

PREHISTORIC DACRE

N Iron-Age
(Nidderdale)

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February 2010

(Also published in the Prehistoric Research Journal No. 47
of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society)

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<http://iron-age.org>

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Look for Dacre Village Hall, the garage or the parish church and you will find yourself in Dacre Banks, a thriving village on the floor of Nidderdale at approximately 100 metres above sea level but seek the Providence Chapel and you will be directed to Dacre Top, a separate settlement three quarters of a mile away at 150 metres on the top of the ridge that separates Nidderdale from the valley of Darley Beck. Dacre Top is the local name for the community that is identified on the Ordnance Survey as Dacre and it has been acknowledged to be the original settlement even though it now has just a few houses and public facilities. These consist only of the Providence Chapel and school room of the United Reformed Church, public toilets, a bus stop and a telephone box. Confirming the status of Dacre Top as an ancient foundation are Dacre Hall that is known to have connections with the medieval era and field patterns that suggest a Dark Age settlement. It is clear that in earlier times the bracing ridge top location of Dacre was the best place to be and as conditions in the valley bottom improved the village has effectively migrated downhill to the more sheltered site with the result that an earlier subordinate settlement has become the centre of the community. One of the results of recent fieldwork, however, is to confirm that in prehistoric times the original settlement of Dacre was on an even higher part of the ridge. Most people today will choose the most sheltered location in which to create their homes but conditions were different then.

The ridge continues to rise from Dacre Top to merge into the plateau of Dacre Pasture and it was at the higher end of the ridge at around 240 metres that a quern stone was found around 15 years ago, a find that drew the attention of community archaeologist Kevin Cale to the area and that prompted a series of projects that have now confirmed the existence of prehistoric settlements up to a mile away from Dacre Top and up to 90 metres higher up the slope, in effect, even earlier versions of Dacre in even more exposed locations. It does in fact appear that the original community was established high on the ridge above Dacre, a location that would have been the most suitable for hunter/gatherer societies with its thinner tree cover and better drainage.

The quern stone was found near a strip of woodland that contained evidence of hut circles which were noted by a Workers Educational Association project group but not excavated. The project area expanded and some enclosures typical of the Iron Age were found 200 metres away. Down slope from these enclosures two small pieces of iron slag were found in the spoil from a rabbit burrow and the appearance of the slag suggested prehistoric origins. It appeared to have been produced at a low temperature and its reddish colour suggested a high level of retained iron oxide, the result of a crude smelting process. The project was then distracted by some very obvious and extensive remains of medieval iron smelting but evidence of prehistoric activity was never far away.

It is likely that the most ancient structure is the remnant of a cairn or maybe a Neolithic long barrow (c4,000 -2,500BC) in a very exposed position on top of the ridge. It is not obvious at first sight but careful inspection reveals some obvious placed and shaped stones and of course the highly visible location is ideal for a ritual site. The exposed nature of the site means that any soil cover will have been lost and it is likely that stone has been removed for other purposes by a succession of settlements and industrial activity. No detailed investigation of the cairn has yet taken place.



Photo 1 Cairn or Long Barrow

The most complete prehistoric feature is less ancient, being a Bronze Age barrow. Its characteristic shape is not apparent from some viewpoints, especially from public roads and until recently it was generally considered to be a natural feature. We now know that this is not the case although a natural rock outcrop has been incorporated and the strength of that rock is one of the reasons why it remains in place today. The rock has been shaped by splitting off layers of stone on the north side, giving the impression of a series of shallow steps that were then covered with soil to produce the distinctive profile of the barrow. The outcrop was too small to provide the complete barrow mound so the profile of the south side has been created by soil covered by a layer of carefully placed stones that have protected the barrow against erosion by wind and rain. There are no other similar features nearby today but there are prominent hilltops nearby that may have been similarly used only to have their structures destroyed by weather or human hand.

Another reason why the barrow has survived seems to be that it has been respected by later cultures which appear to have recognised its ritual or religious significance. This conclusion arises because the barrow and its immediate area contain no evidence of industry despite being surrounded by bloomery furnaces from several periods and a medieval water management system and related structures that were part of an intensive and long lasting iron smelting facility from the time when Dacre was a grange of Fountains Abbey. There is also evidence of graves being inserted into the structure, most obviously thin stone flags on edge and in one case forming a rectangle of an appropriate size.



Photo 2 Bronze Age Barrow and Dacre Top

The most obvious examples of Iron Age settlement are hut circles of which we currently know of ten or thereabouts located on the ridge between the Bronze Age barrow and the earlier cairn. In some cases these are seen as circular embankments, sometimes with an oak tree growing at their centre, possibly on the site of a hearth. The evidence that we have seen to date suggests that the floors are generally formed of small stones and earth or clay. In one case, though, the best visual indicator of a hut is a pair of stone entrance pillars, one still erect while the other is laid flat where it has fallen after the removal of the wall. Trial excavations on this feature have revealed an earthen floor, some fallen wall stones and a shallow ditch around its exterior.



Photo 3 Entrance Pillars

Another hut circle around four metres diameter became apparent during a hot dry summer after a brief but heavy downpour of rain that converted it into a very welcome paddling pool for cattle. Much of the churned peat and soil was then washed away and although it has not been properly excavated it is apparent that there is an impermeable floor of clay and stones beneath it and a stony embankment around it.



Photo 4 Hut Circle

One hut circle of a similar size appeared a year or so after the elimination of bracken by the farmer when the bare ground became repopulated by a variety of plants and grasses. A circular patch of ground around three metres diameter developed with a different appearance from the surrounding area as a less varied range of flora emerged upon it. The plants were mainly sorrel and one or two grasses and it again became apparent that moisture was being retained by an impermeable floor.

These hut circles are quite small but there is a much larger one nearby with a diameter of approximately 10 metres. It is yet to be examined in detail but the part circular sections of the bank that remain leave little doubt about their origin as the base of the wall of one of the more important buildings in the settlement.

Other structures have been discovered nearby including storage pits, and a feature that seems likely to be a well. This is a small rectangular pit of unknown depth near the centre of a group of hut circles and industrial sites that is lined with dry stone walling and currently filled with silt. A very shallow trench is all the work that has been done at present so more investigation is required to be certain but it is very similar to medieval wells that tapped into the ground water and since there is no stream or other obvious water supply in the immediate vicinity, a well at this point would have been very welcome. The storage pits are larger and more solidly walled so that today they show as very damp hollows or small ponds almost full of silt. A test trench across one of the pits revealed a profile that would have been ideal for the purpose with vertical, solid faces to the walls and a flat floor.



Photo 5 Storage Pit

Most of these structures are in a very well defined space on a flat area in a prominent position with a steep escarpment on its southern side. It provides great views today over Lower Nidderdale as it would have done 2500 years ago and it is well placed to monitor the sun rising over the Yorkshire Wolds, 30 miles to the east and to benefit from the sun for the rest of the day at any time of the year with its southerly aspect over the valley of Darley Beck.

In this same area several sites dedicated to metal working have been discovered. The first resulted from a find of iron slag after cattle had damaged a small mound close to a hut circle in some rough pasture. The mound had a diameter of approximately one metre and a height around half a metre and when it was dismantled because of continuing damage by the hoofs of a herd of bullocks it was found to consist mainly of broken and burned stones with some slag among it. The nature of the slag indicates an Iron Age origin and its distribution within the mound with the larger pieces on top and successively smaller pieces further down suggests that it was the result of a single smelt during which the slag was thrown on top of a pile of discarded stones. It is likely that the furnace where the smelting took place is very close by and there are signs of such a thing only a metre or so away. These signs are a cavity in the ground with sand and stones around it that, due to their reddish colour, have clearly been subjected to high temperatures. All of these features are within two metres of a hut circle.



Photo 6 Iron Age Slag

Another find of great significance at this location is the discovery of hammer scale in an area less than one metre square near a small low boulder. This consists of small particles of magnetic, black oxidised iron including many spherical pieces around 3mm diameter. These are the “fossilised sparks” that flew through the air as the bloom or the metal was hammered two thousand years ago or more. It is also very likely that the boulder was the anvil on which the hammering took place although there are no signs of this after centuries of wind and rain. It was these small and apparently insignificant traces that most excited historical metallurgists for these were the most positive signs of the existence of the Dacre Iron Age Smithy.

Less than five metres away another prehistoric iron smelting site was discovered and this was clearly a small smelting hearth, just a shallow baked clay pan approximately forty centimetres diameter with a hole in the bottom that appears to be the entry point for air for combustion. Charcoal was the fuel and while no real pieces of ore were found there were some stains that suggested that the ore being used was the local nodular carbonate ore that was certainly used in the area from the medieval period until the 17th century. Thirty metres from this second smelting site a third and then a fourth were discovered, each with a shallow, baked clay hearth and clearly the sites of early bloomery furnaces.



Photo 7 Iron Age Smelting Site

At around 10 metres from the initial slag find three small forging hearths were discovered, all of a similar shape and simply formed by making a clay lined cavity in the ground and lining it with clay. In one of these hearths a small piece of wrought iron was found embedded in the wall and in another a thin, curved piece of iron was found that appeared to be either a part of the tuyere through which air was blown into the hearth or iron that had been deposited on the tuyere during the heating and forging process. The soil in this area is very acid and it leads to rapid corrosion of iron artefacts and tools but both of these had survived because of the high temperature to which they had been subjected which had resulted in a protective layer of black iron oxide.

These iron smelting and working sites are consistent with the known geology of the locality which is millstone grit with clear evidence on the ground of iron bearing rocks and iron rich springs, it was therefore expected that another site on this Iron Age settlement with indications of metalworking would be yet another bloomery. There was a surprise in store, however and this one turned out to be a prehistoric lead working site. Nidderdale is, of course, well known for lead smelting but that industry was concentrated in one or two parts of the dale where the rocks are limestone and the nearest of these locations to Dacre is Greenhow, five miles away.



Photo 8 Lead Smelting Site

The first indication of lead at Dacre was the discovery of lead dross, the heavily oxidised layer on the surface of a crucible or ladle of molten lead which is skimmed off to reveal the pure molten metal that can then be used for the job in hand. In this case the dross was simply thrown on the floor and this is where we found a dozen or more pieces across an area of ground about 5 metres x 3 metres. There were also some clay lined hollows in the ground with whitish deposits that are typical of lead smelting and a few small pieces of galena, the lead ore that abounded at Greenhow. There is no galena in the ground at Dacre so it does seem that we have a lead smelting site that used ore that had been brought in from Greenhow or beyond.

Hillforts are not often reported in the north and this often leads to the assumption that they were few and far between. This, however, may not be true but may be simply because of the geology. It is difficult to create major earthworks in an area of solid rock and in any case a large structure will be unnecessary when hillsides are steep and rocky and small enhancements are all that are needed to provide a highly defensible location. At Dacre there are terraces that would indeed enhance the defensive capability of a natural slope and that would certainly have impressed the neighbours too. If there was a hillfort at Dacre, this is it. The terraces have been mainly hidden from sight by soil and vegetation but in late summer and autumn the varying colours of vegetation betray the areas of level ground and steep slopes. They are also clearly visible when field walking.

There has been only a very small test trench across one of the terraces but it produced conclusive evidence of a vertical stone face around a metre in height and also an indication that this may have

been faced with white grit stone that is not common in this immediate locality. Four white bands across the hillside would certainly have been an impressive statement in the Iron Age or earlier and they would certainly have taken the edge off any frontal assault.



Photo 9 "Hillfort"

How the prehistoric era came to an end at Dacre is not known but is unlikely to have been an easy and gradual transition. It is well documented that the Romans were at Greenhow exploiting the lead deposits within three decades of their arrival in Britain and a route from Greenhow through Dacre to York and Alborough is better than most of alternatives. At the very least, the locals must have been aware of the implications of the Roman invasion and they may also have needed to submit to occupation or worse. No solid evidence of a Roman presence has been revealed by fieldwork or research but there are tantalising indications of the possibility, including one or two carved stones that bear a marked similarity to similar artefacts on known Roman sites. There is also a field that is the shape of a playing card and that also has a name of Latin origin. We may yet discover real evidence of the manner in which the Iron Age was came to an end but in the meantime we do know that ridge above Dacre was home to people for thousands of years before Dacre made it into the history books.

N.B. This project continues as a part of the activities of Iron-Age (Nidderdale), a local community archaeology project that has attracted a grant from The Heritage Lottery Fund for four years of fieldwork and research. We are now half way through the second year of the four year project and a program of scientific analysis and dating will take place during 2010/2011. In the meantime dating and identification are based on context, typography and the informal opinions of a number of experienced and respected practitioners. We are very grateful for all the assistance that we have received. (Website <http://www.iron-age.org>).

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