



Survey of Great Asby Scar, areas O, P, Q, R, S, T, U

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Westmorland Dales Landscape Project (WDLP), Lunesdale Archaeology Society (LAS) undertook a level 1 survey of areas of Great Asby Scar which were not being covered by the WDLP survey undertaken by Northern Archaeological Associates (NAA) and community volunteers. A small part of the scar had been informally surveyed a few years earlier by Jan Hicks and a few LAS members, just out of interest to see what was there. This was never taken further, but the results were passed to NAA for inclusion in their report where appropriate.

The current survey was undertaken over several months of 2019, 2020 and 2021, chiefly by Jan Hicks and Bob Abram, with the assistance of Jane Abram, Alison Blair, John Trippier, Judith Anstee and Simon Hopkin. The nature of the terrain meant that days when surveys could be carried out were limited by the weather – the limestone pavement becomes treacherous and unsafe when wet, slippery or icy or in very high winds.

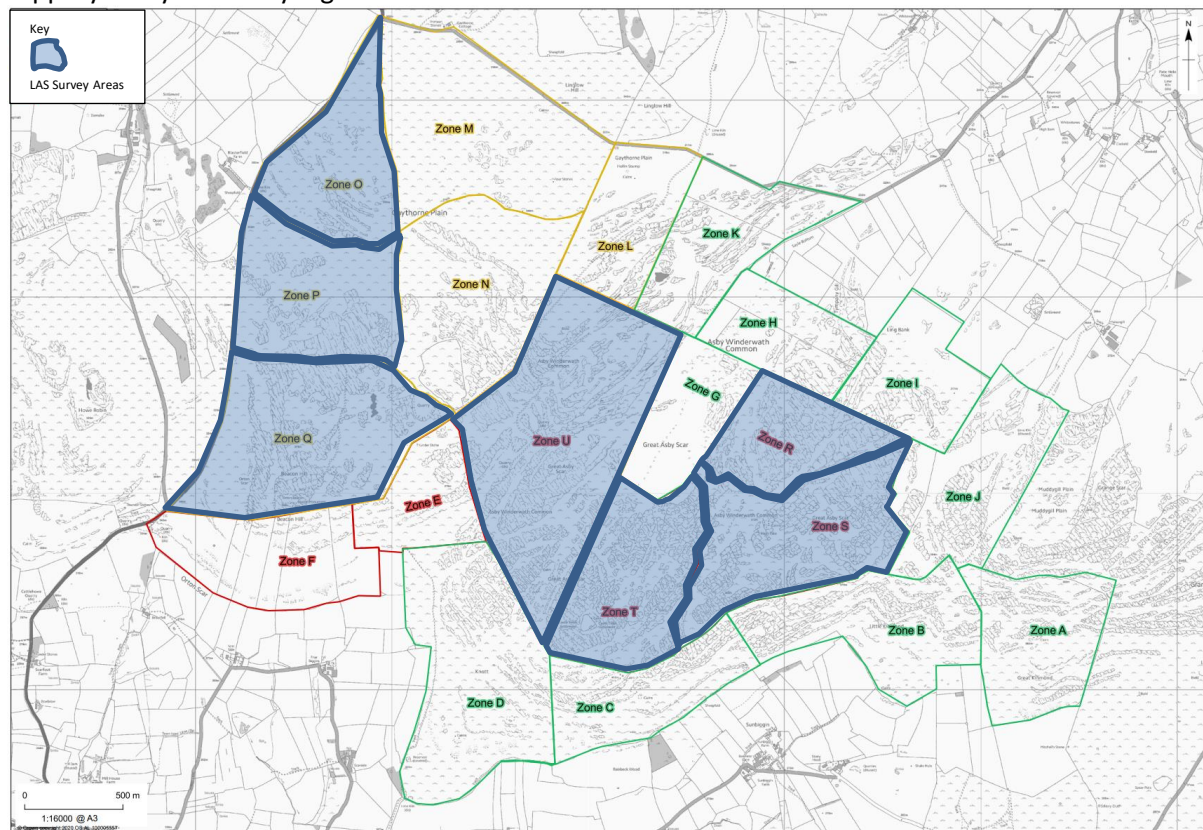


Figure 1 Survey Areas - Based on NAA Survey Areas Map

Areas O and P comprised mainly rough grassland on the northern edge of the limestone. The other areas were largely exposed limestone pavement, interspersed with grassy valleys. Descending the slopes to the North, the limestone pavement often gave way to areas of shallow poor soil covered in ling and heather through which the limestone protruded to a greater or lesser extent.

The pavement itself varied from large expanses of sloping limestone with narrow grikes to flatter expanses with deep wide grikes, often ending abruptly at steep cliff-like edges. Large areas of the pavement were covered in debris where the top layers of the stone had been quarried away and removed, often for sale as decorative water-worn limestone. This process has obviously removed all



evidence of any previous human activity in the area, explaining the presence of apparently “blank” areas in the archaeological record in an area otherwise rich in sites.

LAS has not carried a desk based assessment as the entire area was covered by NAA in their report [Community-Based Archaeological Landscape Survey, Great Asby Scar, Westmorland Dales, Yorkshire Dales National Park, report no: **NAA 20/97**, November 2020].

METHODOLOGY

Grassy areas O and P were walked in transects, and features were recorded as they were found. This approach was not generally possible on the limestone pavement. Here, a slow irregular walk was punctuated by frequent stops when the area around was viewed. If a possible feature was seen it was approached and recorded if appropriate. Another viewing was then taken from this point, and so features were “chased”. The irregular nature of the landscape meant that features were often apparent from one direction and not from another, so an area of ground was covered multiple times, increasing the likelihood of picking up features.

Features were recorded on a hand held GPS, measured and described and most were photographed. They were assigned a number as found.

NATURE OF SITES

As might be expected, the nature of the sites recorded differed between the grassy areas and the pavement.

Signs of settlement, including probable hut circles and the footings of small buildings, were found within the sheltered grassy valleys. Cairnfields associated with clearance and large burial cairns were found in the valleys and across the wide expanses of grass. Prominent stony cairns were much more common on the limestone pavement and are likely to be markers associated with routeways or areas considered significant in some way, although small stony heaps in the grass may also be marker cairns

Sites interpreted as associated with animal management were present in both grass and on the edges of pavement areas. Enclosures were formed by grassy banks, many of which contained stone. On the pavement, enclosures were made by enhancing natural large gaps in the limestone with stones piled on top of the grikes to increase their height and to block off passages. Short runs of low wall may also be associated with the movement of livestock, forcing the direction in which they can move. Only one traditional sheepfold was found, adjacent to the parish boundary wall. Bields, constructed to provide shelter for sheep, were most common in the grassy areas, but also present on the lower pavement.

The pavement areas were characterised largely by cairns, some bields, and extensive lengths of low (generally single stone high) walls, some running for >1km. These were interpreted as likely prehistoric boundaries.

There was also a large number of placed stones wedged upright into the grikes. Some of these showed extensive lichen coverage on the N side (and sometimes on both sides), suggesting great age, and may be prehistoric. Others seem to be more recent and associated with areas of quarrying, possibly marking out an individual’s allotted quarrying area. Several other placed stones which do not fall into this category, being laid across two uprights or simply placed in a prominent position.



Indications of industry in the LAS surveyed area were almost entirely limited to quarries, some of which were very large. One or two contained small stone shelters. As well as the surface quarrying referred to above, there are many discrete quarries which were used for walling and building stone, and also as a source of gate stoups - several large abandoned gate stoups can be seen in some of the quarried areas. Some of the quarries had stones piled onto the edges of grikes to make enclosures, probably for shelter.

One mine was located, and one area of bell pits. There was one lime kiln within the survey area.

DISTRIBUTION OF SITES

The largest number of sites recorded came from the high limestone pavement, areas S, T and U. Areas S and T contain a particularly high number of records, in part accounted for by a very large number of upright stones. Although area U is contiguous with S & T, and has a large amount of pavement, its management may have been different in the past as there are large areas of dense heather and ling, which are absent from areas S and T. In the recent past both areas were grazed by sheep, but grazing is now restricted to a small number of cattle, mostly over the winter. Features such as low banks and enclosures may have been covered by this growth of vegetation and currently impossible to see, although surveys were undertaken at different times of year and with differing degrees of vegetation cover.

Boundaries

The major walls were not surveyed as several were covered by NAA in their survey of adjoining areas. Most are post-mediaeval. The date of the parish boundary wall is unknown, but the presence of large orthostats or relocated erratics in the base in many areas suggest that it is at least mediaeval.

Features which we describe as relict walls are obviously some sort of boundary feature. Many run for considerable distances across the pavement, composed of lines of placed stones on top of the natural limestone. Some incorporate larger stones wedged or chocked into an upright position into grikes. They can be intermittent, probably as a result of erosion and movement of stones by either natural means or by humans or animals, but they are usually easy to trace. They often extend into or across grassy areas, where they are often on low banks.



Figure 2 Relict walls stretching across grassy areas

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Geological features of the limestone suggest that much of what is now bare limestone pavement carried a covering of soil and vegetation in antiquity. This has been eroded away by livestock grazing, tree and shrub removal by humans, and the action of wind and weather. At least some of these lines of stones may therefore be a remnant of an earth bank/hedge-bank that has been eroded along with soils that once covered the limestone pavement. Although most are now only one stone high they could have been stock proof boundaries, or may just indicate land divisions. Some are associated with enclosures. Their age is unknown, but one or two align on cairns and they may well be prehistoric boundaries and markers of territories or field systems.



Figure 3. Relict walls on limestone pavement

Livestock management

There have been many bields, providing shelter for livestock from wind and weather within the survey areas. Most are located on the grassy areas but one or two are present in the high pavements. These are usually L-shaped, and vary widely in length and height. Their condition is variable. Some are almost completely derelict, while others are substantial, and show evidence of recent use by the cattle that are grazed on the common in winter.



Figure 3 Some bields are relatively intact, but most are ruinous



A variety of enclosures which may have been used for corralling livestock were seen. Many were made by enhancing large grikes in the limestone, one end being blocked either naturally or with boulders, and the sides of the grike heightened with rough stone walling or large boulders.



Figure 4 Grikes enhanced with stones piled on the edges to make enclosures

Some of the large enclosures, up to 16m in diameter, seen in the grassy areas may also have been used for livestock. These generally comprise grass-covered stony banks, circular or rectangular in shape. The extant banks are too low to contain livestock, but may have been higher or topped with a dead hedge. Some of these enclosures are found attached to or at the end of relict walls.



Figure 5 Banks forming large enclosures up to 16m in diameter

There is only one traditional sheepfold in the survey area, right on the top of the common and attached to the parish boundary wall.

Settlements

A variety of settlements were found, all in the lower grassy areas. Several individual circular features were considered to be hut circles rather than livestock pounds on the basis of their smaller size and location. While some were located on flat grassy areas, others were built into scoops of gentle slopes, and in at least one case (site **217**) coursed stonework was seen at the rear of the enclosure. Some of these had small enclosures or banks associated with them.



Figure 6 Possible roundhouses, built into a bank, and free standing

Two areas of enclosures and possible fields (e.g. site **374**) close together were found close to Castle Folds, a scheduled Iron Age hillfort-type structure on a limestone outcrop. A third, comprising at least one hut circle and a cairn associated with a series of low banks, lies within area O (sites **482-485**). The latter was reported by Cherry and Cherry (*Prehistoric habitation sites on the limestone uplands of eastern Cumbria, 1989*), but was not surveyed by them. A plane table survey was carried out by LAS on 6 June 2021.

There was one small derelict stone building with an attached enclosure close to an established track (site **243**).



Figure 7 Small derelict single cell building with enclosure

One grassy valley leading into an area of pavement had been closed off with a low bank, forming an enclosure, with the footprint of a small rectangular building in the shelter of the limestone edge (site **168**).



Figure 8 Sheltered valley with two banks constructed across the bottom and a small building at the top below the limestone edge (close up right)

The footprint of a rectangular 2-cell building was found adjacent to the present Appleby road (site **307**). The dates of these settlement areas have not been established.

Cairns

Generally speaking, cairns in the form of bare stone heaps of varying height were found on the pavement, while lower grass-covered mounds of stone with a spread out base were present in the grassy areas, although some small stony heaps were present in grassed areas. No attempt has been made to classify cairns on the basis of function or age, although some of the very large circular stony mounds are almost certainly burials.

The stone bare, usually more or less conical, stone heaps are interpreted as markers, either of routes or territories, or perhaps of significant places. Many, but by no means all, lie on the edges of limestone exposures. They vary greatly in height and breadth, in degree of tumble, and in visibility.



Figure 9 Stone cairns on limestone edge and on grass

An exception to this is the group of 5 exceptionally tall conical cairns on the outcrop called High Pike (site **45**). There is a local tale that these were erected as targets for tanks training on Gaythorne plain, over the valley to the north. The truth or otherwise of this has not been ascertained, but certainly there is a clear line of sight to Gaythorne plain, and while rusted remains of ordnance can be found in several areas of the common it is particularly abundant around High Pike. All 5 cairns have had the tops damaged, but that is common to a lot of the cairns.



Figure 10 Set of 5 five tall cairns on High Pike

The grass-covered stony mounds are generally thought to be associated with clearance, and many lie on the edge of grassy areas. They often occur in small groups.



Figure 11 Cairns in grassland – probably clearance

However, there are some very large mounds (e.g. site **170**), which are likely to be burials. Most of these seem to have been disturbed by digging in from the top. This probably represents excavation by antiquarians – it is known that Canon Greenwell explored many of the cairns in the area in the 1800s.



Figure 12 Burial cairn previously excavated from the top by antiquarians (side and top views)

Industry

One mine shaft and a small area of bell pits were discovered in the northern grassy area approaching Gaythorne plain.

The main industrial activity was quarrying. The survey records a large number of discrete quarries, some of which were close to walls and were obviously used as a local source for that purpose. Other quarries were obviously worked on a more commercial basis. Some were divided into bays.

The very large quarries were too large to be measured and recorded, covering huge areas (and can clearly be seen on Aerial Photographic Maps). Some have associated built up roads and have been worked in the recent past. One contains a metal padlocked building.

The limestone removed from these quarries may have had several uses, including walls, roads, and a source of limestone for burning to lime either in local lime kilns or commercially. At least one quarry was a source of gate posts (stoups) and abandoned large blocks were still present.

The middle of the twentieth century saw a fashion for waterworn limestone as garden feature and large areas of the limestone pavement have had the surface removed, leaving a wide spread of clutter. These areas were not able to be mapped as they were so vast.

One result of this quarrying activity is that whole areas appear to be devoid of all archaeological features because they have been removed. This makes any attempt to interpret the regional distribution of the sites difficult.

Placed stones

One of the enigmatic features of the limestone pavement is the presence of slabs of limestone wedged deep into grikes or occasionally held upright with chock stones. Over 100 such stones were recorded, varying widely in size and visibility. Some were deeply wedged in the grikes, yet barely protruded above them. Most, however, extended well above the pavement. Several were located at the margins, where the pavement gives way to grass, although this may not have been the case when they were originally placed. Their age and function then remains unknown, but the almost total lichen coverage of most of them suggests great age. Their distribution is uneven, some areas being devoid of such stones while others have large numbers; yet other areas have just one or two. This distribution cannot be entirely accounted for by their removal during quarrying.



Figure 13 Typical upright stones wedged into grikes

Similar stones, generally with much less lichen and in less dense distributions, are present in areas of surface quarrying and may be markers of individual “plots” or entitlements. It is noteworthy that during quarrying, or as a process of erosion slabs of limestone are frequently found to have fallen partly into grikes and appear to be standing on edge. These slabs can generally be moved about easily, and only those which were firmly and apparently deliberately wedged were recorded as standing/upright stones.

A few sites are recorded as placed stones rather than upright stones. These consist of arrangements of stones, such as one placed across two others (site **238**), or a small arrangement of blocks around an intermittent spring.

Ordnance

Gaythorne Plain to the north was used for tank training in the second world war, and shells were obviously fired south across the valley. The rusted remains of shells are fairly common and their location is recorded, but they have not been photographed or assigned a number. They are probably transitory features, as people are known to pick them up and move or take them away.



Figure 14 Ordnance is moved into collections by passers by

CONCLUSIONS

The upland limestone pavement is an area which has been extensively used and modified by human management, habitation, burials, land clearance and division of the land. Dating of the sites found in this survey is problematic. Many cairns and placed stones may be prehistoric, marking routes or territories or may have a ritual significance. Other cairns, bields and shelters are likely to be mediaeval and post-mediaeval. Exploitation of the land has continued through to recent times with



massive quarrying for stone, erection of walls and fences, creation of tracks and the continued use of fields and animal shelters.

There has previously been little study of the archaeology of this area. A lot has been lost in the areas which have been quarried, particularly due to the extensive removal of the 'decorative' weathered limestone from the surface. Cairns and ancient walls have been robbed to provide materials for new walls. A limited number of sites are scheduled and few of the observed sites are recorded on the Historic Environment Record.

Despite the environmental protection given to the area current threats are posed by changes in farming practices. Lack of grazing means that scrub is growing in the grikes, and heather and ling are covering grassed areas. Cattle are trampling some of the more ephemeral earthworks and rubbing against cairns. Current livestock management is also creating erosion and damage due to quad bikes.

Environmental Protection of the Survey Area

- High Level Stewardship Target Area (Agri-Environmental Schemes)
- Area of High Groundwater Vulnerability
- Great Asby Scar Nature Reserve (NNR)
- Limestone Pavement Order (*part survey area*)
- Local & National Nature Reserves (*part survey area*)
- *Nine Scheduled Sites of Historic Significance*
- *Objective 2*
- *Drinking Water Safeguard Zone – Surface Water*
- *Medium Climatic Change Vulnerability Buffer Zone*
- *Registered Common Land (part survey area)*
- *Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 – Access*