HareHaugh Long Cairn, Coquetdale: A Short Report on the Results of the Excavation

The focus of the excavation and survey work was a long mound or natural ridge situated beyond the hillfort at HareHaugh. The shape of the ridge made it look like a possible long cairn, but there are several similar ridges in the area, and the object of the works was firstly to find out if it was a long cairn, and subsequently recover as much information about it as possible within a two week period.

The excavation comprised a long trench positioned across the mound, extended by several metres beyond the mound to either side. The trench was positioned to incorporate a small hollow or depression in the top of the mound, and a small low cairn of stones which protruded through the grass to one side of this. An additional small trench was opened over another depression and mound at the other end of the ridge. An extensive earthwork survey of the mound and surrounding area was also conducted.

The programme revealed that the ridge was indeed a long cairn, constructed out of a naturally outcropping stone ridge. The ridge had been quarried away, particularly on the north-east side, and material had been added in places, particularly on the south-west side, in order to make the shape of the cairn. The cairn had been carefully constructed and structured, comprising a number of terraces running parallel with the central ridge of the cairn. These terraces incorporated the outcropping bedrock – this formed the central ridge of the cairn, and a secondary ridge lower down on the north-east side. These had been deliberately accentuated by the inclusion of very large boulders, probably quarried from elsewhere in the mound. These ridges would have been visually very striking if approaching the cairn from the north-east side. A terrace was present in between these ridges, constructed by cutting into the natural subsoil and surfaced with a platform of small rocks. A path led from here up onto the top of the mound. On the other side of the mound, the terracing was still visible, but because of a lack of outcropping rocks, the mound had been made up of small stones, and instead of the ridges, kerbs of larger stones had been used to bring out the terracing. To fully understand the shape of the mound, a larger excavation would be needed.

One of the things that the survey work revealed was that the mound was surrounded by a flat platform on three sides – on the fourth side the track may have destroyed the platform in this area. These platforms formed the lower terrace of the mound. This is an unusual feature in this sort of monument, although there are quite often small platforms recorded at one end of the monument. These platforms would have been used in association with the monument. The small excavation on the southern side revealed that some features were present on the platform, including a low bank and possible ditch running parallel with the long cairn. A larger excavation in this area would be needed to establish the extent of these features and what they and the platforms were used for.

Incorporated into the top of the ridge was a stone lined pit, outlined by the natural bedrock on one side, and by a large number of stones on the other sides, including some large ‘kerb’ stones demarcating the top edge. In this pit

was a stone cist – a box made of thin stone slabs which would have acted like a coffin. The cist, unfortunately, was empty. This would have been the result of antiquarians excavating in the mound before us. The stone lined pit had been emptied some time in the last few hundred years and the cist revealed. Although some stones had been thrown back in the pit, most had been used to construct the low stone mound sticking through the grass that we saw at the beginning of the excavation. Underneath this small cairn a broken flint blade was recovered with a serrated edge – this may well have been found by the antiquarians in the cist and have been thrown up to one side during their excavation. The flint is probably Neolithic.

The earthwork survey also revealed and recorded several similar small depressions and associated small mounds dug into the side of the mound and the platforms to either side: some parts of the monument were very much obscured by the disturbance that these intrusions had caused. One of these was partly excavated, and it appeared that several of these were probably also the result of antiquarians excavating into the mound. Several of these intrusions were noted across the surrounding landscape as well, and their number and concentration in this area seems to indicate quite a concerted campaign. The identification of antiquarian excavations (and cairns) like this is quite important – not only do they help locate monuments, but by accurately surveying them it is possible to distinguish the topography of the monuments they are obscuring: recent survey and phasing of similar monuments have been based on the misinterpretation of earthworks of antiquarian origin.

The most important find of the excavation, however, was a layer of peat identified beneath the stone cist in the centre of the monument. A similar layer of peat was also found in the structure of the ridge to the side of the pit. Initial processing of this material has indicated that it is full of preserved plant remains. This is really important because it will hopefully enable us to work out exactly what the local environment was like when the cairn was constructed, and also provide us with loads of material for radio-carbon dating. No material like this in direct association with a monument of this age has been found in Northumberland before.

Our first season of work had been very successful. Not only has the Coquetdale Community Archaeology Group found the oldest known monument in Coquetdale, it has completed the first modern excavation and survey of a long cairn in Northumberland, provided the first material for radio-carbon dates and environmental reconstruction from these monuments in the region, and the first evidence for terraced structure and external platforms.

The full report on the excavations will be out by the end of March, the radio-carbon dates probably January or February.

Peter Carne
On behalf of Coquetdale Community Archaeology Group
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Survey provided by Jim Wright
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Figure 1. The flint blade found underneath the Antiquarian cairn

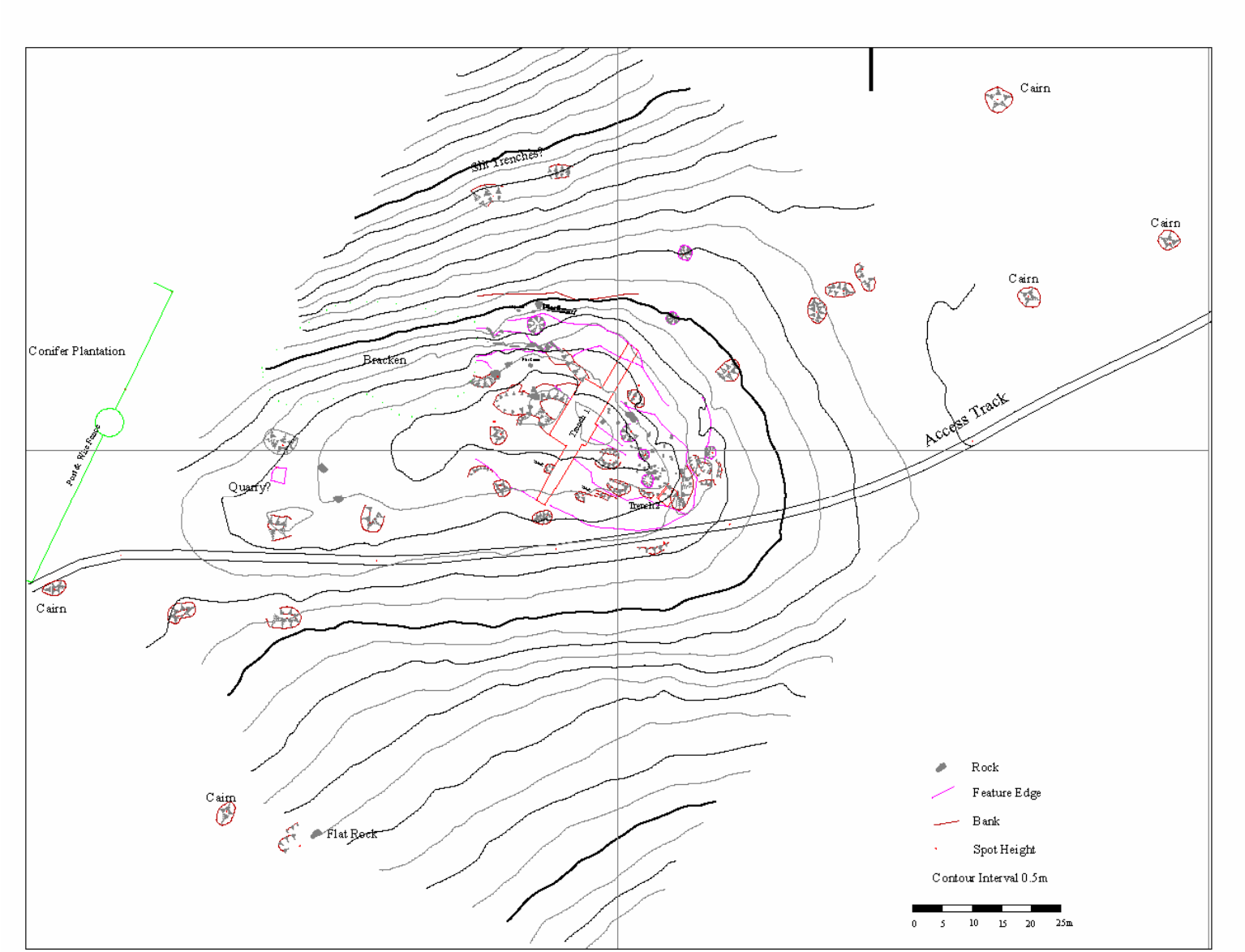

Figure 2. Part of one of the earthwork surveys, showing the contours, platforms, antiquarian diggings and our excavations

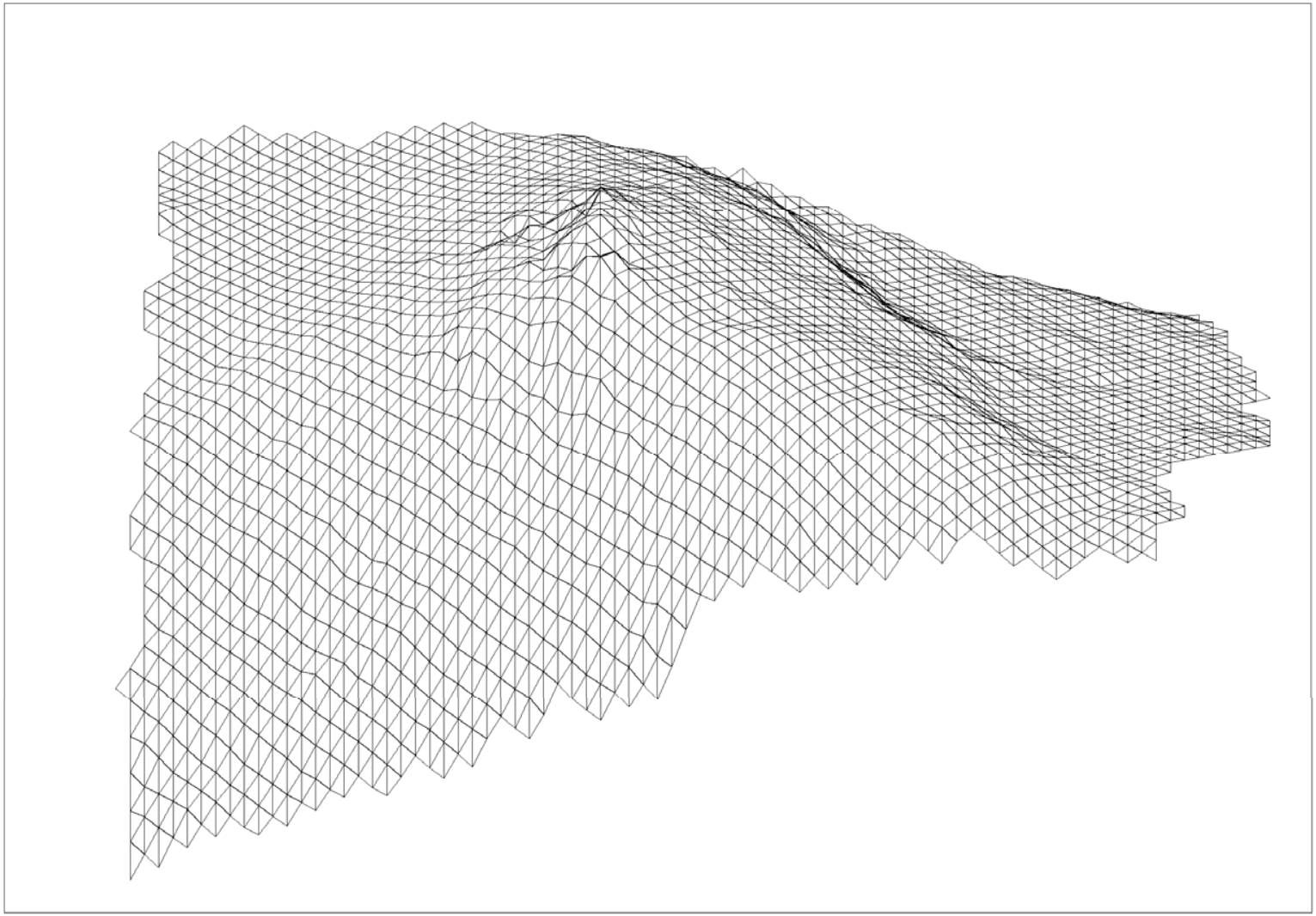

Figure 3. Digital terrain model showing the monument in its landscape

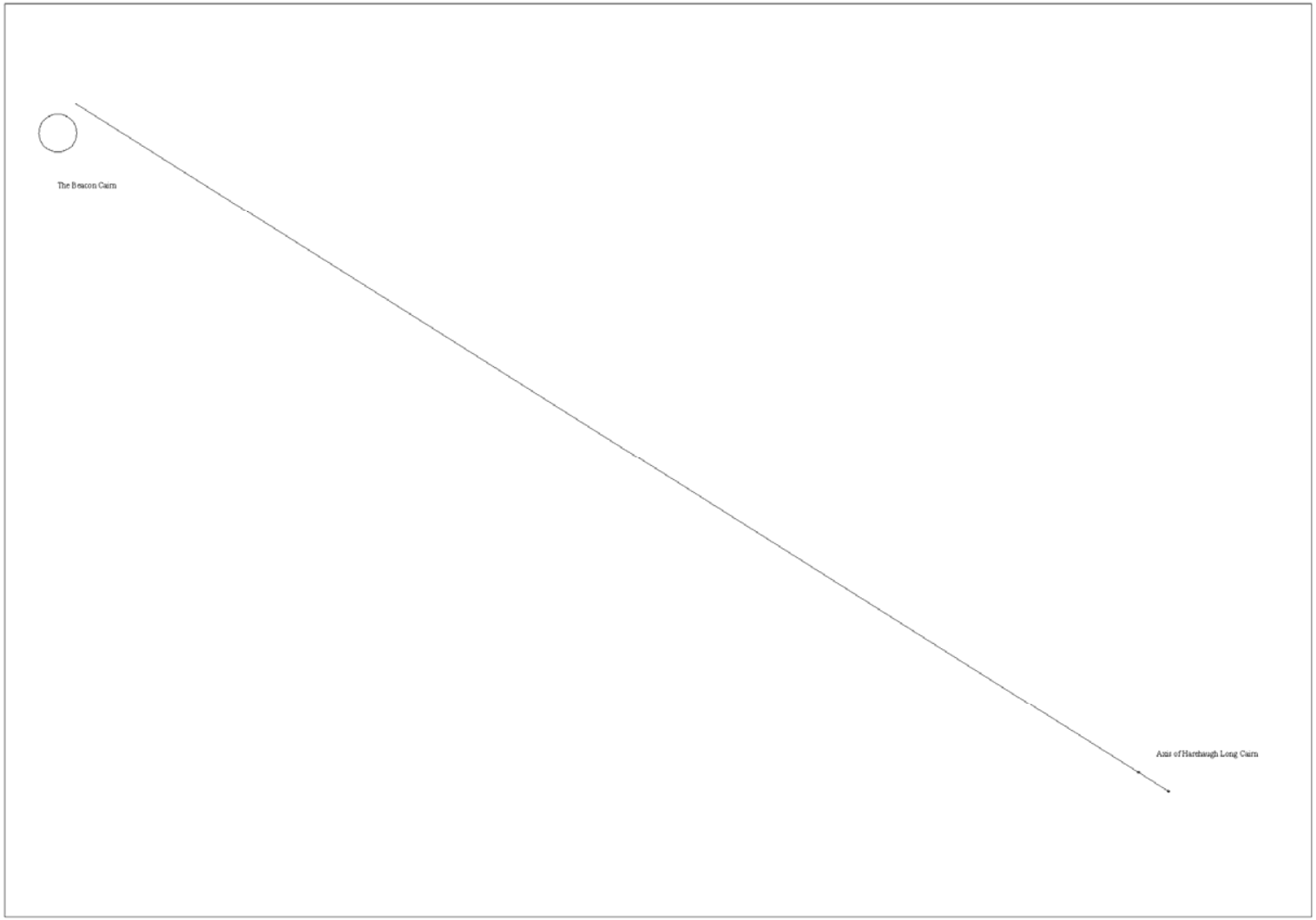

Figure 4. Axis of cairn in relation to cairn on Beacon Hill