

# Archaeological Field Survey Report



Royal Commission on the Historical  
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## SKELMORE HEADS, URSWICK CUMBRIA

by Moraig Brown

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SKELMORE HEADS,  
URSWICK,  
CUMBRIA

NMR NUMBER SD 27 NE 2

NEOLITHIC INDUSTRY AND ENCLOSURE

OCTOBER 1996



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Summary

In October 1996 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England surveyed the remains of an enclosure at Skelmore Heads, Urswick, Cumbria (NMR Number SD 27 NE 2). The survey was carried out as part of the Industry and Enclosure in the Neolithic Project, a national survey seeking to produce a corpus of Neolithic flint mines and enclosures in England. The project was the responsibility of staff of the Archaeological Field Office in Cambridge, with survey assistance provided by staff of the Archaeological Field Offices in Newcastle and Swindon.

The enclosure is situated at NGR SD 274 751, above the village of Great Urswick, 3.5km south of Ulverston, Cumbria (in an area which formed part of Lancashire until 1974). The enclosure occupies a limestone outcrop c.95m above OD on high ground providing views over several kilometres in all directions except to the southeast, where it is overlooked by Birkrigg Common. Skelmore Heads is situated on a carboniferous limestone ridge; the enclosure is situated in pasture, but evidence of ridge and furrow cultivation is present on the slopes below.

The enclosure is a scheduled ancient monument (Cumbria 27688) and is considered to be a simple hillfort which succeeded a palisaded enclosure (Powell 1963; SMR Number 02248); a nearby long barrow was also surveyed (scheduled number Cumbria 27689).

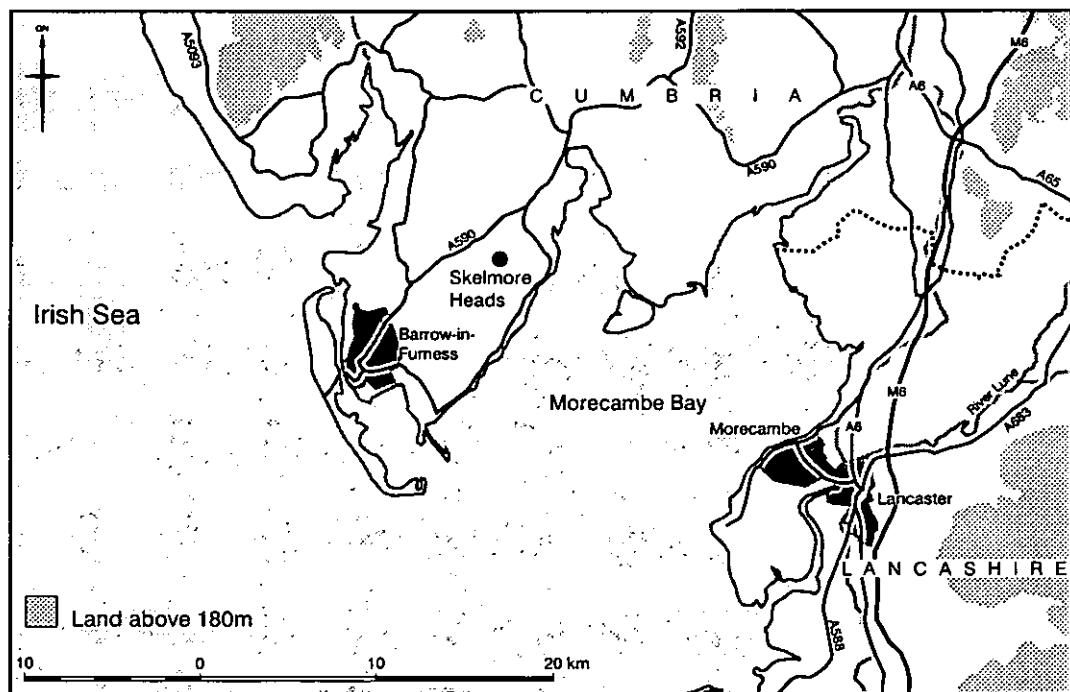


Figure 1  
Location map

## 2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

### The enclosure

The rectilinear enclosure at Skelmore Heads, situated just below the summit of the hill, is defined on the north by a bank with possible traces of a slight ditch; the rest of the circuit is defined by steep natural slopes, interspersed with limestone outcrops. Neither the enclosure nor the long barrow, 150m to the north, were depicted on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition 25" county series map (Ordnance Survey 1890), and they appear to have been first surveyed as recently as the 1950s (NMR Number SD 27 NE 2). An Ordnance Survey sketch plan dated 1958 shows the bank on the northern side surviving to a maximum of 9.0m wide and 1.0m high, with the accompanying external ditch described as slight with a maximum depth of 0.1m.

The earliest recorded archaeological activity at Skelmore Heads, probably a small-scale investigation, was carried out by the North Lonsdale Field Club in 1927/8. However, the results of this episode were never published and virtually nothing is known of their discoveries (Fell in Powell 1963, 4).

The enclosure was examined on three occasions between 1957 and 1960 by the Department of Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Liverpool, who also excavated the long barrow (Powell 1963). Excavation of the enclosure focused on the extant earthworks along the northern side, including what appeared to be an original entrance, and a number of areas within the circuit (Figure 2).

The northern bank was found to be of simple dump construction, between 3.7m and 4.3m wide and was separated from the ditch by a narrow berm; the U-shaped ditch was between 2.8m and 3.4m wide by roughly 1.0m deep, and appeared to have been recut in places. Large boulders in the bottom of the ditch were interpreted as infilling resulting from the collapse of the bank, possibly not long after construction (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 8). No artefacts were found other than some small fragments of bone which were thought to be later intrusions. An entrance on the northern side was confirmed as an original feature, with two ditch terminals separated by a 2.1m wide causeway. A corresponding gap in the bank was noted, but its original form was difficult to reconstruct since extensive robbing had taken place (*ibid*, 10).

In the sections cut across the bank and ditch a number of small conical hollows were identified, cut into the limestone; these measured on average 20.3cm in diameter by between 25.4cm and 35.6cm deep. Some of these were interpreted as post-holes, since they appeared to contain small blocking stones and a light soil "*best interpreted as decayed wood from a post*" (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 12). These hollows appear to have skirted the edges of the bank, an observation taken to indicate the presence of some kind of retaining framework and an entrance structure. However, there appear to have been difficulties in distinguishing post-holes from naturally occurring solution holes, a problem which has been perpetuated by the inclusion of all of them on the excavation plans and sections. It should

also be noted that the apparent skirting of the edges of the bank by these hollows may be due to the fact that they only occur where the ground was not protected by the presence of the bank. Thus while an entrance structure and retaining framework for the bank may have existed, the available evidence is inconclusive.

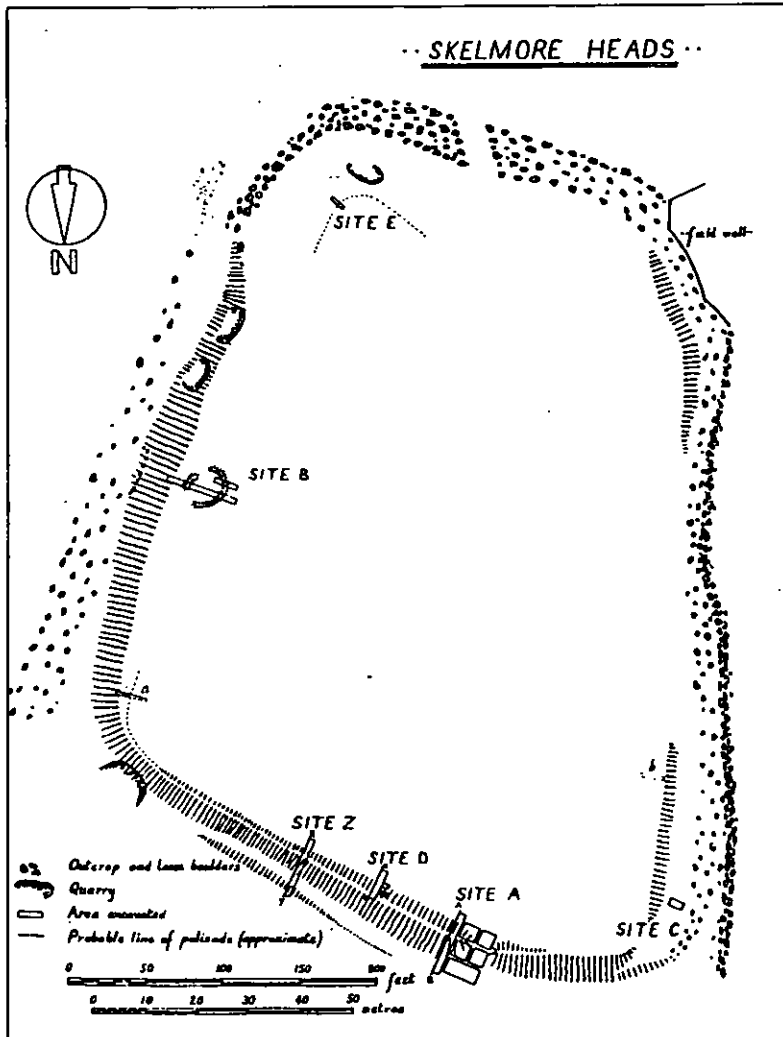


Figure 2:  
Skelmore Heads  
showing the location  
of Powell's  
excavation trenches  
(Powell 1963, 5)

Within the south-eastern corner of the enclosure a long narrow, shallow depression, resembling a cattle or sheep path, was observed running roughly parallel with the enclosure. A short cutting across this revealed a palisade trench, rectangular in section and measuring 45.7cm wide by at least 20.3cm deep (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 17). Corcoran mentions that this palisade trench was visible elsewhere on the hilltop, and he discusses the presence of a palisade outside the bank to the north, but it is not clear which of these refers to the palisade trench and which to the postulated retaining framework.

An elongated hollow midway along the enclosure's eastern side was assumed to be a hut circle and was excavated accordingly. The centre of the hollow was loosely packed with water-worn pebbles which contrasted with the natural limestone; a barbed and tanged

arrowhead and some modern potsherds were recovered from the topsoil (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 16). The feature was interpreted as a disused dew-pond, although the reasoning behind this conclusion is not fully explained.

Corcoran concluded that the various features represented a two-phase enclosure. The first phase consisted of a palisaded enclosure covering much of the hilltop, and was interpreted as a stock enclosure. Following this a bank and ditch was constructed along the northern side of the hill, effectively forming an enclosure with the naturally steep and rocky scarps to the east, south and west; this later phase is interpreted as a hillfort, since the earthworks are "*appropriate only in the context of human warfare*" (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 18). A Late Iron Age date is postulated for the second phase hillfort, by analogy with other (unnamed) sites in northern England and southern Scotland; Corcoran does not propose a date for the palisaded enclosure, though there are hints that he favours a Late Bronze Age one (*ibid*, 20).

In contrast to Corcoran's dating of the enclosure, there is considerable circumstantial evidence for Neolithic and Bronze Age activity in the immediate locality. Four roughed-out stone axeheads (probably Group VI - Great Langdale/Scafell Pike) were discovered in 1959, 20 yards from the north-western corner of the enclosure, deposited in a crevice between two stepped limestone boulders (Powell 1963, 27-30; NMR Number SD 27 NE 46). A fifth axehead, similar to those described above, was ploughed up in 1956 0.5km north of the enclosure (NMR Number SD 27 NE 47), and yet another was discovered in 1906, 400m to the west (NMR Number SD 27 NE 27). In addition, six bronze socketed axes were found together in 1902 in a fissure between two blocks of limestone during quarrying (NMR Number SD 27 NE 29); all are of 'Sompting' type (or variants thereof), a form generally considered to be late Bronze Age. Both saddle and rotary querns were found at Skelmore Heads (Fell in Powell 1963, 3). In addition to the small finds from the area, there is a wide scatter of sites in the Urswick-Ulverston area, ranging from the Neolithic to the Early Iron Age or later (*ibid*, 3).

### The Long Barrow

Situated on a slight terrace below the northern side of the enclosure, the barrow has been subject to at least two episodes of excavation. Along with the enclosure it "*received the attentions*" of the North Lonsdale Field Club in 1927/8 (Fell in Powell 1963, 4). As with the enclosure, no adequate report appears to have been forthcoming, though Powell does suggest that "*digging was undertaken in the mound some thirty years ago when finds of bone and pottery were made*" (Powell 1963, 21). In the absence of written records and finds, it is assumed that these comments refer to the same episode of investigation.

Rather more controlled excavation was undertaken in 1957 in parallel with that on the enclosure (Powell 1963, 20-6). Prior to excavation, the monument appeared as a low mound 18.3m long east-west by 10.7m wide. Two large stone uprights projected from the top of the mound close to its eastern end, and the area between them had been disturbed; there were also indications that other parts of the mound had been quarried for stone.

The excavation demonstrated that the mound comprised stones and boulders of varying size mixed with earth, resting directly on the old ground surface. No kerb was observed, though this may have been destroyed by quarrying; equally no flanking ditches were identified. Towards the western end of the mound, two further upright stones were discovered; with the two at the eastern end, these formed a roughly straight line (though irregularly spaced), the orientation of which differed slightly from that of the mound. All four uprights appear to have been placed into sockets dug into the old ground surface. No structural features which could be interpreted as a forecourt, facade or chamber were observed. No artefacts were located, and nor were there any traces of human remains, though the disturbance between the two eastern uprights, if correctly identified as the site of the 1927/8 investigation, may have been the location of the bones and pottery thought to have been discovered.





### 3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

For words in bold in the text, please refer to Figure 3.

The enclosure at Skelmore Heads is situated on top of a hill with steep sides to the south, east and west; 150m north of the entrance to the enclosure, on gently sloping ground, is situated the long barrow. The remains of a limekiln and associated structures lie 80m north-east of the enclosure.

#### The enclosure

The enclosed area measures a maximum of 143m north to south by 98m transversely (1.7ha; 4.2 acres) and defines a rectilinear space with rounded corners. The northern side, and the northern ends of the eastern and western sides, are defined by a scarp with a maximum height of 2.0m. In places this scarp is topped with a bank measuring at best 2.0m wide by 0.3m high; the bank is best preserved along the northern side, although sections do survive along the eastern side. A narrow external ledge, between 2.0m and 4.5m wide, survives along the northern side and part of the eastern side, almost certainly the silted remains of the ditch discovered during excavation by Powell (1963). The rest of the enclosure is defined by steep natural scarps mixed with boulders and outcrops of limestone: there is no evidence that a bank ever existed here. There is slight evidence for ditch segmentation, though this is not surveyable.

Towards the western end of the northern bank is a simple gap, measuring 5.0m wide; this is the entrance excavated by Powell in 1957 (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 10-11) which had a corresponding causeway across the ditch. At its western end the bank terminates and only a single scarp turns to the south. Beneath it, the slope is interrupted by a platform measuring 31.5m by 4.2m. Another platform occurs within the north-eastern corner of the enclosure, defined in part by a shallow sinuous scarp which merges into the natural fall of the ground towards the west. This platform is wider to the north than the east: 12.5m compared to 4.0m.

Mid-way along the eastern side of the enclosure is a small roughly circular hollow measuring 5.2m by 4.8m, and defined by a low bank, with a small mound to the east. This the feature excavated in 1957/9 and interpreted as a dewpond (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 16).

Within the enclosure, immediately west of the entrance, are two short banks measuring on average 20.0m by 4.0m by 0.4m high, almost parallel with the enclosure bank; these have been interpreted as the remains of ploughing (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 6), though there is little evidence for such a conclusion.

Along the eastern side of the enclosure, 2.0m from the top of the natural slope, are three separate but roughly aligned stretches of a shallow linear depression, 18.8m, 13.0m and 7.2m long respectively, and 0.2m wide by 0.1m deep. It resembled an animal track, but was excavated by Powell in 1957/9 and interpreted as a palisade trench (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 16-17). There was no evidence for this feature close to the northeast corner of the enclosure, where it was noted in 1957/9 (*ibid*, Figure 2)

Much of the area to the north of the enclosure is covered in a limestone boulder field lying on top of the limestone outcrop; Corcoran described this natural feature as “*offering an almost natural chevaux de frise*” (Corcoran in Powell 1963, 6), and this can be most clearly seen on the aerial photographs (see Figure 4).



Figure 4:  
Aerial photograph  
showing the enclosure  
and its setting, the  
cultivation remains  
and the natural  
terracing (NMR AP:  
SD 2775/12)

#### The long barrow

The barrow survives as a low, roughly oval mound measuring 20.0m by 10.0m; it is 0.9m high close to its eastern end and just 0.3m high at its western end. The northern side appears artificially straight, presumably due to disturbance during the construction of the field wall which runs alongside. Two uprights close to the eastern end of the mound measure 0.3m by 0.3m by 0.9m high and 0.8m by 0.4m by 1.0m high respectively; a slight scarp behind the westernmost probably marks the location of the supposed 1927/8 investigation by the North Lonsdale Field Club (Powell 1963, 21).

#### The trig point

A low, roughly circular mound, 9.0m by 8.0m by 0.2m high, situated towards the centre of the western side of the enclosure, at the highest point on the hill, marks the site of an Ordnance Survey trig pillar, visible on the 1st Edition map (Ordnance Survey 1890). The ground here is very uneven, and it is probable that the shape of the mound was altered during removal of the trig pillar, or that it was originally a different shape.

### The limekiln

Only the top of the open-top combustion chamber and the single draw hole of the limekiln are visible; both are almost totally blocked. The base of the kiln is formed from a section of limestone outcrop, while a stone mound surrounds the combustion chamber above; a re-used railway sleeper braces the top of the draw hole and supports the overlying mound. The open-top is lined with brick and now infilled with small rounded pebbles of imported stone; a ladder protrudes from the open-top.

Immediately northeast of the kiln are ruined walls defining a roughly rectangular area, 10.0m by 6.0m, with a 2.2m wide entrance directly in front of the kiln. Whether the walls were part of a roofed structure or merely formed a forecourt for the limekiln is not apparent, but their direct relationship with it is certain.

In the area surrounding the limekiln a number of pieces of ironwork lay scattered about. These included a wooden and iron framework and what looks like a small rail tub, similar to larger ones used to simplify the loading of limestone into a kiln pot at Cowdale, near Buxton, Derbyshire (Williams 1989, 32).

Leading almost directly south from the top of the limekiln to the north-eastern corner of the enclosure, are the remains of a bank, possibly a cart track, with a narrow depression along its centre. Measuring 36.7m long by a maximum of 3.8m wide and 0.6m high, this bank terminates short of a shallow depression, part of which has been infilled with small rounded pebbles, similar to those filling the combustion chamber of the limekiln. Aerial photographs confirm that the hollow is the remains of a small quarry, measuring roughly 18.0m by 8.0m (NMR APs OS/66/49/230-1, and see Figure 4). These photographs, dated 1966, demonstrate that the infilling of the quarry, and presumably the limekiln given the similarity of the stones, occurred after this date.

### Cultivation remains

Between the northern bank of the enclosure and the field wall at the northern limit of the surveyed area are the earthworks of a redundant field, some 130.0m long by 37.0m wide; the field is shown on the OS 1st Edition map (Ordnance Survey 1890). The eastern and western sides of the field are defined by simple scarps no more than 0.3m high; the eastern one contains a single orthostat (0.3m by 0.4m) 70m from its northern end, and a number of earthfast boulders are still present along its line, presumably the remains of a wall. The western side of the field is less well defined, and in places it is too slight to be accurately surveyed, though its line can still be traced on the ground. The southern side of the field is defined by a bank 5.0m wide by 0.3m high, with traces of an outer ditch 3.2m wide by 0.1m deep. The area originally enclosed is totally devoid of boulders, suggesting deliberate clearance since the boulder field would originally have extended across this area. The only feature within the field is a large, irregular shallow scoop measuring 40.0m by 15.0m, possibly the remains of a quarry.

Flanking the northern end of the field are two areas of ridge and furrow cultivation. The smaller area to the west comprises very narrow straight sections, 4.0m wide by 0.1m high, while that to the east is broader and slightly less regular, 5.0m wide by 0.3m high. Aerial photographs clearly show the extent of this cultivation and its very regular form (NMR AP: SD 2775/5, and see Figure 4), and also that the eastern section continued across the field discussed above.

In addition to the archaeological features shown on the main survey plan (Figure 3), the fields to the south and west of the enclosure were investigated, though not included on the main plan. The fields, both naturally terraced, with some outcrops of limestone along the terraces, were extensively cultivated. All of the level areas contain fragments of ridge and furrow cultivation, in varying conditions, most of it apparently fairly narrow and straight. Aerial photographs clearly show the ridge and furrow, which is in extremely poor condition (NMR APs: OS/66/49/230-1).

### Quarrying

In addition to the small quarry associated with the limekiln, there are several other areas of limestone extraction. A large open quarry, measuring roughly 40.0m by 30.0 by a maximum of 2.5m deep, and situated north of the enclosure is shown on the 1890 OS 1st Edition map, annotated "Old Quarry", suggesting that it may have gone out of use by that date (Ordnance Survey 1890). Along the eastern and southern side of the enclosure, there are a number of small quarries, presumably the results of very localised extraction, possibly for use in the building and mending of field walls.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Although no comprehensive archaeological assessment of the area around Skelmore Heads appears to have been carried out, the evidence for prehistoric activity in the locality is substantial. This takes the form of monuments of all periods: Neolithic long barrows and stone circles, Bronze Age round barrows and Iron Age and Romano-British settlement sites are all present within a 5km radius around Skelmore Heads, and stray finds from all periods have been recorded; in the immediate locality, with Neolithic and Bronze Age finds predominating.

Corcoran (in Powell 1963, 17-9) concluded that the palisaded enclosure, probably erected for livestock or as a temporary defensive measure, encircled the entire hilltop and pre-dated the banked and ditched enclosure. The evidence for the palisade ditch encircling the entire hilltop is assumed rather than proven, and where it survives today it looks little more than a cattle track, although excavation showed it to be at least 20.3cm deep; it is not clear from the excavation report whether there were any areas where the palisade was overlain by the enclosure, and it is therefore possible that the two were contemporaneous.

Corcoran concluded that although neither enclosure could be dated on the material evidence recovered, analogy with other sites in northern England and southern Scotland suggests an Iron Age date for the second phase enclosure, and probably a Bronze Age date for the palisaded enclosure, the latter supported by the presence of a few abraded sherds showing similarities with *"that indeterminate but Bronze-Age-like ware from the palisade trenches at Huckhoe"* (in Powell 1963, 20).

The location of the site on a prominent hilltop providing extensive views is in keeping with a prehistoric date for its construction. The visibility of monuments in the landscape was important from the Neolithic onwards, but a more precise date for the enclosure is less easy to establish. It bears some similarity with the possible Neolithic enclosure at Howe Robin, Crosby Ravensworth, Cumbria (NMR Number NY 61 SW 75), in its use of the natural limestone outcrops and the slight rampart of simple dump construction, while its size and shape is more in keeping with an Iron Age date.

The bank and ditch is described as being *"strong"*, and therefore defensive. The bank measures at best 2.0m high, and mostly less than 1.2m; the ditch, as excavated, was a maximum of 1.3m deep. It is debateable whether this can be construed as defensive in the sense of hillforts. Figure 5 shows two views of the hilltop, from the north-east and south-west, demonstrating the lack of defensive potential of the enclosure. There is no conclusive evidence that the enclosure was constructed for defensive purposes. The northern rampart is relatively slight, and the southern, gentler, slope could not be easily defended: the rocks there, while forming an effective visual barrier do not form a physical one. The eastern and western slopes which define two sides of the enclosure are steeper, though again, the barrier is less physical and more visual or symbolic. An Iron Age date for the enclosure is not ruled out, but further evidence is required in order to prove it.

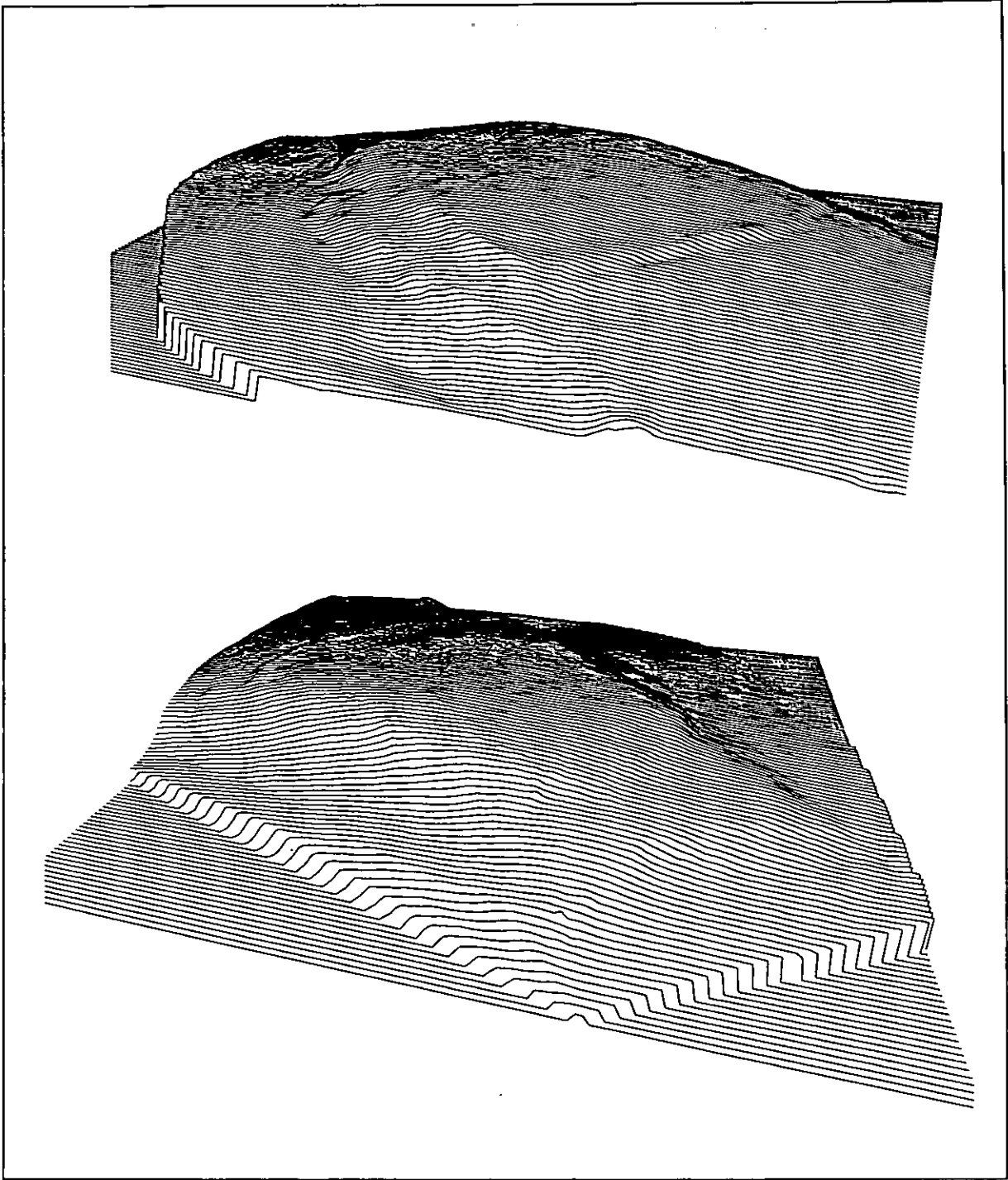
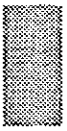


Figure 5: Digital terrain models showing the enclosure from the north-east (above) and south-west (below), illustrating the general topography in the immediate vicinity

One factor which might support a Neolithic date for the enclosure is the location of the long barrow close to its entrance. Excavation has demonstrated that the long barrow almost certainly faced east (Powell 1963, 25), resulting in its being passed closely by any visitor to or from the enclosure. While this could of course be a deliberate post-Neolithic attempt to incorporate an earlier monument into the landscape surrounding the enclosure, a contemporary explanation is more likely.

The long barrow is one of only six in Cumbria, and the only known example from the Furness area (Kinnes 1992, 16). Like other long barrows in the north of England, it is roughly trapezoidal in shape and faces east. It is at the small end of the size range, measuring just 20m long, compared with that at Bellshiel Law, Northumberland (the largest example in Cumbria and Northumberland) which measures 112m long; it is also relatively low-lying, at a height of just 82m above OD compared with the majority which are found above the 200m contour (Masters 1984, 54). It is one of only three excavated examples in the north (along with Bellshiel Law and Raiset Pike, Cumbria), and demonstrates the need for further investigation of this monument type in the region.

Powell (1972) and Kinnes (1992), among others, have raised the possibility that some or all of the stone uprights may have defined some form of mortuary area at the eastern end of the barrow. Given the condition of the barrow, and the fact that Powell's excavation did not find any conclusive proof of this, further work may be no more successful in answering this question.

There is no information pertaining to the limekiln at Skelmore Heads, and dating the activity there is difficult. It is not shown on the OS 1st Edition map (Ordnance Survey 1890), though industrial features of this scale were often deliberately omitted (Keith Falconer, *pers comm*); it is typical of limekilns of that date. Limekilns were preferably built of stone which formed a good insulator, and brick was commonly used for their lining (Williams 1989, 13-4). The internal structure of the kiln could not be assessed due to the condition of the monument, but it is likely that it was a fairly typical intermittent flare kiln, which used wood or peat for fuel, both of which were reasonably easily available given the amount of woodland which previously existed here (Williams 1989, 11; Ordnance Survey 1890). The ramp leading up to the small, now infilled, quarry may have been a simple cart ramp, no evidence for rails being evident. Although there was ample supply of limestone on the ground surface, higher quality quarried rock may have been needed to supply some of the elements required during the firing process, hence the presence of quarrying (Keith Falconer, *pers comm*).



## 5. SURVEY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The archaeological survey of Skelmore Heads was carried out by Moraig Brown and Colin Lofthouse of the RCHME. Control for the survey was supplied using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM. Data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted via computer using Trimap software on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. Archaeological detail was surveyed at 1:1000 scale with tapes using conventional graphical methods. Topographical survey was carried out using a Leica Global Positioning Satellite System 200 by Moraig Brown, Colin Lofthouse, Bernard Thomason and Amy Lax of the RCHME. The report was researched and written by Moraig Brown, with assistance from Martyn Barber, and edited by Peter Topping.

The site archive (NMR Number SD 27 NE 2) and a copy of this report have been deposited in the archive of the RCHME at the National Monuments Record Centre, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ, to where further enquiries should be directed.

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