

Report on the archaeological sites and monuments on Nisbet Farm, Coulter, South Lanarkshire.

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Introduction

Nisbet Farm (OS 1:10,000 NT 03 SW) (NT 037 329) lies 1.5km south east of the village of Coulter that is on the A 702 road. The farm economy is primarily upland pastoral and nearly all of the land is above 250m OD.

The National Monuments Records for Scotland (NMRS) lists and describes no fewer than nineteen archaeological sites on the farm, and to that number may be added a further two that are reported in full here.

Gazetteer of Sites

The sites are given here in numerical order as given and described in the NMRS:

NT 03 SW/ 1	Cultivation terraces	2 of	NT 0481 3308
NT 03 SW/ 2	Enclosure		NT 0465 3393
			(part only on Nisbet Farm)
NT 03 SW/ 14	Hill fort		NT 0425 3311
NT 03 SW/ 15	Hill fort		NT 0443 3329
NT 03 SW/ 16	Hill fort		NT 0438 3294
NT 03 SW/ 23	Crannog (site of)		NT 0427 3354
NT 03 SW/ 24	Ring enclosure (sheep fold?)		NT 0428 3300
NT 03 SW/ 45	Hill fort		NT 0354 3216
NT 03 SW/ 46	Cultivation terraces		NT 037 327
NT 03 SW/ 47	Cultivation terraces	7 of	NT 037 320
NT 03 SW/ 48	Cultivation terraces	8 of	NT 034 320
NT 03 SW/ 51	Enclosure		NT 0384 3221 (see below)
NT 03 SW/ 55	Cultivation terraces	3 of	NT 0442 3307
NT 03 SW/ 79	Quarries		NT 036 323
NT 03 SW/ 80	Enclosure		NT 045 320 (see below)
NT 03 SW/ 81	Farmstead (possible)		NT 045 319 (see below)
NT 03 SW/ 86	Enclosure		NT 047 308
NT 03 SW/ 87	Burnt mound		NT 0415 3303
NT 03 SW/ 88	Burnt mound		NT 0400 3243

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Site A, new site

NT 04023 32621 Burnt mound

On the lower west flank of Black Hill (or Gawky Hill) there is a burnt mound. The mound is slightly kidney shaped and measures 7m by 6.5m overall and by 1m high on the lower west side but only 0.3m high on the open upper side. It is distinctive by a cover of shorter grass than that surrounding it.

Site B, new site

NT 03846 32441 Buchts, enclosure

On the lower west flank of Black Hill (or Gawky Hill) there is a system of buchts within an enclosure. The D shaped enclosure measures c 50m by 30m overall and is open on the west side. Appended to the interior of the north bank there are two buchts that measure 5m long by 1.5m wide. Within the southern bank but not attached to it, are a further two buchts which measure 4m long by 1.5m. All of the buchts are open at the west sides. The entire feature is built of grassy banks now no greater than 2m wide by 0.5m high.

To the west of here and about 20m away are a group of more amorphous features, in poor preservation. A possible rectangular structure measures c4m by 2m; an oval feature is c4m by 1.5 and a circular bank is c5m diameter with a 2m interior. All are banks no more than 0.3m high.

Site C, new site

NT 03820 32286 Modern disturbance?

A level area measuring 8m by 4m appears to be the result of recent disturbance.

Site 51, discussion and re-interpretation

This site is given in the NMRS as 'old cot' (cottage), although the report states it is unlikely to be a habitation. The site is as described although the "bulge" on the lower bank as given by NMRS is a D shaped compartment of c 3m by 3m. The function of this feature is unknown although it may have been a storage area since the main enclosures are clearly a form of animal husbandry, probably buchts for sheep milking. The "courtyard" as given in NMRS is the catchments area to facilitate driving sheep into the main complex of two open-ended chambers.

NMRS photographs B48803 – 48805 show this site and are marked NT03SW/81.

Discussion

Nisbet Farm has a high ratio of archaeological sites to the size of its area; however, the farm lies within a general district, which has a dense distribution of sites and monuments, and of most periods.

The sites at Nisbet can be divided into four main groups in terms of chronology, this is based on available evidence and working back in time, some sites are more problematic for interpretation, group 5;

- 1 Post medieval period c 1600 to present.
- 2 Possible medieval / Dark Ages
- 3 Iron Age c 500BC – 500AD
- 4 Bronze Age c 500BC – 2500BC
- 5 Indeterminate/relatively recent

1 The post medieval period is reflected in the sheep milking buchts and the enclosure at NT 03 SW/51, and possibly to some extent in the more uniform systems of rig and furrow cultivation, which are aligned down the hill slopes in a more or less straight form. Sheep were brought down from the hill to the buchts to be milked after weaning the lambs. Produce was used to make butter and cheese. The buchts were often placed fairly near to the farm, unlike shielings that are always remote locations where flocks were being kept on higher summer pastures and away from unenclosed crops on the farm.

2 The horizontal and oblique running cultivation terraces of which Nisbet Farm and the adjacent Shaw Hill to the north have an exceptional grouping are more problematic to date. When they were recorded in Lanarkshire and Peeblesshire in the 1960's for the purposes of the first major archaeological surveys of these areas (RCAHMS 1967 and 1978), it was then believed they might date to the Dark Ages and be associated with the Anglian influence in the south east of Scotland, which prevailed around the 6th to 9th centuries AD. This position has been challenged in recent years and a later, perhaps medieval date, has been suggested on the basis of the morphology of the terraces. The fact is, there is no definite dating evidence for these distinctive field systems, and their builders remain anonymous.

3 The so-called Iron Age period is well known for defensive settlements, and the series at Nisbet make an interesting grouping, being so closely distributed. They do however make up a larger group if taken with nearby sites to the west and east. The two hill top forts (No's 14 and 45) are well preserved and have excellent viewpoints to the surrounding landscape.

The putative crannog site (23) has not been traced archaeologically; it lies in an arable field which most likely formed part of an ancient loch scenario and which has subsequently been drained, both to the east and to the west. The problem with this site is that, if it is indeed the location of a loch dwelling, it would probably have timber piles or sub structure in its construction. The area has been drained continuously, and more effectively since the 19th century when the crannog was first recorded. Thus the water table in the field will be reduced, allowing any waterlogged deposits of organic material to dry and decay. It is such deposits that are important on crannog sites since they seldom survive in other types of monuments. The forts and crannog are fully described in the Lanarkshire Inventory of Ancient Monuments (RCAHMS 1978)

4 The Bronze Age period is most likely to be represented by the three burnt mounds. Recently dated examples in both Clydesdale and Tweeddale have been shown to be early Bronze Age c 4500 years ago. In themselves the Nisbet examples make an interesting group and are part of an ever-growing number of such sites to be discovered recently in Clydesdale and Tweeddale. Others have been found nearby at Snaip Hill and at Coulterallers Farm.

Burnt mounds are important aspects of the pre-historic landscape since they allow a guaranteed opportunity to accurately date them, and to understand the plant ecology prevailing, through the study of the charcoal and possible pollen, that the deposits contain. They are still poorly understood in terms of the activities that were practised on the sites.

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It is known that the piles of heat reddened and cracked rocks and charcoal, were accrued as a consequence of heating water using fire-baked stones.

The purpose of this is operation is still debated. While most archaeologists favour some form of cooking activity, this is far from being proven for most sites, some of which are in quite awkward locations (such as the higher example at Nisbet). An activity involving cleansing such as a sauna may be more probable.

5 Two sites fall into this category in terms of function and age; sites 24 and 86.

Site 24 is a grassy ring bank and is described in the NMRS as 'sheep fold' on the basis of it having a possible entrance. It measures 8m in diameter. However, in Clydesdale and Tweeddale there are an increasing number of similar sites being recorded, which are now, and indeed for over one hundred years, being questioned as to their interpretation as sheepfolds. The question principally hangs over sites that clearly have no entrances into the enclosures. An alternative explanation is that they may be some type of pre-historic funerary enclosure such as Enclosed Cremation cemeteries of the Bronze Age.

Site 86 is a peculiar feature of intermittent banks and has been interpreted as a possible plantation boundary of fairly recent date, however it lies on the summit of a high hilltop, typical of those defended in the Iron Age and arguably not suitable as a plantation location. The summit of the hill is conical shaped and may have offered little scope for defensive settlement. On balance the case for it being recent is more convincing but the function and date are unknown.

Footnote regarding sites 51, 80, 81 and Site B above:

The writer visited the location of sites 80 and 81 and no archaeological sites were seen. The farmer has lambing pens and sheep feeding fences there, but they leave no surface features.

With reference to oblique aerial photographs held in NMRS; photos B 48799 – B 48805 are given as sites 80 and 81, however, they are actually of Site B as described here. The NMRS photographs do not cover the area of the map upon which sites 80 and 81 are indicated. Sites 80 and 81 in NMRS appear to be confused with site 51 and Site B. **Sites 80 and 81 therefore do not exist and should be deleted from the record.**

Furthermore, photos C55660 – 55663 shows site B (this report) and are marked incorrectly as NT03SW/51. The buchts are clearly shown and the three amorphous features also appear but they are much less evident than the rest of the site. The buchts have obviously been the target of the photographer.

Conclusion

The sites and monuments on Nisbet Farm are a microcosm of much of the surrounding landscape that has a large number of visible and reasonably well-understood monuments of the past. However, some of the more enigmatic sites at Nisbet offer important opportunities to learn more through research and study. The archaeological sites at Nisbet in their entirety are a significant resource for a better understanding of the past, in terms of local, regional and national significance.

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References

Peeblesshire Vol's I and II. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1967.

Lanarkshire Prehistoric and Roman Monuments. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1978

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