

SHILLA HILL BASTLE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT
NMR no: NY 79 SE 2



RCHME Newcastle

SHILLA HILL BASTLE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT

NMR no: NY 79 SE 2



Jonathan Chandler

© RCHME Crown Copyright

1997

Shilla Hill Bastle

NGR: NY 7636 9038
Parish: Tarsset
District: Tynedale
County: Northumberland

Introduction

Shilla Hill is a 16th-century bastle in the Tarsset Valley of Northumberland. It survives as a ruin and only the lower courses of the stone walls remain. There are earthwork remains of two additional buildings immediately to the east and north-east, and also fainter traces of surrounding earth banks and occasional stones that form at least four enclosures.

The bastle is regarded as being in a sufficient state of preservation to be of national importance, and has been Scheduled (RSM No. 25079). This is partly due to the survival of other bastles in the vicinity and, consequently, their 'group value'.

A survey by the RCHME of the bastle and its associated features (NMR No. NY 79 SE 2) was jointly requested by English Heritage and Forest Enterprise, as part of the Kielder Forest Scheduled Ancient Monuments Survey, to inform management plans for this group of sites.

Methodology

The survey was carried out at RCHME Level 3 and at a scale of 1:500. A Wild TC-1610 total station EDM was used to establish a control network for the subsequent detail survey for which a Wild RK-1 self-reducing alidade and plane table were used.

The survey was undertaken in May 1997 by Jonathan Chandler, a Postgraduate student on a work placement, and Amy Lax of the Newcastle Office of the RCHME. The plan and the report were prepared by Jonathan Chandler, under the supervision

of staff of the Royal Commission.

Physical Setting

Shilla Hill is located on the west side of the Tarsset Valley (NGR NY 7636 9038), on the eastern perimeter of Kielder Forest, c.350m west of Comb and 10.3km north-east of Bellingham. It lies within a large strip cleared of trees on previously-afforested land, on the summit of a small hill (185m above OD) which is skirted by two small tributaries of the Tarsset Burn, one situated c.200m to the north and the other c.200m to the south. The Tarsset Burn is c.150m to the north-east, at the bottom of a steep scarp which lies just beyond the edge of the clearing. This scarp would have provided a natural defence to any approach from the north. The slopes of the hilltop fall away on all sides, gently to the south and south-west, and moderately towards the scarp slope above the Tarsset Burn. The underlying geology is glacial boulder clay.

The recent tree planting across the site has caused some damage to the banks, and subsequent clearing of the trees to leave the stumps intact has obscured the banks in places. The whole of the survey area is covered with a uniformly thick growth of tussocky marsh grass with mossy growths in areas; this too obscures some of the archaeological detail. The presence of many tree stumps has made the ground surface very uneven, but because of the sloping nature of the ground drainage appears to be good. Several small drainage channels have been cut to the south and west of the bastle on the edge of the survey area. In places to the west and east, new deciduous trees have been planted at 10m intervals.

Archaeological and documentary evidence suggest that there were at least 12 bastles in the Tarsset valley, dated to the 16th and 17th centuries. Other bastles within 1km of Shilla Hill are Boghead bastle 600m to the north, Hill House bastle 850m to the south-east and the bastle at Comb 350m to the east and easily visible on the opposite site of the Tarsset Burn.

Shilla Hill is one of the sites on the National Park's 'Reiver's Trail' which includes a number of the better preserved bastles; a square stone-built information point has been erected at the side of the footpath.

The History of the Site

The earliest reference to the name Shilla Hill is in 1749 (NCRO QRD 5), and this is the name given in the RCHME publication *Shielings and Bastles* (Ramm *et al* 1970, 92). Originally it may have been called Starheyd (1552), Starr Head (1583), Stairhead (1663) and Starry Head (late 17th century). However, there is some doubt as to whether these names were applied specifically to this site. In 1552 the bastle was mentioned in the order of the Day-watch for North Tynedale (Nicholson 1705, 262). In 1583 it was just one of a number of bastles attacked by the Armstrongs, a band of raiders;

‘...on Frydaie in the mornynge last, being the xxxth of August, in Tynedale unto certin places, that is to say the Keyne, the Reidheughe, the Black Myddynes, the Hill Howse, the Water head, the **Starr head**, the Bog head, the High feelde, and there raysed fyer and brunte the most pairte of them, and maisterfullie refte, stale and drave away fowre hundrethe kyen and oxen, fowre hundrethe sheip and goate, xxx horses and mears, and the spoil and insyght of the houses to the walewe of two hundrethe pounds and slewe and murdered crewellie six parsons and maymed and hurte ellevin parsons, and tooke and led awaye xxx presoners and them do deteigne and keip in warlyke maner, myndynge to ransom them contrarie the vertewe of trewes and lawes of the Marches.’ (Bain 1874, 174).

In 1663 it was one of a number of places in Tarsset held by the Hunter family (Hodgson 1840, 309). It is described as ‘a messuage containing arable land, meadow and pasture 18 acres and sufficient common of pasture, held by Mark and Gerard Hunter for 18d.’ (Alnwick Castle MSS, A VI, No.2).

Land Tax of 14s was paid on Shilla Hill in 1749 by Mrs. Barbary Hall (NCRO QRD 5). After this date there are no further documentary references, although according to legend it was once the home of Hodge Corby or Corby Jack (Hope Dodds 1940, 271). Corby Jack was a friend of Barty Milburn who flourished in the 1580s.

The bastle and a second building are marked on Armstrong's map of 1769 as ‘Shilly Hill’. The name Shilla Hill appears on the maps of Fryer (1820) and Greenwood (1828). There is no mention of it in the 1840 Tithe commutations of West Tarsset (NCRO ZAN Bell 82/6), although Shilla Hill is marked on a map signed by the Tithe Commissioners in 1841 (NCRO ZAN Bell 56/6a). There is no entry for Shilla Hill in the census returns of 1851.

Shilla Hill is marked on the Ordnance Survey (OS) 1st Edition 6" map of 1866. The bastle and the building to the east of it are shown along with the semi-circular enclosure and outer enclosure banks. Several trees have been indicated along the latter. Two of these trees still stand today, and tree stumps others were noted in the survey. The internal enclosure banks and the north-eastern bank are not on this map.

No enclosure banks other than the semi-circular enclosure are indicated on the OS 2nd Edition 6" map of 1898 and they may have fallen out of use by this date.

Vertical air photographs taken in July 1948 (RAF/541/A/442/3218, 3219) show the bastle and the surrounding area prior to afforestation. The bastle, the building to the north-east, the external enclosure bank and the small semi-circular enclosure are clearly visible. Ridge-and-furrow can be seen in the area outside the enclosure banks to the north, north-east and south, but it does not appear to lie within the enclosures.

Description of the Archaeology

The Bastle

The bastle is rectangular and measures 12.2m by 4.5m internally, with its ruined walls being best preserved along the northern and eastern sides. All walls, except the southern, exist as three or four courses. A maximum height of 2m is reached in the north-east corner, and the presence of a large tree here may explain why this part of the bastle has survived. Although its roots may have once held the stone blocks together, they now appear to be causing damage to the structure; the relieving arch above the doorway, recorded in the RCHME survey of 1970, has now fallen down, and the roots have begun to push through the outer face of the east facing wall.

The walls are 1.3m thick and are made up of roughly coursed unhewn boulders with larger rectangular blocks (e.g. 0.9m x 0.4m x 0.4m) of stone as quoins. All stones are roughly faced with a poor finish. There is a weak mortar made up of chippings, and a rubble core.

The ground floor entrance in the east wall is 0.6m wide and at least 0.8m high with rubble obscuring the true threshold. One inner lintel survives, displaced to where the outer lintel once was. The jambs have rounded angles and rebates for two doors. A

tunnel for a drawbar of the outer door is visible in the south jamb. The doorway was originally ornamented with an unfinished double bead moulding (Hope Dodds 1940, 271).

It is possible that there was another, wider, entrance in the middle of the south wall as there is a 1.9m gap where only turf-covered foundations remain, and a lack of rubble inside or outside the building at this point suggests that this is not just an area of collapsed wall.

Two entrances on the ground floor would be extremely unusual in a building of this type; it is possible that the larger southern entrance was inserted later, perhaps when raids across the border had ceased, or when the buildings immediately to the east were built, as they would have made it difficult, or impossible (see below) for livestock to use the eastern entrance. The wider southern entrance might have been built to accommodate cattle, or if there had been a change in function of the ground floor in more peaceful times, it might have served as the main entrance.

No evidence was found for an internal or external stair, despite such a possibility being noted in the earlier RCHME survey in July 1970. It was suggested that a stair lay against the west wall. The thicker nature of the wall here is now thought to be rubble only.

There is much turf-covered rubble both inside and outside the bastle; a semi-circle of tumbled material extends from the west side around the north side to the south-east corner externally, and there is further debris in the interior at both ends of the building.

Other Buildings

There are well-preserved earthworks, defined by stony banks, of two buildings immediately to the east and north-east of the bastle, with several stone blocks protruding from beneath the moss. Both buildings are on a similar alignment to the bastle and both appear to be later additions laid out in relation to the existing building as they partially obstruct access to the eastern entrance. The more southerly building has walls that are parallel to those of the bastle. It is a smaller building and probably consisted of two rooms with an entrance in the southern wall of the east room; there is a distinct gap in the bank here. It is not possible to tell if there was a narrow division

between the two buildings or whether they were connected. The OS 1st Edition map shows them joined together, in which case the eastern bastle entrance may now have served as an internal connecting door. However, it is probable that there was a gap between, them as seen at other bastles, e.g. Boghead and Black Middens.

The internal dimensions of the eastern room are 4m by 2.2m. The western extent of the building is not discernible because of rubble from the bastle, and so the complete internal dimensions of the western room are not known. The banks of the building vary in width; the north bank is 1.3m wide, the east bank 3m wide, although its thickness may be explained by the spread of rubble.

To the north of this building is a slightly larger structure measuring 6.4m by 3.8m internally. It is on a slightly different alignment and almost abuts the building described above with its southern wall. The walls survive as moss- and turf-covered banks 3.5m wide. They survive up to 0.4m high in most places, but reach a maximum of 0.9m at the north-eastern corner. The opposite south-west corner is difficult to discern, and this may be due to later damage.

There is a well-defined gap in the north bank, 1.9m wide, which was probably an entrance. It is possible that there was another opposed entrance in the south wall. Several cuts 0.4m wide and 0.3m deep have been made into the eastern wall, possibly the result of excavation or attempted robbing of the stone. They are sharply defined, suggesting a recent date.

The Banks

The banks (but not the internal banks) are visible as earthworks on vertical air photographs taken in July 1948 (RAF/541/A/442/3218, 3219). They were previously thought to have been destroyed by deep furrow ploughing within the afforestation (OS Field Investigator's report 1970).

The banks form a total of four enclosures which would have been used for holding livestock.

The smallest enclosure is a semi-circular bank extending outwards from the south-west and south-east corners of the bastle. It survives as a low, turf-covered stony bank, which in places is more visible as a parch mark than an earthwork. It is 2.2m

wide with a maximum height of 0.3m. There is a break in the bank in one place, and this may have been an entrance.

There are three larger rectilinear enclosures visible as earthworks; One to the west of the bastle (hereafter referred to as 'A'), one to the north ('B'), and one to the north-east ('C'). The north-west bank extends much further beyond the enclosures to the north-east until it reaches the trees, continuing for another 10m before terminating at the scarp above the Tasset Burn. It is likely that this did not form part of an enclosure and may have served as a more major land boundary. Despite being on a similar orientation to other banks, on the air photographs it appears to overlie the ridge-and-furrow to the north of the bastle and is probably a later feature. Though its sides are distorted by tree stumps it is generally well preserved.

Enclosure A

This is the largest of the three enclosures measuring c.45m by 33m internally. It is rectilinear and has poorly preserved banks which are only just discernible as a slight earthwork. In places it only survives intermittently, though occasionally rough-faced stones are visible beneath the grass. Trees were at one time planted on the top of the bank and these are shown on the OS 1st Edition map. One large tree survives in the middle of the south-western bank, but of the others only stumps remain.

The east corner only survives as an internal scarp and its shape is difficult to determine.

The west corner is well-defined and is the only part of this enclosure where both sides of the bank are clearly visible. It is 2.2m wide. The north-west bank appears to extend further beyond this corner, but it is likely that this is misleading and this 'bank' seems to comprise only of tree stumps, brash and tumble from the corner.

The north-west bank is in a much better state of survival at a height of 0.4m and a width of 1.2m, with stone facing, *in situ*, protruding in places from the base on either side. There are two gaps in the bank; the more westerly one is 3.8m wide and may be original, and the one further to the east which appears where the scarps of the bank fade out.

Enclosure B

The smallest of the enclosures, measuring c.25m by 17m internally, lies to the north of

the bastle. It is rectilinear, and apart from the north-east perimeter bank which survives only as an internal scarp, the other banks are fairly well-defined. The west bank is 3.5m wide and 0.5m high, the east bank 2.9m wide and 0.7m high with a 'dog-leg' at its southern end. The entrance to this enclosure may have been between the north-west corner of the bastle and the bank.

Enclosure C

A rectilinear enclosure measuring c.38m by 18m internally, to the north-east of the bastle. Of the north-west bank only a stub end remains and it gradually fades and disappears; perhaps there was an entrance here at one time.

The north-east bank is generally well-preserved and is laid out along the natural crest of the hill. It is a large bank, 3.8m wide and 0.7m high, probably originally a hedgeline, with two large trees near the centre which can be seen on the OS 1st Edition map, one of which has recently blown down.

The Ridge-and-Furrow

Vertical air photographs taken in July 1948 (RAF/541/A/442/3218, 3219) prior to afforestation show ridge-and-furrow clearly visible as earthworks, to the north, north-east, south and possibly to the west of the bastle. The ridge-and-furrow runs right up to the enclosure walls. To the north the furrows are aligned north-west to south-east and run down the slope. To the north-east the furrows run in a north-south direction down to the scarp above the Tasset Burn. To the south the furrows are aligned north-east to south-west and run down the slope of the hill. A short turf-covered stony bank, which lies to the south-east of the bastle, may be remnants of the ridge-and-furrow as it is on a similar alignment, or possibly a boundary within it. It measures c.15m long by 3.1m wide with a maximum height of 0.7m and appears to be breached in the middle.

The Farmsteads

Approximately 140m to the north of the bastle the remains of two previously unrecorded buildings were discovered during the course of the survey (NMR No. NY 79 SE 10). They were not surveyed but are described here because of their proximity to the main features. They lie 20m apart and are partly concealed by the edge of the forest. Their north-east sides are almost coincident with the edge of the scarp above the Tasset Burn. Both are in poor condition and survive as turf- and moss-covered

banks with some stone-facing visible. The stones are of a similar size and appearance to those of the bastle and it is possible that these had been robbed from that building.

The building closest to the bastle is rectangular (11.5m by 3.4m internally), aligned south-west/north east, and probably had opposed entrances in the middle, revealed by 1.1m and 1.7m wide gaps in the 2.3m thick wall. The end furthest from the scarp is the best preserved and stands at a maximum height of 0.7m.

Further along on a similar alignment is another building, not so well preserved, close to a small burn on the edge of a deeply scored channel. It measures 9.4m by 3.3m internally. The side of the building which runs along the scarp is difficult to define due to pine needles and tree stumps. A large faced stone is visible in one corner.

The buildings are probably the remains of farmsteads, based on their size and the observation that they have opposed entrances, and may date from between the early 17th to early 19th centuries (Ramm *et al* 1970, fig.196).

Bibliography

Bain, JG (ed) 1894 *Calendar of Letters and Papers Relating to the Affairs of the Borders of England and Scotland volume 1 (1560-1594)*. HM General Register House. Edinburgh.

Hodgson, J 1940 *A History of Northumberland Vol 3 i*. John Akenhead and Stumerson Charnley. Newcastle upon Tyne.

Hope Dodds, M (ed) 1940 *A History of Northumberland Vol 15* Simonburn, Rothbury, Alwinton. Andrew Reid and Co. Newcastle upon Tyne.

Nicholson, W 1705 *Leges Marchiarum or Border Laws*. Goodwin. London.

Ramm HG, McDowall RW, and Mercer, E 1970 *Shielings and Bastles*. HMSO. London.

Ryder, PF 1990 *Bastles and Towers in the Northumberland National Park* (unpublished report for the National Park Authority).

Acknowledgements

The documentary research was carried out by Ms. Barbara Harbottle, who kindly allowed her private research to be incorporated into this report.

Vertical Air Photographs Consulted

NAR	Frame	Date	Scale	Repository
CPE/Scot/348	4030-4031	16-Apr-48	1:10,000	NMR
RAF 541/A/442	3217-3220	30-Jul-48	1:10,000	NMR
RAF 541/A/442	4218-4220	30-Jul-48	1:10,000	NMR

Cartographic Sources Consulted

Armstrong (1769) Map of Northumberland.

Fryer (1820) Map of Northumberland.

Greenwood (1828) Map of Northumberland.

Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 6" Map (1866). Sheet 59.

Ordnance Survey 2nd Edition 6" Map (1898). Sheet 59.

Ordnance Survey New Popular Edition 1" map (1947).

ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND				
OFFICE OF ORIGIN NEWCASTLE	COUNTY NORTHUMBERLAND	SCALE OF SURVEY 1:500	METHOD EDM/PLANE TABLE	OS MAP No. NY 79 SE
PROJECT NAME KIELDER	DISTRICT TYNEDALE	DATE OF SURVEY MAY 97	ASSOCIATED PLANS	NAR No. 2
SITE NAME SHILLA HILL BASTLE	PARISH TARSET	SURVEYOR(S) JC. AJL		SAM No. 25079
DOCUMENT STATUS ARCHIVE	NGR NY 7636 9038	© RCHME Crown Copyright	SHEET	CATALOGUE No. COLL 10 72576 GRAM 1130314

