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Whitley Shielings in Gilderdale near Alston

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SUMMARY

In the south-west corner of Northumberland, two and a half kilometres from the remains of the Roman fort of Whitley Castle there is a cluster of shielings called Whitley Shielings. The site is on the north bank of the Gilderdale Burn, just within the Northumberland county boundary with Cumbria on the other side of the burn. The shielings have never been described though a number of them are clearly marked on the 1st Edition O.S. map and more have been revealed by a detailed survey of the area. Between 16 and 21 dwellings have been identified and divided into three groups based on the width of the gable; most are multi-chambered, including some with extensions and some with associated stock enclosures, and smaller, single room structures.

INTRODUCTION

A CLUSTER OF BUILDINGS CALLED WHITLEY SHIELINGS are marked on the six-inch to the mile First Edition O.S. map of the south west corner of Northumberland (fig. 1). The site lies, on the north bank of the Gilderdale Burn, just within the Northumberland county boundary, about 2½ km SSW of Whitley Castle (NY682 464), and 3½ km W of Alston, across the boundary in Cumbria. A number of the structures are clearly marked on the map and more have been revealed by a detailed survey of the area. The structures mostly face south-east, and are situated on relatively flat well-drained land overlooking Gilderdale Burn. The location is separated from the burn by a steep slope, which would make the use of water from the burn difficult. Throughton Well would provide a reliable water supply for some of the buildings as it issues from the base of a stratum of limestone and continues to flow even in dry weather.

A total of twenty structures have been identified, five of which have associated enclosures. The buildings are very similar to the shielings of Northumberland and Cumberland described by Ramm, McDowall and Mercer.¹ They vary from undivided rooms to multi-chambered structures, and are constructed of drystone walling about 0.6 m thick. The eaves walls are mainly aligned between N55°E and N70°E, i.e. parallel with Gilderdale Burn. No excavation has been attempted so that the position of the doorways for several of the shielings is not known but, where they have been found, they overlook the burn. On the plans, walls less than about 0.5 m high are shown by broken lines and those higher are shown with continuous lines. Preservation of the buildings varies greatly, from a low rectangular patch of rubble, e.g. No. 20, to a relatively intact state. Two of the shielings, Nos 1 and 2 have been robbed out to provide stone for the field boundary; strangely, building No. 4 which almost touches the field wall has not been demolished. The variation in condition suggests that the abandonment was phased, adjusting to the need of the community.

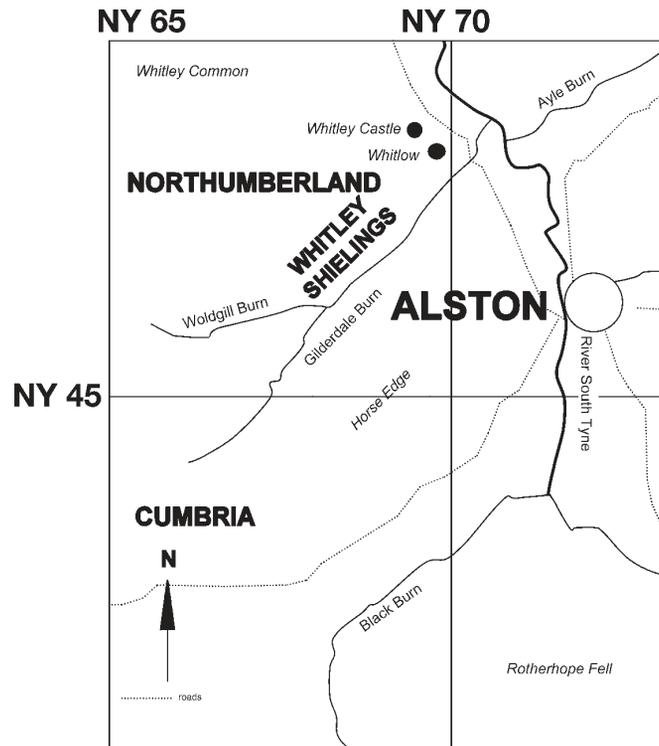


Fig. 1 Whitley Shielings:
location map

Most of the larger buildings were probably dwellings whereas the smaller ones could be shelters for livestock. Where internal divisions are present one of the rooms is usually very narrow, as little as 1.2 m wide. Building No. 3 is in very poor condition and could be two aligned buildings. Several of the shielings have later additions on their southern end. With regard to home comforts, there are no traces of windows or fireplaces, and only No. 9 shows any degree of sophistication with two wall niches in a gable and a possible bed platform.

The shielings (fig. 2) can be divided into three groups based upon the external width of the gable. The first group which accounts for six of the buildings (nos. 3, 6, 9, 13, 17, 19) are approximately 4.6 m; the second are about 3.9 m wide (nos. 1, 4, 5, 7, 11, 16, 20). This group contains seven of the buildings. The third are less than 3.2 m wide and includes four buildings (nos. 8, 10, 14, 15). The significance of the different widths is not known but all the shielings associated with enclosures are of the wider variety, the width may reflect function, status or date of build.

Many of the shielings have an additional room attached to the south-west gable, the walls of the extension are not keyed in to the main building and there is no doorway between the addition and the main building. It seems probable that the extension had an agricultural function, perhaps for milking during inclement weather.

Only one gable — on No. 6 — has survived to sufficient height to allow the height of the side walls and the angle of the roof to be measured (fig. 3). The roof angle was about 60 degrees and the side wall 1.7 m tall. The roof angle would suggest either heather thatch or sod roofing.

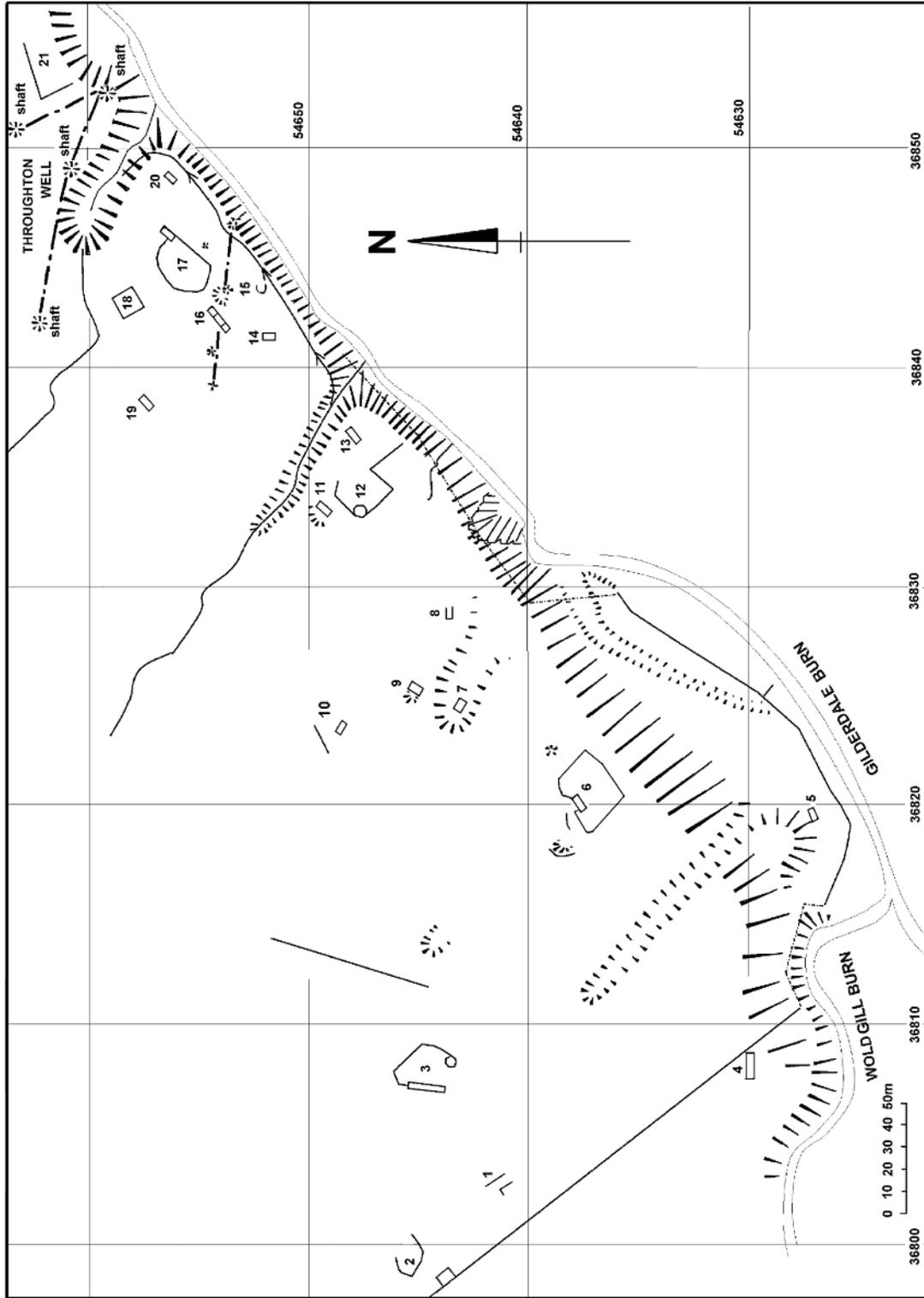


Fig. 2 The shieling grounds

There are five small enclosures each about 150 square metres; three are attached to a shieling, the others are near to a shieling. The shape of the enclosures is very irregular, only No. 6 approximating to a rectangle (figs 3 and 4). Two of the enclosures have a small structure built into one wall, but the tumbled condition of the stonework make it impossible to determine the precise form of these small structures. Two possibilities are that they were built to hold a small stock of fodder for the animals or acted as fuel stores.

Structure No. 18 is situated on a steep slope except for a level portion at the lower side, which is raised considerably above the ground on the outer /downhill side of the wall. The enclosure seems to be a detached paddock with an internal animal shelter, since the remains do not seem compatible with the other shielings it may be of later origin.

No evidence of cultivation has been observed, either within the enclosures or elsewhere in the area. The haugh on the side of Gilderdale Burn just below the confluence with Woldgill Burn would be a likely site for cultivation but the presence of old river channels suggest that it is being constantly eroded by the burn meandering and any evidence will have been removed.

Near Throughton Well, at the north east end of the site, there is evidence of mine working where mineral veins cross Gilderdale; their history is not known but they were probably 18th-century trials made long after the shielings had been abandoned. The remains of another rectangular enclosure (No. 21) nearby may be associated with these mining operations.

Shielings were upland summer grazing lands and settlements for the seasonal removal of herds and flocks from the lower enclosed lands (inbye) to higher ground (outbye), so allowing the lower land to recover from grazing and hay crops to be grown as winter fodder. The period of removal to the fells was strictly controlled either by the lord of the manor or the local manor court. For example, in the adjacent manor of Alston Moor, the time to be spent at the shielings was laid down by the Alston Manor Paine [Penalty] Roll from the beginning of May to the end of June inclusive. The relevant clause reads: 'That every Tennant that have used to go to the sheales doe goe to the same within one month after St. Hellen day [3rd May] and there to stay till St. Peter day [29th June] upon the payne of xiid [12d] for every default.'² According to Winchester this clause was withdrawn soon after 1597 and is evidence that, 'In northern England and southern Scotland the use of shielings continued into the early seventeenth century in a handful of documented areas, but appears otherwise to have declined almost to extinction by the late medieval centuries.'³

During the summer the stock-holders had to prevent their livestock from re-entering the lowlands by maintaining their part of a boundary known as the 'head dyke' between the upland and lowland. This is illustrated again in the Alston Moor Paine Roll by the item:

That every man make his hedges and head dyke sufficient and able before St. Hellen day yearly, sub pena vid [6d] toties quoties and that none suffer any Gaps to be in their out hedges, sub pena for every gap vid [6d].

No dating evidence has been found. Welford in his paper on the Alston Moor Paine Roll reproduces Camden's description written in 1586 of shielings in the North Tyne:

All hereabouts in the wastes, as they call them, as also in Gillesland, one sees a set of people like the ancient Nomades, of a warlike disposition, who watch here with their flocks from April to August in scattered huts called Sheales and Shealings.⁴

Shielings were clearly in use at this date but abandoned, at least in more remote areas by the mid seventeenth century. This is suggested by an article in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* for

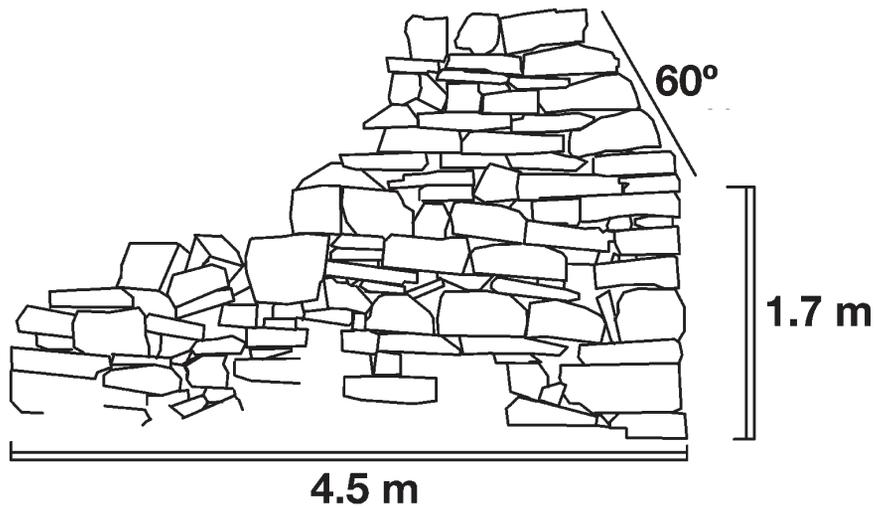


Fig. 3 The gable of building No. 6 (1:50)



Fig. 4 Building No. 6 and enclosure

1747 quoted by Thomas Sopwith, writing in 1833; which describes the ascent of Crossfell from Blackburn as follows:

We are now so much environed with large and extended morasses, rocks and mountains, that they exhibit a frightful appearance; not the vestige of a house, except some old shiels, where, in former ages, the people had resorted, like the Asiatic Tartars, to graze their cattle in summer — a practice now disused.⁵

Unlike the remote shielings on Crossfell, those of Whitley Shielings were only a short distance from the farms that they served, they may have lasted longer than those situated on higher ground; it is assumed that they were used by the inhabitants of Castle Nook and Whitlow and the tenements between them.

To summarise it seems that the Whitley Shielings were probably used until at least the end of the 16th century, and some of the buildings may have been used by shepherds after that date. The possible reuse may explain why some are in much better condition than others.

THE SITES

Site 1

Grid ref.: 6803 4641 (not illustrated)
External dimensions: gable only, width 4.0 m

Comments: Only two gable walls survive, probably robbed of stone for building the boundary wall. Part of an enclosure is present 15 yards to the NE.

Site 2

Grid ref.: 6799 4644 (not illustrated)
External dimensions: unknown

Comments: All structure removed and only rubble remains. Probably used to build boundary wall.

Site 3

Grid ref.: 6807 4644 Figs. 5 and 6
External dimensions: 4.5 m x 21.2 m
Internal dimensions: North room: 3.3 m x 4.8 m 3rd room: 3.3 m x 1.6 m
2nd room: 3.3 m x 6.2 m South room: 3.3 m x 5.4 m

Comments: The building is on a slope. Little remains of the walls, no openings could be discerned; it is possible that the remains represent more than one building. There is an enclosure of about 400 square metres on the east side which includes a small structure built into the wall (Fig. 6).

Site 4

Grid ref.: 6809 4629 Fig. 5
External dimensions: Main building 4.0 m x 10.2 m Extension 3.0 m x 2.9 m
Internal dimensions: East room: 2.8 m x 3.8 m Small room: 2.8 m x 1.4 m
West room: 2.8 m x 2.6 m Extension: 1.8 m x 2.3 m

Comments: The building is on a fairly steep slope overlooking Woldgill Burn.

Site 5

Grid ref.: 6820 4727 Fig. 5
External dimensions: Main building: 3.6 m x 4.6 m Extension: 2.8 m x 2.8 m
Internal dimensions: Main building: 2.4 m x 3.3 m Extension: 1.6 m x 2.2 m

Comments: The building is on the riverside haugh below a steep slope

Site 6

Grid ref.: 6820 4637 Figs. 5 and 6
External dimensions: Main building 4.5 m x 8.2 m Extension 4.5 m x 3.3 m
Internal dimensions: Main building 3.3 m x 6.7 m Extension 3.3 m x 2.6 m

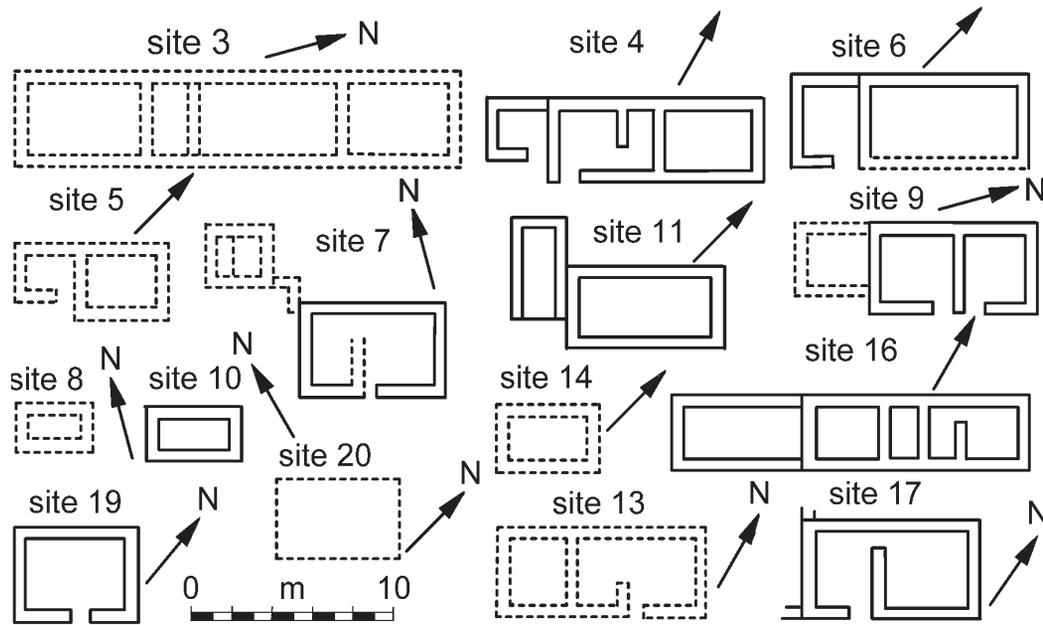


Fig. 5 Sites 3–11, 13–14, 16–17, 19–20 (1:400)

Comments: The building is near a sink hole which has a wall above it. To the south is an enclosure. The protection of the sink hole and the presence of a small wall at the rear of the shieling suggests that the sink hole may have been used as a water source. A semi-rectangular enclosure of about 550 square metres extends 200 metres to the south-east (Fig. 6).

Site 7

Grid ref: 6824 4643

External dimensions:

Internal dimensions:

Fig. 5

Main building: 3.5 m x 7.0 m

East room: 2.3 m x 3.3 m

Small building: 1.9 m x 2.0 m

Small building: 3.1 m x 3.2 m

West room: 2.3 m x 2.0 m

Comments: The building differs from the rest in that it is situated in a small depressed area and is not aligned with the burn. The two buildings are linked by a dog leg of dry-stone wall.

Site 8

Grid ref: 6828 4644

External dimensions:

Fig. 5

2.3 m x 3.6 m

Comments: This small structure is linked to Site 7 by a track down into the hollow.

Site 9

Grid ref: 6825 4645

External dimensions:

Internal dimensions:

Figs. 5 and 7

Main building 4.3 m x 8.0 m

North room: 3.1 m x 2.9 m

Extension 2.4 m x 2.9 m

Extension 3.5 m x 3.5 m

South room: 3.1 m x 3.4 m

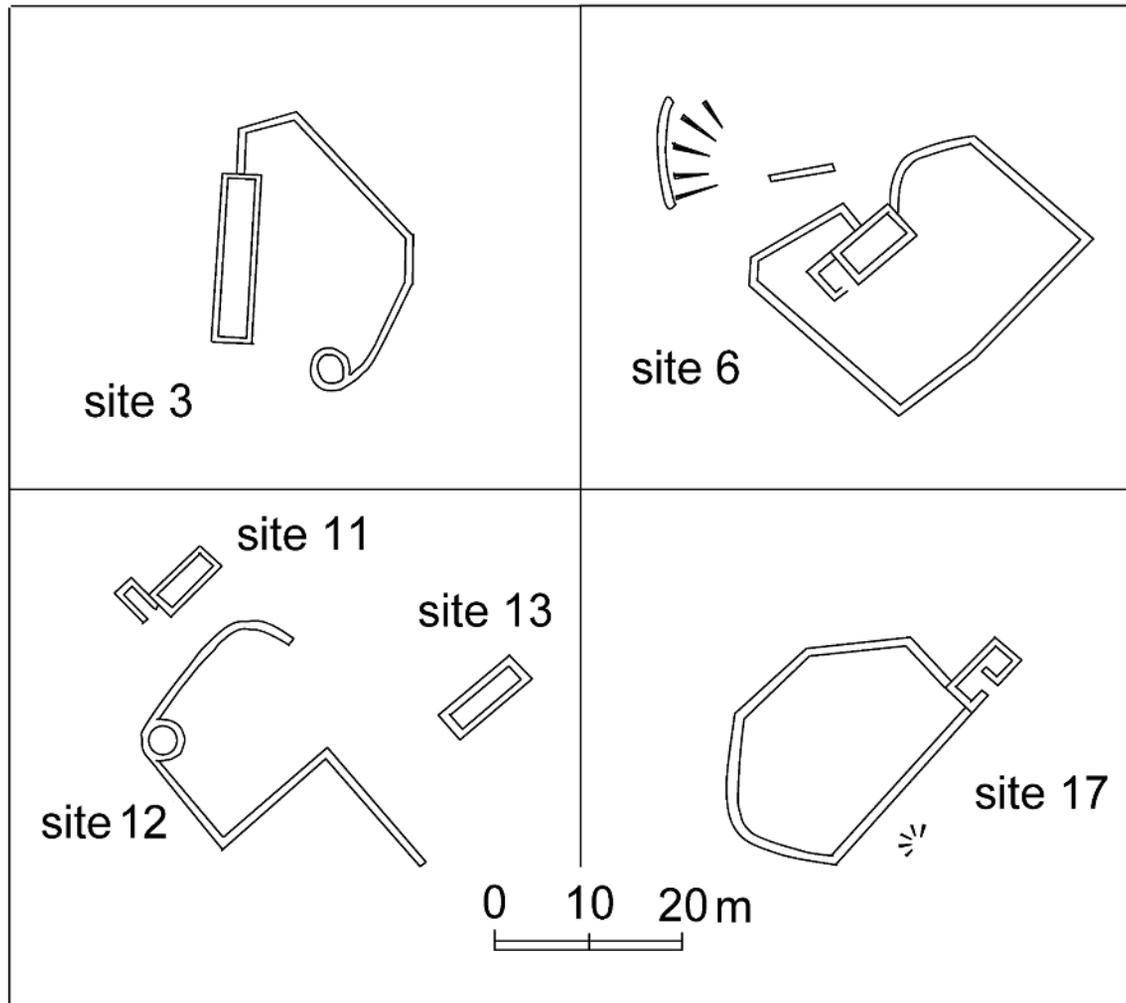


Fig. 6 Sites with enclosures: 3, 6, 11, 13, 17 (1:800)

Comments: The inside of the south gable includes a small cavity, possibly a candle hole. There is a raised area in the SW portion of the south room:, possibly a sleeping platform.

Site 10

Grid ref: 6823 4648 Fig. 5
 External dimensions: 2.5 m x 4.4 m

Comments: A short ENE wall foundation is present about 7 m north of the building.

Site 11

Grid ref: 6833 4649 Figs. 5 and 6
 External dimensions: Main building: 4.0 m x 7.4 m Extension: 3.8 m x 2.8 m
 Internal dimensions: Main building: 2.8 m x 6.1 m Extension 4.1 m x 1.6 m



Fig. 7 Inside Site 9

Comments (Sites 11–13): The two shielings (Sites 11 and 13) which lie to the south of a small rannel are associated with a single enclosure (Site 12). The enclosure wall includes a small structure similar to that in Site 3 enclosure (Fig. 6).

Site 12

Fig. 6

Comments: see under Site 11.

Site 13

Grid ref: 6837 4648

Figs. 5 and 6

External dimensions:

Main building: 4.3 m x 9.9 m

Internal dimensions:

East room: 3.0 m x 5.4 m

West room: 3.0 m x 2.8 m

Comments: see under Site 11.

Site 14

Grid ref: 6833 4649

Fig. 5

Comments (Sites 14 & 15): The small buildings are in poor condition, so much so that the precise shape of Site 15 is not certain.

Site 15

Grid ref: 6836 4648

(not illustrated)

Comments: see under Site 14.

Site 16

Grid ref: 6842 4655 Fig. 5
 External dimensions: Main building: 3.5 m x 10.8 m Extension: 3.5 m x 6.1 m
 Internal dimensions: Main building:
 NE room: 2.4 m x 2.6 m 2nd room: 2.4 m x 1.3 m
 3rd room: 2.4 m x 1.2 m SW room: 2.4 m x 2.7 m
 Extension: 2.4 m x 5.5 m

Comments: The position of doorways has not been determined; it is therefore possible that the building consists of two semi-detached shielings. The structure straddles the line of a small mineral vein which has been tried by a series of small surface pits.

Site 17

Grid ref: 68460 4656 Figs. 5 and 6
 External dimensions: 4.7 m x 8.5 m
 Internal dimensions: NE room: 3.4 m x 4.0 m SW room: 3.4 m x 2.5 m

Comments: Attached to the shieling is an enclosure of about 360 square metres. (Fig. 6) The enclosure forms the centre of the NE group of shielings situated SW of Throughton Well. The availability of a reliable water supply from Throughton Well may explain the concentration of buildings in the group; the leat which brought water from the small stream near Site 13 to Throughton Well was probably dug to provide water for ore dressing at the mine.

Site 18

Grid ref: 6843 4658 (not illustrated)

Comments: The enclosure is built on a steep slope, with only the bottom part level, and this has probably been filled in. The purpose of the enclosure is not known but it is so different to the shieling buildings that the suspicion must be that it is a later structure connected with sheep farming.

Site 19

Grid ref: 6838 4658 Fig. 5
 External dimensions: 4.5 m x 6 m
 Internal dimensions: 3.2 m x 4.6 m

Comments: The small building is situated on a level area above the escarpment on which Site 18 stands and, as such, is remote from the main groups.

Site 20

 Fig. 5
 Dimensions: 4 m x 6 m

Comments: All that remains of Site 20 is a rectangle of rubble.

Site 21

Comments: Two sides of a rectangular enclosure are present to the NE of Throughton Well but these are probably associated with the local lead mine workings.

NOTES

- ¹ H. G. Ramm, R. W. McDowall and E. Mercer, *Shielings and Bastles*, London (1970), 11.
- ² R. Welford, 'Alston Manor Paine Roll', *AA*³, 8 (1912), 264-71.
- ³ A. Winchester, *The Harvest of the Hills*, Edinburgh (2000), 84-5.
- ⁴ Welford, *Alston Manor Paine Roll*, 268.
- ⁵ Thomas Sopwith, *An Account of the Mining District of Alston Moor, Weardale and Teesdale*, Alnwick 1833 (repr. 1984), 51.