Biggar Archaeology group

Bringing the past to the present

Migration routes

Further thoughts on the migration routes of animals and people in the Late Upper Paleolithic period in the central belt of Scotland, and the potential locations of further hunter camp sites of that period.

by Tam Ward 2013

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to understand the location of the Late Upper Palaeolithic site at Howburn Farm, further thoughts are given to potential migratory routes across the central belt of Scotland, of both animals and people, in order to better understand where further camp sites may be located.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009/2010 the discovery of the Late Upper Palaeolithic (LUP) site at Howburn Farm near Biggar was given prominence in publications (Ballin, Saville, Tipping, Verrill & Ward 2009-2010, see all ref's below) and in the media. Since that time the writer has considered the pros and cons of supposed migratory routes of reindeer herds moving in an east/west traverse over the central belt of Scotland (Fig's 1 & 2).

The position of the Howburn camp site has been discussed in earlier reports but without recourse to setting it in a wider context than its location in south central Scotland. The paper presented here attempts to set the location in a broader landscape, stretching beyond the present shores of Scotland in both western and eastern directions, and to suggest potential places where further sites may be found.

Migration over the central belt of Scotland

The present assumption is that Howburn camp is positioned to strategically intercept migratory animals, assumed to be reindeer, and for the hunters be able to better kill the animals passing by, it seems inescapable that such was the scenario.

However, the debate continues with other aspects of the event such as how many other camp sites may have existed and to what extent was the migration taken to, in terms of geography? Both questions are interrelated.

On the belief that sea levels were far removed from present shores around Scotland (Fig 1), and that the North Sea area was more or less a landscape, the question arises as to how far (presumably west) did the animals travel? And what routes would be available to them under those circumstances, for instance the present Clyde estuary would have been mostly dry land, and the various west coast islands would also have been part of the mainland, albeit uplands for the most part, and this land would extend beyond Ireland like a vast peninsula of mainland Europe.

Fig 1 showing potential routes to Howburn, Orkney and Shetland where tools have been found

If the scenario at Howburn is accepted as presented by the writer in previous reports, that is to say the animals were walking south along the east side of the Pentland Hills (leading directly to Howburn) and then turning west to continue in the Glasgow direction, then what impediments would they encounter in their journey from Howburn and indeed from the place where they first set foot in the modern Scottish landscape?

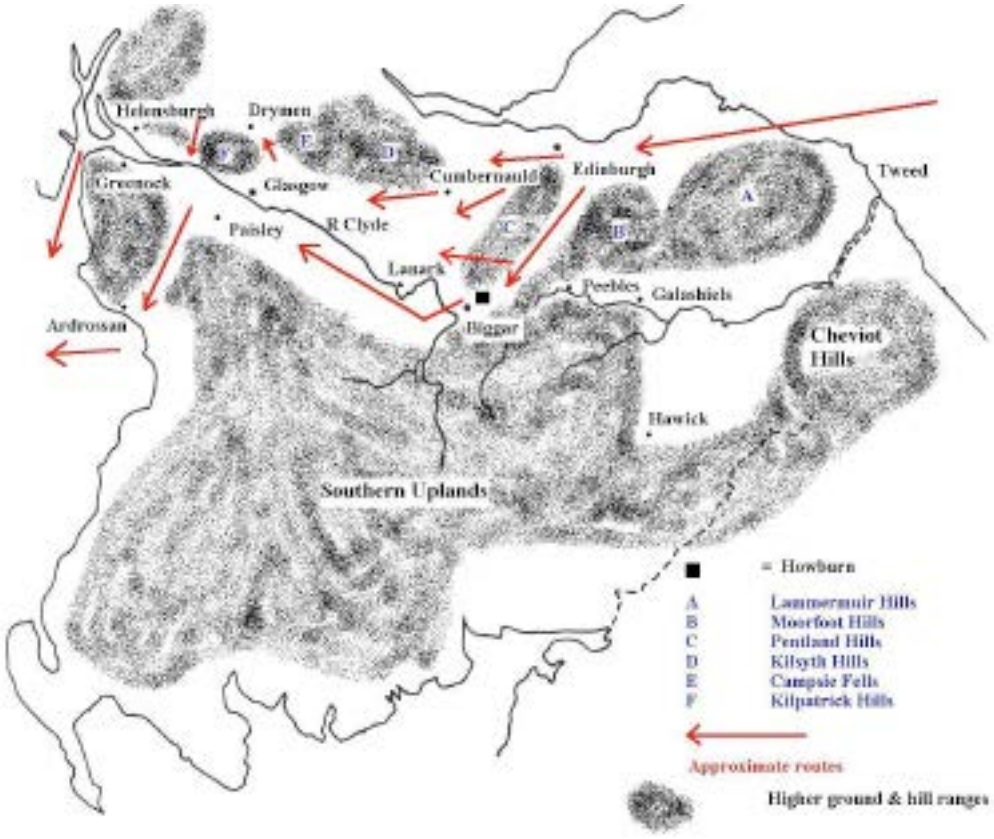

Fig 2 showing potential routes through the central Scotland hill ranges, more detailed topographical maps would need to be consulted to narrow the search for potential routes and site locations.

To recap, the writer believes the animals had two choices to reach Howburn from the east; one was following the River Tweed and the other was coming into Scotland via East Lothian, perhaps both routes could have worked. However, the favoured route by this writer is by way of the Forth area and down to Howburn. The Moorfoot and Lammermuir hills being an impediment as were the Pentland hills. If this assumption is correct then some animals must surely have passed along the northern edge of the Pentlands at Fairmilehead where they would get an easy route to continue westwards.

Geography of southern Scotland Fig 2

The two available routes to Howburn from the east are proposed as follows; by following the Tweed River from Berwick to Galashiels and, by following a line from Dunbar to the northern end of the Pentlands and diverting south.

The great massive of the Cheviots Hills would block access from that direction and the Lammermuir Hills lying between the Tweed valley and the southern shores of the Firth of Forth would similarly act as a barrier to animals, perhaps in calf and wishing an easy walk to the west. It may also be that a tundra like landscape envisaged for this period in Scotland would provide less food on higher slopes than the valleys below, adding a further attraction for valley routes to be adopted by the animals, where grazing was continued en route.

The lower Tweed valley would make an excellent approach to a migration of animals' intent on travelling further west - if it were not for the blocking arrangement of the Southern Uplands to the west of Galashiels and Selkirk. The Tweed valley from that point westwards is restricted severely and at Peebles may have been a major impediment to huge herds of animals trying to pass through the gorge there. The valley restriction only ends at Broughton where the landscape is again open allowing an easy walk past Biggar.

A route from Tweed to Howburn is rejected here since the animals would have to sweep north from Broughton to reach the Howburn site, it would seem more logical that if the animals had reached Broughton by way of the Tweed, they would simply continue straight westwards past Biggar, where no further impediment of high ground exists until past Glasgow.

Therefore, the route favoured here to reach Howburn, is by way of the east side of Pentlands and channelled by the Moorfoot Hills initially and passing West Linton.

A possible sub route by passing Howburn to the north and through the only gap in the Pentland range not requiring steep ascent, could have been at Dunsyre (Fig 3), the only fields through this valley which have been walked by BAG are at Weston Farm. Each side north and south of Blackmount Hill are similar valleys and the Dunsyre side would be well worth prospecting in future, given the opportunity.

Fig 3 shows a possibly local bypass of Howburn Camp through the South Medwin valley.

Plate 1 shows the view west from Blackmount, to the relatively flat Midland Valley leading to the distant Campsie Fells.

The view west from the summit of Blackmount hill at Howburn (Pl 1) shows that migratory animals would not encounter major upland landscapes until they reach the Campsie and Kilsyth Hills to the north of Glasgow, it seems that this hill range would again act as a block to their progress and therefore channel them directly down the lower Clyde valley past Glasgow. Further south and on the assumption that they are walking west from Howburn, the higher ground of the Southern Uplands and Tinto hill near Biggar (Pl 2) and the upland range running from there to Eaglesham, would help channel the animals along the Clyde valley past Lanark to Glasgow.

Plate 2 shows the Southern Uplands and Tinto Hill to the south of Blackmount, the assumed route from Howburn to the west is left to right on this image, with the village of Elsrickle seen in the centre.

To reach Glasgow from the east may also have been possible by following the low country from Edinburgh through West Lothian, and travelling along the valley like neck of land used by the Romans for the construction of the Antonine Wall; past Cumbernauld and sweeping into northern Glasgow from the Kirkintilloch area.

The lowland triangle between Lanark, Greenock and Cumbernauld may have sufficed as a breeding/grazing ground for the herds, before their return to what is now north Western Europe.

However, if they required more territory because of the size of the herd, and were to march further west of Glasgow, then following the course of the Clyde would achieve that, but hemmed by the Kilpatrick Hills on the north , however, they would have to swing south at Greenock , still following the Clyde, to avoid the highlands of Argyll.

Perhaps a better alternative at Glasgow would be to swing south at Paisley and through to Ayrshire at Ardrossan, and then with a free lowland journey westwards. It would of course have been possible to adopt both lines out of Glasgow area as they perhaps did at the northern end of the Pentlands.

The distance from Hamburg to Howburn directly is c 550 miles. Hamburg is where the culture was first discovered and which now gives it its name. The direct line from Howburn to Glasgow is c forty miles and from Glasgow to Ardrossan about thirty. At least a further 200miles is possible if the animals wished to reach the lowlands of what is now the Atlantic shelf, perhaps moving through the gap between the southern tip of the Mull of Kintyre and Northern Ireland. A total journey of c 800 miles each way was possible, a distance which would not be problematic to migrating reindeer as long as a lowland route could be traced through the uplands of Southern Scotland.

Of course, all of the above is imaginary, but the camp site at Howburn is not. In an effort to predict the potential locations of other site sites, it is possible to trace to routes suggested above and select places which would fit the known criteria for such sites as found at Howburn and elsewhere.

The following quote is taken from a 2009 publication (Ballin, Saville & Ward 2009, ibid) on the Howburn site:

“The location of the site corresponds to that of other sites discovered at the northern extreme of the Hamburgian techno-complex (eg Jels, Slotseng, and SØlbjerg; Holm & Rieck 1992; Holm 1991; Vang Peterson & Johansen 1991), that is, on a level terrace of the slopes immediately south of an existing or fossil lake. These loci are thought to be strategically positioned in relation to reindeer migration routes (eg, Johansen 1978; GrØnnow 1987; Vang Peterson & Johansen 1991).”

What may be added to that is a narrow valley site where animals would be constricted while passing through and thus allowing the hunters to pick them off with greater ease, and which appeared to happen for example at Slotseng, South Jutland (Holm1991 ibid).

It will be seen from those descriptions that the Howburn location fits well with continental sites of the Hamburgian and Federmesser periods in the LUP. Therefore this may at least narrow the search for other locations – but still an easier thing to say than to actually achieve.

Nevertheless an attempt has to be made and if the theory is refined and then followed up by fieldwork, who knows what may be discovered?

Proposed camp sites

The Tweed valley is dismissed as being an unlikely route because of the restriction given above.

Somewhere along the North Pentlands, swinging west along and between the routes of the M8 and the A71 roads, if there are any good restricted valley locations, for example between West Calder and Mid Calder, and Riccarton Hills.

The area of Cumbernauld between the higher ground of Slamannan and the western end of the Kilsyth Hills.

The valley formed by the high ground south of Lennox Castle and the southern slopes of the Campsie Fells at Campsie, and perhaps the valley of Strathblane between Milngavie and Drymen where the Campsie and Kilpatrick Hills form a seemingly good location if the animals were inclined to walk to Loch Lomond. Subsequently, and if that happened, the River Leven and the road between Loch Lomond and Helensburgh would both form good routes which would be advantageous to hunters.

Unfortunately, any camps sites which may have existed around the upper reaches of the Clyde Firth, and as far up river as say Dumbarton, would now lie under the water given the sea level rises relative to the landscape.

The route from Paisley to Dalry seems likely on the basis of the theory, especially at the area between Kilbirnie and Beith where natural lochs are to be found, and which are one of the criteria used in this search. The line of the A736 may also be likely between Barrhead and Stewarton. The grouping of lochs between Eaglesham and Lochwinnoch may also be worthy of research.

Further west it seems that most of any opportunities will be lost to the sea.

This theory is only a desk bound one at this stage, and which will be pursued by the author who invites others to take up the challenge of putting another LUP site on the map of Scotland.

The archaeological experience and practice of the writer has always been that if 'nothing is there', more often than not – no one has looked. The countless archaeological and Post Medieval sites now brimming from the maps of the Upper Clyde and Tweed rivers are now testament to that.

Discussion

It is beyond the resource of the writer at the present time to flesh out the bones of this hypothesis, by supplying more details of the suggested routes herein. Rather it has been his attempt to draw attention to the possibilities, thus allowing others to engage with the theory.

The specialists report on the Howburn finds (Ballin & Saville, forthcoming) will undoubtedly raise a number of questions regarding the apparently isolated site at Howburn Farm, so isolated in fact; it is the only one in Britain! Although other, slightly later LUP sites and finds (Ballin & Saville 2009) have long been recognised in Scotland, for example near Oban, Orkney and Shetland (Fig 1) but perhaps in the past not given the attention they should have deserved.

Intensive fieldwork in other places seems the only way forward, but this is outwith the scope of BAG, and indeed outwith their particular regional study area in southern Scotland. Like so many other aspects of the work by BAG, their projects results appear as isolated in south central Scotland. There is no doubt that this is because of the intensity of work undertaken by them, for over three decades and in that localised part of the country.

It seems patently absurd to think that such archaeology (all of their projects) does not exist elsewhere, and this paper merely tries to suggest further possibilities in the LUP aspect of their work, while encouraging others to go and look for it.

The assumption that reindeer were the migration animals is based on the finds from Mainland European sites where near identical tool assemblages to those found at Howburn, exist in association with reindeer remains (e.g. Holm ibid). It is possible that horse were on the menu at Howburn as there seems to be a correlation with both horse and reindeer fossil remains found across central Scotland (Kitchener1998), although this should be viewed with caution as radiocarbon dates of horse are in the Mesolithic period while the reindeer remains have be C14 dated as early as 43,000BP and also as late as the Mesolithic (Kitchener ibid).

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