

## People

### Tom Gledhill

Some six or seven thousand years ago a family of Stone Age people camped for the summer on a small level area of grassland just below the limestone escarpment of Middle Hurth Edge high on the hills between Ettersgill and Langdon Beck. They could look out southward over the heavily forested valley of the Tees to Cronkley Fell while to east and west lay an expanse of open woodland. Behind their campsite was a cave in the limestone from which a small stream issued. These people were hunters and gatherers: hunting deer and wild cattle, fishing, collecting eggs and various plant foods. Though most of their toolkit of flint and chert had been made elsewhere new tools had to be made or re-sharpened and broken and worn out ones replaced. The debris from this together with lost or discarded tools – scrapers, knives and arrowheads – was scattered around the camp.

About three thousand years later the former campsite was re-used by people who constructed a long low mound of earth and stones. We do not know the purpose of this but in building it many of the flints abandoned by the previous occupiers became included in the mound. Later still, just over two thousand years ago another group of people who were farming the area – even growing oats- used this mound as a place to bury beneath small stone cairns the cremated remains of some of their number.

In another five hundred years there was a further development when a bank of earth and boulders was built over the mound enclosing a circular area which apparently had no entrance. The cairns were disturbed and only one was left intact covered by the soil of the enclosure bank. The enclosure and its bank may have had some religious purpose. During all this time the cave in the limestone cliff had been used by wild animals and also at some unknown date for some human burial.

About two hundred years ago these uplands from which the trees had long since disappeared were enclosed into fields by the long straight stone walls which are such a familiar feature of the landscape today.

From 1878 to 1885 the cave was excavated by members of the Backhouse family of York and Darlington. Large Quantities of animal bone and some human remains were discovered and deposited in the Yorkshire Museum. At the same time quarrying was going on at the site, a limekiln was in operation and eventually the cave was almost completely destroyed leaving only a tiny area to be excavated in 1969 -70 by Mr C Simms.

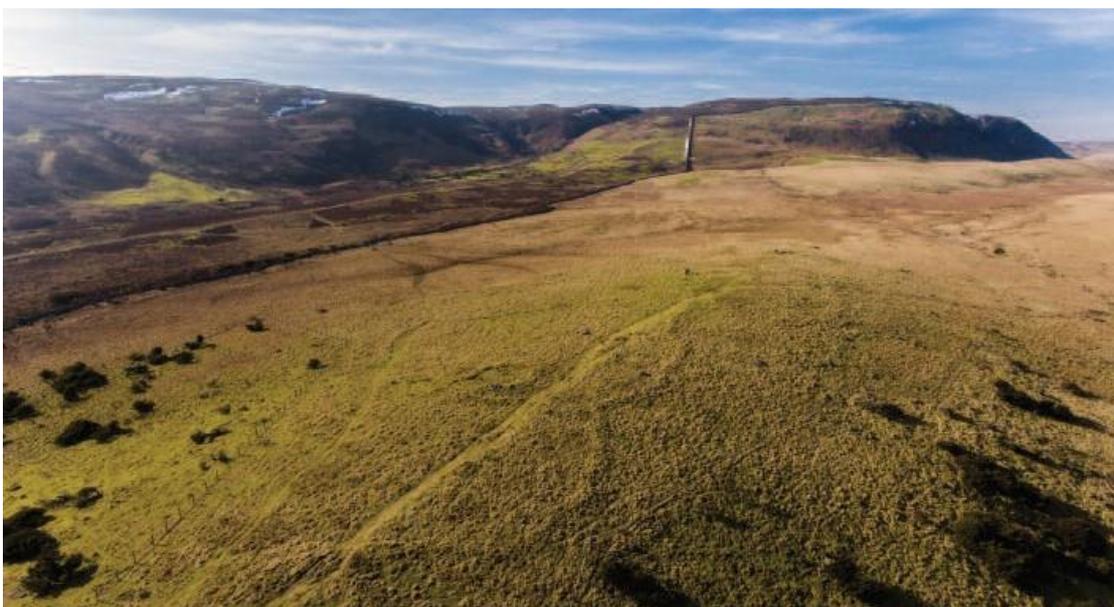
The latest activity at Middle Hurth was the excavation carried out by Dr K. Fairless and the author in 1978-79 and it is from this work that much of the information above has been derived."

The brief account above was written by Dennis Coggins as the introduction to his chapter on the people of Upper Teesdale in the 2003 edition of this book. He and his friend Dr Ken Fairless remain the most significant contributors to our knowledge of the history and archaeology of upper Teesdale. Much of what Dennis wrote in 2003 is still relevant and provides an evocative account of one small part of Teesdale. Since Dennis' account there have been some significant contributions to our understanding of Man's role in the development of the landscape of Upper Teesdale, and our knowledge of the rest of the North Pennines has been nothing short of revolutionised.

Dennis' story starts with Mesolithic hunter gatherers who followed the ice sheet north as it retreated at the end of the last ice age some 12,000 years ago. These small bands of people were part of the North Pennine landscape for the next five and a half thousand years. They saw huge changes as the bare postglacial landscape was colonised first by arctic / alpine vegetation, dwarf shrubs, birch and juniper, later becoming dominated by pine woodland, which in turn gave way to a largely deciduous woodland cover.

Mesolithic hunter gatherers travelled widely using different parts of the landscape at different times of year. Evidence of their presence is widespread, particularly as scatters of flint such as that described by Dennis in the introduction, or the site discovered by Dennis at Stable Crag on the Tees near Wynch Bridge where we can imagine people exploiting the narrowing in the river to catch or spear migrating salmon. Like hunter gatherers the world over these people would have known their environment intimately, exploiting an incredible variety of plants and animals for food, medicine, tools and shelter. There is evidence, particularly from the study of peat cores, that these ancestors of ours actively manipulated the landscape, making small temporary clearings to attract grazing animals and encourage crops of hazel nuts.

The first farmers reached Britain about six and a half thousand years ago, just after the land bridge which had connected Britain to the continent was finally covered by the North Sea. It isn't clear how big a presence these first farmers had in upper Teesdale, but there are intriguing hints of their presence including the long stone mound described by Dennis in his introduction, and at Blackmea Crag Sike above Holwick Scar, again described by Dennis, which consists of two or three small enclosures (fields?) and possibly a rectangular building. Overlying these is a large mound of burnt stones. These mounds of burnt stones, referred to as burnt mounds, now seem to be one of the most common visible remains left by bronze age settlers throughout the North Pennines. When excavated, these mounds of burnt and cracked stones incorporate several hearths and a trough, and like the example at Blackmea Crag Sike are located close to water, often streams or springs. They are often interpreted as saunas, and we may imagine bronze age farmers indulging in ritual cleansing like some North American Indians in the nineteenth century, before going on hunting expeditions in the still largely wooded landscape. Other evidence of bronze age farmers can be seen at Bracken Rigg where the Pennine Way approaches Cronkley farm, where there are the earthwork remains of a hut circle sitting within its own fields.



Bracken Rigg Bronze Age Settlement: A large hut circle can be seen near the centre of the photograph, surrounded by the curving boundaries of a few small fields: © Martin Townsend (Valley Drone)

The impression we get from these glimpses of the activities of early farmers of the late stone age and bronze age are of gradually increasing, but still relatively small scale agricultural activity, probably accompanied by seasonal use of upland grazing and continued hunting of the wild boar, deer and wild cattle which inhabited the woods and grasslands.

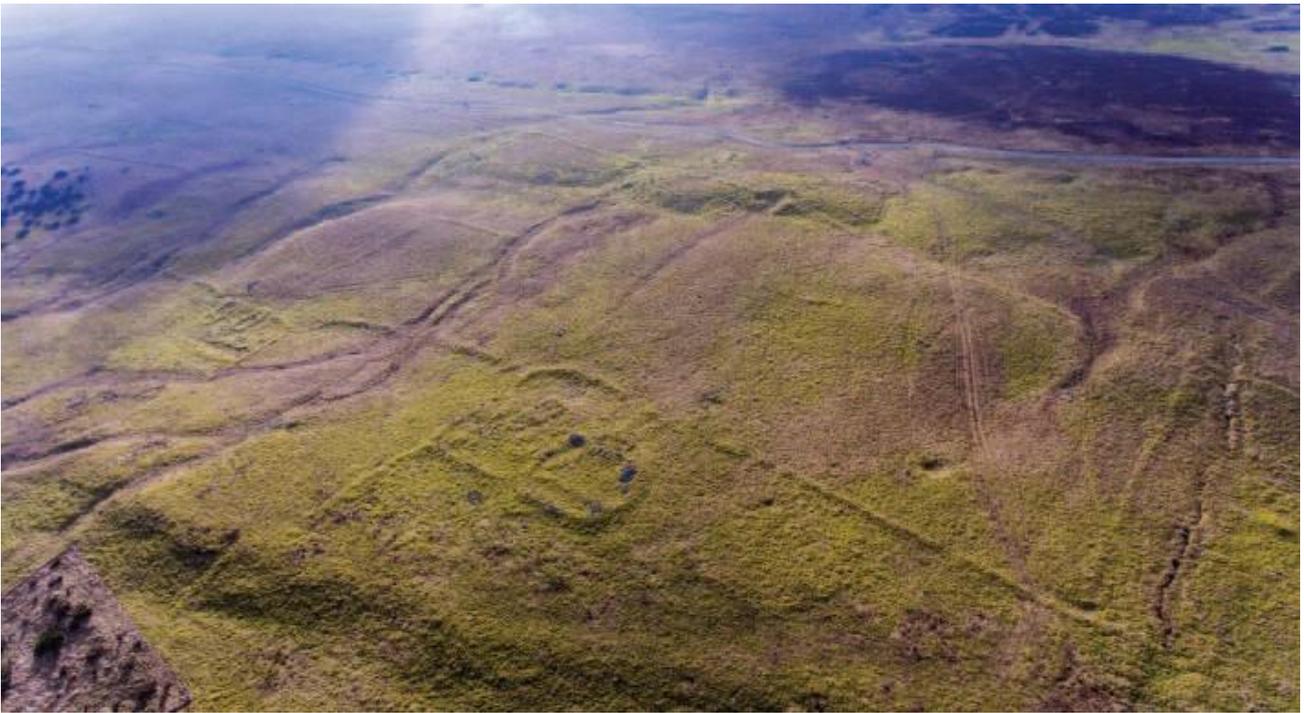
This period of seemingly gradual change came to an end sometime in the late bronze age and early iron age when all over the Pennine uplands there was a massive and widespread loss of woodland cover. The precise cause of this period of woodland clearance is not obvious, but the evidence of pollen profiles in peat cores is very clear; levels of tree pollen fall very low as heather becomes a dominant plant in the uplands for the first time. This environmental evidence is backed up by the archaeology. The remains of Iron Age and Roman period settlements are now known to be widespread throughout the North Pennines. In Teesdale one of the best examples is at Forcegarth where two settlements occupied in the first century AD were excavated by Dennis and Ken and are surrounded by the remains of an extensive field system of small arable and pasture fields.



Force Garth Romano British Settlements: the settlement in the foreground is surrounded by a complex of small rectangular fields and is connected to another settlement by a trackway: © Martin Townsend (Valley Drone)

Roman rule in Britain effectively ended in the early fifth century AD. How quickly this affected Upper Teesdale is unclear, but we do know that in the next five centuries there were several changes in language and religion. We can see the changes in language in place names; Holwick for instance is Anglo Saxon, the language of the first settlers after the retreat of the Roman Empire. By the middle of the seventh century life was probably quite settled in this remote part of the now Christian Kingdom of Northumbria.

All this changed again with Viking coastal raids in the late 8th century culminating in Viking settlement and the establishment of the Viking territory of Danelaw in the 9th century. Upper Teesdale is right on the boundary between ninth century Northumbria and Danelaw and this is reflected by place names too: the many Teesdale settlements have Scandinavian names such as Micklethwaite, in contrast to the mainly Anglo-Saxon place names in Weardale to the North. This contrast is even seen in the way features of the landscape are named today: in Weardale and further North a stream is called a burn and a waterfall is a linn, in Teesdale beck and force are used.



Simy Folds Viking Settlement: the two farmyards in the picture include Norse style longhouses forming part of a small hamlet in an area of rectangular fields on a limestone bench: Martin Townsend (Valley Drone)

The impact of Scandinavian settlement is also visible on the ground, particularly on Holwick Fell where there are several small settlements with Norse style longhouses such as the farmsteads excavated by Dennis and Ken at Simy Folds. Here there were four farmsteads located within a complex of small rectangular fields and some much larger areas of enclosed fell. Although these settlements appear to have been occupied quite briefly, their existence suggests that Teesdale was a busy place in the late first millennium AD. Possibly this settlement and activity was connected with the long-distance route now known as the Green Trod. Where this crosses Cronkley Fell it is still referred to on the map as the Man Gate, an Anglo-Saxon name meaning the common road.

It isn't clear how direct or immediate an effect the Norman Conquest and the subsequent Harrying of the North had on Teesdale or the rest of the North Pennines. We know that Domesday Book records villages and towns as far up as the Tees and no further. The Anglo-Scandinavian aristocracy were to a large extent replaced by Norman Lords, certainly. This is when many of what we think of as typical medieval villages, where farms were clustered together along streets or round a village green, were created out of an earlier more dispersed settlement pattern. This pattern of villages surrounded by open fields, and beyond that common grazing land, dominated from Middleton in Teesdale eastwards and can still be seen in the landscape.

At Mickleton the long thin strips called tofts which formed the property boundaries of the medieval holdings can still be seen clearly, north and south of the village, and beyond that are the remains of terraces, or lynchets and ridge and furrow resulting from cultivation of strips in the medieval open fields.

West of Middleton the Norman lords indulged their love of hunting and designated large areas as forests: areas for hunting venison (Red Deer and Wild Boar). In Teesdale the most significant forests were the Forest of Teesdale, North of the Tees, west of Middleton, and the Forest of Lune which extended south of the Tees from Holwick to the river Lune.

The designation of much of Upper Teesdale as Forest affected the medieval landscape in several ways; in order to maintain the grasslands and woods in good productive condition for the deer they needed grazing, but not in such a way that competed with the deer. In general cattle and horses were preferred because they do not graze as closely as sheep and goats and do less damage to trees. The practice of shieling, seasonal grazing with cattle, which had probably been traditional since the bronze age, was supplemented by cattle ranches, called vaccaries, and stud farms for horses. In the middle of the twelfth century Bernard Baliol, lord of Barnard Castle, granted extensive rights to the monks of Rievaulx Abbey for the pasturing of cattle and especially horses in Ettersgill, Hudeshope and Eggleburn. Such gifts by Norman lords to monastic institutions were common in the medieval period in order to secure the future wellbeing of their souls.



Ore Pit Holes Medieval Mines: over a kilometre length of medieval ironstone mining shows as a line of grassy bumps and hollows where the mining has exposed lime-rich spoil: © Martin Townsend (Valley Drone)

It is important to understand that medieval Forests were areas where particular laws applied for the preservation of the venison (red deer and wild boar) and vert (the woods and grazing), but not just areas of woodland; they could contain villages fields farms and moorland too, and often did. Forests were important as mineral royalties too, where the lord typically took a tithe (or one tenth) of the metal produced. Both lead and iron smelting sites are known, exploiting deposits of ore associated with the mineral veins which abound in the North Pennines. Iron mining and smelting appears to have been much the most widespread of the two.

Over fifty medieval iron smelting sites (known as bloomeries) are known on Holwick Fell alone. Most are small and may have been part of a domestic scale industry conducted by villagers taking their cattle to shielings in the summer.



Keld Smithy Medieval Iron Furnace: a heap of slag next to a spring marks the site of a medieval iron furnace: © Tom Gledhill & Rose Simpkins



Medieval iron slag: © Tom Gledhill

Even at this small scale, huge quantities of charcoal were required to smelt and forge the iron. Amazingly the small pits in which the charcoal was made also still survive and can be found in intakes and around the fringes of the North Pennine fells. Nearly five hundred have been found on Holwick Fell in a survey by the author and Ros Nichol. This evidence of charcoal making and iron smelting suggests that the fringes of fells like Holwick Fell were covered in woodpasture, dominated by birch, but with many other tree species present such as alder, willow and hazel, and that such areas were a hive of industry, with people pasturing their cattle, mining, smelting and making charcoal.

Another period of change began in the 14th century with the start of a deterioration in the climate referred to as the little ice age. This was accompanied by cattle plague and the Great Famine of 1315-17 which affected most of Northern Europe, followed by the Black Death which reached Britain in 1349 and is estimated to have killed 30-60% of Europe's population in a few years. This reduction in population had a profound impact on landscape and society. One effect was that there was more land to go round and in the long term lords had to offer better terms to their tenants in order to retain them. As a result peasant farmers were more prosperous, more were able to eat meat, and there was less incentive to supplement their livings with domestic scale industries. This led to the progressive conversion of former medieval arable to pasture and meadow, particularly in upland landscapes like Teesdale. Keeping stock was also less labour intensive so there was also a gradual reduction in the number of farms.



Field Byre and Lynchets at Low Way: nearly two thousand years of Teesdale history in one photograph. The eighteenth-century byre in the centre is surrounded by a complex of parallel lynchets, evidence for medieval cultivation. The byre sits within an enclosure which was used in the eighteenth century as a stackyard for hay in the surrounding meadow, but probably originated as a Romano-British settlement: © Tom Gledhill & Rose Simpkins

This can be seen in Holwick. Volunteers working on a Heritage Lottery funded project called Altogether Archaeology have mapped the lynchets and ridge and furrow of the former open fields which survive in what are now species rich hay meadows. Between these they mapped the remains of the deserted medieval farmsteads which survive between the modern farms.

Lack of labour resulted in the mechanisation of industry; water power replaced human muscle and the iron industry moved east to areas where there was woodland which could be sustainably managed as coppice and the investment in large scale smelting was worthwhile.

Lead mining and smelting is known to have been taking place in the North Pennines since at least the medieval period, but it underwent a significant expansion in the eighteenth century. This was partly a response to higher demand but was also facilitated by a change from small independent partnerships working small lengths of vein, to leases of longer lengths of vein, allowing greater investment, more efficient drainage and deeper mines.

Ultimately by the early nineteenth century mining in Teesdale was dominated by the London Lead Company who built their headquarters in the small market town of Middleton. The expansion of lead mining not only led to the expansion of towns and villages, it also had a profound effect on the farming industry. Many miners were smallholders, occupying small dispersed tenant farms whose creation was facilitated by the enclosure of common meadows and pastures.

The process of enclosure also created the landscape of dry stone walls, though in the early stages hedges may have played a much greater role than is generally acknowledged. In amongst the smallholdings were some large dairy farms, like Valance Lodge or Lune Head Farm, who supplied the burgeoning population of the dale with milk, butter and cheese. Such farms can be identified by their relatively large size, and often by the presence of large stone cheese presses which can still sometimes be found. This period was probably the highpoint of Teesdale cow keeping and must have led to the creation of a significant area of new hay meadows, particularly in the upper dale.



Wynch Bridge, Low Force  
© Anne Kelly

The lead industry not only led to investment in the farming infrastructure, and the expansion of towns and villages, there were also improvements in transport, such as Wynch Bridge, first built in 1741 to allow miners from Holwick to reach their workplaces on the north side of the valley. Roads were built to take ore to the smelting mills and lead to Newcastle. This culminated in the construction of the railway to Barnard Castle in 1856 and Middleton in 1867, just in time to facilitate the mass emigration of miners leaving for a better life abroad in response to a downturn in the lead industry caused by cheap imports from Europe, particularly Spain.

Better transport and the invention of the breach loaded shotgun in the nineteenth century led to the development of grouse shooting. Seasonal burning has probably been part of the management of upland grazing since hunter gatherers first came to Teesdale after the last glaciation, but the management of heather for grouse is much more organised and widespread than anything which has gone before, giving us the extensive heather moorlands which are such a distinctive part of the North Pennine landscape today.

This is accompanied by predator control to encourage large numbers of red grouse for the shoot. As a by-product of this the North Pennines support both important populations of ground nesting birds such as curlew and lapwing and a robust rabbit population.



Rotational heather burning: © Steve Gater

The Second World War led to the ploughing up of some pastures and meadows to grow potatoes and turnips, but this was just a blip in the post medieval history pastoral farming of the Dale. Also, there were efforts to drain the extensive areas of blanket bog for growing crops which simply led to major deterioration of the peat. Sheep have become progressively more important to the farming economy of Teesdale since the agricultural improvements of the eighteenth century. They now form the backbone of the farming economy. What happens next only the future will tell, but two things are certain: man will continue to be a major factor in the ecology of the Dale, and that change in climate, ecology and landscape are inevitable, as they always have been.