

# A Possible Neolithic Henge Monument at Tynemouth, Tyne and Wear.

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## INTRODUCTION

The cropmark site is situated on the Tyne and Wear coastal plain, half a mile north of the river Tyne and approximately one third of a mile west of the North Sea (at NGR NZ 3617 7016). It was initially recognised by the writer from three aerial photographs taken by the County Borough of Tynemouth Surveyor's office; two on the 6th of April 1956; the other photograph is incorrectly dated, but is earlier than the 1956 photographs.

The first photograph, plate one, looking south east, shows clearly a circular cropmark indicating a bank between the two ditches. It is important to note that a ditch is on the inside of the enclosure. Plate 2 shows that the post-medieval ridge and furrow overlies the circular cropmark site, indicating that it pre-dates the post-medieval period and it is therefore of some antiquity. Also shown on the photograph is an abandoned 4.5 inch heavy anti-aircraft battery, showing four concrete gun positions with ready-use ammunition stores. A command post is situated at the rear and close by to the right are the remains of a radar installation which was originally surrounded by an octagonal fenced enclosure.

On plate 1, the site shows up in the top right hand corner as a perfectly circular shape, clearly not a natural feature, deliberately concentric and clearly made by human activity. The housing construction work taking place on plate 2 provides us with a gauge to scale the site. From this the cropmark is nearly four houses in length and has been calibrated by computer to be approximately 50 metres in diameter. The semi-detached houses in front of the site, numbers 2 and 4 Monks Way, are each approximately 15 metres in length.

Another aerial photograph taken by the County Borough Surveyor's office on the 21st August 1945 (North Shields Lib. PLA 5/1/30) showed only the ridge and furrow. This suggests that the site appears only under particular environmental conditions and has remained un-noticed until now.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the site has remained so far undetected. The photographs were taken for non-

archaeological purposes and the cropmark easily escapes the notice of an un-trained eye. After their initial use by the Borough Surveyors office for development purposes the photographs entered the local studies collection at North Shields Library. The photographs were brought to my attention as an anti aircraft battery (now destroyed) appears on them. Later I noticed this archaeological feature and further researches were initiated.

## DESCRIPTION OF SITE

The circular shape and outer and inner ditches of this cropmark suggest a number of possibilities: One, that the feature is a Class A Neolithic henge. (The other subdivision of classification cannot be attributed as evidence of entrances remains inconclusive.) Two, that it could be a Bronze Age ring cairn. (Clive Hart, pers comm).

Plate 1 shows that approximately 25% of the sites circular shape displays no entrances. We can assume that an entrance or entrances will be on the other side of the site, but unfortunately, because of the height and oblique angle the aerial photograph was taken from and the dark contrast of the photograph, any features here remain hidden. Plate 2 also fails to show any sign of an entrance or entrances. However, if we accept the negative computer enhancement (fig. 1) of the photograph to be accurate then the site, with two entrances, would fall into the Class IIA categorisation. This plate shows two possible entrances orientated WNW and SSE with a ploughed out bank to the right of the enhancement. Further weight of evidence for entrances may come from the asymmetrical position of the entrances in relation to the circular cropmark, which do not pass through the axes of the site. This has been noted on many Class II sites including Arbor Low and Broadlea (Harding & Lee 1987, 42). Many of the one-entrance sites are ovoid rather than circular in plan (ibid).

This site may represent the most northerly class A henge so far discovered; delineated by an external and

internal ditch with a central bank. Most other class A sites are situated in a group in Eastern England (Burl 1991, 13), the most northerly being situated in North Yorkshire (Thornborough complex, Thornborough north SE 281 801).

The site is close to sea and river, which would serve for communication and trade as well as providing the prehistoric community with both river and estuarine resources. The low lying positions of henges in the majority of cases have been associated with proximity to streams and rivers (Harding & Lee 1987, 31-34).

At present the site is largely inaccessible for excavation purposes as modern housing and gardens now cover part of the central area, southern bank and outer ditch (fig. 2). The front gardens, path and minor road adjacent to the motorway (A1058) cover the northern area and inner ditch. The extreme northern part of the site underlies part of the A1058 (Beach Road) motorway west of the traffic island. However, it may be possible for a small exploration trench to be sunk close to the northern perimeter of the site. It was very fortunate that the aerial photography recorded the site before the encroachment of the expanding urban development.

## ADJACENT SITES

The earliest occupational evidence in the area comes from Tynemouth Priory (NZ 373 695) where Iron Age/Romano British roundhouses were recorded in 1963 (Jobey 1967, 33-41). Jobey also carried out a series of excavations on a rectangular enclosure at Marden (NZ 353 708) from which a coin of Antonine date was recovered (Miket 1984, 90). Part of an Anglo Saxon cross shaft known as the 'Monks Stone' was originally situated a few hundred metres away from the circular cropmark site. The street names have been influenced by its presence with names such as Monks Way and Monkstone Crescent. (The cross shaft was moved within the grounds of Tynemouth Priory in 1936).

## FINDS

A Bronze Age flint scraper was recently discovered at Tynemouth Long Sands Beach (NZ 367 704) following storms (C. Hart, pers comm.). This may represent the closest prehistoric find to the cropmark site so far recorded.

A Neolithic polished stone axe of a reworked Langdale type was found in 1961 (NZ 367 709), half a mile from the site in the garden of 19 Barrington Avenue, Marden (Miket 1984, 88). The axe head remains in private ownership.

Two prehistoric cist burials have been found in the area. The first cist was discovered in May 1790 at Billy Mill, North Shields (NZ 336 692) and contained an inhumation (Miket 1984, 78). In 1884 at Chirton, North Shields (NZ 343 683) another cist burial was recorded with an inhumation (ibid).

## CONCLUSION

It is unlikely given the archaeological evidence that the site represents anything other than a prehistoric monument. The circular shape and inner ditch are typical of a period of construction in the British late Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods (Burl & Piper 1979, 277). The covering of the site by post-medieval ridge and furrow certainly proves the site is older than this agricultural cover and provides us with a *terminus post quem*. Construction during the modern period may therefore be discounted: the feature cannot be later than the ridge and furrow.

The seasonal appearance of the site may also be demonstrated with reference to an aerial photograph taken over the site in August 1945 (NS Lib PLA 5/1/30). This photograph shows only ridge and furrow over the site with the gun battery to the right of the picture. Varying environmental conditions clearly influence the visibility of the site, demonstrating it to be a seasonal cropmark.

The geographical situation of the site must also be taken into consideration and compared with that of similar monuments elsewhere, most of which are situated on low lying areas close to river and sea. We must also consider the close proximity of contemporary finds and the two cist burials which confirm prehistoric activity in the area.

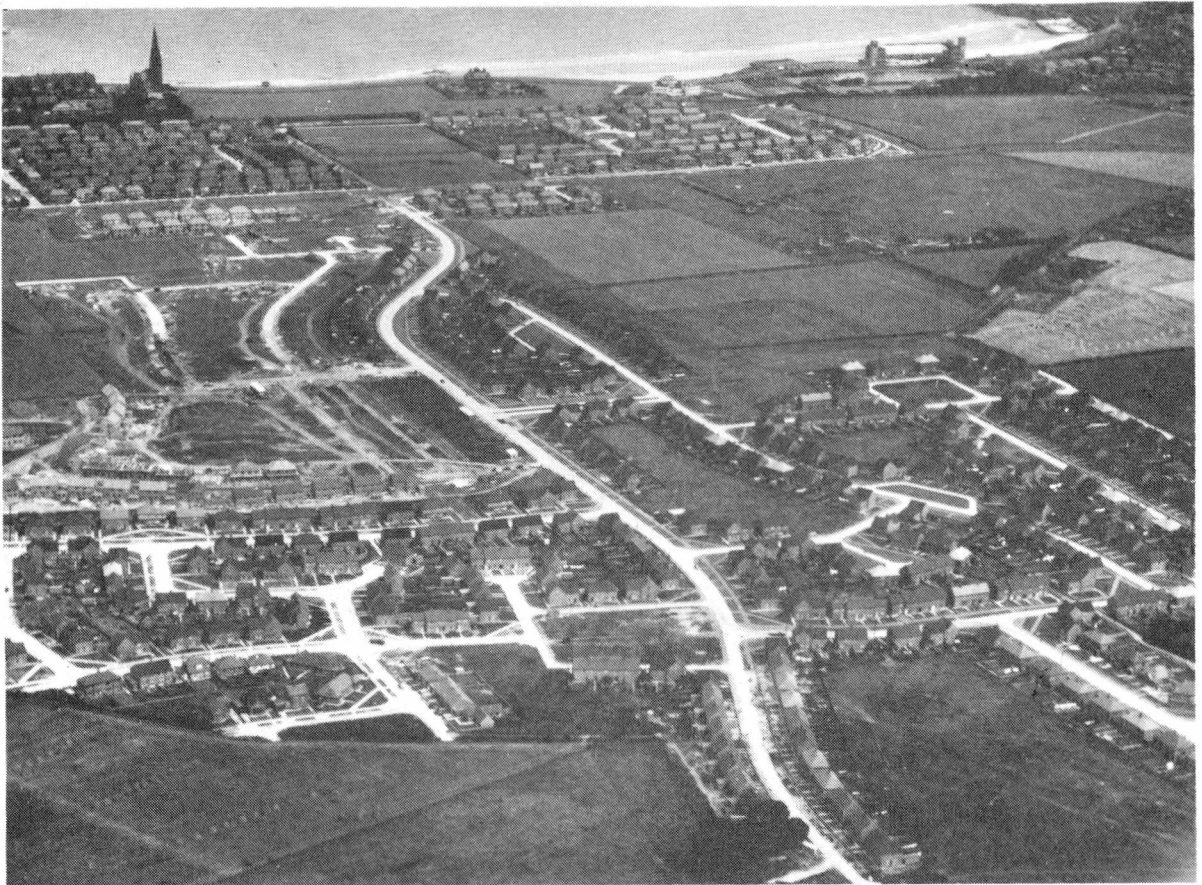
I believe the evidence summarised above suggests very strongly that the feature may well be a henge monument, an important discovery to add to the known distribution of such monuments.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

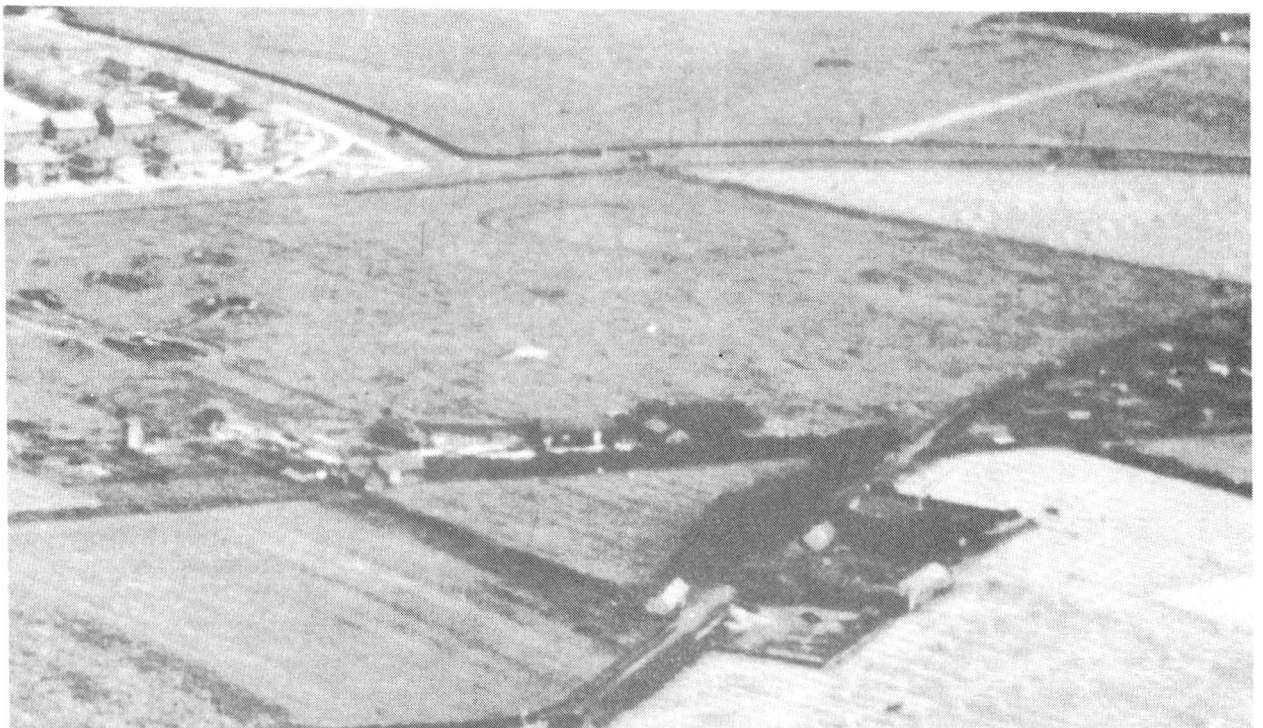
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*Plate 1. View south east, showing the circular cropmark in the top right hand corner of the picture. Incorrectly dated to 1956. This is earlier than plate 2 as no housing development is taking place and may have been taken in 1950 (NS Lib PLA 5/2/ 141).*



*Plate 1a. Computer enhancement of plate 1 looking south east showing the circular cropmark in the centre of the picture.*



*Plate 2. View south over the River Tyne showing the bank and ditches of the circular site, scaled by the housing development and covered by ridge and furrow. The gun positions of a WWII half battery is shown at the bottom right of the picture. 6 April 1956 NS Lib (PLA 5/1/129).*



*Plate 2a. Computer enhancement of Plate 2 looking south, showing bank and ditches scaled by housing development and covered by ridge and furrow.*

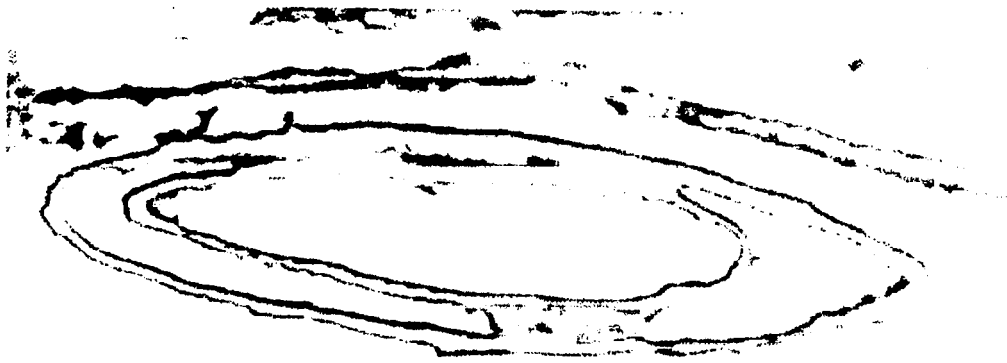


Fig. 1. Negative computer enhancement of Plate 1 looking south east. Two possible entrances are visible orientated WNW and SSE. A ploughed-out bank is shown to the right of the enhancement.

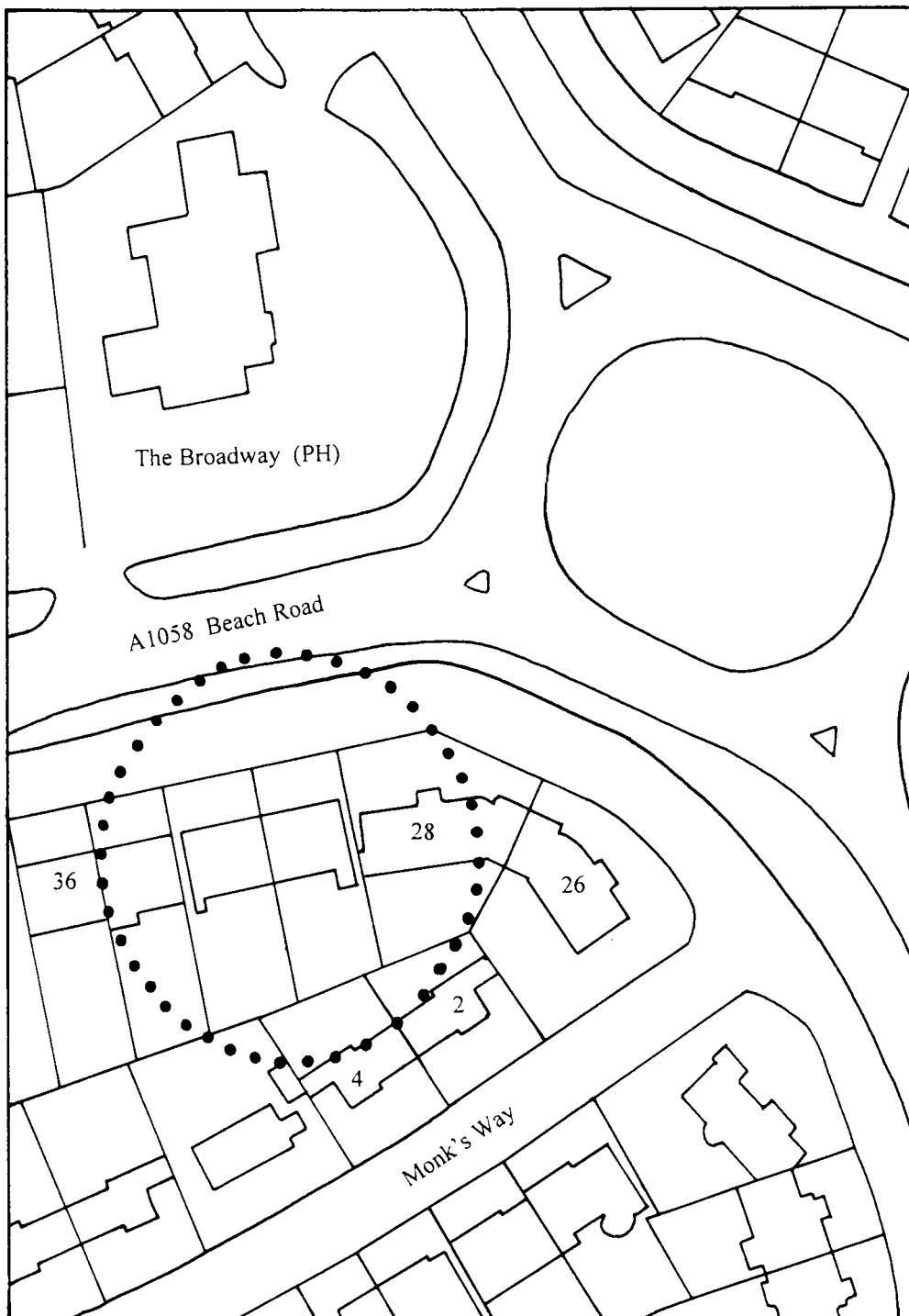


Fig. 2. Plan showing the extent of the site which measures approximately 50 metres in diameter (drawn by Hugh Willmott, based on OS (Crown Copyright) sheet 3670SW).