

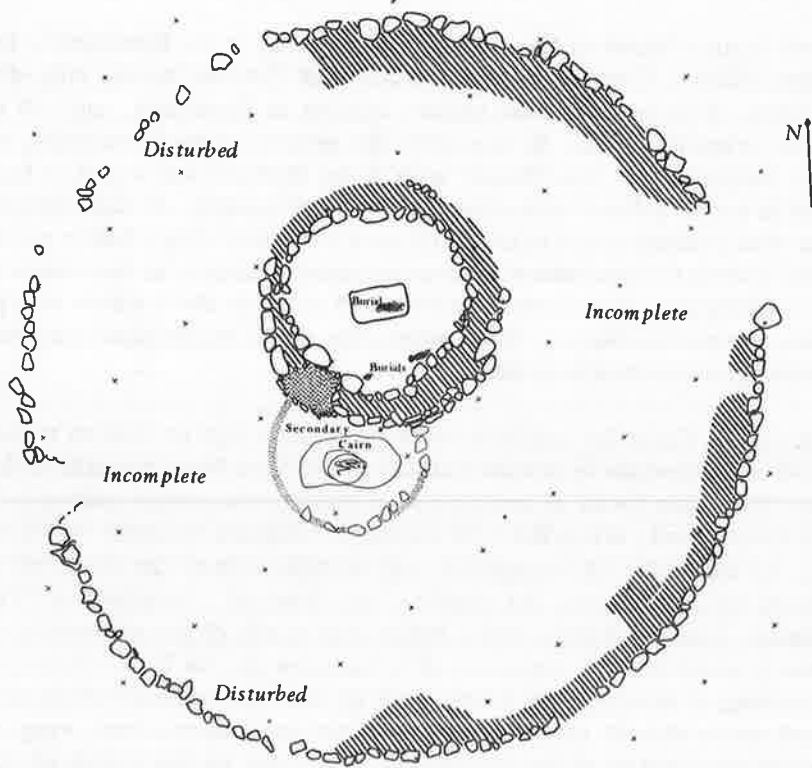
## A RING-CAIRN IN LEVENS PARK, WESTMORLAND

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Introduction. Excavations on a ring-cairn in Levens Park, Westmorland (SD 505862) were begun in 1968 as a rescue operation in advance of road-works. The abandonment of the road-proposals has allowed the complete examination of the site over five seasons. Final clearance is in progress and may substantially alter the present interpretation, but it should be stressed that the partial sampling of the monument, which is all that would have been permitted in a 'rescue' procedure, did not reveal either the date or the nature of the monument and must be considered both misleading and unacceptable.

The ring-cairn is one of a large complex of ancient sites at the north end of the Park which survive above ground at 50 ft to 70 ft OD as surface features and seem to span all periods. Many similar groups must have dotted the good lowland farming country of the Kent valley until destroyed by the widespread and evident medieval ploughing and by later levelling. The Levens sites have escaped a good deal of this because they lie within a Deer-Park which has had a continuous existence since the 14th century. The nearest similar group of sites lies within easy sight on Sizergh Fell, only 1200 m to the NW (Hughes, 1904; 1912). But this group lies on an exposed hill-top at around 400 ft OD and cannot typify the valley where we can infer extensive prehistoric settlement only from scattered finds and from the trackways found in peat-cutting in the Lyth valley 3500 m to the W. The attractions of the Park for settlement were best exemplified as 'the sweetest spot that fancy can imagine' in West's Guide to the Lakes in 1790.

The Ring-Cairn. The basic structures consist of an outer ring or bank, very nearly circular 25 m in diameter overall, with an eccentrically set inner ring 8 m in diameter (Fig. 1). These two rings were based on a footing of large glacial boulders, very common in the Lake District Till which mantles the Carboniferous Limestone in the Dale. Above these footings the structures were built up with smaller boulders, rather like building a wall of tennis-balls on a setting of foot-balls. Layers and structures could not be securely identified in the mass of tumbled boulders that resulted from collapse and later re-occupation and dumping. The plan represents reasonable interpretation based on the most immovable boulders. The outer bank seems to have been about 1 m thick in the southern part where it has been carefully examined; this is comparable with the footings of the Park-Wall, which has stood 3 m high for the last 300 to 600 years with steady maintenance. The double thick-



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10M

Figure 1.

ness in the north sector may be a Dark-Age reconstruction. There seems to have been an entrance to the W, where the line of a former stream (now diverted) runs about 20 m away into a dammed-up pond. There may have been another, opposed, entrance to the E but this is not yet clear. The inner ring is about 1 m to 1.75 m in thickness, with the inner face based on large boulders as well as the outer edge, which has been partly robbed. There is an entrance to the SW and extensive traces of charcoal, ash and flint-waste on the old ground surface indicate earlier or contemporary occupation.

I interpret it as a house of the Beaker period lying in its farmstead, following, among others, Case's re-interpretation of Thames Valley ring-ditches (Case, 1963). It is very like the timber circles at Bleasdale, only 40 km to the S. The primary burial, in this view the owners of the farmstead, was buried in the middle of this 'House' with three Beakers and two flint knives or scrapers in a grave lined with charcoal or burnt planks. At this time the entrance was blocked and a cairn built over the inner ring. Later mortuary use of the site is demonstrated by two secondary burials in this inner cairn and the construction of a secondary attached cairn to the S which was found to contain a crouched burial, in a grave very much larger than necessary, underneath an enormous boulder.

Later Periods. There is no clear evidence of Iron Age or Roman activity; the few abraded sherds of Roman pottery could have been brought with later dumping. The main focus of occupation in the Roman period seems to have been the site named, since the 17th century, 'Diana's Temple' which is 250 m to the S. An extensive re-occupation and modification of the site took place probably in the Dark Ages, but whether 'sub-Roman', 'Anglian' or 'Viking' is not clear. Lines of walls, and a large oven south of the secondary cairn have been planned but the sequence of structures awaits final clearance. A Tudor robbing is indicated by a fragment of late 16th century drinking-glass found just above the old ground-surface in the secondary cairn, very close to the geometrical centre of the outer-ring. This may be the result of curiosity on Sir James Bellingham's move to Levens in 1580. The whole group of sites was referred to in archaeological terms by Bishop Gibson in his 1696 *Britannia* as 'the ruins of an ancient round building (now call'd Kirkshead) which is said to have been anciently a Temple dedicated to Diana. And not far from it appears the ruins of another building; which seems to have belong'd to the same place.' A more successful investigation was made, later, when the three burials of the inner ring were moved and replaced with moderate care. Two of the Beakers of the primary burial came to pieces and were scattered about in bits, but the base of the grave was not disturbed. An early-19th century button of a gamekeeper or estate-worker was found in

this context, and dates the excavation to Mrs Howard's time at Levens. Several hundred tons of boulders, cleared from elsewhere, were next dumped on the site, with much pottery of 1840-60, giving it the appearance of a mound with attached enclosure, and in this state it was planned in 1964 by Mr Don Benson.

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