

Masongill Hall Project 2007-2008

This project is a good example of why it is essential to question the assumptions underlying an archaeological excavation at every stage. The project began with the report from the owners of Masongill Hall Farm, Messrs. Hartley, that a group from Lancaster University had seen the site at the rear of the farmhouse and dismissed it as being "merely Anglo-Saxon." It did not seem likely that this was a verbatim report!



The undisturbed site in 2007

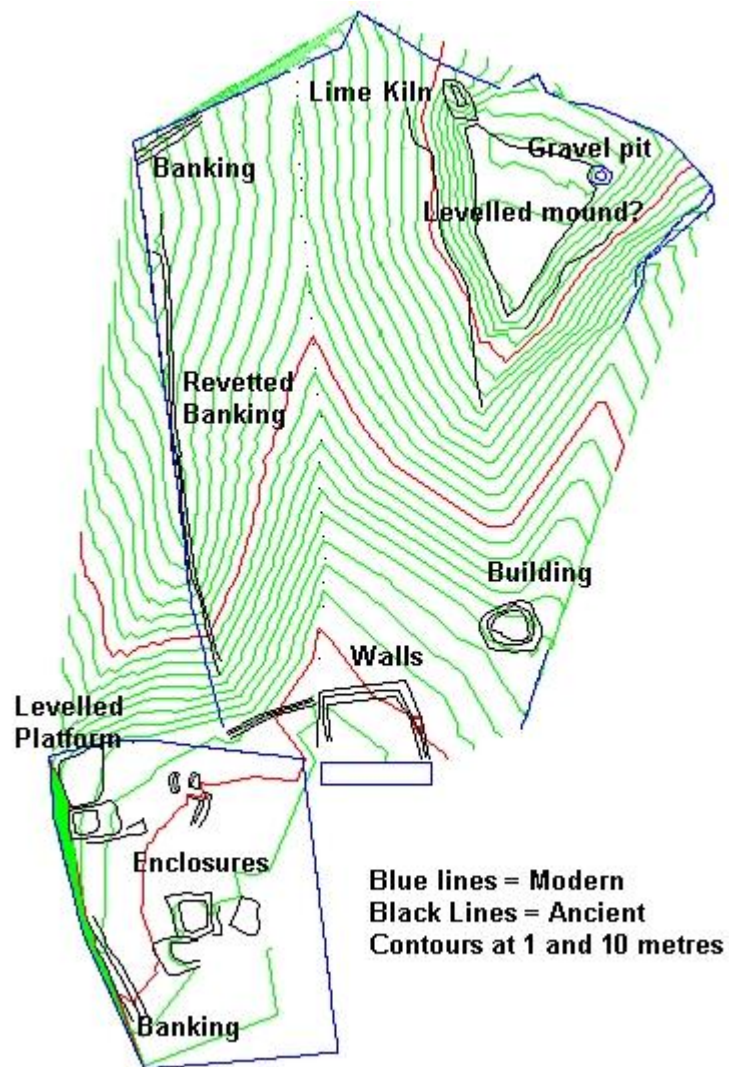
The eye of faith might see the outlines of a building with a possible internal division. What was clear was that the site was filled with rubbish.



Eventually over 100 tons of rubbish were removed

William Hartley pointed out that the "internal division" might be more apparent than real since he had personally tipped stones at this point. This led to the assumption that the "internal division" was non-existent. This was the first of several assumptions to be proved wrong.

The site was first surveyed by total station as part of a survey of three fields immediately adjacent to Masongill Hall which showed clear signs of earlier use.



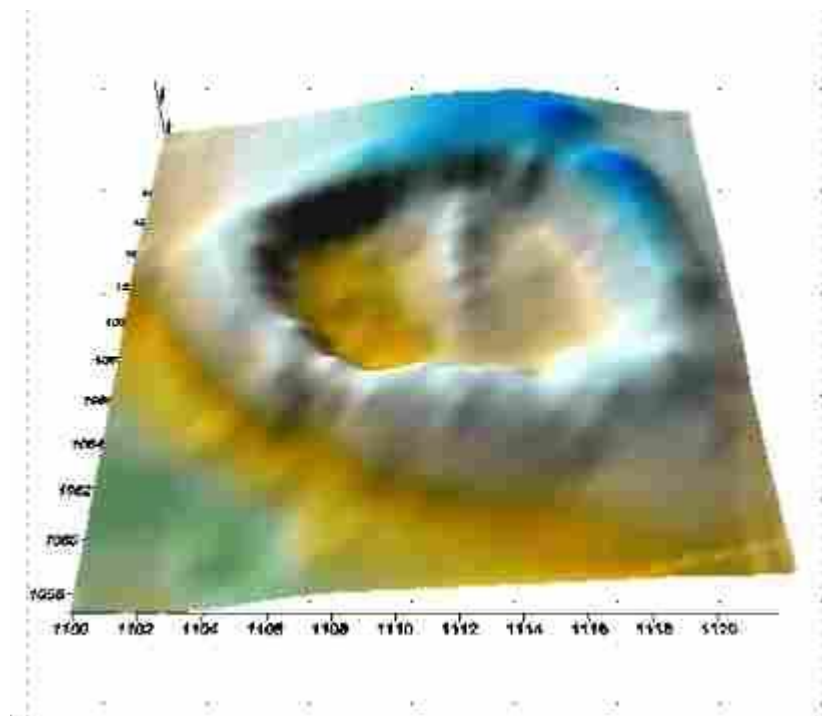
Survey undertaken in 2007 with a total station

Although the site itself cannot be seen on Google Earth some of the features such as ridge and furrow in the adjacent fields can be seen quite clearly.



Notice the remains of thick walls immediately north of the farm buildings

It was important to try and establish the surface features of the site despite the rubbish filling it so a more detailed survey with the total station was undertaken using a 25cm grid (more or less,) with the resulting data being fed into "Surfer" software to produce the image below.



North is to the top, grid figures are in metres To the south of this surface there appeared to be a similar sized enclosure

The first task was to remove the rubbish. Two things became apparent early on. The internal division was real and consisted of a clay and stone bank. The earliest rubbish was mid-Victorian and there was a clean surface below the rubbish. There were in fact two pits at two levels differing by over 50cm. The pits were separated by an internal bank and surrounded by banks.



The clay of the internal division was wrongly exposed at this early stage

It was assumed that the two pits were a Victorian construction (which is not yet established as will be seen later.) Why the two pits were constructed remains a mystery. The siting of the pits behind the farmhouse (constructed in 1832,) upslope of the farmyard and in an open field close to a beck used by stock seems to preclude their being used for clamps for root crops. Indeed the complete lack of organic remains underneath the rubbish seems to rule out any agricultural use other than as a rubbish tip. But if the purpose was merely this why bother to create two distinct pits?

Putting to one side the purpose of the pits and after consultation with Robert White, Senior Conservation Archaeologist with the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, a trench 4m by 2 m was cut across the entrance and part of the southern bank to establish, if possible, the nature of the construction work which had been done.



Trench 1 was cut across the South-West entrance in 2007



Trench 1 at the end of 2007

It was assumed that the banking excavated in Trench 1 had an inner core of large stones which had been laid on a surface of small stones. The banking had then been stoned possibly to stabilise the banking or to minimise the impact of stock on the banking. The stoning seemed to reach down to the floor of the pits which looked to have some remarkably flat stones. Was there in fact a paved surface to the pits below the clean level? And was that a kerb of stones in the entrance?



This was thought to be paving in 2007

Since it was merely the method of construction of what had been assumed to be a Victorian construct which was the subject of the excavation no dry sieving had taken place. In any case there had been no evidence of any datable material whatsoever under the layer of rubbish. However it seemed that the construction might not be Victorian after all. Another phase of digging was proposed for the following year to investigate three things: was the banking to the West of the entrance constructed in the same way as the exposed banking; was there a constructed entrance to the pit; was there a floor made for each pit or was there merely a natural surface which sloped from the higher pit to the lower pit? On this excavation datable evidence for the construction of the pit was a priority.

Returning in June 2008 three trenches were opened - Trench 2 extending Trench 1 West by 1 metre, Trench 3 extending Trench 1 North by 1 metre to investigate the possibility of a paved surface in the lower pit and Trench 4 2m by

0.5m whose purpose was to establish a vertical section across the internal bank and each of the two pits.



Trench 2



Trench 3



Trench 4

The findings were at first sight entirely negative. Trench 2 established beyond doubt that there was no stone core to the banking to the West of the entrance and the banking was not laid on a surface of small stones as seemed to be the case in the previous year's excavation. Trench 3 revealed several alternating layers of stone and soil to a depth of some 40cm below the topsoil which Trenches 2 and 4 confirmed overlay the clay and stone bankings to a depth of 5-10cm below the rubbish layer. Trench 4 further established that the surfaces of the two pits were not the sloping natural surface hypothesised. The "kerb" revealed in Trench 1 in 2007 proved to be carefully laid cobbles. No datable material whatsoever was found.

Just as the dig was coming to an end Trench 2 revealed what appeared to be a wall bottom and the previous assumptions were cast to one side. Had Trench 1 last year revealed not a stone core to the bank but the remains of a wall on which the bank had been constructed? Two investigatory trenches were cut across the North bank (Trench 5) and well outside the South of the site where the the hypothetical wall might explain the "pound" area to the South which showed up so clearly in the surface.



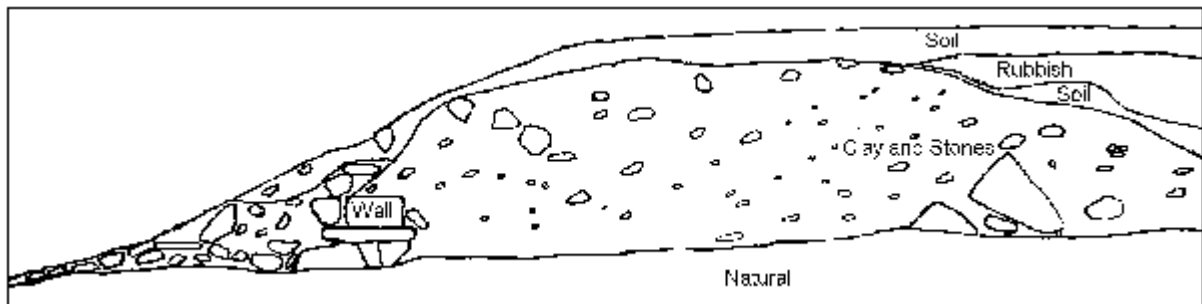
Trench 5

Trench 5 proved to be inconclusive but Trench 6 definitely established the existence of a wall bottom.



Trench 6

INTERPRETATION



From Section Drawing of Trench 2 by Chris Bonsall

When drawings of sections for Trench 1, Trench 2 and Trench 4 were taken it became very evident that underneath the rubbish within and on the sides of the pits there was a fairly uniform level of soil, between 5 and 10 cm thick. The existence of soil underlying the rubbish within the pits AND the banks provides a terminus ante quem of mid-Victorian times say 1870. This certainly seems to fit with the evidence of the pottery found within the rubbish.



Victorian and early 20th Century Pottery

However the pottery indicates the earliest use of the pits as a rubbish pits NOT the date of construction. It is possible that a layer of topsoil was put on top of the banks and the floors of the pits (although exactly why this should be done if the purpose of the pits was to contain rubbish is a question more for the psychiatrist than the archaeologist.) It is possible that the pits were constructed and topsoil allowed to accumulate (in which case why construct the pits if they were not used?) If the topsoil accumulated that would indicate a construction period of perhaps 200 years before mid-Victorian. Therefore it is likely that the pits were constructed between 1670 and 1870.

The alternating layers of soil and stones overlying a natural sand/clay/gravel surface in Trench 3 indicate deliberate placement. Much of the stone in the layers appeared to be quite good building stone. Possibly a wall or walls were demolished or lowered to construct the feature. That walls exist in at least two places underneath the feature would support this hypothesis. The two walls and cobbled surface exposed in Trench 2 suggest Trench 1 revealed the corner of a wall in 2007 which was not recognised as such at the time.



Corner of wall

In 2008 a narrow cobbled surface was exposed between this corner and a perpendicular wall extending to the west.



Cobbling and natural surface in entrance

The stoned surface exposed in 2007 may indicate that there was building South of the site but contiguous with it, the remains of which were used in the construction of the two pits. The position of this building, (if it exists,) well away from the enclosures in the field to the West of the modern farm buildings and well outside the substantial wall remains which are assumed to have marked the site of the old Masongill Hall which was demolished to make way for the present farmhouse suggest that it might be a medieval or earlier building. Of course there may be no building here at all - merely an animal enclosure. It is certainly a site for further investigation with datable evidence emerging at the next excavation.