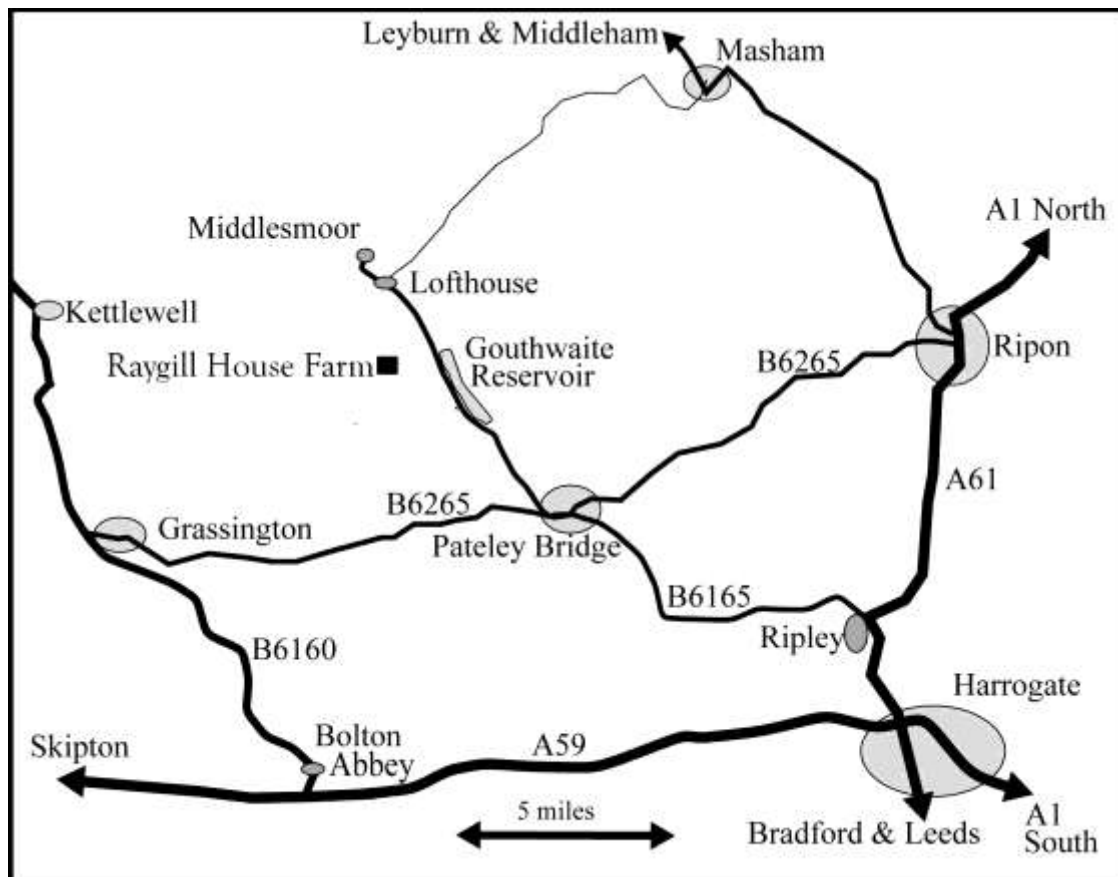


Prehistoric Features at Raygill House Farm

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A report was published in the 2011 edition of *Prehistoric Yorkshire* on a survey of Gouthwaite Farm in Nidderdale and since that time the Iron-Age (Nidderdale) Community Archaeology Group has been invited to carry out a similar survey on a near neighbour, Raygill House Farm. This was a great opportunity because the lands of these two farms are separated only by a single field with the result that we have been able to examine a continuous landscape that extends for two and a half miles along the western flank of Nidderdale beside Gouthwaite Reservoir. The two farms are close neighbours and have some historical aspects in common such as being held by Byland Abbey in the Middle Ages and then by the Yorke family but they differ significantly in the locations of the farmsteads. Gouthwaite Farm is close to the reservoir at 160 metres above sea level, just a little above the valley floor, while Raygill House is at 275 metres. The extra height would not make a great deal of difference in some areas but it is very significant here and raises questions about the origins of Raygill House.



Sketch Map 1 -Location of Raygill House Farm, Nidderdale

The approach to the farm today is by a private road, steep and winding in places as it ascends for three quarters of a mile through woodland and sheltered pastures above the pretty village of Ramsgill and it can be a surprise, after such a sheltered approach, to see that the farmstead is on the very edge of the bleak high moor. The views are spectacular but it is clear that the gently sloping moorland provides little protection from the prevailing wind that often sweeps across the Pennines from Ingleborough and Penyghent 20 miles to the west. The weather can be a challenge even today and the question that arises is “Why is Raygill House here, when even with the aid of modern technology, life in winter can be very difficult?”

The answer could be that in earlier times Raygill House was not inhabited throughout the year but provided seasonal shelter for those responsible for the moorland pasture. It has been suggested that, in the Middle Ages, its role was that of a “pastoral outstation”, an idea that may imply seasonal use rather than permanent residence and this is a role that is even more likely in the Viking era when this part of Nidderdale was settled by people of Norse origin who are known to have farmed in this way, using temporary shelter for the high summer pastures. The recent survey of the farm was, however, prompted by reports of prehistoric features and these have been the focus of attention with results that

tell us that there were people there long before the Vikings and that their settlements were permanent rather than seasonal shelter.

Raygill House is a busy farm and it was rebuilt in the nineteenth century so the immediate landscape has been disturbed and even more so by the later construction of the pipeline from Scar House Reservoir which is nearby. However, there are the remains of an old barn which includes the gable end wall of a substantial medieval building which was originally cruck built. Part of a chimney structure is still in place in the wall and there are signs of one or maybe two salt cupboards. There are also earthworks that could be a holloway and a building platform and beyond these there are two field walls heading north and south both of which are likely to date from the time of Byland Abbey's ownership.

A walk of some 250 metres to the south leads to a number of delves and small quarries of unknown origin but likely to be medieval or earlier and to a hut circle that is almost certain to be prehistoric on the same contour as the modern farm. This is on ground that is more or less level but very close to the top of the escarpment that slopes steeply down to the River Nidd and Gouthwaite Reservoir. It is also 300 metres north of Knott's Gill, a steep sided tributary valley of the River Nidd. The circle is a small feature of around six metres diameter but very recognisable and even if it were alone, its origins could hardly be in doubt. Fortunately it is not alone, a second hut circle can be seen 120 metres further along the ridge and a third 70 metres beyond that, the latter overlooking both Nidderdale and Knott's Gill. There has been no archaeological excavation here to date but the hut circles are similar to some that have been investigated elsewhere in Nidderdale which means that the round houses are likely to have had low rubble walls and floors of earth or clay and stones.

There are other features too in this area, including the foundations of the wall of a small enclosure and several platforms of unknown origin. All confirm human activity but it is the hut circles that provide the most certain indication of human settlement in prehistoric times. Near the third hut circle there is a small enclosure and the remains of field walls that also appear to be of prehistoric origin, all of these being on the higher ground above the steeply sloping flank of Knott Gill down which there is an apparent track way that passes through the upper of two boulder fields.

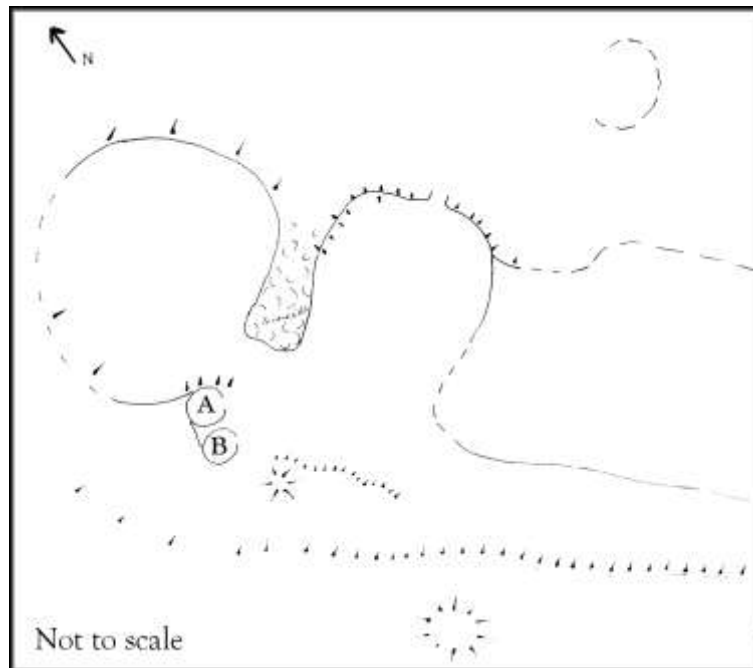
The upper boulder field contains some enclosures and clearance cairns that appear to have originated in the Bronze Age. There is also a roughly built wall in the lower boulder field which encloses an irregularly shaped area approximately 60 metre x 40 metres with the remains of a shelter or other structure close to the stream. It is difficult to ascribe a purpose to the enclosure at this stage of the investigation since it contains a very rocky and steeply sloping area of ground so stock management is unlikely. Ritual use has been mentioned and a large slab above a cavity gives some support to this notion but it seems preferable to await real evidence before taking that thought further.



Photo 1 - Field wall and shelter in Knott's Gill

All of the above features are on the north side of Knott Gill's and, interesting though they are, the best is yet to come for the most extensive and most obvious collection of prehistoric archaeological features on the farm lies on the south side of the gill on sloping ground some 20 metres above the stream.. This is a group of embankments and hollows covering an area approximately 140 metres x

100 metres. The visible evidence suggests a complex of three or four large enclosures within and around which there are smaller enclosures and hut circles, two of which are shown at A and B in the sketch plan. The plan was drawn in some haste during the initial survey and area will be the subject of further investigation in the months and years to come when more details will undoubtedly emerge but current evidence suggests that the settlement dates from the Iron Age..



Sketch Map 2 -Enclosures in Knott's Gill – sketch plan by Gillian Hovell

A measured survey is expected to be the next stage of activity on this site and it is hoped that this may be achieved in the winter or early spring of 2012-13 when ground cover will be greatly reduced and visibility will be at its best. It is also intended to look wider than the visible features for there are other humps and hollows that suggest buried features and that may confirm an even larger settlement area. Further investigation will undoubtedly result in a better insight but the initial thought is that it has been a permanent settlement rather than temporary or seasonal shelter, something that would have been possible in a more congenial climate which appears to have been the norm during the Bronze Age and early Iron Age.

The views are spectacular but this site is facing north and it is a bleak spot today when wintry northerly winds strike the hillside from Lofthouse Moor and the high hills beyond. We are likely to have benefited from this fact however, for it is likely that the wind and the rain are important contributors to the visibility of the settlement as their effects will have led to the frequent erosion of accumulated plant debris and soil. The landowner has also mentioned voracious rabbits as a contributory factor.



Photo 2 - Hut circle A (upper boulder field in the background)

The area in general was a good one for prehistoric people with a wide variety of habitats for the hunter/gatherer and suitable conditions for agriculture but there is at least one other resource that would have added to the attraction of the place in the Iron Age and that is a good supply of iron ore. There is abundant evidence to confirm the existence of medieval iron working in the area including a large slag heap and a bloomery furnace just 200 metres to the south of the settlement complex and Knott's Gill contains a number of features that indicate medieval iron extraction too. If the ore was available in the Middle Ages, it was there too in the Iron Age and it is more than likely that advantage was taken of that resource as it was at Dacre, eight miles to the south. At Dacre, the evidence of prehistoric iron production is overlain and surrounded by medieval bloomeries and the possibility of prehistoric iron working should be borne in mind in any future investigation at Raygill House Farm too.

Mining may not have been necessary for early iron workers because ore nodules suitable for their small scale smelting operations would have been easily collected from the hillsides and from the banks of the several streams in the area, as indeed they are today and bog iron may have been available too but some bell pits could have been excavated. No such pits have been seen around Knott's Gill but any that may have been there are likely to have been obliterated by later activity. There are, however, the remains of one or two bell pits on moorland known as Dewhurst Allotments to the north of Raygill House Farm and they are worthy of further investigation.



Photo 3 - Bell pit on Dewhurst Allotments

The fact that the pits are around half a mile from any other visible prehistoric features may suggest that they are from another era but the lack of visible archaeological features does not necessarily mean that such things do not exist. The ground conditions here are very different from the slopes above Knott's Gill with a thick cover of peat and the plants that it supports. The apparent emptiness of this area may be deceptive since much of the peat will have developed during the last two millennia and will have buried any low or shallow structures that existed before that time.

The same thought arises in the context of the floor of Knott's Gill where there are few archaeological features but where there are large areas of bog, probably a metre deep or more which appear to be, in part, a result of medieval mining at the head of this small valley. With obvious prehistoric features on both sides of the valley it seems likely that more lie beneath the bogs which have developed in more recent centuries.



Photo 4 - The head of Knott's Gill

The fact that the visible archaeology tends to be located on the tops of escarpments can lead to the conclusion that this was the location of choice for our ancestors but this may not be the case. It has been mentioned above that peat and bog may be hiding archaeological sites on the moor top but it is

also the case that a great deal of archaeology may have been hidden or removed from the green fields on the lower slopes, most of which are the result of modern agricultural improvements. The improvements have included enclosure, draining and ploughing but there will also have been the removal of rocks and stones and structures too, however, not all may have been lost. The improved fields on Raygill House Farm have not been surveyed to date but hut circles have been found on Gouthwaite Farm in improved pasture at the lower level of 225 metres and at even lower levels elsewhere in Nidderdale, one hut circle having been seen close to the floor of the valley of Darley Beck at 180 metres. There may have been many more settlements on the flanks of Nidderdale than those that are to be seen on the edges of its moors.

We know already that Raygill House Farm contains some exciting archaeology but it is clear that there is much more to be discovered to add detail to our knowledge of our predecessors in what is truly an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. We look forward to the search and perhaps, if global warming continues, we will be able to leave the cagoules and over-trousers behind and enjoy the long balmy summer days and gentle winters that seem to have encouraged our prehistoric ancestors to live in comfort in the hills.

Acknowledgements

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Illustrations are by Jim Brophy unless otherwise stated.

Further Reading

Jennings, B. (ed.) 1992. *A History of Nidderdale*. Pateley Bridge: The Nidderdale Local History Group 3rd edn.