

# A DAY IN THE LIFE... DISAPPOINTING NEOLITHIC ENCLOSURES BUT EXCELLENT GOOSEBERRIES IN TEESDALE

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Heavy rain as we drive up the A1 makes my daughter Iris (just 6), who is in tow for the day, much less enthusiastic. But fortunately it almost stops as we reach Upper Teesdale. Paul Frodsham and Stewart Ainsworth, waiting by the side of the lane, are here to do paid work for the North Pennines AONB's [LiDAR Landscapes project](#), following up the labours of volunteers, who have been systematically examining LiDAR imagery. I've been invited because they suspect that both the unusual enclosures we're examining might be early Neolithic, but my involvement is unpaid, purely for interest. Retired aerial photographer Tim Gates is along for a nice day out, although his experience of the uplands, which rivals even Stewart's, is always valuable.

We struggle into full waterproofs and set off up the valley side, hopping across a beck that's almost dry, despite the recent rain, and zig-zagging up through the impressive basalt cliffs of Holwick Scar. Nestling in a valley by another beck, I spot the stone footings of a tiny post-medieval sheiling. Tim kindly keeps Iris moving forward by pointing out wild flowers.

After 30 minutes we reach the first site, on a plateau in the bleak moorland, and within seconds we've concluded that it's not a Neolithic enclosure, but a typical Bronze Age field, defined by low banks of stone, laboriously cleared from the surface. Even today, 3,000 years later, the pasture within the plot is richer and greener than the surrounding rough grassland. Iris finds a disarticulated sheep skeleton to play with. A burial cairn, incorporated into the field boundary, is of interest because excavation in the 1980s (we note that the trench was never backfilled!) produced a Neolithic stone axe. But there's no other indication that the cairn's any earlier than the Bronze Age, so the axe might be a curated 'antique'. The monument's position in the landscape also prompts debate: although there's a more conspicuous knoll nearby, the cairn was placed lower down, next to a tiny beck – a deliberate link with water. Paul asks whether it might actually be a 'burnt mound', ie the residue of a Bronze Age sauna, since these are invariably found next to small watercourses. But we're all happy that it's a *bona fide* burial monument. Did a little clearing in the woodland here first attract the builders of the monument, and later the occupants of the tiny farmstead? We look for the site of the large roundhouse that would typically sit at the edge of a Bronze Age field and soon find it, half concealed beneath the drystone walls of a post-medieval sheep-shelter, shaped like a Mercedes badge. There's a welcome opportunity to joke about the sheep-shelter being a Bronze Age "tri-radial cairn", a form of monument that briefly attracted national attention a few years ago when Paul was Archaeologist for Northumberland National Park, and which we think is a fiction. We discuss the potential diameter of the roundhouse and whether it might actually be a dismantled burial cairn, since there's an unusually pronounced 'kerb' on one side (and where has all the stone for the sheep-shelter come from?). After 10 minutes, we've failed to reach a conclusion, but the primary question has been answered and Iris

is bored, so we head back down for lunch, eaten standing by the cars in the drizzle, before driving into the next valley to look at the next site.

This second earthwork has been interpreted previously as an Iron Age palisaded enclosure. Even before we leave the cars, Tim puts money on it being medieval or later, based on a glance at the lidar print-out. It takes us a while to pin-point the start of the footpath up the valley side, because the signs have apparently been removed. Walking back and forth along the lane, we notice some heavily-fruited gooseberry bushes in the hedgerow – Iris wants us to stop there. But eventually we're sufficiently confident in our map-reading to set off boldly through a sea of cow manure, studded with islands of abandoned farm machinery, oddments of scrap and barking, wildly straining sheepdogs (a typical upland farmyard). Using the lidar imagery, we find the enclosure quickly. It is immediately clear that there are actually two separate earthworks. The later one, an enclosure defined by a low bank and ditch, has a very irregular plan that bizarrely surrounds a dry valley and parts of two knolls. Tim and I conclude that it's a medieval or later wood-bank, made to protect a rare – and now vanished – surviving scrap of woodland in this largely treeless landscape. If it was spring, I'd be looking for the tell-tale species of plants that indicate ancient woodland, because they often outlive the trees. The earlier earthwork is what has attracted Stewart's attention: an arc of low, stony bank, almost completely grassed over. It predates the ? wood-bank, which clearly cuts through it. But what appear to be artificial earthworks on the lidar imagery prove to be natural scarps reflecting the underlying geology (that's why it's important to 'ground truth' LiDAR), so, despite prolonged scrutiny, we can't convince ourselves that the arc of stony bank ever formed a complete enclosure. Nor can we date it, except that it's earlier than the ?medieval enclosure. Tim, keen to win his bet, claims that it's just an earlier version of the wood-bank. The rest of us are more circumspect, but we can't get much further without excavation, and that would be an expensive shot in the dark. So we head back down to the cars, Iris clutching a trio of bleached rabbit bones. On the way, Paul and I discuss a publication on the Neolithic in northern England which he's co-editing, and to which I'm contributing – probably the day's most useful outcome for me. I promise to email him things when I get back to York. He and Stewart drive off to inspect a newly-discovered Romano-British enclosure further down the lane, but Iris insists that Tim and I stay to pick gooseberries. Well, payment in kind is always welcome! And as soon as Paul is out of earshot, Tim grumbles that anyway he'd rather pick gooseberries than look at "yet another bloody R-B enclosure".



*I'm looking for any artefacts that might have been excavated from the Bronze Age house by rabbits. Iris is looking for the bones of the excavators.*