Ingleborough Archaeology Group
A survey of the north-west flanks of Ingleborough 2007 -2011

Turbary ground

Yvonne Luke

The site

A turbary ground, once used for the cutting of peats or turves, has been identified at Humphrey Bottom. It is situated over 500m up on the northern flanks of Ingleborough, where the slopes temporarily ease off to form a gently inclined shelf set between much steeper, frequently rock strewn slopes. Its position on flatter land (hence 'Bottom' despite being high up) which is relatively clear of boulders and stones and consequently easy to work is typical of peat grounds in the Yorkshire Dales. The terrace, high up beneath the corrie of The Arks and the summit of Ingleborough, has been a catchment area for accumulating peat over millennia, and it is this which has made it such an attractive resource in the past.

Indeed there is scientific evidence that the peat was once much deeper than it now is, from pollen cores taken in the late 1980s elsewhere on this natural shelf. While the truncation of deposits has been attributed to a *bog burst* (Swales 1987), it is suggested here that peat cutting has played an equally important part in the modification of the peat deposits of the wide shelf at Humphrey Bottom and should be considered as an equally likely cause for this truncation.

Fig. 1 The south-eastern corner of the turbary ground (ING 172) beneath the Arks. Its now eroding edges, frequently cut at right angles and in lines, are clearly visible in the photograph as is the higher level of the ground surface adjacent.

The peat-cut area covers approximately 4000 square metres forming a cohesive block of worked ground. It runs inwards from the edge of the wide terrace pretty much to the bottom of the extremely steep and stony Arks slope which rises up above it. It lies on the southern periphery of the shelf of land, well away from the main watercourse. Its edges, which are eroding, are frequently cut in straight lines and at right angles (Fig. 1). Outside the worked area, immediately to the east where the shelf starts to curve round, the ground level

is higher by up to one metre. In other words, from the edges which survive and are clearly visible, the cut and removed peat appears to have been around a metre deep.

It has been suggested that the absence of this layer of peat over this whole area is due to natural causes, such as erosion and bog burst; and also that individual features within it, such as the rectangular bay illustrated (Fig.2) are totally natural in origin and caused by the liquefaction of peat (Batty 2011). While eroding peat hags can be observed all over the higher gritstones of the Dales, and indeed are frequent on other slopes around Ingleborough, the usual way for peat edges to erode is in irregular shallow scallops and curved cracks which indent incrementally from an eroding face. This process will affect historical artificially created faces as much as naturally eroding ones, and the presence of features caused by natural erosion is not proof *per se* that all visible alterations to a layer of peat are natural in origin. In addition to this it is extremely unlikely that a very deep and narrow section would subside in the shape of this symmetrical rectangular bay with deep square corners and its narrow end on to the face. Nor is the presence of a grass sod at the base of this cutting necessarily proof that the section has subsided through the washing out of the peat beneath the sward, for it is equally indicative of the common – and commonly stipulated – requirement for the immediate replacement of the upper vegetated surface after removal of the peat in order to minimise erosion and hasten the stabilisation of the land. The vegetation type found in this deep narrow cut has been affected by water seeping in from three sides as well as within its deeply shadowed interior. This has favoured the development of water-loving vegetation: again a type of plant evolution frequently documented as being found in artificial 'peat-pots' (Ardron 1999).

Fig. 2 A bay or peat pot, possibly one of the last ones to be worked

A further factor suggesting the historical use of Humphrey Bottom for peat cutting is the ubiquity of *Nardus* grassland, which research in the Peak District has shown to result directly from the removal of peat (Ardron 1999). There are other indications too – the squared angles of many of the faces, and the way the whole area forms a cohesive lower block running across the entire width of the terrace at this point. If it was formed by erosion, surely a gradual retreat along the edge of slope in a long thin band would be expected rather than this cohesive lowered chunk of land.

As mentioned above, the isolation and high altitude of the turbary ground is characteristic of many peat grounds in the Dales, though it prompts the question of who may have used and created it. By far the closest community would have been at Southerscales which lies 2km away to the north. The medieval settlement, owned by Furness Abbey for over three centuries, was at some stage superseded by the farm of the same name. There is every possibility that this was the turbary associated with these successive settlements. Another possibility is that

the ground was used on an occasional basis by the men who worked the stone deposits further round the flank of Ingleborough on and around Black Shiver.

An interesting outcome of this survey is the recognition that at the Humphrey Bottom peat ground there is evidence for the custom of cutting in rectangular bays, known as 'peat-pots' or pits, for in the far south-east corner is a single abandoned bay, possibly among the last ever worked (Fig. 2). From the ragged appearance of the edges here, exacerbated by natural erosion, it is also possible the turves were cut horizontally, a custom which has been recorded not far away in Langstrothdale (Fig. 3) and also around Sedbergh[1], and appears common in the western dales. It tends to leave a more untidy surface as it is cut by a person standing below the face and cutting horizontally beneath the sod, rather than vertically behind it; the advantage is the worker is well placed to cut and lift the block and deposit it on the upper bank in a single move. It also promoted the cutting of bays, rather than long faces, as the adjacent banks were used to receive the fresh turves.

Fig.3 Illustration from George Walker's The Costume of Yorkshire 1814 showing peat cutters in Langstrothdale, with Ingleborough in the distance - 'x' marks the approximate position of the turbary ground on Humphrey Bottom. The illustration is of interest as it shows the peat cutter cutting peats in a small bay horizontally, just as appears to have happened at Humphrey Bottom, and the small stacks in which it was placed to dry

The wider context

Rights of turbary were part of medieval and post-medieval life. The annual ritual of peat cutting was part of the common cycle of activities associated with subsistence communities and undertaken each year. Peat is traditionally cut back from the face which was cut the year before. In late spring or early summer the old face would be cleaned and prepared, and then the turves would be cut with special tools (Rotherham 2009). Once cut, the peat blocks would be laid to dry, often being aired in pairs balanced against each other. After this they would be placed in beehive shaped stacks to dry out further before being moved closer to the farmstead

[1] There is a photograph of a farmer from Dowbiggin near Sedbergh cutting in this manner in Hartley and Pontefract (1968) plate 107.

or cottage for use the following winter. In areas of Britain where the practice has continued in use, whole communities are frequently involved in the activity and families help each other to cut, stack and cart the turves home. Each region of the British Isles developed its own particular types, and here in the Pennines practically every dale had its own style of cutting spade (Hartley and Ingleby 1968).

The main use of peat was for fuel, and it was a particularly precious resource in areas where woodland was scarce or unavailable for common use. Turves were also used as a weatherproof roofing material and the uppermost grass sod was particularly prized for this purpose (Rotherham 2009). There is also documentary evidence that turves were cut for use as sealing clamps in sod (lime) kilns within the manor of Newby on the other side of Ingleborough (Johnson 2008), though generally well documented evidence about these activities is difficult to find. The right of turbary within Ingleton *township* is however mentioned in a document of 1592 which lays out the common rights of the customary tenants of Ingleton manor[2].

Unfortunately there has been no extensive survey of peat workings and turbary grounds in the Yorkshire Dales comparable to the research done in the Peak District. There, work undertaken during the 1990s demonstrated that the impact of peat cutting, 'turf-getting' and 'moss gathering' on the inherited landscape was much greater than had been previously thought, and the effects on the environment have been characterised as 'massive', though generally unperceived and overlooked (Rotherham 1999). However, the recent collective fieldwork on turbary stones by the Yorkshire Dales National Park[3] has highlighted the existence of peat and turf cutting grounds all over the Dales, through the survival of these small marker stones. They are often set in areas which do not now display obvious turbary features and the marker stones form a useful additional body of evidence.

Other evidence comes from various surviving place-names in the Yorkshire Dales. Turbary Pasture in neighbouring Kingsdale is one such example, and places like Turf Rigg are likely to be peat or turf cutting grounds. 'Moss' is another common place-name associated with the activity of turf and *flaw* cutting and moss gathering as witnessed by Newby Moss, Stoops Moss and Thieves Moss on the south side of Ingleborough (Johnson 2008). On this side of the hill there is Harry Hallam's Moss, Black Shiver Moss, Lead Mine Moss and Tatham Wife Moss, all indicating areas where these activities took place. Given that it is estimated that households could get through 5-8000 turves a year to feed their hearths, we should not be surprised at the potential extent of the impact of these activities on the landscape (Rotherham 1999). The presence of turbary roads is another common form of landscape evidence and, although it continues beyond Humphrey Bottom peat grounds and may not be associated with it, a small grass-covered track (ING 173) does indeed exist here traversing the scree beneath and potentially facilitating access up to the peat grounds. The track continues uphill (ING 176) from the turbary ground and runs underneath the remains of a small stone structure (ING 175), which must therefore be later than the track itself and not its goal. Its ultimate destination is unclear, as it vanishes where it crosses an unstable slope, close to a heavily disturbed area

[2] R.R. and M. Balderston n.d (1888) *Ingleton: Bygone and Present* Simpkin and Marshall Skipton and London 272

[3] Yorkshire Dales National Park, Feature of the Season: Turbary Stones

right up against the steep face of Ingleborough. As we could not agree on the origins of this disturbed area – was it a rotational landslip, the results of attempts to mine coal, or indeed a rotational landslip *caused* by the mining of coal? - we have left it out of the survey for now.

Glossary

bog burst when the upper layers of a peat bog liquefy and slide downhill.

corrie an amphitheatre-like valley head, formed at the head of a valley glacier by erosion, with cliffs on three sides and a lip on the fourth.

flaws cut squares of turf.

Nardus a type of grass which thrives on upland acid soils.

township term used particularly in the north of England to denote the basic unit of civil administration.

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