



WITCHY NEUK—FROM THE NORTH-WEST.

IX.—EXCAVATIONS AT WITCHY NEUK, HEPPLE.

BY THOMAS WAKE.

[Read on 19th June 1937.]

In June, 1936, the Northumberland County History Committee undertook the excavation of the fortified enclosure at Witchy Neuk, near Hepple Whitefield in Upper Coquetdale. The thanks of the committee are due to Lady Buchanan Riddell for kindly allowing the work to be done and for other courtesies, and also to H.M. Office of Works (Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments) for permitting the disturbance of a scheduled monument. The writer of the following report is indebted to Mr. F. Gerald Simpson for much valuable advice and for directing some of the work; to Mr. E. B. Birley for the loan of a tent and particularly for arranging that the experience and skill of our member, Mr. Thomas Hepple, should be available; and to the latter for his helpful co-operation.

Witchy Neuk, by which the site is known to residents in the neighbourhood,¹ includes a fortified enclosure, and earthwork dyke running from it for nearly 400 yards SSE, line of up-ended stones, tumuli, and other vestiges of early settlement. The enclosure is about half a mile south of Hepple Bridge and is marked on the 6 inch Ordnance Survey Map Northumberland NXLIX N.W. on the 600 feet contour and 265 feet above the river Coquet. It is situated on the top of an outcrop of sandstone crags, 30-40 feet

¹ Dr. Wilfred Hall kindly helped in this inquiry. The Ordnance Survey gives Witchy Nick, H. Maclauchlan Witches Nick, Dr. Bruce and D. D. Dixon Witches Neuk.

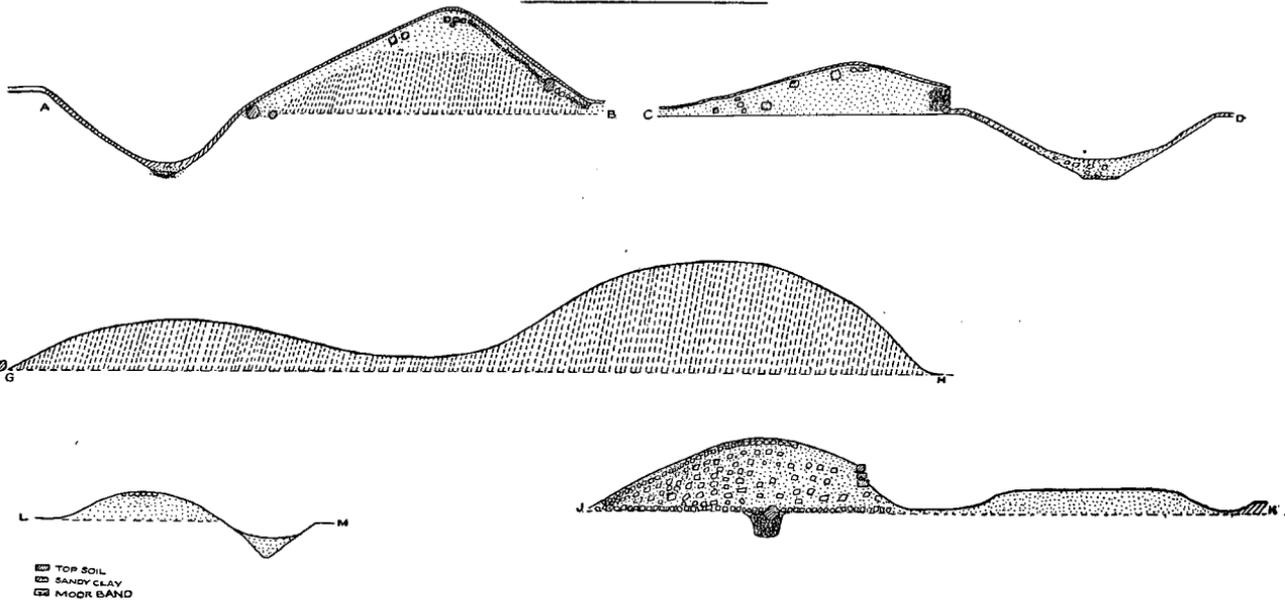
high, which terminate a ridge leading from Whitefield Shank on the south. A magnificent view is obtained of the Coquet valley and the country beyond on the north, but on the south it is shut in by Ravens Heugh and Whitefield Shank, which form the west end of the Simonside ridge. (Plate xvii.) Previous references to it are to be found in H. Maclauchlan, *Additional Notes*, 1864, pp. 86-87; *Proc. Soc. Ant. N/C²* x, pp. 49-50, and 3rd ser. vii, pp. 37-38; D. D. Dixon, *Upper Coquetdale*, pp. 123-125, and in the manuscript notes by J. Collingwood Bruce, *sub* 1864, now in the possession of Miss Bruce.

Lack of definite information as to the period of construction and purpose of this and similar works influenced the committee to investigate the site. Work was continued for two weeks by the writer, Mr. Thomas Hepple, and four local workmen.

The enclosure (plan, plate xxi) is D-shaped with the chord on the north formed by the sandstone crags, and is of type A in the classification adopted by the Congress of Archæological Societies in 1910. The protective works consist of a single rampart and ditch with entrances on the east and west slightly north of the middle. The rampart (plate xix, fig. 1) is in good preservation with the exception of a short stretch at the north-east which has been denuded by weathering. No bank nor ditch appears to have been constructed along the top of the crags; the present wall and inside ditch are modern. The entrances are protected by mounds projecting outwards on the south sides, thus deflecting the approach to the area between the entrance and the crags. The interior of the enclosure is comparatively level on the south and west and dips from near the centre to the north-east.

The west entrance (section J-K, p. 131). The curve of the outward projecting mound recalls the internal *claviculae* of Roman marching camps. A Roman influence is also suggested by the dry-stone walling on the outside of the rampart. (Plate xviii, fig. 1.) This wall consists of from

WITCHY NEUK - SECTIONS



TOP SOIL
SANDY CLAY
MOOR BAND

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 FEET

two to four courses of roughly shaped stones varying in size from 12 inches to 16 inches by 12 inches by 10 inches. About 10 feet south of the entrance and in line with the termination of the main ditch, the wall was deflected outwards about 18 inches, giving the end of the rampart a bastion-like effect. Owing to the disturbed nature of the entrance it was impossible to determine whether the wall had been continued round the entrance into the interior, or had stopped at the edge. An accumulation of stones in the area adjoining suggested the possibility of a wall along the side of the entrance, but there were no foundations for this. Across the roadway, which was 8 feet 6 inches wide, a trench 18 inches deep and about the same wide had been cut and filled with stones. (Plate xviii, fig. 2.) No sign of sockets for posts was traced, but it may be inferred that the entrance had been closed by a hurdle arrangement which was fixed in sockets formed by the stones in the trench which had since fallen in. A large stone on the south side of the trench may have been a check for such a barrier.² The north side of the entrance was too much disturbed to provide corroborative detail for this. The mound projecting outwards from the entrance is now 2 feet high and cannot have been much higher originally. The ditch of this was only 18 inches deep in contrast to the main ditch, which was 6 feet deep.

The rampart (section C-D, p. 131) was formed of sandy clay from the upcast of the ditch. At this section it was 4 feet 6 inches in height and 23 feet across at ground level. Along the top was a pitching of stones, among which was found an inverted saddle-stone for grinding corn. At intervals stones were found in the bank, but these had been thrown in a haphazard way. No sign of a definite kerb was found on the inside. On the outside, however, the wall previously mentioned formed a revetment. This wall

² A similar trench, with definite post holes, across the entrance of Breiddin Hill Camp, Mont., is thought to have been a double doorway within a timber framework. *Arch. Cambrensis*, June 1937, pp. 103-104.

was set back 18 inches from the lip of the ditch and appears to have been covered by the upcast, thus giving the bank a continuous slope to the bottom of the ditch. Behind the wall were a number of stones roughly thrown in. The ditch at this section was "V"-shaped, 6 feet deep and 21 feet 6 inches across at the lip. At this point it was much silted by material and stones from the rampart. The bottom rested on moor-band and quickly accumulated water though the weather was dry. On the east side (section A-B, p. 131) the rampart is 8 feet 6 inches above ground level. The section was not completely cut through. There was no revetment wall on the outside, but the inside slope of the bank was covered by stone pitching. About 2 feet from the base was a large stone suggesting a kerb, but this was not continuous. At no part examined was there any indication of post holes along the crest. A trench was cut a short way into the bank at the east entrance, but no walling was revealed, neither was there a trench across the roadway as in the west entrance.

Hut circles. Section A-B (plate XXI) continued revealed two hut circles. A heavy growth of bracken made excavation difficult here; the roots formed a network over the whole of this area. It was only by carefully clearing these and the loose stones entangled in them that the outlines of the hut circles were made out. Hut circle 1 was 19 feet in diameter. It had been outlined by a shallow trench in which smallish stones were set. On the west side there was an appearance of flagging or a hearth, but no signs of burnt earth or stone. The floor was covered by hard clay. Hut circle 2 (plate XX, fig. 1) was more complete. The outline had been made in the same way, but the stones bedded in the trench formed a double line right round and were more closely set. The entrance was on the north-east and opened to a particularly fine view of the Coquet and the country beyond. The entrance was marked by a line of stones running outwards from the hut for 11 feet. (Plate XIX, fig. 2.) At 7 feet this was joined by a single line of stones running diagonally

from a point 7 feet west of the entrance. The edge of the hut from this point to the entrance was continued by a single line of stones instead of the double stones round the remainder. The hut inside from the entrance was flagged for about 6 feet by 3 feet wide. Round the edge, clockwise, flagging occurred at varying widths to 7 feet at twelve o'clock. There was another section of flagging projecting inwards from the west side. The middle and a section at the north-west appeared to have been unflagged, the floor being formed of compact clay. (Plate xx, fig. 1.) The whole hut site was covered by a thick layer of clay varying in depth to 8 inches. A low bank outside on the east, south and west was also found to be formed of clay. The stones set in the trench forming the edge of the huts could not have been used as foundations for a low wall. It may be suggested that stakes were used for the supports of the roof. These would be kept firm by the packing stones in the trench. The roof was possibly composed of boughs covered with clay. The timber has since decayed, leaving no trace, but on collapsing the clay covering spread over the inside of the hut and some had slipped over the edge, forming the bank round the huts. This style of hut can be inferred from the illustrations of native huts which appeared in *Antiquity*.³ The line of stones on the west side of the entrance and its diagonal counterpart is presumably that of a shelter which protected the opening into the hut from the wind. There was not time to examine the east side of the opening to enable any decision to be made as to whether the shelter had been covered over. In both circles there was an absence of occupation earth. The flags of hut circle 2 did not appear to be much worn, though the flags at the entrance were uneven as if by traffic.

Large flagged area. Thirty feet north-west of hut circle 2 and across a slight natural hollow was an area, roughly 30 feet by 20, laid unevenly with large flagging stones. (Plate xx, fig. 2.) The northern edge of this area

³ Vol. iv, p. 230, pl. iii.

rested on the lip of what appeared to be a natural hollow. On the south side of the area was a flat hearth, roughly oval in shape, 5 feet by 4, the stones of which were cracked and reddened by fire. Four feet south of this was a cooking pit (pit 2), that is, a hole about 18 inches deep and 2 feet across. The sides and bottom of this were blackened with sooty material. Near by, in a rabbit burrow, was found a fragment of ancient glass. North of the flagged area, in the centre of the circular depression, another cooking pit was revealed (pit 1). It was about the same dimensions as the other and had a large stone, in its natural position, forming one side. This stone was reddened by fire and the bottom and sides of the pit were lined with sooty material. In the bottom were found a few fragments of bone, too fragmentary to enable a definite identification, but thought by Mr. Steele of King's College to belong to a sheep or small deer. Another pit was found about 30 feet south of pit 2, but this retained no evidence of use. Near the east entrance a larger hollow gave no indication of date or purpose.

A trench cut across part of the south-western area revealed only three stones laid as though for flagging. A circular hollow inside the rampart west of the centre on the south side suggested a hut circle, but on clearing proved to have been of modern construction. Along this part of the enclosure there is a deep accumulation of loose earth which has evidently been washed from the earth bank.

The earthwork dyke which joined the outer ditch on the south-east had structural features similar to the main work. Section L-M, p. 131, showed the bank to be at present 2 feet 6 inches in height and 12 feet across. The outer slope was continuous to the bottom of the ditch, which was V-shaped, 4 feet deep and 7 feet 6 inches across. The top of the bank had a layer of stones similar to the crest of the main rampart. The entrance through this dyke was at the lip of the ditch of the main work. The roadway was cut by a shallow trench 6 feet long by 2 feet wide and packed by

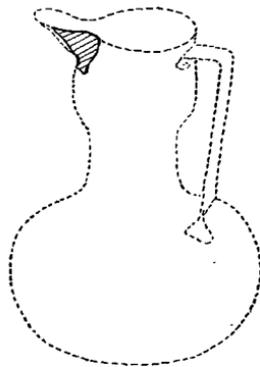
small stones, recalling the trench across the west entrance of the enclosure. The west entrance was also recalled by the way the ditch of the dyke stopped 7 feet short of the end of the bank. The earthwork continued for about 370 yards and stopped in what is now a plantation SSE. It did not run in a straight direction, but formed a sinuous line. It avoided an outcrop of sandstone which forms the highest part of the ridge leading from Whitefield Shank. At one or two places the dyke has been cut through by trackways leading on to the moor which have probably been used when the moor was mined for coal in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Within the area cut off by the dyke is what appears to be the remains of a cairn. Its remains consist of a number of fairly large stones up-ended and forming a rough circle. East of this is a line of up-ended stones running for nearly 100 yards north and south and with what appear to be cairns at intervals.

The east entrance is approached uphill by a deep and wide trackway. Where the hollow way finishes at the top of the bank the line is continued by single stones at intervals of 3 to 4 yards. These terminate at the end of the mound on the south side of the entrance.

On the west side a trackway passes through a gap in the crags. This seems to have been used in more recent times, though it may have formed part of the original features of the settlement. Where it reaches the higher ground there is a circular structure of stones. This appears to have an outside wall, but the interior is a confused mass of stones. A beginning was made to clear it in order to find out its purpose, but time did not permit this to be completed. Scattered over the area south of this were a number of cairns or barrows, and on a plateau between the crags and Swindon Hill on the north were from thirty to forty cairns. At the east end of these were a number of stones forming a large circle, but whether in their natural position or artificially placed was not determined.

Finds. The interest of the settlement with its varied structures was unfortunately mitigated by the paucity of datable artifacts. The saddle-stone for grinding corn is a fine specimen. The surface has been pitted in order to give a tooth to the grinding surface, and it showed signs of rubbing. Saddle-stones are an early type, and it was probably only very shortly before the Roman era that the rotary quern was introduced into this part of the country,⁴ though it appeared in the south of England during the first century B.C.⁵ That the stone was found as a structural feature of the main rampart suggests that its use for grinding had been discontinued, but whether it had been used for the original construction of the bank or at some later repair was not clear. (It may be noted here that rotary querns have been found on a number of similar sites in the county, and a fine series is to be seen at the quarry at Easington near Belford, where a camp is being quarried away.) The fragment of glass has been examined by Mr. W. A. Thorpe, of the Victoria and Albert museum, who is of the opinion that it is of Seine-Rhine manufacture of the third century A.D. He suggests that it belongs to the rim and neck of one of the small one-handled globular jugs with short neck and beaky spout.⁶ In the fragment, which is very small, the narrow end of the rim is approaching the beaky lip. Some fragments of iron slag were found just outside hut circle 2 and one piece between the stones forming the edge of the hut, while a small piece of sandstone with incised marking may have been used for sharpening a metal tool or weapon.



⁴ Bennett and Elton, *History of Corn Milling*, 1898, vol. I, p. 81.

⁵ E. C. Curwen, *Querns in Antiquity*, vol. XI, p. 133 et seq.

⁶ Cf. Morin-Jean, *Verrerie en Gaule*, 1913, fig. 138 and Fremersdorf, *Römische Gläser aus Köln*, fig. 25.

Summary. It has not been possible to trace the name of the site earlier than the authorities mentioned in the introduction. Lady Buchanan Riddell has no estate maps that might have helped. Whether the name has been given to it by virtue of its ancient character, or as being the resort of witches in the popular imagination, is left open. When the excavations were closed down after the two weeks work it was hoped to resume further work later on. The committee were agreeable to do this, but circumstances arose which prevented it. Consequently we cannot claim to have exhausted all the information to be obtained. It has been possible, however, to add to our knowledge of such works. Excavations at different sites, notably Greaves Ash, Gunnerton Crag, Thockrington, Old Bewick, etc., though each showing dissimilar structural features, have nearly all produced evidence of occupation in the Roman period. At Witchy Neuk we have similar evidence. The fragment of glass found is slender material on which to arrive at definite dating, but it does help. The iron slag cannot, in the light of our present knowledge of this district, be considered pre-Roman. The saddle-quern, however, can, but the fact that it was found in a position unsuitable for its purpose cancels its evidence except that its presence might indicate an early date for the settlement in another form. In any case we must allow for a time lag after the introduction of the rotary quern. Only a small part of the enclosure was excavated, and time did not allow a section being taken right through the hut circles or flagging to see if there had been earlier occupation levels. The features outside the enclosure might also be productive of useful information, particularly the stone structure on the west. The stone alignment on the east should also be examined as it bears a similarity to the Celtic field systems elsewhere, many examples of which can be found in Northumberland. D. D. Dixon,⁷ reports that some of the cairns and barrows have been dug into without producing artifacts, and Canon Greenwell has stated that

⁷ *Op. cit.*



Fig. 1. DITCH AND REVETMENT WALL NEAR WEST ENTRANCE.



Fig. 2. STONE FILLED TRENCH ACROSS WEST ENTRANCE.



Fig. 1. RAMPART: INNER FACE OF BANK.



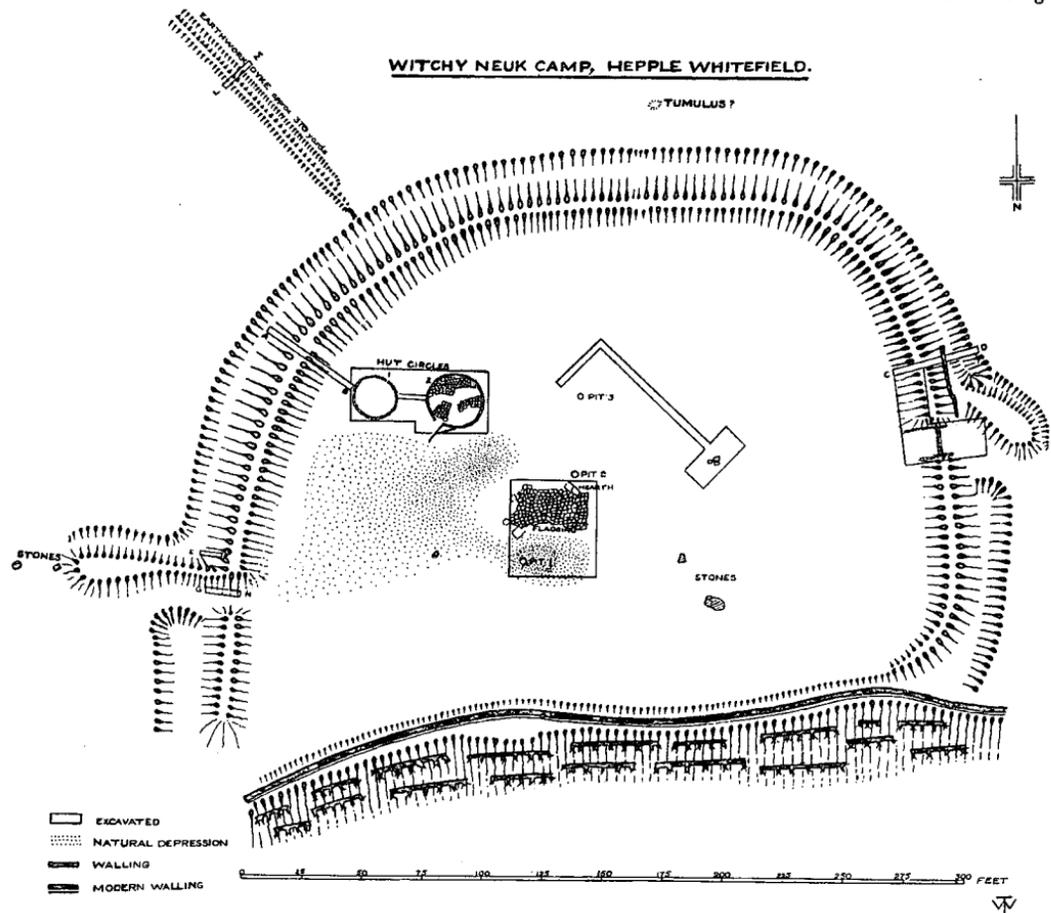
Fig. 2. ENTRANCE TO HUT CIRCLE, 2.



Fig. 1. HUT CIRCLE, 2.



Fig. 2. LARGE FLAGGED AREA WITH HEARTH.





such small mounds rarely produce anything of interest. A small mound on the south side of the enclosure was cut through without result. The nature of the domestic economy of the settlers has yet to be found. Whether they had cattle on such barren ground, or merely relied on sheep, goats and deer, the fragment of bone found is insufficient evidence. The iron slag hints that iron smelting, and presumably forging, was carried on, but the nature of the implements and weapons they made is unknown.