

Carham Parish Walks – Mindrum Farm Walk Sunday 20th October 2019

8 of us met at Mindrum Farm, at the very southern end of the parish, for our walk, which was kindly led by Tom Fairfax, whose family have been farming here since the 1950's. It was a most fascinating and interesting walk (or 'bimble' as Tom would say) round the various areas of the farmland, from low-lying water-meadows to the high ridge above Mindrum (which means 'mountain ridge' in old English). Along the way we heard about some of the history associated with the farm; its ethos of sustainability and bio-diversity with the promotion of habitats for wildlife such as lapwing, grey partridge and brown hare; also how Tom likes to share his pride and enthusiasm for these projects with groups such as ourselves – for example, with us was a member of the Countryside Trust, who organize schools visits to farms.

Starting on the bridleway through the farm we learnt, from Tom's assiduous and ongoing research, about the Roman 'occupation' of Mindrum - that a large marching encampment covering about 50 acres containing up to 12,000 soldiers, was situated here, 200 years before the building of Hadrian's Wall, on an area of raised dry gravel surrounded by marshland. Also up on the ridge there would have been lookout stations and minor camps.

We were made aware, as we passed a series of flooded fields with names such as South East Moss, West Moss, and Bull Moss, how the 'lie of the land' affects and dictates how it is managed. With advice from Natural England, the ancient Mosses are being recreated by installing a scheme, inspired by old methods of managing water-meadows, in which the water is held, but let off slowly, providing a rich environment for a variety of ducks and wading birds - we were delighted to see this in action with a large flock of lapwing, with teal and mallard! The scheme also insulates the ground, producing an early grass crop for grazing.



The bridleway continued straight ahead up towards Camp Hill at 650ft (200m) where there is evidence of an earlier camp – interesting that the area at the top of the track is called Turnchesters – a Roman name? A curved bank can still be seen marking the original track. There is a nice crag to sit on to enjoy the view over the Bowmont Valley to the south east – I suggested that Tom could erect a seat there – a good reason for using the bridleway, which finishes here?!!!

However, our walk turned off the track across a field called Kames' Knowes (field names are always interesting, referring to people, landmarks or what they were used for – other fields we passed were called Tom's Knowes and Swine's Lairs) towards the farm's SE boundary. Following a cut/drain, we passed a line of old ash trees, the fallen branches relevant to the species, caused by 'brittle rot' – Tom plants ash keys/seeds hoping to replenish, and perhaps future seedlings will have some resistance against ash dieback. Heading uphill we walked through an attractive area called The Denes, following a burn and a steep bank, up to Twinley Moss, an old marsh/reed bed forming a small high watershed, managed now in a similar way to the lower mosses.



We followed the Scottish border round to 'Horse Rigg', where a high road forms the boundary of the farm – here we could look over the Tweed Valley to the NE, imagining the Roman sentries there in their lookout camps!

The many shelter belts/woods on the farm provide shelter for pheasant and wildlife – some house a (rather tenuous) population of red squirrels – there is some trapping done to reduce the greys, whose numbers are fast overtaking our native reds. As the woods are thinned, the idea is to plant an 'understory' of layers of vegetation – this to be fenced off from deer with a curved fence, so that they go round rather than over! On some of the upper grazed areas Tom plans to plant fenced copses of larger trees surrounded by smaller trees and shrubs - innovations to add bio-diversity and encourage wildlife.

Thinnings from the woods are chipped and used to fuel a biomass boiler which heats most of the buildings on the farm, and yet another innovation is to add 3% of charcoal to home-grown milled barley for cattle feed – this apparently reduces methane given off by 30%, and also returns carbon to the soil. (Back at the farm we saw another experiment – so-called 'biochar' – charcoal steeped in a liquid to make a fertilizer/soil additive).



Although it was cloudy and dry, Tom had prepared for bad weather by providing 'a little something' on the way round.... and, duly fortified, we finished the walk downhill past arable slopes and grazing sheep back to the farm!

So - It was a very enjoyable and informative afternoon; Tom's passion, commitment and enthusiasm came across, and it was very useful to see things from the farmers' viewpoint, particularly with issues of bio-security and the rise in rural crime, especially on farms. Of course, any user of public rights of way should respect the property it passes through, and hopefully farm walks like this encourage a dialogue, and some kind of rapport between farmers and walkers.

Thank you to all who attended, and especially Tom, his family and all on the farm!

For more information on Mindrum Farm, please visit the website - www.mindrumestate.com

And for information on Carham Parish, please visit our website – www.carhamparish.org