

THE PREHISTORIC ENCLOSURE IN GIPTON WOOD.

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Towards the end of the 17th Century a prosperous middle-aged member of a Leeds Merchant family, clutching his measuring rod, and struggled through the tangled undergrowth of Gipton Wood. Eventually he found what he was looking for, a muddy ditch and bank, he made careful measurements which he noted meticulously in his pocket book. The man was the eminent Leeds antiquarian Ralph Thoresby, Esq., F.R.S. He was engaged in a continuing quest to find and record the remains left by the inhabitants of the area. He had contributed a number of papers to the Transactions of the Royal Society relating to Roman and Saxon monuments in

The North of England. In 1697 this extensive research earned him a fellowship of this Society. His monumental work on the history of Leeds 'Ducatus Leodiensis' was finally published in 1714. On page 112, under the heading Gipton, he describes his visit to the wood.



Boundary Road and Gipton Wood

"In my survey of this Parish I discovered here amongst the remains of an ancient fortification, the out-trench whereof is eighteen foot broad, the first camp about 100 long, and 66 broad, the second camp about 163 square, as exactly as I could measure it for the shrubs, with which it has been long overgrown: They are both surrounded with a deep trench and Rampire; the out-camp is about eighteen poles long, and twelve broad, and at a little distance is a small out-work, about four poles and a half square. "(1 pole - 5.5 yards = 5.029m)

In the same article he speculates about the purpose of the site:-

" conjecture may be admitted concerning what has pass'd above a thousand years ago, I should take this to be the very place of security that Ediwald son of King Oswald retired to, expecting the event of the noted Battle upon Winmore, anno 655, which unexpected retreat of his contributed very much to the defeat of his pagan confederates, who suspected it as a piece of treachery Both the strength of the place ,and its convenient distance from the field, agree very well with the account we have of the transaction."

In Edward Parsons, in his book 'Saxon History' repeats Thoresby's description and measurements of the site but when he makes a search of the area he makes the following observations:-

"Of these works the writer has been unable to find any remains, and he concludes that since the time of Thoresby they have completely disappeared."

James Wardell, in his 'Antiquities of the Borough of Leeds' 1853, writes;-

" At Gipton, in the township of Potter-Newton, are the almost obliterated remains of extensive earthworks, which Dr Witaker describes as 'two interior trenches enclosing unequal spaces and both surrounded by an outer ram pi re, --

He goes on to repeat Thoresby's description of the site, but disagrees with his assumption that the earthworks were formed during the war between Penda and Osway, which resulted in the total defeat and death of the former in AD655 at the battle of Whinmoor.

If James Wardell did actually visit the site himself, he would possibly have been the last person to see the entire monument before Oakwood Boundary Road and the adjacent houses covered part of the earthworks.

This description of the site, as surveyed in November 1984, was entered in the English Heritage schedule of Ancient Monuments, as monument 31496 on the 18th September 1998:-

"The monument includes a late prehistoric enclosed settlement and surviving part of another. They are situated in Potter Newton at the north end of Gipton Wood. The main, southern enclosure has a ditch with a well-defined outer bank. The ditch is about 5m wide and 0.6m deep. The bank is 5m-6m wide and is up to 0.5m high. Immediately to the north is part of a second enclosure which has been partly destroyed by a modern road and housing estate. This enclosure is bounded by a bank approximately 4m wide and 0.3m high. An additional ditch 4m wide with an outer bank about 4m wide and 0.2m -0.3m high is present on the west side of the enclosure."

A later visual inspection of the site identified other artificially levelled areas at the Eastern boundary of the wood and a large terraced section in the centre which may have part of a cultivated field system.

To understand this complex earthwork, we have to see it as one of the distinctive enclosed farming settlements which were common in northern England from between the Late Bronze Age to the Romano-British period (c.1000BC to 400AD). The whole area enclosed by the outer earthwork described by Thoresby was approximately 0.55 hectares. It is located on a hillside with terraced areas and outer cultivated fields. The oval shaped bank and ditch area in the centre of the site was typical of a cattle enclosure of the period. There may have been an additional timber palisade along the top of the bank. The levelled area on the ridge at the eastern of a small boundary may have contained farm buildings or a small settlement. There is evidence of many years of occupation, with later earth works built over and partially destroying earlier settlements. This process has continued right up to the present day with 'Oakwood Boundary Road' and the adjacent 19th and 20th century housing covering part of the site described by Ralph Thoresby.