North York Moors National Park:
Walking, Cairn Building and Ancient Burials

You may be familiar with the Lyke Wake Walk as it winds its way across Goathland Moor and perhaps been tempted to head over to Simon Howe. Why is Simon Howe marked in gothic lettering and why does it say *Tumulus*? What does the word mean? You may have stopped to take in the view from the mound and perhaps, whilst eating your sandwiches or resting your legs, moved a few stones around or brought up another couple from the track to place on the heap. But did you know that Simon Howe is a prehistoric burial mound? Why should that be important?

Historical importance

Piles of loose stones might be the remains of something built in prehistory. During the Bronze Age 3-4,000 years ago, it was the custom to bury people in mounds called barrows (sometimes marked as *tumuli or tumulus* on maps and labelled in gothic lettering). These were often built from stone and were located on hill tops or ridges of higher land. The dead may have been buried with pots or flint tools so disturbing these structures disturbs the archaeological story contained inside.

Archaeologists use this varied information to build up a picture of what happened, much as a detective would do today, except there is no one alive from whom to take a statement and back up the evidence.

Landscape importance

Barrows are located on hill tops in prominent places in the landscape. They can be found on the skyline or forming a focal point for a modern path or they may have had trees planted on them in the past to highlight a hill or a view which is still significant for us today. Historically they have often been used as route markers by pedlars or when moving animals over long distances in otherwise featureless terrain, or to mark a property boundary by inserting a boundary stone into the mound. They are often important features in the landscape even today, because of their visibility, or maybe because they have a local legend associated with them. As a very numerous and distinctive feature of the North York Moors landscape, barrows constitute a significant proportion (about 65%) of the 842 protected sites or Scheduled Monuments, within the National Park.

Why people build cairns today

Cairns, simply piles of stone, are often built today by walkers to help mark a route which is difficult to see on the ground and this is especially true in the North York Moors where there are few prominent landscape features such as trees or hilltops, where fog and bad weather can divert the walker from the right route or where the heather is deep and makes the path hard to locate. Or perhaps the top of a hill has a great view but it's often windy so a wind break is gradually created to provide welcome shelter. Or maybe there's a place people always stop for a breather after climbing a steep hill and look down, perhaps on their home village. A handy pile of loose stone can easily be used as a quarry for creating a new heap or cairn in a better place and it may become the custom to add a stone or two when anyone passes, or even to deliberately take up another stone each time a place is visited. In this way, big cairns can be created and become important markers.

What's the damage?

The problem with building cairns today is that using stones from archaeological features like barrows disturbs the information contained within them, clues that archaeologists use to build up a picture of what happened in the past. For instance, how the structure was built and used, how it was developed for different burials, perhaps over several generations, or what objects were buried with the dead.

This does not mean that every archaeological feature will one day be excavated by archaeologists but it does mean that the features are so important that they deserve to be left undisturbed for future generations: if something 4,000 years old is disturbed, that unique information is lost for ever. Many of these barrows are nationally important and protected as Scheduled Monuments.

It may be that some artefacts moved during modern cairn building will not recognised as such and simply be thrown away, including small fragments of bone which might tell us a lot about the person buried there. Moving stones may disturb post holes or remains of other structures. Inserting a plaque to commemorate a loved one adds a modern intrusion, or it may be fixed to a stone with prehistoric carvings or which is part of a prehistoric feature. Modern graffiti are sometimes carved into the stones on a prehistoric monument.

Other effects

Beyond the obvious problems, these activities can have other impacts. Making something more visible means that more visitors may be attracted to it, creating erosion by following a single line to the summit. In some cases a new cairn might bury or obscure the monument altogether.

What the National Park is doing

To put things right, work is under way as part of the North York Moors National Park Authority's Monument Management Scheme (MMS) which is funded by Historic England. This includes a group of our historic environment volunteers monitoring the condition of the barrows and carrying out remedial work to repair the worst damage. We will also be raising awareness of the issue amongst walkers by posting information on web sites and writing articles in magazines.

If you're walking on the Cleveland Way at Live Moor near Whorlton you might notice a new information sign next to a prominent scheduled round barrow. A modern cairn was removed by the National Park apprentice team earlier this year, revealing the stony ancient burial mound underneath. We hope the information provided will help walkers understand why remedial action was needed and will encourage people to protect the archaeology and help preserve it for future generations. A second walkers' cairn on Raisdale Moor was taken down by volunteers taking great care not to disturb the archaeological remains beneath and we expect more burial mounds with walkers cairns' to be tackled early in 2018.

What can you do?

When in the countryside, it is best to leave things alone and not disturb anything you find. Be aware of the Countryside Code which says "Our heritage matters to all of us – be careful not to disturb ruins and historic sites." https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code/the-countryside-code

You can find out if something is protected by visiting the Historic England web site https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/ where you can search by feature name, or on a map.

So the next time you find a nice sheltered spot for a rest on top of a hill, you can think about more than just enjoying the view and your lunch. You could be helping to preserve an important site for another 4,000 years!

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