

21 September 2019: outing to the Breamish Valley

A guided walk around the historical sites of the Breamish Valley with archaeologist John Nolan, who specialises in the Medieval Period and onwards. Many of the sites we visited linked with Peter Topping's talk 2 weeks before about the Wether Hill excavations.

Eleven of us met up with John on a perfect autumn day, with sunshine, a light breeze and glorious views. We all enjoyed exploring the very rich evidence of prehistoric and later civilisation that the landscape offers. The numerous settlements that this valley has sustained over different periods contrasts markedly with the sparse population of residents and the transient population of visitors and holiday makers today.

The hills here are a scheduled Ancient Monument, and since the 1990s there have been numerous productive archaeological digs. Much of the valley is owned by Northumberland Estates. There is one large working farm where the Wilson family have been working the land since 1949, now diversifying into bird rearing and venison production as well as traditional sheep farming.

Our circular walk of approximately 4 miles took in Ingram Hill, Turfe Knowe, Ewe Hill, Middle Dean Hillfort, Cochrane Pike and Wether Hill. We started in Ingram, passing the church of St Michael's and All Angels of 6th century origin; the rectory, now holiday accommodation; an 19th century Victorian post box, still in use; and Old Ingram Farm and cottages, some dating to medieval times. We then took the track towards Alnham Moor and onto Ingram Hill, from where we were able to scope the landscape. We saw prehistoric terracing on several hills, these used for cultivation up until the 18th century; medieval rig and furrow, running downhill and superimposed on the terracing; and Ingram hill fort, which has been excavated three times – it was originally a palisaded settlement, much later fortified by Iron Age stone buildings, and then occupied from the 6th to the 13th centuries, possibly by the Saxons. Looking down we could see a rare survival in the form of an intact, occupied shepherd's cottage, dating to 1860, with a netty, coal house, pigsty, byre and no electricity.

At Turfe Knowe there are two Early Bronze Age (2400BC) burial cairns, much older than the hillforts, and a triradial sheep shelter (possibly medieval). We moved on to Ewe Hill, which yielded stunning panoramic views and where we saw a memorial to Sarah Wilson and her parents. Sarah had written an excellent social history of the valley (*Reflections: The Breamish Valley and Ingram* published by Northern Heritage in 2005).

Further on we came to the sizeable Middle Dean Hillfort, sited on the edge of a steep ravine and now largely under bracken. The ravine forms a natural boundary with the Cochrane Pike Hillfort, our next destination. There are relics of some tree stumps, probably from the early 1800s nearby. A cross ridge dyke, originally almost 2m deep, formed a boundary between Cochrane Pike and Wether Hill. The well-preserved Bronze Age Hillfort on Wether Hill has evidence of a large settlement with two outer walls and early palisades. There is also a Bronze Age ring cairn, which was found to be full of Medieval pottery. A nearby pit, when excavated, was found to contain a beaker within a box made from oak charred planks. The beaker is now in Breamish Valley Museum.

We returned to Ingram and the museum, with interactive displays and some excavation finds on display. After an invigorating walk exploring ancient landscapes, we happily fell into the Ingram café for very good refreshments.