

# I

## A Possible Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure on Flodden Hill, near Milfield, Northumberland

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The purpose of this note is to draw attention to what may turn out to be the first genuine Neolithic causewayed enclosure so far identified in Northumberland. For, while several other candidates have been put forward in the past (Newman 1976), none has stood the test of time and no sites in the county have been included in the most recently published survey of causewayed enclosures in the British Isles (Oswald *et al* 2001).

The site in question is centred at grid reference NT 9237 3546 in the valley of the river Till, 2 km NW of the village of Milfield and 20 km SW of Berwick upon Tweed (fig. 1), in an area that is already well known as a focus of later Neolithic ritual activity (Harding 1981; Waddington 1999). Although cropmarks were first recorded at this location during routine reconnaissance in July 1994,<sup>1</sup> their potential significance went unrecognised until the photographs were re-examined as part of a project to map archaeological sites over the whole of the Milfield Basin (Waddington, forthcoming). At this point Rog Palmer kindly undertook to make a fresh transcription at 1:2,500 scale with the result that is presented here (fig. 2).

As indicated on the plan, the site occupies sloping ground between the 55 m and 65 m contours. From this elevated position, 20 m above the valley floor, there are extensive views eastwards across the river, taking in the whole of the Milfield Plain and the lower Till valley downstream as far the Etal gorge. Yet, despite its prominent location, the site is not one with good defensive potential as it is overlooked from close range by high ground to the NW where the slope rises to an altitude of 154 m on the summit of Flodden Hill. This avoidance of

the highest ground, which has already been noted as characteristic of the siting of almost all causewayed enclosures in elevated locations (Oswald *et al* 2001, 91–102), ensures that the site could more easily be seen both from low lying ground in the valley and from the surrounding hills. The meandering course of the Till brings the river close to the foot of the hill and within a kilometre of the site, thereby guaranteeing year round access to a reliable water supply, a feature which is shared by most causewayed enclosures. At the same time water may also have been obtained, at least on a seasonal basis, from one or other of two spring-fed streams, now channelled into drainage ditches, which pass within 250 m of the site to the N and the S.

On plan, the Flodden Hill enclosure is sub-oval or egg-shaped. Its dimensions, as measured from the inner lip of the outer ditch, are 106 m E–W by 78 m NW–SE and it has an internal area of about 0.47 ha. The perimeter is formed by an outer ditch which is divided into segments of unequal length, these being most clearly evident round the E half of the enclosure. Additionally, three segments of what could be taken to be a second, inner, ditch can hesitantly be identified in the NE quadrant of the enclosure where they follow a 40 m long arc that is concentric with the outer ditch and set some five to six metres inside it.

The enclosure is bisected along a NE–SW axis by the B6352 road to Kilham, close to the point where it makes a slight double bend to avoid what was originally a small farmstead at North Flodden. On the S side of the road, there are no intelligible cropmarks in that part of the field nearest to the farmstead through which

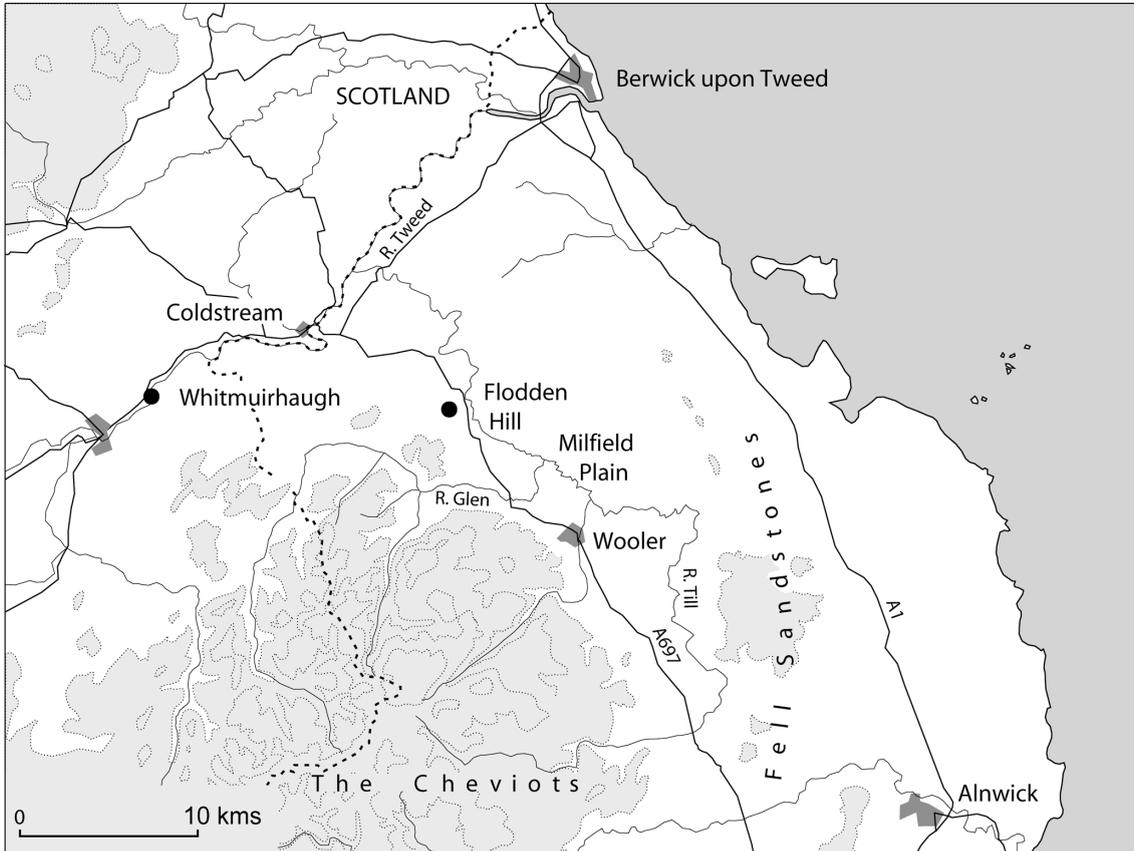


Fig. 1 Flodden Hill: site location plan

the projected course of the enclosure ditch would be expected to run. Likewise no more than half a dozen segments of the circuit can confidently be identified in the neighbouring field to the E where some additional marks may reflect changes in the layout of the field boundaries which have taken place over the last 150 years.<sup>2</sup>

To the N of the road the perimeter ditch is easier to follow though interpretation here is occasionally hampered by the wheel marks of tractors and by the presence of buried land drains which can be seen cutting diagonally across the line of the ditch at intervals six to ten metres apart. Nevertheless it is just possible to make out a slight but noticeable inturning of

the ditch on the NW-facing side of the enclosure at the point indicated by an arrow on fig. 2. Similar inward or outward deflections in the circuits of causewayed enclosures have been noted at a number of sites elsewhere and may have been intended to emphasise the position of the principal, or even sole, entrances (Oswald *et al* 2001, 49, fig. 3.16), bearing in mind that not all ditch causeways were necessarily matched by corresponding breaks in their internal banks.

Given the somewhat ambiguous nature of the cropmark evidence, the suggestion that the site at Flodden Hill may be a neolithic causewayed enclosure can be no more than provisional at this stage and, this being the case, the

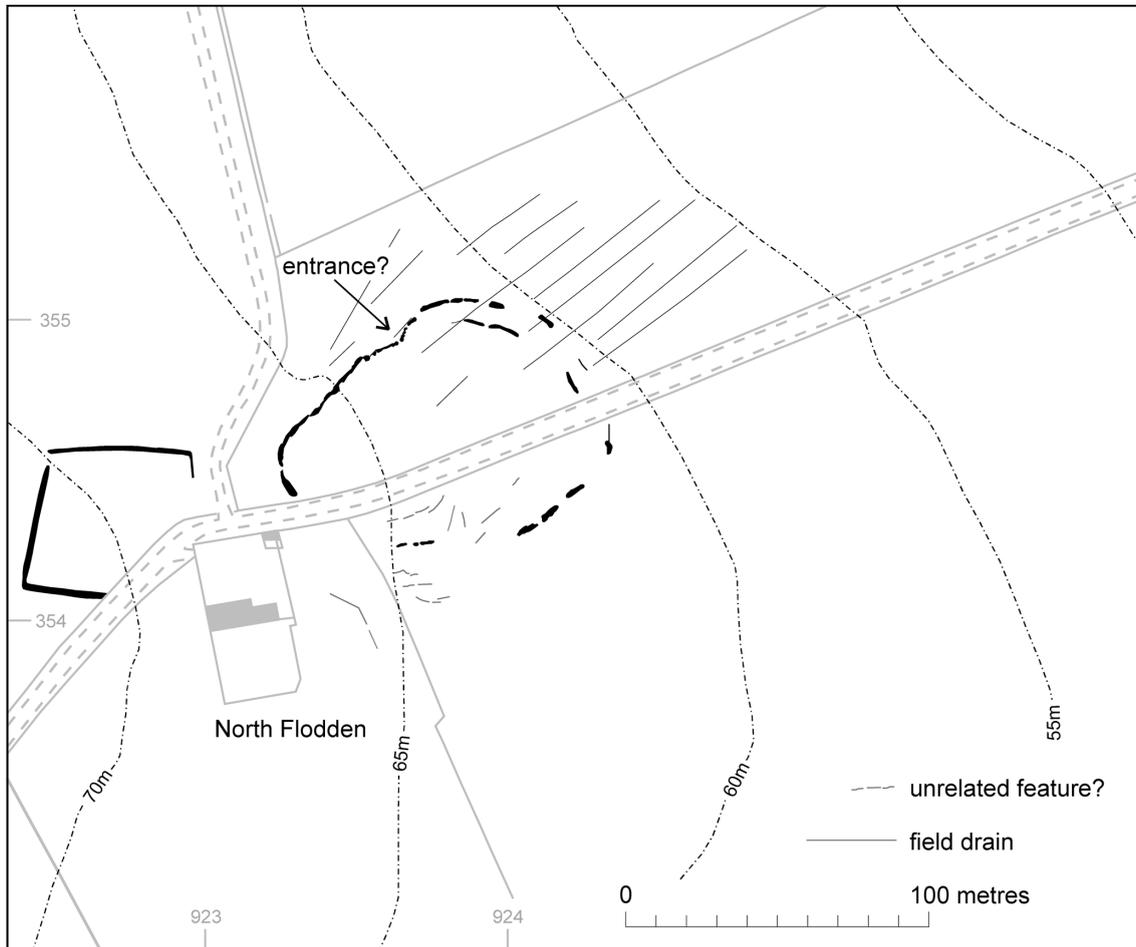


Fig. 2 Flodden Hill: plan of cropmarks. Reproduced from 1965 Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown Copyright NC/2004/44665

main purpose of this note is simply to stimulate further investigation in the hope of clarifying the true nature of the site. For, although the evidence in favour of a neolithic context is suggestive, it is not by any means conclusive and other interpretations are certainly possible. It will, for example, be evident that the Flodden Hill enclosure is comparable in size and shape with many of the small Iron Age forts and palisaded settlements which can now be seen to be widely distributed as cropmarks over lowland parts of northern Northumberland. Indeed it is worth pointing out that there are

no fewer than three curvilinear palisaded enclosures and a multivallate fort on record within a 0.5 km radius of the Flodden Hill site as well as a sub-rectangular ditched enclosure which lies just to the W of it (fig. 2). Although in this latter case there are no visible signs of interior round houses, the form of the enclosure is consistent with it being a late Iron Age or Romano-British farmstead. Alternatively, though perhaps less likely, it would be possible to see this enclosure as a ritual or mortuary structure of the type which can occasionally be seen in close proximity to other causewayed

enclosures, most notably that at Southwick in Northants (Oswald *et al* 2001, fig. 8.10).

Particularly in view of the accumulating evidence for late prehistoric settlement, not only in this particular locality but also in the Till valley more generally, we would be well advised to approach the claim for a Neolithic context in the case of the Flodden Hill enclosure with due caution. Without pre-empting subsequent investigations, it goes without saying that the recognition of any new Neolithic causewayed enclosure would be a most welcome development given the extreme scarcity of such sites anywhere in Britain and particularly in the north. For, at the time of writing scarcely more than half a dozen possible sites have been proposed north of the Humber, the nearest of which is situated at Whitmuirhaugh, on the south bank of the Tweed, 17 kms W of North Flodden as the crow flies (Oswald *et al*, 2001).

By way of conclusion, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that this particular cropmark, like many others in the county, has only been observed once in the sixty year period that has elapsed since specialist air reconnaissance began here in earnest in 1945. As it happens, 1994, the year in which the discovery was made, was an exceptionally productive one for cropmarks, yielding no fewer than 171 new sites, equivalent to half the total number that were recorded in that summer alone. If nothing else, this statistic will serve to illustrate the continuing potential not only of the Milfield Plain but of Northumberland generally, and highlights

the need for continuing reconnaissance even in areas where cropmarks have proved prolific in the past.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are indebted to Alastair Oswald, English Heritage (York), for help in preparing the illustrations and for encouraging the publication of this article in the first place.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Five air photographs were taken on 9th July 1994 (negative numbers TMG 15959/29–33). Prints are available for inspection in the National Monuments Record, Swindon (ref. nos. NMR NT 9235/77–81)

<sup>2</sup> On the 1866 OS six-inch map three small fields or gardens are depicted immediately to the east of the North Flodden farmstead on the S side of the road. As shown, they would have taken in the whole SW quadrant of the prehistoric enclosure.

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