

# THE SIR WILLIAM HILL PREHISTORIC CAIRNFIELD, EYAM MOOR, DERBYSHIRE: EXCAVATIONS 2007–2008

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2000 a small cairn at the upper end of a prehistoric cairnfield on Sir William Hill high above Eyam was excavated (Wilson and Barnatt 2004). This lies within a moorland landscape rich in prehistoric settlement, agricultural and ritual remains (Barnatt 1986; 2000).

This 2000 excavation was a rescue exercise, as the cairn was starting to suffer badly from erosion because of traffic on the well-used public footpath that ran over and immediately adjacent to it. The findings were of exceptional interest, for not only was there a first phase agricultural clearance heap, but in a second phase there was ritual deposition in three pits under an enlargement to the cairn. The recovered finds from the pits included calcined bone, charcoal, three flint scrapers, Beaker sherds, a saddle quern and a chert block. Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age radiocarbon dates of 2130–1890 and 2140–1940 cal BC from material within the pits were obtained. When enlarged, the cairn also had eleven flint scrapers purposefully placed there.

Further excavations at the Sir William Hill cairnfield are reported here, this time with research as the primary objective and designed to place the earlier excavation more firmly in its local context. This new work was carried out in 2007 and 2008 after consultation with Jon Humble, the English Heritage Inspector, submission of a research design to the Secretary of State, and receipt of the necessary permission to excavate within the site, as it is a Scheduled Monument.

The two season programme of fieldwork was designed to investigate further the date and character of the Sir William Hill cairnfield and to place the new results within the debate on the character of prehistoric farming from the Neolithic to Iron Age in the Peak District (Ainsworth 2001; Barnatt 1996; 1999; 2000; 2008; Barnatt, Bevan and Edmonds 1995–2000; 2002; Edmonds and Seaborne 2001; Heath 2003; Kitchen 2000; 2001). The Sir William Hill cairnfield is particularly important because it is an example of a simple cluster of cairns and as such contrasts with areas which have significantly more extensive remains and clear evidence of field and cultivation plot boundaries, as for instance was excavated above Gardom's Edge, near Baslow (Barnatt, Bevan and Edmonds 1995–2000; 2002). It is also smaller in scale, at a higher altitude, with a less complicated layout and smaller range of features, and has produced early radiocarbon

dates. While the settlement and agricultural remains above Gardom's Edge may have similarly early origins they are difficult to demonstrate and much belongs to developed phases of activity which have been radiocarbon dated to the Later Bronze Age and Earlier Iron Age. In contrast, the previously excavated cairn, and perhaps the rest of the remains on Sir William Hill, are a thousand years earlier and agricultural exploitation of this high exposed spot may have been relatively short lived (although this last point is beyond proof).

### SIR WILLIAM HILL

The cairnfield (centred SK 21857830) lies on and beneath the eastern flank of this prominent ridge, the crest of which is at 429m OD and forms the highest part of the Eyam Moor block of gritstone moorland. Here is a discrete cluster of 12–17 small cairns on land between 390m and 405m OD (Fig. 1). The mound excavated in 2000 lies at the western end of the group on the highest land. With the exception of one possible small cairn, the rest of the features lie further east on somewhat lower ground and in two clusters, both occurring where the ground surface is naturally somewhat stony. When the site was first published (Wilson and Barnatt 2004), two potential house sites were also postulated. However, the most promising of these has now been investigated and shown to have clearance stone but no habitation evidence (Trench 2); they are now discounted and the excavated stone feature has been added to the list of clearance cairns.

### THE 2007–08 EXCAVATIONS

In the first season two trenches were opened (Trenches 1, 2), both dug to investigate stony features (Ashmore, Barnatt and Wilson 2007). Prior to starting to dig, one was obviously a small cairn; while the other had stone on a curving break of slope below a gently sloping terrace which was suggested tentatively to be the site of a circular building. Both are on the same small shelf, below the cairn excavated in 2000, and part way down the slope towards flatter land where there are further clearance features. In 2008 attention turned to the flatter land at the base of the slope and a single trench (Trench 3) was opened to investigate a stony feature located at the limit of the cairn-field, at its lower eastern end (Ashmore, Barnatt and Wilson 2008). A series of test pits was also cut in an adjacent area largely free of clearance features but where a lack of surface stone potentially meant that the land could also have been cultivated.

All three trenches and test pits were dug by hand with every stone concentration and small find individually recorded. All areas investigated had heavily podsolised soils. At the surface, heather and coarse grasses grow in a thin peaty soil beneath which there are sandy horizons, with some humic content in the upper parts above an iron pan. Below this the orange-brown soils soon shade imperceptibly into subsoil. There were different amounts of uncleared stone within the soils, all local millstone grit, reflecting both varying natural densities and the removal of stones in some areas by prehistoric farmers.

#### Trench 1

Before excavation it was clear that this cairn was a discrete heap of stones and it was interpreted provisionally as likely to be an agricultural clearance feature; this proved to be the case.

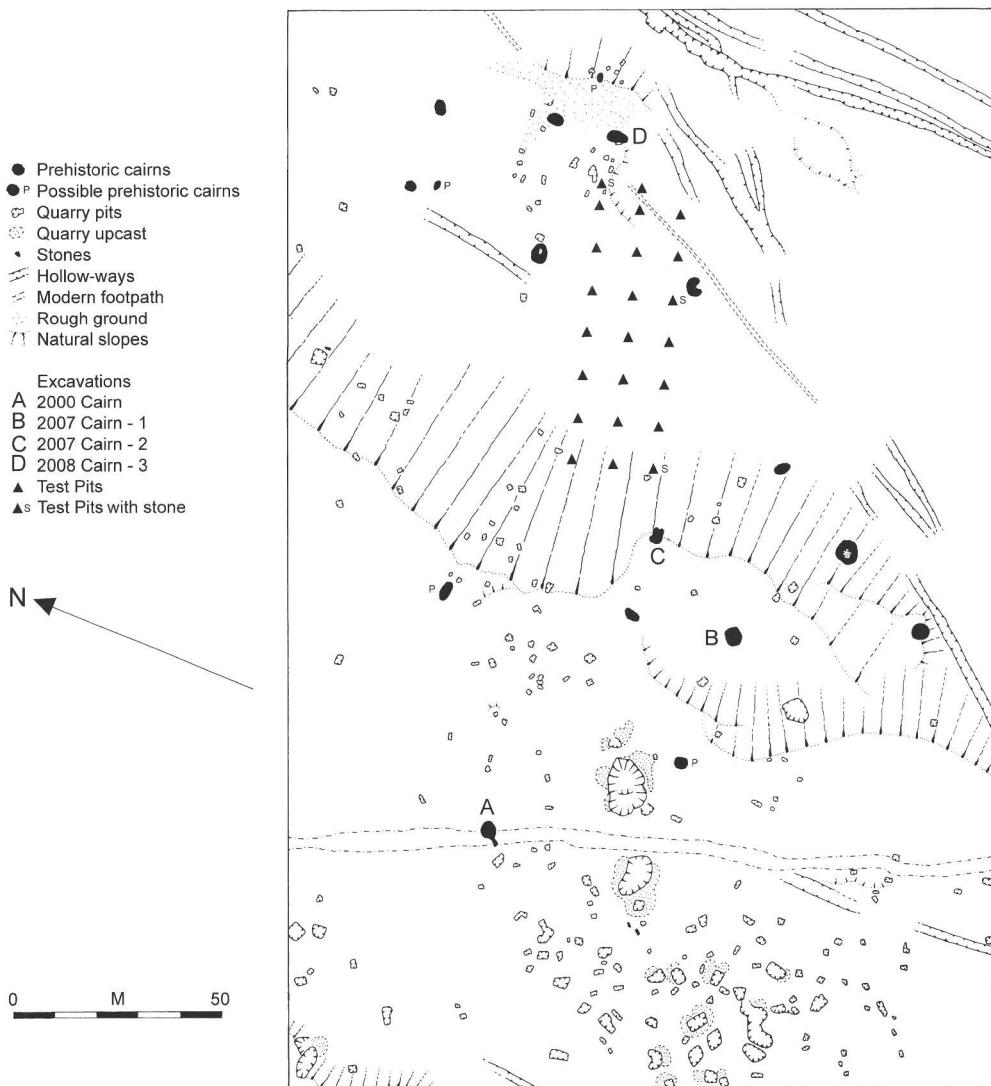


Fig. 1: Location of trenches and test pits dug in 2007–08.

The cairn was 3.5m across and about 0.3m high above the old ground surface (Fig. 2; Plates 1 and 2). The whole feature was removed during excavation in order to fully investigate its structure and to determine whether it covered deposits on the old ground surface or in pits cut into this; these did not exist.

On excavation it became clear that stones were piled at this particular spot during agricultural clearance, rather than elsewhere nearby, because it was where a cluster of naturally-placed stone blocks protruded from the prehistoric ground surface (these and other earthfasts are shown stippled on Fig. 2). This type of location was also chosen for clearance features investigated in Trenches 2 and 3.

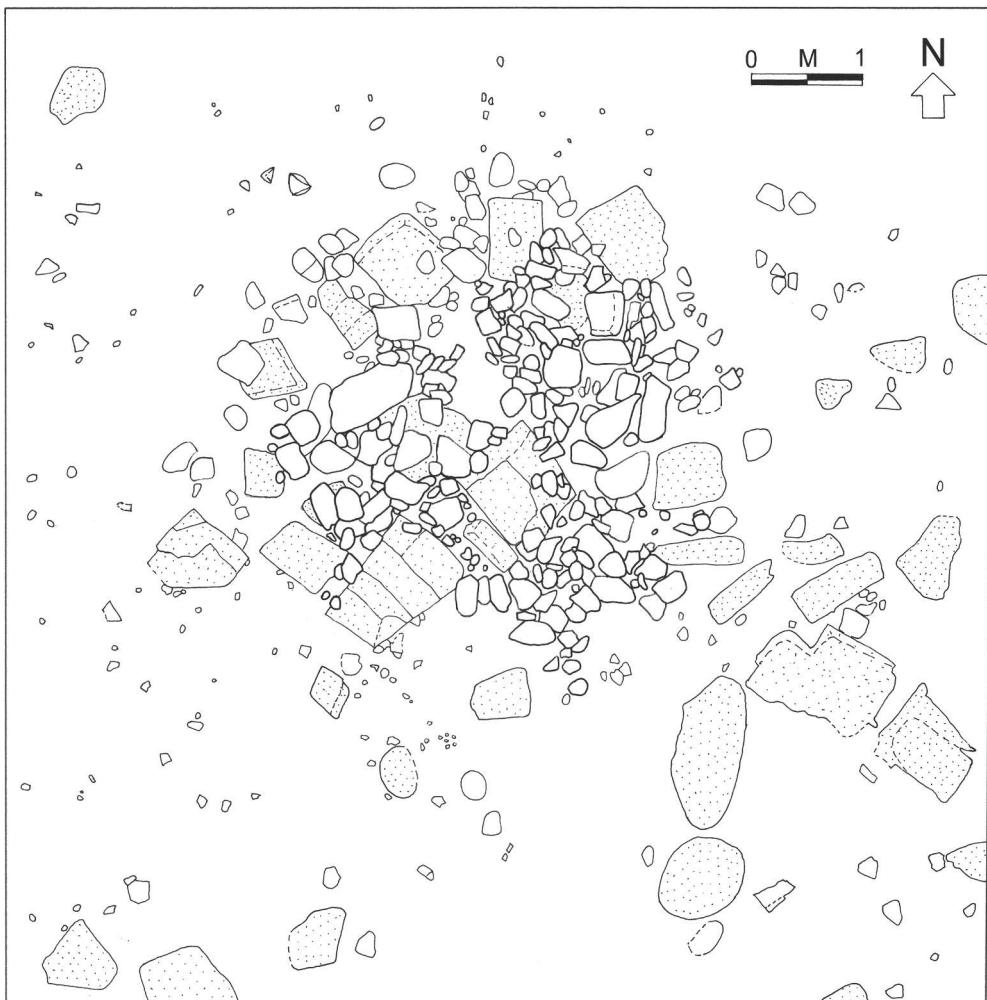


Fig. 2: Trench 1 after the overlying soils have been removed.

The group of naturally-placed stones under the cairn was interesting in that they formed a discrete concentration of relatively un-eroded large rectangular blocks, in a cluster which, while comprising separate stones, mostly retained a rectangular grid-like arrangement reflecting the natural pattern of bedrock joints. In all cases, the individual blocks rested on soil and smaller stones in the subsoil rather than still being attached to the bedrock below. Skewing of some individual lines of blocks, and movement or removal of individual blocks appears to have been the result of periglacial activity. While there was also naturally-occurring stone buried in the soils/subsoils surrounding the cairn, particularly to the south-east, this stood in strong contrast to the angular natural blocks under the cairn, as the boulders and smaller stones elsewhere were heavily rounded by erosion. This appears to have been primarily the result of

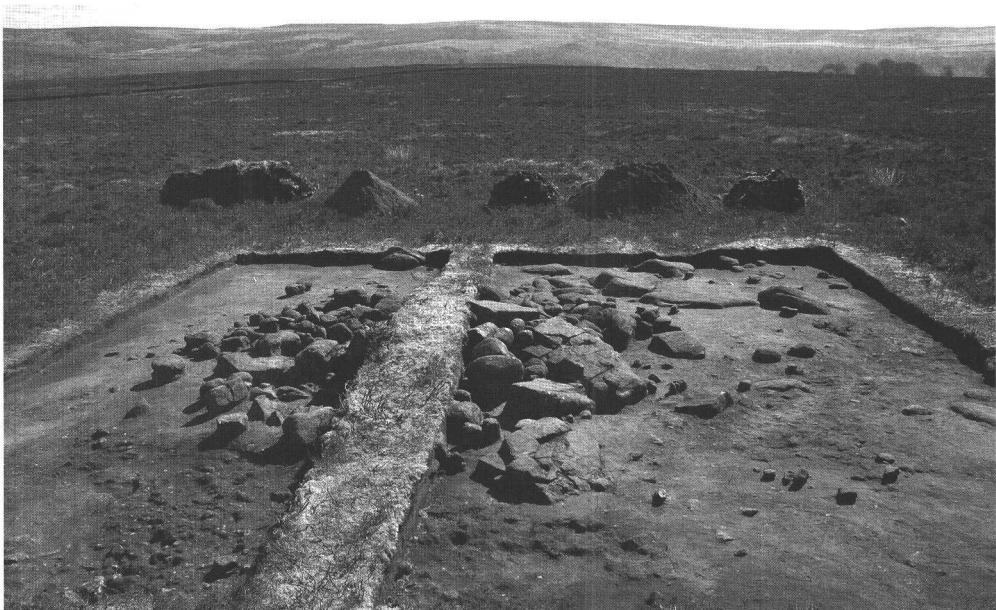


Plate 1: Trench 1 showing the clearance cairn surrounded by stone-free soils, except to the south-east (top right) where naturally placed stones may well have impeded cultivation.



Plate 2: Trench 1 after the cairn had been removed to fully reveal the naturally-placed stone blocks that had acted as the focal point for clearance.

differences in chemistry/drainage characteristics leading to rotting within the soil rather than of differential weathering at the land surface.

The cleared stone moved by prehistoric farmers to the outcrop was placed in a discrete cairn, with little in the way of tumble beyond. At only one to three stones thick, it had never been high enough to lead to significant spreading due to collapse. Most of the natural blocks were still visible as not enough clearance stone had been added to bury them entirely. Virtually all the added stones were rounded and of the same character as those still in the soils in the surrounding area rather than like the angular blocks they were placed upon, and each was small enough to have been relatively easily moved by one person. The exception was a single large block in the western part of the cairn, which had been rolled into a leaning position. This was one of the angular outcrop blocks, and must have lain originally a short way beyond the clearance heap. That this was moved indicates that stone removal took place before or during cultivation in the immediate vicinity of the cairn.

The soils beyond the cairn were mostly relatively stone free and suitable for cultivation, either because rocks had been removed by prehistoric farmers and/or had never existed. A potential exception was to the south-east where buried boulders lie close to surface and the area was unsuitable except for the most desultory of spade-cultivation episodes. Extensive soil loss in this area is unlikely given the low position in the soil profile of the adjacent clearance feature itself.

The clearance cairn comprised placed-stones in different densities, with the greatest number piled downslope in the eastern half where fewer natural blocks protruded from below. This clustering probably indicates that clearance took place downslope in this direction; although whether it included partial removals in the boulder strewn area to the south-east is a mute point. To the west, in contrast, the cairn comprised just a loose scatter of stone between and around the natural blocks. However, what is unclear is whether the soils beyond the trench edge, upslope of the cairn, were naturally freer of stone than those downslope and whether cultivation took place just as frequently, or farming activity here was less sustained.

## Trench 2

Prior to excavation an overgrown stony scarp could be seen. What was not clear was whether there was a built feature retaining the downslope-side of a platform, perhaps for a circular building, or alternatively if all was natural, or lastly if a clearance feature had been placed on a natural break of slope. Shortly after digging started it became clear that the final explanation applied.

At and above the gently-curving natural break of slope there was a low but dense spread of stones (Fig. 3; Plate 3). While some of these were in relatively discrete heaps which in at least one instance comprised placed clearance stone, in other parts there was less certainty over what was naturally-placed and what had been added by prehistoric farmers (certain earthfasts shown stippled on Fig. 3). Much of the spread was only one stone deep, and in the north-western part had many horizontally placed, medium-sized slabs. This seems to be a natural arrangement, for stones of similar character found in clearance heaps elsewhere have usually been found at a variety of angles. Several other small stone concentrations in Trench 2 are uncertainly interpreted, for while they may have been piled up by people, it is to be expected that

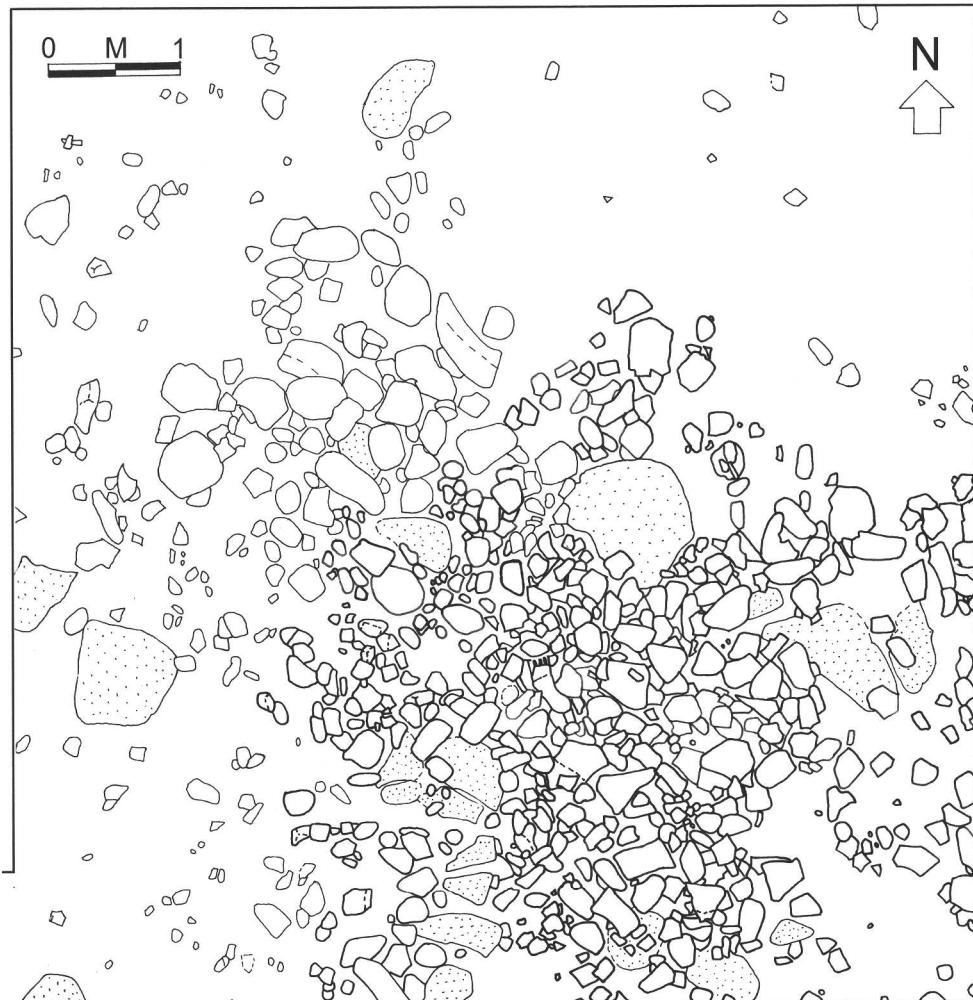


Fig. 3: Trench 2 after the overlying soils have been removed.

naturally stony ground would have some concentrations rather than just evenly spread stones. On the upslope side of the overall spread to the west, stone became less frequent with increased distance away from the scarp, which again is what would be expected to have occurred naturally. However, an alternative explanation, that clearance stone was being thrown with varying degrees of accuracy onto the uncultivated scarp area, cannot be discounted.

One definite clearance heap was identified on the scarp slope in the southern part of the trench. It was 2.5m × 3.5m across and about 0.3m high above the old ground surface. This heap was 2–3 stones thick and comprised a coherent pile, with stones at all angles, as is usually found in clearance heaps. The cleared stones were again all small enough for one person to build into a heap and these comprised rounded rocks gathered from the surface and/or prehistoric topsoil.



Plate 3: Trench 2 after removal of overlying soils, with the main clearance on the slope crest to the back and a single layer of stones on adjacent flatter land in front.

Much of the stony spread was only of single-stone thickness so not all of this was removed. Once excavation had proceeded beyond removal of all overlying ‘peat’ and soil in the interstices between the stones in the trench as a whole, only stones in and near the higher heap to the south were removed to search for underlying deposits; these did not exist.

The land upslope to the west of the stone spread, and perhaps that downslope beyond the trench edge to the east, was naturally free of stone. The soils here could easily have been cultivated in ways which would leave little or no archaeological footprint that would be recognisable today. Presumably the gathered stone in the clearance heap(s) was mostly from the interfaces between naturally stony and stone-free ground.

### Trench 3

A discrete heap of stones here was thought to be an agricultural clearance feature; this was confirmed by excavation.

Once cleared of overlying soils, the cairn was 4.5m × 5m across and a little over 0.5m high above the old ground surface (Fig. 4; Plate 4). During excavation it was fully dismantled in the search deposits beneath; these did not exist.

As with the clearance features in Trenches 1 and 2, the cairn stones were heaped at this specific location because here there was a piece of ground with a concentration of naturally-placed stones (earthfasts shown stippled on Fig. 4). Such relationships are suspected to be common in eastern moors cairnfields and the three examples excavated on Sir William Hill reinforce this observation. They have also been demonstrated in



Plate 4: Trench 3 with the cairn placed at one end of a stony area, which to the north-east (left foreground) was never cleared in prehistory.

several instances at the Gardom's Edge excavations (Barnatt *et al.* 1995–2000; 2002) and occasionally are obvious at unexcavated cairns elsewhere.

The cairn in Trench 3 had been placed on the western part of a spread of natural stones. The latter comprised both relatively eroded, large, mainly slab-like blocks and a number of smaller well-rounded stones. Their distribution and character varied spatially across the trench. A north-eastern zone contained a large number of small to medium, well-rounded, eroded stones set within the prehistoric sandy soils, many of which had rotted. That these rotted stones still exist *in situ* as patches of gravel indicates unequivocally that this area has not been cultivated; if it had been the evidence for fully rotted stones would have been lost as different soils became mixed. This stands in strong contrast to the south zone of the trench where very few stones exist in the friable soil, suggesting that this zone had been subject to clearance and presumably cultivation. However, if it was not for the adjacent clearance heap, the possibility that the area was naturally stone-free could not have been discounted. In the north-western zone of the trench there were significantly fewer natural stones than to the north-east and less evidence of rotting, and this intermediate zone is uncertainly interpreted. One possibility is that this reflects natural variation; another is that this area had been partially cleared.

The clearance cairn added to the natural stone cluster formed a discrete heap with little tumble beyond. It was only between one and three stones thick and had never been high enough to lead to noticeable spreading. The majority of the stones were identical in type to those still in the soils around the cairn. They were most densely placed towards the centre of the mound. Most stones were of a suitable size for a single person to carry. That the cairn exists suggests that stone clearance before or during cultivation took place in its vicinity.

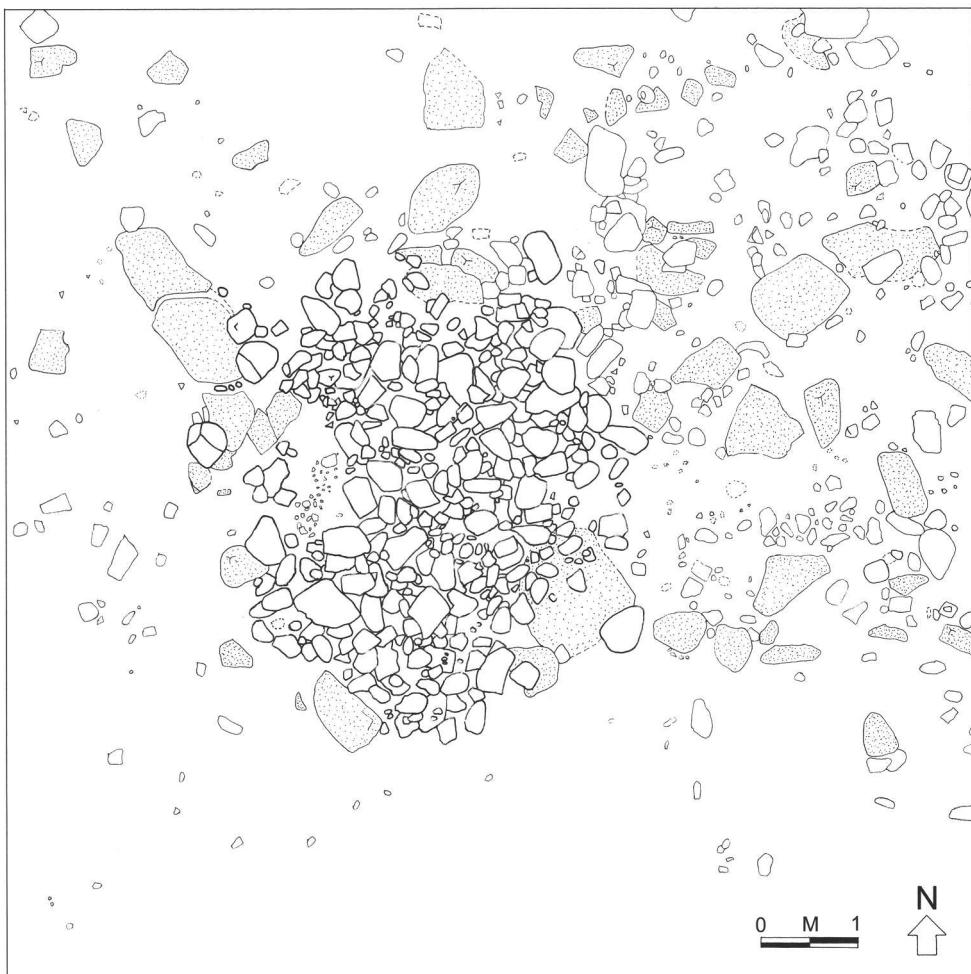


Fig. 4: Trench 3 after the overlying soils have been removed.

Different parts of the clearance cairn comprised placed-stones added in different densities, with some of the earthfast rocks below still visible, even before we started dismantling the cairn. A shallow depression at the west side of the cairn, upon excavation was found to be associated with past animal burrow activity. This does not explain why there were no stones here. We do not know whether there were ever any cairn stones at this point; one possibility was that rocks had been removed sometime in the past. A second burrow of relatively recent origin, in this case probably created by rabbits, was cut into the south edge of the cairn causing some minor disturbance here.

#### Test pits

The initial objective of digging a small series of test pits across a stone-free area where clearance features were rare was to look at soil profiles, and to assess the presence or

absence of uncleared natural stone and artefact densities (Fig. 1). The only visible clearance features were one cairn near the centre of the area and three around the edges. The only artefact discovered in the test pits was a single flint flake and soil profiles were consistent in general terms with podsolised soils found in excavation trenches on Sir William Hill and more generally across the East Moors of the Peak District.

Three individual test pits had natural stone indicating a definite lack of clearance. Two were in positions consistent with the distribution of the clearance cairns at the edges of the stone free area, while one was sited close to the clearance cairn at the centre of the area. In contrast to the three pits with stone, the majority of the pits had relatively stone-free profiles which could potentially but not certainly indicate that soils here have been cultivated in prehistory. Whilst each profile was subtly different from its neighbours, because of heavy podsolisation, no obvious differences allowed cultivated and stone-free but never cultivated soils to be distinguished from each other. However, interestingly, two test pits nearest Trench 3 had very similar soil profiles to the adjacent trench sections, which may suggest that cultivation had extended at least that far.

### Artefacts and ecofacts

The only finds were a small amount of flint and chertdebitage together with two to four flint artefacts. In Trench 1 there were seven pieces of worked flint and one of chert, the latter not necessarily worked. In Trench 2 there were five pieces of flint, two of which join, and possibly two of chert. Taken together with the flint flake from a test pit, this material comprises a loose scatter of material consistent with the 'background noise' found across most landscapes, indicating occasional non-specific activity in prehistory which is undiagnostic of specific types of habitation, task or period. In Trench 3 the finds comprise five small, worn pieces of chert near the surface of the soils beneath the peat, which in these specific cases are not considered to have been worked in prehistory.

In Trench 2 there was a fine example of a Later Mesolithic rod microlith in flint. Undoubtedly this had been in the soil for something like two-thousand years before the cairns were created, and confirmed that the debitage also found did not necessarily relate specifically to the time when stone clearance was taking place. In Trench 1 there was the broken point of a retouched flake knife and a possible crude awl, both in flint; and a relatively large 'rod-like' piece of chert that may have been used as a small 'hammerstone'.

In the hope that the buried soils within the prehistoric features contained a well-preserved pollen record of environmental conditions before, during and after the creation of the clearance heaps, soil columns were taken from within the stone-built mounds investigated in Trenches 1 and 2. No attempt has been made to analyse these, as we have been advised that the pollen survival is likely to be poor. Soil samples for phosphate analysis were taken at regular intervals across both trenches in three horizons to give background information in case pits existed under the stone features; this was not the case. These samples have been retained but again no analysis has been undertaken.

## PREHISTORIC FARMING ON SIR WILLIAM HILL

All three trenches dug in 2007–2008 contained stone-clearance heaps consistent with agricultural activity in later prehistory. The test pits appear to tell the same story. They all stand in contrast to the cairn excavated in 2000, or rather to be more specific with its second phase that included overt ritual activity. Nothing has been found to contradict the working hypothesis that the agricultural activity across the Sir William Hill cairnfield as a whole is Later Neolithic or Earlier Bronze Age in date and was relatively short lived in comparison with sites such as Gardom's Edge which were in use until the Iron Age. However, no clear indications of phasing were found, such as additions to the cairns made over a protracted period, nor are any of the three excavated clearance features closely dated.

It had been hoped that there would have been a house site within Trench 2, which would have extended the range of identified activities at the site and would have answered questions about the character of the settlement that went with the known prehistoric agriculture. The postulated platform here was the most obvious candidate for a potential house platform on the hillside, another a short distance westwards is much less convincing. As excavations at Gardom's Edge have demonstrated, houses with timber postholes exist on relatively flat ground where there is no identifiable trace at surface prior to excavation. Before they were dug, it was hoped that the test pits at Sir William Hill would reveal artefact concentrations that would give clues as to the location of one or more habitation foci on the flatter ground. On Gardom's Edge the only locations where test pits found significant numbers of artefacts was at or close to house sites, while the general background scatter is so low that it is unlikely that manuring of fields from house middens was taking place. The test pits at Sir William Hill were artefact-concentration free.

More fundamentally, it is far from clear whether we should be expecting prehistoric houses at Sir William Hill. The agricultural activity here is potentially something like a thousand years earlier than the houses found at Gardom's Edge. Were the people in the Later Neolithic/Earlier Bronze Age living in similar structures to those built later, or were they part of a more fluid agricultural regime where occupation was seasonal, with much time spent living in temporary structures such as tents during the spring/summer growing season? Was the Sir William Hill cairnfield only visited episodically through the year, either by an extended family group, or by individuals who performed specific tasks, as part of a seasonal round? Or, were the people who cultivated the small cultivation area at Sir William Hill living somewhere else in the local area on a 'permanent' basis, this being just one of a series of 'growing places' that they used, walking here on a daily basis from a farmstead on lower ground?

All this said, we do not even know if the farmers at Sir William Hill came regularly to their plots from habitations elsewhere, or whether it is just that we failed to investigate in exactly the right places on the site.

The lack of close dating at the three excavated cairns is consistent with other clearance features excavated elsewhere; it is normal to find very little evidence that tells of their age and length of use. The known early date of the cairn at Sir William Hill investigated in 2000, which had a first phase that was agricultural in character, demonstrates that clearance cairns on the Peak District's eastern moors need not be assumed to be later in date just because at places like Gardom's Edge there are

Later Bronze Age and Earlier Iron Age house sites and a large enclosure of similar date. Rather, even the sites with late structures may well have been created over a significantly broader time frame than dateable features demonstrate.

The paucity of small finds is consistent with one of the hypotheses we set out to test; the cairns are potentially part of everyday agricultural activity, where little human debris is to be expected in the middle of a cultivation plot. Rather, as found on Gardom's Edge, prehistoric artefacts on the Peak District gritstone moors are anticipated to be found only in specific hotspots, at sites of habitation and ritual activity. The lack of significant artefacts in Trenches 1 to 3 helps confirm the special character of the cairn dug at the summit of the cairnfield in 2000 which had a high density of finds of various types.

Another point of interpretation we were interested in investigating was the duration of time over which stones were being added to the Sir William Hill cairns. In the case of the Trench 3 cairn, this had a discrete and densely packed pile of stones at its centre surrounded by looser packed and somewhat more intermittent stones; while the central heap may well have been from a discrete clearance episode, it proved impossible to tell whether the surrounding stone was added over days, years or even centuries, or whether this happened gradually or in specific episodes. At the clearance features in Trenches 1 and 2, it was also impossible to gauge the time span over which stone was added.

Something of the character of the prehistoric farming at Sir William Hill can be gauged from a careful study of the distribution of cleared ground within the excavation trenches. One thing clear is that the agricultural activity did not comprise traction ploughing where a large regular area was prepared to allow long, straight furrows to be cut with an ard or plough. Instead, cultivation was probably carried out using a spade to hand-dig small irregular plots and stony patches would be gone around if it was inconvenient to clear them away. In places such areas were utilised to dispose of clearance stone. Edges of plots and uncleared patches within plots are discernible in the trenches. In the case of that dug in 2000 the cairn was at the edge of a cultivated area with cleared land to the west, while rotted stone to the east showed that the ground there had never been turned over. This distribution was consistent with what was visible at the surface beyond the trench, where a large stony area with pits where boulders had been removed in the post-medieval period, separated the top cultivation patch from the rest of the cairnfield. How far the top plot next to the 2000 cairn extended westwards is not clear, but it cannot have been very large. Similar rotting stone was found in Trench 3 where the cairn was sited at the end of a very stony area extending to the north-east. This stony ground can be seen on the surface extending beyond the trench, with one further clearance cairn and a second small possible example at its edges. In contrast, the land to the south of the excavated cairn was clear of stones and this ground is part of the large stone-free area extending to the south-west. The ground north-west of the cairn was interpreted equivocally on the basis of what was excavated and the possibility that it had been partially cleared could not be discounted. However, a series of boulder-robbing pits outside the trench edge, with a further clearance cairn beyond, may well suggest this ground again remained uncultivated in prehistory. On the hillside above the areas just discussed, at Trench 2, clearance was placed on a stony natural break in slope and cultivation may well have

taken place above to the west and perhaps below to the east. At Trench 1 this cairn probably lay within the same cultivation plot rather than at its edge, with the only place where cultivation is unlikely being the stony patch of ground south-east of the cairn, beyond where there are further unexcavated clearance features.

The amount of land under cultivation in any one year, and the number of years the sites were in use, is not known. That vestiges of field boundaries are not visible today, unlike larger sites on the eastern gritstone moors, as for example at Gardom's Edge and Big Moor, suggests that agricultural use of Sir William Hill was not sustained over an extended period of many centuries (*cf.* Barnatt 2000; 2008). However, whether actual use can be counted in decades or was the product of work by several generations of farmers cannot be determined. Similarly, we do not know whether cultivation across the cairnfield as a whole all took place before the cairn excavated in 2000 was converted to ritual use, or whether cultivation on the lower ground continued after this happened.

At Sir William Hill, when new site volunteers and visitors alike enquired 'had we found anything' the reply couldn't be anything other than 'interesting piles of stones'. This was not flippant, for as we attempted to explain, the clearance heaps being excavated can potentially tell us something about how people lived and farmed in prehistory, and this is what archaeology is about, and arguably of greater significance than artefacts which happen to be recovered in the process. This met with varying degrees of acceptance, which said more about people's prejudices and our powers of explanation, than it did about the truth or otherwise of the argument.

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Last but not least, particular mention is made of Eileen Parker and Martin Waller who in the first year went beyond the call of duty in planning the site, finds recording, updating the site notebook and stepping into the breech when age and decrepitude meant that others had difficulty continuing. In the second year Martin was indisposed due to factors beyond his control but Eileen again took on the role of site supervisor. She put in more time than anyone, managed the test pitting, again kept the site

directors in order and accepted that she was to blame for everything that went wrong!

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