



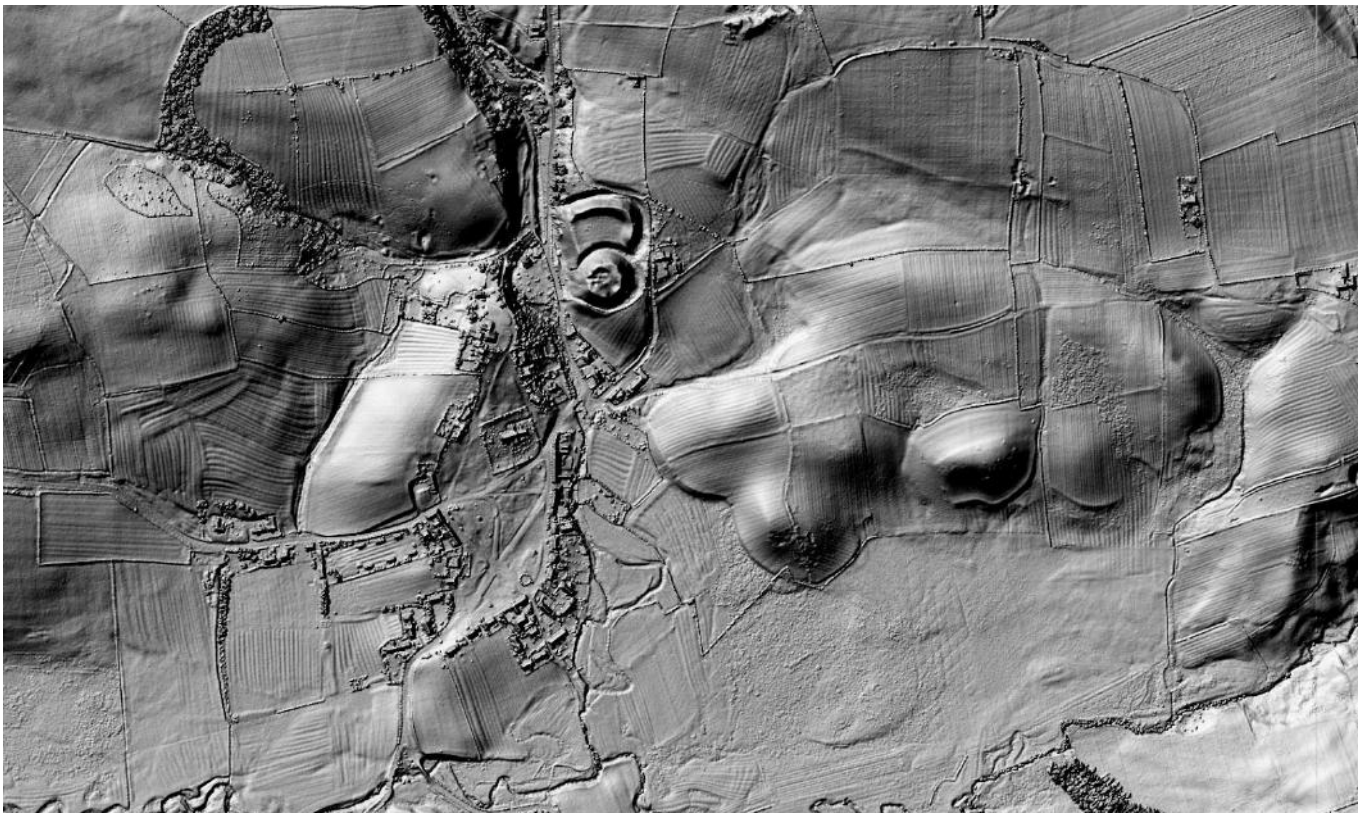
Redesdale

Landscapes through Time

Landscape Area 4

Research and Report by Malcolm McCallum, Julian Philipson,
Alison Simmance and Richard Simmance

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This report is one of a series of six, produced by project volunteers during the *Redesdale Landscapes through Time* project, part of the NLHF-funded *Revitalising Redesdale* Landscape Partnership scheme. The project was managed by Karen Collins (Revitalising Redesdale Heritage & Engagement Officer).

The project background, methodology and general results are summarised in a general Project Report by the Project Consultant, Paul Frodsham (ORACLE Heritage Services). The Project Report and all six Area Reports are available on the Revitalising Redesdale website: <https://www.revitalisingredesdale.org.uk/>

Any questions about the project prior to September 2022 should be addressed to Karen Collins: karen.collins@nnpa.org.uk

From September 2022 onwards, please address any questions to Paul Frodsham (ORACLE Heritage Services): paulfrodsham@hotmail.com



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Cover illustration

Lidar imagery of part of Area 4. This image, extracted from the actual imagery used by volunteers during the Landscapes through Time project, shows the village of Elsdon with its splendid motte and bailey castle, surrounded by well-preserved remnants of its extensive ridge-and-furrow field system. The lack of earlier earthworks in this particular area, such as Iron Age or Roman settlements which are numerous in the southern part of Area 4 (see the first illustration in this report) and in the other areas studied during this project, is initially perhaps surprising. It may be that there never were any here, or they may have been destroyed by medieval or post-medieval settlement or agriculture. Volunteers used this imagery, along with other sources, to construct 'landscape biographies' for each of the project's six areas.

Redesdale Landscapes through time - Area 4

Introduction

We have considered three main sources of information about the area assigned to us, namely Elsdon village and surroundings with Raylees. These sources were

- The Lidar images, the resulting listing of sites and the mapping supplied to us
- Notes on palynology in Frodsham's Archaeology in the National Park, useful for supplementing very sparse information on pre-history
- Books on history – Hodgson, Hope Dodds, Charlton, Elsdon Village Atlas, O'Donnell et al

The overall pattern is that periods up to the Norman conquest provide very little information, while thereafter there is increasing evidence in the form of contemporaneous documents, later syntheses, and physical structures.

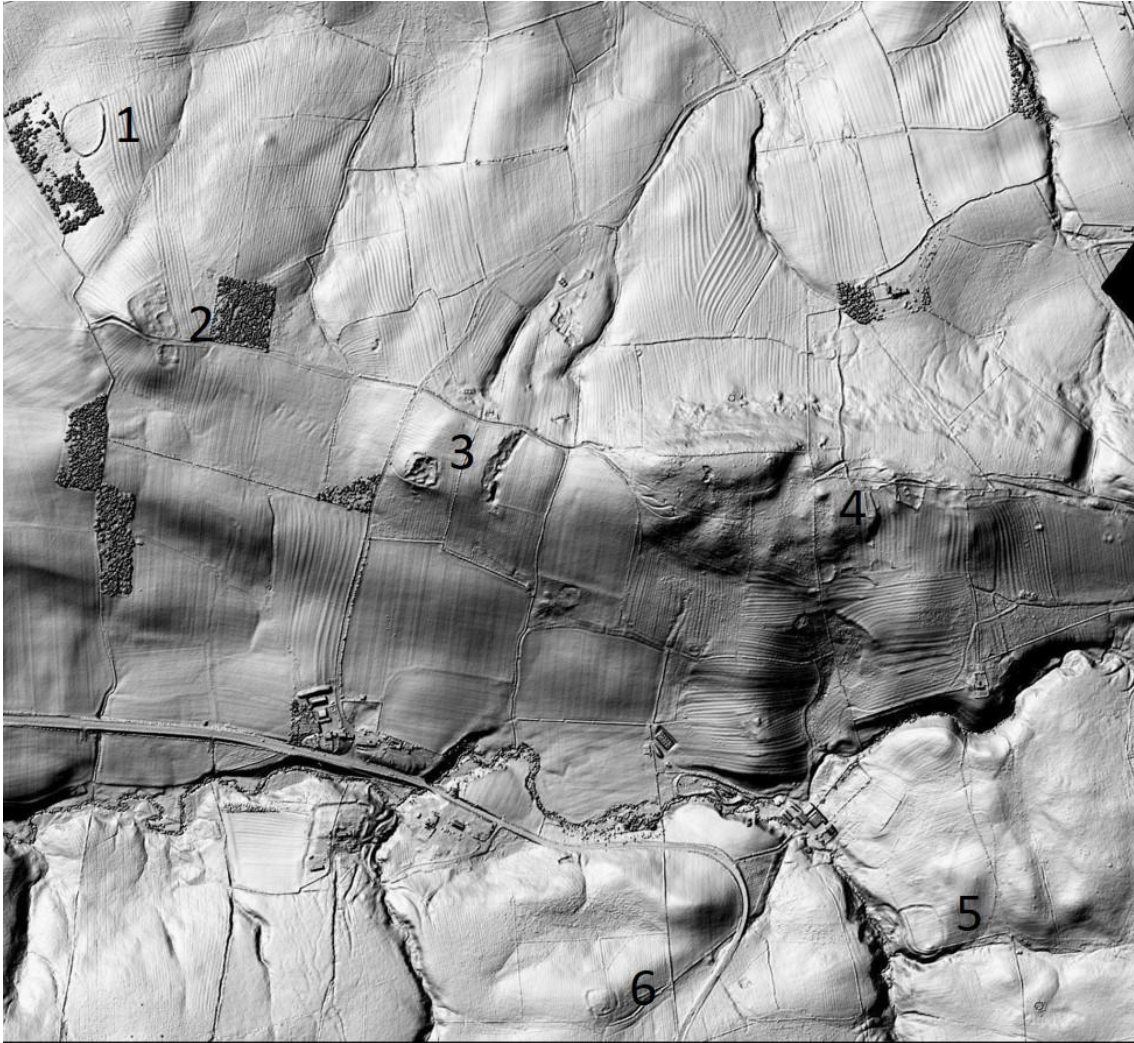
Pre-history

It is known that Mesolithic peoples were present in Redesdale, with flint shards found, but scattered and at low density. There were no finds within our study area. Pollen records show Neolithic inhabitants, the first farmers, were present in the area, with cereal pollens found at Brownchesters as early as BC4000, and at Steng Moss about BC2300.

In area 4 there is a possible Neolithic round barrow on Gallow Hill (lying at circa 250 metres OD), though it seems difficult to distinguish from later remains on a favourable hill-top site.

Two Bronze age axe heads were found on low, formerly marshy, ground west of Elsdon Village, and another two outside area 4 near East Nook, suggesting ritual disposal.

Remains become very slightly more dense once we reach the Iron age, with a possible barrow west of Todholes (lying at circa 222 Metres OD), a possible hill fort at Haining Head (circa 185 metres OD), a definite hill fort south-east of Ravenscleugh (circa 225 metres OD) and three settlement sites – Haining Head, Castle Hill (circa 225 metres OD), Gallow Hill (circa 250 metres OD) with a further IA/RB settlement on Liberty Hill near Raylees (circa 225 metres OD). It is noticeable that four out of six are sited on a ridge of higher ground, overlooking modern Elsdon while also having a view south and west. One suggestion is that this ridge formed part of a longer ridgeway running eastwards as far as Netherwitton and linking to the west with the hollow way running through the IA/RB sites at Haining Head. These sites are echoed by other sites of that era across the valley above Otterburn, with hill forts at Camp Hill and Fawdon Hill. It appears to be likely that all these enclosed settlements / hill forts would have been intervisible during their period of occupation (dependent on the then current tree cover – if there was any).



Iron Age sites around Castle Hill and Gallow Hill

- 1 Hill fort at Haining
- 2 Settlement at Haining Head
- 3 Settlement at Castle Hill
- 4 Gallow Hill complex
- 5 Ravenscleugh hill fort
- 6 Enclosure at Liberty Hill

Roman and early mediaeval

Physical remains continue to be sparse in these eras. Dere Street passes us by entirely, and there are no recorded Roman remains within the area, nor any surviving trackway to link local settlements with Dere Street. However, given that the above settlement sites are highly likely to have continued in occupation through at least part of the Roman period, it is possible that they could have been involved with the production of foodstuffs to be traded with the Roman military as Dere Street and the Roman forts at Bremenium (High Rochester), Blakehope and Habitancum (West Woodburn) which all lie within a relatively short distance - less than 10 miles. Pollen records at Steng Moss show

a massive increase in the pollen of herbaceous plants, followed by strong recovery in tree pollens from AD500 to AD865, which suggests marked impacts caused by the arrival and later departure of Romans from the region. At Brownchesters the pattern of apparent farming activity differed from that nearer to Steng Moss, remaining rather static. It seems surprising that subsistence farmers of the age, with primitive technology, should have been able to produce any surplus to supply Roman forces, but the troops must have been able to source much of their needs locally, and over an extended period.

Early Medieval

There seems to be a discontinuity in the archaeological record at some point during this long period, for the hill-top settlements are abandoned in favour of the valley floor. It may be that there was a progressive transition, and that evidence of such activity has been lost, notably through repeated and extensive ploughing.

It seems likely that the village of Elsdon was founded during the early mediaeval period. The name of the village seems to be Old English, the language used by Anglo-Saxon settlers from the fifth century. It was Ellesden in the earliest sources, perhaps signifying Elli's or Aelf's valley. Scholars seem to be undecided whether the replacement of the ancient British peoples by Saxons was sudden and violent or peaceful and gradual, and there is no evidence in our study area to suggest an answer.

Elsdon lies in the valley bottom, whereas earlier peoples seem to have preferred hill tops, if one can judge by surviving remains. One possibility is that the hilltop soils became impoverished by continued cropping, making the valley soils more rewarding, though later ploughing is visible right up to Iron Age sites. Heavy ploughs were not brought into use until the tenth or eleventh century (though a 7th century find has been reported recently) but Anglo-Saxon settlers may have had some better technology more suited to heavier valley soils, making valley settlements more attractive. Nonetheless, the enduring impression is that the Britons had a cultural preference for hill top settlements while the Anglo Saxons preferred the valleys.

Elsdon is set in a natural amphitheatre with hills to the north, south and east and the later (early) Norman motte and bailey castle is situated at a major communications hub and is likely to have been sited at the pre-Norman estate centre (caput) - to paraphrase the Elsdon Historic Village Atlas.

The present church in the village centre lies on the site of an earlier Saxon building, and is dedicated to that popular Saxon, Saint Cuthbert (634 – 687). Note that Lidar suggest that the earliest church site was just to the north of the present church footprint, on the current triangular, grassed area, but an excavation in 2013 found no such remains.

Late Mediaeval and modern

Following the arrival of Normans documentary records become much more available, and we thought it not part of our brief to regurgitate at length what has been better stated by others.

By the end of the 11th century the Umfraville family were established in the liberty of Redesdale, and this period is well recorded by Hodgson. It is possible that the liberty reflects an earlier estate, but evidence is lacking. A number of the important buildings within the village come from this period, notably the motte and bailey, the church and the tower. Despite Elsdon being well situated at a node of routeways, the centre of lordship was moved at an early date to Harbottle, though the manorial court continued to be held there, with two major fairs plus a weekly market. It remained a centre for the whole of the dale until Otterburn grew in importance astride the later turnpike.

The history of the two fairs and markets was caused by a dispute between William and Gilbert de Umfraville, The Elsdon 'affray'. William had established his right to hold a weekly Thursday market and 3-day fair (St. Bartholomew's Fair) by at least 1279 (earliest recorded date). Gilbert had attempted to hold a market and fair on his land resulting in the dispute. This was resolved and Gilbert established his right to hold a rival fair / market in 1293/4. Both continued to be held for some time, although The Border Survey, 1604, does not mention either market but does record payment of an annual rent, 3s and 4d., for two fairs. It appears that both fairs and markets had ceased by C18th. Although the 1731 Elsdon Common Inclosure map does show the sites, as West Fair Moor and East Fair Moor, neither are shown on the first edition OS map of 1866, or since.

West Fair Moor was shown on the 1731 map as being to the west of High Field House (since disappeared) and east of Soppit (Farm). It had a track running through it which was a continuation of the drove road coming down from the Tod Law Pike area / Dere Street, known as the Great Drove Road or Great Drift Road, which joined the road running westwards from Elsdon (turnpiked in 1776) at Elsdon Gate.

East Fair Moor was shown, again on the 1731 map, as being north-east of High Mote and north-west of Landshet (now Landshot). It also had a trackway running through it (part of a drove road used to avoid paying tolls at Elsdon Gate), which ran on towards Landshot, Whiskershiels and beyond. This trackway is still shown on current OS maps, as a mixture of bridleway and minor road.

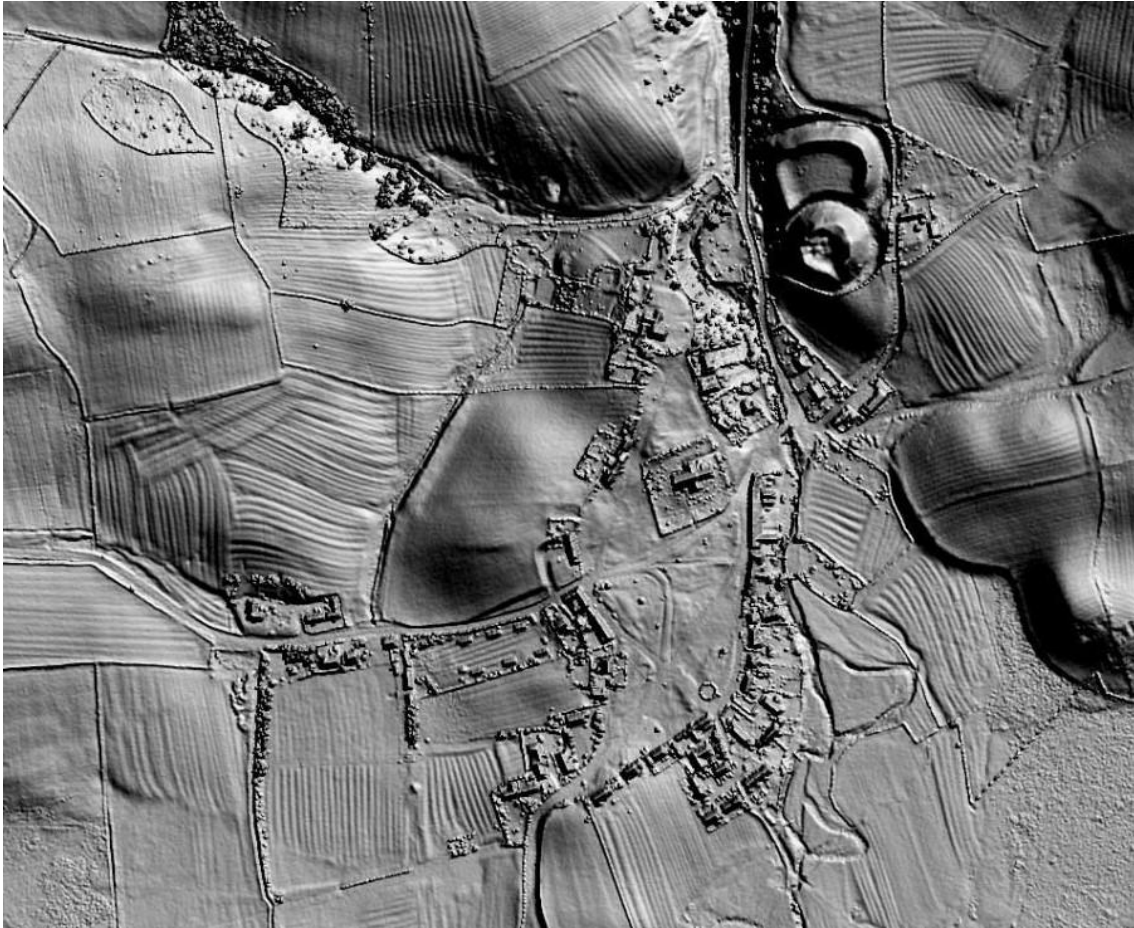
Other physical evidence appears: the pinfold, cockpit, two inns and up to three mills, together with outlying farmsteads. Mining, quarrying and a brickworks lead us towards the modern day.

Elsdon was an important transit point on routes between England and Scotland, particularly for cattle droving. Note that two corridors of 'common or waste' (as labelled on early C19th maps) at the north and south ends of Elsdon village formed droveways (i.e. parts of the Great Drift Road). Thousands of beasts passed through en route to Stagshaw fair and to southern markets far beyond. Apart from the inns, little evidence of their passing remains. No obvious traffic ruts are to be seen, yet the entry and exit from the village seem to have been still unfenced according to the OS map of 1895. There is no obvious provision for cattle to be penned overnight, except possibly at an enclosure beyond Ravenscleugh, so perhaps villagers were ready to admit beasts to fenced paddocks (following enclosure) to benefit from their dung. Remains of a possible drovers' bothy just north of the pinfold was excavated in 2013 and is marked on early OS maps.

Elsdon Village

The form of the village, a nucleated settlement around a village green is perhaps more typical of County Durham than of Northumberland, but the extensive open fields around the village, with grazing waste on higher ground seem to be typical. However, the Historic Village Atlas suggests that the form may derive from a Norman reorganisation.

Elsdon may be contrasted with Harbottle, its successor as manorial centre. The houses of Harbottle line one street in the shadow of the Norman castle, with burgage plots running southwards, and an apparent total absence of open arable fields in the immediate vicinity. To the north and west lay a deerpark, and to the northeast the Lord's demesne, while to the south lay extensive heather-clad common grazings. The nearby township of Sharperton offers yet another model, being a single street with open fields on three sides and on the fourth a small grazing common on the flood plain of the River Coquet.



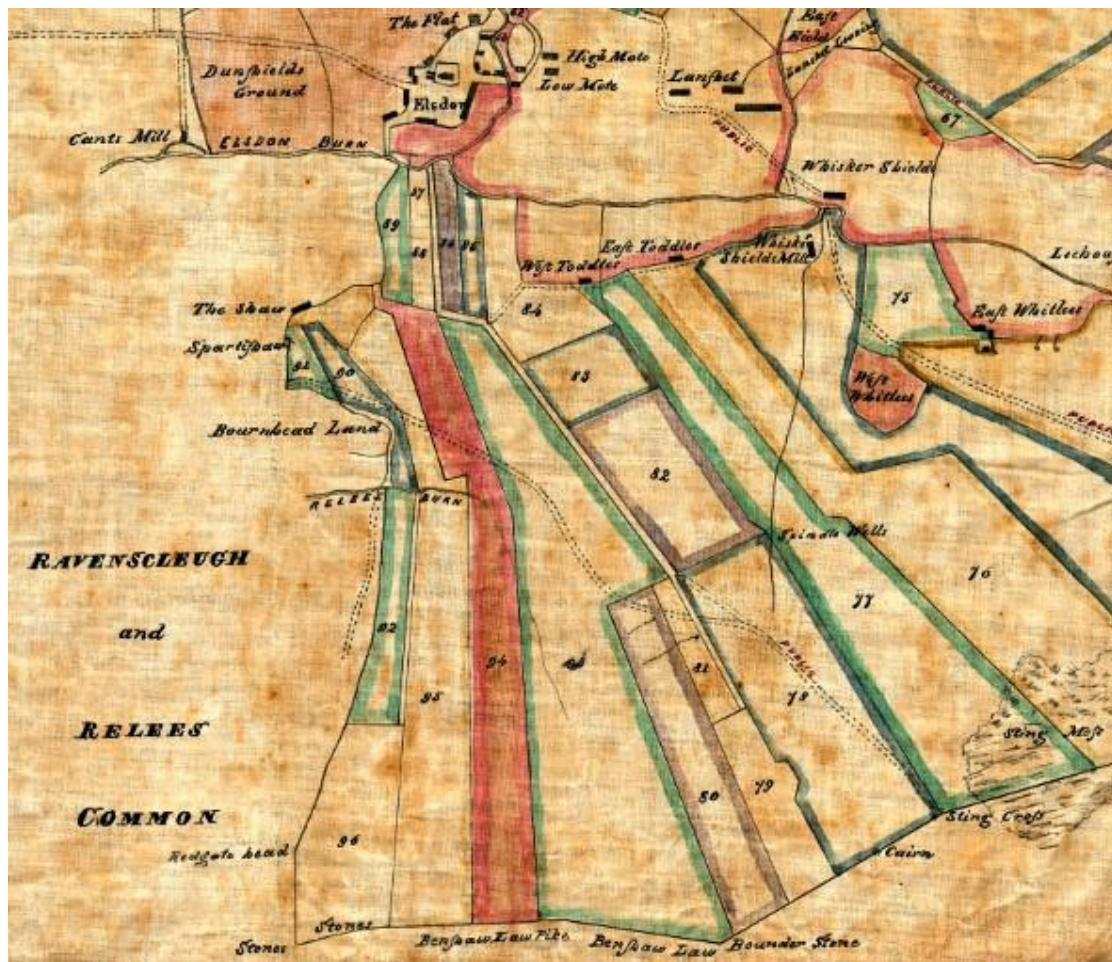
Layout of Elsdon village

Showing motte and bailey, Elsdon Tower, church and village green, with a small part of the rig and furrow surrounding the settlement

Elsdon Common

Viewing the LIDAR images, a striking feature is the intensity of the rig and furrow field system around the village. It must have taken a good number of ploughs, many more oxen, and plenty of ploughmen to farm the open fields of the village, and many hands to harvest the crops.

For most of its existence, the village would have had to be self-sufficient in cereals and other principal foodstuffs, even though the land was not well suited to their growth. Elsdon Common was enclosed in 1731, but that area only ran as far as Soppit and the Shaw, the adjacent land being Raylees and Ravenscleugh Common. The boundary does not seem to follow the parish boundary very closely. The Elsdon allotments of the land to the south and south East, no doubt then classed as waste, are very narrow and rectilinear, and run up to Steng Moss and beyond. The fields on the former Raylees common have a different form, and may have been enclosed by coming into possession of one party though we have no evidence. A feature of the enclosure award is the high number of holders of rights of common who had to be satisfied, possibly a result of the local inheritance custom of gavelkind.



Part of map of common enclosure 1731

It seems that the land remained in cultivation after the 1731 enclosure, for there is a peak in cereal pollen at Steng Moss roughly during the Napoleonic Wars, but nowadays it is almost all rough pasture.

There had been small scale coal mining in the Elsdon area since at least 1723, e.g. a number of 'old shafts' were shown on old OS maps at Gallow Hill, N.W. of Soppit and N.W. of Elsdon Gate. Elsdon Colliery opened in the 1880s just west of Elsdon village by the road towards Soppit, and it closed in 1972. There are also other evidences of industrial enterprise such as the brick works and clay pit to the west of Redshaw and numbers of quarries, otherwise the area remains pretty much agricultural.

Summary

We have evidence that Bronze Age and Iron Age people occupied the area, with the ridge between Elsdon village and Raylees showing some evidence. It would have been good to find more, as there are numerous other sites in Redesdale, but it may be that evidence has been lost to the plough. Limited pollen studies give some idea of the progress and regress of tree clearance carried out to permit arable activity.

The Romans make no discernible mark on the area, despite their lengthy presence in Redesdale.

It seems likely that the valley settlement, now Elsdon village, is a Saxon foundation. There is a regrettable absence of evidence to show how any transition took place.

Documentation for the Norman period and subsequent eras provides a much clearer focus on the area, its existence during the Scotch wars and its emergence into a transport and trading centre in the 18th century, a site of modest mining and quarrying industry, now dedicated to livestock rearing where wide acres once grew arable crops.

Missing evidence

It is not surprising that evidence of Mesolithic activity is wholly absent, nor that only one possible Neolithic site exists in the area. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. More bronze age remains might have been expected, as in some hill-top areas they are quite dense. It is possible that they were present at lower altitudes and have been lost to the plough. Iron age peoples were present on the ridge south of Elsdon village, and again they may have been active at lower levels and their remains destroyed by the plough, though often the plough marks can be seen to skirt abandoned sites.

The absence of information about the early mediaeval period is disappointing, and there seems to be little we can do but exercise imagination, the archaeologist's favourite tool.

Future Research Priorities:

Ravenscleugh enclosed settlement

Gallow Hill complex of sites

Haining Head complex of sites

Castle Hill

Further detailed analysis of the apparently medieval R&F and field systems to investigate possibility of early medieval origins