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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
THE PROPOSED ROBIN'S CROSS AND PEAT FELL
FIRING RANGES.

A report to the Defence Land agent.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
THE PROPOSED ROBIN'S CROSS AND PEAT FELL
FIRING RANGES.

1. INTRODUCTION.

An archaeological investigation of the sites of two proposed new firing ranges was commissioned by the Ministry of Defence Lands Service (North) prior to submission of applications for Planning Consent. The commission was received on the 20th of March, 1995. The Planning Authority is Richmondshire District Council. The investigation was commissioned in response to a request from the County Archaeological Officer, whose advice specified that the work should comprise:

(a) a 'desk-top' study of available map and documentary sources

(b) non-intrusive field inspection to locate and identify archaeological sites

(c) the formulation of mitigation strategies to provide appropriate responses to any archaeological remains which might be identified.

2. THE SITES.

(a) The two proposed small-arms ranges are situated close to each other on Stainton Moor, near Bellerby, North

Yorkshire, on the east side of the Grinton-Bellerby road: they are known respectively as Peat Fell and Robin's Cross.

(b) The immediate surroundings are already used for military training: there is an existing small-arms range a few hundred metres to the south-east and the land all falls within the Danger Area, to which there is no public access.

(c) The land is unenclosed moor, mostly covered by heather. The altitude of the proposed new ranges falls between 370 and 400 metres above Ordnance Datum.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND.

(a) The general area of this proposed development falls within an area of study, comprehending Swalecote and Wensleydale, investigated over the past decade by the University of Sheffield (Dr Andrew Fleming in association with Mr Tim Laurie). No intensive fieldwalking is known to have been carried out over these specific sites, but the area has been included in preliminary reconnaissance. No other archaeological fieldwork in the area is known to have been undertaken.

(b) The North Yorkshire Sites and Monuments Record contains little information relating to this locality. The area has, however, been included in the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments's Yorkshire Dales Survey: this has involved the plotting (at 1:10,000 scale) of information visible on aerial photographs, but has not involved field survey in this area.

(c) The area between Swaledale and Wensleydale is known to be rich in archaeological remains, much of the evidence surviving as excellently preserved, upstanding stone features on heather-covered moorland. Extensive linear field systems of late-prehistoric date may be traced: they may be shown to extend onto Stainton Moor and to be associated with ring-cairns and other features.

4. SOURCES CONSULTED.

The following resources have been used in the compilation of this report:

- (a) The North Yorkshire Sites and Monuments Record
- (b) Yorkshire Dales Survey overlays of plotted aerial photographic information
- (c) Estate, enclosure and other early maps in the North Yorkshire County Records Office: eight maps were consulted, ranging in date between 1772 and 1864
- (d) Ordnance Survey maps dated 1857, 1914 and 1930
- (e) Viva voce consultation with T.C.Laurie
- (f) Unpublished note on Boundary Stones of Ellerton Moor by G.B.Donald.

5. MAP EVIDENCE.

(a) None of the estate maps, enclosure plans and other cartographic sources consulted in the County Records Office provided any useful information concerning the Robin's Cross and Peat Fell sites: the open moorland was generally excluded from maps prepared for specific purposes of estate-management, conveyancing, etc..

(b) Early editions of the Ordnance Survey maps are of more use in reconstructing past land-use in the area of the proposed new ranges. Specifically, they reveal the presence of the Bellerby Moor Colliery, already abandoned by the First Edition of 1857, and described as Old Coal Pits. The whole of this area of moorland, including Stainton, Ellerton, Preston and Bellerby Moors, is mottled with the remains of old mining (much of it of eighteenth century date): the mining was both for lead and for coal, but the latter seems to have been more significant in the area immediately under consideration. The Bellerby Moor Colliery appears as a group of closely-spaced pits, about a hundred in number. There is no indication of buildings or of other surface plant associated with the workings. The main concentration is in the general area of the proposed Peat Fell range, with further Old Coal Pits a little to the north, in the area of Robin's Cross. There is a great expanse of old coal workings to the west of the area under study.

(c) Lead working in the area under consideration is attested by the presence of an Old Hush immediately to the east of the Bellerby Moor Colliery and visible on the First

Edition map. The hush is aligned nearly north-south, and is probably of eighteenth century date (certainly old by 1857). marked as "old hush" on this map.

(d) Further mineral interests in the area are represented by the Black Beck Quarry (sandstone) shown by the First Edition immediately south of the Peat Fell site. This appears still to have been a working quarry at the time it was surveyed. There is another tiny sandstone quarry to the south-east of the Peat Fell range (and just outside the proposal), and an Old Quarry a short way to the west of the Robin's Cross site.

(e) All maps show the presence immediately on the north side of the Robin's Cross range of the boundary between the parishes of Ellerton and Stainton. This boundary has been constant for as long as recorded and is probably of great antiquity. A regular series of boundary stones is recorded on the First Edition map. Robin's Cross marks the intersection of a main estate boundary and the road (itself probably of mediaeval or earlier date): it is an early boundary feature and probably marks the site of an original mediaeval boundary cross.

(f) Little evidence from place-names recorded on the early maps is of much use. An exception to this, however, is Peat Fell. It is well known that peat was extensively cut from moors all over the Yorkshire Dales, and that the common-law rights to gather this important fuel were jealously guarded. Peat Fell may well have been an area from which peat was cut, in which case archaeological remains may have been disturbed in the process.

(g) The name Coney Bow Hill, which occurs on the north side of the Robin's Cross range, may indicate the former presence of an artificial rabbit warren. These were an important economic resource in mediaeval times and were commonly sited on marginal moorland (c.f. those at Newbiggin-on-Lune in Westmorland): there is no trace, however, of the pillow-mounds by which they may often be recognised.

6. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDS.

(a) There is no useful information available in the North Yorkshire Sites and Monuments Record relevant to the area of the present proposals.

(b) The Yorkshire Dales Survey has records of aerial photographs of the area, which have been plotted onto transparencies at 1:10,000 scale. All of the information recorded relates to industrial archaeology and it appears to correspond satisfactorily to that on the early Ordnance Survey maps. A large excavation, with extensive areas of spoil-heaps, seems to represent the Black Beck sandstone quarry. The open shafts and bell-pits of the Bellerby Moor Colliery are also recorded.

(c) No other archaeological remains in the area under consideration have been noted during the fieldwork carried out locally under the auspices of the University of Sheffield.

7. FIELD INSPECTION.

(a) The areas were closely inspected on the ground on the 21st and 22nd of March, 1995: a total of eight hours was spent on the field examination.

(b) All areas were closely examined, with particular attention being paid to the possibilities of minor variations in relief disclosing potential prehistoric boundaries and other features. All areas of surface erosion were examined for the possibility of surface finds of flint or other material.

PEAT FELL RANGE.

(c) The area was largely covered by heather, but there was considerable evidence of recent disturbance, especially by the digging of large machine-cut ditches.

(d) There was much evidence for industrial activity. Some colliery shafts or pits could be discerned within the area, and represent the northern edge of the Bellerby Moor Colliery. Those within the proposed range, however, are on the whole ill-preserved and difficult to define. The important exceptions are largely confined to the southern fifty metres of the area, and to within 300 metres of the south-western corner: here are several well-defined pits which correspond closely in appearance to the much larger number immediately to the south.

(e) The area immediately to the south of the proposed new range is densely covered by industrial workings. The remains of the colliery are very clearly preserved, and a large excavated area, flanked by extensive spoil-heaps, must represent the vestiges of the Black Beck Quarry.

(f) The surface of the site, particularly of its western half, appeared much disturbed by industrial workings: the surface is irregular and seems to have been dug over in many places, presumably in connection with the colliery workings. There are also considerable heaps and spreads of mining waste, mostly in the form of broken snale. These have in places entirely concealed the original ground surface and any features which it might have exhibited.

(g) Despite close inspection of all likely locations, no object of archaeological interest was recovered.

(h) No trace could be recovered of any feature likely to represent settlement, agriculture or any other activity earlier in date than the intensive industrial exploitation of the moor (which seems to have begun in the eighteenth century).

(i) Much of the surviving surface is covered with thin blanket peat, almost certainly of fairly recent development. There is no clear evidence for deep or raised peat bogs: the blanket peat cover is over most of the site no more than 20 centimetres thick, but inspection of the sides of recent cuttings indicated that there are areas of as much as a metre of peat in places, especially towards the eastern end of the site. The peat is amorphous and

distorted in character, and may have been partially dried by the de-watering effects of early industrial delvings below the water table as well as of recent cuttings. The sides of modern cuttings revealed no evidence for buried archaeological horizons.

(j) All substantial exposed boulders were examined for cup-marks or other signs of human activity, none of which could be discerned. Most of this surface stone seemed to have been turned up to the surface as a result of industrial activity in the last two centuries: the rest appears to be natural glacial clutter.

ROBIN'S CROSS RANGE.

(k) The area was covered almost entirely by heather, apart from a few small spreads of shale which seem to be derived from relatively recent disturbance. This made the fine details of relief difficult to establish, and particular care was therefore taken to probe thoroughly in the heather to look for possible walls, cairns, etc..

(l) There were some minor irregularities of relief which are best seen as small spoil-heaps originating in industrial activity peripheral to the main complex.

(m) No trace was found of archaeological features pre-dating the industrial activity on the moor.

(n) Close examination of the limited areas of surface exposure and erosion revealed no object of archaeological significance.

(o) On the northern part of the area is an inscribed boundary stone, one of an interesting series of such stones in the area. They were erected in the eighteenth century to mark estate boundaries: this example is at the centre of the network, at the junction of the estates of Erle Drax, Simon Scrope and Marmaduke Wyvill. It sits on top of a small, disturbed cairn: this cairn is itself probably an earlier boundary marker, but it may well be of early date, and the possibility cannot be discounted that it might be a prehistoric cairn later used as a boundary mark. It appears from M.O.D. plans that this feature would in fact be just outside the boundary of the proposed site.

(p) The blanket peat cover seen on the Peat Fell range appears to extend also over the Robin's Cross range. No evidence for deep peat was noted.

8. DISCUSSION.

(a) There is no surface evidence for prehistoric activity. There remains some possibility that this might exist on some part of the site buried below the blanket peat, although no trace has been observed in the sides of cuttings which have penetrated through the peat. The location of the sites, with regard to natural topographic factors, does not strongly suggest settlement, but the presence of elements of Bronze Age co-axial field systems remains a slight possibility.

(b) The potential of the peat (which to some degree covers both sites) to produce important palynological evidence is low.

(c) The main archaeological significance of the sites is in relation to industrial remains, especially of part of the Bellerby Moor colliery. Most of the physical evidence within the areas of the proposals is already damaged or is otherwise of poor quality. Only a single activity (the extraction of raw materials) is evinced, and this fact further reduces the value of the remains. Remains of early coal mining are abundant in the region.

(d) The most significant remains are those of the well-preserved coal pits on the south edge of the Peat Fell range: it is however understood that damage to these during the construction and use of the range would be minimal.

(e) The boundary-stone on the north side of the Robin's Cross range is an important historical feature, the value of which is further enhanced by its inscription and by its association with other boundary markers in the area. Although it is strictly outside the area of the proposal, it is felt that steps should be taken to ensure the preservation of this monument, not least during the period of contractors' operations.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS.

(a) The boundary stone to the north of the Robin's Cross range should be fenced-off to protect it during the period

of contractors' operations. Should there remain any chance of its being damaged during the use of the range, it should be suitably screened.

(b) A detailed photographic record of the boundary stone should be made.

(c) A basic record, consisting of a plan supplemented by photographs, should be made of the industrial features on the southern edge of the Peat Fell range. *

(d) Arrangements should be made for archaeological monitoring of construction and landscaping works, particularly in view of the possibility of features surviving under the surface peat, and in line with the recommendation in Section 4.249 of the Environmental Impact Assessment