

Evidence for a Roman Camp  
at Roughbirchworth

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# Evidence for a Roman Camp at Roughbirchworth

## Introduction

I first heard mention of a Roman camp on Roughbirchworth Common in 2005 when I was doing research for a landscape archaeology project at Sheffield University. I was studying an area of Oxspring Parish, which included Roughbirchworth where there is an Iron Age circular earthwork. I assumed people were mistaking 'Roman' for 'Romano British' thinking that the Iron Age enclosure may still have been in use in the Romano British period. The 'Roman Camp' at Roughbirchworth has always puzzled me and recently I have revisited the area with fresh eyes. Evidence for the existence of a possible Roman Camp comes from maps, cropmarks, and local knowledge together with observations on the ground. Each source of evidence will be discussed in turn but I will start by giving a brief description of the study area.

## **Description of the study area:**

The study area straddles the parish boundary between Oxspring and Hunshelf parishes. The area is situated in a fork of land between the Greater and Lesser Don rivers, approximately twelve miles north of Sheffield and two miles south of the market town of Penistone in South Yorkshire.

The geology of the area is coal measures sandstone, the underlying rock being Grenoside Sandstone. The land slopes gently to the north-east. The centre of the study area is located at map grid reference SE2575 0118 at an altitude of 270 metres above sea level and is marked with a red cross on the map in Figure 1 below.

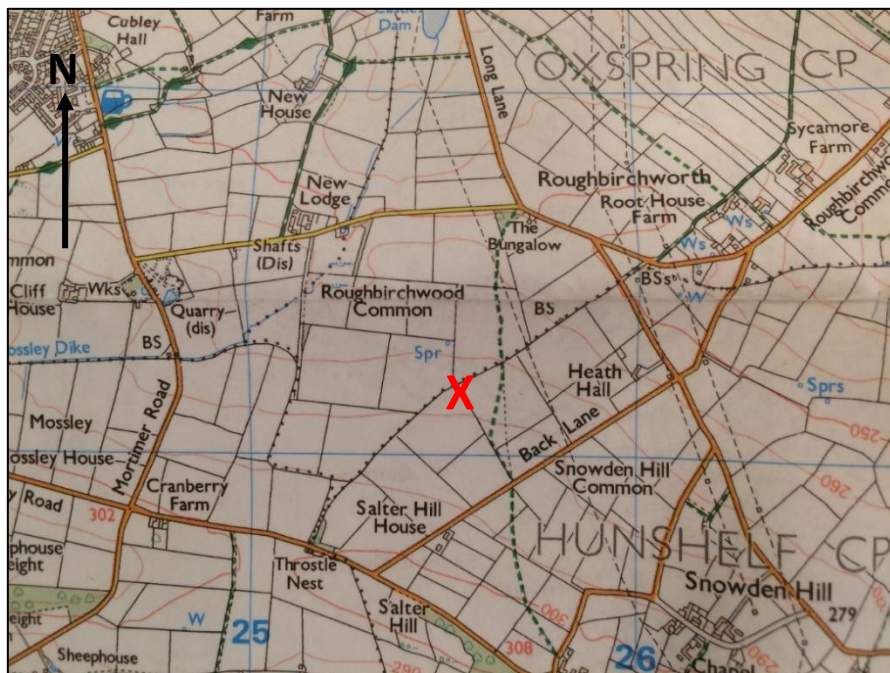


Figure 1: Map showing location of the study area  
Map Series: The Peak District. Dark Peak area 1:25000  
Published: 2006 by Ordnance Survey

## 1. Map Evidence

There are three features which may be relevant to the location of the 'Roman Camp' these being Camp, Parish boundaries and a field anomaly. The features are shown on the map in Figure 2 below. Fields A – F will be referred to individually later in the report.

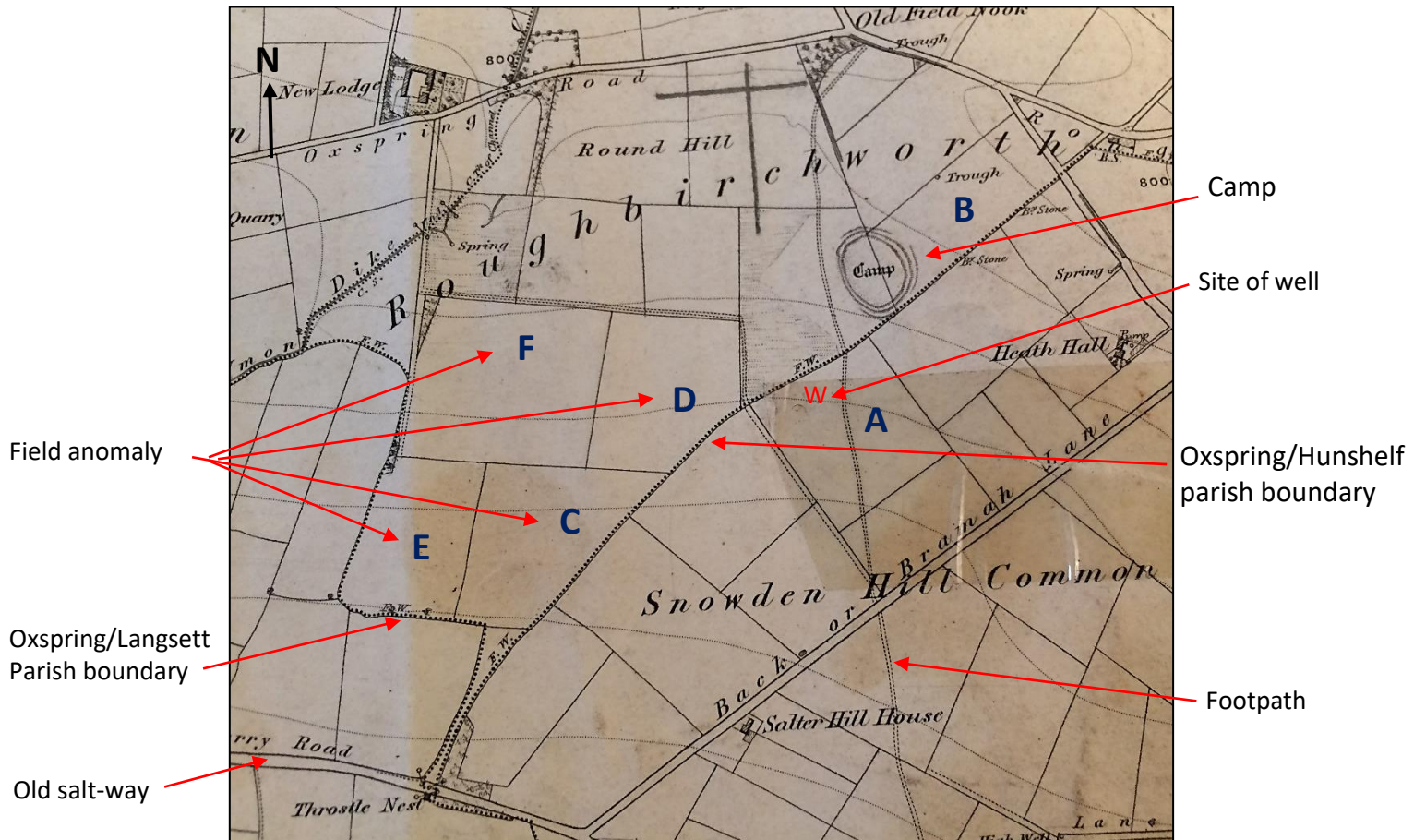


Figure 2: Map showing Rough Birchworth in 1854  
 Map Series: Yorkshire [West Riding] 1:10560  
 Published: 1854 by Ordnance Survey

### 1:1. Camp

The 1854 Ordnance Survey map shows a feature marked as 'Camp' which is represented by three circles. The feature is recorded in the Sites and Monument Record (SMR no. 2173) as an Iron Age enclosure. Ella Armitage mentions the enclosure in 1897 saying that there was a "well marked entrance on the north side" (Armitage 1897, p.43). The enclosure spans two fields, one arable to the east and the other closely grazed pasture to the west. The approximate diameter of the enclosure is 100m. Today there is little trace of the earthwork. Only a slightly raised embankment is visible on the grazed field. There is no indication of the enclosure on today's Ordnance Survey map.

## 1:2. Field Anomaly

The four fields outlined in red on the map in Figure 3 appear as an anomaly in the landscape of parliamentary enclosure fields (Roughbirchworth and Snowden Hill Commons were enclosed in 1826).

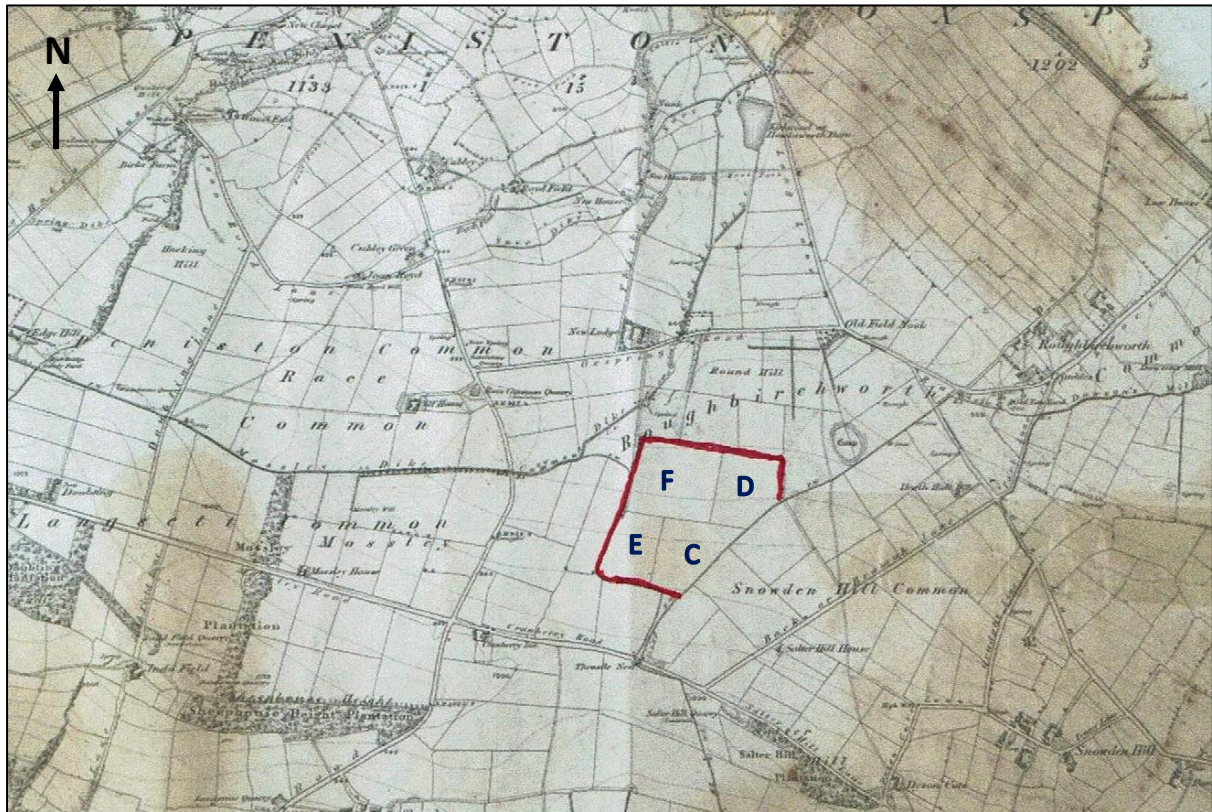


Figure 3: Map showing the field anomaly in the wider landscape  
Map Series: Yorkshire [West Riding] 1:10560  
Published: 1854 by Ordnance Survey

Fields C and D are slighted by the Oxspring and Hunshelf parish boundary while the southern and western sides of Field E are respected by the Oxspring and Langsett boundary. The south-western corner of Field E is rounded unlike the corners of the surrounding fields. A field access road slightes the western edge of Field F.

It would appear that the fields are remnants of a pre-parliamentary enclosure field system but they appear to be more regular than the fields surrounding the commons. The four fields form a large rectangle in the centre of three areas of pre-parliamentary enclosure common, these being Roughbirchworth, Oxspring and Langsett Commons. The south-western corner of Field E is rounded unlike the corners of the surrounding fields.

### 1:3. Parish Boundaries

A parish boundary, indicated by a black dotted line, is seen running past the south eastern side of the 'Camp'. This is the boundary between Oxspring and Hunshelf parishes. The parish boundary is seen to respect the edge of the earthwork. This boundary follows the line of a packhorse route between Bradfield and Wakefield (Hay 2001). This route was in use in 1640 (Nicholson 2001) and probably much earlier.

Another parish boundary can be seen on the south-western edge of the map in Figure 4. This is the boundary between Oxspring and Langsett parishes. There is a gap between the two boundaries to allow access from Oxspring parish onto the main road at Throstle Nest. It is interesting to note that this road follows the line of an ancient salt-way between Cheshire and Rotherham (Hay 2001).

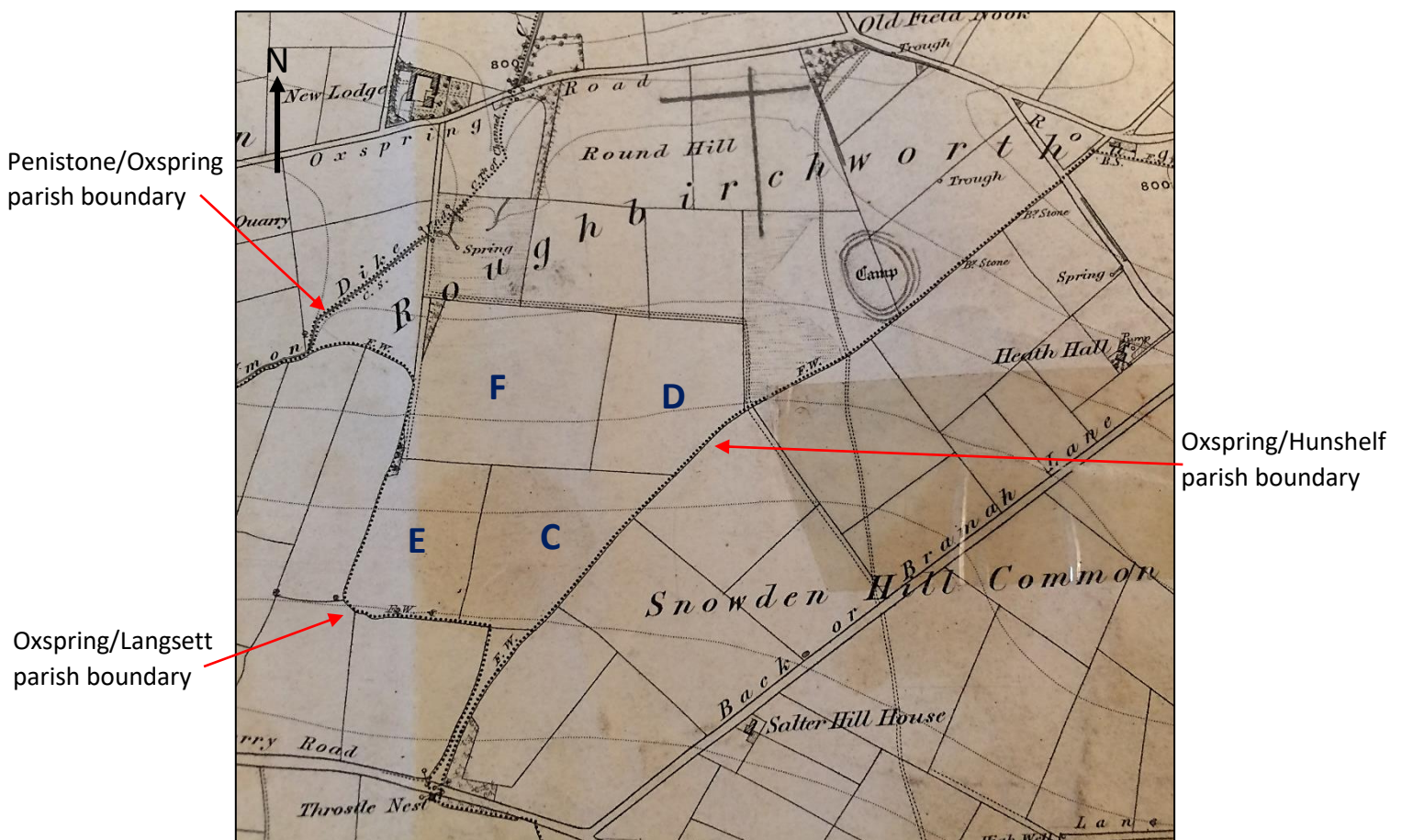


Figure 4: Map showing the field anomaly in relation to parish boundaries  
Map Series: Yorkshire [West Riding] 1:10560  
Published: 1854 by Ordnance Survey

## 2. Cropmarks

A number of cropmarks can be seen on the aerial photograph in Figure 5 below. Unfortunately the cropmarks are difficult to distinguish due to the image being copied. The cropmarks are much clearer on the original copy. For this reason two of the more significant features have been highlighted in red.



Figure 5: Ariel Photograph showing an area of Roughbitchworth  
Source: National Monuments Record  
Date: 1948

Cropmark 1 is just to the south of the circular enclosure. The rectangular outline shows as a lighter shade surrounded by a darker one. This may represent a bank and ditch. Unfortunately the northern side of the rectangle is not visible because this is the edge of the photograph. Assuming that the northern side of the feature forms a rectangle, the area of the cropmark is approximately 8 acres.

A number of fainter cropmarks can be seen around the rectangular area. Cropmark 2 is the clearest of these and is represented by two dark linear features with a lighter area between them radiating westwards from cropmark 1. It is possible that this could be a road or driveway.

### 3. Walkover observations

It is interesting to note that the western wall of the rectangular enclosure is built on a bank. Due to the fact that the land slopes slightly to the north it may be assumed that the bank hasn't been formed by soil creep but has been built deliberately. The bank may be the remnant of an old boundary.

Cropmark 2 is seen to run through the rectangle formed by Fields C, D, E and F before it continues westwards. The point where it crosses the western side of Fields E and F is marked with a red cross on the map in Figure 6 below.

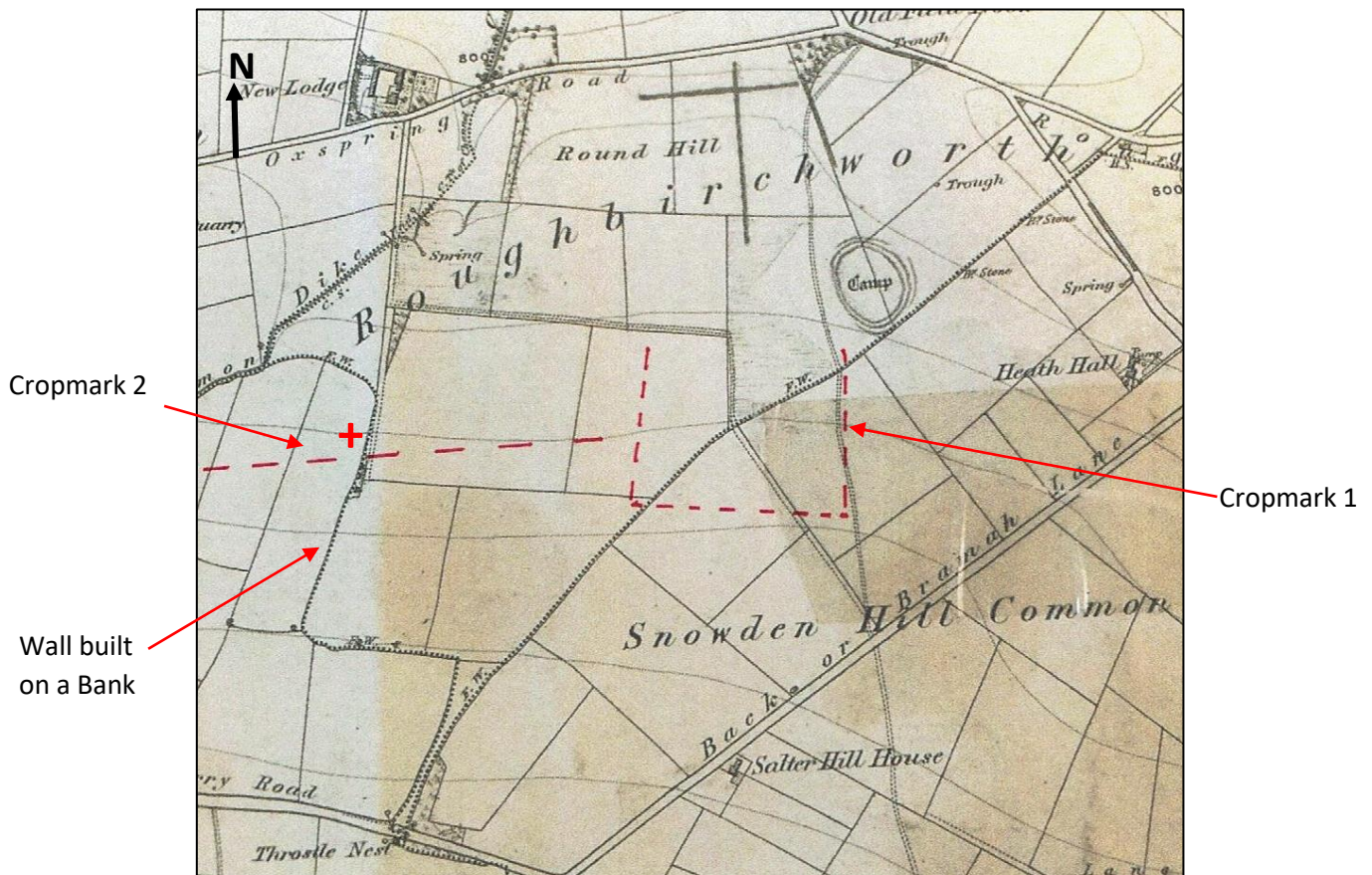


Figure 6: Map showing cropmarks in relation to field boundaries  
Map Series: Yorkshire [West Riding] 1:10560  
Published: 1854 by Ordnance Survey

A number of large flat slabs of stone can be seen either side of the wall in the area of the red cross on the map in figure 6. Most of the stones are at the side of the wall and may have been placed there by the farmer when clearing the field. The stones may be similar to those found in Field B. Two of the stones are shown in the photographs in figure 7 on the following page.

Figure 7: Photographs of two stones found where cropmark 2 intersects the Oxspring and Langsett parish boundary



#### **4. Local Knowledge**

Local farmer Mr Fox was asked if he knew anything about the Iron Age enclosure. When shown where it used to be on a recent Ordnance Survey map he said that was where the Roman camp used to be. Mr Fox said local people have always referred to the area of the Iron Age enclosure as the Roman camp. He didn't know that a circular earthwork was marked on the 1854 Ordnance Survey map.

Mr Fox also mentioned that when he was a boy he found an unusual plant with small white flowers growing at the side of a lane near the 'camp'. He took the plant to school to show his teacher and she sent it to Kew Gardens to be identified. Kew said that the plant originated in central Italy and is often associated with areas of Roman occupation in Britain.

Another farmer, Mr Siddons, was asked about the Iron Age enclosure. He said that the field to the east of the enclosure, Field B, is nicknamed 'graveyard field' due to the many large stones which have been ploughed up there. Mr Siddons said the stones resembled gravestones.

Mr Battey, who owns Field A, said that three Roman coins and a fragment of bronze were found in the field two years ago by a man with a metal detector. The fragment of bronze had a figure holding an object similar to a trident embossed on it. The metal detectorist told Mr Battey that he would take his finds to Barnsley museum but unfortunately the museum have no record of them.

Mr Battey said that the farmer he bought Field A from told him that there was a large round well in the field that had been filled in. The approximate location (according to Mr Battey) of the well is marked 'W' on Map 2. On the ground the possible location of the well is indicated by a slightly raised level area where the grass is shorter than that of the surrounding area.

It is also interesting that people from nearby Greenmoor say that a track going through Tin Mill woods was a Roman road. The track is an extension of Finkle Street and was part of the old salt-way going to Rotherham. A section of the track is visible above Tin Mill wood.

## **Discussion**

The cropmark at Roughbirchworth could be compared with the cropmark of a Roman fort at Rossington near Doncaster which was discovered by aerial photography in the 1960's (Bevan 2006). Both show tracks or droveways radiating from a rectangle.

Part of a Roman road has been discovered in Longdondale (Hargreaves 2017). It could be possible that this road ran between Melandra and a fort or camp at Roughbirchworth before going east in the direction of Rossington and Templeborough via Finkle Street.

The field anomaly is interesting. The four fields appear to be too regular to be from a pre-parliamentary enclosure field system. The large rectangle formed by the fields is situated at the junctions of three areas of common land these being Roughbirchworth, Langsett and Snowdenhill Commons. Why would there be a large rectangle in the centre of the common land when there are field systems nearby? The fact that an ancient route-way slight the eastern side of the enclosure points to it being very old but why is it so regular in shape? It may also be significant that the area of the 'Camp' is situated next to the junction of two route ways, one going north-south and the other going east-west.

Parish boundaries may provide clues for the existence of a Roman presence in Roughbirchworth. The Oxspring-Langsett parish boundary may be significant in the way that it respects an existing feature. It is interesting that the south-western corner of Field E is rounded and resembles the corner of a Roman camp. It was this feature that led to a closer scrutiny of the 1948 aerial photograph. It may be possible that a 'Roman Camp' was situated close to an existing Iron Age feature as a stamp of authority and ownership by an invading army.

The filled in well in Field A may be significant. The well is not marked on any Ordnance Survey maps unlike other wells, springs and troughs. Why sink a well on the common when there are springs nearby? If a well was sunk after the commons were enclosed in 1826 why would it not be marked on the 1854 map.

Could it be possible that a fort or camp at Roughbirchworth was part of the northern frontier between the Roman Empire and the Brigantes tribe? Another possibility is that it may have protected the salt route from Cheshire to the Roman forts near Doncaster and Rotherham. Roman soldiers were partly paid in salt so the security of the salt route would be important. Maybe the Roman fort at Highstones, above Crowden, also protected the salt route?

## **Conclusion**

It can be seen from the evidence that there is a possibility of Roman activity in the area of Roughbirchworth. The evidence being:-

1. The presence of rectangular and linear cropmarks.
2. The discovery of three Roman coins and a possible fragment of a bronze helmet.
3. Map evidence showing a field anomaly.
4. The presence of a well within cropmark 1.

Further investigation such as a geophysical survey of Field A may provide more solid evidence of a Roman presence in the area. The area has scope for further study.

## **References**

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