

ART. XI – *The Roundclose: A recessed platform in Eskdale*
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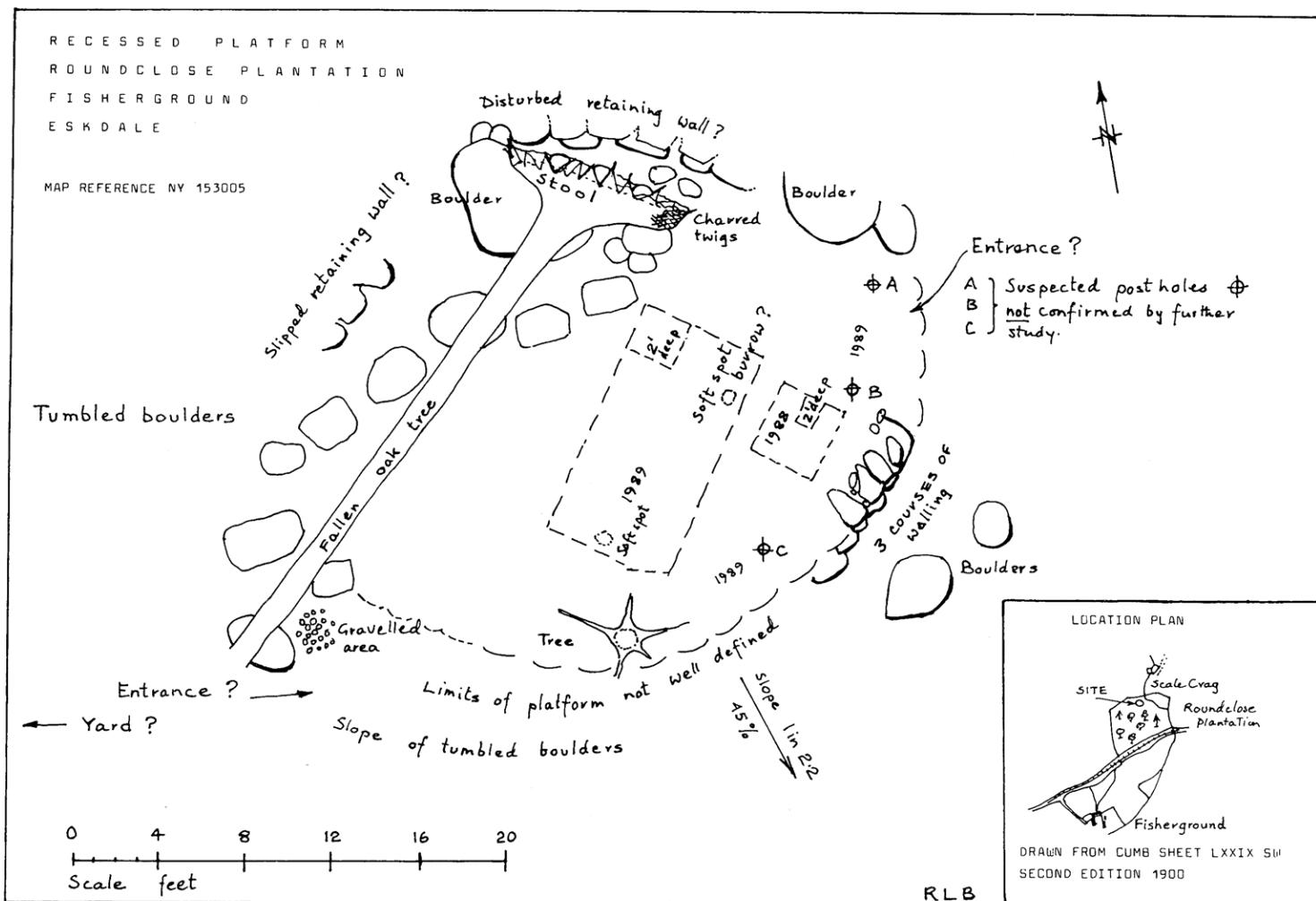
THE examination of a recessed platform in Eskdale reported here, resulted from a meeting with Miss Elizabeth B. Rennie at the Congress of Independent Archaeologists held at Selwyn College Cambridge in September 1987. Miss Rennie had prepared an exposition of some of the results of her investigation in Scotland of features which are best described as recessed platforms. She asked me if I had seen comparable features in Cumbria and I was unable to give an answer. I made enquiries and was told they were quite common in certain areas, and were more or less disregarded by the more serious-minded archaeologists, as being no more than "charcoal-pitsteads." I thought I had done all that was required of me by putting her in touch with the County Archaeologist and our President as there seemed to be little prospect of my doing anything in the field. However, events were in train which gave me a base for operations in Eskdale, namely the induction and institution of my son-in-law as Vicar on 19 October.

Preliminary Fieldwork

It was essential for me to see for myself what these "pitsteads" looked like. I had the record maps of the Society's Prehistoric Committee on which, inter alia, the positions of many "pitsteads" had been marked. In January 1988 I visited two sites shown on the map on the hillside south-east of Whahouse Bridge on rough ground adjoining Dodknott Gill. I found my first impression of these areas as suitable places for the making of charcoal unconvincing. However, a later visit to the woodland on the other side of the Gill found three examples of circular, or perhaps more correctly oval, cut-and-fill platforms. None had been recorded so the question arises: how many more are there yet to be found? Moreover, these were much more suitable places for charcoal burning than the boulder-strewn sites previously examined. Mr Ian Hall of Fisherground, with whom I was discussing the problem of distinguishing between a simple habitation platform and a charcoal-burning place, volunteered the information that he had one on his farm and I would be welcome to inspect it and excavate if I thought it a suitable subject for research. I gladly accepted this offer.

The Making of Charcoal

Dr J.E. Satchell gives an account of the making of charcoal in the second part of his article *A History of Meathop Woods* (*CW2*, lxxxiv, 94f.) which is pertinent to any discussion of the process and its possible connection with all or any of the recessed platforms which have been listed as "charcoal pitsteads". The procedure described is



essentially the traditional turf-covered wood-stack. Charcoal can be made in several ways which enable close control of air intake and the temperature of combustion. It may be made in a pit, but there is no mention of one in this account. Pitstead simply means "a place where there is, or was, a pit." The writer uses the word "sammel" which I think could be important in this context. I have heard it from the lips of Cumberland coalminers where it seems to describe a particular type of geological material met when working a seam. It is in the dictionary as "samel – of brick or tile imperfectly baked, soft from being outermost in the kiln, perhaps from OE *"samæld* half burnt." One can imagine the effect of controlled heat on the sieved soil and appreciate that such material, so carefully prepared would, after each burn, be husbanded and used for the next and many more burns. The certain identification of a deposit of sammel on or around any platform, whatever its original purpose, would point to its use in charcoal burning: its absence would be a qualified contra-indication. I could not accept without question the idea that all platforms were "charcoal pitsteads" because so many were, to my eye, in unsuitable situations, that is to say, no one in his right mind would select difficult steep ground on which to build several platforms together when level ground with soil and good turf for sealing the heap was available not far away. Indeed, what practical man would choose to drag cut timber uphill?

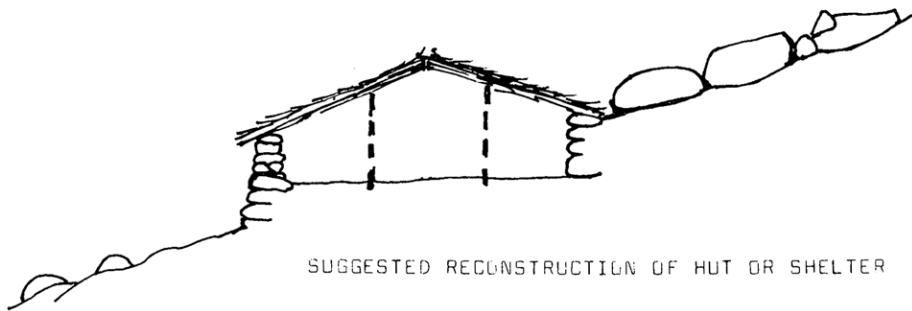
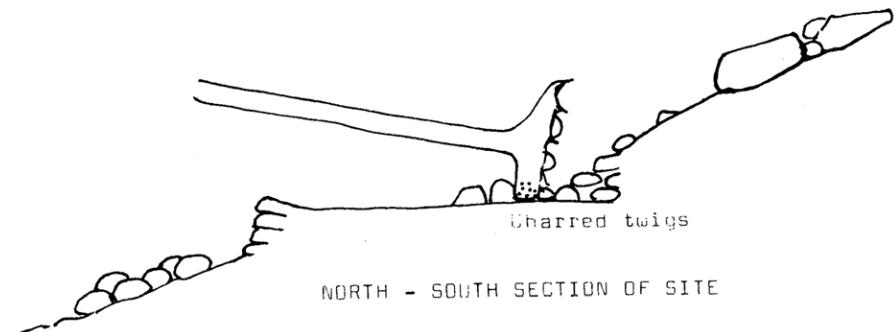
The Site and its Features

My first approach to the site was with Mr Hall of Fisherground. We crossed the Ravenglass railway and ascended the fell track then made for the higher end of Roundclose Plantation where the platform lay among boulders and trees on a steep slope. The grass-covered level space was quite well defined, a wind-felled oak lay at an angle across its westerly edge, its top supported by other trees kept the trunk clear of the ground, but the stool with a mass of roots, boulders, and soil, lay within the outline of the platform. It was clear the fall of the tree had brought down part of what may have been a retaining wall on the uphill side. The description of these places as simply platforms, or recessed platforms on steep slopes, provides neutral ground in arguments over their original purposes. As already stated this site is in Roundclose Plantation (NY 151009) at a height of about 180 feet O.D., that is, about 80 feet above the floor of the Dale at Fisherground. The average slope of the hillside calculated from the contours is 1 in 3.2. Immediately below the platform, which has a slight east of south aspect, the slope measured by Abney level is 1 in 2.2. The hillside is very uneven; the outstanding features being *roches moutonées*, fallen granite slabs and blocks, the near vertical face of Scale Crag and numberless rounded boulders of all sizes. There is no obvious source of water, but in certain areas there are traces of drainage ditches among the boulders. The trees include oak, rowan, birch and hazel. The floor of the platform supports Wood Meadow Grass and Sweet Vernal. Ferns are common but have not invaded the grassy area. No tracks can be seen associated with the platform. Immediately west of it is a level area of natural rock which might be seen as a sort of annexe.

The main reason for deciding to investigate was that this was a solitary example unlikely to have been a unit in an ancient settlement or part of the charcoal industry and therefore merited attention on both counts. I had permission to dig and a free hand to do

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so whenever it suited me. This had its advantages, there was no pressure to organise a large excavation, to be completed by a certain date, recorded, and back-filled, the work could be done in stages. In the event this proved to be the right way to set about the task because the long interval between the stages of the investigation gave me ample time to ponder the implications of what had already been achieved and to decide priorities for the next stage.

The First Investigation 29–31 July 1988

The first task was to strip the thick growth of moss from all the stones at the edge of the platform. This was easy as it peeled off like a judge's wig. Boulders lying on the platform which must have come from a higher level were cleaned and rolled aside to expose the surface below which proved they were recent falls, a deduction confirmed by Mr Hall who told me the oak had been brought down by the "fag-end" of hurricane Charlie three years before (1985) and the boulders with it. We now had a better appreciation of the platform, but no clearly defined retaining wall could be made out on the downslope side, only a spread of tumbled boulders. A short length of walling survived on the east side. A pit was opened nearby for soil and stratification studies. Samples were taken for study at home. The second and third days were spent in clearing features exposed and the damaged retaining wall behind the oak stool. Mr Alan James swept the area for me with a metal detector but got no bleep, hence no metal within the range of the equipment.

During all the clearance work we had kept an eye open for charcoal and half burnt wood, especially among the boulders on the downhill side where it would have collected if it had been swept off a burning floor. We found only a few pieces not much bigger than pencil stubs. We found the surface of the platform, the floor, remarkably smooth and level, roughly circular and about 24 feet in diameter. Gravel, in fact broken up granite, at the south-west "corner" looked like part of a path from a doorway to the level area previously noted. The amount of tumbled stone on the downslope might suggest the south limit of the platform once had rough walling about 3 feet high.

The soil hereabout is a pale-brown sandy clay loam with grains of the constituents of the local granite in it. This is the material of the platform to a depth of more than 2 feet where we tested it. On this had developed a thin very dark humus horizon with some humus staining below, this, in contrast to the mature profile above the back wall which looks to me like a soil developed under heather moor, very black and peaty. I can understand how the charcoal burning idea could gain support.

The Second Investigation 16–17 April 1989

Our immediate aim was to remove turf from part of the interior and hope to find occupation debris and post-holes. We found it impossible to display a surface and although we found two soft places which suggested post-holes I was not convinced. I realised too late that it was a mistake to remove turf as if we were dealing with the usual accumulations of centuries – we removed the trodden surface with the root mat. The

problem of identifying and displaying a floor under these circumstances arises from the fact that, in the absence of protective deposits, the roots of colonising vegetation penetrate the trodden surface and expand it by additional humus to a black mat up to an inch thick with only a very thin transition to the unweathered material below. Consequently turf cannot be removed in the normal way without taking the occupation layer with it.

The Final Investigation 30 September 1989

The date for the last act was fixed by liaison with Mr Tom Clare and members of the Historic Society interested in Industrial Archaeology. I had reviewed my notes and considered my impressions of the feature and its surroundings. This was not a place where charcoal had been made; it must therefore have been a habitation site. I planned a determined attempt to find post-holes among the stones along the line of the outer wall as Miss Rennie had suggested. At first it looked as if we had found four, about 40 inches apart, but careful study showed them to have been made by burrowing animals. From my examination of the turf samples I had taken home I had a new idea to try out. The floor had new grass on it; we tore it off by hand, concentrating on areas not previously disturbed, and then we found we could pull back the grass-root mat, like rolling up an old carpet. There for the first time was revealed a true surface, dark grey-brown and mottled, rather patchy, that is blackish areas merging with brownish areas and iron staining in the paler colours. We found a little charcoal, twigs of hazel and birch – “pencil stubs”.

Surveying: The Final Stages

Negative evidence has its place even if we cannot be absolutely certain that there were no post-holes among the stones of the platform edge. It raises the question: why, in an area of abundant stones of manageable size, should anyone build a hut partly walled with upright poles and wattle infill? Can we reconstruct a hut walled in stone the remains of which would have been seen as a “round close” when the plantation was first made? Was the walling thrown down at that time? How was such a hut roofed? Questions like these were in my mind when I returned to the wood on 8 November to take measurements and levels for the record plan. It was then I discovered that the topmost stones of the surviving piece of retaining wall were six inches higher than the level of the floor. The floor itself was perfectly level north to south and east to west. I went over the whole site very carefully with trowel and brush making notes and taking photographs, then I turned my attention to the tree – had it anything to tell us? Exactly where had it been growing and what did it bring down when it fell?

The tree had been growing within about four feet upslope of the edge of the retaining wall, the scar could be seen in the soil and exposed rock. In its fall it brought down a large granite block which could have formed part of the walling, but which might not necessarily have been placed there, and smaller boulders which could have been part of the construction. These were the ones we rolled over to see if they were recent falls

before we removed them when work started. It is difficult to decide whether the tree brought down walling or whether collapse of walling brought down tree. In any event the most significant discovery came from the earth of the upended stool. The root mass bound together reddish-brown soil and stones. Where the stool rested on the platform the soil mass contained abundant fragments of charred twigs, material like that scattered over the tumble of stones on the south edge. Now, if there had indeed been a retaining wall about five feet high, and the hut had been roofed with poles and thatched with hazel wands and birch twigs, this is exactly where its eaves would have rested. If it caught fire, this is where we ought to find charcoal – the charred twigs.

Summary and Conclusions

Bearing in mind that the first purpose of the investigation was to do sufficient work to determine the nature of the site and to obtain some evidence as to its function rather than complete excavation, an aim difficult to achieve because of the fallen tree, a more or less clear picture emerges of the sort of structure there may have been on the hillside. The idea that this was just another place where charcoal was made can be dismissed. Its situation and features suggest it was a nearly circular refuge or hut, walled all round on a cut-and-fill platform, and roofed with poles and birch brushwood. If the plantation took its name from this site then at that time it must have been walled for it to have been described as a "round close". "Pitsteads" are not walled. No datable objects were found. The absence of any sort of deposit on the floor, soil, "sammel", burnt clay or peaty material does not indicate any great age. It may well have been associated with forest management and the raising of the fell walls. One can imagine the workmen firing the thatch and tumbling the walls when their task was finished.

Note

This short report is an abridged version of a comprehensive account specially produced for and presented to Mr Ian Hall of Fisherground as a token of my appreciation of his interest and help in the work. A copy has been deposited with the County Archaeologist at Kendal. This fuller report comprises 11 pages of text, 14 photographs in colour, 8 extracts with sketches from the excavation record and the 2 drawings here reproduced. I have exchanged notes and photographs with Miss Rennie and I look forward to the publication of her first class work on Scottish platforms which I am sure will have relevance to the study of similar platforms in Cumbria and elsewhere.

Appendix: Other Platforms

The three platforms in the two parcels of woodland immediately west of Dodknott Gill are comparable in siting and dimensions, they lie at NY 2680058, NY 20600062 and NY 20550057. The last is the better defined, visible from the public footpath below as a green hillock among the trees. The slope measured here is 1 in 4. All three are

cut-and-fill platforms of roughly the same size, say 24 feet "back to front" on the slope and 30 feet left to right on the contour. Originally they may have been circular. Soil creep down the slope would reduce one dimension and possible entrances and paths at the sides, that is on the contour, would extend the other. I looked at all three on the 9 June 1990 and give here my field notes on number three.

Dimensions: back to front 23 ft., left to right 27–30 ft. Probing suggests upslope retaining wall of granite blocks, three blocks 12 by 10 by 9 ins. approximately, may have fallen from it or have been recently brought to the site as seats because of a circle of small stones forming a picnic fire. Within the circle, covered with leaf litter, I found aluminium foil and melted plastic. The hearth and the larger stones rest on very dark-brown peat, consolidated leaf-mould; probing suggests an earth floor 8 ins. below at this point. Other trials found a gritty stony surface (cf. Roundclose). Three rabbit burrows at the outer edge of the platform (top of downslope side) penetrate the consolidated leaf-mould above the solid floor and run in level for a few feet. These resemble the "tunnels" at Roundclose first noted as soft spots in the search for post holes and rightly discounted.

Only excavation, especially of number three which should be relatively simple, can reveal structural details. No site appears to have tumbled stone on the downslope side as from a collapsed wall above floor level, and thus resemble many of Miss Rennie's examples where post-holes have been identified among the stones of the outer rim.