

Seeing is believing... or how do we classify what we see?

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As the first paper of the conference, I felt it was important to introduce an understanding of landscape archaeology and our role in survey and recording. Traditionally at RCAHMS, we are identified by the job title 'Archaeological Field Investigator' but perhaps our positions are more aptly described as 'landscape historians', encapsulating the way in which we study the changes we have made to the physical appearance of the environment, present and past, and how we understand and interpret these changes. The word 'landscape' takes account of both physical and cultural aspects, the tangible and intangible, but above all gives us that sense of place. Two major publications are important in launching landscape archaeology, or landscape history if we prefer, as an academic discipline: in England, Hoskins' *The making of the English Landscape* and Crawford's *Archaeology in the Field*, both published for the first time in the 1950s. These illustrate the scope for landscape survey, from the study of specific features (such as prehistoric linear earthworks and medieval castles) to the study of areas containing a multiplicity of different features – a *palimpsest* to use today's terminology.



Fig 1: Plane table survey of the SSE terminal of the newly discovered cursus

In considering our role as landscape archaeologists, recording through prospection, observation and interpretation, we also have to reflect on how the archaeological record has been created, why features survive and where they survive. What we observe has to be set against a dynamic and continuously evolving backdrop of change, man-made and/or natural. And alongside this, we have to take stock of new and improved survey and mapping technologies, which have not only revolutionised our approach to field recording but they have also encouraged a move away from unitary monument recording to landscape recording (the palimpsest mentioned earlier): ultimately this allows features to be set in their landscape context. But while technology can equip us with the tools to record archaeological landscapes, these have to be matched by experience, observation skills and the ability to challenge and review what we see.



Fig 2: GPS survey of the ENE side of the cursus

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The discovery of a new cursus monument in South Lanarkshire, Scotland, provided a case study for exploring the application of these techniques and how they inform our analysis of features, their relationships and their classifications. The cursus is situated at Melbourne crossroads some 4 miles to the northeast of Biggar and just over 25 miles southwest of Edinburgh. To the south, the land is open and undulating but its position in the landscape is interesting as it runs between the start of two ridges of hills that extend NE, effectively framing routes leading north towards Edinburgh, including that of the later Roman Road from Crawford to Inveresk. Both terminals survive, that on the NNW being round-ended while that on the SSE is squared, and this in itself is unusual for cursus monuments. Significant stretches of the sides remain as upstanding earthworks, characterised by a bank and external ditch.

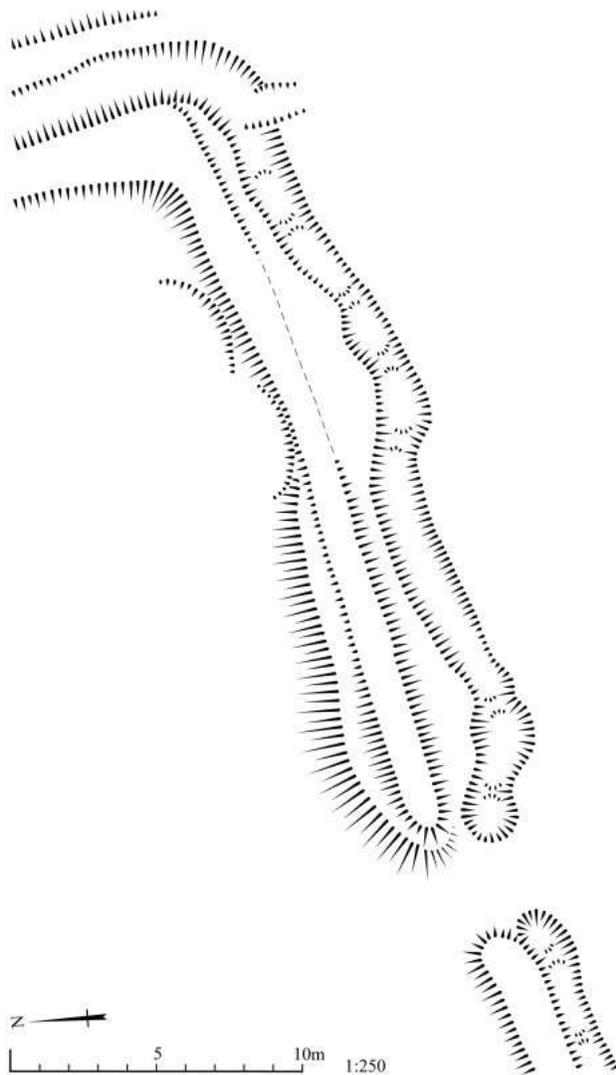
The discovery challenges what we know of cursus sites in Scotland: it is not only the longest recorded to date, but it is one that crosses a deep, steep-sided valley in what is essentially an upland location. Most cursus monuments, certainly in Scotland, are recorded as cropmarks on flat, gravel, river terraces. Measuring 2.5km in length, this new discovery presented significant challenges for survey, especially in managing the relationships between general mapping and detailed recording. It did however provide us with the opportunity to apply integrated survey techniques to explore both the detailed site morphology and the wider landscape context.



Fig 3: Terrestrial laser scanning of the SSE end of the cursus

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As both terminals and parts of the sides survived, our primary objective was to map the monument in the field using the GPS and to supplement the visible remains with information derived from aerial photographs. This was essential in the central levelled section where historic images offered clues as to its course. Here, the lines of the ditches can be traced as intermittent linear soilmarks and cropmarks, albeit that the ENE side appeared the most continuous.



*Fig 4: Plan of the SSE terminal of the cursus, reduced from the original:
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The squared SSE terminal survives in pasture and appeared to have a phased construction, so we capitalised on the chance to use our terrestrial laser scanner to investigate the potential of this technique to provide detailed visualisations of the

earthwork for analysis. We also relied on the more traditional plane table survey to depict and interpret a detail of this terminal too. The traditional plane table survey allowed us to depict the phasing as we observed it in the field, with the bank of the cursus most definitely rising up onto an earlier mound. We were also able to illustrate the wobbliness of the ditch and its segmented character as a series of adjoining linear hollows – in keeping with the pitted nature of Neolithic ditches. What we had picked up on the ground but didn't fully appreciate until we saw the results of the laser scan, however, was the possibility of the ditch having been recut or realigned at the ENE corner. So the combination of the two techniques – the scan and the plane table survey – complemented each other extremely well.

This paper set out to consider different survey methodologies and the part they play in landscape recording, from traditional tape and alidade to GPS and from aerial photographic transcription to laser scanning, above all reminding us of the needs and benefits of an integrated research approach. New technologies will always add to the bigger picture and they will always help us to fine tune the detail, but all that would be wasted if we didn't reference traditional methodologies, and have the knowledge, experience, observation skills and confidence to challenge ourselves and our interpretations. Landscape survey has to be seen as an iterative process. As archaeologists – or landscape historians – we above all should know that the past informs the future.

For information on the cursus, please visit:

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/73422/details/broomy+law+black+mount/>

This paper summarises the author's presentation at the Landscape Survey Group's conference in Sheffield, 2014. It does not necessarily express the views of the Landscape Survey Group.

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