

Notes on the 'D' shaped earthwork in Gipton Wood, Leeds

By Peter J. Kelley

The earthworks in Gipton Wood, national grid reference SE 32653654, are classified in English Heritage's Record of Scheduled Monuments (number SM 31496) as 'a late prehistoric enclosed settlement and the surviving part of another'. It is described as one of a small number of other enclosed settlements which are thought to date from between the Late Bronze Age to the Romano-British period (c. 1000 BC – 400 AD).

Introduction

Gipton Wood is classified by English Nature as 'Ancient Replanted Woodland' and is situated in a densely populated area of Leeds (LS8) about 4 km north-east of the city centre, grid reference SE 3236. The site is approximately 8 ha in area and is in effect in a 'land locked' triangle between Roundhay Road (a major traffic route out of Leeds) to the west, Copgrove Road to the east, Oakwood Boundary Road and Oakwood Nook to the north. (See Fig. 1 below). The eastern side of the wood spreads across a gently sloping plateau. The western side covers a west facing slope of 20 – 30% which drops towards Roundhay Road.

The site was conveyed to the Corporation of Leeds in 1923 by Deed of Gift on the understanding that it should be preserved as woodland maintained for the benefit of the public. The site is currently managed by the Parks and Countryside department of Leeds City Council in cooperation with the Friends of Gipton Wood.

Geology

The soils are a typical forest tilth overlaying moderately strong sandstone with bands of mud-stone and siltstone in lower coal measures. A Geological fault line runs north-east to south-west across the highest part of the wood. There is a disused quarry site at the southern edge of the wood forming an adit, now partly filled with debris. The whole site' including the earthwork, is covered by

managed woodland, the main species being oak, sycamore, sweet chestnut and beech.

The 1851 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 3 below) shows a number sandstone quarries immediately to the west and north of the site. Approximately 300 m south-east of the wood were the underground galleries of Gipton Colliery which once produced coal, fireclay and good quality ironstone. The pit closed in August 1921.

Domesday survey

The Domesday record of Gipton states:

“In Cipton (Gipton) 1 carucate belongs to the jurisdiction of Kippax and Ledston, (previously owned by Earl Edwin).

In Cipton and Coletun (Gipton and Colton), Gospatric had 4-1/2 carucates of land taxable; 3 ploughs possible there. Now Ilbert has (it). Waste.

A church is there. Also Woodland pasture, ½ league long and ½ wide. Value before 1065 – 40s, now – 2s.”

In 1086 Gipton was one of the over 200 manors that had been granted to Ilbert de Lacy by William the Conquer, forming the extensive Honour of Pontefract. The farming settlement appears to have been laid waste but the woodland pasture was still given a value of 2s.

When Roundhay was formed its southern boundary appears to cut through the farm settlement.

The Monument site

The Earthwork is situated on the north-east border of Gipton Wood alongside Oakwood Boundary Road and Oakwood Nook NGR SE 32653654 (Fig. 2 below). The site has the protection of Scheduled Monument status (number SM 31496).

The most recent ‘Topographical Earthwork Survey’ was carried out in the spring of 2004 by the York Archaeological Trust on behalf of the

Friends of Gipton Wood (2004/26). The specification was prepared by the WYAS Advisory Service in cooperation with English Heritage. The funding for the survey and subsequent Management Plan was obtained from the Local Heritage Initiative.

The earthworks lie on a relatively flat plateau overlooking an escarpment. The most prominent feature is a 'D' shaped bank and ditch enclosure, measuring c. 40 m north-south and c. 55 m east-west, surrounded by a shallow 'U' shaped ditch which varies in

width c. 10-15 m. The south and west sides have an outer bank and the south also has a slight banking on the inner side. Measuring from the outer bank the earthwork is c. 55 m north-south and c. 72 m east-west. (Fig. 2 'A' below)

To the north-east of the 'D' shaped enclosure and partially overlaying it, is another banked level platform which has been intersected by the Roundhay Parish Boundary. This platform appears to have once continued further north beyond Oakwood Boundary Road and lies beneath the late nineteenth century housing and roads (Fig. 2 'B' below). The 2004 survey also identified a further platform to the east of the main enclosure which could have been man-made (Fig. 2 'D' below).

South of the main enclosure is a large terrace area, c. 100 metres north-south and c. 65 m east-west, bounded on its western side, by a bank which appears to be a continuation of the outer bank along the western edge of the main enclosure (Fig. 2 'C' below). As suggested by WYAS (WYASPRN 2297) this terrace could represent a lynchet or cultivation terrace on the naturally sloping ground. There appears to be a further lynchet and terrace on the south-east section of the wood running approximately along the line of the geological fault, (identified by the author during the winter of 2004). This could represent the boundary of a large cultivated area to the east of the present woodland site.

The 1984 Survey

A field survey carried out by the West Yorkshire Archaeology Service in October 1984 (PRN 2297) makes the following observations:

“On the northern end of Gipton Wood are the scheduled remains of a prehistoric enclosure and the surviving part of another.

The main southern enclosure is roughly oval in shape and consists of a substantial ditch with a well-defined outer bank. The ditch is about 5 m wide and 0.6 m deep. The bank is 5 m – 6 m wide and is in places 0.5 m high.

Immediately to the north is part of a second enclosure, which has been partly destroyed by the modern ‘Boundary Road’ and housing estate. This enclosure is bounded by a bank approximately 4 m wide and 0.3 m high.

On the west side of the enclosure there is an additional ditch, 4m wide with an outer bank about 4 m wide and 0.2 m – 0.3 m high.”

This survey also identifies, *“An apparently original ramp cut obliquely into the inner side of the western ditch, giving access from the ditch to the interior”.*

Many of the features indicated on earlier surveys have been covered over by later ‘dumping’ of miscellaneous material.

Neither the ‘additional ditch nor bank’, or the ‘ramp’ were visible during the 2004 survey and were probably covered over or eroded away during the intervening 20 years.

The 17th century Survey

The earliest recorded topographical survey of the site was carried out at the end of the 17th or early 18th century by, the prominent Leeds merchant, antiquarian and historian Ralph Thoresby FRS (1658-

1725). It was recorded in his monumental work '*Ducatus Leodiensis*' published 1714-15.

"In my Survey of this Parish, I discovered here amongst the Thickets the Remains of an ancient Fortification, the Out-trench whereof is eighteen Foot broad, the first Camp about 100 long, and 66 broad, the second Camp about 165 square, as exactly as I could measure it for the Shrubs, with which it has been long over-grown; They are both surrounded with a deep Trench and Rampire; the Out-camp is about eighteen Poles long, and twelve broad, and at a little Distance is a small Out-work, about four Poles and a half square."

In 1834 Edward Parsons, in his book 'Saxon History' repeats Thoresby's description and measurements of the site, with the exception that he inserts the word 'feet' into the measurement of the first camp, making it; "*100 feet long and 66 broad*". He never saw the site himself and when he makes a search of the area he makes the following observations:

"Of these works the writer has been unable to find any remains, and he concludes that since the time of Thoresby, they have completely disappeared."

James Wardell, in his book 'Antiquities of the Borough of Leeds' 1853, writes:

"At Gipton, in the township of Potter-Newton, are the almost obliterated remains of extensive earthworks, which Dr Whitaker describes as 'two interior trenches enclosing unequal spaces and both surrounded by an outer rampire,.....'"

He goes on to repeat Thoresby's description of the site but follows Parsons by using feet as the measurement of the first and second 'camps':

“---the first camp was about one hundred feet long, and sixty-six feet broad; and the second camp about one hundred and sixty feet square.”

If James Wardell did actually visit the site himself, he would possibly have been the last person to see the entire monument before Oakwood Boundary Road, Oakwood Nook and the adjacent houses covered part of the earthworks.

Discrepancies between Thoresby's measurements and those found by later topographic surveys could probably be explained by the way the measurements were taken at the time.

Ralf Thoresby was a Leeds cloth merchant who inherited the family business of trading woollen cloth to Dutch and German markets [Rev. R. V. Taylor 1865]. Like many of his contemporaries, when he was twenty years old, his father sent him to Rotterdam to learn the language and trade. He would have used the 'Ell' as the standard measurement for cloth lengths. This varied in different parts of the country, in West Yorkshire the Flemish standard 'Ell' of 27 inches (0.69m) was used (shoulder to fingertip for approximate measurement). [E. Baines 1875]

When Thoresby measured the 'two camps' he probably used a length of twine stretched across the site, and wrote the figures down in a standard notation understood by his contemporaries. Historians, writing over a century later, assumed this measurement was in 'feet'.

If we take the measurements of 100 and 66 as 'Ells' this translates as 68.5 m long and 45 m broad which is almost exactly the size of the present 'D' shaped enclosure. As to the second 'camp 165 square' this would be c. 50 m square. It may have been an extension of the platform later cut through by Oakwood Boundary Road and Oakwood Nook (Fig. 2 'B'), or it could have been located in the southern terrace area, fitting alongside the straight side of the 'D' shaped enclosure and taking up approximately half the area of the Terrace (Fig 2 'C').

Ralf Thoresby also made the suggestion that the earthwork was a fortified camp:

“If Conjecture may be admitted concerning what has passed above a Thousand Years ago, I should take this to be the very Place of Security that Edilwald Son of King Oswald retired to, expecting the Event of the noted Battle upon Winmore, Anno 655, which unexpected Retreat of his contributed very much to the Defeat of his Pagan Confederates, who suspected it as a Piece of Treachery.”

Edward Parsons writing in 1834 also described to the earthwork as a ‘Saxon encampment’.

This idea still persists and was repeated in an article included in a recent work about Gipton [Yelland 1990].

James Wardell writing in 1853 dismissed any connection between the earthwork and the battle of Whinmoor in 665 AD as having been made ‘without sufficient authority’.

Similar sites in Yorkshire

Excavations have been carried out at two similar ‘D’ shaped Romano-British enclosures in Yorkshire:

The site at Upton, near North Elmsall (SE 47551353) was excavated by West Yorkshire Archaeology Service in 1990 prior to its destruction by a housing development. A report on this investigation by Ian Roberts can be found in the Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, Vol. 67, 1995. The report concludes that the site probably functioned as ‘stock enclosure for the temporary corralling of small herds’ and on the basis of pottery finds it also concludes that it had gone out of use by the middle of the 4th century AD. The report also refers to The ‘D’ shaped ‘crop mark’ enclosures at Stapleton, North Yorkshire (West Yorkshire SMR, AP44510817),

Bottom Boat , near Methley; Sandal Magna, near Wakefield; and the earthwork at Oldfield Hill, Meltham.

Excavations were carried out at another. 'Romano-British Enclosed Farmstead' at Billingley Drive, Thurnscoe, South Yorkshire, (SE 452052) also in advance of a housing development. The report on the excavations can be found in the Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, Vol. 76, 2004. This excavation identified a rural settlement which was established during the second century AD and gradually changed size and layout over time until finally being abandoned in the fourth century AD.

In 1981 M. L. Faull and S. A. Moorhouse published an Archaeological Survey of West Yorkshire, they concluded that, on the evidence available at the time, it was not possible to date the earthworks in Gipton Wood but suggest it had an agricultural function.

Conclusions

There is no record of any substantial Archaeological investigations on this site other than the topographic surveys, already cited and the occasional 'walk over' normally during the winter period when vegetation is at a minimum and more of the features are visible.

We are advised that Geophysical examination of the site is unlikely to produce reliable results because of the tree cover and the uneven nature of the ground. A detailed excavation on several sections of the site would be needed to reveal more reliable information about the function, development and dating of the remains.

The 2004 survey notes in its conclusions that:

"The earthworks at Gipton Wood are a relatively unusual survival in an urban environment and the extent to which they have survived gives them a national importance as recognised by their status as a Scheduled Ancient Monument."

On all surviving maps the site is represented as woodland, but at some earlier time part of it was used for agriculture and possibly for a settlement. The fact that one part of the earthwork seems to overlay other earlier sections points to developments taking place during a long period of occupation. The 'D' shaped compound could have been a corral, attached to an existing feature, used for the overnight protection of domestic animals from wild predators or cattle thieves. The surrounding ditch and bank could have been reinforced with a palisade or thorn hedge.

The survival of the earthworks in their present form is almost certainly due to their location in an established wood, which was not used for agriculture during the post-medieval period and not subjected to heavy ploughing. The extent to which later farmland and quarry sites surrounded the wood during the 19th century can be seen from the 1851 OS map (Fig. 3).

The National Monuments Schedule (SM 31496) suggests that the Pennine uplands of northern England contain a wide variety of prehistoric enclosures, settlements and field systems often located on ridges or hillside terraces. These features are thought to date from the 'Late Bronze Age to the Romano-British period (c. 1000 BC – AD 400).

Both of the 'D' shaped enclosure sites excavated at 'Upton' and 'Thurnscoe' appear to have been abandoned during the 4th century AD. This would seem to support the theory that the earthworks at Gipton Wood should also be dated to the Romano-British period until further archaeological evidence is available.

Protection of the Monument

The guidelines for the protection of the site were compiled by the Woodlands Officer for North Leeds and the Friends of Gipton Wood, with the help and approval of English Heritage and the West Yorkshire Archaeological Society Advisory Service. They are contained in the Management Plans for Gipton Wood published in July 2000 and January 2005.

The existences of mature trees with substantial root systems on the earthworks, while having afforded protection over many years, also

pose a threat. The existing Management Plan seeks to apply the 'Forest and Archaeology Guidelines' produced by the Forestry Commission and take note of the Forest Research review document; 'Trees and Forestry on Archaeological Sites' [Crow P. 2004]. There is still considerable scope for investigation into the desirability of different species of trees and shrubs on earthworks and the effects of their differing root structures and moisture uptake etc. on underground remains.

The Wood is criss-crossed by a number of heavily used pathways forming access routes to local amenities. These cause serious erosion to parts of the monument especially during wet periods of the year. To combat this, the most popular pathway across the earthwork has been raised and confined within fixed limits. Also a new pathway, suitable for wheelchairs, bicycles etc., has been constructed which bypasses both the earthwork and the terrace area. Both these pathways have been surfaced with the same type of sandstone that already exists on the site so that the chemical composition of the subsoil is not affected.

'Fly-tipping' has been reduced by co-operation of local residents and more vigorous action by the local authority. The Friends of Gipton Wood have a regular programme for removing litter and unwanted material from the site.

To increase the public awareness of the importance of the Monument and the need to protect it for future generations, the 'Friends' produce displays, leaflets, newsletters and arrange guided tours etc.

List of Sources

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Ordnance Survey map 1851 1st edition

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Fig 1

Boundary Plan of Present Day Gipton Wood

SE3236NE

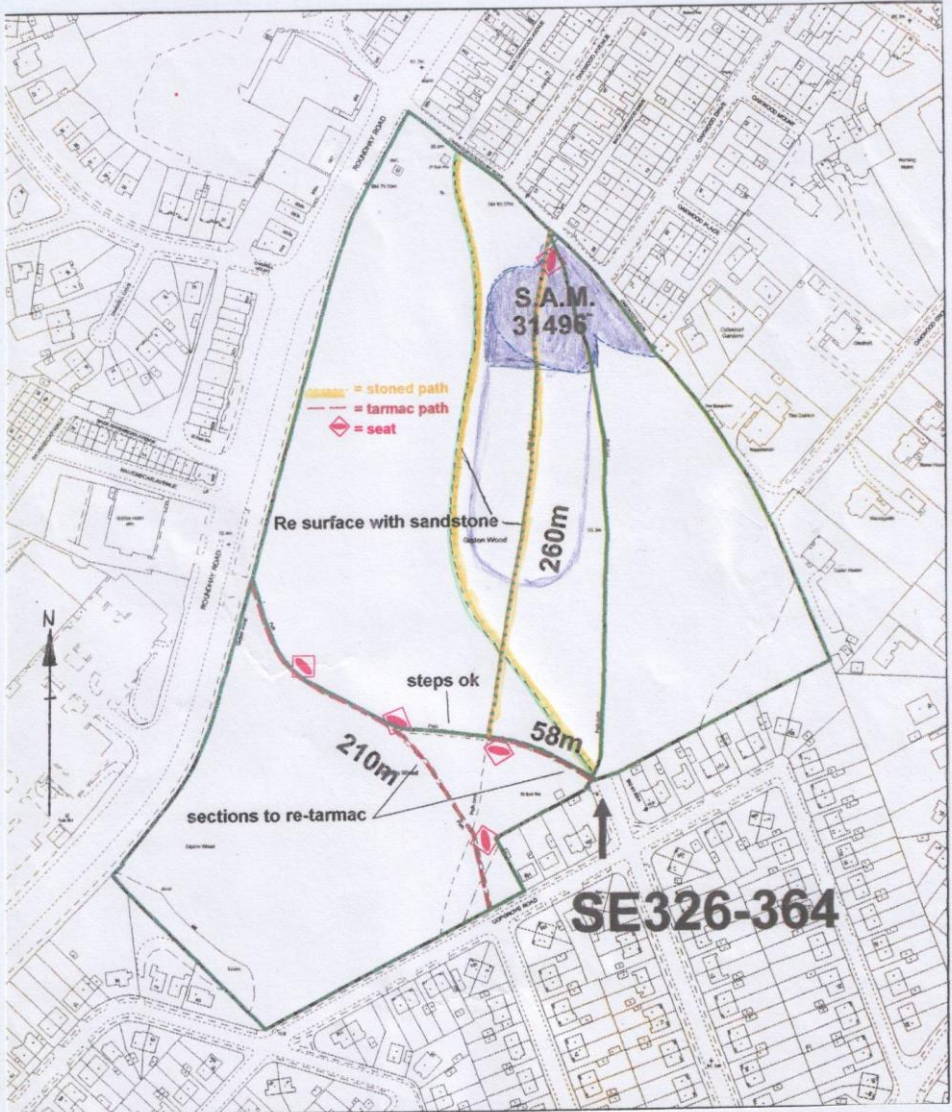


Fig 2

Plan of Visible Earthworks and Terrace SM 31496

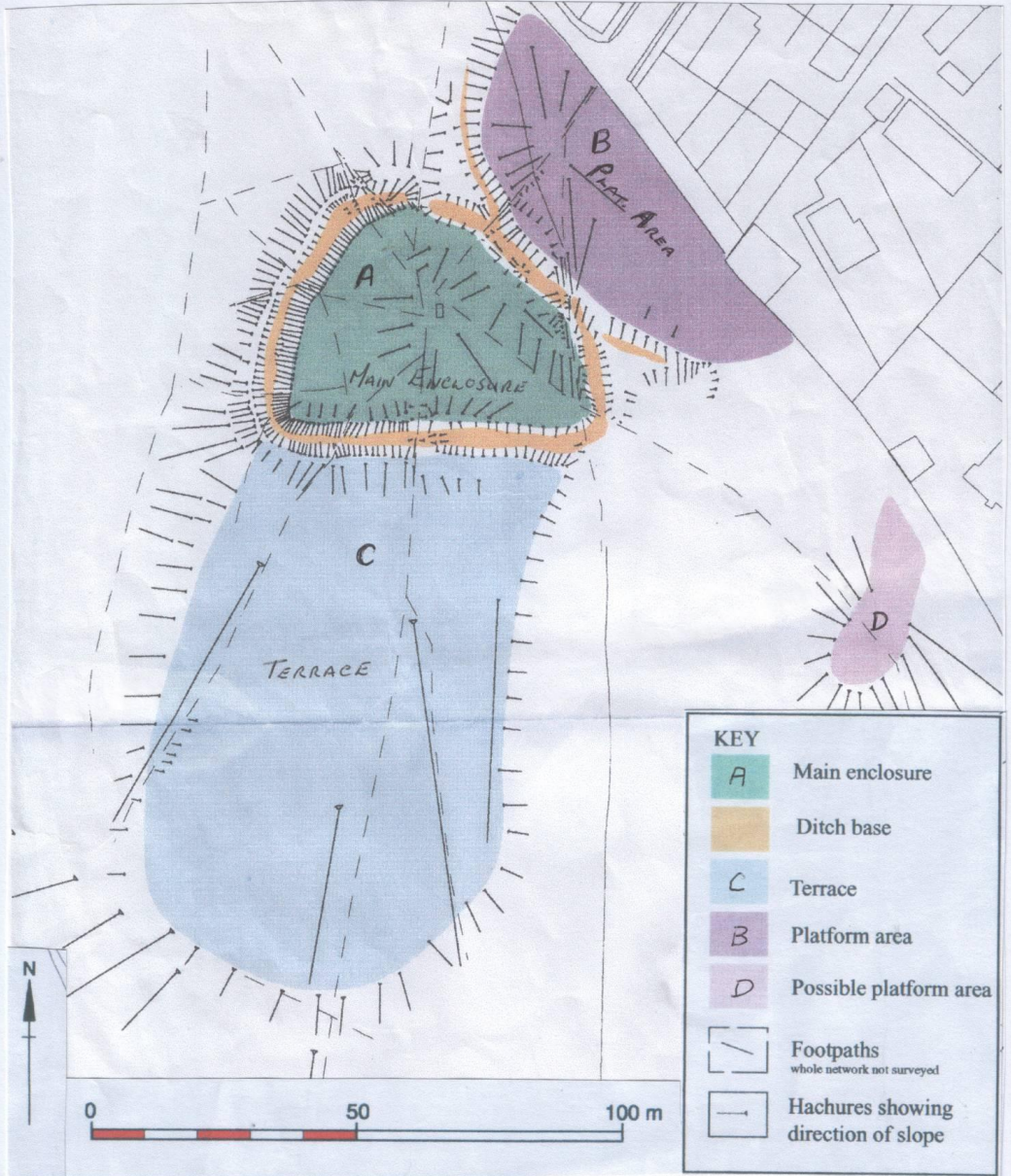


Fig 3

Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1851

