

BAILIFF WOOD: FOREST INDUSTRIES

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT

NMR no: SD 39 SW 15 AND 16



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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. THE REMAINS
3. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Trust woodlands to the east of Coniston Water contain much evidence of forest industries in the form of charcoal burning platforms or pitsteads and 'bark peelers' huts, many of which are served by a network of tracks. From February to March 1995, RCHME Newcastle surveyed at 1:2500 a representative sample of the woods, some 20 hectares in all, centred at SD 304 934, to the north of Hill Gill, largely comprising Bailiff Wood, and also Fair Hill Coppice and part of High Barn Wood. These are exclusively deciduous; oaks, both mature and coppiced predominate, though the coppicing is comparatively limited in area and shows no evidence of present-day management. Birch and hazel can also be identified, together with a scattering of lime, yew and holly. The woods occur on a natural slope facing the lake; in places the gradient is very steep, up to 40%, with low outcropping cliffs, and elsewhere there are level terraces on the hillside. Scattered throughout are 49 charcoal burning platforms, generally built up on the less steep slopes or, less frequently, occupying the terraces, and four 'bark peelers' huts (A1-3), all confined to the terraces.

A plan of 1969 reproduced by Barker (Phd thesis) shows numerous pitsteads, "charcoal burners' huts" and tracks. Though it has been possible to trace some of the tracks through the woods, there is little evidence of a relationship between the platforms and huts on the plan and those found on the ground.

2. THE REMAINS

Charcoal Burning Platforms

Within these woods it is rare for the pitsteads to occur on completely flat ground but where this happens they tend to survive as slight depressions with perfectly flat bases, up to 8.5 m in diameter and not more than 0.2 m deep (see RCHME 1:100 enlargement of pitstead adjoining hut A1). More often the ground slopes, and the stances can be seen as flat circular terraces, on average 6.0 m - 6.5 m in diameter, cut back into the hill-slope, with the resultant spoil utilised to create a front apron. The back scarp and the front apron can attain a height of 1.7 m; this is entirely dependent on the degree of hill-slope. In several cases where the front apron is uncommonly high, it is revetted with crude walling; this is demonstrated in pitstead B at SD 3037 9326, enlarged by RCHME to 1:100.

The diagnostic factor in identifying woodland platforms as charcoal burning stances is the presence of black soil containing small but distinctive fragments of charcoal beneath the over-burden of turf and leaf mould. Commonly, small surface quarries, on average 2 m across and 0.3 m deep, occur in the vicinity of the pitsteads; these are probably 'sammel holes' dug to provide clean earth to cover the charcoal heaps during the burn.

'Bark-peelers' Huts A1-3

Hut A1 at SD 3049 9361 measures about 2.5 m in diameter within a bank of earth and some visible stone about 1.3 m wide and 0.25 m high. On the north-east side, opposite the entrance to the hut, is the customary stone-built hearth and chimney surviving to a height of 0.85 m. The only identifiable wall facing is a length of 2.8 m across the facade; the fireplace itself is 0.45 m wide and filled with stone debris. Around the outside of the hut on the north-west upper side is a contiguous ditch, 0.2 m deep and some 1.3 m wide.

This would serve well for drainage purposes, and may also have been a source of material for the hut wall of earth and stone. Next to the hut is a horse-shoe shaped bank, open to the south-east, which partially encloses an area about 2.5 m north-west-south-east by 1.5 m transversely. The bank, of similar consistency to that around A1, is spread to a width of about 1.4 m and is up to 0.25 m high. About 2.5 m to the north of A1, and behind the hearth and chimney, is a pitstead already mentioned. The relationship between the two, in terms of date and function is unknown; it is however clear that the pitstead cannot be observed from inside the hut.

Centred at SD 3043 9349 on a terrace are two contiguous 'bark peelers' huts (A2) overlooked by two irregular depressions. About 14 m to the west, and not visible from the hut interiors, is a charcoal burning platform. The better preserved north hut is oval, measuring 4.3 m WNW-ESE by 2.8 m transversely within an earthen bank spread to 1.5 m wide and up to 0.25 m internal height. The hearth and chimney are in good condition, 1.0 m high. The wall face of the hearth can be seen at ground level in its entirety forming a neat semi-circle, 2.5 m across the facade and 1.6 m deep. The fireplace, obscured by tumble, is 0.55 m across and of a similar depth; the hut entrance, opposite the hearth, seems to have been protected by a curving outer bank in the manner of a wind break. There is a parallel curving ditch, 0.1 m deep, around the outside of the hut on the east side, which connects to the ditch around the west side of the south hut. The latter is disfigured; it measured approximately 4 m NNE-SSW by 3 m transversely within a spread bank, 1.5 m wide and 0.15 m high on the north side but indeterminate elsewhere. The hearth and chimney, still 1.1 m high, has collapsed into the interior, and little survives of the original form. The two depressions above the huts are each 5.0 m long by between 3 m - 4 m wide and up to 0.65 m deep; the sides are stony but no wall faces as such can be seen. Their purpose is unclear; they may be for storage or possibly they were quarries for the huts.

Hut A3 at SD 3026 9319 follows the same pattern as the others, except that the hut wall contains a greater percentage of stone, notably on the west side where traces of both an inner and outer face are exposed suggesting a width of about 1.0 m. The interior is oval, 4.0 m E-W by 3.0 m N-S, and the surrounding wall is 0.5 m maximum internal height. The original shape of the stone hearth, a semi-circle, is still discernible; it measures 2.2 m across

the front, 1.6 m in depth and 0.9 m high. The fireplace, 0.65 m wide, is choked with stones. There is evidence for a ditch around the E side.

It has been possible to demonstrate that at least 60% of the pitsteads and the three huts A1-2 were served by a series of trackways, on average 1.5 m wide, winding up the hill-slope in a series of dog legs from the public road running along the shoreline. On the lower slopes, two tracks converge on a point by the road at SD 3029 9354, now occupied by a made-up car park. The upper section of the wood is served by a series of zig-zagging tracks which connect with a long track running diagonally down the slope to an area of disturbed and quarried ground at SD 3026 9325. The OS 1st edition 6-inch map shows a roofed building annotated Ivy Hog-house at this point; nothing survives of it, and despite the place-name evidence indicative of a sheep shelter, its function cannot be assured.

The National Trust has quite recently enclosed its forest holdings with a post-and-wire fence; formerly the woods within the area of survey were bounded by a stone wall, and sub-divided by the remains of further walls. These are ruinous and discontinuous, but, combined with the streams running down the hill-slope, appear to form irregular plots. Taking into account the disposition of the various trackways shown on the RCHME 1:2500 plan ascending the hill, it seems probable that the woods were divided up into parcels of coppice, which were harvested on a regular cycle.

3. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barker S, Phd thesis (unpublished), Lancaster University, plan.