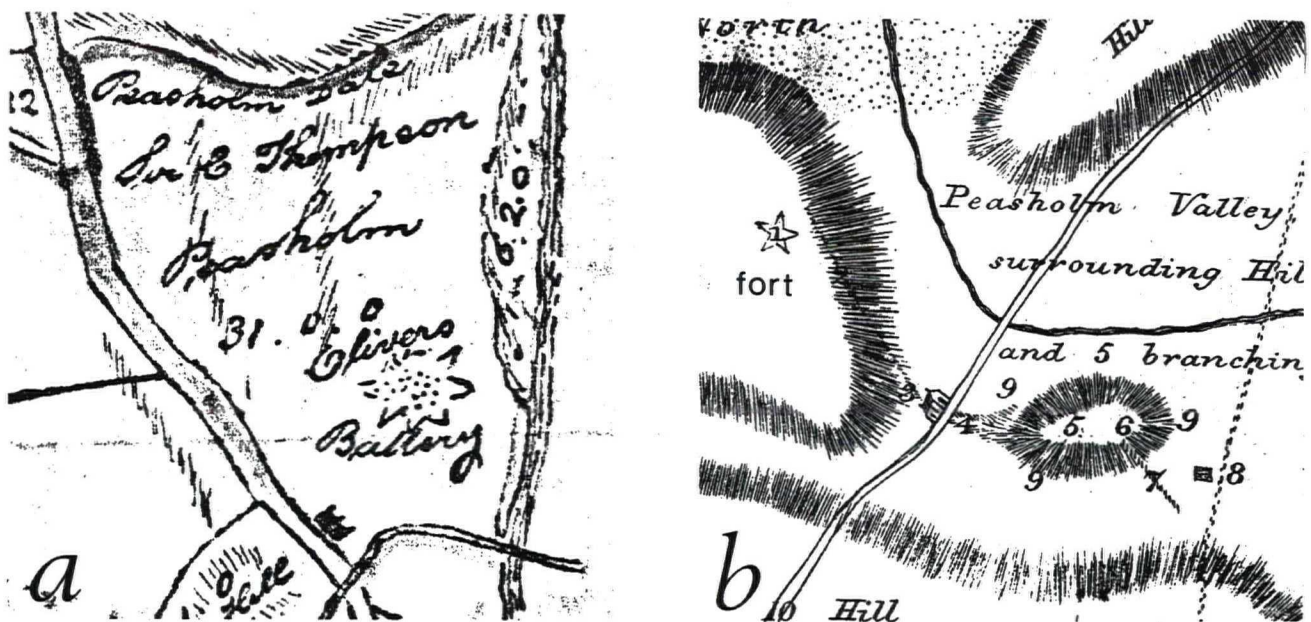


Fig 1: Representations of the Fort from (a) Scalby Enclosure Award map 1777 and (b) Knox (1855) plate 12.

Although no longer visible as an earthwork, the fort appears on OS maps from before the Second World War and rather schematically on Knox's plan of Peasholm published in 1855 reproduced here as Fig 1b. The OS maps show a ditch and rampart in the shape of a star measuring approx 35 metres across (Fig 2b). The earliest representation of the fort is on the Scalby Enclosure Award map of 1777 where it is called Oliver's Battery (Fig 1a). Ten years later the fort is briefly referred to by Schofield in the earliest guide to the town (Schofield 1787, 84) and in 1798 by Hinderwell in his History of Scarborough (Hinderwell 1798, 61). Hinderwell describes the fort as "a regular pentagon, every angle and part of which is grown over with a verdant turf, as though lately made". Presumably for pentagon he meant hexagon as the OS maps show the earthwork with six sides.

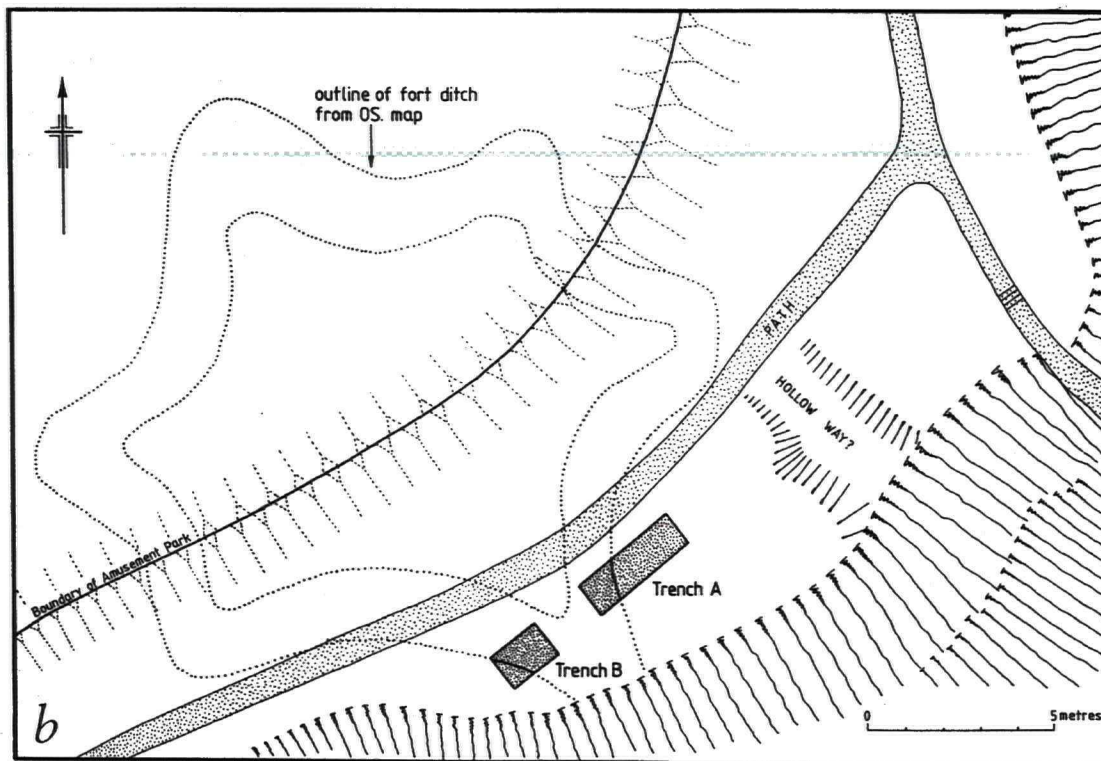
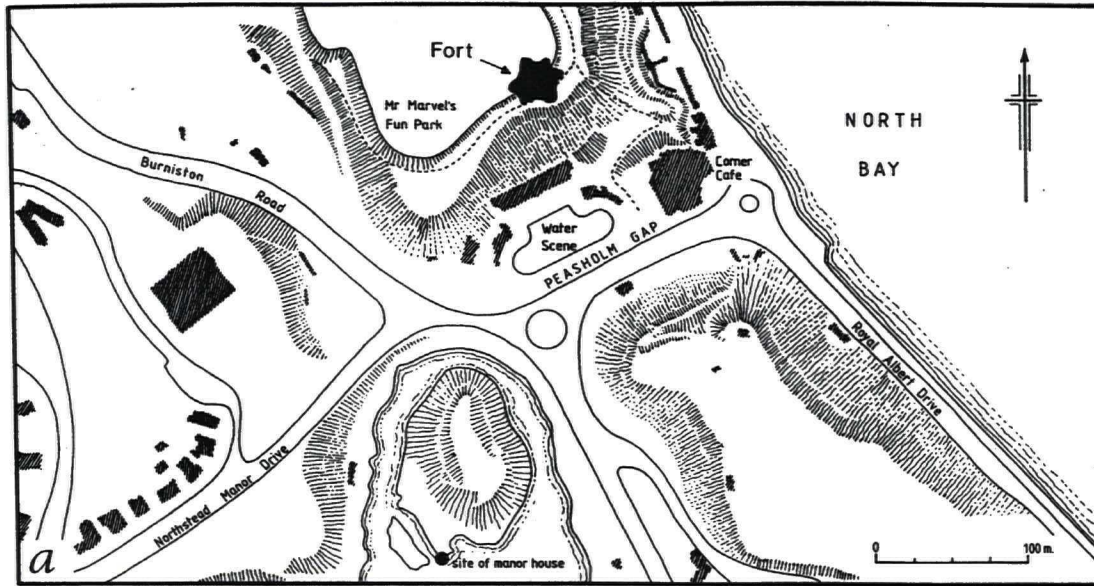


Fig 2: (a) Location and (b) Plan of Peasholm Fort

The fort is not mentioned in any of the contemporary accounts of Scarborough during the Civil War (Binns pers. comm.) and its role in the two sieges of the town and castle must therefore remain a matter of conjecture. Scarborough was first besieged between January and July 1645 by Sir John Meldrum and Sir Matthew Boynton following the defection of the castle governor, Sir Hugh Cholmley to the Royalist cause in March 1643. During the Second Civil War the castle governor, Colonel Matthew Boynton also declared for the king which prompted a second siege by Parliamentary forces ending with the surrender of the castle in December 1648. It is not known during which of the two sieges the fort was built but as an artillery emplacement it would have hindered Royalist attempts to land reinforcements and supplies in the North Bay for the beleaguered castle garrison and would have guarded the main road to Scarborough from the north. A similar fort on Ramshill, protecting the South Bay and the southern approach to the town, was destroyed during the construction of the Cliff Bridge (Knox 1855, 153). The garrison of the fort at Peasholm may also have overseen the market said to have been held in the vicinity when the castle was under siege.

Peasholm fort is therefore an important link with a momentous period in the history of Scarborough and the Archaeological Society felt it imperative that trial excavations should take place to establish the precise location of the fort and to examine its state of preservation. To locate the south-east point of the fort, two trial trenches were excavated within an area of grass between the edge of the cliff and the amusement park (Fig 2b). Although some slight undulations are visible under the grass, none were obviously part of the star fort. The most substantial was a depression to the east of the presumed location of the fort, probably the remains of a hollow way formed by the track shown ascending the hill on Knox's plan of 1855.

THE EXCAVATION

TRENCH A (Fig 3) measured 6m x 2m and was positioned to find the edge of the ditch on the eastern side of the south-east point of the fort. Removal of the topsoil (layer 100) revealed a uniform clayey soil containing patches of stones and clay at the south-west end of the trench. These were interpreted as remains of the rampart cast into the ditch during the levelling of the site. It proved impossible to identify the edge of the ditch at this level because it cut a clayey soil layer identical in appearance to that with which it was filled. Removal of three 20cm deep spits (layers 101-103) across the entire trench revealed the edge of the ditch in plan cutting undisturbed natural clay. From this level the ditch was excavated to its base, 1.4m from the present ground surface, the remaining fill being given the number 104. The ditch proved easier to see in section than in plan, its side sloping at an angle of about 20 degrees from just below the topsoil, and cutting both natural clay and the overlying clayey soil layer. The present ground surface rises slightly at the point where the edge of the ditch meets the topsoil showing that not all surface traces of the earthwork have been lost.

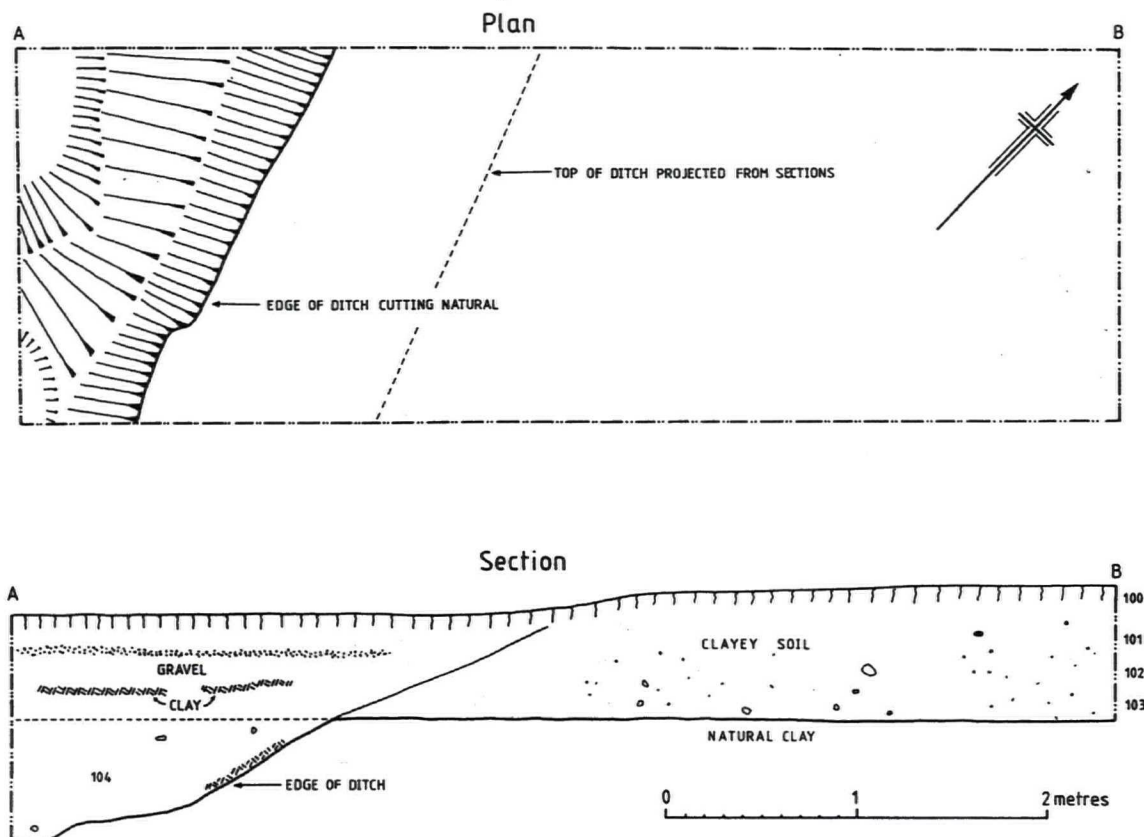


Fig 3: Plan and Section of Trench A

TRENCH B (Fig 4) measured 3m x 2m and was excavated 3 metres to the south west of trench A to locate the western side of the ditch. After removing the topsoil the ditch side was revealed cutting natural clay at a depth of 20cm from the surface. Time prevented all but the most cursory examination of the ditch which proved to be of more complex construction than the portion excavated in Trench A. The uppermost fill of the ditch was a dark grey silty soil containing thin layers of gravel and clay presumably the same backfilled rampart material identified in Trench A (layer 100). Below this was a clayey soil becoming distinctly more gravelly away from the edge of the ditch. Cut into this layer was a vertical sided slot about 80cm wide which zig-zagged with two right angled turns along the course of the ditch. There was insufficient time to fully excavate this feature and only 30cm of its fill was removed (layer 101). The remainder of the ditch was also left unexcavated.

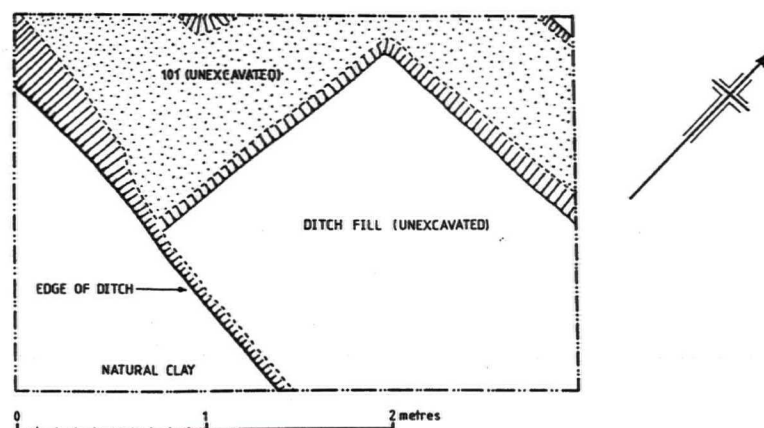


Fig 4: Plan of Trench B

DISCUSSION

The discovery of the ditch in both Trenches A and B means the position of the fort is now accurately located. Hitherto its position could only be estimated by combining maps showing the fort with the modern OS map, a technique which the excavation showed placed the ditch about two metres too far to the east. At 1.4m deep the ditch proved to be rather shallower than anticipated and its gently sloping sides can hardly have presented much of an obstacle. Without more extensive excavations it is impossible to say if the profile in Trench A is representative of the entire fort. If so it suggests the fort relied on its commanding situation and the strength of its rampart for its defence rather than on its perimeter ditch. Since the ditch is also very close to the surface in both trenches, the top could well have been destroyed when the site was levelled and originally the ditch may have been somewhat deeper.

That the ditch was modified at some date is shown by the curious rectilinear feature discovered in Trench B. It was sufficiently wide to accommodate a man and one might speculate that it was dug to protect foot soldiers sheltering in the bottom of the ditch. As such it need not be contemporary with the construction of the fort and indeed the fact that it was cut into the partially filled ditch and was itself filled with a loose uncompacted soil suggests it might be quite recent. One possible date is December 16th 1914 when Scarborough was shelled for half an hour by two German battleships. Many feared an imminent invasion and it is possible that troops hastily re-fortified this position in anticipation of a German landing in the North Bay.

Of the small number of artefacts found during the excavation, none could be definitely attributed to the fort apart from two stone balls 1-1.5cm in diameter which might be musket balls or grape shot. A third was found prior to the start of the dig in a mole hill to the east of the fort. In addition, 11 sherds of medieval pottery, mostly Scarborough Ware, were collected. The nearest medieval site, Northstead Manor House, is 300m to the south-west and the pottery could have come from there mixed up with farmyard manure. Twenty-six flint flakes were also recovered including 2 broken cores, 2 possible blades and a broken point. No Prehistoric settlements are known in the immediate vicinity, and the flints may indicate that occupation took place on the cliff top itself.

CONCLUSION

Although Peasholm Fort is no longer an impressive earthwork, the excavations have shown it still survives as an archaeological site which should be preserved from further damage. The ditch survives close to the surface in the area of Council Gardens and could well be disturbed by even a minor change in land use. The ditch probably also survives in the area of the amusement park, but in neither area is the rampart likely to have survived. Erosion of the cliff overlooking Peasholm Gap has destroyed the south-east point of the fort and will progressively threaten the remainder.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Permission for the excavation was given by Scarborough Borough Council and organised in discussion with Mr M Dransfield and Mr R Hall of the Councils Legal and Valuation Services Department and Department of Technical Services respectively. The excavation was undertaken by Patrick Argent, Dorothy Chaplin, Ron Davies, Charles Gavan-Duffy, Kay Dunderdale, Chris, Frances, William and Ruth Hall, Sarah Hardy, Gary Marshall, John Petty, Mike Roberts and Adam Russell. Jack Binns is thanked for his observations on the fort and Ros Palmer for arranging the site accommodation. Val Kinsler of the York Archaeological Trust kindly examined the flint.

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