

Introduction

Black Mount is a prominent and isolated massive to the west of the village of Dolphinton on the A 702 and north of the village of Elsrickle on the A 721. The hill is composed almost exclusively of Trachyte, an igneous extrusive rock of Lower Old Red Sandstone. The summit is at 516m OD. Above 300m the hill is predominantly heather covered with coarse grazing but cultivation and improved grasslands reach 300m OD and considerably higher on the SW 'tail' of the hill above the village of Elsrickle.

Site No 1

NT 07334595 Ring Enclosure. Possible Enclosed Cremation Cemetery
Solar alignments to mid winter sunset and sunrise

Lying 650m W of the summit of Black Mount and near the eastern extremity of a ridge which slopes gently down from Borland Hill, there is a ring enclosure within which there is a cairn. The site lies at 380m OD.

The 19m diameter enclosure is composed of an earth bank measuring 3m broad by 0.5m high. The grassy bank has no visible stone and it has a flattish top about 1m wide. There is an apparent depression around the summit of the bank, this may be attributable to animals walking around the top of it or may represent an aspect of the monument construction.

The cairn is 5m diameter by 0.3m high and is offset within the west side of the enclosure having a gap of 1m between it and the internal edge of the surrounding bank. The stony cairn has a flattish top but there is a 1m diameter depression in the centre, this is about 0.1m below the top of the cairn.

There is no apparent gap in the circuit of the bank and judging from the uniformity of the enclosure as it survives, it is unlikely that there was an entrance gap in the bank. There is no evidence of turf stripping around the enclosure as is sometimes seen at ring enclosures and which indicates the area where the construction materials were taken from. Similarly the interior appears to have the same angle (almost level) of sloping surface as the exterior ground surrounding the site. Therefore it appears that the bank material, whether originally soil or turf, has been brought to the site. A circa 0.75m irregular stone is showing above the ground level outside and on the immediate western side of the enclosure, it may be outcropping rock, it has no obvious significance.

There is some rush infestation, mostly in the form of a patch on the east side and on the bank at that side, there is also some patchy heather around the bank, otherwise the vegetation on and surrounding the site is short cropped grass.

On the 20th December 1998, and as viewed from the centre of this site, the sun was observed to set within 1° to the left of the summit of Tinto Hill (231° magnetic at that time) and the prominent cairn which lies there. The last glimpse of the sun disappeared before reaching the summit cairn at approximately 15.30 GMT. Tinto hill is 16.5km to the SW and the cairn is at 707m OD.

The event makes a convincing mid winter solstice sunset alignment, and implies that the enclosure may have been deliberately sited to facilitate observation of this event.

Furthermore, if a line between Tinto Hill and the enclosure is extended to the NE, the prominent summit of Mendick Hill (51° magnetic in 1998), 6.8km distant and 451m OD, can be seen centrally within the cross over of the NW flank of Black Mount and a subsidiary summit.

It is conjectured that this alignment will be a close indicator of mid summer sunrise. Should this prove to be so, it will be possible to observe and record the longest and shortest days of each year from the ring enclosure.

Site No 2

NT 06484580 Ring Enclosure. Possible Enclosed Cremation Cemetery
Solar alignment to mid winter sunset

Lying 1.5km W of the summit of Black Mount and on the western flank of the same hill, on a slightly elevated knoll where the ground immediately drops down to the Winter Burn on the NE, there is a ring enclosure. The site lies at 300m OD.

The site principally consists of a double bank of stone but which has been modified on the SW side. The alteration to the original circular enclosure has extended the size of the site and now appears as an entrance.

By reference to the plan (originally surveyed at 1: 100) it can be seen that the original enclosure/s may have measured 20m in overall diameter, while the internal bank may have been 16m in overall diameter. Each of the two banks consist of angular stone up to 0.25m, none of the exposed stone being earth fast and there is no indication of a wall face or kerb. The banks are no higher than about 0.3m when measured from the interior which is featureless apart from a slight hummock (A) within the southern side of the enclosure. Each of the banks vary in width from 1m to 2m, although the widest part of the exterior bank is probably due to subsidence of the sloping ground on the W side.

The apparent alterations which are now seen as a gap on the southern side appear to respect the principal of the original double bank, being extended outwards by up to 5m, running parallel with what may have been the original line of the enclosure and then curving inwards again to form an entrance.

The grass covered site is surrounded by heather, making it distinctive, especially when view from the higher slopes to the NE.

On the 20th December 1998, from this site, the sun was observed to set exactly on the summit of Tinto Hill and behind the prominent cairn which lies there. The sunset began at 15.21 and was complete at 15.27 GMT. Tinto hill is 16 km to the SW and the cairn is at 707m OD.

The event makes a convincing mid winter solstice sunset alignment, and implies that the enclosure may have been deliberately sited to facilitate observation of this event.

Site No 3

NT 07454575 Ring Enclosure. Surveyed at 1:1000

Lying on the NW flank of Black Mount at 400m OD there is a ring enclosure measuring 13m in overall diameter. The grassy banks measure 3m in breadth by 0.5m high. There is a prominent gap of 1.5m on the lower and western side of the enclosure. The interior drops in level by 0.5m down to the gap in the bank. The interior is featureless excepting for a patch of heather growing in the centre. The site lies within a group of sub rectangular enclosures (site No 4).

Site No 4

NT 07454575 Enclosures. Surveyed at 1:1000

Lying on the NW flank of Black Mount at 400m OD there are a series of enclosures which form two close groups flanking an old track which runs N/S across the western flank of Black Mount and also the dry upper gully of the Winter Burn which runs E/W. The enclosures, which are all irregular quadrilaterals in shape, consist of straight banks up to 3m wide but seldom as high as 0.5m, most are around 0.3m high. The enclosed areas range in size from 60 square metres to circa 1400 square metres. They appear to have been made at different times since few of the banks run in line, although four of the northerly group have been made in approximate line running E/W up the fairly steep slope of the hill. At some points (not shown on plan) there are gaps in the banks, but these may be due to erosion rather than being formal entrances, since there are few obvious entrances in the enclosures.
(see discussion below)

Site No 5

NT 08404668 Ring enclosures

On a level summit on the SE side of Hamel Hill and just above the track way leading across Hamel Hill to White Hill, there are two ring enclosures within 22m of each other. The southerly of the two is better preserved; it is smaller at 14m in overall diameter with banks measuring 2m wide by 0.5m high. There is no obvious gap in the bank to denote an entrance. An electricity pole has been installed within the ring which has an otherwise featureless, level interior covered in coarse ungrazed grasses.

The larger enclosure measures 22m in overall diameter with banks spreading to 3m wide by 0.5m high. A 1m wide drain has recently been cut through the entire site and three smaller drains are cut within it, (presumably for tree planting which has never been done). The vegetation within and around the site is the same as the smaller enclosure which is slightly higher and commands a better view.

Site No 6

NT 08604563 Ring enclosure

On the SE flank of Black Mount at circa 350m OD there is a ring enclosure. It measures 17m in overall diameter with a well preserved grassy bank spreading to 3m wide by 0.7m high. There is no obvious gap in the bank to denote an entrance into the level featureless interior. The enclosure lies on a projecting spur of the hill, the ground on all sides of the site drop immediately and steeply down from it excepting that to the NW where there is a small level patch of ground.

Site No 7

NT 08554555 Cairn

On the SE flank of Black Mount at circa 350m OD there is a small cairn. The cairn is situated on a ridge between two tributaries of Mill Burn. It measures 4.5m in diameter by 0.6m high but appears to have been disturbed by the removal of some stone.

Site No 8

NT 086452 Rig and furrow fields

Faint traces of broad rig can be seen running in a NW/SE direction in the improved field. The rigs run over the summit of the ridge there and can be seen to continue into the former plantation strip on the SE where they are better preserved.

NT08554555

On the lower face and broadest part of a prominent ridge lying between two tributaries of Mill Burn there are seven rigs of different lengths. (see No 7 above)

NT 08604560

On the lower flank of the hill face there are a few broad rigs.

NT 08704560

On the lower flank of the hill face there are a few broad rigs.

NT 08704580

On the steeper face of the hill and above the patches of rig to the SW there are narrower rigs running straight down the hill face.

Site No 9

NT 071457 Enclosure. Shooting butt (?)

Near the south western extremity of a ridge between Winter Burn and a southern tributary there is a poorly preserved enclosure measuring 5m by 4m with hummocky banks of 1m wide by 0.3m high. The site is covered in short heather and grasses the same as the surrounding ground.

Site No 10

NT 06604596 Enclosure. Shooting butt (?)

On the SW flank of Borland Hill and just above the severe break of slope at 400m OD down to the Winter Burn, further SW, there is a small quarried area of about 2m internal diameter with the upcast spread around the excavation forming a bank of no more than 0.4m high. On the lower SW side there is an entrance or possible drain leading out. Shooting butts similar to this feature and its location on the hill flank have been recorded in several places in Clydesdale. However, butts are usually found space equidistantly and in lines for organised driving of game birds. This is an isolated example.

This location makes an excellent viewing point for Site No 2 above.

Site No 11

NT 08704557 Ring Enclosure

On the lower SW flank of Black Mount and east of the head water of Mill Burn there is a ring enclosure measuring 18m in overall diameter. The ring is traversed by a post and wire fence and the part on the SE side of the fence, in an improved field, is badly eroded. On the SW side and outside the ring there is an appendage enclosure which loops against the ring, it measures 11m in length by about 2m wide internally. All the surviving banks on the unimproved side of the fence are about 1m wide by 0.3m high. The site is given on early OS maps as "Sheep Ree" and on later maps as "Sheep Fold".

Site No 12

NT 07904495

Ring enclosure, rig and furrow field

On the steep lower flank of Black Mount, immediately above the fence limiting the improved ground there is a rig and furrow field system of four broad rigs 4.5m wide. The rigs are different lengths. One rig is distinctly cut by a ring enclosure measuring 16m in overall diameter with bank of 2m wide and 0.5m high. The bank has no obvious entrance although a sheep pad gives the appearance of a gap on the upper side. The terminus of the cut rig appears as a mound within the enclosure where the ground drops in level by 1.5m. This is a good example where the phasing of a site can be appreciated. The ring clearly post dates the rig and is therefore most likely to be of post medieval date.

Discussion

Ring enclosures are a site type which have not been studied enough to allow a satisfactory explanation as to their date or function. They have mainly been described as 'old sheep folds' especially on early editions of the Ordnance Survey maps. However it has long been recognised (Christison, 1887, Ward 1992 (1)) that many of these circular banked enclosures may belong to another or indeed several classifications of monument.

The following observations have been made regarding ring enclosures in southern Scotland.

Some appear to have no obvious entrances; they can be of different forms and sizes even when found within a group; groups may be up to six in number; location aspects also vary from steep hill slopes to more level sites; some enclosures have features within them, usually small cairns.

Many ring enclosures, which are mostly seen as grassy banks, but sometimes as stony banks, are near to drystane built sheep stells giving rise to the belief that the enclosures were the turf precursors of the stone stells. This is probably true for some of them. The apparent, and in some cases obvious absence of an entrance tends to rule some enclosures out as sheep folds. One possibility for such sites may be stack stands, to contain winter fodder, on the hill and ready for use. For both stack enclosures and sheep folds the banks may have been supplemented with fences of some sort. The date for such sites would probably be between the 17th and early 19th centuries. Stone building for stells and other stock enclosures commenced in the later 18th century and continued through the 19th century when post and wire fences came into vogue.

An alternative interpretation for some ring enclosures is that they are of pre-historic date. Belonging to the Bronze Age and fulfilling a funerary and ritual function. Such sites have been excavated in Clydesdale (Ward, 1992(2)) and Tweeddale (RCAHMS, 1967) as well as elsewhere. These are termed Enclosed Cremation Cemeteries, because cremation burials are often found within them. Some sites may also be hut circles, however, in most cases in Clydesdale this would be the least likely interpretation which could be applied.

The ring enclosures on Black Mount are fairly typical of the range to be found and therefore present the same problem as to their true function. However, the two sites; No's 1 and 2 have the added significance that there are demonstrable mid winter solar alignments to the prominent cairn on Tinto Hill, this adds weight to the explanation offered here that these enclosures are most probably Enclosed Cremation Cemeteries and therefore dating to 4000 years ago or more.

The sub rectangular enclosures (No 4) are a type of feature recorded elsewhere in Clydesdale as single examples, but not in such large numbers and in close association as those at Black Mount. This grouping is therefore atypical so far as recorded sites in Clydesdale go. It is unlikely that these sites represent aspects of arable enclosure, such enclosures are probably stock pounding features and the presence of so many in such a group and straddling the track way over the hill may indicate that this was a drove route. Forest (1816) gives a 'drove loan' on his map from the farm of Howburn to Oggscastle crossing over the SE flank of Black Mount and there is another drove loan given near Newbigging. It is unlikely that these enclosures pre date the 17th century, however, they are poorly understood at the time of this report.

The ring enclosure lying beside and among the rectangular 'fields' is somewhat more problematic (see above), without recourse to further investigative techniques, the age and function of this site remains enigmatic.

The rig and furrow field system (No 8) probably dates to the 17th - 18th century. However, these field systems are still poorly understood and it is possibly that they may be earlier medieval.

The small cairn (No 7) is most likely to be a funerary monument given its isolation on the ridge.

References

- Christison, D 1887 Ancient Remains in Manor Parish. Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland.(1887 - 88) 192 - 207
- Ward, T 1992(1) Upper Clydesdale Through the Ages M74 Project. Biggar Museum Trust
- Ward, T 1992(2) Camps Reservoir Excavations. Interim Report. Biggar Museum Trust
- RCAHMS 1967 Peeblesshire an Inventory of Ancient Monuments. Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. Vol 1 Wierd Law 64 - 66

Footnote:

T Ward visited the site No 1 on 19th June 2000 to record the sunrise. A video was taken of the event which was unsuccessful due to cloud on the horizon. However the sun was noted to progress from about 53° magnetic to 54° over a given time (see video).

Standing in the centre of the ring enclosure the bearing to the summit of Tinto Hill is 231° and to the summit of Mendick Hill it is 51° magnetic.