
Cleveland County Archaeology Section

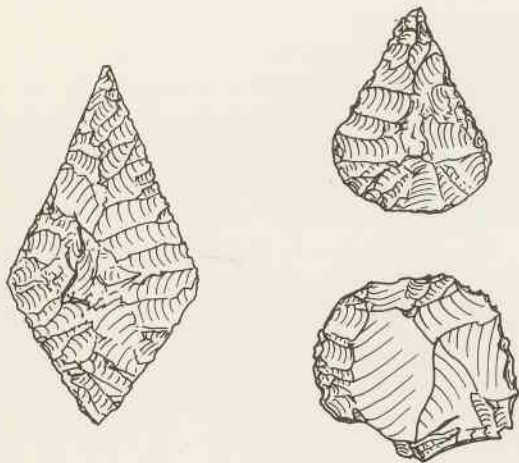
Eston Nab



Edwardian picnic party at the Beacon

Eston Nab is a landmark that most Clevelanders, and those who work on Teesside, know, even if they have not actually visited the spot. Here the Eston Hills reach their highest point, 242 metres above sea level, looming over the estuary of the River Tees. On clear days there are views to the Pennines and far into County Durham. Here a stone pillar marks the site of the still-remembered Napoleonic beacon, here also the earthwork bank and ditch of a prehistoric hill fort still crown the Nab. Since the early 19th century the site has attracted the speculations and attentions of antiquaries and archaeologists. Between 1927 and 1929 Frank Elgee, then curator of the Dorman Museum, Middlesbrough, undertook a series of excavations, and the site was again examined, in the years 1965-1967, by Alan Aberg of the University of Leeds. Between 1984 and 1987 Cleveland County Archaeology Section undertook a programme of excavation and fieldwork in order to throw more light on the history and archaeology of Eston Nab. The work has been undertaken with the assistance of Cleveland County Community Programme Agency, and with the co-operation of Langbaugh Borough Council and ICI Chemicals and Polymers Group.

Early Prehistoric Hunters at the Nab



Neolithic flint arrowheads and scraper

Flint objects found during excavations, and also occasionally as surface finds, show that people were in the neighbourhood of the Nab from early prehistoric times. Much of the flint consists of the waste left behind from the manufacture of tools and weapons, but a few flint blades and scrapers were probably lost by accident. These are of the kind in use in the mesolithic (6000-4000 BC) and neolithic (4000-2000 BC) periods, and suggest that the area may have been used by semi-nomadic groups engaged in hunting or gathering fruits, herbs and other foods. Several fine neolithic flint arrowheads may have been lost in the chase.

Bronze Age Burials

Just a hundred metres to the south of the Nab are two early Bronze Age (1800 BC) mounds, but it is known that another burial mound existed at the very edge of the Nab. During his excavations in 1927 Frank Elgee uncovered parts of an earthenware cremation urn, together with burnt bone and flint. Careful examination of the cliff edge reveals that the last traces of a burial mound built of earth and stone survive to this day. A few other finds may also have come from this mound: these include a small sandstone whetstone and a number of boulders with 'cup-marks' or shallow indentations, which were often placed in Bronze Age burial mounds.

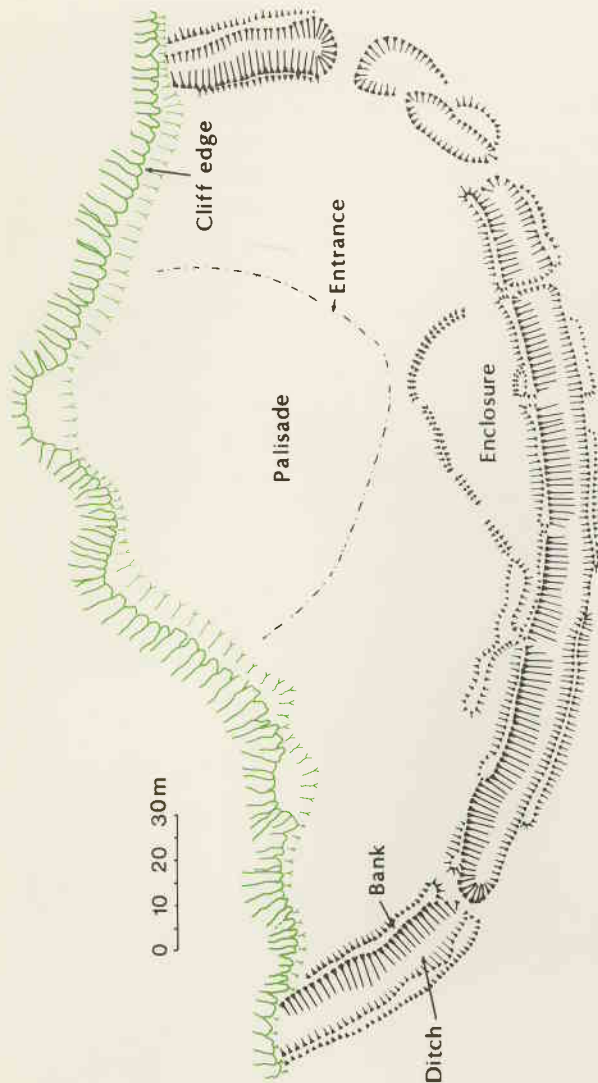


Bronze Age whetstone

The Earliest Fortifications at the Nab

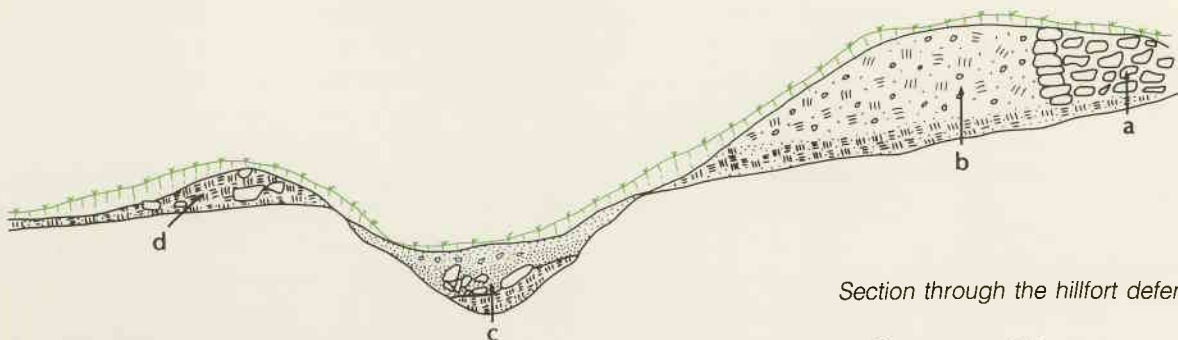
Around 700 BC the first defended enclosures were built at Eston Nab. These were stockades built of vertical timbers set in a trench cut into the bedrock. Traces of two successive palisaded enclosures have been found, but the outline of only one of these is known in detail. This had used the cliff edge as one side, thus saving a considerable amount of construction work, and had an entrance in the south-east side. It enclosed an area of about one acre. Finds of pottery from the palisade trench suggest that it was in use during the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Excavation in the interior shows that there were timber buildings here and the site may have been in permanent use at this time. The inhabitants would have been engaged in farming the Eston Hills, but would also have been able to make use of the resources offered by the nearby coast and river estuary. Similar palisaded sites were being built elsewhere in north-east England at this time, although Eston Nab is the only one known in the Cleveland area.

The Iron Age Hill Fort



Plan of the prehistoric fortifications

As an archaeological site, Eston Nab is best known for the remains of the substantial Iron Age hillfort, which, although damaged by quarrying and stone robbing, still forms a prominent feature on the Nab. The first major fortification consisted of a free-standing boulder wall (a) some 5 metres thick. This does not survive more than 1.5 metres high, but may originally have been twice this height. This wall enclosed a much bigger area than the earlier palisades, around 3 acres, and was a much stronger fortification which also made use of the cliff edge as a defence. The remains of the foundation of this boulder wall can be traced for much of their circuit, just inside the surviving ditch. The boulder wall was enlarged and strengthened by the construction of a bank (b) and ditch (c) just outside, with a small bank (d) beyond this. The ditch was 4 metres wide and 2.5 metres deep and the upcast from it was placed against the face of the boulder wall. A system of posts and hurdles was set up within the clay bank, and, once it was built, the wood was fired, apparently in an attempt to reinforce the defences. Charcoal remains from this will be used to obtain a carbon 14 date for the hillfort; for the present it is suggested that it was built around 550 BC. Unlike the palisade enclosures, the hillfort probably never served as a permanent settlement, instead being used as an occasional gathering place or refuge.



Section through the hillfort defences

The Napoleonic Beacon

After war with France broke out in 1792 a system of temporary fires and beacons was established around the coast to warn of any invasion attempt. The sandstone beacon house at Eston Nab was constructed in 1808; after hostilities ceased in 1815 it appears to have continued in use as a house. From 1850 the discovery of ironstone deposits in the Eston Hills appears to have ensured its survival, and a small cottage was also built nearby. These buildings occupied the eastern portion of the Iron Age hillfort. The 1851 census records that Nicholas and Ann Jones lived here with their four children; Nicholas was an ironstone miner and so were the four men who lodged at the beacon. The buildings were finally demolished in 1956 and are still remembered by many local people. The site is now marked by a stone pillar.



Quarry house on the Nab, 1907



Department of The Environment
Department of Trade and Industry
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Cleveland Archaeology Section is part of County Leisure Services
