

Fontburn Valley – An Archaeological Perspective

The most dramatic feature of the Fontburn Valley is, of course, the reservoir, with its great dam, whose construction started in 1898, and was completed in 1908. As you look around, you will see many relics of life in the valley at this time, and a visit to the *Fontburn Remembered* website (www.fontburnremembered.co.uk) will introduce them to you.

As you walk on the high path above the south side of the reservoir, you can see the unmistakable profile of Simonside, forming the northern ridge above the valley. Some call this a sacred mountain, and there are several archaeological sites in Northumberland that seem to be placed where they have a view of this fine mountain.

On the hillside facing you are three farms: Fallowlees to the west, whose buildings contain the remains of a bastle. Newbiggin in the centre, and Ritton Whitehouse to the east, where there was also once a bastle. Although these are only single farmsteads now, in centuries gone by they were small hamlets supporting a number of families. Below Ritton Whitehouse, and across the former railway line, on a small ridge, lie the remains of Bullbush Cottages, and in front of them, the remains of the old school.

Moving on to the western end of the reservoir, on a large rock, there is a scatter of cup marks, dating from prehistoric time. The cups seem to be arranged in a rough triangle. Is the apex of the triangle pointing towards Simonside? There are also three slots on the western end of it, probably much more recent, and maybe indicating an attempt to break up the rock for building purposes.

At the head of the Fontburn reservoir is a triangle of land formed between two burns coming down from the fells above, and out of sight of Simonside. Here are several groups of stones, which may be cysts or broken barrows. There is also an earthwork. It is all difficult to see in the summer, because of the bracken. Between the head of the lake and Fallowlees, hidden by the wood, and more bracken, there are three more cup marked stones and some hut sites with scooped enclosures marked by scatters of stones.

Walking back along the north side of the reservoir, we can look south to the ridge from where the railway line comes away from Ewesley Station. There the railway cuts through a major archaeological feature – a circular ditched feature, possibly an Iron Age stock enclosure. Nearby is a rectangular camp, maybe Roman, with ramparts and ditches.

The Fontburn Valley contains many echoes of our ancestors who lived here. We hope that you enjoy seeing a few of them.