

Prehistoric Gouthwaite

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Gouthwaite lies on the west side (right bank) of the valley of the River Nidd, close to its upper reaches, its name now being generally associated with the reservoir that was constructed as the lowest of a chain of three that were needed to supply the expanding population and burgeoning industry of Bradford at the beginning of the 20th century (Fig 1). Angram Reservoir at the very head of the valley and its near neighbour, Scar House, supply the water to the city and Gouthwaite's purpose is to manage the flow in the Nidd as it flows towards Pateley Bridge and beyond. The very name of Gouthwaite resonates with history providing a link with the time of Viking settlement.

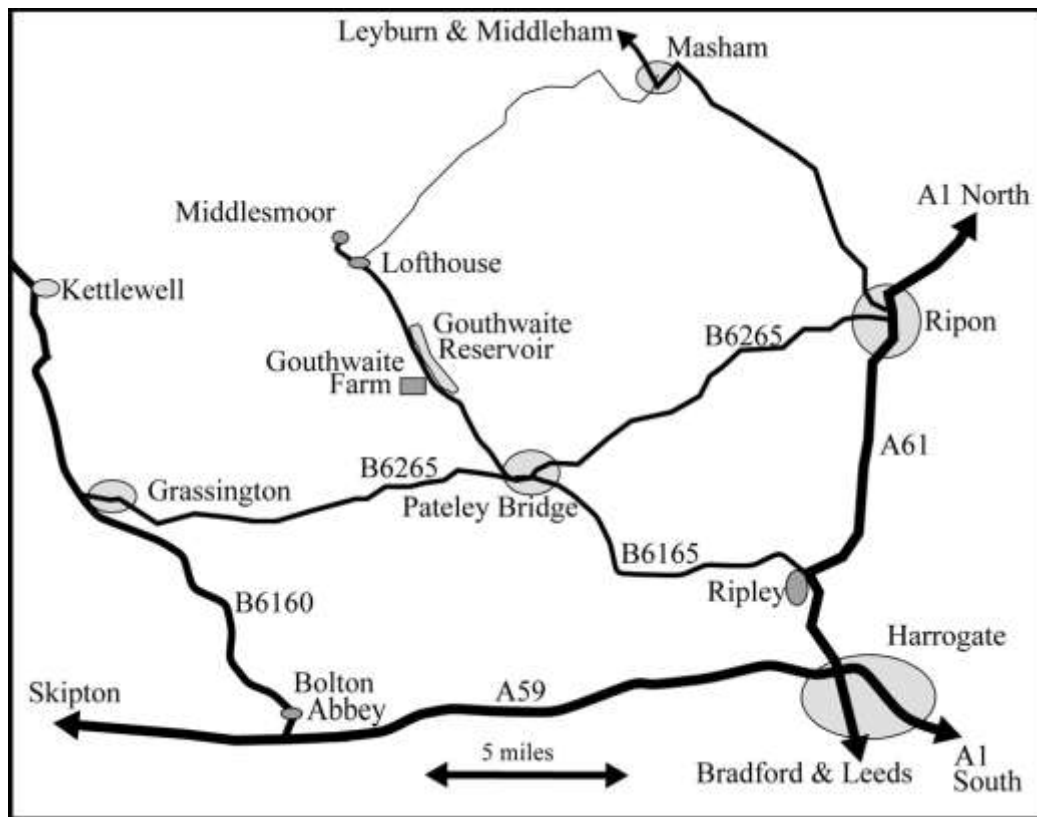


Fig 1: Location of Gouthwaite Farm, Nidderdale

The main buildings of Gouthwaite Farm are situated 150m from the edge of the reservoir and 25m above it and the house confirms its historic roots on sight. It is clearly a building of some distinction and antiquity being taller and more imposing than a typical dales farmhouse, beautifully proportioned and with architectural details such as stone mullions (Fig 2). Things however are not quite what they seem. A clue is that Gouthwaite Farm does not appear on 19th century maps but there is a Gouthwaite Hall on the old maps that does not show on later editions. The Hall is shown at a point that is some 350m south east of the farm, a point that is now below the waters of the reservoir and it was dismantled to be reconstructed at a higher level during the construction of the reservoir which began in 1893. The house at Gouthwaite Farm was previously a part of Gouthwaite Hall.

The story of the Hall takes us back to the Middle Ages because the area was held by Byland Abbey from the 12th century until the suppression of the monasteries in 1538-9 and it is likely that the predecessor of Gouthwaite Hall was a monastic grange. In 1547, the estate came into the hands of John Yorke (later Sir John) and after that the house was developed into Gouthwaite Hall to become one of the Yorke family's principal homes for the next two centuries with the surrounding area being retained as a part of their estate long after that (Ashley Cooper 1998).



Fig 2: Gouthwaite Farm, Nidderdale

The present owners of Gouthwaite Farm are also a part of local history for their family has been here for four generations and the current incumbents, John Rayner and his son Colin, have great knowledge of their family history and their land.

Gouthwaite Farm is an extensive holding that includes good pasture in the valley bottom and extending for some 600m up the steeply sloping side of the valley, a great credit to the endeavours of the many generations who have worked year after year to improve the ground. Above this, for another 400m, the pasture is coarser and some areas remain unimproved which means hard work for the farmers but which, because it has been relatively undisturbed over the centuries, is a great asset for the historian and archaeologist. After this, at an altitude of 290m, the landscape becomes a part of an extensive peat moorland that continues westward for eight miles into Upper Wharfedale.

The geology is millstone grit consisting of sandstone beds and shales, some of which can be clearly seen in the short but deep valley of Colt House Gill that slices through the valley side at the north end of Gouthwaite Farm as its beck flows to the Nidd at the head of the reservoir. Just two fields away to the south is the even more dramatic and craggy Riddings Gill. To cross these is difficult and they certainly act as a barrier to movement and could have played a defensive role in prehistoric times.

There are circular features and platforms that could be of prehistoric origin around the head of Colt House Gill but there can be no certainty of this without further investigation because in this remote and beautiful rural environment there has been a major modern industrial intrusion. The pipeline to Bradford from Scar House passes across the head of both gills and it will have left its own marks as well as the near certainty that it will have obscured or destroyed earlier features. In addition to the pipeline itself which is narrow and discreet, it seems likely that some of the tracks on the flanks of Colt House Gill could have been made to provide access for workers who would have needed shelter on site and for plant and equipment that would have been operated and stored there.

One feature near the pipeline that appears to be authentically historical is a slag heap, one of the most common indicators of iron smelting. It is 100m from the pipeline and in a separate field that appears to have been undisturbed by pipeline work. It is of significant size being around 20m wide and its most likely origin is medieval. It is a matter of record that Byland Abbey held this area of land on the west side of the Nidd in the Middle Ages and that a bloomery was being operated by the abbey at Blayshaw two miles to the north. A slag heap is visible there too and archaeological investigation has revealed bloomery furnaces and related features close by. A discovery of iron ore at Colt House Gill is almost certain to have been exploited by them and it would have been easier to smelt on site than to transport the ore to Blayshaw.

This is a significant find for the archaeological record in general and for the Iron Age (Nidderdale) Project in particular but it may also have implications for the Prehistoric Nidderdale Project because of discoveries at Dacre seven miles to the south east. Dacre was a grange of Fountains Abbey and many features associated with monastic iron smelting have been discovered there including bloomery furnaces, roasting hearths and water management features but it has also been discovered that they overlie or are beside evidence of prehistoric iron making including bowl furnaces and smithing hearths. This will be borne in mind as investigations proceed at Gouthwaite and if evidence remains there is a good chance that it will be found. The local availability of iron could have been another factor that made Gouthwaite an attractive place in pre-Roman times.

A tributary on the south side of Riddings Beck has cut its own little gill in which there are a few ancient coppiced alders and the apparent remains of two dams that are likely to be medieval in origin. There are also possible indicators of iron smelting including iron rich sandstones that could have been used as ore and burned stones that may have been part of furnace structures. It is not possible at this stage to state that iron smelting has taken place but the combination of ore and coppiced timber that would have made good charcoal and water power mean that it is a distinct possibility.

Two fields to the south again there is another gill which is the site of Copy Wood, its name being derived from 'Coppice', indicating its earlier use as a managed woodland resource. Its woodland cover is now very sparse but there are some very old coppiced trees there too. The gill is steep and deep and there has been water management too but at present there seems to be no industrial aspect to it. There is a spring that has been enhanced so that it flows freely beneath the remains of a wall into a small pond that is now almost filled with silt and woodland debris. Other channels appear to have been for drainage rather than water supply. On the edge of Copy Wood there is a feature that has been tentatively defined as a hut circle but there is some unease about that description because of the way in which it is built into a steep hillside and other details. Its location on the edge of managed woodland suggests that it could have been a kiln for the manufacture of potash or charcoal. It will be receiving more attention in the months to come. There are field walls in Copy Wood too, some of which show constructional details that suggest the monastic era but there are other cruder wall foundations that are likely to be much older than that and one of them extends beyond the wood into the open pasture above.

The reservoir clearly changed things in this part of the dale and initial thoughts about its construction tend to suggest that it has destroyed a natural landscape and this is true up to a point but it may in fact give a good indication of the landscape of prehistoric Nidderdale for the dam is constructed on a glacial moraine that had been deposited across the valley at the end of the last Ice Age. In the immediate post-glacial era that moraine would have been a very effective dam on its own, holding back the headwaters of the Nidd until they found a way through an eroded, deepening channel to gradually lower the water level. There is no way of knowing the extent of the lake when human habitation began but at the very least it seems likely that there was a river with adjacent wetlands. This is confirmed by the line of the River Nidd before the construction of the reservoir, a line that is shown on today's maps as a parish boundary passing through the length of the reservoir. It meanders in a way that is typical of a water course passing through a level area of alluvial silt – in this case the bed of the old lake.

The picture emerges of a very congenial place to live in prehistoric times. A wet and thickly wooded valley bottom would have been a good source of food while the well drained slopes above provided

space for settlement and agriculture with the extensive moorland beyond lending itself to the lifestyle of the hunter-gatherer.

One of the most obvious indicators of prehistoric life at Gouthwaite is the outline of an oval enclosure in which Colin Rayner could “see” thirty small sheep safely housed for the night many centuries ago. The enclosure is in fact a part of a wider complex that appears to be an Iron Age farmstead (Fig 3). The oval enclosure, approximately 15m x 10m, is set within a larger enclosure at its lower edge. The larger enclosure is approximately 30m x 25m and includes a hut circle at the higher end, ideally placed, as Colin informed us, to maintain a watch over the penned sheep to guard them from wolves and other dangers. The hut circle is close to an apparent gap in the outer wall that is likely to have been the entrance. There are other features too within the enclosure that require further investigation to establish their true form but it seems very likely that at least one of these is a hut circle too. This will certainly be a prime candidate for detailed recording and investigation. It could have much to tell us about the earliest times of agriculture in Nidderdale.



Fig 3: The inner enclosure of the ‘farmstead’ site, Gouthwaite

The hut circles that we are seeing here and in other parts of Nidderdale are usually low circular embankments with a gap where the entrance used to be and floors of hard earth or clay and stone. They are typically eight metres diameter, sometimes a little more or a little less, and the impermeable nature of the floor means that water collects there so that they are often revealed by rushes growing there. It seems that the huts were built mainly of timber because investigation of several embankments has revealed them to be stone rubble with no real structure. Sometimes a shallow ditch has been seen around the outside of the wall which would have provided protection against surface water flooding. The hut circle in the enclosure is a little different in that it is set into the sloping ground with the entrance at the lower edge, an arrangement that has some benefit in that it reduces the amount of structural work required.

At this stage it is difficult to be certain of other features related to animal husbandry but there is one that may turn out to be so. It is a natural gully approximately 100m south of the farmstead and its southern edge has been enhanced by a wall, the remains of which can be seen along the top of the steep embankment. The embankment may have been deliberately steepened and it would have been an ideal place to corral animals, wild or domesticated.

Another landscape feature that may be related to animal husbandry is the nature of the fields that lie on the even more gently sloping ground above the farmstead site. The vegetation here consists almost entirely of coarse grasses with very little else to be seen except, perhaps, by an expert eye on close inspection. Similar landscapes are to be seen elsewhere in the dales and when enquiries have been made regarding the reason, one answer has been “over-grazing”. While blame for this tends to be

attached to medieval sheep farming, perhaps prehistoric farmers may carry some share of blame for the first farmers can have had little understanding of the long term effects of their activities and would have no reason to worry about them as they faced the daily challenge of survival. This also brings to mind the thought that a decline in the quality of the pasture could have been a reason for the eventual abandonment of the settlement.

No sign has yet come to light to confirm that crops were grown here in prehistoric times and the land in the immediate vicinity of the farmstead is not the easiest for arable farming but less than a quarter of a mile away and 25m downhill there are three or four terraces that could have been used for this purpose. Dating them on sight is not possible with any degree of certainty but prehistoric origins are possible, even likely.

In this area too there are three hut circles approximately eight metres in diameter, one pair only several metres apart and still clearly visible despite being located in a part of a field that has been the subject of modern agricultural improvement. These are 300m south east of the farmstead site and 30m downhill, an indication that it was not an isolated settlement or that there was some continuity of occupation.



Fig 4: Carved rock 'Rock Art 1', Gouthwaite

While many features are difficult to verify there is one that is just 50m from the farmstead enclosure and that has raised a lot of interest with very few doubts. It is a rock ('Rock Art 1') with six cups clearly visible on its flattish top surface and a possible seventh cup although this, if it is one, has been heavily eroded (Fig 4). The pattern of the cups is quite distinctive and the rock is located on a small but prominent ridge a little higher than the enclosure. Although it is close to that prehistoric farmstead site there is no evidence at present to link the two.



Fig 5: Carved rock 'Rock Art 2', Gouthwaite

This was an exciting discovery but the excitement increased on our next visit when two more ('Rock Art 2' and 'Rock Art 3') were discovered in the same group of rocks (Figs 5 and 6) with the possibility of a fourth ('Rock Art 4'), although this is too eroded by wind and rain to be certain. There are other structures nearby including platforms, hollows and possible walls but again detailed investigation will be required to discover exactly their purpose. Whatever that may have been it is apparent that at some point in time this little crag with its sweeping views across the valley and down Nidderdale has been a very significant place for someone (Fig 7).



Fig 6: Carved rock 'Rock Art 3', Gouthwaite



*Fig 7: view of crag containing carved rocks
looking ESE towards Gouthwaite Reservoir and down Nidderdale*



Fig 8: Carved rock 'Rock Art 6', Gouthwaite

Since that discovery two more possible carved rocks have been noted, one approximately 150m to the north ('Rock Art 6') and another 400m to the south of the initial discoveries ('Rock Art 5'). The latter is well eroded but cups and grooves can be traced while the former displays a number of features which seem to include a double ring or cup and ring motif (Fig 8). Further investigation is required to confirm that these are authentic carved rocks but for the time being we need to consider that it is possible that they have something to contribute to the story of Gouthwaite Farm.

Other distinctively prehistoric features at Gouthwaite are walls that run up the slope of the side of the main valley like the one that has been mentioned in Copy Wood (Fig 9). They are of varying lengths, the longest being around 250m or more and there are four or probably five of them, more or less parallel to each other. It is possible that such things could have been created in the monastic era but it is difficult to imagine why this would have been done and they are wider and cruder than would be expected for that time with no sign of any cut stones. They seem to be simply assemblages of natural rocks which is what would be expected before the arrival of iron tools. There is no obvious upstanding structure remaining but there are very clear foundations. Their purpose is not clear but they were created with considerable effort and deserve to be investigated and recorded with care.

The investigative work that has been done on Gouthwaite Farm by the Prehistoric Nidderdale Project amounts to little more than the beginnings of a walkover survey but it is clear that there are many clues about the activities of its prehistoric residents. This is important but possibly more important still are the lessons that it can provide about prehistoric life on the moorland fringe elsewhere for there are many similar sites in Nidderdale and beyond where archaeological remains are less obvious but which could have been just as busy in the distant past.



Fig 9: One of several possible prehistoric walls at Gouthwaite

Acknowledgements

John and Colin Rayner (Gouthwaite Farm), Marian Wilby and Sally Childes (Nidderdale AONB), Dr. Keith Boughey (Yorkshire Archaeological Society), Members of the Iron Age (Nidderdale) Community Archaeology Group

Further Reading

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