

The Prehistory of the Breamish Valley

On 11th September 2019, Peter Topping gave an engaging and informative talk based on his long experience of working at the Wether Hill multiperiod site in the Breamish Valley. Peter is a Multiperiod Landscape Archaeologist and, alongside the Northumberland Archaeology Group, he has been involved with the excavations there for over 20 years.

He started by outlining the multiperiod approach, taking account of layers of prehistory, medieval and post-medieval period. Prehistory was then further categorised into Mesolithic (9000–4000BC), Neolithic (4000–2400BC), Bronze (2400–800BC) and Iron (800BC–43AD) Ages. All was illustrated by abstracted slides which homed in on evidence of Prehistory and there were some excellent aerial photos.

The Wether Hill site has some Neolithic evidence in the form of a pit with food vessels contained in a stone cist, but there is little evidence of any settlements. There is a very well, preserved Bronze Age hill fort, one of the best in the area. On the Alnham side is a cross ridge dyke, a defensive feature, and alongside the dyke is a much later ditch. Both the fort and the dyke date to approx. 450BC. The hillfort was abandoned around 60BC.

Additional Bronze Age features include, a cairn with a surrounding low wall. Excavations revealed the centre of the cairn to be filled with shards of green glaze pottery from the 13th century, so the cairn was plundered long since, perhaps in the Middle Ages. There are outlines of many timber houses and palisade slots for enclosures, some Bronze Age and some Iron Age which point to a substantial mid Iron Age timber palisaded settlement.

Hartside Hill has a well-developed field system showing prehistoric boundaries, suggesting its use as farm land. Evidence of cord rig strip cultivation can be seen, the strips much narrower than those produced by medieval rig and furrow cultivation. Some remnants of sheep teeth suggest animal- as well crop-farming. The acidity of the Cheviot moorland soils leaves very little evidence of organic matter, so the crops which were cultivated are hard to identify. There is evidence of later, stone roundhouses and all is overlaid by medieval and late medieval development and settlements.