

A Survey of North Black Hagg Hillfort, Northumberland (NT 8836 2505)

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North Black Hagg hillfort is situated at a height of 373 m above OD overlooking the precipitous western slopes of the College Valley in North Northumberland. The site is located upon Cheviot andesite overlain by shallow loamy upland soils of the Dunwell group (313b: Soil Survey of England and Wales, 1983, 6). The fort commands extensive views along this valley to the north and south, although ground rising to the south-west and the Border Line beyond restricts the field of vision in that direction.

North Black Hagg is the most southerly fort of a linear series extending along the west side of the College Valley. The fort is intervisible with several others in this series, such as Sinkside Hill, a univallate fort at 334 m above OD (NT 8842 2638; Jobey, 1965, 62, no.84), Great Hetha, a bivallate fort at 343 m above OD (NT 8855 2740; Jobey, 1965, 42 figure 12 and 60, no.3), the small plough-damaged fort on Laddie's Knowe lying at 230 m above OD (NT 8834 2885), and the univallate site on Mid Hill situated at 290 m above OD (NT 8813 2959; Jobey, 1965, 62, no.83). In addition, the fort overlooks a group of three settlements on the valley floor to the immediate north-east (Topping, 1981, 23, figure 9), and commands views across the valley to the extensive prehistoric field systems on the eastern slopes of the valley at South-East Whitehall, East Whitehall, and North-East Whitehall (Topping, 1981, 19-21).

The first record of the fort is by the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Branch in 1949 through the fieldwork of its correspondent Sir Walter Aitchison (NT 82 NE 16). MacLauchlan does not seem to have discovered this site although he did survey extensively in College Valley (and the adjacent Hetha Burn and Elsdon Burn areas) during 1860, producing drawn surveys of the forts of Great Hetha, Little Hetha, and White Hall Camp (Sinkside) amongst others. No MacLauchlan 'hill-sketch' of North Black Hagg exists in the Duke of Northumberland's archive. Similarly, North Black Hagg is not listed by Hedley (1924) in his catalogue of 299 sites (of which MacLauchlan had previously recorded 215 (Charlton and Day, 1984, 33)), nor does it appear in Hogg's 'New list of native sites of Northumberland' (1947). It was not until 1965 that Jobey, following Aitchison, first listed the fort in a publication, classifying it as a multivallate site of 1 acre or less (1965, 61, no.20). However, no drawn survey of this site has ever been published.

North Black Hagg is located on the north-east shoulder of Blackhaggs Rigg, on a locally prominent summit, which was encircled by the defences of the fort. The site is of bivallate form

with tumbled ramparts suggesting an original thickness of 6 m or more, and still surviving to a height of 2.5 m on the eastern side. No conclusive evidence of wall facing was recorded. A staggered entrance narrowing to some 4 m wide cuts through the more prominent defences on the eastern perimeter: the side viewed from the valley floor. This may suggest elements of social display in the construction of this part of the site. The interior of the fort covers roughly 85 m north-east/south-west by 60 m transversely, giving an area of 0.5 ha. The fort covers an overall area of 0.8 ha.

The interior contains four, possibly five, scooped platforms ranged along the west/north-west part of the fort, leaving a sizeable area of the interior apparently devoid of structures. These platforms have little evidence of stone footings - possibly implying the former existence of timber-built structures - and are no more than 12 m in diameter with a back scarp up to 0.6 m high. A low semi-circular platform in the south-east of the interior, standing 0.7 m high, may simply be a natural formation. A hut-circle abutting the outer face of the western perimeter measures 6.0 m in diameter internally, with walls 1.2 m wide and up to 0.4 m high, and has an entrance 1.0 m wide in the south-west. A second sub-circular enclosure of more crude construction, and no more than 7.0 m in internal diameter, adjoins the outer face of the southern perimeter, but this may be a recent animal pen.

The robbed footings of three almost straight walls overlie the northern part of the interior, suggesting a later enclosure or animal pen of roughly triangular plan which was subsequently robbed to create the modern sheep stall. Three recent stone cairns also lie within and are ranged along the east/south-east defences.

There is some suggestion that a detached crescentic natural slope on the south side of the fort has been enhanced to add extra protection to the weakest line of defence.

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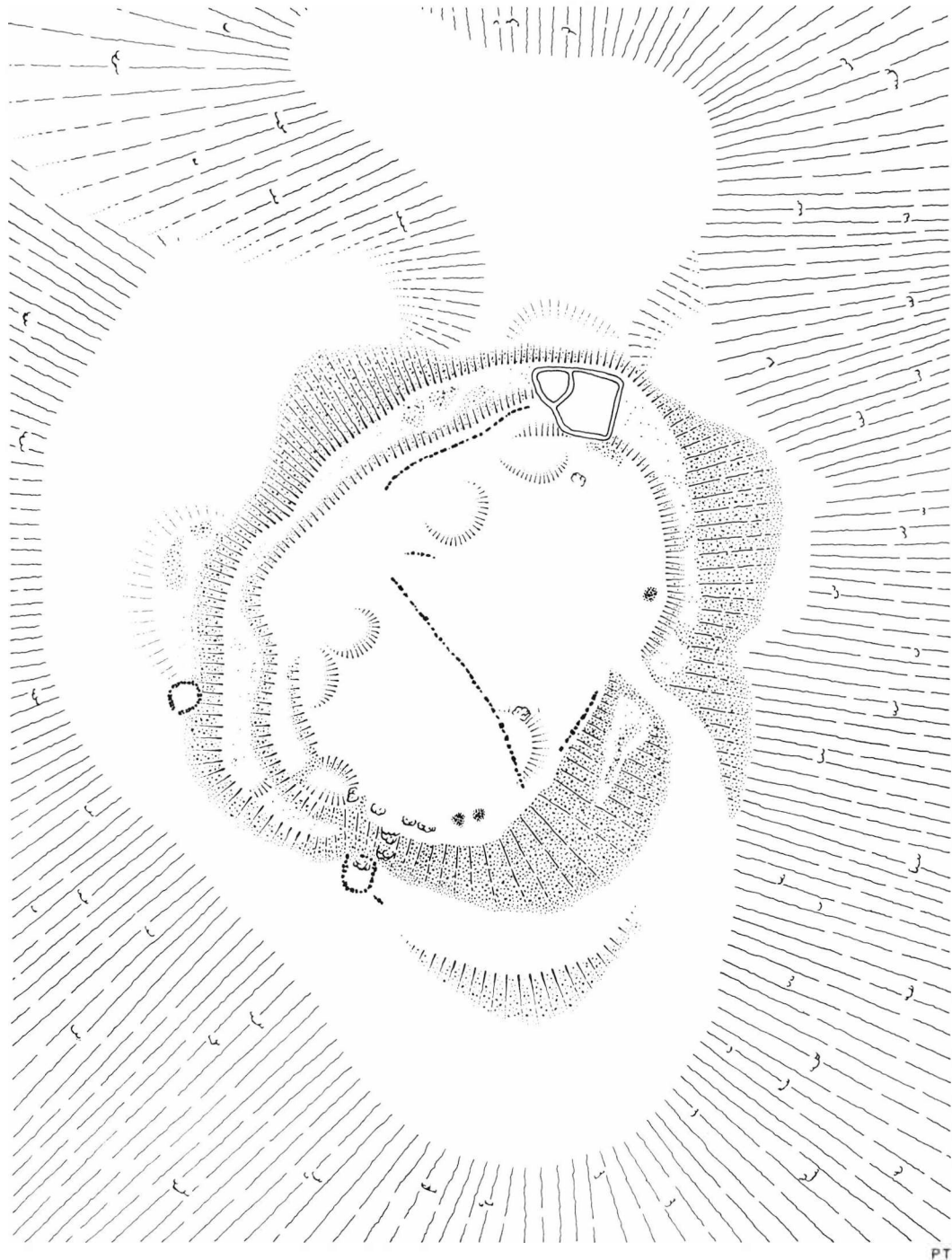


Figure 1 North Black Hagg hillfort, College Valley, Northumberland (NT 8836 2505)