

Biggar Archaeology

Bringing the past to the present



Megget Reservoir
An Archaeological Survey
Tam Ward June 2004

Abstract

An inspection of the shorelines within Megget Reservoir in June 2004, when the water levels were reduced, produced an archaeological landscape. Sites included cairns, burnt mounds, circular stone features and other more ambiguous sites, all of which probably originated in the Bronze Age. A post-medieval dyke and enclosure were also located.



Megget Reservoir looking east to Clockmore (hill).

Introduction

Megget Reservoir lies on the course of the Megget Water, which flows into St Mary's Loch in Scottish Borders. The area is given on OS 1:10,000 map sheets NT 12 SE and NT 22 SW, and on Explorer No 330 1:25,000 (Moffat and St Mary's Loch). The normal high water level of the reservoir 334m OD.

The area was inundated when the reservoir was completed about 1980; the land was formerly semi-improved grassland in enclosures and unimproved pasture.

Given the recent and ongoing discoveries and research of pre-historic sites, in the neighbouring reservoirs of Talla and Fruid to the west, it was considered that similar sites might exist within the Megget area. Inspection proved this assumption to be correct and this report deals with the sites located.

The sites have been recorded by GPS and described only. No survey plans have been made but 35mm colour slides and digital photographs of certain sites have been taken.

The survey was conducted speedily and although searches were made in areas of sites for artefacts, a more detailed search may be fruitful. Modern features have also been recorded as these may lead to some confusion in the future.

Prior to this survey the only archaeological site recorded within the reservoir area was Cramalt Towers, the two towers were excavated in advance of the reservoir completion (Maxwell-Irving, 1981).

Gazetteer of sites

Sites 1 – 6 are located on the valley floor within the western end of the reservoir.

Site 1 Piles of stones (modern) NT 17480 21375

Modern piles of boulders lie in three heaps at the end of a tarmac pathway leading down to the edge of the reservoir. The vegetation free piles are about 4m in diameter by 1.5m high. They lie on the ground above the reservoir edge.

Site 2 Modern test pits NT 17290 21292, NT 17353 12147, NT 17412 21250, NT 17480 21375 plus two similar sites further down into the reservoir.

These pits, each with two distinctive spoil heaps of gravels have been dug mechanically to test for suitable aggregate during the construction of the reservoir. The pits are spaced fairly evenly in a line. The examples deeper in the reservoir are eroding with the pits filling up and the spoil dumps now appearing as cairns.

Site 3 Natural mound NT 17353 21247

This long and low mound was tested and was shown to consist of gravels. It measures 13m long by up to 4.5m wide and is up to 0.5m high. It lies beside one of the test pits given above but is not associated with it. There are a few earth fast stones lying upright and end to end at the eastern end of the mound, these may be co-incidental. However, charcoal from a superficial fire was noted here, along with a clay pipe stem fragment and some rusty iron. This mound could be mistaken for a burnt mound.

Site 4 Burnt mound NT 17424 21229

This is rather superficial but very obvious deposit of heat reddened burnt stone, it is almost level with the surrounding ground surface, which at the time of survey had re-established vegetation growing. The mound deposit was vegetation free. It measured 2.5m long by 1m wide and only 0.1m high.



Site 5 Burnt mound NT 17455 21255

At the immediate base of the steep side of the reservoir edge on the north flank of Dead For Cauld (hill), there is a burnt mound. The dome shaped mound measures 3m long by 2m wide and is 0.3m high. The true extent of the deposit may be greater in area as burnt stone was noted further to the west where re-deposited gravels cover the area. The spring is on the north side of the mound. 10m to the east of the burnt mound is a subtle mound which is 4m in diameter by 0.3m high. When tested it was shown to be of natural origin.



Site 6 Stone enclosure NT 17470 21243

Lying on the west side of one of the modern test pits is a rectangular enclosure made with some boulders but mostly stones of cobble size. It is 15m long by 9m wide at the western end, at the other end where it meets the test pit, the enclosure tapers to a point. The featureless interior is level.

Site 7 Burnt stone spread with charcoal, plus flint scraper and chert flake.

NT 17745 21130 c 335m OD

This scatter lies on the lower northeast flank of Dead For Cauld (hill) and on a projecting area, which drops steeply down into the reservoir. The burnt stone and charcoal flecks are seen emanating from an old ground surface, which lies immediately below a thin horizon of peat. Much of the area has been scoured away but small burnt stones protrude from the peat. It is unlikely that the burnt material represent a burnt mound, rather a hearth or hearths are more probably. A 0.6m long line of stones can be seen and these may indicate a fireplace.

A chert flake and a flint scraper were found on the surface of the area. It is possible that this site may be a settlement or a cremation site. It is under serious threat of being washed away.

Site 7 showing surviving patch of ogs surrounded by scoured ground, looking south.



Site 8 Cairn possible NT 18255 21318
Lying on the west flank of Craigdilly (hill) and occupying the entire summit of a gravel knoll, which is still covered in a shallow layer of peat, there is a possible cairn that measures 3m in diameter by 0.3m high.

Site 9 Burnt mound/s and fire site NT 18190 21384
Lying on the west flank of Craigdilly (hill) and on the west side of a spring that flows from the nature reserve, there is a burnt mound and a fire site.
The surface for much of the dome shaped mound is bare, showing the heat-reddened stone that is lying in a matrix of charcoal enriched soil. The visible extent of the deposit is 5m by 2.5m by 0.5m high, a thin layer of peat covers part of the mound. However, the deposit may stretch further to the southwest, beneath a layer of peat that still survives in situ. 15m in this direction there is a small patch of burnt stones. 3m east of the mound there is another in situ deposit of burnt stone; the extent of this was not tested. 14m from the main mound and further up the beach to the east and lying beside a massive erratic, was a discrete fire site, only about 0.5m in diameter. This was almost scoured away and a small sample of charcoal was hand picked from it since it will not survive the next water rise.
Between the main burnt mound and this fire site, and lying among the re-deposited gravels, there is a large scatter of reddened burnt stone, most of which is larger in size to any of that noted in the in situ deposits. This may indicate that a larger deposit existed in the area.
This area is easily detected by the massive boulder, which will still protrude from the surface at high water level.
A chert flake was found near the main burnt mound.

The following sites are located along the northern shore of the reservoir and on the lower southeast flank of Lamb Knowe.



Site 9 showing the peat covering the main mound (left) and large boulder where the fire site (above) is visible.

Site 10 Iron water pipes

centred NT 17741 21477

Curving around a knoll and completely exposed about 1m below the original ground level, is a line of joined iron water pipes. They can be followed downhill to NT 17740 21455 where there is a brick cistern that has a massive slab of red sandstone capstone (now broken in half). This must have been the water supply for Megget Knowes (Site 11).



Site 11 Building 19th C

NT 17660 21322

The demolished remains of a small lime mortared building lie at this spot. The surrounding area has the ruinous remains of drystone dykes and other walls and enclosures. These and the building are given on 1st Ed OS maps and later maps as Megget Knowes.

Site 12 Cairn

NT 17764 21567

Boulder cairn measuring 2m diameter by 0.5m high

Site 13 Stone wall

NT 17805 21605

This is a linear pile of un-quarried boulders running straight downhill (from above NGR) for about 22m. The boulders form a line up to 3m wide in places. This may be part of a series of sinuous stony banks seen above the high water line (but not recorded here).

This cairn measures 4m by 2m by 0.5m high.

This is a 12m long by 1.5m wide arc of un-quarried boulders. Apart from re-deposited gravel above and below the features, the ground is stone free. The ground is on a slight slope and the stones are seen to be proud of the gravel surface. It is possible that this is the frontal apron of an unenclosed platform settlement, however, there is no rear scarp, and the ground rises up gently from the stone arc.

Site 16 Stone ring NT 17904 21685

However, only 1m down slope, severe erosion is taking place. A section of boulder clay 0.3m high shows a lens of old ground surface lying below the thin layer of surviving peat.



Site 16 The ring of stones looking west (left) and the extent of erosion (right)

A fairly straight bank runs uphill from the above NGR (at the edge of the water 21/6/04) for about 30m to NT 17907 21725. It is mostly composed of cobble-sized stones with occasion larger stones. The bank spreads to 2m wide and is 0.5m high. The antiquity of this feature is betrayed by the covering on in situ peat at its lower end.

Site 18 Stone feature (possible) NT 17919 21710

Immediately on the west side of Site No 17 there is a fairly level area upon which flat stones appear in a random fashion. However, there may be an enclosure marked by an angled or curved line of these flat stones, this would be about 8m by 8m and adjacent Site 17. The area is covered in what appears to be old ground surface with re-deposited gravel over it. Heat reddened stones are strewn about but they have been bleached so that the colouration is now faint.

Site 19 Cairn (probable) NT 17927 21833

Measuring 8m by 4m this pile of stone has been dispersed.

Site 20 Cairn NT 17934 21836

Lying below No19 this cairn is 2m by 1m by 0.5m high.

Site 21 Cairn (dispersed) NT 17946 21841

This possible cairn is c 4m in diameter.

Site 22 Cairns centred 17938 21855

At the above NGR there is a dome shaped cairn that is entirely intact. It measures 5m by 4m by 0.5m high.

With a gap of 2m, another cairn lies upslope, it is an 11m long pile and the upper end may be a separate 4m-diameter cairn. The lower end is slightly dispersed.

3m below the dome shaped pile is an 8m long by 4m wide cairn, it is 0.5m high and is also dispersed. All of the above form a straight line running down hill.

3m to the east of the dome pile is another small dispersed cairn which is 3m in diameter.

Site 23 Cairn (possible) NT 17948 21864

This possible cairn lies on a knoll summit and is 1.5m in diameter by 0.3m high.

Site 24 Stone setting NT 17941 21868

Stones form a semi circle that is an arc 4m in diameter. The ground is clay silt and gravel and is level.

Site 25 Stone setting NT 17944 21875

A few metres to the east of Site No 24 there is another arc of stone forming a semi circle. These are larger stones, some earth fast and others not and they form an area which would be 6m in diameter. The ground is clay silt and gravel and is level.

Adjacent to the stones and on the west side, a 12m long pile of boulders curves around and slightly above the arc of stone.



The two stone settings, (Sites 24 and 25) lie between groups of cairns on ground which has been stone cleared.

There are two cairns almost adjacent and forming a slight curve, one is 7m long and the other is 6m long, each is up to 3m wide and by up to 0.75m high. A possible continuation of stones runs downhill from the lower pile and 5m upslope from the upper pile, there is a 3m diameter cairn, the whole group forming an arc open to the west.

This possible 4m-diameter cairn is now dispersed.

A long cairn measuring 12m by 4m by 0.75m high runs down slope to a point where a layer of stone 5m long by 3m wide connects to a large intact dome shaped cairn. The upper end of the long cairn has been modified in recent times. The 6m diameter by 1m high dome cairn is slightly dispersed on the lower side but the west, east and north sides are intact. The ground to the west of these cairns has obviously been stone cleared apart from a few large boulders.



8

Site 29 Cairn (possible) NT17972 21942
This possible cairn measures 2m by 1m by 0.3m high.

Site 30 Stone settings (modern) NT 17980 21967
There are two stone features probably built by fishermen.

Site 31 Stone piles/building NT 18000 21961
An 8m long by 2m wide by 0.6m high stone pile runs down slope, parallel with it and on the east side is a smaller pile measuring 6m long by 1.5m wide and 0.4m high, the gap between them is 1.5m.

Immediately down slope the remains of a dry stone dyke 8m long also runs down slope. Below this is a rectangular stone enclosure measuring 6m long by 2m wide internally. This may have been a sheep pen rather than a shieling hut as it is on a fairly steep slope.

Site 32 Cairns NT 18021 21962
A layer of stones leads 1m wide leads away to the west of the dyke (above), to a crescentic shaped cairn. It measures 6m long by 2m wide and has a 2m diameter stone free area above it. 4m upslope from this is another cairn, only slightly dispersed it measures 4m in diameter and is a dome shaped 0.5m high.



Site 32 looking south over one cairn to crescentic shaped cairn below.

Site 33 Cairn (possible) NT 18036 21972

A possible dispersed cairn lies at this spot.

The ground above here is covered in angular quarried stone of modern origin. The ground between here and the Ling Hope Burn to the east appears to be stone free as if it had been cleared, however, there are no features on it.

Find spot

A steep sided chert scraper was found on the summit of a peat-covered mound at NT 17799 21517

Discussion

Burnt mounds and burnt stones

The burnt mounds in this survey are very good examples of deposits which would never be detected under normal circumstances, being too shallow in depth, and for the first time in the writer's experience, being covered in a layer of peat.

Where burnt greywacke stones have been subject to weathering below peat, they lose their red colouration, which was caused by the oxidation of iron during the heating process. The surface of the stone and in extreme cases the heart of the stones become bleached by chemical action, thus making identification as burnt stone more difficult. This phenomenon has now been witnessed in other reservoir sites.

Cairns

The cairns in this survey are for the most part fairly ordinary, despite their range of sizes and shapes. The ground adjacent to the cairns has obviously been cleared of stone, compared to other nearby areas. This may indicate that the purpose of these cairns was for field clearance, although a burial function can never be ruled out for any of them. The edges of the reservoir, above the main groupings of cairns are covered in loose boulders, some apparently in groups. It is possible that these may also have been cairns that have been dispersed by the turbulent effects of the water, the reservoir sides are clearly the area of ground which is most vulnerable throughout the periods of normal water level.

Ring features

These rings of stone are unusual in that they are not normally seen in surveys in this part of Scotland. However, a group was recently found within nearby Talla Reservoir (Ward 2004). It is unlikely that such features would be detected under normal circumstances, since banks, which can be seen rising above the ground level, do not form them. The function of these rings can be interpreted as being habitations or perhaps more likely as being funerary sites. In the Megget Reservoir case, the sites are extremely vulnerable to total erosion and further investigation by excavation is recommended here to clarify their true function.

Post medieval and other features

The rectangular stone enclosure and drystone dyke are certainly late in the sequence of sites. It is unlikely that they date before the 18th century. However, the other linear lines of stones may be of pre-historic origin. Later drystone dykes, even when

demolished or partially robbed out, often still have the basal levels of stone indicating the edges of a formal wall.

Erosion within Megget

Like any upland reservoir, erosion of the ground surface and especially that at the reservoir edges in Megget is inevitable. The phenomenon is becoming increasingly better understood as a consequence of the work experience within reservoirs in the last decade or so by the Biggar Group.

The extent of land erosion within the reservoirs is however subject to several criteria; the topography of the ground, the depth of water, the wind directions and the severity of weather conditions. It is not intended to rehearse the details here as the writer is formulating another paper that is given over to this subject.

Suffice to say that the sites within Megget are under various degrees of threat and action should be taken to salvage data from those sites which are most threatened. It would be extremely difficult to afford any type of protection to reservoir sites to arrest erosion; the power of the water is too great.

The critical danger time for sites is when water is rising or falling in level over the site, coupled with severe weather conditions with the inevitable consequence of scouring and re-deposition.

Conclusion

The work in this reservoir now completes the set of reservoirs that lie across the northern edge of the Southern Uplands of Scotland, and which have been inspected by the writer and the group of archaeologists from Biggar Museum (see appendix).

In the land immediately surrounding all of these reservoirs, but except at Megget, which has not yet been walked; a variety of sites and monuments have been located (Ward, various reports). Only within two, Cowgill and Coulter Water, were no sites recorded, the latter has never been examined. The others have an impressive array of differing types of sites that range from Mesolithic campsites; Bronze Age unenclosed platform settlements, cairns, cremation cemeteries, burnt mounds and lithic scatters. At Talla and Megget there are the unusual rings of stones. Daer, Camps, Fruid, Talla and Megget all have post medieval settlement sites.

Recommendation

It is recommended that some of the sites within Megget should be examined by excavation. They are perilously close to being completely scoured away and it is possible that some features have disappeared since the reservoir was built.

PS: this was under taken by The Biggar Archaeology Group in 2005.

Reference

Maxwell-Irving, A M T 1981 'Cramalt Tower: historical survey and excavations 1977-9' *Proc Soc Ant Scot*, 111 (1981), 401-429.
Ward T, 2004 'Upper Tweed Survey' *Biggar Museum Trust*.

Appendix

Reservoirs now investigated by the Biggar Archaeology Group.

		Grid Ref.:
Cowgill	no sites within	NS 010 280
Coulter Water	no data of sites within	NS 040 275
Camps	Pre-historic and medieval	NT 010 230
Daer	Pre-historic and post-medieval	NS 980 080
Peden	Pre-historic	NS 940 125
Fruid	Pre-historic and post-medieval	NT 100 200
Talla	Pre-historic	NT 110 222
Megget	Pre-historic and post-medieval	NT 190 220

To which may be added the reservoir of West Water in the Southern Pentlands, near West Linton to the north, and which produced significant pre-historic sites and assemblages resulting from excavations by the National Museums of Scotland.

Grid Ref.:
NS 120 525